



heart of a

REBEL

EVA SIMMONS

*heart of a*  
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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

The characters in this series are human and flawed, with real struggles, and real triumphs. Hard topics will be discussed with on and off page content that may be sensitive for some readers. Trigger warnings (which contain spoilers) can be found on my [website](#).

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# PLAYLIST

Bulletproof—Godsmack

Put Me in the Ground (feat. Austin Sawyer)—Daniel  
Nunnelee

Miss You All The Time—O.A.R

Unsteady—X Ambassadors

Bleed It Out—Linkin Park

Songs I Can't Listen To—Neon Trees

Bad Liar—Imagine Dragons

Where's My Love—SYML

Us—James Bay

In a Black Out—Hamilton, Leithauser, Rostam

Hurts Like Hell—Fleurie, Tommee Profitt

16—Highly Suspect

If I Get High—Nothing But Thieves

Taxi—The Maine

Savior—Rise Against

Feeling You—Harrison Storm

Only Love Can Hurt Like This—Paloma Faith

Stone—Jaymes Young

Drive You Home—Garbage

Sweet Nothing—Taylor Swift

In Need—Gert Taberner

All The Same—Sick Puppies

You can find the complete playlist on [Spotify](#).

For the survivors

## Verse One



*"Young love burning in heart homes.  
making decisions on wish bones."*





## ELOISE

IT MUST BE FREEING for the guys in the band—the lack of inhibition, the immaturity, the reckless abandon.

Half the time I'm convinced Sebastian, Noah, and Rome are only making music to be pawed at and fawned over. Like right now, as I watch them from across the bar and wonder if I'm the only one in this for the right reasons.

The groupies who flock to our shows are bad enough for a local band in Fairfield, California. What happens if Enemy Muse actually makes it big? Landing a record deal will amplify the troubles brewing inside them. And while I know deep down the guys care about the band as much as I do, their lack of self-control proves fame is going to test them on a whole other level.

Some days it feels like I'm the only one holding the four of us together. While they're getting their dicks sucked and spending our gig money on alcohol, here I am, once again, the only one trying to focus.

Because I'm here for the music. I'm here because there's nothing else worth doing with my life. There's no better feeling than the one I get with my guitar in my hands. Making music is my purpose.

"Eloise..." Sebastian is already slurring as he slings an arm around the back of my chair. "Stop working and join us."

His whiskey brown eyes barely manage to focus as he pushes his dark blond hair off his forehead. He started drinking with the rest of the band the moment our set ended, so it didn't take long before *a little* fun turned into *a lot* sloppy.

"I'm busy." I scribble down a few more words and try to ignore the heavy Bourbon scent on his breath.

I love my brother, but I'm not delusional. He's a trainwreck in the making.

It doesn't help that he's the twenty-one-year-old lead singer in our locally famous band. Being handed all the things I worry one day will be his downfall. Since day one, he's embraced the spoils of even mild success and enjoyed every bit of it. He might work his ass off behind the scenes, but his impulsiveness and vanity are trouble.

Sebastian tries to pull my notebook out of my hands, but I slap a palm over it, pinning it to the bar top.

"You can write tomorrow," he says. "We just finished our set, let's party."

"Noah and Rome not enough fun for you?" I narrow my eyes and glance over his shoulder.

Noah is seated at a table with his girlfriend, Kali, sitting in his lap. She's playing with his shoulder-length blond hair, and he's downing shots like they're water. Rome is across from them laughing, talking to some girl in a leather miniskirt.

"It's not the same without you, sis." Sebastian shoots me one of his ridiculously blinding grins, and I can't help but roll my eyes.

Sebastian doesn't actually want me to come over there to hang out and party. He wants me to chat up the ladies because he knows I'll be able to keep them around longer, giving him a chance to circle in. I'm not sure when the guys in the band turned me into their unofficial wing woman, but it's how they seem to view me lately.

I talk to our fans because I like hearing their thoughts on our shows and music—not so the guys can get in their pants.

"I'll join you guys in a minute, okay?" I sigh, knowing he's not going to let this go. "I just need to get this last verse out or I'll forget what I was trying to say."

Sebastian rolls his eyes but doesn't argue. He may be wasted and beyond the point of caring about work right now, but it doesn't mean he doesn't understand. We co-write all the songs for the band, giving us both a clear understanding of pushing through when inspiration strikes.

"Fifteen minutes." Sebastian points at me as he walks away, re-joining the guys at the table across the bar.



Another round of shots is being delivered and it churns something sour in my stomach. As much as I know we need this, and that staying in Fairfield isn't good for any of us, I'm not sure hitting it big will be much better.

"Can I get you a drink?"

I jump at the deep voice coming from behind the bar, realizing I've been spacing out staring at my brother.

Turning, I'm met with the sharpest brown eyes I've ever seen. Focused, rich, the color of cinnamon. An edge to them that is both fascinating and terrifying because it cuts to the core of me.

The bartender looks down at my glass. It's pooling with half-melted ice. "You're empty."

"Water, please." I push the glass his way.

It's not that I don't drink, but when the guys are having *a night*, it's usually better if I stay sober in case I need to drive their wasted asses home later.

The bartender nods and takes my glass. He fills it to the brim and slides it back in my direction.

When he takes a step back, crossing his arms over his chest, I realize how broad he is. Wide shoulders that stretch the fabric of his fitted white T-shirt. Dark skin skittered with tattoo ink. A tapered waist, making it clear he's solid muscle.

I swallow hard and hope he doesn't notice that I'm off balance all of a sudden. Something about the way he's

towering in front of me, watching me with such intent, tells me he probably does.

“What?” I lean back and cross my arms, mirroring his posture to disguise whatever he’s stirring up inside me.

This bartender might think he’s big and tough, but he doesn’t make me nervous. Dealing with cocky and intimidating men is the story of my life. Between the revolving door of assholes my mom dates, handsy fans at concerts, and the band of horny men I associate myself with, I’ve seen it all.

The smallest smirk ticks in the corner of the bartender’s mouth. “This isn’t your usual scene.”

I shrug a shoulder. “What makes you say that?”

His eyes drop to my water, my notebook, then move slowly back up again, pausing ever so briefly at the flowers tattooed on my shoulder. “Wild guess.”

“Whatever you say.” I shake my head, uncrossing my arms and picking up my pencil.

I’m not sure who this guy thinks he is, but I’m not going to entertain him with wherever this conversation is going. If a distraction is what I was looking for, I would have followed Sebastian back to the table.

I start writing again, but the bartender doesn’t take the hint. I feel his eyes on me, watching me while I write, and it’s unnerving.

“How old are you?” he asks.

Placing my pencil down harder than I have to, I narrow my eyes and look up at him. “Didn’t anyone teach you not to ask a lady her age?”

“Comes with the job.” His eyes move to a bottle of whiskey on the bar, then back to me.

“I’m not drinking.”

“You’re sitting at the bar.”

“No shit.” I roll my eyes and reach into my back pocket, pulling out my ID. “Here. Happy?”

He takes my ID off the bar and reads it over, those cinnamon eyes flicking between me and my picture. Finally, he slides it back to me and plants both hands flat on the bar top in front of him.

“Happy birthday,” he tips his chin down, but his face doesn’t crack a smile. “Shouldn’t you be celebrating?”

“I don’t know, should I?” I slide my ID into my back pocket.

“Twenty-one,” he points out. “Want me to pour you something a little stronger?”

I shake my head. “No thanks.”

Turning twenty-one loses its appeal when it doesn’t actually mark anything new in your life.

My mom wasn’t *parent of the year*, so I’ve known what it’s like to get drunk since I was thirteen. Then there’s the bar scene I’m already all too familiar with from the hundreds of

shows we've played over the past few years. More of the same, and none of it is exciting.

It might be my birthday, but all I feel is the start of another year where I'll be waiting for something to change. Into what? I still haven't figured that out.

The bartender's expression tightens like he's trying to read me, and something about his stare traps me in his cage.

"Is that all?" I roll my shoulders back and try to figure out what it is about him that's getting under my skin.

He nods, standing up tall.

"You're new, right?" I ask him, which gets me a curious expression in return.

He nods once. Everything about him is sharp, quick, to the point.

*And powerful.*

"Figured." I tap my pencil on my notebook, and although his eyes don't leave mine, I get the feeling he notices. Like he's the type of man to watch everything playing out around him, whether he's looking directly at it or not. "Haven't seen you here before."

"You just turned twenty-one today. How would you have?"

I keep my eyes on him, and the smallest smirk that crosses his face draws one on my own.

"I'm Eloise." I dodge his question.

“Adrian.” He breaks my stare, glancing over my shoulder and splitting his attention for a second. He scans the room like at any minute he expects something to happen. Something flashes in his eyes before his gaze once more drops, and he takes a step back to start drying a stack of freshly washed glasses.

“Whatcha working on?” He tips his head to my notebook but keeps his eyes averted, focusing on the glass in his hand instead.

I look down at the page of scribbles in front of me. Half words and half flowers decorating it. “A song.”

“You sing?”

“Sometimes.” I shrug.

It’s not that I don’t have the voice, but Sebastian was always the extrovert of the two of us. He was built for the limelight and all that comes with being the face of the band. Something our female fans seem to appreciate. And I don’t mind because I’d rather stick to my bass guitar and less obvious attention.

“What—”

“Adrian!” Sebastian yells, cutting Adrian off, and I turn to see my brother barreling in our direction.

In the last ten minutes, he’s managed to get drunker, because there’s the faintest stumble to his step now.

Sebastian stops beside me and plants his palms on the bar like he’ll fall over if he doesn’t. He reaches a hand outward and Adrian takes it, giving him a half hug over the bar.

“I didn’t know you were working tonight.” Sebastian grins, then he turns to me. “Remember that guy I was telling you about with the recording space?”

*Recording space* is a stretch. Sebastian said he had this friend with a spare room we could use for recording our demo. He didn’t even mention where he met him, just that the guy offered to help out when Sebastian said we needed somewhere quiet that wasn’t a garage.

“This is the guy.” Sebastian juts a thumb in Adrian’s direction and looks thoroughly amused.

“Nice to meet you,” I say, and he nods back like we haven’t already just done this.

Of course he’s Sebastian’s friend. I’m not sure there’s a guy in town my brother doesn’t know from one place or another. And apparently, Adrian’s no exception.

Sebastian throws his arm around my shoulders. He reeks of alcohol and almost pushes me over at the sheer force of his body’s inability to balance his weight.

“This is the sister I was telling you about.” He rubs his knuckle on the top of my head like I’m a child.

I swat him away, annoyed. We might be twins, but Sebastian likes to treat me like his little sister just because he’s older by two minutes. Not that those one hundred and twenty seconds have done anything to improve his maturity level.

Adrian looks me up and down, those cinnamon eyes knowing just what to do to make me feel vulnerable at one

gaze, before looking back at Sebastian. “You’re coming by this weekend?”

“We’ll be there.” Sebastian shakes my shoulders. “Speaking of, you done, El? Come on and fucking party. It’s our birthday.”

I roll my eyes because I’ve told him a hundred times, I don’t give a shit, but he never listens.

“I’m not partying.” I frown. “Just tell me what you actually want.”

Sebastian leans in close to my ear. “See that chick over at the table in the itty-bitty red tank top?”

I peek over his shoulder and spot some blonde chick sitting between Noah and Rome, matching that description. “Yeah.”

“She’s playing hard to get.” Sebastian shakes his head. “Come over and do that thing you do. Make me look good.”

“What am I, a miracle worker?”

I might imagine it, but I’m pretty sure Adrian snorts in amusement at my comment.

“Funny.” Sebastian stands up and nudges me on the arm. “Come on sis, let’s have some fun.”

I slap my notebook shut and tuck it into my bag. “I’ll be there in a second.”

Sebastian ruffles my hair, then turns to Adrian. “Saturday.”

“Saturday.” Adrian nods, as Sebastian disappears back to the table.

“Sure you don’t want that drink?” Adrian asks me again, looking from me to the increasingly rowdy group of guys in the corner.

I shake my head. “I’d just throw it at them.”

My comment makes Adrian smile for the first time tonight, and I hope he doesn’t notice my breath catching in my chest at the sight of it. Lightning might as well flash in the sky with the force of thunder I feel rolling behind my ribs because his grin is striking.

“Guess I’ll be seeing you around then.” Adrian places a glass in the drying rack and plants his hands once more on the bar in front of me.

I slide out of my stool. “Guess so.”

“Looking forward to it.” He nods, the faintest hint of interest in his eyes as he watches me turn and walk away.

I’m not sure how to interpret his statement, much less the knot his words formed inside me. But it doesn’t matter. I’m not looking for a boyfriend, especially some guy who’s friends with my brother.

All I need right now is myself and my music—for my dreams to take me far away from Fairfield, California.

Men with Adrian’s magnetic eyes are going to have to wait.



**ADRIAN**

I JOLT AWAKE. SWEAT drips down my neck and soaks through my T-shirt. My ears are still ringing, even if only in my imagination, and my heart is racing in my chest.

Light streaks through the window, and it takes me a minute to catch my bearings.

*Home.*

*You're home.*

I take a deep breath and climb out of bed, reminding myself the floor isn't the same as the minefield in my memories. But it doesn't stop me from taking careful steps and assessing every inch of the room. Muscle memory reminds me to stay on high alert because I know at any moment things can be fine, and then—

*Chaos.*

*Destruction.*

*Obliteration.*

Turning on the shower, I step under the cold water and let it wake me up fully. Shivers coil beneath my skin as reality shifts back into focus. I close my eyes to shake what's left of the nightmares, but I'm met with the face that haunts the back of my eyelids.

*Cerulean eyes.*

I turn the dial until the water is nearly scalding, but it isn't enough.

It's never enough.

Some things live with you in ways that go deeper than any memory you've saved from childhood. They brand you like embarrassment and pain. Leaving notches in your heart where their memory sliced a piece out. One cut at a time until you're Swiss cheese and they're gone.

In my support group, I hear that over time the nightmares become less frequent, and the ruin of war won't rest on the edge of your mind forever. That the unhinged reactions will lessen, instead of waiting to break out at any given moment.

Maybe they're right. Or maybe, I'm a failure of a soldier. Not strong enough in the midst of war, and still weak long after.

Climbing out of the shower, I dry off and slip into jeans and a T-shirt. I look in the mirror and notice the hair on the top of my head is growing out. My hands are itching to pull out the clippers and buzz it off. Habits they bred into me over the last eight years.

Three months as a civilian and I still can't seem to figure out what's routine and what's comfort. What's my motivation and what's theirs.

Raking my fingernails on the stubble dusting my jaw, I reach for my razor, but a knock at the door makes me pause.

The band isn't supposed to be here until later in the afternoon, and knowing Sebastian, I figured they would be late. After all, they're a blast to be around when your main goal is to forget the shit in your head, but I can't help thinking that's the same quality that will get them in trouble when they're famous.

I'm not sure why I offered to let the band record at my house. I like my space. I like the quiet. Sebastian caught me at a weak moment, unloading his stress when I was straight out of a therapy session. And as much as I want to disappear in my own loneliness, all I could hear when Sebastian said he and his band were looking for a place to work on their music, was my shrink's voice in my head.

*Your determination to stay alone is killing you.*

So I offered up my den, handing myself over to the chaos that follows Sebastian and his band.

What does it matter anyway? It's not like this is my home. It's my dad's. He might have passed away at the end of my final tour and left it to me, but these walls are his. His hard work, his memories, his love. While I was absent and not appreciating a man I'll never have the chance to prove myself

to. Everything about this place is simply another reminder of the life I stepped out of and can't seem to fit back into.

Another knock echoes through the house, and I make my way to the door. I glance at my phone and it's only ten in the morning. There's no way it's Sebastian.

Reaching the handle, I swing the door open, and burnt umber eyes stare back at me. So dark with her thick eyelashes that they feel like midnight. Flecked with a hint of gold that sparkles like stars a younger version of myself would be naïve enough to wish on.

Eloise Kane, Sebastian's twin sister.

I didn't know who she was when I first saw her sitting at the bar earlier this week. It took a minute of looking at her ID before I realized she shared a birthday and last name with her brother to put it together. And fuck if I wasn't a little disappointed at the thought that she's probably off-limits.

There she was at the dingy bar I work at. Her sandy brown hair was pulled into a slick ponytail and she was writing in her notebook instead of drinking. She looked like she belonged at a catholic school in her tiny white T-shirt and plaid pleated skirt. She shone brightness into the dark space around her.

I might not know much about Eloise, but it's clear she belongs in places better than I deserve.

But there she was, with the kind of pain in her eyes I couldn't quite place—even if I recognized it.

“Eloise.” I nod.

Her gaze works me over. Ticking from the top of my head, downward, assessing. I might have only met her once, but it's clear she's the type who can read people. Her stare strips to the soul so she can peek in and roam around. Only, I'm not most people, so good luck with reading me.

Eloise's midnight eyes dart back to mine. "Sebastian said he texted, letting you know I'd be here early."

I pull my phone out of my pocket and swipe through my messages. There's nothing from him, so I shake my head.

"Wonderful." She rolls her eyes. "The one thing he needed to remember..."

Her jaw tightens, and I get that same impression that I did when I met her the other night—she might be Sebastian's twin, but she's nothing like her brother. While he's reckless and impulsive, Eloise is calm, collected, and in control. Even now, when I can tell she's irritated, she rolls her shoulders back and squares her posture.

"It's fine." I prop my forearm against the doorframe. "What can I help you with?"

"Please tell me he at least mentioned the acoustic foam."

I nod. "For soundproofing."

"At least he did that." She grumbles, looking down and shaking her head.

Today, her hair is down. It's long and stick straight, spilling like silk over her shoulders and resting midway down her chest.

“Did you bring the foam?” I ask, looking over her shoulder at the van parked against the curb.

She’s on a delivery mission, alone. Guess the guys in the band have no fucking manners.

Eloise’s gaze follows mine. “Yeah, it’s all in there. Noah was supposed to meet me here to help, but his car crapped out on him so he’s running late.”

“He should get that looked at.”

“The car?”

I nod.

“Car is code for girlfriend,” Eloise shakes her head, laughing so sweetly I’m tempted to taste it. “She’s not our biggest fan.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“It’s something, all right.” Eloise presses her lips together. “He’ll be here... Eventually.”

Having met this girl only once, I’m not sure why I care that the guys bailed on her. Or why it grinds my gears that she’s solely responsible for setting things up for them, but I can’t help it. Maybe it’s that she’s alone, or maybe it’s the familiar darkness in her eyes, growing like ivy climbing my ribs. Either way, it’s a feeling I can’t escape.

“Let me help.” I tip my chin toward the van and open the front door further.

Eloise's dark eyes skim me over like they did when she first arrived. "You don't have to. The stuff is light. Besides you're already giving us the space to do this—"

"It's fine." I slip on my shoes and walk past her before she can argue.

At the bar, she was sitting down for the majority of our conversation, so I never got the full effect of her height compared to mine. But walking ahead of me, I realize she's taller than I remember, even if I still tower over her with my six-foot-three frame. She's five seven or five eight, at least, and mostly legs.

She's thin, but curvy at the hips, and I have to fight my instincts to not stare at her ass swaying from side to side as she makes her way in front of me. She's a pendulum swinging. Because she moves like she acts—elegant, graceful, careful.

But with all her softness, there's a buried strength underneath Eloise Kane. I just can't put my finger on where it roots from yet.

Eloise opens the back of the van, and it's filled with big foam sheets that look a lot like egg cartons.

Sebastian might not have texted about Eloise showing up early, but he did mention they'd be hanging shit up to absorb sound—or whatever the fuck he was talking about. I was only half listening and don't really care. I've got too many rooms in this house and nothing to do with them. If it makes the band happy to make one look like a padded cell and sing in it, then they can have at it.

“This is really nice of you.” Eloise grabs a couple of the pads and holds them in her arms.

I take a stack and we head back toward my house. “It’s no problem.”

“You live here alone?” Eloise’s eyes dart over her shoulder as she watches me move around her to open the front door and let her in.

“Do now.” I open it and she walks past me.

This wasn’t what I pictured for myself when I joined the military straight out of high school. I assumed if I ever came back home after I got out, he would still be here. I was young, naïve, unaware of what eight years could do to two people.

Him, his disease.

Me, my sanity.

“My dad passed a little less than a year ago,” I say. “This place was his.”

Usually, I’m not one to bring that kind of shit up unprompted, so I’m not sure where it came from.

“I’m sorry.” Eloise frowns, and it seems genuine.

“It’s fine,” I lie. She doesn’t want to hear me spill my guilt about how I wasn’t here for him in the end. “He left the house to me when he died. I didn’t have anywhere else to go after eight years in the military. So, here I am.”

I stop at the doorway to a large den that sits on the opposite side of the house from the living room. “Here we are.”



“It’s perfect.” She looks around the room, and the first genuine smile I’ve seen from her crosses her face. It’s hypnotizing, making me realize for the first time since meeting her that this might be a terrible idea because she draws something strange out of me.

In the eight years I was gone, most of my childhood friends moved away. Either that or moved on. They got married and started families. So when I met Sebastian outside a convenience store a month ago, and he invited me to chill with a few of his buddies, it sounded better than spending another night sitting at home trying to forget the fact that my life is shrapnel flung all over the place.

I thought it would be a distraction filling my time with the band. So I offered them a space to record their demo while I figure out what the fuck I’m going to do with my life. What I didn’t expect when I invited the band into my house was to be blindsided by their bass player, Sebastian’s sister.

One look and she grew life in places sunshine should no longer be able to reach inside me. But Eloise did. Her eyes were roots splitting my foundation. An earthquake I couldn’t help but let rip through me.

We carry a few more loads of soundproofing foam into the house before starting to hang them. It’s not nearly enough to cover the walls, but Eloise seems determined to make it work as best as she can. She starts strategically placing them on the walls she thinks are best, moving them around as needed.

I hold the pieces of foam up for her when she can't reach them, and she's content to work in mostly silence, which I appreciate.

I've never been much of a talker. Which usually pisses off the girls I date because they assume it's an excuse for me to guard my feelings. But Eloise doesn't seem to mind.

She hums quietly to herself, and I wonder if she's working through a song in her head.

Her phone pings and she frowns at it.

"Everything okay?"

She rolls her shoulders back. "Noah's heading over. Now that we're done, of course."

Her midnight eyes flick up to me and there's amusement mixed with irritation. She tucks her phone into her pocket without responding to his text.

"Not going to tell him we're done?"

"Nope," she shakes her head. "If he's going to miss all the work, then he can at least show up and be inconvenienced."

I chuckle, getting the impression the guys in the band put Eloise through the wringer but also that she makes them pay for it when they do.

"I'm gonna head out for a bit, but I'll be back later." Eloise grabs her purse and wraps it over her shoulder. It's knitted, with bright flowers all over it. "You don't mind updating Noah when he finally drags his whipped ass over here?"

“Not at all.” I grin, and her gaze drops to my mouth for the briefest second.

When did we get so close to each other? She’s backed herself against the doorframe and I’m standing directly in front of her. This close she smells like honeysuckle, jasmine, and flowers. Like a whole fucking garden mid-bloom.

I take a step back and straighten up, the action drawing the slightest pinch between her eyebrows. I’d like to think it’s disappointment, but that’s dangerous.

I’m not sure what it is about Eloise that feels like a vine slowly wrapping around my throat. She’s quiet and gentle on the outside, but I feel the sharp sting of her thorns hidden underneath. They cut straight through.

I shake the thought from my head. “See you later then.”

She gives me a half smile before disappearing through the doorway.

The last thing I need right now is a girlfriend. Or a distraction of any kind, for that matter. Taking a deep breath, I put my fucked-up brain in check.

Eloise is in the band, Sebastian’s sister, that’s all.

*Keep your distance.*

My decimated heart can’t take another attachment. Much less, my sanity.

**ELOISE**

MY FINGERTIPS ARE RAW from the scrape of the guitar strings, but my skin isn't where I feel the music shredding me. Every song strips away a layer of my soul, baring my identity. I pour myself into my music, into this moment. I close my eyes and forget anything else— *anyone* else in the room.

It's only me and this beat I've carved from my heart. Lyrics I wrote that my brother's voice uses as a tool to pierce my subconscious.

The words peeling back my secrets like the petals of a flower blooming. Bursting to their full form with color and light. Shriveling when the darkness overwhelms them, but not enough to destroy the roots.

I strum my guitar and lose myself in the song coming to life.

*“Young love burning through heart homes*

*Making decisions on wishbones.*

*Thinking on adrenaline*

*Burning tracks in our skin*

*Rendered unstoppable*

*But we are flesh*

*Nothing more*

*Nothing less*

*It rots, it scrapes, it burns, it breaks*

*We are, we are, we are*

*Human mistakes*

*We are flesh*

*Nothing more*

*Nothing less*

*They'll take, and take, and take, and take*

*We are, we are, we are*

*Bound to break”*

When I hear our songs live, sometimes I wonder where they came from, even knowing I wrote half of them. They sound like pieces peeking through some kind of darkness inside me, and I wonder who else hears them. It makes me wonder who I really am. Because our fans always seem to think I'm strong but inside emptiness echoes.

“What the fuck, Rome?” Sebastian stops singing and the music cuts out.

With his words, my trance breaks and I open my eyes, blinking reality back into focus. I’m met with the sight of Adrian’s den, where we’ve been practicing all day. Sebastian stands directly in front of Rome with an annoyed expression.

“What?” Rome shrugs a shoulder, but he’s wearing that smug grin that’s always getting him in trouble.

Sebastian tips the microphone at him. “You’re playing this fucking song differently every time.”

“Would you rather I figure out how I want it to sound now, or in the middle of the showcase?” Rome taps his fingers against his guitar and levels Sebastian with a glare.

“What are you still figuring out?”

Rome narrows his eyes, but somehow, they still manage to hold the wickedness brought on by his smile. “Not sure, hence the figuring.”

Sebastian tips his head back, annoyed. It’s been a long day and the guys are on edge. I should have expected it at this point. We can only practice for so long before one of us is bound to start arguing with the others.

We fight like siblings.

It doesn’t matter that Sebastian and I are the only two related by blood, we are all family seeing as the band is the only real family any of us are willing to acknowledge at this point.

Sebastian and I have been independent most of our lives. When our mom wasn't using, she was in jail, so she wasn't winning any awards for mother of the year. She didn't show up at back-to-school nights or care if we had a permanent address. She cared about drugs, and we've mostly been an inconvenience to her. That or a reminder of our absent father.

Then, there's Rome. He doesn't talk about his family much, not even to us. Only enough for me to know his mom is dead and his dad is an abusive asshole who should be in prison for the things he's done. At seventeen, Rome moved out and started crashing on our couch, and as far as I know, that's the last time he saw any of his blood relatives.

Noah is the only one in the band who actually has a family that appears well-adjusted. He grew up in the rich part of town, going to the best schools, and was part of the church choir. He had the white-picket-fence childhood with two parents and a handful of siblings. But ever since he joined the band, there's been a rift forming between him and them, and with every passing day it widens. They don't approve of the band or the fact that he wants to pursue music. And even if Noah's got the biggest heart of anyone I've ever met, all they do is resent it.

So here we are—the four of us forming a patchwork family of our own. Making music and pretending our pasts haven't done irreparable damage.

Noah's phone starts ringing, interrupting Sebastian and Rome's pissing contest as they both turn to face him.

“What?” Noah grins, pulling it out of his pocket.

“Tell your fucking girlfriend we’re practicing,” Rome says.

Noah ignores the annoyance in his tone and steps away to take the call.

“Maybe we should call it a day.” I pull my guitar off my shoulder. “We all know where this is going.”

There’s no doubt in my mind Kali is already convincing Noah to go hang out with her, which he’ll easily be talked into. Besides, Sebastian and Rome have hit their limit. If we don’t stop now, things will only get worse.

The front door opens, and I swear the energy in the house shifts when Adrian walks in. His dark cinnamon eyes find me first as he turns the corner and strikes me with his powerful presence.

It’s distracting, to say the least.

I might appreciate the fact that Adrian lets us use his home as our own personal studio, but it also means there’s no escape—from him, or whatever it is he sends tumbling in my stomach.

I’m just thankful that in the month we’ve been working on our demo at his house, I haven’t seen much of him. He goes to work at the bar, says hello in passing, hangs with the guys, and lets them throw the occasional party. Other than that, he keeps to himself.

And he avoids me like the plague. Or maybe it’s my imagination.



“Adrian, man.” Rome grins as Adrian makes his way into the room. “What’s good tonight? Eloise just cut us off for the day, so we should party.”

Adrian’s gaze slides in my direction, striking me with a current of energy. I turn away and start messing with my guitar before he senses what it does to me. Or worse, before the guys notice.

“I’m not working tonight,” Adrian says. “We can chill here if you want.”

He’s inviting chaos to his house with his statement, but he already knows it.

“Fuck yeah,” Rome cheers, pulling out his phone and typing away.

All Rome needs is the word, and he’ll have people showing up in a matter of minutes. He hates to be alone, so he has an uncanny ability to summon a party out of thin air. Plus, Rome has the personality of someone who can bring the most random groups of people together. He knows everyone and everything that is happening. He’s the social glue in our band and my exact opposite.

I admire Rome’s ability to mesh into any social situation, but I also know he uses it as a shield. He surrounds himself with distractions, so he doesn’t have to deal with whatever kicks up inside him when he’s alone.

“You guys have fun.” I wrap my purse over my shoulder and get ready to leave.

Sebastian stops me as I try to make my way past him. “Come on, El, it’s not even nine. Stay. Chill. Be cool for once.”

For some reason they think that because I don’t like to spend my nights wasted with a rotating roster of men in my bed, I’m a buzz kill. It’s called self-preservation. Not that I’ll bother trying to explain that to my brother.

“I’m tired.”

“You’re always tired.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Some of us don’t sleep until two in the afternoon. I’ve been up since seven.”

“Pound a Red Bull then.” Sebastian grabs onto my shoulders and turns me toward him. His lips turn down dramatically and he sags his shoulders. “*Please.*”

I hold his gaze, trying to break him with the irritation radiating out of me. There’s no use. My brother knows that whatever he asks, I’ll do it because I love him.

“Fine.” I unwrap my purse, knowing I’m giving in too quickly, but I don’t have the energy to care. I look over at Adrian. “Mind if I put my shit in your room?”

Who knows how many people Rome and Sebastian will invite over here? The last thing I need is someone rummaging through my things.

Adrian nods his head and I follow him down the hall as Rome’s phone starts ringing. I hear him assigning people shit to bring—which mostly consists of booze and weed. Tonight

is going to be a shit show, but maybe that's not so bad for once.

Recording this demo has been exhausting, and we only have a few more weeks to finish it before the showcase at the end of the month. Rumor is, a few big labels are going to be there, including Neon Records. If we're lucky, this could be the big break we've been working toward.

Our ticket out of this town.

In three weeks, everything might change, and I've never been more ready for it.

Adrian pushes the door to his bedroom open, and I step inside. It's bare and minimalistic, like the rest of the house. Nothing on the walls and spotless. His bed is perfectly made, and I wonder if it's the military that made him like this or if he's always been this precise and clean.

"You can set your stuff anywhere." Adrian waves his arm out to the room as he makes his way over to the closet. All his clothes are hung, sorted, and arranged flawlessly.

I drop my purse on his dresser, and in the mirror, I catch sight of Adrian's back as he strips his T-shirt off and tosses it into the hamper. He's solid muscle, every inch of him thick and carved. Not only is he tall, but he's wide, and he carries himself in a way that makes him seem even larger than he is.

He reaches for a pale blue T-shirt and slips it on, covering himself once more, and I dip my eyes to my purse before he turns and catches me staring.

Zippering it closed, I turn and am met with his dark stare. For a man as large as Adrian, he moves quietly, somehow crossing the distance of the room without a sound. This close, I'm flooded with the scent of black licorice and the faintest hint of gasoline lingering from him riding his motorcycle around town.

The spice of his scent and how he towers over me compounds, and I have to remind myself he's my brother's friend. He's doing the band a favor, and I don't need a man in my life right now. Because without this constant replay of reminders, I might be tempted to throw myself at him just to find out if it really feels as safe as I think it would in his arms.

The doorbell rings, and it breaks our unspoken staring contest.

"That was fast." Adrian's gaze moves to the empty doorway as voices start to fill the house.

"This is Rome we're talking about." I quirk an eyebrow.

"Point taken." Adrian steps aside, holding an arm out to allow me past him. "After you."

For a man of few words, every action speaks volumes. How he holds open doors, how he's always observing, how he prefers his back to the wall and doesn't let his guard down in any situation. How he takes care of those around him, whether he's known you for five minutes or five years. I'm not sure if it's habit or in the fabric of his nature, but Adrian's always guarding and protecting.

“You ready for all hell to break loose?” I nudge Adrian’s arm as I walk past, realizing it’s a mistake the moment I do it. The feel of his skin on mine is an electrical pulse that radiates to my bones.

“Always.” Adrian looks down at me, his eyes dark and focused. “Hell, I can handle.”

My whole body shivers at his statement—at his eyes. I have no doubt those words hold more truth than he wants them to. And for the briefest second, I think he’s given me a peek behind the curtain of Adrian Hale, making me want to see even more.

**ADRIAN**

MY HOUSE REEKS OF booze and hormones, and at only twenty-seven, I already feel like I'm growing out of this shit.

Those first few years in the military, I had no problem burning through my paychecks and drowning myself in whiskey every time I was on leave. But now all I seem to find at the bottom of a bottle are more demons. And I've got enough of those in my nightmares to not need them walking around with me when I'm awake.

So I sit in the corner of the room assessing. Sipping on a glass of cheap whiskey that burns from my throat to my stomach. I watch the chaos unfold around me and let it drown out my thoughts. At least I'm not alone tonight. I'll deal with this mess of people if it means they quiet all the shit in my head.

Noah disappeared when the party started, but the rest of the band settled in, making my home their own.

Rome's playing poker at the kitchen table as per usual. He's finding ways to swindle people out of shit. I'm not sure I've ever met someone so competitive, but he seems set on winning at everything.

Sebastian's sitting on the couch beside me chatting up his buddy Myth. I don't know Myth well, only that he spends a lot of time with Sebastian. Apparently, they met a year ago when Myth moved from Seattle to California. And from what I gather, he's been a fixture around the band ever since.

Right now, Sebastian and Myth are exaggerating a story about their latest show to get the attention of a few girls circling around them. If the guys in the band spent half as much time focusing on music as they do on picking up chicks, they probably would've made it big already. But that's twenty-one-year-old guys for you, thinking with their fucking dicks.

I'd like to say I'm better than that, but it would be a lie. I'm not blind, and I haven't failed to notice Eloise standing in a circle of women almost directly in front of me. Every time the song changes, she swishes her hips and seems to physically adjust to the music with her body, appreciating every pulse of the song playing. I'm not sure she even knows she does it.

She's wearing a black tank top and red leather pants that might as well be liquid with how they hug her ass. Something myself and a few other guys in the room are noticing.

I watch them circle like vultures. Cutting in and out of the conversation in an attempt to draw her attention. I grip my glass tighter every time they get a little too handsy or press a

little too close, waiting for one of them to cross a line and give me a reason to work out a little bit of my aggression, but they don't.

Eloise either doesn't notice or doesn't care, giving them the same friendly, but guarded smiles I'm becoming familiar with from her. It's rare she spares real emotion for a person. That seems reserved for the select few who make it into her inner circle. A place I'm yet to be accepted.

"Isn't that right, Adrian?" Myth knocks me on the arm, grabbing my attention.

I'm not sure what the fuck he's talking about, which isn't unusual. Between him and Sebastian, they're always doing a lot of talking, and I can't help but tune them out after a while.

I nod to pacify whatever the fuck was said, and it seems to do the trick. Myth raises an eyebrow like I've just confirmed something important, and the girls standing in front of the couch widen their eyes, impressed.

"Exactly." Myth's face splits in a wide grin. "In three weeks, Enemy Muse is going to go from small-town rookies to worldwide legends. I'm calling it."

The showcase is coming up quickly, which is why the band has been spending every spare minute in my den. They're getting better by the day, and there's no doubt in my mind that Myth is right. They're going to be discovered. It's simply a matter of time.



“It’s going to be epic,” Sebastian says, tipping his head back on the couch with a grin.

“The shows, the parties.” Myth nudges him.

I shake my head. “A regular wasteland of debauchery.”

Sebastian shoots upright, he and Myth both looking at me. “Holy shit, Adrian. That’s perfect.”

I quirk an eyebrow.

“Wasteland of debauchery.” He waves his hands out in front of him like he’s reading it on a marquee. “That’s the name of the fucking album.”

“You’re kidding?” I shake my head, but he just reaches over and slaps my knee.

“It’s perfect, right?” Sebastian looks at Myth, then to the chicks standing there fawning over him, and they all smile and nod their heads. “Eloise!”

She looks over her shoulder, her eyes landing on Sebastian, before briefly skipping over to me. Sebastian waves her over and she looks a little annoyed by it, but she heads in our direction anyway.

“You need to hear this,” Sebastian says when she stops next to the group of girls. “Adrian came up with the name of the album.”

Her gaze darts in my direction.

“Not exactly.” I shake my head.

“Whatever, man, you said it.” Sebastian sits up tall and smiles wide. “Wasteland of Debauchery. What do you think?”

Eloise’s eyebrows pinch as she works it over. She might be looking at her brother, but her focus is inward, and I imagine the gears spinning in her head as she thinks about the title. Regardless of if I meant to say it or not, I’m genuinely curious about what she thinks.

Finally, her eyes narrow, and they fall on me. “I like it.”

Sebastian slaps me on the leg again and looks pleased with himself. “Told you, man, it’s perfect.”

“Whatever you say,” I shrug, brushing it off. “I’m gonna grab a drink.”

I stand up, but Sebastian jumps up with me, stopping right in front of me before I can walk away. He plants his hands on my shoulders and forces me to face him. “Adrian, man, you should join us.”

“I already told you I’d be there.”

“Not the showcase.” He shakes his head. “On the road.”

“I’ll leave the music to you guys.” I rest my hand on his shoulder and chuckle.

Sebastian looks me dead in the eyes with a straight face this time. “I’m not talking about the music; we’ve got that covered. What I’m saying is we’re gonna need people we can trust once we hit it big. People like you. We all know how that world is.”

I really don't, but I can guess. If the way the guys party now is any indication, I can only imagine what happens when you throw money and fame at the problem. It's a world I have no interest in being in.

"Think about it, Adrian." Sebastian drops his hands to his sides. "Myth is coming with us. You should too."

"Damn right." Myth tips his chin up at me.

"You could manage us. You've got your shit together."

I can't help but laugh because I'm sure it seems like I have my shit together from the outside. Little does Sebastian know I'm barely hanging on most days.

"Appreciate the offer." I shake my head. "But I don't know shit about music. You're better off finding someone who knows what the fuck they'd be talking about."

"El and I have the music part covered." Sebastian looks over at Eloise, and I realize she's been standing there listening intently.

Confusion and thought pool in her eyes as she nods.

"Music's the last thing I'm worried about," Sebastian says. "What we're gonna need is people in our corner who won't fuck us just because we're making them money. And you're good people, Adrian."

"And you're drunk," I point out.

Sebastian smiles so big a girl standing beside him gets hearts in her eyes. Give this guy a stadium and the world is in

fucking trouble.

“Indeed I am.” He grins. “Doesn’t mean I’m not serious.”

He shakes my shoulder before stepping back, sweeping his dark blond hair off his forehead.

“Think about it,” he says, sitting back down on the couch beside Myth and joining in on their conversation.

I look over at Eloise, who’s standing there with an unreadable expression on her face. She shrugs one shoulder, and I’m not sure what that means. If anyone can recognize a bad idea, it’s her, but that’s not what her expression is telling me.

I try to ignore it and brush it off.

Sebastian’s drunk and not thinking straight right now. Just because I’m a few years older than them and seem to know what the fuck I’m doing with my life, doesn’t make it true. I’m a landmine one step away from exploding most days.

I’m a man who spent eight years of his life thinking he was working for one thing, only to come out the other end with nothing to show for it other than night sweats and a bum shoulder.

I’m barely managing my own shit right now. Taking on someone else’s—a whole fucking band—that’s a bad idea waiting to happen. Not only do I know nothing about the industry, but I barely know anything about music.

I might be a fan of Enemy Muse since their sound doesn’t make my ears bleed, but beyond that, I don’t know shit about

the music industry.

“He’s not wrong.” Eloise breaks my train of thought, moving to stand right in front of me. “You’re thinking about it.”

I shake my head. “Not exactly.”

I’m checking off a long list of reasons in the *bad idea* column.

Eloise shrugs her shoulder. “We trust you, Adrian.”

“And that’s enough?”

Her dark eyes narrow, thinking that over. Golden flecks sparkling in the depths of them. “Who knows? But it’s something.”

Eloise turns and walks away, stopping when she gets to the edge of the room to look at me once more over her shoulder. The faintest smile ticks up in the corner of her mouth and it’s downright dangerous. A siren with honey brown hair spilling over her shoulders, calling out to me.

I have no doubt that three weeks from now, everything is going to change for the band. Sebastian, Rome, Noah, and Eloise will be those people on the radio I’ll hear and remember fondly someday. I’ll remember how they recorded their demo in my den and caused havoc in my house with their parties.

But I can’t join them. I’ve barely found my footing after having the ground literally blown out from underneath me.

When the time comes, I'll say goodbye, and let the emptiness claim me again. Just like I deserve.

**ELOISE**

PULLING UP TO MOM'S house, I realize I've traded one party for another. Cars spill down the driveway and into the street, and I can hear the music blaring before I even open my car door.

I tip my head back and consider heading back to Adrian's house. That's probably where Sebastian and Rome will end up crashing, and I'm sure Adrian would let me use his guest room if I wanted to get some sleep. But I peel myself from my car, needing to check on Mom first.

A week ago, she was sober again, but with the scene around me, I'm not sure that's the case.

I recognize a few faces as I make my way inside. They tip their chins up at me like we're friends, even though we aren't. If it were up to me, they'd take their drugs and leave us the fuck alone. Then maybe she'd actually clean up her act.

Sebastian has all but checked out when it comes to dealing with Mom. He's written her off, and I think she's done the

same with him. According to her, he looks and acts a little too much like our father, and it's been enough to create this rift between them I'm not sure will ever close.

I wish I could walk away as easily as my brother. It would be freeing to put Mom in the past with all the bullshit she's subjected us to. But something compels me to try and be the good daughter. Like it'll have the power to turn this into the relationship my heart's been screaming out for all these years.

Stepping inside, I spot Mom sitting on a couch. She's sandwiched between two men whose bodies might as well be made of wires. They're thin, twitching, on edge.

Mom doesn't look much better. She might still have the weight she put on from her last stint in rehab, but she'll be shedding it soon enough. The skin of health she can't seem to wear for more than two minutes.

"Eloise." Mom smiles when she sees me walk in.

When she starts to stand, her legs wobble, planting her back in place. She laughs, but her eyes are vacant craters so it's dark and cold.

I'm pretty sure at some point in her life she looked a lot like I do. She has the same sandy brown hair that refuses to hold a curl and the same dark eyes with golden flecks. But her hair is thin, and her skin has aged beyond her years from the drugs. Any softness in her gaze is a distant version of a woman who gave up trying a long time ago.



I walk over to the couch, clutching my purse tighter because I don't trust this place when her friends come around. Parties that turn from one-night to week-long benders. Random people crash on the couch, and I'm forced to lock my bedroom door to prevent anyone from getting in.

Growing up, Mom never worried about the men she brought around. As long as they fed her a steady stream of whatever she was getting high on, she implicitly trusted them. But I saw the look in their eyes.

So did my brother.

Sebastian insisted we share a room as kids. I knew it wasn't because he actually liked sleeping with his twin sister five feet away. He was worried about whoever was coming and going, so he acted as my shield.

Most kids would probably dread their parent's going on rotating jail and rehab sprints—we didn't. At least when she was locked up, we knew the house would be safe and she would be sober.

"Mom." I walk over to her and stop in front of the couch.

One of the men sitting beside her skims me with his gray eyes and the corner of his mouth twitches.

"Thought you were feeling good after this last stint." I stare down at her, already spotting the lies working behind her stare.

"I am feeling good." Her fingers twitch in her lap, and she grips the hem of her shirt like I won't notice she's trying to

stop herself from fidgeting. “I’m clean, promise. I’ve had one drink, right, Lee.”

“Right,” the guy, presumably Lee, says with a chuckle.

Like after all these years, I’ll actually believe her shit.

“Lovely.” I turn to leave, not able to stand another second in this place.

Everyone in here is twitching like their skin’s crawling. And while for them, it’s probably a result of heroin, mine prickles for another reason. I’ve spent my life around this—around her. I’ve tried to save her, over and over again. I’ve tried to prove my love for her is enough to keep her going without the drugs. Repeatedly, I’ve lied to myself, thinking my brother and I are reason enough for her to get clean.

She never does. It’s a rabbit hole I’m tired of falling down.

“El, wait.” I hear Mom stumbling behind me as I make my way to the front door. She must find balance on her legs this time because her hand wraps around my arm and stops me. The motion jerks me around and she almost falls against my chest, as she grabs onto both of my shoulders to steady herself.

“Mom, you need to sit.” I help her steady, but she shakes her head.

