



DETAILS

SONGS OF FREEDOM #2

EVE HOLMES

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BOOK 2

EVE HOLMES

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To anyone who has ever had to fight for the love they deserve

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you for continuing with Harley and Ezra's story! These boys have my whole heart and I love seeing the love you have for them!

Details is book 2 in the Songs of Freedom Series, and books in this series must be read in order, as this is a continuation of Silhouette. Book 3 will be the final book in this series.

This book is heavier than Silhouette, and dives into some deeper topics and areas of mental health. The content and trigger warnings are at the end of this note, and I encourage you to review them and read with your mental health in mind. Please feel free to reach out with any questions or for clarification.

Details does end on a cliffhanger, but just like Silhouette, it's a promising and hopeful one. An HEA is promised in book 3!

While we are in the rockstar world, this series' main focus is on the relationship between Ezra and Harley. Creative liberties and freedoms were taken within the context of the music world for the purpose of this book.

Possible triggering themes and content warnings:

- Mention of death of a parent
- Alcohol abuse and addiction mentioned
- Emotional manipulation (not from any main characters)

- Severe anxiety with panic attacks and dissociation
- Negative self talk
- Explicit sexual scenes

I hope you enjoy this next chapter in Harley and Ezra's journey!

Happy reading!

Eve xo

CHAPTER ONE

Ezra

IT'S BEEN a crazy fucking month.

I shift my weight in my chair, while Ollie and I wait to begin an interview. It's our last one of the day, and I am ready for it to be over. We played in Seattle last night, then came right to San Jose for a full media day today. Tomorrow night will be our 19th show since we started this tour one month ago in January, after a *very* successful release of our debut album. Capture Music went big and sent us out on a tour consisting of 91 shows over 7 months, beginning in North America and ending in Europe.

I yawn and stretch my arms over my head as I adjust in my seat again, as my ass is falling asleep. I can usually handle media well, and sometimes even enjoy it, but full days like this are tough. Everything else about tour life has been pretty fun, as there is no feeling quite like playing to crowds of 50,000 or more fans and travelling the country with your best friends. The crew are awesome, the fans are amazing, and it is all still very surreal. It's a constant whirlwind, as we don't have a lot of downtime between travel, sound-checks, interviews, appearances... you name it. We never know what the day is going to look like until we get our day sheets in the morning, and the excitement and unknown can be fun. But, these media days? They're not so fun. They remind me of everything I lost.

The interviewer comes into the room, smiling at Ollie and I. She reaches her hand out for each of us to shake. "Hi, nice to

meet you! I'm Cynthia from Media Four Entertainment. We're an online media channel, and very excited to have you on."

"Thank you, I'm Ezra." I smile at her.

"I'm Ollie!" Ollie pipes up, always enthusiastic no matter what time of day it is, or what we've been doing.

"You boys must be tired," Cynthia says as she gets her mic hooked up. "I hear you've been going since 9:00 this morning."

"Yup, you're our last one." I glance at the clock and see it is almost 7:00. We've had some small breaks, but our butts have been in these chairs with a revolving door of reporters for almost 10 hours. We've had a few of these days, where they park us in one spot and let the media come to us as promo for the tour and album.

"Hopefully I'll make it a good one." Cynthia smiles back at me. The Prism media coordinator signals to Cynthia that we're ready and her time has begun.

"So, we have two members of Send Help here, the new sensation from Ithaca, New York, taking over the world. Ollie and Ezra, how does it feel to be launched into fame overnight?"

"Awesome," Ollie says, beaming. I laugh, happy to let him answer. He goes on to explain how our lives have changed, and how insane this whole thing is. We talk about our music and the tour, and I almost think we're about to get away without any of the usual questions I despise. Until we're nearing the end of the interview and Cynthia gives us a sly smile, glancing down at the paper on her lap. "So, I have to ask some burning questions." She pauses, then asks, "Are you guys single?"

I shift my weight and slap on a fake smile, "I am."

"Me too," Ollie says.

"Wow, all four members of Send Help, single! I just interviewed Callum and Harley before you. No girlfriends you

are hiding?”

I keep my smile in place and shake my head, hoping it doesn't look as forced as it is. “I don't know where we'd even find the time.”

She laughs as well and then gives me a sympathetic look. *Oh Cynthia, you have no idea.*

I continue to smile along and answer the rest of her questions about our dating lives, or lack thereof, until the interview is finished. Then we're unhooked from our mics, and we are finally free.

“Should we grab some food?” I ask Ollie as we exit the room.

“Oh, fuck yeah. I think they set up some good stuff this time too.” Ollie rubs his hands together and licks his lips.

The interviews are being held in various rooms in the hotel we are staying at, but one of the conference rooms has been converted into a main break room for our team. As we enter, we see the glorious table of food. I practically moan in pleasure as I grab a sandwich from the table, flop down on a comfy couch, and take a bite. This has been a *long* few days, and even the simple pleasure of a sandwich and a comfy couch is enough to make me tilt my head back and smile.

“Yo, Dad, you wanna play?” Ollie asks as he sits on the couch opposite me.

I look over to Ian, our tour manager, who is sitting at one of the tables working on his laptop. He looks over his computer to Ollie, who is starting up a video game on the TV. “I'm good, Ollie,” he says and goes back to his work with a small smirk on his lips. Ian has pretty much become a dad to us on the road, and Ollie has even started calling him Dad. And I mean, he does fit the role. He has four young guys to look after and organize, which I know can't be easy, and he does it with ease. We all have our different needs, and he somehow meets them all while making sure the tour runs smoothly.

“I’ll play with you,” I say, getting up to move over to Ollie’s couch and he passes me a controller.

“Sick! FIFA? Callum said he’d play with me tonight but who knows when I’ll be seeing him.” He pouts, glancing at the door that leads out to the hallway, and the other interview rooms.

I chuckle, and casually cast my own glance to the door. “Yes, FIFA.”

We play for a little bit while we eat, but the room starts filling up quickly and getting busy with the PR team, as reporters are wrapping up and the day is finished. I don’t want to get sucked into anything else this evening, so I set my controller down and nudge Ollie. “Let’s call it, Ol. I’m tired.” *And don’t want to be around the PR team any longer than I need to.*

Ollie glances around the room and gives me a knowing look. “Yeah.” He switches the TV off and we quietly exit, heading up to our floor.

Once in our room, Ollie flops on one of the beds, pulling a book out of his backpack. “Did you know that reading leads to improved memory?” he asks, as he opens his book and settles against the pillows.

I chuckle as I pull out a pair of sweatpants from my bag. “I bet it does. What are you reading?”

He turns the cover so I can see it, showing me a murder mystery novel. He gives me a serious face and nods, mouthing *murder* before burying his face in it.

I pull on my sweatpants, ready to finally relax. Just as I lay back on the other bed, there’s a knock on the door. Ollie hops up to answer it, and Callum strolls into the room.

“Hey, man.” He nods at me, then looks to Ollie. “Ready?”

“Yup, I’m ready to whoop your ass!” Ollie grabs his backpack and slings it over his shoulder, pointing a finger at

Callum. "I'm undefeated in FIFA." He then turns his finger to me. "Ask him."

I snort and shake my head, while Callum narrows his eyes at him, his competitive side coming out. "We'll see about that."

I laugh at them. "Have fun."

"See ya, dude!" Ollie waves, and they head out.

I lay back on the pillow and let out a sigh. The quietness finally settling in, taking root in my bones and releasing some of the tension. As my eyes begin to get heavy, there's a soft knock on my door. I roll off the bed and make my way over to it, running my hand through my hair and blowing out a breath. As I open it, I see Harley standing there.

"Hey," I say, glancing down the hall to see if anyone is out here with him. There's a few people around, but he's here on his own.

"Hi," he says, and bites his lip. He nervously looks down the hallway as well, before flicking his eyes back to me.

I open the door wider. "Want to come in?" I ask, gesturing inside.

He puts his hands in his pockets and does a little shoulder shrug. "Uh, sure."

He shuffles into the room, and I close the door behind us. He sits on the edge of the bed and rubs a hand over his thigh while I reach into the mini fridge to pull out two bottles of water, throwing one to him.

"How was today?" I ask as he catches the bottle, and I lean back against the edge of the desk.

He scowls at me. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." I cock an eyebrow at him. "What, we're not going to talk?"

He rolls his eyes. "We can, I guess." He takes a sip of his water. "Not exactly what I had in mind for tonight."

“Hm.” I give him an assessing look. “And what did you have in mind?”

He tilts his head. “Sinking my cock into your tight ass would be a start.”

A smile spreads across my face and I set my water down, quickly crossing the room to take his and straddle him where he’s sitting on the edge of the bed.

He looks up at me with those gorgeous emerald green eyes. “It’s bad enough we have to put on that weird show in the hallway like we aren’t together, don’t take that from me in here.”

“I’d never take that from you, baby,” I say softly.

He wraps his arms around my waist and leans his head against my chest. I stay there, letting him hold me as I run my fingers through his hair. As hard as I find this whole situation, I know it’s harder on him. It seems like we are always in the public eye, so we don’t have much time together. He struggles so much with interviews and being in the spotlight. With us having to pretend like we’re not together, I can’t be there for him in the way that I want to be. In the way he needs. I can give him our thumbs up and an arm squeeze when the cameras are away, but it never feels like enough. When we are finally together again at the end of the day, I know he needs this time to let it all go and relax.

He sighs against my chest and pulls back to look into my eyes. “Ollie’s gone for the night?”

I push his hair back from his face. “Yeah, Callum came to get him a bit ago.” I take in the tiredness in his eyes and kiss his forehead. With certain members of our team watching us very closely, we often have to switch rooms late at night. It’s stupid that our management has even assigned us rooms in the first place, with Ollie and I in one and Harley and Callum paired in another. Our whole crew knows that Harley and I are together, and everyone who matters supports us. But, with Capture Music using the media image clause in our contract

against us, they seem to think our fans wouldn't be our fans if they knew we were together. And apparently, if someone was to see us sharing a hotel room, that could tip them off. Which is completely ridiculous. This is our only time to really be together, where we aren't worried about cameras or anyone spotting us. And they want to take that away too. But, whenever he can, Callum arranges for him and Ollie to go to the gym or play video games, so that Harley and Ollie can quietly switch rooms. We owe him a lot for coming up with this plan, and always putting it into place without us even asking.

Harley smiles at me softly, running a hand up my side and around my back. He pulls me in closer to him, bringing his lips to mine. I part to let his tongue sweep into my mouth and gently move my hips against his. I feel a swell of lust rise up inside me as I have him back in my arms, and I know we won't be going right to sleep tonight. Placing my hands on his shoulders, I push him back so he's laying on the bed. He watches me with his bottom lip between his teeth as I continue to rock my hips, grinding my hardening cock on his. "You know, I've been thinking," I say as I push his shirt up so I can run my hand over his abs.

"Yeah?" he asks, moving his hands to my hips.

"About fucking you one of these days."

His eyebrows shoot up and a playful smirk dances on his lips as he raises his hips to grind into me. "Oh really?"

"Hmm." I grin at him.

"Well, maybe one of these days." He pulls my arm so I fall on top of him, bringing my lips close to his. I feel his breath as he says, in a low, sultry tone, "But like I said earlier, I've been thinking of my cock in your ass all day, and I'd really like to get started on that."

A breath escapes me, and I practically moan with anticipation as I nod. "Well then, we probably should."

His lips find mine as his hand moves to the back of my head, pulling me in for a deep kiss full of an intense heat that has been building from days of not being able to touch each other in the way we want. I reach down to undo his pants, reaching in to fist his hard cock and stroke him. He moans into my mouth while he moves his hips to meet my hand.

“Mm, that feels good,” he groans as he kisses down my neck, and trails his hands under my shirt. “Take this off.”

Harley sits up with me as I yank my shirt off, wrapping an arm around my waist to roll us, moving on top of me. We frantically strip the rest of our clothes, and my hands roam over his bare skin, needing to be as close as possible. As he moves his head down my chest, his licks and sucks on my nipple send a zing of electricity up my spine, which is only magnified as he wraps a hand around my cock and strokes. A deep moan escapes me as I sink my fingers into his hair, urging him to increase his pace on me. As he moves back up to sink his tongue into my mouth, my grip tightens in his hair, and lets out a deep growl against my lips. *Fuck yeah, baby, I know what you like.* As he continues to stroke my cock, my need only grows. I want more from him.

I push him off me as I get up to grab the lube from my bag. He immediately catches it as I toss it to him, the sound of the lid cracking open sending a jolt of exhilaration through me. As I lay back down beside him, he gets a feral look on his face and pulls me against him, rolling onto his side.

“Fuck, baby, it’s been too long,” he breathes against my lips. He lifts my leg over his and reaches his arm around me. The feeling is pure electricity as he swirls his finger around my hole, and I can’t help but moan and grind my ass back against his hand. He smirks, pulling me closer again, and pushing a finger inside me.

A breath escapes me as I drop my head to his shoulder. “*Fuck...*”

His finger hits all the right places as he slides in and out of me, lighting up my senses. His hips are rocking against mine,

creating the perfect friction on my cock and I grunt with pleasure as he adds another finger in my hole and stretches me. Our grunts and groans fill the room as I reach down between us to fist his cock and pump him in time with his fingers in my ass.

“I need you in me now,” I pant, as I roll on my back and pull him with me, his fingers slipping out of me.

“Greedy,” he murmurs as he as he immediately pushes his fingers back into my ass and moves his head down my body. His hot mouth finds the tip of my cock, and the sensation is overwhelming. My hands immediately move to the back of his head, and I raise my hips so he takes me deeper. As my cock glides to the back of his throat, I almost come right here and now.

“Please,” I whimper as I try to control my panting and claw at him, frantically begging for more.

He releases me from his mouth and pulls his fingers from my ass, nudging my knee wide so he can settle between them. I watch with anticipation as he lubes up his cock, and swipes his lubed fingers through my crease. A shiver ripples through me, and I’m breathing heavy as he grabs my hips to pull me close to him. His eyes meet mine, and they sparkle with the want and need that I feel. My eyes track his hand as it moves down to grip his cock as he lines up, and slowly pushes into me. “Oh god, yes,” I moan, the feeling perfectly overwhelming.

His hips meet my ass, and I moan again at the intense fullness. Harley starts to move his hips, and the pressure is building already. I run my hand down his abs, watching as that perfect V flexes with his thrusts. His dick is sliding against my prostate, sending intense tingles up and down my spine, and pulling soft whimpers from me. As he lifts my leg higher so he can thrust deeper, my whimpers turn into a desperate groan. *Fuck, yes.*

“Yeah baby, you take it so deep,” he grunts as his thrusts increase in speed and I fist the bedsheets beside me. His thick

cock feels so good in my ass as I grind against him while he fucks me, needing him as deep as possible. I can't get enough of him. I raise my hips again and he knows exactly what I need. He tightens his grip on them, pulling me closer so he's slamming into me. But it's still not enough. I need *more*. I pull him down, grabbing the back of his head and holding tight as he pants into my neck. He wraps a hand around my cock and strokes me in time with his thrusts, bringing me closer and closer.

"Fuck, you feel so fucking good," he says against my neck, his panting increasing. I can tell he is getting close too as I run my hand down the hard muscles of his back to feel them tightening. "Are you going to come for me, baby?" he asks breathily.

"Yes," I moan. He continues thrusting into me hard and pumping my cock, bringing my release to the surface. The tingles rise from my feet and up my legs, leading to an overwhelming pleasure surging through my body. I groan loudly as I shoot cum all over my abs and his hand, quivering under his touch.

"I love when you come for me," Harley breathes as he watches me writhe and moan. He leans back, grasping both of my hips again as he thrusts into me a few more times before his stomach muscles contract and his movements stutter. His head drops and he groans as he comes in my ass. I'm breathless as I watch him, his muscles trembling and hands gripping my hips tight.

As he comes down from his high, he pulls out of me then leans over to kiss his way up my stomach. I feel like I could come again as I watch him lick my trail of cum from my abs, up to my mouth. When he gets there, he pushes his tongue between my lips, giving me a taste of myself. I pull him in to devour his mouth, getting every last drop of my desire for him.

His head drops to my chest and breathes deeply. I let my hand trail down his back, feeling his deep breaths and rapid heartbeat. When he eventually stands up, he looks down at me

with soft smile playing at the corner of his lips. He holds out a hand, and I take it so he can pull me up. As his arms wind around my waist, his head drops to my shoulder, and a large breath escapes him. I hold him tight, knowing he needs this. I need this too.

“I love you,” he says as he tightens his grip on me.

I run my hands up his back and kiss the side of his head. “I love you, too.”

He eventually lets go, but I sense his reluctance. Even though we have the rest of the night together, it's nothing but a fleeting moment in this wild ride we are on. Every minute together feels too short, and we want to hang on tight every chance we get. I lead him into the shower, where I run my hands over every inch of him, craving everything about him and relishing in this moment we can share, just the two of us. Once we're clean, we crawl into bed and fall asleep in each other's arms, soaking up these small moments. Before they are taken away from us again in the morning.

CHAPTER TWO

Harley

THE ALARM SOUNDS, and I bury my face in Ezra's neck, squeezing him tight. He hums and runs his hand up my arm. I'm not ready to leave our bubble yet.

I feel him reach over to turn the alarm off, then he rolls into me, wrapping me in his strong arms. I breathe him in and keep my eyes closed. If I don't open them, then the real world can stay away for a while longer.

"We have to get up, babe," he murmurs.

I sigh. "I know."

Neither of us move for a few more minutes as we continue to hold each other. Eventually, the alarm goes off again and I groan, leaning over Ezra to turn it off.

"Fine," I mutter and plant a kiss on his lips before hopping up to get in the shower.

Ezra chuckles, rolling over to watch me as I head towards the bathroom. "I would say I'd join you, but we're already close on time. And we don't do short showers."

I smirk at him over my shoulder. He's right about that.

As I get into the shower and let the warm water wash over me, I think about the day ahead. I didn't read the day sheet yet for today, but from what we were told yesterday, it will be a busy morning. We are spending the day at the stadium where we are playing tonight, and it sounds like it's filled with media

before sound check. I sigh and run a hand over my face at the thought of that.

Ezra comes into the bathroom as I'm rinsing the last of the shampoo from my hair. He leans against the bathroom counter and rakes his eyes over me.

"That's going to cause some trouble," I murmur as I step out and grab a towel.

"Hm." He steps forward, grabbing the towel from me and wrapping it around my shoulders. "If I can't get any action this morning, I at least want to enjoy a bit of a show."

"Well, we probably should have set the alarm a bit earlier if you truly wanted a show," I say, reaching down to palm my half-erect cock. Just having his eyes on me while I'm naked is enough to get me fired up.

His eyes track my hand down my body and he groans. "Dammit," he sighs as he looks back up at me. "That's not fair."

I laugh, playfully pushing him away. "Get in the shower. Maybe I'll get to fuck you senseless tonight."

"Or I'll fuck you." He shrugs and his lips tip up in a sly smile.

My heart dances at the idea of that. He said that last night too, and I can't help but tease him by acting indifferent towards it. But I would be lying if I said I wouldn't take it from him. And really fucking enjoy it.

"Well, one of these nights may be your lucky night," I say as I turn and head out of the bathroom. The mixed look of shock and intense want on his face completely worth the teasing.

We finish getting ready, and by the time we're all packed up there's a knock at the door.

"Let's go, boys!" We hear Ian's voice from the hallway. I head over and crack open the door. Ian gives me a nod, indicating the coast is clear. I internally roll my eyes that we

even have to do this. What does it matter who I share a room with? But it's not Ian's fault, he's actually helping us and has done a lot for us so we can be together when we have the chance. Our whole crew, besides PR and some of management, has been really open and nice to us. It makes this whole nightmare a bit easier to manage knowing there are people on our side.

Ian leads us to the elevator where Jack, our head of security, is waiting with Ollie and Callum.

"It was an illegal move!" Ollie says to Callum as we enter the elevator, and Jack presses the button for the parking garage.

Callum rolls his eyes at him. "The game allowed it, so clearly it wasn't."

"Come on, man. You won by *one* goal. One! An *illegal* goal!" Ollie looks exasperated.

I give him a questioning look. "What's up?"

"Cal won our last game last night in FIFA, but his winning goal shouldn't have even been a goal." He turns and points to Callum. "He tripped me right before his kick that landed in the back of the net. And no foul."

Ezra snorts a laugh. "Isn't that on the game to pick that up?"

Ollie stares at him. "Not you too..." he shakes his head sadly.

The elevator dings and opens to the parking garage. As we exit, I pat Ollie's back and he gives me a smile. "I knew you'd get it," he says to me. I just smile back at him, letting him have this one.

Jack takes our bags and puts them in the back of the van as we all climb in. Callum puts headphones in and tilts his head back on the seat to close his eyes, and Ollie chatters away with Ian. Ezra and I are sitting together in the back of the van, so I lace my fingers through his. I want to take in as much of him

as I can in these last few moments until we're back in the public eye.

The driver pulls into the stadium where a crowd is forming already. It's 8:00 AM, and the show doesn't start until 9:00 PM. Our fans are dedicated, and it's still such a surreal feeling to know that we even have fans, and that they are this excited to see us. I don't think that feeling will ever go away. Just 5 months ago, we were writing our first song in Ollie's garage, and now crowds are forming to see us in a sold-out stadium.

The van pulls into the underground parking, and darkness fills the space. I sigh and squeeze Ezra's hand, trying not to let it wash over me too as my heart rate picks up. Just as I'm about to get out after Ollie and Callum, Ezra places a hand on my arm to stop me. I look over my shoulder, and the darkness lifts as his sparkling blue eyes look into mine. He pulls me in for a quick kiss. "Love you."

I smile back at him, feeling his calm settle into me. "Love you, too."

The stadium is busy with our tour crew as we walk down the hallway to the rooms that are set up for us. It's kind of easy to get lost in it when we are carted around to endless tasks and events, but when I take a step back to look at it all, it's overwhelming. There's a wardroom and hair room, break rooms, kitchen and dining areas, meeting rooms and more, and they're all filled with staff and crew who fill various roles to make this tour happen. It's chaos, and there are days where we don't get one quiet moment to ourselves. There are times when I have a really hard time managing it all, but I'm starting to learn when I need a break. If I can, I will try to sneak away to a quiet space when I feel the panic rising. But it's rare that I can actually do that.

After we have breakfast, we're ushered in to see Olivia, our stylist, to get our hair done for an interview. Which, and I'd never say this to Olivia, is weird. The most I've ever done myself is tie my hair back, which is how I have it today. I point to my head and give her a pleading look. She laughs and

waves me away, letting me keep my messy knot and pulls Ezra into her chair. He is always first because his takes so long. He has a *lot* of hair that can't seem to figure out which direction it's supposed to go in.

Before long we're sitting in a row of chairs, facing an interviewer from a major news channel to do a live segment with us for their morning show. Interviews are my least favourite thing about this new job we've found ourselves in, but live interviews are the absolute worst. My anxiety is skyrocketing as I try to subtly fidget with my hands in my lap to keep from freaking out. The only thing that keeps me from completely losing it during these moments is having Ezra right beside me.

"So, you boys have become international sex symbols," the interviewer smiles at us. "How does that feel?"

I look down at my hands to hide any facial expressions that are likely to creep onto my face. There are a list of questions we get every time, without fail, and they never seem to get any easier to hear and answer. This is one of them.

"It's a weird feeling, that's for sure," Callum says from my left. "Just a few short months ago no one knew who we were, and we just wanted to enter a Battle of the Bands."

"Well now the whole world seems to know who you are, and all the girls are going crazy for you. So, who here has a girlfriend?" she asks, smirking at us all. *Why do they always have to ask that?*

"Actually, none of us," Ollie says from the other side of Ezra. I give him a quick glance and a slight smile in thanks for answering that for us.

The interviewer beams at us. "How exciting for all the ladies out there!" She then looks at me. "Harley, let's start with you. What do you look for in a girl?"

I shift in my seat. *A better question would be something like, tell us about your song writing process? What are your*

biggest musical influences? But no. Always with the personal questions about girls.

I clear my throat and squeeze my hands to keep them from shaking. “Um...” I press my lips together and I see one of the PR team members, Anna, standing behind the camera. She gives me a pointed look with a gesture of her hand, urging me to answer. “I guess someone who’s caring and thoughtful. Someone who is confident, goes after what they want and isn’t afraid to be exactly who they are.” I’ve used this answer before, and I’ll continue to say the same thing every time I’m asked. I’ll continue to describe the *man I have*.

The interviewer smiles at me. “Very nice.” She turns to Ezra. “And you, Ezra?”

“I mean, that sounds good.” He gestures towards me, indicating he liked my answer. “I’ll take that, too.”

The interviewer laughs and I can’t help but let a small chuckle escape me as well. He is so good at evading questions with humour. As she moves on to ask Ollie the same question, Ezra taps his fist against my knee with a thumbs up, our own little sign to say we’re here for each other. I smile and do the same to him. As I look up, Anna is shaking her head at us with a hard look on her face, and points to the camera. I sigh and bring my hands back together to fidget in my lap.

Eventually the interview finishes, with a few questions about our actual music. As the camera turns off, I feel the tension start to slip away. These interviews are slowly becoming easier the more I do them, but they still bring so much anxiety. I just want to play our music, and I think I would have an easier time with the interviews and other media if it was *actually* about the music. But the questions are always so personal. They want to know everything about us, and it’s intrusive. Why is it anyone’s business what I look for in a partner, or when my last relationship was? Management, or more specifically PR, allows these questions because it’s apparently what our fan base wants to know. It’s what “sells”. If they only knew they’re selling them a lie. But having Ezra

beside me calms me in a way I never would be able to otherwise. Just him being there, close enough for me to brush my arm against him, or for him to tap my leg with his thumb keeps me present when I want to float away.

We're whisked away to sound check next, and as I step onto the stage with my guitar, all the tension leaves my body. Whether it be sound check, or a sold out show, *this* is where I am most comfortable. Which is really odd and I didn't understand it at first, as it is the epitome of being in the spotlight. Being in front of tens of thousands of people should have my anxiety at an all time high, as even just a few months ago I could barely get myself together enough to play in a pub. However, I think I'm starting to realize that it is here, on stage, I can say what I really want to say. Music is my language, and this is how I can communicate. I can say what I can't say anywhere else. I know what our songs mean, and in my mind, I am telling everyone the truth. What they see when we're facing a camera and answering invasive questions isn't real, but this is. When I look out and see the signs, lights and smiles, I feel like these people see the real us. Even though Ezra and I are a hidden secret, I can't help but think sometimes our fans can see past this bullshit. I'm not sure why I have that feeling, but I'm hanging on to it. It feels like hope.

And because of that hope, I can forget about everything else when I'm up here. The only thing that matters in these moments are the guitar in my hands, my band on stage with me, and the fans who love our music. I can briefly forget the closeting, and hiding. I can forget my dad, and the fact that he is riding on my success when all he has ever done is suppress and abuse me. I was able to get where I am despite the damage he did. I *hate* that he's getting payouts from me to keep quiet about my sexuality, but at least it keeps him away from me. It's fucking ironic too, because he never wanted anyone to know I was gay, for fear of what it would mean for *him*. And now, he's getting paid not to tell anyone I am gay.

"Alright, we're good." One of the sound techs, Richard, turns to us once we get the thumbs up from Seth, our head live

sound engineer.

“Good, I need a nap.” Callum yawns as he passes his guitar to the guitar tech and pats his shoulder in thanks.

“No, dude!” Ollie stands from behind his drums so quickly he knocks his throne over. “FIFA rematch! You promised!”

Callum furrows his brow at him. “I did?”

Ollie shrugs one shoulder. “I’m pretty sure you did?”

Ezra laughs, and I try to hide my chuckle as the tech takes my guitar and his bass as well.

“Fine,” Callum mutters as we make our way off the stage to head towards our dressing room.

“Yes!” Ollie jumps with a fist pump. “I’m so going to get you back, this is revenge.”

Callum rolls his eyes as Ollie takes off down the hallway and darts into our dressing room to get the game fired up. “I should just let him win, right?” he asks, as we get to the door.

I shrug. “If you think you can.” I know how competitive Callum gets, he won’t be able to hold back.

He narrows his eyes at me then yanks the door open, walking with purpose over to the couch where Ollie is seated and grabs a controller.

I glance down the busy hallway, people milling about everywhere. Ezra follows my gaze and then gently shoves me into the room. There are too many people around, a lot of them I don’t know. And all I want to do right now is hold Ezra in my arms.

But there are even people in our room. *Awesome.*

I plop down on one of the overstuffed chairs and Ezra claims the other one, on the other side of the couch. I watch him, anxiously rubbing my hand over my thigh. I just want to hold his hand, or sit beside him. But, our booking agent is on a phone call in the corner of the room, and the tour coordinator is talking to some people I don’t know at one of the tables. I

turn back around to face the TV with a sigh. Callum catches my eye and gives me a reassuring smile.

So, we settle in to watch Callum and Ollie battle it out in FIFA, and Callum goes all out. *I knew it.* Ollie is so into it and determined to win, it's as if he's actually playing soccer. He's leaning forward on the edge of his seat with his hat turned backwards, and he even took his shirt off.

It's turning out to be an intense game, and Ezra and I are even into it as we all yell at the screen. I'm so into watching them that I didn't realize the people our tour coordinator was talking to had left. I turn my head as Ian enters the room. He closes and locks the door, smiling at us as he says, "We should probably review the schedule for tonight."

Before any of us can say anything, Ezra leaps off his chair and crosses in front of the tv causing Callum and Ollie to call out in protest. He crashes into me and I laugh. "Oh shut up, you guys are fine," I mutter as Ezra grabs my face and smashes his lips to mine.

"He could have caused mayhem!" Ollie exclaims, but I'm not paying attention to them anymore. Not when I have my boyfriend in my arms again, after having to pretend all day that he is just a bandmate and a friend. I pull him in closer and deepen our kiss, not caring at all that Callum, Ollie and Ian are here. We take these precious moments whenever we can get them.

Ezra eventually pulls back and nestles in beside me in the chair to keep watching Callum and Ollie battle it out. I wrap my arm around him, keeping him close to me.

Ian settles into the chair Ezra vacated and gives us a smile. I appreciate that he will find these moments for us, whenever he can. He doesn't have to, as I know he has a million other things on his plate. I can't thank him enough for everything he does for us. He reviews the schedule for the rest of the evening; Eat, hair, wardrobe, show time. I smile and nod along, as it's the same as pretty much every other night. I know he's doing this so we can have these few minutes

together before it all gets crazy again. But right now, he could tell me anything, because all I care about is enjoying this moment.



“Ezra, are you all about that bass?”

I try to suppress my laugh and Ezra snorts beside me.

Ollie whips around to look at us, a massive grin on his face. He turns back to the fan holding the sign he just read. “You know, I think he just might be,” he says into the mic.

“Way to play it cool, Ollie,” I mutter with a smirk, and adjust my guitar on my lap. We’re sitting on the drum riser, as we always do when it’s Ollie’s turn with the mic during shows. He has his own segment, and it’s everyone’s favourite time. The fans get to interact with him, and we get a show of our own.

“He’s also got it a bit backwards,” Ezra murmurs with a chuckle. “*You* are all about that bass.”

“My god, guys...” Callum groans from my other side and shakes his head.

“Callum, won’t you spread my sheets?”

Ezra and I laugh while Callum groans again.

Ollie looks confused as he gazes at the sign he read. “Why would he spread your sheets?” He glances back to Callum, then to the fan holding the sign. “I don’t want to suggest anything too naughty here, but don’t you mean like... mess them up?” The crowd roars and I drop my head to my hand.

Ollie waits while the fan says something to him, and he looks even more confused. “So, because he is super smart, he can make your bed? I don’t get it.”

The crowd is erupting in laughs and cheers and Callum just shakes his head at Ollie. “Spreadsheets!” He yells to him.

Ollie stares back at him, wide hands in a gesture to say that doesn’t help. He brings the mic back to his mouth. “Yeah, but like how do you spread sheets, like I don’t think making the bed is what we are getting at here.”

Ezra is straight up cackling beside me. Callum stands up and holds up one hand, palm up. “Spread.” He then holds up his other hand in the same gesture. “Sheets.” He slaps his hands together. “Spreadsheets.”

Ollie stares at him for a very long moment until his mouth drops open in realization. He turns to the girl holding the sign. “Oh! Girl, you nasty.”

We laugh with the crowd as Ollie continues his rounds, and before long we are back to playing our songs. I let our music wash over me as I take in the crowd. They sing along with us, dancing, jumping and waving their signs. It’s wild to think we have such an impact on this many people.

My fingers dance over my guitar strings, and I close my eyes. The heat from the lights warm my skin, the vibrations from the drums and bass make my senses tingle, and the cheers from the crowd make me feel alive. Ezra’s voice flows through my in-ear monitors, and I smile. Here, right now, my soul is happy. I open my eyes to watch him, in constant amazement of his talent, beauty and confidence. We’re on this stage, playing in front of thousands of fans, and my attention is only on him.

Music and Ezra, what more do I need?

CHAPTER THREE

Ezra

“LOOK AT THE MONKEYS, LUNA!” I point at two monkeys who are swinging between branches and chasing each other. Luna giggles in my arms as she watches them, her little arms waving with excitement.

“Just like in your favourite book!” Olivia smiles at her daughter.

We finally have a day off after two days of back to back shows, and we are making the most of it. We’re in Oakland, California, so we came to the Oakland zoo with Olivia and her daughter Luna, who is on tour with us. Olivia is our stylist, but she has also become a great friend to us all. She has worked in this industry for a few years now, so she understands how the pressure can build. She’s been a safe space for all of us whenever that pressure gets to be a bit too much, both in and out of her chair.

Harley joins us after reading the plaque at the end of the enclosure. “Cotton top tamarin,” he says, frowning as he watches them. “They’re critically endangered.”

“Oh. Well, that’s not so fun...” I frown. “Way to bring the mood down.” I nudge his arm and smirk at him.

Harley rolls his eyes and mutters, “They are cute though.”

Luna reaches for Harley from my arms, and he smiles as he holds his hands out to take her. Luna *loves* Harley. The guys and I are a little salty about it because Luna is a really cool one year old, and we all want her to like us. And she

does, but she has a serious thing for Harley. I mean, I guess I get it... I also want to be in his arms all the time.

I watch as he holds her on his hip and walks down the length of the enclosure to see more monkeys. *So fucking cute.*

It's just Harley and I out with Olivia and Luna today. Her husband works remotely while on tour with us so he couldn't join, and we were quick to accept when Olivia suggested we come with her. We don't get out much as our schedule is pretty hectic, and we want to see some of the places we are travelling to. Except we suspect we'll get our hands slapped for Harley and I going out together, which is so fucking frustrating. It's not just us, alone, and we *are* band mates after all. Shouldn't we at least look like we're friends?

"He's so good with her," Olivia says as she sees me watching Harley and Luna.

"Yeah, he is," I agree, looking back to her with a smile.

"If you guys ever have kids, I call Godmom," she says as she starts pushing the stroller after Harley and Luna.

I laugh. "Um, not even close to thinking anywhere near that." I look again to Harley as he crouches down in front of the enclosure, holding Luna on his knee and pointing at the monkeys while she laughs. "Even if we were, I'm barely allowed to interact with him in public right now."

Olivia casts me a sad glance. "Sorry, love. I know this is hard."

I sigh. "Yeah."

I briefly let my mind wander to the places I don't often let it go. To imagine what life would be like if we were allowed to be together, openly and honestly. Harley often talks about how much regret he has in hiding our relationship at first, as we had such a short amount of time where we weren't hiding. I don't want him to feel that regret, because I know how hard it was for him to accept and show himself to the world. Only to be told, again, that it's wrong. He needed that time, and I think I did too. But, to think of what could be is both comforting and

damaging. I love the feeling of promise when I think of the day we can free, and I can show the world he is mine while I proudly love him in the way he deserves. But, those are also thoughts that I quickly shove deep down and lock away. I can't get caught up in the future. We have four years of hiding left. I can't get too hopeful too soon.

Olivia nudges my arm and gives me a sad smile. "Let's go see them." She tilts her head towards Harley and Luna.

I smile at her, pulling myself away from the sad thoughts and focusing on the present. Right now, I have a day out with my boyfriend. And even though these outings have to be with someone else, with a high chance of being reprimanded later, I still get to be with him in this moment.

We head over to join them as they watch the monkeys playing, and Luna is squealing with delight as one monkey comes up close to her.

"Hey babe," I say quietly as I reach Harley's side.

He looks up at me and smiles, his green eyes sparkling. He looks happy, and it makes my heart soar. He struggles with all of this, as there are some days and nights where his anxiety is high or he's feeling really down, but in moments like this where I get to see him let go of it all... I want more of it. We have been trying our hardest to find ways to make it work, and I'm proud of him for doing what he can to manage the stress of this career, and this shit that is coming with it.

"Uh oh," Luna says as she watches a monkey drop from the tree.

"It's ok, he just jumped down," Harley tells her, as he stands up with her. She clings onto him and I smile at them. Seriously, they are the fucking cutest.

I reach out and place a hand on his back before my mind catches up to me and I snap it back. I hear giggling, and look over my shoulder to see some girls watching us, phones out. *Awesome*. I pretend like I was reaching out for Luna and adjust her sweater on her shoulder. I turn around and catch Olivia

watching the girls too. She looks at me and nods, indicating they were taking photos.

“Heads up,” I say quietly to Harley. “Phones are out.”

Harley turns slightly so Luna is hidden from their view. What is he doing to me, I’m trying *not* to swoon over him right now.

My phone rings in my pocket and I pull it out to see my dad’s name lighting up the screen. “One sec,” I say as I step away, answering the call. I had tried to call him earlier after talking to Mom, but he was in a meeting.

“Hey, Dad,” I answer.

“Hi, Ezra,” he says, and it sounds like he’s in the car. “I know it’s your day off, I hope I’m not catching you at a bad time.”

“No, it’s all good. We’re out with Olivia and Luna at the zoo. I was just calling earlier to say hi.” I lean against the railing across the pathway from the monkeys. Harley looks over his shoulder and gives me a little wave. “Harley says hi,” I say to Dad.

“Tell him he owes me \$10 since the Hurricanes won last night,” he chuckles.

I laugh. They are constantly betting on hockey, but neither of them actually follow through with the payout. “Will do.”

“So, you’re in Oakland today and tomorrow?”

“Yeah, we have today off and a show tomorrow night. Probably something during the day too, not sure yet.” I glance over at the girls watching us, phones still out and giggling.

“You guys are busy. Are you doing alright?” Dad asks, sounding a bit tentative.

“Yeah, I’m great. Tired, but it’s fun.”

Dad pauses before asking, “And how is Harley?”

“He’s good.” I look over at him again as he laughs with Olivia and Luna. Dad is always checking in on us, and I know it’s because he feels guilty over the situation we’re in. We’ve told him countless times that he shouldn’t, but he does anyway. He had looked over our contract for us and had advised us that it all seemed appropriate. And it did. Until they used it against us. It’s not his fault, as there’s no way any of us could have predicted this. “We’re doing the best we can.”

“Well, as always, I’m happy to hear you’re both doing as well as can be. I know it’s not ideal, but at least you can have some time together today.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I sigh. I look back over to Harley, and he tilts his head towards the exit to say it’s time to go. “But looks like we’re heading out now. I’ll give you a call tomorrow if I have time?”

“Of course. Be safe, love you.”

“Love you too.” I hang up and walk back over to them.

“Getting awfully close to nap time,” Olivia says, eyeing Luna as her eyes are getting heavy. Harley puts her in her stroller, and we wander out of the zoo. We’re stopped for a few photos, but luckily it’s early on a weekday so it’s fairly quiet here, and we get back to our driver without much fuss.

By the time we make it back to the hotel, Luna is asleep and Olivia takes her right to their room. As we’re about to head into the hotel, Anna from PR beckons us over to the tour bus in the parking lot.

“Great,” Harley mutters, as we make our way over to her. “Here we go.”

“Hi, boys,” she says curtly as she ushers us into the bus. “Had a fun day at the zoo?”

Harley flops down on the couch, looking down at his hands. “What did we do wrong this time?”

Anna tilts her head and levels him with a look that I’m happy he doesn’t see. “Photos are already circulating social

media that show you two awfully close.” She turns to me where I’m standing against the bunks. “You know you can’t do things like this.” She holds out her phone to show a photo of me with my hand on Harley’s back, leaning in and smiling at him while he’s holding Luna.

I sigh and rub my forehead with my hand. “Yeah, I know. But it was just a day at the zoo with a friend, and *we’re* supposed to be friends, right?” I gesture between Harley and me.

She tucks her phone back in her pocket and crosses her arms. “Do friends touch each other like that?”

I furrow my brow at her. “A hand on their back? Yeah...”

She shakes her head and sighs. “I know this is hard, but this is the way it is. I don’t think I need to remind you of the stakes here, do I?” I shoot her a glare. *No, I remember quite well that William is threatening us with millions of dollars.* “If you *have* to go out, you *have* to be more careful. Please, no more carelessness.” She looks between us, waiting for us to agree.

“Yeah, ok.” I say, knowing it’s better to just agree than continue to argue with her.

Anna looks to Harley, still looking down at his hands. “Harley?”

He snaps his eyes up to her and then glances at me, blinking a couple times. “Yeah.”

“Ok.” She uncrosses her arms, looking proud of herself. “Enjoy the rest of your day. *Quietly.*” She then exits the bus, leaving us alone.

“Ugh.” I tilt my head back and groan. “I wasn’t thinking, I should have seen those girls there.”

Harley doesn’t say anything and when I bring my head back down, he has a blank look on his face.

“Babe?” I step towards him.

“Huh?” He looks up at me.

I sit down on the couch with him. “You alright?”

He shrugs his shoulders and lets out a big breath. “Frustrated,” he says simply.

“Yeah, me too.” I grab his hand and bring it up to my lips so I can kiss the back of it. “Ollie and Callum are still out golfing, and will be for the rest of the day. Why don’t we stay on the bus and watch a movie? Escape all the people for awhile.”

Harley glances around the bus, seeming to just notice now that we’re alone. He smiles and looks back to me. “Yeah.”

I see a bit of his brightness in his eyes again, so I smile and stand up. “Come on,” I say, pulling him to his feet and leading him to the back room of the bus. It’s a cool set up, with a wrap around couch facing a big TV on the wall. There are windows all around, but they’re tinted so we’re still hidden from everyone.

I put on a movie, picking a sports drama I know Harley will like. I can’t quite get that blank look he had out of my head, and how he lost that sparkle that was in his eyes all day. I want to get it back and make him feel happy again.

I settle on the couch with him and pull him into me, kicking my legs up so we’re lying down. He settles in and rests his head on my chest, letting out a sigh. I kiss his head, and run my fingers through his hair. After a while, I feel him relax under my touch.

“You ok?” I murmur.

He tilts his head to meet my eyes, that sparkle staring back at me. “I am now.”

I give him a soft smile and bring my lips down to his in a gentle kiss. “Good.”

He wraps his arm around me and brings his head back down to continue watching the movie. But after awhile, I can’t take it anymore.

We're alone.

I let my hand wander down his body and slip my fingers under his shirt to feel the waistband of his boxers peeking above his jeans.

He chuckles and tilts his head up to me again.

I smirk at him. "We have the bus to ourselves."

He glances down the length of the bus then back to me. "We do."

"Someone could walk in," I say, dropping my gaze to his lips then back up to his eyes as they flash with the same excitement I'm feeling.

"They could," his eyes flit between mine and a smirk dances on his lips.

"We were told to be quiet though," I say in mock sadness. "Fucking on a bus is far from quietly enjoying the rest of our day."

He cocks an eyebrow and shifts his weight over me. "But I would really enjoy it, so fuck quiet. Scream for me, baby."

I fist his shirt and pull him into me, smashing my mouth against his. His tongue sweeps past my lips to slide along mine and I groan at the delicious taste of him.

He grinds his hips into me and the feeling of his hard cock pressed against mine while we lay here, for anyone to walk in on, is exhilarating. My stomach flutters as I slide my hands down to run them under his shirt, along the hard muscles of his abs and his back. My hands continue to roam him as we grind into each other and kiss deeply, blocking out the outside world and taking this moment for us.

My cock is aching for his touch as he moves his lips to my neck, and I don't care where we are. "Harley, I need you," I pant.

He slips off the couch so he's kneeling on the floor and yanks me by the knees so I move into sitting. I stare down at

him between my legs and smile. “Just like our first time.”

The corner of his lips tip up in a lopsided smile as he reaches to undo my pants. “Hm,” he hums. “That was hot.”

I reach out and sink my fingers into his hair as he slides my zipper down. “You have no idea.” The first time he ever had his mouth on me is something I’ll never forget. The intense feeling of opening myself up to something I was both unsure of and desperately wanting. It didn’t take long for me to be completely all in with him. As I look at him now, thinking about how far we’ve come and everything we still have to face, my love for him is overwhelming.

I sit up, wrapping my hand around the back of his neck to bring his lips to mine. I kiss him feverishly, needing to show him this love I’m feeling, as words just aren’t enough. His hands come up to my elbows as he kisses me back with the same intensity, both of us getting lost in lust. As I let him go, he looks into my eyes, and I know he feels it too. This deep love that connects us and will never break, no matter what. I hold his gaze for a moment longer, before I glance down at my hard cock, then back up to him. “Now you can suck it.”

He laughs and pushes me back against the couch. “Gladly.” He pulls my pants down just enough to free my cock and lowers his head, wrapping his hot mouth around the tip. A groan rumbles from my chest as I tilt my head back, letting the warm, wet sensation overwhelm me. He runs a hand up my abs under my shirt as he slowly takes me into his mouth deeper, wrapping his tongue around my cock and sliding it over that sensitive area behind my tip.

I groan again and watch him as he slowly slides up and down my length, meeting my eyes. My heart skips a beat as I take in that look he gets, when he knows he’s making me feel good and he wants to watch me squirm and moan. He slowly slides all the way down to take me to the back of his throat and my hands automatically make their way to his head. He moves back up at a tortuously slow pace before taking me all the way in again.

“Harley,” I moan as I move my hips up in attempt to increase his speed. He’s teasing me and he fucking knows it.

He hums along my dick and I feel that electric tingle shoot up my spine. My cock is so sensitive as he builds me up, and all I can do is pant and moan as he slowly increases his pace. The pressure is rapidly building and I feel like I’m going to blow, so I reach out to pull him up, sinking my tongue in his mouth. I push him onto the couch so he’s lying on his back, quickly shove his knees apart, and undo his pants. My movements are the opposite of his, which were slow and teasing. Mine are heated and rapid, full of want and *need*.

He watches me as he bites his lip. “Fuck, I wish we had lube,” he says as I yank his pants down, also just enough to free his rock solid cock.

“Mm,” I moan as I take in the sight of him, ready for me. I crawl over him and drop my hips to grind my cock against his. “We really should have it with us at all times.”

“Agreed,” he grunts, as I rub my dick along his and bring my lips to his neck, kissing up to his jaw. He rocks his hips into mine, creating a friction so fucking good I can barely hold myself up overtop of him.

“That feel good, baby?” he asks in a low voice in my ear, as he rocks his hips again, then brings a hand down to wrap around both of us. “Want me to jerk us off?”

“Yes,” I turn my head to breathe against his lips. He moves his hand up and down both of us, quick and feverish, no longer teasing. I can feel his breathing quicken as he jerks us, and his arm tightens around me. We fall into a messy, hot kiss as we grunt and groan, Harley bringing both of us closer to the edge with his hand.

“I’m gonna come,” I pant against his lips. He raises his hand and pushes me backwards so I’m on my knees, and immediately drops his head to take me in his mouth again. He sucks my throbbing cock, as my muscles tremble and I shoot my load into his mouth. My head tilts back as a rush of

pleasure courses through me with my release, and he swallows me down with a moan. “Oh my god,” I grasp his hair in my fist as I tremble, dropping my head to look at him. His eyes are glassy with pleasure and need, as he licks his lips. *My turn.*

I push him onto his back and wrap my tongue around his cock. The second my tongue touches him he is groaning and grasping my arm tight. “Oh, fuck,” he grunts as I bob my head on him, taking him hard and fast. His muscles tense beneath my touch and I feel his cock twitch. “Coming,” he pants, as he erupts in my mouth. I greedily swallow him down, licking and sucking to take it all while his hands keep my head right where he wants it.

I look up as I swallow down the last of him, and he lets a little smile play on his lips. I release him from my mouth, and crawl up his body to kiss him softly. His arms wrap around me, pulling my body close to his. We stay there for a moment, enjoying this closeness and silence that we stole for ourselves, in a place where we shouldn't.

Until we hear the door to the bus open and we both jump up with lightning speed. Our pants are still open and cocks are out, movie credits rolling.

“Boys? You in here?” We hear Ian's voice call out.

“Yeah,” I call out as I finish tucking myself away and do up my belt. I glance over to see Harley just managing to get himself put back together as Ian walks in the back room with us.

Ian glances between us and the TV screen. He chuckles as realization sets in. “Just wondering where you were. Carry on.” He leaves, sliding the door closed to the back room. *Smart.*

Harley snorts a laugh and brings his hand to his head.

“Well, at least he came in when we were done,” I laugh.

“Good fucking thing,” Harley agrees as he shakes his head. He leans over to grab the remote. “Now, let's actually watch a movie.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Ezra

Harley

I'd bend you over this table if I could right now

That would be quite the show. I'm here for it

Ass up then

How about you get your ass up?

Later. I'm busy.

"I LOVE YOU GUYS SO MUCH!"

I look up from my phone to see a girl slide a picture of us across the table for me to sign. "Thank you, we love you too." I smile at her as I sign the photo and slide it to my right for Harley.

"I love your tattoos," she gushes as she steps along the table so she's in front of him.

"Thanks." He smiles at her then signs the photo, passing it to Callum beside him. She continues to move down the table to Callum and Ollie, and another girl steps up in front of me with another photo.

We've been at this signing for about an hour now, and there is still a long line of people waiting to see us. It was

originally planned for just an hour, but we're going a little longer so we can try to fit more people in. It's wild how many fans turn out for these events, just to see us for 2 minutes and get our signatures.

That wasn't a no... so...

“Can I get a hug?”

“No hugs.” Jack responds from behind us before I can even respond to the broken-hearted looking girl standing in front of me. She's young, maybe about 15, and wearing a Send Help t-shirt while hugging a photo of us to her chest.

I give her a sad smile. “Sorry. What's your name?” I ask, reaching out for the photo.

“Emily,” she says shakily as she passes the photo to me.

“Nice to meet you, Emily. I'm Ezra,” I say as I sign the photo and pass it to Harley.

“I know,” she laughs. “Hi Harley.”

She scoots in front of him, and he smiles at her. “Hi Emily. You've waited a long time.” He says as he eyes the line up behind her.

“I really really love you guys. I got in line really early with my dad.” She points behind her to a man standing with a large coffee, looking tired.

I laugh, and wave at him. “Hi Dad.”

He raises his coffee cup towards us and nods. Harley chuckles and signs the photo, sliding it down to Callum. Emily continues down the line up, greeting us all by name and being the sweet, adoring fan we all love.

I sign a few more photos for fans before I can check my phone again.

Harley

You're going to have to work harder than that

I can't help but cast a sideways glance at him and roll my eyes. He smirks at me as he finishes signing another photo and passes it down the table.

It still wasn't a no

Jack taps me on the shoulder and I look back at him. He moves his eyes towards the end of the table where Anna is chatting with Ian and another PR rep. I roll my eyes at Jack and he pats my shoulder again, suppressing a smirk. He tries to warn us whenever we're getting a little too *friendly* and there are PR eyes round.

"Just one hug?" Ollie calls to Jack from the other end of the table, a young girl standing before him, looking hopeful.

"No," Jack grunts.

The girl's face falls, but Ollie looks absolutely heart broken. He lives for his hugs and apparently, according to fans, is the best hugger out of all of us. And he is *very* proud of this. He never lets go first, which can lead to some long hugs, but neither party complains.

He holds out a fist for a fist bump instead and says to the girl, "Next time, double hug."

She smiles and happily agrees before taking her signed picture and leaving.

"Hi!" Another fan approaches the table with a huge smile and her phone in her hand. She slides her photo over to us.

"Hi, how are you doing today?" I ask as I sign the photo.

"I'm good." She glances between me and Harley. "I have a question."

"Shoot," I say as I pass Harley the photo.

“Are you guys dating?”

I snap my head up to her as Harley freezes. “What?” I ask, maybe a little harshly. I soften it with a light laugh. Harley signs the photo but doesn’t say anything and doesn’t look at me.

“Are you?” she asks again, hopefully. I notice her phone is still out... *shit, is she recording?*

My mind goes in a million directions. Why is she asking this? What do I do? Deny it and probably look guilty as fuck because I can’t lie for shit? Or make a joke out of it and hope she just moves on and takes it as that... a joke.

“Well, obviously. It was a toss-up between him or Callum,” I say with a shrug of one shoulder and a lighthearted chuckle to hopefully make it seem like I’m messing around.

She beams at us and laughs. *Ok, so what does that mean?* She doesn’t say anything else though and moves down to see Callum and Ollie.

Harley glances at me and fear is written all over his face. I reach under the table and squeeze his leg. I glance over to Anna, but she isn’t watching. Luckily, I don’t think she saw or heard any of that.

“We’re good. It’s ok,” I whisper to Harley.

He nods and sighs, but still looks nervous. And... I am too. We’ve been so careful, why would she ask that? I glance again to Anna, but she is still not paying us any attention. I internally shake it off, trying not to worry about it.

I take my phone out again, knowing exactly how to get our minds off this.

So, let's talk more about how you clearly want me to fuck you.





The sound of the stadium singing our lyrics gives me chills, every time.

I look out into the crowd, as far as I can see with the lights shining on us, to see phones and signs in the air while they loudly sing along with us. We're playing *Find My Broken Heart*, and this song became a fan favourite to sing along to. The crowd has a way to sing it with us, as when we get to the final chorus, Harley stops singing and holds the mic out for the crowd to take over. And they *sing*. It takes my breath away each time, when a stadium full of over 50,000 people are belting out the words to a song we wrote when sitting in a garage in Ithaca.

Harley puts the mic back on the stand and starts singing again while playing his guitar. I glance at Callum, and he looks the way I feel. We are in complete awe over how amazing our fans are, and everything they do for us.

I take a moment, like I do in every show, to also admire Harley. His confidence on stage grows every time he steps out here, and it's beautiful to watch. He's radiant and happy, smiling at the crowd and feeling the music. Life may be challenging off stage, but on stage is where he finds comfort and can truly be himself. It's become a place where he can let go of everything. He still gets nervous before we go on, but we all do. Once we're out here though, the nerves dissipate and there aren't many feelings that can compare to this.

We close out the song, bringing us about halfway through the concert. And now, it's Ollie's time to shine. He steps out from behind his drum set and the crowd erupts in cheers.

I chuckle as Ollie saunters to the front of the stage and takes Harley's mic, slinging an arm around his shoulders.

“Harley,” Ollie says into the mic. “Did you happen to notice one of the signs down there says, ‘H, is your hair the only thing that’s long?’” The crowd cheers loudly again and I take a sip of water, chuckling to myself. There are always so many inappropriate signs at shows, but they’re pretty funny.

Harley shakes his head and presses his lips together in a playfully scolding gesture at the girl holding the sign, pulling another laugh from the crowd. He then points across the crowd to another sign, saying into the mic, “And did you see that one over there that says, ‘Ollie, teach me how to use your stick’?”

“Oh, I did. Yes, I did.” Ollie looks at the girl holding the sign. “Ma’am, there are children here.” He heads further down the stage with the mic, interacting with the crowd and cracking jokes while reading their signs.

Harley walks over to me and I pass him a water bottle. He takes a drink, and I lean in so I can talk in his ear. He pops out his in-ear monitor so he can hear me. “I would say another joke about your dick... but it’s too long.”

He sputters on his water and rolls his eyes, huffing out a laugh. “Seriously?”

I shrug. “Had to.”

He leans in close to my ear. “You know what I really like in you?”

I pull back and give him a questioning look. He smirks as he says, “My dick.”

I laugh, giving him a playful shove. Callum comes over to join us as we sit on the drum riser. We continue to watch Ollie, laughing at his conversation with a fan as she tells him she travelled from Alaska to see us, and he asks her a million ridiculous questions about polar bears. The crowd laughs, and Ollie continues to make his rounds, interacting with the fans and just loving life. Eventually, he walks back up the stage and puts the mic back on Harley’s stand. “This is *My Desire!*” The crowd cheers, and we start in on the song.

