

REIMAGINED

HYSTORIA BOOK 1

HIS
BIGGEST
REGRET
THE ONE THAT
GOT AWAY

SWEET
STEAMY
SECOND
CHANCE

BAD
REPUTATION
WHEN BOYANDS
FALL
FROM
GRACE

HAILEY FROST

Reimagined

Hystoria Book 1

Hailey Frost



What started as the one who got away ended as the one I never wanted to see again. Now, he's back.

Seven years ago, Cole had the nerve to kiss me goodbye before he and our best friends ghosted me and went off to become rock stars. The kicker? They did it by stealing my song and destroying my life.

Fast forward to now, and I've never been better. I'm the one pulling the strings behind the scenes, the one who makes sensations out of nobodies. Suddenly, my old friends need my help—practically beg for it. And Cole? He wants a second chance.

I should despise him, loathe everything he stands for. But he's working hard for my forgiveness, and damn it, our chemistry is still electric. I keep telling myself it's a bad idea. What if he's just using me like before? Can my heart take it if he breaks it again?

There's too much at stake. There's no way I can let him back in.

Or can I?

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Warning: This book contains material that is intended for a mature, adult audience. It contains graphic language, explicit sexual content and adult situations. Triggers include but are not limited to: Mention of (emotional) neglect and homelessness.

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To all the girls still secretly hoping for their favorite band's
bus to break down in front of their home.

Chapter One

“DO YOU REALLY HAVE to leave?” I ask Cole quietly, my heart hurting at the thought of him leaving me behind. The sun is setting in the sky, casting a warm glow over my garden where we often spend our afternoons. He is lying in our blue patterned hammock, hanging between two trees, his leg swaying back and forth to create a gentle rocking motion. And I am on the soft ground surrounded by high grass and a patch of wildflowers, with my guitar resting on my lap. Summer is in full swing, and the air is thick with the sound of chirping cicadas while the sun bathes everything in a warm, orange glow.

“You know I do.” He lets out a long, weary sigh and sits up, gazing down at me. “We are never going to get this kind of chance again. If we don’t take this invitation to Los Angeles, our band will never make it.”

“I know,” I reply, my voice thick with sadness. “I’m just going to miss you all. You, Pax, Simon and Jake are like the family I always wished for.”

“You still have Steve and Grace.” I can’t help but grimace at the mention of my parents’ names. “And Clara,” he adds optimistically. I roll my eyes and gently put the guitar next to me before laying down on the grass.

“You know that’s not the same,” I murmur. “Steve and Grace are never here, and Clara hates me.”

“Clara doesn’t hate you. She’s your sister. It’s probably just a phase.”

“Well, that *phase*,” I use air quotes for the word, “has been lasting for sixteen years. Clara just hates me. She told me so just yesterday, right before she smashed my favorite mug on the ground.”

“Oh no. Jack?” I nod. When I turned twelve, the guys invited me to watch *Pirates of the Caribbean* with them, even though it was PG-13. The whole time we watched it, I was terrified someone might barge in and arrest me for watching it one year early, much to the glee of Pax and Simon. At one point, they went out of the room to get snacks and barged in yelling, “Put your hands up!” scaring the shit out of me.

Despite that, I fell in love with the movies and had the biggest crush on Captain Jack Sparrow. I mean, who doesn’t? To tease me, the guys got me a mug with his face on it for my thirteenth birthday. I loved that mug, not only because of Johnny Depp’s face on it, but because it reminded me of the evening we watched the movie together.

“Maybe she’s jealous. After all, you have four very handsome best friends.” Cole winks, and I give the hammock a playful shove, making him laugh. The truth is, Clara has had a crush on Cole for years, which means that whenever he is around, she tries to paint me in a bad light and force his attention on her, which annoys him. When he blows her off, she blames me and makes my life hell. Then, the next day, she asks me when he is coming over again, and the whole thing repeats.

There is no escape from this vicious cycle, but as long as the guys are close and I am the only link she has to Cole, she behaves at least.

“Let’s change topics,” I say quietly. “I don’t want to talk about Clara.” He leans back in the hammock.

“Will you play something for me?” Cole’s quiet voice asks from behind the fabric of the hammock. I blink, confused, then nod, realizing too late that he can’t see my response. I shuffle until my back is propped up against a tree, my guitar resting comfortably on my lap, and I begin to gently pluck the strings. My fingers begin to move in a familiar melody, and before long, my thoughts wander as my soft music fills the air.

I remember the day I first met Cole as if it was yesterday. I was only five when my parents moved us out of the city to this small town. I was so angry at them for taking me away from my friends. I was sulking and throwing tantrums the whole drive out here. I screamed, cried, and begged them to leave me with my friends, but no matter how much I sobbed and pleaded with them, they never cared. They were hell-bent on moving to Bumfuck, Nowhere. “Because the city is dangerous,” they said. “Because we want you to have a good childhood,” they said.

Now they are gone two out of three weeks, leaving me alone in the house with my sister, who is four years older. And since the only thing Clara has done since her high school graduation is go out drinking, sleep until noon, and watch beauty gurus on YouTube, I have been pretty much on my own.

One afternoon, just after we moved into our house, I was so unhappy that I packed my tiny backpack and tried to run away. I wanted to go back to my friends, my teacher—Ms. Smith from kindergarten, whom I loved so much—and the nice neighborhood auntie who always gave me lollipops.

I ran to the very end of our huge backyard and pushed through the bushes separating our property from the outside world, and into the woods just behind them. I was six; I had no sense of direction nor any idea where I was going, so I followed a creek I found. With my Winnie the Pooh backpack strapped on tightly, I was ready for an adventure when a black-haired boy jumped out from behind some bushes.

“Who are you?” he shouted, and I grin at the memory of little Cole. Dressed like a pirate with a red shirt, eyepatch, and hat, he stood in front of me and stared me down, pointing a wooden sword at me.

“Just passing through, bye,” was my sassy answer as I proceeded to walk past him.

“You’re like three, where do you think you’re going? The bears are going to eat you!” he warned me, making me stop in my tracks. I hadn’t even considered the possibility of running into a bear. However, I was a big girl on an adventure, and no one was going to stop me. Least of all a boy!

“I’m five! And animals like me; the bears will leave me alone!” I stuck out my tongue and proceeded to walk away from him. That’s when more boys came out from behind the foliage. Paxton, Jake, and Simon. From the corner of my eyes,

I saw them look at each other, but I was past them already when one of them shouted, “Hey, do you want to eat cookies with us?”

What can I say? Food manages to sway me to this day, especially the chocolate chip cookies Cole’s mom makes. Rachel’s baking is amazing. I must have eaten half a dozen of them on that first day I met Cole. We hung out in their living room, munching on the chocolatey goodness and bonding over pirate-talk. Rachel made sure I was okay and felt welcome, acting more motherly than my own mother ever did.

I didn’t want to leave, but eventually, my parents called out my name and I had to go back to my own house, all my plans of running away forgotten.

Cole and I quickly became close friends. When my parents were home and fighting, or when Clara brought guys over that I didn’t want to be around, I’d often find myself at Cole’s house doing homework or just hanging out. Cole taught me how to play the guitar and gifted me my very own one for my fourteenth birthday two years ago. It was one of his old ones, which I already used regularly; however, it belonged to me from that moment on, and that meant the world to me. I keep it safe in their basement, away from Clara’s wandering hands and her ‘rock star smashing a guitar on stage’ dreams. She’d already broken enough of my things as it was.

Cole is my best friend. I can hardly remember a time when he wasn’t by my side, laughing alongside me or smirking at whatever mischief we had gotten up to.

He is the one I turn to when I'm feeling down, need to vent, or just want to talk, and he does the same. Falling in love with him happened slowly, and it took me a long time to realize. Before I knew it, my heart began beating faster in my chest whenever I saw his name pop up on my phone, and I found myself daydreaming about how his lips would feel on mine. How it would feel to run my hands through his silky black hair. About what it would be like to move to Los Angeles with him.

At the same time, I also became incredibly close to Paxton, Jake, and Simon. They were like the brothers I never had. Our relationship is full of loving teasing, but there is no doubt they love me, and I love them. They even joked about letting me be the official mascot for their band, and I can't tell you how much I wanted that to happen. They are like family to me, and I can't imagine life without them.

But soon enough, I'll have to face that reality. Very soon.

Because if there is one thing my parents will not stand for, it is dropping out of high school. I only have one and a half years left until I can follow them to Los Angeles. But it is going to be hard without the guys here; I am going to miss them all so much. Who is going to cheer me up after my next bad grade? Who is going to help me study?

I clear my throat as I feel my emotions rise to the surface quickly. What will Los Angeles be like? Will Rachel still let me come over?

“Hey, what’s going on?” Cole peeks over the hammock’s fabric, startling me out of my thoughts. The sun has mostly set; only a faint glimmer shines over the treetops in the distance.

“Nothing,” I say, trying to hide the pain in my voice. “What do you mean?”

Cole studies me for a moment, his eyes seeing right through my facade.

“Your song started all cheery and now it’s all sad and gloomy.” He sits up and pats the space next to him, but I shake my head and look down. It takes all my strength not to let the tears gathering in my eyes spill down.

“I’m just thinking,” I say and take a deep breath, leaning the guitar against the tree as I force a hopefully reassuring smile on my face. “A lot of things will change and...I don’t know. There are just a lot of thoughts running through my head.” I shrug, feeling overwhelmed. Cole rustles out of the hammock and joins me on the ground, his arm brushing mine as he leans his back against the same tree, right next to me.

“I have a lot of thoughts, too,” he admits, his voice soft and uncertain. “What if we fail? What if we don’t? What if fame turns us into completely different people?” He lets out a sad laugh.

“That’s a lot of ‘what ifs’,” I say quietly, pulling my knees up to my chest and resting my chin on them. We sit in silence for a while, watching the moon rising behind the trees.

“A shooting star!” Cole suddenly shouts excitedly and points at the sky to our right. I quickly look up, trying to catch a glimpse.

“Quick! Make a wish,” I urge him, disappointed when I only see the blinking red light of a plane flying across the dark sky. “I missed it.” Cole closes his eyes for a moment. When he opens them again, a soft smile plays on his lips and he looks at me with an intense kind of look; a look that makes me think that he can read my mind and searches it for every secret I have, just by looking into my eyes.

Instead of giving in to the urge to squirm under his gaze, I unknot my body and lay down in the grass, gazing up at the starry sky.

“Do you think there will be more shooting stars tonight? I really want to see one,” I whisper. Cole chuckles as he lies down next to me, so close that I can feel the warmth of his body on my bare arm and leg. I almost can’t hear him over the loud thumping of my heart.

“Okay, let’s watch the stars until you see one,” he says, and the way his eyes twinkle in the dim light of the stars makes my heart race even faster.

Silence falls around us, only broken by the occasional rustling of leaves and the distant hum of traffic. From time to time, a bat crosses our field of vision and quickly disappears into the trees. Satellites and planes fly over us, but no more shooting stars appear as I stew in my thoughts.

This may be the last time I get to talk to Cole face to face for a while. Suddenly, I am painfully aware of that, and a knot forms in my stomach.

“I feel left behind,” I eventually whisper, my voice barely audible above the sounds of the night.

“Huh?”

Tears well up in my eyes, and I struggle to find the right words. “You asked me what’s going on. I feel like you’re leaving me behind, Cole. And some dark, bitter part of me is convinced that you will live your new life in the big city and forget about me.” At this point, I cannot hold back the tears in my eyes, and I feel them fall on my cheek as I stubbornly continue to look at the sky. “And I want to be happy for you and Pax and Jake and Simon, but I am going to miss you and it’s going to suck.” I wipe my cheeks with the heel of my hand, feeling the dampness against my skin, and try to turn away from him.

“We’re not going to forget about you,” Cole assures me. Then he suddenly grabs my arm and I squeal in surprise when he pulls me on top of him.

“No, don’t look at me. You know I hate crying,” I whine, but Cole’s embrace is too comforting to resist. He hugs me to him tightly and I press my face into his chest, my own heart thumping violently as I listen to the steady beat of his, and I let my tears fall and soak into his shirt as I remain in his embrace.

“Never be embarrassed for showing your emotions, especially not to me,” Cole says softly, his hands stroking my

back soothingly. “I am as sad as you are. So don’t turn away from me. Never from me, Viv.”

I nod as more and more tears break free and soak his shirt. He must feel the tremors rocking my body as I cry into his chest and his hands stroke comfortingly along my back.

“We’re not going to forget you.” Cole’s voice is full of determination. His chest rises under me as he takes a deep breath. “And after you graduate high school, we’re coming back to take you with us. You might not be an official member, but you’re as much part of the heart of the band as Simon, Pax, Jake, or me.”

I manage a watery smile through my tears. “Pinky promise?” I ask, extending my hand, and Cole interlocks his pinky with mine. He surprises me by bringing our hands to his lips and pressing a soft kiss on my pinky finger.

Laughing and crying at the same time, I bury my face in Cole’s chest again, feeling his arms around me, holding me even tighter than before. His touch is reassuring, and I can feel myself gradually calming down.

I wiggle in his hold once I’ve calmed, signaling that my emotional outburst is over.

“Just a little longer,” Cole murmurs against my hair and I nod, sliding my arms under his shoulders and holding on tightly as well. I wish I could pack up this exact moment and revisit it whenever I want.

“I hate this,” he finally admits, his voice strained with emotion. “I want to kidnap you and take you with me, because for some inexplicable reason, I cannot fathom the thought of leaving you behind.” His fingers run through my hair gently, sending shivers down my spine and leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

“I don’t want you to go to prison though, so kidnapping is off the table,” I chuckle through my teary eyes. He shifts his hand from the back of my head to cup my cheek, turning my face towards his. I gulp, acutely aware of how close our faces are, feeling the warmth of his breath on my wet cheek.

“A year and a half,” he says solemnly, his eyes locked onto mine. “That’s only 546 days. And then I’ll come back for you.” His thumb strokes my cheek tenderly, his eyes flickering with determination as he seems lost in thought. Then, with a quiet “Fuck it,” he closes the gap between us and his lips crash against mine.

The kiss is unexpected yet welcome, sending a jolt of electricity through my body. The taste of him lingers on my lips as he cups my face with both of his hands, pulling me closer. Suddenly, I find myself on my back with him hovering above me, our mouths melding together in a heated embrace.

My heart races as his mouth moves hungrily against mine, and I can feel the heat between us, making warmth pool in my core. I respond eagerly, sliding my arms around his back, my hands digging into his shoulders as I lose myself in the

moment, forgetting everything else but him. He is everything I feel, everything I hear, all I smell, and all I can think about.

His hands keep my head in place as he explores every crevice of my mouth, and I let him, my hands tugging his back, urging him nearer, savoring the sensation of his lips against mine, the taste of him filling my senses.

When the kiss finally ends, he stays close, his breath fanning over my wet lips as his eyes dart all over my face, the air crackling with tension.

Laying his forehead against mine, we both catch our breath. My head is spinning and my thoughts are a jumble of emotions and sensations, and it takes me a moment to gather myself. When I am able to form a coherent thought, I swat his back gently.

“That’s so unfair,” I whine, my voice cracking as tears fill up my eyes once more. “You can’t just do that when you leave in a few hours.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, a mix of guilt and amusement in his eyes. “I had to.” He kisses me again, a lingering touch that sends shivers down my spine. We hold on tight to each other, our unspoken “I love you” hanging in the air. Then the time comes for us to go back to our houses. For the first time, we walk the path hand in hand.

I am on cloud nine. My high school graduation can’t come fast enough. Little do I know that just a few days later, my heart will be ripped out of my chest, trampled on, and left to wither.

Chapter Two

Eight years later

I HEAR THE CROWD roar. It's a deafening sound that fills the air and erases everything else. It's like being pulled under water; the feeling is almost overwhelming. It creeps up my whole body, waves of excitement and happiness roll over me with each cheer, sending shivers down my back as they break. Even from backstage, I can feel the air crackling with electricity and the sound of the crowd's screams. It reminds me just how different arena concerts are from small venue shows.

Mia is standing in the middle of the stage, looking even tinier than usual in front of the giant arena. She bows to the people in the stands, waves goodbye, and expresses her heartfelt gratitude for their unwavering support and for coming to her final show of the tour tonight. Only a few moments later, she runs backstage, her red face beaming with an exhausted smile, her blonde, long hair sticking to her neck and cleavage, and her skin glistening with sweat. Immediately, she rushes to me, throwing her arms around me as she laughs into my ear.

"Evie, this is fucking unreal!" she exclaims, her blue eyes swimming with emotions. She grabs my hand and starts jumping up and down like a giddy child, pulling me along with her. We bounce around backstage like super balls, our laughter filling the air.

People start rushing around us, hurrying to clean up the stage so they can go home while we remain to the side, both

laughing and holding each other and jumping in excitement. We made it.

“Tonight was amazing, girl!” I tell her when she lets me go, and I hold my hand up for a high five. Still grinning from ear to ear, she eagerly obliges. Meanwhile, more and more people crowd the backstage area, so I link my arm with hers and lead her through the scurrying bodies to her dressing room.

Every few feet down the narrow hallways, staff members stop Mia to gush about how amazing she was on stage and how much they’ve enjoyed working with her. Their faces light up when she thanks them for their hard work, then poses for selfies and signs merchandise.

Even though she is clinging onto me, barely able to stay on her feet, a grateful smile remains on her face with each interaction. When she starts swaying from fatigue, I put on my manager hat and firmly guide her towards the dressing room. I push her inside, quickly shutting the door behind us before anyone else decides to interrupt.

“Ahhhh,” she sighs contentedly, extending her arms in a stretch. “Silence!” She flops onto the couch and plops her feet on the coffee table. “God, this feels amazing.”

“Right?” I grin and settle down next to her.

“And you’re not even out there, Miss Manager,” she teases me, poking my side playfully, and I grin.

“Yeah, no thank you,” I reply with a sigh, closing my eyes briefly. We have been on the road for three months, touring

across the United States and Canada to celebrate the release of Mia's new album.

For her, tours are standard. Standing on stage is basically her second nature. She's been in show business since she was ten years old, and in the music business for a decade. This tour is hardly her first rodeo.

Yet, it's the first tour I've ever been on as a manager. I've planned and organized tours before, dealing with venue owners and local promoters, but I've never been part of the actual travels until now.

When I first heard of her, she was playing in clubs and bars with shitty management that didn't want to see her thrive. I stole her from right under their noses and took her under my wing. I saw potential in the charming way she interacted with her audience. Paired with her amazing voice, I was sure she had what it takes to be a star. And she's proven me right. This tour felt like a special occasion—a reward for all the hard work we've put in—and Mia and I have been having a blast on the road.

“I still don't get it,” she says, shaking her head in disbelief. “You're so talented. If you kept your songs instead of giving them to Gabe and me, you would be insanely successful.” I open my eyes and sit back up.

“Well, there are reasons.” I clear my throat. “But they would bring the mood down, so let's change topics.” The pout forming on her face tells me she's not happy about it, but she

nods. “There is something else I wanted to talk to you about, though.”

“I want to take a break,” Mia blurts out suddenly, just before I can breach the topic. I’m taken aback for a second, but once her words register, a grin spreads across my face slowly. She avoids making eye contact, her gaze darting around the room nervously.

“Finally!” I exclaim, unable to contain my excitement. “I have been telling you that for months!” Her eyes snap to mine and widen slightly.

“I know you did. It just felt like I couldn’t let my fans down.” She grimaces.

“So what changed?”

“Today, I stood up there and for a moment, I couldn’t breathe,” she explains quietly. “I’ve been feeling it for a while. It’s like a heavy weight on my shoulders, pushing down on me, and at the same time it feels like I’m in a windowless room and the walls start closing in on me. Do you know that feeling when you’re running in a dream but you’re not moving forward at all?” I nod in understanding. “Tonight, when I stood there, I felt all of that at the same time and I was paralyzed. All those people spend so much money to come see me, and I feel like I couldn’t deliver what they deserved.” Her voice breaks, and I immediately take her hand in mine and squeeze it. I never saw her freeze and that worries me. Did I not pay enough attention? Or is she that good at hiding it? What else is she not telling me?

“Your shows were amazing, and your fans love you,” I assure her, and she throws her arms around me. I hug her back and pat her back reassuringly.

“Your schedule is more or less clear. Whatever is in there, I can cancel,” I promise. “Do you want to go somewhere?”

“Somewhere without people would be nice,” she says softly, and I nod in agreement. “I think I’ve run my social battery to the ground.”

“A cabin in the woods?” I suggest and she nods, visibly relaxing. “Done.”

“Thank you,” she whispers and fidgets until I let her go, shooting me a grateful smile. “A cabin and nature sounds amazing. How long do you think I could stay there?”

“However long your social battery needs to recoup. You haven’t had a proper break in the five years we’ve worked together. You’ve more than earned it.”

“We’ve known each other that long already?” she asks, surprised, and chuckles.

“Yeah, I’m starting to feel old.” I grin and she slaps my arm playfully.

“If you’re old, what am I supposed to say? I’m about to hit the big three-oh! My life in the spotlight is practically over!” The fake, panicked tremble in her voice makes me grin wider and wider as we look at each other, and suddenly, as if on cue, we both start laughing uncontrollably.

It's freeing. Now that the tour is over, and a good night's sleep in my own bed is in sight, it feels like a huge weight is lifted off my shoulders. I laugh until my stomach hurts, and each time one of us catches our breath, we burst into laughter again the moment we see the other try to school their face.

"It's not even that funny," Mia wheezes, holding her stomach, while I am brimming with laughter yet again.

"I can't look at you," I manage to say between giggles, and I turn around to look at the wall. After taking three consecutive deep breaths—my first two tries interrupted by Mia's infectious giggling—I finally regain control of myself. "Do you think I can turn around again?"

"At your own risk." I can hear the smile in her voice, but since there is no chuckle, I risk it.

"Thank God, that almost bordered on torture," Mia says and I hand her a bottle of water. Silence fills the room as both of us get lost in our own thoughts. I need to book a cabin for Mia. If it's going to be a long-term stay, maybe buying one would be easier. Then I'll have to cancel her interviews.

"Will you be alright?" Mia's soft voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

"While you're on a break?" She nods, looking a bit anxious. "Of course." I take a sip of my drink, noticing the sting of disappointment that crosses her eyes. I lean forward and take her hand in mine.

“Don’t get me wrong. It’s going to suck to not work with you, and I am going to miss the hell out of you. But I have new songs for Gabe that we’re going to record sometime soon, and I am sure Joe will find something else for me to do. Maybe I will find another girl that dreams of being a popstar and has what it takes.” Her eyes grow wide at the mention of Joe, the label owner, and she quickly hides her face behind the bottle of water.

“Oh God, I didn’t even think about Joe and Scaena. I can never go back to the office. Peggy will kill me.” Now it’s my turn to be confused. What does Joe’s secretary have to do with Mia taking a break?

“Why would she? As far as I know, she’s one of your biggest fans.”

“She’s not going to be once she’s swamped with phone calls.” Mia jumps up and paces back and forth in the room, clutching her water bottle to her chest. My eyes follow her, still confused.

“Can you please stop for a second and tell me what you are talking about?”

“Do you even know how many artists have tried to poach you away from me over the years?” My eyes grow wide and I shake my head. “Guess.”

“I don’t know. Maybe two?” She laughs hysterically and sets her empty bottle on the table.

“Try two hundred.” I almost spit out my drink.

“What the hell? Why? When? How do I not know that?”

“Because Joe told every single one of them to fuck off. He’s such a papa bear when it comes to you.” I glare at her.

“And how do *you* know that?” She grins sheepishly.

“I have my ways of finding out things.” I stare at her, slowly narrowing my eyes. “Okay, Peggy told me. If you want to know more, you have to ask her.”

“Oh, I will,” I assure her. “Now, let’s get ready for your end-of-tour party. Joe and the rest are probably already waiting for us.”



“Congratulations!” Joe’s booming voice carries over the subtle music. Heads turn in our direction, and guests start to cheer and lift their drinks towards us as Mia and I make our way through the bar. The label has rented out the entire venue to celebrate Mia’s successful tour; all roadies, stage managers, and bus drivers are here, invited by the label as a thank you for their hard work. After all, this tour has brought in more than enough revenue to show some appreciation to the ones who made it all happen.

Joe approaches us with a warm smile on his face. His kind eyes and mouth crinkle with small wrinkles. His long, dark hair is streaked with prominent grey strands, pulled back into a relaxed ponytail.

Surprisingly, he is not wearing a band shirt today, but a regular black one that reveals his tattoos peeking out from the sleeves and collar. He must have just come from a meeting with suited-up business people. While he pledged to never become a ‘suit-wearing office wanker’ after leaving his own music career, he does dress up a bit when dealing with them.

I have a huge smile on my face as Joe hugs Mia in greeting, and then me, before he leads us to a table in the back where his wife, Rose, and son, Liam, are already waiting for us with proud smiles on their faces.

“There you are, girls!” Rose gets up and takes a step away from the table as I open my arms to hug her, smiling when she kisses my cheek and undoubtedly leaves some of her bright pink lipstick on my face.

Joe and Rose are the epitome of the saying “opposites attract.” Where Joe is usually dressed in black band shirts covered in skulls and flames, paired with the occasional flannel, Rose sticks to pastels. With her petite figure, long, blonde hair, and gentle eyes, she reminds me of a fairy. More like Tinkerbell than a fairy godmother, though.

Liam definitely takes after Joe where it concerns fashion. As always, he is wearing a graphic t-shirt. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him wearing something else, apart from a suit for weddings or funerals; he even wears them when he works at his bakery, and I know his clients get a kick out of them. I eye it curiously, but I can’t quite make out the motive of today’s shirt. I think it has raccoons and lightning strikes on it.

“Rose!” I exclaim, unable to contain my excitement. It feels like an eternity since I last saw her. “I’m so happy to see you!” I tell her and step back to make way for her to congratulate Mia on her successful tour.

“Evee,” Liam greets me with a warm smile spreading across his tanned face. Laughing, I walk into the spread-out arms of the older brother I gained, embracing him tightly as he wraps his arms around me.

“Leelee,” I tease him affectionately, using the nickname I’ve given him to get back at him for calling me a Pokémon-inspired nickname. His curly brown hair is sticking in all directions today, and his tan is deeper than usual after his recent vacation. “Now, show me the ring, bitch! I can’t believe you got engaged while I was gone!” I say, excitement bubbling inside my stomach.

“I can’t believe it myself!” The smile on his face could power a lighthouse as he holds up his hand, presenting the shiny band on his ring finger. I step closer to have a better look at it. Small, sparkly strips weave around the band, and when he takes it off and hands it to me to get a better look, I can see a very small engraving on the inside.

“It’s so beautiful.” I give it back to him and he slips it onto his finger. “What does it say?”

“It’s the day of our first date.” He grins.

“How romantic! I’m so happy for you both,” I gush, tears welling up in my eyes as I wrap my arms around him once more. The two of them have been dating forever. It’s clear they

are doting on each other, as in love as they were when they first got together. So even though we all knew it was just a matter of time before one of them proposed, I feel more emotional than I have any business being.

“Tomorrow night. My place. I need to know everything about the proposal,” I demand, eager for all the details.

“Done. I’ll bring the food,” Liam replies with a grin.

“Bring your fiancé too. I haven’t seen Mateo in forever.”

“Sure thing,” he replies, his eyes instantly resembling the heart-eyed emoji at the mention of his fiancé. I give him a thumbs up and let him steal Mia from Rose to say “Hi” to her. She looks relieved to escape Rose’s fussing.

“You must be starving,” Joe says, noticing me standing off to the side. “Come on, sit and order something. I want to hear all about the tour!”

“I could kill for a burger right now,” Mia declares, falling into the seat next to me. I nod in agreement. We place our orders and dive into conversation, sharing stories from the tour with Joe and his family until our meal arrives. Mia tears into her burger as though she hasn’t eaten in days, even though I know she stuffed herself with the catering the venue provided. The shows take a lot out of her, though, so I am not surprised when she orders a second burger.

“And then, Eve fired him.” Mia laughs as she recounts a story from the tour. “And she looked badass doing it.” I can’t help but cringe as I remember the one roadie who had given

me a hard time, not believing that a woman could hold any kind of authority over him. Unfortunately, there are still too many men like him in this industry, but I've learned to stand my ground and assert the power I hold, while avoiding drama the best I can.

“Now, get her another Mojito. I'm trying to get her to tell me why she's not going on stage herself,” Mia says with a mischievous grin.

“Well, I don't need to be blackout drunk for that.” I grimace and clear my throat. “Fine. It's not a happy story, though.” I catch Joe's worried gaze and reassure him with a nod. “I'll keep it short. Do you know the band Hystoria?”

“Who doesn't? They had that one big hit a few years ago and have been hotshots in the industry ever since, right?”

“Yeah, that's them. They've definitely made a name for themselves,” I say with a hint of bitterness, remembering that among most of the tour staff, their reputation isn't exactly positive. “I actually grew up with them. When I was five, my parents moved us out of the city and to Bumfuck, Nowhere on a whim. Cole was my neighbor and Paxton, Jake, and Simon were always at his place, so naturally, we grew close. I spent most of my free time with at least one of them, even though they were all two years older than I was. They were like the brothers I'd always wished for.”

I take a sip of my drink, collecting my thoughts before I continue. “I was there when they founded the band. Hell, I even came up with the band name. I was ecstatic when they

got signed with their label, even though that meant they would leave me behind when they went to Los Angeles.” My eyes stare into the distance, reliving the exact moment when Cole received the call. “I shed many tears for them; some tears of happiness, some because I was sad they’d leave without me. They promised to come and get me when I finished school and take me along on their tours. I’d eventually get signed myself and then we would have been able to tour the world together.”

“They didn’t keep their promise?” Mia asks, her eyes widening in disbelief as she reaches out to squeeze my arm sympathetically.

“No, they didn’t.” I take a deep breath before I continue. “Instead, they stole one of my songs and ghosted me. Blocked my number, e-mail, and even when I sent letters, I never got a reply.” The betrayal still cuts deep, even after all these years.

“No way!” Mia’s eyes widen in shock, and she grabs my hand, holding it as I continue.

“Yep. ‘Shadows’ is my song. Although they gave it a rockier feel and sound, but the lyrics and melody are all mine.”

“Why didn’t you sue?”

“Because some other shit went down, and I couldn’t. Now, the time limit for filing a lawsuit has passed and I don’t want to reopen old wounds. It sucks, but it is what it is.” I shrug. “So, to answer your question, I know what the *promise* of fame does to some people. You’ve been in the spotlight for so long already that it doesn’t faze you anymore. That’s why I

like and trust you, but I don't trust myself to deal with that. I don't think I could handle it."

"That makes sense," Mia admits quietly.

"Well, the story obviously has a happy ending. I met Joe, and he basically gave me no choice but to move in with them."

"Rose wouldn't have talked to me again if I had let her leave." Joe chuckles. "I mean, Liam always wanted a sister, and Rose always wanted a son and a daughter. Eve came along a bit late, but we're happy she's part of the family now." Liam and Rose leave their own quiet conversation to nod in agreement.

"And not just because she's a genius and brings in a lot of money for the label," Liam adds with a smirk, and I playfully show him my middle finger.

"Be happy I got your old man off your back about taking over the company," I tell Liam with a smirk.

"Oh, I will be eternally grateful, sister dearest." I stick out my tongue at him, and everyone at the table laughs.

"And then we made the whole thing official, and they adopted me when I turned 21. And while I was changing my name in documents anyways, I switched from Vivien to Evelyn. A whole fresh start."

"Understandable," Mia mutters.

"By the way." I focus my attention on Joe. "A little bird told me something about artists trying to poach me. Not that I want to leave, but I *am* curious. Who was it? Anyone interesting?"

“Oh, you know, nobody important,” he replies much too quickly. I don’t believe a word. I raise my eyebrow, challenging him to tell me the truth.

“Did they offer better pay than you?”

“I told you, I have no idea what you’re talking about. And I pay you more than fairly,” he retorts.

“You do. I’m still curious. I guess I will ask Peggy when I am in the office tomorrow. I mean, now that Mia is taking a break, she might get some calls about it.”

“You’re taking a break?” Rose exclaims happily, capturing the attention of the whole table and all surrounding ones. “That’s fantastic news! What are your plans?”

“For now, I think I will just go to a cabin, far away from civilization, and not interact with people for a month. The tour exhausted all of my people skills, and I need to recharge,” Mia answers and falls into a quiet conversation with Rose as Joe’s relieved eyes fall on me.

“How did you do that?” he asks quietly. Joe has also been worried about the amount of work Mia does, and the lack of breaks she allows me to put in her schedule. Whenever I leave a day free for her to relax and gather strength, she organizes another interview herself or gives her bodyguards a hard time by walking around town and meeting her fans on the street.

She doesn’t like being alone. Maybe she forgot how to exist without the stress she lives through every day; without the

structure that her strict schedule provides. Hopefully, that will change during her break.

“I didn’t. She seemed a bit out of it after some of the shows though. Maybe her body is finally catching up to all the stress,” I explain to Joe, sipping on my Mojito.

“Whatever the reason, I’m glad she is finally willing to get some rest,” Joe says, leaning back and looking pleased. “Speaking of which, when are you planning on taking your vacation this year?”

“I was thinking November,” I answer. “I would love to catch some snow.” He checks his phone calendar and types something into the device.

“Vacation granted. Do you want Peggy to book something for you?”

“If that’s okay, yes please,” I reply with a grateful smile. She’s just the best at finding exactly what I’m looking for.

“Of course, it’s okay.”

“Thank you.” I shoot him a grateful smile.

The rest of the night goes by in a flash, filled with laughter, conversation, and dancing. Liam drops me off at home and helps me carry all of my suitcases inside.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” I ask him, remembering our conversation from earlier.

“Tomorrow,” he confirms with a smile before walking back to his car. I close the door behind him and get ready for bed in

a trance. I can barely keep my eyes open as I wash the makeup off my face and slip into a shirt to sleep in.

As I fall asleep in my own bed, I can't help but feel like a major change is approaching.

Chapter Three

“JUST A MOMENT!” I shout as the doorbell rings, and I scramble to put on a shirt. That’s what I get when I shower so shortly before guests arrive. I can’t believe Liam is actually on time for once; Mateo must have dragged him out of the house by his ear. Or dick. I race to my front door and open it to my best friend turned brother, who is holding three pizza cartons in one hand and a bag full of dips for the crust in his other.

“Move out of the way, woman. I am starving!” Liam pushes past me before I can make space, and the smell of molten cheese, basil, and tomato sauce fills my nose.

“Good thing *I*, at least, was taught manners!” I shout after him, then turn to Mateo. “There’s the fiancé!” I exclaim and open my arms for a warm greeting. He leans his giant frame down to hug me, and I hold him at arm’s length once he lets me go. His tan is deeper than usual, and he’s sporting a scruff, complimenting his short, black hair. The smile that spreads on his face warms my heart and I can’t contain a grin. “I’m so happy for you two!”

“Thank you. I’ve been smiling nonstop since he said yes.” He beams as he lets me go again.

“You better be; I’m a fucking catch!” Liam interjects, coming back into the entryway with a piece of pizza in his hand. He kisses Mateo quickly and with a disgustingly loving look on his face.

“Nice to see you too, Liam,” I tease him. He grins and gives me a quick kiss on my cheek, dangling the piece of pizza far out of my reach so I don’t steal a bite, because apparently, he

knows me too damn well. The smell of it makes my mouth water and my stomach grumble. Chuckling, the three of us make our way to the kitchen, where I pop open a bottle of cheap champagne to celebrate the occasion, before we put our food on plates and take them to the living room to watch a movie.

“What are we in the mood for? Something spooky? Action? Or cheesy?” Liam asks, as he scrolls through the streaming site.

“Action,” I reply, finally taking a bite of the pizza, and groaning as the heavenly taste hits my tongue. “God, this is so good. Antonio deserves a raise.”

“He’s the owner. I’m sure he gets all the raises he wants,” Mateo points out with a laugh, and I pout. After some back and forth, we decide to watch *The Witcher* instead of a movie because, according to Liam, “If I can watch Henry Cavill, I don’t give a damn about the genre.” I wholeheartedly agree.

“Now, tell me about the proposal,” I turn to Mateo and ask, as a fight scene starts to play on the screen.

“We went to the beach,” Mateo begins, but Liam shushes him with an aggressive “Pssst!” as Henry has a line of dialogue between kicking other men’s asses. When the scene cuts back to the fighting, he nods for Mateo to continue.

“Well, like I was saying, we went to the beach,” he continues, grinning from ear to ear. “It was the same place we took our first vacation together. My family arrived there a day

early to set everything up for me. My mother and sisters set up a beautiful picnic at the beach.”

“It was pretty cheesy,” Liam admits, red creeping up his cheeks. “We saw the most beautiful sunset. Then we watched the stars, and we even witnessed a meteor shower!”

The sudden pain in my chest comes out of nowhere. Absentminded, my hand rubs over my aching heart, trying to ease the pain. A memory I thought I’d buried deep inside fights its way to the surface. Of Cole and me, laying under the starry sky, waiting for shooting stars. I take a bite of my pizza, and as I swallow it, I press down this memory with it. It’s been eight years. There is no use thinking about it anymore. No reason it should still affect me like this.

“My mom told me about them,” Mateo continues. I blink the memory away and focus on him. “It’s called the perseid meteor shower or something like that? She said that there is a high probability of shooting stars at the end of August, so I was banking on that. At first, we didn’t even see the same shooting stars. We were just pointing in different directions saying, ‘Oh my God, did you see that one?’ But I really wanted to ask him after we saw a shooting star,” Mateo confesses, sounding sheepish, and his face glowing in a bright red.

“Oh my God, aren’t you just the cutest?” I clutch at my chest and force a smile on my face.

“It was cheesy, but perfect,” Liam raves.

“And then, we finally saw one together. It was really big and left a bright trail in the sky. I asked him, and he said yes,” Mateo adds with a grin, causing Liam to gently slap his arm.

“‘I asked him’,” Liam repeats sarcastically. “Way to downplay, Babe.” He looks at me. “This guy had a whole, super-romantic speech ready, and by the end of it, I was a sobbing mess, and even Mr. ‘I hate showing emotions’ here, was crying.” He pats Mateo’s leg. “He said that I’m the love of his life, he can’t wait to grow old together and build a family, and he will always treasure me. His cousin filmed the proposal, and even he was in tears.”

“Poor Gianluca,” Mateo says. “He stayed hidden, crouched in his spot for a while. I really need to invite him for a drink as a thank you.”

“You’d better, the video is beautiful.” Liam looks at me. “And before you ask, no. I do not have it with me today. I’ll only show it to people at our wedding, you included.”

“Aww man.” I pout and take a sip of the champagne. “I was looking forward to living vicariously through you.”

“Well, how about you get some romance in your life so you don’t have to?” He sticks out his tongue, and I stick my middle finger right in his face.

“I swear, the two of you are like toddlers sometimes, even worse than real siblings,” Mateo murmurs.

“I wouldn’t know,” Liam says, and I slowly nod in agreement.

“Yeah, seeing as you’re the only one present with blood-siblings that you’re close to, we must trust your word, Mateo.”

“What about Gabe?” Liam blurts out suddenly. Gabe is the second-most famous artist at Scaena. He’s also a close friend, whom I occasionally write songs for, just like I do for Mia. It’s perfect for me, because I can help record them and ensure that they capture my vision without having to deal with any of the spotlight when they hit the top of the charts. Not to toot my own horn, but they land there almost every time, and Gabe is happy to deal with the fallout. Happier than me, at least, and I wonder how he hasn’t turned insane yet. The poor guy can’t go anywhere without paparazzi trying to snap his picture, and fans asking for selfies.

Gabe is a sweetheart and one of my best friends, along with Mia and Liam. When I have a bad day, I know he will take time out of his day to let me rant, no matter how busy his schedule is. In return, I make the time for him as well. The two of us have bonded over music and similar life experiences, as he is also not in contact with his biological parents anymore.

“What about him?” I raise my eyebrow.

“Weren’t you two a thing?” Both of them grab their champagne at the same time and look at me expectantly. Sometimes it’s scary how in sync they act.

“Sorry to disappoint, but no. Not happening.”

“Why not? I mean, he’s handsome, rich, and definitely into you.”

“Do I look like money matters to me?” My second eyebrow joins the first as it lifts. Liam shakes his head. “See, that’s not really an argument. I like Gabe. He’s a sweetheart and I’m sure if I put in the effort, I could fall for him. But we just work better as friends.” I shrug.

“What do you mean by ‘put in the effort’?” Mateo raises his hands to form air quotes as he scolds me. “Love happens naturally!”

I shake my head.

“Agree to disagree. I think even when love happens naturally you need to put in the effort to nurture it, so you can feel love again when it inevitably fizzles out. Otherwise, all relationships would end after the honeymoon phase. Why wouldn’t the same work when it comes to falling in love in the first place?”

“Assuming I agree with that,” Mateo says slowly, weighing up his words, “why don’t you want to put in the effort for Gabe?” I take a few seconds to think before I answer.

“Because of the fame,” I finally tell them. “It sounds a bit shallow, but I just know I couldn’t deal with it.”

“He seems like the kind of guy to leave all that behind for love, though.” Mateo ponders, a dreamy look on his face. “That’s so romantic.”

“I’m sure he would. It’s not really fair to ask that of him, though, is it? I would never do that.” I sip on my champagne. “So it’s better to nip this in the bud. We had some amazing

dates, but ultimately, we decided we'd rather stay friends than destroy our relationship by trying something that is bound to blow up in our faces." I take a deep breath. "He is an amazing guy, though, and whoever he ends up with is going to be a very lucky girl."

"You went on dates with him?" Liam asks shocked, and I blink at him sheepishly.

"I knew you'd react like this, so I never told you. Sorry." No, I'm not, and he knows it, judging by the pout that forms on his face.

"That's... amazingly mature." Mateo ignores Liam's outburst. "What exactly about the fame is so off-putting to you?"

"The attention. I don't want people to harass me on the street or take my picture whenever I leave the house. Don't look at me like that; this is Gabe we're talking about. The guy is insanely famous and has obsessively dedicated fans and paparazzi."

"True," Mateo says quietly.

"Is this about the Hystoria situation? Does Gabe know?" Liam leans forward, looking at me curiously.

"No, he doesn't." I shake my head. "It never came up until now. Why?"

"I think you should tell him about what these asshats did. He seems like the kind of man who would fuck shit up for you. I bet he could really stick it to them!" Liam punches the air to

emphasize his point, almost hitting the bottle of champagne on the table.

“For what reason?” My brows knit in confusion. “A scandal I’m not ready to have?” I roll my eyes. “Even though Hystoria is like some annoying side characters in my life that continue to pop up in my periphery from time to time, I’d rather forget about ever having known them altogether.”

The words need a moment to set in.

“You have a point, and I don’t like it,” Liam pouts once he’s thought them over. “I’m not giving up on you and Gabe, though. I ship it.”

“Me too,” Mateo admits, and the both of them dissolve into giggles, while I roll my eyes. “What’s your couple name? Ebe? Gave?”

“Well, the Titanic was also a ship, and look at what happened to her,” I chuckle. “I mean, if you want to ship, go set your sails and hoist the colors, as long as you stay out of it.” I shrug. “And you *will* stay out of it.”

“Oh, will I?” Liam raises his eyebrow, challenging me, but he seems to forget that I’ve been playing this game with him for years now. I have my blackmail material.

“Yes, because I still have pictures from that one Halloween where you two wanted me to put you in drag. And I am not afraid to put them into your wedding picture slideshow.”

“You wouldn’t,” Liam hisses, narrowing his eyes in mock outrage.

“Oh, yes, I would.” I glower and raise my eyebrow right back at him. “Try me, bitch.”

“Okay, okay.” He raises his hands up defensively, while Mateo looks like he’s thinking about whether it would be worth it, at least until Liam elbows him in the side.

“Alright, alright. We will stay out of it,” Mateo admits begrudgingly, his admiring eyes wandering to Liam. “Just for the record, though, you looked amazing, darling,” he assures his fiancé and plants a kiss on his lips.

“Now, can we return our attention to Henry Cavill? Please?” I try to steer the conversation to a less heavy topic and away from their PDA, because I know how quickly the latter can escalate when it comes to those two.

“I’ll grant it. For now,” Liam says solemnly, and I subtly scratch my cheek facing him with my middle finger. He laughs, and we dig back into our now-cold pizza. When we’re done, and the episode has finished, I bring our plates into my kitchen.

My life is stressful. Managing my artists and being a songwriter doesn’t leave too much room for a private life. Luckily, my job is rewarded handsomely in return. After I wrote Gabe’s third top-ten hit, I looked at my bank account and decided it was time to splurge on a house I could call my forever home. It took a few months until I found a house with all of my criteria: a garden and a large kitchen among them. Then it took several more months to have the house renovated to my liking.

Ever since then, I have been adding little details gradually to make this house my home. The decor used to be very modern and clean; however, years of adding tiny decorations, pictures, and other tiny bits and pieces I found on tours, or received from friends and family, finally made my house a place where I feel at peace. I am especially proud of the kitchen.

Even as a child, whenever I dreamed of owning my own home, I always envisioned a large kitchen with an island, so that's what I bought. I rarely get takeout, because I have all the necessary kitchenware to cook for myself. If I have a shitty day, I just throw veggies, rice, water, and spices into my rice cooker while I shower and then—boom, dinner. Today was an exception because I haven't gotten around to shopping for groceries yet.

As I admire my way-too-dirty kitchen top, I realize that I left my phone on there and it's blinking with notifications, so I grab it before I return to the living room.

“The youth of today, always on their phone,” Mateo teases me.

“At least I don't need to ask said youth to Google stuff for me.” I narrow my eyes at him, alluding to a time when he complained that he could only find his favorite protein powder online for outrageous prices. It took me all of one minute to find it far cheaper on the brand's official website, which he never bothered to check.

“Touché,” he admits, just as Liam exclaims, “Wow, buuuurn!” and I laugh.

“It’s an e-mail from Peggy,” I tell them as my eyes skip over the e-mail.

“Has she planned your murder yet?”

“I don’t think so. At least, not yet. We released the news about Mia’s break today, so I guess she must have gotten some interview requests.”

“And a bunch of management requests, from what I heard.”

“What do you mean?” I furl my eyebrows.

“What do you mean by ‘what do you mean?’ Have you asked Peggy about artists that tried to poach you yet?”

“No.” I sigh. “I only went to the office to get something. I completely forgot to ask her.”

“Oooh, then let me fill you in.” Liam seems delighted by the opportunity, and at knowing something I don’t. “When you booked Mia’s first world tour, people in the industry started wondering where this new superstar came from, especially since she’s signed with a small label like Scaena. I heard many whispers whenever Dad and I went to those fancy-schmancy charity events.” He grins. “So many whispers. The things you hear when people don’t know which label you belong to, it is amazing.” I roll my eyes.

Many people in the industry enjoy gossip; it’s what makes and breaks people. I haven’t met anyone as curious and invested into it as Liam.

“Then Gabriel became the new daydream for teenagers nationwide, and people started wondering even more. It didn’t

exactly take them long to realize that you're the common denominator. So, while you were flying out to visit Mia on her tour in Taiwan, Japan, Australia, and Europe, poor Peggy was bombarded with phone calls. Even more so after you decided to focus on Mia and dropped Gabe. People thought you had a new availability, and all but ran Scaena's doors down."

My eyes grow wide as I try to process that information. Why would people run down Scaena's doors? Nothing I'm doing is that extraordinary. I'm sure there are loads of people out there who could do an even better job than I did.

"Why didn't anyone ever tell me?" My brows knit and I'm not sure if I should be touched or angry. After all, I think that's something I should have been told at some point.

"Because it's exactly the kind of attention you didn't want and still don't. You've just said so." I grumble and sink deeper into my couch. He's right. And I'm not sure I like that. It takes a while until the reality of what he's saying sets in.

"You're right," I admit hesitantly. "Still, it's flattering to hear."

"I can imagine." Mateo laughs.

"Did they want the label to sign them, or did they try to poach me?" I grin. "What kind of pay did they offer? Come on, tell me more!"

