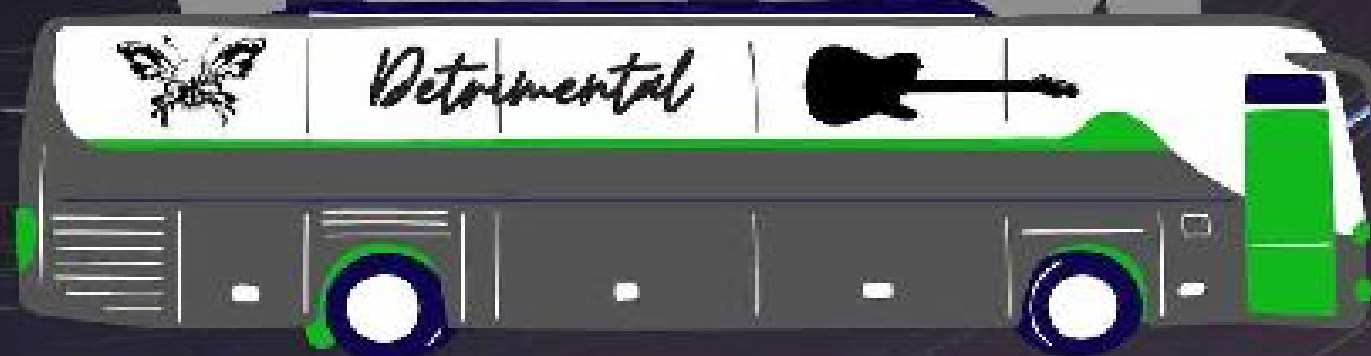


Changing the TEMPO



APRIL MICHELLE

Changing the Tempo
A Detrimental Rock Star Romance
(Book 2)
April Michelle



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“Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always.”

Robin Williams

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From the Author

Content Warning:

This book contains material that is intended for a mature, adult audience. It contains graphic language, explicit sexual content and adult situations.

Trigger Warning:

This book contains mentions of child abuse and parental abandonment. Characters deal with brief episodes of mental health struggles. There is also a non-violent instance of imprisonment/abduction.

These topics may be sensitive for some readers.

Playlist

(Also Available on Spotify)

“Fell On Black Days” ~ Soundgarden

“Sabotage” ~ Beastie Boys

“Under Pressure” ~ Queen, David Bowie

“You Can’t Always Get What You Want”

~ The Rolling Stones

“Be Yourself” ~ Audioslave

“Smells Like Teen Spirit” ~ Nirvana

“Hopeless Wanderer” ~ Mumford & Sons

“Something Just Like This” ~ The Chainsmokers, Coldplay

“Hooked on A Feeling” ~ Blue Swede, Björn Skifs

“Fooled Around and Fell In Love” ~ Elvin Bishop

“When It’s Love” ~ Van Halen

“Feeling Good – Bassnectar Remix” ~ Nina Simone,
Bassnectar

“The Sound of Silence” ~ Disturbed

“Just Give Me a Reason” ~ P!nk, Nate Ruess

“Tiny Dancer” ~ Elton John

“7 O’Clock” ~ The Quireboys

“Last Kiss” ~ Pearl Jam

“Numb” ~ Linkin Park

“Unwell” ~ Matchbox Twenty

“Not Myself” ~ John Mayer

“A Little Less Conversation” ~ Elvis Presley, Junkie XL

“You Really Got Me” ~ Van Halen

“Let’s Go Crazy” ~ Prince

“My Hero” ~ Foo Fighters
“Home Sweet Home” ~ Mötley Crüe
“Come Fly with Me” ~ Frank Sinatra
“Learn To Fly” ~ Foo Fighters
“I’m Like a Bird” ~ Nelly Furtado
“In the End” ~ Linkin Park
“More Than Words” ~ Extreme
“I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm” ~ Dean Martin

Prologue

Shawn

There were far too many hours left in the day for it to have already gone to complete shit. Yet there I was, faced with that unwelcome reality.

Was I overreacting? Possibly. It had been known to happen. But that didn't stop my chest from burning with each shallow intake of breath. It didn't stop my heart from hammering in time with the pounding in my head. But as I relived each memory of the morning's events, I was fairly certain my impending breakdown was justified this time. Which meant I needed to act fast to stop it.

The quickest way to reign in my anger and frustration was to suffocate them with loud music. Would that somehow reverse the destruction this day had inflicted on my life? No. Would it diffuse the minefield of extreme emotions that had been triggered by a single conversation? Again, no. There wasn't a magic solution. The only way past this day was to push through it.

Desperate to escape the fallout of the news I'd just been given, it was no coincidence that I found myself walking up Broadway in the heart of Nashville. It was one hundred percent self-preservation.

Not a single person on the crowded sidewalk gave me a second glance. I was just another random pedestrian despite feeling like I was slowly unraveling. My hard-won self-control was a testament to years of practice, but with each new step, the pressure was building. I fisted my twitchy fingers as my overstimulated senses were further assaulted as signs in every shape and color clamored for attention outside the sea of bars, restaurants, and tourist shops I sped past. A tour trolley bell momentarily muffled the screaming toddler in a nearby stroller while the sticky-sweet scent of a candy shop competed with the cloying aroma of trendy celebrity-owned restaurants. To top it all off, the mid-day summer sun was roasting me alive.

I considered a trip back to my hotel room to exchange the dark grey dress pants, pressed white shirt, and black Oxfords for something more comfortable, but the delay would only compound my irritation. Besides, the business attire provided a bit of camouflage, and I was in no mood to play celebrity today. I wasn't usually recognized away from the rest of my bandmates, but being surrounded by so many music fans was sure to increase those odds. No thanks.

Trudging up Honky Tonk Highway, country tunes tickled my ears but did little to hold my interest. Needing something much heavier to combat the current chaos in my head, I continued to move. I rounded the corner at Second Avenue, where a sultry blues tune greeted me like a lover's caress. Though tempting, today called for something more. More overpowering, more all-consuming. I needed music that wouldn't just dim the spotlight on my seething disappointment. This required a complete blackout.

A few blocks farther, I heard my siren call. The wail of an electric guitar and the relentless beat of a bass drum had my blood humming. Relief was near. But the buzzing in my veins was halted by the vibrating phone in my pocket. Salvation would have to wait.

Seeing Lance's name along with the ridiculous duck-faced selfie he'd stored in my phone had me releasing my pent-up breath and stepping to the side of the building, where I stretched my neck from side to side before answering the call.

"Hey, man," I greeted, the overworked muscles in my jaw tingling as I unclenched them.

"I got your text and gathered the guys. We're on speaker. How was the big meeting?"

"A total disaster. The deal's off the table."

There was no point in sugarcoating it. For months, I had been looking forward to collaborating with the president of Lucky Greene Records to jumpstart my career as a producer. Instead, I'd been fucked over. Hard.

"What the hell?" Lance raged. "Roger's backing out?"

General grumbling from the rest of the band filtered through, reminding me that I was about to relay news that affected more than just me. It would be devastating for all of us.

“Roger’s gone.”

Silence filled the air before everyone spoke at once.

“Gone? What do you mean?”

“Is he okay?”

“What happened?”

“Where did he go?”

Pacing up and down the alley, kicking a mangled beer can as I went, I relayed what little information I had. “Nobody is saying much. All I know is that I was scheduled to meet with Roger and ended up talking to some jackass named Gordon, who is his apparent replacement. There’s a press release coming out tomorrow to announce the change, but the details are sketchy. For whatever reason, Roger suddenly stepped down. And this new asshole made it clear that he’s in charge and that he has no intention of honoring Roger’s promises, including any chance I had of producing our next album.”

“Can he do that?” Jaxon asked.

Having already placed a call to our lawyer, I confirmed everyone’s fears. “Not only that, but our contract also gives Lucky Greene Records complete creative control of our music. That’s never been an issue before because Roger shared our vision. But now we’re at this guy’s mercy, and I have a bad feeling about him.”

“Damn,” Derek sighed, voicing what we were all feeling.

“Were you able to change your flight to come home tonight?” Eli asked.

“I didn’t bother trying. I’m too wound up to fly.”

“We can be there by dinnertime to close down a few bars with you,” Lance offered.

They would do it too. They would make the drive from our North Carolina home just to cheer me up. More than bandmates and friends, they had become my brothers in the only way that mattered: they had my back, no questions asked. Just hearing the offer helped to buoy me.

“I’ll be okay, but thanks anyway. I’m going to soak up some live music and then hit the hotel pool until I’m ready to pass out.”

“This is just a detour, not a roadblock,” Eli offered.

“Exactly,” Derek agreed. “We’re not going to let some asshole come in and push us around.”

“Straight facts,” Lance agreed. “He hasn’t heard the last of this, so let that shit go. For now, marinate in music, find a hottie to hook up with, and have some fun.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I laughed, feeling marginally better knowing I wasn’t in this mess alone.

“We’ll talk more when you get home,” Jaxon promised. “Don’t hesitate to call if you need anything in the meantime.”

As instructed, the remainder of my day was spent bar hopping. Still, my worries were never far off, and each time the music stopped, every word of the meeting with Gordon replayed in my mind. I tried to find a glimmer of hope, but there wasn’t one. The guys meant well, and I knew we would stand together. I just couldn’t shake the feeling that we were on the losing side of this particular battle.

Rationally, I knew it wasn’t the end of the world, but my brain’s default setting leaned heavily toward irrational. And without the guys there to remind me that everything would be okay, my mood continued to sink into a whirlpool of despair again. It would have been easy to slide into self-destructive behaviors. A few drinks would slap a bandage on the issue, but everything would still be there, festering, as soon as the buzz wore off. And I would feel worse for the indulgence. Regulating my emotions was enough of a challenge. I didn’t need anything making it harder.

Between bars, I paused on the sidewalk to close my eyes and implement a helpful strategy for managing the madness. Taking a deep breath, I listed all of the positives in my life. I was the drummer for Detrimental, a world-famous rock band. We were preparing to record our second album with one of the most respected record labels in the business. My bandmates and our crew were the best family anyone could ask for. I was young and healthy, aside from my ADHD and its circus of symptoms, so I still had plenty of time to achieve my goal of becoming a producer. Thanks to my ample skillset and the supportive people in my life, this was a surmountable setback. Ending with another deep breath, some perspective was restored along with a sliver of peace.

I opened my eyes to see that I was just outside The Nosh Pit, a popular rock-themed bar and grill. I also noted that day had turned to night, as evidenced by the blinking, buzzing neon sign that lit the sidewalk around me. Hunger pangs gripped my stomach with an urgent tenacity, reminding me that in losing track of time, I had also forgotten to eat all day. Not surprising. So it was the savory scent filling the air that lured me through the nearby doors as much as the sound pouring out of them.

Finding an empty stool at the end of the bar, I quickly placed my order before turning my attention to the band on stage. While the well-known songs had a few heads nodding along, I couldn't help but evaluate the lackluster performance. I mentally adjusted the balance between the drums and guitar and tweaked the bass line. Then, I mentally urged the lead singer to engage with the crowd instead of staring stiffly at the floor. The result was much more entertaining, and as the completed vision filled my head, I absently mumbled my thanks to the server who set a plate in front of me.

The last notes of the set faded into a modest round of applause, breaking my trance-like state with perfect timing. Starved and eager to tackle my steak dinner, the giant plate of nachos sitting in its place was a disappointment. A quick glance showed the bartender occupied in the distance, and there wasn't a server in sight. Instead, my eyes landed on a woman at a high-top table in the far corner looking equally

perplexed. Assuming a simple mix-up was to blame, I picked up the plate and headed her way.

“Any chance you ordered nachos?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied with a sigh of relief. “And I’m guessing this is yours.”

Any further response died the moment she looked up. The dim lighting prevented me from cataloging all of her features, but the ones I could see held me captive. Her long, flowing hair had varying shades of blonde and a bit of auburn that somehow seemed to shimmer even in the low light. Soulful eyes were framed by thin, black glasses perched on her nose above a light dusting of freckles that graced her cheeks. She was simply beautiful.

The diamond earrings and tennis bracelet she wore added an air of elegance, yet she was dressed for comfort in black leggings and an oversized, well-worn NYU hoodie. She was a complete contradiction of details, and the longer I looked, the more intrigued I became. A smile played at her lips, and an image of my teeth tugging on them sprang to the forefront of my mind.

Painfully aware that I was staring, I cleared my throat and worked to recover a measure of restraint. “Trade?” I asked, swapping out our plates.

“Thank you.”

Hunger played tug-of-war with my desire to linger. But I also knew how uncomfortable it was to be out in a restaurant with someone hanging by my table when all I wanted to do was eat. So, ultimately, hunger and good manners won.

“No problem,” I assured her. “Enjoy.”

One step in the opposite direction ruined all of my good intentions. My seat at the bar had been taken, and the growing crowd meant searching for another one would be useless. Of course.

Some days, you're the dog. Some days, you're the hydrant.

Grammy's familiar words of wisdom filtered through my mind to squash my rising frustration.

"You're welcome to join me."

Knowing my mood, I should have declined. I was bound to be miserable company, and she didn't deserve that. But something about her pulled me in, so I decided to get over myself long enough to eat.

Still, I gave her one last chance. "Are you sure?"

"It's the least I can do for the man who rescued my dinner." She smiled again, but I caught a hint of sadness behind the expression that I hadn't noticed before. "I'm Natalia."

"Shawn," I returned, reaching to shake the hand she offered after I took the empty seat on the opposite side of the narrow table.

Her skin was warm and softer than my favorite fleece blanket. Just as comforting too, and I had to remind myself to let go after the appropriate length of time. The widening of her eyes and quick gasp as I traced my fingers across her palm told me she wasn't immune to my touch either.

Everything else faded away. All that remained was the two of us beneath a buttery pool of lamplight. I couldn't see the individual flecks in her eyes, but there was no mistaking the interest. Her gaze stayed locked on mine as the heat between us grew. Time slowed and each second stretched out until our waitress, Dani, checked in, effectively severing the connection.

Oblivious to our little moment, she apologized profusely for the mishap and offered complimentary drinks to make up for it. Natalia declined, happily nursing the beer in front of her.

"I'll just have another water, but thank you."

"How about dessert instead?" Dani persisted with a nervous smile, clearly wanting to avoid unhappy customers. "A slice of our famous bourbon pecan pie?"

I deferred to Natalia again, who passed on the offer. “I have more than I can handle already,” she laughed.

“I’m good. No harm done,” I assured her.

She sighed in relief. “Okay, but let me know if you change your minds.”

We ate in silence for a few minutes, Natalia casting looks at me like I was equal parts mystery and fantasy. I resisted the urge to fidget under her scrutiny. Between all of my quirks and being in a famous band, I should have been used to attention, but it still made me uncomfortable. And though there was no reason to suspect she knew who I was, her inquisitive gaze left me feeling exposed, like she could see straight into the heart of me. Fortunately, it felt more curious than to find fault. And I knew the difference.

Emboldened, I looked my fill in return. Sitting so close, the dark circles shadowing her eyes became more prevalent, as did the haunting sadness she did her best to hide. She looked tired in a way that spoke of more than a few hours of missed sleep or long days at work. That type of weariness came from being broken down by life. It was one I easily recognized.

A squeal of feedback jolted our attention to the stage, where the club’s manager announced a delay before the next band’s performance. To fill the time and keep the disappointed crowd from leaving, he offered an impromptu trivia session with a variety of prizes for the winners.

Natalia and I were content to continue eating as contestants were chosen and the game was explained. The rules were pretty standard with nothing to note except that the waitstaff would be circulating with prizes for random audience members who played along.

I swallowed hard as I considered my options, which were usually the same: be myself or play the role that would make those around me more comfortable. Determining how much of myself I could reveal was always the worst part of meeting someone new, and I had learned it was best to be cautious. Natalia seemed excited by the turn of events, rubbing her hands in anticipation, but was she a good sport or a sore loser?

I was prepared to downplay my ability for her sake, even though my impulsive nature would make that difficult, especially given my stressful day. Little did I know I had nothing to worry about.

The stage lights danced and a corny jingle played as the manager began the first round of questions.

“Who was known as the king of rock ‘n’ roll?”

“Elvis Presley,” Natalia and I stated, rolling our eyes in unison at the ridiculously easy question.

The expected fanfare played out on stage as contestants responded on digital devices and were then scored on speed and accuracy. Once they were ranked on a large TV screen, the jingle replayed to signal the next question.

“Where is the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame located?”

“Cleveland, Ohio,” we answered. I beat her by a fraction of a second, and we were suddenly staring intently at each other, her raised brow issuing a friendly challenge. Our eyes remained locked, both of us fighting a grin as the jingle played again.

“Dave Grohl, the lead singer for Foo Fighters, was also the drummer for what famous grunge band?”

“Nirvana,” we blurted, our timing perfectly synchronized.

We gave in to the smiles we’d been holding back and reached for our drinks, neither of us breaking eye contact.

After eliminating a few contestants, the manager continued. “Okay, we’re going to step it up a notch for the second round.” Cue the jingle. “What model guitar did Jimi Hendrix play at Woodstock?”

“Fender Stratocaster,” we both said.

Pushing our plates to the side, we leaned closer across the table toward each other. A few nearby patrons began watching us, and Dani came to stand by our table. The extra attention brought a level of unwelcome self-consciousness with it. Despite performing in front of thousands of screaming fans on a regular basis, I hated being the center of attention. As the

drummer, I always did my best to blend into the background to avoid feeling on display. But that luxury was gone now.

The next jingle was drowned out by a sudden influx of noise. The clanking of dishes and murmur of nearby conversations, which I had previously blocked out, came rushing in. My attention pinballed, and I scrambled to ignore the distractions as the next question was asked.

“What famous rock guitarist played the riff in ‘Beat It’ by Michael Jackson?”

“Eddie Van Halen,” we said. This time her answer came out ahead of mine thanks to the sudden glitch in my brain.

She searched my eyes with a questioning look, somehow sensing my unease. Her hand came to rest on mine, sending a calming warmth through me like a drug snaking through my veins. The white noise quieted to a gentle hum, and everything settled within me. But it was her expression, silently assuring me that I was safe to be myself with her, that finally allowed me to fully relax. The enormity of that was too much to process in that moment, and I nearly missed the next question.

“Which member of Rage Against the Machine graduated from Harvard University?”

“Tom Morello,” we said in unison.

I refused to look away. The mysterious link between us became my lifeline to a level of peace I hadn’t thought possible considering the disastrous day I was still sorting through. In my periphery, another round of contestants left the stage under a series of flashing lights. My focus remained on Natalia and the hand blanketing mine. I turned my palm to rub it against hers before lightly wrapping my fingers around her delicate wrist. She mirrored my movements, her touch continuing to steady me. In return, the earlier sadness in her eyes lifted, and it became my sole mission to keep it at bay.

“Alright. This is the final round, so the questions are going to be tougher.” The lights dimmed again, leaving the final three contestants highlighted in spotlights as the jingle

played. “Which rock musician also won a Nobel Prize in Literature?”

“Bob Dylan,” we responded together. Dani and the surrounding crowd began cheering for us once the manager confirmed the answer, which none of the contestants on stage answered correctly.

My thumb traced a path over Natalia’s wrist causing her fingers to curl inward. Her eyes widened in surprise to her body’s response, and the air stuttered out of my lungs. The jingle played again, a reminder of where we were and that I needed to bank my increasing need to touch her.

“Curt Cobain, Jim Morrison, and Janis Joplin all died at what age?”

“Twenty-seven.” I narrowly beat her, yet she beamed with pride.

My heart throbbed, starved for affection like another part of my already enthusiastic anatomy. Unaware of my inner turmoil, our supporters went wild as the contestants on stage continued to flounder.

“Okay. We have one final question,” the manager announced. “Who produced the albums *Highway to Hell* by AC/DC and *Hysteria* by Def Leppard?”

“Mutt Lange.” Grinning wildly at each other, Natalia and I were barely aware of the crowd’s applause.

To celebrate, Dani awarded us matching t-shirts with The Nosh Pit’s logo on them, bagged two slices of pie to take with us, and had a manager comp our bill. But during all of the excitement, Nat’s hand slid away. And without her touch to ground me, the spell I had been under was broken.

Producer. Meeting. Gordon.

The emotional backlash of the final question hit, and all of my earlier disappointment came back in full force to batter my defenses. At the same time, the deluge of noise and attention around us threatened to overwhelm me. It was too much.

I excused myself and headed straight to the companion restroom to lock myself inside and splash cold water on my face. It helped, but I was still on edge. Exiting, I found a side door that led into the alley between the buildings, where several people loitered outside. The air was laced with cigarette smoke but helped clear my head as I slowly made my way back to the front door. Wading through the crowd, I rejoined Natalia at our table, thankful to find her still there.

“Okay, I have to know. Where did you learn all of that?” she demanded playfully.

Relieved she wasn’t in a hurry to leave, and that she didn’t call out my disappearance, I aimed for an honest but simple answer. “Nowhere in particular. I just have a good memory for information that interests me.”

“Music must interest you.”

I nodded. “Definitely. What about you?”

“My dad’s in the industry, so I grew up immersed in it.”

“Lucky girl.”

She looked like she wanted to say more, but was cut off when the next band finally took the stage. I was annoyed that our conversation was cut short, but did my best to enjoy the performance. Unfortunately, I grew restless within a few songs. Silently dissecting their performance, I hid my hands beneath the table to drum along, hoping to release the excess energy that was filling me. That worked well enough until they got to a ballad. The abrupt drop in stimulation made my skin crawl. I shifted and squirmed, needing to move.

“Want to go for a walk?” Natalia asked.

“Yes,” I blurted, standing so quickly I was surprised my chair didn’t topple backward.

I didn’t care what had prompted her offer, my need to escape had me greedily accepting. Natalia gathered her purse and the take-out bag while I made sure to leave a hefty tip for Dani. I reached for Natalia’s hand so we wouldn’t be separated on our way to the door, but even more importantly, the feel of

her skin against mine gave me something to focus on instead of the thick crush of bodies.

Once we were safely outside, I stretched and exhaled fully, feeling like a caged bird set free. With no real destination in mind, we absently joined the flow of foot traffic.

“What did you think of the band?” Natalia asked, gripping my hand when I started to let go. “They’re a popular local act and have gained a nice following. If you ran your own record company, would you take a chance on them?”

Focused on the feel of her hand in mine, I forgot to filter myself. “Hell no.” Instantly regretting my candor, I glanced over to judge her reaction. Natalia smiled brightly, encouraging me to continue, and before I could stop myself, I spewed everything I was thinking. “Two of the guys were wasted out back when I went to the bathroom, which explains the delay. Minus points for their work ethic. The rhythm guitarist was still drunk and kept dragging them down while the drummer rushed to try to compensate. It was a virtual train wreck in my ears. On top of that, the A-string was flat on the lead guitar and the bassist was playing off of sheet music taped to the back of an equipment case. Their original song was decent, but everything was within a limited vocal range, making me question the lead singer’s abilities. There’s definite potential, but they’re not ready for the demands of a contract.”

Natalia stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, forcing me to step in close so she didn’t get trampled by the flood of pedestrians. “Damn, you’re perfect,” she whispered.

I barely held back a laugh. I was the complete opposite of perfect, but reveled in the idea that this incredible woman could see me that way. And after the day I’d had, it was a much-needed stroke to my bruised ego to think I could be enough for someone like her, even for a brief moment in time.

Despite Lance’s earlier encouragement, I’d had no intention of finding a random, willing woman to hook up with. I hadn’t been in the right headspace for feigning smiles and faking my way through polite conversation. But then I met Natalia. Being with her was effortless, at least when I wasn’t

overthinking everything. Encounters like that didn't come along often for me, and I was in no hurry for the night to end.

Slipping into the shadows, I wrapped my arms around her, settling my hands into the dip at the small of her back before pressing her against a nearby building. She was several inches shorter than me, a noticeable difference but not so much that it was awkward to hold her. She felt more like a missing part I had been forced to live without. And now that I knew what it felt like to have her there, I didn't want to let go.

Lowering my head, I paused to make sure she wanted this as much as I did. Her answer was clear as the bag hit the pavement and she fisted my shirt to pull me the rest of the way in. Our lips met in a gentle explosion of sensation, and I felt it wash over me; a ripple that quickly built into a tidal wave.

The kiss started as a leisurely sampling, both of us exploring before sinking further into it. We kissed like we had all the time in the world, knowing the moment deserved to be savored. Then we dialed up the heat. A taste was no longer enough, and her lips parted in invitation as my greedy tongue sought more. I licked, nibbled, and sucked at her lips, eliciting little whimpers and moans from her, which only further sparked my arousal. Wanting all of her at once warred with the desire to make a single touch last as long as possible. It was the most exquisite torture.

Angling my body to further shelter her from view, I pressed my hips into her and we both gasped, breaking the kiss. From there, we fell into a fog of lust. We made it to a taxi, then my hotel, tasting and teasing the whole way. The elevator ride was a blur of groping hands and surging need. Inside my room, her legs wrapped around me as I pressed her against the door.

"Damn, I need you," I groaned as the warmth of her core penetrated through the layers of clothing still separating us.

"Yes," she exhaled.

I greedily breathed it in. "I'm going to strip you down."

"Yes," she repeated, this time with a hitch in her voice.

“Tasting each delicious inch that I uncover.” I stepped toward the bed, letting my hands explore the dips and curves of her body.

She nodded her head as she kissed my cheek, down my jaw and neck.

“Saving the sweetest, juiciest part for last,” I added, inching a hand lower, leaving no doubt in her mind where I intended to go. “Then feast on you until you’re screaming my name.”

A whimper was the only sound she made, but her enthusiastic nod told me she was completely on board with my plan.

“After that, I’ll sink into your sweetness and stay there until we’re both too wrung out to do anything but sleep. Then, we’ll wake and do it all over again.”

“Hell yes,” she moaned. “One hundred percent.”

One night would never be enough. I knew that going in, but it was a problem best faced in the harsh light of day. In that moment, my sole focus was on enjoying the beautiful reality before me. And I planned to make the most of it. I’d be the man who helped her forget her sorrows while also escaping mine.

I laid her on the mattress, my mind going blissfully quiet. All that remained was a burning desire to not just be inside of her but to become a part of her in a way that couldn’t be undone. It was all-consuming and bordered on obsessive.

Never had I felt such a need to claim someone.

And never had I experienced heartbreak like when I woke to find her gone.

Chapter 1

Natalia

One Year Later

“Thanks, Frederick,” I called, hopping from the back seat as the car rolled to a stop.

I was already behind schedule thanks to the long-winded agent who’d insisted we meet for brunch. What should have been a brief discussion regarding the initial terms of signing a band she represented had rapidly morphed into a never-ending sob story about her impending divorce. And as the mimosas flowed, it became her mission to warn me against ever marrying a musician.

No worries there, Katrina.

Pressed for time, I hurried through the heavy revolving door of Lucky Greene Records. Though I had been working from home on various projects for several months, I’d only recently returned to the office. And no matter how rushed I was, I always stilled to appreciate the familiar sights and sounds of the lobby. The trickle of the fountain in the corner, the guitars gleaming on the walls, and the smell of freshly baked pastries from the café all evoked feelings in me that most people would never understand. Growing up, I’d spent as much time in this building as I had at home, so being back was as exciting as it was comforting. At least it would be once I felt like I’d earned my place back into the fold.

Kara, my assistant, fell in step beside me on our way to the bank of elevators. With practiced ease, she handed over two cold drink cups and pulled out the tablet she had tucked under her arm. I eyed the green smoothie mixture in both clear cups before shooting her an evil glare, which she ignored while opening my calendar.

“The management team meeting is in conference room six in fifteen minutes, but Mr. Greene would like to see you beforehand,” she detailed, barely giving me time to blink before moving on. “Your three o’clock with Rusty Threads

was canceled, so I bumped up the video conference call with Detrimental. That opened a block of time to meet with Judy from Accounting to go over the audit you requested before you have to get ready for the charity dinner tonight.”

“And none of that explains why I’m drinking seaweed instead of coffee.”

“It’s kale, and you need to start practicing what you preach,” she said. “Plus, if I know you at all, you’ve already had three cups today.”

Though Kara hadn’t been my assistant long, she had been with LGR for a few years and we’d worked together in the past. She was always been efficient, with a knack for staying one step ahead of whatever was going on. And though we were close in age, we weren’t quite friends. I didn’t really have those since I put my job ahead of everything else. Instead, Kara tended to mother me, which was both a blessing and a curse.

“Four,” I admitted, as we stepped onto the elevator. “But in my defense, that brunch was brutal.”

So was running on a few hours of sleep, but the worry on Kara’s face had me keeping that to myself. I even took a long sip of the fruity concoction to make her feel better. It was actually very good, and I was keenly aware of the health benefits. After all, I was the one who’d asked for a few nutrition-based items to be added to the café menu. Still, eighteen-hour days could not be fueled on wheatgrass alone.

Avoiding any further comment, I focused on today’s agenda. “Were you able to reschedule Rusty Threads?” Her hesitance told me all I needed to know. “Troy got to them too, didn’t he?” I asked, bracing for her answer.

Kara sighed and nodded her head, knowing there wasn’t much she could say to soften the blow. The harsh reminder that my ex-boyfriend was now actively recruiting my clients for our competitor, First String Studios, was followed by a burning in my gut that had nothing to do with the copious amounts of coffee I had ingested. It was solely the byproduct of a guilt-and-remorse cocktail.

“I’ve already placed a few calls,” she assured me.

Her network of connections in the industry was unparalleled, so I trusted her to get the information I needed.

“And what noble cause is tonight’s dinner benefitting?”

With any luck, it would be something frivolous like fundraising to replace the gold filagree in the bathroom at a random diner Elvis once visited. Then I could cancel without feeling bad and tackle the mountain of work that only seemed to grow no matter how much time I spent trying to tame it.

“In Tune with Kids, a non-profit that provides music programs to underprivileged children in local schools and community centers.”

Damn. There was no way out of that with a clear conscience. It looked like I had a night of mediocre chicken, a sizeable donation, and very little sleep ahead of me. But it would be a good opportunity to network and get some positive PR for the company, something LGR desperately needed.

We stepped out onto the seventh floor where Marcy, the receptionist seated behind the large desk, smiled and waved us through as she continued the call on her wireless headset. Just like the other six floors of the building, the hallway was lined with oversized, black and white prints of various LGR artists from the past twenty-five years. They were a testament to the company’s rich history in the music industry, and each photo told a unique story. They ranged from professionally staged pictures at high-end photoshoots to grippingly emotional candid shots from various recording studios, stages, and hotel rooms. And no matter how many times I saw them, they still moved me.

With my hands full, Kara gave a courtesy knock before opening the mahogany door graced with a freshly applied nameplate: *Roger Greene, President*. I might be the only one who knew the depth of the struggle he’d had to endure to resume that position, but the impact of his return had already been felt by many. And though his reinstatement as president hadn’t been seamless, in some ways, it felt as though he never left.

Aside from the giant mess we were attempting to clean up.

“Good morning, ladies,” he greeted as we entered the sunlit corner office.

“Good morning, Mr. Greene,” Kara replied, retreating to her usual chair in the corner.

“Morning, Daddy,” I said, placing a kiss on his cheek as he rose from his desk. “How are you feeling?” I asked for roughly the millionth time in the past year.

“I’m good,” he answered habitually. “And before you ask, I took my morning medications, completed two miles on the treadmill, and ate a boring bowl of oatmeal for breakfast. Nurse Hatchet also checked my vitals, which were normal.”

“Her name is Helen,” I chided with a chuckle.

“Close enough,” he insisted, no doubt knowing his personal nurse’s name but unwilling to admit that he secretly enjoyed all of the fuss she made over him. Which was probably the reason he kept her employed even though his doctors had declared him healthy.

“I’m always glad to hear you’re well. And I brought you a snack.”

“Oh, joy,” he grumbled as he politely took his cup, eyeing it with resignation. “I’d kill for a burger.”

“And they nearly killed you,” I reminded him as we moved to sit on the sofa by the window. “This is a much better choice. See?” I pointedly sipped my smoothie. “I’m having one too.”

Luckily Kara’s cough covered the chuckle she couldn’t hold back.

Dad took a drink and smacked his lips with exaggerated pleasure before getting down to business. “I assume you’ve finished evaluating the client list.”

“I have,” I confirmed, channeling an inner calm to ease the nausea brought on by the current topic. “We lost a total of eleven clients. Many have either signed with First String or

they're in the process of doing so. Six were new artists in development that Gordon all but ignored. Three of our up-and-coming groups simply walked when their contracts expired and no one asked them to stay. The final two were top-tier bands. Rusty Threads just canceled today's meeting, but Kara and I are working to get them rescheduled. Dodging Reality, ironically, isn't answering my calls, but Kara is friends with their lawyer's secretary, who has confirmed that nothing has been signed yet."

"Damn it," my dad said, pounding his fist on his knee. "I never should have left Gordon in charge. His fucking ego trip and lack of artistic sense are killing my business."

The flush of anger on his face brought back vivid memories of him fighting for his life in an ICU hospital bed and was enough to stoke the fire already churning in my gut. It also had me willing to do anything I could to keep his stress levels down.

"I'm going to fix this," I promised.

"It isn't your fault," he reminded me, adding a stern look for emphasis.

But it was. Maybe not in absolute terms. But all of our current problems had started with me and my stupid decision to date a co-worker. To clear my conscience, I needed to ensure that LGR was whole again. It was the only way I would ever forgive myself and hope to make up for my mistakes.

"Where do we stand with Detrimental?"

It was a seemingly innocent question. After all, my dad had no idea that I'd spent the most incredible night of my life with Detrimental's drummer. Or that I'd inadvertently ghosted him the following morning. Or that depending on his reaction to learning who I was in a few hours, it could end up costing the company another valued client.

I pushed my smoothie aside, unable to stomach any more of it. "I have a video conference with them this afternoon," I said, striving for my best poker face. "Rumor has it they're considering going indie, so they're the perfect candidate for

our new contract structure. Plus, I have a few other aces up my sleeve.”

“Do whatever it takes. We need them.”

Those three words weighed heavily on me. We did need them. And it was my job to keep them. Because of the company’s recent troubles, my role as VP of Artist Acquisition also included artist retention and recovery. Of course, having the last name Greene, my role in the company had always extended beyond my current job title, and I had always carried extra responsibilities. This time, I had my work cut out for me. Not only did I need to atone for all the ways LGR had wronged Detrimental over the last year, but I also had to face a certain sexy drummer for the first time since I’d left him sleeping alone in a hotel bed. But whatever happened, I needed to find a way to salvage our working relationship.

To say it was a monumental task was an understatement.

“Want me to sit in on the call?” Dad offered. “I’ve always had a good rapport with them.”

“I can handle it,” I rushed to assure him, not wanting the added pressure of him witnessing the fallout of the only wild night I’d ever had. Besides, keeping Detrimental as part of the LGR family was literally my job. And I planned to do it well.

Following a quick review of our itinerary, we headed down one floor for our first official leadership meeting. Kara settled in and prepared to take notes while my dad and I took seats at opposite ends of the table. We began with introductions and the department heads welcoming us back, giving updates, and submitting various reports. Everything seemed to boil down to two main points. Sales were down along with the overall confidence artists had in us. Both had to change.

I watched with pride as my dad listened to each employee, valuing their ideas and input. Our top priority was restoring LGR’s reputation, and everyone was eager to brainstorm ideas to move the company forward now that Gordon’s reign was officially over. Press releases to announce my dad’s return were scheduled, and since the company would

be turning twenty-five later that year, the idea of an anniversary celebration was a hot topic. But we needed something now.

As more ideas flowed, I decided to share one that I'd been toying with. "What about a contest?" I asked. "Putting a spin on the reality TV competitions, we travel to different cities to audition local bands. Each city's winner gets to perform at a predetermined venue that night to showcase their talent. At the end of the contest, we select one grand prize winner and award a recording contract."

"Ready to Rock," Samantha from Promotions suggested as a name.

The idea swiftly gained traction as everyone began adding their thoughts.

"We can live stream the performances to build more of a following," Ben, the head of Media, added.

"Who and what determines the winner?" Ethan from Legal asked, sparking an outpouring of questions from the group.

"What will the audition process be?"

"Are we limiting it to the rock 'n' roll genre?"

"How do we protect ourselves from another label trying to sign one of our contestants?"

A whistle split the air, bringing everyone's attention back to my dad. "It's a promising idea, but we're not going to have all of the answers immediately. Let's take a few days to determine how each department could best contribute. Meet with your teams, and get their input. But this stays in-house for now. We'll meet again next week to see if this is something we want to pursue."

Chatter filled the air as everyone gathered their belongings and filed out. When my dad and I were the only two remaining, he softly closed the door.

"You hate the idea," I guessed.

“Not at all. It could be great. It could also blow up in our faces and turn into some gimmick. It would require a lot of resources too, and I’m not sure we’re able to risk so much on an unknown band that could wind up being a one-hit wonder. Right now, we need to focus on keeping our current clients and winning back the ones we’ve lost.”

As much as I hated it, I disagreed with him. It was the reason I hadn’t brought the idea to him sooner. I knew he would be hesitant but hoped the backing from other leaders would help sway him. Yes, in our absence, many of our clients had been treated poorly and we needed to regain their trust. But there was no reason we couldn’t do that while also searching out new talent and creating some positive hype for the company.

“Would you support it if I figured out a way to do both?”

“Sure, under the right circumstances, but you’ve already got your hands full. Do you want to push back the expansion into Charlotte for now?”

I vehemently shook my head. “No way. We’ve already got investors lined up. Delaying the project would make them question our commitment. Plus, the expansion is going to play a big part in keeping Detrimental, so we need to get into Charlotte before someone else does. It’s now or never.”

Dad relented with a sigh and a hug. “Alright. Just don’t spread yourself too thin.”

“I won’t.”

At least I would try not to. But getting the company back on track would be worth any added stress or lost sleep.



Five minutes before my video call with Detrimental, I did a final check in the mirror. Wearing a classic black business suit, my hair pulled back in a sophisticated knot at the base of my neck, my contacts taking the place of my glasses, and make-up smoothing out my complexion and covering the dark circles under my eyes, I looked every bit the polished professional. Even though I was shaking underneath.

It was quite a contrast from the last time Shawn had seen me, and despite all my nerves, it was possible he wouldn't even recognize me. Hell, he may not remember me at all. To him, I may have been just another notch in his bedpost; an itch that needed scratching. And I didn't want to admit how much it would hurt if that was true.

Leaving him in that hotel bed had not been easy. And leaving without so much as a note or a way for him to contact me had been something I'd questioned every day since.

At the time, my only thought had been getting to my dad. But as the hours stretched out in the hospital waiting room, with nothing but my thoughts for company, my hasty departure had weighed on me. I wasn't promiscuous by nature, nor was I versed in one-night-stand etiquette. Sure, disappearing like I had was rude by any standard, but it seemed impossibly awkward to call after the fact. Navigating an uncomfortable goodbye and moving on like our time together meant nothing was not a task I was equipped to handle either. So, I convinced myself it was for the best. We had our night, something I was sure Shawn was used to. I simply needed to get over my infatuation and accept it for what it likely was. And even if, by some miracle, I wasn't alone in my feelings, I hadn't been in a position to offer more than that one perfect night. My life had been flipped upside down with no room for anything except making sure my dad was alright. No matter how I looked at it, our time was over. There had been no use prolonging the inevitable.

Still, knowing how it had to end, I wished I could go back and relive it. Again and again.

Taking a deep breath, I popped two pills for the headache that was brewing and exited the private bathroom in my office.

Once I was seated at the table where Kara had everything set up in front of the large monitor, I took a deep breath and mentally reviewed all of the possible ways this could play out. Then I connected the video call.

When the image appeared, I couldn't help but seek out Shawn first. Seated at the side of the long conference table, his profile came into view. All I could do was stare. His shaggy blonde hair, unruly in a way that spoke of anxiously running his fingers through it, was longer than the last time I had seen him. However, the bouncing knee and fingers tugging at his collar were achingly familiar. And as his head turned, the darkest eyes I'd ever seen, strikingly similar to the color of his black polo shirt, pierced the screen. I was afforded only a brief moment to enjoy his presence before surprise registered on his face.

"Natalia?" Shock and anger laced his voice as his entire body stilled.

Okay, plan B: acknowledge we knew each other before moving straight into business. And while I was relieved that he remembered me, this wasn't the time to dwell on it. I had a job to do.

"Hello, Shawn," I replied, determined to remain professional. "And good afternoon, Detrimental. First, let me introduce myself." I steeled my nerves and forged on. "My name is Natalia Greene."

"Greene? As in Roger Greene?" Shawn demanded.

"He's my father."

I straightened my spine, prepared to endure the barbed comments and insinuations of nepotism. I'd heard plenty over the years from people who liked to cry foul despite the years of grunt labor I'd put in. Were my dues easier to pay because of my last name? Of course. And I recognized that. But I also worked my ass off to deserve every break I got, something conveniently overlooked by many.

The guys in Detrimental didn't say a word. They simply accepted the familial connection and were ready to move on. It

shouldn't have surprised me since they had always been a class act. Even in their earliest days, I'd been a fan. Unbeknownst to them, it had been my recommendation for an A&R rep to follow up after I'd seen them perform near my college campus. I'd recognized their talent immediately and, in a way, they had been my first find.

Naturally, I kept tabs on them over the years, telling myself that it was purely professional. Did I know the full names, hometown, and history of every other band we represented? No. But as I looked at the faces on the monitor in front of me, I could readily identify each of them. The heartthrob with soulful eyes and a lethal smile was Jaxon Hartley, lead singer. Olive skin, long jet-black hair, and a heart of gold: Eli Rivera, bass player. The Sawyer Brothers, Lance and Derek: lead and rhythm guitar. Lance was the outgoing and outrageous one with his ever-changing hair color and growing tattoo collection. Derek was more of the quiet, hulking protector.

Then there was Shawn Blackwell, drums. Handsome in his own right, he was known as the brains of the group. There was also a depth and hint of mystery about him that I'd always found intriguing. At times he came across as stoic and aloof, but there was so much more going on below the surface than he ever let on. I'd seen it when he played, but even more so during our night together.

Stay focused, Natalia.

The guys first met while attending the same high school, and the band formed in Lupine, North Carolina, where they currently lived on a shared property. Jaxon's sister, Callie, worked as their booking agent, and his girlfriend, Anna, was the band's personal assistant and unofficial PR rep.

I also knew the media's version of the band, especially Jaxon, who had been portrayed as a heartless bad boy. But few people knew that the band had been forced to uphold an image that they despised, rightfully so, and deserved much better than they'd gotten from Gordon and LGR over the past year.

Looking anywhere but at Shawn, I got the meeting underway. With my heart racing and my pulse pounding in my ears, I somehow managed to appear composed. Luckily, I'd done my homework and was able to coast on autopilot. I verified my dad's return and did everything in my power to persuade them to give us another chance. As directed, I went above and beyond with extra incentives, hitting them where I knew it would have the biggest impact: their music. Gordon had taken their art and twisted it into something so unrecognizable that I really couldn't blame them for wanting out now that their contract was ending. But I refused to let that happen.

With sheer determination, I got them to schedule a time to meet in person during their upcoming break to discuss a new contract. They made no promises, and I fully expected to be hit with a list of demands as their lawyer began negotiations in the coming days. They were certainly in a position to insist on changes. Fortunately, I was in a position to make them happen.

Only after our business was concluded did I allow my gaze to drift back to Shawn. He hummed with energy and looked ready to bolt from the room the second the call ended. But the anger radiating from his eyes was what made my chest ache. It also made my anxiety spike because if he wasn't willing to stay with LGR, we would lose our most valuable client yet. And there would be no doubt who was to blame.

We needed to have a private conversation. The sooner the better. To remain discreet, I gave the entire band my direct contact information, including my personal number. And though it was intended for all of them, I looked at Shawn as I spoke. "Please feel free to reach out at any time with questions or concerns."

His eyes bored into mine, giving no outward sign that the message had been received. But I had opened the door. The next move was his to make.

As the screen went black, I sagged back in my chair and closed my eyes in relief.

Until an immediate text message came through.

Unknown: *Did you know who I was that night?*

Chapter 2

Shawn

It was only the third day of our two-week break, but I had already lost a shoe. Not that misplacing something was a new experience. Put me on a crowded tour bus, where storage space was limited, and I was fine. I knew exactly where everything was because being organized was a necessity. But at home in my cabin, with no immediate need to stay tidy and plenty of room to sprawl, my belongings ended up all over the place. It had always been that way.

Folding my half-packed suitcase closed, I searched behind it. I peered under the bed. No luck. With a weird hitch in my step from wearing only one sneaker, I made my way across my bedroom to the piles of dirty clothes. I'd begun sorting them yesterday but had gotten distracted by my mother's phone call demanding my presence at dinner.

Dinner. Family. Souvenirs.

Hobbling to the living room, I dug through the tote bag sitting on the couch. Placing the bottle of wine I'd gotten for my mother onto the coffee table, I pulled out the little blue gift bags containing necklaces I'd gotten my sisters at Tiffany & Co. in New York City. Then I reached for the new golf club that was leaning against the wall and put it with the other items. I'd purchased the state-of-the-art driver at an elite country club in the hopes it would impress my father. I knew better. But I kept trying anyway.

And okay, I didn't personally buy the necklaces. I'd bribed Callie to do it because even the thought of tediously picking out something in a store as pretentious as that made me want to gouge out my eyeballs. But because of my clever solution, my sisters had lovely gifts and Callie had gotten a nice pair of earrings out of the deal. It was a win for all of us.

Adding one last item to the pile, I made a mental note to grab a wine bag and some of the bows Callie kept stocked in

the main house. Then I left my purchases where I was sure to see them and, hopefully, remember to take them with me later.

Peering back into the bag, I sifted through the various craft beers and bath products I'd picked up along the way for Mr. and Mrs. McCarthy, the caretakers of our property. Shouldering the bag, I decided to try to catch them before they left for the day. Halfway to the door, it occurred to me that one foot was still bare. And it was only seven in the morning. Just another day in the life of a brain that operated on a slightly different frequency.

Placing the bag on the table, I resumed my mission, finally locating the rogue piece of footwear under the dirty laundry. After setting the timer on my phone to keep from overdoing it, I stepped off my porch and onto the sidewalk that led to the paved path surrounding a private lake. Though jogging wasn't my idea of fun, exercise helped center me. And since I preferred the outdoors, I ran, hiked, biked, swam, kayaked, paddled, and rowed whenever possible. Basically, I was happy with anything that was available and got the chemicals in my brain pumping to help ensure a good day.

The soundtrack for today's run was the advanced copy of the debut album by Bursting with Apathy, a new indie band that I'd had the honor of producing. Not a song or two, as I had done for other artists. An entire album. The release party was only a few days away and had been intentionally scheduled to align with my break. Wanting to make the most of my trip to Boulder, I had accepted a few other invitations but was mostly looking forward to attending a concert at Red Rocks Amphitheater followed by a few days of hiking some nearby trails. A week of music and nature was sure to help me unwind after six weeks of being cramped on a tour bus.

Just in time to do it all over again.

I took a moment to stretch, noting the early morning sun glinting off the water and a family of deer near the tree line on the other side. The serene landscape provided a picturesque backdrop, and I was forever grateful to have it right outside my door each day.

Thinking back to the first time I had toured the property, I took great pride in how far it had come. Originally designed as a vacation resort, the developer had abandoned the plans midway due to funding issues. His loss was our gain after I'd approached the guys with my idea for turning the thousand-acre property into a home for all of us. With the main lodge and eight cabins only partially built, it had also given me a much-needed project following our first major headlining tour. Though everyone had been fully invested and we'd made major decisions together, I had eagerly overseen all of the minor details and handled the day-to-day tasks. A few months later, we'd been able to move in and had called it home ever since.

JELDS Lodge, named using all of our initials, faced the large lake and had four cabins flanking each side; cabin being a loose term for each luxurious two-bedroom home. With mine located at the far end, I jogged past Lance's cabin, Derek's, and then Callie's before reaching the main building. Beyond that was the cabin where our tour manager, Pops, lived. There was a guest cabin, then Jaxon's, and Eli's sat at the opposite end.

While we weren't all under one roof, which was probably a good thing considering how much time we spent in close quarters on the road, it gave me great satisfaction knowing everyone was nearby. It was especially nice to live in a place where I could relax and be myself without being isolated.

All was quiet as I ran along the paved path to complete my first lap, and I assumed that everyone else was enjoying the luxury of sleeping in their own beds. I rarely had company at that hour, which suited me just fine. It gave me time to clear my head. In fact, the early morning solitude usually allowed me to do my best thinking.

These days, my mind was split in two. Half of my brain was fixated on my next major project, which involved turning the empty rooms on the lower level of the lodge into recording studios. Having private studios would give the band the convenience of recording locally and on our own schedule, something that had always been a part of my long-term plans.

They would also provide me with the flexibility I needed to produce other artists on the side. And while Detrimental would always be my top priority, I needed other outlets during my downtime. With the final leg of our tour coming up, there was a vast void of free time looming that needed to be filled, making it the perfect time to finalize this project.

Whenever I wasn't thinking about studio designs or researching the best sound equipment, my thoughts turned to Natalia. For the last six days, our simple text exchange had been seared into my brain.

Me: *Did you know who I was that night?*

Natalia: *Yes.*

Whether my phone had been tucked into my back pocket, sitting in the next room, or buried at the bottom of a duffel bag, I could practically hear her message taunting me, daring me to respond. Late at night, nestled in my bunk on the bus, I'd stared at it. And I could practically hear Grammy's voice saying *Don't ask a question if you don't want the answer.*

The problem was that I had wanted an answer.

For weeks after our night together, I'd struggled to accept that we were a one-night stand. Though I wasn't sure what to call us, that wasn't it. I'd had my share of those. Hell, I'd had one-hour stands with groupies on the road. And while my time with Natalia had all of the makings of a one-and-done situation, something about it felt different. The connection had been more than just physical, and I thought she felt it too.

Granted, there was no talk of anything past that night. So, I couldn't explain why it hurt so much to wake up alone. But it did. And like a fool, I waited for her to come back. Amongst the tangled sheets, I remembered how we laughed and ate the pie she somehow kept track of before devouring each other again. And I recalled the feel of her wrapped in my arms as I had drifted to sleep.

Picturing her naked body spread across the bed required adjusting my shorts. Imagining the taste of her skin had me slowing my pace to accommodate my erection. And replaying

the way our bodies had fit together got me so winded that I had to stop and catch my breath. Without a doubt, it had been the best sex of my life.

But then reality came crashing down.

With nothing more than a first name to go on, I'd been forced to accept that she was gone. No note, no exchanged phone numbers, nothing. Simply gone. And though I'd wanted answers to the dozens of questions plaguing me, there weren't any.

Over time, I stopped asking. Instead, I hardened myself to the truth. It was me. I was the reason my relationships always failed. I was the reason women left. And though the knowledge wasn't new, that night drove the point home.

Sure, I could have my pick of women any night of the week. That wasn't ego, it was the truth. After all, they came flocking to the shows hoping to catch the eye of a rock star. And if I really wanted a girlfriend, there were plenty of women willing to overlook my faults in exchange for the lifestyle my bank account could provide. But a serious partner? Someone who might actually love me for who I was? That wasn't going to happen.

And to taunt me with what I could never have, Natalia was back in my thoughts and in my life, proving my theory. Because she hadn't just walked out on a stranger. She'd walked out on me.



Needing to catch up on business before my trip, I locked myself in my home office and blasted an upbeat playlist. Shielded from any possible distractions, I sifted through all of the emails that had been accumulating. Most were easily trashed or required simple responses. Some I skipped over,

like the reminder to schedule my personal interview for Detrimental's multi-issue feature in *Dynamic Notes Magazine*, hoping it would go away if I ignored it long enough.

A few others required more attention, including those from our business manager or lawyer regarding our upcoming contract renewal with LGR. As expected, they handled the bulk of our business affairs, but I was always given copies of everything to review and approve before they were finalized. Reading through all of the tedious fine print was grueling, but it kept me informed. I'd been helpless to fix the problems we encountered with our last contract, something I was determined to avoid in the future. To do that, I had educated myself and was now more actively involved in all of our business matters.

Our terms for this contract were extensive, the most important being that we wanted creative control of our music and that we would have the final say in our public image. Essentially, we wanted all of the freedom of being an indie band while having the backing of a major record label. Unrealistic? Possibly, considering the way the industry was run. But we were prepared to walk away if LGR couldn't meet our needs. Being an indie band would require more work on our part, but the artistic freedom would be well worth it, a lesson we had recently learned the hard way after being forced to go along with decisions that left us resenting our label.

Label. Lucky Greene. Natalia.

I wondered what her reaction would be to reading the proposed changes. I got the impression that LGR was willing to do anything necessary to keep us signed with them, so I was cautiously optimistic that we could reach an agreement. In the end, we didn't want to leave if Roger was back. We also weren't backing down. And we were covering our asses in case circumstances changed again.

After a few hours of staring at the screen, I was almost relieved when my phone alerted me that it was time to get ready for my family dinner.

Almost.

I would gladly face a hundred more emails if it meant not putting on a damned tie. However, dressing appropriately for every occasion had been drilled into me at an early age. And dinner at my parents' house was an occasion. As a kid, I had learned that arriving at the dining room looking less than perfect was unacceptable. Enduring my father's wrath on the subject had left a lasting impression, so much so that I still couldn't bring myself to wear jeans to a casual business meeting. And because I tried to be a dutiful son, I not only put on a tie, I wore the new shoes my mother sent after noticing scuffs on my usual pair at our last dinner. They pinched my toes and I hated every inch of them. But it was still easier to wear what was expected instead of what was comfortable.