It baffles me that she thinks I won’t notice how messed up she is. Like I don’t know the look in my mother’s eyes when she’s clean. It’s a far cry from the black holes currently staring at me.

I guide her to a chair in the den and kneel in front of her. Music pounds through the walls loud enough to make me feel frantic. At least this room's empty, so I feel like I can take a breath.

Mom rests her hands on the arms of the chair, gripping so hard I think her nails might cut through the fabric.

“What did you take?”

She shakes her head, and her greasy ponytail swishes around with the movement. “Just a drink or two, that's all.”

“Mom.” I plant my hand on her knee, and she finally stops bouncing it.

Looking into her eyes, I wish I was enough to make her see she's worth more than this.

“I was having a rough day,” Mom says, like that's a valid excuse to shoot your brain out into the universe. “Bonnie's being a bitch, says they aren't hiring, but I saw the sign.”

Bonnie probably is hiring, but I'm not surprised she turned Mom away after the past couple of chances Bonnie's given her. As if skimming from the register wasn't bad enough, I'm pretty sure my mom trying to fuck Bonnie's husband ruined any future considerations.

“You can't disappear into this shit every time you have a bad day.” I squeeze her knee, feeling it twitching.

Mom leans forward on her elbows and shakes her head again. She can barely sit still and it's hard to watch.

“You’ll never understand.” She rolls her eyes and tips her head back.

She’s probably right about that. I will *never* understand. The drugs, the alcohol, the sex. All tools everyone around me uses to disappear.

Between watching my mom fall on and off the wagon and witnessing the band burn through bottles of booze and women, the appeal is lost on me. Everyone is searching for something to numb the pain, not realizing that all it does is drag them further into whatever they’re trying to escape.

“Stay.” Mom plants her hands over mine and gives me a squeeze. “I want to spend some time with my daughter.”

It’s a battle not to roll my eyes. She might love me, but that’s not why she wants me here. I’m a pawn she uses to convince men to give her another hit of whatever she’s fucked up on. It’s a game I’m in no mood to play.

“I’m heading to a friend’s house. But you should get some sleep.”

*You should clean yourself up.*

*Get it together.*

*Stop being such a fucking mess.*

But I don’t say any of those things because they won’t do any good.

Mom rolls her head back and closes her eyes. “Fine, go.”

I'm not sure when I started feeling like the parent in our relationship. Maybe it was when I was eight, fetching her peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and cigarettes because she was coming down and didn't want to get out of bed. Maybe it was when Sebastian started working at fifteen to try and pay the bills she wasn't, and I was stuck at home babysitting her, so her friends wouldn't steal shit while he was at work. Maybe it's the way it's always been, and I'm just now realizing it.

It doesn't really matter *when*, just that it is. And I'm no longer expecting it to change.

"Call me if you need anything." I stand up.

She nods her head just barely, and I'd think she's falling asleep if she wasn't still twitching.

I wish I could hate her like Sebastian does because it would make all of this easier to deal with. I wish I could resent the fact that she's never been a good mother or the fact that I don't know if I'll ever be able to accept love because of her.

But I can't.

Because no matter what she does, she's my mom. And her love might be shallow, but mine runs deep—through every aching part of me.

The music changes as I leave the house, kicking the beat up a notch and sending my stomach into a tailspin. I step outside and the yard is littered with people. Watching, calculating, waiting.

I avoid their gazes as I make my way to my car, but one figure in particular towers in the shadows at a distance, sending a shiver up my spine. I reach into my purse and grab onto my pepper spray, holding it for good measure.

If the party isn't enough to set me on edge, the neighborhood does a good job of it.

As I reach for the car's door handle, my gaze falls to one of my tires and my insides deflate. The rim's touching the ground and the car is sagging.

"Fuck." I breathe out.

This car has barely been making it for a while, but I don't have the cash to get something more reliable, so I'm stuck with this pile of aluminum for now.

Bending down, I inspect the tire. It looks like it's in one piece, so I don't think anyone's messed with it. But there's no doubt it's flat, so I'm not going anywhere. I should have taken Noah up on his offer to teach me how to change a tire because I'm stuck.

Pulling my phone out of my purse, I scroll until I find my brother's name and hit dial. It rings a few times before going to voicemail.

He was already drunk when I left the party, and by now he's probably passed out or otherwise occupied.

Scrolling through my contacts again, I hit dial on the next number.

It rings only once before he answers.

“You okay?” I’m not sure how he does it, but it’s like Adrian can sense my distress from miles away.

I was sober when I left his house, so he has no reason to think anything is wrong, but the ever-present protector in him can’t help jumping to the worst.

“Can you come get me?” I let out a defeated breath, tapping my flat tire with the toe of my shoe.

“Where are you?”

“Home.”

“Your car?”

I rub my thumb and index finger on my temples. “Long story.”

“I’ll be right there.” He hangs up before I have a chance to thank him, and I tuck my phone back into my purse.

Leaning against my car, I watch the shadowy figures on the lawn. Some making out, some smoking. Then there’s the one lurking around the side of the house. I still can’t make them out and it sends a chill all the way along my spine. I stare at that shadow until it fades around the corner. Until it’s no longer there and it’s a figment of my imagination conjuring up the worst. I stare at empty space until I hear Adrian’s motorcycle a street over, headed my way.

Only then, do I stand up and feel like I’m breathing again.

**ADRIAN**

THE STENCH OF VOMIT hangs in the air, reminding me my life has lost all its glamor. The smell of the weekend is still ripe as I make my way inside the seedy bar I work at, and I wonder how it's come to this. Days running together, time becoming insignificant, another Monday with no purpose.

When I enlisted in the Army right after high school, I saw a different vision of a future for myself. One where I got my shit together. One where I eventually went to college and figured out what I was doing. One where my father didn't die before I could prove to him that I wouldn't spend my entire life being a burden.

While I was busy trying to do the right thing, the universe was planting a bomb and standing back to watch my world blow to fucking pieces.

Mine and *hers*.

When I blink, I still see her raven hair and cerulean eyes. I still hear her voice reassuring me that no matter what



happened, things would all turn out okay. I believed her at the time.

After all, she was the kind of beauty inside and out that only a war could decimate. But that's exactly what I led her into.

It was my idea to enlist, and when I said it, I didn't know she would follow me. I should have known better.

Looking back, I wish I'd done more to talk her out of it when I had the chance. The military might have been my only option, but she had a life ahead of her. Her family had money and connections. She had choices and a full ride to the college of her dreams. But she was convinced that we'd done everything else together since the third grade, so why stop there?

If only enlisting was the same as sharing markers.

I walk through the bar and spot her dad already sitting at the end. An empty glass sits in front of him at barely eleven in the morning. He tips it side to side like he can manifest something that might solve his problem if he stares at it hard enough.

My shift doesn't start for another hour, but here I am, face to face with the man I've been avoiding since returning to town a few months ago.

It's been years since I've faced any of Samantha's family, and I forgot how much Sam looked like her father until his eyes flick in my direction and knock me in the chest. The same blue stare as hers, so rich it's darker than the deepest parts of

the ocean. Memories long buried claw their way to the surface as I walk over to him.

“Adrian.” He tips his empty glass up but looks away.

His elbows are pressed on the bar top, and he’s hunched over it. Sadness draws thick wrinkles on his skin. He’s aged a good fifteen years in half that many. Another thing grief will do to a person.

“Marcus.” I slide onto the stool beside him.

When I was a kid, I called him Mr. Wright because he’s always been a big guy and his scowl is terrifying. But somewhere between spending the weekends on the swing set in his backyard and learning how to fix a car engine in his garage, we got on a first-name basis.

Marcus and my dad were best friends, and by default, it made Sam and I the same. I think they assumed at some point it would also make us more. After all, Sam was so sweet and so fucking pretty. But not all love is romantic. And while I loved Sam with everything, she might as well have been my sister. I would have done anything for her.

If only I could have.

“You’re out,” Marcus says, sliding his glass across the bar to Tommy who fills it halfway with a decent bottle of whiskey.

I nod. “A few months now.”

Marcus brings his glass to his lips, and I wonder how much booze it takes to drown what’s raging inside him. For myself,

nothing seems to do the trick. I'd know because I've tried. All it did was resurrect more than it buried.

We've put more in the ground these last eight years than walks above it, and I still haven't figured out how you come back from that.

Tommy lifts the whiskey bottle in my direction, but I shake my head. I've got to start my shift soon, and even if the owner doesn't give a crap what I do as long as I'm still able to pour drinks, I don't need anything else clouding my head.

"Sorry about your father," Marcus says, his chin down.

"He said you came to see him often."

Marcus shakes his head. "Not enough."

It never is. And that's the problem.

"You wanted to see me." I can't help but cut to the chase. There was a time I would have been comforted by the presence of Sam's father, seeing as he was like a second one to me. But being around him now is a reminder of the kid who shipped out eight years ago with his daughter, only to return alone.

Marcus turns on his stool and faces me. "I'm selling the house. It's too big for one person."

"I'm sorry about Nancy."

My dad let me know when Sam's mom passed away. Said it was a broken heart or some shit. But if it's possible to die from one, I can't help but wonder how I'm still standing.

“Lots to be sorry for nowadays.” Marcus chuckles, unamused.

“Ain’t that the fucking truth.”

He tips his glass up and drains it, turning to fully face me now.

No matter how much time passes, I don’t feel ready for this. The last time we stood face to face was outside the church at Sam’s funeral. He looked me in the eyes, and I realized there was something worse in this world than whatever had broken inside me at her death. It was whatever had shattered in him. The man he was before and the one after were barely remnants of each other. A muted presence where a strong man once lived.

Marcus’s eyebrows pinch, and I wonder what he’s reading in me if anything. I’ve never been transparent with my feelings, and the past eight years did nothing to help that. Sometimes I wonder if it’s a shield or just who I am now.

Impenetrable.

Unbreakable.

Cold.

Sam knew the person I tried to bury, but I’m not sure anyone else will.

“I’ve been cleaning things out, and I thought you might want these.” Marcus digs into his pocket and pulls out something small that makes my throat constrict.

Dangling on his fingers is a simple chain with Sam's dog tags.

*She should have never been there.*

*You should have talked her out of it.*

Guilt does nothing to erase what happened, but I can't help but drown in it anyway.

I shake my head. "Those are yours."

He sets them down on the bar between us and they feel like a bad omen. All my regrets boiled down to two pieces of silver. It's strange to think how a person can be reduced to nothing but ash and a few numbers.

I remember the first time Sam slipped those around her neck. A grin stretched her cheeks, and it was so bright it should have burned me on the spot. She stood tall and proud and said this was what she was meant to do with her life. She said in that moment she'd never felt stronger. After all, between the two of us, I might have been double her size, but she was always the more resilient. The better of us. The tougher of us.

Not that it made a difference.

When I got the call that she was gone, I was halfway across the world from that particular bomb exploding, but I felt it in my chest like I was right there, standing in the heat of the aftermath. Shrapnel lodging in my bones.

The sleepless nights that followed were the worst. Bargaining with the universe in my head. Cursing whatever

was out there that it should have taken me instead. Shouting into a void when I knew it would make no difference.

But that's the problem with pain. The longer it lives, the deeper it roots. And the poison spreads.

It spreads.

And spreads.

Marcus pushes the dog tags in my direction. "She would have wanted you to have them."

"She wouldn't have even been there if it wasn't for me." I shake my head.

"Don't tell me you got smacked upside the fuckin' head with something when you were overseas." Marcus narrows his gaze at me. "Because that there is the dumbest shit you've ever said."

"Sam—"

"Made the decision to enlist her damn self." Marcus rests his forehead on his fingers and rubs. His eyes pinch.

"I should have tried to convince her to just let me go." The ever-present knot tightens in my throat.

"You were two peas in a pod from the day y'all met." Marcus sets his hand on the bar top and something resembling a ghost of a smile forms. "Always on an adventure, looking for trouble. Y'all were always going to do something big. Your dad and I knew that. Neither of you settled for anything less."

I rub my temples with my thumbs and lean back in my chair, feeling the pounding starting in my head.

“Yes, Sam got the idea to enlist from you, but that’s not why she signed up.” Marcus smiles. “She was always a fighter, sticking up for those around her. Always so strong, whether she realized it or not. She went out there doing what she was meant to. Fighting for something.”

The problem with missions like the one Sam was on, is that you don’t get many details about what happened. The official line was *she died fighting for her country*. If I didn’t have a buddy who was with her, that would be that. But I know the truth and her dad is right. Sam died doing what she always did—protecting people.

There were three men with her on the mission and they got ambushed during an extraction at an orphanage. None of them should have gotten out the way it went down. But they did because of the sacrifice she made.

“Take them, Adrian.” Marcus places her dog tags in my hand.

“Why?”

“I see what you’re doing, coming back here and trying to make sense of shit that’s never going to.” Marcus shakes his head and rests his hand over mine. “They’re gone—Sam, your dad. This place is fuckin’ purgatory, and I can’t stand by and watch you sit in it. I’m selling the house, getting out, and I suggest you do the same. Sitting here drowning in the past

isn't going to do anyone any good. Sam wouldn't want that for you."

He clasps my hand with the dog tags between them.

"You were always like a son to me, and losing her, you're all the family I've got left." Marcus sighs. "Take these and remember to be strong like she was. Don't plant yourself and rot. For me, for her, yourself. You've got to be better."

He gives my hands a firm shake, and I nod, taking the dog tags from him as he pulls away.

"Thank you, son." He slides off his barstool and throws on his jacket. "Keep in touch, will ya?"

He pats me on the shoulder, and I nod as he walks away, but the truth is I don't know if I'll ever actually see him again. My stare moves to the dog tags in my hand, and I squeeze them tightly. They're a physical reminder of Sam's missing presence and it hurts to hold them. But at the same time, they feel like her comforting me.

Maybe Marcus is right. Since I've been back, I've been sitting in a past that no longer exists. I've been avoiding moving on because doing so would mean my father and Sam are really gone. And that's not something I've been ready to face.

But how long can I sit with this pain?

The door to the bar opens and laughs fill the room. Sebastian and Noah walk in with the widest grins, laughing about something. Noah shoves Sebastian's arm and he



stumbles. They're headed for the stage, where they've booked a pretty solid gig playing here a few nights a week as they prepare for their showcase.

Behind them, Eloise has her head down, trailing them. She's skimming through her phone and frowning at something on the screen.

I'd like to know what it is she's drowning in that makes her sad all the time. Or why I'm the only one who seems to notice.

Eloise's eyes lift to mine like she senses something striking her from across the distance of the bar, and I wonder if my demons are that loud. If she can sense them circling around. I wonder if the relief I find in her eyes is something I should allow myself.

A flicker of hope.

Of life.

A flash of light that makes me wonder if there really is something bigger I should be doing with my life.

**ELOISE**

WE HAVE ONE WEEK until the showcase, and everyone in the band has been bickering non-stop. Between the set list, final song adjustments, and attitudes, all of us are tired. But somehow, through all the bullshit, it feels like we're almost ready.

There's an energy in the air around the band. Like maybe, something big is about to change. Even in this dump of a bar, an electric current runs through all of us.

I can't remember the exact moment I fell in love with music, just that it's always been a part of me. My tastes are a musical garden of genres blending. I could live without many things in life, but not the sound of a drumbeat picking up, or the chords of a guitar intensifying with the chorus, or a voice cracking at the part of the song where the artist breaks with it.

*Harmonious imperfections.*

I make a mental note to write that down and see if I can build something from it later.

“Let’s take ten,” Sebastian says, hopping off the stage. Feedback cuts through the speakers, but not one person in the bar flinches at the sound.

It’s still the middle of the day, so the only people in here have been drunk since this morning and don’t give a fuck if we’re actually playing music or messing around trying to figure it out.

“Who wants a beer?” Sebastian asks, already headed to the bar. Noah hops down and follows him.

I’m grateful we can at least put our differences aside when we aren’t working through our set. From the outside, it might look like the band is five seconds from breaking up at times, but it’s a rhythm we’re accustomed to.

Rome comes up beside me with his guitar still slung around his shoulder. “One week.”

“One week,” I repeat with a cautious smile.

The guys are already convinced we’re going to get signed after the showcase. I try to be more realistic, but their optimism is contagious.

“Can’t come soon enough.” He drops his chin and shakes his head.

“You going to go see him before we leave?”

Rome looks at me from the tops of his eyes and bites down on the corner of his lip. “I’m good.”

I nod, knowing better than to push further. As far as I know, Rome hasn't spoken with his father since he started crashing with Sebastian and me a couple of years ago. Even now that he's unofficially moved into Adrian's guest room, he's avoided that part of his life like the plague. But still, I thought maybe he would let him know we're leaving town if we do so permanently.

“As far as I'm concerned, he can burn in hell.”

I look up, and Rome's jaw is clenched, but he's avoiding my gaze as he pulls his guitar off his shoulder. The movement tugs at the bottom hem of his T-shirt, showing off the rugged scar that runs up the length of his side. If not for the tattoo ink he's started to slowly fill his skin with these past couple of years, it would be more prominent. But like all the other scars on him, he's finding ways to bury them. Some in healthier ways than others.

“Well, you've got us.” I reach out and place a hand on Rome's arm.

He flinches at my touch but doesn't pull away. His dark brown eyes find me, and if I'm not mistaken, a flash of pain rolls through them. I'm not sure what Rome's trying to prove or escape, but I know he will. Regardless of whatever his father put him through, he didn't let it break him. Instead, he fed off it to grow stronger—something I envy, even with all our differences.

“I know.” Rome places a hand over mine and squeezes. He pats the back of my knuckles and winks. “I'm grabbing a

drink, want anything?”

“You have fun, I’m going to grab water.”

“Of course you are.” He tips his head back and laughs, walking past me with a wicked grin on his face. “Enjoy your water, princess.”

It used to bother me when he called me that, or when the guys would tease me for never partying with them. But I’ve learned it’s their way of showing love. Besides, as much as they’ll give me crap about it, I think they actually appreciate that they don’t have to spend all of their time worrying about me getting into trouble.

I hop off the stage and head to the back, where I know Adrian stores the bottled water. Since the owner is never here, Adrian lets us have our run of the place.

Walking into the back storage room, I turn the corner and stop short right before running into Adrian. He startles, and panic flashes in his eyes for a split second before he buries it.

He might not say anything, but I’m not blind. I know he suffers from PTSD.

“Oh, sorry—” I take a step back.

“Don’t worry about it.” He straightens up and takes a deep breath, composing himself.

Over this past week, something has shifted in him. His eyes still house his demons, but I sense peace beneath the surface. He seems lighter, calmer. Like a weight he was carrying is still there, but not resting as heavily on him.

“Just grabbing a water.” I smile, hoping my cheeks aren’t as red as I feel they are.

In this small space, Adrian is towering. Dim lighting casts shadows on his defined jaw and the cut of his biceps push against the fabric of his T-shirt. Everything about him is intimidating. And hot.

While I’m used to the guys in the band acting like immature boys who want to stick their dicks in everything that walks. Adrian is a *man*. How he carries himself. His work ethic. How he approaches women.

I’ve spent years thinking maybe I’m just not a relationship kind of girl. But then I met Adrian. A man in a sea of boys who are desperate for my attention. He’s nothing like them, and it’s magnetizing.

“Here you go.” Adrian reaches over and grabs a bottle off the shelf, handing it to me.

If I wasn’t parched before, my mouth turns to sandpaper when his fingers graze mine.

“You guys sound good out there.” He tips his chin toward the door.

I roll my shoulders back and take a deep breath. “Work in progress.”

Adrian smiles, and it’s disarming how one look from him can knock me completely off balance. The more time we spend practicing at his house and running through our sets at

his bar, the more I find myself unable to keep my eyes off him. Sparing glances and hoping no one notices—especially him.

And when I catch him looking back... it's downright dangerous.

“Sebastian's convinced this is it, that we'll be on tour this time next year.” I shake my head because my brother is a dreamer, and I'm more realistic.

“You will,” Adrian says, and there's something about his certainty that makes me want to believe him. He's not the type of person who says things just to make you feel better. He'll tell you what he thinks. And the way he pins me with his stare makes me wonder if he's seeing something in me that I've been missing.

“Fingers crossed.” I cross them in front of me—in hope, as a barrier. “Supposedly you'd know since you're going to be there, Mr. Manager.”

When my brother gets an idea in his head, it's almost impossible to convince him otherwise, and ever since the night he decided Adrian should be our manager, he's been all but certain it's going to happen. Even if Adrian shakes off the idea every chance he gets.

Knowing my brother, it's only a matter of time before he finds a way to convince him.

At first, I thought it was insane because it doesn't make sense. Adrian knows less about the industry than we do. But

the closer we get to the showcase, the more it sinks in how much this could really change everything.

And what then? If we end up recording and on tour—if we end up famous. They're all unknowns.

How many hands will be playing marionette with our lives?

Fame, money, sex. It doesn't take someone already in the industry to know how dangerous that combination can be. Add in a record label and manager who cares more about making money than us, and we could really be in trouble.

While it might sound good to have someone guiding our careers who knows the industry, what we really need is someone who will look out for us in ways everyone else won't.

I haven't known Adrian long, and Sebastian hasn't known him much longer. But sometimes you don't have to know a person for a lifetime to understand who they are on a fundamental level. Adrian might be quiet and seem cold, but there's no one I've met that takes care of those around him as he does. He makes a person feel protected and safe. Which is why, the longer I've considered Sebastian's off the wall idea, the more it makes sense.

"I don't know about that." Adrian shakes his head.

"My brother doesn't quit." I narrow my gaze.

Adrian smiles. An uninhibited one that's so rare to see on him. His body shifts and he's an inch closer.



The hit of black licorice and gasoline sends my head swimming. It almost makes me question whether I want him to take Sebastian up on his offer or not. Because every time I'm around Adrian lately, I feel myself drawn. He's the gravity and I'm failing miserably at defying it.

Too bad I have to.

If he joins us in whatever capacity, I'd have to draw a line. I can't be the girl in the band with her heart on the line for the manager. Not to mention, I sense he's working through something deep inside. Even if we could make it past the rumors and judgments, we'd have to find a way past our own bullshit as well.

"We'll see," Adrian says, reaching around me.

For a moment I think he's caging me in. His body so close the fabric of his T-shirt almost brushes my chest. I tip my chin up without thinking. But when he's within inches of my face, he pulls back, and I realize he was grabbing something off the shelf.

Adrian turns to leave, but not before shooting a glance over his shoulder that skims me head to toe. Speaking the kind of volumes I could pick apart and make a song out of.

*You sound like music to my brain*

*Harmonious imperfection, I can't think straight*

*It's either control or chaos*

*Order or disarray*

*One night of pleasure*

*Years of pain,*

*Years of pain.*

Everything about Adrian screams contradiction where I'm concerned. Safety and danger. Meticulous madness. I'm lost in it.

After taking a deep breath, I drag myself from the storage room with the bottle of water I came for. But as I turn the corner, I run straight into Sebastian's chest.

"Woah, sis." He grabs onto my shoulders and steadies me, a devious glimmer in his eyes as his gaze trails from me to Adrian. "Whatcha up to?"

"Nothing." I glare at him, rolling my shoulders back and standing tall.

"Mm-hmm." He looks in Adrian's direction once more. "Looks like it."

I open my mouth to argue, but Rome pops up and smacks Sebastian on the shoulder, drawing his attention.

"I figured it out," Rome grins. "It's the second chorus that's the issue, not the first."

Sebastian drops his inquisition to follow Rome back to the equipment, but I see Noah's eyes on me from across the bar. He's thinking the same thing Sebastian probably was.

*Bad idea, Eloise.*

Noah might as well be telepathically sending the message.

If Adrian does make the decision to come along with the band when we leave, I need to draw the same line in the sand I did with the other guys. Friends. Family. Brothers.

I won't be that girl people question because of a man. I won't be like my mom. Not now, not ever.

**ADRIAN**

THE SHOWCASE HAS ALREADY started by the time I make it across town. I was supposed to have the night off, but Nate was late for his shift, and like the idiot I was, I agreed to cover for an hour. One hour turned into almost three, but at least I finally got out of there.

It takes me a minute to find the band in the mess of people crowding this place, but I finally spot Eloise by the bar. She's taking a sip of water and tapping her fingers on the bar top like she does when she's nervous. The dent in her cheek tells me she's chewing the inside of her cheek and thinking. But even with her rigid posture, her hips still manage to sway to the music like a pendulum swinging.

The sight of her stops me in place. I'd like to think I don't get affected by people, but she's my exception.

Her hair's in a tight ponytail that shows off the length of her neck and she's wearing a cropped white tank top that puts her flower half-sleeve tattoo on display. A small sliver of her trim stomach peeks out. And she's in those liquid black leather

pants, making her mile-long legs look like they've been dipped in oil. But it's not just her beauty that traps me where I stand. It's her eyes, finding me the moment I walk in, like a sixth sense she has when it comes to my presence.

I make my way over to her, noticing a few tables roped off at the back of the club. I assume those are reserved for the record label reps from the way everyone in the place seems aware of them. People whisper and spare glances in their direction, but don't stare too long.

I'm not sure what I expected from a showcase like this, but definitely something a little more glamorous. The way the guys have gone on and on about how it has the potential to make or break them had me thinking I'd be walking into something more professional in appearance. But with the throbbing lights and alcohol flowing, it's like any other night of live music in town, with a few record execs added in.

"You made it." Eloise's eyes skim me like they always do when I stop in front of her.

I'd like to know what it is she's thinking when she looks at me like that, but I also have no doubt I'd be disappointed.

"Didn't miss you guys play, I hope?"

She shakes her head. "Still two bands ahead of us."

I wave a hand at the bartender and he stops in front of me, appreciating Eloise with a smile before looking in my direction.

"Guinness," I order.

The bartender nods his head, checking out Eloise once more before heading to get my beer. She doesn't seem to notice. She never does, actually. And I'm not sure if it's that she's as confident as she should be looking like she does or if she really has no interest in getting a man's attention.

Because she sure as fuck has mine.

When the bartender comes back with my beer, I slide cash in his direction and follow Eloise to the backstage area.

"He's with me," she says to a guy who's a sad excuse for a bouncer at half my weight.

He nods and hands me a purple bracelet that matches the one around Eloise's wrist.

"You nervous?" I ask her as she leads me down a long hallway, stopping at the top of a flight of stairs.

The bands must be chilling in some kind of basement waiting for their turn.

But instead of heading down the staircase, Eloise turns, resting her back against the wall and drawing her bottom lip between her teeth. "I shouldn't be."

"It's okay if you are." I shrug.

"It's probably pathetic." She lets out a breathy chuckle. "I'm sure you've been in much worse situations."

"There's always worse situations." I tip my chin at her. "And different situations, and situations that mean something

different to one person than they do to another. Doesn't invalidate your feelings about it."

"I guess." She chews the inside of her cheek.

Someone tries to get past us, so I slide up next to her on the wall to let them pass. My arm knocks hers and I can't ignore the firebolt of electricity that shoots through me or the fact that I hear her suck in the sharpest inhale at my touch. I can't help but lean closer at the sound, to absorb it even if I'm not brave enough to face her.

"But you've got this." I nudge her arm, and she finally looks up at me.

Her eyes are nearly black between her fake eyelashes and the dim light of the hallway. A night sky with the faintest brushing of stars sparkling in them. It's the same way her freckles dust her face when she's not wearing any makeup.

Without thinking, I reach for her hand and tangle my fingers in hers, wishing the warmth of her palm was enough to make whatever I'm starting to feel about her seem possible.

At least she doesn't pull away. Instead, she tightens her grip.

Eloise looks up at me and there's a lot working behind her eyes. Tonight has the potential to change her life, and I want that for her. I've heard the stories about her mom and know there's nothing left for Eloise in this town but disappointment. She deserves to get away—to be heard. As much as I'd like to keep her here for my own selfish reasons, I know she's meant for bigger things.

And even if I do take Sebastian up on his ridiculous offer and go with her, it doesn't make a relationship with her any more possible. She's Sebastian's sister, she's in the band, and I'm a man with holes ripped through him, no longer capable of giving a woman like Eloise the things she needs.

Eloise squeezes my hand, bringing me the kind of comfort I don't dream about anymore. She opens her mouth to say something, but a figure climbs the stairs and stops beside her, cutting her off.

"Adrian, you made it," Sebastian cheers and Eloise quickly pulls her hand out of mine before he notices.

He moves around her and stops in front of me, grabbing onto my shoulders. For a guy who has the ability to drink like a fish, he's surprisingly sober.

"You need to be our manager," Sebastian says, looking me straight in the eyes.

"I haven't—"

"Just for tonight." He squeezes me hard. "The execs are already circling, and a few of the bands are already trying to get their attention. They've brought along their managers and shit. You need to make us look like we're serious."

"By being your fake manager?" I lift an eyebrow at him.

"Just schmooze them for us, or be charming, or whatever the fuck it is you do that makes people seem to trust you."

I'd like to tell him it's just professionalism and being a decent human being, but I save it.



Looking down at Eloise, I realize she's taken a step away to create some distance. But she's still looking at me, and with one nod, she asks me to listen, knowing I can't deny her.

"All right, where are they?"

Sebastian looks past me, down the hallway Eloise and I just traveled. I follow his gaze and the pseudo-bouncer is giving some guy crap who's trying to get past him.

"Did you see them when you came in?" Sebastian steps back and looks at me.

"Hard to miss."

He nods. "Exactly, just linger over there, look important. See if you can hear what they're saying when we go on."

"Which is?"

"Next." He grins, looking the opposite of his sister right now. He's radiating confidence and not the least bit nervous.

"Got it." I look over at Eloise. "You guys go get prepped; I'll take care of it."

She gives me the faintest smile, mouthing *thank you* when Sebastian isn't looking. I watch them disappear down the staircase, wondering when I got initiated into this makeshift family the band seems to have created.

As I turn to head back down the hallway, I debate whether it's a good thing to be forming these kinds of attachments. After everything that happened with Sam, and then my father, I figured it would be better to just embrace the lone-wolf life

and go it alone. But with every step these guys drag me back in.

The club is going wild for the band onstage. I have a tough time fighting my way through the crowd, but I manage to use my height and build to my advantage to push past them. There are a number of people positioning themselves right by the roped-off section the label execs are in, looking desperate for their attention, and it's clear that's not going to be the way to go about it.

Instead, I spot a table directly in front of them, empty because everyone's trying to be up close and in earshot. Between the music and the screaming drunks, it will be impossible to hear them anyway, so I'm going to have to play this differently.

I take a seat and lean back, making myself comfortable and positioning myself directly in their line of sight. Waving at a passing waitress, I make sure to use my left arm and show off my purple bracelet. Just enough to let them know I'm with someone and not another drunk fan.

Then I sit back and wait, feeling a lot like I did on the battlefield, even if the scene is completely different. I remain patient, assessing the scene. Watching the crowd react to the current band, knowing that's also what the execs will be doing. Seeing how people respond to them and deciding what the record labels are looking for.

The crowd is happy enough to be cheering for the group on stage, but it's nothing like the reactions I've seen from the

crowds at Enemy Muse shows. As the song ends, and the band exits, I don't need to turn around to know that they were good, but they won't be signed.

There was no spark. No magic.

The stage darkens as someone stands front and center talking. But my eyes are on the figures setting up behind them. Sebastian, Eloise, Rome, and Noah all take their places. If Eloise is still nervous, I know that up there she won't show it. She's perfected the art of keeping her composure. And even if she was on edge, the music has this ability of melting it away.

“Enemy Muse.” The man on the stage sweeps his arms out as he walks away.

I lean forward with my elbows on the table and my chin on my knuckles, watching, waiting. Feeling the energy shift before the first chord strikes. It doesn't take someone knowing a lot about music to know Enemy Muse has something special. Something unique.

*Irreplaceable.*

Rome sweeps the strings of his guitar once and lets it echo through the room like a fucking invitation. And the crowd is quieted, on edge, waiting for it.

When the lights come up and Sebastian steps forward with a smile—the force of the sun—stretching his face, all hell might as well break loose. Because the first words come out and the band captures every heart in here.

The crowd comes to life. They're singing, screaming, begging for them. But all the while my eyes are dragged in one direction—to Eloise, taking up her place on the stage with pure, unfiltered confidence.

She's wearing the smug smirk she dons when she's performing, looking like a piece of art up there for us all to sit back and admire. And as the song shifts and Sebastian reaches the chorus, a smile breaks out on her face, and I know she's proud of the words I heard her spend hours, days, weeks putting together.

*“A dark horse on the horizon*

*Bringing battle to our land*

*Sowing seeds and planting visions*

*Of violence in the sand*

*I swear I saw it in your smile*

*A tick of vengeance in your tone*

*Been there once*

*Been there twice*

*I should have known*

*Don't lie tonight*

*There's been enough of that for one life*

*We were feeling fine*

*But it's poison on a good night*

*Say what you want, what you will*

*Who you are is lost, and still*

*Don't lie tonight*

*I just might let you*

*A dark horse rolling in*

*Undoing all we could have been*

*I should have seen it*

*Should have known*

*Rotten words that felt like home*

*Been there once*

*Been there twice*

*Been there way too many times*

*Don't lie tonight*

*There's been enough of that for one life*

*We were feeling fine*

*But it's poison on a good night*

*Say what you want, what you will*

*Who you are is lost, and still*

*Don't lie tonight*

*I just might let you”*

Sebastian holds the microphone up in the air while Noah starts to go wild on the drums. Rome drops to his knees in front of Eloise, and she smirks down at him. The crowd is screaming, and I catch sight of Sebastian’s buddy Myth right in the mess of it, feeling it like everyone else in here is.

There’s no doubt in my mind, they’ve done it. Everything is about to change for the band.

Standing up as the song ends and the room erupts, I casually finish my drink and push my chair in. Turning, I look one of the execs straight in the eye and smirk, baiting him. I lift an eyebrow and tip my head, walking away toward the backstage area.

Knowing, they’re going to come to find me. Knowing, the band is going to be leaving. Knowing, I’m going to have to make a decision.

Stay or go.

**ADRIAN**

SEBASTIAN FLOPS DOWN ONTO the bed. “I could get used to this shit.”

I’m sure he could. Anyone would be tempted by the spoils Neon Records has been throwing at us for the past week we’ve been in Los Angeles. The label flew the band out to sign their contracts, and they are already showering them with perks.

When we’re not figuring out logistics, they’ve been treating the five of us to the nicest restaurants, getting us VIP tables at the hottest clubs, and booking us rooms in a hotel that puts our entire hometown to shame.

Chocolates on the fucking pillows and all the shit a person doesn’t need in life because it’ll go straight to their heads.

As nice as it all is, I can’t seem to get into it. It might be a far cry from the dirt trench I was sleeping in a year ago, but it feels fake and like they’re trying to buy us. And maybe that’s why it’s a good thing I finally agreed to Sebastian’s ridiculous proposal to be their band manager. Because the guys are

already diving deep into the perks, and someone's going to have to try and help them keep their heads above water before they drown in the lavishness of it all.

Sebastian props himself up on his elbows on the bed. "It's fucking nice, right?"

I nod my head before realizing he's not talking to me.

Jasmine and honeysuckle strike my senses before Eloise brushes past. She must have just gotten out of the shower because I didn't know she was even here. She walks by me, and I take in her baggy T-shirt and sweats. Her face is makeup free and her wet hair is in strings around her freckled cheeks, but she looks downright gorgeous.

"I'll tell you one thing." Eloise drops down onto the bed next to Sebastian and smiles wide. "Nothing beats that water pressure."

Sebastian rolls his eyes and sits up. "Chicks, man."

She nudges him in the arm. "Don't be a misogynistic jerk."

At that, he laughs and stands up, ignoring her narrowed gaze. I'm still figuring out the dynamic between Eloise and the guys. Her morals seem to constantly clash with their immaturity, but she also has no problem putting them in their place and swiftly brushing them off.

"You're both coming out tonight, right?" Sebastian props his hip against the wall. "They're sending us to the Mirage, and it's supposed to be fucking epic."



I'd believe him if he didn't classify every place with free-flowing booze and short skirts that way.

"What time?" I ask, not particularly interested in another night of staying out until the sun comes up, but knowing someone has to keep an eye on them.

"Ten thirty." Sebastian pushes off the wall and points a finger at me, then Eloise, as he backs away. "Be ready. This is just the beginning."

I wish I could share in the excitement that stretches Sebastian's face as he walks out of the hotel room. But I can't help but sense something more ominous. Being here is like being dropped in Eden. Anything you could ask for. Tempting. Decadent. Not even the strongest wills can resist this after a while.

Turning back around, I see Eloise sitting on the bed, and I realize that I'm alone in her room with her. I followed Sebastian in without thinking, and now it's just us, with the weight of whatever's been unspoken since we held hands at the showcase heavy in the air.

I take a step back and tuck my hands in my pockets. "I should—"

"Adrian, can I ask you a question?" Eloise cuts me off.

Her smile falls from her face, and I miss it the moment it's gone. I should say no and walk out the door. I should keep this professional. But the broken look in her eyes draws me straight in.

“Of course.”

She lets out a deep breath. “Do you think this is a good thing?”

I’m not sure what she’s talking about, and my face must show my confusion because she shakes her head and frowns.

“These guys are bad enough in our small town.” She waves her hand toward the door. “What do you think fame is going to do to them?”

It’s the same question that’s been plaguing me lately, so it shouldn’t surprise me that Eloise is worried. She’s not like the guys in the band. It’s rare she drinks or parties. She’s constantly got her guard up, and I’m not sure the last time she trusted someone enough to let loose around them.

Her shoulders deflate, and the sight of her defeat is unsettling. Eloise doesn’t show weakness. She holds her own regardless of who she’s around. But sitting in this hotel room, the fight in her eyes is flickering.

I walk over and sit on the bed next to her. It’s a dangerous place to put myself, but I feel her slipping away, which just makes me want to hold on.

She looks up at me, and this close I get the full force of the freckles on her cheeks. Stars that sprinkle the apples of them, tempting a man to wish for all the things he doesn’t feel worthy of. Beauty she hides under layers of makeup, but it’s bare for me in this moment.

I'm struck with awe, staring through the filter of Eloise Kane, seeing the girl underneath.

I might only be six years older than her, but she looks so damn young and innocent right now. She's still yet to see all the things in the world that jump out and break you. If only I could protect her from them.

"I don't know." I shake my head, and the frown deepens on her face.

I'd like to lie and tell her what she wants to hear, that fame isn't going to rip apart the already fraying edges, but I can't bring myself to lie. If anyone deserves the truth, it's her. Always.

Eloise sighs. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"But I'll be here for you." I pull my hands from my pockets and rest them on the bed. "For the band."

I had it right the first time but can't let her know that. Because even if I am here for all of them, looking into her eyes feels like a promise I can't break.

"I know you will," she says with a hint of a smile.

"Hey, I got you something." I dig into my pocket and feel for the chain, hoping to cheer her up. "It's just something small. I saw it when we were out at that street fair yesterday and it reminded me of the daisy tattoo on your shoulder."

She might have a bouquet of tattooed flowers decorating one of her arms, but there's something about the daisy that

always seems to draw my attention. It's gentle, symmetrical, *perfect*. Just like her.

Pulling the necklace out of my pocket, I hand it to her. A small silver flower dangles on a simple chain. It's colorless, like the ones on her arms, with delicate petals.

"Congratulations on your record deal," I say, and it feels really fucking corny, but she brings it out of me apparently.

Eloise freezes, staring at the necklace for a minute, with an unreadable expression on her face. The flower dangles between us like a question that I'm not sure how she'll answer. What seemed like a nice gesture turns into a pressing weight, and I wonder if I've crossed some imaginary boundary by getting too comfortable.

I'm the type of person who prefers clear lines. Limits that define what's right and wrong, okay and not, good and bad. It's why I thrived in the military. Structure, orders, clarity. But everything with Eloise feels the exact opposite. She makes me want to go rogue, and it's fucking dangerous.

"I—" She reaches her hand out and finally takes the necklace from me. "It's beautiful. Thank you, Adrian."

She undoes the clasp and brushes her hair off her neck, wrapping the chain around it. I help her secure the clasp when she can't and my fingers brush against her soft skin. I'm not sure how a woman can be the embodiment of everything gentle, while still feeling so damn strong, but she does.

Eloise places her hand over the flower on her chest and holds it, looking up at me. “Hopefully you brought presents for everyone. Wouldn’t want the guys to be jealous of my bling.”

“I’ll get them a round of shots.” I shrug. “They’ll be fine.”

The ease of her smile should comfort me, but inside I can’t help worrying about what it really does mean that I wanted to do this for her. If I’m going to be their manager, I can’t be treating any of them differently from the others.

“I’m still in shock from all of this.” Eloise rests her hands back on the bed and it tilts her body at an angle. Even in clothes three sizes too big, it doesn’t stop me from appreciating the simplicity of how she wears them.

“It’s something not many people get a chance at,” I say. “You should be proud. Enjoy it.”

“I’m pretty sure Sebastian and Rome will do enough of that for the rest of us.” She lifts an eyebrow and smiles.

“You’re probably right.”

“I’m glad you’re with us.” She sits up and places her hand over mine, where I realize I’m dangerously close to her thigh.

I swallow at the hard lump in my throat and force a smile. “Nowhere I’d rather be.”

Her body shifts and we might as well be magnets because I don’t feel in control of how I’m drawn to her. A force swallows me into a black hole I wish held hope, but it’s more likely to be regret.

Not that I can seem to stop this.

Eloise is so close; I feel her body heat radiating from her hot shower. I feel the humidity fogging my head when her lips part and she lets out the softest breath.

*Gravity.*

It's what she is, dragging me toward her. And it's not the fact that she's beautiful. Or that she's Eloise Kane, soon to be burrowed in the hearts of millions of fans. It's that she's genuine and kind, always looking out for those around her. It's that she's the softest part of the flower, beautiful at first sight, but that she's also the roots—deep, strong, endless.

Her lips part and I know I should lean back. I should not want a taste of whatever life she blooms inside her. I should not want her to draw the decay from my bones. I should not crave something so pure when all I've done is bring destruction to those around me.

I should not drown at the feel of Eloise's mouth on my own as she leans in and closes the distance. But there's no use.

Eloise tips her chin up and presses her rose-petal lips against mine. Time slows down and sound drowns out. Anything but the feel of her against me ceases to exist.

Reaching in, I graze my fingers against her cheek. I hold her jaw in both my hands and wonder if it's her or myself who suddenly feels fragile. Her mouth parts and I slip my tongue in. The feeling beyond whatever else in my life felt like coming home again.

She presses her body closer, and even if our legs are still twisted off the bed, we're nearly chest to chest, hearts racing for each other. She moans, and I can't help but swallow it for the sunshine it draws inside me.

Eloise brings her hands up to my own and covers the back of mine with her palms. Neither of us reaches for more because we both know that one kiss doesn't mean we can actually have this.

I tighten my grip on her and wish this moment didn't feel so fucking breakable. Like she doesn't make me want to lose all control. Like if we could have met under different circumstances, where I'm not blown to bits inside and she's not on the brink of everything she's ever wanted, it could be possible. Like if we could take this kiss and move it to a time and place where life is simpler, things might be different.

Eloise breaks the kiss, but I don't let go of her face. Her hands drag from my own, along my arms, and down my sides, leaving a path of fire in their wake. Until she collapses and buries herself against my chest. I wrap my arms around her and nothing has felt so right.

I breathe in her floral shampoo and press my cheek against her wet hair, wanting everything in the world for this girl, knowing that means I have to deny myself in the process.

"Everything's going to change." Her words are nearly a whisper against my chest.

"It is." I hold her tighter, feeling the pain in the truth cutting to the bone. "And you deserve everything."

**10**

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## **ELOISE**

I'M NOT SURE IF I started it, or he did, but once I felt Adrian's lips on mine, I might as well have been a live wire standing in a puddle of water. Hours later walking into the club and I'm still buzzing.

Adrian follows the four of us through the crowd, and I swear I can feel his eyes on me. Watching my every move as we find our way to a roped-off table. All I can do to stay calm is hope he's not already analyzing all the ways he regrets what we've done.

I know it was reckless, but I couldn't help myself.

He sat there with the necklace dangling between us, and I saw everything I've never been offered.

I'm used to being the person who puts everyone else first. I'm the caretaker. I'm the one who comes in second. But there he was with an offering that felt like so much more than a flower on a string. It might as well have been his heart, usually locked away and guarded, out in the open for my taking.

I sit in the far back of the booth, allowing the guys to slide around me. They're grinning wide as they look around and take in the scene. People are already taking notice, likely trying to figure out if we're important enough to deserve our seats here. Curious stares deciding if we are *somebody*.

We aren't. Not yet. But the air's already changing. People paying attention and treating us differently.

If they only knew the girl they're looking at is no one to be jealous of most days. I live in one of the poorest neighborhoods with my off-the-wagon mother and brother. There's nothing to admire here that doesn't require me wading through shit to get to the other side.

"We need to move to LA." Rome grins out at the sea of faces.

Noah shakes his head, barely moving his eyes off his phone for five seconds. "No thanks."

He frowns and types out a text as he's been doing all night. His girlfriend wasn't thrilled about our trip to LA, and I'm not sure that's a great sign. This is only the first of many trips in our near future.

Being in a relationship might sound nice, but I have no doubt that in this business, it's nothing but trouble. Something I remind myself of as my gaze slides in Adrian's direction.

He's sitting at the edge of the booth, looking more like a bodyguard than a band manager. He's upright and scanning the

crowd, and when the waitress came by, he turned down booze for water.

