



*Dirty
Giana*

JANUARY JAMES

DIRTY DIANA

A BILLIONAIRE BULLY ROMANCE

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Dirty Diana (Femmes Féroces book #2)

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Edit by [The Word Tank](#)

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PROLOGUE



*M*y dearest Diana,

I SAW YOU TODAY. You were wearing a tight pair of jeans and a small blue sweater, and you had your hair tied back in a ponytail. I could see your belly button, and you know what that does to me.

You could have had me, Diana, but you chose someone else. You knew how much it would hurt me, seeing you laughing and kissing another man, when you could have had me. It felt as though you'd stabbed a knife into my heart. I couldn't pick myself up off the floor for two days and my heart still bleeds now.

You chose someone else. Just writing this down cuts my heart afresh.

You chose someone else. But you loved me so much—you told me so, and I believed you.

You chose someone else. But they didn't make you happy, did they? You moved on again, and...

You chose someone else. And it still wasn't me.

You left me with no other choice. I couldn't stand by and let you break my heart again and again, not caring about how I felt.

You left me with no other choice, Diana. Whatever happens next will be all your fault.

You chose someone else. So, I chose someone else too, and you don't like it.

You don't like it so much you moved away.

I know why you moved away. You think this is final, don't you? You think I've found love with someone else. Well, you're wrong. It has always been you. And this is the only way I can think of to bring you back. It's the only way I know I'll be able to feel your flesh and blood again in my arms.

JUST REMEMBER, Diana. This is all for you. Dx

CHAPTER ONE



*I*f I'd known I was about to face a barrage of low-level abuse, I would never have looked up. But hindsight is a wonderful thing.

I was engrossed in my usual evening ritual of dissecting the working day, picking apart every little thing I should have done differently, re-forecasting the number of days I no doubt had left until my bosses had enough of my losses, and decided to cut me loose instead. I couldn't figure out where I'd gone wrong. I was a straight A student, I was an ass-kicking talent scout, and when they first appointed me as vice president of a small indie record label, it started off well. I didn't know what happened. Actually, I did know what happened: Cherry Tatum happened. I just hated admitting it to myself.

Cherry Tatum was the first big act I signed. She was the biggest star of the label and she knew it. At first she was grateful, compliant and eager to do well, but the angel-voiced Celtic singer turned into a diva of Naomi Campbell proportions the minute she got her first Billboard 100 spot. She'd only just snuck in at 99 I had to stop myself from reminding her; it didn't justify her demands for a Beatles-esque tour bus or handpicked frozen peas for her pre-performance nourishment, but her demands had continued to escalate and were now giving everyone around her an epic migraine.

If she was busy working on ground-breaking material, I wouldn't have minded, but she was too busy flaunting her fledgling relationship with some Canadian rapper to give it due

thought. Still, her relationship was good for press. Cherry was one of the most photographed starlets in Manhattan at the moment, which was good for sales. Even if those sales still weren't nudging her any further up the Billboard charts.

Sales were what I needed right now. Correction, sales were what I'd needed for a long time. Phoenix Music was not the unicorn that the parent label, Empirical Records, had hoped it would be. I'd stuck to my guns and only signed alternative acts that brought something a little bit different to the market. I was sick and tired of manufactured mainstream acts dominating the airwaves, and I knew I wasn't the only one. But it seemed as though everywhere I turned, another mainstream TV talent show was popping up, another plastic boy band was being carefully crafted and fed to the masses like pizza. I saw it as my role, my mission, to provide an alternative for people who didn't want to nod along with the rest of the American public, simply liking the music they were told to like.

Unfortunately, there was so much money behind the big established bands and the shiny new ones being peddled out with guaranteed chart-topping tracks, that I'd found it hard to keep up and to carve a niche for my beloved artists. The only thing keeping me afloat was determination. Determination to conquer the numbers and conquer Cherry Tatum's increasingly impossible attitude. I grappled with it day and night, night and day. It was a constant source of anxiety.

So, when a tall, leggy, impossibly beautiful but quite frightening-looking brunette appeared at my side as I perched on a stool at Ted's bar at the end of my block, I wasn't reluctant to look up.

"Sorry about the intrusion," the woman said, her face looking not at all apologetic. She was so tall I had to crane my neck slightly to take in her face. Tall and striking. Her nose was long and slim, her cheekbones prominent and generously contoured, her lips taut but not too full. There was a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her hair was short and cropped closely around her face, and her eyes were huge.

She looked like a much taller version of Twiggy, the famous model from the sixties.

“It’s just that, I see you here almost every night, always late, always on your own, staring into the bottom of the same old glass, never talking to anyone. And I couldn’t stand to watch the car crashing anymore. You need this.”

With one lean, immaculately manicured finger, she slid a card along the bar until it came to a stop beside my empty glass. I didn’t pick it up to read it straight away, but I couldn’t miss the word *Decadence* emblazoned in a sophisticated font across the center.

“I source clients. I’m one of a select few who have the authority to invite new prospects to join us, and they’re usually high net-worth, high energy, high charisma individuals.”

She jutted her hip out and rested one hand on it. The woman oozed confidence, I thought, enviously.

“Yes, you might be thinking, you appear to be none of those things, and I would agree. But seeing you every night like this makes me fucking sad. So, I made an exception. Congratulations,” she smiled, almost begrudgingly. “It’s your lucky fucking day.”

She stood back, leaving the card on the bar.

“Your unique code is on the back.”

Of all the questions I should have fired at her, along with several expletives given the way she’d just insulted me, I chose: “What is this?”

I picked up the card, immediately feeling its expensive, velvety coating, and turned it over in my fingers.

“Think of it as your ‘get out of jail free’ card,” she said, stepping around me in the direction of the door. Then she spun to face me again. “Do yourself a favor, honey. Call the Concierge, get signed up. And don’t think on it too long. That code expires in forty-eight hours.”

With that, she turned on her extortionately expensive, tower-high heels and sauntered her long, leather-clad legs out

of Ted's Bar onto the anonymous streets of Manhattan, leaving me agog with unanswered questions.

I immediately picked up my phone and googled 'Decadence, Manhattan', but not even a mention popped up. Was it possible it had been a ruse, just to make me feel even worse about myself? Because that wouldn't take much. As vicious as her words had been, they were right. I slouched down on my stool and wearily contemplated my life.

I now had a small but struggling record label with four moderately successful acts: one lackluster singer I was going to have to strike off any day now; one edgy guitar band I was certain would make it big if only we could get the right airplay for them; another new singer I had genuine hope for; and Cherry. I knew the board was keeping a close eye on me, counting the balance sheets and coming up short. I knew I was working on borrowed time; if I didn't do something soon to boost our sales, I could be kicked out onto the sidewalk with nothing to my name but the clothes on my back.

When I managed to get a rare break from Cherry's incessant demands, I'd tried everything. I'd tested campaigns and promotions, I'd groveled to the key stations for more airplay, I'd coaxed my three other acts into engaging more with their fans—which most found surprisingly difficult given they were introverted, partially reclusive, indie acts who'd become talented by locking themselves in bedrooms and garages honing their craft and generally avoiding all human contact. In hindsight, hiring this type of niche talent was possibly not the best business strategy.

The mystery woman was right; outside of my job—the only way I'd found to *cope* with my job—I spent the majority of my time at Ted's bar, always alone, always late, always staring into the bottom of a glass, never talking to anyone. I never had anything to say. I couldn't talk to anyone about my past; I had no social life or hobbies to speak of; and I would rather slit my wrists than talk about my work woes to anyone besides my two closest colleagues—and the nearest things I had to friends—Sheridan and Carlos.

I knew how sad I looked. Once upon a time, I would have cared. But these days, I just needed to get through the working week. Not that I had weekends either. Working in the music business had put an end to that. And once upon a time, I enjoyed the scene. I used to love heading out to gigs, dressed in my tight black jeans, Kravitz boots and Arctic Monkeys tour t-shirt, to drink lukewarm beer and check out the latest signed and unsigned talent, but even those gigs made me feel anxious now. How did my acts compare? Would I ever have enough money to sign another band? How did the promoter drag in so many people? Why were my sorry efforts flailing in comparison?

My life was dominated by a fear of failure; it permeated every part of my life. I hardly ate anymore, and my glittering conversational skills had been reduced to two topics: how to save money and how to fight fires. I barely made an effort with my hair and my clothes—I just threw on whatever was cleanest and closest. My make-up bag had seen less action in the last twelve months than a hooker in a monastery. And my personal hygiene system extended to a splash of water, a squirt of deodorant and a hasty toothbrushing session while I hopped about pulling on socks.

I hadn't cared until it was noticed. First, it was Carlos: *"Smells like something's gone off in here. Oh, hang on, are those mold marks on your collar?"* Then, to my utter mortification, Cherry: *"Quite the night was it, darlin'? Didn't you wear that yesterday?"* And finally, my loveliest and most talented of acts, Ayda: *"Is everything ok, Diana? It's just that, well, you look like you've lost twenty pounds in the last month, and I can practically see your zygomatic bone."*

It came to a head when Carlos and Sheridan staged an intervention and forced me to take some personal time. I took five days off work and hated every second. I couldn't stand to be in my own company; I suck. And I was stuck. There was no way out. No other label would employ me as a VP, I would have to start over as a scout. No management company would hire me either. There were no secrets in the industry, everyone knew how bad my books were, and there was no way I could go back to England. I had no choice but to make it work, but I

was running out of ideas. I'd come to hate the four walls of my apartment, and I had no place else to go. Ted's Bar had become my second home.

I turned the card over again in my fingers, and this time I studied the back. It gave nothing away—just the word *Concierge*, a telephone number, and the code the mystery woman had mentioned before she'd departed leaving flames in her wake.

She was crazy if she thought I was going to do anything with it. I might have been desperate and sleep-deprived, but I wasn't stupid. A strange woman comes up and gives me a strange card with no information on it, telling me to call a number, to reach God only knew who. She could be setting me up for anything. Still, I couldn't bring myself to rip it up and leave it at the bottom of my glass in smithereens. I ordered another vodka on the rocks, forcing myself to forget about mystery woman's cruel (albeit true) words and focus on how I was going to drag myself through the week.

"Another long day?" Jez, the bartender glanced up at me as he poured the Grey Goose with a flourish.

"Yup," I answered, flicking my eyes away, signaling that, as usual, I wasn't here for the chat. Then a thought occurred to me. "Hey, Jez..."

Jez froze, his back turned away as he placed the bottle back in its place on the dusty shelf. I'd hardly ever spoken a word to him, so my brief olive branch must have freaked him out. He turned back to face me, cautiously.

"Did you see the woman who came up to me a few minutes ago?"

"The tall one?"

"Yeah. Ever seen her before?"

"Maybe a couple times, ma'am. We don't get the likes of her in here too often, y'know?"

"She gave me a card. Have you heard of Decadence?"

"What is it? Another bar?"

“I’ve no idea.” I reached into my bag and pulled it out to show him. Jez took the card and studied it in much the same way I had.

“Feels expensive,” he said. I nodded and chewed the corner of my lip. “Nope, never heard of it before, never seen the name anywhere.” He handed the card back. “Did she say anything at all about it?”

“Just that it was my ‘get out of jail free’ card. Said I looked like I needed it, whatever ‘it’ is.”

“Well,” Jez said, wiping down the bar and shaking his head. “It could be just what you need: something new and exciting. I don’t turn away customers often, but you could do better than this place, darlin’. You are in here *a lot*.”

“I like it here,” I pouted.

“That’s great an’ all, but a place with a name like Decadence? That sounds a lot more fun. And I hate to say it, but maybe you need to get out of a rut.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I nodded, taking a large swig of vodka. “I just don’t have the time or the headspace to do anything about it.”

“Well,” he said, planting his palms into the bar in front of me. “You know what my motto is? If you keep doing the same thing every day, nothing will ever change.”

I narrowed my eyes, unsure of what he was trying to say.

“I mean, if you don’t change the way you live your life—who you are and the things you do every day—how you expect your life to get any better?”

I turned the thought over in my head as he hovered over me. Fortunately, a couple chose that moment to walk in and slide onto seats at the other end of the bar, so Jez had to move off to serve them, but I pondered his theory. I had been doing the same things day in and day out, yet nothing was changing; nothing was getting any better. Maybe by changing how I dealt with Cherry, things at work might get a little easier. Maybe if I gave a damn about what I looked like, more people might want to look at me.

I noticed I was still flicking the thing that had started the conversation between my fingers. I couldn't expect this little piece of velvety card to be the thing that changed my life, but I could certainly look at changing the way I lived.

I swallowed the rest of the vodka and tucked a few dollars beneath the empty glass, then I slid off the stool to leave. What one thing could I change about the following day? I could give a shit about what I looked like, perhaps. I could force myself to eat breakfast, take a proper shower and wear a dress. Baby steps.

I turned as I walked past the bar towards the door, acknowledging Jez for the first time in twelve months, as I left. His words had got in. And the smug grin on his face told me he knew it.

CHAPTER TWO



*H*eads actually turned as I walked into the office the next day. I wore a navy blue pencil dress that showed off my slim calves and my partially starved waistline, and I'd blow-dried my hair for the first time in months. I thought my dryer was about to blow up, until I realized the smell came from the build-up of dust burning off into the atmosphere.

Today, the anxiety that usually balled in the pit of my stomach every morning was being held at bay by the yogurt and berries I'd picked up at the deli. I hadn't made that much of an effort, but it was enough to stop my teams in their tracks as I passed. I guessed it was the smell of fruity shower gel, as opposed to my usual stench of eau-de-yesterday's-outfit, that drew the stares.

I plastered a smile to my face until I reached the safe haven of my office, then I sank into my chair and heaved my eyes up to the computer screen for yet another Groundhog Day. I'd hardly taken a breath before Carlos knocked on my door. I waved him in while booting up the computer.

"Anything I should know about?" He asked, accusingly.

"Are you surprised I blow-dried my hair?"

He reached out and ran his hand through the surprisingly shiny, poker-straight strands. "I'm surprised you own a blow-dryer at all, to be honest, darling. But no, that wasn't what I was referring to."

"What, then?" I said, refusing to look at him.

“You look, dare I say it, pretty hot...”

“You don’t have to wince when you say that,” I interrupted. I’d known Carlos for three years now and had such intimate knowledge of his facial expressions—largely because he was so free in distributing them—I could feel them vibrate through the air without sparing him a glance.

“...and there must surely be a reason for it,” he finished, ignoring my observation.

“I just fancied making a bit of an effort, that’s all.” I keyed in my password.

“But...” he sucked in a breath. “Why now?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I opened up my inbox and scanned down the list for any emails Marla, my assistant, had flagged for my attention.

“You haven’t blow-dried your hair for over a year, darling. Not since...”

I sighed, heavily. “Say it.”

It was Carlos’s turn to sigh, but he managed to make it sound completely original and utterly dramatic, better than any attempt I could have made.

“Not since The Breakup That Broke Cherry.” He replied, referring to a moment in recent history in which Cherry got publicly dumped by a DJ she’d supposedly been madly in love with. If I’d thought her behavior was atrocious before then, I hadn’t seen anything.

“Well, yes, her ego has certainly kept me busy.”

“So, why now? What’s changed?”

I could tell he wasn’t going to drop it and, annoying as he was, I knew he persisted because he cared. I clicked on a couple of emails I knew needed immediate attention then turned to face him. It was only then I realized he too was graying around the temples. I felt as though I hadn’t looked at him in a long while. What was wrong with me? Had I really been so preoccupied I hadn’t noticed one of my best friends and employees prematurely aging right before my eyes?

“I had a chat with Jez last night, at Ted’s...”

“Jez?” There was that wince again, only this time it slapped me full on in the face. “Really, I’d have pegged you with someone more, um, manly, professional... I don’t know, someone who might own his own apartment?” He curled his hand in the air, while musing to himself who my ideal man would be.

“Not in that way,” I whined. “We were just chatting as I left. Anyway, he said something that resonated with me a bit. Something about changing my ways to change my life. Or, if I don’t change my ways, nothing else will ever change, something like that.”

Carlos tipped his head back and eyed me with the same caution a cat might eye a mouse that had just sprouted insanely large teeth and a wagging tail.

“After how many vodkas?”

That earned him a glare that said if he didn’t get out of my office by the time I’d counted to ten, I would hurl something at him.

“Ok, ok,” he said, holding his hands up. “It sounds... inspirational. Good for you.”

“Was there anything else?” I asked.

“I’m afraid so,” he sighed again. “Our darling little Billboard 100 has requested a re-record of her latest track. The studio in Brooklyn is booked out now for six months and the next best option will cost us triple.”

“Six months? That’s crazy! How is it booked for six months?”

“Aart Bakker, the hot new Netherlands producer, he only wants to work at Beats apparently—nowhere else. Feels a spiritual connection to the place, so he’s booked back-to-back sessions.”

“Jesus. With the money Sony is paying him, he can probably afford way better studios. And worse, it’ll force the price up for labels like us. That’s all we need.”

I punched the intercom. “Marla, can you make a note for me to call Bill at Brooklyn Beats? I should take him for a boozy brunch, Pastis perhaps.”

I turned back to face Carlos, remembering the true root of his exasperation. “Why does she need to re-record?”

“She wants to try the final bridge of *After You* in a higher octave, see what it sounds like,” he said through gritted teeth.

“She can’t do that with a MacBook Air and a microphone?”

“You try asking her that,” Carlos said, forcing his gritted teeth into not quite the fakest smile I’d ever seen on him, but it was close.

“I’ll get onto Eric. He’s her manager; he needs to be able to stand up to her on stuff like this. It can’t keep bouncing back to the label all the time.”

“So, the studio space?” Carlos ventured.

“A hard no.” I turned back to my screen feeling Carlos’ opinion of me do a neck-cracking double-take.

“Is that an absolute, definite hard no?”

“Yes. I’m not playing ball with this girl anymore.” Something had emboldened me, and I wasn’t sure what—possibly the brief conversation I’d had with Jez, the turning heads as I walked into the offices, or maybe it was the black velvet card lying dormant in the bottom of my bag. “We have no fucking money, and until she stops spreading herself around bars and nightclubs, and starts doing a bit more promo, she can just make do with whatever we can afford to give her.”

I felt Carlos’s eyebrows rise, and many a sarcastic comment swallowed. I had to hand it to Jez who, even though I barely knew him, had triggered a chain of events that, oddly enough, had all begun with my hairdryer. I’d simply dressed reasonably nicely and washed and dried my hair, and now, suddenly I was standing up to an artist who’d previously held me captive with her ridiculous demands and entitled behavior.

“For what it’s worth,” Carlos said, a genuine smile forming on his face. “I think it’s about time we stood up to this girl. I have high hopes for Ayda, you know. It won’t be long before Cherry isn’t the star of the label anymore; she’ll have to eat some humble pie.”

“Exactly. Speaking of which, is Sheridan around today? I need to speak to her about the launch of Ayda’s next single. I’ve got such high hopes for this one; I really want all the stations to play it like crazy.”

“She is. I’ll send her in,” Carlos replied, standing up. “And I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that. Her first single went down a storm—everyone’s on tenterhooks for the second. She’s going to kill it.”

I SAT down on the bench beside Sheridan who was eyeing my Caesar salad with suspicion.

“Everything ok?” She asked.

“What do you mean?” I was still buzzing from the meeting we’d just had with Publicity about Ayda’s next release. I hadn’t felt anything like it for over a year. It reminded me of why I loved the industry so much and made me wonder why I’d let a petulant pop star like Cherry ruin all that for me.

“You’re eating, for a start. And more to the point, you’ve actually stopped and sat down for the event. I’m impressed.”

“I’m having a good day,” I said, cracking open the take-out box. “It may not last, so don’t get too used to it.”

It still felt alien to me to be feeling so positive, and I refused to commit to the idea my mood had been enhanced merely because I owned a damn hair dryer.

“Carlos told me about Jez’s prophecy...”

“Motto,” I corrected. “It might be a load of crap, but it made me stop and think.”

“Well, fantastic, I say. Make the most of it,” Sheridan smiled, as she tucked into her pasta salad. We’d walked across to Central Park and were sitting overlooking the boating lake. It always felt so weird to me that there was a giant green sanctuary right in the heart of the world’s biggest skyscrapers. Because I would always be a tourist in a way, I probably marveled at these things more than most.

“I have a good feeling about Ayda’s single,” I said.

“Me too. We need some good luck; I really think this is finally going to put us on the map.”

“It will have been a long time coming,” I sighed.

“Tell me about it. You deserve some success, you know,” Sheridan’s voice was stern. “You work so hard. Although, I do sometimes question where you focus most of your attention...”

“Cherry... I know. That’s changing,” I assured her.

“I’ve worked for many people, and you are by far the most committed, and the most passionate. I mean that.”

I set my salad down on the bench and gave her a giant hug.

“I’m not just saying it,” she continued, as I squeezed her tighter. “I hate that the board gives you so much grief, and you take it, every time, like an ox. It wasn’t so bad when Alex was still here but since he left, I’ve noticed how much harder they are on you. You’re so resilient. I would have left a long time ago if I was you. I know your day will come, if only those dicks in suits would cut you some slack.”

“That means a lot, Shez,” I said, resting my head on her shoulder. She wasn’t exactly like a mum to me, but she was certainly a welcome maternal presence in my life since I’d left England to start over in New York. “I miss Alex. I still don’t know what happened to him.”

“I expect he’s having a well-earned break before taking another CEO job somewhere quieter.”

“You’re kidding, aren’t you? Alex won’t go for quiet. He loved music. He was out gigging right up until he left, which

is why I still find it weird he's gone. And without a trace, too."

"He'll show up again at some point, I'm sure. In the meantime, we'll have a new CEO to impress soon."

"Hmm," I wasn't looking forward to that. Alex had always championed me. It was his idea to turn me from a mere talent scout into the vice president of a brand new label. He'd coached me through my early days of poor numbers and was always there if I needed advice, or a shoulder to cry on, or just someone to make me laugh until tears rolled down my face. We were friends, Alex and I, which made it even harder to understand why he'd fallen completely off the radar.

"Work aside, I do think you should get out a bit more," Sheridan said, patting my head as though I were a pet poodle. "I know I keep saying it but, look at you today; you look great! You need to show yourself off more, meet some guys, have a few dates. Anything to give yourself something to live for other than work."

I sighed and released her, picking up my salad again, only suddenly, I'd lost my appetite.

"I know I sound like a broken record, but this Jez guy knows what he's talking about. If you carry on doing what you're doing—just coming into work, fighting fires then going home or to the bar to drown your sorrows every night—nothing's going to change. And I know you want it to. You wouldn't have made this effort today if you didn't. I bet you feel good, don't you?" She grinned.

"A little," I admitted, begrudgingly.

"I won't bug you about it anymore, but just, for me... will you think about it? You've made a start, but you're not getting any younger. I should know. Finding a man in your forties is a hell of a lot harder than finding one in your mid-twenties."

"Late twenties," I corrected her. "I'll be twenty-seven next week."

"Ach," she spat. "It's mid until you reach something-nine, in my *expert* opinion."

WE FINISHED OUR LUNCH, or rather, Sheridan finished hers while I pushed mine around its take-out box with a fork, then we walked back to the office on Madison. After a morning of meetings and mayhem, I was thankful to have the afternoon to myself to read through paperwork, sign off contracts, and check through our budget reconciliation. But my mind, for the first time in a long time, insisted on wandering.

I'd been knocked for six by everyone's reaction to me looking half-decent, and I felt empowered by standing up to the spoiled Cherry Tatum, and boosted by the forthcoming release by my favorite act—another one I'd spotted and nurtured myself—Ayda. I thought about all these things, and one thing more: the little black card that sat anything but quietly in the bottom of my bag. It had been calling out to me all day and I'd steadfastly refused to succumb to its velvety allure.

I forced myself to read through the last of the papers Marla had laid out on my desk, then I reached down to pull the offending creature out of its hiding place. I held it up and flipped it from front to back. It shared no further information with me, regardless of how much I willed it to. All that it revealed was the name of a place I still had no idea about, a telephone number, and a code that supposedly self-combusted in almost twenty-four hours.

I looked over my shoulder to check I was alone—another old habit that wouldn't die—and picked up my cell. Before I could talk myself out of it, I dialed the number on the card and held the phone to my ear.

Rrrrrring.

If it rings more than three times, I'm hanging up.

Rrrrrring.

If no-one answers by then, it wasn't meant to be.

Rrrrrring.

Thank Go—

“Decadence Concierge. How may I help you?”

Fuck. Hang. Up. Now.

My hand was frozen. It wouldn't compute. My brain had stopped communicating to it. I was having a stroke.

“Hello? Are you there?”

“Um...” My voice had also disconnected from my brain. My body was staging an intervention. “Yes, thanks. I have a card. Um... with a code.”

Shut up. Shut up. Shut uuuuuup. My brain was screaming.

“Congratulations, ma'am. Welcome to Decadence. I just need to take a few details from you...”

Her voice was as velvety as the card which was still poised between my fingers laughing hysterically at me. But I felt instantly soothed, as though I was going to be safe in her hands. I wasn't going to be sold into sex slavery, after all.

“Can you read out the code from the back of the card?”

“Um, ok, it's S9ZEH,” I said, my voice breaking with adrenalin.

“Ah, I should have guessed. That was Sienna, one of our most experienced recruiters. She knows exactly what type of clientele enjoys our offering; if she chose you, you have definitely made the right decision by calling us.”

“Hmm,” I muttered, thinking back to ‘Sienna’ and her cruel words. *Seeing you every night like this makes me fucking sad.* If she really did have a sixth sense about what I would like, she had a damn funny way of showing it.

“Ok,” the velvety woman continued. “I'm going to explain who we are but only briefly. We are a highly exclusive organization and if you're interested in taking this further you'll need to come in and meet with members of our board and sign a non-disclosure agreement before signing up to become a full member.”

“Ok...”

“Decadence is a private member’s club, the emphasis being on the word *private*. If you’ve tried to google us, you’ll have found nothing, and that’s how we like it. In fact, if the search engines ever pick up even a sentence about us, our lawyers will rapidly shut down the offending source. So, you can rest assured that no-one will ever know who we are and what we do, without our express consent.”

She paused to allow me to digest what she’d just said, not that the whole thing made any more sense. She’d said a lot in a couple of minutes without actually telling me anything.

“We operate an identity policy which extends from non-disclosure of personal information between members, to facial coverings. So, no-one will ever know you are in any way connected with the club and its activities.”

My mind was reeling now. “Facial coverings?”

“Yes. Not only for your personal privacy, but many of our members say it enhances the pleasure they receive when interacting with other members.”

I gulped. “P... pleasure?”

“Yes,” the voice said, confidently, with a reassuring smile that reached down the phone line. “I like to describe Decadence as a dating agency that allows anything but dating.”

“You’ve lost me,” I said, not disclosing exactly how long ago she’d lost me, which was approximately as soon as she’d answered the phone.

“We provide a secure and *luxurious* venue where handpicked clientele can meet other carefully selected individuals, in safe, private surroundings where they can express themselves freely without worrying about any repercussions or impact on their daily lives.”

My mind was still reeling. I had no idea what she was saying through all the delicately chosen words.

“Express themselves?” *A venue? Meeting other members? No repercussions?* Finally, my brain seemed to lock the pieces together. “Is this a sex club?”

“I can’t give out any further information over the telephone,” she said, and I could still sense her smile, but she wasn’t denying it. “I want to assure you that everything that happens under our watch is consensual, enjoyable and not available with this level of privacy and security anywhere else in the world. We pride ourselves on maintaining a service that has kept members coming back year after year ever since they first joined. Our members are high net-worth, impeccably mannered, extremely respectful, and incredibly well-maintained. If you join us, you will never find out who these individuals are—they will never know who you are—but you will be free to enjoy their company in a setting that values your safety and anonymity above everything else.”

I felt my spine hit the back of my chair and the air slowly seep out of my lungs. If someone had brought me this proposal a few years earlier, I might have given it some thought without feeling as though my legs were about to crumble. But the last four years had eaten into my confidence, my esteem, my soul. I really didn’t think I had the balls to do it. Just as I was about to say so, the woman spoke again, this time quietly.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she almost whispered. “I was hesitant when I got the code. I wasn’t in a good place. I was strung out, miserable, single and institutionalized. I didn’t really trust anyone. I couldn’t understand why some random stranger had supposedly offered me this way out I couldn’t refuse.”

“So what changed your mind?” I asked, intrigued and desperate for something to relate to.

“Well, getting the code made me realize how empty my life was. I went home that night and swallowed twenty-eight sleeping pills and half a bottle of vodka. It was a lame cry for help really, which was ironic since I had no-one to cry to. When I woke up the next day and saw the note I’d written on the back of the card, I realized I could either take a chance on this thing, or finish myself off properly. I chose the former. And believe me when I say this... it was the best decision I’ve ever made in my life.”

“How?” I pressed.

“I can’t tell you any more right now, but I really hope you’ll take a chance on this. Let me make you an appointment to come in and see us. You won’t regret it, I promise.”

I decided she was either genuine, or the Oprah Winfrey of salespeople. If she was the former, maybe this was exactly what I needed. If she was the latter, at the very least I might be able to learn some skills that could help me resurrect my rapidly decaying business.

I could sense the woman holding her breath. I took a deep breath of my own and renewed my grip on the phone. I took one last look at the card, then at my screen, then at the four walls around me—walls I’d gradually become sick to death of seeing—then squeezed my eyes closed.

“Right,” I said, slapping the card onto my desk. “I’ll do it.”

CHAPTER THREE



I stood in the spot the woman had told me to go and looked around. There was no sign of a black door bearing a number ‘one’ like she had said. I swayed nervously from foot-to-foot as I re-read the instructions I’d scribbled down. Then, a loud crack of thunder and the sensation of a large drop of rain landing on my freshly styled hair, sent a wave of panic through me. Luckily, just as the heavens opened, a voice called out from behind some conveniently placed foliage.

“Hello, Miss?” it whispered, discreetly.

“Yes?” I replied, wondering why I couldn’t see anyone.

“This way,” the voice called, coaxing me past the greenery to a cleverly concealed black door bearing a brass number one above a doorbell. As he came into view, my heart thudded into my stomach, firing off nerves I thought I’d managed to bury about five blocks back. I couldn’t see his face. Not just because it had disappeared inside the doorway but because something covered it; something black and opaque hiding the top half of his head.

Ever since I’d put the phone down to the Concierge, I’d been a bag of nerves. Not once in my life had I ever considered joining a sex club. I’d never even attempted online dating or one night stands, let alone secret sex with strangers. I’d watched the movies, I’d seen the orgies, I’d wondered along with the rest of the audience who in their right mind would actually do something like get involved with a bunch of sex-crazed maniacs to do filthy things in underground

basements. I kept telling myself I didn't have to stay. I didn't have to do anything I didn't want to. I was just going to stay long enough to find out what the deal was, then I would come away, think about it, and probably never step foot near this place again.

But already I was disarmed. This was no underground basement. This was an uptown townhouse, the foyer of which had been lusciously decorated with dark damask-print wallpaper, patent detailing around the door frames, black velvet curtains concealing exits and entrances, and giant crystal chandeliers dimmed to create a calm, seductive atmosphere. I couldn't hear any orgasmic cries or sweaty panting. In fact, I couldn't hear a thing; the place was silent apart from the soothing sound of ambient house music—a welcome refuge from the busy Manhattan streets.

“The ladies bathroom is through there if you'd like to freshen up,” the masked man said, pointing to a door. I remembered my drowned rat appearance thanks to the sudden downpour and gratefully pushed it open, fully prepared to spend a few moments screaming silently at my reflection in the mirror and questioning why on earth I'd agreed to this madness. But before I could do any of that, my jaw dropped. Instead of the blinding blackness of the foyer, the room I'd entered was a soothing white. White walls, white floors, white doors, white vanity units, white chandeliers. Apart from the antique bronze taps and the black Aesop toiletries, everything in the bathroom was a deliciously calming and ironically virginal white.

I took a few breaths and tried to settle my nerves. A console sat to the side of the vanity units, filled with an array of styling apparatus, creams and make-up. I selected a Dyson dryer and re-styled my hair, then I applied a little Nars concealer and Chanel lip gloss. Then I laid my coat carefully over one arm while I smoothed down my Hervé Léger bandage dress—an obscenely irrational purchase made especially for this outing. I had the self-esteem of a thirteen-year-old girl, but I was determined to make as much of an effort as I could. I would only get an invitation to a place like this once, and as much as it petrified me and as out of place as

I felt, I wanted to at least dress the part. I stared at myself in the mirror, not recognizing the woman staring back, but I could feel the clock ticking. I couldn't put this off any longer.

Just as I was about to leave the bathroom, something caught my eye. A small black piece of fabric hung on the back of the door. I picked it from the hook and passed the material through my fingers. It was a silk mask like the doorman had worn, as light as a feather and so slippery I almost dropped it. I turned back to the mirror and put the material over the top of my head and pulled it down in front of my face, remembering how the doorman wore his. The elasticated edge gripped my cheekbones and led to a velvet ribbon at the back, which I tied at the nape of my neck. At first I let out a smirk; I looked like Cat Woman with a little less flesh exposed and no ears. Then, as my eyes grew accustomed to the vision in the mirror, I realized how sexy it looked. My eyes and chin were visible, but I wouldn't have recognized myself in the street. It made me feel strangely comfortable and anonymous, as though I might actually be able to do this.

I emerged from the bathroom to an approving look from the doorman who steered me towards a desk bearing the word *Concierge* in the same bold, gold font as the *Decadence* logo on the business card. The woman behind the desk also nodded approvingly and I noticed she too wore the same slip of silk, and her hair tied back discreetly. She wore black, to match the décor, and had I looked at her from a distance I would have seen merely a small, delicate chin floating in mid-air.

“You must be S9ZEH,” she smiled warmly, and I instantly recognized her voice. “I'm so glad you came. I'm Candace, one of the Concierge team. Not my real name, of course, but I always wanted to be called Candace. From here on, you can be whoever you like. You don't need to have a name at all, if you'd prefer not to. You could be a letter or a number—totally up to you.”

I took a deep breath in. Nerves were raging through me and it took every ounce of focus I had to listen to what she was saying.

“You will be meeting with three members of the board. They will tell you exactly who we are and what we do here—as soon as you’ve signed our non-disclosure agreement—and they will answer any questions you have. They’re ready for you now, but you don’t have to go in just yet if…” her eyes flicked up and down my face, assessing my readiness, “if you’d like a few more minutes to think about it.”

I wanted to wait. I wanted to wait forever, to stay out here in the relative safety of the foyer. I was petrified. I’d never done anything like this before in my life. I’d become so used to just working and keeping my world so small no-one could really see inside it. I hadn’t had a boyfriend since I moved here four years ago. The closest thing I’d come to having sex with was my vibrator, which was not only gathering dust in the bottom of my bedside cabinet, but the batteries had probably run out a couple of years back. And somehow I’d found my way here, to an exclusive sex club where people wore face coverings and called each other by fake names. It was like something out of bad porn movie, only it wasn’t. There was something soothing and luxurious about the place. It was decadent. The name fit like a Saville Row tailored suit.

“No, I’ll go in now,” I heard myself say. Clearly, the memory of actually owning a vibrator had sent a new shock of reality into my core. *Don’t give her time to think*, Groin said to Brain. *Roger that*, Brain replied. *Move her along*, Mouth.

Candace smiled. A warm smile which was echoed in her eyes. “Come this way.”

She put a small hand to my back and steered me down a short corridor. Discreet downlights lit the way, barely, until we came to a door at the end. Candace knocked four times, waited a second, then turned the antiqued brass doorknob.

“Board members,” she announced. “I have our newest prospect here.”

She pushed the door and stood aside to let me pass but I felt frozen, like a rabbit in the headlights. Three people sat along one side of a large, black, oval shaped table, lit by an intricate crystal chandelier which stretched the entire length

and must be worth no less than a million dollars. I recalled the words of both Sienna and Candace. High charisma, high energy, high net worth individuals. That's who'd paid for the chandelier. And if this was only a meeting room, what was the rest of the place like? Then I panicked. How much did it cost to become a member here? Could I really go through the humiliation of turning down this opportunity because I wouldn't be able to afford it?

I felt Candace's hand on my back again and realized my silence and lack of movement were being noted with curiosity by the three pairs of eyes surveying me. I forced myself towards the lone chair at the opposite side of the table. I felt completely bare as I sat down on the black leather seat.

All three board members wore the same face coverings; it was like entering a scene in *Batman*, or *Eyes Wide Shut*. I shuddered. I still didn't know exactly what this place was, nor if it had the potential to expose me as a brazen hussy and ruin my career. I had nothing else to my name, and even that—my job—was hanging by a thread. If the fibers separated and the thread snapped, I'd be left with nothing. Nothing to do, no apartment to live in, nowhere else to go. The nerves rattled through me like a steam train, so loud I could barely hear what one of the committee members was saying.

"I'm sorry," I replied, in a small voice. "Can you repeat that?"

The person in the middle—a woman, similar in appearance to Candace, with the same tied-back hair, same slits for eyes, same conservatively painted mouth—smiled kindly and repeated her words.

"Welcome to Decadence. We're looking forward to telling you about us and, of course, getting to know you a little better."

I swallowed. My throat felt like sandpaper.

"But before we get to that, I need your autograph, here." She pointed to a document in front of me, headlined with the unmistakable words, *Declaration of Non-Disclosure*. "It's a

standard agreement, but feel free to run through the clauses. Take your time.”

My eyes went straight to work, speed-reading through the contract. I’d read so many of these in the last four years that I felt I was less in the business of making music and more in the business of secrets. Talent misdemeanors, PR cover-ups, new release embargoes—I wouldn’t be surprised if somewhere in the world there was an NDA for wiping someone’s backside.

My shoulders relaxed a little and I clicked the pen beside me, realizing it wasn’t just any old pen; it was a Mont Blanc Spider 1906, worth three thousand dollars. Now covered in my sweaty fingerprints. The NDA looked straightforward enough so I signed it and placed the pen back on the table, resisting the temptation to wipe it on my dress first. Then I looked up and, for the first time, allowed myself to see as much as I could of the three board members. The woman in the middle was smiling as she reached over to take the papers. She passed them to a man sitting to her left, who wasted no time in scrutinizing my signature and checking I’d initialed every page. He then looked up, also smiling.

“This gentleman here is the only one in the club who will know your name,” the woman said, clasping her hands together.

I looked across at him again. He had a nice mouth and was so clean-shaven he would have probably reflected light, if there was more of it in the room. I smiled back at him, feeling slightly more comfortable as each minute passed.

The woman spoke again. “Wonderful. Now...” She leaned her forearms along the table. I noticed a delicate gold Cartier bracelet gracing one of her wrists and, surprisingly, a giant diamond on her ring finger. Her nails were like daggers, painted immaculately in a deep crimson which matched her lips. I dragged my eyes away; I needed to focus. I needed to know exactly what I was getting involved in. “Let me tell you all about Decadence.”

I wriggled in the leather seat and tried to cross one knee over the other, pretending to be a lot more sophisticated than I

felt, but my gaze inadvertently flicked to the third person in the room and suddenly, everything seemed to still.

I felt hot, as though my face was flushing bright red and my skin was burning up. I dragged my focus back to the woman in the center, but my eyes insisted on returning to the man on her right. He was staring at me with an intensity that penetrated my skin. His expression, of what I could see, was neither warm nor cold; it was simply intense, as though if he looked away, I might slither back out of the room, never to have existed in the first place. He had a presence that took up half the room. The fact I'd entered the room petrified was the only possible explanation for why I hadn't been knocked backwards until now. His shoulders were thick, his chest rising and falling with an obvious tempo, his mouth set firm, framed by a light stubble across his jaw.

"I won't sugar coat this; you are a mature, intelligent young lady," the woman said, and I forced myself to look back at her. "Decadence is what you might call a sex club. But..." she held up a long straight finger, reminiscent of a primary school teacher. "It is a sex club like no other."

She had my full attention, despite the fact my face was burning up from the intensity of the man's stare.

"Decadence is not just a place to find pleasure, in private. It is a place for relaxation, away from the constraints of your public life. It is a place for exploration, for finding out who you really are, the person you perhaps never realized you could be."

She paused, allowing her words to sink in. Then she continued.

"We facilitate 'encounters' between our clients, based on a list of preferences you give us. Not just preferences you are familiar with, I must add, but preferences you might wish to explore. This is not the place to find your next husband. This a place to find your next fantasy."

My eyes wanted to stand out on stalks but I couldn't let on how nervous I was. I clamped my legs together and clenched everything, in a bid to stop myself from shaking.

“As a new member, you are allowed two encounters per month. If you enjoy your experiences and wish to enhance your membership, you may upgrade to four encounters per month. We have more than three thousand members and five houses in Manhattan where you can enjoy their company. The maximum number our members can upgrade to is six encounters in one month. We do not allow more than that as we have a carefully selected pool of clientele and we do not like there to be repeat ‘encounters’. Which brings me onto the rules.”

I nodded, trying to process everything she was saying.

“We have rules of course, which allow us not only to maintain our clients’ anonymity and privacy, but to protect and safeguard our clients. Our reputation relies on this, and so we are assertive in enforcing these rules.”

I felt the man to her right shift ever so slightly in his chair, releasing a little of his scent—a full, dark woody spice mixed with a strangely intoxicating body odor. I wondered why, out of the three of them sitting opposite me, I could only smell him.

“Number one,” the woman began, holding up the same finger. The more I looked at her, the more she reminded me of a comic book villain with her sharp talons, her full, pouting lips and her clipped New York twang. “We do not permit clients to meet the same ‘encounter’ twice. This is not a place for building relationships, for becoming intimate beyond the pleasures of sexual experience. We find it can be uncomfortable if one of the two parties hopes for more and the other doesn’t. We don’t entertain commitment here; only freedom.

“Rule number two. Under no circumstances must you reveal your name or any personal information about yourself to the person you encounter. This is to protect you. We perform full checks on each of our members and we are confident of the integrity of every single one, but our clients are human at the end of the day, and humans can be unpredictable. We are driven by feelings we’re not always in control of. We help you to manage those feelings by putting in

place these rules. They are there to protect you from yourselves.”

She said those last words with a warm smile, as though she was talking to a child who'd just been strapped into a stroller for their own safety.

“Finally, rule number three.” A third long finger stood to attention alongside the other two and I marveled at how otherworldly they seemed. Everything about this place seemed way out of my league, from the million dollar light fitting, to the now-soiled Mont Blanc pen, to the impeccably manicured woman sitting opposite me, to the furnace-inspiring man to her right.

“You must never show your full face. This...” she pointed one of the long fingers and circled it towards my head, “... remains on your face the entire time you meet with any of your encounters. You wear it as you enter the clubhouses; you do not allow anyone to see you without your face covered. You must always wear your drape.”

“Drape?”

“That is what we call them. Not masks—we are not participating in a carnival. These are drapes: decadent pieces of silk designed to conceal distinguishing features without being intrusive or uncomfortable. They are made of the finest silk so they are extremely light and breathable, and our members report that they do not provide a distraction. In fact, these drapes often serve to enhance the experience of an encounter, providing an additional layer of mystery.”

“Finally, while it is not a rule, per se, we do discourage kissing. Kissing triggers emotions and there is no place for emotion in our club, only desire and fulfilment. We find that when members kiss, they become attached and, as I mentioned earlier, that can be uncomfortable for one or both parties if those emotions and feelings are not reciprocated. As I also mentioned, we do not permit the sharing of personal details or repeat ‘encounters’ so, the inciting of emotion through the act of kissing is, quite frankly, pointless.”

I thanked God that at that moment half my face was covered so the three people couldn't see my eyebrows raised up to my hairline. She made it sound so incredibly clinical.

“What about hair?” I asked. My hair was hanging loose down my back but I noticed both Candace and this woman had their tied up neatly in a bun at the nape of their necks.

“We prefer all clients—men and women—to keep their hair tidy and out of view while they are walking freely around the houses. When you are inside one of our rooms, you are free to untie your hair and do whatever you like with it. But hair can be a distinguishing feature so we advise you to only let your hair down, so to speak, if you feel one hundred percent comfortable.”

“Right,” I replied. The reality was starting to sink in, slowly. It was undeniable. I was inside a sex club—an actual sex club—talking about rules and desire and fantasy. And I was seriously considering becoming a member. I felt at once knee-bucklingly embarrassed, and intensely liberated. I took another deep breath.

“Can I ask...” I said, quietly. “The membership fee. What do I need to pay?”

This time, the man to her left spoke. “This is where you get to thank your recruiter, Sienna. All our recruiters have a very small number of free introductory spaces to give. We need to keep a regular influx of new members to satisfy some of our higher paying clients; we need continual variety.”

For some reason, my gaze was drawn back to the man on the right, and for a fraction of a second, he blinked away. But I saw it. Was he one of those ‘clients’? Even though he was a member of the board? I assumed they were entitled to use the very service they were selling.

“For whatever reason,” the man continued, “Sienna felt you were deserving of one of those codes.”

I raised an eyebrow, inwardly. I knew exactly why Sienna felt I was deserving. I just wished she'd been nicer about it.

“Therefore, you have received a complimentary three months’ membership. After that, if you wish to continue, we charge a minimum fee of eight thousand dollars a month.”

I sucked in a breath. I should have guessed. A place like this, offering a service this specialized, this protected, wasn’t going to come cheap. The three board members heard my gasp and I noticed the man on the left sneaking a glance at the man on the right, whose eyes still wouldn’t leave my own, but another slight shift in his weight upon the seat communicated some small discomfort.

“It, erm,” the other man continued, slightly flustered. “The fee can be negotiable. To a point.”

“Of course,” I said, amazed my voice still worked.

“Would you like me to show you around?” The woman asked, moving the topic along.

“Um, sure,” I replied, feeling quite the opposite.

“First things first,” she said, reaching for a small box on the table and pulling out a black hair band. She rose to her feet and walked round to my chair, stopping right behind me.

“I need to tie up your hair. Do you mind?”

I shook my head, feeling suddenly childlike, remembering how my mom used to comb my hair and tie it back into all kinds of styles. I’d always had long hair. Long, thick chestnut hair that routinely refused to be tamed, hence the avoidance of a hairdryer for so long.

As she pulled her fingers through my hair, I glanced again—as though my eyes were programmed—to the man who was on her right. He was sitting taller than before and his breath had quickened. I had no idea how I knew this; I hadn’t been keeping tabs on his posture or speed of breath, just the rise and fall of his chest.

I felt her hands run through the long strands, picking up stray pieces that tickled the base of my neck. It felt weirdly sensual. There I was, sitting in a dark room with a mask over my face, with three other masked people, talking about sex as though it was a simple pleasure-money transaction, having my

hair tousled by another woman. She pulled the band from her fingers and fastened my hair in a low knot at the nape of my neck. I felt her nails trace the skin across the top of my shoulders and I shivered beneath them. Everyone in the room saw.

“I’ll stay back here,” said the NDA man. “It was nice meeting you. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

The woman looked pointedly at the other man whose eyes had been burning a hole in my neck the entire time my hair was being styled. “Are you staying here or coming with us?”

He cleared his throat—the first sign I got that he had a voice at all. When he did speak I was stunned. Not because of what he said—the words “I’ll come with you” were hardly flooring—but the way he said them. With a British accent.

The man was British, like me. My head spun to face him and he caught it, a slight twinge of recognition crossing his face the way it does when you meet someone who went to the same school as you a few years earlier. You don’t know each other but you instantly have something in common. That must have been why he couldn’t stop staring, I decided. He’d recognized me as a fellow Brit. That was the only explanation.

I followed the woman out of the room, feeling the heat of the man behind beating down on my back. He was walking close to me, too close. The smell of him was intoxicating. I put it down to the mystery and sexual tension flying around me, with the mask, the darkness, the woman’s hands in my hair. I heard voices up ahead getting louder, then a couple appeared, both wearing the designated drapes and non-descript hairstyles. As they came closer I felt a large hand cup my hip, pulling me gently towards the wall. The couple strode past, thanking us, but I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t form a thought, let alone a sentence. I wanted that hand to stay at my side forever. It felt as though his touch burned straight through my dress to the bare skin beneath. Minutes seemed to pass before I realized I’d stopped mid-stride. His hand was still on my hip, burning, and his breath caught in my ear. The woman had walked ahead and turned a corner leaving me alone

momentarily with the British man, the man whose hand was turning my skin inside out.

“I...” I gasped, staring straight ahead.

The woman re-appeared and jerked her head in the other direction. The eye slits in the drapes were so small I couldn't make out her expression, but her movements suggested she wasn't at all surprised by my behavior. I pushed myself away from the wall, reluctantly feeling the large hand fall away from my hip, leaving a cold, bare mark in its place.