The drive itself was painless. "Under Pressure" played on a loop like a mantra. It was a ridiculous habit, but the lyrics gave me strength while validating my feelings as I faced the task ahead. Getting into the right frame of mind made all the difference.

As usual, traffic was minimal, and the scenery between Lupine and my parents' house in the nearby town of Villosa remained familiar, though it was always changing. Both towns had grown over the years with Villosa expanding to include several chain stores and franchise restaurants. However, Lupine had resisted any significant change. In fact, the town remained so small that kids were still bused to schools in Villosa, which was how I'd met the rest of the guys in the band.

Being the only one in the group that hadn't lived in Lupine, I often felt like the odd man out. But with my parents' preference for having me out of sight, I'd spent a lot of my time at Jaxon's house. There, Mama Bee and PapaV made me feel more welcome than I ever had in my own home. And while I couldn't speak for the rest of the guys, I was pretty sure they felt the same way.

As I took the exit off the highway connecting the two towns, my shoulders began to tighten. Spending time with my family was difficult at best, and a tension headache would be the least of the damage done. Dinner conversation usually

alternated between the superficial and the mundane. And while I didn't care about the latest trends, appearances were important to them. Besides, having my sisters drone on about the latest fashions meant I wasn't in my father's crosshairs.

Ultimately, it didn't matter how I was dressed or how successful the band had grown, my father would find a reason to make his disappointment in me known. To him, I was nothing but an embarrassment, and just saying the word musician left a bad taste in his mouth. However, we shared DNA, and with that came specific obligations. I was expected at holidays and routine family dinners for the sake of maintaining some semblance of a relationship. Of course, it helped when I brought gifts.

Gifts. Bag. Bows.

I made a sharp right and parked in front of a general store before jogging inside for the items I'd forgotten earlier. Not that I was surprised. Also not surprising, I was running tight on time, so I hustled back to my SUV and pushed the speed limit the rest of the way.

Turning into the long driveway lined with immaculate landscaping, I couldn't help but hate everything the imposing house represented. It screamed old money, sitting at the top of a hill to look down on the town, much like the people inside of it. Being the largest house around, it was also a bit ostentatious for a single family. But it came with prestige, something my parents valued above all else.

Parking in the circular drive, I slipped the bottle into the bag and slapped some shiny ribbons onto the other gifts before hauling everything to the door. Taking a deep breath, I mentally donned my best-behavior cloak and rang the doorbell.

"You're late," my mother said by way of greeting. "Your father is already in a mood, so don't antagonize him."

Great.

She straightened my tie and brushed some imaginary lint from my shirt before leaving me in her wake. Past the formal

living room and library, she slid open the door to the dining room, where everyone was already gathered.

I barely had enough time to set my offerings on the sideboard before I was wrapped in a fierce hug.

“There’s my boy.”

“Hi, Grammy,” I said, inhaling the sweet scent of her perfume.

Without her presence, I would have rebelled against coming long ago. But I knew how much these dinners meant to her. I had a sneaking suspicion she was the one behind them. Even though getting my father to enjoy a meal with me was a lost cause, I loved her for trying and knew her heart was in the right place.

My sisters were next, doling out ridiculous air kisses and empty compliments long enough for me to hand over the jewelry bags. Audrie and Alivia tore into them, squealing at the similar necklaces. Immediately eyeing what the other got, they traded before putting them on and snapping selfies.

Catching my father’s cold stare, I decided it was best not to delay dinner any further. Dry conversation went with a surprisingly juicy roast, and gossip was dished out alongside crisply roasted potatoes. I did my best to nod and smile as expected while hoping to remain as invisible as possible. No such luck.

“Christ, you need a haircut,” my father complained.

“Leave him be,” Grammy warned.

This was the part of the evening that I dreaded. I hated listening to them argue. More than that, I hated that I was the reason for it.

“It’s stylish, Daddy,” Alivia said in my defense.

“Not in the business world it isn’t. You wouldn’t catch Barret or Preston with their hair like that.”

Ah, yes. My sisters’ boyfriends, hand-picked Duke alumni and loyal underlings at my father’s company.

Something I would never be. But if my sisters married them, he would finally have the sons he'd always wanted.

"Were they busy tonight?" I asked in a feeble attempt to redirect the conversation. I just wanted to get through the evening so I could go home and finish packing.

Trip. Hotel. Natalia.

Ingrained fear reminded me that this was not the time to let my attention wander. I pinched my leg, an old habit from my childhood, to keep from going down that rabbit hole.

"They're in Vegas on business," Audrie explained.

Grammy nodded solemnly. "Well, I'm sure you girls have nothing to fear. Sin City is no match for haircuts like theirs."

Audrie smiled proudly while Alivia nodded. Neither had learned the art of sarcasm.

I couldn't help but take pity on them and filled the awkward silence. "Lucky for me, the people I do business with don't care what my hair looks like."

My father scoffed. "They simply don't expect more from someone who bangs on drums and calls it work."

"Well, by that logic, I have no reason to try to impress them."

The glare he sent my direction had me withholding the fact that my lawyer had multiple tattoos and piercings. I also didn't bother explaining, again, that there was more to my job than what he saw. But there was no convincing my father, so I didn't bother wasting my breath. Instead, I resorted to bribery.

With dinner cleared, I rose to get my parents' gifts. Setting the bag in front of my mother, she pulled out the wine bottle. The price tag on it alone would have her bragging to her social circle for weeks. Yes, she was shallow and materialistic, but the smile on her face made it worth the purchase.

"Thank you, darling. I'll be sure to save this for a special occasion." Translation: *I want to keep this around long enough to brag to everyone I know.*

I passed the golf club to my father, who held it at arm's length to inspect it.

"It's a new model, exclusive to the Pine Peaks Golf Club," I explained.

His jaw tightened, desire for the object finally outweighing his urge to criticize it. "If it's so exclusive, how the hell did you manage to get it?"

"Lex Fraser came backstage at a show in D.C. and invited me to join him for a round the next day."

I hated name-dropping, but it was a necessary evil when speaking with my father. And the fact that a former PGA champion had deemed me worth his time had my father turning purple.

"*You* played golf with Lex Fraser?"

I opened my phone to the photo of us with a few other well-known golfers. Lex had one arm around my shoulders, and everyone was making various faces and devil horns with their hands.

"They're all fans of the band," I said, shrugging my shoulders. They were just people.

My father made a choking noise but tightened his grip on the club. Sadly, I considered it a win.

Moving on, I passed the final gift to Grammy.

"You didn't need to get me anything," she gently scolded, opening the sturdy gift box. "Oh," fell from her lips in a soft sigh.

Alivia peered over her shoulder. "Syrup?"

It was indeed an assortment of flavor-infused maple syrups.

"When in Vermont," I paraphrased, downplaying the sentiment behind the gift. But judging from the glow in Grammy's eyes, she understood perfectly.

We shared many special memories from the times I'd stayed with her. Especially our first summer together. Free

from the restrictions at my house, where sugar had been banned from my diet, she let me eat pancakes for breakfast every day. Sometimes, we even had breakfast for dinner. It was just one of the ways she had changed my life for the better, and I remembered them all.

Deciding to leave on a positive note for once, I bent to kiss my mother's cheek. "I have an early flight in the morning."

"Where are you off to this time?" she asked with a wistful tone. I knew she had always wanted to travel more, but the hours my father kept didn't allow for many personal trips.

"Boulder," I answered. "I'm attending a release party for a new indie band." I left out the part where I was their producer. Since losing the opportunity to produce Detrimental's album last year, I hesitated to share any news until it was a done deal. Otherwise, it provided more ammunition for my father to launch at me.

"Oh, that sounds nice," she said in her most patronizing voice, happily buzzed after reaching the bottom of her wine glass several times throughout the night.

"Sounds like a colossal waste of time," my father grumbled.

To him, it would be. For me, it was the next step forward. This project had the potential to be huge. And even if it didn't win any awards, it was good experience and a way to be recognized within the industry. Pair that with the studios I was planning, and it could grow into something remarkable. And it would be all mine.

My father had never given me any credit for the band's success, pointing out that there were five of us and assuming that the others must be carrying my weight. The lodge, while impressive and worth more than my childhood home multiple times over, was also shared between us. And while my investment accounts were flush, I didn't flaunt my wealth. But having my name and talent recognized by the top executives in the industry would be something for my father to

acknowledge. And I might finally be deemed worthy in his eyes.

Grammy walked out with me, carefully placing the box on her passenger seat before turning for one last hug.

I soaked it up knowing I wouldn't see her again until after the tour ended. "Enjoy Europe with your friends."

"Let's plan dinner, just us when I get back," she suggested, a look of resignation in her eyes.

We both knew my father didn't want these family dinners, and forcing us all together wasn't helping anyone. Maybe it was time to accept that and move on.

"I would really like that."

I watched her drive away, some of the heaviness in my chest lifting. But, as it always did, the emotional hangover from my father's bitterness followed me home. It never failed to upset me, though in some ways, I understood it. As the youngest child, I was the son my father had always wanted. I just wasn't the perfect replica of himself he'd envisioned. Not only that, I outright refused to fit the mold he'd created for me. In his eyes, I was the fuck-up of the family, and he took every opportunity to remind me of it.

With that dark cloud of thoughts swirling over me, I blindly shoved items into my suitcase. I would probably forget something important like underwear and be forced to buy new ones. It was the reason I had six phone chargers and more socks than I knew what to do with. I was forgetful on a good day, so the odds of remembering everything tonight were slim at best. Pulling a handful of shirts from their hangers, those odds narrowed when a particular item hanging in the back of the closet caught my attention.

T-shirt. Nosh Pit. Natalia.

Everything came back to her these days, and seeing that shirt dredged up a slew of memories. Most were good, but overshadowing the happy times was the hurt of waking up alone. And because I was already raw from seeing my father, it ate at me the whole time I finished packing and got ready for

bed. It filled my thoughts as I tossed and turned, recalling every conversation, every smile, and every touch. No matter how many times I analyzed the night, nothing stood out to make me question our connection. And no matter how hard I tried to turn off my brain, sleep would not come. I couldn't shake the unrelenting need to know why she left.

Despite the hour, I did the only thing I could think of. I grabbed my phone and fired off a single text, hoping I wasn't inviting more trouble.

Chapter 3

Natalia

Tossing my glasses onto the desk, I rubbed my eyes in the hopes that the words in front of me would stop blurring. *Just one more hour*, I begged my body. *Then I promise to get some sleep*. Not that my work would be done, but I would have a little less to start my day with tomorrow.

A quick glance at the time confirmed it was already tomorrow and had been for a few hours. These days, it wasn't unusual for my workdays to finish in the early morning hours, especially while managing so many different projects at once. And while I knew my schedule wasn't sustainable, my unrelenting guilt and determination kept me going. It was crunch time, and I planned to utilize every available hour.

There were only ten days left to finalize all of the details in the new contract structure we were rolling out. Ten days to ensure that LGR was ready to become an innovator in the industry again. Ten days before my idea would be put to the test. Because in ten days, we would be meeting with Detrimental and presenting an offer that only LGR could make.

I had every reason to believe that the guys in the band would accept the terms of their contract. After all, some of the details were inspired by their recent demands and would give them more freedom than anyone else in the industry. But they were the first client being signed under the new structure, and I had to get it right. There was no room for error.

Assuring my dad that this was the right direction to take, attending endless meetings with all of the different departments to finalize the changes, and networking to build a more comprehensive production team was a full-time job in itself. That didn't take into account the time I spent working to bring back the clients we had lost or the new clients I was seeking to sign. Or the time spent managing the A&R team. On top of that, I was dealing with some staff drama, analyzing real estate options for the Charlotte expansion, and I was neck-

deep in research for the Ready to Rock proposal. And if I could overcome the last few hurdles for the contest, I would need to be available to travel in a matter of weeks, when I would finally get to do what I liked best: scour the country for hidden talent.

I only wished there were two of me to get it all done. And that the timing was better. I hated leaving town while the company was still vulnerable, but this was my project and I wasn't ready to hand it off to anyone else. The positive exposure the contest would generate was too important. Besides, I could work from the road with Kara's help back in the office.

The only real worry I had was in leaving my dad. His doctors had all assured me he was healthy, but accepting that was easier said than done. He was my only family, and nearly losing him was the most difficult thing I'd ever been through. Naturally, he insisted he was back to normal, but I wondered if he was likely to approve Ready to Rock just so that I wouldn't be around to nag him. Which would also happen if I got my own apartment, something he'd been hinting at recently.

I had moved back home last year to help take care of him following his surgery, but with so much time focused on his health and now the company, I hadn't been in a hurry to find a new place. And though the split floor plan in the penthouse condo gave us each plenty of privacy, it was never meant to be a permanent arrangement.

Picking up my phone to add contacting a realtor to my ever-growing to-do list, I was completely derailed by an incoming text message.

Shawn: *Why did you leave?*

For days, I had been anxiously anticipating the question, knowing I owed him an honest answer. Yet it still sent a fresh wave of apprehension through me.

With the soft glow of the bedside lamp at my back, I moved to the windows of my bedroom to stare blankly at the city lights. I recalled a similar view of the city from Shawn's hotel room and could practically feel his arms wrapping

around me from behind. Then his solid weight pressing me against the glass.

In truth, not a day passed that I didn't think of him and our time together. Many nights, those memories had been my only company, and the mere thought of his body pressed against mine still got my blood heating. But it was more than that. We'd been able to read each other's responses, and there had been an ease that belied our short relationship. Even before anything physical happened, I'd sensed every subtle shift in Shawn's mood that night. From his hesitance to join me for dinner to his cautious competitiveness during trivia to his increasing discomfort as the band played, an undeniable awareness had permeated me.

Part of my job included being able to read people. And while I was generally good at it, I'd never had such a visceral reaction to someone. The turmoil swirling in his eyes had been painful to witness, and I'd needed to soothe the tension in his body as if it were my own. He somehow eased my worries too, and as the night progressed, we both forgot everything but our pleasure. Until an urgent phone call had ripped it all away.

In the days and weeks that followed, the memory of that night had been the only thing holding me together. Following my dad's heart attack and his decision to appoint Gordon as CEO for a one-year term while he recovered, I had also taken a leave from my job. I refused to be farther than the next room while my dad recovered. There was no way I was leaving him for hours or even days for work, which suddenly seemed inconsequential in the grand scheme of things.

However, I wasn't prepared for being at home all of the time. My new role of caretaker became an endless task of managing doctor appointments, home-health specialists, medication refills, dietary adjustments, and worry. It was exhausting and isolating. But thinking of Shawn gave me a link to the outside world and made me feel a little less alone.

I knew the loneliness was getting to me when Shawn began invading my dreams. In one of them, he showed up at my door after tracking me down. He swept me into a kiss, confessing his love for me and promising he would always be

there for me. In another, I stood rooted at my bedroom window, watching the destruction of a tornado as it approached. Lightning flashed as debris floated through the air, spinning at an ever-increasing speed. Just before the storm reached me, I was pulled into Shawn's arms and the skies cleared. Though the details varied a little over time, both became recurring dreams. And no matter what else changed, the intensity of them always left me feeling safe and protected the rest of the day.

The comfort those dreams brought was very real, even if the dreams themselves were only the makings of my fanciful imagination. Things like that didn't happen in real life. And, eventually, I had to return to reality.

Shawn's anger had been obvious during the video call last week. And my response to his first text message probably didn't help. Yes, I had known who he was. I never would have gone to a hotel room with a complete stranger. Looking back, I should have made that clear. I knew what it was like to be used for who I was and couldn't help but wonder if he thought that's what I'd done. That alone would justify his anger. If not, there was one other possibility to consider. Could he be upset because I left?

Knowing that my concentration was shot for the night, at least on work, I returned to my desk and closed my laptop. Then, I pulled back the covers and crawled into bed. The question on my phone was burned into my retinas, and I could still see it when I closed my eyes. There was no escaping it. Regardless of our upcoming meeting, I knew I needed to make things right with him. I owed him that much. And if I had any hope of keeping Detrimental as a client, we needed to be able to work together without any added tension. Hoping for the best, I sent a reply.

Me: *It's complicated, but I would like to explain. Can we talk?*

Sinking into my pillow, my weary eyes slid shut again. Fatigue weighed me down yet I felt like I was floating at the same time. It was a strange paradox, just like being able to recall every detail of my night with Shawn with startling

clarity while somehow feeling like it had happened to someone else. And, honestly, I hadn't been myself. I'd barely slept all week and was treading through a haze of stress and worry. By the time I ended up at The Nosh Pit, I was running on fumes, seeking something familiar to steady me.

Drifting away on the realization that not much was different between then and now, the buzzing of my phone had my eyes popping open to see Shawn's name lighting up the screen. I had assumed he would call sometime tomorrow. Clearly, I was wrong.

"Hi," I answered, trying not to sound half asleep or like a teenager getting her first call from a boy. "Thanks for calling."

"Why did you leave?" he bit out.

His words crashed over me, reminiscent of another time his gravelly voice filled my ear. But the tone this time was far from the sultry vibrato in my dreams. Beneath the surface of his blunt question, there was also a hint of wariness that wasn't there before. His defensive tone was meant to bury it, but I heard it alongside the hurt I had caused.

"It was never my intention to leave like that," I began, debating how much I wanted to reveal. "But I did, and I owe you an apology and an explanation."

"So explain." He wasn't making it easy for me, not that I blamed him.

"To clarify, I trust you with what I'm about to say, but a lot of it isn't common knowledge."

"Understood."

And I knew he did. Being in the public eye, he would understand better than most about maintaining personal privacy and the importance of trusting who you shared information with.

I took a deep breath. "Last June, my dad had a massive heart attack."

It was still difficult to talk about some of the events that had taken place over the past year. Every time I said the

words, I relived that traumatic time a little. Remembering the fear in my dad's voice as I held his hand, the call for paramedics, and the images of him struggling to live as we waited was so hard. So was recalling the days of trying to get him stabilized, running tests, and determining the course of treatment by specialists spewing a barrage of medical jargon. Then came the decisions needing to be made, both personal and professional. I had to breathe through the residual panic, though it was getting better with time.

"The night we met at The Nosh Pit, I needed an escape. Dad was scheduled for surgery the following morning, and I was a nervous wreck."

"That explains the shadows in your eyes."

People often looked at me and saw my carefully constructed tough outer shell. So, the fact that he not only noticed my sorrow but remembered it, made my heart warm in an unfamiliar way.

"It had been a rough couple of days," I admitted. "I could be wrong, but you seemed upset as well."

"Yeah, I met with Gordon that morning. He was already pissing on everything to mark his territory."

"I'm sorry. I was so wrapped up in my own problems that I never even questioned why you were in town that night. And I had no idea that my dad's illness would have such swift consequences."

"That's understandable." He went quiet, apparently lost in thought. "So, I was a distraction."

The acceptance in his voice was painful to hear. "Not at all. The band was supposed to be a distraction." I chewed my lip, knowing I was about to divulge more than I should but helpless to stop it thanks to my muddled brain. "The only way I can describe meeting you was like finding a light in overwhelming darkness." The heavy breathing in my ear was evidence of some powerful emotions on his end, but I couldn't decipher them. Was my confession too intense? Did he share

the sentiment? “I hate not being able to see you. Please talk to me.”

“I’m still processing. When did you know who I was?”

“From the moment I saw you. I’ve been following Detrimental since your early festival and college venue days.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

I exhaled loudly as I thought how best to explain it. “Partly because it didn’t seem like you wanted to be recognized. I also didn’t want to have to go into detail about my dad since he insisted on keeping the news private. It was easier to pretend we were just two regular people who met and hit it off. That was cowardly on my part. And it’s no excuse, but the night was going so well. I didn’t want to ruin it.”

He cleared his throat and there was some rustling in the background, but he remained silent for a long stretch. I waited, respecting his need to sort through what I’d just said. Turning off the bedside lamp, I got comfortable, wishing I was looking into his eyes instead of the empty pillow beside me.

“Is that why you left?”

“No. I woke up to a call letting me know that my dad’s surgery time was being moved up because of a cancellation. I completely panicked at the thought of not seeing him beforehand. I wasn’t thinking of anything except getting to the hospital as fast as possible.”

“I sleep like the dead, but I wish you had woken me up.”

“Honestly, I do too. After I realized what I’d done, I should have tried calling the hotel, even at the risk of you blowing me off. Instead, I kept putting it off until things settled down. But the longer I waited, the more I figured I was too late. By then, you either hated me or had forgotten all about me. So, I took the coward’s way out and avoided the issue altogether. It was a shitty thing to do to you, and I’m very sorry.”

He let out a low groan before simply saying, “Okay.”

“Okay?” I asked, needing a little more to go on. “Is that ‘Okay, I hear you and will think about it’ or ‘Okay, I understand why you did it and forgive you’ or ‘Okay, I agree you did an awful thing and will hate you for all of eternity’?”

He huffed out a laugh. “Okay, that was a really sincere apology. The rest of it depends.”

“On...?”

“On what you want from me.”

I blamed the sleep deprivation, but my first thought was that I wanted a repeat of our night together. I wanted to feel that intense connection with him again. And I wanted to wake up wrapped in his arms, where I wasn’t alone when bad things happened. I wanted to see if what I felt in my dreams was as good as the real thing.

Unfortunately, anything beyond a professional relationship was out of the question. A lot of people in the industry had their eyes on me, waiting for LGR to fail so they could swoop in and pick at the remains. Thanks to Troy, doubts about my integrity were also swirling and, in some cases, judgment had already been passed. But I was determined to prove that they’d all underestimated me. To do that, I had to maintain a level of professionalism with Shawn and every other client we had to avoid any further doubt in people’s minds. My focus had to be on the needs of the company. I couldn’t afford to get sidetracked, no matter how tempting. Lucky for me, my biggest temptation lived hundreds of miles away and was going back on tour soon. That was sure to make things easy.

“I’d like to put the past behind us so we can be friends.”

“Friends?” Doubt and disbelief laced his voice.

“Yes. I enjoyed spending time with you. And if I hadn’t left that morning, I’d like to think we would have parted as friends. I could be wrong. Maybe you would have taken my number to be polite and then tossed it.” His grunt told me he disagreed. “Either way, there’s a million reasons why anything more than friendship wouldn’t have worked, geography being

a big one.” Of course, we would have been free to meet up whenever he was in town, an option I regretted no longer having. “But for the sake of working together, I want us to have a clean slate. What do you think?”

He was quiet for a moment before letting out a defeated sigh. “Friends it is.”



Reuniting with Shawn gave me a burst of energy and happiness that nothing seemed to shake. Even the endless paperwork and research became more tolerable. Best of all, he’d agreed to be my friend. Well, he didn’t say no to being friends. The fact that he seemed less than thrilled with the possibility was something I chose to take as a challenge. And in my delirium, I was determined to not only make up for the way I’d treated him last year but to be the best damned friend he ever had. Granted, that was unlikely given the history with his bandmates, who were, in fact, his best friends. But it didn’t stop me from trying.

Each morning the following week, I started with a text message. A simple greeting was then followed by stilted questions asking how he was doing. My inadequate skills left me disheartened, and it didn’t help when his responses were delayed by several hours and remained sporadic as the days passed. Still, I refused to give up, telling myself it was for the good of the company.

Shawn slowly began to share more about himself, and I learned that he was in Colorado. He was vague about the reason, but he seemed to be enjoying his time there based on the photos and comments he sent. Meanwhile, I spent an exorbitant amount of my limited time searching for silly music memes, puns, and jokes to send at random times throughout the day. He eventually responded in kind and had a quirky

sense of humor that always brought a smile to my face. I started looking forward to our interactions so much that I set a special notification sound on my phone for him and made sure the volume was turned up on my normally silenced phone to make sure I didn't miss a single message. Was that typical, everyday friend stuff? How would I know? It seemed to work, and that was all that mattered.

As if he knew I was thinking about him, a drumbeat sounded from my phone, which was propped against my computer monitor for easy access. The smile that blossomed still felt rusty from disuse, but I suspected that would soon change. Unlike my workload. I constantly had enough to do for three full days, as evidenced by my cluttered desk and the incessant pinging of my office email alert. Yet all I cared about in that moment was finding out what Shawn had sent me. Since our late-night phone call, this was the first time he had initiated a conversation, and such a milestone deserved my full attention.

Shawn: *Flight home delayed. Stuck in hell. Please send snacks.*

Laughing at the absurdity of his message, I turned in my office chair to view the river while simultaneously hitting the call button before I had time to talk myself out of it.

“Can I just say how much I hate flying?” he asked without preamble.

“And you don't want me to send the company jet, just food?”

“Damn. It's times like this that I need to seriously reconsider the benefits of becoming a diva. I could demand both as part of my standard rider.”

“Only the finest imported water would be served, and the Skittles would be pre-sorted by color.”

“Naturally. I will never understand why people demand only certain colored M&Ms. They all taste exactly the same. It's the Skittles you have to watch out for. One wrong flavor

combination and you can go from tasting a rainbow to tasting a mud puddle.”

The fact that he was completely serious had me enthralled. “Interesting. What other demands would you have? I don’t want to offend your delicate palate at our next meeting.”

“Well, since you’re asking, I hate anything lumpy, especially when it bursts in your mouth like caviar. Just the concept of boba tea is a major turn-off. I have no interest in chewing my beverage. I also think pumpkin spice is completely overrated, cilantro tastes like soap, and raisins should be banned from human consumption.”

I hummed thoughtfully to smother the laughter in my voice. “Raisins, huh?”

“There’s nothing worse than thinking you’re biting into a chocolate chip cookie only to discover a mummified grape.”

I could practically hear the shudder racking his body. It was funny but also not. “Seriously. Are you okay there?”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “The flight is supposed to board in about an hour, so I should make it back in time for the surprise party Jaxon’s throwing for Anna’s birthday tonight.”

“She seems pretty great,” I said, imagining her surrounded by family and friends. And if there was a pang of envy with that thought, it was an unwelcome development that I chose to ignore.

“Honestly, I can’t imagine anyone more perfect for Jaxon.”

My office phone blinked with an incoming call, but I let it go to voicemail. Knowing that Shawn was bored and alone, I couldn’t bring myself to hang up. Instead, I asked him to tell me all about the party, which he said would be at their home. The pride in his voice came through as he gave me a detailed description of the property he lived on, and I soaked up each word, wanting to know everything that was important to him.

We segued into a discussion about Detrimental’s upcoming visit and contract renewal. I was hesitant, assuming

the conversation would become awkward when it turned to business, but it flowed flawlessly. And the more we talked, the more Shawn continued to impress me. Unlike many musicians who hired people to handle all of their business matters, Shawn was involved at an impressive level. In fact, his knowledge of recording contracts could rival that of our top executives.

Surprisingly, I found myself eager to share my ideas with him. I wanted his feedback so I could finalize any last-minute changes ahead of our meeting. Plus, discovering that Shawn would understand the significance of the changes I was making in the contract structure was too exciting to resist.

“I have some really good news for you, and I don’t want to wait until Friday to share it.”

“What? Are you going to give in to all of our demands?” he joked.

“Yes.”

Silence stretched out. Luckily the background noise assured me that we hadn’t been disconnected.

“Wait. You’re serious?”

“Yes.” I took a deep breath and rushed ahead. “I’ve been working on a new business model to change the way we write our recording contracts.” I started going into detail, talking way too fast. But once I got started, I couldn’t seem to stop. I laid it all out, wanting to make sure he got the whole picture. “Think of it as an à la carte menu of services to develop a contract based on your current needs. Nothing is off limits. You can choose to use our staff or bring in anyone you want. Anything from cover art to PR to backup musicians. It’s all on the table.”

“What about studio space?”

“Wherever you’re comfortable.”

“Producer?”

“Your call.”

I heard the sound of a zipper, some rustling of paper, and then the click of a pen. “How does it impact the initial recording costs and royalties?”

We spent the next forty minutes in a fast-paced exchange of information. For every answer I gave, he had two more questions. But his excitement grew with each new one asked. Anyone else would have been bored to tears with the conversation. Or they would have listened politely, not retaining a single thing I said. But not Shawn. He analyzed every detail, verified every fact, and took copious notes, judging by the sound of several pages turning.

“Holy shit,” he breathed. “You’ve found a way to offer all the benefits of going indie while maintaining the support of a big label. It’s genius.”

Hearing his praise made all of the long hours and sleepless nights feel worth it. “Be sure to tell that to my dad. He’s still not convinced it will work. Right now, we’re only offering this to a few select clients, and you’ll be the first.”

“Could you send me a copy of the financial calculations? I want to do a few comparisons to determine which areas we want to focus on.”

“Of course. Hang on.” I turned back to my computer to send him the information. “Done. That reminds me, there are going to be some changes here in the PR department, and I would love to get Anna officially on staff. Would I be stepping on any toes if I offered her a permanent job?”

“Yeah, fine,” he mumbled, clearly distracted by the documents I’d just sent over.

“The timing will align perfectly with our expansion into the Charlotte area, so that won’t be a conflict for her either.”

“Yep.”

Chuckling at his rote response, I decided to play with him. “And then my pet unicorn jumped off the roof and landed into a giant pool of marshmallows.”

“Mmhmm. Wait, what?” I could practically hear the moment he snapped back to reality. “Shit! They just made the

final boarding call. I have to go.”

“Have a safe flight. Call me once you finish looking everything over?”

“Okay, bye.” And with that, he hung up.

“Bye,” I laughed, shaking my head as I pictured Shawn rushing to the gate after losing track of time. Hopefully, he made it. And that they served great snacks.

Chapter 4

Shawn

“It’s a party, man! Why do you look like you’re deep in work mode?” Lance asked, handing me a bottle of beer as he sat at the foot of my lounge chair.

I’d made it home for Anna’s party, barely beating the guest of honor, who was currently wrapped around Jaxon as they made the rounds. The large sliding doors between the indoor pool and outdoor deck space had been opened to create the ideal area for entertaining a crowd. Papa V and Pops had joined forces to grill the best burgers, chicken, and ribs in town to go with the table full of side dishes that Mama Bee had organized. Kids from various crew members’ families splashed in the pool as the adults relaxed and played lawn games.

But my mind, being made the way it was, couldn’t switch gears. It was a common misconception that people with ADHD lacked the ability to focus on anything. Not true. We simply had trouble regulating our attention, often creating an all-or-nothing scenario. When something was of little or no interest, then it was extremely hard to concentrate or retain information about the subject. However, when we became interested in something, there was no stopping us.

For example, if I had run into Mayor Buckland at the grocery store five years ago and he started rambling about zoning regulations, it would have been torture for me to stand there for more than ten seconds before tuning him out. But when we purchased our property, I actively sought him out, scheduling multiple meetings with him to learn all I could to make sure we were zoned to meet our current and any future needs. It all came down to motivation. And that often led to fixation.

Since getting all of the contract information from Natalia, I had been completely consumed. Because if the band got everything we were asking for, and it looked like we would, then I had every reason to go ahead with the studio

construction. And the sooner the studios were completed, the sooner we could start using them to work on our next album. Which I would be producing. And no matter how exciting that seemed, I was afraid to get my hopes up. After all, I had been burned before.

Until it was official, I didn't want to jinx anything by talking about it. I simply told the guys that things were looking good for our upcoming negotiations. Of course, that didn't stop me from scheduling an appointment with the construction company to review their bid on the studio project. As long as I was at it, I prepared an order for the sound equipment I had decided to use. Because if the meeting in two days went as planned, I wanted renovations to begin as soon as possible.

But Lance was right. It was a party. I slid my phone into my pocket and did my best to give him my attention.

"Cheers," I said, tapping my bottle to his before taking a long swig from it.

Yes, I drank. But never to excess and never when I was upset. The self-imposed restrictions helped keep me from forming unhealthy habits and were something my friends understood and respected.

Though I was close to all of the guys in the band, I was closest with Lance. He was the one who had asked me to join the band they were putting together after we'd met in detention our freshman year. Without any sort of audition whatsoever, he had invited me over to Jaxon's house and introduced me as their new drummer. The craziest part was that they'd all accepted me without batting an eye. That day turned out to be the luckiest of my life. Without music and Detrimental, I was afraid to think about what my life might have become.

"How was Boulder?" he asked.

"Great! The release party was packed, and the first single is already being picked up by the local stations."

"I listened to the finished album, and it's hot. I've already made a few posts, but be sure to send any new links my way

so I can share them.”

Lance was a social media junkie, and with his following, a simple post would reach millions of people. It could make a huge difference for a new band.

“Thanks. I know that will mean a lot to them.”

“No problem. Everybody needs a little help when they’re getting started. Makes me appreciate all Roger did for us early on.”

“That’s for sure.”

Thinking back to when we’d first been approached by a rep from LGR seemed like a lifetime ago. We were just a bunch of determined kids playing festivals and clubs in between school and work schedules. Then everything changed, and it had been one wild and exciting ride.

“Speaking of Roger, it’ll be good to see him on Friday. And how did we not know he had a daughter?”

That was a good question, one that had prompted me to do a little digging. “Apparently, she’s been working her way up as an A&R rep.”

“Makes sense. So, are you finally going to tell me how you two know each other?”

I drained the last of my beer knowing I had avoided the conversation as long as possible. Mostly because I needed time to wrap my head around the situation and sort through my feelings.

“Remember the night I spent in Nashville last summer after finding out that Roger was gone?”

“No fucking way! That was her?”

I hummed in agreement. “Talk about a small world.”

“Seriously. But now you can reconnect, so that’s cool.”

I ran a finger through the condensation on my beer bottle. “Not a good idea.”

“Why not? You were all twisted up over her.”

“Yeah, because she ghosted me.”

“You liked her.”

“We had a good time. End of story.”

“You keep telling yourself that, but I know you. You caught feelings for her.”

“She left without a word, and I was already upset over the meeting with Gordon. It messed with my head.”

“Because you liked her.”

“Fine, I liked her.” Damn it. How did he always do that? “It was an amazing night. *She* was amazing, and we clicked in a way that made me feel like it was something special. But none of that excuses the fact that she bailed on me, especially since finding out that she knew who I was this whole time.”

“Ah, the plot thickens.” He rubbed his hands together in excitement. “You’ve talked with her since the video conference.”

“I have. I wanted answers. But then,” I paused for dramatic effect, “she asked if we could be friends.”

“Oh, shit.” Lance’s smile fell.

“Yeah, the kiss of death.”

I should know. The few relationships I had attempted all ended with a woman insisting she wanted to be friends. Which was a lie. It simply put a fancy bow on the dismissal. Although, I had to give Natalia credit. With the effort she was putting in, she might truly mean it.

“It’s for the best,” I conceded. Having analyzed the situation from every conceivable angle, I had arrived at the same conclusion as Natalia. “It would never last between us, and we’re going to have to work together.”

“How do you know it wouldn’t last?”

I gave him the look; the one that told him he already knew the answer. “Aside from her never expressing interest in more than one night, living in a different state and having a crazy schedule would make it nearly impossible. Plus, you

know how I am. I'm not wired for the long haul. Sure, in the beginning, it's good. I'm focused and spend every spare minute with a woman. But when the novelty wears off and my brain returns to its usual glitchy setting, I get distracted and all my quirks, which began as endearing, start driving her insane. She quickly realizes I'm not worth the effort and breaks up with me." I shook my head in defeat. "This saves both of us a lot of time and agony. Maybe we could even be friends if we skip all of the messy drama."

"But then you also skip the fun parts," he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

He made a good point, though I wasn't about to admit that to him. The sex with Natalia had been off the charts. And every time I thought about her or remembered that night, my body reacted. But then I also remembered the aftermath.

A lesser-known fact about ADHD: it was often accompanied by its ugly, emo cousin, RSD. Rejection sensitive dysphoria was another way in which my brain struggled to regulate emotions, specifically rejection or even perceived rejection. Added to that was the trauma caused by constant criticism from my parents, teachers, and peers which had been branded into my brain. The result? I had become so used to living with disapproval that I began to anticipate it before it even happened, and any actual rejection or criticism felt a hundred times worse than it actually was. Even after years of working with a therapist, I still struggled to keep things in perspective. So, I instinctively avoided situations that put me at risk.

Natalia's rejection had carved another scar on my already battered soul. It would take a lot more than a few text messages to get me to open myself back up to being hurt by her again. The fact that I was willing to try to be friends was a big enough trust fall.

"The only fun I need right now is a game of cornhole. You in?"

Lance rolled his eyes at the obvious attempt to change the subject. "Sure, Captain Subtle. Let's go see who wants to have

their asses kicked.”



By Friday morning, I was buzzing with anticipation. During the drive to the airport and the entire flight to Nashville on LGR’s private plane, which offered an impressive, raisin-free breakfast selection, I mentally reviewed the details of the contract. Again.

I had spoken with Natalia a few more times over the past couple of days and was feeling good about the upcoming meeting. She had assured me she was handling our PR problems and had already reached out to Jaxon about hiring Anna to officially become our publicist. Roger and our lawyer, Ox, who was also based in Nashville, would both be in attendance to assist with the negotiations as well.

Everything was lining up perfectly, and it felt too good to be true. The rest of the guys seemed to be a bit nervous too, and a strange tension filled the air. But if everything went as planned, this was going to be a landmark day for all of us.

A driver was waiting at the airport in Nashville to take us to LGR’s headquarters right in the heart of the city. The building itself had a simple brick exterior with rows of arched windows and a large revolving door. An understated logo above the door was the only indication of the building’s identity. Inside was a whole different experience. The airy lobby extended up three stories with memorabilia tastefully displayed throughout the area. Strategically placed lighting and plaques gave each item a sense of importance, and I wondered if we would earn the honor of having something on display there one day. I could almost see one of Lance’s guitars proudly mounted on the nearby wall, and it warmed my chest.

That image evaporated the moment Natalia stepped into view. She looked like she had in the video conference, every bit the business executive she was. Today's sharp navy suit and emerald green blouse hugged her body to perfection, and although she was still strikingly beautiful, it was drastically different from the way I had always pictured her in my mind. This Natalia wasn't the approachable woman I'd met last year or the slightly vulnerable one I'd spoken with on the phone. It was like meeting her high-strung, impeccable twin. And while I wasn't sure how I felt about this new side of her, I understood the need for a professional façade and how both halves came together to make the whole.

One thing that hadn't changed was my desire to touch her. Part of me simply wanted to rumple her up to find my Natalia under all of the added layers of bravado. The rest of me was obsessed with finding out if she tasted as good as I remembered. And despite the promise I made to myself not to let her hurt me again, the urge to kiss her was far stronger than I expected.

Natalia, however, remained completely unaffected. Following a polite greeting for the group, she led us upstairs to a large conference room where Bianca, our soon-to-be former publicist was seated. Roger was there as well, and we took a moment to welcome him back with handshakes and heartfelt words before getting down to business. I took the chair beside Roger at the far end of the table, hoping the distance from Natalia would bolster my waning self-control.

It didn't. Apparently, Natalia's alter ego not only looked different, she was also a complete badass. Her confidence and ability to command a room had me seeing her in a whole new light. I watched in awe as she presented some disturbing information regarding our publicist. Then promptly fired her. It was just about the sexiest thing I had ever seen, and it turned me on in ways I never knew were possible.

With each passing minute, I grew more infatuated. I tried to stop it along with my body's reaction, which was as ill-timed as it was frustrating. We were friends now, and friends

didn't lust after each other. But damn, she was hot. There was no denying that.

I did my best to ignore my arousal as I fumbled through discussions until Natalia left to escort Anna to her official interview. Once the door closed behind her, I could finally relax a little.

"I owe you all an apology," Roger offered the group. "I'm sure you've heard the reason I left last year." We all nodded, having seen the press release announcing Roger's return along with a brief explanation about his absence. "I kept my illness a secret to avoid exposing any weakness to our competition. Little did I realize my biggest threat was within my own company." He grunted in disgust. "By the time I was made aware of the damage being done, it was too late to do much about it. Gordon had a year-long contract and refused to leave early. It was faster and easier to wait out the contract than try to take him to court to break it. And while I didn't have much of a choice in leaving, I regret that you had to pay the price for it. Now that I'm back, I'm going to do all I can to make it up to you. Especially you, Shawn."

My gaze, which had been following the doodles I was making on the notepad in front of me, sprang up to meet his. "Me?"

"I made you a promise that I wasn't able to keep." He reached out to rest a hand on my shoulder. "Things were out of my control, but I still feel like I let you down. That second album would have been a hell of a lot better if you'd been allowed to help produce it. I intend to honor my promise now if that's something you still want."

It was one of our requirements for signing, and I had fully expected it to be fulfilled as part of our negotiations. But having it offered freely meant more, and he knew it.

I had to swallow past the lump in my throat. "I'm looking forward to it."

Roger had become a bit of a role model for me over the years, and learning that he had been ill worried me for more than professional reasons. I wished I could have been there for

him, to make his recovery easier. And the thought of Natalia carrying the burden alone only made the feeling intensify, though I didn't want to think about that too deeply.

Instead, I focused on the opportunity before me. It was a chance to make a name for myself on a much larger scale. And even though I knew Roger hadn't intentionally backed out of his promise to let me produce our last album, it felt good to hear that he still believed in me. His approval had become invaluable, often filling the void my own father had created.

My emotions continued to run high as Natalia and our lawyer rejoined the meeting. Negotiations went smoothly since Ox and I had also reviewed the contract ahead of time. There were still various details to iron out along the way, but the day progressed much as I hoped. With one exception. An apparent misunderstanding had Jaxon fleeing the room to get to Anna to clear things up while the rest of us forged on.

Lunch was catered in, followed by more contract talks. And through it all, my attention remained divided. Looking directly at Natalia was too overwhelming, like staring at a solar eclipse; beautiful with the potential to cause irreparable damage. But even with my gaze averted, I knew exactly where she was in the room, and I was aware of every move she made.

From the moment she had greeted us until negotiations were wrapped up, everything about her pulled me in. It should have felt wrong. But no matter how much I reminded myself that she had hurt me, I couldn't help but think of the reasons she left, and I instantly wanted to forgive her. I had, mostly, but that didn't mean I could forget. And seeing her again served as a constant reminder.

I didn't want to want her, but I did, and the contradicting emotions were wreaking havoc on me. Fortunately, we were scheduled to fly home in a few hours. We were also heading back on tour on Tuesday, which would provide a nice diversion. With Natalia remaining in Nashville and me in a different city every night, our friendship could continue via text messages and occasional calls. The whole thing would probably fizzle out as fast as it started. Either way, she would

be far from reach and the lingering attraction would fade. End of story.

The mood in the room turned festive once the contracts were signed. We toasted with sparkling cider in deference to Roger's health and mingled about, shaking hands and patting each other on the back. Natalia and I offered each other stilted congratulations but subtly kept our distance. Not that it mattered. Everyone else was too busy to notice us. After all, there was plenty to celebrate. LGR got to keep a high-profile client while Detrimental regained a large amount of freedom.

"It's a hell of a contract," Ox praised. "I predict the new structure is going to be a turning point for LGR." He raised his glass to Roger and Natalia.

"Thank you, but I can't take any of the credit," Roger clarified. "It's all Natalia's doing."

"Very impressive."

"She's full of great ideas," her dad complimented with a huge smile.

Witnessing his pride in her sent a sting of jealousy through my chest. I knew my father and I would never have the kind of relationship that Natalia had with her dad or that Jaxon had with his. I would never know that level of support and understanding. My father was far too rigid. And that was fine. I could respect our differences and the fact that we didn't share the same interests. I just wanted him to do the same.

"That's it!" Roger exclaimed. "I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner."

"Think of what sooner?" Natalia asked.

I had tuned out for a moment and tried to read the room to figure out if I had missed something important. Judging from the facial expressions and body language, it wasn't anything too serious.

"The solution for Ready to Rock." He outlined Natalia's idea for a contest, piquing my interest. "We've been so close to moving forward with it, but the logistics of putting together a concert each night on such short notice were creating quite a

challenge. Plus, it just didn't have enough visibility on its own to ensure a proper return on the investment."

I had to admit the idea was great, but also agreed with Roger's analysis. Then I started to get a sinking feeling in my gut because I already knew the answer to their problem.

"What's your suggestion?" Natalia asked.

"Go on tour with Detrimental!" he exclaimed, confirming my fears. "They already have the next six weeks of shows lined up, and all of the arrangements are made. Your contest winner each day can open their show each night."

"Borrowing Trouble is already opening for them, remember?" Nat argued.

"They can open for the opener. You get the idea. And best of all, there's no need to worry about booking venues or selling tickets. You'll already have an audience that's ready to rock. Ha!" he laughed, nudging her shoulder. "See what I did there? But seriously, it couldn't be more perfect."

Natalia looked as horrified as I felt. "I can't just hijack their tour!"

I wanted to agree with her, but Lance beat me to it.

"Sure you can," the traitor tossed out, earning a glare from me. With a knowing smile, he continued. "What better way to show the world that the relationship between Lucky Greene and Detrimental is stronger than ever?"

"But your first show is in four days!" Natalia sputtered.

Another very good point. Surely that would derail this crazy train.

"And the whole basis of the contest is to see who already has what it takes to earn a record deal," Roger said. "Legal and Media are ready. Travel arrangements have been planned. We just need PR to spread the word."

"I'm sure Anna can help," Jaxon offered. It seemed he was against me too, even unwittingly. "And though we wouldn't be doing it as a PR stunt, it would be nice to be seen doing something positive for a change."

Damn. As pained as I was to admit it, Jaxon was right. Bianca had taken every opportunity to destroy our image, claiming it would boost record sales. The contest would allow us to show who we really were and repair some of the damage. But, surely, we could find other ways to do it.

“We start at home in Charlotte,” Jaxon continued. “There are plenty of local bands who would kill for a chance like this.”

“I don’t want to inconvenience you guys,” Natalia argued, though less convincingly.

Shit. I needed to intercede before I lost my chance. Just the thought of having her on tour was enough to have my skin flushing hot and cold. My dick quickly voted a resounding *yes* while my head automatically revolted against the idea. But the words were stuck as I stood frozen, emotionally paralyzed.

“We would be happy to have you,” Eli assured her.

“Each winner could even join us on stage to play part of the encore. It would be a lot of fun,” Derek added.

“And no matter who wins, every band could go home with some feedback and a cool experience,” Lance said.

I felt myself waver. Ready to Rock was exactly the kind of contest we would have loved to enter back when we were hoping to get the attention of a record label. And, honestly, it would benefit everyone involved. I couldn’t think of a single legitimate reason to protest, especially hearing that the rest of the band was on board. So why was I still hesitating?

Looking across the room, my eyes locking with Natalia’s, I had my answer. Being around her brought up so many mixed emotions. Hurt, forgiveness, anger, lust, and hope were all there in varying degrees. I just wasn’t sure which one was dominant.

Jaxon turned to look at me. “You know how we operate. It’s all or nothing, so if you don’t want to do this, we won’t.”

All too often, I was impulsive when it came to making decisions, going with my gut instinct. But even my gut was split down the middle on this one. If I said no, my bandmates

would back me one hundred percent and we would walk out the door. And it was tempting.

Then one sentence changed everything.

“Shawn can produce the album for the winning band.”

Chapter 5

Natalia

The words were out of my mouth before I realized I was saying them. But they felt right. And if having Detrimental on board was what it took to have my dad's full support, then so be it. The company needed the exposure this contest would bring.

With Detrimental officially remaining and morale already improving among existing clients, LGR was no longer on life support. However, infusions of new talent and positive publicity were still necessary to keep the recovery efforts going. Ready to Rock would provide both. If I could convince Shawn to be a part of it.

With the added incentive, he had every reason to say yes. Except one. I would soon find out if he was going to hold our history against me or if he was willing to move on. But I had to ask myself a similar question. Was I letting the past influence my offer? Aside from the obvious need to make the contest happen, I thought about the possible reasons for letting him produce the winning band's album. Was I trying to buy his forgiveness? Was I desperately bribing him so he would agree to support the contest? Or did I understand how much the opportunity would mean to him and want to make him happy? If I was brutally honest, it was all three.

It had taken considerable effort not to stare at Shawn throughout the meeting. But now that our business was concluded, I gave in and looked my fill. Wearing a pale grey button-down shirt and black dress pants, he was as handsome as ever. And while he didn't look uncomfortable, he wasn't quite relaxed either. Even now, he shifted his weight back and forth as though his feet were bothering him. Judging by the condition of his shoes, I would guess they were new and in need of being broken in. Of course, his discomfort could also stem from having every set of eyes on him.

A suspended silence filled the room as everyone waited for Shawn's answer. The jingling of keys in his pocket made

me realize too late that I had inadvertently put a lot of pressure on him. His decision had somehow become the determining factor in approving the entire contest, and that wasn't fair. If he agreed, it needed to be because he wanted to, not because he'd felt forced into it.

"You don't have to decide right now," I offered, though I didn't have a lot of time if I was going to miraculously pull this off before their next show. "Talk it over with—"

"I'll do it." His voice was firm, his eyes filled with determination as he stared me down. There was a bit of a challenge in his posture, almost daring me to rescind the offer.

"Excellent!" my dad exclaimed, eagerly clapping his hands. Then he went completely off the deep end. He looked at Shawn with an eager smile. "Natalia's going to need help, and since you'll be producing the winner, you should be involved in the whole process. How do you feel about being Ready to Rock's co-producer?"

Shawn nodded once and simply stated, "I'm in."

I stood in shock as my little contest spun out of control. My original vision of working with just the help of a small team was blown to bits. Instead, the entire production had multiplied in size, and I now had a partner.

My head was spinning. I wanted to argue but couldn't risk my dad backing out. And sure, Shawn would be a tremendous help, but it also meant we'd be working together. A lot. Long hours of reviewing application videos, conducting auditions, evaluating performances, and analyzing everything to determine a winner. The thought was as terrifying as it was exciting.

I must have zoned out, because the next thing I knew, my dad was herding everyone else from the room.

"We'll give you two a few minutes to work through some of the details while we go tell the other departments the good news," he said.

The room emptied, filling the air with an undeniable energy. Shawn and I stood on opposite sides of the conference

table, eyes locked. Mine felt wide with shock while his held the same earlier glint of determination. But every thought of contests and tours melted away as we slowly, silently migrated toward each other. With each step I took, the attraction that had been simmering just below the surface began to unfurl. It swelled within me, and I fisted my hands to keep from reaching out to him. He remained guarded too, his hands firmly in his pockets as though he was fighting a similar battle.

Coming face to face for the first time in a year, I wasn't thinking about all of my reasons for staying away. All rational thought vanished as I focused on the way the scent of cologne mixed with his skin to lure me closer. He smelled even better than I remembered, and I longed to bury my face in his chest to simply breathe him in.

Standing so close, I had to lift my gaze to look into his eyes. Passion burned there, evoking all of the memories I kept safeguarded. The feel of his skin on mine, the taste of his kiss, and the sounds he made as he came all rushed to fill my mind. Based on Shawn's ragged breathing, he was remembering too. His gaze lowered to my mouth and he inhaled deeply. Indecision plagued his features. He stilled, and I could see an internal battle being waged as his eyes slid shut.

Time stopped.

A lengthy exhale left him, and the tension drained from his body. His lids lifted to reveal eyes that were now calm and steady. He lowered his head, tracing his nose up the side of mine. Our breath softly swirled together as he hovered just out of reach. The exchange of air felt more intimate than if he'd already kissed me, and my lips tingled in anticipation.

Fingertips skimmed my face in soft strokes, increasing the tenderness of the moment. Needing to feel more of him, I pressed our bodies together and allowed my hands to drift from his hips to his back. The moment stretched, my heart racing along with the fluttering in my belly. It was singlehandedly the most sexually charged moment of my life.

Then our mouths collided.

All tenderness vanished. This kiss was demanding, almost punishing as his hands gripped my head, angling it perfectly while his tongue dominated mine. All of the pent-up emotions from the past year that we'd held onto came pouring out. The raw intensity was nearly my undoing. Each relived memory and every romanticized fantasy had paled in comparison to the reality of being consumed by this man.

A raging want stormed within, and I grasped at his shirt, yanking it free from the waistband of his pants. I slid my hands under the material, marveling at the feel of his skin. It was silky smooth, and his stomach muscles rippled as I pressed my palms against them.

Shawn trailed kisses down the side of my neck, biting and licking each step of the way. His hands roamed my body, desperate for more. Splayed across my ass, his fingers clawed to pull me closer while the evidence of his arousal pressed into me. I was reaching for his zipper when the sound of voices in the hallway filtered in.

Jumping back, I bolted across the room to slam the door shut. Terrified by the thought of someone seeing us together, I closed my eyes and rested my head against the cool surface of the door.

Shawn's arms wrapped around me from behind. "Hello, friend," he whispered with a soft chuckle.

Laughter bubbled out of me, helping my panic recede. Turning in his arms, I reached up to sweep the hair out of his eyes. "Hi."

Safely concealed from view, I gave in to the urge and rested my cheek against his chest to absorb his presence. We stood wrapped together with his chin resting on top of my head while we regained our senses.

Sliding an empty sandwich platter out of the way, he lifted me to sit on the nearby countertop. The new position eliminated much of our height difference, and I marveled at having his body cradled between my legs. My perch also provided me with a direct view into his eyes, where everything I felt was mirrored in the depths of those dark orbs. I

recognized all of the longing and turmoil surrounding our brief history, but there was also a gleam I hadn't seen before.