As if he feels me staring, his dark cinnamon eyes flick to mine, running like a lightning bolt straight through me. His gaze dips to my parted lips and the faintest smirk ticks up at the corner of his mouth.

How long has it been since I've been so attracted to a man?

Months, years?

Never?

Watching my mom be so giving with her body took the appeal away. I didn't lose my virginity until I was nineteen, and it was with a guy I knew my whole childhood. Since then, I've only been with one other man, and it was quick and unfulfilling.

I gave up and assumed maybe I'm just not a sexual person.

That was until I felt this butterfly flutter in my chest. A pulse that started deep in my core. One look from Adrian and I'm throbbing.

Before him, I was never curious about the feel of someone's hands on my skin, of their lips on mine. I've never fantasized about what someone might do to me if we were alone. Or imagined what they might look like if everything else was stripped away. Not until him.

Maybe this is why I've heard girls say it's possible to lose your head over a man. Because sitting here with heat pooling in my belly, I want to lose it all for Adrian.

An arm slings around the back of my shoulders, and I look over to see Rome sitting there smiling at me.

“Someone’s smitten.” He narrows his eyes, shooting me his trademark grin.

Dropping my stare to my drink on the table in front of me, I shrug. “It’s just good he finally decided to join us.”

“That it is.” Rome shakes his head and chuckles, likely not missing that I’m trying to distract from the fact that I was just staring at Adrian. “Nice necklace.”

Looking down, I realize I’m twisting the daisy charm between my fingers without thinking. I glance at Rome, who always seems to know more than I’d like him to. He’s a walking lie detector sometimes. Maybe it’s that he’s so good at keeping secrets of his own, it makes him well-versed in sniffing them out of others. Because without saying anything, his stare moves from me to Adrian and tells me everything I need to know—I’m not being as subtle as I think I am.

I drop the necklace and reach for my drink.

“Cheers.” I smile.

Rome tips his beer up at me and clinks my glass. “Cheers.”

Of all the guys in the band, Rome and I have the least in common. We shouldn’t get along since he pisses me off more than not. But maybe it’s like the yin and yang tattooed on Rome’s stomach. Two opposing sides balancing each other out. Finding comfort in the polar opposite. Because even with all our differences I feel closer to him than almost anyone else.

“How’s it going at Adrian’s?” I change the subject.

Rome twirls my hair around his finger, but it’s not flirty, he’s just naturally affectionate with women. “Guy’s a little uptight.”

“That guy’s also your boss now.” I nudge him in the side.

“Good luck with that.” He laughs, and I can’t help but agree. Of all the jobs Adrian could have accepted, I’m pretty sure being Enemy Muse’s manager has got to be the worst.

“Hey.” Rome looks down at me with a worried expression. “Things all right at your mom’s since I left?”

“Sebastian’s been keeping an eye out, and I avoid the place when her friends are over. But other than that, she’s usually either out somewhere getting wasted or sleeping off whatever she’s coming down from. Besides, we’ll all be gone soon enough.”

“The suits want us back in a couple of weeks to start recording right?”

I nod. A couple of weeks and I’m not sure the next time I’ll be back in Fairfield. “Then who knows what’ll happen.”

“Can’t fucking wait.” Rome squeezes my shoulder but then frowns when he catches an uncertain look on my face. “It’s going to be great, El.”

“You going to be able to handle it?”

He draws his lips between his teeth and thinks that over. “Been through worse.”

I have no doubt about that, but I don't think he's looking at it the same way I am. Just because Rome knows how to handle the worst of times, doesn't mean he copes with them in the best ways.

"Besides, how bad can it be?" Rome smiles. "Anything's better than where we're coming from right?"

"Right."

He smiles and unwraps his arm from around me, planting a hand on my knee and patting me twice. "I've got you, El. We'll all get through this together."

*Together.*

It's how we started, and the only way we know how to do this, so I believe him.

"Boys." Three men I recognize from the label walk up to the table.

A tall one with blond hair tips his chin at me. "And lady."

He probably thinks he's being polite, but all it does is get under my skin. The guys don't notice because it doesn't impact them, but I've seen it this whole trip. How they get treated differently than I do. How their questions are heavily regarded and mine are brushed to the side. How they look to Sebastian for the answers when it comes to our creative direction when I wrote half of the music.

To them, I'm an accessory in the band. Up there to look pretty and contribute in ways they deem appropriate, and that's it.

Adrian stands up and shakes their hands, while Sebastian falls into conversation with one of them, clearly not noticing.

One of the men waves for a waitress, putting his Rolex on full display. Everything about the three of them exudes money. From what they're wearing to the bottle of champagne they order. They throw dollar signs around like they've never spent a day without it in their life, and although the guys seem to be appreciating it, I'm not impressed.

"El," Sebastian says, and I realize everyone is looking at me.

"Sorry, lost in thought." I smile, and a dark-haired exec looks at me like he's thinking, *of course you are, pretty dumb girl.*

"A toast," another one of them says.

I look down and realize there's a new drink in front of me and so I lift it up, joining the rest of them.

Now that a few suits are added to the mix we're drawing more attention from the female crowd that has started to circle.

"To this new adventure," one of the execs says, smiling.

"And to the pussy," Rome adds.

I hip-check him, but all the guys just laugh. Like he needs any more encouragement.

"Cheers."

We all take a drink, and even though it's only my second, I already feel it going to my head. If this night is any indication

of what's in store, I can't help but wonder how much of this will be about the perks of fame, and how much will be about the music.



If life has taught me anything, it's the speed at which a night can quickly turn from fun to chaos. Add three record execs and a new record deal to the mix, and it's a straight-up shit show.

Even Adrian looks drunk as he stands at the edge of the group with Sebastian, chatting up a couple of girls in dresses so small they're going to pop out of one end or the other if they aren't careful.

The song changes and the lights flare, sending a sharp pain shooting between my eyes. I sway where I'm standing and catch my balance on the back of the booth.

"You okay?" I'm not sure when Adrian made his way over, but he's standing directly in front of me, holding onto one of my arms.

"Fine, just think I drank a little too much."

"Lightweight," Rome teases, as he walks by.

Adrian shakes his head, but he doesn't take his eyes off me.  
"Maybe you should sit."



“I think I’m going to take off actually.” I take a step forward, but Adrian’s grip tightens.

“I’ll walk you.”

“I’m fine,” I assure him. “Stay, have fun. This is as big of an opportunity for you as it is for us. You should celebrate.”

Adrian turns me to face him fully, and we’re so close he’s towering over me, sending my insides spinning.

“The hotel is right around the corner.” I narrow my eyes at him.

“I’m aware, but you’re not wandering the streets of LA alone.” His grip tightens with whatever just flashed through his head. “I’ll walk you. I can always head back right after.”

I tip my head to the side, wanting to argue with him, but also knowing that there’s probably no use. “Fine, but you’re coming back after.”

He nods once and leads me to the edge of the group.

“You can’t leave already, sis.” Sebastian frowns as he sees me walking up to him with my purse. But even if he’s putting on a show of disappointment, he won’t stop me. I’m never the last one at the party, so if anything, he’s probably relieved his sister won’t witness the rest of his night.

“Have fun.” I give him a hug. “And be good. We have a flight tomorrow afternoon we can’t miss.”

Shaking hands with the record execs, Adrian finally leads me outside, and the cool air of the night is a relief from the

heat of the club.

Free from the chaos of the club, I realize my head is foggy, and I'm having trouble feeling my legs. It might have only been a couple of drinks, but clearly, I've lost my ability to handle my alcohol.

Once we're away from the mass of people who were standing outside, Adrian slips his hand in mine, and it feels so warm and good. I look up at him, and his eyes almost shimmer against the California night.

“What are we doing?”

Adrian's eyebrows furrow, and I feel his confusion the same as I feel it in myself. He shakes his head. “I don't know.”

I rest my head against his arm as we walk, wishing the hotel was a lot farther away so I could stay like this longer. Walking with Adrian, holding his hand, floating. I don't want to let go of this moment. So when he stops outside the hotel and guides me through the door, I can't help but feel the disappointment.

“Here we are,” I say, as we get to the elevators.

Adrian pushes the button in silence, not releasing my hand, so I don't either. We wait for the doors to finally open, and once we're inside, I can't help but slide my hand down his arm, and back up again. Again and again.

He's firm, strong. The trunk of a tree with millennia of history. I'd like to lay with him and read the rings of his life to learn about where it was he started to feel broken. Maybe I'd even feel safe enough to show him mine.

The elevator comes to a stop at my floor, and he walks me all the way to my door. Once we stop outside it, I turn to face him.

“You could come in.” I hold both his hands in mine.

Adrian looks me over, and although his body is close enough to feel the heat, I sense distance. “You’re drunk.”

I open my mouth to argue, but the slightest shift of my body makes me stumble, and my back hits the door harder than I expect it. Maybe he’s right, and I’m drunker than I realize, because his face blurs as he cups my jaw and holds me in place.

“El?”

“I’m fine,” I brush him off and force a smile, even though my head is starting to swim.

“I’m just saying, I wouldn’t want you to do anything you would regret.” His dark eyes feel almost pained looking at me.

“I wouldn’t.”

He shakes his head ever so slowly. “Can’t risk it.”

Every cell in my body wishes he would. Wishes one of us was reckless. But like statues carved from our own need for control, we stand with that gap of space between us. A line, and neither of us crosses it.

I nod, but it’s barely a movement with his hands holding my face. “Goodnight, then.”

His body shifts, and I think he's stepping away, but his fingers thread back through my hair and he steps in, dipping his mouth to mine. If my mind wasn't already blurry, this would be enough to take any thoughts left. I melt at his touch, wanting more and more. My hands find the front of his T-shirt, and I pull him closer, feeling every hard plane skate against me. I melt against him. But just as I'm about to drag him into my room, he breaks the kiss and steps back.

As he does, my vision fogs, there are three of him, then two, and finally one. My skin is hot, almost feverish, and I have to brace my hands on the door behind me.

"Are you okay?" He steps closer and touches my arm.

"Fine." I force a smile, but the air is starting to feel like static and I'm not sure if I'm going to pass out or throw up. "I think I drank more than I realized. I need to lay down."

The last thing I want is Adrian to see me puke, so I need him to get out of here before I do.

Adrian's eyes skim me. "You sure you don't need anything?"

I'm not sure if I'm swaying or if the hallway is, but the floor feels like it's floating on open water, slowly rolling with the waves.

"I'm good." I shake my head. "Go, keep an eye on the guys. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Eloise," he says, looking me over once more with a pinched expression before turning and walking away.

I watch him make his way down the hall, waiting until he steps into the elevator to peel myself upright. Hopefully I didn't look as trashed as I feel.

Turning around, I almost fall against the door but manage to catch myself. And when I blink, it takes longer than it should for my vision to come back to me.

Something's not right.

I wipe the back of my hand against my forehead and feel the sweat. It was only two drinks, right? *Did I see who set them in front of me?*

My heart starts to race as the floor tilts on its axis. Panic racing with my pulse.

*What was in my drink?*

I fumble for my room key, but when I try to slide it into the lock, I miss. My temples pound and I rest my forehead against the door, trying to catch my bearings.

I slide the key in again and this time I find the slot and manage to get my door open. My room is dark when I step inside but it feels like the air is throbbing. I'm about to close the door when a hand slides around me from behind.

“Adrian?”

Even as I say his name, I know whoever this is feels nothing like him. They're cold and gripping their fingers around my throat from behind, pushing me inside my room.

*I think?*

The room is spinning, and I can't figure out if I'm imagining things.

I step forward again and my vision flickers as I try and find my way toward the bed. One foot in front of the other, until I feel the figure once more behind me.

I reach for thin air and find nothing; my limbs aren't working and I can barely stand. Maybe I'm not, because I feel like I'm floating, and someone is carrying me. They're setting me on a cloud.

Or, is that a bed?

"Relax." I hear foreign whispers in my ear as I start to fade out. "Relax."

But I don't recognize the voice or what they're doing to me, just that I'm dreaming and awake at the same time, and I'm being plucked like petals from a flower as unfamiliar hands peel my clothes off.

"Relax," the whispers come again.

Then nothing but a flower in my vision of darkness. It curls with the absence of sunshine and caves in on itself. It withers like it senses what my insides are doing. It dies with my pain. It shrivels in the cold empty space and with each petal, a piece of myself falls away.

Slowly, it sheds itself.

Or is that me?

An unwelcome thrust tears me apart and all I feel is pain, so deep it stabs my soul.

This can't be happening right? I must be dreaming. This is a nightmare that's all too real. Except, like the withered flower in my vision, I feel the cold emptiness of this moment. I'm stripped of beauty, robbed of purity, reaching my roots deeper to see if there's anything left.

I hide in a dark corner of my brain until the pain stops and the weight holding me down finally releases. But when I try to look up and meet the face of whoever did this, the room is foggy, and my eyes can't make out the figure in the shadows.

I almost think I was right the first time. This is a figment of my imagination. But then the phantom comes close again and reaches in to rip the chain from around my neck.

**11**

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## ADRIAN

SEBASTIAN TOSSES HIS BAG into the car, then leans against it with his arms crossed over his chest. “Has anyone else noticed that El’s been way the fuck off lately?”

I was beginning to think I was the only one seeing it. Clearly not.

“Something’s up,” Rome agrees, taking a final hit of his joint before putting it out. “She skipped our last practice, and El never skips practice.”

Sebastian nods, and there’s a worried pinch between his eyebrows.

Ever since we got back from LA a couple of weeks ago, Eloise has all but shut down. She disappeared for a few days immediately after, and when she finally resurfaced, she said she was just processing everything that was happening, insisting everything was fine.

Except, she didn’t seem fine.

I can't help but think about that night outside her hotel room and wonder if my pushing her away was a mistake. It's the last time she's looked me in the eyes, and all I can figure is that I did something wrong, I just don't know what it is.

She was drunk, and if she and I are going to work out whatever this is between us, it's not going to be when she's messed up in the head. If only I could get in the same room as her for five minutes and figure this shit out.

"Think something happened?" Sebastian looks at me.

I shrug. "No clue. Could it be stress, like she said?"

"Maybe. I mean El is a bit of a control freak." Sebastian laughs.

I'd like to explain to him she's only that way because she's surrounded by the three of them, but I don't.

"That's putting it mildly." Rome nods his head. "But you're probably right. There's a lot of shit going on right now. It's a big change."

"Tell me about it," Noah says, walking up and looking like he hasn't slept in days. His long blond hair is tied back in a bun on the back of his head and there are dark circles under his eyes.

"Where's your leash?" Rome teases as Noah adds his bag to the stack in the car.

Noah leans against the car next to Sebastian and wipes his palms over his face. "Don't be a dick. Not in the mood right now."

“Me? Never.” Rome grins.

I’m not sure what’s going to be worse, keeping Rome and Sebastian in check when we get to LA or worrying about Noah disappearing every five minutes to call his girlfriend. I appreciate that the man seems committed, but it’s clear she’s not on board with where the band is heading, and I’m not sure it’s going to play out well.

Not that I’m one to talk when I can’t get a certain brunette out of my head.

“Speaking of.” Sebastian looks over my shoulder as tires crackling against the pavement draws my attention.

I turn to see Eloise coming to a stop in her beat-up Hyundai. How that thing is still running beats me, but I guess that doesn’t matter much right now. That car, along with this house, and everything else, is just going to sit here for the next few months while the band is in LA recording.

I’m still not sure how I fit into the world they’re dragging me into, but it feels like I’ve made the right decision more and more by the day. It’s not like I had any attachment to the bar. Much less this town, now that there’s no one left here who matters.

Sam would call it escaping, and maybe she’d be right. But anything is better than sitting still right now.

Eloise steps out of the car, and I walk over to help her with her bags.

“You ready?” I ask when she doesn’t greet me.

She nods, eyes hidden behind her wide-rimmed sunglasses.  
“The guys ready to go?”

“They are.”

She reaches for a bag, but I snatch the handle and pull it out of her hands.

“Adrian, why didn’t you help us with our shit?” I look up and see Rome grinning at me as he watches me throw one of Eloise’s bags over my shoulder.

“Fuck off,” I tell him, and he goes back to bullshitting with Noah and Sebastian.

Eloise closes the trunk and turns to walk away.

“Hold up a minute,” I stop her, resting my hip against the trunk.

She freezes, not facing me as she tips her chin up and rolls her shoulders back. It’s not news to me that Eloise isn’t always the warmest person, but whatever is going on with her these past couple of weeks has her shut down on another level. She hasn’t so much as cracked a smile.

One would think landing a record deal would put her in a better mood, but all it seems to have done is bring her stress.

Eloise turns to face me, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Did I do something wrong in LA?” I ask, noticing her whole body stiffen at the question.

Even if I was the one who kissed her that night outside her hotel room door, she was the one who first initiated it earlier

that evening. At no point did she seem uncomfortable, so I'm not sure why it seems to make her so tense.

"No, you didn't." She shakes her head.

"All right." I rake my fingers across the back of my neck and can't seem to get a read on her. "Because I thought we were on the same page when we—"

"Adrian." Eloise looks over her shoulder at the guys and then tips her head to the house. "Not here."

She walks away and I follow her inside, ignoring the fact that Sebastian calls out to me asking what the fuck we're doing.

Closing the door behind Eloise, she steps into the den. It's been emptied of their equipment and feels hollow compared to how it's been these past few months.

Eloise slips her sunglasses off, and her eyes look like maybe she's been crying. If so, she's buried the evidence under a thick layer of eye makeup. But it isn't the faint redness of her gaze that has my attention, it's how her eyes are distant. The burnt umber no longer warm, instead cold, emotionless black holes that stare back at me.

"We can't do this." She shifts her shoulders back a fraction. But even if her tone is harsh, there's something crackling just beneath the surface of her hardened expression.

"And what exactly is *this*?"

She might want to talk around the subject, but I'm not doing it. If she wants to draw some kind of line between us, that's

fine, but she's going to have to say it.

"It was different there."

"In LA?"

Eloise nods, but I don't miss that it also makes her flinch. "There was a lot going on between signing the record deal and... everything else. We got caught up in the moment."

"Did we?" I take a step closer to her because she can say that all she wants, but there's no way I believe it.

What happened in LA started well before that. Somewhere between meeting Eloise and seeing her at my house every day, things changed. The road we were on was inevitable, and now she's trying to cover her tracks thinking I won't notice.

"I get you've accepted the job with the band, and I'm happy about that, but don't make this personal."

"Personal." I laugh because I'm not sure what the fuck else she thinks this could be. "If it's not personal, then how do you explain the kiss?"

"A mistake." The words come out so fast I can't deny them.

She doesn't even blink as she stands there looking at me. Not a pull of regret in her tone.

"And now it's done." She crosses her arms over her chest. "Like you said, the band comes first. This will just get messy. It's better if we just leave it as it was and move on. For the band."

"Come on." I step closer. "Don't do this."

I reach out to her, but she pulls her arm away and panic floods her face, catching me off guard. Was I that blind to everything? Was I making this all up in my head? Because I thought she wanted me as much as I wanted her, but all of a sudden it looks a lot different in this nearly empty house.

Eloise holds her arms tight over her chest and rubs them with her hands like she's protecting herself from something.

*From me?*

I take a step back.

She has to know I'd never do anything to hurt her, and if kissing her crossed a line that makes her think otherwise, then I've made a bigger mistake than I originally thought.

"I—" Raking my hands over my hair, I step back further. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have."

"Adrian." My name is almost a plea, but I'm not sure why, she's made it clear. We were friends, and I fucked it up in so many ways.

"I understand," I say, holding my arms at my sides and feeling like the world around me might as well be slipping away.

The same overwhelming feeling I had when Sam died floods me. The same as when my father was sick, and I couldn't be there for him. I've misread something with Eloise and left her alone in whatever it is that's causing this reaction. And I can't do it again.

“It’s not...” But she doesn’t finish her thought, either because she doesn’t want to hurt me, or she can’t. “We need to keep this professional for the band.”

The band. Fuck, what have I done?

“I can step aside,” I say, but Eloise closes in on me at that statement, stepping right in my space.

“No.” She shakes her head. “The guys need you. *I* need you.”

Her hand lifts like she’s about to reach out, but she stops herself.

“It’s just better if we don’t...” She drops her chin. “It would get messy.”

I nod, knowing she’s right. I knew this all along and still acted on it anyway like a reckless fool. I work for the band now, getting involved with her has the potential to end in a real fucking mess.

She tips her chin up and looks me in the eyes. This close I almost think I still see the flecks of gold in them. I can almost feel the garden that is her heart blooming.

But I have to ignore it because she’s right. We can’t do this.

“I’m sorry.” She frowns.

My hands beg me to reach out to her. To hold her. To take away whatever it is that’s weighing her down. But I resist. “Don’t be. You’re right.”



I'm not sure why she looks disappointed I said it, but her lips turn down the slightest.

"I want this for you, El." I tuck my hands in my pockets so they don't go rogue. "I want you to have everything you've ever dreamed. And I'll do anything I can to make it happen."

A promise I feel in my bones.

Because I want to kiss her.

Hold her.

Have her.

But I want more for her than to be selfish with any of those things.

Turning, I start to walk away, knowing the distance I need to create is much more than physical, but that this is where I need to start.

"Adrian," she calls out, and I look at her over my shoulder. "Thank you for everything, and for not walking away. I—the band, needs you."

"You've got me," I say, leaving the room before she notices how much it hurts to say it.

Stepping outside, I clutch my pocket, where Sam's dog tags sit, and I make myself a promise. If what Eloise needs is a friend, a band manager, I'll be it. Nothing more, nothing less. I'll be the person I never got to be for those I've lost.

No matter how much it hurts.

## Verse Two

"Don't lie tonight, there's been  
enough of that for one life."





**12**

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**ELOISE**

## Six Years Later

CLOSING MY EYES, I breathe in the crisp night air. The edge of summer has always been my favorite. The coldness of winter melting slowly from my bones. Add in an outdoor stadium and thousands of fans, and I almost feel my heartbeat again.

I open my eyes and look out at them.

Desperation.

Tears.

*Devotion.*

Stepping forward on the stage, I let myself soak it in. I do what I do best: I become Eloise Kane, Rock's Princess. Strong and confident, powerful in ways that if they could look inside they'd know it's a lie.

But in this moment with them, I feel a fragment of what they've seen in me for the past six years: *Unstoppable.*

My fingers are raw from playing my heart out tonight. The energy of the band pulses on the stage like it used to in the beginning.

It should be reassuring. After all, the guys are finally finding themselves on the other side of fame, and for the first time in a long time, I think we stand a chance in this world. Sebastian settling down with Cassie. Noah getting sober and finally convincing Merry to give them a chance. Even if Rome

is still as reckless as ever, I should be comforted by the fact that the majority of the band is on my level for once.

*So what's this unsettling whisper coming from inside?*

Their sense of peace only makes me feel more chaotic.

Maybe it's that I'm used to being the reliable one in the band and now I'm not. After all, for six years I've been the center force of gravity while they spun in circles. First, it was women, then parties, then drugs. Slowly escalating until it reached a corrupt crescendo. And through it all, there I was, Eloise Kane, with my finger on the spinning wheel that was our family. I kept us steady. Never wavering for fear of the damage it could cause.

Only now, I'm slipping. As they fall into place, the uneven shards of myself are more evident. Pieces I've carefully tucked away start to peek through.

One wrong step.

One wrong move.

*Everyone will see your truth.*

The crowd screams, and I realize I'm drifting in my thoughts again. I look over and spot Rome lying on the stage, ripping into the song with his guitar. Sebastian stands nearby thrashing around, and every woman in here is entranced.

It takes all my effort to push aside whatever's running rampant in my mind as I walk to the edge of the stage and pretend nothing else exists. I let myself soak in the throbbing pulse of the audience and bathe in the screams.

I let their love put me back together again.

In their eyes, I'm whole—even if it is a pipe dream.

The song cuts out and Sebastian flips off the audience, marking the end of tonight's set.

Four more weeks until we wrap up our seventh tour, and I still can't believe how we got this far. How the world hasn't had its fill and spit us out yet.

Unwrapping my bass guitar from my body, I hold it up and paste a time-perfected smile on my face. Giving our fans one more taste of what they need before walking off the stage. Appreciating how up here I can be whatever it is they're looking for in themselves.

Sebastian, Noah, and Rome have only ever seen a sea of women waiting to please them, but I've always had a different vision. Our fans might drool over the guys' ridiculous abs and celebrity smiles, but that's not why they come to our concerts.

They want the music.

They want our souls.

They want to dip their hearts in the lyrics and soak them up to see if they can feel wherever we drew them from.

Stepping off the stage, I'm overwhelmed with the inescapable weight that's buried me for the past eight months. Ever since I stayed at Adrian's house while we wrote our last album.

*Ever since the first rose showed up on the doorstep.*



“You guys were amazing,” Cassie says, throwing herself into Sebastian’s arms.

They’re so good together it’s a little ridiculous. I honestly never thought my brother would settle down, much less with a good girl like Cassie. But something about her pink hair and sweet-as-sugar personality lured him, and I’ve never seen him so happy.

He pulls back and brushes her hair out of her face. “Thanks, babe.”

My stomach tugs from somewhere deep, and I wonder when that started. Being single for years hasn’t bothered me. It’s easier. But as Sebastian hugs Cassie, and Merry wraps herself under Noah’s arm, I long for something I stopped thinking about a long time ago.

“We’ve got to be on the road in an hour,” Adrian says, coming up beside me.

I jump because I didn’t see him there, and I hope he doesn’t notice. It’s irritating enough my body can’t kick the chemical reaction of being in his presence. I don’t need him aware of that fact.

“Seriously? An hour?” Rome sighs, probably disappointed there’s no time to hit up a bar or strip club before we shoot out to the next city.

“Seriously.” Adrian pulls his phone out and starts thumbing through it.

Rome stalks off, irritated.

Adrian's mastered the art of not letting the band's antics faze him. It's the only reason he's been able to handle managing us for all these years. That, and pretending he doesn't feel whatever this unnerving tension is that exists between us.

Maybe he doesn't. Maybe it's all in my head. After all, I was the one who pushed him away and sealed the door shut, giving him the impression it didn't faze me as it seemed to do him.

"Hold up," Adrian says, as Sebastian and Noah start to follow Rome. "You guys remember the camera crew starts rolling tomorrow, right?"

*Wonderful.*

I don't realize I said it out loud until all eyes move in my direction.

"I don't know why we agreed to this." I feel myself getting defensive now that my feelings are known. "Like they don't already have enough of us."

Adrian tucks his phone in his pocket and crosses his arms over his chest. "It was in your contract for the tour. With any luck, they'll sell the documentary to a streaming service to hype the next album."

"Who says we're even writing a *next album*?"

Sebastian quirks an eyebrow at that, but I ignore him. Just because they've been running us thin for years doesn't mean we can't get a break.

“They assumed—”

“Well, they shouldn’t,” I cut Adrian off, handing my guitar to a roadie who walks up for it. “I’ll do the interviews, finish out this tour, but after that, I don’t know.”

Noah steps forward, looking like he wants to say something, but Merry holds him back. I appreciate that about her. Noah might always want to play peacekeeper, but sometimes you just have to let people get it out, and if anyone understands, it’s her.

Adrian clenches his jaw, but the slightest pinch between his eyebrows tells me he isn’t frustrated, he’s worried.

I’d know. I’ve seen enough of it on all their faces for the past eight months. Apparently, while the guys are allowed to spiral whenever they want, I’m not. God forbid I step out of line for once.

“We’ll talk tomorrow.” Adrian nods, ending the conversation.

I hate how he can do that. How at one point he felt like an actual person, and now he’s become so much of a barrier between the band and the rest of the world, I wonder if his insides have morphed into an actual wall there’s no climbing.

Instead of arguing or pointing out the fact that it’s my life and I should get an actual say, I turn and walk away, ignoring Sebastian who tries to call out for me. They’d prefer I keep my mouth shut and do as I’m told—always have. The trouble is, after six years, it’s becoming increasingly difficult.

I turn the corner and step outside of the stadium, and I'm struck by the chill of a cool breeze that makes me shiver. A group of people huddle against the side of the building, and I recognize a group of crew members waiting for the buses to be ready. A few eyes dart in my direction, but I keep walking, not in the mood to be friendly.

Just as I'm almost out of earshot, I overhear something that freezes me in place.

"Can you picture Adrian married?" Quinn, our Social Media Manager, tightens her neon blue ponytail and shakes her head like she can't believe it herself.

Stacy straightens up at Quinn's question and brushes her hands over her dress slacks, looking out of place to be standing outside a rock concert. "He's been dating Becca for almost a year now, it makes sense, right? I don't think Adrian's ever dated, so that's got to mean something."

"Hopefully she says yes then." Quinn smiles, but when her eyes find mine through the group of people, it falls. "Eloise."

The group turns, and I realize I'm frozen, staring at them. I try my best to recover, rolling my shoulders back and forcing a smile. "Just heading to my bus." I jut my thumb in the direction of it and turn to keep walking.

Quinn jogs up beside me. "Eloise, wait."

She grips my arm and turns me to face her.

"I didn't see you standing there." She frowns. Her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are wide, searching me for a reaction.

“It’s okay.” I shrug, wrapping my arms around my center when the wind kicks up. “So, Adrian’s proposing to Becca then?”

I try to sound nonchalant, but the pity on Quinn’s face proves I’m not pulling it off as well as I’d like to think.

I can’t help it. This is Adrian we’re talking about. Sure, he and I never actually dated, but some pathetic part of me held on. Especially since he’s avoided relationships as much as I have. Not dating anyone seriously, never seeming attached.

He might have had the occasional girlfriend when he was in the mood and screwed a groupie or two when it was convenient. But he isn’t like the guys in the band. He was discreet.

Part of me thought it was for my sake.

Apparently not.

I should have known his relationship with Becca was different. He’s been with her for almost a year now—I guess. She didn’t join us on tour, and he doesn’t mention her, but Adrian’s not an open book. I should have known they were still together even if part of me wondered—hoped—they had split.

*But getting engaged?*

It’s the opposite, and it sends my stomach spinning.

When they started dating, I thought she was simply his version of a distraction to avoid the fact that I was staying at

his house while we recorded our album. I thought she was a convenient excuse.

“I don’t know for sure,” Quinn says, giving me a sympathetic look. “You know how rumors spread on tour. Boredom, and all.”

“It’s fine.” I force a smile. “I’m happy for him. I want him to be happy, and if that’s what Becca is, then good for him.”

Quinn’s eyebrows pinch, and I can see her trying to read me.

“Really,” I say, grabbing her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. “Adrian deserves the best, this is a good thing.”

“If you say so,” Quinn says. “I guess I just always figured there was something going on with you guys and eventually you’d act on it.”

“Me and Adrian? No way.” I laugh, but it feels more like the air being kicked out of me. “Rumors remember? We’ve always been just friends.”

The lies sour on my tongue. Friends might be all we’ve ever been officially, but it pales in comparison to whatever that statement pulls to the surface inside.

“I’m good, promise,” I say again, sounding like a record on repeat. “Good, but cold, so I’m going to get to my bus.”

Quinn smiles and pulls me in for a hug. I pat her on the back before cutting it short. No matter how much I’ve tried, physical affection doesn’t come as easily to me as it seems to most people.

She smiles at me in understanding before splitting off in the direction of the crew. And I'm relieved once more that the band splurged on our own buses for this tour. All I need right now is sleep and to forget whatever unwanted feeling is rising in my gut.

If it's true that Adrian is getting engaged, then I am happy for him—really. But it doesn't stop my heart from splintering. Knowing the door that I closed six years ago is officially being sealed. Nailed shut.

Permanently.

Making my way around the corner, I breathe a sigh of relief as my bus comes into view. Only, it's cut short when I get closer and see something hanging on the door. A single white rose is tucked into the handle. And while to anyone else it might look like a sweet gesture from an admirer, my stomach sinks with the truth.

Because I know it's *him*.





## ADRIAN

EVERY TIME I THINK being the band manager for Enemy Muse will get easier, something goes sideways.

With Sebastian and Noah lovesick over their girls and not out causing trouble, it should cut my workload in half. But with Eloise on edge and Rome mid-spiral, I'm spinning my wheels as fast as ever. At least with Rome, it's no surprise. He's been circling the drain he's inevitably going to be flushed down if he doesn't face some of his demons for years. But Eloise catches me off guard.

She's been calm and collected since the day the band made it big. She closed her real self off and morphed into whatever version of herself she thinks fans need from her. She built carefully crafted walls to prevent anyone from getting past them and that was that.

End of fucking story.

Except—these last eight months, something has shifted.

At first, I thought it was because she was staying at my house, and she sensed I've never really gotten over what still lingers between us. But then I suspected it was something more. Something she has absolutely no intention of letting me near, even if it's my job as the band manager to protect her.

It's fucking frustrating.

While I've managed to perfect the art of pretending not to give a shit about her personally in order to do what's best for the band, it doesn't mean there aren't invisible chinks in my armor. All it takes is one rogue look from Eloise's deeply brown eyes and I'm not sure what I'm even fighting for anymore.

Apparently, neither does she.

If she's really done making music after this tour, I can't stop her—or blame her, for that matter. All four of them have given up their lives in return for fame. And although Sebastian and Noah are slowly navigating how to balance both, Eloise has always given her entire soul to her music. If the day comes she wants more, I have no doubt she'll walk away.

“You think too much.” Rome pops me in the shoulder with his fist. His eyes are bloodshot, and I really hope he's not too high to make it through this interview.

“Someone around here has to.” I cross my arms over my chest and look past him, where the rest of the band is making their way into the room.

The camera crew has been set up for an hour waiting on them, yet they walk in like they haven't been keeping everyone waiting. While I've been listening to the crew bitch about spoiled rock stars, the band has been taking their sweet-ass time as always.

Marlene, the documentary crew's personal assistant, jumps up when she spots the band walking in and hurries over. If she's trying to pretend she doesn't have stars in her eyes, she's failing miserably. The woman can barely keep it together, especially when her eyes fall on Noah.

"You're here, excellent." She brushes her hands over her skirt and rolls her shoulders back, showing off her full height, which in heels is nearly six feet.

Sebastian shoots her his trademark celebrity grin. "Where do you want us?"

Just because he's taken now, doesn't mean he's any less charming. He knows exactly how to work his megawatt smile to get exactly what he wants. They all do.

Marlene guides the band to the table where the camera crew is seated, and they drop into chairs across from them. I know none of them are happy about the documentary—except maybe Rome—but it's part of their contract, so I'm glad they're at least playing nice.

The band hasn't committed to anything once this tour ends in four weeks, so the documentary will keep them on the map while they figure things out. It's something the label is clearly aware of given the fact that they're milking this for every last

drop while the hooks are still in. God forbid they not have a plan if the band goes on hiatus.

I honestly didn't think Enemy Muse would ever take a break from music. They've run on fumes for years, and I've managed to keep them somewhat whole in the process. But these past few months have been different if Eloise is any indication. And I'm not sure what the fate of the band is after the tour ends.

I should be relieved at the thought of the band slowing down because it means I can as well. While the band has worked their asses off, I've been right beside them, grating myself to the bone. I've sacrificed everything for them—my own life, a family, a relationship. And it's been worth it to see them succeed and get everything they deserve. But I'm thirty-three now, and at some point, I've got to separate a portion of my life from theirs.

I need to grow the fuck up and figure out what I'm doing with myself.

Offering to manage Merry's career was my first step to branching out professionally from the band and finding my own path. It's allowed me some freedom while the band has trotted the globe. I've gone back and forth between Merry and Enemy Muse, and it's given me some space to breathe.

But that doesn't make it less exhausting. If anything, now I've got even less time than before. This isn't the kind of life you live if you want to get married, have a family, and settle the fuck down at some point. And I still want that...

*I think?*

My gaze moves to Eloise because of course it does. Six fucking years doesn't stop me from being the idiot who can't keep his eyes off her. She might as well suck the oxygen out of the room when she enters because one glance sends my lungs into a battle for air.

Today, she's in simple black jeans and a skintight red tank top. Her hair is already perfectly slicked into a ponytail and she's donning a full face of makeup at seven in the morning. It makes me miss those few months when she stayed with me last year. Padding around my house in leggings and oversized T-shirts. Her long sandy brown hair in messy buns or tumbling recklessly around her shoulders. She wasn't the rock-princess persona the media has familiarized themselves with.

She was just Eloise.

The girl I met at a bar, scribbling in her notebook.

Fuck, I must be staring, and I just hope it hasn't been too long, because her rich brown eyes dart in my direction. There's a tightness in her clenched jaw and an almost sad look in her eyes that I can't figure out.

Wish I could.

"Thank you for meeting with us," Marlene says with a smile, pulling Eloise's attention.

I sit at the end of the table with the band on one side and the crew on the other. A familiar position I'm always putting myself in. These four might make me want to jump off a cliff

half the time, but damn if I'll ever let something happen to them. They're the only family I've got. And since I'm not great with my words, my only option is to show that in my actions.

“This is Dean—” Marlene motions toward a man sitting next to her. He can't be more than twenty-five with his baby face and overeager green eyes. Then, she turns to the man on her other side, who might as well be Dean's opposite with a full head of gray hair and a gruff expression. “—and this is Mark. They're going to be your crew so get familiar. They'll be following you around, asking questions, and getting the inside scoop on your lives.”

Eloise shifts in her seat, and I don't miss that her fingers clench where they're wrapped around the arms of her chair.

“Only in public,” I say firmly, looking at Marlene.

Marlene smiles brightly. “In public, yes. But we also need to get to know the band outside of the public eye. Learn what makes Enemy Muse so special.”

Leaning my elbows on the table, I square off with her, needing to make myself clear. “That's fine, but no one on your crew is following them around when they're alone, that's their time. You schedule all your recording times through me, am I clear?”

I see Noah cock a grin out of the corner of my eye, but I don't move my gaze off Marlene. Right now, she might be seeing an over-protective band manager, and that's fine. There's no way in hell I'm letting these two guys alone in a

room with any of them and risking someone feeling uncomfortable.

Marlene narrows her eyes, and I realize I've underestimated her. But she doesn't let the facade crack, forcing a smile instead. "Understood."

I nod and sit back as she continues to go over the plans for the documentary. She oozes over them like they aren't used to this shit on a daily basis. And even Sebastian, who usually appreciates getting his ego stroked, looks checked out as she works to sell them on it.

"We'll also be doing individual interviews." Marlene leans forward and smiles. "We want to hear about how you got started, what got you to where you are today. The early days, the band forming, signing your record deal. Everything."

"Everything?" Eloise cocks an eyebrow, and even if the interviewer doesn't notice, there's something she's hiding behind that word.

Sebastian must also sense it, because he looks over at his sister, and then at me, asking me a silent question. Eloise tends to let these kinds of meetings play out in front of her, speaking only when asked a direct question. But there's something unnerving in her expression that makes me wonder why *everything* is all that important right now.

They've been in the public eye for long enough to not have any secrets left.

Marlene nods. "Everything."

Eloise swallows hard and her eyes move down. She's quiet for the rest of the meeting and rushes out before I can touch base with her. Usually, I'd let her just do her thing and avoid me. After all, it's what she and I are good at. But I can't shake this feeling something is off, so I follow her to her tour bus instead.

"I'm fine," she says like she can hear me behind her and knows what I'm about to say before I get the chance. But even if her words are clipped purposely to brush me off, I'm not letting her off the hook that easy.

"Eloise." I barely catch the door to her bus before it swings shut behind her.

She's pissed—about what, I have no fucking clue. It's not an emotion she shows often, but it's been coming out more and more lately.

"We need to talk about this." I climb the steps into her tour bus and turn the corner, dipping my chin and raking my fingers over the back of my head as I do.

Every time I step in here, I can't help but hide my face because if I didn't, I'm positive it would give away what Eloise's floral scent does to my chest on the first inhale. I try to not take it in, to not let it affect me. I bury the burning in my throat and hold my composure. But when I lift my face, Eloise's back is to me, and her entire posture is rigid.

"El?" I reach out and place my hand on her shoulder, which makes her jump.



She spins so fast, and it isn't until she does that I see the tears pooling in her eyes.

“Hey,” I step toward her but freeze when I see what she's holding in her hand—a familiar daisy necklace on a simple silver chain.

The sight of the jewelry forms a knot in my throat. The last time I saw the necklace was the night I gave it to her. I wrapped it around her neck right before she kissed me in her hotel room. All the pieces that had been outside me settled into place, and everything was right.

Until the next day, when the girl I fell for the moment I met her shrunk into herself, and she never wore the necklace again. I didn't even know if she still had it.

She's clenching the string, and it draws out the whiteness of her knuckles. And something about it gives me a sinking feeling in my stomach.

“Adrian, I—” the words end on a sob as she rushes past me, disappearing into the depths of her tour bus, leaving me wondering what the fuck is going on.

That is, until I turn back to the mirror she was standing in front of and see it. Scrawled across the surface are letters drawn in paint, but it's the color of blood.

### *SHUT YOUR MOUTH OR PAY THE CONSEQUENCES*

And there's a white rose on the table beneath the message.

**14**

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**ELOISE**

## Eight Months Earlier

I'M BEGINNING TO FEEL cooped up at Adrian's house. If only my renovators could have waited five more months before they got started, I wouldn't be out of a home while recording this album.

I should have taken Sebastian up on his offer to crash with him, but being the thoughtful sister I always am, I wanted to give him and Cassie space in their new relationship.

So here I am, crashing at Adrian's house and pretending it has no impact on me.

What was I thinking?

I stare at the door to my bedroom like danger lurks on the other side. In some capacity it does. Because when I step over the threshold there's no escaping the fact that I'm in Adrian's space and I still haven't gotten over him.

So here I sit on the other side of it, no matter how odd it might seem that I'm locking myself away in my room to avoid reality.

After all, Adrian is *Adrian*.

No matter how many times I tell myself I'm the one who wanted him to stop pursuing me and it's for the best, I still don't believe it. And no matter how obvious it is he's moved on and there's no point wallowing in what could have been, being in such close quarters is bringing up all kinds of feelings.

Two knocks strike the door, making me jump.

“El?” Adrian’s voice comes from the other side.

I stand up and start pacing. “One minute.”

It’s like he can sense me sitting in here thinking about him because I swear a few minutes ago Merry was still here recording and they were in the basement.

I walk over to the mirror and run my fingers through my stick straight hair and try to give it the volume it’s lacking. When I’m not on tour, I look like a dim version of myself. No makeup, flat hair, no leather outfits. It’s unnerving. Because without the façade to hide behind, he might realize I’m no one anymore. Not even the girl I lost years ago.

*The same time you lost him.*

I shake the thought and walk to the door, swinging it open and hoping I look more confident than I feel. Adrian has one forearm propped against the doorframe. His gaze skims downward, and I feel my legs prickle. I forgot I was wearing an oversized T-shirt, and nothing else.

His stare snaps to mine in a way that makes me feel caught... seen... bare. He’s always had the power to strip me to the bone at one glance, whether he realizes it or not.

“What’s up?” I swallow at the lump in my throat.

Adrian stands up tall and crosses his arms over his chest as he does whenever he’s closing himself off from something. “I’m heading out, do you need anything while I’m gone?”

I should be thankful that he's always checking in on me when he comes and goes. How he stocks the kitchen with my favorite things and makes sure I have everything I need. But it's just a reminder of the relationship he and I can never have, so all it does is make me sad.

"No." I cross my arms over my chest and let my gaze fall to the clock on the wall. "Besides, I doubt they'll have anything I need where you're going."

It's eleven thirty at night, so I know he's not going on a grocery run.

Adrian's been spending lots of time with Rome and Noah at strip clubs. And while he might not explicitly say it, I have a feeling he's doing it to avoid me.

"That's not..." Adrian lets out a deep breath and runs his palms over his face.

"You don't have to explain yourself to me, Adrian. I was just pointing out a fact. I'm fine. Go have fun." I force a smile, because even if it does rile up unwanted irritation every time I know Adrian is out with random women, I know I have no right to feel it.

"I'm not going out with Rome and Noah," he says.

"Okay..."

It might just be my imagination, but I swear the air is full of static. The hair on the back of my neck is standing on its ends and the energy between us is unbalanced. Something about the look in Adrian's eyes makes them empty and disconnected.

He's the same wall I've been staring at for years now. Both of us shut down and pretending nothing existed beyond him being my manager. Even if deep down in me rivers run beneath with a truth no one knows about.

"El..." He runs his palm over his face once more, and I'm not sure I've ever seen him look this nervous.

I cross my arms over my chest, suddenly feeling like I need a barrier to protect me from whatever he's about to say. "You can tell me. Friends, remember?"

Every time I say the word *friends*, it feels like a lie. But I bury my own feelings, knowing there's something else going on.

"I'm seeing someone," Adrian says, pressing his lips together right after.

It takes me a moment to process what he said. Because at first, I think I must have heard him wrong.

When Adrian and I agreed to keep it professional between us, we did. We might be friendly to each other for the sake of the band, but we don't talk about our relationships with other people.

*Not that I've had one.*

But here he is, mentioning he's dating someone, and my stomach drops.

"You have a girlfriend?" I ask, even if I already know the answer.

Adrian nods as the weight in my belly sinks. He's telling me because I need to know. He's telling me because it's serious.

"It's just—"

"Adrian, it's okay." I smile wider, but my grip on my arms tightens. "I'm happy for you. This is a good thing."