"Nope. I knew this would go to your head. I shouldn't have told you." I throw a pillow at Liam's grinning face.

"I'm just curious. I would never leave Scaena."

“That’s perfect, because we both know Dad wants you to take over someday. The fact that I’m not interested might have gotten through his thick skull, finally.”

“The fact you started your own bakery might have been a subtle hint for him.” I laugh. “Maybe we can talk about it once I’m sick of touring. All the schmoozing and networking seems boring as fuck to me right now.”

“It doesn’t have to be, though.” Liam grins. “I know for a fact that Dad wants you to join him for some charity shit this weekend. I think it was some kind of motto party. That sounds like fun networking.” I grimace.

“That depends entirely on your definition of ‘fun’. It’s probably going to be a flock of rich people exchanging fake pleasantries and having the most superficial small talk, just waiting for you to turn around so they can talk behind your back. Besides, it will take hours for me to get ready.” I sigh. I like looking pretty, but I hate the effort and time it requires. Perks of being a woman, I guess.

“Well, it’s more fun than sitting in an office, I’m sure.” Mateo laughs. “Now, come on, tell us what the email says. Knowing Peggy, she wouldn’t have sent it at this time unless it’s either important or interesting.”

“Or entertaining,” Liam quips.

“Alright, alright.” I open the message again, this time paying more attention to its contents. “Okay, first, she curses me to the moon and back. Then, she says to not take it to heart, she still loves me, but right now she would bury me alive with a

wide grin on her face, and my screams would be music to her ears.” God, that woman is scary as hell. I shudder. “If I go missing, you know who did it. Avenge my death.” The both of them nod solemnly and I continue reading. “Next, there’s a list of artists. Apparently, all of them called and asked to be considered for future management by me. Fuck me, that list is long!” I’m looking at around forty names.

“Told you!” Liam exclaims. “Let me see!” I hand him my phone and lean back, resting my head on the back of the couch.

“Tell me if you see someone interesting,” I say dismissively and rest my eyes for a minute.

“You don’t want to know which artists are pining for you?” Mateo wonders, and I shake my head.

“Nah, not now. I have enough to do this week with some last interviews for Mia before her hiatus, and at the beginning of next week, I have a recording session with Gabe for his new album.”

“That sounds exhausting. How many songs are you giving him for the album?”

“He picked one of my songs so far and wants to collaborate on three more, if I remember correctly. My calendar says I will be at the recording studio for two days, so that seems about right.”

“Holy shit!” Liam exclaims suddenly, and Mateo and I both startle.

“What the hell, babe?” he complains, and I clutch my heart. It’s still beating at record-worthy speed.

“Yeah, Liam, what the fuck? And why are you laughing?”

“It’s just so ironic; I’m not sure whether it’s sad or funny,” he presses out between laughter, amused tears forming in his eyes. “Hystoria wants you.”

All the blood leaves my face. What? I blink, the information registering in my brain slowly.

“What?” I ask and grab my phone from Liam’s hands, needing to see that for myself. He wasn’t lying. Peggy even noted that Paxton is the one who called and asked to set up a meeting to get to know me. “No way.” I jump up and pace the living room, quickly dialling Joe’s number.

“What’s up?” he greets me, sounding cheerful as usual.

“On a scale of one to ten, how mad are you going to be when I tell you I’m going to reject Hystoria?”

“Oh, you got Peggy’s e-mail,” he laughs. “Zero, of course. We had a good chuckle about it, actually.”

“Are you sure? They’ve won Grammys and whatever other music awards are out there.”

“Of course, I’m sure.” Frustration clouds his voice. “You really need to stop doubting me, Sweetie. I told Peggy to include them as an ‘FYI’, so relax. Take some time to go over the list and see if any of the bands interest you. If not, Peggy will send out rejections on the label’s behalf.”

“You guys are angels.” I sigh in relief and wish him a good night.

“So? Is Dad going to have your head?” Liam pops his head over the back of the couch, eyeing me curiously.

“Why do you sound so hopeful?” I raise my eyebrow. “No, of course not. He told me to have a look at them tomorrow and Peggy will take over the rejections. Maybe that’s enough for her to live out her sadistic streak.”

“Good. Not that I wouldn’t have avenged you, but I don’t like getting dirt under my nails, you know the deal.” He winks at me, and I shake my head. He’s such a fiercely loyal person. “Now, get some more alcohol and let’s continue the show!” Liam shoos me to the kitchen, and I laugh as I comply and get another bottle of champagne for us.

Chapter Four

“SMILE AND WAVE, MIA. Smile, and wave,” Mia whispers to herself as security hustles the two of us through a crowd of fans. They’ve been waiting for Mia to come back out ever since we entered the television building hours ago; now, they are pushing from all sides, trying to get close to her.

Even though we have five big, muscly men shielding us from them, situations like these are stressful as hell. Once we are seated in the label’s limousine, we both take a deep breath.

“You okay?” I ask Mia and she nods, after taking a second to evaluate. “Then that’s a wrap.” I smile at her. “That was your last interview. You’re a free elf now!”

“Yeah.” Her smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m going to miss it. Not a lot. But a tiny bit. Maybe.”

“I’m going to ask you that again when I visit you in two months.” I wink. “I doubt you will say the same then.”

“Maybe.”

The ride to the label is quiet. Mia is lost in her thoughts, staring out the slightly-cracked window and letting the wind tousle her hair. I watch her from the corner of my eyes. She seems exhausted, missing the usual pep in her step and sparkle in her eyes. I hope nothing serious has happened to warrant this, and that she will use her break to actually relax for once.

“You know you can always talk to me, right?” She looks up and meets my eyes.

“Yeah, I know,” she answers quietly, and finally, a real smile slowly spreads on her face. “Thank you, Eve.”

I nod. Mia directs her gaze back to the window and I decide to use the time it takes us through rush hour traffic to answer e-mails on my laptop. Only the sound of my keyboard clacking and the occasional honking or loud music streaming in from a passing car breaks the silence.

I blow out a relieved sigh when we arrive back at the label and I see no fans gathered in front of the entrance. Maybe they didn't think that Mia had a reason to return to Scaena again before her hiatus. Mia, however, made it clear from the beginning that it would be her last stop, as she wanted to thank everyone, before she leaves. The car stops right in front of the entrance, and the same five security guards jump out of the car in front of us to lead us inside the building, and usher us inside the elevator. Mia pushes the button to Scaena's level and silence fills the iron box, only the slight hum of the elevator's engine in our ears.

"Surprise!" everyone shouts as the doors open on Scaena's level. I jump when party poppers explode on all sides, and Mia yelps in surprise, laughing when confetti and glitter rain down on the both of us. She looks around the room with glassy eyes, meeting everyone's expectant gazes.

"Thank you, everyone," she says sweetly, and looks at me. I raise my eyebrow, which is our nonverbal communication for 'Are you alright?' She sounds a bit off. But Mia nods, and I take that as my sign to take a few steps back and let her talk to everyone.

Scaena employees swarm her from all sides, like moths gravitating towards light, and the area around me becomes crowded quickly. I hurry to the side where the more introverted people stand to observe the madness from afar. It's understandable. Mia very rarely comes to the label's office or has the time to chat with everyone, so when she does, it's a highlight for those that don't work closely with her.

I catch Mia's eye and point toward my office, letting her know that's where I'll be, in case she needs me or wants to go.

"Where are you sneaking off to?" I only manage to take a few steps in that direction before a female voice chimes up behind me. I turn around with a sheepish but genuine smile, facing the tall woman. As always, her hair is gathered in a rigid bun, not one single hair out of place. Her strict aura precedes her, making the hair on my neck stand up, even though I know that she's a lovely woman at heart. Well, at least to me she is. I've seen grown men cry after she's told them off.

"Peggy! My absolute favorite co-worker of all time!" I exclaim as I walk towards her with my arms reached out for a hug.

"I'm only allowing this because I haven't seen you in months," she grumbles, but returns the hug.

"I know, I know." I sigh. "I'm sorry." She mutters something probably mean under her breath when I link my arm with hers and walk us to my office. I close the door behind us and put my laptop on the table. "And I'm really sorry about that."

“No, you’re not.” She chuckles and I nod.

“You’re right,” I admit guiltily. “Mia really needs the break, and whatever people make of that is not really my fault.” I shrug.

“Yeah, I know.” Peggy’s face relaxes and the corners of her mouth rise ever so slightly as she leans her hip against my table. “This too shall pass.”

“Exactly.” I grin. “Are that many people still calling about Mia?” I wonder as I take off my jacket and hang it on the hook next to the door. To my surprise, I hear Peggy laugh hysterically behind me.

“You think this is about Mia?” She cackles. “Sweet child, today I had at least thirty calls asking for you.”

“Really?” I lean against my desk, pausing to gather my thoughts. “I thought Liam was lying when he said you’re getting so many inquiries about me. But that’s... kind of cool?” A shy grin sneaks on my face. “Just. Wow. Can’t we add an automated message to our system to ask callers to write emails instead? I could deal with those, so you don’t have to.”

“No. Our phone system is far too old for that.”

“Of course it is.” I roll my eyes. “Can we set up a new number with a mailbox? Let them leave their contact data.”

“Oh. That could work,” she says pensively. “I will ask Joe and IT about that. What about the list I sent you? Anyone interesting on there?”

“Not really,” I admit and open my calendar book. Yes, I am one of those people that likes to track appointments in a handwritten book, in addition to my phone calendar, just so I can add some notes and to-dos. “At least nothing that caught my eye. I’m also kind of swamped with post-tour work right now, so the earliest I have time to do artist research is next week.”

“You could always take Gabe back,” Peggy points out, but I shake my head.

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea. He’s finally gotten into a good rhythm with Henry, and I’m still consulting for them anyway, so it’s not like I’m completely out of the loop. I think I’m ready for some fresh blood, but research is going to take time with the number of applications.” I sigh. “Gabe and Mia really made it easy for me back then. Minimal research, and then I just walked into one of their shows. By the end of the evening, I had their signature.”

“And look where they are now,” she says wistfully. “On top of the charts and America’s hearts. You did well. I’m sure Joe would let you try that approach again.”

“Maybe. I’ll see if someone from your list catches my eye and ear. If not, I’ll try my approach again.” I wink and Peggy chuckles.

“I don’t think Joe will care either way. Now, enough chitter chatter. I’m going to get some pizza.” She opens the door and peeks around the corner. “Looks like the crowd has dissipated. Are you coming along?”

“Sure.” I link my arm with hers again and we walk down the hallway, joking about who Scaena’s next star is going to be. The kitchen area is a lot less crowded than before, but there is still a group standing around Mia. Like lemmings, they hang onto her every word as she shares some anecdotes from the tour.

My stomach grumbles embarrassingly loud when my eyes land on the food. Quickly, I grab a plate and throw three pieces of pizza on it before I make my way through the crowd and hand it to Mia. As much as my tummy grumbles, the star comes first. Without missing a beat, she gives me a grateful smile and then continues her conversation with Sarah from our marketing department. I hurry out of the crowd again and finally get a plate full of pizza for myself.

“There you are.” I turn to the all-too-familiar, warm, male voice and look at Gabe.

“Gabe. It’s been a while.” I smile and step into the hug he offers. I can almost feel Liam and Mateo’s stares on the back of my head from the other side of the room as Gabe embraces me quickly but wholeheartedly.

Without wearing high heels, I only reach up to his sternum, so I need to look way up to see the gentle smile on his face. His wild, blonde hair is tousled, like it always is, and his tan makes his blue eyes pop.

“It’s so good to see you, but I’m really damn hungry,” I say when he releases me and his booming laughter catches the

attention of everyone in the room, just as I finally bite into the cheesy goodness.

“It’s good to see you too,” he says with a warm chuckle, then reaches behind me to get himself a plate. His sudden closeness takes me by surprise, and I inhale sharply. As always, he smells amazing, not of artificial aftershaves or perfumes—his natural scent is intoxicating enough as is. It’s a mild, earthy scent, like a walk through a forest after a light spring rain. He leans back again, and I blink, willing my mind to get back to reality. When I look up at him, he winks at me, knowing very well what he is doing. Damn him.

He enjoys messing with me. I can never quite tell if it’s all in good fun, or if it’s his way of wearing me down until I agree to give him a fair chance. Moments like this make me wonder. It’s one of the reasons I don’t need Liam and Mateo walking around with their shipping nonsense.

“Henry wanted to talk to me, but I will be back soon. We need to catch up. Don’t run,” he says with a mischievous smirk, before heading off to Henry’s office with his pizza-filled plate. I don’t even notice how long I am looking after him until Liam’s gentle nudge yanks me back to reality.

“That was hot,” he says, one of his eyebrows raised suggestively and almost vanishing in his hairline. Instead of answering, I take a bite of my pizza and chew it slowly. I then grab a napkin and make my way to the far side of the room, Liam following closely behind me like an obedient puppy.

“Seriously, you could cut that tension between you two with a knife,” he teases, still trying to pry a reaction from me.

“I know,” I say simply and shrug, not willing to give him the satisfaction of admitting how it bothers me.

“I always forget how sexy he is up close.” I nod. There is no use denying that. He has the model face, with sharp cheekbones, dimples in his cheek when he smiles, the body of a roman statue paired with the voice of a siren, and the patience of an angel.

“And that doesn’t change a thing for you?” I glare at him.

“This is not ‘staying out of it,’ Liam. Knock it off.”

“I’m just curious.”

“And I’m not talking about this anymore,” I say firmly and bite into my pizza.

“Okay, okay. Message received.” He pouts and throws his hands up defensively. “It’s not why I came over anyway.” The look I am giving him makes him fidget; suspicion must be dripping from my expression. “Well, it’s only part of why I came over here. How are you doing?”

“I’m okay.”

“It must be weird with Mia leaving.”

“I’m telling myself it’s not forever,” I let him know. “It’s just a break, not a goodbye. Granted, it’s an indefinite break, but I’m pretty confident that she will come back to Scaena sooner

or later. And even if she doesn't, that's life. We will stay friends anyway, and that's what is most important to me."

"That's surprisingly mature." He throws my words from the start of the week back at me.

"I don't understand why Mateo and you keep saying that. I'm very mature!" I stick out my tongue, causing the two of us to chuckle. "But yes, I am going to miss her, and I am sure the first few weeks will suck."

"I know, for me too," Mia's tiny voice sounds from behind me, and I jump. Liam grins and I want to wipe the smile right off his face. That meanie saw her standing behind me.

"Giving me a heart attack is nothing to smile about!" I complain and turn to Mia, who looks crestfallen.

"I'm going to miss you too," she says miserably and holds up her hand. "Pinky promise that we will message lots?" I link my pinky finger with hers.

"I promise. And mark the first week in November in your calendar, because I will come to visit you." A grateful smile spreads across her face slowly, and she takes out her phone to do just that. Soon, more Scaena employees come over and ask her to sign merchandise, or plain sheets of paper for their friends and families, or to take a picture with her. The frown from the car is gone from her face, and she seems truly delighted to get to know everyone who is a part of her and the label's success.

“So, I’m back.” Gabe suddenly appears between Liam and me and slides his arm around my shoulders. “Hey, Liam, what’s new?”

Liam holds up his bejewelled hand. After an appropriate amount of admiration from Gabe, he excuses himself and returns to his fiancé. Mateo appears to be in a heated conversation with Victoria from our booking department. I think she is the only Italian in our office team, and both of their hands are flying through the air passionately as their discussion grows more intense and they gesture to get their point across. I wonder what they’re talking about. Probably something ordinary, like the weather.

“So, your brother is engaged,” Gabe teases, wiggling his eyebrows playfully. “Is Rose already stressing you to follow in his footsteps?”

I let out a short laugh. “She wouldn’t dare.” I roll my eyes. “Funnily enough, it’s Liam who is on my ass to go out and date. And apparently, he ships us.”

“What a coincidence, I ship us too.” Gabe winks and I shake my head in amusement. “Just kidding. I like what we have,” he quickly pedals back. “It has been a while since we hung out, though.” I hear a slight tinge of rebuke in his voice and nod. He’s right.

“I’m really sorry about that.” I lean against him, and his arm tightens around my shoulders. “My schedule should be calming down after next week.”

“Are you sure?”

“I hope so. We have our recording session at the beginning of next week, but after that, I will take some time to have a look at artist applications. I need to discover whether Mia and you were lucky picks, or if I have amazing foresight. I will take my time with them, which means less traveling for the time being. For the foreseeable future, I will have a very boring nine-to-five job.”

“You could always take me on again. I’m sure Henry would buy you flowers and bring you coffee for a year if you took me off his hands.”

“You mean like I did when he agreed to take you on?” I grin cheekily and he pinches my arm. “Ouch!”

“Don’t be a baby. You’ve hurt my ego.”

“You will survive.” I grin. “On a serious note, you know I love working with you, right?” He nods. “Good. But I think you are old enough to know this now: if we spent as much time together as we did when I was still your manager, I would strangle you.” He bursts into a booming laughter. “I’m serious. You were so young and sweet back then. Now you’re—” I make a gesture at him. “This.”

“Confident? Sexy? Sassy?”

“Full of yourself,” I joke. “This combo would not work today.”

“You’re right.” He wipes an imaginary tear from his eye, and I hope acting doesn’t become one of his new show business-

ventures. “You became a lot bossier and I became much sexier. It’s a bad combo.”

“Exactly.” I grin. “By the way, please tell me you are at the charity thing on Saturday?”

“I think so. You mean the one from Headlight Music?” He takes out his phone to check.

“Yeah, that’s the one. What was it about again?”

“It’s for Wishing Well, I believe, a foundation for sick children. Henry told me there is also a motto, but I forgot what it was.”

“Joe forwarded me an email and it says to dress appropriately for a ball.” Gabe makes vomiting sounds. “Oh, come on, it could have been a worse theme.”

“Like what?”

“Like... uniforms. Latex. Victorian. Don’t complain, the motto is easy for you. All you need to do is put on clothes that are only slightly stiffer than your usual attire. I need to grovel and ask Peggy to find me a proper dress on super-short notice because I forgot.”

“I already got you one. It’s in Joe’s office.” Peggy suddenly appears next to Gabe, and I startle, yet again.

“What the hell is going on today? I swear, I’m going to have a heart attack.” I clutch my chest but manage to smile at Peggy. “Thank you, Peggy. What would I do without you?”

“Well, you’d look out of place at the charity ball, for one. Your appointment at the salon is at two on Saturday. Don’t be late or Yuki will have my, and your, head. You know her.”

Yuki is the wonderful woman who always does my hair and makeup for any label-related events. After two failed attempts at finding someone to deal with our sometimes-demanding schedule, Yuki has become the go-to stylist for Mia and me. I assure Peggy that I will be on time, mainly because Yuki scares me, and just like that, she disappears into the crowd again.

“Seriously, am I that inattentive, or are people sneaking up on me today?” I ask. Gabe’s arm shakes around my shoulders as he tries to suppress his laughter. His warmth is comforting; his arm around me feels like a blanket protecting me from the world outside our two-person-bubble. And he has the perfect height to lean against.

“Maybe a bit of both,” he admits and pulls me a bit closer. “Don’t worry. I will protect you from all those bad people trying to scare you.”

I close my eyes and take in the moment for a bit. Life could be so comfortable if I’d let myself fall for him.



Finally, the party dies down. Everyone packs their signed merchandise and leftover food before they extend their well wishes to Mia and leave. The timing is perfect, because her

flight departs in four hours, and we still need to get to the airport. Gabe hugs me goodbye, and we make plans to hang out during, and after, the charity ball.

“Time to go,” I let Mia know, and she waves goodbye to everyone remaining, before she hurries over to Joe. She hugs him goodbye and while I can hear their murmuring voices over the sound of everyone leaving, I can’t quite make out what they are saying.

The way to the airport is just as quiet as the car ride to Scaena. Mia’s eyes are firmly planted on the window, but I can still see her fighting tears. When the car pulls onto the highway, I can’t keep quiet anymore.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, worry dripping from my voice.

“Yeah.” She doesn’t turn her head, and I can only barely hear her voice over the loud car.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” She wipes her face. “It has been a while since I had to do things alone. Since I’ve been on my own. It scares me, but I think you’re right. I need this.” She laughs shakily. “There is Wi-Fi though, right, at this cabin?”

“Yes, of course. How else would I be able to stay in contact with you?” Mia seems to relax a bit at that. “And you’re not alone. I’m just a short plane ride or call away.”

“Thank you.” She sighs and finally looks at me. “I’m not sure if I have ever told you that. Thank you for giving your best for me and for supporting me. Without you, fame would

have been so much scarier, and I am really, really thankful that I always count on having you in my corner, as a friend and as my manager. Especially in a business as backstabbing and fake as the entertainment business, it means more than I can express.” Tears are welling up in my eyes and I take her hand in mine, squeezing it gently.

“Thank you, too,” I finally say, my voice cracking. “You took a chance on me, too, and let me find my way in this business. It was, and still is, trial and error for both of us, and I am happy that you are the one I get to try, fail, and win with.” The dam breaks and the two of us start sobbing. Mia unfastens her seatbelt and scoots closer, throwing her arms around me as the car leaves the highway.

“God, look at us. Crying because we won’t see each other for a few weeks.” I sob and laugh at the same time.

“I know.” Mia wipes the tears from her face. “To our first step out of co-dependency.”

“To our first step,” I agree with a grin and raise an imaginary glass to toast to that.

“Keep me updated on everything,” Mia says as our driver securely parks the car right at the airport entrance.

“Of course,” I assure her. “You too. I want to know everything. And if you just want to talk, I am always just a phone call away.”

“Same.” She smiles and we share one last tight hug.

“Have a good vacation. Love you.”

“Love you too,” Mia says and puts on her sunglasses and sweatshirt with a huge hood to hide her face. She hops out of the car and takes her luggage out of our driver’s hands.

I wave at her as she disappears into the airport with two guys from our security company until she is out of sight. Then I sink back into my seat and take a deep breath, replaying what my therapist said, over and over: “Change is not always bad.”

Chapter Five

“ET VOILA!” YUKI EXCLAIMS and spins my chair to face the mirror. As always, when she works her magic on me, I’m stunned, fighting the urge to touch my face and hair to confirm it’s real.

Yuki is a petite Asian woman in her fifties, who usually rocks a very neat hairdo and little to no makeup. By looking at her, you would never know how much talent she has, that her eye for color and style simmers just below her inconspicuous surface.

I’m convinced her talent is wasted on people like me; she should be dressing celebrities for red carpet events or actresses for movies. I asked her about it once, and she shared with me that she’s not a fan of celebrities in general and prefers to work with the people behind the curtains. It gives her the best of both worlds: getting recognition while remaining drama-free and keeping her salon out of the attention of the paparazzi.

“You outdid yourself this time, Yuki,” I tell her, and she pats my shoulders lovingly. My long, blonde hair is curled and gathered in a relaxed updo, giving me a soft and almost angel-like look. Before styling, she put more highlights into my hair, making it appear more voluminous and full. My face looks flawless, yet natural. My skin is glowing, thanks to the subtle highlighter on my cheekbones, and my blue eyes pop, thanks to the subtle, darker shades of eyeshadow she used on them. I look amazing.

“I had a good model to work with,” she grants me one of her rare compliments. “Did you bring your dress?” I nod. “Then

head on back and slip into it. Peggy told me she'd send a car to pick you up at five." She checks the watch on her wrist. "Which is in about ten minutes."

"I'll hurry," I promise her and grab the garment bag as I head to the back of the store. The first time she told me to put a dress on in the back, I expected to be changing in some office. But alas, it's Yuki. In hindsight, of course she would have a proper changing room back there. I pull the curtain closed behind me and hang the garment bag onto a hook before I undo the zipper on it. I've seen the colors of the dress when I peeked into the bag at the office earlier today, but nothing could have prepared me for the look of the full dress.

"Wow." I whistle and take a step back to admire it.

The dress is a pale blue, with a corset bodice and a sheer layer, adorned with beautiful embroidered flowers. I bet even my tiny boobs will look amazing in it. Even more flowers embellish the corset at the hip as they merge into the skirt in a beautiful curve. The skirt is made of tulle, however, not in a fluffy, princess, dream-sized diameter kind of way, but elegantly flowing to the ground.

But my personal highlight: it has long sleeves, made from the same tulle as the skirt. They are sheer as well, and also decorated with embroidered flowers. The shimmering petals tie the whole dress together beautifully. My colorful tattoos will be visible but muted by the dress. Which is fine with me. In fact, I prefer it. I've never liked my upper arms and while

wearing sleeveless dresses is not the end of the world, I feel a lot more comfortable with them.

I hurriedly change into the dress. When it comes to closing the zipper on the back, I pop my head out of the changing room and ask Yuki to help me.

She whistles when she sees the dress in full. “Peggy outdid herself this time too.”

I nod and suck in my breath as she zips up the dress. When I saw the corset, I got a bit worried about my ability to breathe throughout the evening. But while putting it on, I realized that the fabric is stretchy and only made to look like a corset. Thank God.

“I was expecting the worst, considering.” I grin. Of course, over the five hours it took to bleach my hair, paint my face, and suffocate me with hairspray, I filled her in about everything that’s going on at the label. At least, the stuff I can disclose.

“I think she got her revenge.” Yuki points at the shoes on the bottom of the garment bag. “Those are going to be killer.”

“Oh, damn her.” I sigh and take them out. “They are beautiful, though.”

They are platform high heels, and I just know that wearing them will hurt after one hour, tops. However, they look like they were made for this dress. The base color is the same as the skirt’s tulle, and they are embellished with not quite the

same, but very similar-looking small flowers. They are beautiful. “Good thing I brought some black flats.”

“It’s a sin to wear flats with a dress like this,” Yuki scolds me as I put on the first high heel.

“It’s better than walking around the premises like a new-born fawn or barefoot. The dress is too long for anyone to see my shoes, anyway.” I laugh and put on the second shoe. After shuffling a bit, I am satisfied with how they fit, and take a matching handbag out of the garment bag.

I laugh when I open it up and see a bundle of accessories in there. “It’s like Mary Poppins’ bag.” I grin and quickly change my earrings and piercings, putting in the small diamond studs. Then I slip on the subtle fitting necklace and wristband. They are only one thin strap with the tiniest of pendants.

“Alright, how do I look?” I turn for Yuki and almost stumble, thanks to the too-high heels. Yuki lets her eyes wander over me and nods approvingly.

“You look good. Now, pack your things and get out of here; the car already arrived before I got in here.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” I hastily throw all my clothes into the now-empty garment bag, before putting my phone and keys into the handbag. I kiss the air next to Yuki’s cheek so as to not smudge my makeup and hurry outside, knowing that she will charge herself a proper tip to the company card on file.



The car stops in front of a house that looks like an old French estate. Its stone facade is adorned with statues, sculptures, and intricate embellishments, with grand windows, lined by artfully carved stone arches, matching the doorframes. As the car slowly drives closer, I realize that most of the statues are of naked or barely clothed people. How tasteful. A small grin plays at my lips.

Finally, the car comes to a stop. The driver opens the door for me and I give him a tip, before trying to get out of the car without ripping the beautiful dress. As my feet hit the ground, I grimace. The entire way up to the door, the ground is paved with cobblestones. Who thought that was a good idea for a black tie and high-heel event?

Thankfully, my dress's train is short enough that I'm not tripping over its seam, but I fear the shoes are going to provide a challenge this evening. Julian, my driver, sees me struggle and jumps out of the car to lend me a helping arm and I shoot him a thankful glance. I clutch onto him as he leads me to a more even patch closer to the entrance, my eyes firmly on the ground to make out where I can step next. This is what cliff climbing is like in the horizontal.

Finally, I look up, letting my eyes wander over the scene in front of me. Women in beautiful dresses, accompanied by men in elegant suits, scurry around, their chattering causing an excited buzz in the warm evening air. My eyes come to a stop when I see Joe and Rose standing to the side. I hope they're waiting for me. I can't imagine anything worse than stumbling in there by myself and trying to socialize with strangers.

“Thank you, Julian.” I smile at him gratefully before he hurries back to move the car and make space for the car behind him to drop people off. I’ll have to get him some pastries next time as a thank you.

I make my way over to Rose and Joe as fast as my shoes let me. Rose does a double take when she spots me, then waves me over excitedly.

“You look great, sweetheart.” She smiles and motions for me to turn around. I oblige and lift the tulle a bit as I twirl, so it flows more beautifully.

“Thanks, Rose.” I feel myself blush. I hug both of them, when a woman with a huge, neon pink gown walks by us.

“Goodness.” Rose’s eyes grow big, and I cover my mouth with my hand. It looks atrocious. Our eyes follow the eyesore until it’s out of our sight.

“Now, let’s get this over with.” She sighs. I grin and link my arm with hers.

“Don’t be *too* enthusiastic, dear.” Joe chuckles and takes Rose’s hand. Together, we enter the pompous mansion, and with each step, more and more stunning details come into sight. Colorful flowers are stacked in beautiful vases everywhere and assault us with their sweet scent. Candles light the hallway, statues casting flickering shadows against the white walls. The sound of my heels on the marble floor echoes against high walls, decorated with paintings, each one more breath-taking than the next. They seem familiar. Maybe I’ve seen them in my history books back in high school.

“Richard Brooks is our host for today,” Joe whispers, his eyes taking in the interior and his voice laced with awe. “Billionaire-heir. He had this house built with Versailles as inspiration.”

I let out a low whistle. “That’s amazing.” Rose nods. She comes to a halt, taking a moment to observe the painting to our right more thoroughly.

“And you haven’t even seen the garden yet,” Joe adds. “I hear it’s enormous. Apparently, there’s a maze and fountains.”

“I can’t wait to see it.”

“Take Gabe with you,” Rose interjects, sounding concerned. I look at her, confused. Did Liam put any ideas into her head? “Don’t look at me like that. I heard the gardens are very dark, and I think it would be safer if you had a man with you.” She rolls her eyes and chuckles. “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Sorry, sorry.” A sheepish grin spreads across my face. “Yes, I will make sure to go into the dark garden with Gabe because that would not cause any rumors, whatsoever,” I joke.

“Perfect,” she replies with a grin of her own.

“A scandal is just good publicity,” Joe adds with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “I think you should take one for the team.”

“Well, I think I took a lot for the team already.” I laugh. Waiters pass by us with trays full of champagne glasses, and I grab one for myself before I change the topic. “Anything, or anyone else, I should know?”

“Don’t worry, we’ll make a round and introduce you first,” Rose assures me, and my shoulders sag in relief. To my knowledge, the only person I know at this event is going to be Gabe. I assume that I’ve seen, and even met, a lot of the people here in passing, but I am horrible at remembering names and faces. I meet too many people at these events and I’m not looking forward to another awkward conversation where I pretend to know the person I’m talking to.

“Let’s start by saying hello to our host,” Joe suggests, and Rose and I follow him as he leads the way.

Richard Brooks is a man in his fifties that exudes wealth. Everything about him screams money: the way he carries himself, the way he gestures, and the nasal tone of his voice. You just know that man was born into privilege; even though he might seem normal at first glance, his confidence and charm reveal his heritage.

He greets us with a friendly smile and pleasant conversation. Joe thanks him for the invitation.

“Of course, I am so glad to have you here. Enjoy yourselves, and of course, don’t forget to donate!” Joe shakes his hand and promises to do just that. “The buffet is already open if you’re thinking of taking advantage of that.” Rose and I discreetly share a look. There *are* worse things than spending an evening in a beautiful villa, drinking champagne, and stuffing my face with fancy buffet food.

“Come to think of it, I am pretty hungry,” I tell Rose and she chortles.

“Sitting in a hairdresser chair all day must have been so exhausting,” she jokes, and I stick out my tongue at her just as my stomach starts to grumble. “I’m hungry too, though; let’s see if we can find the buffet.”

“Thank God,” I joke, and we follow Joe, who seems to know the way. Unfortunately, too many people stop us in our effort to find food. Joe never fails to introduce people to me, as he promised, and I engage in a bit of small talk with them until it’s socially acceptable to excuse myself.

Usually, all it takes is smiling and asking people what they do. Especially the men, who love to go on a tangent about their jobs and companies, which, sooner or later, leads to boasting about their wealth, which means I don’t need to add much to the conversation except for a smile and asking a pointed question occasionally.

“As much as you hate these networking events, you’re extremely good at them,” Rose compliments me in a quiet moment. “You should have brought more business cards.”

“Why? I don’t need more business.” I shrug and flip through the stack of cards I have been handed. So far, I’m unimpressed. Nobody struck me as a useful contact for the future. I keep some cards from journalists that have expressed their desire to interview me for business magazines. The rest I discreetly stick into one of the giant vases that are placed all over the event space.

“Eve!” Rose scolds me, and I grin at her cheekily.

“Where else would I put them? Do you see a trashcan?” She shakes her head disapprovingly, realizing I’m right. “Nobody will notice,” I promise her, but she still pulls me away. “These events are much more fun when you’re here too; usually, I would already have at least six offers for sleepovers by the time I am two hours into an event.”

“No!” She gasps and stops in her tracks. “At networking events? Who do they think you are?”

“Someone’s arm candy,” I shrug, trying to downplay the situation. If I’m honest with myself, it annoys me to no end. If I don’t try to see the fun side of it, it’s going to make me angry and frustrated, so I tend to laugh it off. “Their expression when I introduce myself and they realize who I am, makes it almost worth it.”

“Well, you still shouldn’t be used to it.” She looks somewhere behind me and waves, the stern expression remaining on her face. “Don’t you agree, Gabe?”

“Absolutely,” he says with conviction and greets Rose by kissing her on both cheeks. We exchange a quick hug before he addresses her again. “What am I agreeing to?”

“That it’s tasteless to proposition people at networking events.”

“Yep, wholeheartedly agree. Why, did someone try to steal you from your husband?”

“Such a charmer.” I can see red creeping into Rose’s cheeks under her makeup. “No, Eve just told me she’s been

propositioned at these kinds of events before.” Gabe’s head slowly turns until he looks at me, concern and anger clouding his beautiful eyes. I find myself shrinking under his piercing stare.

“That’s unacceptable,” he snarls, his voice dripping with anger. “Who was it?”

“It’s okay, I can handle it.”

“I don’t care if you can handle it,” he retorts sharply. “You shouldn’t have to. Tell me, who was it?”

“It doesn’t matter, Gabe. Let’s just forget about it.”

“No, it does matter. No one is allowed to mess with you.”

“I’m a woman in a male-dominated business, Gabe. It would be easier to ask who hasn’t made suggestive comments.” I shrug, as a memory runs through my head and makes me grin. “Did you ever wonder why we built our own marketing department instead of working with the marketing firm for your first album?”

“Now that you say it...”

I continue, a mischievous glint in my eye. “The CEO was one of those sleazebags. You should have seen his face when I walked into the meeting room to inform him that we would not be moving forward with any business.” I laugh. “It was amazing. I think he was about to ask me to get him a coffee when I cut him off to start the meeting. His eyes grew wider and wider when he realized who I was and what I was about to do. Good times.”

“So that was the reason.” He ponders. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It never seemed worth mentioning. I deal with this kind of treatment far too often. What would change if I told you every time?” Gabe narrows his eyes, his lips pressed together in a tight line. Just then, Joe swoops in and extends his hand toward Rose, dissolving the tension building around us.

“May I have this dance, beautiful woman?” he asks her with a cheeky grin. Rose giggles and of course takes his hand, letting him lead her onto the dance floor.

“I didn’t even know they can dance,” I say as I watch them swirl about the room in what I assume to be a waltz.

“I still want to know when shit like that happens to you,” Gabe says determinedly. “And I’m sticking by your side today. No way in hell anyone will talk to you that way today.”

“I can imagine a worse fate,” I say with a playful wink. “Now, can we please get food? I can’t believe Rose got herself distracted. We’ve been trying to get to the buffet for the last hour.”

“What’s been stopping you?”

“Small talk.” I wrinkle my nose in distaste. He breaks into laughter and places his hand on the small of my back to guide me to the next room where, finally, we find food. Who knew it was this close?

“Holy shit,” I whisper, my eyes brightening with delight. “They have a chocolate fountain!” I rush towards it with Gabe

following right behind me.

“Are we skipping the main course?” he asks with a chuckle.

“I mean, you don’t have to. I just think eating dessert after the main course is an incredibly old-fashioned way of approaching things.” I shrug and grab a plate.

“I can’t argue with that.” Gabe chuckles and takes a plate as well. We fill it with all kinds of fruits before each of us grabs a small bowl. We fill it to the brim with chocolate and I pray that I won’t spill any of it on my dress as we walk around slowly to find a spot to eat.

“Let’s go to the garden,” I suggest. “Joe said it was stunning and I’m sure we can find a more peaceful place to sit.” I almost need to shout so he can hear me over the loud chatter that echoes against the high walls and ceiling.

“Sounds like a plan. Follow me.” I nod eagerly and he leads the way, guiding me through several rooms until we approach a double-winged door. He holds it open for me and I step into the refreshing night air.

Gabe closes the door behind us, and suddenly, all of the chatter inside is muffled. A comfortable silence falls around us and I take a deep breath. It’s dark, so I can’t see too much, but it smells like flowers and summer and the tiniest hint of chocolate from our bowls. Gabe keeps on walking, and I curse when I hear pebbles crunch over his steps.

“Give me that for a second.” He takes the plate from my hands and sets it on the wide balcony railing made from stone,

together with his. Then he gets on his knee in front of me and I hold onto his head as he helps me out of my shoes.

“Where are your spares?” I take the black flats out of my bag and hand them to him.

His hands palm my thigh as he takes my shoe off, then sets my foot on his thigh until I can slip into the comfortable slipper. Then he does the same with my other foot, making sure I’m able to keep my balance.

Meanwhile, I’m having the biggest Cinderella moment and I’m blushing violently. Good thing Gabe’s more fixated on my shoes than my face.

“How can you even walk in these?” Gabe grumbles as he gets up and clamps my high heels under his arm.

“Determination and pain,” I reveal and grab both of our plates. He takes his own out of my hand again swiftly and starts walking fast; I almost need to jog to keep up with him.

He leads me past several bushes that must be hiding fountains. I can’t see them, but I hear the gentle platter of water and smell its faint, earthy, and slightly metallic hint. Finally, he stops at a small pond, pointing to a bank to our right. I didn’t realize it was there, but now I can see its outline in the moonlight.

I groan in pleasure as I take the first bite of chocolate-covered fruit. The chocolate is rich and smooth, coating the inside of my mouth.

“This is amazing!” I whisper and close my eyes to really focus on the taste. Gabe clears his throat and when I look at him, he fidgets and doesn’t look me in the eyes. I shake my head.

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” I playfully punch his arm and he licks his lips suggestively to mess with me. We put our plates between us to share and try fruits from each other’s plates.

“Strawberries are the winner,” Gabe announces and plops another one of the chocolate-covered fruits into his mouth.

“I agree,” I say. “The citrusy ones taste weird with chocolate. But at least now we know that first-hand.”

“Look at us, proper scientists.” We both reach for the last strawberry at the same time. I still. Then I look up and meet his eyes, my heart thumping in my chest as he holds my gaze, looking at me with intent. His face comes closer and closer, and my eyes grow wider with each centimetre.

“Nope,” I say quickly and retract my hand, my eyes narrowing as I glare at him. “I love you, but I am *not* having a romantic moment with you.”

“Shame. I would have shared.” He winks and dunks the fruit into the leftover chocolate, then pops it in his mouth mercilessly. That’s when I realize it.

“Oh, you traitor!” I playfully jostle his arm and he laughs. It was just a ploy to get the last strawberry. “I can’t believe you would do that to me!” I whine.

“Relax, we can just grab some more,” he promises and puts our empty plates on the grassy ground at our feet. “Not now though. I’m enjoying the quiet out here.”

“I agree.” I lean my head back to look at the night sky. Clouds cover it, but I can see some stars blinking and the full moon peeking out behind a cloudy veil.

“Can I tell you something?” Gabe asks after a few moments of comfortable silence.

“Of course. Always,” I assure him, tilting my head to meet his gaze.

“I have been thinking.” He takes a deep breath. “Maybe I want to take a break too.”

I blink.

“Maybe?” I ask softly, my mind racing. “Is everything alright?” I reach for his hand and take it in both of mine, letting my thumb draw reassuring patterns over its back.

“Yeah, maybe.” Another deep breath. “I feel... lonely,” he admits, sadness tainting his voice. “Not in an ‘I’m all alone in the world’ sense, but I want what Rose and Joe have. I want my... person. But, as long as paparazzi and stalkers are constantly hounding me, I feel like I can’t even start looking for that person.”

Gabe gives me a pointed look and I gulp, feeling a bit guilty. “Relax. I still like being your friend. This is not about running from fame to court you,” he assures me. “I just feel like I need some time to figure myself out. I’ve grown so much since you

found me and I need to find out more about who I am now, what I want from life, and what I want from my career. I also don't mean I need the break in the next few months. I know that would be rough on Scaena with Mia gone too. But maybe, after she returns, we can revisit this conversation?"

"Of course," I assure him. "And you're sure everything is okay? Henry is not overworking you?"

"Yeah, of course." He sighs and his gaze meets mine. "I'm fine. Mostly. All in all, I'm content. You know I love my job. I have amazing friends and my fans. I'm not burnt out or anything like that. If I'm ever not okay, you are the first person I would tell. It's only come up recently, I haven't put much thought into it as of yet. Tonight just solidified a thought I've already played with."

"Oh. Why?"

"Something about Liam being engaged and the way Rose and Joe looked at each other as they danced... just made me want to have someone too. I've thought about it before but put the topic on the back burner. From here on out, I think I want to make it more of a priority," he thinks aloud. Then he stretches quickly and jumps up. "But who knows? Maybe my future wife is just around the corner."

"I am sure you will find someone amazing." I pat his arm reassuringly. "You are the nicest, most thoughtful guy I know. And you deserve someone just as awesome."

"Promise me you will bring me to my senses if I turn up with a bitch or gold digger?"

“I will do my best!” I promise and think for a second. “Liam will probably even help me.”

“Yes, he will.”

I laugh. I can't help but picture Liam fighting with a five-four model with fake boobs and eyelashes. If it ever comes to that, I need to make sure I have a camera within reach.

“Now, how about we go and check what else the buffet has to offer? I heard rumors that the menu changes throughout the evening,” Gabe suggests, and I stand up to adjust my dress, pleasantly surprised that no food landed on it.

“That sounds like a solid plan.” I smile and he grabs our plates. “You need to lead the way back too though; I didn't pay attention to it.”

“Too distracted by my ass?” he teases and wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

“Oh yeah.” I slap it playfully. “Scaena's ass. Let's see if we can feed into some rumors, coming out of the dark bushes together.” He stops and turns around, barely able to hide a grin. I can almost see the immature laughter bubbling up in him.

“Yeah, I know how that sounds. Don't say anything.” I hide my red face behind my hands. Gabe cackles and starts walking.

Meanwhile, my thoughts are still circling our conversation from earlier. The friend in me wants him to leave the situation alone. Who knows, maybe he will find somebody amazing on

his own? But the manager personality in me wants to plan and organize blind dates to set him up with someone nice. Which I know he would not appreciate, especially not from me.

I have to check in on him more often. I really neglected any kind of communication on tour, which isn't cool of me. Now that I'm back, I will keep an eye on him and do better to listen to his struggles whenever he needs to vent.

Chapter Six

GABE AND I STEP onto the balcony. Muffled music rings through the closed glass door as dancers step and sway in harmony in what I can only assume is a waltz. I purse my lips. It looks tranquil, yet like my personal hell. Gabe chuckles and extends his hand.

“Come on, give me the plates. I’ll get us a bit of everything and come back here.”

“My hero.” I hand them over with a relieved smile. He winks mischievously before he disappears inside. Meanwhile, I turn my back to the door and step to the railing, looking down at the garden. The moon casts a silver glow over the water fountains below, their gentle splashing blending with the chirps of cicadas, the music behind me only a gentle, distant hum.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, slowly filling my lungs with the late summer air as one of my fake lashes tickles the skin just below my eye.

As much as I am advocating for breaks when it comes to my artists, I have become irresponsible at taking them myself. Mia’s departure has thrown my schedule off kilter. Normally, I follow tours with at least a week of vacation for the artist so they can recoup and rest. For whatever reason, I failed to take that week myself. Now, I’m exhausted. Not only from work, but from constantly having to put on a professional face.

A rustling behind me jolts me back to reality. My eyes fly open as the music from inside becomes louder, just for a moment, before the balcony door closes again.

“That was fast,” I murmur and rub the inner corner of my eye, careful not to smudge any of my makeup. I turn around, expecting to face Gabe with our plates and hopefully some more food, but instead I’m faced with the unwelcome sight of four faces that used to be familiar to me.

“The hell?” I mutter to myself. The air crackles with tension and my heart throbs painfully in my chest as a flood of memories threatens to overwhelm me. I take a deep breath, determined not to show them how their sudden appearance rattles me.

“Are you Evelyn from Scaena?” Paxton asks, his eyebrow raised as he lazily looks me up and down. My tongue suddenly feels heavy and words are running through my head at lightning speed.

I cross my arms in front of my chest and nod curtly. All these years, I’ve managed to dodge them at industry events. It’s one of the few stipulations I gave Joe when it came to attending these affairs: only if Hystoria won’t be there. Yet, here they are, ruining my mood.

Gathering my confidence, I muster them back just as lazily, and exuding what I hope is an arrogance to match Paxton’s. They’ve grown up. Obviously, they have, but it’s the first thing I notice. I wish I was still wearing my high heels—the four of them tower over me. I gulp when my eyes rest on Cole, and quickly redirect my gaze. Looking at him hurts the most.

It feels unreal to see them after all these years. Their faces are the same... yet different. Sharper. Edgier. More defined.

Jake and Si even sport a beard, the same boys who couldn't grow a scruff for the life of them. They are strangers, yet familiar, and I wonder if they even realize that.

“We heard you're looking for a new artist.” Paxton steps closer and comes to a stop only a few feet away from me, forcing me to lean my head way back in order hold his gaze steadily. Jake, Simon, and Cole stay back. “Sign us.”

Not a question, but a demand.

I look for a glimmer of recognition in his hard eyes, but I'm unsuccessful. All those years of friendship, everything I've gone through with them, truly minimized to this moment. Anger starts brewing in the pit of my stomach.

Some people would say that letting go of anger would be more mature, or more freeing. However, I am not 'some people.' Fuck that. Thinking about Hystoria used to awaken a fury deep inside me, fuelled by self-doubt, pain, and sadness. Nowadays, thanks to therapy, it is more of a simmer when the occasional memory crosses my mind.

But back then? I would spiral for days, wondering why I wasn't good enough for them. What did I do to deserve this kind of betrayal?

I am not that girl anymore though. So I push aside my anger and hurt to focus on this moment—the moment I've anticipated for years. I planned how this conversation would go in my head, over and over, yet now, my brain is empty. I can almost see the lone tumbleweed flying through my mind

where I stored all of my plans and ideas on how this would go. I clear my throat.

“First, good evening to you too,” I reply calmly, forcing my voice to sound confident and steady, holding Paxton’s challenging gaze. It’s a staring contest; a fight for the dominance of this conversation. Whoever looks away first loses, and he knows it.

Paxton raises an eyebrow, clearly taken aback. Even more so when I shadow his movements and take a step toward him. His little display of arrogance doesn’t intimidate me, neither does the fact that we’re standing out here, four versus one.

“Second, I am still in the process of researching potential artists.” I search Paxton’s eyes, looking for any indication as to how he will react. As a respected professional in the music business, I am privy to all the gossip, and Hystoria is a huge topic. Everyone I’ve talked to cites Paxton as a bomb with a very short fuse. I don’t want any drama, at least not at this event. It’s too important for Joe to leave a good impression at these gatherings. “While some decisions have already been made, the official results will be sent out by Scaena. Please await our correspondence.”

I smile at him sweetly and he breaks our staring contest to look at his band members. I won.

My eyes skip over the other band members as well, wandering to the balcony door. Where is Gabe?