"We really need to work on our timing," he teased.

I groaned in frustration as the possible consequences of being discovered together played out in my mind. "I can't be seen with you."

It was a quiet reminder to myself, but Shawn looked as though I had slapped him. Stepping away from me, he schooled his expression, and I watched as the glimmer of light in his eyes died.

Realizing how my words had sounded, I rushed to explain. "I swear, it's not you." I reached for him, but he widened the space between us. Hopping off the counter, I moved closer, determined to keep him from shutting me out. "The timing really couldn't be worse. LGR is in a delicate phase of rebuilding right now, so I can't risk being caught like this."

He remained silent but didn't retreat further. For whatever reason, this strong, sexy man needed reassurance from me, and I was desperate to give it.

"Aside from my reputation in the industry taking a hit by sleeping with one of our clients, I can't afford to have people wondering if I'm playing favorites with the new contract structure." I conveniently left out the embarrassing details about my reputation already being questioned because of a few ugly rumors Troy had started. "LGR really can't afford any negative press right now, especially with the expansion we have planned. Our image needs to be one our investors trust. Plus, if someone saw us, it wouldn't take long for rumors to spread and for Ready to Rock to lose credibility before it even gets off the ground. We can't let that happen."

Shawn seemed to mull that over before slowly nodding his understanding. "I get it," he reluctantly admitted. "I know how the media can be, and my name would be dragged in the mud right alongside yours. It wouldn't take much for people to start assuming that I got the production gigs by sleeping with you."

“Which is total bullshit.” I grasped his face and stared up at him. “You’re brilliant and no one should ever doubt that.”

A slight grin tugged at one side of his mouth before his shoulders deflated. “Fuck. Friends, huh? You really meant that?”

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I?”

“No reason,” he muttered, though I sensed more to his answer.

Accepting our fate, we reluctantly retreated to the table to hammer out the details of the contest and determine the general process for how each night’s winner would be selected. Once we got started, the overwhelming task took all of Shawn’s attention. His focus never strayed once. Which was a good thing, or so I reminded myself. Shawn was efficient, productive, and always one step ahead of me. The way he could look at a situation and automatically see any possible hurdles and their solutions was impressive. A good idea became great. He brought the impossible within reach. And for the first time since I had started working on the project, I could breathe a little easier.

Then I remembered the timeline we were working with. There was so much to do that my mind began to spin. But I put on a happy face as I walked Shawn to the SUV waiting to take the band back to the airport.

“I need to wrap up some loose ends here before heading out to Charlotte on Sunday. What hotel is closest to you?” I asked, ready to type the name into the notes on my phone.

“Just stay with us,” he offered. “It’ll be easier.”

Already feeling like I was crashing their tour, I refused to impose on him or the band any further. Shaking my head, I was all set to decline his offer. And it had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that being around Shawn for an extended period of time would tempt me more than I cared to admit. Nope. None. Zero.

“I couldn’t do that,” I insisted. “Besides, I’ll also have a driver to accommodate.”

“The lodge has plenty of room. And honestly, the nearest decent hotel is half an hour away. It would be better if we didn’t waste time driving back and forth. Plus, you can park your bus there, and your driver can coordinate with ours before the tour begins. It just makes the most sense.”

Damn, I couldn’t argue with any of that. So, I accepted his very generous offer and hoped I wouldn’t regret it.



I regretted it. But not for the reasons I thought I would. Being there was like getting a glimpse into a life I had always wanted but would never have.

Sunday’s dinner at JELDS Lodge turned out to be a noisy, laughter-filled affair. All of the guys from the band were there plus Anna and Callie, Jaxon’s parents, and Anna’s de facto parents, Pops and Molly. Everyone had eagerly welcomed me, insisting I join them after Frederick was whisked away by their driver. It was nothing like the stuffy, formal dinner parties I usually attended. In fact, the entire place was unlike any I had ever visited.

Throughout my life, I had been in the homes of many celebrity musicians. Most were filled with jaw-dropping amenities including everything from the most modern art and lighting to opulent wine cellars and private helipads. As a kid, I was more impressed by things like a trampoline room, private waterpark, or mini-golf course. Still, they always felt like fun places to visit, not to live.

Not here. Yes, it featured a home theater, an indoor pool, and a private lake. But everything from the color scheme to the furniture had comfort in mind. It was meant to be lived in, not to be used as a showcase. And while the main building was

plenty impressive, I felt more relaxed there than I ever had when visiting another person's home, famous or not.

Though the lodge was anything but typical, it wasn't some extravagant whim or wild investment that the guys planned to resell for a profit. They had put a lot of personal touches into it to make it theirs. And the fact that these guys had such a deep-rooted connection that they chose to live together spoke volumes. Knowing that Shawn was a part of it made me happy in a way I couldn't quite explain.

I'd never had many meaningful friendships. Part of the issue was that I had grown up around mostly adults. Because of that, I had always been more mature than my peers and felt awkward around them, never quite sure what to say or do. The few friends I did make didn't last. My peers either befriended me out of politeness or because of my name and what I could do for them. They were always around whenever I had extra concert tickets or passes to popular events. Otherwise, they were quick to disappear. Especially after I made it clear I wasn't going to be used for my connections in the music industry to get someone's boyfriend or cousin special treatment.

Throughout high school and college, I was that friend who got invited to birthday parties but not shopping trips or sleepovers. Granted, maybe they didn't think I would enjoy those things, but it would have been nice to be included. After graduation, the pattern evolved. I continued to get invitations to engagement parties, weddings, and baby showers with detailed gift registry information but received very few donations or RSVPs in return for the charity events LGR was hosting. Once I realized I was the one initiating every phone call or luncheon to keep in touch outside of major life events, I stopped holding on to people who didn't want to stay.

Instead, I immersed myself in work. The long hours and constant travel made it difficult to maintain any kind of relationship, friendly or otherwise, so I convinced myself that I wasn't missing out on anything. But during my dad's illness, I had been on my own, and I became very aware of that fact. I had also been faced with the knowledge that if I lost him, the

only meaningful thing left in my life would be my career. And, for the first time, that bothered me.

It's a good thing you're not looking for a husband. You're already married to your job, and there isn't room in your frigid heart for anything or anyone else. True, Troy's parting words had been harsh, but they had done nothing to make me consider changing. Maybe he had a point.

And maybe I was more sleep deprived than I realized if I was considering anything my ex had to say.

But looking at all of the happy faces surrounding the oversized kitchen table, I couldn't ignore the emptiness echoing inside of me. The people gathered there were a family in every sense of the word. They were a team; a unit. Yet they welcomed me wholeheartedly, immediately making me feel like a part of their group. Even when the conversation turned to Jaxon and Anna's engagement and wedding planning, I was encouraged to take part. I didn't have much to contribute but still enjoyed sharing their excitement. How could I not be happy for such genuinely nice people?

Everyone was in a good mood, and it seemed downright contagious. The parents were proud of their kids, and that meant all of them. They praised Lance for a recent social media award and Derek for his mural on the side of the new fire station. Callie got recognized for her volunteer work at a nearby animal sanctuary, and everyone gushed over Eli's homemade peach ice cream during dessert.

Discussion turned to the car Papa V and Pops were working on, then Molly's life back in Virginia. I was still working out the details of her connection to Anna, but both women were a blubbering mess when she mentioned the possibility of moving so she could be closer.

"Tell us more about this contest of yours. What's the process?" Mama Bee asked, looking between me and Shawn.

Yes, we'd been seated next to each other. And yes, it was torturous in a long list of ways. Topping the charts was the fact that I was only a few inches away but couldn't touch him. Even more troubling was that he had no such reservations.

Every chance he got, his hand drifted under the table to rest on my thigh or trace small circles up and down my leg. It was slowly driving me mad, yet I made no move to stop him. Not when it was exactly what I craved.

From the moment I arrived, it had been a constant struggle to resist him. Shawn had always held a certain allure for me. His talent spoke for itself and was a huge turn-on. So was his physical appearance. He had a long, lean frame and the face of a movie star. And his eyes. The inky pools belied the incredible depth hidden behind them. They were the gateway to a mind rife with experiences, stories, and secrets; the kind I wanted to dive into. During interviews, he was open and friendly but never divulged anything personal. On stage, he commanded attention while also shrinking away from the spotlight. And it was that air of mystery surrounding him that captivated me.

Meeting Shawn at The Nosh Pit and the night that followed had given me a glimpse into the man himself, and our budding friendship had allowed me to peel back another fascinating layer. The contract meeting showed me a whole different side to him as well. And with each encounter, my interest only grew. But seeing him at home, completely relaxed and at ease in frayed shorts and an old Audioslave t-shirt, I felt like I was truly seeing the most authentic version of him. He was less guarded in his actions and smiled more freely. And it was intoxicating.

I was drunk on him and wanted more. Of course, wanting him had never been the issue. Having someone discover our personal relationship was what had me setting up boundaries. And getting caught was still a possibility, even far from Nashville and the prying eyes of LGR's competitors.

Except...

The lodge was a big place. Not to mention Shawn had a house a short walk away. We had two days before the contest began. Maybe, if we were careful...

Was it worth the risk?

I knew my answer before I braved a glance at the man beside me. Since our stolen kiss in the conference room, all I could think about was getting lost in him again, just as I had done last year. If only for an hour, I wanted to escape my worries about LGR, contracts, and my dad's health. I wanted to let go of the guilt and responsibilities that weighed me down each day. But more than anything, I ached to experience the level of contentment I had only ever felt during our night together.

Out of necessity, our one night had sustained me for a year. If we could have just one more night, surely that would get me through the next several weeks of touring. But now that I knew what I'd be forced to give up, would it be enough? It had to be. Anything more was asking for trouble. Even if it was the best kind of trouble.

Based on every look and touch since my arrival at the lodge, I was sure Shawn was eager for more too. And as soon as we were alone, I planned to test that theory.

First, I had to get through dinner.

Turning to Mama Bee, I focused on answering her question. "Each band submits an application online along with a performance video. The deadline for entering is noon two days before the show in their selected city. The top three will be notified by noon the day before the show. Those bands will arrive the following morning for a live audition to determine the finalist, who will get time on stage for practice and a mentoring session with Shawn. Highlights will be posted on LGR's website and social media pages, where their performance will also be streamed live and then saved. Fans will be encouraged to leave comments throughout the contest and vote for their favorite band, but Shawn and I will ultimately determine the final winner."

I fielded a few more questions and filled in missing details, hoping the occasional lilt in my voice that coincided with Shawn grazing a particularly sensitive spot on the inside of my knee wasn't too noticeable.

“It’s a great concept,” Pops complimented. “And it sounds like you’ve got all of the logistics worked out. I can’t wait to see what happens.”

His approval meant a lot. As their tour manager, he already had his hands full. The last thing I wanted to do was add to his workload or give the band a reason to regret having me tag along. I was also determined not to take advantage of them any more than necessary, and I made sure part of the contest’s budget included covering the additional costs for the crew, catering, and security.

“Keeping track of everything will be the biggest challenge. Thankfully, my assistant is an organizational wizard and will help coordinate the chaos from Nashville.”

“We also agreed on the importance of being as consistent as possible,” Shawn added. “Public interest will naturally grow as the contest progresses, so we want the rest of the experience to be as fair as possible.”

“I’ve heard the live reads on the local station, and there’s a lot of hype online already,” Lance said.

“How many entries have you gotten so far?” Eli wanted to know.

Without having to check, Shawn knew the count. “Eight for Charlotte, and plenty more are coming in for other shows.”

Talk of the contest continued as we cleaned up. I offered to rinse the dishes as Shawn washed, taking every opportunity to caress my hand and brush against me. To anyone else, it looked innocent enough. But each time his skin met mine, I was sure my body would give me away. Whether it was a slight catch in my breath or the way I leaned into his touch to make it last a second longer, I expected to be called out. But that never happened.

The kitchen soon emptied and everyone said goodnight, leaving us to start our work on the contest. But Shawn had other things on his mind. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the refrigerator with a clear message in his hooded gaze. He wanted me. But what happened next was my call.

The opportunity was too perfect to pass up. And knowing we may never get another, my choice was simple. Besides, it was just one more night. As long as nobody found out, what could go wrong?

Chapter 6

Shawn

We barely made it to the end of the building before I turned to reach for her. Even in the dark, our mouths found each other. The kiss was frantic and lacked any finesse, but that didn't matter. I finally had her alone.

The whirlwind of recent events had put me through a rollercoaster of emotions. From our unexpected reunion to that hopeful kiss in the conference room and the tentative agreement that followed, I had been through a series of ups and downs. And even though accepting the imposed friendship wasn't my first choice, it had put me back on solid ground. In the friendship zone, I was safe, and the rules made perfect sense. Natalia's need for discretion was completely understandable, and I wanted to protect myself too. Keeping things platonic was the smart thing to do. And with some added distance between us, I was able to stand by that decision. But when she was right in front of me, all of my good intentions seemed to disappear.

As she'd stepped off her bus, all reason and logic had vanished too. With one look, seeing the banked desire in her eyes, my self-control hadn't merely crumbled. It had imploded. Now, I couldn't get my hands on her fast enough.

I guided her down the shadowed trail that ran between the buildings. It was nothing more than a worn footpath, but I knew it well.

"Where are we going?" she asked, stumbling on a tree root.

"My cabin. We'll have privacy there." I halted my steps, looking back to make sure she hadn't changed her mind. There was just enough moonlight filtering in to see her nod. It was all I needed. Impatient to get there, I squatted down and held out my arms behind me. "Hop on."

She hesitated a split second but then clambered up my back with an excited squeal. A quick hike later, we were

fumbling through my front door. As we stepped inside, the energy between us shifted. The urge to rush dissipated like an early morning fog. Anticipation still crackled in the air, but it was less charged.

Natalia eased down to regain her footing before leisurely exploring the room. The entire cabin was monochromatic with varying shades of grey and industrial details. I didn't bother with knick-knacks since they ended up buried in the clutter I tended to accumulate. Plus, they required dusting, a task I avoided at all cost. But watching her now, I was thankful I had cleaned up ahead of time.

Natalia ran a hand along the back of the plush sofa, blissfully unaware of the mayhem hidden safely in drawers and cabinets. She made her way through the living room, pausing to study a few pictures and some memorabilia on the walls. With a raised eyebrow, she sought permission before moving farther, barely sparing a glance at the open kitchen before she continued down the hallway.

“My room is on the right,” I urged.

Giving me a cheeky grin, she went left.

There was nothing remotely exciting about my home office. I kept it simple to avoid distractions and to keep important things from getting lost. But the bookshelf, specifically the collection of old textbooks, caught Natalia's interest, and she spent a few minutes tipping her head to read the various titles. A desk bearing multiple monitors dominated the remainder of the room, but it was otherwise empty. Except for the numerous ADHD skeletons literally hiding in the closet.

Over the years, I'd explored an array of different hobbies including drone flying, archery, lock picking, and soldering small metal sculptures. Most interests were nothing but short-lived fixations, losing their appeal once I mastered the skill or simply got bored. I revisited some, depending on my mood and available free time. Otherwise, the remnants of them remained piled out of sight.

Natalia meandered out of the room, pulling the door shut behind her. Leading the way, I turned on the light in the hall bathroom for her to poke her head into. The only thing of note there was the Iron Man shower curtain that Lance had snuck in as a joke. Natalia smiled in amusement but didn't comment. All that remained was the master bedroom.

I stood with my back to the door as the moment of truth arrived. And in that moment, every doubt I had hit me like a ton of bricks.

“Are you going to let me in?” she asked, her brow furrowed with confusion as I stood motionless.

Talk about a loaded question. We would be working closely together for the next six weeks, so there was no denying that she was already back in my life. But as the memory of waking up alone reared its ugly head, I questioned how much farther I was willing to allow her. Physically, I was on board. I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted anyone. But I also knew this was destined to end, and we both had a lot to lose if it ended badly. And while the risk to our careers was substantial, I was more concerned with the emotional fallout I would face when she left me again. Because I had no doubt she would, whether it happened in two weeks or at the end of the tour. Either way, we still had a job to do.

“We both need this contest to go well,” I pointed out. “Can we do this and not allow it to affect our work?”

Producing Detrimental's album would be a huge accomplishment for me, and it was already guaranteed in writing. But I also needed the credibility that would come from working with outside bands, which was exactly what the producer title and visibility associated with Ready to Rock would give me. I wasn't willing to jeopardize such an important opportunity.

Natalia looked up at me, the small crease deepening between her brows as she considered my question. Instead of answering, she posed one of her own. “It's just one more night. Couldn't we be friends who sleep together without expecting anything more?”

I started shaking my head immediately. “There’s no way one more night will be enough. We have too much chemistry to think we’re going to be around each other constantly in the coming weeks and not eventually combust.”

Natalia chewed her lip as she thought it over long and hard. She looked on the verge of turning me down, so her next words surprised me. “Anything we do would have to stay hidden. Not even a hint of this can get out.”

“Agreed.” It was our only real option, even though Natalia deserved more than a tawdry affair or to feel like a dirty secret. But as I pondered that, the second part of her offer registered. “Wait. Are you really okay with this being a friendly arrangement and nothing more?”

“Absolutely. I’m not looking for a serious relationship. Besides, we’re each going back home after the tour and contest are over. It wouldn’t make sense to get emotionally invested. And if we stick to being friends, we could still see each other discreetly after things settle down with the company. If you’re interested.”

Was she kidding? That sounded damn near perfect. I already knew anything romantic between us wouldn’t last, so the bar was set pretty low for me. But six weeks would give us enough time to do our jobs and have some fun on the side before I had the chance to drive her away. And if we went into it with the same expectations, neither of us would get hurt. Hell, we might actually have a shot at remaining friends. It was just the last thing I expected her to suggest, so I needed to know, with one hundred percent certainty, that there was no lingering hope for some fairytale ending here. For either of us. We needed to shut that shit down.

“Hit me with a truth bomb,” I suggested.

“A what?”

“A truth bomb. Tell me something you would never reveal to someone you hoped to date because it would turn them off.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

The fact that she was willing to ask why and not assume I was crazy was encouraging. Especially considering I was making this up as I went along.

“People who are dating tend to hold back, afraid to be themselves because they might say or do the wrong thing. We’ll use that to our advantage. Think of this as an insurance policy against romance; a romance repellent. If we’re brutally honest now, we can prevent any romantic feelings before they happen. It’s the best way to guarantee neither of us will start to want anything beyond friendship.”

“So, we nuke any possibility for romantic feelings to develop but still get to enjoy all the benefits of spending time together.”

I nodded. “All. The. Benefits. I’ll even go first,” I offered, tamping down the sudden unease prickling the back of my neck. “I have ADHD, which often makes me a shitty boyfriend. I’m moody, I’m late for dates, and I forget to return calls and texts.” It was a little nerve-wracking to expose some of my biggest flaws. But, once it was done, I felt a sense of relief.

Natalia remained pensive as she absorbed the information. Then it was like watching a switch flip. Her eyes burned into mine, and she took a deliberate step closer. Reaching behind me to turn the doorknob, she steered me into the room.

“Lucky Greene is my first priority,” she began, kicking her shoes to the side. “It makes me a shitty girlfriend. I work long hours, cancel plans, and I hate being made to feel like I should apologize for it.” My knees hit the edge of the mattress, and I sat dazed as Natalia pulled her shirt over her head, leaving me with a view of creamy skin and black lace.

“I tune out in the middle of conversations and have no idea what was said. Don’t ever mention something important and then expect me to follow through later. I need reminders and if it’s time sensitive, I’ll need to set an alarm in my phone.” I toed off my shoes and shucked my t-shirt, then pulled her down on top of me. With deft fingers, I peeled away

the bra to palm her breasts. “Fuck, you’re beautiful.” I crushed my mouth to hers until we ran out of breath, panting more confessions.

Popping the snap on my shorts, she shimmied them and my boxer briefs down my legs. “I’ve lost touch with all of my friends and I don’t make time for people unless they can benefit the company.”

“I’m terrible at keeping in touch with people too. Part of the reason I wanted to buy the lodge was to keep my friends nearby, like that’s not completely dysfunctional.”

Ridding her of her shorts and panties, I rolled her to her stomach and left a trail of wet kisses down her spine. The scent of her filled my lungs, and I wanted to savor every inch of baby-soft skin. As I reached her hip, Natalia turned so I could continue my journey up her stomach, through the valley of her breasts, and over the curve of her neck as I absorbed each new moan and hum.

She cradled my hips in her legs, running the arch of her foot up my calf. “I have crippling test anxiety. I couldn’t pass the exam to get my license and have to use a driver to go anywhere. People assume it’s because I’m spoiled, but I hate the lack of independence.”

Forging a new path, I drifted lower. My tongue circled one nipple, then the other. “Emotionally, my dial is set at an eleven, so everything I feel is automatically amplified. It takes constant effort to control my reactions, even to the littlest things.”

Natalia’s hands ran through my hair as I went lower. “I’ve been accused of being cold and emotionally detached. If I’m sensitive, the men in this industry perceive it as a weakness. I have to be strong, but then they think I’m a bitch.”

Grasping her thighs, I spread them wide, and her breath hitched as I licked a stripe up the center of her. The familiar taste of her prompted my next thought. “I become fixated on new interests and lose all track of time, sometimes for days. I get so wrapped up in what I’m doing that I forget to eat or sleep.”

Making her come was suddenly my next obsession. Alternating pressure and intensity, I flicked and licked, learning what drove her higher. Slick with arousal, her body welcomed the finger I eased inside of her. Curling the tip, I sought out the treasure I knew was hidden deep within. Her back bowed off the mattress as I hit my mark. The combination of my hands and my unrelenting tongue cranked the tension in her body until it was too much to be contained. Shattering beneath me, she shook as I continued to work her through her first orgasm.

When the sensation became more than she could bear, she fisted my hair in both hands and pulled me up into a searing kiss. I shared the taste of her on my mouth, eager for more. Reaching into the bedside table, I blindly grabbed a condom and worked it on. With one more kiss, I hooked an arm behind her knee and slid into the warmth awaiting me. A ripple of muscle stroked my dick as I bottomed out, proof of her earlier pleasure and a foreshadowing of what awaited me. Too worked up to be gentle, I fell into a ruthless rhythm. Each thrust into her surrounding heat brought me closer to the brink. But in a surprising move, Natalia flipped me to my back.

Empowered by the position, she sat upright and rocked her hips, gaining strength with each movement. Fully on display, her breasts bounced in time as her pace increased. Pleasure and confidence covered her features as her eyes locked onto mine. "I have no desire to ever get married."

I almost came right then. "Oh, fuck. Same." I managed. "And I don't want kids."

"Hell no," she agreed, her voice pitching as she found the perfect angle.

I could feel her climax building again and forced mine back through sheer will. Reaching up to catch her nipples, I rubbed the pads of my thumbs over them. Feeling a tremor of response within her, I pinched the rosy peaks and tugged with increasing strength as the answering quakes grew in intensity. Free from inhibition, she arched into my grasp, spurring me on. With a firm pull, I rolled the pebbled flesh between my fingers as the friction between us pushed her over the edge

again. She cried out, falling forward to brace her hands on my chest as another wave of euphoria overtook her. A few powerful thrusts was all it took for my own release to claim me. Gripping her hips, I held tight as we savored every last burst of sensation. When she finally collapsed on top of me, we were spent and breathing heavily.

After several minutes of basking in the afterglow, my mind began to whir. My first thought was that I could stay right where I was forever and die happy. But thinking like that would only put me on a path to heartbreak. Instead, I allowed myself to objectively appreciate the perfection of the moment, but then I remembered the plan.

Smacking her ass, I eased her to the side, mindful of the condom. I hopped from the bed and, with a parting kiss, strode into the bathroom. Still, I couldn't contain the smile that stretched across my face as I cleaned up. The night had turned out better than I could have imagined, and I had every hope that I could keep up my end of our unconventional bargain.

Returning to find an empty bed, my smile instantly died. My first instinct was to blame myself. Should I have stayed in bed longer? Did I stay too long? Was I too casual? Not casual enough? Pulling on the first pair of sweatpants I found, I was convinced I had already done something wrong.

Instead, I found her in the kitchen, digging through the refrigerator as the hem of my t-shirt flirted dangerously with the swell of her ass cheeks. It was just the right length to scramble my thoughts and to leave me wondering if she was wearing anything underneath. That question remained unanswered as she turned, holding two bottles of water.

She didn't look upset, but I needed to be sure. "You okay?"

"Fantastic!" She rose to her tiptoes for a kiss. "Go grab your laptop while I raid the pantry for snacks. We've got audition tapes to review."



What happened between us stayed with me long after I walked Natalia back to her room in the lodge. From start to finish, the night had been incredible. I didn't regret a single moment. I just didn't trust it, and I couldn't figure out why. It nagged me throughout the next day as the guys and I loaded the bus, talking about my plans for the studio space, and I kept waiting for the bubble to burst as I cautiously enjoyed a poker night while the ladies had an impromptu girls' night out.

It took days to finally pinpoint the reason for my unease. After all, everything had gone so well. And that's when I realized it was what *hadn't* happened that was so pleasantly unnerving. There had been no hesitation as we crawled back in bed to review video submissions for the contest and no weirdness whenever we interacted the next day. Best of all, it felt completely natural when she showed up at my door for another casual visit after her night out.

There had been no awkward conversation about riding into the city together for the first set of live auditions either. Since the rest of the band didn't need to be at the venue until the afternoon, it just made sense. So, we went with it. The bus ride, the friendly hook-up on the way, and our ability to switch into work mode; all of that had been seamless too. And though my smug subconscious pointed out that it was exactly what we agreed to, I was still convinced it was some sort of trick. Being together, even without any added expectations, couldn't possibly be that easy.

Usually, I would have buried myself in work to get over whatever funk I was in. But standing in the green room with Natalia by my side, I wanted to lose myself in her instead. Crazy enough, distracting myself with the cause of my distraction somehow made perfect sense to me. Finding someplace private enough for us to get friendly was the challenge, and that wasn't going to change anytime soon.

The dressing rooms had been set up as individual audition spaces since the stage was still being set, and the contestants were encouraged to mingle before and after their scheduled times. Networking was a critical part of this business and could make a huge difference in their success. Plus, we wanted to foster a sense of community among the bands rather than pit them against each other.

With the auditions completed, everyone was gathered so we could announce the finalist who would open the show tonight. The air was ripe with excitement and nervous energy as each band huddled together. Their attention was on Natalia, who was all business in her black suit and cream-colored blouse. But the only thing I could focus on was her familiar scent as she handed out envelopes containing our feedback and gave them a pep talk.

“Before we announce our decision, I want to let you know that we saw something special in each of you. You wouldn’t be here otherwise. Don’t let today’s outcome discourage you or stop you from continuing your journey. And no matter where you are along that journey, it’s only over if you stop moving forward. All of you are on our radar now, so we’ll be following your growth. And when the time is right, Lucky Greene Records would be happy to have you join our family.”

Family. Rejection. Alone.

A bitter ache formed in the pit of my stomach. Playing a hometown show brought a special kind of energy because it was a chance for our friends and relatives to come to the show. Not for me. I already knew mine wouldn’t be there. Sure, some of the other guys wouldn’t have parents there either because they had moved away. That was understandable. But my family, who lived less than an hour from the arena, always made the conscious choice to stay home. And no matter how many times it happened, it still stung.

Natalia’s hand on my elbow gently pulled me back from my mental detour to find everyone watching me expectantly since I was supposed to announce the winner. Out of habit, I ignored the concern in her eyes and the added strain in the

room from my unintentional delay. I had learned it was best not to draw any more attention to my awkward fumbles than necessary. It was also easier for me to move past them without having to explain myself.

Having no tolerance for long, drawn-out ceremonies anyway, I hadn't prepared any kind of speech. I simply gave them the news. "For tonight, we would like to invite The Strutting Penguins to perform." The winners celebrated with hugs and back slaps as they accepted congratulations from the other contestants. "We hope the rest of you will show your support. There are tickets reserved at the box office if you need them."

We stayed long enough to shake hands all around and pose for a few pictures. Then, Natalia and I left everyone to pack up their instruments. Navigating the long hallway, we worked in tandem. I began calculating how soon I could get The Strutting Penguins on stage for rehearsal while Natalia called her assistant to arrange the publicity announcements and ensure that everything was in place for the live stream.

As she relayed the details, I tried to forget the shit swirling in my head. The second-guessing, the overthinking, the family drama. All of it. But it wouldn't stop hammering at me. I was considering a jog in the parking lot to burn off the unwelcome stress when an empty storage room caught my eye. Even better.

The need to feel her eclipsed all other thought, especially the rational voice in my head telling me there was no time in the schedule to get naked. I didn't care. I nudged her inside and closed the door before she had time to protest. The room was mostly shadows with only a dim overhead light to guide me as I unbuttoned her blazer. By the time my desperate fingers had her shirt opened, revealing today's selection of lacy undergarments, she was cutting her conversation short.

"I'll send over the updated information in a few minutes, Kara." Without waiting for a reply, she ended the call and slid her phone into her laptop bag, which then dropped to the floor. Placing her palms on my chest, she leaned into me.

“Hello, friend,” I whispered low in her ear. “I thought of something else you should know about me. I’m impulsive and need to keep my hands busy. So, be prepared to be touched. Often.”

“Mmm. You do have very skilled hands, and I can think of a few ways to put them to good use.”

Liking the sound of that, I didn’t hold back. I kissed her with everything I had. Snaking my hands around her waist, I squeezed her luscious ass. My dick was already hard, and I made no effort to hide it as I pulled her closer. “Yeah?”

“Absolutely. Foot rubs, back massages...”

I laughed, and all of the lingering darkness in my head melted away. The relief felt so good that I decided to hold on to it for as long as possible. Fuck it. My family would always be a sore spot for me, so I needed to take control where I could. I decided to stop worrying about the inevitable downfall of my arrangement with Natalia. There was no point. It would happen when it happened, and I was done spoiling what time we did have with doubts and negativity. For once, I was going to turn it off and simply live in the moment. And in that moment, life was good.

I dug my thumbs into her glutes, happy to work in some massage time if that’s what it took to get my hands on her. Stealing another kiss, I couldn’t help but wonder how much time we had before someone came looking for us. The immediate buzzing from her bag gave me my answer.

Breaking apart with a groan, she retrieved her phone and pressed the device between her cheek and shoulder while working to re-button her blouse. “Ben, I’m on my way to check the video feed now. Let me call you back in two minutes.”

I picked up her bag and handed it to her as she disconnected. “You’re just going to leave me like this?”

She glanced down at my tented pants before rising up to smack a kiss on my lips. “I am. But look on the bright side. Now you’ll have something else to do with your hands.”

With a saucy smile, she sailed out of the room, leaving me too charmed to be frustrated.

Chapter 7

Natalia

My nerves multiplied in waves as I waited in the green room, where a crowd of friends and family had gathered. I alternated between being worried that something would go wrong and assuring myself that we had done all we could. It was out of my hands now, and that was not a feeling I enjoyed at all. How did Shawn do this every night?

Glancing in his direction, there was definite tension. It could have been the number of people packed into the tight space, but it seemed like more. At first glance, he appeared fine. He smiled and talked with an older couple he was obviously familiar with. But his eyes were dull and his laughter was shallow. Something was off.

“Are those Shawn’s parents?” I asked Callie.

We stood off to the side of the refreshment table chatting and catching up. Since our night out for pizza and beers, I had been making more of an effort to get to know the other women on the tour. Admitting my lack of friends to Shawn made me realize it was something I wanted to change. And I figured Callie and Anna would be a safe start since they were already immersed in the music world. Plus, I genuinely liked both of them.

“No, that’s Mr. and Mrs. McCarthy. They help manage the lodge and surrounding property. Shawn’s parents don’t come to the shows.”

“Ever?”

Callie shook her head. “I’ve only met them once when the guys graduated high school. They don’t approve of Shawn’s career choice and use it as an excuse to distance themselves from him.”

“What? Why?”

Just then, Lance walked up to grab a bottle of water. “Because they’re rich fucking assholes, who are more

concerned with appearances than their son's happiness."

He started to say more, but the door opened and The Strutting Penguins were escorted inside. Looking completely dazed, their eyes went even wider as they stepped into the crowded room. Naturally, Jaxon and the guys rushed to make them more comfortable, introducing them to everyone and treating them like family. Grabbing a few extra waters, Lance left to join them.

"Are you okay?" I asked, noting the sadness clouding Callie's eyes as she watched Lance pass a bottle to his brother.

"Not really," she admitted. "I messed up, so things between me and Derek are awkward. Being back on the bus is going to be hard, and I'm feeling a bit sorry for myself."

My first instinct was to try to help. This wasn't something I could easily fix, but I wanted to offer some type of support. "You're welcome to ride with me."

"Really?" Her surprise was evident.

The more I thought about it, the better it sounded. "Sure. I'm already following the band's bus, so you won't be far away. And, other than Frederick, I have it all to myself. I would love the company." Her eyes filled with so much longing as she looked across the room that it hurt to watch. "I can't make things magically better, but I can offer you a little space while you sort them out."

Her shoulders slumped in acceptance as she turned to me. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Positive. I can't promise non-stop fun because I work a lot. But I would really like having you there. And think of the perks. It will definitely be quieter and smell better."

A smile broke through the sorrow. "That sounds great."

"So that's a yes?"

"Yes," she said more confidently. She stepped in to give me a quick hug, which I clumsily accepted. "I have to help Pops with something first, so I'll bring my stuff over after the show."

“Perfect.”

As soon as she left, I could feel Shawn’s eyes on me. Instinctively, I knew exactly where he was and turned toward him. Sure enough, he was staring at me with an intensity that left me reeling. The slant of his brow and tilt of his head seemed to ask if I was alright. I nodded in reply, assuring him that I was fine.

I silently returned the question, still concerned about him and wondering if his parents’ absence was to blame for his current mood. He was wound tight, but the furrow in his brow relaxed slightly. Then the heated look he gave me had my heart racing. It went far beyond want. It was raw need. Warmth spread throughout my body and I had to force my thighs together to calm the pulse pounding between my legs. I wanted nothing more than to cross the space separating us and press myself against him instead.

The stage manager chose that moment to poke his head in and call The Strutting Penguins to the stage, breaking our not-so-subtle connection. Luckily everyone’s attention was on the anxious contestants and not on us. Wishing them luck, the crowd flowed toward the stage to watch from the wings while Shawn and I headed to the floor of the arena.

Walking next to each other, our arms brushed and our hands touched occasionally, intensifying my craving. I was desperate to feel more of him, but we weren’t alone. Mitch, a new member of the security crew, accompanied us.

With the recent surge in Detrimental’s popularity, there had been a few minor incidents with crowd control and a fan breaking into Lance’s hotel room. In response to the growing attention and to prevent any safety issues, the band had increased security for the final leg of the tour. Objectively, I knew that anyone in the public eye took on a certain amount of risk, but the idea of him or any of the band members actually being harmed was unacceptable.

Mitch had been assigned to handle anything related to the contest to reduce the added security risk. His job included keeping contestants out of restricted areas and ensuring

everyone's safety throughout the day. And while he had argued that it would leave us more vulnerable, Shawn insisted that we watch the performance from the control booth. He preferred the direct view of the stage, which would allow us to see and hear the band better. To help keep his identity safe, he wore a baseball cap and regular street clothes. We also waited for the house lights to go off before making our way to the booth under the cover of darkness, which seemed to satisfy Mitch.

With Shawn's hand at my back, I climbed into the partially enclosed platform. There, in the heart of the arena, the crowd's energy enveloped us. I noted that the seats were filling quickly, a clear indication of the opener's popularity. Some opening acts were lucky to play to half of the total audience. But with *Borrowing Trouble's* rising success, fans were coming to see them just as much as the headliner. Lucky for me, that translated into even more exposure for *Ready to Rock* and for each night's finalist.

Mitch stood guard at the booth's entrance, leaving us alone with the single technician operating the complex equipment in front of him. A dozen or more seats lined the space, but Shawn led me to the back corner. The combined darkness and enclosure wall hid us from view, making it the perfect little hideaway. Safely tucked together, Shawn reached out to take my hand as the first note sounded.

The *Strutting Penguins* played their hearts out, and the show was flawless thanks to *Detrimental's* skillful crew. By the end of the first song, my nerves calmed, and I forgot about the million details that went into creating a great performance. I simply enjoyed a show with the man beside me.

Shawn was just as fascinating to watch. With his razor-sharp focus, I could practically see his mind at work, analyzing the performance and making mental notes. Yet it was clearly a labor of love. His head nodded to the beat, and his shoulders relaxed. The rigid set of his jaw eased, and he smiled in approval. It was a beautiful sight.

All too soon, the set came to an end. Shawn shifted back to the present, and though it was a subtle transformation, I noticed. He was guarded once again, and I felt his earlier

tension return as Mitch whisked us back to the dressing rooms, where Shawn and I were supposed to part ways.

“Let’s get the preliminary evaluations written up while everything is fresh in our minds,” I said, creating an excuse to go inside since Mitch was still in earshot. Shawn’s look of confusion quickly cleared as I urged him through his dressing room door. As soon as it closed, he was reaching for me.

Slamming his mouth to mine, I could practically taste the day’s pent-up emotions. Hints of anger and frustration were there, but they were buried beneath the raging need that threatened to swamp us both. Kissing him back, I mirrored his level of intensity. I opened for him and ran my hands through his hair, gripping it to anchor him in place. The sting of his fingers curling into my hips hit me as he dragged my body against his prominent erection.

“Damn, I’ve wanted you all day,” he panted, trailing kisses along my jaw before resting his forehead against mine.

The abrupt alarm blaring from his phone had us both swearing in frustration. Shawn reached into his pocket to silence the offensive technology. The storm still brewing in his eyes was painful to look at, but there wasn’t time to ask about it. Instead, I left him with one soft, lingering kiss to try to offer some support and convey that I was there for him.



I had been to more concerts than I could possibly recall. From dive bars to modest venues to sold-out stadiums, I had seen the most obscure bands, world-renowned artists, and everything in between. I had even attended a recent Detrimental concert as part of my efforts to win them back. But nothing had prepared me for the experience of standing just off stage to watch them play to a packed arena.

Of course, my enjoyment might have been influenced by the unobstructed view of their sexy drummer seated amongst his vast percussion set-up. Dressed for maximum comfort and ease of movement, he wore black bicycle shorts and low-top sneakers. That was it. And with little left to the imagination, I was glad he was concealed behind his drum kit at the back of the stage.

As much as his body drew me in, the sheer power that he unleashed while playing held me captive. I had seen it before, but this time, I felt it. More importantly, I was beginning to understand it. He was engaged in a battle against the demons that haunted him. Each stomp of the bass pedal, every strike of a cymbal, and the continuous pounding on the snare was an assault against an invisible enemy, draining him emotionally and physically.

Drenched in sweat and out of breath, Shawn exited the stage with the rest of the band as they regrouped for the encore. Catching the towel thrown his way, he wiped his face and hair before moving it down his neck and chest. Aware that I was staring, he quirked a brow in my direction as a sexy little smirk tugged at his lips. I had no shame in being caught and shrugged a shoulder to convey as much.

As rehearsed, Borrowing Trouble would join them for two more songs. Then, The Strutting Penguins would join the finale. With so many people waiting at the side of the stage, Shawn was able to make his way to me without being too obvious. Still, we had to play it cool.

“Enjoying the view from back here?” he asked.

I looked him up and down, tracking the beads of sweat gliding down his torso. Only when they disappeared into the waistband of his shorts did I look him in the eye. What I saw there was just as appealing. The dark orbs held a warmth that had been missing earlier. In fact, all his features had softened, and his loosened posture was proof that his pain had been vanquished for now.

The noise around us grew, making it necessary for me to lean in so he could hear me. Coming from any other man, the

musky scent and heat radiating off his body would have had me turning away. With him, it made me hungry for more.

“I’m heading to my bus as soon as The Strutting Penguins load out. How soon can you meet me?” I wasn’t sure what other obligations he had following the show, but it was the only chance we might get to be alone.

“Give me a few minutes to take a shower and pack up my dressing room. Then, I’m all yours.” Shifting his body sideways, he adjusted the bulge in his shorts. His eyes closed in concentration while his hands began playing a muted version of air drums and he muttered, “Crash, bass, snare, snare, paradiddle, snare, bass.”

“What are you doing?”

“Recalling an early drum lesson. I can’t remember the teacher’s name, but he reeked of garlic and always wore the same dirty jeans. Learning ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ took on a whole new meaning. It’s what I think about when I need an instant boner killer.”

“Interesting,” I said, pressing my lips together to keep from laughing. “So long as there’s no permanent damage.”

“No worries there,” he assured me with a grin.

The rest of the show was a friendly jam session, a virtual dream come true for the contestants. And while that was great, my attention was on Shawn, who was relaxed and finally having fun. He even handed his sticks to the drummer of The Strutting Penguins, who stood in awe for a good five seconds before jumping into action. In my experience, it was quite an honor to play another musician’s instrument, making the night even more memorable for him.

Another memorable moment had been when Jaxon called Anna out on stage to join him. He’d shared the news of their engagement with the crowd then added an extra surprise by pulling her close for a dance as he poured his heart out in a song. And if my eyes sought out Shawn, it had only been to remind myself that I had exactly what I wanted. I didn’t need anything more.

As the final song continued, I became aware of someone standing at my back. Anna had gone to watch the rest of the show with the other family members in the control booth, and everyone else was on stage, so I should have been alone. I took a step forward to make more room for whoever was trying to get a closer look. But whoever it was followed. I turned to find Mitch directly behind me, with no apparent reason for being in my personal space. Annoyed at the disruption, I took a full step to the right and angled my body away from him.

“Aw, honey. I don’t bite.” His eyes wandered the length of me, leaving no doubt of his interest.

“Not happening,” I said, crossing my arms and using my serious, business voice.

He nodded with a predatory gleam in his eye. “Challenge accepted.”

Shaking my head, I stared him down. “It’s not a challenge, it’s a refusal. I’m here to do a job, and so are you.”

“No reason why we can’t mix a little business with a lot of pleasure. Have a drink with me.”

The offer came complete with him reaching out to caress my cheek. Luckily, the predictable move allowed me to dodge the contact.

Swallowing my irritation, I tried my best to remain professional while putting this arrogant jackass in his place. “Let me be clear. I am not interested in anything you have to offer, so you need to back off. Otherwise, we’re going to have a serious problem.”

The tic in his cheek and harsh glare would have made another woman cower or be the first to look away. I held his stare, forcing him to break it. When he did, his entire demeanor changed.

Laughing off the whole encounter, he stepped back. “No need to get your feathers ruffled. Can’t blame me for noticing the prettiest girl in the place.”

Ick. Did women really fall for this kind of crap?

A sudden influx of road crew and equipment cases around us signaled the end of the show, which aggravated me further because I'd missed the rest of it. Jaxon was already closing out the show, recognizing each band and encouraging fans to follow Ready to Rock online. Shawn glanced over to check in with me as he made his way to the front of the stage to wave and toss his drumsticks into the crowd. He had enough on his mind, and since Mitch was finally gone, I simply smiled in return.

As soon as Detrimental exited the stage, riding an emotional high from their performance, crew members took their place. And the moment the house lights came on, they began the laborious process of tearing everything down.

The engagement celebration continued backstage with friends and family in no hurry to leave. Shawn, on the other hand, stayed the bare minimum of time before catching my attention and slipping out. I stayed long enough to say goodbye to The Strutting Penguins and to remind them of a few key points in the contract they had signed. It was mostly filled with contest regulations and legal fine print, but it also had a standard NDA along with a clause giving Lucky Greene a right of first refusal if anyone else offered them a contract before the end of the contest.

But the moment I stepped onto my bus, contracts were the last thing on my mind. I had a sexy man heading my way, and I had a limited window of time to enjoy him.

Chapter 8

Natalia

An hour later, I was sprawled out like a starfish, one leg interwoven with Shawn's as we lingered in the aftermath of our extremely friendly interlude. Every nerve in my body hummed with satisfaction as my skin cooled and my heartbeat settled. I could have easily drifted to sleep if not for the hours of work I still had to do. And the worry that someone would discover us together. Not that I needed an excuse for being seen with Shawn. The contest gave us plenty to do and would provide enough of a cover if anyone asked. Just not if we were naked.

It was routine for the drivers to get together each night for cards or to travel into the city we were visiting, which worked well in our favor. Having my bus parked across from the fenced musicians' lot also gave us a small measure of privacy. But not for long. The backstage festivities would eventually wind down, and people would start to disperse. As it was, neither of us had immediately remembered to close the bus door once Shawn was on board. Anyone could have stumbled upon us, and we wouldn't have even noticed. We had been too caught up in each other to care and needed to be more careful in the future.

Propping myself up on my elbows, I did a quick search of the small bedroom located at the back of the bus. Other than the bed with small built-in shelves on either side, the room had a vanity table in one corner and storage closets lining the back wall. The room, along with the rest of the bus, was decorated with white fixtures, black hardware, and unfinished wood accents, giving the space a clean, natural feel.

Finally spotting my jacket on the floor, I crawled over Shawn to reach for my phone in the pocket. I had several new emails along with a text message from Callie letting me know that I could expect her in about twenty minutes.

Wanting to make the most of every minute we were alone, I settled back on the bed. Shawn wrapped his arm

around me and placed an absent kiss on the crown of my head before exhaling in contentment. It was the most peaceful I'd ever seen him.

“Will you tell me what was bothering you earlier?” I asked, hoping I wasn't ruining the mood.

I waited quietly, giving him the choice to answer or not. He had been remarkably open so far, and though he was doing it to keep me from getting too attached, I wasn't sure it was working. Call me crazy, but the more I learned, the more I liked about him. Each detail provided an additional piece of the puzzle I was building in my head. No, not a puzzle. More like the image in a kaleidoscope. Each bit of new information was an added fractal, giving the design more color and dimension. And depending on the angle you looked at it, the image changed. Just like the man himself. Depending on your motive and perspective, what you saw would vary.

He didn't speak right away, flinging an arm over his face to avoid looking at me. Only then did he open up. “My parents refuse to watch me play, so every hometown show is another reminder that I'm not good enough for them. It fucks with my head.”

Even though I had suspected as much, it still hurt to hear. “I'm sorry. I can't imagine anyone not seeing how amazing you are. Especially your own parents.”

“Oh, believe it. Truth bomb story time.” He shifted to his side and propped his head in his hand, clearly more comfortable now that he knew he had my support. “I have two older sisters, so my father was thrilled to learn he would finally have a son. To say I was a disappointment is an understatement. From an early age, I was a handful. I was energetic and had a hard time following directions. School was a constant challenge. I got in trouble a lot, and because my behavior was so disruptive, a teacher suggested having me evaluated by my pediatrician. My father refused, convinced I needed more discipline. But no matter how hard he was on me, I could never become what he wanted. No matter what I did, it wasn't good enough, even though I tried so fucking hard to

earn his approval. One day, I overheard him arguing with my Grammy. He said I was defective.”

I had to work to keep my voice steady. “How old were you?”

“Twelve.”

The thought of Shawn having to endure that at such a young age made me want to go find his father and slap some sense into him. Instead, I tugged him back down to pillow his head on my chest so I could stroke his hair. It wasn’t much, but my dad had done the same to me when I was upset and it always made me feel better.

“What about your mother?”

“She goes along with whatever my father says. It would be undignified to cause a scene.”

“And your Grammy? Why were they arguing?”

Despite the heavy topic, his body slowly relaxed with each stroke of my hand. “My father was forever disciplining me. He used to make me run laps around the perimeter of our property whenever I took too long finishing my homework. Ironically, that’s how I learned that exercise helped me focus better. Of course, when I tried running before doing my homework, he punished me for procrastinating. I couldn’t win. He seemed determined to find fault in me. During dinner, he kept an old riding crop next to him, just waiting to strike my hands if I played with my silverware or tapped my fingers on the table. But the worst was when I got in trouble at school because public image is everything to him. That’s when he brought out his old fraternity paddle. Grammy walked in on a paddle day and was furious.”

I pictured a younger version of Shawn enduring his father’s abuse, and my heart broke. “Did she make him stop?” I managed to ask around the lump in my throat.

“Oh, yeah. He hasn’t touched me since, but only because she threatened his inheritance. I got lucky because of the timing too. It happened on the last day of school after my final report card had set him off, so she packed me up and took me

home with her for the summer. While I was there, she had me evaluated and sent the results to my school. Even with proof, my father refused to acknowledge the diagnosis. And it's not like a diagnosis is a cure. It took several more years of trial and error before I learned to sufficiently manage my symptoms. During that time, he made his disapproval clear, voicing it every chance he got."

Silence stretched as he got lost in old memories, my chest aching as the emotions played over his face. He looked so lost that I wondered if it had been easier for him to bear the paddle than his father's cutting words.

"To this day, I'm nothing more than an embarrassment, yet I still invite my parents when we perform near home and leave tickets at the box office for them, knowing they won't come. Pretty pathetic, huh?"

"No." My tone was more forceful than I had intended, but I couldn't stand the thought of him hardening his heart because of his parents' callous treatment. He deserved so much better. "There's nothing wrong with having hope."

A long-suffering sigh escaped him. "Honestly, I'm not sure I even know what I'm hoping for anymore."

"You'll know when you find it."

Meanwhile, I would do all I could to make sure he didn't stop searching.



The days flew by in a hectic blur of activity. There was always too much to do and too little time to do it. My days were long and my nights were longer with sleep continuing to be a rare luxury, and I felt like I was continuously being pulled in several directions as I juggled everything. But the following

Sunday afternoon, I found myself floating in a kayak. Me. On the water. Immersed in nature. Not that I had anything against nature, but the occasional beach or mountain vacation in a five-star hotel with a spa was the extent of my experience. But Shawn had shown up at my hotel room that morning, insisting that I needed some fresh air and sunshine, and I had been too tired to resist. Or pretend I wanted to. Working around the clock was starting to take its toll, so getting to spend the day with Shawn was all the incentive I needed. The rest would still be there when I got back.

Surprisingly, Shawn had arranged everything from the rental car and cooler filled with food to the hats and sunscreen. More than likely, he had someone else make the arrangements, but it was the thought that counted. Of course, when I originally packed my swimsuit, I had pictured a hotel hot tub, not the warm, salty waters of the Gulf of Mexico. And even though I would have to work extra hard later, I couldn't help but appreciate being right where I was in that moment.

With each of us manning a kayak, we paddled away from the busy shore toward the open waters. The waves were minimal, mostly created from jet skis that drowned out the call of seagulls as they passed. I could feel the slight burn in my arms with each stroke of the paddle, but it felt good to stretch out my stiffened muscles. It made me glad Shawn had suggested two single kayaks instead of a double, especially when he pulled up beside me and we could see each other as we made our way to the small island in the distance.

The employee at the rental stand had described it as a hidden gem that most tourists didn't take the time to visit. There was a ferry that also shuttled people back and forth, but there were no bars, hotels, or amusement rides to be found. It had been left as natural as possible and was registered as a state park. Other than a small marina, concession stand, and playground, it was completely undeveloped. Even the seagrass was left to grow among the white sandy shores.

It took a few minutes to stop thinking about work and to finally relax, but once I allowed my mind to drift, I was shocked to realize that we were two weeks into the

competition already. Falling into a routine, each day had felt much like the one before. In between all of the daily responsibilities associated with the contest, I spent as much time as I could working on LGR business. I checked in with my A&R team, fielding emails and approving travel and new contract offers. Every afternoon, I also made a call to my dad, who assured me he was taking good care of himself and wasn't overdoing it at the office. Knowing that I got my work ethic and dedication from him, his words were of little comfort. But I was doing all I could to minimize his workload.

I tried to squeeze in some downtime too. I made it a point to join the band for dinner each night. On top of getting to enjoy everyone's company, I loved seeing Shawn interact with his friends. They joked and told stories meant to lovingly embarrass each other, and it was just nice to see him so relaxed and having fun.

Dinner was also my chance to get to know Anna and Callie better. I was nervous at first, worried we wouldn't have much in common, but we soon discovered a shared love of tacos and family. And really, what else mattered?

As we sat around the table last night, everyone had been running low on energy. The schedule was grueling with shows every night from Tuesday to Saturday, and it was the fifth night in the stretch. They were all worn out and looking forward to having a few days off in the comfort of hotel rooms with real beds. And it was well deserved.

On top of their mandatory two days off each week, the band only toured for six weeks at a time before taking a two-week break. They had insisted on that schedule to prevent exhaustion or getting burned out, and I respected them for making themselves a priority. It was definitely a lesson I needed to learn. And I really was trying.

It had also become routine to watch the show with Anna and Callie each night, though Callie usually found a reason to leave before it ended. She was still trying to keep her distance from Derek and avoided being around the band any more than necessary. She insisted that moving onto my bus had helped, but there hadn't been time to talk much more than that. Most

of our time together was spent sleeping. Or at least she was sleeping. I was up until the wee hours working. And thinking about Shawn.

Naturally, my favorite time of day was right after the show. Other than a few stolen moments in closets and dressing rooms, it was the only time we had to be alone and to give in to the attraction that consistently built throughout the day. But even then, we were forced to hurry. Thankfully, Callie's job seemed to keep her occupied, and we were legitimately reviewing contest applications by the time she returned each night. But all of the sneaking around and rushed encounters left me eager to soak up every minute of our day off together.

