



HERC
merciless
BODYGUARD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SR JONES

Her Merciless Bodyguard

Ruthless Defenders

Book 3

SR Jones

Skye Jones

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Editing and Cover Design by Silla Webb | Masque of the Red Pen

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Epilogue

*This book is for all the women out there who just want to
shine.*

And for the men who let them.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my editor, Silla Webb

And to all the Alpha girlies, and my beta readers, and the wonderful romance community.

You all rock!

Chapter 1

Summer

THE MUSIC POUNDS BEHIND ME, RAISING TO A CRESCENDO, AND the crowd roars. I hold my arms in the air, the floaty kaftan-style top falling down under my arms in swathes of gold and turquoise. I bounce on my toes. This is better than anything. Better than alcohol. Drugs. Sex.

The high. The frenzy. The adoration. The energy flowing between me and the thousands of fans in front of me.

I feel it all coming from them in waves of pure love.

Bliss.

Over twenty thousand people here ... for me. Well, the band officially, but everyone knows I *am* the band. The only woman out of the five of us.

The music press ran with stories of my untamed ways and my misspent youth and made me the figurehead. I'm the wild child of what remains of the small indie music scene, but the irony is that I'm clean. I don't do drugs anymore. I don't even have a glass of sherry at Christmas.

We're also no longer an indie band and haven't been for a long time. We got signed to a major label, and now here I am, playing packed out arenas and living the healthy life.

Nothing but pure plant-based goodness goes in my body.

The only thing I need now is *this*.

The energy building in front of me and the beat behind my back as Donavon goes to work on the drums.

The man has arms to die for, and no wonder. They get a workout every day.

The crescendo builds, my heart rate rises, the roar from the crowd swells, my feet move faster and faster, and then ... silence. Nothing but the spotlight on me, arms raised.

Then I open my mouth and let out the long high note, and for a moment it's as if I'm flying. Soaring in nothing but pure bliss.

The bass kicks in, my vocals become a part of the symphony we make once more, and the crowd jumps in a frenzy.

All too soon it's over. A lot of musicians get stage fright. It's why they drink and do drugs. To calm it. To conquer it. The sensible ones take beta blockers. Or meditate or some such shit.

I suffer from stage *love*. Nothing, and I mean nothing, in my life has matched the adrenaline of being on that stage. I drank to blot out the mundanity of normal off-stage life, not to drown out any fear. I took drugs to try to recreate that high. It didn't work. Instead, it gave me a damn heart arrhythmia and landed me in hospital for five days.

Now, I don't do anything but chase natural highs. I've jumped out of airplanes. I've dived the deepest seas. If I go skiing, you'll find me on the off-piste slopes, but nothing matches that high of having the crowd in the palm of your hand.

The rest of it, I don't like, and increasingly I'm even coming to hate it. The interviews. The politics of dealing with the record label, the media, the other band members. We're in a sweet spot that suits me just fine, but Zane, our bass player, wants more. Way more. We make money, we fill stadiums, but our sound is retro. We aren't up there with Imagine Dragons, and I'm not Taylor Swift or Gaga levels of fame. Nowhere near. That suits me. It doesn't suit Zane. He loves adoration and the fame.

I only love the stage these days because nothing else compares to riding that high of energy from the crowd. The rest of it is seriously getting me down, though.

I think I might have come close to my stage euphoria, in the ocean, on my surfboard. I bought a summer home in Cornwall, and I've fallen in to hanging with the surfing crowd. From my first time trying, I was hooked. If being on stage makes you feel like a god, being on the waves makes you feel inconsequential and alone in the jaws of nature. They are different, but both are a thrill ride.

More and more these days, I think I'm preferring the inconsequential moments. Those seconds when a big wave comes at you, and you can either ride it or be obliterated. You aren't trying to conquer the wave. It's not an ego thing; you're trying to become one with it. To be accepted by it.

Perhaps in some ways that's how I've been with a crowd on stage. Perhaps it's why I love that part of this music business shit, but not the rest. Being on magazine covers and the rest of the media circus puts you above everyone else. There's you, the famous one, and the fans.

On stage, I genuinely don't feel that way. It's more like an energy, the same as that ocean wave, and you need to tune into it and be one with it. You might be the figurehead, but you're still a part of the overall synergy.

If you get it wrong, the crowd can turn. It's happened to us before at gigs, particularly when we were starting out.

As the roar builds for us to go out and give them more, I prepare myself to ride that wave and to surf with the thousands out there. Nameless and faceless, I never focus on individuals, or I'd lose my nerve. I simply see a sea of energy, and that? That I can ride. I bounce twice on the balls of my feet and then run out to the stage.

I grab the mic in sweaty hands and yell, "You want some more?"

The crowd roars back, and the drumbeat starts as Donovan goes to town on his kit. I close my eyes and start singing ...

flying ... surfing.

Then, all too soon, it really is finished. In a few hours, the stadium will only hold a few tired cleaners and the stench of sweaty bodies, lager, and snack food.

I burst into my dressing room and dance around it, still too buzzed to stay still.

“Goddamn adrenaline junkie.” The low voice from the corner of the room almost has me screaming.

“Jesus, Ron. Warn a girl, won’t you?”

Ron is our label manager. Middle aged. American. Rich. Stupidly handsome and on wife number four who is twenty years his junior.

Why is he here? Ron doesn’t normally come to our shows. We don’t earn him enough to qualify for that offer, and he spends his time babysitting and schmoozing the truly supernova acts under his care.

“Did you watch?” I ask, panting.

I’m aware suddenly that I’m dripping in sweat. I pull my kaftan-style top off, leaving only my crochet bikini top covering my breasts. Ron won’t care. He’s seen it all before. And I mean *all*. He’s seen me naked as the day I was born. We’ve partied a few times at his home in Italy, when he was on wife number three. Lazy days by the pool buck-ass nude, and long nights by the bar. Nothing happened between us, but we’ve seen the goods plenty of times.

I have hot pants on, and I strip those off too, leaving me in the matching bikini briefs.

Ron narrows his eyes. “Summer, you’re looking too skinny.”

I frown and glance at myself in the mirror. I suppose I am thinner than usual. I shrug. “It’s not from bad stuff, I can assure you. In fact, it’s all good. I’ve been clean for over two years now, Ron. You know that. This is from eating healthily and working out.”

“You need to go eat some cake.”

“Why? I like it.” I look at my sporty body. I could be an athlete.

“Because it isn’t hot.”

My jaw drops open as I whirl around to face him. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, come on, Summer. We all know that a damn big part of the band’s success is you, and a big part of your success is all those dads out there in the audience who want you bouncing up and down on their cocks, the way you bounce up and down on that stage. You’ve always been slender but in that nubile, lithe way they like. Now, you’re looking ... sinewy.”

He pushes up from the couch and walks over to me. Hands on my shoulders, he turns me to face myself in the mirror again. “You’ve got to give them some tits and ass. Doesn’t matter if it’s big and juicy, or small and pert, but you need to give them *something*. At this rate, we’re going to have to pay for you to have a tit job, and they never look quite as good as the real thing.”

“Firstly, yes, they do. My friend, Jasmine, owns a pair she paid for, and they are stupendous. I mean, you’d leave your wife for a night with them.” I laugh. They really are spectacular, and they look so damn real. “Secondly, it’s a moot point because I am not getting my tits done for fuck’s sake. I’m a musician.”

He chuckles. “You’re an amazing singer. But you are also hot. That matters. Your whole image was the nymph-like young thing the dads could all drool over but tell themselves it was okay because you were legal ... just. Now? You’re an ex-addict. Heading toward thirty. Lines starting to show, and tits almost gone because you’re an adrenaline junkie who just can’t stop. Look, Summer, you’ll always be a gorgeous woman, but a lot of your appeal was in the free spirit, young girl vibe, and that’s going. How much sun are you getting?”

He holds my hair in his hands and tsks his tongue behind his teeth. “It’s dry. Your skin is getting weathered. Do you use protection.”

I pull away from him, wincing as he doesn't let go of my hair fast enough and it tugs against my scalp. "Fuck you, Ron."

"Careful, Summer. You know you're my favorite, but I'm still the boss."

"I'm twenty-six; how is that heading for thirty?"

"It is. You'll be there in a blink of an eye. All I'm saying is we look after our assets, and you're an asset, and we want you to keep on working with us for a long time. So..." He grabs my hands and holds them, giving me a soft, almost kind gaze.

There's nothing soft or kind about Ron, though, so I know his eyes are lying.

"All I'm saying is try to eat a bit more. Work out a bit less. Wear some sunscreen. Maybe think about a touch of preemptive Botox, and don't spend all summer with a bunch of beach bums."

"Fine," I snap. "Factor thirty it is. Cake every day. No tit job, though. I put my foot down."

There's an amazing vegan bakery near me, and having a slice of cake daily won't be a hardship. It's not as if I'm skinny from trying. I just have endless nervous energy, can't stop moving, and often forget to eat. Particularly when I'm deep in the writing cave working on new songs.

"I can't believe you flew all the way over the Atlantic to tell me to eat more cake," I scoff.

His face grows serious, and this isn't a faked, fatherly concern. He looks ... scared. "I didn't."

Oh God, is the label dropping us? *No*, I tell myself. If that were the case, he wouldn't be lecturing me on what to eat. What then?

"There's something you need to know. We've been trying to handle it, but it is becoming beyond our ability to do so."

I frown. "Is Donavon on drugs again?"

"No, this is about you, Summer."

My heart drops. Oh God, they want to replace me? If I don't have the tit job, they are going to replace me as the front woman, I know it.

The words that come out of his mouth are the last thing I ever expected to hear.

“You have a stalker.”

Chapter 2

Summer

I PAUSE, BLINK AT RON, THEN LAUGH. “ERM, I THINK I’D BE the one to know if I had a stalker.”

“No, you wouldn’t. He hasn’t approached you yet, but he’s been watching you. We say he, but we have no idea at this stage. He, or she, has been writing to you, regularly. It started out sporadic, became monthly, weekly, and it’s almost daily now. The letters go to one of the PO Box addresses that we use for all the band members at the label. They aren’t writing to you here at the English address some fans use, your old offices from before you had us, the way some do.”

“How do you know?” I ask.

“Because Lizzie reads that mail. You still get a few hundred letters a month to the building she works from, the one you started out in. The rest write to us, at the label. Fans mostly use email these days or messages on your social media, which your media manager handles, but this person uses pen. Kind of old school to have a stalker who still uses pen and paper, but there is something of the seventies hippy about you, Summer, so I suppose it fits.” He sighs. “You know that Layla runs your socials. We think the person has also been commenting all over your IG. She blocked them, and they simply came back with a slightly different username but close enough to recognize it is them, and they are saying similar stuff. Same on the band’s Facebook page. The thing that alerted us to this becoming more serious is that the last few letters have up close and personal photographs of you.

They've been as close to you as I am now, and you didn't even know it."

My blood runs cold. My skin pebbles, and I shiver. The sweat is cooling on my skin, and Ron's words are like a cold bucket of ice over me. I reach for my long, soft cardigan and pull it on, wrapping it around me and holding it closed.

"Go on."

"It's not the first time you've had an overly keen fan. It's par for the course. Part and parcel of the business. You always have the security detail with you on any official business, and we thought that was enough. This, though, this person is utterly fixated, and we're concerned about your safety. What about when you're not with the band? In Cornwall? Staying with a friend? You're at risk, we believe. So we want to hire you a close protection detail who will be your shadow. Just yours. By your side day and night until we, or the police, can find this freak. We've handed everything over to the cops, and we also have a private investigator on it. We will find them and stop them, but until we do, well, the label thinks you need a higher level of security."

I blink and take in his words. Me having an obsessed fan seems surreal. That level of devotion is for the Swifties and the Beyonce fans, surely? Not little old me. I don't do Vogue covers or get brand sponsorship deals. I almost laugh at the thought. I live in vintage clothes from the 70's and 90's, mostly skipping the eighties because the decade was a crime against fashion. When I'm on stage, I wear extensions in my hair to make it hang right down my back. Once they are out, it's just beyond my shoulder blades. Stage Summer also dons false eyelashes and heavy kohl. A daisy on my cheek and pale, creamy pink lips. Off stage? I wear very little makeup and mostly wear my hair up in a bun. When I'm enjoying downtime, few people recognize me.

Plus, the UK is lower key than America in general in the way we treat famous people, and because we're Brits, and this is our home, most of us live a normal life away from the tours and album release promos.

“I don’t need a bodyguard, do I?” The idea seems vaguely ridiculous.

“I’m afraid you really do. We’d be remiss in our duties to you if we didn’t bring this to your attention. I’m ... we, the label is scared you could get hurt.”

I sigh and start to pull the clip-in hair extensions out. They’ve fallen off on stage before, but I don’t want the real thing because they hurt my scalp too much. As I take the hair out, parts of Summer the singer drop away to reveal the real me. Summer is my given name, not a stage name, but the persona I wear is almost a character. When I’m on stage, I’m a free spirit and nothing but grace and energy.

Off it, I’m a neurotic, nervous, overly wound-up mess.

I drop the extensions on the counter and frown. They’re getting to be too dark for my hair.

My hair is blonder than it used to be now that I’ve been spending my summers on the beach most days. It’s a warm, golden blonde, and I like it a lot. It makes my light brown eyes pop, I think. Most naturally blonde people have blue eyes or green. And most natural blondes need the help of the hairdresser to stay that color once they hit their twenties and beyond. Not me; the golden tones only seem to get brighter the more time I spend in the sun.

“Do you want to get Eddie to look into it?” I ask.

Eddie is the day-to-day band and tour manager. He comes with us on the bus as we travel all over the place. It’s not glamorous. It used to be, back in the early days when I could clean out an entire hotel bar with my friends. Now that I sip at an orange juice after the show, one room seems like another, and I miss my dogs and the beach.

When I’m touring, they go live with my bro, Sebastian. Our parents are getting older now. Mum had me at forty-four and is almost seventy. They moved to Scotland a few years back when Dad retired and love it there, but it means I don’t see them often. Seb is in London and visits me in Cornwall regularly.

Eddie visits too. He's not just the tour manager, but he's a friend of mine. "Why didn't you simply call Eddie and get him to sort this out and explain it to me?" I ask.

Ron sighs. "You're far too important an asset to the label for this not to be something the board wants sorted at the highest level. Plus, I have contacts." He pauses and scratches the back of his neck. A tell he's nervous. "I have an acquaintance. He runs an outfit that provides close protection to VIPs."

"How do you know him? Does he provide security for Reba?" I ask him, referring to the label's biggest star. A woman who can't go anywhere without being mobbed. A superstar on another level of fame to most of us.

"No, actually. I know him because before he went into the security business, he used to buy and sell failing companies, and one of those companies was a London based record label. He bought it, stripped it, turned the bare bones around, and sold the pickings to me."

I frown as I take a pad of cotton wool from the dresser and pour makeup remover on it, swiping over my left eye to start removing the heavy kohl. "Why not use the firms who provide security for the big guys in the stable already?"

He sighs and once more scratches his neck. "Because we think you need more than generic security. The guys this man has are the best. He's here, with one of them. I said you'd at least meet with them."

Now I understand the neck scratching. He's dropped this on me. Furthermore, how long has he known about this threat and not told me anything?

"How bad is it? Like, what are they saying in their letters? I can tell you're freaked out, Ron, and that's not like you."

"Summer, I'm not going to tell you what is in those letters, but trust me when I say it is bad."

"Great. You know my imagination will do a marvelous job of supplying the details if you don't give them."

“Let it. I’m not saying. Now, will you let me go and fetch Silvanov and his man? Meet them and see if you’re happy to have one of his men with you for the next few weeks until this fucker is caught? The man he’s brought to meet you is highly trained. Ex-Navy SEAL, and not any old SEAL—the ones they call SEAL Team Six.”

I shrug. “That means nothing to me.”

“Let’s just say they are the best of the best. Will you meet with them?”

“Of course, I’ll meet with them, Ron. You blindsided me, but I’m not a rude bitch.”

“Just try to be pleasant.”

“Aren’t I always?”

“No, Summer. You’re not. Sometimes you’re a Grade A pain in my ass.”

I snort as he heads out the door and then turn to stare at myself in the mirror again. I’m hot suddenly when I was cold before. I slip off the cardigan and fan myself with the big, vintage Spanish fan on my dressing table. The thought of being spied on and photographed has me sweating a little again as if I’m on stage, but this is not pleasant. Not the rush of happy adrenaline, but more the low, bass heavy thrum of dread.

* * *

A few moments later the door to the dressing room swings open, and Ron strides in. *Nice knocking, asshole*, I think. I didn’t imagine he’d be so quick, and I’m still wearing my crochet bikini. Two men follow him into the room. They are both massive. That’s the first thing that strikes me. The second is that one of them is seriously hot, but also cocky. I can tell at one glance. My intuition rarely lets me down.

Please, let McHottie-Dick-Features be Silvanov, and the other dude be the one who is to be my new shadow, I send up a quick prayer to the goddess.

“Erm, you got undressed again,” Ron states, with one brow raised.

“I was hot. I thought you’d be longer and that you’d *knock*. Anyway, I wear this on stage some nights.” I shrug. “And a lot less around your pool, Ron, and you weren’t bothered then.”

His cheeks turn a fetching shade of mottled pink, and I’m genuinely confused at his reaction. I’m not ashamed of my body. It’s only flesh and blood and bone. Men are so weird about this stuff.

“Erm, Konstantin...” Ron turns to the not cocky hot one. “This is Summer. Summer, Konstantin Silvanov.”

Damn. So McHottie-Dick-Features *is* the one who is going to be guarding me. Not that Konstantin Silvanov got hit by the ugly branches on the way down or anything, but he’s kind of severe looking, and cold, if the expression in his eyes is anything to go by.

Whereas the other guy is trying to bite back a smirk and failing, from the way his mouth keeps twitching at the corners. He also has those baby blues, framed by thick lashes. A strong, sexy jaw and a wicked mouth.

I can tell with one glance he’s an arrogant player, and he’s going to be the kind of guy I hate.

“Pleased to meet you, Konstantin.” I smile at him, ignoring the other man.

He smiles back, and damn, even his smile is hard. “This is Targe ... *Jake*.” He laughs. “Can’t get used to calling you that.” The man’s voice is rough, and his accent makes him sound sexy as hell.

I glance at Jake.

“What is the name you were going to say?” I turn back to Konstantin.

“Target. His call sign and what most of us call him.”

“Hell, even my mom calls me that now,” Jake says with a chuckle. His voice is deep and carries a gorgeous, velvety undertone.

I always notice voices. Perhaps because I'm a singer.

"Jake, Target, call me what you prefer. My surname is Elland." He smiles at me, and two dimples light up what is already a full wattage grin to supernova levels of sexiness.

Oddly, though, he leaves me cold deep down, beyond that surface jolt of attraction that I imagine most straight women would get from his looks. I've seen so many of his type doing what I do. The number of men who try it on with you when you're the lead singer of a band is legion. He has the easy charm and the smile, but I've seen it all before. Maybe it's a good thing it's him guarding me because *him*, I can see right through. The other one, not so much.

I go back to wiping my makeup off, giving the men my back. I'm not trying to impress, so I don't care if they see me with kohl smeared all over my face. Or if they see my ass cheeks poking out of my swimsuit.

"So, you're going to be my new protection detail?" I ask as I swipe.

"Well now, that's up to you," Konstantin replies. "We feel that Jake here would be the best fit. He's incredibly well trained. He is charming enough to blend in with people if you must go to events, while some of our other men lack that trait. He's also an adrenaline junkie, the way you are. He'll be happy to jump out of planes alongside you or go skiing down some deadly mountainside."

I drop the cotton pad and turn slowly to Konstantin. "How much, exactly, do you know about me?"

"What Ron here told me, and what I read about you. I always do my research."

"Why?" I demand. I'm being that prickly bitch Ron warned me not to be, but I can't help myself.

Konstantin doesn't even blink at my tone. He walks closer to me, stepping deeper into the room and more into the light. "If you were a total nightmare, the way some in your profession are, I'd have turned down the assignment. I'm not about to possibly waste a man's life on someone so strung out

on drink and drugs that they're a danger to themselves and others."

He means someone like me, a few years back.

"If you say yes to having Jake here as your detail, there are some rules you must adhere to. Break them, and I withdraw Jake."

Wow, he's talking to me as if I should be grateful. "I'm the fucking client," I say. "Aren't you supposed to do whatever I want?"

"You're not the client. Ron is. And no, you must do what Jake here says when it comes to matters of your security and personal safety, at all times. My staff at the base will vet and, if needed, *handle* all your social media moving forward too."

"Yeah, sorry, no. I don't think we're a good fit."

I turn to Ron. "Thanks, Ron, but no thanks."

Konstantin shrugs. "Fine. Your choice. But personally, I'd prefer being bossed around for a little while than risk being found by the person who wants to rape me with my own music award. That's a pretty creative and specific fantasy your stalker has right there."

I can literally feel the blood draining from my face. I reach behind me to hold the chair for support. "What?"

"Erm, Konstantin, I hadn't quite gone over the nature of the threats," Ron says.

"Why not?" Jake snaps.

His attitude takes me by surprise because all the laid-back charm is gone, utterly wiped out by a cold, calculating gaze as he glares at Ron.

"It's not in her best interest," Ron says. "She must go on stage every night and perform. It might put her off, having that stuff in her head."

"She has a right to know," Jake says. "If she doesn't know the full extent, how can she make informed decisions? You're

keeping it from her, for what? So, you can have the cash cow carry on delivering?”

Okay. I’ve changed my mind. He’s hired.

“I’m the one paying you,” Ron snarls.

“I’m not talking about sending Summer every lurid, weird thing this dude has scrawled on a page, but she needs to know the severity of the threats. Although, perhaps not quite in the detail my boss here has just given.” Jake flashes Konstantin an annoyed glare.

He’s not even hired and he’s already going to bat for me with my boss and his own.

“He’s right, Ron,” Konstantin states with a sigh. “I went too far, but we can’t keep someone safe who doesn’t understand the severity of the threat. The same way I’ve laid down the rules for Summer, I’m going to lay them out for you. Full disclosure for the client, or we walk.”

Ron huffs out an annoyed breath but then gives a curt nod and turns to me.

“The threats are extreme, violent, and increasingly sexual in nature. We believe that the person stalking you is an imminent threat; hence, why I suggested a special close protection detail. One that doesn’t leave your side.”

“You’ll have to sleep, no?” I say to Jake.

“Of course, but I’ll be in the room next to you, and there will be alarms set up all around your property in Cornwall. You only have a couple of UK tour dates left, before you start the European leg in a few weeks’ time, right? Before you start the European leg of your tour. I suggest you return to your coastal home for a while during the break. Also, I’m not the only person on this detail.”

“Oh?” I glance at Ron and then Konstantin.

“We have two undercover men who will be at the hotels, following you guys. They aren’t known to you, Ron, or anyone. Target here is the man who will be by your side. Obvious. Visible. The other two are ex-Spetsnaz and ex FSB,

which is ex-Soviet special security services. Trust me—they are excellent, and no one will know they are there. No one will know who they are.”

Ron clears his throat. “I still think I ought to know as the label executive who called you.”

Konstantin shrugs, clearly not bothered one jot by what Ron thinks. “I must ensure that no one within the organization who might be doing this finds out who the other guys on this are. In fact, knowledge of their existence stays in this room and back at base with my team. No one must know. They’ll be there however, Summer, wherever you are. Hotels. Concerts. Ron has given us your tour schedule, and they will be with you the entire time. If you decide to use our services.”

“Jake is like a decoy?” I ask. “There to be seen.”

Jake clears his throat, and his jaw tightens.

“Christ, no.” Konstantin shakes his head. “Jake is cleared to carry his weapon here. He’ll be armed. He’s an excellent shot. He won’t hesitate. The man is not window dressing. He will be visible and hopefully a deterrent, and he’s the one the bullet stops with. Jake is your closest protection.”

He pauses. “I have every ounce of faith in him, but if the worst were to occur and you guys were in trouble, he has an alarm he can press and the men we have in the background will come running. They’ll only be moments away. We will give you one too. The alarm will also alert us at the head office, and I can get police there fast, as well.”

“Like those alarms old people wear around their neck?” I ask.

“Again, no. Tiny. Discreet. I’d suggest attaching it to a small key ring and always keeping it on you. Except for when you’re on stage.”

“You seem like a truthful guy. Do you think I’m safe on stage?”

He pauses for a moment. I know what he’s going to say because of the pause and because Ron opens his mouth to begin to speak, but Konstantin holds a palm up in front of

Ron's face. He silences the head of the rock division of the world's biggest record label with the arrogant gesture, and I almost laugh. *Wow*.

"Truthfully, Summer, as I told Ron here, no. I don't believe you are completely safe on stage. We can't... *No one* can protect you against someone shooting at you from the crowd."

"The risk is low, though." Ron shoots Konstantin a death glare. "It's very unlikely any stalker here in the UK has a gun. Most stalkers don't do things out in the open either; they lurk in the shadows. Shooting you isn't something that is likely from this person."

"I see you've all been discussing this in depth, and yet no one told me, *Ron*. You don't think that's shitty?"

"I do," Jake says. "If you do hire us, and I'm the person you choose as your personal protection, then there will be none of this secrecy from me. I'll be upfront."

Since he dropped the oozing charm persona, I find Jake a hell of a lot more tolerable. He's still stupidly handsome of course, and massive. Muscles on muscles if the way he fills out his shirt is anything to go by. Konstantin is even bigger, but he's also terrifying, without any of the charm Jake can layer on.

The door bursts open, and Jake's hand goes to his hip. His shirt is hanging loose over his pants, and I realize he has a gun there. Jesus.

It's Zane, our bass guitarist. He's the bad boy of the band, and the one all the girls want. He's a huge Tik Tok star, as viral videos of him ripping his shirt off during a tour last year shot our single to the top of the Spotify charts. It was a brief moment of a real taste of fame, but it didn't last. He's also a dick, but I love him anyway—the way you would an annoying brother. We were once something vaguely more, but no longer. I had to call an end to it when I cut out all the other bad habits. Zane is as toxic as fuck as a lover.

"You planning on getting some sun, Summer?" He waggles his brow at my bikini, comes over to me, and slaps

my right ass cheek.

“Fucker.” I smack his hand away.

He wraps his arm around my neck and pulls me into him, kissing my cheek. “How wild was that? You were on fucking fire. I almost came at the end with the energy from that crowd.”

I roll my eyes.

He’s done some coke. I can tell. He’s always more arrogant when he’s had some.

As if he’s only realizing there are other people in the room, he turns to them. Then his face sobers. “Oh, hi, Ron.”

“Zane.”

“What’s this? A mother’s meeting?”

“It’s private,” Konstantin snaps.

Zane turns his gaze on Konstantin and for a long beat, considers him. “Okay. I’ll leave you guys to it. You were awesome, Summer.” Then he does something I’ve never seen Zane do before. He nods politely and walks away.

“Where will you be if I need to find you?” Ron asks.

“I have twins in my dressing room, so knock.” Zane flicks his tongue out at Ron, waggles it obscenely, and walks out.

“Christ,” Jake mutters.

“After we are done here, I’ll tell the rest of the band about the situation. I don’t think you should cancel the European leg of the tour, Summer. It could impact the band’s sales permanently.” Ron scratches the back of his neck and then rubs his nose as if he’s getting a cold. A sure sign he’s stressed. Bet he’s dying for some of Zane’s coke.

“I need to think. I’ll finish the dates we have left in the UK, and then I’ll do as Jake suggests and head to the coast, and I’ll consider your suggestion. I want all the correspondence.”

“What?” Ron acts as if I’ve slapped him. “No, Summer. You don’t need to see this stuff.”

“I want the correspondence. All of it. Everything.”

“You heard the lady,” Konstantin says. Then he turns back to me. “You want Jake, yes or no? You want someone else? Or are you going to find your own detail?”

“I want Jake,” I say simply.

“Good.” Konstantin slaps Jake on the back. “You know when to report in.” He turns back to me. “You’ll be getting a call from a lady named Cassie. She’s my wife, and she runs things at the office. She’ll talk you through the social media side of things. You might want to chat with Reece too. He’s the guy who helps with that.”

He strides right up to me. “I know this is scary. You have my word that we will do everything in our power to keep you safe. Ron might be paying me, and he might be the client, but you are the person in danger, and you are my and my entire team’s priority.”

I nod and for some stupid reason, find myself blinking back tears. Jesus, if I had Daddy issues, I’d be halfway in love with this guy already. There’s just something so commanding about him.

“So ... erm, does Jake stay now, from this moment?” I ask, glancing at the huge American towering in the corner.

“Yes. He stays.”

“And he has ... he has a gun?”

“Yes.”

“How did you swing that here?” Ron asks.

Konstantin shrugs. “Connections.”

“Okay. Thanks,” I say, wanting to end this now so I can get back to the hotel and have my upcoming breakdown in private.