“Excuse me? We are Hystoria. Why would you need to research other artists?” He furrows his brows, his eyes

snapping back to mine as he is trying to make sense of me not jumping at the chance to manage them.

“What makes you think I have to justify myself?” I raise my eyebrow. He narrows his eyes and I mirror him. “Now, if you will excuse me, I am expecting company.” I take another step forward, in an attempt to walk past them and find Gabe inside. A hand on my upper arm jolts me back.

“This conversation is not over,” Paxton spits, and I stomp on his foot. “What the hell, bitch?”

“What the hell, bitch?” I repeat mockingly and rub my arm. He has a tight grip. “Why the fuck are you touching me?” My vision turns red, and my blood starts to boil. The audacity! “You know what? I can just tell you. I have no intentions to manage you, so you can fuck right off.” I make another attempt to move past them, and this time it’s Si’s arm that stops me. At least he only extends it. I swear, if anyone else touches me tonight, hands will fly.

“I’m very sorry for his behavior,” he says, at least sounding genuinely sorry. “Please reconsider,” he pleads.

“I am afraid I am firm in my decision,” I say quietly.

“Bitch,” I hear Paxton’s bark out behind me.

“And now I’m even firmer on it.”

“Ignore him. Is there anything we can do to make you rethink your decision?” His eyes grow large and round, his lips turning into a pout, a full-blown smoulder. Is he doing what I

think he's doing? Who does he think he is, Flynn Rider? Do I look like Rapunzel?

“Ew. No.” I stumble back.

“At least tell us why?”

“Yeah, you better have damn good reasons,” Paxton adds. All of them look at me expectantly.

I sigh and cross my arms in front of my chest again. The tips of my fingers gently tap against my upper arm while I think. There are so many ways I can play this conversation. I could continue as if I've never met them, cite their reputation as my reason, and hope it's good enough for them. Then again...

I'm still seething, but the tiniest bubble of excitement joins the feelings parade as I realize it. I have the power. They *want* me to manage them. Considering their reputation, and the fact that a little bird told me their contracts with their label might expire soon, they *need* me. This is it, my opportunity for the best 'fuck you' I could ever give them. How will I do it? With how my brain is short-circuiting right now, I will just go with the flow. One thing is sure, I want to wipe that arrogant smile off their fucking faces. A ferocious laugh wants to escape me, but I dim it to a mischievous smile.

“Okay. Fine. I shall indulge you. Three reasons. First.” I hold up my finger. “Just from this short conversation, I can tell you are difficult to work with. One of you doesn't have his emotions under control and will get physical if he doesn't get his way. The four of you don't work together; otherwise this

conversation would have been a lot more harmonious.” I chuckle. “All I see is a sinking ship.”

“How dare y—” I hold up my hand to silence Paxton.

“I am not done. You will speak when it’s your turn. Reason number two.” I hold up a second finger. “If you had done the bare minimum before contacting my label, and researched my work, you would have noticed that I only take on new artists. You’re neither new, nor currently at a success level where you get to make demands from me.” A pointed look makes the four of them fidget and look at each other nervously.

None of them are objecting. All of them are looking at me, jaws dropped and eyes wide. Whether it’s because of the facts I’ve confronted them with, or the fact that I dare talk back at them, remains unknown. They are all but squirming under my hard gaze, and I suppress a laugh.

This happens too often during negotiations. Men like to bark loudly, establish themselves as the bosses. They want to let you know they’re the alpha and you shall submit to their every word. Yet, at the tiniest sign of backtalk, they will backpedal, unsure how to react. They only feel powerful as long as nobody challenges it. But guess what? In this conversation, I have the power.

Truth be told, I could pity Hystoria. Surrounded by yes-sayers that go behind their back to complain about working with them, paired with all the public attention. The saying, “It’s lonely at the top,” was not made from thin air.

“And third.” I prepare for the final and biggest blow. “You guys are a huge liability. That is why I will not be signing you.”

My thoughts start racing with anticipation. This is where things get spicy. Either they accept these reasons and we can all go our separate ways—in my case, to the car where I’ll call my therapist—or this is where the grand reveal will be happening. Throughout the conversation, I had been waiting for it, a glimmer of recognition in their eyes, but it never came.

I mean, come on. I haven’t changed that much since back then, at least not any more than they did.

Paxton stares me down, his jaw ticking as he shoots a confused look at Si. Frankly, I’m surprised he even let me interrupt him earlier, even more surprised that he doesn’t take this chance to jump at my throat. He probably feels just as steamrolled as I did when they appeared behind me.

“What do you mean, a liability?” Jake finally asks. Before I answer, I look around, making sure that we are the only people on this balcony and within earshot.

“Because I know that you stole your biggest hit. And that the girl you stole it from has all the receipts.” I chuckle darkly. “While I doubt finding a lawyer would be worth it, I’m sure the press would be all too curious.” Seconds tick by slowly as they register what I’ve just revealed, their jaws dropping open one after the other as they try to find the words to answer me.

“So, there, you have your reasons. Please do not contact me again, my answer is ‘no.’ Later, haters,” I say cheerily as I

brush past them, waving my fingers in farewell before I can see their reaction. I wonder if they'll realize.

When we first started hanging out, Si and Pax hated me. Pulled-my-ponytails-and-stole-my-bag kind of hate. Therefore, instead of saying goodbye, I resorted to saying 'later haters.' Even when we became friends, the saying stuck. Well, until they left, anyways.

"What?" Cole's loud voice becomes muffled as I close the door behind me. I lock it, for good measure. Hopefully they'll have to walk around the giant house to the front door to get back in.

With fast steps, I hurry to where I think Gabe might have gone. The music and chatter quickly drown the sound of the rattling balcony door. I don't look back as I navigate through the crowd. On a whim, I turn a corner and find myself in an empty corridor, eerily quiet compared to the noise level of the rest of the event.

Perfect. I lean my head back against the wall and take a deep breath, waiting for my heartbeat to slow as I sort my thoughts. My chest feels tight and I try to fill my lungs with air. I'm close to hyperventilating but, despite that, a small smile forms on my face. It seems stupid, but so profound at the same time. I've just slain my demon.

"What was that?" Gabe's voice right next to me makes me jump.

"Jesus Christ," I gasp in shock and clutch the fabric on my chest. "You scared the shit out of me."

“Sorry. You looked like you were walking away from something and I didn’t want to stop you,” he says, concern in his eyes. “Did something happen?”

“Yeah, my past caught up to me.”

He looks at me puzzled, probably wondering if this is a good time to have me declared insane.

“I ran into some former friends. And an ex,” I explain and take one more deep breath. My heart rate is starting to slow down and I begin to feel better.

“Oh, I see. Well, how about we eat here, where nobody is going to find us, and then get the hell out of here?” He holds up two plates. I didn’t even realize he was holding them. “We can hang out at my place.”

“Sounds like an excellent plan,” I say, feeling a bone-deep exhaustion starting to settle over me.



We eat in silence, instead of teasing and chattering like before. My thoughts circle around the conversation with the guys from Hystoria. Gabe is content staying next to me without talking, aware that the encounter is affecting me more than I’m admitting.

He takes my empty plate out of my hand and hands them to a waiter as we make our way to find Rose and Joe. We find the two lovebirds, still, or again, on the dance floor, and wave them over to let them know that Gabe and I are leaving. Joe

leads their dance in our direction until they come to a stop in front of us.

“Why are you leaving so soon, hon?” Rose asks, with a red face and slightly out of breath, her brows knitted in confusion. “We’ve only been here two hours.”

“Well, I said hi to a bunch of people, went into the very dark garden with Gabe—” Gabe’s face becomes red as Rose laughs heartily and playfully hits his arm. “—and I ran into Hystoria. I think I’m set for today.”

“What?” Joe asks, his voice a bit too loud for my liking. I see several heads turn and feel their eyes on our small group. I hush him, not wanting to draw any more attention. “I had no idea they would be here,” he promises, and I nod. “Where did you see them?”

“Outside. They tried to argue with me about becoming their manager. So if four adult-sized children try to come at you, it’s probably my fault.” I shrug.

“No worries, I heard they’re a pain in the ass to work with anyway,” Joe says, mirroring my shrug.

“That’s what I told them.” I grin. Joe holds his hand up for a high five and I oblige.

“Are you okay?” Rose asks, her voice in my ear barely louder than a whisper as I hug her goodbye.

“I could be better,” I admit just as quietly. “They threw me for a loop, and now I’m super exhausted.” Worry fills her face as her concerned eyes inspect my face for my reaction.

“Did they say anything?”

“They didn’t even recognize me,” I huff, letting out a dark chuckle. “But it’s fine.” I take a deep breath and straighten my posture. “I’m fine. They’re nothing to me. Once I am over the surprise, I will forget about them again. Just like I did seven years ago.”

“That’s my girl,” she says proudly and pats my cheek. “Maybe give Barbara a call on Monday though? You should really cover this in your next therapy session with her.”

“Oh, definitely,” I promise and move on to hug Joe goodbye as well.

“You good?” I chuckle and nod. “Rose just asked the same.”

“Well, if you need me to kick any asses, just tell me.”

“Not right now.” I smile. “Although, I might have told them they are arrogant jerks and a liability. I would not be surprised if they tried to contact you to complain about that.”

“Oh, I hope they do.” He grins mischievously. “I hope they do it when Liam is close, he’ll explode on them like a firecracker. Now you kids run along, have a good evening.” We nod and make our way through the crowd. Gabe is polarizing and stopped every few feet for a picture or autograph, but he manages to shield me from any attention and fulfils their requests as fast as possible.

Once we’re finally outside, I take a deep breath of the fresh air. It started to feel like I would suffocate inside. Gabe makes a call and a valet brings his car over just a few minutes later.

“Ladies first.” Gabe winks and opens the passenger door for me. I smile at him gratefully and plop my butt onto the seat, groaning as my weight is finally off my feet. In flats they don’t hurt as much, but the high-heels sure did a number on me.

“God, this feels amazing.” I stretch out my legs and start to gather the tulle so it doesn’t get caught in the car door. Gabe helps me, pushing and draping the fabric until he can gently close the door and walk to the driver’s side.

I steal a last look at the villa. Now that it is dark and the walls are lit by spotlights, eerie shadows change the whole vibe. The romantic atmosphere has transformed into something haunting. It’s very fitting for this strange and tumultuous evening.

Gabe starts the engine and smoothly navigates the car down the long driveway and then out of the giant gates. Just before we take the turn out of the grounds, I see four figures in the distance, storming out of the villa.

Chapter Seven

“YOU LOOK GOOD IN my clothes.” Gabe stops to look at me, his eyes lighting up as I enter the living room. Carefully, I place the dress that Peggy selected for me over a chair, gently running my fingers over the fabric. It’s beautiful; there is no question about it. For the purpose of hanging out, it’s too uncomfortable though, so Gabe offered me a black shirt that almost reaches down to my knees and sweatpants that won’t even stay on my hips. One of my hands clutches the waistband as I walk.

He’s done the same and exchanged his three-piece suit for a simple white shirt and grey sweatpants as well. I swallow. The way he is sitting on the couch is downright sinful. One of his legs is propped on the couch, while his other foot is on the ground. The muscles in his arms dance as he holds a glass of whiskey in his hand, gently swirling it. The sight of the moving liquid is mesmerizing.

“I know. I look like a proper fashion queen right now.” I laugh and cock my hip for a mocking fashion pose. “Now, where can I get some of that?”

“You’re a whiskey drinker?” He gets up in a swift movement and sets his glass down, before he walks over to a cabinet and takes a glass and a bottle out of it.

“Not really, but tonight calls for alcohol. And I’m not too picky.” I shrug and grin sheepishly.

“Ice is in the freezer.” He points toward the kitchen as he twists the bottle open. I take the hint and get some ice cubes. I head back to the living room, dropping the ice cubes into the

glass he hands me, grimacing when the smell of pure alcohol hits my nostrils.

“That’s what I thought.” Gabe laughs and sits back down on the couch. I take a sip of the amber liquid and cough. God, that burns. “So, what exactly is going on between you and Hystoria?”

“I’ll tell you once I’ve finished the glass,” I rasp. “Meanwhile, would you mind helping me take out all the bobby pins? Please?”

“All the what?” he asks cluelessly, and I giggle. Lifting my arm, I reach into my hair, digging my fingers into my hairspray-clad hair, until I feel one of them between my fingers, and take it out, grimacing, as it pulls on a few hairs. “These little fuckers.” I throw it onto the coffee table. “I have no idea how many of these Yuki put in.”

“Okay, sure. Sit down.” He pats the couch pillow next to him, and I fall on it, groaning, as I can finally put my feet up again. I hiss when he finds the first, my eyes watering as the pin pulls on only one or two hairs.

“Sorry,” he mumbles.

“It’s fine,” I yawn. With each pin, he gets better at it, and after only a few more pins, he’s an expert, taking them out one by one, his fingers running gently through my hair. Soon, my eyes grow heavy, and I lean my body against the back of the couch so I don’t drift off. This is nice. Really nice.

“Hey, don’t fall asleep on me,” Gabe teases, nudging me gently.

“I’m not.” I yawn, fighting to keep my eyes open.

“You liar,” he laughs quietly. “Do you want a coffee?”

“No, thanks. The last time I drank one of your coffees, it kept me up for days.” I yawn again as Gabe chuckles, amused.

“Do you want to tell me what happened? You’re more quiet than usual,” he says quietly, worry clouding his voice as he runs his fingers through my hair. “I think that was the last one.”

“Thank you.” I ruffle through my hair to loosen it, a relieved sigh escaping me now that my scalp is not feeling tight anymore. “I feel way better. As for what happened, how much time do you have?” I lean back into the couch, letting my head rest against the top of the backrest.

“For you? However much you want,” he says quietly, doing the same and turning towards me to capture my eyes with his, his gaze focused and radiating concern. I shift the glass in my hand, twirling it and scratching imaginary freckles of dirt off it.

“It’s been a while since I’ve told someone more about my past than a rough overview. Let me warn you, it’s not a happy story.” I grimace. He continues to hold my gaze, reaching out to take one of my hands into both of his, intertwining our fingers.

“Okay.” I quickly drink the rest of the whiskey, the pain in the back of my throat grounding me as I begin to tell my story.

“When I was five, my family moved to the middle of nowhere. And I mean that there was no other house within a mile. We even had a forest on our grounds.” His thumb starts rubbing gentle circles on the back of my hand, the touch comforting me as I continue to recount. “On the second night, I decided to run away and travel back to the city. I packed my tiny backpack with toys and my journal and slipped out of my room’s window. It wasn’t even night; I was fully convinced that I could run away in broad daylight.” An amused chuckle escapes me and when I lift my gaze to Gabe’s face, I see the corners of his mouth twitch. “Anyway, I ran and ran, as quick and far as my little legs could carry me, only to end up in my neighbor’s backyard.” That makes him chuckle, and I enjoy the sound of his warm voice.

“Don’t judge me, the grounds there were huge, and I was not a sporty child. Anyway, Cole was my neighbor, and I ran into him when he was playing pirates with the other Hystoria guys. They got me to play with them and convinced me to go back home. My parents never even realized I was gone, but they weren’t really present parents to begin with.” I reach for the bottle and pour more whiskey into my glass. “No idea how CPS never got involved; my parents left my sister and me alone all the time when they had to travel for work.”

“You have a sister?” He sounds surprised, and when I look into his eyes, I see surprise and pain. I guess after knowing me

so long, it's a shock to not know something this fundamental, so I get it.

"It's complicated," I admit and squeeze his hand slightly. "She didn't like me, and my parents were never there, so I found myself going over to Cole's place a lot. His mom was nice and basically took me and the other Hystoria guys in. I'm not so sure what their home lives were like, but we grew up like siblings in Cole's home."

"Why didn't she like you? I think you're very likable," he asks quietly, and I clear my throat.

"So, Clara, my sister, is only a few years older than I am and when we were still young, we got along great. She used to do my hair every morning and played with me when she came back from school. That changed after we moved. My parents shifted many parent-responsibilities onto her, including looking after me. Looking back, I somewhat understand her anger. I was the reason she couldn't live her youth. She couldn't go out and drink with her friends because I would be home all alone at night. She wasn't allowed to bring anyone over who my parents didn't know, and considering they were never there, they didn't even try to get to know her friends. My staying at Cole's house didn't change anything. Our parents weren't there, but they made sure to put a camera in the driveway so they could see who comes to our house." I gulp. "She despised me." I shrug, muted anger boiling in my stomach, as I feel a sting building behind my eyes. It still hurts to acknowledge that the person I used to look up to can't even look at me anymore.

“Cole and the other guys formed Hystoria and became the school’s stars. And then she started to hate me even more. Clara developed a crush on Cole and suddenly realized how much I had been hanging out with him and the other guys. Before that, she never cared, even made fun of me for only having guy friends. Suddenly she hated that I spent time with him. On the other hand, it gave her the freedom to do whatever she wanted at home when I was at his place. I think that drove her crazy. Funnily enough, it was around that time that I also developed a crush on him.”

“Aww, you’re turning red.” Gabe lifts his hand to poke my warm cheek teasingly and I raise my middle finger.

“Oh, shut up. We’re getting to the depressing part of the story now.” I smile sadly, and his face turns solemn. “So, Hystoria was taking the school by storm, and even though we never really talked about it, I slipped into a manager role. I planned their events, how we’d get there, what they got paid, ran their social media, and all that stuff. Six months before their graduation, I found out about a band contest somewhat close by and encouraged them to participate. Long story short, they participated, and won a three-year contract with a label in Los Angeles. They all agreed to move there after graduation.”

“They?”

“They’re two years older than me,” I point out and he nods. “By the time they left, I still had a year and a half of school left.”

“So, they went without you?”

I nod. He narrows his eyes, a flicker of anger flashing on his face.

“I wanted to go with them, I really did. But finishing high school was like the one thing my parents cared about. No matter what grades and how many days we skipped school, we needed to get our diplomas. Even back then, I found that understandable, so I couldn’t just pack up and join them. There was this part of me that was still trying to please my parents, no matter how often they showed us how little they cared. So I stayed back, even though it broke my heart, and I thought it broke theirs as well.

“Cole and I were closer to each other than to the rest of the guys. Of course, I mean, I used to hang out at his house almost every day. We would play together when we were younger, then we would do homework together, or just hang out. He taught me how to play the guitar, and we’d play songs together, and give them our own little twist. He was amazing. Thoughtful. Understanding. He wrote love songs with the most amazing lyrics. It was basically impossible to not crush on him.” I chuckle darkly. “I never thought he’d feel the same. He dated other girls and told me about it in such detail. It didn’t take me long to realize that he didn’t see me that way. In the beginning, that was a tough pill to swallow, but at least I knew where I stood and I could deal with it. Then, on our last evening, he admitted he had a crush on me too. We shared a very romantic first kiss, and watched shooting stars, and the next morning he left for Los Angeles.”

“That must have hurt,” Gabe says softly, and I nod.

“It did.” I clear my throat and avert my eyes. “But it gets even worse.” I laugh darkly. “After they left, I was so sad. I couldn’t stop crying for two days.” Thinking back, I can’t help but roll my eyes. “The heartbreak was real, let me tell you.” I take a deep breath and try to compose myself. “Then, adding to the physical distance they just... disappeared. They drove to LA so they could bring their instruments and they sent me pictures; goofy selfies, the sights they visited, even of their flat tire as they were stranded on the side of the highway. When they reached LA, their messages became shorter. Scarcer. Then they stopped answering any messages at all.” I pause, trying to breathe through the pain that thrashes in my chest when I recount that moment. Sometimes, just before I wake up, my mind wanders back to it, convinced to this day that it’s just a cruel joke. Then I’m awake, and the pain is still very real. “Then one day, I turned on the radio and heard one of my songs being played.” I clear my throat. Gabe looks at me stunned.

“Shadows.” The name of my song lays heavy on my tongue, its echo hanging in the air like a dark cloud suffocating any sound.

“No way.” Gabe’s mouth hangs open, his head slowly shaking in disbelief. “They stole your song?”

“Yes way,” I assure him.

“But how?” His eyes are wide in shock.

“I’m not sure,” I admit. “The last time I saw Cole, he asked me to play it for him. Maybe he recorded it.” I shrug. “It

doesn't really matter in the end. I tried to find out what the hell was going on, but they blocked me, all of them. I think that moment is the greatest pain I've ever felt." To my dismay, I hear my voice shaking slightly, so I clear my throat.

"As soon as I was able to form a coherent thought, I grabbed my laptop to go through all my recordings and data, to gather evidence that the song was mine. The pain really fuelled my anger; I was ready to hire lawyers and wipe the floor with them. Instead, I found my whole laptop had been completely scrubbed. There was nothing left. I still don't know exactly what happened. Trust me, theorizing about it still keeps me up at night sometimes. By now I am pretty sure that Cole asked Clara to reset my laptop to factory settings, regardless of the fact that it would erase everything I had ever worked on. Every single song and idea I had ever recorded was gone."

"Oh, wow." Gabe jumps up and paces right in front of the couch. "Why are you so sure that it was Cole?"

"I don't think any of the other guys had her number, but I know that Cole's mom had it. My parents insisted on them exchanging numbers for emergencies."

"That is so messed up."

"The story still continues," I say softly. "Sit back down, please. You're making me nervous with your pacing."

"I don't know if I can. It just makes me so angry, I need to let off some steam."

I look at him pleadingly. He sighs and rubs his face in annoyance before he sits down next to me.

“Thank you.” A small smile tugs at the corners of my mouth.

“What happened next?” He looks at me with concern, yet I see anger simmering behind his eyes.

“Knowing that Cole, Pax, Jake, and Simon were not close anymore, my sister made a plan to get rid of me and,” I raise my hands for air quotes, “‘enjoy the rest of her youth’. Never mind the fact that I was sixteen and she didn’t even have to babysit me anymore. I even had my own car, for fuck’s sake. Anyways, she told my parents that I was skipping school, hanging with a bad crowd, about to repeat a year, and I’m pretty sure she told them I was smoking and hiding weed in my room. The next time they were home, they didn’t even listen to me when I tried to tell them what was going on. They just kicked me out.”

Gabe’s jaw drops. “Just like that? What the hell?”

“Yeah. Just like that.” I nod, the lump in my throat all too familiar.

“So what did you do? Did you go to Cole’s mom?” His eyes are searching for the answer in mine, probably hoping for a happy end to all of this.

“I couldn’t,” I say softly. “What would I have told her? ‘Your son stole my song and I want to sue him, but my sister deleted any proof I had?’ Or live there, never mentioning it, while having to stare at pictures of that traitor on the wall?”

There was no way could I go to Rachel.” I sigh and take a sip of my whiskey to counter the pain creeping in my veins. “At least that’s what teenage me thought. Hindsight is a bitch; I totally should have gone to her. Instead, I threw everything I had in my car, emptied my bank account, and went off. Luckily there were online programs that let me finish my GED while I slept in my car and drove around the country.”

Gabe’s eyes widen in shock. “You slept in your car?” His voice is tinged with disbelief. I nod. He tenses, as though he’s ready to jump up again so I reach for his hand. I want to get through this story without any more breaks.

“Yeah,” I confirm, trying to sound nonchalant, but judging by the tick in his jaw, I don’t think I’m very successful. “I didn’t have enough money to get a motel room every day, so I had to approach my living arrangements very strategically. I got myself a cheap phone with internet and a gym membership for showers. Laundromats were another lifesaver and even though it took me a few months longer than the school would have, I managed to get my GED online. I am not going to lie, it was rough. Especially after I graduated. I hit ‘send’ on my last assignment and had a panic attack when I realized that I had no idea what to do from there on.”

“What do you mean?” His skin under my palm is warm and grounding.

“Well, to apply for loans or to universities, I needed an address. To apply for jobs, I needed an address. Without money, I couldn’t get an apartment. It was a vicious cycle.”

“So then what happened?”

“Joe saw me sleeping in my car during one particularly nasty winter day.” I remember, trying to shove the memories of the countless nights I spent in the backseat of my car trying to keep warm aside. The memories of my fingers and toes going numb even though I was covered in five blankets; those of my breath turning white in my car; those of staring up at the night sky, swallowing down my tears, and wondering if things would ever get better.

“I was parking next to a park around the corner from their house. I went to get a coffee at a bodega down the street. He must have seen me in my car, because he sent Rose to chat me up and invite me to their home. And I just went with her.” A pained chuckle escapes me. “I just went with her. And it’s the best thing I ever did. Did a voice in my head remind me of all the human trafficking stories on the news? Hell yes. But I was so fucking cold, Gabe, I couldn’t say no. They offered me dinner, I slept in their guest room, and after that, they wouldn’t let me leave.

“First, they convinced me to stay until it wasn’t freezing temperatures anymore. Then until I could apply to universities. Then until I found a job. Before I realized it, I didn’t even think about leaving anymore. I liked it there. And I liked them. So one evening, as Hystoria was on TV, they realized something was off with me, and I told them everything.”

“That must have been difficult.”

“It was. My parents didn’t believe me, so this was a conversation I’d feared for quite some time at that point. But they were so great about it. Joe demanded to hear some more of my songs. It took me a week to work up the nerve to play him some of my music, but when I did, he was so thrilled that he immediately offered me a job at Scaena. Truth be told, he wanted me to be one of his artists, but as you can guess, I turned that down. Instead, he offered me a manager position.

“Meanwhile, Rose was determined to become my surrogate mother. Every week, she would take me out on a mother-daughter date, and we always had the best time.”

They became less and less after I graduated college and started working full-time, but maybe it’s time I ask her for another one soon. We have so much to talk about.

“And Liam slipped into a big brother role effortlessly, even though he wasn’t even living with them anymore. All of them, quite literally, saved my life.

“Three years ago, they asked to adopt me, to make it official.”

I smile at the memory. Joe, Rose, and I went to the courthouse to sign the papers, and when we came back, we found their house completely decorated in pink, and all of our friends greeting us. Liam had arranged a surprise party with a gender reveal theme. It was embarrassing, but the love I received from them that day made me cry through the whole thing.

“Three years ago?” I can see the wheels turning in his head.

“That’s what that was?” he asks, his eyes turning wide. “I, legit, thought it was a gender reveal, and never worked out for whom.” His cheeks flush red and he lowers his head, letting go of my hand to hide his blush. “I thought asking would be rude, so I never did. I just assumed someone was pregnant and then forgot all about it.”

“That’s so cute.” I chuckle. “It’s okay; I think it was right around your first album release. You had other things on your mind.”

“Still seems like something I should remember.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it. It was confusing, considering all of you didn’t really have any context.”

“I’ll try.” He chuckles. “And you haven’t seen Hystoria since then?” Gabe brings the conversation back to the topic.

“No, not until tonight,” I admit. “Joe would check with the organizers, or by listening to the grapevine, before sending me to events. God knows why they were there tonight.”

“From what I heard back there, they came to convince you to drop everything and become their manager.” Gabe chuckles, amused at the idea.

“I didn’t know you overheard our... talk,” I say with a grimace, heat creeping up my cheeks.

“More like argument.” He laughs and I bury my head in my hands to hide my red face. “Yeah, I couldn’t help it. They were way too loud to ignore.” I peek through a gap in my fingers to find his amused face very close to mine. “Come on, no need to

be embarrassed. I can't blame them for trying, and considering what you've just told me, your reaction was incredibly professional. I don't think I would have been able to remain that calm." He grins and pries my fingers away from my face. "The way you put Paxton in his place was glorious. I wondered what he did to have that coming."

"I mean, you know I don't tolerate people talking to me like that in general."

He laughs softly. "Yeah, I know. I learned that in our very first recording sessions."

"Yes, you did. And you learned it the hard way." My lips curl into a small grin, remembering the tirade I rained on him after he tried to make me get his coffee. "But, between the two of us, Hystoria is not famous enough anymore to act as entitled as they do."

"Oh wow. I didn't know you had such a mean streak." His lips stretch into a grin.

"Is it mean if it's the truth?" I purse my lips and cock my head. "Their last top ten song was two years ago. And yours, what, like three months?"

"More like yours," he admits, a flash of irritation crossing his face.

"Ours," I assure him.

"Knowing they stole your song makes me feel bad for profiting off your songs now."

"Why?"

“I don’t know. It feels like I’m exploiting you,” he admits, his tone laced with guilt. I gently swat his arm.

“First, you’re not ‘just’ profiting off my songs; I am offering them to you. You’re not stealing my notebooks and recording them without asking. Consent is key, as I’m sure you know. Second, you can’t even compare yourself to those song-stealing cockroaches; you pay me.” I shrug. “Plus, you’re actually doing me a favor.”

“How am I doing you a favor?” he asks, guilt still visibly gnawing at him, the same way he’s gnawing on his lip.

“I make music because I want my songs to reach people. If I never release them, they won’t. No one would ever hear them if not for you, because I sure as shit would not be releasing them myself. We’ve talked about this; fame is not for me. I’ll remain backstage and push my artists forward as well as possible.”

“That’s really remarkable,” he says quietly. “Thank you for sharing your songs with me. I promise to treasure them.”

“You’re welcome.” I take another sip of my whiskey, the ice cubes in it long melted. I get up to fetch us more of them and top off our drinks, feeling Gabe’s eyes following me curiously.

“What is it?” I ask him when I sit back down.

“It makes sense now.”

“What does?”

“Your songs. *‘Would we have our own happy end? Or would our paths separate anyway? Thanks to you, I’ll never know.’*”

he quotes one of the first songs I wrote for him. “It’s about Cole and you, isn’t it?” I pause. Funny how some songs I write to work through my thoughts and feelings manage to hit me like a punch when I’m reminded of them. I nod.

“And he’s the reason you won’t date anyone famous?”

I nod again.

“The whole thing left me with loads of trauma,” I explain. “It’s the main reason I’ve been in therapy. When people you entrust with your life break your trust this massively, it leaves scars. I don’t think the combination of romantic interest and fame is something I can get over.”

“That’s okay.” His hand reaches for mine and envelops it. “I mean, it sucks for me, but if it’s what you have to do to feel safe, what I think doesn’t matter at all.”

I bite my lip and nod. It hurts to admit, but he is spot on.

“You haven’t dated much at all since I’ve known you, come to think of it.”

“Not in the time we’ve known each other, no. There was one guy I dated in college. Chase. He was a good guy, and even though it couldn’t have been easy to date me, he made me feel comfortable and loved. Ultimately, we broke up because he had to move away for his job and I didn’t want to leave. After that, I stuck to casual dating and hook-ups from time to time.” His eyes are fixed on me, jumping around my face, and I can see thoughts running through his head.

“Are you still in love with Cole?”

“I don’t think so,” I admit, a deep sigh escaping my lips as I try to sort my thoughts about the evening. “I thought I’d be indifferent. After all, he’s basically a stranger now. But I feel shaken up. I think I’m more in love with the idea of what we could have been than who he is today, but I haven’t exactly had any time to sit down and analyze my feelings. Generally, I try to not waste any of my thoughts on him, though.

“How about you? I know there is no one right now, but how was your dating life before you got famous?” I try to change the topic and luckily, Gabe goes along with it.

“Basically non-existent. Do you remember what I looked like when we first met? Not exactly ‘Look, that’s my boyfriend’ material,” Gabe says with a chuckle. I try to think back to our first meeting. I was out shopping for clothes and he stood in a pedestrian zone, playing his guitar and singing a cover of “I don’t wanna miss a thing,” by Aerosmith. The passion in his voice made me stop but admittedly, his appearance didn’t scream confidence the way it does today. His face was chubbier, and his hair was sticking out in all directions, in a messy way, not in an ‘I was styled to look like I just woke up’ way. He had no fashion sense and he wore the ugliest pair of sunglasses I had ever seen.

Despite that, he radiated passion. It was in the way he played his guitar and bared his soul on his lips, even though nobody stopped to listen other than me. After a minute I moved on, but I couldn’t get his voice out of my head. There was so much potential. What are a few vocal lessons in the grand scheme? Voice techniques you can teach people, but courage? Passion?

Those can't be taught. So, after doing my shopping, I went back, and luckily, I caught him just as he was packing his guitar away.

“Without trying to sound mean, I understand where you're coming from,” I say, the both of us smiling at the memory.

“It's fine. Still, thank you for dragging me to Yuki and having her work her magic on me. She did amazing,” he says, throwing back his head and shaking his blonde, curly hair.

“Yuki did great, but so did you.” I point out and poke his chiselled jaw. “Honestly, I think the way you started carrying yourself, and training until you became comfortable with your body, did more for you than Yuki's makeover.” I can see he's getting flustered. It's kind of cute to see one of the most famous musicians still getting embarrassed by compliments. “So, no one serious these past few years?”

“No. It's not like I've never dated, but do you remember the scandal that broke around Christmas two years ago?” I furrow my brows and think for a second.

“I'm sorry; you'll have to jog my memory. There are so many crazy media stories I've dealt with since then, I can't remember that particular one.”

“One of the women I dated worked for a magazine and wrote a very elaborate piece about our dates. Turns out, all I was to her was a way to further her career. Back then, I told you the press got all info from an acquaintance, though.”

“Ah yes, I remember. If I remember correctly, it helped your image more than damaged it, but I get it. That’s a huge breach of trust.”

“As you said, fame makes people do crazy things.”

“Yeah. Or the promise of fame,” I point out. “I’m sorry that happened to you. I guess it’s a side of fame I haven’t really thought about.” I try to remember more about the incident, since it’s obviously one that affected him a lot. “Why didn’t you tell me it was the girl you dated?”

“Because it was embarrassing. It felt like such a rookie mistake to make,” he admits quietly.

“It’s not,” I assure him. “Don’t ever think that trusting people is a rookie mistake. This business is ruthless, and as you now know, I’ve also trusted the wrong people.” I shrug. “Shit happens, and some people are just assholes. Even I can be an asshole. Usually, it’s justified, though.”

“Amen to that.” He raises his glass, and I clink it with mine. “I don’t trust many people, especially not in this industry. I trust you though. So thank you, I guess. Sometimes I need your reality checks.”

“Thank you too, Gabe. And just say the word; I will be all too happy to hand you a reality check on a silver platter.” I chuckle and lean my head against his shoulder.

Chapter Eight

“GOOD MORNING, STAR SHINE.” The words roll off my tongue like a melodic greeting, as I strut into the recording studio with a bright smile on my face and a tray of freshly brewed coffee in my hands. “Thank you.” I direct a thankful grin at Emily, today’s producer, as she opens the door for me. The coffee tray clinks lightly as I set it down on the large table, surprised I managed to bring all of the cups here in one piece and without spilling.

“Here’s your latte.” I hand her one, then check the next name. “Cappuccino for Preston. Hi, long time no see.” I hold it up for him to grab and immediately reach for the next cup to read out its intended recipient. “Toffee Latte for Lana. Sorry, they were out of caramel topping.” I hand her the steaming cup with an apologetic smile. I know how much she loves that caramel stuff on her coffee.

“Thanks, Eve. I’ll survive without it.” She winks and grabs it quickly. I return her smile and continue to check names and hand out cups, greeting everyone as I do. I’ve worked with everyone before, and remembering their coffee orders feels like a minimum effort to show my appreciation for the great work they do.

I hand Gabe his hot tea last. His vocal coach says no coffee on recording days. “Now, let’s write some number-one hits.”

I am strangely motivated for a Monday morning. Yesterday I was glued to my piano, pouring my heart into melodies and lyrics, my fingers moving over the keys on their own. My whole body was buzzing with the need to put my doubts and

pain to paper, my brain running at one hundred miles per hour to translate them into lyrics. And here I am today, bringing along three songs that Gabe can add to his new album and feeling a lot better.

As Emily and the musicians set up the recording booth and run sound checks, Gabe and I make ourselves comfortable in the corner with a stack of paper and pens. I take out my phone to show him some of my recordings from yesterday so he can decide if he likes them or wants to change the lyrics.

“Maybe I need to thank Hystoria.” Gabe beams at me, his eyes shining with excitement. “These songs are bomb.”

“I admit, I think they will become some of my favorites too.” I grin, my heart swelling with pride. “And to write them took a weight off my shoulders. I feel much better about everything now.”

“Were you okay yesterday? You still seemed pretty rattled when you left,” Gabe says quietly, and a warm smile creeps onto my face at the concern in his voice.

“Oh, I still am,” I assure him, patting his shoulder gently. “But screaming my feelings into the void, aka those three songs, did wonders. I’m still furious, but it’s more like a distant echo now, instead of all-consuming, if that makes sense.” I smile tightly.

“Perfectly,” Gabe says and nods in understanding.

“Yo, Gabe, get in the booth!” Emily’s voice booms through the studio and our heads snap up.

“Aye!” Gabe salutes and does as she asks, taking the sheet with the lyrics with him and smiling in anticipation as he puts on the headphones. My mind wanders as I watch him through the soundproof glass, goosebumps spreading on my arms as I hear my lyrics fall from his lips. It sounds so different when he sings it, yet he’s perfectly conveying everything I was feeling when I wrote it. The pain and desperation are clear in his voice, as though the lyrics are his own.

Emily nods in approval as she manipulates some buttons and controls. The first time I worked with her, I was so damn nervous and intimidated. She had an excellent reputation in the business, while I was brand new to it, as was Mia. Emily took us under her wing immediately as we recorded Mia’s album. I soon realized why Joe recommended her so highly. Emily is incredibly talented and knowledgeable, and proved to be a fantastic teacher as well.

She showed me the basics of producing and took me aside for an afternoon to show me the ropes. She also taught me key knowledge I needed in order to distinguish a competent producer from one who understands how to sell himself. Emily is my go-to producer, and I hire her whenever our schedules allow it, because I just know that she understands exactly what my artists want to convey with their songs. Without a doubt, she always manages to capture that exactly. Also, I just love working with her.

“By the way Eve, your phone has been buzzing for a good ten minutes. Either answer it or shut it off,” Emily scolds me and I startle. I never even realized it was going off.

“Aye!” I imitate Gabe’s salute and grab my phone on the way out. Once in the hallway, I wander around until I find a quiet spot. Just as I am about to unlock it and see who is blowing up my phone, it starts vibrating in my hand. An unknown number is showing on the screen.

“This is Evelyn,” I say, my voice echoing in the empty hallway.

“Vee. Can we talk?” Cole’s raspy voice catches me off guard. My whole body freezes as a shocked breath escapes me, my heart thumping painfully in my chest. “Vee.” That nickname used to be reserved for just him.

“Please?” he adds, and finally, I can shake off the shock. With trembling fingers, I remove the phone from my ear and end the call. Then I block the number. For good measure, I shut it off completely.

I lean against a nearby window and stare at my reflection, trying to calm myself down. Breathe in, Eve. Hold. Breathe out. Again. In and out. In. And out.

It’s not surprising that Cole managed to get my number. What I find more surprising is the fact that he went searching for it now. Seven years. He had seven years to do that.

Taking another deep breath, I brace myself before I walk back inside.



When the shock wears off, it's replaced by frustration. Then frustration quickly turns into annoyance. It's not just that Cole called me, it's the implications. Where did he get my number? If he called me in the office, it would be one thing; that number is more or less public knowledge. My mobile number isn't. And I can't imagine anyone from Scaena giving it out randomly.

I stew on my questions as Gabe finishes recording the three songs, trying to redirect my focus to the lyrics and instruments. The team is efficient though, and there is not much input I can give them as they play through the songs again and again, until Emily and Gabe give their approval.

Unease gnaws at my thoughts when Emily announces that we are done for the day. The songs have turned out amazing with Gabe's interpretation and twist to them. Now, the memory of Cole's unwelcome call is back with full force. With clammy hands, I step out into the hallway and turn on my phone, expecting the worst.

I'm sure there will be more lists from of potential artists from Peggy, maybe a scolding and telling me to get to it. Sometimes I still get emails asking for interviews with Mia. Instead, what greets me are a ton of missed phone calls. Three numbers have called me, around fifteen times each, in the last five hours, and there are two numbers in between that have called me once each.

I sigh and contemplate which numbers to block. While it might be the Hystoria guys, what if it's something else, or

urgent? I guess I should at least answer the unknown numbers once, just to make sure that it's not anyone else trying to get a hold of me. Maybe Liam lost his phone in a club again, and that's his way of letting me know he has a new number.

“Bad news?” Gabe suddenly appears next to me, a bottle of cold water in his hands.

“Someone got wind of my phone number,” I tell him, my voice tight as I try to hide my irritation. “I might have to change it if they don't stop spamming me. At least they are not bothering Peggy.” I take a deep breath and try to relax.

“She would make your life hell.” Gabe takes a swig of his water, barely able to contain a grin. “I remember back when I didn't have my post box and she had to deal with all the fan mail. I had to buy her a very expensive cake to get back into her good graces.” He chuckles.

“The chocolate one?” A small grin tugs at my lips.

“Nougat.”

“Oh, she must have been incredibly pissed.” We both laugh, the tension in the air dissipating slightly. At least for a few seconds, until my phone rings again with an unknown number showing on the screen.

“Want me to answer?” Gabe gives me a questioning look, but I shake my head before I lift the phone to my ear.

“Yes?”

“Viv, just let us explain,” another familiar yet strange voice pleads on the other end.

“No,” I say simply and block this number as well.

“Cole?”

“No, I think that was Simon,” I reply and roll my eyes. “I think I should go home and sort this mess out.” I shrug apologetically and walk back into the studio to pack all the notes we wrote and my laptop into my bag.

Gabe follows close behind and gathers his own belongings as well. “Thank you, everyone! Have a good evening!” I shout and wave, before I exit the recording room. I distinctly hear Gabe saying goodbye as well, then the door opens behind me, and hurried steps catch up to me.

“I’m taking you home,” he insists and opens the door for me.

“There is really no need,” I object, but he shakes his head. “I can take the bus.”

“I know you can. I’m still bringing you home.” He nods towards his company car, a sleek Mercedes with tinted windows. “Hop in.”

I do as he says. Good thing that I walked to the studio today. It took me an hour and a half, and while it helped to wake me up after my night’s little sleep, exhaustion is catching up to me quickly. Just as I fasten my seatbelt, my phone starts vibrating again. At least this time I recognize the caller ID.

“It’s Peggy,” I tell Gabe, who has just gotten into the car, and he grimaces. I am not religious, not at all, but I send a quick prayer to whichever God there is.

“Hi, Peggy,” I answer in the most cheerful tone I can muster.

“We have some packages here for you.” She cuts right to the chase, and I can hear the annoyance in her voice.

“I feared that could happen.” I grimace, feeling Gabe’s curious gaze burning a hole into the side of my head. “What kind of stuff?”

“Flowers. Chocolate. A bottle of expensive tequila.” I feel my stomach churning at the mention of tequila. Tequila with orange juice was my drink of choice when I was a teenager. I swore it off after getting too drunk at one of Liam’s birthday parties. It caused the worst hangover I ever had. I remember the pounding headache and throwing up like it was last weekend. Ever since that near-death experience, I stick to the occasional fruity cocktail or beer, only sometimes resorting to harder stuff. For example, when Hystoria ambushes me at a charity event. Liam still teases me about it, but I am never touching tequila again.

“Peggy, I am so sorry.”

“There are a bunch of cards too. Something about being sorry and wanting to talk? Whose heart did you break? Oh, this one says Pax.” I close my eyes and take a deep breath, bracing myself for what I know is coming after the gears in her head stop spinning.

“Paxton? Hystoria Paxton? *Evelyn Duncan!* What the hell did you do?” I hold the phone a bit away from my ear.

“Nothing, Peggy. They’re the ones who screwed up. I’m innocent in this.”

“*They?* You have a lot to explain!” I hesitate and rack my brain, trying to think of a way to handle this without revealing too much.

“I’ll make you a deal. You put any cards or messages on my desk and keep the presents. In exchange, I won’t explain anything in detail. Deal?”

I cross my fingers and hope she accepts this bargain. While it was surprisingly easy to share everything with Gabe, I know he won’t tell anyone else. Peggy is great, but she is not the most adept at keeping secrets. Not at all. Once, a one-night stand drove me to work because I was running late. We arrived at the same time as Peggy. The guy didn’t even get out of the car and there was no PDA whatsoever, yet by afternoon, no less than five people had asked me about my new boyfriend. Telling them he wasn’t was awkward as hell.

“You drive a tough bargain,” she says quietly as I can hear her fingers tap onto her desk the way they always do when she’s thinking hard.

“And everything else that might come in,” I elaborate on my offer, and she chuckles. Meanwhile, Gabe starts the car and maneuvers out of his parking spot.

“Alright, alright, I’m convinced. Only because that chocolate is a damn good one, young lady.”

“Thank you, Peggy.” I sigh in relief and sink back into the comfortable car seat. I tell her where to put the cards, and then she dismisses me, since she has more work to do.

“What does a girl have to do to be left alone?” I roll my eyes and scroll through my phone. Maybe Liam should give them a call and tell them to leave me alone. He can be intimidating if he wants to be.

“Do you think they will give up?” Gabe’s eyebrows furrow in concern. I shrug.

“Probably not,” I sigh. “I guess I’ll have to call Joe later and let him know that I will work remotely the rest of the week. I just can’t deal with that right now.”

“You could come back to the studio tomorrow.”

“I don’t think that’s a smart idea,” I admit. “I really need to book a therapy session with Barbara and make some sense of where my head is. I won’t be of much help.” A yawn escapes me. “Plus, it looks like I have a situation to take care of. That’s the first time I’ve had to deal with this kind of stuff personally, so that feels a bit weird.”

“Maybe you should really hear them out,” Gabe suggests and my head whips around. I glare at him. “I’m just saying it. Maybe they will leave you alone then.”

“They won’t.” I slowly avert my gaze and look out of the window.

“What makes you so sure?”

“Experience, Gabe. I’ve been dealing with men in this industry for a while now. Give them an inch and they take a mile. I’ve seen it with Mia and experienced it myself plenty of times.”

“Not all men are the same though.” I roll my eyes.

“No, but as a woman, you pick up certain vibes. Men in power positions are persistent and I’ve hurt their egos. Meeting them will not be a friendly chat and I am not up to hashing it out with someone I have no interest in being in the same room with,” I explain firmly.

“Why not?” he presses, his tone coaxing.

“Because I don’t want to. It’s that easy.” I am aware that I sound like a toddler who is trying to get out of eating broccoli, but that is really all there is to it.

“You don’t want closure?”

“No, Gabe,” I snap at him, my annoyance mixed with exhaustion destroying my niceness filter. “My life was perfectly fine without them in it. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“But what if they’ve changed?”

“Oh, they’ve changed alright.” I scoff mockingly. “They’ve become arrogant jerks who expect me to ask ‘how high’ when they demand that I jump.”

“Maybe you just caught them on a bad day.”

“What the hell is going on, Gabe?” I am furious. “Why would you find excuses for them when I just told you what they did to me?”

“I’m just saying, if I made a mistake, I would appreciate being given a second chance.”

“They didn’t make a mistake, Gabe,” I say, massaging my temples as my head starts to throb. Great, now I’m getting a headache. “They made several conscious decisions to steal from me and discard me like an empty candy wrapper.”

“Maybe they still deserve the chance to make things right.”

“Good thing we’ve talked about this recently. Here is your reality check, Gabe. You can appreciate all you want, but that still does not mean that anyone owes you a second chance.” I cross my arms. “And thinking you do is really damn arrogant. You fuck up, you live with the consequences. Some fuck ups are just not forgivable. And if you’re going to say that ‘forgive and forget’ is better for my conscience or whatever, I swear to God, I will jump out of this car no matter how fast we’re going.”

“Okay, then I won’t. But I will be thinking about it.” Dismayed, I feel wetness pooling in my eyes.

“Well, I can’t stop you.” I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself and blink back the tears. Sometimes I hate being an angry crier, and today is one of those times. “You can think all you want, as long as you keep it to yourself. But if this friendship means anything to you, you will make sure to stay the fuck out of this,” I say angrily, and grab my bag. We finally stop in front of my house.

“I mean it.” I look at him. “Saying ‘they deserve a second chance’ is easy for you, but for me, it’s being confronted with trauma I worked very hard to overcome. And I deserve to put myself first in this and have people respect my boundaries,

especially people I consider friends. Goodnight.” I see that he wants to say something, but I don’t give him a chance to reply. Without looking at him again, I get out of the car and close the door just forcefully enough that I know it will annoy him.