I smile as Harley turns to me and winks. This song is a special one for us since it's the first one we wrote together, at a time when we were unsure of how we felt, or how to admit how we felt about each other. But now, singing this song reminds me of everything we can and will do to fight for our love. There's nothing we can't face, and win.

I step up to my mic, singing out the first few lines of the first verse. My eyes scan across the crowd and my heart skips a beat. To see our fans singing along to this song, and to even be *playing* this song in front of a crowd, is overwhelming. Sharing something so meaningful to us, when no one is allowed to know, is pure adrenaline. Every time I sing the line, "*the feeling of your eyes on me*", I remember all those times I snuck looks at Harley or would catch him looking at me, and he would quickly divert his gaze. I smile as my eyes find his on this big stage, with thousands of people watching us. We used to hide these looks from each other, but now I want him to see me looking at him. I want him to know my eyes are always going to find him, and if I could, I would never take them off him.

His eyes sparkle as I playfully stick my tongue out at him, and he chuckles before turning back to the crowd. I love being able to play around with him and have fun in front of so many people. Off stage we're told what to do and how to do it, and scolded for even being friendly. But here, on stage, we can push those boundaries a bit. No one can hear us when we say what we really want to say to each other, and there's a thrill in sharing those words in front of such a large audience. It feels a bit like we're taking back some of that control that is constantly stripped from us.

Because on stage, *we* are in control.

CHAPTER FIVE

Harley

THESE ARE the types of events that make me so uncomfortable, I want to crawl out of my skin.

We were invited to a charity gala put on by the music industry in Los Angeles, and there are tons of artists and music executives here. Including William. None of us are happy to see our label director, and having to pretend like we are is absolute torture. Besides the fact that he is here, I'm also uncomfortable because I am in a suit and sitting at a table with a \$1000 meal in front of me. It feels like my nerves are on fire and I am counting down the hours until I can leave.

I glance across the table to William who is laughing and smiling with a fellow executive in the business. He brought us here to show us off. Clearly he didn't say that, but he didn't have to. With the popularity we've gained across the globe over the past few months, William is taking full advantage of it and using us to gain more traction in the music industry. As if he even needs it, he's already at the top of his game being the director of the biggest music label on the east coast.

I shift in my seat and pull at my uncomfortable button down shirt and blazer. I hate dressing up, but at least our stylist chose suits well suited to us all. I'm in a black suit with leather details and a black button up. And of course, I'm sitting by Callum, who always looks so effortlessly put together. Man can rock a suit like no one's business, and his crisp black suit, white button up and black skinny tie is no exception.

"I wish we could drink here," Callum mutters.

Ollie flashes him a knowing look from beside him at the large round table we're at. He's in a blue floral suit. *Floral*. And because it's Ollie, it works. "Tell me about it," he murmurs and takes a sip of his water. He glances down at his glass then looks up. "Think we could be sneaky?"

Ezra leans over me from my other side so he can quietly say, "If you find a way, loop me in." He then glances at me, eyes dropping to my lips before leaning back. I let my gaze briefly roam over him, as he looks fucking incredible in his light grey suit, the top few buttons of his white shirt undone. We've had no time alone lately since we've had to sleep on the bus while travelling the past two nights, and our days have been filled with events and media. I miss him, and need him. Even though he's right here with me, he's not within reach. I desperately want his touch, and just to hold him and kiss him.

Callum looks over his shoulder to the bar then back to us. "I don't know guys. As much as I could use a drink right now, I don't think it's worth it." He eyes William across the table warily. We're often quite on edge at events like this because of our media image clause. And in my case, I'm just on edge in general. The contract specifically states things such as no underage drinking in public, but we also know this clause extends to a lot more. Things they can apparently make up whenever they damn well feel like it.

I shift again and push my food around on my plate. I've barely touched it, as I'm so fucking anxious and have no appetite at all. Luckily, the dinner appears to be over and waiters are clearing plates. Except unluckily now, the mingling and schmoozing is about to begin.

"Hey guys." Ben comes up behind us and places a hand on mine and Callum's shoulders. He is unfortunately seated at another table, and this whole event would be much more bearable if we were sitting with him rather than William. "You all look comfy." He glances to William, who is still chattering away with the other guy, then back to us with a knowing look. Ezra snorts a laugh and takes a drink of his water.

“Benny, we need some fun.” Ollie turns to him with pleading eyes and taps his water glass.

Ben chuckles and glances over to the bar. He motions with his head to follow him. “Come on. I’ll get you one. Just make sure you hide it from any cameras.” Of course, there are cameras everywhere. Why host a charity gala if you can’t show off to everyone how amazing you are?

“Fuck yeah!” Ollie jumps up from his seat.

Ezra looks at me with eyebrows raised in question. I shake my head. “No. But you go.”

He leans back in his chair and smiles. “No, I don’t need one.”

“Really. Go. I think you do,” I laugh. He doesn’t often drink anymore, and I know that’s because of me. I feel bad about that, but he always tells me that he doesn’t need it and it’s a choice he’s making. I have nothing against him, or any of the guys, drinking. But in this moment, I don’t want to join them because of how nervous I am. I’ve seen the destruction that can happen when someone uses alcohol to manage their emotions.

He gives me a look like he wants to kiss me, and fuck do I ever want that. I squeeze his leg under the table, and he gives a cheeky smile before hopping up to go with Ben. I watch him go for a moment before turning back to the table. Thankfully William is up and lost to the crowd, but I’m surprised to see that Callum is still here. “You’re not going?”

“Nah. I’m good.” He smiles at me and leans back in his chair.

I squint my eyes at him. “I don’t need a babysitter,” I say with a smirk.

“Good, because I’m not one,” he laughs. “But also, I don’t want to miss out on this show.” He casually points across the room, where a popular celebrity couple is *attempting* to hide an argument.

“Damn,” I laugh, watching as she says something to him through gritted teeth, harsh eyes and a fake smile.

Callum leans forward. “Mini writing prompt. What’s their story?”

“Hm,” I assess them for a moment. “He looks bored out of his mind, so I’m assuming he didn’t want to come.”

“So, probably an angsty fight-to fix-our-love song,” Callum agrees. We often find ourselves waiting around for things like travel and events to start, and one way we stay entertained is to have mini songwriting prompts based on things we observe around us. We’ve actually written some cool songs based on them, while others are pure nonsense and just a hilarious outlet.

“She’s putting in all the work, he’s not pulling his weight. All she wanted was a nice night out on the town...” I shake my head sadly.

“But he just can’t get his shit together enough to do this one thing for her. This is their breaking point.” Callum blows out a breath. Suddenly, they are basically sucking each other’s faces off. We stare at them for a moment before we both start laughing.

“Well,” Callum says, turning back to me. “We didn’t quite get that-”

“Boys.” I look up to see William approaching the table and all the fun is sucked right out of the room. Standing with him is a girl around our age, who I recognize as Charlotte Verlice. She’s an A-list singer and has been dominating the music scene with pop hits for years. “This is Charlotte. I thought you all should meet as you’re both battling it out for the top of the charts,” William says. I don’t miss the way he glances to the other executive he was talking to, who is from the label Charlotte is signed with.

Charlotte immediately sits in Ezra’s empty chair next to me and holds her hand out for each of us to shake. “Hi, it’s great to meet you. You guys are amazing.” She flashes a

perfectly white smile at us and pushes her long blonde hair back over her shoulder. William smiles and turns away, heading back into the crowd.

“Thank you, you are too,” Callum says, glancing at me. It still doesn’t seem real that we’re on par with these famous people who we have been listening to and seeing in the media for years. And now we’re sitting with them as they compliment *us*.

“So, how are you guys finding this crazy world?” She gestures with her wine glass to the room.

I chuckle lightly and look down at my hands. “It’s certainly crazy.” I shrug.

“Honestly, I don’t think we’ve had that much time to really process it all,” Callum adds. “We were thrown straight in and it’s been non stop since we started.”

Charlotte nods with wide eyes. “Yeah, from the looks of it, I’d say so. I was lucky enough to get a softer start, since I was about 14 when it all began. But on a much smaller scale. I’ve often wondered which was harder. To grow up in it or to be thrust into it like you were.”

“That’s really young,” I say. “I couldn’t imagine doing all of this at that age.”

She shrugs and smiles. “I love this job. I love music and singing for my fans. I wouldn’t want to do anything else, so as hard as it was growing up in the industry, it was worth it all to be doing what I truly love.”

A wave of sadness rushes over me at that thought. I do love this job. And as fun as creating music and playing for sold out stadiums every night is, I love Ezra more. All the hard parts of this, having to hide and only take fleeting moments with him, doesn’t feel worth it all to me. I glance over my shoulder to Ezra, who is standing with Ollie, Ben, and another guy, talking and laughing. He catches my eye and smiles at me. I return the smile before bringing my attention back to the table.

Charlotte watches this interaction then leans in and quietly asks, “You guys are together, aren’t you?”

I freeze. *Shit.* “What?” I ask, unable to think of anything better to say.

Callum leans forward and laughs quietly. “We’re all close. We’ve been through a lot together, you know? We’re all best friends.”

I look to him, trying not to panic, but thankful he’s here to deny this for me. I bring my gaze back down to my hands, wanting to shrink away and disappear from this table forever. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

“It’s ok.” Charlotte says, and I reluctantly look up at her, trying to play it cool. “I, too, have been victim of the music scene closeting.”

I furrow my brow as I stare back at her. “What do you mean?” I manage to say with a shaky voice.

She glances around and says in a low voice, “I’m bi. But the public will only ever see me date men.” She looks between me and Callum. “That’s not exactly my choice in how I wish to portray myself.”

Callum gives her a sad look. “There’s nothing you can do about it?”

She shrugs. “I’m sure there is. But I’m single right now anyway. And I haven’t had serious enough relationships to really care if the public knew about them.” She glances to the bar at Ezra. “It’s painfully obvious though how in love you two are.” She smiles but then quickly turns serious. “Be careful with that. I’m signed with a tough label too, but... I wouldn’t want to be on William’s bad side.”

I turn back to Callum, and he gives me a worried look. “So, this is... common?” I ask.

Charlotte presses her lips together while she thinks on her answer. “Not necessarily...” she says slowly. “I know of several artists who are queer and have to go out of their way to

keep their private lives hidden from the public for the sake of their image. But..." she glances over to where William is standing, "If what I've heard is correct, you guys have a pretty nasty contract right?"

"What do you mean, what you've heard? You know about our contract?" Callum asks.

"People talk. All I've heard is that William managed to get you guys into a long and intense contract, with some seemingly unfair stipulations. I can only assume that applies to your relationship?" she asks.

"No one can know," I rush, feeling panic bubbling under the surface.

"Don't worry, there's a code in the music industry. No one speaks about this kind of stuff to others. Secrets are safe." She smiles at me, but it doesn't do much to ease my fears.

"Callum," William calls over to the table. He beckons him over to where he's standing with some people, none of who I recognize.

"What does he want," Callum murmurs as he stands up, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Be right back, bud."

"Ok," I say glancing around the room. People are up and mingling, and it's getting loud and busy. I feel my heart rate pick up and my hands start tingling. I don't see Ezra or Ollie anywhere and my chest tightens. *Fuck, maybe I do need a babysitter.*

"Let's get some fresh air," Charlotte says as she stands and takes my hand, urging me to stand up as well. She observes me cautiously, and I know she can sense the anxiety brewing.

"Ok," I agree, apparently unable to form any other words. I'm feeling lightheaded and losing my breath, quickly headed towards full panic mode. I let her lead me through the room and through a large set of French doors onto a stone veranda. Once we're outside in the evening air, I take a deep breath in, gripping the railing tight as I over the lights of LA from where we are nestled into the Hollywood hills. Charlotte stands

quietly beside me and leans against the railing to look over the city. Eventually, my pulse slows, and my head starts to clear.

“It must really suck,” she says eventually, looking up at me. “I’ve never been in love, so I can just imagine how shitty this whole thing is for you guys, being told you can’t love how you want to.”

I turn to meet her eyes and she is looking at me with sadness. “Yeah,” I agree. “I’ve heard that my whole life.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she says as she turns back to the lights and wraps her arms around herself.

“I’m sorry,” I say as I shrug out of my jacket and wrap it around her bare shoulders.

She smiles up at me. “Don’t be. But thank you.” She laughs.

I smile back at her. She’s really nice, and I feel comfortable with her. She didn’t have to take me out here or stay with me now. I know when she sat down with us, she didn’t expect to deal with a guy having a panic attack. I lean my elbows on the railing in front of me and let out another breath, closing my eyes for a second to try to calm down enough to head back inside.

“Are you ok?” Charlotte asks softly.

I nod and stand up straight again. “Yeah. Sorry, it just...” I sigh. “It’s a lot.”

“I get it. Like I said, I couldn’t imagine being thrown into all of this like you guys have been. Zero to sixty, eh?”

I huff out a laugh and rub a hand down my face. “Exactly.”

“Plus having your personal life on the line...” She looks up at me again. “That really sucks.”

“So, how did you know?” I ask tentatively. If she could tell we are together, I’m now worried other people will too. And what does that mean for our contract?

“I don’t really know...” she says thoughtfully. “I could tell you two were close. It wasn’t until I saw you here tonight, in person, that it clicked. When you look at each other, it’s just with so much love. It’s adorable.” She smiles.

I bite my lip and look away from her, the panic rising again. *Shit*. Is this a breach of contract? Am I breaking this clause by not denying this all and talking to her about it?

“So, what exactly does William have in your contract to be able to do this?” she asks.

I look back at her, not sure what to say. I’m never sure what I’m allowed to say or do, and especially with this. “I’m not allowed to talk about it.”

She draws her brows together. “About your contract?” Her features soften as she seems to understand. “Or your relationship with Ezra...”

I bite the inside of my cheek and look away from her.

“Hm,” she hums, glancing inside at the party. “I always knew he was a dick.”

I let out a little laugh and nod my head in agreement.

“Well, good news is, you didn’t tell me anything.” She shrugs. “I guessed it. And, that code I was telling you about? It’s real. Honest to God, I will not tell a soul. No one is wanting spread other people’s business, we all have our own shit going on. It’s a general understanding.”

I nod. “Ok,” I breathe out, still feeling anxious and like I somehow just royally fucked up. “I’m constantly worried this is all going to blow up.”

“Yeah, I can understand that. But be sure to enjoy the ride too. This is a crazy time, but at least you can enjoy the rise to fame together.” She glances back into the party. “And Ezra seems great, from everything I’ve seen about you guys. I’m looking forward to meeting him, hopefully I can tonight.” She gives me a warm smile that immediately draws one out of me as well.

“Yeah, he is great,” I say, glancing inside as well at the people milling about. I don’t see him anywhere, or Ollie or Callum. “I’m not sure where he is though,” I say quietly, trying not to let the panic rise again.

“Well, we can go look for him. I also need to meet this comedian drummer of yours.” She laughs.

I chuckle. “Yeah, I don’t think it will be hard to find Ollie.”

“But first,” she reaches in her purse and takes out her phone, “put your number in. I know how hard it can be in this industry, and it helps to have someone to talk to who has gone through some of the same things.”

I take her phone and give her a soft smile. “Thank you.” I put my number in, and then she texts me so I have hers.

She slips her phone away and looks up at me. “You ready to go back in?”

I smile at her and nod. “Yeah.” I feel better now, knowing I have another friend to help navigate this cutthroat world.

She smiles widely. “Let’s go find your boyfriend.”

CHAPTER SIX

Harley

WHEN WE GET BACK to the hotel, the first person we see is Anna. She's walking down the hall as we approach our rooms, and I let out a sigh of frustration. I thought I might be able to go right into Ezra's room without having to go through the sneaky exchange.

"Photos from the gala are already out and looking great," she says as she stops in front of our doors and smiles at us.

"Great to hear," Callum mutters as he pulls out his key card and unlocks our room. I glance across the hall to the door I want to be going through, as Ezra unlocks it. I'm tired, and just want to get this suit off and lay down with him. I've been craving his touch for days, and it's so close.

"Good job tonight." She moves past us but then turns around again. *Oh my god, just go, please.* "Be sure to rest up, you have a photoshoot in the morning."

We all nod and murmur good nights to her, but she stays there, watching us. Specifically, me. I sigh, and walk into the room I share with Callum, closing the door.

"Give her a minute, she'll leave." Callum says, patting my shoulder as he walks into the room, taking his suit jacket off.

I lean against the wall behind the door, rubbing a hand down my face. "What if she knows we switch?"

"Well, even if she does—"

There's a bang at the door that makes me jump. I look through the peephole, to see Ollie in the hallway. I open the door and he walks in, rubbing his elbow. "Why do you guys always close doors?"

Callum walks over to him, pulling him into the room. "Dude, we need to be *quiet*."

"Which is why I figured you would have left the door open! So I could sneak in and be fast! Come on, Cal, it's not rocket science." Ollie shakes his head at him and flops down on his bed.

Callum closes his eyes for a moment before he opens them and smiles at me. "Have a good night."

I give him a half smile. "Night."

I cross the hallway, and the door immediately opens. Ezra pulls me into his arms once I'm in the room, and I fall into his touch that I'm so desperate for. As he squeezes me tight, a wave of emotion suddenly rolls over me and a hitched breath escapes my chest.

"What's wrong?" He gently pushes me back so he can see my face, concern written all over his.

I let out a shaky breath. "I don't know." And honestly, I don't. After not being able to touch him like this for days, having a hard night, and finally getting him back in my arms... It's all catching up to me. "I just miss you."

His features soften and he brings a hand up to cup my face. "I miss you too." He leans his forehead against mine.

We stay there for a moment, just leaning against each other and being in each other's presence. I think back to everything Charlotte said tonight, my mind ruminating on her words. How closeting can be expected in the industry. But mostly, I can't stop thinking about her reaction to our situation. It doesn't happen like this. This is cruel.

"Talk to me," he whispers.

“It’s all just really hard,” I breathe out. “I had a panic attack tonight.”

His eyes dart up to meet mine and the concern is back on his face. “When?”

“At the table after I met Charlotte. Callum and I were talking to her, and she knew we were together. She said she won’t tell anyone, there’s some kind of code or something. She was talking about the industry and closeting, and I was alone and couldn’t see any of you and I...I...” I feel the panic rising again and I try to swallow it down.

Ezra takes my hand and leads me over to the bed, pulling me down with him to sit. “It’s ok, babe. It’s all going to be ok.” He rubs a hand over my back. “She seems like a genuinely nice person, and I believe her when she says she won’t say anything. We’ll be alright. We can do this, I promise.” He squeezes my hand and I look up at him. His blue eyes are full of hope and I desperately want to feel that hope with him. But nights like this, it’s hard to share in his positivity. “And you know why I know we can do this? Because we have each other. I’d do anything for you, and we’ll continue to find ways to make this work.”

I let his words sink in and nod. “Thank you. I know you’re right, and I’d do anything for you too.” I look down at our hands and sigh. “Sorry, I don’t want to make this night all about my issues.”

“Hey.” I look back up at him and his brows are drawn together as his eyes roam my face. “That’s not what this is. You know you don’t ever have to apologize to me for feeling whatever you feel. I hate that I couldn’t be there for you tonight. But I’m here for you now, and I *want* to be.”

As I look back at him, I once again feel overcome with both sadness, but also joy. Joy that he is mine, and he is so caring and wonderful. But sadness that I can only have this behind closed doors. “How did I get so lucky,” I say softly.

Ezra pulls me in and holds me tight against him. “Ditto.”

Eventually he releases me and stands up, walking over to the desk in the room. “Now, I don’t know about you but that meal was actually pretty shitty. For \$1000 a plate you’d think they’d give us more than a tiny salad and some kind of vegan mushroom thing. LA, right? So, I say we order up some room service and watch movies in bed all night.” He comes back over with the room service menu, passing it to me with a big smile.

I smile back at him, joy pushing sadness back down somewhere deep. “That sounds perfect.”

I finally get to change out of my uncomfortable suit, and we order room service. We settle into bed, eating junk and watching movies as we laugh and hold each other. As we fall asleep, I rest my head on his chest and listen to his heartbeat, his arms wrapped around me. It’s the perfect ending to a stressful evening, and a bit of that hope creeps back in.



I wake early the next morning to Ezra’s soft breaths on my cheek. He’s so close he’s practically on top of me, and I chuckle softly to myself as I gently wiggle out from beneath him. I look back to him as he lets out a soft murmur in his sleep. *Adorable.*

I head into the bathroom and close the door gently, starting up the shower. I close my eyes and focus on the feeling of the water running over my skin and take a deep breath. Ezra is right. We can do this. No matter how hard it gets, my love for him will make all of this worth it in the end.

I finish up my shower and when I quietly exit the bathroom, I’m surprised to see Ezra sitting up in bed stretching.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” I ask, pulling a pair of boxers out of my bag.

“No,” he says, yawning. “I think I rolled over and you weren’t there, so I got sad.” He pouts and then laughs. He rolls out of bed and rakes his eyes over me as I stand there in just a towel. “Mm.” He closes the distance between us to place a kiss on my lips, then heads into the bathroom.

I pull on my boxers and settle back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Ezra comes back out of the bathroom and plops down on the bed next to me. “Since you wake up at the ass crack of dawn,” he pokes me in the ribs and I laugh, “it’s still early. We have time before we have to go.” He rolls over to face me. “Do you want to go grab breakfast or just stay in?”

I let my gaze run up his body until I land on his eyes. “Stay in.”

The corner of his mouth tilts up. “I like that plan.”

I bring my mouth to his and kiss him, pushing my tongue past his lips and pulling his body close to mine. His hands roam up my abs and mine reach down to his boxers, cupping his cock as he gets hard.

“You know, I think it might just be your lucky day,” I say against his lips.

“For what?” he asks on a breath.

“You still want to fuck me, right?”

He pulls back suddenly and stares at me. “Really? Harley, I know I was kind of pushing it, but I was just having fun. If you actually don’t want to I-”

“I do,” I say. “Ever since you first mentioned it, I’ve wanted it.” I move my lips to his neck and start kissing a line gently down to his chest. “I just couldn’t help but tease you a bit first.”

Ezra lets a breath escape him as his hands trail up my back. “Are you sure?”

“Fuck yeah, baby, I’m sure,” I say against his chest as I reach a hand down to push his boxers over his hips. I was actually surprised myself by how much the idea excited me

when he first voiced it. I've shared with him that I've never bottomed as it requires being so vulnerable with someone, which is something I could never do. But with Ezra, I can. He's played with my ass a few times, and it feels fucking fantastic. So, having his cock inside me? Yeah, I'm in.

Ezra groans as I bring my hand to his cock, stroking slowly. I continue to kiss his chest as his fingers tangle in my damp hair. "Mm. So hard already. You must really like this idea," I say as I look down at his hard cock in my hand.

A laugh rumbles in his chest. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't excited."

I raise my eyes to him and smile. "I can tell." I move my lips up to his and say, "I am too."

He makes a guttural noise and pushes me onto my back. Leaning over me, he reaches into my boxers and fists my solid cock, crashing his lips to mine.

I grip the sides of his head and grind my hips up into his hand while we devour each other's mouths. I breathe against his lips, "You going to get me ready for you?"

He groans into my mouth and then quickly hops off the bed to grab the lube from my bag. I take my boxers off as I watch him walk back over to the bed, cock hard and feral lust all over his face. I wrap my hand around my dick and stroke, causing him to tilt his head and moan. I bend one knee, placing my foot on the bed and opening my legs wider, inviting him in.

"Fuck," he mutters as he drops onto the bed beside me, laying a heated kiss on my lips.

"Stretch me out, baby," I murmur on a breath, and he immediately reaches for the lube. He is letting me direct this, and direct this I will.

He brings his lubed fingers down to my ass and rubs a gentle circle around my hole as he pushes his tongue back into my mouth. I moan at both the sensation of his fingers, and the taste of him. My hands grip his back and I pull him closer,

deepening our kiss as he continues to tease and massage my hole.

“Put a finger in,” I pant, and he does as he’s told. I inhale sharply at the sensation, both tension and pleasure coursing through me. Once he’s in, he gently starts moving his finger and the tension eases. He kisses down my neck, sucking the skin behind my ear as he slowly moves his finger in and out, back and forth. “Another,” I breathe.

“Hm,” he sits up, keeping his finger in me as he moves my leg so he can gain better access. He watches his hand as he pushes another finger inside me, then looks up to me. “God, you’re fucking hot.”

I writhe and moan as he works me, moving his fingers in and out of my ass, scissoring and curling, stretching me out and making me feel so fucking good. He strokes my cock with his other hand, and I can barely take it anymore.

“Fuck, Ezra,” I moan. “Get inside me.”

He slides his fingers out of me and crawls up my body to place kiss me delicately. “You’ll tell me to stop if it’s too much?”

I look into his eyes and smile. “It won’t be. But yes.”

He smiles back at me and gives me one more kiss before settling between my legs again. He lubes up his cock and I lift my hips. I try to stay relaxed, as my heart is thrashing while he lines himself up to enter me. He grips one hand around his cock, his other arm supporting my leg, and he slowly pushes into me. I hiss at the intrusion of his thick cock, the burning and stretching overwhelming me. He pauses and meets my eyes. “Keep going,” I grunt.

He looks back down and continues to slowly push in, the uncomfortable sensations starting to subside and a feeling of fullness taking over. His hips meet my ass as he bottoms out, and he moves his hand to my other leg, staying still and breathing hard. He looks up to me again. “You ok?”

I nod and swallow hard. “Yeah.” I reach up to pull him down so I can kiss him. Once I’ve taken my taste, I whisper against his lips, “Now be a good boy and fuck me.”

He breathes out hard, and I feel his body tremble with anticipation and need. He slowly moves his hips, sliding out so just the tip of his cock remains inside me, then slowly all the way back in. He continues these movements, slow and careful, while he places kisses along my jaw. I run my hand up his back and dig my fingers into his skin as I get used to this unfamiliar sensation. As he continues his steady thrusting, the feeling of him inside me builds to an overwhelming, warm connection with him. I have never allowed myself to feel this vulnerable, on any level, with anyone. And as I am engulfed and filled by him, I feel both vulnerable and helpless in the best way possible, while I give all my trust to him to use my body and not hurt me.

I grab his face and bring his mouth to mine in an impassioned kiss. He kisses me back with intensity, increasing his pace in my ass. But not enough.

I push him back forcefully, so he slips out of me and he gives me a startled look. “Are you ok, what’s wr-”

“I need you to *fuck* me, Ezra,” I say, rolling over and getting on my hands and knees. I look back at him over my shoulder and his eyes widen. “Take it. Take what you want.”

He immediately gets up onto his knees and grabs my hips. He lines himself up, and *slams* into me.

“Yes,” I grunt. I drop my head between my shoulders as he rams into me, hard. “Harder baby, use me.”

“Fuck,” he moans, thrusting hard. The sound of our skin slapping together as he fucks me fills the room, along with our grunts, pants and moans. His dick is rubbing me in all the right places inside my ass as pleasure steadily builds through my lower body. It’s a feeling I’ve never felt before, a fullness I never could imagine. I reach a hand down and pump my cock as he fucks me from behind. I push myself up to press my

back against his chest and he wraps a strong arm around my torso.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he whispers in my ear.

I groan and pump my cock faster. His dick slides against my prostate, over and over and I close my eyes, trembling and shaking as it feels like my dick is being edged from the inside. The feeling spreads through the rest of my body and I drop my head, overwhelmed by endless waves of intense warmth and tingles. The waves continue to build, and suddenly it feels like one huge wave washes over me. I get a surge of intense pleasure as I seem to lose control of all of my muscles. My cock shoots ropes of cum with an orgasm so strong I fall forward on my hands. “Fuck, fuck, oh god,” I grunt as I continue to shake, and the waves just keep rolling.

“Fuck, yeah,” Ezra pants as he thrusts into me, harder and faster. “I’m coming.”

I feel him tense as he fills me, moaning my name and falling over to rest his forehead on my back. I’m breathless as I let my body fall flat to the bed, and Ezra slips out of me, falling down by my side. I roll onto my back and pull him into me for a kiss full of heat and love.

“Pretty great, huh?” Ezra chuckles as I release him.

I huff out a laugh, looking into his eyes, which are sparkling with pleasure and passion. He never ceases to amaze me in how safe, and comfortable he can make me feel. “You could say that.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ezra

“HARLEY. WE HAVE BEEN *THROUGH* THIS.”

We’re at a photoshoot today, and as usual with these sorts of things, I am attempting to play peacekeeper between Ollie and Harley.

“Ollie, I swear to God, if you tell me one more time to *smize*, I’m going to lose it.” Harley glares at him from his place on a stool in front of the camera.

I hold up my hands and look between Harley and Ollie. “Alright, let’s just see what happens without the smize?”

“Look, all you have to do is smile with your eyes, but not your mouth. Like this.” Ollie gives Harley a smouldering stare. He just stares back at him, blank faced. Ollie throws his hands in the air in exasperation. “He’s all yours,” he says to the photographer before walking away.

The photographer lowers his camera with a confused expression as he watches Ollie leave. “Ok, then,” he says, turning back to Harley. “Keep that pose.”

I move to stand with Ollie and he crosses his arms, shaking his head. “Not everyone can pull off a smize like you can, Ollie,” I chuckle, patting him on the back.

Olivia snorts a laugh from behind us, as she fixes Callum’s hair. Ollie slowly and dramatically turns to face her, mouth open in disbelief that she would even question his abilities in front of the camera.

She quickly schools her expression. “You really can, babes,” she nods seriously to him.

“Oh, don’t placate him.” Callum rolls his eyes and hides a smirk.

Ollie points a finger at him. “You know I can smize like no one else can.”

Ollie and Callum continue to bicker about smizing while Olivia attempts to wrangle them both to fix their hair. Meanwhile, I turn my attention back to Harley and let my eyes roam over him. The photographer has him sitting on a stool, one leg propped up on the top rung with his hand on his knee. He looks fucking *edible*. I bite my lip as I get lost in the memories of what we did this morning. Fucking him while he was taking control, telling me what he wanted me to do to him... ramming my cock into his ass while he grunted for me to fuck him harder. *Fuck*.

Harley meets my eyes from where he’s sitting and I must have my feelings written all over my face, because he gives me a dangerous look, full of knowing. The corner of his mouth tilts up while he assesses me, and the longer his eyes are on me, the more my need for him increases. I take a deep breath and break eye contact with him, not wanting to get hard right here in the studio.

“Fantastic, we got it.” The photographer lowers his camera, and turns to us. “Quick break, then we do group shots.”

Harley walks over to us and Ollie snorts. “Ok, so smizing is not the answer.” He looks between us with a playful smirk. “What did *you guys* get up to last night?”

Harley just shrugs, and Ollie waggles his eyebrows at him.

Callum heads over to the couch and sits down on it, yawning. “I wonder if I have time for a nap. I barely slept last night because of Ollie’s nightmares.”

“Do *not* lay down, Callum Monroe.” Olivia stands suddenly from her chair and points to him. “If you fuck up

your hair, *again*, I'll be very pissed.”

Callum holds his hands up in surrender and makes a show of shifting uncomfortably on the couch while sitting. Olivia rolls her eyes and goes back to scrolling on her phone.

“Wait, Ollie’s nightmares?” Harley asks, looking at Ollie.

Ollie sighs sadly. “Yeah.” He goes over to the couch and sits beside Callum. “You know how I’ve been reading a lot because it improves memory?”

“Yeah,” I say as I take a seat in one of the chairs across from the couch, and Harley does the same.

“Well, I’ve really been enjoying murder mysteries because it’s exciting, you know? But...” he swallows hard. “They’re also fucking scary, man,” he whispers.

Callum rubs a hand over his face. “He wakes up in the middle of the night, yelling about trench coats.”

I suppress a laugh and try to keep a serious look on my face. I feel Harley shift beside me and clear his throat, trying to do the same. “I’m sorry to hear that, man. Maybe you should try another genre?” I offer.

“Yeah,” Ollie says sadly. “I just thought it would be fun since I escaped murder, but I don’t think I’m truly over it yet. Maybe I’ll try fantasy.” He looks up with a hopeful smile. “Dragons would be fun.”

“That’s a good idea,” Harley agrees.

The door to the studio opens and we all turn to see Val, our director of publicity walk in. I freeze and Harley practically turns to stone beside me. I hear Callum mutter under his breath, “Talk about nightmares...”

She walks over to us with a big smile on her face. “Hello boys!” We all murmur a greeting to her as she takes a seat in a vacant chair. Olivia looks over from her area in the corner and meets my eyes. She presses her lips together and gives me an apologetic look. She then grabs her phone and leaves the

studio. I don't know anyone, besides the PR team, who actually likes this woman.

She is still smiling at us, and it's freaking me the fuck out. Why is she even fucking here? She wasn't at the gala last night, and I don't think she was even in LA yesterday. And why does she look so happy?

"You all look great, I'm excited to see this campaign." She glances between Harley and I. "I've come with wonderful news."

Harley and I exchange a worried glance. I don't think her definition of wonderful is the same as ours. She turns to the photographer, who is busy setting up his camera for the next shots. "Can you give us a moment please?" He looks to her with confusion, clearly wondering who this woman is coming into his studio and asking him to leave. But he gives a slight nod and motions for his assistants to follow him to another room. We all sit in uncomfortable silence while we wait for the room to clear, and for her to get on with whatever this is.

"Well, it looks like an opportunity has fallen into our laps, and we have a way to make this work for you," she says proudly, once the photographer and his team have left.

"Make what work?" I ask.

She gestures between Harley and I. I feel a surge of hopefulness and glance at Harley. He is watching Val with a wary look on his face. "Us?" he asks quietly.

She smiles and nods at him. "Harley, it looks like you created quite the stir last night. Charlotte Verlice, she's a catch."

Harley draws his brows together. "Huh?"

She pulls out her tablet and turns it towards us. There's a photo of Charlotte and Harley on the veranda at the gala last night, smiling at each other while she has his coat around her shoulders. My heart drops to my stomach as I fear where this is going.

“Rumours are you two are dating.” She smiles.

“How is that a good thing for us?” I ask, my temper rising.

Val sighs. “It’s good because it takes the attention off of you two.”

“What attention?” Callum leans forward.

“Well.” Val turns the tablet back around to her and starts tapping away on it. “Your fans have started to notice that there might be something going on with you two. And Ezra, your little comment the other day didn’t help.”

She flips the tablet around and shows us posts on social media of people questioning if Harley and I are together, with photos of us where we look... well, close. Even though we are really careful in public, I can’t just turn off my love for him. I can’t hide how I feel about him. He’s everything to me, and in these photos of us, simply looking at each other... it shows.

I swallow hard. “What comment?” I ask, as I stare at the photos.

“At the signing?” Val asks. But it’s more of a statement than an actual question.

I close my eyes and groan. *Fuck*. When the fan asked if we were together and I joked about it, trying to get the attention away from us. I guess that plan failed.

“So, what does this mean?” Ollie asks from the couch. He’s looking at Harley, and I glance at him too. He’s sitting quietly and looking down at his hands.

“Well, it means we have to do some damage control, and Charlotte looks like a wonderful opportunity for us.” Val states simply, like this is all just some game and not our fucking lives. *Damage control*. Like anyone knowing Harley and I being together causes *damage*. And the way she’s talking about *us* as if she’s affected by any of this.

“I don’t see what’s so wonderful about the world thinking I’m dating someone I’m not,” Harley says quietly, not looking up from his hands.

“It’s wonderful because this helps you two to be together. In private,” Val adds. “We let everyone think you are dating Charlotte and all this attention about you,” she gestures between Harley and I again, “dating each other goes away.”

Harley looks up at her. “We don’t want to lie to our fans.”

“It’s not lying,” Val says, exasperation lacing her voice. “It’s letting them perceive this however they wish.”

“They are already perceiving this how they wish,” Harley says right back to her, not missing a beat. “And you want to change it.”

Val sighs and closes her eyes for a moment. “Harley. This is what you want, right? You want to be with Ezra? Well, this is how we do this. We don’t *have* to be doing all of this to support you, but we are. We are doing this to help you, so please just let us help you.”

I stare at Val, anger running through my veins. Trying to *help* us? With this situation they put us in in the first place? “And what does this help look like exactly?” I ask in a sharp tone.

Val doesn’t take notice of my snark and plasters her fake smile back on. “I will reach out to Charlotte’s team and see what we are looking at to get a PR relationship going-”

“What the fuck?” Harley cuts her off. His expression is tight, and I can see his hands shaking. “Are you even going to ask me?”

“Calm down,” Val says as she rubs her fingers between her eyes, like this is a bother to her. “Like I said, I am trying to help you here.”

Harley shakes his head at her. “By putting me in a fake relationship with a girl? You can’t just-”

“I can,” Val says sharply. We’re all silent as we stare at her. She adjusts the tablet in her lap. “Now, as I was saying, I will reach out to Charlotte’s team and see what we can get going. A PR relationship will involve some public outings and dates

where we will arrange for you to be photographed. I'll see how long of a contract we can get in place."

My head is swimming. *What the fuck?*

"A contract for a relationship?" Ollie scrunches his nose up.

Val sighs with a look of frustration at all the questions we have. But if she would just fucking explain what this shit is, that would be a start. Or, you know, stay the fuck out of our personal lives. "Yes. We often do PR relationships for promotions, album releases, diverting attention..." she glances at Harley. "A contract ensures all needs are met for each party and to determine the length of the relationship. We will make sure this supports Charlotte as well."

I think about what this means, and that the world is going to see Harley, my boyfriend, dating someone else. Jealousy creeps in at that thought. Even though it's not real, our fans are going to think it is. He's mine, and it hurts to think that he's going to be portrayed as someone else's.

I turn my head to look at Harley next to me, who has gone quiet again. He is staring at the floor, and it seems like he's not listening anymore.

"So," Val says as she stands up, clearly wanting to get out of here before we ask more questions or continue to protest. "I will leave you to finish the rest of your shoot. I'm looking forward to seeing it." She glances around to all of us. "I will be in touch."

None of us say anything as she heads towards the door, waving to the photographer and leaving, taking with her all our hope and happiness we had today. I turn back to Harley and he's still looking down, his fingers fidgeting in his lap. I place my hand on his leg, "Babe?"

He blinks and turns his head to me. "Yeah?" He then looks at the empty chair Val was in and back to me.

I meet Callum's eyes and we share a worried look. "You ok, bud?" he asks.

Harley rubs a hand over his face and sighs. “Does it matter?”

All the air is sucked right out of me. I hate seeing him feel so defeated, after all he has done for himself to get to a good place and be happy. It seems like for every good moment we have together, we’re faced with another obstacle. He had such a hard night last night, and we were feeling good about it all again after we were able to talk it out.

“Give me your phone.” I hold my hand out to him.

Harley reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone, handing it over to me. I unlock it, scrolling to find Charlotte’s number. From what Harley said about their conversation, and from what I’ve learned about her when we met, she has been through this before. Maybe she can shed some more light on this and what it all means.

Hey Charlotte, it’s Ezra. Just wanted to check with you about something. We just had a meeting with our PR director and have some questions that involve you.

I look up to give Harley a reassuring smile. He’s biting his lip and his fingers are back to fidgeting in his lap. I glance over to where the photographer is setting up his camera for the next shot, wishing I could comfort him. Ollie gets up from his seat and moves to sit beside Harley, slinging an arm around his shoulders. The phone vibrates in my hand, and I look down to see that Charlotte has replied.

Charlotte

Hi! Yes... I’ve seen the photos and know where this is going.

I assume they want a PR relationship to continue to hide you two?

Yeah, exactly.

I can't help but bring my thumb up to my mouth to chew my nail while I wait for her response, the bubbles dancing to show that she's typing. I lean forward with the phone so Callum can see too, and I won't have to recap everything where the photography team can hear.

Charlotte

And let me guess, you can't decline?

No, we have an image clause and they can do whatever they need to do to market us

Holy fuck

Well, luckily, I don't have to agree to shit. There's nothing in my contract that states I have to do this. If I decline, there's nothing they can do.

Relief washes over me and I feel Harley relax a little beside me. Ollie squeezes his shoulders and whispers, "Fuck yeah."

Really? That's awesome

Yup. Fuck them!

Thanks so much Charlotte. We really appreciate it.

"Well, that's good news." I sigh as I lean back in the chair and lock Harley's phone, handing it back to him.

"Thank fuck," Callum mutters, shaking his head. "I can't believe Val is even trying to do this."

"Feel better?" Ollie asks Harley.

Harley smiles slightly and nods. "Yeah. That helps."

“Alright, boys,” the photographer calls to us. “We’re ready for group shots.”

Callum and Ollie get up and make their way over to him, but I put my hand on Harley’s arm to stop him. “This is going to work out. We have people on our side. We got this.”

He smiles at me, and it’s a real, genuine smile. He nods and blows out a breath. “Yeah.” He holds up a thumb and I do the same, pressing the pad of it to his. “We do.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Harley

I HAVE ALWAYS WANTED to go to Chicago. From the day my mother introduced me to Chicago blues as a kid, I fell in love with it. The bluesy sound of the electric guitar became my influence when I started playing and writing, and even in Send Help my contributions tend to have a blues undertone despite our pop rock sound. Chicago is where the electric sound of blues began, and so many of my musical heroes began their careers there. The city is rich in its history, and I want to see and experience it firsthand.

Until this year, I've never been outside of the state of New York. Now, I have been to states in almost half of the US, and in a couple months we are headed to Europe. But for the next three days? We're in Chicago. And tonight, we have the night off.

It's early evening, and I'm antsy. I look around Callum and Ollie's room where we are all hanging out, playing guitar and video games. We just got here this afternoon, after a gruelling couple days, so we've been sent to our rooms to "rest up". But... we're in Chicago, and I can't just sit here.

"You guys want to go find some blues?" I ask them from my perch on the bed, with my acoustic in my hands. My leg starts bouncing as I wait for their answer, hoping it's a yes.

"OH MY GOD." Ollie drops his controller and turns from the TV to stare at me. "Yes," he whispers with an excited smile. I grin back at him. He is also a fan, and we often listen to it on the tour bus when we want to unwind and relax.

Ezra laughs as he manages to score on him in their game. He then turns to me. “Blues in Chicago? What, you’re interested in that?” A smile spreads across his face and I throw my pick at him. I’ve been talking about this for weeks, counting down the days until we ended up here. So yeah, it’s no surprise, except apparently to Ollie, that this is what I want to do tonight.

“Fuck yeah, it’s a night off. Let’s do it.” Callum sets his guitar down and stands up. “Let’s go ask Ian.”

I practically leap off the bed, vibrating with excitement. This is one of my dreams come true. Ollie bounces beside me as we make our way to Ian’s room. “I should get a fedora. I have one, but I didn’t bring it with me. What was I thinking?” He dramatically shakes his head, scolding himself.

Callum knocks on Ian’s door and the second Ian opens it, Ollie blurts out, “Dad, can we go out to see some blues?”

Ian looks between us all and chuckles, “Hi, fellas.” He opens his door wider and gestures for us to come in. “Tonight?”

Jack is sitting at the desk in the room with a laptop open and it looks like they were working on something. He looks to us as we enter the room, nodding his hello, then turning his attention back to the laptop.

Ollie flops down on one of the beds, making himself comfortable, and I tentatively glance at Ian as I lean against the wall. “Yeah,” I say, but it comes out more as a question. It’s everyone’s night off, and we’re not supposed to go anywhere alone. I immediately feel guilty for asking and want to take it all back. It’s a really weird feeling to have people who want to do things for you, and the odd occasion I have asked him or our team for anything, I feel like I’m taking advantage of them. In my experience, receiving kindness and favours comes with a price tag, so I’ve learned to not ask or expect anything. Just stay quiet and don’t make waves. I’m now learning that kindness is not always transactional, and that *most* of our team genuinely want to help us. But that guilt

runs deep, and it easily rushes to the surface if there is even a ripple in the water.

Ian gives me a reassuring smile, but I sense a hesitance. The guilt slams into me hard, and I hurry to take the request back. “Never mind, it’s ok. I’m sorry, we don’t have to go.”

“No, no.” Ian holds up a hand. “Let’s see what we can work out.”

Ezra wraps an arm around my shoulders and kisses the side of my head. “It’s ok to ask for things,” he whispers to me. I blow out a breath and nod, trying to stay calm.

“Everyone is off tonight,” Ian sits on the edge of the other bed. “The plan was for you guys to stay in the hotel.” He rubs his chin. “And I’m sure everyone is on the lookout for you with two concerts here over the next two nights.” He pauses for a moment. “You all want to go?”

“Pleeeeeease?” Ollie puts his hands under his chin and gives him the puppy dog eyes.

Callum leans against the wall beside me. “I’ll stay, we don’t all have to go.”

“No, man, it’s ok. We don’t have to go. Really.” I shake my head at Callum, feeling really uncomfortable now as this is becoming a problem because of something *I* want to do.

“Babe, you’ve literally been talking about this for weeks,” Ezra sits on the edge of the bed Ollie is sprawled out on. “You have to go. This is the only night we can while we’re here.” He turns to Ian. “So...?”

Ian looks between us all, and sighs. “I have quite a bit of work to do here tonight-”

“I’ll take them.” Jack stands up from the desk and turns around crossing his arms.

Ollie sits bolt upright on the bed. “Oh my god.” He whips his head back and forth between Jack and Ian, curls bouncing.

“You sure?” Ian raises his eyebrows at Jack, seeming surprised that he wants to take us out in the city on his night off.

Jack nods. “We’ll go to Buddy Guy’s Legends. It’s my favourite blues club here. I saw Bo Diddly play there and the last time I went was in 2015 when The Rolling Stones visited.”

We all stare at him in complete silence, until eventually Ezra breathes out, “What the fuck?” Jack rarely ever speaks about himself, or at all, so we don’t know much about him. He’s a blues fan? And he saw Bo Diddly? Did he meet The Rolling Stones? I glance at Ezra whose eyes are bugging out of his head, as he’s a massive Rolling Stones fan.

“You...” I find some words as I continue to stare at him, “saw Bo Diddly play?” Jack simply nods. “He is one of my favourite guitar players.” I say quietly, in complete disbelief that Jack got to see the man who played such a key role in the transition from blues to rock and roll.

“I met him after he played.” He looks between us all staring at him, waiting for answers. “My father is from Chicago so we spend some time here. He is friends with Buddy Guy and Chester Burnett.”

“Are you serious?” Ollie gapes at him.

“Who’s Chester Burnett?” Callum asks.

“Howlin’ Wolf,” Ollie and I respond at the same time, and Ezra and Callum shrug.

Jack puts his hands in his pockets, as if this is every day, normal, news. “So, we going?”

Ian runs a hand through his hair. “Protocol is one security member for 2 of you, so unless we can get someone else to agree to go...”

Callum pushes himself off the wall beside me. “Like I said, I’ll sit this one out.”

“Me too,” Ezra adds.

I whip my head between them. “What?” Then I stare at Ezra. “This is probably our only time we’ll have together while we are here.”

He pulls me down to the bed beside him. “But this is really important to you, and I want to see you experience it. You and Ollie go. You guys are the blues fans here, I’ll kick Callum’s ass in Street Fighter.” Ezra smirks at Callum.

“You wish.” Callum rolls his eyes.

I give Ezra a hesitant look, not wanting to give up the limited free time we get together.

“You guys actually have a couple hours tomorrow with nothing scheduled.” Ian looks up from his phone with a smile.

Ezra beams at me. “Let’s go out for lunch tomorrow? Have a little adventure in Chicago of our own?” He slides his eyes to Jack, who nods. “And you can make it up to me when you get back,” Ezra says with a wink as he stands up.

I smile back at him. “Obviously.”

“Let’s go.” Jack heads towards the door, business as always and wasting no time getting us organized.

“Be safe,” Ian calls to us as we follow him.

Before Jack opens the door, Ezra wraps a hand around my arm. He grabs my chin and presses his lips to mine. “Have fun,” he says as he pulls back.

I smile as I look into his beautiful blue eyes, feeling so grateful for him. “Thank you,” I say softly.

Ollie slings his arms around our shoulders and looks between us. “Where’s my kiss?”

Ezra reaches up to place his hand on the side of his face and Ollie’s eyes widen in surprise. Ezra then playfully slaps his cheek and laughs, walking towards the door.

Ollie shakes his head. “That was uncalled for.” He rubs his cheek and mutters, “Such a tease.”

Ezra and Callum head back to the room, while Ollie, Jack and I grab a cab to Buddy Guy's Legends. The anticipation rises inside me as we drive through Chicago, and it's almost unbearable as we pull up outside the club. It seems silly that something like seeing live blues music in Chicago is such a big deal, given everything we have been through over the last couple months. But, not too long ago, even moving out of Lyons seemed like it would never happen. I never thought I would have anything, or that I deserved anything. I still think that sometimes. And with every new experience we have, I have to remind myself that it's real. I'm still waiting for the day I wake up and realize it was all a dream, or it all falls apart. But it hasn't happened yet. And until it does, I never want to take any of these opportunities for granted.

My heart drops when I see the bouncer, but Jack ushers us to the door, leaning in to say something to him. Then the bouncer just waves us through. I give Jack a questioning look and he just points with his chin to us to enter the club. *Such a mysterious man...*

We walk into the club and the sound of electric blues guitar makes my soul fucking *sing*. I can't help the massive smile that spreads across my face as I look over the crowded club to the stage. A popular blues artist, Jackson Nolan, is playing tonight and he's *good*. I've been listening to him for years, and I'm blown away that we are in the same room right now.

We find a table, and I let myself get lost in the music. There is nothing quite like the blues with its distinct rhythm, melancholic tone and raw emotion. Growing up, I often listened to various blues artists for comfort. BB King once said the blues were like a problem child, perhaps a bit ashamed to let anyone see and not sure how anyone would take it. That's how I always felt about myself. I was made to feel like the problem child, and to feel ashamed of myself and how people would see me. So listening to the blues took some of that burden away. Because despite being a problem child, so many

people loved it. It gave me a bit of hope, that maybe someday, someone would love me too.

“Excuse me?”

I turn around in my seat and there’s a girl and a guy about our age standing awkwardly by our table. “Hi,” I say.

The girl smiles. “Hi, I am so sorry to interrupt, I just wanted to say hi and that I love your guys’ music.”

“Thanks!” Ollie beams back at her. Jack is sitting in his seat across the table from us, arms crossed and assessing them. This place is not somewhere our fans would likely frequent, so these are the first people to approach us. And... it’s nice. As much as I love being able to share our music with the world, the intense fame we have found ourselves in is overwhelming. I miss being able to go out, or do anything, without it being a big deal and needing security.

“Would I... be able to get a picture with you guys?” she asks tentatively.

I glance to Jack and he looks around, then nods. “Oh, thank god,” Ollie jumps up from his seat. Now he *loves* this part. He thinks it’s awesome being noticed everywhere, and he could take photos and give hugs all day long.

Her boyfriend takes the photo of us with her and before they go, she says to me, “You and Charlotte Verlice are super cute together.”

My stomach flips and I try to keep the annoyance off my face as I plaster a smile on instead. “We’re just friends.”

The guy smirks at me from behind his girlfriend and she just nods and smiles. I can’t stand that people still think there is something going on between us, weeks later, even though we’ve both denied it. Pictures of us from the gala are still circling around with stupid headlines like “*Secret Relationship*” and “*Hidden Romance*”. If only they know what the real secret relationship was. Val is quite happy with how this all turned out despite her initial displeasure that Charlotte declined her offer for a PR relationship. Her whole idea of “let

them perceive this how they wish” is actually working out for her.

When they leave, I bring my attention back to the stage as Jackson Nolan gets lost in his melody, eyes closed and feeling his music. I take a deep breath, and allow myself to feel it too. It burrows deep in my soul, pushing the negativity away, just like it always has. I have always found my comfort in music, to escape the world. It became my reason to keep going, and I smile to myself as I think of my real reason for that now. I wish he was here with me, and I'm overwhelmed with love for him as he made this happen for me tonight. I pull out my phone and take a quick video of the stage as Jackson launches into a sick guitar solo, so I can show Ezra when I get back.

The rest of the night is fucking awesome. A few more people approach us, but it's laid back and they all respect our space and time. It crosses my mind a couple times that Ezra and Callum could have come since we didn't get a lot of attention, but I understand where Ian was coming from, and it was out of his hands.

As the night comes to a close and Jackson heads off the stage with his band, Ollie turns to me with a look of awe. “Fucking. Sick.”

I laugh, “He's amazing.”

Jack looks over our shoulders and stands up. “Follow me.”

Ollie and I get up, ready to follow Jack through the dissipating crowd to the exit. But instead of leading us out of the club, he is taking us to a door near the stage. He shakes hands with a guy who smiles at us and lets us into the room, where Jackson Nolan is sitting with his band.

“Jack!” He booms when he sees us walk in, and he gets up to give Jack a hug.

“The fuck?” Ollie says under his breath.

“How does he know everyone...” I say in wonder as I watch them embrace like long lost friends.

“Jackson, this is Harley and Ollie.” Jack turns to us, beckoning us over.

“Who are you...” Ollie stares at Jack as we walk over to them.

I extend my hand to Jackson. “Hi, I’m Harley.” He takes my hand with a beaming smile. “You are amazing,” I say to him, in complete awe over this man before me. He just killed it on stage, and has a talent I could only ever aspire to have. I have spent years listening to this guy, and now here I am shaking hands with him. This is fucking surreal.

“Jack and Jackson... the Jacks.” Ollie breaks through my amazement and pulls a chuckle from my lips as Jackson throws his head back with a laugh.

“I’ve heard lots about you. I hear about Send Help everywhere, and I’m the last person to turn on a mainstream radio or music channel.” He sits back down in his chair and motions for us to take a seat with him. I sit in a chair opposite him and try to refrain from pinching myself. It’s wild to me that someone as talented as him knows who we are. “So, you youngins are blues fans?” He smiles at us. “I love to see that.”

“Yeah,” I smile back at him. “I grew up listening to it.”

“Oh yeah, I love it. Helps my brain slow down.” Ollie nods seriously. I chuckle, and Jackson does as well.

“This is one of my favourite parts about touring, meeting fellow music lovers. Especially the young ones who carry it on.” He settles back in his seat, taking a drink of his beer. “How has your tour been going so far?”

I look around the room and take in the relaxed atmosphere as everyone sits around having a drink and chatting. The door to the room is open to the rest of the club, and there is no haste or urgency to do anything else or to get anywhere. This is the complete opposite of what our post show routine looks like.

“Uh, it’s good,” I say, shifting in my seat. “It’s a lot to get used to.”

“It’s so fun,” Ollie pipes up. “We play a show most nights and have been to so many different cities.”

Jackson smiles at him. “You guys must be having fun exploring the country.”

Ollie shakes his head sadly. “Well, we don’t get to see much of it. This is the first city we’ve been to in a while that we’ve been able to go out.”

A flash of sympathy crosses Jackson’s face before he replaces it with a smile again. “Where are you off to next?”

“I think Toronto after this.” I glance at Jack, and he nods. “Then we’re continuing to tour North America for another couple months before we head to Europe.”

Jackson lets out a low whistle. “Damn.” He looks at Jack, who raises his eyebrows and nods slowly in a knowing look. Jackson looks back at us and clicks his tongue. “Busy.”

“Yeah,” I laugh nervously, rubbing my hand over my thigh. I try not to think too much into the future as it all seems so big and well... scary. Ollie nudges my arm and gives me a reassuring smile. I smile back at him and nod. *Just stay in the moment.*

“I’ve been playing music for over 40 years, and I’ve yet to play outside of the US. Even with this tour, it’s four months and will only have 31 shows. You guys struck it big.” Jackson looks between Ollie and me. “That’s quite the adventure.”

My mind wanders again, this time to what we’ve been through so far. I can’t help but feel a little jealous of Jackson. He just played an amazing set, in a fairly intimate venue and gets to relax post show and chat with fans about music. Our post show routine is usually being ushered out of the venue to beat traffic and avoid throngs of fans, either to a hotel, the tour bus, or the airport. Our interactions with our fans are usually frantically signing autographs or taking pictures while fighting crowds. I would love to be able to sit down casually with them, like we are right now and be able to talk music. And not about who I am and am not dating... Lying to them.

“Yeah,” I sigh. I immediately regret the apathetic way that came out and Jackson gives me a questioning look. “Your tour looks great too,” I say in an attempt to cover it up.

“Big time fame not quite as fun as it looks?” Jackson asks, seeing right through me.

“It is,” I say honestly. Because it can be fun. I’m just an anxious disaster most of the time. And you know... controlled and hidden. “I guess in a way it kind of feels like we cheated.”