I followed the woman, mechanically, along another corridor and up a small stairwell lined with tiny lights illuminating each step. As I reached the top, I felt his fingertips brush against mine sending tendrils of heat up the veins in my arm. I'd never had such a visceral reaction to anyone before in my life. Then again, I'd never visited anywhere so sensually decorated, to wear, and be shown around by people wearing, a slip of silk over my face. The gently lit darkness, the soft ambient beats playing from discreetly located speakers, and the decadence of the silk I could hide behind like a cowardly troll on Twitter, combined to create a deliciously seductive atmosphere in which I felt in control of my destiny—something I hadn't felt for a very long time.

We followed the woman through to a circular room with a bar placed right in the center.

“This is the House Bar,” the woman said, as I arrived beside her. “Feel free to come here anytime. Even if you don't have an encounter for the night, it's a place to come and relax, to meet members you might like to encounter. You can take note of their chosen name and make a request at the Concierge desk. Or, you can simply enjoy their company for an evening, no strings attached. It's really very informal.”

I nodded.

“Down there...” the woman pointed to a long corridor that ran off the far end of the room, “...are the spaces we provide for encounters to happen.” She turned to face me. If I could see her eyebrows I'd have sworn she'd just arched one,

conspiratorially. There was a reason she'd said 'spaces' and not 'rooms'. I didn't need to wait long for her to elaborate.

"Each space is furnished like a hotel suite, complete with a seating area, a small kitchenette, a window looking out over the city, a bed... of course. Along with other furnishings that may help to enhance our members' experience of the evening."

I nodded again. I really didn't know what to say. I felt strangely empowered by the effect this place was having on me but, at the end of the day, I was still being given the grand tour of a sex club. A sex club of which I was apparently now a member.

"I've taken the liberty of arranging an encounter for you this evening," she said, smiling. My heart stopped and thudded to the floor right there, and I fought the urge to spin around and look into the eyes of the man behind me. And I had no idea why; he was hardly likely to help me. This was the whole point of the club—to provide opportunities for complete strangers to meet and have sex. He had a vested interest in those encounters being successful, so they would continue and the membership fees would be paid, and his pockets would be lined. Despite that, I heard the rhythm of his breathing pick up, and I felt tension oozing out of his lungs in long controlled breaths.

"I have your key here. Room eight. Are you ready?"

I stared back at her in disbelief. This was it? I was going to have sex with a stranger, right here and right now? With a man my pheromones were clearly obsessed with standing just inches away from me? My brain was reeling so my damn body took over again. *Fingers, grab the keys. Feet, start walking. Eyes, focus.* Before I knew it, I was moving in the direction the woman had pointed, away from the man I'd felt an inexplicable connection to, towards another who was expecting sex from me any minute now.

This wasn't my life. It wasn't possible. In the space of one hour, with a piece of silk gauze over my face and a manicured hand running through my hair, I'd become a different person.

As I reached the door and placed the large key inside the lock, I looked back. The man with the British accent was still standing there, filling the corridor, his shoulders almost touching each wall, his legs planted firmly into the floor, his chest rising up and down. I had no idea who he was. All I knew was I'd had one taste of his chemistry, through the tips of our fingers, and I was drowning in it. I dipped my head and turned the key, stepping away from him and towards another.

CHAPTER FOUR



At first the room felt bright, from the street lights below. Otherwise, the room itself was just as dark as everywhere else I'd seen in this place. My eyes scanned the room looking for my 'encounter' but landed on nothing, apart from everything you'd expect from a nice hotel suite. I walked quietly through the rooms, finding a vast charcoal bathroom and another, smaller room lined with floor to ceiling cabinets, with a pole in the center.

I walked to one of the cabinets and opened it. Inside were several glass boxes, each housing a different sex toy, or what I assumed were sex toys—I had never been in a position to experiment with the few past boyfriends I'd had, so I wouldn't know half of these items if they walked up and slapped me on the ass. I closed the doors and walked back out to the main suite and pressed my forehead against the window, looking down at the streets below. I felt my breath hit the glass, cooling my skin as it ricocheted back to me. I needed it. I needed to cool down.

The man I'd left out in the corridor had left his mark on me when he cupped my hip and brushed my fingers. I knew the atmosphere was designed to be conducive to heightened senses and sexual energy but I knew there was an attraction, despite us not being able to see each other's faces. I didn't want some stranger to walk through the door; I wanted *him*. But, I reasoned, even if I was able to have an encounter with him, it could only happen once. I'd heard the rules loud and clear. I cared for my anonymity and my safety; I didn't want to

break any rules, especially when I already felt so out of my depth.

In the corner of my eye I noticed a flashing red light. I left the window and walked towards it. It was coming from a security camera located high on the wall facing the bed. I almost laughed out loud. Of course members would be watched. I would have been completely naïve to think no-one would check on the encounters as they happened, maybe even linger on some of them for kicks. The thought both repulsed and intrigued me. I didn't have an exhibitionist bone in my body. That was why I worked on the business side of show-business.

I eyed the camera suspiciously as I walked around the bed. When it moved, I stopped and swallowed hard. I was being watched right there, in that moment. By who? Could the man in the corridor have access to the cameras? I decided there and then, for the sake of my own pleasure for the next hour or however long it would be, that yes, he did. And regardless of who my designated encounter was for the evening, I would perform instead for *him*.

I reached a hand behind my head, staring straight into the camera, and felt around for the band holding my hair in its knot. Then I tugged it free, letting the long waves cascade around my shoulders. I walked back towards the window, feeling the camera move with me. I hoped he was on the other side, looking down the lens, watching my every move.

The sound of another key in the door made me turn and press my back against the window. My whole body shook with nerves. A man entered the room. He was slender, maybe a foot taller than me. He wasn't the man in the corridor. He wasn't the man who could be watching me from behind the camera. The door clicked shut and he turned to face me. I didn't know what to do, what to say, so I just stayed where I was, shaking, feeling the camera zooming in on me. He took long strides towards the window and stopped, his chest just inches from mine. His eyes were dark, his lips full and youthful. He couldn't have been more than a couple of years older than me and I couldn't help but wonder who he was, what he did for a

living, who he might have had waiting at home for him. I glanced down at his hands and, to my relief, saw no metal glittering up at me. He moved closer until I could feel his breath hot against my collarbone.

I looked over his shoulder and caught the eye of the camera; it was still zoned in on me. I placed a hand on the man's chest, feeling its pulse against my palm. Thankfully, I wasn't the only one for whom nerves were overriding flesh. I felt his fingers tug at my dress, inching it upwards. It tickled and I had to grit my teeth together to stop myself from giggling. I couldn't focus; my head was in tatters. Here I was, in a strange room, with a strange man, about to do things I hadn't done in years, with someone else watching. My heart pounded at the base of my throat, but it wasn't long before my hyperactive thoughts were eclipsed by the sensation of someone's fingers against my lace underwear.

I gasped, letting my head fall back, uncontrollably, against the window. I couldn't believe I was doing this. I was in the hands of a total stranger, whose name I'd never know, in a blackened building no-one knew existed. My head spun as his fingers worked their way around the fabric of my panties and into my soft, damp flesh. I let out a long, pent-up moan. It had been years. As he found a rhythm with his palm, I pulled my head forward to focus on his zipper. Despite the lack of practice, I knew instinctively what I had to do, which was fortunate, as I needed the autopilot. I worked his pants down over his hips, letting them drop to the floor, and reached inside his boxers. Then it was his turn to moan.

I wrapped my hand around his length, pulling it gently towards me in a languid, flowing movement. His fingers turned lazy as I worked over him, his breath jerking out in short gasps against my ear. I found myself moving against his hand, my body overriding my shyness, and looked up into the camera.

"How do you want me?" My voice sounded different, smoky and deep. Who was this stranger? Not the stranger with his fingers moving inside me, but the person who was staring into the eye of a lens while stroking someone's cock. The

camera moved to its left. The bed. Whoever was watching was talking to me, directing me, telling me where to go. A wave of lust crashed through me, taking me completely by surprise.

Before I could attempt to do as the camera said, the man before me dropped to his knees. My dress was already pushed up over my hips, my panties pushed idly to one side. I gasped hard at the sudden absence of friction and wriggled restlessly. Ignoring my need for urgency, he reached up and took hold of each side of my panties, slowly pulling them down my thighs until they landed softly on the floor. He stepped me out of them, holding my legs apart by the ankles. Then he brought his mouth to my core. I cried out in relief, looking back at the camera. It was square on me again. I imagined it was *him*—*his* hands anchoring me to the floor, *his* tongue flicking back and forth across me, *his* lips cupping me and sucking softly. Whoever this was, the man between my legs, he'd had a lot of practice—whatever he was doing felt amazing. Then again, I didn't have a lot to compare it to.

My hands found his head and I ran my fingers along his drape, feeling the silk shimmering against my skin. Still, I stared into the lens, wanting the man I'd left behind in the corridor. I imagined lifting my legs over *his* thick shoulders, nestling *his* mouth between my thighs. I imagined *his* electric fingers cupping my ass as he rocked me to a long drawn out climax. I pictured *his* face as I straddled him, *his* lips parted with need, *his* eyes closing as I sank down onto him.

The man's tongue circled me in rhythm with his fingers and I felt the blood rush to my core, throbbing for release.

"Fuck me," I panted, as my orgasm rose up and out of my core. My entire body shook against the glass as I glued my eyes to the camera, making sure *he* saw everything. I was emboldened because it was a fantasy. No-one would ever know I was here; no-one would ever know who the person was behind the drape. Like this, I could perform for a camera; I could let myself go.

The man got to his feet with a look of triumph glinting out from beneath his drape. I smiled in gratitude then nodded towards the bed. I knew there were other rooms, other

apparatus, other things we could do and use, but I wanted to stay here, on the bed, near the camera. I wanted *him* to see everything, to be a part of this. The man kicked off his boxers and pulled me across him. I heard the buzz of the camera as it followed us, but I now had my back to it. I needed to face it.

I turned away from the man on the bed and positioned myself above him, cowgirl style, ready to sink down. I heard the snap of latex and felt him nudge at my entrance, letting me know he was ready. I looked up and stared directly into the lens as I lowered myself slowly onto his cock. I circled my hips as I moved, eliciting a series of gruff moans. He was long but not thick, but I didn't need perfection; I had the camera and my imagination for that. I let the lids of my eyes close for a second, savoring the sensation I hadn't felt for four years—another human being inside me. A hand reached up to my zipper and pulled slowly, the sound piercing the otherwise silent air. The dress came loose around my torso and I pulled it over my head, revealing a brand new Lejaby bra. With its delicate gold lace and minuscule ribbons it seemed too innocent and flawless to be in a room like this. I was defiling my own bra.

The camera had trained itself on me and it watched as I moved, circling my hips, drawing out tortured moans from the man beneath me. I sat up tall and pulled my hands through my hair, lengthening my stomach, pushing up my breasts. Something had taken over me; this was so far out of character I may as well have been a different person. I was so entranced by the way my body was moving of its own accord, relishing the attention of the lens, imagining the man whose hands had burned a hole through the fabric of my dress, that I jumped with surprise when the man beneath me pushed me off.

“Bend over,” he ordered, gruffly. I didn't have a chance to reply before he pushed me forward so hard my elbows almost gave away. He kicked my knees apart roughly and re-entered me, going deeper than before. I gasped with the sudden, unpleasant intrusion.

“This is more like it,” he growled, in a thick accent I couldn't place.

He withdrew halfway then he slapped himself into me, then repeated the movement, hard and fast, like a jack hammer. My breasts spilled over the top of my bra and bounced back and forth as he pummeled me, and I pressed my lips closed so as not to betray the sound of air being pushed out of my lungs in short, sharp gasps. It took all of my strength to stay upright on my arms as he pounded away, faster and faster, harder and harder. It was the worst sex of my life, bar none. Even losing my virginity was not as one-sided and as humiliating as this. I couldn't look at the camera—I couldn't lift my head up against the force of the man behind me, so I hung it down in shame.

Finally, a noise sounded from behind me. A deep growl brewing inside him. He was coming. It burst into a loud roar and with one, two, three fast thrusts, he filled the condom and collapsed across my back.

It took me a few seconds to catch my breath and when I looked up at the camera it had turned away. My heart drummed. The show hadn't gone at all the way I'd hoped. I'd wanted it to be sensual, mutually satisfying, a pleasure to watch. But instead it had been dramatically one-sided, with jack rabbit behind me literally sprinting through the motions, and deeply embarrassing. Reality slapped me in the face, hard. The impression I'd had of being a member of this club was vastly off the mark. I'd been lured into a dark, mysterious world full of lustful promise, only to have the truth of it hammered into me like a drill. It was sex in its rawest, barest form. It wasn't connection; it was selfish fulfilment. Each party was responsible for their own satisfaction, whichever way it could be achieved. I'd had my turn, then it was his. A transaction.

I ignored the pain searing through my groin as I climbed off the bed. He'd already pulled on his boxers and pants while I stood there, uneasily, only partially dressed in a gold lace bra with ribbons. He straightened his drape, although there was really no need to; these things stayed uncannily in place, as though they'd been designed especially for this. Duh. He stepped up to me and ran a small thumb across my cheek.

“Thanks for the fuck,” he said, placing his lips on the side of my face. “Welcome to the club.”

I stayed where I was, staring out of the window, as I heard the door close behind me. I’d gone from feeling empowered, sexy and in control, to feeling cheap, dirty and used. I hadn’t enjoyed it and that would have been obvious to anyone watching. I’d been stupid to expect that the sex would be anything other than gratuitous fulfilment. I remembered the woman’s words: *There is no place for emotion in our club, only desire and fulfilment.* And that’s exactly what it had been. But what bothered me more was the fact someone had seen it. Whomever had watched had been so repulsed by the show, they’d turned the camera away.

It might have been *him*.

I felt humiliated. If it had been him, how would he feel about me now? That couldn’t have looked sexy—me bouncing around the bed like a ping pong ball, completely helpless against the pounding of a man on a selfish mission to get his climax. I felt stupid. That was it. Just plain, fucking stupid. But what did I expect?

It dawned on me; I’d been so desperate for an escape from my own miserable life, I’d created completely unrealistic expectations of what was ultimately a seedy underworld.

Forget the man with the thick shoulders and the heaving chest. He was a part of this too—this unrealistic façade. The chemistry I thought I’d felt had all been part of the mirage. I didn’t know the guy, I couldn’t even *see* the guy. He was just an image I’d built up in my head, aided by the heady cocktail of darkness and disguise.

No, I was better than that. I wasn’t going to be sucked into a world of faceless, heartless, rhythmless sex. I would get new batteries for my vibrator and that was where my experimentation would end. I repeated this to myself over and over as I pulled on my obscenely expensive dress and covered my shame with my jacket, buttoning it up tight.

I was never going to step foot in this place again. I was going to forget the whole thing ever happened. Sienna and

Candace and the man from the board could all go to hell. I twisted my key in the lock and opened the door, determined not to look back. But as soon as I stepped into the corridor, my resolve disappeared. Two doors down, leaning back with his head against the wall, was *him*.

As the door clicked shut, he snapped his head up and looked at me. It was only as he straightened and filled the corridor again, sucking all the light into his silhouette, I noticed the tension throughout his body. I walked slowly towards him, alarmed at the rigidity of his stance. He was literally clenching all over. His muscles jutted out of his suit jacket, his thighs strained against his pants, his jaw ticked angrily. I pressed myself against the wall to move past him but he didn't budge. So I allowed myself one last look at his face. It was pointless; I was never going to see him again. Plus, I'd already agreed with myself, the whole thing—meeting him, feeling the strange chemistry in his fingertips and against my hip—had been nothing but an idealistic fantasy. My brain was adamant, stepping into protection mode after the humiliation it had just endured. But maybe that was the whole point, my body argued. Maybe a fantasy world was what I needed. They were both silenced as I caught a glimpse of his eyes through the slits. They were dark and angry.

“I'm sorry that happened to you,” he said, his voice low and rough. “Most encounters are better than that.”

I swallowed a gasp. He had been watching. I hadn't been sure but I'd performed anyway. Feelings of lust and embarrassment swarmed in my blood. Then his fingers touched mine. His eyelids closed briefly as the shock of electricity passed through us, then they opened and speared me.

“Let me make it up to you.”

“I don't know...” I started to shake my head but his fingers moved up to clasp my jaw and held me firm.

“You deserve better than that,” he bit out. “I'll show you.”

After an eternity, he released my face and stepped aside. I felt suddenly free and alone, and I didn't like it. I felt

vulnerable, as though I needed someone to hold me up. But I forced myself to step back and take a breath.

“You’ll receive an email,” he said. Then, to my retreating back, he added: “Bring a change of clothes. You’ll be staying the night.”

A gasp caught in my throat as I forced myself to walk away. I had no intention of coming back, despite his assurances. I was not cut out for this; I was not cut out for him. He was too much—his presence was too overbearing, his masculinity too frightening. He’d seen things I’d never in a million years want anyone to see, yet he still wanted to make it up to me somehow. It didn’t make any sense. It was fiction. It was over.

I RELISHED the hit of damp air against my skin as I walked down the street. Being outside helped. I’d been unwittingly sucked into a secret world—one I realized I didn’t want to be a part of. I would chalk it down to experience, and maybe one day it would be a cool story to tell at parties, to close friends who wouldn’t judge me. And the man at the center of the mirage? He would remain as exactly that—part of a mirage. Maybe he’d appear in my dreams, my fantasies, if I ever really did resurrect my vibrator.

As I walked down the street putting more distance between me and the man in the mirage with every step, something tugged at my flesh. By the time I’d reached the end of the block, the truth had punched me square in the face. He was more than a fantasy. He was a promise that a fantasy could come true. His thick claws had reached inside and taken hold of my skin. My only hope now was that he’d be the one to forget.

CHAPTER FIVE



“Not Ted’s Bar,” Carlos wagged a finger in my face as he stepped into my apartment.

“I can’t think of anywhere else to go,” I whined, watching him march across to my cocktail cabinet—a loose description seeing as it housed more bills and dead plants than actual cocktail ingredients—and slam down a bottle of sauvignon blanc.

“Attaboy,” he clipped, swiping away a small pile of decaying leaves.

“I’m a girl if you hadn’t noticed,” I replied. “And what are you looking for?”

“Attaboy is a bar. What are you, a senior? Bottle opener.”

I reached into one of the drawers of my tiny Manhattan kitchenette and handed him a corkscrew.

“Never heard of it.”

“That’s because you haven’t ventured further than East Sixth Street since you were a talent scout. And that was, what, three years ago? Consider this a well-needed education.”

“I thought it was my birthday, not school,” I huffed. “And I’m not a senior, but I am now a whole year older. You should be nicer to me.”

“I brought wine. That was nice.” Carlos popped the cork and poured two large glasses of wine, handing one to me and nodding his instruction to drink it with some urgency.

I took a large mouthful, realizing it was actually delicious and Carlos must have bought a posh one—i.e. spent a small fortune. “Fine,” I said. “If I nominate you Teacher of the Year, will you be a little nicer?” I took another mouthful of wine.

“There’s a limit to how nice I can be, you know. A) You’re my boss, and B) You don’t have a dick.”

Thankfully I managed to spit the wine back into my glass. Carlos would have had something to say if it had hit the floor and gone to waste.

“You’re incorrigible,” I smiled.

“That’s why you love me.” He leaned forward and gave me a huge kiss on the lips. It was the first I’d had in a while. Even the last man I fucked had managed to refrain from planting his lips on mine. I shuddered, wishing I could forget the whole jack rabbit incident. Three days had passed since my evening at Decadence, but I still felt the shame and embarrassment acutely. I could never tell anyone about it, not even my closest friends. It was mortification of the highest caliber. I was grateful when a knock at the door relieved me of my own thoughts.

“Darling! Happy birthday!” Sheridan wrapped her arms around my neck, clinking two bottles behind my head. “I know I only saw you about an hour ago but, happy birthday honey!”

“Thanks babe,” I said, closing the door behind her.

“What’s that?” Carlos asked, his face contorted into a grimacing point, like a mouse whose cheese had been laced with arsenic.

“Carrot juice,” Sheridan replied, defiantly.

“Is there some sort of champagne mixer I don’t know about?” He said, spotting the other bottle in her hand and narrowing his eyes. “Carrot Royale? Hareperol Spritz?”

Sheridan pushed him, playfully. “I’m trying to be healthy. I spotted about three new lines on my forehead today. I need to overdose on vitamin C. What are you drinking?”

“Wine,” Carlos and I both answered in unison.

“Wine doesn’t make you younger,” she said, glaring at us both.

“Neither does carrot juice,” we both said at the same time.

Sheridan’s eyes moved accusingly between the two of us, as we each brought the glasses of delicious grape elixir to our lips.

“Ugh.” She plonked both bottles down on the cabinet and grabbed another glass. “You win. Wine it is.”

TWO HOURS LATER, we arrived at Attaboy and settled into one of the booths.

“I can’t believe you’ve dragged us out to Brooklyn,” Sheridan moaned.

“And I can’t believe you’ve never been to this bar before,” he shot back. “You’re the marketing VP of a hip and happening indie label—you should be acquainted with all the hot bars, most of which are here, in my very own neighborhood, of course.”

He paused to order us a round of cocktails that, if we were left to our own devices, we’d never have been able to pronounce the names of.

“Don’t worry,” Carlos said, noticing the alarm etched across Sheridan’s face. “They’re made with pineapple and mango. Plenty of vitamin C.”

She smiled back at him, sarcastically. “How do you do it then, Carlos?” She leaned across the table towards him. “How do you stay so slim and young-looking? I need your secrets.”

“Well,” he began. “I don’t exercise, for a start.”

“Not at all?” I asked, genuinely surprised. Everyone I knew in Manhattan exercised. Often at a swanky gym. At 5am. Every morning. Except me.

“God no,” he replied, looking authentically disgusted. “My sex life provides me with all the exercise I need.”

Sheridan looked at me with undisguised envy. “I hate him sometimes.”

“What do you mean?” Carlos fired at her. “Haven’t you got back in the saddle after Mr. Italy?”

Sheridan smiled with relief as a waiter placed three iced glasses filled with colorful, and no doubt lethal, liquid on the table. “Yes, I am back in the saddle, darling,” she replied, with a sarcastic note. “I just haven’t found a horse I’d like to mount on a regular basis.”

I squeezed her hand sympathetically. We all knew how much of an ass Mattio Russo, aka Mr. Italy, had been to Sheridan, but she’d kept going back for more, regardless of how many times he lied, cheated and behaved appallingly. She swore she was only in it for the sex, but once she finally did call it a day, she couldn’t climb out of her bathrobe for two weeks.

She looked at me with innocent, appealing eyes. “I’m worried he’s spoiled my expectations forever.”

We’d all heard how hugely he was hung, how athletic he was in the bedroom, how relentless he was in the pursuit of her pleasure. But he was still an ass at the end of the day.

I nodded, not really knowing what to say. Ass or not, Mr. Italy had given my forty-eight year old friend more sex than I’d seen in a lifetime, let alone the last four years.

“What about you?” Sheridan said, ignoring Carlos’ shaking head.

“Don’t bother asking Miss Chastity over there. The only four posts that get any action from her are those she scrolls through on Phoenix Music’s Instagram feed.”

I rolled my eyes, trying not to laugh. His observation was entirely true, except for the one hideous experience I’d had only days ago at the secret sex club. But I was determined it would remain exactly that: a secret. A secret I wished with all my heart I could forget. But despite my days being filled with

back-to-back meetings, repeated calls from Cherry Tatum and her pathetically inept manager, and demands for the latest figures from the suits on the top floor, my nights had become tormentingly empty—a wasteland. Barren, but for one signpost pointing to a lone black door and the man who stood behind it.

As it turned out, I hadn't needed to resurrect my vibrator. Not when I had the memory of his touch, his fingertips, his black eyes beneath the drape, his gaze behind the lens. As much as I'd tried to put him out of my mind, the man from the club would not stay away. He loomed in my thoughts, in my dreams, my fantasies. It had been four days and the promise of an encounter had not yet come to fruition. At the very least, I was safe, and my secret was too.

"He's right," I said, smacking my lips. "Especially when I still have these issues going on with Cherry. I don't have the mental capacity to deal with my next dental appointment, let alone an actual living, breathing man."

"Well," Carlos said. "You've started to put your foot down with Cherry. I think that's a great start. Once the other acts see you not taking any more of her shit, they may stop acting up too."

"They're not all bad..." I argued.

"But they're not all great, either. They could be doing a lot more to earn their keep. Honestly, I think some of these young musicians expect platinum records and Grammy awards to grow on trees."

"Second that," Sheridan added.

"Do you have a plan?" Carlos asked. They'd made suggestions until they were both blue in the face but I hadn't been ready to admit to my failings, let alone face them.

"I don't know. I want to end her contract, get her out, but she brings in money. Not a lot, that's for sure, but she brings it in. The board will kill me if I put a dent in that. I need to find a way to compensate for any losses."

“What about Ayda?” Carlos asked. “Her next single is going to be huge. Everyone’s saying so.”

“But she’s so new,” I replied, shaking my head despondently. “The board won’t take me seriously if I suggest I can reap everything I lose by sacking Cherry and replacing the loss with a brand new, unproven act.”

I took a long sip of cocktail, still feeling helpless but at least a little fuzzier.

“But,” I added, looking between the two of them, “I need to be less afraid of the consequences of standing up to her, and stop meeting her ridiculous demands. I’m refining her contract at the moment, making it crystal clear she will be in breach of contract if she kicks off in public or if she refuses to do a gig. I was way too soft in the early days; I had too much sympathy for these small indie acts. But I’ve come to understand they want this as much as, if not more than me. But they can’t have everything handed to them on a silver platter; they have to work and they have to be fair.

“Good on you,” Sheridan said, tapping her glass against mine. “It still amazes me that some acts can’t be bothered to work for the fame. They don’t make ‘em like they used to...”

“If you go on one more time about Tina Turner always being the last to leave the studio,” warned Carlos, “I will confiscate your cocktail.”

Sheridan held up her hands. “Jus’ sayin’.”

She got to her feet and squeezed out of the booth.

“For what it’s worth,” Carlos said, stirring a silver stick around his glass, “I’m proud of you for recognizing that something has to change.”

“I’ve known it a while, Carlos. I don’t know why it’s taken me so long to do something about it.”

“Simple,” he answered, with a flourish of his hand. “You’re exhausted, and you haven’t been looking after yourself. You’ve been working like a maniac, then drowning your sorrows in that hovel on Avenue C every night. It isn’t healthy. I don’t know what’s changed in the last week but

you're different. It's like something's clicked and you're not going to take any shit anymore."

I opened my mouth to protest but he talked over me in classic Carlos style.

"I'm not going to ask who it is but someone's got under your skin; it's the only explanation for why you've been turning up to the office looking like Anne Hathaway in *The Devil Wears Prada*—*post* makeover."

"There isn't anyone," I managed, finally.

Carlos stared at me, as though he was trying to read behind my eyes. He sighed in defeat.

"Well, if it's not a somebody, it's a state of mind. Something must have changed for you to finally face up to this. Look..." he took hold of my hands. "Whatever it is, I'm glad it's happened. We need more of this Diana Delaney," he said, nodding his eyes up and down my figure.

"Thanks Carlos. I fully intend for this Diana Delaney to stay," I replied, silently adding that it would be a Diana Delaney *sans* sex club secrets and thoughts about forbidden men in dark suits and black face coverings.

Right at that moment, Sheridan reappeared, disguised by three burning sparklers wedged into a fluffy chocolate cake. She unashamedly launched into a loud, off-key rendition of Happy Birthday while I tried unsuccessfully to fold myself in half and slide beneath the table. When the agony of being stared at by every pair of eyes in Manhattan's hippest bar had subsided, I cut into the cake and heaped portions onto plates for the three of us.

"What took you so long?" Carlos moaned, passing around spoons.

"I went to the ladies room," Sheridan pouted. "Fresh lippy and all that. You never know who we might run into."

Carlos eyed us both, curiously.

"Did you know," he mused, prodding the cake with his spoon. "By the time you reach seventy, you will have

swallowed between seventy and a hundred ounces of lipstick?”

I stared back at him. “How would you even know that?”

Sheridan took his word for it, unquestioning. “That explains why I can’t fit into a size ten dress,” she replied, shoveling cake into her mouth.

“I read Cosmo,” Carlos shrugged.

“You read women’s magazines?”

“Business, not pleasure,” he winked, and I couldn’t argue with him. As the label’s Head of Talent, he needed to know what was going on in all things popular culture.

“Well, I’m pleased to hear you’re keeping up with your on-the-job education, Carlos,” I grinned.

My phone buzzed on the table and an unrecognized email address appeared on the screen.

Carlos raised an eyebrow, asking me a million questions without uttering a word. I picked up the phone, shielding the screen from them both, and opened the message. My heart suddenly thrummed.

Your company has been requested by one of our clients for the evening of July fourteenth. A suite has been reserved in House Five at nine p.m. Please arrive promptly.

If you do not wish to accept this invitation, please email the Concierge.

Sincerely, your hosts.

“Is everything ok, Di?” Sheridan asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I nodded, lost for words.

“It’s the mystery man,” Carlos winked.

I felt Sheridan’s confused, uninformed eyes on me.

“There is no mystery man,” I assured her, but a part of me—an unquestionably large, undeniably astute, deafeningly adamant part of me—knew I was lying. I’d been waiting for

this. I hadn't needed my vibrator anymore because this was enough. The anticipation, the unfettered desire, the aching want, for a man I'd performed for once and kissed never.

I was going to have one night. One night with a man I'd felt more chemistry with than any other human being in my life. One night only. Who was I kidding? I wasn't going to miss this for the world.

CHAPTER SIX



I took one more glance at the invitation sent to my new personal email address. It looked unmistakably official with the word DECADENCE emblazoned in large glossy letters across the top.

I slipped my phone into my handbag and stared at the discreet silver number five on the door in front of me. Then I tugged the drape down over my face and pressed the buzzer. A second later, the door opened and a man also wearing a drape let me in. House Five was indistinguishable from House One. The walls were painted black and long ebony velvet curtains hung over every doorway, concealing sights and sounds, apart from the familiar ambient beats through more hidden speakers. And the carpets were smooth and quiet, absorbing the sound of every footstep.

I was greeted by a host who took down my membership number and confirmed the appointment, then I was led through one of several heavy curtains and down another dimly lit corridor. We passed several doors before reaching one named 'Silk'. The host handed me a large key, exactly like the one I'd been given to the room in which my beautiful gold lace bra had been violated.

I turned the key and nodded my thanks to the host, then I pushed the handle and stepped inside. Like everywhere else in the place, the room was dark. I hung the key on a large hook by the side of the door and noticed another key was already hanging there. He was here.

I had entertained the thought it might not be the man from the board who'd asked for this encounter. What if it was another person? Would I stay? If it wasn't for the intense chemistry I'd felt with the man, I wouldn't have come back here at all. So, if someone else walked into the room, I was certain I would leave.

Before I could consider it further, I heard them—someone else's footsteps in the room. I took a deep breath then turned around to see who might be waiting for me; to see who it was who'd specifically requested my company tonight. My eyes scanned the room as my head turned, gliding across the enormous bed with its freshly-washed sheets, the bedside tables no doubt filled to the brim with condoms, battery-operated devices and lubricant, and the heavy drapes hanging to the side of the floor to ceiling window that stretched the length of the room. They were stopped in their tracks as they landed on a silhouette against the glass. It was him. Even at this moderate distance, I could tell it was him immediately.

His thick shoulders moved gently as he breathed and his suit jacket bunched at one hip where his hand settled in the pocket of his pants. His thighs were curvaceous beneath the cotton of his suit, and his whole form sucked in half the room's oxygen. That had to be the only explanation for the fact I could hardly breathe. Overtaken by nerves, I stood rigid to the carpet, clutching the bag he'd told me to pack with a change of clothes. We stood still, taking each other in. It was so dark, I couldn't tell if he could see me clearly, and I certainly couldn't see the details of him—only his outline and his presence, which was almost blinding.

He stepped away from the window and walked towards me, slowly, and my heart leaped into my throat. It was just the two of us now, in a room together, with full permission and full consent to have sex—all night if we wanted to. I should have felt cheap. It was a one night stand after all. But I didn't; I felt stomach-churningly incapacitated. I couldn't move, I couldn't breathe; I couldn't believe I was even standing there. I was Diana Delaney—the barely afloat music label VP whose acts ran rings around her. I was the too-young great-hope-gone-wrong in the eyes of the parent company and the rest of

the industry. I was the naïve little Brit girl trying to tread water in the ocean of Manhattan. I should have been slaving over my computer, working into the early hours doing everything I could to save my company; not indulging myself in a seedy sex club with a man I was never going to see again.

He continued towards me slowly, his expensive suit stroking the muscles around his thighs and calves. He eventually stopped, the tips of his shoes touching the tips of mine. Both our drapes clung to the contours of our faces, stroking the top of our lips, reminding me of the strongly worded advice against kissing. The drape aside, even in the darkness I was barely afforded a glimpse of the man in front of me, but I could feel his breath, hot and sweet against my forehead. I had to crane my neck to look into his eyes. They looked down at me like they belonged to a hawk, but all I could see was black.

He reached down and uncurled my fingers from around the handle of my bag. They ached as they released the leather, alerting me to the fact they'd been gripping it for all they were worth. I heard the bag drop to the floor.

A thick hand reached around my back and felt for the knot at the nape of my neck. Gently, the fingers pulled at the band holding my hair in place, tickling the skin across my shoulder blades, until I felt long pieces of hair tumble around my shoulders. His breath shallowed; it was barely perceptible but I felt it as though I was wired up to him, able to sense the smallest change in his physiology. That's what this club did so well; it created an atmosphere with its darkness, its disguises, its rules and its assurances, creating a false sense of security and sensuality. None of this was real, I told myself. If we were two normal people on the street, in broad daylight, in plain clothes, no drapes, it would be a whole different story.

He brought a second hand up my shoulders and stroked his palms down the top of my arms. His fingers lingered there, stroking the sensitive skin inside my elbows, before running down my forearms to my wrists. He hesitated then, as though he was bracing himself for an electric shock. I didn't know about him but I was already feeling it. My arms were fizzing

with the contact and I had to remind myself to suck air into my chest then push it out again. His fingers slid down across the palms of my hands and curled around the backs of my fingers, running up and down from my knuckles to the tips. It was foreplay of a kind I'd never experienced before in my life. My mouth had dried up, all moisture heading south to my thighs, and my knees had locked to prevent them from buckling.

He released one of my hands, causing it to jerk from the withdrawal, then he led me by the other to what looked like a lounge. There, he stopped and motioned for me to sit down on the dark, velvet sofa. I sat, suddenly unsure of what to do with my limbs. I crossed one leg over the other, turning my body to face his as he sat a couple of feet away—within arm's reach. Then he reached behind him to flick the switch on a lamp which bathed us both in a golden light. It was the most I'd seen of him. I lifted my chin and finally saw his eyes. They weren't black; they were dark blue, almost indigo, and shaded by dark lashes that protruded from beneath his drape. He still wore a short layer of stubble around his jaw, and his hair was a dark and dirty blonde color, just visible below his ears.

He was staring at me with the same level of intensity I remembered from my first meeting and I felt uncomfortable with the silence. I had to say something to break it.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked him, my voice breaking with nerves.

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he reached a hand up to my face and stroked it around my cheek, pushing his fingers back towards my hair. Then he stopped suddenly, as though he'd just realized what he was doing.

“Nothing,” he replied, his voice dry. “Nothing yet. I want to know a little bit about you first.”

I coughed to clear my throat. “I thought we weren't supposed to share personal information.” I shouldn't be the one telling him the rules; he was probably one of the few people who'd made them. His lips twitched into a slight smile.

“We don't have to take that rule so literally. I can tell you what I like—sexual or otherwise; you can tell me what your

fantasies are, your dreams—inside and outside the bedroom. The kind of information we don't share is that which might identify us, out there." He jerked his head back towards the window.

"What do you want to know?" I tapped my fingers together—a nervous habit I'd always had—then watched as he turned to the table beside us and handed me a flute of champagne. In the darkness, I hadn't noticed it was there, but now I could see there were two flutes and an ice bucket with a bottle of Cristal poking out of the top. Beside that was a small platter of fruits. My mouth began to salivate; I had hardly eaten since I'd received the invitation, and still wasn't sure I could stomach anything now. I brought the bubbles to my lips—champagne was different; I could always stomach champagne. Besides, the alcohol might help my nerves unwind from the tight spring they'd coiled up into.

He watched me intently, each slow blink of his eyes stripping away another layer.

"Are you hungry?" He asked, finally. I felt as though he could see right through me.

"I don't think so," I shook my head.

He reached out and took a piece of mango between his fingers and brought it up to my mouth anyway.

"The best mango you'll ever taste," he said, softly, stroking it across my bottom lip. My lips parted, curiously, and I took a bite. He then returned his hand, popping the other half of the mango slice into his own mouth. My stomach rolled inwards. It had been such a small, innocent gesture, but I felt as though I'd been punched in the gut. He watched me closely as I chewed the fruit as delicately as I could. I'd never felt so utterly self-conscious and on display before; I was almost hyperventilating.

"So, you like fruit," he said, one corner of his mouth curling upwards.

I smiled and nodded. "So do you."

We continued to watch each other take sips of the champagne, and gradually, my nerves began to settle.

“Whereabouts in England are you from?” I ventured.

He shook his head. “Too personal,” he replied, and my nerves stood to attention once more. I didn’t know how to play this game. I already felt as though every step I was going to make this evening would be the wrong one. “But I can tell you why I left.”

I nodded, keeping my mouth closed.

“I was bored,” he said, simply. “It was too small a country for me. And the kind of work I do... well, there are only so many places I can do it. New York is the perfect place for me to be right now.”

I was entranced. He might have thought he was giving impersonal answers but I felt I was getting to know him, regardless. His voice was mesmerizing, so even if he hadn’t really told me much, I felt sated simply from the sound.

“What about you? Why did you leave?” He asked.

A deep chill ran through my bones and I shuddered. I would never be able to control the way I responded to questions about my past, and specifically why I’d left England. His eyes narrowed, intrigued.

“Same as you,” I lied. “I just felt like New York could offer me a lot more. I’d always wanted to travel, and live somewhere a bit more glamorous, I suppose. I picked the right place,” I smiled wryly, glancing around the luxurious suite to illustrate my point.

He took a long pause before replying. “Do you like it here?”

“Here, meaning New York, or this club?”

“Both,” he answered.

I sighed before I could stop myself. “I love New York,” I said, truthfully. “I love the hustle and bustle, the bars, the nightlife, the shops, the culture, the people... But I’ve got

myself into a bit of a rut, I guess. This is probably the most exciting place I've been in a long while."

I had his full attention and he nodded for me to continue. I put down my glass and folded my arms protectively.

"Truthfully, being here, in this club, it makes me feel nervous. I've never done anything like this before, and I feel a bit embarrassed to be honest."

"Embarrassed?" He cocked his head to one side.

"Well, yes. I don't usually sleep with strangers. In fact, the last time we met, that—that was the first time. I really don't know why Sienna chose me; I don't bring anything special to this club—only my naivety and lack of experience."

"Don't underestimate how sexy that is," he replied, softly.

"Sexy? I don't think I've ever felt sexy in my life."

I flicked my eyes up to his, almost apologetically, and was surprised when his hands reached out to me again. He cupped my elbows and pulled me towards him. His face was just inches from mine and I could taste the champagne on his breath. His eyes burrowed into me at close range and I felt his hands move up my arms to my shoulders. I hardly dared breathe. He stroked his fingers down my back and I shuddered again, but his expression of deep concentration didn't waver.

His hands traced my spine right to where it met the seat then ran gently, tentatively, across my hips where they settled for a moment. His breathing deepened, making his chest rise and fall with a heaviness that hadn't been there before. Slowly, he moved both hands around my hips, to the crease of my thighs, which he gently prized apart, pulling my left knee up to rest on the seat. I'd chosen a different kind of dress for the occasion—shapely but loose. I didn't want a repeat of anything from my first night at the club. Even the Lejaby bra had been banished to the back of my closet.

He didn't take his eyes off mine as he moved one hand to settle against the curve of my buttocks, while his other hand stroked the top of my exposed thighs.

My breath quickened but his touch remained under his complete control.

“I thought you wanted to get to know me first,” I said, the words coming out in short, rasping bursts.

“This is getting to know you,” he replied, calmly, as his thumbs softly kneaded the delicate skin at the crease between my thighs and my pelvis. I became acutely aware of a throbbing sensation about an inch away from his fingers and felt sure he could feel it too.

“You have beautiful, soft skin,” he said.

I couldn't think of a response, and even if I had, I wasn't entirely sure I could have voiced it. Instead, I rested my hands on his legs in an attempt to stabilize myself against his firm body. His fingers brushed lightly against my panties, and I folded forward with a gasp. His breath quickened as my forehead rested on the crisp cotton of his shirt, and I breathed in his warmth and his scent. I wanted to sneak my hands beneath his jacket and around his back to pull him towards me, but not only did that seem too intimate for what this was meant to be—a mere sexual experience; a one-night stand—but I was completely incapacitated by the intensity of it all.

His fingers curled around the lace and stroked the skin beneath, lightly at first, as I closed my eyes against the torment. His fingers were thick and experienced, knowing exactly where to glide lightly and where to sink deep, as though he was playing a delicate instrument. I stunned myself when the word “Jesus” came out of my mouth, breathy and foreign. His touch didn't waver; instead, it found a rhythm, stroking me back and forth, with long, probing sweeps and gentle circling. I could feel myself panting with need but it was as though I was standing outside of myself looking in. Who was this person?

My forehead sank deeper into his chest, moving slightly as his chest rocked in time with the tempo of his fingers. They were tantalizingly slow and my breath was begging for me.

“We've got all night,” he said, as though I was the one who needed to slow down. I trembled at his words and he withdrew

his hand, leaving me bereft with longing. The hand that had cupped my behind moved up to my shoulder blades and coaxed me into laying back against the sofa. With the hand now free from massaging me senseless, he pulled a cushion beneath my hips, raising my pelvis, opening me to him. My legs fell to the side like jelly and I laid there, rendered helpless with the need for his fingers—or anything belonging to him—to return. He shifted himself backwards and ran his hands beneath the cotton of my dress, finding the lace of my panties. Oh God, was he going to do what I hoped he might do? The throbbing between my thighs had sped up to the point of pain; I desperately needed a release and the waiting was agony.

The lace tickled my skin as it was pulled slowly down over my hips, my thighs, my knees. He reached my ankles and paused to remove each of my shoes. I watched the sheer concentration on his face as he eased each one of the heels off my feet, slipping them over my toes and placing them gently on the floor. Then he teased off the lace and bunched it in his hand, holding it there. The golden light from the lamp swirled in his eyes; there was no doubt in my mind he was savoring this. But then again, he must have had plenty of experience, seeing as he was a board member of a sex club. He must have had his pick of all the women who stepped foot in this place. He was a professional one-nighter. I couldn't tell if the thought aroused me or repulsed me, but I didn't have time to dwell on it as he hooked his hands—one of them still curled around the lace—beneath my knees, bent forward and placed them on the ridge of his shoulders. My breath had halted. If he brought his lips to me, I was going to last all of one second. I'd never felt so turned on in my life.

“I...” I whispered, as his eyes came closer to mine. “I can't take it. This is killing me.”

He leaned forward and brushed his lips against my cheek, breathing hot, intoxicating air into my ear.

“Then let me be the death of you.”

I turned my head to catch his lips in mine but he moved backwards, a smile teasing the corner of his mouth. I closed my eyes and felt his breath between my thighs. I writhed a

little, needing to find some release, but it didn't speed him up. He took his fucking goddamn time.

"Please..." I groaned. I had nothing to lose now; he knew what I needed; he knew it was killing me; there was no point feeling shame in begging.

"Have you been thinking about this?" He whispered into me, his voice deep and thick.

"Yes," I panted, without even a beat.

"With me?"

"Yes." What did he want from me?

"Good. I want you to want me like this."

"I do," I gasped. "Please... don't make me beg."

"Oh," he chuckled softly, the vibrations reaching into my core like tendrils. "You already are. And you..." he uncurled his tongue into my flesh, causing my back to arch in shock, and a short, untethered cry to leave my throat, "... are fucking sexy."

He pushed himself forward from the hips and sank his face into me. I cried out, feeling the tremors begin, and I gripped the edge of the sofa as though I might levitate off it. His tongue reached inside me, exploring my walls, curling and uncurling. He moaned into me as his lips sucked against my folds, the combination sending me high. Then he pulled back and replaced his tongue with his fingers, probing me deeply, rocking me over the cushion. His lips found me again and sucked me between his teeth. A sharp sting was eased by the lap of his tongue and he repeated the motion relentlessly.

I groaned loudly, gripping the sofa tighter. I wanted to hold his head but I feared the touch of his drape might shock me out of this perfect fantasy-come-true.

"Seriously..." he gasped, pulling back for air, "you have no idea how sexy you are." His breath blew against my clitoris, which was pulsing from the assault, and his tongue lapped against me again, over and over, harder and harder, circling me, grazing me, dipping into me alongside his languid

fingers. I leaped beneath him, feeling the heat grow with rapid intensity. He held me down with one free hand and plunged his mouth onto me, sucking out my climax with concentrated efficiency. I let myself go as I had never done before. I was never going to see this man again; I had nothing to lose. I arched myself into him and gripped his head, forgetting his drape, pulling him deeper. He groaned with pleasure and I vibrated against him, loud cries leaving my body like demons. His firm grip held me in place as I fell about uncontrollably and he continued the torment of his tongue. Even as I melted into the sofa, relieved of the biggest orgasm I'd ever experienced, he continued to lick me softly, acclimatizing me to a new state of being.

CHAPTER SEVEN



When he finally stopped, I felt him sit up and move off the sofa. I could do no such thing; I was paralyzed. Then I felt two wide forearms glide beneath my back, lifting me into the air and bringing me back down onto his lap. I rested my head against his shoulder as he settled back with a remote control in his hand. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a screen flicker to life and a menu of options appear. I didn't want to turn my head to look closer, I wanted to sink myself into him, my need for an orgasm quenched but my need for him intensified.

I reached a hand up to curl around his neck and nuzzled my lips into him, kissing the base of his throat. I knew kissing was frowned upon but he wasn't kissing me back, so in my mind, it didn't count. His arm pulled me into him and I could hear his heart beating against my ear; it was slowing with every minute that passed.

"You need to eat," he whispered, and my stomach growled in response. I felt him smile.

"I need to return the favor," I replied, pressing my lips again to his throat.

"We have all night," he said, stroking his fingers down my arm in a gesture that stunned me with its intimacy. "I'm ordering nachos."

"We can get nachos here?" I suddenly remembered where we were. We were in a sex club in downtown Manhattan. Ordering... room service?

“We can get anything we want,” he replied, casually. “We have a Michelin-starred chef on site who can rustle up anything from Confit de Canard to grilled cheese. I figured we probably don’t want a five course meal right now, although you could have one if you wanted?”

I couldn’t see the raised eyebrow but I could feel it. I shook my head. “Something light would be better. Nachos will be perfect.”

He squeezed me lightly in agreement and clicked a few buttons on the remote.

“Now, what film would you like to watch?”

I sat up at that and narrowed my eyes at him. “You want to watch a film?” I felt totally lost and out of my depth. I thought we were there to have sex—lots of sex—and he wanted to order in food and a movie?

He laughed and I almost fell in love with the sound. I saw his teeth for the first time and they were perfectly straight and perfectly white, having no doubt taken full advantage of the American dental care system.

“Yes. I keep telling you, we have all night. But...” he dropped the remote and moved both hands to my waist, pressing down into the sensitive area that I could not bear to have touched. “You don’t seem to be listening to me.” He squeezed and I buckled, gasping for air in a fit of giggles.

“Stop! I’m sorry,” I choked, between giggles, as his fingertips tortured me. “I’m listening, I promise.”

He was grinning broadly when I finally composed myself. I was still sitting on his lap feeling cradled like a child, his arms wrapping around me protectively.

“You’re so cute,” he smiled, bending his head to nuzzle into my neck as I had done with his. Just as I was about to melt again with the sensation of prickles erupting all over my skin, he blew a raspberry into my neck, making me leap about a foot off his lap. I lost my balance and fell to the side, and he caught me just as I was about to slide unceremoniously off the sofa. His giant hands held me up and I turned to face him, my

knees coming down either side of his thighs. Suddenly the joviality of the tickling and the raspberry-blowing simmered and we stared into each other's eyes. I wanted to kiss him. I needed to kiss him.