His face falls, almost like he's disappointed at my approval, but he recovers quickly. "Thanks, El."

I nod. "Go have fun, I'll see you tomorrow."

While I thought Adrian was spending every other night at a strip club with Rome, apparently, he's been seeing someone. And while it might seem unusual, this feels worse than random women rubbing their breasts on him. This is a relationship.

*A girlfriend.*

My heartbeat hammers between my temples at the thought because he's actually moving on.

Adrian steps back. "Before I go, I almost forgot, something was delivered for you. It's on the counter."

"From who?"

He shrugs. "No clue. An admirer."

It's an odd thing to say because usually my fan mail is directed elsewhere, but he doesn't seem worried, so he's probably just messing with me.

"All right." I go to step past Adrian, expecting him to move, but he doesn't, bringing us really close.



He smells intoxicating, and I realize he must be wearing a new cologne. The scent, mixed with the way the fabric on his thin long sleeve white shirt stretches his chest, reminds me of things I'd prefer to stay buried.

I dare to look up at Adrian, with him only a step away, and he holds my stare. Something works behind his cinnamon eyes, and in this moment, I wish I could take back everything I said to him years ago. I wish the truth had come out instead of my harmful lies. But just as I'm about to open my mouth and say just that, he steps away, breaking our staring contest.

"Have a good night, El," he says and walks away without so much as looking back at me, even if my eyes don't leave him until he disappears around the corner.

All I can do is watch him go and wait until I hear the garage door close behind him, before unfreezing my feet. My regret doesn't need to ruin things, so I have no choice but to bottle it up.

I head into the kitchen with a sour feeling in my gut from the way Adrian left. Staying with him is the worst idea I've had in years, and there's no getting out of it.

Turning the corner, I see a single white rose sitting on the counter with a card next to it. It's an odd delivery and seeing as I haven't dated in years, I'm not sure who would be sending it to me. But it feels nice to be appreciated, especially with my favorite thing in the world—flowers.

Maybe it's from Sebastian, who has been trying to get on my good side as we start writing this new album. We've

already argued a few times about the direction, and at this rate, the band is going to be fighting nonstop before we go back on tour.

I walk over and pick up the rose, spinning it between my fingers and taking a deep inhale of it. I love roses, but then again, I love all flowers. Setting it down, I pick up the card, peeling it open.

There's no indication on the outside who it's from. The only writing is my name in perfectly neat letters on the envelope. But when I pull out the card and read it, my head starts hammering. The air gets fuzzy, and my insides are tearing. Because the message isn't sweet at all.

*YOU'RE MINE, ELOISE. DON'T FORGET IT.*

**15**

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## ELOISE

I GRIP THE SINK and refuse to close my eyes. I refuse to sink into a place where the man in my nightmares can still reach me.

I count down from ten, as I let out a deep breath.

It's a trick my therapist taught me when I was in the depths of coping with what happened. And some days it feels like the only way to drown out damage laced so deep I'm not sure I'll ever escape it.

At first, I was numb. At a time when I should have been feeling, I couldn't. Because if I did, it meant it was real—I'd been raped. It was impossible to process.

But then the nightmares started. Alone in my bed, I'd feel his hands on me. I'd feel his breath on my neck while he split my soul. I'd feel his memory like an actual presence haunting me. Something years of therapy still hasn't fully mended.

But as if he sensed me trying, he wanted me to know he wasn't done. My body wasn't enough, he wanted my mind as

well. And it all started with a single white rose.

I don't let go of the sink and stare into my dark eyes. My pupils are dilated in the dim light of the bathroom, and they remind me of the black holes I stared into long after the night we signed with the label. Pools form at the brim of my eyelids and slip out, no matter how strong I try to be. Because one moment takes me back to a time in my mind there's no escaping.

I step back and sit down on the closed toilet.

If I thought the roses were enough to break me all over again, now he's escalating. And I'm still no closer to figuring out who he is. Like the phantom that drugged me and drained me, he hides behind his messages.

Haunting me. Stalking me. Making it known I'll never escape him.

And I have no idea why.

A knock at the bathroom door makes me jump, bringing me back to the reality of my tour bus. When I ran into the bathroom, Adrian had to have seen the message on the mirror, and I know the time has come. I've hidden the truth for years, hoping burying it would give me the power to make the pain in it disappear. I was wrong.

The threat drawn on the mirror in red lipstick is not only an escalation, but also a message that he has access. He somehow slipped past security and found his way into my personal

space, and I can't help the bile rising in my throat with the thought.

I open my hands in my lap and look at the daisy necklace I've clenched so hard there are indents in my skin. A necklace that meant so much when Adrian slipped it around my neck the night we signed our record deal, and it feels like a lifetime since I've seen it.

*Since the man who raped me stole it from around my neck.*

If I had any doubts about the identity of the stalker who was leaving me white roses, they've been put to bed. Only one person had *this*.

"El, can I come in?" To my surprise, it's not Adrian's voice, but Sebastian's.

I'm not sure if I'm relieved or panicked as everything I've been hiding knocks against my ribcage fighting to get out. I never told anyone what happened back then, not even my brother. And although the jokes about my lack of a dating life got old over the years, it was easy to brush it off and let them think whatever they wanted about why I was celibate. But now, everything I'm not prepared to face is coming to the surface.

*There's no going back.*

I tip my head up and take in a deep breath again, counting to five on the inhale and ten on the exhale. I try to calm the racing in my chest, before standing up and wiping the wetness away from beneath my eyes.

Reaching for the door handle, I pull it open and find my brother on the other side with his hands caging the doorframe. His jaw is clenched, and his expression is dark as he takes me in. His gaze drifts to my wet cheeks, and it feels like the invisible scars I've buried are peeking through.

"I'm okay," I lie before he has a chance to ask.

I wish he'd believe it, but the lift of one eyebrow bleeds with doubt. Just because I'm the more perceptive of the two of us, doesn't mean he's not still my twin. One look and he can see straight through me.

"I'm firing your security guard." His teeth clench.

Sebastian's solution to everything is to fire people, so I shouldn't be surprised.

He lets go of the doorframe and stands up taller. A pinch between his eyebrows shows the vulnerability he rarely offers. One look and I see the boy I grew up with standing in front of me. The one who slept on my floor when my mom partied with random guys. The one who looked at me as his little sister, even if we're the same age. I see someone I haven't seen in a long time, and it's unnerving. Because it means the severity of the situation is something I can't keep avoiding.

"If you fire them, then what?" I cross my arms over my chest, trying to sound nonchalant as I hold onto the remaining fragments of my tough exterior. "You going to sleep at the foot of my bed like when we were kids so you can watch over me?"

Sebastian tips his head back and runs his fingers through his dark blond hair. “This isn’t funny.”

“No fucking shit.”

His eyes drop to mine, and I realize I said that out loud, but it’s all spilling out, and I can’t seem to stop it.

“Adrian called the cops; they’ll be here soon.” Sebastian looks me up and down, assessing my reaction.

I do my best not to let it show. Because him telling me the cops are coming means I’m going to have to do the one thing I’ve avoided for years.

I’m going to have to admit out loud what broke Eloise Kane.

Admit that I’m a shell of the person I replaced.

I’m going to have to face my truth.

I’ve been a coward. While the press latches onto the fact that I’m not afraid to speak my mind and stick up for women’s rights, they don’t realize that’s only on the outside. While I’ve been fighting the battle for other victims of abuse, I’ve allowed myself to quietly live as one. And the world is about to find out I’m a fraud.

I’m tarnished.

I’m ruined.

“Are you going to pass out?” Sebastian reaches for my arm, and I flinch, which makes him quickly pull away. “You’re really fucking pale.”



I step back and shake my head, running my fingers through my long hair and wishing I could disappear in myself.

“El, what’s going on?” Sebastian looks like he’s towing a line, trying not to push me, but fighting against himself about it.

“Nothing.” I roll my shoulders back, taking a step past him.

He steps aside, and I make my way toward the front of the bus. Maybe if I face this like I do everything else, I won’t have to feel it.

*Compartmentalizing.*

That’s a word my shrink used often when everything first happened. She said I was well versed in how to put things in tiny boxes and tuck them away, so I wouldn’t have to deal with them. She told me it likely stemmed back to my childhood and my relationship with my mother. But she also said at some point I was going to have to deal with it or face the consequences.

Maybe she’s right because I feel my regrets kicking me from inside.

Adrian’s back is to me when I reach the front of my tour bus. His large frame blocks my view of the words I know are on the mirror in front of him. And even if I’m a blender of emotions, there’s something about having him in my space that’s comforting.

Except, right now, his posture is rigid as he types away on his phone, and I sense the tension rolling off him.

At my movement, he turns, and the look in his eyes freezes me in place. Because the calm and collected energy I'm used to feeling from Adrian is replaced with fury. His gaze is hard and his shoulders are stiff.

Adrian is fucking pissed.

His eyes move to Sebastian, before landing on me again like a dart dead center. "The cops just pulled up to the venue. They'll be here in a few minutes."

He tucks his phone in his pocket and crosses his arms over his chest.

I move toward the makeshift kitchen counter on my bus and lean my back against it. Sebastian looks around Adrian and my eyes follow to the words on the mirror.

"It's probably a fan messing around." I force a chuckle but it's so far from amused there's no believing it.

"It's not." Adrian pins me with his stare.

Standing up taller, I practice my most passive expression on him. I'm not going to let him affect me. He's our band manager—soon-to-be-engaged band manager—nothing more.

"We'll see." I shrug a shoulder, with the threat on the mirror staring back at me.

"White roses."

Two words fall from his mouth, and I swallow hard, not able to avoid his eyes even when I look away. I dip my chin

and shake my head, not sure how I didn't think Adrian would put two and two together.

After the first white rose was delivered to Adrian's house, others followed. One every week I stayed with him. Each time they did I lied to him before throwing them in the trash, saying it was from an old crush and disregarding it. I'd bury the knots those bouquets formed in my stomach and pretend they had no effect.

Something I thought I got past Adrian. Until now.

"White roses?" Sebastian looks at the flower sitting beneath the mirror and his eyes pinch. His gaze darts between me and Adrian with utter confusion painted on his face.

Adrian steps toward me, a few feet away, but in my tour bus, it all feels in my space. His arms drop to his sides and his hands unclench in a show of vulnerability. I try to steady my breaths, but they only kick up again as Adrian's eyes drop to my mouth, before looking back up again.

He bites the corner of his bottom lip as he looks me over, and I sense him actively trying to relax his shoulders.

"What's going on, Eloise?" He takes another step closer, but Sebastian stays in place, looking between us. "I can't help if I don't know what's happening."

Now, Sebastian does step forward, and they're both closing in.

"Does this have something to do with how you've been—"

My gaze narrows as I look in Sebastian's direction and he's smart enough to not finish his sentence.

The last thing I need right now is to be chastised for my mood. If they only knew.

*If they only knew.*

But that's the problem, isn't it. I can't hold onto this forever. What started as something I buried, was eventually mended through therapy, but that never made it actually go away. One night will always be in the fabric of who I am.

*Acceptance.*

My therapist said it was the final step, and I now realize I never took it. Not that she wanted me to accept what that monster of a man did to me, but that I had to accept it would now forever be a real part of me to decide how I lived with. I would have to learn how to make it my strength instead of my destruction.

"El?" Sebastian says, and I realize I've been drifting again.

Tears pool in my eyes, and I'm powerless to stop them from streaming down my face. I want to run, to hide. But there's no going back. The police will be here any minute and I'm going to have to say the words out loud.

That can't be how Adrian and Sebastian hear it.

Closing my eyes, I take a measured breath, and try not to feel the invisible hands from my nightmares on my skin. I open them and face Adrian and Sebastian, letting out an exhale I want to disappear with.

I dig deep and find that courage I'm always talking about. The strength I speak about in interviews. The power I urge girls to fight for. I grab onto it, hoping it's enough to prevent me from falling apart.

“Six years ago...” The ground shakes, or maybe it's in my head. My body vibrates with the words clogging my mouth. I drop my eyes to the floor and remind myself I'm on solid ground.

“Eloise?” Adrian takes a step closer.

I tighten my grip on the daisy necklace I'm still holding and look Adrian in the eyes. “Six years ago, I was raped. And the man who left the flowers is the one who did it.”

**16**

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## **ELOISE**

SEBASTIAN'S GAZE IS MURDEROUS. While Adrian is staring so intently, I'm convinced he might be trying to snap something in half with his mind. And both of them are looking in my direction, seated across from me at the table on my tour bus.

I can almost hear the plants growing in their pots around me in the silence.

Not that I should have expected anything else. While I feel like a weight has finally been lifted, I know it's only because Adrian and Sebastian have taken my place under it as they've listened to what I had to say.

When I first started spilling my truth, it felt like pulling out fingernails one at a time. But the more I told my story, I felt the weight of it melt away with every admission.

Reliving the night Adrian dropped me off at my room.

The floor moving beneath as my blood swished with whatever was slipped into my drink at the club.

The man who followed me into the darkness.

It might be blurry and hard to recall, but it doesn't make it any less present. Especially the next morning when things were clear. Except, I kept those details to myself as I told Adrian and Sebastian because I'm not sure I'm ready to let those memories out of the dark yet.

When I woke up the next morning, I was only wearing a shirt. At first, I prayed it had all been a nightmare, but then I looked down. Knowing—feeling what happened. A sick feeling burst out of me as I ran to the toilet and puked up my insides.

I barely managed to make it to the hospital, while also avoiding the band. And when I finally did, I had to relive it all over again as the nurse inspected, took samples, and assessed.

I spent the entire next day getting in and out of the shower, waiting for the water to wash all the way through me. But there was no getting clean enough. Even years later I can feel the specks in places no bath or therapist can reach.

“You reported it?” Sebastian asks, finally breaking the silence.

I nod, worried he's going to break a molar grinding his teeth like he is, but I ignore it and try to remain calm for him.

“Then why the fuck isn't this motherfucker behind bars already?”

“There was no hit on the...”

*Rape kit.*



But I can't get the words out. My heart jumps to my throat and I can feel it pulsing with every breath. I shake my head. "They don't know who did it. Whoever it was, didn't have a criminal record. Probably still doesn't."

Adrian's jaw clenches and his fingers tighten into fists.

Sebastian's reaction is one thing. He's my brother, and even if he won't admit it, a little emotional. He's always been the knight-in-shining-armor type who doesn't hesitate to jump to my defense. But while Sebastian is explosive and vocal, Adrian is unnervingly calm.

His gaze almost... deadly.

I didn't want Adrian to ever find out the truth for this very reason. He was the one who dropped me off at my room the night it happened and being the gentleman he is, he left me at my door and walked away. He had no way of knowing what was lurking when the elevator doors slid closed. Not that he'll hear me if I try to tell him that right now. If how I've blamed myself is any indication, I have no doubt Adrian might be doing the same.

Pounding comes from the tour bus door, and Sebastian flies out of his seat to get it. But Adrian stays sitting, facing me, not so much as blinking as he stares me down. The man could really ruin a girl with that look because it makes me transparent.

"Cops." Sebastian looks over his shoulder, and only then does Adrian move, standing to meet them at the door.

Two officers make their way onto my bus, and even my potpourri and plants aren't enough to calm me. Adrian shows the police officers to the mirror with the message on it. He points to the flower and does his best to explain what's happening. I hear him say something about the white roses that were delivered to his house last year, and I know for certain Pandora's box has been opened.

All I can do now is hope the police report is filtered enough that I'll have time to deal with the band's reaction before I have to watch it go through the press.

"Eloise," Adrian's voice is calm and even.

Looking up, I'm faced with him, flanked by the officers, and I realize I'm picking at the corner of my thumbnail.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions, ma'am," one of the officers says.

I nod and they pull out their notepads.

Sebastian slaps Adrian on the shoulder and tips his head to the doorway, before looking at me. "We'll be outside."

They step away, leaving me with the two officers. While I've never wanted to do this again, I try to remind myself anything is easier than telling Adrian and Sebastian. So I start from the beginning, recounting my nightmare once more, wishing I could just escape it.



When the cops leave, the guys don't immediately rush back onto the bus, so I assume they must have set up security outside so they could meet with the rest of the band. I'm under no illusion Noah and Rome haven't already been told what happened. Cassie and Merry either. At least if Adrian and Sebastian broke the news, I don't have to recount it another time today.

Something unexpected bubbles up within me—relief. It's finally out there. I don't have to hide worrying someone will discover my secrets. The important people in my life know. It's done.

Stepping into the shower, I can't seem to get the water hot enough. My skin turns red, but I feel almost numb at this point. And when I finish showering and dressing and make my way back to the front of the bus, I know why. Because the words on the mirror stare back at me.

### *SHUT YOUR MOUTH OR PAY THE CONSEQUENCES*

I honestly don't know what the words mean as I wet a rag and scrub them off, leaving red smears streaking the surface of the mirror. There was nothing to shut my mouth about because I never told anyone after filing the initial police report years ago. But now, because of this, it's going to be out there. If the monster wanted me silent, he went about it the wrong way.

The thought twists knots inside me.

*What if this is exactly what he wants?*

I pull an oversized sweater overhead and decide it's time to face the band. They're just going to worry until they see me, and we aren't hitting the road again until tonight. If I don't quiet some of their concerns, they're going to spend the entire day making things up in their heads and worrying I'm going to lose it.

I open the door to my bus and the wind grabs it, almost dragging me with it. But strong arms steady me.

"Adrian," I gasp. Letting go of the door, he helps me down the steps and shuts it behind me. I pull my sweater tightly around my chest. "What are you doing out here? I thought you left."

"Sebastian went to meet with the guys." His eyes scan me from head to toe, and I wonder if he's making sure I'm still intact.

"And you're..."

"Keeping an eye out."

I cross my arms over my chest. "That's what security is for."

He tilts his head but doesn't bother responding.

With Adrian standing in front of me, I'd like to think he's here because he cares on a level that isn't just him being my manager. I'd like to think I'm not the only one stuck in the same spot I've been in for years, unable to move past it. But as I look into his dark brown eyes, I know I waited too long, and he's moved on—especially after what I just told him.

The real reason Adrian is waiting for me outside my bus probably has to do with my overprotective brother. Sebastian is hot-headed when it comes to people he cares about, and after someone got onto my bus, he's probably already started firing crew members.

"Where is he?" I ask Adrian, holding my sweater tight. It's early June, but the final remnants of spring still sit in the air, and I have no doubt the sky is about to unleash something that mirrors what I'm feeling inside.

Adrian tips his head, and I follow him across the lot, through a maze of buses. We've spent the majority of the past five months overseas, but nothing feels as good as being home for the tail end of our world tour. The next four weeks will be a series of shows, ending with the week-long Sun Daze Summer Festival, and I'm counting down the days until I can disappear back into my home in Denver.

We stop at Sebastian's bus, and Adrian opens the door for me. Always the gentleman.

I've got one foot inside when the intensity of the air sinks in. I make my way up the steps, but even before I do, I know they're all here.

Climbing the steps, I find myself once more face to face with Sebastian, who is sitting on the couch beside Cassie. Her usually bubbly smile has been replaced by the hard line of her lips that she tries to force upward for my sake. But even the pink tips of her hair aren't enough to brighten up the mood.

Merry's seated right next to Cassie on the couch, looking like Cassie's dark twin with her tatted skin and all-black outfit. While Noah and Rome are seated on either side of the table, turned out to face me.

"Here, let me move so you can sit," Noah slides out of his seat and stands there facing me.

His mouth falls open like he wants to say more, but his eyes pinch and we both know there aren't really words for something like this. The past, the present—demons once more roaming wild, ready to haunt me.

Instead, Noah pulls me in for a big hug and I melt into it.

These guys may drive me nearly insane, but they're my family. And while suffering in silence felt like the only option for a long time, it doesn't anymore.

Noah lets go and sits on the arm of the couch by Merry, who nods at me but doesn't say anything. I wonder if that's why Noah was drawn to her. She knows when to insert herself, and when to keep quiet. Maybe it's that she's had her own share of pain and knows that no one else can really comfort me through it. But her small gesture feels big.

I sit across from Rome at the table, and he leans forward, flipping a coin between his fingers and staring me down. His gaze is dark and serious, and when he swallows, it bobs the third eye tattoo that's inked on his throat.

"This fucker's got another thing coming to him," Rome says, stilling the coin and setting his palm over it on the table.

It's a promise, and something about the look in his eyes makes me nervous about just how far he's willing to take that statement.

"Damn right," Sebastian says.

I scan the room, as Adrian perches himself at the makeshift kitchen counter.

"I'm fine, okay?" I force a smile, but all it does is hurt inside. "I'm a little shaken up—"

"He got on your fucking bus, Eloise." Sebastian leans forward and shoots daggers out of his eyes.

"Cool it." Adrian's gaze slides in Sebastian's direction in a warning.

Sebastian leans back and Cassie plants her hand on his leg. I'm not sure even that will calm him right now.

"I'm aware." I narrow my gaze at him. "And the cops are going to look into that."

He snorts a laugh, and I feel Adrian stiffen.

"Got something to say?" I challenge.

Sebastian looks me dead in the eyes, and I can't help but notice that they're a little cold. "They could have been doing something sooner, El."

"You're mad at me." It's not a question. His body language makes it clear, but it forces me to roll my eyes. "I'm not defending myself with you."

“You don’t have to,” Rome says, and I turn to see him still looking at me intently. After a beat, his gaze moves to my brother. “Be pissed all you want, man, but direct it at the right fucking person. It’s not her fault someone did this to her. When and if she wanted to share this shit with us isn’t on her either.”

Rome isn’t one to involve himself in band meetings. Sure, he shows up, but generally, it’s with a joint in hand and a woman waiting for him back on his tour bus. But right now, not only is he present, he’s fully here, staring Sebastian down. And I wonder what dark secrets from his past scratch at the surface as he does.

“We’re here for you.” Rome slides a tattooed hand across the table and places it over my own. “Nothing else is going to happen.”

I nod, biting back the tears building. I might have been ready for all of them to know, but I’m not ready for them to see me cry. As I slide out of the bench seat, Sebastian stands up to meet me.

“I’m sorry, El.” He wraps me in his arms, and even if he pisses me off more than anyone else on the planet, the familiar smell of his wintergreen gum and leather jacket takes me back to when we were kids and he’d sit with me on the porch while Mom disappeared. “I’m just... this isn’t about me. I need to do something, but I can’t. And I just wish I could go back and—”

“Don’t,” I break the hug and look at him. “If there’s anything years of therapy has taught me, it’s that at some point



you have to stop looking backward because you can't change it. All we can do is move forward."

He pulls me in for another quick hug. "We're going to move past it, once and for all."

I hope he's right, because six years is enough, and I'm really not sure how much more I can take.

"All right, I'm going to go lay down for a bit. We take off soon anyway." I pull away from my brother.

Sebastian nods, and Adrian stands up, reaching for a bag I hadn't noticed sitting on the floor beside him. He tosses it over his shoulder and nods his head.

"What..." I start, but then I notice him and Sebastian looking at each other. "No."

"No?" Sebastian doesn't look amused.

"I don't need a babysitter." I cross my arms over my chest. "I'm not a kid at mom's house anymore, Adrian's not sleeping on my floor."

"True. I was hoping for at least a couch." Adrian's face is stone cold when he says it, but it brings a bubble of a laugh from my brother.

"Come on, El." Sebastian grips my shoulders. "That fucker got on your bus. We still haven't figured out how that's even possible, but I don't trust any of our security guys if they let that happen. Adrian offered to ride with you just to keep an eye on things."

“Offered?” I quirk an eyebrow.

“I might have asked him.” Sebastian shrugs.

I shake my head.

“It’s fine.” Adrian takes a step forward, and I’m not sure if it’s my imagination, but the entire bus spins a little. “I’m sick of the snoring on my bus anyway.”

He’s been riding with some of the crew this tour. We offered to get him his own space, but the guy is minimalistic, so he turned us down.

“Don’t fight me on this.” Sebastian squeezes my shoulders and his eyebrows pinch.

As annoying as it is that they worked out this ridiculous plan behind my back, I know it’s only because they care. They’re trying to control the situation in any way they can, and I get it. That’s been me for years.

“Fine.” I sigh, and Sebastian gives me a hug before letting me go.

I look over my shoulder at Adrian and nod my head once for him to follow as I make my way off the bus, knowing this is a bad idea even if it’s for my safety. Staying at Adrian’s house was one thing. There were walls I could hide on the other side of.

But my bus? There’s no escape.

This is probably my brother’s worst idea ever, and I’m not sure he even realizes it.



## ADRIAN

REPLAYING THE EVENTS OF the night I walked Eloise to her hotel room after leaving the club doesn't change the outcome of it. But it doesn't stop me from mentally looping until I feel like my brain is going to snap.

How had I been so blind?

And not only to what happened at the hotel but the aftermath of it.

Before we left for LA six years ago, Eloise stood in front of me a different person than she had been. She looked me in the eye with nothing left. I thought I pushed too hard or crossed a line. I made it all about myself instead of noticing the parts of her that were breaking.

Was she really that good at hiding it? Or did I just not want to see the truth?

Raking my hands over my closely shaved scalp, I try to figure it out all over again. If I thought the world snapped into

an alternate reality when I found out Sam was dead, this is something else entirely.

There Eloise was, feet away as the elevator descended.

I left her.

This is on me, regardless of what she says.

“Adrian?” Eloise stands in front of me with her eyebrows pinched, and I feel like I’ve been blind to not have seen the darkness in them. “Are you coming in?”

I’m frozen in the doorway to her bus, staring. Stepping inside, I close the door and lock it, wishing it was enough to keep out whatever I sense looming.

Eloise picks up a watering jug and begins watering her plants. I’ve been around many rock stars at this point but she’s the only one I know who keeps a near garden on her tour bus. Vines climb one wall, flowers hang near the kitchen sink. Every empty corner is filled with greenery.

She cares for her plants as if watching them grow breathes life into her. Maybe it does.

Tipping the water jug to fill a vase of purple flowers, she looks at me over her shoulder. “Couch okay?”

I nod. “Slept on worse.”

Anything beats desert dirt and wondering if you’ll be blown to bits in the middle of the night.

Eloise sets down the water jug and turns to face me. Her hands grip the counter behind her, tightening as the bus starts

to move. The motion sends my stomach to somewhere on the road behind us because parked, it felt like there was still a way out, and now it's just me and her.

Eloise chews her bottom lip, a nervous tick that's unlike her, but I shouldn't be surprised she's unsettled after the day she's had. As the bus moves once more, my attention is drawn to the chain swaying against her chest.

"You're wearing it," I say, knowing I should probably just let it go for both our sakes, but something about the daisy I gave her hanging low on her chest sends my heart skittering on the pavement.

Her hand presses over the necklace.

"Didn't know you still had it." I toss my bag in the corner and take a seat on the couch. The air is thick, flowery, caught in my lungs.

Eloise holds the charm between her fingers and looks down at it. "I didn't."

My eyebrows pinch, trying to figure out what the fuck she's talking about. It's not until her eyes are glassy that pieces clink together one at a time.

Me giving it to her.

Her just as quickly never wearing it again.

The way her fingers clenched around it as she stood in front of the threat drawn on the mirror.

Swallowing hard, I feel like time just got a hell of a lot thicker, and I'm fighting to move through it.

"He..." I can't finish the sentence.

Eloise blinks a tear away as she nods. If what happened wasn't enough to make me want to gut the man like a fucking fish, the fact that he kept the necklace I gave her as some fucked-up trophy makes me all kinds of violent.

She drops the necklace beneath the neckline of her T-shirt, letting it disappear like a secret she's not ready to face.

I'm not sure what strikes me more in this moment, the fact that she seems scared of it or the fact that she's wearing it. A token reminder of evil, but she's keeping it around her neck anyway.

"I should let you get some rest." Eloise lifts off the counter but doesn't let go as the bus swerves slightly.

"Not tired," I say. "Even so, it's your bus, pretend I'm not here."

My phone pings in my pocket and her eyes drop to it, the same expression from earlier this morning straining on her face. She's wearing all her emotions today, which isn't like her. And as much as I'd like to help her let go of what's wound her up, another twisted part of me wants to set us both on high speed and find out if we can finally catch up to whatever has spent the last six years brewing.

"Shouldn't you get that?"

I shrug one shoulder. “Probably the documentary crew already catching wind of the cops or some shit. It can wait until tomorrow.”

“Or Becca.” The second the words escape, Eloise looks like she wants to take them back. Panic bleaches her face, but she rolls her shoulders back in a move that is so her, I can’t help the smirk that tugs the corner of my mouth.

“Doubt it’s Becca,” I say, really curious about why that draws so much interest from her.

Eloise crosses her arms over her chest, looking me over. “But I thought—”

She cuts herself off abruptly. Like her filter is on the fritz and she’s barely managing to keep a lid on it.

“What did you think?” I cross one ankle over my opposite knee and stretch my arms across the back of the couch. It’s not big and going to be one hell of an uncomfortable bed, but not the worst I’ve ever slept on.

Eloise shakes her head and dips her chin. She runs her fingers through her hair before looking back up at me with a lost expression. “You’re not getting engaged?”

I can’t help but laugh. Loud.

Engaged?

What the fuck is she even talking about?

“Oh, God.” She buries her face in her palms and shakes her head, the faintest peek of a smile not hidden by her small



hands.

“Tour life high school got you?” I chuckle.

Something about going on tour turns the crew into teenagers again. Fucking like rabbits, spreading gossip to kill the boredom. A bunch of adults acting like they’re sixteen. And the longer we’re on the road, the worse it gets.

Eloise uncovers her face, and the brush of a smile on her lips is the slightest bit... *relieved*? Which is when it occurs to me that she thought I was going to pop the question to Becca.

“We split up,” I admit, realizing she had no idea because I don’t talk to anyone about my relationships, especially her.

“I didn’t realize.”

I lean forward, planting my elbows on my knees. “Not one to update everyone on my relationship status, I guess.”

She nods her head, thinking that over as she chews on her bottom lip again, which makes it even plumper than it naturally is.

After a long beat, she comes to sit down on the couch next to me. I might be all the way on the other side, but with her turned to put her feet up and face me, she’s right there.

It doesn’t matter how much time passes since the day I first met Eloise Kane. She’s still the only girl with the ability to send my brain into a tailspin with one look. Which just so happens to be the look she’s currently giving me.

“I’m sorry.” She pulls her knees to her chest and wraps her arms around them.

“Don’t be.” I shake my head. “You have absolutely nothing to be sorry for, got it?”

Eloise stares at me. A whole universe swirling in her eyes. Gold flecks of stars that once made me wish for so many things, and now all I want to do is get one more to save her from any more pain.

“There’s just...” Eloise sighs, pressing her lips together. “There are things I wish I could go back and change.”

Words I can relate to more than she realizes. I’ve disappointed every person who has ever meant anything to me by simply not being there when they needed me. The band was my redemption, my chance to make a difference. Something I failed at on day one without even realizing.

Eloise shivers, and I grab the lavender blanket she has folded on the couch, reaching over to wrap it around her shoulders. It’s the absolute least I can do and feels like an insignificant gesture at a time like this, even if she smiles a thank you at me.

I’ve spent the last six years beside Eloise—at concerts, interviews, press junkets. Years managing every aspect of her life. Yet, somehow, sitting on this couch feels like the first time I’ve been in her presence in all that time.

“What are you thinking?” I ask, noticing her expression is pinched.

Eloise tips her chin up. “That I should probably be falling apart right now. Or, freaking out or something. But I just feel... calm.”

I’d like to think it has something to do with me being here, but just like it always is with Eloise, I know that’s wishful thinking on my part.

“I didn’t realize how much I was holding onto until I said it out loud, you know? I didn’t realize how much it was holding me back.”

Her eyes dart to the window as lightning strikes outside, brightening her cheeks in the dim light of the bus.

She looks back at me. “I don’t know if I want to keep doing this.”

“I’ll only be on your bus until we figure out the security situation.”

“Not that.” She shakes her head. “I trust you more than any of them anyway, so I get why my brother suggested it.”

*Trust.*

People really should stop handing that to me, because I’ve proven time and again it only ends in pain.

“I’m talking about touring, and all that comes with it.”

Her shoulders deflate, and I’m staring at what the guys have been avoiding since they started recording their last album—Eloise needs a break. She deserves one, they all do, so I

shouldn't be surprised. But a selfish part of me can't imagine a world where I'm not constantly around her.

"The label knows things are up in the air after this." I force a smile I hope she reads as genuine.

Eloise nods and reaches out for me, taking my hand where it's sitting on the couch between us. It shocks me enough that I almost pull away because I don't think she realizes the power her touch still has over me. How one brush of her palm on the back of my hand drags me straight back to the man who came home broken after eight years in the military. A man she helped find his way again.

"I'm going to get some sleep," she says with a yawn. "But Adrian, thank you for always being there."

I dip my chin.

"I mean then, and now." She squeezes my hand, and I want to argue because I wasn't there to help her back then and I'm only here now because I can't fucking stay away.

But I keep my mouth shut and let her think whatever she needs to if it will help her get some rest.

As Eloise disappears into the back of the bus, a hole widens in my chest. I lay down on the couch and cover myself in the lavender blanket she left. It smells like a fucking garden, because even if she's spent years hiding from the sun, somehow, she still manages to bloom.

I close my eyes and say a prayer for the first time in as long as I can remember. Hoping, whatever is up there hasn't given

up on listening. I wish, I will, I want, and I pray for so long I don't realize I've fallen asleep.

That is until I wake up to screaming.



## ELOISE

“WHAT ARE YOU WORKING on?” Adrian asks, stepping out of the bathroom.

I look up and instantly wish I didn't. Because even fully clothed the man is a distraction with his still damp skin making his white T-shirt extra clingy on his broad chest.

“A song...” I set my pencil down and take a deep breath. “Or I don't know. Maybe it's a song. At least words are flowing again.”

Adrian looks from me to my notebook and smiles. “That's good.”

If anyone knows how difficult songwriting has been for me lately, it's him. When I stayed at his house recording the last album, I couldn't put pen to paper. It was frustrating feeling like I was arguing with Sebastian over every lyric.

But today, I woke up with words flowing out of me.

Adrian walks over to the couch, where he's turned that corner of my tour bus into his makeshift bedroom this past

week. At least he's settling in because if he's going to continue crashing with me, he needs some space that's his. And from the way things are going, it doesn't seem like he's going back to the crew bus anytime soon. Between the tense conversations I've overheard him share with my brother, and the lack of leads from the police back in Spokane, he'll be on my bus for the foreseeable future.

Deep down, I'm relieved he's here. His presence has always made me feel calm and safe. Add in the fact that he's discreet and knows better than to tell my brother about me waking up screaming on a nightly basis from reoccurring nightmares, and I'm thankful it's him instead of a random bodyguard.

It took two years after the incident for my nightmares to fade. But with enough therapy and pre-bed meditation rituals, I made it happen. I was finally sleeping in peace. Except now they're back, and no amount of measured breathing or positive podcasts have done shit to stop them.

Adrian sits down on the couch and pulls his phone out, flipping through it. His phone is constantly pinging like windchimes in a storm, and I'm not sure how he keeps up with it.

Frowning, he tips his head back and takes a deep breath, making me wonder what he just saw that stressed him out.

I pretend not to notice as he sits like that for a moment, but it's hard not to, and I find myself peeking at the length of his thick neck through my curtain of hair. My gaze moves over the muscles that peek through the neckline of his T-shirt, and I



can't help but appreciate how his heavy breathing stretches the fabric.

I used to be better at not noticing. After the assault, I honestly thought I'd never look at a man this way again. The idea of dating someone, much less touching them had my skin crawling. So while the guys made fun of the fact that I never showed interest in men, I let them think what they wanted. It was easier to be the born-again virgin in their eyes than to let them know the truth.

But the fact is, as the years passed, and I started healing from that night, it was less about fearing sex and more about fearing everything else. Celibacy became more about closing myself off than being physically intimate. It was about control.

For years it worked so well I actually believed it.

If only Adrian with his rock-hard body and warm cinnamon eyes didn't have this magical ability to remind me of exactly what I'm missing. And with him single and sitting on my bus, my resolve is wearing thin.

"You okay?" Adrian's voice snaps me out of my head, and I realize I'm sitting here staring at him.

I'm so pathetic sometimes. No matter what a badass rock princess the rest of the world thinks I am, I'll always be that twenty-one-year-old girl with hearts in her eyes when it comes to this man.

"Fine. Thinking." Turning back to my notebook, I pretend to scribble down something but immediately cross it out

because it's gibberish.

A knock on the door to the tour bus makes me flinch, and I don't miss that Adrian notices. But he doesn't say anything, which I appreciate. He makes his way to the door to check who it is, and I know there's no way we're paying him enough for this. He's our manager, our friend, our mediator, and now my pseudo-bodyguard. I'm not sure how we haven't worn him out yet.

After briefly talking with someone outside, he comes back in, locking the door right behind him.

“The crew is ready.”

I let out a sigh and hope my annoyance doesn't show. It's not Adrian's fault we signed up for this documentary, but it's making an already busy tour feel downright claustrophobic.

Nodding, I close my notebook and stand. Adrian's gaze drags down my body, pausing on the short hemline of my black leather skirt, before he turns his face away like it never happened, opening the door to the bus when I approach.

“The rest of the band is already at the hotel.” Adrian holds the door open, and I slip sunglasses over my face before stepping out.

He follows me outside, and it's hot for early June, which I should expect from Phoenix. I'm just thankful we'll be here a few days, so I'll have a break from the tour bus. Because this much time around Adrian in a T-shirt and sweats is going to be the end of me.

The documentary crew is set up and already filming as we make our way across the parking lot. I try to pretend they don't exist, even if it's impossible. And more importantly, I remember to wear the fake smile the world expects because they don't actually want the real me.

While the world will stream this from the comfort of their living rooms and feel like they're getting some kind of inside glimpse into what it's like behind the scenes with Eloise Kane, in reality, it's still all staged. So while they'll see me on my *day off* hanging with the band and relaxing, this is just another photo op with scripted conversation.

A couple of actual bodyguards flank us as we make our way to the hotel, tightening in when they spot a group of fans crowding the entrance.

But it's Adrian who stays directly at my side, taking my hand like a secret when there are too many bodies to see what's really going on. He holds me close and even among a mass of people, I trust him not to let me go.

I try not to think about how safe he makes me feel, about how I wish his hand in mine meant as much to him as it means to me. But as we step inside the cool lobby and he breaks his grip on my fingers, I know I'm just a job to him.

"What up, El." Rome slides into the space beside me and wraps a tattooed arm around my shoulders. He hugs me close to his side, and to anyone else watching it probably seems like any other day with these guys treating me like a sister but coming from Rome it's especially comforting.

All of the guys in the band have been looking out for me in their own individual way this past week. They rotate check-ins and try to seem nonchalant about it. But while I expect it from Sebastian and Noah, Rome has been the one to surprise me the most because he rarely likes obligations that cut into his party time.

Rome hasn't brought up the incident once, and I appreciate it. While I know all of the guys care, Rome has a different understanding of physical abuse than Sebastian and Noah. He's been a victim himself, and even if he doesn't talk about it, I sense the impact it's had on him. He understands violation and pain without needing me to explain it to him.

Instead, he's just there for me, checking in more frequently and spending occasional nights on the bus playing cards with me and Adrian instead of going out with random women. For the first time in years, Rome reminds me of the teenage boy who crashed on our couch when his own world fell apart. Someone I didn't realize I missed so much.

"We're all ready," Rome says, and I can't help but smile for what feels like the first time today, as I remember what we've been planning.

"Ready for what?" Adrian asks.

Rome shrugs a shoulder and plays coy. "Let's just say we're not headed upstairs yet."

He turns me to the right before we hit the elevators and goes down a separate hall. I can feel the wheels turning in Adrian's

head, but I don't dare look at him or he's going to see it all over my face.

"Rome." Adrian's tone is a warning.

"Chill, bro." Rome looks over my head at Adrian. "Sebastian and Noah are down here, just changing up the meeting location."

"That's what I'm worried about."

Adrian is the kind of guy who likes to have control. He decides where we go and when. He keeps us on a tight schedule, rarely wavering. And even if we all kick and scream from time to time about it, we all know it's for the best. Without him, the band would have fallen apart years ago.

But today we're throwing the curveballs. Because the band has plans for Adrian, and he's not escaping them.

Rome breaks free from me and swings his arm wide as we step into the event room. "After you, princess."

The rest of the band is already gathered, and I can't help the wide smile that stretches my face. I turn back just in time to absorb Adrian's reaction. His eyes meet the center of the room and go wide.

"Happy birthday, boss," Sebastian cheers, setting off some kind of popper that rains confetti down over us.

"You didn't."

I burst out laughing and it feels like it's been weeks since I've done that, but I can't help myself. "Your face." I point at

Adrian. “Yes, we so did.”

Adrian’s narrowed gaze slides in my direction, and he tries really hard to maintain his stone-cold glare, but when he sees me cracking up, a smirk fights its way through.

“I told them you’d hate it,” Merry says, walking up with an amused expression on her face. She hands Adrian a plate with a piece of cake and is clearly enjoying his reaction as much as the rest of us.

Adrian hates his birthday. He wouldn’t even tell us when it was for the first couple of years we knew him. But Sebastian worked his magic and had his connections figure it out. Ever since then, we find ways to surprise him each year just to prove we’ll never let it go. Usually, it’s a week or two before or after his birthday to catch him off guard, never on the actual day, like today. Which is brilliant because there’s no way he was expecting it.

Letting out a sigh, Adrian takes the cake and points the fork at Sebastian. “You’ll pay for this.”

“Not worried.” Sebastian flings an arm around Cassie, who just laughs.

“Let me guess...” Adrian looks at me. “Your idea?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I smile and flutter my eyelashes at him, feigning innocence. There’s no point. Adrian knows I’m behind these celebrations. I can’t help it. Just because he doesn’t think he deserves to celebrate another year around the sun, doesn’t mean he shouldn’t.

“Good job keeping it quiet, princess,” Rome says, brushing his hand over the top of my hair and making me fight him off before he messes it up too bad. “I was sure he’d have figured it out with you two shacking up and all.”

Every part of me hopes the camera crew didn’t hear him and misinterpret what he said.

“Rome—” But he’s already headed across the room, ignoring me.

He grabs a slice of cake from the table and then walks up to Noah, flicking a bite at him just as Noah’s about to lean in and kiss Merry. That only sets her off. Noah might be the peacekeeper, but Merry is wild. She jumps at Rome and shoves a piece of cake flat against his chest in retaliation.

“You’re gonna pay for that, sweetheart.” Rome smiles, heading back to the other table, and just then, all hell breaks loose.

Cake starts flying and I’ll be surprised if the hotel won’t bill us for it. But when I look over at Adrian, thinking he’s going to be irritated at the band for acting like kids, I realize he’s standing right there, smiling at me.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He shrugs, but there’s a playfulness in it.

“I see.” Reaching over, I swipe my finger across the frosting on his plate and smile as I dab it on his nose. “Happy birthday, boss man.”

“So, that’s how it’s gonna be?” His eyes darken, as he takes his thumb and wipes the frosting from the tip of his nose.

I lift an eyebrow at him. A dare I can’t help but issue.

He steps in so he’s hovering over me, and I can smell the sweetness of the frosting between us. “Game on then.”

But before I can run, his smile holds me in place, just as he plants the plate of cake directly on the top of my head.





## ADRIAN

“I’M GOING TO BE picking cake out of my hair for a week, no thanks to you.” Eloise walks back into the room with her hair still damp as she weaves her fingers through it.

When her hair is wet, it’s nearly black, reminding me of a river at midnight the way it sticks to her skin in a winding path down her back. The tips brush the edge of skin that peeks out between her cropped tank top and baggy sweats, which are riding low on her hips.

“I seem to recall you starting it.” I raise an eyebrow as she plops down onto the couch beside me.

A couch I’m thankfully not going to be sleeping on since I booked the suite with multiple bedrooms for us. My back has been killing me this past week, and although I’ve made sure not to complain about it, I’m looking forward to having a mattress for once.

“Couldn’t resist.” Eloise smiles, still picking at her freshly washed hair. Her dark eyes flick to me and I swear the space

between us shrinks. “So, another trip around the sun, huh, old man.”

Being six years older than the members of the band can sometimes feel like nothing at all. While at other times—like when they trap me in the middle of a food fight—feels like twenty.

“You’ll get there someday, kid.” I don’t miss that she scowls at my teasing her. Eloise might think it’s funny to call me old, but I can dish it back just as easily.

Not that she should worry. There is nothing about Eloise Kane that is anything but mature and drop-dead sexy. Dressed up, dressed down, doesn’t matter. She’s stunning.

“Thirty-three, right?”

I nod.

“Sometimes it all just feels like yesterday, doesn’t it?” She leans back, stretching her legs out on the couch so they almost touch me. “Drinking cheap beer in your living room with all those random people Rome used to invite over.”

“Sometimes,” I agree.

In certain ways, the years since the band signed have flown by. In others, it feels like an entirely different lifetime has passed since my time in the military. A past life somewhere in the cracks inside me. Even as I press my hand over the dog tags tucked beneath my T-shirt, the man who lost Sam doesn’t feel the same as this one.

“Do you ever think we gave up too much?” Eloise asks, her eyes falling to my hand flat on my chest.