“I’ll go talk to the band.” Ron saunters over to me and tips my chin up with a sweaty thumb. “I swear, Summer, I didn’t keep this from you to keep the money rolling in. I thought it

would fuck you up, and there might never have been a need to tell you but as it escalated, I realized that keeping it from you was wrong and that I had to share the information with you. I'm sorry.”

He kisses my forehead and then leaves with Konstantin.

Suddenly, it's just my bodyguard and me.

Chapter 3

Jake

THE WOMAN IN FRONT OF ME IS A STRANGE SIGHT. THE DOOR closes behind K, and I'm left with a lady in a bikini, in the dead of night, with wild hair, one eye bare, and the other heavy with kohl. She looks slightly unhinged.

"I suppose I better get dressed," she says.

"I'll turn around and give you some privacy." I turn and face the wall and look at the posters lining it as she rustles around in the background behind me. There are posters for comedy acts, bands, and famous solo singers. There's one, faded and torn at one corner, which makes me smile. Kate Bush. Mom used to listen to her obsessively when I was a kid.

One of the posters is from a band I saw two years ago, back home in California. Not that it really is home these days. I move around so much I don't feel as if I have one anymore. Then again, it's been that way for most of my life. My parents moved all over the place when I was a kid. My youth seemed to be spent as the perpetual new kid at the start of every term. It made making friends difficult.

In fact, I didn't really have any friends until I joined the military. Now, instead of friends, I have a band of brothers. We might not see each other regularly these days, but I know that if I ever called any of them at three in the morning needing help, they'd be there. Even if they had to fly across the world, they'd give me anything I needed. It goes both ways.

It's crazy to me how many of them recently seemed to have found some sort of peace. Priest has his lady, Roze, and

his new home on Corfu, but more than that, he has a purpose. Priest and Roze are running a charity for victims of domestic violence, and they're both totally wrapped up in it. It's no surprise because he has always been an honorable man. It's how he got his call sign. Not because he is religious, but because you can tell him anything and he'll take it to the grave.

Everyone thinks I'm called Target because I'm good with a sniper rifle, but that's not the reason. I got my call sign because back in the day, when things were a little wild, there wasn't a woman I couldn't close the deal with if I put my mind to it. Cole had said that any woman I targeted always ended up in my bed. That's how the name came about, and it stuck.

I've stopped all of that, though. Drinking too. And the partying. I slowly realized that I was just chasing the high of combat in various self-destructive ways. It's ironic that a lot of the guys I served with spend their time trying to get over their time in combat. I must be insane because I miss it. So fucking bad.

There's nothing like the adrenaline rush you feel right before you step into a gunfight. It is the most alive one can ever feel.

The woman I'm now guarding seems to be chasing something too. When Konstantin did a deep dive into her background, we saw that for a long time she'd struggled with drug and alcohol issues. A couple of years back, she ended up in rehab, and it appears she's been clean since. I'm not going to judge. At one point, I was keeping Jack Daniels shareholders in the lifestyle they were accustomed to. Now, Summer gets her kicks from doing crazy stuff like jumping out of airplanes. I get that. It might not be the exact same way that I've tried to find peace from my demons, but I do understand it.

I have my own dirty little secret that no one knows about. Not even Konstantin with his army of hackers and investigators. When it all gets too much, and I need to feel that rush, I go to my favorite underground fight club and go a few

rounds with the latest street fighters. Win or lose—it doesn't matter. It's the fight that I'm looking for.

It's ironic to me that humanity seems to be split into thirds. There are those of us always seeking and chasing the adrenaline. There are those of us trying to hide from any sort of rush whatsoever and keep their world entirely safe. Then there's the other seventy percent or so, the vast majority, who lies somewhere in the middle. They are probably the well-adjusted ones. Some people might call them the boring ones. I bet their lives are easier than mine though.

“Okay, you can turn around now.”

There's more rustling, and I turn to see Summer packing a few things into a cavernous bag. She's wearing jeans and a Ramones t-shirt. Her hair is pulled into a loose ponytail, with a few tendrils hanging around her face. She's reapplied a little makeup, I think. Her lips are a rosy pink, and there's a little pink to her cheeks too, but that's all I can see. The rest is just barefaced prettiness. She is pretty too. Of course, I'd seen the press photographs of her many times. She looks gorgeous in those, but anyone can look good with the right lights, a face full of makeup, and a talented photographer.

In the flesh, she's just as pretty but in a different way. She looks younger and fresher. I already know what her body looks like because she spent the first ten minutes of our acquaintance wearing nothing but a string bikini. Her figure is fantastic. Lean, toned, fit, and healthy. Her manager had been grouching about her needing to put weight on as we walked to her dressing room.

He was worried any extra stress might mean she ate even less. He said she got far too skinny, and guys wouldn't be jerking off to someone with no tits and ass. He sees her as nothing more than a lump of meat to make them money, and I hold little respect for him.

As for her body... It's gorgeous the way it is.

I've been with women of all shapes and sizes and can honestly say I find a variety of figures beautiful. There are some guys who have a type, and they always go for that same

look. Not me. There's a beauty in some people that just shines out from them. It could be the way they move, the way they laugh or smile, or even their voice.

Because I am an admitted manwhore, the guys expect me to always go for the model perfect girls, whereas I rarely do. Sometimes they'll ask me why I choose a particular woman. They might say something like: *her friend is a lot hotter*. And yeah, I'll look and can see it objectively, but they don't have anything that holds my interest.

It might be as simple as the way the woman I decide to hit on that night dances. Or even the way she holds a drink. People seem to think guys like me, who spread it around, are assholes who hate and degrade women, but I've honestly always enjoyed their company, often more than men. I don't think the women who have slept with me are whores, or loose, or whatever other shit men say about women who enjoy sex.

I've never had a moral issue with my sleeping around, but I realized when I got right down to it that the sex, and the Jack Daniels, were distractions from the emptiness, and eventually one or the other would kill me. So, I stopped. Instead, I started getting my face smashed in on the regular. It's ironically safer because you can't kill your opponent in the underground ring I fight in. It's the only thing in the rules.

"Okay, I'm ready to leave." Summer slings her bag over her shoulder and walks toward me.

"Where are we heading?" I wonder if she wants to go to some raucous post-concert party.

"To the hotel," she says. "I don't go to the parties anymore." Her face looks a little sad when she says this. "I kinda miss it in a way. It's great after a concert when you're buzzing on a high, but I can't risk it. Too much alcohol there." She turns to me, then gives me a soft smile. "I suppose you've read all about me?"

I nod because I'm not an asshole, and I'm not going to lie. Anyway, she already knows that K did a deep dive on her.

“Then you know that I had an addiction problem.” She shrugs. “I thought it would be the drugs that would be the hardest addiction to break to be honest. Strange thing is, I don’t really miss them. Put me in a room with a bottle of Johnny Walker, though, and I start to itch. I soon figured out it was best for me not to go there.”

“How do you come down from the high then?” I ask her.

“How do you know that it’s a high?” She shoots me a look as she opens the door. “Maybe I hate it out there.”

I’ve just watched her perform, and I swear she transformed into a goddess on that stage. She was the deity, and the audience were her worshippers. There is no way she wasn’t riding that high. I put my hand on her upper arm to slow her roll as I turn to her.

“Listen, I know all about your past, so fair is fair... I had the same issues as you. The drink at least, and for me, women too. The reason I did it was chasing the high of battle. Nothing, and I mean *nothing*, felt as good as that moment right before I had to run into a hail of bullets.”

Her eyes widen.

“I know it makes me sound crazy, but going into battle was very much like I imagine a concert is for you. I watched you out there tonight. I’m a good judge of character, Summer. And if you try to tell me that you hated it, I’m going to call you the biggest liar I’ve ever met. You loved every single second of it. You were so high from the love of that crowd that I bet you could see the curvature of the earth.”

A thought hits me then, unbidden, and so *wrong*, that I push it immediately from my mind.

I bet she’s wet from it.

She gives another one of those lazy shrugs that I’ve come to realize is a common piece of her body language repertoire. “It is a high for me, yes. Like nothing else on earth. You got me.” She turns to me, and her eyes are glowing as if lit from within.

They're a beautiful warm brown, and in the bright lights of the hallway, they look almost golden. It's an unusual combination, the honey brown eyes, tan skin, but with golden blonde hair. I wonder if her hair is natural then or highlights, but there isn't the regrowth associated with highlighted hair; it's blonde all the way to the tip of her head.

She gives a bitter little laugh that almost sounds like a cough. "That's why I did the drinking and the drugs. The same way you did. I wanted that same high, but I never really found it. And, of course, the depths of the next day were horrific. A raging hangover is bad enough, but add in the feeling when you've done ten lines of coke, and it is the biggest downer."

"How do you cope without it?" I ask.

"I have to. My after-show routine now is to go back to the hotel, change into my workout gear, and hit the gym. I put rock music on, loud. I work out, even though I've just spent hours on stage dancing and singing and screaming into that mic until I'm sweating. I still need to work out and loosen up. Let it out. I take a swim, then I hit the hot tub. Finally, I head back to my room and take a shower or maybe a soak in the bath or watch a movie. By the time I go to bed and hit my meditation playlist, I'm exhausted, and I do sleep. It works for me."

I nod in understanding. "Yeah, I work out a lot too."

She surprises me when she reaches for me and grabs hold of my bicep, squeezing through my shirt. "No shit, Sherlock."

"I don't do it for the muscles, though. I work out to try to get rid of some of the adrenaline I always seem to carry."

"How do you get rid of the rest of it?" she asks.

I start to walk down the corridor again, taking hold of her elbow and pulling her with me. "I'll plead the fifth on that one for now."

"Oh, I see," she says with a slight sneer. "You get to know all about me, but I don't get to know all about you. Not fair."

If I tell her, she might tell K and demand new protection. If K finds out I get my kicks in illegal underground fighting

circles, I'm pretty sure he'll throw me off his team. And if he doesn't, Andrius most certainly will.

I need to throw her a bone, though, and get her off the scent. I turn and toss her a blinding grin that I hope is charming and carefree enough to fool her. "Let's just say I like my sports and activities extreme. A bit like you. Maybe even more so."

She laughs at that. "Baby, no one is more extreme than me."

I join in with her laughter, thankful my distraction technique may have worked. We walk down the corridor together in silence, passing door after door where loud music blasts, and from one of them screams and gasps.

"Fuck, harder," a woman moans.

"That's Zane's room, if you couldn't have guessed," she says with a roll of her eyes. Her cheeks flush though, and I file that away. Do her and Zane have history? If so, it's something I need to know.

"Fuck, yes," a man roars.

Jesus.

As we walk down the corridor, there are people drinking, smoking, and some people kissing and fondling one another.

It's like the people all around us didn't realize the nineties have come and gone. There are about ten sexual harassment lawsuits I see within just a few minutes. This is Summer's world, and it's a different one than most of us inhabit these days.

Summer ignores it all. She walks to the doors and pauses. She looks at me and grins as she pulls a ball cap down over her face, before pushing open the doors.

My heart sinks when I see the crowds gathered.

Here we go.

Chapter 4

Jake

I SHOULDN'T HAVE WORRIED BECAUSE SUMMER THE SINGER disappears before she steps out of the doors.

She pauses on the doorstep, still in the darkened recesses of the hallway, and takes something out of her bag, pulling it down over her face.

It's a navy baseball cap, and it hides her hair and the profile of her face. As she walks, she changes her gait. She does this thing where she shrinks in on herself, reducing her height, and walks like an old man. She slips out of the building and past the gathering fans without anyone noticing her. It's a side door she's taken, but there's still a group of around fifty people hanging about. Not one of them glances her way. In fact, more of them look at me.

So, this is how stars go incognito.

This is going to be one hell of an interesting assignment.

She walks around the corner, pulls a key from her bag and clicks it, and a car beeps to our right. It's a Mercedes sports car, convertible. Fancy. I glance around me, on alert as always, and once she's safely in the driver's seat, I slide into the passenger seat.

"Nice car," I say.

"Thank you," she replies with a grin. "I purchased it a couple of years ago when our album went platinum. I've always wanted a poser's car. I'm not really into flashy things in general, but this car is flashy. I know that, but I don't care,

so sue me. She's my baby." She pulls smoothly out of the parking lot and onto the quiet night road.

"How far is it to the hotel?"

"Not long," she says. "Takes me about fifteen minutes if the traffic is light, which it is this evening. So, are the other security guys following us right now?"

"They will be, yes."

"Do you know who they are?" she asks.

"I do," I reply, a note of wariness creeping into my tone. Myself, K, and Andrius, along with Reece and Cassie are the only people who do know.

"But you're not going to tell me."

"I could, but then I'd have to kill you." I deadpan. Then I grimace at myself. It's not a funny joke, what with her facing a possibly homicidal stalker and all. "All you need to know," I try to smooth it over, "is that they're the best. Anybody recruited by Konstantin and Andrius are absolutely hot shit."

"Hhhmmm." She hums out the sound, low and thoughtful. "I take that to mean you think of yourself as hot shit." She flashes me a look before focusing on the road.

I ponder her words for a moment. "When it comes to protecting people, I suppose I do. I'm extremely well trained. That's not me being big headed; it's just the truth. There are *very* few people who can get through the training for the SEALs. To get into the special development team, well, you have to be the best of the best. And I suppose to head into the situations we do, you have to feel bone deep that you're the best of the best. Otherwise, you can't do it."

"I get that, actually." She shoots me another quick glance. "It's the same with me. I do have my doubts and days where they plague me, but when I get up on that stage, I *know* that I can hold that crowd. You need to have that untouchable self-belief, or you would never do what I do. Having said that, there are many singers who allegedly don't. They need to take drugs or to drink. Some of them need medication to go out and perform. I don't really understand that myself. I suppose

there's a part of every performer deep down somewhere who believes they are a little bit special. Even if you have massive anxiety before you get onto that stage, or in front of the camera if you're an actor, the very fact that you want to do in the first place must mean there's a little tiny part of you that thinks you're the GOAT, you know?"

She uses her blinkers to indicate to turn right, and we head off the main road down a quiet tree-lined street. The *GOAT*. Her using that expression reminds me of how much younger than me she is. The girl might be famous, but she's barely out of her early twenties, and I'm over the hump of my mid-thirties.

"It makes sense." I automatically check for my gun at my hip as we approach the road that houses the hotel. "It's the same with what I do. To decide you want to be in the special forces, there has to be a certain element of real self-belief, or you wouldn't try. Plenty of people stop during the training, for sure, but to get there in the first place, part of them had to have believed they could do it. To complete the training is a whole other level. It's not the most physically fit who succeed but those who have the mental grit to see it through to the end."

"Really?" She doesn't sound bored, so I continue.

"Yes. There were guys who were stronger, faster, and had better endurance than me. What they didn't have was the mental aptitude to complete the training. It's probably the same with famous people or anyone at the top of a demanding profession. You don't get there if you're not determined. You don't get there if you're not willing to try, and try, and try. For every person who stands in front of a huge crowd the way you do, ten times as many stumbled at the first block."

"It's true. They say for every famous movie star there are thousands who walked at the third rejection."

"There you go then. It's the same with Hell Week. People give up mentally. They walk away."

I pause for a moment as I consider my words. "I'm not talking about people who really crack," I say. "To my mind, that's the same as breaking a leg. It's an injury. I'm talking

about people who give up. You see it all the time during training. They just think: *fuck it*, I've had enough. I can't blame them because it's horrendous. They don't want it badly enough, and the pain isn't worth the reward. I did want it. The fact that I did, and the fact that I went through what is considered the most difficult military training in the world by many, means I have certain skills now. I don't think I'm infallible, but I do trust my instincts."

She casts me another one of those quick glances, and there's a sly smile playing about the corner of her lips. "You do know that many people say the best military training in the world is actually the British Special Forces?" Her smile grows bigger.

"Oh, no you didn't. Now, you're getting into tricky territory. You could start World War Three with talk like that, young lady."

"Young lady!" she exclaims with a squeal of delight. "Did you just travel back in time?"

"I'm a gentleman, so I used the polite term. Perhaps politer than I was feeling at your most egregious suggestion."

"You think you SEAL guys are better than the British SAS then?"

"Absolutely."

She giggles, and it's a nice sound. Joyful and happy. Then it trails off as if she's letting the worry back in. The things she's learned in the past hour must be playing on her mind. They would for anyone.

"Here we go," she says, indicating right and pulling into a parking lot by the small hotel where she's staying.

I was surprised when I heard that Summer wasn't staying in the same place as the rest of the band. The other guys are residing at a luxurious five-star place in the center of the city. Summer chose this smaller, boutique hotel on the outskirts. It looks nice, but it's giving me major anxiety that she spent last night out here alone when there's someone stalking her.

“Do you always stay separate from the rest of the band?” I ask. “Is it common for you to be out here in quiet hotels on your own when touring?”

As she smoothly slides the car into a parking spot, a hint of blush colors her cheek. “No,” she says reluctantly. “That’s the only five-star hotel in this town that’s big enough to house everyone and, well, I’m sort of banned from there. I didn’t want it to ruin the experience for everyone else. We could have all fit into the Travelodge or somewhere similar, but it doesn’t have the same facilities. I didn’t think everyone else should have to suffer because of me. I said on this occasion I’d stay somewhere separate. To be honest, I’ve enjoyed it. This place is nice. It’s cute, and the rooms are comfortable. I quite like being away from everybody.”

“What did you do to get banned from the other hotel?” I’m intrigued now.

“Oh no,” she says with the shake of her head. The movement loosens a few more tendrils, and they fall around her face in golden strands. I get the strangest urge to brush it back from her forehead, but I keep my hands tightly by my side, so I don’t do anything inappropriate. “You know I can find out.” I shoot her a wink as we unclip our seat belts. “All I need to do is ring Konstantin, and he can find out in an instant.”

“Yes, you could, but that would be a dick move. You don’t seem like a dick to me, *Target*.” She says my call sign with such a lingering disdainful emphasis that it’s almost enough to make me pissed. “If you want to be a dick, then by all means call the boss and find out my dirty laundry.”

Oh, I can be a dick; I never claimed to be anything different. I’m about to shoot her a cocky reply when she grabs the door handle. I rest my hand on her upper arm, halting her. “Let me get out first and check around, okay?”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously. I need to make sure it’s safe and there’s nobody lurking around before you get out. From now on, whenever we arrive anywhere, I get out of the car first. It’s a

hard and fast rule. You stay put while I check everything is clear, then I'll come open your door. You don't get out of a car until I'm at that door holding it open for you, understood?"

The easy vibe between us for much of the journey disappears as her eyes narrow. "I don't like your bossy attitude," she says.

"Tough, lady. It's a basic enough rule. I don't see what your problem is with it. Most women would love for a man to get out of the car and open the door for them."

"Your idea of what most women would like seems to be stuck in the previous century."

Ignoring her, I climb out of the car and look around. There's nobody in the parking lot, so I jog around to her side and open her door. I offer her my hand, but she shuns it.

Climbing out of the car and hoisting her bag onto her shoulder, Summer walks in front of me to the back entrance of the hotel.

When we reach our side-by-side rooms, I hold my hand out, stopping her from entering hers. I step inside and check it out thoroughly. When I beckon for her to enter, she does so with a wary glance around. "I'm not going to feel very safe with this situation, even with you next door."

She sighs and chews her lip.

The room is a suite, not fancy like the big five-star hotels but comfortable and spotless. When you step inside from the hotel hallway, you enter the small living space with a desk and chair, a mini fridge, television, and a comfy chair, along with a large sofa. There's a door to the right and that leads to a small, self contained bedroom, with an attached bathroom.

"I can take the sofa," I say easily. "Then I'm right here with you."

She blinks at me. "I can't ask you to do that. You won't get any sleep on the sofa."

I laugh. "I could sleep on the floor."

"Really?"

“Yeah. I’ve slept on sand, stone, concrete, and even on the side of a mountain once. A hotel sofa is fine.”

A small grimace tugs at her pretty mouth. “I’m like the Princess and the Pea in comparison. If my bed doesn’t have at least a memory foam mattress and a topper, I sleep for shit.”

I shrug as I glance around the room. “It’s what you get used to, I suppose.” Then I crack the mini bar and take out a bottle of water, offering her one too. She raises one brow, and I realize that I’m helping myself in her room, so I try the *aw shucks, sorry*, smile that I hand out when I do something that isn’t too polite.

She rolls her eyes.

What the hell? No one rolls their eyes at my patented charm.

Taking the bottle, Summer narrows her eyes slightly. “You know, that charm you ooze doesn’t work on me.”

I’m genuinely intrigued because it works on most people. “It doesn’t? Not even a little?”

“Not a smidgen. It’s fake. An act.”

Well, crap. It is fake, an act, one I’ve been wearing so long it fits like a second skin. “So ... drop the charm?”

“Yes, Marvel, because I don’t find it endearing at all.”

“Marvel?”

“Yep. You’re like a Marvel hero come to life. All muscles, tan skin, blue eyes, and that grin of yours; along with your lifesaving, fighting the baddies abilities, of course. But you see? It’s not my thing.”

Damn. I place a hand over my heart and stagger backward. “You’ve fatally wounded me, m’lady,” I say in a mock British accent.

“The only thing wounded is your ego, and it’s a dint. Hey,” she says with a cheeky grin. “Maybe that’s your superpower? Your ego is bulletproof. I’m going to call you EgoMan. Capital E, capital M.”

Okay, now she's starting to genuinely make me tetchy.

"My ego is not that big."

"Sure, it isn't."

"What the fuck about yours?" I point at her. "You're the one who stands in front of ten, twenty thousand people a night and takes their worship into her soul."

"I have an ego. Not denying it. It's not the same thing, though. See, who I am on stage is an act, a person I invented. I love it, being her. It's a blast, but then I come back to reality, which is starting now, by the way, and it's a downer because me, the real me, is no one special. I'm not all that clever. I'm not brave. I'm not stunningly beautiful. I don't have a lot of friends, and my dating life is a disaster."

I file these nuggets of information away for later perusal.

"The one thing I have is my voice. I know I can sing, and hey, there are better technical singers out there than me; I can't hit the notes some can. I don't have the range some have, but I have something people like. I don't know what it is, but I have it. So yes, there my ego resides. This?" She waves her hands over herself. "There's not much ego for this if you must know the truth. And now I'm going to crash into the biggest post-show downer, and you'll see what a mopey bitch I am, so you better beware. I need to go work out, or the other option is drinking that mini bar dry and crying myself to sleep."

"Right, okay. Gym it is, then."

"Do you have gym clothing with you?" she asks.

"Yes. My bag is in my room. I can take two minutes and go change, then bring it in here, and we can hit the gym."

"Sounds like a plan. You'll need swim shorts too. Do you have those?"

"I do."

"You're a regular Boy Scout."

"I swim a lot. Whenever there's a pool nearby. Figured there'd be a few, and if you wanted to hit it, I'd be more than

happy to.”

“You like swimming then?”

I give her an exaggerated shocked glance. “I’m a SEAL; it’s what we do.”

“Of course. Right, well. Go grab your stuff, EgoMan, and I’ll get changed.”

I ignore her nickname, even though I hate it, and head to the door. She’s annoying as fuck, but the fact she sees through my act is something I find weirdly hot. She called me on my shit, and very few do. I can’t find her hot. She’s the job not a dating prospect, so I need to lock that shit down.

“See you in five.” I head out the door without a backward glance.

Chapter 5

Summer

EGOMAN. I CHUCKLE AT MY OWN JOKE AS HE CLOSES THE door behind him. I think he dislikes the nickname, and I shouldn't wind him up when he's standing between me and my stalker, but it's true. He has a massive ego. Add in the fake charm, and I bet the world, so far, has simply let him steamroll himself all over it.

Not me. I'll do what he says when it comes to my safety, but I won't fall for his fake charm, and I won't let him steamroll me in the same way.

He annoys me, and I don't understand why. What the hell does it matter to me if he owns confidence so strong it could power a city? Why do I care?

Because you think he's hot, and you're trying to find every reason under the sun not to.

I ignore my inner voice and hurry to get changed. The last thing I need is him coming back here and finding me with one leg in my leggings and one out, hopping around the way I always do to get them on.

Glancing at the sofa, I smile. Whatever I might think of his patented act, I do feel much safer with him sleeping in here and am grateful he offered. I'll tell him that before we go to bed. I'm not a complete bitch.

I'm tying the laces on my Nikes when he bangs on the door twice, and without waiting for an answer, he barges in.

“Shit!” I shriek in surprise. “What if I’d been naked?” I ask.

“I’ve already seen most of the goods. That bikini left very little to the imagination.”

“It covered the most important bits,” I shoot back.

“If nipples and pussy are the most important bits, then yeah. Left everything else on show though.”

“Are you ... slut shaming me?” I glare at him as I finish tying my second shoe.

“Hell no; I approved.”

“Oh, thank God. I can sleep easy tonight then. EgoMan approved.”

“You know my name is Jake, right? I already have a nickname— Target. You may use either of those.”

I grab my towel and swimsuit and push by him, patting him on the chest with my bundle as I pass. “Ah, but they don’t wind you up, so where would be the fun in that?”

We walk down the hallway and take the elevator down to the gym in silence. He has a few things bundled up too. I try to spot his gun, but fail.

God, this is my reality now.

We reach the lower ground floor and hit the workout space. It’s only a small gym—two treadmills, a bike, a cross trainer, and a couple of weight machines, with a few free weights and mats in the corner. Next to the gym is a small, spotless pool and a hot tub. No one is using either, and why would they be at almost one in the morning.

“This place is nice,” Jake says. “Clean, quiet. I prefer it to a bigger hotel.”

“I think I do too. I might make staying in boutique places a habit.”

Jake is wearing a long, loose t-shirt, and long-ish shorts, but he rips the t-shirt off to reveal a tank top. It’s loose, more

like a basketball jersey really. It doesn't cling, but it does show his arms and shoulders and ... Oh. My. God.

He clambers onto the treadmill, hits a few buttons, and heads straight into a jog.

I decide to use the bike as it is behind the treadmill, and I can get my cardio on without sweating beside him on the other treadmill. For someone who can stand in front of ninety thousand people at Wembley, I can be ridiculously self-conscious at times.

Earbuds in and music blasting, I begin to peddle as if I'm in the world's hardest spin class. For a while, I'm lost in the music and my thoughts, but then I look up, and I almost fall off my bike. Jake has taken his top off.

What? Why? When?

Holy moly, guacamole. His back! It's insanely broad, and right in the center is a huge eagle tattoo, wings spread out over his shoulders.

The ink work is beautiful. I watch, mesmerised as it moves with him, and I want to trace my fingers over the lines. I have plenty of tattoos myself, but mine are small. I have flowers, a butterfly, the peace sign, and an olive branch.

My tattoos are all about peace, and his seem to be about power, strength, and the ocean.

There's an anchor with rope wrapped around it on his lower shin. On his right shoulder there's something else, and it looks like a compass from what I can see of it. Farther down his back, off to the left, is a partial map with an old, wooden sailing ship on it. Now, I want to see the front, so not caring if I look like a creeper, I take my earbuds out, slow my peddle, and dismount the bike.

I walk around to the front of the treadmill and glance at his face as I stand in front of him. He frowns a little but doesn't slow his pace. Peeking out of the waistband of his shorts is a thick black band that seems to wrap around his waist. I stare at it for a moment, puzzled and realize with a jolt as I stare closely that it's a hidden holster.

He's not wearing earbuds, I notice. "Not listening to music?" I ask.

"Got to keep the senses alert. I'd normally have them in, and I'd close my eyes for some of my run, but not today. Looking after you, remember?" He gives me a flash of a smile.

This is his real smile. He's running fast, and when he speaks, he's out of breath, and his body is coated in a sheen of sweat.

"You can run with your eyes closed?" I ask in slight awe. I'd fall straight off the treadmill if I tried.

"Yes. It's great for training your balance. Do you want to leave?" He glances down at the controls as if to slow the machine.

"No." I reach out without thinking and put my hand on the front of the treadmill. "I wanted to see what ink you have on your front."

His brows shoot up.

Goodness, please let me simply look at the artwork on his body and not the work of art that *is* his body.

Of course, I take some of it in; how could I not? Pecs, abs, biceps, all so utterly gorgeous, and I get the insane urge to bite him. What the fuck? I am not that kind of girl. I feel as if I'm going slightly feral. Is this what too long without drugs, drink, and sex has done to me?

On his front, below his left pec, running down over his defined ribs and abs is a dagger running through a rose. It's the only ink he has with that color, and the deep red of the rose is gorgeous.

That's his final ink, or of what I can see, unless he has something high up on his legs. I walk to the side and look at his compass. He keeps running, eyes front.

"Your artwork is gorgeous," I say.

"Yours isn't bad either," he responds, and then turns to look at me as his voice lowers. "I particularly liked the butterfly on your left ass cheek."

How did he... Oh, Lord ... of course. I was wearing my bikini when he first saw me.

“You have insanely good balance. If I was looking to the side at someone as long as you are, while running at that speed, I’d have fallen off.” I can surf too, so I’m hardly a klutz. I have good core muscles and good balance, but not like him. He’s boss level.