Every pore and every hair and every cell on the outer part of my skin was burning. I suddenly needed the intimacy of his lips against mine. He'd told me we had all night; and in that moment something crystallized. I wanted to fill this one night with everything, including his kiss. I let him stare up at me for an eternity, while I metaphorically squeezed my thighs together as tightly as I could, trying to ignore the pain building from another anticipatory rush of blood to my arousal. Whatever it was that we shared—even if it was an illusion precipitated by being in a secret location with a man whose name I'll never know, and a face I'll never see—we could only share it for one night. And the clock was ticking.

Without warning, his lips rammed against mine. His tongue stroked ravenously along the opening of my mouth setting it alight, parting my lips, expertly caressing my sensitive skin. The tension in his arms released as I sighed into him, and I felt a hand curve around the back of my head. His tongue explored mine, curling around it in a dance, licking playfully at my taste buds, as his fingers rooted through my hair, tussling and teasing it as his tongue roamed my mouth. I felt him hard as glass between my thighs and wondered how long he'd been this aroused for. I ground myself against him and a low growl emerged from his chest, as though I was compromising his control. I felt his hands grip the side of my face and his thumbs reach the edge of my drape. He withdrew his lips then, keeping his face just an inch from mine. Then his thumbs pushed the drape upwards a little, revealing the tip of my nose.

I suddenly became aware of my breath, panting in short, sharp gasps. I felt as though we were about to do something even more forbidden than sleep with each other as strangers in a secret place. Not only had we kissed, deeply and with an intimacy I could only describe as carnal, but we might be about to cross a hard line: reveal our faces to each other. I knew why he was holding my face so close; there was a

camera behind us, monitoring our every move. If we were caught doing this, well, I didn't know what the consequences would be; I hadn't thought to ask. But they probably involved an abrupt end to this insanely erotic evening and a termination of my membership. At the crux of it all, I would never see this man again. I had to remind myself, I wouldn't be able to anyway. Another rule. Never meet the same member twice. I had nothing to lose.

I brought my own hands up to the edge of his drape and he didn't stop me. I followed his lead, only lifting it to the apples of his cheeks. His nose was strong, like him, straight and perfect, like his teeth. A light shadow appeared on his cheeks, indicating chiseled features. With his cheekbones and square jaw, he had the face shape of James Dean—my grandmother would be proud. He paused before lifting the drape above my eyes, and I took a breath in, preparing myself. Not that it really mattered what he looked like; my hormones had already decided he was hot as fuck, and my groin didn't have eyes.

Together, we pushed the drapes slowly upwards. The first row of thick eyelashes came into view then his deep blue eyes, pupils so wide I almost fell into them. Then his long upper lashes, then thick, unruly brows. Definitely James Dean. He slammed his mouth against mine and then everything moved fast. He lifted me up so I was kneeling above him, and whipped his belt through the buckle, lifting his ass off the sofa to shove his pants down his thighs. It was happening.

I took control of the kiss, holding his head firm as I probed his mouth with my tongue. His moved lazily, his focus momentarily elsewhere. I heard the latex snap—there must have been condoms in every crevice. I pulled back to assess his eyes for a second. They were hungry, desperate. Then they closed and I was filled to the brink. I cried out in shock. He was enormous. I had no idea how I was going to move on this thing; it was like being wedged onto a pole.

“Fuuuuuuck,” he growled, in a voice that alarmed me. Then his head dropped onto my collarbone. “Sorry,” he gasped. “I'm sorry.”

“What for?” I asked, once my breath had returned.

“I couldn’t stop myself...”

My drape had fallen with the sudden intrusion but his was still hitched above his eyebrows. I lifted his head to take him in.

“It’s ok,” I whispered. “I want this. I want you to fuck me.”

The relief in his face was quickly replaced by hunger. “Good. I wanted to rip his damn balls off...”

I shook my head. “Please forget about that. I hate that you saw it. I just... I need you to fuck me, ok? Please?” I was aware I was begging again, but he was inside me, filling me entirely, touching every wall, every nerve ending. My insides were on fire and only movement—his movement—would soothe it.

“You need to be caressed,” he said, shifting slightly and settling into me. I couldn’t speak. “You need to feel everything, smoothly, slowly.” He rocked, drawing himself out slightly and easing himself back in, stoking the flames.

“No,” I almost choked. “I need you to fuck me.”

He lifted my hips, easing me off his cock until I felt the tip brush against me, then pulled me back down, smooth but fast. Our sighs of relief entangled. I took over the movement, feeling my thighs burn, but I focused everything I had on the sensation of him inside me, pulsing with every thrust. His hips rose to meet mine, pushing him deeper than I could have imagined possible. One hand left my hips and pulled my head down to his, holding me on his lips as I moved.

“You’re so sexy...” he whispered into my mouth and I swallowed the words. “I’m going to come in this condom. I wish I was coming in you.

“You’re inside me,” I answered him, my lips attached to his. “I’m feeling everything.”

“Do you want to feel me come?” His voice was a shadow of what it was before; deep and dry.

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Tell me,” he ordered.

I didn't hesitate. My need was the same as, if not greater than, his. “Please... come inside me. I want to feel you.”

“Again.”

“Please...” I sank my hips onto him and clenched my thighs, clamping myself around him, earning a feral groan.

“Again.”

“Please... come...” I meant it now. I was there. I needed him to come with me. “Ple...” I couldn't even finish the word before the sensation took over me.

“Don't stop,” he rasped, gripping my hips and pulling me down, pushing me up, meeting my hips with his. I couldn't respond; I couldn't fight; I couldn't do anything except let him take over. The blood was pulsing through me, the heat rolling from my nerves, up through my stomach, my core.

“Fuuuuck,” he called out again. “I'm coming. Oh my God, I'm coming.”

I felt him hit the top of the condom, the bursts pulsing against my walls, and I came again, a new wave of heat reaching up through my stomach, radiating out through every pore, sweat forming a sheen along the surface of my skin. He jerked inside me and I clung to him for stability. He remained there as we came down the other side, catching our breath.

“Are you ok?” He said, eventually, his eyes still closed.

“Yes,” I said, my voice breathy. I thought I was ok, but something was amiss.

“I want you to know my name.”

He shook his head. “No...”

I lowered my voice to a whisper. “...Its Diana.”

His head stopped moving and his eyes bore into my mine, as though he was trying to read my motive. I gave him a small smile. I wasn't a threat to him; he needed to know that.

Instead of replying, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine, kissing me slowly and deeply. He held the back of my head, pulling me in towards him with a new level of intensity. We settled into a motion, a tempo, like a wave, his lips soft against mine, moving as though they'd been made for each other. I felt warmth wrap around my torso as my fingers stroked the back of his neck. Whatever he was afraid of, he needn't worry about it with me. Besides, it was just one night. It didn't matter that he knew my name.

Ten delicious minutes passed when a knock came at the door. He pulled back, slowly, reluctantly.

“Nachos,” he said, with a grin.

CHAPTER EIGHT



I took one last look at his beautifully chiseled face before he returned the drape to his cheeks. He lifted me up and placed me gently on the sofa, then he got to his feet, pulled up his pants and walked, casually, to the door. For a moment I really felt as though we were in a hotel and our room service had just arrived. But when the door opened and I heard the voice at the other side, I was reminded, starkly, of where I was.

“Sir,” came a familiar woman’s voice. I turned to look, as discreetly as I could, knowing that I was lit up in the glow of the table lamp and she was out in the corridor, bathed in darkness.

“Here’s your order.” I saw a tray pass hands and swallowed my surprise. I’d half-expected whoever it was to walk into the room, place the tray on the desk and wait for their tip, but this, I remembered again, wasn’t a hotel. It was far from being a hotel. While rooms could apparently be ‘rented’ for a whole evening, there were no other similarities whatsoever. In a hotel, I wouldn’t have to cover my face in a bid not to be recognized; in a hotel, I would be free to come and go with one person as many times as I liked; in a hotel I could kiss whomever I wanted without it being frowned upon (to an extent) and I could shout my name from the roof terrace with no repercussions.

I narrowed my eyes in an attempt to identify the woman.

“Thanks,” he answered. “You didn’t need to bring these up yourself. Where’s Arnaud?”

“It’s nothing,” the voice replied, and I saw a hand wave away the remark. “Anyways, I need to update you on Myles.”

“What about him?” His voice took on a different tone; not a friendly one.

“He’s demanding a refund for the whole year.”

“No,” he clipped. “His behavior was unacceptable. He had a responsibility—” his voice lowered. “We could have lost the member.”

“Of course, I will reiterate the terms of his membership contract to him. He knows that as one of the Elite, he has certain responsibilities.”

“He isn’t staying, Sienna. This isn’t a negotiation.” His voice betrayed an unambiguous anger, and I froze at the mention of my recruiter’s name. “He needs to know he cannot treat a lady that way and get to keep his membership privileges.”

“But, sir, everyone else agrees his behavior wasn’t terrible...”

“I don’t care what everyone else thinks,” he growled. “I watched the fucking tape. He was selfish and rough. It is no way to introduce someone to the services we offer.”

I heard Sienna sigh in resignation. “So, that’s why you booked the suite for the whole night? Damage limitation?”

His voice lowered further and I craned my neck to listen.

“No, not damage limitation. Human decency.”

“Sir, no-one books a suite for the whole night. Even the most decent of our humans.”

There was a beat of silence before he spoke again and his words were unmistakable.

“They. Are. Not. Me.”

THE DOOR CLOSED and he returned carrying the nachos. He walked straight across the room towards me and placed them in my lap, bringing his lips to mine in a slow, delicious kiss. His tongue, already familiar with my own, curled and teased my lips until, reluctantly, I pulled away.

“Is everything ok?” I asked.

“Everything’s fine,” he said, settling next to me on the sofa and grabbing a handful of nachos. “Just a difference of professional opinion. Nothing for you to worry about. All I want you to worry about is how much you can enjoy this evening.”

“That’s not going to be too difficult,” I mumbled, tucking into the nachos with as much delicacy and femininity as I could muster. “I’m having a pretty good time already.” I glanced sideways at him and saw him smiling as he propped his arm against the sofa, resting his head as he watched me.

“That’s good. Me too.”

I licked a dribble of tomato sauce from my chin, self-consciously and noticed him shift his hips slightly.

“Do you have something more comfortable you’d like to change into? I’m afraid I’m fresh out of bibs so I have nothing to catch the sauce from staining your dress.”

I looked up and just managed to stifle a small laugh.

“*Now* you’re concerned about staining my dress?”

“Touché,” he grinned. “But seriously. You look stunning in that outfit but we’re going to be here all night. I want to know what you’re like when you’re Netflix-and-chilling.”

I licked another dribble of errant sauce from my bottom lip and faced him. “You want to see me slobbering out in my pjs?”

“If that’s what you kids are calling it these days, yes.”

“What about you? Do you have pajamas?”

“Yeah, sure,” he shrugged. “Pants, anyway. I get too hot in a top.”

I almost choked on my cheese. The thought of seeing this man topless hadn't occurred to me until that point. And now it was all I could think about.

"Let's change," I said, with more urgency than I intended.

It was his turn to laugh as he took the bowl from my lap, his fingers brushing the cotton just covering my thigh, sending shockwaves up into my stomach, and placed it on the table.

"Are you not eating?"

"I ate at the office," he said, and I paused, involuntarily. He worked in an office. A piece of information I latched onto like a greedy puppy.

"Here?" I asked, sounding as casual as I could.

"No. The City." He got to his feet and held out his hands. I took them and allowed him to pull me to my feet, bringing me flush to his chest; a chest I was about to see naked, which sent my appetite flying in the opposite direction. "And that's all you're getting, lady," he smiled, knowing I was pushing my luck.

"I hope not," I said, dragging my eyes down to his zipper. "Otherwise I'll be asking for a refund."

"I'll give you more than a refund," he laughed and pushed me lightly towards the bathroom. "I'll get your bag."

I pattered in my stocking-clad feet into the bathroom and switched on the light. It was set to be dim at best and barely flickering at worst. I was going to need a few hours to acclimatize to sunlight after this night was out. I leaned back against the vanity unit and looked around. No expense had been spared. The shower was plated gold, as were the 'his and hers' faucets and towel rails. A giant rainforest shower hung from the ceiling, and a large oval bathtub stood at the far end of the room next to yet another floor-to-ceiling window. The whole place had been designed for sex and decadence, hence the name I realized, again.

I didn't need to look up to know he was in the room with me; his presence drew the atmosphere to him and I physically felt the rush of air against my skin. I pretended to be distracted

by the view as he placed the bag on the unit behind me, gliding his forearm across my shoulder.

“Do you mind if I change in here with you?” He stood in front of me, waiting on my answer.

My voice escaped me so I simply shook my head in reply.

His eyes continued to burrow into me and again I felt at a loss as to how to play this game. The sex should have relaxed me, the orgasm from his tongue before the sex should have relaxed me. I shouldn't still be a bag of nerves around this man, but the way he stood over me, staring, as though waiting for me to make some sort of move, put me more on edge than I'd ever felt in my life.

I coughed and turned away to retrieve my pajamas from my bag. I thanked God I'd treated myself, not only to the Herve Léger dress and the Lejaby underwear I'd worn the first night I came to the club, but to a pair of Agent Provocateur pajamas too—online of course, I would never have been able to show my face in the actual shop.

I suddenly needed to look amazing for this man. Despite the fact he seemed to share the same shock of a chemical attraction after only an hour of meeting and he'd specifically requested my company this evening, and despite the fact he was looking at me as though he wanted to eat me alive, I still felt a relentless need to impress him, to make him want me.

I clutched the eye-wateringly expensive fabric to my chest, expecting him to move back and allow me space, but he didn't. My heart rose slowly up to my throat and lodged itself there, pounding uncomfortably. His eyes dropped to the rose-colored fabric and, finally, as though realizing where he was and what I was trying to do, he stepped backwards, training his eyes on my face again as he did.

I reached a hand behind my back in an attempt to lower the zipper, but I was too flustered; it was too hard, holding the pajamas so tightly under the scrutinizing gaze of this insanely beautiful man.

“Let me help,” he said, his voice dry. He placed his hands on my shoulders and turned me to face the vanity unit. I looked back at us both in the mirror. The sight of him and me, two complete strangers wearing masks, undressing together in a bathroom, struck me like a bolt of lightning.

“What is this?” I whispered. “What are we doing?”

“What do you mean?” he answered, finding the zipper and tugging it along the curve of my spine.

“I don’t know who you are. You could be anyone.”

He stopped pulling the zipper and stared at my reflection in the mirror.

“We can stop anytime you want,” he said, a slight tremor invading the smoothness of his voice.

I looked into his eyes, knowing my problem was the exact opposite. I didn’t want to stop; I never wanted to stop. I wanted to feel this way forever—wanted, needed, lusted after, by this man.

“I don’t want to stop,” I whispered, noticing his shoulders fall.

“Good,” he said, resuming the downward journey of the zipper, revealing my lower back to him. “Neither do I.”

“Why did you want to spend tonight with me?” I forced out.

He took a deep breath and focused intently on the circles his fingers were now tracing on the skin above my sitting bone. He moved as though he were about to speak but then stopped again, and so did his fingers. Then he looked boldly at my reflection.

“Too personal,” he said, simply.

I was too stunned to ask anything else, so I just watched as he gently tugged the dress over my shoulders and let it slide to the floor.

“I think I might need more than that,” I whispered, eventually.

He didn't reply. Instead, he turned me around and lifted me to sit on the vanity unit, parting my legs and nestling himself between them. He bent his head down, bringing his lips to within an inch of my face. His eyes were slightly pained. I couldn't tell if he was as frustrated by the rules as I was, or if he was simply enjoying the tension. I couldn't bear the close proximity so I lifted my chin, and brushed his lips with mine.

"I didn't think we were allowed to do this," I whispered. I moved my lips from side to side, brushing them along his, until I felt his hands clasp me firmly around the head.

"We strongly advise against it," he said, his lips against mine.

"Why?" I demanded, softly.

"You know why," he silenced me then, by closing in on me and easing his tongue between my teeth, taking over my mouth completely. With every swipe of his tongue across mine, I melted a little more. Had I known foreplay could be this good, I would never have left it alone for four years. The question I'd uttered only minutes ago had escaped my mind, which had been his precise intention. He pulled away and stood back a step.

"Stockings," he muttered, licking his lips; lips that were pink and plump from teasing mine. I suddenly became conscious of my exposed thighs and I wriggled uncomfortably.

"Do you mind if I take them off with my teeth?"

"I'm sorry?" I stifled a giggle.

"I just... always wanted to take stockings off a beautiful woman with my teeth."

"You can if you take your clothes off first," I replied. Two could play at that game. I didn't know how the hell to play but I was giving it my best shot.

Without hesitation, he pushed his pants down his legs and stepped out of them, leaving me no time to gasp at the sight of his molded thighs in the flesh. Then he ripped his shirt, buttons popping everywhere, and yanked it over his arms, smiling timidly at me.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” I laughed. “I thought men only did that in books.”

“What kind of books do you read?” He said, grinning, as though he’d passed some sort of test.

“Well, actually, I don’t have time to read books but if I did, they’d probably be quite filthy.”

“Like porn?” He asked, placing his hands on the lace tops of my stockings.

“No, not porn! Contemporary romance.” I was loving the fact we could banter like this while he was making sexual moves on me.

“Right. Sure.” He dismissed my argument and leaned in for another slow kiss. This time he probed deeper, his tongue becoming hungry, coupled with his thumbs working their way beneath the lace. I gasped into his mouth. His hands were nowhere near my center but I was already throbbing. Again.

He pulled back, somewhat reluctantly, and bent at the knees, bringing his head towards my right thigh. His drape had unleashed some of his hair and it was now tickling my leg. I clamped a hand over my mouth to stop an adolescent giggle escaping my throat. But as soon as I felt his breath, I needn’t have worried; I was rendered speechless. He clasped the lace in his teeth and dragged it wretchedly down my thigh, following it with his fingers. I dropped my head backwards, feeling every small inch of flesh catch fire as his teeth grazed across it. I felt the stocking slip off the edge of my toes and he repeated the movement on the other leg. By the time he stood and brought my head forward to look into my eyes, I was panting with lust.

“Fuck...” he said, realizing what a state I was in. He pushed his boxers over his hips and in one swift movement, pulled me towards him, pushed my hastily pulled-on underwear to one side and drove himself into me. We both cried out in relief. All the man had done was remove my stockings and I was melting all over him. It had to be the darkness. It had to be the drapes. It had to be the dreaded rules. I’d never been this hot for anyone, ever. He buried himself into

me and dropped his head to my shoulder. His breath was heavy and labored, as though he'd climbed a mountain to get here.

“What the fuck...?” He growled into my chest. “What are you doing to me?”

“I could say the same,” I panted, feeling him deep and thick inside me. He let me mold myself around him and then he inched himself in and out slowly, while he sucked on the skin between my neck and my shoulder. I was suddenly aware we were not using protection and I could feel every thick vein and every delicious ridge.

“Condom...” I just about managed. “Is it too late?”

He lifted his eyes to mine.

“Shit.” He pulled out of me completely and fumbled in one of the drawers below, pulling out a shiny packet. My heart sank a little as he pulled on the sheath but any sense of disappointment subsided when he filled me again. It was the right thing to do.

“God, you feel so good,” he murmured, as he moved with an agonizingly measured rhythm.

“So do you,” I breathed out.

“Is this ok? This position?” He said, searching my eyes for approval.

“It’s amazing,” I gasped. I didn’t want to speak; I just wanted to savor the feeling of him stroking my insides, caressing every sensitive spot within me, stirring me to a peak. He pressed his lips to mine and I moaned into them, letting go.

His fingers dug into my buttocks and I was lifted above the unit. My legs wrapped instinctively around his waist and I was carried into the shower cubicle and held up against the glass wall. I was brought down more heavily onto him and my breath rushed out as I gripped his back. He turned the handle on the shower and we were suddenly covered by a downpour of water.

“I always shower before bed,” he said, his lips never leaving mine. We were both completely naked except for the drapes over our faces. I dropped my head back to see another camera facing the cubicle—there would be no removing our drapes in the bathroom. I pushed my fingers up into his now-drenched hair and tugged it as he thrust into me, pounding my back against the glass. He was filling me completely and pushing as far as he could go. Our skin was soaked and I had to renew the grip of my legs to stop from slipping.

“Jesus, I’m close,” he panted, as he grazed the spot inside me that burned with need.

“Me too,” I breathed through the sheet of water into his lips. His fingers dug further into my skin and I felt the delicious formation of small purple indentations. Our soaked drapes clung to our skin and my hair hung in wet trails down my back. He moved his lips to my jawline and teathed his way along to my ear then he breathed into it, sending prickles of electricity all the way down my spine. I gasped and released a small cry. I couldn’t hold it in. Then he stopped moving. The pounding of the water from the showerhead became more pronounced, along with my breath which came in short, sharp gasps. I was on the cusp, about to fall.

“Fuck,” he whispered. “I don’t want it to end.”

“We’ve got all night,” I rasped.

“Mmmm,” he moaned into my ear and thrust again, taking my climax right back to its edge. I gripped his back, digging my nails into his shoulder blades, and felt him drive forcefully into me. The orgasm balled in the pit of my stomach and I lost all sense of where I was. The heat rolled outwards from my core to the surface of my skin and I shook violently in his hands, a small, animalistic cry leaving my throat.

“Jeez,” he hissed, and he started pulsing against me, hard and sharp, then softer and more mellow, until he gradually stopped, gripping me in place.

It took me at least a full minute to catch my breath and then he released me slowly to the shower floor. He shifted to

the side to stop the water beating directly onto me, and wiped his thumb across my lip, shaking his head.

“What is it?” I asked, my voice silky and sated.

There was a long pause before he spoke. “Nothing.”

He smiled and led me back out of the shower, enveloping me in a giant, fluffy bath sheet and planting a small kiss on the end of my silk-covered nose.

After we dried off and dressed in our slobbing-out clothes, I followed his smooth, bare back out of the bathroom and watched him pick up the nachos, champagne and glasses and make his way to the bed. Setting everything down on a bedside table, he moved back against the pillows and patted the comforter beside him. I crawled up and nestled in the crook of his arm, feeling instantly warm and safe. His large body seemed to wrap around me like a blanket and I tried to imprint every single sensation onto my brain. I didn’t know if I’d ever have this again with another man—this comfort, this ease, this constant low hum of lust. He tucked one hand into the waistband of my pajama pants and picked up another remote control with the other.

“We’re watching a film,” he stated, in a firm, business-like voice that sent a shiver down my spine. I always used to have a thing for authoritative men—until the ones in my life started to make it miserable. His powerful tone brought out feelings in me I thought I’d buried not long after Phoenix Music had slid into the red. I snuggled further into the pit of his arm.

“Any preferences?”

I shook my head coyly against his ribcage. “Anything except horror.”

I felt him smile above me and watched as he clicked through the selections.

“How about Love Actually?”

I leaned forward to show the exact grimace on my face. “Are you serious?”

He laughed. "I just thought we could maybe point out the different places in London we've been to. Or there's Notting Hill."

"The only place you see in Notting Hill is Notting Hill," I smiled, settling back into his warmth.

"Ok, so how about London Has Fallen?"

"Ok!" I replied. "Much better."

"Is that because you like action movies, or because you like Gerard Butler?"

I grinned. "Both..."

"Gerry. Should've known." I felt his head shake.

I stayed put in the crook of his arm. "Gerry? Do you know him?"

"I did for a while, yeah."

I tried to sound unimpressed by this quite impressive revelation. "How come?"

"Just work," he replied, reaching a hand up to stroke my long hair behind his arm.

"So, you're what... in showbiz?" My heartbeat sped up a notch. I didn't expect an answer.

"I'm in whatever business I'm needed to be in," he replied, cryptically.

"That makes you sound like a hooker," I replied, before sitting bolt upright and looking back into his eyes. "You're not, are you? I mean, you're very good at... this."

He burst out laughing at that and pushed me back against the pillows, finding my ticklish spot again and digging into it for all he was worth. When he finally let me up for air, I'd clean forgotten what we'd been talking about.

"I like that you think I'm good at this," he said, as we entwined ourselves again.

"Why? You didn't think you were?"

“Well, I just... I know I’m on the board here, but, I’ve very rarely utilized it’s... services. I don’t make a habit of sleeping with many people. I don’t have time, to be honest.”

I sat very still, aware that in order to best process this latest information, I’d stopped breathing.

“So,” he continued. “I’ve never had any idea whether I’m any good or not.”

“Well,” I said, my voice cracking, but working at least, “you are. Very good, I mean. Too good, really.”

His chest stilled. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well,” I struggled to find the right words. “This is the kind of night a girl likes a lot of. I mean, like, more than once.”

A thin stream of breath rolled out through his lips but he didn’t answer straight away. We turned our attention to the movie, but my focus was nowhere near on it. I was acutely aware I’d just voiced the cardinal sin—wanting to encounter the same member more than once, and he part-owned this place. He had actually made those stupid damn rules.

Then he took a deep breath and spoke, like a robot.

“That means we’ve done our job well. We want all our guests to have a great experience. It’s a bonus for me that I’m the one who’s been able to deliver it.”

And a little piece of my heart fell away.

I SQUINTED as my eyes adjusted to the early morning sunlight. It was the middle of summer in Manhattan, and already swelteringly hot and humid. At least it took my mind off the man I was walking away from. Everything seemed to ache—my chest, my torso, my groin... my heart. It had taken every ounce of willpower to walk away from the room we’d just spent twelve hours laughing and fucking in, leaving him

standing in the doorway, filling it with an emotion I couldn't decipher through my racing heart.

We'd watched the entire movie in silence, me rigid to the core, him as still and remote as the piece of plastic clasped in his hand. Towards the end of the movie, the sheer energy it had taken for me to stay emotionally robust had exhausted me and I fell asleep against his shoulder. I woke up an hour later to the sensation of his lips on my stomach and his fingers in my hair.

I woke up with a fresh resolve. I had only six hours left with this man; I was going to damn well enjoy every single one.

The sex had been mind-blowing; the foreplay even more so. I learned more about what turned me on in that one night than in the entire four years I was at University and the subsequent four years in New York—supposedly the sexiest city in the world. Between and during the insanely intimate sex, we'd talked and giggled, about everything and nothing. I'd come away, as he'd planned all along, knowing very little about him, other than the fact he worked in an office, in no industry in particular, and he was once mates with Gerard Butler. Everything else I knew was purely physical. I knew what turned him on; I knew what position made him climax within seconds; I knew every facet of his lips and mouth; I knew the taste of his skin. It felt wrong that I knew very little else, but there was no point worrying about that now. It was over. It would all be a vivid and treasured memory I would most certainly resurrect every single night for the rest of my life.

I focused on walking along the burning sidewalk towards the nearest station and attempted to recall my schedule for the day. I tried to ignore the very real burning sensation that had taken up residence in my ribcage, and the acidic taste at the back of my throat suggesting I might throw up at any moment. I focused on the day ahead. I would get through it all by immersing myself in work, I'd already decided.

It wouldn't be a bad thing. I was determined to keep this new momentum going. Cherry Tatum would no longer run

rings around me. My other acts would see exactly how I dealt with egotistical behavior. The suits would see a side of me they would damn well respect, for once.

My first task was to overhaul the budgets. We were going back to basics. We were going to beg, borrow and steal airplay; we were going to pursue press coverage with integrity, not with personal antics; we were going to show the fucking music industry exactly why indie acts were so valuable. I remembered my original mission—one that had seeped away in the midst of pressure to hit numbers and make headlines. It was to offer the music-buying public something other than an identikit, pre-packaged, artificial artist. We were going to bring good music back.

Every time my thoughts tried to stray to the last time I felt his lips on mine, the feeling of my fingers curled in his, my climax screaming inside the sound-proofed room, I dragged them back to my work and the day ahead. I couldn't keep re-living our last conversation. He'd told me goodbye. His lips punctuated every syllable but his eyes denied every word. He couldn't even look at me. Even when I hesitated, when I placed my hands on the back of his head and forced him to face me, his eyes would still not focus. Instead, he wrapped his arms around me, squeezed me a little too hard, and gave me a long, lingering, last kiss on the lips. Then he turned me around and lightly pushed me through the door. That had been my answer; the only conclusion I could draw. The date was over and it was time for me to leave. No doubt he had business to attend to.

There had been no indication he wanted more than this, other than the fact he wouldn't let me out of his sight for the last hour and he insisted on pleasuring me even when I'd finally run out of steam and could barely take any more. Like he'd said, the club had done its job well. Too fucking well. When I finally came down from the impossible high I was feeling, having had the best night of my life, I would realize that the club had done itself out of a member. My experience with him had effectively ruined any experience I could have with anyone else.

And that was if the club would have me back. I'd broken almost every rule in one night. Not only had we kissed, repeatedly, but we had shown our whole faces to each other, and he knew my name was Diana. My stomach thudded to the ground for the hundredth time that morning as I realized I'd had the best fun, the best sex and the most amazing night with a man I fancied more than anyone I'd ever met, and I didn't even know his name.

CHAPTER NINE



“*N*o, Eric. I’m not putting her up in The Carlyle. She’s going in The Westin. I have to fund her security team as well and I simply can’t afford four thousand dollar suites for everyone. If that’s what she wants, she can pay for it herself, or she can stay somewhere without security.”

I hung up the phone to Cherry Tatum’s manager for the fourth time that morning, and returned to looking at the monthly budget. Slowly, with every cut-throat decision I was making, the red digits were giving way to black. My other acts were taking it on the chin. GingerX wasn’t happy about adding six more shows to her tour but she sucked it up; Painting Panthers weren’t overly happy about doing three station lives in the next two weeks, but they agreed anyway. But Cherry was digging in her heels.

I knew exactly who was on the other line the second my phone rang again.

“Cherry,” I said, forcing my voice to sound uncharacteristically stern. Cherry was used to me being a pushover, doing everything I could to appease her, keep her sweet. At one time, she was the darling of our tiny label, but now she was turning into a liability. She was costing more money than she was bringing in, and that was about to stop.

“What the hell is going on, Diana?” she snapped, with the unreasonable ferocity of a toddler. “First it was the studio; then wardrobe—and you know I need Clarissa; she’s the absolute best stylist this side of LA—; and now it’s the damn hotel? I

know Eric has told you about my insomnia; I simply can't sleep if I'm in a sub-standard room somewhere off the corner of shit street and second."

I took a deep breath, swallowing all the expletives I wanted to fling down the phone at her.

"Firstly, Brooklyn Beats is unavailable for our budget; Eric has explained that to you. We have access to a perfectly good alternative up-state. If it's good enough for The Weeknd, it's good enough for us. Secondly, if you haven't learned some tips from Clarissa by now, after two years of working together, then she wasn't worth a cent of what we paid her. And thirdly, if you have issues with insomnia—which, no I wasn't aware of, that's your own business—then you need to get professional help. It will not be fixed by softer furnishings and a larger bathroom."

"Why are you singling me out?" She hissed.

I realized she must have been speaking to other acts and was aware we were cutting back more on her privileges than anyone else's.

"Because you spend more of our budget than anyone else does. It's about time I equalized things between everyone. It wasn't fair, and..." I paused for impact, "and it wasn't necessarily deserved either."

Cherry laughed, a low, slightly sadistic cackle. "Oh, and I guess they bring in as many sales as I do, right?"

"They do these days," I said, glancing at the spreadsheet in front of me. "If you spent less time scouring the gossip columns for any small mention of you and your latest lover, and more time looking at the quarterly report we distribute to every act, you would know this."

I knew I sounded harsh, but I was simply giving as good as I usually got. This was the way Cherry had always spoken to me, and until now, I'd rolled over like a puppy and done her bidding. That had changed. A new determination had seized me. It had begun the minute I'd received that cryptic invitation to the Decadence Club, and only embedded itself further into

my resolve as I explored the more confident side of myself that it—or he—had brought out in me. She was silenced.

“If you like, I can send you the latest report now, along with the revised contract Eric needs to discuss with you, and the measures I’m proposing in order to bring our label back to profitability.”

Still nothing.

“That’s settled then. I’ll ping this over now, and I’ll let the team know to expect you at The Westin on Thursday.”

I hung up the phone and noticed I’d stopped shaking. The tremors had begun as soon as I’d picked up the phone, but vanished as I stuck to my guns. I was changing the way I did business, and I was adamant I was going to succeed.

I returned to the spreadsheet, adjusting a few more data cells until the whole page turned black, then I closed the file and sent it to the board. I wished I was in each of their offices as they opened it. Surprised would be an understatement. It was going to take some serious adjusting to make it work—no more charged-back lattes, no more unnecessary travel or overnight stays, no more cabs, no more subsidized lunches. I meant business. I’d slashed the marketing budget by seventy percent, revised all management fees, halved talent expenses and proposed changes to staff benefit packages. The reality was, if nothing changed, it wouldn’t be long before we’d all be out of jobs. I was asking the team to have a little faith and give a little more commitment in return for healthier career prospects in the long term.

I’d pre-empted conversations before I had them. If anyone didn’t like it—the acts included—they could leave, within reason. But with other indie labels seemingly dropping like flies, and other offshoots creating yet more mainstream manufactured acts popping up in their places, there weren’t many other options available to them. I wasn’t taking advantage of that; I simply knew what we were up against and what we all had to lose.

“Can I come in?” Sheridan tapped at the door.

“Sure, I just reached a natural break,” I said, spinning my chair to face her.

“I know; I’ve been watching. We all have,” she said, in reference to the entire marketing team sitting outside my glass-walled office. “We can practically see the smoke coming from your desk; your keyboard must be on fire, girl.”

I rubbed my shoulders feeling an inordinate amount of tension there. “I just sent the latest budget proposal to the board. If they approve it, I’ll need to hold a meeting with everyone; there will be some significant changes.”

“Sounds intriguing,” she smiled. “So, you’re weren’t kidding around the other night?”

“What do you mean?”

“At your birthday? You were talking about changing up contracts, putting your foot down a little more. With Cherry.”

“Not just Cherry,” I said, my voice firm. “The changes I’m proposing will affect everyone. You and me included. Not everyone will like the changes, I can guarantee.”

“Not everyone can handle change,” she shrugged. “But we really need some of that around here.”

She settled into a chair beside my desk. “What has triggered these changes? Is it really just what Jez at Ted’s Bar said to you?”

I could feel a blush burgeoning at the base of my throat. I reached for my water bottle and swallowed back a large mouthful.

“I think that’s part of it,” I replied, unable to meet her eyes. That was the truth. But I couldn’t tell her the rest of it. I couldn’t tell her that spending a night with a complete stranger who’d released every single one of my inhibitions, had made me feel almost invincible. Unleashing my sexual desires had given me a new lease of life. It had reminded me of exactly what I loved and needed to save. My first experience of the Decadence Club had been significantly less than pleasant, but the second experience had made up for it a hundred-fold. The only problem was, I knew it couldn’t be repeated, and already

I mourned the only night I would ever have with the most perfect man I'd ever met.

To my surprise, I'd received an invitation for another encounter the following day and I still hadn't been able to bring myself to accept it. I wasn't ready to meet another man. It could be anyone and they would never meet the standard I'd now hold them to. The man from the board had ruined it for me. I now understood what Sheridan had meant about everyone after Mr. Italy being a gigantic disappointment. My own experience had spoiled me for good.

"But ultimately, I've had four years to make this work, and I have this weird feeling I'm about to run out of time," I said. "I owe it to everyone—the acts, the team, the public for heaven's sake—to pull my finger out and make it work."

"Well, it certainly looks like you're doing that," Sheridan smiled. "What's next on your list?"

"I need to book myself tickets to a different gig every night for the next two weeks—I've looked through *The Voice* and have a list right here."

Not only that, I needed to keep myself occupied. If left alone, my thoughts returned to the club and I couldn't afford to waste time mourning the fact I'd experienced something I could never have again.

"And I need to meet individually with every member of the team, update them on the plans. Then I need to drag my sorry ass round the major radio stations and do some groveling for more airtime."

"Wow," Sheridan breathed out. "Make time for food, ok?"

"I will," I said, picking up my cell. "Must crack on."

Sheridan took that as her cue to leave and snuck out of my office leaving me with my ticking clock and a long list of to-dos. I clicked on Carlos' name. He was more or less my right-hand man and I needed a few right-hand things doing.

"Carlos," I typed. "I know you're heading out with Dree soon. If you pass the Moleskine store, can you grab me a new planner? And if you go past The Butcher's Daughter, can you

bring back the kale smoothie I like? Also, if you see Bernhard from Finance on the way, can you ask him to call me? Oh, and if you get chance to look at Cherry's contract, can you double check the leave clause? Think that's it. Speak soon, Di."

Five seconds later, my phone pinged. It was Carlos.

"Dude. I'm on the toilet. Please advise."

CHAPTER TEN



I followed the doorman into the foyer of House Four—yet another building occupied by the Decadence Club. I wondered, not for the first time, just how much money *he* must be making through his directorship of this club. As per Houses One and Five, the concierge took down my membership number and led me through the mish-mash of black corridors, to my room for the evening, this time labelled ‘Onyx’.

“Enjoy your evening, madam,” the young woman said, waiting until I’d turned the handle before walking away. I entered the room, letting the door close behind me, and looked around. The lay-out was slightly different to the two previous rooms I’d been in. It was a more characterful building—older, with more detailing around the walls and high ceilings. It was smaller, making the bed seem larger. The windows were tall and ornate, different to the modern floor-to-ceiling ones I’d become used to. I could only see one other door which appeared to lead to a bathroom; there were no additional rooms laid on for more experimental sexual activity, and there was no suite—no seating area—like last time.

I wondered, for the millionth time, who had invited me here.

House Four was way downtown. Perhaps it was someone who worked on Wall Street or at City Hall. I didn’t want to think about it. I had no intention of enjoying the person I was to spend the next few hours with; I was just going to imagine they were him. After my first experience, I knew how it

generally worked; one orgasm each, any which way, then goodbye. I sat down on the bed with my back to the door and kicked off my shoes. I'd spotted the surveillance camera to my left but I refused to look at it.

I knew *he* would know I was here. Whatever his role was in the club, he would have access to the books, member activities, a room-booking schedule, invitations. I wanted him to know I'd turned up and was here for another man. I was almost angry at him. How could he deliver a night of such—*fuck it*—decadence, knowing that's all it would be, and not have a problem with it? Well, I did. I hated that he didn't want more. I hated that he was willing to let it go—the chemistry, the banter, the comfort... the sex. I knew I could have sex with another hundred men and none of them would come close to the sex I had with him. But maybe he didn't see it the same way. Some people enjoyed depriving themselves, torturing themselves. Maybe he really was a sadistic bastard at heart. In which case, I was better off without him.

My feelings were all over the place and I realized it probably wasn't the best laid plan to accept an invitation for faceless, meaningless sex with yet another stranger. But, I was burning up. Ever since I'd walked away from House Five, leaving him in the doorway, I'd been on fire. I needed something, someone, *anyone*, to put it out. A key turned in the lock, answering my prayer. Let's just get this over with. Bring me to the fucking brink, whoever you are, and let me try to get on with my life again.

I wasn't sure whether to feel repulsed or intrigued when the sound of heavy panting entered the room. I dared not look round. Even when I heard the door close and the key turn again, and a jacket drop to the floor. I didn't want to know who could be so unhealthy and so unfit as to enter the room barely able to breathe. We were on the ground floor for God's sake; there hadn't even been steps to climb. I focused on the window, letting whoever was in the room know I wasn't there for pleasantries; I was there for a quick, single-minded fuck, and they could just damn well come and get it.

The heavy breathing came closer as footsteps worked their way around the bed. The drape over my face acted like a set of blinkers; I could only see what was straight ahead of me, which was nothing, until...

“Diana...”

My heart crashed against my rib cage as I realized the man standing in front of me wasn't a grossly obese, incredibly unfit man who couldn't even make it down the hallway without having a seizure; it was a man who'd clearly run from a far end of town to get here. It was him.

“We have thirty minutes before the camera activates again.”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Take off your drape.”

Ok, now I understood.

I couldn't contain the lust burgeoning in my stomach, and, it appeared, neither could he. I pushed off the drape and unhooked my hair in one swift movement, standing to look up at his drape-free, insanely beautiful face. He clasped his hands around my head and rammed his lips onto mine, taking my breath away. I had no idea how we undressed, but somehow, within seconds, we were naked and falling back against the bed. His lips and tongue moved greedily along my jaw, my neck, my collarbone, tugging my skin between his teeth then caressing away each sting with a flick of his tongue as he went. I writhed about beneath him, wanting anything and everything. Thirty minutes of relative normality, before we would be restricted again by rules.

His teeth nibbled their way to my breasts, which he kneaded gently with his hands. His fingers teased my right nipple, pinching lightly, tugging and circling it with his rough fingers, while his teeth and tongue on my left brought me to the edge as he sucked on the soft pink nub. The sensations stunned me. I had not been prepared for this—to feel myself under this man again. The realization that he also wanted more

made me delirious. One night hadn't been enough for either of us. Thirty minutes was next to no time but I would take it.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, feeling him nudge at my entrance. A small cry of anticipation left my throat, but I wanted something else. I quickly unwrapped my legs, pushing my hands against his chest. He raised his head to look at me. His expression wasn't one of confusion; it was one of accommodation. He wanted to allow me anything; I could read him completely in that moment. I wriggled myself down the bed, bringing my face level with his cock.

"Oh, Jesus," he murmured, as I licked the tip, needing more but holding myself back. "I won't last a fucking minute."

"You will," I said, my smooth voice betraying the roaring waves of lust thrashing around my insides.

I pulled his buttocks down to ease my access, then wrapped my lips and tongue around the head, pulling him towards me, taking him as deeply down my throat as I could.

"Dia—" he choked. I felt his hands hit the bed above my head. He was on all fours and incapacitated. "Fuck," he panted.

I pulled back and swirled my tongue around the head, clamping my lips around him again when he jerked.

"Hold still, baby," I cooed, stroking my tongue along his length. I'd never wanted to do this to anyone before; it had always seemed a bit gross. But I wanted to do everything for this man. The fact he was so turned on by me only served to turn me on further, and I wanted to be the best for him; I wanted him to never want another woman again. I felt him tremble above me, his thighs and torso tensing to hold in every urge to let go. His breath heaved in and out as though he was lifting weights.

"Wait..." I heard, then he withdrew himself from my grasp. Before I knew what was happening, he'd straddled me again, facing away. With an uncontrollable surge of lust, I realized what he was doing. His cock lowered towards my mouth which was waiting, open, greedy for him, and his lips

lowered to my entrance. My hips bucked as he touched me with his tongue and I felt two strong hands pin me to the bedsheets. I'd never done this position before, but I loved it. And in that moment, I knew I would love anything with this man. Anything.

The angle made everything feel different—amazingly different. His tongue touched my clit, sending a jolt of electricity through my core, then stroked languidly down to my opening, spearing me gently, before repeating the move again, and again. I dragged my focus back to him, sucking him into my mouth, into my throat, and back out, finding a rhythm. He groaned, the vibration working its way inside me. When I made the same sound, his cock jumped forcing me to grasp it tightly as I worked my lips and tongue along his length. The air was thick with the sound of our tongues, our lips and our moans. I wanted to record it and keep it forever.

I couldn't speak but the animalistic sounds emanating from my chest made it clear I was close, and he closed his lips over my nub, flicking his tongue back and forth, sucking and nipping until my head fell back against the mattress. I still held him, throbbing in my hand and I moved it along his length, drawing the same from him. I panted hard, feeling the spark of a climax come to light in my belly.

“Fuck,” I gasped, pulling my head up and taking him in my mouth again. I needed him to feel the same pleasure I was feeling. I pulled him deep and dragged my lips back and forth along him, swirling my tongue, tasting every inch of his flesh, salty from the exertion of getting here. He buried himself further, pressing the flat of his tongue against me. Then I felt his fingers work their way inside, massaging me in time with his tongue. I was lost. The sensation overtook me as I blindly gripped his length with my lips. A warm trickle of salt entered my mouth and I swallowed it, ravenously. Then he pulsed. I increased the pressure of my lips and the firmness of my tongue, pulling his flesh as I moved. He pulsed again.

A low groan emerged from his chest and splayed itself across my flesh.

A long “mmmm” drilled into my clit and his fingers worked beautifully against my sensitive wall, bringing me to the edge. The urge to drop my head back was overwhelming and it was all I could do to grip him tighter with my lips when I came beneath his tongue. As I bucked against him, he filled my mouth. He came so fast and hard I almost choked, unable to swallow it all. I continued to flick my tongue over the head as my tremors rolled and he emptied everything. His tongue laid lazily across me, as his fingers gently stroked my wet flesh, and I rubbed my thumb across him as I finally let my head fall. I was exhausted and elated, as though we’d cured each other of something. We might only have had thirty minutes, but if that was all I had to get the biggest orgasm of my life, it was more than enough.

He eventually rolled away only to return and lay alongside me, propping himself up on one arm. I ran my hands through my hair, spreading it across the pillow, and arched my back in a slightly sedated stretch.

“You’re fucking gorgeous,” he said, his eyes heavy-lidded.

I turned to face him, unable to hide the smile I’d been holding in since I first saw it was him who’d come into the room. “How did you manage this?” I asked. “The cameras, a second ‘encounter’.”

“You don’t need to know,” he smiled, sending my stomach into orbit.

“It’s very naughty,” I pointed out, adopting a stern expression.

His became serious too.

“I needed to see you again,” he replied, turning his attention to my hair which he stroked back with his fingers.

“I’m glad. I hoped you might.” I felt timid saying it. It was as though I was confessing my undying love for him. It was weird—we’d already committed the most intimate act a man and a woman could commit, but somehow I felt as though this conversation was the most intimate and high risk behavior I had ever engaged in.

“Diana,” he started, drilling his eyes into me. “I want to see you again.”

I breathed air in, hoping it would bring some courage with it. Something told me I was going to need it.

“By this do you mean sex? Or see each other?”

“Both.”

I was stunned. It was exactly what I’d wanted but never thought in a million years it might actually happen. “How?” I asked, knowing it was against every damn rule he’d designed and I’d agreed to.

It was his turn to take a deep, sobering breath. “Don’t, you know, read too much into this, but... I’ve been thinking about quitting my role on the board.”

“What do mean by reading into it?”

“Well, it’s a big move and I wouldn’t want you to feel any pressure to make anything, you know... work.”

“I’m not following...”

He stroked his fingers down the side of my face and for the first time in our short windows of intimacy, I couldn’t read him.

“If I quit, I’ll be free to date anyone I want. I’ve been toying with the idea for a while but now, I don’t know, this gives me a good reason to quit. But I don’t want that to freak you out...”

Ok, *that* made sense. I suddenly felt light-headed. Was he for real?

“...I’ve done this for a few years now, and... I’m taking on something new. I don’t really have time to do this anymore. I mean, board member duties. And I don’t want you to expect too much, at least in the short term...” he was rambling.

“I don’t expect anything...” I said, quickly.

“And you’re not freaked out?”

“Well, I expect more great sex, for a start,” I grinned.

He laughed at that and relaxed a little.

“I’m not freaked out,” I assured him. “I get that you have other things going on too. But, if I’m honest...” I dipped my eyes away from his face. “I’m pleased you want more of this. I wasn’t sure how I was going to walk away, again.”

He suddenly hovered above me, taking my face in both his hands.

“It almost broke me, watching you leave.”

I was stunned at his admission.

“I was torn. I have responsibilities here. I really didn’t think being with you again was an option...”

“So, what changed?” I whispered.

“I couldn’t sleep,” his brow furrowed. “I kept replaying everything in my head.”

I took a sharp intake of breath. “Neither could I.”

“I threw myself into work...”

“Me too...”

“But I could barely focus...”

“Me neither...”

“You weren’t going away...”

“Neither were you...”

He placed his lips on mine, softly, grazing his teeth against the delicate skin, and kissed me, long and slow.

He eventually pulled away and resumed the intensity of his stare. “I didn’t think you’d show up here again...”

“I only came because I wanted to pretend it was you,” I admitted. He studied my face, silently. “I wanted it to be you,” I said. “But I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

“Well, you will,” he said, sucking in a breath. “I would see you tomorrow if I could, and the next day, and the day after that. But...” He sighed, heavily. “I’m not going to have a lot of free time over the next few weeks.”

I raised my eyebrows, questioningly. He was quitting this place; he could tell me what he did for a day job now, without any repercussions.

“I won’t bore you with the details but it’s a new gig. Once I get my feet under the table, as it were, I’ll have more time.”

I nodded, accepting all I could get.