I’ve never told her that I only wear Sam’s dog tags when I feel I’m losing my footing, but in this moment, I feel like she senses it. How they’re all I have left to ground me when this past week has pulled the rug out from under me.

“Maybe.” I feel my heartbeat quicken, so I drop my hand to my side. “But no matter what you do in life, you’ll inevitably give up something. It’s just a matter of what.”

Eloise’s eyebrows pinch in thought. She folds her legs in front of her, leaning forward so she’s close enough to me that I can smell her flowery shampoo. “What did you give up, Adrian?”

*You...*

For agreeing to be the band’s manager.

For walking away that night at the hotel.

For letting us draw a line we couldn’t cross.

For me being so fucking professional.

“Nothing,” I say instead, swallowing the lie. “I already had nothing left.”

“And here I thought I was the pessimistic one.” She dips her chin and shakes her head at me, but there’s amusement playing in her eyes.

It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Eloise this relaxed. I’d expect her to be on edge with everything coming to the surface

right now, but a weight seems to have melted away instead. Her posture, her smile, the air around her is carefree. Almost weightless.

I want to ask her the same questions she asked me. I want to know what she feels like she's given up for her dreams. But I'm not sure it's fair to make her face the answer with everything she's going through right now, so I stay silent.

“Do you want to get married someday, Adrian?” she asks, surprising me.

“If it feels right.”

I'm not sure if anything ever will. Every relationship I've been in has always felt temporary because I've seen enough to know anyone I care about eventually leaves in one form or another. So I've buried myself in my work.

A wife, a family... those are things I'm smart enough not to imagine.

“What happened with you and Becca?” Eloise rests her arm along the back of the couch, and I wish I was brave enough to brush away the rogue strand that tumbles over her face. “You two seemed happy. Not that I spent much time around her. But you were, right?”

“I guess,” I say, not really sure if *happy* is an emotion I'd use to classify anything anymore. “She was great. But she deserved more.”

“More than you wanted to give her?”

“More than I could.”

Eloise frowns. “This life will do that to you.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

My heart was sectioned off years ago. Pieces cut out and handed off. No matter how hard I’ve tried, there’s no more of me to give. Anything left still resides with the owners I assigned years ago, like the brunette sitting in front of me.

Eloise’s eyes pinch, and I know she’s trying to read me. She’s better at it than anyone. To most, I’m an impenetrable wall. But her fingers always find their way through.

“That day we left Fairfield—”

“You don’t need to talk about that,” I say, already sensing the turmoil brewing behind her words.

“I do.” She shakes her head. “Because I lied to you, and you deserve to know that.”

Taking a deep breath, my chest feels like it’s running out of room. I remember the day Eloise is talking about clearly. Her standing in front of me saying that everything that happened between us was a mistake. For years, I believed I’d crossed a line I shouldn’t have. And ever since finding out the truth about what happened to her in LA, I’ve wondered what about that particular day was in my head and what wasn’t.

“After what happened, I didn’t know what to do.” Eloise drops her gaze to where her fingers are digging at a hole forming in the knee of her worn-out sweats. “For a long time, I didn’t think I’d ever know myself again. And it made it really hard to face anything. At that moment, I knew the only thing

that mattered was getting through the day. I couldn't let the guys down—let you down.”

Her stare flicks up at me and she grips her thighs like she's bracing herself.

“I was scared.” Her eyes pinch. “I didn't know who I was, or how I felt. My feelings for you got mixed up in everything else, and it was too much to process.”

“I understand.” I reach out and plant my hand over hers. It feels like gravity grounding me in place when our skin connects.

She shakes her head. “I never stopped caring about you.”

Eloise holds my hand in hers, but she's not looking at me anymore. Her eyes are off, and I'm not sure if she's avoiding me or whatever her admission stirred up.

“El.” I squeeze her hand and she looks at me. “I never stopped caring about you either.”

I'm not sure if we're talking about friendship or something more. I'm not sure it matters. Because it feels like this is what we've needed to say for years, and I don't have an urgent need to analyze it.

Life on the road is chaos in so many ways. Amplified by overstimulation. It might be the quiet in this hotel room in Phoenix, or it might be the truth escaping. But somehow, for the first time since I graduated high school and joined the military, in this moment, I'm sitting completely still.

Eloise's deep brown eyes are focused on me, the pupils so large they almost swallow all the gold in them. The scent of her floral shampoo hangs in the air, reminding me what a shame it is that she's ever felt anything less than the beauty she radiates inside and out because she has the power to bloom miracles within the most damaged hearts, including my own.

There's a life force she embodies. I'd like to drink it down and remember what life feels like again. But I wouldn't dare drain the parts I know she needs to find her way out of whatever darkness she's been hiding in.

"You should get some sleep," I say, pulling my hand away and feeling suddenly cold.

She rolls her lips between her teeth, and I'd like to think she's as torn as I am. Like those two people who couldn't resist each other years ago are barely beneath the surface begging to get out. But I know it's too much to hope for after everything she's been through.

I stand up and create some distance before I do something stupid.

*Order.*

*Control.*

It's what I'm best at.

Stopping at the doorway to my room, I hold the frame and turn to face Eloise, where she's still perched on the couch deep in thought.

"I'll be right here if you need anything."



“You can take a night off, you know. I’ll be okay.”

“I know.”

“Good.” She stands up and crosses her arms over her chest. Her stare darts between my room and me. I’d really love to know what it is she’s thinking because the darkness in her eyes is overwhelming. “Enjoy having an actual bed, and don’t worry about me.”

I chuckle. “Not possible.”

Her eyebrows furrow, and I realize I probably shouldn’t have said that out loud, but fuck it. If there’s one person on the planet I spend an unhealthy amount of time worrying about, it’s Eloise Kane. Her career, her image, fans wanting too much from her. Now we’ve added a stalker who assaulted her to the mix and I’m not sure I’ll ever not worry about her again.

At least that much I keep in my head. Because if she knew all the ways I’ve imagined peeling off the flesh of the man who hurt her one layer at a time, I’m not sure she’d ever look at me the same again.

Eloise stands up and starts walking toward her room, directly across the suite from mine. And in this moment, the number of times I’ve watched her walk away creeps up on me. Because I’d love nothing more than to tell her we’ve spent too long playing these games and we both deserve it to each other to give us a real shot. But as she pauses in her doorway and looks at me with unmatched vulnerability, I’m smart enough to keep my mouth shut.

“Goodnight, Adrian.”

“Night, El.”

She disappears into her room, and I walk into mine, not shutting the door so I can hear anything that might happen.

As much as it tortures me to be this close to her day in and day out, especially in our current situation, she feels too far away.

Laying down on my bed, I stretch out under the covers and stare at the ceiling. For once I'd like to be impulsive. To act before thinking. For once I'd like to pretend that I'm brave and actually fucking do something. But as I close my eyes and see Eloise's face behind my eyelids, I know that what I want and what she needs are different.

She deserves to be safe. And I'll do everything in my power to make that happen.

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## ELOISE

I'VE NEVER HAD A solid group of girlfriends. Maybe it's that I've spent so many years in a band with all guys, but female friendships have been few and far between. Something Merry and Cassie seem intent on changing as they force me to tag along with them.

At least they're amusing to be around. Even if they're close, they're very different people, which makes for some entertaining hang-outs. So when Cassie suggests a girls' spa day in my suite before our final show in Phoenix, Merry's frown wasn't surprising, seeing as she's been vocal about the fact that she'd rather hit up a tattoo parlor.

"Where's Adrian?" Merry looks across the suite to Adrian's room.

Through the door, I can see his bed perfectly made and not a thing out of place. He's the tidiest man I've ever met, and over half a decade out of the military hasn't made him sloppy.

"If I had to guess, making himself scarce."

Cassie holds a hand on her hip. “Smart man.”

Merry smiles at her and drops down onto the couch. “All right, what is this shit you think you’re going to put on my face.”

“Gold-flecked exfoliator mask,” Cassie says smiling. “Quinn swears by it.”

Cassie hands one to me and one to Merry, who frowns.

“What is it with you two and all this pink shit?” Merry cocks an eyebrow, looking at the bubble gum pink packaging.

Cassie tosses her hair over her shoulder. “Don’t knock it ‘til you try it.”

Merry snorts a laugh but opens the package, humoring Cassie.

If they hadn’t become friends in college, I’m not sure they ever would have, given their different personalities and interests. But the closeness they built during that time is palpable. Enough to make me want their kind of friendship in my own life.

“You better get used to all this girly shit, future Mrs. Hayes.” Cassie winks at Merry.

“First of all, I haven’t decided if I’ll be taking Noah’s last name.” Merry leans forward and rolls her eyes. “My name is perfectly fine as is. And second, who says my wedding will have any of this girly shit. If I had it my way we’d run off to the nearest courthouse and just get it over with.”

“Romantic.” Cassie frowns.

“I don’t need romance.” Merry leans back and grins. “Just give me a hot-as-fuck honeymoon, and I’ll be happy.”

Cassie throws her head back in a laugh, and I feel the blood rushing to my cheeks at the thought. The way they’re so open about their sex lives is bad enough considering it involves my brother and a guy who might as well be. But add in the fact that it’s been far too long since I’ve been with a man, has my insides spinning at the thought.

“Speaking of sexual tension.” Merry’s gaze slides in my direction. “Adrian’s been awfully close and protective lately.”

“He’s my manager.”

“Mine too.” Merry’s eyes narrow. “I don’t see him sleeping on my couch.”

“I blame my overprotective brother for that.”

Cassie grins. “Except he’s not the reason why Adrian’s doing it.”

“What are you talking about?”

This is why I avoid getting buddy-buddy with people on tour. I don’t need more people dipping their fingers into my life and making stories out of things. But as Cassie and Merry sit there with mischief in their eyes, I can’t help but want to know what they’re thinking.

“What?” I ask again, trying not to sound frustrated.

“Eloise.” Merry stands up and walks over to me, reaching out to hold either side of my arms. “The man is in love with you.”

“Adrian?” I laugh, but it doesn’t stop the knot from forming in my throat.

Merry looks over her shoulder at Cassie, who shakes her head and walks up to us.

“It wasn’t Sebastian’s idea for Adrian to stay with you,” Cassie says with softness in her expression. “At least, not at first. Sure, Sebastian was fully onboard once Adrian mentioned it because there’s no one he trusts more with his sister, but it wasn’t your brother who came up with the idea.”

“It’s his jo—”

“No way.” Merry shakes her head. “Don’t even say it.”

“It’s his job,” I finish.

Merry frowns. “His job would be hiring you better security.”

“Not sleeping on your couch,” Cassie adds.

They’re both looking at me like I’m not thinking straight, and I can’t help but wonder what’s in my head and what’s reality staring me in the face. After Adrian started dating Becca last year, I stopped trying to convince myself there was ever going to be a second chance for us. Burned bridges don’t rebuild on their own. But what if that’s what we’ve been doing, slowly, without realizing it?

Me, staying at his house.

Him, being here for me.

One plank at a time strung across this six-year-wide canyon that's stretched between us. How dangerous is it to think we could?

"Can I offer you a little advice?" Merry ticks a pierced eyebrow up at me. "You and Adrian are blind to what's in front of you. And even if you saw it, I worry you're both too damn professional to do anything. But you deserve to be happy, Eloise. So tell me, do you like him?"

"I—" *love him*. But I can't say that. "I guess."

"Adrian's a gentleman to a fault." Merry smiles. "He isn't going to cross a line with you, no matter how much he wants to. And trust me, the man might be hard to read, but it's blatantly obvious he wants to."

Cassie laughs and nods her head.

"I think I understand why you've been careful, and I get that." Merry squeezes my arms. "But girl, you've suffered long enough. Everyone deserves a little recklessness in their life, even you."

"And what if I can't?"

Merry takes a step back, dipping her thumbs in her pockets and skimming me from head to toe. A smile ticks up in the corner of her mouth. "I've got faith in you, girl. But don't wait too long. The man isn't going to be single forever."



My tongue swells in my mouth because she's right. If his relationship with Becca is any indication, he's getting more comfortable with the idea of settling down the older he gets. He's in his thirties now, and no doubt looking for a lasting relationship like the guys in the band seem to be. But I made myself clear to him that we could never be more than friends, so even if Merry and Cassie are right, he'll never act on it with me.

Adrian would never cross a boundary I didn't want to be crossed. It's one of the things I respect about him. But it also has left us in this stalemate. Both of us standing on either side of the fence, never once reaching for the latch.

Safety.

Comfort.

Security.

The same things that draw Adrian and me together are what keep us apart. And how long am I willing to let it happen? If I'm truly ready to face the other side of this, it means standing in front of my feelings for Adrian and not looking away. It means deciding whether I'm willing to lose him or not.

Thinking he was going to marry Becca was bad enough. If I keep waiting, he's going to move on for good at some point.

I should know. I'm already thinking about moving forward myself by debating what I'm going to do after this tour. What happens if we do go on a hiatus, even for just a little bit? Am I ready to walk away from the band—from him?

My head spins at the thought of Adrian not being at my side every day. Of not seeing his face every time I walk off stage. Of not having him check on me when I've been a little too distant for a little too long.

He's the one man in the world who looks at me like I can be Eloise Kane or just Eloise, and it's all the same.

"Think about it." Merry smiles, probably already noticing I am.

She turns, and she and Cassie start peeling open face mask wrappers. With one tug they are already a mess, and Merry points out that she said this was a bad idea from the start. But I barely hear them. In my head, I'm already stuck on the carousel that Merry placed me on.

For years I've been a fraction of who I am, worried there was nothing left. The world may look at me and think they're seeing Eloise Kane, but it was a projection of my mask. While they called me a voice for women everywhere, I was a woman failing myself in every way.

I became the victim.

But no more.

If someone thinks they can scare me, control me, or temper me, they've got another thing coming. I'm stepping forward and ready to melt the ice that froze me. He didn't destroy me because I survived. I'm here.

Opening up to the band was my first real step forward in years, and I'm itching to take another.

There's a fire creeping through the cold places inside me, begging to break free, to burn bright, to light me up. I'm finally ready to take what's mine, and no one is going to stop me.

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## ADRIAN

I'M FUCKING BEAT.

Every time we near the end of a tour it wears on me, and this one is no different. The crew is tired. The band is tired.

Fuck, I'm tired.

Not that it means I'm getting a break anytime soon. We still have three weeks left on tour, with one of them being the Sun Daze Festival—a reality already setting me on edge.

Controlling the environment around the band is hard enough at venues and hotels, but at a week-long outdoor concert, it's a nearly impossible situation. Add in the fact that I still have no leads on Eloise's stalker and I'm ready to pull the plug on the whole thing.

As if those thoughts aren't unsettling enough, for the first time in years I'm not sure what's coming next.

Eloise hasn't agreed to a new album or tour, so as far as I know, the band will be taking some time off. And while that will free me up to focus on Merry's next move, I'm not

looking forward to what that means for me not seeing Eloise on a daily basis.

The elevator door slides open, and I make my way down the hall, hoping whatever I'm wrestling with in my head isn't showing on my face as I approach Beau, the security officer standing in front of Eloise's door.

“Anything?”

Beau shakes his head. “Quiet night.”

“Good.”

He steps aside so I can go in. If he thinks anything about the fact that I'm heading into Eloise's room in the middle of the night, he doesn't let it show. I have no doubt in my mind the rumor mill has been swirling with everything that's been happening lately, but the crew is smart enough not to say shit to my face.

The room's dark when I step inside, and I'm flooded with a familiar sense of relief from the floral scent that hangs in the air as I close the door. Everything about Eloise is comforting. Her smell, her voice, her presence. It's exactly what I need after a rough night.

While she's been back in the room for hours now, I've been wrangling the crew and prepping to hit the road again tomorrow—or today. Looking at the clock, I realize it's already three, and we're taking off by noon.

I really should go to bed, but I'm stressed, thirsty, and wired.

Dropping onto the couch, I tip my head back, trying to relax my mind.

“Adrian?”

I look up and see Eloise coming out of her room, rubbing her eyes. Her hair is wild around her shoulders and she’s in nothing but an oversized T-shirt, showing off the length of her legs.

“Yeah, it’s just me.” I hate that she has to worry about every little sound. “You can go back to bed.”

Instead of turning around, she walks over and sits on the coffee table in front of me, close enough that her bare legs are between mine and the room starts shrinking in on itself.

“You okay?” I sit up straight and try to read her.

Beau knows to call if anything out of the ordinary happens, and it’s been silent all night, so I figured Eloise was in bed sleeping. But the way she’s sitting this close, chewing at the inside of her lip worries me, and I hope I didn’t miss something.

“I’m fine.”

Her answer and her body language say two different things. Her hands grip the coffee table, and she looks stressed with her whole body tensed.

“Adrian, can I ask you a question?”

My eyebrows pull together. “Always.”

She draws her bottom lip between her teeth and I'm not sure if that was the right answer for the middle of the night, but I'm curious what's working behind her beautiful eyes.

Eloise pulls her shoulders back like she's preparing herself for something. Sitting up straight, she looks me in the eyes, not blinking. "What do you see when you look at me?"

"You're Eloise Kane." I try to shrug it off, not sure where this is coming from.

"Right." Her grip tightens on the coffee table. "But who am I to you?"

"I'm not sure if it's smart I answer that question, El." I shake my head.

For so many reasons I know it's better to stay quiet. Her, sitting this close has my defenses faltering. If I'm not careful, I'll break the promise I made to myself when I accepted a job as the band manager and swore I'd be her friend and nothing more.

"Why?"

I swear she leans in the slightest bit because a hit of her floral shampoo strikes me.

"I see you as a good friend." I rub my hands over my face, before gripping my thighs. "And I'm your manager. Anything I say beyond that would be selfish."

"How?"



I'm not sure why she woke up intent on digging into old wounds, but Eloise has an ice pick out and seems intent on chipping.

I tip my head back and close my eyes, taking a deep breath through my nose before looking up at her again. "It's selfish because we can't be anything more than friends."

"More, as in..." The way she drags that out without finishing might as well rake me through the coals.

I nod.

"So it's true?" Her eyebrows pull together in confusion. "You still like me?"

"Of course I like you, El."

She shakes her head, and her long sandy brown hair rustles around her shoulders. "Not like that. Not like *friends*. I'm asking you if you *like* me, Adrian. Like you did back then."

"Eloise." Her name comes out like a warning as my brain backfires, because *like* doesn't begin to define what it is I feel for her, but I know better than to go there.

"Why won't you answer? Is it because I'm broken?"

I can't help but lean forward and plant my hand over hers at her question. "Of course not."

"Then what is it?"

"I can't get distracted again." The words are barbs on my tongue, but it's the truth. No matter how much she tries to convince me it isn't my fault what happened to her, I wasn't

there. I was thinking about myself that night, and what *I* wanted.

I can't do that when it comes to Eloise. I'm her manager, she needs me to have a clear head.

"I can't go halfway with you, Eloise."

"What does that mean?"

"We can't stop and start again. This isn't six years ago when we barely knew each other and didn't have any attachments."

"So?" She faces off with me, not realizing the seed of hope in that one word, burrowing in the soil while my fingers try to dig it out before it starts to grow.

Eloise pulls back and runs her fingers through her hair, pulling it away from her face. "What are we doing?"

She stands up and starts pacing the room, spinning her hair around one of her hands and looking up at the ceiling as she does. Stirring up a feeling in my gut that something's going to snap. And maybe that's what I want right now. For both of us to be able to go back to that day we stood face to face, and for us to break instead of building walls.

"I know what they say about me, that I'm a hermit, or re-virginizing myself, or whatever." Eloise frowns and it makes me want to punch the guys in the band for always picking on her for shit they knew nothing about. "But it's not like I didn't want to. I just couldn't after everything."

I stand up and walk over to her. "El, you don't have to explain yourself."

“I want to.” She stops abruptly, turning to face me, and her words plant me in place. “Because this is always where we end up, Adrian. Me, shutting you out and you accepting it. And I appreciate that you have in the past because I had a lot I had to work through. But I worked through it and at some point, we both need to face this.”

Her gaze falls to her feet.

“I know I messed it all up,” she says, with the faintest hint of defeat. “And I know I should probably leave the past in the past for both our sakes. But there have been too many things I’ve spent years not saying, and I’m not going to do that anymore, especially with you. What happened between us wasn’t a mistake. It was the only thing that ever really meant anything to me, and I was too scared to face that with everything else going on. If you’ve moved on, I’ll accept it. I will. But you deserve to know that I haven’t.”

*Moved on?*

The words hurt because nothing is further from the truth. As much as I wanted to, I’ve always known that’s not possible when it comes to her. All roads led back to Eloise Kane. She was it for me, and I’ve been torturing myself waiting for her to see it.

Eloise blinks and there might as well be fire in her eyes because they burn bright in the dim light of the room. She takes a step back, but without thinking, I move toward her.

Magnetic energy drawing me in.

I reach for her hand, and we're so close her exhales are my inhales as she looks up at me. "You want to know what I see when I look at you?"

She draws her lips between her teeth and nods once.

"My *whole fucking world*." I draw my hand up to her jaw and hold it in my grasp like I've wanted to do a million times. "I see the only girl worth looking at. And not just because you're the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on, but because you have the energy to make a man, as broken as I am, feel alive inside. I see your bravery. I see your fragility. I see your strength and fear. I see power that brings me to my fucking knees and kindness that gravitates people to you. You might feel broken, but you're the most whole thing I've ever known."

Eloise's exhale melts her hard posture. Her cheeks warm and she allows the weight of her cheek to rest in my palm. I dare to trace my thumb over her bottom lip, and it takes me back to the beginning, remembering how she feels against my skin. I might as well have not felt anything since.

"You make me want to be selfish." I step closer, and there's no space left between us. "Because while I'm supposed to be here for the band, it's only ever been for you. It didn't matter whether you wanted me or not, because I would have burned the world to the fucking ground to give it to you."

Eloise reaches up and cups her hand over my own. "I've always wanted you, Adrian."

Her fingers graze the back of mine. She drags my hand down her jaw, her neck, her collarbone. Until my palm is flat over the center of her chest between her full breasts. Through her thin T-shirt, I feel her heart racing.

“I want to take it back.” She looks at me and I feel her heart beat harder. “I want to go back in time and fix it.”

“It doesn’t work like that, El.” I tip her chin up with my free hand and her grip tightens on the one holding my palm to her chest. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t change the future.”

I probably should have lied right there to save us both from whatever is about to happen. I should have slipped into my role as her manager and told her the past is the past and the future needs to remain business. But I’ve waited to hear these words from her lips for years and holding her now draws the truth out of me whether it’s good for us or not.

Feeling her heart racing beneath my palm, I know where this road leads. There will be no detours like the ones we’ve taken in the past. No stopping. No slowing down. It’s a straight shot to everything I’ve wanted, and I can’t help but be terrified of what that will do to both of us.

Eloise needs me to be here for her right now as her manager. She needs me to protect her from what’s out there trying to get her. To do that, I need a clear head. I can’t be selfish or distracted.

I should resist this pull.

But on her exhale, I already know there's no use trying.  
What was lust back then has spent years growing deeper roots.  
Ready, waiting to rip me open.

I want to keep her safe.

And I want *her*.

Even if it breaks everything. Because if there's a grenade  
worth not surviving, it's Eloise Kane.

“What are you thinking?” Eloise asks, and I spot fear in her  
expression as her dark brown eyes search my face for a clue.

*You need to lie.*

*Lie.*

*Lie.*

There's no use.

“That I'm tired of being so fucking professional when it  
comes to you.”

She presses her chest against mine, and there's only my  
hand separating us. “Then don't.”

Two words and Eloise makes me everything I'm not.

Reckless.

Impulsive.

Selfish.

Gripping the front of her T-shirt, I pull her to me and take  
what I've wanted since the day I met her.

Everything.



## **ELOISE**

I KNEW THERE WAS a possibility Adrian would be a gentleman when I bared my feelings to him. That maybe he was really over the past between us. I knew it was a risk putting myself on that ledge and asking him to catch me.

But still, I held my beating heart in my hands and asked him to accept it, knowing the pain I'd feel if he didn't. Knowing, either way, I had to break the stalemate and hope he'd meet me on the other side. And with blood spilling between us, I finally saw in his eyes the same war that's waged in me since we met.

I saw the wall crumble as he pulled me in for a kiss.

It could be that it's been six years since I've kissed him, but the power in his kiss isn't sweet and gentle like I remember. It's possessive. Claiming. And every aching inch of my body begs him to take everything.

Adrian's hands slide down my sides, and the years I've spent fearing a man touching me melt away because under his palms I feel safe.



I feel *loved*.

“Eloise.” My name is a plea on his lips, and I respond by wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Please don’t stop.” I know it’s desperate but I’ve never needed affection like I need it from him in this moment.

Adrian gazes down at me and grins, and I might as well melt in his hands at how it feels to be held by a man who exudes power like him. He slips his hands down my sides and around the back of my thighs as he reaches down and lifts me up, wrapping my legs around him.

“Wasn’t planning on it.” He winks, before his mouth lands back on mine.

My insides go tumbling. Down a hill that stops at a cliff. Endlessly falling and I don’t ever want to stop if the feeling brings me closer to him.

He walks us across the suite and into my room, past that barrier I’ve laid awake at night wishing he would cross. I stared at the doorway, knowing we’re both too cautious to breach the line.

Except, now he does.

Adrian lays me on the bed, but he doesn’t stop kissing me. Slow and sweet. Hard and frantic. Switching between the two as I sink my teeth into his lower lip. The pain forces a grunt from him as he grinds his hips between my legs.

I’ve never needed him more.

Reaching for the bottom of his T-shirt, I tug and strip it off. He plants his hands on either side of my head so he can hold himself up, and it draws out the cut of every hard muscle in his arms and chest. I can't help but trace the lines on his stomach. Skimming my fingertips over places I've only explored in my dreams.

My hands make my way to the button on his pants, but he grips my wrist to stop me.

"El." He tips my chin up so I'm looking him in the eyes, and I realize his are filled with worry. "We don't have to do this."

Adrian wraps his hand around my jaw, tracing my bottom lip with the pad of his thumb, back and forth.

"You don't want to?"

"Of course I want to." Adrian breathes out a laugh that relaxes me. "But you're more to me than that. This isn't just about sex."

*Sex.*

My pulse throbs between my legs at the way the word falls from Adrian's lips. His eyes rake me over, and I wonder if he hears my heart racing.

"I don't want to rush you," he says.

Now I'm the one who can't help laughing. "We've spent years not rushing."

“It’s not just that.” His thumb stops on my lip, pausing there.

As his gaze darkens, I realize what he’s talking about. He’s worried about what this could mean after all I’ve been through. Because Adrian is the kind of man who thinks beyond his own impulses, and he’s worried I’m not ready.

I grab onto his hand and move it down as I did before, pausing when his palm rests over my heart, letting it tell him all the things my lips have been too scared to admit for all these years.

“I trust you, Adrian.” My other hand finds the side of his face and he leans into my touch. “And I want you to show me what it’s like to *feel* again. It’s been—”

But I can’t finish that statement because I refuse to bring any darkness into this space.

He lifts his hand from my chest and pushes my hair off my face, holding onto the back of my head and tipping my face up to meet him.

“You’re the only good I feel anymore,” he says against my mouth.

There’s enough sadness in his eyes that I believe him. While most people don’t think much of Adrian’s silence, I know he buries a lot in it. Pain. Heartache. A whole life he lived before I met him. And I realize I’m not the only one here searching for love. He needs me as much as I need him.

Bringing my mouth to his, I press against him, and we roll until he's beneath me and I'm seated on top of him, feeling his hard length begging between us.

I lift up and plant my hands on his bare chest, relishing the look in his eyes as he stares up at me. For the years I spent feeling weak and powerless, he lays there and draws out a strength I forgot I had. And I need to show him, help him understand what that means to me. That he sees me for everything I try to hide, and everything I want to reveal to him and him only.

He makes me feel like myself again.

I reach for the hem of the oversized T-shirt I'm wearing and peel it off. Adrian's grip tightens on my thighs as his eyes work their way down my body, where I'm in nothing but a thin scrap of underwear that doesn't hide anything.

Under his gaze, I feel my power surge through me. I feel appreciated, cared for, *valued*.

"Fuck, Eloise." Adrian's fingers dig into my thighs, and I swear he gets harder between my legs.

Slowly raking my hands down his chest, I drag until I find the button of his jeans again. This time, he doesn't stop me as I pop it.

He's letting me control the situation, and I know for a man who rarely hands that over, it's his way of showing me I can trust him.

Stripping him of his pants and underwear, I swallow hard. He's fully exposed and propped up on his elbows on the bed, watching me stand in front of him at the base of it. And I can't drag my eyes away from his dick, hard and twitching as he stares at me.

It's been years, but they've never felt like so many until this moment with him fully exposed in front of me. And I want him more than anything, but it's also been so long I can't help the nerves that skitter to the surface.

Adrian sits up and reaches for my hips. "What are you thinking?"

I look into his eyes and notice the bridge of his nose is pinched.

"It's been..." I pause, trying not to reveal my secrets but failing. "I'm just out of practice."

Adrian chuckles, and it breaks the tension, which I appreciate.

"El." He tugs my hips to draw my body against him. "You have nothing to worry about. You were meant for me."

My heart thunders and I can't help but gravitate toward those words—toward him.

His thumbs hook in the sides of my underwear and he peels them off slowly, dragging them all the way down my legs and then slowly trailing his fingers all the way back up again. His gaze darkens and with both of us naked I feel his restraint breaking.

Adrian leans forward and presses a kiss to my stomach, but I feel it all the way between my legs. The stubble on his chin grazing my soft skin.

“You—” he kisses lower “—are—” his lips are at the apex of my thighs “—perfection.”

He lands an open-mouth kiss on my clit, and I buckle over him, catching myself on his shoulder as it takes the strength from my legs. Adrian smiles at me and pulls me onto his lap so that we’re chest to chest, and I’m straddling him.

He drifts his hand down to continue the work his tongue started at the same time as his mouth finds mine. I swear I feel him on every inch of my skin. His body searches for my love and I want to peel myself open and help him find it.

His thumb runs in circles on my clit, and the tension is thick as I get slicker, sliding back and forth over his dick. Just as the pressure starts to build, Adrian pushes a finger inside me, and I feel my entire body clench around him.

“Eloise.”

I open my eyes and see he’s pulled his face back.

“I—” I take a deep breath. “Keep going.”

Adrian circles his thumb and watches my reaction as he drives his finger in again. My body starts to adjust to the feeling, and I don’t take my eyes off him. I watch him watch me and it makes me feel like I’m coming apart at the seams.

Another finger slips in and this time I don’t flinch, I crave it. I want to feel full of him. I start to shift my hips with the

movement and it's almost too much for my body to handle as he works me in his hands. Gripping onto his shoulders, he rolls his hand as I start to grind my hips to the movement. Building like the beat of a song aching for a chorus. And with a final roll of his thumb on my clit I come apart, screaming something I can't put words to as I collapse against his chest.

He pulls his hand out, and I try to catch my breath. I know I'm soaking his dick by just sitting on it, and it's so hard I'm pretty sure it's got to be painful for him.

Finally sitting upright, I plant my hands on each of his shoulders and shift again, appreciating that it makes his eyes roll back in his head. I slide a hand down and wrap it around his dick, stroking it, as nervous as I am excited. He's not even inside me yet, and I'm soaking at the thought of being one with him.

I start to lift, but Adrian stops me with a hand on my shoulder.

“Should I get a condom?”

I look up at him and realize it didn't even cross my mind because it's been years for me, and it's *him*.

“I'm on the pill, so not unless you want one. I trust you.”

Adrian brings both of his hands to the sides of my face. “I'm yours, Eloise.”

I can't help the feeling that rises in me as I press my lips to his at that statement. All I've wanted since I met him was for him to be mine, and the admission pulses in my chest.

Tightening my fingers around his dick, he doesn't stop me this time when I lift and position the thick head of it at my entrance slowly starting to lower on him. He stretches me to my limits, and it hurts as much as it feels good.

I look him in the eyes as I sink onto him and feel every inch my body takes until I'm fully seated, and the breath has been pulled from my chest. His hands grip my hips, and I rock slowly, trying to adjust to the feel.

"Fuck," he breathes out as his eyes roll back and he loses anything else he was going to say.

But as I start to circle my hips and tilt my head back, he grips my chin and forces me to face him.

"Eyes on me." He runs his thumb over my bottom lip. "It's just us. And I need to see every piece of you when you come apart."

He lets go of my face, but I don't break his stare because I'm lost in the connection—the security, the safety. A pull so strong I've never shared it with any other person. It floods me with fear, and I can't help but wrap my arms tighter around him and press my forehead to his.

Adrian must sense the shift because he snakes his hands up my back and into my hair. He lifts his hips to meet me as I ride him, and we drink in the racing breaths between us. He pulls me apart and heals me with every thrust. With every breath. With every inch of our bodies pressing together.

Touch I've long forgotten. I've long feared.



And with him I crave.

“Adrian, I need you,” I whisper against his mouth, pressing the faintest kiss to his lips.

“You have me.”

He bites down on my lower lip and draws it into his mouth, sucking. Between that and his dick hitting me deep and hard I feel myself tightening. He lays back, pulling me over him, and drags his hands down to my hips.

“I—” I can’t speak. I can’t think.

All I can do is feel Adrian’s hands roaming my skin. His teeth clamping on my lip, and his fingers digging into my thighs as he takes control of the movements.

Tension builds where I’ve never felt it. Somewhere in my core, my heart, my mind. Every part of me ready to burst.

“Come for me, baby.”

His words are soft, but his thrusts are hard as he holds me over him and pounds his hips up. Like he’s as desperate for my release as I am. His muscles flex as my pussy clamps harder in search of friction. White noise fills my ears and static buzzes.

A forest fire spreads.

I shatter and he drinks my screams. His fingernails dig into my skin as he follows me with his own release. And I feel us both on the brink between control and chaos, barely holding it together. I feel his warmth inside me absorbing what was cold for far too long.

He holds my face against the crook of his neck and our breathing is frantic.

This should feel like a mistake because he's my manager and my friend, and we were never meant to act on this.

But with his dick still throbbing inside me and his arms wrapped around me making me feel safe, all I feel is comfort. Because Adrian is where I've always belonged, and I'm tired of denying it.

**23**

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## ADRIAN

*SMOKE IS WHAT HITS me first, followed by a sinking feeling in my stomach.*

*I hear explosions, and I think they're farther away than they are until the ash starts raining down around me.*

*But I got out of here.*

*I escaped... didn't I?*

*Coughing comes from behind me, and I spin to see her face from a distance. Cerulean eyes transform the moment I look into them. Darkening to a burnt umber as the girl changes from Sam to Eloise.*

*She shouldn't be here.*

*None of us should.*

*There's fear in her eyes as they skate over me, and when I look down, I see I'm covered in blood.*

*Death. Pain. It's all I bring. And here she stands trusting me to protect her.*

*I take a step forward, but it's like the earth stretches with my advance, because the closer I try to get, the further she is. And that's when I hear it—tires crunching over dirt.*

*They're coming for her, just like they did Sam.*

*“Adrian!” She screams as her face turns.*

*The fear in her eyes sends my feet running. But I can't reach her. All I can do is watch as she looks at me once more with hurt in her eyes.*

*And then she's nothing.*

*We're nothing.*

*Pieces.*

*I failed her again.*

*“Adrian.”*

My eyes fly open to find Eloise's worried face hovering over me in bed. My heart is racing and my fingers are gripping the sheet at my sides because even if it was just a dream, I feel like I'm hanging on for dear life. I swear I can still smell the smoke lingering in my nostrils. A reminder that no matter how much time passes, the battlefield tucked itself under my skin and refuses to release me.

“You all right?” Eloise strokes her hand across my cheek and frowns. “Here I thought I was the only one with nightmares.”

I plant my hand over hers on my face and look up at her. Checking her for wounds that are all in my head. Pushing down the fear I can't help but feel creeping up in me. Doubt that I'll fail Eloise in the same way I failed Sam.

It's irrational, but it doesn't stop me from harboring the weight as I look into her worried eyes. I can't help but think about how being with her will cloud my judgment, which is dangerous in our situation.

Eloise blinks and I take a deep breath.

*She's whole.*

*One.*

*With me.*

Right where she belongs.

"I'm fine." I roll until she's flat on her back and I'm looking down at her beautiful face. Her cheeks etched with the kind of smile that makes art of her expression.

I might as well still be dreaming with her naked next to me. Looking like a goddess on display. Every inch of her a fantasy I never thought I'd deserve to see, to touch, to feel. I'm tempted to bury myself inside her to show her just how deep she's got her hooks in me.

Because I'm fucking gone for this girl.

Eloise's eyes say so much right now. They're gentle and she's relaxed, but the slightest pinch reveals how she's trying to read me. And for the first time in years, there's a

vulnerability in them. She's handing me the pieces she doesn't hand anyone, trusting me with the part of herself that disappeared after the band became famous.

The real Eloise.

Her fingers run over my chest. Tracing me, memorizing me. They might as well be knives slicing through so she can embed herself where she belongs. Her hands send an electrical current over my skin as she blazes a path from my neck to my stomach.

“What do you dream about?” she asks.

One hand moves to the ink scattered on my arm, where I hide stories I don't say out loud to anyone. It's been years since I've added to my tattoos. Years since anything felt like it deserved a place on my skin.

But Eloise's hand.

Her fingertips.

She might as well brand me with her touch and replace all of them with her.

“Nothing good.” I bring my hand up to her face and brush her hair away.

I roll to my side and draw her back against my chest, wrapping my arm around her.

Eloise continues to trace the designs on my arm one at a time. “Tell me.”

Burying my nose in her hair, I inhale deeply. In all the years I've spent with the band, my time in the military remains something I haven't talked about. Almost as if I could bury what I don't look at. A lie I've hidden behind, as evidenced by the fact that one incident was all it took to drag me back into that place in my brain.

Ever since that first rose landed on my doorstep, it was like my bones could feel danger closing in. The nightmares I'd escaped for years were back, made worse when Eloise admitted what actually happened. And now, I feel like I can't close my eyes without seeing the demons that live in my head.

"It's always the same." I hold Eloise in my arms. "I see Sam off at a distance—"

"Your friend?"

Eloise is the only person in recent years I've talked to about Sam, not that I've said much. She knows enough to understand why I've got Sam's dog tags, and she's perceptive enough to probably see that I've never really gotten past her death.

I nod against the back of Eloise's head. "I see her clearly, just standing there in the middle of the desert. There's smoke, but it's all white noise. And then I see the tank. But I can't get to her. Not until it's too late."

"I'm sorry, Adrian." Eloise squeezes my forearm with her hand.

"Except, today it changed."



She rolls onto her back so she can look up at me. “What do you mean?”

“It was Sam.” I brush the side of her cheek with my thumb. “And then it was you.”

Eloise’s eyes pinch before they widen in understanding. “It’s not—”

“I know.” I scrub my palm over my face. “It’s not my fault.”

“Well, it isn’t.”

If only saying it and believing it was the same thing.

She opens her mouth but stops herself from saying whatever she was going to when she looks at my face.

“I understand that it’s not my fault directly, just like Sam wasn’t.” I can’t stop rubbing my hand over her cheek, her throat, her chest, waiting for reality to slip away from me. “But I wasn’t there for you, and irrational or not, it’s hard to forgive myself for that.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Somewhere in the back of my nostrils I still smell the smoke, even if it’s just my imagination.

“With Sam, I should have tried harder to talk her out of enlisting.” I shake my head. “Her parents had the money to send her to college. But she always got these ideas in her head and just couldn’t fucking help herself. I made it sound like an adventure, and Sam... well she lived for that shit.”

“She sounds like someone I would have gotten along with.”  
The corner of Eloise’s mouth ticks up.

I can’t help but smile. “Most definitely. She was a lot like you. Cautious on the outside but the heart of a rebel.”

“And that’s me?” Eloise’s face pinches.

“When I met you, I knew you were gonna do something big.” I brush my finger over the soft skin between her eyebrows and it smooths her expression. “Because as wild as the rest of the band was, they had you, thinking clearly, getting done what needed to get done. But also, breaking barriers. Even when it drove me fucking insane.”

For some reason, that makes her frown.

“What?”

“I was a fraud. All this time these women have been looking up to me and little do they know that I’m just a victim myself.”

“You’re a *survivor*.” Planting my hand on her cheek, I turn her face toward me. “And not talking about it doesn’t make you a fraud. It’s what gave you your fire in the first place. They don’t need to know your story to be inspired by you.”

“But maybe they should.”

I shrug. “That’s up to you.”

She lets out a deep breath, but I still feel the tension of whatever’s on her mind weighing heavy.

I'm not sure Eloise sees the same thing the rest of the world does when they look at her, and it baffles me. She never needed to tell her story for women to be able to relate to her. Whatever place it was her passion burned from was so hot they felt it anyway. I assumed it had to do with how she grew up, and her mostly strained relationship with her mother. But after learning the truth, I realized it went deeper.

Words are cheap. You can say just about anything. But to feel it—to believe it—takes bravery. And whether Eloise likes it or not, before she ever admitted to her pain, she carried the truth in her eyes and spent her whole career using it to help others.

“How do you do it?” Eloise presses her forehead against my chest. “How do you move on?”

“Don't know. You just do.”

I don't tell her that it doesn't mean it actually fixes anything. I don't tell her that it doesn't mean you're not still broken. I don't tell her that up until a year ago I still considered that it might be easier if I just put a bullet in my brain.

Not helpful.

Besides, I'm still here, so that's got to count for something.

Eloise looks up and cups my face in her hand, almost nose to nose with me. The imaginary smoke from my dreams is replaced with the scent of flowers at her closeness.

*Life.*

*Beauty.*

*Eloise.*

She makes me feel in a way I no longer thought possible. Warms through the ice I was certain had claimed me all the way through.

Pressing her onto her back, I slide my body between her legs and dip my mouth over hers. She wraps her legs around my hips, digging her heels into the backs of my thighs, and winds her arms around my neck. Parting her mouth, I take everything she's willing to give with her kiss.

Her air. Her heart.

"I need to feel you," she whispers against my mouth.

I almost come all over her stomach with that one sentence but manage to thrust into her instead. Hard enough to make her scream as I stretch her tight pussy. I'm not sure if it's me or her who needs it more as I thrust inside her, but she makes me want to fuck her until I own everything I've been denying myself.

Her soft body clenches and softens at the same time. She's warm and tight and I might black out from the feeling alone.

Nothing in my life has felt like she does. Like fucking paradise I don't deserve. In my hands, she might as well be liquid trying to slip away, and I'm spreading as wide as possible to contain her.

Eloise moves her hips to meet my pace, and I'm pretty sure I'm coming apart for good as I take her bare and claim every

inch of her body.

But that's not what scares me. It's the thunder in my chest. Echoing as it gets louder. A storm brewing in the air. Chaos where the past meets the future.

Eloise moans and her breath quickens. And as my body feeds on her reaction, I pick up speed. Slipping a hand up to cup her full breast, while fisting the hair at the back of her head in my other hand. I tug and her whole body arches against me. Slamming in, needing every piece.

I'd like to be gentle for her sake, but she makes me want to possess her. And the way she moans in pleasure the harder I thrust only drives me to do it more.

I'm going to fuck her until it breaks us both apart. I'm going to shatter us until we're the only ones who know how to put each other back together.

A scream rips from her throat as I spill myself into her, thrusting us to the edge of pleasure and pain.

It's selfish how whole I feel as I lift up and look her in the eyes. How her arms might as well be holding me together. It's dangerous how fast my heart races to try to meet the smile that crosses her face.

Because I need to keep her safe, and I'm so far under with this girl I'm not sure I'm capable anymore.

**24**

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## ELOISE

SCREAMS WELL UP AS the set ends. Thousands of teary fans beg us from the depths of their lungs.

*They need us.*

After all this time it's still unreal to walk off the stage and leave them wanting. Always craving more no matter how much we give them.

Adrian's eyes find me around Noah's shoulder and the faintest smirk ticks up in the corner of his mouth before he looks away. He's mastered the art of pretending these moments between us don't exist, but I feel them loud inside my chest.

We haven't discussed what we're doing or said anything to the band about what's happened. The last thing either of us wants is for the guys to worry about things turning messy. And at the end of the day, Adrian is still our band manager. Crossing the line with him didn't change that. It just made things more complicated.

I try to tell myself not to get too attached, to not think beyond this moment, but I can't seem to help it. Adrian's eyes sneaking in my direction force all the possibilities to stretch between us. One glance throws more ideas into my head than I should allow.

Hope I'd given up on until this man pulled it out of me. And while I know I should try to keep this casual, all I can do is wonder who I am to him.

In public, he keeps his distance and remains professional. He acts as if things haven't drastically changed between us. And as much as I respect Adrian for his calm and collected actions, sometimes I wish he'd just cross the room, push me against the wall, and claim me out loud.

No apologies.

Sebastian wraps his arm around Cassie and plants a kiss on the top of her head, whispering something to her before parting ways and heading over to Adrian. I pretend I'm not watching, trying to keep my focus on my guitar while I half-listen to whatever Noah is saying. But when Rome belts out laughing, I realize I'm probably failing, because I have no idea what's so funny.

Adrian turns his back to me as Sebastian approaches, closing them off from the people backstage. Sebastian's entire back stiffens with whatever Adrian says, and my brother's eyes dart in my direction for a millisecond, sending a shiver up my spine.