Fortunately, Shawn was the least recognized member of the band. I assumed that was intentional on his part since he didn't like being the center of attention. So, on a secluded beach, he would only be noticed by the most devoted fan, and they would have no idea who I was, making the risk of discovery minimal. Here, we were just another couple enjoying a day at the beach. And it felt amazing.

Paddling along, I let out a startled squeal as a fin breached the surface ahead of me.

Shawn turned to me. "What's wrong?"

"Shark." I whispered as if that would somehow keep the animal from noticing us. It was a bit ridiculous that I felt more at ease in a room filled with egotistical businessmen and arrogant artists than I did being a few feet away from a giant fish. But, hey, we all had our comfort zones. "There." I pointed ahead of us as it resurfaced, though it was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

Stilling our paddles, we bobbed quietly and scanned the area. It wasn't long before two fins briefly emerged side by side.

"Dolphins," Shawn corrected and resumed the gentle pace he had set for my benefit.

"Really?" I asked, my fear turning to excitement. "How can you tell?" I trusted his answer, but my brain wanted proof

to ensure I didn't end up losing any vital parts. Or non-vital parts for that matter.

“Their fins are shaped differently. On a dolphin, the dorsal fin curves back, and they have a horizontal tail fin. Also, sharks tend to swim alone. When you see their fin, they're likely hunting something below them, so you would see it above water for a longer period. Since dolphins are mammals, they don't have gills. They come to the surface to breathe and then go back under the water.”

His expansive knowledge of things never failed to impress me, and I couldn't help but smile. “How on earth do you know all of that?”

“My final science project in the seventh grade, complete with clay models and a video presentation. I had recently watched a documentary on sharks and was a bit obsessed.”

“I bet your teacher was impressed.”

“Not really,” he laughed, but it held little humor. “I got so distracted by the other stuff that I forgot to type up the report. I failed the assignment because I didn't meet the requirements, even though I guarantee I learned more about my chosen topic than any other kid in that class did.”

The sorrow I had been feeling whenever I thought of him dealing with so much at a young age quickly turned to irritation. I hated picturing Shawn as a kid, constantly having his enthusiasm and curiosity crushed by the demands other people placed on him. And it was those same people who should have been supporting him and helping him navigate the world who were most to blame. It infuriated me, but also created a burning need to understand him more so I would never be one of those people.

Paddling the rest of the way to the island provided the perfect outlet for my anger, and by the time we hit land, I was feeling better. Eager to escape the scorching sun, we secured the kayaks and got ready for a swim. The heat in Shawn's stare was nearly as potent as I peeled off my shorts and t-shirt to reveal a cute floral print bikini with an off-the-shoulder ruffled top. I stared in return as he tossed his hat and shirt into his

kayak, leaving him in a pair of navy board shorts with a pale blue palm tree printed on one side. But I really overheated when the little patch of hair below his belly button caught my eye. After all, I'd been up close and personal there last night, and I knew exactly where it led.

With a low growl, he kicked off his shoes and tugged me toward the water before we could get into trouble. Once we were knee deep, I sat and reclined back to let the gentle waves wash over me while Shawn charged deeper and dove in. He swam for several minutes before turning back with a hand mounted on top of his head like a fin. The waves helped guide him toward me, and as he approached, I widened my legs so that he ended up cradled in my lap.

"Mmm, a tasty treat," he said, lifting himself high enough to place a salty kiss on my lips before resting his chin on my chest.

"Are you going to eat me, Mr. Shark?"

"Later," he promised.

Balancing on one hand, I used the other to sweep the hair from his eyes, noting the spiky clusters of his lashes. He grinned up at me, and I felt my pulse leap. Because in that perfectly simple moment, I knew I could completely fall for him.

Not despite his differences.

Because of them.

He was unlike anyone I had ever known, and it only made me want him more. Not just want him, I wanted to prove to him how incredible he was. I wanted to be his biggest champion and help defend him against anyone who dared to make him feel bad about who he was. More importantly, I wanted to erase all of the negative bullshit that had ever been planted in his head and replace it with the absolute knowledge that he was worthy and perfect just as he was. His rare ability to not only persevere in the face of adversity, but to thrive, was something to be proud of.

I had already spent the past two nights scouring the internet for information on ADHD to prove it. What I discovered had been overwhelming. Not only did ADHD come with its own set of challenges including trouble regulating emotions and deficits in basic executive functioning skills like organization, time management, and impulse control, but other conditions often accompanied it. Depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and sleep disorders were just a few. And the more I learned, the more I felt like I didn't know.

I'd read articles and watched videos until my head hurt and my eyes crossed. Some gave scientific explanations and listed treatment options, while others provided tips for supporting a loved one. It was all great information, but so much of it depended on the individual's needs. I also found a few social media content creators who broke everything down on a more personal level. They made the subject much more relatable, but it still boiled down to one key fact: every person was different. So, if I truly wanted a better understanding of Shawn and his struggles, I needed to know him on a deeper level. And for all of his truth bombs, there was a lot I didn't know yet. But I was determined to learn every bit: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

As we explored the shore, examining seashells and watching various birds chase their next meal, I knew the only way I was going to fully unravel the mystery of Shawn was by spending as much time alone with him as possible. Not exactly a hardship for me, but I sensed it might be an issue for him. We were already into the second weekend of the tour and had yet to spend an entire night together. I understood that it wasn't possible when we were on shared buses, where there was no way to keep our arrangement a secret, but that didn't explain the nights we'd had private hotel rooms.

Last night, the sheets hadn't even cooled before he was out the door. And even though that was part of our deal, I felt like there was more going on. I tried not to take it personally. After all, there were plenty of potential explanations. Maybe he preferred our dynamic the way it was. Maybe he was more comfortable sleeping alone. Hell, maybe he snored like a grizzly bear.

Grinning at the thought, I tugged on the hand holding mine to bring him in for a quick kiss. “Do you snore?”

In all of my research, the one consistent piece of advice for supporting someone with ADHD was honest, open communication. We were already ahead of the game there, so I used it to my advantage.

“What?” He laughed as though he wasn’t sure he’d heard me correctly. “Do I snore?”

I nodded. “That’s the question.”

“And will there be more oddly random questions?”

“Absolutely. I want to make sure I’m able to sweep the Shawn Blackwell category on *Jeopardy* if it ever comes up.”

“Well, since trivia is kind of our thing, I need to be equally prepared.”

“That’s only fair.” If I wanted to earn his trust enough for him to open himself completely to me, I had to be willing to do the same. “I don’t snore. But I do hog the covers. You?”

Shaking his head, he grinned at me in amusement. “No. However, I am known to keep talking until I fall asleep. And you already know I’m a very sound sleeper. According to the guys, I mumble in my sleep sometimes too, but it’s nothing coherent.” Stopping, he splashed some cool water on both of us before we continued walking. “My turn. Any siblings?”

“None that I know of.” A heaviness filled my chest, as it always did when this topic came up, but I brushed it aside. I owed Shawn the same honesty he’d shown me. “My mom took off when I was four, and I haven’t heard from her since.”

“Shit.” He paused long enough to give me a hug. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. I had the best dad a girl could ask for.” Not wanting to bring the mood down, I kept the conversation moving. “How did you get into drumming?”

A genuine smile lit Shawn’s face. “Grammy. She thought I needed an outlet for all of my excess energy, so she bought

my first drum set and arranged for lessons the first summer I stayed with her. I've been playing ever since."

"Sounds like you hit the grandparent lottery with her."

"Absolutely," he agreed. "My grandfather passed when I was eight, and it was difficult for her. In the end, she came out of it stronger and fiercer than ever. She spends a lot of time traveling with her friends now, but we're still close." He stooped to pick up a large shell before tossing it back into deeper water. "What about your music education? Obviously, you were around it as a kid. Did you also go to college?"

"I did. I have a degree in music business from NYU. I looked into other schools, but ultimately the music scene in New York weighed heavily on my decision. That and my need for an extensive public transportation system," I admitted with a healthy dose of humility. "I read somewhere that you dropped out once the band started becoming successful. Were you able to finish college?"

"Yes. Despite my father cramming Duke down my throat my whole life, I wasn't interested in a two-hour commute. And though leaving home sounded great, I didn't want to move so far from the guys. I was willing to compromise and attend UNC in Charlotte, which also has a well-respected business program. Plus, Jaxon had already been accepted there. I stood my ground and my father ultimately gave in. I lasted two years, but when the band started getting more bookings and was approached by LGR, Jaxon and I both decided to make the band our priority. Because of that, my father kicked me out and cut off his financial support thinking he could control me. He had no idea Grammy had already set up an account for me so I wouldn't ever be beholden to him. He also doesn't know that I finished my bachelor's degree online and went on to earn a master's in finance."

"Impressive," I said, adding another line to the long list of reasons I wanted to maim his father.

Having circled the small island, we layered on more sunscreen before reboarding the kayaks to paddle our way through the nearby mangrove trail. The small coastal trees

formed a lush canopy, providing some timely relief from the relentless sun. The dense trees cut us off from the outside world, and I spoke softly so that I didn't intrude on the hushed reverence filling the space.

“Is this how you usually spend your days off?”

The trail widened, allowing Shawn to maneuver beside me before answering. “Pretty much. I'm not one to sit idle and I don't like being stuck inside, so I try to find some type of outdoor activity. Sometimes the guys will join in, and sometimes I want to be alone to recharge. It just depends on where we are and how I'm feeling.”

We continued our trek with more questions, and I gained a bit of insight into the man beside me with each new answer. There was a depth to him that intrigued me, and if I had a hundred years, I wasn't sure I would learn everything about him. On the surface, a lot of the details seemed insignificant. But I was paying attention, aligning new little facts with what I'd already learned. And in the end, I noted one consistency: Shawn was capable of anything when allowed to do it on his terms.

Chapter 9

Shawn

I pressed the key fob to unlock the rental van for everyone as I headed toward the driver's seat. Eli gave an exaggerated bow as he held the passenger door open for Natalia. The fucker. It irked me that he could do shit like that and get away with it while I had to pretend to be completely indifferent. Just as irksome was the fact that I wanted to be all chivalrous and gentlemanly in the first place. So I reminded myself—again—of what we were and why I needed to keep things simple.

My hidden crankiness aside, the mood was light and the cabin filled with laughter as the rest of the group piled in through the sliding doors on each side.

“Damn, I’m still stuffed,” Lance complained.

“I can’t believe you managed to eat that entire burger,” Anna said with a shudder.

“Yep, and I have the hat to prove it. But I would’ve thought twice about it if I’d known we were going to play laser tag after. That completely wrecked my game. I would have had Derek at the end otherwise.”

“Keep dreaming, little brother.” Derek laughed off the comment with a friendly shoulder bump.

Were we giant kids at times? No doubt. But we played hard to balance out the times we worked hard. Sometimes we just needed to have fun and let off some steam. And since nobody expected us to show up in arcades and escape rooms, we weren’t often recognized. And if we were, the smaller crowds kept things from getting out of hand.

The ensuing brotherly banter faded into the background as I focused on navigating back to the hotel. Part of me couldn’t wait. The sooner we got there, the sooner I could slide inside Natalia’s welcoming body. But another part of me wanted to stall, dreading the emotional quicksand that followed.

The whole point of our friendship pact was that there were no expectations and I was free to leave at any point, no questions asked. Oddly enough, that was having an unexpected effect on me. Because I didn't have to stay, I wanted to. I'd always been a bit oppositional that way. When someone told me I wasn't capable of doing something, I usually found a way to prove them wrong. So, it stood to reason that without the added pressure that came with a romantic relationship, I found myself willing to give more. I just wasn't sure I could do that without also getting more attached than I already was. And each time we came together, the more conflicted I became.

Ultimately, it was that fear of getting attached and inevitably hurt that spurred me to leave, despite the impression that Natalia wanted me to stay. Because no matter how much I wanted to fall asleep beside her, where I could reach for her in the middle of the night, I couldn't make myself do it. Both nights last week in her hotel room, I'd panicked and fled to my room. Knowing that she had been busy with work, I used the excuse of not wanting to be in her way. But I was running out of excuses.

Last night had been the hardest. We'd both been so content, and I had been on the verge of giving in when that same twitchy feeling came over me. Before I knew it, I was dressed and escaping back to my room under the pretext of having an early appointment.

To feel like less of a liar, I sent off a text to my therapist to schedule a quick session. Jeremy was part therapist, part advocate, part mentor, and he had been instrumental in helping me manage my ADHD over the years. During this morning's video call, he narrowed down my problem to basic fear and a need to communicate, which wasn't a huge surprise. Most of life's problems, even for neurotypical people, stemmed from the same place, and after a brief discussion, I felt better about facing the situation.

Looking over at Natalia, with the streetlights flickering across her features enough for me to see her staring back at me, I was more scared than ever. The predictable fear of

rejection was there. So was the glaringly obvious fact that once I moved past it, there was nothing to stop me from completely falling for her. And that was downright terrifying.

True, she was a workaholic. All week, she had barely come up for air and some sex-based stress relief before she was back at it. Not that I was the best at moderating myself, but I felt that made me uniquely qualified to recognize the signs of someone who needed a break. So, aside from wanting to spend time together, I had asked her to join me today in the hopes of restoring a little balance in her life. I just never imagined the effect the day would have on me.

A day at the beach fell within the list of approved friendly activities. But it had turned into much more, and I wasn't even sure how it happened. We just did what felt natural, and we had an amazing time. Under different circumstances, I would have called it a perfect date. And a huge part of me wanted to call it just that. In fact, if the rest of my life was filled with days like this, I would gladly spend them all with her.

Even with the madness of the tour, we meshed in a way I had never experienced before. She was always one step ahead of me, handing me my misplaced audition notes or returning the wallet I'd forgotten on her bus. And she did it all without impatience or annoyance. Being with her was easy. So the more I was with her and the more I shared, the more I needed to remind myself of what this was. And what it wasn't. Because she was starting to feel like the one person who could actually accept all of me, and I was starting to wish for things I couldn't have.

I parked the van and was careful to maintain my distance as we all rode in the elevator together. For security purposes, our rooms were all on the same floor, so I went through the motions of going to my room to keep up appearances. I quickly changed into some basketball shorts and a t-shirt before grabbing my wallet, phone, charger, and toothbrush, which I was determined to need.

Peering out into the hallway to make sure the coast was clear, I headed down the hall. Before my knuckles hit Natalia's door, it opened and I was hauled inside. As usual, the minute

we were alone, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. I backed her toward the bed, dropping my belongings on the dresser along the way. Pausing to fumble in my wallet, I felt for the condoms I stored there, only to come up empty.

"Damn it." Tearing myself away from her, I looked to verify what I already knew.

"What?" Tugging at my shirt, Natalia kissed her way across my chest, unaware of my suddenly flagging cock.

"No condom."

She simply pointed toward the nightstand, where a fresh box sat ready for use. And it was a thirty-six pack. My dick rocketed back up and practically saluted the woman yanking the shirt over my head. Licking and biting my nipples, she explored as my hands roamed down the back of her shorts, where I was met with nothing but bare skin.

Groaning my approval, I spread her wide before lifting to wrap her legs around me. With a few steps, I lowered her to the bed and quickly stripped her bare. Shoving away my own clothes, I leaned over her. My hands made a path up her thighs, following each curve until my fingers reached the wet heat I craved. Sliding in one finger, then two, her body coated them thoroughly as I increased my pace and circled my thumb over her clit. As she began to coil in anticipation, I slowed, easing my fingers from her body. She protested with a frustrated moan as I licked the length of each finger. Eyes locked, she pulled me in for a deep kiss before I went straight to the source for another taste.

Burying my face between her legs had become my new favorite place. I flicked my tongue in a way that had her chanting my name and fisting the sheets, but it wasn't enough for me. I slid lower and tongue fucked her, my thumb toying with her clit. Increasing my efforts, I felt her tense and then shatter as she came, drenching my face. I licked her clean and made my way up her body, leaving a trail of her scent along the way. Swirling my tongue around each breast, I sucked the tips into hard peaks. I pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses up one side of her neck, under her jaw, and down the other side.

My dick throbbed, demanding attention, so I refocused just enough to rip open the box and suit up. I continued to touch and taste her body, reigniting her arousal until I was poised and ready. Eyes locked on hers, I slowly sank in, savoring the tight heat surrounding me until I filled every inch of her. Blanketing her, I hooked my arms under her shoulders while she wrapped her legs around my waist. I kissed her softly, drawing out the moment, then pulled back and thrust hard.

“Hang tight,” I warned.

Holding her firmly in place, I slammed into her with a strength that would have rattled the headboard had it not been attached to the wall. Her nails bit into my back, sending a spark down my spine. With each stroke, she arched up into me, and I could feel the change in her body as she neared another orgasm. I wanted to draw out the pleasure, but I was too far gone. I needed the release. Wanting to feel as connected as possible, I kissed her deeply, and we came almost simultaneously. Pulse after pulse, I filled the condom as she milked every last drop from me. With the last of my energy, I rolled her on top of me before collapsing in a sweaty heap.

As we recovered and my softening dick eventually began to slide from her, I tied off the condom and tossed it to the floor. That’s when the usual anxiety kicked in. Natalia must have felt it too because she raised up enough to look at me before she spoke.

“Talk to me.”

Those three little words meant far more than the usual ones people doled out during pillow talk. And the fact that she wanted to listen, wanted to know what was bothering me, and wanted to work it out was encouraging. There was no judgment in her tone either. It was just a simple request, making it easy to open up.

“I want to spend the night.” It was the truth, plain and simple.

“Good. I want you to spend the night.” As if the matter was settled, she tucked her head back under my chin and drew lazy circles on my chest.

I released a slow breath, but couldn't get relaxed until I asked the hard question. “Will you promise to be here when I wake up?”

Her head popped back up. “Where else would I be?” Her eyes widened as the answer hit her. “Oh, shit. You think I'm going to leave again.” She shook her head vigorously and her voice was thick with regret. “I wouldn't do that. Not now. Not when I know...”

“Hey,” I comforted, hugging her tightly. “I believe you. My brain just likes to be an asshole sometimes and needs to hear things said out loud.”

She eased back and started to speak again but hesitated, looking more unsure than I'd ever seen her. That alone had me on edge. “Is RSD an issue for you?”

An icy chill traveled down my spine. I had been down this path more than once, and it never ended well. “What do you know about that?” I asked, hoping she wasn't about to say the words that would ruin everything.

“I did some research on ADHD.”

I couldn't move fast enough. She toppled over as I scrambled to get out from under her. Grabbing my shorts from the foot of the bed, I shoved my legs in them with my back to her. “Why?”

The reason was always the same, with minor variations. *I just want to help you. I found something new for you to try. I read about some medications that you can take.* The possibilities echoed in my mind. But again, I needed to hear Natalia say the words.

I snatched my shoes and sat in one of the chairs to put them on, but Natalia appeared and straddled my lap, preventing any further progress. My body was stiff with tension, and I refused to look at her until she gripped my face and turned my head.

“What the hell just happened?”

Knowing it was going to gut me, I asked the question again. “Why?”

“Why did I research ADHD?” I nodded once, not wanting to say something I might regret. “Because I want to understand what it’s like for you; your struggles, how you cope.”

I braced for the worst. “And...”

Refusing to back down, she pressed a quick kiss to my rigid lips. “And because I never want to hurt you again like I did our first night or let you down because I don’t understand how to support you.”

I began to speak, only to take a ragged breath and try again. “You aren’t trying to fix me?”

“Fix you? Fuck that.” Her grip on my head tightened, slowly caressing my cheeks with her thumbs. The gesture was at odds with the outrage on her face, which was just as soothing. “You are not broken,” she said, speaking each word with a conviction that left no room for argument.

My throat began to burn, and I clenched my jaw to fight off the emotions threatening to swamp me. But then her words shifted something in my very core, like a houseboat being moved to solid ground. I felt safe and steadied.

With my mind steeped in that heady feeling, I didn’t have the words to tell her how much they meant to me. Instead, I poured everything into a kiss and returned to the bed to show her. Taking my time, I explored every inch of skin, silently worshiping her, body and soul, until we lay wrung out, drifting to sleep. Together. Then, in the cover of darkness, she whispered a declaration that altered my entire world.

“I’ll never leave you again,” she promised with a sincerity that made me long to believe her.

Fucking hope.



I woke with Natalia's body draped over mine, pressing me into the mattress. Instead of feeling smothered, I was surprisingly content to enjoy the warmth of her breath against my neck as her impression of a weighted blanket calmed any remaining worries from last night's conversation. It was another example of the unexplainable way we simply fit together.

Aside from the occasional misunderstanding on my part, all of our time together felt natural in a way I had never experienced so quickly. Even when my brain was being an asshole, I didn't have to hide who I was from her, which freed me in a way that was hard to describe. There were only a handful of people I was truly comfortable around, and those relationships had been built over many years of unconditional support. Yet Natalia was quickly becoming a part of that select group. She had slipped past all of my defenses and made it clear that no matter how complicated it was to be with me, she was up for the challenge.

But, as with anything good in my life, doubt crept in. She wasn't really with me, was she? If we were in a real relationship, how long would it last? In all likelihood, her willingness to accept so much of my baggage came from the fact that she knew she would only have to deal with it for a short time. After all, we were just friends who slept together, and she would be going home as soon as the contest ended.

The six weeks we had committed to the contest also happened to be the average length of the few relationships I had attempted, so there was a good chance I could make it to the end before it all fell apart. Hell, I was already halfway there. Plus, Natalia and I had spent more time together in these first few weeks than I had with all of my past girlfriends combined. She knew me better than any of them ever had, and she hadn't changed her mind yet. However, it had been pretty

smooth sailing up until now. There hadn't been much opportunity for her to really see the moody, unorganized, hot mess I could be. And I still worried that as soon as that happened, it would be the beginning of the end.

As though manifested straight from those doubts, multiple problems arose in the days that followed to put that theory to the test. On Wednesday, the studio remodel at the lodge hit a major delay because I'd forgotten to submit the payment for the sound equipment, so it never shipped. And because it was sitting in a warehouse instead of my garage, the construction crew was at a standstill. I spent two days preoccupied with making phone calls and sending emails but was unable to expedite the order. The situation left me unable to sleep, causing me to be more irritable and unfocused than usual.

Just when that was resolved, I had a run-in with Mitch, who was too busy flirting with groupies at the back door to check in the contestants. As a result, auditions ran late, creating a domino effect in my schedule for the rest of the day. And though I was able to hang on to a sliver of professionalism, it took considerable effort.

Now it was Saturday, and the band we selected was turning out to be less than cooperative when it came to taking advice, thoroughly testing my patience and working my absolute last nerve.

"All I'm saying is that you have the perfect opportunity to engage the audience if you make these changes," I explained for the third time.

"Yeah, but the point is to emphasize the lyrics," Tym, the lead singer for Ablaze, insisted. "That's why the drums and guitar play the rhythm at the same time that I'm singing them."

"I get that, but instead of emphasizing the lyrics, they're drowning them out, and then you have dead air that follows. I know," I said, holding up a hand to prevent the argument he was preparing. "It's for effect. But if you use that time to

repeat the rhythm, the audience can echo the lyrics and interact with the song. It's all about making connections at this level."

"And because we're not hotshots with platinum records, we can't possibly know what we're doing." Tym rolled his eyes.

My fuse was lit. "Are you fucking kidding me?" I roared as Natalia swept onto the stage.

"Good news!" she announced with more cheer than I could handle at the moment. "We got a new sponsorship offer. Zombie wants to start running digital ads on their website and during tonight's stream, but I need you to look over the contract before we can get rolling on it."

"Zombie? The energy drink?"

"Yes. Can I steal you for a minute?"

"Right now, I'd agree to a root canal if it gets me away from this arrogant prick," I muttered so that only Natalia could hear me. "Carry on, maestro," I threw over my shoulder as I followed her off stage.

As soon as we were out of sight, she pulled me in for a scorching kiss. "I need you to do something for me," she whispered.

My lips continued a trail down her jaw and behind her ear. "Sure. Where's the contract?"

She waved a hand in dismissal. "That's covered. The sponsor is a long-time business partner with LGR."

"Then what do you need from me?" My hands roamed, discovering that I could reach under her blouse without unbuttoning it. Jackpot.

"Tell me how I can help you with the fiery idiot."

"What?" I asked, still lost in a lusty haze.

She locked her fingers behind my neck to hold me still. "You're frustrated, and it's been building all week. Please tell me what you need. A break? Want to tell them to fuck off and call our runner-up to offer them the gig? Leave them alone and

let karma sort it out? Or you can tell me to stay out of it. I don't want to overstep, but I hate seeing you like this."

After learning that she had researched ADHD on her own and that her reasons were pure, I opened myself up to the million questions she had, answering every single one as best I could. We agreed on the importance of communicating, and I let her know that I hated to be coddled or made to feel like I was incapable. She then made me promise to let her know if I ever felt that way. Her sole interest was in understanding me. Not changing me. Not fixing me. Simply supporting me. And the fact that this week had not sent her running was nothing short of a miracle.

Hooking my fingers in her belt loops, I dragged her in to nip her lower lip before taking a thorough taste. Aware that we were only partially concealed, I let her go and stepped back. "Thank you. Walking away for a few minutes was probably a good idea."

"Don't forget, we're recording all of your mentoring sessions to post online. It won't be your fault if they crash and burn after not taking your advice."

"I mean, it is right there in their name."

We shared a laugh and decided to drop some not-so-subtle hints about my role in producing the winning band's album and my weight in deciding the winner. But if their attitude didn't improve, I would walk away. I wasn't going to waste my time on a band I couldn't work with. And if nothing else, they would be a good example of what not to do.

We returned to the stage, where the members of Ablaze were sitting around on their phones without a care in the world. My anger began to resurge but was cut short the second I spotted a lone figure on the second-level balcony. His features weren't clear, but there was no mistaking the camera blocking his face.

Grabbing the nearest mic, I yelled for security before leaping off the stage at a dead run. I could see Pops and a few other crew members in the distance as they scrambled into action. I pointed out the cameraman, who was making a hasty

retreat. Pops barked out orders into his walkie, telling everyone to be on the lookout for the trespasser and to secure the exits. More crew joined in, eager to help in the search, but he was nowhere to be found. Despite trying, the video technician hadn't been able to get a clear enough shot to try to identify him either. So, in the end, we were left with nothing to go on, which royally pissed me off and added to my already shitty mood.

Narrowly missing the excitement, the rest of Detrimental returned from a media appearance and gathered on stage for an update as Mitch came sauntering up the steps.

“Where the hell have you been?” I demanded.

“What the fuck is your problem?” he returned.

I took one step in his direction, prepared to tell him to pack his bags but Pops beat me to him.

“The problem,” Pops began, speaking in a tone that left no room for argument, “is that we had an unauthorized visitor on your watch. Now, mind your tone and answer the question.”

Mitch bristled but did as he was told. “I was helping Callie load the luggage into the van so she could get everyone checked in at the hotel.”

“Not your job,” Pops stated, swiping a hand through the air to cut off Mitch's protest. “You left your post without informing anyone, leaving a gap in security. While your help with Callie is appreciated, it wasn't necessary. We have plenty of people who could have helped her. Next time, you call for assistance and do the job that you were assigned. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Mitch bit out before returning to his post.

Pops asked me to go through the details once more to point out where I had seen the cameraman, and we tried to determine what his line of sight could have captured. More than likely, he was a random guy trying to make a buck by getting exclusive photos of the band or the contest, which wasn't anything unusual. But it didn't take long for me to

realize the area behind the curtain, where Natalia and I had just been, would have been viewable from his angle. And when I looked over at Natalia, the look in her eyes told me she had come to the same conclusion.

Chapter 10

Natalia

Panicked, I instinctively made my way to Shawn's dressing room. He was right behind me, carefully closing the door before pulling me into his firm hold. Fisting his shirt, I shut my eyes and wished I could rewind the past hour to do it differently.

Knowing the potential fallout a leaked photo could cause, I silently cursed myself. I knew better. LGR's image, the clients I was trying to win back, the contest, and the expansion were all on the line. But Shawn could also be affected, and it hadn't been fair for him to risk his reputation without having all of the facts. So, as much as I'd tried to avoid it, I was going to have to explain that despite our agreement to be brutally honest with each other, I had held back parts of my past.

I couldn't stop the regret that filled me whenever I thought of Troy and his lies. Just like I hadn't been able to stop people from believing them. And though I had no reason to think Shawn would be so easily persuaded, it was still embarrassing to admit the mistakes I had made and how they continued to haunt me.

I had also learned enough about ADHD to understand I might be nothing more than his current fixation. There was a good chance that the novelty of our relationship would wear off and the excitement would wane. That happened in all relationships to some degree, but Shawn could lose complete interest. Even worse, I didn't know what signs to look for or how it would happen. Would there be a gradual shift in his attention, or was he simply going to wake up one day and realize he was done with me? And was there any way to stop it? Probably not, but dumping my problems on him seemed like a surefire way to speed up that process. So yes, holding back had been a selfish choice. I wasn't ready to lose him.

Little did Shawn know he wasn't the only one with an unhealthy fear of rejection. That was another tidbit I hadn't shared, and there were still plenty. But my biggest secret was

that no matter how hard I tried to convince myself otherwise, this had always been more than a casual fling between friends. Agreeing to label it that way had been an attempt to guard my wary heart. But I had been a fool to think I could keep my feelings in check and an even bigger fool to think they wouldn't grow with each passing day.

I tried fighting it, but everything seemed to be working against me. Even Shawn's truth bombs had backfired epically. Instead of pushing me away, the more I learned about him, the closer I wanted to be. Each new detail only made him more vibrant, and I couldn't imagine anything that would change my feelings for him.

Did I dare hope he felt the same?

No matter what happened, I owed him the truth. All of it. He had been nothing but honest with me and deserved the same in return. It was time for me to step up.

"I'm so sorry," he offered, tightening the grip he had on me.

His apology only made me feel worse. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I should have been more careful."

"*We*. We should have been more careful. But if I remember correctly, I kissed you first back there. This is not your fault."

He exhaled slowly and rested his chin on the top of my head. "Maybe it won't be a big deal. It was just a kiss, and we were in the shadows. Even if he got a shot, it couldn't have been very good."

That may have been true, but we couldn't keep taking chances. And he needed to know why. All of the reasons why.

A knock at the door bought me a slight reprieve. Shawn was slow to release me, rubbing the chill from my arms before stepping away. The quiet hum of conversation preceded the rest of the band, Callie, Anna, and Pops, who wore concerned expressions as they filed into the room.

“Sorry to barge in,” Anna began. “We just want to make sure you guys are alright.”

I looked at Shawn, who nodded in encouragement. This was his real family. If he trusted them, so could I. “The man with the camera may have gotten a picture of us together.” Everyone stared blankly. “Kissing.”

I expected more of a reaction, but other than a few smiles and an *ahh* from Lance, there was nothing.

“You guys knew?” Shawn asked.

“It was supposed to be a secret?” Jaxon laughed as Callie smacked his stomach.

“How did you find out?” Shawn wanted to know.

One by one, they recounted their accidental glimpses of us in various places including my bus, Shawn’s dressing room, and various hotel hallways. Clearly, we hadn’t been as discreet as we thought.

The added worry churned in my gut. “Do you think anyone else saw us?”

Shawn tucked me safely against him. “No. It sounds like we were spotted in private spaces. We’ve been extra careful out in the open.”

Anna eyed us thoughtfully. “I’ve learned firsthand the importance of maintaining a level of privacy in my relationship, but I’m sensing there’s more to the story.”

“There is,” I admitted.

I hadn’t been expecting an audience, but everyone was bound to learn the truth sooner or later anyway. And since I was new to the group, it was best if they heard it from me. I already trusted them to believe me, and having their support could make a big difference in handling any issues that might arise.

Looking up at Shawn, I needed him to know I would do all I could as well. “I told you it was important to keep our relationship a secret, but I didn’t fully explain why.”

“Alright. Tell me now.”

Shawn led me to the small sofa at the side of the room and pulled me into his lap, playing with my fingers as everyone settled into various chairs or leaned against the wall. Then all eyes were on me.

“I think we all know that any personal involvement between Shawn and I could be perceived the wrong way. Everything from Detrimental’s new contract to his role in Ready to Rock could be questioned. People love to assume the worst.”

“And those people can fuck right off,” Lance tossed out. “You shouldn’t care what they think.”

“You’re right. Normally, I wouldn’t.”

“So why worry about it now?”

There was nothing but kindness emanating from everyone, which made my confession easier to say, but no less difficult to hear. “Because my ex publicly accused me of using my status at LGR to manipulate him into a relationship.” I felt Shawn’s body tense under me, but he remained quiet. “Troy spread ugly lies, and our business has already suffered because of it. I can’t risk anything adding to those rumors. Not right now.”

“Back up. I need more details so I know how to fight this,” Anna said, going into PR mode.

Her unwavering willingness to stand behind me was humbling because it went beyond professional interest. I could see in her eyes that she was a woman who knew what it was like to be wronged by someone she trusted. She wanted justice.

Feeling less alone in my fight, I took a fortifying breath and dove into the sordid tale of a stupid girl who fell for the wrong guy. “When I joined the A&R department a few years ago, I worked with a man named Troy Crandall. He was attractive, and he said and did all the right things. Neither of us wanted anything serious, especially considering how much we traveled, so we kept it simple. We spent time together when it

was convenient, and appreciated always having a date for industry events.

“The relationship worked for a while, but then he slowly became a different person. He was quick to anger, and he was often distracted. He wouldn’t call for weeks, then show up like nothing happened. And whenever I tried asking him about it, he got really defensive. I started to distance myself, but he apologized, blaming everything on stress and promising to do better. But things only got worse. Money suddenly became an issue because he wasn’t bringing in many new clients and his commission checks showed it. Rather than take responsibility and make more of an effort, he turned his resentment toward me, making nasty comments about my wealth and the advantages he felt my last name provided.

“At that point, I was done. I ended it, hoping to salvage our working relationship, but it didn’t matter. The accounting department discovered he was falsifying his expense reports to get reimbursed for more than he was owed and he was terminated.”

Callie scoffed. “I’m guessing he didn’t take that well.”

“Not at all. He tried telling them I had authorized the extra funds, but when I refused to back him up, he spewed insults and ranted about unfair treatment. Security promptly escorted him out and banned him from the building. I hoped that would be the end of him, but he started telling anyone who would listen that I had initiated the relationship and that he felt pressured to date me out of fear of losing his job. He said I got him fired after *he* broke up with *me* and that I made up stories about him to cover it all up. To make matters worse, my dad had his heart attack soon after, and Troy took advantage of our absence, claiming our disappearance proved we were hiding something. He even threatened a lawsuit, but it never happened. Likely because he didn’t have a case. Either way, Legal assured me that they were prepared, so I let them handle it. I needed to focus on my dad. But since we weren’t around to counter Troy’s allegations, some people started to believe him.

“LGR lost a few investors while we were gone, which was just as likely due to the change in leadership. We had no idea Gordon was causing so many problems or that he was also costing us clients since he altered the reports he sent, but that’s a whole different story. What matters is that it created the perfect opportunity for Troy. He managed to land a job at First String Studios and has been luring in LGR’s clients as they leave.

“LGR is stable,” I assured them. “But I don’t want to lose any more clients or the new investors for the Charlotte expansion. If rumors start spreading that I’m sleeping with a client, implying an abuse of power again, it could ruin everything I’ve been working to repair.”

“What has Roger’s advice been?” Jaxon asked.

“I hid a lot from him while he was recovering, so the gossip had already died down by the time he learned about it. He was initially upset but wasn’t interested in correcting anyone who was so easily swayed. At the time, I agreed with him. However, a freshly leaked picture could stir up more rumors and breathe life into Troy’s lies. It’s a chance I’m not willing to take right now.”

“Do you want my advice?” Anna asked, disrupting the quiet of the room.

“Please,” I nearly begged, desperate for a way to escape Troy once and for all.

“Stop hiding your relationship with Shawn. It makes you look guilty and will only reinforce any negative perceptions when news gets out. And it always gets out.”

“So, what do we do?”

“Just be yourselves. Act as though you aren’t doing anything wrong because you’re not. Meanwhile, I’ve had a few ideas brewing since I first saw you together. Taking into consideration everything you just shared, I think the best approach is to face this head-on. We need to maintain control of the story.”

“How do we do that?”

Shawn's hands gently squeezed mine. "We need to be the ones who tell it."



We. I clung to the word like a life raft as I paced my hotel room after the show. The lone wall sconce above the bed created a soft glow but did nothing to soothe my nerves. My favorite pajama shorts and t-shirt, though comfortable, were of little help either.

Not only was Shawn late, but there hadn't been time to talk privately after the meeting in his dressing room. The delays caused by the intruder barely left time for a quick bite of dinner before the meet-and-greet. Following the show, all I had gotten was a brief promise to meet me at the hotel. Then he had disappeared.

With each minute that passed, my doubts snowballed. I had no idea how Shawn was feeling or what he was thinking. And, what was taking him so long? Was this the first sign of him pulling away from me? I tried not to assume the worst. The only way to do that was to keep reminding myself that he said *we*.

Wearing a path in the carpet, I went over Anna's plan. Again. She hadn't finalized anything, but her suggestion was simple. She wanted to create a buzz on social media rather than release a formal announcement. Using strategically planned pictures and posts, she could establish a timeline for our relationship and set the tone for it. Using short clips of us during auditions and rehearsals, she would paint a picture of how the contest had brought us closer together. Fans would feel like they were getting a front-row seat to our relationship as it evolved, which would foster an emotional connection with us. Then, they would be more likely to ignore any negative rumors that might arise.

Still, there were no guarantees.

And what would all of this added pressure do to our actual relationship? We had agreed to remain casual but would have to show a more romantic side to the public. And we did have a romantic side; one I didn't want to ruin with expectations or public demands. Shawn already hated being in the spotlight. He'd been all too happy to avoid most of the band's morning media appearances thanks to the contest auditions. So the thought of intentionally drawing attention to him was something we needed to discuss. I didn't want him doing anything he might resent, though I couldn't help but wonder if he already felt that way. There had been no mistaking the tension in his body earlier, and he'd remained eerily quiet as Anna described her plan.

As my doubts spawned new worries, the whir of the electronic door lock had me frozen in place. Exhaustion radiated from Shawn as he tossed the extra keycard and his belongings on the dresser and closed the space between us. But as his face emerged from the shadows, one look was all it took. I stepped into his welcoming arms, inhaling the scent of his favorite body wash as he cradled my head against the steady beat of his heart.

Time stretched out as we took comfort in each other, and the tenderness of the moment helped quiet any lingering doubts.

"Damn, I needed that," he said, tugging me toward the king-sized bed. "Come on."

His eyes drooped as he stripped down to his boxer briefs and climbed into bed, holding up the covers for me.

"Wait. Is that...?"

He stared at the shirt I had won at The Nosh Pit last year. It was well-worn, the design having faded after countless washes. But it was super soft and always made me feel closer to him when I wore it. So, I wore it often.

"Yes." Without another word, I was pulled in close, and we both let out a long sigh. "Do you still have yours?"

“Mmhmm. Back of my closet. Too afraid to wear it. Might get lost.” I could hear the fatigue in his voice and half-formed sentences, but damn, he was ridiculously sweet. See? Romantic. “Pecan pie still makes me hard.”

I laughed at that, relieved that nothing seemed to have changed between us. We still had a lot to figure out, but tomorrow would be soon enough.

“It’s been a long day,” I said, reaching to turn off the light.

“Long week,” he mumbled. “Talk later.”

“Okay.” I tilted my head to kiss his jaw, only to find that it had already gone slack with sleep. “Sweet dreams,” I whispered.

I had barely closed my eyes before sunlight came peeking through a thin gap in the curtains. I was equally surprised to find myself draped all over Shawn again. There was probably some subconscious reason for the new habit, but it was a nice place to be, so I didn’t rush to get up.

Blinking the room into focus, I worked to recalibrate my brain. Being on tour, often waking without knowing what day it was or even where I was, it usually took a minute before everything clicked. But then it did. It was Sunday, and we were in Houston for the two days off. However, I had a feeling we were going to be plenty busy.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, but I was too content to reach for it. It buzzed again, quickly followed by Shawn’s, which was still on the dresser. Noticing that he’d forgotten to plug it in last night, I carefully climbed off of him and padded over to take care of it. The screen was locked, but showed he had nine new messages. I couldn’t bring myself to wake him and assumed someone would have come in person if there was something urgent happening.

I ignored my phone long enough to use the bathroom and secure my hair in a messy bun, then took it with me as I eased the sliding door to the balcony open, making sure to leave the curtains in place so the light didn’t flood the room. I squinted

against the bright sunshine and had to blink several times as my eyes adjusted. With the thick humidity added in, the shade covering most of the space was the only thing that made the balcony tolerable as I checked my notifications. There was a missed call from Kara and three from my dad, who was also at the top of my text message list.

Dad: *Call me!*

The ingrained worry over his health left my hands unsteady as I connected the call, mentally calculating how fast I could get home.

“You have five seconds to explain why I had to find out about you and Shawn through social media rather than a phone call from my own daughter,” he bellowed.

I sagged into the patio chair as the sheer volume of his voice assured me that he was alright. Then his words registered. Damn. Had the photo of us been leaked? And how much damage had already been done?

“Which site?” I asked, putting the call on speaker so I could check my messages from Kara. Sure enough, she had already sent over several direct links.

“It’s all over the internet! So don’t try to talk your way out of this. I want to know what the hell is going on.” He continued talking, but it faded into the background as I opened the first site.

Bracing myself for a grainy photo of us in the shadows of the stage, I was shocked to find a series of picture-perfect images of us in an intimate embrace. In the first picture, I was looking up at Shawn, who had his back pressed into a wrought iron gate while his hands possessively cradled my ass. As the photos progressed, he leaned in for a kiss and I rested my head on his chest. Part of each picture had been cropped out, leaving only a tuft of Lance’s bright orange hair. The caption under the post read *NOLA selfie. #photobombed #newlove*. Detrimental and Ready to Rock were also tagged along with both of our names.

I recognized the private courtyard from last week's stop in New Orleans, but the timestamp showed the pictures were uploaded last night. Which meant this was what Shawn had been doing while I was anxiously awaiting him. Knowing what it cost him had my vision blurring with unshed tears. Because he'd done it anyway. For me.

"Natalia Shae!" The command snapped my attention back into focus. I'd been middle-named, which meant this was serious business. "Are you listening to me?"

"Yes," I said out of habit. Then added, "No, not really." Overcome by the significance of Shawn's gesture, I couldn't stop the smile that bloomed. It grew as I continued clicking the links to various social media platforms, finding the pictures already shared and garnering thousands of likes and comments.

"Is this some kind of publicity stunt for the contest?" my dad asked, finally lowering his voice to a normal level. "No." I'd never been able to lie to my dad. Sure, I'd withheld things at times, but I could never willfully tell him something that wasn't true.

"So, you're dating Shawn?"

"Kind of," I hedged. "It's complicated, and I'm sorry I didn't warn you ahead of time. We were faced with getting outed and didn't want to have someone spin the story the wrong way. I promise we're going to do everything possible to keep this from affecting the contest or LGR."

Dad let out a dismissive grunt. "We'll be fine. And I'm going to tell you again: what Troy did was not your fault. Hell, I liked the guy too, but deciding to trust someone always comes with risk. You can't let that hold you back. I only have one concern. Are you happy?"

"I'm very happy." It was the truth, and I had the straining cheek muscles to prove it.

"Good. Then I'm happy for you. To hell with anyone who has a problem with it."

I knew he meant every word. Still, I couldn't help but tease him. "No lectures about the hazards of dating a musician?"

"You're forgetting I was once a musician. All of those warnings when you were a teenager were justified. But I also know Shawn is one of the good ones."

I told myself I didn't need his approval, but hearing it did funny things to me. My mind conjured images of the three of us at birthday dinners and spending holidays together.

"Nat?" The sound of Shawn's voice carried from inside.

Shit. "I have to go, Dad. I promise to call you later." I barely heard his reply as I pushed past the curtain to hurry back in. "I'm here," I called, blinded by the sudden darkness. Shawn's silhouette was enough to guide me, though I couldn't make out many details. "I didn't leave," I rushed to assure him.

"I know," he said, wrapping me in a sleepy hug.

He hadn't gotten dressed yet, so I took advantage of having free reign over the expanse of his back. My hands explored as my vision cleared, landing on my open suitcase on the luggage stand.

"Oh, right."

"What?"

"You knew I was here because all of my stuff is still here."

"No." He leaned back to look directly at me. "I knew you were here because you said you'd never do that again and I trust you."

Trust seemed to be the theme of the day. My dad's trust in me. My trust in Anna. Most importantly, the mutual trust Shawn and I were building to show we had each other's backs. And though his words meant a lot, his actions spoke volumes.

He had no way of knowing how much both meant to me or how much he was beginning to mean to me. And I wasn't quite ready to say the words out loud. So, I tried my best to

show him. With a searing kiss, I thanked him for the sacrifice he had made for me; for us. My hands carded his hair, brushed the dusting of hair on his chest, and skimmed down the path of his ribs, gently assuring him his trust in me was not misplaced. They had just circled his waist and entered the back of his boxer briefs when a knock at the door pulled us apart. Both of us groaned as a muffled voice came through.

“Van’s leaving in thirty minutes,” Lance called from the hallway.

Shawn adjusted his obvious erection as he stomped over to swing the door wide. “What are you doing here?”

“Good morning to you too, Sunshine.” Lance barged in and went straight for Shawn’s phone. “Answer this,” he said, handing over the device, “to avoid this.” He pointed to himself.

Shawn tapped the screen to unlock it, a furrow forming between his brows as he swiped through.

Meanwhile, Lance moved to the small dining table, passing me a large cup of coffee before pulling a bottle of orange juice and two breakfast wraps out of a bakery bag. “I’m assuming he crashed hard last night.” At my nod, he continued. “Good. Anna worked her magic, so we have a day packed with opportunities for you two to be seen together. You’re already trending, but we need to keep the momentum going.” Heading back toward the door, he smacked Shawn’s underwear-clad ass. “Let’s get this love fest on the road!” he howled, leaving as quickly as he’d arrived.

Dazed and still a little confused as to how all of this had come about, I turned to Shawn. “Did you maybe forget to tell me something last night?”

“Yeah, about that.”

Chapter 11

Shawn

Following a day of non-stop public appearances, some time on the water with the guys was exactly what I needed. It was the perfect way to spend my Monday as Nat worked on LGR business back at the hotel. Her job required too many hours of being stuck indoors for my liking, but I respected her dedication. And the pride she took in her work was commendable. It went far beyond family obligation or a sense of responsibility. My only criticism was that she spread herself too thin, so I was doing what I could to make her job easier. Today, that meant freeing her from distractions, namely me.

“Alright, man. Time to fill us in,” Jaxon said, looking at me as he leaned back on the cushioned bench.

Everyone had their lines in the water, ready and waiting for a bite. The captain of the chartered boat had gone below deck, giving us the chance to speak freely. That left the guys and Pops, who was there as a friend but also provided an added layer of security. The man was a fierce presence, a trait from his days in the military, and since we still hadn’t identified the cameraman, the extra set of eyes was appreciated. Plus, with him being part of the inner circle of people we trusted, we didn’t have to monitor what was being said.

“You guys know we’re together, and you know why we were hiding it. What else do you want to know?”

“Details, man,” Lance urged.

The thought of anyone gaining intimate knowledge of Natalia brought out every protective streak I never knew I had. And it must have shown.

“Bro! Not those details.” He gave my shoulder a shove for emphasis. “I just meant that you two looked good together yesterday. So, is it a tour thing, or are you guys in it for the long haul?”

I filled my lungs with salty air as I considered the question. The truth was, I didn't exactly have an answer. "We're somewhere in between, I guess."

I downed half of my water bottle then peeled off the label and wrapped it around my finger as I gathered my thoughts. It was difficult to explain something that I hadn't even figured out for myself. As far as I knew, nothing had changed for Natalia. She wasn't looking for anything beyond what we originally agreed to. We were simply done hiding it. People could assume whatever they wanted. And though things were starting to feel different for me, I had kept that to myself. Even when it seemed like she might be having similar feelings.

"Well, it's only been a few weeks," Derek pointed out.

"Or has it?" Lance asked suggestively.

"Interesting." Jaxon drew out the word. "How long have you actually been together?"

I filled in the blanks for the rest of the group, pointing out that even though we met a year ago, we'd only spent one night together, so the time in between didn't count.

"We agreed to a friends-with-benefits thing," I admitted.

Jaxon barked out a laugh loud enough to scare off every fish within a five-mile radius. "Good luck with that."

"What does that mean?" I asked defensively.

"Just that Anna and I started out as a tour fling with a set expiration date too. Now, we're engaged and I can't imagine my life without her."

I thought about what they had and couldn't shake the envy that filled me. There were a lot of things I'd learned to accept about myself over the years, and not being cut out for a relationship was one of them. I thought I was comfortable with that fact. But in reality, finding someone who made me want more, knowing it would always remain just out of reach, cut deeper than I ever thought possible. It also made me wonder if there was anything I could do about it.

“What changed things between you?” I asked, hoping for a little insight.

Jaxon contemplated his answer. “It wasn’t any one thing or any one moment. It just evolved. I felt safe with her and was able to open up in ways I never had before. Same for her. We became as emotionally intimate with each other as we were physically. Don’t get me wrong, it’s scary as hell to be that vulnerable with someone. But when you love them, it’s worth it. And it makes your relationship stronger.”

Everything he said made sense, though I knew it hadn’t always been a smooth road for them. Natalia and I were sure to encounter some hurdles too, but I felt like we already had an advantage. We had been so unflinchingly honest with each other from the beginning that it made opening up to her easier.

Still, it was a gamble.

“What if I do all of that and she leaves anyway?”

“What if she doesn’t?” Eli asked.

I knew my chances were pretty slim. Natalia lived in Nashville. Her dad was there, along with a company bearing her name. She had also made it clear from the beginning that LGR was her top priority. Why would she ever walk away from that? Not that I expected her to. LGR was a part of her, just as Detrimental was a part of me. When two people came together it shouldn’t mean that either one had to give up their professional identity. Instead, they should help build each other up and be their partner’s staunchest ally. Jaxon and Anna were a perfect example of that.

“How is she handling your ADHD?” Lance asked. “Any issues there?”

“She’s fucking amazing. I’ve never met anyone so willing to accept me for who I am.” Jaxon narrowed his eyes like he was mildly offended. “Aside from you guys, but we met as kids, when shit like that doesn’t matter. And we had years to bond and learn about each other. Natalia jumped right into the deep end. She’s done a ton of research already, and we’re both

very open about it. Best of all, she hasn't mentioned medications or suggested anything else to try to change me."

I wasn't against medications, but most came with a variety of side effects. One that I had tried during high school actually made my symptoms worse. With others, I didn't like the way they made me feel. After a lot of trial and error, I opted to treat it with diet, exercise, and therapy. Fortunately, I found a combination that worked for me. It was still a daily struggle, but with enough coping strategies in place, it was manageable. Best of all, I felt like I was in control of it instead of the other way around. But there were bound to be challenges, and my needs might change. Having a partner to support me through those ups and downs was almost too much to wish for.

"That doesn't sound like something a casual fuck buddy would do," Jaxon pointed out.

"I know, which is encouraging. It also scares the shit out of me."

"Why?" Eli asked.

I tried my best to explain the connection. "You guys know the few girls I dated in the past left as soon as my attention started to wander. They felt like they were second to everything else, so they ended it. That sucked, but I've realized that it was more about the rejection than actually losing them from my life." Eli nodded for me to continue. "With Natalia, I'm terrified of losing interest in her and that I won't be able to stop it from happening. I don't want to see that hurt look on her face. But more than anything, I'm so far gone for her that it would kill any hope I have of being in a real relationship. I can't imagine a more perfect partner for me, and deep down, I know that if I can't make it with her, I don't have a chance in hell of making it with anyone."

Water lapping against the boat was the only sound filling the silence.

"Damn," Derek sighed, looking a little shaken.

“Watching you together yesterday,” Lance began, “I could see how comfortable you are with her. You’ve never been like that with anyone besides us.”

“Exactly my point. With anyone else, attending a baseball game would have been a mental shit show. But she made it enjoyable.”

Anna had secured a box at the Houston Astros game, a brilliant combination of being public enough for us to be photographed together while maintaining a measure of privacy. And it would have been an ideal scenario if not for the fact that I had a long-standing dislike of baseball.

I had nothing against the sport itself. Well, not much. The pace was too slow for my liking, so I preferred hockey. But I mostly avoided it because of the emotions it stirred up.

Starting at a young age, my dad had forcibly tried to instill a love of the game in me. Being a star baseball player had been the highlight of high school and college for him, so he’d been eager to relive his glory days through his son’s future sports achievements. He pushed me to play Little League, but there was too much downtime and I was forever getting sidetracked. Any fun I did have was always short-lived due to my father’s frustration and the lectures that lasted the entire ride home.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, he insisted on taking me to the annual Duke alumni games, where I was warned not to do anything to embarrass him in front of his old college buddies. Needless to say, the length of the game far exceeded my ability to sit still. And my father’s patience. Some form of punishment followed every game, making me resent the sport even more.