“We still have five minutes,” he grinned, rolling himself across me, squeezing the air out of my lungs. My thighs parted, instinctively, and I felt him hard, again, between my legs. He closed his lips on mine, easing his tongue between my teeth, swallowing any objection I was hardly likely to have. He stroked my tongue with his and, pinning my head to the pillow with the weight of his kiss, he filled me. His lips never left mine as he moved, slowly and persistently. I was completely at his mercy, pinned down and invaded, and I never wanted it to stop.

My orgasm rose, peaked and abated, and still he moved, bringing himself slowly, measurably to a climax. I gripped my legs around him as he pushed himself as deeply as he could, his mouth still closed on mine. A low moan vibrated against my lips when he came, jerking only lightly against my core.

We laid there, still and silent, stroking our fingers across each other’s skin, until the seconds ran out and we parted to cover our faces. Then, after we’d dressed, he walked me to the door and held my fingers until our arms were outstretched. He stayed inside the room while I walked away. Only this time, without saying goodbye.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



I floated into the office, so early that most of the desks were still empty. I hadn't slept, but not for the usual reasons I hadn't slept in the last week. I was on cloud nine. I'd had the best sex of my life, again, with a man who was prepared to quit a directorship for me. And not just any man—the most beautiful man I'd ever laid eyes on.

I didn't need to make a special effort with my appearance this morning; I was glowing from the inside out. I felt as though the new life I'd begun after hearing those fateful words from the bartender in Ted's Bar, was crystalizing before my eyes. Without needing to think about it, I'd styled my hair, taken greater care applying my make-up, and selected a low-cut, wide-legged romper from my closet, and lifted myself up by four-inch wedged-heel shoes. I felt like a million dollars.

I was pouring myself a coffee when a knock came at the door. I spun around to see Jake Davis, Empirical's Chief Personnel Officer. His appearance was always ominous—he only ever approached people when he had very good news or very bad. After the revised figures I'd sent the board the previous day, I hoped the news was good. He paused, taking in my newly polished appearance.

"Diana," he began, dragging his eyes back up to my face, unashamedly. "We're having a directors meeting at nine. I need you to be there."

"Sure," I replied. "Do I need to prepare anything? It isn't in my schedule."

“Garrett’s leading it...” he replied. That struck me as even more ominous than the fact Jake Davis was standing in my doorway. “The chairman? Sounds serious.”

“It is,” Jake stated. “I need you to be there promptly. No need to prepare anything. But you might want to clear your calendar for the rest of the day.”

“Should I be worried?” I frowned.

“You have no need to worry right now; it’s just an update. We can always catch up later if you need to discuss.”

He tapped the doorframe and ran another cursory glance over my body, then turned and walked away.

I was officially worried. Jake Davis, despite being the head of all our human resources within the business, was perhaps the least personable and approachable director. He was useless at disguising matters that might be concerning and this occasion was no different. I swallowed back my coffee and looked out of the window of my hard-earned Manhattan corner office. Was I going to lose it? Had I left it all too late? Had I left it too long to make the tough decisions? Anxiety balled in my chest as I listened to the clock ticking on the wall.

AT FIVE MINUTES TO NINE, I walked through the door to the boardroom. Only three other directors had arrived, and I nodded to them in greeting, noticing their own panicked expressions. Sheridan entered close behind me—as marketing consultant to the Group, she also attended these meetings, and I was relieved to see a friendly and familiar face. The directors, myself included, worked in disparate parts of the business, meaning we only ever crossed paths at the quarterly review conferences and at times like these, which were few and far between.

“Any idea what this is about?” Sheridan said in a low voice as she sat beside me.

“None whatsoever,” I replied. “But I’m not getting a warm glow about it, put it that way.”

“I’m glad it isn’t just me.” She leaned in closer. “I loved the new sets of figures, girl. Ballsy. And exactly what we need.”

“Thanks,” I smiled. “I just hope I get a chance to put the proposal into practice.”

Sheridan turned to face me, full on this time. “You’re looking hot this morning, by the way. Where are you getting these outfits?”

“My closet,” I replied, shaking my head. “I know; I’m as surprised as you are. I’d forgotten I actually own nice clothes.”

“Not just nice, Miss Delaney—freaking jaw-dropping. I mean, look... Geoff and Tristan can’t take their eyes off you.”

I couldn’t bring myself to look up at the VPs of our two other offshoots, so I took her word for it.

“If you’re looking to get laid,” she went on. “There’s your offer, right there.”

I stifled a laugh. “Thanks, but no thanks. I’m sorted in that department.”

A hand placed itself on my opposite shoulder, turning me sideways to face her.

“Say what? You’re seeing someone?” The shock on her face would have insulted me had it not been completely justified. I hadn’t dated anyone for as long as she’d known me. A long time.

“Kind of,” I said, failing to hide the smile that was brewing on my lips. It was not what I wanted to say. I wanted to scream it. I wanted to stand on my chair, right there, in the middle of the boardroom and scream it for everyone to hear. I’ve got a *boyfriend!* But several things stopped me. First of all, we’d simply had sex a few times; we weren’t exactly dating—yet. And second, I still didn’t even know his damn name. I didn’t really know anything about him, except how to make him

come in thirty seconds or less. “I’ve just seen a guy a couple of times, nothing too dramatic.”

“Nothing too dramatic?” Both eyebrows were raised in astonishment. “You’re glowing, babe. If I didn’t know better, I would have guessed you’d been getting busy with it. Your skin is... well... vibrant.”

“Sheridan, stop,” I put a hand over her mouth for fear one of the other directors would hear. I did not want any element of my private life to be aired in the workplace. “I’ll tell you everything later, I promise.”

“You better,” she wagged a finger at me.

I was saved then, by the arrival of Garrett Green, the chairman, who walked to his seat at the head of the table, but instead of sitting in it, he perched his hands on the back of the chair and scoured the room, checking we were all present. Satisfied, he started to speak.

“Thank you all for coming at such short notice. I have some important news to update you on.” He coughed, almost nervously, which was unusual. Garrett was known for being a fair but definitely tough chairman, whose temper when roused could reduce grown men to sniveling boys.

He continued: “I know you are all aware of our financial situation and how we are performing in relation to our competitors. We’ve been up against some serious challenges in the last few years, most notably, piracy—the threat to our survival in that respect continues—and significant changes to the way people purchase and consume their music. We have adapted as far as we can with the resources we have, but it isn’t enough. Our shareholders are demanding fundamental change, and this will impact all of you; some substantially more than others.”

The tension in the room was palpable. Every single person in there was holding their breath, sensing the worst was about to happen: our jobs and those of our teams could be at risk.

“We need to take a long hard look at the way we are structured and consider drastically downsizing, to focus our

energies and resources on a small portion of our existing business.”

My heart was in my mouth. I had done myself no favors, managing a label which had only declined in performance, draining profits rather than making them. I kicked myself again for having let the likes of Cherry Tatum dictate to me the way I ran my own business.

“I’ve appointed a new CEO,” Garrett went on, “whose remit is to review the entire organization and recommend divisions and departments that no longer meet the needs or objectives of Empirical.”

At that moment, the door opened. I turned back to face Sheridan whose eyes were wide and anxious. I tried to convey to her with one glance my fear for the future of Phoenix, but her eyes didn’t meet mine; they were on the door. She spoke quietly and without moving her lips.

“And he would have to be a sexy motherfucker,” she whispered.

I turned to face the front of the room and died on my seat.

It was him.

The man with whom I’d spent the best few hours of my life; the man who had just given up his place on the board of a successful club for me; the man who had declared his desire to see me again, sleep with me again... was my new CEO.

His dark blue eyes were surveying the room, curiously; his lips were drawn and taut. His suit was elegant, perfectly fitted, freshly cleaned. His form and charisma filled the room. I watched as his eyes touched on each single person, taking them in, taking note.

Then they landed on me.

He paused his roaming for the beat of a second, registering nothing, then continued to graze his eyes across the rest of the room. I slowly let out a breath. I was fucked. Every which way. Nothing could happen between us now. He’d just been appointed to kick me out of a job. He would know it too, but

according to his blank expression, he cared a hell of a lot less about it than I did.

Garrett was still talking but I heard nothing but the loud sound of my pulse throbbing through my eardrums. My heart had sunk low into my belly, my brain banishing every single now-painful memory of the earth-shattering sex we'd had together.

I just about managed to bring my consciousness back to the party when Garrett announced the name of my latest and no doubt last-for-a-long-time lay.

“... Jude Peyton-Harris.”

I noticed *Jude's* eyes flicker towards me, almost imperceptibly. No one else would have noticed. Only me. He knew this would be the first time I heard his name.

I swallowed, feeling a giant lump in my throat which subsequently alerted me to the ache in my heart. The last few hours had flipped my emotions in two extreme, opposite directions. One minute I was embarking on a relationship with someone I was irrepressibly attracted to, someone who'd had his tongue inside me and his cock in my mouth only hours earlier, someone I thought I might actually have a future with. The next, my heart had been flung across the room along with the possibility of losing the one thing that had meant anything in my life: my record label.

The man who'd held me up against a vanity unit while he fucked me senseless now held my future in his hands, and I knew exactly what he would do with it: screw it up and throw it in the trash.

I felt at once inexplicably angry and utterly heartbroken. His face now represented my demise. In it, I saw nothing but a future heading down the drain.

But that was crap; I was kidding myself.

In his face I would only see the lust that had swarmed in his eyes, the curve of his lips as he revealed his plans to leave the club, for me. I would only ever see the delirious expression

he wore when I brought him to orgasm as I ground my hips above him.

I closed my eyes tightly to stop any tears forming and studied the desk as he spoke. His voice was different. He spoke with an authority with which nothing argued. His words were crystal clear; his meaning and intentions unambiguous. He laid it out straight.

“From this point on, you are all at risk. And that means your teams are too. You will be consulted as part of the restructuring process, but your cooperation will be precisely and only that. It will not strengthen any case to keep you or your division intact.”

His words were unemotional, plain and hard-hitting, endearing him to no one. I could feel the defenses of all my colleagues go up, the resentment undisguised on their faces.

“I have already hired the management consultants McAuley Finch to support the process and I will appreciate you each making time for them whenever they require it. I will also aim to meet with you individually over the next few days to discuss any concerns you may have.”

It occurred to me I would have to be in a room with this man again, alone. To talk about my business and how he planned to break it apart. I couldn't look at him.

“I'm not here to make friends...” he continued, his voice directed towards the other side of the table, “... but this will be a lengthy process; it will be helpful if we can all behave respectfully towards each other.”

The room fell silent as soon as he stopped talking and I couldn't help but look up to assess his reaction. He was staring right at me. I swallowed hard and looked away again.

“Thanks for your time,” he finished. “I needn't remind you that everything we have just announced here is confidential. There will be a written announcement circulated to all employees later today, with some FAQs to help you answer any questions your teams may have. I look forward to meeting you all individually, in due course.”

He turned and walked out of the room, taking my heart with him.

CHAPTER TWELVE



“*A*rrrogant, British bastard,” Sheridan spat as we remained seated and stunned, along with everyone else. “No offense, honey.”

“None taken,” I replied, my voice a mere squeak.

“The nerve of the guy. Just walking in here with no compassion whatsoever for the fact he’s just turned everyone’s world upside down.”

I nodded and listened to Sheridan, afraid to open my mouth.

“That’s why they didn’t mention his name before the meeting,” another director piped up. I recognized him as one of the distribution heads—someone responsible for ensuring our acts’ CDs were available in all major record stores. I figured his job would be obsolete if Garrett’s vision was realized. “He’s notorious.”

My ears pricked up. “Notorious for what?” I asked.

“Tearing companies apart and selling off the pieces. Peyton-Harris is famous for it.”

Another director piped up. “I knew I recognized the name. Didn’t he do the same to Silver Star, the film studio out in LA?”

I remembered Jude’s reference to Gerard Butler. It was all making horrible sense.

“Reduced the whole business to one department. They outsource everything now; they control the services, they’ve

driven down prices everywhere.”

“Do they still make money?”

“Tons.”

“Damn,” Sheridan interjected. “We’re screwed, right? All of us?”

Tristan leaned across. “Not quite all of us...” He looked pointedly at me and Geoff. “Our subsidiaries will go outright; I’d bet my life on it. We specialize in alternative music, not mainstream. And that, unfortunately, seems to be the way the industry is heading. The rest of the business will be trimmed down.”

“Fuck,” Sheridan collapsed against the back of her chair. I didn’t know what she was angsty about. She was probably safe in her role as a valued consultant to the rest of the business. I was gone, there was no doubt about it. It wouldn’t have been so bad if it was at the hands of some faceless or dickless suit that I wouldn’t be able to call out in a line-up. As my shitty awful luck would have it, it was at the hands of a man I had fallen completely in lust with.

Stupid as it sounded, in the seven hours since I’d left the room in House Four, I’d imagined myself marrying the guy, bearing his children, moving to the suburbs and having lots and lots of no-holds-barred sex. He’d told me he was leaving the club board for me. What would happen now? Would he still leave? Or would he think there was no longer any point?

It would be highly unethical—impossible—for him to continue a relationship with me now. It wouldn’t just be a matter for the Decadence Club board; it would be a matter for the shareholders and the legal entities that represented them and us. The only way it could happen was if I left of my own accord. And I couldn’t.

I had no place else to go.

I followed Sheridan out of the boardroom.

“Is a martini out of the question?” She asked, a note of hope in her voice.

“I can’t,” I sighed. “I need to be around—and sober—for when this announcement lands.”

“Of course,” she nodded. “Are you ok? You’ve been really quiet about the whole thing.”

I couldn’t help it. My feet stopped moving and a sob escaped my mouth before I had a chance to eclipse it with my hand.

“Shit, Di...” Sheridan said, putting her arm around me. “Come on. My office.”

She led me down a fire escape stairwell, to the floor below. From this direction, the first door we reached was the one to her office. She bundled me inside and sat me down on the sofa. After handing me a fresh glass of water, she sat and pulled me into her shoulder. I heaved out uncontrollable tears, soaking her jacket within minutes.

“Jeez, honey, you poor thing. We’ll get through it, ok? We’ll get through it together,” she stroked my hair and I buried my face into her. I didn’t dare lift my head; I knew I’d have to tell her the truth.

“Here,” she said, handing me a tissue. I blew my nose and dabbed at my eyes, knowing they were a lost cause and black mascara had probably already streaked its way down my cheeks. I sank my head into my hands.

“Oh, God, Sheridan.”

“It’s ok, we’ll get through it,” she repeated.

“It isn’t that,” I mumbled through my fingers.

“What do you mean?” Sheridan rubbed my back lightly as though I was holding my head over a toilet bowl, about to vomit. I didn’t think I was far away from that, to be honest.

“Jude is... him,” I said, quietly. “He’s the guy.”

“What guy?” She asked, perplexed.

“The guy I’ve been seeing,” I breathed out in a long sigh.

“What?” She pulled me up by the shoulders and made me face her. My pained expression must have said everything

because she suddenly looked mortified. “That’s him? And you didn’t know?”

I shook my head. “I had no idea. I didn’t even know what his name was until he announced it.”

Sheridan screwed up her eyes. “I’m not following...”

“Ok,” I said, taking another deep breath. “I’m going to tell you something but it has to go no further. Do you understand? If things weren’t already bad enough, if this gets out, I don’t know what will happen—to me or him.”

Sheridan nodded, warily, and I told her. I told her everything. From my unpleasant first introduction to Sienna, to the moment I met Jude, to our first ‘encounter’, to our second ‘illegal date’, to his decision to leave the club. She listened intently, absorbing every word and it wasn’t until I finished that she released a hiss of air between her teeth.

“That complicates things,” she said, quietly.

“No shit,” was my response.

“I’m guessing you can’t talk to him, ask him to go a bit easy on you?”

I shook my head. “You know as well as I do it wouldn’t do any good.”

“Well, you have to speak to him. Today. You need to know what’s going on in his head. I’m guessing he didn’t know you worked here, right?”

“He couldn’t have,” I said, exploring every facet of my brain for any recollection that might suggest otherwise. I’d signed up to the club with a personal email address, personal cell number, personal credit card. They could have looked into my social security if they’d really wanted to, but I got the impression they were too intent on sucking me in and retaining a new member than being overly anal about my details.

“Call Magda now. She must be managing his schedule. Get an appointment with him asap.” She held out her cell for me. “Do it, Di. You can’t go home at the end of the day without having spoken to him.”

She was right. I did as she instructed.

“Hold on, Diana,” Magda said. “I only just set up his planner. Let me check with him.”

I waited while she put me on hold. While she spoke to the man who’d only hours ago declared he was going to leave a prestigious, probably lucrative, role so he could be with me, to ask if he’d spare me five minutes.

“He’s tied up today, Diana. Are you around later this week?”

The volume was up on Sheridan’s cell and she could hear every word. Her face contorted into personified shock and she shook her head vigorously.

“I’m afraid not, Magda. I need to see him today.” I racked my brains for a plausible excuse; an excuse he would not be able to refuse. “I have reason to believe there might be a conflict of interest in his appointment and I’d like to discuss it with him.”

The phone went quiet again and Sheridan held two thumbs up at me.

“He’ll see you at six,” Magda confirmed. “Prompt.”

“Thanks Magda,” I smiled down the phone before hanging up.

“Nice...” Sheridan grinned. “Giving you five minutes to talk about what the fuck is going on is the least he can do.”

“I know,” I agreed, then the realization I was going to get my one-on-one hit me. “I need to fix my face.”

“Don’t you worry about that, my darling. I have half the Sephora store right here in my desk,” Sheridan smiled. “I am going to repair your face, and some. That asshole will regret ever setting foot on these premises when he sees you. Mark my words.”

With that, she enveloped me in her arms one more time, then stalked around to her desk to unleash her weapons.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



It was the longest day in the history of my life. My eyes became intimately acquainted with the clock on the wall, the clock on my cell, the watch on my wrist, and I monitored each, studiously, as the time inched agonizingly slowly towards six pm.

The announcement came and went, knocks on my door came and went. I briefed my managers, my mind elsewhere, and I tortured myself with thoughts about what the fuck I was going to do.

I couldn't leave the label. VP jobs at indie labels didn't grow on trees, and anyway, with my track record, I doubted anyone would touch me. I couldn't go back to being a talent scout; I would be considered "too experienced". I couldn't go back to college; I had no idea what I'd study and besides, I relied on the US working visa this job had secured me. Without it, I would have to go home. And that was *not* an option.

My appetite had vanished and, without sleep, I felt light-headed as I walked along the corridor to Jude's office. I'd been in that office hundreds of times to meet with Alex, the former CEO. We'd all been told he'd resigned, but now I suspected he'd been pushed—that hiring Jude had been a calculated and premeditated move on the part of the board and shareholders.

I still couldn't believe Jude—the man whose body I knew intimately—was sitting behind that door. My heart thumped as I approached it. I knew how my body would react as soon as I saw him. I would melt into a pool of lust, right there on the

floor, while my brain battled to realign itself to the new reality—a reality in which he and I would be enemies. Because we wanted two very different things. He wanted me out, and I wanted nothing of the kind.

I hesitated at the door, hoping I might summon some inner strength from somewhere, but my heart still thumped, loudly and erratically. He'd said six pm prompt, and it was six pm. I had to go in. I knocked twice and waited. After a long pause I heard, "Come in".

I pushed the door and held my breath as he came into view. It helped, holding my breath. I considered, in that moment, making it the basis of my coping strategy. I could just *stop* breathing. Then I realized that nothing was going to help, not even self-imposed suffocation.

My heart racketed around my chest the moment I set eyes on his dirty blonde hair softly curled around his ears; his dark blue eyes staring back at me, warily; his large form standing rigid behind his desk. It reminded me of when I'd emerged from the room during my first night at the club. He was tense all over, as though he was trying to repel something.

"Take a seat," he said, his voice hollow and sounding nothing like it had when he'd stroked the contours of my thigh less than twenty-four hours earlier.

I did as he instructed, swallowing my nerves. He slowly sat down himself, in the seat opposite me; the same seat I'd seen my previous CEO sit in many times before. The air in the room was different to how I remembered it. It was cold—the air con had been cranked right up—and it smelled of fresh body odor and worn leather, as though there had been a lot of pacing around.

"I understand you have some concerns about my appointment," he said, sitting back in his chair, the full width of his cotton-covered chest exposed as his jacket fell open. My breath hitched.

"That's an understatement," I replied, getting straight to the point. If he thought I was going to go along with this, without even acknowledging our relationship, he was sorely

mistaken. “Did you know I worked here?” I knew the answer would be no; he would never have made any of those plans to see me if he had. But I wanted answers—any answers.

“No, of course not.”

“Do they know about your role at the club?”

“Yes. I’m on the board of several organizations and I disclosed all of them.”

“You’re still on the board of Decadence, then?”

“Resigning from a board takes time, Miss Delaney.”

I balked at his use of my surname. He’d already been through our employee records, I guessed.

“And that’s still your plan?”

He took a measured breath. “I can’t discuss that with you.”

His robotic dryness was beginning to get on my nerves.

“Can I ask you one thing?”

He didn’t reply, but the tick of his jaw suggested he knew what was coming.

“Did it mean anything to you? What we had?”

Had. I was already speaking about our relationship in past tense and it made a little piece of my heart ache. He stared at me, almost incredulous. His voice was quiet, and more akin to the Jude I thought I knew.

“Of course it did,” he replied. “Don’t you think I’m in as much shock as you are? You were the last person I expected to see in that room.”

“You acted as though I was nobody.”

“I had to,” he said. “You have to be no different to anyone else here. I have to treat all of you the same, no favors.”

“I’m not a child,” I grimaced. “I know how these things work and I don’t expect any favors. Why did you keep me waiting until six to meet?”

He dropped his head.

“I wasn’t sure what to say to you,” he said, quietly. “I still don’t know. It wasn’t even yesterday when I had everything planned out—how you and I might be able to start seeing each other.” He stretched his arms up and behind his head and faced out of the window, then he gave a small, hollow laugh. “Fuck. I was even planning where to take you at the weekend.”

My stomach plummeted another inch as it hit me again what was being ripped away. It was like someone was pulling a table cloth, leaving everything intact on the foundation beneath. Only, in my case, even that was turning to rubble.

As he stared out the window, something to my left caught my attention. The usually pristine white, unscathed wall of Alex’s old office had a massive dent in it, right across from where Jude was sitting. I looked back to the hands resting at the back of his head, the head I had held when we kissed for what I hadn’t realized would be the last time. The knuckle of his right hand was purple.

I stood and walked around the desk, his eyes following me nervously.

“When did this happen?” I asked, taking hold of his battered hand. In one glance I knew he couldn’t lie about it. We were in bed together only hours earlier and this bruise had not been there then. And while I’d been immersed too deeply in shock in the boardroom to have looked at his hands, I somehow knew the injury had happened since, and that dent in the wall had something to do with it.

“Nine twenty-three,” he replied, in a whisper.

I mentally rewound. He’d walked out of the boardroom at exactly nine twenty and it would have taken him three minutes to walk back up the stairs and along the corridor to here, his office. I raised his hand to my lips and gently kissed his bruised knuckle. Tears pricked my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” he said, his voice cracking.

“I know. But that’s how I feel,” I closed my eyes to focus on the broken skin of his hand against my lips. “I just feel sorry; about all of this.”

He turned his chair towards me and pushed himself to his feet. His hand turned over in mine, then it cupped my face.

“Diana...” he started. I looked up into his eyes and saw liquid. He tilted my chin up towards his and brought his lips down to mine. The metallic taste of dried blood gave way to the sweet tang of his mouth and I allowed myself to drown in him. I knew it could never happen again. He moved deliberately and meaningfully around my mouth, stroking my tongue with his, teasing it across my lips. It was no ordinary kiss; he was leaving his mark on me, because he knew he could never return.

I reached my hands up and pushed my fingers through his soft curls, tugging him further into me. In turn, he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his body. I felt him thick and firm between us and almost cried knowing I would never feel him inside me again. A sob passed from my throat to his and it seemed to remind him where he was.

“Fuck, fuck!” He groaned, dropping his hands and pulling away. He turned his back to me and rubbed his bruised hand across his face, wincing slightly.

“Diana... you have to forget that happened. It can’t happen again.”

“I know,” I whispered behind him. “Don’t worry. I won’t expect it again, but I can’t promise I’ll forget.”

He hit his forehead with the heel of his palm. Then again, and again. I reached forward and held his arm. “Stop it, please...”

He turned to face me and his eyes were ringed red.

“I wish I hadn’t been their only option,” he whispered, almost to himself.

“What do you mean?”

“The board. Your board.”

“Why were you?” I didn’t follow; surely there were plenty of people available who did the kind of job Jude had been hired for.

“This,” he waved his arm, referring, I presumed, to Empirical Records, “is a much-loved brand. The acts are international darlings. The choices I’m going to have to make will be deeply unpopular. I’m expecting the usual—hate mail, death threats, broken windows, the lot. Not many people are willing to walk into a situation like that.”

“So, why you?” I frowned.

“Because...” he laughed again, bitterly, “I don’t care. I have no fucking feelings.”

He scrubbed his face again. “Supposedly.”

“I don’t get it,” I said, shaking my head. Because I didn’t. The Jude I knew had feelings. Feelings of lust, desire, need.

“All my life I’ve been numb,” he said, bitterness on the edge of his tongue. “I’ve had no problem walking into a business like this and shredding it to pieces. I can make any company a lot of money, by doing the work they’re too soft to do themselves. I’ve never known any of the employees I’ve had to fire, let alone slept with them several times or agreed to start up a relationship with them.”

He walked to the other side of the room, shaking his head.

“This is justice, it has to be. I deserve this. I’ve been ruthless until now, and this is payback. No one gets away with being such an asshole for so long.”

“That’s rubbish,” I said, understanding he wasn’t actually talking to me; he was having this conversation with himself and I was simply witness to it.

“I deserve it,” he said, quietly, facing out of the window.

I stood there, at a loss for what I could say to make him understand it wasn’t his fault—none of this was. Then, as though a switch had been flicked inside him, he seemed to transform into the Jude I saw in the boardroom—blank,

callous and abrupt. He turned sharply from the window and strode purposefully towards me.

“I can’t continue this conversation,” he said, suddenly business-like. “It stops now. And I have a job to do.”

I stepped back in surprise at the sudden change in his tone.

“You’re going to try and force me out, aren’t you?”

The least he could do was tell me the truth; what I could expect.

“Yes. Your division is a drain on the business.”

I almost choked. The way he said it, so blunt, so matter-of-fact; it threw me off balance.

“It makes no financial sense to keep it,” he continued, twisting the knife. “And your acts are peanuts compared to big hitters elsewhere in the group. If anything, Phoenix Music is a distraction, an indulgence. It’s the music industry equivalent of those little hobby shops set up by rich housewives as something to do with their time.”

I gasped. His sentiment was venomous but his tone was even, and deadpan, like his face.

“I’m not going to roll over for you,” I spat at him. “You can’t get me out that easily.”

He smiled, thinly, almost regretfully. “That’s what they all say.”

I straightened, now hating this man with every fiber of my being. “I will fight you tooth and nail, all the way, Jude *Peyton-Harris*.”

He reached out once more and curled his bruised fingers around the curve of my chin. He closed his eyes and shook his head, lightly.

“You have no idea who you are fighting, Diana *Delaney*. They all lose. And so will you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



I arrived at Sheridan's "emergency martini meeting" a little worse for wear. If I hadn't known that already, I would have deciphered it from Carlos' look of horror as I approached the table he'd reserved in a bar on the corner of all-hell-has-broken-loose and shitfaced-is-the-only-way-out.

"Don't..." Sheridan warned him as I dragged my heartbroken, mind-fucked ass onto the stool. "Now is not the time."

"I'm as gone as you are, sweetie," he said instead, in an attempt to commiserate with me.

"I'm not gone," I croaked. "I'm not going fucking anywhere."

"I told you," Sheridan whispered to Carlos. "She's in denial."

"Well," Carlos said, straightening and putting an arm around me. "We all know de Nile is a river in Egypt. I'm with Di on this one. I'm not going anywhere either."

I looked up at him, slightly surprised he was so tied to our little label. I'd thought everything in Carlos' life was slightly superficial. Apparently I was wrong. He read the skepticism on my face.

"I love it, Di. I love our Phoenix family. I have the best team in the world, and we have some of the best indie acts in the world. I'm not going to let that asshole push them out when they deserve to be heard. The world needs to hear

them!” He wiped an eye, dramatically, and I hugged him tightly.

“Thanks, C. I appreciate it. I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

“Did you talk to Peyton-Harris?” Sheridan asked.

“Yes. I wouldn’t say it was the most successful or positive conversation I’ve ever had. Certainly not in terms of saving my future at the label anyway.”

“So, your... connection... to him counts for shit?”

I glanced at Carlos, who’d settled himself back on his stool and was pushing an olive delicately around his martini glass.

“I knew you’d tell him eventually,” Sheridan nodded towards Carlos, “so I’ve saved you the time and effort,” she concluded, ever the planner.

“Yes, exactly that. Shit,” I said, taking a grateful sip of the espresso martini they’d ordered for me.

“I have to say, darling,” Carlos purred. “I’m mightily impressed you joined a sex club. My impression of you has shot up the charts. I’m dying to know what it was like.”

I shook my head.

“I can’t... I can’t talk about that right now. I can only think about the shit that’s on my doorstep—the sorry state of my love life and the fact that my actual life is hanging in a balance that HE is in total control of.”

Sheridan reached her hands across the table to give mine a squeeze. “Ok,” she said. “We’re listening.”

I took another big mouthful of martini. “I liked him,” I said, quietly. “I really liked him. From the moment I first saw him, even when he was wearing that ridiculous mask, I knew there was something beneath it. And when he touched me, not in that way, but just casually, I felt some sort of electricity run right through me. I’ve never felt that before, with anyone.”

Sheridan and Carlos listened in silence as I told them of my first night with Jude, and my second, and the rules we’d

broken, and the plans he'd made to quit the club for me. They listened as I waxed lyrical about how I'd grown to know someone so intimately in such a short space of time. And they stroked my hair as I broke down, recalling the last conversation we'd had where I realized I hadn't really known Jude at all.

"I should have known it was all a complete fantasy," I said, shaking my head again. "But I was sucked in, one hundred percent. Why has this happened to me? Why do I never learn? I date no one! And I'm twenty-seven for God's sake. Shouldn't I know better?"

I looked at them both, unconvinced of my own response to that question.

"Honey," Sheridan replied. "You're never too old to learn something stupid."

But I was on a roll, a Di-beating roll of self-pity.

"Why did I have to choose the man who would end up being the most powerful, most hideous and most frustratingly attractive asshole ever to walk into my life? Why didn't I just settle for that geeky guy who groped me at the Empirical office party two years ago?"

It was Carlos' turn to voice his wisdom. "Because if you have to choose between two evils, you should always pick the one you haven't tried before."

"You both make it sound as though this was an inevitable rite of passage," I sulked.

"Well, it is, sort of," Sheridan said, kindly. "The only difference here being that the man who has effectively dumped you, is now orchestrating the demise of your career. That's not normal, and I don't envy you in the slightest."

"At least you look as hot as shit—present moment excepted," Carlos volunteered. "He is going to be kicking himself that he can't finish what he started. You keep up with this new look you've unveiled and he's going to be waddling around the place like Clint Eastwood on Viagra."

“Thanks,” I muttered, placing my head into its current most-happy place: my hands. I could sense them exchanging concerned looks, like two helicopter parents discussing a newly emo’d teenager.

As I hid my face, I had a sudden realization. I didn’t have much time. I didn’t know how fast this bastard worked, but I couldn’t risk being left behind again. I had to figure out some moves, and make them, fast.

I sat up so quickly Carlos almost fell off his stool.

“I need a campaign,” I announced. “We need to go public with this.”

Sheridan and Carlos stared back at me, wary of my sudden change in mood.

“The statement that went out earlier today was completely misleading at worst and utterly vague at best. We need to tell the public what’s really happening. Our fans need to know that everything we stand for—independent music that hasn’t been falsely manufactured to some data-driven, insta-pop formula—is at risk. They need to know that the music we champion—the home grown, creative, ground-breaking alternative to the manufactured mainstream—could very well go away if we don’t do something to save it.”

“Cherry won’t go away. She could go to another label,” Carlos said. “She’s established enough now.”

“I wouldn’t say Cherry was terribly alternative, though,” Sheridan argued. “But the rest of our acts are. And they need us. No one else will snap them up, I can guarantee you. They’re still relative unknowns; they’re not money-spinners, by any stretch of the imagination.”

“But they have fans,” I reminded them. “And there are millions of people out there who want to see more diversity in the music industry. Reality talent shows are everywhere, they’re like wallpaper. Surely people are getting sick and tired of them. They want something new, and independent music is currently the only thing bringing that. You only need look at all the unsigned YouTubers causing a stir to know that people

are looking elsewhere for their music. No one is really championing that stuff. Maybe we could.”

“I like it,” Carlos said, which was a relief because, as Head of Talent, I would expect him to be heavily involved in this.

“So, let me get this straight,” Sheridan said. “We want to champion ALL alternative music so that people will want to save *us*?”

“In a way, yes,” I said, thinking it through out loud. “We need to reposition ourselves, and quickly. We need to start some sort of Daily Talent Spot, where we highlight a different unsigned act every day right across our platform. We need to open up our own social channels to unsigned artists, and even host online bite-sized concerts showcasing independent talent.”

“So, where does Phoenix fit into all this?” Sheridan asked.

“Because Phoenix signs the best,” I replied. “And we can only do that if we have our finger on the pulse, if we know what’s out there, what people are enjoying.”

“So, you don’t think, by showcasing unsigned talent, we’re drawing ears away from our own artists?” Carlos was also skeptical.

“No. The very opposite,” I replied. “We create a buzz—we design the landscape, we build the houses, then we let people in.”

Carlos frowned, nervously. “I still don’t get. We’re building houses now?”

I laughed, almost light-headed with delight at my spontaneous idea. “No, by handpicking and celebrating the unsigned talent we think people will enjoy, we take ownership of that space, then we introduce our own acts. People love being the first to discover. We give our fans that ability, on a plate, then we hit them with new releases for the small number of acts lucky enough to be signed by us.”

“I like it,” Sheridan said, tapping her cheek with a long manicured fingernail.

“And once all that is in place, we hit the social media channels with a hashtag campaign: #savephoenix. We deliver a service that music fans globally will instantly appreciate, then we tell them it could all be taken away, along with the best of the best that we’ve handpicked to sign. We champion ALL alternative music, not just our own acts. We represent the genre; the principle. If we go, it won’t be long before the other labels follow suit and suddenly the airwaves are awash with manufactured crap.”

I drank the rest of my martini and placed the glass back on the table with a loud ‘clank’.

The two of them looked back at me with something resembling awe; only, it couldn’t have been because it wasn’t too long ago I was bending over backwards to meet every whim of our most diva-licious artist and taking the whole damn label with me.

“We don’t have much time,” Carlos said.

“Are you on board, though?”

“Yes. Absolutely. It’s big, it’s ballsy and, well, it’s all we’ve got. Let’s do it.”

Carlos and I high-fived then we both stared at Sheridan for her verdict.

“I think it’s the bloody best idea you’ve had since you hired me,” she grinned. “I’m in.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“*M*agda, darling, how are you?” I trilled, raising my voice above the din of the New York City traffic. I’d just had yet another successful meeting with a media group, this time about sponsoring a segment on the primetime show of their highest-reaching station, dedicated purely to unsigned acts. Our repositioning had taken off like a rocket. Our social channels had grown exponentially, thanks to all the new sparkling bands and artists we were now showcasing, and we’d managed to crash YouTube with our first ever UnSigned mini concert.

“Mr. Peyton-Harris would like to see you this afternoon. When are you due back in the office?”

I stopped walking and ducked into a doorway.

“I wasn’t intending to come back today. I’m meeting with...”

“Mr. Peyton-Harris insists.”

“Fine,” I sighed, refusing to hide my dislike of the man who was trying to ruin my life. “What’s the nature of the meeting?”

“He wants to discuss your recent marketing activities.”

I smiled to myself. “Which ones? There have been rather a few.”

Not only had we successfully established our position as the champions of new and alternative music, we had also launched #savephoenix, through a revealing interview that

Ayda had graciously given to *MusicWeek*. It was still early days but the hashtag was already trending on every social media channel.

I'd personally met with each of our acts—Cherry included who, to her credit, was genuinely upset and expressed a desire to help in any way she could—to explain our new strategy and the hashtag campaign. They all jumped at the chance to pitch in and help, and not just because their futures were on the line, but because they truly cared about good music and really wanted to save the label that had put so much faith in them.

“Your Save Phoenix campaign. I believe...” I felt her lean closer to the phone, “... he feels you've overstepped the mark with Ayda's interview and disagrees with your interpretation of the statement we put out.”

I loved Magda. As the CEO's executive assistant, she was putting her job on the line by giving me more information than she needed to. But she was an ally, and she'd made it clear she hated Jude as much as everyone else did. It wasn't just because he was looking at each of us through a magnifying glass for any flaws or signs of weakness, but he had the emotions of a wooden plank. I didn't recognize him. Gone was the man I'd had mind-blowing sex with, who'd sat me on his knee to eat nachos, who'd tickled me until I couldn't breathe. Gone. Poof. Like smoke.

“Magda, I love you. Thank you for the heads up.”

“You're welcome,” she replied, then lowered her voice further. “I love it, by the way. It's genius.”

I laughed and hung up, then turned on my heel. If Sir Jude needed me back at base, then back to base I would go.

“YOU WANTED TO SEE ME.” I stood in his doorway, watching his eyes narrowing on his screen and trying to slow the beating of my heart. He looked up, a flash of something crossing his face before he adopted his usual blank, deadpan expression. I had only seen him once since that fateful meeting where we'd

basically threatened to annihilate each other, and that had been at another director's meeting, through which I had attempted to ignore both his frequent glances and the throbbing between my legs.

I hadn't exactly dressed for this occasion—my mind had been focused wholly on saving my label, and less on the cut of my dress. But, admittedly, the navy lace shift I'd thrown on that morning did make my breasts appear fairly sizeable, complementing my rounded hips. I allowed myself a hint of smugness as he—unintentionally, I suspected—raked his eyes over me before he spoke.

“Take a seat, please.”

My heels clicked as I walked across the polished floor and sat in the chair opposite him. I placed my notebook on my lap and held my pen, poised to take down whatever instructions he was about to give me.

He turned fully to face me and rested his forearms on the desk. I noticed he hadn't made any attempt to personalize his office. There were no framed photographs, no business awards, not even a comedy mug or mouse mat. Only his Empirical-issued computer and a plain Mont Blanc pen. He leaned forward, burrowing his eyes beneath the surface of my skin. Not for the first time since I'd met him, I shivered at the proximity and inhaled the sweetness of his scent. I had no doubt that, even while their lives were hanging in the balance too, a whole swathe of young employees would have been drooling over our sadistic CEO. He was beautiful. Movie star beautiful. He really was a young, more modern James Dean. I tried to imagine the drape over his face again, but it simply served to turn me on. I cleared my throat and attempted to think of something else. The campaign. Always the campaign.

“What do you think you're doing?” He asked, a fake smile crawling across his lips.

“Excuse me? I'm sitting in your office,” I replied.

“With your little marketing campaign?” He clarified. Not that I needed the clarification; I knew exactly what he was referring to.

“If you thought it was ‘little’, I doubt you’d have called me in here to talk to me about it,” I replied, giving him my own fake smile in return.

He ground his teeth then slowly sat back, keeping a firm grip on my gaze.

“It’s not good use of your time, Miss Delaney.”

“Oh? Then what is?”

“You should be focusing on ways to make back some of the losses you’ve incurred in the last four years... Not playing around with a silly hashtag, whining to the world because someone is finally holding you accountable.”

I was stunned by his brevity but I couldn’t show it on my face. It took all my strength to stay put and give as good as I was getting.

“Mr. Peyton-Harris,” I cooed. “Our organic reach has increased exponentially. Our press coverage has quadrupled in quantity, and sentiment towards our brand is one hundred percent positive. We are already seeing a sharp uptick in sales downloads across all our acts. I would say I have been doing exactly that: I have been making back some of those losses. I guarantee you, in less than two months we will have beaten our forecast for the entire year.”

“You’re behaving irresponsibly.”

“How so?”

“You’re creating something that kids are getting excited about...”

“And that’s irresponsible, why?”

“Because it’s all going to be taken away.”

“That’s on your head, not mine. I thought you didn’t care about getting hate mail. Thought it was par for the course, no?”

“It is irresponsible because you already know the outcome, Diana...” His voice was raised and his muscular shoulders had tensed. I knew because I could hardly take my eyes off them.

“You knew all along this wouldn’t last. It isn’t fair on the fans.”

“Woah, wait a minute...” I held up a hand. “This is not a foregone conclusion, *Jude*. McAuley Finch haven’t completed their review and no one has undergone a consultation yet. If you had already made a decision to close down my label, it would be a pre-meditated one. And I do believe that is against the law.”

His skin darkened and I watched his Adam’s apple as he swallowed, realizing what he’d said.

“I’m saying your label is at risk of being closed down,” he corrected, between clenched teeth. “Knowing that, and continuing to court fans who are so passionate about this stuff, is irresponsible. I need you to stop.”

The wind rushed out of my lungs.

“You *need* me to stop? Stop my campaign?” I couldn’t believe he’d had the gall to ask. “It’s out of my hands now, I’m afraid. If the hashtag spreads, it won’t be because of me. If it spreads, it’s because it means something to people. Who am I put a stop to that?”

I glanced down at his hands. The bruising had faded but his knuckles had taken on a new hue. White.

“You’re doing this to get back at me,” he said, lowering his voice.

“Actually, you’re very much mistaken,” I replied, shaking my head. “In fact, you don’t even factor into my thinking anymore.”

I noticed him recoil slightly.

“I’m doing this because I need this job. I care about it. I care about my teams.” I almost added, “This is all I have”, but I caught myself just in time. Something told me that if I exposed anything that hinted at weakness, he’d be all over it like a rash.

“Welcome to business,” he said, coarsely.

“I don’t need welcoming,” I sneered back at him. “I’ve been here quite a while actually. Longer than you in fact; well, the music business anyway.”

“How do you know?” He asked, accusingly. “How are you so sure I haven’t worked in this industry before?”

“Because I’ve done my research.”

“Oh, right? And what did you find?” A small smile touched his lips and I realized he was genuinely curious to know what I’d found out about him.

“Well,” I began, “I know you left the UK before you finished Uni. You don’t even have a degree.”

“I don’t need one,” he said, arrogantly. “I have balls instead.”

I bit back a hundred responses to that claim while trying to steady my breathing.

“You tear a company apart and then you disappear. Sometimes for months. Completely vanish. You’re not around for the gushing press articles afterwards, or the awards the companies win soon after their restructures.”

“They’re not my companies. Once I’m done with something, I’m done.”

“Is that so?” I asked.

“Yes. I’ve already told you,” he folded his arms. “I tend not to feel a fucking thing. I’m not the proud father watching my board take the hand of my daughter in marriage; I’m the seedy fucking uncle who swoops in first, gets drunk and smashes everything up, then leaves to let others enjoy the party.”

“You have quite a way with words,” I said, quietly, sickened at the man he had turned out to be.

“They’re all I have,” he replied.

A breath passed between us. What were we even talking about?

“They don’t have to be,” I said, quieter still.

Our eyes had locked and the air around us had stilled.

“Yes,” he said. “They do. It’s what I deserve.”

We sat together in silence, our eyes roaming each other. Our hands couldn’t reach out to touch but our eyes could go wherever they wanted.

Then I remembered that no amount of chemical attraction would fix the situation I was in. I had one priority and one priority alone: to save my business and my job. I stood, awkwardly.

“I have to go,” I said. “And I have to do this.”

He stayed seated, watching me. He nodded slowly, allowing me to finish what I had started with something resembling dignity. Or at least that’s what he thought. But he didn’t know Diana Delaney, not the real Diana Delaney. He didn’t know exactly how high the stakes were for me.

Whatever demons he was fighting, mine were worse.

And that’s the thing about having demons—they make you do demonic things.

And he would eventually find out just how demonic I could be.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“*I* can’t believe this,” Carlos squealed, hanging up the phone.

We were on our way to the *MusicWeek* awards having been offered free seats thanks to the unexpected success of our campaign.

“The cast of *The Mayhem Show* have declared their support too. They’ve donated three hundred thousand dollars to the fund...”

I shook my head in disbelief. Only two weeks after the campaign had hit the newsfeeds, we’d been forced to open a bank account: rich music enthusiasts all over the country had wanted to donate to our cause, to keep Phoenix afloat. I’d had to hire a campaign manager—an ex-Democrat—to figure out how we could spend it within legal limits to further our cause but also to help secure our future.

The campaign had become so mainstream it was now considered trendy to be behind it. Alternative radio stations across the states were reporting phenomenal increases in listeners and YouTube had reported an all-time high in advertising profits for that quarter. It was no longer just affecting us. The campaign had impacted everyone.

Restaurants had jumped on the bandwagon by donating a portion of meal profits to the cause, and playing only Phoenix-signed acts while patrons dined. Talk shows were giving slots to new musicians to capitalize on the heightened interest in alternative music. Big shot artists were dedicating their awards

to unsigned acts and instigating grass roots projects to encourage underprivileged kids to learn music. Recording studios were offering ‘Unsigned’ mornings to allow kids to record at a heavy discount. Music fans were carving out a new ‘influencer’ niche becoming citizen talent scouts for hot new acts. It turned out the threat to have Phoenix Music closed down might well be the one reason it could be saved.

“Is *he* going to be here?” Carlos asked me as we stepped out of the cab.

“By ‘he’ I’m assuming you mean Mr. Peyton-Harris?”

“Of course. I can’t bear to say his name.”

“I’m guessing not. He’s not going to make any friends by being here, not now the word is out he’s the one trying to throw us off the map.”

“Phew. So I can get totally smashed without his beady eyes judging me.”

“I wish they were beady,” I sighed, exasperated. “It would make hating him a lot easier.”

“You’re at a disadvantage, you know,” he said, looping my arm through his. “You saw him before he became the monster. He sucked you in like an orchid mantis. I never had that pleasure. I knew what an asshole he was before I saw him. That tainted my view somewhat.”

“I still can’t get my head around it, Carlos. There are moments when I speak to him he seems to go back to the Jude I knew before he came here. Not that I knew him hugely well then, but, you know what I mean...”

“You knew him in all the important ways,” Carlos said, pushing open the doors for us both. “And don’t forget, if what you told us was not a figment of your imagination, there were feelings on his part too. He’s not made of stone, as much as he’d like everyone to believe.”

“I can’t help but wish this would all go away and I could just start afresh, but it isn’t is it? It isn’t going to go away. He really is trying to get us out, and I really can’t roll over and let him do that.”

Carlos un-looped his arm and turned to face me. “No, Diana. It really isn’t going away and he isn’t going to get any nicer. I hate to say this because I know you don’t want to hear it, but you’re never going to be able to go back to him. Nothing is ever going to happen between you again. It wouldn’t be allowed while the two of you are fighting for position, and once the restructure has finally been done, whatever the outcome, too much time and shit will have passed between you, you won’t want him anywhere near. I suggest you start getting used to that fact. I’m saying this because I love you. You’re clearly hanging on for something that isn’t going to happen. I don’t want to see you getting even more hurt than you already are.”

“I just...” I sniffed and looked over Carlos’ shoulder at the very tempting table of champagne flutes, just waiting for me to get my hands on all of them. “I couldn’t believe my luck, you know? This gorgeous man who was seriously the best sex I’ve ever had, wanted to actually be with me—at one point, anyway. I couldn’t understand it. I mean, it’s me, Dreary Diana. What the hell did he see in me?”

“I’ll tell you exactly what he saw,” Carlos replied, sternly. “He saw a stunningly beautiful, kind-hearted and passionate woman. Someone he would be damned lucky to have by his side. And you’re smart and, you know, opposites attract.”

I smirked and gave him a giant hug. This seemed to be how I operated these days, my emotions swinging wildly from confident and ass-kicking to unsure and second-guessing.

“Thank you, Carlos,” I smiled, into his shoulder. “I need a bloody drink.”

“There’s my girl,” he replied. “There’s a table full of bubbles, right there, with our names written all over them.”

We helped ourselves to three flutes each before moving on to find our table. I was slightly tipsy by the time we sat down and I welcomed the food that would arrive no doubt in teeny tiny quantities in due course. It might have been New York, home to giant portions, but this was showbusiness, home of the size zero.

WE ATE the food and clapped respectfully as the winner of each award was announced.

“Hardly any indies, yet again,” Carlos grunted, after the last award was given out. “There’s nothing different anymore; it’s all so samey. I’m disappointed in *MusicWeek*; they’re supposed to champion diversity and originality.”