“It’s something you can train yourself to do,” he says with a shrug, still facing me.

“Maybe you’ll have to teach me.”

“Let me know when you want to hit the pool,” he tells me, cutting the conversation short. I’m not offended; he’s breathing hard, and talking probably isn’t his priority right now.

I nod. “I’ll do another thirty or so in here, need to burn off that adrenaline, and then I’ll be heading to the pool. Is that okay?”

“Lady, this is your show. I’m the shadow. I go where you go. I’ll hit the weights for the next thirty.”

He slows the machine, and by the time he’s come to a walk, I’m back on my bike. When he steps off the treadmill, he walks over to the weights.

As I cycle, I don’t put my earbuds back in. For some reason, tonight, I prefer the silence as I grit my teeth and go hell for leather to expel the hyped-up stress hormones from my body.

Jake is quiet as he lifts. He doesn’t let out all those grunts and groans I hear guys making sometimes in the gym.

I glance at him at one point, and he’s doing bicep curls, and I have to look away because his body should be illegal. Since when did I get into guys with bodies like his? It’s like Chris Hemsworth entered the space during his Thor era. I’m usually more of a Loki girl.

I find myself winding down faster than usual, and soon, I’m beginning to feel a bone-deep weariness wash over me.

“Hey,” I say as I slow the bike, “do you mind if we hit the pool?”

“Nope. That’s fine.” He does two more reps and then lowers the weights. “Let me check out the changing room first.”

“No one has come down here,” I point out.

“Someone could have been waiting for you.”

My blood chills at his answer. Once more, the reality of it all hits me.

Jesus, this is scary.

He glances at me, and his face grows serious. He walks over to me, running a white towel over his shoulders and chest, wiping up the sweat. When he is close enough that I can smell the fresh scent of sweat, some aftershave, and something that is probably just him, and truly delicious, he reaches out and tips my chin up.

“Hey. I’ll be right by you, and there are two men with eyes on us at all times. You’re protected, okay?”

I nod, but the sense of fear is crawling all over me like millions of tiny bugs, making my skin itch. Pulling in a deep breath, his scent hits me once more, and the anxious itch morphs into something primal. A warmth fills my belly, and I resist the urge to lean in closer and do something crazy like rub my nose along his neck and collarbone.

If you’d told me yesterday that a guy’s fresh workout sweat could smell so damn good I’d want to lick him, I’d have laughed at you.

Damn, the man gives good pheromones.

I sway a little on my feet, suddenly overwhelmed with everything.

“Hey, whoa, are you okay?” Jake wraps his hands around my shoulders and steadies me. “You think maybe you ought to give the pool a miss? Just for tonight? You’ve had somewhat of a shock; might be hitting you now.”

To my utter horror I burst into tears. Judging from the freaked-out expression that steals over his features, Jake is as horrified as me.

“Oh hey, no need to cry. Shit.” He looks around him and then grabs a towel, handing it to me as my sobs only increase.

“Crap,” I manage to stutter out through the sobs. “I’m sorry; ignore me. Come down and then the news, you know? Overwhelmed. I’ll be okay.”

I wipe my eyes and know I must look horrendous. “The worst part of it is, I can’t do the things most people would do to deal. I can’t get drunk. I can’t smoke a joint, or even a cigarette. I’m living clean. Most of the time, I like it; I do. Then there’s days like today, when I’d give anything for a bottle of vodka, you know?”

He nods. “I do.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. So you need something else. A new vodka. What do you do now?”

“I do this. Work out. Hit the pool, meditate. It’s just not cutting it right now.”

“There must be something that cuts it no matter what?”

I shrug. “Only surfing, and the ocean is a long way from here.”

He watches me, and I can see his mind turning almost. Then he grins. “Give me a minute.”

Grabbing his phone from his bag, he makes a call, talking quiet enough I can’t hear, then he makes another call, and finally a third.

Heading back to me, he grabs his things. “I think I’ve found something. You okay to drive us if I give you directions?”

I glance at the clock on the wall. “It’s late.”

“You want to surf or not?”

“Yes.”

“Well, come on then.”

Chapter 6

Jake

IT'S WORTH THE PHONE CALLS AND THE FAVORS OWED TO SEE Summer's face as she rides the wave at the man-made surfing facility.

The place opened its doors for us in the early hours of the morning to allow a stressed-out rock goddess time to chill. I'll admit, I used her name for the last part of my phone marathon, the part where I begged the manager here, after getting his number from someone who can find anything, to open in the dead of night. His kids have concert tickets to the next show, and I have one relaxed client.

Technically, this isn't quite the same as surfing; it's allegedly harder. More akin to a mix of surfing, bodyboarding, and snowboarding.

She's owning it though. On that wave and riding high.

I had a go and did okay, but I'm not as good as she is. I didn't focus properly either. Too uptight without my weapon on me, even if we have the place to ourselves. The minute I pulled my shorts back on and my holster, I relaxed a notch.

Summer, though, is good. She seems naturally talented at this shit.

When she's finished, we head back to the car, and her grin could light up the city.

"Feeling better?" I ask.

"So much." She turns and runs at me and throws her arms around me, taking me in a hug.

It surprises me, and for a moment, I stand stupidly with my arms by my sides, but then I get with the program and hug her back. Briefly. The hug is so warm, and she's so slight in my arms, and her scent? God, she smells fresh, like the ocean waves she loves riding. Her scent is one of possibility and endless horizons. It does something to me. Something I can't let happen.

I step away and smile down at her, forcing the casual friendly expression on my face. She is beaming, and it's nice to see.

"I can't thank you enough," she says. "Wow, that was a blast. What I needed and then some."

"So long as you sleep."

"I didn't know you were a nanny too." She shoots me a sideways glance. "You're pretty good at this. Maybe your balls-deep confidence is well deserved, EgoMan."

The way she says the name this time, however, doesn't have my hackles rising. It's a soft tease, not a hard dig.

I laugh and shake my head at her.

As we drive back in silence, I hope that the rest of my time babysitting will turn out this easy. If all goes well, Reece, who is back at base, will find out who this guy is, and then we can neutralize the threat and let Summer get on with her life.

I'm exhausted as I finally crash onto the sofa in the living room of her suite. I fall into a deep sleep, but I awake at anything out of place. A noise. A rush of air. Just that presence of someone else in the room. I'll jerk out of sleep. I always do.

Unlike a lot of my compatriots, I don't suffer with the nightmares and the flashbacks, so I wake up in the morning, refreshed and astonished. I glance at my phone to see it is past nine. I never sleep in this late. Not sure of what time Summer gets up, I scroll on my phone and wait for her to rise.

And wait.

And wait.

Fuck me. How long does she sleep in? I'm dying for a coffee and a leak, but this place doesn't have the facilities in the room for making a drink. In the end, I don't care if I wake her. I need sustenance, so I order down for food and coffee. The need for caffeine is riding me harder in this moment than the need to relieve myself. A croissant and a cup of espresso is my breakfast of choice. The knock on the door is quiet, and I thank the man balancing the tray on his hand before I close it behind him just as quietly.

By the time the clock ticks past noon, I'm bored and increasingly desperate for the toilet. I suppose we went to bed so late that I didn't get all that much sleep, but I'm used to running on empty. Sometimes I've gone days on end with only fifteen minutes here or there. It's not optimal, but I can function. Summer won't be the same, so I ought to let her take as long as she needs. At some point in the next twenty minutes or so, my bladder is going to take the decision out of my hands.

Finally. At twenty minutes past twelve Summer surfaces. She pokes her head out of the room, sees me, and smiles. She looks different. She's wearing a set of what appear to be kid's pyjamas. Her hair is braided, and her face is free of any makeup. God, she looks about eighteen. I know she's not, but like this, she sure does look young.

"Are those kids pajamas?" I ask her.

She laughs. "No. They're anime."

"What now?"

Her eye roll is epic. "Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously."

"Japanese animation? Howl's Moving Castle?"

I shake my head.

"You need educating," she says. "I'm going to take a shower. I'll be about twenty minutes, then we can go get some breakfast. I have a sound check at three but nothing before or after until the show."

“I already ate,” I say.

“Oh.”

“You can eat though, of course. I’m happy to grab another coffee.”

“Right. Thanks for that.” She smirks and then closes the door before I can say anything else.

Anything like... *I need to use the bathroom; can I use it before you take a shower?*

A moment later I hear the water running. I need that damn bathroom. I’ve not taken a piss in forever. God, she might not be a diva on the level of some famous people—in many ways, she’s incredibly down to earth – but Summer clearly doesn’t think about other’s needs. Or she’d realize that I’ve been out here without access to the bathroom for hours.

Goddamn, should I just piss in the plant pot in the corner?

Nah. Poor plant never did anything to anyone.

I could sneak next door as I am technically allowed a bathroom break, but I promised her I’d stay here in the suite with her. This room has the living area that I’ve been relegated to. Then a door to the bedroom and bathroom. If I leave to go the room next door, even if only for a few minutes, I leave her in danger if someone broke into the suite from the hallway. Now that I’ve thought about how much I need to take a leak, though, it’s *all* I can think about.

Fifteen minutes later, and I’m done. I need to use the bathroom. The water is still running. I’ll bang on the bathroom door and shout through to let her know I need to use the toilet and to hurry up.

I shove open her bedroom door and stop dead.

Laid out on the bed, not wearing pajamas anymore, not wearing *any damn thing*, and with one hand between her legs and her eyes closed, is Summer.

My first thought is—*why isn’t she in the damn shower?*

My second thought is—*I want to help her with that.*

Then I realize there's a sound, low but it's there, and it's coming from her phone. It's some guy moaning filth in a deep voice.

Is that her lover?

Her eyes snap open, and she screams.

The sound reverberates from the walls, jarring in the silence.

I stand there, for once in my life unsure of my next move.

"Oh my fucking God," she screeches, throwing the phone at me.

I pick it up from the floor, and part of my brain registers that she's listening to something recorded, not a lover on the phone.

Dropping it on the bed as if it's on fire, I look away.

"I'm sorry; I thought you were in the bathroom."

She's off the bed now, totally naked, and she storms over to me. "So you walked in, even though you thought I was in the bathroom?"

"I was going to knock on the *bathroom* door," I say with gritted teeth. God, she *is* a fucking diva. Scratch my earlier thoughts. A gloriously naked diva, and I'm as hard as nails, but she's still spoiled and entitled. "To tell you to hurry up."

"Why?" She throws her hands up, and what it does to her tits is epic.

"Do you want to get dressed?" I ask.

"I think you've seen it all now."

"I needed the goddamn bathroom."

"So, you just barged in. Bit sus."

"Sus? *What?*"

"Suspect. Suspicious. Weird. Maybe downright creepy."

She did not.

“Creepy? Fuck you. Why have the water running? Do you know how much water you’ve wasted? Jesus fucking Christ, I could have had three showers by now. I’ve not taken a leak since last night because you’re such a princess you don’t rise until the middle of the day. You also didn’t want me to leave you alone in this room, and I promised. Then you got up and declared you were taking a shower, slamming your door on me before I had a chance to tell you I needed to take a leak.”

Her face is red. “I can’t believe you walked into my room. You must never do that again, understood? Always, and I mean always, knock.”

“Fuck you. I’ll go use my own bathroom. There’s nothing in my contract saying I had to camp out on your couch. I’ll be next door.”

I turn to go, but her muttered, “*Fucking asshole creeper,*” stops. Me. Dead.

I turn slowly and glare at her. She must sense the change in me because she takes two steps back and crosses her arms over her chest.

“What did you call me?”

“Nothing,” she mutters.

Oh, yes, she did.

“Creeper? Is that what you called me?”

“Forget it.”

“Oh, no, we’re not forgetting it.”

Her eyes widen.

“Put some fucking clothes on,” I snap.

To my surprise, she says nothing but grabs the long t-shirt on the floor by the bed and hurriedly pulls it over herself.

“There are some rules here, alright?” I hold my hand up.

She nods once.

“Firstly...” One finger up. “I’m not a creeper. You can fucking call me EgoMan or whatever the shit you want, but

that sort of accusation, absolutely not. Rule one is no accusations like that when you're the one doing freaky shit. Secondly..." My second finger pops up. "I thought you were in the shower. The water has been pounding down for ages now. I thought your generation was all about saving the planet. Rule number two—we make sure the bodyguard gets a toilet break before you take your morning masturbation meditation, okay?"

Her face turns thunderous.

"Thirdly." My third finger pops up. "Don't waste water." I turn my back on her, stalk into the bathroom, and turn off the water. Then I hold my finger up at her before slamming the door. "Don't fucking move."

I take the leak I've been dying for, wash my hands, and go back out. My temper is under control despite appearances. I'm pissed at her for calling me a creeper, but I'm not some volatile fucker who can't handle myself. People who are volatile and go off at the slightest provocation don't fit well in the Special Forces.

When I re-enter her bedroom, she's sitting on the bed, looking small. Fragile, almost.

Her face has grown redder, but there's a determined, angry set to her jaw. I expect few people lay down the law with her. Tough. I do.

"You call me a creeper again, and we're done."

"Done?" She laughs. "You work *for me*."

"Technically, I work for the record label, and I can resign. You can have someone else."

"No, I don't want that."

"Let's get one thing straight—I have no need to be creeping on you or anyone." I don't know why her accusation has made me so damn angry, but it's really riled me.

"I suppose you can have any woman you want." She rolls her eyes at me again as if the idea is preposterous.

"You know my name, Target?"

She nods.

“It wasn’t given to me because I was a good shot.”

“Oh?” She furrows her brow. “I thought...”

“Once I set my sights on a woman, I could take her home. I don’t think I’ve struck out more than twice in my life. So, the guys called me Target. Not boasting, and I am not proud of some of my past behavior, but I can assure you, if I wanted some action, I’d go and get it. I wouldn’t need to burst in on your sad little moment with your iPhone lover.”

She launches off the bed, her face scarlet. “Well, fuckboy, you couldn’t *target* me. You couldn’t get me into your sad little web and have sex with me.”

“Baby, I’m not fucking asking.”

“Good!” she seethes.

“Good,” I reply like a child.

She stares at me, and it’s as if a thousand feelings flash across her face at once.

“Can I take my shower now?” she asks.

“Be my goddamn guest.”

I storm out of her room, and once more the water starts up. Sitting on the sofa, I have to ball my hands into fists because despite saying I wasn’t asking, *damn* I want to touch her. I want to go in there right now and make her come, the way she needs.

This isn’t good. There’s a spark between us that seems to ignite into anger far too frequently, but it’s the sort of spark that could ignite into something else *far too easily*.

Do I need to tell Konstantin I want off this gig? Half the time, I want to put her across my knee and do what her daddy clearly never did, or she wouldn’t be so damn volatile and misbehaved. Other times, I want to fuck that little frown and worry divot right off her face.

Christ.

I drag my hand over my face, suddenly feeling all of my thirty something years. Why am I even letting my mind conjure up stupid images of me and her? I'm way too old for her. Too jaded. Then again, she's lived a life most people can't even dream of. I'm sure in some ways, Summer is more jaded than me. In others, she seems to have kept some of her innocence.

I tell myself to get my head on straight and that moving forward I'm going to be nothing but professional with her.

Chapter 7

Summer

THE WATER BEATS DOWN ON ME, AND I LET MYSELF CRY. WHY do I do this? I always seem to alienate the people I need on my side. He's right. It was selfish of me not to ask if he needed to use the bathroom. He's been on that couch for hours.

I'm not some demanding diva, but I don't always think. My dad used to say that to me. I can hear him now. "Your problem, chick, is you just don't think."

I'd have upset my brother, or Mum, and never meant to do it, but I was up in my own head. Thinking up stories or songs, or playing games in my mind. I spent three years aged seven to ten being an elfin princess in my own mind. It makes it hard to be in the real world when your mind wants to be anywhere but.

Swiping angrily at my tears, I reach for the shower gel. God, the mortification. He walked in on me doing *that*. And listening to that hot-voice-guy from Patreon. Ugh. Could it be any worse? Why didn't I take care of myself in the shower?

Because then I wouldn't have hot-voice-guy to help me get off.

The worst part of all of this is that underneath the sheer embarrassment, I'm so turned on I could melt into a pool of needy nothingness.

It's not the Patreon guy who has me in this state, and it's not Jake walking in on me either. It's one simple line.

One angry command.

The way he said to me: *put some fucking clothes on*. It got me so hot and bothered, I had to cover it up by being a bitch for the rest of the conversation.

It was an abrupt, growled order. Low. Dangerous. As if any second my nakedness was going to make him ... do something. Something dangerous.

Something wild.

Does he feel the same way I do right now?

I recall what my counsellor told me. Sex can be just as much of a drug as cocaine and booze. I stopped it *all*. No more rushing into relationships for me. My last one had been disastrous. A fellow rock star, a bassist for a huge American metal band. God, he was gorgeous. He also had a drug problem way worse than mine, and as I discovered when I surprised him on tour one night, a groupie problem he couldn't quit.

I'd walked in on him in bed with two of them.

He'd begged me to give him one more chance, but I'd walked away. Jake seems different, but then he told me the real reason for his nickname, so maybe he's not so different after all.

He was a Navy SEAL, and I might not know much about the military, but I know those guys are pretty famous. Do they have groupies too? He's tall, built like a Norse god, crackling with an air of arrogance and danger, and that's before he pulls out the SEAL card. Does that have them dropping their panties faster than a rock star winking at a front row fan?

God, why can't I meet an accountant I like?

Determined not to finish what I started, even though I really need it, I shower quickly and then get dressed in jeans, a strappy top, and throw a loose cut-off Blondie t-shirt over it. I put some curly girl appropriate mousse in my hair, scrunch it a little with my fingers, and style it into a loose, messy bun. It can dry naturally; it's warm enough today.

Then I spritz on some perfume and dab on gloss, a quick dusting of bronzer, and a swipe of mascara.

Taking my oversized glasses from the dresser, I shove them into my bag and brace myself for Jake's disapproval.

When I exit the bedroom, he's on the couch again, reading something on his phone.

"I'm ready," I say. My voice sounds as if I've reverted to being eight years old, so I clear my throat. "What do you want to do?"

He looks at me, brows raised. "Me? I'm here to follow you."

"Yes, but I've been a pain in the ass for you, and I don't have to be at the sound check until three so... Is there anything you'd like to do?" My face is flushing again; I can feel the warmth.

"Not really."

"Oh." I want to sink into the floor. Of course, he won't want to do anything. He's not here for fun.

Then his face softens as he watches me. "I don't know the country. Is there anything you can suggest?"

I perk up a little. "Do you like old stuff? History?"

"Love it."

"Okay, well there's a stately home only about a twenty-minute drive from here. We could go there?"

"Sounds different. Yes. If you want to do that, I'll gladly come and look at one of your stately British homes."

We ride down in the elevator in comfortable enough silence, and then I get into the car and gun the engine. It's a top-down kind of day, but I don't bother. Instead, I turn the air conditioning on. As we're driving my phone rings, and I answer.

"Hey, gorgeous. You okay?"

I grin at the voice ringing out in the car. It's Lizzie. She's my best friend and my assistant. I hired her to work for me when the band was taking off. She was grateful for the offer because she had no job and few prospects. Plus, Lizzie likes

bad boys, and by being my assistant and coming on a lot of the tour stops with me, she gets to meet plenty of them.

“Yes, why?”

“I spoke to Ron, and he said you have a bodyguard? He told me about your stalker, asked if they’d written to the London offices. What the hell?”

“Yep. I’ve only found out myself last night, Liz. I don’t know anything. I’m waiting to see the letters he’s written.”

“Wait, why? Don’t see the letters, hon; it will upset you.”

“I need to. I have to understand what I’m dealing with and honestly? I think my mind is making up worse things. You know what my imagination is like.”

She laughs softly. “Hey. Do you want me to read them and give you the summary?”

I pause at her offer. I trust Liz with my life, and if she read them, she could note the main themes and threats. That way I don’t need to actually see it.

“I don’t know,” I say, unsure. “In one way I want to say yes, but in another, I think I ought to see it for myself. There might be something in there to give me a clue as to who this is.”

“A clue? Hold on there, Miss Marple,” she says with a soft laugh. “It’s going to be some deranged fan, not anyone you know.”

“We can’t be sure.” I shrug as I turn onto a quiet, long, country road that will lead us to Charrington Hall.

“Well, the offer is there. You know I’ve got you, bestie.”

“I know.” I smile because I really do.

“What are you doing now?”

“Taking my bodyguard to Charrington Hall.”

“The boring old house?”

“I don’t think it’s boring,” I reply with a laugh.

“You always were the clever one. Strange how you became the singer. At school, I’d have figured you’d end up something like a scientist, and I’d be the one to be the free spirit artsy type.”

I laugh at her words. “Lizzie, you like the free spirit part; the art, not so much.”

She giggles. “You’re right. I do love a walk on the wild side. I swear, Blaze is doing my head in.”

Blaze is her new boyfriend. A MOTO GP bike racer. Hot as sin, but as trustworthy as a snake.

“What’s he done now?”

“He’s posted pics with some flaky cheugy girls. I swear, I lowkey need a break from socials. It’s making my head spin.”

“Take a break, bestie. Don’t let him mess you up. You are so much better than him.”

I mean it too. Liz is hot. Waaaaay hotter than me. She has glossy dark hair, blue eyes, and curves that make men’s mouths water. She could have been a model. Now and again, she dabbles with that stuff. She has a large Instagram following and an OnlyFans account, but she’s on the road and working with the band so much, she doesn’t have time to devote to it. Something I feel guilty about whenever she brings it up. I have told her I’d find a new assistant if I’m getting in the way of what could be a good career for her, but she always backtracks at that point and says she likes the work too much to leave.

“I wish,” she says.

“Oh, Liz, don’t you dare. You’re hotter than the sun, and every guy wants you.”

She gives a soft, almost bitter laugh. “Summer, bae, they want you more.”

“No, Liz, not really. It’s only the fame.”

There’s a pause, and then she says, “I’ve got to go. Love you, bestie. Have fun with the dust and cobwebs at the olden days house.”

I laugh as she hangs up.

Glancing at Jake, I laugh again. “What?”

“I need a fucking translator to understand half of that conversation.”

“Too many Britishisms for you?”

“Too many Gen Z-isms.” He drums his fingers on his thigh. “She’s jealous of you.”

“What?”

I glance again, then focus on the road. “You’ve heard two minutes of conversation; are you insane.”

“No. Perceptive. She’s jealous. It drips from her tone and the things she said.”

“We are best friends, Jake. Have been since school. She’s gorgeous. Every guy sees her and falls a little bit. You’ll be the same. So, no, she’s not jealous.”

“Hhmm,” is all he says.

We arrive at the carpark for Charrington Hall, and I find a shady spot to leave the car. Then we pay the fees to enter the grounds and the house, and I lead Jake into the cool, marble-filled entrance hall.

Incredibly detailed murals cover most of the walls and ceiling. The fireplace is almost as tall as I am. The walls and archways are rich, blue-veined marble. The beauty, history, and opulence are breathtaking.

“Fuck me,” Jake says, looking around him.

So that’s what awe looks like on the face of a man who has seen and done so much. I like it. I expect it takes a lot to inspire it in him.

I grin. “You like?”

“It’s ... insane. You could argue this is grander than the White House. Is this the Queen’s place? It belongs to the Royal Family, right?”

I laugh then. “No. This is not part of their estate.”

“Fuck me,” he repeats.

“Pillaging half the world paid well. I’d argue that this isn’t even the grandest stately home we have.”

He whistles, low and quiet.

“Come on. Let me show you my favorite room, the library.”

We walk slowly through the ostentatious entrance hall and dining room, to the sweeping spiral staircase, and I take him to the library.

“This is gorgeous, isn’t it? Imagine sitting here, on a rainy afternoon in the eighteenth century, quietly reading. Bliss.”

Jake is watching me, his eyes slightly scrunched up as if working out a math equation. “You don’t strike me as the kind of girl who likes quiet afternoons in the rain.”

I poke him gently in the stomach and almost do it again because his stomach is granite. “I like quiet and rain and books. I also like adrenaline and the roar of the crowd. I suppose ... I live in the extremes. It’s the bits in between I don’t fit in.”

“Yeah, I get that. I love the thrill of the rush too, but I also love hiking all alone. Nothing but me, the birds, and peace. Maybe we both don’t fit in the middle.”

I watch him, a strange feeling taking hold. As if I’ve known him for years. We wind each other up. He has me going from zero to sixty faster than anyone else, but maybe this is why? Perhaps we are, in some profound way, kindred spirits.

We finish our tour and then grab a sandwich and coffee in the café in the garden courtyard. It’s lovely, and a real breath of fresh air from my usual routine while touring.

“So,” I begin, wiping my mouth with my napkin. “Are our shadows lurking somewhere nearby right now?”

He nods. “Of course. The guys back at base mulled over two options. Go in obvious, with a big detail. You know the kind of thing: four massive guys surrounding you at all times.

Or, something less showy but probably safer for you. This way, whoever is stalking you, they only believe you have me.”

“Unless they’ve seen the other two. If they’re watching me.”

He laughs at that, takes a sip of his black coffee, and leans back. I try not to admire the smile lines fanning out from his eyes. They’re damn sexy. “I’ve been looking for the past two days, and I’m trained to spot people, and I haven’t seen them. I really doubt some weirdo with a fixation on you can see them.”

He shrugs. “It’s why no one but you, me, your manager, Ron, and the guys at base know we have them.” His face grows serious, the laugh lines melting back into his skin as if he’s just used an eraser on them. “You can’t tell anyone about them, Summer. Not your band members, not your bestie, no one.”

The way he says the word bestie, as if it’s covered in slime makes me laugh softly.

“Okay. I won’t. Pinkie promise.”

He rolls his eyes at me, downs the rest of his coffee, and signals the waiter, handing over his card.

“What are you doing?” I ask as the waiter takes the card and goes to the till.

“Paying.”

“No, I pay. You are working for me. I should pay. I decided to come here.”

His bland expression morphs into a scowl, and two new lines appear, faint brackets either side of his mouth. God, even they are sexy. Why am I finding everything he does, every micro expression, so delicious?

“I pay if I take a lady out for lunch.”

I can’t help the very unladylike snort that shoots out of my nose and grab my napkin to cover it up. “Firstly, I am not a lady. Secondly, how ... quaint. I’m the client, and I chose to do this, so I should pay.”

“No,” he says firmly.

Oh, God, and here he goes again. Winding me up. “What if I decided to go to a five-star Michelin something or other place? Huh? What then? You could be paying thousands. I earn a fortune. I can afford to pay. I’m not some broke-ass girl, you know?”

He laughs, and the mixture of anger and desire the arrogant sound creates in me is something else.

“Listen, princess. You’re a big shot. I get it. You earn good money. I get that too. I don’t let women pay when we go out.”

“Let?”

“Yes, let. What is your problem?”

“*Let?*”

“Are you going to start screeching at me in public? We don’t need that kind of attention.”

“I could murder you right now with my bare hands.”

“Nah, you couldn’t. I’m highly trained.” He tosses me a wink and takes his card from the waiter who is hovering nervously to Jake’s right.

He winked at me. Like he’s some sort of ... sex God, not an annoying, old fashioned, arrogant, asshole. I want to smack that happy smirk from his face. Or throw my water all over him.

I want to smudge the leftovers of my sandwich into his smirking, winking face.

I want... Oh shit.

I want to kiss him.

Chapter 8

Jake

THE TOUR OF THE STATELY HOME WAS MUCH BETTER THAN I expected, and I'm interested in reading up a little on this nation's history. I'm a history buff. Love it. Mostly, I read military history, but I can break that up now and again.

Summer is walking beside me, almost stomping her feet. She's so funny when she gets mad. I can see it burning in her. It's as if her rage, which frankly comes on astonishingly easily in my opinion, is too big for her to contain. It makes her twitchy. She seems to feel everything at high resolution. It must be exhausting in some ways, elating in others.

I bet it makes her dynamite in bed. If she takes the same energy crackling inside her all the time to between the sheets, wow.

The flowers here are nice, I think, trying to force my mind from Summer and sex. I can't let it go there.

Oh, look, roses.

Fuck, I want to pin her down and contain all that energy, so it's focused on one place. Her pleasure.

Nope. No. I will not.

"Nice roses," I say.

She looks at me, and the ragey expression she's wearing like a designer dress drops for a moment. "You like flowers?"

"Yes ... sort of. I mean, they're nice, right?"

"Are you okay?"

“What? Yes. Why?”

“You seem . . . weird.”

“No. I’m not weird.”

I want to fuck you. I want to kiss you. I want to claim you. You’re fucking wild, and I love wild rides.

“I’m perfectly fine.”

“Right.”

We get in the car, and I automatically check my weapon before I slide into the seat. I glance around, trying to spot two big lurking presences but see nothing. Intrigued and a little concerned, I take out my burner phone, and as Summer drives us to the sound check, I dial.

It’s Andrius who answers. “Yes.”

“We still have the tail, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

“Why? Trouble?”

“No. I don’t see them.”

He laughs. “That’s the point, asshole. Anything else? I’m busy.”

“Jesus. Sorry I called. I’ll let you get back to your super important paperwork.”

There’s a breathy giggle and a whispered: *we can do this later.*

Andrius growls, and I bark out a laugh.

“Okay, I’m gone.”

“Call if it’s important,” he orders.

“Of course, but I hate to interrupt your sex sessions.”

“What? I’m not having fucking sex, you idiot. I’m on the phones this afternoon.”

“I heard Violet. What are you doing then?”

“We’re looking at puppies,” Violet says, coming on the line.

“Puppies?”

“Yes, for our daughter. She wants a puppy.”

I frown. “Don’t you have a ton of dogs, and horses, and God knows what else there? It’s a zoo.”

“Yes, but she wants her own.”

“Fair enough.”

“Be careful, Target,” she says softly. “Look after yourself over there.”

“Yeah, call if it is important, asshole.” Andrius hangs up.

The man has the charm of a toad sometimes.

“They are following us?”

“Yes.”

“See?” She shoots me a glance. “You were worried too.”

I shake my head. “Not worried. Surprised at just how good they are.”

“I find that reassuring.”

“You should.”

The angry atmosphere between us has mellowed again. It’s almost as if the sparks of anger and confrontation are like foreplay, and these mellow moments are like the after-sex come down.

Stop thinking about sex, Target, I order myself.

We arrive at the venue, after a fifty-minute drive, park, and I follow her into the stadium, checking around me as we go. The place is huge but not as big as the venue she played the other night. This is in the next city over, but the band is staying in the hotel and simply traveling back and forth on the tour bus. I’ll be going with Summer in a car hired for her by Ron. The bus is too easy of a target. The car driver is also security trained. This evening she’ll have me, the driver, the

two men we have following us, and at the venue, Ron has hired fifteen extra security guards.

It's heavy handed, and it still doesn't make her safe. She'll be up there on stage, and anyone can take a shot from the crowd. She could be injured, or worse, killed. If I had my way, she'd be in a bulletproof box like the Pope rides around in.

Better, I'd cancel the tour right now, but Ron won't hear of it and Summer doesn't want to either, she says. At least they're on the last leg of the United Kingdom part of their tour, and the European portion doesn't kick off for a while. We will have some time in Cornwall, where it will be much easier to keep her safe.

"Bestie!" A curvy, beautiful brunette throws herself at Summer as we enter the backstage area and wraps her in hugs and overbearing scent.

I almost cough, her perfume is that strong. She's wearing a face full of perfectly applied makeup, and she has glossy, long hair.

"Lizzie." Summer hugs her back.

Lizzie's gaze meets mine over Summer's shoulder, and her eyes widen a touch. "Who is this?" she asks, pulling away.

"This is Jake. The bodyguard I told you about."

The world can know about me. Andrius and K decided that, but not the other men shadowing her.

"Well, nice to meet you, Jake." She holds her hand out and smiles at me.

She's *very* beautiful, I realize as I look at her. There's something about her, though, I don't like, and I can't put my finger on it.

"Oh, one minute; something came for you, Summer."

Lizzie sashays off to the back of the cavernous space and messes around on a table there.

"She's gorgeous, isn't she?" Summer says wistfully.

"She's very pretty," I say truthfully.

“I always envied her, that beauty. It’s incandescent, and God, her figure. Men drool over her everywhere we go.”

I bet they do, and yet, Summer is somehow even more enticing. She’s radiant in a way that Lizzie isn’t. Or, at least, she is to me.

Lizzie is polish and curves, and sexy clothes, and yes, she’s the kind of girl an insecure guy would love to have on his arm to show off to the world, but Summer is ... *Summer*. I’ve never met anyone quite like her before. And when she gets on that stage ... my God. The way she holds the audience in the palm of her hand is the biggest turn on I’ve ever seen.

Lizzie returns with a package and hands it to Summer. It’s beautifully wrapped, and she smiles and starts to unwrap it.

“No. Don’t,” I say. “It needs to be inspected.” I turn to one of the security team members hired by Ron for this event and beckon them over.

“Can you get this checked with the security scanner please?”

He nods and ambles off with the package.

“Oh, God, I feel sick.” Summer groans. “For the first time in a long time, I’m scared to get up on that stage.”

“Babe, listen to me. You’re going to slay, okay? No weird little creeper is going to put you off your stride, alright?” Lizzie beams at her.

“We don’t know it’s a he,” I say. My comment is a nothing. A throw away comment. A surprising number of celebrity stalkers are female. Lizzie’s reaction is odd.

She glares at me. “Of course, it’s a man. Women don’t do this sort of thing.” She huffs out a bitter laugh. “We are normal.”

“Actually, the majority of people with erotomania are women.”

“Eroto ... *what?*” Lizzie stares at me as if I’ve made the word up.

“Obsession with someone who is famous. To put it simply. More women seem to be that kind of stalker than men. It’s the only area where they outnumber men.”

“Erm, earth to bodyguard—Summer is female.”

“Women stalk women,” I say, and then out of patience with her, I turn to Summer. “Do you need to go to the dressing room before the sound check? I want to sweep it if you do.”

“No,” she says with a smile. “I’ll only use it before the show tonight.”

The band members meander into the backstage space one by one. “Babe,” Donovan, the drummer, says, putting his arm around Summer and kissing the top of her head.

There’s something in the way he looks at her as he pulls away that I file away. There’s a longing there. Is there a history? I’ll have to ask Summer. I doubt whoever is stalking her is this close to home, but you never know.

The pattern fits a crazed fan exactly, but there are always exceptions to the rule.

The ear-shattering whine of a microphone being adjusted rings out in the auditorium, and I wince.

Lizzie jumps as if she’s been electrocuted. “Crap, I haven’t made your tea. Give me ten.”

She rushes off. “Tea?” I ask Summer.

“She makes me a honey and lemon tea before I sing. Swears it coats the vocal cords.”

A sexy, dishevelled redhead sashays off the stage and smirks at someone to my right. I glance and see Zane lounging against the far wall. His face is closed off, and his gaze slides away from the redhead. When I look back to her, she flushes. As she passes us, she mumbles a hello to Summer.

“Who is that?” I ask quietly.

“Flame.”

“Because of the hair?”

“Yeah. I don’t even know her real name. Flame is the name she got when she started out as a roadie.”

“Got to be a tough gig, being a female roadie.”

Summer shrugs. “We have a few. There’s Janice.” She points to a plump, pretty blonde who is adjusting the mics. “And Sasha.” She points again to a striking black girl, wearing hot pants with legs that go on forever, who is working on the synth.

“They don’t get a lot of shit?” I ask. “From all the guys.”

“I don’t know. I mean, back in the day when I went to the parties, it was a blur. Now, I don’t go. Sasha, though, she’s been with us the longest, and she’s amazing. Tough, clever. I doubt she gets too much crap because the girl can handle herself. Big time. Janice is quiet and shy, and she is definitely safe from any trouble.”

I frown at her. “Why?”

She points to a huge man covered in tattoos and piercings, with a ball cap on, and a long, bushy beard. “Because that is Bear, and he’s married to Janice. In fact, his protection, if it were needed, would definitely extend to Sasha too. She and Janice are really close. Best friends.”

“Okay, what about Flame?”

Her expression is thoughtful. “I don’t know actually. I don’t think she’s as friendly with Janice and Sasha. She’s a guy’s girl, you know? She seems to like hanging out with them, having a drink. I doubt she has any trouble. Lizzie got a whole load of stuff rolling when all the MeToo scandals erupted, and we had diversity officers in to do talks, and there were guidelines she wrote up about acceptable behavior.”

Two minutes later, Lizzie is back, holding a steaming mug and hands it to Summer who sips at it.

“Hey, Lizzie.”

“Yeah?”

“Is there ever trouble with the roadies? Anyone unhappy with how they’ve been treated?”

She shakes her head. “No, not for a long while. There was a guy we had a few complaints about. Hitting on the women. He had a thing for Sasha and wouldn’t take her polite no as an answer. Kept hitting on her. She was more than capable of handling him, she said, but I fired him.”

Bingo. A disgruntled ex-employee. A disgruntled sex pest, ex-employee. Could be the one sending the messages.

“Can you get me his info?” I ask Lizzie.

“Sure.” She smiles at me and then turns to check on Summer.

Then it’s time for the sound check and rehearsal. I stand at the edge of the stage and watch, fascinated by how technical it all is. I had an image of rock stars as spoiled kids who turned up, sang, or played the guitar and got paid millions. This is far from that image. It’s an art the way they check their instruments, talk to the road crew, adjust microphones, speakers, and lighting.

Once they are happy, which takes around forty minutes, they begin the set rehearsal.

Song one is a big hit for them, and an amazing showcase for Summer’s vocals. As she sings, I swear the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“She’s amazing, isn’t she?” Lizzie draws me out of the trance I’m in, watching Summer.

“Yes, she is.”

She sighs. “You know, even when we were in high school, she was the one everyone gravitated to. I was the pretty one, that’s what they all called me, but Summer, she was Miss Popular. Even the boys preferred her over me, despite me being better looking.”

I glance at her, wondering where this is going.

“She’s got this thing, this ability, to make people look at her, and then look some more. That’s before she even opens her mouth. She’s like the sun, you know? Warming everyone around her. I never had that.”

There's a sadness to her words. No bitterness. The love she seems to hold for Summer is there, shining out of her eyes, but there's a melancholy.

"We all have talents and things we are good at. I'm sure you have yours," I say to her. "The things that are unique about you."

"I'm organized." She chuckles. "Hence why I make a good PA. I'm pretty, so the band and the roadies like having me around. I make a good cup of honey and lemon tea."

She watches Summer. "I wish, though, I had a talent like that. Something that makes you stand out from everyone else."

"I'm pretty sure you stand out." It's not an empty comment. She's very beautiful, and I can't imagine her not getting a lot of attention.

"If I go solo, then yes. If Summer is around, you tend to disappear." She shrugs and walks off to start organizing some media packs on the table.

I watch her for a beat. Could she be the one sending Summer those letters? Then I immediately discard the thought. It's a stupid idea. Why would she? What would be the point?

Plus, she talked about her with genuine affection. Yes, maybe there's some jealousy there, but she also clearly has deep affection for her friend.

Could it be the drummer? He's watching Summer now as he plays, banging the drums as if getting out all his longing.

Again though, it's too close to home. The profile we have on the person doing this is someone obsessed. The letters are sexual and fetishised and clearly fit the pattern of a deranged fan. That's what all the research they've done back at base tells them.

Something itches at the back of my brain. Pamela is a shrink, right? Cole's lady? Maybe I ought to get her to take a look at the letters.

Snapping my fingers at two of the extra security hires, I beckon them over. "Eyes on her."

I point to Summer. They nod and stand like sentries at the edge of the stage, watching. I walk to the far end of the cavernous backstage space and dial.

“Hola.”

I smile at the greeting. “Reece, you big bastard.”

“Nice to speak to you too, Target. Is all going well?”

“Yes, it is. I would like to let Pamela look over the letters that have been sent to Summer. See if she has any deeper insight.”

There’s a long pause, and I’m about to ask Reece if he’s still there when he speaks. “Better yet, one of the men I worked with before I came in on this, his lady has a friend who qualified as a clinical forensic psychologist. I bet she’d take a look. She’s called Mags. Give me ten minutes to make some calls.”

“Okay. Great. Thanks.”

I hang up and pace a little as I think. If this woman can read the letters, she might be able to create more of an in-depth profile than we already have.

They’re being delivered to Summer’s hotel room this afternoon. A bad idea if ever there was one, but she’s insistent.

I think it will throw her for a big curveball. She believes what is in her head is worse, but I bet seeing it in black and white, every lurid threat, will be horrendous. Summer needs to know the reality of the situation, I’m totally onboard with that, but reading every single line of crap the person who is stalking her has spewed onto the page? Nope.

Ten minutes later as the band belt out a heavier song than their usual stuff, my phone buzzes. It’s a text from Reece with a brief message.

Call Mags; this is her number. She says she’ll read the letters.

A phone number follows.

I’ll call her later, after the show.

Two hours later, and the rehearsal is over. Summer is laughing it up with the band, and she's glowing. The drummer definitely has lovestruck eyes for her. Lizzie is seemingly jealous, but not to any great deal that worries me. She's all worked up over her boyfriend, so that's where her emotional energy is centered. I'll send the letters to Mags, but I'm still convinced it's a fan doing this.

Two hours later, and I'm once more in a dressing room, but this time I get to see pre-show Summer. She's a jumpy, ball of pent-up energy. Like a nuclear reactor about to blow.

She jumps on the balls of her feet as she runs through vocal exercises. I'm sitting on a worn couch in the far corner of the room, keeping quiet. I don't want to do anything to disturb whatever her usual pre-show routine is.

The low rumble of music from the warm-up act has been thumping away for the past thirty minutes.

Then silence.

“Are you ready to welcome Aegean Wind to the stage?”

It's a pretentious name for a folksy stroke rock band with seventies vibes, but it works somehow, especially with Summer as their lead vocalist. Their biggest fan group is Millennials, which is strange because I'd have thought Boomers would be their target. The sound to me is so reminiscent of some of those big names of the seventies, but then again, maybe that's the appeal? A throwback to a simpler time. The nostalgic belief that things were easier in the distant past.

To give them their due, they throw in some nineties dance bass now and again, to create a sound that's unique to them but dripping with nostalgia.

Two loud bangs at the door have Summer jumping like a cat on a hot wall.

“Two minutes, Summer.”

“Okay.”

She blows out a long breath, sucks in another, then raises her hands up to the ceiling, tips her head back and closes her eyes. Then she screams.

Jesus.

I almost run to her, but I stop as her primeval wail continues. After a long moment, the sound wavers and her lungs run out of air, and when she slowly quietens, drops her arms, shakes them out and grins.

Turning to me, she raises her brows. “Showtime, bitch.”

Every bit of the Summer I’ve been with the past few hours is gone, and the star is in place.

Chapter 9

Jake

THEY DO TWO ENCORES. THE ENTIRE BAND SEEMS PUMPED tonight. It's their penultimate gig of this tour. There's a one-off Wembley concert, with two other bands headlining with them, inked on the calendar for Christmas, but for this tour, the last concert is in London in a few days, then they take a break.

I have their schedule so that I know where they will be and when. I'm hoping we find Summer's stalker well before the European leg of the tour, which kicks off in five weeks. The European leg looks arduous and long. They're going to need the rest they have coming up.

The final scream of a guitar and then they're running off stage, hugging and laughing, the roar of the crowd following them like a ferocious wind.

"You were amazing out there," Lizzie cries as she pulls Summer into a hug.

"Thank you, babe."

"Why don't you come to a damn party for once?" Zane pokes her.

I can see the war in her eyes. She wants to, but she knows it's a risk. I think she's about to do it but then a slight, middle-aged lady sidles up to Summer, clipboard in hand and says something to her, and the energy and light slowly drain from her.

"Nah, I can't, Zane."

"We won't let any drugs cross the threshold," he pleads.

“I’ve some reading to do back at my hotel room.” Summer looks deflated. The high gone. The adrenalin she had the previous evening after a show, markedly missing right now.

“What reading?”

“Nothing important.”

“If it’s not important, Summer, come to the party.” Zane rolls his eyes.

Flame has sidled up behind the band and is watching from off to one side.

“I don’t want to fucking party,” Summer yells.

Zane’s face turns ugly, and he pushes her. What the fuck? He pushes her so hard she stumbles back and falls against a table.

Before I can even think, acting purely on instinct, I’m in his face and I pull my fist back and hit him once, in the gut.

He doubles over with an *ooooomph*. I pull him up by his collar and am about to pile my fist into his face when someone grabs hold of my arm.

I turn to shake them off but see it’s Summer. “No.” Her voice is begging, pleading almost. “Don’t.”

Pausing, the rage in me subsidising a little, I stare at her. She comes close to me and whispers. “He’ll have you sacked, and I need you. Let it go.”

I push Zane away from me. Hard enough for him to stumble and end up on his ass on the floor.

“Do you think you’re going to get away with that?” he seethes as he pushes himself to his feet.

“Do you think you can get away with pushing Summer around that way?” I fire back.

“We do that sort of shit all the time. She gave me a fucking black eye once with a beer bottle, so get off your high horse, *bodyguard*. You don’t know us, okay? You’re no one to us. We’re a fucking family. We’ve known each other for years. I can tell you every single thing that makes her tick, and vice

versa. We might fight, but we're kin. You're an outsider, and you'll be gone soon."

His words hit deep for some reason. It's crazy that they do and has me seriously questioning my mind right now. I am the hired muscle. I am not close to any of them. Summer is just a job, and I only met her days ago, so why do I care?

"I might be the hired muscle, but you touch her like that again, and I'll smash your pretty face up. Understood?"

He swallows hard, clearly smart enough to realize I mean every word.

"I'll sue you."

I laugh. "Good luck with that. If you want it to come out in court that you shove Summer around, then go for it."

He stalks off, but not before he pokes me again in the chest. "Family, remember fucker. We are family."

"Not all families are healthy or happy," is my reply.

He gives me the finger as he exits backstage.

Flame and a few other roadies follow Zane, presumably to party too. Flame is wearing a tight hot pink dress, which clashes with her hair and should look terrible but somehow looks good. She's incredibly sexy. One of the hottest women I've seen in years. Her body is nothing but toned curves and endless legs. Her mouth is pouty and hot pink too. She should be exactly my type, except I've had my head turned already by a mouthy, tempestuous singer with a voice like an angel.

One of the guys, a young man with muscular arms, wearing nothing but a leather vest, slings his arm around Flame's shoulders. She's staring after Zane, though. I idly wonder if there's something between them. Although Zane doesn't seem to know she exists, so maybe not.

I turn to Summer, my jaw clenched. "How often does he do shit like that to you?"

She shrugs. "It's not a big deal, Jake. We're all high on the after-show rush. He pushed me harder than he meant to."

I recall the way he slapped her ass too, the first time I met her.

“He’s a dick,” Donovan says, surprising me. “He thinks because you two once bumped uglies for a few months, he can treat you as if he owns you.”

They *screwed*?

I’m not a jealous guy. With my history? Being jealous makes me a massive hypocrite, but right in this moment, a blinding hot ball of something ugly burns in my belly. It’s corrosive and acidic and *new*.

It’s the damn green-eyed monster, and he’s squatting in my gut.

Why?

What the fuck do I care?

Christ, I need to get my head on right.

“Do you want to go to your dressing room, babe?” Lizzie asks. “Let’s go. You can get changed while I tell you the saga of what Blaze has done now.”

“Sounds good,” Summer says.

I sit in the corner of her dressing room, and the energy is markedly different from the previous evening. Lizzie regals Summer with the twists and turns of her turbulent relationship, and I expect Summer doesn’t really care too much because she has far bigger things to worry about. But she nods, and frowns, and smiles in all the right places.

Then we’re leaving. Lizzie is off to the party, and we’re headed back to our hotel. When we arrive and Summer opens the door to her room, there’s a sack of mail sitting by the desk.

It might as well be an unexploded bomb for the way she looks at it.

“You don’t have to read it,” I say.

“I do,” she replies. “I really do.”

She grabs it, walks into her bedroom, and slams the door.

What the fuck?

Then it opens again. “Sorry. I’m going to take a shower. Do you need to pee?”

I laugh. “No. I went before we left the stadium.”

“Just wanted to make sure, what with you having a sensitive bladder.”

I shake my head at her, but I don’t bite. Her mood seems volatile. Sad, but also as if it could turn at any moment into rage. What does a truly raging Summer look like? She’s a rock star after all. Will she start smashing up the hotel room?

I take the time to call Mags and send some of the letters over to her that I have photographed on my phone. She says she’ll get back to me when she’s read them.

The shower finally turns off, and then there’s silence.

Summer must be reading some of those poisonous words. Letting them drip into her soul and twist her mind. Like weeds in a garden, you let shit like that in, and it can take over.

The minutes tick by.

I can feel the explosion building behind her door and am not sure what the hell to do about it.

God, I’m tired and hot. I ought to take a shower.

I grab my toiletry bag and a towel from my overnight bag and knock on her door.

“Can I take a shower?” I ask her.

The alternative is going to my room, and I don’t think she will want to be left alone right now.

“Yes,” she says distractedly.

I walk in and pause. She’s reading, and her face is pale beneath her tan. It gives her a wan, almost sickly appearance.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, of course.” She brushes me off with a wave of her hand, but her pinched features and tapping foot give away her anxiety.

“Summer, why don’t you stop now for tonight? You really don’t need to be in the mind of that freak. I’m here. Your shadows are close by. Base is on alert. We have a veritable army of people who can help if we need them to, and the local police and British security services are all aware of the threat and contactable.”

She glares at me. “I need to see if there is a clue as to who this person is. It might be someone I know. Like a manager or a roadie or someone.”

“A manager? Like Ron?”

“Not Ron, obviously. But yeah, maybe someone else at the record company, or one of our crew guys.” She scrubs a hand over her face. “Whoever it is, he has a vivid imagination.”

She pauses as I watch her.

“Good God, Jake. Stop staring at me like I’m an exhibit in a museum. Go take your fucking shower.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I mock salute and roll my eyes as I close the bathroom door on her.

If she wants a pity party, well, that’s on her.

I’m five minutes into my heavenly, hot shower when I hear the faint scream. What the hell? I pause. Did I hear that? Or not.

I turn the water off and listen. The bathroom door flies open, and Summer runs in.

Fuck my life; I’m totally naked here, and half hard because let’s just say I was about to take care of business.

“He’s so sick,” she shouts, her voice wavering as she throws the papers onto the bathroom floor where they settle like confetti.

“I have to do something or I’m going to drink all that vodka in the mini bar.”

Christ, this gig is not worth it. I sigh. “Let me finish my shower, because you know, naked here. Then I’ll get dressed and we will go back to the wave place.”

She stills as if she's only just realized I'm naked. Then her gaze travels the length of me, and the color in her cheeks returns. As she looks, my dick has a life of its own and starts to harden fully.

Shit.

"Christ," I grumble as I grab for the towel, but she pulls it from the wall of the shower stall, out of my reach.

What the hell?

"You know," she says as she moves a step closer. "I don't think the wave machine is going to cut it tonight. I'm about to explode, Jake."

"Yes, clearly." I'm wary as hell. The energy between us is like a minefield. One step in the wrong direction, and *boom*.

I need that towel because Summer like this? It's a turn-on.

"What do you want to do?" I ask as I glance around to see if there's anything else I can cover myself with.

"You."

"Sorry?" I misheard surely. If not, she's just come out with the worst chat up line in the world.

"I want to do you. Or rather, I want you to do me."

"Summer," I say as I try to take this down a notch, but before I can complete the rest of my thought, she's pulling the dress from her lithe body, and underneath the simple cotton sheath she's completely nude.

Her pussy is bare. Waxed and shiny as if she's moisturized it, and maybe she has. Suddenly my mouth is watering. My cock pulses and a bead of pre-cum appears at the tip.

"Is that for me?" she murmurs.

I need to stop this.

I don't think this is in the bodyguard handbook under *acceptable ways to calm the client down*.

Then Summer does it. She obliterates all my reason because she takes four more steps to me, opens the stall door,

and drops to her knees.

Chapter 10

Summer

I DON'T CARE IF THIS IS WRONG.

I don't care if it's bordering on lunacy.

All I care about is silencing the screaming in my head.

I can't drink. Or do a few lines. I can't go out and screw some nameless, faceless stranger because there's always the risk it will be all over the tabloids the next day.

I could go ride the waves again at the indoor surfing center, but I don't think that is going to calm the panic consuming me. We're at DEFCON one as far as my nervous system is concerned, and I need something right now to take the edge off before I shatter.

Jake is safe.

He's my bodyguard. He won't sell our encounter as a story. He won't get obsessed or weird or stalk me. He won't hurt me.

He's safe.

Safe dick.

I need something, and so I will use him. He's not adverse to the idea if his impressive erection is anything to go by, and God is it impressive.

My mouth waters even as my knees scream in protest at the hard tiles. I look up at him, the water slicking down his body and highlighting every gorgeous dip and bulge of muscle.

He's staring at me, and I can see the indecision in his gaze. Not wanting to give him time to decide this is a bad idea, I reach for him, and he jolts when I take hold of him.

His entire body stiffens as I lean forward and suck him into my mouth. His taste explodes on me. Clean and fresh with a tang of salt. Like the ocean. Like riding the waves.

I close my eyes for a moment and luxuriate in the taste and feel of him.

I'm more turned on than I thought I would be. My clit aches as I work him, and when he lets out a deep, tortured groan, I swear I think I'm going to come.

This man is someone I seem to spend my time either wanting to fight or ... do this with. He's not my type, and yet he's the hottest thing I've ever seen. He reaches up and holds onto the top of the shower enclosure, and I look up, taking in his masculine perfection.

His eyes are dark and glittering as he watches me, and his jaw is so tight I think it might break.

Suddenly, he reaches down and pulls me up, stopping me. I frown; is he calling this off?

The next moment, I'm against his chest as he holds me in one arm and turns the shower off with the other. Holy hell, that is hot. How strong is he?

He carries me to the bed and places me on it, towering over me.

"You sure about this?" he asks.

I laugh.

"What's funny?"

"I started it."

"Still need you to be sure."

"I'm sure."

He climbs over me, water dripping down his body. I run my hands up his arms and trace the strength of his muscles.

Even though he's big, there's an elegance to him somehow. A poetry to the way his body moves when he shifts or flexes.

"You're so big," I say. Then because I'm a dick, I add, "That's not normally my thing."

He arches one brow.

"I'm sorry; forget I said that."

He laughs. "Darling, you don't have to worry about hurting my feelings. I can take it."

The way he says darling has me almost fainting in delight. I want to ask him to say it again and again, but I don't.

He dips his head and kisses me all over my stomach. He works his way up to my breasts, kissing them and gently squeezing them. He sucks one and then the other nipple into his mouth.

Ron's words about me having no tits come back to me, and I try to move Jake's head up and get him to kiss me, hating to think he's disappointed in my body. He lifts his head and glares at me. "You don't like it?"

"No, I do, but you don't have to." I shrug awkwardly.

"Don't *have* to?" He frowns at me.

"Yeah, I know they're not ... you know. They're not my best feature."

His frown darkens. "They're fucking gorgeous." As if to prove his point, he continues worshipping them.

"I want to eat you up," he growls against my skin. "You taste of sunshine. How do you do that? You look like the sun and you even taste and smell of it."

I laugh a little. "Organic coconut shower gel and body lotion. I use them all the time, and they have genuine coconut oil in them."

"I love it." He moves up my body and nuzzles the crook of my neck, inhaling and making me squirm in delight at the sensation.

My skin goosebumps as he kisses my throat. When he wraps one big hand around my throat and holds me still as he looks at me, my whole world stops.

He doesn't squeeze or threaten in any way, but he holds me as if somehow grounding me. His thumb brushes over the side of my throat and up under my jaw, and then he leans down and bites along my jawline. Gentle nips and kisses to the underside of my jaw. No one has done anything like this before. He uses his hand to angle my head to one side and sucks my earlobe in between his teeth, biting and making me gasp.

By the time he takes my mouth, I'm desperate.

I pant into the kiss, but he keeps it restrained. He controls it, giving me more of him incrementally. A tiny nip at the corner of my lips. A fleeting swipe of his tongue teasing my lower lip. When I open my mouth to cry out, he sucks my lower lip between his teeth, and the sensation goes right between my legs.

Finally, he gives me what I want, claiming my mouth in a hard, demanding kiss, our tongues meeting and swirling as we taste one another. He's still holding my throat, his thumb caressing my jaw as he deepens the kiss.

I press my body against his, needing more, and he breaks off the kiss, staring at me for one long, intense beat, before he moves down my body again. He kisses his way to my lower stomach, and then he parts my legs and simply stares for a moment.

I've never had anyone look at me so intently before. I try to close my legs, suddenly feeling embarrassed, but he makes a small, displeased growl in the back of his throat, and I freeze.

"Let me see," he murmurs.

I nod and feel myself redden as his gaze takes me in.

"You are so fucking perfect," he says. "God, look at you."

I'd rather not. We had to look at ourselves in a mirror once as part of a *Worshipping the Feminine Self* class I took with an

old hippy friend of mine, and it was frankly mortifying. I like pussy, in porn. My own? Not so much.

Jake, though, is looking at it as if it's a work of art by Monet himself.

Then, for some stupid reason, my brain thinks it's a good thing he doesn't think it looks like a Picasso, and I giggle.

I giggle.

In the middle of a heated moment.

My last fling hated shit like that. He once punched the pillow right by my head when I laughed at something he did during sex.

I freeze, but Jake looks up at me, and there's mirth shining in his gaze. "That's a nice sound," he says.

I flush a little. I'm making this weird.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I was imagining my pussy as a work of art and then thinking how weird it would be if it was a Picasso."

He stares at me for a beat, and then he laughs too. "Your mind is unique, Summer."

"It is. Some might say odd."

"I like odd." He kisses my left thigh. "Odd is interesting." He kisses my right thigh. "Odd and different are my thing." He kisses the top of my mound.

Then he parts my lips with his fingers and licks right over my clit. I arch my back and cry out as he flicks his tongue over the sensitive bundle of nerves, and I can't believe it, but he almost has me at the edge of coming with only a few flicks and strokes of his tongue.

My hands tangle in the bedsheets, and he works me harder, taking me higher and higher. When he pushes a thick finger inside me and crooks it, I explode. My world shatters into shards of beautiful glass and bright colors as I float outside myself for exquisite seconds, before I slam back down into the reality of my body.

The post orgasm feeling that hits isn't one of mellowness, but sadness and a return of some of the gnawing anxiety.

Jake is watching me. "You okay?"

I nod and bite my lip. "I want more," I whisper.

He grins. "I can be of service there."

Then the grin falters. "Shit, I don't have a condom; do you?"

I shake my head. "Nope."

He sighs and kisses my belly. "We'll have to get dressed and go get some."

"We?"

"Can't leave you alone."

"I'm clean and on the pill," I blurt out.

I need this. *Him. More.* Getting dressed and leaving this room will break the magic spell, and I will crumble.

"I'm clean," he says. "I'm checked regularly as part of my quarterly health check."

"You have a quarterly full health check?" I ask, distracted for a moment.

"Yes. I do all kinds of work, including contract military work. I have to be at peak fitness, and some employers want certification, so I have a regular health check. Includes labs, blood pressure, a treadmill test, sexual health test, and blood sugar ... all that shit."

"Wow. I can't remember the last time I went to the doctor. I only know I am clean because I got checked out at the clinic when I stopped all the drinking and stuff."

"You said that was a couple of years ago, though."

"Yes. I haven't been with anyone since I got clean."

His expression changes. Oh no, he's going to call this off. I can see it in the seriousness growing behind his eyes. Those eyes I'm increasingly enchanted by are conveying a message I don't want to see.

“It’s not a big deal,” I say.

“It kind of is. I’m your first since you got sober.”

“So?”

“So, Summer, that’s a big thing.”

“Only if you make it one.”

He starts to move as if he’s going to get off the bed and no, nope, can’t have that.

I play dirty and wrap my arms around him. I pull him down on me and whisper in his ear as I press my warm body against his. “Jake, I want you to fuck me. I want you to fuck me hard, and hold my throat while you do, exactly the way you did when you kissed me. I want you to make me scream, and I want you to fill me with your cum. I want you to make it go away.”

I don’t say what I need him to make go away, and he doesn’t ask. His only answer is a groan before he claims my mouth in a devastating kiss.

Then he’s giving me what I want. He lines himself up with me, and as he looks deep into my eyes, he holds my throat, this time a little tighter, a little harder, and he slams into me.

Oh God, *this*. This is what I need.

My eyes flicker closed, and I relish the sensations of being held in place at such a vulnerable point of my body, while a massive cock slides into me, stretching, burning, soothing, healing. He fills me up, chasing away all the dark places.

“Look at me,” he demands.

My eyes snap open, and I watch him as he works above me, his muscles coated in a sheen of perspiration which mingles with the remnants of his shower. He’s a work of art. A beautiful machine.

His cock is amazing. He changes angle, and I gasp. What the hell? Did he just hit my G-spot? No guy has managed that before. My trusty G-Spot vibe can get it, but even then, it takes me ages to get the angle just right.

It's always worth it because it gives me the best orgasms when I manage to find the right spot, but it's like a quest some days.

Jake has unerringly hit it, and I cry out as he does so again.

"That's it," he says, voice low and dangerous. "Right there, huh?"

My hands go up to brace against his broad shoulders, fingers scrabbling uselessly against the wall of bone and muscle that is the rock moving relentlessly in me and above me.

Oh God, I'm seeing damn stars. Tears fill my eyes, which I don't understand, as he fucks me so hard and perfectly. I mewl out these pathetic little sounds as I reach for something I know will obliterate me once I find it.

"Jake," I gasp.

"Let it go, baby," he says. "Come on me. Come on my cock. Let me feel it."

He bites my lip, and I shatter. I come so hard I scream out his name and garbled nonsense as I clench and clench around him.

"Fuck," he swears as he finds his release.

He fills me with his essence as I float down, down, down from the high.

I don't land on a soft cloud, though, but on something hard and terrifying.

A new reality.

I just had the best sex of my life.

I just got blown apart, wide open and vulnerable, by this man.

I gave him my everything. He held me down and fucked me—he made me scream his name.

Shit.

Jake is most definitely not *safe dick*.

He's not safe at all.

Chapter II

Jake

SUMMER WAS QUIET AFTER WE SCREWED FOR THE FIRST TIME. We fell asleep for a while, and she woke me up all tangled around me, and we went for round two.

After that, she grew even quieter. Does she regret it? I hope not because fuck me, I want to do that again. In a whole variety of ways.

I've been sober and sexless for some time now, and Summer just woke a part of me that I had forgotten the joys of.

I don't want to put it back in the box again. Or, at least, not yet.

I've crossed a line; I know that.

Worse, though, is this weird possessive thrill I get whenever I look at her.

The woman used me for sex. Let's be honest. She was climbing the walls with anxiety, and she used me to temper the demons.

That's fine. Except, now I keep getting this odd little tinge of pride when I look at her. As if she's mine.

She's not.

Summer belongs to the world. They own her. The fans. The music lovers. The media. Her industry.

She can't be mine.

Why do I feel so possessive over her?

I've come-and-run more times than I can count, so why am I feeling this way now?

It's weird.

Worrying.

The woman is hot, but plenty of women are. She's beautiful, but ditto. She's funny. I still keep thinking about her *Picasso pussy* and smiling. She's charismatic.

Maybe I'm just starstruck and need to get over it. I saw her on that stage, the way she moved like a goddess and sang like a siren.

Underneath it all, though, she's just a scared, twenty-something girl, who in many ways is oddly naïve.

Summer has seen the world and played packed stadiums. She's been an addict and recovered. She's lived more lives than most people her age have, and yet, she's also, at heart a young woman who seems a little lost.

I'm older. Harder. Jaded.

I'm the last thing she'll need even if she does want a relationship.

She sighs and moves into me. Warm. Smelling of coconut.

God, I want to steal her away and keep her locked up like Sleeping Beauty in her castle.

Those thoughts are frankly fucked.

I swallow them down.

We need to get up and go out. Do something.

Should I wake her?

If we get out of this sex laden room, we can try to get back to normality.

Hopefully.

Maybe.

Mind made up, I reach for the phone and order room service. Two coffees and some pastries.

We can eat, refuel, and head out.

I check my messages and see one from Mags, so I read through it. She basically says without seeing more, and only going on letters, she can't be definitive, but she thinks the letters are odd. Almost too perfectly what a deranged stalker would say. As if the person writing them isn't really a deranged stalker at all, but someone pretending to be one. Then she cautions me that is only her gut feeling, and it would be very dangerous indeed to discount the threat as not being real on her having only read a few letters. She ends by saying I can contact her with more if I need to.

I sigh. Unless I can find something more to go on, like a psych eval, without a real person to talk to is nothing more than a stab in the dark, as Mags herself says. It's useful as it gives me some ideas to work with, but nothing more.

Summer makes a small noise beside me, and I turn to look at her.

It's early. Not even seven in the morning, but if we stay in this room, I'm going to fuck her again and again. The way it's making me feel, all possessive caveman, I don't think I should.

She stirs, moans, and then snuggles into me, and I'm instantly hard.

Aching.

Fuck, I want her. Her pussy is tight, wet, and warm, and it's my new favorite place.

Luckily, just as I'm about to give into my baser urges, there's a knock at the door. I grab my gun and throw on a t-shirt and sweatpants. Keeping my gun behind me, I open the door a crack. "You can leave the tray on the floor, thanks," I say to the young man balancing the tray.

He frowns but places it on the carpet outside the door and watches me for a moment. "Thanks," I say with a smile.

He shrugs and ambles off toward the elevators, and I grab the tray and slide it inside, closing the door behind me. I head back to Summer.

“Hey.” I kiss her neck, and she smiles sleepily. “I got us some breakfast. Time to get up.”

* * *

The zoo?

She wants to spend the day at the zoo. That seems so out of character for an adrenaline junkie like her, but I agreed to do what the client wants, so we’re at the monkey enclosure now.

“I just love them,” she says with a contented sigh.

I feel sorry for the poor fuckers. Stuck in captivity. I don’t say anything to Summer because she seems happy, and I don’t want to burst that bubble.

We finish up with the big cats last. “You remind me of a lion,” she says.

“I do?”

“Yeah, only your muscles and your ink are your glorious mane.”

I laugh at that. “Okay, if you say so.”

“I do say so. Come on, you *know*, right? I mean, have you seen the number of women who have given you the big eyes today?”

I shake my head. “They are all looking at you.”

“Nah, no one recognizes me like this.”

She’s wearing sweatpants, a light sweater with some brand logo I don’t recognize. A ball cap is pulled low over her face, and sunglasses cover much of her features. The sunglasses are plain, and they hide a lot.

“I can go about incognito quite easily. Also, on stage and in photo shoots, I wear extensions, clip-in ones, and people always think I have long blonde hair. Shoulder-length hair under a ballcap isn’t what they think of when they think about Summer from Aegean Winds.”

She does look different, I suppose. The makeup is a big part of her onstage persona too. Without it, she appears younger.

“Do you want to get a drink?” she asks.

I nod. “We can do that.”

“There’s a nice country pub about five miles from here. I looked it up before we came out. We could go and have an orange juice in the beer garden.”

I agree, and we head there, her driving, me in the passenger seat. I’m still trying to spot our shadows and failing, and it’s starting to bug me now.

When we reach the pub, Summer and I order. Lemonade for me, orange juice for her. She grabs a couple of bags of crisps too.

Then we sit in the late morning sun and eat the crisps and drink. It’s pleasant. Easy. Summer, when she’s not hyped up or on the edge of a nervous breakdown, is surprisingly pleasant company.

“I need to visit the ladies, before we leave,” she says.

I nod and follow her. I head into the room first to make sure it’s empty and safe.

It’s a small bathroom with two stalls, both fitted with heavy, old fashioned wooden doors. There are two sinks, a large, ornate vanity, and a chair in one corner, along with a full-length mirror running down the wall.

I glance at Summer as she opens the door and steps into the room.

“Fancy. They use this place for weddings, so it’s probably why the restrooms are so nice. God, you could live in here.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

As she closes the door, I notice that it has a lock on the inside, so the entire restroom can be locked. *Interesting.*

Walking over to Summer, I lock the door behind her.

“Are you desperate to use the toilet?” I ask.

“No. I want to go before we set off, but I’m not desperate.”

“Good.”

“Why?” She stares at me, then over at the door and back to me.

“I want to fuck you, and I don’t want to give you a bladder infection.”

“How kind of you to think of my health,” she says with a laugh. “Fucking in a bathroom though?”

“Baby, this is the Ritz of bathrooms. Go over to the sink, and hold onto the vanity,” I order.

She frowns for a quick moment, but then the expression clears and her mouth twitches into a tiny smile. “Ooh, are you bossing me around?”

“I am. Go.”

She walks over to the vanity and holds onto it. I walk up behind her and run my hands down her sides. She shivers, despite the touch being so light over her cotton sweatshirt.

“Take this off,” I order.

She pulls her ball cap off, and then pulls the top over her head. Her glasses are in her bag; she put them there when we were having our drinks, and she places the bag to one side. Now, she’s only in her bra, and a pretty, lacy thing it is.

I think we’ll keep that on.

I reach around in front of her and pinch both her nipples through the lace, teasing them until they are rock hard peaks. She moans and presses her pussy against the vanity.

“You humping the vanity, Summer? That desperate for relief?”

“Yes,” she gasps.

I bite her earlobe, then suck a mark onto her neck and realize with a stunned ferocity that I want the entire fucking world to see it.

Her head drops back onto my chest, and we watch one another in the mirror as I bite and lick at her throat and neck and continue teasing her nipples through her bra.

Needing more, I shove her sweatpants roughly down her legs, and her panties follow. Parting her folds, I trail my fingers over her already swollen clit. She shivers and bucks back against me. She's wet and ready for me, and I want to roar in triumph.

There's a drumbeat of insistence racing through my veins. *Mine. Mine. Mine.*

Pulling my zipper down, I take my cock out without bothering to take my pants down, and I rub the head of it over her clit, making her sob and gyrate against me.

"Jake, please."

"Please what?" My voice is almost unrecognizable. I'm teasing her, but I'm barely holding on myself.

"Please, put it in me."

Those words. She didn't say *fuck me*, or *do it*. She said something much filthier and hotter.

Christ. I could come all over her pussy like this and mark it.

I don't want to waste it all, though, when I could be buried deep inside her.

"Hold my throat again," she says.

I don't need to be asked twice. One arm holds her hip as I slowly ease my way inside her, my skin shivering all over at the ecstasy. The other hand I wrap around her throat, my thumb under her jaw, holding it up.

Her eyes drift closed.

"Watch," I order.

She snaps her eyes open, and her gaze meets mine in the mirror as she shakes at the invasion.

"Fuck, you're tight," I grunt as I slam into her.

She moans, and her hands holding onto the vanity curl harder in their grip. I fuck her fast, not able to finesse this, and she grinds against the vanity again as I take her in deep strokes.

“Are you working that pretty little clit against the cool marble?” I ask.

“Yes,” she gasps, her cheeks warming to a nice shade of red.

“Does it feel good?”

“God, yes.”

“Rub yourself against it. Make yourself come on it, while I fuck you deep.”

“I am.” She’s panting now.

I watch us in the mirror, and the size difference between us is turning me on.

She articulates my thoughts. “You’re so big compared to me,” she says. “Holding me trapped like this against you. God, I need ... I want...”

“You need to come?”

“Yes.”

“Rub harder and faster, baby.”

She’s pushing her pussy up against the smooth edge of the vanity, and I can see it in the mirror, and I’m not going to be able to hold out. If she doesn’t come in a minute, I’m going to lose it anyway.

“Look at how swollen and wet your pussy is.” I bite her ear again. “It’s positively gliding over that counter.”

“Oh, God. Jake.” Her knuckles turn white, and her eyes widen as, panting and gasping, she comes. She’s half humping the counter, and half pushing back against me, and she’s lost all rhythm.

I let go and fill her as I come so hard, I go lightheaded.

I hold her tight as I drape myself over her, both of us half fallen over the vanity now.

Jesus, we are incendiary. There should be a health warning against sex this damn good.

“*Hello?*” The door rattles, and I jump.

Summer shrieks, and I laugh as she gathers her clothes. Half hopping, half tripping over her feet, she shuffles into the stall and, slams the door closed, leaving me out here with my dick half hard still.

I tuck myself away.

“One moment,” I shout. Then I wash my hands, wipe the counter with some paper towels, and make sure I’m decent before I stroll to the door.

I open it, and a woman who looks to be in her mid-sixties is eyeing me with suspicion. “This is the ladies,” she points out.

“Yes, ma’am. I was making sure it was safe for my client. I’m her private protection detail.”

Her face changes immediately. “Is she famous?”

“Yes,” I say, trying not to laugh when I hear the outraged splutter from behind the stall door where Summer is.

“She’s a famous actress,” I go on. “She’s going incognito today though.”

“Ooh, who is it?” the lady asks.

“I can’t say. I’m sure you’ll understand. She won’t be but a moment.”

The toilet flushes, and Summer steps out of the cubicle, cap back on, sunglasses too, and her head down.

“Hi,” she mumbles at the lady and scoots by her, not washing her hands as she slips out the door.

“Oh, I know her.” The lady claps her hands.

Shit.

“She’s in the new Bond movie.”

“Yes, that’s her. I must go.”

I follow Summer out the door and close it behind me, the woman trying to peer around it as it closes.

“The new Bond movie,” Summer says with a giggle as we leave the pub and head to her car.

She sits in the driver’s seat, rummages around in the pocket of her door, and takes out a bottle of hand sanitizer. She pops the lid, liberally applies it over her hands, and then takes a tissue out of the same pocket and dabs them dry.

“Where to now, Miss Money Penny?” I ask.

“I’d have you know; I’d play the love interest not Miss Money Penny.” She shoots me a glance, her brow arched. “I’d be a Bond girl. Except I wouldn’t because I think it is sexist and outdated. Unless Henry Cavill was bond, and then, you know.”

I wonder if she’s ever had the urge to act. After all, onstage, she basically becomes someone else. Who is she when she has long periods away from the crowds? She’s officially finishing the UK leg of her tour in two nights, and then is free to head back to Cornwall. The last venue is London, and the venue holds twenty thousand people.

“I want to get to London early,” she says.

“Fine. So, back to the hotel to pack up and then get a head start on the journey?”

“Sounds good.”

As she drives, her phone starts beeping, and someone is blowing her messages up. “Fuck’s sake,” she mumbles under her breath, as she pulls into a roadside parking lot to take a look at her phone.

Her face tightens as she reads. “Shit. I need to be in the recording studio tonight.”

Her tone is so unhappy, it makes me wonder how much she enjoys this gig. The stage stuff, yes, for sure. The rest of it? She’s so uptight right now, she could explode.

“Say no,” I suggest. “Say you’re tired.”

“I can’t. This is for charity. A special single. Zane sings on it too. We need to re-record some of the vocals.”

“I don’t like that guy,” I say.

“He’s harmless. A dick but harmless.”

“I don’t think pushing women around is harmless,” I say as I shoot her a stern side-eye.

“He’d never hurt me properly,” she says.

“Summer.” I’m about to give her a lecture, but then snap my mouth shut. Who am I to tell her how to live her life or who she should trust?

I’m her bodyguard, a distraction for her and nothing more. It sucks, and it is ironic because I think this might be the first time in my life where I want something more. Or, at least, to find out if there *could be* something more.

And yet, unlike so many other encounters, I have no say here. The ball is firmly in Summer’s court.

I’m being used for sex.

It’s karma catching up to me. The user becomes the used.

When will she discard me?

How will it feel?

Not good, I think as I look out the window.

Not good at all.

Chapter 12

Summer

WHEN WE REACH THE RECORDING STUDIO, I'M SUDDENLY exhausted. I realize that I don't want to do this. I have no desire to go in there tonight and belt out some vocals. We still have another show, and my voice is tired. My throat is scratchy.

When we arrive, I sip at some tea with honey, hoping it will coat my poor vocal cords and let me get some decent lines laid down.

“Do you know the muffin man?” Zane enters the room singing cheesily. He's always singing this rhyme to his own tune.

“Dooooo, youoooo, know the muuuuuuffffiin man. The muffin man. The muffin man. Oh, do you know the muffin maaaaaan?”

God, shoot me now.

Zane like this is difficult to navigate. I plaster on a false smile, and he grins at me. “*Hey, baby.*”

He's high, a little at least, and probably at least two Jack and Cokes in.

“Jack and Coke, please,” he says to one of the sound guys as if they're his servants.

They stare for a moment, and then shrug and go in search of some from the trolley in the corner. Zane has this way about him where he can make people do things for him. He dazzles them.

He's gorgeous. Funny when he wants to be. Full of life and passion. He tears off his sweatshirt, revealing a tank top underneath. It fits tight to his lean, muscular body. His arms are rangy, and I know under the cotton covering his stomach there is a six pack, because Zane might not work out much, but he doesn't eat an awful lot either, and he uses a lot of energy on stage and in bed.

He's a dirty fuck but a lazy one. He never got me off the way Jake has. For a guy who is so textbook He-Man in appearance, Jake is surprisingly good in bed. I'd have thought he'd be crap if I'm being honest. Full of that false confidence some men have where they think they're so hot they don't have to do anything.

Zane can be a bit that way. Filthy, but not too interested in whether you have as good a time as he does. Then again, Zane hasn't ever felt anything for anyone he screws. Maybe if someone came along who could tame him, it would be a different matter.

He was my type for years. Now? I prefer the tank standing guard in the corner.

Objectively, Jake is a striking man, handsome for sure, but Zane has that bad boy, rock god thing going for him that drives women wild. I don't think Jake's kind of handsome would translate to posters on the walls of teenage girls' rooms. But *out there*? When he's walking about in the real world and people look at him, *they really look*. Often twice. He doesn't seem to notice it, but I have.

Zane's beauty comes alive in front of a camera or an audience. It's as if adoration lights him up from inside. Criticise him, though, or worse, ignore him, and something ugly comes to the surface. I think back to when I told Jake that Zane was harmless, and I wonder if that is really true.

I've seen a darker side to him. A couple of times, I've genuinely been scared, a little at least.

"Okay, let's get a run through done, at least," the studio manager says.

I nod and go put my headphones on as I stand by my mic.

For some reason, I suddenly feel shy. I glance at Jake and realize that I'm going to sing in front of someone I really want to impress. That's a new thing for me. Normally, while I might want to lay down a good track, I don't want to impress the people in the room. Now, I do. I want him to find my voice beautiful, and the fact I care what he thinks is breaking me out in a sweat.

Oh, God, what if I choke? Screw up the words? Sing out of tune?

"You okay, Summer?" Zane asks me.

"Yes, fine."

I take my headphones off and walk over to Jake. Hopefully what I'm about to ask him won't piss him off. "Do you mind waiting outside while we do this?" I ask.

His face tightens and yep, I've pissed him off. "Why?" he barks his answer.

"I'm erm ... I feel self-conscious."

"In front of me?"

"Yes."

"Oh." His face darkens, like a cloud has passed over above him.

"It's because I ... I care what you think ... of my singing, and it's suddenly made me shy. I don't normally care. Now, I do."

"You don't care when you're singing in front of thousands."

I shrug. "I don't know them, and I never look at their faces."

"You don't?" He is seeming less pissed now and more intrigued.

"No, I don't. I'm sure some singers do, but I try to see them as a blob. A faceless mass. That way it's easier for me

not to get nervous. Don't take this the wrong way. It's because I know you and I ... erm, I like you that I ... well..." Oh, God, I sound as if I'm twelve.

His face breaks out into a big grin, though. "You like me?" He pokes me in the ribs.

"Oh, God, get out, you big goof." I laugh as he nods.

"Okay, but I'm right outside this door. I'm not leaving from there."

"I know. Bodyguard duties, right?"

"Right."

The door closes behind him.

A breeze behind me has me turning around. Zane is standing there, fanning himself with one hand. "Aw, how sweet. You and the bodyguard are bumping uglies."

"We are not." I shake my head and go to push past him.

He grabs me, and his grip on my wrist is hard enough to burn. I try to pull away, but he only tightens his hold. I glance around the room, but the other people are too busy checking equipment to pay attention to us.

"I heard you. *I like you.*" He sing-songs the words.

My cheeks heat, and I try to get away again. "It's none of your business, but it isn't what you think at all. I like him like ... a brother."

My mind is whirring. If Zane tells the bosses I'm with Jake, they might fire him. Then I won't see him again.

"Right. Of course, you are just like siblings. Totally the vibe I get." His grip tightens more, and where his thumb rests on the inside of my wrist is aching now in a dull, deep pain.

"Zane, you're hurting me."

"Summer. Don't think you're too good for me. You're not the only star in this band."

What the fuck? Where is this coming from?

I start to sweat as panic rides me. Is Zane my stalker? No, he wouldn't. He's an ass, a narcissistic pig, but a stalker? No. He wouldn't write those things that I read the other night. I don't think he's capable. And yet, he's still digging into my wrist.

I wrench my hand free finally. "I said, you were hurting me. Don't grab me like that again."

"Or what? You'll tell the Incredible Hulk out there? Ooooooh, I'm scared."

He laughs and saunters off to the microphone.

It takes me ten tries to finally get some half decent vocals down. Zane and his fuckery put me off my stride entirely.

By the time it's a wrap, I am exhausted, have a headache and am in a bad mood.

Jake slips into the room at some point as I'm stuffing things into my bag.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Yes, just exhausted. My head is splitting."

"You need to eat." He glances at his watch. "It's late, but you've barely eaten all day."

He's right, I haven't. Which means, he hasn't either.

"You want to grab a burger?" he asks.

"That sounds great. I know a fantastic vegan fast-food joint."

"Vegan?" He wrinkles his nose and looks kind of adorable doing it. For a moment, he doesn't look like a massive, terrifying man, but I get a glimpse of the boy he once would have been.

"You won't be able to tell. I swear."

"That's a pretty serious promise you've made there," he says.

"I will prove it to you. Come on. I'll drive us over there, and we can eat and then head back to the hotel. I need an early

night.”

We eat and talk, and it feels remarkably easy. Jake even compliments the food, which makes me smile. Jake is kind of laid back for someone who is a self-confessed adrenaline junkie. I’m not laid back at all. My neuroses are front and center. When we finish, I insist on paying this time, and then we drive back to the hotel.

Once I’ve taken a shower, I poke my head out the door to see Jake curled up on the sofa. “Bathroom’s free,” I say. Then I clear my throat, suddenly feeling super exposed. “I’m not feeling up to anything. My head is killing me, but erm, do you want to share the bed? I’d ... I’d like it if you are okay with it?”

He turns to me and smiles, that lazy, sexy as hell smile of his. “Sure, I’ll share the bed. This thing was sprung with iron forged in hell itself. It keeps poking me in the back.”

“Okay. Great.”

This is weird.

He busies himself in the bathroom while I busy myself having a mental breakdown about what exactly is going on between us.

I curl up on my side and at some point, my mind drifts, thoughts coming and going like fleeting flashes of sun through the trees in a windy forest.

* * *

I surface to the sound of voices outside the hotel room. I blink. What time is it? The room is lit by the light from outside, strong enough to come through the curtains, so it must be day. I glance at my phone on the bedside table. Nine-thirty. Early for me. I’m capable of sleeping through to lunch after a show or recording. The come-down crash is epic some days when I’ve been singing.

The warm brush of skin over my wrist snags my attention, and I glance down to see my arm thrown across Jake’s

stomach and his hand wrapped around my wrist as he strokes at the underside.

I smile up at him, but he doesn't smile back.

"Who did this?" he asks.

I frown. "Did what?"

"These marks. They weren't here yesterday, and it sure as hell wasn't me."

I jerk my wrist free and look at it. Even in the dim light I can see the bruises. Perfect finger-shaped splodges of purple decorate my skin.

Crap.

"Summer." There's a warning in his voice.

"Jake. Don't."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't. I'm not in the mood for an argument."

"I don't want an argument. I'm simply asking who did this to you."

"No one."

"Oh, right. It just appeared."

"It's not important."

"Fuck, yes, it is."

He turns my face up to his with his hand under my chin. "Who. Did. This."

I stare at him as his eyes darken in anger. "You know what," he seethes, "forget it. I can guess."

"Then why bother asking, asshole?" I throw myself dramatically out of bed and storm to the bathroom.

The door shuts behind me with a resounding bang, and I start cleaning my teeth.

Chapter 13

Summer

THE JOURNEY INTO THE VENUE FOR THE SOUND CHECK FOR OUR last UK tour date is silent. I'm sulking, and he's seething. Marvellous.

We packed the car before we left because tonight, we will stay in London, and then tomorrow we are heading to Cornwall. Except, I might head there tonight. I'm so over all of this.

I plan on calling that massive Russian dude and telling him I want a new bodyguard too. I never should have started something with Jake. Zane and me, we're complicated. We have a toxic sibling-style relationship these days. There is no sexual attraction, despite what Jake might think, not anymore. Just the resentment of two egos fighting to be the prima donna of the band.

Zane thinks because he's the hot boy with all the girls thirsting for him that makes him the most important band member, but he's wrong. If he left, lots of fans would be upset, but the band would carry on because he writes very few of our songs these days. He sings on some tracks, but Donovan actually has a better voice. He could lay down lyrics if Zane left.

Bass players aren't hard to find, to be truthful.

What is hard to find is a front woman. I *am* the band in many ways. I'm the one who gets the magazine shoots, the interviews, and most of the publicity. In fact, I've turned down so many things the band doesn't know about because I always

try to keep it collaborative. An *us* situation, not a *me* one. Zane? Would he turn those things down? I doubt it.

The thing is, though, he's part of us and has been from the start, so there's a strange acceptance of his presence even though it's toxic. He's like the sibling in a big family that everyone knows is the problem. The one who rarely comes home for Christmas, and when he or she does, the rest of the family dreads it. That's Zane. But he *is* family.

That's the part Jake doesn't get.

Family fight. Families have asshole members who piss the others off. Most families are toxic one way or another.

"I can hear you thinking." Jake's voice makes me jump.

It's a pleasant, low rumble, and I find his accent sexy. It's softer than a British accent. The words are more drawn out.

"You don't get it," I blurt out. "Zane and me."

"Okay, so enlighten me."

"He's family, okay? He is toxic sometimes, I admit that, but all families have a member who is a pain, who everyone else thinks is a dick, but at the end of the day they're still a member of the family, no?"

He sighs. "You know what I do with toxic people?"

"No, but I'm sure you're going to enlighten me, oh great one." I throw his words back at him.

"I cut them out. Like a cancer."

"Well, how cold and surgical of you. Not all of us wield such sharp implements, Jake."

I try to block him out and focus resolutely ahead on the road, suddenly sick of this conversation and not sure why.

"Who do you really have in your corner, Summer?"

"Erm, hello? My friends, the band, Ron, and Eddie."

He shakes his head, which I can still see in my peripheral vision. Right now, I'm so mad at him, I wish humans could

wear blinkers like horses, and then I'd only see ahead and not be so aware of him beside me.

“Ron, we can tick off that list. I'd argue most of your bandmates too. Perhaps, when you were young and it was fun, yeah, but now? They're in it for the money and the fame, and you know, deep down, Summer, you know that you're the one who gives them that.”

He blows out an annoyed breath. “You might tell yourself all the time it's a team effort because you're nice and kind, but it's not. If you walked tomorrow, they'd fade into nothing, but you'd still be a star. Your best friend is hanging on your coat tails, enjoying the ride, and I don't know enough about Eddie to make a judgment.”

I snort. “God, you think you can read people so well, don't you?”

“I know I can.”

“I don't want to talk to you anymore. Shut up.” Oh my God, I sound like I'm ten again. He's upsetting me, though, and I need to focus and drive. At this rate, I'll wrap us around a lamppost.

You're so upset because he's right, an insistent little voice deep inside me says. They're not really on your side. The only person you truly have on your side, who you could really trust is Seb.

If push came to shove, would they be there for me? Would Lizzie still be my bestie if I did what I've been secretly dreaming about? Packing it all in and just surfing daily and living my best life by the ocean?

Being on stage is the ultimate thrill, but being out on the ocean is almost as good, and without the horrific come down afterward, or the rest of the crap, which I'm thoroughly bored of. The media tours, the photo shoots, even studio work is losing its shine. I realize with a jolt that a lot of that has to do with Zane and his dick-ish ways.

We arrive at the concert venue, and I storm inside, my bag slung over my shoulder. A hand grabs my upper arm.

“Hey.” Jake is right up in my face. “What did I say about getting out of the car before I’ve checked if it’s safe?”

“Sorry,” I mumble. The fight is out of me right now. I need to preserve that energy for the show. If I let it all out in a huge bust up with my bouncer, I’ll be flat on stage. I’ve been there before.

He watches me for a beat but let’s go. In my dressing room, I begin the transformation into the Summer the fans want. The hair extensions go in. I slip into my bikini, with shorts over the bottoms, and nothing but a flimsy kaftan that is patterned but gauzy, over the top. When I hold my arms up, it looks like wings hanging down. I pile on bracelets and chain necklaces. Then I add the makeup. Heavy eyeliner. Lash extensions. A daisy on my cheek. I do it all myself as I can’t stand being messed around with by other people before a show.

When I’m done, it looks like a bomb has gone off around the dressing table, but I don’t care. Lizzie will come in and clear that all away for me. She always does.

I can feel Jake’s gaze on me the whole time, heavy, like a full rain cloud. I don’t know if it’s heavy with judgment or concern, or both.

Does he feel anything for me? We’ve had some hot sex, but other than that we don’t really know one another.

I turn to him and fix him with a dazzling smile. “Here she is, the one they all want.”

He moves then, unfurling from the wall like a predator, alert underneath the faux laziness in his movements.

When he reaches me, he tips my chin.

“I won’t lie, Summer, when I saw you on stage, I was mesmerized. Your voice, your energy. The way you hold the crowd in the palm of your hand. You’re like a goddess up there.”

I swallow hard because I am, but that’s not me. That’s *her*, the persona. Yet Summer is who everyone wants. The star.

“But you know who I prefer?”

I shake my head.

“The girl in the ball cap at the zoo.”

Then he lets go of my chin and walks back to the couch, sitting down and tapping his foot as he does something on his phone.

His words hit me hard.

In these past few days, I’ve been more myself with him than anyone else other than Seb and my parents get to see. I suppose I had to. He was living in my space and with me twenty-four-seven. Hell, he’s even seen me masturbating to one of my favorite spicy audios.

“Sometimes, I want to walk away from it all,” I blurt out.

He glances up at me and carefully places the phone by his side. “So, why don’t you?”

I laugh at that. Is he crazy? “I’d let the whole band down. Ron. The record label. And I love it ... out there. It’s such a rush.”

“Yes, I imagine it is. Like no other high, huh?”

“Yes.”

“A bit like war was for me, which I know makes me sound like a sick fuck, but it’s the truth. The fact is, though, Summer, sometimes the things that make us high aren’t the best things for us.”

He runs a hand through his messy hair. “I honestly believe if I hadn’t got out when I did, I’d be dead by now. I missed it, and so I chased that high with alcohol, women; you know the sordid story.”

I do because I’ve done it too.

“I’ve seen you on that stage, but I’ve also seen you after. You might as well be coming off a three-day bender. Yeah, you handle it, and you’re clean.”

Then he kills me.

“But for how long, Summer? How long until one day, the comedown is just too much. Or the build-up beforehand is too intense? Or you and Zane get into it, and it turns really ugly? You’ve found a way to get that high, only in a much safer way. Surfing.”

I laugh at that. “You’re probably one of the few people who would call surfing safe.”

“Compared to what you’re doing to yourself, it is.”

“What am I doing to myself?”

“Surrounding yourself with toxic people and telling yourself they’re family. Using the energy of the crowd to fill a hole inside you that you don’t need to fill anymore. You found something to do that. You’ve talked to me about Cornwall, your home there, your love of surfing, and your dogs. When you talk about those things, do you know something?”

I shake my head, determined not to damn well cry.

“You light up more than when you’re on that stage when you talk about those things. Maybe that’s your new way to get that high you need, but in a way, that isn’t self-destructive.”

It’s not as if I’ve not had these thoughts myself. “But who walks away from all this?” I ask.

He shrugs. “It’s not as if you can’t keep on putting music out. If you go solo, though, you control it, right?”

I’ve thought about it, had tiny daydreams where I do my own thing. An album every few years, that I produce with my own money, make truly mine, and take my time on. Small, intimate shows at indoor venues, and dancing to my own beat.

The success is what is keeping me trapped. I feel as if I have the world at my feet, and who walks away from that? Plus, the band will hate me.

Jake stands, walks to me, and takes my hand. “Summer. I don’t get a say in your life. I’m not someone you need to consider when you’re making decisions, and I have no right really to talk to you this way about this shit. I’m just calling it like I see it.”

“Why?”

“Why what?” His brow furrows.

“Why even bother? Like you say, you’re not a part of my life.”

The words sting because for a stupid, blinding moment, I wish he was. For a truly deranged few seconds, I imagine carrying on writing myself abusive notes if my stalker suddenly stops, just to keep Jake around.

“Because I like you.” He says it so simply as if it is all that counts. Then he kisses me.

Oh, this kiss.

It’s not like the others he’s given me. His lips find mine, and they’re soft but so full of yearning it’s like the chorus to one of our biggest hits. The kiss lifts me up, up, up, as he tastes me, takes from me, and gives in return. His big arms crush me to him, and he deepens the kiss. All I can taste, smell, and feel is Jake.

This is a high I could chase forever. No comedown. No nasty adrenaline hangover, just a sweet yearning for more, more, more. A drug that won’t crush me and leave me in the dirt.

“Holy fuck, I knew it. Whoohoo!”

I pull away from Jake as if he’s radioactive. He licks his lips, his gaze still on me as he resolutely ignores Zane.

“You dirty little fuckers.” Zane saunters into the room. “Is this allowed? I mean, I think Ron ought to know what is going on here. Is this part of the bodyguard manual, soldier boy? Fuck the client? I don’t think it is. Seems like a huge abuse of power. The hashtag *me too* crowd will love this shit.”

He actually says the word hashtag, which makes me want to throat punch him.

Jake still doesn’t look at Zane, but he gently takes hold of my wrist and holds it up.

“You do this?”

He doesn't turn to Zane but focuses on the marks on my wrist.

“What? Fuck no.”

“Jake...” I shake my head.

“No, Summer.” Jake smiles at me, and it's sad, and I know ... I know he's going to blow this all up. He's going to do something and get taken off my detail by Ron, and I can't bear it.

“Please don't,” I whisper as the tears that have been threatening all week build to where one spills over.

“Why are you so intent on protecting him?” Jake asks.

“I'm not. I'm protecting you because I can't do this without you.”

The room erupts into a silence so profound and dense you could swim through it.

It lingers heavily as none of us speak. Jake and I do an awful lot of communicating with our eyes, and then a slow clap to my right finally has me turning to Zane.

“You fell in love? With him? That stupid hunk of muscle and zero brain cells? Fuck you, Summer, you pathetic cow. We could have had it all.”

“What? Since when did you want anything with me? We were done a long time ago.” I ignore the horrible name he called me and focus on the message of what he's saying because it's fucked up.

“Yeah, and we should have never been. I hope you'll be happy with your gorilla. I expect what he lacks in brain cells he makes up for in muscle mass, although his dick is probably tiny from all the steroids. Still, it will fit your dried up, overused pussy. You stupid whore.”

One moment Jake's gaze is on mine, and the next I'm staring at nothing as Jake moves like lightning. He hauls Zane up against the wall, hand wrapped around his throat.

Zane punches Jake hard in the side, but Jake doesn't flinch.

His thumb caresses the side of Zane's neck as if he's stroking a lover almost. Deadly quiet, he starts speaking. "Did you know, Zane, that the neck is a very vulnerable part of the body? For instance, if I put just the right amount of pressure here..."

Zane groans as Jake presses either side of his neck. Jake's fingers loosen almost instantly. "Hurts, right?"

Zane tries to wrench his head away and punches Jake again. Jake takes the blow, but I notice this time, he's tensing his body, using his muscles as a cage to protect his bones and organs. He grabs Zane's flailing fist, now only holding him with the one hand by the throat.

"Stop fucking fighting me or I could accidentally give you an injury. I'm not going to hurt you; I'm merely giving you a quick anatomy lesson. Now the thing is, lots of people watch movies where someone applies pressure to the neck, the way I did to you, and the person passes out, and then they come around and they're fine. I'm trained in that. You felt it. Two seconds and you didn't like it. Probably felt a bit swimmy in your head. I do that to you for ten seconds... You're out. The thing is, though, Zane, *there is no safe way* to do that to someone. You probably would come around, but maybe I'd accidentally tear your artery with the pressure. Right?"

Zane has gone so still I have to check he's even breathing.

"I might cause some nerve damage. The human body is incredibly strong but also remarkably and terrifyingly fragile. You never know when something you do to someone could cause a lot more damage than you realize."

As if he senses that he's not capable of winning this one, Zane does something I've never seen before. He crumples, like cardboard left out in the rain. His face falls in on itself, and the false bravado he shows the world is stripped away. It's as if for a fleeting flash I see what he'll be like middle aged when all the fame and women are gone.

I see his true core self.

“I don’t want to press here again,” Jake says with another scarily loving caress to Zane’s throat. “But if you leave marks on Summer ever again, I’ll do worse. Do you understand me?”

Zane swallows thickly and nods.

Jake lets go. “Good boy. You can go now.”

Holy hell. *Good boy?*

Zane shoots me a defeated glance and slinks out of the room like a child. I don’t think for one moment, though, in a few hours he won’t be fuming and plotting all the ways he can pay Jake back for the humiliation.

“Jake, you ... you took him apart. You tore him to bits. He’s going to hate me.”

“Nah.” Jake shakes his head. “I only showed you who he really is, and he’s not going to do anything to you. You know why?”

“No.”

“Because he’s a bully, and he’s more than met his match. He’ll run off, tail between his legs, and find some poor new person to take it all out on. What he won’t do is come for you.”

I hope he’s right. “What if he’s the one writing the letters?”

Jake laughs. “That’s kind of what some of that was about. A test, if you like. I might be wrong, but I don’t think he has it in him. The stuff he does to you is in the moment, right? Little flashes of temper. I’m not sure Zane is either confident enough, mentally unstable enough, or sick enough to write those letters.”

“So ... you’re saying he’s a good guy.”

Jake stares at me, and then we both burst out laughing.

“Come here.”

I go to him, and he caresses my throat, but in an entirely different way to how he did Zane’s. This is most certainly

sexual. “Go out there and shine like the fucking summer day you are.”

He kisses me once, fierce and beautiful, and in that moment, I fall in love.

Chapter 14

Jake

MY PHONE RINGS HALFWAY THROUGH THE BAND'S SET. IT'S base, so I click my fingers at the extra security and point to my eyes and then at Summer. They understand the signal.

“Yes?”

“Hey there.” It's Reece speaking.

“You got some news?”

“Something weird has come up.”

“What?”

“Some of the letters ... they're posted from very near to where Summer lives in Cornwall.”

I pause mid step and almost stumble. “What?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn't this come up sooner? It's an obvious thing to look at the postmarks of where the letters came from.”

“They were often covered in lots of crap, stamps and the such, because they were sent internationally to the record label.”

“So, it's someone local?” That makes no sense. Does Summer even know anyone there, except to say hi to? Maybe some of the local surfers, but...

“Unless... Summer is sending them herself.”

I don't speak. For a moment of blinding rage, I want to rip Reece's tongue out of his mouth. “Are you fucking crazy?” I

finally find my voice.

“Don’t flip out on me, okay. What’s going on over there?”

Oh no. Not going there. “Nothing, but I’ve spent time with her. I saw how upset she was when she read those letters. You said some, so I presume others aren’t?”

“There are letters posted from all over.”

I sigh and laugh. “Reece. You fucking come to me with some crazy ass story again about how Summer is sending letters to herself, and I’ll fly over there and slap you. My first thought would be that whoever is stalking her is literally doing just that. Following her. I bet the letters postal location match tour dates and places too.”

There’s a longer pause.

“Spit it out.”

“We had one of those handwriting experts analyse the letters, and while it isn’t exactly the same to Summer’s handwriting, it is very similar. Similar enough that the expert says it could be Summer trying to change her own handwriting.”

The rage I’m beginning to feel is not proportionate, I know that. It means ... shit, it means that I’m feeling more for Summer than just a client, or even a fuck buddy. “I don’t think she’d do that.”

“You have reasons for your certainty on this, Target?”
Reece’s voice has become cooler.

He’s massive, blond, and seems like a big old friendly bear, but he’s ex-Special Forces like me. He’s not some cuddly, gentle giant. Not beneath the surface.

“Yes, I do. Spending time with her day in and day out. That is reason enough.”

“How many days? You don’t know her, man.”

“I know enough.” I know what she tastes like. I know what she looks like when she comes. I know she’s as wild as a stormy ocean and as beautiful as the sunrise. Could she be

crazy enough to be doing this and I've missed it? The thought sits like bitter acid in my stomach.

"Reece, unless you have something more concrete than pseudo-science bullshit; I've got to get back to my client."

"Okay. I'm just trying to give you a heads-up, Target. Don't want you getting mixed up with someone who is going through some things." He hangs up.

Mixed up with? *Going through some things?* Is he kidding me? I throw my phone at the wall and am grateful when it doesn't shatter because I need the damn thing. I pick it up and walk to the wall. It's kind of padded and spongy. I frown at it. Weird.

"They host a play center in this part of the building in the day. Soft walls. In case the kids bounce off them."

I turn to see Lizzie by me. She smiles at me and jerks her head to the stage. "She's got them right where she always has them. On their knees for her."

On their knees for her is an interesting way of putting it. I look at her beautiful, perfectly made up, flawless face. Lizzie is a stunning young woman for sure, and objectively, if I look at her and Summer without my Summer infatuated blinkers on, I can see she's better looking. Heck, you could probably put Lizzie next to a top model, and she'd hold her own.

She comes closer, and her scent is expensive, as are her clothes and the watch on her wrist. It's an Omega and must have cost a few thousand. Does she earn that much as Summer's assistant? Or does she have a friend with deep pockets?

"You're not watching her," she says.

"I'm about to go back. Had a call from base."

"Oh, a break in the case?" She waggles her brows as if this is a joke.

"No," I snap.

"Ah, don't be that way, *Target*." The way she says my call sign is breathy, seductive. An invite.

I realize then that no one can see us here, even if they were looking. It's dark in the recess of this part of the backstage area. The walls are black, and there are few lights on; the only light is what reaches us from out there.

Lizzie steps closer again. "Is she a diva to guard?" She laughs. "I love her, of course I do. She's my bestie, but she can be full on. I bet she's run you ragged."

I decide to play along for a while, see where Lizzie leads this conversation.

"Yes, she can be a diva." I laugh. "It's what we are paid for, though. To babysit people."

"Who else have you babysat, Target?"

"No one famous."

She takes another step closer.

"You know, she's the one who they all want." She scoffs then. "Zane is such an arrogant asshole; he thinks he's the draw. He's not. It's all her. All Summer."

There's a wistfulness to her tone. I can't figure this woman out. Sometimes she seems almost bitter, and others deeply admiring. Maybe she's conflicted.

"I know your room is next to hers. She told me the day we found out about you being hired that the *big lug was going to be right next door*. Her words." She laughs. "Are there any rules that you can't have visitors?"

"I can't have visitors, Lizzie. Anyway. I'm in her room." Then I add quickly, "On the couch."

"Really? She makes you sleep on the couch? Aren't you a bit big for that?"

"I manage."

"It's a shame you don't have your own space." Her hand snakes out, and she runs her fingers down the side of my bare arm. My t-shirt sleeve is cut high, and she caresses my bicep. "God, you're a big boy."

Big boy? Is that meant to be hot?

“Listen, Lizzie...”

“You’re not mesmerized by her, are you? I think I can tell. The others all are. Even Zane. It’s why he gets so angry. He hates her, but he wants her. You know?”

“I don’t know.”

She laughs again. “They used to fuck. Summer used to fuck a lot of people.”

Her words make me see red. I hate the idea of Summer fucking Zane. Not because I’m being morally judgmental, but because he’s such a fucking asshole.

“She’s used goods.”

Now that is most *definitely* not something a bestie would say.

“Really?” I reach out and grab her hips because she’s pressing a little too hard into me, grinding her hips now.

“Yeah. The drink and drugs, they make you indiscriminate, you know.”

I tell myself I have no right to feel what I am, but I still get a vicious twang of jealousy at her words, even though I did the same damn things myself.

“Do you want to go around the corner?” she asks me.

“I can’t, sorry. Need eyes on the client.”

“Not even for my lips on your cock?”

Holy fuck. “What about Blaze?”

“He’s a cheating arsewipe. Why can’t I have some fun too? More to the point, why can’t you? You can fuck my mouth.”

Double holy fuck. I shake my head at her. “That would get me fired. But thanks for the offer.”

She steps back. “Thanks for the offer?” She slaps me.

It’s hard enough to sting, and I’m shocked she did it. My mind is trying to keep up with the mixed mess that is Lizzie, and I can’t figure her out at all.

“Arrogant asshole. You ought to be grateful that someone like me is even talking to you, never mind offering to get down on my knees for you, and that’s your response?”

“Ma’am, I would get fired.”

“So?” She laughs. “They can get her another bodyguard, and we could have some fun. I’ve been told I’m a perfect ten. Not many times in life a man gets the chance with a perfect ten, or so I’ve been told. Of course, I don’t see myself that way.”

“You could be an eleven, and the answer would be the same. I’m here for Summer. I work for the record company. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” I go to move past her.

Her damn hand raises again. Is she fucked in the head? I grab her wrist, stalling her. “Lizzie, you really don’t want to do that.”

“You’re all the same. Even Blaze. None of you see the value in *me*.”

With those words, she storms off, leaving me perplexed and intrigued. That girl is not okay. She’s not balanced. She’s up and down. Admiring of Summer for sure, but deeply, fucked up levels of jealous too. Then again, she’s dealing with a cheating boyfriend, and maybe that’s what has her so messed up? Still, the dynamic between her and Summer is twisted.

I had a friend in school, and his sisters had the most toxic relationship I’d ever seen. Anyway, years later, there was a scandal, because one of the sisters screwed the other’s husband, and then the other sister killed her for it. I recall that sometimes they were best friends, and in many ways, they got on and had a lot in common, but their competitive streak turned deadly and cost them both their lives, literally and figuratively.

Summer and Lizzie’s relationship reminds me of that, except only one of them is competing. Lizzie.

* * *

When Summer and the band finish, the backstage is different from previous after shows I've witnessed. It's subdued. Zane is quietly fuming. Donovan and the two other male members, Robbie and Mark, are chatting in a corner, voices low, and Summer is chugging down a bottle of water. The crowd is roaring for the encore. Usually, this five or ten minutes before the band go back out and give them two rousing numbers is full of crackling energy. Not this time.

"Jake. A word for a moment."

I turn in surprise to see Ron beckoning me. I glance at Summer, make sure the extra security has eyes on her, and then follow him back into the second room; the one with the padded walls.

"We're letting you go. With immediate effect."

"What?"

"You're done here."

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out to see Konstantin blowing up my screen. *Great.*

"I don't understand."

"You don't get to intimidate and be violent toward one of our band members and stay in your role. Sorry."

"Zane?"

"You assaulted him, so yes, Zane, for starters."

"He assaulted Summer, so perhaps you ought to deal with that first."

He purses his lips and frowns at me. "The band has a complicated relationship that I understand and manage very well. You have caused no end of issues since you started here. Now, Zane's one thing, and he came to me very upset not that long ago, and I considered acting, but now Lizzie has added to the complaints."

"Lizzie?" He's lost me now.

Ron leans in. "She says you got heavy with her backstage. Scary. She doesn't like your vibe."

“My fucking vibe?” I try to hold my temper in because blowing up right now will only add to Ron’s list of sins against me. “She came onto me,” I say.

Ron laughs.

“What’s so fucking funny?”

“Lizzie? Came on to you. Lizzie, as in, looks like Cindy Crawford on steroids, came on to ... *you*?”

“Yes, and I told her I wasn’t interested and to back off. I didn’t touch her. As for Zane, that I admit. He’s a fucking asshole, and he has manhandled Summer more than once.”

“I’m sorry, Jake. I must let you go. No choice. I can’t have this hassle.”

“Let him go?”

I glance over Ron’s shoulder and see Summer standing there, her face pale under her stage makeup.

Ron turns around. “Yes, baby girl, but we’ll have new security in place before you leave for Cornwall.”

My phone goes again, and once more I ignore it.

“No. He’s not leaving.”

“Yes, he is. We’ve fired him. As of this second, the record company is no longer paying *his* company.”

Summer’s features harden, as if she has steel underneath her skin and it’s only now showing itself. “Fine. *I’ll* hire him.”

Summer turns to me. “Are you willing to work for me?”

I have whiplash here. I ought to walk away. She told me herself she was done with me not that long ago. I can’t, though. I can’t leave her here, with Zane, Lizzie, and the stalker, and a man like Ron who calls her *baby girl* and definitely doesn’t have her best interests at heart.

“I’ll stay,” I say.

“You can’t,” Ron snaps. “Summer, he must go. The record label demands it.”

“Fine. He can go, only I’m going with him. The band can do the encore without me.”

She grabs her fringed bag from the side table and slings it over her body.

“You can’t fucking walk off without doing the encore. You could be in breach of contract.”

“Sue me then.”

Zane stalks up to join the shitshow. “Why is he still here?” He jabs a finger at me.

“We’re just leaving,” Summer says sweetly.

Zane flinches. “*You* can’t leave.”

“Watch me, fucker.” She goes right up to him and holds her middle finger in his face. “You tiny-dicked, ego driven, utter asshole.”

I chuckle at her words. Ron stares as if Summer has grown two heads, and Zane turns puce. Summer begins to walk away, and then everything slows down.

Zane pushes her, *hard*, and she pinwheels forward, arms flailing as she tries to catch herself. I’m already moving but the distance is too great for me to reach her. She hits the side of the table as she goes down, crumples on the floor, and cries out.

Ron turns to Zane and starts hustling him back away from the scene.

I focus on a crumpled, moaning Summer. *Fuck.*

I bend down and shout to one of the security guards to get the backstage lights up so I can see better. The room is flooded with bright, piercing fluorescent lighting a second later.

Summer isn’t bleeding anywhere. Thank God.

“Where does it hurt?” I ask.

She sits up. Okay, she’s sitting. That’s good. No serious neck or back injury it would seem. She hit the table side-on, and sure enough, her right arm is cradling her ribs under her

breast. She breathes in and winces. “Oh crap, it hurts,” she moans.

“You need to get checked out. Can someone call the fucking paramedics?” I snap.

Lizzie kneels beside her friend. The look on her face is one of such genuine shock and upset that I’m convinced in that moment, she’s not the one behind the letters. She might be jealous, but she loves her friend, it seems.

“Can you stay with her for one moment?” I ask Lizzie.

She nods.

I click my fingers at one of the extra security guards. “Don’t move from her side.”

He nods and stands right by Summer, arms folded over his massive chest.

I storm out of the room and to the main backstage area, where Ron and the band are whispering in a huddle.

Ron turns, sees me coming, and stands between me and the boys. I don’t stop, pushing him out of my way; I watch him stumble to the floor out of the corner of my eye.

Zane scrambles to his feet from where he’s sitting on the edge of a set of steps and runs up the steps. Where does he think he’s going? There’s nowhere to go that way.

He realizes this too late and turns, glancing wildly about him. I reach him, grab him by the throat, and punch him three times in his ribs.

He crumples with a sighed *oooomph*, and when I let go of his throat, he falls to the floor like an empty sack.

Something hard and tight grabs both of my arms, and I turn to see two of the venue’s security guards holding me.

“Get him the fuck out of here,” Ron screams.

I try to shake myself free, but they have a tight hold of me.

Shit. I lost it, and now Summer is in danger if I get thrown out of here.

I dig my heels into the floor, slowing the men so they must stop. I could throw them off me if I wanted to, but that would probably panic Ron and the other security, and then people could get hurt.

“Let me stay with Summer,” I say.

“You’ve just attacked a million-dollar asset, you utter asshole. What if he can’t play again?”

I scoff, “I didn’t break his arm, only his ribs. Quid pro quo. If you don’t let me stay with Summer, I’m going to the media.”

“You’re what?” He comes right up to me and pokes me in the chest. “Do you have a death wish? Do you realize you’ve broken every oath your company gave to me. Do you really know who your boss is? You’ve fucked Silvanov over. You’ve made this thing he’s building look like a joke outfit with your antics. Close protection threatening to go to the media? Fuck you. You’re finished in the business, and when I’m done with it, Silvanov’s company is finished too.”

He’s right on almost every score. I’m most certainly finished. Both in this business and I imagine with K too. But Andrius and Konstantin’s business will be okay. They can smooth this over. I don’t care what happens to me after this; I only care about not leaving Summer right now, when we still don’t know who the stalker is.

“I don’t care.” I hold his gaze. “Let me stay with my client, or I will go to the fucking press and ruin you all.”

His cheeks color, and red veins are highlighted when the blood rushes to them. A map of the life he’s led; too much drinking I imagine. He’s not the kind to be out all hours in the wind and snow getting broken capillaries that way. “Let him go.” He snaps his fingers at the guards once.

Ron walks away from me, taking out his phone and not sparing me another glance. I know exactly who he’ll be calling.

“What the fuck do we do?” Donovan asks him.

Ron pushes him away viciously. “Get out on fucking stage and sing. You can sing, so do it. Get on that mic and give them something.”

Donovan hesitates for a beat, and Ron pushes him again toward the stage.

“Donovan, earn your millions.”

Walking as if he’s going to the gallows, head down, body language meek, Donovan steps out onto the stage, and the crowd roars.

I reach my client, and my phone rings again. I’m relieved to see while I was arguing with Ron the paramedics have arrived. “Is she okay?” I ask.

The woman checking Summer out turns to me. “You are?”

I’m about to say, *her security detail* but Summer opens her mouth and blindsides me.

“My boyfriend. He’s my boyfriend.”

Lizzie gasps and turns to me. I don’t respond at all to what Summer has just said because while I’m not averse to being her boyfriend, not one bit, only a few hours ago she was telling me she was done with me, and this whole cluster fuck is giving me a headache. Then I look at her, really look.

I see past the pain etched in the lines around her mouth, past the makeup, and the determination she said those words with and see deep in her eyes, the fear. More like terror. Summer is scared. If she needs me to step up and be her boyfriend right now, I will.

Then once she’s feeling better, we are having a talk because Summer doesn’t know it, but I’ve fallen for her in the craziest, dizzy-making, head spinning fastest way, and she can’t keep messing around with how I feel.

What Summer needs to understand is that if she becomes mine, then she’s *mine*. I will play for keeps, and if she’s giving me the green light for the game to start, then she can’t keep brushing me off whenever she gets upset. I won’t let her. I’ll make her stay and fight.

My phone rings again, and as the paramedic continues to look over Summer, I sigh and answer it.

Chapter 15

Summer

MY RIBS ARE KILLING ME. THE FALL BROKE THEM. THE hospital doctor in the accident and emergency room explained to me that they don't do anything for broken ribs anymore as binding them can cause pneumonia. They simply leave them to heal alone. It means around six weeks recovery, as there were three broken ribs, so I need to rest and take it easy.

No surfing, I think. No more touring for at least six weeks, and probably longer because stage work is exhausting, which means the European leg needs to be postponed. Not that I'm sure I'll be doing it anyway.

So much has happened, and I need to think.

The band used to feel like home, and I suppose in many ways it still does, only now I can see how toxic that home was.

Jake is standing by my hospital bed, solid, big, reassuring. I have been a bitch to him because I am all over the place with my feelings, and it's been freaking me out. I need to apologize.

His phone rings, and he doesn't even look at it.

"Aren't you going to get that?" I ask.

He turns to me. "I'm not a masochist, so no."

"Who is it?"

"My other boss, Andrius."

Then he sighs. "I should say ex-boss as Silvanov just fired me."

I wince. “What? Oh my God, I am sorry. I can pay you,” I say. “You won’t be without a wage.”

He turns to me and laughs. “You sound so worried.”

“I am. I don’t want to be the reason you’re out of a job, and out of pocket. I can pay you for as long as you need.”

His laugh deepens. “Summer, I don’t need you to do that.”

“Yes, but I know you were relying on this job.”

He frowns, his laughter dying out a little. “You don’t know that though, do you? You just invented that information out of thin air.”

I’m confused. “This is your job. A new role you took, after leaving the service. I have gotten you fired. So yes, I think I’ve messed things up for you.”

“I took the job for something to do. I can find something else to do. I don’t need the money.”

Oh, men and their pride. “Well, of course not, but let me pay you anyway.”

“Nope.”

My heart flips, and it hurts my ribs, the breath I suck in at his words. “Are you leaving?”

“What? No.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Did you mean it?” His words are deadly serious, but I don’t know what he is referring to. He clarifies it anyway. “When you called me your boyfriend, did you mean it?”

I can’t believe I said that. “I’m sorry; it was presumptuous.”

He sits on the edge of the bed and takes hold of my hand. “Did. You. Mean. It?”

“Yes,” I say. “If you’re onboard with that, then yes, I’d like it to be the case.”

“Right, okay. So, I stay. As your boyfriend. The protection is a free extra.” He grins at me.

“What will you do for money? If you won’t let me pay you?”

His smile returns. “Summer, do you think I’m living in my car or something?”

“I don’t know. I mean, no, but you need to work, I imagine. No shame in that, most of us do.” I can feel my cheeks heating.

“I don’t need to work; I already said that.”

“Yeah, for a few weeks or a month or two, but eventually you will, and I don’t want you to go yet. I want this ... us...”

“Summer.” He grabs hold of my flailing hand as I try and fail to express myself. “I don’t have to work again ... *ever*. Not if I don’t want to.”

I stare at him. “What?”

“I’m wealthy enough that I don’t have to work.”

“How?”

He laughs. “You seem very concerned with my financial wellbeing. Okay, firstly, I inherited a property from my grandmother. Secondly, I earned a lot of money during my military career, which I didn’t spend because I was always working or training. Thirdly, I’ve developed a nice side-line advising script writers and producers on military matters, and finally, I’ve carried out paid contract work in the past, which was high level, very off the books, and earned me more money than is decent for such dirty work.”

“What kind of dirty work?”

“The kind of work that I’m okay with doing, dirty as it is, because it rids the world of even dirtier people.”

“Hits?”

“Summer, don’t ask me. Moving forward, from this moment on, anything you want to know, I will always be truthful, but I can’t talk about that stuff.”

My stomach does an odd flip flop. He’s killed people? For money? Bad or good, that’s a ... that’s a big deal.

He's rich.

He's not said as much, but it's in what isn't said. This man has money and financial security.

In one way it is good, not because I care about or need his money, but because guys can be funny about stuff like that. Now I don't have to worry about something as fragile as the male ego ruining a relationship I'd really like to work.

I realize something then. I've just made another assumption about Jake. How do I know how he'd react to me having more money than him? If I even do. I'm making so many preconceived assumptions about this guy.

"There's some caveats, though," Jake says, dragging my eyes back to his face. "If we do this, then there are rules. We both tell the truth going forward. You get mad at me, you face it, and we talk, or fight, but you don't walk away or threaten to send me away. You don't get to do that if we're doing this, okay? Not unless you mean it, and then I'm gone. For good."

I swallow hard. He's right, and if we start this, I can't fuck it up with my dramatics every time I get upset. I'll try my damn hardest to act like an adult; I swear it to myself there and then.

"What else?"

He smiles at me, big and wide. "That's it, sweetheart. Honesty and no more threats of sending one another away. We stay, we fight, we make up, and we only end it if we mean it."

"Those sound like fair rules."

"I'm a fair man."

"You broke Zane's ribs." I point out.

He shrugs. "He broke yours. That's absolutely fair. He's lucky I didn't cut his balls off and make him eat them."

I laugh and then wince. *Ouch*. Laughing is going to be a painful endeavor for a while.

"We need to get you back to your home in Cornwall, and you ought to rest."

His phone rings then. “Motherfucker.” He answers it this time. “*What?*”

There’s a pause as he listens before he replies. “Yeah, well K made it quite clear I’m sacked. It’s irrelevant.” A pause. “Okay, let me make this easy for you, Andrius. I resign. There are no hard feelings. I don’t want any bad publicity to affect your company. I’ll say whatever you want if Ron goes to the media with all this. I appreciate you saying you’ll stand behind me, but I’m done. I’m sorry to let you guys down.”

He nods, frowns, and then says. “Hold on; I’m putting you on speaker.”

“I’m not concerned about the fucking company, Target.” The voice is deep, accented, and calm, despite the swearing. “This is a nothing burger. We can shut Ron up. K has things on him. He’s a slimy fucker, and he’s not going to wreck us. I’m concerned about you walking away when your client is still in danger.”

“I’m with her now, and I’m not leaving her side. I’m not walking away from her,” Jake says as he smiles at me. “I’m walking away from the job.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m protecting her on my own dime, my way; no worries about anyone’s reputation. We still haven’t found her stalker. I’m doing this my way now.”

There’s a long pause and then Andrius abruptly asks in his harsh voice, “Are you fucking her?”

I splutter and wince. God, it hurts.

“None of your damn business.”

Andrius laughs. “That tells me all I need to know. Jesus fuck. I’m going to have to start employing real ugly assholes. This isn’t working at all. You’re not supposed to fuck the client. Why does this keep happening to our company? There has to be some epic karma at play here. Cassie,” the man calls out.

I hear a woman answer in the background.

“We need to vet the recruits more strictly. Only exceptionally ugly men from now on.”

I hear her chuckle.

“I started it,” I say and wince as another laugh escapes me at Jake’s expression.

“Seems to be a pattern emerging,” Andrius says. “Hence why I need to find some soldiers who have hit every single branch of the ugly tree on the way down.”

“Sailor,” Jake says automatically. “I’m a sailor.”

There’s a sigh at the other end of the call.

“If there’s any financial blowback or reputational hit for you guys from this, I’ll pay you, or I will sort it out. I’m going to be staying with Summer, though, and I’m going to find out who the hell is stalking her. My way.”

“Understood. But, Target?”

“Yeah.”

“Things get nasty, and you need our help, we’re here, okay?”

“Does K know that?”

“K will be fine. You know he’s hot headed.”

“I’ll give him a massage later. He’s holding a lot of tension in his shoulders.” The woman who spoke before, Cassie, says with a chuckle.

Jake laughs at that. “Okay. Well thanks, guys. I appreciate it. Take care.”

“Yep.”

They hang up. “So, it’s just you and me?” I ask, nervous suddenly.

“Yes, sweetheart, just you and me.”

* * *

It's so strange being back in my small home in Cornwall with the big, brooding presence that is Jake taking up so much space. I would normally have my furbabies with me, but because I'm resting, Seb has agreed to keep them with him for a couple of weeks more until I'm healed enough to start walking them daily.

Jake is ... distracted. We've been back two days, and I'm scared he's regretting his decision to be my boyfriend.

Honesty going forward, he'd said.

He's sipping at a coffee, sitting at my kitchen table, looking so gorgeous it should be illegal as a ray of sun hits him through the open blinds.

"Are you regretting being here with me?" I blurt out from where I'm lurking in the doorway.

He glances up. "Hey there. You should be in bed."

"I'm bored," I say. "Also, I can feel you brooding from up there."

"I'm not brooding. I'm thinking. It's entirely different."

"What are you thinking about?" I take the seat opposite him.

He puts his phone on the table between us, and I see that on the screen are all the letters that were sent to me.

"You read these, right?"

"Yes."

"Did the writing look familiar?"

I frown. "No, not really; why?"

"Apparently, some people think it looks like your writing."

My blood runs cold despite the heat of the morning sun. "What?" I take his phone and really look at the actual writing rather than the content of the letters. "I suppose ... it's kind of generic girly writing. I don't write much these days, so I rarely put pen to paper, except to sign things for people, and that's

stylised. Do they ... do people think I'm writing these to myself."

A worse thought hits me, making me nauseous. "Do *you*?"

He scoffs, "Do I—fuck, no. I know you're not writing to yourself, but it's bugging me. You say it's generic, but it's cursive."

I frown. "So?"

"A lot of young people don't write cursive."

"Erm, we do here. In Britain. We're taught cursive in school still."

"Ah, okay. So, this person could be young? Your age ... or younger?"

"Younger? I mean, yes, but that would be unusual, wouldn't it?"

He shrugs. "The more I read the letters, the more they seem fake. At first, I thought, truthfully, it was Lizzie. She's jealous of you, by the way." He looks at me, and I sigh.

"I know."

"You do?"

"Yeah, deep down I know she is. It's always been weird between us. Like siblings, I suppose. I get it."

"You do?" He asks me the exact same question again.

"Yes, of course." I shrug. "She's a lot more beautiful than me. The kind of beauty that should open doors, or so we're led to believe. She's smart too. Yet, somehow, in ways I don't understand, she was always in my shadow."

He smiles and sips his coffee. "Do you want a drink, by the way?" he asks, gesturing to his cup.

"I'd love a coffee, if you don't mind?" I could make my own, but I kind of like being pampered.

"Of course."

As he busies himself making me a coffee, boiling the kettle, and putting the instant in the cup, no fancy machines

here in my little kitchen, I watch him, admiring his body shamelessly. “Why did you smile? Before, when I said about her being in my shadow.”

“Because I do understand it,” he says, not turning around. “You shine. You just do. There are some people who light up the world a little more, and you’re one of them. You can’t fake that or buy it, and it makes you attractive. I don’t mean sexually.” He pours the boiling water over the granules, but I’m transfixed by the beautiful things he’s saying about me. He’s saying it all as if it’s nothing, but his words make me want to cry. “Although, you’re hot too. I mean attractive in the real sense of the word, to everyone. The sort of person people just ... gravitate to. Want to be around. Want to watch. Some people just have that extra something about them.” He shrugs. “It’s no surprise to me that you’re a star, Summer, because you sure do shine like one.”

He gives me my coffee, and I blink up at him, unable to stop the goofy smile spreading over my face. “You think I shine like a star?”

Leaning in, he brushes his lips over mine as he places the steaming cup on the table. “The brightest one in the sky.”

My heart stutters and beats a little faster.

“Wow, Jake. That’s some of the nicest things anyone has ever said about me.”

“It’s all true.” He sits opposite me. “So, I do understand why Lizzie was in your shadow even at school before you were famous. When you were hurt, though, I saw the real fear in her face. You two are like sisters. I think at times, she almost hates you.”

I shake my head at that word, thinking it’s too strong.

“But deep down underneath that?” He strokes one finger over his lip as if thinking. “There’s a bond there. It’s too deep for her to be the one writing those fucked up things. Yet, I keep coming back to how fake it all seems. How... Okay, listen to this one.”

He slides his phone toward himself across the table and starts to read. I shiver at the horrible, vile things the person has said they want to do to me.

“It’s all a bit ... too... Perfectly what someone trying to be a stalker would say.” I sigh. “Mags said something similar, that she couldn’t say purely on letters alone, but they seemed almost staged.” She did add that it would be a big risk to make the assumption, however, that this wasn’t a person who was deadly serious in their intent; as to write them off as an attention seeker could mean massively underestimating the threat. Still, the more I read, the more my gut thinks Mag’s initial assessment was right.

“I don’t understand.”

“It reads like the script from a Criminal Minds episode.”

I laugh but then the fear returns. “Yeah, but, Jake, those scripts are written that way because people really do and say those things.”

My coffee is perfect when I sip at it. He’s learning how I like my coffee and my toast. I like mine darker than he does. He likes it just touched by the heat of the grill, the weirdo. I like it a golden brown all over.

“They do, yes, but this is... I can’t put it into words easily. It just reads fake, or as someone writing a letter in the style of a stalker. I kept thinking it was Lizzie or maybe Zane, but as I’ve read more of the letters, over and over, I’ve started to believe this might be someone younger. The only thing confusing me was the cursive. If you say you’re still taught it in school here, this might be a kid. Like a teenager, or maybe university age.”

“Really?” I wipe my hand over my face. “That seems weird. For a teenager to be doing this.”

“Not really. Young people are more likely to stalk and be stalked by their peers than older adults. This could be some guy or girl still in school, or if not in school, then not long out of it.”

He scratches his cheek. “The only thing that doesn’t add up is that the letters come from all over, so the person travels around. Often following you and the band.”

“Some fans do that,” I say.

“Really? Like all over the place?”

I nod. “Some really committed ones, yes.”

“Do you have regular fan mail? If so, who reads it for you? Is it kept?”

I smile. “Lizzie reads it, and yes, she does keep it. It is in a huge cabinet at the main office in London. I don’t know why she keeps it, but she says it’s good practice. At the end of a few years, she recycles some of it, but I don’t think she’s done that for a while. I distinctly recall her saying the cabinet wasn’t full yet. Thank God, we aren’t Taylor Swift famous. We get a few hundred letters a month. Lizzie reads them, and then puts them in the filing cabinet, and some she gives to us to answer. Like if it is a kid who is sick or something, she’ll ask us to write back if we have the time. We always do.”

“Maybe Lizzie isn’t as useless as I had believed,” Jake says. “We need all hands-on deck in that office.”

“Why?”

“I’m thinking, if I photocopy a few of these and give them to folks, they can search for similar writing style, sentence structure, handwriting and the rest. It’s a long shot, but you never know. It might help.”

“You think this could be a fan who was genuine at first, and now, for some reason, has turned rogue?”

He sucks his bottom lip between his teeth, and it makes me want to bite it myself. “Could be. I have no idea, but we might strike gold. If it’s a younger fan, maybe they wrote to you guys when they were much younger? Like early teens or something.”

“We don’t have a lot of young fans really. Our fan base tends to be twenties and up. We’re kind of hippy-dippy as Seb would say. We’re not really what a lot of kids are listening to.”

“I know, but kids have varied tastes. You might sway more one way demographically for sure, but you’ll have fans in all age groups.”

“It’s worth a try.”

“Anything is worth a try.” Jake smiles.

I get the distinct impression he isn’t only talking about the letters, but his words have a deeper meaning.

I smile at him, sip my coffee, and we enjoy the morning together.

Chapter 16

Jake

LIZZIE HAS HIRED FOUR NEW TEMPORARY STAFF MEMBERS, AND they are working at the office, going through reams of fan mail. She also has someone at the record company headquarters in America doing the same. I can hardly ask them myself as Ron has me on a banned persons list.

We called in on Lizzie one day to see how she was getting on. Summer had some shopping to do anyway, so we'd been in town. When Summer referred to a filing cabinet, I hadn't understood she meant something huge which could hold tens of thousands of letters.

It is going to be like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

We're back in Cornwall again now, and I'm relieved. I prefer it here.

Summer's laughter drifts to me from where she's down by the water's edge. It's a glorious summer's day, and she has her babies back. The breed surprised me. I had her pegged as a Labrador or Spaniel kind of a girl, but Summer has two Afghan Hounds.

They are fitting, though. They remind me of the seventies, a bit like the band, and Summer herself. She's a child of the past in many ways. Ethereal and free spirited, and she doesn't fit so well into this hard-edged, fast-moving world. That's okay; neither do I. We can be misfits together.

In the past couple of weeks as she's recovered, I've found myself getting to know her. We play a game where one of us

will ask the other a random question. This morning she asked me my favorite color. Her expression when I said I didn't have one cracked me up. It must be a girl thing, or maybe a Summer thing, because there are a whole lot of colors that I like. I don't have a favorite. Her's is turquoise, and particularly turquoise with gold. Followed by teal, and yes, you guessed it, teal and gold.

She is wearing a long skirt, with tassels hanging down from the waist, and a strappy top. I'm tired, and my eyes want to drift closed as I lie back and feel the sun on my face, but I won't do that. It could put Summer in danger.

There haven't been any new letters.

The silence is unnerving.

It has me second-guessing myself once more.

Maybe it's someone close to her who has been doing this and hence why they have stopped. The person knows she has security now, and they don't want to be found out. Or maybe it was a kid all along, and they grew bored.

I'm feeling lazy today. This place can lull you into a new rhythm. It's one of ocean and surf, sun, wind, and endless skies. Cornwall is fucking magical. We went to a small coastal town yesterday, and it was so damn cute. Tiny white houses, cafes, delis, and lots of art galleries. This place is pretty special, and I can see why Summer loves it so much.

She heads back up the beach to me, her hair blowing in the breeze. The dogs are following her, and their hair blows too.

When she reaches me, she sits, takes a drink of water from the bag and sips at it then turns to me, her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped around her legs.

"We need to talk," she says.

My stomach bottoms out. That doesn't sound good. Has she decided to tell me this is over? I know she's been thinking long and hard the past few weeks about her life, what she wants it to look like going forward. She's had a few phone calls with her mother, and a long one with Seb, her brother. Even a couple with Lizzie.

I've given her the space and privacy to talk to them without me listening in. I turn the television up, or I head out for a walk.

Summer knows my feelings on it all, but I don't want to sway her one way or another as this has to be her decision. Otherwise, she'll only resent me.

"Okay."

She laughs then. "Don't look so worried. I've made a decision. I didn't tell you until now because I wanted to be utterly sure this is what I want."

"Okay."

"Jake." She giggles once more and shakes her head. "I've decided to leave the band."

I blink and stare. Did she just say the words I've been wanting to hear? Then to my surprise, anxiety crashes the party where I had expected happiness. If she does this for me, or on my advice, she's always going to blame me if it doesn't work out well.

"What made you decide?" I let some sand sift through my fingers as I watch her closely.

She scrunches her nose a little, this cute thing she does sometimes when she's thinking. "It's the radio silence. I thought they were my family, but where are they?"

She opens her arms and gestures at the beach around us. "Zane clearly isn't going to come and see me because he caused this, and he'll be feeling shitty and guilty or maybe not. Who knows? Maybe he blames me for it all. Either way, he's not going to be heading this way to visit. Donovan, though? The others? Ron? Eddie? Only Lizzie has been in regular contact. She's offered to come down a few times. I said no, but she offered. It's a scary thing, you know?"

"What is?" I ask.

"To realize you're quite alone and the group of people who have been around you for years—men and women, you thought were your people—really weren't."

“You’re not alone.” I drop the sand and rest my hand on her warm knee. “You have me. Your parents. Seb. Lizzie. It’s a lot of people on your side, Summer. Plus, you will make new friends too if you move in a different direction. What will you do?”

Lifting her gaze up to the azure sky, she shuts her eyes and smiles. “My own music. I’ve wanted to do that for a long time now. I can cut albums myself, and then play smaller venues.”

“You’re sounding as if a solo Summer won’t take off. As if you know it for a fact, but you might. Summer might be bigger than the band. You ever think of that?” I nudge her gently.

She faces me and wipes a hand over her face. “That’s just it, Jake. I don’t want to be. I want this to be my own thing, and I’ve realized as I’ve been thinking, I want to keep it small. I don’t want the fame. Not the way I used to. I’d like to do my own thing, play smaller venues, and truly go back to what it used to be like to be an independent performer.”

“If you’re sure.” I smile at her. “I think it’s the right choice. I think the band is toxic, and if you want my honest opinion, I think they might fall apart anyway, sooner rather than later. This way, you get out first. You take control. You make the first move. On your terms. I just...” I trail off. “I don’t want you to do this for me and resent me if it doesn’t work out.”

“Jake. You’re the first guy I’ve ever been able to see a forever with.”

Her words stun me.

“But I’d never leave the band for a man. Any man. I’m leaving for me. This is my decision, based on what I think is best for my life and career moving forward, with or without you in the mix.”

“You see a forever for us?” I ask.

“Yeah, maybe. I can... I hope we could. Do you?”

“Yes, Summer. I’ve felt that way for a while now, but I didn’t want to pressure you. There’s so much going on in your life right now.”

“Jake, you’re not and you haven’t. I promise.”

“Okay, so that means it is probably safe to tell you something.”

“What?” She quirks one brow at me.

“I love you,” I say softly.

I take her hand, covered in sand, and hold it, warm and small in my own. “I mean, I really fucking love you, Summer. Head over heels.”

“Same,” she says, squeezing my hand. “I really fucking love you too. Arse over tit.”

“What?”

She giggles. “It’s my version of head over heels.”

“Poetic.”

“Right?”

“Maybe you could put that line in a song.”

She snorts and half-heartedly throws some sand at me. “You’re a dork.”

“You’re a goddess.”

“Shut up.” Her cheeks flush a pretty shade of pink, and I lean in and nuzzle her neck.

“You know, you smell all coconutty, and you know what that does to me.”

“I do,” she says.

“Want to go home?”

“Yes, please.”

I help her stand, and she puts the two dogs’ slip leads around their necks, and we head home.

When we get through the door, she takes the dogs’ leads off, makes sure they have water, and then crooks her finger at me. “Come on, lover boy.”

I laugh and then lunge at her. She squeals and takes off out of the room and up the stairs.

I follow, hot on her heels.

Chapter 17

Summer

JAKE'S HEAVY TREAD FOLLOWS ME UP THE STAIRS AS I RUN, giggling toward our bedroom.

I sense him before I feel him. A rush of energy as if we're connected, and then warm arms are carefully sweeping me up and carrying me over the threshold of the bedroom.

He nuzzles my neck and mock growls, making me shiver and laugh at the same time.

Then he gently places me on the bed and stands looking down at me. "Look at you," he says. "So fucking beautiful."

Under his intense, hungry gaze, I feel beautiful. For the first time truly in my life, I feel as if someone is looking at me, the real me, and seeing beauty. He's not looking at Summer the huge star. Hell, he is intensely relaxed about me walking away from it all, so he's not into me purely for the fame.

Two nights ago, he told me that he thinks the Summer he gets to spend days on the beach with is every inch as much of a goddess as the one he watched on stage from the wings.

"You're looking at me with such big eyes," I say, a small smile playing about my lips.

"All the better to see you with, my dear," he replies, citing the line from Little Red Riding Hood. "Although right now, I'm more interested in eating you."

He grabs my hips and pulls me to him, to the edge of the bed. I'm wearing a loose kaftan top over my bikini, and he pushes it aside as he takes the tie strings on the left side of my

bikini and undoes it with agonizingly slow moves. When he has both untied, he pulls the material from me and throws it to one side, then hands on my knees, he parts my legs, and simply looks.

“Goddamn,” he says. “I never get bored of looking at you. So fucking perfect.”

He parts me with his thumbs and sucks my clit into his mouth, making me moan in response to the rush of sensation. He sucks on the hood and then flicks his tongue over it until I’m a writhing mess.

This man can take me to exquisite heights so very quickly, it should terrify me. It’s like he knows exactly how to play my body.

His big hands hold me apart as he takes me to pieces, and I come with a cry, throbbing against his lips. He groans against me as if he’s feeling as good as I am. Then he pushes two thick fingers inside me and crooks them, and I buck up off the bed. God, he’s good at this. So damn good.

Soon he has me panting, and only then does he push his swim shorts down. His big cock slaps against his stomach, and I reach for him. “I need you now,” I say.

“Happy to oblige.”

I shuffle up the bed as he crawls over me, and as he rubs himself against my entrance, I hold his gaze. This feels ... big. Different somehow. We’ve told one another how we feel. Bared our souls. We never break eye contact as he pushes inside.

It’s ecstasy feeling him fill me slowly and deliberately. He takes his time, and when he’s halfway in, his body shudders as if it’s too much. “Christ, you turn me on,” he says, still staring right in my eyes.

For a moment, I want to turn away, to hide, but I make myself keep looking as he pushes deeper inside me. When he’s as deep as he can get, he starts to move. He grabs my hands and holds them together in one of his, moving them above my

head. With his other hand he strokes over my cheek, jaw, lips, as if mapping my features.

It doesn't take long before I feel another orgasm building. It's too deep and too intense for me to hold off, but he comes first, shivering as he swears against my neck and empties himself in me. The sensation tips me over the edge, and I join him as we come together, clinging on to one another as if we're each other's life raft in the stormy sea of this attraction.

Then, when it's over and we're both floating back down to earth, he gathers me into his arms and pulls me close, throwing one leg over me, and caging me in his warmth and security.

"I love you," he says again, kissing my head. "I promise you, Summer. I'll always do my best to keep you safe, not only physically but emotionally too."

I tip my head back and kiss him softly on the lips. "Ditto," I say. I get a sudden flash of an image. Us saying the same to one another, on the beach, me wearing white. I feel my flesh pebble in response to the vivid glimpse of a future I hope will one day become reality.

Marriage? The thought hits me then. I'm daydreaming about marrying this man. I wait for the panic. The thoughts of how crazy this is, and it must be madness, but they never come. Instead, I think how right it feels. How fitting that this man, this fellow free spirit should be the one to claim me. To tether me to him.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks.

"Nothing," I reply. No way am I letting him know I was daydreaming about our wedding day.

"Liar," he says with a soft laugh.

"What?"

"I can feel your brain overheating from here. You're thinking deeply about something."

What will he say if I tell him? Will he freak out? It's too soon. Too early. Then I look at him, and I get that exact feeling I get in front of a crowd when everything comes together in a

moment of pure bliss. He's looking at me, and I can sense he wants me to say it.

“Okay. I was thinking about how cool it would be if we said those exact words about keeping one another safe both physically and emotionally, as our vows, if we ever got married.”

For a moment he doesn't answer me. Then, with a smile, he simply says, “If? Ever? Oh, baby, I'm a little more certain than that.”

And just like that, once again, he takes my breath away.

* * *

We spend a few days enjoying one another's company when I'm not fielding irate calls from Ron. He lost his shit with me after I told him I wanted to leave the band. Says I'm in breach of contract if I don't do the European leg of the tour, but I've read it and so long as I have health reasons, I'm not in any way breaching my contract. I have a doctor's appointment in two days, and I shall simply say that the stress of performing when I have such awful threats levelled against me from a stalker, alongside being attacked by a bandmate is making me unwell with panic.

My ribs still hurt, too.

So long as I get a letter from the doctor, it should be fine.

Zane has called me twice, and he's also livid. He was horrible on the voicemail he left me. I can't believe he injured me, and then didn't once call me to see how I was or say sorry, but now he's leaving threatening messages.

The final one he left on my phone is frankly weird. He's talking about how good we were together and that passion like we had can't be ignored or denied. It's bizarre stuff because we didn't have that kind of passion. It was nothing like what I have with Jake. We were too fucked up half the time to even get it on. I can't recall most of the sex we had. It passed in a chemical haze. Same must surely go for him.

The way he's talking has me wondering if he's the stalker. I don't think so, but I know I ought to let Jake listen to the messages. The only thing stopping me is I'm afraid that Jake will lose his shit and go after Zane, and then I'll lose him. If he attacks Zane again, Zane will press charges, and I cannot cope if Jake ends up in jail because of me.

Wanting to take my mind off things, I go in search of Jake. "How about we take a trip out? Maybe go to Truro, have some lunch?"

"Sure," he says with an easy grin, and my heart lurches.

When Jake smiles that way, he's beautiful. I can't believe when I first saw him that I thought his beauty was unattractive. Now, he's the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen.

It's strange how when you get to know someone you can totally change your view of their outward appearance.

We grab our things, and I make sure the dogs have had a chance to go to the toilet outside before we leave, and then we lock up and head to the car. "You want to drive?" I ask Jake.

He frowns. "No. I can't protect you if I'm driving and something happens."

"You still think there's danger?"

He automatically pats his hip, and I realize he's checking his gun. He still carries that and has it with him. It still gives me a jolt of fear every time I think about it.

Pushing the thought of the cold metal weapon aside, I focus on the things we can do in Truro. When we are in the car and out on the open road, I put on some Mamas and Pappas and crank the volume up, singing along to Monday, Monday, and California Dreaming.

Jake keeps glancing at me, smiling. "I love hearing you sing," he says. "Your voice is fucking incredible."

"Your sex skills are," I reply with a laugh.

"Not the same as being one of the world's most amazing singers, but I'll take the compliment."

I park near the old gothic quarter, and we take a wander around a few shops before we sit outside a café bar and order lunch. Vegan for me, a burger for Jake.

I always thought I'd only want to be with a vegan guy for anything long term, but honestly? Jake could hunt down a cow with his bare hands, and it wouldn't put me off him. I'm not sure he could do much to put me off him, which is a little bit worrisome. My morals aren't as strong as I thought they were. A sexy side smile. A bunch of muscles and ink. Amazing skill between the sheets ... and my morals are burned to the ground.

Smiling a little at myself, I sip the fresh lemonade I ordered. The crisp, sharp taste bursts on my tongue, and I sigh in satisfaction as I sit back in my chair. Then I sit up again, a frown pulling between my brows.

I'm pretty damn sure I just saw Flame across the road, watching us from a dark alleyway.

Not thinking, I get up and wait to cross the road, intrigued and puzzled.

Heat at my back lets me know Jake is right behind me. He doesn't demand to know what I'm doing or say anything; he just has my back, and that feels amazing.

Two buses come past, obscuring my view, and when the road clears finally, I jog across. But I can see there is no one in the alley.

“What's wrong?” Jake asks as I look around me.

“I'm sure I saw Flame,” I say. “I could have sworn it was her. I'd recognize her hair and the way she stands and dresses anywhere.”

“Flame?” He scrubs a hand over his jaw. “The roadie?”

“Yeah.”

His face grows serious as fuck. “You sure?”

“I'm pretty sure. She was watching us from this alley.”

He takes his phone out and dials. “Can you get me everything on a roadie the band has called Flame. That’s all I’ve got—Flame. But she’ll be on the rosters, and it’s not a common first name, is it?”

He waits for a beat then says, “Get Reece on it, if you don’t mind. Dig into her whatever ways you guys can. Legally. Illegally. I don’t care.” Then he hangs up and takes my hand, leading me back across the road. “If you saw her here, then it seems incredibly suspicious to me. Plus, she has reason to dislike you, no?”

I shrug and bite my lip. She did have that thing with Zane but... And he did leave me those messages. I realize then if I tell Jake about them now, it’s going to look suspicious. As if I kept it from him for nefarious reasons, such as still liking Zane. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We walk back to the café and take our seats, and I turn to him. “I’ve received some messages. From Zane.”

“Oh?” His expression darkens, his skin tightening across his features.

Shit.

“Yeah. Erm, I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to do anything that could get you into any sort of trouble.”

“I’m a big boy, Summer, and you promised we’d be truthful. I can’t fucking protect you if I don’t know everything. Are you sure that’s the only reason you didn’t tell me? All along, all this whole time, you’ve been protecting Zane somehow. Do you still have feelings for him?”

My temper sparks instantly. “Are you fucking kidding me? I’ve told you I love you, Jake. Put myself out there. Even said about us getting married. That isn’t something I do lightly.”

“Fucking. Ditto. Yet here I am again, being kept in the dark. And here you are again, protecting Zane.”

“I’m protecting you,” I hiss. “You might be a *big boy* as you put it, but you can still go to jail, and then where would I be? Totally alone. Not only with someone after me but with the man I love rotting in Jail. That would be horrific.”

To my shock, tears prick at my eyes.

My next words are a mere whisper. “Now that I’ve found you, I can’t lose you.”

His face softens, and he reaches for me, taking my hand. “I feel the same way, and when you keep me in the dark, it puts you in danger. Can I see the messages?”

I sigh and take out my phone.

He reads, and the tautness returns to his features. “That fucker,” he growls.

I know I shouldn’t like it, but the possessiveness in his tone turns me on, and I want to climb onto his lap and grind against him right here with everyone able to see. Instead, I squirm in my seat.

After we’ve eaten and drank, I tell Jake I’m just popping for a pee. He comes to follow me, but his phone rings. I put my hand on his arm. “Answer it. I’ll be two minutes.”

He frowns and shakes his head, but as he speaks, I see he becomes distracted and starts to write something in the notes of his phone, so I slip off. My stomach is feeling a little upset, and I don’t want my hot bodyguard in the bathroom if all this stress affects me.

As it happens, I only need to pee, the distinct ache still there but nothing more. I wash my hands and put my hand over my belly as I look at myself in the mirror. Ugh, stress plays havoc with my digestive system.

The door opens and I turn, half expecting to see a furious Jake. But it’s Flame.

Instant regret for slipping away hits me.

She holds her hands up, though. “I wanted to talk to you. Have for a few weeks now. I want to say sorry.”

“Sorry?” I frown and turn to fully face her, trying to keep calm.

“I wrote those letters.”

Despite my suspicions of earlier, I still gasp as if slapped by her confession. The shock of hearing her say it aloud hits me hard. “Why?” I ask. “I don’t understand.”

“I wanted you to leave the band.”

“Zane?” I ask her with a sad shake of my head.

To my shock, tears fill her eyes even as at the same time, she laughs. “God, no. He’s a total asshole. Seriously. You think I care about Zane? Or more to the point that Zane cares about you? He hates that you don’t want him because he wants everyone to want him, but he no more cares for you than he does anyone else, except himself. No ... it’s Donovan.”

Now I’m totally lost.

She smiles sadly. “We’ve had an on again and off again thing for a while now, but I’ll never truly be his because he’s in love with you.”

Donovan? She’s so wrong it’s funny.

The door opens with force, and Flame makes an oomph as it hits her in the back, and she stumbles forward.

Jake storms in, and I expect him to help her right herself, but instead he ploughs into her and knocks her to the ground.

She cries out as she hits the carpet, and he rolls her and grabs her arms, pinning them before he pulls a zip tie out of his pocket and proceeds to tie her wrists together.

What the fuck?

“Jake! You’re going to hurt her.”

“Hurt her? I could fucking shoot her and be within my legal rights.” He props her up against the counter and with one hand on her upper chest, he barks, “Stay.”

Eyes blazing, he turns to me. “You slipped away from me.”

“Yes.”

He laughs, taking me utterly by surprise. “I let you.”

“What?”

“I saw Flame watching you again. I thought if she knew I wasn’t with you, she’d make her move. I followed her, and I’ve been outside this door the whole time. Listening.”

“Oh, so you knew I was safe and still burst in with enough force to shatter her ribs. Jake, untie her. Please.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely not.” He turns to her. “Carry on. I got most of it on a recording, but I’d like to hear the rest of your confession for the police.”

She starts to cry and turns to me. “I’m sorry, Summer. It got out of hand. It started as a stupid prank because I was so jealous and so hurt. I wanted to see you hurt too. Then it grew into an obsession, and I began to think you might actually leave the band, and I could get Donovan to myself.”

“You got your wish,” I say sadly.

“Yes, except the minute Zane pushed you, and you broke your ribs, I knew I couldn’t do that to you. I felt so bad for you, and I hated Zane then and realized I’d been as bad as he had toward you. I loathed myself in that moment. I went and spoke with Donovan. Told him how I felt. I didn’t tell him about the letters; I’ve only told you. He said there would never be anything serious between us even if you and he were never a thing because he didn’t feel that way about me.”

Big, ugly sobs wrack her. “I’m just the roadie. No one in the band ever ends up with the roadie. I should have known all along not to fall in love with him.”

“Very touching.” Jake rolls his eyes. “Maybe in court this will get you a more lenient sentence. You can tell it all again to the police.”

“No.” The word is forceful as it escapes my lips.

“Excuse me?” Jake narrows his eyes.

“No. I don’t want to go to the police.”

Something deep down, in my gut, tells me Flame won’t be an ongoing threat to me.

“Summer, you’re not thinking clearly. She sent letters from places you were, at the times you were there. It means she

followed you.”

Flame turns to him. “No, it doesn’t because I tour with the band.”

“You sent letters from Cornwall too. You followed her down here.”

“I didn’t.” More fat tears roll down her cheeks. “Donovan followed her here. I came along for the ride. I know now he just used me. He used to say he wanted to holiday down here, and now and again we’d see glimpses of Summer, in a bar, or on the beach, and I’d say to him that we should go and say hi, and he’d decline. Say she needed some downtime and space from the band, but I’d see how he’d watch her.”

“Is he a danger to her?” Jake asks. “In your opinion?”

She shakes her head. “No. Not Donovan. Anyway, I think he’s finally moved on.” Her laugh is dark and bitter. “Just not with me. He’s met a singer in a girl band. Lacey Jackson.”

I stare at her. “Donovan is seeing Lacey Jackson?”

She’s not his speed. The girl is crazy and wild and stunningly beautiful.

She nods and sniffs. “Seems someone came along who managed to obliterate you in his heart, but it sadly wasn’t me.”

Flame lifts shaking hands to her face and awkwardly pushes some hair back from her cheek. “I really am sorry, Summer. I know you have to take me to the police, Jake, but, Summer, I want you to know this so that you can get on with your life. I really am not a threat to you. Those stupid letters were taken from an episode of a cop show I watched years ago, where this actress was being stalked. That’s where I got some of the crazier ideas from.”

I glance at Jake, and he sighs and swipes his hand over his mouth. “Do you have any fucking clue how much trouble you’ve caused?” he asks. “How much money you’ve cost the record company alone? I think you’re going to find yourself with a civil suit most likely too.”

She bites her lip and nods. “I suppose I deserve it. It’s as if I lost my mind. I was in this fever dream. It’s so... You wouldn’t understand,” she says to Jake. “It’s so intense on tour. It’s as if you’re in an alternative world and everything feels heightened. It’s surreal and in that state of mind, the feelings I had for Donovan were elevated beyond what was really there. I lost it; I know that now. A total obsession. If Ron and the record company want to sue me, they can. I don’t have anything worth taking. So far as I’m concerned, the only person I owe an apology to is standing right here in this room with me, and I’ve said my piece.”

Flame turns to me, and her gaze is sad. “I know it can’t make up for what I’ve done, but I want you to know you’re safe. I might be crazy enough to send those stupid, pathetic letters, but I never would have harmed you.”

“They weren’t pathetic letters, though.” Jake walks into her line of sight, forcing her to look up at him as he looms over her. “They were terrifying letters. Deranged. I’d use a lot of adjectives, but not pathetic. You scared her to death. You fucking scared me. You say you won’t hurt her, but how the fuck do we know? You’re not okay, Flame, because an okay person doesn’t do this.”

He takes out his phone, but I’ve beaten him to it. “Who the fuck are you calling?” he demands.

“My lawyer.”

“What? Why?”

“I have an idea, and I need to ask them if it can be done.”

He shakes his head and starts to pace. “I don’t fucking like this, Summer. You need to let me call the police.”

My lawyer is in a meeting, so I can’t speak with him just yet. I hang up and face Jake. “I don’t want to call the police. What if with my lawyer, we can sign some sort of agreement that Flame will agree to therapy for her issues, and we leave it at that?”

Flame’s sobs have stopped but fresh tears drip down her cheeks. “I can’t afford therapy. I don’t have any money. Not

enough for long term therapy. I don't need it; I promise I know what I did was wrong."

"Fucking therapy?" Jake is fuming. His cheeks have a tint of red on them, and I've never seen that before. "No."

"Jake..."

His hands flex at his sides as if he's keeping himself from lashing out. I know he won't do it, but he's fuming.

"I can pay," I push, standing in my power, facing up to his anger. "I don't want Flame to be arrested. It won't help me, Jake. I want to put this behind me. I don't want a court case. Or the publicity, and I don't want to think of Flame in jail because of this."

"It's. Not. Safe." He grinds each word out.

"Wait..." Something is picking at my brain. "Didn't you say, the other night when we were talking that your friends run a thing for abused women where they can go to the place on Corfu and learn yachting skills and survival skills? They have therapists there, etcetera, right?"

"Yes, but that is for people who have been abused, not for stalkers, babe."

"Jake, don't call me *babe* like that."

He's being a dick, and I'm starting to get angry. "I've seen how female roadies are treated. I bet you've had more than your fair share of horrible experiences right, Flame?"

She nods and sniffs. "I suppose a lot of it seemed normal to me after the way I grew up."

"How did you grow up?" I ask, intrigued.

"My father was high up in an illegal motorcycle club, and it wasn't the best environment to be a teenage girl. It's why I became a roadie. I needed to leave, but I couldn't settle into anything nine to five, so I lied about my age and went onto the road."

So, the girl had a bad start, and then became a roadie, which as a young woman would have surely meant

harassment, or worse.

“Please, Jake.” I walk right up to him and wrap my hands around his thick forearms, corded with muscle and sinew. “I understand how you feel, I truly do, but try to see it from my point of view.”

His head shake is less vociferous this time, and I think I might be breaking through. “You think this is safe because you know Flame. The threat doesn’t seem as real, but I think it is.”

“If I’m wrong, I have a bodyguard.” I smile at him and hold his gaze.

Slowly, like the ice of winter melting into spring, his eyes warm and his lips twitch.

“Please, Jake, can we try my way? If Flame does anything, she has to know now that she’s told us, that she will be the number one suspect.”

Jake turns to her. “You know the people I work with?”

Flame nods.

“They’re Bratva. Do you know what that means?”

She swallows and nods again.

Jake tips her chin up, his hold harsh. “You fuck up and do something, anything to Summer, and you won’t only be dealing with me and the police. Understand me?”

She exhales a shaky breath. “Yes, and I promise I won’t. I couldn’t hurt a fly.”

“I keep trying to tell you that you have already hurt her. Terrifying someone is hurting them.”

“How about you talk to the guys in Corfu and see if they can take Flame into the course? Help her? Let her have therapy and some time to come to terms with her past?”

“Wait, didn’t you say they were Bratva?” Flame starts to walk toward the door, and a savage grin tugs at Jake’s features.

“Yeah, I did. You know, I think a vacation on Corfu might be just what you need.”

“Oh my God, you’re going to send me to be killed, aren’t you?” she whispers as her face whitens.

“Jake.” I smack his arm. “Don’t be a dick.”

Flame looks about to faint, so I grab her hands and squeeze them. “They are ex-Special Forces, like Jake, and they run an organization to help traumatized women. I’ll make you a deal: you go out there for a month and do the course, and I’ll not inform the police here. I’ll pay for it. But you do the course, you forget about Donovan, and you get your head on right. Deal?”

She gives a small hiccup as more tears roll down her cheeks. “Yes, I promise. Deal.”

Jake sighs and shakes his head. “You’re too soft, Summer.”

“Good thing I have you to be hard for me then, isn’t it?” I realize too late the double entendre to what I’ve said and roll my eyes at his smirk.

“Let me go call Konstantin,” he says.

Jake leaves us alone for a moment. I know he’ll only be right outside the door, but I’m glad he gave me a little time. “Flame, I can’t lie. Those letters caused me a lot of distress, but they also brought Jake into my life, and let me see for myself how toxic Zane and the band had become. I can’t condone what you did, but I don’t hate you for it either. Go to Corfu. Get some rest, and then maybe try a different path in life.”

“I’ve only ever done this.” She grabs some tissue from one of the stalls and blows her nose.

“You’ve acquired a lot of skills from it, though. Must be plenty of jobs that require the organizational tactics you need to do your current job.”

“I suppose so.”

“First things first, though. Go to Corfu and get well.”

Jake strides back into the room. “You’re on a flight in two days.”

“Two days?” Flame gasps. “But I can’t. I mean, I have to do things, organize myself... I need to—”

“Two days, non-negotiable.” Jake folds his arms, and I know this is his line in the sand.

“Flame, if there’s anything you need me to do, like organize to feed a cat, or water your plants, I can. You need to go in two days, though. It’s only for a month, and I’ve already said that I will pay.”

“No cat. No plants. Nothing and no one really. I just have to clean my flat and sort my clothes. It feels so sudden. Rushed.”

“It is rushed,” Jake says. “I want you over there and getting the help you clearly need.”

“I’ll go. Of course, I will. I appreciate you both agreeing to this and not turning me over to the police. Thank you, Summer.” She hugs me, making me jump a little with the affection in the gesture. Then she leaves the room, and I stare after her.

“You’re too fucking soft,” Jake says. He’s repeating the exact sentiment from earlier.

“Like I said before, then it’s a good thing I have you to be hard for me. Do you want to show me how hard for me you are?” I pull back and wink.

He bursts out laughing. “Summer, that was the worst line I’ve ever been given. You know it was bad, right?”

My cheeks warm as I laugh. “Busted. Yes, it was.”

“Come on. Let’s go home, and I’ll prove to you that I’m literally as hard as nails.”

I rush after him, barely able to wait until he lives up to his promise.

Things might be uncertain in many ways, but this man is one thing I’m sure of.

He links his hand in mine, and we step out of the café and into the bright light of our future.

Epilogue

THE SUN IS SO HOT HERE IN FRANCE COMPARED TO BACK home. We're in the historic city of Avignon, and the hotel we are in has a small rooftop pool, which I'm taking full advantage of right now. I swim to the edge, prop my arms on the side, and look at Jake laid out like a buffet of masculinity on the sun lounger.

He's put his book down and is reading his phone. The expression on his face is serious. We're the only people here by the pool, which is odd, but it is early. Most people are probably still stuffing their faces at the breakfast buffet.

"Anything wrong?" I ask.

He glances up and smiles at me. "No. Nothing is wrong, but Priest sent a message about your friend, Flame."

Priest is working with his girl, Roze, on Corfu, running various courses for women who need a bit of help in their lives. "Oh yeah? What does he say?" I ignore the dig about my friend, Flame. Jake still has a bit of a bee in his bonnet about the way I insisted she get help instead of punishment.

I love the man, and he makes my heart skip a beat whenever I look at him, but he sees the world in black and white, while I see all the shades of grey. He thinks if you do something wrong, then you should be punished. He believes that letting people off is a sure-fire way to encourage more bad behavior. I, on the other hand, believe in giving people second chances.

“She’s doing well. Apparently, she’s having a lot of therapy and has become quite friendly with Roze. She confided in Roze that a lot of stuff happened in her childhood. Priest hasn’t shared what,” Jake says.

“Quite right too.”

“But he does say that... Well, it was bad. Goes a long way to explain her behavior.”

“Jacob,” I use his full name, which I never do. He raises one brow and looks at me. “Are you saying I was right?”

I smile. His expression darkens, but there’s that tell-tale twitch of his lips that lets me know he’s not as pissed as he’s trying to make out. “Not right, per se, but you might have had a point.”

I climb out of the pool and walk over to him, bending over him and ignoring his shout of protest as cold water hits his hot skin. “You’re saying I’m right; admit it.”

He stands fast and grabs me in his arms, making me gasp in surprise as my feet are swept from the ground. Jake strides to the pool and unceremoniously throws me in.

I hit the water gasping and splash my arms to stay afloat. “You asshole,” I shout.

He laughs and executes a perfect dive.

As he swims toward me, I back away, but the pool is round, and not very big so I don’t get far before he has me cornered.

“You got me all wet,” he growls. “Think I ought to return the favor.”

A small whimper escapes me as his knuckles brush against my clit, a gentle touch over my bikini, but it’s enough to make me squirm.

We’ve not fooled around for a few days. We’ve been traveling, and I’ve been exhausted. I’m on a small, solo tour. I arranged it myself. Twenty venues over two months, so the schedule is quite hectic. I’m playing small, intimate places and linking the tour to my first solo album due out in three months.

It's often the other way around. You release the album and then do the tour, but I wanted to create some buzz for this.

I haven't played any of the songs from the band. I'm in a legal battle over that right now. I've told the band members, I'm quite happy for them to get a new front woman and keep performing the tracks, even though many of them were mostly written by me, but I want the same courtesy.

Those songs are from my heart, and I want to be able to sing them. Donovan and the others all said yes. Zane said no, and the label backed Zane.

It's short-sighted and stupid of them. I wasn't going to use the songs on any recordings, only play them live, but they've pissed me off, and now I will fight them. I'll take back the rights to those songs and release an acapella album, and if I have to, I'll get an injunction out on the band to stop them from playing the ones I wrote solo at their concerts.

It's not about the money—it's about the way I've been treated. The way Flame was treated. The way so many damn women are treated in this industry. We are often the ones who bring in the money, but the men control it all. The music industry might as well still be in the seventies for the way it treats some of its biggest female stars sometimes.

Not that I'm a big star, but I did earn Ron and his gang plenty of money, and if this is their thanks, screw them. I'll fight for what is mine, and they can start from scratch.

“You look angry,” Jake says. “Not what I was going for.”

“Sorry. I keep thinking about Ron and the record label, and it pisses me off.”

His fingers pull the material of my bikini bottoms to one side, and I glance around us, panicked. “Jake, we can't. Anyone could come onto the roof.”

He slides one finger over my clit and my eyes roll back in my head at the deliciousness of the sensation. I shiver when he leans in close and nips at the side of my neck. This man can get me from zero to sixty in no time. He knows exactly how to

turn me on, but he changes it up enough to make it exciting every time.

This, though? In public?

“Relax, baby,” he says.

“Erm, we’re in a public place. It’s not easy to relax.”

“The door squeaks loudly when it opens.”

It does? “I haven’t noticed.”

“You’re not all that observant.” He says this between kisses peppered against my skin.

I pull back from his nuzzling of my neck and slap one muscular pec. “Rude.”

“It’s true.” He laughs softly. “You’re too stuck in your head. Sometimes I think an elephant could fly right by you, and you wouldn’t notice.”

“I’m not that bad,” I insist.

“You’re pretty bad. The door squeaks. It’s loud. There’s no one else here. No noise to stop me from hearing it.”

“What if someone in one of the taller buildings can see?”

“So, what if they can?” His finger slides inside me, and I grab his shoulders, moaning.

“I’d love them to see how fucking gorgeous you are when you come undone.” His words are shocking, but they light a fire in me. It’s an ember I didn’t know existed. I wouldn’t have thought being an exhibitionist in any way would excite me, but it does.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, but you are all mine. Let them look from their windows. Maybe some guy will be watching and won’t be able to stop himself from taking his dick out and stroking it because you’re just too fucking gorgeous for him to resist.”

“Jesus, Jake.”

“He’ll wish he was me. Maybe he’ll come all over the glass as he watches you, but no one gets to touch you. Only

me. You're fucking mine, and I want the world to see it."

I can't speak because his words are depraved but hot. So, so hot.

"That's it, Summer. Come on my fingers."

I do, and it almost hurts it's so good. There's a strange friction from the water, but it isn't unpleasant, just different.

"I'm going to fuck you now, and if someone comes through that door, I won't stop."

I'm paralyzed and torn between fear and intense arousal. Jake slides his fingers out of me. "It's a good thing you're so wet and turned on that the water won't be able to wash it away."

Then he frees himself from his swimming shorts and brackets his arms around me. "Wrap your legs around me, baby."

He's standing, but it's a bit too deep where we are for me to do so. I wrap my arms around his neck, and my legs around his waist, and he slowly, and carefully, pushes in.

Oh God, the friction is delicious. I shiver and moan, and he bites the juncture between my throat and collarbone.

"You feel so tight like this," he says.

Holding me to him, he begins to move in earnest, fucking me in the pool out in the open. I look around at the few buildings high enough for someone to see us from. They are far away, and I doubt anyone is looking, but still; those things Jake said, they come to my mind, and I find my desire building again.

"You like it, huh? The idea of being watched? Of some guy over there behind us in a building so overcome with looking at you like this that he has to take care of himself?"

He's tapped into a kink I didn't know I had, and it has me burning up, but there's also a tendril of fear there. How far would he want to take it?

I imagine myself laid out on a table in some secret club, Jake spreading me open as a crowd of men watch, and I cry out as I come unexpectedly.

Jake swears and grips me to him as he stutters in his rhythm and fills me.

When it's over, and I've come back to reality, I stare up at him. "We just had sex in the pool. That's ... disgusting."

He puts himself away, pulls my bikini back into place, and pats my pussy as if it's his pet. The action turns me on even though it's kind of depraved too.

"It's chlorinated." He laughs.

"You're an animal," I say. "And that stuff about the guy watching me..."

He shrugs. "Got you off, didn't it?"

"Is it a thing of yours?"

"Not really, but I thought it might be a thing of yours, so I tested it out."

"Why would it be a thing of mine?"

He stares at me as if I'm stupid. "Baby, you love being on stage. You're a performer."

"I'm not a sex performer," I point out.

"No. It's fantasy, not reality."

"So, you wouldn't want to like ... take me to a sex club and show me off?"

He goes still. So still it's a little bit scary. "Fuck no," he growls.

I relax. Thank God, so it's just a bit of fun. Between us. That I can handle.

"Do you want to go to a sex club and be shown off?" he asks me, his face dark.

"No. Jake, you're the one who came up with the whole, some guy is watching us thing."

“Made you come, didn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then.” He grins. “But in reality?” His face darkens so fast it’s like a storm cloud blocking out the sun. “Fuck no.”

“Okay, that’s good. I liked it ... as a fantasy. You’re right; it did get me hot. But I don’t want that in reality.”

“Good. I was already planning how I’d kill every man in the sex club after they’d seen you like that.”

I burst out laughing. “If anyone who didn’t know you heard you say that, they wouldn’t realize you were joking.”

“I’m not joking.” His face is serious.

I slap his arm and laugh. Jake doesn’t laugh, and he holds my gaze. “Baby, not joking.”

“Oh.” I swallow hard. “You’d kill them for looking at me?”

“Naked? Coming?” He growls under his breath. “Fuck yes.”

Holy. Shit.

Damn him, that has me turned on too. Even more than the imaginary window guy. “Jake.”

“Yes, baby.”

“I think I need you to take me back to the hotel room now. I want to do bad things to you, and I really don’t want to risk getting caught.”

“Your wish is my command.”

He helps me out of the pool, and we dry ourselves off brusquely and quickly, both of us wanting to get somewhere private.

“Thank you,” I say as he takes my hand.

“What for?”

“Loving me.”

He turns to stare at me. “Summer, you don’t have to thank me for that. You made it pretty damn easy to do. I love you more than anything or anyone else. I want to marry you, knock you up, and have tons of little Summers running around.” His cheeks color a little then. Something that rarely happens and a tell he’s feeling strong emotions. “In fact, I have something for you. I was going to do the whole down on one knee thing, after I’d booked a fancy restaurant, but then Priest said he thought you might hate that. Might not want the publicity.”

He stops and looks around us at the empty roof garden. “Come here.”

He pulls me toward a small seating area, dotted around a rose garden. It’s a pretty spot, and he gently pushes me down into one of the chairs.

Then he bends down on one knee just like in the movies. I clasp my hand over my mouth because I can’t believe this is happening to me. I’d somehow never envisioned it when I’d thought about my life.

He reaches into the beach bag he’s been carrying with all our stuff and takes out a small toiletry case. It has the few bits he carries with him. Toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, moisturizer, and deodorant. He pulls out a small dark green box.

My mouth is dry, and my heart is pounding. Oh. My. God. This is really happening.

He looks up at me, and in his gaze, there is a vulnerability I don’t normally see.

“Summer, will you marry me?”

The words are simple. None of the *will you do me the honor* bit, I see on television shows when people propose.

He smiles at me and sucks in a breath.

I don’t speak, and his smile falters. I can’t speak because the lump in my throat is getting in the way. I clear my throat and blink rapidly.

“Yes,” I manage to say. “Yes, Jake, I will marry you.”

I throw my arms around him and kiss him as if my life depends on it.

He kisses me back equally ferociously.

I'm playing a concert tonight; I know my voice will soar, full of emotion after this start to our day.

"Do you like the ring?" he asks me as we finally break our kiss.

I look down at the ring nestled in the sumptuous green velvet.

It's yellow gold, which I love, and it is a stunning deep blue sapphire, surrounded by two large diamonds.

"It's massive," I blurt out.

He laughs. "It's antique. I hope that is okay? I saw it when we were in Milan. I just glanced in a window, at a jeweller as we were walking by and saw it. So, when you were in that meeting with the reps from the new record label that wants to sign you, and I was waiting outside, I slipped away and grabbed it. It was only a few doors down."

I take his free hand, the one not holding the ring in mine. "You know you can leave me alone now, right? Flame is not going to do anything else."

There's a furrow in his brow. I noticed the emphasis he put on the fact the shop was only a few doors down.

"I'm still your bodyguard," he points out.

"Not anymore," I say firmly.

His face falls.

"You just got a promotion. Husband-to-be."

The smile he gives me isn't his trademark smirk, or his shit-eating grin, or his small, lip twitch of a smile. This smile is big, open, and so beautiful it cracks my heart wide open.

"Do you want to try your engagement ring on, wife-to-be?" he asks.

I nod and sniff as I wipe one stray tear away. "Yes."

He slips the ring on my finger, and I admire it as it sparkles in the sun. “It’s beautiful.” I sigh happily. “It shines so much.”

“It’s perfect then, because so do you.”

With those romantic words, my husband-to-be picks me up in his arms and carries me to our hotel room.

The end.

Thank you for reading.

I truly appreciate it so very much.

Her Ferocious Warrior is the fourth and final installment in Ruthless Defenders series, coming Winter 2024!