Even with all of that working against me, yesterday’s game had been surprisingly enjoyable. Natalia didn’t care that I wanted to stand or that I tended to watch the team’s wacky mascot over the actual players. Instead, she held my hand during “The Star-Spangled Banner” as the game began and had me singing along to rowdy versions of “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” and “Deep in the Heart of Texas” during the

seventh inning stretch. In between, she plied me with snacks and encouraged me to dance along with all of the pop hits that Orbit, the mascot, was performing to. Without knowing it, she had given me a new memory to attach to baseball, somehow replacing all of the old ones in a single shot.

And it wasn't just baseball. She had a healing effect on me every day, rewriting the narrative in my head, one negative thought at a time. Because of her, my life was changing for the better, and I was desperate for her to stay. Forever.

Pops shifted in his seat and looked as though he had something to contribute.

“Any words of wisdom?” I asked.

He had always been quiet about his past, but he exuded the type of insight that came from a lifetime of experience.

Nodding once, he spoke with quiet conviction. “We’re all taught to fight for what we want, but that’s not enough. You have to fight to keep it too. Otherwise, you look up one day and realize it’s gone.” His eyes got a far-off look as he got lost in old memories. “My advice is simple: make the effort. You never know when something you didn’t say or didn’t do could have made all the difference. And the regret will eat you alive.”

The back of my neck tingled at Pops’ words. For so much of my life, I had felt like I didn’t have any control. Maybe that was why I gravitated toward the projects that I did. Because, even if I failed, I still controlled my next attempt. And if it took ten tries, or even twenty to get something right, that was okay. I learned from each mistake and took pride in the accomplishment once I finally achieved it.

I couldn’t completely control the situation with Natalia. However, I could control my part in it. The realization emboldened me. Because, honestly, I would never find a better partner, someone who felt like she had been designed specifically for me. And even though I had never really believed in fate or soulmates, I felt like we were meant to be together. But one thing was certain. If I sat back, waiting for

the perfect relationship to grow all on its own, I was destined to fail.

With Pops' words resonating in my head, determination took hold. My focus became laser-sharp, and my goal became clear: win Natalia's heart. And if I was fortunate enough to succeed, I would take his advice and spend the rest of my life doing whatever was necessary to keep it.



Knocking, because I'd forgotten my keycard, I swept Natalia into a hug and carried her across the room the second the door opened. Her laughter fueled my good mood, so I spun her in a circle before putting her back on her feet. I was bursting with energy; amped up and ready for battle. My excitement was immeasurable, outweighing any apprehension I might still have over my decision to move forward with our relationship. And as Nat looked up at me with happiness radiating from her face, I couldn't help but kiss her.

The taste of her lips was enough to send me soaring, and it would have been so easy to lose myself in her. But I was focused on my mission.

Win. Natalia's. Heart.

I trailed a few light kisses across her cheek before easing back.

Her nose wrinkled and her mouth puckered as she turned her head to the side. "You smell like fish."

"That's because I reeled in a few big ones," I explained, miming the action. "Had to get a picture before I released them." In a sneak attack, I pulled her back into a big bear hug and twisted to press the front of my shirt into her face. She

squealed in disgust and fought to break free, but it only spurred me on. “Are you trying to say I stink?”

“Yes!” she shrieked.

I curled my fingers into her ribs, discovering a particularly ticklish spot that had her squirming and begging for mercy between peals of laughter.

I paused my hands. “Do you give up?”

“Yes,” she panted.

“Then you have to pay a forfeit.” I puckered my lips and waited.

She smacked her mouth against mine, and I relaxed my arms enough for her to get out if she wanted. Instead, she pressed both palms against my chest and leaned back, trusting me to support her as we stood there grinning at each other.

“I’ve got another truth bomb for you,” I said, holding her stare.

“Tell me.” Her smile was encouraging, and the intensity of her gaze always made me feel like the center of her world. It was a heady sensation, and I never wanted it to end.

My heart stuttered once before I continued, more determined than ever to make her mine. “When I decide that I really want something, I become single-minded. I don’t let anything hold me back from going after it.”

She leaned in close. “I kind of noticed that already.” Then she whispered her own secret. “It doesn’t scare me.”

“No?”

“No. It’s actually very sexy.”

“I’m glad you feel that way because I’ve decided I really want something.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

I paused just long enough to signify the importance of my answer. “You.”

“Me?” Her smile slowly dimmed.

“You,” I repeated. “You and me, to be more specific.”

She stepped free from my hold, and a crease formed in her brow as she spoke. “I thought we decided it was best if we didn’t expect anything more from each other.” Her words were reminiscent of our original agreement, but her voice lacked its prior conviction. In fact, I would say she sounded intrigued by the idea.

I tried to reign in my enthusiasm so I could properly explain myself. The last thing I wanted to do was freak her out.

Needing some form of connection, I picked up her hands and laced our fingers together. “That’s the most amazing part. I don’t want anything more. I just want what we already have to be real.” She remained quiet, a thoughtful look on her face. Taking that as a good sign, I pushed on. “I want to keep waking up together and continue spending our days learning about each other and supporting each other. I want us both to fall asleep knowing we’ll do it all again the next day, and the day after that. But I also want this to be something we both put our hearts into because it matters and we don’t want to lose it.”

The stunned expression on her face made my heart pound. For a brief moment, I worried that I had gone too far, too fast. I had always been impulsive, more so when I knew with absolute certainty that I was making the right decision. But I also understood that Nat took time to think things through. That was the way she operated, and I respected it. Not only that, I felt it gave us a nice balance.

Neither of us had rejected the love-themed hashtags Anna suggested when she initially laid out her social media plan. They were simply a part of the packaging. We needed all the support we could get, and even I knew #justacasualfling would be a tough sell. The important thing was establishing that we began seeing each other after Detrimental’s contract had been signed and my part in the contest had been decided. That way, our relationship was between two consenting co-workers with neither having any authority over the other.

That information provided enough detail for publicity purposes, but did nothing to encompass the complexity of the relationship that had snuck up on us both. We'd simply been doing what felt right without needing to define it beyond our original agreement. But now, I wanted more. Now, when I thought about those love hashtags, they sparked something inside of me. I knew they weren't real. Yet. But I so wanted them to be.

"For how long?"

"What?" I asked, trying to return from my mental detour.

"You said you don't want to lose it, but there will be a lot of challenges once the tour is over. For starters, our jobs and homes will pull us in different directions. How long can we make this work? And is it worth the risk of getting our hearts broken if it doesn't?"

I pressed my forehead to hers, wishing I could promise that wouldn't happen. But I couldn't. "I know there's a lot of things working against us, and I don't have all of the answers. Nobody ever does. We just need to be willing to work through issues as they occur. And I want this to work so badly." The shuddery confession left me feeling more exposed than ever before. But, remembering all of the advice I'd been given, I pushed through the discomfort that came with being vulnerable. "I'm in deep, and I feel like you're right there with me. At least I hope you are. If I'm wrong, please tell me now."

She immediately shook her head. "You're not wrong."

They were the sweetest words I'd ever heard.

"Then don't overthink it. Yes, there are times for that, but if you do it now, you're going to come up with too many reasons not to try. And I really want to try. Please take the leap with me."

A shy smile pulled at her lips. It took so much concentration to hold back my excitement that I barely caught her when she launched herself at me. Our mouths came together in a jumble of laughter, but it wasn't long until the

warmth of her tongue found mine. Then the kiss shifted. It became demanding and continued until we both ran out of air.

“Yes,” she gasped, nipping at my bottom lip.

I tugged on hers in return. “Yes?”

She nodded, going back in for another kiss as more laughter bubbled to the surface. “Yes! I have no clue how we’re going to make this work, but I want it all. With you.”

“We’ll figure it out together,” I promised.

“Starting with a shower.”

I could definitely work with that.

Chapter 12

Natalia

With my heartbeat thumping in my ears, I followed Shawn toward the back of my bus. Most of the bunks we passed were empty since Frederick and Callie were the only people using them. Shawn had already chosen one to store several items in before carrying a final bag toward the wardrobe cabinet in my bedroom that I had emptied for him. He chattered excitedly, never staying on one topic for long and not needing more than an occasional nod in agreement or hum of encouragement from me. That was good since I was more focused on watching him. Seeing him there, knowing we didn't have to hide anymore, felt so damned good. And with each shelf and hanger he filled, the feeling grew.

I had never spent more than a few days at a time with a boyfriend before, so this was going to be a new experience; one I was looking forward to. Being single wasn't because I liked to be alone. I simply didn't want someone to come between me and my job or to make me feel like I had to choose. Shawn had never done that. In fact, his drive and dedication rivaled my own. That was probably what made him so supportive, inside of work and out.

Riding together felt like the next natural step, especially considering our relationship upgrade. And though the question may have slipped out during our post-orgasmic haze in the shower, I didn't regret asking him one bit. I'd come to think of us as a team, wanting to get his input on contest decisions and other matters whenever possible. He offered a unique perspective and his advice was always spot on. My only complaint—which wasn't against him personally—was not getting enough time alone. Having him on my bus was the perfect solution. Unfortunately, it was also a temporary one.

I had no idea what would happen once Ready to Rock and the tour ended. A few weeks ago, I would have been eager to get back to my life in Nashville, but that existence seemed cold and empty compared to life with Shawn. He added a

richness to my life that I never realized was missing. And now that I had him, I was not willing to give him up. So, until we figured out what our future together looked like, I had no choice but to take what I could get.

The buses soon entered the highway, taking us to our next venue just a few hours away. It was early evening, and with plenty of time to fill, Callie had rented out a drive-in theater along our route. Apparently, it was something she did often, and with both bands and their crews invited to attend a showing of the first two *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies, a caravan of buses and equipment trucks soon lined the perimeter of a grassy field while blankets and folding chairs filled the center of the viewing area. To complete the experience, several large speakers had been set up to broadcast the sound since no one was inside their vehicles.

The smell of popcorn filled the air along with hamburgers being grilled at the concession stand as Shawn spread out a blanket for us and nestled me in front of him. Everyone else from Detrimental had wandered off, but Jaxon and Anna were on the blanket beside us, making it feel more like a date. Our first date, since we were officially a couple now.

Shawn's request for a real relationship had been a surprise, not that it had taken much effort to convince me to accept. None, really. I'd just needed to get out of my own way and take what I so desperately wanted. And now I had it.

So why did the weight of our new status suddenly feel so heavy?

I knew the answer, even if I didn't want to admit it. It was the same reason I avoided all relationships. Sure, work played a part in it, but it also served as a convenient excuse to avoid getting attached to anyone. Because when you cared about someone and they left, it hurt. Avoiding that pain became a matter of self-preservation.

Despite all of that, I wanted to make our relationship work, and Shawn was right. What we already had was perfect just as it was. Nothing needed to change. But by putting our hearts into it, it felt like *everything* had changed.

There was no denying that my heart had been involved from the start. But now, I had to acknowledge it. I could no longer hide behind our original agreement, pretending that I was safe from the possible consequences of getting emotionally involved.

Until today, we had an agreement to walk away as friends when our time together ended. No hard feelings, no one got hurt. And as challenging as that might have been for me, the promise of him staying in my life would have been worth it. But one conversation had put all of that in jeopardy. Now, not only did I have to open myself up to getting my heart broken, there was a real risk of losing Shawn altogether. Because now, if he lost interest or wanted to walk away, it would mean breaking up. And the odds of remaining friends after that were slim.

I could lose him entirely.

Consumed by that thought, I barely noticed the movie starting. The only thing that registered was Shawn's warmth at my back and the way he fidgeted with my fingers, lacing his in and out of mine, tracing the length of each digit, or lining up his hand with mine and pulling away to leave just the tips connected. He probably didn't even realize he was doing it, but I liked knowing he was relaxed enough to act without censoring himself. It was especially heartwarming that his body seemed to crave a connection with mine, however small.

Focused on the feel of his hands, I wasn't prepared to be yanked to my feet when the first song in the movie began. I looked around in shock to find everyone dancing and singing along as the opening credits played. Then, just as suddenly as it began, the crowd sat back down when the song cut off. It was like the craziest alternate version of musical chairs imaginable.

Anna and I shared stunned looks before laughing uncontrollably at the absurdity of it all.

Jaxon just shrugged his shoulders. "It's become a tradition whenever music plays during the movie we're watching."

I turned to Shawn for further explanation.

“Jaxon came up with the idea when we were younger. It was a way to keep me from having to sit still for the entire length of a film. The plan worked really well at home but made for some interesting times at the local theater.”

They joked over the shared memories, and my respect for Jaxon grew by leaps and bounds. He truly was a great guy, and I was glad to see his image finally getting restored to reflect that.

I was at a slight disadvantage since I had never seen either of the movies and wasn't familiar with the soundtracks, but Shawn made sure I wasn't left out. He pulled me to my feet each time the music played, which turned out to be mostly classic hits. We danced to familiar songs like “Hooked on a Feeling”, and I couldn't help but light up when Shawn nodded his agreement as he mouthed the words.

The fun continued when Jaxon belted out the lyrics to “Fooled Around and Fell in Love”, serenading Anna at full volume. Laughter was mixed in as everyone sang along, erupting further after Lance's playful dare to feature the song at their wedding.

The rest of the night was just as enjoyable. We cuddled while Shawn popped Milk Duds into my mouth and stole sugary kisses. And though I missed a lot because I was lost in my own little romantic bubble, the movies quickly became my new favorites. My earlier worries were miles away, and the only thing that mattered was living in the moment.

That was the magic of being with Shawn.



It was nearly midnight by the time the final credits rolled, but the night wasn't over. The speakers began pumping out an upbeat playlist that kept the party going. We danced some more and held hands as we mingled, and it felt nice to be ourselves. Best of all, we weren't preoccupied trying to sneak away for a few minutes alone.

We had just cozied up for a slow song when my phone vibrated in my pocket. Concerned because of the hour, I quickly checked the caller ID. "It's Blake."

"Who?"

"Blake, from The Strutting Penguins," I clarified before answering. "Hello, this is Natalia Greene."

I had to plug my ear to block out the background noise to hear the tentative response that came through as he identified himself and apologized for the late call. Seeking a quieter place, Shawn and I climbed the steps onto our bus, and once we were away from the noise of the crowd and idling engines, Shawn signaled for me to put the call on speaker.

"Of course I remember you, Blake. Shawn is here too. Is it alright if he joins us?"

As soon as Blake agreed, Shawn called out a greeting and asked, "How can we help you?"

"It might be nothing, but we just finished a show and were approached by a man offering us a record deal." My gaze shot to Shawn's. "We didn't sign anything or make any promises," Blake rushed to add. "But it was a bizarre conversation, and I wanted to make you aware in case word got back to you."

A prickling of unease crept up my spine. "What was so strange about it?"

"Well, we told the guy that we would consider his offer, mostly to be polite, but it never hurts to keep your options open, right? But he pushed worse than a damn car salesman. We even explained that Lucky Greene had the right of first refusal, hoping that would get him to back off a little. Instead, he laughed and told me not to worry, hinting that he had some

kind of hold over you. Then he came right out and said he would make sure you knew it was in your best interest to let us sign with him.”

Troy’s earlier threats of a lawsuit briefly came to mind. Then I began to question the timing of the mysterious cameraman and the likelihood that he hadn’t been acting on his own. Someone probably sent him. But why?

“Did he say anything else?”

“Before he left, he made it clear that he would be contacting other contestants and couldn’t promise his offer would be good once he moved on. He tried to make it sound like he was looking out for us, but it felt more like a manipulation tactic.”

“What was his name?” I asked, waiting for him to confirm my suspicion.

“Troy Crandall from First String Studios.”

“Motherfucker,” Shawn hissed, pacing the confined space.

“Do you know him?” Blake asked.

“Unfortunately, I do,” I admitted. “He’s a former LGR employee, and I would advise anyone to stay away from him.”

“No worries there. We definitely got a bad vibe from the guy.”

“You’re a class act, Blake,” Shawn said. “We appreciate you coming to us. That means a lot.”

“No problem. We respect you guys and don’t want to do anything that could ruin an opportunity to work together in the future, whenever that might be.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I assured him.

We ended the call and I sat in silence while processing everything Blake had said.

“Do you think Troy sent the cameraman?” Shawn asked, obviously making the same connection I had.

“I think that’s a safe bet. I just wish I knew his motive. He couldn’t have known about us ahead of time, so he wouldn’t have been working that angle. But he probably needs a new source of talent now that the flow of unhappy LGR clients has dried up. Our contestants could be a fresh source of talent, but it might be more than that. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was gathering information to copy the contest or even trying to sabotage the whole thing to make LGR look bad. Right now, there’s no way to know for sure.”

“Okay, but why would he think he could convince you to give up contestants? The threat of a lawsuit is bullshit, and even if his cameraman got decent photos, we’ve outed ourselves. He doesn’t have anything.”

“But he probably doesn’t know that. He was always sporadic with social media, only checking in every few days. And if Troy did manage to get pictures of us, he wouldn’t hesitate to use them to discredit me or for a little blackmail.”

Shawn stilled. The same tension that had been there when I first told him about Troy returned to his body, and my guilt spiked over not telling him sooner. Knowing the destruction Troy was capable of leaving in his wake, I should have done more to protect Shawn. He deserved to know any potential threat he was facing and who it was coming from.

I looked at him and thought about all he had faced over the years to take control of his life. He had worked so hard and didn’t deserve to have Troy’s vindictiveness touch him or his career in any way. The possibility made my stomach churn. But that fear didn’t take long to turn into anger, which built on the anger I was already harboring for Troy. He had taken enough from me and those I cared about, and I refused to allow it to continue.

“I’m going to fix this,” I promised, making my way to the back bedroom in search of my laptop. But as I hugged it to my chest, I paused.

“What’s the matter?”

I looked over to see him toeing off his shoes and felt torn for the first time ever. I knew I wouldn’t be able to rest until I

handled the Troy situation. But I was also worried that he wouldn't be as understanding about my job now that we were a real couple.

"It's our first night on the bus together, but I need to take care of this." It felt like a test, one I wished I could take back because I was afraid of his answer.

"Okay." He shrugged his shoulders and pulled his shirt over his head to trade it for a clean sleep shirt. "How long will you be?"

"An hour?"

"Alright. I'll start going through the next round of contest videos."

I couldn't help but stare as he climbed into bed with his tablet and patted the space next to him. Was it really that easy?

Apparently, with the right person, it was.



Two and a half hours later, Shawn trudged into the front lounge to find me. I glanced up from my computer to note his rumpled appearance as he leaned in to give me a sleepy kiss before collapsing into the seat next to me.

"Babe, what are you doing?"

Riding the tail end of a caffeine wave, I was still going full steam ahead. "I'm drafting an email to Marketing to approve a budget increase for the Ready to Rock campaign. The new sponsorship will pay for more digital and radio ads. We can't afford TV just yet, but I think we can get a few popular talk show hosts to promote the contest in their opening monologues." A few other issues had popped up in my inbox, but I hadn't bothered with those yet. My main focus was on staying a step ahead of Troy and taking preventative measures

to stop any possible damage he could cause. “I already sent an email to each contestant regarding Troy and another to Legal to update them on the situation.” Hitting send, I looked back up. “What else am I forgetting?”

He blinked slowly. “Sleep.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I told you I only needed an hour, but you dozed off, so I came out here to keep from disturbing you. I just have to fix this. I need to stop Troy. I can’t let him hurt you too.”

I was rambling, but couldn’t seem to halt the words. From past experience, I knew that there was a certain level of exhaustion when all of my control fled. Apparently, I had hit it because the filter between my brain and mouth was gone. Usually, since it happened in the wee hours of the morning, I was safe from having anyone witness it. This time, I wasn’t so lucky.

“You aren’t responsible for what Troy does. You know that, right?”

I heard his words, but they didn’t compute. He didn’t understand. How could he?

My head was muddled with thoughts as I tried to explain it. “This is all my fault. If I had never dated Troy, none of this would be happening. I made a horrible mistake. But I can’t make mistakes because when I do, bad things happen.”

The feel of his hands on my thighs helped steady me, but the soothing tone of his voice was enough to have me unraveling again. “What kinds of things happen?”

“People get angry. People leave. I don’t want you to get angry and leave me.”

Shit. I hadn’t meant to say that out loud either, but it was so hard to keep my guard up with him.

He gently cradled my face, tipping my chin to look into my eyes. “Why would I be angry?”

I covered my face with my hands, where I could hide while my insecurities were laid bare. “Because I didn’t tell you

the truth about Troy. The other night in your dressing room, I know you were mad. The same thing happened tonight when his name came up. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

He peeled back my fingers, forcing me to look at him again as he spoke. "It's okay. Yes, I'm angry about the situation, but I promise I'm not mad at you." He punctuated the statement with a sweet kiss. "I care about you, so I don't like that you've had to deal with everything by yourself or that he's still causing problems. But that's all on him, not you."

The gentle stroke of his thumbs across my cheeks began to calm me, slowing my thoughts and settling my riotous emotions. "You're not upset that I kept it from you?"

"No." He urged me on my feet, where I swayed from exhaustion as much as the rocking of the bus, then took me by the hand to tow me to the bedroom. "The only thing I'm upset about is you carrying all of this on your shoulders and that you aren't taking better care of yourself." He tucked me under the blanket, leaving the small lamp on after he settled in to face me. "Listen, there are still a lot of things we don't know about each other, but we'll get there. We both have a lifetime of history and stories, and we'll share them when something is important or when the time is right."

"Okay," I whispered. Almost instantly, that sleepy, floaty feeling took hold and I was fighting to keep my eyes open.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Where is all of this coming from? You're usually such a complete badass and nothing seems to get to you. It's okay if it does. You're human. I just want to understand."

Until that moment, I wasn't sure I understood where my growing need for control had come from. Then it hit me like a lightning bolt, and it was so obvious that I was surprised I hadn't already made the connection.

"I don't want you to be mad at me," I numbly repeated. I stared in his direction, my eyes unseeing. Instead, a dozen

memories flashed before me. It all made sense now. The guilt, the self-blame, the obsessive need to fix everything.

I released a heavy sigh, literally deflating under the weight of my realization. But while I came to grips with the reappearance of my old demons, Shawn was left to imagine the worst.

“Did someone hurt you because they were angry?”

“No.” I smoothed the crease in his brow, wanting to ease the worry my hesitation had caused. “Nothing like that.”

He wasn’t convinced, and it illustrated just how much I was holding back compared to how open he had been. Yes, I had shared things, but they were mostly shallow confessions without a lot of explanation. It was a trick I had learned when keeping people from getting too close. It had also worked to ensure that no one saw past the image of a polished music executive who was in charge of her world. Little did they know that underneath it, I was an emotional mess.

But weren’t we all?

Shawn had lowered his defenses, allowing me to be a true partner for him. And I needed to give him the same opportunity. Otherwise, our relationship would always be unbalanced and doomed to fail.

“I guess it’s my turn for a truth bomb story.” I inched closer, needing his warmth. “I don’t remember much about my mom, but the one clear memory I have is of the day she left.” I paused as the images came to life in my mind. “I was four years old and had made a mess trying to pour a cup of juice while she was on the phone. I tried to clean it up, but she yelled at me and sent me to my room. When my dad got home from work, he found me there, crying and promising to be good if I could come back out. He kissed away my tears and took me out to the living room to watch my favorite movie. He turned the volume up, but it was a small apartment, so I could still hear them arguing in their bedroom. When it got quiet, I peeked around the corner to see my mom hauling her suitcases through the front door. She walked out and never looked back.”

“I’m so sorry.” Shawn’s voice was raw as he wiped away a stray tear from my cheek.

“I turned into a bit of a perfectionist after that. I had this irrational fear that if I did something wrong my dad would leave too. I had nightmares about him leaving, and I cried when he would go to work, terrified that he wouldn’t come back. He got me into therapy, which helped, but the fear never completely went away. In school, I always had this underlying need to get good grades and stay out of trouble. And there were times when I put too much pressure on myself to be perfect and make sure my dad was proud of me. My therapist said it was also the cause of my test anxiety. I learned to manage well enough for written exams, but anything performance based can be difficult.”

“Like a driving test,” he reasoned.

“Exactly. Over the past year, a lot of my fears have slowly been creeping back in. Since my dad’s heart attack, I’ve felt so guilty.” My throat clogged with emotion as I admitted that out loud for the first time.

“Why would you feel guilty about that?”

“He had just gotten off the phone with Legal regarding Troy’s accusations. One minute he was furious, ranting and raving. The next, he was clutching his chest and struggling to breathe. I almost lost him because I dated the wrong guy.”

“No, babe.” He tightened his hold on me as if willing me to believe him. “You almost lost him because of a health condition. The rest was just shitty timing. I’m sure your therapist told you the same thing about your mom when you were little.”

“She did. And logically, I know that. But recently, all my unhealthy habits have gotten worse again.”

“That makes sense. You’ve been under a lot of stress, taking on more than any one person could handle. And I know you aren’t getting enough sleep.” His look dared me to argue with him.

“Those things certainly don’t help, but I was managing. Okay, I was barely managing and not well.” As much as it grated on me, I could admit that.

“When I think about everything you’ve accomplished lately, I am in complete awe. You’ve done an amazing job. But at what cost? I understand why trust is hard for you right now, but you have to let people in and let others help carry the load.”

“I trust *you*.” I had come this far, so I pushed through my discomfort to confess the rest of it. “Admitting how much I care about you and putting my heart on the line today was a big step for me. I think it was bigger than I realized, but you made it so easy. I’ve never fallen this hard for anyone.” My words were nearly cut off by his hungry kiss, reinforcing that I wasn’t alone in my feelings.

“Same.”

Another slow kiss followed, and I wished that was enough to allay my fears.

“I love that we made our relationship official, but I think it also triggered a part of me that will always worry you’re going to leave as soon as I do something wrong.”

He adamantly shook his head. “No way. If anyone understands how that feels, it’s me, so I promise that won’t happen. You’re stuck with me now.”

“Same,” I echoed, lightening the mood for a few quiet minutes.

But the levity quickly faded.

“Fuck.” Shawn rolled to his back and rubbed his face. “I’m the world’s biggest asshole.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you’ve gone above and beyond to help me deal with my shit, and I’ve barely taken the time to understand yours. It’s my first day as your boyfriend, and I’m already terrible at it.”

“That’s not true,” I argued. “I would even say it’s the opposite.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Because there have been plenty of chances for me to share more, but I wasn’t ready. Which kind of makes me the asshole. I’ve been intentionally hiding parts of me out of fear while you were being open and honest.”

“I still feel like I’ve been a needy bastard. But I’m going to do better. I really don’t want to fuck this up.”

“Me neither.”

I could feel my earlier fatigue blanketing me again and reached to turn off the light before settling in the nook of his arm. The room was shrouded in darkness, and the light trace of his fingers up and down my arm soothed me further.

“Sorry your mom left,” he whispered.

I blinked, barely making out the shape of him beside me. “Me too. My dad told me they weren’t happy together and that she was already planning to leave. He wanted me to know it wasn’t my fault.” I wished believing it was that easy.

“Maybe it was better,” he mumbled, a sure sign his mind was shutting down too.

“What was better?”

“She left. Wish my father left. Or sent me to live with Grammy.” He hummed sleepily. “Which is worse: a parent who leaves, or one who stays to remind you every day they don’t want you?” His voice faded at the end as he drifted off.

My heart ached as I considered his question. There were no winners in either scenario, only pain. Maybe it was our similar scars that drew us together, recognizing what the other needed and driving us to protect the other from harm.

I pressed a kiss into his chest and swore to do everything in my power to shield him from the world and those who would carelessly hurt him. And as I finally allowed sleep to pull me under, I felt safe knowing that Shawn would be there to do the same for me.

Chapter 13

Shawn

It was almost eight in the morning when I stumbled into the front lounge to see Natalia already hard at work at the little dining table. Right where I found her a few short hours ago. And while I was still wearing the wrinkled clothes I'd slept in, she was fully dressed and ready to take on the day. But despite becoming more relaxed in the past few weeks, even going so far as wearing jeans to the auditions, she was back in full business mode this morning. The only exception was her glasses, which gave her a sexy librarian vibe that revved up my barely tamed morning wood. Just as alluring was the severe bun restraining the thick locks of her hair that I wanted to maul with my fingers.

After growing up with so much emphasis put on personal appearances, it hadn't taken long to figure out that Nat's was based on more than professional expectations. The dark colors and conservative cuts also created an emotional barrier to keep people at a distance. So, after sharing what she had the night before, it was possible she was feeling a little vulnerable and wanted the added layer of self-confidence this morning. And that was fine. But I wanted to assure her she didn't need it. Not with me.

"Hello, girlfriend," I greeted, taking her face in my hands to kiss her long and hard.

Her resistance lasted a fraction of a second before she leaned into my touch. Still joined, I maneuvered her to sit astride my lap as I snagged her seat and worked to remove the elastic band imprisoning her hair. Combing my fingers through the silky strands, I eased back to look at her.

"Gorgeous."

Before I could dive back into those kiss-swollen lips, the door opened and Lance bounded up the steps.

"What the hell is with you interrupting us?" I asked, giving him my best death glare.

“You can pause the celebration for one minute while I congratulate you.”

“What are we celebrating?” Natalia asked, wiping at her lips and tucking the loose strands behind her ears.

Lance wasted no time in filling her in. “Bursting With Apathy hit the top ten on Billboard’s charts for streaming, digital sales, and radio airplay!”

I returned the fist bump he offered as Natalia looked back and forth between us. “Who?”

“Side project,” I said, waving away her interest.

I had seen the alert on my phone when I woke up but was still processing the news. Plus, it occurred to me that my involvement with an outside band might make things awkward. I wasn’t in direct competition with LGR, but this didn’t exactly make us allies either.

Lance, of course, wouldn’t let it go at that. “Your boyfriend produced their debut album,” he told her. “And it kicks ass!” His phone pinged with a message and he turned back toward the door, pausing on his way out. “We’re off to our radio interview. I’ll be sure to work this into the conversation.”

“Thanks, man.”

Once he was gone, I braved a glance at Natalia to gauge her reaction.

“I’m so proud of you,” she said before sealing the words with a kiss. “It must be a day for good news.”

“Oh, yeah? What else is going on?”

Simply waking up in her bed and knowing that we weren’t hiding anymore was enough to make me happy. It would have been better to find her in bed when I woke up. But that wasn’t likely to happen anytime soon unless I tied her to the bed. That mental image, combined with having her in my lap, had my blood pumping as she turned to face her computer.

“I got an email from Troy asking me to call him. He included a photo of us, confirming his link to the cameraman,

but nothing else in writing. The subtle threat was clear, but he could deny it just as easily.”

I looked at the picture on her screen, which was the equivalent of a cold shower, and felt the low growl in my throat as I wrapped a protective arm around her waist. “Explain how that’s good news.”

“First off, we know for sure who sent the cameraman. Even though we don’t know why, we know who we’re dealing with. Second, I refused his request and sent back screenshots of our social media posts, effectively ruining whatever he had planned. But I may already know what that was because I also received an email from Ablaze. Apparently, Troy approached them right after the concert in Houston on Saturday night and presented an offer. They’ve asked to be released from their obligations to LGR.”

Ablaze’s performance had been met with a mediocre response from the crowd, and they were consistently the least favored band on the LGR website. Go figure.

“I assume you agreed.”

“Hell yes.”

“The fact that they will be Troy’s problem now is the best news yet.”

My satisfaction was quickly erased by the fact that Troy had been in Houston the same day as the cameraman. At best, Troy had been there to poach a potential client. But there was still a good chance he was up to more, and I needed to talk with Pops regarding security to take some extra precautions. Knowing everything I did now, I was determined to take his threats seriously.

“In other good news, my video call this morning with Rusty Threads’ manager went extremely well. They’ve decided to stay with LGR, which is another big loss for Troy.”

“Still no response from Dodging Reality?”

“Nothing, and it’s driving me crazy. They’re the only top-tier client I haven’t gotten back. Securing them would put

LGR where it was before Gordon took over. At least as close as I can get it.”

Wanting to help, I considered reaching out to Vander, Dodging Reality’s drummer. We had met a few times over the years and kept in touch. In fact, I’d seen him at a recent festival in Florida, where he had confided that they were looking to go indie. They were skilled songwriters with a unique sound that I would love to explore, but that couldn’t happen unless they left LGR. And now that I knew how much they meant to Natalia, I wanted to do whatever was necessary to make sure they stayed.

Talk about an unexpected twist.

Sure, I did things all the time for the benefit of the band, but I was mostly accustomed to putting myself first. That wasn’t the case with Natalia. Even before we were an official couple, I had started factoring her into the decisions I was making. Releasing the photos to Lance’s social media accounts had been somewhat spontaneous, which wasn’t exactly out of character for me. Acting impulsively usually gave me a small endorphin rush but was generally reserved for things like buying an expensive instrument or cliff jumping in Hawaii. And while sharing my private life on social media had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, I had been shocked to realize the pleasure I felt came from knowing I was taking care of Natalia, not the act itself. Definitely a new experience for me.

Natalia resumed working as I absently toyed with her hair and nibbled the side of her neck. Content with her in my lap, I pulled out my phone and used the time to tackle a few random tasks before we needed to head to the morning’s auditions. I texted my security concerns to Pops before opening my email, where more good news awaited me. An update from the construction company informed me that my sound equipment had arrived, and the crew was back on track with minimal delay. I had just finished my reply when Natalia’s body went rigid, and I could tell our streak of good news was coming to an end.

“Damn it,” she exhaled, scrolling through the document on her screen. Reaching for a file beside her, she flipped

through the stack of papers until she found what she was looking for.

Peering over her shoulder, I noted it was a financial summary of LGR's proposed expansion to Charlotte. I turned my attention back to my phone, not wanting to snoop on sensitive information. However, Nat soon slumped back against me with a sigh and tossed the whole file back onto the table.

“What’s wrong, babe?”

“The building in Charlotte I was hoping to purchase didn’t pass inspection. There are major electrical and plumbing issues that would kill the budget and push back our entire timeline. I can try to find another location, but every other building I’ve seen either needs extensive structural modifications to accommodate our needs or is out of our price range. Either way, I’m back at square one.”

I rubbed her shoulders to loosen the knots forming there. “Do you mind if I take a look?” I asked, unsure if I was crossing some unknown boundary.

She didn’t hesitate to pass me the printout she’d been reviewing. I quickly scanned it, rearranging and adjusting costs in my head. For me, the solution was simple. But it wouldn’t have occurred to her because she was focused on a traditional expansion. Her aspirations were based on data and a predictable business model, unlike the dream project I’d been planning for years.

I tugged her legs to turn her sideways on my lap so I could see her better. Maybe it was all of the thoughts about acting impulsively, but I dove in, knowing it was the right thing to do. Even if it meant possible changes for me.

The first step was getting her to appreciate the heart of my idea. “What’s the goal for Charlotte? What are you trying to accomplish with this expansion?”

She paused a minute to think. “Well, when performing at its best, the Nashville studios are booked months in advance. I want to have an alternate location for our signed artists to use

without any delays, and I'd like to offer studio rentals for indie artists when there's availability."

"So, you're planning to duplicate what you already have?"

I could tell I struck a nerve when her spine straightened. "Not an exact replica, but basically, yes. What's wrong with that?"

"There's nothing wrong with it," I began, not wanting to offend her in any way. "Just hear me out, okay?" She nodded for me to go on. "You're trying to set LGR apart from everyone else, right? And with the new contract structure, you're able to provide more of an indie experience, which boils down to having options. So, why not use this expansion to create a selection of unique studio environments as part of those options?"

"How?"

"By doing the opposite of what you already have in Nashville. It's a great studio," I rushed to add. "Artists who want that big city energy surrounding them will be happy there. But others prefer a quieter setting with fewer distractions. For example, there are studios in New York set on an entire estate with amazing views of the Catskill Mountains. Artists retreat from the world and can focus solely on their music there." I had read about them when I was younger and fantasized about recording there. The pictures alone were breathtaking. "Obviously, something on that scale isn't necessary, but it's the type of atmosphere you could create. And if you build outside of the city, your budget could fund multiple settings." I couldn't help but envision my own long-term plan. "You could start with a location in town for the main office space and a few studios. As you grow, you can add additional locations to offer different experiences. Buy an old farmhouse and put a studio in the basement, or purchase some property and build something from scratch. By creating an inclusive space, bands would essentially have unlimited studio time and could work around the clock, whenever inspiration struck them. Plus, they'd enjoy another small-town perk: privacy."

And if I imagined everything happening in Lupine, I kept that to myself. For now. But I had a smile on my face the rest of the morning, knowing I had given her something to seriously consider.



Fans gathered early outside the San Antonio arena, and the crowd grew steadily throughout the day. With the help of security and well-placed barricades, Lance made a surprise appearance late in the afternoon to sign autographs and pose for pictures. Anna tagged along, passing out flyers to promote a local charity she had partnered with, and though nothing could adequately capture the supercharged energy in the air, she snapped dozens of photos to upload to our social media accounts. She took extra care to include those with homemade Ready to Rock t-shirts and signs.

Thanks to everyone's help, there had been a noticeable difference in the contest's popularity. LGR's website, specifically the contest page, was drawing higher traffic, and there was a large spike in visitors during each live stream. The rising interest was also evident at the shows, and Nat was quick to point out the large number of people there cheering on today's finalist, Betting Blind. The local favorites had gained a huge following, and based on their performance, it was well earned.

We always aimed for a great show, but tonight's crowd exuded an energy that pushed us to another level. It was just one of those nights when there was something extra in the air. Everybody felt it, and the added buzz in the crowd got us more pumped up, which spurred the crowd even more. The cycle continued, and by the end of the night, we were drained but riding a massive adrenaline high.

Sadly, what goes up must come down. Following the show, Pops called a meeting to reinforce the importance of security procedures and to discuss the recent concerns. All stage deconstruction was halted as every single member of the tour gathered. After a brief review of crowd control protocols and a few changes in staff assignments, a photo of Troy was displayed on the big screens.

“While Troy does not pose an immediate threat at this time, we believe he is responsible for the recent security breach. We’ve all gotten lax with some policies, but that changes now. First and foremost, you must wear your laminated ID at all times. No laminate, no entry. No exceptions. I don’t care if your ninety-year-old grandma comes to visit backstage, she needs a visitor pass. And if you invite someone backstage, you better be willing to vouch for them and keep your eyes on them. Security is everyone’s job. You see someone without a laminate, you stop them. Be aware of your surroundings and immediately report anything suspicious. Any questions?”

A few matters were clarified, and it was nice to see the matter being taken so seriously. But it wasn’t surprising. Our crew was as loyal as they came.

By the time Natalia and I made it to the bus, I was completely wiped out. I fell into bed, pulling her down with me for a long, leisurely kiss.

Her laughter was not the reaction I expected. “What’s so funny?”

“It feels strange not frantically making out before we watch the next set of audition videos.”

“Well, for the sake of consistency, I’m happy to speed things up,” I offered, making quick work of the buttons on her blouse.

The hand on my cheek stopped me. “No. It’s nice being able to take our time.”

“It doesn’t kill the thrill for you?”

“Are you kidding? Knowing I can have you for as long as I like is a bigger turn-on than the risk of being caught.”

“Really?” I asked, liking the sound of that.

She nodded slowly, a sexy gleam in her eye. “As a matter of fact, I think we should watch the videos first. That way, I’ll have the rest of the night to prove it to you.”

Testing the theory, we quickly completed our work before we took our time, exploring and discovering new ways to bring each other pleasure. We were so happy with the results that we agreed to permanently change our routine.

Another change came Thursday night when Anna organized a girls’ night, commandeering Natalia’s bus for a few hours following the show. Jaxon kissed Anna goodbye as if they would be apart for days, though the buses weren’t even leaving the parking lot. The rest of us gave him grief for it, but strangely enough, I could relate. For the first time, I was in a relationship where I truly missed the other person when they weren’t around. In the past, I had thought of girlfriends at times and looked forward to seeing them again if we made plans, but had never felt so connected to someone that I didn’t want to miss out on simply being with them. More importantly, those feelings showed no signs of fading.

In preparation for the night, Nat and I had worked during dinner to finish our contest duties. Multitasking wasn’t exactly my strong suit, which meant I was starving by the time I arrived for the guys’ video game marathon on the band’s bus. Thankfully, plenty of extra snacks had been arranged for our post-performance appetites.

Grabbing a sandwich and some fruit, my thoughts wandered back to LGR’s expansion project. Nat hadn’t said anything about my recommendation yet, which had me restless. Naturally, I couldn’t let go of the idea and had been obsessing over the thought of having her in Lupine. I even had the perfect building in mind for the main location. The old firehouse in town had been sitting empty for months and would easily accommodate the new studios and office space. Out of curiosity, I’d gone so far as to look it up on the realtor’s

website. Just in case. Sure enough, it was still available and priced to sell.

So why was I hesitant to show her?

LGR moving to Lupine was a sound business move, so wanting Nat in Lupine wasn't purely selfish. Actually, having her there would come at a cost. It would mean letting go of my own studio expansion plans. I would still have the studios at the lodge for the band's use and any personal side projects, but anything beyond that would be pointless. LGR would already have the market covered.

Which begged the question: did I really need additional studios? After all, I was only one person and could be a successful producer without them. Hell, very few producers even owned studio space. The extra studios were more of a long-term plan in case Detrimental took an extended break. Until then, I didn't have any use for them. I could continue my side projects as planned and pursue contract work for LGR if I chose to.

But would it feel the same?

Would I be as satisfied working for Lucky Greene Studios as I would owning Blackwell Studios? And the biggest question nagging my brain: would my father respect my efforts without the physical space bearing my name? Having my own business made the achievement more tangible, especially when located in the center of town for all to see. With my original plan, my success would be much more evident and my father would have to acknowledge it. Wouldn't he?

I hated that his opinion still mattered when Natalia already meant more to me than he ever would, but the need for his approval had become ingrained in me over the years. It was an issue I had been working through with my therapist. Trying to overcome my desire to prove my father wrong, even though he would always see me as defective, was still a struggle. Deep down, I knew he was never going to change. As part of accepting that, Jeremy suggested focusing my

efforts on the things I could control and the people who made me happy.

Nat made me happy.

No, that wasn't right either. She didn't *make* me happy. She simply had a way of helping me see myself in a more positive light. Even my differences. My life was better because she was in it, and my hope was to have the same effect on hers.

I knew how much LGR's success meant to her, so if expanding to Lupine helped, I was all for it. And if adjusting my plans also meant having her close more of the time, then I would consider it a win for me as well. We would already be facing weeks apart while I toured, and her job involved a good amount of travel too. On top of that, I didn't know how often she even planned to be at the new location, so having time together may be challenging. Compromise would be necessary, so I was prepared to split my days off between Lupine and Nashville. Hopefully, she was willing to do the same.

There was so much to consider, and I wondered if it was too early in the relationship to be making life-altering decisions. The impulsive part of my brain wanted to jump right in, regardless of the possible consequences. My gut told me that it would be okay. But a small, rational part of my brain, which happened to sound a lot like my father, forced me to stop and think before acting. It reminded me to weigh the risks and consider what I would be giving up. In the end, I decided that waiting a few days to show her the firehouse listing wouldn't hurt anything.

Meanwhile, I had been reviewing our schedules to plan a special date for us. While researching upcoming cities, I discovered that Dodging Reality would be playing a festival about an hour outside of Nashville a few days before our show there. From the beginning, Nat planned to go home for the two days off ahead of that show, and since I decided to join her, the timing was perfect to reach out to Vander to schedule a meeting. However, I wanted to clear it with Nat ahead of time to avoid crossing any lines. I needed to make sure my

involvement didn't make her think I doubted her abilities. Or give anyone else reason to doubt them. We didn't need any new rumors getting started. Of course, I had to make sure she was willing to accept my help first.

I was considering the best way to convince her when a game controller landed in my lap, reminding me where I was and what I was supposed to be focused on.

"There's been a lot of requests for you at our interviews this week," Lance said, loading the next game

"Yeah, Anna mentioned it. I guess I can't hide forever, especially with the way the contest has taken off. And it's only continuing to grow. Nat received a proposal this morning from a cable network that wants to produce and broadcast the grand finale, complete with performances and a fancy ceremony to announce the winner."

"Damn, that's crazy." Jaxon shook his head in disbelief. "Are you okay with all of that?"

"I think so." As long as Nat was there, I would be alright. "It's hard to explain, but with her, everything just works. I'm more comfortable in my own skin and feel like I can be myself. She doesn't magically fix me or take away my problems, but I don't feel like I have to carry them alone anymore. Does that sound insane?"

"Not at all." Jaxon cleared his throat and slapped me on the back. "That sounds like love."

Damn. It did. And that made me the luckiest man on earth.

Chapter 14

Natalia

“Alright, girl. Spill. What’s going on between you and Mitch?”

Anna finished pouring our margaritas and stared at Callie expectantly as my head spun around in shock.

“What? You and Mitch? When did that happen? And how did I not know about it?”

Callie sipped her drink, deliberately stretching out the moment before she sighed and gave in. “It’s no big deal. We spent the day together while you guys went to the baseball game, and then he was with the group I hung out with at the drive-in.”

“And?” Anna prompted.

“And we’ve kissed a few times.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of all of that. The Mitch I’d met was an arrogant ass, but maybe he was different with Callie. And the last thing I wanted was to alienate my new friend by criticizing her choice in men. Crap, this friendship thing was complicated.

“You’re happy with him?” I asked, trying to be supportive.

Her shoulders slumped, and there was a sad smile on her face. “I’m happy enough for now, and the attention is nice. It’s been a lonely couple of weeks, and being around you guys with your perfect relationships doesn’t help. I have to accept the fact that I can’t have Derek, and I need to move on with someone else. So, that’s what I’m doing.”

“I’m sorry,” Anna said, pulling Callie into a hug. “I should have been a better friend the past few weeks.”

Guilt filled me, knowing that I hadn’t been there for her as much as I could have either. “Me, too,” I added. Anna waved me in to join the hug.

“It’s fine,” Callie insisted. “You have your own lives. I’m just trying to figure out mine.” She eased back and wiped her eyes, then shook off the emotions. “Enough of that. Let’s put on some music and dance.”

We drank and danced around the narrow confines of the bus, bumping into each other and being silly until Jaxon arrived to toss Anna over his shoulder. And as Shawn came into view, I marveled at how lucky I was to have found him and that he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

A little tipsy and a lot turned on, I urged him down the hallway. As soon as we made it to the bedroom, I pulled his head down and kissed him hard. Tugging his shirt, I was forced to break away to peel it over his head. His shorts and boxer briefs went next. Sinking down to my knees, my eyes locked on his, I ran my tongue around the head of his hardening length before slowly taking him into my mouth.

The groan that came from him bordered on lewd as the back of his head hit the door. He widened his stance just slightly, and I reached up to grasp the globes of his ass in my hands, urging him to move. His head snapped back down to see the message in my eyes. There was no mistaking it, and the slow thrust that followed told me so. He threaded his hands into my hair, fisting it gently, and began to move. I hummed in appreciation as he picked up his pace, going a little bit deeper.

My hands skimmed the skin on his hips, and I dragged my fingernails down the inside of his thighs, then back up. I cupped his balls, rolling them, tugging them, and lightly squeezing them. I could see and feel his breathing stutter and his muscles flex. Without warning, he pulled free, resulting in an obscenely wet sound. My clothes fell away as he backed me across the small space. Kisses rained down all over my face and neck as we fell on the bed, the heat of his skin pressing against mine. I could feel his erection against my hip and enclosed him in the circle of my legs, locking my ankles to hold him close. His cock stroked up the center of me, sending off sparks as each inch traveled over my clit.

“Again,” I begged, and he repeated the movement.

Wet and ready, he was poised just outside of me with no barrier between us. I needed to feel him like that within me. Soon, I hoped. For now, he reached for a condom. Surprising even myself, I took the packet from him, slowly tearing it open, covering the leaking tip, and rolling the material down to sheath him.

Searching his inky eyes, I was met with a look I had never seen there before. It simultaneously thrilled and terrified me because I recognized the unspoken declaration. I tried to convey the depth of everything I was feeling too, but neither of us said the words.

The heat in his eyes flared as he slowly sank into me. Blanketing me with his body, he wrapped me in his arms and simply held tight. This was different from all of the other times we'd been together. No distractions, no talking, no race to the finish. Soft fingers tipped my chin for a long, drawn-out fusing of our mouths. His tongue matched the leisurely glide of his cock, both filling me with a longing for more. The sheer intimacy of the connection had my arousal spiking to new heights. With a few more strokes, pleasure gripped me. Gasping at the force of it, all I could manage was a stream of incoherent words of approval.

Encouraged by my rambling, Shawn's pace increased along with his determination to hit all the right spots. Keeping his weight off of me limited the use of his hands, so he rolled us over. Grabbing my waist, he pulled me down as he thrust his hips upward, then reversed the movements. Rising to my knees and using the position to our advantage, the strokes grew longer and harder. The sounds echoing in the small space were a delicious combination of moaning and wet skin slapping together. It was raw and real, and I loved every second of it.

His hands moved to my breasts, a definite benefit of having a tactile boyfriend. I leaned into his touch, always eager for more, and felt myself spiraling higher again. Rocking my hips, the additional friction sent me flying. My inner muscles tightened, spurring a shudder to ripple through him just ahead of his climax. He roared with his release, filling the

condom with bursts of warmth. I continued moving to milk every last drop. When we were both fully depleted, I fell into a puddle on top of him, only stirring long enough for a quick clean-up before I drifted off in a haze of contentment.

Waking was a different story.

It began well enough, lazily wrapped together in bed. Then, sleepy kisses turned into a sultry sixty-nine, and we completely lost track of time.

After rushing to get ready, I waited for Shawn, who had disappeared with a promise to be right back. My foot tapped in irritation even though I tried not to let the delay bother me. We still had a few minutes, but I hated being late. It went against my obsessive perfectionist tendencies. But I needed to suppress those, so I took a deep breath and focused on picking up our discarded clothes from the night before. As I did, I noticed three pairs of Shawn's shoes strewn about. Then I saw the paperwork piled all over the vanity, the dirty clothes pouring out of his cabinet, and a growing collection of half-empty drink bottles on the shelf by the bed.

"Nat, babe, have you seen my phone?" Shawn called, his footsteps getting closer.

"How am I supposed to find anything in this disgusting mess?" I fired back, my annoyance falling from my lips before I could stop it.

When he didn't respond, I turned to find him standing in the doorway, holding a cup of coffee and my favorite veggie egg bites from the food tent. He stood frozen as his eyes darted around the space. Then his expression became resigned, like a child who had been scolded and was preparing for his punishment. I immediately felt awful.

There was no way I was going to allow the moment to turn into some long, drawn-out episode though. The criticism would weigh on him, and the guilt would eat at me. Neither of us would be able to focus. So, this needed to be resolved right now.

“You went all the way to the food tent for me?” I asked, softening my voice.

“Yes,” he answered hesitantly, making it sound more like a question.

“Thank you.” I pecked his cheek and smiled to make it clear that I wasn’t really upset. Well, that wasn’t true. I was upset with myself and my lack of patience this morning. “I was all set to nag you like a fishwife, and you had to go and be sweet and thoughtful. Now, I can’t be mad, though I was clearly misled based on the condition of your house when I was there.” It was meant to be a joke, but it backfired.

“Shit, I’m sorry.” He set my breakfast on the little built-in nightstand and rushed to clean up.

I stepped into his path, going up onto the balls of my feet to grab his face and kiss him until he finally relaxed. “Stop. It’s okay,” I assured him.

“No, it’s not. I’m usually much better on the bus, but I don’t have a system worked out yet. I’ll do better.”

“I’m sorry too. I’ve never really lived with anyone before, but it makes sense for there to be an adjustment period while we work out some of the details.” To start, I needed to learn to adapt better and pick my battles. “It’s only fair that we find you some more space. And, yes, I would appreciate you being a little neater, but I want you to feel comfortable here, not like a guest. Being a neat freak is one of my issues, so I’ll work on that. And once we get you more settled in, I’ll know where things belong. I can help, okay? We’ll figure it out. Together.”

Wrapping my arms around him, I held on until he returned the hug. It took a few minutes, but his shoulders slowly lowered and he exhaled. “Okay,” he whispered. “Together.”



Working side by side in the green room, Shawn occupied himself on his laptop while I attended a meeting via video with Rusty Threads to sign their new contract. They were the second band to be offered the new structure, and since they also used Ox as their lawyer, I had him to thank for helping steer them back to LGR. Kara, always one step ahead of me, had already reached out to his secretary to determine the best thank-you gift.

After finalizing the emails to forward everything to Legal and PR so they could add the news to the next press release, Shawn swept me up in a hug and spun me around to share in the excitement. His lips crashed to mine in celebration just as the door opened.

“Is it safe to come in?” Lance asked, pretending to cover his eyes.

“Safe enough,” Shawn assured him.

“Good. We’re moving up the sound check so we can try to open early.”

The remnants of a tropical storm were predicted to pass through the Shreveport area over the next few days, blanketing the city in rain and wind. It wasn’t enough to be dangerous but would definitely put a damper on things. Even with the venue being enclosed, the outer bands of rain would make it a soggy night for fans. But they would still come, and Detrimental was determined to reward their dedication with a great show.

“Okay. Give me one minute.” Returning his attention to me, Shawn lowered my feet to the floor and snuck one more kiss. “I want to show you something,” he said, shedding his t-shirt in preparation for playing.

“I think she’s seen that,” Lance quipped. “Besides, there’s no time.”