I sighed next to him. He was right. The field of music seemed to be awash with generic, soulless artists who sang about the exact same thing: love and heartbreak. Nothing about teenage angst, social strife or emotional turmoil. It was as though the punk era, grunge and Britpop had never happened. If today’s mainstream music was to be believed, there were no issues in the world other than the fact the boy next door kissed and cheated.

“Excuse me...” I looked up to see a middle-aged gentleman hovering over our table. “I hope you don’t mind me approaching you; I saw your name on the table list back there.”

“No problem at all,” I replied, smiling.

“My name’s Randy Nolan. Executive Vice President of MSG Live.”

“Oh!” I spun round to face him properly. This was an unexpected, unprepared for, once-in-a-lifetime meeting. “MSG—Madison Square Gardens. I know exactly who you are and it’s an honor. How do you do?”

I held out my hand and simultaneously booted myself under the table. How do you do? Who even said that any more, apart from ninety-six-year-old men who still lived in English country piles that were crumbling into rubble around their ears?

He smiled and shook my hand.

“I’m great. I wanted to come over here and congratulate you on your campaign.”

“Thank you,” I said, kicking Carlos to get out of his seat. “Would you like to join us for a few minutes?”

“If you don’t mind, I would like that. I have a proposal for you.”

One last kick in the shin and Carlos was up and out of his seat.

“Here,” he smiled through a wince. “Take my seat. I need the bathroom anyway...”

“Thanks Carlos!” I said, brightly.

“...Right after I’ve visited the emergency room,” he muttered under his breath as he limped away.

“A proposal? This sounds very interesting.”

He sat down and clasped his hands between his legs. I’d wanted to meet with this man my entire career, but I never thought I’d get the chance. High ranking venue execs didn’t meet with lowly indie VPs often, if at all; they usually left that kind of thing to the artist relations team.

“Well, I’ve been watching your campaign to save Phoenix Music with great interest, I have to say.”

“I’m flattered to hear that.” Flattered was an understatement.

“My team first alerted me to the way you began championing unsigned acts with such passion. Honestly? I had no idea what you were thinking. We all knew something was going on over at Empirical. We’d heard about the Peyton-Harris appointment and we knew that didn’t bode well for the group’s subsidiaries, so we were thinking, what’s this girl up to, starting something like this?”

“I don’t think you were the only one,” I said, my attention still stuck on his knowledge of ‘the Peyton-Harris appointment’. I was impressed at Jude’s notoriety.

“But as soon as the hashtag leaked out, I got it. What a strategy and what a tactic. You are one ballsy woman, you know?”

“Thank you,” I blushed. “I’m assuming that was meant as a compliment?”

“It was,” he said, in all seriousness. “But that’s not why I’m here. I’m here because you have shone a light on this undercurrent of music fandom that’s been bubbling beneath the surface with no valid outlet. I mean, you’ve got all these social networks—YouTube, TikTok, Instagram—but no one place for the cream to really rise to the top, y’know? Until now. You’ve created this platform where music fans can come to discover, speculate on and start following semi-approved, brand new acts. It’s genius. You’ve really tapped into something here.”

“Thanks,” I said again. I was starting to feel a little embarrassed. Here was an industry guru, praising me and my idea as though it was the best inception since The Beatles.

“What I’d like to propose...” he said, pulling his seat forward so that his knees were touching mine, and we were out of earshot of the rest of the people sitting at our table, “... is a free concert at the Garden, featuring your acts and a handful of unsigned acts that we ask the public to vote for.”

I swallowed a dry lump in my throat.

“Are you serious? A concert? At Madison Square Gardens? For my acts?”

“Yes,” he laughed. “Shh. I’d like to keep this under our hats until we can hash out the details, ok?”

“Oh my God,” I breathed out, clutching my chest as though it were about to blow up.

“We would foot the entire bill in return for joint brand exposure.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I said, the idea of having all my acts play at the Garden still blowing my mind.

“I would want to create a brand for this event—Phoenix-X-Madison, something along those lines. Our brand is becoming a bit old hat; it would do us the world of good to be seen not only to be championing the same unsigned acts that you’ve unearthed, but to be seen at the heart of their exposure

too. It would be obvious that Phoenix is the driving force behind the event, but I'd want the public to know Madison Square Garden shares the same passion."

I couldn't believe I was hearing this. The biggest venue any of my acts had played at was the Bowery. The Gardens were fifty times the size. I wondered for a brief moment whether our acts would be able to do it, or whether they'd freak out at the sheer size of the place. And the unsigned acts... that represented a giant risk, not even knowing them while asking them to play to an audience of tens of thousands...

"I've got MTV interested in showing it, too."

"What?" My good old British manners had left the building. I could hear my mother correcting me: "It's 'pardon', dear. Not 'what'."

"I'm good friends with Kober..."

"The..." I almost choked. "Robbie Kober, the president of the network?"

"The very same. He's already put in an informal bid. We could both be paid handsomely for this. You wouldn't need to worry if the worst happened and the label is scrapped."

"Any profits would go into our campaign fund," I said. I couldn't take that money for myself. I didn't need to be rich; I just needed to keep my job.

"Well, what do you think? You interested?"

I couldn't believe the answer wasn't scrawled obviously across my face.

"Yes!" I gasped. "Yes, absolutely!"

"That's settled then," he grinned. "I'll have some papers sent over first thing and I'll set up another meeting so we can hash out the details."

"Fantastic," I replied, fighting the urge to jump up and down and squeal at the top of my lungs. I bit down on my lip as I watched him amble casually back to his table, as though he made people's dreams come true every day. Then again,

running a place like Madison Square Gardens, he probably did.

Carlos sat back down heavily and stared at me with expression that conveyed how deeply unimpressed he was at having been dismissed.

“Carlos,” I whispered, grabbing both his hands. “Have you ever been backstage at Madison Square Gardens?”

“Are you kidding?” He eyed me with sarcasm. “I fucking wish.”

“Well, your wish is my command,” I grinned. “We’ve just got ourselves a gig.”

I watched as his face fell in disbelief and then gasped as he flung his arms around me, almost crushing every bone.

“Diana Delaney,” he said, squeezing me tightly. “What have you done?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“Diana,” Magda whispered down the phone. I could hear her breath, shallow, at the other end. “He’s going to call you any minute. I had to warn you. As soon as he’s done with McAuley Finch...”

“Is it about the restructure?”

“No,” she whispered, just loud enough for me to hear. “It’s about the concert. He wants it cancelled. I’ve never seen a man so angry. He’s livid, Diana. Are you really sure about this? I know you want to keep Phoenix going, but... I wouldn’t want to make such an enemy out of him.”

He was livid? I was livid. I was in the midst of co-creating the biggest and best concert since Live Aid. The exposure it was getting, not just for Phoenix, but for Empirical Records too, was unprecedented. And he wanted me to scrap it? What kind of a CEO was he?

“I’m available to see him whenever he wants, Magda.”

“What are you going to do?” She whispered. I could hear the fear in her voice.

“Nothing,” I replied. “Absolutely nothing. This isn’t costing us any money so it can be extra-curricular if that’s what he really wants. I’ll even take Phoenix’s name off the branding—everyone already knows we’re behind it anyway. He can’t stop us all from doing something in our spare time.”

“You’re playing with fire, Di. Please be careful.”

“Magda, you’re such an angel to me, letting me know this. But I have nothing left to lose. If he’s already decided I’m gone, what’s one little concert going to hurt?”

“It’s anything but little, Di.”

I grinned from ear to ear. “I know.”

I STOOD outside Jude’s door, having been summoned, as Magda had predicted, almost immediately after his meeting had ended. Unlike the previous few times I’d been asked to come here, I was calm. I was finally proving to myself I could actually do this. It had taken four years and the threat of collapse to get me here, but here I was. Everything that had led up to this point since the announcement—the UnSigned campaign, the #savephoenix campaign, the #savephoenix fund (which was now worth three million dollars), and the plans for the Madison Square Garden concert—had only solidified my self-esteem. I felt more confident than I ever had before.

My teams and my artists treated me with the respect I’d finally earned, and each had separately expressed their admiration for my tenacity. I was like a dog with a bone, fighting for their livelihoods and the integrity of the music industry with every ounce of energy I had. And it had been contagious.

Everyone around me now lived and breathed these campaigns. It was no longer just a job. It was a cause, a way of life, and they loved it. The Phoenix offices were vibrant—the edgy sound of unsigned acts played throughout, and the aesthetic had become brighter; people were no longer dragging their feet to work in the same old black jeans and t-shirt, as though they were about to attend a funeral. The corridors had become catwalks for people expressing their individuality loudly and proudly, and I encouraged it. Much to the curiosity of the McAuley Finch team who’d seemingly taken up residence in our techy basement. If I didn’t know their true reasons for being there, I would have thought they were

enjoying the banter, the music and the general buzzy atmosphere.

“I don’t have the capacity to deal with this now,” I heard him say. “We can look at it later. I have someone... *something*... more pressing to deal with right now.”

I straightened, knowing this was my cue. I waited a couple of beats and then knocked at the door.

“Come in.”

I pushed open the door and held my breath. Despite the fact weeks had passed since Jude had first graced our corridors, I still couldn’t help the visceral reaction I had every single time I saw him. My heart raced, my palms dampened and beads of sweat threatened to erupt from every pore.

He waited for the door to close and then he let rip.

“You’ve tested my patience to the limit, Diana. I’m done being nice to you...”

“Nice?” I spat. “You think you’ve been nice to me? In what world is threatening to close down my business, fight me to the end and have fun doing it, nice?”

“Cancel it. Now.”

“No.”

“It’s not a question. It’s an order.”

“And the concert has nothing to do with Phoenix Music, so you have no authority to instruct that.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” His fists were balled and I knew that if I were a man, I would be risking those knuckles cracking against my jaw right about now.

“It means that I’m taking the Phoenix brand out of it completely, so it has nothing to do with you or Empirical Records.”

“That’s bullshit. It’s obvious Phoenix is behind it. It’s our acts that are playing...”

“...of their own steam,” I snapped, ramming my hands onto my hips to punctuate the point.

He turned his back to me and stomped across his office to a filing cabinet. He pulled out a copy of the *New York Times* then strode back towards me and held an article up in my face.

“This,” he hissed, his face bearing down on me, “is not ‘nothing to do’ with Phoenix. The brand name is sprinkled all over this like fucking seasoning.”

“That was an interview Randy gave. I had nothing to do with it.”

“Randy,” he sneered. “You two are best friends now, are you?”

“What does it matter? We’re working together on something amazing. Something meaningful. Unlike you.” I batted the newspaper away and brought my face up to his so he could see just how damn angry I was. “You! You just rip everything apart, don’t you? You can’t see that what we’ve created with this campaign is revolutionary; it’s breathing life into music again. And all you can do is tear it down.”

His eyes narrowed; I knew he was listening. I’d got him this time, and I was on a roll.

“Does it bring you pleasure, huh? Do you enjoy ruining thousands of peoples’ lives?”

He began to shake his head but I continued, unabated.

“You are sick, Jude. *Sick*. Is it because you can’t create anything yourself? You’re like a child with no toys. You’re jealous you don’t have any of your own so you go around smashing up everyone else’s. Well, you’re not having mine...”

Before I could vent the entirety of my rage, his hands grabbed my face and his mouth came down on mine, fast and furious. My gasp of shock was swallowed by the aggressive movement of his lips. His tongue invaded me, blocking out any other sound. My hands pushed at his chest but he wouldn’t budge. I needed air. His hands moved down quickly to dig into my hips, lifting me up against the door. My legs moved instinctively around his waist just as they had the first night we

spent together. I had no control. His kiss overpowered me, telling me wordlessly that I wouldn't ever be free of this torture.

After an eternity, he pulled back, grabbing my face in his hands once more, as though I might turn it away from him. He stared into my eyes, searching.

"I can't fucking do this," he whispered, but he didn't move away.

Then I realized what he was searching for. My desire. He needed to know I still felt something for him. It was as though we were existing in parallel dimensions. In one world we were arch enemies hell-bent on bringing each other down through whatever means necessary; in the other we were glued to each other, physically and emotionally. I felt more for him in that moment than I'd ever felt during our encounters at the Decadence Club. I decided to give us what we both desperately needed. I reached my own hands up and gripped the back of his head, pulling him towards me, and I kissed him back.

This time it was slow, intense and meaningful. Our tongues explored each other, our hands holding each other gently. It was as though everything around us had stopped. We were in some time warp where the world was no longer relevant. We weren't both fighting for opposing things; we were fighting for one thing and one thing only: this. I tipped my head back as his lips found my throat and a delicious moan escaped me.

"You're driving me insane," he whispered, reaching my collarbone and pulling my shirt open with his teeth. A hand came down to pull the lace of my bra, exposing my breast while his other hand locked the door. His tongue found my nipple and circled it, drawing another moan from my lips, and I gripped him tighter with my thighs. I had no words to answer him with.

My fingers ran through his hair, tugging gently, manoeuvring his head this way and that, drawing out the sensation of his mouth roaming my breasts. I had needed this. Needed him. He dragged his face back up to mine and brought

his lips down softly, teasing me again with his teeth and his tongue. He swallowed another moan and then he stilled.

Frozen.

I knew it was over. I knew he was going to back away.

He did it slowly. He pulled back, grazing his teeth along my lips, biting down at the very end in a delicious nip. Then he placed a soft peck against the skin that now stung. A hand glided across my buttocks, smoothing out the imprints his fingers had left when he'd hoisted me up, then he held me as my feet dropped to the floor.

He turned and walked back to his desk, then he sat down and faced his computer screen. I was glued to the floor. My legs were like jelly and I was turned on to the point I couldn't move.

"We're both just going to have to do what we have to do," he said, softly. "I hate fighting with you."

"I'm not going to stop until I get what I need," I said, in a quiet voice.

"I know." He looked at me then, his eyes unusually warm. "And neither am I. But, regardless of whatever we each have to do, I need to be able to handle... this," he said, casting his eyes down my legs and back up my torso to my face.

My smile was bittersweet. In another life we could have had each other; we could have followed through on that eruption of need. He would be fucking me right now against the door, and I would coming for him with everything I had.

"Come with me," I said, before I could talk myself out of it. "Come to the concert."

He sighed and gave me a half smile. "You know I can't do that."

"Why not? They're your acts too at the end of the day. It might even do your reputation some favors. You know, have people see you're making a real effort to understand what we have to offer, before you have to make the difficult decisions.

You're appreciating the music scene; you're not just some suit hired to break up the party."

He seemed to consider it.

"Please, Jude," I said. "Do it for me. For everything you're not able to give me."

His half smile fell, then.

"In another life I'd give you everything."

The breath left my lungs and my chest hollowed. It took an enormous amount of strength to hold myself together.

"I'll have a pass waiting for you backstage," I finished.

Then I turned, unlocked the door and walked out of the office of the man I'd just fallen illogically and inexplicably in love with.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



“*T*hirty minutes ‘til showtime!”

The voice of a runner boomed through the backstage corridor.

I was fighting hard to get a grip and keep a million plates spinning in the air. Thankfully, every single one of my acts were feeling good about the show. They were calm—or as calm as they could be knowing they about to play live in front of twenty-thousand people in the crowd and a further eight million people via MTV.

“Can someone please check on Ayda for me?” I shouted to one of our talent managers. “She needed a change of shoes and she’s on after Jilted and Alana Malone.”

The manager nodded before sprinting down the corridor towards Ayda’s dressing room.

The sounds backstage alone were electric. Guitars, drums, keyboards, all going through testing on stage, the vibrations throbbing through the walls; the sound of singers practicing their ranges inside dressing rooms and along corridors; the low hum of the fans vying for position in the audience; the efficient barking of orders from the MTV producers running around with cameras, boom mics and trailing wires.

Amidst all this, I heard the pounding of feet coming towards me. “Where’s your radio, woman? I’ve been looking for you for an entire freaking decade,” Carlos panted. “Bring back CBGB’s; this place is like the Grand Canyon. I think I’ve done enough exercise to last me the year.”

My phone rang. “Can you hold a sec?” I said as I answered, then muted it. “What do you need?”

“Sheridan says Jim Rutter from *Rolling Stone* wants a word before the show starts,” Carlos panted. “Seriously, where’s your radio?”

“Marla took it when I went to the bathroom. Jim Rutter? The editor? Jeez.” I had no time to get nervous. And really, I should have expected this. The whole music industry wanted a piece of this event. “Where is he?”

“Suite Sixteen.”

“I can’t leave the guys down here, Carlos...”

“You’ll be done before the boys from Jilted go on. You can walk down with them,” Carlos reasoned. “And besides, the whole talent team will be right there with them. We’ve got managers, therapists, puke bucket carriers, professional musicians ready to jump in if they get stage fright. Everything is completely covered, ok?”

I could see the veins popping out the side of his temples.

“Go talk to Jim, will you? You’re giving me a hernia here.”

“Fine, ok, I’m going. Tell the band I’ll be right back.”

I ran down the corridor in my sneakers—the only appropriate footwear for a night like this—and remembered the person holding on the other end of the phone.

“Diana Delaney here,” I panted, taking the steps two at a time. “Thank you for holding.”

“I’m outside,” came his voice.

I stopped at the top of the stairs to catch my breath. How did I not look at my cell and see his name?

“You’re here,” I replied, my voice unintentionally breathy.

“You did invite me, remember?” I heard his smile.

“Yeah, um...” I could barely think. Hearing his voice had completely thrown me.

“I won’t keep you. Jim Rutter is expecting you.”

“What? How do you...?” Then I realized. “I didn’t mute you.”

“It’s ok, you’re busy. Go see him. I’ll come find you backstage.”

His kindness sent my gut reeling back to the first night we spent together and I felt momentarily swamped with grief. Since our lapse in control and our subsequent agreement to let each other do what we had to do, I hadn’t seen or heard from him. Several weeks had passed and I’d been completely consumed by preparations for this night. I’d heard from colleagues across the business he was alive and well, continuing a thorough root and branch review of the entire operation. But he’d left me alone. He knew I needed to do this. Whether it would change his mind about closing my label or not, he was letting me do this for my own sake.

“Ok,” I said, clearing my throat. “Just ask security to send you up to Suite Sixteen.”

“Sure. See you soon.”

He hung up and I took a couple of breaths to steady myself, then I jogged along the corridor to the famous hospitality lounge.

I spotted Jim chatting to Randy Nolan and Robbie Kober. I was starting to understand that all the top dogs in showbusiness were best buddies. It was as though as soon as you reached a certain level, you were in the club.

“Speak of the devil,” I heard Randy say as I approached them.

“I wondered why my ears were burning,” I smiled. “Jim. Diana Delaney. It’s an absolute pleasure.”

I recognized the signature glasses as he enthusiastically shook my hand. “Likewise,” he replied. “Shall we sit?”

He led me to the front row of seats overlooking the venue, where we could see the tens of thousands gathered below, waiting for their favorite fledgling acts to come on stage. I’d

only been in this room once before when we did an initial recce a few weeks earlier, but Jim obviously knew his way around.

“A regular here, are you?”

“A perk of the job, Miss Delaney.”

He smiled again as we sat down on the big, legendary leather chairs. “Well, Diana,” he began. “I rarely interview non-artists, but it seems you are the true star of this event.”

“I’m sorry?” I gasped. I wasn’t expecting a full-on interview. Maybe just a couple of quotes or pointers, but not an actual interview.

My blood ran cold as my mind raced through the implications. So far, my name hadn’t been connected in any significant public way to this campaign. It had all been focused on Phoenix and the names of the artists. If anyone’s name had become well-known through this campaign, it was Jude’s, and not in a positive way.

I wasn’t naïve enough to think the campaign had been contained within the shores of the US either; I knew our acts had fans in Europe and Asia too. But *Rolling Stone*...

Rolling Stone was sold on newsstands across the UK. If I, personally, was featured in its pages, I would be taken right back to the place I never wanted my face to be shown again. I couldn’t risk it. I couldn’t risk anyone putting two and two together. I couldn’t risk anyone suspecting the Diana Delaney they may have heard of in relation to some quirky alternative rock campaign in the States might be the same Diana Delaney who fled her small town in England four years ago, never to be heard of again. Until now. The thought frightened me. In fact, scratch that. The thought terrified me.

“Wouldn’t you rather interview some of the acts, Mr. Rutter? I’m sure your readers would be far more interested in them.”

“Believe it or not, no,” he replied. “We’ve already been inundated with requests for coverage of you, specifically, Ms. Delaney. You should be flattered. This kind of exposure, for

someone in your position, could be a lifeline. A very lucrative one.”

“You mean that if my label is closed down, other labels might want to snap me up?”

“Exactly.”

I weighed the risk as quickly as I could. Having certain people discover where I lived, potentially putting my life in danger, or being so exposed I could secure myself a career for life. *Think, Diana, think!*

I didn’t have time to. I knew he was standing behind me. I could smell his musky odor and knew it was him without having to look round.

“Good evening,” Jude said, bending down to kiss me on the cheek.

Jim looked at us both in surprise. Clearly, he’d been of the same opinion as the rest of the industry—that Jude and I were at war, loggerheads, barely speaking. Our heated arguments were heard and relayed from our own offices all the way across town to Sony’s. Our heated mistakes, thankfully, weren’t.

“You must be Jim Rutter. Pleasure to meet you.”

“Jude Peyton-Harris,” Jim said, slowly. His expression betrayed his curiosity about a man who’d been hired to tear down a portion of Rutter’s beloved music industry. But Jude was charming. I knew that better than anyone. And Jim was already putty in his hands. “I was about to interview your arch nemesis. Would you like to hear what she has to say?”

“I... er,” I began, flustered. “I really don’t think I can do an interview now. I wouldn’t do it justice. My mind is all over the place and I really need to focus on my acts. I’m so sorry.”

Jude glanced at me with a look of confusion. He was probably wondering why I was passing up an opportunity to screw him even further into the ground by not giving an interview and airing all his dirty laundry out to the biggest music readership in the world.

“I’m sorry,” I said again, getting to my feet.

“It’s ok,” Jude said, putting a hand on my arm, sending sparks coursing through my veins.

Jim looked from Jude to me and back to Jude, not disguising his frustration at missing out on an interview.

“Maybe after the show,” I said to Jim, making a mental note to disappear completely so it would never happen. The more I thought about it, the worse an idea it sounded. I wanted a future in this industry so badly it hurt, but I couldn’t risk my life for it.

“Jilted are on their way to the stage door,” Jude said, softly. “Why don’t you head down there? I’ll speak to Mr. Rutter for a few minutes, then I’ll come and join you.”

I nodded, mutely. What the hell was I doing? This whole concert had come about because I’d wanted to protect my job and my label, but now I was turning down the opportunity to secure myself a place in the halls of fame. I didn’t think Jim Rutter would treat me too kindly after this.

Jude leaned down to whisper in my ear.

“Let me deal with it, Diana. Go.”

“Enjoy the show, Jim,” I said to him, then turned and made my way quickly out of the suite and down to the stage door.

The bandmembers were shitting themselves. I could see Dree, one of the talent managers coaxing the lead singer down from a giant speaker. He was shaking from head to toe.

“How long now?” I asked one of the runners.

“Five minutes,” he replied.

“Dree,” I said, calmly. “Can I?”

“Please, Di,” she said, her eyes wide and anxious.

I stepped forward and took hold of the singer’s hands.

“Jimmy, it’s me, Diana. Remember, we met at your show at Wild Birds?”

He looked up and nodded briefly, the whites of his eyes stark against the chalky black backdrop.

“Listen,” I said, in my most soothing voice. “I know you’re scared. I’m scared too. We’re all scared. Every artist that goes on this stage is scared.”

My fingers vibrated with his trembling.

“But we have to be,” I continued. “If we’re not scared, it doesn’t mean anything. You know that, don’t you? You’re scared because this is everything you ever dreamed of. You’re scared because you don’t want to make an ass of yourself. Well, let me ask you this.”

I reached up on my tiptoes to draw his eyes down to look into my own.

“How many artists do you know have made an ass of themselves on this stage?”

He shrugged.

“That would be none,” I answered for him. “And do you know why? It’s because the high you’re gonna get as you walk up those steps, the fucking *euphoria* you’re gonna feel when you’re up on that stage facing all those people who are here for you, is going to overtake everything you are feeling right now. Do you hear me?”

I had his attention. The trembling had slowed.

“How old were you when you first dreamed of playing on this stage?”

“Six,” he croaked.

“Ok, imagine I’m your six-year-old self, right now. What are you going to tell him, huh? What are you going to do?”

He looked at me as though I was some crazy person.

“I... I don’t know...”

“Three minutes...”

I turned to the runner and held up my hand. “No more counting. We’re going on when we’re ready, you got that?”

He nodded, nervously, then spoke quietly into his radio.

“Take your time, buddy,” I said to the singer, who was staring at me, wide-eyed. “What have you got to say to me?”

“I’m going to... um... I’m—”

“Good,” I coaxed. “Come on. Zone everything out. I mean, *everything*. Your only focus is you at six years old. What are you telling me? You’re outside the stage door to Madison Square Garden. You’ve wanted to play on this stage for twelve years. What are you telling me, right now?”

“I’m going to play on that stage,” he rushed out.

“What stage?”

“Madison Square Garden.”

“Say it again.”

“I’m going to play at Madison Square Garden.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m in a band.”

“What, just any band?”

“I’m in a great band.”

“Just great?” I pushed him, dared him.

“Fucking great.”

“Just fucking *great*?”

“Fucking awesome,” he replied, his conviction growing.

“So, hang on, tell me again what you’re about to do.”

“I’m about to play on stage at Madison Square Gardens, man,” he replied, raising his voice. “Because I’m in a fucking awesome band.”

“And you’re part of something huge,” I urged.

“I’m part of something fucking huge.”

“And you’re going to love every minute of it.”

“I’m going to love EVERY FUCKING MINUTE,” he said, turning the heads of the rest of the band towards him. The relief on their faces was palpable.

“Now tell me again,” I said, quietly. “I’m your six-year-old self, ok? Seriously. What have you got to say to him?”

He jumped down from the speaker, grabbed my face with both his hands and stared deep into my eyes. I felt someone tense beside me but I was as embedded in this personal experience as was the lead singer of the first band to hit the stage.

“You did it,” he said, his eighteen-year-old irises swimming. “You fucking did it. I’m about to make our dream come true. I’m going to get on that stage and play at Madison Square fucking Gardens, dude.” He choked back a laugh. “And I’m going to fucking love every minute.”

Then he lunged towards me, planting a giant kiss square on my lips, before releasing my face and turning back to his band.

“Let’s go,” he instructed, and they followed him up the steps.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



“We’re on,” I heard the runner say as he passed, along with about fifteen other people who’d been waiting around us with bated breath. I waited until they were all out of earshot then I let out a gasp of relief and clung to a hand rail beside me. It was then I felt his arms wrap around my waist, keeping me from collapsing altogether. His mouth found my ear.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered, his warm breath sending tendrils of lust through my core. “What you just did was amazing.”

I was breathless. My adrenaline was almost spent and my lust for this man refused to abate. I let him hold me while I composed myself, then I unpeeled his arms and turned to face him.

“What was it back there?” He asked, as his beautiful, unusually concerned expression came into view. “Why didn’t you want to give an interview to *Rolling Stone*?”

I searched his eyes, knowing these moments of being so close to him were forbidden and far from guaranteed. I treated every moment as though it might be the last. I noted down the lashes I’d never noticed before, the slight arch of his brow I’d misremembered, the flawless skin I’d failed to appreciate until now. I logged it all away in a vault at the back of my mind.

“Too personal,” I whispered, and we shared a mutual recollection of the times he’d delivered those same words to me. It seemed to symbolize a switch in power in our

relationship. Back then, when he was a director of the Decadence Club and I was a mere member, and an utter novice at life, he'd held the keys to who knew what. And now, I was the one running the show—literally—and I was the one holding the key.

“Come on,” he said, squeezing my hand. “I came to see a show. Lead the way.”

I took a step back towards the corridor, then stopped. The plan had been to take him back to Suite Sixteen— not only did it offer the best view in the house, but that view came with endless champagne and the legendary tacos. But suddenly, I wanted to show Jude the real backstage experience. I needed to distract him from questions about my past—the real reason I wouldn't give an interview—and I needed him to see exactly what he was going to be ripping away from me.

But mostly, I needed to be with him. I wanted to share what I loved so much about music; I wanted him to feel things as acutely as I did. I wanted him to feel the thud of the drums beating in time with his heart; I wanted him to absorb the sound of the guitar in his bloodstream. I wanted him to hear the lyrics as if they were his very own thoughts. And I wanted him to understand me, without me having to say a word.

I turned in the opposite direction, towards the steps. I felt his hesitation and looked around to give him a reassuring nod. It was only then I noticed he'd shunned his signature suit and shirt for black jeans and black t-shirt. He looked stunning. I'd become so used to seeing him with all my senses, my eyes were suddenly taken aback. He looked slightly nervous, as though I might be about to shove him onto the stage for the crowd to throw bottles of urine at him.

“We're going to the side of the stage,” I said, kindly.

He nodded and allowed me to lead him up the stairs, past the runners, through to the side of the stage.

It was deafening. Conversation was over for now; we would barely be able to hear ourselves think, let alone speak. I pulled him into a corner so I could keep a hold of his hand without anyone backstage seeing, but he released it to place it

on my back where he proceeded to draw circles along my spine, the same way he did when we stood in the bathroom at House Five.

Jimmy was killing it. The whole band was killing it. Sweat poured off them as they threw themselves around the giant stage. The MTV cameras moved around them, zooming in, zooming back out. Fans at the front screamed until they were blue. And amidst it all, my skin was burning under his touch. He moved his hand beneath my t-shirt to gently stroke the skin there, almost absent-mindedly. It wasn't sexual; it was intimate. But it was killing me like the very first time. No-one would have guessed he was having such a devastating impact on the woman at his side; his eyes were trained on the band, watching their every move, noting the role of each instrument, absorbing each heart-thumping song.

We stood like that for three songs. By now, Jilted had found their groove and were rocking the stadium. Jimmy caught my eye halfway through one song and winked. I felt Jude's fingers still for a moment, then resume their relentless caress. As he continued, I became weak. I didn't know how much longer I could stand it—the proximity, the closeness, his touch, his attention. I wanted him with my whole body and my whole heart, and the pain of knowing those things could never fully have him was scorching me from the inside out.

Suddenly, his hand left my back and his lips brushed against my ear.

“I need to talk to you,” he said, loud enough that I could hear above the throbbing speakers. I looked up at him. His eyes were strained, his jaw ticking. He had a look on his face I knew better than to mess with. There was an urgency about it that unnerved me. I nodded and guided him back out to the corridor.

“Privately,” he clipped.

I led him to one of the storage rooms. It sounded too urgent to allow for the long walk up to the management offices where I'd been camping out for most of the afternoon. Once inside, I closed the door. We were surrounded by old speakers,

one drumkit and a couple of spare guitars. Being so close to the stage, we could still feel the vibrations of Jimmy's guitar and the drum beat through the walls.

"What is it?" I asked, suddenly panicked.

"I have to tell you," he said, wringing his hands. "I don't want to close down Phoenix..."

"What...?" I rushed over to him, taking hold of his hands, but the shaking of his head told me that what he did or didn't want didn't actually matter.

"I've been given a strict brief, Diana," he said, his voice thin. "I've been ordered to do whatever it takes to shut you down, along with Geoff's label, Metronix, and Tristan's Country Base."

"What?" I repeated. "Why? By who?"

"I don't know," he said. "I shouldn't have even told you this. There's nothing either of us can do. It's what Garrett has briefed. I don't know why. I'm the scapegoat, Di. I'm just the messenger."

The emotion in his face seemed to rise up to his eyeballs and they suddenly swam. I couldn't speak. I couldn't understand why Garrett would want to shut all of this down. And if it was someone else forcing him, I couldn't understand why they'd want to either. I knew it wasn't too long ago that I was reporting loss after loss, however minimal, but Phoenix was now one of the biggest brands on the planet. It was probably worth almost as much as the parent label by now.

"I know what it's doing to you," he continued, filling the void. "I can see you're putting everything you've got into this, and it kills me knowing it won't make any difference."

He gripped my hands tighter.

"I can't keep it from you anymore. Seeing you with that guy before..."

"Jimmy..."

"Yeah, the singer. Seeing what you did for him, it made me realize this isn't just a job for you. It's your life; it's who you

are and you're damn good at it. I don't want you to think it's me taking that away from you. I..."

He tailed off, his face contorted with all the things he needed to say but couldn't find the words for. He turned abruptly and punched a fist into the nearest speaker.

"Fuck, fuuuuck," he growled, gripping his now-bloody hand. I took a step backwards, alarmed and confused.

"Jesus, Diana..."

"I don't understand," I whispered. Because I didn't. I didn't know what he was trying to say. I didn't know why anyone would want to ruin Phoenix like this. I didn't know why Jude was so angry.

He bounded up to me, taking hold of my face. My eyes were drawn immediately to the black and blue wave forming rapidly across his knuckles.

"They're paying me to be Satan," he whispered, coarsely.

I tried to shake my head to object but he held it, vice-like, in his hands.

"I've fallen in love for the first time in my life, and they've turned me into the fucking devil."

Before I could comprehend what he'd just said, he rammed his lips onto mine. My body was limp with shock but his mouth held me in place, channeling all his anger and frustration into the kiss. His lips pressed down hard onto mine and his tongue forcefully commanded my own. We became an entangled vine of no sight, just pure feeling. I knew this wouldn't last; he always pulled away, so I allowed myself to become drenched in his need, knowing it would dissipate.

But he gave me more. His thick palms released my face and hooked beneath my arms, lifting me up onto a speaker, his mouth never leaving mine. I could feel the vibration of the stage through the solid black mass beneath me. I pushed my fingers through his hair, feeling the sweat beading along the back of his neck, and I moaned with sheer happiness. I loved feeling him all around me. I loved it when his barriers broke

down and he couldn't stay away; I welcomed him back with my entire body. It ached with invitation.

He stroked his hands beneath my loose shirt, probably feeling my own sweat clinging to my skin, then he pushed it up and over my head, our lips parting as he tugged the shirt past my face. He glanced down at the black lace bra I'd worn for no other reason than it wouldn't show up beneath my shirt under the stage lights. My stomach hollowed as I panted from the sudden withdrawal.

“What the fuck are you wearing?” He said, his voice dry and cracking.

I couldn't think of an answer but it didn't matter. His lips were on my throat, his fingers pushing my chin upwards for better access, while his other hand traced a line from my ribcage down to the waistband of my jeans. His need to taste my skin had pushed me backwards and I had to rest on my hands to stop myself collapsing.

“Jude...” I began, my voice thick and wanting.

He reached a finger up to cover my lips while his own continued their journey across my collarbone. His other hand fumbled at the buttons on my jeans and I squirmed with need. He popped them open, one by one, his lips not wavering once, then he tugged me to the edge of the speaker and brought his face up to meet mine.

“We need this,” he said, simply, then slipped a finger inside the fabric. I gasped as I felt it glide across me. He held my eyes, watching my reaction as he stroked back and forth, slowly, deliberately. I licked my dry lips and settled back against my hands. His face was different. It was as though a dam had burst and he was wallowing in that serene moment between realizing he was about to die but hadn't yet been engulfed by the water. I watched the muscles in his arm grow taut and release as his fingers continued to stroke across my skin.

The vibrations through the speaker had stopped and I could hear Jimmy speaking to the crowd. Then the chanting began, the crowd asking for more. They were about to launch into

their debut single, the one that was shooting up the charts faster than the speed of light. The crowd were going crazy for it, mirroring the way I felt about the man standing between my legs. We were all dying of anticipation.

As I heard the first few notes ring from Jimmy's guitar, I pushed myself forward and brought my hands to Jude's jeans. I unbuttoned them hastily, before he could withdraw from me again, and reached inside to feel him hard as a rock. It was his turn to gasp and suddenly his eyes glazed over. The wave was close. I pressed my lips to his and took control of the kiss as I moved my hand up and down his length, committing every curve, every ridge to my memory. This would be the last time; I could feel it in my bones. His fingers worked their way inside me and we found a rhythm—me rocking lightly on his palm, him thrusting his hips gently towards me, aiding the movement of my hand. With the first bars of the song kicking in, knowing that the band was fine—and not just fine; they were killing it—and Jude and I so close in body and emotion, I was melting with pleasure.

“I want to fuck you so badly,” he breathed into me. “But this is too good.”

I moaned in reply as the words just wouldn't form. I was almost there and I couldn't stop the train. His fingers reached a little deeper as I rocked back and forth and he fucked me with them unashamedly. I choked as I felt the warmth build, and he thrust a little harder into my hand, knowing I loved having him there.

“You're so wet, baby,” he cooed, his lips still glued to mine.

As my body tensed, he pushed his fingers deeper and stroked his thumb across my clit, taking all of my breath away. My body wrapped itself tightly around his fingers as I came, my back arching away from his chest. My cry was immediately swallowed by the bass kicking in behind me, the anthem rising by several decibels with the voices of a few thousand people joining in. I writhed against Jude's fingers as he drew out a long orgasm from me. Then I lifted my head to face him. He'd surrendered. He was going under and he was

taking me with him. I was suddenly lifted and spun around, then a hand pushed my back until my stomach and chest were lying flat against the speaker. I felt a rush of cool air against my hips as my jeans were pushed down my thighs, then his fingers returned, pushing aside my underwear and feeling for my entrance. And then I felt him. His feet kicked mine to the side, parting me further, then he pushed himself inside, smoothly and quickly. I let out another moan which was again swallowed by the nearing crescendo of the anthem. I felt a hand scoop up the hair that was splayed across my shoulders and bunch it into a fist. My head jerked backwards, my chest lifting up from the cool black surface.

Jude pulled himself out almost fully, giving me a moment of respite from the pressure, then he drove himself back in, growling into my ear as he did. I felt his chest thick against my back, tensing as his hips thrust into me relentlessly. His hands worked their way beneath my chest to cup my breasts. I winced as he took my nipples between his rough fingers and pumped them. This was a Jude I hadn't seen before. He was all need and no mercy, and I didn't care. I was grateful for anything. I wanted this moment to last but I knew, from the way his cock throbbed with each thrust, this was something neither of us could control.

"You're... not..." I panted, as he pounded me against the speaker. "The... devil."

I had a sudden urge to have him know that despite everything he was doing, I didn't blame him, and I didn't think he was evil. Far from it. I'd met the devil and it wasn't Jude.

"I love you." The words left me before I could stop them. I had never planned to tell him that.

I felt his cheek damp against mine and his breath thicken. He didn't reply. Instead, he kicked my feet further apart and pulled my hips away from the speaker, then drove in as deep as he could possibly go, pushing the air right out of my lungs. His fingers reached down to find me, circling my flesh as he thrust again and again. He was close and I was delirious. He anchored a forearm on the speaker and I laid my head on it, feeling the blood pump through his veins as he neared his

climax. The song on stage reached its peak, the drums blasting through the walls and the crowd singing in sync. Jude increased the pressure of his fingers and I sobbed as I came again beneath his relentless caress. As I tightened around him, he yelled in my ear and rammed me hard against the speaker. His body bashed against mine as the tremors rocked through him.

We stayed still for a few moments, neither of us saying a word, as we caught our breath and listened to the crowd roaring for more of the band. It would be Alana Malone's turn on stage next. She had the confidence of a lion; she wouldn't need me to coax her up the steps. If anything, the runners would be holding her back right about now.

Slowly, Jude withdrew and fastened his jeans. I pushed myself back to standing, fastened my own jeans then turned to see him holding my shirt. He gently pulled it down over my head, waited for me to push my arms through the sleeves, then smoothed it down over my belly and took my hands in his.

"You can't love me, Diana," he said, quietly, not raising his head. "I'm not a good person."

I ducked down so he couldn't avoid my eyes.

"I do," I replied. "I've loved you for a long time."

He finally lifted his gaze and stared back at me, confused.

"Why? I'm fucking up your life and getting paid handsomely for it. You should despise me with every corner of your soul."

"I knew something wasn't adding up, and you just confirmed that. Someone else is making you do this."

"I should never have told you that," he sighed, releasing my hands and taking a step back.

"Who is it?"

"I honestly don't know," he shook his head. "I only know what Garrett tells me. He's the one I answer to."

"Garrett is a good guy; I don't get it."

“I don’t think any of this is his choice,” Jude said, running a hand through his now-damp hair. “He’s probably under orders too.”

I sank back against the speaker.

“So, what now?”

“You’ll never win this fight,” Jude said, stepping towards me again. “There are powers beyond me that will make sure of it.”

I shook my head, defiantly.

“Please, Di, listen to me. Don’t make a fool of yourself. You’ve done so much for the alternative music scene already. This is the best career peak anyone could ever dream of. Now is the time to bow out gracefully.”

My stomach churned with a million emotions. He wasn’t listening to me—he never had done. I needed this. I needed the job; I needed the business. I couldn’t leave. I couldn’t go home.

“What do you know?” I said, the despair undisguised in my voice. “You’ve seen me in action once. Once! And suddenly you think this is enough for me?”

“You could get another job anywhere...” he began, but I cut him off.

“No. I. Can’t!” I said, my voice getting louder. “There is no other label doing what I do. They’ve all been slashed...”

“There are in England,” he said, rubbing his temples.

“I’m not going back there.”

“Why? You’d be a fucking big fish in a small pond. You wouldn’t have to deal with these corporate assholes screwing over the record business.”

“I’m NOT going back there,” I repeated, knowing there was an edge in my voice Jude had not yet heard.

“Why, Diana? What happened there?”

I focused on my breath—breathe in two, three, breathe out, two, three. My heartrate was through the roof. I'd never meant for the conversation to take this turn. I never wanted to get so close to my past again.

“Something happened,” he continued, sensing the door to my soul might be open ajar. “Is that why you wouldn't give an interview to *Rolling Stone*?”

I stormed past him, closing the metaphorical door in his face. “I don't have time for this,” I hissed. “I have a fucking concert to run.”

I heard his footsteps but before he could reach me, I spun round.

“I suggest you head up to Suite Sixteen to watch the rest of the show...”

“Diana...” his eyes were full of apology and his hands ran through his hair again. The cotton of his t-shirt clung to his abs, taunting my defiance.

“...or you can leave.” I forced out the words. We'd just confessed our love for each other, but this was bigger. This was my life, and I couldn't risk it for anyone.

I turned, opened the door, and walked through it. My eyes were on the bands, the future. They had to be. The alternative was too painful to bear.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Carlos and Sheridan sat opposite me, staring with wide eyes, jaws on the table.

I'd taken them to Buvette as a treat for their immense work in helping organize the concert at the Garden, and I'd just announced the next stage of my plan. Phoenix was the only proper indie label left on the east coast. We'd already proved that the public still wanted indie music. I wanted to carve space for it in the mainstream and take some of the airwaves usually reserved for the likes of Maroon freaking 5, and give it over to bands and artists that were doing something different, more creative, more inclusive. I wanted my own show. Not for me personally, but for the music scene. A show that celebrated alternative music.

"Aren't you *exhausted*?" Carlos said eventually, projecting his own exhaustion onto me. We'd all worked incredibly hard and the concert had wrung every last drop of energy from all of us. The difference with me was, I had no other life. This was it. It was the only reason I got out of bed.

"Do you think that's what winners say when they reach the last hurdle? No. They keep going. Because only the winners stick it out to the end. The losers give up way before."

"Is that your motivational speech?" He whined, cocking an eyebrow.

"He's right," Sheridan added. "You need to take a breath, honey. You'll have a nervous breakdown."

I paused to consider that for a moment. Perhaps a nervous breakdown would be the answer to my problems. Everyone had told me I was going to lose Phoenix anyway. But no, I couldn't just roll over and let it happen, and there was still a small niggling feeling in the back of my head that something, just something, might expose itself and give me a way in. I couldn't look away; I couldn't take a break. If I wasn't in the thick of it, every hour of every day, I might miss whatever weakness existed in my opposition, whoever and whatever it was.

I hadn't told Carlos and Sheridan what Jude had told me and they had no idea we were still, intermittently, sleeping together. As always, despite everything that had happened between us, Jude and I had reverted to not speaking, not meeting, and simply letting each other get on with doing what we had to do.

We were still opposed but there was an understanding between us. A level of respect. Love. We both knew nothing could come of that love, which made it feel reckless and heightened. I no longer hated him; I craved him. If ever my thoughts strayed from Phoenix, from the risk of it all being taken away, they landed squarely on him. I'd replayed every moment we'd spent together, every time we'd failed to keep our hands to ourselves, every word we'd spoken, every climax we'd shared. My mind might have been wholly and entirely my own, but my heart was his.

"Look, you guys don't need to do anything just yet," I assured them. "I'm going to start putting some calls into various networks and production companies. I'll draw up a synopsis, maybe arrange some meetings. If anyone bites, I'll bring you on board. I know you have enough on your plates with just managing the acts and everything else."

"You're right there," Sheridan replied. "I'm no longer the marketing woman. I seem to have doubled up as a therapist, a lawyer, a tour promoter, a manager, a talent booker. It's crazy. Things were booming before the Garden, but now they're insane."

I smiled, sympathetically. “I really appreciate everything you’re doing, Shez. And you too,” I nodded to Carlos. “It means so much to me. But I’m almost insignificant here. It’s about the music industry now. It’s about keeping that niche alive for indie bands to thrive. You know that, right?”

They both nodded. “Yeah, we get it, Di,” Carlos sighed. “And I love it, I really do.”

“Why don’t you take a couple of days off,” I suggested. “No-one will die. Just direct any queries to me; I’ll handle it.”

His faced lifted briefly. “Are you sure? I’d hate to leave you in the middle of all this.”

“I’m positive. I’ll be fine here. Just brief your teams before you go, and take a few days to just switch off, ok?”

They both nodded, gratefully, while I tried not to think too much about how the hell I was going to manage without them. Then the sound of thudding feet grew louder, to be quickly joined by the sound of someone panting heavily.

“Marla!” Sheridan gasped. “Are you ok?”

My assistant appeared, completely red-faced and panic-stricken.

“Thank... God... you’re... here,” she stammered between breaths. “I couldn’t get hold of you...”

“No signal,” Carlos said.

“What’s up?” I asked her, scooting to the side to let her sit.

She answered my question by slapping a newspaper down on the table for us all to see.

Battle of the Brits, the headline screeched. Beneath it was a photograph of me storming down the corridor at Madison Square Garden, while Jude stood in the doorway of the storeroom, his black t-shirt sticking to his chest, his hands planted firmly into his pockets, a frown etched clearly across his face. Only I knew what that frown had really meant. But panic filled me. What else had the photographer seen? What had they heard?

I snatched up the paper and started scanning through the article quickly.

The musicians weren't the only people venting their emotions at Madison Square Garden on Thursday night. Infamous business fixer and the man tasked with restructuring the legendary Empirical Records, Jude Peyton-Harris, and subsidiary label boss Diana Delaney were in clear disagreement about something, most probably the future of the label behind the show: Phoenix Music.

I scanned further down.

Diana Delaney joined Empirical as a talent scout in 2018. She was the very scout behind the spotting of multi-platinum-winning Empirical-signed Kirian, and indie star Cherry Tatum, who became the first act to be signed by Phoenix. Empirical bosses took a huge gamble appointing Delaney as VP of a brand new label with no prior experience of running a business, but Alex Jefferson, then CEO, said at the time: "[Delaney] has a rare talent for knowing what lands well with today's music consumers. We want to nurture that talent and amplify it through the growth of a new, highly targeted subsidiary."

I swallowed a hard lump, remembering how Alex had supported me, unwaveringly.

Unfortunately, sales in the first three years reflected Delaney's inexperience and it wasn't until the board hired Peyton-Harris to conduct a root and branch review that Delaney stepped up to the plate and launched campaigns that have dragged Phoenix Music out of the red. Only time will tell if the phoenix will rise from the ashes of this fire. In the meantime, the industry is left speculating over the relationship between Peyton-Harris and Delaney, both Brits on a conquest to achieve polar opposite goals. Peyton-Harris, who studied at Harrow before quitting Loughborough University in 2014, is said to be "livid" about Delaney's "antagonistic pursuit" of column inches, too late in the day, according to a source. Meanwhile, Delaney, who graduated from Cambridge University in 2018 and arrived in New York only days later, is

thought to be “defiant and determined” to save her label from supposedly inevitable collapse.

I felt a white heat envelope me and my senses numbed. They had my picture, they’d linked me to Cambridge. All the dates lined up. My eyes flicked to the masthead. It was the *New York Times*. Available in every decent newsagent in the UK. And I was on the front fucking page.

“Di, are you ok?” Marla put an arm around me but I hardly felt it; the room was spinning.