“Write three hit songs for a guy, and that’s how he thanks me,” I mutter, and ram my key into the lock of my front door, rattling it, as it doesn’t want to turn. “Fuck him. Fuck Hystoria. Fuck this goddamn fucking door.” Finally, the door opens, and I walk inside. “What a fucking day.”

“Please, tell me I’m not crazy?” After hopping in the shower, I couldn’t help but doubt myself. Knowing Liam is always quick to call me out, I called him. I value Gabe, he is a great friend. But I need to know that I am not crazy for sticking to my guns.

“First of all, what the fuck?” Liam asks, astonished. “Second of all, why the fuck do you only call now, and not as soon as you came home from the charity ball? Third of all, why did Gabe not film you putting Paxton in his place? I would have paid good money to see that!” I chuckle at the comment.

“Oh, it felt amazing. But that’s not the issue.” I take a deep breath before I continue. “Am I crazy for not giving them a second chance? And for not letting them explain?”

“Gabe is a great guy, but sometimes he can be a bit insensitive. You are not crazy for not wanting to forgive those assholes. They hurt you, and if you don’t want to reconcile, it’s not Gabe’s place to butt in.”

“Thank you, Liam. I really needed to hear that.”

“No need to thank me, babe. If Gabe can’t respect your decision on this, maybe he’s not as great of a friend as you thought. I kind of want to fuck his shit up for even saying that.”

“I hope you mean that in a metaphorical sense, not literally.”
I chuckle.

“Ew!” Liam exclaims, and I hear Mateo laughing in the background.

“Anyway, I’m a bit stuck,” I admit.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“I mean that I have no fucking idea what to do,” I reply with a trembling voice, and grab my blanket to wrap it around me. At this point, I want to hide from the world and never leave my house again.

“How about you stay home for the rest of the week? You don’t really need to sit in your office to research artists,” Liam suggests, concern clouding his voice.

“True.”

“That’s step one. You stay home, you do your work, and you pick a new artist. Or you take the break that you would hound Mia to take, have a little vacation this week, and get a puppy that Mateo and I can watch when you’re on tour. Step by step.”

“A puppy?” I repeat, surprised.

“Say the word, and I’m driving to a shelter with you,” he promises, and I feel the corners of my mouth lifting. Only a bit, though.

“I got you to smile by thinking about dogs, didn’t I?” he chuckles.

“Yeah, you did.”

“Great. Now, call Barbara for an appointment, then call Dad, and tell him you’re taking some days off. What time am I coming over tomorrow?”

Chapter Nine

TAKING THE REST OF the week off was one of the best things I've done in a while. I will give Liam that. I didn't realize how exhausted I was and how I'd neglected my mental health with everything going on. No wonder my body had to catch up on sleep. After my phone call with Liam, I hopped into the shower and then went to bed. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I conked out.

The next day I was woken by the doorbell, as Liam showed up on my doorstep to announce that he'd also taken some time off work, for some much-needed sibling time. I'm sure he knew that was exactly what I needed.

After my argument with Gabe, I found myself drowning in doubt and 'what ifs'. Liam listened carefully as I talked through them and provided input where my thoughts were stuck. I also made good on my promise of booking an appointment with Barbara, and we had a long talk about the situation as well, especially about me relapsing into self-deprecating thoughts. It was a hard conversation, and I cried a lot, but at least now I feel like I have a grip on the situation instead of drowning, feeling paralyzed as I'm caught in an ocean current.

"You are going through very complex emotions. Processing them can be a long and difficult journey," she'd said. "It's like peeling the layers of an onion. Each layer potentially reveals something painful and new to think about. It's not fun, but it's important to take the time to do it properly. It's easy to get caught up in the moment, and make permanent decisions in the

heat of it, but taking the time to analyze the situation with a clear mind will give you a whole new perspective on everything.”

“And remember, there is no rush, and no shame in taking the time you need. Whether you want to forgive them or not is your choice. Only your choice. You can also decide to hear them out, for closure, and not forgive them. Do it at your pace, and do whatever makes you feel comfortable.”

I’ve been stewing over this the whole week. I shut off my work phone and made an effort to relax and push any big decisions to the back of my mind to revisit after I’ve been able to clear my head. Liam and I spent the week watching movies, baking together, and clicking our way through some shelter websites. Sadly, while all the dogs were really cute, we couldn’t find one that would be available for a first-time dog owner.

Liam made it easier to think through stuff. He listened and made suggestions, and just knowing that he was close, so I could word-vomit whenever I needed to, helped a lot. I am not that much closer to knowing what to do, but now I feel more comfortable with that.

Still, my mind is in a constant back and forth. It’s like I have an angel and a devil on my shoulder; only in my case, one of the voices is Gabe, while the other one changes between Barbara and Liam.

Today is my first day back in the office. I wave at Peggy and Joe as I pass them chatting in the kitchen, and stop to talk to

Sarah, one of our marketing employees, for a second. In reality, I'm stalling. I just know that a heap of messages, missed calls, and emails is waiting for me.

My heart races with apprehension as I open the door to my office. With a deep sigh, I set my bag down, and start my computer before I sit. As the screen flickers to life, I glance at my phone.

153 missed calls. Over 200 messages. Lastly, around 50 emails. I whistle at the last number; that's actually far less than I was expecting. As my computer loads, I skim through the messages, and block the numbers that obviously belong to Hystoria's members. They must have asked others to use their phones because there are so many more than four numbers that have been spamming me.

I'm growing more and more irritated. It's one thing to ask someone for a favor, but it's an entirely different thing to spam someone when they say no. So unprofessional. At least they didn't flood my inbox.

I take a deep breath and decide to tackle the emails first. Good thing most people know me well enough to send me an email when they can't reach me on my phone. That makes it easier to find out if I need to call anyone back. It looks like I don't need to, though.

Once I've cleared all inquiries from my inbox, I open the list of artists Peggy has sent me so far. I scroll down. There are 80 bands and artists on it so far. I sigh and rub the bridge of my nose. That's so many!

Well, no helping it. I reach for my headphones and pop them on, then I type the name of the first band into my trusty search engine and check out their releases and music videos. They're not good. Talented producers and sound engineers can work wonders, but this band sounds like their songs were recorded by a band member's uncle, who is a hobby DJ. Which is a shame, because the foundation of their music is not bad.

I tap my finger against the top of the table as I click on another song. It's still lacklustre, but the melody is more engaging. Then the singing joins in and I grimace. Yeah, that's a no.

Opening my e-mail again, I draft a quick template to use for responses. Even though Peggy offered to send rejections out in bulk, I want to give bands a chance to improve. It's the least I can do to show them how thankful and honored I am that they trust me enough to want to lay their careers in my hands. Maybe they will get back to us when they've figured themselves out. So I draft a quick feedback, along with my rejection, and send it out.

When my lunch-alarm goes off, I have barely made a dent in the list. Maybe I've underestimated how long the work would take. Whatever. Luckily, I have no deadline. I know Joe would prefer me to take my time and find an amazing band or artist for the company, instead of rushing and picking someone I'm not one hundred percent behind. Just like me, he values quality over speed.

Hunger starts to gnaw at my insides, and I raise my arms for a quick stretch before I get up. What do I want to eat today? As I walk over to my jacket, I weigh my options. There is a supermarket in the building next door. Supermarket food is somewhat boring though. The burger restaurant around the corner doesn't sound great right now either. Then I remember that a new Chinese place opened a few weeks ago. That sounds divine right now.

Decision made, I begin to shrug on my jacket. Suddenly, my door swings open without a knock, and I startle. When I realize that it's Joe with a steaming bag in his hand, a smile spreads on my face.

"Do you have some time for me? I come bearing lunch." He holds up the bag, and my eyes light up when I realize it has the logo of the Chinese place on it.

"Always!" I reply, smiling at him and the food in his hand. "You're a mind reader. I was just about to head out and get Chinese myself." I return my jacket to the hook, and scurry to the kitchen to grab some plates and cutlery. As much as I love seeing Joe fumble with chopsticks, I'm feeling nice today and grab him a fork.

When I come back, Joe takes containers out of the bag and places them in the middle of the table so we can get some of everything.

"How is it going?" He looks over at my closed laptop. I chew on a spring roll and contemplate for a moment before answering.

“Alright, I think. There are a bunch of no’s and I put two on a ‘maybe’ list. Nothing that has really knocked my socks off yet.”

“That’s about what I expected,” he mutters and nods in understanding. “Say, could you do me a favor and make a ‘top ten maybe’s’ list as well? I’ve been thinking about expanding the business and would love a few more recommendations from you.”

“Sure,” I reply, happy to help out. “That’s the first I’ve heard of an expansion though.” I lean in a bit closer. “How many people are you hiring? Who do you have your eyes on?”

“I have nobody in particular in mind yet,” he says, but the mischievous grin he sports betrays him. “I might have heard that Spotlight has run into some troubles recently.” He clears his throat. “And I might have been approached by several of their employees.” The twinkle in his eye tells me this was definitely the case.

I raise an eyebrow in curiosity. “Spotlight? Wow, never thought that would happen. And their bands don’t want to leave?”

“They do, but their contracts will make it difficult.” He lets out a frustrated sigh. “Currently, it looks like they will have to go down with their ship before they can sign on elsewhere.” The twitch in his eye tells me he’s not happy with that. “No wonder Spotlight is going down, though. They have two managers per artist. I don’t know why, but we have never needed that.” He shakes his head in disbelief. “Don’t know if

they still work with messenger pigeons, or what, but we've never needed more than one manager per artist."

"I mean, if you have coddled, arrogant artists, like Hystoria, I get it. You'd need one person for tactical, one for babysitting." Joe's booming laugh startles me for a second and I almost choke on my fried rice.

I decide to switch the topic and ask him how Rose is doing. She called me at home yesterday and told me about new flowers she bought for their home, to decorate it autumnier, and Joe confirms that she is in an absolute decorating frenzy for fall and Halloween. Then he asks me about my week and whether it helped me relax.

"A bit," I confirm. "Liam and I had a good time and I cleared my head. I've blocked all of their numbers now, but I'm sure they will find other ways to call. So if you want to reach me, call my house number."

"Sure, absolutely," he promises. "And let me know if you find out how they got your number."

"Don't worry, I doubt it's a label-wide data breach," I say as he scoops up the rest of his sweet and sour sauce up with his last spring roll. "Just loose lips."

"I sure hope so," he grumbles, as he checks the clock on the wall behind me. "On that note, I have a meeting in," he checks the calendar on his phone, "five minutes ago, so I'll be off!"

"Leave the containers, I'll deal with them. Thanks for the food."

“Anytime!” he shouts as he disappears out my door. I collect all the containers and flatten them, then stack the plates and utensils and bring them to the kitchen. On my way back, Peggy waves me down.

“Sorry, Peggy; if this is about more fan mail, I’m not sure what to do,” I say sheepishly.

“It’s not about more fan mail, don’t worry.” She chuckles. “But now that you mention it, here are all the cards.” She rummages behind her desk and produces a sizeable stack. “Have fun reading them. I promise, no peeking.” Her eyes drill into mine and I squirm under her gaze, but I don’t budge on telling her more about what’s going on. “Someday I’ll get it out of you,” she says, disappointed when I don’t relent. “But you have a visitor.”

My heart sinks. “Please tell me it’s not—”

She doesn’t even let me finish. “Don’t worry. It’s a woman. She’s waiting by the elevator.”

“Okay,” I say, stunned. “Thank you, Peggy.”

My mind races as I make my way to the elevator. Who could it be? It can’t be Mia, she’s still in her cabin, far away from here. From what she’s written me so far, she really likes it there. Also, Peggy would just say her name instead of saying ‘a woman.’ So it can’t be Rose, either, for the same reason. Did I forget something at Yuki’s?

Maybe one of the artists that asked to be considered sent their mother to persuade us? It wouldn’t be the first time, nor

the weirdest thing to happen at Scaena.

My footsteps echo down the hallway as I make my way to the elevator. As I turn the corner, I notice a woman inspecting one of our artist pictures on the wall. She has her back to me, brown hair reaching down to her shoulders. Not wanting to startle her, I clear my throat softly to announce my presence.

“Hi. I heard you wanted to see me?”

She turns around slowly. Her eyes meet mine, and immediately my heart jumps as I recognize her face. It’s Rachel.

“Vivien!” she says warmly, her face lighting up as she walks towards me with her arms stretched out for a hug. Shocked, I instinctively return her affectionate embrace.

She smells like the cinnamon buns she always used to bake. I blink back tears as memories of us baking them together rise to the surface. She pulls away from the hug, only to hold me at arm’s length to examine me with her kind eyes. I can’t help but do the same. Subtle wrinkles have formed in the corners of her eyes, and up close, I notice the strands of grey hair. However, the kindness on her face, and tenderness in her eyes, remains unchanged.

“You look great!” she says warmly, and I finally snap out of my trance.

“You too, Rachel.” My face feels tight as I force a smile. It’s good to see her, but I am still too shocked to make sense of it, my heart beating excitedly in my chest. “What a surprise.

Come on; let's catch up in my office." The hallway has ears, and I have my suspicions confirmed when we round the corner and I see Peggy's door closing. I open the door to my office and let Rachel enter before me.

"Do you want a coffee?" I ask her, and she nods enthusiastically, her curious gaze wandering all over the room. I leave her in my office and hurry to the kitchen, where I close the door behind me immediately and lean my back against it. Holy shit. I take deep breaths while I gather my thoughts. Once the shock has worn off a bit, I take two mugs out of the cupboard and let the coffee machine do its thing.

What is it with people giving out my information? I rub my temples and add it to Cole's shitlist. After all, who else could it have been? Still, that does not quite explain what she wants here. I take the two mugs and add milk to mine, and sugar to hers, before walking back into my office. When I open the door, I find her studying the pictures on my wall. They are milestones I had in the industry: Gabe's brightly smiling face as he accepted his first award, Mia grinning widely on her first red carpet, and me beaming backstage at Mia's first stadium show, feeling like I'm on top of the world.

"That's quite impressive," she says, and I can't help but feel a sense of pride.

"Thank you." I put both of our mugs on the table and sit down. Rachel follows suit, her eyes still wandering along my picture-plastered wall. Then, to my surprise, she opens her bag and takes out a container.

“Really?” I ask excitedly. “You brought me cinnamon buns?”

She nods, a warm smile on her face as her eyes find mine. “I sure did,” she confirms and opens it, my mouth watering as the smell hits my nose.

“I’m so glad to see you, Viv,” she says again and pushes the container towards me.

“I go by Evelyn now. Or Eve,” I tell her, and take the pastry she offers me. I sink my teeth into it, the warm, gooey frosting melting in my mouth like a popsicle on a dashboard in the summer. I groan as the cinnamon flavor hits my tongue. “God, they’re as good as I remember. Thank you.”

“That explains how I never found anything about you online.” Rachel’s voice is filled with wonder, her eyes wide as the last puzzle piece falls into place.

“You searched for me online?”

“Of course. I figured out pretty quickly what happened, and I’ve been trying to find you ever since.”

“Oh, wow.” I lean back in my chair, a mixture of emotions battling inside me. “How did you find out?”

She chuckles.

“Well, your sister is quite the talker. She confided her plan to some friends. They grew suspicious because she was suddenly hosting so many get-togethers when your parents were out of town. I think she expected them to applaud her, but let me tell

you, they were not very impressed with her. In fact, they were horrified.”

“Is that so?” A grin slowly spreads on my face, as I imagine her shocked face.

“Absolutely. The news spread quickly. A day later, the whole town knew. Everybody was talking about it wherever she went. I think a year or two later, she left town. From what I heard, she finally found a university that accepted her.”

“Who would have thought?” I say with a chuckle. Karma might be a bitch, but she hoes in my favor.

“Who, indeed?”

“So, let me guess,” I change topics quickly. “Your son told you where to find me?”

“That would be correct.” Rachel gives a playful wink.

“Did they send you?”

“They might have,” she replies coyly, shifting in her seat uncomfortably. “So if anyone asks you, I have tried my hardest to convince you to talk to them.” I raise my eyebrows, trying to make sense of it. “But, from woman to woman,” Rachel leans forward, lowering her voice, “let them stew. They deserve it.”

“They do, indeed. How much did they tell you about what happened?” I’ve always been curious about that.

“Oh, I know everything,” she confirms. I nod. Of course, she does. “Cole doesn’t stand a chance against me. One strict look,

and he spilled.” She leans forward and places a comforting hand on mine. “I am so sorry for what they did to you. You didn’t deserve that.”

“That means a lot, coming from you.” I squeeze her hand and blink back tears that are forming behind my stinging eyes.

“I do wish you had come to me, but I understand why you didn’t,” she adds, her voice comforting. “You’ve never been great at asking for help. But I am so glad to see that you have done well for yourself.”

“Thank you, Rachel.” I smile tearily. “It was hard to see them again. From woman to woman,” I repeat and take a deep breath, “do you think I should hear them out?”

She leans back in her seat, considering my words carefully. “What is making you hesitate?” is her counter question.

“It feels like I would not be the one to benefit from any conversations,” I admit. “I made my peace with not having closure, and if that would be the only reason for talking to them, it is not enough for me. The only other reason I can think of is that *they* want closure or forgiveness.”

“Closure,” she ponders, taking a moment to think. “I can’t speak for all of them, obviously. But I know that it’s been eating at Cole all these years. My boy was in love with you, as I’m sure you know.” My eyes widen. Yes, we kissed, but the L-word never left either of our lips. “Well, now you know. Oops.” Rachel shrugs, a small smile playing on her lips as she continues. “So I’m sure forgiveness and closure play into his

motivation. As for the others—” She takes a deep breath, worry shining in her eyes when she proceeds.

“They’ve been struggling. All four of them. Their label overworks them to the point they can’t produce good music, which leads to them working even more to make up for it. Trust me, I make no secret of the fact that they would not be in this position if they had you in their corner. You always knew how to stand up for yourself and your friends. Also, they could use a healthy dose of real talk and people who are willing to give them a kick in the butt, instead of kissing it.”

“Yeah, I noticed Paxton packs quite the ego now.”

“Oh, the others aren’t coming up short on inflated egos either.” Rachel sighs. “I’m not saying they’ve turned into bad people, but they could definitely benefit from some guidance. Maybe they want to reconnect because they miss your friendship. But I heard you are very well connected in the industry, so I don’t blame you for thinking that’s what they want. Hell, after everything that’s happened, what else are you supposed to think?” She leans back in her seat. “I am not planning to interfere with this in any way, but I hope we can stay in touch, and have coffee from time to time, no matter what happens between you and the boys.”

“Of course. I would love that,” I say, delighted. Back then, I couldn’t gather the courage to say goodbye to her. But of all the people I had to leave behind, she’s the one I’ve missed the most.

We chat more and fill each other in on our lives. Rachel tells me about her fiancé, and how she moved to Los Angeles to be closer to where Cole lives and is going to follow him here to New York, where he's bought an apartment with the intention to settle down. Apparently, she was in town to have a look at apartments herself.

In turn, I tell her about my job and what it entails. I share my favorite memories from tours, and we laugh together as I recount them. She asks me a million questions about the European cities I've visited, as she's still not decided where she would like to spend her honeymoon. Paris is too cliché for her, London too rainy, and Berlin too loud. Maybe Amsterdam would be more up to her speed.

I barely notice the time passing, until I glance at my phone and realize that two hours have passed. Rachel must have noticed my critical expression. She stands up and gathers her belongings.

“Oh dear, I didn't mean to keep you from work for so long,” Rachel says apologetically. “But I'm so glad we got the chance to catch up.”

“No, no. It's okay. I'm so glad you stopped by.” I feel a pang of sadness as I emerge from behind my desk and help her into her jacket. “It was really good to see you.”

“You, too,” she replies, and turns around to face me. “You know, I always thought of you as my daughter. To be honest, I hoped Cole would make you that officially. But even if not, I would never think any differently.” Instead of an answer, I

raise my arms for a tight hug, hoping it conveys all the love I have for her. As we pull away, I hand her one of my cards.

“Here is my number.” I let her know. “My private number is on the backside, although it will probably be hard to reach me as long as certain band members spam my phone.” I wink. “Thank you for coming by, Rachel. I really missed you.” She raises her hand to cup my cheek.

“I really missed you too. We will keep in touch,” she promises and hurries out of the door. I slump back into my chair and bury my face in my hands.

Chapter Ten

LOOKING INTO ALL THE artists Peggy sent over is taking me a lot longer than expected. There are so many talented musicians out there. I've found a few that I'm planning on recommending to Joe, but honestly, none of them have completely blown me away yet. I'm still holding out hope. If there is no one on Peggy's list, maybe it's time to hit up some local bars to scout new talent. After all, finding talent in the wild has worked well for me so far.

Oh. Actually, I like that idea. Maybe Joe will let me travel and hit up bars all over to scout new talent. I could make an adventure out of it! Then again, I've just come home after several months of traveling. I will keep that idea in mind.

As I drag myself into the elevator of the company building, I can't help but let out a heavy sigh. Today was especially rough. I spent what felt like an eternity doing research, only to have Joe call me into a meeting to help decide on our new distribution partners. While I appreciate the fact that Joe wants my opinion to weigh in on his decisions, there is nothing worse than meetings where old men discuss deals among themselves, while they expect me to take notes and get coffee for everyone like some kind of glorified assistant.

In addition, the other three men that were part of the meeting just love the sound of their own voices, never mind the fact that they talk in nonsensical circles for what feels like an eternity in a never-ending loop of boredom and frustration. So, fair to say, I'm ready for a quiet evening.

As I step out of the elevator, my eyes catch sight of Gabe, who is standing with his back to me, chitchatting with our receptionist. I resist the urge to pummel him with one of the large plants in the lounge.

I love Gabe, I really do. Did. Whatever. Fundamentally, he's a good guy, but the way he is trying to push his own empathy onto me is not cool. Even after our fight, he hasn't let up and is trying to push me toward Hystoria, even though I've made it more than crystal clear that I am not interested in talking or reconnecting.

After my talk with Barbara, I tried to see things from his perspective. Maybe he is actually convinced that he's trying to be helpful. But now, a week later, all I feel is frustration at his persistence. So, I've decided to keep some space and steer clear of him, for the time being. Which was easy as long as I was at home and could act as if I wasn't when he knocked on my door. Now in the office, it's proving more difficult. I never realized how much time he actually spends here.

When Linda, our receptionist, sees me, my hand flies towards my mouth, putting my index finger in front of my lips to signal her to show no reaction. She's great at discretion, so I have no concerns that she won't show her usual poker face. Only a slight nod indicates that she's seen me. I form a heart with my fingers to say thank you and sneak past the two of them quickly, pulling up my hood as I walk through the revolving door, only feeling slightly like a bank robber trying to get away from the crime scene without being seen.

The days are getting shorter and the air colder. Fall is finally approaching. Standing at a red traffic light, a cool breeze blows through my hair and refreshes me after breathing the stale office air the whole day.

Thank God this is a small town, where I don't need to worry about walking home after dark. It never hurts to stay alert, of course, but in a big city like Los Angeles, I would be scared out of my wits. That's just one of the things that makes Scaena so unique. Despite being based in Joe's hometown, close enough to New York City to be in regular business with labels and agencies from there, but far enough to avoid the hustle and wild night life, it manages to keep up with all the big labels out there.

Taking in another deep breath of fresh air, I feel my mind start to clear. I reach for my headphones and put them on. Not quite able to leave work behind yet, I select a playlist full of indie bands. A catchy but basic beat flows into my ears, and I start to bob my head along to the rhythm. The light turns green and I start walking, my steps light on the wet pavement.

The streets are full of people making their way home, some runners, and people walking their dogs. A cute little Corgi walks past me, its little butt wiggling from left to right with each step. Maybe I need to check out some shelters again. That's just too adorable!

Living on my own has been exhilarating. No more walking on eggshells and constantly worrying about my oversensitive sister. No more needing to be quiet after a certain hour,

because the people I live with have gone to bed. I can play my guitar anytime I want to. Does Mother Muse strike me with a whip at three o'clock in the morning? No worries. In fact, do it harder, Mother. Give it to me. I can just sit down with my instruments and tinker with songs. It's such a liberating feeling, but sometimes, it gets a bit lonely.

I come to a halt as the next song reaches its chorus. Lost in my own thoughts, I only now realize how incredible the singer's voice is. It blends beautifully with the instruments, building up a powerful chorus and keeping me engaged when the next verse follows. Quickly, I pull out my phone and start the song from the beginning. I might be onto something here.

I begin to walk again, this time my whole focus on the song. It starts calmly, with just a low male voice and acoustic guitar. The raw emotion in his voice makes me shudder as goosebumps form on my arms, changing from low tones in the verses to high pitched in the bridge, and then powerful and raspy in the chorus. It's so captivating that I don't pay any attention to the instruments, so I start it from the beginning once more.

The guitar's melody is strong, but the bass takes the song to the next level. It's unusual to hear a bass solo, but they make it work seamlessly. I'm growing more and more impressed by the complete picture, each instrument fitting together perfectly like puzzle pieces to create a complete impressive image.

Lost in the music, and in analyzing it, I don't notice the figure waiting on my doorstep until I almost step on him.

I jump back, instinctively reaching for the pepper spray in my pocket, but the man raises his hands in a defensive motion and pulls back his hood.

“Cole?” I say in disbelief. “What the fuck?” His tired eyes and pale face make him look like a different person. So familiar, yet a stranger. He looks at me innocently, and I can feel my anger boiling up inside me.

“Hi,” he says, as though it’s the most normal occurrence that we’re running into each other in front of my goddamn house. I shake my head.

“And bye,” I say through gritted teeth. A heavy silence falls around us, but he doesn’t let me past.

“I need to talk to you,” he says, his pleading voice barely above a whisper.

“Well, there is nothing I want to hear, and nothing I have to say to you,” I answer firmly, and try to push past him.

“Please,” he begs, stepping in front of me. “I know we messed up. I messed up. I need to explain. Let me make it up to you. Please.”

“No. You need to leave.” I finally dodge him and make my way to my front door. The mixture of shock and anger causes my fingers to tremble as I try to fumble the key into the lock. Without looking back, I pull the door shut behind me and throw my jacket into a corner. On second thought, I turn around and pull the door open a tiny crack.

“How did you know where I live?” I demand, my voice laced with apprehension.

Cole remains still. For the first time, I take in his slouched posture, his eyes cast downwards as his arms hang limply by his side. A lump forms in my throat. My heart hurts, tiny needles picking into it as I can't help but feel sorry for him. Nobody deserves to be as exhausted as he looks. Something deep inside me screams to hug him and provide comfort, but I shut that voice down fast.

“Gabriel told me,” he finally says, his voice only a whisper.

“Thanks.” Before I do something I will regret, I shut the door again. “That motherfucker.” I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to calm my heart rate. My mind races with anger. What the hell was he thinking? I can't believe he would stoop so low and just plainly ignore every single thing I've told him.

I take a seat on my couch and try to calm down. Muffled music reminds me that music is still playing on my headphones. I curse. Hopefully, I can still find the song that caught my attention.

I take another deep breath before I unlock my phone and pull up my chat with Gabe. The more I think about everything, the more furious it makes me and my fingers tremble as I type out a message.

Eve: *When did we start giving our addresses to strangers? I would have let your fan club know.*

Almost immediately, I see that Gabe opens my message and within seconds, the three small dots indicate he is replying. I brace myself for his response. It's probably only going to add fuel to the fire.

Gabe: *You should hear him out.*

Another surge of anger washes through me. To say my blood is boiling would be a vast understatement. It is one thing that our opinions on this matter don't align. However, if there is one thing that makes me absolutely furious, it is when people think they can make decisions for me.

Eve: *That's not your call to make.*

I fire back, my fingers moving over the screen quickly. Thank God for autocorrect, because the way I am stabbing at my screen makes the words I am trying to use only vaguely perceptible.

Gabe: *I saw the way you looked when you talked about him. Trust me, I only did what's best for you.*

Eve: *No. You're not. You're trying to make me do what *you* think is right. Making choices about my life without my consent is not okay.*

The chat grows blurred, and I blink away the tears that suddenly fill my eyes. I snivel and wipe my eyes, trying to keep my emotions in check. But it's no use. I can feel the lump in my throat and hear my voice cracking as I start to record a voice message.

“I can’t believe you’d do this, Gabe. I thought we were friends. I honestly did. But you know what? Friends listen to each other. What friends don’t do is meddle in the shit I’ve told you explicitly to keep out of, and what friends do even less is give out a home address. That’s not looking out for me, that’s putting me in danger. And even worse, you’re betraying our friendship.” That might sound dramatic, but honestly, it feels like he’s taken a knife and stabbed me right in the back. “I trusted you. I can’t believe you’d betray my trust like that. How could you?” I pause the recording as my tears start to flow over. Then I continue. “I can’t even look at you right now. Don’t contact me again outside of work. Lose this number.” Before I can change my mind, I hit ‘send’ with a shaking hand and block his number.

I walk upstairs, my mind and heartbeat racing as I try to process what just happened. I hope that taking a scalding shower will help me relax. On the way up, I can’t help but glance out the window to see if Cole has left yet.

He is still there, standing in front of my house, looking lost and exhausted as he stares at my front door. It’s hard to believe that this is the same boy who could make me feel like I was on top of the world. Loved.

Suddenly, Cole slides down into a crouch and buries his face in his forearms. He stays like that for several minutes and despite all the anger, I feel my heart aching for him.

Once upon a time, Cole was the one person I saw in my future. I dreamed of us conquering the stages of the world and

having the time of our lives doing so. Even before that kiss.

But now, as I watch him outside, those former joyful memories hurt. He is no longer the boy I used to know, that much is clear. Now, I am haunted by his pale face, showing bone-deep exhaustion, and regret shining in his eyes. I know I appear like a hardass. I know that my emotions don't show on my face. And I know that I appear okay. But deep down, I'm hurting. All of my wounds are ripped open as my heart is breaking all over again. All of the pain that I felt seven years ago is slowly but surely starting to bubble to the surface, threatening to drown me. Only this time, I know how to swim and how to turn pants into a life vest.

A part of me wants to forgive them just so that I won't have to deal with them anymore, so I can pretend that I am back in my youth, and the world is not a scary place. It is the same part that makes my heart flutter whenever I hear his name on the news or see his face on a screen. That wants to forget he ever betrayed me.

Another part wants to ignore the whole situation and stew somewhere far away until all the drama is gone and Hystoria have forgotten about me again. It worked great for me the last few years. But I know it won't resolve anything in the long term. I'm not the kind of person that runs away, and I'm not going to become one because of Hystoria.

A third part of me wants them to suffer, to make them experience the pain that I felt with their betrayal, and then some. All the guilt, shame, and suffering they caused me. Will

that really make me feel better though? Or would I just stoop to their level?

So how do I navigate all these three parts inside of me screaming at the same volume?



Cole is at my door the next day too. And the one after that. And the next one. Rain or shine, whenever I come home after work, I find him sitting on my doorstep, looking up at me with those puppy eyes. He remains there for hours after I'm home, leaning his back against the front door and looking more and more exhausted every day.

I've even called Rachel and asked her to talk some sense into him. She sounded worried when she promised she would, but he doesn't seem to listen to her. I usually just ignore him, but yesterday, I asked him to leave one more time.

"I will come here every day until you let me talk to you," he said and planted his ass right back on my doorstep, challenge shining in his tired eyes.

"I could have you charged for trespassing, you know?" After all, the front of my door is part of my property.

"Then I will wait on the sidewalk. Would that suit you better?"

I glared at him wordlessly and heard him chuckle as the frustration probably showed on my face. I ran back inside and slammed the door shut. Unfortunately, he's right. The spot

where he usually sits is mostly hidden from the street. If he were to linger on the sidewalk, I'm sure it wouldn't take even an hour until someone recognizes him. Then they will ask why he is standing in front of that particular house and all hell is going to break loose.

In all my time in the music business, I have done my damndest to stay out of any spotlights. Which is a skill, considering my last two artists were top stars. Yet, Cole could erase all my efforts with his mere presence.

I want to be angry with him for being so persistent, but the fact that he manages to be considerate, while annoying me to no end, makes my heart flutter. Which, in return, makes my blood boil. Why can't he just leave me alone, forget he ever existed in my life and let me keep living it as I did these past years?

I still curse Gabe for giving out my address. I don't know if it's only Cole who knows where I live or if the rest of Hystoria knows where to find me as well. The uncertainty makes me a bit nervous. To be honest, it also makes me question what other info Gabe might have shared. I've told him so much confidential stuff that not knowing what else he passed on is making my toes curl.

I have already let Joe and Liam know what's going on. Both of them were outraged on my behalf. Liam even offered to sign Gabriel up for several spam e-mail newsletters as retaliation.

“I've heard Scientology is very insistent.”

“And what are you going to do if they manage to convince him to sign up?” I rolled my eyes and he nodded contemplatively, never having considered that. Then he offered to sleep over if I ever feel unsafe, which sounded like a better plan. I am still thinking about taking him up on either offer. Maybe not Scientology, but some political campaigns, or porn sites, sound like a fun way to get back at him. But for now, I have decided to ignore everything: Cole, the whole Hystoria situation, and Gabe.

Since my voice message, he has reached out to me via his manager’s phone, on my work line, and he even messaged Liam. Liam was more than happy to take the opportunity to lay into him. I overheard parts of their conversation, and damn, Liam really didn’t hold back.

“You know what happens when you leak addresses of girls living by themselves? They get fucking killed, Gabe, Jesus; have you lost your goddamn mind?”

Hearing it from someone else seemed to have opened his eyes. Where he was trying to justify his actions before, now his messages contain apologies. But how much do they really mean if he only came to his senses after somebody else told him he fucked up?

Nonetheless, I remain stuck with an unwelcome guest at my doorstep, and there is nothing I can do about him. At least, not if I don’t want this drama to blow up.

Have I thought about getting it over with and inviting him in? Absolutely. Would it feel like I let him win? Also,

absolutely. Is it the main reason I'm not doing it? Damn right. I'm the main character in my life, and I won't let people be a part of my story who demand to be in it. At least not willingly.

On the other hand, I can't let this continue forever. My nerves are stretched thin already, and my blood pressure rises when I think about going home. But how do I get rid of him? I stop myself when my thoughts turn to 'what would hurt him the most?' This malicious side of me is new. I can be manipulative when it comes to business, and sometimes a bit too honest, but hurting people on purpose is not something I ever want to do.

Confronting Cole obviously doesn't work. I rub my temples. Even Liam proposed hitting where it hurts. But can I do that? I mean, I *could*, but do I really want to stoop that low?

I'm not desperate enough. Yet.

As I approach my house, I notice a group of girls huddled in front of it, chatting excitedly. My stomach drops as I realize they are fans. Of course. This just had to happen. I grind my teeth so hard I can feel a headache approaching, pain throbbing just behind my eyes. Quickly, I walk to the other side of the street, assessing the situation as I approach and hiding behind cars as I get closer.

The girls giggle and fawn over Cole as he signs their notebooks. The smile plastered on his face looks exhausted, even from a distance. I shake my head. Now what?

I can't exactly walk past this group in my front yard without calling attention to myself, so that's not happening. Pictures

will hit social media within minutes; then the paparazzi will get wind of it...I know the drill. It's happened to Mia and Gabe more times than I can count, basically whenever they are in public. I'll just wait here, behind this nice, yet a bit dirty, white van for a few minutes and hope they will go away.



They do not go away. When I peek around the van to see if they have left fifteen minutes later, they are still happily chatting away. I frown. What now? I take my phone out and scroll through my contacts. Should I spend the night at Liam's? But what if the group is even bigger tomorrow?

I look up to assess the group size again. At that moment, Cole's eyes meet mine, and suddenly time stands still. After what can't be more than a second, I'm pulled back to reality. The very messy reality. I can see the slight amusement in his eyes, and the grin on his face suddenly seems more genuine. He has me right where he wants me, and he knows it. I try to convey my irritation with a stern look. Then I nod. An unspoken promise between the two of us.

Gently, he ushers his fans away from my home and down the street where I came from. I hurry to my front door, not even checking for any approaching cars as I cross the street. I just want to be inside, where nobody can see me, and I can pretend that everything is fine.

I unlock my front door in record time and push it closed behind me quickly, locking it again. With a heavy breath, I lean my back against the wooden frame and slowly slide down until my butt hits the ground.

My heart is beating fast. Whether it's because of the adrenaline rush, my short run, or anxiousness about fulfilling my part of the unspoken promise, I don't know. But I guess I will find out.

Chapter Eleven

I'M STILL SITTING ON the ground when I hear a quiet knock on the door. It jolts me out of my spiralling thoughts, back to reality, where I have to face Cole. I groan quietly as I get up, my back hurting from sitting on the hard ground without moving. Maybe I am getting too old for this. I peek through the peephole, already knowing who is lingering behind the door. It's Cole. Of course. I mean, who else would it be?

“Come on, Viv.” His soft voice seeps through the door. He knocks again. I don't know what it is today, but hearing my old name on his lips, his voice laced with pain and hope, hits me like a wave. It pulls me under and makes it hard to breathe. For a moment, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Then another. Until it doesn't feel like I'm drowning anymore, and my anxiety ebbs away. Once I feel calm, I face the door again. I swallow, and before I can change my mind, I open it.

If this were a movie, there would be a spotlight on him and romantic music in the air. In reality, there is just darkness, anxiety, and the sound of a car honking in the distance. It feels inadequate, considering the storm of feelings reeling inside me.

“Can I come in?” And just like that, the storm subsides to a gentle breeze. Yet, loaded with electricity; a gentle buzzing that makes the hair on my neck stand up like a warning before lightning strikes close by.

Still speechless, I move aside and let him step in. The gentle click of the door closing echoes before silence falls around us.

The air thickens with tension as we face each other awkwardly, my eyes wandering anywhere around the hallway but him.

I was wrong. In my last session with Barbara, she asked me if I truly feel like I'm able to let go of the past. I thought I was ready to live without any regrets or feelings that are better off in the past. I was truly convinced that the past doesn't mean anything anymore, that I closed that chapter and would be able to put the book onto a far away shelf in the attic, where I might stumble into it many years down the line. Now, I realize that it's more like it is tattooed on my skin, always a part of me and ever-present.

Suddenly, I am sixteen again, and we are sitting in Cole's garden, joking with each other like we used to. Rushing our homework so we could grab our guitars and make music together.

I blink the daydream away and compose myself. Times have changed, and my name is not even Vivien anymore. Now anger is washing over all of the romantic feelings I ever had for him; frustratingly, I can still feel them simmer just below the surface.

"It's Evelyn," I say wearily and nod toward my kitchen. I need a drink. Not in an irresponsible 'getting drunk to avoid talking to him' way, but oh boy, a shot of Jägermeister would definitely help right now.

"You'll always be Viv to me." He shrugs, flashing a cocky grin at me.

“Probably because, just like that name, I will only remain a part of your past.” Now it’s my turn to shrug. I walk ahead, noting with a hint of satisfaction that the smile has quickly disappeared from his face. I lead the way to the kitchen, feeling his gaze on the back of my head.

“Do you want something to drink?” I ask him as I turn on my stove. Hot chocolate seems like a good way to calm my nerves. I eye the bottle of rum on my shelf. Maybe I will add some later.

“I’ll have what you’re having,” he says, and takes a seat at my kitchen island. I nod and pour some more milk into my pot. I could use my microwave, but for some reason, pot-boiled hot chocolate just hits differently. My hands shake a bit as I measure out the chocolate powder, something I never do. Let’s be real; chocolate is not measured. You pour that stuff in and taste it until it’s right. But I’m trying to appear collected. I stir the milk and keep my eyes on it so it doesn’t boil over.

Finally, it boils, and I can’t avoid Cole anymore. I hand him the mug and sit down opposite him. For now, I am leaving the alcohol out of my drink, but I am still eyeing the bottle.

“So, why are you here?” The words come out a bit harsher than intended. My arms cross in front of my chest as I try to calm myself. Cole looks everywhere but in my direction and takes a long sip of his cocoa. Finally, he sets down his mug and meets my gaze, his eyes holding a mixture of uncertainty and regret.

“I need to talk to you.”

“You mentioned that. Well, this may be your only chance. Go ahead.”

“I owe you an apology.” He spins the mug in his hands, and I can tell he is struggling to find the right words. “I’m sorry.”

That’s it? I didn’t expect a speech, but at least a bit more. I wait for a moment, thinking there will be something else to it, but he remains silent. What a let-down.

“So you’re here because you feel an obligation to apologize?” I raise an eyebrow at him, my defenses going up.

“God, Viv—”

I cut him off and correct him, this time more firmly. “Evelyn,” I remind him sternly.

“Viv,” he doubles down, challenging me. “It’s not like that.”

“Well, then, what’s the deal? You’re in my house, calling me something that’s not my name anymore, and wasting my time. Did you really think an ‘I’m sorry’ was going to cut it?”

“I didn’t think this far,” he admits. Pain flashes across his face before he buries it in his hands. “I thought I’d spend at least another week out there.”

“Well, it’s not like you gave me a choice, but what else is new,” I say bitterly, noting with a pang of satisfaction that he flinches at my words. “If it weren’t for your fan group outside of *my damn home* and the fact I don’t want to end up in any tabloids, I wouldn’t have let you in. So please just get this over with so I can go back to my blissful, regular life, where you don’t exist.”

“I’m sorry,” he tries again. “What we did was inexcusable. Hurting you is the last thing I’ve ever wanted to do. It’s not an excuse but we... *I* never intended for all that to happen.”

“Well, what exactly did happen?” I lean back in my seat, my arms crossing in front of my chest again. Like they can protect my heart as it starts to ache again.

Not knowing what happened has bugged me for the longest time. I came up with so many different scenarios. Made excuses for them or imagined the worst.

“I was dumb. On the way to Los Angeles, I showed the guys your song. It was so fucking good, and I was so damn proud of you. Paxton is the one who took the file and played it to our producers. They loved it and insisted we make it our first single.” He rubs his eyes, suddenly looking ten years older. “The rest of us only realized it when we were in the recording studio.”

“So why did you go ahead with it?” I ask, my tone sharp with anger.

“We tried to stop it. But Pax is really fucking convincing. He told us you gave him permission. We only found out much later that he had lied.”

“When?” I can feel anger bubbling up in me, but I take a deep breath and force myself to stay calm.

“On the day it was released,” he admits with a heavy sigh. “Blocking you was our panic reaction. A shitty one, no doubt.”

“You don’t say.” I laugh bitterly and roll my eyes at that understatement. There is one more question I need an answer to. “Who talked to Clara?”

“That would also be Pax.” He wrings his hands, avoiding my eyes as I fix him with an angry stare.

“Of course. How convenient,” I mutter sarcastically. “Why?”

“I don’t know. As you might have realized, fame got to his head. He’s changed a lot since then.”

“So I noticed.”

“You need to know that I came back for you.” He clears his throat and looks at me with pleading eyes. “I swear to God. I was counting down the days until your high school graduation and until I could see you again. I had everything planned. I had a huge bouquet of roses and bought kneepads to make grovelling easier. I freed up a room in my apartment for you in case you decided to forgive me and come to Los Angeles with me.” He pauses for a moment, taking a deep breath before he continues. “If you call bullshit on everything else I am telling you, I need you to believe this: I came back for you.” He looks at me with such intensity in his eyes that it makes me look away. I nod slightly. I believe him. That doesn’t mean it changes anything.

“Why didn’t Rachel tell you I was gone?”

“I wasn’t the best at keeping in touch that first year,” he admits sheepishly. “And when I did, I never dared to ask about you. I was too scared of what she might tell me. So I kept

contact to a minimum. Mom didn't even know that I was coming back for your graduation. I just appeared in front of our house. She almost shut the door in my face." He glances behind me instead of meeting my eyes. "I searched everywhere for you, picked apart all of our spots, hoping that you left me a message. I even asked your sister where you were, but she wouldn't say." He lets out a deep sigh and finally looks at me again. I gulp.

"I even hired a fucking PI's to find you, but obviously, they were not successful. So what the hell happened?"

"Oh, just about what you would think. After my sister was successful in getting me kicked out, I lived in my car. Then I moved to a stranger's home and found a new family in the long run. That's the short version."

"What's the longer version?" he pleads, his eyes searching for an answer in mine.

"None of your business," I reply, my voice hardening. He sighs, frustrated, and jumps up from his seat to pace my kitchen.

"Please?"

I clear my throat and get up. Striding over to my shelf, I grab the bottle of rum and set it on the table as I slide onto my seat again. Then I pour a hefty amount into my mug and take a long sip, grimacing as the alcohol burns in my throat.

"The longer version," I state and glare when he tries to interrupt, "is that I lived in my car for two years."

“What?” His eyes widen in disbelief, and he covers his mouth with his hand in horror. Maybe he thought I was talking about a few days instead of a longer period of time. I ignore his outburst and continue talking.

“Every day was a struggle. I didn’t know where I could sleep. How I’d be able to finish my GED, or if I even had a future. All the while, my song was playing on the radio every goddamn hour. It was mocking me, digging the blade even deeper, twisting it for good measure. Great times.” I laugh, but it’s a bitter sound that makes him flinch. His hand trembles as he holds onto his mug tightly, his eyes vast but alert.

“I travelled across the States for a while. I tried to figure out what to do with my life, and worked a few odd jobs here and there, so I’d be able to afford food. The traveling part was fun; however, sleeping in a car is not fun. Even today I become claustrophobic in them, even in tour buses. Did you know that people call the police on you when you try to sleep in parking lots? In some cities, people will try to break into your car and do God knows what; I never stuck around long enough to find out. In other cities, they would attempt to steal my tires. I had to stick to rural areas. I had to survive cold winters and hot summers. On the roughest days, I would try to get myself a motel room when I could afford it. My savings held up for around two years of very, very frugal living.

“One particularly brutal winter, Joe’s wife, Rose, found me struggling to stay warm, and invited me to their place for the night. I was suspicious, I mean, thanks to you guys, my trust issues were through the roof. But I had nothing to lose, so I

went.” I shrug. “Fortunately, they were not a family of cannibals or axe murderers.” He flinches, but I continue talking. “Instead, they gave me food, a guest room, and a change of clothes. They invited me into their family. Yet every day, I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.” I take a deep breath. “I would wonder when they were going to abandon me, too. No one just runs around giving people a home. Least of all to me.” I swallow hard, past my closing throat. “Because everyone I trusted had let me down, I did not allow myself to trust them.”

“Oh, Vi—” I glare at him. “Evelyn.”

I clear my throat and continue. “To their credit, they sent me to therapy. It took a long time and a lot of patience, but eventually, I started to truly trust them. They were the ones who proposed an adult adoption to make me feel more secure in their family. That day became the happiest day of my life. I celebrate it now instead of my birthday. Afterward, I had to change my name on all my certificates. That’s when I decided that I was done with Vivien.”

“I don’t know what to say.” His voice quivers, and he wipes his eyes before I can see the tears forming in them.

“If it helps, there isn’t really anything you could say.” He winces. I guess it doesn’t help. “Anyway. Now I’m a manager at Scaena, and sometimes write songs for our talents.”

“For Gabriel?” He still doesn’t look composed, but I’ll allow the change of topic. I’m sure he will stew over everything else

I've said for a while. So I nod, taking a sip of my spiked hot chocolate.

"Amongst others, yes. I've written Apocalypse, Blue Moon, and Reborn, for example."

"I thought they had a familiar touch." He nods, impressed.

"Sure you did," I say sarcastically and take another sip of my spiked cocoa. That's when I realize that I never offered him any of the rum. Oh well, sue me. "So now that you've heard my sob story, what more do you want? You're not here just to catch up," I state plainly, and he nods.

"I wish I were." He runs his fingers through his hair, frustration evident on his face. "Because I absolutely would, if I had found you under better circumstances," he points out.

I roll my eyes. Of course, he would.

"Our label is going to drop us when the contract expires in December. We've been doing everything we can to keep them happy, but it never seems to be enough."

"Okay?" I raise an eyebrow.

"We want you to become our manager. You're the best there is. Please," Cole begs, holding my gaze but I shake my head.