Shawn chucked the shirt at Lance's chest before turning back to me. "Just click the tab at the top of the screen and let me know what you think."

I watched him head out the door, torn between needing to work and wanting to follow him. I couldn't seem to get enough of seeing him play. I'd already watched his mentoring session that morning, amazed at his ability to hear the slightest imperfections and tweak them, fine-tuning a band's sound without changing it. I was equally impressed with his skills in the studio. I'd been spellbound listening to Bursting with Apathy's album. Yes, I was biased. But it was good. Really good.

As his girlfriend, I was inordinately proud of him. As a colleague, I admired him. And as a professional in the industry, I wanted to hoard that talent and recruit him to work for LGR exclusively. Which got me thinking about the possibility of offering him more opportunities as a producer, obviously working around his obligations with Detrimental.

I'd already called my dad to discuss moving the new studios outside of the city, and he was supportive of the change. On top of the financial benefits, moving everything closer to Lupine would also make it easier for Shawn to be involved with various projects. Which meant spending more time together. It was a significant factor, but I tried my best to keep it in perspective. Overall, the decision felt good, like it was meant to be. I was even toying with the idea of making him an official part of the expansion. Maybe Production Director. But that was a decision for another day.

With so much still undecided, I was no closer to figuring out my long-term schedule; a subject Shawn and I avoided talking about. I hated dwelling on the unknown and Shawn didn't want to add any pressure. After all, nothing had fundamentally changed. I was still dedicated to LGR and making sure my dad's legacy continued to grow. Except now when I envisioned the future, a day when I might step in to fill my dad's shoes, I pictured Shawn by my side. Not as a date or a coworker, I saw him as my partner in life. But if I wanted a

true partner, I had to be one too. That meant making time for our relationship and finding a better work-life balance.

And if anyone had told me a few months ago that I would be reassessing my priorities, I would have thought they were delusional.

Shaking my head in amusement, I resumed my seat and turned Shawn's laptop to get a better look. There were over a dozen tabs open at the top, which didn't surprise me. I sifted through a few to determine what he wanted to show me, pretty sure the eBay auction for the vintage nightclub sign wasn't it. The 'Things to do in Shreveport' tab was a wash, literally, and nothing about the Tenneville Music Festival homepage stood out. But then the screen filled with a real estate listing for an old firehouse in Lupine. Curious, I scrolled through the description, taking in details about the layout, square footage, and historic architecture. Then my breath stopped. The pictures brought it all to life, and I could see it would be the perfect place for the studio Shawn had described to me.

"Hey, Natalia," Anna said, rolling in a cart of refreshments.

"Hi," I absently replied, engrossed in photos in front of me until I realized I had a newly transplanted Lupine resident with me. Lupinian? Lupanite? Whatever. She was a valuable source of information. "Anna, what do you know about the old firehouse for sale in Lupine?"

"Not much. I've passed it a few times. It's a cool old building right in the center of town. It's next door to the bakery and across the street from the deli."

"How far is it from the lodge?" My mind was spinning with possibilities, and I was already envisioning the LGR logo out front.

"Less than ten minutes. Why?"

The price was lower than anything I'd ever imagined, the location meant being close to Shawn, and the building met all of the requirements.

I could barely contain my excitement. “I think I just found our new office and studio space.”

“Really?” she squealed, coming to look over my shoulder. “That would be fantastic!”

We browsed through the listing, pointing out things we liked and ways to modify the space to fit our needs until I couldn’t wait a minute longer. I made a call to Kara to contact the realtor and coordinate with Legal to put in an offer. But since it was Saturday afternoon, it could be a few days before we had a response.

“Let’s keep this between us for now, okay?”

“Alright. But we better hear by Monday because I’m terrible at keeping anything from Jaxon,” she laughed.

“I know it’ll be tough. I just don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up until we know the offer is accepted.”

“That makes sense. I can’t wait to see their reactions though. You know Lance will want to be the first one down the fireman’s pole.”

“He’s not going to let me remove it, is he?”

“No way!”

Hearing the guys’ voices in the hallway, I closed out of the realtor’s website and hastily turned Shawn’s laptop back the way it was. I couldn’t wait to tell him LGR was coming to Lupine.



Throughout the day Sunday, I compulsively checked my email, but there was no news. I hadn’t expected any, but the anticipation was killing me. On top of that, we’d been stuck inside with no break in the weather. Both bands and a few

members of the security team were booked at a higher-end hotel while the rest of the crew chose a more budget-friendly option down the road. Most preferred to use their lodging allowance to share rooms so they could save the extra money.

As a result of the storm, our hotel wasn't very busy, allowing the guys to have relative privacy to enjoy the gym, indoor pool, hotel restaurant, and lounge area without worry. Card games and television helped pass the time, but Shawn was restless from being cooped up for so long.

He was finally able to relax after expending his excess energy on me. Not that I was complaining. I was happy to reap all of those benefits. And since the shift in our relationship, I especially enjoyed the downtime that followed. The intimate conversations, when we shared the deepest parts of ourselves, were a new experience for both of us. They had also become something I looked forward to. It seemed that no matter how much I learned, I still wished I could crawl inside his head to further explore his mind.

Sprawled out on our bellies, listening to the rain as it pelted the window with each gust of wind, my fingers traced the single tattoo on his right bicep. The black gothic butterfly was also the band's logo, representing the idea that not everything was as it seemed. At some point, every member of the band had been misunderstood or underestimated. And every member had gotten the tattoo as a symbol of their devotion to one another. Whenever I looked at it, I was reminded of Shawn's complexity and my never-ending quest to peel back the intricate layers.

I reached up to brush the hair out of his eyes. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Produce a song. I know the technical process, but the individual creativity that sets a song apart is fascinating. I mean, the same song can literally be arranged an infinite number of ways." I bent one arm to prop my head up. "Take the song 'Feeling Good'. The original Broadway piece has been covered more times than I can count, and each version

evokes a completely different feeling. Nina Simone's arrangement makes me want to spend an evening in a jazz club learning to swing dance. Michael Bublé's version inspires ballroom dancing and has been popular for the first dance at many weddings. Then I listen to Bassnectar's remix and it makes me want to do a strip tease."

Shawn scrambled for his phone and immediately began playing the Bassnectar version while looking at me expectantly. "Show me what you've got, sexy."

"Ha ha." I smacked him with a pillow before settling on top of it. "Seriously. I listen to a song like that, and the possibilities are endless."

"Very true. And it's a big risk to remake someone else's song, especially if it's well-loved. Some, like Disturbed's version of 'Sound of Silence', are huge hits. Others completely bomb. Because of that, I would much rather work with original material. That way it isn't being directly compared to anything else."

"That makes sense, but how do you know what you want a song to sound like?"

"I don't know. I just kind of hear it, at least the general arrangement. And I can play with it in my head, imagining what different instruments and adjustments would sound like."

That seemed like an exceptional talent, but Shawn was full of those. "Do you play any other instruments?"

"A few, but just the basics. Trumpet, trombone, guitar, and a few other percussion instruments like the xylophone and chimes. I also went through brief phases of being fixated on the theremin and steel drums. They're cool for layering in different sounds." He reached for my hand and began toying with my fingers. "You grew up around music, but I never thought to ask if you play anything."

"Piano."

"Really? That's impressive. I can transfer enough knowledge from the xylophone to know which key is which,

but could never sit still long enough to learn more than ‘Chopsticks’.”

“I had several years of lessons, but I was never brave enough to perform in front of anyone. It was just a fun hobby and gave me a better understanding of music.”

Shawn smiled and quickly rolled out of bed before tossing my pajamas and robe at me. “Come on,” he urged.

I got dressed without hesitation but couldn’t help my curiosity. “Midnight snack?” I asked, ready to hit up the little shop in the lobby that sold ice cream bars.

“You’ll see.”

I slipped on sandals and let Shawn lead me down to the darkened lounge on the first floor. Then to the piano sitting in the shadows at the back.

“No way,” I argued, trying to pull my hand free of his.

“It’s either this or the strip tease.” He awaited my decision with a devilish grin.

I couldn’t resist him, no matter the mood, but a playful Shawn was especially undeniable.

“Fine, but no laughing. It’s been a while,” I warned, adjusting the bench so I could reach the foot pedals.

“There’s no one here but us. No pressure.” He reached down to smooth the worry from my brow before settling onto the bench at my side.

Placing my fingers on the keys, I began playing “Just Give Me a Reason”, quietly singing along. It was written as a duet, and I was glad when Shawn joined in. His smooth, sexy voice was enough to make me want to play more often if that was my reward. We sang together, my heart warming as the lyrics told us that we weren’t broken and that we could learn to love again. My fingers stilled as the song’s message hit home. I looked at Shawn, who stared back with the same longing I felt. The kiss that followed was filled with tenderness and promises of the love we were building. It was a kiss I locked away in my mind to remember forever.

Shawn watched intently as I went on to play random bits of different popular songs. Then, with my approval, he sent off a text to the rest of the gang, who soon trickled in to join the fun. Lance brought an acoustic guitar and strummed along to “Tiny Dancer”. Everyone sang and ate ice cream and laughed well into the night. Even the desk clerk joined in as we ended the night with a lively rendition of “7 O’Clock”.

Shawn smiled and shook his head in amusement while he straightened a few chairs once the room was empty. “That’s not what I was imagining when you said you had piano lessons,”

“I remember some classical stuff too,” I said, shifting into Beethoven. “My piano instructors were pretty traditional, but I used to hang out at LGR after school most days and had a lot of lessons from musicians passing through too.”

“Damn, I bet that was cool.”

“It really was,” I said, truly appreciating my childhood.

There had been plenty of times I was bored out of my mind waiting for my dad to finish work, but I had also been given opportunities most kids could only dream of.

It made me sad that Shawn had often felt the need to hide his interest in music when he was growing up to avoid his father’s disapproval. Despite all of that, he was a member of a famous band, making a name for himself and sharing his talent with the world. Yet he was only getting started.

And I couldn’t wait to see what the future would bring.

Chapter 15

Shawn

I crept from the bed, careful not to wake Nat as I silently grabbed some clothes and my shoes. Just because I couldn't sleep didn't mean she shouldn't. Besides, it was nice to see her finally getting some rest.

Making my way through the bus, I pushed aside the mounting anxiety that swelled every time I thought about the live interview scheduled with the local morning show in a few hours. To burn a little energy, I walked to the catering tent as the sun painted the sky with pinks and oranges. Focusing on the beauty of everything around me, I tried to ignore the news van pulling into the parking lot and the fact that they were an affiliate of a national media company. I didn't want to think about the likelihood of the interview being played during the entertainment segments of news shows across the country. Instead, I reminded myself how fortunate I was to be able to do what I loved for a living. This was simply part of the job.

I had always been willing to do my share of public appearances, but couldn't deny being relieved when our former publicist had come up with a plan to make Jaxon the face of the band, pushing the rest of us into the background in the process. As much as I hated what she'd done to Jaxon and his image, the break from the media had been nice. So, it had been another lucky coincidence that our revamped PR had coincided with the contest, giving me another excuse to avoid the usual morning media obligations. Today, that luck was coming to an end. To accommodate my busy schedule, the local morning show host and her crew had generously offered to broadcast on location. From the arena. At a time dictated by me.

I was out of excuses.

But it would be good for everyone. Detrimental's image would benefit, and Ready to Rock would get free publicity. All I had to do was sit with the guys and answer a few questions. And try not to fidget on national TV. Or get distracted by

anything going on around us. Or tune out and lose track of the questions being asked. Or monopolize the conversation when I got excited about the contest. Or reveal too much about my relationship with Nat if the topic came up.

Fuck.

Anna briefed me yesterday on the talking points she had already sent over to the station. It was a courtesy to stick with the pre-approved questions, but we had practiced answers to additional questions that might be asked, just in case. Needless to say, I had obsessed over them ever since.

My mind was abuzz as I gathered our breakfast, and I regretted not getting up sooner to fit in a morning run. I seriously needed the endorphins, but I hadn't wanted to leave Nat or the comfort of her bed.

I robotically ate and dressed in jeans and a fitted black t-shirt, as Anna had instructed. Through it all, I was still stuck in my head, shuttering my emotions and getting my virtual mask into place so I would be ready to face the inevitable scrutiny that awaited me. For once, I felt out of practice, and it emphasized just how relaxed I'd become over the past few weeks. Even with the contestants and crew, I'd been more at ease, able to be myself without the usual worry about my quirks.

Now, my skin felt too tight and my palms were sweating. But I was a Blackwell, and we never let our discomfort show.

Nat walked with me to the green room, which had been set up for the interview. Lights were mounted on poles in the corners and a grouping of chairs had been arranged in two rows to fit everyone on screen together the whole time. Great.

We were the last to arrive, and I held Nat's hand in a death grip as we were introduced to the show's host. I begrudgingly let go as make-up and mics were applied, but she remained close by.

In no time, we were seated and the cameras started rolling. I had hoped for a seat in the back row but was directed to the front since I would be speaking about the contest. Being

put on display left me especially tense and hyper-aware of my mannerisms, and focusing on that made it harder to concentrate on the conversation around me. On top of that, the lights hummed annoyingly and were hot in the small room. But each time I felt myself starting to unravel, I looked for Nat. She never left my line of sight and met me with a supportive smile, keeping me grounded.

As usual, Jaxon and Lance were the center of attention and answered most of the questions. With equal parts efficiency and charm, they addressed the band's recent media struggles while quelling any negative rumors regarding our relationship with LGR. Our recent charity work was highlighted, including the food drives Anna had added at each show, and the discussion ended with a segment on Ready to Rock. Using the utmost concentration, I gave my practiced responses and remained evasive when asked about my relationship with Natalia. We planned to increase interest and encourage fans to watch the bonus footage for additional glimpses into our lives.

I held it together but was left feeling irritable and had a massive headache by the time it ended. Yanking off my mic pack, I handed it to a waiting technician and wrapped an arm around Nat's waist as I steered us directly back to the bus.

"Damn, I'm glad that's over." Heaving a sigh of relief, I toed off my shoes and peeled away the constricting jeans before kicking them aside. "I think it went well though," I added, my sweaty t-shirt muffling the words as I yanked it over my head.

I turned to toss it on the bed but found Nat there with her hand extended, having already cleaned up the other items. It was a compromise we'd made. She wouldn't let my messiness bother her as long as I didn't get upset when she cleaned up after me. It was a strange arrangement but one that seemed to work for both of us. Our quirks somehow managed to be complimentary. And if anything, it made me more aware of my bad habits because I didn't ever want to take advantage of her.

“Thanks, babe,” I said, stealing a quick kiss. I was also determined to make sure she knew I appreciated her efforts.

“Did I ever tell you that I used to watch your interviews?” She dropped the dirty clothes in the hamper while I rummaged through my closet for something comfortable so we could get to the auditions.

“No. Were you checking me out?” I teased.

“Kind of.” Her shameless smile hit me right in the chest. “There was something mysterious about you that always drew me in. Jaxon and Lance are the most outgoing, so they naturally get the spotlight. Eli is thoughtful, but usually only speaks up when he has something meaningful to add to a conversation. Derek is naturally quiet, content to be in the shadows.” She sat on the edge of the bed, looking up at me with somber eyes while I finished dressing. “But you were an enigma. People often took you as aloof, but there was a depth there that others overlooked. I used to think it was so sexy. Now, it just makes me sad.”

I sat beside her to tie my shoes, but my task was soon forgotten. “Sad? Why?”

“Because, now that I know you, I can see how much of yourself you hide. I understand why you feel the need to cover up some of your ADHD symptoms, but it was like you became somebody else today.”

It was scary how accurate her observation was. “I kind of did.” I fell back onto the mattress and pulled her down next to me as I fumbled to explain how I felt when I had to fit in around other people. “Honestly, there are a lot of times when I feel like an actor playing the part of a character named Shawn Blackwell.”

“That’s what was so difficult to watch. I saw how much effort it took, and I don’t understand why you do it.”

I thought back to when it all started and tried to make it make sense. “I had this drum instructor, not the smelly guy, this guy was a blues drummer who also taught music theory at UNC. He probably got roped into giving me lessons after a

large donation to his program from Grammy. Anyway, one of the first things he taught me was the importance of tempo. Obviously, a slower tempo is generally used for sentimental songs, and the tempo would be much faster in a rock song. Then he showed me how tempo can change within a song, either to affect the mood of the song or to emphasize a part of it. So, as a drummer, I had to balance providing a steady pulse with being flexible with the speed of that pulse.

“Me being me, I went home and watched every video I could find and learned everything possible about tempo. And that’s when I stumbled on the idea that changing the tempo of a song can affect the way people perceive it. You can have the most somber lyrics, but if they’re set to an upbeat tempo, people don’t realize they should be sad. I instantly thought of the song ‘Last Kiss’. I must have heard it a dozen times, humming along and tapping my foot, not really listening to the lyrics. Until one day, I did. Everything I felt about the song changed. And that’s when it hit me. If I changed enough about the way I presented myself, I could change the way I was perceived too.”

Nat let out a pitiful whimper. “That’s the most depressing thing I’ve ever heard.”

I closed my eyes and exhaled, trying to explain something that most people would never understand. “Everybody uses masking as a coping mechanism sometimes, right? We all hide our nervousness at job interviews or feign interest when listening to someone when we’re bored to tears. It’s the socially appropriate thing to do to fit in and make others more comfortable.” Nat rolled on top of me and rested her head on my chest as I went on. “For me, that means constantly adapting to match the expectations of where I am so I can blend in. On top of the usual things, I have to put effort into staying seated, not fidgeting, and concealing my emotions when I get overly excited or upset. I even have to hide the mess in my house so I can try to impress a beautiful woman who’s coming over.”

“Ha! I knew it,” she crowed, poking me in the chest.

“Yeah, yeah. You got me there. But you would have run screaming otherwise.”

“Or I would have spent the night organizing your closets.”

“I think we found a much better way to spend our time that night.” I ran my hands down her back and caressed her ass, my balls tingling at the memory.

“Agreed. And I’m okay with you keeping the fake neatness habit.” Her face went from teasing to somber. “But I don’t like the others.”

“Me neither,” I admitted. “It’s mentally exhausting. But it’s the only way I learned to fit in when I was growing up. When I could pretend to be like everyone else, I wasn’t in trouble all of the time. People liked me better, and it was nice to feel accepted.”

“But at what cost? You have to constantly sacrifice yourself for the sake of others. Who cares what they think? You’re such an extraordinary person, and I think people would like you more if you let them see who you really are. I know I do, and I never want you to feel like you have to pretend with me.”

I pulled her down for a quick kiss, overwhelmed by the warmth filling my chest. My family had never been affectionate with words or actions. Grammy was the only person I loved who I told regularly. Now, because I had such limited experience, those three little words got stuck in my throat. And as much as I wanted to say them, the fear of rejection was still very real. That would never go away. And speaking the words out loud would only amplify the pain of that possible rejection.

Unaware of my dilemma, Nat sat up to straddle my hips, pinning me in place with her palms on my shoulders. “I’m going to suggest something, but I don’t want you to make a decision right now.”

“Okay,” I hesitantly agreed.

“I think you should tell your story.”

“What?” I tried to sit up, but her weight encouraged me to stay. I could have easily overpowered her, but went along with the symbolic gesture.

“I listened to your suggestions about the studios. Now, I want you to listen to me and then think about what I’m saying.” She waited for my nod. “Millions of people have ADHD, which doesn’t lessen your struggle, but sometimes it’s nice to know you aren’t alone. I think growing up in a small town was isolating for you and made you feel like there was something wrong with you. And growing up with your father made you more aware of any differences you have. But I promise you, they aren’t nearly as noticeable or strange as you think they are. I think they’ve been built up in your head as something you need to be ashamed of. You’ve been made to feel like you have to hide who you really are, and it’s a huge disservice. Think of all the people just like you. How incredible would it be for them to have someone they could look to as proof that they can become successful despite the obstacles?”

“I don’t want to become some poster child for ADHD.”

“Absolutely not. Other people may benefit from hearing your story, but the most important reason to tell it is for yourself.”

My heart was hammering at just the thought. “How would that help me?”

“Because right now you’re imprisoned by the need to hide it. Once you’re free from that, you can truly be yourself. Then, nothing can stop you.”



By the end of our sound check the following afternoon, I hustled from the stage knowing exactly what I wanted to do.

Having finally come to a few decisions, I was eager to follow through on them. I should have acted sooner. I knew that, but with everything else going on, it had been easy to keep procrastinating. Plus, I'd needed the right mindset. Today, something had clicked, and I suddenly refused to care what my father would think. He was never going to approve of me, and I was done chasing the impossible. Instead, I was going to focus on what was right in front of me. I was ready.

In a few short months, Nat had given me a newfound confidence. She had gotten into my head and heart in ways that made me believe I deserved love just as I was. Was I perfect? No. But that didn't mean I wasn't worthy. And though I still couldn't get the words out, I wanted to show her how much I loved her.

With Nat busy on the bus, I snuck into my empty dressing room to get started. I knew, without a doubt, that I wanted Nat in my life. And just like me, she needed reassurance that I wasn't going to leave her. So, I planned to prove how much I wanted to be together.

My first call was to Vander. I hadn't officially cleared it with Nat, but she had been excited the other day after looking at the page on my laptop, so I decided to take that as a good sign. The call went better than I thought it would. He couldn't speak for all of Dodging Reality but did imply that they were having difficulty with their transition to become independent. It was the perfect opportunity for me to promote all of the benefits of LGR's new contract. And boy did I sell it. Vander eventually put me on speaker with the whole band, who promised to finally return Kara's call and schedule a meeting.

High on that victory, I opened my laptop. With barely contained excitement, I loaded the website and found the phone number I needed. As the call connected, I scrolled down the page.

"Lupine Realty, Bailey speaking. How may I help you?"

"Bailey! This is Shawn Blackwell." Bailey and I had gone to high school together, though she was a year behind me. "When did you move back to town, and what are you

doing working for your parents?” Living in a small town meant that small talk was necessary for getting anything done.

“Oh, my goodness. Shawn! It’s so good to hear your voice. I moved back a few weeks ago. Long story, but mom finally talked dad into retiring, so they asked if I wanted to take over the business.”

“Good for you. And them.” We chatted for another minute to catch up, but I knew time was limited. “Listen, I want to buy a property.”

“Fantastic! Which one are you interested in?”

“The old firehouse on Main Street.” Saying the words out loud sent a rush of pleasure through my veins. Nothing had ever felt this right.

“Aw, sorry but that already sold.”

“What?” I asked, sure I had misheard her. “I’m looking at the listing online right now.”

“I was just getting ready to update it. I got an offer last Friday, but the inspection took a few extra days. The report came back this morning and the contracts were signed about an hour ago. If you’re interested in a commercial property, I’ll be happy to see what else I’ve got.”

My heart grew heavier with each word she spoke, and a loud rushing sound filled my ears. I mumbled something barely intelligible about getting back with her before ending the call. And then the bottom fell out, triggering an avalanche of self-loathing. I tried to fight it, but every good thought I’d had moments ago vanished as it was buried under the weight of everything I hated about myself. I criticized my decision to wait and detested my tendency to procrastinate. I had lost the perfect opportunity to have it all, and there was no way to get it back.

I should have gone with my gut. I should have bought the property when I first saw it. And I never should have let my father’s opinion influence my decision. It was that thought that set me in motion. I needed to run.

There were too many fans outside for the parking lot to be an option, but I was nearly vibrating with the need to move. Scrambling for a solution, I headed to the arena. Eyeing the seating areas, there was a nice wide space between the front row and the safety railing on each level. Perfect. Mounting the stairs, I headed to the third level, where the shadows were the heaviest. There, I could hide until I got myself back under control.

I set a punishing pace, trying to outrun the intrusive thoughts that hammered at me. *You waited too long. You failed again. You're never going to be good enough. Nat deserves better.*

Uncertainty blanketed the future in a foggy haze. I imagined how perfect things could have been. Then, I pictured the worst. Because my brain was like that. And even though I recognized that it was being an asshole, everything felt as if it was happening in real time. I saw Nat living far away. The distance would wear on our relationship. She would eventually get sick of being alone and fall for someone new. And I would be alone again.

The sweat on my face mixed with the silent tears that leaked out. In that moment, I hated my brain. I hated forgetting to follow up on important things. I hated not being in control of my emotions. And I hated my fucking father.

Ignoring the stitch in my side, I pushed harder as my father's face replaced the images of Nat. I could hear the words he had spewed so many times before. *Defective. Worthless. Useless. Pathetic.* The insults fueled the fire within me, pushing me on, just as they had done whenever I was being punished. *Quit your sniveling, or I'll give you something to cry about. I'm doing this for your own good. You'll thank me one day. This is what you get for not being more careful. Actions have consequences, so maybe next time, you'll think harder about both of them.*

I tried. I really did, but it felt like I was doomed to a life of regrets. And if I lost Natalia, it would be the biggest regret of my life.

Chapter 16

Natalia

“It’s official,” I told Anna as I passed her on my way to Shawn’s dressing room. I glanced around the busy hallway to make sure I wasn’t overheard. “Let’s plan on telling everyone at dinner tonight.”

“Seriously? I get to work in Lupine?”

“We both do.”

The happiness radiating from her face was nearly enough to make the move worth it. And it probably matched my own. But it was Shawn’s face I wanted to see the most. With a quick hug and a promise to try to keep her excitement concealed, Anna headed off.

Shawn’s dressing room was empty, but I took a seat on the small sofa, figuring he would show up soon enough. I spent a few minutes surfing different social media sites, checking out the profiles of the bands in the contest to gauge their following and what type of content they posted. I had just clicked on our newest contestant’s page when Lance burst into the room.

“What the hell happened?” he demanded.

Startled by his abrupt entrance, I fumbled my phone. “What are you talking about?”

“Did you guys have a fight? Break up?”

“What? No! Why would you think that?” The implication shook me to my core, and I rushed toward the door.

Lance led me out to the stage, where Pops and Jaxon were waiting. Pops pointed across the arena, up toward the top. I didn’t know what I was looking for until the lone figure moved out of the shadows. Shawn was running the path at the ledge of the upper level at a rapid speed. I couldn’t see any other details, but I knew deep in my gut something was very wrong.

“He’s been at it for over an hour,” Pops informed me. “Usually, with a little time, he works out whatever is bothering him, but he isn’t slowing down.”

“The interview yesterday morning stressed him out, but otherwise he’s been okay,” I explained, racking my brain. Had I pushed him too hard with my suggestion to open up about his ADHD? We had talked about it, and he seemed fine. But obviously, something had triggered this reaction.

“Usually, he runs to clear his head,” Lance explained. “But sometimes, he runs to punish himself—”

“Like his father did,” I finished, shrugging out of my suit jacket as I hurried to the side of the stage. I flung it on top of a random equipment case and kicked off my heels as I grabbed a bottle of water and a towel. I needed to get to him and stop whatever inner turmoil he was in.

“He told you about his father?” Lance asked.

“Yes. And if I ever have the pleasure of meeting him, I’m going to throat-punch him.”

Lance nodded in approval and promised to stand by in case I needed his help. It took me a while to make the climb, trying to judge where he would be once I reached the top. By some stroke of luck, I caught up to him just as I mounted the final step. I was already winded, a reminder to start working out more, but managed to keep up with him. It was difficult to run beside him due to the tight space, and I banged my hip on a pole along the way.

“What’s wrong?” I panted, glancing between him and the narrow aisle. He remained stoic, refusing to answer. “This only works if you talk to me.” Still nothing. I was quickly running out of steam and Shawn looked like he was ready to drop. To force the issue, I burst ahead and turned to block the path.

He was drenched in sweat and breathing as hard as I was while he paced like a caged animal. I didn’t say anything else, just waited him out.

“I fucked up, and I’m too upset right now to talk about it,” he panted. Thankfully, his breathing was finally slowing, but the defeat in his voice scared me.

“That’s alright, but I can’t see you like this and not do anything. So, we can sit together quietly until you’re ready, or you can yell and scream to get it all out of your system. It’s up to you. Either way, I’m not leaving.”

Giving in, he sank down and slumped against the concrete barrier in front of the first row of seats. I handed over the water and towel, which he made use of. For several minutes, he avoided looking at me, almost as though he was ashamed to face me. Whatever was bothering him was obviously big. At least in his mind.

“I had the perfect chance, but I screwed it up,” he said quietly. “I let you down. And the worst part is that it’s all because I let him win. It could have been great, but I waited. I wanted to be sure. Then I forgot, and now it’s too late to fix it.”

He wasn’t making much sense, his mind spinning faster than his mouth could keep up, but at least he was talking. “Okay. You forgot to do something. A lot was going on this week, and it was easy to get distracted.”

“No, you don’t get it. I’M THE DISTRACTION!” he yelled, ending his statement in a hiccup.

I climbed into his lap to hug his sweat-drenched body which was shaking from exertion. “No, you’re not,” I soothed. “You are a smart, thoughtful, caring, wonderful human. And humans make mistakes. I know it feels bad right now, but you need to be easy on yourself. Things have a way of working out, and I’m here to help if I can. You have an entire family willing to help whenever you need them. You just need to let us in.” I stayed there, with his face buried in my neck, murmuring soothing words until a long sigh shuddered out of him.

With a steadier, calmer voice, he explained. “Remember my idea for LGR’s expansion? Well, I found the perfect location. But I hesitated. I let all of the shit going on in my

head get in the way, and I waited. Now, it's gone. The building already sold. I'm too late, and I hate that I let you down."

I felt sick. No matter how well intended, my actions had led to this. My secret had caused him harm. It was physically painful to acknowledge, but this wasn't about me. I couldn't undo the damage. The best I could do was to try to repair some of it. I fought against his hold to look at him, but he kept his head down.

I cradled his face, tipping it up to find his eyes closed. "Babe, please look at me."

When he finally opened his eyes, they were bloodshot and swollen. I tried my best to stay strong for him, but the agony I saw there was my undoing.

My voice wavered as I admitted the truth. "It was me."

"What was?"

"The old firehouse. It was me," I repeated as the tears began leaking down my face, hoping he would forgive me. "I'm the one who bought it. You told me to look at the listing on your computer, remember? So I did. You were right, it was the perfect location. I wanted to surprise you, but if I'd known what it meant to you, I never would have kept it a secret. I'm so sorry."

He stared at me, slowly comprehending what I just said. "I wanted you to see the Tenneville Music Festival schedule because Dodging Reality will be nearby while we're in Nashville this weekend. They've agreed to meet, by the way." I decided to unpack that little treasure later. For now, that could wait. "You really bought it?"

"Well, the company did." I wiped my face in annoyance, knowing I must look completely wrecked.

"You're coming to Lupine?"

"Yes. If you're sure it's what you want. But if you have any doubts—"

"No!" He shook his head adamantly. "I don't have a single doubt about wanting you there. It was the thought of

dealing with my father that was messing with me.”

“What does he have to do with this?”

Now that the stress was wearing off, Shawn’s body had gone lax. I settled against his chest listening to the deep rumble as he spoke of opening his studios in the hopes of earning his father’s respect.

With every word, I couldn’t help but worry that I let my need to please my own father overshadow Shawn’s dream. And I would never be able to live with that.

“You’re an incredibly talented musician and producer. As much as I want you to be a part of LGR’s future, I will understand if you need to stand on your own. It won’t change anything between us. And you can have the firehouse if you want it.”

“I appreciate the offer.” His voice was calm and sure. “But my dream has changed, and it’s even better now. It’s been hard letting go of the need to prove my father wrong. No matter how screwed up that sounds.” He turned to kiss the side of my head. “I’m done basing my future on anything except what makes me happy. And you make me so damned happy.” He paused to clear the emotion from his throat. “I’m a greedy bastard, so I want you in Lupine whenever I’m there. And I’ll come to Nashville whenever you need me to. Because making us work will be my greatest accomplishment.”

“Our,” I corrected, slowly standing and giving him a hand up.

“Huh?” He staggered to his feet, clearly worn out.

“Our. It will be our accomplishment. You aren’t the only one responsible for making this work.”

We made our way downstairs and assured the others that he was alright. Lance insisted Shawn skip the meet-and-greet, giving him a few hours to rest before the show. So, after taking turns in my impossibly small shower, we crawled into bed.

“Sorry I’m such a mess,” he mumbled, settling in to be the big spoon behind me.

“Nope. I don’t accept that. The only thing you’re allowed to be sorry for is not coming to me when you were hurting. Life is messy, but I’m here for all of it.”

“Wanna do better.”

His breathing evened out before I had a chance to respond. “And I’ll love you either way,” I whispered.

He slept through the barrage of text messages I received from everyone wanting to check on him. Easing from the bed, I quietly met them outside the bus. It was just who Shawn deemed the inner circle; the guys from the band, Callie, Anna, and Pops.

“Is he okay?” Eli was the first to ask.

“Yes. He’s asleep right now.”

“Good. Let him rest,” Pops advised.

“I’ll get the drum tech to fill in during sound check,” Derek offered.

“What the hell happened?” Lance wanted to know.

I explained the mix-up with the firehouse and how Shawn thought he had ruined the opportunity.

“LGR is coming to Lupine?” Jaxon asked, turning to Anna as the significance of the news sank in.

“Surprise,” she said with muted enthusiasm due to the circumstances.

That didn’t stop Jaxon from scooping her up and kissing her soundly. “That’s great news, which we will continue to celebrate later,” he said, whispering more promises in her ear. “Right now, we focus on Shawn.”

Lance nodded. “Without making a big deal out of it. He’ll already be feeling self-conscious and hates being coddled after an emotional episode like that.”

“Business as usual with some added reassurance,” Eli confirmed. “I haven’t picked the cover song for tonight. Any suggestions?”

As Shawn's favorite songs from Rage Against the Machine and Soundgarden were considered, I couldn't help but feel the need for a different approach.

"I have an idea." All eyes turned my way as I explained my choice.

And so, Jaxon paused in the middle of their set that night to talk with the crowd. I stood in my usual spot just offstage where my view of Shawn was best. He still looked wrecked but not in a way most people would notice. There was just a dullness to his entire demeanor which had been there since he'd woken up. He was also hesitant, like he was waiting to be judged for his behavior. He'd held my gaze, silently challenging me to get it over with. It took real effort not to take that shit personally.

"How's everybody doing out there?" Jaxon yelled, receiving an immediate deluge of screams in return. "You having a good time?" More shouting. "That's good to hear. We love coming on stage each night to help people forget their worries and escape life for a while." The cheers echoing throughout the arena were deafening. "Life is fucking hard, and music can help make the struggles a little easier to bear. But sometimes, the people we love are dealing with a burden heavier than we ever imagined, making it difficult for them to reach out. There may be a moment, one that you might never realize the importance of, when they need to know they aren't alone. So, check in with your people. Don't be afraid to show them you care and tell them you love them."

Jaxon turned to face Shawn on the premise of getting a drink of water. But before reaching for the bottle, he pounded his chest twice and pointed discreetly at his chosen brother. Shawn pounded his chest in return and gave a nod of acknowledgment before Jaxon returned to his mic stand.

"The next song isn't ours, and it isn't our usual style. But it's a beautiful reminder to surround yourself with people who will love you through all of the ups and downs of life without judgment. Because we never know when we'll need that same grace given to us. The song is called 'Not Myself' and we hope you enjoy it."

Sheet music was placed in front of Shawn, and thousands of phone flashlights lit the arena as the first chords rang out. The drum part was simple, which worked in Shawn's favor since the sentiment behind the lyrics had him visibly shaking. And the moment the song finished and the lights went low for the brief break, he was in my arms, where I would always want him.



The rest of the band and road crew remained in Chattanooga while we headed to Nashville for the two days off ahead of the show there. I was due in the office tomorrow to catch up on a few things, including the long-awaited meeting with Dodging Reality. I owed Shawn for that one and had asked him to attend since they felt so comfortable with him.

Today, however, was for spending time with my dad. And Shawn.

Wednesday's emotional meltdown had taken a lot out of him, but he bounced back quickly. And after finally accepting that LGR was expanding into Lupine, he had been near bursting with happiness. I worried about his mood swings, but ultimately there was nothing I could do but support him. Just like any other health issue, it was impossible to predict the future. People were diagnosed with horrible diseases every day. But if you loved someone, you did everything you could to be there for them.

I intended to stand by Shawn, whatever may come.

He absently reached for me when I rolled out of bed, but never woke as I slipped on my robe and padded barefoot to the kitchen. Walking down the hallway, the familiar sounds and smells surrounded me like a warm blanket.

My dad and I had moved a few times after my mother left, first to make a fresh start and later to reflect his success. I was ten when we settled at the high-rise condo, and from the moment we entered, it had been home. Over the years, it had remained comforting in a way only the most meaningful places can be. Even when I had gone away for school or moved into my own place, I had always looked forward to coming back. So, I was especially aware that it felt different this time.

Nothing had noticeably changed. The same pictures lined the walls and the same furniture filled the great room. And though it still felt welcoming, it wasn't my home anymore. My home was with Shawn.

And that realization required coffee.

"There's my girl," my dad said, rising from the kitchen table to wrap me in a hug. "Sorry I wasn't up to see you last night."

"No problem. We got in really late. I'm just glad we didn't wake you."

I took a moment to look him over. He looked healthy. In fact, he looked healthier than he had in a long time, and I couldn't tell if he had changed that much in the last five weeks or if I was simply seeing him clearly after being gone. Either way, it gave me peace of mind knowing he was doing well.

"How's life on tour?"

"Crazy. Exhausting. Hectic. But kind of amazing." I loaded a pod in the coffee maker, happily noting the used one was decaf.

"That sounds about right," he said wistfully, likely remembering his days as a rising star.

Most people weren't aware that my dad had been in an up-and-coming band before founding LGR. Midway through their first tour, my mother's pregnancy shifted his focus. Shortly after I was born, he decided to leave the band to provide a more stable home for me, making my mother very unhappy in the process. She had married a musician who was

on his way to becoming famous. Being the wife of a struggling businessman was not what she had signed up for.

“Do you regret giving it all up?” I asked, leaning against the counter.

“Never. I only regret that it cost you your mother.”

“I don’t. Besides, you’re the best dad anyone could ask for.”

I had come to terms with my mother’s decision long ago, and after learning about Shawn’s parents, I was even more thankful for it. Clearly, she had not been suited for motherhood. I took a long sip of coffee, fully appreciating the bond I had with my dad. We could talk about anything, though I had always shied away from talking about my mother. But my curiosity had grown over the past few weeks.

“Did you love her?”

“Your mother?” At my nod, he released a sad sigh. “No. I thought getting married was the right thing to do. I had hoped we could grow to love each other in time, but we just wanted different things.” He spun his empty coffee mug as he chose his next words. “I know our marriage left a bad impression on you. I hope you won’t let that get in the way of your happiness with the right person.”

Gathering ingredients from the refrigerator to make a simple breakfast, I considered his advice. I had never wanted to get married or have kids, mostly because I worried a family would interfere with my career. At least that’s what I told myself. The real reason, my deepest, darkest fear, was that I could turn out to be like my mother. Being responsible for raising another human being was scary enough, never mind the fact that I was terrified I was genetically programmed to be an awful mother. I never wanted to do that to a child.

As for marriage itself, I had mixed feelings. I wasn’t against it, per se. For practical purposes, there were benefits of having a union legally recognized, but I had never fantasized about a big, fancy wedding. Fairytales were nothing but fiction, and I knew better than to believe that marriage came

with a guarantee. A piece of paper didn't keep two people together. A lifelong commitment was a choice that had to be made every day, even during the worst of times. Until Shawn, I had never envisioned being able to do that. Or believed someone could feel that way about me.

Rather than dumping all of that on my dad, I continued layering yogurt, fruit, and granola into three glasses while settling on a response. "I think loving the right person can make all the difference."

He was quiet for so long that I started to worry I had upset him. But when I turned to bring our breakfast to the table, he wore a sentimental smile. "I think you're absolutely right, and I couldn't be happier for you." He stared at his breakfast, nervously fiddling with his spoon as I sat. "So, I hope you'll be happy for me."

"What do you mean?"

He cleared his throat. "I've been seeing someone."

My spoon froze midway to my mouth. Over the years, he had casually dated women but had never gotten serious, probably a side effect of his first marriage. Being a single parent didn't help either. So, the news was a bit of a shock. I immediately felt protective, wanting to know who she was and if she was good enough for him. But would I be happy for him? Absolutely. And if having someone else in his life helped ease my guilt over spending less time with him, that was a welcome benefit too.

"Who is she?"

"It's Helen," he admitted, a blush staining his cheeks.

My father. Blushing.

"Nurse Hatchet?" I asked, unable to hide my surprise. Then I pictured them together and caught myself smiling. "How long has this been going on?"

"We got to know each other during my recovery. I finally asked her on a date about two months ago."

“Two months...Wait a minute. Is that why you were hinting for me to get my own place again? So you could—” I shook my head to veer off the path my mind had started taking. “Nope, not going there. So, when do I get to meet her? Is she here now?”

“No, and you’ve already met her,” he pointed out.

“As your nurse, not as your girlfriend.” Oh, shit. My dad had a girlfriend. That would take some getting used to. “I want to meet her when she isn’t wearing scrubs and taking your blood pressure.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

The concern in his eyes reminded me of all the years he’d put my needs first, reassuring me he would never leave me. He’d been there for every milestone and special occasion, encouraged me from afar while I’d gone away to college, and supported me while I worked my way up in the company. Every step of the way, he had been there for me, so I was determined to support him now. “I couldn’t be happier for you.”

The moment was bittersweet, with an unspoken acknowledgment that things were changing for both of us. We would always have each other, but now our lives would be filled with the love of others too. And I couldn’t be more grateful that he was alive and well to enjoy all of it.

“We booked a reservation for dinner tonight if you’re both free.”

My heart swelled at his easy acceptance of Shawn in my life. “Of course. The only thing we had planned was to get outside for a bit. I’m thinking a bike ride along the river would be good.” I heard the shower turn on and regretted the need to bring up work, but I knew tomorrow would be packed with meetings and I might not get another chance to talk to my dad alone. “I actually wanted to talk to you about Shawn.”

“Oh? What about him?”

I took a breath to steel myself, feeling like I was on the edge of a steep cliff and preparing to dive. “How would you

feel about making him a permanent part of LGR?”

He sat up straighter, a clear sign I had his undivided attention. “In what way?”

“Maybe a Director of Production at the Lupine office? He could collaborate with other producers and even manage a production team.” I described his experience working with other bands, one of which was now sitting at the top of the charts, and addressed the need to work around Detrimental’s schedule. “He has big dreams of being a producer and the talent to make it happen. Imagine what we could accomplish if we joined forces and—”

“Yes.” He laughed at my stunned silence. “But I have an even better idea.”

Chapter 17

Shawn

Preparing for the day's agenda, I woke early to use the fitness center in Nat's building to center myself before heading into the office with her. The lobby and offices looked and felt different somehow. There was also an energy in the air I hadn't noticed before. Or maybe it was just me. All of the usual stress that came with being there was gone. There was nothing for me to hyperfocus on, and I could just enjoy my visit.

The meeting with Dodging Reality ended in success, and I was proud of my unexpected contribution. When Nat had asked me to attend the meeting, I assumed she wanted me there for moral support. Both parties trusted me, so I was happy to help bridge the gap that had opened over the past year. But, to my surprise, Nat had introduced me as part of the team and included me in the entire process. And when both parties walked away from the table happy, it left me with a unique sense of satisfaction.

I was even more proud of Nat. Witnessing her in work mode never got old. She was intelligent, confident, and compassionate. But there was also less of an edge to her today. She wore her usual business clothes but opted to forego the suit jacket, leaving the stylish cut of the maroon blouse on display, and her hair was pulled back with some kind of clip, allowing it to fall softly down her back. Most of all, she had a more relaxed demeanor. She was still a badass, just more at ease with her title and less defensive about it.

I wanted nothing more than to grab a handful of her ass as we walked down the quiet hallway to her corner office. Sadly, that wouldn't happen with Roger walking beside her. He had been remarkably accepting of me, but I didn't want to push my luck. I knew he had always respected me on a professional level. However, it said a lot that he was also happy to have me dating his only daughter, and I was determined not to do anything to screw that up.

We had all been a little hesitant at dinner last night, adjusting to the new roles Helen and I now filled. But we were soon laughing and enjoying each other's company. Roger and Helen acted like lovesick teenagers, which seemed to amuse Nat. Not that we were any better. It had become a subconscious habit for me to be touching her in some way whenever she was within reach. Still, I had been mindful that her dad was watching and kept it PG. Just as I did now.

In the privacy of Nat's office, a large desk sat in front of a wall of windows overlooking the river, and a sofa and two chairs made up a small seating area. Though it was a nice space, I couldn't imagine being confined to it all day. Unless Nat was there. Of course, we wouldn't get much work done if that was the case. Especially as thoughts of putting that couch to good use filtered in along with fantasies involving her desk.

PG, I reminded myself.

"Excellent work in there. You two make a great team," Roger complimented, settling into a plush armchair.

Accepting we wouldn't be alone anytime soon, I settled for having Nat on the sofa beside me. "I enjoyed being a part of it. Don't get me wrong, making and performing music will always come first for me. But it was interesting to be on the business side of things."

"We appreciate your help, as well as the offer for Dodging Reality to use your personal studios while we're getting the Lupine building ready."

"I was happy to do it," I assured him. "Once I got over the shock of having them ask me to be their producer."

"Well, you better get used to it," Nat said. "I have a feeling your calendar is going to be booked for the foreseeable future."

I hoped she was right. Being a producer had been a dream of mine for so long that I was having a hard time accepting the reality of it now. It felt too good to be true, especially for a small-town guy. Sure, LGR would do well in Lupine because they were already well known in the industry. I was a small

fish, still building my reputation, so Dodging Reality's request had blown my mind. But once that had been decided, the rest of the details simply fell into place. The band wanted a recording space away from a big city, something I could definitely relate to. They also wanted to get into a studio as soon as possible, and with me as their producer, my studios were the obvious choice. Plus, the lodge could accommodate everyone, giving us unlimited access whenever inspiration struck.

Holy shit. Blackwell Studios had its first client.

I hadn't officially named the studios but had been mentally calling them that since the idea had formed. Originally, I wanted to put my name out there to show the world what I had accomplished. And by the world, I meant my father. Now, that didn't hold the appeal it once had. Instead, there was a quiet contentment in my success that didn't need any outside validation. As long as I was proud of my work, that was all that really mattered.

Looking at Nat, I knew I had her to thank for my new attitude. Her faith in me fortified my sense of self-worth and gave me the courage to see my differences in a new light. Yes, some of them made life harder. But they also gave me a unique set of abilities. I'd heard some people refer to them as superpowers, but I wouldn't go that far. I was, however, finally able to see that there were some perks to having ADHD. Being different didn't always have to be a bad thing, and that realization brought a little peace into my life. I was even considering Nat's suggestion to do an interview. Because she was right. If I could help even one person out there who was struggling, it would be worth it.

Nat and Roger had continued talking while my mind wandered, but she pulled me back into the conversation by gently squeezing my hand.

"There's another matter we want to discuss with you," Roger began, piquing my interest.

He exchanged a look with Nat before continuing. I couldn't decipher the meaning, but it conveyed the seriousness

of what was coming. Worry automatically kicked in.

Nat must have sensed my unease because she folded one leg and turned to face me. “It’s all good, I promise.”

“Alright.” I exhaled and began toying with her hand.

“We need someone to help manage the new studios in Lupine,” Roger explained.

“Oh, okay. I could recommend a few locals or make some calls to people I’ve worked with and see if they’re interested in relocating.”

“Thank you, but we already know who we want.”

“Who?”

“You.”

My eyes nearly popped out of my head as I turned to look at Nat. Was he serious?

“What my father is trying to ask is if you would consider coming to work for LGR permanently.”

Excitement hit me as a million more questions flooded my brain. What exactly would that entail? How would that work with my tour schedule? What would that mean for our relationship? Would it allow us more time together or less? Would I have to give up my studios?

Putting aside my concerns, I thought of hers. “Have you considered how it would look to other people?” I asked.

“Yes, which is why I had a long talk with my dad this morning.

“You’re not worried that people will talk?” I asked both of them.

“Let them!” Roger exclaimed. “The results will speak for themselves. And when we’re celebrating our success, we’ll know who to leave off of the guest lists.”

“Are you sure about this?” I asked.

“Without a doubt,” Nat said. “Part of our discussion was about finding ways to share more of the workload. We’re

looking to add people at each location to help with that. It will keep Dad's stress levels down."

"And Natalia's," he said with a stern look. "I don't want her to end up like I did. Work is important, but health and family should come first. We want to hire more people, but we also know how important it is to find the right people. You are our first choice, but if you don't want the job, we'll find someone else."

"But we really want it to be you."

An hour later, my head was still swimming. Their offer hadn't been given lightly. We'd hammered out most of the logistics, and they had thought of almost everything in regard to the professional side of the offer. My responsibilities would include assisting in business decisions and overseeing all music production at the new location. When not on tour, I would be more hands-on with the production, while simply facilitating the process for others when I was gone. I could keep my studios for personal use and take on side projects, as long as there weren't any conflicts with LGR. The salary was generous, as was the title of VP of Production. Logically, there wasn't a single reason to turn it down.

But logic was for the brain, not the heart. And with both of our hearts so heavily involved, this wasn't a time to be impulsive. Fortunately, Roger insisted I take a few days to make my decision. And there was a lot to think about.



That evening, I was no closer to giving them an answer. I just knew that I was willing to do anything necessary to be with Nat. Which was the only explanation for my voluntary attendance at a black-tie fundraiser in a ritzy hotel ballroom.

Dinner passed with minimal discomfort thanks in part to the lively conversation with Roger and Helen. He regaled the table with tales from his early days of being a musician and as a single father trying to start a record label. There was an especially amusing story about the time Natalia fell asleep under a piano and if you listened closely to the recording, you could hear her light snores.

As we began to mingle, I was introduced to more people than I could count. I didn't even attempt to remember names, knowing that they wouldn't stick. All I knew was that I met dozens in the music industry, made small talk with some of the wealthiest residents of Nashville, and rubbed elbows with a few city officials. And through it all, my focus was on Nat and the pride I felt at being by her side. It might have had a little to do with the long, flowing gown that modestly hugged every inch of her. It was the perfect balance between sexy and classy. And though it seemed like every man in the place was probably looking at her, it gave me great satisfaction to know I was the one taking her home.

The one person I had yet to meet was Troy. Nat had warned me that he was expected to be in attendance. After all, the event was raising money to restore one of the oldest theaters in the city, and First String Studios was a long-standing name in the community. As much as I wished he wouldn't show, a part of me couldn't wait to meet him and put him in his place. I knew Roger felt the same.

This was the first social event he had attended since his illness. It was also his first public appearance with Helen, so he didn't want anything to overshadow the significance of those two things. We all agreed that any confrontation with Troy would need to be direct without causing too much of a scene.

He and Helen were making the rounds on the other side of the room, all of us listening for rumors about Nat or LGR. So far, I hadn't heard a single negative word spoken, allowing me to focus on my beautiful girlfriend. The emerald fabric of her gown sparkled as the light caught the intricate patterns of the beadwork. The color also brought out the green flecks in

her eyes while providing a nice contrast to the auburn tones in her hair.

“You’re absolutely beautiful, inside and out,” I complimented, pulling her close once we were alone.

“And you look devilishly handsome, but I need to make one adjustment.” She swiftly removed the bowtie and tucked it into my jacket pocket before unbuttoning my collar. “There,” she proclaimed proudly.

A few heads gradually turned our way. “People are staring.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “They don’t matter. Are you more comfortable?”

“Infinitely.”

“Good. Besides, what’s the point of being a rock star if you can’t be a rebel every now and then?”

“In that case, I’m going all out.” I shrugged off the jacket and draped it over the back of my chair before leading her to the dance floor.

Time ceased as I held her, swaying to the subdued instrumental covers of classic hits. I tuned out everything around us, making it feel like we were in our own little world. Until a tap on my shoulder burst that illusion.

“Mind if I cut in?” A man about my age gave me a hard stare along with a smarmy, politician’s smile. “We haven’t been introduced. I’m Troy Crandall.”

Refusing to let go of Nat, I glanced at the proffered hand, then met his gaze. “I can’t say that it’s a pleasure. And yes, I mind very much. But it’s not up to me.” I raised an eyebrow in question at Nat. I would probably throw up if I had to watch them dance together, but I respected her to make her own decisions. Then I would back her one hundred and ten percent.

“One dance,” Troy urged. “I’d like to talk to you for a minute.”

“No to both,” Nat replied with an overly fake smile and deceptively friendly tone. “We have nothing to talk about, and

the thought of you touching me makes my skin crawl.”

“I want to apologize,” he said, sounding almost sincere.

I could tell he was nervous. He chewed at his upper lip and wiggled his nose before reaching up to scratch it. The guy was more fidgety than me, and that said a lot.

“I’m not interested in another meaningless apology. If you’re truly sorry for all of the horrible things you said and did, you would do something about it. Then I’ll know you’re sorry. Until then, kindly fuck off.”

Resuming our dance, Troy was effectively dismissed. I couldn’t say how long he stood there gaping like a fish. Nor did I care. I was focused on the badass in my arms.

We danced until our feet hurt and the band took a break. Dessert was served as the theater’s president encouraged more donations with a heartfelt speech. A few large benefactors were acknowledged for a healthy dose of peer pressure, and some key items for the silent auction were promoted. Nat and Helen decided to check the status of their earlier bids while Roger and I offered to get fresh drinks for all of us.