“I... um,” I stuttered. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Shall I come with you?” Sheridan asked, her face betraying the fact she was taken aback by my reaction to the article. Shouldn’t I have been pleased? It was coverage. It was an astute observation about the dynamics between the man who was threatening to tear down a perfectly good music label, and the woman who was trying to save it. That’s how they would see it. That’s how everyone would see it. Except me.

“Sure, honey,” Marla said, as she moved to let me pass.

“I’m ok,” I said to Sheridan, my smile weak and unconvincing. Still, I waved her away when she attempted to insist. Then I walked—God knows how—to the bathroom and collapsed to the floor in the nearest cubicle. Everything was shaking. My hands, my knees, my teeth, even the ass I was sitting on. The white heat still engulfed me and I couldn’t think straight. I knew what this was. It was PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder. The idea that my new life was going to be discovered had sent me spiraling. I needed to get over it, and quickly, before anyone suspected anything more than mere shame in being associated with Jude in an article which was essentially about two business people bitching at each other.

I took some deep breaths and tried to clear my mind. I was scared but, so far, I had no reason to be. He was in England. He wouldn’t have even seen the paper yet, and he may never see it. I could well be worrying for nothing. The level of risk was the same as always. In a couple of days maybe it could be higher, but right now I was as safe as I had been for the last

few years. The shaking slowed down and I wiped the cold sweat from my brow with a tissue. After a few more minutes had passed, I clambered to my feet and walked out to the vanity unit. I placed my hands either side of the wash basin and stared at my reflection.

“You’re going to be ok,” I said to myself. “You have to believe that, otherwise, what’s the point? You may as well give up now. You may as well keep running.”

I watched as my expression changed from one of a frightened rabbit in the headlights to one of reluctant determination. I had to go back out there and pretend everything was ok. I had no other choice. I couldn’t tell anyone the truth; I would sooner die. I took one last deep breath and walked back out to the restaurant.

Three faces looked up at me as I returned to the table.

“Are you ok?” Sheridan mouthed, and I nodded.

“The article’s not that bad,” Carlos surmised. “It’s more embarrassing for him, I’d say.”

“I know,” I said. “I think it was just the shock of seeing us both in the same article. I didn’t think we would be that newsworthy. Surely this whole campaign is about the bands and the music, not the suits who are fighting it out behind the scenes.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit,” Carlos frowned, turning the picture towards me. “Papers love beautiful people. And look at you both. He might be an asshole, but he’s one hot, brooding asshole. I mean, check out those abs for God’s sake. It’s a good thing he doesn’t wear black every day; I might have defected to his side by now.”

I couldn’t help but snort out a laugh.

“And you...” he continued. “I know you were wearing your ‘comfy’ clothes but you are gorgeous. Look at your long, flowing hair and your, frankly, ridiculously beautiful eyebrows. You make a real hot mean girl in that picture. I’m sure every man who walks past that paper is going to want a piece of you.”

I shuddered at the thought.

“They had to print that picture, Di. The story is neither here nor there. But you two are the most beautiful people in Manhattan right now. And they’ve caught you mid-fight, post-fight, whatever. It’s human interest at its best.”

I sighed, heavily.

“Can we put it away?” I pleaded. “I don’t want to see it anymore. I’ve got better things to think about.”

Carlos, Sheridan and Marla exchanged glances before Marla tucked the paper under her arm and rose to leave.

“Marl,” I said, stopping her. “Take my seat.” I looked back at them all. “I’m really sorry; I’ve lost my appetite.”

I threw my company credit card down onto the table. “Have whatever you like. You’ve earned it. I’m going to head home and get an early night.”

Marla looked stricken. “I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have interrupted your evening...”

“It’s not your fault,” I smiled, patting her arm. “I would have seen it at some point. And the article, as you say, isn’t so bad. But it’s just come as a bit of shock. Maybe I am pretty exhausted. You guys enjoy yourselves, take a couple of days off. I’ll see you back in the office Monday.”

I smiled again, hoping it looked genuine. I just needed to get out of there, out into the fresh air, back home to my apartment where I wasn’t out in broad daylight; where I could bolt the door with the fifteen locks I’d attached to it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“*Y*ou’ve done it again, Di,” said Magda. “I thought I’d never seen a man so angry the time you secured Madison Square Gardens, but this time... He’s going to bust a blood vessel.”

“Let me guess. The meeting with the production companies?”

“The very same. You are playing with fire, Di. You know that, don’t you? If any TV production company signs anything with Phoenix, it will make his job impossible to do.”

“That’s the idea,” I replied, filling my mug with yet more coffee. I hadn’t slept for forty-eight hours and I wasn’t about to succumb to it now. “Where is he?”

“I’ve no idea. He was due back in the office for a meeting with the guys from McAuley Finch, but he hasn’t shown up yet. I’m probably going to have to move a bunch of stuff around in his schedule. He’ll want to know if you’re coming in. What shall I say?”

“Say no. I’m working from home for a couple of days. I need some space. If he has a problem with that, he can email me.”

“Email?” Magda practically choked on the insult. “You know he’ll call you.”

“Well, tell him I’m screening. I have to. I’m exhausted.” It wasn’t a lie. But I wasn’t exhausted with work, as everyone would suspect, I was exhausted by fear.

“You are one hell of a firecracker, Di, I have to hand it to you. Gotta go. He’s on the other line.”

“Thanks, Magda. Good luck!”

If it had been any other time, my stomach would have flipped several times over at the mention of his name, but it was incapable of doing that. My stomach was jelly; petrified. If I wasn’t pacing my apartment, my ears peeled for the slightest sound, I was sitting on the toilet emptying my bowels for the fiftieth time.

Then a knock came at the door and I froze, my pacing feet now glued to the floor. I waited, no longer breathing, and the knock came again.

“Diana, I know you’re in there. Let me in.”

I almost collapsed with relief to hear Jude’s voice.

I didn’t care that he’d left the office all the way up town and made his way to the East Village, no doubt to give me a stripping down for continuing to pursue my plan of securing some sort of TV show for my label. I was just so relieved it was him. I had to stop myself from running to the door to let him in.

After unbolting the fifteen locks and a further two I’d just installed, I opened the door to a face that I loved but had never seen so angry.

“What the fuck are you playing at?” He shouted, storming past me into my apartment.

“If you’re going to speak to me like that, you can bloody well get out,” I snapped back at him.

He took a deep breath and levelled with me.

“You have to stop this, Diana. Don’t you remember what I said? It’s a gigantic waste of time. Nothing is going to stop your label from being closed down. Don’t you get it?”

I looked back at him, blankly. Everyone was telling me the same thing but I refused to relent.

“Why do you care? Why does it matter if I’m wasting my time?”

He tugged his hand through his hair and paced my small living room. Then he stopped, right by the table where all my papers were strewn.

“You’re embarrassing yourself,” he said, in a quiet voice.

“I’m the only who can say whether or not I’m embarrassed, Jude. And I can quite confidently say, I am not. While ever I am fighting for my label, I will not be embarrassed.”

“Ok then,” he said, tearing off his jacket and flinging it over a chair. “I’m embarrassed. You’re embarrassing me.”

“Ah, now we’re getting to the truth,” I said, folding my arms and cocking my head to one side. “Why the hell should you be embarrassed if you’re so sure you’re going to win? Huh? You’ve already said that, whether you want to or not, you’re going to shut me down. So why on earth should you be the one who feels embarrassed?”

“This,” he snapped, dropping the same article Marla had brought me onto my table. My eyes flicked to the letters it had landed on and my belly turned to liquid again. He was close enough that he’d be able to read them if he looked. I had to get him out of my apartment.

“I had nothing to do with it,” I sighed, shrugging my arms in what I hoped appeared to be some sort of truce. “Besides, it’s just gossip. And probably, now, in everyone’s trash.”

I stepped toward the table hoping to take the paper and shove it in the trash to demonstrate my point, while somehow covering up the letters before he could read them. Instead, he blocked me.

“Please, Di,” he whispered, heavily. “Please, stop.”

I looked up into his eyes and noticed they were dark and foreboding. There was something he wasn’t telling me.

“I don’t understand,” I replied. “You were ok with having me put up a fight. What’s changed?”

He stiffened. “Nothing has changed. It’s just... We’re getting close to making the announcement and... I don’t want to see you wasting any more time. It’s futile.”

“You’re not doing this because you care,” I said, narrowing my eyes.

“You’re right,” he said, bluntly.

I took a step back to process his change in tone.

“If I could behave the way I really feel, we wouldn’t be having this conversation, Diana. I’d be beating those dicks to a pulp. I’d be right there with you, fighting to keep this label going, doing whatever I could to make your dreams come true...”

I gripped the back of a chair for some stability.

“But I can’t behave the way I feel. You know that.”

“Why don’t you quit? I asked, emboldened by his declaration.

“Asking me to do that is like asking you to stop trying to save your label.” He grinned to himself, realizing the irony.

He shook his head. “I don’t know why I came here,” he smiled. “I knew I wouldn’t be able to change your mind. You’re too headstrong. Just like me.”

I smiled too, knowing it was the truth. Despite the completely different paths we were on, we were scarily similar. Maybe that’s why we couldn’t leave each other alone.

“I wonder what the NYT would make of this,” I giggled. “You being in my apartment.”

“Don’t even,” he began. “I have to go. I don’t trust myself—what I’d do—if I stayed.” His smile dropped suddenly, only to be replaced by a film of sadness. Then he paused, as though he’d only just noticed the redness around my eyes.

“Are you ok?” He asked, reaching a hand out to touch my face.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, brushing him away gently. “I’m fine. Just tired, that’s all.”

He looked momentarily dejected, then recovered himself quickly.

“Ok, well, you know where I am,” he sighed. Then he turned to pick up the newspaper and stopped. My blood froze in my veins as his fingers crawled from the *New York Times* across to the papers just hidden beneath. He tugged gently at one, watching as the words came into view. I held my breath. I couldn’t hide it now. He would ask me what the hell the letters were, I would tell him, and he’d never want to have anything to do with me ever again. I cherished the last few seconds of his company, while he still thought he loved me, while he still thought he knew who I was.

Then his chin lifted and his eyes met mine.

“What are these?” His voice was neither stern nor warm, just questioning.

“Letters from my stalker,” I said, with a small, bitter laugh.

“What?” His frown made it clear he didn’t find it at all funny.

“I have a stalker,” I shrugged. “It started at University. I came to New York to escape him. Everything was ok until that came out.” I nodded to the newspaper still lying on the table. “And now he’s back.”

He looked back at the letters.

“These... these are sick, Diana. How many are there?”

“Ninety-three,” I answered, without even needing to think.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered, then looked back at me. I knew what was coming next.

“Have you reported it?”

I pinned my lips shut and shook my head. I couldn’t look at him.

“Why the fuck not, Diana? He’s threatening to kill you. He’s written it all down in great, disgusting detail. What the hell are you thinking?”

I couldn't look up. I just shook my head again. I felt a tear as it made a track down my cheek.

Suddenly, Jude was standing in front of me, forcing my head up to look at him. I squeezed my eyes shut. I couldn't see his face when I told him the truth.

“You have to report it, Diana. Someone out there wants you dead. They know where you live, they know where you work. He's a fucking screwball and he needs to be locked away.”

Still, I said nothing.

“Diana! For fuck's sake. You have to do something about this. What if he goes and does this to someone else, huh? That will be on you, if you don't do anything about this...”

“He won't...” I whispered, opening my eyes.

“What?” Jude said, squinting at me as though he was taking me in for the very first time. “How do you know that?”

With my face still in his grip, I reached out and felt around for the last letter I'd received. The one that had arrived only that morning, addressed to me at my New York apartment, with a Manhattan date stamp, telling me he was in this very city. My fingers found the tell-tale creases where I'd screwed it up in despair, then unfolded it to read and re-read and re-read it again, like the abuse victim I was. I held up the letter so he could see plainly exactly why I knew my stalker wouldn't do this to anyone else. I watched Jude's eyes move from left to right, left to right as he took in the words that I repeated along with him because they were already etched on my brain.

MY DIANA.

Finally, I've found you. You've no need to worry anymore and you've no need to be alone. I'm coming to get you and we're going to live as we were always meant to. Together, as a couple, deeply in love.

I know why you left.

You couldn't bear the burden of heartache, seeing me every day living under the same roof, hearing me make love to Mum every night through the thin walls of our bedrooms. Even knowing it was always you I saw when I came wasn't enough for you. I know that now, and I'm sorry. I promise I will make it up to you. You are the only one I want and always will be.

I love you, with my heart, my body and my soul,

Dad x

I WATCHED the Adam's apple in Jude's throat bob up and down as he swallowed. In slow motion, his eyes glided across the paper towards my face.

"Is this for real?" He said, so quietly that if it were not for the fact he was standing a foot in front of me, I wouldn't have heard him.

I nodded, mute.

"Your father?" The disgust hadn't quite settled on his face but I could see its tendrils crawling across his brow.

"Stepfather," I corrected, realizing that might not be quite so awful, as awful as it still was.

Now it was Jude's turn to squeeze his eyes closed and shake his head.

"Your mother?"

I knew what he was asking and I knew one and two word sentences were no longer appropriate.

"They're still married, as far as I'm aware," I said, turning to walk back into the kitchenette. I poured two glasses of water and handed one to him as soon as he opened his eyes.

He drank half the glass then renewed his stare. "Does she know?"

I shook my head. "I can't do it to her."

"Diana..."

"Alright, let me explain."

I rested my hands on the kitchen surface, more for stability than effect, and took a deep breath.

“I met him when I was at college. I was sixteen. We dated for about a year but he became... too protective.”

I paused to steady my breathing. I’d never uttered a word of this to anyone.

“It was weird. He would want to know exactly who I was with, where I was going, how long for. Even if I wasn’t going anywhere—if I was just staying at home with Mum—he would want to know exactly what I was doing, what I was watching on TV, when I was going to bed, that kind of thing.”

Jude listened in silence.

“It came to a head on my seventeenth birthday. I went for dinner with some girlfriends and he barged into the restaurant, screaming all kinds of accusations at me, like I was in a relationship with one of my friends, I was cheating on him. It was mortifying. He dragged me out of the restaurant on my birthday and drove me home. He never came inside the house but I think he stayed out there, watching. I broke it off of course, expecting the obsessive behavior to continue, but it didn’t. It went strangely quiet.”

I took a few sips of water and Jude leaned back against one of the chairs.

“I thought it was over,” I sighed. “I started my final year of college, everything was going great. And then...” I rubbed my face, as though it might erase the memory. “And then my mum came home from work one day, sat me down and announced she’d been seeing someone and wanted me to meet him. We went out for dinner, and he walked in—Aaron.”

“Your stepfather,” Jude clarified. I nodded.

“He’d done it on purpose,” I said, still disbelieving that someone could be so calculated, so obsessed, that they would date someone for that long, just to get back at another person.

“They’d been dating for six months by that point. My mum never told me about her boyfriends unless she thought they were going to work out. Which is what made the whole

situation even worse. My mum was smitten. I hadn't seen her that happy in years. A part of me really hoped what they had was genuine and that even if he'd been a dick to me, he might still be right for my mum."

"Does she know you two had a thing?"

I shook my head. "I didn't want her to know, and Aaron agreed. I think he knew that if my mum found out, she wouldn't want anything to do with him, and he'd be out of both our lives..."

I drank down the rest of the water and took another deep breath. My lungs were burning from the strain of holding it together.

"He moved in soon after that and I did hear them having sex. Every night. And every night I vomited into a trashcan by my bed. Not because I was jealous—God, no. But because I knew he was doing it for my benefit." The tears began to roll down my cheeks.

Jude didn't move. It was as though if he did, he would break the spell and I would suddenly shut down. But it was halfway out now; I had nothing left to lose.

"I got accepted to Cambridge University and I started looking for places to live as soon as my college term ended. I think he panicked then; it became real that I was leaving. That was when he proposed to her. He needed me to know he wasn't going anywhere. I broke then and pleaded with my mum not to marry him. She kept asking me why but I couldn't bring myself to tell her. It was one thing asking her not to commit to him, it was another telling her that the previous eighteen months had been a complete lie. We had a huge argument and I moved out. She went ahead and married him."

I suddenly felt light-headed and had to rest my elbows on the surface and my head in my hands. Within seconds, Jude was at my side, his hands drawing back the hair that had fallen around my face.

"I had to go to the wedding; my mum begged me to. We were barely speaking but she called, crying hysterically down

the phone, pleading with me to go. She wanted me to be a fucking bridesmaid. I drew the line at that but I agreed to go to the wedding. I shouldn't have. I stayed off the alcohol, thankfully, but my mum got inebriated. As soon as she was incapable of walking, he came after me. Followed me to my room at the hotel and broke his way in."

Jude's hands began to rub my back.

"I screamed bloody murder, I swear. The man never stood a chance. It didn't take long for the people in the room next door to call security. I never did find out who they were but I'll be forever grateful to them. He was capable of anything in that moment; I could see it in his eyes."

I lifted my head and saw Jude beside me in my peripheral vision, and tears on the kitchen surface.

"I left that night and went straight to Cambridge. I stayed in a cheap hotel until I found somewhere more permanent. At that point, I had no reason to hide my address from my mum. I was so naïve; I should have known he would follow me there. That's when the letters began. I moved onto the campus which was much more secure but he still tried to reach me. I had to move a few times. He always vowed he'd try and win me back once I left Cambridge. So I came here."

I was still staring straight ahead, waiting for Jude's reaction, waiting for him to turn on his heel and leave. Because what sick fuck gets involved with their stepfather and lets their mother go along blithely unaware? I felt his hands on my shoulders, turning me, straightening me, until I was facing him. He seemed taller, or perhaps I'd shrunk a few inches with the weight of shame.

"Come here," he said, softly, and pulled me towards him. He wrapped his arms around me while I stayed still, frozen, unable to believe he was genuinely trying to comfort me. He drew those same circles along my spine and breathed into my hair while I continued to re-process everything I'd just said. I couldn't believe it was my life. I'd managed to block it all out for the last four years; I'd managed to trick myself into believing it had never happened. Apart from the fact I was

completely estranged from my mum, and she never knew why, there was nothing to remind me of just how much I'd fucked our family up.

I pulled back, uncomfortable with the sympathy, knowing I didn't deserve it.

"Where's your real father?" Jude asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. "No idea. He left when I was two."

It was then I noticed the muscles in his jaw clicking up and down as though he was trying to suppress something.

"So, plenty of daddy issues over here," I joked, trying to lighten the mood. Jude didn't smile. Instead, he pulled me back towards him and stroked my hair. It felt nice, but it felt alien. I'd just bared my rotten, damaged soul to him, and he was still here.

"Get your stuff," he whispered through my hair into my ear. "You're moving in with me."

I pulled back again and stared at him, wide-eyed. "Have you gone mad?"

"What do you mean?" For once, Jude looked positively confused.

"I can't move in with you," I said, wriggling free of his arms. "What do you think the fucking *New York Times* would have to say about that?"

Jude closed his eyes and shook his head as though he'd misheard.

"You really care about that? This psychopath is looking to kill you, Di..."

"He won't kill me..." I started.

"You don't know that. He's flown all the way here to track you down, the second your photo hit the newsstands. Di..." he stepped towards me again. "He's obsessed. Four years have passed since you last saw him. You said it yourself, you don't know what he's capable of."

“But I can’t move in with you!” I repeated. “With everything that’s going on, I can’t be seen to be sleeping with the enemy, for God’s sake.”

“It doesn’t have to be like that,” he said. “We don’t have to be *together*...”

“It doesn’t matter. That’s how it will look.”

He sighed and pulled at his hair—a sure sign he was frustrated. “I just want you to be safe, Diana. Is that so bad?”

“I’ll go to a hotel for a few weeks,” I said, trying to appease him. I couldn’t afford a hotel, but he didn’t need to know that. I would confess everything to Sheridan and hope she’d let me sleep on her couch.

“I can’t believe you’re still fighting me, Diana. This is *your life*. It meant enough for you to decline an interview with *Rolling Stone*. I don’t understand why you won’t let me help. After that article...” he nodded towards the *NYT*, “my place is the last place he’ll look.”

“I can’t,” I said, shaking my head, punctuating the conversation. “I still have a label to save, and that won’t happen if I’m living under your roof.”

Jude sighed heavily and looked around my apartment, as though he might only ever see it this once. I was pretty sure that was accurate. Despite having just offered me sanctuary in his home, I was certain he would never want anything to do with me sexually, ever again. There’s nothing like a wayward tiff with an ex-boyfriend-come-stepfather to turn someone off.

“Fine,” he said, not looking at me. “Can you at least let me know when you’re in a hotel?”

“Sure,” I said. He was just being polite.

I watched his shoulders drop as he grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair, took one last look at the incriminating letters on the table and walked towards the door. He stopped, taking in the ridiculous number of bolts I’d attached, and squeezed the bridge of his nose. He wanted to say something, but he didn’t. He wrenched the door open and walked away without looking back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



S handed Sheridan her triple shot, super skinny latte.

“You don’t have to get me one of these every morning, you know,” she smiled.

“Come on, it’s the least I can do. You’ve given up your spare room for me. I promise it won’t be for long; I’m going to find another place.”

“You’re going to report the guy is what you’re gonna do,” she frowned. She’d taken the exact same stance as Jude. But neither of them understood. I couldn’t report Aaron; it would break my mum’s heart if she ever found out what he’d been doing, the letters he’d been writing. But I also knew I had to do something; I just wasn’t ready to decide what. I was pretty sure it would involve confronting him and trying to put an end to it once and for all, but I needed to gain the strength to do that. Just a couple more weeks, while I focused on securing a TV show for the label, that was all I needed. Then I could take a step back and focus on my stepfather. Until that time, I needed to hide out, and Sheridan had come to my rescue.

I pushed open the main doors and followed Sheridan through the lobby. As the elevator doors opened, Jude stepped out. He nodded at Sheridan who returned a thin smile, then he burrowed his eyes into me as he passed. He was hiding his feelings around other people less and less. Sheridan wasn’t the only one who’d noticed.

“You sure you guys haven’t got it together?” She asked me once Jude was well out of earshot.

“I’m absolutely sure,” I lied. Too many uncomfortable truths about me were surfacing; I didn’t think I’d be able to cope if Sheridan knew Jude and I had said the L word while still snapping at each other’s jugular like rabid animals.

“He’s got it bad,” she added, and I couldn’t help but smile to myself.

“The announcement is coming up in two weeks.” I said, changing the subject. “That’s how long I’ve got to secure one of the networks or production companies.”

I could sense her eyeroll and chose to ignore it.

“If you can bag a TV show in the middle of all this, I will let you have my job, girl. I’ve worked in this business for thirty years and I’ve never known anyone take such ballsy publicity steps. All I can say is, I hope I never have to go up against you for a job interview. You would wipe the floor with me.”

“Nonsense,” I waved my hand, heading for my office. “See you at lunch?”

“Absolutely!”

MARLA WAS STANDING in my office when I reached it, hopping from foot to foot.

“I have HPI on the phone for you,” she practically squealed.

“HPI? The TV network?” I dropped my bag and walked quickly to my desk.

“The very one. It’s one of the planning execs, Myra Barclay?”

I shook my head, not placing the name.

“Thanks Marla.”

I waited until she’d left my office then I picked up the phone.

“Diana Delaney.”

“Diana. Myra Barclay here, I’m VP Planning for Reality and Talent Programming at HPI. Have I caught you at a good time?”

I swallowed back nerves and walked to the window, looking out over Madison Avenue. This could be it. This could be the final nail in the coffin for whomever was trying to end Phoenix. It would make zero sense to close down a label that had secured some sort of partnership with a major national TV network.

“You have. Now is perfect.”

“Great! I understand you’ve been in touch with my team, with a view to discussing some ideas for a new talent show?”

“That’s right,” I said, half-holding my breath. “With all the attention Phoenix and the indie music scene is receiving at the moment, I suspect now is a good a time as any to capitalize on the public’s appetite for this kind of music.”

“I read the synopses you provided, and really liked them,” Myra continued. “I’d love to talk to you in person. When can you come in?”

My heart thumped against my ribcage. “Um, any time,” I replied. “I can come in today if you’re free?”

“I can certainly move a few things around. How does eleven am sound?”

“That sounds fantastic. I’ll bring my two right-hand...”

“No need,” she said, quickly. “Just bring yourself at this stage. As and if talks progress, we can start bringing in other members of both our teams.”

“Absolutely.”

Thankfully, I wrote down all the instructions she gave me for where to go, as my brain would never have digested them; I was in shock. This was exactly what I wanted, and I’d forced myself to believe it could happen. But deep down, I felt as though I was still running on a fluke. The Madison Square Gardens show had been the peak—we were never going to be

able to top that. That was the one persistent thought stuck in the back of my mind. But perhaps I was wrong; perhaps this train really had developed tracks of its own. I wasn't really steering the wheel anymore; I was simply being taken along for the ride.

I hung up the call and stared out at the streets below. I couldn't believe what we'd already achieved, let alone what we might be about to achieve. We'd engaged the entire nation in a campaign to halt the closure of a tiny, previously insignificant record label; we'd set up a fund to support the marketing campaign behind the cause; we'd pulled off the biggest free concert indie fans had ever seen; and now we might be about to secure a show on a major TV network celebrating independent talent from across the States. I needed to tell someone. I couldn't tell Sheridan yet—she'd berate me for being more focused on this than on my psychopathic stepfather. I couldn't tell Carlos yet—he was still recovering from exhaustion after the concert. There was only one person I could tell who would truly understand what this meant to me, who would share this moment of almost-insane achievement with me, despite it going against everything he was standing for.

“Jude,” I said, as he answered the phone.

I heard him walk to the door of his office and close it.

“You ok?” His voice was anxious, as it had been since he'd discovered the letters.

“I'm great,” I smiled. “I needed to tell you something.”

“I'm listening.”

“I'm meeting with HPI. In a couple of hours.”

“Are you kidding? HPI, the network?”

“Yeah. They like the synopses. They want to talk in person.”

“Oh my God, Diana,” he sighed, and I heard the smile in his voice. “You are unstoppable. That is amazing; I'm really happy for you.”

“I know it might make things... complicated,” I began.

“A little, but fuck it. I like a challenge.”

“I apologize now if you get any backlash.”

“It won’t be any worse than the backlash I’m already getting. You’re not the only one who doesn’t want this label to be shut down.”

“Thank you,” I said, quietly. I caressed the phone with my fingers, wishing he was standing with me. He’d become more than my boss, my ex, and my enemy. He was a friend, a confidante, a lover. I was grateful that even after he’d learned about my past—specifically the one element of it that had come back to haunt me—he was still there for me. Probably not in a sexual way, like before, but he was still kind-of on my side. I knew it would end, that as soon as this restructure was resolved and the verdict had been announced, he would disappear, like he always seemed to after these jobs, and he would have no reason to ever see me again. But I cherished this moment—him listening to me and being pleased with what I’d achieved, being there with me as I fought against whomever was paying his salary.

“For what?”

“For not hating me for doing this.”

“I could never hate you, Diana. You know exactly how I feel.”

I nodded to myself; I did know exactly how he felt. Sorry. He felt sorry for me and sorry for himself for having fallen into this mess with a woman whose past was infiltrating her future. He would be feeling regret at ever having met me at the Decadence Club in the first place. It would have been a lot easier to fight someone he hadn’t slept with several times over. Still, we were where we were, and I was grateful. I needed to hear his voice, and he gave it to me when I needed it. I couldn’t ask for more.

“I’d better go and prepare,” I sighed, not wanting to end the call.

“Sure. Will you let me know how it goes?”

“I will.” I gripped the phone until my knuckles were white. “Jude...”

“You’ll be amazing, Diana,” he whispered. “You always are.”

I stared at the phone long after he’d hung up.

Where the hell had I gone so wrong?

I had everything I’d ever wanted in my life: a gorgeous, intelligent man I’d fallen head-over-heels in love with—even if it was no longer reciprocated and he’d be gone in a few weeks—, friends who would do anything for me, and a job I was finally really bloody good at. But none of it fit together; it was all fighting against me. Obviously, having a psychotic stepfather stalker didn’t help matters, but even without that, I had every piece of the jigsaw but I couldn’t make any one of the damn things fit. The outcome was hovering in front of my eyes like a mirage but I couldn’t allow my eyes to focus; I couldn’t entertain the thought that it was all going to fall away and I’d been left with nothing: nowhere to live, nowhere to work, no Jude. Only a man who’d devoted the last eight years trying to make me his. Maybe that was all I deserved. Maybe everything he’d told me in his letters was true. Maybe I was unlovable by anyone but him. Maybe I was ugly. Maybe Jude had simply taken pity on me and now felt obliged to see it through to the end.

I placed my phone on the desk, and packed the relevant papers and my computer into my bag, robotically. The doubts were making their way under my skin, like serum, and despite having had the most encouraging call of my career, I had a horrible feeling it was all about to blow up in my face, exactly as I deserved.

I FOLLOWED Myra’s assistant along the slick corridors of HPI’s seventh floor where, according to the glistening floor map in the lobby, was where all the senior exec offices were located. She tapped on a door, then opened it, signaling for me to enter.

There was no woman in the room, no Myra that I could see. Instead, there were two men I recognized immediately: Ralph Zeiner, the CEO of HPI, and Donnie Hoffman, the face of the three most successful mainstream talent shows on air. The real deal. This was no meeting with someone who might include my ideas in a Monday morning planning meeting; this was a meeting with the most influential people in talent TV. And way above my station.

I felt a hand push me into the room and realized I'd been standing like a lemon with my jaw on the floor. I was stunned. No, I was starstruck. And petrified.

"Miss Delaney," Zeiner said, with a well-practiced smile. "Take a seat."

I did as I was asked but I hardly dared breathe. This would be it. I would find out here and now if my idea was likely to go ahead or not. Usually these things were proposed, discussed, refined, discussed again, then sent up a floor for approval, then another floor, then another, until it reached these people who would make the final decision. Not this time. I was bypassing all those other stages and going straight to the top. Whatever decision was going to be made about my idea for a show, would be made right here and right now. I reached into my bag and pulled out the original synopses.

"No need for those," Hoffman said, then he turned, unsmiling, back to the assistant. "Send in Marty."

Marty? The only Marty I knew at this level was Marty Weissenberg, the CEO of Blue Hill, the most successful record label in the world and Empirical's biggest rival. My throat constricted from the sudden absence of fluid. What the hell was going on?

Sure enough, the man whose face had graced *Rolling Stone*, *Time* magazine and the *Wall Street Journal* several times over walked into the room and came to sit opposite me, his expression impassive. My stomach was liquid. If this meeting didn't start and end quickly, I was going to have to excuse myself and run to the bathroom. These were the most

powerful men in music and they were sitting right in front of me, and me alone.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why we’ve asked you here, to meet with all of us,” Zeiner began. “Well, let me get straight to the point.”

I held my breath.

“Your campaign to save Phoenix is nothing short of incredible. You started from a place of, frankly, utter insignificance, and you’ve created a zeitgeist movement that we haven’t seen in this industry since Britpop in the nineties.”

I could feel my head getting lighter as the breath stuck in my lungs.

“You’ve not only put your small subsidiary on the map; you’ve put it in the halls of fame. It’s going to go down in history, your little record label. You should be extremely proud of what you’ve achieved.”

Finally, I breathed out. “Thank you,” I gasped. I had no idea what else to say.

“As you can see,” Zeiner continued, “You’ve got the attention of the biggest minds in showbusiness, collectively, right here in this room.” He followed the statement with a huge smile, but I could see it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “That’s more than anyone else has managed to achieve—at your level, anyway.”

I hid my surprise at his patronizing comment and looked at each one of them in turn. Zeiner was the only one smiling. Hoffman and Weissenberg were sitting back in their chairs, casually, and eyeing me as though I was some inconvenient insect that had landed on their food. I suddenly felt very uncomfortable.

“So, now that we’ve got the due praise out of the way,” Zeiner leaned his forearms across the table and the smile left his face completely. “All that’s left for me to say is, stop everything you are doing. Now.”

My blood ran cold. Had I just heard him right?

“You’ve had your fun. You’ve made your point. Now stop.”

“I... I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t,” Weissenberg stepped in. “You’re a talent scout, looking for the next pretty song. Well, let me tell you the name of it: Stairway to Oblivion. If you continue with this charade, you’ll never work in this industry again.”

The room spun slightly as I tried to get my head around his words. “I’m sorry?”

“Diana,” Hoffman said, his voice as sickly sweet and thick as treacle. “I know you think the world has been deprived of decent music and shows like ours have been churning out, what did you call them, over-engineered cardboard cut-outs...”

I swallowed. “I didn’t mean that... I had to make a controversial point to get the cut-through...”

“But the fact is,” he continued as though I hadn’t said a word. “The talent that I find, the talent that Blue Hill produces, and the talent that HPI delivers to the masses who want it, makes some very important people a lot of money. And your little project has put quite a dent in that. So, it has to stop.”

I almost choked on his words. “You’re saying that my little record label is losing you money?”

“Not just your label, Miss Delaney,” Zeiner replied. “This pathetic little movement you’ve created. This ridiculous demand for music that has been hashed together in some ugly teenager’s fucking bedroom. It’s an insult to the music industry.”

I scrambled to make sense of what they were all saying, but that was the problem; it was nonsensical.

“I still don’t get it. You’re saying that the #savephoenix campaign, the fact that we’re giving airtime to unsigned acts that deserve a break, is eating into your share of the market?”

“That’s a small part of what we’re saying,” Zeiner replied, his fake, bleached white smile resurfacing, making me feel a

sudden need to hurl into a bucket. “It’s actually doing more than that. It’s turning the tide of trend away from commercial music, which is basically our livelihood, and towards a more fragmented marketplace where, frankly, we don’t control the income. And that doesn’t benefit anyone.”

“And by anyone, you mean the three of you,” I said, my brain finally catching up.

“Precisely,” Zeiner smiled.

“Well, not exactly,” Weissenberg said. “Our shareholders too.”

“And politicians who don’t need the American voting public to be listening to music that incites objection and rebellion,” Hoffman added. “They work very hard to create peace in this country, and the kind of music you are promoting threatens that peace.”

“You mean that by giving people music that inspires them to question the world and the societies they live in, I’m ruining all the hard work the politicians in this country have done?”

“You’re a smart girl,” Hoffman replied.

“Well, I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “But if the politicians had done such a great job in the first place, no-one would need to write that kind of music.”

All three men stared at me as though I was stupid.

“We didn’t bring you in here for a discussion about the merits of our current political landscape, Miss Delaney,” Zeiner said. “We brought you here to inform you that this campaign stops now. No negotiation.”

“What if I don’t agree?”

“Then we will buy up all advertising space and airtime, pricing you out of the market. We will launch a counter-campaign imploring the US public to support the mainstream acts, putting a thousand times more budget behind it than you can ever afford. We will shut down any social media site continuing to support you, and we will ensure you won’t get a job working in this industry ever again. We’ll even have you

wiped of your Cambridge degree. Don't make the mistake of thinking we don't have fingers in every pie in every corner of the world."

My breath had shallowed. It was official and unmistakable. It was there in black and white. They were going to end me. Not just me but Phoenix—all my staff, my acts, all the bands we'd supported through our campaign.

"But this all began before the campaign," I thought aloud. "You wanted to shut down Phoenix before all of this. Why?"

Hoffman finally broke a smile. A sadistic one. "Because," he sneered, "as long as there is airtime given to indie music, there will always be a risk people want more. If it isn't there to begin with, the public don't know to ask for it. They're stupid like that."

I couldn't believe this was the same man so many teenagers looked up to. He was the face of every major talent show on TV, accompanying so many young musicians on their journeys, celebrating with them when they got the votes and consoling them when they didn't, having the final say on which ones got the record contracts. It suddenly occurred to me, he was masterminding the whole music industry. He and these other rich, powerful men in suits were operating these young kids with dreams like puppet masters. They were molding these kids into shape, regardless of who they really were. They were publicly humiliating the ones who brought even an ounce of individuality to the stage, and championing only those who were pliable, and so desperate they would do or be anything in order to have a glimpse of fame.

"So, you don't want any indie music, anywhere?" I felt sick to the stomach.

"That's right," Hoffman nodded. "And our plans were running along quite smoothly until you kicked your toys out of the pram. We hadn't expected the news of your label being under review to trigger such an extreme—and remarkably successful—reaction."

"But Sony has indie acts..." I said, thinking through it as I spoke.

“Not for long,” Zeiner replied, rubbing his hands together. “This is what we mean about a plan. We can’t ask every record label Chairman to restructure their organizations at the same time. That would seem too obvious. No, when Sony sees how successful Empirical is after the restructure, when we reward Garrett Green with new contracts, more airtime on HPI’s shows, they will follow suit. It has already been arranged. As Marty said, our plans were running quite smoothly until you came along.”

I couldn’t believe it. They were slowly wiping out all indie music, and the entire music industry was in on it.

“So, all the Chairmen are on board with your plans? The CEOs too?”

“Chairmen, yes. Some CEOs. Not all,” Hoffman replied. “Not yours, for example. His predecessor was opposed to the plan, as we’d expected. We helped Green source somebody completely impartial. Someone we knew wouldn’t give a shit about the industry. Someone who doesn’t give a shit generally. Jude Peyton-Harris fit the bill perfectly. I must say though, I would have expected a fixer of his caliber to have shut you down a lot faster than he has done. Maybe he’s losing his touch.”

My heart shivered. It hadn’t been completely crucified by this giant bombshell, and the news that Jude had nothing to do with these men filled me with relief. I know he’d told me he didn’t know who was behind the plans, but I couldn’t have been sure.

“I can’t just stop everything now,” I said. “I’ve spent money on promos; it would look weird if I pulled everything and just gave up...”

“Which is why Garrett Green is on the phone to Peyton-Harris right now. The restructure announcement has been brought forward to tomorrow morning...”

“That’s two weeks early!” I gasped. My dream was over.

“Thanks to you,” Zeiner smiled.

One by one, each brick from the wall I'd built around me, came crashing down around my ears, blocking out any other sound. All I could see were the expressions of the three men who no one knew ran not only this industry, but half the political landscape too. They were smirking, eerily, like the villains in some seventies James Bond movie. I had to get out. I couldn't breathe in the same air any longer. I stood abruptly.

"I trust we'll have no further need to speak with you," Zeiner attempted to confirm. I didn't give him the luxury of a reply. Instead I turned and walked straight out of the room, through the corridors, down the staircases and out of the building, everything I'd ever dreamed of dragging along in tatters behind me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



I walked, numbly, towards Empirical Records HQ. I'd texted Marla to arrange a meeting with all the staff in an hour. There was no point in delaying the inevitable. I didn't need to be told I couldn't utter a word about the people I'd just met; I'd be ended far more quickly if I let on the three biggest dicks in the music industry were controlling everything about it. Garrett would have spoken to Jude but how much he'd truly know was anyone's guess. It didn't matter. He'd be busy getting the announcement signed off, the details approved by lawyers, the logistics put in place. As much as Jude supposedly cared, he wouldn't have time to even think about the repercussions it was going to have on my little label.

Everything was coming to an end. Phoenix, my job, my relationship with Jude, whatever that was. After the announcement, we'd all be on notice, out looking for other jobs, trying to piece our lives together. Jude would be holed up working through the finer details of closing down not one but three subsidiaries; he'd have no time to console me, and neither would I want him to. He wouldn't have won; it wasn't even his game we were playing, but with this and the fact Aaron was somewhere nearby, my relationship with Jude had been forced to its inevitable, messy conclusion.

I pushed open the door with a heavy heart, and watched my feet as they stepped, one at a time, mechanically towards the elevator. I looked up to push the button and my chest swelled, possibly for the last time.

“Don’t...” I whispered, silently imploring him to leave me alone; there was no point.

Jude looked down at me but I couldn’t meet his eyes. The elevator arrived and the doors opened. Three other employees approached but Jude held a hand up to stop them entering the elevator. He stepped in behind me and punched the button to close the door. I finally looked up and saw fire in his face. He was boiling over with anger. I had to stop myself from shrinking backwards as the doors closed. We hadn’t got halfway to the floor above when he punched the buttons again, bringing the elevator to an emergency stop. Before I could object, he pulled me into his chest, pushing his fingers into my hair, holding my head firm against him.

“I’m coming with you,” he murmured into my hair.

I couldn’t reply. I was trying with every breath to stop the tears. I couldn’t afford for my team to see me this broken.

“I’m coming to the meeting,” he said. I didn’t have the brain space to question just how bad an idea that was. He hadn’t even made an announcement to the whole company about his plans—in fact, the lawyers were probably still going over them. “You’re not doing it alone.”

He released my head and I pulled back to look at him. His eyes were swimming with emotion.

“Not because I don’t think you can do it,” he hastened to say. “But because I have something to add.” His fingers stroked my forehead as he moved stray hairs from my broken eyes. “It’s your meeting, but I’m coming with you.”

I still couldn’t speak so I nodded.

“I love you, Diana,” he said, his voice soft and breathy. Then he lifted my chin and brought his lips gently down onto mine. I hiccupped against his mouth, finally unable to hold it all back. He pressed down, swallowing my sobs, and teased his tongue between my lips to distract me. His fingers clutched at my hair, massaging my scalp, and I clung to his waist for fear I might buckle under the weight of everything that was happening to me. He kissed me as though he really meant

those words, though I still couldn't bring myself to believe them.

When he finally pulled back, he wiped a finger beneath my eyes, erasing any trace of tears.

“Garrett told me everything. I know who's behind it. I know what we have to do.”

I nodded again, the feeling of catastrophic failure and disappointment in an industry I loved scratching at me with sharp claws.

He hit the button and the elevator resumed its upward journey.

“I'll see you in an hour,” he said, planting one last soft kiss on my lips, just before the doors opened. I watched him head back down the corridor to his own office, while I made my way numbly back to mine.

EXACTLY ONE HOUR LATER, I walked through the silence to the front of the biggest meeting room we had, and turned to face everyone. Most of my team—all thirty or so of them—had been with me from the beginning, investing as much of their time, passion and energy into this business as I had. Their expressions told me they knew what I was about to say. Some had even shed tears already—their mottled cheeks and red-ringed eyes gave them away. Sheridan and Carlos sat to the left and right. They were sitting with their teams while shooting me simultaneous looks of sympathy and encouragement. I didn't know where to start. In the time since I'd arrived back at my office and then walked here, to this meeting room, I'd simply stared out of the window, knowing it was unlikely I'd ever be able to look out at that view again. I hadn't written anything down; I hadn't thought about how I'd approach this. I had to wing it.

“Thanks everyone for coming at such short notice,” I began. I paused to look around. Everyone's eyes were on me, waiting for me to drop the bomb. A few looked slightly

hopeful, in denial about the inevitable. “I want to start by thanking you for everything you’ve done to get us to this point.”

I heard a small sob from the back of the room, and saw my assistant Marla put her arm around Dree.

“We’ve managed to do the impossible. We’ve taken a small indie label with a small voice and turned it into one of the famous brands on the planet with a lot to say. We’ve put indie music back on the map, giving hundreds of musicians a spotlight they deserve but never would have had if it weren’t for us. We’ve reinvigorated music. Our own acts have shot up the Billboard charts and are being recognized as the phenomenal talents they are—even Cherry,” I added, to a collective chuckle. “We’ve kicked ass at Madison Square Gardens!” I said, raising my arms. “I mean, who gets to do that?”

A sea of smiles emboldened me.

“We are the best team in the music industry right now. We are unbeatable.”

I let the words hover in the air before I smashed my fist into them, shattering the illusion.

“We’re going to go out on a high,” I said, firmly. “We’re going to be remembered for this moment. Not as the label that peddled out Cherry Tatum for four years, but as the label that shook the industry, that gave indie music a voice again.” I wanted to add we’d be the last label to ever do it, but I couldn’t let on what I knew.

More sobs emerged from around the room. It was obvious what I was saying. My attention was suddenly drawn to the back of the room, to the doorway, which was being filled with the presence of a man who knew exactly what this moment meant to me. I continued, smiling.

“In a way, having the threat of closure hanging over us was the best thing that could have happened to the industry. By trying to save Phoenix, we’ve given hundreds of bands a voice; we’ve exposed fans from the most unlikely places;

we've put indie music front and center again—exactly where it belongs.”

I saw Jude push himself off the doorframe and start walking towards me. Heads turned and glared at him as he passed.

“I don't know what will happen to indie music now,” I continued in an attempt to draw people back—Jude didn't deserve their disdain. “After we go, there will only be three other labels left in the States to represent those indie artists. We should feel proud that we've breathed life into the scene in such a big way. Maybe indie music will live on.” I didn't believe the words as I spoke them, but if I couldn't leave them with jobs, I would at least leave them with hope.

Jude reached my side and turned to face everyone. I could see the looks of confusion as peoples' eyes darted between Jude and me. As far as they were all aware, Jude and I hated each other. As the *NYT* had stated, we were the two Brits supposed to be at loggerheads.

“There will be an announcement tomorrow morning...” I began, my concern for Jude growing as he faced all those whose jobs he was about to make redundant.

Jude turned and put a hand on my arm. “May I say a few words?”

“Of course,” I replied, wondering why he wanted to throw himself into the bear pit twice. Why do it now if he was going to have to do it all again tomorrow?

“The announcement tomorrow has been delayed,” he said to the room. My head snapped up to look at him. He didn't return my surprised stare. Instead he took my hand in his and squeezed it. It didn't go unnoticed. The entire front three rows of people stared at our hands tightly clasped, no doubt wondering what the hell was going on, and why their boss was in cahoots with the enemy. “And I won't be taking it.”

I glanced back at Sheridan and Carlos who were staring at Jude with open mouths. None of us knew what was going on. Except Jude.

“I’ve quit as CEO of Empirical Records,” he continued, and I couldn’t hide my gasp. He turned to face me. “I’d like to take up the post of CEO, Phoenix Music, on a temporary basis, if that’s alright with you,” he looked at me questioningly, but I couldn’t move. “I won’t take a salary. We’re going to need all the money we can get.”

He turned back to face the room.

“Diana and I discovered something today. She wasn’t going to tell you because she didn’t want to put anyone else in the same position she’s in—that if she continues to push for Phoenix to be saved, her life, inside and outside the music industry, in no uncertain terms, will be ruined.”

I felt everyone’s eyes return to me.

“Most of you know I’m here to work on a brief from the Chairman of the board and our shareholders, to propose changes to the structure of Empirical Records. Well, it has come to light today, that the brief I’ve been given didn’t, in fact, come from our Chairman and shareholders, it came from somewhere entirely different.”

The whole room was hanging on to his every word and I felt beads of sweat running down the back of my neck.

“Diana met with Ralph Zeiner, the CEO of HPI today.”

There was an audible gasp.

“And Marty Weissenberg of Blue Hill.”

A wave of shock rocked the room.

“And Donnie Hoffman.”

Everyone seemed to have stopped breathing.

“They threatened Diana.” I stared up at Jude. How did he know that?

“They told her if she didn’t stop this campaign they would shut her and us down. And, collectively, they have the power to do exactly that. They don’t want independent voices out there. They want the world to be awash with bland, manufactured artists who do what they’re told, and not what

they feel in their hearts. They're shutting all the indie labels down, one by one. And most of them are going—they're fading away and taking valuable talent with them. But when it came to shutting down Phoenix, what they were not bargaining for was Diana."

He looked at me again, his eyes full of emotion. I still couldn't speak. I felt as though I was in the heart of a tornado. Chaos was swirling all around me, but inside my bubble, the air I'd wrapped around myself, all was oddly calm. I knew there was nothing more I could do; I just had to let it all unfold.

"Your Vice President has not only pulled this label out of debt, she's put flames beneath it. She ignited a movement that never would have happened otherwise. We knew it hadn't pleased everyone, but until today we didn't know to what extent it had pissed off some of the most powerful people in this industry."

I couldn't take my eyes off Jude. I watched his jaw move as he talked, feeling sure my love for him was written all over my face, but I didn't care.

"We're going to fight," he announced suddenly, and the whole room erupted. I looked around, confused. One minute I was about to close down my label and surrender to the forces that didn't want us around; the next I was hearing my supposed enemy announcing we weren't going to just roll over and take it. We were going to take on the most powerful men in music. He was mad. He was absolutely and unequivocally mad.

"It might not work," he continued. "We might be totally annihilated, as they've threatened, and you may be further away than ever of staying in an industry you love, but we're going to go down fucking fighting."

People whooped and high-fived, while others shouted questions. Jude raised his hand for calm.