"No," I say firmly. "You've burned that bridge, I'm afraid."

"Yeah, I figured." He smiles sadly. "But I promised the guys I would ask."

I nod curtly, wrecking my brain. Do I know anyone who could benefit from signing them? Or, better, do I know anyone

who would even want to work with them? After all their reputation precedes them.

Maybe Alex. He's one of my oldest friends in the industry and founded Rampenlicht with his fiancé. If I remember correctly, he left a year ago after they broke up. A few days ago, I got some kind of invitation from him. I think he founded his own label. It might be worth a try. As much as I detest Hystoria, if there is a way for one of my friends to benefit from their misery, I'm all for it.

"So?" Cole's voice brings me back to reality. He looks at me expectantly.

"Huh? Sorry, I was distracted."

"I said I want to take you on a date," he repeats, his words hanging in the air as I try to make sense of them. Then anger rushes through me and I'm not sure if I should laugh or smash my mug on his head. The fucking audacity!

"No thanks." I expect him to shrug or for disappointment to wash over his face, but instead, it shows determination.

"Why not?" he presses, his voice growing low. Goosebumps form on my arms. That voice is new. "Do you have a boyfriend? Is it Gabe?"

"That's the second time you've mentioned him. From here, it looks like one of us is into him, and it's not me."

"Don't play with me now, V—Eve," he growls, and I roll my eyes.

“I’m not going on a date because, first of all, you’re not forgiven. We might have had something as teens, but that’s all it was. So get that out of your head quickly, because it’s not happening.”

“So, no boyfriend.” He pumps his fist in the air. “I’ll work for your forgiveness. Whatever it takes.” I look at him incredulously.

“No,” I say firmly.

“Because you don’t like me like that?”

“How would I know? We’re strangers.” I roll my eyes. He leans forward, his eyes drilling into mine.

“We can get to know each other again. Isn’t that exciting?”

“Did you miss the part where you fucking stole from me and led to my homelessness? What makes you think I would ever consider you?” I ask him, flabbergasted.

“I will prove to you that you can trust me!” He sounds eager, his voice bubbling with excitement. I shake my head.

“What about ‘I want you to leave me alone’ is so hard to understand?”

“I’ve been searching for you for seven years, Eve.” At least he finally got my name right. “I’m not giving up so quickly.” He jumps out of his seat.

“Listen, Cole. I don’t date famous people. Never have, never will. Why would I subject myself to all the drama that comes with it, especially after everything that’s happened?”

“Because you like me. Admit it.” I groan and bury my face in my hands, trying to talk myself out of something I might regret. After a second, I take a deep breath and lower them, looking up at him.

“You need to get off your high horse,” I say, my voice laced with exasperation. I stand up and collect our empty mugs. His eyes follow me as I bring them to the sink.

“Was I head over heels for you seven years ago? Absolutely. Is that what you want me to admit?” I take a deep breath, struggling to contain my emotions. But anger starts boiling within me, and despite my efforts, my voice grows louder with each word until I’m shouting at him. “I was so fucking in love with you that I was ready to leave my parents and school behind. You’re the one that convinced me not to. And what did I get?” I take a deep breath and turn my back on him, a bit embarrassed that I lost my cool like that. I shake my head and start washing the mugs. “Trust issues and homelessness is what I got,” I grumble under my breath and put the mugs to the side to dry. “Who do you think you are, demanding me to put myself into the same position again?”

“So no. I will not go out with you,” I state, making it clear, and throw the dish sponge in the sink. “End of the discussion.”

“You’re more straightforward than you were back then,” he remarks, unimpressed by my outburst, his eyes glinting with mischief. “I like it.”

“Yeah, and I tolerate less bullshit. This conversation is over.” I turn to face him, drying my hands on a towel. “I have stuff to

do. You need to leave.”

“I will. Begrudgingly, I want to emphasize.”

“Emphasize all you want, as long as you walk out that door,” I demand, my tone allowing no room for argument. I gesture toward my front door. “And for fuck’s sake, no more hanging out in front of my house.”

“But it’s fun! And I get to see you.”

“And I get anxiety about coming home,” I say deadpan. “So stop it, please.” His expression falters as my words register.

“Anxiety? I never meant to—”

“Road to hell, paved with good intentions, blah blah,” I interrupt him. “I don’t care. Just leave my home out of this. The last thing I need is your fans, or paparazzi, gathering in front of my house hoping to catch you.” He still doesn’t look quite convinced, so I take a low blow. Not below the belt, but almost. “You’ve disrupted my life enough, don’t you think?” I ask him with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, I am still determined to win you over.” He rounds my kitchen island until he stands right in front of me, his familiar scent hitting my nose. I gulp. He’s so close that I fear he might hear my heart beating fast and see the turmoil of emotion in my eyes.

“I’ve waited half my life to be with you. I can wait a little longer.” He leans forward, his breath feathering across my cheek. Before I can even process how close Cole is, he crashes his warm lips against mine. Just for a second.

SLAP

I push him away from me, holding my stinging right hand to my chest. Tears form in my eyes for many reasons as I glare at him, and my breathing grows heavy.

“Worth it.” Cole grins, as he holds his red cheek. He looks like he wants to add something, but changes his mind, and quickly walks out the door. The click of him pulling it shut behind him sounds heavy in the sudden silence. My lips are still prickling, and my hand is warm from the hit.

Did that really just happen?

I raise my hand, gingerly touching my lips as though I’d be able to feel remnants of him there. Then I sink back onto my seat.

Damn him.

Chapter Twelve

“SEEMS LIKE YOU’VE GOT a suitor.” Liam’s humorless laugh reverberates throughout my office as he saunters inside, carelessly throwing his jacket onto one of my chairs before flinging himself onto another one. His eyes twinkle with curiosity.

“Is that so?” My gaze flickers up from my laptop, eyebrows raised.

“Cole is sitting in the waiting area,” he says, his eyebrow slowly wandering up. Around lunchtime, Peggy let me know he was here for me, her eyes full of unspoken questions burning a hole into the side of my head. To her credit, she didn’t pry. On the way to the kitchen, I told Cole, in no uncertain terms, to leave. Then again, considering our last conversation, what did I expect to happen?

“According to Peggy, he insists on ‘doing the wooing in person now’,” he says, using his fingers for air quotes as the corners of his mouth twitch into a nosy smile. “What’s up with that?”

I sigh and sink deeper into my chair, hiding my face in my hands as I feel heat rising into my cheeks. “I can’t believe he’s still sitting there. I told him to leave three hours ago.”

“That guy is persistent,” he remarks and lets out a whistle. “I respect that.”

“I know.” I scowl. “He’s a menace.” The look Liam shoots me tells me that he doesn’t believe me.

“And he’s so damn nice,” he adds, a note of surprise in his voice. “Holding elevator doors open, greeting everyone coming and leaving. Weren’t Hystoria members supposed to be assholes?”

I have no answer to that, so I only shrug. “He’s so nice that Peggy even offered him a coffee.” I can’t help but chuckle.

“I hope he declined,” I say and sit back up.

“He didn’t, but he smiled through the pain, as she slurped her green tea.” Liam shakes his head as he laughs, and I have to grin. “When I saw him, I was about to let hands fly for what he did to you, but I figured Peggy’s coffee is punishment enough. For now, at least.”

Peggy is the poorest coffee brewer in the office. I don’t know how, but that lady even manages to screw up an espresso on a completely automatic coffee machine. This doesn’t bother her, however, since she only drinks tea.

“Speaking of tea, how was the kiss?” Liam leans over my table to watch me up close, his eyes twinkling with curiosity. “Spill!”

“Wow, that was quite a stretch,” I tease him. Minutes after Cole left my house, I sent Liam a voice message, which was less about the details of the kiss and more about me trying to sort my thoughts aloud. I promised to fill him in the next time we saw each other, so I am not surprised that he couldn’t even wait a day. Gossip queen.

“It was quick.” I clear my throat. “Then it was painful for him, probably.” I shrug.

Liam’s jaw drops. “What?” he almost shouts, amusement showing in the wrinkles forming around his eyes.

“I slapped him,” I say sheepishly and look down shyly.

“You did what?” he exclaims, bursting into laughter.

“Okay, it definitely wasn’t my finest moment.” I shrug sheepishly, defending myself. “But I was surprised. And I was still angry.”

“I wish I could have seen that.” He presses out between chuckles. “So you made out, full tongue action, and then just - SLAP?”

“No, it was just a peck. And the slap followed immediately.” I fan myself, hoping it will help dissipate the heat from my cheeks. It doesn’t work.

“Girl, I don’t know what to say.”

“Then how about you keep your mouth shut?” I bite the inside of my cheek and look him straight in the eye. That was rude of me, but it just slipped out. Luckily, Liam has a thick skin and ignores those kinds of comments. I’ve never been more thankful that he is not easily deterred. My mind really is all over the place; language is the least of my worries.

“Not happening.” Liam grins at me cheekily and blows me a kiss. “So...” He taps his fingers impatiently on the table. “Go on. Tell me more.” I hesitate, not sure what to answer. “What are we thinking? Did you like it? Was it good? He *does* looks

like he's an excellent kisser. He sounds as fierce as you do, maybe I ship you two."

"Seems like you like him." I raise my eyebrows in challenge.

"Seems like *you* like him," Liam retorts, his teasing grin replaced by a more serious expression. I slump a bit.

"Touché."

"Well, do you?"

"Like him?" He nods. "I don't know." I sigh. "It's not that easy. If you're asking if I'm attracted to him, the answer is yes. Of course." I rub my temples. "But do I like him? How would I know? We haven't talked in seven years. Maybe he's an asshole and just able to mask it better than Paxton. So even if I gave him one more chance—" I catch his eyes and raise my pointer finger as I elaborate. "And that's a big 'if'; there is still a big issue."

"You can't trust him." I nod.

"I don't think I can. No. I don't know." I lay my head back and look at the ceiling. "I've been asking myself that ever since he started sitting on my doorstep."

"The fact that you're contemplating it means something, though," Liam points out, and I look at him, confused. "I know you. If it was a definite 'no' you wouldn't waste any more thoughts and energy on it."

"Huh." I consider his words for a moment. It's true. If there was no doubt in my mind that I never wanted to see Cole again, I would not be hesitating. I would have called security

up here to remove his ass from Scaena's office. "I hate to admit it, but you're right."

"I know." He winks, his confidence unyielding. "So, what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know," I whine. "I'm definitely too petty to just welcome him with open arms."

"That's my girl. Does that mean you're planning on caving?" I roll my eyes. I hate the way he worded that. Like I'm losing a competition, which kind of makes me not want to do it after all.

"Probably at some point." I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "I'm not even sure I could call it 'caving.' I've had a thing for Cole for the majority of my life. I can't just turn that off. Even if I wanted to. Trust me, I would if I could." Liam nods understandingly. "I need to see he's sorry. Camping in front of my house is easy, in comparison. Before I can even think about giving him another chance, I need to see some effort from his side."

"Do you think you can get over the past?"

"That's what I've been asking myself for the last week," I reply with a heavy sigh. Liam looks at me with pity. "Maybe. It depends."

"On what?"

"On whether what Cole said was true, and Pax was the one who pulled the strings," I explain, my gaze dropping to the

ground. “Which would still hurt, but not as much, if that makes sense.”

“Oh, it makes perfect sense. Your connection with Cole was much deeper than the one with Pax. After all, he’s not the one who stole your first kiss, almost your virginity, and then a song.”

“Something like that.” I roll my eyes. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not exactly thrilled with Cole for letting this whole thing happen, but I understand being intimidated by a manager and label.” I release another deep sigh.

“So that means we like him?”

“I don’t know.” I bury my face in my hands. “Yes. No. Ugh. As I said, I’ve liked him half my life. That said, I’ve also hated him for many years. Let’s file this question under ‘to be decided.’”

“Well, if you like him, I like him. And if you’re about to claw his eyes out, call me for an alibi.”

“Of course.” I take a deep breath. “I really hope I don’t regret this. Ultimately, I think I’d regret not trying to give him one more chance.”

“You do you. I will support you either way. And if you want to give him one more chance, you should probably start by letting that poor sap in after I leave or Peggy might poison him with her coffee.”

“I will consider it,” I promise him with a grin. “Anyways. How was the venue yesterday?” Mateo and Liam had started

to scout locations for their wedding.

“It was beautiful,” he raves. “Very modern, sleek...”

“So, not what you’re looking for?” I nod in understanding, and he grimaces. I hit the nail on the head. I’ve known Liam for many years already, so I know he always envisioned his wedding to be cliché and in a cute, intimate venue with a lot of flowers.

“Exactly,” he says with a hint of disappointment in his voice.

“Come on, don’t be discouraged so early on. You have a plethora of other options to look at!”

“You’re right,” he sighs. “I just want to be married already. I don’t want to do all the planning and visiting... maybe the cake tasting, that part sounds fun. The rest sounds like it sucks. Don’t you want to take over for me?” he whines, and I can’t help but chuckle.

“I’m not the one getting married, so I’ll pass.” Liam purses his lips for a pout. “Plus, if I ever do get married, it will probably be a destination wedding. That eliminates most of the planning.” I rub my hands together gleefully.

“Eve, I am so fucking tempted to just elope; you cannot imagine.” He groans and buries his face in his hands. “But Mateo’s family would kill me.”

“Oh, I’m sure of that. Plus, you want your cliché wedding, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do,” he answers sheepishly. “And goddamnit, I am going to have it! And I am going to have fun!”

“Yes, you are!” I cheer him on, not able to contain my grin at his newfound enthusiasm.

“Anyway. I need to pester Dad. You have fun with your future lover boy.” He jumps up and walks out of my office quickly. Dumbfounded, I look at the spot where he just sat. That guy can be a whirlwind.



I wait a few more minutes before I walk to our waiting room. I find Cole curled up in a chair, flipping through a magazine resting on his knees, with a cup of, what I assume to be, terrible coffee in his hand. A feeling of warmth spreads through my chest as I take in the scene.

“You look cozy here,” I observe, leaning against the wall. His head snaps up at the sound of my voice, and a grin spreads across his face when he realizes it’s me.

“Vi—Eve! There you are.” He jumps up and holds his arms out for a hug. Then he realizes that we are in full view of the office staff. I can already feel a bunch of curious eyes staring holes in the back of my head.

He quickly drops his arms, his expression turning sheepish. “Do you have an office?” He grimaces, and I nod wordlessly.

Cole follows me, saying “Hi” to everyone we encounter on the way. When we finally arrive, he closes the door behind us with a sigh of relief and leans against it.

“Let’s try this again.” He straightens up and walks over to me. He steps closer, his breath hot against my ear as he pulls me into a warm embrace. I feel my body tense up in surprise, but he doesn’t let it deter him. “Hi,” he whispers softly into my ear, ignoring the shiver that runs through my body. My face is resting against his chest, the thundering of his furiously beating heart making me blush.

“Hi,” I respond quietly, and try to relax just a bit. My arms are trapped between our bodies, but I can feel his hands resting on my hips, his warmth enveloping me gently. I breathe in deeply, taking in the familiar scent of fresh air and cedarwood that he exudes. It reminds me of our last evening; the precious last moments we shared before everything fell apart. I want to drink his scent in, lose myself in it until all my thoughts disappear, and I can allow myself to just go with the flow instead of overthinking.

“You look great,” he mumbles against my hair, and I feel his grip tighten slightly. I gulp, feeling my cheeks turn hot.

“Thank you,” I murmur softly, my voice muffled against his chest as I let my eyes flutter close. For just a moment, I allow myself to let go. To forget about the past and feel this. Only a moment.

He releases me after what feels like an eternity, and although I’m a bit hesitant to step back, I do. Flustered, I bring the table between us and clear my throat as I sit down, schooling my expression before looking at him.

“What brings you here?” I ask nervously, grabbing a pen to fidget with.

“Well, since I heard that Pax’s attempts at bribery have all gone straight to your office manager, I came to deliver my bribery personally,” he says, a playful glint in his eyes.

“Bribery?” I raise an eyebrow, my pen clicking against the table.

“Well, yeah. He thought the most effective way to get you to give us a chance would be to smother you in flowers and chocolate. I didn’t bother to correct him.” He shrugs, a faint smile on his lips. “He’s already dug his own grave. I figured a few more inches would not make a difference.” I burst into laughter and finally feel relaxed enough to let the pen go. His eyes follow my movement. Something changes in his expression when he realizes I’ve stopped fidgeting.

“Tell him Peggy said thanks. So, what do you want to bribe me with?” I lean back in my chair and cross my arms.

“Bribery, ‘win you back present’, whatever you’d like to call it.” His admission catches me off guard.

“You don’t need to buy me things, you know,” I say, feeling a bit uncomfortable. I’ve never been good at accepting gifts. Or compliments.

“I know,” he reassures me. “But I really want to give you this. It’s not something you can buy, if that makes you feel better.” He reaches into his backpack.

“Did you make me something?” I ask, intrigued.

“Kind of,” he replies, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. He continues to rummage in his bag and finally pulls out a hand-sized present, wrapped neatly in blue paper with a bow on top. He hands it to me, but I hesitate to take it.

“Go on,” he encourages me with a smile. “It is not going to bite you.” He laughs, and I finally grab it with awkward hands. “Come on, unwrap it. Do you want me to turn around?”

I give him a subtle middle finger and gently peel the wrapping paper off to the side. Once upon a time, I found opening presents so incredibly awkward that I would ask him to turn around during the unwrapping process. Receiving gifts used to make me feel pressured. People want you to have a certain reaction to what they got you. Some get angry if you don’t show the kind of emotions that they anticipated. Like, calm down, Aunt Gerda, socks from Walmart aren’t a terrible gift, but not one I am going to shed any tears over.

That’s one of the results of being dependent on handouts. It’s become a sense of normalcy, and I couldn’t care less if Aunt Gerda is offended by my emotionally lacking response.

I fold away the paper and reveal the backside of what appears to be a picture frame. I give Cole a quizzical look, and he motions for me to turn it around.

I do and the frame almost slips out of my hands. My fingers tremble with emotion as I stare at the picture, utterly speechless.

In the year before Cole left, Rachel had invited me to join her for Christmas cookie baking. She had even teased that

since she didn't have a daughter and Cole regularly managed to burn frozen pizza, it was only fair she'd teach me all the family recipes and how to make her famous butter-nougat cookies. She kept that promise. We spent the entire day laughing, kneading, rolling out the dough, and decorating the finished cookies. Cole joined us for the latter, and we had an absolute blast.

The picture captured that moment perfectly. I never even realized that Rachel got her camera out. Cole and I stood next to each other, chatting, our faces full of joy and mischief. Cookies and frosting were scattered around us, and we were covered in flour after dousing each other in it. I might have even cracked an egg on Cole's head, or was that just wishful thinking? Rachel stood to the side and looked at us, beaming a smile. It is a cute picture. Intimate.

"Remember our gingerbread men?" Cole chuckles, and tears threaten to spill from my eyes.

"Yeah. We would make them murder victims when we lost their limbs while transferring them onto the baking trays." I laugh, a sense of warmth and happiness spreading through me as I relive that memory. "Most brutal cookies I've made to date."

"Have you ever tried your hand at them again?" he asks, his eyes shining curiously. I shake my head.

"They were Rachel's family recipes. It didn't really feel like my place." I clear my throat, my heart swelling with emotion. He nods in understanding and then points at my picture wall.

“When Mom was here, she saw your picture wall. I thought it would be nice if you had a picture from... before, to put on it.” He blushes slightly. “Of course, it’s okay if you don’t want to, I’ll just tell her—”

“Shut up,” I interrupt him, my voice breaking. “I love it. Thank you,” I say, not being able to take my eyes off the picture. “It brings back a lot of memories.”

“Good ones?” he asks softly. I can hear the tenderness in his voice.

“Good ones,” I reply, my voice thick with emotion. I place the picture frame down on my desk. “Some good ones I’ve forgotten about. So thank you. And please send my thank you to Rachel for the idea.” I shake my head in disbelief when he looks up. “I can’t believe you waited almost four hours to give me this.”

“I would wait for a hell of a lot longer if I had to.” His smile fades into seriousness. “I told you, I know I have a lot to make up for. But for years, I thought I’d never see you again.” His voice grows thick with emotion. “Fuck, Eve, I really thought I lost you. Now that I found you, I am not letting go again. I’m so fucking determined to make you mine. You better get used to this face.” He points at himself, and I roll my eyes. Grinning, he waves and then walks out of my office, a small spring in his step.

I glance at the picture again and then at my picture wall. I prop it against my computer screen. Only until I decide where to hang it, I tell myself. Only until then.

Chapter Thirteen

“WHAT AM I DOING here?” I mumble to myself, as I look up at the sign for the music venue. Nostalgia washes through me as I take in the blinking lights and excited chatter of fans around me. The last time I was here was during Mia’s first headline tour. I love this location. It has a very nice layout, and if I remember correctly, an amazing security concept.

My heart nearly stopped when some guys tried to jump on stage to get to Mia. Luckily, their security was there in a fraction of a second, pulled them down, threw them on the ground, and then escorted them outside. I don’t even want to know what they expected or wanted to happen. However, I made sure to film the way they took them away, just so Liam and I could laugh at it later. Mia, luckily, never even realized what was happening.

Today, however, Hystoria are going to play their tour finale here. When I first heard about it, I couldn’t help but smirk to myself. There is a German word, ‘Schadenfreude,’ that describes the feeling of being smug about someone else’s misfortune. I can’t help but think to myself, ‘If I had been their manager, they would be playing in stadiums by now.’

I am not here to watch their show, though. Today, I am here to talk to Paxton.

Cole has continued to bring me small presents every day for the past two weeks. More pictures from back then. Burned cinnamon rolls he tried to make himself, knowing how much I love Rachel’s recipe. Bouquets of wildflowers that resemble

those that grew in his garden back then. He's doing all the right things, and I don't know how to react.

During the first week, I was petty enough to let him wait for at least an hour every day. However, when I noticed how exhausted he was every time, I relented and told Peggy to send him straight to my office. Slowly but surely, he is creeping his way back into all my thoughts and my heart. It's downright annoying.

So, I need to talk to Pax. I need to know if it was really him who decided to use my song, if he lied to the others so they would get on board. And I need to do it now, before I let Cole's affection get me so high that having the ground ripped from under my feet would crush me again. I am still at a point of return, where cutting contact again would hurt like a bitch, but would not wreck me the way it did last time.

Now I'm here. Determined, yet scared and hesitating going in. Finally, I tear my eyes away from the sign and walk around the building to get backstage. The area is full of people hauling equipment around, and I manoeuvre my way around suitcases and people until I finally reach the entrance.

After presenting my pass to the sour-looking man, he promptly nods and opens the door for me. I asked Cole for a backstage pass when he stopped by at the beginning of the week. True to his word, he handed it to me the next day, with a big smile on his face, as he told me he'd be looking forward to having me there. No further questions asked, even though they were etched on his face.

As I approach the artists' dressing room, I hear the loud voices of Jake and Paxton echoing through the hallway. I come to a stop right outside of it. Raising my fist, I want to knock and say "Hi," before I continue my way to the VIP area, but I halt. At first, I think they are joking with each other, but I can't make out what they're saying, though. Then I note the lack of laughter and the voices become angrier and angrier.

Yeah, I'm not going to interrupt that. If working with artists has taught me one thing, it's that trying to talk about anything significant that is likely to cause any strong emotions just before a show is a terrible idea. Artists are on edge as they anticipate performing for a crowd, nervous, and easily irritable. One wrong move or topic, and they will blame you for everything, from their water not being the right temperature to the wrong color on the walls.

I continue walking and climb the steps to the VIP area. It's right beside the stage, on a balcony overlooking the crowd. Rachel's face lights up when she sees me, and I walk over to her. There are some other people I might have met before who nod in greeting and I smile at them in greeting—my standard reaction when I have no idea who these people are.

"Great to see you here," Rachel says with a smile, and I step into the hug she offers.

"It's good to see you too."

"You're not only here to watch the show, are you?" she asks, raising an eyebrow curiously.

“You know me too well.” A sheepish grin spreads on my face as I let my eyes wander over the other VIPs. Alex is supposed to be here tonight as well.

A few days ago, I told him that Hystoria is up for grabs, and I think his label might profit considerably from signing them. I also happen to know Alex has a lot of nieces and nephews that he regularly looks after, so dealing with Hystoria should be a piece of cake for him. It appears he hasn't arrived yet, though.

“I'm sure they will all be happy to see you here.”

“Well, if anyone asks, I'm only here for you, Rachel.” I wink as she grins. Then the light goes dark and the music changes to Hystoria's intro.

We step closer to the barrier and set our eyes on the stage, just as the curtain falls. Fog fills the stage and suddenly, they appear. I don't even have time to prepare myself before the first guitar riffs echo through the sound system, and their fans answer with ear-numbing screams. Rachel and I start rummaging in our bags simultaneously, until we find our earplugs and put them in to dampen the noise.

“Why don't they have a support band playing first?” I wonder aloud. Scanning the VIP area and the small part of the backstage that's visible, I don't find their current manager. Something feels off.

I shake my head and try to redirect my attention to the stage. Whatever is going on is none of my business after all.

Maybe their arrogance is somewhat justified. The show they are giving their fans is impeccable, and not only because of the excessive use of pyrotechnics. They are filling the room with their presence. Smiles are plastered on their faces as they interact with their fans. Everyone is having a good time. Their fans sing along, jump to the beat, and hold up their lit-up phones during ballads. It's clear that they love Hystoria's music and adore the band. It's really a shame that their label seems out of ideas about what to do with them.

Both Rachel and I notice their exhaustion. It's evident in the way that Cole grabs his water bottle after nearly every song, and how Paxton leans his torso down every now and then to catch his breath behind the drums.

"They're less energetic than usual," Rachel shouts in my ear and points at Jake and Simon. I keep an eye on them and realize that while they point and interact with fans a lot, they don't move around much doing so.

However, considering their apparent fatigue, I need to give credit where credit is due. It's clear that they are giving their all for their fans, hiding their tiredness as they put on the show of their lives. Considering their bad reputation in my circles, it's really interesting to see.

As they play the intro to their fifth song, I feel a tap on my shoulder from behind. I turn, and Alex's serious face comes into view. He's wearing a suit, and his long hair is gathered in a low bun at the back of his head, a few stray strands framing his rugged face. We exchange a quick hug before he motions

that he wants to talk to me later. I nod in agreement. Talking while the band is playing on stage doesn't seem like a way to hold a constructive conversation.

As the concert progresses, the atmosphere never wavers. Hystoria has its fans in the palm of its hand, playing the crowd like a puppet on strings.

The end of the show approaches. The guys have gone backstage once already, leaving their fans begging for an encore and bathing in the cheers as they return to the stage. Suddenly, the bright lights turn mellow, and a familiar intro rings from the sound system. Cole looks in our direction worriedly.

A chill runs down my spine as my hands start trembling, and my legs feel like they're about to give out. It's 'Shadows.' My song. For whatever reason, I never considered hearing this song—my fucking song—live. My heart starts pounding in my chest, beating so hard I expect it to overshadow the sound of the bass and drums.

I need to get out of here.

Suddenly, the air feels too thick to get into my lungs. I gasp for air, but it feels like I am suffocating. At the same time, it feels like the walls are closing in on me, like there is not enough space around me to take a deep breath.

Hiding my panic, I motion to Rachel that I will wait for her outside. I take a step toward the exit and almost stumble. Luckily, I manage to hold onto a table while I regain my balance. I close my eyes for a moment to gather myself before

I focus on the door and stride toward it. Nothing else matters besides getting out, as the familiar chorus plays behind me.

Opening the door requires me to push it with my whole weight. I stumble out of the hall. The heavy door falls shut behind me, muffling the sound of my song and the crowd singing along, so I can barely hear it. Finally, I can breathe easier again.

Resting my back against the cool wall, I slide down until I'm sitting on the ground, my knees pulled up to my chest. I bury my face against them and close my eyes. Take a deep breath, Eve. In. Out. Slowly, my racing heart starts to slow down, and my breathing steadies.

Slowly, I get up, taking another deep breath as I lean my weight against a standing table. Blinking, I wait until I find my balance again before I make my way to the bar and get a glass of water. Alcohol is tempting, but it tends to amplify my emotions instead of allowing me to remain cool and controlled. So, water it is.

I return to my wall spot and sit back down, enjoying the otherwise empty hallway, while I put the cold glass against my forehead. Only a moment later, the door opens, letting in a burst of loud sound. At least they are not playing Shadows anymore. I look up as the door shuts loudly and find Alex making his way over to where I'm sitting. Wordlessly, he plops down beside me, his tall frame folding effortlessly onto the ground, and I lower the glass.

“Hey, Eve. How are you holding up?”

“Quite alright.” The lie easily slips from my lips, my voice hoarse but steady. “How about you?”

“You don’t look like it,” he observes, ignoring my question. “Your face is as pale as the wall.”

I chuckle weakly. “That’s what a girl likes to hear.” I lean my head back against the cool wall. “Just some pesky emotions.”

“Because it’s your song?” he asks, and my head snaps up to stare at him with wide eyes.

“How did you know?” I turn the glass in my hand nervously.

He chuckles. “I did some digging after you asked me about signing them.” My eyes widen. “Don’t look at me like that. It was strange that Scaena wouldn’t go for Hystoria themselves. I asked Joe what’s up and he told me the, undoubtedly, short version of events over a beer. So, from friend to friend, management genius to label owner, what’s your plan?”

“I don’t have any plans,” I tell him and take another sip of my water, feeling the cold liquid make its way down my throat. “I’m not interested in being involved in any scandal, nor am I interested in fucking up your business. If I were planning anything, I wouldn’t have dragged you into this.”

“Right. Sorry, that’s not what I meant at all,” he says sheepishly, but I wave him off. Nothing to apologize for, I would have been suspicious as well. “So, would you consider legally selling your rights to the song to them now?” I look at him and notice the hope on his face.

“Is that your condition for signing them?” I hum in understanding when he nods. “For your benefit, I would do it. I trust that you will offer me a fair deal.”

“Of course,” he chuckles, and his shoulders sag in relief. “That’s the least I can do. Thank you. Do you think they’ll say yes?”

I tilt my head and take a moment to think.

“Yes. Yes, I think so. They only have a few months on their current contract left and no other label has made an offer yet. You saw them. They love making music, they will grasp any chance to keep going. Just promise me one thing?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t overwork them. I’m not their biggest fan right now, but I’d still kick your ass if you drive them straight into a burn-out.”

Alex chuckles and offers me his hand. I take it and we share a firm handshake.

“I promise.”

“Good. Thank you. Can I talk to Pax before you break the news?” He gets up and pats the dirt from the ground off his pants.

“Didn’t have a chance to pluck his feathers yet?” Amusement laces his voice, and the corners of his mouth twitch.

I shake my head. “Oh, I plucked some feathers when I told them they’d have to keep searching for a new manager. But there are some questions I would like to have answered.”

“So you need some leverage to get your answers?” He raises his eyebrow and whistles. “That’s smart.”

“Thank you.” I grin and take the hand he offers to pull me up. “I’m also excited to see you knock down their egos a few notches.”

He breaks into laughter. “Yeah, I heard they had a few... issues here and there. Pretty sure my staff is going to hate me. But I think I can humble them a bit.”

Before I can answer, the doors fling open and the rest of the VIPs flock into the hallway. Looks like the show has ended.



Heated voices reverberate through the long hallway leading to the artists’ dressing room. Alex and I exchange awkward glances, before he shrugs and pushes the door open without knocking. I stay outside until he shouts, “Everyone’s decent.” Only then do I pop my head around the corner, greeted by sounds of surprise as I step inside.

Before I can say anything, Pax speaks out.

“I almost didn’t believe it was you. You look like shit,” he remarks, clearly exhausted himself. I look him up and down. His hair is wet and plastered against his face; his shirt and

pants are soaked with sweat, so I can't make out their original color.

“Likewise,” I reply wryly. “Do me a favor and step out with me for a minute?” As I turn, I catch Cole’s quizzical gaze and I try to return his gaze as reassuringly as I can. Pax mutters something under his breath, but stands up and drags his feet as he walks out into the hallway. I close the door behind us and cross my arms in front of my chest.

“What did I do to you?” I ask, but he refuses to look at me. After several moments of silence, I decide to change tactics, even though I am not proud of the ultimatum I’m about to give him.

“Paxton, there are two ways to handle this. Either you play along and give me some answers, or I go back inside and tell Alex, the only person willing to sign you, that the deal we worked out is off. Then you can continue searching for a label willing to work with you.” Paxton’s face turns into a scowl, and his jaw tightens. His knuckles turn white as his hands grip into fists, his eyes finally meeting mine. Surprised, I take a step back. There is so much hate in them. I gulp but stand my ground. “So, last chance, what did I do to you?”

“Nothing, you did nothing,” he spits and paces the hallway, his movement erratic and muscles tense.

“So, what the hell?” My voice grows agitated. Paxton has no goddamn reason to be frustrated or pissed. I sure do, though. “Stealing my song is maybe something I could have moved past. Hell, if you had *asked*, I might have even given it to you.

But blocking me? Cutting me off after everything I did for you guys?”

“I was scared you’d take everything from us, okay? We worked so hard to get to where we were.” I look at him incredulously.

“I know. I was right there with you. Doing the brunt of strategic work for you, if you remember,” I point out, but he shakes his head.

“And you had the power to take all of that away from us.”

“So that’s why you went to Clara?”

“Damn right. And she was all too happy to help out.” A cruel chuckle emphasizes his words. I take a step back. Whoever is standing in front of me is not the Paxton I used to know. The sweet guy that used to jokingly tease me for being so close to Cole has turned into an emotionless robot.

“So, let me get this straight,” I say, my voice shaking with anger. “You stole my song and were afraid I’d retaliate; to ensure I couldn’t, you eliminated me from your lives by ruining mine?” He nods, his gaze again evading mine. That answer is the one I expected, yet the pain stabbing at my chest is a surprise. “Wow. Just wow.”

“It had to be done. They were almost too easy to convince to drop you.” He shrugs. “And I mean, look where you are now; everything worked out. I don’t know what you’re so upset about.”

“I’m upset because you betrayed my trust. Because thanks to your actions, my life went to shit.”

“You’re just upset because I separated you and your beau.” He rolls his eyes. “Honestly, it was sicken—”

“Shut the fuck up, Paxton.” I step closer to him, vibrating with anger, the urge to lash out at him making my fingers tingle. “You have no idea what I went through, so don’t you dare say anything about it.”

“Sorry, sorry,” he says with a blank expression and voice devoid of any emotion as he takes a step back with defensively raised hands.

“Are you apologizing because I’m a good contact to have in the industry or because you mean it?” I ask, my voice rising.

Paxton remains silent. There, I have my answer.

“That’s what I thought,” I say, shaking my head. “From a former friend to another, Paxton. You need help.” He chuckles darkly, his eyes flashing with defiance. “Your actions have consequences. Take this advice from someone who has seen a lot in this industry. People talk. Sooner or later, no one will want to work with you anymore.” He takes a step back, anger radiating from his eyes.

“That’s so kind of you to say,” he says mockingly.

I raise my eyebrows challengingly. “Stuff that condescending tone where the sun doesn’t shine, Pax. While I might not have been in this industry as long as you, my network is strong. Very likely stronger than yours. And trust

me when I say that everyone I've talked to is aware of your antics and sick of them." I pause for a moment, allowing my words to sink in. Once they register, he glares at me wordlessly, fury dancing behind his eyes.

"Alex is considering signing you. Only if I give him the go," I continue. "But that attitude is not going to fly with him. You should consider it; I mean, how many other labels are knocking at your door?" A sizzling silence ensues. I've put my Mentos into Coca Cola and I'm just waiting for it to explode. However, I stand my ground, meeting his furious gaze with a cold look. I've won. And he knows it too.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. So maybe, watch your tone and relearn the concepts of saying 'Please' and 'Thank you.'" With that mic-drop statement, I turn around and start to walk back into the dressing room.

"So, do you forgive me?"

"I'll forgive you when I get a sincere apology," I reply firmly. He won't be getting off the hook that easily. "And whatever Alex determines the song is worth," I mutter under my breath as I open the door and put on a fake smile. Pax follows me in, rocking a sour expression as he takes a seat next to Simon. But I don't give a fuck anymore.

Alex looks at me quizzically, and I nod slightly to let him know that I got what I wanted. I'm not quite ready to call it closure, but at least I have some answers now. And I feel fine with that outcome.

“All right, guys,” he says loudly, drawing the attention of the room. “Eve has recently asked me if I would be interested in welcoming you to my label.” All of their eyes land on me, growing wide as Alex continues talking. “As is, I cannot take that risk, as you surely understand. But Eve and I have come to an understanding.” He crosses his arms and pointedly looks at Pax. “We agreed that she will sell you her rights to ‘Shadows’ officially. My lawyers will contact yours about the deal, and we will negotiate a fair compensation. Once that is done, I would like to talk to you about a contract.”

Jake and Simon jump up, looking at him with wide eyes, while Cole grins at me triumphantly. Meanwhile, Pax looks like he’s just bitten into a sour apple.

“Seriously?” Jake asks, his voice filled with excitement.

“You’re signing us?” Simon’s eyes grow wide in disbelief. “Fuck yes!” The two of them jump up and punch the air.

“Once everything I just mentioned is taken care of, yes. If you’re interested?” Alex asks, and all eyes are on Paxton, who stands there with his arms folded across his chest. He purses his lips as he realizes he is in the minority and exhales sharply.

“Fine,” he spits out, his voice dripping with venom. He strides forward, haphazardly gathering all his stuff in his arms before storming out of the room in a huff. Alex and I exchange glances, then shrug and turn our attention back to the remaining members. Simon and Jake turn and look at us questioningly.

“Now, that’s out of the way, can we greet you properly?” Si asks, a wide smile on his face. When I nod, they trap me in a sandwiched embrace that leaves me gasping for air.

“It’s so fucking good to see you,” Jake says, his hug growing tighter.

“I want to hear everything you said to Pax just now.” I can hear the grin in Si’s voice.

“You haven’t grown a bit, shorty.”

“Don’t be mean to her; we haven’t seen her in ages!” The two of them continue to bicker over my head, which I can’t even shake as they are squishing me so tightly.

“Why is Cole not here?” Jake realizes suddenly and looks around, letting me go. He sees Cole stand awkwardly to the side. Then he looks back at me, his eyes furrowing with confusion. Then he looks at Cole again.

“You’ve met since the charity ball.” He points at the two of us, his mouth gaping open. “And you didn’t tell us!” he says accusingly. Cole shrugs, a sheepish and apologetic look on his face.

“Don’t be mad. If it wasn’t for him, Alex wouldn’t be here. You can let me go now,” I tell Simon, and he takes a step back hesitantly, while Cole steps forward.

“Oh, so now you want a hug?” Jake says teasingly and opens his arms.

“Well, from her, not from you.” Cole slips his arms around my shoulders, while Jake and Simon look at each other

mischievously. One second later, they corner us from both sides, and I am caught in the middle of a group hug until Cole taps out, his body shaking from laughter.

“For the record, you’re not forgiven,” I tell them once they let me go.

“We know,” Jake assures me with a heavy sigh, and gently ruffles my hair. The familiar gesture almost brings tears to my eyes, and when I look into his face, I can see the acknowledgment hurts him too. I avert my eyes and clear my throat. Simon quickly changes the topic.

We catch up for a bit. They tell me about their tour shenanigans and most memorable fan encounters. Then they ask about me. For now, I decide to spare them the sob story, but I tell them about Joe, Rose, Liam, and Mia. I’m not in the mood to talk about Gabe, though.

“So, are you single?” Simon asks with a mischievous grin. “Ouch! Don’t punch me.”

“Then don’t ask stupid questions.” Jake rolls his eyes.

“Why? It’s not like I’m hitting on her.” I eye them curiously. “But lover boy over here hasn’t taken his eyes off her the whole evening.” He nods at Cole.

“True.” He shrugs, not an ounce of embarrassment at being caught. Meanwhile, I can feel my face turning warm. As a distraction, I ask them something insignificant about their last album. Luckily, they go along with it. Alex just sits to the side and watches us catch up, a warm smile on his face.

Time flies by, and as the night goes on, I find myself yawning every few minutes.

“We should head out,” Simon says, as he catches me hiding a yawn behind my hand yet again. The others agree and gather their belongings. We walk through the labyrinth-like hallways backstage, waving goodbye to everyone that’s still working.

It feels like I’m thrown back in time. We fall into our old walking formation effortlessly, Cole and me in the front, as Jake and Si trudge behind us with Alex. We are joking and laughing, and the guys bubble over with laughter at my retelling of my earlier conversation with Pax. While it wasn’t a particularly funny conversation, in hindsight, his reactions were hilarious.

Finally, we are outside. Si and Jake hug me goodbye and head to their cars, promising to keep in touch. Afterward, I turn and look at Alex inquiringly.

“Can you give me a ride? I walked here.” I suddenly feel dumb for not considering how I would get back home. My heart is still racing from the confrontation with Pax, and walking home alone with my thoughts and memories seems daunting.

“From Scaena?” He whistles. “Damn girl, that’s quite a trip.”

“I’ll drive you,” Cole suddenly volunteers and nods towards his car.

I bite my lip. Something has shifted between the two of us tonight. I don’t feel ready to face it yet, but then again, what

good will delaying the inevitable bring?

“Is that okay? I can absolutely drive you home,” Alex offers me an out. Of course, his sharp eyes didn’t miss that I am shaken from this evening. I nod and smile at him, grateful that he’s looking out for me.

“Yeah, that’s fine.” I hug him goodbye, and Cole opens the passenger door for me.

Jake and Si cheer and whistle at us loudly when I get into his car. I answer by showing them my middle finger before Cole closes the door. He doesn’t acknowledge the two jokesters, yet he beams with a smile as he rounds the car, keeping his back to his bandmates. When he passes Alex, they exchange a few words. I can’t hear them, but Cole’s smile doesn’t waver when he gets in.

He starts the car and it buzzes with a gentle purr, and he expertly reverses out of the parking space. Jake and Si zip past us, honking and flashing their lights as I hear them laughing through their open windows until they are out of our sight, and Cole and I sit in comfortable silence as he merges into traffic.

“You didn’t really come to watch us today, did you?” he asks, breaking the silence. I shift my weight on the seat, biting my lip nervously.

“No,” I admit quietly, thankful that his attention is on the road instead of me.

“Then why?” he presses on. “I saw you with Mom, and then suddenly you looked unwell, and a moment later you were

gone.”

“I wanted to talk to Pax.” I shift around nervously and clear my throat. “And I needed some fresh air during the last three songs.”

“The last three—ohhhh.” He realizes, his eyes growing wide as he runs his hand down the side of his face. “I didn’t realize. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I try to reassure him. “It shouldn’t have come as a surprise.” Now it’s his turn to shift uncomfortably.

“So what did you talk to Pax about? Aside from the ego check.” He changes topics and I cross my arms in front of my chest.

“I... needed confirmation,” I say quietly, not knowing what his reaction to that might be. Cole stops at a red light and turns to me, putting his hand on my thigh and squeezing it slightly. “Of what you told me.” I gulp.

“You did?” Another squeeze, this time more firmly. Heat rises to my cheeks. “And?” I resist looking at him, knowing it might dissolve all my intentions of not jumping into anything recklessly, but I can hear the excited smile in his voice.

“Well, he did. Confirm it, I mean.” I play with the hoops of my bag and stubbornly look outside the window.

“Come on, Eve, don’t make me beg for scraps.” Another squeeze, more firmly this time. He takes his hand away from my thigh to change gears, as the light turns green.

“I still don’t know if I can date you.” His hand returns to my thigh, sending shivers down my spine. The warmth of his hand burns into my leg, short-circuiting my brain. His thumb rubs gentle circles on my fabric-covered skin, and I shift under his touch, arousal building inside me.

“But hearing Pax admit that he’s the one behind everything changes things,” I admit quietly. My hands are clammy, and I gulp. I’m nervous. My heart is pounding like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, about to bungee jump. He lifts his hand from my thigh to find mine, interlacing our fingers and rubbing calming circles over the back of my hand as I pause, contemplating how to continue. Cole waits patiently until I go on.

“I’ll fly out to visit Mia next week,” I tell him when we turn onto my street. “I’ll unblock your number.” Finally, I dare look in his direction. I watch his Adams apple move as he swallows hard, anticipating my next words. “I suck at texting but...text me?”

“Fuck yeah,” he bursts out before I even finish my sentence. We reach my house, and he hastily pulls into a parking space close by, ignoring the angry beeping sound from his car that complains it’s too close to the car in front of us.

Cole turns off the engine, and suddenly, silence encompasses us, only disturbed by the sounds of our breaths. It’s a comfortable silence. Even though I’ve averted my eyes again, it’s like we are basking in each other’s presence, enjoying the peaceful moment while it lasts.

His hand is still holding mine and I can feel his finger tremble ever so slightly, before he breaks the silence.

“Can I take you on a date?” he asks so quickly, I almost don’t understand him. As soon as the words register, I snap my head up in surprise, meeting his eyes filled with hope. I gulp.

“A date?”

“Yeah,” he confirms, running his hand through his hair nervously. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I don’t know,” I confess softly. “I think as much as I always pictured a future with you, I never envisioned a ‘dating’ part. We knew each other so well already.”

“And now I want to get to know you again.” He lets go of me, lifting his hand to delicately put a strand of my hair behind my ear. Cole’s touch is gentle, sending an electric shiver down my spine. My breath hitches as his fingers brush against my cheek, before they come to rest on the side of my face, his thumb gently brushing along my temple.

“Look at me, Eve,” he demands, his voice low and husky, making the hair on my arm stand up. My heart races as he lifts my face, his gaze intense and unwavering as I meet it. “Will you let me?”

Chapter Fourteen

HIS QUESTION LINGERS IN the air. My heart is hammering against my ribs as I try to find the answer by looking out of the window. *Can I let him?*

I lift my gaze to find his eyes fixed on mine, full of hope. It reminds me of how often I used to look into them. How looking into them felt like home. How the stars reflected in them during our last night together as we confessed our feelings for one another.

The realization hits me like a falling brick wall.

I just can't throw that away.

For whatever reason, the universe brought us back together. The least I can do is give it a chance to prove itself, right? I bite the inside of my lip nervously. What if I get hurt again?

I go still. The truth is, I've been hurt by him. But I survived. And now I know that I'm strong enough to do it again if I need to.

As much as my brain tells me to get out of this car, shut the door behind me, and leave the past behind, I just can't do it. I close my eyes and take a deep breath before I speak.

"Yes," I whisper. "I think I would like that."

The words take a moment to register. When they do, his face lights up slowly, as though he doesn't trust that he heard me right.

Without saying anything else, he leans over the console and pulls me into a hug. It's awkward. My torso is turned at an

unnatural angle, and my knees are pressed against the center console. Still, as awkward as this position is, I wouldn't change this moment for the world.

“Thank you,” he says, his husky voice right next to my ear. His breath grazes my cheek and I feel his lips pressing against it, only for a moment, before he lets me go. I raise my eyebrow. He's brave, considering his face must have hurt for a while after the last time. “Tomorrow, five pm. I'll be here.”

Butterflies are running amok in my stomach.

“What are we doing?” I ask, anticipation making me feel giddy. I compose myself and school my face, not wanting to reveal how excited I really am. “I don't think I can stay out late. I still have to pack.”

“I'm not telling you.” Cole winks. “Dress comfortably.” He leans closer, lifting his hands to cradle my cheeks, his touch feather-light against my skin, as though he's scared I might slip away. For moments, we just look at each other. My eyes jump between his, trying to memorize their cobalt color and the pattern of grey flecks in them. I don't know what to do with my hands, so I wring them awkwardly.

He chuckles, the sound reverberating through the car, and the vibrations from his body shaking mine. Then he turns serious again.

“Don't slap me again,” he begs quietly. My heart beats furiously against my lips when he leans in, and the nearer he gets, the more I feel like I'm drowning. Drowning in his scent and the heavy air around us.

I close my eyes, feeling his breath drawing closer and closer, until his lips brush mine.