As we reached the bar, Roger noticed Troy at a nearby table talking with several other people. “Was he giving Natalia a hard time?”

I laughed. “He tried. Remind me never to get on her bad side. She’s a force to be reckoned with.”

“That she is,” he said proudly.

After placing our drink orders, we couldn’t help but overhear Troy’s conversation. I already disliked the guy on principle, but there was an air of arrogance as he spoke that really grated on me.

“I know talent when I see it, and Ablaze is going to be the next big thing,” Troy bragged. Roger and I rolled our eyes at each other. “Lucky Greene is going to regret letting them go.”

“I would have to disagree,” Roger interjected, causing the man standing at the bar beside him to turn. Clearly recognizing each other, the two men exchanged polite greetings.

“Roger! It’s good to see you back in action,” the man said.

“It’s good to be back,” Roger assured him. “Let me introduce you to—”

“Shawn Blackwell,” he filled in. “You’re making quite a name for yourself. I’m Dave Robensen, President of Frist String Studios. Any time you’re ready to join my team, you let me know.”

My years of being dragged to parties with my parents allowed me to remain civil. “Thank you for the offer, but my heart is with Lucky Greene.”

“Can’t blame me for trying,” he said as our drinks were delivered. “Stay a minute,” he encouraged. Without waiting, he turned to make the rest of the introductions. The names of some other industry executives and a few starstruck interns were rattled off to add to the list of those I wouldn’t remember. “Troy was just updating us on his latest discovery.”

“I’d love to hear what he has to say,” Roger encouraged. The pointed look and veiled message were clear.

Most people would have backed down when faced with the former boss they had stolen from and spread lies about. Not Troy. He took it as an opportunity to shine. He bragged about how talented the members of Ablaze were and the number of songs they’d already written. Then he sat there in all of his smugness, ready to be commended for a job well done.

But it was no secret how he had acquired Ablaze. He was the equivalent of an ambulance chaser, and judging from the bored expressions on everyone’s faces, they knew it too.

“As I said, we have no regrets,” Roger said. “There’s enough business to go around.”

“And somebody has to pick the low-hanging fruit,” I added, unable to help myself. Sure, it was petty. But the man brought out every territorial instinct in my body. He needed to understand that any slight against LGR or Natalia would not go unanswered.

The insult resulted in a few smothered snickers from the group and a glare from Troy, which I returned with a toothy smile.

“Ah, I’d almost forgotten there was bad blood between you two,” Dave said, clearly enjoying the thought of stirring up some drama.

“On the contrary,” Roger assured him. “I’m quite happy with the way things are working out.”

“Good, good. Then there won’t be any hard feelings over Dodging Reality.”

That got my attention. “What about them?”

The gleam in Dave’s eye increased. “They’re joining the First String family.” He gestured to Troy to confirm the statement.

“I’m in the final talks with them and anticipate a signing this week.” I had to give it to Troy. He could bluff as well as the best poker player. Too bad we held the winning hand.

“Really?” Roger didn’t even attempt to hide the doubt in his voice. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Why is that?” Dave asked.

Roger reached for his and Helen’s drinks, clearly preparing to leave. “Mainly because I’ve learned that little of what comes out of Troy’s mouth is the truth.”

Dave scoffed, clearly unconvinced.

“And,” I said, gathering the other drinks. “Dodging Reality signed with us this afternoon.”

Leaving them to sort through that, we turned to go. But not before Roger stopped to impart one last bit of advice. “Word to the wise: Troy also likes to get creative with his expense reports. You might want to have a look at those.”



Too wound up to sleep, I convinced Nat to join me in the rooftop pool. Swimming laps felt great. But since it was the middle of the night and we had the space to ourselves, stripping off our suits for some naked time felt even better.

Content in the afterglow, Nat looped her arms around my neck, allowing her legs to float out behind her as I walked backward in random paths. The city lights below us competed with the stars above as the distant echo of traffic combined with the splashing of water. I should have been completely relaxed. But as it had done all day, my mind returned to the earlier conversation regarding my future with LGR.

A few months ago, I would have jumped at the opportunity. But there was more at stake now, and my career wasn't my only priority. Instead, my decision would be based on what brought me closer to Nat. Because I didn't want to build a life without her.

“Is it too much, too fast?”

The question shouldn't have surprised me. Nat knew me better than almost anyone, so it wouldn't be difficult to know what was on my mind.

Were things moving too fast? Not for me. But that didn't mean it wasn't scary. Our personal relationship was already moving at warp speed, and I was terrified I was going to do something to ruin it. If it all fell apart, there would be even more of a mess to clean up if we intertwined our personal and professional lives further.

“What if I said it was?” I hedged.

She hummed thoughtfully. “Then we would slow things down.” A worried crease formed between her eyebrows. “Is that what you want?”

“No,” I answered, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “The job itself sounds great. Detrimental will always come first, but I want something more. It’s just the way I’m wired.”

“Then what’s holding you back?”

I’d been processing that very question all day, and my decision revolved around one thing. “You.”

I stilled, awaiting her reaction.

Her legs floated inward to anchor around my waist. “Me? How am I holding you back?”

There was no anger or irritation, only curiosity. Did she really not know how significant this decision was for me? Maybe living apart for long periods of time was something she expected. And, sure, I knew there would be times when we had to be apart, but I wanted to keep them to a minimum. To do that, I would have to put my heart on my sleeve and admit how important that was to me; how important she was to me. And though that meant opening myself up to risk, it was becoming easier to do with her.

“I need to know where you’ll be.” My heart pounded, but I pushed on. “I don’t want to commit to staying in Lupine if you’re going to be in Nashville.”

“But you live in Lupine. Aren’t you already committed to being there?”

“Yes and no. I have a home there, but I also have complete flexibility when we aren’t touring. So if you need to be in Nashville during that time, I want to be able to go with you.”

I held my breath in anticipation, each second stretching into an eternity. We had agreed to make our relationship real, but maybe that meant something different to her. Maybe she wasn’t ready to make a life-altering commitment. Maybe I was being presumptuous in assuming she would even want to be together all of the time. I rested my forehead on hers, not wanting to see the pity in her eyes if that was the case.

“What if I found a way to be in Lupine permanently?”

My head jerked back up. “You would do that?”

“Of course,” she said, a smile playing on her lips. “I know everything is happening fast, and we haven’t talked about what happens at the end of the tour. But if LGR is going to be there, and you’re going to be there, then that’s where I want to be. Would that be okay with you?”

I nodded enthusiastically. “It’s more than okay with me.” Things were aligning better than I could have planned.

“I need you to know something else though.”

I barely heard her, too busy picturing our life in Lupine. There was plenty of room in my cabin for her if she wanted to move in. We could travel back to Nashville as often as she needed for work and to visit her dad. But thanks to technology, she could do a lot of work remotely. She had already proven that during the tour.

Her laughter and gentle kiss brought me back. “Hey, stay with me. I’m trying to tell you something important.”

“Sorry. I’m listening.” There were plenty of details to work out, and I was prepared to make any compromise she needed. After all, she had just made a huge one. It was so overwhelming that I was completely unprepared for what followed.

“I don’t want to put any pressure on you, and I don’t want anything in return. But I need to say this because you deserve to hear it, and I want to erase any doubts still plaguing you.” She palmed my cheeks and looked me in the eyes. “I love you. Completely. Unquestionably. I’m in love with you and that isn’t going to change.” My head automatically shook in disbelief. “Yes. I love who you are; your integrity, your loyalty, and your drive to always grow as a person. You are incredibly smart and talented, yet you remain humble. I love your strength; the way you refuse to give up when the cards are stacked against you. I love your heart and the way you take care of those around you. There is so much of you to love. How could I not?”

I crushed my lips to hers, needing a minute to get my rioting emotions under control. Her words had rocked me to my core because everything she said echoed the way I felt about her as well. I had just been too afraid to tell her. But now I knew there was no reason to hold back.

“I—”

A finger pressed against my lips to halt my words.

“You can’t say it now. Remember I said I didn’t want anything in return.”

“But—,” I mumbled against her finger.

“Nope.” She laughed at my responding growl, then grew serious. “I know I come across as pretty tough. I’m not always the most sentimental or romantic person. But there is one thing I want.” I nodded for her to continue. “I want the first time I hear those words from you to be special. I don’t want them to be as a response to me saying them.” I hummed my disagreement. “Even if you really mean it.” I sighed my resignation. “I want you to say them when I least expect it, in your own time, when the need to say them just overpowers everything else.”

There was something especially sweet about her request. Yes, she had a bit of a tough outer shell, but I had already seen her soft underbelly. It wasn’t something she showed many people, so I was determined to protect that vulnerability. Just as she always did with mine.

She already knew how I felt. And because my love for her was so strong, it wouldn’t be long before the words followed.

Chapter 18

Natalia

The final week of the tour kicked off in spectacular fashion. The Nashville crowd came ready to party, and they did not leave disappointed. From the opening contestants to the guys in Detrimental, everyone took the show to another level. Adding to the excitement, several local celebrity musicians were in attendance, which turned the extended encore into a mega jam session. Fans went crazy during the impromptu memorial tribute, starting with a random Elvis song—we were in Nashville after all—and went on to include Van Halen, Prince, and an especially heartfelt tribute to Foo Fighters. Fans remembered the lives that were cut too short, waving lit phones, dancing in the aisles, and singing along with the various artists crammed on stage together.

The festivities continued backstage, where I met up with Shawn after saying goodbye to my dad and Helen. I quickly scanned the room to find Shawn talking with the night's Ready to Rock contestants. He stopped mid-sentence when he saw me, a smile lifting one corner of his lips. Cutting through the crowd, he pulled me close and greeted me with a hungry kiss. Whistles pierced the air, and I felt myself blush, but there was no place I'd rather be.

Moving out of Nashville had never been part of the plan when I started the expansion project. It was my home, and I'd made a lot of good memories there. I especially never saw myself relocating to a small town like Lupine. But falling in love with Shawn had changed me. Not that I was revolving my whole life around a man. The notion of someone giving up their entire identity to be in a relationship was absurd. And truthfully, I didn't feel like I was giving up anything. Instead, we were building a life together, and Lupine was the best chance of successfully doing that. True, I wouldn't have chosen Lupine for the expansion if it hadn't been for Shawn, but life was unpredictable like that. And now I couldn't imagine any other option.

As for where I would live, that hadn't been decided. It was implied that I would live with him, but he had never explicitly asked. And I meant what I had said about him setting the pace. I never wanted him to feel compelled to do something or to make decisions impulsively that he would regret.

The offer to work at LGR was also still unresolved. Again, he had implied that he wanted the job, and his reason for holding back had been eliminated. Yet he still hadn't accepted, and taking the job needed to be because he wanted it, not out of any sense of obligation to me. He had to decide what was best for him. Judging from the way his lips pressed against mine, I was pretty sure I had the answers to all of my questions.

We broke into laughter as catcalls and applause grew louder around us. The green room had quickly transformed into an after-party with music blaring and drinks flowing, and it was especially crowded with the extra guests.

"I love," he said slowly into my ear, "the taste of you." My stomach flipped at the near confession, and the smirk on his face told me he knew exactly what he was doing. "Want to get out of here?"

The low rumble of his voice sent a shiver down my spine. Nodding my agreement, we were only halfway down the hall when Pops came into view. I didn't know him well but could feel the tension rolling off of him.

"What's wrong?" Shawn and I asked in unison.

"Someone broke into your bus."

"What?! Oh, shit! Callie!" Worry immediately overshadowed my shock when I remembered her going to the bus to rest because of a headache.

"She's fine," Pops assured me. "A little shaken up, but otherwise okay."

"What the hell happened?" Shawn wanted to know.

"She heard a noise and went to check it out. The intruder took off as soon as he realized he wasn't alone. His face was

concealed by a hoodie, so she only got a basic description.” Pops hesitated briefly as if trying to spare me from the rest of it. “He made quite a mess. Papers were scattered, and food was dumped all over the place.”

Shawn wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me close. I leaned against him, thankful for his steadying presence. “Any other damage?”

Pops nodded. “The entry keypad on the bus door is broken and the cabinets were spray painted. You’ll need to go through things with the police once they get here to determine if anything is missing.”

I wanted to argue that the police weren’t needed, but knew better. The bus was leased, so an official report would be helpful in filing the insurance claim. Still, I didn’t want the incident to become gossip.

Pops seemed to read my mind. “I’ll make sure they’re discreet.”

He went to find Jaxon while Shawn and I hurried to check on Callie and wait for the police. We found her pacing back and forth in front of the bus, a couple of roadies standing guard nearby. Reassuring hugs were given as we exchanged apologies.

“Why are you sorry?” she asked.

“It’s my bus, and I hate that this happened while you were on it. Why are you sorry?”

“Because I slept right through all of it. I didn’t even get a good look at the guy.”

“I’m just thankful you weren’t hurt.”

“CALLIE!”

We turned to see Derek running full-out across the parking lot as the rest of the band followed at a distance. Reaching Callie, his hands frantically roved her face and down her arms as though seeking physical evidence that she was unharmed.

The air shuddered from his lungs as he pulled her close. “You’re okay?”

She nodded and melted against him, only breaking away when everyone else joined us. She briefly explained what happened, then went into greater detail once the police officers arrived. I thought hearing Callie’s account of events had prepared me, but I was still shocked when I was guided onto the bus.

The place was ransacked. There was no other way to describe the utter mess left behind. It was just as Pops had described, yet seeing it in person was so much worse. Other than the mess, nothing seemed damaged other than the cabinets. The odor from the spray paint was overwhelming in the small space, but the message that was left behind was more disturbing. Across the cabinet doors, *your luck will end* was written in bright red.

“What the fuck?” Shawn asked angrily, voicing my exact thoughts.

Not much rattled me, but those dripping crimson letters did. I stood dazed as the police completed the task of collecting evidence. A younger man finished dusting for fingerprints and taking photographs of the damage while an older officer pulled me aside.

“I’m Officer Daniels,” he said, his gray, bushy mustache dancing with each word. He had a soothing countenance, like a kindhearted grandpa. “I’m sorry this happened to you. Most of it could be dismissed as a random act of vandalism. Except for the spray paint. That seems personal. Is there anyone you can think of who might do this?”

Shawn and I exchanged a knowing look. There was only one person who came to mind. We relayed Troy’s information and a brief overview of our history together. Shawn then described his interaction with Troy the night before, which had likely provoked him.

Once the report was complete and the officers were gone, we were left among the ruins. I started picking up papers, mostly to regain some semblance of control over the situation.

I was so angry someone had done this, afraid of what the message might mean, and a bit overwhelmed trying to figure out what I was going to do without a bus.

“Leave the rest of it for now,” Shawn said, climbing back up the stairs. I had been so deep in thought I hadn’t noticed him leaving. “Just gather up what you’ll need for the next several days.” Sensing my confusion, he went on. “Frederick will stay here to get the bus repaired and cleaned. In the meantime, we’re riding with the band.”

I was too thankful for his help to question it. I wasn’t used to someone else taking charge, but it was a welcome reprieve. The only bright side was that the intruder hadn’t made it to the bedroom, where my laptop bag and other personal items were safely stored. Grabbing what I needed, it wasn’t long before I was welcomed aboard Detrimental’s bus and was stowing my items in a cabinet beside Shawn’s bunk.

I eyed the bed skeptically.

“It’ll be tight, but we can share. Or you can sleep in Callie’s bunk,” he said, pointing to the bunk below his.

“Won’t she need it?”

He shook his head. “She went to ride on a crew bus after some sort of argument between Derek and Mitch.”

My heart ached for Callie. Loving someone who didn’t love you back was a heavy burden, though judging by Derek’s reaction earlier, his feelings ran deeper than he was willing to admit. Concerned for my friend, I promised myself I would check on her tomorrow. With so much going on, I didn’t want her feeling overlooked again. In the meantime, I would appreciate the time I had with the man I loved.

“Prepare for some hardcore snuggling,” I warned, climbing up into his bunk.



Repairs took longer than expected, so we spent the rest of the week on Detrimental's bus. I quickly learned that touring with a rock band was much less glamorous than it looked, and sharing a bathroom with eight other people was not something I was in a hurry to do again.

On the plus side, I got to know Shawn's bandmates better and even had the opportunity to witness them writing a song together. Inspired by all of the recent events, it was about starting over, and though I couldn't hear the finished arrangement in my head the way Shawn could, I had no doubt it would be amazing.

Excitement over the new song gave everyone the boost they needed to get through the final days on the road. Except for Derek. He remained somber, and though Callie smiled whenever I saw her, it didn't quite reach her eyes. Anna and I made sure to check on her each day, and she assured us she was alright. Still, she looked sad, and I was determined to spend more time with her as soon as we got home to Lupine.

Until then, there were a million things to do. Along with the tour ending, so was the contest. We had accepted the offer from the cable network to produce and televise an award show for the grand finale. Helping to coordinate the details only added more work, but the increased visibility for LGR was worth it. To say that Ready to Rock had been more successful than I ever dreamed was an understatement.

Unfortunately, work wasn't the only thing keeping us up at night. Officer Daniels had called to say that Troy had an alibi for the night in question. On top of that, the fingerprints collected didn't yield any new evidence, so they were no closer to solving the case. Because of that, Shawn had become mildly obsessed with my safety, making sure I was never alone.

It was sweet in a way, just like the habit he now had of teasing me with half confessions of love throughout the day. *I love...waking up with you. I love...your ass in these jeans. I love...watching you in badass business mode.*

“I love...the way you encourage me without pushing.”

That one came late one night, his hand trailing up and down the valley of my spine as I lay sprawled on top of him to make the most of the bunk space.

“Connect the dots.”

It was a phrase I had begun using whenever his thoughts took a turn that I wasn't aware of. In this case, we had just been ranking the top ten bands from the contest to determine who would perform at the finale, so the change in topic seemed to come out of nowhere and I needed help making sense of it.

“Anna reminded me earlier that it's my turn for a feature story with *Dynamic Notes Magazine*. The journalist has been trying to schedule it for a while and asked Anna to help nail down a time since I've been avoiding her. It got me thinking about your suggestion for a tell-all interview.”

“Really?” I pushed up on one elbow.

“Yeah, and the more I consider it, the more comfortable I am with the idea. I don't want to keep my ADHD a secret any longer. You were right, and hiding it makes it seem like it's something I'm ashamed of. It's a part of who I am, and I'm tired of pretending otherwise.”

My chest warmed at the thought. “I'm so proud of you.”

“Well, I haven't done anything yet, and I'm still terrified of doing it. But I did think of a way you can make sure I go through with it.”

“I'm sure you did,” I teased, imagining all of the explicit incentives he had in mind.

“Not that,” he laughed, smacking my ass. “I'll make you a deal.”

“What kind of deal?” The serious expression on his face had me a little nervous.

“I’ll tell my story if you play piano with us tomorrow night at the final show.”

“WHAT?!” Forgetting the confined space, I reared my head back and banged it on the roof of the bunk. “I can’t play on stage in front of that many people. No way!”

Shawn rubbed the back of my head, more to calm me than to soothe any real injury. “Just take a minute to consider it. We always play ‘Home Sweet Home’ on the last night before we head back to Lupine. We even haul around an old upright piano just for this song. Jaxon usually plays, but we could easily make the switch. We can even set the piano at the back of the stage and keep the cameras off of you.”

The mere idea of performing on stage in front of thousands of people made nausea swell in my belly. But I looked at Shawn and thought about how brave he was to face his fears. He wasn’t doing it for me, but I helped him find the strength to do it. Surely, with Shawn’s support, I could overcome my fears as well.

Which was how I found myself standing just off stage the following night, ready to throw up. Forget butterflies. My stomach felt like one of those caves where thousands of bats came flying out all at once.

All three bands were ready and waiting for the final encore. Detrimental had just come off stage to grab one last drink of water and wipe off more of the night’s sweat.

I leaned into Shawn’s loose embrace as he caught his breath. “What if I mess up?”

My part was a simple, repeating melody, and we had rehearsed a few times. Still, my nerves were getting the better of me.

Lance, true to form, took the opportunity to be ridiculous. “If you fuck up, we’ll stop the entire show and explain to the crowd that you got distracted by the memory of getting freaky with Shawn on top of the piano after practice this afternoon.”

My earlier fears suddenly seemed trivial. “You wouldn’t.”

His blank expression nearly got me. “Nah,” he laughed. “I’ll just jump in and turn it into another guitar solo.”

“Lance has no problem with the spotlight,” Jaxon assured me. “We’ll make it work. No worries.”

That certainly took the pressure off, so I continued to give myself a mental pep-talk while the bands played the first three songs of the encore. Then the lights dimmed, which was my cue. Anna and Callie both wished me luck as I made my way on stage. My heart felt like it was going to beat right out of my chest as I sat, instantly looking over at Shawn, who had nothing but love and support in his eyes. I recognized the look because that was exactly how I felt every time I watched him.

Taking a deep breath, I began to play. The four minutes flew by, my fingers moving without thought. I’d heard the song countless times, but as Jaxon sang, the lyrics took on new meaning. All of my life, I had regarded home as a familiar city or building. Now I knew better. Those places were only made meaningful by the people in them. Nashville would always hold a special place in my heart, but it was no longer my home. Neither was Lupine. Shawn was my home now, wherever he may be.

As the final notes rang out, I locked eyes with him. I stared as he removed his earpieces, jogged to the front of the stage to toss his drumsticks into the crowd, then rushed back to sweep me up and spin me around.

“You did it!” he shouted above the noise of the crowd.

The volume was unlike anything I had ever experienced. It wasn’t for me, but being a small part of it was a heady feeling. Conquering one of my fears was liberating in a way I couldn’t put into words either. So, I poured my gratitude and elation into a kiss, which cranked the crowd’s volume even higher.

All of the bands took a bow while Jaxon thanked everyone for coming to close out the tour with them. Shawn dragged me forward, and I reluctantly joined in. Looking

down the line, I took a moment to truly appreciate the new family I had become a part of as the entire crew was invited on stage to join the farewell. It was the last time they would all be together for a while, making the moment bittersweet. A lot of hugs and back slaps were exchanged along with a few tears as the bands made their final exit off the stage.

Excitement was interwoven with exhaustion as everyone packed up one final time. And as the early morning hours crept in, the vibration from the bus helped lull us toward sleep.

“Are you sad to see it end?” I wondered aloud.

“A little. It’s been a great tour, for a lot of reasons. But it’s time for that chapter to end so another can begin. And I’m looking forward to what’s coming next.”

Folding my arms on his chest, I rested my chin on my hands. “What do you see happening?”

He hummed and wrapped his arms around me. “I see us spending a lot of time together, working at the new studios and sharing a home.”

“You want to live together?” I asked, needing to make sure there were no doubts on his end.

“Of course.” His brow creased. “Don’t you?”

“Yes. But we hadn’t discussed it explicitly, and I didn’t want to make any assumptions.”

He pulled me closer until I settled my head into the crook of his neck. “You can always assume I want to be with you. This is the beginning of our life together, and I’m ready for all of it.”

My heart melted a little. “And you’re sure about not wanting the whole marriage-and-kids thing? You’re not just saying that because I said I didn’t want them?”

“Honestly,” he began hesitantly, making me wonder if he had changed his mind. “I’m open to the idea of marriage, but it’s not something I feel like I need. I’m yours, with or without the fanfare. As for kids,” he paused again, more to choose his words than a lack of conviction. “That’s something I’ve never

wanted. Most days, I can barely take care of myself, so being responsible for a child is petrifying. Don't get me wrong, I plan to be a kick-ass uncle when the guys have kids, but I don't want my own." A long sigh escaped him. "Being the only son, the expectation is for me to marry and have children to carry on the family name. But my father was a terrible parent, and I feel no obligation to him whatsoever. Combined with all of my other issues, I just don't think I would be a good dad. And I'm okay admitting that."

"I think that's a very mature, responsible decision. I respect you completely for it. And just so you know, I've got the birth control covered and was tested at my last physical. All of my results were negative. We can ditch the condoms if that's something you're comfortable with."

His groan was so loud the other guys must have thought we were up to something. "Holy shit. You tell me that now, on a crowded bus when I can't properly take advantage of that information?" He shifted under me, proving the immediate effect my offer had on him. "Just so there's no misunderstanding, yes, I'm comfortable with that. My tests all came back negative too. And I trust you when you say we're protected. But what about you? You never said why you don't want marriage or kids. Do you think you'll wake up one day and regret it?"

"No. My reason for not wanting children is a lot like yours. I just don't feel like I'm wired for it, and the last thing I want to do is have a child and then abandon them like my mom did to me. But it's different for women. Society sets this standard that getting married and having a family is the measure of having a successful life. A lot of people can't fathom a woman not wanting those things, so it comes with a stigma, like there's something wrong with me for feeling the way I do. But I already feel fulfilled with my life, more so now that I've regained a little balance."

I took a deep, cleansing breath, feeling lighter for having admitted all of that aloud for the first time. "I've never needed a man to make me feel worthy or like I've accomplished some ultimate life goal. Being together for the last six weeks has

proven that.” I felt him tense slightly beneath me and raised onto my forearms for the rest of my explanation. “I know that sounds bad, but it’s realistic. Could I survive without you? Yes. I did it before, and I could do it again if I had to. But I don’t want to. I want to share my life with you because it’s so much better with you in it. And the fact that I want you, but don’t need you, makes me want you even more. Does that make any sense?” I laughed.

“It makes perfect sense,” he assured me.

“Good. Because I don’t ever want to lose you. I’m in this for life.”

He pressed his lips firmly against mine, slowly gentling the assault on my mouth. “Me too,” he breathed, brushing the hair from my face.

Panting and more than a little turned on, I tried to remain focused. Throughout the week, we had managed to find enough privacy for some sexy times. The usual storage closets, dressing rooms, and even a backstage shower stall had proven quite handy. Now that I was used to the bunk, it was becoming harder to resist making full use of it. But I wanted to finish answering his question first.

“For the record, I’m not opposed to marriage itself either. There are some legal and financial benefits. But the idea of a big production and wearing an exorbitant dress to stand in front of a bunch of people for a few minutes and openly profess my love and devotion to someone makes me cringe. The only person that needs to hear those words is you. You are the only one that matters and, ultimately, the only one who will know if I keep my promises. Like you, I’m open to the concept. I just don’t need the world to witness it to make it valid. It would mean more to me for it to remain an intimate exchange between us.”

“I love...that idea,” he said with a wicked grin, first reaching for the light switch and then me.

Chapter 19

Shawn

Leaning back against the plush sofa, a deep sense of satisfaction blanketed me. Just as it had every time I walked into my new studios.

My. New. Studios.

The crisp, clean scent of new construction and fresh paint hung in the air, yet the sharp perfection in the rooms left me with an urge to muss them up a bit; break them in. So, while the second studio was intended for paying clients, and as such, I was holding off on customizing that space, the guys and I wasted no time adding memorabilia, pictures, and our favorite instruments to personalize ours.

After taking a few days to unwind from the road and give our new studio some character, we jumped right into recording. Our first priority was to accept LGR's very generous offer to re-record one of our most heartfelt songs the way it had been intended, not the twisted version we'd been forced to release. Finally at peace with that, we worked on finishing the song we'd started last week on the bus.

Since Detrimental had been asked to perform at the Ready to Rock awards show, we wanted to make sure we added appeal without taking attention away from the competitors. That required a delicate balance. On the one hand, the show's producer had gone to a lot of trouble to put the program together on such short notice and wanted to ensure its success. Being able to promise the world premiere of a new song from Detrimental served as an insurance policy for bringing in viewers. But the show also needed to focus on the contestants and their talent. Taking all of that into consideration, it was decided that we would open the show with one of our most popular songs and perform the new one just before the winner was announced.

Aptly named, "Begin Anew" was an anthem about new beginnings and summed up the way we were all feeling. Life

was full of choices and fresh starts. We were making one with LGR and a new album. A new tour would follow. All the while, new relationships were being formed and new opportunities were emerging. Hell, we were even recording it in the new studios as I began the next phase of my journey into music production.

Between takes, everyone jammed and messed around to get more comfortable with the studio pace. The typical control booth overlooked an open performance area. Patterned rugs covered various cords on the floors while our collection of professional backdrops from prior tours and fan-made signs, covered the soundproof material on the walls. Bright overhead lights, wall sconces, and floor lamps provided lighting options to help create the ambiance we wanted. There was also an isolation booth nestled at the end of the control room with a shared window. A common room with a mini-kitchen and bathrooms separated the two studios, which mirrored each other so that the performance spaces were at opposite ends of the building. It was exactly how I had envisioned it.

So was living with Nat. We had been home for nearly a week, most of which had been just as busy as being on the road. Maybe more so. Nat had settled into my cabin, though I could already tell that storage space was going to be an issue. And that was before the moving company was due to transport the rest of her belongings next week. To prepare, we worked to clear out some of the junk I had accumulated and attempted to organize the rest. But the way she doubtfully eyed the remaining space made me thankful the lodge had plenty of empty closets. And if we needed a bigger place, we could always add on or build a bigger house across the lake like Jaxon and Anna were planning to do. Hearing both options had gone a long way in soothing Nat's concerns. Besides, the result would be the same. We would be together.

While I was busy in the studio, Nat met with contractors and sifted through the endless paperwork involved with opening a new business. I missed her when she was gone, which made me obscenely giddy. I even remembered to text her a few times. Let's face it, loving her didn't turn me into a new person. I still got wrapped up in work and lost track of

time, but as soon as I emerged, I looked for her. And that alone made me happier than I thought possible.

So why hadn't I told her I loved her?

The corner of my mouth lifted in amusement every time I asked myself that question. Oh, she knew I loved her. I made sure of that. But those three little words remained unspoken. At first, it hadn't been a conscious decision. In fact, with her confession, I had wanted to say them back. But in that split-second hesitation, when my brain went haywire from overthinking the moment, she had asked me to wait. It was actually a very sweet request, and because I loved her, I couldn't deny her or her reasoning. Not saying it had soon turned into a little game, a funny inside joke between us that I was in no rush to end. Now, neither of us knew when I would finally say the words, and the anticipation was half the fun.

In other news, the final preparations were being made for the contest finale, and everyone was looking forward to attending.

"Mom is so excited for her first private flight," Jaxon laughed, typing out a reply on his phone. "She feels so fancy being able to travel with full-sized shampoo and conditioner bottles."

I still couldn't believe Mama Bee and Papa V were coming with us. Hell, I was amazed the guys were so enthusiastic after just coming off the road. But everyone had insisted on showing their support, even before we were asked to perform.

"Wait until she sees the snacks," I joked.

It had been very generous of Nat and Roger to offer to fly all of us to Nashville for the live show. To make the best use of the plane, Roger and Helen were flying in today so he could visit the new office space. The rest of us would fly back with them tomorrow morning for rehearsals and then the ceremony would take place the following evening. The only downer was that Grammy wasn't scheduled to be back from Europe until next week, so she would miss it.

“Have you heard from your parents?” Jaxon asked.

“No, and I don’t expect to.”

Eli looked over at me. “Are you okay with that?”

“Actually, yes,” I assured everyone. “Since my meltdown a few weeks ago, I’ve been working with Jeremy on some unresolved issues with my father that I’d been dealing with. Well, I hadn’t been dealing with them which was why they were affecting me so much. But he’s helped me get to a place where I can accept that my father’s actions are a reflection of him, not me. All I can do is extend the invitation without any expectation. And, honestly, I only invite my parents at this point out of a sense of obligation. I know it’s fucked up.” I laughed without any real humor. “We’re still working through that part of it.”

My real family, the people in my life who mattered most to me would be there. All except for Callie. She had gone to stay with Mitch at his house in Georgia. And while I didn’t care for the guy, she was an adult, so I was trying to respect her decision. We all were.

The studio door opened, prompting Derek to hop off his stool and place his guitar on a nearby stand to relieve Anna and Nat of the bags they were carrying.

“Thank you,” Nat sighed. “I swear there’s enough food here to feed us for a week.”

Stepping out from behind my drum kit, I reached for her, releasing a contented hum as she settled against me. Yep, still stupidly giddy.

Anna began opening various brown paper bags. “Bob and Deb at the deli wanted me to tell everyone they said hi and that they’ll be watching the show.”

Nat smiled up at me. “I still can’t believe they have sandwiches named after each of you.”

“Me neither,” Eli laughed. “But their system sure makes ordering our favorite food easier.”

Everyone claimed a spot on the area rug for a casual picnic lunch. Conversation flowed over the best sandwiches and salads in the state until an alarm on my phone had me gathering my trash.

“You ready to go?” I asked Nat.

“Now?” She checked her watch. “We still have plenty of time, don’t we?”

“Yeah, but I need to make a stop on the way to pick up your dad and Helen.”

“Okay.”

Crumpling our wrappers, we said our goodbyes and made our way out to my car. Nat slid behind the wheel, where her seat was already adjusted from our drive last night. Living in a small town with little traffic and lots of backroads, I had encouraged her to drive us wherever we went. First, I wanted to get a feel for her driving abilities. Nothing a little practice didn’t fix. Second, I wanted her to get as comfortable as possible for the surprise I had waiting for her.

“Which way?” she asked, making her way down the long, wooded driveway.

As we reached the end, the partially constructed stone wall came into view. With all of the recent security issues, the guys and I had decided it was best to take a few more precautions. None of us worried about the locals. After all, we had grown up there and trusted our friends and neighbors to look out for us. Sadly, the same couldn’t be said about the rest of the world. The first step was securing the accessible portions of the property. To look as tasteful as possible, we had chosen the eight-foot privacy wall and security gate to be built with the same materials as the main lodge. It wasn’t cheap, but it was the price we were willing to pay for peace of mind.

Realizing we had stopped and Nat was patiently waiting for directions, I pointed her toward town.

“I need to pick up a friend,” I explained as vaguely as possible as we pulled into a small office center. “Nat, this is Matheos,” I introduced after he hopped into the back seat.

“He’s...” At that moment, I realized I’d been so preoccupied with arranging my surprise that I hadn’t come up with an excuse for Matheos riding with us.

“I’m looking to buy a drum set for my nephew, and Shawn is going to give me some advice.”

All true, even if that wasn’t happening today. And thankfully, his help extended to covering for me. Shooting him a look of thanks, I relaxed and let him direct our route. After navigating a few intersections and making several different turns, we made a seemingly innocent stop in which Nat had to parallel park outside of the bakery so Matheos could run in for a coffee. I barely managed to keep a straight face, especially with the looks Nat was giving me. By the time we looped the entire town and she was guided back into the original office complex where we started, she was past the point of confusion.

“Perfect,” he praised. “Come in when you’re ready.”

“Thanks, man. Just give us a minute.”

As soon as the door slammed behind him, Nat turned to me. “Okay, I know I’m still getting used to small-town life and the people who live here. Bob and Deb at the deli were lovely; nice, normal people. But this guy must be drinking from a different water supply. What was with the joyride for a coffee? Why couldn’t we have gone inside the first time we were here?”

I had to smother a laugh. “We need to go inside to get your picture taken, which we couldn’t have done earlier because you hadn’t taken your driving test yet.”

It took a minute for my words to click, and then I watched her chin wobble with emotion.

“Oh, shit.” I pulled her across the center console and hugged her. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to go in if you don’t want to.”

“I want to,” she mumbled against my neck. Sniffing, she pulled back before kissing me hard on the mouth. “I can’t

believe you did this. *How* did you do this?” she asked between kisses.

“Matheos and I went to school together, so I called him up and explained the situation. One of the perks of a small town is that people here are willing to go out of their way to help others. Plus, the rules are a little more flexible.”

Blowing out a big breath, she wiped her eyes and grabbed her purse. Meeting at the front of the car, I laced my fingers with hers, but before we went in, she stopped short.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “Before I get too caught up in the excitement and forget to tell you, I want you to know how much this means to me.”

“I do know,” I assured her. “Through all of my struggles, you find a way to support me without making me feel like there’s something wrong with me. I wanted to do the same for you because I love...that you love me, flaws and all.”

A laugh burst from her lips. “You’re still not going to say it?”

“Nah.” We both laughed as I pulled the door open. “I’m picking my moment, and it’s going to be epic.”



With a full day ahead of us, we made our way to the airport well before the sun began to rise. Our motley motorcade, consisting of several vehicles to transport everyone, had met at the lodge before lining up for the drive. Loading the plane took longer than expected, but everyone was in high spirits despite the ungodly hour. Derek and Eli raced the final carts of luggage and instruments to the waiting crew member at the rear cargo door as Lance started a game of naming songs about flying. Papa V sang the chorus to “Come Fly with Me” as he

and Mama Bee danced across the tarmac with Roger and Helen. Pops and Molly were quick to join in, as were Jaxon and Anna as he began singing “Learn to Fly”. I had just grabbed Nat when Lance belted out a warbled “I’m Like A Bird”. We all broke into raucous laughter as we reached the stairs and boarded the plane. But as we entered the cabin it came to a screeching halt.

My parents were seated front and center, wearing polished attire and matching dour expressions.

“You came,” I said, stating the obvious but too shocked to produce anything more substantial.

“Your email said six. It’s nearly half past,” my father pointed out. Why it mattered to him if we were running late, I had no idea.

My mother, ever the diplomat, rose from her seat and approached me. “Of course we came, darling. Your father insisted.”

They really came. I looked at my father and then back to my mother, too many questions bouncing around my head to settle on one. But as the silence turned awkward, Nat’s hand squeezed mine. “My parents, Lauren and Bill Blackwell,” I introduced. “Mother, father, this is my girlfriend, Natalia Greene.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” Nat politely shook both their hands and received stiff greetings in return.

“Your sister showed us the media reports of your relationship. Quite undignified.” My mother’s nose wrinkled in distaste as she subtly reprimanded me.

My father grunted his agreement. “Hopefully Ms. Greene is up to the task of keeping you in line and smoothing out all of those rough edges.”

“On the contrary.” Nat stared my father down. “I love his edges just as they are.”

I didn’t need her to fight my battles for me, but damn, it felt amazing to have a partner in my corner. In fact, it felt like I had an entire army behind me. Which I sort of did. Everyone

had boarded and was standing at my back as though an imaginary battle line had been drawn.

“As we all do,” Mama Bee added, diffusing the moment. “It’s lovely to see you again, Lauren. Come tell me the latest gossip in Villosa.”

Fortunately, the flight was quick and I was too shell-shocked over my parents’ sudden interest in my life to make a scene. I was still processing their appearance while we packed Nat’s very organized belongings at Roger’s condo. And I was no closer to an explanation while we devoted several hours to preparing for the finale of Ready to Rock, so I eventually pushed the matter aside.

All of the contestants had been invited to attend, but only the top ten bands were scheduled to perform in a randomly chosen order. Nat and I were there to give advice and ensure the contestants were portrayed at their best. Each band’s stage rehearsal was followed by a recorded interview that would be used as part of their introduction. The video segment would provide viewers with more of the band’s backstory while giving the crew time for instruments to be swapped out. Thankfully, the cable company had hired a stage manager to handle all of the logistics because I was already at my limit. And after the second day of more rehearsals, teleprompter readthroughs, and learning stage markers, I felt like a caged animal.

The moment we stepped off the elevator connecting the hotel ballroom lobby to our floor, I pounced. I tossed Nat over my shoulder in a fireman’s carry and smacked her ass as I rushed down the long hallway. We didn’t have a lot of time to spare, but I was determined to make the most of what we had. Tossing her on the bed, we both made quick work of our clothes, Natalia only slowing to give me a view of her lacy curves as she peeled away her bra and panties. My dick throbbed painfully at the sight. I reached down to give it a cursory stroke, and as much as I wanted to slam into her hard and fast, I held back. Seeing her laid out before me, I had a sudden need to take my time and live fully in the moment.

I crawled over her body, planting small kisses along the way. Spreading her thighs, I worshiped the center of her until she was a writhing, moaning bundle of nerves. Her hands fisted my hair, urging me on. But as I felt her coiling tightly, nearing the finish line, I eased away.

She groaned in frustration as I savored the taste of her on my lips. Slowly exploring my way up her body, I teased us both a little more before sliding home. The bare heat surrounding me was still a novelty, and it only increased my need for her. I began moving slowly at first, the drawn-out friction fueling my desire for more. Each thrust built up speed and strength, inching her up the bed. Growing desperate, I flipped her onto her hands and knees and plunged back inside. My fingers dug into her hips as I slammed forward with each stroke. My lungs began to burn from exertion as I felt the familiar tingle start up my spine.

Not wanting to go over the edge without her, I pulled her upright so her back was pressed to my chest. The new position allowed my hands to work her over, one pulled at a nipple as the other stroked her clit. All the while, my hips kept their earlier rhythm. Being a drummer definitely had its advantages. The combined stimulation had her detonating fast, and the telltale tightening of her inner muscles pushed me to the brink. Pleasure washed over both of us, and I shook from the strength of it. Falling forward, I rolled us just enough to keep from crushing her before collapsing into a boneless heap.

The stress of the day had been lifted, and I felt a hundred pounds lighter. Unfortunately, there was no time in the schedule for cuddling. We barely regained our senses before rushing to make up for the time we'd lost. But it was totally worth it.

Nat stood in front of the bathroom mirror and smoothed out the front of her dress. "What do you think?"

We had insisted on keeping the dress code less formal to accommodate all of the competing musicians and their limited budgets. Part of me wondered if Nat had insisted on it to make me more comfortable too. Without a doubt, she would have

done it without drawing attention to the fact. Again, to make me more comfortable. Damn, I loved this woman.

Tonight, she wore a black and green plaid dress. It wasn't overly stylish or outlandishly sexy, though the deep V-neck exposed enough cleavage to have my pants tightening again. That was my first reaction. My second was to tell her she was beautiful because no matter what Nat wore, she would always be the most beautiful woman in the room to me. But confidence had never been an issue for her, so I couldn't fathom why she was seeking my approval.

Then the significance of her dress hit me. Nat always wore green to business-related events as a nod to Lucky Greene Records. Tonight, she wore green and black to represent both of us; Greene and Blackwell.

"Fuck, I love it." I pulled her to me and pressed my mouth to hers. While I had her distracted, my hands roamed, removing the matching belt from around her waist. It was a simple sash of fabric that was tied at her hip, making it easy to claim.

"We don't have time, babe," she groaned against my lips.

"I know." Removing my belt, I replaced it with hers, tucking in the loose ends. My black-on-black ensemble now had a pop of color. And damn did I like wearing something proclaiming that I was hers. In return, I fastened my belt over the simple string loops on her dress. The black leather, silver studs, and skull buckle added a touch of rocker to her appearance. My stomach flipped, the same way it did when I saw her in one of my shirts. But that was in the privacy of a hotel room or at home. This was a statement to the rest of the world, on live television, that we were together.

"Too much?" I asked, hoping she liked the look as much as I did.

"Perfect." She wrapped an arm around my waist and rested her head on my chest. "Coordinating details without being cheesy."

I kissed her deeply again before rubbing my thumb across her cheek. “I love... cheesy.” Her laugh was mixed with a groan as she shoved me away to slip on her shoes and head for the door. I had to hustle to catch up. “What? Are you saying that you would veto matching t-shirts at Disney World?” She shuddered as we reached the elevators. “Ugly turkey sweaters on Thanksgiving?”

“No!”

“How about coordinating pajamas for Christmas?”

She thought that one over as we descended. “Just at home? Not on those personalized photo cards that people mail out, right?”

“Ooh! I forgot about those. And, let’s be real. The entire point of those cards is to provide photographic evidence of how perfect your life is. Therefore, matching pajamas are a must.” How I managed to keep a straight face, I wasn’t sure. But, now that I had started this insanity, I was determined to see it through. “How about a compromise? His and hers jammies, one picture in front of the tree, and I get to post it online Christmas Day.”

“Deal,” she agreed, calling my bluff. And we both knew it.

“Great.” I stared her down, our mouths twitching with the effort not to smile until we broke down laughing, just as the elevator doors opened.

We managed to get ourselves under control as we entered the ballroom that had been transformed for the event. For the pre-show dinner, a huge buffet had been set up to encourage people to socialize. It also meant I wasn’t stuck in a chair for hours, another loving detail ensured by Nat, who positively glowed as we made our way around the room.

Balancing a sophisticated business sense with elegance and charm, she was grace personified. From the catering staff to the top music executives in attendance, she treated everyone with respect. And she received plenty in return. Judging from the overwhelming interest in advertising during the show and

the sheer number of attendees from the music industry, it was safe to say that LGR had not only regained its former glory, it had likely surpassed it. We couldn't walk five feet without being descended upon by someone new. It was apparent to all that Nat's hard work and gambles had paid off in a big way, and I couldn't be happier for her.

Gathered in one city, the competing bands had finally gotten to meet each other and spend time together. Not only did they make a ton of connections with other upcoming artists, they were able to network with some important names in the industry. Nat made it a point to introduce them to Roger and a few other key members of the LGR team while I ensured they met Ox, who stressed the importance of seeking legal advice before signing any future contracts.

Plenty of media correspondents were present too. Indigo Kelley, our favorite journalist from *Dynamic Notes Magazine*, had flown in just for the occasion. And after introducing her around, I pulled her aside to finalize an interview date. It was time to tell my story.

The only low point of the evening was running into Tym from Ablaze. The band had been invited as a courtesy but were not part of the show since they had severed ties with Ready to Rock. And while Tym had always been annoying, he was downright insufferable now, parading around like he was somehow superior since his band had a record deal. As if that wasn't enough to have me grinding my teeth, wherever Tym went, Troy followed. The only award either deserved was for Asshat of the Year, and if it wouldn't give them the attention they were so desperately seeking, I would have gladly bestowed the title on one of them on national television. But I was determined to play nice. Even when Troy managed to corner us with no one else around.

"Natalia, I really need to speak with you," he had the nerve to say.

His beady little eyes shifted as I stared him down. Though there was no solid proof, we both knew he was behind the break-in and damage on Nat's bus.

“Hard pass.” Natalia said it with a smile to keep from making a scene, but as she took a step away, Troy stopped her.

“Please. I need your help. You owe me that much,” he urged.

The sight of his hand on her arm obliterated any tolerance I had for the man. “You have exactly two seconds to get your fucking hand off of her before I remove it for you,” I growled. It wasn’t an empty threat thanks to a brief obsession with jiu-jitsu a few years back.

Troy raised both hands in a show of surrender. “Relax, man.”

“I don’t owe you a damn thing,” Nat spit out. “Especially after everything you’ve done. So, whatever bed you’ve made, and whoever is in it,” she added with a disgusted look, “is your own doing. You were not invited here, and you certainly aren’t welcome. So, unless you want to be removed by security, you’d do well to stay far away from me and mine.”

Troy’s face flushed red as we walked away, eager to be anywhere else.

“Bastard,” I muttered, snagging a slice of cake and a fork from the nearby dessert table.

After feeding each of us a bite, I scanned the room, my gaze landing on my parents, who I had strangely all but forgotten about. I’d been too preoccupied by the show to give them much thought. Not that either of them had sought me out since landing in Nashville. Even now, my father seemed completely focused on the conversation he was having with a stuffy older gentleman in a custom suit as my mother dutifully stood at the side, sipping her wine.

For the first time in years, probably since my high school graduation, they were in attendance at an event for me. Yet their presence felt hollow.

“Shouldn’t I be happier about my parents being here?”

Nat stole the fork I had left hanging mid-air, then hijacked the plate and scraped off a big section of chocolate

frosting for herself. “You should feel however you feel.” The cryptic answer wasn’t exactly helpful.

“Sure, but I’ve waited for this moment for years. All I’ve ever wanted was for my parents to show up. Now that the moment is here, it feels anticlimactic.”

She let out a sad sigh, which didn’t make me feel any better. “Truth bomb time,” she warned, feeding me another bite of cake. “It pretty obvious that their appearance doesn’t mean they’ve accepted you, and I think that’s what you’ve truly wanted.”

Damn. She was right. Over the years, I had created a dozen different scenarios in my head of them finally showing their support. Not that I’d ever imagined a grand gesture or heartfelt declaration, but I had envisioned my father finally taking pride in me. At the very least, he would respect my accomplishments. Instead, he had been as critical as ever on the plane. Then he’d ignored me. So, why bother coming at all?

I found myself drifting in his direction. Roger had replaced the other gentleman, but my father still wore the same serious expression as he handed over a business card.

“Let me tell you about some limited investments you’ll want to get in on.”

There was the missing piece of the puzzle. This wasn’t about me at all. It was a business opportunity; a new pool of potential clients. I should have known.

Roger turned to greet us, a kiss on Nat’s cheek and a warm handshake for me.

My father simply gave a single head nod. “Shawn.”

My mother placed a hand on my arm as a cue to stop it from tapping against my leg before fussing with my collar. “Where on earth is your tie?”

“At the store, waiting to choke some other hapless victim.” My blunt reply had her sucking in a dramatic breath and clutching at her necklace. But I couldn’t find the will to care.

“Honestly, Shawn,” my father scolded. “You need to set a better example if you ever expect to be taken seriously.”

Roger boomed with laughter until he realized no one else was joining in. “Surely you’re joking, Bill.”

“The only joke is Shawn’s choice of career.”

Standing in a room full of people, who were attending an event that I was an important part of, my father still couldn’t find a kind word. And if it wasn’t going to happen then, it never would. That much became abundantly clear.

Instinctively, I prepared to do battle with the range of emotions my father’s words usually brought on. But, this time, there was only resignation. Jeremy once told me I would know when it was time to walk away from my parents; a defining moment that finally made the decision a simple one. I just never thought it would happen in the middle of a crowded ballroom.

The shock on Roger’s face would have been comical if the situation hadn’t been so incredibly depressing. “Do you even know your son?” he asked, outraged on my behalf.

My chest grew tight as Roger began listing off, in great detail, all of my recent achievements. As he attempted to sway my parents, I took the opportunity to really look at them. I felt nothing. No need for approval, no lingering sense of obligation, no desire for their love. Nothing.

It was time to let go.

In that moment, the most amazing thing happened. I realized that I wasn’t releasing them from our relationship. I was releasing myself from it. And I felt lighter than I had in years.

“You okay?” Nat quietly asked, taking my silence as cause for concern.

“Yes. I really am.”

My smile widened as Roger continued his lecture. “I can say with absolute certainty that he is the most sought-after person in this room tonight. For weeks, my secretary has been

fielding calls from artists eager to work with him. Hell, I've offered him a job as VP of Production in our new office and would be proud to have him join us."

"And I'm honored to accept," I said, knowing it was the right decision.

Roger and Nat wore matching smiles, but neither looked surprised. It was meant to be. We could finalize all of the details later. For now, I was enjoying the thrill of the moment.

Feeling emboldened, I turned to my father. "What exactly is it about my career that's so disagreeable? It's really no different than yours. We both take other people's assets and work to increase their value. That takes knowledge, skill, and a fair amount of talent. The only difference is that I wholeheartedly love what I do while you only care about status and your net worth." There was no point in telling him that I had far exceeded him in that area. Even though that might be the one thing that impressed him, I refused to buy his affection in such a superficial way. "You've spent your whole life maintaining an image and validating your life through the approval of other people, but I don't want to live like that. I will never fit the mold you created for me, but I'm happy with who I am. And I have plenty of people who love me just the way I am too."

"Damn straight," Grammy said.

Jolted by the sound of her voice, I spun to find her behind me. "Grammy! You made it!"

Her hug was accompanied by a playful smack on my arm. "Did you honestly think I wouldn't be here to see my grandson perform on national television? Besides, I've got a bet going with the girls over who's going to win tonight. We each have our favorite."

"Are they here? Do you need a table?" I asked, ready to do whatever was necessary to accommodate them.

"Lance already took good care of us, don't you worry." She pointed to a table in the front row, where a group of older ladies were already laughing with Helen and Mama Bee. I

briefly introduced Grammy to Roger and Nat, who were brought in for hugs. “You are even lovelier in person, Natalia. The girls and I have been so excited to meet you. Shall we go over before they swarm us?” She turned to me. “Are you ready, sweet pea?”

The tic in my father’s jaw was the only sign that he was annoyed at being effectively ignored.

I looked him in the eye and nodded once. “I’m through here.”

“Well, I’m not.” Natalia reached over to pluck the business card from her dad’s hand and return it to my father. “You can keep this. We would never invest with someone who doesn’t even recognize their most valuable asset.”

“Ooh, I like her already,” Grammy whispered up at me.

Roger shook his head sadly. “Google is free, Bill. Try searching Shawn’s name sometime. I think you’ll be amazed by what you learn.” With a pat on my shoulder, he led the way. “Come on, son.”

With a beautiful woman on each arm, I happily followed.

Chapter 20

Natalia

Waiting for the stage manager's signal, we stood behind the thick curtain that would open after the final commercial break. I held the official envelope containing the winner's name, ready to read the enclosed card if my performance anxiety caused my brain to freeze up in front of the cameras. In his newfound confidence, Shawn had offered to do most of the talking to take some of the pressure off of me. My primary job would be keeping the envelope safe from Shawn's fidgeting fingers so we would have more than keepsake confetti to present to the winners. It was just another example of how our unlikely pairing made us great partners, both professionally and personally.

"Were you serious about accepting the job with LGR, or was that a barb to throw at your father?" I had tried waiting to ask him, but my excitement won out.

"Absolutely serious. I love...working with you." The hint of a smile played at the corner of his lips as he brought his forehead to mine.