"I'll take questions in a moment. First, let me tell you briefly what we're going to do. We're going to be hit hard by the bigwigs with money. Diana will update you on that. As

CEO, I believe it is my job to provide you with the environment and resources with which you can do the best job under the circumstances. As of this afternoon, we will be based out of my house on West eighty-ninth. As soon as word leaks that I've quit to support Phoenix, security will kick us out of here. As soon as we finish this meeting, collect all your personal belongings and any files you think will be important. Email documents to personal accounts, download folders, whatever you can. Everything will be confiscated before the day is out. I will provide computer equipment. Come straight to my house—I'll get take-out, we'll make a plan."

He continued. "Notify all our acts of the change in our location. We'll need to start the business over, but we'll fight for the name. I have lawyers who will help. Diana and I will obviously need to work closely together; she's going to move in and be based at my house for the duration of this rescue."

I stared at him and he squeezed my hand again. I could tell there were many in the room now questioning our relationship, despite the fact it was alleged we could barely sit in the same room together. Part of me was grateful for him taking control and doing all this when I, frankly, was exhausted and beaten down after that morning's meeting. But part of me was annoyed that he'd announced this without discussing it with me first. I knew he'd done it on purpose. I'd already turned down his invitation to move in with him once. He was doing this out of concern for my safety. I was the face of Phoenix now; he needed me.

I looked at Sheridan and saw her lips had curled at the sides, clearly pleased that Jude had made some sort of move. Carlos, who was none the wiser as of yet about my stalker stepfather, was frowning in confusion at the sudden turn of events.

"The first thing we're going to do," Jude went on. "Is go to the press with everything we know."

I moved to interject but Jude shot me a wink, melting my stomach.

“Alex Jefferson, your former CEO is on board. He is a witness to what we now know is blackmail: the chairmen and CEOs of this industry have been threatened with aggressive action if they don’t comply and close down the labels supporting independent music. He’s going to join us this evening.”

I saw the smiles spread across the room. Everyone had loved Alex. To know he was going to be involved in our mission gave everyone a little more confidence that whatever we were going to do might actually work.

“Before we all leave, I have one last thing to say.”

The room fell silent.

“We are going to come under fire. There will be exposes and accusations. Warn your friends and families they may be approached by reporters. There will be extreme restrictions placed on what we can do – studio availability, ad space, promo opportunities, venues, you name it. We’ll need to get creative about where we get exposure for our acts. And we’ll need to thicken our skin. Do you think you can do it?”

The entire room exploded with cries of ‘fuck, yes’, whoops and cheers. I couldn’t stop tears from streaking down my face and I squeezed Jude’s hand gratefully. He didn’t let go until everyone had filed out of the room to hastily rescue all the corporate information they could. Then he turned to me and placed a finger on my lips.

“Don’t say a damn thing,” he said. “I’ll see you at home.”

Then he strode out of the room, leaving me at a complete and utter loss for words.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



I climbed out of the cab, with Sheridan and Carlos following close behind, and stood on the sidewalk staring up at Jude’s house. It was a brownstone. The whole house was his.

“Breaking up companies and selling them off must be one hell of a lucrative business to be in,” Carlos said, as Sheridan let out a long whistle.

“He’s a keeper,” Sheridan added.

“It’s not like that,” I said, shooting them both a look. “There’s too much at stake now. There’s nothing between us. Not that there was ever much to begin with.”

“Oh, ok, so he goes around holding the hands of all his VPs does he?” Carlos raised an eyebrow. I jerked my head towards the door.

“Come on, we’ve got a lot to do.”

I pressed the doorbell and swallowed back my surprise at the fact it was opened by a housekeeper—a middle-aged, kind and efficient-looking woman.

“Come in, come in,” she said, ushering us through and clearly loving the fact she was indirectly involved in some soon-to-be-famous music industry battle. “Mr. Peyton-Harris has had the two reception rooms arranged into offices for you.”

I could feel Carlos’ eyebrows reach his hairline. “Thank you, er....”

“Jenny,” she smiled, then she leaned in a little closer. “I don’t suppose Diana will be here soon, will she?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but was quickly shut down when Carlos’ foot met with my ankle.

“She was right behind us,” he answered. “Why?”

“Oh, no matter,” Jenny waved her hand. “I’m just anxious to meet her. Ju... Mr. Peyton-Harris, speaks about her a lot, and I understand she’s finally going to be moving in. He’s had me prepare a room and fetch flowers especially. I think he’s more excited about that than running this record business, to be honest,” she giggled and I fought the blush that was threatening to creep up my cheeks.

“That’s wonderful, Jenny,” Carlos smiled, sweetly. “I think she’s secretly more excited about that too.”

I spun around to glare at him, only to be met with a look of feigned innocence and the suppression of a giant smirk.

“Come on,” Sheridan said, taking hold of my arm. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

She tugged me through the enormous hallway into the first reception room and I couldn’t help but gasp. It was the size of my entire apartment. Tables lined the outer edges of the room and brand new MacBooks sat atop them, alongside fresh pitchers of water and crystal glasses. I noticed the décor was fairly plain—pale cream walls and mahogany detailing. The ceilings were high with an intricate cornice in the center and around the edges. A handful of contemporary paintings hung around the walls, but other than that, there was nothing to suggest this was the home of an actual person. Perhaps an anonymous hotel somewhere, but not a home.

I sat at the first table and booted up the laptop. Then, when a few more entered, we stood and exchanged a few words about how excited, slash petrified, slash fired-up we all were, before settling down again to set up Google alerts. I needed to know exactly what was being said about Phoenix, about me and my acts, by whom and when. The noise reduced to a low hum as the room filled up and people got straight down to

business, contacting the acts, their managers, any studios we'd booked, promo appearances we'd scheduled. I was knee-deep in a list of radio stations across the country we could beg for airplay when he called my name.

I looked up to see Jude standing somewhat uncomfortably in the middle of his own drawing room, watching teams of people punching their keyboards, their cell phones stuck to their ears.

“Can I talk to you for a moment?”

I smiled, ignoring the few pairs of eyes that were following our every move—Carlos and Sheridan's included. I followed Jude out of the room into the hallway, then past the staircase into a kitchen that stretched across the whole back of the house.

“I just wanted to show you around, quickly,” he said, sounding a little apologetic. “I'm sorry I didn't really talk to you about that.”

“There was no ‘really’ about it. You didn't talk to me at all,” I smiled. “But it's ok. I'm here now.”

The relief on his face was obvious. “Good, because I've got people packing your stuff at Sheridan's. It'll be here within the hour.”

“You move quickly,” I noted.

“I have to. We're under immense time pressure now,” he said, pointing to a row of cupboards. “Everything you'd want to eat is in there. If there's something you'd like and we don't have it, just write it down for Jenny.”

“Time pressure,” I repeated. “Is that why you asked me to move in?”

He was walking back out of the kitchen when he stopped and turned to face me.

“No. You know it isn't. But if this is what it takes to get you to realize I want you in my life, no matter what, and your safety is important to me, then this is what I'll do. Come on.

Let me show you your room, then you're free to get back to work."

I followed him up the wide staircase, stunned that a staircase this wide even existed in Manhattan. Real estate was so expensive I was sure someone else would have attempted to build another house on the staircase plot, were it to be moved. He walked quickly, showing me each room. He had a study, a library, and a large bathroom in addition to six en-suite bedrooms.

"Here," he said, nodding through the doorway of a large room overlooking the back of the house. It was quiet and serene, and beautifully made up. I could smell the flowers Jenny had arranged especially, before my eyes located them. The room was white—white walls, white carpeted floor—with pieces of dark, antique wooden furniture dotted around, including a stunning four poster bed. The curtains were also white and flowed from side to side with the breeze from the window. "This is your room. I hope it's ok."

I swallowed. "It's gorgeous," I whispered.

"I just had it decorated," he said, not looking at me. It was a bit, um, well, it needed a fresh lick of paint."

I smiled to myself, remembering what Jenny had said—that he'd hoped for a while I would move in.

"It's just across the hall from my room," he said, glancing behind us to another bright, airy space filled with white and accented by dark wood. "If you were to need anything."

I suddenly became aware of only one need. Him. I couldn't imagine sleeping in such close proximity to him, but unable to wrap my legs around his or tuck my arms around his torso. We'd technically only slept together for one hour but we'd been physically close pretty often. I couldn't imagine what it was going to be like. We'd be alone, no-one else around; no-one to tell us we were breaking any rules; no-one to judge us for being together while our jobs were completely opposed. We were no longer at war; we were on the same team. We were no longer under the rule of the Decadence Club; my membership had expired a long time ago. Yet we were going

to sleep in separate rooms, separate beds. I knew it was for the best. We had to focus. We were about to be hung out to dry by the industry; we were about to be completely annihilated. We couldn't afford to lose sleep or be distracted by sex. Not now.

"Thanks," I said. "And not just for giving me somewhere safe to live for a while, but for doing all this for Phoenix."

"It's not just for Phoenix you know..."

I couldn't hear anymore. My head was already all over the place and I needed to focus.

"Well, thanks," I muttered. "I must get back." I turned and walked quickly back down the stairs, hearing his solid feet on the soft carpet behind me.

"Oh, she's here," I heard one of the managers saying as I walked back into the drawing room. "Jenny, this is Diana, Diana this is Jenny, the housekeeper."

I smiled, unable to erase the look of guilt that had crept across my face.

"Oh!" She laughed, lightly. "We've met actually, but thank you. Miss Delaney..."

"Oh, it's Diana, please," I said.

"Diana. I need to show you how the security system works. Come this way."

I followed her out to the main hall. Just before we reached the door, she turned and grinned. "I hope the flowers are to your liking."

"They're beautiful," I grinned back.

SHERIDAN WAS the second to last person to leave the compound as we were now calling it.

"I'll be back at eight. Are you going to be ok?"

I looked around once more for Jude. He was the only other person left in the house—his house—but I hadn't seen him for the last hour and had no idea where in this vast palace he was.

"I'll be fine. Just nervous about what the papers are going to say tomorrow."

"Just imagine the worst," Sheridan said, squeezing my arm. "Then you can only be pleasantly surprised."

"Thanks, hon."

I watched her give Alex a hug before she left, then turned to face my former boss-come-demerger consultant.

"I can't thank you enough for coming, Al. The team were beyond excited to see you."

"I wouldn't have missed this for the world," he sighed. "I just wish I was seeing you all again under happier circumstances."

"Well, at least I now know why you left Empirical," I said, leaning up against the newly-erected desks.

"I wish I could have told you at the time," he replied, shaking his head. "I had to sign about twenty non-disclosure agreements; you know how it is."

I grinned. "But, I guess, since I found out anyway, they don't mean shit."

"You got that right."

"Well, thanks for all the advice, I really appreciate it. And I know Jude does too. He's amazing at what he does, but... you know the industry so well."

Alex spanned his eyes round the room until they landed back on me.

"So, you're living here, huh?"

"Just while we sort through the next few weeks," I hurried to clarify.

"I didn't see that coming," he muttered almost to himself.

"It isn't like that, Alex."

He held his hands up, grinning mischievously. “Hey! I’m not here to judge. You do whatever you need to do.” His face turned serious. “Just know that I’m so damn proud of you, Diana. There were a lot of people who questioned why I promoted you when I did—I’m not going to lie, and I’m sure you knew that. But good God, you’re a formidable little firefly. You’ve taken this industry by its own horns and you’re ramming sense back into it. I knew you were always going to be good but I had no idea you were going to be this good.”

“Stop it, Alex,” I shook my head. “It’s never been just me.”

He bent down and landed a kiss on to the top of my head.

“Never could take a damn compliment.”

He turned and walked towards the door.

“I’m always at the other end of the phone, ok? Just call if you need anything.”

“We will. And Alex...”

He turned as he stepped through the door.

“Thanks. It’s so good to see you again.”

“Likewise. Now, go get some rest. You’re going to need it.”

I watched Alex head back out onto the sidewalk before closing the door and securing the locks. Two of them looked as though they’d only been installed in the last couple of days.

I walked back to the drawing room to clear the last of the take-out plates. As I carried them through to the kitchen, I felt him appear behind me. A hand reached out and opened the dishwasher.

“Let me do that. You’ve had an insane day.”

I stood, leaning backwards, away from his chest as he bent over me.

“So have you,” I answered. “You quit your job to join a business that may not make it past the end of tomorrow.”

He stacked the dishes and closed the door, bringing himself chest-to-face with me. He knew he towered over me and I was pretty sure he enjoyed it. I felt his lips come down on the top of my head.

“That’s the killer attitude,” he replied, then walked back a few steps so I could fully take in his smile. He’d changed into sweat pants and a thin, white t-shirt, giving me an eyeful of the chest I’d melted all over at the Club.

“You’ve done this on purpose, haven’t you?” I grinned up at him.

“Done what?” He pushed his hands into the pockets of his pants and cocked his head, innocently.

“Changed into that shirt, knowing how I like... seeing you.”

I metaphorically shook my head at myself but there was no point in denying it; I fancied the pants off him and it was written all over my face.

“You can *see* me any time you want now,” he said, one corner of his lip curling upwards, smugly.

I stood still for a few moments, taking in deep breaths. He was going to make this impossible.

“I can’t,” I said, finally. “There’s too much going on. This attack on the mainstream music industry. Aaron still out there, God knows where...”

“You’re safe here,” Jude’s face fell, serious again.

“I know,” I said, shaking my head. “But my head is too full to think of anything else right now.”

“I get it,” he smiled. “Anyway, I’m not trying to do anything here. I just got ready for bed, that’s all. I have an early start tomorrow and I just didn’t want you clearing everything up on your own.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling strangely disappointed, but I should have known. “Ok, well, I’d better go to bed too.”

I followed him up the stairs and gave him a weak smile as we entered our separate rooms.

“Just shout if you need anything,” he said, holding my gaze one last time.

I nodded and watched his door close, putting two walls between us, as though the one I’ll built around myself hadn’t been enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



“Ok, so you know that shit we were all expecting, and the fan it was destined to fly into?” Carlos announced, smashing a proverbial axe into the jovial banter. Sheridan, Jude and I were tying up some loose ends before we all finished up for the day. “Well, it’s happened.”

He laid the newspaper down on a desk in the center of the table and we all peered over his shoulder. I felt Jude’s breath on the back of my neck, then it stilled as we all read the headline.

Hey Jude: The fool who played it cool. Former friends and employees speak out about failed fixer.

It had been a week since Jude had quit as CEO of Empirical and a week since we’d all taken up residence in his townhouse. As expected, we’d been bombarded with calls from journalists and people posing as concerned music fans, as well as damning press articles and TV reports accusing us of being reckless and acting in our own interests, and not in those of the fans and artists. We’d ploughed ahead, regardless, all of us spending hours putting right every single contact we valued from across the industry.

Jude and I had slept apart for five nights, each night feeling longer and emptier than the last. Every evening, I fought the urge to stay awake, to tiptoe across the hall, to knock on his door and climb into his bed. Every evening, I’d resorted to satisfying myself with my own fingers, remembering the feel of his tongue lapping against my skin, as

I buried my face into the pillow so he wouldn't hear me screaming his name as I came. Every morning, I'd shower and dress with one eye on my door, hoping he'd walk in, make me stop whatever I was doing and throw me back into bed.

Every time I walked barefoot into the kitchen I held my breath, hoping he was there, barely dressed, waiting to lift me onto the surface and fuck me before anyone arrived for the day. My mind was indeed full and occupied, and not just with thoughts of Phoenix and my stepfather, but with dirty, incriminating thoughts about the man now standing behind me, pressing an obvious hard-on into my back. I didn't get it. If he was as turned on having me around as I was living under his roof, why wasn't he making sure I knew it?

We all fell silent as we read the words. It was the first big personal attack any of us in the team had received, and it was damning. I'd known Jude for six months and still knew very little about him. I felt as though he knew everything about me; I'd laid it out bare, warts and all. But he'd disclosed very little to me about his past, and now it was all here, in black and white, staring up at us from the pages of the *New York Times*. Whoever had written this piece was fully in bed with Hoffman, Zeiger and Weissenberg—as pliable and moldable as the acts they were turning out onto the airwaves.

Following the announcement that notorious business fixer, Jude Peyton-Harris, quit his role of CEO with Empirical Records just a mere five months into the job, former friends and employees have been stepping forward with stories of broken trust, abuse of power and blatant betrayal. According to numerous sources, Peyton-Harris' brand of corporate restructuring is characterized by extreme emotionless criticism at best and bare-faced bullying at worst.

Peyton-Harris move to New York soon after the death of his father, leaving Loughborough University in the UK without completing his degree in International Business Management. Former tutors described him as , "passionate, enthusiastic and highly intelligent," until the death of his father, after which he became "reclusive" and "withdrawn from student life". According to sources, Peyton-Harris was close to his father,

and the death of City financier Andrew Peyton-Harris hit him hard. As the story goes, the financier was on route to Loughborough to watch his son compete in a rugby tournament when his car was hit by a truck that had spun out of control.

I reached behind me to feel for Jude's hand but he'd stepped back, out of reach.

Peyton-Harris quit his education only weeks later and landed his first job in New York with debt collection agency, CreditGain. According to former colleague Casey Bernhardt, Peyton-Harris was "emotionless and determined". He rose up the ranks quickly, becoming VP Operation within two years. "I never knew anyone to work so hard," Bernhardt remembers. "But he never made any friends at the firm. He was single-minded and only interested in how the firm could make more money. It was great for business, but he wasn't popular."

Peyton-Harris went on to become CEO of numerous businesses, hired for his unemotional approach to business restructuring, doing the painful dirty work of cutting the fat from tens of underperforming corporations, including Silver Star film studio. He also joined the boards of a number of other businesses, advising on operations and strategy.

Teresa Long was an employee of Silver Star. "Mr. Peyton-Harris not only removed my job from the organization, he seemed to take extraordinary pleasure in doing so," she explained, fighting tears. "I developed social anxiety following what my therapist defines as prolonged, systematic bullying at the hands of Peyton-Harris, and I wasn't the only one." Numerous others have stepped forward with similar stories but have preferred to remain anonymous.

I couldn't read any more of the article. It was tearing Jude apart and I could feel the hurt radiating from him.

"That's really below the belt," Sheridan said, angrily. "There has to be something there our legal team can work with—libel?"

"Leave it," Jude said, firmly.

“We can’t,” Carlos said. “This affects our reputation.”

“They won’t retract it without proof,” Jude sighed. “And if I did find people to provide counter quotes, it would take time and the damage will be done anyway.”

“You’re not a bully,” I said, quietly, turning to face him.

“I am,” he replied, his eyes empty and resigned. “I deserve this article. It was a long time in coming.”

“I think we should call it a day,” I said, folding the paper and handing it back to Carlos. “Let’s reconvene in the morning, make a plan then.”

“Sounds good,” Sheridan nodded. “I’m exhausted.” She turned her eyes apologetically towards Jude but he’d turned his back to all of us, and was staring at the wall.

“We’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

Sheridan and Carlos quietly gathered their belongings and sloped out of the house, leaving me alone with Jude.

“I’m sorry to read about your father,” I said, softly, as I walked up behind him.

“Thanks. It was a long time ago.”

“Still. It can’t be pleasant, reading about him in an article like that.”

“No, you’re right. He doesn’t belong in there. He doesn’t deserve to be associated with the bastard I’ve become.”

“Don’t say that, Jude,” I tried to turn him around but he wouldn’t budge. “You’re a good man.”

“I’m not, Diana. Just ask my mother.”

“What do you mean?”

Finally, he turned to face me and I was shocked to see his eyes damp with tears.

“It was my fault my father died. I am the reason my mother is a widow.”

“What?”

“The article was right. He was on his way to watch me play. The weather was horrendous—torrential rain. He was late leaving work and he put his foot down. He was doing ninety miles an hour when the truck veered into his lane. He had nowhere to go; he would’ve seen it coming.”

His voice broke as he relayed the tragic story.

“I went ahead and played the game, none the wiser, just thinking he’d forgotten or couldn’t make it. I probably cursed him.”

“You weren’t to know...” I gripped both of his hands.

“My mother... she—” He swallowed, unable to finish the sentence.

“Jude, it’s ok.”

“No, it isn’t.” He withdrew a hand to rub his eyes. “My mother blames me for my father’s death. She held it in, all the while we were preparing for his funeral and sorting through his belongings. But she was quiet; she never attempted to comfort me. Not once.”

“People handle grief in different ways,” I said.

“No,” he shook his head. “She told me exactly what she thought. It was one morning. I was about to leave to watch a game. I forgot to fetch something from the shops for her—it was an innocent oversight, but she just snapped. She screamed at me, told me I was good for nothing, all I cared about was myself. She let rip all the horrible thoughts she’d had about me over the years and just laid them on me right there. Then she topped them off by saying it was my fault my father died. I thought I was numb by that point but that final accusation drove into me like a knife.”

“Jesus, Jude...” I began, but I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t imagine how that must have felt.

“She apologized after she’d calmed down, profusely. But, you can’t ever take those kinds of words back. I couldn’t carry on the way I had been after hearing that. I couldn’t stay in England using my parents’ money to get through university; I didn’t feel worthy. So I came here. And that’s that.”

“You know it isn’t true, though, right?” I said, pulling him towards me. “You weren’t responsible for his death. It was an accident.”

He nodded but his eyes swam. “I do—rationally—of course I do. I wasn’t driving that freaking truck. But the fact it’s what she thought. That’s what hurt.”

“God, Jude. That’s awful. No one deserves to be told something like that.” I wrapped my arms around him, feeling his heart beating fast against my ear.

“That’s why I do what I do,” he said, murmuring into my hair. “I learned early on how to switch off my feelings. Once I realized I could do that, I became invincible in business. I could do all those jobs other people found difficult because I’d trained myself not to care.”

I nodded against his shirt, feeling the muscles rub against the side of my face.

“But I can only shut myself down like that for so long. That’s why after every job I disappear. Because the feelings come back, a hundred times stronger. I fucking hate myself for doing what I do and for treating people so inhumanely...”

“It isn’t inhumane,” I argued. “It’s just not a nice job to have to do, making people redundant.”

“I don’t make it easy for people,” he buried his lips into me as he confessed. “I get a kick out of being a senseless bastard, for that window of time. But the worse my behavior, the harder it hits me afterwards. I get everything I fucking deserve, Di. Including this.”

I pulled back to face him. “You do not deserve this, Jude. Listen to me.” I brought my hands up to his face. “This stops now, ok? You are not a fixer anymore, you’re the CEO of an indie label that’s doing its damndest to survive. You’re leading a team of people who respect you, who want to follow you. You’re a good man. Look at everything you’ve done for me.”

Finally, he made eye contact.

“I want to be good for you,” he whispered. “Ever since I first laid eyes on you. You were so nervous, so unaware of how beautiful you were, how good you were at life. I couldn’t believe you had so little confidence. You were my opportunity to do some good for once, to help you understand you were more than what you believed yourself to be.”

“And you did that. I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Are you?” His mouth curled, sadly.

“Yes,” I replied, and I meant it. “I’m under your roof, just as you wanted me to be.”

He sighed, his eyes penetrating mine, as though he was searching for something else.

“This will pass,” I said. “People will only remember the tragedy of a young man losing his father. They won’t remember the scathing comments made by ‘sources’ that were probably fake anyway, and even if they do, they’ll probably forgive you given everything you’d been through.”

He nodded slowly. “We’ll see, I guess.”

He pulled out of my grasp. “I’m going to call it a night,” he said, turning away. “Jenny made a lasagna for us but I’m not hungry. You go ahead and tuck in. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He walked away, out of the room, leaving me feeling as though there were a million things he still wasn’t telling me. But he’d never opened up to me before; I didn’t want to push it too much. I was grateful in a way. I was beginning to know the real Jude, and I was falling even more deeply, even if it wasn’t reciprocated.

I WASHED and changed into my satin camisole and shorts. I’d been back to my apartment once during my stay at Jude’s, to retrieve a fresh set of clothes and the latest letter. Jude had insisted on reading it, his fists turning white as he pinned them into the kitchen surface.

“How much longer, Diana?” He’d hissed. “How many more of these do you need to receive before you do something about it?”

“I’m going to do something,” I assured him, more confidently now that I was living under his roof, feeling safer than I did in my tiny apartment. “I promise, I am.”

I had more space to think, finally. The team was doing everything they could to keep the acts and the business afloat; I wasn’t in it alone. If I could just rid my head of inappropriate thoughts about Jude, I might finally be able to devote the time and space I needed to, to figuring out how the hell I deal with my stepfather.

I padded around the room, barefoot, imagining what he was doing across the hallway. If it was me who’d been the subject of such a damning press article, he’d have been knocking at my door, making sure I was ok, making sure I had everything I needed. Should I be doing the same? I wanted to. I wanted to see if he still wanted me. I was falling for him more and more each day and the risk of my heart being completely broken should he not return the same feelings, was getting greater and greater. But I was suddenly consumed with nerves. Why the hell did I pick this moment to decide I wanted to make a move? It was obvious Jude was in a bad way. He’d been attacked publicly, his background dissected for the world to see, his character exposed for that of a villain—someone who couldn’t be trusted let alone liked, or even loved, as he’d insisted was the case.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I’d flung open my door and I was knocking on his.

“It’s me,” I said quietly. “I just wanted to check you were ok.”

“Open the door,” he said, his voice distant.

My heart thumped at the base of my throat as I did as he asked. It was dark in his room; it took my eyes a moment to adjust. I could make out his form standing in front of a window—his broad shoulders, narrow waist and thick thighs sucking all the light into his rigid posture. As my eyes became

used to the low light, I swallowed a gasp. He was naked. Completely naked, completely exposed, and turned away, staring out of the window.

I couldn't stop my eyes from devouring him, greedily, running from his round buttocks, down his muscular legs and back up his spine, flanked by rippling curves. He literally took my breath away.

"I... I'm sorry," I started, as I went to close the door.

"Stay," he ordered.

I suddenly became aware of my torso—throbbing, everywhere. My legs were shaking with lust, the tops of my thighs growing damp with need.

He turned slowly to face me, daring me to not look away. My eyes attached to his but my peripheral vision could not mistake his giant hard on, aimed right at me. My breath came and went in short, sharp bursts and he arched himself forward, concaving his chest, as though he was trying to stop himself from pouncing.

"Are you finally going to let this fucking happen?" He growled.

A breathy moan escaped my mouth. I was nothing but pumping blood, weak bones and need.

"Or are you going to make me lay here for yet another night, fucking my own hand while you pant out my name in the next room?"

My legs gave way and I collapsed to the floor. In a second he was standing over me, lifting me, his breath suddenly hot against my skin, and carried me as though I was as light as a feather, across to his bed. His eyes ate me alive as he laid me down.

"You heard..." I gasped, feeling his lips against my throat. A rush of air licked my skin as he pulled away.

"Yes. Even as you screamed into a pillow, I felt the words vibrating through the walls."

My hips bucked at his words. Now I was the one who was exposed. “And you were...” What was wrong with me? I was incapable of finishing a sentence.

“I was fucking myself, Diana. Every night. As soon as you closed the bedroom door.”

He dragged his teeth along my belly, pushing my camisole up and bunching it on my chest. “As soon as I heard your breathing, getting heavier...”

He smoothed his hands around my breasts, kneading them gently, licking his tongue along the waistband of my shorts. I squirmed beneath him earning grunts of frustration each time I broke his contact with my skin.

“That’s when I gripped myself harder.”

“Jude, please...” I took one of his hands and pushed it inside my shorts, pressing his fingers against my heat. I cried out, preliminary tremors shaking me to the core.

“That’s when I thrust into my palm, imagining it was you.”

I pushed one of his fingers inside me and gripped it, giving a cry of release. By now, both my hands were down my shorts, desperately trying to maneuver his fingers exactly where I needed them.

“I rolled onto my stomach,” he rasped, “imagining you were beneath me...”

“Jesus,” I gasped, trying to bury his fingers as deeply as I could, bucking my hips up to meet them.

“I knew when you were almost there. I could hear your breath getting hard. I heard the bed moving as you writhed about on it.”

“I..” I couldn’t get him far enough in. I needed more.

“I closed my eyes and fucked you into the mattress, Diana. When you came, so did I.”

“Aargghh!” I cried, rolling him onto his back with a strength I didn’t know I had. I found his cock and sat above it, my hands shaking uncontrollably with the urgency of need.

“I can’t...” I sobbed.

He smacked my hand away and angled himself at my entrance then pulled me down, hard. I screamed with the intrusion and collapsed across his chest feeling him panting beneath me.

“Finally,” he gasped, catching his breath. “Fucking finally.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



“*H*offman and Co must be livid,” Sheridan chuckled, as she shoveled a forkful of pasta into her mouth. Jenny, perhaps sensing that Jude had taken a knock and could probably use some home-cooked attention, had created an Italian feast for the entire team.

“They’d pulled out all the stops with that article about Jude, and it turns out no-one gave a shit.”

Sheridan and I had sloped off to the kitchen to have a much-needed catch-up in private.

“It bothered him though,” I said, sipping my water. My appetite had shrunk in the last week. The fact I’d hardly slept since the article came out and I’d knocked on Jude’s bedroom door may have had something to do with it. I hadn’t stepped foot back in my own room; Jude had insisted I sleep in his.

“It doesn’t seem that way to me,” Sheridan replied. “He’s floating around the place like he’s on cloud nine.”

I focused on the plate in front of me, knowing a bright red blush was giving me away.

“Finally got it on, did you?” I heard the grin in her voice.

“It’s not really like that,” I said.

“Oh, no? Then, how is it? Tell me. I haven’t had sex in months. I need to live vicariously through other peoples’ sex lives.”

“It isn’t just sex, Shez,” I said, glancing up at her, timidly.

“You’re telling me that like I didn’t know.” She placed her fork down and stared right at me. “I know it’s more and I’m pleased you’ve finally let him in. The man’s been dying over here, I could tell.”

“That’s rubbish. He’s just, I don’t know. He’s just excited to have a woman around twenty-four-seven.”

“You are blind, girl.” Sheridan picked up her fork and prodded it towards me. “I know I used to hate the guy but, since he jumped ship and started doing *proper* work...”

I couldn’t help but smile.

“...I’ve really come to like him. And we talk, you know? He tells me shit, he asks me shit. I know more about him than you think. And I happen to know that he has loved you for months. You are his damn world. It’s killing him that you won’t do anything about this Aaron guy. If you leave it much longer, he’s going to snap and try to find the psycho himself.”

“No...” I started.

“Don’t push it, Di. He wants you safe. He doesn’t want some creep hanging around, sending you crazy letters and threatening to kill you. And you are mad if you think otherwise.”

“Ok, ok,” I said, holding my hands up. I changed the topic. “How are our acts doing?”

“They’re doing ok,” Sheridan replied, looking hopeful. “We’ve got enough in the bank to honor what we owe them and the contracts are holding up. No-one’s jumped ship yet. They know they’ll have much less chance of being signed anywhere else, seeing as Hoffman and Co are trying to shut proper music down. And they’re staying positive. We had fifteen shows booked for the next month and only eight have cancelled, so not everyone is on the Hoffman payroll as we’d expected. We cannot secure studio space though for love nor money. Jude was talking about us building our own...”

“Our own recording studio?”

“Yeah, he just mentioned it this morning, like it had just occurred to him. How rich is he? The sound-proofing alone on

those things costs an absolute fortune.”

I smiled and shook my head. Jude had absorbed himself into his new role with passion. He seemed to come alive when he was throwing ideas around with the team, negotiating with lawyers, banks and potential investors. He seemed to be in his element; nothing like the way he was when he was commanding Empirical Records, or eyeing me across the table as a board member of Decadence. Then, he seemed hungry, but empty. He’d become a different person in the last few weeks. Even with the damning article about his past, he recovered quickly, realizing the team was right behind him, and he was back on the phone the very next day.

“And how’s the team doing?” I’d had my head buried in numbers and contracts—I’d hardly come up for air—and hadn’t been as close to the team as usual. Thankfully, Sheridan had stepped in to help.

“They’re really good. They always felt like they were part of this bigger cause but now that we’re trying to separate from Empirical and establish Phoenix as a company in its own right, they feel a sense of ownership. They really care about the business and they’re doing everything they can to keep the cogs moving while you and Jude do the business stuff.”

“We should have a little celebration this afternoon,” I said. “Before everyone heads home. Just to say thanks for all their hard work.”

“That’s a great idea.”

“I’ll pop out get a couple of bottles of fizz and some cakes.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No,” I shook my head. “Stay here; I know you’re busy. I could really use some fresh air; I haven’t left the house since I moved in here.”

“Are you sure? I mean, that psycho is out there...”

“I don’t think he knows I’m here, Shez. And besides, its broad daylight. I’ve got an alarm on me too. I’ll be fine. I just need a bit of space and fresh air.”

“Ok, if you’re sure. You should tell Jude...”

“I’ll be five minutes,” I laughed, shaking my head. “I’m a big girl. I’ll be fine.”

I finally managed to shake off an overly concerned Sheridan and made my first outing since I’d been living with Jude. I stood on the steps of his brownstone and looked up and down the street. It was quiet but for a few people strolling up towards the main avenue. I looked around at the other houses, wondering who else was rich enough and fortunate enough to live in this neighbourhood.

I made my way up the street towards the store, keeping an eye on the people around me. I honestly didn’t think Aaron would have tracked me here, but I didn’t know who I was dealing with anymore. The death threats had been a recent development. Up until then, his letters had been merely derogatory, attempts to convince me I was nothing without him, that I needed him just so I could function. It was only since he’d discovered my whereabouts they’d become violent.

I wondered what his relationship with my mum was like now, and whether or not he still made her happy. One time I tried calling her. I don’t even know why; I was hardly going to tell her the man she was married to was stalking her own daughter—the very same daughter he’d dated and slept with when she was only sixteen. She answered the phone using his last name, confirming to me they were still very much together. Maybe she was in on his ruse—surely he couldn’t have kept this consistent abuse up in secret, without being discovered. But, I knew deep down she would never allow it to happen if she became aware of it. She would leave him and lose several years of her life. That was why, when she answered the phone, I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t tell her it was me. She’d want to know where I was, why I’d left. And I wouldn’t be able to tell her. So there was no point.

I consoled myself with the knowledge she’d guess it was me and she’d at least know I was still alive. But I realized I couldn’t have her back in my life while receiving death threats from her husband and not letting her know about it. The more time that passes, the greater the pain of heartbreak becomes. It

had gone from being six months of betrayal, to twelve months and a proposal, to four years' betrayal, to now almost eight years' betrayal. That's how long they'd been together. That's how long he'd been pretending to love my mother while stalking me obsessively. That's how long I'd kept this a secret from her, and I would rather she died estranged and ignorant to the truth than feeling as though eight years of her life had been a complete and utter lie.

I picked up a couple of bottles of prosecco and a tray of muffins, then made my way back towards Jude's house. As I rounded the corner, I noticed a young guy coming towards me. He was younger than Aaron so I wasn't worried, but he was eyeing me curiously. As he got nearer, I noticed a sly smile spread across his face, and his mouth started moving. It looked as though he speaking to me; he was looking right at me. Then I realized he was singing.

"I don't care what you say, I wanna go too far..."

"Excuse me?" I said, turning as he walked past.

"I'll be your everything, if you make me a star..."

I stopped, recognizing the song. He turned to face me and started to walk backwards, the smile on his face growing even wider.

"Dirty Diana, oh," he sang, loudly. "Dirty Diana, oh."

I stared at him, confused. Did he know me?

"Dirty Di—ana, oh, Dirty Diana..."

Then he stopped and punched the air, singing "Let me be!" as he spun around to continue up the street.

I stood and watched him walking away while a strange feeling came over me. Something had happened; I just didn't know what it was.

I closed the door behind me and went straight to the kitchen. The hum of chattering that usually came from the drawing room had quietened significantly. They must all be engrossed in something, or feeling hungover, I thought with a small smile.

I still felt strange about the boy on the street; I needed to tell Jude something was off. I pushed the bottles into his giant refrigerator and turned to see him standing feet away from me.

“Hey,” I began. “The weirdest thing just...”

“Di...” his voice was eerily calm. “Come upstairs.”

“Really? Now?”

“Yes. I need you to see something.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Upstairs? I thought I’d seen everything,” I joked.

He didn’t laugh. If anything, a flash of sadness crossed his face.

“Is everything ok?”

“It’s fine, babe, just come upstairs.”

Babe. He never called me babe during work hours. It was too informal and we still didn’t want the rest of the team to know we were more than just work colleagues.

He followed me up the stairs resting a hand on my back then took my hand in his as we reached the top.

“In here,” he said, leading me into his office.

“Hey!” I said, as Sheridan and Carlos came into view. They were sitting on the sofa looking anything but happy to be there. “What’s going on?”

Jude led me to an armchair alongside the sofa and held my shoulders as he sat me down. Then Carlos handed me the newest issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine.

I spun it around to read the front page and froze. There I was, my picture taking up the entire cover. It was a photograph of me taken at an awards event after I’d had a few cocktails. I was sitting on a chair chatting to someone out of shot and my wrap dress had fallen to the side, showing off the tops of my stockings. My eyes were half-closed—the picture had been carefully selected to ensure I looked as drunk and seductive as possible—and I was gently tugging at the neckline, showing off a mound of ample boob. My eyes moved up to the

headline, *Dirty Diana*, and the subhead, *Sex, lies and rock 'n' roll*.

“What the...?”

Carlos reached out and opened the magazine to where he'd stuck a post-it to the offending article. It ran across three pages, with other photographs featuring the acts I had signed, Jude, a shot of Cambridge University and... Aaron, my stepfather. I clasped a hand over my mouth.

“I can't read it,” I said, my fingers muffling my words.

Jude dropped to his knees beside me.

“You have to, Di, or you'll just be wondering what it says. Think of it like a Band-Aid—just rip it off. We're right here with you.”

He smudged a finger beneath my eyes; I hadn't realized I was crying. I nodded, still covering my mouth as though that would stop any horrible things being said. But I knew it was too late for that.

Diana Delaney, the much-lauded VP of troubled label Phoenix Music, is hiding secrets. Or telling lies. You decide.

I skimmed down the first few paragraphs which seemed to recap my journey from talent scout to VP of a small label, from the launch of our campaign to #savephoenix and the show at Madison Square Gardens. Then my stomach turned.

This is what we know, or what we've been led to believe. The truth, however, is much darker. It is a story Diana Delaney tried to hide. It begins with incest.

I wretched into my hand but luckily, nothing came up. Still, Sheridan passed a waste paper basket to Jude who placed it at my feet.

As a sweet sixteen-year-old, Diana met her first love, the twenty-two-year-old engineer Aaron Battersea. They dated for over a year until a lovers tiff broke them apart. According to our source, the couple were “incredibly happy together.” It came as a huge surprise when they separated. “I always thought they were made for each other. Aaron was so attentive

and Diana was smitten with him. They were inseparable until they had a misunderstanding at her seventeenth birthday party.”

Who the fuck was their ‘source’ I thought, angrily. It was clearly someone who knew shit.

While Aaron and Diana never reignited their relationship, they remained in contact, and when Aaron became involved with Diana’s mother, Beatrice, Diana happily attended their wedding. Sources say Diana moved to Cambridge shortly afterwards but remained in close contact with both Beatrice and Aaron.

With a taste for the darker side of sexual life established, Diana joined the notoriously private and exclusive Decadence sex club in New York, where she met Peyton-Harris who was a board member at the time. While the club continues to refuse comment regarding its members, sources close to Peyton-Harris confirmed he and Diana had sexual relations while they were both in attendance at the club.

I picked up the waste paper basket and threw up the contents of my lunch. Jude grabbed my hair and rubbed circles on my back. I wiped my mouth with a tissue that Carlos held out, and returned my eyes to the page.

It is unknown how the relationship between the two played a role during the first few months of Peyton-Harris’ appointment, but Rolling Stone can confirm their relationship was never disclosed, which broke contractual obligations. Former employees have stated they knew nothing about a prior relationship between Peyton-Harris and Delaney, suggesting they’d either been unaware of the situation beforehand or they were lying outright to everyone around them.

This latest finding comes at an inconvenient time for Delaney and Peyton-Harris who are in the process of sourcing new ownership for the controversial label. This comes after they hurled unfounded accusations of monopolization and corporate misconduct at music industry Godfathers Ralph Zeiner, Donnie Hoffman and Marty Weissenberg.

I read the last paragraph which simply summarized what a lying, cheating whore I apparently was and lowered the magazine to my lap.

I never wanted notoriety. I never wanted to be the story. I never wanted anything other than to play a part in helping others make great music and put it out there. I never wanted Aaron to marry my mother. I never wanted to join a sex club. And I never wanted to drag a man I loved into this disgusting life I'd somehow created.

"It will be trash before you know it," Sheridan said quietly.

I shook my head. "It's *Rolling Stone*. It's on the news stand for a *month*." I hiccupped, my stomach feeling empty and acidic. "People collect it, for fuck's sake. This isn't going to go away."

I stared at the photograph, willing my eyes in the picture to open just a little bit, and my dress to close up just a little bit. But it was too late. It was all too late.

"I have to speak to the teams," I said. "I need to step down from all this. It's not fair that they continue to work so hard while I drag the reputation of this amazing business down."

"You can't quit," Carlos rushed out.

"He's right," Jude said, firmly. "This is your business. You are Phoenix Music. You have to rise above this. Everyone will see the article for what it is: a pack of lies."

"But it isn't, is it?" I said, looking up at him, daring him to deny it. "It's all true. I did date my stepfather once upon a time. I did go to my mother's wedding. I did join a sex club. We did sleep together under that roof. And we didn't disclose our relationship to anyone, and we should have done. It's all true."

Jude stared at me. He couldn't deny it. Any of it.

"But none of it is wrong, either," Sheridan said. "You were perfectly entitled to date Aaron. You weren't to know he would one day become your stepfather. You went to your mother's wedding because it was what she wanted. If you hadn't gone, they would have twisted the story to suit. Yes,

you joined a sex club, along with thousands of other people in the city. Yes, you slept with Jude. You are fucking human. And for all anyone knows, you and Jude were no longer in a relationship when he became your boss. The only mistake you made was not telling the board you knew each other and in what capacity. But I bet my life and yours, the team—and the general public—will forgive you for that.”

I sank my head into my hands. Everything Sheridan had said made sense, but I still felt sick, and guilty, and ashamed.

“Come and speak to the team,” Jude said, squeezing my shoulders. “They’ve all read the article and they’re more concerned about you; they’ll want to know you’re ok. Let’s go and show them exactly who you are. You’re human. You’re hurt and upset. But you’re still here, and when you’ve regained your strength, you’re going to fight. Harder.”

I wiped my eyes and let Jude pull me to my feet. I felt weak and inconsequential. But he was right; I had to face the music. They were my team—they’d stood by me throughout this whole ordeal. They deserved to see the real me and understand the truth.

The four of us made our way down the stairs and I heard the silence descend before we’d even reached the bottom. All eyes landed on me as I walked through the door, pushed along gently by Jude’s hand behind me.

I looked out at the sea of sympathetic faces and took a shaky breath.

“I’m sorry I’ve dragged you all into this,” I began. “This is my past and it should have nothing to do with our present or our future.”

I noticed some eyes drop to the floor.

“I don’t expect this to go away over night, but do you know what? Hoffman and Co have done their worst. I don’t think they can hurt us any more than this. So...”

I took another deep breath.

“We should look at this moment as our rock bottom. From here on, we can only climb. We can only get stronger, and

wiser, and better. They've played their whole hand and they've yet to see any of our cards. We are going to go back to the drawing board now. No more fire-fighting and groveling to people who are scared shitless of the big bad bullies. We're not going to them anymore. They're going to come to us. We're not playing by Hoffman's rules anymore; we're changing the fucking game."

I felt Jude shift beside me.

"It all starts with the music," I said, looking up at him. "We need to make more of it. And make it amazing."

"But we can't get into any studios," Dree said, quietly.

"We're going to make our own," Jude announced.

"But what about getting airplay? Only half the stations who played us before are willing to take our acts," said Anthony, Sheridan's promo exec.

"We'll use different channels," I replied. "TikTok, Clubhouse... I mean, hell, why don't we just make our own? Why don't we create our own indie music platform? We know people want it. We could charge a small subscription fee—all profits going to the #savephoenix fund."

I saw a few heads nodding around the room.

"And what about ownership? We're still entangled with Empirical."

Jude stepped in. "Our legal team updated me this morning. Empirical has agreed to sell the business to us for a reasonable price, and we can afford it. But we're still fighting for the name. We might need to think of a new one..."

He looked at me, probably expecting a look of despair. I had named Phoenix four years ago, after all. I should be attached to the name, but I wasn't.

"I don't think that's such a bad thing. New name, new era. How does Rebel Records sound?" I asked the room. It took a couple of seconds for the suggestion to roll through their minds, but once it did, there were smiles and nods, some whoops.

“I love it,” Jude said beside me. “It describes us perfectly. We’re the round peg that refused to be squeezed into a square hole; we’re the teenager who smoked pot behind the sports hall at school...”

“We can make a shit hot marketing campaign with that,” Sheridan added and her team lit up.

“Great,” I smiled, waiting for the excitement to settle. “Now, back to the article.” I steadied my breath again. I had to get it out; this team who’d stood by me through everything needed to know the truth.

“It’s all true. Jude and I met when he was a board member of the Decadence Club. I was approached by a scout to join. I never would have done but I was at an all-time low. I would have said I wasn’t thinking straight, but I can’t be ashamed; it’s out there now. I joined a sex club.” I shrugged my shoulders, waiting for the judgement. But it never came.

“I did meet Jude there, but I didn’t know who he was then, and he didn’t know me. Discovering he’d been hired to close us down was...” I was suddenly hit by a wave of emotion—the same emotion that hit me when I saw him in the boardroom that first day. He seemed to sense it and he brought an arm around my chest, still steadying me from behind. “It was the worst day of my life,” I said, finally, looking up to see everyone not wide-eyed and horrified as I’d expected, but smiling, sympathetically.

“Working with him while we were both fighting for different things was torture, and that’s the truth. I couldn’t tell anyone because I was embarrassed about the way we’d met. So that part about me not disclosing our relationship is true, but it’s the only thing I’ve done wrong.”

“Before we go any further,” Jude jumped in. “We owe it to you to tell you what our relationship is now.”

My head spun around to face him. What did he mean? What was he going to say? What *was* our relationship now? He gave me a small wink and looked out at everyone.

“Diana and I are together, if you hadn’t already noticed...”

“Of course we had,” piped up one of the talent managers.

Jude smiled. “I guess it’s been hard to conceal it, especially as she lives here with me now. To be completely transparent, we were not together officially until recently. We spent a long time trying to maintain a professional relationship only. But we are together now, and very happy.”

Jude squeezed his arm around me and my stomach melted in on itself. I wanted to turn around and kiss him hard, but that would have been several steps too far.

“What about your stepfather?” Dree asked. “I’m not being nosy. It’s just... he looks familiar.”

I took another deep breath, my nerves jumping to attention at the mention of him.

“Yes, of course. I dated Aaron Battersea when I was sixteen. We were not deliriously happy, as ‘the source’ in the article suggested. He was cruel and possessive and I broke up with him when I turned seventeen. He pursued my mother in secret, until she was so smitten she decided to ‘introduce’ me to him. I was very young; I probably didn’t handle it in the right way. I didn’t say anything about the fact we’d dated. It was only when my mum agreed to marry him that I tried to stop her. Yes, I attended their wedding, but I had begged her not to go through with it. To this day she doesn’t know why. Although...”

I thought back to the article and the fact the magazine would be available in the UK and my relationship with Aaron wouldn’t be a secret for much longer.

“... that’s probably about to change.”

I took another deep steadying breath.

“The truth is, my stepfather is damaged. He hasn’t been able to forgive me for leaving him and, as such, he’s spent the last eight years trying to get me back, despite being married to my mum. I fled the UK to get away from him. But since the article about me and Jude came out, he’s been here, in New York, trying to track me down.”

I watched as people looked around at each other, contemplating this new information.

“That’s it!” Dree gasped. “That’s why he’s familiar. He was here,” she rushed out.

“Here?” Jude asked, his arm going rigid around me. “This house?”

“Just outside,” Dree continued. “I saw him yesterday and a couple of days before that. He looks older than the picture, a bit unshaven, but it was definitely him.”

My heart was beating out of my chest. He’d found me, and it didn’t matter how tightly Jude was holding me, or how many locks he’d added to the door, the feeling of fear that came to light in my stomach, knowing Aaron was close, was irrepressible.

“We’re reporting it,” Jude said, firmly. “That’s it. Enough’s enough. He’s too close now, and it has to stop.”

He was bracing himself for me to turn around and refuse, again, like I always did. But the article had changed everything. Word was out now. The world would know; my mum would know. Her heart would be shattered anyway. And the letters gave me all the proof I ever needed to keep the man away.

I nodded and held his arm.

“I know,” I said, softly. “I will call the police.” My stomach sank at what I had to say next. “But there’s someone else I need to talk to first.”

JUDE FOLLOWED me back up the stairs. This was something I had to do on my own, but he insisted on accompanying me to his library, to where the offending article still sat, mocking me from his coffee table. He rolled it up and stuffed it into the back pocket of his jeans.

“I’ll be just outside, babe,” he said, kissing me on the forehead. “Just say the word and I’ll come right in.”

I waited for the door to close, then picked up the phone. I couldn’t believe I was going to speak to my mother for the first time in seven years, since I’d escaped to Cambridge after the wedding. My insides were awash with anticipation—fear for what she might say to me, for how she might react; relief at being in contact with her again and sorrow at having been apart for so long. I had no idea what she knew or how she felt about me. She might hate me for leaving and cutting her off; she might find it too painful having me back in her life. I couldn’t think about it; I just had to make the call. If I didn’t tell her the truth, someone else would, and soon.

I listened to the rings, gaining some comfort from the knowledge my stepfather wasn’t at home with her; he was here in New York, trying to find me. My heart beat hard and loud in my ears, almost drowning out the sound of the rings. Then I heard it. A ring stopped halfway, a rustle, then a breath.

“Beatrice Delaney.”

Delaney?

I took a deep breath and gripped the phone.

“Mum.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“Thank you,” Jude wrapped his arms around me as the police car set off down the road. “Thank you for finally reporting that twisted maniac. Hopefully, it won’t be long before they find him.”

“If he was around here only yesterday, like Dree said, he can’t have gone far.”

“How long has your mum had the restraining order out on him?” Jude asked, squeezing me.

“Two years,” I replied, shaking my head, recalling our conversation.

Mum had been expecting my call. She’d been contacted by *Rolling Stone* when they first started compiling the article. But their announcement of my relationship with Aaron hadn’t come as a surprise to her then, either. She’d suspected something ever since I fled the country. A friend had told Mum they’d seen Aaron in Cambridge when he had no business being there.

After I graduated and disappeared off the face of the earth, Mum had rummaged through his belongings and found half-finished letters. For two years, he lied to her, saying he’d been writing poetry, recalling words his own parents had used with him, with his siblings, with each other. We both knew Aaron had had a difficult upbringing, so this explanation, while being a complete lie, was plausible.

One day, she found another letter, this one with my name on it, and confronted him again. He turned on her, a different

person. It was as though he was some demon dressed up as a functioning human. He attacked my mother, beating her black and blue, with a temper he hadn't revealed in six years. She was stunned but not stupid. She went straight to the police, which resulted in a frustratingly short prison sentence and a restraining order. His outburst changed him; he refused to speak to my mother, even when she visited him in prison. He wouldn't give up any information about where I was, otherwise, she'd sworn to me over the phone, she would have tracked me down herself.

We stayed on the phone to each other for two hours; we had a lot to catch up on. But mostly, we had a lot of apologizing and forgiving to do. My mum deeply regretted not listening to me when I begged her not to marry Aaron, and I deeply regretted not telling her why. I was pleased to learn she'd been seeing someone else—a lecturer at the local college. He was quiet, undramatic, chivalrous—a completely different character to Aaron. I couldn't wait to meet him, and I wouldn't have to wait for long. Mum had agreed to come to New York the following week. After I explained the situation with the business, with Jude, with everything that was happening in my life, she insisted on coming to me. And I couldn't wait to finally show her around the city that had become my home.

There was only one fly left in the ointment: Aaron was still out there. It wouldn't be long, the police had assured me, before they'd catch him. His behavior indicated he was careless and they'd had other sightings reported. They would keep eyes on the area round the clock, expecting him to return within days. It would all be over quickly, they'd said. I hoped, with every fiber of my being, they were right.

“I'D LIKE TO MAKE A TOAST!” I called out, trying to gain the attention of the jabbering voices around the table. We'd chosen Buddakan for the celebration because it was vibrant, buzzing, and had a seating area that could accommodate our entire team

of now thirty-four people. The only problem was, it was so buzzy, I couldn't hear myself think.

Jude bashed a fork against his champagne flute to quieten them down. As soon as I had everyone's attention, I started.

"I just want to say a huge thank you and congratulations to you all. Today, we officially became Rebel Records!"

"Whoop!" came a collective cry from the table, along with clapping hands and stamping feet.

"This has been one hell of a journey," I continued. "We've survived personal attacks, we've overcome a severely squeezed pipeline of promo opportunities, we've seen our enemies in broad daylight, and we've discovered who our friends in this industry really are."

I scanned my eyes around the table.

"No ordinary team did this. We did this. YOU did this. This business isn't just mine, or Jude's, or the new investors'. This business is yours. Listen up..."

I held up a hand for complete silence.

"We've been fortunate enough to have found investors who believe in the biggest principle we stand by: that everyone has a voice and should be able to use it, no matter what. They know that without you, this business wouldn't still be standing. And they want you to be rewarded, not just for everything you've done so far, but for everything you do in the future."

I nodded to Marla who began to pass around letters addressed to each member of the team.

"Open them" I nodded, and watched as their jaws dropped to the table.

"Inside, you'll find a bonus—a thank you for your hard work, your dedication and your belief. You'll also find a letter welcoming you as a shareholder of the business. We've decided to run this label as a cooperative, meaning that you will get a share of its financial success every step of the way. Jude and I will continue to lead, but you are the directors of

your own destiny—this label’s destiny. It’s in your hands as much as it is in ours.”

Faces looked up at me, tears rolling down cheeks.

“This is insane,” Carlos uttered beside me. “We own the label now?”

I squeezed his shoulder in response.

“A toast,” I reminded everyone. “To Rebel Records. To you.”

The entire team rose to their feet and clinked their glasses, still dazed by the news.

“Come on,” Jude said, tugging my hand. “Let’s leave them for a few minutes.”



I FOLLOWED Jude up the steps. I couldn’t stop smiling. I’d been planning the change for weeks. It was all I’d wanted, ever since Jude announced he was going to quit Empirical and join us on our solitary journey. I knew we were making that journey as a team and it didn’t feel right somehow to continue chasing profits for faceless shareholders who could be bought by the likes of Hoffman and his friends. We championed democracy for music; I wanted democracy for my team. Jude was right; they needed time to process the shock of becoming owners of the label, and they needed to squeal and cry with each other, and come to terms with it, together.

Jude found a table in a corner, sat down and pulled me onto his knee.

“Can’t I sit on a chair?” I moaned, squirming to get comfortable.

“No, come here,” he replied, tugging my ass into his crotch so I could feel him rigid behind his pants. “I want to play with you a little bit.”

My breath escaped my lips in a rush and I looked around at our fellow patrons, wondering if we could really do this

without being noticed. Before I could protest, Jude slipped his hand beneath my long silk skirt and stroked his fingers along my thigh. I jerked suddenly, almost slipping off his lap.

“Easy, girl,” he whispered, bringing his lips to my ear.

“I’ve been wanting to feel you all fucking night,” he drawled, pushing his fingers beneath the fabric of my briefs. I brought my cheek alongside his so he could hear the pace of my breath.

“We’re at a work dinner,” I said.

“I don’t care.” He punctuated the sentiment by pressing his thumb down onto me, taking my breath away. Slowly, he circled it, eliciting a long, quiet, unrestrainable moan from my lips.

“You’re extremely wet, Diana,” he said, the hot air from his throat caressing the side of my face.

I couldn’t reply; I was biting my lip to stop any further sounds escaping. I was sitting in clear view of the rest of the restaurant with my boyfriend massaging my damp skin, prizing me apart, preparing to fuck me with his fingers.

“How long have you been waiting for this?” He whispered.

“All... night,” I managed.

“I’ll say,” he said, confidently. That was what turned me on so much about this man. He knew exactly where to touch me, how to bring me to the edge. He knew exactly what I needed, and when I needed it. He would seek me out in the kitchen or late at night in the reception room offices, knowing I needed to be relieved of some stress or another, and he would take my mind off the problem there and then, without even undressing me. His fingers were incredible, and he knew it. His tongue was incredible; the way he moved inside me was incredible. And he bloody well knew that too. It would have been infuriating if it wasn’t just so, damn, good.

“That’s it,” he cooed, pressing me apart, feeling my legs slip slightly outwards.

His fingers caressed my opening, even as I pushed my hips towards them, asking for more.

“Greedy, greedy,” he teased.

“You’re such an ass,” I groaned, biting his earlobe until he got the message.

“Here you go, baby,” he murmured, pushing two fingers slowly into my depths. I spun my face bringing my lips to his and moaned into his mouth. He instantly caught my kiss and moaned back into me, circling his fingers, feeling his way deeper. His thumb continued its torturous torment, pulling me to a peak. I needed more of him inside me.

“Please,” I begged, pulling apart just long enough to say the word. It came out lazily, desperately. He responded by pushing two more fingers inside, stretching me as wide as I could go. Then I felt his other hand on the small of my back. He parted his knees so I was perched on just one, then he rocked me, gently, back and forth, over the round of his thigh. His flattened palm pressed me forward onto his fingers, forcing them deeper, then held me as I rocked backwards, relieving me as his fingers pulled out circling my walls, before I was rocked forward again. He moved me like an instrument, bringing me down onto his hand and relieving me again, over and over, until I couldn’t take any more. The sounds reaching out from my chest into his became stronger and less patient.

“God, I want you so badly,” I whispered, staring into his eyes. They danced playfully.

“Later,” he promised. “Let’s deal with you first.”

He held my gaze while he pressed his thumb down, drawing another delicious breath of air from my lungs.

“Fuck,” I gasped, rocking harder.

“I’ve got you,” he said, then clamped his lips over mine, just as an uncontrollable cry began to emerge from deep within me. He took control of the rhythm as I shook helplessly on his lap, continuing to rock me back and forth, pressing down on my flesh, rubbing his thumb in small circles.

I almost choked with the intensity, blind to the hundreds of other diners seated around us. As my senses returned, Jude slowed our kiss, pulling back to pepper his lips against mine as my heartrate returned to normal.

“God, you needed that,” he said, quietly, as I dragged my eyelids open again.

“You’ve ruined me,” I replied.

“No, I’ve sated you,” he insisted. “And...” he drew me into him again. “I’m fucking harder than ever.”

I brought a hand down to the mound in his pants.

“Don’t...” he warned. “I’ll come in my jeans and that would be horrendously obvious. I can wait. But only just. Until I can get you the other side of my front door.”

I gave him a promising smile. “I need to freshen up,” I said, wriggling to stand.

“Well, don’t take too long,” he replied. “We’re spending another ten minutes here, then we’re going to let these guys get hideously drunk without the bosses around, and I’m taking you home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



“*J*eez, this place is a long way out,” Carlos moaned as he propped a bicycle by the doorway.

“You can have an office nearer to a station if you’re prepared to pay for it out of your own profits,” I said, with raised eyebrows.

“I know, I know, I get it. I’m just knackered from the bike ride.”

“Unfit,” I smirked.

“Yeah, that too,” he huffed, walking away.

“Where are you off to?” Sheridan said, running up behind me. “We need to leave for the awards in thirty minutes. It’s going to take us about an hour just to get over the bridge at this time of day.”

“I’ll meet you there,” I said. “I just need to go home first.”

“Di...” Sheridan warned. “He’s still out there. The police haven’t caught him yet. Should you be going back on your own? Let me find Jude.”

She turned and I grabbed her arm.

“No,” I hissed. “I’ve got him a gift, a surprise, but I’ve left it at home. I really wanted to give it to him tonight at the awards.”

Sheridan eyed me, cautiously. “Can’t you send someone else? Can’t Marla go?”

“No,” I shook my head. “I can’t remember exactly where I’ve hidden it; I’ll need to rummage around. I can’t ask Marla to do that.”

“Will you at least take a cab? I really don’t want you walking around the streets with crazy on the loose.”

“Already called one,” I said, tapping my nose. “Tell Jude I had a short notice meeting in town. I’ll see you all there.”

I left Sheridan shaking her head as I bounded out of the door to the cab waiting by the sidewalk. It wasn’t a lie. Tonight would mark one year since I first met Jude. It had been exactly three hundred and sixty-five days since I’d caught him staring at me across the table at the Decadence Club. So much had happened in that time and we were both changed people as a result, but still together and stronger than ever.

I hadn’t gone all out on a gift, but I’d arranged something I thought was meaningful. His prized Mont Blanc pen—the one I signed the NDA with and later found in his office at Empirical, I’d had it engraved with his name and new job title: Chief Music Maker, Rebel Records. I hoped to God he wouldn’t kill me for permanently tattooing his three thousand dollar pen. I’d also got something else; something I couldn’t exactly reveal in the middle of an awards ceremony—he would have to wait until we got home and I could change into it.

I smiled to myself as I climbed out of the cab and unlocked the front door. I knew Jenny would have left for the day, but I could smell the bagels she’d bought fresh from the bakery, ready for our team breakfast tomorrow. I closed the door and took the stairs two at a time, heading straight for my room. I figured I would have hidden the pen in there, knowing Jude didn’t step foot inside it and discouraged me from doing so these days, too. He wanted me in his room, entirely.

I opened the top drawer of the dressing table and found it. Opening the box, I turned the pen over in my fingers watching it reflect the light from the window. It was July again, the month we met, the night we met. I remembered feeling the

urge to wipe this very same pen clean of the sweat marks my fingertips had left on it. I'd been so nervous.

I tried to recall my state of mind. I was stressed out beyond belief, feeling completely helpless, useless, worthless. I was lost and didn't know where to turn. Receiving the card from Sienna really did save me. The club itself was irrelevant. I hardly got into the spirit of it; I didn't take advantage of all the complimentary encounters I was offered, but it changed my life all the same. Meeting Jude changed my life.

My heart flipped over, recalling the butterflies that coursed around my stomach when he appeared in the room for our first encounter. My first visit was a blur—the intensity of his stare, the sensuality of the woman's hands and the hideous mediocrity of the sex during my first encounter. The second couldn't have been more different. It was fulfilling, lust-ridden and intimate. And the grief I felt afterwards, believing it would never happen again, was all-consuming.

I clutched the pen to my chest, letting the memory of that pain sear through me. Then I held it out to study the words I'd had engraved. A whole year; I couldn't believe it. So much had happened in that time. I'd freed myself from so much—from debilitating beliefs about myself, that had been ignited and nurtured by Aaron Battersea, to the clutches of a group of men who wanted to manipulate music until it meant nothing at all to anyone. I'd done it all on my own terms, with the love of my life by my side. I squeezed my eyes closed and breathed in his scent—it was everywhere. It was his house after all.

I realized something was wrong before I opened my eyes. The scent I was used to had been polluted somehow, with a smell that took me back almost a decade. My eyelids shot open and focused on the pen I was still holding in front of my face. This time, it wasn't a heartfelt, engraved message staring back at me, it was the reflection of a man. A man who didn't live here, who didn't belong here. It was the reflection of a man who wanted me dead.

I spun around to face him, my blood cold as ice, my head light and threatening to crumble.

“Aaron...” I said, my voice cracking with fear.

“Daddy,” he corrected, one side of his lip curling upwards.

“How did you get in here?”

He took a step into the room and I backed up against the dressing table.

“It’s not a very good housekeeper who fails to lock the back of the house, is it?” He smirked.

“Why didn’t you just knock, for God’s sake?” I tried. Perhaps if I just treated him like a normal person who’d given me no reason to be afraid of him, he’d behave like one.

“Diana,” he began, his face clouded in shock. “You haven’t replied to any of my letters. Why would you answer the door?”

Fuck.

“What do you need to see me about? What’s so important that you’d come all the way to New York?”

He strode up to me quickly, sending my heartrate into a wild panic, and pinched my cheeks between his thin, bony fingers. I almost vomited at the feel of his breath on my face.

“Darling, I’ve been so worried about you. Ever since the wedding... I knew how it would hurt you. And it did, didn’t it? You disappeared and wouldn’t have anything to do with me. And all because I married your mother. I should never have done that. It was you I wanted all along. I should have just come clean, instead of torturing us both.”

He lunged forward and spread his lips around my tightly closed mouth like a giant fish against the side of its tank. I gripped the edge of the dressing table; it was the only thing anchoring me to reality and I needed to stay in it. He sucked his lips back, making a loud smacking sound as he pulled away.

“You haven’t forgiven me,” he whispered, drawing a finger down over my lips, a badly clipped nail catching the skin. I flinched ever so slightly. “I know I have to make it up to you.

And I promise, now that I've found you, it's all that matters to me."

He uncurled the fingers of my nearest hand from around the surface of the dressing table.

"Sit with me," he whispered, his voice piercing my skin like a dagger. He pulled me to the bed and sat me down against him, clasping my hand in his. "We have a lot to catch up on."

My brain scrambled for some idea as to how I could talk to him, get him to see some kind of sense. He was crazy, but I was sure there must be a way to communicate with him on his level. If only I could keep him at bay or distract him so I could run from the house.

"I don't think I could ever forgive you for what you did," I said, quietly, watching his eyes for some sort of reaction.

His eyes filled with genuine concern. He was deluded. "What do you mean, darling?"

"For marrying my mother," I said, meaning every word, but not in the way I wanted him to think.

"Instead of marrying you," he said.

I forced myself to nod.

"That's why I'm here, Diana. I know that, and I'm here to win you back." He stroked a hand down my cheek bringing his scent perilously close to my nostrils. I swallowed back a sliver of bile.

"I'm afraid that..."

"You're afraid, what?" He asked, turning my face to look directly into his.

"I'm afraid that if you're capable of marrying my mother if you really wanted to be with me, that you are capable of hurting me again." It was my protection. I wanted to force him into a position he would have to defend. He would want to prove he wouldn't hurt me.

“Oh my God, Diana,” he plunged his head into his hands and mumbled through his palms. “I’ve really fucked up, haven’t I? You really think it’s my intention to hurt you?”

“Yes, I do. Your letters... you made it clear you wanted me dead. What else am I supposed to think?”

“I needed to get your attention,” he whined. “You’d ignored everything else.”

I was shocked when the first sob erupted into his hands, then stunned when he began balling his eyes out—big heaving sobs that looked alien coming from a grown man. I tentatively put an arm across his shoulders, for no other reason than I was a human being and couldn’t bear to see anyone upset, even if they’d written a letter to me describing in great detail how they wanted to rip off my skin, fuck the corpse and send it back to my mother in a casket.

As his body rocked beneath my arm, I remembered the platinum pen I was still holding between the fingers of my other hand. It glistened from the early evening light shining through the window. It was the only potential weapon I had at my disposal. I tightened my grip around its barrel, around the words I’d had engraved on it only days earlier. I couldn’t do anything yet; he wasn’t in enough of a compromised position. I needed to lull him into a false sense of security, put him at relative ease, make him think he’d half won the battle, whatever it was he was fighting for.

I forced myself to wrap my arms around his neck.

“Shhh,” I forced out into his ear. “It’s ok. I want it to work. I want you to make it up to me. I want us to have that chance.”

His hiccupping sobs subsided and he looped an arm around my waist, pulling me close to him. When he looked up, his eyes were glazed, as though he’d taken a Class A drug.

“Do you really mean that?” He said, his voice cracking with genuine feeling.

I nodded.

“What about...” he looked around the room, a sneer of disgust forming across his lips. “What about Jude Peyton-

Harris?”

My heart throbbed at the sound of his name. It was pointless even hoping Sheridan had told him where I was really going. I wanted more than ever for him to burst through door and yank this poisonous rodent off me, but I knew it wouldn't happen. They would all be in a cab now, chatting and laughing their way to the awards in Times Square, expecting to meet with me as planned in the main hall.

“I can leave him,” I said, almost choking on the words. “He doesn't mean anything to me. He was a placeholder for you,” I lied, marveling at my ability to act like my life depended on it.

“Is that really true?” He looked at me sideways, as though he didn't trust what I was saying.

My chest tightened. I needed him to believe me. If he thought for a second I was toying with him, my life could well be over. “Aaron,” I said, softly. “I don't want to disrespect him; he hasn't done anything wrong. And it's his heart that's going to be broken when he finds out I've chosen you. I can't speak too ill of him in his own home.”

He blinked at me. “You've chosen me?”

I forced a smile onto my face. “Of course, Aaron. It's always been you.”

His own smile dropped suddenly. “Then show me.”

I twitched. “What? What do you mean?”

His whole body twisted to face me and I was forced to lean backwards so as not to consume his breath.

“I know you don't want to disrespect him, but I need to know how you feel before we walk out of here. I need to know you're not lying.”

“Why would I lie?” I gasped, panicking.

“I don't know,” he shrugged his shoulders dramatically, like a fifteen year-old defying his parents. “Maybe because you know I broke in here? You might be scared?”

“Aaron,” I rushed out. “I’m not scared of you. Don’t give me reason to be. Please...”

He seemed to stare at me for an eternity, trying to work out what was really going on in my mind. I couldn’t allow any room for ambiguity. I forced myself forward, opened my lips and kissed him. When his shocked mouth didn’t respond, I pulled back.

“Aaron, please,” I begged. “It’s been too long, Don’t deny me now. I need you.”

A tear rolled out of his eye and he lunged forward, grabbing the back of my head and crashing his teeth against my lips. He drove his tongue inside my mouth, depriving me of oxygen, and pushed me backwards onto the bed. His weight on top of me was terrifying. I felt the pen in my hand and clutched it tightly, my only connection to any possible way out. His legs kicked mine apart and I heard my dress rip. When he lowered, I felt his cock pressing into my waist and almost wretched again. He was threatening me, bullying me, torturing me, and he was hard.

He pressed one hand into my jaw, his sharp fingers almost cutting off my blood supply, then I heard the buttons pop on his jeans. My heart banged against my ribcage and a I felt cold all over. I couldn’t move my legs, he’d planted himself firmly between them.

“Aaron,” I choked. “I’m not ready for...”

“It’s been too long, you said. Let me make it up to you. I need to know how you really feel, how wet you are for me.”

I was as dry as a bone. His fingers crawled towards my entrance and I knew that the minute he discovered how ready I wasn’t, it would be game over. He’d know I was lying and I had no idea what his next move would be. I felt his skinny cock nudging at me and I swallowed back the vomit.

“Aaron, please... Not yet, it’s too soon.”

“Show me,” he groaned, his fingers prodding at my entrance.

I couldn't risk it; I couldn't let him go any further. The sickly sweetness of his aftershave was sending tendrils of fear through every limb, and he was frighteningly close to pushing himself inside me, against my wishes.

I gripped the pen and drew my hand back as far into the bed as it would go. Just as the head of his cock pushed at the edge of me, I brought my hand around and down towards him, driving the nib of the pen into his neck. His head snapped backwards and he stared at me, as though he didn't know what had just happened. I yanked the pen out of his neck, watching the blood trickle out of the hole it had left. I had no idea where I'd hit or how deep or how much damage I'd caused. All I knew was, he was still on top of me, his brain quickly working out what I'd done.

In a beat, my entire body coiled then opened out, pushing him backwards on to the bed. I managed to wriggle out from under him, the pen drawing lines of red along the comforter. I tried to put my legs on the floor but they were jelly so I rolled as far along the floor as I could to get away from him. In slow motion, he sat up, glaring at me in shock.

“What did you do, Di?” He said, in genuine bewilderment.

I pushed myself back towards the door like a crab, not daring to look away. He still had the advantage, even in his state of shock. He still had the strength to get to his feet, take two long strides and hover over me in a heartbeat. I, on the other hand, was crumpled on the floor, my shaking limbs disabling me from getting out of the room.

He brought a hand up to his neck and it was immediately coated in blood. He looked from his dark red hand to me, back at his hand, then back to me, as though he was trying to process what I'd just done.

“I thought you wanted this,” he whispered. “Did you just lie to me?”

I didn't answer, there was no point. I was a dead woman either way. Instead I tried to scramble further back towards the door, stupidly knocking it closed.

“Did you just... lie?” He repeated.

I shook my head, painfully aware I’d trapped myself in there with him.

“You bitch,” he spat and in a breath he leaped up off the bed and put his hand around my neck. He wasn’t a large man; in fact, he wasn’t much taller than me and he was skinny as fuck, but he still managed to drag me halfway across the room by my throat. He rammed my head down to the floor hard, and my vision spun. I felt the pen being torn out of my hand and an excruciating pain appear in my thigh as he drove it into my flesh. I couldn’t even cry out, the pain was so searing. I heard more ripping of satin and felt cool air against my skin, then I realized he’d torn my dress away from my body, exposing only my underwear. My sight returned and I saw him glaring down at me, salivating like a wild animal.

“Aaron...” I breathed out, “Please, don’t...”

I didn’t know what I was asking. I really didn’t know what he was capable of. Was he going to rape me? Kill me? In that moment, the stark thought hit me that it was going to be one of the two. Either he was going to ram his dry, rigid bone into me, ripping me from the inside out, or he was going to stab me to death with the pen I’d just had engraved for my soulmate. Suddenly, something took over me. As he lowered his hands to my arms to pin me down I kicked my good leg off the ground, bringing my knee up to his head, knocking him onto his back. I rolled over and clambered to my knees, my bleeding leg dragging behind. The pen had rolled away but I could just reach it if I got past him. He was grabbing his head with his hand. He might not even see me...

I threw my upper body across him, reaching for the pen, but he brought his hands down and held me fast across his middle.

“Stop, Diana,” he growled. “Stop fighting what is meant to be.”

He shoved me face-first down onto the carpet beside him and in a second had straddled me. His hands pinned my

shoulders and arms to the floor and he pulled back to angle himself for the ultimate thrust.

“Please, don’t!” I cried out in alarm. Fear swirled in my blood stream, pumping through my temples, blocking out all sound. I was helpless; I couldn’t move. The only thing I could do now was let him have his way and hope it would sate him enough to keep me alive. Brick by brick, I shut myself down. My eyes, my ears, the smells, the sensations against my skin, the taste of nausea in my mouth. I numbed it all. If I didn’t experience it, perhaps it never happened.

I gritted my teeth and waited for it to be over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Eventually, I felt light above me and I was able to breathe again. My body was limp as I was hoisted into the air and twisted around. As my head spun, I saw faces. Not Aaron's but other peoples'. People I didn't recognize. I was lowered. I felt someone's arms wrap around me. I was carried out of the room and into another. My numbed brain couldn't process where I was going. Even when I was placed in a large bathtub half-filled with lukewarm water and softly scented bubbles, I forced any recollection from my mind. I stared straight ahead, as though whatever wasn't in my direct line of sight didn't exist.

Warm water covered my hair and I felt hands rubbing soap into it. Was it Aaron? Had I imagined the other people? Visions of the woman at the Decadence Club tying my hair back glided through my mind, along with the face of the man who'd jack rabbit me into the mattress. Donnie Hoffman appeared like a hologram wagging his finger at me, telling me about the three rules. Some part of me knew I was living through a trauma, and all I could do was close my eyes.

When they re-opened, I was lying in a large, comfortable bed, with a man by my side. I didn't dare look up. If it was Aaron, then I was still in the same hell, only cleaner.

The weight on the bed shifted and the figure bent down towards me.

"Hey..." came a soft voice. "Di, it's me. Jude."

I was convinced I was dreaming. How could I have gone from being pinned to the floor by Aaron, to lying in a bed beside Jude? I forced my neck to turn until his face came into view.

“Fuck,” he gasped, and broke down right in front of me.

“Di, I’m so sorry,” he cried. “I should have been here. I should never have let you out of my sight.”

His hand covered his face but I could see the contours of his cheekbones which, despite my state of confusion, still sent ripples of lust through me. He sat up and dragged his hands down his face, pushing up his jaw, angrily. He didn’t say anything else. Something had changed between us; I could feel it.

“What happened?” I tried to speak but it came out as a whisper. My vocal chords ached.

Jude sighed, heavily, then turned to hold both of my hands. “Sheridan told me where you were going the minute you left, so I got a cab straight here. I called the police on the way; I had a bad feeling and I didn’t want to chance anything.”

He sighed again, letting out a low growl with it.

“Di, I heard the screams as soon as I got close to the door. I couldn’t get up the stairs fast enough. I had cops right behind me. When I saw him hovering over you... fuck!” He shoved his fingers into his hair, gripping the sides of his head as though it might explode. “I turned fucking feral. I couldn’t help myself. I got him off you as fast as I could and...”

“Go on,” I needed to hear it all.

“I beat the guy to a pulp, Di. The police saw it all.”

I felt my chest rising and falling as I prepared to ask him what I needed to know. “Did he rape me?” I whispered.

“He was inside you when I grabbed him but only just, I think,” he said, the despair in his voice causing it to tremble. “If only I’d been two minutes faster,” he shook his head, a fresh flood of tears streaking down his cheeks.

“I nearly killed him, Di. Right in front of you. It took three cops to pull me off.”

“Where was I?” I asked, bewildered.

“You’d shut down,” he replied. “It’s textbook, apparently,” he said, sighing again with the effort of understanding.

“Where is he?”

“The police have him.” Jude leaned over me and stroked a hand through my hair. “Diana.... You’ll never see him again. He is gone, believe me. And if he ever gets out early, I will kill him, I promise you. I would have killed him just now, if they hadn’t stopped me.”

He scrubbed at his face.

“Fuck! I wish I had. I think I’d rather do jailtime than live knowing the fucker is still walking the same planet as you.”

I pushed myself, with some effort, up onto my elbows, noticing a thick bandage tied around my thigh and purple bruises forming around my hips.

“But... he isn’t coming back, right?” I asked, the panic not completely subsiding within my chest.

“No,” Jude shook his head, his face fixed into a determined scowl, like a boxer about to finish off his opponent. “He’s not coming back.”

I pushed myself up to sitting and stared at the wall. “He’s gone,” I whispered, unable to believe it. Even though I’d been out of his reach for the last four years, he’d been in my life, looming over me, always with the threat he might track me down and do something like this. It would take some time before my brain would accept I was finally free, that I was no longer estranged from my mother, that I could live my life like a normal person.

“The pen...” I remembered.

“The cops took it. Evidence.” Jude said.

“I’d had it engraved for you,” I whispered. “But I never want to see it again.”

Jude turned to face me and finally, a look of something resembling hope, appeared in it. “What did it say?”

“It just said ‘Rebel Records Chief Music Maker’. It was silly really, but I wanted to commemorate a significant change in your life. It was a beautiful pen.”

“It was,” he smiled, “but I don’t think I’d be able to look at it again without thinking of this, right now.”

My heart dropped and I could no longer feel blood pumping through my veins. It dawned on me: he couldn’t handle this. He would never think of this moment as one in which I’d been saved, as I would look back on it. He would always see this moment as the one in which he’d failed. And it would take a strong man to be able to live with that. Was Jude strong enough?

“Are we ok?” I whispered, dreading his reply.

He paused for too long and my eyes filled with tears. I heard him breathing steadily beside me but I couldn’t see him through the salty veil. I couldn’t stay. I couldn’t bear to hear him utter the words.

I pushed myself slowly to my feet, my thigh instantly burning from the change in pressure. I started to limp towards the door when I felt his hands behind me, scooping me into his arms. The tears fell, drenching the t-shirt Jude must have dressed me in, and I couldn’t look into his eyes.

“Yes, we’re ok,” he said, finally, sitting down and cradling me on his lap. “But I can’t speak for you—I could never imagine what that must have been like—but I’ve changed. In the last two hours I’ve become a different fucking person.”

I managed to look up at him, fearing the next words to come out of his mouth.

“I’m never letting you out of my sight.” He bent his head, his tears falling to mingle with my own. “I’ve realized today just how much you mean to me. I knew you meant a lot before, but now... You’re my life, Diana, my world. If anything happened to you, I don’t think I could go on. I know I told you I loved you, back when we were still fighting each

other at Empirical. But it's so much more than that now. I want you by my side, always. You've worked your damn way into my soul. When something happens to you, I feel it, physically."

His eyes bore into me, willing me to believe every word.

"This is more than love, Diana. You're the air that I breathe and I can't live without it."

He buried his head into my shoulder and I felt the tears roll down my chest. As for words. I had none; he'd exhausted them all. No-one had ever said anything so beautiful to me in my life. I squeezed him to me and kissed his head, cherishing his damp hair against my lips.

Eventually, the tears stopped and he looked back into my eyes.

"I want to go to the awards," I said, surprising us both.

He shook his head. "No, Di, you need to rest."

"No. I need to be with the team. It's an important night."

"No, it isn't, Di. We haven't been nominated for an award. We're a brand new business now; we weren't eligible."

"It doesn't matter. The acts are there. I've hardly seen them since the Gardens, and I know how tight their schedules are now. I need to thank them, check in on them."

Jude shook his head again but I knew I'd got in. He pulled me to his chest.

"You're such a good person," he muttered. "But you're infuriating. I have to let you go, otherwise you'll bloody find a way there without me."

I smiled, apologetically. "You'll come too?"

"Of course. I'm never letting you out of my sight," he replied, horrified that I'd even considered he wouldn't accompany me.

"Thank you." I leaned forward and he opened his lips for me. It was the first time we'd kissed since that morning, since before Aaron had broken into Jude's home. Jude took it

slowly, moving his tongue lightly against mine, letting it graze along my lips. He held my head gently, as though it was made of the finest glass and might shatter at any second.

It was a kiss filled completely with love. It came from the bottom of his heart with open arms. It came from his soul.

CHAPTER THIRTY



“**S**he deserved the standing ovation, and some,” Jude said to my mum who was sitting on the couch clearly in awe of my boyfriend as he recounted the night of the award ceremony.

My heart had swelled to twice its size, not only since my mum had landed at JFK, but since she had entered the same room as my soulmate, and I had the two most important people in my life, together in the same room.

“It wasn’t for me,” I corrected. “It was for you too, and the team, the acts—everyone. The industry even!”

“Has she always been like this?” Jude frowned at my mum. “Never able to take a compliment?”

Mum laughed, heartily. “Most of the time, yes. But she had her moments when she was very young.”

“Go on,” Jude probed, winking at me. “I want to know everything, including all the embarrassing bits.”

I rolled my eyes and stood to refill everyone’s coffees. I secretly wanted to hear the stories my mum used to tell about me growing up. I hadn’t heard them for too long, and I’d blocked them out after Aaron appeared; it hurt too much to think of the good times.

Jude was right about the standing ovation, though. We arrived at the awards late, of course, gushing our apologies to a team unaware of the real reason why. I spent most of the evening with Cherry, Ayda and Jilted, who we’d signed since Madison, being regaled by stories of their lives on the road.

“We really feel as though we part of a giant juggernaut,” Ayda said, beaming at me. “It’s incredible—such a privilege.”

“Yeah,” Cherry added. “It’s a good thing I’m single again. I don’t have time for a boyfriend anymore; I’ve never been busier. But I love it, I really do.”

“I’m so pleased,” I said, squeezing her hand. “How’s the insomnia?” I raised an eye brow and she grinned.

“It’s a lot better now. It wasn’t so bad to begin with but... I think you probably knew that.”

“We’ve come a long way, you and I,” I said, pulling her into a hug.

“And I hope it continues,” she replied as I released her. “I really do. This is my family. You are my family.”

We turned our attention to the final award, which was usually Label of the Year, genuinely curious to know whether Weissenberg’s Blue Hill would win for the fourth year in a row. I felt Jude’s hand smooth gently over my knee, carefully avoiding the bandage that tightly bound the wound in my thigh.

We all watched the host begin his spiel about all the great music that had been released that year, all the great acts that had been signed, but then his speech took a direction none of us were expecting.

“We won’t be awarding a Label of the Year in this ceremony tonight. Our panel believes there has been too much controversy surrounding the management and control of record labels in this country in the last few months, and want to take some time out to reconsider the criteria against which the winning entrants are judged.”

A collective gasp reverberated around the grand hall, and Jude squeezed my knee. I couldn’t bring myself to look at him, though; my eyes were glued to the host on the stage.

“Instead, we have created a Special Recognition Award, a one-time acknowledgement of someone who has turned the tide of the industry; who has shone a light on the need for diversity and authenticity of voice; who has birthed and

nurtured a spirit in the far corners of the alternative music landscape, bringing it to the attention of the music-buying masses.

Jude's hand squeezed tighter, but I still couldn't look away, and my breath was stuck in the hollow of my throat.

“This is someone who didn't shy away from the threat of social media. Instead, she leaned into it. This is someone who didn't see unsigned talent as a waste of time; instead she embraced them for what they are—raw, talented musicians, unmolded by commercial interests and still fighting for their principles and beliefs, fairness and social justice. This is someone who didn't back down from the threats to close her small independent label; instead she fought tooth and nail, against the biggest names in our industry, and emerged victorious with a cooperative label that is now blazing a trail.”

I didn't dare breathe and could feel my head growing lighter as a consequence.

“This year's one-time Special Recognition Award goes to...”

I didn't even hear the name of the person he announced. No-one did. In fact, I couldn't even see the guy anymore. Arms were flying in my direction, hugging me, kissing me, high-fiving me, attempting to pick me up and spin me around.

Amidst it all, I felt his presence. A thick arm curling around me, chaperoning me through the hysterical audience. Hands were pounding on tables, feet were stamping on floors, voices were yelling out their congratulations. And all I knew was Jude had me. He kept everyone at a distance so they wouldn't press on my bruises or suffocate me after my ordeal. He did all the thanking and the smiling, which was helpful seeing as I was too shocked to speak.

Jude tried to let me go, to walk the steps to the stage on my own, but I held his hand fast. I wasn't doing this without him. Reluctantly, he guided me up the stairs towards the host who was beaming from ear-to-ear, brandishing what looked like an enormously heavy brass statue.

With his free hand, the host pulled me to the center of the stage and placed me in front of the microphone. I sensed a boom mic overhead and a film crew zoning in on my face. I turned to see Jude but he'd stepped back, out of shot, telling me in no uncertain terms this was my moment, not his.

The rest of the evening was a complete blur. I don't even remember what I said in my speech, although Carlos and Sheridan had since both relayed snippets—Sheridan gushing about how I couldn't thank everyone fast enough, and Carlos whining about how his name wasn't the first to roll off my tongue. I remembered being approached by pretty much every person who worked in the industry, even close rivals and people who'd refused us opportunities after Hoffman tried to do his worst. And I remembered that throughout it all, Jude never left my side.

When we finally came home, he steered me away from the room that was now cordoned off with police tape, into his own, and sat me down while he recalled every single compliment and congratulations, in wonder. And when I chastised him for not taking due credit for the achievement, he held my face and sternly told me it was my success, and mine alone. No-one could have or would have gone to the lengths I did, or had the ideas I had. Yes, I had a great team behind me who followed my lead. But the success was all mine and I should shut the fuck up and enjoy it.

I wasn't really listening. I was watching the ripple of his muscles beneath his shirt as he paced the room recalling every little thing with the sexiest smile on his face. I was stroking my gaze up and down his form as it moved around drawing the light with it. I was gripping my thighs together tightly, ignoring the burning sensation around my wound, knowing that if I didn't do something soon, I would explode from sheer lust.

He paced and talked non-stop for an hour. Only when I walked over to him, pulled his pants over his hips and took him in my mouth, did he finally give it up.

I LISTENED, laughing, as Mum recounted a story about when I asked the entire front row at my school performance if they'd liked the show. "There was a time when she craved the attention," Mum said. "It was hilarious to watch."

"I wish I'd been there," Jude grinned.

Mum shook her head, smiling. "Kids change so much as they grow up. Things happen, things affect them, and before you know it, they're adults and they're out of your hands." She looked at me with melancholy in her eyes, prompting me to wrap my arms around her for the fiftieth time since she'd arrived.

"I don't ever want to be out of your hands, Mum," I muttered into her hair.

"Well..." Jude interrupted. "I was hoping, actually, Mrs. Delaney..."

Both Mum and I twisted to face him. He suddenly looked nervous and was standing over us both, rocking from foot-to-foot.

"That you might be ok with me taking her off your hands completely?"

I squinted at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, if you stand up, I'll tell you," he said, impatiently.

I did as he asked, feeling my mum's hand clasped around my own giving it a squeeze.

Without warning, Jude dropped to one knee.

I flung a hand across my mouth and he bent around me to face my mum.

"Is that a yes? It's kind of urgent."

Mum hiccupped a sob. "Yes! Have her."

“In that case,” he returned to me, his eyes glistening. “Diana Delaney, you infuriatingly stubborn, insanely talented, stunningly beautiful woman... You have a lot to answer for; I thought I was happy until I met you. Well, not happy as such, but I thought I had life sussed. Then you came along and turned everything upside down. Suddenly, I didn’t want to be a board member of a sexy, edgy club; I didn’t want to be the CEO of one of the world’s biggest record labels; I didn’t want to be an inactive bachelor-about-town anymore. I wanted to be a boyfriend; I wanted to sit on the bed and cuddle and watch Netflix; I wanted to be sitting with the cool kids listening to rock music instead of discussing employment contracts with a bunch of businessmen. I wanted to make the mad jump from a successful career to co-leading a label everyone wanted to have shut down.”

He watched me as the tears rolled down my face, and his voice quietened.

“I wanted to tell you about my past; I wanted to talk to you about my father and the grief and regret I live with every day. I wanted to share with you the pain I feel whenever I think about the words my mother said to me. All things I never knew I wanted until I met you.”

“I love you,” I mouthed silently.

“But one of those things,” he continued. “I don’t want anymore.”

I moved my hand from my mouth down to my chest, trying to still my heart.

“I don’t want to be a boyfriend anymore.”

He tucked a hand into his pants and pulled out a small box.

“I’m sorry I haven’t taken you anywhere special to do this. I wanted your mum to be a part of it and she’s only here for a few days...”

I stared, wide-eyed, at the giant diamond blinking up at me from the open box.

“I want to be your husband, Diana. Will you marry me?”

I collapsed onto my knees and took his face in my hands, peppering it with kisses.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,” I whispered, each time my lips parted from his skin.

I heard my mum sobbing behind me, and I reached out to take her hand while pulling Jude into my neck. I had never been happier. I had everything I’d ever wanted, and right then I wanted nothing more than what was right there, in that room.

EPILOGUE



Jude squeezed my hand as we opened the door to Cherry's dressing room. The atmosphere inside hit us like a wave. Music pumped out of a speaker in the far corner of the room and numerous scantily clad people—men and women—were running from wall to wall fetching makeup and items of clothing, reading out cards from well-wishers over the loud noise, and flying high with adrenaline. I noticed Ayda grinding to the music against Cherry's friend Callum, and Amber, the bassist from Jilted, strutting around miming to the lyrics. I couldn't see Cherry until the makeup artist stepped to one side. Our eyes locked and she squealed.

"You're here! Oh my God, Di, I'm freaking out!"

I rushed over and gave her a giant hug, taking care not to ruin the makeup artist's handiwork.

"You're going to be amazing. The crowd out there is going nuts."

"This is my biggest gig, ever," she said, eyeing me seriously.

"And you've earned it," I assured her.

It was the truth. Cherry had come a long way since the days of demanding three thousand thread count Egyptian cotton-clad sheets and being photographed falling out of cabs with her latest fling on her tail. The threat of Phoenix's closure had rocked her; it had made her realize a future in this industry wasn't guaranteed. She'd not only stopped her demands, she'd

offered herself up to do whatever she could to help the cause. She'd worked overtime doing promotion, she'd taken on her own styling and social media management, growing her own following by showing her true self and being honest about the challenges she'd faced on the road to stardom. And her craft had grown all the stronger for it. The songs she'd been writing were deeply personal, sometimes tragic, often rallying. She'd been described by music critics the world over as a breath of air for the mainstream-numbed Gen Z.

Ayda wasn't far behind Cherry in the charts with her jazzy edge. She appealed to a broader, arguably more sophisticated audience that didn't gobble up every release and instead waited for the albums which were played at dinner parties and chilled-out gatherings in hundreds of thousands of homes. Both had become firm friends and I watched them dote on each other like a proud mother.

"Jude," Cherry smiled, seeing my fiancé at my side. "Thank you so much for coming."

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," he grinned. "I can't wait to see you up there on that stage."

"Did you know Billie Eilish is here?" Cherry said, her voice trembling.

"I saw," I said.

"And one of the Jonas Brothers," Jude added. "Although I never know which is which."

I jabbed him in the ribs. "At least you know our acts—that's the main thing."

"Darlings!" I didn't need to look round to know who'd just burst into the room—I'd be able to pick out that voice anywhere.

"Hello Carlos," I turned to plant a large kiss on his cheek.

"This looks like the after party," he sang. "Have I missed the show?"

"Come here, you," Cherry reached out her arms to pull him in. "I need some Carlos courage, I'm so scared."

I watched them both cuddle and slid an arm around Jude's waist, feeling him kiss the top of my head.

"Have you seen Shez?" I asked Carlos' back.

"She's gone straight to her seat. Wants to make out with her new man I reckon,"

"She's brought Dean?" My voice rose a level. "I can't wait to meet him!"

And I couldn't wait to catch up with my friend. She had barely come up for air since Dean Rogerson, an investment banker from Chicago, had asked her on a date. She'd been working like a trojan but every other spare minute had been taken up with her new love interest and I couldn't be happier for her.

"We'll head down," I said to Cherry. "Do you have everything you need?"

"I could do with a double..." she said, her face fearful.

"Double vodka? Double scotch? Your wish is my command," Carlos replied.

"No, a body double, you heathen," she prodded him.

"I can stay with you," I said, seriously. She was about to play again at Madison Square Gardens, only this time, on her own, with only one support act. If she hadn't been crapping her pants, I'd have been worried.

"No, I'll be fine. Eric's here, Carlos and Ayda will come with me, and the rest of the team. You go inside."

"Ok, if you're sure."

"I am. You better come back here afterwards though. I have a free day tomorrow so tonight I am going to party!"

"You bet." I hugged her one last time. "I'm so proud of you, my angel," I whispered in her ear.

When I pulled away she looked back at me with glistening eyes. "And I'm proud of you, Diana. I have you to thank for all of this."

I tried to shake my head but she grabbed it. “Thank you for believing in me.”

“Thank you for giving me someone to believe in,” I smiled, weakly. “I better go before I reduce us both to tears,” I added, squeezing her hand. “I love you. Break a leg!”

I let Jude pull me back through the crowded dressing room and out into the cool air of the corridor.

“God, I’m so nervous for her,” I said, as we made our way through the rabbit warren of corridors.

“I know you are. It’s rolling off you in waves. You need to chill.”

“I’ll be fine once she starts. It’s just all the preparation—so many people working to make so many things happen. So many opportunities for something to go wrong.”

“You need to calm down before we take our seats,” Jude muttered. “I can’t have you freaking out everyone else with your own anxiety.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Yes, you will,” he said, suddenly pulling me back to stand in front of him.

“What are you doing?”

“Tradition.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What are you talking about?”

Then I turned to look where his gaze had travelled and saw the door to the room where he’d fucked me over a speaker the last time we were at this venue.

“We can’t come backstage at Madison Square Gardens without a re-run of the real show.”

“Are you kidding me? I can’t miss the start...”

“We have twenty minutes...”

“You’ll have to be quick,” I warned, knowing it would take me less than five minutes to reach my own climax, knowing what he did to me.

He grabbed my hand, practically dragging me to the door, then he pulled me into the dark storage space.

“That won’t be a problem,” he whispered, his breath sending tendrils of desire across my skin. “With the memory of everything we did in here last time, and knowing exactly how to make you come, and seeing you dressed like a fucking goddess, I have no doubt we can do this quickly. The question for me is this: Do I want to fuck you quickly? Or do I want to draw it out for as long as I can, until you are on your knees begging me to end the agony. Hmm?”

He trailed a finger down my cheek and held my waist tightly as my knees turned to jelly. In the dark I could only just see his eyes but they were dancing, reminding me of when I could only see them through the slits in his drape; reminding me of the times he couldn’t put me down the night of our first encounter; reminding me of the darkness in them when I finally gave into him after the press had hung him out to dry. I’d never known desire like it. We couldn’t get enough of each other. I thought having a night out together somewhere public like this, would give us both a break from the relentless need for closeness, for a release from the pent-up desire that built up through the day. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t go even one night without feeling this man around me, inside me, all over me.

I moaned as he dragged his lips from my lips across to my earlobe, taking it into his teeth and biting down softly.

A low, gentle growl left his throat and he hummed into my ear.

“Option B it is.”

The end.

Thank you for reading *Dirty Diana*! [CLICK HERE](#) to download *The Announcement*, the moment Diana discovers Jude’s her new CEO, from Jude’s perspective, for FREE!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

January James lives in the smallest cottage in East Sussex with her husband, daughter and imaginary cockapoo (she will get one, one day!) Until recently, she inhabited the fast-paced, adrenalin-fuelled workplaces she writes about, as a communications professional. Now she spends her days dreaming up new characters and stories and trying her best to avoid indoor soft play.