Time stops. At the same time, it feels like I can finally breathe again. Like a weight I was unknowingly carrying on my shoulders fell off. I lift my hand until it finds Cole's shirt. It's the only thing that makes me aware of reality as his tongue probes against my lips, demanding entrance into my mouth. I grant it.

"Cole," I pant as he pulls away to gaze up at me. His lips are red, and his shirt crumpled, but it's not enough. I want him to look wrecked, as ruined as I feel, until there is nothing he can think about but me.

This time, I'm the one to bridge the gap between us, and he welcomes me with a smile playing around his lips before I cover them with mine. My hands wander over his torso, higher and higher, until I bury them in his hair, pulling him closer. I need him closer.

"Holy shit," he gasps against my lips. Without breaking the kiss, he slides his car seat backward, pulling me with him until I'm in his lap. Craving more of him, my hands wander under his shirt, wanting to feel the heat of his body as I kiss him, the way I wished I'd kissed him all those years ago.

"Fuck, Eve." His heated words are like worship and send a shiver through my body. He pulls away, but only far enough that he can fix me with his heated gaze. His tongue pokes out of his mouth, running over his lips, my eyes transfixed on it.

He groans as he tastes me on them. I shift in his lap, feeling him harden under me.

“If you don’t leave now, I won’t be able to let you go,” he says, his voice rough from desire. His arms are around my middle, and he buries his hot face in the crook of my neck.

“Okay.” I gulp, not able to hide a small grin.

“You have no idea what you’re doing to me,” he mumbles against my skin. Then he leans forward, opening the door.

“You’ll have to let me go.” I struggle against his arms that still have me in a tight lock. He releases me reluctantly.

I climb out of the car. It’s difficult when your knees feel like pudding and blood is rushing through your head, making you dizzy. I almost hit my head on the doorframe as I get out, but he buffers the impact with his hand.

“Good night, Cole.” He closes the car door and beckons me closer to his open window.

“Sweet dreams, Eve.” Cole pulls me closer by my shirt until our lips collide in a short but hot kiss. I just know my face is bright red when I pull away, and the cocky grin on his face proves me right.

I don’t have any words, but I don’t need them. I turn around and stumble to my front door, where I fumble with my keys, trying to open it. Cole stays in his spot until I close the door behind me. From my hallway, I watch as he stays for a few more seconds before he drives off.

Only when he's out of sight do I dare lift my hand to my face and gingerly touch my lips. They are still prickling, and still feel warm.

God, I really hope that I'm doing the right thing.



The doorbell rings as I pace my living room. My stomach has been fluttering in anticipation ever since I closed the door behind me yesterday evening. It's a miracle I managed to fall asleep at all, and the restlessness came back with a vengeance once I woke up. I already cleaned my whole house, just so my hands would have something to do and I could distract myself.

I had no idea what to wear, which led to me emptying my wardrobe onto my bed. Which I then had to tidy up, which took way too long, so I decided to ditch the makeup today, and I'm not sure if I'm indifferent about it or really damn nervous.

I can feel my pulse quicken when I peek through the window and confirm that Cole is standing outside. Hurrying to the door, I try to collect myself. Deep breaths, Eve; take deep breaths, just like Barbara told you.

I can do this.

A smile spreads on my face as I turn the doorknob. I've been both waiting for, and dreading, this moment all day. Now that he's here, all the anxiety seeps from my body, and I am practically vibrating with excitement.

I open the door, and the sight of him takes my breath away. Or maybe it's the fact that now I know what his lips feel like on mine, and how his hands feel as they explore my body. We stare at each other in awe for a moment.

“Hey there,” Cole says softly, finally breaking the silence. His eyes light up with excitement, and a smile stretches across his face as he steps closer.

I nervously wet my lips. He looks breath-taking today. Or maybe it's the fact that I haven't allowed myself to admire him yet. He's wearing a plain black shirt with long sleeves, and washed-out jeans with holes at the knees. It's nothing extraordinary by any means, but for some reason, it makes my brain short-circuit, and I can't help but stare. He still looks exhausted, but it's not as bad anymore.

“Hi,” I say with a nervous giggle. “Wait, I'll get my shoes,” I add, turning to my hallway.

“No need.” Cole steps inside and closes the door behind him. I look at him, confused. That's when I notice the two bags he is holding. He grins and walks right into my living room, where he places them on the ground.

“I'll explain everything in a minute,” he says with a wide smile. “But first, I need a proper greeting.” He spreads his arms open wide. “Come here.”

A flood of sizzling excitement surges through me as I step into his arms. I let out a small gasp as he pulls me against him tightly. As soon as his arms lock around me, a deep, contented sigh leaves him as he buries his nose in my hair. I close my

eyes and take the moment in; his warmth enveloping me, the feeling of the soft fabric of his shirt against my face and one of his hands gently massaging my scalp as it pushes my head closer against his chest.

My hands wander over his back in slow circles, and I feel him shivering against me at my touch. All the nervousness and anxiety of seeing him again is gone. It feels like I'm finally home. I can't help but let out a contented sigh of my own.

A small, pleased sound escapes him at that.

We stay that way for what seems like an eternity, trying to compensate for all those years apart, trying to familiarize the way our bodies feel against each other, and breathing in sync. Finally, I pull away, but he doesn't let me out of his arms yet; instead, he clasps his hands on the small of my back, giving me just enough space to look at his face when I lean back. When I do, his breath feathers over my face. He is close enough that I can see each pale freckle on his nose.

"Your social battery seemed pretty drained yesterday," he leans in close and nips my ear, his words barely above a whisper. "So, I thought we'd do something at your place, instead of going out." He leans back again and looks at me with a knowing smirk. I feel the blood rush to my cheeks. I didn't realize it was that obvious.

Before he lets me go, he nods toward the two bags. "Do you have some wine glasses?"

"Of course." I tear myself away from him and walk to the kitchen, where I take a moment to lean against my counter.

Holy shit, my heart is racing. I've opened the door to it the tiniest bit, and it feels like he's flung it open and marched in like he belongs there. It scares me. But I like it, even though it feels like balancing on the edge of a cliff, scared to be pushed and fall to my demise.

I grab the wine glasses and make my way back, finding him kneeling on a blanket laid out in the middle of my living room and pulling food out of his bags.

"A picnic?" I ask, surprised.

"Yes." He takes the glasses from my hand and gestures for me to sit down. I do as he says and lean my back against the couch, watching as he tries to open the wine bottle. It takes him several tries before he finally manages to extract the cork.

"Don't laugh," he scolds me, as I can't contain my chuckle anymore. "I've opened, like, two wine bottles in my whole life."

"I can tell." I grin, taking the glass he hands me. We clink glasses, and he uncovers all the containers he brought with him. Within minutes, it feels like I am sitting on a charcuterie board. He keeps pulling out more and more food.

"This is amazing," I say as he sits down opposite me and grabs the last container. Once he opens it, I recognize the smell immediately. "Gruyère? You remembered?" I ask, eyes wide in surprise.

In school, we once had a project week to learn more about other cultures. Everyone in my class had to prepare a

presentation about a different country and its customs and culture. Jean, a boy from my class who had French roots, obviously chose France as his country. His parents were thrilled to share their culture and prepared boxes of food for him to bring to class; among all the delicacies in those boxes was Gruyère cheese.

Most of my class had gagged at the smell and intense taste, but not me. I think I ate most of it, in the end, while everyone else munched on a homemade baguette.

It's been years since I last had it. Beside the fact that it's expensive, not every supermarket has it. There is a fromagerie on the other side of town that I usually go to if I crave it and have the time.

"I remember everything about you," he says casually. Ignoring my stunned expression, he holds a piece of the cheese in front of my face. Without even thinking about it, I open my mouth and he gently pushes the piece of cheese between my lips. I moan as the taste hits my tongue.

"So good," I tell him and note that he's looking at me with wide eyes. I wink, and lick my lips sensually for good measure, before I take a closer look at what else he brought, just to avoid looking at his crotch. The moan was a bit provocative, but damn, it really came from the heart.

True to his word, Cole tries to get to know me again. He asks me about my favorite artist, movie, and person. He asks about Joe, Liam, and Rose—and I am all too happy to tell him about my newfound family.

In return, I ask him about his favorite song, his favorite celebrity he's met, the coolest country to tour and so much more. I ask him about fame, and even though I notice that he tries to deflect the question and seems nervous, he answers truthfully.

Suddenly, his expression turns more somber.

“What happened?” he asks with a quiet, yet serious, voice.

“Huh?”

“Back then. I need to know what happened. Mom just told me you suddenly weren't living at home anymore, and now you're here.”

I bite my lip. It's a heavy topic and I'm not sure I want it to ruin this beautiful evening.

“Please?” he pleads and shifts where he sits anxiously. “Not knowing has been driving me crazy these past years, because I'm imagining the worst.” I pause and contemplate his plea.

“Okay,” I finally say, and reach for the wine. After my glass is full again, I start talking.

He lets me speak without interrupting. When I tell him about living in my car, he stands up wordlessly and sits down beside me, putting his arm around my shoulders as he continues to listen to me.

To my surprise, I find it easier to talk about everything.

All these years, my story was something I carried around with me; a burden only I had to bear and work through. Now

that I talk about it more and more, it takes away from the significance I've placed on it. My past used to be Voldemort, the villain whose name you dare not speak, but now that it's in the open, it's suddenly not so scary anymore.

Cole looks at me, shocked, when I'm finished, but quickly schools his expression to a more neutral one.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly, squeezing my shoulder.

"I know." My answer is just as quiet. Silence falls, and I'm not sure whether it's comfortable. I can almost hear him beat himself up over it.

"We should put the leftovers in the fridge," I finally say and get up, my shoulder feeling cold at the loss of his arm around them.

We pack the scarce leftovers back into their containers and put them into my fridge, while he remains unusually quiet. The atmosphere is tense, pensiveness hanging so thick in the air, I could cut it.

We walk back to the living room. Suddenly, a thumping sound and a pained groan makes me turn around. Cole is on the ground, holding onto his toe.

I try to hold in my laughter. I really do. Until he starts rolling around and I'm gone.

"Don't laugh! I'm in pain!" he presses out, and I turn away from him. That just makes it funnier. After a moment, I hear him chuckling behind me; meanwhile, tears are streaming down my face, and my stomach starts hurting from laughter.

It takes forever until I catch my breath; even longer until I'm able to look at him without bursting into laughter again. I still have a wide grin on my face when he starts searching for something in his bags.

Finally, he takes out a DVD and holds it up.

"Good thing I'm one of those people that still has a DVD player," I point out and take it out of his hands as I turn the tv on. I put the disc into it and fumble with my remote until I find the proper channel. It's been a while since I've used it.

"I just knew you would have one." He chuckles, and I cross my arms, pursing my lips in a pout.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just saying, you're the type to have one," he chuckles. "I bet you have a record player as well." I narrow my eyes. I do, in fact, have one. It's upstairs. As if he's reading my thoughts, or just able to correctly interpret my expression, he bursts into laughter.

"Yeah, yeah. Just laugh. During the next internet outage, I'll be the one laughing! Or when more movies get taken down from Netflix, and I can just grab them right from my shelf." I stick out my tongue, and he makes an attempt to grab it, so I pull it back in quickly.

"Well, when it happens, I'll know where to go," he mocks me, and I subtly raise my middle finger. My head turns to the screen, when I hear familiar music and only now realize what

we're watching, too busy bickering with Cole to have realized it when I put it in.

“Harry Potter?” I grin and get comfortable on the ground, my back once more against the couch. We grew up with the franchise, yet it's been ages since I've watched the movies. This is a very welcome surprise.

The intro still gives me goosebumps.

When we were young, we devoured all of the books and movies. We used to watch them over and over again, until we practically knew them by heart. Then we would read the books to each other until we knew them by heart as well.

Whenever a new movie or book came out, Rachel would wait with us for hours in front of the cinema or bookstore, so we'd be among the first ones to get to it. She'd even let Cole skip school so we could devour them immediately.

“You're not going to pay attention anyways until you've read it.” She'd shrug and call the school for both of us.

We spent so many weekends eating popcorn, watching the movies, and comparing them to the books. They are among my favorite memories of my childhood.

“Yep. If you're like me, it's been a while since you've seen them.”

“That might be the case,” I admit as he gets up and climbs behind me. A small yelp escapes me when he pulls me into his lap and close to him until my back rests against his front, his breath tickling my neck.

“We don’t have to sit on the ground, you know,” I say nervously. “I have a very comfortable couch.”

“I’m good.” He wraps his arms around my middle, his voice right next to my ear. “I think it’s really comfortable here.” I close my eyes and gulp, but his hand starts drawing calming circles onto my stomach, and I find myself relaxing into him as the movie starts.

We don’t talk much during the movie. We never have. Harry Potter movies are movies to pay attention to.



“I have one final surprise,” Cole lets me know when the movie ends. I look up at him with furrowed brows. More surprises?

It’s already pretty late, and I still have some tasks to do before I leave for Mia’s cabin tomorrow. Like packing and... I yawn. Yeah. Packing.

“Don’t look so distrustful. It’s going to be fun! Be a darling and turn off the lights?” I still, and turn slowly, narrowing my eyes at him. “Get your mind out of the gutter. It’s not my dick.”

I shake my head and stand up. Even though I’ve been sitting on Cole instead of the ground, my back feels stiff, so I raise my arms above me and stretch.

“Oh, wow.” Cole laughs when he hears my bones crack. I ignore him. I don’t ignore, however, the way he drags his leg

up and limps over to his bags. Even though it's probably my fault that his leg fell asleep, I can't hold myself back.

"Oh, wow," I mock him with a devious grin, and he subtly scratches the side of his head facing me with his middle finger. I giggle and make my way over to the light switch. After that, I go to the TV and turn it off. Suddenly, it's pitch dark in the room.

"Come here," Cole beckons me to him. Slowly, I walk toward his voice, holding my arms out so I don't run into any furniture; like he did before, during broad daylight.

My heart starts racing with anticipation as I hear him rustling with something. Suddenly, he grabs my ankle and I squeal.

"Easy," he laughs. "Get down here with me." I get back on the ground slowly, trying not to step on his feet, or hands, or any other body part. As I sit, he pulls me back, until we both lie on my very soft carpet, next to each other, facing my ceiling.

"Okay..." I say dazedly. "That's my ceiling. My very dark ceiling."

"Don't be so impatient," he scolds me, and I hear a switch clicking. Nothing happens. I am about to ask him what was supposed to happen, when I see it.

My whole living room is full of stars. Not real ones, of course, but I realize the switch was for a star projector. The room is transformed into a magical, starry wonderland, and we

lay in the midst of a sea of twinkling lights. I stare at them in absolute awe.

“Wow,” I whisper, and feel him nod beside me. There is really not much else to say.

“This is the night sky of May 25th, 2015,” he lets me know. I rack my brain for a few moments. What happened in May? It takes me a few moments. Then it clicks.

“Our last day,” I say quietly, with a lump in my throat. His hand is trembling slightly as it finds mine, interlacing our fingers.

“And the day of our first kiss,” he reminds me gently.

Yeah. And that.

He raises our hands and presses his warm lips on the back of mine, before he places them over his heart.

“I don’t even know what to say, Cole.” My voice is choked with emotion. The stars start to blur as I blink away tears.

“Then don’t say anything,” he replies, drawing a pattern on the back of my hand with his thumb. “Just let me lay here with you and enjoy your presence.”

“Okay,” I sniff. In the dim light, I can see him motioning for me to lift my head. When I do, he slides his arm under it, pulling me closer until my head rests on his shoulder: the same way we lay there all those years ago, trying to make out star signs in the night sky.

“Did you ever learn any star signs?” I ask him, and he shakes his head.

“There wasn’t a point,” he says with a tinge of sadness.

Saying goodbye later is hard. Both of us know that it’s way too early for a sleepover. Especially because I am leaving early the next day.

I can’t help but hold onto his sleeve when the time to say ‘good night’ comes.

“You’ve unblocked me, right?” Cole steps out of my door and down the first step in front of it, bringing us to eye level. I nod. “Good girl.” He winks and I roll my eyes.

He reaches for my hand and pulls me nearer, until I’m close enough that his nose can nudge mine. “I know what you’re thinking.” One of his hands lays warmly against the side of my neck, the other at my hip.

“Do you?”

“You’re scared this will go away while you visit Mia.” I turn my eyes toward the ground. He hit the nail on the head. My heart feels like it’s in my throat. I want to take a step back, shocked that he can still read me like an open book. But he holds me firmly in place. “Don’t,” he pleads, and I stop resisting as he lifts my head until my eyes meet his.

“Some things about you never change.” A small smile plays around his lips. “You have the cutest crease between your eyes when you’re worried about something. And you start biting the inside of your lip.” He raises his hand on my neck to free

my lower lip from being masticated, gently caressing it with his finger. Then the hand returns to my neck.

“So, before you worry all night and next week, I need you to know that I’m all in.” I gulp at the sincerity I can see in his eyes. “If you wanted me to, I’d go with you in a heartbeat. I’d kidnap you, chain you to me with handcuffs, so you won’t leave my side. Nobody will take you away from me again,” he pledges and leans his forehead against mine.

My breath quickens. Cole lifts his hand to cradle my cheek, the tips of his fingers rubbing the side of my head tenderly, like I’m made of porcelain.

“What I did was horrible, but you cannot imagine how desperate I was when I couldn’t find you.” He exhales heavily, and I can see the turmoil in his eyes. “I was a wreck. I hired three PIs to find you, all without success. I couldn’t sleep and didn’t eat because I was so fucking worried.” He looks away for a brief moment, his eyes watery when he meets my gaze again.

I lift my hands and lay them against the sides of his face as a lone tear overflows. The stubble feels strange under my hands as I tenderly wipe the tear away with my thumb.

“My point is, now that I’ve found you again, you’re mine. And I’m yours. I will do anything to earn your forgiveness. Let me prove that you can trust me again.”

I inhale sharply, masking a sob, and he turns his head and presses a kiss into the palm of my hand. “Anything,” he

promises again. “No matter how long it takes, okay?” I nod. “Promise me you won’t run away?”

“I promise you that I will try,” I sniff, and he nods, relief washing over his face.

“I’ll take that.” His lips curve up, happiness radiating from him as his eyes fixate on my lips, making me bite them inside nervously. “Now, I’d really like to kiss you,” he whispers, his warm breath gently caressing my lips. “May I?”

“Yeah,” I whisper. The word barely leaves my lips before he presses his lips to mine, his hands tangling in my hair and pulling me closer to him. I whimper, and he seizes the chance to lick at my lips until his tongue slips into my mouth, setting my insides on fire. His hand curls against the nape of my neck, holding my head still, as he kisses me in a way that makes my knees go weak.

My fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt as our tongues dance with each other. Our breaths intermingle and his body presses against mine, like two magnets that are finally not separated anymore, giving in to their attraction and clashing against each other.

He makes a sexy sound in his throat when my hands wander up his body and bury into the thick of his hair, a mix of pained and turned on that makes heat pool between my legs. I melt into him, and he demands more, teasing, sucking, and nipping at my tongue until I’m a breathless mess in his arms.

My lips chase after him when he ends the kiss. The silence of the night is interrupted by his low chuckle and our heavy

breaths as we remain in my doorway, arms around each other.

“Sweet dreams, Evie,” he finally whispers. One more time, he presses his lips against mine again before he tears himself away from me and walks to his car. There is a spring in his step, and I can’t help but grin blissfully.

He turns out of his parking spot and blows me a kiss, before he disappears into the night. Then, just like last time, I close the door behind me and lean my back against it, lifting my hand to my tingling lips.

A full-blown laugh escapes me as I make my way upstairs to my bedroom.

Chapter Fifteen

COLE: *Hey, beautiful. How was the flight? See anything interesting?*

I grin as I read his message while I wait at the baggage claim. Since unblocking him, we have been messaging constantly. He asks me about my day and follows up on what I tell him. He sends me selfies and pictures of dogs he sees in public. Conversation flows easily between us, as if no time has passed at all.

However, he's been tight-lipped regarding his work and the guys. It makes me wonder if anything is going on after the way Pax stormed out of the arena. I hope everything is okay.

Yesterday, Alex sent me a proposal for my song rights. Since I had some time to kill during the flight, and needed some distraction, I managed to read through it and marked anything I disagreed with. There wasn't much. The compensation his lawyers drew up is fair, and the conditions are fine. There are only some issues with wording I would like changed before signing.

I hope he implements them soon, because even just reading through the provisional proposal, I could feel parts of the weight on my shoulders tumble, and I could breathe a little easier. Maybe I will finally get some much-needed peace of mind and I can finally close that chapter and enjoy having one less thing to worry about.

Eve: *A bit tumultuous, but I didn't barf. So yay for me. Nothing interesting to see, though, mostly clouds and birds. What are you up to?*

Cole: *I'm at Mom's today. She says "Hi."*

Cole: **selfie**

Cole: *We're going to do scandalous activities, like building her new bookshelf.*

I grin at the picture of the two of them mushing their faces together so they'd both be in the frame. In my mind, I try to picture the two of them assembling furniture and shake my head. It's going to be a disaster.

Eve: *Hi back! Have fun, you two! I hope Rachel's fiancé is better at assembling than you two.*

Cole: *Rude.*

Cole: *I miss you!*

I feel my lips curl into a soft smile as I read his message. Then I see my suitcase coming down the conveyor belt and type out a quick answer.

Eve: *I miss you, too.*

I collect my suitcase and keep an eye out for my driver. Mia doesn't have a driver's license, and her driver-slash-bodyguard is off today because it's his daughter's birthday. After calling around, and being unable to find a taxi service or rental car, the local hotel owners offered to come and get me. It's a bit weird, but Mia has met them and assured me they're not kidnappers.

I spot my name on a sign held by a sweet-looking older couple. The woman greets me with a hug and smile on her

face, while the man immediately reaches for my suitcase. After a moment of shock, I plaster on my client-facing smile, and half-heartedly return the hug. Mia was right. People here are much friendlier than in the city.

The older woman introduces herself as Kelly and calls me 'Hun'; she then introduces her husband, Will, a gruff-looking man who seems to communicate only by grunting. Kelly ushers me out of the airport, and I shiver when a cold breeze creeps down my neck. It's a lot colder than I expected. Damn, I shouldn't have put my scarf so far down in my suitcase. I wrap my arms around my middle and hurry along. Thank God, their car is not very far away, and when I offer to help Will heave my suitcase into the trunk, he shoos me away. Usually, I would insist, but jumping into the car and escaping the cold wind sounds like a better plan to me; so that's what I do.

Kelly and I chatter all the way to the cabin. We pass several small villages, and she tells me all about them and their most current drama. Apparently, her friends from high school live all over the area and exchange their stories in regular coffee and knitting sessions. She also talks about Mia, the gnarly winter they are expecting, and their son, who has just gone through a nasty divorce after his wife was unfaithful.

"If you ask me, he should have just forgiven her." She shrugs. "And really, I'm sure it was his fault! He didn't give her enough attention. I've always thought so!"

My eyes grow wider and wider at how she talks about her son. Even my parents weren't so unhinged. I feel sorry for the

poor guy.

“So, his ex-wife has been seeing your son’s best friend behind his back for two years, and you’re blaming your son?” I say incredulously and slump into the back of my seat, shocked. Is it normal to share that kind of juicy family drama with a stranger here?

“I must not have raised him right.” She huffs and looks out the window. “Now he’s not talking to the both of them. Such an overreaction. I mean, she made one mistake.”

“No. She deliberately made several decisions leading to a year-long deception. She probably lied to him over and over again. That’s not ‘one mistake.’ And what about the friend?”

“What about him?”

“I mean, he was your son’s best friend. Why is he sticking his dick in his best friends’ wife? Of course, your son would feel betrayed.” She looks at me with surprise, and Will chuckles in the driver’s seat.

“That’s what we’ve been telling her.”

“Oh, shush you!” She waves him off.

“Nah, if you tell our family drama to a stranger, you might as well give the full picture.” He rolls his eyes. “She invited Steve, the former best friend, and our daughter in law to Thanksgiving dinner, and now she’s angry that our son won’t come.”

“After all we’ve done for him!”

“What do you mean?” Now it’s my turn to roll my eyes. “Do you mean the vigorous support you offered him after his separation?” I raise my eyebrows. “Or are you one of those people that think just because you raised a child and provided the basic necessities, they should be subjected to every one of your whims for as long as you live?” She looks at me, clutching her hand to her chest. “Sorry,” I admit. “It’s none of my business, but kind of a sore spot. I had parents like that, and do you want to know how that ended up?” I don’t give her any time to react before I continue. “I cut them off. We’ve had no contact for seven or eight years now.”

“Eight years? How old were you then?” Will asks, shocked.

“I was sixteen when they kicked me out of the house.”

“Oh, my.”

“Yep.” I pop the ‘p’ and look at her intently, wondering if she needs me to connect the dots.

“I can’t just uninvite them,” she rambles on, connecting nothing. “That would be rude. They’ve been part of our family for so long.”

“So has your son. Even longer than that, I assume.” I shrug. “And he’s the one who has been wronged.” Kelly purses her lips.

“Will, you let her talk to me like that?” she addresses her husband, who rolls his eyes.

“I mean, she’s right.” He shrugs and Kelly huffs. Then she demonstratively looks out of the window.

The rest of the ride is blissfully quiet, as Kelly stewes in her thoughts, yet I feel uncomfortable. She stares daggers at me through the rear-view mirror and I fix my stare outside, sometimes looking at her through the window's reflection.

Maybe my statements were a bit intrusive; after all, I know nothing about their family dynamic. And how is it my place to voice my opinion anyways? I guess she kind of asked for it, but maybe it was rude. I take out my phone and message Cole.

Eve: *If I disappear, and they find my body in a forest, my drivers are the ones who did it.*

Cole: *What did you do? Do I have to worry?*

Eve: *I might have stuck my nose in family drama.*

Cole: *Of course, you have. I will avenge your death. I hope it's short and painless.*

Eve: *Thanks!*

Only a few minutes later, I notice Will slowing the car down before he turns into a muddy road. The car jolts as we drive over uneven terrain, through what looks like a forest.

Hopefully, they are not steering away from the road to cause my slow and painful death. I mean, who knows? Maybe they want to hunt me down like prey and shoot me as I run for my life. After they kill me, they'll bury my cold, dead body somewhere in the forest where nobody will ever find it.

But Will steers the car toward a familiar cabin, and I sigh in relief. Nowadays, you really can't know. Or I might have watched too many true crime documentaries.

The house is cute and whimsical and looks exactly like the pictures I saw online. Mia is already sitting on her porch and jumps up excitedly when Will parks the car, bouncing on her feet as she waits for me to get out.

“Eveeee, I missed you!” she shouts as she pummels me and the both of us almost land in the mud. I can’t help but laugh and hug her back, before I hold her away at arm’s length and survey her face. She looks good: less exhausted and her smile is as sunny as when I first met her. It’s been a while since I’ve seen it.

“I missed you too!” I assure her, grinning from ear to ear.

“Hey, Will. Hey Kelly,” Mia greets the couple, and they exchange quick hugs, although Kelly still seems to be pouting. Will hands me my suitcase.

“Is everything okay?” Mia asks, looking at the three of us with a puzzled expression, as she senses the tension in the air. Her eyes land on Will, and a quiet chuckle escapes him.

“Don’t worry. She is sulking because your friend told her that you’re right about Thanksgiving,” he explains as his chuckle turns into laughter. I eye Mia. Her expression darkens for a fracture of a moment, before she puts on a fake smile. “You girls have fun! Let us know if you need anything,” Will continues, unaware of Mia’s change in mood, and ushers Kelly back into the car.

We stay put, and wave after them as they leave. As soon as they turn and drive out of sight, Mia links her arm with mine and leads me to the cabin.

“Sooo, what did Will mean?” she asks curiously as we step inside.

“Kelly told me her family drama and wasn’t very happy about my opinion on it.” I shrug. “Could I have been nicer? Sure. Did I want to? Not really.”

“She brings that out in people.” Mia sighs. “I swear to God, her life is so boring and uneventful that the whole... incident,” she waves her hands in the air, “is the only thing that gets her attention.

“That explains a lot,” I nod and grimace. Those are the worst kinds of gossips. As someone who has to deal with paparazzi and reporters, I’m very familiar with that type.

“Ignore her. This is not work. And Dan is very tempted to go no-contact once they move away in spring.”

“Dan is her son?”

“Yeah.” She blushes. “He’s my neighbor. Will and Kelly live in the village. He moved out here to get away from them.”

“I see,” I say, a grin in my voice as I wiggle my eyebrows playfully. Her face turns even redder, and she gently slaps my arm.

“Don’t give me that look,” she giggles. “Now, unpack, get into your sweatpants, and I’ll open some wine. I heard we have quite a lot to talk about.” I smile and do as she suggests.



When I come back, Mia has started a fire in the fireplace, and prepared blankets for the two of us. That's when I first manage to take a proper look at the interior. The floors are made of polished hardwood, while a plush rug covers the center of the living area. It invites you to lay on it and spend time in front of the fire while it rains or snows outside.

A large couch and a few armchairs are arranged around a small, wooden coffee table facing the TV on the wall. Rustic artwork and framed landscape pictures add to the homey feel of the room. It's very comforting, and the exact opposite of Mia's modern apartment in the city.

"Sooo." I turn to face Mia, who is looking at me expectantly, holding two wine glasses and a bottle in her hands. I smile at her gratefully and take the glasses out of her hands. "I heard Hystoria is back in town," she says as we sit on her couch. I pull the coffee table closer to set the glasses down. Meanwhile, Mia expertly opens the bottle. "Tell me all about it."

So I start to talk as she pours the wine. I didn't even realize how much I missed talking to her. Sure, we've exchanged text messages and even spoke on the phone a few times, but that's different. Mia is an amazing listener and offers her opinion or advice where appropriate, while always remaining patient, attentive, and kind.

As artist and manager, we are attached at the hip during work, be it on tours or album productions. I have seen her at her best and worst, and she has seen me at mine. I love Liam

like my own brother, and I feel just as close to Mia. Even though we met through working together, I consider her the sister I always wanted.

As I recount the events of the past few weeks, Mia listens attentively, squealing in delight when I tell her how I rejected Hystoria at the charity event, and laughing at my description of Pax's angry face.

When I inform her that Gabe had given out my address, she becomes as upset as I was. But I reassure her that I have everything handled and the car drive here is probably the closest I've been to being murdered by a stranger.

I tell her about Rachel's visit, and how it shook me. She squeezes my hand as I dissect my feelings. Fury forms behind her eyes when I tell her how Cole and Paxton explained what happened.

"God, what an asshole." She sighs, swirling the wine glass in her hand. "I mean, not like that's a secret. I think I had a photo shoot at the same location as Hystoria some years ago. I'm pretty sure I told you how staff fled to our shoot to catch their breath and calm down. It was a mess."

"Now that you mention it," I mumble and take a sip of my wine, "yeah, I remember that."

"Honestly, I think you're being way too generous with them," she admits and stands up to get us some snacks. "I don't think I would have sold them the song now."

“Oh, trust me, a vindictive part of me didn’t want to do it either,” I laugh darkly. “I’m doing it more for Alex than for Hystoria.” I set down my glass. “I know that his ex fucked him over pretty badly. He deserves a good fresh start with his new label.”

“And you think Hystoria is just that?” Mia returns with a plate of crackers and cheese.

“I think they can be a distraction.” I grin and take some of the snacks as she offers me the plate. “He’s going to have his hands full. Plus, they have a solid fan base, and despite Paxton’s ego, people are still willing to work with and for them. I think Alex can handle their antics.”

“From your lips to God’s ears.” She clinks her glass against mine before she takes a hefty sip.

“We will see. So, how has Bumfuck, Nowhere been treating you?”

“Oh, it is blissfully boring here.” She laughs. “It’s amazing. I haven’t felt this relaxed and refreshed in years. I really should have listened to you earlier and taken a break.”

“I’m so glad to hear that.” I smile.

“And the best thing about it is that nobody recognizes me. I don’t even have to wear a hat or scarf to cover my face. I mean, I still do it because I can’t quite believe it, but I don’t need to costume myself up like back home!”

“I loved the red wig and glasses, though.” I grin as I picture it in my mind. “You looked really cute with them.”

“Thank you.” She twirls her blonde hair between her fingers. “Maybe I’ll order some temporary hair dye. I’ve been dying to try out new colors. Pun intended.”

I laugh and set my glass down. “So what do you spend all day doing? I’m glad you’re taking the time to rest and recoup, but doesn’t it get boring?”

“Oh, not at all.” She blushes. “I read a lot.” She points to her tablet. “And sometimes, I chop wood. Don’t laugh!”

“Never.” I grin, and she slaps my back. “Oof, yeah, you’ve definitely gotten stronger.” I giggle and rub my shoulder.

“Sorry, not sorry.” She shrugs before she continues. “I also hang out with my neighbor. Sometimes I look after his dog while he’s working.”

“Ah. The mysterious Dan? Tell me more about him.” She blushes, and suddenly the fireplace seems very interesting to her. A small smile spreads on her face as she continues to speak softly.

“Well, her name is Darling, and she is a two-year-old husky. She might look angelic, but she can absolutely cause chaos. But then you look into her eyes and forgive her because she’s so cute!” she gushes. “One of her eyes is blue, while the other one is golden; it’s the cutest thing! Some days she’s the biggest cuddle bug, others, she drives me absolutely mad. Here, I have a picture.” She hands me her phone and shows me.

“Yes, absolutely, very cute,” I admit as I scroll through her pictures. “I meant the guy, though.”

“What about him?” She squirms, and quickly grabs her glass to swallow half of its remaining contents.

“Tell me more about him,” I gently press, grinning. If we’re talking about my guy troubles, hers are also on the table. She fidgets, and her face grows even redder. I’m not sure whether it’s because of the wine or because she’s embarrassed.

“He’s thirty-seven,” she begins, then clears her throat. “Kind of gruff. He works as a carpenter. He builds furniture and wooden decorations in his workshop next to his house.”

“Huh? Then why do you have to watch his dog?”

“Because she’s clingy and gets in his way. That’s not the best situation with power tools around,” she explains, filling her glass with more wine.

“Ah yeah, that makes sense.” I chuckle. Seems like the wine is getting to me. “So he brings her over every day?”

“No, I go over there.” I raise my eyebrow, swallowing a chuckle. “Don’t look at me like that. We’re just friends.”

“Your face is practically burning, Mia. Are you sure about that?”

There is a long pause as I can see the wheels turning in her head. “I don’t know,” she finally exhales, her voice trembling slightly. “He’s the first guy in forever who doesn’t fawn over the fact that I’m famous. I don’t know if I’m attracted to him or the fact that he sees me as an equal and not just someone rich and famous he can use to his advantage.”

“I get it.” I nod.

“What do you think?”

“I think you’re worrying too much. It’s good that you’re cautious. But when you’re talking about him, you look absolutely smitten. It’s adorable, your whole face glows, and you have that loving look in your eyes. I’ve never seen you look like that when you’ve talked about a man before.” A small grin forms on my lips. “You look a bit like the heart-eyed emoji.”

“Oh, God.” She hides her face in her hand, embarrassed. “I have such a crush, Eve; you can’t imagine.”

“Yes. Yes, I can.” I chuckle, feeling genuinely happy for her. I hope this Dan guy is a good one, because if anyone deserves a happily ever after, it’s Mia.

I pour us another glass of wine and let Mia change the topic. The rest of the evening passes by in a blur of conversation, movies, and laughter before I finally bid her goodnight, feeling exhausted from the day’s travel. I’m not sure why, but flying sucks all the energy out of me. When I get into bed, I fall asleep only seconds after my head hits the pillow.



“It’s so nice out here,” I say, stunned, as we trek through the forest, down a path that starts in Mia’s cabin’s backyard. It looks like a painting brought to life. The leaves are painted in a brilliant array of reds and golds, announcing the arrival of

autumn, while the moss on the trees' trunks creates a soft, contrasting carpet.

I take a deep breath, noting how fresh the air feels in my lungs. Birds are chirping in all kinds of melodies, and an occasional rustling announces small critters scurrying as we get close to them.

“Disgustingly idyllic,” Mia agrees and takes a right. We are going to collect Darling and take her along on our walk, since, apparently, Dan has to finish an important project. Darling is already waiting for us when we approach a cabin that looks strikingly similar to Mia's. She immediately approaches us, eyeing me curiously as she comes closer. Mia greets her with lots of head scratches and a high-pitched baby voice, and I bend down to let her sniff me and give her some pets on my own. Her fur really is incredibly soft, and her mismatched eyes are even more striking in real life than they were in the pictures Mia showed me.

Her owner is nowhere to be seen, and I admire the amount of training that must have taken place to let the young dog wander free without any fear of her running away. Mia hurries inside to get a leash and harness, which she then straps Darling into before we leave.

Darling accompanies us on our walk, although three hours later, I rename it to a hike. When we return, I am drenched in sweat, while Mia looks like she just stepped out of her cabin. There is still a clanging sound coming from Dan's workshop, so Mia tells me to go ahead.

“I see, I see,” I say teasingly and wiggle my eyebrows at her. “Well then, have fun with Dan.” I wink. “See you later.”

“Oh, fuck off,” she answers jokingly and walks inside the house with her middle fingers raised. I laugh and walk the short way over to Mia’s cabin.

It reminds me of our backyard. Behind it was also a forest. The very forest I met Cole in when I tried to run away. The whole way back to Mia’s cabin is like a walk down memory lane.

Mia still has not returned when I finish showering, so I raid her fridge for some frozen food and make myself dinner. Afterward, I try to navigate her TV, and after taking way too long to understand the remote, I manage to find something on Netflix to watch. A few moments after pressing play on a show that sounds promising, my phone blinks with a new message, and I unlock it.

Cole: *Hey gorgeous. How was your day?*

I blush. I’ll never get used to being called pretty by Cole; each time, it makes my heart flutter violently and causes heat to creep up my cheeks.

Instead of texting him back, I hit dial and call him. He answers after only one ring.

“Hey, beautiful,” his raspy voice greets me as he picks up the call.

“Hey there,” I answer quietly. We both pause for a long moment before I chuckle. “Sorry, I didn’t really think further

than saying hi.” I yawn as his low snicker fills my ear.

“Did you have a good day?”

I make an affirmative sound and tell him about my hike with Mia. Several times my eyes drop closed, and I force myself to sit up.

“How was your day?” I ask him after I finish. The sigh on the other end of the phone makes me worry.

“It was okay,” he finally says, and I grimace. That doesn’t sound great. “Pax was being Pax.”

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly.

“No, no,” he says quickly. “Nothing to be sorry for. We should have addressed his behavior sooner and nipped it in the bud. We’re going to talk to him, I’m sure we’ll get it under control.”

I look at the wall and replay the words in my head, not sure what to answer. I think this goes deeper than superficial annoyance at Pax, but if Cole says they have it handled, I am not going to interfere.

“I’m sure you will,” I finally say, hesitantly.

“When are you coming back?” He redirects the conversation, and I hope he doesn’t hear my relieved sigh.

“If everything goes according to plan, I will land around six pm on Sunday.”

“Good. That’s good. Is anyone collecting you at the airport?”

“I haven’t asked around yet,” I admit and yawn again. “I’ll probably get a taxi.”

“I’ll come to get you.”

“You don’t have to,” I assure him quickly. “I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but you’re kind of famous. I’m sure it’s a hassle.”

“I don’t care,” he says firmly. “I just really want to see you.” It sounds like he gets up and paces around a room. “I’ll even make sure to disguise myself. Because I know that I won’t be able to keep my hands off you when I see you again.” I close my eyes. The memory of the kiss on my doorstep sends a shiver down my spine.

“I can’t wait,” I say softly, my heart aching. “And then?”

“Then I’m taking you home,” he promises. “I need to sleep next to you. I really want you be the last thing I see before I close my eyes and the first one when I open them.”

I gulp, the sincerity in his voice making a delightful warm feeling unfold in my chest.

“I’d like that.”

“Then I want you to ride my face and come on it again and again until all you can remember is my name.”

“Cole!” I exclaim, my face burning.

“Eve,” he moans into the phone, and I quickly hold it away from my ear. The sound makes my core tingle, and all kinds of pictures flash through my head.

“I’m not having phone sex with you, Cole,” I warn him, and he chuckles with a low voice, making me fidget on the bed. My fingers wander to my core instinctively, running over my panties before I realize what I’m doing.

“Shame,” he says breathily, and I groan.

“I’m hanging up.”

“Think of me when you take care of yourself,” he murmurs. “And I’ll think of you.”

“Good night, Cole.”

“Sweet dreams, Eve,” he chuckles and ends the call.

I lay back down, putting my phone on the nightstand after setting my alarm. My thoughts drift for a while, recounting the last part of our conversation and making heat pool between my legs. However, the long hike exhausted me, and I fall asleep picturing Cole, sweat dripping down his chest and with my name on his lips as he comes.



“And if you hurt her, I will find you,” Mia’s voice quivers with fury as she speaks. “I will hurt your loved ones, then you, and then I’ll fuck up your career. I’ll make sure you never feel safe again. So you better watch out.”

I blink and realize she’s talking into a phone. Someone responds on the other end, but I can’t make out the words.

“It’s not a threat; it’s a promise. Don’t fuck it up this time,” she says before hanging up the phone.

I sit up, disoriented, and get even more confused when I see that she is holding my phone.

“Huh?”

“Sorry. I had to.” She throws the phone at me, and I catch it just before it hits me in the head.

“Did you seriously threaten Cole? Please tell me I dreamed that.” She looks at me innocently, and I groan, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes.

“How did you even unlock my phone?”

“I didn’t have to unlock it. He happened to call just as I was about to wake you up. It’s kind of your fault for falling asleep in the living room and leaving your phone out like that, now that I think about it.” She grins at me before she plops onto the couch. I quickly retract my legs before she sits on them. Before I can answer, Mia grabs the remote on the coffee table and turns on the tv.

“Oooh, Wednesday. I’ve been waiting to watch that one.” She presses play, but I grab the remote from her fingers and pause it again.

“I feel like we should talk about this.”

“What’s there to talk about? He has hurt you before, and you’re my bestie, which means your man deserves the ‘treat her well, or you can treat your broken bones’ talk.” She shrugs. “Don’t pretend you wouldn’t do the same.”

“Yeah, but—”

“No buts.” I raise my eyebrow, and she waves me off. “Oh, don’t be so childish.”

“Excuse me, have you met me?” I laugh and throw a pillow at her, which leads to a good-natured pillow fight. I let her win, obviously.

When I’m in bed, much later, I watch my phone. It’s been quiet the whole day, besides the occasional email, which I intend to ignore until I’m back at work.

Wrapped in my warm blankets, I have my window open and enjoy the cool, clean air. Through the open curtain, I can even watch the stars right from my bed. When I can’t fall asleep, I start to count them, waiting for my phone to flash up with a notification for a message from Cole. But it remains silent and dark until I fall asleep. I really hope Mia’s threat doesn’t make Cole think I’m friends with a psycho.

Chapter Sixteen

THE VIOLENT AND RELENTLESS buzzing of my phone jerks me awake. I let out a groan, my mind still foggy, and reach for it, fumbling around, trying to silence the noise. But it's not my alarm.

I sit up, my stomach dropping. The room is still dark, the forest outside veiled in an eerie silence, only broken by the occasional hoot of an owl in the distance. Something is off. A knot forms in my stomach as I finally have the phone in my grasp, watching notification after notification pop up; new messages from Liam and Cole appear on my lock screen rapidly. What the hell is going on?

Within a second, I am fully alert. Something must have happened if the two of them are bombarding my phone. I unlock it, my fingers trembling in anticipation. The bright light of my home screen is blinding in the dark room, and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. I swipe down on the notifications, and my heart races as I see the multiple missed calls and messages.

Missed call from Liam

Cole: *Babe, I swear on my grandma's grave, it wasn't me.*

Missed call from Cole

Missed call from Liam

Liam: *They better pray for their souls, because I'm gonna make them suffer.*

Cole: *Hey, don't check your socials. Just call me back, okay?*

Liam: *I'm going to kill them. One by one. Slowly and painfully.*

Missed call from Cole

Liam: *I will pluck each hair on their body, one at a time, until they scream for mercy, and then happily continue.*

Cole: *I'll hunt down whoever did this. Unless Mia beats me to it.*

Liam: *I'll even record their screams, I bet you could make a revenge song out of that.*

Liam: *And then I'll rearrange every piece of furniture in their house by a centimeter, so they stub their toes on every corner.*

Liam: *Seriously, where the hell are you right now?*

I jolt up and hastily slip my feet into thick socks and throw on a cozy sweatshirt to ward off the chill, before I hit the 'call' button. Liam answers after only one ring.

"Eve, thank God. Where are you?" he asks, his voice full of relief.

"I'm visiting Mia this week. I've told you that." My heart races as the words leave my lips.

"Good. So you're far away from civilization."

"Why is that good? What the hell is going on?"

"You haven't seen it yet? Wait, no, don't open your socials, I'll tell you," he replies. My chest grows tight and my heart pounds in my chest. This suspense is going to be the death of

me. “Someone leaked to the press not only the fact that you and Cole are dating, but all the dirty laundry about *your* past while they were at it. Conveniently, they didn’t include the fact that Hystoria stole your song. They do, however, mention that it’s what you’re proclaiming.”

I stand there, next to my bed, in the cold room, shell-shocked. The news hits me like a ton of bricks, knocking the wind out of my lungs. I’m dizzy. Slowly, I sink onto the bed, feeling like I’m drowning. I can’t breathe. My head is spinning, and I’m gasping for air.

“Shit, Eve,” Liam’s voice breaks through the haze in my mind. There is rustling on his end of the phone as he searches for Mateo. “Call Mia; she’s hyperventilating.”

“No,” I gasp, forcing myself to slow my breaths. I’m not successful. Tears spring to my eyes as I struggle for air.

“Breathe with me,” Liam says calmly and takes deep breaths for me to imitate. I clutch the phone to my ear, and slowly the panic in my chest subsides to a simmer instead of an inferno.

“Who did it?” I bury my face in my free hand. Now that the panic has died down, I can feel the weight of the situation bearing down on me like a boulder pressing down on my chest.

“We don’t know yet; we’re working on it,” he promises, and I hear someone cursing in the background. “A dead man walking, that’s for sure. Dad and his lawyers are already on it. He’s calling in all the favors he can think of.”

“I appreciate your willingness to murder for me, but you’re too pretty for jail,” I try to joke even though panic threatens to overwhelm me.

“I know. Don’t worry, I’ll send Mateo to do it,” he says nonchalantly, and I can hear the smirk in his voice.

“Oh, you can do it, my love. I’ll gladly take the blame.” I hear his fiancé’s voice in the background, followed by what sounds like a smooch on his cheek closer to the phone.

I’d roll my eyes at their Morticia and Gomez-like antics if I was clear in my head. Instead, curiosity is gnawing at me. Despite Liam’s warning, I take my phone away from my ear and put him on speaker as I unlock my phone. I need to see it. I didn’t want to believe it, but as soon as I open Twitter, I know he is right.

Several hundred notifications and mentions flood my feed. Ice creeps through my veins as I scroll down, trying to assess the damage. What was released? I try only to focus on pictures and scroll past the comments, but my eyes get caught on a few of them. Most of them are hurtful, some straight-up insults, with only an occasional ‘Good for them’ in between. Startled, I close the app again quickly.

Next, I open Instagram. Exactly the same. What the fuck? What should I do now? There are pictures of Cole waiting in front of my house. There is no way I can go back there now. At least not anytime soon. Or Scaena, because a picture of me walking into the building is also featured.

My heart stops when I get to the next picture, panic washing over me like a cold splash. Someone was diligent. There's a family picture from my childhood. Next to it is my former name. Now they are all over the internet. All the years I spent fighting to keep my anonymity. Shattered. Within hours. Not even a full day, no preparation. Nothing. Just like that.

"Are you hyperventilating again?" Liam's concerned voice brings me back to reality.

"Maybe." I realize that my breathing has become shallow and rapid. I force myself to take some deep breaths, trying to calm down.