"Me too." But for the first time, I worried about the possible ramifications. "I don't ever want work to come between us though, okay? Can you promise me that our relationship will be the priority?"

We were both driven by our jobs. Knowing we had that in common often made it easier to relate to each other. In my heart, I knew working together would continue to bring us closer. But I also knew there would be times when tough decisions would need to be made; when we would have to consciously weigh the impact a business matter would have on our personal relationship.

"I promise." He paused, staring intently into my eyes. "That's why my one condition for joining LGR is merging my studios with yours."

I shook my head in denial, knowing what that meant to him. “You don’t need to do that. We can work out a way to keep them separate.”

“No. I can’t run separate studios. It would feel disloyal. If I’m going to do this, I’m doing it all the way. Besides, Dodging Reality already proved that the lodge was a valuable alternative during their contract negotiation.”

I conceded his point, but only exclusive bands should be afforded that option. After all, he would essentially be opening up part of his home for clients. “Are you sure? Having your own studios has always been your dream.”

His fingers fidgeted at my waist and his voice grew quiet. “That’s because I thought I’d always be on my own. But, if given the choice, I would rather build something together with you than have all of the success in the world and no one to share it with.”

Swoon. If that wasn’t love, I didn’t know what was.

“Let’s go end this show so I can kiss you senseless,” I whispered into his ear, not wanting to endure the wrath of the eagle-eyed make-up artist who had just touched up my lipstick.

His groan coincided with the cue for our entrance. Shawn had already been on stage twice to perform, but it was my first time stepping into the bright lights and viewing the audience from this vantage point. Though most of the tables were shrouded in darkness, the entire front row of our friends and family was visible. So were the two empty seats where Shawn’s parents would have been if they’d opted to stay for the show. I hated that for him, but if he could make peace with it then so could I.

We stopped at our markers, a skinny microphone stand in front of us and the three remaining finalists behind us. As rehearsed, Shawn began reading from the teleprompter, reflecting on how far the contest had come and what it meant for everyone involved. While he thanked those who helped make it possible, I ran my thumb across the silver seal on the envelope. We were seconds from announcing the winners, and

I wished I could see their faces. Watching their reaction was my favorite part of offering a new client a record deal. It would be a pivotal moment for them and had the potential to alter the course of their lives forever. Just as the contest had done to mine.

Never in a million years did I imagine that my little idea would become so successful. But it had. From the number of applications to the elaborate awards show and everything in between, it had been an amazing ride. Seeing so many of our talented contestants performing in the same place on the same night had been especially gratifying too. Of course, nothing was better than watching Detrimental take the stage.

Seeing Shawn perform would never get old, and I was usually so caught up in watching him that I didn't fully pay attention to the lyrics Jaxon was singing. I'd heard them so many times I knew them by heart and could absently sing along without any real thought. But the debut of "Begin Anew" had captivated me. The balance of mainstream appeal and rebellious edge was sure to make it popular. Add in a message that everyone could relate to, and it was bound to be a huge radio hit. After only hearing it a few times, I was already hooked on the chorus.

Stand up, stand tall, or get pushed aside

You're the one who will decide

For everything's a choice

Raise your voice

Choose you

And start anew

All of my recent choices had led me to this moment, and I was thankful for every single one. Tomorrow, we would fly back to Lupine to fully begin our life together. My dad was healthy and happy, thanks in large part to Helen. He was even talking about working toward semi-retirement. LGR was back to being a respected name in the industry, and we were all determined to keep it that way. For now, my focus would remain on the new office, allowing me to recruit talent while

having the flexibility of touring with Detrimental. The cable company was even interested in turning the contest into a television series when the new tour started, which would help in merging our schedules together. Most importantly, living and working in Lupine provided some much-needed balance between my career and personal life, which would include spending time with all of my new friends.

Then there was Shawn, a true partner in every way. Whatever I needed, he was there. But I loved him beyond the things he did for me. He was smart, talented, loyal, and sensitive. His struggles hit him hard. But he also loved hard. And he wasn't afraid to show it. Was he perfect? No. But he was perfect for me.

A round of applause signaled the end of Shawn's speech and alerted me that it was my turn to speak. Nerves bubbled just below the surface as I glanced at the monitor. The gentle pressure of a hand in the small of my back settled me, reminding me of his earlier advice. *Just act like it's any other business meeting.*

"Again, we want to thank all of the contestants who entered Ready to Rock," I read. "The sheer amount of talent we saw confirmed for us that the future of rock 'n' roll is going to be an exciting one. And though there may only be one winner here tonight, I anticipate many more additions to the Lucky Greene family in the months ahead." I side-eyed Shawn as the audience cheered. This was so far from a normal business meeting. "Now, the moment we've all been waiting for. The winner of Ready to Rock is," everyone held their breath as I opened the envelope, "Betting Blind from San Antonio, Texas!"

Confetti and hugs surrounded the winners as the closing credits played. Seizing the moment, Shawn swept me up in a kiss that made me thankful the cameras were off of us. At least I hoped they were.

"You did it, babe," he murmured against my lips.

I assumed he was talking about my role in announcing the winner, and sure, I could have done it without him. But I

wouldn't want to. And I didn't need to.

“We did it. The contest, the expansion, repairing LGR; all of it. That was us. Together.”

“I love us together.”

“I love us together, too.”



Celebrations were still going strong in the early morning hours when we headed back to our hotel room. I had a meeting at nine with an interior designer to review plans for the new office space, so I tried to get some sleep. A little after five, I woke from a champagne-induced dream so excited I had to get up. Careful not to wake Shawn, I grabbed my laptop and settled into the plush chair in the other room of the suite. By seven, I had brainstormed and researched my idea, and by eight, I was seated across from my dad to show him.

“Greenwell Studios?” he asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

He was still in his pajamas, a robe tied neatly at his waist. Helen was similarly dressed as she offered us each some coffee. I almost felt bad for dragging them out of bed. Almost.

“Yes,” I said, barely able to contain my enthusiasm. “It would still be a branch of Lucky Greene Records, but with a distinctive name. Shawn wants to join his studios with ours in Lupine since he accepted the VP position.”

“That’s very generous of him.”

“It is. So, it shouldn’t just be our name on the door.”

My dad simply smiled at me and nodded once.
“Brilliant.”

“I’m honestly not sure why I didn’t think of it sooner. I’d already asked the designer to incorporate black and green in the color scheme for the new office to represent both of us. Speaking of which, I’m going to be late for my meeting with him if I don’t hurry.” I wanted nothing more than to go crawl back in bed with Shawn so I could wake him with the good news, but the fact that the designer was willing to meet on a Sunday morning was not something I could pass up. Besides, I still had one final errand to run.

I hugged Helen and kissed my dad’s cheek on my way out. “You’re coming to the groundbreaking ceremony next Monday, right?”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” he replied, adorably including Helen.

I left on a high of excitement and caffeine that lasted throughout the morning. The design meeting went even better than expected, and I couldn’t wait to see the everything implemented. Before leaving, I sent our graphics department a request for new signage along with some preliminary sketches to use as inspiration. It was all coming together.

“I still need to make a quick stop at the office on the way to the airport,” I told Frederick as he held the rear door of the waiting car.

He checked his watch. “It’ll be tight, but I’ll get you there as fast as I can.”

I could have rented a car for the weekend, but having Frederick drive me added a layer of security that made Shawn feel better. Me too, if I was being honest. Plus, I hadn’t needed to go anywhere other than the hotel until now.

During the drive, I decided to check in with Shawn, hoping I could catch him before he left the hotel.

“You were supposed to wake me,” he complained, answering on the first ring. He was more annoyed than angry, as I figured he would be.

“I know, but you looked so peaceful. And we both know you would have been bored to tears at the design meeting.

Plus, something came up and I left early to go see Dad.”

“Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. I just needed to finalize something for the Lupine office.” It was only half of the truth, and I couldn’t wait to tell him the rest of it. But it wasn’t a conversation I wanted to have over the phone.

“How was the meeting?”

“Great, but it ran long. I brought my suitcase with me in case that happened, so I’ll meet you at the airport as soon as I grab what I need from the office, okay?”

“Alright. But for the record, wake me next time. I’d rather sit through a boring meeting than wake up alone.”

The guilt I felt over leaving him wasn’t enough to stop the smile that broke free. It wasn’t my fault he said such sweet things. “Deal. And I’ll make it up to you in when we get home later.”

“Hmmm. I like the sound of that. Especially since we have months ahead of us to spend there.”

“I can’t wait. I love you.”

“I love that you love me.”

Chuckling to myself, I dropped my phone back into my purse as Frederick pulled up to the curb. Parking wasn’t allowed there, so he would need to stay with the car while I ran in.

“I won’t be long,” I promised. I was keeping my office there but needed to gather some important files and a few personal items to take with me to Lupine.

“No problem. Text me if you need help carrying anything down.”

“Thanks, Frederick.”

Using my building key, I entered the vacant lobby through the side door. Having been there at all hours throughout my life, the silence was as familiar as the commotion during business hours. The security system had

already been disarmed to deactivate the motion sensors, meaning someone was probably working in one of the studios. Musicians and producers could be a temperamental lot, often working all hours. It wasn't unusual for recording sessions to last all night and into the next day. The glowing red light outside a studio halfway down the hallway confirmed that was the case.

As I stepped into the elevator, I wondered how often I would find Shawn in his studios when he couldn't sleep or at odd times when creativity struck. During the ride up, I imagined all of the music he would create throughout his lifetime. And as I gathered an empty file box from the supply closet, I pictured myself, proudly at his side through it all.

I was genuinely honored to be working with him. He was just tapping into his talent and was sure to have an extraordinary future. But I was even more humbled by his love. It was messy and a bit chaotic at times, much like the man himself. However, it was also absolute. I had come to learn that he loved so completely because he yearned to be loved that way in return. And though his parents didn't appreciate the things he had to offer, I would never make that mistake. I was committed to loving him just as fiercely as he loved me.

With my mind on Shawn, the scene before me didn't immediately register. The door to my office was already opened and glass sprinkled the carpet under the shattered panel beside it. Dazed, the box slid from my grasp as I slowly made my way inside. The blinds on the windows were partially opened, casting long rays of light across my desk. The usually immaculate surface was littered with papers and the drawers were hanging ajar. Among the mess, my computer monitor was lit with a failed password message on the LGR login screen. The sight was enough to snap me back to reality. But it was the click of the door latch behind me that sent a shiver of fear up my spine.

Dread welled up in me as I turned to meet Troy's cold stare. His back was pressed against the door; my only exit. Deceptively lax, his shoulders slumped and his arms dangled

at his sides. But the gun gripped loosely in one hand had me taking a cautious step backward. The chaos around me was forgotten. I couldn't look away from his wrist, twitching to shift the barrel's aim back and forth as he mumbled something.

When I didn't comply, he shouted, "Drop your purse!"

My only lifeline was the phone inside of it, but he obviously knew that too. Dropping my small handbag, I followed his instructions to kick it toward him and then sit at my desk. I did my best to stay level-headed as I recalled the safety classes my dad insisted that I take before moving to New York. They came back to me in jumbled bits and pieces as I evaluated the situation. Rule number one: don't panic. I could fall apart later. Rule number one: don't panic. I could fall apart later. For now, I needed to stay focused on what had to be done. Screaming for help would be pointless since there were several floors between me and anyone else. Running would only work if an opportunity arose and I could guarantee my escape. So, as long as he had a gun, my best chance for getting out of this unharmed was to cooperate and give him whatever he wanted.

"What do you want, Troy?" I asked, trying to make my voice as soothing as possible so he wouldn't hear the way it quivered. I also hoped to appear as non-threatening as possible.

"You weren't supposed to be here," he muttered instead of answering the question. "You ruined the plan, just like you always do."

Pacing a short path in front of the door, he ran his hands through his hair, seemingly unconcerned that one held a deadly weapon. He was breathing in short pants, and his eyes constantly shifted, never settling on anything as though he wasn't able to focus on what was in front of him.

My gaze shifted between him and the office phone that sat at the corner of my desk, just out of arm's reach. It was buried under papers, which would provide a nice cover if I could get to it without him noticing.

"What did I ruin?"

“Everything!” he shouted, charging forward and waving the gun around to punctuate his words as he got in my face. “You were supposed to keep dating me. I was supposed to get a promotion. But instead, you got me fired.”

“You were stealing from the company,” I reminded him.

“Only because I had to work twice as hard to compete with you. I needed an edge so I could keep up with all of the extra travel and long hours. It got expensive.”

That edge quickly became apparent. Up close, I could see a fine sheen of sweat on his pale skin and a slight tremor in his hands. I was no expert on substance abuse, but he was obviously coming down from something. Given his recent unpredictability and his growing agitation, I needed to tread carefully.

“Why are you here?” I asked, the answer coming to me almost immediately. I never kept cash in my office, and there wasn’t any expensive art or memorabilia there either. But I did have something of value to him. “You want my new contract structure.”

“You’re finally catching on!” He laughed like the subpar villain he was. Not that he would ever see himself that way, but it gave me an idea to stroke his ego and get him talking.

I played dumb. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it sooner.” In a way it was true. Of all of the reasons he’d had to harass me, the contract wasn’t one I had considered. And if making him think he’d bested me would keep him bragging about how clever he was, I was all for it. Still, I had to be subtle. “So, why send a photographer?”

“He was there to do a little recon. I needed to know which bus was yours, your routine, and where you kept your laptop. When he got the pictures of you and Shawn, I thought I had something to work with. But then you ruined that by announcing your little affair online.”

“And recruiting my contestants? Was that just something else to bargain with?”

“Partly. Or I got a new client. It was a win either way.”

“I assume you were looking for the contract when you broke into my bus. Was it really necessary to trash the place?”

He paused to rifle through his pocket and snort something from a small container, verifying my earlier suspicion. He wiped his nose and smiled, seemingly proud of himself. “It needed to look like a random break-in.”

“And your alibi?”

“A guy who works at a nearby bar owed me a favor. We made sure the camera out front caught me coming in and then leaving a few hours later. It was easy enough to use a back door to leave for a while, and he vouched for me being there the whole night.”

“How did you get into the building today?”

He merely scoffed at my question. “Some new producer let me follow him in when I flashed my old ID badge.”

Taking in his rumpled appearance and bloodshot eyes, I wondered how long he had waited outside for someone to approach the building so he could talk his way inside. The whole situation felt surreal and made me wish I was secretly recording his confessions to use as evidence later. Since that wasn't an option, I tried to gather as much information on my own as I could.

I hummed thoughtfully, pretending I was impressed. “You've gone to a lot of trouble to get a copy of my contract. What do you plan to do with it?”

Two thoughts came to mind. First, by sharing its details, he would effectively put an end to LGR's ability to offer the contract exclusively. That was bound to happen anyway as word got out, but having the full document leaked would surely speed up that process. Second, he could try to implement it, but that would require the backing of his label. Which had me curious. “What's in it for you?”

“Other than the satisfaction of watching your perfect world crumble?” He shrugged one shoulder. “Dave offered a large bonus to anyone who could get him a copy of the new contract everyone was talking about.”

“So this is all for money?” Money to support a drug habit that was taking over his life. Looking back, I could see that it was at the root of everything that had gone wrong, and I almost felt sorry for him.

“It’s easy to dismiss the need for cash when you have plenty of it. Not so simple when you owe certain people and they’re demanding to be paid. Even more difficult if your job is hanging by a thread and the only way to keep it is by promising your boss what he wants.” He shifted from side to side, his agitation seeming to grow at the reminder. “I tried to be civil and ask you for the contract last night, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“How rude of me not to let you steal my work since you were willing to ask nicely.”

My sarcasm was met with a hard stare that remained unflinching until a muffled drumbeat came from my purse on the floor.

“How cute,” he mocked, making the connection between the ringtone and Shawn. Troy did his best to ignore it, but after the second call went unanswered, my office phone rang. “Persistent, isn’t he?”

I was on the brink of reaching for it when Troy swept aside the stacks of papers and yanked the cord from the back of the phone. My heart sank as my options for getting help dwindled. Still, I wasn’t ready to give up.

Deep down, Troy wasn’t a bad guy. By no means was I excusing his recent behavior. He had made some questionable decisions and had done some awful things. And no matter the reason, he was still responsible for all of it. But today’s glimpse into his personal habits helped explain the changes I had seen in him, meaning the man I had known was still under there somewhere. I wished I’d seen it sooner and wanted to get him some help. Of course, I could only do that if we both got out of there in one piece.

I didn’t believe Troy was a violent person. But he wasn’t thinking clearly either, and desperation made people do crazy things. So, it was up to me to get us through this. Because of

our past, I was hopeful that I could connect with him and work to find a solution to our current predicament. It also helped that he didn't see me as a threat. But that wouldn't be the case if Frederick or Shawn came barging in.

I tried reasoning with him. "Shawn's expecting me."

"Is that supposed to convince me to let you go?"

"No. It's a simple fact." Which was punctuated by a series of text alerts. "He knows where I am, and if I don't meet him, he's going to come looking for me." Frederick was probably starting to question the delay too, and I really didn't want him getting dragged into the middle of anything. "I think we can agree that this situation has the potential to go very badly for both of us, so let's figure out a way to prevent that, okay? You want the new contract format? I'll give it to you. Just let me text Shawn back to tell him I'm going to be late."

"So you can slip in some coded message? I don't think so. I'll text him myself to make sure he stays far away."

I nearly groaned aloud as he dug through my purse to find my phone. It was even harder to remain calm when I saw the satisfaction on Troy's face as he typed out a message.

"What did you say?"

He held the phone up for me to read.

Shawn: *Almost done?*

Shawn: *Call me.*

Shawn: *Are you okay???*

Me: *I'm not coming. This isn't working for me anymore. I hope you understand and that we can still have a successful working relationship.*

"Sound familiar?" he asked.

Indeed. Those were the same words I had used to break up with him. Of course, Troy had no way of knowing that Shawn had accepted a job with LGR or that I was literally in the middle of moving in with him. Or that Shawn would take one look at that message and know something was horribly

wrong. That message ensured it wouldn't be long before he showed up, ready to slay any dragon. And while the intention might be heroic, it was the exact scenario I was trying to avoid. There was no way I was risking an altercation as long as Troy was high and wielding a gun.

"Don't worry." Troy patted my shoulder, misinterpreting my distress. "You can sort things out later. For now, he'll be too upset to come looking for you. Problem solved."

A final message came through, making him cackle with glee.

Shawn: *No problem baby. It was fun while it lasted. See you around.*

"Bet you weren't expecting that," he taunted. "Guess I did you a favor."

No, not really. There was no doubt that Shawn knew I was in some sort of trouble. He was simply playing along. The casual tone of his reply confirmed it. And while I was glad that he wasn't spiraling emotionally, believing he had been dumped, he was probably going crazy with worry instead. The other clue he had slipped in was more subtle, but it was just as meaningful. Shawn always called me babe, not baby. He'd rambled off a sleepy explanation one night that baby was too sappy, which didn't suit either of us. Changing the endearment in his message was a signal acknowledging something wasn't right.

Which meant I needed to get Troy out of there as fast as possible.

"The contract files are on my computer," I offered, waiting for his permission to retrieve them.

"Log in."

He stood behind me, making it impossible to do anything other than what he commanded. His paranoia grew as I worked, alternating between rushing me and making me stop so he could listen for sounds in the hallway. Fortunately, it didn't take long to send a copy of the contract template to his email.

Did I conveniently leave out the necessary supporting financial documents to make the contract meaningful? Yes. Yes, I did. It was a calculated risk, but he wouldn't know the difference until it was too late. Hopefully, about the time he was being arrested.

“Be sure to send it to Dave now, and remind him about the bonus he offered. You wouldn't want the message to fail while you're in the elevator.”

And I wouldn't want to miss linking Dave to this crime.

I sat completely still as he tapped away on his phone screen. And as he wandered toward the door, I remained especially quiet, hoping he would be too consumed with his prize to pay me any attention. My hope that he would simply leave was probably unrealistic, but I held on to it anyway.

“Done,” he said, slipping his phone into his pocket. Only then did he seem to realize I was still there. And that I was a loose end. “Now I just need to figure out what to do with you.”

Chapter 21

Shawn

It took about three seconds for the shock to wear off and to accept that staring at my phone wasn't going to produce a message letting me know the whole conversation I'd just been a part of was some sort of twisted joke.

"I have to go." My mind spun as the words barely reached our travel party that was gathering inside the private airport terminal.

Lance and Derek stood closest to me. "What?" they asked in unison.

"Nat's in trouble. I have to go."

Frantically looking around, I searched for the fastest way to get to her. The hotel shuttle van that dropped us off was long gone. I could take a rideshare, but the pick-up area for those was on the opposite side of the airport. So were the taxis. Renting a vehicle would take way too long. I was ready to bribe a nearby limo driver when Papa V pulled in with the rental car he had gotten for the elders – his word, not mine—to go sightseeing while the band was busy with rehearsals.

"We need to borrow the car," Lance stated and was handed the keys as Mama Bee, Pops, and Molly climbed out. Derek had already alerted Jaxon and Eli, and all three of them piled into the back seat of the compact sedan. With Lance already behind the wheel, I hopped into the passenger seat. The second my door closed, he hit the gas.

"Where to?" he asked, navigating the airport exit ramp.

"Lucky Greene."

Lance aimed us across town, the distance interminable. On top of that, traffic was heavy, moving much slower than normal. At least it seemed that way.

"What's going on?" Jaxon asked.

“Nat left this morning to meet with the interior designer and then planned to stop at her office to grab a few things. When we last spoke, she was on her way to her office at LGR, but I haven’t been able to reach her since. I tried calling and texting with no luck. When I finally got a response, it was a message saying she was breaking up with me.”

“Bullshit,” Lance declared.

“Exactly,” I agreed.

As much as it pained me, there had been a microsecond that I had nearly believed it. My asshole brain had been quick to point out that her bags had been packed and she left without a word, just as she had done before. Add in a blunt text message that left no room for misinterpretation and it would have been difficult for anyone not to experience a moment of doubt. But I knew better. I’d forced the negative thoughts aside, refusing to let myself fall victim to the emotional quicksand that was always lurking. Still, something was very wrong. I felt it in my soul.

“Was she alone?” Eli asked.

“Shit! Frederick was scheduled to drive her.” I rushed to pull up his contact information, wishing I had thought to call him sooner. “Please tell me Natalia is with you,” I begged.

“Not directly, no. I had to stay with the car, but I’m getting concerned. Isn’t your flight at noon?”

“Yes.” I checked the dash clock noting it was quickly approaching twelve o’clock. Nat was never late. “Something’s wrong. I received some text messages from her phone, but they weren’t from her. Every instinct in me is screaming that Troy is involved. Have you seen him or anyone else?”

“A group of people left a few minutes ago. Otherwise, the building is locked on the weekends. Only approved staff have access.” I heard a car door slam and the jingle of keys. “Fortunately, I’m one of them.”

The call would be lost as soon as he went into the elevator, so I had no choice but to let him go. Besides, I didn’t

want to distract him from his task. “Call me back as soon as you know anything. And be careful.”

The rest of the drive was tense as the possibilities weighed heavily in the air. I didn’t know Troy well enough to understand the reasoning behind his continued harassment or to predict his next move. All I knew was that Troy seemed hell-bent on causing problems and getting revenge for whatever wrongs he’d perceived against him. But how far would he go?

Panic over the thought of anything happening to Nat competed with a heavy dose of guilt. I should have been with her today. Instead, she was left to face an unknown threat alone. Losing her was unfathomable, and the mere thought left me struggling to breathe. Worst of all, I still hadn’t told her I loved her. So, what had been a cute joke between us could end up haunting me forever.

Helplessness would have consumed me if not for the guys. They kept me talking and focused on what I had to do. We debated calling the police but agreed it would be pointless without more concrete information to give them. I could only imagine trying to explain that my girlfriend dumped me in a text message, but it couldn’t have been her because she loved me. Other than giving the operator a good laugh, it would have been a complete waste of time. We also debated calling Roger. He had every right to know if something was wrong. But, again, we didn’t have much to tell him. Until we knew more, there was nothing he could do, and we hated to worry him unnecessarily given his heart condition.

With no other options, we were on our own.

I was ready to pull my hair out, analyzing the problem from every possible angle when an idea finally came to me.

“Bloodhound!”

“I don’t think we’re ready to call in the dogs yet,” Lance said with a pat on my shoulder, clearly humoring me.

“Not the dog, the app.” I scrolled through my phone to find the little dog icon. “Nat downloaded it to help locate my

phone whenever I inevitably misplace it. It's really cool because it has two modes. It provides a GPS location to narrow down the search to a specific address. Then, an alarm can be activated to make it easier to find." In showing me how to use it, we had practiced finding each other's phones, so I already had Nat's tracking information saved. With a quick search, the map showed her phone was still at LGR. "There's no guarantee she's still there, but at least we know it's a solid place to start."

Lance parked beside the black SUV in front of LGR just as Frederick stepped out onto the sidewalk. Alone.

I bolted from the car. "Did you find her?"

"There's no sign of anyone. Her office was obviously broken into though. That's enough to get the police involved."

"I'm on it," Jaxon offered, making the call. Eli stayed outside with him to watch the front of the building and wait for the police while the rest of us headed inside.

Frederick didn't lock the door behind us but quickly reset the alarms. "This will tell us if anyone leaves. In the meantime, let's get to the security office and see what the cameras picked up."

I wasn't overly familiar with the building, but remembered the studios being on the ground level, divided between the two main hallways that branched off of the lobby with the bank of elevators between them. Frederick veered down the hallway on the left, leading us to the last door. Scanning his badge on the keypad, he accessed the security office, flicking light switches and turning on monitors with practiced ease. He was clearly at home there.

"When I'm not driving, I like to hang out in here. Roger appreciates having an extra set of eyes on things, and the security guards are always happy to have company." Frederick's fingers flew across the keyboard of the control center as he spoke. "Okay, you guys watch all of the exits here." He nodded toward a set of camera feeds on one large monitor. "I'm going to pull up some earlier footage to determine if they're still in the building."

Unfortunately, cameras only covered certain areas and there was no sound, so we were forced to piece together events. The first was footage of Troy chatting with a group of people in the lobby before turning toward the elevators.

“That’s the group I saw earlier, but he wasn’t with them when they left.”

Frederick continued to speed through the recording, which was made easier since the building was closed. It meant that anyone on screen was noteworthy. Still, I gasped when Nat finally appeared. My attention was riveted on the screen while she got into the elevator and then exited on her floor once Frederick switched cameras. The only other person to come on screen was Frederick when he arrived later to look for Nat.

“They must have taken the stairs,” Frederick concluded. Minutes ticked by as he scoured every available camera angle. “Got ‘em! They were headed down the north hallway just a few minutes ago.”

I felt sick as I watched Nat walking alongside Troy. Then I saw the gun in his hand and nearly came unhinged.

An alarm sounded just as a warning flashed across the main monitor.

Lance pointed out our target. “There he is!”

Troy had just stepped into the alley behind the building. But there was no sign of Nat. I was already halfway out the door when I heard Frederick direct Lance to go with me while he and Derek went after Troy. Honestly, I didn’t even care about Troy in that moment. My sole concern was finding Nat and making sure she was okay.

Lance and I sprinted back to the lobby and then down the other hallway. I shouted Nat’s name the whole way but was met with silence. We split up. I took the doors on the left while Lance checked the doors on the right. Knowing she had to be there somewhere, we methodically tried each locked handle with no luck. After a few doors, I could feel my panic rising.

Refusing to give in to it, I took a breath and reopened the locator app to trigger the alarm.

“Hold on.” I signaled for Lance to remain quiet as we continued down the hallway. Moving as quickly as we could, we pressed our ears to each door. A faint beeping had me grasping a handle that thankfully turned. “In here!”

The outer studio door opened to a small control room, where I saw Nat’s purse sitting on the empty workspace beside the soundboard. “Nat?” I spun in a circle, checking every inch of the small space, but the only sign of life was the empty candy wrappers and coffee cups overflowing from the trash can.

Lance silenced the incessant beeping of Nat’s phone as I peered into the recording space. The oversized window provided a clear view of her slumped over in the far corner with her hands tied behind her back by an electrical cord. It was then wrapped around the leg of the piano behind her to keep her in place.

“Nat!” I ran to the door of the sound studio only to find it locked. “Damn it!” I dropped to my knees. “It’s a simple pin and barrel lock.”

“What do you need?”

Scanning the room for anything useful, I rattled off possible items. “Paper clips, safety pins, hair pins. Anything thin but long and bendable.”

“The receptionist’s desk in the lobby probably has some.”

Lance took off running as I hurried back to the window, where Nat was already looking up at me with hopeful eyes. She appeared unharmed, and relief hit me like a physical blow. I’d never been more thankful for anything in my life.

“I love you!” I shouted even though I knew she couldn’t hear me. I said it again and again, slowly so she could read my lips. I pointed to myself, made a dopey heart shape with my hands, and then pointed to her. “I love you.”

She managed a wobbly smile and nodded her head. *I know*, she mouthed.

The sound of Lance's heavy footsteps built to announce his return. "Here," he panted, passing me a handful of paperclips. "The police just pulled up. I'll go let everyone know we found Natalia."

"Thanks, man."

Using overly exaggerated miming and wild gestures, I did my best to explain to Nat that I was going to work on unlocking the door. She nodded in understanding, and though I hated losing visual contact, the need to hold her as soon as possible spurred me into action.

First things first, I reshaped two of the paper clips into a crude version of the tools I would need to get the job done. Kneeling to keep the lock at eye level, I methodically worked each internal pin with the delicacy and precision born from practice. In truth, the only other time I'd picked a working lock was when I forgot the key to an equipment case and we were scheduled to perform within the hour. Thanks to the internet and a few helpful videos, I had been able to open my cymbal case without breaking it to get to them. That experience jumpstarted an interest in lock picking that lasted until I mastered a variety of mechanisms. And though it had been a few years since I had cast the hobby aside, the skill came back with little effort.

The audible click I'd been waiting for had me twisting the handle and pushing the door wide. I sprang to my feet to cover the remaining distance before dropping back to my knees. Cradling Nat's tear-streaked face, I kissed her fiercely before untying the cords behind her.

As soon as she was free, I gently helped her to her feet. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"I'm fine."

The words were all I needed to hear before crushing her to me. A tremor wracked my body as I bent my head to breathe in her scent. My hands roamed over her body, taking inventory and assuring me that she was real and that she was alright. Even after a few more kisses, I knew it would be a while before I was ready to let go.

“I love you,” I whispered against her lips.

“I love knowing that you would find me.”

“Always.”



Our trip home was delayed by several hours because of the nonstop activity that followed. Nat gave her statement to the police, putting me through a range of emotions from pride to stark terror. She described how she accidentally interrupted Troy’s theft and then did her best to outsmart him. Unfortunately, after handing over the contract, Troy hadn’t been content to leave. Instead, he became emboldened enough to try to take her to a local ATM to withdraw as much cash from her accounts as the machine would allow. That plan hit a snag when he heard the sound of someone coming up in the elevator, but he decided to force Nat down the stairs to make their way toward the back exit. He got spooked again when he heard voices in the lobby. Nat used that opportunity to convince him he was better off leaving alone, gladly offering her debit card and the PIN if he left her behind. He agreed, on the condition that she let him secure her in the soundproof studio so he could buy enough time to escape. Then he fled like the coward he was.

He didn’t make it far, and I would never tire of hearing Frederick describe Troy’s brief encounter with Derek. Cornered and outmatched in number and strength, Troy had pulled his gun on Derek, who simply plucked it from his grasp before punching him square in the face. The force of the blow caused Troy’s head to ricochet off the brick wall behind him, knocking him out cold. And though I would have loved to witness that firsthand, I took great satisfaction in seeing Troy wheeled out on a stretcher.

Nat, however, had just been saddened. She stopped midway through her statement with Officer Daniels to make sure he and the paramedics knew Troy had drugs in his system so they could ensure he received the proper care during his recovery and after. She was a much bigger person than I was.

Meanwhile, Eli and Lance took Derek to the local ER for an x-ray to make sure no permanent damage was done. After all, his hands were a valuable commodity. Roger also arrived after receiving a call from Jaxon and then the alarm company because of the suspicious activity. He predictably fussed over Nat, making sure she was alright before he and Frederick escorted the police to Nat's office to document the damage and to the security office to collect the video evidence.

By the time it was all said and done, the sun was setting when we finally boarded the plane. Since finding her, my need for constant contact had been as vital as breathing. Her hand in mine, my palm at her back, her nestled against my side. It was the only thing that kept me sane.

Outwardly, Nat appeared calm and in control. No one noticed the strain in her eyes or the tightness in her smile. And they didn't think anything of the way she crossed her arms protectively in front of her. I did. I also knew how much it bothered her to look vulnerable in front of others, even when it was completely justified, so I didn't call her out on any of it. Eventually, the protective shell would break. And when that happened, I would be ready.

There was a small fracture during the trip home. In an uncharacteristic move, Nat crawled into my lap for the flight. I had zero complaints. Instead, we took comfort in each other, quietly processing all of the day's intense events and emotions.

When we finally arrived home, everyone dumped their luggage in the great room to be dealt with in the morning and shuffled off for some much-needed sleep. But once Nat and I were alone in our cabin, I could see that she was struggling.

I led her into the bedroom, where I gently removed our clothes, wishing it was as easy to peel away the darkness that had touched us that day. Once I pulled her under the hot spray

of the shower, I added my sudsy hands to soothe knotted muscles and wash away some of the lingering tension. Only then did she crack.

A choked sob echoed off the tiles as Nat buried her face in my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and held on tightly, attempting to lend her my strength now that hers was fading.

“Let it all out, babe.” I rubbed one hand up and down her back. “You were so brave and so fierce today. And I’m so fucking proud of you.”

Each whimper and hiccup sliced through me, but I held firm. I was prepared to stand there for as long as she needed. The steam swirled around us for several minutes before she let out a ragged shudder, effectively releasing all of the pressure that had built up inside of her.

“I always thought nothing could be worse than almost losing my dad, but I was wrong. Knowing you were on your way and that Troy might hurt you was more than I could handle. My only thought was getting him out of there so he would be far away from you.”

I eased back to look into her eyes. “I felt the same way. I was going crazy thinking of all of the possibilities. Without even knowing what was happening, I would have gladly traded places to keep you from harm. And when I first saw you lying on the studio floor, I swear my heart completely stopped. I don’t know what I would do if I lost you.”

I focused on the feel of her, alive and well in my arms. Lust was there, but it simmered beneath a burning desire to worship every inch of her body as I gave thanks that she was safe. Nat was the toughest woman I’d ever met, but she wasn’t invincible. That reality was as terrifying as it was humbling.

I hovered just out of reach, the taste of her mingling in the misty air. As we slowly closed the space, I sank into the softest, sweetest lips I would ever know. I continued to kiss her with an aching softness even as my fingers dug into the flesh at her hips. I licked and nibbled down her neck as an overwhelming need to be careful battled with a raging desire

to completely devour her. My very soul was demanding something intensely life-affirming, but the day's events, along with the reminder of our mortality, called for reverence. The contradiction left me torn.

I searched Nat's face for guidance.

She peered up at me with a mixture of tears and water running down her face. But her voice was steady. "I need you to make me forget."

The raw request was all it took. I lifted her, my hands under her ass to support her weight as she wrapped her legs around me. Pressing her back against the shower wall, my mouth devoured hers. It was sloppy and desperate as tongues fought for dominance. We kissed with a fervor that was bound to leave us with bruised lips tomorrow, but we kept going. I nipped at her lower lip and her hands fisted my hair, the pain only driving us higher. Her desire to be overcome with pleasure did not mean she would simply submit. She needed an outlet for all of the residual anger and fear still swirling within her. It was a challenge I readily accepted.

With her pressed firmly in place, my fingers roamed to explore her exposed core. Finding her slick and ready, I plunged two fingers into her velvety heat. Without waiting, I added a third finger, curling them to hit just the right spot. She instinctively sought friction, writhing against my body. A few strokes of her clit against my happy trail and she detonated.

She was still in the throes of her orgasm as I lined her up and impaled her on my cock. Her unrestrained moan drowned out my softer grunt as I hit bottom. With a little maneuvering, I hooked my arms under her knees to hold her in place and slammed into her. I thrust with deep, hard strokes at the angle that made her breath hitch and her hands fist the back of my neck. Driven by her response, I doubled my efforts, determined to flood her with as much pleasure as she could stand.

The water eventually grew cold, overstimulating our senses before becoming an unwelcome intrusion. I towed us off, lingering to lap at water rivulets as they ran down her

body, giving special attention to those on the peaks of her nipples and in the dip of her belly button. Letting the towel drop to the floor, I scooped Nat up and carried her to the bed. Positioning her at the edge, I folded her legs back to open her fully to me. With no deadlines, interviews, interruptions, or other responsibilities looming, I put all of my effort into making this night last.

Several positions and a few orgasms later, she was crying for mercy. "It's too much." The words were muffled since she had collapsed onto the mattress.

With all of my attention focused on her, I had unintentionally edged myself to the point of desperation. I kneeled on the bed behind Nat's sated body, my dick throbbing angrily and I ached with a need to come. Seeking relief, I gripped her hips, pulling her back onto me, one sensitive inch at a time. Claspng her shoulders for added leverage, I let loose. A few good thrusts soon set off a chain reaction. A tingle raced down my spine, my balls tightened, and then I was shooting an unending load into her warmth. I threw my head back, roaring with the intensity of the release. Spots clouded my vision and I nearly blacked out as I fell forward, rolling us just enough to land on the bed.

I had no idea how much time passed before I was finally able to think straight. I was too blissed out to care. But when my brain finally came back online, it was filled with a singular thought.

"I love you. Completely and without reservation. I love you."

We had fallen facing each other, so I knew she was awake. The fingers tracing my hip came to a halt, and there was a brief pause. "I love you too."

The sincerity of her words was there, but she sounded different and I couldn't pinpoint why. Was she just not ready to face the world yet, or was there more going on?

"You okay?"

She bent one arm to prop her head up. Then there was another pause as she gathered her thoughts. “Considering everything that happened today, it seems absurd, but I have a request wrapped in a mini truth bomb.” I nodded for her to go on, picking up her free hand to play with. “After weeks of build-up and anticipation, I thought hearing you say that you love me would be some ultimate euphoric moment. But it wasn’t.” My grip on her hand tightened. “Let me explain,” she urged. It was tough, but I managed. “I *know* that you love me. I just like hearing it your way better.”

“My way? But I hadn’t told you that. I kept putting it off, and the whole time I was trying to find you, there was a burning regret in my stomach because I was so afraid you might never hear me say it.”

She pulled her hand from mine, gently smoothing out the worry lines between my brows. “I knew. The words didn’t matter. I knew because you showed me and told me in a hundred other ways.” Her fingertips traced the outline of my lips. “Every day, you go beyond saying you love me. You tell me exactly *why* you love me, and that means more than those three little words ever will.”

When she put it like that, it made sense. I still got a little thrill when I recalled her earlier response that she loved knowing I would find her. The words did hit different; they went deeper. Life had left us both a bit insecure when it came to being loved. The people who should have loved us unconditionally had let us down, leaving us with scars that caused us to question our worth. But we were loveable, even if we needed a little reassurance now and then.

“So, we do it our way?” I asked.

“I love...our way.”

Epilogue

Natalia

Life in Lupine took some getting used to, but the pros far outweighed the cons. Everything moved at a slower pace, but the people were genuinely friendly. Options for shopping and dining were limited, but so was crime. And pollution, and noise, and stress. Besides, whatever the town lacked was never more than a short drive away.

By far, the biggest pro was Shawn. Not just having him there, but what the town did for him. There was an ease about him that no other city could generate. Sure, he was happy to travel to Nashville when necessary, and he indulged my need for city life with plenty of date nights in Charlotte. But Lupine was home. It was where he most belonged, and that was enough for me.

After taking a few days to recover from everything we'd been through, Shawn had gotten right to work in the studio with Dodging Reality while I spent my days overseeing the renovation at the old firehouse. Wanting to keep the studio's name a surprise until the very end, I had to keep Shawn away from anyone and anything that might give it away. Turns out, that was easier than I ever imagined. His long hours in the studio and hyper-fixation on several smaller projects kept him well occupied. And though that helped my cause, his schedule had me worried he was working too much.

No, the irony was not lost on me.

Fortunately, we had blocked off the month of December, which was rapidly approaching. Technically, the firehouse studios were ready to open, but we had decided to wait until the new year to schedule any clients, intentionally setting aside some time for ourselves and to be with family and friends. Now that I had an abundance of both, I couldn't wait. Shopping trips with the ladies were already planned, as were several other holiday traditions including decorating the lodge for Christmas. Dad and Helen were flying in for the holidays, and so was Grammy, who I absolutely adored. Callie was

supposed to be home too, though she had been vague on dates and no one had heard from her in a few weeks. But the last time she had checked in, she was happy with Mitch in Georgia.

With so much happening and so many things to look forward to, November had flown by. Shawn's feature interview was published, garnering a lot of positive feedback from fans and colleagues. The overwhelming support helped reaffirm his decision to discuss some of the personal details of his life. Not everything. After all, it was healthy to keep some matters private. But sharing his general struggles and most meaningful triumphs had indeed lifted a weight from his shoulders.

The night before Thanksgiving, everyone gathered in the main kitchen to help prepare the big meal. Mama Bee assigned tasks, reigning over the mayhem. A gourmet chef, I was not. But I chopped and peeled my heart out as music played and fun was had.

Shawn, however, was unusually antsy and distracted. I'd noticed it building for several days, despite his latest recording project coming to an end, and I needed answers. The moment we were alone in our cabin, I pounced. Literally. I got him flat on his back and straddled his hips, pinning him to the mattress. It had become an effective technique when I needed to get his attention.

"Out with it," I demanded. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he hedged, not convincing me one bit. I patiently waited him out, something I'd also learned to do. It worked like magic. With a groan, he gave in. "Fine. I have a surprise for you and it's making me crazy trying to hold it in. It's all I can think about, which makes me more worried I'm going to slip up and say something."

I pressed my lips together, trying to hold back my laughter so he would know I was taking him seriously. I was only partially successful.

"I mean it," he insisted. "Seriously, I think we need a new rule: no secrets or surprises. They're too stressful and they

always get us into trouble.”

He had a point. The firehouse purchase alone had proven that. And I still hadn't told him the reason I left early the morning after the awards show. He would only feel a misguided sense of guilt over the fact that he hadn't been with me during my altercation with Troy.

He'd felt bad enough when I started having nightmares. At his suggestion, I talked with Jeremy, who had worked wonders. Not only did he help me resolve some lingering trauma caused by Troy, but he worked with me on my fear of loss and rejection, which I hadn't realized was initially triggered again by my dad's illness. In hindsight, I could see how nearly losing him, even unintentionally, had sparked my unhealthy need for control and to prove myself. It just looked different now that I was an adult, which I was learning to recognize.

“No secrets or surprises?” I asked, thinking about my own secret. It had been difficult to keep the studio's name hidden on documents and still get his input on important matters. And as much as I wanted to surprise him, we worked better as a team. We always had. “I think you're right, and I've been keeping a secret of my own that I want to tell you.”

Planting his feet on the bed, he arched his hips up, sending me toppling forward. I managed to catch myself before easing down to peck his lips. Using the position to his advantage, he held me close. “Okay, but me first, or I won't be able to focus on yours.”

I settled in and got comfy, crossing my arms on his chest to rest my chin on top. “Tell me.”

“Well, we've both been working really hard and deserve a break, so I booked a vacation as an early Christmas present.” He rushed to fill in more details, excitement lacing his voice. “I double-checked with Kara to make sure your calendar was completely clear. We leave next week and will be gone for twelve days.”

Using his phone, he pulled up the website for an all-inclusive resort in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. He scrolled

through pictures of the private villa he had chosen, which had an infinity pool overlooking a breathtaking view of the ocean. The resort itself had several dining options and offered twenty-four-hour room service. In addition to that, there was a full range of other amenities including a spa and various guided excursions, plus concierge service to fulfill any request. It was a virtual paradise.

Shawn went on to explain that since there weren't any direct flights and he preferred to break the trip into smaller segments anyway, we would be spending a night in Denver each way. Being close to Boulder would also give him a chance to check in on Bursting with Apathy, who was gearing up for their first major tour. The rest of the time would be for exploring the city together.

“It sounds perfect.”

“Okay, but if you decide to change or add anything, it won't hurt my feelings. As much as I loved surprising you with the plan, I don't want the sole responsibility of executing it. I'm terrified I'll lose our passports or miss a flight because I mixed up the times.”

“Good, because sitting back and not handling anything would completely stress me out.”

We both laughed, and any remaining worry seemed to melt away. He sighed in relief before grinning. “Okay. Your turn.”

“I'd rather show you.”

Curiosity etched his brow as we put on our shoes and jackets. It continued to radiate from him as I drove us out to the new studio site. And it grew to near bursting as I made him wait while I went in to turn on the exterior lights and grab a stepladder to reach the burlap that had been tied in place to cover the sign above the door.

“Ready?”

“Aren't you supposed to wait until the grand opening for this?”

“Nope. This is all for you.” With that, I pulled on the string and let the fabric fall away.

I slowly descended the ladder and moved closer, keeping my eyes on Shawn so I could see his reaction. He stood motionless except for the muscles working in his throat. His eyes repeatedly scanned the sign. The black background and the little green clover in the corner caught his attention. But he kept returning to the text that read *Greenwell Studios*. The significance of the new name was obvious, but he seemed to need a moment for it to soak in. Once it did, he cupped my jaw in both hands and slammed his lips against mine.

When we finally came up for air, he reached for both of my hands and dropped to one knee.

“Marry me.”

Stunned speechless at the sudden turn of events, I could only stare as I felt my eyes well with unshed tears. Sure, we talked about the idea of getting married, but I had pictured another practical conversation followed by a quick trip to the courthouse. I was not mentally prepared for a romantic proposal.

“I was working up the nerve to propose on a remote beach in Mexico, but now I get to remember this moment each time I walk past this spot. We can get married whenever and however you want. This is simply me telling you I’m ready because I love...my life with you in it. And I want to have that forever. So, Natalia Shae Greene, will you marry me?”

Without hesitation, I gave him my answer. “Yes.”



It was perfection. Ten days of warm sun, sandy beaches, and relaxation. We spent our days snorkeling, exploring all of the

local landmarks, and Shawn even convinced me to go on a utility vehicle tour through the nearby desert. Following a few hours of rest, our nights were reserved for beachside dinners, dancing, and exploring each other. And though we had enjoyed every moment, our final night came far too soon.

Determined to soak up each and every remaining minute before our flight in the morning, we were the last to leave the little open-air bar that we had discovered just down the beach from the resort. The crowd was long gone, and the live band had been replaced with holiday music that drifted through the air as employees cleaned up. In no rush to leave, we swayed together until the bartender announced the final song.

The opening notes of “I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm” flooded me with memories that were only a year old but felt like they had happened a lifetime ago. With a quick inhale, I pressed further into the comfort of Shawn’s chest.

“You okay?” The familiar rumble in my ear and the gentle hand soothing my back helped remind me that those dark days were over.

Safe in his arms, where I didn’t have to hide my emotions or pretend to be tougher than I felt, I gave my honest, watery response. “It’s crazy how much can change in a year. This song brought back a lot of bad memories from the holidays last year. But it also made me so thankful for what I have now.”

He hummed sympathetically. “Wasn’t your dad getting better by then?”

“Yes, but everything was finally catching up with me. I was so grateful Dad was alive and that he was getting better, but I was just beginning to emotionally process it all. On top of that, he didn’t need my help much anymore, and I didn’t have work to keep me occupied, so I was left with a lot of time to think. And with nothing else to do, I was feeling a little lost. There were many sleepless nights spent binge-watching old movies and reality shows, drowning my feeling in ice cream.

“One night, Dad and I were decorating the tree and listening to old Christmas albums when this song came on. I’d

heard it plenty of times before, but it struck a nerve with me. As most things did, it made me think of you and the night we shared. Then, I connected the lyrics with a line in *An Affair to Remember* about winter being cold for people who don't have warm memories, and I was suddenly filled with a longing for more. I was choking back tears because I didn't want to be old with only memories for company. But the bitter truth was that the love keeping me warm was nothing more than a sentimental fantasy, not anything tangible. I didn't have *you*. So, I started that day feeling lost and ended it lost and lonely, barreling toward depression."

Shawn wiped away the moisture under my eyes with his thumbs before kissing my forehead. "I would have been there if I had known. It kills me to think about what you went through and to know you had to face it all alone."

"It could have been so much worse, but the holidays were a definite low point for me. I spent that night wallowing in self-pity and drank a bit too much wine. But then I woke up the next day determined to move past it. I buried all of my emotions in work and threw myself into researching the idea for a new contract structure and then the contest. Now here we are, a year later, and everything has changed."

"Yes, it has."

When the song came to an end and the lights began to dim, we wound our way down the sandy path back to our villa. Rather than going inside, we cuddled in the oversized lounge chair under a full moon, watching its reflection on the dark waves as they came rippling onto the shore.

I thought about how much better my life was now and how much of that I owed to the man beside me. But it wasn't enough to just think it. He deserved to hear it.

Turning to face him, I sat cross-legged and took both of his hands in mine. "You didn't know it, but you came into my life when I needed you most. Without even trying, you helped me through some of my toughest days. Still, I wish I could go back and do it over. Not just so I wouldn't have been lonely that one night, but so we could get back all of the nights we

lost. Even though we've made up for lost time and balanced all of the bad with good, I will always wish for more of everything with you; more adventures, more projects, more time at home or on a bus or on a beach. And whether this lifetime gives us fifteen years together or fifty, I will always wish it was longer."

Lost in the beauty of the moment, my words kept flowing. "I am so in awe of you. You balance strength with vulnerability, combine talent with intelligence, and you love with your whole heart. I feel lucky just to know you. The fact that you love me back is so overwhelming that sometimes I'm afraid it can't be real. But you tell me and show me every day so I know that it is.

"We'll have hard times, but we'll also have each other to lean on. And when the hard times come around, they will simply remind us to appreciate all we have and that there's a price to pay for being so incredibly happy the rest of the time. And no matter what may come, I will always be your biggest fan and your fiercest protector. I promise to love you more than anyone; unconditionally and unequivocally for the rest of my life."

Shawn leaned in to press a soft kiss on my lips and then each of my hands. "I love...that you have such a big heart. You also came into my life when I needed someone. Both times. Not only had I given up on ever finding someone to love me, but I thought that I was incapable of giving someone love the way they deserved. Looking back on our first night together, you planted a seed of hope in me. You gave me a glimpse into what was possible. And though I was disappointed that I couldn't have it right away, I realize now that many seeds need to endure a dormant season and will wait for the ideal conditions to make sure that what grows is healthy and strong.

"You make my life better in ways I never could have imagined. My dreams are bigger, my life is richer, and my heart is fuller. I used to look at the future and base my potential happiness on the band's success or other professional accolades. It was centered on things around me because I was

never fully comfortable with what was on the inside. You helped to change that. You see me, all of me, and you make it your mission to support me in every way. And as much as I love all that you give, I promise to give you as much in return. I vow to never take you for granted and to always carry my share of the hardships. Through the good times and bad, I will strive to be a man you deserve; a true partner.”

My heart melted with each new sentiment, but he wasn't done.

“I will also do my best to tell you every day why you mean so much to me so you will never have cause for doubt. But I need you to understand that there are times when I'm so consumed by what I feel for you that it's impossible to single out one reason why. When that happens, the words 'I love you' are all I have to offer. And though the words may seem common and overused, know they are never said lightly. When I say I love you, it's because I love all of you, every single part, and they're the only words I can find to encompass the enormity of that.”

I felt my eyes welling up, not sure I was going to make it through much more without falling apart. But I did my best to hold on while he finished.

“Throughout life's crazy journey, you are the one I want beside me. I also promise to be your biggest fan and your fiercest protector. And I absolutely promise to love you more than anyone, unconditionally and unequivocally for the rest of my life.”

Twin tears spilled over as I leaned in to press my lips to his. The kiss deepened and lingered, both of us captivated by the perfection of the moment. He pulled me into his lap, where I was wrapped in the fiercest hug. We held on tight, never wanting to let go of the comfort, safety, and love we felt there. Right where we belonged.

“Why can't it be that easy to get married?” I sighed.

Shawn hummed in agreement then pulled back, his eyes going wide. “It can be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Simple. We’re going back through Denver on our way home, and Colorado allows self-solemnization. All we’d need to do is visit the county clerk’s office for a license to make this official.” He stared at me a moment, letting that sink in along with his barely restrained excitement. “What do you think?”

His smile grew, mirroring my own as the idea took hold. It was impulsive and exhilarating. It was unconventional but genuine. It was unexpected yet perfect. It was us.

“I think we just got married.”

NOT THE END...

I hope you enjoyed reading *Changing the Tempo* as much as I enjoyed writing it! Please take a minute to leave a review on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#). Reader reviews make a huge difference for authors and are always greatly appreciated.

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things get rough.

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you will ever know.

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April is a contemporary romance author who lives in Florida with her husband and two grown children. They have reached Diamond level in the Cat Distribution System with a current count of nine. April was an elementary teacher before pursuing writing as more than a hobby. Her two addictions are romance and sweet iced tea. She also has a mild obsession with recycling. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, listening to music, gardening, and visiting Walt Disney World.