Sebastian claps Adrian on the back and they nod at each other as he makes his way over to me. He smiles at Noah and Rome, but his jaw is tense, and the way the guys fall out of their conversation tells me I'm not the only one who noticed.

"What?" I roll my shoulders back. A show of strength when I feel my insides tumbling.

"There's been more flowers." Sebastian stands up tall, and I'm not sure if he's trying to put on this tough exterior for me or him.

"What do you mean *more*?"

Sebastian lifts his hand to scratch the back of his neck. One of his many ticks that tells me he's not as cool and confident as he wants me to believe right now. His eyes dart to Noah and Rome, who I'm suddenly aware have surrounded me.

"He's started having them delivered. A dozen every day for the past three days." Sebastian dips his chin. "And then today, Adrian found one in your guitar case."

My head swims. "How?"

"No fucking clue." Sebastian reaches out and takes my hand at the same time as Rome plants a hand on my shoulder.

Only then do I realize I'm shaking.

"Th-the c-crew?" My words are coming out stilted, but I can't help it.

Sebastian shakes his head. "Adrian had his guy look into everyone on the crew and they all came back clear. None of

them have records or were anywhere near LA the night it happened.”

“But he was here.”

A few heads backstage turn, and I realize it came out a lot louder than I anticipated. But I can't help it or contain it.

Six years ago, I thought the assault was random. But when the flowers started arriving at Adrian's house, it became clear it wasn't random at all. Further proved by the recent escalations. He wants me to know he's still here. He wants me to know he's *always* been here. He wants me scared.

I put on the strongest front I can as I wipe my face of all feeling. If he had access to my tour bus and guitar case, he could be anywhere around me. And as unnerving as that thought is, it's also a reminder that I don't want him to have the pleasure of watching me break.

“Thank you for letting me know.” I nod my head.

Sebastian's eyebrows furrow, but I don't give him a chance to say anything as I slip out of his grip and duck out of the band's circle. I hold my head up high and ignore the eyes watching me. Too many of them for me to count, one set, in particular, burning into the side of my head from where I know Adrian is still standing.

I keep my cool on the outside even as an avalanche strikes within.

I keep calm.

Collected.

It isn't until I reach my dressing room and shut the door that I pull the curtain open in my chest. It's all there where it's always been. One tear and I shred from the inside out.

I bleed.

I break.

*I can't escape him.*



“Damn girl.” Merry whistles. “What the fuck have you done with Eloise Kane?”

“No idea what you’re talking about.” I smile as I slide up next to her.

It’s a lie. I know exactly why half the room turned to look at me when I walked in. All thanks to this knockout dress.

It’s not that I’m overly modest, since being a rock star doesn’t really allow it, but I don’t usually make a show of myself either. I keep it simple, understated. Classy, cool Eloise.

Except tonight I really don’t give a shit.

I’m tired of feeling like the men in my life have taken the power of feeling sexy away from me, so I’m taking it back. Between the guys my mom brought around looking at me like they wanted to end up in jail for whatever they were thinking, to the man who forced himself inside me, I’ve harbored a fear

of exposing my body, worrying that if I show too much, I'll be exposed.

But that's what *he* wants, what they all want. To quiet me. To make their actions my fault when it isn't. No more.

I've emboldened many women to reclaim their own power—their own bodies—that it's finally time I retake mine.

Which is why I'm standing here in this dress.

After last night's show, I've been on edge. So while Adrian spent the day working with the crew on plans for the upcoming Sun Daze Festival, I went out shopping. Flanked by security, of course.

The second I saw this dress hanging in the window, I couldn't help myself. And my original plan for what I was going to wear to this charity event went out the window.

The dress is scarlet red, strapless, and long, but with a slit that goes all the way up the front of my leg until it reaches my hip. It draws out my curves like an hourglass, and I don't have to be vain to know I look damn good in it.

But screw everyone else, I'm wearing this for me.

"Loving the red." Cassie bumps my shoulder on my other side, and I can't help but smile at her.

Merry, Cassie, and I walk into the ballroom and are immediately surrounded by suits. Every so often the record label puts on these circus shows and forces us to attend. They say it's for a good cause, and while I know it is, I also know

they're not here for that. They want the validation their generosity shines on them.

Especially since the band currently has a camera crew following us around, watching our every move. The label doesn't really care about victims of assault. They care about the optics, and how our being here makes us look good, and in turn them.

If it weren't for the fact that it's my charity headlining tonight, I might have skipped it. But even if I know most people are here for the wrong reasons, I'm not.

With my first big paycheck, I started the Lilac foundation, and have continued to pour a portion of any profits made into it ever since. I might have not been able to help myself after the assault, but I could help others.

"I hate these things," Merry groans.

Cassie shrugs. "At least it's for a good cause."

Merry rolls her eyes, and I can't help but shake my head and laugh because I agree with her. I'm all for the portion of this that's about helping people, but tonight is only happening so everyone can pat each other on the back about it.

"You got your speech ready?" Merry asks.

I nod. "Ready as ever."

Hopefully, they don't sense my nerves through those three words. I might be on stage in front of thousands of people on a regular basis, but that's with the guys at my side. Tonight, I'll

be up there alone. And no matter how many stadiums I've graced, my confidence always falters in moments like this.

On an empty stage, rock princess Eloise Kane is replaced with the same girl who messed up her speeches in school and refused to join the debate team.

"There she is." Sebastian's eyes land on Cassie the moment he spots us making our way through the crowd. His arm is around her as soon as she's within reach.

Merry slides up to Noah, who skims her black lace dress once before giving her a kiss that's borderline inappropriate for this setting. Rome is occupied talking to a couple of actresses in the corner, so it's just me standing there between two couples.

It's cute... I'm happy for them... but I'm also really jealous all of a sudden.

If I thought it was hard enough to watch these four go at it a week ago, something about the secret Adrian and I have been keeping makes it harder. Because for the first time in my life, I want that. To feel part of something more than just the band. I want a relationship that's for me.

Just as the thought crosses my mind, a figure walking through a far doorway draws my attention. As if he's been manifested from my thoughts, Adrian struts into the room in a tux.

He wasn't going to attend tonight, since he avoids events like this anytime he can. But there he is, at the far edge of the

room looking so delicious I can't help imagining peeling every layer off him later.

If I thought years of celibacy were difficult, I've learned there's something worse—knowing what Adrian's body feels like inside me, and not being able to claim it at any given second.

Adrian's eyes find mine from across the room and they skim me head to toe in appreciation. But when his gaze meets mine again, more than lust lives there. His mouth ticks in a smile that says something deeper.

Because although I know Adrian likes what he sees physically, his stare slices through to appreciate so much more. He's in this for more.

Adrian heads in my direction and my insides start to ache.

To quake.

To shiver.

With every step, the intensity of his stare is stronger.

From beside me, I hear Sebastian say Adrian's name in surprise since none of us expected him to be here, but the rest is white noise. Because my focus is on the man in front of me, looking nothing like the controlled version of himself I'm used to.

His pupils dilate and he's wild. Feral. Reckless. A reflection of the layers peeled back within me.

I'm certain, if anyone is watching, it's written all over my face. My desire for him mixed with my secrets. All I can do is hope they aren't paying attention.

Adrian must sense it, because when he stops at the edge of the group and nods hello, he smirks before collecting himself and moving his gaze off me.

I take a sip of my champagne and wish we could be careless. I wish we could stop worrying about the consequences and he'd take my stare as permission to walk straight over and kiss me. I wish he'd claim me as his in front of everyone.

I'd love to open Pandora's box and all that it contains.

But I don't.

Sebastian falls into conversation with Noah and Cassie, and Adrian casually makes his way to me in the circle, using the passing tray of champagne as an excuse to lean closer.

"You're gorgeous," Adrian whispers, low enough that no one can hear it, but it still manages to thunder through me.

I tip my chin up, smiling over the rim of my glass, but I avoid his gaze. "You're not so shabby yourself."

From the corner of my eye, I swear I see Merry smirking, so I walk away before she, or anyone else, starts to whisper. But I feel his eyes on me, and I realize that's where they've always been.



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## ELOISE

I PEEK OVER AT Adrian and smile when I see him frowning at his phone. I can't help it, even grumpy and working he looks so darn sexy. His grimace draws attention to his rigid jaw and dark eyes. His demeanor is completely out of place standing in the middle of this event, surrounded by champagne and diamonds.

I slide up beside him but keep my eyes averted as I take another sip of my drink. "You do know you can relax for a night, don't you?"

It's still only my first glass of champagne, but something about the bubbles sends it straight to my head.

"The media circus that surrounds the four of you doesn't care how fancy the party is." He tucks his phone in his pocket. "It never sleeps."

"Like you."

From the corner of my eye, I spot Adrian's smirk.

When Adrian was sleeping on my couch, I didn't realize how little sleep he was actually getting. But this past week we've been sharing a bed, and it's become clear. He's on his phone working well past when I fall asleep curled up next to him, and, more often than not, I wake up to an empty bed.

"This dress isn't like you." He shifts in closer, and I get a hit of his fresh scent—cool, calming like a snow-covered forest. "Can't say I'm complaining though."

Blood rushes to my cheeks, and I scan the crowd to see who might be watching. Luckily, no one is since they're all distracted by alcohol and conversations. Even Sebastian and Noah, who no longer drink, seem like they're enjoying themselves in whatever conversation they're having at a far table.

"Maybe I wanted to make a statement." I finally dare to face Adrian, and his eyes dip to my cheeks as I feel them flush.

"Mission accomplished." Adrian steps in closer and tips his chin down to bring his face beside mine. "When the sky whispers, it brings the wind. You, Eloise, are a fucking hurricane."

A shiver runs the full length of my spine as he takes a step back and reaches for his drink. His Adam's apple bobbing with a hard swallow makes me want to run my tongue along the lines in his neck.

For a girl who spent years undistracted by sex, Adrian's uncorked something within me, and my body can't get enough of him.

“Eloise,” a voice coming up behind me makes me jump.

I spin on my heels and hope my smile hides my surprise.

A woman with curly red hair stands in front of me. She’s wearing a dress blouse and slacks, like most of the staff.

“They’re ready for you, if you’ll follow me.” She holds her clipboard against her chest with one arm and waves a path for me with the other.

I look over my shoulder at Adrian, and he’s staring at the low dip of the back of my dress. His gaze moves up to mine and he tips his glass in my direction.

“Good luck.” He winks as he takes a sip of champagne, and I hope the woman didn’t see it.

I follow her through the crowd, looking back as a group of record executives closes in around him. Some guy with blond hair and the coldest eyes I’ve ever seen says something, and Adrian already looks irritated. I’m not sure how Adrian does it, but I’m thankful he acts as a shield between the band and them. I couldn’t handle it.

As I make it to the stage area, I run through my speech once more in my head. The words are jumbled and don’t sound as good as when I wrote them down. If only this was pre-recorded, then it wouldn’t matter because they could edit out the rough parts.

But as I look out at the room full of faces that will soon turn to me, my stomach spins.

On the redheaded woman's cue, I'm shuffled up the staircase and told where to stand at the side of it. I stand tall and try to reclaim the courage I had when I walked in tonight wearing this dress, but alone in front of the crowd it's not as easy as I'd like.

I hear a man with a microphone introducing me, the crowd clapping. I feel the hand on my lower back that guides me to the center of the stage. And then it's quiet. I'm standing before a sea of people by myself, swallowing hard as feedback cuts through the speakers.

My speech is on the tip of my tongue as I look out at all the faces. A well-rehearsed story that leaves out the gory details of my life and focuses on the women this charity is meant to help. Because that's how I prefer it. While the spotlight shines on me most of the time, in these situations, I'd prefer it doesn't.

But as my lips part and I find the band's table in the crowd, my eyes fall on Adrian, I want to quiet the self-doubt playing in my head.

*You're a fraud.*

*They deserve better.*

*You're hiding.*

I want to be stronger.

"Thank you all for coming." I plaster on a smile and hope it doesn't reveal my hesitation. "The Lilac Foundation is a cause

close to my heart, so I want to start by saying your time and donations are appreciated.”

The heartbeat of the room echoes in my ears as I take a deep breath.

“Some of you have been to this annual gala before. You’ve heard me talk about the importance of using your voice as a platform for those who are struggling to find their own. You’ve heard me talk about being the person who speaks up for others to ensure they aren’t brushed aside in the system. But all along, I’ve been quiet myself.”

Murmurs ripple through the room. No doubt already wondering if the rumors in the press are true. And part of me wonders if I’m actually saying this. I’m going off-script, and I can’t seem to help it.

One sentence and I’m lighting a fire that will inevitably spread, leaving Adrian to deal with the mess. But as I look up at him and he nods for me to continue, one tick confirms what I already know about him. He isn’t intimidated by my voice like so many other men, he wants me to use it. He supports me in being myself and speaking my truth. Welcoming any headache the press might give him as a result.

My eyes move to Sebastian, who smiles as he meets my gaze. My brother is here; the band is here, supporting me unconditionally. Whether I continue after this tour or not, I’ve got a voice many don’t. A voice that can be used for change. It’s time I do it.

“What you haven’t heard me admit before is that I’ve also been a victim.” It comes out like glass shards, but they don’t immediately take my voice, so I keep going. “I’m sure you’ve seen recent reports in the media, and rumors are already starting to spread. So to put those to rest, I’m going to speak my truth. Six years ago, I was sexually assaulted, and it’s still something I’m healing from within myself. I was scared to say this out loud for a long time—that I am a victim. Because I worried if I showed my weakness, I couldn’t be strong for those around me. But the truth is, my weakness and my pain are what make me stronger. It’s where I found my voice and learned to speak up for others. So while I’m not ready to divulge everything that happened, I am ready to stand here tonight and tell you that I am no longer going to live as a victim, because I’m a survivor. Something I was reminded of recently.”

My eyes lock on Adrian’s, and I try to hold back the lump in my throat.

“I was lucky enough to have a strong support system around me after everything happened, but so many women and men don’t. They suffer in silence, are brushed off, or worse, are told they’re lying. That’s why I started this foundation, to provide validation that is too often stripped away. To help victims of abuse be heard, even if I was suffering from my own. So while we sit here tonight and pat ourselves on the back for helping a good cause, I want you to remember what it is that our time and money will actually do.”

“And to those of you out there like me, who have experienced some sort of domestic, sexual, or physical violence in your life, and have carried it around like a secret out of fear or embarrassment. I want you to know someone hears you. Someone feels your pain. Someone believes you. And while I’ve been quiet for far too long, I’m done now. I’m going to be loud. And I’m going to stand up for your justice as well as my own.”

Turning, I walk off the stage, hearing the echoes of claps around me. I might not have gotten into the gory details of what happened when I was assaulted, but I sliced open the wound far enough to let the infection show. The messy parts they’ll talk about.

Let them.

I’m done getting on stage and showing a false version of myself just to keep them comfortable. I’m ready to share my ugly truth and force them to see me for who I really am. And even if my monster is out there watching, threatening me to hold my tongue, I’m no longer going to do it.

*Shut your mouth or pay the consequences.*

Fuck that.

I hope he saw this.

As I make my way back to the band, people stop me to give me quick smiles and greetings, but it’s all lighthearted and awkward. The thing about abuse is it brings out the strangest reactions from others: pity, nerves. People don’t know how to



look at you or what to say when really all I've ever needed is them to be there.

Around the room, I feel eyes and hear whispers. A game of telephone already starting. Seeking out my gory details. I'd like to think they want to know because they're trying to understand but they just want the dirt.

"Proud of you, sis." Sebastian stops beside me and wraps an arm around my shoulders.

Cassie stands there with her eyebrows pinched. "Is that why you started this foundation?"

"I needed to do something." I shrug.

Cassie nods as her eyes get glassy. Sebastian must notice because he releases me and wraps his arms around her, and it makes me happy to see my brother happy.

I feel Adrian—smell him—before I even spot him walking up to me. He stops at my side, and I turn to avoid watching my brother make out with his girlfriend.

"Sorry for the circus that speech's going to cause," I say.

Adrian smirks. "Wouldn't be a day at work if one of you wasn't keeping me busy."

His tone is laced with playfulness, and I feel like I'm finally starting to see behind the stressed band manager that is Adrian Hale. And it makes me wonder if a small part of him enjoys watching me make a mess.

“We’re taking off.” Sebastian slaps Adrian on the back of the shoulder before leaning in to give me a hug.

Cassie’s eyes dart between me and Adrian, and I wonder if she sees it—if any of them do.

It’s not like Adrian and I haven’t spent plenty of time alone together, especially given my current situation. But if the air is anything like the electric current I feel with him standing beside me, I wonder if they notice things have changed.

*Would I mind?*

If this could be real and I could fully embrace letting go of my reservations as I did up on stage?

I’m tempted to find out.

“We’re right behind you.” Adrian nods.

Sebastian and Cassie head in the direction of Noah and Merry, who are already walking out the door, while Rome weaves through the crowd and makes his way over to me. I’m surprised to see his arm empty, assuming at some point tonight he would have latched onto one of the ridiculously attractive women with eyes pinned in his direction.

“Strike out with an actress?” I nudge Rome’s arm with my own when he comes to a stop beside me.

“You know I didn’t.” He grins but then tucks his hands in his pockets and shrugs. “Just not feeling it.”

My eyebrows must shoot up on my forehead because Rome cracks up at whatever expression stains my face.

“Since when is Rome Moreno not feeling it?”

“Never,” Adrian answers before Rome can.

Rome shakes his head and dips his chin, running his fingers through his short hair, long enough now that it’s waving at the ends. His gaze moves back to me and instead of arguing with Adrian, he just shrugs.

Come to think of it, this isn’t the first time in recent weeks I’ve noticed Rome alone. Between him hanging out with the guys or playing cards with me on the tour bus, his usual interest in screwing whatever walks by is tapering. I don’t know whether I should be happy to see Rome not drowning himself in women or worried.

“That was some shit up there,” Rome says, his smile dropping.

I shrug a shoulder. “Didn’t really say much.”

“Doesn’t matter what you say, they’ll always want more.” He places a hand on my shoulder. “You don’t owe them a thing. But just admitting it, that shit’s brave. I hope you know that, El. Somewhere out there is someone who feels a little stronger because of you.”

“I hope so.” I swallow the lump in my throat.

“There is. I’m proud of you.” Rome’s expression darkens and he squeezes my shoulder. “Well, I’m out of here.”

“Really?” I quirk an eyebrow. “You’re actually leaving alone?”

“Miracles do happen.” He grins as he dips away.

And as I watch him disappear into the crowd, I hope he’s right.



## ADRIAN

SEEING ELOISE IN A sexy little red dress might have sent my blood pumping, but it still pales in comparison to the sight of her in baggy sweats and an oversized T-shirt. Her sandy brown hair's tied loosely in a tumble on the top of her head and there's not a swipe of makeup covering up the galaxy of freckles painting her cheeks.

Alone on her bus, away from the cameras, she allows me a glimpse of her raw. And I swear this girl is a warhorse on a path of conquest through my heart. Slowly consuming the last beating fragments.

I'm a mess for her.

At her mercy.

Completely.

"It's harder than I expected keeping this a secret." Eloise drops down onto the couch beside me.

She tucks her feet up underneath her as I open my arm to welcome her at my side. She's still warm from the shower and

her hair is fuzzy and untamed. Her scent is a secret garden I'm already so far lost in, I stopped searching for an escape.

As much as I usually dread being on tour, occupying her bus isn't something I mind. It feels like nothing can touch us here—touch *her* here. On the road with the world passing by, she's only mine.

“You're anything but a secret.” I squeeze her against me.

She melts at my touch. Literally going soft and liquifying to my side, seeping through my pores with the kind of trust that I know is her handing me her life. The thought alone will do something to a guy's head. It slams against doubt like a wrecking ball, destroying any chance of me getting out of this whole.

Eloise sighs and it relaxes her further.

“What?” I grip her chin between my thumb and forefinger and tip her face up to meet me.

The three little lines that wrinkle her forehead when she's nervous are prominent. For a girl who tries to uphold the impenetrable wall so no one can break through, there are certain things impossible for her to hide from me.

The crinkle of her nose, the blush of her cheeks, her voice going up an octave. Small tells she buries as soon as she realizes they're showing. They peek the truth out from where she tries to hide it.

Only, it doesn't matter what her blood rushing to the surface of her skin or her fleeting expressions tell me, there will

always be more working inside. Endless earth. A jungle on the outside, wild roots beneath.

“El?” I release her chin.

“We aren’t saying anything.” She sighs.

“About?”

“Us.”

*Us.* I like the sound of that word a little too much.

“Do you want to?”

“I don’t know.” Eloise frowns, but I’m not sure what elicited her reaction. She tries to lean back, but I tighten my hold because I’m not ready to watch her pull away. “What if things don’t work out? We could mess up everything.”

Mess it up.

Decimate it.

Demolish it.

All things I’d be fine with looking in her eyes and holding her against me. I’d unleash complete annihilation of everything I’ve built if it means not losing her, and that’s a scary fucking thought. Because I’m not a man known for being reckless, in business, life, or relationships.

My steps are lines of a map, carefully placed. But Eloise makes me want to go off the path, straight into the minefield that might give out at any second beneath me. And something terrifying creeps up in those safe places I’ve hidden in.



This could rip everything to shreds, and I honestly couldn't care less.

I wrap my hand around the back of Eloise's neck, digging into her hair and fitting the pads of my fingers against the soft flesh of her scalp. I pull her until she's a fraction away from my face, and her breath might as well be the only thing that's keeping life flowing.

"Eloise, let me be clear." I tighten my grip. "If this doesn't work out, it won't be on me. It will *never* be on me. It wasn't back then, and it sure as fuck won't be now."

Her lips part, but my fingers tightening through her hair stops whatever was on the tip of her tongue, about to slip out. I draw my other hand up and over her jaw, cupping it in my palm and watching the stars in her eyes sparkle like the sun breaking through a stormy horizon.

"I'm fine being quiet about this if that's what you want." I brush my fingers through her hair, loosening my grip and brushing a rogue strand behind her ear. "I'm also fine with telling the whole fucking world. Whatever you're comfortable with. I've never needed much from this life. But you, El, are everything. Hide me away or burn my life to the ground in a display that tells the world I'm yours. It doesn't matter. I'm not going anywhere."

She blinks, her eyes dipping to my mouth, to the breath I know is fighting to break out because it's impossible to keep steady with her this close and my heart pounding like corruption in my chest.

Raising her hand, Eloise traces the line of my jaw with her fingers. I'm not sure what decision she's making, but her eyes, dark as the night sometimes, are lit with something that feels a lot like a match striking.

“Tell me it'll all be okay, Adrian.”

Her words are so quiet that even this close I barely hear them. Either that or the sledgehammer of blood against my temples makes it impossible. And for a woman who is usually difficult to read, I watch her face bloom like a flower before me, showing me all the fear she hides from the rest of the world. Pain that streaks her eyes, worry that stains her cheeks.

Holding her face in my hands she feels so small. She might be the strongest woman I've ever known, never backing down or revealing her weakness. But in this moment, she's so breakable it's frightening. Because her fear isn't unfounded. There are forces bigger than her and me in this world waiting to rip it all apart, thinking they have a right to take more than they deserve.

And for the first time in the past year, I see why she's been slowly curling in on herself, refusing to make plans after this album. She's scared.

“I'll never let anything happen to you.” I brush my thumb over her bottom lip.

It's a promise I'm determined to keep, no matter the price.

Eloise slides into my lap with one leg on either side of me. Delicate and beautiful. A butterfly. *My* butterfly.

Her lips tease mine, raking me with her breaths. I want to hold her a centimeter away as much as I want to close the distance. Because feeling her life force and feeling her body are one in the same. I'll dip myself in both and drown there.

Eloise takes away my decision when she plants her mouth over mine. Her tongue slips into my mouth, and I feel the vines spreading. Crawling through every inch of me.

Skating my hands down her neck and shoulders, I move all the way to the hem of her shirt and strip it overhead. The rush of air pebbles her nipples as I draw her chest to my face and pull her sweet breasts to my mouth. I bury myself between their fullness as I tug at the peaks.

Eloise rocks her hips, and I can feel the warmth between her legs through our clothes.

This fucking woman is a grenade, threatening to tear me into bits there's no putting back together. I can't help but draw my hand down and cup her pussy, desperate to watch her shatter.

She grinds against my hand as I find her mouth again with my own. Drinking her moans and loving that I'm the one to cause them.

There's something inexplicable that opens inside me as her body begs for mine from my lap. The fact that she's spent years in her cocoon, comfortable and closed off. The fact that I'm the man she opened up to. She let me hold her, touch her. It makes me want to take care of every shard she reveals and put her back together again.

A responsibility she hands me with every pant of her breath. To be the man she trusts. When she opened her palms, she handed me her heart, her safety, her body. She decided I'm worthy of something I can't quite understand.

Gripping onto the backs of her thighs I lift her and carry her to the bedroom in the back of the bus. After spending more than enough time trying to sleep on that cramped couch, I've no desire to fuck her there.

And as she wraps my body like a koala and her hips grind against mine, that's what I plan to do—fuck her until neither of us can see straight.

Until there are no secrets left between us.

Until I rip us both open and there's no option for her to run.

Falling onto the bed, I stop myself from crushing her by catching myself with a hand by her head. But she doesn't let me go. If anything, her legs grip tighter.

I'm desperate for her need. I want to be everything to a woman who refuses to depend on anyone but herself. I want to be her warmth, her air, her soil, her sunshine.

Lifting up, I strip off her baggy sweats in one move, her underwear with them.

Fuck, she's beautiful.

More so than people even realize. While they obsess over the woman plastered on the cover of magazines and place her on a social scale of standards that mean nothing, she's immeasurable. Especially like this—stripped naked before me

on the bed, she's a goddess carved just for me. Not a flicker of hesitation in her eyes as I drag my hands between her thighs and peel them open to witness what I do to her.

“That look...” she says, drawing my attention.

I lift my stare to hers and notice a smile tugging on the corner of her mouth.

“What about it?” I drag my hands up her thighs but skate past her pussy and love how the nearness of my fingers is still enough to make her entire body shiver. I move up her small waist, over her stomach, brushing the underside of her breasts.

Sex has always been a means to an end for me. When I've wanted it, I've gotten it, and that's been fine. But with Eloise, I could lay here all night touching her and taking my time. I could bury myself in her for hours and I'm not sure even that would be enough. As I drag my hands over her skin, I want to never stop.

Planting my hands on either side of her face, I hover there, waiting for her to answer my question.

Eloise lifts on her elbows, bringing her face just beneath mine. “You're the only person who has ever looked at me like that. You see me, Adrian.”

“Always have.” I drag my hand into the hair at the back of her head and wrap my fingers through it. “Always will.”

She falls back onto the bed, and her hands move for my sweats, her movements turning more frantic as she tugs them down and releases me. I barely have time to strip my shirt off,

before she lifts to kiss me, and wraps her hand around my dick.

That's all it takes for my brain cells to vaporize. Her palm rubbing me up and down, guiding the head of my cock against her wet slit. Her hips lift, nudging me just inside, before lowering again.

"You wouldn't be teasing me, would you." I bite her bottom lip and pull, loving the smile it forces.

"Never." But her body says different, as she rubs my dick against her clit, circling, before dragging it back down again.

"Fuck," I grunt, trying not to come at the feel of her alone.

Eloise is breathing harder with each circle she makes, the wetness of her pussy now coating her hand as she slides it up and down me. It's almost enough to drive me out of my mind. Or out of my body. Because I swear as I lay my body over her, we become one person.

She kisses me and I feel her body quiver. Her teeth clash against mine, and I know she's right at the edge because she's frantic. But I refuse to have her break apart and not feel it from inside her.

Grabbing her wrist, I pull it from my dick and pin it over her head, wrapping my other hand around her jaw as I break our kiss.

"Your orgasm is mine, Eloise." I line myself up at her entrance. "And I want to feel every bit of it."

Driving into her, I hit so deep that her head tips back and her scream is silent. I don't let up, pulling out just enough to thrust in again, and again. As much as I wanted to do this slow, she makes me desperate.

"It's mine," I say again, burying my face in the crook of her neck and dragging my teeth along her throat, stopping to feel her pulse racing. "Now give it to me."

She locks her legs around me and her whole body starts to shake. Eloise detonates in my hands—the most beautiful explosion. And I feel every pulse of it wrap around my cock as she tightens around me.

All-encompassing, quivering. She's so tight I can't take it and she drags my own climax out. Her pussy begging for my release as I pour into her.

As I claim her.

Because the truth is, it doesn't matter what we say about our relationship. How I feel about Eloise is no secret. There's no going back. She's mine, and I'll never let her try to convince me otherwise again.





## ADRIAN

ELOISE PAUSES BEHIND ME the moment I grip the handle to the tour bus.

“Everything okay?”

I look her up and down. Even though I fucked her body into absolute submission last night, her mind is another story. The pinched expression tells me she’s wild with worry.

She reaches for my hand and pulls me away from the door, resting her chest flush against mine, seeking comfort. It’s innocent and filled with trust, reminding me of the last time I saw Sam, standing with her in my arms before she got on the plane. Back when I felt like I still had the power to protect people. When it didn’t feel like everything I touch goes bad.

While Eloise grips tighter, fear wells up inside me. What if I can’t keep her safe?

*She trusts you.*

“Do we have to?” She mumbles against my chest.

I wrap my arms around her shoulders and hope she can't hear the panic in my raging heart. "Unfortunately."

With her flush against me, this is where the lines between being her manager and being something more start to clash. I'd love nothing more than to say *fuck it*. To cancel this whole festival and drag her back into her bed. Better yet, drag her all the way back to Denver and fuck her in my sheets there. Finally doing what we should have a year ago but were too scared to.

Except, I can't. As her boss, and the person responsible for making sure her career stays on track, I need her to walk out this door.

"One more week." I kiss the top of her head.

She sighs. "One week."

I'm not sure what bubbles up inside me, but the unknown of what's happening with the band after this tour makes me suddenly anxious.

Three knocks come at the door, and before I can process the familiar sound, the door swings open behind me.

Eloise pulls away and I turn to see Sebastian standing in the doorway looking from me to her.

Fuck, I unlocked the door, but she stopped me right before I opened it. The narrowing of his eyes mixed with his smirk is a clear indicator we're caught. And as much as I'd like to care, I don't. Especially after what Eloise said to me last night. She's

lived with enough secrets; I don't have any desire to be the burden of another one.

“Well, that answers that.” Sebastian steps onto the bus.

I shrug a shoulder and don't take my eyes off him, waiting to see if he's going to say anything else.

He doesn't, which I appreciate.

Our friendship has always involved this mutual understanding, where even if we piss each other off, we trust each other. That fact has been tested a few times over the years due to the role I play professionally. But at the end of the day, we're always looking out for each other. Hence why he's never explicitly told me to stay away from his sister.

“Wait.” Eloise steps forward as Sebastian starts to turn. “You're not going to say anything?”

Sebastian looks over his shoulder and smirks at her. “You can't shock me, sis. You're not the only one with those twin voodoo mind reading tricks.”

He walks off the bus, leaving Eloise standing with her mouth open staring at the door.

After a long pause, she looks to me. “You didn't even try to deny it.”

I shrug.

“He's going to tell the whole band.”

“Okay.”

“They're going to tell everyone else.”

“Probably.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “And you’re okay with that?”

“Like I said.” I reach my hand out to her. “You aren’t my secret.”

Eloise looks down at my hand like it’s a sacrifice. My heart on an altar waiting to see if she’ll claim or destroy it. I’d be fine with either because from the moment I met Eloise, I always knew the fate of that particular organ was in her hands.

What I can’t explain is the reaction in my chest when she laces her fingers through mine and accepts me. When she doesn’t let go as I lead her off the bus. How she stays close and plants a hand on my arm even as the documentary crew starts rolling. Even as eyes start watching.

Looking down at her, it’s not everyone else I’m noticing though. It’s her, the moment before her sunglasses slip over her eyes.

She sees me.



The band sits through a day full of interviews. I’m not sure how they do it, still smiling through the same questions they were peppered with hours ago. Taking turns between who is on and who is checking out. Sebastian and Noah take the lead with the questions today, followed by Rome making random

off-the-wall comments just to get a reaction. Eloise is forced into it every time they want the *female perspective*. Two words that draw a noticeably irritated reaction from her.

I'm just glad they're playing nice. This press event's only the start. We have a week to get through at this festival, and between the media and the fans, I can't help but feel the vultures circling.

Not that I'll let it show.

Every time Eloise's eyes find mine, I plaster on a forced smile and wait for her shoulders to relax. She doesn't need to see how on edge I am about this.

Security is nearly impossible with this many people coming and going, because there are no barriers in the middle of the desert for me to shield them behind. I can't help but constantly watch my surroundings every time Eloise steps off her tour bus. Feeling like she's in a snake pit, and I'm not sure which one is going to bite.

My phone ringing cuts my thoughts short.

"Adrian," I answer.

Before I was Enemy Muse's band manager, I rarely got calls or texts. Now the fucking thing never stops ringing. Or pinging. Or blinking.

It's fucking annoying—and my job.

"How are the press events going?" Nathan's fake cheery voice on the other end of the line is always grating.

“Fine.”

“Not going to elaborate?”

“No.”

It’s not that I don’t like the guy—okay, maybe I don’t. But it’s that for the head of a record label, he’s still got enough time to be micromanaging. And it’s not because he gives a shit about them personally. He just wants to check in on his cash cow to ensure its still producing milk.

“Where are we at with Eloise?” The real reason he’s calling finally comes through.

“She’s still not committing to anything after this tour.”

“Then I guess you’ll have to convince her.”

Fuck, this guy. “Excuse me?”

“She’s tired, we get it.” Nathan forces what sounds like an exaggerated sigh because there’s no way he actually *gets it*, he just wants me to think he does. “But there’s no time for them to be taking breaks right now. I can give her a month or two, but that’s it. You know how things move in this industry. If they’re not careful, they’ll be forgotten just as fast as they were discovered.”

*Sounds like your problem.*

That’s what I want to say, but I don’t. As much as I’d like to tell Nathan to fuck off, I’ve made it as the band’s manager this long for a reason. I know how to stay levelheaded. And with

the festival already causing enough stress, I know better than to go poking a bear.

“I’ll talk to her.”

I can feel Nathan smiling on the other end of the line and it makes me clutch my phone harder.

“Is that all?”

“Actually.” Nathan makes a clicking sound with his mouth like he’s just now remembering something. “There’s been a lot of chatter about their last charity event. From my understanding, Eloise went off script.”

“Your point?”

“The last thing we need right now are waves. I appreciate her little causes and whatever makes her feel relevant, but after Sebastian’s sex tape and Rome’s paternity scandal last year, let’s keep the gossip to a minimum.”

“Meaning?”

“Put a lid on it.” Nathan’s tone is uncompromising.

He’s the type of man who is used to getting what he wants and controlling everyone around him. I’ve managed to keep him off the band’s case for the most part, by being their barrier for his bullshit. But as the years have gone on, the label just gets more feral, and it’s becoming impossible.

Give, and they always want more.

“I’m not sure what you expect me to do,” I say, feeling fed up. “Eloise has a right to say whatever she pleases. And given

the recent incidents and the fact that she *has a stalker*, I'm inclined to let her do whatever she needs to take back her own power in this situation."

"It's cute you care, but this isn't a request."

*It's an order*—not that he has to say it. I was in the military for eight years. I know what it means to be talked to like a soldier. Problem is, I'm not part of Nathan's army, refuse to be.

"I don't work for you. I work for the band," I remind him.

"Something I allow for now, Adrian." Nathan's tone is clipped. "Get Eloise to sign the contract for the next album. Sweep this little *I'm a victim* crusade of hers under the rug. And do your job. I want good press, another album, and results."

He hangs up before I can tell him where to shove it, and I'm gripping my phone so hard I'm surprised I don't break it. I shove it into my pocket and hold myself back from punching something. Instead, I find Eloise through the crowd of reporters and see her staring in my direction.

Even with her sunglasses on, she can't hide the pinch between her eyebrows, and I wonder what's showing on my face. I force a smile her way to try to pacify her worry, but she doesn't relax, and I don't blame her. As much as I'd like to pretend everything is okay, I'm not sure it is anymore.

Last night I promised her I'd never let anything bad happen to her, which is near impossible when we're swimming in a pit



of piranhas. One wrong move and they'll rip the flesh straight from our bones.

I've been the perfect band manager. Protecting them, while also making sure I guided them in the right direction that would ensure they would be successful. If the label said jump, I'd ask how high. And even if I had had the band's best interests at heart, a part of me has always known that it was also a job—one I've done well.

My feelings for Eloise muddy it up.

Professionally, I know I should listen to Nathan. It's too early for the band to go on hiatus because they'll fade into the background faster than any of them realize. And Eloise continuing down this path of revealing her truth is only going to cause more pain before she reaches a point of healing.

I should be the voice of reason and follow the directions I've been given.

But the longer I stare at Eloise's face, while she answers a reporter's question and her smile grows, I can't help but be dragged back to six years ago. When Sebastian stood in front of me and asked me to take on this role. Not because I knew what I was doing, but because he trusted me with them—as people.

And while I'd like to think I always have, maybe that's not the case at all. Because they spiraled, and in so many ways, I haven't been able to prevent it.

I've failed.

It strikes me in the pit of my stomach. We've turned into the monster we were trying to avoid in the first place.

*Not anymore.*

Nathan might think I'll stay in line and do as I'm told. But I meant it when I said I don't work for him. If the band decides to fight this battle, I'll fall right beside them. After all, if war has taught me anything, sometimes you need to unleash chaos to restore order.

So be it.

## Verse Three



"I wrote love for you,  
with the broken bones in me."







## ELOISE

THE SUN DAZE FESTIVAL has done nothing but put Adrian on edge, but I can't help that I feel the exact opposite.

There's something about the fresh air at the beginning of summer. The sun beating down on what's felt like cold skin for years. I'm warmed from the inside out.

At a distance, I see Adrian watching me, and appreciate that he's open about it now. Looking at me like more than just another member of Enemy Muse he's keeping safe. Instead, he's watching *me*, Eloise. Unapologetically for anyone to notice.

It's hot.

And it's out in the open.

News of me and Adrian spread like wildfire through the band and crew. But that pales in comparison to how it spread through the media. We can't stand within five feet of each other without having our picture taken.

*Eloise and her band manager.*

It's the first time since becoming famous I've been openly seen dating anyone, and they can't get enough.

People no doubt have their opinions about the fact that he's my manager and it could be a mess waiting to happen, but I couldn't care less. Because when we stepped off the bus hand in hand three days ago, I never felt more honest about who I was than in that moment.

I'm lucky to have Adrian with me after everything that has happened. We've been to hell and back. I'm not hiding it anymore.

I lean back in the grass and listen to Merry singing up on stage. Her voice is so much softer than the girl it's attached to. Soft and floating through the venue. Her music, mixed with the sun and the peace of this moment feels like heaven.

Even if I know the devil is playing in the background—a stalker who we've yet to reveal. Right now, I still let myself forget that fact and soak in this day. Because with Adrian nearby watching me and a clear sky above, I'm naive enough to feel untouchable.

The nice thing about outdoor festivals is the relaxed nature of them. The stretch of grass is filled with blankets and groups of people. It doesn't matter if you're a fan, singer, or actor because we all feel the same. An eclectic mix of everyone coming together in a week where being a celebrity doesn't seem to matter as much. We're all just here, existing under the same sun.

Not that it means Adrian and Sebastian aren't still on edge.

They might be giving me a false sense of freedom by letting Cassie and I sit on this blanket out in the middle of the crowd, but it doesn't mean we aren't flanked by security dressed in discreet outfits and under their constant supervision.

It's irritating, but I'll take what I can get. There's nothing like watching a show this way, and Merry is absolutely crushing it.

From that first time I heard her in Adrian's studio, I knew she was meant to do something with her voice, and here she is. With Noah no doubt watching her closely from the side of the stage, sounding like she belongs up there with the world worshipping her voice.

"The man is obsessed," Cassie whispers in my ear. "Adrian hasn't stopped staring at you this entire song."

I can't help the warmth that climbs my cheeks at her remark, and I chance a glance at him.

"Obsessed is a strong word." I smile, unable to fight it.

"Mm-hmm," she hums. "And accurate."

I brush it off but love the feeling it brings. Knowing I have such power over him. Thousands of people here, and his eyes are constantly watching me.

"He seems happy." Cassie leans in closer, her shoulder brushing mine. "And I swear I didn't think that was possible."

"Doesn't help that my brother was pissing him off at the time, and you were in the middle of it."



“True.” She smiles.

Adrian wasn't thrilled when Sebastian brought the girl from his sex tape scandal on tour with us. Not that I thought it was a good idea either. But the more I saw my brother with Cassie, I got it. And I'm glad Adrian eventually did too.

“Speaking of obsessed.” My eyes trail to my brother, who is standing next to Adrian. He's talking to a group of people, but he can't stop looking at Cassie. “I never thought I'd see my brother so gone for someone.”

“I'm gone for him too.” She grins.

Maybe that's why I love her. Not just because she makes my brother happy, but because she's genuine. In a world where I've watched women take and take from him, she gives. They're equal in their love for each other and that's rare.

“Gotta say, I kinda thought he'd have been on one knee by now.” I wink.

Cassie laughs. “Oh, he would have been if I hadn't stopped him.”

“You stopped him?”

“You know Sebastian.” Cassie smiles and her eyes are bright. “He started talking about marrying me a month into this tour. My parents had barely adjusted to the idea of me dating him, so I'm sparing them heart attacks a little while longer. I told him to not even think about it until this tour is over.”

“It's almost over.” I cock an eyebrow at her.

She nudges me with her shoulder. “Something he’s been sure to remind me of.”

It makes me laugh because knowing my brother, he’ll be down on a knee in no time once this tour ends. I make a mental note to ask him about it later because he probably already has a plan.

Merry’s set ends and we jump to our feet to cheer her on. If the crowd’s reaction is any indication, Adrian’s about to be really busy with her career. I’m not sure what that means for us, but I’m suddenly equally unsettled and excited.

My doubts are interrupted by a body sliding up beside mine, and I look up to see Adrian towering over me with a grin. He slips his hand into my own and it’s like holding a warm cup of coffee in the middle of winter. Heating me where it feels impossible to do so.

“Enjoy the show?”

I nod. My voice is stuck in my throat because there’s something about how the air leaves the space around me as soon as Adrian steps into it. The scent of spice and licorice clouds my head.

Another band takes the stage, and I don’t recognize them, but Sebastian reaches over and nudges Adrian on the shoulder.

“This is the band I was telling you about. They’re gonna go somewhere. Trust me.”

“They signed yet?” Adrian asks.

Sebastian shakes his head. “They were going to go with Magnum and backed out at the last second. But I’m telling you they’re gonna be big.”

The lead singer opens her mouth, and I’m met with the voice Sebastian is talking about. It’s unreal, cutting straight through the day and taking hold.

“Wow,” I exhale.

“See.” Sebastian winks in my direction. “I don’t know what went down with Magnum, but whoever signs them is going to be lucky. Fuck, if I was a producer, I’d walk the fuck over there with papers right now.”

His face drops, and I feel like a thought just crossed his mind, but he doesn’t say anything more about it as he watches them play.

Sebastian pulls Cassie down to the blanket and wraps himself behind her, swaying to the song.

“Hey.” Adrian tips my chin in his direction with his thumb and forefinger. “I’ve gotta go check in on Merry, you gonna be okay?”

“Go.” I tip up on my toes and give him a quick kiss. “If anyone gets near me, my brother’s ridiculous personality is sure to scare them away.”

“Hey.” Sebastian swats at my leg. “I’m charming as fuck, right babe?” He looks at Cassie who’s just laughing.

“But really, go. I’m fine. There’s security everywhere.”

I try to sound relaxed for his sake, even though I know it doesn't do any good. There's no way Adrian will relax this week unless we're naked in bed together.

"Stay with your brother and Cassie." Adrian narrows his eyes, and I'm not sure why he thinks I'd try to escape.

As much as I pretend I'm unfazed by everything going on, I'm well aware we're not any closer to figuring out who's stalking me. This festival might make me feel free, but I'm not dumb enough to think I'm safe.

"Go." I pat his chest and move to sit.

Before my butt finds the ground, I'm pulled up into Adrian's arms and he leans in for a possessive kiss. Frantic lips on mine as he sucks my lower lip between his teeth. His hands dig into my lower back while mine wrap around his neck, and my feet lift off the ground as he pulls me to him.

"Gross," Sebastian says, interrupting us.

Adrian breaks the kiss and glares at my brother. "Fuck off."

Sebastian throws his hands up as Adrian sets me down, kissing me quickly once more.

"I'll find you in a little while." His eyes skim my sundress before he turns and walks away.

Dropping down onto the blanket beside my brother, I don't miss that Cassie's grinning at me.

"What?" I fight my grin.

“I miss the man-hating Eloise who wasn’t making out with my best friend.” Sebastian’s face puckers.

“First of all, I was never man-hating.” I glare at him. “Second of all, you deserve to witness that and more after what I’ve been subjected to.”

My gaze falls to where Sebastian’s hand sits under the hem of Cassie’s shirt and he’s stroking her stomach.

“She has a point, babe.” Cassie smiles up at him.

He sighs. “Fair enough. But still gross.”

I shake my head and laugh. Payback for Sebastian’s antics over the years isn’t actually something I care about, but if this gives me a chance to poke him in the ribs about it, I’ll take it. Honestly, it just feels good to have someone at my side. It’s a companionship the band, fans, and friends were never able to fill. Adrian sees me differently.

He’s never looked at me as a celebrity. Even when he watches from the side of the stage, I don’t think he sees Eloise Kane like everyone else. I could have all the fame in the world or none of it and it wouldn’t make a difference.

He sees the girl who used to hide her purse in his room when he’d throw a party. He sees the girl he picked up from her mom’s house when shit went bad. He sees the girl who crashed in his guest room while we recorded an album.

He sees the girl who sat across the bar from him at twenty-one, writing in her notebook and probably looking out of place. He sees the girl who wasn’t yet affected by assault and

fame. And in his eyes, I'd like to think somewhere deep she still exists.

A part I thought I buried in a secret place, but he managed to uncover.

The set continues and the sun starts dipping below the horizon, casting a warm sunset beside the stage. I tip my head back and close my eyes, listening to one band after another, making a playlist in my head.

Chatter comes from all around. Laughs, whispers, even sex somewhere in the distance if the moans are any indication.

I lose myself in the music on this warm summer night, until a shiver runs the full length of my spine.

"It'll be okay." A voice that sounds eerily familiar filters through the air. "He's got this. Relax."

*Relax.*

*Foreign hands on me.*

*Relax.*

*Heavy body over me.*

*Relax.*

*Forcing himself inside me.*

I shoot upright and my eyes fly open, jolting Sebastian as I jump up and look around.

*Relax.*

Even in my drugged state that night, I remember that voice. The man who took everything I didn't know I had until it was gone.

“El.” Sebastian stands up with a worried look on his face.

I search the crowd, the faces. But they're all a blur, just like he was in the dark. A monster in plain sight that I can't recognize.

“El.” Sebastian grips my arm and turns me to face him.  
“What's wrong?”

I fight it. I bury it. I beg the tears not to fall.

It's no use as they start pouring.

“He's here.”





## ELOISE

ADRIAN'S GRIP ON MY hand tightens as a group of people passes by.

"I told you it's okay." I hold his arm and rub it up and down, trying to reassure him.

It's forced, because it doesn't even put me at ease, but I can't help it. The man who's haunted me for years is here, at the festival, and it's causing havoc. But if I let it show it will only stress Adrian out more and won't do anyone any good.

"It's not," Adrian's voice is calm.

Too calm.

This is how he's been since earlier when Sebastian told him what happened.

I heard *him*. I'm sure of it. The monster's voice has replayed in my nightmares for years, so even if I wish it was a figment of my imagination, I know it wasn't. What's even more frustrating about this situation is knowing it, and still being unable to do anything.

He was right behind me—close—yet I still couldn't recognize him. He could have been any of the faces in the crowd that stared back. A fact that's as frustrating to me, as I'm sure it is to Adrian.

"I'm sorry." I tip my chin down.

My words bring Adrian to a halt, and I run into his chest as he steps in front of me, stopping my path. His hand wraps around the edge of my jaw, lifting my face to meet his.

"You have nothing to be sorry for."

His dark eyes hold mine. The depths of them an abyss as I try to make out any light in them. All color's drained by either the night sky or the dilation of his pupils.

"If I knew what he looked like—"

"Doesn't matter." Adrian's shoulders stiffen. "We'll find him."

Adrian's fingers brush my jaw before he releases me. With an inhale, I wonder if his lungs are fighting for air like my own are. Taking in deep breaths that are claimed by the smoke from the campfires burning all around us. If I close my eyes, it almost feels like the flames of hell licking at me from a distance. A devil waiting to pounce.

"Come on." Adrian tugs my hand, gripping it harder, and pulling me behind him.

Luckily, we don't perform until tomorrow night, because I'm not sure my nerves are steady enough to go on stage right

now. Not to mention Sebastian is fuming. Every flower, every incident, once more sets everyone in the band on edge.

I've had stalkers over the years. Overeager fans that want to get close. Eyes following me constantly. But this is different.

I'm sure if it were up to Adrian, I'd be locked on my tour bus with bodyguards standing at the door and him on top of me—either to fuck me or so no one could get close—maybe both. But I'm not willing to give up all the perks of being at the country's biggest festival just because someone is out there intent on me living in fear.

I did that for long enough.

So against Adrian and Sebastian's protests, I made it clear I'm enjoying this with or without them. From Adrian's firm grip on my hand, he obviously went with the first option. Not that I'm complaining.

"Where are we going?" It might have been my idea to get off the bus, but Adrian was the one insistent on where we're going.

"You'll see." Adrian peeks at me over his shoulder and even though his jaw is still tense, he cracks the slightest smirk. The light of campfires all around highlights his strong features.

This late in the evening, the performances are done for the day, but the festival still rages on around us. Tents, buses, campfires. People all around drinking, partying, enjoying themselves. Not one of them is paying attention to me.

I appreciate that I'm just another person in a setting like this. They couldn't care less that I'm Eloise Kane, bass player for Enemy Muse. A few passersby even nod their heads at me like I'm any other person on the planet.

The crowd thins out as we reach the outskirts of the festival, and up ahead, I spot a large temporary building that has been erected in the middle of nowhere. Adrian guides me toward it.

The closer we get, I notice it's built from painted planks and no two are the same. Each one looks like a work of art in its own right, encasing the structure. The doorway is tall and wide, but stepping inside, there's no roof, leaving it open to the night sky above.

It's a larger space than I expected, with benches and blankets all around. In the center sits an altar filled with candles, flowers, and pictures. An offering to whoever might be listening.

"What is this?"

Adrian stops us in front of the altar. Releasing my hand, he wraps his arm around my shoulder and pulls me close to his side. It's a warm night, but the feel of his body still manages to send a shiver of anticipation through me.

"Clarity." He hugs me close.

I skim the hundreds of pictures, letters, and trinkets scattered about in front of us.

"Not sure I get it," I say honestly.

Adrian rests his chin on the top of my head as he holds me close. “People come here to leave things behind. Supposedly it helps. That’s what the crew was saying, anyway. I thought you’d like it.”

Adrian always knows exactly what it is I need without asking. But as I look up at him and see the pain streaked on his own face, I realize us coming here is for him as much as it is for me.

“Did you bring something?” I ask.

Breaking his stare on the altar, he looks down at me and shakes his head. “Just memories.”

I nod in understanding because so much of what we carry around isn’t physical. It’s the weight of something intangible we have no way of releasing. And like Adrian seems to be, I feel my own burdens now more than ever.

“Let’s sit.” Adrian tugs me along, finding a bench in the back of the makeshift room for us to sit on.

It’s a warm night, but he still covers us with the blanket he’s been carrying, and I love how it makes us feel like we’re in a cocoon. Looping his arm under my knees, he turns me so his arm is hooked around my back and my legs stretch over his lap.

I rest my head against his shoulder and take a deep breath.

True safety isn’t something I’m used to, but all it takes is Adrian’s arms to make me feel like I’m somewhere I can’t be harmed. It’s not just that he’s large and is solid muscle. Or that

he has a stare that intimidates even the strongest, most intimidating people. It's that I know, without a doubt, he would never willingly let anything happen to me.

Body or heart.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" He brushes my hair off my cheek.

"I was just wondering what we are." It's not what I meant to say, but my defenses are down, and I can't help slipping.

Adrian's hand freezes, before falling to my thigh. "To each other?"

I nod against his chest.

"What do you want us to be?"

"You're good at that." I chuckle.

"At what?"

"Answering a question with a question."

I look up at him and there's something foreign in his eyes. Frustration maybe, but I don't give in.

"What do you want us to be?" I repeat his own question because he's always throwing the ball in my court. Except right now I don't trust that I won't throw myself at the mercy of him without knowing his intentions.

"I already told you." His expression stiffens.

"No, you told me if this ends it won't be you who does it." I shake my head. "But you never said what *this* is."

I'm sure I sound pathetic. Feminist Eloise Kane begging a man for an answer. Desperate for him to claim her, whether he realizes it or not. Somehow in this space, I'm willing to admit it's the truth. Sitting at the altar of clarity, I want to see it all—including him.

Adrian squeezes my thigh with his large hand. "I want you to be mine."

*Mine.*

Something about that word sends a shiver all the way through my bloodstream. It's the controlling, possessive side I've always known exists in Adrian shining through. He doesn't say, boyfriend and girlfriend. He doesn't place labels that mean nothing more than a relationship status on social media to him.

One word and he claims me fully.

Lifting my hand to his cheek, I trace the line of it with my thumb. "I already am."

One word and I let hesitation turn to dust, knowing I tell women not to lose their hearts over a man, and doing it anyway. Except, I trust him to know he won't let me disappear as I hand myself over.

Adrian cups the side of my neck with one of his hands. "Good."

A man of few words, but he uses all the right ones to make me puddle at his feet.

Leaning in, his lips brush over mine before he claims my mouth, and I crave his possession. I'm a conquest and he's intent on taking it all. No survivors. No mercy.

The arm he's looped around my back, pulls me closer so that I'm tugged onto his lap. I don't break the kiss when he does, sinking deeper instead. I search for every moment we've wasted in this kiss. Every secret I should have told him sooner. Every part of myself I buried in him and have been longing for.

Adrian's hand on my thigh toys with the hem of my short summer dress, but he doesn't move for more, even if I feel his dick harden as my ass moves over him.

Breaking the kiss, he tips his forehead to lean it against mine. His eyes are closed, but I can't help tracing every inch of his face and memorizing it all over again. Like I haven't seen it hovering over me in bed, or watching me from afar, or casting stolen glances in a crowded room. I trace him like I need to burn how he looks into my mind, so I never forget it.

"You're worried," I whisper, noticing the furrow between his eyebrows.

I pull back to run my finger over his forehead, between his eyebrows, smoothing it out as he pins me with a stare.

"Not worried, no." He shakes his head ever so slightly. "Thinking."

"Penny for your thoughts?"



His gaze dips to my mouth and he kisses me where my lips curve into a smile like he wants a piece of it for himself.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

I frown. “I thought you said you wouldn’t ever be the one to end it.”

“I wouldn’t.” He shakes his head. “But that doesn’t mean it’s not possible. People around me have a habit of disappearing.”

I run my hands over the back of his neck and realize Adrian’s showing me a vulnerability I didn’t know he had. He’s not one to seem weak in any situation. He’s strong, unmovable, unwavering. But in my arms, there’s something breakable inside him.

“I’m not Sam.” I tighten my grip. “Or your father.”

He opens his mouth, but I plant my finger over it, silencing him.

“I don’t know what the future holds, none of us do. But I know that none of it matters—a day, a year, a decade, a lifetime—as long as I get to spend as much of it as I can with you, I’ll be happy.”

Adrian exhales and I draw the line of his lower lip, slowly, tracing all the way up his cheek and around the back of his head to meet my other hand.

He tips his forehead once more to meet mine, but this time, instead of closing his eyes, he looks directly at me. “I love you.”

I'm not sure if the gasp came from my mouth or my heart, only that he kisses me before the sound is even halfway out, refusing me the right to respond in words, and draining it from my body instead.

**30**

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## ADRIAN

ELOISE SKIMS HER HANDS down my sides and there's pure mischief in her eyes.

“What are you up to?” I eye her suspiciously.

“Oh, nothing.” But her hands move inward once they reach my thighs and make a path straight to my dick.

Grabbing her arms, I force her to step back on a groan. “El, you've got a show in twenty minutes.”

“Exactly.” She closes the gap of space again and presses her perfect tits against my chest, knowing they're my weakness. “Twenty minutes is plenty of time if we make it quick.”

Her hand cups my hardening cock through my pants.

“Fuck.” I tip my head back, trying really hard to stay strong and think clearly.

She grips harder, stroking down, and I feel myself wavering. My head tips to the flimsy door on this makeshift green room, and sure enough, I did lock it. I probably checked three times

to be sure, I've been so on edge. Making sure no one can get to her.

No one but me.

Lifting onto her toes, she brings her mouth to my neck and peppers it with kisses. "Come on, Adrian. Take what's yours."

God this woman has the art of psychological warfare down because she knows exactly what will break through my defenses.

She drags my zipper down, and my protest dies on my lips as she sinks to her knees in front of me, dragging my pants to the floor with her.

I'm always lecturing the band about not getting distracted with sex before a show, yet I can't seem to give two fucks about it as Eloise wraps her lips around my cock and takes me all the way to the back of her throat.

The things this woman can do with her mouth have the power to drive a man insane. I grip the wall beside me like it can save me from the buckling of my knees when her tongue drags my full length.

Eloise gives head like she genuinely enjoys it. Wrapping her hands around whatever doesn't fit in her mouth, thrusting me all the way in and choking on me. Holding me there as she gags, before pulling back with streaks of saliva coating my dick.

My brain might as well shut off entirely because I'm pretty sure someone knocks on the door with a warning about the

show starting soon, but it's at the same time as Eloise looks up at me with tears in her eyes and my cock down her throat.

I've never seen anything sexier as she lets me grip her hair and fuck her face.

As tentative as I was with her when we first started having sex, Eloise has been quick to prove that's not what she wants from me. She's no fragile doll that wants to be carefully handled. She wants me to take her hard, and I'm inclined to oblige.

Tugging her ponytail, I pull her off my dick before I'm spilling down her throat. As much as I'd like to watch her swallow me down right now, we're short on time and fuck if I'm going to be selfish when she's due on stage in fifteen minutes.

"Hey." She forces a pout and it's adorable. "I was enjoying myself."

"I can see that." I wipe the corner of her mouth and realize she's going to have to fix her makeup, even though I appreciate making a mess of her. "But I'd like to enjoy you too."

Grabbing her by the shoulders, I pull her up and spin her around, pushing her chest forward to bend her over the makeup table in her dressing room. Her cheek is pressed close to the mirror, and I don't miss that she's watching my face with a dark lust in her eyes.

“These fucking pants...” I undo her oil black, skintight pants and tug them down her hips, leaving them at her knees. “Drive me insane.”

She’s trapped between my hand pressing firm between her shoulder blades, and her pants limiting how far she can spread her legs.

I knead her ass with my palm and she lifts it to meet me, so I smack it and her whole body flinches. Meeting her stare in the mirror, she grins as I rub my hand over the reddening skin on her ass.

“Let’s see what sucking me off did to you, Eloise.” I run my hand down between her legs and she is so wet she’s coating the inside of her thighs.

“Like I said.” She smiles at me through the mirror. “I was enjoying my—”

I cut her off by shoving two fingers in her pussy. “And as I said, I’d like to enjoy you as well.”

Her eyes roll back and her whole body relaxes as I pump my fingers into her once more before pulling out and smacking my wet hand on her ass again, making her back arch at the changing sensations.

“Adrian—”

But I cut off whatever she was going to say by shoving my dick in her with one hard thrust that moves her body up the table so her cheek’s pressed against the mirror. I’m tempted to grab her ponytail as I fuck her from behind, but we already

have the issue of time and her makeup smearing, so I'm smart enough to not add to future problems and grab onto her shoulder instead.

"You were saying?" I tease her, thrusting in hard once more.

Over and over.

*I'm merciless.*

That's what she told me last night after I fucked her three times. That, and the fact that she enjoyed it.

I can't help myself when it comes to her. I've never wanted anyone like this. Pounding into her like I can imprint myself on her body and soul. Pulling her shoulder to tug her body back with each thrust forward.

I know I'm being ruthless. But she's soaking my dick and loving every second of it. Bending at the knees I'm able to hit that sweet spot that makes her scream, so I have to abandon the shoulder and wrap my hand around her mouth instead.

The walls are as thin as the doors and people are probably hearing enough already.

Her pussy clenches as her climax hits, and it draws mine out of me. Both of us shaking as I collapse against her back. I feel her smile against my hand, and I remove it now that we're both reduced to heavy breathing.

A knock on the door makes us both jump.

"Five minutes." A voice comes from the other side.



Eloise smiles at me in the mirror, and I turn her head to the side so I can kiss her puffy lips.

“I love you,” she whispers.

There’s no way she’ll be to the stage on time, which I should care about as her manager. But I couldn’t care less.

“I love you more.”



The set is going well considering it started ten minutes late. Something Rome was sure to give me crap about before slinging his guitar over his shoulder and walking onstage.

Can’t blame him with the number of times I’ve reamed him out for getting lost in random pussy backstage. Except that Eloise is as far from random pussy as a woman gets for me.

She’s everything. The garden of Eden. Wonderland. My destiny.

“The show started late.” A voice comes up beside me, and I turn to see two suits standing at my side. Cyrus and Mark, two of Nathan’s record label pit bulls who rarely leave their ivory tower in Los Angeles.

The fact that they’re here isn’t a great sign, but I’m not surprised. I’ve been sending Nathan to voicemail ever since his call the other day, and I haven’t figured out what my strategy is for dealing with him.

I'm not going to push Eloise into something she doesn't want to do, and the fact that she's finally taking ownership of her power after handing herself over to the label for the past six years seems to be the catalyst of it.

Not that Nathan's going to let it go.

While he can't actually fire me from being Enemy Muse's manager, he has a lot of pull in the industry. He can make it difficult as I expand my horizons with new talent—namely Merry—and he knows it.

If he chooses to take his frustration with the band members out on me, I have no doubt he will.

“There were issues with the sound system.” I cross my arms over my chest. “You know how this equipment is outdoors.”

Cyrus and Mark might not believe it, but they nod their heads in unison with eyes fixed on the stage.

Mark is someone I'm familiar with and has been at a number of big events that involve the band. He's around my age and a smart guy, even if he's kind of a snake in the grass if you're not careful. At least he's the devil I know with his dark hair and sharp features.

Cyrus, on the other hand, I'm not very familiar with. He's attended a couple of events over the years: the record deal signing, select charity galas, and the party when the first world tour ended. But even when he's there, he mostly keeps his distance, and I get the impression he's not as socially versed as he'd like everyone to think. He's my height and build, but

awkward. He doesn't know how to hold himself. Add in his pale skin and light blond hair and there's something about the guy that's unnerving.

He stands near me with eyes fixed onstage, and I'm not sure what it is but the guy makes me uncomfortable. Him, and the fact that Nathan only sends him when there's something big to deal with. His presence gives me the impression Nathan is fed up with my avoidance tactics.

"Did you get the new contract signed?" Cyrus turns to face me.

"If I did, you'd have heard."

Cyrus maintains his cold expression, but there's something calculating behind his eyes. "And Eloise?"

Her name in his mouth—really any of their mouths—is what makes my blood boil.

"Is doing what she deems fit." I cut off whatever assumptions he might have about her falling in line.

Although I haven't talked to her about extending the contract with the label, she has brought up her speech at the gala with me, and indicated she wants to tell her story. She wants people to know that anyone can be a victim, even Eloise Kane, and that they shouldn't be ashamed of it.

Since there's already a documentary crew following her around, she asked me to set up an exclusive interview where she plans on putting her full truth out there.

Fuck the label execs. If they think I'm going to stand in the way of that just because they don't want to make waves, they're wrong.

"Hmm," is all Cyrus gives in return.

Mark offers even less, not so much as making eye contact. They think I don't know that they're planning to go to the band directly, but I'm not an idiot.

"The festival ends tomorrow, and Nathan wants to meet with the band the second they get back to LA," Cyrus says.

With no contract in hand, they were smart to send the band back through LA at the end of the tour, booking their tickets home to Denver from there. Trapping them into a meeting before they can escape.

I'm still not sure how that's going to go. The guys have said they're willing to do whatever Eloise wants once this tour is over, even if that means taking a break. But I honestly never thought that would happen.

With a final nod, the execs wander off, back to whatever pit of hell they crawled out of in the first place. Doesn't matter because I'm just happy they disappear before the band's set finishes.

The crowd goes wild when the song ends. Sebastian flips off the audience as a thank you, I guess. He's an asshole like that. Then, they all move to the front and wave before making their way off stage.

Eloise slides right into my arms and I can't say I'm complaining. As far as I'm concerned, she should have been doing this after every show.

"Fuck, you two haven't had enough?" Rome rolls his eyes. "Thin walls you know, and I was on the other side."

"Did not need that image in my brain," Sebastian says, immediately walking away to avoid the conversation entirely.

"Me either," Rome yells toward Sebastian's retreating back.

"Fuck off, that's payback asshole," I say.

Rome shrugs with a grin stretching his face. "Fair enough."

"Surprised we didn't hear anything coming from the other side." Eloise crosses her arms over her chest and stands off with him.

"Maybe I'm saving it for later." Rome brushes her off, and she accepts it, but I don't miss that it's odd for him.

I'm used to peeling naked women off him just to drag him on stage, but lately, it hasn't been an issue.

"You have fun with that." Eloise shakes her head, then turns to face me. "I'm gonna wash up real quick and meet you back at the bus. I know you've probably got shit to handle."

"Unfortunately."

I'd like to do more of what we did earlier, but that's not an option after a show. While the band disappears to do whatever it is they want to do, I'm stuck with the crew for hours instructing them while they break down and finish up.

Eloise lifts onto her toes and gives me a kiss. “I’ll stay up waiting.”

Turning, she disappears into the crowd.

“Fucking, Adrian, had it in you all along.” Rome slides up next to me with a grin stretching his cheeks.

“Save it.”

“No thanks.” He smiles, his eyes moving in the direction Eloise disappeared.

I follow his gaze, thinking I’ll catch her in the crowd, but she’s already been swallowed up in the mass of people. Which is when it hits me that security is still standing to my left instead of following after her.

*She’s alone.*

Rome says something else, but I’m already moving as that feeling settles in my gut. The same one that woke me in my sleep the night Sam died on the other side of the world. A sixth sense I’ve never been able to kick. If he’s been out there waiting, I have no doubt in my mind, I just handed him the perfect opportunity.



## ELOISE

THE ENERGY IN THE air is feral. I'm still thriving off the vibrations of the crowd as I walk back to my tour bus. Everything about tonight has me buzzing, from the show we played to Adrian bending me over a table.

The man does wild things to me.

After losing my virginity at nineteen, sex felt like a chore I never really enjoyed. While the guys in the band seemed to thrive off the physical connection, I always wanted something more intimate. Something I never truly understood before Adrian.

Sex with Adrian is the opposite of anything I've ever felt. He touches me like he'll never get enough, looks at me like I'm the only person in the world worth looking at, fucks me like he wants to break me just so he can be the one to put me back together again.

I don't just want it; I *need* it from him.



Making my way through the crowd, I spot the lot of tour buses ahead. With the few people meandering this far out, I'm struck by the quiet of it. Deafening silence all around.

A silence that can only be the result of one thing: I'm alone.

In my rush to get back to my bus after the show, I forgot to make sure security was following me. I must have been coming down from the high of performing, because as I glance over my shoulder, not one of them is in sight.

My heartbeat pounds in my chest, in my lungs, between my temples. It's beyond loud all of a sudden. Thundering in every crevice and making it hard to hear anything more than my shoes crunching against the dirt beneath my feet.

I quicken my pace as I weave through the bus lot. But there's so many and it's a maze to get to mine. The rush of it all makes my vision blurry as every bus looks almost the same. I can't help but feel lost among them.

I've walked this path many times over the past week and it's suddenly foreign.

*Think, Eloise. Think.*

A shuffle behind me freezes me in place. Even if I know I should keep my feet moving, I can't seem to do it.

I don't have to hear him to know I'm being hunted. It's an instinct. The relationship between predator and prey. I can feel him watching for me from somewhere nearby, closing in on his obsession.

Moving my foot a step forward, I'm stopped by a hard chest coming up behind me and something cool brushing the edge of my throat.

"Relax, Eloise." His voice is coated in the same evil my nightmares feed off. "I'm here to save you."

I try to shake my head, but it scrapes something against my throat, so I stop.

"Good girl," he whispers right against my ear, and I get a whiff of his musky cologne. "Now be quiet and come with me, and there'll be no harm to your pretty little throat."

*No harm?*

The damage is already done. This is the man who shredded my life to pieces at one touch.

But I listen because if there's a chance of getting out of this with what I have left, there's no choice but to. His arm snakes around my waist, and I get that sickening feeling in my stomach as all the buried memories of him touching me come to the surface. I almost bend over and heave out my insides, but his blade pressing against my throat prevents it. In my head, I'm dragged back to that night. How even through the drugs I could feel him all over my skin.

He guides me around a few buses and we might be in the middle of a hundred of them but there's not a person in sight. It's a risk he's even doing this here, but it's a show of his desperation, which is even more terrifying.

Nothing is more dangerous than an animal cornered, and that's how he feels to me in this moment. He's conjured an end of the line in his mind, and I'm worried about what that means for me getting out.

Stopping at a bus in the middle of the lot, he reaches around me and pops the door open, pushing me through it. I almost fall forward when I reach the top step and he shoves me inside, but I manage to catch myself on a table as I hear him shut the door behind me.

The bus looks a lot like the buses the band has been using for this tour. The same layout, and the same decor before I personalized mine with a garden's worth of plants. That's when I spot the file on the table and see our record label's name written across it: *Neon Records*.

I spin, and for the first time, I'm placing a face to the voice that's haunted my nightmares. A face that's not unfamiliar at all. Sharp features that are almost harsh the way he grits his teeth. Pale skin drowned out by his nearly white blond hair. The same man who was standing next to Adrian earlier at the edge of the stage, and my head starts to spin with the pieces clicking together.

He was there the night we signed our record deal. He was at the club handing out drinks to toast our celebration. He was even at the charity event.

He rarely comes to events, and when he does, he keeps with the executives in secluded corners, talking to only Adrian when it's necessary. I figured he found himself too important

to mingle with the talent, but now I see it. He wasn't avoiding the band because we were too lowly.

He was *watching*. He was waiting for his moment.

"Eloise." He smiles, but it doesn't reach his cold, icy eyes.

There's no comfort in his expression, and not only because he looks domineering, but because he looks almost excited. Black depths vicious with intent. A hunter who's about to get their kill and can't wait to watch the life drain from it in his hands.

"Have a seat." He points the knife in his hand, toward the couch. "I insist."

It's not an offer, it's a demand. My body might fight me, but my self-preservation forces me to the couch. This isn't like before when he drugged me, raped me, and tormented me. All those times he was a faceless figure. A monster hiding in the dark. Now, I've seen his face. That alone says more about his intentions than any of his words. There's no walking away from this without the risk of me exposing him.

Ice pools in the deepest pits of my stomach at the realization.

"Who are you?" I'll try to keep him talking long enough to think of a way out of this.

He leans the weight of his hip against the counter across from me. "I suppose we haven't been properly introduced. I'm Cyrus, the man who made you."

*Made me?*

This arrogant monster has the right to think that just because he clearly works for my label, he's responsible for my success. His ego knows no bounds, which is concerning. In my experience, men like him, who think they are owed something, don't have a problem taking what they want, whether it belongs to them or not.

“What do you want?”

“I thought that part was clear.” Cyrus grins, a wicked gleam makes his eyes shine. “You.”

He points the knife in my direction, and I try not to let the punctuation of his movement reveal what it does to me inside. A man like him no doubt gets off on fear, and the last thing I want to do is provoke him.

His phone makes a sound and he pulls it out to read whatever is on the screen.

“Good, we'll be leaving soon.”

“Leaving?” The word came out more frantic than I intended.

He looks up at me with narrowed eyes. Just when I think it's not possible for their darkness to deepen, it does. Emotionless. And worse than that, empty.

“We have unfinished business.” He steps toward me, and I can't help but flinch, which he only seems to appreciate as he smiles. “I didn't intend on it being so soon, but you had to test my patience.”

I'm not sure what he's talking about. Besides him being a rapist, a stalker, and now a kidnapper, we have no business I'm aware of. But he seems to think so.

The necklace, the flowers. To him, this is personal.

"Smart girl." He smirks, but it doesn't feel like a compliment. "Putting the pieces together like the puzzles your brother is always playing with."

"How do you know that?" I'm not asking the right questions, but I can't help it. Everything about this monster throws me off balance.

"I own you. I know everything."

There's no doubt in my mind he believes his statement.

"Now get comfortable, my driver will be back any minute." He points at me.

"And if I don't?"

It might be stupid to challenge a man who is clearly unhinged, but I can't sit here and wait for him to take me somewhere desolate to do whatever he's planning. This monster wearing the skin of a record executive will take me down with him if need be. My only chance to fight is here where there's still a possibility of getting out.

"You'll do as you're told." There's not a hint of worry in his tone. He sees me as the same woman he drugged and drained of her ability to fight.

I roll my shoulders back. "Why are you doing this?"

“I already told you—”

“We don’t have unfinished business.”

His eyes flare when I cut him off, and for the first time, I think I might have pushed a button.

In one swift movement, he lunges forward and has the knife pressed at my throat. “Hands under your thighs. Don’t get any ideas.”

I do as directed, racking my brain for any option that will get me out of this alive. He must sense my thoughts because he tightens the grip of the blade on my throat, and I feel my skin barely fighting against it.

“We do have unfinished business.” His tone is even and cold. “Ever since we locked eyes in that club, and I saw your feelings for me. Don’t try to deny it after our night together.”

“You raped me.” I know it’s the wrong thing to say as soon as the words leave my mouth, but I refuse to let him think anything of that night other than what it was.

He can take a lot of things from me, but I refuse to hand him my power. Whatever his sick mind has turned what he did into, it wasn’t mutual. It wasn’t consensual. And his feelings are not reciprocated.

The knife digs against the skin of my neck, and I feel it slice through the surface, wetness slicking the blade.

When I told Adrian I wanted whatever time we had left, I didn’t think it would be one night, but I bury the tears that

want to spring in my eyes because Cyrus doesn't deserve them.

"I loved you." Cyrus holds the blade firmly against me, and I'm not sure what's more terrifying, the fact that he thinks it's love, or that it's past tense. "After that night, I was willing to wait for you until the time was right. I was willing to let you have your career as long as you played by the rules and were a good girl. And for years you listened. You knew what I wanted. But then you ran to him."

*Him?*

My face must show my confusion because Cyrus smirks.

"You think I could allow you to stay at his house without any retaliation?" Cyrus sneers and I realize he's talking about Adrian.

The pieces start clicking into place. Five years of silence before the roses started. Five years of no word from him. It wasn't that he'd given up. He was watching, waiting. I'd been alone, never dating anyone after the mental torture he put me through. But when I stayed at Adrian's house to record our last album, he assumed things had changed.

"I wasn't sure then, so I sent you presents to remind you." He reaches out and drags his cold fingers along my shoulder. "I know how much you enjoy flowers."

I open my mouth to speak, but his grip tightening on the knife stops me.



“I wasn’t sure, but then you had to flaunt it like a little slut right in front of my face.” His eyes are empty. An abyss. Oblivion. He leans in close. “For that, my love, you’re going to pay.”

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## ADRIAN

I BANG MY FIST on Sebastian's door once before I throw it open.

"Sebastian," I yell, feeling myself getting more unhinged by the moment.

"Adrian?" It takes a minute while I hear him stumbling to the front of the bus.

Him and Cassie must have made quick work after the show ended because he saunters out in a pair of undone jeans and nothing else. A grin stretches his face until he sees mine, and I must look as murderous as I feel because his whole posture stiffens.

"Adrian, what's wrong?" He buttons his pants, looking around me.

"Tell me you've heard from her."

"Who—" His eyes widen as he cuts off his own question. "Eloise? What happened?"

“Fuck.” I rake my hands through my hair and punch the nearest surface, which doesn’t do much to the solid countertop, but makes my knuckles throb as much as my temples. I knew she wouldn’t be here, but after searching her bus and every other place I could think of off the top of my head, I had to check. Hoping, that by dumb luck she was hanging out with her brother, and I was worrying for no reason.

Sebastian grabs my shoulder and turns me to face him. “Where’s my sister?”

“I don’t know.” The words have to be forced out because I’m not ready to admit it. “She left right after the show and didn’t take her security with her.”

“Why would she do that?”

I just stare at him because there are no words. No answers. Just fucking darkness where light should be. Emptiness where Eloise should be at my side.

“What’s going on?” Cassie pops out of the back of the bus and even the sight of her doesn’t soften Sebastian’s expression. She walks over to him and wraps her hands around his arm.

My phone pings, but when I look down at it, it’s a non-update from security.

*Nothing yet.*

Fuck, how can someone just disappear? There were hundreds of people around after the show and it’s like none of

them saw anything. I'm not even confident she's still at the venue with the number of cars and buses that have been going in and out.

“Anything?”

“No.” I tuck my phone into my pocket. “But I've got to get back out there. I'm not standing around staring at a fucking wall waiting for these idiots to find her.”

“Find her?” Cassie steps back when she puts together what's happening. “No.”

“Babe, stay here and lock the door.” Sebastian grips the base of her skull as he bores his stare into her. “If that fucker's out there, I'm not risking shit happening to you. Do not open the door for anyone. Understand me?”

She nods and he plants a possessive kiss on her before grabbing a T-shirt and slipping it on.

Sebastian waits to hear the click of the lock before walking away. We might both know this stalker has honed in on Eloise, so there's likely no threat to anyone else at the moment, but I don't blame him for worrying. If this guy was willing to grab Eloise in plain sight, I have no doubt how far he's willing to go.

Pacing the line of buses, my mind trails to the warzone. Sick minds calling the shots on people's lives. Towns wiped out in the blink of an eye. I might not know who this man is, but I know his kind. He's a warlord. A predator. He has no intent on stopping until he gets what he wants. And now that the object

of his obsession is likely in his possession, I can't help the sick feeling that boils up thinking about what he could do to her.

If he so much as thinks about touching her, I'm going to skin him alive.

Turning, I punch the side of a bus. And now my fist is really stinging.

"Adrian?" Sebastian looks eerily calm. No, not calm. Worried.

It should concern me. He's the hothead. I'm the thinker. He's chaos. I'm order.

Except right now, where my hands are itching to tear the fucking world apart before I lose someone else I care about.

"Keep walking." I start moving again, not waiting to see if he's followed.

My phone pings, but it's the same bullshit as before. *No update. No sight of her. No answers.* I type back for them not to bother me with bullshit.

Sebastian gets on his own phone and is on the line with venue management, sending our guys to review camera footage. At least one of us is thinking with a clear head. Mine is clouded by the scent of blood.

Blood I'm going to spill if that monster gets near her.

It's a dangerous fucking thought. My protective side coming out in full force. The beast inside me I've only unleashed once,

and that was in an actual battle. But I can't help what the thought of losing Eloise does to my insides.

Turning the corner, I'm blindsided by a body nearly running into me.

"Watch it." The words are out of my mouth before I put a face to a body.

Mark glares his cold green eyes at me. Then, they move to Sebastian, who looks five seconds away from losing his cool after hanging up the phone.

"What's wrong?" Mark asks, evenly. Like he doesn't actually care but thinks his cash cow is about to burst into flames.

"Can't talk right now." I push past him and he just chuckles.

But then something freezes me in place. No, not something. But the lack of something—or someone.

"Wait." I spin around and advance on him. "Where's Cyrus?"

"Cyrus?" Mark scrunches his eyebrows like he can't fathom why I'd be asking that question.

It wasn't a secret that I wanted him to fuck off earlier, but now, the picture's forming in my head. The unnerving way Cyrus watched Eloise from the side of the stage. The fact that he's the only one still at the label who was there the night the band signed their record deal. The fact that Eloise's stalker had access to her schedule, the venues, her life.

A snake hiding in the grass.

“Adrian, what’s going on?” Sebastian comes up beside me.

But I don’t answer his question or break my stare with Mark, which I’m sure has turned deadly from the worried expression on Mark’s face.

“Cyrus, now,” I push.

“On his bus or gone.” Mark shrugs, and I hate how nonchalant he is, even if he has no clue what’s going on. “He’s headed to check on Four Clovers and deliver a bus since one of theirs took a shit. Why?”

“Where’s the bus?”

“He’s probably gone.”

“Bus. Now.” So help me, I’m going to shove this man through something if he doesn’t stop fumbling over his words.

I have no doubt he’s going to report this to Nathan, but I honestly don’t give two shits about it, as long as I can get to Eloise.

“Space thirty-two, I think. Maybe thirty-three. Why—”

I’m turning before he can finish his question. I know what spot already because I saw a bus there earlier, a few spots down from Eloise’s. I noticed it was the same model bus as the ones the band members are traveling around in and was surprised another band had splurged on it, given no one else at the festival has the kind of money and fame as that of Enemy Muse. I should have known something was off.



“Why are you looking for Cyrus?” Sebastian is jogging beside me now.

“He has her.”

“Cyrus?” Sebastian chuckles, albeit not amused. “Suit from the label, Cyrus?”

I nod. “Remember the signing party at the club?”

Sebastian’s expression falls, and he picks up his speed. “Fuck.”

I pull out my phone and shoot off a text to security. We’ll get there long before they do, seeing as I can already see the bus up ahead, but I need backup to pull me off the guy if I want to avoid jail time.

Space thirty-three, just like Mark said. The same spot I remembered it in.

I’m out of breath by the time we reach the door, but I don’t need air to live when I have pure hatred coursing through my system. Reaching for the handle, I’m relieved to find it unlocked. The snake didn’t think he’d be caught. Why would he? That fucker.

Stepping onto the bus, Sebastian and I make it to the top of the steps before freezing.

“Adrian.” My name barely makes it past Eloise’s lips with the hand restricting her throat.

She’s in the same floral top and black leather pants she wore on stage, but her makeup is smeared from the tears that streak

her cheeks. Cyrus is positioned behind her, like the coward he is, using her as a human shield.

It's the lowest form of battle, refusing to fight your own fights.

One of his hands is wrapped around the base of Eloise's throat, while another holds a knife at her artery. He's at least smart enough to pick a spot that's deadly, which is as concerning as it is infuriating.

I don't miss that there's a faint line of dried blood where her throat meets her chin, knowing he's already hurt her is enough to make me see red. But unlike earlier when I felt unhinged, I dig deep to restore order within myself because her life isn't worth the risk of me going off the rails.

Sebastian moves to step forward, but I throw an arm out to stop him when I see Cyrus flinch. Luckily, he takes the hint and stops.

I so badly want to look Eloise in the eyes and offer her any comfort I have. The problem is, I have none right now. Cyrus is unpredictable and has already proved himself dangerous. I'm not willing to break his gaze and face the repercussions.

“You should leave.” His voice is flat and unamused.

“And you should drop the knife.”

The fucker smirks.

“Glad you find that amusing.”

He twists the knife slightly, tightening his grip. “You want to know what I find amusing, Adrian? Your inability to follow orders.”

“And what orders are you referring to right now?” Maybe if I keep him talking, I can get an opening. I might not be breaking his gaze, but it doesn’t stop me from taking in every inch of his surroundings, looking for a way to strike.

“The manager isn’t paid to fuck the talent.” Cyrus narrows his eyes.

So that’s what this is about. Eloise and I going public was the straw that broke the camel’s back. This was never about hurting her; it was about *having* her.

“We were fine before you.” Cyrus flinches and in return, Eloise does too. “Happy.”

At least now it’s clear he’s delusional. I know for a fact Cyrus has never been directly in contact with the band. He keeps his communication with them through me. The relationship he’s manifested in his head is a figment of his imagination.

It makes him dangerous.

It makes him lethal.

With that realization, I do spare a glance at Eloise because I’m not sure how far Cyrus is going to take this, only that I’ll go down fighting if I have to. But not before I get one more good look in her eyes and make a wish on those stars that make them sparkle.

When I meet her gaze, her fear is replaced with worry from whatever she reads on my face because she's always been so perceptive.

Her lips part, but before she can convince me otherwise, I've already tipped the first domino, dropping the lighter Cyrus didn't see me fish out of my pocket. Cyrus's eyes dip for a fraction of a second as the lighter hits the floor of the bus in a distraction.

*A fraction of a second.*

It's all I need to reach them. To wrap my hand around his and shove Eloise out of the way, into Sebastian's arms. But as expected, Cyrus doesn't go down without a fight. If anything, he roars up the moment she's out of his grip. He tries to push me aside, to take back control, to reach his obsession.

I shove my body against his and try to knock the knife from his grip with a hit of both our hands against the counter. It doesn't work. Instead, I make a wrong move and he gets the slightest advantage, shoving me.

The blade sinks in like a hot knife through butter. It slips into my body without any resistance. So smooth I barely feel it. And what I do feel, I ignore, in favor of using Cyrus's moment of admiration toward his handiwork against him. I slam my fist into his face so hard I feel his bones break under my knuckles. Or maybe that was my hand shattering. I'm really not sure what's him or me, only that I don't stop until he's no longer moving, and I'm being pulled off him by security.

“Adrian.” Eloise flings herself at me, but I flinch when I sit back, and the knife moves inside my gut.

I slump against a cabinet as she kneels in front of me.

Fuck, this hurts all of a sudden.

“Oh, God.” Her hands fly up to cover her mouth. “You’re hurt. Why would you do that?”

Tears pool at her lashes, and I can’t help but reach up to brush her cheek. Her dark eyes find mine, stopping time or speeding it up—who knows anymore. Her stare might as well be the gates to heaven and hell combined. Every place I belong has always been in her.

“It’s going to be okay,” I say.

It might be a lie, and if so, my last words might be something I can’t live up to. But as long as she believes it in this moment, that’s all that matters.

My hand falls as my whole body gets weak.

Eloise leans in and buries her face in the crook of my neck, careful not to move the blade. “Stay with me, okay? Stay with me. I love you.”

“I love you too, El.” It’s the last thing I get out before it’s too hard to keep my eyes open anymore, so I let her dark eyes take me away.

**33**

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## **ELOISE**

I WAS ALMOST CONVINCED Adrian is invulnerable. Because even when he's opened up to me and given me glimpses of the man beneath the hard exterior, there's no weakness in him. Only strength.

But at the end of the day, we're all human.

A truth I was faced with as I held his face between my palms and begged him to hold on until the paramedics arrived. I watched him fight the fragility that exists within all of us. I watched war wage in his eyes until he slowly slipped into darkness.

Even then, eyes closed and barely breathing, I refused to believe I could lose him—that I would be the reason. Adrian is a warrior, a fighter, and as I learned on the bus, he's someone with a dark side that he let out for me. Because as I stood there with the knife at my throat, Adrian was eerily calm. It wasn't until his gaze wavered and he looked at me that I realized it was only because he had made a decision. He was willing to sacrifice himself if it meant saving me.

At the end of the day, he would do whatever it took to do what he couldn't do for Samantha or his father.

Keeping good on his promise if it meant going down fighting.

And down he went. But like the fighter he is, he refused to stay there. And I can't help the swell of relief that overwhelms me every time his eyes meet mine.

"You look like shit." Rome walks into the hospital room with a bouquet of pink flowers like the asshole he is.

"Charming." Adrian narrows his eyes at him.

I have no doubt he's planning Rome's demise in his head. All he needs is the doctors to unhook him from the hospital bed he's chained to by wires.

"These..." Rome reaches out his hand with the flowers toward Adrian, turning to me at the last second. "Are for you, princess."

Pink carnations and I can't help but laugh at the randomness of it. But the fact that Rome showed up with flowers is surprisingly sweet.

"Sorry, didn't bring you shit, brother." Rome drops into the chair at the other side of the room and draws his hands up behind his head as he stretches his legs out. "I'll let Eloise handle your get-well gifts."

Rome winks at me, and I can't help but roll my eyes.



“It’s for the best.” Adrian pats my hand, and I know he’s probably right.

“So, when are we breaking your giant ass out of here anyway.” Rome taps his feet together because it’s impossible for the guy to sit still.

“There will be no breaking out.” I walk over to the window and set the flower vase down before making my way back to Adrian. “So don’t get any ideas. You’re not going anywhere until the doctor gives you the okay.”

“Yes ma’am.” He grins, and the smile mixed with his words does wild things to the butterflies living in my chest.

“Save the *fuck me* eyes for once I’m gone,” Rome groans.

I turn and glare at him. “Not everything is about sex. Everyone isn’t like you.”

“First of all, you’re a shit liar and you were totally just thinking about sex.” Rome leans forward and dips his chin.

I hate when he’s right, and I hope the blush I feel crawling like ivy up my chest doesn’t reach my cheeks.

“Second...” Rome draws the word out. “Never mind, I don’t have a second. I like to fuck; I’d be an idiot to say otherwise.”

“Shocker.” I roll my eyes.

He shrugs one shoulder. “Not going to apologize for it.”

“Didn’t expect you to.”

“Not everyone is in it for more than sex.” He leans back.

“Namely you?”

“Namely me.” Rome smiles. “I’ll leave the sappy pussy-whipped shit for you two.”

I shake my head but drop the subject. I should have known better than to think that Rome spending a couple of nights alone in bed meant he was turning a corner. Everyone’s a little fucked up, but Rome’s scars go so much deeper than the rest of us. And even if he uses sex as a mask for refusing to deal with whatever haunts him, I know there are bigger reasons he never lets anyone close.

“Speaking of pussy-whipped bitches—”

“Hey.” I narrow my eyes at him. He knows I hate that word. “Watch it.”

“Sorry, princess.” Rome waves his hand out and pretends to bow from his seated position. “Speaking of pussy-whipped *beeoches*...”

“Not any better.”

“Noted.” He ticks a finger in the air, but I can tell he doesn’t actually give a shit. “Where’s Noah and Sebastian?”

“Doc crew,” Adrian says, wincing when he moves funny. “They’re filming final interviews to piece in with tour footage. Don’t worry, you’ll get your turn.”

“Lovely,” Rome grunts.

He used to love interviews. Any chance to show off and make the world love him. It’s another thing that’s shifted in the

past few months. Each interview he seems to get quieter in front of the camera. Either that or irritated, which usually leads to him facing off with Adrian about his attitude.

Adrian must already be thinking the same because his gaze is zeroed in on Rome from across the room. “Behave.”

“Aww, you know me, Adrian.”

“Exactly.”

Rome grins and feigns innocence, but he’s the farthest from it.

“Speaking of...” Adrian places his hand over mine again and squeezes. “The crew wants to set up a time with you for Thursday. But if that’s too soon...”

“It’s fine.” I nod my head. “Can’t hide from all of this forever.”

After what went down at the festival, things blew up in the media. If Neon Records was worried about what my retellings of my sexual assault would do, they weren’t prepared for the full truth. Not that I was either.

With Cyrus locked up, more than just his deviant behavior came to light. The record company discovered he’s been embezzling money for years and he was using company resources to stalk me the entire time.

One secret was unburied after another.

It didn’t take much for the press to paint a clear picture of everything. And once word spread that Cyrus was the one who

raped me years ago, the hungry teeth of the press dug in. They're still drinking blood from the flesh of that particular wound, but now the story is getting twisted, which is why I want to tell my side more than ever—something the label isn't happy about.

They actually had the nerve to ask me to not talk about it. *Wouldn't want to draw more attention.*

Well, fuck them.

I hung up that particular phone call from Nathan and went straight to the documentary crew saying I wanted to share everything.

I'm ready to tell the bad, the ugly, and the unimaginable. I don't care if it's hard for someone else to hear. It exists. It makes me who I am, and I'm done hiding from what happened in an effort to make other people more comfortable.

"I'll have them set up the time then." Adrian squeezes my hand.

He must see whatever is working in my eyes, because his thumb lingers on my skin and grazes it back and forth.

"How are you doing, El?" Rome asks.

I turn to see he's leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. These two can read me like a book, apparently.

"Better, surprisingly," I say. "It wasn't an easy situation by any means, but knowing the truth is better than when there was this faceless shadow chasing me."

Rome nods. “You’re tough as shit, have I told you that lately?”

“Learned from the best.”

Rome smiles, but his usual confidence isn’t in it. His eyes drop to the small Band-Aid at the top of my throat, and I dip my chin to try and hide it.

I’m well aware things could have been much worse, and the slice on my throat is an unwelcome reminder that Cyrus got to me in the first place. I’m not sure what would have happened if Adrian and Sebastian hadn’t shown up. Honestly, I still have a hard time thinking about it.

“Well, I’m going to take off.” Rome slaps his knees and stands.

It draws the attention of a passing nurse whose eyes widen at the sight of him, before she scurries down the hall with a flushed face. The man is a magnet.

“Remember, interview.” Adrian points at him. “Answer your texts.”

“Got it, Captain.” Rome gives him a mocking salute before dipping out of the room.

“Asshole,” Adrian mutters.

I pat his arm. “Aww, you know you love him.”

“No.” Adrian shakes his head. “I love *you*. The rest of the band is simply tolerable.”

“You care.” I nudge him. “Alert the presses.”

“That’s it.” Adrian reaches out, ignoring the IV’s and his stab wound to grab me and pull me into the hospital bed beside him.

“Hey.” I yelp at the sudden movement. “You’re supposed to be healing.”

“So are you.” Adrian’s finger finds my jaw, carefully tracing around the Band-Aid at my throat.

“It’s a scratch.” I push his hand away.

Adrian shrugs. “Same.”

“Yours is a stab wound.”

“Debatable. I feel fine.”

He wraps his hand through the back of my hair and pulls my face toward his, planting a bruising kiss on me. My lips are still puffy and sore from last night when he wouldn’t keep his off them.

He kisses me like he’s reminding himself he’s alive.

He tugs me closer and my body molds against his. I trace my hands over his chest, skating where I shouldn’t and making him wince.

“Sorry.” I pull away and scan him like his wound might break open at any minute and start spilling blood.

Just because I’m doing surprisingly well, doesn’t mean there haven’t been side effects. Like the constant feeling of Adrian’s blood on my hands. Or the lingering fear of losing him. Strange, small things that imprint in the larger moment.

“I’m good, El.” Adrian cups my cheek. “A stab wound is nothing.”

“Oh really?” I roll my eyes, not believing it.

“Really.” He pulls my forehead to his. “The only thing that could ever actually hurt me is losing you.”

There’s a surprising amount of strength and vulnerability in that comment. The willingness to admit his weakness. Understanding that by doing so he’s handing me a secret piece and trusting me with it.

Trust I broke once and don’t plan to ever again.

“I promise to never hurt you.” I trace the line of his jaw. “At least not intentionally. Don’t hold it against me if I’m feeling you up and hit a stab wound.”

Adrian tips his head back and laughs freely, in a way he only ever seems to do in front of me. “I’ll survive.”

“You better.” I curl up against him and he wraps his arm around me to cocoon me in the bed next to him. “All I could think on that bus was that I told you we’d spend the rest of our time together and that we could have already hit the end.”

“It wasn’t.”

“It could have been.” I sigh, unable to help if I sound a little defeated.

Adrian leans down and rests his face against the top of my head. “Still wouldn’t regret it if it was. Because I had you.”

“That’s an awfully romantic comment coming from you, Adrian Hale.” I bury my face against his chest and hide my smile.

“You bring it out of me, Eloise Kane.”

“Then by all means.” I smile. If this is my reward, I plan to keep doing whatever I’m doing.



**34**

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## ADRIAN

I'M NOT SURE IF Eloise realizes it, but she has both of my hands in a death grip. Her eyes are closed and she's whispering quietly to herself.

“El.” I squeeze her hands. “You're chanting like you're performing the voodoo magic your brother is always accusing you of.”

She opens one eye, peeking out at me and smiling.

“Talk.” I brush her hair from her face and tuck it behind her ears.

Her sandy brown locks are in their naturally stick straight state today and I realize how long it's getting. Hanging all the way to her belly button where it falls over the front of her shoulder.

“I'm making the right decision, aren't I?” She squeezes my hands harder as if that's possible. “Talk me out of it.”

“Not going to happen.”

“Okay, then talk me into it.”

“Get out of your head, you’ve got this.” I step in closer and don’t miss that it makes her breath catch in her chest. If I have to distract her with the fact that she can’t help but react when I’m this close to her, I’m fine with it.

“It’s just an interview.” She rolls her shoulders back like she’s preparing for battle.

I nod. “Just an interview.”

Probably the biggest one of her career, not that I’ll say that. It can’t be easy to bare your wounds to someone, much less the press. I’m still working through sharing some of my trauma with Eloise, and she’s the girl I’m head over heels in love with.

Eloise is walking into a room of unknown faces to talk about being attacked by her rapist.

The thought still brings bile up in my throat, and I have to actively tell myself not to hunt him down in prison.

“What was that?” Eloise brushes her fingers over my chest. “You just went somewhere dark.”

She’s got a way of reading people that makes it impossible to hide anything from her, so I don’t even try, opting for kissing her instead. Which catches her off guard if the gasp that escapes is any indication.

I hold her cheeks in my hands and take all her doubts away, appreciating that she softens like she always does when I touch her. I’m no longer sure how I went so many years

resisting her because I can't imagine the bleak desert that was my life before Eloise bloomed an entire garden in it.

“Break it up, lovebirds.” Something hits me in the side of the head as Sebastian's voice interrupts our moment.

He's lucky he is Eloise's brother and my friend because I'm tempted to smack him when I look down and see he tossed a pen at me.

“You're lucky that didn't hit her.” I glare at him.

“Wasn't gonna.” He leans against the wall and crosses his arms over his chest. “I've got killer aim.”

Eloise rolls her eyes. “Don't hurt yourself patting yourself on the back.”

“Oh, El, that's cute that you think I would.” He points his thumbs at himself. “Rock star, remember. I've got people to do it for me.”

“Oh my God, make him stop.” She tips her head back and groans.

“I've given up on that miracle.”

Sebastian laughs and walks over to us, planting a hand on each of our shoulders. “Good luck, El, you've got this.” He turns to me. “And you're being summoned while your girlfriend is busy.”

*Girlfriend.*

I'm not sure why that word catches my attention the way it does. It's what Eloise is, even if we haven't labeled it with that

word in particular. It feels insignificant to call whatever we are something so trite after everything we've been through.

Eloise must notice too because she stiffens. "We're—"

"Good luck, *girlfriend*." I stop whatever argument she was about to make, and even if the word pales what I actually feel for her, I don't mind that her cheeks light up when I say it.

Sebastian steps back, giving us room for me to plant one more inappropriate kiss on her before she disappears.

I'm sure I should care that her brother is standing right there, but I don't give a shit. I've seen him in more than enough compromising situations over the years that the guy has no right to say crap to me.

"What's going on?" I ask as he guides me toward the hotel elevator.

We're in Denver for final interviews and the end-of-tour Fourth of July concert. Afterward, we all finally get to head home, at least until the band figures out what they're doing.

"We need to chat about what comes next." Sebastian walks into the elevator and takes one wall.

I face him from the opposite side. "I thought El still hadn't made a decision about recording another album."

"She hasn't. This is different." He's wearing an expression that tells me he's actually being serious, so whatever it is it's big.

I follow him out of the elevator and down the hall to Noah's room, where he and Rome are playing a video game.

"Fuck off." Noah tosses his remote.

Rome climbs to stand on top of the couch, holding his controller overhead. "All hail the champion."

"In your dreams." Noah shoves Rome, who goes toppling.

"If that's what you're into." Rome winks.

Noah walks away and joins Sebastian and me at the table. "This fucking clown—"

"Is beating the shit out of you every round," Rome finishes, twisting a chair around and straddling it to join us.

Noah shakes his head as he ties his hair back at the base of his skull.

"Please tell me you didn't call me here to mediate these teenagers." I look at Sebastian.

"Twenty-eight, thank you very much." Rome nods proudly.

"Not why we're here, dipshit." Sebastian shoves him, then folds his arms on the table in front of him and looks at me. "The guys and I have been cooking up an idea, and we want to run it by you. El's on the fence, but she sounds willing to sway whatever direction, depending on your thoughts."

I lean back in my chair and cross my arms over my chest. The guys coming up with an idea can mean a couple of things, and I just hope it's not like the last one that involved a mess of paint and a massive cleaning bill from the stadium.

“What do you think of us starting our own label?” Sebastian asks.

I tick an eyebrow up. “A record label?”

“Obviously.”

The laugh that comes out of me hits so hard, I can’t help but bend over and grab my chest. Tears spring to my eyes as I sit back up and face them. “You’re fucking serious?”

“Your faith in us is flattering.” Sebastian shakes his head.

“Oh, I’ve got faith.” I wipe my face. “Hence me following your dumbasses around on tour for the past six years. But a record label is next-level shit. You’re gonna need faith, a church, a huddle of nuns, and a whole fucking choir to pull that shit off.”

“Hot nuns?” Rome smiles.

Noah shoves his arm. “You’re going to hell, you know that, right?”

“It’s probably where all the hot strippers will be.” Rome shrugs.

“Back to actual business, assholes.” Sebastian narrows his eyes at them.

This is when I know Sebastian’s serious about something. He doesn’t get dragged into bickering with the rest of the band. He’s laser-focused.

“I get that it sounds a little extreme,” Sebastian says.

“Try massively.”

“But...” He plants his hand on the table in front of me. “We know the industry in and out by now. I can spot talent. And you’re all about that business shit at this point.”

“Hold up.” I lift my hand in front of me. “What does this have to do with me?”

The guys all share a look, but Sebastian keeps the floor. “You’d be in on it with us, obviously.”

“Obviously?”

“*Obviously*,” Rome repeats for emphasis, or because he’s a dick. Probably both.

“Like I don’t have enough shit going on wrangling the four of you every five seconds.” I quirk an eyebrow at Sebastian.

“Look, man. I get this sounds fucking wild. But that’s what we do right? When’s the last time this crew sat back and did something predictable?”

“Never.” I’m sure he meant it as a rhetorical question, but I can’t help reminding him that they’re always giving me a headache.

“Exactly.” He brushes off the fact that I was making a dig at him. “We haven’t been happy with things at Neon Records for a while now, you know that. And after all this shit with El, honestly, there’s no way we’re extending our contract, no matter how much they’re bugging us and waving perks in front of our faces.”

His statement isn’t a surprise. Eloise hasn’t entertained anything from the label after what went down. It might not be



their fault in the grand scheme of things, but Cyrus operated under their roof, and whatever little trust existed is gone. Not to mention, they haven't treated the band like people in years.

“So your solution is to create a label instead of shopping around?”

“They said it themselves, eventually people will move onto the next big thing.” Sebastian sits back. “I don't think that will happen anytime soon, but we all know this industry chews people up and spits them out at any given moment. We need to start thinking long-term. Big picture.”

“Who the fuck are you and what have you done with the members of Enemy Muse? I'm being pranked, right? Or are you actually growing the fuck up?”

“Aww does that mean Dad is proud?” Sebastian nudges my arm and Noah laughs.

“No, I give all credit for this to Cassie and Merry.” I wave a finger between them. “That's the only explanation for why you'd all be thinking so clearly.”

“Fair enough.” Noah shrugs not even trying to deny it, because we all remember the mess they were before they found women strong enough to help them put their heads on straight.

“Fuck.” I scratch the back of my neck.

“Fuck no, or fuck you'll do it?” Sebastian lifts an eyebrow.

I school my expression and look him in the eyes. “Fuck, as in, *why the fuck am I even entertaining this?*”

The only answers I get to my hypothetical question are shared grins as they elbow each other.

They feel me caving. *I feel myself caving.*

Agreeing to be their band manager with zero experience was one thing. This is something else entirely.

“How are you always talking me into shit I know nothing about?” I ask, really not sure there is an answer.

Sebastian grins. “Someone’s gotta drag you outta the square you keep painting yourself into.”

“Touché,” Rome gives a cheer with a non-existent glass and pretends to down it in one drink before slamming his fist on the table.

“Does that mean you’re in?” Noah asks.

All eyes are on me, and I’m not sure why they’re all putting so much weight into my decision. They could do it without me. But I’m not sure they would. In one way or another, I joined this fucked up family the second I joined them on their first tour. And there’s no going back.

“Fuck it, I’m in,” I say before I can change my mind. “Don’t make me regret it.”

“Do we ever?” Sebastian smiles with his stupid, wicked grin.

I don’t bother answering because he already knows it. Besides, it’s led me to where I am, so I don’t think I could regret it if I tried.

**35**

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# ELOISE

DENVER.

There's nothing like playing in this stadium. We might come from Fairfield, but Denver is where we built our home. A place we settled into once we figured out who we were as humans instead of being just our parents' children. The crowd reacts differently here. Or maybe we play differently. It's a mutual feeling that can't be compared to anything else.

The heat of summer soaks differently in a city that understands the cold depths of winter. The same way I do, deep to the bone, longing for the season to change and breathe in warmth again.

Finally, I am. We all are.

Today's show might be a celebration of the end of a tour, but it's also the beginning of things I couldn't have foreseen when the band got started—a future in music that extends beyond us, into something larger.

“They’re wild out there today.” Sebastian wipes his sweaty hair off his forehead as a roadie hands him a water bottle.

We only have a few minutes before we need to be back on stage, but we’re all taking the chance to catch our breath and cool off between songs.

“Fucking right they are. I already miss touring.” Rome frowns.

“It just ended.” Noah jabs him in the arm.

Merry comes up between the two of them and latches onto Noah’s arm. “I’m with Rome on this one. Keep me on the road forever and I’d be happy.”

“My rolling stone.” Noah leans in and plants a kiss on her.

“I get punched in the arm and she gets a kiss.” Rome juts a thumb at them. “Favoritism.”

“Who’s the one with the pussy?” Merry winks at Rome.

“See, ladies and gentleman, that’s how you win an argument.” Rome wraps an arm around Merry’s shoulders and pulls her in. “And it’s also why you’re my favorite.”

Noah shoves Rome away and Merry laughs, soaking in his jealousy.

“What? She had a point?” Rome grins.

Adrian hangs up his phone call and starts making his way over to us. We might be backstage at a concert, but he’s always working. Not that the band helps when we’re constantly keeping him busy.

After we officially cut ties with Neon Records, Adrian got the ball rolling on our label, and it's been a lot of work. If I thought he didn't sleep before, this is going to be a whole new beast.

Adrian barely makes it to the group when his phone starts ringing again.

"Damn it, I need to take this." He holds up his phone and points it at Sebastian. "I'm blaming you when I die young from stress."

"Can't die young when you're already old." Sebastian grins at him.

Adrian steps in and plants a quick kiss on my lips that might as well ignite my entire body on fire.

"He's lucky I love you," Adrian murmurs against my lips.

I smile. "I know."

Adrian steps away to take the call, and I turn back to the group.

"You're moving in with Adrian, huh?" Merry wiggles her eyebrows at me while a wide grin stretches her face. But there's no judgment in her tone.

To the outside eye, it might seem sudden for me to move in with Adrian, but in reality, when I think of staying in my own house, all I feel is every one of our years apart weighing me down. I'm tired of the space between us, and I'm happy he feels the same.

I shove Sebastian in the arm. “Loudmouth.”

“It was an accident, I swear.” He holds up his hands.

“Does that mean you’re selling your house?” Merry asks.

We talked about moving into my house since it is bigger. But his house felt right once I add a few hundred plants to it. After all, he has the recording studio and the better view.

I shake my head. “No, for now I’m going to rent it. I found some dancer who was looking for a place to stay near Denver while she preps for an upcoming show.”

“Did someone say dancer?” Rome perks up with a ridiculous grin on his face.

“Don’t get any ideas in your head, Rome.” I step toward him, intent on cutting off wherever his deviant mind is trailing off to. “You will not be defiling my house or that poor girl. Besides, she’s not your kind of dancer.”

“My kind?” He throws his hand over his chest, pretending to be offended. “What could you possibly mean by that?”

“She means a girl who has goals in life beyond using your dick as her own personal stripper pole.” Merry smirks.

I point a finger at his chest. “I’m warning you. She’s too good for you, don’t even try it.”

“Is that a challenge?” Rome smirks, facing off with me.

I cross my arms over my chest. “No.”

“I heard a challenge, princess.”

I turn around, giving up. I might not know much about the girl who will be making my home her own, but one thing was clear, she doesn't seem like the type who would go anywhere near a guy like Rome.

At least, I hope not, for her sake.

"El, I want to talk to you about something real quick." Sebastian throws an arm around my shoulder, and we take a step away from the group. "I've been thinking about Wicked Heat, and I think you should sing it."

"That's the next song."

"Yep." He nods, looking down at me. "It's new so the fans won't know the difference. And with things up in the air about when we'll be recording again, it might never make it to an album, anyway. So, take it. It's your song."

"Our song." I correct him.

"You wrote most of it." He holds the microphone out. "We both know this is your song."

I slip out from under his arm and turn to face him. Sebastian sober is different from how he was for years, and sometimes I still get whiplash from it. He's goofy again, thoughtful, caring. And with the microphone hanging between us, I feel all those sentimental things he'd make fun of me for if he could listen to what's going on inside my head.

"You need to sing this one. It's all you." Sebastian pushes the microphone into my hands, and I take it so it doesn't drop when he lets go.



He plants his hands on my shoulders and for a second I forget there are tens of thousands of fans screaming for us right now. He's simply my brother who's two minutes older. I see us as children, surviving times that still make my stomach hurt to think about them. I see someone who might look like my dad if we had ever gotten to know him. I see the only stable family I've ever known, and I can't help the tear that slips out.

"My voice isn't warmed up," I argue.

Sebastian brushes away a rogue tear. "Stop making excuses and get out there." He turns back to the group. "El's got this one, guys."

"Really?" Noah grins. "That's awesome."

"You've got this, princess." Rome nudges my shoulder as I near him. "And don't worry, I'll carry us on the guitar, so no one hears how shit Sebastian is on bass while you sing."

"Fuck off." Sebastian flips Rome off before slinging the bass guitar around his shoulder.

Even if Sebastian rarely plays an instrument on stage, he knows how to play almost as many as Rome does.

"Time." Adrian stops in front of us, letting us know break's over.

His eyes fall to the microphone in my hand.

"Remember the headaches you were saying we give you." I scrunch my nose. "Sebastian decided I'm singing this one, so if I'm out of tune, get ready to field the media."

Adrian pulls me in. “Never.”

He plants his lips on mine, but even as he pulls away, I still feel the petals of his kiss blooming with each tick of the smile that climbs his cheeks.

I follow the guys to the stage, and it feels funny to stop in the middle of it. I’m more comfortable off to the side, playing off their energy. I’d rather let the guys throw themselves around and make the screaming fans happy. Here in the middle, I’m exposed.

But that’s my life lately. Ripped open so there’s no hiding. No more secrets.

As I hold the microphone up and feel Rome start in on the guitar, I remind myself of that fact.

Nothing can stop me. This is my stage, my life, my destiny. I open my mouth, and I celebrate surviving with every last breath.

*“When you strike a match to your life*

*you expect something bigger than the flames that eat it up*

*I waited, I waited, and I burned*

*For a phoenix that never came*

*When you set your life on fire*

*You expect something more than the scars that make a map*

*Of who you were*

*And who you became*

*It was darkness before I ever saw the light*

*It was darkness before the flames that lit up died*

*And it's darkness still*

*But you saw the light*

*For me*

*You saw the light*

*So I wrote this song for you, chaos so sweet*

*I wrote love for you, with the broken bones in me*

*I stand and burn for you, will you burn for me?*

*Tell me can you stand this wicked, wicked heat?*

*When you walk through fire you forget about the coals*

*They don't go out as easy as the flames that scald your soul*

*When you walk through fire you learn it leaves a mark*

*In places you've forgotten, seen only in the dark*

*It was darkness before I ever saw the light*

*It was darkness before the flames that lit up died*

*And it's darkness still*

*But now I see the light*

*In you, with you*

*I saw the light*

*So I wrote this song for you, chaos so sweet*

*I wrote love for you, with the broken bones in me*

*I stand and burn for you, will you burn for me?*

*Tell me can you stand this wicked, wicked heat?*

*I was told you can't go down in flames and come out the  
other side*

*I was told that stories end if the hero inside them dies*

*I was told many things I shouldn't have survived*

*But I survive*

*I thrive*

*I thrive*

*So I wrote this song for you, chaos so sweet*

*I wrote love for you, with the broken bones in me*

*I stand and burn for you, will you burn for me?*

*Tell me can you stand this wicked, wicked heat?"*

The song cuts out and I realize my eyes are closed as screams rip through the stadium.

“E-lo-ise, E-lo-ise.”

They're desperate, needy, begging.

I used to think there was no feeling like it. And while I still draw in the energy they so freely hand over to me, that's not what lights me up from the inside. Because now I have myself. And I'm no longer scared to reach down when needed and grab onto that girl I thought I lost years ago.

I draw strength from the voice I forgot how to use. For the words, I feared. For the past, I was running from.

Looking to the edge of the stage, I spot Adrian standing with his arms crossed over his chest, and he's smiling. He probably received five phone calls in the time it took me to sing one song, but he's standing there watching me instead of answering them.

He tips his chin up and it says so many things only he can offer me.

To start over, I had to burn it all down. And for the first time in my life, the heat feels incredible.

# **ÉPILOGUE**

**ELOISE**

## One Month Later

SEBASTIAN AND I MIGHT be twins, but while I take after Mom physically, he doesn't. Something that's abundantly clear as he sits across the table from her. Any resemblance he and I have must be a blend of the two of our parents because while I have her same round cheeks, freckles, and midnight eyes, he has sharper features, accentuated by the scruff on his jaw.

I've always guessed Sebastian must resemble our father, but my mom was selfish and destroyed all evidence of his existence, so we'll never know. Just because the man bailed on his own children doesn't mean we didn't deserve to at least know where we came from.

I take a breath and remind myself that I should just be happy with how far we've come. Mom's been sober for a few years and there's finally life returning to her hollow frame. But even with the roundness in her cheeks and the filled-out space beneath her eyes, there's still a certain weariness that hasn't completely faded. Dark circles under her eyes that even sleep doesn't take away. Wrinkles etched on her face, more prominent than other women her age.

The effect of drugs lingering long after.

This might be her longest stretch of sobriety, and I can't help hoping this is finally it—the time she'll stay sober. She's managed to hold a steady job for a couple of years now and hasn't destroyed the house Sebastian and I bought her.

She's good.

For now.

Sebastian is more cautiously optimistic, and I don't blame him. I'm not sure the bridge between them is one that will ever fully rebuild, but his attending occasional family dinners is a start.

"So you're giving up the band?" Mom looks at me.

The two of them still direct most conversation through me, treating me like their own personal telephone.

"Not giving it up, we're just taking a break." I set down my fork, already feeling overfull. "We've got enough on our plates with the new label."

"That's exciting." Mom's eyes dart between us.

Sebastian nods but doesn't say anything.

"How are things with you and Adrian? That's his name, right?"

"We're good." I smile, wishing I was back at home right now and not sitting here feeling like I'm building a relationship between strangers.

"And Cassie?" Mom looks at Sebastian.

Sebastian's shoulders relax because Cassie's name is one of the few things that can actually breathe joy into my brother regardless of the situation. "Good."

His answer is clipped, but his face lights up.



“Just good?” I nudge him, trying to lighten the mood. “Sebastian’s going to pop the question any day now. But the jerk still won’t tell me his plan.”

“Really?” Mom sits up with excitement in her eyes. “That’s great, honey.”

Sebastian forces a smile like he hasn’t spent the past week talking non-stop about the fact that he’s going to propose.

“I’m gonna hit the head.” Sebastian excuses himself for the bathroom.

Mom’s gaze follows him the whole way, lips turned down.

“Sorry, Mom.” I reach my hand out and place it on hers. “He’ll warm up.”

She forces a smile and pats the back of my hand. “I don’t hold it against him.”

At least she’s not in denial about the long road ahead. During her final rehab stint, Sebastian joined me for a family counseling session and gave her a piece of his mind. After years of Mom pretending none of what she did had impacted us, she was finally forced to face the truth.

The tension in the room was thick, but it was finally all out there. And if I’ve learned anything, it’s that sometimes getting uncomfortable is necessary to get to the other side of it.

While Sebastian and Mom’s relationship is moving in the right direction, they aren’t at my level with her quite yet. I always was more forgiving when it came to her. She’s my

mother, and I'd rather have a relationship with her than none at all.

It took me a year away from Fairfield to come to that conclusion. After we recorded our first album and completed the first tour, the band decided to settle down in Denver, but I took a trip back home first. She wasn't clean yet, but it was the first brick in what eventually became a lot of things.

Over time, what started as sporadic visits turned into frequent phone calls. And when she did finally get sober, I felt like I had my mom back again. So, while Sebastian continued to hold a grudge, I was ready to get to the other side of it. There was enough I was holding onto that I didn't need more.

"I hear the documentary will release soon." Mom changes the subject.

I roll my shoulders back, bracing myself every time for the feeling that reminder brings up in me. There's no hiding once my interview is released, and even if I know it was the right decision, it doesn't make it easier knowing I'm letting the world behind the curtain.

"It is." I nod.

"I'm proud of you, sweetheart. After everything—" Mom frowns.

I squeeze her hand. "I'm good now. Promise."

"You always were stronger than me, Eloise." She wraps her other hand over mine. "I know now the effect my decisions had on you and your brother. But you managed to come out

the other side. And look at you, speaking your truth. There are so many things I should have said. Men I let take advantage in one way or another... but you owned your power. You're strong.”

Tears sting in my eyes as I look into her glassy ones.

My biggest fear growing up was turning into my mother. She let man after man take advantage until the point where she was no longer herself. And even if I took the opposite approach, I became as much a shell as she was after what Cyrus did to me.

He closed me off, made me silent. I represented one thing to women around the world, but to myself, I was hiding. I was weak.

I was *her*.

Telling my story shed that skin. I reclaimed my history, and I'm finally moving on.

“I'm proud of you, honey,” she says again. “You and your brother are going to continue doing amazing things. Greater than I could ever have imagined.”

Sebastian sits back down at the table, and she lets go of my hand, but his face relaxes when he spots her gesture. Even if there is this invisible barrier, it's thinning. The air is clearing. There is a break in the trees.

And through it, I see home again.



Adrian's at the kitchen table when I get home, working and looking hot as hell, even if he is beyond stressed.

It's not that I want him to be stressed, but I can't help that I love watching how much he cares about every little thing he does. It's why my brother trusted him to be our band manager years ago, and why the band agreed if we were going to start a label, he was going to have to be a part of it.

He's the glue that's kept us together all these years—and the glue that keeps me together on a daily basis.

“Don't burst a blood vessel.” I smile, dropping my purse on the counter and walking across the room.

He catches me with his arms around my waist as I reach him. “How was dinner?”

“Surprisingly good, even if I'm still playing peacekeeper. Sebastian managed to give her a two-armed hug at the end of it. I consider that a win.”

Adrian nods, and I lean down to plant a kiss on his lips.

There's no feeling like coming home to him. I thought it would be harder than it was to leave my own house behind, but at the end of the day it felt like empty walls that belonged to a version of myself I no longer saw in the mirror. Besides the plants, nothing else in that space was living. Not until recently.

But here, with him... I belong.

“You going to be working all night?” I look over my shoulder at the spreadsheet on his computer screen.

He closes it and pushes it away on the table, so he can lift me up and sit me in front of him. “Not now that you’re here.”

His hands slide along my sides, over my hips, until they find my thighs and he pushes them open so that he’s seated between my legs.

“I wouldn’t be distracting you from important things would I, Adrian?” I bite down on my bottom lip.

Adrian watches me as his hands slide up and down my legs. “By all means, please distract me.”

I’d like to play hard to get, but it’s impossible with him. One look and I’m a melted mess in his hands. I’d like to spend my whole life with his fingers on my skin, molding me into whatever it is he seems to see when he looks into my eyes.

Reaching for the hem of my T-shirt, I strip it off and throw it into the kitchen. Adrian’s eyes move to my breasts, and I appreciate how his Adam’s apple bobs at one glance of me topless in front of him.

“No bra?” He drags his hands upward and cups my breasts in his palms.

I shake my head and smile, but he pinches my nipples and turns my moan into a scream that I can’t hold back. Adrian is more than a little obsessed with my chest. I’m pretty sure if it was up to him, I’d always walk around topless.

I tip my head back as he kneads me in his hands, before dragging his palms down my stomach and undoing my pants.

“Am I going to find underwear?”

I look up at him and smirk. “Guess you’ll have to find out.”

Planting my hands on the table, I lift my hips so he can peel my skintight red pants from my legs.

“Fuck, El.” His eyes widen as he confirms his suspicions.

“Figured they’d just get in the way.” I shrug.

Adrian throws my pants over his shoulder and instead of a snappy comeback, he dives between my legs.

“Shit,” I curse as his tongue drags along my pussy.

I scratch my fingers along his skull, raking at the short curls that have started to grow since the tour ended.

He spreads my thighs wider with his large hands and devours me like he’s starving and I’m dinner placed on this table in front of him. One thumb moves to my clit, sending my brain spiraling, while his tongue dives inside me.

I’m not sure if I’m moaning or screaming, because the intense feeling drains the sound before it rips from my mouth. I tip my head back and even when I try to cry out, he pinches my clit and all that escapes is grunted silence.

He dives two fingers in and I’m close. So close my legs start shaking and I can’t help but grip his head between my thighs. Right as I reach that edge, Adrian reaches up and grabs my tits

in his hands as he fucks me with his tongue, and I come apart on his face.

I fall back to the table out of breath and shaking. Flinching when he takes the opportunity to pinch my sensitive nipples.

“Fuck, Eloise.” He lifts his head, and I look down to see him smiling at me. “You’re perfect.”

He releases my breasts and stands up to strip. He might as well be carved from stone. The man is a wall of muscles, with perfectly cut lines that aim directly toward his dick.

Sitting back down in his chair, he grips my thighs and pulls me down the table toward him until I land sitting in his lap.

“How did that feel?” He smiles against my mouth, kissing me so I can taste myself on him.

I tip my head back, and he takes the opportunity to dive his face between my breasts.

“So fucking good,” I moan as he draws one of my nipples into his mouth. “I can never get enough of you.”

His hand reaches behind my head and grips my hair to tip my face back.

“Oh yeah?” He grins with such darkness in his eyes that I shiver. “Then show me and ride this dick.”

He grinds his hard cock between my legs, and I already feel heat pooling in my core. Adrian’s strong hands grip my ass, lifting me to position himself at my entrance, before shoving

me down onto him and leaving me breathless. He's rough, hard, ruthless. And it's so fucking hot.

I've spent my life being treated like I'm delicate because I'm a woman, but Adrian sees me for my strengths, not my weaknesses. He knows I can take everything he gives and more. The thought alone makes me soak him in excitement.

"Fucking perfect." He tugs my hair to pull my head back, so he can play with my nipples while I grind my hips in circles on his lap.

His hips lift and twist, hitting every corner I didn't know existed. I clench around him, feeling every ridge of his dick moving in and out as I come apart on him again. With him, I don't mind shattering into pieces, because I trust him with every last one of them.

The waves of my climax subside but the overall sensation ripples across my skin.

Adrian lifts me up to stand and lays me back on the table so my back is flat against it as he pounds into me. Merciless thrusts as he grips my thighs and tugs my body toward him. It's almost too much as he hits the depths of me again and again. My eyes roll back at the sensation and when I open my mouth to scream, he drives two fingers in it, refusing to let me bury it as I cry out around them.

On a final hard thrust, Adrian pulls out and removes his hand from my mouth to grab his dick with it. Coating himself in me as his release shoots all over my stomach and my chest. With the darkest gleam in his eyes, he paints my skin.



Once he's empty, he releases himself and leans forward, both hands on the table on either side of my shoulders.

"You look perfect." He grins.

"Is that so?"

He dips his face down until he's a breath from my lips.  
"That's so."

It's dirty. Filthy. And I love him.

# **EPILOGUE**

**ADRIAN**

## One Year Later

“LOOK AT YOU.” SEBASTIAN stops in front of Merry and grins wide.

Cassie nudges him in the shoulder as if that will stop him.

“Aren’t you pretty.” He winks.

Merry crosses her arms over her chest and gives him a glare so intense I’m surprised he doesn’t burn up on the spot. “Shove it.”

Noah wraps his arm around Merry’s shoulder and gives her a kiss on the cheek. “Don’t listen to that dipshit.”

“Dipshit?” Sebastian pretends to be offended. “Is that any way to talk to the groom?”

“When the groom is you, yes.” Noah quirks an eyebrow.

Sebastian shrugs and Cassie wraps her arms around one of his with a smile.

“Sorry,” she says to Merry. “But you look so pretty in pink.”

“Only for you.” Merry points at her, before taking a sip of her champagne.

Leave it to Cassie to throw a pink wedding. Pink flowers, pink bridesmaid dresses, pink hair for her, and a pink tie on Sebastian. Not that he seems to mind. Because when either of them likes something they’re a little excessive about it, and apparently that draws them to each other.

Looking down at Eloise, she is perfectly polished beside me. So much so that I can't wait to mess her up later. She watches the scene play out in front of us and doesn't seem to mind her pink dress at all.

I was almost certain the band was in for a nuclear reaction when Cassie announced she was going to dress them all in bubble gum pink for her wedding. One look from Merry and an all-out battle ensued. But, even with all her resistance, Merry is a good friend, proven in this moment.

I'm not sure any of us thought we would see the day Merry would be standing in the middle of a jam-packed wedding reception in a bright pink strapless dress. Even if she added her flare with a black studded belt and her trademark *fuck-you* expression.

"It's almost time for pictures," Cassie says, smiling.

She's in a floor-length dress that does some swoopy thing at the bottom all the girls have been fawning over. Eloise told me it's mermaid style, whatever that means. All I know is there's pink lace covering the upper half that matches her hair, and it's fitting for her.

"I need more champagne before that happens." Merry hands her empty glass to Noah.

He trades it for a fresh one from their table and laughs, but it gets a glare out of her.

"Glad I'm amusing you." Merry rolls her eyes.

“Sorry, beautiful. Promise you can take your frustration out on me later.” He tips her chin up for a rough kiss.

Cassie steps forward and pushes them apart. “Noah Hayes, don’t you dare mess up her makeup and hair before we get pictures taken.”

“Better hurry up then.” He winks.

Cassie looks at Sebastian and groans. “Can you get your groomsmen in line and meet me in the back with the photographer?”

“Sure thing, babe.” He leans in, but she shoves him back when he tries to plant a big kiss on her.

“Makeup,” she reminds him, walking away.

Sebastian shakes his head and turns. “What are you grinning at?”

“Your dumb ass.” I shrug.

Eloise looks up and narrows her eyes at me, but there’s amusement in her smirk.

“Where’s Rome so we can get this taken care of?” Sebastian scans the room. “If he delays my plans to ravage my bride, I’m going to disown him.”

“Gross.” Eloise tips her glass in her brother’s direction before taking a sip.

“He’s sorting something out with the D.J.” I look over the crowd.

Sebastian follows my gaze to where Rome is up on stage with his buddy going over the set list or talking shit. Who really knows with Rome. He always has and always will do whatever he wants at any given moment. Much to my ever-rising blood pressure.

“Got it.” Sebastian claps me on the back. “I’m gonna go wrangle him. Meet me by Cassie in ten?”

He holds up his hands with his fingers stretched and I nod.

“Ooh, I love this song.” Merry smiles, grabbing Noah and dragging him toward the dance floor.

“Ten minutes,” I yell after them.

Even at Sebastian’s wedding, I’m standing here trying to keep these guys on schedule. Why do I still associate myself with them?

That’s right—I care. Fuck me for that.

“It is a good song.”

I look down to see Eloise looking up at me with a smile on her face. She slides her hands around my waist and curls close to my chest, which pushes her tits up in her strapless dress. From the grin she’s wearing, she knows exactly what she’s doing.

I groan. “All right. One song. Then pictures because I’d like to stop giving a shit and enjoy the night at some point. Cassie is not going to let that happen until she gets what she wants.”

“One song.” Eloise smiles, knowing she won.

She tugs me out to the dance floor near where Noah and Merry are dancing, pressing herself against me once more.

It's difficult to complain when Eloise feels so good in my arms, so I hold her tighter, trying to let my stress go.

I can't help it. I like order.

Besides, the band should be thankful for that personality trait or we'd never get anything done with the new label, Perdition Productions. Dark name, but that's what you get when you leave the final decision up to Rome. Doesn't matter anyway. People don't care about the name as long as it has Enemy Muse tied to it.

We're up to our ears in demo tapes and shit to do. I don't think I've had a day off in a year.

While the guys handle most of the talent side of things, Eloise and I have been focusing on the business end. It's a good balance and gives me plenty of time with Eloise.

The label's main focus going in was to put artists first. After spending years with a label that didn't treat them as humans, the band wanted to create an environment that values music and people over money. Their passion is drawing talent left and right.

Merry was the first artist they officially signed, and since then, we've signed three other bands.

Between that and Enemy Muse's own music, we're all busy.

Enemy Muse took a few months off after the tour last year to focus on the label, while simultaneously deciding what they

wanted to do. It was enough time to make them miss creating music themselves, so they ended up back in the studio working on anything and everything they ever wanted to do now that they didn't have a label breathing down their necks.

The result was their best album yet. They've held number one spots on the charts for months now, even without touring.

I'm sure eventually they'll want to hit the road again, but for now they seem content just putting out music and focusing on other bands.

Besides, with Noah deciding to follow Merry out on her tour this summer it's been good to not have to juggle schedules.

"You're thinking too much." Eloise runs her finger between my eyebrows.

I close my eyes and let her smooth out my stress with her touch.

"You're right." I squeeze her tighter and dip my forehead down to hers. "The only thing I should be thinking about is you in this sexy bridesmaid dress."

She rolls her eyes. "You think I'm sexy in everything."

"You are."

She shakes her head, but she can't brush off the blush that climbs her cheeks at my comment. It's enough to make me wish we weren't in a room full of people, so I could strip off her dress and see how far down her chest that blush goes.



Eloise sways against me, calming me in a way nothing else in my life can. The nightmares have all but faded, and with some therapy after the events with Cyrus last year, hers have as well.

My head finally feels quiet. I don't wake up with a minefield of memories at risk of exploding. I just exist.

With her.

“Sebastian said something strange to me.” Eloise looks up at me.

With her eyeliner, her burnt umber eyes are extra dark and endless.

“Sebastian says lots of things.”

Eloise smiles. “True. But this was about you.”

I quirk an eyebrow.

“Did you actually create a social media account?” Her eyes narrow with deviousness.

I tip my head back and laugh. “Of course that's what he picked up from that conversation.”

“So there was a whole conversation?”

“Maybe.” I shrug one shoulder.

Eloise looks at me suspiciously. “Going to elaborate?”

I lean down and give her a quick kiss on the forehead.  
“Nope.”

Her face puckers as she looks me over. “I don’t like you colluding with my brother.”

“Trust me.” I squeeze her tightly. “You won’t mind when it comes to this.”

She narrows her eyes but doesn’t argue because she knows me well enough to know I’d never hide anything from her without reason. That and Eloise is the kind of girl who loves surprises, so she probably assumes I’m up to something.

She’d be right. I’ve been walking around with a ring for the last few months trying to figure out the best way to propose, and once Sebastian found out, he insisted on helping me. I don’t need his help but try telling him that once he gets an idea in his head.

I’m still not sure how my proposing at a tulip show means I need social media accounts, but he was adamant about it, and I was too annoyed to argue with him.

“So, back to this social media thing. Is it true?” She nudges me.

She and her brother are as different as can be in most ways, but they both have this uncanny ability to hold onto whatever little bit in a conversation they want and not let it go.

I smile at her. “Maybe.”

“Oh. My. God. Adrian Hale enters the modern age with the rest of us. I never thought I’d see the day.” She pats her hands on my chest and laughs like it’s the funniest thing she’s ever heard.

“Don’t get too excited. I don’t even have a profile picture.”

“The fact that you at least know what a profile picture is...”  
She tips up and kisses me, before pulling back with way too much excitement on her face. “I’m going to relationship status you.”

“Fucking shit.” I shake my head and she laughs.

She knows how ridiculous I find all that crap. If someone doesn’t know my phone number, I don’t know why they need to know what’s going on in my life. But maybe that’s why Eloise and I complement each other. She drags me out of the dark ages.

“I’m taking that as a yes.” She nods once.

“Relationship status me all you want,” I tell her, leaning in and running my nose along the side of her cheek so I can whisper in her ear, breathing in her floral scent. “For you, I’d be fine shouting it from the rooftops.”

She giggles, as I kiss a path up her neck. Soon, she’ll be my wife, and she can scream that all over the internet too if her heart desires.

I don’t want her to be a secret ever again.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Thank you so much for reading *Heart of a Rebel*! If you liked it, please consider leaving a review. Your support means the world to me.

If you're eager for more discussions with other readers of the series, you can join my [exclusive Facebook reader group](#).

Get a sneak peek behind the scenes and stay up to date on my latest releases by [subscribing to my newsletter](#).

### **Keep Reading...**

Ready for the next installment in the Enemy Muse series? Check out Rome and Lili's forbidden romance, [Worth the Trouble](#), and meet the girl with the power to reach the heart of the infamous Riff King.

## WORTH THE TROUBLE

To the rest of the world, Rome Moreno is the Riff King. An icon, a Rock God. When I met him, he mistook me for a stripper and asked me to ride his lap. So consider me unimpressed.

I didn't mean for him to take that as a challenge...

There's no place for a tattooed hunk of trouble like him in the regimented life of a world-class dance princess. My days run on a carefully timed clock – where I go, when I practice, what I eat. I sold my soul to the devil to pay for my dreams, and I've accepted it.

But one taste of forbidden fruit can do the most destructive things. Especially when I discover Rome's scars go a lot deeper than his tattoo ink.

I honestly believed that if they already owned my existence, it meant I had nothing left to lose.

I was wrong.



Continue reading Rome and Lili's story in, [\*Worth the Trouble.\*](#)

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Eloise and Adrian... my quiet pair. I've always loved the unique strength these two represent. In a world of chaos and indulgence, Eloise and Adrian are the glue that holds the band together. All the while, suffering in silence with heartbreaking trauma.

This was a difficult book to write. These two gutted me in so many ways. And they both had so much to overcome individually before they could open up and let each other in. To say they were stubborn pair to write, would be an understatement. But their love and healing was everything.

To all the women and men who have experienced sexual or physical assault, and to the soldiers who return from war with scars inside and out... I want you to know you are seen and heard. You are important. Just because the ripples of pain are individually experienced, and often times invisible to the outside world, does not invalidate them. They are real and I see you.



I hope if you are suffering you find strength in these pages to reach out for help or healing.

*International Sexual Assault Resources:*  
<https://www.rainn.org/>



This series has been an incredible journey. And I couldn't do it without the people in my life who make it possible.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Eva Simmons writes hot, heartbreaking romance with complex heroines, and broken, dirty-talking bad boys who fall hard for them.

When Eva isn't dreaming up new worlds or devouring every book she can get her hands on, she can be found spending time with her family, painting a fresh canvas, or playing an elf in World of Warcraft.

Eva is currently living out her own happily ever after in Nevada with her family.