"What should I do?" I finally ask and lean back, closing my eyes. Maybe when I open them again it will have been a bad dream.

"You're going to hang up the phone. Go to Mia. Have some breakfast," Liam itemizes with a reassuring tone. "And then you call me again. Dad and I will have a plan by then. Okay?"

"Okay," I say weakly. "Thank you, Liam. Love you."

"I love you too," he assures me and as always, it warms my cold, little heart a bit. "Everything is going to be okay." I nod again and hang up. I take another deep breath, repeating his words in my head like a mantra.

Everything will be okay.



Mia greets me downstairs with a concerned look in her eyes.

“Joe called me. Go on, sit down. Here is a coffee.” She hands me a hot mug and starts making some scrambled eggs.

“None for me, please. I’m not hungry.”

“Nah, you’re just anxious.” She dismisses my protest and places a plate in front of me. “You need to eat. Trust me, I’ve been there,” she says with a gentle smile, trying to offer me support.

“I always thought I kept you pretty drama-free,” I grumble, taking a sip of the coffee. It feels like acid burning in my throat.

“You did, but once you’re in the public eye, people will make up stuff about you. Remember the scandal,” she uses air quotes for the word, “where I got ‘caught’ with Gabe? “

“The one that turned out to be a picture of you two only talking at the charity gala?”

“That’s the one. At some point, you stop thinking about what other people think.” Mia shrugs. “It’s the paparazzi and reporters that are the real problem. I wish I’d read an interesting story about me for once.”

“I wish all they had was some story,” I sigh. “They just exposed my whole life to the world; past and present.”

“I know,” she says sympathetically, concern shining in her eyes. “Whoever leaked the story did a thorough job. If you weren’t Cole’s girlfriend, I doubt anyone would care.”

“Yeah. Talk about bad timing, huh?” I say pensively, my head snapping up as the sudden realization hits me. Mia turns away from the stove to face me, the same realization written on her face as she voices the unspoken question.

“Do you think Cole did it? You mentioned that you two talked about the past,” she asks, her voice tentative and her eyes growing wide. For a moment, the question hangs in the air like a thick fog, threatening to suffocate me.

“We did. Pretty recently, too,” I say with a heavy sigh. The more I think about it, the less I can think of anyone else who could have done it. I mean, he’s the only one who only recently learned my address. If anyone else from my circle wanted to leak it, they could have done so years ago.

“To be fair, I had more or less the same conversation with his mother,” I add, grimacing at how ridiculous it sounds. Then again, Rachel doesn’t know where I live.

“Let me guess, neither of them seems like the type?” Mia raises an eyebrow, her eyes searching mine. I know what she is trying to tell me. She’s been through these kinds of conversations before. I know they are hard for her, and every time, I ached with her as her heart broke a bit more whenever she found out she trusted the wrong person. Usually, though, our positions are reversed. I can’t say I enjoy this side of it.

“I know, I know,” I say, my voice heavy with defeat and thick as I swallow unshed tears.

“But why would they do it? Sure, they spun the story, but they hardly appear as saints,” Mia tries to reason and turns off

the stove and fills her own plate before joining me at the table.

“All publicity is good publicity, good or bad,” I say, letting out a deep sigh. “I can’t believe it. Fool me once...”

“Hey, as of now, we don’t know who did it,” Mia interrupts me, her voice firm. “Innocent until proven guilty and all that.”

But even as she speaks, a calmness washes over me, and I know deep down that my mind is made up. I shake my head.

“Can I have your phone for a second?” She hands it to me immediately.

“What are you doing?”

“Calling Gabe to check if he gave my address to anyone else,” I tell her as I scroll through her contacts. “I’ll have my answer then.” Gabe answers within two rings.

“Hi Mia. Is Eve alright?”

“No, Eve is pissed,” I bite out. Calm down, Eve. Snapping at Gabe will not fix anything. “Who else did you give my address to?”

“I only gave it to Cole. What the hell is going on?”

“Check twitter.” I end the call and hand Mia her phone back. “So apparently he only gave it to Cole.”

“You don’t look too happy about knowing that.”

“Because that means he betrayed me. Again.” I could kick a wall at this stage.

“I can’t imagine him being the one that gave it to the press.” Mia scratches her chin, her eyes wandering lost in thought.

“Maybe he’s angry that I don’t want to represent them, after all,” I say quietly. “What if he’s only trying to get back with me, so I’ll change my mind? Or to get revenge?”

“And now that you’ve made it clear it’s not going to happen, they’re going scorched earth?” Mia sighs heavily and I nod. “That would be...”

“Fucked up? Devastating?”

“Both.” She lays her hand on my shoulder and squeezes it gently. “It would be both. Especially now that they have Alex.”

“I guess they feel like Alex is not good enough for them.” I laugh darkly. “I need to go back for damage control,” I sigh, already feeling exhausted at the amount of work I’m expecting. I grab for my phone to check flights when it hits me.

“Shit, Mia, they have pictures of my home. I can’t go home.” My voice breaks, and tears are welling up in my eyes. She comes over and sits beside me, taking my hand in hers. Her touch is warm and comforting and for some reason, it breaks me. My tears spill over, leaving warm trails on my face before I wipe them away.

“I’ve worked so hard for this fucking home, and now I can’t even go there,” I cry, my voice cracking with frustration and despair. “Just because some dumbfuck gave out my address.”

“There, there.” She pats my back soothingly. “You’ll be able to go back. Someday.” She winces. “Maybe not soon, but

someday for sure.”

“That house is my baby.” I sob. “Fuck this, I’ll have a nine foot high wall installed.” I reach for my phone, ready to call the first landscaping company appearing in a Google search, but she quickly takes it away.

“I’m sure Liam or Joe will handle it.” She points at the plate with now-cold food in front of me. “Now. Eat.” I look at her defiantly, but her expression tells me that if I don’t eat, she will find a way to shove the food down my throat.

“Yes, Mum.” I wipe some stubborn tears away from my eyes, lift my fork, and push the food around on the plate. Her warning glance makes me put the tiniest amount on the utensil and I try to swallow the eggs past my constricted throat.

“There you go.” She pats my head empathically and takes the plate away when I’m finished. Just as she turns around, my phone chimes.

“How did he—” I look at the device disbelievingly and pick it up. “Can you read minds?”

“No, why?” Liam chuckles on the other end of the line.

“Because I literally finished my breakfast the minute you called. That timing was perfect.” At least I can still appreciate the little things.

“It’s intuition, babe.” He chuckles and even though my life feels like it’s crumbling around me, it makes me grin. Just a little bit.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“You’re having an early vacation,” he lets me know, and I raise my eyebrow, displeased. The last thing I need is a vacation and time to be alone with my thoughts. Mia notices my hesitation and motions for me to put him on speaker.

“Hi Liam. Just a warning that I’m listening in,” she interjects, and he greets her in return.

“You’re getting the full Mia experience,” Liam continues. “Cabin. Woods. Although you do have an additional outdoor fireplace for the extra cozy experience. Huh? Doesn’t that sound great?” He actually sounds excited, but I’m not so sure.

“She can just stay here,” Mia offers, and I shoot her a thankful look.

“No offense, Mia, but we rented this cabin out so you can relax. There’s no need to put you right into the middle of my drama,” I tell her. “Thank you, though.”

“She’s right,” Liam chimes in. “You just relax, and then you two will be back on the road before you know it. Eve, I sent John. He’ll be your temporary bodyguard and pick you up. He’s going to a nearby hotel, in case you need security when you go out.”

“You can just get me a car. I have a driver’s license, remember?”

“Yeah, that means you can fuck off though, so not a chance.” I sigh dejectedly.

“Where would I go?”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t exactly go home, where do you think I would run off to?”

“Fuck knows.” Liam laughs. “But I don’t care to find out, and neither does Dad, so just accept your fate. John is already on his way, anyway. I think he’s excited. He got to choose his own car this time. I hope it’s a comfy one.”

“Does it matter if it’s comfy?”

“Ask that to your back after the seven-hour drive.” He laughs, and I groan. I despise sitting still for so long and while I like John, he’s not the chattiest driver. It’s going to be a long and silent drive.

“Great. Amazing,” I utter with a resigned groan. “So what about everything else? What statement are we putting out? Do I need to do something? Did you find out who it was?”

“Dad said he wanted to call you,” Liam mumbles something inaudible to someone off-mic. “Okay, Dad just came over, I’ll put you on speaker too.”

“Okay.” Click. “Hi Joe. Sorry for the fuzz.”

“Hey, Eve. How are you holding up?” I clear my throat, clenching my jaw. That simple question, and the worried tone of Joe’s voice, is threatening to make me cry again.

“So-so,” I admit, gulping past the lump in my throat.

“Now, first off, don’t apologize for something you have no influence on,” Joe assures me, and I feel a sense of relief wash over me. “Second, I’ve called Alex, and he agrees with me that the best course of action is to come clean to the public.

Meaning we're releasing a statement that you've written the song but signed the rights over to Hystoria."

I nod. It's kind of what I expected. "Alright."

"If you're okay with it, Alex would prefer if we left out the exact timeline."

"What does that mean?" I look at Mia, but she glances at me just as clueless.

"It means we are just releasing that you signed over the rights fair and square, without the tiny detail that it happened rather recently." I pause. Truth be told, I don't want to agree until I know who talked to the press. Then again, I also don't want Alex to suffer from drama he has no part in. After all, I'm the one who dragged him into it in the first place.

"Alright," I finally mutter, ignoring Mia's surprised expression. "Tell Alex he owes me big time."

"I've made that much clear already." Joe chuckles.

"Who do you think it was?" Mia asks abruptly. "Sorry. Hi, Joe."

"Mia! I hope you're doing well." He sounds genuinely delighted to hear her. By now, he must think of her as family as well.

"A bit bored, but I am humbly reminded that it could be worse," she responds with a dark laugh, making Joe chuckle on the other end. "Now, who sold that story?"

“I mean, there aren’t exactly many people who know about my past.” A bone-deep sigh leaves my lips. “If we’re talking about motive, it must have been someone from Hystoria.”

“We think they’re still angry Eve is not going to work with them,” Mia volunteers, drawing understanding ‘Aaah’s’ from the other side of the line.

“You think they would go that far?” Joe asks, and I can hear the scepticism in his voice.

“Honestly, I don’t know what to think about them at all. I know they went a lot farther in the past.” I rub my hand over my face, suddenly exhausted. “And as much as Gabe has been acting like a jackass, I don’t think it’s him.

“So that leaves Cole. Maybe Paxton gave him some ideas, since apparently he’s good at this kind of thing.” I roll my eyes. “At this point, I know nothing. They might have lied about the song theft being his idea so Cole could approach me again.”

“Now we’re venturing into conspiracy theory level.” I can almost see Liam holding back a chuckle. “So maybe don’t draw the worst conclusions just yet.”

“Oh, I am drawing. And I will continue to draw until we have answers. Call me van Gogh.”

“Well, then we better get back on it.” Joe chuckles. “Don’t cut off your ear. Love you. We’ll keep you updated.”

I say goodbye to them, my heart almost bursting as I look at the phone screen grow dark. It’s lovely to be this loved and

know that each of them is going to stick around when shit hits the fan.

I wish they'd been there for me the last time as well.



“Nope, she doesn’t want to talk to you,” Mia growls into the phone as she paces in front of the windows. It takes a few moments for me to realize that I fell asleep on the sofa again. I have the biggest Deja-vu, but when I sit up, she is talking into her own phone.

“No, I am very serious,” Mia says calmly, pronouncing her words very carefully. It’s the kind of scary calm that settles over her just before she deliberately scratches her long nails down your cheek as she slaps you across the face; the kind where she chooses every single word deliberately, waiting and ready to strike below the belt at any time. “When can you talk to her? When you’ve proven you weren’t the one who fucked up her life. Again.” I hear Cole’s agitated voice, but despite the sound being quite loud, I cannot make out his words.

“I don’t have to prove shit. The only people who know her history with your band, as well as her real name, not including you, can be counted on one hand. They’re all very trusted people, I might add. And the story breaks days after she’s told you? What a coincidence.” Another angry torrent of words, although this time, I believe I can make out some curse words. And a lot of ‘fucks.’

“Well, get me proof of that, and I might think about it. Bye.” She hangs up and turns to me. “Sorry. I didn’t want to wake you, but I got a bit carried away there.”

“It’s okay.” I yawn and sit up. Hearing her fight with Cole for me makes me feel all warm and happy inside. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.” She sits down next to me and nudges me playfully. “And you’ve done this for me plenty of times.”

“It’s quite literally my job though.” She looks at me, a flash of hurt crossing her face. “You know what I mean. I’m doing it for you, but I also enjoy the part where I get paid for it.”

“I get it,” she assures me. “If you were only in it for the money, you’d have dropped me when I drunkenly destroyed my hotel room in San Francisco.”

“No, when I had to collect you, high as fuck, from a casino in Vegas,” I remind her, making her laugh. “You spent the whole night stalking a security guard, convinced he was a stripper.”

“In my defense, he looked just like Channing Tatum.” She chuckles, her eyes lighting up. For her, it must be a fun memory, but she kept escaping her security guards and me the whole evening. To us, it was a nightmare.

“He really didn’t.” I laugh, and she joins in. Okay, looking back, the situation might be funny. Our laughter subsides and the air grows heavy with silence. Mia is typing something on her phone, and I’m lost in my thoughts. Did I miss any signs?

How could I not notice that Cole only got close so he could strike again? Am I that gullible?

“I feel like a failure,” I confess after a few minutes, breaking the silence. Mia types something into her phone furiously but looks up sharply at my words.

“What the fuck for?”

“I’ve handled so many of these,” I say, gesturing helplessly. “All these so-called scandals. And now that it’s happening to me, I feel paralyzed.” I sigh and hug a pillow to my chest. “I hate it.”

“I know. I felt the same way whenever it happened to me,” she admits. “But I was lucky enough to have you by my side. Now I can finally return the favor.” She smiles at me, and I feel my heart swell with gratitude.

“And I know you probably regret getting yourself involved with Hystoria again. But I think it’s admirable that you’ve given them another shot. It makes you the bigger person, don’t you think?”

“Well, I sure wish I felt better about it.” My voice is sour with bitterness.

“It will come with time.” She shrugs. “And even though we’re like, ninety percent sure, it’s still not confirmed,” she reminds me. She’s right. But, like usual, I’m jumping to the worst-case scenario immediately so I can prepare myself for it.

“Do you really think so?”

“God, I never thought your self-esteem was this shit.” Mia’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. In my job, I need to appear confident to be taken seriously. But lately, it’s been hard.

“Usually, it’s not. This is just reopening some old wounds.” A deep, bitter sigh escapes my lips.

“Well, let me elaborate,” she says, her voice calm and measured, although I can see the anger simmering beneath the surface. “No matter who I talked to in the industry, they only ever had good things to say about you.”

I open my mouth to object, but she holds up her hand to stop me and continues speaking. “Well, apart from stagehands you fired for being incompetent or sexist assholes, of course. Yet every artist, manager, and I don’t know what their job title is, so I’m going to call them office workers, I talked to, praised you to the heavens, and told me how lucky I am for having you. They respect you for being firm and fair. So give yourself a bit more credit for judging an emotionally difficult situation wrongly, *maybe*.”

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks, and I stare at her, my mouth agape. I never knew people spoke so highly of me, but it brings warmth to my cheeks. Maybe she has a point. Maybe I *am* too harsh on myself.

“Oh. Wow,” is all I manage to say.

“So shut the hell up and trust us to help you handle this shit,” she says bluntly, but with a hint of playfulness in her tone.

I can't help but laugh at her directness, and I raise my hands in surrender. "Okay, I get it; no need to keep ranting."

"We both know you can't take a fucking compliment, so I don't think you do. But I'll let it slide," she adds, her scolding tone turning gentle.

I'm about to thank her, when we hear a car approaching outside. Our heads whip around to face the front door, and my heart starts to race. We look at each other, the same worry written on our faces. I motion towards the window, and before I can do it myself, Mia sneaks over to take a look at our visitor.

"It's John," she says, and my shoulders sag in relief. Maybe this cabin is hidden better from the paparazzi than I thought. When I look at her, Mia narrows her eyes at me.

"This conversation is not over. You better keep in touch."

"I promise," I say, holding up my pinky finger. She locks it with hers, looking at me suspiciously. "Maybe you should head over to Mister Mountain Man for a few days," I suggest. "After all, I booked this cabin under my name. Sorry for that."

"You keep on apologizing." She lets out a scoffing breath. "You need to do that less. But I think you make a good point." She bites the top of her finger and looks deep in thought. Then she snaps out of it just as quickly. "You know what, I think you're right. Staying here would be *totally* risky. I should really stay over there, a few days. For safety reasons."

“Safety, absolutely. Definitely until after Thanksgiving,” I say, winking. “I hear he has no plans anyway. And maybe you might want to just go over there and see what he says. Asking beforehand gives the option of saying no.” I grin, and her eyes light up with mischief. “I learned that in Management 101. Call Liam if he does tell you to go back, though, so he can arrange something else.”

“See, you have the best ideas. Let it get to your head a bit,” she jokes, ignoring the last part of my advice, and runs up to her room. “What should I take with me over there?” she shouts, making me laugh as I open the door for John. He greets me with a grunt, and before I can even offer him a coffee, he heads straight to the kitchen and makes one himself.

“Good to see you too,” I shout after him, and head upstairs as well to pack my suitcase.

John helps us carry down both cases. I, for one, was tempted to just push it down the stairs, but considering this place is only rented, maybe it’s better to have someone strong help out.

“I didn’t even get to meet your hunk,” I whine as I hug Mia goodbye before we part ways.

“Hopefully there will be other opportunities.” She squeezes me and I tighten my grip around her small frame as well.

“I am sure there will.” I take a step back and grin. “Have a good Thanksgiving, yes?” She nods. “And write me.”

“I will.” Her smile is devious. “I want all the tea. I am too curious about how all of this will turn out. I’m crossing my

fingers for an unexpected plot twist.”

“Thank you,” I say dejectedly, and grab the handle of my case. “Ugh. I hate partings. I’ll see you soon.” After one last hug, I follow John to his car.

He grins when the big SUV he rented comes into sight and I whistle at the size. His smile, however, is quickly wiped off his face when he lifts my heavy suitcase into the trunk. I can’t quite hide my grin as I climb into the giant vehicle.

Chapter Seventeen

AS EXPECTED, THE RIDE is quiet; the only sound in the giant car is the pretty loud hum of the engine. John focuses on driving, while I find myself shifting between gazing out of the window, getting lost in my thoughts, and staring at my phone.

Despite my best efforts to stay away from social media, I can feel the urge to check my accounts creeping up on me. Then again, I have already seen everything there is to see this morning. What am I hoping to find by looking again? Considering the few comments I've seen, it would just be masochistic to open any app.

So I uninstall all social media apps from my phone, leaving only my messenger app, which I use to stay in touch with everyone back home.

Liam keeps me up to date on their investigation. As promised, Joe is pulling strings like a master puppeteer, leaving no stone unturned, and reaching out to everyone in his network who might owe him a favor. Still, no luck. The uncertainty makes me more and more anxious with each hour that passes.



After driving up the umpteenth mountain, John turns onto a long, gravelly road. We travel along the driveway for another five minutes until we arrive at a cabin, snugly nestled between trees and a small creek.

“Wow,” I exclaim as I jump out of the car. Liam was not exaggerating. From the outside, it looks incredibly inviting, as if it was taken straight out of a Christmas movie.

John grunts and I assume it’s in agreement. He gets out and motions for me to stay put while he runs inside to do his security thing. When he comes back out, he nods and throws me the key before he hoists my suitcase out of the car and brings it inside, then quickly drives off.

Walking inside the cabin, I take the interior in with awe. It looks even more inviting on the inside. I head straight to the fireplace, and I can already see myself sitting in front of it, wrapped in a blanket, with a cup of hot cocoa. I can feel my body relaxing already. However, my attention quickly shifts to the wall of books next to the fireplace.

Books are stacked from the ground to the ceiling, from one wall to the other. I take a closer look and see titles from my favorite authors, some I have read before and some I haven’t. I make a mental note to pick one up later. The couch in the center of the room looks big enough to fit three people, with soft cushions and plush blankets thrown over it. I can’t help but smile as I imagine myself curling up on it and getting lost in a book.

The tips of my fingers start to tingle, aching to run along the spines and pick out a book to read. I’m becoming giddy. How long has it been since I last had time to relax and read? It must have been long ago, because I can’t even remember it.

When I walk into the next room, I'm surprised to find it's a music room. The space is occupied by not only guitars and drums, but also a full-sized piano, which dominates almost a third of the room.

The next room is a spacious kitchen. I check out the contents of the fridge and find it fully stocked with snacks, drinks, and a bunch of vegetables and ingredients for cooking. Liam has really thought of everything.

As I search through the freezer, I come across a few frozen dishes like pizza and lasagna. My stomach is already grumbling since John only stopped for lunch, many hours ago. I guess one of the lasagnas is going to be today's dinner, because after that drive, I am way too exhausted to cook. While the oven preheats, I head upstairs to explore the second story of the house.

Upstairs, I find another cozy living room, with an even more breath-taking, elevated view, compared to the one downstairs. There are also two bedrooms. I choose the one with the larger window and roof lights and leave my suitcase there. The adjoining bathroom even has a jetted tub, and I make a mental note to make full use of it this evening.

I hurry downstairs and put a lasagna into the oven before calling Liam.

"So? How do you like it?" he asks as soon as he picks up.

"It's great," I reply, pacing the living room. "I might just shut off my internet and ignore you all for two weeks."

“And we couldn’t blame you.” Liam chuckles. “Honestly? Sounds like a fantastic plan. You deserve a break, so go for it!”

“I’ll think about it. If I stop answering you, don’t worry, I haven’t been murdered. I’m just off the grid.”

“No problem, I’ll let everyone know to leave you alone for a while.”

“Thank you. So. Any developments?” I ask, hopeful to finally receive some answers.

“Kind of,” he sighs. “We found the reporter who wrote the article, but he’s not revealing his source, no matter how much we pester or how much money we’re willing to throw at him.” A heavy sigh escapes me. Of course. Anything else would have been too good to be true. At least it’s a start.

“Who is it?”

“A guy called Hunter Davidson.”

“Ah, I know him. Of course he’s not budging; that guy is a hardass.” I exhale a long, exhausted breath. Then I suddenly have an idea. “If his source is from Hystoria, we can give him a bigger story, though, can’t we? I mean, there would be boy band drama, that’s bound to sell amazingly, right?” There’s a moment of silence on the other end of the line. “Liam?”

“That’s so smart,” he responds, his voice filled with admiration. I can almost hear the face palm through the phone. “That’s so smart. So damn smart. And you’re fucking ruthless.”

“Am I?” I shrug. “I prefer the term ‘payback.’ If it was them, they would have nothing to fear. And a wave of public drama would seem well deserved.”

“You’re right,” Liam chuckles on the other end of the line. “I’ll tell Dad. Wait a second.” I hear muffled voices and chuckling, then Joe’s booming laughter.

“We’ll try that,” Liam finally lets me know, and I can’t help but grin.

“Good luck. Keep me updated.”

“Will do. Until then, enjoy your quiet time.”

“Wait, before you go, how long is this cabin rented for?”

“Indefinitely.”

“Huh?” I almost run into the bookshelf in my surprise. “What do you mean by indefinitely?”

“It belongs to a friend of a friend of Dad, I think,” Liam explains. “She moved to Spain last year and said you can stay in her cabin for as long as you want or need to. She also said to feel free to use everything.”

“Oh wow, that’s very generous,” I say slowly, still processing the information. Just then, my timer beeps, indicating that my food is done.

“Well, I need to get my lasagna out of the oven, so, later.”

“Then shut off your phone and enjoy some quiet. Have fun!”

I assure him that I will do just that and then hurry to get my food out of the oven. It’s easier to think with a full belly.



I keep my promise the following week and avoid the temptation to check social media. My laptop remains in the bottom of my bag, shoved in the corner of the living room. Out of sight, out of mind. Every day, either Joe or Liam calls me to provide an update, even though there isn't any new information to report. Or maybe they want to check to see whether I've died of boredom already.

They tell me that Cole has been showing up at Scaena regularly to check if I'm there or if he will find anyone who's willing to tell him where I am. But Peggy and Joe are sending him away. Even Gabe has visited a few times, with the same outcome. I'm sure if I had both of them unblocked, my phone wouldn't stop buzzing with messages from them.

Meanwhile, I am really enjoying my isolation. I read at least one book a day. Whoever owns this cabin has a very broad taste in literature, and their collection features books of different genres and authors.

I also play instruments, just for the sake of playing them. Nowadays, when I pick up instruments, it's because I am writing a song, tinkering, or changing sounds. I can't remember the last time I played them just for fun. Now, I take the time to play them without thinking, letting the music flow through me as my fingers dance across the piano keys or guitar strings.

I've never played the drums before, but after stumbling upon some beginner guides online, I'm trying it out. Anything really, to keep my mind off things, plus it's a good way to work out my frustration.

I have also been spending a lot of time cooking. I almost never get to enjoy my big kitchen at home, but here, finally, I have all the time in the world. I collect herbs in the garden outside and chop them up myself instead of using dry or frozen ones. I let the meat marinate instead of throwing everything in the pan because I'm so tired I just want to sleep.

As I stir my sauce for tonight's dinner and let out a contented sigh, I realize how much I have missed this: the quiet, the calm, and having time for myself. Taking a step back and taking care of myself, instead of just being a manager or artist, feels like a breath of fresh air.

Just as I think that, my phone rings.

"Who is disturbing my solitude?" I ask without checking my caller display.

"It's me." Liam chuckles. "Solitude?"

"Well, I'm making the best of my tricky situation." I joke, and he laughs even harder.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself. Maybe I shouldn't tell you we found out who talked. Or how we might be able to get people off your back soon." I pause, intrigued.

"You found out?" I ask, my voice full of hope and curiosity.

"Hell yeah. Don't say you doubted us!"

“I would never,” I respond, pretending to cough. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Although with all the time you were taking, I was wondering if you would be waiting for people to get off my back by themselves. So, spill. Who was it?”

“Do you have a TV in the cabin?” Liam asks, and I look around the room.

“Of course,” I tell him when I spot it on the wall and walk over to the device.

“Turn it on to channel five.”

“Okay,” I say, puzzled, and do as he says. “You want me to watch advertisements for diarrhea?” Liam chuckles.

“Of course not. Ah, there they are.”

Cole, Jake, and Simon step into the frame. All of them look serious and solemn as they line up in front of a row of microphones in front of their label’s building. My eyes are drawn to Cole immediately. Even though he is wearing sunglasses, I can see the exhaustion carved into his face.

Jake takes a step forward and clears his throat, his hands fidgeting as all eyes land on him.

“Due to personal differences, Hystoria will take an indefinite hiatus,” he announces, his voice loud and clear. The crowd stirs in shock and confusion, and several reporters gasp. My eyes widen in surprise as well. He is basically admitting to the band members fighting on live tv. That takes balls. “Starting immediately.”

“Paxton?” I ask Liam. He’s the only member not there, and it can’t be for any other reason, right? He makes a sound of agreement. “Goddamnit,” I mutter under my breath, anger boiling in my stomach. How could he do this to me again? I’ve signed Alex’s goddamn agreement and sold the song to them. ‘You’re the one who can destroy us,’ my ass, there are no grounds for that anymore.

“We wore the journalist down. Once we confronted Paxton, and by that, I mean that Dad tore into him and threatened him with legal actions, he confessed to his band. I wasn’t there, but I was told security had to escort him back to his car for his safety,” Liam explains quickly, and I picture the scene in my head. I can’t imagine how angry Jake, Si, and Cole must have felt at their bandmate endangering their future like this.

“The bad news is, you’ll have to do an interview with the reporter at some point,” Liam continues, interrupting my thoughts. I grimace. I really don’t want to. But considering the peace of mind I now have, I guess it is worth it.

“Are there other repercussions?”

“Of course, the information reached Alex, and he is not signing them for now. Hence the hiatus. Their label kicked them to the curb, effective immediately. They’re beyond fed up with Hystoria’s drama. That’s all I know, though.”

My attention returns to the TV, where reporters begin to bombard the band with questions. I can’t help but feel sorry for them as they stand there, looking overwhelmed and a bit lost. “*Where is Paxton?*”

“Will you ever come back?”

“Is the girl really your girlfriend, Cole?”

“Did you steal any other songs?”

I can see the panic gradually creeping into Jake’s eyes at the barrage of questions and accusations thrown at them. Instead of answering, he takes a step back and signals his bandmates to follow him. Cole, however, seems to have a different plan in mind. He steps in front of the microphones, shaking off Jake, who is trying to pull him along.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Cole says firmly, causing a murmur to go through the crowd, and my heart to leap into my throat. He smirks before he continues.

“Yet,” he adds with a mischievous glint in his eyes, causing a few gasps and some giggles from the audience. Then the reporters start shouting questions at him even more fervently.

“Son of a bitch,” Liam shouts in my ear, his reaction making me chuckle.

“Come on, Cole.” Jake also doesn’t seem amused. He pleads with Cole to step back, and I swear I see him mouthing, ‘don’t get us into even deeper shit.’ But Cole shakes his head, undeterred. Then he faces the microphone again.

“And since she has probably blocked me, this might be the best opportunity I can get.” His eyes wander over the crowd of reporters before settling on the camera for this channel, his eyes looking right into the lens with intent.

“I know that I messed up. I’m not asking for forgiveness right now, because I know I don’t deserve it yet. I want you; no, I need you to know that I love you, Eve. I have loved you from the moment I set eyes on you. And I knew that I fell for you when you doused me in flour while baking Christmas cookies with my mom.” I inhale sharply as the words reach my ear, my heart racing as I try to process them. A million thoughts run through my head.

“How romantic,” Liam fawns. But I am still in shock.

“He loves me?” My voice is barely above a whisper, and I need to sit down. Then it hits me, “The picture!” I exclaim and jump right up again, pacing in front of the tv, where the crowd is murmuring.

“The picture?”

“When he came to Scaena for the first time, he gave me a picture for my wall,” I say, losing any composure I had left, “from when we baked Christmas cookies together.”

“I repeat: how romantic.” Liam chuckles, and I look back at the screen. Cole leans in to talk into the microphone again.

“Hurting you will haunt me for the rest of my life. And I am going to spend it proving to you how sorry I am,” he says, his voice softening. “I will do whatever it takes to earn your trust and your love back. Please give me a chance to prove myself.”

He pauses, his eyes brimming with emotion. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I feel tears prickling in the corner

of my eyes as he continues. “Please, Eve. Call me. Let’s talk about this. I need you. More than anything.”

With that, he turns around and walks away, his two bandmates following close behind. As the camera lingers on the empty spot where he was standing, I try to make sense of everything I’ve just heard.

“Eve? Are you still there?”

“Yeah,” I say softly, still stunned by what just happened. “I don’t know what to say.” Thoughts are running through my head at the speed of light, and I don’t know which ones to focus on. Paxton. Yeah, let’s start with that. “Why would Paxton do that?” I ask Liam.

“Seriously? Cole confesses his love for you on live TV, and you’re wondering about Paxton?”

“I need to start somewhere,” I say, rolling my eyes as he laughs at me. “Oh, shut up!”

“Alright, alright. Fair enough.” He still sounds amused. “The reporter didn’t know, and doesn’t seem to care, as long as he makes money off a story. But I have a feeling that something might be up with him. Think about it, what are sudden personality changes sometimes a symptom of?” he asks secretively.

“You mean like substance abuse?” I wonder, and suddenly, so much clicks into place. “Wow. You’re right. I haven’t thought of that, but it would make sense.”

“Right? Poor guy.”

“Don’t be too sympathetic.” I scold him gently. “So, what now?”

“Now, you go and take a bath in that amazing bathtub and think about what to do with your lover boy. I bet he’s waiting by his phone for your call.”

“Right,” I answer, heat rising to my cheeks as I remember his public admission. “What should I do?”

“You make him come to you and let him screw your brain out,” Liam answers nonchalantly, and I choke on my spit. “Come on, don’t tell me that’s not what you had in mind.”

“A lady doesn’t speak about such things,” I say, feeling a flush creep up my neck. I’m by no means a prude, but there are just things that have no business coming up in a conversation between Liam and me.

“See, if you were a lady, I’d even believe that,” he jokes, and I can hear him trying to suppress a laugh. He quickly says goodbye and disconnects.

I pace the room and try to gather my thoughts. This is too much to process all at once. Is Paxton really doing drugs? Cole loves me! How did none of the other members ever realize it? Cole loves me! Did I overreact in icing Cole out? Does that mean I don’t trust him? Will I ever be able to trust him again?

I look at my phone on the table as though it contains the answer to all my questions. It remains dark, however, taunting me with the lack of incoming notifications, just when I am

praying for somebody to solve all my problems with a simple finger snap.

Without thinking, I grab my phone and unblock Cole. I take a deep breath and try to calm my nerves before pressing the call button. What am I going to say to him?

He answers before I've made up my mind.

"Hey," Cole greets me, and I can almost hear the weight it takes off his chest.

"Hi," I respond, feeling shy. I'm not sure what I even want to say, but after knowing that I jumped to conclusions way too quickly, I feel the need to apologize. But I don't know how to start.

"I'm sorry," he says before I can even think of the right words.

"For what? Apparently, I'm the one who made hasty assumptions," I admit and start pacing the living room again, biting my thumb as I listen to him.

"I should have been more suspicious of Pax," he says, frustration lacing his voice. "We all knew he was an asshole, but I never thought he would do something like this. Especially considering how much he hates paparazzi himself." I can tell that he is just as hurt by the whole drama as I am.

"How are you holding up?"

"Like always." His words are heavy, all energy sucked out of his voice as he answers. "Holed up at home and increased

security.” I bite my lip. My heart breaks at the thought of him being all alone right now.

“Do you want to come here?” I ask quietly, blood rushing through my cheeks.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah,” I say breathlessly, fluttering anticipation building in my core.

“Where are you?”

“Scaena booked me a cabin away from all the turmoil. I’m not even sure where exactly it is, but it’s lovely.” I rummage through my notes, looking for the exact address of the cabin as my heart starts fluttering at the prospect of seeing Cole again soon. “How about it? Do you think you could use some quiet?”

“That sounds heavenly, to be honest. As long as you’re there.”

“Okay,” I whisper, my face turning warm. “I’ll send you the address.”

“Okay.” I hear the smile in his voice, and it sends a grin to my face as well. “I’ll see you soon. I can’t wait,” he adds and hangs up before he can hear me say, “Me neither.”



A persistent knocking at the front door makes me jolt out of sleep at three in the morning. The noise is startling in the big,

empty house, and suddenly, I feel like I'm in a horror movie. Then again, why would an axe murderer knock?

The chilly air makes me shiver as I get up. I make my way down the stairs, my mind racing through all the possible scenarios. I keep an eye out for potential weapons I can grab if it's an intruder. Then again, why would an intruder knock? Sleep and murder documentaries are making me paranoid.

Finally, I reach the front door, checking the peephole before unlocking it and seeing a familiar face staring back at me. I open the door, and before I can even say hello, Cole scoops me up in his arms, holding me tightly against him with his face pressing against my collarbone. I'm stunned but quickly recover, wrapping my arms and legs around him like a koala and burying my face in the crook of his neck, greedily drinking in his scent.

"Hi," I finally mumble into my comfortable spot. His whole body shakes with laughter, and I can't help but smile against his skin. "I don't want to ruin this, no doubt, very romantic moment," I murmur against it, the hair on my neck standing up. After all, I sleep only in panties and a shirt, and haven't bothered slipping on anything else before I came down. "But I'm fucking freezing. Turn a bit so I can kick the door shut." Relief floods me when the cold breeze around my bare legs stops.

"Better?" he asks, his warm voice filled with amusement.

"Much better," I reply, yawning as I snuggle closer to him. He's really warm.

“Where’s your bedroom?” I point toward the general direction of the stairs. He gets the gist and walks over to them, and I giggle as he cups my butt so I don’t slide off as he climbs them. I find I really like hanging onto him like a koala. It makes me feel safe. As we reach the top of the stairs, I point him in the direction of the bedroom, and he quickly finds his way there. He stops in front of the bed and sets me down gently, then gets back up, and takes a step back, an inquiring look in his eyes as his gaze holds mine.

“Come on, get in here,” I answer the unspoken question and climb under the covers, then pat the empty spot next to me. “I’m tired. We’ll talk tomorrow, okay?”

I watch him as he slips out of his jacket, shirt, socks, and jeans. It’s an obscene sight, the way his muscles move as he strips. He winks at me when he finds me staring, and I’m glad he can’t make out my red face in the dimly lit room. He is still grinning when he slips under the covers.

I giggle as we fumble around for a moment, trying to find a comfortable position. Eventually, we settle in with him holding me close. I lay facing him, my face buried against his warm chest, as his arms wrap around me in a gentle embrace. A gentle smile spreads on my face when I feel his soft lips press against the top of my head.

As I begin to drift off to sleep, I feel a sense of peace washing over me. This is where I’m supposed to be. Right here.

“Sweet dreams, Evie,” he whispers softly.

“Sweet dreams, Cole,” I mumble. The steady sound of his breathing lulls me into a peaceful slumber, and I drift off to sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

I WAKE UP ENVELOPED by heat. We must have shifted during the night, and now Cole is spooning me from behind, holding me close to him with one arm under my head and the other wrapped around my waist.

I reach for my phone on the bedside table to check the time. 10 o'clock. Cole must have driven half the night in order to get here, and I still feel heavy with sleep. So instead of getting up, I turn in his arms until I'm facing him.

He looks so peaceful asleep, with his features relaxed and his breath gently blowing against my collar bone. The dark bags under his eyes look better now that he's having a decent rest. I can't resist the urge to reach out and touch his cheek, feeling the softness of his skin and scratchy stubble under my fingertips. Pulling my blanket a bit higher, I snuggle closer, shutting my eyes as I take in the moment. I wish there was a way to keep these kinds of moments in a jar and go back to them whenever I want to.

Suddenly, Cole groans and scrunches up his nose in the cutest way. Like a puppy about to sneeze. It's a sign that he's about to wake up, something he's done ever since his teens. I consider turning around again, so as not to appear like a creep watching him, but his arms tighten around me. Without opening his eyes, he turns so that I lay on top of him.

His chest vibrates under me as he lets out a chuckle, his eyes still closed. "Good morning," he murmurs, his voice husky from sleep. It's really, really sexy. One of his eyes pops open, and the smile that floods his face is indescribable.

“Good morning,” I mumble, suddenly shy. I rest my head on his chest, listening to the sound of his heartbeat, feeling the rise and fall of his chest with every breath he takes. We lay there for a while, basking in each other’s warmth and company until the growling of my stomach breaks the peaceful silence.

Cole chuckles again, this time with his eyes open, and I can see the love and affection in his gaze. “Looks like we need to get up and feed the beast,” he teases, and I nod in agreement before I tear myself off him. Once I’m up, I make a beeline for the bathroom.

When I come back out, I hear a sizzling sound and the smell of eggs and bacon hits my nose. I follow it to the kitchen, where Cole is busy preparing breakfast for us. We eat silently, no words needed right now. Whenever I look up, I catch Cole staring at me with a gentle look in his eyes that makes my cheeks go red.

After breakfast, we settle onto the couch in the living room. It’s raining outside, and the gentle patter against the window lulls us into a calm silence. But I promised him we would talk today, and I am itching to say my piece.

Feeling uneasy, I clear my throat and fidget with my fingers as I gather the courage to speak up.

“So,” I start, not quite sure how to begin.

“So,” he echoes with a teasing smile and takes my hand into his.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out. I avoid his gaze, feeling a knot of guilt in my stomach. “I shouldn’t have blocked you without hearing you out first.”

“Accepted,” he says gently and lifts our hands to place a kiss on the back of mine. “I didn’t blame you, to be honest. I know that I have a long road ahead of me until you trust me again.” I nod and turn to lean my back against his chest, and his arms wrap around me without hesitation.

“Still. I should have at least heard you out.” It’s a bit easier to talk when I don’t face him.

“Hindsight is always 20/20. Maybe next time you can hear me out before doing that.” I feel him shrug. “We’ll get there,” he promises, and I nod, feeling reassured.

We spend this day, and the next, relaxing and getting to know each other again, making up for lost time. Sometimes, when I glance over at him, I find him staring at me with a serene smile on his face. It turns even wider and brighter whenever our eyes meet.

We play music together, although none of our own songs. We take walks together, watching the wildlife and admiring the colors of the leaves as they change for the fall. We even cook together, resulting in more than one food war. And when the darkness falls outside, and rain gently taps against the windows, we cuddle up together to read or watch movies. Or we lay in bed together, enjoying each other’s presence and just talking.

I haven't breached the topic of Paxton. Cole admitted how his friend's betrayal hurt him. While we are both sure that Paxton's main intention was to harm me by exposing the past, Cole is not only angry on my behalf but also because Paxton was so fixated on hurting me that he either did not think, or did not give a damn, about who else would face the consequences.

It doesn't even take a day to feel like we've never been separated. It reminds me of how well we used to work together, how much sense we made, and how much I loved him back in the day.

The love returns slowly, like a rosebud, growing as I nurture it, from a frozen block it has thawed and is starting to bloom once again. I find myself blushing when Cole compliments me and becoming shy when he stares at me for too long and says he loves looking at me. A shyness I haven't felt in years.

Before I even realize it, three days have passed, and Liam calls me again.

"The interview was romantic as hell but not really beneficial in terms of getting paparazzi to back off," he sighs apologetically. My cheeks flush red as I remember it. Somehow, it feels like it was weeks ago instead of mere days.

"I mean, there are worse things than being out here," I say as I pace by the big living room window. "But I also kind of want to get back to work and have some normalcy again."

"And we miss you and want you back here. It's almost time for our annual Halloween movie marathon."

“I know,” I whine and assure him that I miss him too. “By the way, you can send John home again.”

“Huh? Why would I strand you in Bumfuck, Nowhere?”

“I’m not stranded,” I retort. “I might have a visitor. Maybe.” Depending on whether he freaks out at that admittance or not.

“A visitor,” he repeats, sounding intrigued. “Is Mia there? That girl, why would she put herself in the middle of this? We *just* got her to relax.”

“Cole is here,” I correct him quietly and hold the phone away from my ear, just in case.

“WHAT?” he exclaims, and I chuckle as he confirms my suspicion.

“Why are you so surprised? You literally told me to invite him.” Silence.

“Well, you never listen to me; how am I supposed to know that this time you would? I have so many questions.”

“I probably won’t answer them yet.” I shrug.

“Well, whatever. Just remember, I’m too young to be an uncle,” he jokes. Heat creeps up my face.

“I don’t think you have to fear that yet.” And then I quietly add, “He hasn’t even kissed me again.”

“Yeah, of course. The last time he got slapped,” he remembers, and a grin slowly spreads on my face.

“He didn’t,” I correct him, thinking back to our date.

“Eve!” I hear the shock in his voice. “And you have not told me that?”

“Sorry,” I say sheepishly.

“Well, you better be. Once you’re back, you, me, and a bottle of wine. I need to know everything.”

“That sounds great.” I laugh, and we say our goodbyes. I promise to check in with Joe and talk about returning sometime soon. After all, as much as I like it here, I know I can’t stay here and away from work forever.

“How about you come and stay at my place?” Cole asks as he walks into the room after I’ve hung up the phone.

“Huh?” It takes a few moments for his words to register.

“Yeah. The security in my building is really good. And I’ve just moved in, so nobody knows I live there.”

“Yet,” I point out, but he just shrugs nonchalantly.

“Even if they did, they won’t get into the car park under the building. We could still get in and out by car without being seen,” he explains, approaching me slowly and snaking his arms around my waist in a warm embrace. “What do you think?”

I ponder over his suggestion for a few moments. I can’t come up with a reason not to do it.

“I think it’s a good idea,” I admit and nod in agreement. “I’ll tell Liam about it in a few days.” I giggle and feel his body

vibrating against me with a chuckle. I'm not ready to leave this bubble out here in the middle of nature yet.

Then I look up at Cole, his face mere inches away from mine, and I feel my heart leap in my chest.

I can't blame him for not kissing me again. As Liam mentioned, the first time Cole kissed me after a conflict, I slapped him.

But I know he wants to from the way he is watching me when he thinks I won't notice, his soft gaze following my every movement. Or from the way that, sometimes, his gaze is fixated on my lips when I talk. So now, as we stand here in a gentle embrace and I can see his eyes transfixed on my lips again, I raise myself on my tiptoes and gently press my lips to his, feeling a flutter of nervous excitement in my stomach.

For a moment, his body tenses, and I wonder if I have read the moment wrong. But then, I feel him soften under my touch and my lips catch his groan. His arms tighten around me, pulling me closer as he deepens the kiss. His soft lips press against mine, eager and hungry, his tongue gently probing at my lips until I open them.

I only realize we are moving when the couch nudges against the back of my legs. He releases me, but only for a moment, before he pulls me onto his lap, his hands grasping my hips as he claims my mouth once more. I'm powerless, unable to resist as he ravages my mouth, moaning softly as his tongue teases mine, and my body melts against his. I tremble under his touch, my body aching with need as his hands roam over

me, teasing and tantalizing every inch of my skin. I whimper as he tangles his fingers in my hair, his mouth moving hungrily against mine as he dominates me completely.

Every kiss leaves me breathless, and I find myself moaning in pleasure as his hands wander down to my butt, gripping me tightly as he grinds me against his lap. I cling to him, my fingers digging into his back as I let go, giving him complete power over me.

I whimper. He breathes my name against my mouth, sounding like worship as it rolls from his lips, so softly, like saying it out loud would make me disappear, before he claims it again.

As he breaks away from my lips for a moment, gasping for air, I feel his hands wander lower, slipping into the loose sweatpants I'm wearing. My heart races as he kneads my cheeks, pushing me harder into his lap, stealing any coherent thought I still had.

“If you want to stop, you need to tell me now,” he gasps between kisses. But all I can do is shake my head, unable to form any coherent words as he dives back in, stealing my breath away once more.

I gasp as I feel his hardness right between my legs. One of his hands leaves my butt and wanders to my front, fingers deftly undoing the loose knot I tied so the slightly too-big pants would stay on my hips.

Then he changes his mind, and his hand wanders up under my sweater. My body reacts to his touch immediately,

goosebumps rising all over my skin, and my nipples harden under his fingertips. I moan into his mouth when he cups my breast, rubbing my nipple with his palm as he squeezes it roughly, his movements turning more urgent.

I break the kiss and bury my head in the crook of his neck, inhaling his scent that smells like a forest after rain and home. I arch my back, pressing myself harder against his hand, urging him on. Every touch is like a bolt of electricity, sending sparks flying through my veins.

“I need to see you,” he gasps, and I raise my arms wordlessly so he can pull up my sweater, swiftly removing my bra as well. I don’t even have time to be shy when he sees me for the first time, as he puts his arms around me and in one smooth move, lays me on the couch. He pulls my pants off painfully slowly, his heated gaze burning against every inch of naked skin he uncovers. I fidget under his hungry gaze, but I’m also entranced, watching his every move as if I’d die if I looked away.

He licks his lips, his eyes roaming over my naked body with such hunger it makes me feel like a goddess. “So beautiful,” he murmurs, leaning down and licking a strip from between my breasts up my collarbone. He kisses me heatedly as he reaches my lips, his hands roaming all over my body with a feather-like touch, igniting every nerve ending along the way.

I groan into the kiss and try to meet his touch, wanting more. He chuckles and looks so goddamn *happy* when I open my

eyes, that delightful warmth pools in my belly and my heart flutters.

I grab his shirt, pulling it up his body until he leans back and quickly pulls it over his head. The silver jewelery on his nipple catches my eyes, and I lick my lips; I can't help but reach out and flick it curiously.

“Shit,” he moans breathily, and I take that as an invitation to explore his body with my mouth, licking and biting and kissing my way over his tattoos until he captures my chin with his fingers, forcefully lifting my face upwards and merging our lips once more.