Ollie turns his head to me, and I meet his eyes. I’ve never voiced this before, and I’m not really sure why I am now. It just hit me, and I think seeing what we missed out on is bringing up a lot of these feelings.

“We did skip a lot,” Ollie agrees, giving me a soft nod of encouragement. “We didn’t get the typical experience like touring around in a van and finding gigs, or even playing smaller venues.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “We went right to the big stuff. It’s fun, but I also feel like we missed out on a different kind of fun.” I look around the room. “A relaxed kind of fun.” I glance back at Ollie, and he nods again, knowing exactly what I mean.

“Ah.” Jackson observes us for a moment. He sits forward in his chair and sets his beer on the coffee table in front of him. “Well, music knows talent. Most people in the industry want what you guys have and will never achieve it. There’s a reason you shot to fame, and it’s because you’re good. I don’t think that’s cheating.”

I try to give him a smile, but I can’t quite mean it. “Thanks.”

Jackson gives me a warm smile. “I can imagine it’s hard though, and that fame comes with a lot of positives and negatives. Are the positives worth the negatives?”

Charlotte’s words enter my mind again, like they often do. How all the hardships were worth it for her to be doing what she truly loves. And how I keep thinking they’re not worth it for me to have to hide my love for Ezra. I do love creating and

playing music for our fans, but there is a love in my life that will forever rival everything else. But there's really no sense in thinking any other way about it, because we're stuck. This is the way it is for the next four years and there's nothing we can do to change it. I love Ezra and I love music. I just hate having to hide a huge piece of myself, again.

I feel Ollie shift beside me, and I realize I missed what they were saying. I look up and see Jack quietly observing me. I'm not sure what to say, and I'm thankful when Ollie chimes in, "I think we're still just finding our groove with it all."

I nod in agreement, "Yeah. Definitely."

Jack checks his watch and speaks for the first time since we came in here. "We should go."

Jackson stands with us and holds out his hand for us each to shake. "I hope we cross paths again soon. And I am really looking forward to following your career. I better hear some blues from you at some point." He winks at us, and I smile at that thought.

"Absolutely," I say.

We make our way out of the now empty club and into a cab. On the way home, I drop the video of Jackson playing into the shared folder I have with the PR team. They manage my social media, since it's required I have it. And it's the last thing I want to do. I don't want to see what people say or think about us, as it's just yet another way we are in the spotlight. Social media isn't about the music, it's about *us*, another intrusive view into our lives. And that brings up so many anxious feelings that I can't bring myself to do it. So, I put pictures or videos in the folder as required and they post it as me, so the world can see a fake, curated version of my life. And I don't have to experience the world's subjective view of who they think I am. Win win, I guess.

I lay my head back against the seat and watch the city lights rush past us as we make our way back to the hotel. I sigh as I look out the window, and let a small smile play on my

lips. Tonight was one of those positives that make the negatives just a bit more bearable.

CHAPTER NINE

Harley

“HARLEY!”

I turn around to see Anna waving me over to her and I groan. We just finished soundcheck, and Ezra and I are getting ready to head out for lunch and explore some of Chicago.

Ezra glances back at her as well, then turns to me. “Want me to come with you?”

“It’s ok, hopefully it will be quick. She’s probably wanting to talk to me about my lack of social media skills, as usual, and how my photos aren’t *personal* enough.” I roll my eyes. Fucking ironic.

Ezra smiles. “I’ll go chill with Ollie and Callum in the dining room until you’re ready.”

“Ok, be there in a minute.” I squeeze his arm as I turn back towards Anna, and Ezra follows Ollie and Callum into the dining room.

As I approach Anna, my stomach drops as I realize she’s standing with two men, and one is holding a microphone. *Fuck*. I look back over my shoulder, but Ezra is already gone.

“Harley, this is Nick from Blues Radio Chicago.” Anna gestures to the man holding the microphone. “He’s going to do a quick interview with you.”

I bite my lip and rub my hand on my other arm. “Um, just me?”

“Yes.” Anna nods and smiles. “We know you’re a big blues lover, and you posted about going out last night.” She raises her eyebrows slightly, giving me a look telling me to go along with it. “So, you can do this one on your own, right?”

Nick seems to sense my hesitation and adds, “We think it’s really cool that a young pop rock sensation is such a fan of the blues, we’d really love to chat with you about it.”

I nod, taking a big breath and plastering on a smile for him. “Ok.” *If this is about music, maybe it will be ok. I can talk about music. I can do this.*

Nick nods at the other guy and he fiddles around with a tablet, then looks up and says, “Live in one minute.” *Live?? Oh fuck.* Nick hands me a microphone and I try to hide my shaking hand as I take it. I shove my other hand in my pocket and take a deep breath. *Don’t freak out, don’t freak out.*

The other guy starts counting down from 10, and when he gets to three, he holds up his fingers to silently count down as my anxiety ramps up.

Nick effortlessly launches into his introduction of this segment and me, but I can barely pay attention as I grip the microphone tight in my hand to keep from shaking.

“So, Harley, you went to Buddy Guy’s Legends last night.” Nick smiles at me. “You’re a blues fan?”

I shift on my feet and clear my throat. “Yeah, I listen to it often.” I manage to get the words out and they feel heavy leaving my mouth, like I’m in slow motion. My gaze slides over Nick’s shoulder to Anna, who is motioning with her hands for me to continue or elaborate.

Before I get a chance to, Nick continues, “Who are your favourite artists?”

My brain seems to like this question, and my mind travels to my favourite artists. I feel a sense of ease wiggle in, and I let out a breath. “My favourite guitar player is Bo Diddly. I’m a big fan of Buddy Guy, obviously, and Willie Dixon, Howlin’ Wolf, Hubert Sumlin...” I pause for a moment, realizing I’m

feeling ok. “I really like some of the more modern artists as well such as Peter Higgins, and Jackson Nolan last night was incredible.” Anna gives me a thumbs up, and I wish she’d fuck off. I know that’s harsh, as she’s just doing her job. But I’m nervous enough as is just doing this interview alone, and I don’t need the added stress of having her watch and analyze my every move.

“He is amazing, isn’t he?” Nick grins. “How do the blues influence your writing?”

I perk up at this question. *This* is the kind of interview I’ve been wishing we had. If I have to do them, I want them to be about our music. I feel some tension slip away as I smile back at him. We fall into a discussion about the influence of blues on rock today, and how I incorporate it into our music and my writing process. It ends up being an easy conversation, and I almost forget I am in an interview. I’m finally relaxed while in the media, alone, and I can’t quite believe it. Until one seemingly innocent question opens the flood gate again.

“So, you’re quite young, how did you get into blues? Did someone introduce you to it?”

I swallow hard and pause for a minute. I’ve never mentioned my mom, or anything about my personal home life in the media. I’ve somehow managed to avoid it up until this point, and even though I knew it would be brought up eventually, I’m not ready for it. I never will be. I look at Anna and she gives me a quizzical look and flicks her hand towards Nick so I’ll answer him.

“Um, my mom.”

Nick nods and immediately continues, “Do you come from a musical family?”

I am frozen, just watching this scenario unfold. I don’t want to go there. I don’t want to be here. I don’t know how to answer, and I find my eyes keep making their way to the door to the dining room down the hall, hoping Ezra will appear and pull me from this nightmare. I need him, I always have him to

keep me here when I want to leave. “No...” I say slowly, as I reluctantly bring my attention back to Nick. “Just my mom.”

Nick smiles widely at me. “She must be proud of where you are now.”

Those words hit me like a knife to the heart. I feel like I’m on autopilot and my mouth is moving, the words coming out before I realize it. “She died when I was 7.”

Nick’s face falls and his eyes widen. “Oh, I’m sorry.” He glances quickly at the other guy and then back to me. “Um, did your dad help you find your way in your music career?”

I’m vaguely aware of Anna motioning to him that that line of questioning is off limits, as my mind is still trying to catch up and follow what’s happening. Everything is hazy and I can’t stay focused. My whole body is tingling, and I just want to get the fuck out of here. I’m screaming at my body to move, but I can’t. I’m frozen to the spot, doing what I am supposed to by continuing this interview, even though I don’t feel like I’m in charge anymore.

“Well, thank you for talking with us today, Harley.” I hear Nick’s voice, but I can’t seem to find it. I know he’s in front of me, and I see him, but it’s like I’m underwater and sinking deeper and deeper. “I hope you have a great show tonight, we’re excited to see it.”

I just nod with no words coming out, and I notice the assessing look Nick gives me as he holds his hand out for me to shake. I shake his hand, and the second he takes the microphone from me, I’m gone. I don’t say bye to Nick, or check in with Anna, as my body is finally catching up to my brain and getting me the fuck out of there. I need to find Ezra, so we can leave. We were going to have a fun day, and it was just taken from us. But I want to get it back, I need it. I need him.

I walk to the dining room and stop at the doorway. It’s busy, and I can’t make myself go in. I look around, spotting Callum and Ollie at a table, but Ezra isn’t with them. He isn’t

in here. I back out of the room before anyone can see me. *I need him.*

I feel like I'm floating through space as I walk down the hallway, looking for him and not finding him. My panic is increasing. I need to get out of here. It's busy, it's overwhelming. My hands are numb, my heart is thrashing, my head is swimming. I keep walking with my head down as I leave the hallway, not sure where I am going. I eventually look up and find myself facing a set of stairs. I walk around them, and duck into the space underneath, sliding my back down the cool cement wall until I'm sitting on the floor.

"Fuck," I mutter as I rub a hand over my face. As I pull my hand back, I notice it's wet. I bring my fingertips back to my face and trace the tears running from my eyes. A staggering breath escapes me. I don't cry. I don't understand what's happening, and I feel the tears continue to fall as my chest heaves.

I drop my head into my hands and try to breathe deeply, but the emotion takes over. My mom is my only happy memory. I'm not ready for the world to know she was taken from me and my whole life fell apart after. She's my only family, and was my only source of comfort and love for the few short years of childhood I had. I don't want to share her with anyone. I don't want my only positive memories to become something that people pity me for, and to become something negative. Maybe it was naïve to think I could keep her a secret forever.

And my dad. I immediately feel lightheaded again at the reminder of him, and the worry rushes in. I don't let myself think about him, but people are going to start to wonder and question why all the guys talk about their families and I don't. He continues to have this control over my life, even when I have no contact with him and have a team to keep him away from me. He has always made me feel ashamed of my life and who I am, and even though I have escaped him, I am still showing the world a version of myself that is not real. I still

feel shame because of the lie I am putting forward for everyone to believe. This is still not me. I just want to be me.

I want Ezra. Where is he? I don't have my phone, as I left it in my bag in our dressing room before soundcheck. I feel helpless and stuck, unable to move past this moment. I feel like I'm 7 again, and my world has come crashing down around me while I sit in a hospital room after Mom passed, frozen in time and wishing it wasn't real. Just like when I was 10, and my father hit me for the first time. Or 13, the first time I slept outside under the trees because I was too afraid to go home, and couldn't let anyone see my black eye.

“Harley?”

I look up and Ian is watching me with concern. He has a bag slung over his shoulder and it looks like he is just getting here. When he sees my face, he immediately ducks under the stairs to kneel beside me. “What's wrong?”

My breath hitches and I shake my head. I don't even know where to begin.

Ian moves to sit against the wall beside me. “Take your time,” he says quietly.

I turn my head to look at him and he is watching me carefully. He doesn't say anything, giving me time to get my head sorted enough to talk. This isn't the first time he's found me alone, taking a break. But it's the first time he's seen me like this.

“Bad interview,” I say as I turn my head away from him and wipe my eyes.

“Oh?” he asks softly. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” I mumble. “They asked about my parents.”

“Hm.” Ian nods his head. I haven't gone into much detail with him, but he knows my mom died and that my dad is a problem. He's never asked for anything more, letting me share what I want to. “I'm sorry you had to go through that.” He

then checks his watch. “Aren’t you supposed to be out with Ezra?”

I take another stuttering breath in. “They pulled me before we left. And now I can’t find him.” I run my hand over my face and feel my pulse quicken, and my chest becomes heavy as the panic ramps up again.

Ian pulls his phone out of his pocket muttering, “This isn’t right.” He taps away at it, then turns back to me. “I just told him where we are.” He pauses for a moment. “I’m sorry you’ve had a hard afternoon, and that things didn’t go to plan.”

I nod and sniff. I was really looking forward to having this time with Ezra, and it was all taken from me, and then some. I move a shaking hand up to rub my eyes as I take shallow breaths, and Ian reaches out to squeeze my shoulder. “Try to take a deep breath.”

My breath hitches as I try, and the anxiety only rises. I drop my head to my hand and close my eyes. I hear footsteps, and I look up to see Ezra. “There you a-” he pauses once he sees me. “Oh my god.” He rushes over and drops to his knees in front of me. “Are you ok?”

I nod slightly while I meet his eyes, his hand cupping my cheek and thumb wiping away the residue of fallen tears. “Oh, baby,” he murmurs. “What’s going on?” He glances at Ian then back to me.

“I had to do an interview. They asked about Mom. Brought up my dad. I...” I trail off, as I feel the tears start to well again. “I couldn’t find you.”

Ezra shifts so he’s sitting on my other side and wraps an arm around my shoulders. He pulls me into him and runs his fingers through my hair, placing a kiss on the top of my head. I sigh, and fall into his touch, letting my head fall against his. “They pulled me into one too,” he says quietly.

I hear Ian sigh beside me. Suddenly I get an overwhelming feeling of guilt, that he is having to deal with this. With me. I turn my head back to him. “I’m sorry, I-”

Ezra tightens his grip around my shoulders. “Hey.”

“Sorry,” I say. “I mean-” I shake my head in frustration. I don’t know how *not* to apologize for being like this. No one asked for this, and I *am* sorry to have to put everyone through my crazy emotions. But I also do understand what Ezra means. I know I’m allowed to feel these things. I just feel bad for unintentionally putting it onto others.

“It’s ok, Harley,” Ian says, giving me a soft smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m just...” I sigh, staring out into the hallway while Ezra rubs his hand up and down my arm. I try to organize my thoughts, and it starts to make sense. Weirdly enough, this reminder of my dad has put everything into a bit more focus. I’m feeling the same as when he had control over me. I’m not allowed to be me. This anxiety I’m feeling right now is a mix of being alone in an interview, questions about my parents, missing my time with Ezra, and having to hide myself. “I’m so fucking sick of hiding, and not being able to spend time with you.”

Ezra pulls my head in and murmurs into my hair, “I know.”

“You know, boys...” Ian says slowly, looking out into the hallway, then back to us. “They need you as much as you need them.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Ian shrugs one shoulder and stands up, grabbing his bag from the floor and glancing down the hallway. “Try not to let the fear mongering get to you. Yes, there are unfortunately things you have to do and hide as part of your contract. But they wouldn’t be here either if it wasn’t for you guys.” He points a thumb down the hallway. “They may be taking a few too many liberties with their scare tactics, and you have a right to negotiate. Take this advice carefully, but I would be looking for balance somewhere. Right now...” he shakes his head slightly, “it’s tipped in their favour. It doesn’t have to be. I

think you can take back a bit of that control and find a way to make this work for everyone, not just them.”

I feel Ezra nod, so I do the same. Although I’m not sure how that is even possible. “Thanks, Ian,” Ezra says.

Ian meets my eyes and gives me a sad smile. “I’ll leave you two alone. Unfortunately, it’s getting close to time. See you down there.”

Ian leaves, and Ezra and I stay under the stairs, my hand wrapped in his as I lean my head against his shoulder. “That seems impossible.” I mumble.

“What does?” Ezra asks quietly.

“Taking back control.”

Ezra shifts so I lift my head and meet his eyes. “No it isn’t.”

I roll my eyes. “Where have you been the past few months?”

Ezra huffs out a laugh. “I think he’s right. They need us. And we’ve been letting them have all the power to dictate what we do and how we do it. Maybe it’s time to fight back a bit. We can still meet the requirements of the contract and have a bit more say. We do still have a personal life even though we’re on tour.” He nudges my arm. “Like do we *really* need to be in separate hotel rooms?”

I perk up at that. I would fucking *love* it if we could convince them to allow us to share a room, and not have to sneak around late to switch. I smile at him. “Yeah. Nighttime is our time off...” I’m reminded of what Holly said during our meeting before our album release concert. The media image clause is about the media. Not our personal lives. They are blurring these lines and I would fucking love to clear that up for them.

Ezra leans in to brush his lips against mine. “More time for fucking.”

I laugh against his lips and reach up to wrap my hand around the back of his neck, pulling him closer for a kiss. I pull back and look into his eyes. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.” He smiles. He then sighs and looks down at his watch “We should probably head into hair and get dressed, though.” I nod and take a deep breath. He reaches up to push my hair back and smiles at me. “Ready to fight back?”

I smile back at him. “Yeah,” I say softly. He leans in for one more gentle kiss then stands, holding a hand out to help me up as well. I wrap my arms around him and sigh into his neck. I appreciate Ian, and everyone else who puts up with me when I’m panicking. But only Ezra can help me in times like this, and I am so grateful for him.

We head down the hall, Ezra holding my hand until we get closer to our dressing room and all the people back here. The second we open the door to the room, Olivia calls Ezra over to her chair. “Where have you been, you know I need like, a fucking hour for your mop,” she huffs as Ezra sits in her chair and Olivia starts squirting his head with a spray bottle.

“You alright?” Callum says from behind me, and I turn around to see him holding Luna.

I smile as she reaches her arms out, and I take her from him. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Callum smiles and pats my back as he heads over to wardrobe to get changed. I take Luna over to her area beside Olivia’s chair, and we sit on the floor where she has her play mat set up with some toys. Olivia brings her to the stadium on nights when her husband is working, and everyone loves it. We all take care of her while Olivia works, and I love the time I get to spend with her. I’ve never had experience with kids, so I’m surprised at how comfortable I am around her. But it’s a peaceful, quiet joy. She doesn’t judge and we can just be happy and quiet in each other’s presence.

When Olivia is finally finished with Ezra’s hair, he heads off to get dressed and I’m next while Ollie takes over with

Luna. My hair takes about 5 minutes, as the most she ever does is brush it, spray some stuff in it and then muss it up.

Right before I grab my clothes to change, Ezra wraps his hand around my arm, pulling me out of the room and around the corner to a dark alcove off the main hallway. He pushes me to the back wall where we're surrounded by random objects such as old signs, brooms, and stacks of chairs.

“Want to push some boundaries? Feel some of that power we've been missing?” he breathes as he steps in closer to me. I glance over his shoulder to the open hallway where people are milling about. It isn't just our crew back here, as there are stadium staff and various other people around. No one seems to be able to see us, as it's dark back here. I shift so the chairs block us from their view.

I look back to him with a smirk. “What do you have in mind?”

He presses his lips to my jaw and kisses his way up to my ear. “This.” He moves so his lips are hovering over mine. “You're mine, and I can kiss you wherever I fucking feel like it.”

I smash my lips to his, gripping the back of his neck and pulling him into me. He presses me against the wall with his body, his hands finding my waist under my shirt. I part my lips to let his tongue in, sliding against mine in the most delicious kiss that I crave every day when I can't have him. But he's right. Fuck that. I *can* have him. His hand trails up my body and his fingers run through my hair, tangling and pulling, just how I like it.

“Fuck,” I pant as I continue to devour him, pulling him as close as he can possibly get and relishing in the feeling of having him like this when I'm not supposed to. My heart is thumping from both excitement and fear. But the thrill wins and I turn him so he's against the wall. I raise my hand to his neck, gripping him under his chin and grinding myself into him, owning him. Because he's *mine*.

“Harley, where are you?” I hear our wardrobe stylist call out.

I reluctantly pull my lips from Ezra’s and sigh. “We’re picking this up again later.” I rub the pad of my thumb over his glistening bottom lip.

“Fucking right we are,” he breathes out, eyes bright and cheeks flushed.

I force myself to pull away from him and adjust myself in my pants. I blow out a breath and leave the alcove, back to the dressing room to get changed.

Olivia looks up as I enter, gives me the once over and shakes her head with a smirk. She walks over to me. “Next time tell him to avoid the hair,” she murmurs with a smile as she makes her adjustments, returning my hair to her perfectly mussed up state that apparently isn’t the same as post make-out hair.

“Well, that’s no fun,” I say with a fake pout.

She snorts. “Get.” She points me towards the changing room, and I make my way over to change into my ripped black jeans and The Smiths t-shirt.

“Alright boys, let’s go! 5 minutes!” Ian calls into the room.

We follow him down the hallway to the area behind the stage, the sound of the crowd getting louder as we get closer. My heart thumps and I shake my hands out, blowing out a big breath. Once I’m on stage, I feel like I’m home, like it’s where I’m supposed to be. But the anticipation and the build up to that moment sends my nerves into overdrive. I close my eyes and squeeze my hands, shifting my weight between my feet until a sound tech comes over to me to get my in-ear monitors on.

“Stars!” Ollie opens his arms and Ezra, Callum and I move into him, wrapping our arms around each other in our usual huddle. “Burn hot,” he says, looking between us all with a huge grin.

I smile, finding comfort as always in our pre-show routine. “Burn hot!” we all say back in unison.

“Ten!” Someone calls out, and we grab our guitars, putting them on and getting into our spots to rise onto the stage.

“Five!”

I look over to Ezra and he gives me a thumbs up. I return the gesture and wink at him.

Time to fight back, baby.

CHAPTER TEN

Ezra

I REACH MY HAND OUT, feeling the empty bed beside me. I slowly open my eyes and take in the sight of the rumpled sheets and pillow under my hand. A small smile plays on my lips as I hear the rustling of paper in the room. He always wakes up before me, and I find it comforting that he is here with me while I sleep.

I roll over to see Harley sitting on the couch by the window, writing in a notebook with his guitar beside him. I let my eyes roam over him, taking in his beauty. The morning light is streaming in through the window, illuminating his gorgeous face and his hair, which is tousled from sleep, hanging loose around his collar bones. He is wearing only his boxers, the muscles in his arm tensing slightly as he writes.

“Mm,” I hum as I continue to watch him.

He looks up at me and a smile spreads across his face. “Morning.”

I throw the covers back and get up, walking over to him. I lean down, tilting his chin up with my fingers to place a gentle kiss on his lips. “Morning.” I glance at the coffee table and the scribbles in his lyric book. “Writing?”

“Yeah.” His gaze slides up to me, his eyes dancing over my face and down my chest. He points with his chin to the coffee machine. “Get some coffee and come join me.”

I smile and kiss his forehead before I gladly get myself some coffee. I make him another one as well and join him on

the couch. He has his guitar in his lap now and he's playing around with some chords.

I run my hand along his back and peer at his book. "So what are you writing?"

He tilts his head slightly while he looks over his words. "I've been hearing a bit lately how positives should outweigh the negatives, and the good times should make the tough ones worth it all." He turns his head to face me. "At first, I thought they didn't. Even though I love music, nothing about this job was worth it to not have you completely. But, after what we decided yesterday, to take back what's ours? We can make it all work for us. Because I love everything about you. I love you more than anything. We can have both, us and the job we love."

My lips tilt up in a smile as I observe the fire building within him. I love it when he lets his confidence out. He has been through so much in his life, and he deserves every good thing that comes to him. I stay quiet and let him continue, enjoying this glimpse into his thoughts as his eyes shine with purpose and determination. "I want to fight back. Capture Music can't take away what belongs to us. You're everything I've ever wanted, and now that I have you, I'm never letting go." He glances at his notebook. "Even though we still have to hide, we know what's ours. It's what makes us *us*." He reaches out and turns the book towards me. I look at the page, and he has written *Details* at the top. I read over his words, his thoughts forming the beginning of a song.

*It's what you do when you touch me
Calm me, love me, we're meant to be
Secrets that are just for us
And my eyes will always find you
The light in my dark room
It's you, I always knew
It's our love to get us through
Our details, I belong to you*

I bring my eyes back up to stare into his. I lean in, kissing him in a deep and slow kiss full of the love I have for him. His hand trails up my arm and cups the side of my face as we break apart and I lean my forehead against his. "It's perfect." I lean back so I can see his eyes. "And you're right. What's ours doesn't belong to anyone else. And *no one* will take it from us." I smile. "And how rebellious of you to put it all in a song."

Harley laughs. "Well, I mean it's ours, but we can also use it as a bit of a fuck you."

I bite my lip on a smile. "I love it." I push his hair back, lacing my fingers through it and he leans his head into the touch. I look down at the notebook, to the empty space where his lyrics ended, waiting for more. "Traces of my fingers in your hair..."

He brings his eyes to mine and then drops them to my leg as he trails a hand up my thigh, then presses the pad his thumb to it. "Secret ways to say I love you."

My hand continues to explore his body, down his back and around his waist, along the top of his boxers. I playfully cock an eyebrow at him. "Getting in trouble in a hotel room..."

He shifts his guitar in his lap so he can turn towards me, bringing his hand up my side, his palm caressing my skin. He smirks with a slight shake of his head. "Don't care what people say..."

I sigh into his touch, letting my hand move over the hard muscles of his arm and over his chest, to the tattoo of a bear over his heart. I trace my finger over it, remembering when he told me the meaning of it. The bear symbolizes a warrior spirit, healing and strength. It's also symbol of maternal love and protection. He's been protecting his heart, and his love for his mom. I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude that he has let me in, and that he chose me to love. "I want to hold you

when you need me..." I breathe out as I continue to run my fingers over the beautiful tattoo.

He's silent for a moment as he watches me. "Just you and I forever."

I look up into his eyes and bring my lips to his, breathing against him "I am so in love with you, and everything that's ours." I push my tongue between his lips, and he opens for me immediately. I kiss him with all the emotion our song holds, and it doesn't feel like enough. There aren't words strong enough in this world to represent the intense feelings I have for this man, and I would do anything for him. To love him, protect him, and keep him as mine forever.

I eventually release him and once again lose myself in his beautiful eyes. I take his hand in mine, kissing the back of it. "I love this fire in you. And I desperately want you to keep it. I know this isn't ideal, but I do know, with absolute certainty, that we can do this because we have each other." He smiles back at me and my heart soars at how happy he looks. "You've come a long way and I'm proud of you. You're going to achieve so much more too. Remember how anxious you were at Battle of the Bands? And now look at everything you've done."

"Because I have you," he says softly.

I shake my head at him. "Because you're amazing. It's all you. I'm just happy I could help you find your strength. But you will always have me, whenever you need me."

Harley looks down at our hands in my lap and says, "Always?"

I squeeze his hand so he looks up at me again. "You're stuck with me..." then I dramatically whisper, "*forever.*"

He rolls his eyes and scoffs, pulling a laugh from me. He then takes his bottom lip between his teeth, looking adorably shy as he says, "Good."

I tilt my head, holding back a smile. "Does this mean I need to get you a promise ring or something?"

A laugh bubbles out of him as he shakes his head. “I can just take your word for it.”

I laugh with him and then grab the neck of his guitar, pulling it back onto his lap. “So, what do we have for a melody?”

“Hm,” he murmurs as he thinks for a moment. He takes his pick from the coffee table and starts in on a slow chord progression in G major, giving the song a slower melody with a lyrical and idyllic sound.

“I like that,” I say as I grab his lyric book and jot down the lyrics we just wrote. He continues adding to the melody and I listen as he creates a beautiful backdrop to our lyrics that reflect the ardent meaning of our words. We don’t often create songs that have a slower tempo, but the intimacy in the melody is perfect. He suddenly starts singing the chorus he wrote in a low voice and my stomach flutters. He looks up at me when he finishes, and I smile at him. “Gorgeous.”

He blushes slightly as he looks back down at his guitar, and I can’t wipe the smile off my face. I nudge him with my elbow. “Keep going, what’s next for this verse.” I point to our lyrics I just wrote down.

He picks the melody back up, playing around with some chords to change up the progression for the verse. I watch him, in awe at how gifted he is in writing music and how naturally it comes to him. He snaps me out of it when he looks at me with eyebrows raised, waiting for me to sing. I laugh and shrug my shoulder, not ashamed of ogling my hot, talented boyfriend.

I pick up the book and start singing the verse we wrote. We play around with it, creating our melody and writing more verses. I write lyrics about how much I want him to love himself as much as I love him, and he writes about my heart healing his soul. They’re beautiful, intimate lyrics, and it’s the most personal song we have ever written. It’s a song that should be just for us, but we want the world to hear it. When people look at us, they see a false picture of what we are.

Friends, band mates. But he is my everything. This song is a way for us to tell them the truth and show them those details they're missing. While no one will truly know it's about us, we will. And every time we play it, we will be professing our love to each other for everyone to hear. And there's an intense thrill in that.

As I write down the last of our lyrics and close the book, Harley leans down to put his guitar back in its case. I watch him, and decide I need to ask him a tough question. I know he won't want to talk about it, but I need to know he is ok.

"So, we never really got to talk about what else happened yesterday," I say quietly.

He sits back on the couch but doesn't look at me. "Hm...."

I tilt my head to try to meet his eyes. "Are you ok?"

He bites the inside of his cheek and shakes his head. "No. I don't want to have to talk about her with reporters." He then adds quietly, "Or him."

"You don't have to." I tuck his hair behind his ear so I can see him and my heart sinks at the heartbroken look on his face. "She's also yours, and you don't have to share her with anyone."

He shakes his head slightly. "I froze, I had no idea what to do."

"I'm sorry, babe." I move closer to him and wrap my arm around his shoulders, bringing him in close. "I know this is tough. They ask questions that are none of their business. But we don't need to answer them all. Keep protecting what's yours. Power, remember?"

He finally turns his head towards me and I'm sad to see that fire he had is now reduced to embers. I wrap both my arms around him and bring him in for a tight hug. "You got this. I'll help you. I promise."

He hugs me back tightly, burying his face in my neck. "Thank you."

I keep holding him until my phone buzzes on the table beside the bed. I sigh and reluctantly let him go so I can check it, seeing that it's Ian texting us to head out in 15 minutes.

“We need to get ready to go.” I look up to Harley, still sitting on the couch and staring out the window. He looks back at me and nods, standing up.

“What can I do to light your fire again?” I ask as I watch him gather his things.

His eyes flick to mine and he drops his bag, walking over to where I'm sitting on the edge of the bed. He leans down and presses a kiss to my lips. “Just be you.”

I sigh as I look into his eyes, seeing them burning just a little bit brighter. “Done,” I whisper.

As we pack up to leave for the stadium, I find myself excited to begin this journey as we carve out a new path for ourselves in this crazy world. We're ready to take back what belongs to us.



I look out the window as we make our way through downtown towards the stadium. The van is quiet, as Callum and Ollie each have their headphones in, and Jack is talking to the driver in the front seat. Harley and I are seated in the back as usual, and I hold his hand in my lap as I lay my head back against the seat. Harley rubs his thumb over my thigh, and I smile, squeezing his hand.

We sit in silence, watching the city pass by, until his hand starts to make its way further up my thigh. I lift my head to look at him, and he glances up at everyone else in the van before bringing his eyes back to me with a mischievous look. “Shh.”

I let go of his hand and he brings it up to palm my cock, rubbing me over my jeans. I press my lips together to keep

from moaning and my muscles tense as my dick hardens with his touch. He raises his hand to my belt buckle, and slowly, quietly, undoes it. I bite my lip as I watch him unbutton my pants and slide my zipper down. *Oh my god...*

He glances again to Ollie and Callum. Callum is leaning his head against the window with his eyes closed, and Ollie is enthralled by a game on his phone. Harley looks back at me and smirks, then lowers his gaze to his hand as he reaches into my boxers and fists my hard cock. I stifle a sound in my chest and grip Harley's leg tight.

"Can you be quiet?" he whispers. I breathe out and nod vigorously. He gives me a sly smile and leans in closer. "Good boy."

I tilt my head back and bite my lip again, not sure how he expects me to be quiet if he's going to do that. I drop my head with a stuttering breath as he moves his hand up and down my cock. I widen my legs and gently move my hips as he continues to stroke me in my pants. Knowing that at any moment Callum or Ollie could turn around and peer over the seat has me close to exploding already. I writhe in my seat as I try to keep my moans at bay, and Harley pumps me faster.

The van turns a corner, and he slows to a teasing pace. I look out the window to see a crowd of fans at the entrance stadium parking lot... which we are quickly approaching. "Harley," I whisper.

"Not yet," he whispers back.

I'm trembling under his touch, and grasping his leg in a bruising grip as he continues to tease me slowly. I'm impossibly hard and my heart is thumping. He's pulling shaky breaths from deep within me as his fingers trail up and down my hard length while the van slows at the parking lot entrance. The fans are held back by gates and the windows are tinted, so even though they can't see us, the thought we could be caught like this is exhilarating. My whole body goes rigid as I attempt to hold back from letting go right here.

The van enters the parking lot and as we get closer to the underground parking, Callum stretches and yawns. I quickly glance at Harley, and he is watching Callum with a small smirk, hand still working my cock as he once again increases his pace. I feel the tingles begin in my legs as I tip closer to the edge, waiting until he lets me fall over it.

Ollie puts his phone down and looks out the window as we enter the underground parking. "Let's do this," he says with a clap of his hands.

"Let's," Harley says, and tightens his hold on me, pumping me faster. I fall forward to rest my forehead on the back of the seat in front of me, hiding my face and Harley's hand in my pants. I'm shaking and feel my face twist as I try not to moan while I erupt in Harley's hand. My chest is heaving as I stay there for a moment, coming down from an intense orgasm, and I feel the van stop. Harley pulls his hand from my pants and brings his fingers up to my lips. I immediately open for him to he slip his fingers into my mouth and I lick the evidence of our forbidden act from them. I lean back to look at him and he keeps his eyes on mine as he brings his hand to his mouth, licking the rest of my cum from his fingers. *Fuck.*

The van door opens, and I quickly drop my hands to do up my pants. As Callum and Ollie get out, I lean into Harley. "Now I have cum all over the inside of my boxers."

He smiles and shrugs one shoulder. "Oops?"

I laugh and push him, so he exits the van. Now that's the fire I'm talking about.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Harley

“IT’S ALL STICKY,” Ezra whispers to me while subtly adjusting himself in his pants as we walk down the hallway in the stadium.

“Are you complaining?” I smirk at him.

He gives me a look out of the corner of his eye. “No,” he mutters with a smile.

I reach out and grab his hand, giving it a squeeze and holding on for a moment before I let go. I glance behind me to make sure no one saw and catch Callum hiding a smile. He raises his eyebrows at me in a knowing look, and I chuckle as we continue to make our way to the dressing rooms.

We’re meeting with Ben here at the stadium today to discuss our next album, and I’m looking forward to seeing him. We don’t see much of him since we’re on tour, but whenever we do, it’s like a breath of fresh air. He’s so positive about our situation and is always wanting to help however he can. He’s one hundred percent on our side, and we greatly appreciate him.

He won’t be here for a bit so while we wait for him to arrive, Ollie pulls out a soccer ball and we play around with it in the wide stadium hallway. Ollie and I are on one side, and Ezra and Callum on the other. Ollie holds the ball up in his hand and looks Callum dead in the eye. “No illegal moves, right?”

Callum rolls his eyes. “Dude. It was a *video game*. I didn’t make the call!”

Ollie just nods at him with a look of distrust. “Mm hm.”

Ezra walks up to Ollie. “Just drop the ball,” he says as he smacks it out of his hands.

Ollie dramatically points at Ezra, mouth open in disbelief. “Illegal!”

“Deal with it!” Ezra shouts as he accepts a pass from Callum and kicks the ball at the wall that is mine and Ollie’s “net”, earning himself a goal.

“Ha!” Callum points at Ollie. “That’s how it’s done.”

Ollie sighs and shakes his head. “We just can’t win...” he says to me.

I shrug. “Well, I can.” I dart in to steal the ball from Ezra and Ollie whoops behind me. I duck around Callum and pass to Ollie, who kicks at the opposite wall down the hall, and scores.

“Fucking right!” Ollie yells, leaping onto my back as I laugh.

One of our wardrobe stylists sticks her head out of the wardrobe room. “Boys, language!”

“My bad, Susan, sorry!” Ollie yells back to her.

Callum takes this opportunity to steal the ball from him, and Ollie chases him down the hallway towards our net. Ezra pushes his shoulder into mine and casually cups my ass with his hand before running after them. I chuckle as he looks back at me over his shoulder with a cheeky grin. *Yeah, I like this new plan a lot.*

We continue playing, taking over the hallway with our game. Some of our crew members pop in to play with us as they make their way through the hallway, and we get in trouble by other staff as we get in their way while they’re trying to work. It’s fun, and I feel completely at ease as I just

enjoy time with my family with nothing else occupying my mind.

I have the ball and kick it over to Ollie, but it goes wide. Just as he turns to follow it, it goes whizzing by him and slams hard into our wall. I look behind Ollie, and Ben is strolling towards us, laptop tucked under one arm with his other hand in his pocket.

Ollie gapes at him. “Benny, what the fuck?”

Ben gives him a little nod as he approaches. “I’m more than just a suit, Oliver.”

Ollie stares at him, head slowly shaking as he whispers, “I have so many questions.”

“Get in here,” Ben says as he grabs the back of his neck and playfully shoves him into a meeting room.

We all follow and take a seat at the table while Ben closes the door, locking it. I smile, knowing why he did that. Ezra slides his chair closer to me and slips his hand onto my thigh.

“Honestly, I didn’t need to be here for this. It could have been a phone call.” Ben says as he sits down and opens his laptop. “But, what’s the fun in that?”

“Because we’re your favourite band.” Ollie nods seriously.

Ben looks at him with a serious nod back. “Obviously.”

Callum leans forward over the table. “I get it, the travel is exciting.” Callum has been loving tour, as he loves to travel. Even though we don’t get to experience many of the places we go to, we have been able to do some pretty cool things in some new cities. He’s really excited for Europe, however. Him and Ollie like to go golfing as one of the many sports they enjoy, and he is pumped to golf over there.

“Absolutely.” Ben smiles at him. “So. New album.” He turns his attention back to his laptop. “Since you’re on a pretty lengthy tour, you’ll be recording on the road. And we’re starting this process now so we can take our time with it. I

don't want you guys getting too burnt out with everything else you have to do."

I let out a sigh of relief. I was worried about how this was all going to work. We're already so busy and don't have a whole lot of time to ourselves. Ben flashes me a knowing smile. "We don't plan to release the album for about another 7 or 8 months. So you have lots of time to write, and record. First though, writing. Do you need Charlie out here with you guys to write?"

"I don't think so." Ezra pipes up. Charlie is our producer-songwriter and he is great to work with. But we don't tend to use him for the writing process, and more for just fine tuning what we already have when ready to record. Ezra squeezes my thigh. "We've been writing."

"Me too."

We all turn to look at Ollie, who is smiling proudly.

"You have...?" Callum asks tentatively, and he nods. Ollie doesn't really write songs. When he does, they tend to be about things like hockey or his snare drum. "What is this one about?"

"It's a love song," he says, surprising us all. Then he gets a sad look on his face. "About a long lost drummer girl."

Ben whips his head to look at him and Ollie gives him a questioning look. "What?" Ollie asks.

"Nothing," Ben mutters, then looks back to his laptop screen. "I'll take a look at your tour schedule to see what we can arrange for studio time, and will coordinate with Ian while I'm here. You guys just keep working on writing for now. And you might be able to use some soundcheck time when it's closed to work out some sounds too."

"Oh, sick." Callum smiles and I perk up at that too. The thought of playing *Details* on stage, even if not for fans yet, sends a rush of excitement through me.

We continue to plan out the next album and briefly go through what we have so far. Ezra and I have a couple songs along with *Details* and Callum has some he's been working on. Plus, with Ollie's mystery love song, we're off to a good start and we're looking forward to putting it all together. I smile to myself as I think about our time writing songs in Ollie's garage, and can't wait to relive some of those simpler times.

"I'll get this all organized, and you guys keep working away on your songs." Ben closes his laptop and we all stand up. "I head out tomorrow, so I'm looking forward to seeing the show tonight."

"Thanks for coming," I say, smiling at him.

He reaches out and squeezes my shoulder, glancing between me and Ezra. "All good here?"

Ezra wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me into him to kiss the side of my head. "Getting there," he says.

Ben smiles and nods at us, heading for the door. I reach my hand up and pull Ezra's lips to mine, sneaking in a kiss before the door opens.

"I need coffee," Callum yawns as we make our way down the hall back to our dressing room.

"You don't have coffee here?" Ben asks, peering into the kitchen.

Callum nods. "We do, but it's not great."

Ben checks his watch. "Well, you guys still have time, I'll take you to get some. I have a car here."

"Oh my god." Ollie whips around, and I run into him.

"Jeez," I mutter, and he reaches out to steady me. "Do you really need any?" I ask him.

Ollie shakes his head and says, "Probably not," at the same time Callum says, "No." Ollie just shrugs and turns around, finding the soccer ball again and starts kicking it around.

Ben chuckles then turns to us. “You guys coming too?”

“Fuck yes,” Ezra breathes out.

I shake my head. “No, I’m good. You guys go, I’ll stay here with Ollie.”

Ezra smiles and subtly squeezes my hand before they head off. As I turn to join Ollie, someone I don’t recognize walks by me and smiles. I return the smile and nod a hello, but he stutters in his step and stammers out, “Your girlfriend is super hot.”

I can’t help the sigh that escapes me. “Charlotte and I are just friends.”

His features twist in confusion as he says, “No, Sofia Fernandez.”

Now I’m equally confused. I stare back at him. “What?”

He laughs nervously and glances down the hall. “Um, sorry.” He backs away. “Love your music.” He ducks his head and scurries off down the hall and I watch him go, now feeling even more confused.

“What’s going on?” Ollie asks as he dribbles the soccer ball up to me and notices the look of bewilderment on my face.

“Who’s Sofia Fernandez?” I ask him.

He scrunches his face up like he has no idea what I’m talking about. Then it seems to dawn on him. “Oh, wait a minute. Isn’t she the lead singer for that band we met in Minneapolis?”

My heart picks up its pace as I remember them. They’re a new band who are touring the states right now, and we ended up crossing paths in Minneapolis. They came to meet us, and we talked with them for a bit. *Please, no...*

“What?” Ollie asks.

“That guy seems to think she’s my new girlfriend.”

Ollie's eyes widen and he reaches into his pocket to take his phone out. I bite my lip, not wanting to see anything written about me. I haven't looked at anything yet, and I don't want to now. But I have no idea what this means, and I need to know. I move beside him so I can see, as he does a quick search of her name. And there I fucking am. A photo of us that looks conveniently cozy when all we're doing is talking in a busy and crowded room. With headlines declaring a "*budding romance*".

"What the fuck?" I croak out. *Why?* We were all there, all talking to her and the rest of her band. Why is this happening again?

The hallway feels like a dark tunnel, and I feel hollow. My heart is racing, my pulse thundering in my ears. My thoughts are spiralling and all I can hear in my head is *Why? Why me, why again?*

I feel a hand on my arm and I jump. "It's ok," Ollie says, and pulls me into the dressing room. I follow him, trying desperately to stay present and not freak out. I sit on the couch and put my head in my hands. "Why..."

I feel the couch depress beside me. "I don't know, man," Ollie says.

I try to catch my breath, and not let the anxiety take over. My mind is racing but I try to bring it back to this morning with Ezra and what we talked about.

"How can I help?" Ollie asks.

I lower my hands from my head and take a deep breath. "I don't really know."

He suddenly sits forward on the couch, scooting to the edge and opening his arms wide. "Here, hug me."

"What?"

"I give great hugs, it will help, trust me." He motions with his hands for me to hug him while continuing to hold his arms wide. And before I know it, he's wrapping his arms around me

and pulling me into him in a massive bear hug. And, ok... yeah, it's great. I take another deep breath and let my thoughts wander back to our song from this morning, reminding myself that we are fighting back. This doesn't matter. It's not real. *We* know what is real, and we have a love no one can hurt. I feel the tension dissipate and I let out another breath as Ollie continues to hug me. "Thanks, Ollie." I murmur into his shoulder.

"Of course," he says. Then he whispers, "I did it."

I laugh and pull back from him, just as Ben, Ezra and Callum come into the room.

"I got you a smoothie," Ezra says as he walks up to me and hands me a cup. He gives me an assessing look and sits beside me. "What?"

My mouth tilts in a soft smile. He can always tell when I'm anxious or in my head. "Well... apparently I have a new girlfriend."

Ben pulls his phone out and taps away at it while Callum scoffs and mutters, "Great."

Ezra sighs and glances towards the door, running a hand over my thigh. "You ok?"

I nod and sigh. "Yeah..." Callum shows his phone to Ezra so he can see what I'm talking about. "I just wish this shit would stop."

"Sorry this is happening again, guys." Ben says as he tucks his phone away. "I know it's easier said than done, but try not to let it get to you too much. These rumours happen..." He glances out the door and lowers his voice. "Just a little worried where they are coming from."

"It would be a lot easier without all the other shit," I murmur.

Ezra huffs. "Yeah, these rumours are ok but apparently bandmates sharing a hotel room isn't."

Ben draws his eyebrows together. "What do you mean?"

“We can’t share a hotel room, for fear of what people will think,” Ezra rolls his eyes. “We have to sneak around to switch late at night.”

“Seriously?” Ben glances between us. “Damn... I had no idea.”

“Yeah, and we get reprimanded each time we spend *our* personal time together,” I mutter.

Ben furrows his brow again. “Have you brought this up with Holly?”

“No...” Ezra trails off. “I think we just kind of realized how much they were taking from us. And we just decided to take it back.”

Ben smiles. “Good for you.” He then huffs out a breath. “Man, this PR team... But use Holly. It’s what she’s here for as your artist relations manager. To make sure your needs are met both on and off the road.”

“We will, thank you,” Ezra says to him, then turns to me, “I’m proud of you, though.” And honestly... I’m kind of proud of myself for not completely losing it over this.

“I helped.” Ollie pipes up and we all turn to him. “I have magical hugs.”

I laugh. “Yeah, thanks Ol.” I reach out to pat his shoulder and he beams at me.

We continue to hang out with Ben prior to the show, and I let myself fall back into my relaxed, carefree state I was in before a rumour stole it from me. But I got it back, and that’s a big fucking win.



“Hey.”

“Hm?” I roll over in bed to see Ezra propped up on his elbow. “Want to go on a little adventure?”

I glance at the clock which shows it’s 3:23am. “Right now?”

I can see him grinning in the darkness and I can’t help but smile back at him as he nods. “Yeah.”

“We just finally got to bed like an hour ago and have to catch a flight in the morning.” I yawn as I roll onto my back. “Where are we adventuring?”

“It’s a surprise.” He hops off the bed and throws a pair of board shorts and a t-shirt at me.

I groan as I sit up and shield my eyes as he turns on a lamp. “Only because I love you.”

I groggily get dressed and Ezra leads me out of the hotel room into the empty corridor, and into the elevator. He presses the button for the top floor, which is the pool deck.

“The pool?” I ask him, and he flashes me a key card.

“I was talking to the night manager earlier. He said we can use the pool when we came back tonight, and he’d make sure we were left alone. He gave me his pool key card so we can get in after hours.” The corner of his mouth tilts up in a sly smile. “He was referring to all of us. But I didn’t say anything to the guys. I waited until everyone was asleep, as I figured this would be better if it was just me and you...”

A smile spreads across my face. “I agree.”

The elevator opens and Ezra moves to the only other door up here, swiping the key card. The lights in the pool deck are dim as most are turned off. I look around the room, and it’s... private. The door we just came through is frosted, and is the only access to the rest of the building. We’re on the top floor of the hotel so the pool is surrounded by windows overlooking the city. I glance up to the ceiling. “Are there cameras?”

Ezra shakes his head and points to the camera above the door. “He turned it off tonight.”

“Are you sure...?” I ask, peering at the camera, even though there are no lights on it.

He walks up to me and slips his hands under my shirt, lifting it over my head. “I’m sure. He showed me. He was very adamant that we’d have privacy. He says he understands that we need to be able to *relax* after back to back shows, and doesn’t want his hotel to be responsible for any... *scandals*... such as leaked footage of us on our time off.” He kisses down my neck and I bite my lip. My fingers find the hem of his shirt and slip inside, my thumbs rubbing over his hip bones.

“Then let’s go swim,” I say in a low voice into this ear, and he pulls back with a grin, yanking his shirt off and throwing it on a lounge chair.

I watch him as he steps into the pool and drops into the water. The muscles of his back flex as he moves his arms, swimming to the middle of the pool. I pull my bottom lip between my teeth. He turns around to face me. “Coming?”

I take in a breath and adjust my half hard cock in my shorts. “Probably.”

He laughs and the beautiful sound echoes off the pool room walls. I walk down the steps into the water, swimming over to Ezra. He wraps his arms around me when I get to him, and immediately my mouth finds his. A thrum of excitement courses through me as we kiss, holding each other in the middle of a hotel pool. My heart is thumping wildly, and while I should be anxious that we’re going to get caught... I also don’t really fucking care. I am filled with determination to make this work for us, and if pushing some of these boundaries is how we do it, then I will find great joy in doing just that.

Ezra wraps his legs around my waist, the water making him weightless in my arms as he presses his hardening cock into mine. I moan into his mouth and he deepens the kiss, claiming me out in the open.

“Fuck,” I murmur against his mouth. He chuckles and moves his mouth down my neck.

“Hm,” he moans against my skin, and I reluctantly push him back so he flops into the water and goes under.

“You’re going to make me bust right here. And I don’t think the hotel staff will appreciate that clean up,” I smirk at him as he surfaces and laughs.

“Yeah, maybe not so much.” He ducks under the water again, then comes back up with a look of exaggerated shock on his face. “You’re hard as a rock. Harley, this is a *public* place.”

I scoff and splash water at him. “And who’s fault is that?”

He scrunches his face up adorably and does a little shrug. “I’m hard too, so... yours.”

I duck under the water and swim towards him, my hands finding his hard cock. I rise out of the water in front of him. “Hm, I see that.”

He licks his bottom lip, and my eyes drop to take in the sight. He starts walking, pushing me backwards until my back hits the side of the pool. He nods with his chin to the edge. “Up.”

I hoist myself up so I’m sitting on the edge, and he nudges my knees apart to move between them. A chuckle escapes me as he reaches out to open the fly to my shorts. “Really?”

“My turn,” he says, his eyes bright and full of mischief. “But lucky me, I get to have my mouth on you.”

I groan as he takes my cock out of my shorts and immediately drops his mouth to me, like he’s starving for it. I lean back on my hands and watch as he bobs his head on my dick, licking and sucking, pulling groans and moans from me. His hot mouth feels so fucking good, as he slides along my length at just the right speed to make me more and more sensitive. The feeling of his tongue wrapping around my cock has me moving towards release, quickly. I groan again, and his

eyes dart to the door behind me. I move my hand to his hair, and grip tight, urging him to look back at me. “Eyes on me.”

He moans onto my cock, which pulls one from me as well. The sight of him taking me like this, in a public pool when anyone could be watching or could walk in, is driving me wild. He keeps his eyes locked on mine as he swirls his tongue over my sensitive tip, and I tighten my grip in his hair even more. “Fuck, baby, you look so hot with your mouth on my cock.”

His hand moves down under the water to stroke himself as he continues to work me, and I’m damn near ready to explode. His grip on my hip tightens and I know he’s getting off on this too. “I’m going to come,” I pant as my muscles contract and I pull his head in, thrusting myself deeper into his mouth. His other hand moves off his cock to grip my other hip as he takes me deep, and my dick throbs in his mouth while a feeling of electricity rushes through my entire body. I shoot my release down his throat, and he greedily swallows me down. And like the good boy he is, he keeps his eyes locked on mine the whole time.

“Get up here,” I pant as he releases me from his mouth. I jump down into the water and hoist him up to the edge of the pool. He immediately brings his hand down to continue stroking himself as he says, “Fuck, I’m ready to come.” I bat his hand away and sink my mouth onto him, lapping up his delicious cum and swallowing down every last drop of him. He groans as his fingers slide into my wet hair, and I continue to lick him clean while he watches me, breathing heavy.

I pull his hips so he sinks back down into the water with me, bringing my mouth to his. He grips the back of my neck and we kiss fervently, lost to this private moment in a public place. I feel an intense warmth and satisfaction, and not just because of the mind-blowing blowjob he just gave me. It’s also because of the *fuck you* we are sending to those who are trying to cage us. We’ll play by their rules where it matters, but right here and now? Nothing else matters but us.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ezra

HARLEY'S LEG is bouncing beside me, and I reach out to put my hand on his knee. He looks to me with worried eyes, but I see some of it melt away when I give him a reassuring smile.

“Are we all here?” Holly's voice comes through the phone in the middle of the table. A chorus of yes's sound throughout the room from people on the phone and here in person. “Great! Let's get right to it. Boys?”

I take a deep breath and one more glance at Harley. I know I need to take the lead on this, and I have no problem with that. I look around the table and take in the faces staring back at us. Anna and another member of the PR team are here, along with Ian. On the phone is Holly, Val and I think someone else but I'm not completely sure who they are. We spoke to Holly yesterday, and she arranged this meeting for us. She offered to take care of it herself, but we felt like this was something we needed to do and say.

Harley's leg starts bouncing again, and I tighten my grip on him. “It's ok,” I murmur to him. He nods and looks down at his hands.

I clear my throat and shift in my seat. “We feel like our personal time is being compromised.” I start off. “We understand that on tour we are in the media often, but we also do have time to ourselves, and we want to be able to use that as we want to.” I pause to take another breath. “We want to be able to share a room in hotels. That's pretty much our only time we have together in private.”

“You already are.” Val’s voice comes through the phone and Harley huffs out a breath, shaking his head.

I bite my tongue and try to keep my cool. “Uh, no... I’m paired with Ollie, and-”

Val cuts me off. “We know you switch.”

If I bite my tongue any harder, I’ll bite it right off. “Ok,” I grit out. “So then what difference does it make for us to just be in a room together without having to switch around later?”

“If someone was to see-” Val starts, but Holly’s voice cuts in.

“Then they’ll see two band mates going to their hotel room. Just like Callum and Ollie will be. Good point, Val. And since where these boys sleep isn’t public relations related, I think this is a fair request that Ian can take care of?”

“Absolutely, Holly. Will do,” Ian says from his seat across the table from me and he gives me a wink. I can feel Harley relaxing under my touch on his leg, and I turn my head to see him now looking up at the table, some of that fire coming back.

I hear some murmuring on the phone and it sounds like Val is talking to someone, and she doesn’t sound pleased.

“Continue, boys,” Holly says.

I sit forward, resting my elbow on the table. “We want to be able to freely spend time together on our days off and free time. We know there are limits because of media and we’re not arguing this. But we’re constantly worried about getting hands slapped for just spending time together alone. We have really busy days, and we are trying hard to play by your rules. We just want to have some free time for each other. We feel like there is a very fine line between our personal and professional lives on tour, and we want a bit more of a balance.” The corner of Ian’s mouth tilts up in a smile and he gives me a little nod.

We hear Val sigh, then she says, “You are constantly at risk of being in the media while on tour. It’s not like the paparazzi

and fans stop when you guys do.”

“We understand, but we are being careful no matter where we are and when it is,” I say. “And we will continue to be.” *Except for in the van, and in the pool... but that doesn't really count...*

“Well, as per the terms of your contract, this is also a reasonable request,” Holly says. “After all, we did already discuss this exact issue previously, did we not Val?”

“We did-”

“Wonderful, so we will continue to do our jobs and only concern ourselves in the professional aspect of their lives.” Holly says cheerfully, and I want to jump through the phone and hug her. I *love* how she doesn't take their bullshit and manages to get things done without stepping on toes or being rude. “I guess it would make sense for Ian to work with his team on this as tour manager.” And now I could fucking kiss her. Taking it right out of Val's hands, which she has no right to be meddling in anyway.

“Anything else?” Val asks with a bite to her tone, and Anna ducks her head, furiously scribbling notes.

I decide to push this a bit further, since we're all here and getting somewhere. “So...” I glance at Harley. We didn't say we were going to talk about this, but I really want to, because I know it weighs heavily on him. “What's going on with these rumours about Harley dating girls? That's two in just a few weeks when all they were doing was talking.”

“Hm,” Holly hums. “I'm aware that Charlotte was a potential PR strategy, but I can't say I know much about Sofia. Val? Any light you want to shed on this problem?”

“They're simply rumours. It happens in this industry Harley, consider yourself lucky. It means you've made it.” Harley shares a glance with me, like he's trying not to roll his eyes. So, I do. Anna gives me a sharp look.

“And, whether you want to believe it or not, it's helping you with exactly what you are asking for here today,” Val

continues. “The fans were questioning if something was going on between you both. But, once these rumours of Harley being popular with some A list ladies began, those questions have dramatically reduced. That’s a major win. We can use this to your advantage, to give you exactly what you’re asking for. With the attention diverted to Harley potentially dating other celebrities, you two have more room to be together how you wish.”

I chew on my lip as I consider this. I understand what she means, but why do we have to use Harley’s reputation and a false narrative about him so we can have what we want? Shouldn’t we be able to have what we want regardless of rumours, and weren’t we just discussing that?

Harley speaks up for the first time since we all sat down, pulling my thoughts right out of my head. “But we just had a plan for us to have more time together...?”

“And this helps that plan, yes,” Val says.

Holly’s voice comes through the phone next, “I will agree that rumours happen, and media like to take things and run with it. As long as our involvement doesn’t perpetuate this narrative...”

“They’re just rumours. There are always rumours,” Val says sharply. “We may never know where they all come from, but what we *can* do is help shape them in a way that benefits us.” I don’t miss the way she says *us* not *you*. “This will all be old news in a couple weeks anyway,” Val continues. “Just let it blow over and let us handle it. In the meantime, you’re getting what you’ve asked for.”

Harley and I share a look and I can see a hesitation in his eyes. I try to give him a reassuring smile, but it falls a bit flat. As much as this sucks, maybe it will just blow over. And what other choice do we have? Rumours are rumours, and we are getting what we’ve asked for. All we can do now is hope this thing with Sofia goes away and there are no other fake dating stories to deal with. Maybe we can count this conversation as a win.



“Sunshine!”

Harley runs down the steps as Lulu gets out of the cab and leaps into his arms. I smile as I watch them then turn my gaze to Hannah as she gets out the other side. I bounce down the steps as well, as she rushes around the car into my outstretched arms. “Ah, I can’t believe we’re here!”

“Me either, it’s been too long,” I say, beaming at her as I pull back and Lulu runs over to hug me as well.

“We’ve missed you!” Lulu exclaims, then looks at the house. “This is where we are staying??” I glance up at the house and snigger. Yeah, it’s fancy. The hotel we were booked to stay at was full, so Ian got us a house to rent for the night while Hannah and Lulu are visiting. I guess this is what we end up with rather last minute, and close enough to downtown Nashville. None of us are complaining, though.

“Where are the guys?” Hannah asks as we grab their bags and make our way into the house, seeing that Callum and Ollie aren’t here.

Harley closes the door behind us. “On their way. They had to wait for another driver from the stadium.”

“So, how did your meeting go?” Lulu asks hopefully as her and Hannah claim a couch in the living room.

Harley and I sit on the other couch and I put my arm around his shoulders, giving him a squeeze. I know he still doesn’t feel great about how the meeting went, even though they agreed to our requests.

“It was good,” I say and Harley glances down at his fidgeting hands in his lap. Lulu looks at him quizzically. “They’re going to back off our personal time and we get to share a room.”

“That’s great!” Hannah beams at us.

“But?” Lulu asks, still looking to Harley.

He looks up at her and sighs. “I just feel like we’re going to pay for it somehow. It went a little too well. And Val is doing nothing about these rumours of me with girls because it,” he holds his finger up in air quotations, “*helps us.*”

“Hopefully there won’t be anymore.” I take my arm from around his shoulders and grab his hand. “And we’ll manage it if there is. But in the meantime, we get more time together.” I smile at him and a smile spreading across his face as well. His eyes brighten a bit, and an excitement builds in me as I realize I’ll be able to see him like this more often.

“Yeah,” he agrees, and I kiss the back of his hand.

“I’m happy to hear this is-” Hannah starts, but the front door bursts open and Ollie enters the room with arms wide and breathing heavy with a frantic look on his face.

“Triad!” he yells excitedly with a massive grin as he starts walking towards Hannah and Lulu. They laugh and get up to hug him in a three-way hug. Ollie closes his eyes with his head tilted back as he hangs onto them, basking in his emotions like he can’t believe this is real. “We’re finally back together,” he says in a low, dramatic whisper.

“Alright Ollie, let them breathe.” Callum walks up behind them, carrying both his and Ollie’s bags, shooting him a look that says he isn’t too happy to have been left with this task.

Ollie finally releases them, grinning widely. “I’m just so excited to have my girls back.”

“We’re excited too, Ollie,” Hannah laughs and pats his chest, then moves give Callum a hug.

“How was the flight here?” Callum asks as we all take a seat again, but Ollie jumps back off the couch before his ass even touches the cushion.

“Oh my god! I got so caught up in the excitement I forgot to show you!” He rushes over to his bag and starts rooting

around in it. I chuckle, as he's barely been here 5 minutes and already so much is happening. His brain is a magical place. He pulls out a t-shirt and holds it up. "Look!"

On the t-shirt is a logo made up of a blue guitar with wings behind it and flames burning around the bottom, with *Send Help* written over it.

"Whoa, that's sick!" I stand up and take it from him, admiring the design. "This is not our official merch, where did that come from?"

"A fan sent it to us!" Ollie says and then turns around to his bag again. "Her name is Maria. She sent us a bunch of stuff that she made." He pulls out more t-shirts and sweaters and dumps them on the coffee table. "There are flames. How did she know we burn hot?!"

"Damn." Callum picks up another shirt, holding it up so he can see the logo. "This should be our official merch instead..."

"It should," Harley agrees, claiming a hoodie for himself. Lulu grabs it from him and puts it on, aiming a sweet smile at him. He rolls his eyes and grabs another hoodie, tucking it behind him and giving her the side eye.

"I claim this one," Hannah says, pulling on a t-shirt with our band name surrounded by flames.

We all claim what we want from the pile and settle back onto the couches while Callum grabs us all a beer and a sparkling water for Harley.

"So, what's new back home?" I ask as I take a sip of my beer.

"Not a whole lot." Hannah eyes Harley and says tentatively, "Julia is telling everyone you guys had a thing."

Harley huffs and shrugs. "Add her to the list."

"It's Julia, no one believes her anyway," Lulu assures him. "Everyone who matters knows the truth." As she and Hannah have become so close, Lulu has had the pleasure of getting to know Julia, and like everyone else, doesn't like her. "Plus, she

hijacked one of my dates so I'm extra fucking salty with her right now." She rolls her eyes and takes a drink of her beer. Hannah gives her a look with a little eye roll to say she didn't approve of this date to begin with.

Ollie's head snaps up. "Did I hear about this date yet?"

"Not yet," Lulu says, and Ollie's mouth drops open in shock. She quickly adds, "It *just* happened before we came here."

Ollie looks relieved and nods, settling back into his chair. "So, what happened?"

"I had met this guy the last time I was down visiting Hannah, and we arranged to meet up again while I was there last night. We all went to The Den, but he suddenly became a massive dick. He ordered my drinks for me without asking what I wanted, getting me gross fruity shit, and started flirting with the waitress." Lulu shudders. "Then Julia waltzes up and starts flirting with him, and next thing I know they're sucking face in a corner booth."

"What the fuck?" Harley asks with a look of disgust. "What the fuck is wrong with her? And him. Sorry you had to go through that."

"Girl," Ollie leans forward with a serious look directed at Lulu and shakes his head. "You can't put up with that. If he was going to act like that in the first place, you don't want him."

"Amen to that sister," Hannah says as she holds her drink out to cheers Ollie and he clinks his bottle to hers with a serious, knowing look.

The rest of the afternoon is relaxed and fun as we hang around the house and catch up. I'm happy to see Harley relaxed after our meeting, letting go of his reservations and enjoying this time we all have together. We play some of our new songs for the girls, and we end up finding a snakes and ladders game in one of the drawers. Callum somehow arranged it into a competition with elimination rounds, and we

got way too into it. Some more than others, as Hannah and Callum each let out a pretty intense competitive side that had Ollie hiding behind Harley, whispering to him to make them stop.

When it's time to head to the stadium, the girls come backstage with us while we get ready. They have the option of sitting in the VIP box for the show, but their plan is to stand front and centre on the floor. And we are really excited to have them there.

We're just finishing hair and getting something to eat when Anna comes into the room. "Hi boys, I need to review your schedule for the next couple days with you," she says, not looking up from her tablet.

Lulu gives me a questioning look, and points a thumb to her, mouthing *who's that?*

"Hi Anna," I say. "These are our friends Hannah and Lulu."

Anna looks up, just noticing they are here. "Oh, hello." She then lowers her gaze back to her tablet.

Lulu smirks. She's heard all about Anna. "Hi, Amy." She smiles sweetly. "Nice to meet you."

Anna joins us at the table we are sitting at and looks to Lulu. "It's Anna."

"Oh, sorry." Lulu waves a hand and laughs a ditzy laugh. Harley looks down to suppress a chuckle and Callum takes a bite of his food to hide his smile.

"So," Anna says, attention back on her tablet again. "You'll have a taping to attend tomorrow before we head out and when we land in Atlanta we'll be going to an event where you'll be playing a small acoustic set, then a radio show before soundcheck. It's an open soundcheck and we're having a fan Q&A after." Anna continues to ramble on about everything we need to do over the next few days and we all just sit and listen. We get day sheets each morning that outline what our day

looks like, and it's better to just wait until we get those rather than try to think ahead too much.

Hannah and Lulu stare on in bewilderment as they listen to how packed our schedule is. "Wow, that's a lot," Hannah mumbles.

Anna snaps her attention to her. "It's their job."

Lulu stares back at her. "Sorry, Allison we didn't mean anything by it. Just not what we're used to." She smiles that sickly sweet smile again.

Anna presses her lips together. "It's Anna."

"Of course, yes." Lulu smiles and taps her head with a *silly me* motion.

Anna takes a breath in and turns towards Harley and me. "Now, I hope I don't need to remind you that this next little bit is going to be quite media heavy. We will be careful, right?"

I nod. "Always am." Harley just nods and doesn't look up from his plate.

"Hm," Anna hums as she stands up to leave.

"It was great to meet you, Ashley," Lulu calls to her, and Hannah lets a small chuckle slip out.

Anna turns on her heel and leaves the room, Ollie bursting out in a cackling laugh the second she's gone. Harley turns to Lulu with a sly smile. "You're fucking trouble."

Lulu shrugs. "I mean, yeah maybe that was a bit much, but she was rude."

"That she is," Callum mutters as he gets up to go change. It's almost showtime, so one of the security team members brings the girls to the floor while we head behind stage.

Ollie is proudly wearing his new t-shirt from Maria and points to the flames on it as we get into our usual pre-show huddle. "Burn hot boys!"

“Burn hot!” We all shout back, and the countdown begins to rise on stage.

I look over my shoulder to see everyone moving into position for showtime, and I walk up behind Harley, touching his shoulder so he looks back to me. I place a quick kiss on his lips, with our backs still to everyone else. Everyone who is here knows we're together, but it feels exciting to do this on the riser, with thousands of fans just past this wall. Harley's eyes dart over my shoulder before he brings them back to me, giving me a dangerous look that promises more excitement later.

As we rise onto the stage, I feel new sense of calm. One that holds promise of better things to come, as we work through the obstacles in our way. Today was just what we needed. Standing up for ourselves with the PR team, and then seeing Hannah and Lulu again, it feels like it did before. When things were simpler, and we had control over our lives.

The sight of Hannah and Lulu in the front row made this show the best one we have ever done. They cheered us on and sang along with all the other fans, and people were even asking them for selfies when they realized they knew us. It was the best night, and we never wanted it to end.

Watching Harley smiling and singing, laughing at Lulu making funny faces at him made my heart swell. I'm happy to see him be light and carefree after everything that has happened. We did something hard today by standing up for ourselves, but we did it. And we can do it again if we need to. We're going to be ok.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Harley

“READY, BABE?” I hear Ezra call to me in the bathroom just as I finish brushing my teeth.

“Yup,” I say as I exit the bathroom and see him buttoning up his light blue shirt. I let my eyes rake over him, taking in the way his pants fit over his ass perfectly, and he leaves the top few buttons open.

He turns around and his eyes immediately drop to my shirt. “No, you’re not.”

I look down at my Led Zepplin t-shirt, and back up at him. “What?”

“We’re going to a fancy french restaurant, you can’t wear a ripped band t-shirt,” he says as he moves over to the closet and pulls out a black button down.

I look again at my shirt and run my fingers over the holes along the hem, “It’s not that bad...” I mutter, and Ezra shoves the black button up into my hands.

“For this, it is,” he says seriously. Then a smile spreads across his face. “I wish I was getting that shirt off you for a different reason, but Olivia and Marcus are waiting.”

I snatch the shirt from him and give him a side eye as I pull my comfortable t-shirt off, and the other shirt on. Ezra watches me as I button it up, then groans. “Now I want to take that one off you too.”

I laugh and pull him into me, pressing my lips to his. “When we get back.”

“Deal,” he breathes onto my lips.

“Let’s go,” I say, pulling back and taking his hand, leading him to the door. I pause, looking him up and down, giving him a playful smirk before letting go of his hand to open the hotel room door.

He grumbles behind me as he follows me out of the room and down the hall to the elevators. “Why do you always have to tease me right before we go out?”

I shrug. “It’s fun.”

Olivia and her husband, Marcus, are waiting for us in the lobby. We’re going to dinner with them tonight, which they very nicely invited us to so Ezra and I can get out of the hotel somewhere together. Over the past week, since our meeting, we’ve been allowed more time together. Management have become more lenient on allowing us out, but of course the PR teams says as long as it’s not just the two of us. It’s a start, I guess. I still feel weird about the whole thing, like something isn’t sitting quite right. But I think I’m doing what I always do, which is waiting for the other shoe to drop. I have a tendency to think everything will go wrong because, well, it always has.

The restaurant is just down the street from our hotel in Louisville, so we’re able to walk there. Jack had agreed to let us go without security since it’s 2 doors down, but we wave to him as he sits in the lounge with a clear view of the door as we leave the restaurant. And I bet he’ll still be there when we come back. I glance back over my shoulder at him, feeling bad that his whole night is going to be spent there because of us.

“We didn’t ask him to do that, he’s doing it on his own. It’s because he cares,” Ezra says when he notices where my attention is. He smiles at me. “It’s what people do when they care.”

I smile back at him. It's a foreign feeling to have people looking out for me like this, and I don't know if I'll ever get used to it.

When we get to the restaurant, Olivia scurries up to the hostess and leans in to say something to her. I look around the dimly lit restaurant with the candlelit tables and low mood music playing. I shift on my feet, some discomfort settling in as I am far outside of my comfort zone in a place like this. I look down at my shoes and take a deep breath.

"This way," the hostess says to us, and I look up to see her gesturing for us to follow her. Olivia and Marcus let Ezra and I go first, as we follow the hostess through the restaurant towards the back. I keep my eyes cast down, feeling the anxiety rise. Why did I think I could handle a dinner in a fancy restaurant? My eyes dart around the room trying to locate a bathroom or exit so I can plan my escape if I need to. I'm about to grab Ezra's arm and tell him I can't do this when the hostess leads us into a room off the back hallway. Inside the private dining room is a single table with a candle burning in the middle, and two chairs.

Ezra stops and looks at the hostess. "Um-"

Olivia steps forward, smiling. "This is for you guys. We'll be out there." She tilts her head out the door, towards the main dining room.

"What?" I ask, glancing at the table again.

"When I told Callum you guys were joining us, he made a phone call," she says. "We know you guys don't get out alone, and every couple deserves date night." My eyes dart to the hostess who is pulling out our chairs, then back to Olivia with panic. She shakes her head. "And don't worry, all privacy concerns are taken care of." She turns towards the door where Marcus is waiting for her. She looks back before she leaves, looking between us and smiling. "Enjoy your date."

"Your waiter will be right in," the hostess smiles at us and gestures to our seats at the table in the small private room.

“Uh, thank you,” Ezra says as we take a seat. My panic is still building, as I don’t know how we are able to do this. The staff are going to see us and know this is a date. This is breaking every rule they have for us.

“Ez, I...” I rub my hands on my thighs and glance at the closed door.

“Babe,” he says softly, and I bring my gaze to his. He is smiling at me, looking completely relaxed and content. “If Callum handled this, you know it’s done right. I’m assuming NDAs are involved, which I know is not ideal and feels gross... but,” he reaches across the table and takes my hand, “we’re on a fucking date.” He beams at me.

A light laugh bubbles out of me. “We’ve never been on a date before.”

Ezra thinks on that for a moment and mumbles, “Oh wow, we haven’t.” He squeezes my hand, and his lips turn up into his beautiful smile again. “Well, now we are.”

I smile back at him, and let his smile and touch ease my fears, melting away the tension and bringing me into his calm.

The door opens slowly, and I can’t help my response when I quickly pull my hand out of his and onto my lap. “I’m sorry,” I whisper to Ezra, as I remind myself that we don’t need to do that here. I’m having a hard time believing this is real, and my thoughts continue to bring me back to the what ifs. What if Val isn’t on board with this and finds out, what if someone who hasn’t signed an NDA sees us, what if-

“Harley,” Ezra’s soft voice cuts through my thoughts as the waiter enters the room and closes the door behind him. “It’s ok.”

“Hello, and welcome to Le Pavillion.” The waiter pours water into our glasses. “My name is Andy and I’ll be your waiter for this evening.” He sets menus in front of us, and he’s all business. He’s not eyeing us, trying to figure out what this situation is, or wanting to ask us any questions. He’s treating

us like he would any other customers, and I feel myself begin to relax.

Andy reviews the menu with us and makes his suggestions based on chef's specialities. I've never ordered in a restaurant this like before, so I'm completely lost as my eyes scan the names of appetizers and mains full of words I can barely pronounce. I'm relieved when Ezra orders for us, and the waiter leaves to put our order in.

As the door closes, I chuckle. "Thanks for taking the lead on that, I have no idea what I'm doing."

Ezra smiles. "No upscale French restaurants in Lyons?"

I sip my water and give him a look over my glass. "Hardly. Closest thing is some locally owned crepe shop Lulu loves to go to."

"Ah, so your ex-girlfriend turned current secret lover took you to a French restaurant already. I have competition," Ezra says with a smirk.

I bite back a smile. "Yeah, better step it up and win back my heart." After Hannah and Lulu visited us, there were some questions floating around in social media whether Lulu was yet another secret relationship I had. Photos from fans were circulating, of her making funny faces at me during the show. So naturally, that means we're dating. Because every girl I look at, I'm romantically involved with. Luckily nothing really came from it, and it all went away in a couple days, so now I can laugh about it. But I still can't stand that these absurd speculations about my personal life keep happening.

"You feeling ok here though?" Ezra asks me, tilting his head slightly and observing me with a soft gaze.

I take a moment to appreciate him, and how amazing he is. How he always checks in with me when he knows I'm anxious, and immediately makes me feel better. "I love you," I say through a smile.

He chuckles and leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Well, I love you too."

“Really though,” I say, reaching out and taking his hand across the table, not caring anymore that we are in a restaurant. “Thank you for always being understanding of my worry.”

“Of course,” he says, rubbing his thumb over the back of my hand. “I’m always here for you.”

“And yes,” I answer his earlier question. “I’m feeling good here, with you. I’m always good with you.”

When our food comes, Ezra teaches me everything I don’t know about eating in a place like this, like what fork to use for each of the tiny portions of seemingly never ending courses. Why does it all come out so small and in order? Why can’t we just get it all at once? We laugh about it as I navigate this fancy setting for the first time, feeling completely comfortable and happy having this experience with him.

Our meal ends with a surprise dessert sent to us from Olivia and Marcus; A piece of chocolate cake with the words “Happy First Date” written in chocolate on the plate.

Ezra laughs and picks up a fork. “How did she know?”

“Probably eavesdropping outside the door,” I joke, eyeing the door to the room.

“I mean, she weirdly knows everything,” he says, taking a bite of the cake and then staring at me with wide eyes.

“What? What’s wrong?” I look down at the cake, my fork hovering over it.

“It’s fucking delicious,” he whispers and shoves my fork out of the way with his to take another bite.

I chuckle, taking some of the cake myself, and fuck. He’s right. It’s like a chocolate cloud melting in my mouth. “Oh my god.”

“This might be the best thing I’ve ever had in my mouth,” Ezra mumbles as he goes back in for more.

I smirk at him. “The best thing?”

He meets my eyes, and his lips tilt up in a lopsided smile. “No. I’m saving the best dessert for later.”

“Well then,” I set my fork down and lean forward. “Eat up, baby, we better get home.”



It feels like forever until we make it back to the hotel. But as soon as we do, and we’re safely alone in our hotel room, Ezra wraps his arms around me from behind to start unbuttoning my shirt.

“I finally get to take this shirt off you,” he murmurs low into my ear.

“Hm,” I moan as I tilt my head back while he kisses my neck, sliding his hand under my shirt and down my abs. He reaches my belt buckle, and undoes that as well, slipping a hand into my pants and palming my hardening cock. “Fuck,” I groan.

He continues to stroke me, making me hard as he grinds his cock into my ass and sucks my neck. I close my eyes and take in his touch, letting it encompass me, giving me a feeling of euphoria only he can give me.

I grab his hand and pull it out of my pants, turning around to slam my mouth against his in a heated kiss. He opens to let me in, my tongue sliding against his as I pull him close to me and grind my cock against him. He’s hard and waiting for me, and I desperately want my mouth all over him. I keep my lips on his, kissing feverishly as I unbutton his shirt and push it off his shoulders. He shrugs it off as I undo his pants and drop to my knees.

He groans as he looks down at me, his fingers lacing through my hair, the look of anticipation on his face giving me a thrill. “Now this is the meal I’ve been craving,” I say as I stroke his cock with my hand, rubbing the glistening bead of

precum down his length with my thumb. Then I take his tip into my mouth in a long, slow suck.

He tilts his head back and groans again. “Fuck, Harley. That feels amazing.”

“Hm,” I hum as I take him in deeper, savouring every bit of him. I continue to lick and suck him slowly, as he trembles under my touch and grips my hair. I take him all the way in, and he lets a noise escape him that has my dick jump. I keep his cock in my mouth as I push his pants down, so he steps out of them. Then I pull back so I can turn him around, pushing him so his hands are resting on the bed.

“The next course,” I pant, as I bring my hands up to his ass cheeks and my tongue to his hole.

“Oh my god,” Ezra groans as his head drops between his shoulders and he pushes his ass back into me. I lick his hole, slowly pushing my tongue further into him, continuing to draw this out and feel him fall apart beneath me. “Fuck, Harley, oh my god,” he pants.

I groan as I continue to eat his ass, my dick impossibly hard as his pants and moans urge me on. “Please,” he begs. “I need you in me.”

I stand up, shedding the last of my clothes and grab the lube from his bag. Ezra moves onto the bed, watching me as he slowly strokes his dick.

I shake my head as I walk back over to the bed, coating my fingers in lube. “That’s mine.” I grab his wrist and lift it over his head, leaning over him so he lays on his back. I lower my lubed up fingers to his ass and push them into him. He throws his head back with a garbled moan and writhes underneath me as I move my fingers inside him. I torture him with slow movements in and out of his ass as he whimpers. “Please...” he begs again, his eyes glassy and cheeks flushed.

“Please what?” I ask as I lower my mouth to hover over his.

“Please fuck me,” he breaths against my lips.

I lower my head and his free hand immediately finds the back of it, pulling me in for a deep and impassioned kiss. I pull my fingers out of him, and grab the lube to lube up my cock. Ezra watches me, and widens his legs in anticipation.

“You want to ride me, baby?” I ask with a smirk as I continue to stroke my cock. Ezra immediately sits up and pushes me onto my back. I chuckle and place my hands on his hips as he straddles me.

“Fuck yeah, I do,” he says as he takes my dick in his hand and lowers onto me.

“Oh god,” I groan as I lift my hips to push into him and grip his hips tight. His ass meets my hips as he takes me all the way in, and I let out a stuttering breath at the intense feeling of being so deep inside him.

Ezra drops his head and presses a hand to my chest as he starts moving on me. He grinds into me, riding me faster as we both pant and moan. He leans over to kiss me, moving himself up and down to slide along my cock. He feels fucking amazing, and I want even more. He whimpers and trembles as I reach between us to grip his dick and stroke him.

“You ride my cock so well, baby,” I say into his mouth and he grips my shoulder tight as he drops his forehead to mine.

“I’m getting close,” he pants out. But, I’m not done with him yet. I release his cock and place my hand on his chest, pushing him back.

“Not yet,” I say as I reach for the lube and shove it into his hands. I bend my knees and open them wide. “Ride me while you get me ready. Then you’re going to fuck me and come in my ass.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ezra

HOLY. *Fucking. Shit.*

I hold the lube in my hands, staring down at Harley beneath me. And I almost come right here and now at the thought of what he wants to do.

“Fuck yes,” I breathe out, opening the lube bottle and coating my fingers. He moans and moves his hips up to grind his cock deeper into my ass, pulling a groan from me as well. He widens his legs more as I sit back on him enough to bring my hand behind me and swipe my fingers over his hole.

“Oh yeah, baby,” he murmurs as he closes his eyes and thrusts his hips up into me again.

“Fuck,” I say on a breath, watching him in complete awe. It’s no secret between us that I fucking love it when he takes control of me, and I love being a bottom. I mean, any prostate owner who says they don’t like it being stroked to mind blowing orgasm is lying. And lucky me, I have a hot as fuck boyfriend with an amazing cock. And since I love having that cock inside me so much, I haven’t fucked him since that first time a few weeks ago. But if he wants me to fuck him? I will gladly do as I’m told and *fuck him*.

Harley moans as I continue to rub my fingers around his hole, and I begin moving my hips as well, rocking myself on his cock. His hands land on my thighs in a bruising grip as he bites his lip. “Oh my god...” he pants. Then he meets my eyes with a dangerous, sexy smirk. “What are you waiting for?”

Exhilaration rushes through me, and my cock is leaking onto his abs as I move my fingers to push into him. I slide up his cock as my finger sinks into his ass, and once it's in, I lower myself back down on him. A husky groan escapes him as I feel him tremble under me and his grip tightens on my thighs even more. I pull my fingers back out slightly while I move myself up and down on his cock, and shove them back in slowly. "Oh, fuck..." he moans as he squirms in pleasure, his eyes closed and breathing heavy. I swallow hard as I watch him and continue to ride him as I finger his ass, putting another finger in, and stretching him out. I don't know how much more I can take, as his abs are coated with my precum and my dick is so hard, it hurts. I need more of him. I need it all.

"Harley," I croak out as I try to keep myself from unraveling. I need him to take us further and I need him to tell me what he wants. I *need* him to control me, tell me how he wants me to please him.

He reaches up to grab my arm and pulls me forcefully down to his mouth, my fingers slipping out of him. He bites my lip as he wraps his strong arms around me, thrusting his hips up and fucking my ass hard.

"Oh my god," I grunt with intense pleasure as the pressure builds and I get closer and closer.

He slows, then pushes me backwards. "Ready to fuck me?"

I nod through heavy breaths, staring into his eyes and waiting for him to tell me how he wants it. A smirk dances on his lips as he realizes what I'm waiting for.

He places a hand to my chest, pushing me back further so I move off his cock and kneel between his legs. He wraps his legs around my waist, pulling me in so my dick is lined up with his ass. "Now fuck the cum out of me," he says raising his hands behind his head and grabbing the headboard.

Fuck.

I breathe out hard and grab his waist, pushing my hips forward and sinking my rock solid cock into his tight ass. He groans and grips the headboard tight, and I drop my head at the intense feeling of being inside him as I bottom out. I pause, staring down at Harley as he stares back at me. He swallows hard and then smiles. “Good job.”

My whole body lights up with electricity and I immediately pull back to slam into him, hard. He groans loudly and I grasp one of his knees, opening him wider so I can go deeper. “Fuck, baby yes, so good. That’s it. Just like that,” he grunts and I continue to thrust into him, deep and hard, his words making me absolutely feral.

I grasp his cock with my other hand and pump him in time with my thrusts. I’m not going to last much longer and by the looks of it, he isn’t either. His muscles tighten as he tilts his head back on a groan. I release my grip on his knee, leaning over him to drop my forehead to his chest as I continue to fuck him and stroke his cock.

“I’m going to come,” I pant out, not able to hold back any longer.

He grabs my hair and pulls my head up. “Look at me when you come.”

And I explode.

I shudder as I come in his ass, my body shaking as I can barely hold myself up. But I keep my eyes on his, watching them flutter while he tightens even more underneath me. He is pulsing in my hand, and I can’t help but drop my eyes to his cock while he shoots ropes of cum up his abs.

He is breathing heavy as he comes down from his high, his eyes meeting mine again. He uses his grasp in my hair to push my head down, and I crawl backward, sliding out of him.

“Mm,” I hum as I lower my mouth to his skin, his grip in my hair guiding my movements. I lick his cum and follow the trail he left for me, all the way back up to his lips. I push my

tongue into his mouth and he greedily takes it, releasing my hair to wrap his arms around me and pull me in close.

I breathe deeply into his touch, fully sated and content. Best meal ever.



“Are you excited to see your girl tonight, Harley?”

I try not to roll my eyes, and subtly press my shoulder into Harley beside me to lend him some strength. The interviewer is eagerly awaiting his answer, microphone pointed at him.

“She’s not my girl,” Harley says simply, and the interviewer smirks at him.

“But you must be looking forward to seeing her again,” she raises her eyebrows with a smile.

Harley shifts on his feet. “I’m looking forward to us all getting a chance to see a good friend, yes.”

“Yeah, we’re all pretty pumped to see Charlotte,” Callum interjects before the woman can say anything more on the subject. “She’s a great friend to us all. She watched us play earlier, so we’re excited to see her sing this evening.” He waves a hand between him and the interviewer. “Sorry, bumblebee.”

I glance at Harley and he meets my eyes, suppressing a smile while Ollie looks down to hide his laugh. It’s been constant today, the cameras and microphones in our faces as we make our necessary appearances at the outdoor music festival we’re taking part in in Louisville. There’s an awesome line up of musicians, but sadly we don’t get to see too many as we’re stuck doing so much press. We’ve already played, so now we’re just trying to make it through the rest of the day. And to help us get by, we’ve created challenges for each of us to complete. And of course, we’re keeping score. Callum has

to incorporate the word “bumblebee” in each interview, and so far, he’s eight for eight.

The woman glances around her head, looking frightened. “Oh, um, ok, well I guess we’ll wrap this up then,” she says frantically. *Oh, she’s afraid of bees. Oops.*

“Ok, then,” Harley says, clapping his hands together three times, earning him his point for the action we challenged him with.

“Me-ow,” Ollie says nodding, fitting his word in before the interview ends. Leave it to him to just randomly say it, and for it to weirdly work.

And that leaves me. Like hell I’m letting these guys get ahead of me. I bring my fingers to my lips and blow a kiss to the camera. “Thanks for the interview.” *Suck it, Callum. I see your eight bumblebees and give you eight kisses blown... blew? Blow-kisses? Whatever. We’re tied.*

The woman gives us all a strange look but slaps on a smile, and then scurries away with her cameraman, waving her hand around her head to escape the nonexistent bumblebee.

Ollie throws his head back and roars a laugh. “Fantastic.”

Anna rushes over to us. “What on earth are you guys doing?” she asks us, exasperation lacing her voice.

I shrug. “Interviews, why?”

She sighs and gestures to the tents behind the stage. “Go. Eat lunch.” She then wanders off muttering about not wanting to be a parent quite yet.

We make our way to the tents that are set up behind the stage for the artists, with multiple options for food and space to lounge and relax. I laugh at that, wondering if any artist here is getting the chance to relax, as the grounds are teeming with media.

“Tent 4,” Harley says, looking up from his phone and down the row of tents.

“Right here,” Callum leads us to tent 4 and as we enter, Charlotte waves us over to where she’s sitting at a large table.

“Hey, guys!” She grins at us as we take a seat. “I hope you don’t mind I chose this tent. The chef here is one of my favourites. He makes a mean burger. I already ordered them for us.”

“Sounds great,” I smile at her as I take my seat next to Harley, and subtly place a hand on his knee under the table.

“Charlotte.” Ollie leans back in his chair and sighs. “I have a question.”

“Shoot.” Charlotte leans forward, looking intrigued.

“Do you read?”

Callum, Harley and I all groan. “Ollie, man-” Callum starts but Ollie holds his hand up to stop him.

Charlotte looks between us all trying not to smile. “I do... why?”

“What do you read?” Ollie asks her, also leaning forward, placing his hands flat on the table. “I need suggestions. But not fantasy.” He shakes his head. “Magic is terrifying.”

Callum rubs a hand over his face and blows out a breath while Harley and I chuckle. Charlotte smiles and gives Ollie a sympathetic look. “Maybe you need to try something like a romance?”

Ollie nods thoughtfully. “Yes...” He smiles. “I could do that.”

“If you somehow manage to get nightmares from a romance, I’m done. I’ll sleep on the bus.” Callum mutters. We’ve tried to convince Ollie that maybe he should take a break from reading, but he’s determined to find his genre. A romance may actually work for him.

Charlotte laughs. “How about a sports romance?”

Ollie snaps his head to her, eyes wide. “That’s a thing??”

“Oh, honey. Do I have recommendations for you.” Charlotte takes her phone out, and her and Ollie look over her books to pick out some options for him.

Harley chuckles and leans into me, speaking lowly. “First Hannah and Lulu, now Charlotte... yet somehow I’m the manwhore.”

I laugh with him, looking back over at Ollie practically sitting in Charlotte’s lap as he scrolls through her phone with her. He really does make fast friends with everyone he meets. I get a wave of sadness thinking of Harley’s comment, how Ollie can be over the top friendly with girls and there hasn’t been a single dating rumour about him. But Harley gets it all. It’s not fair, but I’m happy Harley can laugh about it, now that it’s starting to cool off.

Our food arrives, and Charlotte was right. This burger is fucking *heaven*. “Oh my god,” I mumble around the food in my mouth.

“Don’t say it,” Harley mutters with a smirk.

I give him the side eye and bump my shoulder into him. “*Third* best thing I’ve ever had in my mouth,” I chuckle.

Callum sputters on his drink and Ollie and Charlotte burst out laughing.

Charlotte wipes her mouth with her napkin. “I’m happy to see things are going well,” she laughs. She smiles between Harley and me. “For real though, it seems like things are better?”

I nod and smile at Harley. “Yeah, they are.”

He nods as well. “We were able to convince them to stay out of our time off. That really helps.”

A look of shock crosses Charlotte’s face before she quickly schools her expression and smiles widely. “That’s great. Wow, with your contract, that’s amazing that they are willing to work with you on this.” *Don’t I know it*. I didn’t tell Harley this, but I was worried they would point out something else in our

contract that prevented them from meeting our requests. The media image clause was a surprise hidden in plain sight, and I didn't know if there might have been something else in there too.

I slip a hand back under the table to squeeze Harley's leg. "Yeah," I laugh. "We were surprised too, but it's working out as well as can be."

Charlotte beams at us and holds up her drink glass in a cheers. "Well then, congrats on making the shitty system work for you!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Harley

THOUSANDS of tiny lights wave in the air around us, and I'm overcome with emotion as I step back from the mic, letting the fans sing.

I think I'm into it, I think I'm losing it

In the darkness, looking for the light

Can't make sense of what I see

She's a silhouette

She's making me sweat

Through the fog, she could save me

I stare out into the sea of fans, listening to the words I wrote. The ones I never thought I could share with anyone. And now, *Silhouette*, our number one song, is being sung to us by a stadium full of fans. This happens at every show, and it gets me every time. It's about a love I never thought I could have and was ashamed to want. But that meaning has changed for me. Now, this song is about wanting to show everyone the love I *do* have. I'm proud of that love. Each night, when we play this song, I find myself wondering... if I could walk right over to Ezra and kiss him in front of everyone here tonight, would I?

"Sing it out, Columbus!" Ezra shouts into his mic and I smile at him. I let my eyes roam over him, watching his fingers pick his bass as he takes in the crowd, his hair a wild,

beautiful disaster and his smile wide and bright. I think back to the first time I told him I loved him. We were surrounded by window lights of the tall New York City buildings, and I felt like I was on a stage, not unlike this moment right now. Except in this moment, on this stage, I can't do what I need and want to. I may never know the answer to my question, and I know I shouldn't even be entertaining that thought. I bite my lip and turn back to the crowd, trying not to get too caught up in hopes and dreams.

I step back up to the mic to finish out the song, letting the rumbling bass and the electricity from the guitar roll through me, helping me to stay content and at peace. I close my eyes as I sing the last line, thinking of love. Ezra, and music. As much as I want other aspects of this job to fuck off, at least right now I have the two best things I could ever ask for.

As the song ends and the crowd cheers, I make my way over to the drum riser and Ollie tosses me a bottle of water.

“How are we all doing tonight?” Callum checks in with the crowd, and they respond with a deafening roar. Ollie laughs behind his drum set as I almost choke on my water and wince in response to the intense cheer. I squirt some water at him, which only makes him laugh some more.

Callum continues to chat with the crowd, telling them know how excited we are to be here and how amazing they are here in Columbus. And they are. It's a sold-out show, and the atmosphere is absolutely electric. I scan the crowd, taking in the signs they've made for us, and all the smiling faces. I smile as I notice fans wearing our new merch as well. Callum certainly has a way of getting shit done, as they hired Maria as our new merchandise designer.

I stay back by the drum riser while Callum does his usual part of the show. I find immense comfort in the routine we developed for our shows, and I think this is another reason why I feel so at home on stage now. Before we started playing almost every night, being on stage was the unknown. I was putting myself out there for all to see, in a compromising

position outside of my safe, predictable routine. Now, it's the only place I know exactly what is going to happen, and how. Seemingly overnight, everything else in my life has become the unknown, and is perpetually in a state of chaos. Until we get a day sheet in the morning, I don't know what the day is going to look like. My only constant is having the guys with me, and Ezra's presence is what keeps me from spiralling deep into panic every time I sit in front of a camera, or have a microphone shoved in my face. But shows are predictable. They are routine. We play the same songs, in the same order. The lights are the same, our stage is the same, and I have the guys with me. I can separate myself from the rest of it, and just get lost in our music as there is nothing else to worry about.

Sometimes though, in moments like this where I am standing back and observing, I can see the full magnitude of it all. It's hard to see just how big we really are in the day-to-day chaos, but these quiet moments in the middle of a stadium where I have nothing to do but think... the panic starts to creep in. And in these moments, Ezra always finds me.

He walks over to the drum riser and puts a hand on my back, leaning in to speak in my ear. "Breathe."

I take a deep breath and nod. He leans in again. "I don't have anything else to tell you except that you look hot and if I keep talking to you, I can also get away with keeping my hand on you."

I laugh, immediately feeling the tension and worry float away. I reach up and pull his in-ear monitor out. "You can put your hands on me all you want after the show."

"Oh, I will," he says seriously, as he pulls away from me. Callum is wrapping up, and we have a few songs before it's Ollie's time. He's already pointed out a few signs to me during the show so far, so I know this will be a good one. I run through the show schedule in my head, using the predictability to bring me comfort, and the lingering feeling of Ezra's touch to calm me. As I adjust my guitar strap on my shoulder, I take

a deep breath and step back up to my mic, the feeling of peace settling back in.



“Get the fuck in here, now.”

I laugh as I step out of my boxers and into the shower, Ezra’s hands immediately grabbing me and his lips landing on mine before I even have the door closed. I step under the warm stream of water with him, and sigh against his lips as I fully relax into his touch.

“You good, baby?” he murmurs between kisses, hands trailing over my skin bringing me an intense rush of heat.

“Yeah, I am,” I growl as I grab his ass and pull him into me. We had to sleep on the bus last night, so I’ve been waiting all day for this.

Ezra hums and rocks his hips, grinding into me. He pivots us so my back is against the shower wall, and he kisses down my neck and chest, dropping to his knees.

“Not wasting any time, I like it,” I chuckle.

He looks up at me with a serious look. “I could barely touch you all day and didn’t even get to sleep with you last night. Yeah, I need this now.” He wraps his hand around my cock and brings his mouth to my balls, licking his way up my length and making me instantly hard. *Yeah, I fucking need this now too.*

I watch him as he licks and sucks me, taking me into his mouth as his hands grip my thighs. I groan at the feeling of his mouth on me, my spine tingling as he takes me in deeper and sucks harder. I let him work me for a bit as the heat and pressure in me builds, but as I get closer to the edge, I stop him. I have a different plan.

“Come here,” I pant as I reach down to grab his arm, pulling him to his feet. I reach behind him and grab the body wash off the shelf. “That feels fucking incredible, but I don’t want to come down your throat tonight.”

“Oh?” he asks with a cheeky grin, moving in to kiss my neck. “And where are you coming tonight?”

I pour body wash into my palm and bring it down to rub over his hard cock. “Your ass,” I say in a low voice into his ear. He shivers against me and brings his hands up to either side of my head, pressing his palms against the wall. I continue to stroke him, and he drops his head against my shoulder with a groan.

“Fuck, that feels good,” he moans.

I rub my other hand over his body, lathering him up and continuing to work him. He is panting and quivering against me, until he eventually pulls back shaking his head.

I smirk at him. “Too much?”

He huffs out a breath and squeezes his cock. “Yeah, if you want to come in my ass you better hurry up and get in there.”

I chuckle and pull him back under the stream of water to rinse him off. “Go dry off. And clean the steam off the mirror. We’re going to need it.”

A light dances in his eyes at this order, and I bite back my smile. I love feeding his desires. He leans in to press his lips to mine, pushing his tongue into my mouth in a desperate kiss before he gets out of the shower. I lather myself up, rinse off, and stop dead in my tracks as I open the door to the most beautiful sight I think I’ve ever seen.

Ezra is leaning against the bathroom counter, one foot propped up on the toilet. He’s watching me with an intense look in his eyes, one hand stroking his cock. The other... fingering his ass.

“Oh my god,” I breathe out.

“I can’t wait any longer, I need you to fuck me right now,” he says in a low voice, and I am across the room, slamming my mouth to his before he can even finish that sentence.

“Turn around,” I mutter as I pull back and grab the lube from the counter. He quickly turns himself to face the bathroom mirror, and I lube myself up. I step into him, and he takes in a stuttering breath while he watches me in the mirror. I drop my lips to his neck to place a soft kiss against the delicate skin, the water from my hair trickling down his back leaving a wave of goosebumps in its wake. I slowly run my hand up his back and down his arm, grasping his forearm to place his left hand against the wall beside us. I then run my other hand down his right leg, lifting his knee onto the counter. He continues to watch me in the mirror, anticipation in his eyes. As much as I enjoy having his cock inside me, I know he loves it more when I take from him.

“Mm,” I moan as I slowly run my hand down his body, admiring him like this. I bring my hand to his ass and swipe over his hole, which is ready and waiting for me. “Such a good boy.”

He lets out a strangled groan as he pushes his ass back into my touch. I grip my cock and line myself up to push into him. As I do, I look into the mirror to see his blue eyes staring back at me. I grip his shoulders as I sink into him while his eyes flutter on a moan.

“Oh, fuck,” I grunt as am overcome by the intense feeling of him, and the gorgeous sight in front of me as I watch him grip his dick with his right hand. I run my hands down his sides and grasp his hips, pulling back to push into him again. I continue to thrust into him, his little moans of satisfaction driving me to increase my pace and fuck him hard. His moans turn into loud groans and grunts that fill the room with mine, along with the sound of our skin slapping together. I watch him in the mirror, his gaze boring into me. He pushes his ass back so I take him even harder and deeper. I groan in appreciation, and I don’t miss the way his eyes light up at this subtle praise.

I reach my hand up to grip his under his chin, as I sink my cock deep into his ass and hold him there. I bring my mouth to his ear and meet his eyes in the mirror. “Such a good bottom for me.”

He practically melts in my arms as a breath staggers past his lips and he quivers. I drop my hand from his chin, grasping his hips again and I fuck him, hard. He briefly drops his head as his whole body tightens, and he strokes his cock. I wrap one arm around his torso, holding him up as he tilts his head back to meet my eyes again in the mirror. “F-fuck, oh my g-o...” he stutters as his eyes flutter and his knees buckle. I drop my eyes to his dick, which he has stopped stroking and is shooting cum onto the counter and mirror. The sight has me unraveling, and I groan loudly as my balls tighten and tingles flow through me. I follow him over the edge as the intense release takes over my body, and I come in his ass while holding him tight.

Ezra is still shaking as I pull out of him and he drops his hands to the counter, lowering his head and taking a deep breath.

I chuckle as I slowly let go of him. “You alright?”

“Holy fuck,” he breathes out. He looks over his shoulder at me and smirks. “You may have to carry me to bed.”

I laugh, wrapping my arms around his waist from behind as if I’m going to lift him up. He laughs as well and turns around in my arms. “I’d settle for a piggyback,” he says with a smile and a playful shrug.

“Deal.” I kiss the tip of his nose and turn around for him to hop on. He chuckles, climbing onto my back and I take him to the bed while he makes terrible jokes about riding me. By the time I’ve thrown him onto the bed, and he got the rest of his awful jokes out of his system, the drowsiness has set in. We drift off to sleep in each other’s arms, and while I felt peaceful before, this is where I feel absolutely *serene*.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ezra

I LET my fingers pick the bass line I've written for *Details*, as I give Ollie the time he needs to find his beat. He nods his head along to it from behind his drum set and holds a hand up. "Got it."

"Sweet, let's roll," Callum says from his spot on an amp across from me, picking his guitar up and placing it on his lap. I smile as I look around the room, all of us sitting on amps while writing songs, just like we did when we first met. Ben was able to get us some studio time this morning in Miami so we can work on writing in privacy. It's just us here, as we're not actually recording, and it's nice to have this quiet time with the guys to just hang out and write like we used to.

We've worked on a few other songs so far this morning, including Ollie's love song. Which, I must say, I was pleasantly surprised by. I wouldn't necessarily classify it as a *love* song, as it's how much he lusts after this girl, and if he ever found her again he would not be able to contain himself. And I don't think he means containing his *excitement* in the way it comes across. But I mean... it fits, and it turned out to be an awesome song with heavy drums and a fast-paced tempo. He wants to name it *Zero Chill*. Well, at least he knows.

Right now, though, we're working on *Details*. Harley and I were a bit hesitant to share such a personal song with the guys, but they loved it. When we told them about our reason for writing it, as not only a song for us but also as a fuck you to

Capture Music for hiding us, they said we definitely need to put it on the next album.

Ollie finds his beat and Harley starts in on guitar, Callum and I joining with what we have already worked out. We've kept it as a slower, acoustic song since it fits the lyrics well and allows it to remain intimate. We don't have any other song like this, so we're enjoying the challenge. It's been fun to expand on our sound a bit for this album, such as creating a more drum and bass heavy track, this slower song, and possibly even an instrumental.

"I like that," Harley murmurs as we close out the chorus, all of this coming together exactly how we've pictured. Ollie whoops in excitement, and I chuckle. It did sound perfect.

"Me too." I glance at Harley's lyric book. "I'm wondering if we should switch these two verses and it might flow a bit better."

Harley looks at what I'm pointing to, and smiles. "Yeah, that would definitely work. We could-"

"Oooohhh..." We turn our heads to Ollie who quickly looks up from his phone and then back down, chewing his bottom lip.

"What?" I ask him.

"Um..." Ollie looks at Harley. "I don't know if you want to know."

Harley sighs. "Who is it this time..."

"No one... new..." Ollie glances at me and I furrow my brow, getting up to see what he's looking at. I peer over his shoulder at his phone and my heart drops to my stomach.

My eyes scan over the article, titled; "*Heartthrob Harley Scott Happily Playing the Field and Crushing Women's Hearts*". I see Charlotte, Sofia and Lulu's names, and phrases jump out at me like "Romantically linked to three women in just one month", "Won't commit", "Womanizer", "Many celebrities lusting after him, waiting for their chance". But

what my eye lands on, and sends a rush of despair through me, is the photo. Harley is sitting on a stool, one leg propped up with his hand on his knee. He's looking off camera, a sultry look on his face. A look that was aimed at me. I feel an intense sadness, that no one will ever know that moment was ours. It's been taken from us, now associated with a lie of using women and breaking hearts.

"What is it?" Harley asks tentatively from where he's sitting.

I look up at him, trying to fix my expression, but I've clearly failed as he is watching me with wide eyes. "Babe, I..." I don't know what to say. I look down again to Ollie's phone as he pulls up multiple articles that are sharing the same information.

"What?" Harley stands, panic on his face. I don't know how to share this with him. I know I have to, as he's going to know eventually. And I'd rather it come from me. Callum stands as well and steps over to him, placing a hand on his shoulder and giving me a cautious look.

I sigh and meet Harley's eyes. "There are articles circulating about you being... basically a player. Using women and not willing to commit, playing them all at the same time..."

He's silent as he just stares back at me, still as a statue.

"Are you fucking serious?" Callum reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone.

Harley turns around, putting his back to us all, but I see his hands shaking and hear the hitched breath he takes in. I step around the drum set to go to him, but I don't get there in time. He brings his hands to his head and the sound that escapes him nearly rips my heart out. "Why?" he croaks out. I reach him and he turns into me so I can wrap my arms around him. I don't have an answer, and I wish I did. I don't know why this is happening to him, and why it's all coming so hard and fast.

I don't have the words to say, so I just hold him as my mind races in all directions. I look at Callum and he glances up at me from his phone, disbelief written all over his face. He bites the inside of his cheek and his eyes dart to Harley as he pulls back from me suddenly, his eyes wild with panic. "I can't. I can't, I can't..." he takes in a deep breath but doesn't let it out. His body is tense and he rakes a hand through his hair, turning to look around the room. "I can't do this, I need out..."

"Baby, hey," I reach out and place a hand on his arm. I haven't seen him like this in a while. He's been doing so well to manage his anxiety despite all the shit we've been dealing with. But this... this is something more than the usual bullshit. This is extreme and downright *mean*. I don't blame him for feeling this way, but it pains me to see him in such a deep panic when there's nothing I can do about this.

Ollie stands from behind his drum set, looking at me with eyebrows raised, asking what I need from them. I quietly hold up a finger in a *wait* motion.

Harley meets my eyes and it's like he's pleading with me for help. There are a million questions circulating in the depths of his gaze, and I know he needs me but he doesn't know what to do. I take his hand and lead him over to the amp where he was sitting. I pull a chair over and sit across from him, leaning forward and holding his hands in mine. "Talk to me. What are you thinking?"

His eyes flit between mine as he swallows, and I feel his body trembling. "Breathe," I say in a low voice and squeeze his hands. He takes a big breath in. "And out," I say, and he blows out a shaky breath, looking down at our hands. When he looks back up at me, his eyes are glassy with unshed tears. I rub my thumb over the back of his hand, and stay quiet, giving him time to sort through his thoughts. He glances at Ollie and Callum, and a look of shame quickly crosses his face.

Callum catches it and takes a step over to him, squeezing his shoulder. "It's alright, bud. This is a lot, and I'm really

sorry you're having to go through all of this.”

I tilt my head to catch Harley's eye again, and a staggering breath escapes him. “Someone else is always telling the world what I am, and it's never true.” My heart breaks. He's escaped his dad, only to be trapped by someone else, and it just continues to grow and become bigger and bigger.

Ollie moves over to sit with us, and we're all quiet as we let him process and talk this out. “Being linked to these girls is one thing, but now they're labeling me as something I'm not. And no one will ever know because I can't tell anyone the truth. I can't deny it or they'll know, and everything will fall apart and it will be all my fault-”

“Harley, no, none of this is your fault.” Ollie shakes his head. “And of course you can deny it.”

“Yeah,” Callum agrees. “It's not true, and you're not telling them why it's not true. That's not breaking any rules.”

I squeeze Harley's hand and he looks at me. “They're right. By denying it, you're not admitting to anything.”

“Where did this even come from?” he mumbles. He looks so defeated, and I hate it. I only ever want him to be happy. He is the most loving person and has such a sweet soul. He doesn't deserve any of the negativity he has had in his life, and I hate that it just keeps coming for him.

Callum shoots me a look like he might know the answer to that question, but Harley catches it. “What?” Harley asks sadly.

Callum gives him a sympathetic look and hesitates. “Um...” he looks down at his phone and turns it so we're looking at the photo of Harley they used for the article. “This photo was never released.”

I swear my heart stops beating. Then how did they get it? It would have had to come from our team, as they own the rights all unreleased professional photos of us... which means PR would have to have known about the content of the article. And they let it happen?

I bring my eyes back to Harley and he is staring across the room. I feel his hands shaking in mine and see his chest moving with rapid breaths.

“We’re going to figure this out,” I say, but I hear the weakness in my voice. I don’t know how to figure this out, or what to do about it. But I *do* know that I can’t keep letting this happen. I take a breath so I can add strength to my voice. “We *will* figure this out.”

“We’ll help,” Callum adds. “Whatever you guys need from us to get them to lay off this shit, we’ll do it.”

Harley’s eyes snap up to Callum. “This isn’t-”

“If you’re about to say this isn’t my problem and I shouldn’t have to deal with this, I’m sorry, but no. You’re my friend and I want to help my friend.” Callum smiles at him. “So, with all due respect, shut up.”

A small smile briefly forms on Harley’s lips, but it quickly disappears. I rub my thumb over the back of his hand. “We can do this.”

Ollie opens his hands wide and gives Harley an expectant look. “Need a magical hug?”

“I think Ezra’s probably got this one, Ol,” Callum says.

Ollie holds his hands up and gestures between us, nodding quickly. “Yes, of course, obviously, yes.” He then raises his eyebrows at Harley again. “But if you do need one...”

Harley sniffs and breathes out a laugh. “I know where to find you.”

Ollie gives him the finger guns with a wink, and then hops up to head over to his drum set. Callum nods at me and follows him.

“You ok, baby?” I ask him in a quiet voice.

He bites his lip and sighs. “No.”

I pull him into a hug and hold him, wishing I could take away all this pain. It’s not fair. “How about we do our best to

get through today, and we'll talk more tonight. We'll try to see if there's something we can do about this." I don't know what that will be, as Val was quite clear that these rumours of Harley dating girls was seen by her a good thing. I can only image she's having a field day with this and won't want to do anything to change this message. *If she didn't create it herself...*

"Ok," Harley murmurs into my shoulder.

I pull back and press my lips softly to his. Just a few more hours and we will have some time to ourselves with no other obligations. We both need that. We'll take every last one of these moments together and make the most of them. Four years is a long time...



"What is your favourite colour?" A bashful looking fan asks us.

"Purple," Ollie immediately answers next to me, a wide grin on his face.

I chuckle and raise my mic to my mouth. "I think maybe red." I look down to where Callum is sitting on the opposite side of Ollie.

"Yellow," he says.

"Harley?" The moderator of this fan Q&A asks him.

Harley looks up and meets my eyes from where he is sitting beside Callum. "Blue."

I give him a soft smile and a little nod. After working on our songs early this morning, we had done a small acoustic set here on the beach with this Q&A immediately following. When the stools came out for us to sit, they quickly ushered us into our seats to begin and I didn't have a chance to sit by Harley. He was already anxious, and this only exacerbated his

panic. I've been trying to keep him calm from across the stage, but it doesn't seem to be working. He's in a fragile state right now, and it is killing me not to be beside him so I can lend him some strength to get through this. We're done for the day after this Q&A, and I can't wait until I can comfort him properly. Callum puts a hand on his back, and Harley gives him a little smile.

The next fan approaches the mic and smiles at us. "Hi, I'm Aisha. I'm just wondering what your favourite part is, so far, of being in Send Help?"

I smile at her. "That's easy. Meeting these guys," I say as I turn my smile down the line up of my band mates.

"Awww," Ollie says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and squishing my face to his shoulder. I laugh and playfully push him away. "I mean, same. But also making sick music to share with sick fans like you." The crowd erupts in a cheer and Ollie looks quite proud of himself.

Callum laughs and adds, "And travelling the country to meet you all," which is followed by another cheer.

Harley remains quiet, looking down at his mic in his hands. I glance at Callum, and he gives him a gentle nudge. He raises his mic and looks over the crowd to the beach beyond them. "Um, creating and playing music, with my friends," he says, casting us all a quick glance. The mixture of sadness and panic in his eyes when they land on me is heartbreaking. Sadly, other areas about being in Send Help aren't going so well right now.

I look back to the mic as the next fan steps up. "If you could, would you go back to living a normal life?" My eyes fly to Harley before I realize what I'm doing. He is looking right back at me, and I can't read the look on his face. But his body language is saying he is ready to jump off this stage and fly the fuck out of here. I fight against every instinct in my body to do just that.

Before either of us can say anything, Ollie saves the day. “We actually talk about this often, so I’ll answer for all of us. Overall, no because we love what we do, and we love our fans. Sometimes the pressure can be a bit much so there are times we may wish life was a little quieter, but I don’t think any of us would like to give up a music career to go back to work and school.”

I feel a rush of relief and can see it in Harley too. That was not a question either of us would have liked to answer. Ollie’s answer was true though. We love music, and we don’t want to give up the job. But we’d gladly give up the meddling and control that comes with it.

And speak of the devil, Anna appears in my line of sight, just off stage behind Harley. I try to keep my expression neutral and turn back to the crowd. But when I look again down the stage to check in on Harley, she gives me a harsh look and points to the crowd.

Fuck, is this day fucking over yet.

We manage to get through the rest of the event without too many difficult questions and Anna remained in her spot, silently scolding me every time I so much as glanced in Harley’s direction. But we’re in a live event, what is she going to do? Harley needs me and I’m not going to abandon my boyfriend because of a harsh look and a wrist slap later. Thankfully, Harley didn’t see her as I know that would have only contributed to his panic.

We finally wrap up and are directed off the beach towards the cars waiting for us. We stop to sign some autographs along the way, and as I’m signing one, my eye catches something behind the group of fans. I look over my shoulder to see Ollie behind me and one of our security guards standing close by. “Hey, Ollie, come sign these ones,” I say and sneak past the girls while they swarm Ollie. *Sorry, Ol, but I have something to do.*

I walk up to the market table, and the woman smiles at me. “Looking for something in particular?”

I scan the table, and smile. “Yeah, that one.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Harley

I LOOK out the window of our hotel room, over the palm trees and pools to the bright blue water of the ocean. Over the years, I had often found myself wishing I could see palm trees and clear turquoise waters, and never thought that would come true. I was going to be stuck in Lyons forever, under my dad's control. And now, here I am standing in this fancy hotel with multiple pools, 5-star restaurants and a private beach. But I can't enjoy any of it. Because the price I'm paying for this experience is starting to eat my fucking soul.

I startle when I feel hands on my waist, so lost to my head that I didn't even hear Ezra come up behind me.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," he says quietly as he wraps his arms around my waist and rests his chin on my shoulder.

I shake my head. "It's ok, I was just..." I trail off, not even sure what I was doing. Just thinking, I guess.

"What's on your mind?" He squeezes me a little tighter, and I bring my arms up to wrap around his.

"How this is my first time being at a beach."

Ezra lifts his chin from my shoulder to look at me. "What?"

I shrug. "It's not something I ever had the opportunity to do," I say quietly. Even when we were in California, we didn't get to go to the beach as we were so busy.

Ezra looks out the window again and then back to me with a smile. “Well, let’s go.”

I sigh and gaze into his sparkling eyes, the colour mimicking the ocean beyond the palm trees. Even with all this shit that is happening to us, he still radiates positivity and hopefulness. I love him for it, and I feel guilty that I can’t join him in that. “I don’t know... I don’t really feel like doing anything.”

He turns me around to face him. “We have a private section of the beach, it will be quiet. And it will just be us. Cal and Ollie are going golfing, they won’t be back for a few hours.” He grabs my hand and leads me over to the bed where I threw my bag. He opens it and digs around inside, pulling out my swim shorts. “Let’s go enjoy the water and sunshine, and we can talk about all of this if you want to. Ok?” He presses the shorts into my hands and gives me a hopeful look.

I nod, taking the shorts from him and he smiles widely. “Good.”

I can’t help but return his smile. Every time I am thrown into this deep, dark hole, where I feel trapped and helpless, it’s his bright smile and sparkling eyes that give me the strength to crawl out and keep going.

We get changed and head down to the beach, enjoying the quiet walk. It’s a high-end, private resort hotel, and I’m happy that no one here seems to care about us. We aren’t stopped once on the way down, and we are even able to go on our own without security. By the time we get to the beach, and enter our private section, I’m actually feeling a little better.

“Oh, sick,” Ezra flops down on a day bed under a cabana. “Now this is just what we need.”

I glance around nervously. “Can we...”

“No one can see us. It’s completely private.” He sits up and grabs my hand, pulling me over to the bed. He’s right, it is. We’re hidden from view of the rest of the beach, and the curtains on the cabana add even more privacy.

He reaches up and pulls my sunglasses down my nose so he can see my eyes. “Before we let loose and have fun, talk to me. Please.”

I take my sunglasses off and look out over the ocean from our perch on the daybed. “I don’t know how I can do this.” Ezra is quiet, but he places a hand on my leg while I think. He never rushes me when I’m working through something or feeling anxious, and I appreciate how patient he is. “I just feel like this is a never-ending battle, that I am never going to win. I’m losing myself the deeper into this we get, and I didn’t have much to hold on to to begin with.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” he says, rubbing his thumb over my thigh. “You may have just recently found your voice, but it’s strong. I know because I see it every day. What’s being spread out there isn’t the truth, and that sucks. But that doesn’t mean you’re losing yourself to this false narrative. You’re still you, and we all see you for what you are. Which is a beautiful, amazing person who loves deeply. I wish more than anything that every single person on this planet could experience the beautiful soul that you are. But the people who really matter the most do see it.” I turn my head to look at him and he gives me a soft smile. “Anyone who believes these lies, we don’t want them in our life anyway. We need to hold onto hope, and that this *isn’t* a never-ending battle. We are fighting, remember? And we are going to come out the other side, even stronger because of it.”

I bite my lip to hold back tears that are threatening to spill over. What did I do to deserve him? How did something so great happen to me? “The only way I can do this is with you.”

His smile brightens and he pushes his shoulder into mine. “You have me.”

“I didn’t today,” I say sadly, wishing I could move past this sorrow and just be happy with him in this moment. I feel stuck, and hopeless.

He sighs and gives me a sad look. “I know. I hate that I couldn’t be by you when you needed me.”

“What if that starts happening more...” I question, my heart rate increasing at the thought of having to do the most anxiety inducing part of this job without Ezra there. He is the only reason I’m able to get through interviews and media appearances. His gentle touch or close presence is what I need to stay grounded and function when my anxiety wants to take over.

Ezra shakes his head. “Today was a fluke, it was a quick set up and we unfortunately didn’t have the chance to switch up our seats. I always want to be there for you, babe.” He sighs. “But realistically, it could happen again, and you do occasionally have to do media without me.” I nod, knowing this is true, and hating every second of it. Even a good day in media, with Ezra right by my side, I’m anxious. When I’m alone, it’s unbearable.

He smiles and moves his hand off my leg, reaching into his pocket. “I have something for you.”

I watch him as he holds his hand out and opens it, a silver ring with a black band in the middle sitting in his palm. My eyes fly up to meet his. “What...”

He laughs. “You said you just wanted to take my word for it, but I saw this at the beach this afternoon and I had to. I’m always going to be here for you, Harley. But those times when I can’t be physically present with you, you can have this as a reminder that I got you, and you can do this.”

He picks up my left hand and slides the thick silver band onto my thumb. Then he holds up his thumb, pressing the pad of it to mine. I look down at the ring, bringing my other hand to it to spin the middle band.

“I promise I’ll always do everything I can for us, for you. You’re stronger than all these nasty rumours and lies, and so is our love for each other. I want you to remember that every time you look at this ring.”

I’m overcome with so much emotion that I don’t even have the words to express my gratitude and love for him. I pull

him into a hug and hold onto him tight, never wanting to let go. “I love you,” I say, but it’s not enough. There is nothing I can say or do that would express just how much love I have for him. I bury my face into his neck and breathe him in, holding him impossibly tight.

“I love you too, Harley,” he says softly, running his hands up my back. We hold each other like this for a while, until I eventually release him and take his face in my hands to kiss him, my worry about the rest of the world completely falling away as my love for him takes over, pushing every negative thought from my mind.

“Thank you,” I whisper against his lips.

Ezra smiles and takes my hands in his, running his thumb over the ring and turning the spinner. “I would have sprung for a nicer ring, but your style is a bit too grungy for the jewellery stores.” He looks up at me with a cheeky grin.

I laugh. “I mean, when you originally said promise ring, I pictured diamonds. I’m actually kind of disappointed.” His face breaks out in a huge grin, and I laugh again. “No. No diamonds.”

“Fine.” He rolls his eyes on a laugh. “Come on.” He stands up and holds his hand out for me to take. He pulls me up and places a quick kiss on my lips. “Let’s go swim in the ocean.”

I smile back at him, excitement creeping in as I realize I’m about to do something I’ve always wanted, and I get to do it with him. Before I can say anything else, he slaps my ass and starts running towards the water. “Race you!” he yells over his shoulder.

I laugh, taking off after him. “Not a race if you cheat!”

He cackles as he runs into the water, and dives under the surface. The cool ocean water washes over my legs as my toes sink into the sand, bringing me a sense of peace. When the water reaches my hips, I dive under, letting all the worry float away with the waves. As I surface, I’m met with the most beautiful colour blue that rivals even the ocean we are

swimming in. Ezra's eyes are alight with pure joy as he smiles at me, water running down his face from his hair, and I feel like my heart could burst at the gorgeous sight of him. I've been seeking happiness my whole life, and Ezra is it. He is the embodiment of light and happiness, and he is teaching me how to welcome this into my life as well. I don't think he realizes just how much he has helped me since I met him that first day in Ithaca, when I believed I didn't deserve to have friends. I almost didn't even go to Ollie's that day, and I'm so fucking happy I did. I place my hand on his hip under the water, unable to take my eyes off him. I'm in beautiful, clear blue water for the first time in my life, but all I can look at is him. He's perfect, and I am absolutely obsessed.

He inches closer to me, a mischievous smile on his lips. "Just a heads up, I'm going to kiss you." My eyes dart to the beach but he tsks me. "Eyes on me."

I snap my eyes back to him, a breath of laughter escaping me. "Oh really..."

He smirks and shrugs one shoulder. "Two can play that game."

"Hm." I squint my eyes at him. "But you like it so much when I tell you what to do..."

He nods. "It's true. I do." He moves even closer, so that our chests are almost touching. "But right now, I'm going to take a whirl at it." He grabs my arms and pulls me under the water. Once my head is under, he brings his lips to mine. The water swirls around us, and we press into each other, hands roaming.

Eventually, we break apart and he swims backwards as we surface with a smile. "No one will ever know..." he says dramatically.

We spend what feels like hours in the water, floating around and throwing a football, just having fun and forgetting everything that has been weighing on us. What started as one

of the worst days of this tour, is now ending as one of the best. And I really don't want it to end.

As the sun lowers, we lay in the cabana hidden from view and curled up together, watching the sky change colours from blue, to orange and pink. I rest my hand on Ezra's chest, and he places his over it, running his finger over the ring.

"That does not count, we're having a rematch."

"But it was great! And so much fun!"

"For you maybe! No, we're doing it again."

I chuckle against Ezra's chest, and he gently runs his fingers through my hair. "Here they come." He sings softly through a smile.

Callum and Ollie arrive at the cabana, still in their golf clothes. Ollie flops onto the bed, smiling at us. "Hey lovebirds! This is sick." He looks around the area with a nod of approval.

"How was golfing?" I ask, sitting up to make room for Ollie, and he scoots up the bed to sit beside me.

"Amazing," he says, at the same time Callum crosses his arms and shakes his head saying, "Fucking awful."

Ezra laughs. "What happened?"

"Everything. Everything happened." Callum stares at Ollie, who just shrugs.

"I won," Ollie says, reaching over me to grab a water bottle from the side table. "I don't think Callum is too happy about that."

Callum opens his arms wide and stares at him with his mouth open. "Do I need to remind you that you almost fucking killed us?!"

Ollie waves a hand at him, dismissing that accusation.

"Wait, what?" I ask, looking between them.

Ollie hops off the bed, smacking Callum on the back. “Let’s go get dinner and I’ll tell you guys all about it. My version, because it’s the truth.”

“No, *my* version is the truth,” Callum stares at Ollie as he walks past him, heading back to the hotel. Callum follows, and we hear them continue to bicker about what each of them think really happened this afternoon.

“Well, this ought to be good.” Ezra laughs as he stands from the bed. “You up for dinner with them tonight?” he asks me, as I get off the bed too.

I pull him into a hug and kiss the side of his head. “Yeah. I’m feeling much better.”

He smiles at me and pushes my hair back. “Good.”

As we head into the hotel to get ready for dinner, I take a deep breath and lock the memory of this afternoon away, so I can revisit it whenever I need it. And that brings me a welcome feeling of peace.



“Hey!”

Lulu’s smiling face lights up my screen and I smile back at her. “Hey, Lu.”

“Show me the view!” she exclaims, and I chuckle, turning the camera around so she can see the view from our balcony. “Oh my god, it’s gorgeous! Did you go swimming yet?”

I flip the camera back around to me. “Yeah, we did yesterday. It was awesome.”

“Ugh, I am so fucking jealous.” Lulu shakes her head, but she’s still smiling. “You’re living quite the life now, rockstar.”

I chuckle, looking out over the palm trees. “Yeah... quite the life.”

“Har.” I look back at her and her smile is gone. “How are you doing? I heard what they’re saying...”

I blow out a breath and run my hand down my face. “It fucking sucks. But-”

“What’s that?”

I give her a questioning look. “What? I was just saying I-”

“Yeah, I know, we’ll get back to that I promise, but... what’s on your thumb?”

I look down at the ring on my thumb, and hold it up for her to see. “A ring...”

Her face slowly morphs into a giddy smile. “Did Ezra give you a ring?”

“A *thumb* ring, Lu,” I chuckle. “It spins.” I spin it with my index finger so she can see.

“That is fucking adorable,” she says through her massive grin.

“Coffee time!” Ezra appears on the balcony, holding two cups. He had gone down to the lobby to grab us coffee so we can enjoy some time on the balcony before heading out for the day. “Oh, hey Lulu!” He passes me my cup and kisses the top of my head, then sits beside me on the outdoor couch.

“Hey, Ez!” She’s still smiling widely and I roll my eyes at her. Girl has zero chill. Geez, maybe her and Ollie really are meant to be friends. She chuckles to herself and then puts her serious face back on. “So, how are you guys managing with this stupid shit being spread around?”

Ezra looks at me, letting me answer. “I think we’ve decided to let people think what they want to. We still have each other, and that’s all that matters.”

Ezra’s lips tilt up in a smile, and he puts an arm around my shoulders. “Exactly.”

“Good for you,” Lulu smiles. “I’m really, really proud of you Harley.”

“Me too,” Ezra says, pulling me in to place a sloppy kiss on my cheek.

“Ugh.” I push him back playfully and make a show of wiping my cheek. “Gross.”

Ezra laughs and takes a drink of his coffee, keeping his arm around me which is right where I want it.

“So, any more awful dates we should know about?” I ask hesitantly.

Lulu shakes her head. “Nope!” Then she holds up a finger. “Oh, wait. I did accidentally end up on a date, but I didn’t know it was a date until I got home and he texted me. I didn’t even know he had my number... I’m still not really sure how any of it happened...”

“How...?” Ezra trails off, not sure how to ask the many questions we both have about that.

Lulu shrugs and shakes her head. “I honestly don’t know. To all questions, that I also have.”

Lulu launches into her story, and we laugh along with her as she shares how she got herself into this crazy situation. When we hang up with her, we continue to enjoy our morning together in this little bubble we have just for ourselves, drinking coffee and taking in the peaceful and quiet atmosphere. And it’s absolutely perfect.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ezra

“I GOTTA SAY... I think I might be siding with Cal on this one,” Harley gives Ollie a sympathetic look, and Ollie throws his drumsticks in the air, one of them hitting our sound tech, Richard. He simply shakes his head and continues on his way, checking amps.

“Harley! You’re always the reasonable one, what the fuck!” He stares at him in disbelief and Harley presses his lips together, looking at me for help.

“I mean...” I adjust my bass strap on my shoulder. “I agree. The golf cart-”

“Harley.”

We all turn our attention to the side of the stage, where Anna is beckoning Harley over. I look at Richard, who nods to us, indicating soundcheck is complete. *Great. So, what does she want...*

“What?” Harley asks her hesitantly.

“Come with me, I need to speak with you about something,” she says, tapping away on her phone, not even looking at him.

“No,” Harley says, and every single set of eyes on this stage turns to him. *Yes, baby.*

“No?” Anna says, lowering her phone and glaring at him.

Harley hesitates slightly, but he continues. “We just finished soundcheck, and nothing else is scheduled until

showtime. Which means we only have a couple hours for ourselves before we start getting ready.” I see his fingers fidgeting with the ring on his thumb and my mouth tilts up in a smile. “It’s our time off, we can talk tomorrow.”

Anna stares back at him, fire burning in her eyes. Ollie whips his head back and forth between Anna and Harley, mouth open and a smile dancing at the corners of his lips. I glance at Callum, who is smiling proudly at Harley and not even trying to hide it.

“Fine,” Anna says through gritted teeth, and lifts her phone again. “I will *schedule* a meeting with you for tomorrow.”

“And I’ll be attending too,” I say, slapping on a sweet smile. “Since I have a feeling this may affect the both of us.”

Anna takes in a deep breath and shakes her head slightly, eyes flashing. She mutters something under her breath that I can’t hear, but I don’t care. This is fighting back, and the only thing I care about right now is that Harley made this happen. I am *so* fucking proud of him. “I guess I’ll be seeing you both tomorrow.” Anna says, eyes down on her phone, thumbs tapping away as she leaves.

Harley turns to me and lets out a breath, eyes wide. “Holy fuck,” he whispers.

Ollie laughs and jumps off the drum riser, throwing his arm around Harley’s shoulders. “Dude! That was fucking incredible. I totally forgive you now for not taking my side.”

Harley rolls his eyes at him, but he smiles and looks down, trying to hide an adorable blush.

“Good job, Harley,” Callum says, beaming at him with the same pride I am feeling. “I bet that felt good.”

Harley looks up and lets out a shaky breath. “It did,” he says through a smile.

I can’t keep my eyes off him, or stop smiling at him, as the guitar techs come to take our instruments. Before we can leave the stage, I pull him the opposite way, towards the front of the

stage. “Come with me,” I turn to him and put a serious expression on my face. “I need to speak with you about something.” But the smile quickly creeps back onto my lips.

He huffs out a laugh. “And if I say no?”

I shake my head. “You won’t want to say no to this.”

“You guys coming?” Callum calls to us from the stage exit.

“We’ll catch up with you in a bit,” I call back, and I hear Ollie whoop and yell, “Get it!”

“Shh, shut up,” Callum says as he elbows him in the ribs, and they head off, bickering as usual.

I laugh and hop off the stage on to the arena floor, Harley following. The lights in the arena are off, with just the stage lit up, so we head into the darkness.

We reach the back of the floor and I turn to him. “You got me all hot and bothered, and since it’s our time off...” I raise my eyebrows at him.

The corner of his mouth tilts up. “Say no more.”

I push him against the back wall, pressing my lips to his and pushing my tongue into his mouth. He groans as he parts his warm, soft lips and lets me in, his hands dropping to my hips and gripping tight. Our bodies press together, and I get lost in him as he envelopes me in his embrace.

A throat clears, and we jump back from each other, heads whipping to the hallway entrance.

“Hi boys,” Ian says, glancing at the stage. “Soundcheck complete?” He looks back to us with a smirk.

“Uh, yeah...” I say, adjusting my shirt, while Harley runs a hand through his hair and looks anywhere but at Ian.

Ian nods. “I was just upstairs, checking out the suites. They’re nice. And private.” He raises his eyebrows at us with a tilted smile, then turns to continue his path backstage.

We watch him leave, and Harley lets out a small groan while I burst out laughing.

“That was embarrassing,” Harley mutters.

“Come on,” I say as I catch my breath, and grab his hand. “Let’s go up then.”

We hold hands as we run down the hallway to find the way up. We abruptly stop once we reach the end of the hall, seeing Anna in the concession area. We frantically back up to hide around the corner.

“Should we turn ar-” Harley starts but I shush him.

“We’re on a mission, and we *will* be successful,” I whisper seriously. Harley chuckles, but then gives me an earnest nod.

I peer out around the corner to assess the situation. The area is quiet, with no one else around but Anna. She is leaning against one of the large pillars in the middle of the area, tapping away at her phone. My eyes sweep the environment, taking in the path we must navigate to reach the stairs. I turn back to Harley. “I’ve located the stairs.” I wave my hand in a motion for him to lean forward with me. I point to him then to the pillar that is approximately 7 feet away from us. I then point to myself, and the garbage can beside it. Harley nods and crouches down, ready to run for it.

I hold my hand up in a fist as I keep my eyes on Anna, waiting for the moment we can go. Harley tries to move my fist down, whispering, “I can’t see.”

I keep it up, looking over my shoulder to him. “I can, I’m giving you the signal,” I whisper frantically.

He furrows his brow and shakes his head. “Why do you need to give me a signal, I could just watch with you.”

I stare back at him in disbelief. “Do you not know how these operations work? There is always someone who-” But I don’t get to finish because suddenly Anna’s footsteps are approaching us.

Harley plasters himself against the wall and looks at me with wide eyes. “What do we do?”

“Oh, now you want my directions...” I murmur as I drop to the floor and pull him down with me. I watch as Anna approaches the hallway entrance, eyes still glued to her phone. She stops near the pillar that was supposed to be our next vantage point. And right now, she has a clear view of us, if she was to ever look up from her phone.

I hold my hand up and motion for Harley to follow me. I start crawling towards the other side of the pillar, staying low and keeping my eyes on Anna. She doesn't notice us, and honestly... it's almost impressive how focused she is on her phone. Like, we are clearly visible and not all that quiet.

We get to the other side of the pillar and press our backs against it. She's not moving. She is still standing there, tapping away. Harley meets my eyes and raises his eyebrows, asking what's next. I move over to the garbage can, crouching behind it so I can peer over the top. The second I do, Anna appears before it, and I freeze. She drops something in the can and continues to stand there, *still* not looking up and still not seeing me. *Oh my god.* I slowly drop back down to the floor and scoot back beside Harley. I mouth to him *she's right there.*

Harley rolls his eyes and leans his head back against the pillar. But no. No, babe. We're doing this. I survey our surroundings from this new vantage point and start to develop a plan. Ok, so there is a sign for one of the concession stands so if we can manage to get there, we can hide behind it before we have the chance to move to the other pillar, which is further away from the stairs, but it creates a less visible path around the-

And she leaves.

Harley stands up, looking down at me. “Well. That was fun,” he says flatly.

I stare up at him from the floor. “I had a whole plan...”

“Come on,” Harley chuckles as he walks towards the stairs. I get up to follow him, letting my eyes roam one more time over the path that would have had us successfully avoid Anna. I *guess* this is better. We make our way to the suites, and as we enter one, we leave the lights off and I close the door behind us.

Harley stands at the railing, looking over the arena and the stage. “Crazy that we play on that...”

“Hm,” I agree, standing beside him. “It seems so much... bigger up here.”

He clenches his hands and nods. “It does.”

I grab his hand, bringing the back of it to my lips. “And you fucking rock it every night.”

He smiles at me, and I waste no time hooking my hand behind his neck and pulling him into me. We kiss deeply, pressing our bodies against each other like we just can’t get enough. Because I can’t. I slide my hands under his shirt so I can get closer to him, feeling his hard muscles flexing as he presses against me.

Harley reaches between us to undo my belt and slide my zipper down. My heart is thrashing as he reaches into my boxers and grips my cock in his fist. I moan into his mouth and grip his shirt as he moves his hand up and down my hard length. He shoves my pants down further with his other hand, freeing my cock from my boxers. His kiss and his strokes become slow and intense, and I bring my arms around his back to hold him. This moment is about connection for him, and not just about sex. He needs closeness and comfort after everything he has been through in the last 24 hours. I run a hand down his back and feel his stress slipping away as we meld into each other, both emotionally and physically. I want to make him feel good, all over.

I bring my hand between us to open his pants and pull out his solid cock. I gently take his hand off my dick and take us both in my grip. He lets out a breath from deep within his

chest as he relaxes under my touch. “I got you, baby,” I whisper to him as I stroke us.

We’re panting and moaning into each other as I pump us together in a slow and steady pace, letting him melt in my arms as I kiss him.

We hear voices down on the stage as they continue setting up and I smile against his lips. “I know they can’t see us, but it’s kind of fun to imagine they could.”

“Well, then let’s give them a show,” he breaths out.

He takes a step back and lifts his hand to my hair, running his fingers through it slowly while his eyes track the movement. His hand trails slowly down my neck, over my chest and my abs. I keep my eyes on his, watching as his gaze roams over my body while he touches me. His intense look of desire has me feeling like I’m going to lose all control. As his hand and his eyes trail lower on my body, he lowers himself to his knees.

I reach out to grasp the railing beside me, and swallow hard as I watch him. He grasps my pants and pulls them lower, his other hand gently moving to curl around my dick. He slowly strokes me while he raises his eyes to mine. We stare into each other’s eyes for a moment, saying nothing and everything. It doesn’t matter how crazy life is now, we create these moments for ourselves. Whenever we need these intimate moments for touch, emotional comfort, or even just for some fun, we will be there for each other, always.

He licks his lips and then lowers his eyes, breathing in, and taking me into his mouth. I sigh with pleasure and sink my fingers into his hair. He closes his eyes as he falls into this touch, moving up and down my length, taking me deeper. He moves in closer to me, running his hand up my abs and under my shirt as he keeps his mouth on me, licking and sucking. The pressure builds as I get closer, his touch and his mouth unbearable in the best way possible. I look down at him and his green eyes are already looking up at me. My heart flips as I

take him in. He is so fucking beautiful... and my cock in his mouth is certainly a beautiful sight too.

I pull him up, and he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand as he stands. "I want my mouth on you now," I pant as I reach down and grasp his cock, rubbing my thumb over the tip. I then bring my thumb up to my mouth, licking his precum while he watches me with a heat in his eyes.

I drop to my knees and immediately take him into my mouth. I am heated, and desperate for him. I bring my hands behind him to grip his ass, taking him in slowly, all the way to the back of my throat. I look up, and just like I was hoping he would, he brings his hand to the back of my head to encourage even more. And I take it. I swallow down, holding him deep in my throat and pulling the most delicious moans out of him. I pull back to suck his tip and take a breath before I swallow him down again. He is panting and gripping my hair tight as I continue to suck him, and I am going to come soon just from the sounds he is making.

He pulls his hips back, and out of my mouth. "I want to come with you," he says as he grabs my shirt and pulls me up to my feet. And now, we're both ravenous. I walk him backwards, pushing him up against the wall and he forcefully pulls me into him. We grind against each other, while I drop my head to bring my mouth to his neck, licking and sucking under his ear. He tilts his head back, sinking his fingers in my hair as his other hand moves between us. He grasps our cocks and strokes us, quickly increasing his pace. As I moan into his neck, he pulls my head back by my hair so he can bring his mouth to mine. We're panting and groaning against each other's lips as Harley pumps us both, his other hand still in my hair and mine fisting his shirt.

"Fuck," I grunt. "I'm coming."

"Yeah baby, come with me," he breathes. I bring a hand up against the wall beside his head as I drop mine to watch us come in Harley's hand. My hips jerk and my breath hitches as the pressure releases, a wave of pleasure rolling over me while

I feel Harley's cock twitching against mine. Our cum mixes together over his hand, and shoots onto our shirts. I slam my mouth to his as he pants my name, unable to get enough of him.

As we come down from an intense high, I pull back and look down at his hand covered in cum. My eyes slide back up to his, with a silent question. He answers by raising his hand to my mouth. I keep my eyes on his as I lick his fingers, tasting us and what we share together. He bites his lip as he watches me, then brings his hand to his mouth. After he cleans the rest of us off his fingers, he presses his lips to mine as I sigh into him, overcome with how much I love him. And how much I love *us*.



I wake in morning to the sound of the alarm and feel shifting beside me as Harley turns it off. I open my eyes and see him laying on his back, wide awake and staring at the ceiling.

“Morning.” I reach out and lay a hand on his chest. He turns his head to look at me, and I see anxiety swirling under the surface.

“Morning,” he says, and I frown at the tightness in his voice.

I rub my thumb over his chest. “What are you worrying about?”

He presses his lips together as he turns his head back to look at the ceiling. “The meeting with Anna this morning.”

I sigh and move in closer, draping my arm over him to give him a squeeze. “I’ll be there with you.”

He nods and swallows. He’s quiet for a moment before he says quietly, “I don’t even know what it’s about...”

I've wondered this too but didn't want to say anything to potentially worry Harley. "It can't be anything too big, it's just with Anna. She deals with all the tour PR, so maybe she has plans to meet with all of us." I shrug my shoulder, really hoping that's all this is.

Harley nods slightly again, but doesn't say anything.

"It'll be ok, babe. Whatever it is, I'm there with you and we won't let her be her usual sassy and rude self," I say as I prop myself up on my elbow and look down at him. "Maybe someday we'll even get to her smile."

Harley chuckles, which brings a smile to my lips. "Imagine that..."

"Or, we could just keep calling her various A names and piss her off even more than we usually do," I laugh.

"Fuck," Harley laughs. "Lulu definitely got under her skin."

"Yeah, she was super rude to them." I shake my head thinking of the way she was speaking to Hannah and Lulu. "Maybe we should call her various Anna-type names.... Annabelle. Johanna. Brianna. Anneliese..."

Harley smiles. "Or just Anne."

"Oh, that's a good one, she'd really hate that," I laugh.

He chuckles and then sighs. "No, we don't need to be mean just because she is."

And there's that beautiful soul I love so much. Even when people are awful to him, he is kind. He has every right to be angry at the world, but he isn't. He is learning to stand up for himself, and to watch him do this with grace and respect for those around him is incredible. *He* is incredible.

I bring my fingers up brush his cheek. "You're perfect."

He brings his eyes to mine and a gentle smile graces his lips. "You are."

The alarm goes off again, so we get up and pack our things. We head out of the room much earlier than I would have wanted, as we are meeting with Anna before we have to be at the bus. What I wouldn't give for one more hour with Harley in a hotel room...

As we approach the meeting room in the hotel, I quickly grab Harley's hand to give him a squeeze. I can see the anxiety all over him and I wish I could take it all away. "I'm here." I smile at him, and he takes a big breath. "Ready?" I ask, as we reach the door.

"Yeah, let's get this over with," Harley says. "Maybe it'll be quick, and we can go back to the room for a bit longer..." He gives me a soft smile, and I grin right back at him.

"Now *that's* the spirit." I push the door open, and the smile immediately falls from my face.

Sitting at the table in the middle of the meeting room is Anna, Val, and William.

Well, shit.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Harley

I IMMEDIATELY TAKE A STEP BACKWARDS, and I am ready to run. Before I can, Ezra grabs my hand.

“What’s going on?” he asks the room, holding my hand tight to keep me here.

Val gestures to the two seats across from them. “Sit. We have much to discuss and not much time to do it.” She looks annoyed as she moves her gaze between me and Ezra.

My heart is racing, and with every beat I feel myself retreating further and further away. I can’t be here. I can’t do this. My breaths are shallow, and I feel like I’m about to start hyperventilating. I try to step backwards again into the hallway, but Ezra holds my hand and turns to face me.

“I got you, babe,” he whispers and reaches behind me to close the door.

The second the door clicks shut, my body seems to shut down. I’m frozen, unable to make myself move at all. I can feel my breathing increase as the room closes in around me. I want to leave. I can’t do this anymore.

I hear voices in the room, but I can’t pay attention long enough to know who is saying what. Ezra’s voice cuts through the chatter as I hear him say, “Can you just give him a minute, you completely sprung this on us.”

His blue eyes appear before me, and I feel his warm hands on my cold arms. “You got this,” he murmurs low, his words just for me. “We can do this, I promise. Breathe.” I take a

stuttering breath in and out while looking into his eyes, and he nods, rubbing his hands on my arms. “Good. Let’s sit down, ok?” I nod, and he takes my hand, leading me to a chair that he pulls out for me. He sits beside me and rests his hand on my thigh. I can’t look up at Anna, Val and William sitting across from us, so I keep my eyes down as I try to keep from losing myself too much.

“Are we ready to get this started? Like I said, we don’t have much time,” I hear Val say with a bite to her tone.

“Ok,” Ezra says, shifting in his seat beside me. “What is it you want?”

“Well, we understand there is an issue.” Val sighs. “Harley, you refused to meet with Anna yesterday. What could have been a simple and quick meeting has now become something much bigger, as we had to fly down here last minute to ensure this meeting happened without any further pushback.” Ezra squeezes my leg tight, and my heart tries to beat out of my chest. I look down at his hand on me and try to focus on the feeling of his touch. “Frankly, Harley, we are getting frustrated with your attitude towards us as we try to help you.” My hands are now shaking in my lap, and Ezra moves his hand over them to hold tight.

He leans forward like he’s about to say something, but William starts in before he can. “Let’s cut to the chase here, shall we? You wanted to share your hotel rooms and to spend your time off as you wish. From my understanding, we gave that to you, did we not? Now, you need to let us do our jobs. Neither Val, nor I, should have to be here for this meeting to happen. I am hoping we can have a calm and rational discussion here, so we can discuss these issues and make a plan.” My leg is bouncing and I am trying everything I can not to bolt out of this room right now. I can’t even think straight. My attitude? Pushback? “Val has informed me that she arranged a PR relationship for you, Harley, with Everly Jones for promotion for her new movie-”

“What?” I ask, looking up for the first time since I sat down. I thought these were just rumours we were letting blow over, now she’s arranging an actual relationship? Again?

Val sighs and shakes her head. “Harley. Please, we can’t keep having this problem.”

William is sitting back in his chair in a relaxed position, observing me with a look of indifference. “As I was saying. This PR relationship will be promotion for the movie, as well as your album and tour. Since you are making headlines, there is quite a bit of interest in you from many A-list ladies.”

“Our meeting was so that I could inform you of this and go over your schedule with Everly over the coming weeks,” Anna chimes in, her hands crossed on the table in front of her. *That was their idea of a simple and quick meeting?* I shake my head, unable to form any words. *Why is this happening? Why are they doing this to me?*

Ezra glances at me with worry in his eyes. “Why is there such a push for Harley to be publicly dating all these girls? They’re calling him a player, it’s not fair. That’s not at all who he is.”

“It’s selling,” Val says simply. “Since you have gained this reputation as a ladies man, sales have increased. Send Help is getting much more attention. We are even adding tour dates as there is a big demand for you. It’s good business.” I look back down, and squeeze Ezra’s hand in mine. *Please, this can’t be happening. Please, make it all go away.* “It all fits perfectly into this role for you. You are the quiet, mysterious, bad one in the group. The girls love it, and they all seem to want you since you’ve been linked to some popular women. This image is working for the brand. You’re bringing in lots of attention.” *Which is the last thing I want.* I don’t want this image. I just want to play music. I feel tears stinging the back of my eyes as I try to make sense of all of this. How this all started because of a photo of me and Charlotte. How did we even get here, how did it come to all of this?

“And, more importantly, fans are continuing to question if you two are a couple,” Val continues. “The touches and the looks in the media, plus you two spending all your time together outside of obligations, it’s being noticed. Social media is filled with theories of you two dating.”

“What is so wrong about that,” I ask quietly, as I bring my eyes back down. My voice feels like it’s miles away. I barely even feel real right now.

I hear Val sigh again. But William’s voice sounds instead. “We’ve been through this. Your fan base is almost entirely made up of girls who see you all as heart throbs, and they want to date you. If we were to say you two are together, you risk losing everything you have built so far.”

“Ok, wait.” Ezra leans forward to rest his arm on the table. His voice is full of fire, and I look up to see his features have hardened and his body is rigid. “Our time off is not up for negotiation, we’ve already discussed-”

“Which is why we have to divert attention from you,” Val cuts in. “Because you are together all the time, if we continue to create this image for Harley-”

“So you did create it,” Ezra says. “These *rumours*, you called them, were planted by you. This story of Harley using women, was you?”

Val opens her mouth to speak, but William’s loud voice comes so suddenly that my whole body jolts and I turn to him with wide eyes.

“Enough!” He stares at Ezra, and when his gaze slides to me, my body starts shaking uncontrollably. There is anger in his eyes, and I’m overcome with fear. Fear of what’s to come, and how bad this gets. I know how bad it can get, and I don’t want it. I drop my eyes to the table and duck my head. My hands are tingling, rising up my arms to my core. I need to disappear, fast.

“We have tried working with you, only for you to fight back against us at every turn. *We* manage you. *We* know this

industry and how this works. *We* got you to this point. We listened to everything you brought to us, and we've worked with you to meet your needs. You now need to meet us halfway. This attitude you are showing us is completely unacceptable. Do you really want to be the reason why this all falls apart, and you, along with Callum and Ollie, lose everything? Simply because you refuse to work with us, to meet your needs, that *you* requested? This *is* happening."

Ezra is silent beside me, his hand in mine my only tether to reality. He shifts in his seat and clears his throat. "I hear you, William. I do. But I also don't feel like we are being heard. Yes, you've allowed us to share hotel rooms and have our free time together. However, these lies about Harley are extreme. They are the farthest thing from who he is, and I feel like there must be a better way to do this."

"I might have an idea," Anna says slowly, and I glance up to see her leaning forward with a pensive look. The tingles are working their way through my body, numbing me. My head feels heavy and light at the same time, and I'm losing my feel of Ezra's hand in my mine. I squeeze him again, and I vaguely feel him squeeze me back.

"If we *don't* go forward with the full PR relationship with Everly, and Harley just attends the movie premiere, that could still create quite a stir. This continues to support the image created for him, rather than one of commitment, which doesn't really fit." I draw my brows together as I slowly take in her words. It almost sounds like she's trying to help us.

"Meanwhile, Ezra's image is wholesome, charming boy next door. What if we lean into that, and have him date the girl next door?" I close my eyes. *No, no, no.*

"What?" Ezra breathes out, tightening his grip on my hand.

"Hm," Val hums. "I like this. It will be much easier for contracts and scheduling as well."

"And," I hear the excitement in Anna's voice, "fans already discovered who Hannah Davis is. Ezra's ex-girlfriend

who recently visited him on tour.”

I see Ezra’s hand tighten around mine even more, but I don’t feel it as I float away. I watch the room from afar as William nods along in agreement while Val and Anna plan our lives, creating even more lies for our fans. I drift away into my escape, the darkness I was once so familiar with, as their chatter fades and quiet washes over me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ezra

I LEAD Harley to the bus, my hand on his elbow as my head whirls with a million thoughts. *What the fuck, what the fuck...*

Harley is walking beside me, but it's like he's not even here. His eyes are empty, his body is rigid... he is not himself. I need to get him into the bus so I can sort my thoughts out and help him come back.

"Heyo!" Ollie calls to us as we enter the bus. "You didn't come to breakfast, so I brought one of everything." He gestures to the table with a proud look, where he has set up a buffet of breakfast food. "I don't think I was actually allowed to take any of it... but I did. I made four trips." He turns to look at us and his face quickly falls. "Whoaaaa..."

"Thanks, Ollie, we just need a minute," I murmur as I take Harley's hand and lead him to the back of the bus.

Callum is seated on the large couch in the back room, and he looks up from his phone as we enter. He immediately sits forward, a look of concern etched into his features. "What happened?"

Ollie comes into the room behind us and slides the door closed. "Harley? You ok?"

"Hm," he mutters and shakes his head. His eyes are distant and unseeing as he sighs, and I guide him to sit on the couch.

Callum shoots me a worried look. I've never seen him this checked out, and I'm trying not to panic myself.

“We just had our meeting with Anna, which actually turned out to be a meeting with her, Val and William,” I say quietly, filling Ollie and Callum in while I gently squeeze Harley’s forearm. He looks down at his hands and clenches them tight, then stretches his fingers out.

“The fuck? They’re here??” Ollie climbs up the couch to carefully peer out the window, despite them being tinted.

I look back to Harley, who sighs again as he stares at the floor. I wrap my arms around him and hug him tight. I hate this so much, all of this. Every time I try to protect him, and I think we are making progress, it seems to just get worse. His hands move from his lap and his arms wrap around me. He sighs again, but this time it feels like a release as I feel his body move into me. I pull my head back to look at him, and his beautiful green eyes stare back at me. I smile softly as he returns to himself. “Hey, baby.”

Harley glances around the bus, then brings his eyes back to mine. They’re filled with questions and my heart breaks to see him like this, lost and broken, after all he’s done to feel ok with where we are. Where we *were*...

“What happened...” he says in a quiet voice, his eyes searching mine. And now my heart is shattering into a million tiny pieces. I want to take him away from here, from all these people who are trying to hide us and hurt us.

I swallow down the lump in my throat and try to add strength to my voice. “It’s ok, baby. We got through the meeting... it’s ok.” I force a small smile and tuck his hair back behind his ear. “There’s some good news. You don’t have to do a PR relationship with Everly Jones.”

“Oh my god.” Ollie rolls his eyes. “Another one?”

“Yeah,” I say with a sigh. “Val planted all these stories and rumours. This image they’ve created for Harley is what they call *good business*, as apparently sales have increased and we’re gaining more media attention. And they’re adding more tour dates...”

“Or, it could be our music...” Callum says, shaking his head with a huff.

“Yup,” I agree. I place a hand on Harley’s leg and squeeze. “But, you don’t have to do that anymore. You just have to attend the premiere. That’s it.” Harley presses his lips together and nods.

Callum observes him for a moment before cautiously asking, “But...?”

I let out a breath. “People are questioning if Harley and I are together again. Or still, I don’t know. Val and William are determined to divert attention from us, so...” I sigh and reach up to run my fingers through Harley’s hair as he looks down at his hand to spin the ring on his thumb. “They’re putting me in a relationship instead.”

“The fuck?” Ollie whips his head between us all. “Ok, first of all... why are they so hung up on you guys dating girls? Callum and I aren’t dating anyone, why aren’t they coming for us?”

“I guess we’re all over social media, with fans noticing how we spend all of our time together and our *touches and looks* towards each other.” I shake my head. “This is apparently damage control to bury these theories.”

Callum looks down at this phone and taps away at it.

“Ok then, *second* of all,” Ollie holds up two fingers, “I’m like, *always* touching everyone. It’s my love language. Well, one of them. I have them all. But anyway, no one has ever gotten after me for that or wondered if I’m dating any of you.”

“I’m on social media...” Callum says, still looking down at his phone. “And honestly, fans seem to love it. It seems like they *want* you guys to be together.” He turns his phone towards me, and I reach over Harley to take it. Harley turns his head and doesn’t look at the screen as I flip through the photos and posts. There are some posts from people simply wondering if there is something more between Harley and I, but others are stating how much they hope it’s true.

I sigh and pass Callum's phone back to him. "It doesn't matter, unfortunately. William and Val don't like this type of attention, and they want to hide it. Apparently, us being with girls is more relatable for fans, and *sells*."

"Can you get Holly involved again? She was a big help last time." Ollie glances between us hopefully.

I let out a breath and shake my head. "William was very clear that this is PR and she doesn't have any say in it."

Callum locks his phone and shakes his head sadly. "So, who are they trying to set you up with?"

I glance at Harley, and he briefly meets my eyes before looking back down at his hands. The flash of pain in his gaze is like a punch to the gut. "They want Hannah."

"My- I mean *our* Hannah?!" Ollie stares at me, mouth open in shock.

I nod, rubbing my thumb over Harley's thigh. "Yeah. I guess since she visited with Lulu, fans discovered who she is and that we dated. It fits their image they have for me...sweet, romantic long-term relationship..."

"Oh, I'm going to touch you all so much," Ollie says shaking his head and we all look at him in question. "To divert attention," he says with a serious nod.

Callum turns his attention back to me and Harley, choosing not to go there. "But she could just say no, right? Like Charlotte did."

I nod slowly. "Yeah, she could. But they said if she does, they will find someone else. Another girl who isn't in the industry to fit the *role*."

Ollie scoffs. "Holy fuck."

"They're serious this time," I sigh, feeling defeated. "This is happening."

Harley still hasn't said anything, as he spins his ring on his thumb. I hear the bus engine roar to life, which means we'll

soon be on the road. I need to get this out before Ian, Jack and the others get on the bus with us. I don't think Harley heard this part in the meeting and I want him to understand. This isn't all on him anymore, he no longer has to carry this burden alone. There is a tiny bit of a silver lining for him.

“Once this happens, and the story is out about me and whoever they find for this... They've promised to back off you, Harley.” Harley's eyes snap up to me. “You won't have to put up with anymore of this bullshit and these awful lies about you. They will stop trying to link you to girls and pushing the media attacks on you.” He stares into my eyes for a moment, then blinks and slowly shakes his head, an intense sadness swirling under the surface. He knows what this really means. The focus is simply being shifted from him, to me. But I don't care. I can take it. I can do this for us.

Because I can no longer sit by and watch these lies spread about the man I love, while they slowly destroy him. I'll do what I need to do to protect him and keep every promise I made to him. This is just a bump in our road... everything will be ok.

I hope.



I gently kiss Harley's head and slide out of bed, trying not to wake him. He finally fell asleep, and he needs it. We have a show tonight, and since we had to be up early this morning for that bullshit meeting, and to get to Fort Lauderdale for a soundcheck, we haven't had much rest. I stand up from the bed and look down at him. He still hasn't said much, and I'm worried about him.

I run a hand over my face and grab my phone, heading for the balcony. I gently close the sliding door behind me as I step out into the late afternoon breeze. If only I could enjoy it. I unlock my phone and scroll to Hannah's name. I stare at it for

a while until I finally press call, bringing the phone to my ear. I don't want to leave this too long, and they get to her before I do. I'd rather she hears this from me.

"Hey, Ez!" I hear her cheerful voice as the call connects.

"Hey, Han," I try to add some lightness to my tone. "How's it going?"

"Pretty good, just finished up at the lab. What are you up to?"

"Uh, just at the hotel." I glance back through the glass door into the room, making sure Harley is still asleep. "Everyone is sleeping since we have a show tonight."

"Why aren't you sleeping?" she chuckles.

I sigh and rub my eyes.

"Ezra?"

"I... Hannah, Prism is going to call you and ask you to..." I stutter as I jump right into it and try to find the right words, as there is no easy way to say this. "They want you to be in a PR relationship with me. And I need you to say no."

She's silent for a moment and I hear a door close. "Why?"

I lean against the balcony railing and look out over the ocean. "They're not happy with the attention Harley and I are getting from the fans, and the only way they will back off all this shit with Harley is by putting me in a relationship for the media." I let out a breath. "And they know we dated, so they want you."

"What does that even mean?" she asks softly.

I shake my head, even though she can't see me. "From my understanding, they'd bring you out on tour every so often to be, like... photographed with me to support this story that we are together. They kept saying they will offer you a very attractive package, which means paying you, but... it's all so fucking gross, and I'm so sorry, Hannah. I wish this didn't involve you at all, and I tried but they are going to ask you

anyway. And I want you to hear it from me first and for you to say no.” I can’t help the tension that’s rising in my voice, as I ramble and let all my thoughts out at once.

“And what happens then, when I say no?”

I hesitate, not wanting her to feel bad over this. This isn’t her problem, and I hate that this puts her in a difficult position. “They find someone else.”

“So, you’ll have to spend time with some random girl on fake dates...”

“I know where your head is right now, and this is not your problem to fix. I appreciate it, but this is such an unreasonable ask, and the only reason I am telling you this is so you know what’s coming when they call. And that you know I don’t want this for you.” I drop my head to my hand as I lean against the railing. *Please, Hannah. Make this easy and just say no.*

Hannah sighs and stays silent for a moment. “Ez, I... I don’t really know what to say. It’s a lot. I don’t want to be in the media and making headlines... I have school and I’m trying to get published and land an internship this summer. Even the attention I got just from visiting you guys on tour was overwhelming.” I nod my head in my hand, understanding completely. Before I can say anything, she continues, “But, I also would feel terrible knowing I can help and I didn’t. And I love you guys, I want you to be together and happy. At least I am already your friend and you wouldn’t have to deal with someone random...” I listen to her think out loud, and I close my eyes. *I wish I could just make this all go away.* “How long would it be for?”

I push myself upright and swallow hard. “I’m serious... I don’t want you to have to do this. Please.” My eyes start to burn, and I feel a sob building in my chest. I can’t let anyone else I love get hurt.

“Oh hun...” she says softly, clearly able to hear the torment in my voice.

“This is too much, you can’t.” I choke out, unable to keep the emotions down.

“But it will only get worse for you, right?”

I don’t say anything, pressing my lips together to keep myself from letting it all go.

“I figured,” she says. “So... for how long?”

I sniff and sigh. “I don’t know.”

“Well...” Hannah says thoughtfully. “If I *do*, we’d basically just be hanging out as friends like we do anyway, right? And Lulu could come sometimes too, Harley would love that.” I feel a tiny surge of hope run through me, and I immediately feel guilty. I *don’t* want this for her. But I also can’t deny that it would obviously be better than some random girl I don’t know. “Maybe I can negotiate with them on how much I am actually in the media and the length of it? Like... maybe they’ll do a trial period or something?”

“I hate that they’re putting you in this position,” I murmur, feeling the guilt take over that she’s even trying to see the positive in this shitty situation.

“If I can help you and Harley... I want to try. I’ve seen how hard this is for you both, and Lulu and I both wish there is something we could do to help. This isn’t exactly what I had in mind for helping you... but, the alternative is worse.” She then chuckles slightly. “Plus, I’ll make them pay me some big bucks. That will be nice.”

I huff out a breath of laughter, but I don’t feel it. “This is a lot to ask of you.”

“I’m not going to lie, Ezra. It makes me really nervous. This isn’t a situation I really want to be in. But... you’re also my friend and I want to help you. Maybe I can convince them to do it for just a month or two, until summer, and that will be enough to take the heat off you and Harley.”

“I would feel awful if this doesn’t work out for you...”

“Let me at least talk to them and see what they offer. And what I can negotiate. If this is what they want, then it sounds like I have the upper hand here. Best case scenario, I get to visit you guys more and the pressure is taken off Harley.” I can hear the smile in her voice, and it brings a small one to my lips as well. If it *does* work out, I guess it could be the best possible scenario. But if it doesn’t... I shake my head. I can’t go there. I have to look on the bright side.

“You’re the best, Hannah. Thank you.”

“I hope this all works out. And I’m really sorry you guys are having to go through all of this.”

I look back through the door to Harley, as he tosses in his sleep.

Yeah... me too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Harley

THIS IS A NIGHTMARE.

I sit on the bed and watch Ezra get dressed to go on a fucking *date* with his *ex-girlfriend*.

I know it's fake. It's not real, and I know Hannah and Ezra are doing this for us. But it still sucks. A lot.

“Babe?”

“Yeah?” I look up from his fingers as they button his shirt to meet his eyes.

“I was asking what you're going to do tonight?” Ezra looks back at me with his brows drawn together.

“Oh, um,” I shift on the bed to lean back against a pillow, and shrug. “I don't know.”

Ezra sighs and walks over to the edge of the bed, sitting down and taking my hand in his. “Are you going to be ok? I'm so sorry this is happening. I wish I could do something about it...”

“I know,” I say quietly. It's all completely out of our hands, and honestly, I am glad it's Hannah and not some girl we don't know who may not be understanding of mine and Ezra's relationship... and who may end up falling for him.

“I wish Lulu could have come with Hannah. Hopefully next time.” Ezra reaches up to rub his knuckles on my cheek, and I just nod.

There's a soft knock on the door, and Ezra leans in to give me a kiss before he gets up to let Hannah in. I look down and spin my ring as I hear him greet her.

"Hey, Harley." I look up to see Hannah in a yellow sundress, her soft brown hair pulled back in a high ponytail. She looks like the perfect match for my charming boyfriend.

"Hey." I try to force a smile for her. I hate that there is a tension here. But it's not between us. I love Hannah, she is a great friend to me and Ezra, and Lulu. I love hanging out with her, and I wish this visit was one where we could. We're all on edge with this situation, and I wonder if we will be for the next three months of this contract. It's only been a couple days since Anna, Val and William concocted this plan, and they were quick to get Hannah to agree and come out to Orlando so they can parade her and Ezra in front of the cameras. *Damage control.*

Hannah gives me a sad look and moves to sit on the bed where Ezra was a moment ago. "I'm so sorry, Harley. This really sucks. I wish this wasn't happening at all for you guys." She places a hand on my arm and squeezes.

"Thank you, for doing this," I say, looking up to meet her eyes. "I'm happy it's you."

"Of course, I want to help." She smiles. "Next time I'm bringing Lu. She is pissed she had to work."

I let out a little laugh. "Yeah, I've heard all about it."

Ezra comes out of the bathroom, and the sight of him dressed and ready for a date sends a dagger through my heart, as I try not to think of our date. The only one we've ever had, and maybe will ever have.

The dagger twists as my thoughts take over. Why did I have to hide us, in Ithaca, before this all started? If I had just been open, honest and not been so fucking scared, I would have had more time with him to go on dates and love him in the open. I would have held his hand while we walk down the street, kiss him and not care what anyone thought and tell him

I loved him, loud enough for the entire world to hear. Maybe the label wouldn't be hiding us now if we hadn't been hiding when we signed with them. I should have asked the hard questions then, rather than wait and see if they would be ok with it. Why did I do that... Why did I have to be so scared?

I bring my hands to my face and press my fingers to my eyes. Why did I fuck it all up?

I feel a shift on the bed and strong hands on my shoulders. I drop my hands and look up through blurry eyes to Ezra's gorgeous face. He is looking at me with concern, Hannah standing behind him with the same expression.

"What's going through your head, baby?" he asks softly, rubbing his hands on my shoulders.

I sigh and shake my head. "Everything."

He pulls me into a hug and holds me close against him. I close my eyes and focus on his touch, wishing we could stay like this all night. I don't know how I'm going to be able to let him go to leave this room.

There's a crash at the door, and Hannah rolls her eyes. "We know who that is..." she murmurs as she heads over to open it. I bury my face in Ezra's neck, breathing in his scent and trying not to let my emotion take over.

"I have intel!" we hear Ollie's voice at the door as Hannah opens it for him.

"On what?" Hannah asks.

I move to pull back from Ezra, but he hangs on tight for a moment longer. When he releases me, he cups my cheek with his hand, looking into my eyes. I see the same sadness that I feel staring back at me.

"Fake dating," Ollie says triumphantly. My gaze slides over Ezra's shoulder to see him holding up a book with a proud grin.

Ezra cocks an eyebrow and turns to look over his shoulder at him. "Huh?"

“My book I’m reading. It’s a fake dating trope.” Ollie opens the book and I see he has notes scribbled in it and sections are highlighted.

“I thought you were doing sports romances?” Hannah asks, peering at the cover of the book.

Ollie throws his head back on a sigh. “I was. But I got too into the sports. It was too hard to focus on the love. And I *want* to focus on the love.” He looks back down at his book. “So, when I heard we were going to be doing the fake dating trope in real life, I decided to do some research. I have notes.”

Ezra looks back at me with a smirk. Even I am intrigued about what these notes are.

“Ok, so,” he continues. “In order for this to be believable, there needs to be like, a banter between you two.” He gestures between Ezra and Hannah. “From what I gather, there is typically some sort of tension prior to the initiation of the fake relationship.” He looks between us all, then quickly back down at his book, flipping pages while muttering, “But we will just skip to the next part...”

“Um, Ollie...” Hannah tilts her head and scrunches up her face. “I’m not sure the fake dating trope is actually applicable here.”

“What, why? You are literally fake dating!” Ollie stares at her while a post-it note falls from his book, fluttering to the floor.

“Well, in the fake dating trope the two main characters end up actually falling for each other and dating for real,” Hannah says slowly.

Ollie is silent for a moment while he continues to stare back at Hannah. He then slams his book shut and throws it in the air. “Well, I can’t read this then!”

Ezra chuckles and turns back to me, while Hannah attempts to comfort Ollie, telling him he had a great effort and that we all appreciate it.

“Unfortunately, we have to head out,” Ezra says softly, just for me as he takes my hand. “Text me if you need me, ok?”

I look into his eyes and nod, holding his hand tight.

He leans in and kisses me softly, his hand moving up to the side of my face. “I love you,” he says as he rests his forehead against mine.

“I love you, too.” I swallow down the lump in my throat. Why is this *so* fucking hard. Why is everything so hard.

“I’ll be back soon,” Ezra says as he stands and it’s like he’s moving in slow motion. My mind desperately wanting to hang on to this moment and not let him leave. All I can do is nod.

“Have a good night, you guys,” Hannah says to me and Ollie as her and Ezra make their way to the door. I have to look away from them before I jump off the bed to grab Ezra and refuse to let him go. I hate that I can’t even look at them or say anything, and that’s not fair to them.

“Thanks, Hannah. See you guys later,” Ollie says for us, and as I hear the door click shut, I shut my eyes as well. *Fuck this fucking nightmare.*

I feel Ollie sit on the end of the bed. “You want to watch a movie, man? Order in some food? Chill, party?”

I open my eyes to see his big, soft brown eyes looking at me with sympathy. I shake my head. “I don’t think so. Sorry. I don’t really feel like doing anything.”

He gives me a sad look. “Callum is at the gym, he should be back soon. We can all just hang out? Whatever you want to do, or not do.”

“I think I just want to be alone.” I look down to spin my ring again. “Thanks though.”

“You sure?” I hear the sadness in Ollie’s voice, and I hate that I am bringing him down too. Which is exactly why I shouldn’t be hanging out with them tonight. It’s not fair to bring everyone else into my sadness.

“Yeah. I’ll be fine.” I look up to him and try to put a small smile on for him, but I can’t. “I’ll come over if I feel up to it later.”

Ollie presses his lips together and observes me for a moment. “Ok,” he says slowly. He stands from the bed and hesitates. “We’re here for you, Harley. Let us know if you need anything, ok?”

I nod and blink back the threat of tears. “Thanks, Ollie.”

Ollie nods, and quietly leaves the room, the door closing softly behind him. And even though it’s what I requested, I feel completely alone. I slide down the headboard so I’m laying flat on my back and stare at the ceiling.

My boyfriend is on a date, with someone else, for the world to see.

I feel a tear slide down the side of my face, and I quickly blink away the rest of them. How did this happen? How did this get to be so big and ugly? The lies, the rumours, the hiding. I *hate* it.

My mind travels back to the thoughts I had earlier. If I had done things differently at the beginning, would we be in this situation? If I *never* had to hide... would we be hidden now? If I was allowed to be gay, would everyone else be ok with it? But I’ve never been allowed to be anything that I truly am... I’ve been wrong my whole life. I am wrong.

I’ve managed to keep my dad’s words out of my head for so long, but I feel my stomach tighten and my hands go numb as I feel them, dancing at the edges of my thoughts and forcing their way in.

Worthless piece of shit.

You want to be gay, then no one will want you.

And they don’t. They’ve tried to make me fit a mould, but I couldn’t do it. I’m wrong, I’m not what they want. They’re focusing on Ezra now, because he’s perfect. And I’m a failure.

I squeeze my eyes tight and bring my hands to my head. Please, don't let him in...

Your mother would be ashamed of you.

I feel another tear escape, and I choke out a sob as I wipe it away. No, I can't let him win... please...

My phone dings, and I try to ignore it. But it dings again, so I reach over to grab it from the bedside table.

Lulu

I have a quick break at work so just checking in. How you holding up?

I drop the phone to my chest as I think on how to answer her. *Fucking terrible.* But I can't keep dragging everyone down with me.

Alright I guess

Lulu

You don't need to lie to me. Are you sitting alone in a hotel room?

Of course, nothing gets past her.

Yeah

Lulu

Why aren't you with Ollie and Callum? Ollie said they're playing video games, you could join them?

He offered. But I just want quiet

That's fair. But, please don't withdraw... you don't have to be alone. I have to get back to work but text me if you need to and I'll get it on my next break.

If you can, try getting outside to go for a walk or something. Love you, talk soon *heart emoji*

Thanks, Lu. Love you too

I set my phone down beside me on the bed and let out a large breath. I look around the quiet hotel room, my eyes landing on Ezra's bag.

You ruin everything.

"Ugh," I sit up and drop my head to my hands. "Fuck..."

I can't sit here like this for the next few hours. I get off the bed and grab a black hoodie, putting it on and pulling the hood over my head. We're in Florida, so it's too hot for a hoodie, but I don't care. I need to get out of here.

I glance at my phone on the bed and decide to leave it there. I just need to get away. I need to escape this hell hole.

As I leave the hotel, I'm greeted with a wall of heat. I lower my head and pull my hood down even more to hide my face. I don't know where I'm going, but I don't care. My feet move, taking me down the street and I keep my head down. I briefly think about Jack, Ian and the security team. They're going to be pissed I went out on my own like this and didn't tell anyone. But what does it matter... I can't seem to do anything right anyway.

I eventually look up as I reach an intersection. I look left, down the street that leads to a quiet residential area. The houses are all private, set back from the road and nestled into a hill. It looks peaceful. I let my eyes roam over one of the houses. It has a white fence surrounding it, with large trees offering privacy from the rest of the neighbourhood. It is high

up on the hill, separated from everything else, and I can't look away.

What if we never signed with Capture Music and Ezra and I could live in a place like that, with peace and quiet. Away from prying eyes and the meddling and control. If I could, right now, I would take him and escape to a house far up a mountain where no one can find us, and we just be *us*.

I tear my gaze away from the house and turn my head to the right, looking down the road that leads to the stadium we are playing at tomorrow. This path holds chaos, control and fear. An unfortunate familiarity. I refrain from looking back at the house as I continue walking, towards my fate.

As I reach the stadium, I enter the main door, keeping my hood up and my head down as I make my way through the quiet hallways. I don't know why I came in here. Why I feel like I need to punish myself. I don't want to be here.

The sounds of the crew setting up the stage echo through the hallway, so I enter the lower bowl area to look over the space that will be filled with fans tomorrow night. The stage is almost finished, and there are just a few crew members around. I'm about to turn around and head back out, when I hear guitar playing through the speakers. I look back to see who it is playing, when I realize it's me. It's a recording of when I was playing around on stage during soundcheck the other day. My eyes scan the stage and floor area, confused about where its coming from. Until I see the sound booth, and our live sound engineer, Seth, is adjusting sound levels. I watch him for a minute, as he plays around with it. He adds a sound effect to it, his head down and lost to his world. I barely register that my feet are moving, as I walk down the stairs towards him.

"Hey," I say as I approach him, and he looks up surprised. "That sounds cool."

Seth looks back down at the sound control and steps back, letting it play. "I hope you don't mind. I record all of you guys playing individually so I can start getting an idea for sound

prior to soundcheck. Makes it easier.” He glances at me again. “And I like playing around with sound when it’s quiet in here.”

“I don’t mind.” I step closer, leaning against the wall of the booth. “Is it ok if I listen?”

Seth meets my eyes with a smile spreading on his face. “Not at all.” He motions for me to enter the booth, and I step inside.

I take a moment to observe him as he works, and I realize I don’t know anything about him. We know most of the crew pretty well, as we spend so much time together. But Seth is quiet and isn’t really around much. He tends to keep to himself. He looks to be in his early to mid 20’s, and I’ve always been surprised that he is our head live sound engineer. But as I watch him work, I realize that he is brilliant. This is easy for him, and I guess that’s why he plays around with the sound as well, so he can have some fun and challenge himself.

He looks back at me, his chin length blonde hair covering most of his face. “Want to test some sounds?”

I perk up. “Really?”

“Yeah. Go grab your guitar.”

I head backstage and find our guitars on their stands. As I reach for my Gibson, my eyes land on Ezra’s red bass. I feel a pang of sadness as I let my eyes rest on it for a bit. I know he is only across town and I will have him back with me soon, but he feels so far away from me right now. In a way, it almost feels like I lost him.

I close my eyes and take a breath, trying not to lose it and let this emotion get the best of me. I just need to get through tonight. And then do this all again in a few weeks when they’ve scheduled Hannah to come back to keep up this appearance.

I grab my guitar and head back out to Seth. He hooks my guitar up to the system, and I let the feeling of it in my hands calm me. I appreciate that Seth isn’t giving me any of those

looks or asking me questions that people usually do when I am feeling anxious and in my head. It's quiet as he adjusts some knobs, and I start to feel some of the stress dissipate as we sit in silence while he gets set up.

He glances down at my pedal board by my feet. "I have some effects I can add to the amps which could sound cool with your pedals."

"Yeah?" I ask, adjusting my guitar in my lap and tapping one of my distortion pedals with my foot. I don't often use distortion as it doesn't really fit our style since it's so heavy. But we do use it a bit, and I'd like to play around with it more.

Seth's eyes follow this movement and he smiles, moving his hand to a knob on his soundboard and making some adjustments. He gives me a little nod, so I start playing around with a riff I've had in my head for a bit. And it sounds really fucking cool. Seth makes some more adjustments to alter the tone, and I let myself fall into the music. I don't even realize I'm smiling, and that the worry and sadness has slowly slipped away. I let myself move deeper into this feeling, enjoying the quiet company as I spend time with my music, finding a bit of solace here in the darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ezra

“I THINK he would really love that,” Hannah smiles at me, as we approach her hotel room door.

“Yeah,” I smile back, “I just hope we have the time before we leave Orlando. He’s never been on a rollercoaster. I love being able to share all these new experiences with him.

Hannah beams at me as she takes out her room key. “I love how much you love him.”

“Sorry, I’ve talked about him all night,” I chuckle.

“Don’t.” Hannah shakes her head. “The reason I’m even here, doing this, is for you guys. I’m here to help, and that includes listening.”

“Thanks, Han.” I wait for her to open her door. “You sure you want to hang out in here alone for the rest of the night? It’s still kind of early.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Hannah says, looking back over her shoulder as she enters her room. “Have you seen that bathtub? I’ll be reading in there for the rest of the evening before I get in my pjs and relax in that king sized bed with room service. I will be racking *up* that room bill. After all, they are paying for me and my services.”

I laugh. “Fair enough. Well, enjoy yourself. And thank you again, for everything.”

“Of course,” Hannah smiles, hand on the door. “Now go, spend the rest of the night with Harley.”

I smile as I back away from the door. “Night.”

“Good night,” Hannah says in a sing-song voice, closing the door.

I pull out my phone as I walk down the hall to mine and Harley’s room. I’ve texted him a couple times tonight to check in, but he hasn’t responded. Ollie and Callum said he decided to stay in our room alone, so I hope he is just sleeping... but I quicken my pace as worry starts to set in.

I quietly enter our room, peering around the corner to the bed and hoping to see Harley there, asleep. But it’s empty. His phone is on the middle of the bed, and as I pick it up, I see all my text notifications on the home screen. He hasn’t read any of them. How long has he been gone? My heart starts racing as I look around the room. It’s exactly how it was when I left, where is he? Is he ok?

I cross the hall and bang on Ollie and Callum’s door.

“Yo, what up!” Ollie smiles at me as he opens the door. I look past him to Callum, who’s sitting on the edge of the bed, controller in his hands as he plays a video game.

He looks over to me, and quickly stands up. “What?”

“Where’s Harley?” I ask, looking around the room.

“He’s not in your room?” Ollie asks, poking his head out into the hallway.

“No. And he left his phone.” I run a hand through my hair. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

“Shit,” Callum mutters. “We should have checked on him...”

“Hey, Ollie,” I hear Ian’s voice in the hallway.

I push past Ollie in the doorway to join Ian in the hall. “Ian, have you seen Harley?” I ask him, panic lacing my voice as I look up and down the hall.

His face falls. “No, why?”

“He’s not here and he doesn’t have his phone, I can’t find him.”

“Dammit,” Ian pulls his phone out and brings it to his ear. “Jack, where are you-”

“OH MY GOD,” Ollie exclaims loudly, and we all turn to see Harley walking down the hallway in a black hoodie with his hood up. He looks up with surprise and once he sees me, a look of relief crosses his face. *Fuck, babe, you have no idea.*

“Where were you?” I ask, my tone harsher than I intended it to be.

Harley’s eyes widen and he stops suddenly, looking back at me with fear in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, I...” I sigh.

“Let’s go in your room,” Ian gestures to our door across the hall and Harley nods, taking his key card out and opening the door.

I glance back at Callum and Ollie, who give me a nod and retreat back into their room to continue their game.

Once we’re in the room and the door is closed, Harley sits on the bed and pulls his hood down. He looks so defeated and a rush of air leaves me as I take in the sadness in him.

“Harley.” Ian leans against the desk and crosses his arms. “You can’t go out on your own and not tell anyone. What if something happened? And you didn’t even have your phone.”

“I know,” Harley mumbles as he rubs a hand over his face. “I’m sorry. I needed... to...” he shakes his head, “I don’t know.”

“Next time, let me know you want to go out. A security member will take you where you want to go, and I’ll know where you are.” Ian tilts his head as he observes him. He’s slumped over, looking down at his hands. “It’s not just because of my job. I care about you Harley, and I don’t want to see anything happen to you.”

Harley's eyes slide up to meet Ian's, and a look of uncertainty crosses his face. As if he doesn't believe him. I draw my brows together in confusion at this expression, and I'm even more confused when he just looks back down to his hands.

Ian glances at me and nods, patting my shoulder as he moves to the door. "Have a good rest of your night, boys," he says, then closes the door, leaving us alone.

I turn back to Harley who sighs and raises his eyes to meet mine. It almost seems like he's waiting for me to berate him.

"Where were you?" I ask, trying to keep my tone soft. I'm still trying to come down from such a heightened state, wondering if something happened to him.

"I went for a walk," he says quietly. "To the stadium."

"Why?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. I ended up staying for a while with Seth... it helped get my mind off... everything." He rubs a hand over his thigh and fidgets with his fingers.

I feel tension enter my body, and I stand up straighter. "Seth? Our sound engineer?"

Harley's eyes snap to mine. "Yeah."

"What were you guys doing?" I ask, a tightness in my voice I can't hide. I feel a jealousy creep in, and it's an ugly feeling.

Harley shifts his weight and looks back down to his hands. "Playing guitar. He showed me some sound effects he had worked on."

I'm silent for a moment. "And you didn't take your phone? I've been texting you. I've been thinking about you all night, worried about you, and now I come back and you're not even here. I had no idea where you were, I was so fucking worried." I can't help it as my voice rises.

Harley nods, and doesn't say anything, keeping his head down.

"Harley, talk to me," I say, uncrossing my arms, not even realizing they were crossed to begin with. He looks so dejected, and he can barely even look at me. His short answers to my questions are worrying, and it's not like him at all to just leave and not take his phone. That ugly feeling builds, and I don't even think before I ask, "Can you tell me what you and Seth talked about?" I'm desperate to know what's going through his head, but I hate how I'm sounding so accusatory.

He shakes his head. "Nothing. Just guitar and the tech setups."

"That's it?"

His eyes flash as he looks up at me. "Yeah. That's it."

We look at each other, not saying anything, and I can't stand this straining feeling between us right now. Before I can say anything, Harley speaks again.

"I just needed to escape all of this for a bit. It was nice to focus on something else for a while."

And once again, I don't even realize what I'm saying before the words are out of my mouth. "Did you need to escape me?"

Harley's hands rise to his head, and he blows out a breath. "No."

"Then what are you escaping, if you can't even talk to me about it?" I cross my arms again.

Harley doesn't say anything as he sits there, head in his hands, his hair hanging loose and covering his face. I watch him, waiting for him to explain. Why can't he talk to me? What isn't he telling me?

"I don't even know what I'm feeling," he eventually says, not lifting his head from his hands. "I feel everything, and nothing at the same time. I... I don't think I'm going to be

able to do this. I don't know how to sit by and watch you date someone else while I am hidden away because I'm a failure."

My stomach flips and I drop my arms, as I start to understand. He is feeling like he failed, and now I have to do his job. "Babe..." I sigh as I move to sit on the bed beside him.

He still doesn't lift his head. "I'm just bringing everyone down with me. This whole mess is because of me, and now you have to do this and it's all because I couldn't do what I needed to do. I'm so sorry, I did this to us, and now I'm just fucking it up even more." He looks up at me with panic. "I didn't talk to Seth about anything, I promise. He taught me about adding sound effects to amps with my pedals. I was able to forget about all of this for a while, but not about you." He turns his body to face me, and the amount of fear in his eyes is alarming. "Please, I promise. I'm so sorry, I won't do it again, I swear, I won't."

I stare back at him, overwhelmed by this response and the look on his face. His eyes are pleading, glassy with unshed tears as his body trembles. I don't even know what to say. I take a moment to let my thoughts catch up to me and take a deep breath. This tension is a result of this shitty situation, and not because of either of us. I over-reacted, and he-

"I didn't mean to make you mad," he says, cutting into my thoughts. His voice is shaky, and he turns his head away from me as he squeezes his eyes tight and shakes his head. "I hate this. I hate everything, I hate myse-"

"Don't you *ever* fucking say that," I cut him off, my voice loud. He startles and looks back at me with wide eyes. His whole body is shaking, and his breaths are hitched.

I reach out to take his hand, but he pulls it back. He looks frozen, and scared. "Hey," I move myself closer and gently reach out to pull him into me. He lets me wrap my arms around him, but he remains rigid. "I'm sorry, baby, I didn't mean to scare you," I murmur into his ear.

A sob escapes him, and he falls apart in my arms. I hold him while he cries, trembling under my touch and soaking my shirt with his tears.

I guide him backwards with me as I lay on the bed and pull him tight against my body. I let him cry, as my own tears fall as well. He fists my shirt, burying his face in my chest as the emotion he's been trying so hard to hold in all day is finally let out. "I got you," I whisper to him, running my fingers through his hair.

I think back on what he said. He feels like a failure. He thinks this is all because of him, and that he's bringing everyone down with him. I hate that he is feeling so terribly about himself, and I know these thoughts are the result of his dad. He is reliving all that trauma right now, through this situation. He is being hidden, told that everything he is doing is wrong, and that he is not accepted as who he is.

"I'm so sorry, Harley," I whisper to him as I kiss the top of his head.

He wraps his arm around me and holds onto me tight, taking in a deep breath as his sobs slow. "I am too," he chokes out.

I shake my head. "I over reacted. I let the stress of this whole thing get to me, and I got jealous. I know I don't need to be, and I'm glad you were able to find something to do tonight and get your mind off this for a bit." I turn my head to look at him, and he looks up at me. His green eyes are shining bright with his tears, and his cheeks are wet. I bring my hand up to wipe away the tears that are falling. "I think I let myself feel threatened. That you found a calm with someone else. But I should be happy about that."

Harley swallows and chokes out another sob. "I didn't. I only find calm with you. All I could think about was you."

I tilt his chin up and press my lips to his, tasting his salty tears. I've been so stuck on the fact that I need to do this for us and to take the pressure off him, but now I'm wondering if this

is even worse. I don't know what the answer is, and how we are supposed to do this.

But as I continue to hold him in my arms and his tears slow, I know that we have to.

It just really fucking sucks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ezra

“HARLEY?” I sit up in bed and frantically look around the room. *He’s not here, where is he?*

The bathroom door opens, and I’m flooded with relief. He looks up as he enters the room and I try to fix my expression so he doesn’t see the unnecessary worry.

He runs a hand through his hair, and crawls back into bed, wrapping his arms around me. I hug him back and kiss the side of his head. “Morning.”

“Morning,” he murmurs into my neck.

I gently push him back so I can look at his face. “How are you doing?”

He sighs and runs his hand up my side, as we sit in the middle of the bed. “Better now.”

I watch him for a moment as he seems to get lost in a thought. “I’m worried about you,” I say in a soft voice.

He bites his lip and nods, looking down. I place my fingers under his chin, bringing his eyes back up to mine. “We should talk about last night.” I immediately feel his muscles tighten under my touch and I shake my head. “I just want to make sure you’re ok. We’re ok, babe, I promise.”

Harley lets out a breath and his gaze slides over my shoulder as he takes a moment, and I give him time to sort out his thoughts. He eventually looks back down at his hands, but I catch the look on his face. It’s shame.

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly.

I reach up to move his hair back, so I can see him clearly. “For what?” I ask softly.

He sighs and keeps his eyes cast down. “For reacting the way I did, when I thought you were mad at me.”

I swallow hard. “Harley...” he reluctantly looks up, and I stare into his beautiful eyes. “That is absolutely nothing to feel ashamed about, and to apologize for. I get it. Emotions were high, and... I know it brought up some past feelings.” His eyes start to fill with tears, and I swallow down the lump in my throat before I continue. “Please, never feel bad for being anxious or scared.” A tear rolls down his cheek and I brush it away. I know what was going on in his head when that happened, and I don’t need to say it so he has to relive it all again. Bad things happened to him when he was shown anger. I know that he knows I would *never* hurt him, but I also know that in that moment, he was unable to control his reaction. It breaks my heart that his pain runs so deep. “You have a heavy past, and I know it will always affect you. But babe... I can’t even begin to describe how much it hurts to hear you talk so negatively about yourself.” I sniff, as let some of my feelings surface, thinking about the way he was talking last night. “Just like I said in our song... I want you to love yourself, just as much as I love you.”

He drops his forehead to my shoulder, and I hold him against me. His arms wind around my waist, and we sit there like this while I give him the time he needs to feel his feelings. He eventually takes in a deep breath and says, “I think that’s one of the reasons I was, and am, so scared to lose you.”

“Why?” I ask gently.

“Because you’re teaching me how to love myself.”

I take his shoulders and gently push him back, bringing my lips to his in a soft kiss. He falls into my touch, and I hold him even tighter. I pull my lips from his, just far enough to say, “We won’t let them win, Harley. They can never break us.”

Harley pulls back so he can meet my gaze, and I smile at the look in his eyes. A little bit of that fire is coming back. “I knew you’d like the sound of that.”

He huffs out a little laugh and smiles. I reach up and trace his lips with my thumb.

“When I was out last night.... I saw a house,” he says, lacing his fingers in mine. I tilt my head as I listen to him, loving it when he shares his thoughts so candidly. “It was up on a hill, surrounded by a fence and large trees. It was private and... perfect. At the time I was sad about it because I want that for us. I want to leave and just find a house way up on a hill or a mountain, away from everything. But...” he looks down at our hands. “The more I think about that house, I want to be happy about it. Because we can have that someday. There has to be an end to all of this, right? It has to get easier.”

I smile and nudge his knee with my elbow so he looks up at me. “I would love to live in the mountains with you.” A small smile forms on his lips and my heart soars. “And we will. All of this will end, and we will have our happily ever after. With the white picket fence, the big trees, a dog, a cat, whatever we want.”

Harley’s smile widens. “And goats.”

I laugh. “Goats?”

He shrugs, chuckling. “I always thought they were cool. Those mini ones that jump around.”

“Oh my god.” I stare back at him. “Like the goats in pyjamas?”

“Yes!” He exclaims with a bright smile.

I reach up to grasp the back of his neck, pulling him into me again and kissing him fiercely. I *love* seeing him happy and smiling, and if holding onto this dream of a house in the mountains with goats in pyjamas is what makes this happen, then we’re going to be fucking goat farmers. Harley’s hands slide up my thighs as we kiss deeper, feeling this connection between us that is now stronger than ever. It was a hard night,

and I know there will be more. I know we will continue to face hard times throughout our lives, but we can get through them and we won't let anyone break us.

I lay back on the bed, pulling Harley with me. He lays beside me, and I bring my mouth to his again, kissing him gently. I let my hand run up his side, and he shivers under my touch. My eyes trail down his body while I bring my hand down to his boxers, running my fingers along the waistband. When I look back up at him, I'm taken aback by the uncertainty in his eyes. "What's wrong?" He presses his lips together, and I see another flash of shame cross his features. "Babe, what is it?"

"I'm sorry," he breathes out and sits up. "It's not you, I'm just..." he sighs and rubs his eyes. "I'm just still not feeling great..."

I sit up with him and wrap an arm around his shoulders, pulling him into me. "It's ok," I say into his hair. "What can I do to help you feel better?"

"I don't know," he says quietly, leaning his head against my shoulder. "I'm just too in my head."

I kiss his head and hold him tightly. I want to take away all these bad feelings he has. When it's just us, he's so confident and carefree. It's breaking my heart to see him feeling unsure, especially in a space where he knows himself so well.

"I know it's not easy to be vulnerable," I say. "But I'm really proud of you for having this hard talk and working through it."

He reaches his hand out to mine and holds it, running his thumb over each of my fingers. He doesn't say anything, but he eventually pulls my hand into him and places it on his hip. I run my fingers gently over his skin, and he lifts his chin. There's a look in his eyes that takes me a moment to understand... he wants me to take control.

I let my fingers graze up his body to the side of his neck. "Will you let me take care of you?" I ask softly.

He nods, looking down at my lips. I close the gap between us, pressing a kiss to his lips. I feel the rush of air leave him as he begins to relax as my hand gently runs down his arm.

“Lay back,” I say as I bring my hand to his chest, gently pushing him backwards. He lays down, keeping his eyes on me, where I can see the anxiety and uncertainty. I lay beside him and let my hand roam over his chest. “Close your eyes, feel my touch on you.”

Harley takes in a deep breath and closes his eyes. I watch him, as I continue to rub my hand over his pecs, up his shoulder and down his arm. His features soften and his breathing deepens. “Good, baby. Just relax.” I whisper to him as I bring my lips down to his chest and kiss his skin.

A soft moan escapes him, and I smile. I glance up at his face, seeing his eyes open to look down at me.

“Uh uh,” I say through my smile. “Eyes closed. Feel my touch.” The corner of his lips twitch, and I get an idea. “Maybe you need some help with that.”

I slide off the bed and go to the closet, opening a suit bag and pulling out a tie. As I turn around, Harley’s gaze falls to the tie and immediately back up to my eyes. I drop back down onto the bed with him and run the silky tie up his arm. “Focus on how this feels...”

He closes his eyes as I rub the tie across his chest and down his abs, back up his arms and to the side of his neck. He swallows and lets out a breath. I bring the tie up to his face and across his eyes. “Is this ok?” I ask.

He nods, and I gently lift his head to wrap the tie around his eyes and tie it off. I look down at him, laying on his back in only his boxers and my tie over his eyes. I reach my fingers out to his stomach and slowly, lightly run them up his abs. Goosebumps form on his skin and I can’t help but bring my lips down to gently run across his flesh. A breath catches in his chest as I lick up his abs and blow my warm breath over him.

“What does that feel like?” I ask in a soft voice, continuing to kiss and lick up his stomach.

“Like a warmth... spreading through me,” he breathes out.

“Hm,” I hum, continuing to work my way up his abs and over his chest. When I get to his mouth, I press my lips to his and push my tongue inside. He opens for me, and I grab his wrists to bring them above his head while I straddle him. I break our kiss and look back down, letting my eyes roam over his face. Even with his gorgeous eyes covered, he is breathtaking.

“You are beautiful,” I say. His lips part as a breath escapes him. I lean down to trail kisses along his jaw. “Now you say it.”

He swallows. “Say what?”

“That you’re beautiful.”

I feel his heart beating faster, so I place a hand over it while I continue kissing along his jaw and neck. “Say it for me, baby.”

“I...” his breath catches. “I’m... beautiful...”

“Good.” I move my kisses down his neck to his chest, where my hand is over his heart. I trace my fingers over it and over the bear tattoo. “I love your heart. To be loved by you, Harley, is incredible... Your love is truly special.” I look up to his face, as he chews his bottom lip. “Say it.”

“My...” he hesitates, unsure how to continue.

“Your love is special.”

He presses his lips together before he chokes out, “My love is special.”

“You are brave.”

“I... I’m brave.”

“Mm,” I hum as I bring my lips back down to his chest, and kiss over his heart. My hands run down each of his arms,

feeling his hard muscles. I move them back over his chest and down his abs. “You are strong. You can handle anything life throws at you and come out even stronger.” I glance up at him and his head tilts down towards me, even though he can’t see. I’m silent and keep my hands still on him, waiting for him to do what he needs to do.

“I’m strong,” he says in a quiet voice. I smile, running my hands back up his body and leaning over him again, my lips hovering just over his.

“I love you,” I say against his lips. “Who do you love?”

“You,” he breathes out.

“And?”

I can feel his heart racing, but I stay quiet, waiting for him to say it.

“Myself.”

“I need to hear the whole thing, baby.”

I see a tear escape from under the blindfold and his breath catches. “I love myself.”

I bring my lips to his in a passionate kiss. His hand finds the back of my head, and I let him hold me there, wanting him to control this kiss. His heart is still racing, and I feel the tightness in his muscles. I gently reach for his hand and lift it back over his head. “Let me help you relax. Just feel my touch, focus on feeling good.”

He gives me a small nod. I run my thumb over his bottom lip. “You’re doing so good.” I gently drop my hips to his, and my mouth to his neck. He tilts his head back on a breath, his chest rising and falling as I slowly grind my hips into him and lick and suck the soft skin of his neck.

“Tell me how this feels,” I pant against him.

“Good,” he says softly. He lets out of a gentle moan as I grind into him again. “Really good.”

I lift myself off him, releasing his wrists from my grasp to crawl backwards and settle between his legs. I run my hands up his legs while watching him. He keeps his hands above his head while he breathes deeply. I bring my eyes down to his boxers and run my palm over his cock, which is just as hard as mine is.

A groan escapes him, and he adjusts his hips on the bed. I lick my lips as I grasp the waistband of his boxers, slowly pulling them down to free his cock. He bends his knees so I can slide his boxers off, and *fuck*. The sight of him naked before me, blindfolded with his hands above his head... I pull my boxers off as well, and reach down to give my dick a squeeze to release some pressure.

I let my other hand trail back up his thigh and see him release a breath. "That's it, relax."

He lets out another deep breath, and I reward him by wrapping my hand around his hard cock and slowly sliding up and down the length of him.

"Mm," he moans, tilting his head back.

I slowly pump him, varying the pressure and speed while he writhes under my touch. "Fuck," I mutter as I watch him, wrapping my other hand around my cock as well.

I lean over, bringing my mouth to his tip, and Harley gasps, "Oh god."

I moan onto him, taking him in deeper and licking up his precum.

"Oh my god," Harley moans again, as I feel him move his hips slightly. I continue to suck him and stroke myself, waking up his senses and bringing us close to the edge. But I need to be closer to him. I release him from my mouth and kiss my way up his body. I get to his lips and push my tongue past them. He immediately takes me in, sliding his tongue along mine. I feel more of him and his confidence, and less uncertainty. I break our kiss and reach up to pull the blindfold

off him. It's my turn to lose my breath, as his eyes are shining brightly back at me.

"Hi, baby," I breathe out. He brings his hands down from above his head to wrap around my back, pulling me into him. Our mouths slam together in a fierce kiss, and I grind against him. He moves his hips with me, as our cocks rub together with a friction that drives me closer and closer to ruin. I groan into him while his hands run up my back and into my hair. We're both breathing heavy, panting and grunting into each other's mouths.

I pull away from his lips. "Say it again," I pant out.

His eyes flash as he looks into mine, then to my lips. Just when I think he needs more coaxing, he says the most beautiful thing I've ever heard him say.

"I love you. I love myself. I love us."

I crash my mouth to his, unable to get close enough to him. I want all of him. I want to give all of myself to him. I reach a hand down between us, taking us both and stroking.

"Oh, fuck," he wraps his arms around me tighter, his stomach muscles contracting. His hips jerk and he grunts, shooting cum all over his abs and my hand. I watch him with my bottom lip between my teeth as I continue to stroke, and I follow him. The pressure releases and I drop my forehead to his with a moan, a wave of pleasure rolling through my body.

He continues to hold me tightly as we let our breaths catch up with us. I take in the feeling of his strong arms around me, his warm skin against mine and his breath against my neck. He eventually loosens his grip, and we both roll over so we are laying on our sides facing each other.

"I love us too," I say, looking into his bright green eyes.

He smiles and kisses me softly. His smile then falls, but the contentment in his eyes remains. "Thank you."

I place a hand on his chest. "It's all true." I snap my eyes back up to his with a smile. "Oh, and I have something else for

us to do today.” He gives me a quizzical look. “We’re going on a rollercoaster. I was able to convince Ian to allow us to have some time at Universal Studios after the fan meet and greet there this afternoon.”

Harley’s eyes widen. “I’ve never been on a rollercoaster.”

I laugh. “I know. And today, we’ll do it together.”

His eyes sparkle, and my heart feels like it’s going to explode from joy. “Which one should we do?” he asks.

“We’re going to fit in as many as we can.” I reach over to the bedside table and grab my phone. “Let’s look them up and make a plan.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Harley

AFTER WE SHOWER and get ready for the day, we make our way across the hall to Ollie and Callum's room. Hannah will be leaving this morning before we head to the fan meet and greet at Universal. They just added this event to the schedule yesterday, and originally we thought we were going to have more time to spend with her before she leaves.

Callum opens the door for us and as we enter, he places a hand on my back to stop me. "Hey," he says quietly, as Ezra heads into the room to sit with Ollie and Hannah. "Are you ok?"

My eyes follow Ezra as he sits on the couch, and I think how to answer this question. I feel some shame creeping in again, as I remember how worried they all looked last night when they couldn't find me. I look down at my feet and swallow. *Fuck, I feel bad that I made them all worry, and I didn't even say anything to them.* As I raise my eyes, and he is watching me with concern. "Sorry I left last night. I know you guys were worried, I wasn't thinking..." I shake my head, feeling disappointed with myself. And then feeling guilty that I feel disappointed in myself...

"It's ok. Really." Callum places a hand on my shoulder. "But are you ok?"

I nod slowly. "Yeah. I mean... I have some work to do. But I will be."

He squeezes my shoulder and smiles at me. "Good."

We move into the room, and Ezra opens his arm so I sit beside him on the couch. He wraps his arm around my shoulders and kisses the side of my head, while Ollie passes me a mug of coffee. I settle into the couch next to Ezra, in quiet comfort while I listen to their conversation. Hannah is sitting cross legged on one of the beds next to Ollie, talking about how great it was to stay in a luxury hotel and have some time to relax before a busy week at school. As awful as it is that we need to use her to hide, I am glad that she can find the perks in it and had a good time while she was here.

“Yeah, but we barely got to hang out,” Ollie pouts, looking down into his coffee.

Hannah turns to him, a surprised look on her face. “Ollie, we hung out for hours together yesterday afternoon when I first got here, and we have been together all morning so far.”

“Yeah I know, but... I just miss my girls,” he mutters.

Hannah pats his back and suppresses a smile. “I know, we’ll all be back together again soon.”

Callum snorts a laugh and tries to hide it by taking a drink of his coffee. Ollie looks up at him with squinted eyes.

Ezra places his mug on the coffee table, clearing his throat. “There is something we should all talk about,” he says seriously, and then looks at me.

My heart starts beating fast. “What?” I ask quietly.

His face breaks out in a huge smile. “Harley’s 20th birthday.”

“OH MY GOD.” Ollie almost drops his coffee all over the bed, and Hannah grabs it from him. He stares at me, eyes wide. “Holy shit, that’s this week!”

I huff out a laugh. “Yeah?” I look around the room at everyone, as they smile at me with excitement. “So?”

Callum chuckles and leans forward in his chair. “It’s your birthday, and a big one. We need to celebrate it.”

I shrug. “It’s not a big deal...”

“Not a big deal??” Ollie jumps off the bed. “Are you kidding me!? We need to plan... Ok...” He looks around the room, then to Callum with his arms out wide. “Callum, where’s your whiteboard when we actually need one!?” Callum shrugs one shoulder, and Ollie turns around with a huff, starting a search of the room for something to write on.

“I wish I could be here to celebrate with you, Harley,” Hannah smiles at me. “Is Lulu able to come? She mentioned something about trying to get some time off.”

I shrug and shake my head. “I don’t know, I didn’t ask her.” I glance at Ezra who is looking at me with eyebrows raised in question. “I don’t understand what the fuss is all about, it’s just another day.”

Ollie gasps and turns around from rooting around in a desk drawer. “We are all going to be the same age for almost one whole month!” We all stare back at him as he looks between us all excitedly. “Then Cal is going to be 21 next month, that will be fun, then Ezra a few weeks later in June, and me in September... Wow none of us have winter birthdays, I never realized that...” He turns back to the desk, opening and closing drawers.

Ezra shakes his head and turns back to me. “It’s not just another day. I know you’ve never really celebrated before, but we are going to this time. We’re going to celebrate *you*, babe.” He wraps his arm around my neck to pull me against him, pulling a laugh from me.

“Bowling?” Ollie asks as he stops his pacing, having given up on searching for something to write on. He squints his eyes and shakes his head. “No, that’s not it...” he starts pacing again muttering about party hats.

Callum sighs and throws a pillow at Ollie. “Sit down, Ezra probably has an idea.”

Ollie nods seriously and sits back down on the bed cross legged beside Hannah, resting his elbows on his knees and

chin in his hands, ready to hear the plan. Hannah laughs and pats his back.

“Well,” Ezra tucks my hair behind my ear and smiles. “We’re going to be in Charleston. So, I’m thinking we get a nice cottage on the beach for the night. Have a beach bonfire, play guitar, swim in the ocean...”

I smile, thinking of our perfect day we had in Miami, and how much I’ve been wanting to have that again. Getting away with the guys to a beach and leaving everything behind for night... it sounds like an amazing day.

“What do you think?” he asks me quietly.

My smile widens, and I nod.

I’m learning to love myself, and taking a day to celebrate my birthday with my family sounds like a great way to work on that.



This is overwhelming.

So much is happening here, and I am crawling out of my skin.

It’s hot, it’s loud... it’s too much.

I sigh as I rub my hand on my thigh and look around at the crowd of fans. I don’t even fully understand what this event is because I can’t even think straight. We’re standing in front of a wall with our band logo, and fans are coming up to us in a steady stream to chat and take photos. I feel like a fucking prop.

Ezra is standing away from me, next to Callum. And this time, it was on purpose. I glance at Anna, who is hovering near Ezra watching him closely. Then I glance to my left, to Stephanie, another PR assistant. They didn’t need to tell me what her role is for me to know why she showed up here

today. She's my new handler. Because I'm difficult, and too much for Anna to manage on her own.

I turn my attention back to the next fan approaching us.

"Hi!" She beams. "I love you guys so much!"

"Aw, thanks, we love you too!" Ollie slings his arm around my shoulders and places his hand on my pec. He's been very touchy with all of us today, and I think this is him putting his "divert attention" plan into motion.

We take a photo with her, and the next fan immediately approaches. I try to take a deep breath as my hands start to tingle, but the hot Florida air is not helping. I rub a hand over my face and look to my left to find some water. Stephanie shoots me a look to turn back.

"Can I just-" I start but she cuts me off.

"Your fans are here for you, all you need to do is be friendly and take photos." she points a finger to the crowd behind me, indicating I need to turn around and keep going.

I turn back around and blow out a breath. *Ok, just focus on the rollercoasters. Soon, we're going to have fun, and this will all be over.* I raise my eyes to look at the rollercoasters in the distance and breathe again. I try to look over to Ezra as well, but Anna shakes her head at me.

"Harley?"

I look down to a girl standing before me, with a confused look on her face. "Uh, yeah?"

"Can I get a photo?"

I swallow and nod, trying to smile for her. "Yeah."

She moves in beside me and wraps an arm around my waist. I immediately feel uncomfortable and want to move away from her. The noise from the park is crowding in on me and I try to shove these feelings away so I can get through this. If I could just take a break and come back in a minute after I've had a chance to calm down some, I know that would help.

As the fan moves on to take photos with the other guys, I look around for Jack or Ian. Maybe they could help me get away for just a second. But I can't see them anywhere. It's too busy here.

"Harley," Stephanie's voice cuts through my thoughts. "What are you doing?"

"I just need a break, can I please-"

"We are almost done, you can finish this and then have a break," she looks over my shoulder and nods to someone, pointing off to the distance.

I close my eyes. "Can I have some water?" I ask.

"Here." I feel a hand on my arm and open my eyes to see Jack beside me, holding out a bottle of water. I take it with a thanks and focus on the feeling of the cold in my chest as I take a drink.

"Ok, go," Stephanie motions for me to return to the chaos.

Jack takes the water from me and gives me an assessing look. I nod to him, knowing I need to just get through this and then I'll be able to spend the rest of the afternoon with Ezra, having fun.

I turn around to join the guys, Ollie with his arm around Callum, weirdly caressing his face while Callum tries to shove him off, and Ezra...

Where's Ezra? I whip my head around, but I don't see him anywhere.

As I walk back over to Callum and Ollie, I feel like I'm moving in slow motion. I don't even realize what's happening as fans come up to us for more photos, and I just let it all happen. My eyes are roaming the crowd, and my panic is rising.

What seems like both a minute and an hour later, I feel a hand on my forearm. I look down to see Callum leading me away from everything.

“What?” I ask him, not quite sure what is happening.

“We’re done,” he says to me, and stops as we reach a quiet spot. He looks at me cautiously. “Ezra had to go with Anna...”

I look up at him, my pulse thundering in my ears. “Why?”

He hesitates before he gently says, “He had to go do an interview about... him and Hannah.” He holds up his fingers in air quotations and rolls his eyes. “*Breaking news* she called it.”

I lower my head and rub my fingers over my eyes, disappointment setting in. “So, no free time today.”

“I’m sorry, man,” Callum says sadly.

I briefly entertain the thoughts that cross my mind, that they are doing what they’re not supposed to do. Touching *our* time. But I quickly shove them away. The last time I tried to fight this, it only got worse. And I can’t let it get worse than this. It *can’t* get worse than this.

I turn back to the rollercoasters and watch them rise, fall and loop around, listening to the happy screams from the people who are free to have fun.

Hopefully someday...



“Burn hot!”

But I’m not feeling it. I’m always anxious before we go on stage, but this is different. This is more.

“Three, two...”

Everything feels like it’s happening *to* me, like I’m not even a part of it. I’m just a bystander while this routine I always felt so connected to plays around me.

“Harley,” I hear Ezra’s voice, and I look over to him as we begin to rise. “Breathe, babe, you’re ok.”

I nod and take a deep breath. As we rise, I feel the warmth from the stage lights on my face, and the cheers from the crowd intensify. I breathe through it, waiting for the calm to set in, like it usually does in this familiar routine. Once I’m on stage, I’m ok. I’m home.

But it doesn’t happen.

My heart feels like it’s trying to break out of my ribcage, and I feel lightheaded as I look out into the crowd and the bright lights. I lower my head as my hands work on their own to start in on *Silhouette*. *Breathe, focus, think. This is what I do, this is what I know, this is the same as every other night.*

Except it’s not. And I don’t know what’s wrong with me. The stage is the only place I have felt comfortable since I’ve been thrust back into the dark, and now this is being taken away from me too.

This isn’t right, why do I feel like this? This is my routine, this is my safe space...

I hear Ezra’s voice through my in-ear monitors, singing the first verse of *Silhouette*. I immediately snap to attention and swear to myself. *Fuck*. I missed my cue.

I step up to my mic and glance at Ezra, who is looking back at me with so much concern in his eyes that it makes me hesitate. But I take a deep breath and sing into the mic, taking over from Ezra. I close my eyes, letting my fingers dance along my guitar strings, and try to feel the music in my soul. *This is what I do, this is what I do...*

Ezra moves closer to me, and even with my eyes closed, it helps me begin to calm. I can feel him, and he’s just what I need. As we close out the song, I turn to look at him, knowing his smile will help me center and get back into my comfortable space. But just off stage, I see Stephanie staring at me with a heat in her eyes. *Why? This is my space. Please, leave me alone.*

Ezra smiles at me anyway, and I release a breath. *Just ignore her, focus on good things, think of Ezra, think of the beach...* I bring my hands together to spin my ring as I look back out to the crowd as they cheer.

“Hello Orlando!” Callum says into his mic, and I take this opportunity to turn around and rub my hands over my face.

Ezra comes up behind me and places a hand on my back. “You ok? What’s going on?”

“I’m fine, I’m ok...” I breathe out. “Anxious.”

He draws his brows together while he looks over my face. “It’s been a stressful couple days, it’s ok to feel anxious. Just focus on the music, and look to me when you need me.” He gives me a thumbs up and smile.

I nod and adjust my guitar strap on my shoulder. He squeezes my arm before we turn back to the crowd, ready to start in on our next song. I have to keep going. We’re here for our fans, and for us. This is what we love to do, I need to do this, I *want* to do this.

As we work our way through our set list, I settle into the routine and find small moments of comfort where I can. But the panic continues to nag me, and I can’t help it when my mind wanders to those thoughts... What if none of this is fun anymore?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Harley

THIS IS the first time since this tour started that I have been relieved for a few days off from shows. Especially since they keep adding dates and we often have back to back shows. We left Orlando this morning for Tampa, where we have some studio time to record this afternoon and tomorrow morning. Then a travel day on Thursday brings us to Charleston on Friday.

I glance around the studio and take in how different it is from the one we recorded in in New York. Capture Music's studio was swanky, pristine and state of the art. We were working with the best of everything, which was awesome... but it was cold. It was a machine to impress, and pump out hits. This studio feels homey. There are comfortable couches scattered around, with skylights and wood panelled walls to make it feel warm and inviting. I scoff to myself when I think of that contrast. How at the time, in the New York studio we felt comfortable and happy. And here, in the warm and inviting studio, I feel dark and depressed.

"That sounds amazing." Ben smiles at us as Dave, our producer, finishes playing what we have recorded. So far this morning we've laid down instruments for the chorus for *Details*. "I really like the slow, intimate vibe. Different than everything else you've done, but still your sound."

Ezra smiles at me from his perch on a stool across the room, his bass in his lap. I smile back, but it's forced. *Ugh. I just can't shake this feeling.* I'm so confused. The anxiety I've

been feeling the past couple days has settled, right in the pit of my stomach, and will not budge. No matter what I try, I can't move past it. It's this ever-present feeling of doom and it has a tight hold on me. The last time I had this strong, persistent, nagging anxiety was when I lived with my father. Because I always had to be prepared for something bad to happen. Living in the unknown kept me on edge, so I learned to live in a state of fear. This is starting to feel familiar... and that is a very uneasy feeling.

And the news is quickly spreading about Hannah and Ezra, which isn't helping. I haven't seen any of the articles or photos that have been released from their organized date for a photo opportunity, and I don't want to. I can't. I can't look at anything online about any of us, but especially that. I have enough uncontrolled thoughts and doubts about myself, I don't need the opinions and views of others to fuel that even more. The only thing that's helping at all right now is holding onto Ezra's words, and the words he gave me to say to myself. But it can be really hard to say them sometimes. And to believe.

I'm aware of everyone in the room speaking, but I can't focus on them. I look down, and my eyes roam over the lotus tattoo on my arm. I bring my finger up to trace it and think of Lulu. She picked this one out for me. Overcoming hardships... I miss her. I miss simpler times, that at the time felt so complicated. If I only knew...

The couch depresses beside me, and I immediately know it's Ezra. I lean my shoulder against him, and he brings his hand up to the back of my head, running his fingers through my hair. "You look lost," he says in a low voice.

I nod and look up at him. "Yeah." I sigh. "You keep pulling me out of my head. Must be exhausting."

His brows draw together, and he shakes his head. "Of course not. I love you, so I want to help you." He takes my hand in his. "I'm sorry you're feeling so anxious, baby. I wish I could take it all away."

I lean my head against his shoulder and sigh. "Me too..."

We sit like this while Dave and Ben chat for a bit and Callum and Ollie goof around with a ball they found. Eventually, Dave turns to me. “We’re ready for you, Harley.”

I sigh and sit up. Time to lay vocals for the chorus. Ezra sits forward too and reaches across me to grab my chin, placing a kiss on my lips. I give him a half smile and he gently pushes me up, smacking my ass and earning a full smile. “There you go,” he laughs.

I make my way into the live room and slide the headphones over my ears, positioning myself in front of the mic. I feel my heart pick up its pace again, and I blow out a breath. *Why? Why is this happening?* The pins and needles work their way up my arms, and as the music starts to flow through the headphones, I feel lightheaded. The words get caught in my throat as my head tries to organize everything that is happening, and I miss my cue.

“*Fuck,*” I mutter, quickly looking up through the glass to see all eyes on me. I feel a heat rush up my neck, and I rub the back of it. “Fuck. I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok,” Dave says. “We’ll go again.”

I nod, and Ezra stands up from the couch, walking towards the glass and giving me an encouraging smile. I let my eyes linger on him for a couple beats, while the music starts in my ears again. The music we wrote together when we thought things were so terrible and wanted to fight back. And now, everything is a fucking mess. What I wouldn’t give to go back to that moment and hang on to it.

I look down at the lyrics in front of me, and the words seem to swim across the page. I shake my head and close my eyes, once again missing my cue. “Shit,” I breathe out, and take staggering breath in. I turn away from the glass and squeeze my eyes tight.

“Is everything ok with the-” Dave starts, but I quickly turn around and grab the mic, pulling it closer.

“No, it’s good. Let’s go.” I keep my eyes cast down at the lyrics, focusing on the page and waiting for the music to start so I don’t miss again.

“Ok...” Dave says with uncertainty, but the music starts.

I don’t miss this time. I sing out the first few lines of the words I wrote for Ezra and I, but I hear the weakness in my voice. I’m raspy and shaky, fighting the emotion that desperately wants to come out.

*It’s what you do when you touch me
Calm me, love me, we’re meant to be
Secrets that are just for us*

That last word, my voice catches, and I stop, raising my hands to the booth walls on either side of me and lowering my head to look at my feet. *Don’t. Not here...*

The studio is quiet, as no one says anything. My breath feels like it’s getting away from me, and I can’t make myself look up or move.

I hear movement, and then feel Ezra’s hand on my arm. I lower it and fall into his touch. His strong arms wrap around me, and I let him just hold me. At this moment, I don’t care that Ben and Dave are watching. This just feels good.

Eventually I hear footsteps and raise my eyes over Ezra’s shoulder to see Ben approaching us. He tilts his head, observing me. “Let’s talk,” he says gently.

I nod, and Ezra guides me over to one of the couches in the live room, behind the mic. I notice Dave quietly head out of the studio, and Callum and Ollie stay in the control room.

Ben sits on an ottoman across from the couch where Ezra and I are sitting. “So... I take it things aren’t going so well.”

I lean forward and place my face in my hands.

Ezra sighs and places his hand on my knee. “No. They aren’t,” he says. “We wrote this song as our way of fighting back a bit. It’s about us... and a way we can show the world that we love each other. I think with everything that’s been going on, Harley is finding it a bit hard to sing.”

I nod and sit back on the couch. “I’m just...” I sigh. “It’s all just getting to me.”

“We’ve been separated more lately, and Harley...” Ezra peers into my eyes, seeming to ask permission to share this. I nod to him. “Harley is feeling really anxious. I’ve been helping him manage it all, but the more time we spend apart, and with all of this... shit going on, it’s all building.”

Ben’s eyes slide to me, and I see the openness he’s always had with us. He’s listening without judgement and *wants* to hear all of this. I feel like I can be completely honest, and I decide I should be.

“I have always been anxious. I never wanted to be in the spotlight like this. I love music, I want to play music. I love our fans and what we do, but the rest of it is too much. The only way I can do any of this is because I have Ezra with me.” I turn my head to Ezra. “I know I shouldn’t have to rely so much on my boyfriend to just function...” I shift in my seat, “but it’s all happening so fast that I can’t even think, and the anxiety just takes over...” I feel the tension enter my body again as the overwhelming feelings surface.

Ezra squeezes my leg. “It’s alright.”

Ben looks between us while he seems to think for a moment. “I’m sorry guys. I wish I could be here more to support with all of this. But even then, Val has made it crystal clear to Holly and I that anything falling under publicity is her teams domain. And William is watching us all carefully to ensure we stay in our lanes.” He stops and seems to think how to proceed. “I’ll be honest, he is making a lot of money and gaining a lot of attention from Send Help, and he’s a greedy fucking bastard. He is determined to milk this fandom for all they are worth, and unfortunately, he believes that this image

him and Val have created of this band is what is going to do that.”

I lower my head, and nod. I know he wants to help, but I also know his hands are tied. How do you argue something like this with the director of the music label?

“But,” Ben continues, “it sounds like, once again, Val and her little posse are pushing into areas they shouldn’t be.”

Ezra nods and sighs. “Problem is, any time we try to argue that, they find ways to take more from us.”

“Of course they do,” Ben murmurs.

And in perfect fucking timing that almost makes me laugh, the door to the studio opens and in walks Anna, her face buried in her phone as usual. When she looks up, she stops with a flash of panic on her face.

“Ben, hi.” She glances behind her to the door, and it looks like she wants to leave. “I didn’t realize you would be here.”

“Hi, Anna,” Ben says, staying seated on the ottoman. “Yes, I take a keen interest in my artists and like to be here to support them when I can. Within the scope of my job, of course,” he adds with a smile.

Anna presses her lips together as she shifts her eyes between me, Ezra and Ben. “I can come back-”

“Don’t be silly,” Ben cuts in, still smiling. “We’re all here now, let’s hear it.”

She hesitantly steps forward, fidgeting with her phone in her hand. Ezra keeps his hand on my knee and I’m thankful for that, because I want to get up and run away. Anna coming to talk to us unannounced is never good news. And of course, it’s unannounced because she knows now that she can. Because if I say no, Val and William come. And then things get even worse.

Callum and Ollie make their way into the live room as well, and grab chairs beside us. I glance at them and give them

a small smile, appreciating the support. Callum nods to me, and Ollie smiles back.

Anna stays standing and crosses her arms. “Val asked me to speak to you,” she says, looking at me and Ezra. I drop my head back down to my hands. *What the fuck did we do this time?* “She isn’t happy with the social media attention after last night’s concert.”

“Why?” Ben asks.

“People have noticed you were off last night, Harley. Missing lyrics, barely interacting with the crowd. And Ezra, your attention was purely on him.” I look up at her to see her glaring at us. “There are a lot of questions floating around about why this is, and linking it to the news breaking of you and Hannah.”

“So?” Ben asks shrugging one shoulder. Ollie snaps his fingers and points at Ben, looking to Anna for an answer.

Anna raises her eyebrows. “*So*, they are continuing to question if Harley and Ezra are together and if this is just a way to hide it, since they were both looking rather upset.”

Ben opens his hands wide in question. “It is.”

I don’t even realize I’m holding my breath while watching this interaction until Ezra nudges me. I let out my breath and keep my eyes glued on them.

Anna sighs. “Yes, but they are also aware of how they are to act in public to not draw this sort of attention to themselves.”

Ben rubs a hand over his face and stands up. “So, two bandmates can’t look at each other and smile? Talk on stage, and provide appropriate comfort to each other when emotions are high? Be human? Have emotions, because of people interfering in their relationship?” He puts his hands in his pockets and stares back at Anna. “Which they *are* hiding at Val and William’s *request*.”

She scoffs, “They aren’t simply *chatting* and smiling at each other. They are spending all their time together, touching each other in media-”

Ben points a thumb over his shoulder to Ollie. “Ollie full on groped Callum yesterday at the meet and greet.”

Ollie crosses his arms and leans back in his chair, smiling widely with a nod. “I did.” Callum shakes his head and closes his eyes.

“Are you going to have a talk with them as well?” Ben asks her.

Anna sighs and holds a hand up. “No, because they aren’t gaining media attention for obviously being in a relationship. Listen, bottom line is Val isn’t happy with the way you two are interacting in the media,” she gestures between Ezra and I, “especially now that news is out about Hannah and Ezra. You’re bringing even more attention to this when we are doing everything we can to help you hide it.”

Ben observes Anna for a moment. “Hm,” he tsks. “Well, that isn’t their fault. Seeing as you pushed for the relationship with Hannah, that ultimately gave the media and fans something more to question, did it not?” Anna narrows her gaze at Ben, and he just shrugs. “Maybe you need to rethink your marketing strategies. I can *help* you and discuss this with Val if you want. I know you’re busy, seeing how you had to bring in another PR assistant to support you in this undertaking.”

I feel like a statue as I look between Ben and Anna, unable to even feel anything right now. We’re all quiet, just waiting for her response. Ezra grips my leg tight and Ollie has his fist pressed to his open mouth, eyes flying between them.

Anna opens and closes her mouth, then huffs and shakes her head. “No need,” she says tightly. “I can fix this.” Her eyes flash to us sitting on the couch and I can’t help but recoil into Ezra’s touch.

“Great,” Ben says flatly, and turns to us, putting his back to her.

She spins on her heel and storms out of the room.

“Ben-ny,” Ollie claps his hands. “*YES!* Oh my god, I’m like, kinda turned on right now.”

Ben ignores him and looks at us. “*Details* is going to be your lead official single for this album. You say it’s a song for you, as a way to fight back and show your love to the world? Then let’s do that.” He looks at me, and the look in his eyes brings me a swell of gratitude. He really cares, and I know if he could, he would be making this all go away. He didn’t need to get involved in all of that, but he did even though he may have to pay a price for it later.

“Thank you, Ben,” I say to him.

He nods and smiles at me. He then glances between Ezra and I, seeming to get an idea. “What if you two sing the chorus together? You don’t have any other songs where you do that... it can be another little message to send to the world. Will that help, Harley?”

I smile, and my heart settles for the first time in days.

As we set up to record the chorus together, I hang on to this feeling. Because I need to find these small moments to hold on to where things may feel a bit better, and this one feels right. I’m disappointed in myself for not being able to do this the way it was planned, but both of us singing this sends a stronger message. Together, we share the truth with the world. And as we sing, my voice is stronger. Ezra makes me stronger. I know I should be able to do these things on my own... but as Ezra looks into my eyes, I know that neither of us want that.

We’re stronger together, and there is nothing wrong with that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ezra

“MY BOYS!”

I laugh as Mom wraps her arms around Harley and I, pulling our faces into hers so she can kiss our cheeks. “Hi, Mom.”

“Oh my goodness, I am so happy we could get down here while you had some time,” she smiles between us while holding our hands.

“I am too,” Harley says smiling back at her.

“Alice, let them come in,” Dad says from within their suite, and Mom steps aside with a chuckle to usher us into the living room.

Dad sets his drink down on the coffee table and walks over to us with open arms and a beaming smile. He hugs each of us with a pat on the back. “It’s great to see you both. Come on in, can I get you a drink?”

“Wow,” Harley says as he looks around the suite. “This is nice.” The big floor to ceiling windows overlook the bay, and the resort pools. Once my parents heard we were spending a couple days in Tampa to record, they decided they would come out for a vacation and to see us. Harley and I were both very excited to hear they were coming, as we could use a bit of familiarity and comfort right about now. Except their resort is nicer than where we are staying so... that’s not fair.

Dad holds out a can of lemonade for Harley and he takes it with a smile. He then holds a beer out for me, and I start to

hesitantly decline before Harley pushes me towards it. “Yeah, ok.” I laugh. *I could use a drink.*

“I wish you could stay here with us for the week,” Mom says as she sits on the couch with her wine glass, Dad taking his seat again beside her. We sit on the couch across from them, and the view of the water from here is breathtaking. “I miss having you at home, it’s so quiet now.”

Harley looks down at his lemonade in his hands and mumbles, “Yeah, I miss it too.”

I can’t help the sigh that escapes me as I also think about how much I miss home. Harley had moved in with us after we got back from New York, for about a month before we left on tour. We still had to hide, but at least at home we could do so in a quiet bubble away from control and chaos, and with love and support instead. I grab Harley’s hand and lace his fingers in mine. When I look up, my parents are both watching us with concern. They know how hard this has all been, as we talk to them often and share everything that is going on. But now they get to see it.

“Well,” Dad says, adding some brightness to his voice to lighten the mood. “How about we focus on having a great time together tonight. There are some lovely looking restaurants in the area, should we go out for dinner?”

Harley and I share a panicked look. Both of us, going out to dinner with my parents? Even though Harley is a part of this family, we can’t let anyone know that. If we’re seen, this could add more fuel to the fire. Then Val would be *pissed* that we are continuing to contribute to the theories of us being together. And I don’t want to know what she will do next if that happens.

“Or...” Mom says, setting her wine glass on the table, noticing our panicked reactions. “We have a beautiful view of the bay, with a spacious patio and dining table. Perhaps we order in from the resort and relax this evening?”

Dad quickly nods. “Wonderful idea, dear. I think that sounds like a fantastic night.”

I squeeze Harley’s hand and nod. “Thanks. We... we can’t really go out and make it look like...”

“Like what it really is.” Mom gazes at us sadly. Then she sits up straight with a bright smile. “But, we’re here with our boys again and I couldn’t be happier about that.” She claps her hands together. “So, let’s celebrate being back together.”

I smile and scoot to the edge of my seat, holding up my beer. “Yeah!” I look back at Harley and fake pout at him, motioning to my beer in the air with my eyes.

He snorts, and moves to the edge of the seat as well and holds his lemonade up, clinking it to mine. “Cheers.” He smiles.

“To having the family back together!” Dad cheers as him and Mom clink their glasses to ours.

“Um,” I tilt my head at Dad. “Emma?”

“Well, yes, obviously,” Dad sits back on the couch. “She couldn’t be here or she would be.” He takes a sip of his drink and shifts in his seat. “But don’t tell her I said that.”

Mom chuckles and gets up to call down to one of the restaurants for dinner. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Once dinner is ordered, we move out to the patio, and set ourselves up at the dining table to enjoy the sunshine. We easily fall into relaxed conversation, and I take a moment to soak it in. Dad and Harley are scrolling on Dad’s phone, and I can’t help but smile and just watch them as they talk. Plus, the sun is hitting Harley just right and he looks fucking gorgeous.

“You could do a dyna or a softail,” Harley says, pointing at the phone screen.

Dad nods. “Hm, yes I was looking at those...”

Mom whips her head around to Dad. “Daniel, I already worry about one of you on a motorcycle, there will *not* be

two.”

Dad chuckles and Harley flashes Mom an apologetic look. Dad shakes his head at Harley with a smirk, putting his phone back in his pocket. “It would be pretty fun though. Harley and I could take them upstate in the mountains.”

Harley’s eyes widen as he looks at Dad, then to Mom. And it’s fucking adorable because it looks like he is a little kid waiting to be told *yes* to something he really wants. I reach out and grab his hand, bringing it up to my mouth to kiss. He smiles at me, and my heart dances. I want to give him everything he wants in this world. He’s never had a family to show him love, and I love watching him have this experience.

“Well,” Mom says taking another sip of her wine. “If you and Harley are taking motorcycle trips then I guess Ezra, Emma and I will be taking some beach vacations.”

“And a cruise,” I say with a smile and a nudge to Harley, who rolls his eyes. He would take the motorcycle trip over a cruise any day.

“Oh, yes, even better.” Mom nods, and we all laugh.

There’s a knock at the door, and Mom sets her glass down to get up. “That’s dinner.”

Dad places a hand on her arm. “I’ll get it.” He heads through the glass sliding doors, and Harley carefully follows him with his eyes, leaning back from the doors. I lean forward a bit as well, to help block him from view.

Mom sighs and gives her head a shake. “It’s sad to see how good you are at that.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Harley mumbles.

We hear the front door close, and Mom looks through the patio doors. “They’re gone.”

Harley sits forward again, and I reach out to pull him into me for a kiss. Even when I can’t have him in a tiny moment like that, and even when he’s right beside me, I miss him.

Dad brings dinner out to the table, and we all dig in, piling our plates up full of delicious food. Even when she's not actually cooking, Mom goes all out. She ordered enough food to feed the tour crew.

"Oh my god," I mutter around a mouthful of pasta. "This is fucking delicious."

"Ezra," Mom tsks me.

"Sorry," I chuckle. "Yours is obviously better."

"That's not what I meant," Mom rolls her eyes and Dad and I laugh. I look over to Harley, who is picking at his pasta, and it looks like he hasn't really eaten any of it.

"You ok, babe?" I ask.

He gives me a tight nod and smile. But I can tell he's anxious. I glance at my parents, and the way they are watching Harley tells me they know he's struggling. He's not himself. He's been trying hard all night, and there have been moments of happiness shining through, but overall he's carrying a dark cloud.

"Harley, honey," Mom says gently. Harley looks up at her from his plate. "Do you want to talk?"

Harley furrows his brow and slowly shakes his head. "Um, I'm just... I..." he looks to me and I slide a hand on his thigh. "I've been feeling really nervous lately, it... just really gets to me sometimes." He quickly looks up at Mom and Dad. "Thank you though, for the meal. I'm sorry, I kind of lose my appetite when I'm anxious."

"Oh, sweetheart, it's ok. I'm not at all worried about dinner. I'm worried about *you*." Mom sets her fork down and tilts her head. "And it's completely understandable that you have been feeling anxious lately. You've been through a lot."

Harley swallows and looks back down at his plate, and he looks like he's thinking about what he wants to say. But he doesn't seem to be able to find the words.

I rub my hand on his thigh. “It has been a rough few days. We’ve lost some time together, and I know you need that. I need it too.”

Harley raises his eyes. “But I should be able to at least do an interview if you’re not with me. I can’t.” He shakes his head, and I see the panic in his eyes. “I’m falling deeper into this the more that happens, and now I’m just anxious all the time and I don’t get it... I can’t need you all the time to do this...” he scrunches up his face and shakes his head again.

I think back to this morning when he said something similar to Ben. That he feels like he shouldn’t have to rely on me to function. “Why do you keep saying you shouldn’t have to rely on me? You’re allowed to need me.”

Dad leans forward and rests his elbows on the table. “It’s ok, Harley, to need him. There’s nothing wrong with leaning on loved ones, and you two are in a very difficult situation. *Anyone* would be feeling anxious if they were in the position you were in, and especially someone who regularly experiences anxiety. Thrust into the spotlight with a demanding touring schedule, plus having to hide who you are and your relationship? I think you’re handling this like a fucking champ.” He glances at me and then back to Harley. “You said you don’t get it, why you’re feeling anxious all the time?”

Harley takes a shaky breath and pauses. “I think I know...”

Dad presses his lips together and nods. “Would you agree that this is all a familiar feeling for you?” he asks gently.

Harley nods, and Mom murmurs, “Oh, Harley.”

I reach up to push his hair back from his face, running my fingers through it. His green eyes find mine, and I stare into the depths of them. This beautiful soul... damaged, yet perfect.

“What are you doing to help manage this anxiety? Both of you?”

I look back at Dad and I don't really know what the answer to that is. I don't know if what I've been feeling is anxiety, but I've definitely felt stress over this entire thing. "Well, we have the hotel room at night, whenever we're not on the bus or flying. And on days off we may go out with some of the crew or the guys... or stay in the hotel if we want alone time."

Mom leans forward. "You can't just live your life locked away in a hotel room. You have to get out and have fun together, see the country you are travelling."

Harley shakes his head. "We can't. We need to go with other people, and even then they don't like us to be seen together."

Mom scoffs and picks up her wine glass, muttering, "So stupid."

Dad shrugs. "So, don't be seen."

It's my turn to scoff. "Like it's that easy."

"You have a wardrobe department and a makeup artist. Get creative." Dad smiles, and takes a drink of his beer.

"A disguise?" Harley asks, eyebrows raised.

"Why not?" Dad shrugs one shoulder, then leans forward to rest his elbows on the table. "Your mother is right. You need to have fun and enjoy this adventure you're on. I understand you're limited in what you can do, but try to take all the opportunities you can."

Harley shifts and says softly, "Everything we plan to do, they take away."

My stomach drops at the deep sadness in his voice. I think of the rollercoasters, and how disappointed we both were that we didn't get to do that. And we both really needed it.

"Well, you have tomorrow afternoon off, right?" Dad asks. Harley and I nod. "Be spontaneous. Ask Ian to help, and get out to explore Tampa together. I'm sure you can find a way to do it, and you have members of your crew who will help." He

pauses. “And we’ll help in any way we can too. I’ve been looking over your contract some more...”

“Dad, please don’t blame yourself for this, none of us saw this coming.” I feel terrible that he still feels so badly about it. But even his lawyer didn’t pick up on this in the contract. It was hidden, sneaky, and downright vile.

He holds up a hand. “It’s just something I’d like to do. If there’s a way out of this mess, I’d like to find it.”

I smile at him. “Thanks.” But inside, I know it’s pointless. There’s nothing in there that will get us out of this.

Mom’s phone starts ringing, and she picks it up to a FaceTime call from Emma. “Were you guys just not going to call me at all?” I hear her voice come through the speaker.

“Oh honey, we’re still eating,” Mom says with a chuckle, as she turns her phone around so we can all see each other.

I smile at the screen. “Hey, Em.” Harley leans in and waves at her.

“Hey guys! Ah, I wish I was there, but I have one more exam this week.” Before any of us can respond, she says, “Did you give it to him yet?”

Dad breathes out a laugh. “As we said, we are still eating.”

“Well, I have to head out soon, so...” She raises her eyebrows and I laugh. She really is going to be a great lawyer. Direct, stubborn and persuasive, what more does she need?

“Give what to who?” I ask, looking at Mom and Dad. Mom smiles and hops up, heading into the suite. I give Emma and Dad a quizzical look and Harley does the same.

Mom comes back out to the patio with a gift bag, and a surge of happiness rushes through me. I know what’s going on now, and I damn near start crying. I swallow it down and suppress my giddy smile.

“Happy Birthday, Harley!” Emma exclaims.

Harley's face falls and he looks between us all in disbelief. "What...?"

Mom sets the gift bag on the table in front of him and leans down to kiss the top of his head. "We can't be with you on the actual day, so we thought we'd give you your gift now."

Harley stares at the gift bag, and he looks frozen. "You..."

I place a hand on his back, knowing this is a lot for him. "It's because they love you, babe." He looks at me and I smile. "Open it."

He glances one more time around the table before he reaches for the bag, and I notice his hands shaking slightly. I rub my hand on his back, keeping the contact with him to help him out. He reaches in and pulls out a guitar strap. It's leather, with custom tooling along the edges that look like flames. I glance at my parents with a smile. It's the perfect gift.

Harley runs his finger over the tooling and reaches the end of the strap, where his name is etched in small letters along the bottom. "Thank you," he says softly, looking up at my parents, and to Emma.

Mom gently takes the strap from his hands and turns it over, so we're looking at the inside. Etched into the leather is *Larson*. "Perhaps it's a bit assuming, but we decided to put our last name on the inside, because you're a part of this family even though we can't tell anyone else. No one can see it but you, and we will know it's there as well. Just a little reminder that you're loved, Harley."

Harley's eyes fill with tears, and I blink back my own. Mom leans down and wraps her arms around him, and he leans into her, hugging her back. I take my hand back, giving them their moment. I look at Dad and he is watching them with love and pride.

He gets up to hug Harley as well, and Emma chimes in through the phone, "The flames were my idea!"

Harley sniff and laughs. "Thank you, Emma. I love it." He runs his fingers over *Larson* again and I'm overcome with

emotion. I reach out to pull him into me and press my lips against his. I feel him smile against me, and that is the best feeling I've had all night.

Mom and Dad settle back into their seats. "Let's finish up dinner," Mom says, smiling at Harley and me. She turns her attention to the phone. "Emma, you can catch us up on how exams are going."

Harley moves the gift bag to the floor but keeps the guitar strap in his lap. I smile as I see him keep his hand on it. *So. Fucking. Cute.*

Emma regales us all with her tales of exams and parties before she has to go, and its great dinner entertainment. The fact that she parties one night and rocks an exam the next is unfathomable. Her brain is amazing.

As the sun goes down and the night dwindles, an intense feeling of comfort washes over me. Harley is under my arm, leaning against me on the outdoor couch as we listen to Dad talk about his business and Mom continues to bustle around filling our drinks. It feels like home, and I latch onto it. I fall deep into the familiar feeling, filling my tank so I can keep going and stay strong for both of us. I need to. I can't let it empty.

And when Mom suggests we stay the night in the second bedroom, we both quickly agree. Neither of us want to leave home again quite yet.

As we head into our room, and I close the door, there is a heat and lightness in Harley's eyes. We both needed this. And we both feel ready to do what we need to do.

Let's have some fun, baby.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Harley

THE SECOND WE FINISH RECORDING, I am vibrating with excitement. And that is a feeling I haven't had in a long time. We finished what we needed to do at the studio early, and Ben let us go for the rest of the day. Which means we have the entire afternoon and evening free, and I get to spend it with Ezra. We're taking Daniel and Alice's advice, and there's a somewhat spontaneous plan in motion.

"So, what are you guys going to get up to for the rest of the day?" Callum asks us as we take the elevator up to our hotel rooms.

Ezra smiles and loops his arm around my waist. "An adventure."

Ollie looks up from his phone eyes wide with intrigue. "What kind of adventure?" He then cocks an eyebrow. "Wait, a sex adventure?"

Jack shakes his head slightly and turns away.

"No," Ezra laughs, then looks at me with eyebrows raised and a shoulder shrugged. "Well, I mean..."

"Both," I nod in agreement.

"Sick." Ollie nods and looks back down at his phone.

I laugh. "What are you guys doing?"

Callum opens his mouth to answer, but Ollie immediately looks up again. "Oh my god, so much." The elevator dings and the door opens. "Did you know there is whole games room

here? Yup, there is. And there is a pool table. So, Callum and I challenged Benny and Jack to a game of pool.”

Callum looks at him with confusion as we exit the elevator. “We did?”

Ollie nods. “Yeah. Wait, were you not there? Where were you?”

“I... don’t know?” Callum glances at Jack, who shrugs like he doesn’t know of this plan either.

“Well,” Ezra chuckles, pulling the key card out for our room. “Enjoy.”

“We will!” Ollie calls over his shoulder as they continue down the hallway towards their room, and Ezra lets us in to ours.

Not even a minute after we close the door, there’s a knock. I smile, and turn around, letting Olivia and Luna in. Olivia drops a bag on the bed and plops Luna into my arms. “Who’s first?”

I sit on the bed with Luna, as she twists her little fingers in my hair and giggles. “Ezra.”

“I still think it’s unfair that she likes you more than any of us,” Ezra pouts as he moves over to Olivia, who is opening her bag and pulling out clothes. And makeup.

“Um,” I say, shifting Luna onto the bed. “I don’t think we need makeup.”

Olivia whips around, shock on her face. “But it’s a disguise! We need to, it can completely change the shape of your face!”

“Let’s start with the clothes and then we’ll see...” Ezra says, pulling out a shirt with tiny flamingos on it and raising his eyebrows to her.

Olivia yanks it from his hand with a huff. “Fine.”

She had raided her husband’s wardrobe, as well as the wardrobe department, and she went all out. As they work

away on getting Ezra dressed and trying different looks for him, I play with Luna and enjoy the peace and joy she brings. When they're done, and he enters the room again, my jaw almost hits the floor. *Where did my sweet, adorable boyfriend go??*

He is in black ripped baggy jeans with old beat up converse – *wait are those mine?* – and a black tank with torn edges like the sleeves were ripped off. It's a far cry from his usual style of light coloured t-shirts, crew necks and faded jeans. But what really gets me, is the hair... Olivia sprayed a temporary dye on it, so it's dark, almost black, and slicked back underneath a backwards hat. He takes his dark sunglasses off and smiles at me. *Ah... There he is.*

“Shit...” I breathe out, standing up. “You look so... edgy.”

Ezra laughs and walks over to me. “That turn you on?”

I shrug one shoulder and look him up and down. “Kinda...”

“No fu- ... bleeping... in front of the baby,” Olivia says rooting in her bag. Then she looks at us with panic. “Or me.”

“Well, let's see what you do with Harley before we make that decision.” Ezra winks at me, and moves to the bed with Luna, plopping down beside her and earning himself a cute giggle. “Yesss,” Ezra fist pumps the air.

As I turn around to Olivia, she is holding up the flamingo shirt. “Oh, no-”

“Oh, yes.” She grins at me, and it looks fucking evil.

I resign to my fate and put on the clothes she hands me. By the time she is finished with me I barely recognize myself in the mirror. I'm wearing bright white converse, light blue shorts, a white button up with tiny pink flamingos all over it and my hair is in some sort of weird braided maze underneath a light blue snapback to make it look like I have short hair. And it's all topped off with *white sunglasses*. I shiver as I look back at my reflection. This is awful. But... perfect.

“Oh. My. *God.*” Ezra bursts out laughing.

“Shut up,” I murmur through a smile.

“So...?” We both turn to Olivia, who is holding up a makeup brush with an expectant smile.

“No,” Ezra and I say at the same time.

She rolls her eyes and scoffs, shoving the makeup back into her bag and slinging it over her shoulder. As she picks up Luna, ready to leave, she smiles between us. “Have fun today, babes. You deserve it.”

“Thanks, Olivia.” Ezra beams back at her. “This is perfect.”

Once she leaves, Ezra looks me up and down again, shaking his head. “So fucked...” He then snaps his eyes to mine with a smile. “Let’s go fuck with Ollie.”

A smile spreads across my face. “Poor guy will be so confused.”

We head down to the rec area, passing some tour crew members who don’t even look at us. The disguises are working, and we share a mischievous smile. This will be fun. We enter the games room, where Callum and Ollie are playing pool with Ben and Jack. I guess Ollie’s plan was a success after all.

Callum looks up at us as we approach the pool table. He’s about to look away when he does a double take. I raise my finger to my mouth in a *shh* motion and he suppresses a smile, looking to Ollie and waiting for the show.

“Hey man,” Ezra says, disguising his voice by making it deeper. “Love your music.”

Ollie turns to him and smiles. “Thanks! I’m Ollie.” He holds his hand out to shake and Ezra takes it.

“Mike,” he says.

Ollie holds his hand out to me as well. “Ryan,” I mutter, trying to mask my voice as well and not laugh. *Does he really*

not know it's us??

“Nice to meet you! You guys from Tampa?” he asks, smiling between us.

“Nope,” Ezra shakes his head, “Just visiting.”

“Ah cool, it’s really nice here,” Ollie leans against the pool table, settling in to chat with his fans. I see Ben behind him shake his head roll his eyes, while Jack simply crosses his arms with a smirk. Callum is doubled over, silently cackling. “Were you able to make it to the show in Orlando?”

“Yeah, we were there,” I say, nodding.

“Honestly though, I feel like the drumming was a little flat,” Ezra says, and I press my lips together so I don’t burst out laughing at the look of horror on Ollie’s face.

“Oh... Um, well...” Ollie looks between us, unsure what to say, which is a first.

“Yeah, and the snare drum you were using was buzzing, you may want to try a new one,” I add, and if he looked insulted before, he is downright *devastated* now. That snare drum is his “baby”.

“What... my... I...” Ollie looks back at Callum, who is still laughing his head off silently. Ezra and I take our sunglasses off and when Ollie turns his head back to us, he jumps back with a yell of surprise. “Oh my god! No! No, I don’t like it!” He waves his hands around like he is attempting to make the disguises go away.

“Dude, *how* did you not know it was us??” Ezra asks in disbelief.

“Because I never thought my *friends* would try to deceive me!” he says, looking astonished with his hand over his heart.

Callum is roaring with laughter and wiping away tears. “That was fucking great. You *introduced* yourself to them.”

Ben walks over to us and chuckles. “Love the disguise.” He holds out a set of car keys with a smirk. I take them and he

winks, turning back to the pool table and shoving Ollie towards it. “Your go.”

Before Ollie can complain anymore, we dart out of the rec room and run down the hall towards the lobby. But we stop dead in our tracks when we see Anna and Stephanie sitting at a table in the lobby having coffee. I quickly put my sunglasses back on, and Ezra does the same. They glance at us, and turn back to each other to continue their conversation. They don’t know who we are.

Ezra grins at me. “Shall we?”

I nod. “I think we shall.”

We take the table in front of us, sitting in their line of sight. They glance at us again and I give them a wave. Anna hesitantly waves back and turns to Stephanie, shrugging her shoulders and Stephanie shakes her head. They look confused. *Excellent.*

Ezra leans in, and I’m glad we’re both thinking the same thing. I grab the back of his neck and bring my mouth to his. He immediately lets his hands roam my chest as my tongue slides against his, and we fall into each other, putting on a lovely show for our handlers.

When we separate, Ezra peeks over at them. “I think they’re trying to figure it out...”

“Let’s not wait until they do,” I say, grabbing his hand and standing up. He follows me, chuckling as we make our way to the front door. But not before we spy Ian sitting at another table near the door, enjoying his coffee and a book. And the smirk on his face says he saw our little show as well.

“Be safe,” he says, bringing his eyes back down to his book. “Call me if you need anything.”

Ezra salutes him and grabs my hand again, pulling me out the front door into the warm Florida air. As we walk towards the parking lot, hand in hand, I’m overcome with a sadness. Holding his hand, kissing him, having fun... in public. I

should be happy right now, but instead I'm letting myself think about what happens when this goes away.

“No.” Ezra stops and stands in front of me. “Happy thoughts.” He takes my chin in his hand, squishing my cheeks. “This is a *fun* day. You're allowed to have fun, and everything else is going to fuck off for today, ok?”

I nod, knowing he is right. I can't focus on the negative when we finally have this day to ourselves. He smiles. “Good. Now, smile.”

I try to smile, but he's still squishing my cheeks. “I can't.” I mumble.

He drops his hand and cocks an eyebrow. I smile at him, and he reaches up to pat my cheek. “Good boy.”

Oh. No, that's not going to fly. I'm the only one that gets to say that.

“You're going to pay for that later,” I grumble as we continue our walk.

He smiles at me. “Hope so.”

As we reach the parking lot, I unlock the doors to the car Ben got for us. And he went all out. I slide into the driver's seat of the Mercedes S class and rub my hands over the steering wheel. “Damn,” I say as I look around the car. After starting up the engine, I sit back and look down at the screen.

“What?” Ezra asks, looking between the screen and me, as he buckles himself in.

“Last time I drove a car was when I got my licence, and this one has so many buttons and screens, I just need to... figure this out...” I press some buttons to try to get the air conditioning on but end up adjusting my seat instead.

“Oh my god, should you even be driving?” Ezra slaps my hand away, turning the AC on and resetting my seat.

I shrug. “I know how to drive, it's just this fancy ass car...” I put the car in drive and start to pull out of the parking

lot. “The road is the same as on a motorcycle... I can do this...”

Except Tampa traffic is fucked and we’re both on the edge of our seats and nearly sweating buckets by the time we reach our destination. “You can drive on the way back.” I say, throwing the keys at him like they’re on fire.

“Uhh... great.” He pockets the keys. Then he taps my leg. “Rollercoasters,” he says with a big smile.

My face breaks out in a massive grin as well and I straight up fucking *giggle*. “Rollercoasters.”

I look up at the entrance to Busch Gardens, and my pulse is pounding from excitement. As we get out of the car and start making our way towards the entrance, Ezra grabs my hand, and my first reaction is to look around to see if anyone can see us.

“We’re hidden, babe. No one cares, it’s just us,” he says as he squeezes my hand.

I blow out a breath and smile. *Everything else can fuck off for today.*

We make our way through the ticket kiosk, opting for the full day pass because we are going to ride every rollercoaster we can. I’ve never been on one, and don’t know when I’ll have the chance again, so I’m going to make the most of it.

As we step up to the line for the first one, I am literally bouncing on the balls of my feet. I look up as the rollercoaster loops over our head and laugh.

As I bring my head down, Ezra’s lips meet mine. He holds me against him for a few beats before he lets me go and smiles. “You’re adorable.” I feel a blush form over my cheeks, and he rubs his knuckles over the warming flesh. “Really fucking adorable.” He then snorts a laugh. “Even in a flamingo shirt and braids.”

I tilt my head back in a deep laugh, that feels *so* good. It’s like a release, and I haven’t felt this in a long time.

When we reach the front of the line, and get buckled into the rollercoaster, I am shaking from anticipation. But now that I'm in it.... I'm starting to have some doubts. "Um... Ez, do you think we should have started with something smaller?" I ask, glancing up at the loops in the track.

"No way, babe. Go big or go home." He grabs my hands and laughs. "It's completely normal to feel some nerves before it starts. Once we get going, you settle into it, and it'll be fun."

I nod my head, "Ok. If you say so...."

He didn't fucking say so.

I'm frozen in absolute terror as we're shot through the sky on a metal death trap. My stomach tightens, feeling like it is going to turn inside out and my heart might explode. I grip Ezra's hand so tight I swear I'm going to break it. Meanwhile he is laughing beside me, having the time of his life.

When it finally stops, Ezra turns to me. He is beaming, his black hair his usual mess from the intense wind. "So?"

I stare back at him, unable to form words. The seats unlock and I push it up, getting off this fucking thing as fast as I can. I slip my hat and sunglasses back on, and Ezra does the same. Once we're away from the rollercoaster I turn to him with an intense stare.

"What?" he asks through a chuckle.

"I hated it."

He bursts out laughing. Hard. And I can't help but join him.

I sigh and look around at all the crazy rides that I will *not* be able to do. "Well, now what?"

Ezra pulls me into him, wrapping his arms around my waist. "How about we just have a regular, normal, everyday type of date?"

I smile widely. "Yeah?"

"Dinner and a movie?"

Now my heart could burst for a completely different reason. “Let’s do it.”

Ezra drives us to a pub, where we order burgers and watch hockey on the big screens. We stay for hours, just talking, eating, and enjoying each other. Even though we are seated in the middle of a pub for all to see, it feels like it is just us, and no one else in this space exists. I am completely lost in him, as nothing else matters. His smile, his laugh, his hand on my knee, or his lips on mine are the only things I care about right now as I block out the rest of the world. And when we make our way to the movie theatre across the street, we pick a random movie and make out in the back row. It’s everything I could have ever wanted, and I’m happy.



“I had to shampoo my hair eight times.” Ezra comes out of the bathroom, rubbing a towel over his head, with another one wrapped around his waist.

I’m pulling at my hair, trying to undo all the tiny braids Olivia put in it. I grunt in frustration, and Ezra chuckles, coming over to stand behind me and take over. I look up at him in the mirror I’m seated in front of, and smile. His hair is back to blonde and even when it’s wet, it sticks out in every direction possible.

“Your hair looks good a little curly,” Ezra says, undoing the last braid and running his fingers through it.

“Don’t get any ideas,” I smirk at him in the mirror.

He tightens his fingers in my hair and gently pulls my head back so I’m looking up at him. Then he places a soft, perfect kiss on me. “Never. Don’t ever change a thing.”

I stare up into his blue eyes, unable to tear my gaze away. He runs a hand down my chest and leans in to kiss me again while he grabs the hem of my t shirt. He pulls it up and over

my head while he looks at me in the mirror. His hand runs over my right arm and shoulder, his eyes moving over me. “Except maybe another tattoo...”

My gaze slides up to meet his. “What are you thinking?”

He tilts his head. “Not sure. But someday, I want to pick one out for you.”

The corner of my mouth curves up. “Then I’ll pick one for you.”

“On my virgin skin?” he sniggers. “Hm. It’ll have to be a really good one...”

I stand up, turning to wrap my arms around him. “Agreed. And in the perfect spot...” I walk him backwards until the back of his knees hit the bed. He falls back, pulling me with him.

“Maybe here...” I kiss his chest and he lets out a little moan of pleasure. I trail my mouth up to his shoulder. “Or here...” I reach his neck, and smile against the soft skin. “Think you could pull this off?”

He lets out a breathy laugh. “Not a chance.”

“Hm.” I move back down his body, kissing a trail down his abs. “Thug life?” I ask, tracing an arc over his belly button with my finger.

He laughs. “Absolutely not.”

“Yeah, only Mike could pull that off...” I smirk up at him and he chuckles. I nod for him to move up the bed, and I settle between his legs. Running a hand down his leg, I murmur, “Maybe a calf piece...”

“Perhaps,” he says, watching me with desire in his eyes. I reach up and gently undo his towel, tracing my fingers on his hips and gently over his cock. I look up at him with raised eyebrows. He huffs. “Yeah fucking right.”

I smile, and lean over him, dropping my mouth to his in a deep kiss. His hands find their way to my hips, and he pulls

me down to grind against him. “Take these off,” he breathes against me as he pulls at my sweatpants.

I stand up, shoving my sweats and boxers off while he drops his hand to his hard dick and strokes. I groan at the sight and reach down to palm my cock as well. But I need to touch him, have him, devour him. I drop back onto the bed, and crawl over to where he is laying. I lower my mouth and lick the glistening bead of precum. He shivers and reaches for my cock, stroking me while I suck him into my mouth. Shifting from my hands and knees, I lay down beside him as his hands guide my hips towards his head. I lean over to take him back into my mouth, as he does the same to me.

“Oh fuck,” I groan as his hot mouth teases my crown.

He hums onto me, and I nearly arch off the bed in pleasure with the sensation. I take him back into my mouth, sliding my tongue along his length, tasting him while he tastes me. His hips rotate towards me, and I grab them, rolling onto my back so he’s on top of me.

“Fuck my throat while you suck me,” I pant, as I line his cock up with my mouth and tilt my head back.

He groans deeply as he drops his hips and slides his cock into my mouth. I open my throat for him, and he glides all the way in, as he takes me back in his mouth. The sensations are overwhelming, my hands gripping his hips hard. He sucks me while he moves his hips, fucking my mouth and my throat.

I groan as he increases his pace, both on my cock and in my mouth. I tilt my head back further to take even more of him in and I feel him tremble. He pulls his mouth off my cock as he grunts loudly. “Oh my god, fuck... yeah,” he moans again. “Yeah, just like that, baby, so good.”

I push him back and out of my mouth, looking down at him as he looks back at me. He smirks, and I shake my head at him. He knows what he’s doing. He knows he has it coming for him with that “good boy” from earlier, and now he is straight up *asking* for it.

I push him, so he rolls back onto the bed, and then onto his stomach. I move behind him and grab his hips, forcefully pulling his ass up. My hand runs down his back, then over his ass as I squeeze it hard. He looks over his shoulder and bites his lip, waiting for me to tell him, and show him, what's next.

I drop my mouth to his ass and gently bite his flesh, running my finger over his hole as he shivers in anticipation. "Good boy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ezra

HIS TONGUE GLIDES over my hole, lighting up my senses. My head drops to the bed as I groan, and I push back against his mouth. The warm softness of his tongue on my hole, the rough scratches of his stubble against my skin and the tight grip of his hands on my hips is overwhelming me in the best way possible. My whole body tingles as he licks and flicks his tongue, opening me up for him.

“Fuck you taste so good, baby,” he murmurs into my ass, and I respond with a muffled moan into the bed. He presses into me harder, deeper and the pressure causes an electric feeling to tear through me. I’m writhing and moaning while he eats my ass and I never want him to stop. Waves of pleasure roll over me as he switches between hard and soft licks and sucks, and I am desperate for even more.

He pulls away from me, but I stay put. My breathing is heavy as I wait for what I know is coming, and when I hear the sound of the lube bottle, my heart jumps in my chest. I look back over my shoulder to see him gripping his cock with one hand, the other swiping his lubed fingers over my hole. He slides his gaze up my back to meet my eyes, and my breath catches. This fierce look in his eyes is so intense, I just stare at him. I know it’s been missing, but to see it back in him now is a shock. To see just how much of him was gone. I swallow down the emotion, and just watch him, as I take in every inch of him. My eyes move down his beautiful face, his strong chest, his abs and gorgeous cock... until he pushes a finger into me, and I let out a guttural moan at the welcome intrusion.

He groans as well, and I glance back at him again to watch as he strokes his cock in time with his finger stroking the inside of my ass. If I had electricity rolling through me before, I am now lit up like a fucking Christmas tree. And his cock hasn't even touched my ass yet.

I meet his eyes again and he smirks. He knows what I want him to do. I'm fucking desperate for it. I *need* him to show me how strong he is, for him to tell me what he likes, wants, needs... to tell me what I need.

He leans down and gently bites the flesh of my ass again, pushing a second finger into me. His eyes dart back to mine. "You're doing so well for me, baby."

A warmth runs through me, and I close my eyes as I push my ass back so he fingers me deeper. "More."

He chuckles. "Greedy..." he stops moving his fingers in me. "What do you say?"

My eyes fly open, and I immediately pant out, "Please."

"Mm," he adjusts himself behind me and continues to finger my ass, deeper and harder. I moan loudly and grip the sheets by my head. "Fuck, this ass is perfect. Your tight hole drives me fucking wild."

"Oh my god," I groan. My cock is leaking, and throbbing as he works my ass, and his mouth is driving *me* wild. And I want even more. Yeah I'm greedy, and I don't fucking care. "Please baby, please fuck me," I groan.

He pulls his fingers out of me and rolls me over onto my back. He looks down at my weeping cock and groans, dropping his mouth to lick up my mess. "You taste incredible."

He's going to make me come before he's even inside me. My heart is thrashing and my dick is so hard it hurts. "Please," I whimper, and look down at him between my legs.

He takes his bottom lip between his teeth and runs his hands over my body, like he can't believe it's real. I watch him, letting him have this moment. His hair falls in a mess

around his shoulders, and a strand falls forward over his eye. His green eyes are bright, and his tattoos flex with his muscles as his hands roam my body. A sudden surge of recognition rolls through me, and I realize that this is the first time in a while I have truly seen him look so... alive. I sit up suddenly, grabbing his face and pulling him in for a kiss. His hands slide up my ribs and I melt into his touch.

I kiss him deeply, full of the passion for this man I love so much. When I pull back, gasping in air, my chest heaves as I look into his eyes again. They move between mine as we both take this moment to just see each other. Love each other silently and be the strong support we both need. I lay back, pulling him down with me. I reach for the lube, and pour some onto my hand, bringing it down to stroke his cock. "Fuck me," I whisper.

He hums deep in his chest, and lifts my leg, looping his arm under my knee. He lines himself up to my hole and pushes in. The pressure is intense, and sends ripples of satisfaction through my core. I grab at him, needing all I can get, as he pushes all the way in to me and bottoms out. He breathes heavy, looking down at where we are connected. "Fuck..." he groans.

Then he pulls back slowly and slams into me. I grunt out in pleasure and grip him tight, encouraging him to fuck me even harder. And he does. He thrusts into me hard, fast and deep. We grunt and groan, our hands gripping, grasping, pulling hair and scratching skin. I watch as his abs contract with each thrust, and my hands explore the hard lines of his body.

He follows my hand with his eyes, and then he takes it in his and places it on my cock. I start pumping myself with his thrusts and *fuck*. This isn't going to last long.

"I love being so deep in your ass," Harley grunts as he watches me stroke myself. "Take it baby, moan for me. Show me how good this feels."

I throw my head back on a loud groan and drop my hand from my dick, grasping the bed sheets on either side of me.

Ho-ly fuck. “I’m... I’m gonna come...” I grunt out as he continues thrusting. The pressure in my pelvis increases and I feel the intense warmth spread throughout my entire body. This wave of pleasure that only he can bring me, and I ride it, over and over, until I come crashing down in an intense release. My cock is shooting cum all over my abs and chest, and Harley doesn’t stop. He keeps going and takes my cock in his hand to continue pumping me. He reaches around with his other arm to lift my hips up, and *what the fuck?* That wave I was riding? I’m back on it. I’m hard as a rock and tiny shocks are spreading up my spine, preparing for round two.

“Oh my god,” I pant as I grab Harley’s arm in a bruising grip.

“You’re going to come for me again,” he says in a husky voice, as his eyes roam over my cum stained abs and chest.

I swallow hard and nod, as that’s all I can do right now.

Harley glances at the window, and then back to me. He stops his thrusting and pulls out of me, hopping off the bed.

“What?” I ask, breathless.

He holds out a hand for me and I take it, unsteady on my feet as I stand with him. He walks me over to the floor length window, which overlooks the city. We’re high up in the hotel, and the view is breathtaking.

He pushes me up to the window, and I place my hands against it. He wraps his arm around my waist to grasp my cock and slowly stroke, leaning in with a low voice in my ear, “Let them see.”

I tilt my head back and he meets my lips with his. He pushes his tongue into my mouth, as he continues to stroke me. I’m already sensitive from coming once, and my dick is begging to come again. Now that he wants to fuck me against a window, overlooking the city? I’m trying really fucking hard to contain myself.

He breaks our kiss and reaches down to grasp his cock, sliding it back into my ass. I immediately feel the pressure

building again, and I'm ready to explode. "Harley, oh my god..." I breathe out, my arms trembling as I push my hands against the glass.

"Fuck, you feel so good," he mutters against my shoulder, as he wraps his other arm around my waist and starts thrusting into me again.

I drop my head, breathing heavy as I try to hold out a little longer. But I am so close. I look down at the tiny cars in the streets below, and the lights in all the buildings around us. Even though we are so high up, and far enough away that it's doubtful anyone can see us, there is an intense excitement of even the possibility that we could be seen. And I don't think I can hold it in anymore. "I need to come," I groan as I reach a hand behind me and grasp the back of Harley's neck.

He presses his lips to my neck and holds me against him tighter. "Come, baby."

My muscles all shake and tremble as I come again, my knees buckling and my cock pulsing in Harley's grip, as I shoot cum all over the window. Harley holds me up against him and I feel his movements stutter as he groans into my neck while he comes in my ass.

I lean my head back against his, and we stand there panting, while he holds me up. He kisses my shoulder gently and carefully turns me around to face him. I stare into the warmth and love in his eyes, and smile.

We're back, baby.



"Maybe it's my new superpower," I say, and take a sip of my coffee, smirking at Harley.

He scrunches up his nose and smiles. "Well, I'm jealous of your superpower." He sets his coffee down on the bedside table. "But it's actually great for me too, because I can fuck

you for longer and just keep making you come...” He lifts the blankets and ducks his head under, scooting down the bed.

I laugh, lifting my coffee up in the air. “Ok, now I’m really loving this.”

He moves under the blankets between my legs, and I feel him bite the inside of my thigh. “Ow!” I laugh and I hear his cute, muffled laugh from under the covers. His hands start to roam up my thigh and I reach over to set my coffee on the table beside me.

I widen my legs and settle back as I feel his lips on the inside of my thigh again, this time in a slow, gentle kiss, working his way up, and up...

A buzzing sound comes from Harley’s side of the bed, and I look over to see his phone lighting up on the bedside table with a phone call. “Babe, your phone,” I say, hoping he chooses to ignore it.

“I don’t care,” I hear his voice, and feel his breath against my skin. I smile, as he continues working his way up to where I am patiently waiting for him. But almost as soon as his phone stops buzzing, it starts again. He makes a little noise of frustration, but still doesn’t move to answer it. I hesitantly look over to it, wondering who could be persistently calling him this early in the morning. By the third call, he grunts in annoyance and whips the covers back, crawling over to it and picking it up. He freezes.

“What?” I ask, sitting up.

He turns the phone towards me. It’s Anna.

I sigh and rub a hand over my face. “We’re travelling today, so I’m not sure what she would need... maybe just answer it and hopefully she’ll fuck off once she gets to say what she wants to.”

He nods, worry creeping into his eyes. He slides a thumb over his phone and brings it to his ear, sitting against the headboard beside me. “Hi, Anna.”

I hear Anna's voice come through the speaker, but I can't make out what she's saying. I carefully watch Harley's face, and my heartbeat picks up as a look of devastation sets in.

"No, you never told me it was—"

I hear her voice again, increasing in volume and I can feel the tension pouring off of Harley. I place a hand on his thigh and squeeze.

"This afternoon? With who?" His eyes widen. "I can't go alone."

I furrow my brow as I watch him, and I can sense his panic rising. *What is she saying?* I motion to him for his phone, and he passes it to me. I hit speaker and hold it out in front of both of us.

"-keep facing this issue. This is something that was discussed with you, and you agreed to. You will be going, and that's final."

"Anna, it's Ezra. Harley's still here, but what is this about?"

A heavy sigh comes through the speaker. "The premiere."

I close my eyes as realization sets in. I forgot all about this. The movie premiere they wanted to send Harley to, to ignite rumours of him and Everly Jones. After they decided to start with Hannah and I instead, they had made Harley agree to attend the premiere if they were to lay off the rumours of him. But at that point in the meeting, he couldn't hear them. So he has no idea what she is talking about right now...

"Anna, can you just... run through the plan for us please? I... I didn't realize it was tonight. I don't think we knew the date..." I am scrambling, trying to figure out how to do this and keep Harley from spiralling.

Another big sigh comes through the phone. "Like I said to *Harley*," she says, "the premiere is tonight, in LA. He will be flying out this afternoon and staying overnight there, flying

back tomorrow afternoon to Charleston where the rest of you will be.”

“Ok...” I try to wrap my head around this. Did I forget something? Why are we just hearing about this now for the first time? “This is kind of short notice, isn’t it?”

“No, because we discussed this in the meeting we had with Val and William, you both knew the date. And it’s on Harley’s day sheet that was sent this morning.”

I shake my head. “It’s a travel day, we shouldn’t even have a day sheet to check. And a lot happened in that meeting, I don’t think we remembered-”

“Well, that’s not my fault now is it. Harley, you’ll stay here until the driver comes to take you to the airport at 11:00. Ezra, bus leaves at 10:00,” Anna says curtly.

“I... uh...” I start to feel my own panic set in. *Fuck fuck fuck, what do I do....* “Anna, can we just... one second, please-”

“Ezra. This is Harley’s appearance, and he agreed to it. It’s a simple attendance at a premiere, then he flies back. It’s not something we need to make into a big deal. It’s simple. Just do it.” And she hangs up.

I stare at the phone, my mind still trying to catch up with everything that just happened.

And then it does.

Fuck.

I turn my head to Harley, and he is staring at the wall across from us. His hands are fidgeting in his lap and shaking.

“Harley...” I reach out and take his hand in mine. He turns to meet my eyes and the panic is palpable. *Stay calm, keep him calm... stay calm...*

He shakes his head, and his shoulders rise as he swallows hard. “No, I can’t. I can’t do that...”

I take a deep breath. “We’ll...” but I don’t know. I don’t know what to do.

My head is swirling as all the thoughts run through my head at once. He’s going to be alone, in a massive event with cameras, interviews, attention...

His birthday.

It’s tomorrow. He’s going to wake up alone and fly all afternoon to get back to us. Alone.

I swear to myself again. *Shit*. I planned it all. We have a cottage on the beach tomorrow night, it’s supposed to be the perfect birthday for him, a celebration that he deserves. I convinced him to be excited about it... and the whole time, I knew that he had this premiere to go to. But I’m so fucking confused, because I don’t remember them telling us a date. Could I have missed it because I was thinking about so much? Harley was fading beside me, they were talking to me about bringing Hannah in for a PR stunt...

I’m so in my head trying to sort this all out, that I’m jolted back to the present when Harley jumps out of my grasp.

“No, no, no,” he gets off the bed and grabs his head, whirling around to look at me. There’s so much emotion flashing through his eyes, I don’t even know where to begin. “Ezra, I can’t do this.”

I get off the bed and walk around it to him. “You can...” I say, rubbing his arms. “You can do this.” I take a deep breath again, trying to fight off my own panic. But the problem is... I know he can’t. I try to focus on how to make this work, but I can’t think straight. I need help. And I hate that I do. I’m supposed to be strong for us both. I’m supposed to be able to figure this out and handle it.

I grab a pair of sweatpants, and motion for him to sit on the bed. “Here.” I kneel and slide them up his legs, and then pull a pair on myself. “Just wait, baby, ok? I’m going to see what I can figure out...” I run a hand through my hair as I grab

my phone. My hands are shaking as I tap away at it, keeping an eye on Harley as he drops his head to his hands.

Hey, are you up? Can you come over?

I blow out a breath and sit down beside Harley, squeezing the back of his neck. He is trembling, his head still in his hands.

Callum

Yeah, once sec

A minute later, there's a knock on the door.

As I let Callum in, he takes one look at us and whips his head to me. "What's wrong?"

"Um," I glance at Harley, who stands up and walks to the window, his hands clasped behind his neck and his body rigid. "Harley has to go to the premiere tonight."

Callum draws his brows together. "That's still happening? And it's tonight? They never said anything."

I shake my head and shrug. "Yeah, I... don't know, but yes, it is." I look at Harley again, and he meets my eyes with a question. "We need your help," I say to Callum.

"Ok." He nods. "What can I do?"

I swallow. "I want to ask if I can go with him, but I know they will say no." Callum nods in understanding, seeming to know where I'm going with this.

Harley sits on the bed and blows out a breath. "He shouldn't have to go just to look after me..."

Callum immediately turns to him and shakes his head. "No, it's not like that. You're one of my best friends and I love you, so I want to support you. I don't *have* to, I *want* to."

I move to sit on the bed next to Harley as he gives Callum a sad look. "Babe... I know you don't want to go alone, and I

just want to make sure you are ok. And I know you would rather one of us be there.” *Plus knowing Callum is there will help me feel better too...*

I glance at Callum, and he is looking down at me with worry. He nods and pulls his phone out. “I’ll call Anna. One sec.”

He steps out onto the balcony, and I wrap my arm around Harley. He is trembling still, and the second the balcony door slides shut, he drops his head to my shoulder and lets out a shaky breath. He’s trying to hold it together, and it breaks my heart that in just a couple hours I have to leave him here to do this all on his own. *Fuck, I hope they let Callum go...*

We sit in silence, as I just hold him against me, waiting for Callum to come back in. The anticipation is killing me, as I think of everything else I could try to do if this doesn’t work.

When Callum comes back in, he nods. “I can go.”

A rush of air escapes me, and I kiss Harley’s head. “Good,” I breathe out.

Callum eyes me, and motions to the door with his head for me to follow him. “One sec, babe,” I say to Harley as I get up. He lays back on the bed and brings his hands to his face.

I follow Callum to the hallway, and he closes the door behind us. “So, the flight back... because it’s now two seats, she had to change the flight. We get back at 1:00 am on Saturday.”

My heart cracks right in half.

He’ll miss his entire birthday.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Harley

I STARE into the mirror and try to breathe. My suit is constricting in every way possible, and I just want to rip it off and run away. I pull at the tie around my neck, needing more air. Wardrobe and hair just left, and now that I'm alone, the reality of this is setting in. How am I supposed to walk down a red carpet for a premiere of a movie I know nothing about, answering questions about who knows what, cameras and microphones in my face...

I hear a knock, and I don't even know what I'm doing as my feet move to my hotel room door, opening it for Callum. His voice sounds far away as he enters and greets me, and I walk back into the room and sit on a chair.

"Harley?" I look up at him and he's watching me cautiously. My heart is pounding in my chest so hard it hurts, and I lift my hand up to rub over it, scrunching my face up. My head feels like it's floating, and I am being spun around in the air... like a rollercoaster.

I drop my head with a sound that feels like pain. Because it is. I'm in fucking *pain*. Everything hurts, and I can't figure out where. I can't do this tonight, there is no way I am going to be able to do this. Even with Callum there, I still need to talk, take photos, smile, be a fake version of myself for everyone else in the world to see. So that the people who make money off of me can be happy. But I'm not happy. I'm never allowed to be happy. I was teased with it, again... and now it's gone, again.

I feel hands on my shoulders and look up at Callum kneeling in front of me. His mouth is moving but I don't hear him. My pulse is roaring in my ears so loudly, it's like an amp with too much voltage, drowning everything else out and overheating to the point it can't function.

My chest feels like it's going to cave in from too much pressure. I shake my head and squeeze my eyes shut, willing it all to go away. But the thoughts keep coming in every direction, overlapping and competing for my attention.

I'm going to fail this too.

I'm going to panic in front of everyone.

I'm going to get in trouble.

You're worthless.

I feel a hand on my knee and hear Callum's voice murmuring something. *Focus, please, don't do this to him...*

"Harley?"

I open my eyes and look at the phone in front of me. Callum is holding it out between us, and Ezra's voice is coming through the speaker.

"Hey, baby, you hear me?"

I sniff and let out a big breath. My hands shake as I rub them over my thighs and nod. "Yeah."

"Good. Just breathe ok?"

Suddenly, I am overcome with guilt. I drop my head to my hands and shake my head. "*Fuck.*"

"What's wrong?"

That you even have to be on the phone with me right now... that Callum had to call you. That I can't do anything right, or on my own.

Callum doesn't say anything, but his hand on my knee tightens.

“I’m sorry,” I say into my hands, “that you have to do this.” My heart is still racing, and I feel an intense heat rising up my neck.

“I don’t know which one of us you are referring to, but I asked to be here,” Callum says. “And I’m here to help you because I want to, remember?” He reaches up to my hand and pulls it from my face, placing his phone in my palm. “Talk to Ez, I’ll be outside.”

He heads out onto the balcony, and I look down at the phone, Ezra’s name on it sending a sharp pain through my body. I need him, and right now this is closest I can get. I hit the speaker off and bring the phone to my ear.

“Don’t apologize to me either. I’m sorry you have to do this. I wish I remembered about it so we could have come up with a better plan...”

I sigh and rub a hand over my face. It’s not fair that this is all on him. That he is having to manage me and my inability to do any part of this job. “No, it’s not on you. They could have let us know.”

I hear the tightness in his voice when he agrees with me, “Yeah. They should have.” His voice softens. “You feeling better?”

No. “Yeah.”

“Don’t lie for me.”

“Ok, no.”

I hear him release a breath. “Fuck this is hard.” I’m surprised by the tone of his voice, as it sounds pained. I know he is finding this hard, and I know he is feeling this pain as well, but he never lets it show. And now I’m feeling even more guilt, knowing he does that for me.

“I’m so sorry Ezra,” I choke out. “I know you don’t want me to say that, but please just let me. I know I’m a lot. You do so much for me, and I just... I’m sorry.”

He's silent for a moment, and I hear a shaky breath. "I'll let this one slide, only because you said please." He lets out a little chuckle. And I'm surprised when I do the same. "But really, Harley, you are not a lot. And I love you. I support you because I love you, and that's also why Callum is there for you. I understand why you have these thoughts. But this is what love is. And you deserve it all, even when your brain tells you you don't."

I swallow down the lump in my throat. "I love you."

"There is nothing better in this world than hearing that from you. I love your love, babe. I'm here for it all. The good, the bad, the panic, the sadness... I promise."

I nod, even though he can't see me. "I don't know how I'm going to do this tonight. I just had a panic attack and all I did was put on a suit..."

"And that's ok. Harley, you don't need to beat yourself up for being anxious. It's ok that this is overwhelming and a lot to deal with. But we're going to get you through it, ok? You wearing your ring?"

"Yeah. Always." I look down at it and spin it with my index finger.

"Bring your phone, and I'll text you whenever I get a chance. Ollie and I have to go to an album release party of some sort tonight. I guess we needed appearances since you and Callum have one." He scoffs. "But I'll have my phone on me."

I bite my lip and fidget with my ring again. "Ok."

"I love you, and you can do this. I'm here to help, and so is Callum." His voice is now strong, and confident. And it's helping me feel a bit more capable of trying this.

"I love you too. Thank you," I say with as much confidence as I can muster up.

"I'll text you later. Bye, babe."

I take in a big breath and let it out. "Bye."

I hang up, and sit there for a second, focusing on my breath. My phone buzzes on the table beside me, and I pick it up to see Ezra's name. A small smile finds its way onto my lips, as I slide my thumb across the screen.

Ezra

Had to.

Attached to the text is a GIF of Joey and Chandler from Friends, giving a thumbs up with the words, *you got this*. I let a light laugh bubble out of me and send a text back.

It's perfect. Thank you.

I get Callum from the balcony, and then unfortunately, it's time to head out. And to make this all even better, Stephanie is riding with us on the way there. And talking non-stop.

"Harley, you should make some time to introduce yourself to Everly, she should be aware you're coming. We'll need photos of you and Callum, both together and individually. Oh, and Harley, when answering questions please keep your attention on the interviewer, you tend to let your attention wander."

I look out the window and try to breathe deeply, squeezing my hands and spinning my ring. Callum pats my knee and gives me a reassuring smile.

But as we pull up to where we will be getting out, panic takes root again. I can see the red carpet area, and it's full of people. It looks like absolute chaos.

I turn to Callum with wide eyes and my heart feels like it's just one more beat from exploding. He grabs my arm and squeezes. "I'm with you."

The door opens, light pouring into the car and overwhelming my vision. I'm frozen to the seat as I look out the open door, down the long carpet full of people and cameras.

“What are you doing, *go*,” Stephanie urges, gesturing us out the door.

Callum shoots her a look, and she gives him one right back. “You are here because we said you could be. You said you’d help him, now get him out there.”

Callum turns to me and squeezes my arm again. “Sorry, bud. Let’s go... the sooner we do this the sooner it’s over.”

I seem to move on autopilot as I get out the car, my legs moving completely on their own. People start calling our names, waving us over and taking our photos, and I feel every muscle in my body tighten. *Fuck, and we’re not even in yet.*

“Harley! Callum! This way!”

“Over here!”

“Send Help!”

My chest is heaving and I feel dizzy as the overwhelming environment closes in on me. We’re walking down the carpet, Stephanie ushering us along, and I am fighting every urge in my body right now not to turn around and run away. And never come back.

“Callum, Harley,” a woman with a microphone behind a barrier waves us over with a smile and Stephanie gestures for us to go. “Are you here to support Everly?”

I don’t say anything, and not only because I physically can’t make myself speak. But because I know that whatever I say will be taken the wrong way and used to further perpetuate this image everyone seems to have about me. I have no idea what to do, and thankfully Callum jumps in.

“We don’t actually know Everly, but this is a big premiere that we are happy to be here to support the entire cast. It’s a very anticipated movie, we’re excited about it.”

“Harley, did you know that Charlotte Verlice is here?”

My eyes whip up to hers. I see Stephanie out of the corner of my eye make some sort of motion to me. “No. I didn’t,” I

force out.

“Her and Everly are good friends,” the woman says, her eyebrows raising.

I nod. *So?*

“There may be a competition between them now, huh?”

And that’s the last I hear.

I look around the area we are standing in and feel like I’m seeing it from a different perspective. One that is not mine. I see everything from above, disconnected from this world I desperately want an escape from. And that feels... good. I feel a comforting numbness wash over me, coating me in a safe blanket to keep everything bad out. The pain is fading, and I fall further into this welcome feeling.

I move down the carpet, and the line of reporters and cameras, in a fog that only seems to thicken. I’m speaking, but I can’t hear myself. I’m walking, but I don’t feel my feet.

I sense Callum beside me the whole time, and his gentle touch on my arm, but everything else is kept at a distance. And when I’m suddenly inside a large, quiet room, the far away voices start to get closer.

“-friends, I didn’t know this was the plan, and she didn’t either.” I turn my head to the voice, and see Charlotte standing with me and Callum.

“Well apparently they don’t tell anyone anything.” Callum says to her.

I look at Charlotte with surprise as my mind seems to be feeding me the events of tonight in slow motion. We ran into her on the carpet. She said she didn’t know we were going to be here. I look behind me through the doors we just came through... are we finished?

When I look back at Callum and Charlotte, she is watching me with worry in her eyes. “You alright?”

I nod and rub a hand on the back of my neck, looking around the room. “Hm.”

Charlotte slips her hand around my elbow. “Let’s go find our seats. I’m going to sit with you guys.”

I feel like my senses are all turning back on, one by one, as we walk into the theatre. And they are on fire. I squint my eyes and rub a hand over my chest, my step stuttering. I see Charlotte and Callum share a look, and I know what that means. I’m a mess.

I let them lead me in, and we take our seats. It’s quieter in here, and the lights are dim. Once I’m seated, I involuntarily take a heavy, stuttering breath deep into my chest.

“These are so overwhelming,” Charlotte says, adjusting her long dress around her legs. “I usually can’t wait to get out of there.”

I rub my hands over my eyes. She’s trying to make me feel better about being such a wreck.

I finally find my voice, but it comes out shaky and weak. “I didn’t want to be here at all.”

Callum pats my knee in a reassuring gesture, and Charlotte gives me a sad look from my other side. “I’m sorry this is so awful for you guys. I was really hoping they were actually going to make this work for you.”

I look down, spinning my ring, and feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. I pull it out just as the lights are dimming for the movie to begin.

Ezra

We’re headed to this party now, just checking in. Haven’t heard back from you yet... everything ok?

I scroll up to see he sent a couple texts to check in, and I didn’t even see them. I close my eyes tight and shake my head slightly, trying to wake my brain up.

Movie is about to start. I don't know. I somehow got through it.

Ezra

Just sit back and try to enjoy the movie. The hard part is over, you did it. I'll check in again soon. You're doing great

I miss you

I miss you too

As I put my phone back in my pocket, my body feels heavy and sore. I feel like I just ran a marathon. My brain is both tired and wired, and the lights and sounds from the large screen are intense and jolting. I close my eyes and try to calm myself enough to watch the movie. But I can't. It's so overstimulating, and I need an escape. So I go back to that comfortable place where I'm numb, and I don't have to feel a thing.



And I'm panicking again.

Why won't this just stop.

Why won't everything just *stop*.

I throw my suit jacket on the bed and run my hands through my hair. Why does everything about tonight feel so... fake? Like I wasn't even there. I have this intense feeling of doom lurking over me that something is very wrong with this, and I can't place it. It's this heavy feeling of something, almost like regret and shame right in the pit of my stomach.

"Hey." I turn around and Callum is closing the door to my room behind him. "You want to talk?"

I swallow and press the palm of my hand to my forehead. “I don’t even know what’s happening.”

He takes off his suit jacket as well and puts it over the back of the chair. “Just start talking, we’ll figure it out.”

I observe him for a moment as he sits in the chair and waits patiently for me to sort my shit out. But I don’t and the words come out before I can even process what I’m saying. “If I could, I’d walk away from this all right now.”

He nods in understanding but doesn’t say anything.

“I’m not cut out for this. Just seven months ago I had a panic attack right before I came to meet you guys for the first time, and almost turned around before I even made it there.” I’m pacing at the edge of one of the beds. I stop once I realize that I am. But the energy is buzzing around inside of me, needing somewhere to go, so I continue. “Something as simple as meeting some guys in a garage to play music felt like the biggest thing I would ever have to do. And now... it’s too much, too fast, and it’s all lies and rumours and hiding and punishment...” I stop pacing and stare out the window. “It’s home all over again.”

My eyes slide down to meet Callum’s, and there’s an emotion there that I can’t read. He blinks and looks down, clearing his throat. When he looks back up, it’s with the determination and fierceness he always has.

“Even though you felt like you weren’t going to be able to come meet us, you did. At the time, that felt like something you couldn’t do. And you did it. And something pretty fucking great came from it.” I nod slightly and drop onto the edge of the bed.

“And I know, things really suck with how this is going. The way they are treating you guys...” he shakes his head. “You know, Harley, I knew... but I never really took the time to think about it and fully understand.” He swallows, and I can see some of that emotion work its way back into his features. It’s sadness. “I knew this was all bringing up some past

emotions for you, that you've been through this before. But I think I've recently started to realize *just* how similar it is. But on a much bigger stage, with a lot more at stake."

I drop my head with a sigh. "With no escape this time."

I hear the sadness lacing his tone, when he also sighs, "Yeah."

"I just wanted to leave home, play music, and be free." My eyes start to fill with tears. "I feel even more trapped now than I was before."

Callum gets up from his chair and sits beside me on the bed, pulling me into him for a hug. "I'm sorry, Harley. I can't even imagine what this all feels like."

I close my eyes, and tears run down my cheeks. The numbness that has been holding on to me lifts a little, and the emotions rush in like a dam has just opened. My breath hitches and Callum holds on tighter. He's giving me permission to let it out. This side of me I only ever let Ezra and Lulu see. The messy side, where emotions take over and nothing makes any sense.

I gently cry onto his shoulder, and he just continues to hug me. His calm and steady presence is comforting, and I'm thankful he's here. If I was alone, I would be in complete darkness.

I eventually pull back from him and wipe my eyes, taking in a deep breath. He tilts his head and gently asks, "I can go grab my bag, and stay in here tonight?"

I nod. "Yeah."

He squeezes my shoulder and quietly heads out of the room.

I pull my phone out and tap on Ezra's name to send a text. He is at the launch party, or whatever it is, so I don't know when he'll get this. But right now, my head is feeling somewhat clear, and all I can think about is him.

I lock my phone and get up, pulling shorts and a t-shirt from my bag. I head into the bathroom and change out of my suit. As I pull my t-shirt over my head, I look into the mirror and let my eyes roam over my face. It feels like both seconds and hours as I look at my reflection. I shake my head and squint my eyes. I don't even look real... and for some reason, that is also comforting.

I hear the door to the room open, so I head back out as Callum claims the other bed.

As I settle onto my bed, I look down at my ring on my thumb, gently spinning it and thinking of him.

I sniff, and look up at Callum. "Thanks for coming. And staying with me."

"Of course," he says sitting on the edge of his bed. He glances at the clock on the nightstand between the beds and then around the room. "Should we put a movie on for a bit? Or do you want to go right to sleep?"

I let my eyes fall to my phone again. I haven't heard back from Ezra yet. And I'm not even sure if I'll be able to sleep tonight, anyway. "Um, we can watch something." I glance at the tv and then back to him. "I... have a headache." I don't know what else to say, or what I'm even asking. I still feel foggy, and like my mind is working slower than my body.

"Ok, well, we can put something on, and just turn it off if it's too much." He turns the tv on and finds a movie as we get into our beds. He turns the brightness and the volume down, and I'm in such a weird emotional state, that just that act makes me want to cry again. As we lay in bed, the comedy movie quietly playing and Callum drifting off to sleep, my phone buzzes on the bed beside me.

Ezra

Sorry for the late reply, just getting a break now.

I love you too. So much. What are you doing now?

In bed watching a movie. Callum is falling asleep I think. I don't think I will be for a while.

I wish I was in bed with you.

I'm glad you're still awake though. Because I've been counting down the minutes.

It takes me a moment to realize what he is talking about. And as my eyes slide up to the corner of my phone screen, it changes to 12:00am

Ezra

Happy birthday baby

CHAPTER THIRTY

Ezra

I WATCH Harley as he sleeps restlessly in bed, tossing and turning. There is tension in his face and body, and I can't take my eyes off him as the worry inside me grows. The look on his face when he came back last night is haunting me. It was 3 am after a long day of travel, but it was more than being tired and jet lagged. He had an intense sadness to him, and it almost looked like he had just given up. The vacant expression on his face was alarming, and I'm desperate for him to come back to me.

I shift in my chair by the window and look over at his birthday gift that I didn't get to give him yet. It's sitting on the desk, still wrapped. A portable record player, with his mom's favourite records that I had Mom and Dad send out from his collection. It breaks my heart that he spent his entire birthday yesterday travelling. He had Callum, so he wasn't alone, but it is not at all what I had planned for him. I planned for him to be surrounded by love and celebration. I close my eyes and blow out a breath. I can't believe I didn't even get to *see* him on his birthday. When I was the one to make such a big deal out of it. Because it was supposed to be a big deal. I wanted him to be celebrated and feel special.

He tosses in bed again and makes a small pained sound. *Fuck, I wish there was something I could do about all of this...*

I haven't looked up anything about the premiere because Harley and I both agreed, from the very beginning, that we were going to stay away from news and social media related to

anything about us. We don't want the outside influence and added stress of knowing what people are saying about us, potentially adding even more negativity. We have enough of that from within our team. But seeing how he is right now... I need to know.

Callum had filled me in and said that he seemed to disappear during the event. He was absent, vacant, void. And I get a sinking feeling in my stomach, remembering how he was after the meeting with William and Val. It was scary to see, and I think that happened again.

I open my phone and type in *Harley Scott*. My pulse is pounding. I don't want to know, but I also need to. I need to know what happened, and what we are facing here. I need to know how I can help him.

My heart drops to my stomach as I see the headlines and stories that are spreading. *Fuck, fuck, fuck*. There are photos of him, looking distant, blank faced and absent. And it's what I thought... He wasn't there. He escaped. But these articles are calling it something else. *Rude, disinterested, closed off*. My eyes roam over the ugly words written about my beautiful boyfriend. They claim he snubbed Everly Jones for his suspected ex, Charlotte Verlice, and is causing a rift in their friendship. And that he doesn't care. It's all fake drama, and the media is eating it up.

With shaking hands I head into social media, needing to know if it gets better or worse. Why the fuck is this happening? This was supposed to be a simple appearance, since they had already agreed to it *for him*, and that's it. No more stories, no more pushing girls on him. That's why this thing with Hannah is happening. Are they even going to do anything about this? Or is this Val's handy work? Regardless, she will be pleased. She doesn't care that they are ruining Harley's reputation, because they like the attention and money it's apparently bringing in. But we are in this position in the first place because of our music. People come to our concerts because of our music, buy our albums because of our music. So, what exactly is this even selling? This clear obsession with

these roles they have created for us doesn't even seem to be recognized by our fans, just the media headlines. The only thing these lies are actually doing is bringing us stress, sadness and fear.

But our fans know the truth. I see it, as I scroll through posts and photos with nice words, *truthful* words, about us. There's a photo of Harley and I at one of the live acoustic events we did a couple months ago, before this all became so big and messy. I have my thumb pressed to his thigh, and he is looking down at it with a gorgeous smile. My eyes fill as I look at it, this peaceful, beautiful moment that seems like so long ago, and I wonder if we'll ever get back there. I shake my head and keep scrolling. I can't get stuck on the what ifs. Our true fans are convinced that Harley and I are together, and I need to hold on to this. I need to ignore everything else and know that the truth *is* out there, even though our own management is trying to squash it all down. And that sends another ripple of worry through me. If this plan of theirs still isn't working, and our fans still think we are together... what's next?

I hear another small sound come from Harley as he rolls over in bed. I look up, and he is sitting up in bed, eyes wide and chest heaving.

"Hey, baby," I set my phone down and move over to sit in front of him. I reach up to push his hair back, which is damp from sweat. "You ok?"

He squints his eyes and looks down, bringing his hand to his forehead with a noise of discomfort. When he looks up again, I am taken aback by his appearance. He got in so late last night, and he was so tired and off, I brought him right to bed. But looking at him now... how did I not see this sooner?

His eyes are distant, almost unseeing, as he blinks a few times. He has dark circles under his eyes, and his face seems thinner. I run my hand down his arm, and let my eyes follow. Has he lost weight?

He makes another noise and then says in a cracked, weak voice, “I have a headache.”

I swallow and bring my hand up to his head, running my fingers through his damp hair. He seems to be trying to look at me, but it’s like he can’t find my eyes. My chest is heavy, and I blink back the threat of tears.

“I’ll go get you some water.” I kiss his clammy forehead and make my way into the bathroom. With a shaking hand I grab a glass and turn the tap on. I watch the water run from the tap, and then close my eyes. A silent sob escapes me, forcefully breaking free from the confines I put it in. It’s getting harder and harder to keep this all in, and I drop my head between my shoulders as I let just a couple silent tears fall. But no more. Because I need to be strong. I can’t fall apart right now. I stand up straight and take a deep breath, wiping the tears away, and filling the glass with water.

One step at a time.



“Here’s your shirt, babe.” I pass Harley his t-shirt he’s going to be wearing on stage tonight and he takes it.

“Thanks,” he slips it on and I watch him carefully, like I have been all day. After he woke up this morning the way he did, I can’t seem to look away from him. He ended up coming around after a while, but this dark cloud is still hanging over him. I had to tell him what I saw online, since I didn’t want him to hear it from Anna or Stephanie, and he’s been quiet and withdrawn since. Now that we are at the arena, and we go on in an hour, I can sense him slipping away again. But I desperately want to keep him here.

“Hey,” I take his hand and he looks at me. His eyes are dull and sad, and the sight is destroying me. “Kiss me.”

His eyes dart around the wardrobe room, but we're alone in here. Callum and Ollie already changed, and everyone is out in the dining area.

"Please?" I ask, raising my eyebrows to try to look playful.

His eyes drop to my mouth and he nods, stepping into me. My heart rate spikes, and my hands immediately find his hips. It's like going home. His lips meet mine, and sparks ignite in me. I know he feels it too, because he presses in deeper, our grip tightening on each other. I part my lips and he does the same, our tongues gently sliding against each other. I feel him starting to come alive under my touch, but there's still so much more of him I can't reach.

We hear a sound outside the room, and he quickly pulls back from me. I immediately feel that loss and my hands follow him, refusing to let go. His eyes are brighter now, but they're filled with panic.

"I don't know what's happening," he says, the fear in his voice palpable.

I nod, and step closer to him. "I know," I slide my hand up to cup his cheek. "It's been a lot."

"Ezra," Anna comes into the room. I close my eyes and grip Harley's arm to keep him from pulling away. *Stay with me, baby.*

I sigh and open my eyes, turning my head to her. "What?"

Anna looks between us, disdain evident in her features. "Hannah is coming out tomorrow. You will do a lunch out and then she'll attend the show in Raleigh."

"What, no," I shake my head in confusion. "Her next visit is in a couple weeks. When we're in Europe."

"Yeah, well," she shrugs. "Plans have changed." She glances at Harley. "Since Harley took it upon himself to create a stir, having another sighting of you and Hannah will help with a *diversion*, which is what you want right? These stories of Harley, out of the media?"

I stare at her, seething. What the *fuck* is wrong with these people? Why are they treating our lives like this is all a game for them? Like we're not even people.

I grip Harley tighter and don't say anything, as all I can do is stare at her.

"Alright, then. Tomorrow, check your day sheet." And off she goes.

I bring my eyes back to Harley and he is looking down at his feet. "Harley." He looks up at me, and the brightness is gone. "She's wrong, you did everything right. You know how they think... we'll get through this too. Just... stay with me, ok?" His eyes flick between mine with confusion. I try to put a smile on for him, but I know it's weak. "Let's go get something to eat."

"I'm not hungry," he says shaking his head and looking around the room. "Can we just stay in here?"

"You haven't eaten all day..." I grab his hand. "Please, babe? Will you just try for me?"

He glances out the door and chews the inside of his cheek. He nods slightly, but I know he still doesn't want to.

I lead him out and into the dining area. It's still a bit busy, but the crew are starting to head out and get ready for show time. I spot Callum and Ollie and bring Harley over to them to sit. "I'll get us food," I murmur as he sits with them.

Ollie glances between us and stands up. "I will."

"Thanks, Ollie." I take a seat beside Harley and place my hand on his knee under the table. His leg is bouncing, and he's fidgeting with his ring.

"Hey, Harley," Callum says, putting his fork down and leaning his elbows on the table. "You see the highlights from the game last night? The Rangers are going to the playoffs."

Harley looks up at him, and I sense a bit of intrigue. "No, I didn't."

“Oh, man. Ok, so they were tied heading into the third...”

I internally sigh in relief and take this moment to pull my phone out. I tap on Hannah’s name and type out a message to her.

Hey, I guess they want you to come out tomorrow. I’m sorry, I know this isn’t the schedule and super late notice but I wanted to give you a heads up and you can just say no.

The three tiny dots start dancing immediately, so I keep my eyes glued to the phone while Callum continues to fill Harley in on the game.

Hannah

What? You didn’t know? They called me this morning and said you asked them to ask me. I agreed because I thought you needed me... they made it sound like you really wanted and needed this to happen.

What the fuck??

No, I had no idea. I just found out.

Ollie appears and sets a plate of food in front of me, and one in front of Harley. “Thanks,” I murmur to him, watching my phone screen as Hannah types back. Ollie sits back down beside me and whispers. “What’s going on?” I show him my phone screen for him to read.

I look up to Harley as he glances down at his plate. “Try to eat something, babe.” I take a bite of my pasta and squeeze his knee under the table.

He takes a deep breath in and out, picking up his fork and pushing a salad around his plate. Ollie nudges my arm and I look back down at my screen.

Hannah

They were adamant that I needed to come out, I've been worried that something was wrong and you couldn't talk. I was just waiting until you could call or text me. If I had known this was all them, I would have said no. I was supposed to go to a conference tomorrow...

This is getting out of control. *What. The. Fuck.*

I look up at Ollie and he is shaking his head in disbelief reading Hannah's message. His eyes slide over to Harley, and I follow his gaze to see him rubbing his forehead with his hand.

"What's wrong?" I ask. I feel Ollie take my phone from my hand, and I let him.

"Headache," he mumbles. I look down at his plate and he hasn't eaten anything yet.

"Have some water," Callum pushes his water bottle towards him. He meets my eyes, and they're filled with worry. *Yeah, me too.*

"10 minutes!" Ian calls into the room. I look up at him, and his eyes roam over us. He stops and enters the room. "Hey guys... what's going on?"

How do I even answer that? *We're being completely manipulated and controlled, I can't keep up with everything I need to, my boyfriend is falling apart at the seams, and I can't keep him together, and I don't think I'm far behind him...*

"We're just..." Ollie looks between us all and I take a moment to register the looks on Callum's and Ollie's faces as well. They also look tired. They are also worn out. I've been so caught up with Harley and myself, and Hannah, and everything, I haven't even noticed my band mates. My best friends. They are having to deal with all of this, plus the stress of tour, added dates, and the never ending number of events we have to attend. The lack of freedom, lack of privacy...

"Tired," I say, meeting Ollie's eyes. He gives me a sad smirk and I blink back the tears behind my eyes. He's always

so positive, and seeing this sadness in him is heartbreaking.

Ian sighs and nods, looking around the room. “I’m arranging a break for you guys before we head to Europe. It’s not solid yet, but hopefully you’ll have a week at home soon.”

I feel a surge of hopefulness rush through me. We all desperately need a break, and I really really fucking hope this can happen. My brain is tired, and I can’t even organize my thoughts right now to focus on everything I need to. I need Harley to eat, I need to respond to Hannah, I need to figure out what’s going on tomorrow, I need to-

“Ezra.” I’m snapped out of my thoughts by Ollie. He hands my phone back to me. “I texted Hannah for you, just focus on tonight.”

I nod, sticking my phone back in my pocket. *One step at a time...*

As we are walking down the hall to the back of the stage, Callum places a hand on my elbow. I fall back with him, as he glances towards Harley. “Is Harley going to be able to do this?”

I look at him, as he puts his in-ear monitors in and slings his guitar over his shoulder. His fingers run down the flames of his guitar strap as his eyes seem unfocused. He then squeezes his hands and looks around, like he’s on high alert and waiting for something to happen.

I bite my lip and look back to Callum. “I don’t know.”

And as Ollie pulls us into our huddle, it feels different. It feels... like none of us want to be here. I look into each of their eyes and see sorrow, exhaustion, anger, fear... it’s not right. We’re supposed to love this. We *do* love this. Being on stage, and playing our music is what we all want. But not like this...

“Burn hot, boys,” Ollie says, quietly, and without the enthusiasm he always carries with him.

“Burn hot,” we all mumble back, and I hear the crack in Harley’s voice. I hang on to him a bit longer, squeezing his arm and silently sending him all my strength.

We all try to hide it on stage and show our fans the love they deserve. Our fans, who know the truth and don’t care about this shit that our own team is spreading. They support *us* and not the lies. We are here for *them*.

But every time I look at Harley, I just want to take him away. He is not here. He is going through the motions, and doing what he needs to do, but I don’t know where he is. His eyes are blank, his voice is hollow, and I just want him back.

I’m fucking scared.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Harley

I RUB my hand over my forehead and blow out a breath, flopping down onto the couch. It's quiet. I look around our dressing room in the stadium where we're playing tonight. Our second last show until we get a week long break. It's quiet...

Lulu said she was going to call this afternoon, so I set my phone on the coffee table and lean over, placing my head in my hands. *Why won't this headache go away.*

My phone starts buzzing, so I reach out and slide my thumb over the screen to answer. "Hi, Lu," I say as I lift my head to look at my screen. But I don't see her. It's a phone call from an unknown number. I bring the phone to my ear, confused. "Hello?"

"Still talking to your failed attempt at being straight, I see."

I freeze. *No. No, no, no, no, no...*

"What, you're not going to talk to your own father?"

I swallow hard. The room is spinning, but I can't move. My body is turning numb and I can't catch my breath. I feel like I'm going to suffocate. "What... how did you get my number..." I croak out.

He laughs. "Do you know how many people work around you? You'd be amazed at what a simple bribe can do."

I press the heel of my palm to my forehead and shut my eyes. *This isn't real, this isn't real... this can't be real....*

“You know, it’s interesting to see you dating all these women... this is their way of hiding you, and what you really are, isn’t it?” He scoffs. “Told you.”

I stay silent, frozen to the spot and unable to do or say anything. My heart is beating so fast it’s like it’s not even in my chest.

“I’ve been thinking. Since you’re so successful, you should be paying me more money. You know why?” He laughs when I don’t answer. “Because you, you piece of shit, ruined my reputation. The whole town is wondering why my very successful and famous son doesn’t talk to me anymore. Why he left and never came back and refuses to even talk about me. You fucked everything up. So, you’re going to pay for it, so I can get out of this town.”

I close my eyes. *Please, no...*

“And seeing how your own team wants to hide the disgrace that you are, I bet you don’t have a leg to stand on with them. Which means you won’t be telling them I called.”

“But you signed a-”

“Like I just fucking said, you won’t be telling them I called.”

My hands are shaking, and I can barely focus. I try to think of the NDA, of everything Holly said, what this means that he’s even called. But I can’t organize my thoughts and it’s all a jumbled mess of emotion.

“You can’t...”

He laughs again. A dark, taunting laugh. The laugh I’ve heard so many times when he’s drunk and wants to fuck shit up. “There are other ways I can get you to do this for me. I may not be able to come after you, but your NDA says nothing about Ezra Larson.”

My eyes snap open. “What?”

“You think I don’t know? It’s fucking obvious.”

My body moves on its own as I stand, a rush of anger rolling through me, competing against the panic and causing a crash of intense, overwhelming sensations to ripple through my entire body. “Don’t ever say his name,” I say with a shaky, weak voice.

He sniggers. “Then pay me my fucking money.”

He hangs up.

And my world comes crashing down around me.



My phone buzzes and I look down to see Lulu video calling me. I look around our dressing room. I’m alone in here. I sit up on the couch and slide my thumb across to answer. “Hi.” My voice sounds distant and raspy. I shake my head to try to wake up.

“What? What’s wrong?” She asks, concern lacing her tone.

I shake my head and rub my eyes. “What?”

She tilts her head, observing me through the screen. “I called you four times until you picked up... did you forget?”

Shit. “No, um, sorry, I was just... lost track of time.” I look around the room again and feel the recent memories start making their way back in.

She adjusts herself in her seat and gets closer to the screen. “Harley. Oh my god...”

I blow out a breath. “Yeah, I know,” I snap. “I know I look awful, everyone keeps telling me that.” She’s silent, gazing at me through the screen as I bring my hand to my face again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to... I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok...” Lulu says hesitantly. “Are you... talking to anyone about all of this? This is a lot to deal with, Har, you need an outlet.”

I sigh, again. “What’s the fucking point.”

I hear laughing out in the hallway, as some of the tour crew work at setting up for tonight. I raise my eyes to watch them walk by, enjoying themselves. And I feel an intense jealousy that they do.

“Harley?”

I lower my eyes back to the screen. “Yeah?”

“I asked what you are doing for lunch since Ezra and Hannah are out...” She is watching me with that look everyone has now when they look at me. Pity, concern, confusion.

“Um, nothing.” I shake my head and squint my eyes. “I’ve had this headache for days now...”

She’s silent again and I lean back on the couch with a noise of frustration. Why can’t I just have a normal conversation. It’s like I can’t access any of my thoughts anymore. Everything is jumbled and messy, fractions of thoughts and questions with nothing actually making it to the forefront. It’s too much work and energy to try sort through it all...

“What do you think?”

“About what?” I furrow my brow.

“About... Harley, are you not hearing me?” she asks, adjusting herself again. “You keep... getting lost.”

I swallow and try to focus, turn my brain on, make it work. “Yeah, no, I’m fine, sorry,” I clear my throat and sit up straighter. “What did you say?”

“I was saying when you get home for your break I’ll come down and see you. We can have a fun day or two together and have some good times.” She smiles at me. “We can give you something else to focus on, look forward to. Good memories to hold onto while on tour.”

“And remind me of everything I can’t actually have.” The words are out of my mouth before I even realize what I said. *Fuck, I am being a dick.* “Shit, Lu, I’m sorry... fuck, I am fucking this up.”

“Talk to me, please,” she says, pleading with me. “Just talk, Harley, I don’t care what it is.”

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth to think, but her voice cuts in before I get too deep. “Don’t think. Just talk.”

I meet her dark eyes, warm and inviting. The ones I’ve always looked into when sharing the hard stuff and breaking down. And I realize... I am breaking down. I have been, for a while. And I don’t know how to stop it. And... this afternoon...

“I’m scared. I can’t have anything and I’m afraid to look forward to anything. Because everything is taken away. It always is. I’m not allowed to be happy, I will never be happy. I always have to pay a price for it, and the price this time is too big, I can’t pay it...” I meet her eyes again. “And not just the money. Ezra. I was happy, and now they want to take him away. I can’t let them do that, but I can’t do this either.” I stand up, needing to move. “And I can’t do the interviews, the photoshoots, the media, it’s all too much. I could barely do it before when I had Ezra with me and now he’s gone all the time, and I can’t do it.” I run a hand through my hair. Lulu is quiet, letting me talk. I feel like I should stop, but I don’t. I keep going. “Dad called. He wants money. I should have stayed in Lyons-”

“What?” Lulu cuts in.

“I did this to everyone.” I continue. “It’s because I’m gay, and they don’t like it. They don’t want me-”

Lulu cuts me off again. “Harley, your dad called?”

I lift a hand to my face and choke out a sob.

I hear a heavy breath come from her. “Ok, let’s just... Har, I know it’s hard, but you’ve done so well being away from him, try not to let his words impact you too much. Everyone

who *matters* loves you so much. You know this. Both your dad and Capture Music are vile fucking monsters. But you have so many people around you who love and support-”

“But I can’t, Lu, it doesn’t matter because I can’t do any of it, I can’t *be me*, they control me, they fucking *own* me.” I feel my body shaking, and I’m losing control. I try to look back at the screen, but it’s a chore to keep my eyes focused.

“Just look at me, ok?” I hear her far away voice.

I should have done everything differently.

I shouldn’t have hidden when I found Ezra.

I should have told Capture Music I was gay before signing the contract.

I shouldn’t have signed the contract.

I shouldn’t have pushed back against a monster who controls me.

I should have learned my lesson.

I should have...

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Ezra

“I CAN’T DO THIS, EZRA.” Hannah puts her fork down and glances out the window where paparazzi are taking photos.

I nod. “Yeah, we can probably go now...” I glance around to see if I can flag the waiter down for our check.

“No, I mean... this.” Hannah gestures between us. “This is not what I agreed to. They manipulated me. That’s not a good feeling, which I know you know. Because they do this to you guys every day.”

I nod slowly and look down at my plate. *Yeah, I know.*

“Ez, I want to help you guys, and if it was the simple 3 month plan with visits every few weeks like it was supposed to be, then no problem.” She shakes her head. “But they lied to me and took advantage of the fact that I care about you and Harley. If something was really wrong and you had asked me to come out, I would have. But how they did this... and *why* they did this...”

“I know,” I breathe out. “They did to you exactly what they did to us. Sweet talk you into a contract and then change it up once you’re hooked. I should have seen this coming.”

“None of us expected that to happen here,” Hannah says softly. “But I can’t let this interfere with my life. I needed this weekend for school. I have an exam next week I need to study for, and there is a conference I was attending this weekend.” She glances out the window again. “And now it will look like I

skipped it to have lunch with my boyfriend, which is not going to look good for internship applications.”

My heart drops at the look on her face. I feel absolutely awful that she felt like she even had to come. I hate that they are doing this. I hate that I didn't see this coming. I hate that she felt like she couldn't say no. “I was serious when I said you could have said no-”

“And then what would they do to you guys?” Hannah asks, tears welling in her eyes. “I felt stuck, and obligated. And it's not your fault, at all,” she rushes to say as she reaches across the table to grab my hand, “but this was my worry about the whole thing. After talking to them, before agreeing to any of this, they assured me this would never happen. But they used my relationship with you guys against me and got me here.” She shakes her head again, a tear falling. “I can't do that again.”

I squeeze her hand and swallow the lump in my throat. “I understand,” I say with a cracked voice. “It's not a good feeling.” I wish I had more to say. I wish I could make this all fucking go away.

Hannah sniffs and wipes her eye. “Also... people hate me.”

“What? Who?”

“I get messages on social media, and even to my school email, from people who are mad at me that I'm helping to hide you and Harley. Some of these messages are really mean. Most are just trying to get me to confirm that you guys are together, but some of them...” she blows out a breath, then meets my eyes. “I don't respond to any of them.”

I close my eyes and try to keep myself from losing it all, right here in the middle of this restaurant. *Keep it together...* “I wish I could fix all of this,” I say, my voice weak. “I'm so sorry.”

Hannah sniffs again and squeezes my hand. “I wish I could too. But this is so much bigger than we are. There's no way to

get out of this contract.” She pauses. “And I’m scared that there’s no escape from their manipulation either.”

I bite my lip, nodding. “I know,” I whisper.

“I’m so sorry, Ezra. I tried,” Hannah says in a soft voice. And it nearly fucking breaks me. This is not on her at all. She did everything right. *We* did everything right. All of us. But they are continuing to fuck with our lives so they can tell a story that doesn’t exist.

I shake my head and hold her hand tighter. “You were perfect.” I look around and signal the waiter. “But I can’t let this happen anymore.” I pull out my phone. “I’ll get you a flight home for this afternoon.”

“No, Ezra, I can’t.” Hannah looks at me with wide eyes. “They will just come for you guys even more and who knows what they will do. And won’t that be breaching the contract, they will just-”

“No, it won’t be, because this wasn’t an agreed upon date.” I tap on my phone and work on booking her flight. I can’t let her keep doing this, they can’t bring everyone else down with us. This is the only thing I can do right now, and I need to do it.

Hannah hesitantly watches me, fidgeting in her seat. When the check comes, I pay it quickly and grab her hand. “Let’s go.” I lead her out of the restaurant, my heart racing with fear. I know I will pay for this, but I need to do it... I *need* to do it.

When we get to the car, I open the door for Hannah and pull her into a hug. “Thank you, Hannah. For everything. You didn’t have to do any of this, and we really appreciate it. We love you.”

She squeezes me tight, and I feel her softly cry. “I love you both.” When she pulls back, she looks up to me with glistening eyes. “What are you going to do?”

I sigh and shake my head. “I don’t know yet... but I’m going to try to get you out of this.”

Hannah gives me a sad look. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

I huff out a laugh. “Well, maybe it’s time.”

Her eyes widen. “Ezra, no-”

“I’m kidding,” I assure her. *Maybe.*

I usher her into the car and lean in to speak to the driver. “Can you take Hannah to the hotel? I’ll call for another car.” The driver agrees and I lean in to whisper to Hannah, “Call a cab to the airport once you get there.”

She nods, and whispers back, “Thank you.”

As I watch the car disappear down the road towards our hotel, I look up to the sky and close my eyes. *Breathe...* But I don’t know what I’m actually supposed to do now. This is another thing I now have to figure out...

“Oh my god, Ezra Larson!” I turn my head and see two girls, about my age, quickly approaching me.

“Hi,” I say, trying to sound cheerful.

“We’re coming to your show tonight! We are so excited!” One of the girls smiles and I can’t help but smile back at the genuine look of happiness and excitement on her face.

“That’s awesome, we’re looking forward to playing and seeing you there.” I quickly glance around. We’re always told we’re not allowed to go out alone and without security, but... this isn’t so bad?

“Do you mind if we take a photo?” The other girl asks sheepishly.

“Not at all,” I lean in and smile for the selfie with them.

“Thank you so much,” she beams at me after taking the photo. “I love your music. *My Desire* is my favourite song.”

I smile, thinking about writing that song with Harley, in Ollie’s garage. “Thanks,” I say. “That’s a special one for us.”

The girls’ eyes widen, and I quickly realize what I just said. It’s credited as written by Harley and I, and it’s all about

wanting that person you think you can't have... I quickly try to think how to get out of this, but I stop. *I'm just so tired...*

"I love that," one of them says with a smile. "I think I love it so much because I've felt that way once too."

I look between the girls who are smiling at me. They are friendly and warm, and I sense it. It's what I saw on social media. It's real. *They know. And they support us.* "Thank you," I say.

"Thank you for taking the time to talk to us. That was really cool," one of them says, and it gives me a weird feeling... one I can't quite place.

"Enjoy your day and can't wait to see you tonight!" She says with a grin and the other girl adds, "Thank you for the photo!"

"Anytime. Enjoy the show," I smile at them. They take off down the road, smiling and waving back at me. As I watch them go, I have this sudden realization that we have been kept away from our fans. We're always *told* what they are thinking, saying, doing, and that it's not what Val and William want. We're taken from one place to another with so much security and time limits we're never allowed to actually talk to them. Events where we interact with them are so scheduled and managed, it's chaotic. We love our fans, we *know* what they think about us and how much they love us because we see it at shows, and we see it on social media. But we never get to experience the good and experience a genuine connection with them. To actually have this interaction with them and talk to them... *feel* their support and love. I feel the emotion rise as I realize this is yet another thing they are keeping from us. Something else they are taking from us.

One thing at a time...

Instead of calling the team for another car, I call an Uber. I need some sort of separation from this chaos, and even just the familiarity and simplicity of this small act is a welcome feeling. I'll take it where I can get it.

As I get to the stadium, my phone starts buzzing. I'm walking towards the entrance to the backstage area, so I stop before I get there and pull my phone out.

Lulu's name is lighting up my screen with a phone call. I look at it with confusion. She only does video calls, and why is she calling me when I know she had plans to talk to Harley this afternoon... and she knows I'm supposed to be with Hannah...

"Lulu?" I answer, with a bit of panic. *Is something wrong?*

"Ezra, what the fuck is going on?" *She* sounds panicked, and my pulse immediately skyrockets.

"What?" I ask, reaching for the door to the stadium and increasing my pace. *Fuck, what's wrong...*

"I was just talking to Harley. He is *not* doing well."

"I know," I say in a rush. "I know."

"Is anything being done to help him? I know you are doing the best you can but, Ezra... he is *bad*. And you can't do it all."

I stop and lean against the hallway wall. It's quiet, and there is no one in here. Once I go through the door at the end of this hallway, it all begins again. The pressure, the problems, the never ending demands. The only thing on the other side of that door that keeps me going is Harley. I need to get to him, but I need to sort myself out before I do. I need to be strong for him. "I know," I say again. Because I do know. I know he is not doing well, I know he is fading more and more every day, and I *don't* know what to do.

"Ez... I'm not saying this to increase the amount of pressure that is on you, as trust me, I do know you are doing everything you can, and I know this is extremely hard on you too. But because you love him, I need you to know, this is the bottom."

I swallow and slide down the wall, sitting on the floor. "What do you mean?"

“I’ve seen the lowest of the lows. I’ve been there when he is completely broken down, and completely lost. He’s learned to numb... and he’s there. It’s bad, and I’m worried it will be very difficult to get him back.”

My eyes burn with tears, as I bring my hand up to my forehead. “What do I do?”

She’s silent for a moment before she softly says, “I don’t know. He... needs to talk to you. But... I think you both need help.” I hear her sniff. “How can I help?”

I tilt my head back against the wall. “No one can help.”

“That’s not true. We all want to help. And I’m sure there is something we can all do.”

I stare up at the light on the ceiling, letting it burn into my eyes. Letting the overwhelming sensation wake me up and try to ignite some miraculous plan. “What is Harley doing now?” I ask her.

“He’s in your dressing room. I managed to calm him down enough. But he’s... not there.”

I nod, knowing what she means. He disappears. He escapes. He numbs.

“I’m going there now.” I rub a hand over my face. “Thanks for calling, Lu. I promise, I will help him.”

“And help yourself,” she adds. “I know this is a lot for you both, please take care of yourself. And please call me if you need anything. I feel completely useless here, and I want to help.”

“You are helping.” I glance at my watch. “Hannah’s going to be getting on a flight soon to go back home. I bet she would like a call from you, she’s not feeling too great either.”

Her voice sounds panicked again. “What, why?” But before I can respond, she says, “It’s ok, I’ll call her. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Thanks, Lu. I’m going to go find Harley.”

“Keep me updated,” she says.

“I will.”

As I hang up the call, I’m immediately overcome with the emotions I’ve been suppressing all day. They all come rushing up to the surface, plus everything I’ve shoved down deep in the past few months. My strength shatters, and I feel completely helpless. My body is heaving, hot tears streaming down my face, and an intense overwhelm radiating through me.

Everyone close to me is struggling. Harley is barely able to function, and I can’t help him. Hannah is being manipulated and used, and I can’t help her. Lulu is watching her best friend fade away from afar, and I can’t help her. Ollie and Callum are exhausted and stressed, and I can’t help them.

The pressure is too much. I want to hold everyone up, I want to make this all better, I want this all to go away. I want the house in the mountains with Harley. I want to see him smile. I want him to be healthy, happy. I want to take him away from all of this, I want to live our lives how we want to, I want to love him without worry and fear.

I bring my hands to my head and pull at my hair, squeezing my eyes tight and suppressing the scream I want to send out into the universe. *Fuck.*

There’s a bang at the end of the hallway and I look up to see Ian and Ollie coming through the door. They stop when they see me, and I quickly wipe my face.

Ollie rushes forward and kneels down in front of me, eyes full of worry. “What?”

I shake my head. “Nothing,” I murmur.

“It’s not nothing.” He looks over my face. “Did something happen?”

“Everything happened.” My voice comes out all raspy and the tears start flowing again. I can’t help it. The gates have

opened, and there's no stopping it now. "Everything is shit, I can't fix anything, and it just keeps getting worse."

Ian sits beside me against the wall. "It's not all on you, Ezra."

I sniff and shake my head. "So I've heard."

"Well, it's true," he says, and Ollie moves to sit on my other side, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. Ian lets out a sigh. "I've been watching this all unfold, wishing I could do something about it. And watching you be so hard on yourself in the midst of the impossible... You're doing everything you can."

I don't say anything, as I'm not sure what I can say. I just feel completely defeated.

Ian continues, "We have one more show after tonight, and then you have a week off. Use it well. Rest, recharge, spend time together doing everything you want to do. And I will work on creating more breaks and space for you all in this next leg of the tour." He pauses for a moment. "And bringing in support." He glances between me and Ollie. "For everyone. I've been having difficulty with William and getting him to agree to certain things I'd like to see happen." I turn my head to him, not sure what he means by that. "More days off, less media appearances... And Holly has been trying to work on him too. But it seems like the more we try, the harder he fights back."

"Same," I mutter.

"But we're not going to stop trying," he says, his tone reassuring. But, right now, nothing will convince me this is going to get any better. "I'm hoping we can make these changes in Europe. I don't want to get your hopes up, but I want you to know that you do have help. We are doing everything we can to try and make this just a little bit easier. And if there is anything at all that you," he looks around me to Ollie, "any of you, need, I'm here."

“Thanks,” Ollie says softly, his arm still around my shoulders.

“Harley is not ok,” I say, tears still falling.

Ian nods. “Yeah,” he says quietly. He turns his head to look at me again. “I’ll clear the rest of your afternoon. Don’t worry about any of it. I’ll deal with Anna, Val, everyone. Just... go be with him. Take some time for yourself. All of you. We’re almost done this part of the tour. Just hang in there a little bit longer.”

I nod. Even just these last two shows feel impossible to do.

But we don’t have a choice.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Harley

I LOOK across the bus to Ezra's sleeping face. He's asleep in his bunk, while I sit in mine. The bus is dark, and I don't know what time it is. But I know I haven't slept. I want to reach out and touch him, but I don't want to wake him. Everyone is asleep.

I look around the quiet bus, and it takes me a minute to remember where we are going. We had a show tonight in Raleigh, and our last show of the US leg of this tour is tomorrow in Richmond, Virginia. I rub my head with my hand, scrunching my face up. *Fuck, I wish this headache would go away.* I barely even remember the show tonight. Or how I even got on this bus...

I crawl out of my bunk, heading into the back room. I slide the door closed and sit on the couch. Looking out the window at the passing scenery, I let my mind wander. It's busy. It won't shut up.

I lay my head back against the couch and stare at the ceiling instead.

My throat hurts.

I try to cough quietly, so I don't wake everyone up.

I feel like shit.

My eyes land on my backpack at the end of the couch, so I pull my lyric book out. I open it to the last page I wrote on and stare at the words. The distant memory plays back to me, when

I wrote these lyrics. It feels so long ago, but it was just yesterday.

Sing what I can't sing

Be what I can't be

Keep you close to me

Stay in my soul

When the world comes crashing down

Please don't let it die

You're the only one I need

I close the book and stare out the window again.

Please don't let it die.



“What are you most looking forward to about Europe?”

“Golfing,” Ollie answers immediately. “Definitely golfing.”

The interviewer looks to me. “Um,” I look at Ollie, and he gives me soft nod, “I think just going... I’ve never been anywhere.”

“Well, you’ll certainly be well travelled soon.” The interviewer smiles at us. He looks down at his notes for his next question and I shift in my seat. My eyes are heavy, and my back hurts. My muscles all hurt. I cough and Ollie moves his arm so he’s touching me, and I can lean against him a bit.

“This tour has really only just begun, and it’s become so big, so fast,” he says, looking up to us again. “Where do you think you’ll be in 5 years? 10 years?”

I sniff and look down at my hands. *Who fucking knows.*

“Hopefully still playing music for the fans who love us,” Ollie says, and I can hear his smile in his voice. But it’s not the same. It’s duller now. Everything is.

“Harley?”

I look up to the interviewer, who is waiting for my answer. I feel my heart pick up speed, and I immediately feel a rush of panic. Now I’m fucking panicking, *because* I’m going to panic. “Uh,” I squint my eyes against the lights shining on us. “Sorry, what was the question?”

“Where do you see yourself in 5 years?” He asks, giving me a confused look.

I don’t say anything for a moment, as I don’t know how to answer. Because I don’t know. What did Ollie say? I lean into him some more and try to take a breath. “Still playing music, I hope.”

The interviewer smiles. “Alright, last question. What can you tell us about your next album? We hear you are recording, anything we can know about it now?”

Ollie pushes his knee against mine in his seat next to me, in a signal he’ll answer this. “Just that we are playing around with some new sounds, but it will still be us. We’re really excited about it.”

The second the lights are off, and the interview is done, I drop my head and rub it with my hand.

“Hey, let’s go,” Ollie says, pulling at my arm. “Ezra and Callum are done too.”

I get off my chair and follow him, out of the room we are in and into the hallway. We’re in a hotel for some interviews about our last show of this leg of the tour. I think we go to the stadium next...

I feel a hand on my arm and turn around to see Olivia, holding Luna. She pulls me into another room and Ollie follows. “He’ll come in here when he’s done, love.” She gestures for me to sit in a chair, and Luna reaches out for me. I

take her into my lap, and Olivia tilts my face up patting powder under my eyes with her lips pressed in a firm line and worry etched into her features. *Everyone looks at me like that.*

Ollie sits on the bed and flips a book open.

“What are you reading now, Ollie?” Olivia asks him, looking over her shoulder.

“Trying enemies to lovers.” He sighs and looks up at her. “I don’t think it’s going to work for me though.”

“Why not?” she asks with a slight smirk as she turns back to me.

Luna giggles and plays with my ring on my thumb. I look down at her and pull her against me tighter. There’s something about her that just simplifies everything and brings some comfort.

Ollie closes his book and sets it beside him. “Even though I know it ends in love, I don’t like it when people are mean.”

The door opens, and Callum and Ezra come in. Callum walks over to me, taking Luna from my lap. I stand up, and Ezra’s arms are around me immediately. “How you doing?” he asks softly. I just sigh against him, and he knows that’s my answer.

He pulls back and brushes a hand over my forehead pushing my hair back. His eyes flick between mine, and they look sad.

“Harley!”

I close my eyes. *No. Please, just stop.*

Stephanie comes into the room and glares at me. “Listen, this attitude *has* to stop. Ignoring questions, constantly asking them to repeat, are you even listening? This is unacceptable. Get your act together.”

Ezra whips his head around. “What the fuck?”

“Don’t,” Stephanie holds a hand up to him and peers around him to me. “*Everyone* is noticing this behaviour of

yours. Your fans are questioning what's wrong with you, interviewers are wondering why you won't even speak. You have one more interview later this afternoon. Pay attention this time."

Callum stands up and Olivia takes Luna. "Don't talk to him like that."

Stephanie ignores him and pulls out her phone. "William is here and would like to talk to you all before the next interview. Meet him in the conference room in 5 minutes."

And she leaves.

William. He's here.

Ezra turns back to me and grabs me by the shoulders. "Hey, hey, hey."

I try to pull away. I try to grab him and run. *Let's just go, let's leave.*

Ollie and Callum are in front of me too. They are talking, I don't hear them.

Ezra's arms wrap around me and he squeezes me, tight. My arms find their way around him too, and I hang on to him.

"Please, I don't want to," I murmur into his shoulder.

"I know." He rubs my back. "But we're all going to be there." He pulls back and I take in the room around me. Everyone is watching me. "Let's go see what he has to say."

Just as we're all about to exit the room, I grab Ezra's arm to stop him. "We have to-" he starts, but my memories have just caught up with me. I haven't told him yet. They don't know what happened.

"My dad called," I say, and Ollie and Callum whip around. Ezra's eyes widen and his mouth drops open.

"What the fuck?" Callum looks between me and Ezra. "When?"

“Yesterday...” I look between them all. “I... just remembered...” I rub my forehead again. “Sorry, I meant to tell you...”

“It’s ok,” Ezra grabs my hand and pulls it from my face. His eyes are wild, and I feel the tension pouring off him. “What did he want?” he asks hesitantly.

“More money,” I say quietly.

“Motherfucker, he can’t do that, he signed an NDA and he can’t even contact you!” Ollie paces the room.

I look at Ezra, sadness overwhelming me. “He threatened you.”

He swallows and rubs his hand on my arm. “We’ll get it sorted out...” But he doesn’t sound so sure of that.

“Let’s go!” we hear Stephanie’s voice from the hallway.

Callum sighs and shakes his head. He looks between Ezra and I again. “We’ll make a plan after this bullshit meeting.”



“There they are!”

We enter the room, and William is sitting at the boardroom table with a massive smile on his face. Ezra grabs my hand and I squeeze it tight. I’m fighting every instinct to run.

We all take a seat on the opposite side of the table to him. “William,” Callum says in a curt greeting.

“I wanted to come out for this last show, and to share some amazing news with you.” He leans back in his chair, grinning.

None of us say anything and wait for him to continue. I just want to get this over with and get out of here.

“The tour has been a massive success so far. And we anticipate Europe will be as well. Which is why we are adding

dates to Europe and extending your tour.” He is beaming now and looking proud. Proud of what? Destroying our lives? “After Europe, you will be coming back to New York for your second album launch and then you will head out to Australia and Asia to tour both albums. We’re working on setting up a second US and Europe leg for the second album as well.”

We sit across from him in silence, none of us giving any sort of reaction to this news.

Williams face falls, and a look of annoyance sets in. “You should be happy about this.”

“Do we get a say?” Ollie asks.

Williams eyes slide to him. “You don’t want to be a successful recording and touring artist?”

“That’s not what I said-”

“Then this is how that happens.”

We’re all quiet again, and William just stares back at us.

Callum leans forward. “I think it’s hard for us to feel happy right now, when all of these decisions are being made about us, without considering our needs.”

William smirks. “Your needs. Such as?”

Callum scoffs. “Not to be completely controlled in every aspect, for one. I mean, look at what you are doing to Harley and Ezra-”

“For.”

I whip my head to him.

“What?” Ezra asks, tightening his grip on my hand.

“*For* you.” William nods.

“You think you are doing all of this *for* us...” Ezra’s voice is shaky, and I am vibrating in my seat. I’m just watching this unfold and can barely feel my body. I’m in my comfortable place where I can’t feel. But I want to go. I don’t want to hear

this. “Do you even know how this is all affecting us?” Ezra asks, his tone gaining an edge.

William leans over the table, narrowing his eyes at Ezra. “Do you really want your relationship in the public eye? Name me one public relationship that you think is successful. They all end, because of the interference of media, public opinion, all the outside pressures. You should be pleased that you get to keep it to yourselves.”

I hear Ollie mutter from down the table. “Seriously...”

I’m shaking now, my skin breaking out in a sweat, and I’m grasping Ezra’s hand impossibly tight. “You are interfering,” I say quietly, but he hears it. I don’t even know where the words came from, it doesn’t feel like they came from me. His eyes land on me and I recoil. I want the chair to swallow me whole and take me away from this nightmare.

“Don’t confuse interfering with support, Harley.”

Ezra whips his hand out of my grip and slaps it on the table. “Support?!” I watch him, with my heart thundering and muscles trembling. He stands, leaning over the table. “You are *hurting* us. You are trying to break us, all so you can, what? Earn some money?” His voice is quivering, and I see the rage and devastation all over him. My numbness starts to crack, as I see him breaking. I can’t watch him break. I need to help him. “Do you not care that you are completely fucking with us?”

William leans back in his chair again, his eyes scanning over all of us. “Anything else?”

Ezra huffs out a breath in disbelief and brings his hands to his hair. “Oh my god,” he mutters.

Callum stands up beside Ezra. “Yeah, there is. We’re human, William. We’re not machines. You can’t just keep adding concert dates, and more media and events and completely fill all our time. We need to fucking *sleep*.”

Ollie leans forward. “And we know you are ignoring tour staff’s requests as they attempt to actually make this an enjoyable and manageable experience.” He then suddenly

stands up pointing a finger at him. “And my snare drum was damaged-”

“Not now.” Callum grabs his hand and lowers it.

“Yeah, ok.” Ollie sits back down but continues to glare at William.

Ezra sits back down beside me, and I place my hand on his thigh. I let the touch and connection with him seep into my senses, and they stir. He places his hand over mine, and we squeeze tight.

“Basically, William,” Callum sits down again as well, and crosses his arms on the table in front of him. “This is fucking bullshit. And we can’t continue like this. We can’t keep doing this if we’re completely broken.”

William *smiles*. He fucking *smiles*. “You can’t handle the pressures of being famous rockstars? Ok.” He reaches down to his briefcase, and pulls out a large, thick folder. He slides it across the table to us.

Callum reaches for it and opens it. “What’s this?” he asks.

“That is a complete breakdown of what you owe Capture Music if you are to walk away right now.”

Ezra’s grip tightens and I look over to the folder in front of Callum. *Millions. Each.*

“You will see a detailed breakdown of everything that has been invested in you to get you to this point. Recording, the tour, professional salaries, tour staff. You will be required to pay that all back.”

None of us say anything.

“You committed to four years, and four albums. If you leave now, you also owe us expected revenue from the remaining albums and tours.”

Callum looks down at the folder and flips through the papers. “What...”

William stands, buttoning his suit coat jacket, and picking up his briefcase. “I understand you have a break after tonight.” He walks to the door and looks back at us. “Take it. Recharge. Come back with a clear head. We won’t be doing this again.” He opens the door and walks away.

Ezra leans forward and places his head on the table. “No...”

I swallow, squeezing his hand. I blink a few times and sniff, trying to get my thoughts straight.

Ollie stands up, running a hand through his hair. “Fuck!” I jolt, staring at him. I’ve never seen him angry...

Callum is still flipping through the folder, never ending pages of writing and numbers.

My family is falling apart. They’re breaking. I look down at my hand in Ezra’s and reach over with my other hand to touch my ring. He lifts his head from the table to look at me. His eyes are glassy, and he looks so defeated. My heart is breaking. And I feel it.

Ollie starts pacing. “So, we just have to continue on like this?”

Ezra sniffs and reaches up to tuck my hair behind my ear. “Looks like-”

“Maybe not.”

We all turn to Callum, who closes the folder and looks up at us.

“What?” Ollie asks, sitting down again beside him.

Callum picks up the folder. “He might have just given us the key to get out of this whole thing.”

I feel a surge of something rush through my body. I don’t know what it is, but it’s waking me up. My heart is racing, my hands are tingling. I feel Ezra’s jittery leg under my touch.

“What do you mean?” Ezra asks him.

“The pompous prick outlined absolutely everything we would be on the hook for. Which means he gave us information we didn’t have before... We now know exactly who is involved and where. And I think I have an idea how we can use this to our advantage and end this. All of this.” Callum meets my eyes, and I see his usual, intense fire burning in him. I feel a spark ignite deep within me too.

I slide my eyes to Ezra. I stare into his beautiful blue eyes, as they come alight with hope. I feel the fog clear, and the numbness fades away. For the first time in days, I feel alive. As I gaze into the soul of this man I love with my whole heart, I can share in his hope. We’ve both been broken, but we will build each other back up. We will do this together. We will fight this, with our family.

Ezra smiles as we continue to look into each other’s eyes, and I feel a smile form on my lips as well. “Ready to fight back, baby?” he asks me, that question meaning so much more now, than it did before.

I nod and squeeze his hand. “Yeah.”

“GUYS.”

We turn to look at Ollie, who is now sitting cross legged on the table, his familiar, massive, happy grin back in place. He sticks a hand out and looks around at all of us. “Are we burning hot, or what?”

I stand up, placing my hand over his. Callum and Ezra do the same, and we all look between each other, full of love, hope and determination.

“Burn hot!”

...To Be Continued in

Remastered

Songs of Freedom, Book 3

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Want to know what happened when Callum and Ollie went golfing? Need some more fun with Harley and Ezra? Head to my Instagram [@eve.holmes.author](#) under my links to get your free bonus content!

If you enjoyed *Details*, please consider leaving a review!

THANK YOU

Thank you so much to each and every one of you who read *Silhouette* and *Details*. I can't even begin to describe how much it means to see so many of you sharing your love for these boys and following their story. Thank you so much, and lots of love to you all!

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To all my animals... thank you for putting up with me. They have the pleasure of seeing the real, unedited, behind the scenes author life and, well... they deserve major props.

And, as always, coffee. You magnificent bitch. Thank you for your service.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eve is an avid lover of coffee, getting lost in fictional worlds, crafting and ducks. She lives in a small town in Atlantic Canada with a bunch of animals and plans to get many more, much to her family and friends dismay.

When she's not trying to get ducks to love her, she can usually be found fantasizing about living in a treehouse, riding her horses, drawing, and attending bookclub - which is just an excuse to engage in shenanigans with her friends... but bookish shenanigans.

Eve enjoys a challenge, and will gladly turn the strangest writing prompt into a book. We're just getting started, hold on to your hats!