“I want to taste you,” he moans into the kiss, and I grin.

“Get your clothes off, first,” I demand breathlessly, and he obliges happily, letting me peel his sweatpants down his legs until we can throw them somewhere across the room.

I lick my lips at the sight of him. His dick is big, but not so giant it will split me in two, twitching eagerly as he crawls back on top of me.

“Like what you see?” he asks teasingly.

“Hell, yes.” My eyes wander over his body as he crawls back on top of me, admiring his chiselled abs and toned arms. He is covered in tattoos, each one a work of art, and I can't resist running my fingers over them as he bends down to lick my nipple. My skin tingles with pleasure as he works his way downwards, his hands kneading my breasts and sending jolts of electricity through my body as his tongue leaves wet traces

over my stomach, making me shiver when his breath gently blows on them.

As his hands continue to roam over my body, I can feel the heat between us growing, and I let out a soft moan as he traces his fingers over my skin. I'm caught up in the moment, lost in the sensations, as he kisses his way down my body. My heart is pounding in my chest, and my breath comes in short gasps as he reaches my core, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine.

"Hell, yes," he repeats, and I gently swat at him. Smiling, he catches my hand and pins it onto the couch next to me. My eyes are glued to him as he moves down, a delicious anticipation building up inside me and I can feel myself getting wetter by the second.

"You're so much more beautiful than I ever imagined." Before I can register his words, I feel his hot breath on my skin as he lowers himself between my legs. His hand releases mine, instead grasping my thighs, and spreading them apart. A groan escapes his lips when he finds me wet for him.

Leaning forward, he rubs his scruff against my inner thighs, making me whimper and thrash under him. He slides his finger through my wetness and gently blows on my exposed sex, making me shudder.

Then he dives right in, finding my clit with ease and circling it with his tongue, while his hand finds my nipple again, pulling it and flicking it before doing the same to the other one. The pleasure is intense, and I can't help but moan loudly

as he sends me closer to heaven with each lick, each flick of his tongue, and each touch. I don't know where to put my hands; they grab at his back, at the couch, until he reaches up quickly and guides them to his hair, moaning absolutely obscenely when I grasp it and pull.

My body is on fire, and I'm lost in the sensations as he pushes his first finger inside me, gently probing, pushing, and stroking until he finds the spot that makes me gasp with each touch.

"There it is." He grins, proud of himself as he abuses his new knowledge and any sanity I had left is flying out of the window. My grip on his hair tightens and my hips meet his movements.

I'm overwhelmed. I gasp and thrash, lost in the intense pleasure he is giving me. He continues to stroke and tease me relentlessly, driving me closer and closer to my climax. My breath catches in my throat, and my whole body tenses.

"I'm so close," I cry before my screams become unintelligible as he intensifies his efforts, his thumb abusing my bundle of nerves as his fingers pump in and out of me. "I need you inside of me."

"Soon," he promises as he crawls up my body, capturing my lips.

"Not soon enough, Cole; I *fucking need you inside of me right now*," I moan against his lips, almost screaming, as my hands dig into his back to pull him closer.

“I want to watch you come undone,” he groans against my lips, capturing my eyes with his. “I want to watch you fall apart for me. Please, let me see.” His words send a shiver down my spine, and I can feel my cheeks flush with heat. I stop all protests at this point; I can’t even remember my name anymore. Instead, I bury my nails into his back as he drives me closer to the edge.

“Yeah, baby, come for me.” His coarse voice is right next to my ear, and I come undone. My hips buck involuntarily, and he pushes me down with his body while he keeps thrusting his fingers inside of me. I shout his name as my body tenses and I release around his skilled fingers. “So beautiful. You’re coming so good for me,” he drawls against my lips.

He pulls back for a moment, gazing down at me with a hunger in his eyes that sends shivers down my spine. I can see the desire in his gaze as he positions himself between my legs and feel his hardness pressing against me, making me gasp. I take a deep breath, anticipating the feeling of him filling me up completely.

Cole pushes inside slowly, inch by inch, until he’s buried deep inside me. I gasp at the sensation of being full with him, and he groans in pleasure.

He leans in, his lips brushing against mine and his breath hot on my skin as he whispers, “Watch me, baby. Watch me make you feel so good.” I force my eyes open and focus on his hot gaze as he begins to move, setting a steady pace that quickly

has me moaning and clutching at him as pleasure builds within me once again.

I throw my head back and let out a cry of ecstasy as I feel the familiar tension building in my body. He's relentless, never slowing down as he drives me toward the brink of release. I let myself get lost in the sensations, the sound of our breathing filling the room with the soft sounds of skin against skin. His movements become more urgent, moving faster and deeper inside of me, and I feel myself teetering on the edge of release.

"Come again for me, baby," he whispers, and it's all the encouragement I need as my body tenses and pleasure rips through me once more, leaving me gasping and trembling in his arms. He continues to thrust inside me relentlessly, and my moans grow louder and more desperate as I feel my lower belly tighten again.

Suddenly, ecstasy tears through my body again, and I scream his name as my whole body trembles around him. I open my eyes again, just in time to see his flushed face tense. He moans my name through slightly parted lips as he drives into me with stiff movements as he comes, and it's the sweetest sound I've ever heard.

He collapses on top of me, his body still trembling slightly with aftershocks. I wrap my arms around him, holding him close as we catch our breath. His head rests on my chest, his beard tickling my skin, and I run my fingers through his hair.

"Finally," he whispers, and the amount of emotion in that one word brings tears to my eyes. Eight damn years.

“Yeah,” I whisper against his hair and feel his mouth forming a smile against my skin as a comfortable silence fills the room, only disturbed by our panting breaths.

“That was really hot,” I say softly and grin at him lazily. He turns his head and returns my gaze with a content smile on his face.

“*You’re* really hot.” He grins and kisses me, this time with no haste, just lazily exploring my mouth as we both catch our breath again. Then he pulls out of me, and I grimace at the empty feeling.

“When did you even get a condom?” I ask him as he takes it off and ties it up.

“Had it in my pants, but don’t ask me when I put it on. I couldn’t tell you.” He gets up and brings it to the trashcan before getting on the couch again, this time pulling me on top of him instead of covering my body with his.

“So, you imagined this?” I ask cheekily, remembering what he said earlier.

“The whole eight years.” He sighs and kisses my nose. “All the damn time.”

“What *exactly* did you imagine?” I wiggle my brows, teasing him, and he pinches me in the side.

“I can tell you in like thirty minutes,” he promises and pulls me up with him. “First, I need a shower, though.”

“Great plan, I’ll come with you.” I wink at him and try to get up. To my surprise, my knees buckle under my weight, but he

catches me before I hit the ground. With a cocky grin on his face, he carries my spent body up the stairs to the bathroom.

Chapter Nineteen

“YOUR APARTMENT IS IN there?” I point at the building in front of us. It looks like a cross between a prison and a skyscraper.

“Top floor,” Cole confirms, and activates his turn signal. We’ve just spent a week at the cabin, enjoying each other’s company—if you catch my drift—and we’ve decided it’s time to face the music. Joe and Liam are on board with our plan, so I’ll be staying with Cole until the hype dies down.

To be honest, I’m surprised at the level of persistence from Hystoria’s fans. I’m not exactly a public figure, and I thought their fan base wasn’t that gossipy. I stand corrected. Maybe the scandal of having written one of their songs has fuelled the interest. Nevertheless, after Scaena issued a statement on my behalf, I’m not sure what they’re hoping for. Obviously, I’m trained in PR, and all they’re going to get from me is a “no comment.”

The drive has been long, and although I managed to doze off for a while, I’m feeling drained. I can’t imagine how Cole feels; or how exhausted he was to do the same drive at night to come to see me.

I’m beginning to see that that’s the kind of guy he is. From his stories, and from what Rachel told me when I called her, I’ve learned that Cole is the glue that holds his band together. He’s always there for them when they need him, even at the expense of his own well-being. As much as Pax thinks otherwise and sees himself as the centre of the universe and Hystoria, he couldn’t be more wrong.

Cole drives us into the underground parking lot, and I marvel at how luxurious it is. On the way here, Cole told me about his car being registered, but I have never seen barriers rising by themselves without having to insert a card into a machine or talking to anyone.

“I’m impressed,” I admit, as he expertly maneuvers his way through the lot, and finally parks at a spot marked with his tags. I stop myself from salivating when he does that sexy thing where he puts his arm behind my headrest and looks focused as he reverses into his parking space, but it’s definitely going into my... Is there a female version of a spank bank? Flick file? Whatever it’s called, that image is going into it.

Cole insists on opening my door for me, and we both take a second to stretch our backs after the long ride, before he leads me to the elevator with his hand firmly nestled on the small of my back.

I grin widely. This courteous behavior is new to me, but I am not complaining. Not at all. He punches a code into the elevator and we exit directly into a living room. My eyes grow wide, not only at the elevator right in the living room, but at the sheer size of it.

“Wow, it’s huge,” I say in amazement, turning around to take it all in.

“Why, thank you. But what do you think about my apartment?” Cole asks, winking at me, and I gently swat his arm at the childish remark.

“It’s beautiful. Very...modern,” I reply, still looking around. Truthfully, I’m not so sure I like it. The room looks like it’s taken straight out of an interior design magazine; it’s clean, to the point of being sterile.

“I like yours more,” he says, as he takes my coat off and hangs it up by the elevator. “It’s more homey.”

“I think so too,” I admit and approach the large window front to check out the view. “I just didn’t want to criticize your home after seeing it for all of five seconds.”

“But after the sixty we’ve been in here, it’s okay?” he teases, wrapping his arms around me from behind.

“Hey, you started it! But your view from up here is amazing.” It really is. You can see the entire town and make out some mountains in the distance. “I bet you see some beautiful sunsets and sunrises from here.”

“You’ll have to come around more often and see them with me.”

I grin during the entire tour of his apartment. Each room resembles the living room. Cold, modern, minimalistic, spotless.

“I like this one best,” I mention, when we stand in his bedroom. It’s cozy, and the only one that doesn’t look like a sterile doctors’ office.

“Of course, you do.” Cole chuckles, pinching my butt playfully.

“Ouch!” I pinch him back, laughing. “What I meant is that it’s the only room with some character, with the pictures of Rachel and you, and your guitars. And your books.”

“I know. I’m just not here enough to attempt to make this my own,” he explains with a shrug. “This is how I bought it.”

“You never changed anything about it?” I look at him, shocked.

“Only the bedroom.”

I can’t help but feel a twinge of sadness for him. “That’s sad, like living in a hotel permanently.”

“There are worse things.” He shrugs again then rubs his neck.

“But there are better things, too.” I pat his arm empathetically. “Once the news has died down, we should go furniture shopping together. We could also look for some decorations online.” Cole’s eyes light up at the idea.

“I’d like that,” he says as a smile spreads on his face slowly. Then he takes my hand and leads me back to the living room. “I’m not sure how long I’ll keep living here, though, so let’s put it on the back burner for now.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, my heart beating a little faster. “I thought you just moved in. Where do you want to move?” Is he planning to leave this town? Just as we’re starting whatever it is between us?

Cole turns to face me, his eyes locking onto mine. “Your house, perhaps?” he says with a wink and cheeky smile. I sigh,

relieved. Then his words register and I freeze, stunned by the suggestion.

“Someday, that would be nice,” I say, trying to regain my composure. “But I’m not even sure if I can move back there. It’s not exactly safe.” I pause. “Also, isn’t this a bit fast? It feels pretty fast. What if this doesn’t work after all?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. Then we’ll search for a new home together. When you’re ready.”

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. “When I’m ready,” I confirm.

“So, how about we watch a movie for a change?” I chuckle at his suggestion, considering how we’ve watched at least two movies a day for the past two weeks.

“Sure. Do you have anything comfortable I can change into until our suitcases arrive?” This building has some fancy concierge service that will collect our suitcases from his car and bring them up. The thought of my car keys being in a stranger’s hands sends shivers of discomfort down my spine, but I guess when you’re used to valets and concierges, it becomes normal to you.

Cole disappears into his walk-in wardrobe and returns with a way-too-big shirt, and sweatpants that are definitely too wide. I thank him and he walks out of the room to let me change. Not that he hasn’t seen me naked yet, but I appreciate the gesture.

When I return to the living room, he has already spread out blankets on the couch and is scrolling through his streaming services on his giant TV.

“This is like a home theater,” I marvel as I sit down next to him.

“I know, that’s why I love it. Check this out.” He presses a button on his remote and blinds lower over the windows, turning the whole room pitch-black.

“That’s so cool,” I say with wide eyes, grabbing the remote and inspecting it. “What else does this thing do?”

“You can turn all of the lights in the living room on and off,” he explains and shows me the button, “and these are for the stereo system.” He points at them. “Everything else, I can do on my phone.”

“Like what?” I ask curiously.

“I can watch security cameras, grant elevator access, tell my robot vacuum where to go and I have my favorite pizza place on speed dial.”

“That’s so cool. I didn’t think you’d even own a vacuum; don’t rock stars of your caliber have a cleaner?”

“I do, but vacuuming takes a lot of time and I don’t like people in my space. Present company excluded,” he adds quickly as I raise a pillow to throw it at him. I lower it slowly, looking for any hint of insincerity in his eyes, futilely. “Now, what do you want to watch?”

We settle on a new series and snuggle up on the couch, with me leaning against him, and one of his arms around my shoulders as I rest one of my hands on his thigh. He starts the first episode, but I really can't pay attention. The story seems interesting, but as much as I try to focus, my mind keeps wandering to the to the man next to me.

I turn my head to watch—no, admire—Cole, taking in every detail of his features in the dim light. I find myself looking at the way the corner of his eyes crinkle up when he laughs, or the small crease between his eyebrows when he focuses.

“What are you looking at?” He looks down at me and smiles.

“You.” I grin and lean up to give him a quick kiss. But he has other plans and deepens the kiss immediately. I barely notice that he has the remote in his hand again, but suddenly the TV stops, and a dim light appears instead. Cole pushes me until I lie down and crawls on top of me, never breaking the kiss. It is both gentle and all-consuming, an intimate play of our tongues.

He doesn't even need to touch me to make me whimper against his lips; the combination of his lips against mine, our tongues dancing with each other, and his scent surrounding me is all I need. My hands wander over his clothes, exploring every inch of his body above me.

“You look so fucking hot in my clothes,” he mumbles against my lips as his hands glide under the shirt I'm wearing. “I never want to see you wearing anything else again.”

I can feel my face flushing with pleasure, and I can't help but grin. It's such a turn-on to see him so possessive. His hands are warm against my skin as they slide up my body, sending shivers of pleasure down my spine the closer he gets to my breasts.

They slip under my bra with ease, and he grips my breasts firmly, his fingers digging into the flesh as he massages them roughly. Then he lets them go. I watch his face; his eyes are glued to his fingers as they wander over my body, and his tongue runs over his lips, his expression full of desire.

As his hands wander lower, I feel myself getting wet. I moan softly, arching my back and pressing myself closer to him. Slowly, he pulls down my pants and underwear, and two of his fingers slip inside me easily, without any hesitation, as if they belong there, and I gasp in pleasure.

“Yeah, take what you need,” he mumbles against my throat as I move my hips against his skilled fingers, whimpering. I claw at his clothes and he pulls back for a moment to undress. After he pulls his shirt over his head with one hand, his heated gaze lands on me.

My shirt is scrunched up under my chin, my bra hastily pushed aside, and my pants and underwear lazily pulled down. I must be a messy sight right now, but I don't care. His lips curve into a predatory smile as he slides my pants and underwear down my legs, his fingers trailing over my skin. He leisurely crawls up my body, his eyes never leaving mine, until

he captures my lips with his, his tongue expertly exploring my mouth.

My heart races as his fingers find their way back between my legs, and I arch my back, wanting more. His fingers slide into me effortlessly, making me moan out his name. I can feel myself growing wetter with each passing second as he expertly works his fingers in and out of me, capturing my moans with his mouth. The sensation is so intense that my legs start to tremble, and my breath hitches in my throat.

“Wait,” I whisper against his lips, as the familiar pressure begins to build in my stomach. He looks at me, worried, but I try to assure him with a small smile.

“I want to taste you,” I whisper, and push him off me, gracefully sliding onto the floor, where I discard the rest of my clothes. He groans at the sight of me sitting before him, completely naked. I wink at him and unbutton his fly to take out his throbbing cock.

His taste is deliciously salty and musky, and I savor the drops of precum coating my tongue as I work my way up and down his shaft. Then I take his tip into my mouth. The sensation of his cock against my tongue is almost overwhelming as I take him deeper and deeper.

“Fuck, you’re taking me so good,” he groans, his hands finding their way into my hair. I let him push my head down, taking him inside my mouth until I struggle to breathe and my nose is buried in his pubes. As I suck and fondle him, my free hand caresses his abdomen and chest, feeling the definition of

his muscles. I flick his nipple piercing again, remembering how sensitive it makes him there, and he gasps, pulling me off his dick.

“If you continue that, I’m gonna come in your mouth,” he groans breathlessly, and I raise my eyebrow in response.

“I don’t see a problem with that.”

“I do.” He pulls me onto his lap. “Because I want to come inside you,” he growls, his hungry eyes locked onto mine. A shiver runs down my spine, and I swallow heavily, nodding in agreement. I’m already wet from his touch, and the thought of him filling me up is making me fidget on his lap.

“I’d like that,” I moan as my pussy comes into contact with his bare thigh. The warmth of his lap against my bare skin, and the hardness of his erection pressing against me, is enough to make me dizzy with desire. “You have a condom?”

“Of course.” He reaches into the pocket of his pants that are hanging over the back of the couch and produces a foil packet. Then he lays back, pulling me with him until I lay on top of him.

“I want to see you ride me,” he says and trails his finger down my front, leaving goosebumps on my skin as I arch into his touch. It disappears between my legs, and I buck as it slips inside of me. My hips start moving on their own as he grazes my walls.

He curls his finger just so and I feel a jolt of electricity shoot through me. “Please,” I whimper, needing him to take me over

the edge. He responds by adding another one, before increasing the speed and pressure of his movements, pushing me closer and closer to the brink. Then he pulls them out, and I groan at the sudden emptiness.

“Cole!” I whine and he chuckles hungrily. Opening the package, he reaches behind me to put the condom on, then he lines himself up against my wetness.

I moan as I lower myself and feel him enter me, his cock sliding into me gradually. I let out a long moan as he fills me up completely, my walls clenching around him.

“That’s it, baby, you’re taking me so well,” he groans, and I whimper as he thrusts upwards. At first, he moves slowly, his hands gripping my hips, pulling and pushing me to match the rhythm of him rocking into me. Each thrust sends a jolt of pleasure through me.

I might be on top, but Cole is definitely in charge. I lay my hands on his chest, holding onto him tightly as the pleasure builds and builds.

His eyes are transfixed on my breasts, which wiggle enticingly with each movement. He leans up, and his lips find my nipple. He sucks on it, rubbing the other one between his fingers, sending electric currents of pleasure straight to my core.

“Oh yes!” I gasp and arch my back, pushing my breast into his mouth. “Don’t stop.”

He takes the hint, alternating between each breast, suckling and biting as his dick and fingers work their magic.

God, this feels amazing. His hands wander to my hips, pulling me down when he thrusts up, and I feel myself getting closer to the edge. He hits my sweet spot over and over, and I feel myself on the brink of orgasm, almost seeing stars.

“Fuck,” he mutters, “I can’t get enough of you.”

I can feel my muscles tightening as the welling pressure inside me engulfs me, blacking out everything except Cole, and I know that I’m about to come undone. My moans turn into screams as he continues to pound into me, and I know that I’m on the verge of exploding. I feel myself getting close to orgasm once again, and he knows it too; his movements become more frenzied as he tries to bring me over the edge. Then, suddenly, he pulls out.

He grabs me and throws me onto the couch with one swift move. I whimper at the loss of his cock inside me, but he quickly pushes inside me and starts fucking plowing me. “You’re so fucking hot,” he growls, his hands gripping my hips tightly.

“Yes, yes, Cole!” I moan, the pleasure building inside me again.

He fucks me even harder, his lips finding mine as he circles my clit with his thumb.

“That’s it, baby, come for me,” he whispers, and I let go, his name on my lips like a prayer, as my orgasm washes over me

in waves.

He pounds into me, faster and harder, his hand squeezing my breast roughly as I ride my high, shuddering and shaking as I reach the longest and most intense orgasm I've ever had. I am a trembling, blubbery pile of boneless goo in his arms. He slows down, waiting until I open my eyes again so he can see I am alright.

Challenge glimmers in his eyes as he wordlessly picks up his pace again, licking his lips as he pulls back, his eyes locked onto mine.

"I'm not done with you yet," he growls, resuming his movement.

"Fuck," I shout and claw at him, too sensitive in all the right places. He captures my hands and pins them over my head with one of his. I struggle against him, but his grasp is tight. There is no escaping as he drives into me, his movements rough and primal. Not that I want to escape.

His fingers tighten around my wrists, his grip almost bruising, but I welcome the pain; it adds to the intense pleasure I'm feeling. He continues to thrust into me with a frenzied pace, his breath hot against my neck.

"I'm going to make you come again," he promises, his movements becoming even more aggressive. "You're going to come so hard for me, baby."

I moan in response, my body on fire with desire. He's pushing me to my limits, but I want more. I want him to take

me harder, faster; to make me scream his name until my voice is gone.

He seems to sense my need and drives into me even rougher, his movements bordering on brutal. I cry out, unable to hold back as another wave of pleasure crashes over me, consuming me completely.

Cole moans against my throat, as his teeth graze over the soft flesh where my neck meets my shoulder. Then, with a groan, he shudders and releases inside me, gently biting down on the skin of my neck. I whimper, turned on by the way he marks me as his.

My body trembles with aftershocks of pleasure, and I wrap my arms around him tightly, feeling his warmth against my skin as we both ride out the waves of ecstasy.

“You’re mine,” he murmurs, before he eases out of me, his voice low and possessive. “All mine.” I can feel the truth in his words, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

My fingers trail up and down his back as I bask in the post-orgasmic haze, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Yours,” I whisper back, my voice breathy and content.

He leans down and kisses me tenderly, cupping my face in his hands.

“Good,” he murmurs against my lips. “Because I don’t plan on letting you go again.”

“I don’t want you to,” I confess, my eyes locking with his.

He grins, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Great, because I have a lot more in store for you,” he says, his hands trailing down my body.

I shiver in anticipation, my body already responding to his touch. “I can’t wait,” I say, my voice filled with eagerness.

He chuckles and pulls me closer, his lips grazing mine once again.

“Oh, I know. You’re insatiable,” he says, before taking me in his arms and carrying me to the bedroom.

Chapter Twenty

“ARE YOU EXPECTING SOMEONE?” Cole asks me as he approaches his ringing house phone. I shake my head as he answers it.

“Yes. Uhhhh. Sure.” He hangs up and turns to me. “Apparently, you are. Liam is coming up. How the hell does he know where I live?”

“Now you know how that feels,” I tease him and pat his shoulder. “I told him. You know, in case you turn out to be a serial killer and I need to be rescued.”

Cole laughs, “If I wanted to kill you, wouldn’t I have done that at the cabin already?”

“Who knows, maybe you have a torture chamber here that you wanted to use first,” I joke, and he shakes his head in disbelief. The elevator dings, and Liam strolls out, followed by two more familiar faces.

“Look who I found on my way,” Liam announces, pointing at his companions. “It’s a party.”

“Not really,” Jake sighs and throws himself onto the couch, looking weary.

“Most depressing party I’ve ever been to,” Si mutters and sits down right next to him, not looking any happier.

I try not to blush, thinking about what Cole and I did on that very couch yesterday. But Liam catches my eye. His attentive gaze jumps to the tiny bit of bruise you can see over the neck of my shirt, and he subtly raises an eyebrow when he spots it, the corners of his mouth twitching.

Oh, he knows. He comes over to me, and I greet him with a hug, then address the guys.

“I’m sure you have some important things to talk about. Liam and I will hang out in the other living room.”

“There is another one?” Liam asks, amazed, as I pull him after me to another, albeit smaller, room with a couch and TV.

“I know, right? This apartment is huge.” I roll my eyes. I might have gotten lost on my way to the bathroom. I also couldn’t find the bedroom on my own, at least not the master. I ended up in one of his guest bedrooms until Cole found me; he laughed at me as we went back to his bedroom.

Liam and I settle in for a catch-up session, and he wastes no time in peppering me with questions about our time away. We’ve been in contact, but I haven’t really had any time to tell him about Mia’s crush, for example. After I fill him in, he proceeds to update me on everything that’s been happening back home.

“Good news: Peggy has calmed down,” he reports, and I let out a relieved sigh.

“Thank God. Was it that bad?”

“I’d say so. She ended up turning off her phone for a week and only checked emails from people she knew. Anything else got deleted without a second glance.”

“A wise move,” I agree and nod. Our heads turn around as Cole enters the room. He hands us each a steaming cup of

coffee. I beam at him gratefully, and he plants a quick kiss on my head before ducking out again.

“Soooo what is going on here?” Liam gestures between the now-closed door and me, and I find myself grinning from ear to ear.

“Quite some fucking, for one,” I quip, and he almost chokes on his coffee. I pound his back until he stops coughing.

“The way you two looked at each other didn’t look like *just* fucking,” he manages to wheeze out and I chuckle.

“I never said that,” I chide him and set down my mug. “It’s a... situationship I guess? We haven’t really talked about it, but it involves kissing, cuddling, fucking, and talking.”

“Sounds like a relationship to me.”

“Yeah. I suppose it does.” I gaze down at my feet and bite my lip.

“Why are you unsure?” Liam leans forward, his full attention on me now, much like when I tell him about the latest office gossip.

“My first reaction, when shit hit the fan, was to blame him,” I confess softly, scratching the skin on the cuticle of my thumb nervously. “And then I blocked him. I’m not sure if the trust I have right now is enough for a relationship.”

“Did he complain about how you handled it?”

“No. He even said he understands. I guess I am frustrated with myself.”

“Why?”

“You’re asking a lot of questions today.” I sigh. “I want to trust him again, but I don’t think I’m there yet. It makes me doubt that I’ll ever get there.”

“And what does he say about that?”

“Nothing. He says he understands.”

“So let me get this straight. You’ve given a man a chance who really hurt you in the past. And don’t put all of this on Pax, because any of the guys could have stopped him or at least kept in contact later on. So, you give him another chance, but you don’t trust him.”

“Yet,” I add, but he waves me off.

“As of now, you don’t trust him. And he knows that, and despite that, he is putting in all the work, is absolutely fine with it, and willing to continue working for it, and you don’t believe him? I mean, what did you expect?”

“I don’t know.” I sigh. “To feel less guilty about it, maybe.”

“Is your trust still as broken as four months ago?”

“No,” I admit quietly.

“Joking aside, are you planning on holding your past over his head whenever you argue?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then you have nothing to feel guilty about.” He shrugs. “Loverboy needs to put in effort so you can trust him again, and you need to be open to building that trust. You’re either

going to be there someday, or not.” He pats my head. “Have you talked to Barbara?”

“It’s been a while.” I grimace. With everything that’s been happening the past few weeks, booking an appointment with her has completely slipped my mind.

“Then that’s your first step. As long as none of you give up, I think you’re going to be okay.”

“When did you get so wise?” I ask, leaning against his shoulder.

“While you were out enjoying *nature*,” he teases. “As a reward, I would like some tea.” His grin turns mischievous. “So, how is the sex?”

“It’s amazing.” I blush and tell him about how we christened the couch yesterday. Only the gist of it; he doesn’t need all the details.

“Good thing I did not sit down,” he laughs, and I poke his side.

“We cleaned it and threw a blanket on top.”

“There was a blanket? Then why didn’t you do the nasty on that? Beginner mistake; blankets are much easier to clean than a whole couch,” he scolds, and I hold up my middle finger.

“Heat of the moment,” is my answer, and he nods in understanding.

“Oh, I know what *that* feels like.”

“I know. I remember how you told me about your little stint on the beach with Mateo,” I remind him with a laugh, and Liam grimaces at the memory.

“Beach sex sounds way more romantic than it is. Ugh, sand should never ever get in those places.” He shudders.

“Beginner mistake, should have used a blanket,” I tease him, and he gasps before setting down his coffee and approaches me with claw-like hands. I shriek and jump up, but he’s faster, and before I know it, he has me cornered on the couch, tickling me.

My screeching laugh summons Cole, who watches us with amusement.

“Don’t just stand there. Help!” I pant, and he shakes his head.

“You probably deserve it,” Cole says with a grin, and crosses his arms as he leans against the doorframe.

“Oh, I like him,” Liam laughs, as he pins my hands down and continues tickling me with his other hand.

“Liam, let go,” I screech. “I’m going to pee if you continue.”

“Welp, we don’t want that.” Liam jumps up quickly and pats imaginary dirt from his pants. Cole high-fives him when we pass him on our way out.

“Some things never change,” he laughs, and Liam looks at us confused. “It’s what she’d always say when she wanted us to stop tickling her.” Cole clues him in, and Liam’s confusion turned to recognition. Oh boy, if looks could kill. I run ahead

as he approaches me again with outstretched fingers, bringing Simon between us to shield me from another tickle attack.

“So, what did you guys talk about?” I ask once I’m sure Liam has given up. I still watch him from the corner of my eye.

“Alex is not sure if he wants to proceed with our contract anymore,” Jake says dejectedly and buries his face in his hands. “Which sucks, because after Pax’s stupid stunt, absolutely no one wants to work with us anymore.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.” However, I am not surprised. I am going to keep that thought to myself, because the guys look absolutely devastated. The way they sludge on the couch, they remind me of deflated air dancers.

“What’s up with that Paxton guy, anyway?” Liam asks curiously and walks over to Cole’s fridge to check it for snacks.

“What do you mean?” Si asks, looking very confused.

“Honestly, that’s not normal behavior. Aha!” Liam grabs a bowl of grapes from the fridge and pops one into his mouth shamelessly. “Alcoholism? Is he on coke?”

He chews on the grape as three sets of confused eyes stare at him. “What? I’m not kidding.”

“You never saw anything?” I ask them, and their heads turn to me. “I don’t doubt that people change in eight years, but Pax used to be so sweet. I just can’t imagine that he turned into whatever this is out of nothing.”

They nod slowly, and I can see the wheels moving inside their head.

“I have a hunch,” Cole finally says softly, breaking the tense silence. “Remember how his attitude changed after he went to L.A. alone ahead of us?” The others nod. “Maybe that’s when he was introduced. You know he always keeps things close to his chest, but goddamn, even Katie told him to pound sand.”

“What?” I ask, surprised. Katie was Paxton’s best friend back in the day. If I remember correctly, she didn’t move to Los Angeles, but somewhere close enough to be able to meet regularly. I always thought those two were perfect for each other, but during one of the last band practices I went to, Katie told me there was nothing romantic going on between her and Paxton. She did, however, confess that she might feel more for him than friendship. I haven’t really kept up with her life, but they were so close. I am honestly shocked that they’re not close anymore.

“Yep,” Si confirms. “I think they kept in contact another year after we moved to L.A.? I don’t know for sure. But he almost never visited her, so I guess they grew apart.”

“I heard it turned into some kind of friends-with-benefits thing,” Jake adds, and I gasp.

“I can’t imagine that,” I say, shaking my head. “No way would she have agreed to that.”

“Well, that’s what Pax told us. And then, when we confronted him about flirting and taking groupies to his

bedroom, he just shrugged and played it off like she meant nothing to him,” Jake says quietly, and I want to facepalm.

“Okay, if I didn’t hate Paxton already, now would be the moment,” Liam says and offers me his bowl of grapes. I take one, still in disbelief, and nod in agreement as I pop it into my mouth. Just what the hell happened to Paxton?

Cole lets out an exhausted sigh. “Whatever the reason, we’re all in deep shit, thanks to him. So what now?”

“Beats me,” Jake says. “We’ve always made music; what else would we do?”

“I’m sure you will find something,” I reassure them. “Hystoria is taking a break anyway. You can take some time to actually relax.”

“That sounds boring,” Si complains.

“Or you could go solo.” I offer another solution and Jake perks up. “I mean, you don’t have any contracts right now, do you?” I look between the three of them, and they all shake their head. “Talk to Alex again. Knowing him, he will recognize that Paxton is the true liability. Maybe he’ll have a solo spot ready for you. There might be one other possibility, but I don’t think you’re going to like it.” I smile tightly.

“What?” They say in unison, and I take a deep breath.

“Kick Pax out,” I say, very matter-of-factly. “Temporarily and replace him while he gets psychological and medical help, or forever. That would be a big step, though.”

“Yeah, it would.” Jake sighs and looks at the other guys. “We started the band together, and we always said if one of us goes, we all do. And I’m not ready to say goodbye to Hystoria.”

“Right,” Cole says quietly, and I squeeze his hand. He shoots me a thankful glance, and I can see his inner turmoil mirrored in his sad eyes. I hate that he is hurting.

“Maybe a break would be a good idea. After all, we haven’t had one in years,” Simon says, scratching his head. The other two guys nod in agreement.

“My advice: sleep on it for a week,” I tell them and grab another grape. “There is no need to rush. Think it over for a bit.”

“You’re right,” Si admits and then sighs deeply. “I’m not ready to make these kinds of adult decisions.” The other two agree with him and Cole gets up to get everyone a beer.

They stay for a few more hours, and we order pizza. I try to distract them from thinking about Pax, and the chaos he’s created, but I can see their thoughts wander back to it all the time. They get a solemn look and become quiet, but we all ignore it when it happens.

Liam also stays after cancelling his plans with Mateo. In a quiet moment, he tells me that he wants to get to know the guys if they are going to be a part of my future. My eyes wander to Cole as he laughs at something Si says, and I nod. Yes, I think Liam will see them more often in the future.

After a few more hours, the guys are all asleep on the couch, exhausted from the emotional rollercoaster of the day. I gather some blankets to cover them up, but as I'm bringing them back to the living room, Cole catches me in the hallway and pulls me into a hug from behind.

I let the blankets fall to the ground to turn around in his arms and his lips come to rest against my forehead.

"I'm glad you're here," he whispers, and I feel my heart swell with warmth.

"I'm also glad I'm here," I reply with a cheeky grin.

And it's true. Truer than I thought it was up until this moment. Even though my life has turned to chaos since he reappeared in it, even though my own home is definitely the more comfortable one, right here, at this moment, I don't want to be anywhere else.

We stand for a moment, wrapped in each other's arms, until I lean up and press a gentle kiss to his lips. We sway together to the soft music playing in the background, and right now, everything feels right in the world.

Epilogue

THE SOUND OF THE crowd is deafening as I make my way to the VIP seats. I can feel the excitement in the air as I see people jumping and screaming in anticipation. Tonight is Jake's first solo concert, and I am a bit late because I got stuck in traffic. No wonder, considering he chose a venue that takes more than an hour to get to from Scaena's headquarters.

Hystoria is still on break. Shortly after their visit to Cole's apartment, they made a point to grill Pax about what the hell is going on with him. They didn't share too much of that conversation, and honestly, it doesn't concern me, so that's fine. All that counts is that they got somewhere, and I hope Paxton will get it together.

They gave him a year to clear up his act, and as far as I know, he has checked himself into a facility to get a grip on whatever it is.

Paxton's sudden disappearance overshadowed any drama I was involved in. I ended up staying with Cole for two more weeks before I felt brave enough to go back to my own house. Luckily, no paparazzi or fans were lurking around anymore. After a weekend of clearing the dust layer and installing mirror foil and thick curtains to all of my windows, I could finally relax in my own home again.

Si and Jake were constantly hanging around my house, playing video games or watching TV; they had nothing to do and didn't know how to fill their time. While I loved having them around, it got to be too much. All of my suggestions to get them to go outside and have a good time fell on deaf ears.

After a month, I had enough and took matters into my own hands. I booked them a luxury wellness retreat, something I knew they'd enjoy. The package included yoga, meditation, massages, and healthy meals, everything they needed to recharge their batteries.

Cole, on the other hand, insisted on staying. Not because he wanted to do something specifically, just to stay close. Truth be told, I got extremely annoyed. I love the guy but damn, a girl needs her alone time sometimes.

It all changed when one day, Liam showed up on my doorstep with a puppy in his arms. Apparently, he had seen a picture of a small Labrador on the local shelter's Facebook page and decided to surprise me with the little furball. Later, he confessed that he had gotten sick of my whining and decided to take matters into his own hands.

I was enamoured with the puppy instantly, and now I can't imagine coming home without him waiting for me. I decided to call him Ninja. Because he's a sneaky little menace sometimes. Cole was all too happy to help out with the puppy. He would spend days at my house, entertaining Ninja while I was away on business trips.

Speaking of Liam, he and Mateo finally got married this summer. It ended up being a beautiful destination wedding in Hawaii, where they exchanged vows on a picturesque beach just as the sun was setting behind them. It was incredibly charming and just the way Liam always dreamed his wedding would be. The celebration that followed was just as amazing.

The memories never fail to bring a smile to my lips. It was so cute and intimate; we all had a wonderful time.

During the wedding celebration, Liam playfully hinted that Cole should propose to me soon, but I shut that down instantly. Nobody will determine our timeline but us, and we're not there yet.

We are going strong, but we still have our hiccups from time to time. I am still adamant that he leave me alone when I write new songs, while Cole misses the way we tinkered on them together. After some heated discussions, one of them during a therapy session with Barbara, he finally realized what he was asking of me. It was a tough talk to have, and we were both emotional wrecks for a few days, but it was necessary.

All in all, Cole is incredibly understanding of my need for space and time. If it were up to him, we would have moved in together just a month into our relationship. I told him to ask me again after a year, and I have no doubts that he marked that day in his calendar. There are still doubts in my mind, but I am trying my best to work through them in therapy, and now I'm finally at a place where the thought of living together doesn't make my skin crawl. Quite the opposite, actually.

Still, sometimes I worry about what will happen when Cole goes on tour again. However, that is a problem for future me. Present me is trying to live in the moment and not worry too much about 'what ifs.'

I've somewhat made up with Gabe. He apologized for giving out my address, and while he seemed remorseful, that's not

something I can easily forgive. We are friends again, but I doubt we will ever be as close as before.

Mia came back after spending only four more months in her cabin, so I never got around to picking a new band for myself. I found some gems that I forwarded to Joe, though. She never mentioned her neighbor from the cabin again, but sometimes she gets a sad, longing look in her eyes, and I'm sure there is something she isn't telling me. I'm not pressing her, though. She knows where to find me when she wants to talk.

As for Jake, he decided to pursue a solo project after his vacation. There were some songs he wrote that Hystoria's label denied because it didn't align with their brand and now he's seeing his chance to bring them to the world on his own.

Alex was happy to sign him as a solo artist and continues to thank me for it. His label has a solid foundation now, and once there is a decision on Hystoria, he is open to signing them after all. Ultimately, the fate of the band rests on Paxton or their decision to replace him.

"Sorry, sorry," I apologize to the people I push past as I navigate my way over to Cole and Si.

"There you are!" Cole greets me with a warm kiss and hands me a cold, bubbly glass of champagne.

"Sorry. Some moron made a stink after causing an accident. Traffic stopped for like three miles." I take a sip and stop myself from gulping down the whole thing. It's so nicely cool and refreshing. "At least nobody looked hurt."

“Let’s hope we can say the same about everyone’s eardrums once this show starts,” Si quips, and I playfully swat his back.

“Come on. He’s your friend, be more supportive.”

“Okay, okay,” he chuckles, and we all turn our attention to the stage as the first notes reverberate through the air. We quickly make our way to the balcony, where we settle in to watch Jake perform solo for the first time without the support of his bandmates.



The concert is a complete success. It’s clear that Jake feels strange on stage without the guys and doesn’t always know what to do with himself, but he quickly gets over it and begins to enjoy himself thoroughly. And so do we. We dance, head bang, and laugh throughout the concert. His music is different from what he made with Hystoria, but in a good way. It’s raw, emotional, and personal. You can feel his passion in every note he sings and plays. Which is surprising, because I had no idea he could sing.

The evening continues at his after-party, where the music doesn’t stop. We dance until the early hours of the morning, fuelled by the energy of the show and the drinks we’ve had. Jake looks happier than I’ve seen him in a long time and I’m glad this evening worked out well for him.

I got us a hotel room right around the corner because I anticipated the amount of alcohol we would drink and the fact

that we would be absolutely exhausted after the party. Thank God I did. We stumble our way back to the hotel, giggling and singing. Cole looked like he could fall asleep while walking and I was also more than happy when we finally made it to our room. I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I wake up to find the sun already high in the sky and turn to see Cole still tangled in the bedsheets, murmuring and turning in his sleep. I can't help but smile at the sight of him, looking so peaceful and content. Careful not to disturb him, I get up, my bare feet meeting the soft carpet.

As I brush my teeth, I become aware of a light pounding behind my temples, but besides that, I feel okay. Considering how much champagne I drank yesterday, that's not too bad when it comes to hangovers. I pop a painkiller and make myself a coffee before I step onto the balcony.

Our hotel room is perched high above the city, and the view from our balcony is stunning. It reminds me of Cole's apartment, just as clean and sterile. Good thing we're only here for tonight.

I take a sip of my coffee as I watch the hustle and bustle on the street. It's amazing how far away everything seems from twenty stories above the ground. I lean against the railing and let my eyes wander over the city as I get lost in my thoughts. I can't wait to get back home and cuddle with Ninja. Liam is watching him for us today.

Suddenly, the balcony door opens behind me, and I hear Cole's bare feet padding toward me. He wraps his arms around

me, his head resting on my shoulder as we admire the view together.

“Hey, you,” he whispers in my ear, his voice rough with sleep.

“Hey, you,” I answer, and lay my hands on his, linked over my belly, and he chuckles. We stand silently as we watch the city.

“Thank you,” he murmurs softly into my hair. I tilt my head back to look up at him, a confused smile playing at the corners of my lips.

“For what? Standing out here?”

“For giving me another chance,” he replies, his arms tightening around me as he sighs contently. “I dreamed of this, you know. The whole eight years. I cannot count the number of times I wished you were with me. In my bed. My arms. Me in you.” I gently nudge him with my elbow, but he only laughs and continues. “Hitting me with reality-slaps when needed.” He chuckles, and I turn around in his arms. “I’m so glad I found you again.”

“I’m glad you found me, too,” I whisper, and kiss his chin. “I’m yours. The rest will fall into place,” I assure him, and he presses his lips against my forehead.

“You know I’m going to put a ring on this finger, right?” He takes my hand into his and kisses my ring finger. I feel my cheeks heat up, and my smile grows even wider. Not today, but someday, I want that.

“Yeah. I know. I’m looking forward to it.”

Cole’s eyes sparkle as he leans in and whispers, “The grandest proposal you’ve ever seen.” My eyes widen, and I quickly shake my head.

“No, no, no. Don’t you dare. I don’t need grand, Cole.” The smile on his face makes me forget to breathe.

“I’ll think of something. Will you say yes?” Cole asks, his voice dripping with anticipation. I sigh contently, closing my eyes and resting my head against his chest.

“Probably. How about we revisit that living together situation first, though?” Cole’s breath hitches, and I can feel his heart beating faster against my cheek.

“Are you for real?” he asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Yeah.” I nod to emphasize my point. “Ninja misses his father. And I kind of like you too.” Cole chuckles and presses a kiss against my temple.

“Good, because I kind of like you a lot.” He grins. “When am I moving in?”

“We can also look for a house together.” I’ve thought about this long and hard. I love my house. It’s *mine* and exactly what I envisioned.

But back then, I didn’t ever see myself sharing the house with someone. Both Cole, and sometimes I, need space and time for ourselves, and my house is too small to make that happen.

There is also the security issue to consider. We've been lucky, so far, that nobody has spotted Cole. The public seems to have forgotten that my address was leaked, but I never managed to feel one hundred percent safe in my house again. Plus, I know that relying on luck is a dangerous game. Sooner or later, we will find fans or paparazzi on the doorstep and my home is not equipped to handle prying eyes and unwanted attention.

More than that, I want to live somewhere that reflects *us*. I want us to create the space we will be living in, together. I know Cole would be happy to move into my house and give me the reigns when it comes to a new house, but sometimes I fear he only does it because he still feels bad about everything that has happened. But I want us to create our new home together.

Judging by the smile beaming from his face as he holds me at arm's length, I can tell that Cole feels the same way.

"Are you sure? I know how much you love your house," he asks, brows furrowed in concern.

"Yes, I'm sure." I smile reassuringly, and I reach up to cup his face, gently caressing his cheek as he leans into my touch and closes his eyes. "I want to build a home with you."

"That sounds amazing. I want a pool," he points out and nods, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. "And six bedrooms," he continues, grinning mischievously.

I laugh. "Six? That's a bit excessive." He stops my laughter with a kiss.

“For our four children, one for us, and one for guests.”

“Yeah, no. We’re not having four children.”

“Three,” he bargains, and I shake my head. “Two.”

“Maybe.” I grin into his chest. “Someday.”

“Someday,” he agrees softly and leans closer. His smile meets mine, and I feel my heart swell with love. The kiss intensifies, and he carries me back inside in his strong arms, laying me gently on the bed.

Yeah. I guess everything turned out all right.

Afterword

Not quite done with Reimagined yet? Subscribe to my newsletter for exclusive content, news and sneak peeks and get a free bonus epilogue from Cole's POV!

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of Reimagined. This is my first book and I am so excited that I get to share it with you!

I never knew how important reviews are until I decided to write and actually publish Reimagined. So if you can spare a minute or two, please consider leaving your review or even just a rating on Amazon, Goodreads or any other website you'd like. I promise, I value each and every one of them!

Coming up!

Jake's story is next!

He pisses me off the second we meet. Doesn't like my dog. He should be off-limits. But there's something about him that drives me crazy.

Jake's the rudest guy I've ever met, but his charm might just be my kryptonite. One rescue at a concert and everything changes. Maybe he's not all bad, and maybe, just maybe, he's exactly what I need. Working together, the tension builds until it finally explodes.

I'm convinced he's a bad idea. But he's hell-bent on proving me wrong. Can I resist the magnetic pull between us, or is this a bad idea worth risking my heart for?

Preorder Dynamic Contrast now!

Keep an eye out for Simon's book!

When life sucks and you think it can't get worse... trust me, it can.

After my relationship ended badly, I'm leaving the city and moving back home. I look forward to packing everything into my car and enjoy the nice, quiet, road trip - until my brother asks me to take his best friend along and doesn't accept a 'no'. The same best friend that rejected me brutally when we were teens.

But I'm an adult and I can act like one - even though Simon's grumpy demeanor is pushing all my wrong buttons. Soon disdain turns into sparks and when we need to share a bed, know I'm in trouble.

Then again, if life gives you lemons... maybe it's time to enjoy a good lemon cookie.

Preorder Counterpoint now!

Want to know what happens to Paxton?

Sometimes I wish life had dealt me a different hand. Perhaps then, my parents would still be alive, and I could have graduated from university instead of dropping out to care for my brother and working in a bar—struggling to make ends meet each month.

In another life, Paxton and I might still be friends, but when I needed him the most, he was off touring the world. I haven't heard from him in years—until he suddenly shows up at my work. In a turn of events, he becomes my roommate, hiding from the public and his band members. And just like that, the old crush I thought was history comes rushing back.

I only need to deal with him for a few months—just until my brother heads off to college. That can't be so hard. Right?

Preorder Breakdown now!

Acknowledge-ments

The editors I've gotten to work with, who made this book into the best version it can be. I appreciate the time you took with it and the amount of details you've pointed out.

Thank you to my bestie for letting me run ideas by her and always giving me (sometimes unpleasant) truths. I wouldn't have been able to do this without your encouragement and kicks in the ass.

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And lastly, a big thanks to you for giving my first book a chance! I really hope you've enjoyed reading it as much as I have loved writing it.

About the Author

Writing romances has been Hailey's dream since her teens. She's obsessed with coffee (especially pumpkin spice latte's) and rock music. When she's not busy writing or working, you can find Hailey planning her next trip, daydreaming or shamelessly rewatching her favorite movies and series for the hundreth time.

Find Hailey on social media:

