



REMASTERED

SONGS OF FREEDOM #3

EVE HOLMES

# REMASTERED

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SONGS OF FREEDOM

BOOK 3

EVE HOLMES

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*For all the warriors out there, who fight everyday to add some  
light to a dark world*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for joining Harley and Ezra for the end of their story! It's bittersweet to end this trilogy, as I have such a soft spot for these boys. I have *loved* seeing how many of you love them as well!

Remastered is the third and final book in the Songs of Freedom Series, and books in this series must be read in order as it is a continuation of Harley and Ezra's story.

Some of the heavier themes from Details does continue through this book, but overall, I can promise a much happier story! It's the HEA I've been promising since book one!

The content and trigger warnings are at the end of this note, and I encourage you to review them and read with your mental health in mind. Please feel free to reach out with any questions or for clarification.

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

Possible triggering themes and content warnings:

- Mention of death of a parent
- Alcohol abuse and addiction mentioned
- Emotional manipulation (not from any main characters)
- Severe anxiety with panic attacks and dissociation



- Explicit sexual scenes

I hope you enjoy Harley and Ezra's final chapter!

Happy reading!

*Eve xo*

## CHAPTER ONE

---

*Harley*

I PULL the clutch and shift gears, glancing down to see every inch of my travel passing beneath me. The wind rushes past my ears and over my skin, alerting every single one of my senses. I adjust my grip on the throttle and accelerate, letting my motorcycle take me down the open road. A small smile forms somewhere within me at the familiar feeling. It feels like flying. It feels like freedom.

I take a big breath in and try to push everything from my mind. Every muscle in my body feels like it's moving for the first time in weeks, and I am finally seeing the world around me. I'm starting to wake up from a really long sleep. And in a way... I don't want to.

We got back to Ithaca yesterday after our last show of the US leg of our tour, and we have a week at home before heading to Europe for three months. The second I stepped foot into Daniel and Alice's home... my home... I fell apart. Everything seemed to catch up to me all at once, as I was finally in a space where I could feel. And watching Ezra break down right beside me was the worst pain of all. Ezra and I spent the night just holding each other, as we let it all out and slept. Which I don't think I've actually done in weeks. And to sleep for fourteen hours was an unfamiliar feeling. My body feels both rested and unsettled, and I have no idea what it needs or wants.

Daniel and Alice suggested I get out on my bike today, but I was reluctant to leave Ezra. I only have a week to spend with him where we don't have to hide, and I don't want to waste a

single moment. But now that I am out here, I know it was the right call. I'm awake. And as good as this feels to be riding the roads on the outskirts of the city, I need to get home to him. I want to go *home*. As I loop back around, that small smile within me starts to make its way to the surface as I picture Ezra's smiling face.

I pull into the garage and kill the engine, sitting on my bike for a moment in the space Daniel and Alice have created here for me. I feel a swell of gratitude and belonging as I look around. Sometimes I still find it hard to believe they want me here. But they do want me, and they don't want to change me. I sigh and swing my leg over my bike, hanging my helmet on the handlebars. In six days, I have to go back out on tour, where I am not allowed to be who I am, and where they constantly try to change me.

My eyes roam over my bike as I stand there, lost in thought. Even just looking at it brings me some comfort, and I realize just how much I've missed it. I had worked so hard to get this bike, saving up everything I had to buy it, then trading guitar lessons and fixing guitars to get it running. It was a struggle, and one of the hardest things I had ever done for myself. Actually, I think it was the first thing I had ever done for myself. I close my eyes and sigh as I think about the hardest thing in my life right now. Which is protecting what brings me the most joy. Hard work paid off once before. I hope it will again.

I blow out a breath and open the door to the garage, heading into the backyard and towards the house. The feeling of the sun on my skin sends another ripple of comfort through me, so I pause to look up towards the sky. The warmth spreads across my face, and an involuntary breath leaves my body. *Stay awake. Stay here. For Ezra.*

I hear the back door close and as I lower my head, the smile that was fighting its way to the surface wins. His bright blue eyes and gorgeous smile are aimed at me, and it wakes up every single cell in my body. I open my arms as he gets closer and he falls right into them, wrapping his around me.

We silently hold each other for a minute until he murmurs into my shoulder, “I missed you.”

I pull back enough to look into his eyes and kiss him softly. “I missed you too.”

“Have a good ride?” he asks with a smile.

I let my eyes roam over his face as his eyes sparkle with the sun. “Yeah.” I nod and hold him a little tighter. “Right here is where I want to be though.”

He smiles wider and glances back at the house. “How are you feeling?”

“Better now,” I say as I follow his eyes to the house. “What?”

He reaches up to run his fingers through my hair. “So... I still feel bad that we missed your birthday.”

I sigh, resting my forehead against his. “I don’t need a celebration or party, and I don’t want you to feel bad about that. All I need is you.”

A little smile plays on the corner of his lips. “But if you could have a redo...?”

A breath of laughter escapes me. “Are we having a redo?”

He eagerly nods his head and it’s fucking adorable. “I think I got a little too excited about it though, and I now realize the surprise probably isn’t a good idea.” He motions with his head towards the house. “Everyone is inside.”

My eyebrows shoot up as my eyes dart towards the house again. My heart picks up its pace and I grip Ezra a little tighter.

He squeezes my arm to bring my gaze back to him. “We’re just having a low key dinner, with family. Mom’s cooking and we just want to celebrate you, like you deserve.” He rubs his hand on my arm. “No expectations.”

I let out a breath and nod. I don’t even know why I’m feeling anxious. Skyrocketing anxiety seems to be my new default, and every little thing feels like a huge undertaking. “Who’s everyone?” I ask.

Ezra beams at me and takes my hand in his. “Want to go see?”

I smile back at him and nod. I know he would never intentionally put me in a situation where I would feel uncomfortable, and I will always trust him. He leads me towards the house and into the all-season room. As he pushes the door open, I freeze. My mouth drops open as I stare at the table and everyone sitting around it.

Ollie immediately stands up, knocking his chair over as he bounds over to me and engulfs me in a massive bear hug. I’m still in shock that he and Callum are here, as my arms slowly wrap around him.

“Happy birthday, man,” he says quietly.

I swallow down the lump in my throat as I bury my face in his neck and squeeze him tight. They should be home with their families...

“You didn’t have to stay,” I whisper.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and lift my head to see Callum smiling at me. “We’re heading out tonight. The last little bit was hard... We want to end this chapter on a good note before we start the next one.”

I sniff as the threat of tears sting my eyes and nod into Ollie’s shoulder. Ollie squeezes me impossibly tight, which pulls a small laugh from me.

“Ok, Ollie, let him fucking breathe,” Callum murmurs.

Ollie lets me go and pats my shoulder, sniffing back tears as well. “Sorry, man. I’m really feeling the love.” He lets out a breath and fans his face.

“It’s ok,” I laugh, as Callum wraps his arms around me.

“Hey, sunshine.”

Callum steps back, and Lulu’s smiling face is staring back at me.

The tears that were stinging are now welling to the surface as I try to blink them back, but one falls. She steps forward,

and as soon as her arms wrap around my neck, a breath catches in my chest.

“It’s ok, Harley,” she murmurs into my ear.

I let her hold me for a moment, as she’s done so many times before when my emotions start to get the best of me. She’s always been my safe space and has helped me get through so many hard times, when I fall apart and can’t build myself back up. For so long, she was the only one who ever saw my moments of weakness and was the only one who could help me continue. I don’t think I realized just how much I’ve missed her until this moment. She is my best friend and I have shared everything with her, from happiness to sadness. Now, I barely get to see her and every time we talk... I’m a mess. I was hoping that after I left Lyons, I’d be able to share more happiness with her.

She eventually pulls back, and Hannah and Emma both rush forward. I laugh as they both hug me and hold tight. “Happy birthday!” Emma says into my chest.

Hannah looks up at me, her soft brown eyes full of warmth and love. “Happy to have you home.”

“Thank you,” I say softly, hugging them both back.

Daniel and Alice come into the room and Alice ushers us all to the table as she starts handing out drinks. As I take my seat, I look around at everyone I now have in my life. I’m in awe that they are here for me, and I’m overwhelmed with the amount of love I have for every single person sitting at this table. I look down at my hands and take a shaky breath, trying to pull myself together.

“You ok, babe?” Ezra leans in and places a hand on my thigh. I quickly look up and glance around the table.

“Fuck,” I mutter as I whip my eyes back to Ezra. “I’m sorry, I...”

He grabs my hand and kisses the back of it. “It’s ok. We’re home, baby. You can let go.”

I stare into his eyes, and I’m flooded with relief, love, acceptance, comfort... home. I wrap my hand around the back

of his neck, pulling him into me. “I love you,” I whisper against his lips.

He smiles. “I love you too.” He presses his lips to mine, and I melt into his touch as I finally drop my guard. We’re home. No one here will hurt us... We’re safe.

I slide my hand on his thigh as we reluctantly break apart. He rests his forehead against mine and smiles. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

I let out a little laugh. “Fucking right it does.”

“Lunch is served!” I tear my eyes away from his to see Alice and Daniel carrying in trays of food.

“Wow, this looks incredible,” Callum says as he stands up to take the tray from Alice. As usual, she went all out. She has multiple different salads, burgers, various kinds of fries, mac and cheese and more.

I scan my eyes over the table that is full of food. “Whoa,” I whisper.

“Enjoy, sweetheart,” Alice says quietly, as she kisses the top of my head and moves to her seat.

We all dig in and fill our plates while everyone chatters away. I take a moment to just listen while I eat but after a couple bites, that familiar anxious feeling starts creeping in again. I take a breath and try to push it back down. I don’t know why I’m anxious right now. I’m surrounded by everyone I love and I’m home. Why is this happening? I try to focus on Lulu and Hannah, as they talk about where they are going to live this school year. Lulu is finally going to start her degree now that her grandmother is doing well, and she has been accepted to Cornell. They are looking for an apartment so they can live together, and tomorrow they are going to check some places out.

“The one we saw already was a three bedroom. We love it, but we don’t know anyone else looking for a place,” Hannah says as she pulls up the ad on her phone and shows it to Emma.

“And I am not living with a rando.” Lulu shivers.

Emma laughs. “Been there, done that. Definitely do not recommend.”

Ollie huffs and looks down at his plate, mumbling, “If I was here, I could live with you.”

Lulu smiles and pats his arm. “We wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He looks up at them with a serious expression. “Promise me the triad will remain a triad. I don’t think my heart can handle a quartet.”

Emma snorts a laugh. “Um, and if either or both of them get a boyfriend?”

Ollie sits up straight and shakes his head. “No, that’s different. I will never stand in the way of anyone’s love. But in the end... boyfriends come and go. The triad is forever.”

Everyone laughs and I try to join in, but it feels like an effort. I look down and sigh, silently scolding myself. *Get your shit together.* Everyone is here for me, Alice made this beautiful meal, and I can’t get out of my own head enough to laugh with my friends. Why does everything feel like such a fucking effort?

“Not feeling very hungry?” Ezra’s voice cuts through my thoughts.

I shake my head slightly. “Not really,” I say quietly, looking down at my plate which is still full.

“It’s ok,” he smiles and slides his hand onto my thigh. I observe him as he turns his attention back to Emma as she shows him something on her phone. He looks as tired and worn out as I feel. I feel another pang of guilt as I look down at his hand on my thigh. He is also struggling, yet he has to take care of me. Because I can’t stay present. I hid when things got too hard and left him to deal with everything. I let him do all the work for us, and because of me... he’s hurting even more. I hate that I did that, and I don’t want to do it again. I need to be here for him and help him. I need to support him like he supports me.

*Stay awake. Stay here, for him.*



I blow out a breath and pop a zucchini fry into my mouth. And damn. It's delicious. I settle into my chair, placing one hand over Ezra's on my thigh, and listen to everyone chatting around me while I try to eat. I eventually feel some of the tension in my body start to slip away, and I try to focus on just being here with my family.

Ollie and Emma are debating who the best Avenger is, and it's creating a heated yet funny conversation at the table. Ollie says Thor because he's a God and has a hammer and Emma says Ironman because he's a leader and so intelligent. But they're both wrong because it's Spider-man. Not only because of his strength and agility, but because he's been through so much and has so much determination. I guess in a way, I can identify with him.

I feel Callum shifting in his seat beside me. I turn to him, and he is awkwardly looking around the table, fidgeting with his fork. I furrow my brow at him, as he is always so calm and collected.

"You ok, Cal?" I ask quietly.

His eyes dart to me and I'm surprised to see the sparkle and excitement in them. "Yeah." He smiles. "Sorry, I know this isn't the right time to get into it all, I'm just a bit antsy as I've been working on-"

"OH MY GOD."

Every set of eyes turn to Ollie at the other end of the table. He slowly raises his hand to point at Callum, eyes wide. "You have a plan," he whispers.

All eyes then shift to Callum.

His face slowly breaks out into a huge grin. "I think I do." He slides his gaze to me with a question. "But this is Harley's-"

"Let's hear it." I smile at him.

"You sure?" Callum asks tentatively.

"Yeah, I am." I nod. We haven't had a chance to talk too much after William gave us a folder outlining every penny we

have to pay back to him if we were to leave Capture Music. I can't help the intense worry that takes over me whenever I think about us fighting back against William. Every time we had tried to fight back, it only made everything worse. And this time, it's much, much bigger. But I also know we can't keep going on like this. I need to stop being scared and face this with everyone else. And right now, maybe this is what I need to get out of my head. I need to do the hard things and have faith that the hard work will pay off.

Callum nods back to me with a smile and reaches down to the floor beside him, lifting a tube.

I shift in my seat and try to keep my heart under control as it pounds against my ribs. Ezra laces his fingers through mine and gives me a soft smile. He opens his mouth to say something to me, but Ollie suddenly stands up, bumping the table. His eyes are glued to Callum and anticipation is rolling off him.

He slowly points at the tube in Callum's hand. "Is that...?"

Callum stands as well, undoing a Velcro strap around the tube. "It is." He pulls a tab, and unrolls some kind of portable, retractable whiteboard, like a scroll.

Ollie raises his hands in the air and cheers, "Fuck yeah!" He then quickly lowers his hands and turns to Alice. "Oh, I'm so sorry Mamma Larson, I just get very excited when Callum Callums."

Alice chuckles. "It's ok, dear." She then eyes the whiteboard. "I am intrigued though..."

I look back at Callum, and he has the portable whiteboard propped up on a stand. *Where did that come from?*

Hannah raises a hand in the air from her seat across from Callum, and he points to her. "I just have a question about this whiteboard."

"Yes." Callum turns towards it. "It's just a prototype, but so far I do believe it will be a good travel whiteboard that takes up minimal space."

“Oh my god,” Emma murmurs and adjusts in her seat, eyes glued to the whiteboard. Or... to Callum? I see Ezra shoot her a questioning look and Emma shifts again, clearing her throat and awkwardly making a point of looking *directly* at the whiteboard.

“What are all the names for?” Lulu asks.

I look over the names he has written out. They are colour coded, and it looks like he has them grouped into categories of some kind. I don't recognize any of them, and they all have large numbers beside them.

“Yes, I'm just about to get to that-”

“Are those the names from the folder that William gave us?!” Ollie gapes at him, still standing.

“Ohhh, is it??” Lulu whips her head back to Callum with wide eyes.

Hannah raises her hand again. “And the numbers too?”

Ollie snaps his fingers and points at Hannah with an expectant look to Callum.

Callum brings his hand to his forehead and blows out a breath. “Yes.” He then turns his back to the table, muttering, “I should have waited to bring this out.”

Ezra slowly leans forward. “Um... so what is this?”

Daniel chuckles and leans back in his chair. “Why don't we let Callum explain what he's worked out?”

Callum nods at Daniel. “Yes, let's.” He holds up a pointer and slides it down the list of names. “This list here, are some of the names from the folder and the amounts they've been paid.”

Hannah once again raises her hand. Callum sighs and motions to her to ask her question. “Why only some?”

Callum holds up his hands in a *wait* motion and looks around the table. “I'm going to back up and start at the beginning.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea, Cal. You’ve got us all a little lost and confused here.” Ollie nods seriously as he takes his seat again.

Callum glares at him, and Emma smacks him on the arm. Ollie opens his hands wide in question and stares back at Callum. I press my lips together and try to suppress a chuckle.

“Ok,” Callum blows out a breath and picks up the folder that William gave us, “so what I originally saw in here that didn’t feel quite right, was that Capture Music uses another company to deliver their music catalogs for distribution to digital music stores. And to manage royalties. It’s a platform named Sentry. Which is weird because Capture Music is a major record label. You would think they would have already negotiated deals with digital service providers for all of this and that they don’t need a middleman.”

“I would not have thought that,” Ollie says, shaking his head. “Only you would have thought that.”

Callum glances at Ezra and I and we both just shrug. I don’t know how any of this works, as it’s all so big and complicated. I’ve honestly never thought about how our music gets out there, it just happens.

“Ok, well, anyway,” Callum waves a hand in the air, “it got me wondering why they are relying on a distribution partner when I’m sure they have the necessary departments already within the label. So, I looked into these types of platforms a bit more, and they can be used to reduce costs for labels as they distribute music and manage royalties from one single platform instead. And when this happens, the platform, in this case Sentry, takes a percentage of the label’s royalties for doing that work. And as artists, it doesn’t make a difference to us since we still get our percentage no matter what.”

Ezra nods slowly. “Ok...” he motions to the whiteboard. “So, what’s all this then?”

“Well, since William was *so* thorough in this folder, he included all earning reports as well as expenses, so he could account for every single penny spent on us that we would owe back if we were to leave Capture Music today.” He pauses for

a moment. “I was surprised though, not to see any reports from the digital service providers. Only royalties reported by Sentry. From what I’ve learned, platforms such as Sentry receive the reports and payments from the providers and then Sentry simply distributes royalties to artists and labels. Everything else in here is so detailed, right down to the cent... but royalty earnings are glossed over.” Callum looks down at the folder and sighs. “And guess who owns Sentry?”

My eyes snap up to his. “Seriously?” Tension once again enters my body, and I feel my heart pick up its pace. I squeeze Ezra’s hand tighter and brace for what’s coming. Because I know it’s bad, and I have a feeling I know where this is going.

Callum nods. “William. He developed this platform as a way to cut costs, and the Music Group that oversees Capture Music uses Sentry for some other major labels as well.” He drops the folder onto the table. “So, I looked into Sentry some more. From what I can tell of other similar platforms, it shouldn’t be as big of a team as this.” He points to list of names on the whiteboard. “These people appear to work for Sentry, and I could locate information on them.” He then points to another list of five names. “These people were also listed on reports as being a part of the team, and therefore earning royalties from us. But I can’t seem to find information on them anywhere within the company. Just a name, that’s it. Almost like they don’t even exist.”

“Holy fuck.”

We all turn to Alice, in shock. She shakes her head and motions towards Callum. “What, that’s very surprising news!”

“It certainly is, dear.” Daniel nods at his wife, then turns back to Callum. “You think William is pocketing this money?”

Callum nods. “I think he could be, yes.”

Lulu meets my eyes and shakes her head in disbelief while Ollie mutters, “Oh my god.”

Callum continues, “Also-”

“There’s more?!” Ollie brings his hands down to the table in exasperation. Lulu places a hand on his back in comfort and

he rests his head on her shoulder, blowing out a big breath.

“Well, if we think about why we only have Sentry reports and not reports from providers... I have to wonder if he might be funnelling some money there as well. Our royalty percentage is high for industry standard at 25%, and he used this as a big selling point for us to sign. What if it’s that high, because we’re getting that percentage of only some of our royalties that we are taking in?”

Daniel leans forward, resting his arms on the table. “So, Sentry may be reporting a lower earning on royalties, meaning he pockets the unreported amount. And the reported amount is also possibly being paid out to a team consisting of some people that may not even exist, meaning he is taking even more of your royalties and thus stealing from both you, and the label.”

“Yes,” Callum says.

The silence in the room is deafening. I let this all sink in as I think about what this means. As I think about everything we have gone through over the past seven months, I start to shake. The hell we have been in, the caging, the lies, the rumours, the fucking torture was all so William could make money and take even *more* from us. My heart is slamming against my ribcage, and I feel my palms start to tingle and sweat. I’m vaguely aware of voices around me and Ezra’s hand in mine, but I can’t get out of my head. While we suffer, he wins. While we lose, he gains. We hurt, so he can come out on top.

Suddenly my feet are moving and I’m leaving the room. I don’t know where I’m going or what I’m doing, but I just need to go. And as I walk away, I also feel myself retreat to my dark, quiet space. My safe space. Where pain doesn’t exist.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

*Ezra*

I STAND AND FOLLOW HARLEY, the concerned voices of our family fading behind me. I catch up to him in the kitchen and place my hand on his shoulder. “Babe, hey.”

He turns around and my heart drops.

“Where are you going...” I ask him quietly, as he looks into my eyes. But he’s not really looking. I can see him fading.

“It’s too much,” he murmurs as he drops his eyes and scrunches up his face.

I take him into my arms, holding him tight until his arms wrap around me too. “Just stay with me babe, please,” I whisper.

He squeezes me tighter and buries his face in my neck. “I’m here.”

We continue to hold each other, until I can feel us both start to relax.

I pull back and look into his eyes. “I know this is big, Harley. But... it might be a way we can get out of this.”

His eyes flash with panic and he shakes his head. “He’ll punish us even more, he’ll know what we’re doing and we’re stuck in this contact. It will only get worse, he will make it even worse.” His breath catches. “It can’t get any worse.”

I bite my lip to keep my emotion back, looking down to take his hand in mine. “I know. I... I don’t really know what to say. This is... a lot. I don’t know what we’d even do with this

information, and I don't know how it's all going to work out. And it fucking kills me to say that." I feel my eyes well up. I want to have the answers, I want to know what to do to make this all better. Even just to make him feel better right now. "But... I know that we can't continue on like this. Something needs to change, and something needs to happen. This might be that thing to help us."

His glassy eyes follow a tear that escapes and runs down my cheek. "I know," he says softly.

I swallow and nod. "We're going to figure out a way to get out of all of this. Remember, we need hope, Harley." My voice catches as I say, "Please. Please have hope with me."

He blinks, and a tear falls. I reach up to wipe it away while he sniffs and nods.

"Boys?"

We turn to see Mom hesitantly enter the kitchen. Her face falls as she takes in our tear-stained cheeks. She rushes forward and wraps her arms around us both. "Oh, boys..." she says softly.

I let out a stuttering breath, trying to keep everything in. Now is not the time to let it all out, again.

"I know this is all hard to hear, and hard to work through," Mom says as she pulls back and looks between us. "What Callum has figured out is worth looking into, but we don't need to worry about this right now." She takes Harley's hand in hers. "This afternoon is about celebration. Celebrating Harley, and you boys being home. Let's leave it at that for right now, and we will talk about all of this another day. There's no rush. Ok?"

I take in a deep breath and nod, while Harley does the same. She's right. That was a lot to take in for all of us. Harley is already working through so much, and I know he has been struggling to just get through this afternoon. We need to ease into this, but I am so proud of him for the step he made today to face it. I take his hand in mine and give him a soft smile. "Proud of you, babe."



He sniffs and meets my eyes with a gentle nod and smile.

“And now, it’s time for cake.” Mom smiles at us. “Ready to come back in?”

Harley takes a big breath in and nods. “Yeah.”

Mom smiles at us and heads back into the room. I keep Harley’s hand in mine and start to follow, but I feel him pull back a bit. “What?” I ask as I turn around.

He wipes his eyes, trying to hide the look on his face as he glances at the door to the all-season room. But I know that look. “You know everyone here understands.”

“I know.” He sniffs again. “It’s still hard.”

I pull him in for a kiss. “I’m here with you, baby.”

As we enter the room, I see Callum has put his whiteboard away, and everyone is sitting around the table quietly chatting. Lulu gets up and silently wraps her arms around Harley’s waist. I let go of his hand so he can hug her back. Hannah looks up at me from her seat, reaching her hand out to squeeze mine with a soft smile. As we move to our seats, Callum stands up and pulls Harley into a hug.

“Sorry for bringing this up today,” he says quietly to Harley.

Harley shakes his head. “No, I told you to. It needed to be said, and I know we need to deal with it.” Callum lets him go, and Harley sighs. “I think I just... need a minute.”

“Of course.” Callum nods. “Whenever you’re ready.” He looks at me and gives me a soft nod and smile as well. We all know we will talk about it again and for right now, what needed to be said has been said. We’re all in a fragile state, and we need to take our time getting back into this mess. This week is for all of us to relax and just focus on reconnecting with our old lives.

Mom brings out a beautiful cake that she made for Harley, and Ollie starts pouting about not singing *Happy Birthday*. Everyone else is under the – correct – impression that Harley wouldn’t like that sort of attention, but he eventually gives

Ollie the ok to go ahead with it. Ollie goes *all out*, and it's both terrible and awesome. Once Mom is finally able to serve the cake, we enjoy it while we talk about things that bring us happiness. Harley and Dad talk once again about motorcycles while Mom pretends to be upset about it, and Hannah, Lulu and Emma continue to look at apartment ads with Ollie providing his unsolicited input. Callum and I eventually pull out Spikeball in the backyard, and everyone joins in. It's fun and relaxing... for the most part. Hannah and Callum once again let their competitive sides out to play and Ollie ended up going inside with Mom because he was too scared. She gave him some more cake and sent him back out with a message for us all to play nice.

But the best part of this whole afternoon, was seeing Harley smile. He was finally able to let go and just let himself have fun. And for myself, there was no better feeling than seeing that and to kiss him, touch him, and love him without looking over my shoulder and waiting to get my hand slapped. I think we both felt a huge weight lift from our shoulders. We needed this, and I smile to myself as I realize we have six more days. I'm determined to make the most of it.

As the sun starts to go down and the afternoon comes to a close, it's time for Ollie and Callum to head to the airport.

"I'll text you all the time and send all the updates." Ollie looks between Harley and I, and it looks like he's going to cry. "I'm going to miss you so much."

"It's just a few days, Ollie, we'll all be back together again soon," Harley says, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder. Their cab pulls up to the front of the house and Ollie lets out a wail of despair.

"My god," Callum mutters with a smirk as he moves in to hug me.

I chuckle against him as I squeeze him tight. "Hopefully your cab ride is uneventful."

He laughs. "I'm not counting on it." He pulls back and glances over to Harley and Ollie. Ollie is practically hanging off of him like a koala and... yup he's crying. Callum turns

back to me with a soft smile. “Have a good week. You guys deserve it.”

“You do too,” I say. “Thanks for coming.” I glance at Harley as Ollie eventually lets him go, dramatically wiping his eyes. “And for looking over all that information. I think we just need-”

“We’ll get to it when we can.” Callum smiles at me. “When the time is right.”

I smile back at him, as Ollie mopes over to me and sniffs, draping his arms around my neck. I chuckle, as I hug him back. “We’ll miss you, Ol.”

“Promise me you’ll keep me updated on *everything*.” He pulls back and stares at me with his tear-filled eyes. “I need photos. And don’t worry, I’ll send them too.”

“Of course.” I nod and smile at him. “We’ll keep in touch.”

He tilts his head back on another wail and engulfs me in another embrace. Harley bites his lip on a smile as he and Callum break their hug, and I wince as Ollie squeezes too tight.

“Alright, Ol, our car is here.” Callum taps him on the back.

Ollie takes in a sharp breath and looks around the room. “Where are my girls??”

“Right here, babe.” Hannah enters the room with Lulu in tow. “We’re heading out now, too.”

Ollie closes his eyes and opens his arms, a tear rolling down his cheek. Lulu and Hannah share a little smile and move into his arms to hug him goodbye.

“This is so hard,” he whispers.

“You’ll be alright, Ollie. And we’ll keep texting like we always do,” Lulu murmurs into his chest as he squishes her against him.

Harley smiles as he moves in closer to me, wrapping an arm around my waist. I kiss the side of his head and we watch

as Callum pulls Ollie away from the girls.

“I love you all!” Ollie yells back as Callum pushes him out the front door and they make their way towards the waiting cab.

“We love you too,” I call back with a laugh.

“My goodness,” Hannah laughs as she turns back to us. “Well, we’re off. Lots of apartment hunting tomorrow.”

“And we *will* find one.” Lulu smiles. “You guys have a great day tomorrow.” She grabs Harley’s hand and gives it a squeeze. “And I’m looking forward to hanging out with you this week.”

He smiles back at her and nods. “Me too.”

I can’t help but beam at them. I love the connection they have, and I am so happy they will have time together this week. I know Harley needs it, and I think Lulu does too. She’s been without her best friend for a while now, and I know it’s been hard for her to see him struggle when there’s nothing she can do.

The second they are out the door, both mine and Harley’s phones buzz. We take them out and see that Ollie has texted the group chat.

**Ollie**

This is unbearable. I miss you so much \*crying face emoji\*

I laugh when he also sends a selfie of him sitting in the back of the cab with a pout on his face and Callum giving him a quizzical look.

“How many of these do you think we’re going to get before he even gets on the plane?” Harley chuckles as he taps out a reply that he misses him too.

“At least fifteen I’m guessing.” I let my eyes roam over Harley as he finishes typing his message and slides his phone back into his pocket. I reach out and pull him into me, placing

a gentle kiss on his lips. He slides his hands up my back and sighs. “You ok, baby?” I ask quietly.

He smiles as he looks into my eyes, and my heart skips a beat. He looks happy. “Yeah, I am,” he says.

I kiss him again, holding onto him tight as we stay right here in the foyer.

He sighs against me as he rests his chin on my shoulder. “Thank you for tonight,” he says.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” I lean my head against his and smile.

“I’m eating more of your cake, Harley.”

We break apart to see Emma walking past us into the living room, carrying a plate with a piece of cake.

Harley chuckles. “Go for it.” He then peers into the kitchen. “We should go help your mom clean up.”

Emma plops down on the couch and waves her hand. “It’s all done.”

I turn back to Harley and smile, grabbing his hand to pull him towards the stairs. “Good, come with me.”

As I lead him up the stairs I hear Emma call, “Fine, don’t watch a movie with me then!”

“What are you doing?” Harley asks as I lead him to our bedroom.

I pull him in and close the door, pointing towards the bed for him to sit. He gives me a wary look as he does, watching me as I open the closet and start rooting around.

“Seriously, what are you doing?” he asks again.

I find what I’m looking for and pull it out. His eyes drop to the present in my hands, and back up to meet mine.

“I didn’t give this to you yet because it... it just didn’t feel right.” I sit on the bed beside him and place my wrapped gift for him in his lap.

He stares down at it for a moment. “I remember this.”

I nod and tuck his hair behind his ear. “Yeah. I had it on the road.”

He looks up at me and I see an emotion flicker in his eyes. And I’m pretty sure it’s embarrassment.

“No.” I shake my head.

He draws his brows together and tilts his head in confusion.

“There was a lot to deal with, and we *both* had a hard time with it. You’re not allowed to feel bad about that.” I nudge him with my shoulder and smirk. “I’m putting my foot down.”

He huffs out a little laugh. “Oh, really.”

“Yeah.” I nod towards the present. “Open it.”

He looks down to the box in his lap and slides his fingers under the edge of the wrapping paper to pull it off. Inside is the portable record player I got for him. He presses his lips together and runs a hand over it.

“Your mom’s favourite records are underneath.” I gently push the record player back so he can see the stack of records from his mom’s collection underneath it.

He swallows hard and keeps his eyes cast down at the gift in his lap. He’s silent, as he just sits there staring at it.

I tentatively place a hand on his back. “You ok?”

He blinks a couple times and nods, while a tear falls onto the box. “Yeah,” he says, in almost a whisper. I give him a moment, and he eventually turns to me with wet eyes. “Thank you. It’s perfect.”

I smile, wiping away the tear on his cheek. “I know you’ve always used music, and especially her record collection, to connect with her and to bring you comfort. I want you to have that on the road too.”

He drops his head to my shoulder, and I wrap my arms around him. I feel the stuttering breaths leaving him and feel his tears fall onto my arm. I blink back my own and kiss the top of his head. “Why don’t we try it out?”

He nods and sniffs, sitting up. I take the box from him and pull out the record player. It looks like a worn, black leather briefcase, and it has speakers built into it. I open it and set it up on my desk. I turn back to him as he is looking through the records.

“You got all her favourites...” he says with a small smile, flipping through the stack.

I lean back against the desk, crossing my arms and lifting my chin triumphantly. “I listen.”

He looks up at me with a big, beautiful smile. He stands, holding up B.B. King, *Live in Cook County Jail*. “I think this one.”

I nod with a smile as I watch him put the record on, and B.B. King’s voice fills the room. As his eyes slide to mine, I take his hand and lead him back to the bed. We lay down, with his head resting on my chest as we listen to the album. After a few moments, he laces his fingers in mine and brings my hand to his lips. He kisses the back of it and says, “Mom would love you.”

I bite back the tears that well to the surface and run my fingers through his hair. “I would have loved her too,” I say softly.

As we lay there, listening to the record play, I close my eyes and just feel him against me. This content feeling is exactly what has been missing, and is exactly what we need. And I will be sure to take it with us wherever we go.

## CHAPTER THREE

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*Ezra*

“I MEAN... GOATS COULD LIVE HERE.”

I laugh as I lay back on the blanket, pulling Harley down with me. “They definitely could,” I agree.

We took Harley’s bike up to the Catskill mountains today, and it’s been fun to get out on a little road trip. We found a spot to hike and ended up at a secluded look-off over a big field with an amazing view of the mountains. Mom packed a huge lunch for us, so we’re settled on a blanket while we eat and enjoy the peaceful quiet.

Harley rests his head on my chest, and I breathe him in. I feel every ounce of tension in my body slip away as we lay here under the sun, the sounds of the light breeze rustling in the trees and birds chirping around us.

I let a big breath out in contentment. “I could stay here forever.”

Harley chuckles lightly. “I wish.”

I kiss the top of his head and we continue to lay here, feeling perfectly happy and relaxed.

Our phones both buzz and Harley laughs. “He managed an entire hour this time, that’s impressive.”

I laugh as well as I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone.



**Ollie**

\*heart emoji\*

I just love you guys so much. I miss you \*loudly crying face emoji\*

I'm so lonely

Harley snorts a laugh as he reads the texts on my phone. “Isn’t he with his family?”

I smile and start to type that out, but Callum beats me to it.

**Callum**

You’re lonely? You have four siblings.

**Ollie**

I know but they’re all busy right now and I’m  
ALL ALONE

He sends a selfie of him lying in a hammock by a lake with an open book on his chest, and a pout on his face.

“That actually looks like a great time,” I chuckle as I tap out a reply.

It looks like you’re having a relaxing day though. I’m sure you’ll have company again soon enough.

And we love and miss you both too.

I hold up my phone, pulling Harley in closer to take a selfie of us. I send it to the group chat and pause for a moment to look at it. We’re both smiling, and it’s real. I think about all the photos that have been taken of us over the last few months either without our permission or with forced, fake smiles. This

one, though, is the real us. I set it as my home screen photo and Harley wraps his arm around my waist, smiling.

**Ollie**

\*seven loudly crying face emojis\*

IT'S PERFECT

Callum sends a selfie as well with his brother and it looks like they are playing soccer. He looks happy and it fills me with joy that they are both enjoying this time off. Even if Ollie is lonely at the moment...

**Callum**

Miss you guys too!

**Ollie**

This is just what I needed

I really needed a pick me up

My sister gave me a book to read but it is DARK ROMANCE. Like, wtf? They kill people! Does she not know me at all??

Harley and I laugh as we continue to text with them for a bit. Callum tells Ollie to put the book down and maybe just take a break from reading, but he is still determined to find his genre. He sends a few more photos showing us around his house until one of his brothers comes home, and Callum goes back to playing soccer with his brother.

As I tuck my phone away, Harley sits up. He chews his lip and looks out over the view, seeming to think on something. Then, he surprises me by saying, "What are your thoughts on everything Callum said yesterday?"

I sit up too and shake my head. “We don’t need to talk about this now.”

“I know.” He nods and chews his lip again. “But I can’t get it out of my head...”

I know what he means. I’ve been trying hard not to think about it, but I can’t help it. Ever since he said William may be skimming off the top and falsely reporting our royalties, it’s just constantly buzzing at the back of my mind. And I’m wondering what this all means for us. “Yeah,” I say softly. “Me too.”

We sit in silence for a moment before he continues, “Do you think he really is doing that?” He meets my eyes. “Stealing from us?”

I let out a breath. “He’s fucking shady so... I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Harley nods and plucks a blade of grass, looking down at it as he rolls it between his fingers.

“But if he is, I think that’s something for us to be hopeful about, as a potential way out of all of this.” I say, looking over the mountains in the distance. “And we know Callum... he wouldn’t have even shared this if he didn’t think it was true.”

“But how will we even know if it’s true?” Harley glances at me, and I see the fear in his eyes even though he’s trying to hide it. “He has hidden everything so well. He has us locked in this contract, and even a lawyer and your dad didn’t see anything wrong with it. And they couldn’t find a way out of it either.” He tosses the rolled up blade of grass and plucks another one. “How the hell would we ever be able to prove this is even happening?”

I’ve been wondering that myself. He clearly slipped up by giving us that folder with so much information in it, and we know he thought it would just be a scare tactic and that we wouldn’t actually look into it. Especially on a Callum level. But I highly doubt he would let any other information be easily accessible. “I don’t know...” And I hate that I don’t. “Callum has some sort of plan in the works, and I’m sure by

the end of this week he will have done even more work on it. Let's hear him out, and take it one step at a time, ok?"

Harley nods as he stares out at the view.

"Hey." I nudge him, and he turns his head to me. "It's hope. It might work out, and it might get us out of this contract."

His eyes flit between mine. "And if it doesn't?"

"Then..." I look over the field below us and smile. "We hang on to a different hope. This one." I gesture to the field.

He looks over the field as well and then back to me. "This one what?"

I smile at him and take his hand. "Regardless of how this turns out, we are going to have a life after all of this. And I am *very* much looking forward to having goats with you Harley."

His face breaks out in a smile, and mine widens. I turn back to the field below us and point to an area near the trees. "Their pen could go right there."

I watch as his eyes sweep over the land, and he points to another area. "That's where the house would go."

"Hm," I agree, nodding. "With a nice pool and hot tub."

He nods and gives me a cheeky smile. "Obviously."

I lean my head on his shoulder. "How amazing would it be to live up here..."

He kisses the top of my head. "Being anywhere with you is amazing. But living here with you would be a dream come true."

"Then we'll do it," I say, rubbing my thumb over the back of his hand. "Even if this does end up being another three and half years, we have this to look forward to." I lift my head off his shoulder and reach up to turn his face towards me. "But I'm also not going to give up hope that this could be a way out for us. Whatever that ends up looking like."

He takes his bottom lip between his teeth and looks down at our hands. I can tell he's working through something, so I

stay quiet and wait for him to sort out his thoughts.

Eventually he says, “I don’t want to leave you anymore.”

I tilt my head and draw my brows together. “Leave me?”

He sighs and raises his eyes again. There’s a vulnerability in his gaze, like this is hard for him to say. “I left you to deal with all of it. With all the pressure, the negativity, the demands... me... and I just left so I didn’t have to deal with it.” He shakes his head. “That’s not fair to you.”

“Harley,” I shake my head as well. “You didn’t leave me. That’s how you were able to cope with an insane amount of stress. And I dealt with it in my own way. Neither are ideal, but we’re able to learn from it.” I pause for a moment. I have been wanting to talk to him about this but didn’t really know how or when. “Is that something that used to happen often?”

He looks down as he fiddles with a string on the blanket, and nods slowly. “I think so.” He presses his lips together as he seems to be thinking about how to explain. “I don’t know when it happens, and it just feels comfortable. Like I’m comfortably numb... I guess it’s easier to escape than feel pain.” He raises his eyes to mine again, and they are bright with worry. “But I don’t want to do that again. I can’t keep letting you deal with everything, and I feel bad that I did.”

“Never feel bad about that, baby.” I grip his hand tight. “It’s what you know, which is heartbreaking.” I pause for a moment. “I was worried about you, and I was scared. But that’s not something I want you to feel bad about. I was worried because I love you and it killed me to see you hurting so much.”

He gently nods his head and looks down again to our intertwined hands. “Me too. And I want to be there for you, just like you are for me. Ezra...” he sighs. “You’ve been so strong through this whole thing, and seeing you break down when I couldn’t be there for you... and I wasn’t even here...” his voice catches as he shakes his head.

“It’s ok, baby.” I lift his chin with my fingers. “We’re going to be there for each other. I’ll help you, and you’ll help

me. I think I need to learn to feel my feelings, instead of just trying to make everything better all the time. It's ok for us both to feel sad, mad, or hurt. And I think maybe us getting some support in learning how to manage all of this is also a good idea."

Harley nods. "Yeah," he says softly. "I know. I'm so tired of feeling anxious all the time, about everything. I want to be better, for both of us... and Ollie, Callum, Lulu and Hannah. I just... I feel like I'm constantly leaning on everyone I love, and everyone is always having to support me. I feel like I'm just a burden..."

I move closer to him. "Loving you is *never* a burden."

He bites the inside of his cheek and looks down.

"Harley, when I say I love you, I mean all of you. Every single scar, both inside and out. I fell in love with absolutely everything about you, and I am here for it all." I observe him for a moment as he runs his thumb over the back of my hand. "I only want to help you in managing all of this so that you are happy and comfortable, because you deserve it. Nothing about you is ever a burden."

His eyes rise to meet mine with a small smile. "I'm happy and comfortable with you." He leans in and places a soft kiss on my lips. "And I love you too."

I smile back at him, pulling him in for another kiss. When we separate, I stand up and hold my hand out to him. He looks up at me with a question, but takes my hand anyway as he lets me pull him up. "Let's go explore our land," I say, keeping his hand in mine.

He chuckles. "So this is our land?"

"Yeah. I mean, we already have a house and goat barn all planned out, we've pretty much laid our claim on it." I shrug, grinning at him.

He moves in closer to me, moving his hands to my hips. He presses his lips to mine, and I part to let him in. As his tongue sweeps into my mouth, I let out a small moan of satisfaction. In this moment, right now, I'm not sure I've ever

felt more connected to him. I feel like we are finally back to feeling like ourselves, but now, we're even stronger. We've faced hell, and they weren't able to break us. And no one ever will. I'm confident in Callum, and if he thinks he found information that could get us out of this, then I trust him. But if it doesn't work, or if we're wrong about this whole thing, then I am even more confident in our love for each other that will get us through this.

“Should we go hike?” Harley says softly against my lips.

I nod and smile. “Yeah.”

We leave our stuff where it is, as we don't plan on going too far, and want to come back to this spot before we leave. Harley leads the way, finding a trail to follow through some woods. And I'm happy with that because I get an awesome view of his ass as we climb a small hill. As we get closer to the top, I hear water. Harley reaches the top and turns back to me smiling. “There's a waterfall.”

I book it the rest of the way up the hill and look over the beautiful view. The tall waterfall is running into a large swimming hole, and the space is surrounded by trees. I turn to him with a big smile. “I think we need to go swimming.”

His lips tip up into a cute lopsided smile. “I think we do.”

We head down the other side of the hill towards the water. I lift my shirt over my head, dropping it onto a rock and kick my shoes off. Harley does the same, and I stop for a moment as I watch him shed his clothes down to his boxers. I let my eyes roam over his body and feel my heart breaking as I take in his leaner figure. It hurt to see him going through all that stress, and seeing the effects of it all now are just as painful. He turns to face me, and I quickly drop my eyes to my hands as I take off my pants.

“It looks pretty deep,” he says, walking over to a large rock at the edge of the water and stepping onto it.

I toss my pants onto the pile of our clothes and walk over to join him, peering into the water. “It does,” I agree. I look around the edge of the water. “I think we can get in over-”

Harley jumps and my heart damn near fucking explodes.

I stand there, frozen, as the water splashes up around him and he goes under.

It feels like an eternity before his head breaches the surface, with a huge smile. “It feels nice.”

“*Nice!?*” I stare back at him. “How did you know you weren’t going to jump onto a sharp rock or something and break your fucking legs??”

He laughs. *Laughs*. “I could see it was deep.”

I shake my head and take a deep breath. *God fucking help me*.

“Jump.” He looks up at me on the rock as he treads water.

I take another deep breath and shake my head at him. But I jump anyway. The cool water envelops me, and he’s right. It feels amazing. As I surface, Harley is still smiling while he watches me. And that’s the best feeling of all.

I smile back at him and shake my head again. “Ok, yeah, it feels nice.”

His smile widens and he gestures to the waterfall with his head. “Want to go check it out?”

“Fuck yeah.” I duck under the water and start swimming towards it. I feel him beside me, and I jump on his back as I rise to the surface. He laughs, and I hang onto his shoulders as he continues swimming, pulling me along.

We stop in front of the waterfall and look up at it, letting it spray us. Harley motions to go around it, so we swim to the edge of the water and climb up on the rocks. I lead us behind the waterfall to sit on the big rocks and watch the water falling down in front of us, the loud roar taking over the small space.

Suddenly, Harley turns to face me. “I will do anything, and everything we need to do to fight this.”

I stare back at him, surprised by this energy radiating off him. He looks determined, and bright. All the life that was



sucked out of him over the past couple months is back, and then some.

“I’m in, 100%,” he says. “I want this life with you. I want to live here in the mountains, swim under a waterfall every summer and have our goats. I want all of our dreams to come true. I need this for us. Whatever we have to go through to get there will be worth it, because you’re all that matters to me. I will do anything we need to do to have this life.”

I take in a big breath, at a loss for words. I stay silent for a moment as I look into his eyes. Eventually, I smile at him and he returns it. “I will fight anything for you, Harley.”

He leans forward as I pull him into me, pressing my lips to his. His lips part, and I’m ravenous for him. I pull him even closer towards me, needing every inch of his skin against mine. He swings his leg over me, straddling me on the large rock we’re sitting on. As my hands fall down to his ass, I deepen our kiss, pulling him against me so he’s as close as possible. He gently rocks his hips, and I’m hard in an instant.

“Fuck, Harley...” I murmur into his mouth, and he groans softly. He kisses down my jaw and to my neck, nibbling under my ear as he continues to rock his hard cock against mine through our wet boxers. My hands are roaming his body, my fingers tangling in his wet hair as he continues to kiss up and down my neck, driving me absolutely wild.

“Stand up,” he says as he pulls back from me and stands. I immediately do as I’m told, as right now, I need everything he is going to give me. He drops to his knees and pulls my boxers down to free my cock, a hungry look on his face. “Fuck my mouth.”

A rush of air escapes me. “*Fuck,*” I mutter as he looks up at me.

His eyes are sparkling with excitement and desire. I sink my fingers into his hair and guide my cock to his lips. He opens, and keeps his eyes on mine while he takes me in.

“Oh my god...” I murmur as the perfect feeling of his hot mouth on me takes over all of my senses.

I grip his hair tighter, while his hands reach around to my ass. He gently pulls me towards him, encouraging me to do exactly what he told me to do. I thrust into his mouth, and he briefly closes his eyes, moaning around my cock. As I continue thrusting, and keeping a firm grasp on his hair, he looks up at me with a feral look in his eyes. He likes it rough, and if he wants me to fuck his mouth, I gladly will. And while his mouth feels fucking fantastic wrapped around my cock, I need it to do something else right now.

I yank his head back off my dick, pulling his hair so he looks up at me. I hold him there, staring down at him, waiting for him to do what he needs to do.

The corner of his mouth quirks up. “You want something, baby?”

I chew my bottom lip and continue looking down at him on his knees, his head tilted back as I pull his hair.

“You’re doing such a good job fucking my face, but we both need more, don’t we?” he says in a low, sultry voice.

My breathing quickens, and I pull his head back even more.

He winces, then smiles. “You’re not going to come until I say you can.” He drops his hand to his dick and starts stroking himself. “And when I let you come, you’ll make a mess of me like a good boy.”

I forcefully pull his head towards me and sink my cock into his mouth again, right to the back of his throat. He gags and his eyes move back up to mine. But I see the heat in them. He wants even more. I continue to thrust into his mouth and throat while he greedily takes me, and he continues stroking his own cock while his other hand grips my thigh.

I groan and stutter in my thrusting, as I feel myself getting close. Harley squeezes my thigh, staring up at me. He sucks me hard, flicking his tongue on my sensitive tip and slowly moving up and down my hard length.

“Oh fuck, Harley...” I tip my head back and loosen my grip on his hair, letting my hand fall to his shoulder.

He moans around my cock, and I look back down to see him increasing his pace on his own dick. He pulls back so he can say, “Fuck it, Ezra. Come.” He wraps his free hand around my cock and pumps me while he continues stroking himself. “Come all over me.”

“Holy fuck,” I moan while he brings me to the edge. My balls tighten, and I explode with an overwhelming pleasure that courses through me. My legs feel weak and my whole body trembles as I shoot cum onto his chest. He leans in to wrap his lips around my cock, lapping up the rest of my cum while his eyes flutter and he comes in his hand.

I look down at him as he lets out a deep sigh, coming down from his high. I smile as he falls back onto his butt on the rocks, and glances up at me with a soft, “Wow.”

I laugh. “Yeah, wow.” I kneel down in front of him and kiss his lips, tasting myself on him. “And we have five more days of that.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

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*Harley*

“AND THIS WILL BE MY ROOM!” Lulu pushes open the door to the second bedroom in the apartment she signed the lease for yesterday with Hannah. I look around the room and smile. It’s pretty big, with a large window on the far wall. The apartment is on the top floor of an older home in Collegetown, and it’s perfect for them.

“I love it.” I smile as Lulu heads into the room and opens up a closet, gesturing to it dramatically. I laugh as I peer inside it, and she mouths, “*walk-in closet.*”

“We were super lucky to find this one. It was the last one on our list and had just come up because the people who were going to take it backed out last minute. We signed for it on the spot. And good thing, because everything else was crap.” Lulu beams around her room, and I can’t help but watch her with a big smile. She deserves this. I’m so happy she is finally able to start her degree, and that she found such a good friend in Hannah. They are going to have the best time here this year. And while I’m sad I’m not going to be here to be a part of it with her, at least I will be able to see her more now. Since she’s now a student, and not working, she is going to be able to come out and visit us on tour more often.

“I’m happy for you, Lu,” I say as she turns back to me. “You deserve all of this.”

She smiles and walks towards me, wrapping her arms around my waist and resting her head on my chest. “Thanks, Har.” She stays there for a moment until there is a knock on the door. She lifts her head and smiles. “Pizza’s here.”

I chuckle as she skips out of the room to answer the door. I stand in the middle of Lulu's new bedroom and look around the empty space. She is moving her stuff in next week as she plans to spend the summer here with Hannah. She just finished her job last week and is looking forward to a summer off. And to visit us in Europe, which we are all really excited for.

Lulu comes back into the room with a pizza box and drops onto the floor. I sit with her as she opens the box, and the delicious smell fills the space. I smile yet again, as I'm reminded of all the times we used to have pizza on the floor in her room back in Lyons. I'm happy that some things never change, and this is exactly the familiarity I have been missing and need right now.

We each take a slice and Lulu fills me in on what classes she will be taking this year. It sounds intense, as she is aiming to complete her bachelors in three years before going into Physiotherapy. "So, I'll be taking an extra course for each semester this year, and I think next year will be even more. I have the option of doing some coursework over the summer next year as well," she says around a bite of pizza.

"That sounds insane. You're going to have the time for that?" I ask, shaking my head slightly. Girl is ambitious and I know she's capable, but damn.

She shrugs. "I'll make the time."

I snort a laugh. "That easy, huh?"

She throws a piece of pepperoni at me, which I catch and toss into my mouth.

"So," I glance around the room again. "Where is everything going?"

She sits up straighter and points to the window. "Bed is going under the window." She then points to the opposite wall. "Desk there, dresser there..." she continues pointing and naming off where all her furniture is going, and I chuckle. Of course, she already has everything planned out.

I just sit there, smiling at her.

She eventually presses her lips together on a smile and meets my eyes. “What?” she asks.

“I just love seeing you happy,” I say.

She smiles widely and reaches across the pizza box to grab my hand. “Ditto.”

I look down at our hands and sigh. “I feel like I owe you a bit of an apology, Lu.”

She whips her hand back from mine and holds her finger up. “No. Nu-uh. Don’t you dare, Harley.”

I chuckle lightly. “Just, let me do it and then I’ll shut up.”

She rolls her eyes and waves her hand towards me in a motion for me to get on with it, clearly showing her displeasure.

I set my pizza down in the box and look at her, smiling softly. “You’re the best, you know that right?”

She levels me with a look. “Obviously.” Her mouth tilts up in a cheeky smile.

I huff a laugh. “You’ve helped me through a lot. Like... more than I think you know.” I swallow and shift my weight on the floor. “And I feel like I’ve taken more from you than I’ve given. I’ve been a mess every time we’ve spoken recently. And I know I haven’t been the best friend to you. I’m going to change that.”

Her eyes soften as she watches me, but she doesn’t say anything. She lets me continue, even though I know she has a lot to say about this.

“Ezra and I spoke about it yesterday... about what Callum said, and that we may actually have a way out of this. But, even if we don’t, I know I have work to do. To be better and manage all of this stress. I know what you’ll say to this because Ezra already said it, but I feel like... *have* felt like... too much. I know I have issues, and I feel bad that everyone has to deal with them, and me.” Lulu opens her mouth to say something, but I hold my hand up to stop her. “But things are going to change. Here, at home, I’m happy. I have a family I

love, and I know what I want out of life now. I've been feeling lost, and stuck. But now, even if we go back to the exact same thing we've been dealing with over the past couple months... I know what's on the other side. I want this life. I want happiness, positivity, fun and freedom. I'm willing to work through whatever we need to, but I'm also feeling hope that we don't have to." I sigh and shake my head slightly. "I guess what I'm trying to say is... I love you, Lulu. You've been the best friend I could have ever asked for, and I just want you to know that you've helped me. I know I've been extra heavy recently, and I want to thank you for everything. And from now on, I'm going to try really hard to be better... for you, and me."

Lulu doesn't say anything as she sets her pizza down. She raises her eyes to mine again and they are filled with tears. "I don't think I've ever been more proud of you, Harley." She smiles and a tear tracks down her cheek. "You know you don't owe me an apology, or to say anything about any of this. But I am so happy to hear that you are feeling better about it all. And you know I'm always here for you. Always."

I smile, and Lulu launches herself across the pizza box and into my lap. She wraps her arms around my neck and I laugh as I squeeze her tight.

"I love you too, Harley," she murmurs against me. She then pulls back and moves to sit beside me on the floor. She observes me for a moment, and I can see the wheels turning. "Can I ask you something?"

I nod, knowing where this is going. And I'm ready. I'm ok with it.

"What do you want to do about your dad?"

I bite the inside of my cheek. I've been thinking about this a lot, even though I haven't spoken about it with anyone. Not even Ezra. I think everyone knows that it's not something I will be able to discuss easily, and that this time at home is needed to relax, rather than work through this hard stuff. But, Lulu knows. She knows we need to talk about it, and she knows she's the one to do it. And after yesterday with Ezra, I

do feel ready to face it. It's another obstacle I need to get over to reach the life I want. But I still can't help the anxious reaction I have, as the memory of him makes its way to the forefront of my thoughts. My heart starts racing, and my palms turn clammy.

I feel Lulu's hand on my arm, and I turn my head to face her. "Breathe," she says.

I blow out a big breath and nod. "Yeah..." I rub my forehead and breathe again. "I just wish he'd fuck off."

"I mean... he will." Lulu shrugs and laces her fingers in mine.

"And what makes you so sure of that?" I ask as I look down at her hand in mine.

"Well... what really can he do?" she asks. "He made a huge mistake by calling you."

My heart is still pounding as I think back to his phone call. I can barely remember what he even said, but I vividly remember how I felt when I heard his voice come through the phone.

"Harley." I look up to Lulu and she smiles at me. "It's ok if you don't want to talk about this now."

I immediately shake my head. "No." I keep my grip on her hand and keep my eyes on hers, letting her presence keep me grounded. "Why do you think it was a mistake?"

"Because there's nothing he can do. He signed an NDA and has a no contact order. He already breached one of those, and you could easily fuck him over if you choose to do something about it." She squeezes my hand. "But I say... let him hang himself."

I swallow hard. "Meaning?"

"He already fucked up by contacting you. You don't have to pay him, and he can't admit to anyone that he did call you. And if he reaches out again? Then he's even more fucked." She shrugs a shoulder again. "There is literally nothing he can do to make you do this. His threat against Ezra also doesn't



hold any weight. What would he do, ask him for money? Then he also says no.”

I nod as I think this over. I know she’s right. I could do something about it now since he reached out to me when he has a no contact order, but... I just don’t feel like I have it in me. I don’t even know what that would look like, besides talking to Holly. But then, does it just become a bigger issue when I could just ignore it and hope he goes away? What Lulu is saying does make sense. If he was to do anything else, then he’s fucking himself over, not me.

I sigh and tilt my head back, looking up to the ceiling. “It’s hard to just sit and wait. Not knowing what he’s going to do.”

“Yeah,” she agrees. “But in the meantime, I think you maybe get a new number and only give that one out to your friends and family. And... if he’s going to contact you again, let him. It’s only going to end badly for him.”

I lower my head to see her watching me carefully. I smile at her, and a look of surprise flashes across her face. I laugh. “You expected me to freak out.”

She raises her eyebrows, but then slowly nods. “Well... maybe. Yeah.” She chuckles. “This really is a new you.”

I laugh softly and look down, her hand still in mine. “I’m working on it.”

“I’m impressed. And really fucking proud.” As I raise my eyes again, she is beaming at me. She suddenly stands and pulls me to my feet. “Let’s go outside in the sunshine, Sunshine. I haven’t shown you the backyard yet.”

As she leads me down the stairs and into the backyard, I realize that I’m proud of myself as well. I may have felt some anxiety while talking about him, but I didn’t let it take over. And I was able to let it all go. I blow out a big breath, and it feels good. It feels like a huge release. I can do this... I can get through this.

“Ta-da!” Lulu pushes the back door open to a small, quiet, fenced-in backyard. There’s a small deck, just big enough for a

small table and chairs, and a grassy area with what looks like an overgrown garden.

I look around, smiling at how smitten she is with the space. “It’s great. Are you going to garden?”

“Of course I am,” she says, hands on her hips as she stares down at the mess of weeds and rocks. “I just need to learn how first.”

I laugh and reach down to pull some weeds from the soil. It actually looks like it could be in decent shape underneath it all. “Well, let’s clean it up.”

She claps her hands together. “Oh my god, yes! Ok, so I think I need to grow tomatoes, lettuce, kale, carrots...” she starts listing off a grocery list of vegetables as we pull weeds out of the small garden. I just smile as I listen to her. Sounds like she’s going to need a lot more space.

We’re on our knees in front of the soil as we clean it up and rearrange the rocks to create a wall around the garden. My phone buzzes with a text, and as I have my hands in the soil, I motion to my pocket for Lulu to answer. She pulls it out and laughs.

“Let me guess...” I smirk.

“You would guess correctly.” She turns the phone towards me so I can read the text.

**Ollie**

I need an update Harley. I haven't heard from you in two hours.

Lulu smiles at me and starts tapping away at my phone. I narrow my eyes at her. “What are you saying...”

She waves her hand at me as she settles onto her butt in the grass, letting me continue *our* work on *her* garden. I shake my head, continuing to pull weeds and level soil until Lulu starts laughing again.

“What...” I look at her over my shoulder.

She wipes at her eyes through her giggles and turns my phone to me so I can read their conversation. Lulu has been texting him, pretending to be me.

'Sup man. \*waving hand emoji\*

Just hanging out with my best friend and loving life dude

**Ollie**

\*astonished face emoji\*

Harley I... I'm so fucking proud right now I don't even know what to say

\*upside down face emoji\*

Lulu says hi \*waving hand emoji\*

OH MY GOD

HI LULU, I miss you so much, I am so jealous you are together right now. \*crying face emoji\*

But also so happy. I'm conflicted. And Harley. Your emoji game is ON POINT.

I don't think I've ever felt a pride quite like this before

\*light blue heart emoji\*

I shake my head at Lulu as the bubbles start dancing to indicate Ollie is typing back. "I'm never going to recover from this."

She laughs and taps out another reply to Ollie. “Yeah, you definitely won’t.”

“Harley!!!”

Our heads both follow the sound of the voice, which is coming from the other side of the fence. Suddenly Julia’s head pops over the fence. “Hi, baby! I was wondering when you were going to come see me!”

Lulu stands up. “Julia... the fuck?”

Julia smiles widely at me, ignoring Lulu. “I live right here.” She points to the house behind her. “I just moved in this week!”

Lulu turns to me with wide eyes. “And I thought this place was perfect....”

I stand up as well and rub the dirt off my hands. “Um... hi...” I back up a step as it looks like Julia is about to climb the fence. This girl just can’t take a hint. Or even a direct *no*. Ever since we first met at Battle of the Bands, she has been desperate, and I don’t get it. I straight up told her I’m gay and with Ezra but she still believes we have a chance.

“You coming over after you’re finished with...” she gives Lulu a once over with a look of disgust, “whatever this is?”

I narrow my eyes at Julia. “No. I’m not.”

Julia stares back at me and then smiles. “Ok, I’ll come over there then.”

Lulu whips around to face her. “Oh, like hell you are.”

Julia hops down from the fence and disappears.

“Is... is she actually coming over here?” I turn to Lulu with wide eyes.

She shakes her head and grabs my hand. “We better go then.”

We run to my bike, quickly pulling our helmets on. I start it up and she slips on the back, winding her arms around my waist. Just as Julia turns the corner on foot, I rev the engine and take off down the road.

She starts waving her arms, yelling at me to wait for her. Lulu laughs and waves back at her. "Great to see you Julia!"

I laugh as we continue down the street, no destination in mind. But it feels good. To just have fun, laugh and be completely carefree for the first time in a long time.

And I absolutely love it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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*Emma*

“OK, SO SEE WHAT I MEAN?” Emma dramatically points to the TV screen. “Ironman is the best Avenger.”

I roll my eyes. “Your debate was with Ollie, not me.” I throw a chip into my mouth and watch The Avengers battle it out. Thor then appears, wiping out half the battlefield. I turn my head to Emma with raised eyebrows. “But I’m on his side.”

“Oh, fuck off.” She shakes her head and settles back in her chair, looking pouty.

I chuckle and lay back on the couch. Harley is out with Lulu, Dad is at work and Mom just went out for a meeting for one of her charities. With just Emma and I at home, I sadly realize that it’s been a while since I’ve had some time with her to just hang out. She lived at home when she went to Cornell so we hung out a lot, and we’ve always been close. But after she left to attend Columbia, and then the insanity that my life turned out to be, we haven’t had any time for just us in almost a year. She heads back to school tomorrow, so I’m happy we got this chance to have a quiet afternoon together.

I glance over at her, and she is smiling down at her phone while she taps away at it. I smirk at her. “And who’s that?”

Her eyes fly up to meet mine and she locks her phone. “What?”

My eyebrows shoot up. *Oh, interesting.* I smile widely, gesturing to her phone with my chin. “Seeing someone?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “Just texting a friend.”

“A *friend*. I see.” I chuckle. “Is that why you’re going back to school a day earlier than you need to?”

Emma narrows her eyes at me and then glances down at her phone as it lights up. She quickly looks back up to me and sighs. “I am going back a day earlier than I need to... but that’s not why.” She adjusts herself in the oversized chair so she’s sitting cross legged, facing me.

I sit up as well. “What’s going on?”

“So...” She looks down at her phone again as it continues to light up. *Damn, this guy must really be into her.* “I’ve been thinking about everything. With your contract...” She pauses for a moment, pursing her lips as she thinks. “I don’t want to get hopes up or anything, but I just want to find out some *what ifs*. I have a contract law professor, who is fucking brilliant. We know your contract is rock solid, which sucks... but if what we think is happening *is* happening, I can gather some information on what that would look like for you. As it more than likely means termination of the contract.”

I stare back at her, processing this information. I nod slowly. “Yeah... I mean, I would assume so, if what Cal said is true and we can prove it...”

She nods as well. “But then, what does it all mean for you? I have a lot of questions about your contract even if you can terminate. I won’t bother getting into them now, because I don’t want you to worry about anything until we know it’s even a thing. I’m just being extra cautious, and getting all the information we can. And my professor would be a good starting point, as she’s highly sought after.”

I quickly shake my head. “You can’t tell her-”

“I won’t.” Emma holds a hand up to stop me. “And I’m not even going to say who you are, who the contract is with, nothing like that. She won’t know a thing about you guys, I’m just pulling out a few clauses and will say it’s part of my independent study or something like that.”

I blow out a breath and nod. “Ok.”

“But...” she eyes me carefully, “I guess I do want to ask one thing.”

“What’s that?” I ask tentatively.

“What do you think you’ll *want* to do? Let’s say you get out of this contract, and away from William and Capture Music.” Emma stands up and moves over to the couch I’m on, sitting beside me. “Do you want to continue in this career?”

I rub my thumb over my bottom lip as I think on that. Honestly, I haven’t even considered what all of this would mean for our future, past getting out from under William. “I haven’t given it any thought.” I drop my hand and turn to look at Emma. “We all love creating and playing music. That part hasn’t changed for any of us, I don’t think. But the last thing I would want is for this whole situation to happen again.” I think back on how great everything seemed at first. When Capture Music first signed us, and they made us believe this life would be perfect. How do we even trust anyone now? I swallow hard and squeeze my eyes shut. “*Argh.*” I lean forward and rest my head in my hands.

Emma places her hand on my back. “I’m sorry, Ez. I didn’t mean to bring up any hard feelings, was just wondering.”

“No, no, it’s ok.” I lean back and smile softly at her. “It’s something we’ll need to figure out. Right now, though, I think all I can manage to consider is just getting out.”

“Of course.” Emma smiles back at me. “I’ll find out some info regardless, and we’ll have whatever we need for whatever you guys decide to do.”

I lean over and rest my head on her shoulder. “Thanks, Em.”

She rests her head on mine and wraps her arm around my shoulders. “Any time.”

Emma’s phone is lighting up and vibrating on her chair with a stream of incoming texts. I laugh and lift my head. “Alright, seriously, tell me about him.”

She clucks her tongue and stands up, heading over to her chair again. “Why do you assume it’s a romantic interest?”



“Because who texts anyone that much if they aren’t?” I tilt my head and give her a knowing look. *I will get to the bottom of this.*

Emma lifts her eyes to me as she pauses her typing. “Ollie?”

“Ok. Fair enough.” I chuckle. Speaking of Ollie, I haven’t responded yet to his thirteen texts from earlier this afternoon, which has probably tripled by now. I should really do that before he has a stroke or something.

But before I can pick up my phone, I hear the rumble of Harley’s motorcycle outside and my stomach flutters. I smile as I peer out the window to see him parking out front.

“Fucking adorable,” Emma mutters as I keep my eyes on him through the window.

“Shut up and keep texting your mystery dude,” I murmur through a smile.

Harley comes into the house and when he turns the corner into the living room I smile widely, opening my arms. He grins at me and crosses the room to fall down onto the couch with me.

“Have fun?” I ask, kissing his head as he nuzzles into me.

“We did.” He turns to look at the TV and smirks. “Debate still on?”

“No,” Emma says at the same time I say, “Yeah.”

Harley laughs and settles in against me as I spoon him on the couch. “Well, you’re all wrong anyway.”

We continue watching Marvel movies for the rest of the evening, still debating which Avenger is the best. We order take out and Emma and I make a fort in the living room like we used to when we were kids. We were both shocked to hear that Harley had never made a fort before, and the look of pure joy on his face when we nestled into our makeshift blanket fort between the couches was fucking adorable.

As we sit in our fort, eating greasy take out and watching superhero movies, I can’t wipe the smile off my face. I feel

like a kid again, as something so simple is bringing me so much joy. It may be silly... but it's also fucking perfect.



“Oh my god!!”

I laugh as Harley fake winces while he accepts a massive hug from Sarah, the owner of The Guitar Shop.

“You’re here! Oh my god!” Sarah pulls back and holds him at arm’s length, looking him up and down. “Famous rockstar Harley Scott, visiting the little people.” She shakes her head, tears forming in her eyes.

He scoffs through a smile. “You know it’s not like that at all.”

“Of course it is!” James comes around the front counter in the shop, placing a hand on his wife’s shoulder so that she releases Harley from another tight embrace.

I watch them with a smile as Harley hugs his former employers. These people gave Harley his chance at life outside of Lyons and were the first here in Ithaca to show him what family and love can look like. He often speaks about how much he owes them for his new start in life after leaving his dad, and... well, I guess I do too. He came to Ithaca because of the job here at The Guitar Shop, and if he had ended up anywhere else, I never would have met him. And I am *so* grateful I did.

“Ezra!” Sarah scoots over to me and wraps me in a hug.

“Nice to see you again.” I smile as she squeezes way too tight, close to popping a rib. She murmurs an apology as she eases up her hug and hangs on a little bit longer.

I glance over to Harley, and he looks like he is holding back some emotion. He was really excited to come see them today, and I’m glad we were able to. We thought we may miss them on this trip home as they were away for a bit. But luckily,

they came back into town today, on our last full day here. I had only met them a couple times before we left on tour, but each time they were warm and inviting, and it felt like I had known them forever. Except... they don't know Harley and I are together. I was actually surprised when Harley said he's not even sure they know he's gay.

“Come out back!” Sarah ushers us further into the shop as James heads to the door and locks it since they're now closed. “Away from prying eyes since you guys are so well known now.”

Harley chuckles and follows Sarah into the back room. He looks so happy, and I want desperately to reach out and touch him. I smile to myself as I settle onto a stool in the back room and wait. We spoke about what he wanted to do, and I'm already bursting with pride for him.

“So, tell us everything! How has tour been so far?” Sarah smiles between us, with so much excitement she looks like she's going to burst out in song and dance.

Harley sits on a stool beside me and casts a thoughtful glance at the desk behind him. There's a guitar sitting on it, and it looks like it's getting some work done to it. I watch Harley as he lets his eyes slide over it briefly before he turns back to Sarah and James. “Pretty awful, really.”

James chuckles, but when he realizes Harley is being serious, his face falls. “Wait, what?”

Harley shrugs his shoulders and reaches out to me, lacing his fingers in mine. “Yeah, our label doesn't like that we're together so it's a lot of hiding, lies and stress.” Harley smiles at me. “But hopefully this leg of the tour is a little different.”

Sarah and James are silent as they stare back at us, and I try to hide my smile. I did not expect Harley to share this news like this, and I fucking love it. He hadn't told them about us before as we were both nervous about letting anyone know due to our contract and what it would, literally, cost us. But Harley decided that he wanted to tell them on this visit because they are family to him, and honestly... I thought I might have to support him through it a bit. Guess not.

“Shut up!” Sarah stands up from her chair, looking between us. “Shut up, that is so fucking cute!”

James tips his head back on a laugh as Sarah clasps her hands over her mouth. “We’re happy for you guys,” he smiles at us. “But I’m sorry to hear things aren’t going so well for you.”

I squeeze Harley’s hand and smile. “Thank you. But, like Harley said, things are going to change.”

Sarah sits in her chair again and scoots it forward so her knees are almost touching ours. “Tell us everything. And I mean everything. Start from the day you met.”

We all laugh, and Harley starts in on our story. As I sit there with my hand in his, listening to him confidently share the details of his life he was once so scared to share, I’m overcome with so much love for him. As hard as it’s been since we’ve signed with Capture Music, and especially the last few months, he has still come so far. Not even a year ago, he couldn’t say the words. He had so much fear and anxiety to tell anyone who he truly was, and now he is proudly telling Sarah and James exactly who he is. Even when he’s been told relentlessly that it’s wrong.

I don’t know if I’ve ever been more proud of him than in this moment right here.



I run my fingers through Harley’s hair as we lay in bed, listening to The Beatles on Harley’s portable record player. We’ve been ending each day like this, putting on an album and just laying with each other while we listen.

Except this is our last night doing this, because tomorrow morning we leave for London. I wrap my arm around him tighter and sigh. He raises his head off my chest to look up at me. “You ok?”

I smile at him. “Yeah, baby. I’m good.”

He smiles back at me, but I see the effort it takes.

I push him so he's on his back, and I prop myself up on my elbow beside him. "How are you feeling?"

He looks up at me and hesitates for a moment before saying, "Anxious."

I nod, resting my hand over his chest to feel his heart beating. "Yeah," I say quietly. "Me too."

Worry flashes through his eyes, so I shake my head and smile. "It's alright, babe. I think it's expected for us both to be nervous. We'll be ok."

"Hm." His eyes follow his hand as he runs it along my arm. "Let's... let's just not think about it for tonight. I don't want to give them any more of our time than we need to."

Before I even realize what I'm doing, I'm laying a fierce kiss on him. He has come so far in just a week, and I'm overcome with so much happiness. Seeing him content and relaxed, and able to manage his anxiety has been nothing short of amazing. I know we'll continue to have some hard times on the road regardless of how we approach this, but he's right. Right now, this is our time. And we're not giving them even one second of it.

Harley deepens our kiss as he grasps the side of my head, and I move on top of him. Our kiss becomes desperate, and *I* feel desperate. I want every inch of him, every part of him, and I can't get enough. Our hands explore our bodies as we grind against each other, and we stay locked in a heated kiss. Eventually, I begin to kiss my way down his chest, shoving his sweatpants over his hips.

His soft moans join the sounds of The Beatles in the room as I run my tongue up his hard length, and my cock jumps at the delicious sound. As I take him in my mouth, exhilaration rushes through me. It doesn't matter how many times we have done this, I still feel intense excitement whenever I can get this close to him and give him such an intimate part of myself. As I eagerly suck him, he reaches down and takes my hand. My heart skips a beat as I raise my eyes to see him opening the

lube bottle and pouring some on my fingers. I release him from my mouth and immediately sit up so he can kick his sweatpants off. The second they are off, I take his cock back into my mouth and lower my fingers to his ass.

Harley widens his legs and groans as I swirl my fingers around his hole and take him deeper to the back of my throat. I can barely contain myself as his hands find their way to my head again, encouraging me to take him harder, faster. And as I slide a finger inside him, the feral groan that comes from him almost sends me over the fucking edge.

“Fuck, Harley,” I pant as I pull back to look down at my finger in his ass. He moves his hips to grind against my hand, and I happily oblige his subtle demand by putting another finger in.

“Oh my god.” Harley grips my arm tight, tilting his head back as he writhes under my touch. I groan at the gorgeous sight, curling my fingers to hit that perfect spot inside him and watching as he squirms, pants and grunts. I’m so hard it hurts, but I can’t stop, and I can’t look away from him as his cock leaks onto his abs and he grips my arm so tight I’m going to bruise. And before long, I can’t fucking take it anymore.

I sit up and shove my sweatpants off. Harley looks down at me with a flushed face, panting hard as I lube up my cock. He lifts his hips, and I practically fucking growl as I line myself up to his hole, and push inside him.

“Yes, fuck, Ezra. Fuck me,” Harley pants as he wraps a hand around his cock and his legs around my waist. A breath escapes me in a rush as I look down to watch my cock sliding in and out of him while he strokes himself in time with my thrusts.

“Oh my god,” I mutter, running my hand down his thigh and hooking it under his knee. I lift it as I lean over him, desperately wanting to be even closer to him. I want more, *need* more. His tongue immediately finds mine as our lips meet, and we fall into a messy, hot kiss full of lust and love.

His moans urge me to increase my pace, pulling even more from him. “You feel so fucking good, baby,” he says against

my lips.

A rush of heat runs through me at his words, and I rest my forehead against his as I try to hold back. I never want this to end, but he feels so good and I am getting closer and closer.

His hand lands on my chest and he pushes me back up to kneeling. “Fuck me,” he says in a low, dangerous voice. “Make us both come.”

My breath catches in my chest at his demand, but I do what I’m told and grab his knees, thrusting into him hard. He grunts and reaches down to grasp his cock, but I bat his hand away. His eyes flash with the promise of a reprimand later, which I’m very much looking forward to. But for now, I’m running this show. He told me to make us both come, and I take my job *very* seriously.

I wrap my hand around his cock and narrow my eyes at him with a smirk. “Mine.”

The corner of his mouth tilts up in a sly smile as he raises his hands above his head, grabbing the headboard. “Then show me what you got.”

*Well, fuck.* “Gladly,” I pant, as I pull back and slam into him, his hands gripping the headboard tight and his face contorting with pleasure. Our moans get louder as I fuck him hard, and damn, I hope no one is home right now. But it doesn’t take long before I feel the tingles rising up my legs and my release rushes to the surface. Harley groans loudly as I pump his cock in time with my thrusts, and I feel him pulsing as he comes.

“Fuck, f... fuck, fu-ck,” he stutters and grunts as his cock shoots cum all over his abs. I stare down at him as he trembles through quick, heavy breaths, each of my thrusts seeming to pull more and more cum from him.

The sight alone is enough to tip me over the edge. I fall over him, trying to keep myself up with shaking arms. The pleasure rolls over me while I close my eyes, feeling Harley’s hands run up my sides as I come in his ass.

When I open my eyes, Harley smiles and runs a hand up his abs. My lips part immediately for him to slide his fingers into my mouth. I keep my eyes on his as I lick every last bit of him from his fingers, then lower myself down to push my tongue past his lips. His soft moan as he tastes himself on my lips is damn near enough to get me going again.

A content sigh leaves my body as I roll over to lay beside him, resting my head on his chest. The Beatles are still playing, but I close my eyes as I focus on the sounds of Harley's breath, the feeling of his skin against mine, and the taste of him still on my tongue. I am completely consumed by him as he fills every single one of my senses, and my overwhelming love for him fills my entire heart.



## CHAPTER SIX

---

*Harley*

I FEEL like I'm going to be sick.

I shift in my seat and look out the tiny airplane window as we speed down the runway for takeoff. As the plane lifts into the air, my eyes stay glued to the city I call home while it disappears beneath the clouds. My leg starts shaking, and I bite my thumbnail as the plane rises higher into the air. I suddenly feel overcome with the intense urge to get off this plane. I'm not afraid of flying... but I'm afraid of our destination.

My breaths are shallow in my chest as the white noise inside the plane is roaring in my ears. My thoughts are screaming at me, but I can't make out anything they're saying. I feel myself fall into the spiral, and even though I'm aware of it, I can't seem to stop it.

A warm hand covers mine, and I lift my head to the seat across the aisle from me. Almost instantly, my thoughts clear and my breath returns. He smiles at me, and everything falls right back into place.

Ezra squeezes my hand as he reaches across the aisle. "I got you, babe," he says in a low voice.

I give him a soft smile and squeeze his hand back. "I know."

He reluctantly takes his hand back as his eyes sweep across the cabin. I sigh and try to stay calm. I hate that we are back to hiding, constantly aware of our surroundings and who could be watching... I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I

just want Ezra beside me. We're flying first class, which is great, I guess. But it means we have private, individual seats and I can't have him close to me. As we continue to ascend into the air, I keep my eyes closed and lean my head back against the seat, trying hard to just calm down.

Eventually, a ding sounds as the seatbelt sign turns off. I open my eyes to see Ezra immediately standing from his seat. He smiles as he stands before me. "Up."

"Huh?" I ask, as I stand up anyway.

A flight attendant approaches us. "Would you like your beds made?"

I look at Ezra, still confused.

"Please. We have some song writing to do, so it will be easier to sit together in one of our pods." He smiles his naturally charming smile at her, and she fucking *blushes*.

"Of course," she flashes a flirty smile back to him and moves forward to convert my seat into a bed. I turn to Ezra with eyebrows raised. He shrugs with a light chuckle.

Once the flight attendant has made up my bed, she moves to do the same to Ezra's. As soon as she's out of earshot, I lean into him. "You looking for trouble?"

His eyes sparkle as they move down my chest and back up to my eyes. "Always."

"Alright, there you go," the flight attendant smiles at us. Or... at Ezra. "Please let me know if you need anything else."

"We're good, thank you," I say, a bit of a harshness to my tone. I immediately regret it and put on a smile for her. But she's still making eyes at my boyfriend, so never mind. I take my smile back.

"Thank you." Ezra nods at her and gestures for me to enter my pod. I slip onto the bed and Ezra follows. He slides the partition closed so we have a bit of privacy and settles on the bed, leaning against the wall opposite me. I just stare at him.

He chuckles. "Jealous, baby?"

“You know what that charming as fuck smile does to people...” I say, watching him as he flashes that exact smile right back at me.

“Hm. I don’t think I do... you might have to show me.” His smile morphs into a playful one and I roll my eyes at him. He reaches out for my hand. “You know I only have eyes and smiles for you, babe.”

I lace my fingers in his. “I know.” My eyes slide over the partition, which isn’t high enough to completely block us from view. “I just don’t like it when people look at you like that, and I can’t even let them know you’re mine.”

His features soften and he nods. “I know the feeling.”

I glance around the cabin, suddenly aware that someone could hear us. Ezra squeezes my hand to bring my attention back to him. “We’re good,” he says in a low voice. I know he’s right, we’re talking low, we’re in a private pod, and we can’t hear anyone either. But I feel myself moving back into hyper-vigilance mode, and my anxiety is ramping up again. From the second we woke up early this morning, it’s been growing at a steady pace. And I can’t even begin to describe how much I hate that feeling.

Ezra keeps his hand in mine and says, “We have tonight to just relax in the hotel. It will be nice to catch up with Callum and Ollie, Olivia, Luna, Ian, Jack...”

I swallow and nod. I know he’s trying to help by getting me to think of the positives of tour. But I also think I need to continue what I started over this week at home. Which is facing this head on and working towards an end to all of this.

I raise my eyes to Ezra. “I want to hear what Callum has to say. I need it. I can’t let myself fall back into this, I need to know this is going to end and how we are doing this.”

Ezra’s eyebrows raise in surprise.

I take a deep breath. “The unknown brings the most anxiety.”

He nods and smiles softly at me. “Ok. Just name the time and-”

“Tonight,” I say. “The sooner we can get back to living the life we had this past week, the better.”

Ezra looks thoughtful for a moment while he nods slowly.

“What?” I ask, tentatively.

He seems to snap back to attention. “Oh, sorry, yes. Tonight, absolutely.” He blows out a breath. “So, I was just thinking about something Emma asked me. It’s something we all need to talk about, but I want to ask you first. If we do get out of this... do you still want to be Send Help?”

I drop my eyes to our hands. The thought hasn’t even crossed my mind. What *does* come after this? If we get out from under William, what does that even mean? Do we continue to do this under someone else and just hope they don’t fuck us over like he did? What if it all happens again, or what if it’s even worse? Or, what if it all works out? What if we choose not to, and we pass up an opportunity for this job to be exactly what we’ve wanted? What if-

“Harley.”

I slowly raise my eyes to Ezra’s. He slides his other hand onto my thigh, knowing I need as much of his presence as I can get to stay grounded and keep from freaking out right now. “Just talk, babe. What are you thinking?”

I shake my head. “I honestly don’t know.” I tighten my grip on his hand, as I can feel mine shaking. “Everything has been so hard... I don’t want to do it again. Even just being on this plane, going back...”

“I know,” he says in a soft voice. “It’s ok to feel anxious. I felt it too when Em asked me. And it’s ok if we’re not ready for that question yet.”

“We need to answer it at some point,” I mutter, looking down at his thumb tracing patterns on my thigh.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “But not now. We have time to figure that out. We’ll talk with Callum and Ollie tonight and start there. We can cross that bridge when we get to it. Ok?”

I look up again and nod. His gorgeous blue eyes are bright, even in this dim airplane cabin. I look between them, hoping they stay bright this time.

Ezra then smiles and reaches into the front pocket of my bag, pulling out a deck of cards.

“How did those...?” I ask, confused as I didn’t put them there.

He shrugs. “I shoved them in your bag as mine was full. You’re a light packer, you had the space.”

I chuckle, watching as he starts shuffling the cards. “So, no song writing?” I ask with a smirk.

Ezra laughs. “It was a ruse.” He winks at me, and then starts dealing out the cards on the bed between us. “Now, I’m sure you know this, but legend has it... I’m a master at Go Fish.”

I huff a laugh. “Yeah? Well, I’m undefeated in Crazy 8’s. Bring it, Larson.”

“Brought, Scott.” He tilts his head in an attempt to look menacing, but it doesn’t work. He’s adorable.

We spend what feels like hours playing cards as we get closer and closer to London. I can’t help it as my eyes keep finding the screen that shows us how much time we have left in the air. As that number gets smaller, my heart beats faster. I’m trying really hard to stay in this moment and just focus on having fun with Ezra, but my mind is taking me in a million different directions. The what ifs, the shoulds, the I can’ts... I desperately want to go home. And I feel like I am resigning to my fate. Pulled by this force to a place I don’t want to go. But I need to keep fighting. For this man sitting directly across from me. For my family, and for myself. This time, we need to win.



“I won.”

I roll my eyes and sit on Callum’s bed in his hotel room. “No, I actually won more games than you did, so that means I won. Even Go Fish.”

Ezra points a finger at me. “Not true.”

Callum holds up a hand and looks between us. “What was your scoring system? Brackets? Rounds with points? I can take a look at your log and see if we can clear this up.”

Ezra and I both stare back at him. He’s dead serious.

“We... we don’t have a log...” I say slowly.

A look of intense shock crosses his face, and I almost feel like I should get up and hug him to make him feel better. “Then... how are we going to know?” he glances between us with wide eyes.

“We won’t,” Ezra says gently. “And we’re ok with it.”

“Yeah, it’s all good... it’s just for fun.” I smile at him, but he still looks distraught. “But next time, we will definitely keep a log.”

Callum nods and mutters, almost to himself, “Ok. Ok, that’s good.”

Ezra tries to hide a smile as he meets my eyes, and I do the same. Dude loves his numbers.

We got to the hotel in London about an hour ago, and after dropping off our stuff in our room we made our way to Callum’s. Ollie isn’t here yet, but he should be pretty soon.

“So, tell me more about your time at home.” Callum sits on the bed beside me, and Ezra takes the desk chair. “It’s good to see you happy, bud.” He pats my shoulder and smiles at me.

I smile back. “Thanks. I think it’s exactly what we needed.” I look to Ezra, and his smiling face gives me the courage to just go for it. “But I’m ready. I want to talk about what you found out, and I want to make a plan.”

Callum nods slowly, giving me an assessing look. “Are you su-”

*THUMP.*

Ezra bursts out laughing, while Callum closes his eyes and sighs. “Why does he always assume our doors are open...”

Ezra stands up to open the door and I laugh. “Shouldn’t he have a key?”

The second Ezra opens the door, Ollie pounces on him. “OH MY GOD. EZRA. IT’S YOU.”

Ezra stumbles backwards as Ollie hangs onto him. “Um, yes, it’s me.”

Jack carries Ollie’s suitcase into the room, hiding a small smirk. As head of security, he’s escorted each of us to our rooms, and as always, he’s stoic and silent. But Ollie’s antics can usually get some sort of reaction out of him.

“I didn’t know you would be in here, oh my god, I thought I would see Callum first and then go find you and Harley, but OH MY GOD,” Ollie’s eyes land on me, and they’re glistening with tears, “you’re all here.”

I smile at him as both Callum and I move to stand up from the edge of the bed, but he crosses the room in record time and pounces, tackling us both so we land on the bed on our backs with Ollie on top of us. His arms wrap around each of our necks as he pulls us in close to him in a bone crushing hug. “You don’t even know how hard it was to be away from you guys.”

“Well, I think we actually do, Ol,” Callum chuckles. “You texted about every hour to tell us.”

I laugh and hug him back. “But we missed you too.”

“I never want us to ever be apart again,” he murmurs against my neck, and my heart drops. I think back to Ezra’s question on the plane. What happens to Send Help if we do get out of this? I mentally shake it off, remembering what Ezra said. We’ll get there when we get there.

But I hang on to Ollie a bit tighter. Because one thing I do know, is I never want to let any of these guys go. No matter what happens, they are my family.

Callum wiggles out from under Ollie, who then rolls off me into Callum's vacant spot. He lays on his side facing me, his hands clasped together under his cheek. "You ok?" he asks in a quiet voice, just for me.

I nod, smiling. "Yeah. I am."

He grins widely and I can't help but laugh. Even when Ollie is just being Ollie, he spreads joy. And I'm so happy to see that he is also back to his usual happy self.

"Have a good night, boys." Jack waves to us as he heads to the door.

Ollie's eyes widen and he sits upright, staring at him. "Jack." Jack stops and turns around to face him. "You're not going to hang out?"

Jack looks between us all and shakes his head, slowly saying, "No." Which is understandable. I don't think his idea of fun is hanging out with a group of 20-year-olds he is constantly having to manage.

Ollie nods seriously. "Ok, so tomorrow. I miss our hangs."

Callum gives me a quizzical look and I shrug. I didn't know they hung out.

But apparently Jack doesn't either because his brow furrows slightly and he hesitantly says, "Ok." He turns to the door again, and I don't miss the look of bewilderment on his face.

As Jack leaves, Ollie watches the door close. "Love that guy."

Ezra snorts a laugh and Ollie whips his head to him with a questioning look. Ezra just holds his hands up in surrender.

Callum heads over to the fridge and opens it, reaching inside to pull out a couple beers. "We can drink here legally. Anyone want one?"

Ollie jumps up with his hand in the air. "Me!"

Ezra smiles and holds out a hand. "Sure, I'll take one."



Callum looks to me in question, and I hesitate. I'm feeling ok... but knowing what we will soon be talking about, I don't know. I don't want to drink if I'm anxious. Suddenly, I'm caught off guard by a thought I've never had before. And it sends a jolt right to my core... an intense feeling of disappointment and fear. *It might be easier to manage with a drink.*

"No," I say forcefully and shake my head. "No."

Callum closes the fridge door and glances at Ezra.

Ezra leans forward and sets his beer on the desk. "You ok, babe?"

I rub a hand over my face. "Yeah... yeah, sorry..."

"Don't say sorry," Ezra says.

I sigh and look up to give him a soft smile.

He gets up to sit beside me on the bed, and Ollie sits on the other bed. Ezra places his hand on my back. "What's up?"

I look between Ezra, Callum and Ollie. I remember when I first met these guys, and sharing anything about myself with them felt so hard. But now, I know I can be open and honest with them, about anything. And I feel completely comfortable with it.

"I think I'm... this sounds weird, but I think I'm anxious about being anxious," I say. "I really don't want to relive the past couple months... and I might be a bit desperate to keep that from happening..." I trail off, looking down at my hands. I feel shame creeping in at that ugly thought I had. It's always been my number one rule for myself. My dad managed his emotions with alcohol and he ruined his life, and almost ruined mine. I won't be making the same mistake. And the fact that thought even crossed my mind for a second... I hate it.

"It's ok," Ezra says. "I think we all feel on edge, and protective of our feelings now. I'm pretty sure I can speak for all of us when I say we don't want to feel what any of us have felt over the past couple months."

Callum and Ollie nod and murmur their agreements.

Callum sits in the desk chair, and gives me a look of understanding. “What do you need?”

I give him a smile and motion towards the portable white board I see rolled up on the desk. “Your plan.”

He raises his eyebrows and Ollie slaps a hand to his mouth with wide excited eyes. Ezra smiles and looks at Callum. “Well, then. Let’s hear it, sir.”

Ollie whoops in excitement and I laugh. I will not succumb to this fear, anxiety and sadness that has plagued my life for as long as I can remember. And I refuse to fall into even more unhealthy ways of coping with it. We *are* going to get out of this, and I am 100% in to do whatever we need to do.

*Here we go.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

---

*Ezra*

I LACE my fingers in Harley's, and even though he's not showing it, I feel the tension in him. He is trying really hard to do this, and while I'm proud of him for it... something seems off. His firm reaction to a beer earlier is not one I've seen before. And I can't help but feel worried about it.

I watch Callum as he sets up his whiteboard, and see he has more added to it. Besides the names he had earlier, there are now arrows linking some, questions written out and more lists.

Ollie moves to sit on the bed on Harley's other side. "Cal. Lay it on us. Give it to us straight. Don't hold back. What are we looking at here..." Ollie says seriously, eyes roaming over the whiteboard.

Callum tilts his head, opens his mouth to say something, but then thinks better of it and turns to the board with a sigh. "Well... we have a lot to figure out."

Harley tightens his grip on my hand, but I don't think he notices. "Like what?" he asks.

"First of all, we need to confirm that Sentry is falsely reporting royalties. And the only way to do that, is to see the reports from digital service providers that sell and stream our music."

Ollie throws his hands in the air with a huff of exasperation. "And how do we do that!?"

Callum sighs again, and that doesn't instill me with much confidence. "Honestly, I'm not sure. It's not like we can just

go to these providers and ask for our reports. There are certain channels and protocols for this all to happen. I think we'd need to go through Sentry somehow. That's where they are sent, and I highly doubt anyone else in Capture Music has them. Otherwise, why would they even use Sentry?"

"So," Harley says softly, and we all look to him. "We need to go to the company William owns, to find information he may be hiding, to prove that he is fucking us over."

"Yeah." Callum is silent for a moment as he looks over the whiteboard, and we all stay quiet as well. I feel my heart pick up its pace as I think about the magnitude of this. We're talking huge amounts of money, and a very powerful man who owns us. I feel the worry trickle in, as I think about how determined Harley was to hear all of this, and how the possibility of the end was giving him the strength he needed to come back and do this all again.

"And what if we don't find anything? Or what if we do get the reports, and they are accurate?" Harley asks, his voice laced with concern. I can feel his anxiety growing, and Ollie shoots me a cautious look.

Callum glances at his whiteboard one more time, but then pulls the desk chair in front of Harley to sit down. "I've had all of these thoughts too," he says. "I've started and stopped all of this research multiple times because I kept getting so discouraged, thinking it didn't matter. Nothing was going to work. We're fucked." Callum shrugs and presses his lips together. He pauses, and I can see that he is trying to keep his emotions in check. Just when I think he is going to move on and get back to business as usual, he surprises us all. His voice catches as he says, "But I need to try. I can't keep going like this. None of us can."

My eyes sting with the threat of tears at the pain in his voice. He doesn't tend to show his emotions, as he consistently remains a strong and solid support, using logic to work through tough times. But he's been hiding behind that logic. He's been hurting, and his way of dealing with it has been to throw himself into this information William gave us in an attempt to find a way out.

“I don’t think I realized just how bad I was feeling,” he continues. “Once I got home...” he shakes his head and looks down, blowing out a breath.

“It all caught up,” Ollie says in a soft voice.

Callum nods. “I didn’t even want to come back. The only thing that gave me enough strength to do it, besides the fact we had to, was you guys. I was exhausted, and just... sad. And angry. So fucking angry that William and his team are treating us like game pieces to make money, and a never-ending energy source to attend events, play more shows and just completely drain ourselves all so they can achieve *their* dreams and *they* can make money. And not once have they ever asked us what we want. Not once did I ever feel like William saw us as people, with feelings.” He looks between Harley and I. “Especially you.”

I swallow hard and squeeze my hand even tighter around Harley’s. I don’t trust my voice right now, so I look down at our hands in attempt to find the strength and words.

“I didn’t want to come back either.” Ollie’s voice cuts through my thoughts and I whip my eyes to him. His eyes are glassy as he looks between us all. “Like, I’m really good at being positive about anything and everything, but... I’m having a really fucking hard time being positive about this.” He sighs while his eyes slide to Callum’s whiteboard, and I’m taken aback by how defeated he looks and sounds. “I hate how they treat us. I’m tired of being tired, I’m tired of seeing people I love in pain, and I’m so fucking tired of never knowing what they’re going to pull next and why.” A tear falls from his eye, and he hastily wipes it away, shaking his head.

Harley pulls his hand from mine and immediately wraps his arms around him. Ollie buries his face in his neck and hangs on to him. My own tears finally fall as I watch them and as my gaze slides to Callum, his eyes are also misty.

Harley pulls back from Ollie and glances between Callum and me. I’m not understanding the look he is giving us, and it almost looks like he is building the courage to say something.

I meet his eye again and he holds my gaze for a moment. “What is it, babe?” I ask.

He nods slightly and looks down to his hands, blowing out a breath. “I considered having a drink tonight to make this easier.”

My heart falls to my stomach. Callum reaches out to squeeze his knee while Ollie glances at me again with concern. We all know what that means for Harley. He doesn’t need to say any more. “Oh, baby,” I murmur and grab his hand again.

He shakes his head and sniffs. “I can’t. I never want to have those thoughts again. And I hate that the insane demands of this job are chipping away at all of us. I hate seeing all of you hurting so much...” Harley looks up at Callum. “We need out.”

I eventually tear my eyes away from Harley, turning my attention to Callum as well. He sits in his chair before us, as Harley, Ollie and I sit on the edge of the bed. The energy in the room seems to shift, as we all take a moment to realize the importance of this. We are breaking. And while this seems huge and frightening, possibly chasing something that might not even exist... it’s also the hope we’ve been trying to hang on to all along. We need to try.

“We could be wrong,” Callum says softly. But I hear his confidence rising to the surface again. “It’s a huge industry, and we barely know how it all works aside from writing and playing music. It *is* bigger than we are.” He leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees. “But. William fucked up. In his attempt to scare us into doing exactly what he wants us to do, he gave us a user guide. We know where every cent goes, and to who. He made it as big as he could, to make it look as scary as he could. But he severely underestimated us.” He takes in a big breath, looking between the three of us. “I firmly believe that he is hiding something. And I am confident it has something to do with our royalties. It just doesn’t make sense why *everything* is so detailed, but the earning reports are bare bones and we only have summary reports from Sentry. I *know* we can do this.” Callum puts a hand out and raises his eyebrows. “What do you think?”

Harley immediately places his hand over Callum's with a nod. "I trust you, and I believe you."

I reach out as well, placing my hand over Harley's. "I'm in, all the way."

We all turn our heads to Ollie as he looks down at our hands. He nods and places his hand on top of ours. "I'll always burn hot with you boys."

Callum smiles. "Love you fuckers."

I laugh and Ollie stands up opening his arms wide. "It's *totally* group hug time." He reaches down and yanks Harley's arm, so he stands as well with a chuckle.

Callum and I follow, and we all fall into a group hug that is somehow both awkward yet completely comfortable. Ollie eventually releases us, but I hang onto Harley and pull him into my arms.

"I'm so proud of you, babe," I whisper to him as I hold him tight against me.

He nods into my neck and whispers back, "Thank you."

I reluctantly start to pull back, but he grabs my face and presses his lips to mine. I close my eyes and keep my hands on him, wishing I never had to move from this spot.

"Aw."

We break our kiss and turn our heads to the bed, where Ollie is sitting cross legged, hands under his chin as he watches us with a smile. His eyes dart between us. "What? You're cute."

Harley chuckles and sits back down on the bed, pulling me down beside him. I wrap my arm around his waist and lean my head on his shoulder. I feel a sense of urgency and need, but it feels good. It's a need to fight and stand up for ourselves, and to protect my family from danger and hurt. Sharing our hurt and being open with each other has given us the edge we need. We have a fire burning now, and no one is going to put it out this time.

"We're ready," Ollie says seriously, nodding to Callum.

Callum nods back with a smirk and spins in his chair to his whiteboard. “So... we need a starting point.”

We all stay silent while we watch him, and I can practically hear the wheels turning as he looks over everything he wrote down. “It’s all a bit messy right now, as all I had were thoughts that I couldn’t really see through at the time...” he mutters, almost to himself. I smile as we give him his space to work it out.

Eventually, he spins his chair back to us. “Ok.”

Ollie claps his hands and rubs them together, his massive smile back in place. “Here we go!”

“We need the digital service provider royalty reports. But we know that is going to be a huge challenge, and we are going to need help. We can’t get them ourselves.” He picks up the folder from William and opens it. “For now, we can use this to follow the money trail. Let’s see where the money goes, and who the most important players are. Maybe we can find an in somewhere...” He flips a few pages, eyes scanning the numbers and names. “And then there’s Sentry. For being a digital based company, there is barely any information out there about them that I can find. So, we’re probably going to have to find out more information about them through Capture Music as well...” He trails off, seeming to be talking to himself again.

“Cal. Dude.” Ollie opens his hands wide. “Explain yourself.”

“Yeah.” Callum shakes his head, bringing himself back to the present. “I’m still trying to make sense of it all... But basically, we need the royalty reports to know if Sentry is falsely reporting our royalties and by how much, and we need to find out if this is an accurate representation of Sentry’s team. There has to be someone at Capture Music that works with Sentry in some capacity, so we’ll need to look through the folder and follow the money to find out who that is. And then hope it’s someone who we could have some kind of access to.”

“Or Ben...” Harley says.



Callum smiles. “We’ll need to have a chat with him soon. We definitely need to go over this with him and see what light he can shed on all of this.”

“And you said other labels use Sentry as well?” I lift my head from Harley’s shoulder, looking at the label names he has written out on the whiteboard. My eyes land on one in particular. Spectrum Records. “Charlotte’s label...”

“Yeah.” Callum nods. “I mean, if he’s doing it to us and probably all other artists with Capture Music... I wouldn’t be surprised if Sentry is skimming off the top from everyone.”

Harley huffs and shakes his head. “Of course he is,” he mutters.

“So,” Ollie presses his hands together and thinks for a moment. “What exactly is this all going to mean for us? Let’s say we manage to find someone within Capture Music close enough to Sentry, and/or we get the royalty reports from digital service providers. And let’s say whatever we find proves we are right, and William is fucking us over. Then what?”

Callum crosses his arms and nods his head. “Then it should be a way for us to get out of our contract. Emma is meeting with her professor today-”

“Wait.” I hold up a hand. “You know about that?”

Callum blinks as he stares back at me. “Yes. She needed some of these details to bring forward in a hypothetical scenario to discuss possible outcomes so we can be as prepared as possible for the potential termination of the contract.”

I blink back at him and shake my head. “God, you’re both such nerds.”

Callum releases a breath and shrugs. “We will hear what she has to say probably tomorrow.” He turns to the desk and places the folder on it.

“And then William is going to get it. He’ll wish he never even met us,” Ollie says darkly. We all turn to him in surprise. His eyes widen. “Whoa. That was dark.”

“Yeah... kinda.” Harley agrees.

Ollie shakes his head and blows out a breath. “It’s the dark romance. It got to me. Casey should have known better, it is *still* affecting me. The nightmares are so bad this time.”

Callum groans and I laugh. “Your next read should definitely be something light and fluffy.”

Ollie nods. “Maybe friends to lovers.”

“Excellent idea,” Callum says as he turns around to face us again. He then crosses his arms, once again taking on his business stance. “So, to recap. We are going to spend some time looking over this folder so we can find a way into Sentry and get our hands on those reports. We need to be really careful. For all we know, every single name in here, except people like Holly, Ben, Ian, Jack and so on, worship William. We also know that we can’t fully trust everyone on our crew,” his eyes flash towards Harley.

A zing of anger runs through me at the thought that someone on our team gave his number to his dad.

“So, we’ll need to keep this really quiet so we don’t set off alarm bells,” Callum continues. “We don’t want to bring any extra attention to us while we’re trying to figure this all out.”

“Extra attention,” Harley says quietly.

I sigh, knowing what he’s thinking. Just us being us draws extra attention.

Callum gives him a sympathetic look. “It’s ok. We’re going to figure it all out. I know it’s a lot...” he pauses for a moment, “but one step at a time, right? We’re going to do this. We’re going to be free.”

I wrap my arm tighter around Harley’s waist. “Fucking right we are.”

Harley turns his head to me and smiles. “Goats.”

I chuckle. “Goats.”

“Goats?” Ollie asks, scrunching his face up in confusion.

Harley laughs and shakes his head. “Just a freedom thing.”

“Freedom goats.” Ollie nods his head seriously. “Got it.” But I’m pretty sure he doesn’t.

“Alright.” Callum stands up. “It’s our first night back together. I think this is enough of all of this for tonight... let’s have some fun.”

We all eagerly agree, pushing everything to the back of our minds to focus on us, and just have fun. We ended up playing cards for the rest of the evening since we couldn’t go out anywhere. Harley and I continued to rib each other about who won the most games on the flight, so we played Go Fish and Crazy 8’s to determine the true winner, letting Callum keep score in a complicated log that included charts and variables. And of course... Ollie won.

I chose not to drink my beer, and Harley gave me quite a few scolding looks for it. He’s made it very clear to me that he doesn’t care if I drink... but I care about him. I can just imagine how difficult it was for him to have those thoughts, and then to share them. He is everything to me, and if this is something he needs to work through, I am right there with him in whatever he needs. I smile as I realize Callum and Ollie put their drinks away too. We are always going to be here for each other, to support in whatever way we can. We can share our happy and our pain, and it will never change our love for each other.

And that is why I feel completely confident that we will be getting out of this. Callum is right. William severely underestimated us. We are family, and our love and support will keep us going and drive our fight for freedom. And this time... we are going to burn *really* fucking hot.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Harley

I SQUEEZE my hands together as I sit before the interviewer, waiting for the next question. Callum rests his arm on the back of my chair, gently placing his hand on my back to help me calm my fidgeting, and I appreciate the gesture. It's our first full day back on tour, and I am feeling... a lot.

“You've had massive success in your US leg of your tour.” The interviewer looks up from her notes. “Is there anything new we can expect on the European leg?”

Ollie shakes his head from his seat on my other side. “Not really. I mean, why change perfection?” He winks and the interviewer laughs.

I look down at my hands as I spin the thumb ring Ezra gave me, my leg bouncing. I'm fighting every urge to look over at him on Callum's other side, because Stephanie and Anna are here. We had a *talking to* this morning as a reminder that we need to work with them. And that their tolerance for our *disobedience* in the media is low. I think that us coming back, and not paying out the millions and millions of dollars to get out of this contract, has given William and his team even more power in their attempt to control us. We're still on day one, and I can feel a shift already. They are not going to be putting up with anything.

My heart starts racing again, as it has been all day. Just when I think I have my nerves under control, I lose it all again. *This is the last interview... I can do this...*

“And you, Harley?”

*Fuck.*

“Um...” I look up, trying desperately to avoid Anna’s stare, and to think of what the interviewer asked us. But it’s all a jumble in my head and I can’t sort through the mess.

“You still can’t decide, can you?” Callum nudges my arm with a smirk. “London just has too many cool things to do, why choose only one?” He smiles at me, and I nod back at him, trying to plaster on a smile as well.

“Right,” I say, figuring out what the question was. Something about what we’d like to do and see while we’re here in London. “Just being here is cool.”

The interviewer smiles back at me, and I breathe out a sigh of relief. *Fuck, why is this happening again? Why am I anxious? Why can’t I just listen to a simple fucking interview question?*

Thankfully that was the last question, and all the interviews are done for the day. As I’m unhooked from my mic, I finally let my eyes fall on Ezra and a swell of both relief and sadness surges through me. I had him for a whole week, where I didn’t have to think about any of this shit. I didn’t have to hide anything. I keep trying to remind myself that we are working towards an end to this, and that it *will* end... but it’s so hard to keep focused on that when anxiety takes over and I get sucked right back into those familiar feelings. And because they are so familiar, I fall so easily. Like a comfortable torture. I fucking hate it.

Ezra walks up to me and glances over his shoulder towards Anna and Stephanie, who are chatting away while looking over a tablet. “Come on, babe,” he says in a low voice, gesturing for me to follow Ollie and Callum.

I nod and turn to exit the room behind them, heading down the hallway in the arena where we are playing tonight. I squeeze my hands into tight fists as we walk, wishing I could be holding Ezra’s hand. It’s busy here as we are only a couple hours away from showtime, and I can feel the unease taking root once again. As I look around at the people buzzing about, and as we are ushered down the hall to go eat before hair and

wardrobe, I get flashes of all the times I did this before. It feels like I am *supposed* to be anxious, and fighting it is only making me more anxious.

As we head into the dining room, I push away the urge to turn around and leave, instead following the guys towards the buffet of food. Ezra eyes me as I hesitantly take a plate.

“Maybe try some soup?” he says softly. “Ease into it, babe. You’re ok.”

I nod, exchanging my plate for a bowl and filling it with some soup. I take a deep breath, urging my body to cooperate and just *stay fucking calm*.

I only get a few spoonfuls in before I can’t do it anymore. My anxiety is ramping up as I see the crew heading out to finish getting everything ready for us to go on.

“You ok Harley?” Ollie asks quietly.

I raise my eyes to him and see concern staring back at me. “Yeah,” I say, trying to give him a smile. I know it’s weak, but I need to try. I can’t do this again. I need to keep going and stay present, strong and focused.

Ezra places his hand on my knee under the table and smiles at me. I bring my attention to the feeling of his hand on me, and the feeling his smile gives me. Just as my heart is starting to calm down, Ian comes into the room.

“Five minutes boys, then head into hair and wardrobe.” He pauses by our table, and I don’t miss the cautious look he gives me. I lower my head and look at Ezra’s hand on my knee. Everyone is treating me like I’m fragile... because I am. I feel like I am close to losing it. I’m desperately trying to hang on to reality and find comfort in the idea we are fighting this. But those thoughts are too new. They keep slipping out of my grasp, immediately replaced with the well-worn, familiar thoughts that my brain knows too well. The ones that tell me I’m worthless, none of this will matter because I don’t deserve it. I’m supposed to be uneasy, on edge, anxious... because I’m not supposed to be happy and calm. Why bother fighting when this is what I was always supposed to have... I’m always

supposed to be controlled, hidden, abused. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to push them out. *It's not true, it's not true...*

“Let’s go,” Ezra’s voice cuts through the chaos in my mind. I open my eyes and see him looking at me with so much worry, it breaks my heart. Callum and Ollie are getting up from the table, casting worried glances my way as well.

“I’m going to fuck this up,” I whisper to Ezra.

He shakes his head. “No, you’re not.” He glances around the room, then back to me. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, it’s all just...” I can barely catch my breath as I try to explain, “rushing in.”

Ezra nods. “Ok. Just stay with me. We’ll get through this.”

As we head in to see Olivia and get changed, I stick close to Ezra. I need his presence right now as I try to calm down and stay focused on the routine. It’s the same routine we have had every night that I once found comfort in. It’s all the same. It’s predictable. I know what’s coming next. I focus on my breathing as I get dressed and am vaguely aware of Callum and Ollie staying close and exchanging worried glances as they talk to me. They’re trying to keep me distracted from the anxiety that is taking over, but I’m having a hard time hearing what they are saying. And as I sit in Olivia’s chair, I also notice the look of concern on her face. *Fuck, fuck, fuck, I am fucking this up. I just want this panic to go away, I’m ruining this for everyone.*

“Luna is with Marcus tonight, I kind of wanted to bring her anyway,” Olivia says as she fusses with my hair in her usual routine. *Routine. Focus on the routine...* “But with the travel yesterday she’s pretty tired and grumpy.” Her eyes flick to mine in the mirror as she sprays something in my hair, and I try to snap out of my anxious haze to answer her.

“Yeah, I bet,” I say, shifting in my seat and taking a deep breath.

She squeezes my shoulder as she finishes with my hair. “You got this, love.”

I nod, swallowing down my embarrassment. It's a weird feeling to know that everyone here has seen a different version of me that I have no connection to. And that version was enough of a mess for everyone to be so worried about it coming back.

Ian's voice comes from the hallway, "Alright, let's go!"

My eyes fly towards Ezra, and the panic I have been trying to keep at bay takes hold. My whole body feels like it's filled with white noise, crackling and fuzzy as I start to lose feeling in my fingers and toes.

His eyes widen and he rushes towards me. "Hey, hey." He glances towards the door and back to me. "You're ok, you're safe."

I shake my head. "I don't know why this is happening." My breathing is fast, and my head feels light. "I want to go. Let's go, please. Ezra, please, don't make me do this." I grab his hand, my body screaming at me to run.

"Boys?" Ian pokes his head into the room. His eyes land on me and now *he* looks panicked. "Harley..." He enters the room and gently closes the door.

I can barely catch a breath, as my chest feels tight, and the fuzzy feeling crawls up my legs and arms. "Why is this happening..." I croak out.

Ian approaches me and places his hand on my shoulder. "Look at me." My eyes find his, and they are full of warmth and care. "This is just a response your body is having to being back here. You left tour feeling this way, it's normal for you to fall back into this. You haven't always felt this way, remember? You can get back there, I promise."

I nod, trying to make sense of what he's saying. But my mind is messy and it's hard to grasp onto those thoughts.

"Let's just take it one step at a time, and just walk down the hall. Ok?" He looks between Ezra and I, and Ezra squeezes my hand, smiling at me.

"I got you, babe," he says, keeping my hand in his as he slowly starts moving towards the door. My feet follow him,



but I still have that feeling inside me that is trying desperately to turn around and run away. I involuntarily suck a breath in and keep my eyes on Ezra.

As we get into the hallway, Ezra lets go of my hand and wraps his arm around my shoulders instead while we walk down the hall. He murmurs to me, “This is what you do, Harley. Music. We’re just playing music. The music we wrote, for us. Just think about that.”

I nod. “Ok,” I say on a breath.

A sound tech approaches me as we get backstage and I get my in-ear monitors on, and my guitar over my shoulder. I run my fingers over the flames etched on my guitar strap, letting the feeling bring me some comfort. I drop my eyes to the word *Larson* etched on the inside of the strap. The family that gave me this guitar strap, the family that I belong to, the family that cares for me and brings me comfort. I try to hang on to this feeling and keep the waves of panic away, but every sound around me is dragging me back out of that comfort and pushing it further and further away.

Ollie pulls us into a huddle, and the guys chant, “Burn hot!”

But I feel like I’m floating away, and I can’t say it.

As I step onto the riser so we can rise on stage, I’m overcome with an intense need to get off. To run away. I can’t keep that feeling away anymore.

“Ten!” I hear a voice counting down the seconds until we rise on stage.

My breath gets caught in my chest, and a war begins in my brain. I’m trying to stay, but I want to leave. But the more I try to stay... the more I can feel myself fade away. My whole body feels numb, and I know my mind is next. My thoughts are becoming distant, and I feel an unsettling, yet comfortable disconnection setting in. *No. No, no, no, don’t. Please, don’t.*

“Seven!”

“No.” I turn around and try to step off the riser, but Ollie catches me. He wraps an arm around my shoulder and

squeezes tight.

“Hey buddy, it’s ok. We got you,” he says in a low, calm voice.

Ezra’s hand lands on my arm. “Harley, you can do this. Remember, it’s just music. And remember what Ian said. You haven’t always felt this way, you can get back there.”

My hands shake as I adjust my guitar strap on my shoulder and run my fingers over the flames again. “Ok.” I whisper. But I don’t feel ok.

“One!”

The riser starts its way up to the stage, and my heart is racing a mile a minute. Ezra reluctantly moves back to his spot, keeping his eyes on me. But Ollie stays right where he is, his arm around my shoulders. “This is your song,” he says. “Just play it for you.”

I drop my eyes to my guitar, and let my hands start in on *Silhouette*. Ollie drops his arm from my shoulders so he can make his way back to his drums, as he starts a few bars into the song. I hear the deafening roar of the crowd as we reach the top, but I keep my eyes down. *Focus on the music. Stay here.*

As I step up to my mic, I’m not sure if I can even sing. I quickly glance at Ezra, and see him carefully watching me, ready to take over if I need him to. As I turn my head back to my mic, I close my eyes and let the music take over me. *This is my song. Play it for me.*

The words come out, but they don’t feel like they are coming from me. My body is working on autopilot, and it doesn’t even feel like it’s mine. I open my eyes, needing to do whatever I can to stay grounded. I’m in this weird space between numbness and full panic, and it’s a really uncomfortable feeling. I feel like at any moment I could tip one way or the other, and neither option is one I want. Looking out into the crowd, I feel an overwhelming dread brewing in the pit of my stomach, so I quickly drop my eyes to my guitar again. *Just play it for me... for us.*

I somehow manage to get through the song, and as *Silhouette* comes to an end, I immediately turn around and walk to the drum riser for a bottle of water.

“Hello London!” Callum calls into the mic, and the cheers engulf every one of my senses. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. This is our routine. The routine that brought me so much comfort before. Why is it not giving me that comfort now? I thought I was in a good place... I thought this was over.

Ezra appears before me as I open my eyes. His eyes flick to the side of the stage and then he grabs a water bottle off the drum riser as well. “You’re doing great, baby,” he says.

I shake my head. “Why is this so hard?”

“It’s hard now, but we’re going to work on it. It will get easier.” He grabs my water bottle and opens it, pushing it back into my hands. “Take a drink.”

The cool water flows through me, stirring my senses and bringing some awareness back to my body. A huge breath escapes me, and Ollie smiles at me from behind his drum set.

“Look at me when you need me,” Ezra says, smiling his beautiful smile and instantly sending a wave of calm over me. I nod, trying to hold onto that calm, and raise my thumb up between us. He smiles widely and presses the pad of his thumb to mine, while I resist the urge to grab his hand and pull him into me.

As Callum wraps up his introduction, Ezra and I move back to our mics. My hands are still shaking, and I am still teetering that line with a risk of falling into full blown panic. I don’t understand, but right now, I need to get through this. For myself, Ezra, Callum and Ollie... but also our fans. I let myself finally look out over the crowd, taking in their happy, smiling faces. Signs with our names on them are waving in the air, and they are cheering and waving at us. They are here for us. And I wish I could do better for them.

As the show goes on, I keep trying to focus on the positives and holding onto any feeling of calm that starts to

make its way in. But overall, I remain anxious and frustrated. And when the show ends, I am disappointed in myself. As the numbness and panic fades away, the reality of it all settles in. I failed tonight. And I hate that feeling more than anything.

## CHAPTER NINE

---

*Harley*

THE DRIVE back to the hotel after the show is silent. Ezra slips his hand into mine, but I just keep looking out the window of the van. I'm barely keeping myself together right now, and I know that if I look at him, I'm going to break down. I lightly squeeze his hand, and as he does the same back to me, I feel the sting of tears in the back of my eyes. He is so understanding. And I'm a fucking mess.

I close my eyes, as even the passing sights of London are too much to take in right now. I'm tired, drained, sore... I don't even know what it is I'm feeling. Sad, angry, worried, disappointed... everything, nothing...

"So, what do you think we should start with tomorrow?" Ollie asks us, and it takes me a moment to realize he's talking about exploring London. We, surprisingly, have most of the day off tomorrow before our second show here and had planned to go out together and see the city. "I *need* to go on the London eye."

"I'm down for starting there," Callum says. "I'd really like to do The British Museum."

"Oh of course you would," I hear Ollie say through a chuckle. I stay facing the window, my head resting against the back of my seat and my eyes closed while I listen to them. "Oh, wait," Ollie says. "They do afternoon tea there right? Like high tea? Yeah, we're so going."

I hear Ezra laugh beside me. "I think there's high tea all over this city."

“I do believe you would be correct,” Ollie says in an awful British accent. The guys all laugh, but I can’t join them. I can’t even bring myself to turn my head.

Silence falls over the van again, and Ezra rubs his thumb over the back of my hand. I squeeze my eyes tight, trying to keep the tears from falling. I tighten my grip on Ezra’s hand, the only way I can communicate with him right now without completely falling apart. I feel his other hand on my bicep, as he gently traces his fingers over my skin.

I feel the van slow to a stop and open my eyes to see we’ve arrived at the hotel. I immediately open the door and get out.

“Harley, just wait,” I hear Jack from the front seat, and Ezra’s hand loops around my elbow to stop me. I release a breath and turn around to face him, Callum and Ollie. Just as I expected, they have worry etched all over their faces.

“I’m sorry,” I breathe out and immediately drop my eyes to the ground.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” Callum says gently.

I hear Jack’s footsteps approach us as he rounds the van. I nod, still looking down and not trusting myself to say anything without all of my emotions escaping. And what emotion that will be, I don’t even know. But I *am* sorry that I am dampening the mood and making this so awkward for them.

“Let’s go,” Jack says as he reaches us and Ezra places his hand on my back, guiding me to follow him.

I stay quiet as we follow Jack into the hotel and the second the elevator doors close, Ezra’s hand finds mine. I press my lips together and blink, desperate to hold it all in. Ollie places his hand on my shoulder, but I can’t look at him. Besides the risk of letting the emotional floodgates open, I also feel like I let them down tonight. And the amount of shame I feel over that is overwhelming.

“Hey,” he says softly.

My eyes are filling with tears, so I keep them cast down and shake my head.

Ollie steps in closer and wraps his arms around me, pulling me into him for a hug. Ezra lets go of my hand, and I pause for a moment before I hug Ollie back. A choked sob escapes me, and he hugs me tighter.

“It’s ok,” he says, and I take in a stuttering breath as I try to reign myself in before I completely lose it in this elevator.

The elevator dings, and Ollie gently releases me. I look up into his big, soft brown eyes, giving him a slight nod. He smiles at me, squeezing my arm before he heads off the elevator while Jack holds the door open.

The rest of us follow, and before Callum and Ollie head into their room, Callum places a hand on my shoulder. “You did great, Harley.” I manage to look up at him and he smiles. “We’ll have a good day tomorrow, ok? Have a good night.” I’m thankful he doesn’t wait for a response from me, but as he heads into his room after Ollie, I swear to myself. I can’t even talk to my friends, as they try to support me.

Ezra and I reach our room, and once inside, I sit on the edge of the bed. I look down at my hands on my knees and just stare at them.

“Babe?” Ezra sits beside me and runs a hand over my back.

The emotions I was trying so hard to keep down suddenly rush up, and out. I’m doubled over with my head in my hands as I cry. My vision is blurry from hot tears as they drip from my eyes onto my knees and my breath seems to catch in my chest with every inhale. I’m shaking with every sob, unable to control or stop this intense release.

Ezra drops to his knees on the floor before me and pulls my hands from my head. He pulls me into him, holding me close while I continue to let everything out. I grip his shirt tight, my body heaving and shaking while he continues to quietly hold me, letting me cry against him.

My sobs eventually slow, and Ezra pulls back from me to look into my eyes. As he pushes my damp hair from my face, I see the pain in his. I know he struggles to see me hurting, just

like I can't bear to see him hurt. But I also know tonight was hard for him as we tried to get back into this routine. And once again, I was such a mess that I couldn't even be there for him. He had to be there for me.

"What's on your mind, baby?" he asks as he runs his fingers through my hair.

I sniff and let out a shaky breath. "Everything."

Ezra nods. "I get that. Just let it out."

I look down and take his hand in mine. "I thought I was doing better. I thought this was all going to be better." My breath stutters as a tear falls onto our hands in my lap. "I don't know why that happened, and I..." I shake my head, pressing my lips together.

Ezra places his fingers under my chin, lifting my head so I'm looking into his eyes again. "And you what?"

He knows what I'm thinking. And before I even say it, I know what his response will be. I know I shouldn't have these thoughts, but I can't help it. And I don't know how to get rid of them. "I... feel like I let you all down."

"Oh, baby," he murmurs as he wipes away a tear with his thumb. "You know you didn't. You could never let us down. We all know that was really hard for you."

I swallow hard and blink away another tear. "And you had to take care of me again."

A small, soft smile forms on his lips. "I'm always going to take care of you, Harley. I never *have* to take care of you. I chose you. Every part of you, remember?" He raises his eyebrows at me, waiting for me to agree. I nod and his smile widens. "Even on your best days, I'm going to take care of you. Because I love you, and I'm here. For everything."

My head drops to his shoulder, my arms wrapping around him again as I slide off the bed and onto the floor with him. He pulls me close, holding me while we sit on the floor of the hotel room, and I continue to gently cry against him.



“Tell me more, babe. What else are you thinking?” Ezra asks, his voice soft and low.

I keep my eyes closed and my forehead on his shoulder as I take a deep, shaky breath in. “I’m frustrated. Disappointed.” Ezra trails his hand up and down my back, staying quiet to let me think and get this out. “I don’t understand why I’m so anxious. I used to love playing on stage... What if I never get it back...”

He stays quiet for another moment, continuing to slowly move his hand over my back and his fingers through my hair. The motion is comforting, and just being here with him is starting to calm me down. He rests his head against mine. “Do you think Ian was right? You’re anxious now because you were so anxious when we left tour? I mean... it was a lot then, and it’s still a lot to come back to.”

I sniff and nod my head. “Could be.”

“Being home was great for both of us. But coming back... I found myself also falling back into old thoughts.”

I pull back from him so I can look into his eyes. “What thoughts?”

Ezra sighs and tilts his head while he tucks my hair behind my ear. “I felt the uneasiness... the need to constantly look over my shoulder and worry about what each of my actions are going to mean for us later.” He bites the inside of his cheek, hesitating for a moment before he continues, “Harley, I don’t want you to think of this as anything you’ve done wrong, or anything you need to feel bad about. But I was really, really worried about you tonight.” I feel my heart pick up its pace, and he must read it on me because he shakes his head with a little smile. “I said don’t feel bad.”

I stare back at him, thoughts rushing through my head that I know I shouldn’t be having. But I can’t help them. *I’m a burden, I’m too much work for him, I’m bringing him down, I’m a failure...*

“Stop.” He nudges me. “The only reason I’m telling you this, is because I want to help you. I’m scared, Harley. I don’t

want to see you suffering like you were during the last bit of the US tour. I know you don't want to go through that again, and it broke my heart to watch..." His voice cracks, and he trails off, dropping his eyes. My hand finds his and he looks back up at me, blinking away tears. "Truth is, babe... I know I can only help you so much. I wish I could take all of this pain away, for you, for me, for Callum and Ollie... and if I could take it all on myself, I think I would." He looks thoughtful for a moment as he looks into my eyes. I see the pain under the surface, where he tends to keep it until it's too much to handle.

"I know," I whisper. We briefly spoke about this before, but I know it's time. I know I need this. "I think I need to talk to someone."

Ezra nods with a soft smile, running his thumb over the back of my hand. "I think I do too."

As we sit on the floor, looking into each other's eyes, I get an overwhelming urge to become stronger for us. I have leaned on Ezra for so much, and I have learned so much from him. But I know it's time I learn how to manage this part of me. Because I realize now, I never had a reason to before. I never had anything to fight for, or care for. But now, I'm looking at my reason right in the eyes. I want to do better. I want to be better. For both of us.

"I love you," I say with a strength to my voice that has been missing all day.

The corners of his eyes crinkle as he smiles. "I love you, too." He reaches up to hook his hand around the back of my neck, pulling me in for a soft, gentle kiss that is full of love. "I can feel the tension in your neck," he murmurs against my lips.

I sigh against him, and he gently pushes me back so he can stand up. I stay seated on the floor, watching him as he walks over to our bags. My eyelids feel heavy, and every muscle in my body is tight. It's almost like I am feeling everything my body went through today, all at once now that I'm in a space

where I can feel. I'm exhausted, but wide awake at the same time.

Ezra turns around to face me, and he's holding a few of my mom's records in his hands. He holds them out to me. "Pick one."

As I take them from him, he heads into the bathroom, and I hear him filling the bathtub. A small smile forms on my lips as I pick a Rolling Stones album for Ezra. I hold it up for him as he comes back into the room and his face lights up at the sight of his favourite album. "Excellent choice."

He pulls me up from the floor, leading me to the big soaker tub filling with hot water. He has my new portable record player set up, and as the album starts playing, he slowly strips my clothes off, and then his. As we step into the tub, the feeling of the hot water on my sore muscles is instantly soothing. But the best feeling is having his strong arms wrap around me as I lay against his chest. I close my eyes and listen to the music, feeling his breath and letting my muscles relax.

As *Honest I do* starts playing, he chuckles.

"What?" I ask, smiling as he jostles me in the water with his light laughter.

"Did I ever tell you I jerked off to the thought of you while listening to this song?"

I whip my head back to look at him. "No."

He nods, trying to look serious. "Well, I did. The night before Battle of the Bands."

My eyebrows shoot up. "But... you didn't... we never..." I let out a breath of laughter. "You freaked out after Battle of the Bands when we kissed."

He winces. "Yeah... not my finest moment." He then smiles and brings his fingers through my hair. "But the moment I first saw you, I couldn't get you out of my head. You overwhelmed me, in the best way possible. And you continue to do so, every day."

I reach up, pulling his lips down to mine. I don't know how it's possible, but I continue to fall deeper and deeper in love with him.



*Bzzz*

“Hmm,” Ezra groans sleepily against my chest. I keep my eyes closed and tighten my hold on him, ignoring the buzzing phones on the bedside table.

*Bzzz*

*Bzzz*

*Bzzz*

“It’s too early,” Ezra mumbles. “Why is he even awake?”

“Because he doesn’t sleep,” I mumble back.

We start to drift back to sleep, but our phones buzz again.

Ezra sighs dramatically and rolls onto his back. “Now that I’m awake I have to pee.”

I chuckle, opening my eyes to see him sitting up, his thick blonde hair a wild mess as he adorably rubs his eyes. “Hurry back.”

As Ezra heads into the bathroom, I pick up my phone to see what Ollie is texting about so early. I open up the group chat to see a string of texts from him.

**Ollie**

OH MY GOD.

DUDES. I just went for a run, and London is so cool.

Jack came with me by the way. So don't worry, I'm safe. \*safety vest emoji\*

Callum is still sleeping. Harley and Ezra are you still sleeping?? \*eyes emoji\*

I'M SO BORED. Jack made me go back to my room. So now I'm just basically watching Cal sleep.

I'll make another coffee. That will help me wait until you guys wake up and then we go out and have all the fun. I am SO EXCITED \*men with bunny ears emoji\* \*men with bunny ears emoji\*

Ezra comes out of the bathroom, sliding back under the covers and cuddling up to me. He snorts a laugh as he reads Ollie's texts on my phone. "As if he needs another coffee."

I smile as I lock my phone, placing it on the bedside table again. "I'll respond to him in a bit. If I do it now, he'll be over here in about ten seconds."

Ezra nuzzles into my neck. "Good call."

I close my eyes and wrap my arms around him. I push every thought away that is attempting to creep in, trying to remind me of the pain of last night and the worry of our second show tonight. But none of it matters right now with him in my arms.

As Ezra snuggles closer to me, I lift his chin so I can press my lips to his. His hand slides over my chest as he deepens our kiss and I almost shiver at the feeling. We shared a level of vulnerability with each other last night that somehow brought us even closer. To accept that we need help, and to find that help outside of each other in order to *be* there for each other. I slide my hand down his body to his hip, and he moves on top of me. As he gently rocks his hips against mine, I slowly run my hands up and down his back. I focus on the feeling of his

tongue sliding against mine, the hard lines of his muscles under my touch and the softness of his skin pressed against my chest, and I get completely lost in him. We kiss with heat and passion, acting on the words we said last night. The love we have for each other that grows every day and will never stop. I can't get enough of him, and as he sinks his fingers into my hair and grinds into me, I can tell he feels the same.

I let my hand trail down his back again and slip into his boxers. As I press a finger to his hole, a soft moan escapes him. That's all the encouragement I need to continue to rub and tease him while he grinds his hard cock against mine.

When he eventually sits up, the look on his face is pure hunger. He rakes his eyes down my body, pulling his bottom teeth between his lips. His eyes flick back up to mine. "My bag or yours?"

"Yours," I say, reluctantly taking my hands off him so he can get up. I watch him as he retrieves the lube from his bag, and I slide my boxers off as he walks back over to me.

"Mm," he moans as he drops his boxers as well and climbs back onto the bed between my legs. A heavy breath leaves my chest as he wraps a hand around my cock and drops his mouth to gently lick my sensitive tip.

I watch him as he slowly takes me all the way in, and back out. His hand rubs up my abs as he continues to suck me, and the sensations of his hot mouth on my cock and his warm touch roaming my body is already driving me crazy. He's moving at a slow pace, taking me deep into his throat and keeping his gorgeous eyes glued to mine.

"Come here." I pull his arm, and he releases me from his mouth crawling up my body to bring his lips to my mouth instead. I kiss him with a fierce need, once again grinding against him as I try to touch every part of him. My hand finds the lube bottle, and I can practically feel the excitement in him as I pop the top open with my thumb.

I laugh against his lips. "You don't want this, do you?"

Ezra bites my bottom lip and chuckles darkly. “More than anything.”

That pulls a feral groan from me. I devour his mouth again and roll him onto his back as I prop myself up on my elbow beside him. I break our kiss so I can lube up my fingers, and as I bring them down to his hole, he pulls me back in for another deep kiss. He keeps his hands on either side of my head as I swirl and rub my fingers over him. He’s almost vibrating with anticipation, and as I push a finger inside him, he moans into my mouth.

“That feel good, baby?” I ask as I kiss along his jaw, slowly sliding my finger in and out of him.

He grips my hair tight and nods with another moan. I continue to work and stretch him, adding another finger and making him writhe under me as we kiss, and he makes the most delicious, needy moans and groans. “More,” he pants.

I’m hard as a fucking rock as I push a third finger inside him, and he tilts his head back with a guttural groan.

“Fuck, baby...” I breathe out, kissing down his neck. As I move my fingers in him, curling them and hitting that spot, his fingernails dig into my shoulder and his whole body tightens.

“Oh my god,” he grunts. I look down at his weeping cock, and I am close to coming right now at the sight of it. I bring my eyes back up to him and watch in awe as his face twists in pleasure and he pants and whimpers while I fuck him with my fingers. He reaches a hand down and wraps it around my cock, stroking me and making me impossibly hard for him. And that’s it... I need my cock in him, *now*.

I pull my fingers from him, pushing him to roll onto his side facing away from me. I waste no time lubing up my dick, grabbing his hips, and sliding inside him.

“Oh, fuck,” I moan as I enter him, and he immediately pushes his ass back to take me deeper. I wrap my arm around his chest and bring my mouth to his ear. “You were made to be a bottom, baby.”

He quivers under my touch while he tips his head back on a deep breath. “Then take my ass and fuck me.”

A wave of electricity rolls through me, as I slowly roll my hips, thrusting into him deep and hard. Ezra’s hand reaches down to his knee, pulling it up to give me the angle I need to go even deeper, and pull as much pleasure from him as I can.

I already feel the pressure building as I continue to fuck him, increasing my pace and holding him tight against my chest. And the second I drop my hand to his cock, he grunts loudly, jerking his hips as he comes hard. His whole body is trembling as cum shoots from his cock, and he buries his face in the pillow while grunting through his release.

“Holy fuck, Ezra...” I’m close to exploding, so I continue to thrust into him until the pressure in my pelvis peaks and my balls tighten. My cock throbs in his ass as I come, my forehead pressed to the back of his shoulder while the intense wave of pleasure rolls over my body.

We both continue to lay there, panting, my dick still in his ass as we try to catch our breath. I trail my hand softly up his side and rest it over his chest, feeling the fast, hard thumps of his heart.

*Bzzz*

Ezra blows out a breath. “We should try to teach him some patience.”

I smile and kiss his shoulder. “Good luck with that.”

We let our phones continue to buzz as we stay wrapped up in each other for a little bit longer, and I let this closeness feed my soul. With him, I know I can do this. With him... I can do anything.



## CHAPTER TEN

---

*Ezra*

“RIGHT THEN, CHEERIO.”

I roll my eyes and take a sip of my tea as the waitress leaves our table.

“Dude,” Callum shakes his head at Ollie. “No one says *cheerio*.”

Ollie shakes his head right back at him. “Not true, I heard it before.”

“In a movie?” Harley asks, eyebrows raised as he looks at Ollie over his teacup.

Ollie drops his mouth open in shock that no one believes him. “No.” He looks around the dining room. “Just you wait, someone will say it and you’ll see I am right, and I am *blending* in.”

Harley smirks at me and I chuckle. We’re having afternoon tea at The British Museum after seeing the exhibits and letting Callum geek out. And in a very surprising turn of events... Harley as well. Ollie and I ended up trailing around behind them as they had nerdy in-depth conversations about human history and culture. Just when I thought I knew everything about him...

“So, what are we doing after this then, chaps?” Ollie asks as he plucks a sandwich off his tiered tray and takes a bite, pinky finger in the air.

“I don’t know, depends how much time we have,” Callum mutters, tapping away at his phone before sliding it back in his

pocket.

“Dude, who are you texting, we are all here,” Ollie gestures around the table to himself, Harley and me.

Callum stares back at him. “I do know other people.”

Ollie rolls his eyes and waves a hand, dismissing that idea.

Harley chuckles as he looks between them, taking a bite of his sandwich as well. I can't help but watch him with a smile. As he laughs and jokes with Ollie about the absurd idea that Callum has friends outside of us, it's hard to even picture the broken Harley I was holding last night. I've been feeling more protective over him than usual today and am trying not to feel so on edge about our second show tonight. He has been working hard to push his anxiety aside and let himself have fun today, and I need to do the same. After a pretty intense night last night, getting out to explore London with the guys is just what we need. That, and the mind blowing sex we had this morning.

So far, it's been a great day. We started with the London Eye, which Ollie was very excited for. However, once at the top we discovered he has a fear of heights. We asked him why he wanted to go on a giant Ferris wheel and he said he was just trying to be strong for us. Even though it was *his* idea in the first place. He ended up hugging Harley the whole way down, and we adjusted our plans to see Tower Bridge, Big Ben and the Tower of London from lower levels.

“Oh my god, it's Send Help!”

We all turn to look where the voice is coming from. A few girls about our age are cautiously approaching our table. We've had a few people approach us throughout the day, but these are the first fans to come see us while we've been in the museum.

“Hi,” Callum smiles at them, and they immediately rush over to us.

“We saw you last night!” One of the girls says, bouncing up and down on her feet.

I see Jack and Matteo, another security team member, shift in their seats at their table next to us. I chuckle to myself as I look at these excited girls and feel weird about having security around them. I mean... they're completely harmless. But I also appreciate their watchful eye, as Jack always grunts to us, "*You never know.*"

"Can we get a photo?" One of the girls holds her phone up and looks around the table at us.

"Oh, hell yeah." Ollie immediately jumps out of his seat and puts an arm around the girl's shoulders. She turns beet red and looks like she's going to faint. We all follow while Jack gets up to take the photo for us. Harley is beside me, and I take the opportunity to wrap my arm around his waist as we all huddle in close. He looks at me out of the corner of his eye with a smirk.

As we all move to take our seats again, one of the girls smiles at Harley. "It's good to see you smiling again, Harley. It seems like you've been having a tough time."

Harley freezes, his face falling. *Shit.* All the thoughts start rushing through my head as I think about what to do. *This is going to set him back, what do they know, how do I keep him from panicking here...* but before I can manage anything he says, "Thanks," in a soft, low voice.

Callum steps closer to Harley and smiles at the girls. "So, you're not coming to both shows?"

The girls all start chattering away, saying they wish they could and if they are able get a last minute ticket they will. I nod slightly to Callum as a thanks for getting the attention off Harley and slide my eyes to him. He takes his seat at the table again, staying quiet while we finish chatting with the girls. He manages a smile for them as they leave, but I can tell it's a bit forced.

Once they're gone, I lean over to him. "You alright?" I ask him quietly.

He nods, looking between me, Ollie and Callum. "It's just... weird to hear it from fans, that they've noticed

something is wrong...”

Callum nods and reaches out to squeeze his shoulder. “They care about you.”

Harley gives him a weak smile. I wish I could hug him, kiss him, and help him feel better. He was doing so well, and I want to help him get his spark back. I want to see him smiling, laughing, and joking again. He sighs deeply and looks down at his plate.

Ollie glances at me with the same worry I’m feeling. We all want to help him, and none of us want to see him suffering in another spiral again. Ollie claps his hands together and plasters a smile on his face. “So, here’s what *I* think we should do next. Because we are going to wrap up this tea party in time to have some more fun.” He plucks another sandwich off his tray with a flourish. “Now, I know we have some history nerds in the group so, there is one place we *have* to go for the *most* important history ever to exist, ever.”

Harley looks up at him, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

Ollie points at him. “You know what I’m talking about.”

Harley nods. “Abbey Road.”

“Abbey Road.” Ollie holds out a fist over the table for him to bump, which Harley does with a smile.

Ollie continues to chat our ears off about The Beatles and why *Abbey Road* was their best album. I feel myself relax as Harley joins in and I can see the tension leave him. As Ollie meets my eyes again, I send out a silent thank you to him for the distraction, helping Harley take his mind off of everything. And when my phone buzzes with a text from Emma asking if we have time to chat about what she found out, I send her a text back to say not today. Today is about fun, and forgetting everything that has been weighing us down. Even though it’s important, the *most* important thing right now is to just be *us*.

And that’s exactly what we do. The rest of the afternoon is carefree and easy as we stroll the streets of London and end up touring Abbey Road. Being inside the studio where The

Beatles recorded some of their best and most popular music was unreal. And as we were leaving, Ollie made us recreate the iconic Beatles picture on the crosswalk. It actually turned out pretty cool, and he already has plans to blow it up and put it on his wall at home.

Eventually, we make our way to the arena to get ready for showtime. As we are walking down the hallway towards our dressing rooms, Harley becomes quiet.

“Hey,” I nudge him with my elbow as we walk behind Ollie, Callum and Jack. He turns his head to me, and his eyes are bright with worry. “What do you need?”

“I don’t know...” he says, blowing out a breath and shaking his head.

I subtly reach out to squeeze his hand, wishing there was something I could do. He suddenly stops, looking into one of the rooms. Ollie and Callum look back once they realize we’re not following, and I gesture for them to continue. As they head into our dressing room, Harley enters the room he is peering into. I follow him, seeing Ian at a table with his laptop.

“Hey boys,” Ian greets us, looking up from his work as we walk over to him.

“Hey,” Harley says, glancing around the empty room nervously.

Ian flashes me a cautious look and I try to keep my face neutral. I’m not sure what Harley is doing, and as he reaches to pull a chair out, I see his hands shaking.

He sits down across from Ian, so I do the same. Ian closes his laptop and crosses his arms on the table before him, patiently waiting while Harley fidgets with his hands in his lap. “Um, I just wanted to... ask you something...”

My heart picks up its pace as I think I realize what he’s doing.

“Shoot,” Ian says, looking between us.

Harley quickly glances at me and then takes a big breath in. “I need help. I want to... talk to someone. Like, a therapist.

I don't want to feel like this anymore."

I feel like I'm going to burst with pride. I press my lips together to keep from having a huge reaction that is totally not appropriate in this moment, and just stay quiet.

Ian smiles softly. "Absolutely, Harley. I can help you get that set up."

"Thank you," Harley says quietly. He looks down at his hands. "I don't know how to find someone, or where to start..."

Ian keeps his eyes on Harley, his smile still in place. "I know some people to ask. We'll get it all sorted out. And once we find someone for you, I'll block it in your schedule."

Harley looks up at him again and nods.

"I'm proud of you Harley," Ian says gently. "That's not an easy thing to admit and ask for. I'm happy to see you making this step, and that you'll be getting the relief you need, and deserve."

I bite my lip as I watch Harley process this. I want to launch myself at him and wrap him in a huge hug, kiss him and shower him in praise and affection. Ian is right. This is huge. We talked about getting help just last night, but he did this all on his own.

"Thanks," he says shyly, almost in a whisper.

Ian's eyes meet mine and I quickly glance around the room to confirm that no one else is in here. I slide my hand onto Harley's thigh and he looks up at me. "You are amazing, babe."

His cheeks blush slightly, which makes me smile even wider. I lean into him, bumping him slightly with my shoulder. "And I'm going to find one too." I turn back to Ian. "I keep thinking about what you said to me at the end of the US tour."

His face softens as he seems to remember when him and Ollie found me, completely breaking down in a hallway by myself, feeling like I couldn't fix anything and that it was all on me to do so.

“You said I was being too hard on myself.” I take a breath in. “I think I do that a lot more than I realize.”

Ian nods, his smile getting even bigger. “I’m happy to hear that too.”

Harley places his hand over mine, and I feel him relax a bit.

Ian stands, picking up his laptop and checking his watch. “You have a few minutes before you have to be in hair and wardrobe.” He walks towards the door, turning around once he gets there. “Take a moment for yourselves. You’ve earned it.” As he leaves, he closes the door behind him, leaving us in the room alone and in private.

Immediately, my arms are around Harley, my face buried in his neck. “I’m so fucking proud of you.”

He breathes out a small laugh and tightens his arms around me. “I’m proud of you too.”

I take this quiet, private opportunity to do everything I’ve been holding back on today. I bring my hands up to his face, pressing my lips to his in a gentle, but passionate kiss. He kisses me back, letting his hands run up my sides. But he breaks our kiss after a moment and blows out a shaky breath.

“You alright?” I ask, keeping him close against me.

He nods, looking down at his hand as he rests it on my hip. “I’m trying really fucking hard to stay calm right now.” His eyes flick to the door as we hear voices outside from our crew. He then whips his eyes to the clock on the wall.

“Just look at me, babe,” I tilt my head to catch his eye. When he brings his gaze back to me, I can see the worry growing again. “What are you thinking?”

He takes another deep breath in and lets it out. “A lot.” He pauses to think for a moment. “That was fucking hard, I’m feeling anxious about tonight, I’m anxious because I know I’m going to be anxious, I’m worried now that fans see it too, I don’t know how to do therapy, I don’t know what to talk about or how to do any of it...”

I nod and take his hand in mine. “But you did it, it’s ok to feel anxious, I’m here to help you, our fans love you, and you don’t need to know how to do it.” I smile as he tilts his head back to look up at the ceiling, and sighs again. “One step at a time, right?” I ask, squeezing his hand.

He lowers his head and nods. “Yeah.”

“So, let’s think of it as just going to hang out with Olivia while she fusses with our hair. I’m sure she has lots to say tonight since she went on the Harry Potter tour today.”

Harley chuckles, and the sound is music to my ears. “Ok.”

I kiss him one more time before we make our way to Olivia, and the second we walk into the room, we’re greeted with an adorable squeal of delight. Luna... the perfect distraction.

Harley smiles as Luna totters towards us. “Hey Luna,” he says, crouching down to greet her.

Olivia yanks me into her chair, and I watch as Harley carries Luna over to the couch where Callum was playing with her.

“Marcus isn’t working tonight,” Olivia says to me quietly as she sprays my head with water. “But I brought her anyway. I thought Harley would like having her here.”

I smile at her in the mirror. “I’d say you’re right.”

As Olivia launches into her very detailed and enthusiastic recap of her Harry Potter tour, I continue to keep my eyes on Harley. I can’t help but think about last night and how anxious he was, and how he completely broke down in the hotel room after the show. My heart is breaking at how hard he is trying to stay calm and keep that from happening again, and I hate that this is so much work for him now. Playing on stage used to be his escape, and the thing he most looked forward to about this job. And while it looks like he is keeping it together, I see the subtle signs that say he’s teetering on the edge, and trying to hide it. He’s rubbing his hands on his thighs and spinning his ring, and he’s either zoning out or hyperaware of what’s going on around him.



As Harley moves into Olivia's chair next, I stay with him. His eyes find mine through the mirror as I sit close by, and I smile, holding my thumb up for him. The corner of his lips quirk up slightly, and he holds his thumb up as well.

Olivia sprays some stuff in his hair and looks at him in the mirror. "Whatever you did to this today, love, it already looks great."

I quirk an eyebrow at him, and he breathes out a light laugh. He did nothing to it today after fucking me senseless. *Sex hair for the win.*

Olivia looks between us and rolls her eyes. "Oh god," she mutters, suppressing a smirk.

We continue to move through our usual pre-show routine as we get dressed, head backstage, and get our in-ear monitors and guitars on. I try to keep Harley focused on me and just think about it all step by step. But the closer we get to rising on stage, the more anxious he becomes. He is shifting his weight between his feet, shaking his hands at his sides and breathing heavy. I move beside him in an attempt to comfort him, the crowd roars as our intro begins. The sound sends a thrill through me, but Harley's eyes turn wild, and he backs up a step.

I step forward, closing the distance between us to grab his arm. "It's alright, just talk to me."

He shakes his head, not meeting my eyes. I squeeze his arm to get his attention, and when his eyes land on me, they search mine, almost like they're coming back into focus. "I don't even know why I'm scared," he says in a tight voice.

I swallow hard. I wish I knew the right thing to say and do here, but I don't. They're going to start counting down for us to rise on stage any second now and I don't have the time to help him through this.

He squeezes his eyes shut and mutters, "I just want to turn my brain off."

As Ollie approaches us with arms open wide, ready for our usual pre-show huddle, I pull Harley into me. I squeeze him

impossibly tight to my side, as Callum and Ollie join in and drape their arms around our shoulders. “We got you, babe,” I whisper to Harley. Then I turn to Ollie. “I think we need a little distraction here, Ol. Care to help us out?”

Ollie’s eyes flick to Harley, then back to me with a wide grin. “Aye, bruv! We’re going to be bloody brilliant this fine eve, lads!” He says in his awful British accent. He holds his hand out between us all and looks each of us in the eye. “We shall perform with the hottest of flames, and nary a blunder will come our way. We’re ace, chaps. And blimey! We will leave this stage feeling abso-bloody-lutely chuffed. So, chant with me, mates. Push all the rubbish aside and let it all out. Burn hot!”

We all stare back at Ollie as he grins widely, shoulders back and looking proud.

Suddenly, Harley chuckles, and I smile. Now Ollie looks *really* proud of himself. Harley puts his hand on top of Ollie’s and we all follow suit, with our usual, “Burn hot!”

As we rise on stage, Harley looks over at me. He runs his fingers over the flames on his guitar strap, and I see his chest heaving with his fast, shallow breaths.

“*Breathe,*” I mouth to him.

His eyes close and he takes a big breath in, letting it out slowly. His hands shake as he lowers them to start playing, but I see more confidence than I did last night.

Throughout the show, I see glimpses of his usual self on stage. The moments when he completely let go, getting lost to the music and smiling at the crowd were fucking *beautiful*. He was still anxious, but he did it. I never had any doubts he would get it back, and while he still has some hard work to do, he is well on his way to finding comfort on stage again. And I’ll be right here with him, every step of the way.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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*Harley*

I ADJUST my guitar in my lap and look across the stage to Ezra. He's sitting on an amp, mindlessly picking at his bass while people mill about around us, getting the stage set up for the *Details* video shoot.

"Ready to shoot in fifteen," I hear someone say near one of the cameras pointed at us. My pulse picks up and I shift on my stool. Ezra is now blocked from my view as someone is talking to him, and that sends a rush of panic through me. I groan to myself as I bring my hand up, rubbing my forehead. *He's right there. Why the fuck do I feel so anxious, just because I can't see him.*

A hand lands on my shoulder and I look up at Callum. "Hey, bud. Need anything?" he asks with a smile.

"A new brain," I mutter, glancing around the stage. There's a camera pointed at us, and I quickly look away from it. "And for these cameras to fuck off."

Callum nods and moves to block the cameras view of me. "Yeah, I hear you there. As if the amount of media we do now isn't enough."

I huff out a breath in agreement. When we arrived in Dublin last night, they told us about their plan to start *Behind the Scenes* videos for things such as music video shoots and photoshoots, starting with the *Details* shoot today. They're even talking about doing this for some concerts. Like we don't have enough media presence already. Now, they are recording what little private time we had during these stressful events.

Apparently, it's to give our fans an "inside look". But it feels intrusive, and once again like we are selling our fans a fake version of our lives. Because I know this will be edited down to look like we are all enjoying every aspect of this job and are happy as can be.

But as I glance over at Ezra again, I feel a stab of pain. Those little moments I had with him, where we could steal some time for each other during the day in order to keep going... are gone. And my guess is they are doing this because Ian went to bat for us to decrease media time and create more free time for us. I was surprised at first that Val even agreed to it, but now it makes more sense. Her answer was to ramp up the amount of media in the time she has us scheduled.

"Alright, places guys," the director calls out, and Callum gives my shoulder another squeeze before heading over to his seat.

The video is going to be shot entirely on this stage, with various angles of us playing the song in casual positions on stools and amps, and later they'll add in shots of a small, relaxed crowd.

Ezra looks over to me as the person he was talking to leaves, and he smiles. I smirk back at him as he gives me a thumbs up, but it quickly falls away as Stephanie appears in my line of sight, shooting me a scathing look. Ezra follows my gaze, looking behind him to her scowling face. She mutters something to him that I can't hear and walks away. My pulse is now thundering in my ears as I try to pull my gaze away from him before I'm reprimanded, but I can't seem to do it. Ezra shakes his head and mouths to me, "*It's ok.*"

I feel frustration creep in, mixing with my nerves to create a surge of uncomfortable energy. I bite my lip and rub my hand over my leg as it bounces. Why can't they just leave us the fuck alone. Right when I feel like I'm starting to get a handle on everything, they change it up and expect more from us. Or less, I guess. They want less of who Ezra and I actually are, and more of who they want us to be. And putting these cameras in here is making that happen. Which is making me feel... angry. A wave of guilt rolls over me at that thought, and

I don't even know why. It's been a constant rollercoaster of emotion for the past week since we've returned to tour. I've managed to get through a few more shows with less anxiety, but it still hits me suddenly, out of nowhere. There are moments when I feel good, but the second I recognize that in myself, I'm thrust right back into that dark space where a thundering heart, shaky hands and doubts rule my mind and body. Which then leads to frustration, which leads to sadness, which leads to exhaustion... and at the end of the day I'm hit with guilt and shame. It's fucked, and I hate it.

“Ok, ready in five, four, three...” someone calls out and I try to snap back to attention. I need to focus. While I'm aware of how in my head I am, I also don't care right now. I have so many feelings coursing through me that I can't figure out which one to focus on, and everything that is happening around me starts to fade away. I feel like at any moment, I'm going to lose control. I'm on the verge of dropping my guitar and leaving, and I know I can't do that. So... I numb.



“Fuck.” I rub a hand over my face and sigh. I keep my hand over my eyes, and yet another sigh escapes me. If I thought I was frustrated before, I really am now. No, I'm *pissed*. At myself. I just keep fucking failing. I lower my hands and run them under the cold water, splashing it over my face. My eyes stay closed, keeping the world out. I can't face it right now.

But when I feel a hand on my back, I turn, and immediately his arms wrap around me. “It's alright,” Ezra murmurs in my ear.

I slowly open my eyes and take in the empty changing room. The second the shoot wrapped, I ran out of there. The memories of the day are slowly slipping into my mind, reminding me of everything that happened and piecing together the fragmented moments I've been trying to make sense of. I close my eyes again and blow out a breath of frustration.

“What’s that for?” Ezra asks gently.

I lean back against the counter and look him in the eyes. He looks worried. “I keep fucking this up.” I bring my hands to my face and groan in anguish. “Fuck, Ezra, why the *fuck* is this still happening.”

He pulls my hands from my face, his brows drawn together in confusion. “It’s ok that it is, Harley, and you’re not fucking anything up. This is a lot. I felt uneasy with the cameras and everything today too.”

I shake my head. “I fucking hate this,” I say, almost in a whisper.

Ezra swallows hard, and nods. “I know, babe.”

“I wanted to be... *there* for this.” I reach out, placing my hand on his hip. “It’s our song.”

He smiles softly at me. “And it always will be.” He reaches up to run his fingers through my hair. “It’s just a video. The song is what matters to us, right? And it’s going out into the world even without a video, so we can tell everyone how much we love each other.”

I nod, knowing he’s right. But I just can’t shake the uneasy, restless, energy in me.

Ezra runs his hand down my arm. “And... you have your first therapy appointment tomorrow.” He smiles again. “Hopefully that will help.”

My heart skips a beat, and again the anxious feelings flood me. “Yeah,” I breathe out, pushing away from him to start pacing the room.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, and the look of confusion that crosses his face again exacerbates all of these feelings I have. *I’m* confused, I can just imagine how I am making him feel right now.

I run a hand through my hair, still pacing. I need to move. I feel like I’m wound up in this tight ball, desperate to escape but afraid to at the same time. “I don’t know, Ezra. I don’t fucking know. I don’t know anything.” I drop my hand and

look up to the ceiling, blowing out a huge breath. “I’m feeling... everything. I can barely stand to be in my own body right now,” I say as I shake my hands at my sides, my feet still carrying me back and forth across the room. “I’m anxious, I’m mad, I’m sad, I’m tired... I’m scared for therapy tomorrow. I don’t know what to tell her, what she’ll think of me, what I *can* tell her... Where do I even start? What will she actually do? What if it doesn’t even help?”

The door to the changing room opens and Jack appears. He looks between Ezra and I, his eyes dropping to my hands as I wring them in front me. I drop them, squeezing them at my sides and turn to walk to the other end of the room as I have this urgent need in my body to keep moving.

“Leaving in five,” he says, before he gently closes the door, leaving us alone again.

“Harley,” Ezra steps in front of me to stop my pacing. “I’m sorry you’re feeling this way. I wish I could take it all away from you. But these are the feelings you need to talk about tomorrow. How about we get changed, and when we get to the hotel, I’ll help you sort through these thoughts, ok?”

I look into his bright blue eyes. And I suddenly realize that moment I’ve been wanting all day is here. I have him, in private. And all I’ve done is push him away and worry. I take his face in my hands, pressing my lips to his.

As our lips part, and I open my mouth to speak, he speaks first. “Do *not* apologize.”

I let out a small chuckle, dropping my forehead to his shoulder and holding him tight.

His arms wrap around me, his hands running up my back. “You’re vibrating,” he says. He brings his hands to my shoulders, squeezing them. “Let’s go. We’ll get a hot shower and relax when we’re back at the hotel.”

We change out of our clothes we had for the video shoot, and getting into sweatpants and a comfortable t-shirt feels better. But the whole ride back to the hotel, I can’t keep my leg from bouncing and my hands from fidgeting, even with Ezra

holding my hand the whole way. This nervous energy is washing over me in continuous waves that just won't stop, and as it continues to build, I can barely stand to be in my own skin. As we pull up to the hotel, I am chewing on my thumbnail, feeling like I'm going to explode.

I get out of the van and follow the guys into the hotel, but before we get to the elevator, Jack puts a hand on my shoulder to stop me. "Come with me," he says.

I furrow my brow at him, and glance at Ezra. It's late and we have an interview in the morning, and a show tomorrow evening. Usually, Jack is trying to get us all to our rooms and to bed the night before a show.

He looks at Ezra as the elevator doors open, and he steers me away from them. "He'll be up soon," Jack says as he starts down the hall.

I hesitantly follow, looking over my shoulder to the guys as they step onto the elevator, Ezra watching me with concern and confusion.

"Where are we going?" I ask Jack as he continues to make his way down the hall.

He turns a corner and stops in front of a door, tapping a keycard to it. The plaque by the door reads *Gym*. He doesn't say anything, leading me inside and grabbing a duffle bag. I watch him as he unzips the bag and tosses a pair of boxing gloves at me. "That restless energy you're feeling needs a place to go." He walks towards me, holding a pair of hand wraps. He takes one of my hands in his and starts wrapping it. "The anger, frustration, sadness... it builds. You need to let it out. I found boxing when I was in the military." I look up at him and his eyes flick up to mine before he drops them back down, taking my other hand to start wrapping it. "It helps to get out of your head, and into the moment. And it's a way to express that anger and emotion that's buried deep down." He takes the gloves from me, sliding them on each of my hands. "When you release that energy and allow yourself to let it go, you get a break. You get relief." He finishes strapping the



gloves onto my hands and steps back. “Have you ever boxed before?”

I shake my head. “No.”

He nods, moving beside me. “Right or left-handed?”

“Right,” I say, watching him as he moves into a boxing stance, his right foot angled back. He looks at me, and I move into position, copying his stance.

“Good. Right hand near your chin, left just a bit over your face,” he says, reaching over to move my left hand up to cover part of my face.

He shows me a few punches and jabs, teaching me to shift my weight and pivot.

“Yes,” he says, as I punch the air before me. “You have a good stance.”

I feel a smile tugging at my lips as I continue to move through the motions he is showing me. It feels good to move my body and have something to focus on that has nothing to do with my thoughts.

He moves in front of me. “The true test is if I give you a push, can you maintain this stance?”

I nod, ready for the test. But as soon as I see his hands come out towards me, I freeze. And the second his hands touch my shoulders, I collapse and stumble backwards. A rush of panic runs through me. I see stairs underneath me as I fall down them, hearing a crack as pain shoots through my shoulder. I hear my dad yelling at me, calling me an unworthy bastard, and laughing because I hurt. I blink, as static sounds in my ears and my eyes slowly focus on the floor before me in the hotel gym. My chest rises and falls with quick, shallow breaths, and every muscle in my body is shaking. I’m frozen, head down and breathing heavy, unable to move.

Jack’s feet enter my line of sight as he moves to stand beside me. He doesn’t say anything, as he just stands there and I slowly start to feel my body again.

Eventually, I raise my head, but I can't bring myself to meet his eyes. "Sorry," I say in a raspy voice.

He's silent for a moment before he quietly moves to stand in front of me. I take a stuttering breath in and raise my eyes to look at him. His hulking frame that is usually held in a protective, arms-crossed, all business stance, is relaxed and inviting. And as I meet his eyes, they are soft.

"Those emotions run pretty deep," he says, and it's not a question. He knows.

I nod. "Yeah." I look down at the gloves on my hands. "Um... My dad hit me. I guess that just... reminded me of it..."

Jack blows out a breath and turns back to his bag. I raise my eyes to see him pull out two pads and strap them to his hands. As he turns back to me, he gives me a look of understanding. "I know what it can feel like to have memories force themselves upon you. Especially when you've tried to bury them."

I look between his eyes and feel an intense comfort in his gaze. Jack doesn't speak much, but he is observant. I think he communicates through actions more than words, and he doesn't need to say anything more than that for me to understand. He's had to work through these same feelings before.

He steps in front of me again. "Think you can land those punches on these?" He holds up the pads strapped to his hands.

I look between them, taking another breath in, and nod.

He nods back at me. "Put everything into it. Just let go. Use your body, let everything you are feeling flow through to your hands and onto the pads."

He holds a pad up and jerks his chin towards my feet. I move back into my stance, eyeing the pad on his hand. As I push off my right foot, and my right hand lands on the pad with force, my entire body feels like it releases a breath.

My eyes flick up to Jack's, and he smiles. "Good. Again."

I punch the pad again, and again, and again. Each time, I feel more tension leave my body. The intense pressure through my joints sends a rush of comfort through me. I hit harder, and harder, alternating hands as Jack holds up the other pad. I stay focused, watching the pads and landing hits. As my intensity increases, I feel like I am reaching deeper within me. Like I am scratching at the surface of a box I buried long ago. Each punch brings me closer to it, and the emotions I've suppressed for so long begin to stir.

"Keep going. Good. Let it out," Jack says as I continue to land hard punches on his pads.

My breathing is heavy and my muscles are tight, but it feels good. This is different from the fear and anxiety I feel every day. I feel powerful, and in charge. For the first time ever, I feel like I am in full control of my body and my mind, with nothing scratching at the back of my brain, begging for attention.

As I slow my punches, an unfamiliar, but intense rush flows through me. I feel light. I lower my gloves and take a deep breath in, feeling it all the way to my core.

Jack smiles at me. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

I let my breath out, feeling every negative thought flow with it. I feel alive and awake, and like years of tension has finally left me. As I close my eyes, basking in this intense and amazing feeling, a tear falls down my cheek. But this time, it's not from sadness.

It's relief.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

---

Ezra

I GLANCE at my watch for the tenth time in fifteen minutes.

“He’ll be ok,” Callum says as he sits beside me on the couch, passing me a bottle of water.

“Thanks. And yeah, I know.” I unscrew the top and take a drink, trying not to worry about how Harley is making out in his first therapy session. He’s in our room, as Ian found him a therapist that will do video calls since we’re on the road. So, I’m hanging out with Ollie and Callum in their room.

Ollie tosses a ball into the air and catches it while he lays on his bed. “He seemed pretty good at the interview this morning.”

I nod. “Yeah, he was. He’s feeling a lot better after last night. Jack took him boxing.”

Ollie sits bolt upright on his bed. “He *what?*”

Callum sniggers and leans back on the couch.

I try to hide my smile, knowing this will likely gut him not to be included. “Yeah, I guess Jack is a boxer and taught Harley some things. It helped him feel better, and get his anxious energy out.”

Ollie’s eye is practically twitching as he stares at me. I wait, letting him process this information.

“Ok,” he holds a hand up, “first of all, I am very happy for Harley, that is awesome. But *second of all*, Jack never told me he was a boxer and I would totally box with him!”

“Do you box?” Callum asks flatly, knowing the answer.

“No, but I could!” Ollie jabs the air in front of him and pretends to duck a punch.

I chuckle, pulling out my phone and shooting Emma a text that we’re ready for her phone call after her class. We’ve been putting it off all week, but it’s time to hear what she found out about our contract and what our options are if we can prove William really is fucking us over. Harley should be finished by the time she calls, so he’ll come over here when he’s done. And as that thought pops into my head, I check the time again, wondering how he’s doing.

Callum nudges me. “Want to talk about it?”

I turn my head to look at him and he offers me a reassuring smile. I smile back at him. “Just... worried about him. Thinking about how he’s doing.”

Ollie nods, tossing his ball back and forth between his hands. “Me too. But he’s going to rock it. Therapy is pretty cool once you get into it.”

Callum and I both look at him with surprise. “You go to therapy?” I ask.

He nods and moves to sit on the coffee table in front of us. “For years. More so when I was kid, not so much anymore. I don’t know if you guys have noticed, but...” he looks between us seriously, “I have a really fast and busy brain.”

Callum nods slowly, quickly glancing at me. “Yeah, I guess we kinda noticed...”

Ollie nods solemnly, like he’s sharing a deep, dark secret. I smile, as even though it’s an obvious fact about him, he feels like he’s opening up and sharing something with us. “Yeah, so Mom put me in therapy to help me with like, focus and stuff. It totally helps.”

“That’s awesome, man. Glad it helped you.” I smile at him, and he beams with pride. “I’m actually starting therapy this week too,” I say.

Callum smiles and Ollie holds out a fist for me to bump with a, “Fuck yeah.”

I laugh, bumping his fist. “Yeah, I think I tend to ignore my own needs for others. I could use some help with that.”

“You don’t say...” Callum says in mock shock.

I snort out a laugh and grab a controller, turning on the TV. “Let’s play FIFA. I need to occupy my mind with something else right now.”

“Solid game plan, dude.” Ollie shifts to sit on the couch beside me, plucking the controller out of Callum’s hand. “You played first last time.”

Callum shakes his head at him. “We played together. Just the two of us. So, no one played *first* last time.”

Ollie shrugs his shoulder as he taps the buttons on the controller. “Pretty sure you did *last* last time.”

I chuckle as Callum murmurs his displeasure and settles back on the couch to watch us. But as we play, my thoughts continue to drift back to Harley. He was nervous when I left, talking again about how he has no idea how to do this. But he’s talking to a professional, so he’s obviously in good hands and I know he’ll be ok.

Eventually my phone starts ringing and I look down to see Emma’s name lighting up my screen. I pick it up and put it on speaker, right as Ollie scores on me and lets out a whoop of excitement. “Hey, Em,” I say through a laugh. “Callum and Ollie are here.”

“Hey guys,” her voice comes through the phone, chuckling. “I can hear that. Where’s Harley?”

“He’ll be here in a minute,” I say, setting the controller on the coffee table. He should be wrapping up about now and heading over here.

“Should we wait for him?” Emma asks.

“Yeah, if you have time?”

“Yup, I’m done for the day, just got home,” she says.

“Emma.” Ollie leans in closer to the phone. “What are you reading right now?”

Callum rolls his eyes. “My god, Ollie, are you seriously going to ask *everybody* this?”

Ollie looks up at him, dead serious. “Yes.”

Emma laughs. “Still on your reading journey? Ok, let me see. Currently, besides textbooks, I am reading a book on the conscious state of *flow*.”

Ollie’s face twists in horror. “Uh, thanks. But I’ll pass.”

Callum leans forward, his elbows on his knees. “Did you get to the part about non-self-conscious individualism?”

I whip my head to him as Emma gasps through the phone. “Oh my god, yes. And how it actually makes you *more* complex?”

“What the fuck?” I ask, watching as Callum smiles at the phone.

He looks up at me and drops his smile. “I read that book too.”

“Of course you did,” Ollie says, dramatically throwing himself back on the couch.

A knock sounds at the door, so I pass the phone to Callum and head over to open it for Harley. He steps into the room, and as I close the door, he turns to face me. He doesn’t say anything, but slowly steps into me while I wrap him in a hug.

“You ok?” I ask quietly.

He nods against me and sighs. He’s quiet for a moment before he says, “That was hard.”

“I bet.” I hold him tighter and kiss the side of his head. As I keep him here in my arms, I feel a huge amount of pride. His life has been riddled with pain, and he is due a lifetime of happiness. I will do everything I can to make that happen, but I am ecstatic that he is also taking matters into his own hands and working on creating this life he deserves.

He turns his head, his lips meeting mine in a soft kiss. “I love you,” he says against my lips.

I smile, squeezing him tight and pulling a little chuckle from him. “I love you too.”

I lead him over to the couch where Emma and Callum are chatting away about the book Emma is reading while Ollie is dramatically draped on the couch, looking bored as he stares out the window. He turns his head to smile at Harley as he sits on the coffee table across from him. I sit beside Harley, placing my hand on his thigh.

“Well, the concept of the alteration of time is-”

“OH MY GOD.” Ollie rolls his eyes and stares at Callum. “Let’s move *on* already.”

Harley gives me a questioning look.

“Emma is reading a book Callum read,” I explain. Harley nods knowingly and gives Ollie a sympathetic look, but I can see his amusement. Ollie is clearly feeling a little salty about being left out of some book talk.

“Ok, ok,” Emma says. “Harley’s here?”

“Yeah, hi Emma,” Harley says, shifting his weight anxiously. I rub my thumb over his thigh, giving him a smile and hoping this isn’t going to be too much for him.

“Hey!” she says cheerfully. “Ok, so I guess I’ll just get right into it.”

A nervous energy enters the room as we all sit quietly, waiting to hear what our future may hold.

“So, to be honest, at first I didn’t think you could have grounds to terminate your contract since it is Sentry falsely reporting royalties, if they are. And your contract is with Capture Music, not Sentry.”

I meet Callum’s eyes, but he doesn’t look worried. I release the breath I’ve been holding and trust Emma to work through this with good news.



“However, William owns Sentry, and is the director of Capture Music. He chose to use Sentry rather than in-house departments for distribution of music. If he can be found responsible for this, that blurs those lines. So, I had to pick apart your contract a bit more.”

Harley’s leg starts bouncing, so I move in closer to him, wrapping my arm around his waist.

“What would most likely happen once William is proven guilty of embezzlement, is the music group overseeing the label would sever ties with him and hire another director for Capture Music. And they would retain you under your current contract since it is with Capture Music, not William as an individual.”

Callum rubs his hand over his chin thoughtfully. “That makes sense...” he mutters.

“But... I do think you’d have the grounds to terminate if you wanted to. Technically, Capture Music has a right and responsibility to collect all *gross* income. Any company should be aware of all revenue and expenses from the top level, and not blindly rely on a third party to report to them. The only way Sentry would be getting away with that is because William owns it and is director of Capture Music.”

“So, he has his hands in both pots to make sure the accounting department in Capture Music doesn’t know the gross earnings or question it...” Callum says thoughtfully.

“I would assume so,” Emma says. “But, what this means, is that we could very likely argue non-performance by the company. This happens when they do not fulfil their obligations of the contract. And one of their obligations is to provide you with timely, detailed, *accurate*, reports showing all revenue received and all expenses occurred. Which William has done... but if we are right, he is aware that they are not accurate. And they are far from detailed. If he didn’t know, that’s on Sentry. But if he does, that’s on Capture Music.”

“And that means we can terminate?” Harley asks hesitantly.

“My professor seems to think so. Not all instances of non-performance allow termination of a contract, but non-performance does include breach of contract.” I hear some papers shuffling through the phone. “Which, technically, this is. And technically, is grounds for termination.”

Ollie sits up straight and looks between us all, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “So... if we can prove this is happening... we have a serious shot at getting out of this?”

My heart starts beating faster as I look down at my phone, waiting for Emma’s answer.

“Yes.”

Ollie whoops with excitement, fist pumping the air. “Fuck yeah!”

Harley and I laugh, but Callum stays quiet, watching us.

“What?” I ask him.

He looks down at the phone. “And what happens after we terminate?”

Emma is silent for a moment. “The label will still own the rights to your music. They are copyright holder, owner and author. They will still earn royalties on it, and they own the recording, the musical composition and even the lyrics. You won’t be able to play your music.”

We’re all dead silent.

“You can purchase back your recordings and the rights to them.” She pauses. “However, the payout is quite large.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, running a hand over my face.

“So... you guys will have a decision to make,” Emma says gently. “Once you prove William is doing this, you can either walk away without having to pay anything, but without your music. Or you can stay and hope whoever replaces William has some semblance of a heart and doesn’t enforce the insane clauses in this contract.”

Harley sighs and looks down at his hand, spinning his ring on his thumb.

“Ok.” Callum scoots forward on the couch. “Regardless of what we decide to do, we need to get the earning reports from digital streaming services so we can prove that William is doing this. Emma, you said if Capture Music fails to provide detailed listings of all earnings and expenses, it’s a breach of contract. So, we need to prove this.”

“William would be the one hiding this, so I’m not sure how you are going to get it...” Emma says cautiously.

“I know... so I think it’s time we talk to someone who knows more about the inside workings of Capture Music.” Callum nods. “I think it’s time we talk to Ben about all of this.”

“Oh fuck yeah, Benny will totally help.” Ollie nods between us all enthusiastically.

Harley gives a tight nod and looks back down at this thumb ring.

I take his hand in mine. “What are you thinking, babe?”

He looks up with a big inhale. “I’m just stuck on the end, I guess.”

Ollie nods thoughtfully. “Yeah... neither option is ideal...”

“I won’t be able to keep doing this, guys. Not like this.” Harley shakes his head. “There’s no way.”

“We don’t have to, I will walk away with you, bud,” Callum says and Ollie and I nod in agreement. “Like I said before, the most important thing is us, not this job.”

“But, walking away and leaving behind everything we have worked for...” Harley blows out a breath and rubs his forehead with his hand. We all fall into silence again, as we all know what this means. It’s a blow for all of us. We worked so hard on this music, and it’s also *our* story.

I feel a hurt in my heart as I think about our songs, and them not belonging to us. I think of *Silhouette*, and what it means to Harley. A song he wrote at such a vulnerable time in

his life as he was figuring out his sexuality. *My Desire*, and how we both wrote it, coming to accept that we wanted each other. And *Details...* our story. The song we wrote to shout to the world how much we love each other. And if we leave... someone else will own our story. Someone else will make money off *our* story.

I swallow and pull him into me, holding him tight. “One step at a time.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

*Harley*

I PUNCH the pad on Jack's hand with all my strength, immediately following with a lead uppercut as he moves the other pad in front of me.

"Good, more," he grunts as I land another jab.

I continue to follow his pads, punching with force and letting the worry and negativity flow out of me. Jack steps backwards, but I follow, immediately closing the gap to continue landing my hits. He smiles and it spurs me on even more.

"Harley," I hear Ian say behind me. I lower my gloves and turn around to see him in the door, smiling. "Shower in fifteen, ok?"

"Ok," I nod, out of breath, but feeling good. The sweat trickles down my back and the shiver it sends through me is invigorating.

I turn back to Jack, and he taps the pads together, holding them up again with a smirk. "Keep it going," he says.

I smile, getting back into my stance and continuing to go through the six different punches Jack taught me. He is starting to challenge me more, even though this is only our second time doing this. Every now and then, he takes a step back, forward or to the side and I have to stay focused and follow him without interrupting my punches.

After what seems like only two minutes, he lowers his pads and gestures to his duffle bag with his chin. "Time's up."

I nod, walking over to his bag and dropping the gloves in it. As I'm unwrapping my hands, he leans against the wall, arms crossed. "We'll need to get you your own gloves soon."

I smile at him. "Yeah, I think so."

He picks up his bag and pats my shoulder while I wipe my brow with a towel. I take a moment to appreciate the lightness in my body, even though I have to go get ready for a show right now.

"Thanks, Jack," I say as he starts making his way to the door.

He looks back and gives me a crooked smile. "Same time next show."

I smile and nod. "Deal."

As we leave the room and I head towards our dressing room, Ollie appears out of nowhere.

"Hey, buddy, what's up? Oh, you're all sweaty. You were boxing? With Jack?" He glances over his shoulder looking for Jack, who seems to have disappeared already.

I nod, running a hand through my sweaty hair. "Yeah."

"Hmm." He presses his lips together and nods as he walks along beside me. "That's cool, that's cool."

I try to hide my smile as we reach our dressing room, pausing before opening the door. "If you ask, he might teach you too."

He puts a hand on his chest and shakes his head with wide eyes. "Oh, no, no, it's yours. You guys do the thing." He holds his hands up with small punches to the air between us. "Just being curious, you know..." He puts his hands on his hips and stares off into space nodding. "Jack and I will find our thing someday. Probably running. Yeah, definitely running."

I pat his chest with a smile. "For sure." I pull open the door and head into our dressing room where Ezra and Callum are on the couch playing video games. They both look up as I enter, Ollie trailing behind me.

“Hey,” Ezra says, standing up.

I glance around the room, and thankfully no one else is in here. “Hi.” I smile as I walk over to him, giving him a kiss.

His eyes flick between mine as a huge smile spreads across his face. “Well... *hel-lo*.” He takes my hand in his and gives it a squeeze. “Boxing was good?”

I nod, taking a big breath in. “Yeah, it was.”

“Good,” he says softly, letting go of my hand and winking at me.

I scrunch my nose at him, and I head into the bathroom to shower. As I step under the warm spray, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. It’s been a busy day, and this is the first time all day I have been alone, and it’s been quiet. We had an interview this morning, then I had therapy, our talk with Emma, then we had to come right to the arena. I was starting to get pretty wound up but was relieved when Jack suggested boxing before the show. I’m not sure I would have been able to manage otherwise.

I take my time with my shower, slowly washing my hair and letting the water just run over me. My thoughts wander to what Emma said this afternoon, and the decision we are going to have to make. And my heart starts pounding. Then my thoughts start in on the show tonight. And I feel the tingles start in my hands. But... it’s less. The light feeling in my body from boxing is still there, and the panic doesn’t seem to be pushing back. It’s just... there. I blow out a breath, putting my hands on the shower wall, letting the water run over my face.

I pull a breath in for the count of three, sending it right to my stomach. Then I blow it out, counting to five. I do it again, and again, and again. My therapist, Lauren, had me do this today, and at the time I thought it was silly. I know how to breathe. But apparently, I don’t. I let my thoughts take me back to my conversation with her today. I was so nervous to talk to her, and when I started to tell her about my home life, trying to explain why I’m like this, I lost it. The anxiety took over and I couldn’t do it. But somehow, she seemed to understand exactly what it was I needed. She didn’t ask me

any more questions and we didn't talk about anything else. She taught me these deep breaths I can use when I feel anxious, and told me to practice grounding myself with my senses. Five things I can see, four things I can touch, three things I can hear, two things I can smell and one thing I can taste. It all seems so simple... but it's *so* hard. Why is *breathing* so hard?

I release one more breath before I turn off the shower and step out. As I stare at myself in the mirror, I have conflicting feelings. I feel anxious, but calm. And it's not a war, they are not competing with each other. It's almost like an awareness... the anxiety is deep in my body, rooted there, and it feels like it is never going to leave. It is a part of me. But the calm I'm feeling is on the surface. It's new, fresh, fragile. In a weird way, this new calm is almost more anxiety inducing...

I shake my head, grabbing my clothes and pulling them on. I don't understand this new feeling. I guess I don't understand calm. But I guess it's something I'll be learning.

I exit the bathroom, and Ezra is there waiting for me. "Hey baby," he says with a smile.

I smile at him, walking into his open arms. "Hey." I melt into him, resting my head on his shoulder with a sigh.

"We haven't had a chance to talk yet, so I just wanted to make sure you're ok," he says softly, resting his head against mine.

I nod into his shoulder. "Yeah. Today was a lot, but I'm... ok."

He gently pushes me back to look into my eyes. "I'm glad to see you're starting to feel better."

I nod and swallow, once again feeling the anxiety creep up. "I think it's best I don't think about it right now."

His eyes flash with concern, but he quickly smiles again. "Ok. I'm here for you, babe. Whatever you need."

I bring my lips to his in a soft kiss. "Thank you."



As we walk down to hair and wardrobe together, I tie my damp hair back. I'm already dressed since I showered, and Olivia lets me keep my hair as is, so I have some time. And time isn't good for my nerves. I sit on the couch and watch as Olivia tames Ezra's hair, while Callum and Ollie get changed. The longer I sit here, the more my anxiety rises. Thoughts I don't want are trying to make their way in, reminding me of the decisions we have to make, of the parts of my past I shared with Lauren, of going on stage tonight and wondering if I'm going to be anxious again. I rub my shoulder as I stare down at my knees, trying to focus on my breath and do the deep breathing exercises she taught me.

The couch depresses beside me, and I look up to see Ian. He smiles. "You were looking good in there, who knew you had a boxer in you?"

I breathe out a light laugh. "Not me."

"I think you're capable of a lot more than you give yourself credit for. You play any other sports?" he asks.

"Uh, not really. Just some hockey whenever I could," I say. "I like sports... Just never had much of an opportunity to play."

He nods thoughtfully. "So who's your team?"

I smile at him. "The New Yorker in me says the Rangers. But really... I'd go with the Habs."

He tips his head back on a laugh. "Traitor!"

I laugh as well, and even though I know he is doing this to help distract me, it feels really good.

Anna comes into the room on her tablet, tapping away on it. She looks up and briskly walks over to me. "Harley, I need to schedule an interview in a couple days, but you have this time blocked on your schedule, we will need to move whatever this is--"

"No, Anna, not now," Ian says calmly, but firmly. "And no, that time stays blocked off."

Anna stares back at Ian. She then looks back down at her tablet. “But it’s twice a week, that’s too much time to-”

“We said no,” Ian says, still calm. “It stays. Not an option.”

Anna’s eyes slide to mine, and I quickly drop my gaze. This is not something I want to deal with right now.

“Alright then,” she says curtly, and whirls around, leaving the room.

Ian is quiet for a moment before he turns back to me. “So would you hate me if I said I was a Bruins fan?”

I whip my head to him in shock, not sure how I’m going to handle him being a fan of my team’s rival, but he laughs and says, “Kidding. Rangers fan here.”

“Thank god,” I say with a smirk.

Ian glances at his watch, then to me. “Alright, time to go,” he says, patting my leg and standing up.

Ezra walks over to me with a smile as I stand as well. I glance around the room, and quickly grab his hand needing some contact with him before we head backstage. I feel my nerves stirring, and I am desperate to keep them all right where they are. But as we walk backstage, and complete the same routine as every other night, the anxiety continues to rise. I close my eyes, breathing in for the count of three and out for the count of five. It’s getting harder to do these breaths, and I feel the frustration beginning to bubble inside me. But I breathe again, and again. I think of how focused I was, and needed to be in boxing. I think of how my body felt when hitting the pads, and the breaths come easier. *Ok... I can do this. I can do this.*

I feel an arm around my shoulders and open my eyes to see Ollie’s happy grin. I smile at him, and I’m surprised by how... ok I feel right now. The anxiety is still there, hovering and nagging, but not taking over like it has been. Each show has been getting easier, but this one feels different. My body feels different. And my brain is noticing.

And as I place my hand over Ollie, Callum and Ezra’s while we yell out, “Burn hot!”, I feel it. I *want* it. I want to feel

good, and I feel a rush of determination to get back there. My heart is thundering against my ribs and my hands are shaking, but I don't feel like I need to leave. While I'm not yet feeling the confidence and comfort I've lost, and am so desperate to return to, this feels like a step in the right direction. And right now, I'll take it.

I focus on the routine, reminding myself of what's next and listen to Ezra's voice in my head saying *one step at a time*. And finally, I let myself, for the first time since we returned to tour, to *really* feel the music. I feel the bass and drums in my chest, I feel the guitar strings on my fingers and the heat from the lights on my skin. The roar of the crowd rolls over and through me, lighting up the part of me that has darkened. The part that loves this. It's dim... but it's there. I can see it, I can feel it. It's coming back.

Once we reach the middle of the show and it's Ollie's turn to talk to the crowd, I'm surprised to realize that there were moments when I felt like I had actually let go. Every now and then, the anxiety dips beneath the surface, letting me have that moment before it comes back to settle in that deep, comfortable, yet uncomfortable space within me.

I sit on the drum riser beside Callum as Ollie makes his way to the front of the stage, chatting with the crowd and reading signs. Ezra sits beside me and flashes me a smile. He pops out my in-ear monitor and leans in. "You're hot."

I smile, subtly looking him up and down. "You're not so bad yourself."

His smile widens, and his eyes sparkle. He looks *so* happy. And if that isn't motivation enough to get better, I don't know what is.

"*What* is with the whole sheets thing?" Ollie says into the mic, exasperation lacing his voice.

Ezra, Callum and I look down the stage to Ollie as he stands before a sign, hand on his hip, studying it carefully. He points to the girl holding it. "What's your name?" He waits for the answer. "Melissa. Hi, Melissa. Your sign says, '*Callum, I'm also a freak in the sheets*'. Care to explain?"

Callum groans. “Here we go again.”

Ollie draws his brows together as he listens to Melissa explain her sign. “Excel. Is that what that green X is? What does it do?”

I chuckle. I’ve never even owned a computer and I know what that is. How does he not know that?

Ollie looks back at us. “Is this that spreadsheet thing again?!” The crowd erupts in laughter and cheers and Ollie smiles widely. “It is! Oh, I got it!” He points to Melissa again. “You... are trouble. But I love it. Keep it up.”

I laugh, and it feels *so* good. I stay in this moment, watching Ollie prance around the stage continuing his comedy session, while I focus on this feeling. And I smile to myself when I realize, I’m reclaiming what I lost. In this moment, I have hope that I can get better.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

---

*Ezra*

AS I SHUT the water off and step out of the shower, I pause. I let my eyes roam over him while he stands at the bathroom counter, brushing his teeth. Harley's eyes meet mine in the mirror and I almost lose my breath. A lot happened today, and while I've tried to make time to check in on him, I haven't had a chance to truly *see* him.

His eyes are soft, but bright. Relaxed, like I haven't seen in a long time, and like they are truly seeing. As I take in the way he is standing, his shoulders almost slouched, and his hand resting softly on the counter before him, I realize just how much tension he has been holding in his body.

I walk up behind him and wrap my arms around his waist, kissing his neck softly. "Have I told you how proud I am of you?"

He smiles and leans over to rinse out his mouth. "You've mentioned," he says as he stands up straight again. His eyes seem to unfocus for a moment as he looks thoughtful. I stay quiet, continuing to hold him here against me while his hand mindlessly trails over my arm around his waist. "I had fun tonight," he says quietly, still seeming a bit lost to his thoughts.

I smile and press my lips to his shoulder. "I could tell."

A small smile tugs at his lips, and he turns around in my arms to face me. "It wasn't like it used to be. I still felt nervous, and it was hard. But... it's better." He releases a breath. "I think I can get better."

“Of course you can.” I kiss his nose, and I feel like I am going to cry I am so fucking happy for him.

He trails his hand over my chest, tracking it with his eyes. “I never thought it would be possible.”

I place my fingers under his chin to tilt his head up so I can see his beautiful green eyes. “It was always possible. You just need a little help to see it.”

He nods lightly. “Maybe a lot of help...”

“However much, it doesn’t matter. You’re getting what you need now, and I am so happy for you.” I rake my fingers through his hair. “You’ve had a rough go, babe, it’s more than ok to need whatever you need.”

His eyes move between mine before they soften with a smile. “I need you.”

I cock an eyebrow at him. “Any particular part of me?”

He chuckles adorably, casting his eyes down at my towel-wrapped hips. He looks back up with a small shrug and a smirk.

“Mm.” I nod. “Ok. But...” I reach into his sweatpants and fist his cock. “On one condition.”

He bites his lip with a sparkle in his eye. “What’s that?”

“You let me make you feel good.” I squeeze his cock and run my hand up and down his hardening length.

He lets out a breath and drops his eyes to my hand in his pants. When they rise again, they’re filled with heat. *Oh yeah... this will be fun.* “We’ll see,” he says in a low voice.

I smile, and move my other hand to my towel, dropping it to the floor. His eyes follow my hand as I wrap it around my cock and pump myself in the same rhythm in which I’m working him. He pushes his pants down then places his hands on the edge of the counter on either side of him, watching as I jerk us both. His eyes are roaming my body while his tongue runs along his bottom lip, and I can barely take it. I step into him, crashing my mouth to his. His hands grasp the back of

my head as he kisses me forcefully, pulling a moan from deep within my chest.

“So what are you going to do to me?” Harley asks against my lips, keeping me pressed against him with his hands in my hair.

I breathe against him heavily, taking both of our cocks in one hand and stroking. “I’m going to suck you while you keep your dirty mouth moving.”

He smirks dangerously. “Then get down there.”

I’m on my knees in no time, wrapping my lips around his perfect cock. He groans, sinking his fingers into my hair while I lick and suck his tip. “Fuck, baby, yes...” he moans.

My cock jumps at the sound of his husky voice filled with pleasure. The pleasure I’ve been desperate to give to him all day as I watched him let go and finally feel. I wanted so badly to help him feel even more, and now that he’s in my mouth, I am even more desperate. Desperate to give him every ounce of relief I can. I bring a hand down to stroke myself, as the thought of him coming in my mouth is already making me fucking feral.

“Yeah, Ezra. Fuck, I love it when you touch yourself,” he says in a breathy voice.

I raise my eyes to him, as a thrill shoots through me. He is looking down at me, one hand still on the counter beside him, the other in my hair. I take him deeper into my mouth, and into my throat. I hold him there, before slowly pulling back while I stroke my cock. His eyes stay on my mouth, his bottom lip between his teeth while he groans.

I drop my eyes to his dick before me, and lick from base to tip. I feel his shiver, and his grip tightens in my hair. I do it again, slow and teasing. Then I take his head back in my mouth, licking and sucking that sensitive part of him right under the tip.

“Mm,” he moans. “You’re so good at sucking me, baby.”

I moan, taking more of him into my mouth while I feel a pressure build within me at just his words alone. As I continue

to pump myself, I bring him to the back of my throat, right to the base of his cock. I swallow, fighting off the gag as my eyes water, needing more of him. I want every single bit of him. His groans are sending tingles up my spine, the subtle encouragement and praise filling my needs as I fill his. I pull back to take a breath and once my lungs fill with air, I go right back in.

“You look so fucking hot on your knees with my dick in your throat,” he says in that raspy, husky voice that sends my entire body into a heated, lust filled mess of desire.

My eyes fly up to his, an intense warmth rushing through my body as my cock hardens even more in my hand. I feel like I could explode right here and now with the way he is looking at me. And his perfect, dirty fucking mouth...

I release him from my mouth again so I can take a breath, pumping him as I pump myself, increasing my pace to bring us both closer. I don't know how much longer I am going to last. And I think he knows this, because he tilts my head back so I look up at him. “Be a good boy and make me come.”

I whip my head out of his grasp, shuffling closer to him on my knees and taking him right into my mouth. I suck him, hard and fast, and as his hips start thrusting, I groan in pleasure. I jerk myself with the same intensity, and as I see Harley's stomach muscles tighten, I know he's as close as I am.

Harley grunts. “I'm coming. Come with me, come... come...” he urges me, as I feel him pulsing in my mouth. The second I feel his hot cum on my tongue, my release surfaces and pleasure rolls through my body as I come in my hand. I swallow Harley down as he groans, his hand once again finding my head, keeping me on his cock as he shoots his cum into my mouth.

Once I've taken every last drop, I pull back, falling onto my butt on the floor. I look up at him as I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “Feel good?” I ask on a breath.

He breathes out a laugh, leaning against the counter. “Yeah. Really fucking good.”





“Ok I think we should do something so fun it will just blow *all* our minds,” Ollie says, looking around at us seriously.

“Like what?” Harley asks, dealing out cards to each of us.

Ollie looks around the bus as he thinks on this. “Well, we have a show tonight, so we don’t have much time... Oh!” He raises his hands up in excitement, almost hitting Callum in the face beside him. “Soccer in the hallway?” He then shakes his head. “No, no that’s not it...”

“Why don’t we wait and see if they have any ideas for something they’d like to do?” I suggest, picking my cards up from the table.

“Yeah, ok, good idea.” He bounces in his seat as he picks up his cards as well. “I’m just so excited to see my girls. It’s been way too long.”

Harley chuckles beside me, looking over his cards in his hand. We’re all excited to see Hannah and Lulu, but Ollie is literally vibrating. They arrived in Belfast this morning, and are waiting for us at the hotel, as we’re on the way from Dublin. Hannah was scheduled to come out for us to have a *date* tomorrow, and luckily Lulu is coming too. We’ll all hang out today, and they’ll get some time together tomorrow while Hannah and I are out being fake and deceiving our fans.

“You’ll see them in less than an hour,” Callum says, laying a card down. “Now, go.”

I smile, as I feel Harley’s leg bouncing beside me as well. Ollie isn’t the only one who’s excited.

We pass the time on the bus playing cards, while Callum adds the outcome of each game to his score log. Harley and I bought him a logbook for all his score keeping, and when we gave it to him I swear he was going to cry. So now, we have a running log of all the various games we play, and he keeps track of not only scores, but variables such as location, time of

day, amount of players, even the music we're listening to and the weather. He gets so excited over it, and I think we're going to need to get him a bigger logbook soon.

The second our bus pulls up to the hotel, Ollie is on his feet. "Ok, let's go. Let's go, let's go."

"Wait til the bus stops, Ol," Harley says, peering out the window as we are still moving.

"Yeah, ok." Ollie shakes his hands in front of him and blows out a breath.

I laugh, then turn to Harley, cupping the side of his face and laying a big kiss on him. He smiles against me and kisses me back, taking this moment for ourselves before we head back into the public eye.

The bus stops and Ollie immediately jumps off with Matteo calling to him to wait and running off behind him. We follow, catching up to him in the lobby as he anxiously waits for our rooms. And the second we get up to our floor and Hannah opens the door to their room, Ollie pounces on her.

"Oh my god! It's been *so long*," Ollie wails as he hangs onto her.

"It's only been a few weeks, Ollie," Hannah laughs against him.

Lulu scoots forward to hug Harley, and his massive smile is fucking adorable. We all get our hugs in, and Ollie is so excited I eventually find him in my arms as well. But whatever, he needs a hug so I just go with it.

"So what are we doing??" Ollie asks, sitting in between Hannah and Lulu on the couch in their room. They laugh and move to make room for him. "I had ideas, but I've been told to ask you. Do you like soccer? Wait, no, what are your ideas?"

I shake my head as I sit on the arm of the chair Harley is sitting in. He wraps his arm around my hips and leans his head against me with a smile.

Lulu laughs. "Um, yes we like soccer?" She looks around at us. "How long until we head to the arena?"

Callum checks his watch. “A few hours.”

Hannah peers over her shoulder out the window and then to Ollie with a smile. “I think a few hours is enough time for a game of soccer in the field over there.”

Ollie whips his body around on the couch to look out the window. He then stares back at Hannah with wide eyes. “This is why we’re friends.”

Lulu sniggers and looks to me and Harley. “Before we go, let’s catch up. I know a lot has happened since we were all together.”

Harley nods. “Yeah. Emma told you guys what she found out about our contract?”

Hannah gives us a sad look. “She did. That’s a tough decision to make.”

Callum sighs as he rubs a hand over his chin, which surprises me. He hasn’t really let his frustration with this show, as he’s always on task and looking to the next step and what we need to do. I think the waiting is hard for him, as we have nothing we can really do to move this forward right now until we talk to Ben.

“But, we’re going to talk to Ben about it,” I say, trying to help Callum out. “He’s coming out in a couple days while we’re in Paris, where we have studio time to finish the last of the recording for the album. Then, hopefully we’ll have a better idea at what we’re looking at.”

Callum looks up at me and smiles with a nod. “Yeah. I’ve already got everything sorted out for when we talk to him.”

I smile back at him. “I figured you would.”

“Sounds like a solid plan,” Lulu says, standing up. “So, since we have nothing that needs to be done right now, let’s go play some soccer.”

“Yeah!” Ollie jumps up. He claps his hands together looking around the room. “Ok, change into your soccer playing clothes everyone, and meet in the lobby in ten. Ok,

break!” He runs out of the room at lightning speed but comes back a moment later. “Cal, I need a key.”

Callum shakes his head as he reaches into his pocket taking out the keycard and ushering Ollie out of the room. Harley and I follow, heading to our room to change. Jack and Matteo agree to come with us, since Ian doesn’t want us all leaving the hotel alone, even though it’s close by. And as we cross the street to the field, I’m actually feeling quite excited about this.

Lulu points to Harley. “You’re on my team.”

He smiles and walks over to her, giving her a high five.

“Wait.” Ollie holds a hand up and adjusts his headband. “I don’t think that’s fair.”

“Why?” Harley asks.

“Because...” Ollie looks between Harley and Lulu. “You’re like, all connected and shit.”

Lulu scrunches her face up in confusion. “Huh?”

Ollie waves a hand at them, then points at me. “If they’re on a team together, then you’re on mine.”

“Ok...” I say as I walk over to him, not sure what his thought process is here, but I think we’re all just going to go with it.

“Hannah is with us, and Callum, with them.” Ollie nods proudly, like he’s just solved a big, hard puzzle.

Callum shrugs and walks over to join Harley and Lulu.

We set up goal lines, and as we play we quickly drop all the rules, much to Callum’s dismay. We remain on our teams, but really we’re just doing everything we can to score on each other. It’s fun and carefree, and we eventually start coming up with the best and most ridiculous ways to score. At one point Ollie actually managed to score in a handstand. And no one can figure out how.

As I pass the ball to Hannah, my eye catches Anna at the edge of the field with a cameraman. I groan and catch Harley’s

eye to signal to him that we're being watched and recorded. His eyes flash to Anna and back to me, and I *hate* that some of the light in him immediately dims.

Lulu whips her head around to see what he is looking at. Her face twists into an evil smile. She raises her hand and waves dramatically. "Hi Alanna!!"

Anna looks down, shaking her head and looking pissed. *Well, I mean... she deserves it.*

Hannah appears beside Lulu, shielding her eyes from the sun and theatrically squinting at Anna. I angle myself away from Anna to hide my smirk, watching as Hannah overacts her recognition of her. "Oh, hey! Abigail, right?"

I see Anna muttering, but she's too far away for us to hear her. Thankfully.

Harley smiles as he looks down at the soccer ball at his feet, and Ollie snorts a laugh, not even trying to hide it.

"You're welcome to come play with us!" Lulu calls to her. "You may want to change out of the heels though, ground's a little soft!"

She shakes her head, turning her body away from us to talk to the cameraman.

Lulu shrugs. "Ok, maybe next time!"

Callum laughs and motions for Harley to pass the ball to him. He does, and I walk over to him, glancing over my shoulder at the camera.

"You alright?" I ask, but I'm surprised to see the amusement in his eyes.

"Yeah." He smiles and shakes his head as he glances towards Anna. "I just want to have fun."

I smile back at him. "Well, then let's have fun."

We continue to play our version of soccer for the rest of the afternoon, and Anna eventually leaves us alone, as some fans gather at a distance to watch us. Callum kept his records, but as we make our way back into the hotel, he's mumbling

about how he's going to have to create a lot of categories to capture all the variables of our goals.

The girls travel with us to the arena, and once again they stand front and centre for the show. And I think having Lulu there was the best thing that could have happened for Harley tonight. He boxed with Jack again before the show, and he took his time to practice his breaths when he was feeling anxious. But I saw even more of those moments tonight where the anxiety let go, and he was able to just be himself on stage. The happiness on his face when he looked into the crowd and saw his best friend smiling back at him was amazing to watch. And the pride Lulu has for him was clear as day. Ollie was right. Harley and Lulu really do have a special connection, and it's a beautiful thing to see.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

---

*Harley*

“HARLEY?”

I snap to attention, looking up at Lulu sitting on the bed across from me. “Huh?”

“What’s on your mind?” she asks, popping a gummy bear into her mouth. She gives me a cautious look, and I quickly put on a smile that I know looks fake and place my letter on the scrabble board between us.

“Not much,” I say with a shrug. Except that’s not true. I keep letting my mind wander because my boyfriend is on a date.

“Hm,” Lulu hums, clearly not believing me. “Spill.”

I sigh, grabbing the bag and pulling another tile. *V. Well, that one sucks.* I take a moment to organize my thoughts, piecing together where exactly my mind has taken me in the past hour since Hannah and Ezra have been out on their PR date. And it’s a bit all over the place. I’m feeling sad, that *my* boyfriend is being portrayed as someone else’s, frustration that this is still happening, and that we have zero say in any of it, anxiety because it just sucks... and wonder.

“I...” I let out another breath. “I’ve been wondering what is going to happen.”

“Yeah. I get that,” Lulu says, placing her tiles on the board. “But like Ezra said yesterday, there’s not much you can do until you talk to Ben tomorrow and see what the next steps are.”

I shake my head. “No... more than that.” I fiddle with a tile in my hands, running the edge of it along my fingertips. “I think... I’ve been wondering lately, if I could say I’m with Ezra... to everyone... would I?”

Lulu’s face softens as she sets the bag of tiles down to listen.

“I mean, I get these feelings whenever Ezra is out with Hannah. And even though I know it’s not real and I love Hannah, I am *so* jealous.” I keep my eyes down, ashamed of feeling this way.

“Of course, anyone would be,” Lulu says gently.

“Yeah, but...” I look up at her and press my lips together, thinking of the right words to describe this feeling. “If we do get out of this? Whether we continue with a director who doesn’t care that we’re together, or if we don’t and we walk away... it all comes back to that same fear I had ever since I realized I was gay.”

“The one your dumbass father instilled in you that isn’t true?” she asks, tilting her head to keep my eyes on her.

“It’s hard to truly believe that no one is going to care if I’m gay when his words have been my truth for the past ten months.” I look down at the scrabble board, letting my eyes trail over the letters. “Even though I *know* the people that really matter love us.”

Lulu sighs. “Yeah. I know.”

I spin my ring on my thumb. “I love Ezra, more than anything. And I *want* everyone in the world to know he is mine. I just can’t help but feel like I can’t do that... Which is fucked because this is exactly why we want out of this. So we *don’t* have to hide.” I forcefully blow out a breath, rubbing a hand over the back of my neck.

“If I could just give my two cents?”

We both look over to the desk where Ollie is sitting with his laptop.



“You don’t *have* to come out.” He spins in his chair to face us. “Just because you are free, doesn’t mean everyone needs to know your business. It means that you are no longer controlled. You are literally free to do *whatever* you want. If you want to keep your love a secret, that’s your secret to keep. If you want to shout it from the rooftops, also your call. Or you could quietly just *be* and let the people who actually care to notice, notice. That’s the beauty of freedom. You call the shots.”

Lulu and I stare at Ollie as he turns back to his laptop.

“That... was very insightful, Ollie.” Lulu slowly turns to me with wide eyes.

I nod. “Yeah...” I say slowly, thinking on what he said. It makes sense. And thinking of it that way actually makes me feel a bit better about it. *I* have the choice, and I hold the power. If this all works, no one will be in control of me anymore. “Thanks, Ol.”

He holds up a thumb, face buried in his laptop.

I chuckle, picking up my tiles and laying them down to form my word. And earning myself a double word score. I look back up to Ollie. “What are you working on?”

“My Goodreads.” He turns around again, holding his laptop and flipping it around to show us. “Hannah showed it to me this morning. It’s a site, with *all the books*. With *reviews*. So I can see what it’s all about before I start.” He proudly looks down at his laptop. “I feel like this may be the answer to my problem.”

I lean closer, looking at his page he’s created. “So you add books you want to read?”

“And rate and review them.” He nods seriously. “I’m building my TBR right now.” I give him a questioning look and he adds, “To Be Read.”

Lulu smiles at him. “So, what’s up next then?”

“Well, I’m currently reading a friends to lovers book. And honestly? I’m into it. I like it. But it’s not quite a five star for me.” He shakes his head slowly as he looks over his list of

books. “Something is missing... And I don’t know what it is...” He starts typing furiously as he mumbles, “Best friend’s brother is a thing?”

“Well, hopefully you find it,” I say as I watch Lulu place her tiles, earning a *triple* word score.

“Shit,” Ollie murmurs.

“What?”

“Computer just died. And my charger is in my room.” He runs a hand through his hair in distress. “I have so much more work to do.”

“I’m sure if you’re quiet, Callum won’t mind you going in to get it,” Lulu offers.

Ollie picks up his computer and stands. “Yeah, well, he told me he needed a nap, but when I left he was on his phone, thumbs flying a mile a minute. So I bet he didn’t even nap.” He points a finger in the air dramatically, tucking his laptop under his arm. “And for that, I will not be quiet. I’m going in. Wish me luck. No! Wish *him* luck.” He strides to the door with purpose, whipping it open, and leaving.

Lulu laughs as the door closes. “God love that precious little soul.”

I chuckle, as I grab the tile bag from her. “For someone so... disorganized, he has a solid grasp on life.”

“Oh my god, right?” Lulu looks up at me in surprise. “Like, damn. That was good.”

I smile, setting my letters on my rack. I’m quiet while I scan the board, looking at what I can work with. But I’m not really paying attention. I shift on the bed nervously. “Um... I did want to ask you something.”

“What?” she asks, a bit cautiously.

I clear my throat and pick at my thumbnail. “Do you know what’s going on with my dad?”

I hear her set her tile back down, and I reluctantly raise my eyes to meet hers.

“Do you really want to know?” she asks.

I shrug one shoulder. “Well... no. I changed my number so he hasn't contacted me. But... I just feel uneasy about what he could be doing. I've been trying not to think about it, but talking with Lauren and trying to tell her about growing up... I can't help but think about it again.”

Lulu wraps her arms around her knees, gazing back at me. “Your brain has been busy.”

I let out a huff of amusement. “Tell me about it...”

“Well, if it will help, I'll tell you. But if you think it is going to cause you more anxiety, I won't.” Lulu says, quite matter-of-factly.

I furrow my brow at her. “Well, how am I supposed to know that unless you tell me?”

She pauses to think on that for a moment. “Fair enough.” She moves into a cross legged position on the bed. “Ok. It's nothing bad. It's actually... kind of good,” she says, and I feel my heart beating faster. “He sold his business.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Seriously? Why?”

Lulu shrugs. “My guess? He realized he wasn't going to be getting more money from you, so he needed to do something to get out of town. Because what he told you is true. People don't like him anymore.” She pauses, seeming to check in with me.

“Why do you say what?” I ask, trying to get my heart rate under control. Even just thinking about him causes me so much anxiety, but I also think I need to know this. I've been worried about the unknown. The waiting, the wondering, the general uneasy feeling knowing there is something dark lurking that could attack at any moment.

“He kind of showed his true colours. Everyone has been gushing about you to him, telling him he must be so proud and asking when you will be coming to visit...” She rolls her eyes. “He's pretty dumb you know. His anger came out to play. He's been trying to paint this picture that you hurt him by leaving

and you refuse to acknowledge him even though he's done so much for you, but... people can see through that bullshit.”

I nod slowly, processing this. I knew he was saying those things about me, as he was even when I lived in Lyons. I was *troubled* and he was putting on a show to make it look like he was doing everything he could to manage me. But people don't believe him? I can't even picture that. He is, or I guess was, a cherished figure in Lyons.

“So, he sold his business,” she continues. “He wasn't getting much business anymore anyway, since he became such an asshole to everyone. He probably plans to use that money to get out of town.”

“Wow...” I say. “I was not expecting that.”

“So... problem might be solved.” Lulu grins at me, tossing another gummy bear into her mouth.

I nod, trying to smile back but not quite able to. “Unless we get out of this contract and the payouts to him stop...”

Lulu waves a hand to dismiss that idea. “He still can't do anything. You know why? He has a whole mess of people to go through if he wants to get to you.” She reaches over the board to take my hand in hers. “And none of us are going to let him.”

I smile at her, and this time it's real. “Love you Lu.”

“Love you too, Har.” She squeezes my hand, then sits back to look down at her letters. “Now let's get back to me kicking your ass.”

I scoff. “You wish.”

We settle back into the game, but she doesn't live up to her trash talk because I am totally winning. Just as I am laying down the word *Voyager* – I guess the V isn't so bad after all – the door opens and I see Ezra's smiling face.

“Hey, baby,” he says as he crosses the room, taking my face in his hands and kissing my lips.

“Hey,” I murmur against his lips with a smile.

Hannah plops on the bed beside Lulu and peers at her tiles. “Girl, you could have made like three different words with these tiles.”

Lulu slowly turns her head to stare at her. “Well, welcome back.”

Hannah plucks a tile off the rack, placing it on the board to take Lulu’s turn.

I chuckle, and my eyes slide to Ezra as he unbuttons his shirt and slips it off. Hannah looks up at me, and follows my eyes to Ezra as he digs in his bag for a t-shirt. She giggles, turning her attention back to the game.

She gives me a sly look. “Should we give you two some time?”

I roll my eyes, tossing her the tile bag. “I think we can manage for now.”

She takes one of Lulu’s gummy bears and tosses it into her mouth. “Ok, but if you need to jump his bones, we’ll leave.” She grins at me and I laugh, picking up a gummy bear to throw at her. She catches it, popping it into her mouth with a proud smile.

Ezra sits on the bed beside me and kisses the side of my head. He looks down at my tiles and picks up the letter Q, placing it on the board to make the word *Qi*. And, he placed it on a triple letter score.

“Qi?” Lulu asks, looking up at him.

“Yeah. The vital life force that flows through the body.” Ezra says simply.

Lulu and Hannah stare back at him and I laugh. “I think we won,” I say.

Ezra wraps his arm around my shoulders and smiles. “I think so, babe. I think so.”

“Ugh, well, I don’t think that counts since you guys just strolled in here and took over,” Lulu says, waving a hand between Hannah and Ezra.

“Poor loser,” I say, pouting at Lulu.

She picks up a pillow and launches it at my face. “Oh, shut it.”

I laugh, tossing the pillow back to her as Ezra fixes my hair.

“Ok, then. Rematch.” Hannah rubs her hands together. She suddenly sits up straight. “Wait. Where’s Ollie and Callum?”

“Callum was napping, but Ollie didn’t think he was actually napping and instead thought he was texting someone, so he went to cause havoc,” Lulu says, clearing the scrabble board.

“Oh, ok,” Hannah says simply, helping her put the tiles back in the bag.

We play another round of scrabble and Ezra and I win again, this time with the word *Za*. Apparently it’s a real word. And apparently Ezra is really good at scrabble.

And when it starts to get late, the girls don’t bother going back to their room. They stay with us, and we watch movies late into the night eating candy. As we put on our third Marvel movie, I cuddle up to Ezra in our bed with a content sigh. Lulu glances over at me from the other bed where she and Hannah are, and smiles.

As uncertain as a lot of things are right now, I know one thing is for certain. I love my family with all my heart.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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*Ezra*

“IT LOOKS like we hate each other,” I murmur as I glance at the video Anna created of us playing soccer, which she posted to the band’s social media.

Harley doesn’t even look at Callum’s phone as the video plays, and Callum turns it off before it finishes. It conveniently has clips of Harley and I shooting teasing looks at each other that, if you didn’t know any better, could be taken as actual tension. And of course, it’s full of clips with Hannah jumping on my back or hugging me... and none of the clips where she does the same to Harley, Callum and Ollie.

“But there were fans there,” Callum sticks his phone back in his pocket. “I saw some photos and videos they posted that shows quite the opposite.”

“Great,” Harley murmurs, looking out the window of the studio. “Something else for Anna to get mad at us about.”

I glance at Callum and he gives me a sympathetic look.

“Ok, Ollie, ready?” Dave, our producer, says into a mic that feeds into the live room.

Ollie gives a thumbs up from behind his drum set, adjusting himself on his throne. As the guitars start playing for his song *Zero Chill*, he starts in on his drums. It sounds awesome, and I love that this song is a bit unlike our usual sound. And not only because it’s a drum and bass heavy track, but the lyrics are... something else. It’s about his long lost drummer girl, and let’s just say, I do *not* want to be in the

room whenever he is reunited with her. If these lyrics are anything to go by, I hope they reunite in privacy.

Callum heads over to sit by Ben as they work on recording Ollie's drums. I scoot across the couch to sit closer to Harley as he continues to look out the window at the busy Paris street below us. I give him a nudge and he turns to look at me.

"Sorry," he mumbles. "That video just got to me."

"Yeah, I know. Same." I'm not sure what angle Anna is trying now with all of that. Maybe she is trying to make it look like we don't really like each other. But I don't see how that could even work since, like Callum said, there are other photos and videos out there showing that's not true.

Harley fidgets with his ring and watches Ollie through the glass.

I nudge him again. "Let's hear it."

He nods then glances at Ben. "What if this doesn't go well?" he asks quietly.

I look over at Ben as he smiles and flashes a thumbs up to Ollie through the glass. Honestly, I've been questioning this as well. And not because of Ben. Because what if we are wrong. He is going to be the one to tell us if we are way off base with this, or if it is a real possibility. He knows the inner workings of the label far better than we ever could, and if he says there is no way this is true? I don't even want to think about what that will mean. Especially for Harley. But I smile at him and take his hand, pushing those thoughts away. "It's Ben. He's going to help us out no matter what, it's going to be fine."

Harley holds my eyes for a moment and then releases a breath, looking down at our hands. "I'm just feeling a little extra nervous today, I think. A bit anxious about therapy again tomorrow."

I smile, loving how open he is being and admitting that all on his own. "I get that. Can I help?"

He looks up at me again with a soft smile and squeezes my hand. "This is perfect."



I lift his hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to the back of it. And his smile melts all of my own worries away.

After a bit, Ben calls for a break. “Alright, guys. Lunch.” He stands up and pats Ollie on the shoulder as he comes back into the control room. “We’ll finish up drums after.”

Charlie, our producer-songwriter, gives Ollie an amused look. “So, Ollie. I need to know. Who is this song about?”

“Oh.” Ollie whips around to face him. “My long-lost drummer girl.”

Charlie chuckles. “And how exactly is she long lost?”

“Well,” Ollie sits on a chair, looking sad, “we met the night of Battle of the Bands.”

Ben turns to look at him, brows drawn together. “The night I met you guys?”

“That would be the one, Benny. That would be the one,” Ollie says wistfully. “We had a night filled with passion and lust... it was perfect.” He pauses, sadly staring off into space. Charlie opens his mouth to say something, but Ollie continues, “But alas! I lost her. Never heard from her again. She left before I arose in the morning, leaving nothing but a note of sweet sorrow. She had to catch her ride home. And where that home is, I shall never know.”

We all stare back at him, while he dramatically falls back in his chair.

“You... didn’t get her number? Or look up her band to find her?” Dave asks.

“Oh, I tried. I tried *everything* David. I can’t find her. I can’t find anything with her band name, and we didn’t exactly get around to exchanging numbers, you know...” He gives Dave a pointed look, and Dave just nods uncomfortably.

Ben is still looking at Ollie with a furrowed brow. He slowly turns and sets his coffee cup down. “Was she the one with pink hair?”

Ollie turns in his chair so fast he almost knocks it over. “Do you know something!?”

Ben quickly shakes his head. “Nope. No. I just... remember her.”

Ollie sighs and turns back around, falling into his chair again.

Charlie laughs and stands up. “Well, ok then. The song makes more sense now.” He heads towards the door, Dave getting up to follow and patting Ollie on the shoulder in condolence. “We’re heading out for lunch. Anyone want to come?”

“I’m going to stay here,” Ben mumbles as he scrolls through his phone and takes a sip of his coffee.

Callum shoots us all a look and I nod at him. *Now’s our chance.*

“I think we’ll stay as well,” Callum says.

“Alright. See you in a bit.” Dave waves to us as they head out.

“You guys want to order in?” Ben asks, still looking down at his phone.

We all mumble our agreement and he looks up and around to each of us. “What?”

Harley’s leg starts bouncing, so I place a hand over it. “We have something we’d like to go over with you,” I say, a bit hesitantly.

Ben nods at me. “Ok. What is it?”

Callum stands up. “It’s kind of a lot. No, it *is* a lot.” He gestures for Ben to take a seat.

Ben slides his phone into his pocket and sits, quietly waiting for us to explain.

Callum pulls out his portable whiteboard, and Ollie nudges Ben’s arm. “This is great, watch this.”

As Callum unrolls his whiteboard and sets it up on the stand, Ben silently watches. I see his eyes move over the writing on it, and my pulse skyrockets as his face stays

completely neutral. I try not to squeeze Harley's leg too hard in my attempt to stay calm.

"We believe William is falsely reporting our royalties through Sentry, and pocketing the unreported amount," Callum says, getting right into it.

Ben still doesn't say, or do, anything. And I get a very uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I don't even look at Harley, because if I do, he's going to see panic all over my face.

Callum points at the names of the individuals we couldn't locate, the payout amounts, and more scribbles that I don't understand. "William gave us a breakdown of all of the expenses we would have to pay back if we were to terminate the contract, but the earning reports were bare. Just an amount, with barely any kind of a breakdown of where they are coming from. The percentages paid to these people are—"

"I'm going to stop you right there." Ben holds a hand up and I feel like my heart is going to beat right out of my chest.

*Fuck, fuck fuck.... This is a fucking disaster, we were wrong...*

He points at the whiteboard, and we are all still and quiet, waiting for our world to come crashing down around us. All our hope is about to be taken from us, in this moment, right here.

"I'm going to need more information on this portable whiteboard."

My eyes fly to Callum, my grip impossibly tight on Harley's leg.

Callum is staring back at him, frozen in his spot. "Um... I made it?"

"It's fucking brilliant. I want one." Ben leans back in his chair and rubs his chin. "Excellent for travel."

"Yeah..." Callum glances at us, and I finally turn to look at Harley. His expression is pure terror.

Ben looks between us and Callum, then to Ollie who has his hands pressed to the side of his head, his wide eyes flying between us all.

“Oh,” Ben waves at the air between us, “no, no, I believe you. Yeah, William is a fucking prick, I’m not even surprised to hear this.” He sits forward in his chair, gesturing for Callum to continue. “Carry on.”

“Dammit, Benny,” Ollie drops his hands and rubs them over his thighs. “You are playing with fucking fire, dude.”

Ben grimaces. “Sorry, guys.” He then points at the whiteboard again. “But for real, I want one.”

Callum nods at him. “Ok.” He blows out a breath and turns back to the whiteboard. “Alright, so... we have a lot of questions about Sentry. We can’t find any record anywhere of several of the people we’ve apparently paid, and their roles don’t even seem to make sense for what the company is.” Callum picks the folder up and passes it to Ben. “I put a summary sheet at the front of the folder that outlines everything I’ve found so far on this.”

“Of course you did.” Ollie nods, and Callum shoots him a look.

As Ben looks over the folder and Callum’s summary sheet, I turn to Harley. “You ok, babe?”

He nods tightly, eyes glued to Ben.

Ben snorts as he flips a page. “Hm.”

“What?” Callum asks.

He doesn’t say anything for a minute as he continues reading, and the tension in the room starts to rise again. Eventually he closes the folder and leans back in his chair. He lets his eyes roam over the writing on the whiteboard again while he looks thoughtful.

“Oh my god, Benny, you’re killing us!” Ollie blurts out, slamming his hands on the arms of his chair.

Ben ignores him and nods. “I knew Sentry was shady. I always fucking knew...”

I meet Callum's eyes and I see some excitement in them. He turns back to Ben. "So... what do you think about all of this?"

"I think you're right. Honestly, I have been waiting for the day William fucked up. And he did." He opens the folder and flips to a page. "Mark Caddel."

Callum nods, gesturing to the list of Sentry names on the whiteboard. "He's one of the Sentry employees I can't find any information on."

"Yeah, I bet you won't," Ben says. "He used to work for Capture Music. But one day he dared to disagree with William. And William used his power to blacklist him from the entire industry. Ruined his fucking life. He made him sign an NDA that he could never speak of any of it again and now he works at a dry cleaner in the Village."

"So, he's using his name to funnel money?" Callum asks, sitting in a chair across from Ben. Harley leans forward slightly as his attention stays on Ben.

Ben nods. "Looks like it. I'd say he's probably using his record of employment with Capture Music somehow to make him look like a Sentry employee but is actually paying himself instead."

I think on this for a moment. "Wouldn't people see that name though and question this?"

"No one knows," Ben says, shaking his head. "He just left the company one day, and William said he was off to work in another area. Which does often happen so no one really questioned it. If they saw his name there, it would make sense."

Ollie holds his hand up, turning to Ben. "So, how do you know this then? If he signed an NDA and can't talk about it, and if no one knows...?"

"I know him well. Or I guess... knew him well." He's quiet for a moment before he quickly looks up at us. "We can't use that information though. It would be a breach of his NDA and destroy his life even more."

“Ok,” Callum agrees, looking excited. “We don’t have to, because that’s all we need to *know* this is actually happening.”

Harley releases a breath and I turn to look at him, my hand still on his leg. He meets my eyes, and they are bright with hope.

“So, you need the digital service provider reports to confirm this,” Ben says, looking over the summary sheet Callum provided him.

“Yes...” Callum says. “But we would need to get those from Sentry, because-”

“Leave it with me.” Ben closes the folder and looks around to each of us. “I’ll work on it.”

“For real, Benny?” Ollie asks, gazing at him lovingly.

Ben chuckles. “For real.” He then turns serious. “But guys. This is serious. This is nothing to mess around with, and I highly encourage you all to stay extremely quiet about this. About everything even related to this. If there is *any* indication you are digging around to find out information on William...” he shakes his head, and we don’t need to hear the rest of that thought.

“We know. We aren’t going to say a thing to anyone,” Callum agrees.

“Good.” Ben then looks over to me and Harley on the couch. “And... I hate to say this guys. But... maybe, just for now... try to go along with whatever they are doing. Just until we know exactly what our next steps are. This is huge, and we don’t want to ruffle any feathers anywhere, or give them any ammo William can use against you or get you deeper into this before we can get you out.”

And once again my hand is squeezing the life out of Harley’s leg. *Shit*. I turn to look at him, and he is biting the inside of his cheek while he looks at the floor.

“Nothing crazy. Just keep the peace as much as possible,” Ben says softly. “I know it’s already tough. But it’s only for a little while. I’m going to work on this right away, and as soon as we have these reports, we’ll have a plan.”

I nod slowly, looking again at Harley. I don't know what exactly that means, to keep the peace and go along with whatever they are doing. Maybe nothing will even change... or maybe everything will.

Harley nods and swallows hard. "Ok," he says weakly.

Ben gives him a reassuring smile. "I'll be as quick as I can, I promise." He then looks around to the rest of us, with a serious expression. "And while I am working on this, I want you guys to do something *really, really* important for me."

Ollie slides to the edge of his seat. "Name it. We got you, boo."

"Have fun."

We all share glances with each other, then look back to Ben as he smiles. "You guys have been through it. And clearly, you've been working hard in other areas too." He holds up the folder. "So, you need to have fun. You're in Europe. Enjoy it. Explore, live your lives and just be... twenty." He flashes a quick look at Harley. "There's an end in sight for all of this shit. But for now, don't worry about it. I got this part."

I smile at Harley as Ollie crashes into Ben for a huge hug. He smiles back at me, but I can tell he's feeling the same unease I am.

We have to play by their rules. And while I understand why, and agree with it, it's an unsettling feeling. What is actually a few steps forward, feels like a few steps back.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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*Harley*

“THAT SEEMED VERY difficult to share, Harley. What are you feeling in your body right now?” Lauren asks, as she carefully observes me through the computer screen.

I wipe my teary eyes and try to focus on what I’m feeling. Lauren has been helping me listen to my body, and it’s hard. Especially after I just told her everything that I had been so nervous to share with her. It’s only our second session, but I just suddenly felt like I needed to tell her. I have only shared these parts of my life with people who are close to me, and even then it took awhile to do so. But speaking with her today, I felt like I could. And it all came out. I told her about my mom dying, how my dad tried to cope with it and ended up hating, abusing and neglecting me. I told her about the times I slept outside when I was afraid to go home, or the days I went with no food because I had no one to ask and no way to get it. I told her about finally leaving Lyons, and how hard it was to make that decision because of how worthless I felt. The thoughts I had, saying why even bother?

Then I told her about everything with the label and how I am once again back in hiding. Trapped with their control over us, just like I felt under my dad’s control. I think I just vomited everything, and I don’t know if I even made sense. But she quietly listened, with no judgement.

And I told her about Ezra. The frenzy of nerves in the pit of my stomach immediately settled as I told Lauren about the love of my life, and as she smiled warmly and told me she can see how happy he makes me, I wholeheartedly agreed.



I take a breath in, so I can answer her question, and listen to what my body is telling me as we near the end of our session. “Like a weight has lifted,” I say, rubbing my eyes again.

Lauren nods and smiles at me. “I bet. You’ve been carrying a lot. Thank you for sharing all of that with me.”

I nod with a sniff.

“You’ve won some pretty big battles,” she continues.

I furrow my brow at her. “I don’t think I’ve won anything.”

“Sounds like just telling me your story is a battle won.” She smiles warmly. “And I think there are a lot more that you don’t even recognize. I want you to take a moment, to acknowledge your courage and resilience. Everything you’ve fought through on this incredible journey you’re on. I think you may realize you are stronger than you think you are.”

I smile, looking down at my ring. “Ezra says the same thing.”

“Smart guy,” she says with a chuckle.

I look up at her again. “He is.”

“Be kind to yourself Harley,” she says. “You’ve been dealing with a lot, for a long time. Your homework until I see you next is to take a break. Do at least one thing every day that brings you a calm joy. Something that is just for you.”

I let out a little laugh. “Someone else just told me something very similar.”

Lauren laughs. “I like that. Sounds like you have a strong support system.”

My smile falls as that realization hits me. A warmth spreads through my chest when I think about everyone I have now, and the care they have for me. Just like I care for them. “I do.”

She nods with a smile. “Take care of yourself. See you next time.”

As I close the laptop, I let out a big sigh and look up at the ceiling. I hear the muffled voices of our tour crew out in the hallway as they work on getting set up for our show here tonight in Paris. My thoughts return to what Lauren said as I keep my head tilted back. Be kind to myself. Take a break. Thinking over the past little bit, I realize I have started to do just that. Boxing, listening to records with Ezra at the end of each day... they bring me a calm joy. They quiet my mind and help me feel.

I head into the bathroom in our dressing room and look in the mirror to make sure it doesn't look like I've been crying for almost an hour. But it does. I shoot Ezra a text to ask where everyone is, and splash cold water on my face.

### **Ezra**

In the stands, section E

That's weird, I figured they'd be in the dining room or something. We completed sound check after our interview this morning, so we have some time before our pre-show routine begins. I head out of our dressing room and make my way to the stands. As I approach section E, Ezra is standing at the entrance with a smile.

He tilts his head with a small frown as he takes in my red eyes. "How are you doing, baby?"

I nod, looking over his shoulder to Ollie, Callum, Hannah and Lulu in the stands. "Alright." I bring my eyes back to him. "I told her everything."

He takes my hand in his. "That must have been hard."

I nod again. "Yeah. But I have the same homework from her that Ben gave us. Have fun... take care of myself, take a break..."

Ezra smiles widely. "I can help you with that."

I smile, glancing around to make sure no one else is here, and step into him. "I'm sure you can."

He places a quick kiss on my lips, then leads me down the steps into the stands. I take a seat beside Lulu, and Ezra sits on my other side. Lulu smiles, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and kisses my head.

Ollie holds out a coffee cup. “Thought you could use this.”

I smile, taking the coffee from him. “Definitely. Thanks.” I look around the quiet section of the stands we’re sitting in. “So, why are we up here?”

“Hiding,” Callum says simply. “Talking...”

“About?” I ask hesitantly, taking a sip of my delicious coffee.

Ezra laces his fingers in mine. “What Ben said.”

I nod, lowering my coffee cup. About playing by their rules. I take a deep breath, sending it right to my core.

“We think it could actually be kind of... fun,” Ezra says with a sparkle in his eye.

I raise my eyebrows. “Fun?” I look around at everyone as they share hopeful looks with me. I feel a prick of annoyance deep within me. “What the fuck is so fun about continuing to hide and letting them control us?” I pull my hand out of Ezra’s and stare back at him. “Are you serious?”

“Harley,” Lulu starts, but I cut her off.

“No.” I stand up. “I don’t know where you guys have been the past few months, but nothing about this was *fucking fun*.” I try to move past Ezra but he stands up, blocking my way. “Move,” I say, looking past him and feeling an intense anger building.

“No, just stay,” he says, shaking his head.

“Fuck, Ezra, *move*.” I push past him, setting my coffee on the stairs as I head up them, needing to get out of here. What the fuck are they even thinking? How could they think this would be *fun*?

A hand lands on my arm as I get to the hallway, and I whip around, pulling it away as I expect to see Ezra. But it’s

Hannah. I slide my eyes over her head to where I just came from, but the entrance to the section is empty.

“I know how it sounds,” Hannah says softly.

I drop my eyes back to her, but I can't say anything. I feel... betrayed. Like they think everything I've felt and gone through... those *battles* I've been *fighting*... are nothing. Something to just do again, and have fun with.

“Can we sit?” Hannah asks, gesturing to a bench in the wide hallway.

I shake my head. “No, Hannah, I need to go.”

I turn around to leave, but I stop when she chokes out, “Please?”

As I slowly turn around, I see a tear track down her cheek. She smiles with watery eyes and gestures to the bench again.

I sigh, reluctantly walking over to the bench and sitting down.

She sits beside me, but I keep my focus across the hallway, over the rows and rows of seats.

“People don't like me,” she says.

I blink and turn my head to look at her. Her eyes are misty, and she looks sad.

“I start my internship next week,” she continues. “And I'm scared to death about what people will think of me. I'm being portrayed as this bimbo who follows her rockstar boyfriend around the world. There's barely been any mention in the media about who I actually am. An aspiring biologist who is passionate about environmental conservation.”

I stay quiet, watching her as the tears continue to fall.

“Your true fans know I'm not really Ezra's girlfriend. And some of the things I've seen tell me they likely have a negative view of me because I am helping to hide you guys. So, no matter what people believe, if I'm with Ezra or not... I'm not well liked.”

My eyes well with tears as I take this in. I knew this was hard on her, but I never knew just how much. And now I feel even worse because I know she didn't share this with me before because of how *I* was feeling.

"The PR team is already trying to negotiate a contract extension once these original three months are up, for me to continue to *date* Ezra." She turns to look at me with watery eyes. "They're telling me if I don't do it, they have another girl lined up."

My heart falls to my stomach. *Not again...*

"But we're not going to let that happen." Hannah shakes her head. "We're going to do whatever we can to keep fighting and get out of this. And we all know what is happening behind the scenes. We know that the work is being done to put an end to all of this. But in the meantime, we need to play along." She reaches out and takes my hand. "I know, the word fun wasn't the right one. Trust me, I get it."

I nod, knowing she understands. Just like I understand her pain. Having the world see you as someone you are not... it's a deep hurt.

"We were just talking about how we can make this easier for all of us while we work through this." She looks down at our hands. "To protect all of our feelings."

"How?" I ask.

She looks back up at me and smiles slightly. "We're still figuring that out... but, I'm sure there are ways we can fuck with the PR team while *playing along*." She smirks and bumps her shoulder into me. "For example, I may wear at least one rainbow item on each photographed outing..."

A laugh escapes me as I stare back at her. "You would probably pay for that."

She shrugs. "I'm still doing exactly what they asked, and nowhere in my contract does it say they pick my clothes or accessories."

I give her a lopsided smile, then look down at her hand in mine. "Thanks, Hannah. I'm sorry this has been so hard for

you. And I'm sorry I took off like that."

"I get it," she says. "Seriously, Ezra... poor choice of words, buddy." She shakes her head and smirks at me.

I chuckle. "Really though."

She turns her body to face me and holds her arms out. "Hug time."

I smile, wrapping my arms around her. I'm happy she opened up to me about this, and I can appreciate how difficult this whole thing has been for her.

"Do you want to go back?" she asks as we break our hug, gesturing with her head to where Ezra, Callum, Ollie and Lulu are still sitting. "Or I can let them know you needed some time."

I nod, standing up. "Let's go back."

Hannah loops her arm in mine, and as we reach the top of the stairs all eyes turn to us. I immediately feel shame, embarrassment, guilt... and if Hannah didn't have her arm in mine I might just turn and run away.

Ezra stands but doesn't approach me. His eyes are full of worry, and I hate that I snapped at him like that. And now *I'm* worried that he's mad at me... and he has every right to be.

"I'm sorry," I say as we reach him, and Hannah lets go of my arm to take her seat.

He reaches out for my hand, and I didn't even realize it was shaking. "Me too. It was insensitive to say it would be fun." He glances at Hannah, and she gives him a soft smile in return. He brings his eyes back to me. "That's not what I meant."

I nod, stepping closer to him. "Thanks. But..." I pause, slipping my hand onto his hip. "Maybe it would be fun."

A smile slowly spreads across his face. He cups the side of my face with his hand and presses his lips to mine.

"Aww!" Ollie claps his hands together. "I just love love, don't you guys?"

I block out everyone's chatter as I hold Ezra against me, resting the side of my head against his. "I really am sorry," I say quietly, just for him. "I think I'm feeling a lot after this afternoon, and I—"

"I get it." Ezra pulls back to look into my eyes. "We're good."

I kiss him again, sighing against him. I realize we are out in the open here in the stands, but I also don't care. The arena is closed right now, and anyone who would see us is likely our crew.

So... fuck it.



I turn off the shower, stepping out to see Ezra leaning against the counter.

"Have a good box?" he asks, his eyes dropping to my naked body as I reach for my towel.

I nod, rubbing the towel over my hair. "I did."

He continues to watch me, his arms crossed over his chest.

"What?" I ask.

He smiles. "I love how relaxed you look after boxing."

I drape the towel over my shoulders, walking over to him and placing my hand on his hip. "I love how relaxed I feel after boxing."

"I'm happy to hear that," he says softly, his eyes dropping to my lips. But instead of kissing me, he looks back up into my eyes. "I just wanted to check in again, and make sure you are ok after this afternoon."

"I am." I nod. "Are you?"

He nods as well. "I am."

I lean in to kiss him, and he parts his lips, letting me push my tongue into his mouth. As his hands trail down my body, and cup my bare ass, he lets out a groan.

I smile against his lips. “Something you want?”

“Yes, actually.” He turns, reaching behind him. When he turns back to face me, he is holding a bottle of lube.

My eyebrows shoot up, and my eyes whip to the closed bathroom door. “Really?” We’re in the arena, in the bathroom attached to our dressing room, with a show we need to get ready for in about thirty minutes.

He nods seriously, pulling the towel off my shoulders. “Really.” His hands drop to his pants as he undoes his belt buckle and slides his zipper down.

“Fuck,” I murmur as I bring my hand to my cock, feeling it harden as he slowly strips all of his clothes.

“I was going to ask if you wanted to fuck or be fucked, but...” his chest rises with a large breath as he looks down at my hand on my cock. “I want to be fucked.”

“I’m good with that,” I say, closing the distance between us, and turning him in my arms so he’s facing away from me. His hands land on the counter, and he pushes his ass back to grind against my now hard dick.

He moans as I drop my hand to grasp his cock and pump him. I lay kisses from his shoulder up to his neck, and his whimpers encourage me to work him even more. He reaches out to grab the lube, and I hold up my hand that isn’t wrapped around his cock. He lubes up my fingers, and I bring them back to his ass.

“Fuck yes, Harley,” he grunts as I swirl my fingers around his hole. I keep sliding my hand up and down his cock as I slowly push a finger into him, causing him to grunt and slap his hands down on the counter before him.

“That feel good?” I ask, sliding my finger in and out of him as I jerk his rock hard dick. “You want more?”



“Yes, please.” He tilts his head back, his lips meeting mine. As I push my tongue into his mouth, I push another finger into his ass. His legs tremble, but he continues to grind his ass back into my hand.

“Fuck, this ass is heaven,” I murmur against him as I increase the pace of my fingers in his ass and my hand on his cock.

The groan that comes out of him is deep and raspy, and so fucking sexy. My thumb rubs the precum on the tip of his cock and I bring it up to his lips. He immediately opens, licking it all with a moan of appreciation.

Suddenly we hear voices on the other side of the door, and I stop moving my fingers in his ass and my hand on his dick. I glance towards the door to make sure it's locked, which luckily it is.

I slide my fingers out of his ass and grab the lube. “Those moans will have to be quiet now,” I say as I pour more lube on my fingers, coating my cock and swiping more over Ezra's ass.

He looks over his shoulder at me with a smirk. Then, he leans over to rest his elbows on the counter, putting his perfect fucking ass on display for me.

*Well, fuck.*

“Holy shit...” I grab his hips, and push into him.

His head drops to the counter as he works hard on containing his grunts, while I try to do the same. He feels fucking incredible. I slide my hand up his back as I thrust into him, desperately trying to be quiet. But I feel him through every inch of my body. Everything is lighting up and pleasure is coursing through me. It's like I'm floating on a fucking cloud and the only thing I can feel right now is him.

His hand moves down to his cock, and I grab his hips to thrust harder. His breath is quick and his back muscles are tightening and thank fuck, because I'm going to come any second now.

“I’m coming,” I grunt quietly as I thrust into him a few more times, hard.

Ezra’s knees buckle as he holds himself up over the counter, moaning softly as he comes in his hand. A rush of warmth and tingles spreads through my entire body, sending a wave of pleasure crashing over me. I pull out, and jerk myself as I come all over his ass. I drop my forehead to his back as I try to stay quiet.

“Hair and wardrobe!” We hear Ian’s voice come from within the dressing room.

Ollie responds with, “Aye aye!”, and I chuckle against Ezra’s back.

I stand up, and grab my towel to clean my cum off his ass. He turns to sit on the counter, letting out a big breath. His eyes are glassy, cheeks flushed and hair a mess. He pulls me into him for a kiss, and I wish we could just stay here all night.

I smile against his lips. “Well... now I’m very relaxed.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Ezra

“WHO TAKES the longest to get ready in the morning?”

All fingers point to me, and I nod. “Yeah, I have a lot of hair.”

The host of the talk show we are doing in Paris laughs, and flips her cards to the next question. “Who is most likely to cry during a sad movie?”

I immediately point to Ollie next to me and Callum and Harley do the same. Ollie points to himself, then raises his mic to say, “I am a very sensitive person.”

The crowd laughs, and I smile as I look across the sea of happy faces to the Eiffel Tower in the distance. It’s a beautiful summer day, and it was really nice to play a small set on this outdoor stage. And now we are playing a “most likely to” game. Which... I think we’re kind of enjoying.

The host, Manon, flips her card and eyes us. “Ok, so you’ve been in agreement for most of these questions so far. Let’s see about this one. Who is the best hugger?”

Ollie raises his hand in the air before she even finishes the question. “Me. It’s me.”

The crowd cheers loudly, and I glance to Callum and Harley with a chuckle. Harley smiles from his seat next to Callum... the farthest seat away from me. My eyes slide to Stephanie off stage, and she shoots me a look. *Oh fuck off, it’s a smile.*

“Do you guys agree?” Manon asks us. I turn to face her, pretending to think. Because I can’t say who I *know* is the best hugger. “Yeah, Ollie gives pretty great hugs.”

“Hm,” Callum presses his lips together and slowly shakes his head. He places his hand on Harley’s shoulder. “I think I have to go with Harley.”

Ollie looks to Callum with his mouth open in shock and the crowd laughs again. “No way, bro.” He points at himself. “It’s totally me.” He then peers around Callum to Harley, waiting for his answer.

Harley’s eyes meet mine for a quick moment before he tips his head towards Callum with a smirk. “Cal.”

Ollie gasps loudly into his mic. “What? You said my hugs were magical!”

Harley slowly shakes his head. “You said that.”

The crowd erupts in laughter, and Callum winks at me. I chuckle, knowing we are going to hear all about this later.

“Ok, ok, so no agreement on that one,” Manon says. “Here’s one. Who is most likely to get married first?”

We’re all quiet for a moment as we glance at each other.

“Ezra, you’re the only one with a girlfriend, could it be you?” Manon says with a cheeky smile.

I hear some boos in the crowd, and I try not to wince. Hannah is standing with Lulu off to the side of the stage and I see her duck her head and turn away.

“Um...” I can’t help it as my eyes slide to Harley again, but I quickly cast my gaze back out to the crowd.

“It’s probably between these two,” Callum says, pointing between me and Harley. I stare back at him, frozen. *What the fuck is he doing?*

“Really?” Manon looks at Harley. “Harley, are you a romantic at heart?”

“Uh...” he looks at Callum with panic in his eyes, clearly also wondering what he’s getting at with this. “I guess so...”

The crowd cheers and I try not to have any sort of reaction. And I try *really* hard not to look at Anna or Stephanie.

“He totally is,” Callum says, slinging an arm over his shoulders. “He is all in with the person he dates, and he loves with his whole heart. He’s a sweet guy, even though you’d never know with this rough exterior.” He playfully plucks at Harley’s ratted Guns N’ Roses t-shirt then at his hair hanging loose around his shoulders.

Harley looks frozen in fear as he stares back at Callum.

Manon smiles. “That’s so sweet, Harley. Are you dating anyone now?”

Harley slowly raises his mic, and it’s clear he is trying to figure out what to say. And while I watch him, thoughts start swirling around in my head.

I think about yesterday, when I said we could make this fun. As I look at Harley’s fear-stricken face right now, I feel awful. Of course this could never be fun for him. He’s had to hide his entire life. And while I am also hiding, it’s not the same for me as it is for him. And Hannah. Her reputation and character is in question, and I can’t even begin to describe how much I hate that. That wasn’t supposed to happen.

Ollie suddenly raises his mic and says in a snarky tone, “They’d have to be the world’s best hugger apparently.”

The crowd laughs, and I join in. I laugh even more when Ollie gives me the side eye. *Wait... I think he’s actually upset about this.* Damn, he’s going to make us have like, a hug-off or something.

Manon picks up her cards, and relief courses through me. And as she reads off the next question, I sneak a look at Harley, who looks as relieved as I feel.

But the second the interview finishes, and we exit the stage, I grab Callum’s arm.

“What the fuck was that?” I whisper shout to him.

Callum smiles. *Smiles.* “I didn’t say you were getting married to *each other*. I said it was *between* you two. Now,

how anyone takes that is up to them.” He shrugs, then turns to Harley. “And I think it’s time we smooth out your reputation. Because everything I said is true, and I didn’t say anything about *who* you love. As Val said before... let them perceive this how they wish, right?”

He turns to leave, and I stare after him. As I think about what he said on stage, I smile. In a way... he kind of signalled to everyone what is really going on. *Let them perceive this how they wish...*

Harley smirks at me before he turns to follow Callum.

Well then. That’s one way of sending a *fuck you* to our team.



“Ok, now how do I say *croissant*?” Ollie asks the waitress with a flourish of his hand.

She gives him a quizzical look. “Croissant.”

“Oh!” He beams around the table at us. “I got one!”

Lulu snorts. “Good job, buddy.”

Ollie turns back to the waitress seriously. “Ok, I will have one *croissant*,” he says, pronouncing the word *croissant* in a very poor French accent, “and one *café*.” He sets his menu down delicately and proudly grins around the table.

The waitress nods, trying not to laugh. “Bien.”

As she takes off to put our orders in, Ollie sighs dramatically with a smile, looking around the quiet sidewalk where we are seated outside the café. “Don’t you just love Europe?”

I smile at him. “It’s pretty great.” As my eyes slide to Harley sitting beside him, I try not to eye fuck him right here in the open. He changed into a plain white t-shirt after the event this morning, and he pulled his hair back in a messy knot. He has black aviator sunglasses on, and even though I

can't see his eyes, I know he's looking at me across the table as he casually leans back in his chair. Europe looks pretty fucking great on him.

“Ok should you guys just sit together so we don't have to be caught in the middle of the love stares?” Lulu's voice cuts through my ogling.

Harley smirks and turns his head to her beside him. “It was your idea for us *not* to sit together to avoid any potential talk after this morning.”

I see Callum grimace slightly. “Uh, yeah about that. I realize I should have...” he quickly glances around to make sure no one is around and then lowers his voice, leaning closer, “asked you guys first before I said anything, but it just came to me. Is it ok that I said that?”

I look at Harley again and he nods. “Yeah,” he says. But I can't quite tell what he's feeling as I can't see his eyes because of the sexy as fuck sunglasses... but I don't want him to take them off. *I'm so conflicted.*

He then smiles. “I can see now how this could be kind of fun.”

Ollie hooks an arm around his neck. “That's the spirit!”

Harley laughs, pushing him back and fixing his now crooked sunglasses. *Yeah baby... put them back on...*

Hannah shifts in her seat beside me, and I glance over to her. She is smiling softly, but she's been a bit quiet since we got here. “You ok, Han?” I ask quietly.

She nods, smiling at me. “Yeah.” She then sighs. “The boos kind of sucked.”

I notice Harley watching us across the table. His lips turn into a slight frown as he drops his head to fidget with his hands in his lap.

“I know,” I say. “I'm sorry that happened.” And I wish I had more to say. I don't know why some of our fans seem to hate her. Even if they suspect she is a cover-up for me and Harley, *she* didn't cause this whole thing. And for people to

boo her today... I can only imagine how that felt. I feel awful that she is going through this, and that our PR team is pressuring her to extend her contract when it hasn't gone well for her. I wish there was something more I could do.

I reach out to squeeze her shoulder as the waitress brings us our pastries and coffee. Ollie dramatically butchers his *Merci*, and the waitress attempts to correct him. But he just keeps saying it the same way. It's like that scene from *Friends* when Phoebe is trying to teach Joey French. But the waitress eventually leaves, letting Ollie think he was successful.

And before we even have a sip or bite, Callum lets out a big sigh. "Ok, I have to say it," he blurts out.

We all look to him, and Lulu slowly raises a finger to point at him. "Callum. No."

He looks like he's barely able to hold in his words as he looks back at her, ready to burst.

Lulu keeps her finger up, tilting her head as she gives him the stare down. "No."

Callum bites his lower lip before letting a big breath escape him, followed by his thoughts. "I just have to say, I was thinking about the contract some more and once we get the service provider reports we can look at-"

"Callum Monroe!" Lulu says sharply. "You are *not* supposed to be thinking about this! You are supposed to *relax*. Do you know what that means?"

Callum presses his lips together, still staring back at her.

"Well, do you?" she asks him again.

We all turn our heads back to Callum, as we quietly listen and observe. Ollie holds his croissant before his lips, ready for a bite as his eyes fly back and forth between them.

He takes a slow breath in. "I do." He lets his breath out. "But maybe just-"

Harley holds his hand up and Callum immediately stops.



My heart starts beating faster as I watch him. He takes a deep breath, and I wonder if he's about to panic. I tense in my seat, and I see Lulu shift a bit closer to him.

“We've been given orders to have fun and let go of this for now. And while I can appreciate how hard you continue to work on this, Cal, I'm going to ask if we can wait to talk more about it later. Right now, I think it's important we just enjoy this time... I know it's what I need.”

Callum's face breaks out in a huge smile, and Ollie drops his croissant to his plate to start clapping.

I see Harley blush slightly as he adorably ducks his head. I want to dive across this table and show him exactly how proud I am of him for recognizing that he doesn't want to do this now, and telling us exactly what he needs.

He looks up at Callum again, looking a little embarrassed. “Sorry for-”

“Oh, don't you fucking dare.” Callum points a finger at him. “That was awesome.”

Harley smiles sheepishly again and my god, the mixture of adorableness, sexiness and assertiveness is doing things to me...

“I just got a bit excited about it, but I know. You're right. It's not the time, we have other work to do.” Callum nods, blowing out a breath. “I need the fun too.”

Ollie holds his croissant up in the air. “To fun!”

Hannah giggles beside me and picks up her pastry, holding it up and tapping it to Ollie's croissant. “Agreed. This is mine and Lulu's last day with you guys. Let's let everything go, and just have fun!”

We all hold up our pastries in a really weird cheers while Jack gives us a questioning look from his table. But none of us care. We eat and drink our delicious coffee at the café and end up opting out of the typical touristy attractions Paris has to offer.

We roam the quiet neighbourhood we found ourselves in after the café, and the girls end up pulling us into some rather unique boutique shops. We laugh as they place fancy hats on our heads and wrap scarves around our necks, completely letting go to play dress up. And we don't even care when fans approach us to take silly pictures and dress up with us. Ollie even tries to get Jack to participate, but obviously that doesn't go as planned.

And after gelato by The Seine, we sadly say bye to the girls as they head off to the airport. It was amazing to have them with us for this time, and we all wish they could stay longer. But they'll be back. And in the meantime... we're going to have fun.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

*Harley*

I CAN'T WATCH our video.

I listen to *Details* play but I keep my eyes down, away from the screen. I know I disappeared during this shoot, and I don't want to know what that looks like. I can't bring myself to look into my own eyes and know I wasn't even there.

"Harley, you don't want to see it?" I hear Anna's curt voice over the sound of our song playing.

I keep my eyes down and shake my head.

I hear her murmur, just making out the words *difficult again*.

Ollie leans in closer beside me and whispers, "Don't listen to her."

The video finally ends, and as I raise my head I'm met with disapproving stares from both Anna and Stephanie.

"How are you supposed to promote this single if you've never even seen your own video?" Anna says, crossing her arms.

"He knows what the video is all about," Ezra snaps at her. I whip my head to him, and he is glaring at Anna. "It looks exactly as planned. It doesn't matter that he doesn't watch it."

Stephanie huffs and picks up her phone, tapping away. *Oh, awesome.*

Anna raises her chin, looking down at us as we all sit before her on the couch. It's just us in our dressing room here

at the arena in Oslo, and I wish Ian or someone else was in here too. My pulse picks up as I take in the look on her face. This never ends well.

“We have been very pleased that you finally decided to work with us,” Anna says, looking between me and Ezra. “I *do* hope that continues.”

I glance at Ezra beside me, and he tries not to roll his eyes. But there’s a small smirk playing at the corner of his mouth, and I feel an amusement stir in me as well. Yeah, we’ve been *working with them* over the past week. We’ve been just nodding along with everything, such as where we sit in interviews, being separated for media and car rides, and even trying not to look at each other in the presence of cameras. My anxiety has been high most of these days, but I’m trying my hardest to work through it. And trying my hardest not to think about what’s on the other end of all of this, as I try not to get my hopes too high that this is all ending soon.

But what Anna and Stephanie don’t seem to realize, is that we’ve been subtly attempting to let our fans know that what we are telling them is a lie. We’re answering all the typical invasive questions, but doing so in a way that lets people read between the lines. Like when an interviewer asked Ezra the other day what the most romantic thing was that has done for his girlfriend, and he answered with the most romantic thing he has done *recently*. Which was buy a portable record player as a gift, because “someone’s favourite music should always be available to calm and heal the soul.” And not once did he specify who it was actually for.

I feel a prickling of anxiety in my core as I think about this. I don’t know if what we are doing is actually getting across to our fans, but it’s making me think again about that nagging question... if I could tell the world I’m gay, and that I love Ezra, would I? Could I? I take a deep breath and remind myself of what Ollie said. It’s not a decision I need to make right now. And I guess, in a way, this is doing what he said. Which is quietly just *be*. And the fact that our PR team is actually being *nice* to us right now is... well it’s fucking weird

is what it is. Seeing Anna smile at us was one of the more frightening things I've seen in a while.

“So, Val and William have asked us to discuss some things with you,” Stephanie says, still tapping away at her phone. *Why are they always on their phones...* “Your second album launch concert will be in New York in September.” She finally looks up from her phone. “We will be ramping up some media in the coming weeks for promotion. We have just shy of two months to work this, so I don't think I need to further explain the importance of this time.” She glances towards me when she says this, and I try my hardest not to look away and let her win. “This is a very anticipated album, so let's give your fans what they want.”

“Agreed,” Ezra says with a smile that is totally cheesy and fake. But Anna and Stephanie smile back at him proudly.

“Happy to see the cooperation, Ezra,” Anna says, then slides her gaze to me. “Hope we can see this from all of you.”

I nod. “You got it,” I say in a flat voice, keeping my eyes on her.

Her face morphs into a smile and I almost recoil from the sight. “Good. We'll review the schedule with you once it's settled.”

“Can't wait,” Ollie grins at her, and awkwardly wraps an arm around both me and Callum in an almost seductive way.

Anna watches with confusion, and then picks up her laptop and leaves with Stephanie in tow.

Once the door to our dressing room closes and we are alone, Callum pushes Ollie's arm off him. “What are you doing?”

“Operation touch a lot,” Ollie responds immediately. “It worked before, have you completely forgotten?”

Callum shakes his head and moves off the couch to a chair instead.

Ollie's arm is still around my shoulders, his hand resting on my pec. As I turn my head to Ezra, his eyes are zeroed in

on his hand.

“Ohh,” Ollie lifts his hand and takes his arm back. “You know what, I *like* that. I do. The MC in my book was jealous, and possessive of his girl. It was fucking hot.”

“Is this the brother’s best friend one?” Callum asks, looking up from his phone.

“Yes!” Ollie exclaims. “Oh my god, Cal, you remembered. I knew you cared.”

“Hm,” Cal murmurs, quickly dropping his gaze back to his phone. “So did this one do it? This is the one?”

“Well,” Ollie whips out his phone, nearly elbowing me in the ribs. He pulls up his Goodreads. “You see, it had elements that I enjoyed. Like the little bit of sneaky sneak that happened since she was digging her bro’s BFF. That was fun. But there’s still just... something isn’t quite *right*.” He blows out a breath as he scrolls through the seemingly hundreds of books he’s added.

I watch as he continues to scroll. “So, what’s going to be next?” I ask.

“I don’t know... maybe I need to branch a little further out in the romance world. Find something a little different... challenge my perspectives, you know?” Ollie looks at Ezra and I, apparently waiting for an answer.

Ezra glances at me with a smirk and nods. “Sure.”

“Ok,” Ollie stands up and grabs his bag, pulling his laptop out. “I need to go write a review. I’m so behind, I haven’t even reviewed Charlotte’s recommendation yet. And that was *forever* ago.”

As Ollie heads off to a table to work on his reviews, I feel a pang of guilt. Charlotte. We’ve been texting a bit as usual, but she still doesn’t know anything about what’s potentially going on with Sentry and her label. And it feels gross to keep that from her. I understand why we have to, as we need the proof first. But I just can’t help but wonder what this will all mean for her.

“Hey.” Ezra nudges me. “What are you thinking?”

“Just...” I sigh. “How weird it feels to keep all of this from Charlotte. And how much weirder it will be to keep it from her when we see her next week.”

Ezra nods. “Yeah, I’ve thought that too. Knowing she’s probably getting screwed over isn’t a good feeling. But, maybe by then we’ll have heard from Ben? Then hopefully we can tell her.” He laces his fingers in mine and smiles at me.

I breathe out a laugh. “You always find the positive in everything.” I smile at him and lean in to brush a kiss on his lips. “I love it.”

“And I love you,” he says, pulling me back in for a real kiss.

As we break apart, I look into his sparkling blue eyes as he smiles. He looks happy. I know he has been worrying about me, and Hannah, and everything else going on. But as always, he remains focused on the bright side and stays hopeful. While I do love that about him, I also can’t help but worry a bit. He said that he needed to learn to feel his feelings and not just try to make things better all the time. And while he has been talking to someone, he hasn’t said too much about it. I hope this happiness that I see is a true happiness, and not a cover up to push his true feelings away.

The door to our room opens and we quickly pull away from each other, moving to opposite ends of the couch. But as Jack enters, I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Ready?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I nod, standing up.

Ezra smiles. “Kick some ass.”

I scrunch my nose up at him and follow Jack down the hall to one of the empty rooms.

“I got you something,” he says, reaching into his duffle bag and pulling out a pair of brand-new boxing gloves. He tosses them to me, and I just stare down at them in my hands. “It’s about time you had your own pair.”

I look up at him, at a loss for words. But he doesn't seem to care that I can't find the words, as he walks over to me and takes my hand to start wrapping it.

"Thank you," I say softly, watching him wrap my hand.

"You're welcome," he says. "I have two young girls, who are complete princesses. So like hell they will be boxing." He pauses for a moment. "So, thank you for letting me share this with you."

I chew my bottom lip and nod, letting the feelings take root. Thankful that he chose me to share something that means a lot to him, and beyond grateful that he gave me my first pair of gloves. I stay quiet while he finishes wrapping my hand and moves on to the other one.

"Jack?" I ask, feeling some nerves build within me.

He raises his eyes from my hand. "Yeah?"

"What's... next?"

His brow crinkles as he observes me. "Next for what?"

"Boxing," I say, dropping my eyes again. "After hitting the pads."

Jack is silent for a moment as he finishes wrapping my hand and slides my gloves on. "Blocking."

I nod quietly.

"There's no rush," he says gently.

"I know," I say, as he finishes strapping my gloves on.

He slides the pads onto his hands, but then drops them to his sides. "When you feel like you are ready, we can work on that. But you tell me when that is." He pauses for a moment. "When someone hits you in boxing, it is *expected* to hit back. And when you block and hit, you are protecting yourself. You learn to read your opponent and anticipate what's coming. You need to be a step ahead, outsmart them and maintain your control over the situation." He nods his head slightly. "I think you're going to be good at that when the time comes."



I feel a rush of tingles and heat as the anxiety sets in at the thought of taking a punch. I feel my mind trying to shut down even just thinking of it. I can't help but picture myself frozen in space as I take a hit, like I have many times before. Because that was the only way to survive. I couldn't fight back. But as I let Jack's words settle in, a comfort settles with it. I *can* fight back. I am *expected* to fight back. I can learn to block, hit, and protect myself. To gain and maintain control over the situation. And that sounds like something I want. I want control over my own life, my own actions, my own thoughts... I don't want to be afraid anymore.

I nod at Jack, a small smile forming on my lips. "Ok. I'll let you know."

He nods back at me. "Good man." He gets into his stance, raising his pads, and I do the same with my gloves.

As I work through the combinations he calls out, I feel the calm wash over me and my body quiets. I focus on my feet so I can be in range to make my hits and maintain my balance for speed and accuracy. The invigorating feeling of my punches on the pads flows through my body, releasing all the tension I've had throughout the day, and helps me prepare for the show. It feels like my body is thanking me, as I do this thing that is just for me, and I practice being kind to myself. And that's a damn good feeling.



"I really want to fuck you right now," Ezra whispers in my ear as we get into the van after the show.

I turn my head to him. "Right now?" I ask with a smirk.

He slides his gaze to Callum and Ollie as they climb in after us. "I wish..."

I lean in closer, bringing my lips to his ear. "What if I want to fuck you?"

A shiver ripples through him as he lets out a breath.

I run my hand up his thigh, keeping my voice low. “You love having my cock in your ass too much, you won’t be able to resist that, will you?”

He swallows hard and shifts back in his seat. I place my hand over his cock and squeeze as the van doors close. “Mm. Hard already. You do like the sound of that.”

He turns his head and there is an intense heat in his eyes. “Yeah, you can fuck me.” He runs his hand over my knee, up my thigh and over my own hard cock. “After I fuck you.”

“What are you two whispering about back here?”

We both turn our heads to see Ollie peering back at us from his seat. It’s dark, so I don’t think he sees us grabbing each other’s hard dicks over our pants...

I reluctantly pull my hand away, and Ezra does the same. “Just about what we’re going to do tonight,” Ezra says with a dangerous smile.

“Oh, cool, anything fun? Can I join?” Ollie looks between us hopefully with a huge grin.

Callum snorts and smacks him. “Dude.”

“What?” Ollie asks, looking between the three of us as the van pulls away from the arena.

We just stare back at him, waiting.

“Oh!” Ollie leans back, glancing at Callum who just shakes his head. “Oh, yeah, no you guys just... I’m good.” He waves a hand towards us and awkwardly turns back around in his seat.

I chuckle, turning my head back to Ezra. My eyes drop to his hand as he reaches over to me again and palms my cock over my jeans. I watch him as he bites his lower lip as he continues to rub me, and *fuck* I want him *right now*.

Thankfully we aren’t far from the hotel, and by the time we pull up, I am rock solid and desperate for him. I want to grab him and run straight to our room, but I adjust myself in my pants and climb out of the van, waiting for Jack to take us up.

“You going to come in my ass first?” I whisper in Ezra’s ear as we walk into the hotel and towards the elevator.

He groans and eyes Callum, Ollie, and Jack walking ahead of us. “Fucking right I am.”

My cock twitches in my pants at the needy sound of his voice. “Good,” I say, keeping my voice low. We stop in front of the elevator, and I hang back so the obvious bulge in my pants isn’t... well, obvious.

The elevator dings, and as the guys head in, I murmur to Ezra. “I’m looking forward to riding you with your cum in my ass.”

He stutters in his step, and I push him onto the elevator behind everyone. As the doors close, he keeps his eyes on me. The feral lust is palpable, and I’m trying everything I can not to jump him right here and now. I’m aware of Ollie and Callum talking to each other, but I’m not paying any attention. My focus is on my man in front of me, just like his is on me. As we keep our eyes locked on each other, everything else fades away. And I don’t care at all what anyone around us thinks.

The doors open, and I can’t get to our room fast enough. I murmur a good night to Ollie, Callum and Jack and push our door open. Ezra pulls me in and the second it clicks shut behind us, his lips crash into mine. We tear our clothes off, littering the floor as we slowly make our way to the bed, our lips locked in a heated kiss the whole way. And once the back of my knees hit the mattress, I fall onto it, looking up at Ezra staring down at me.

I reach down and grab my cock, opening my legs for him. “Fill me up, baby. I’m waiting.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

---

Ezra

FUCK.

I don't think I've ever moved so fast as I drop to my knees before Harley and take his hard cock into my mouth.

"Fuck, Ezra, that feels good," Harley murmurs as I take him to the back of my throat. With the heat that has been building since we got into the van, and those filthy words he's been whispering to me since, I am fucking *ravenous* for him. And as I suck him, I can feel it in him too. He's writhing beneath me, with his fingers in my hair and his moans filling the room.

And as much as I love his cock in my mouth, he wants me to fuck him. Which I am more than happy to do.

I lick down his length to his balls, taking each of them into my mouth and sucking, pulling even more moans from him. Then, as I move lower, he props himself up on his elbows to look down at me.

I smirk back at him. "I think it's about time I ate this ass, don't you think?"

His lips part, and I see the hunger in his eyes. Then his mouth tilts up in a sexy smirk. "I do."

I drop my eyes to his ass and hook a hand under his knee, lifting his leg. I've been wanting to do this for a while, but since I take my orders like a good boy, it hasn't come up. And I'm tired of waiting. It's time I give some orders and make this happen.

“Come here,” I say, pulling his ass towards me as I stay kneeling on the floor. He moves down the bed, and I immediately lower my mouth to him. As my tongue glides over his hole, he lets out a deep groan that sends a thrill right through me. I increase the pace and pressure of my tongue over and around his hole, letting his moans and whimpers fuel me. I can’t get enough as I continue to take from him. And as I push my tongue inside him, he tenses with a guttural groan that urges me on even more. I want to make him feel good... to give to him, take from him and share myself with him. I’m turning fucking feral as I eat him, moaning into his ass as I continue to work him with an intense enthusiasm.

“Ok.” Harley taps my arm. “Oh my god.”

I pull back from his ass and look up at him as he sits up on the edge of the bed. He’s breathing heavy with a flushed face and glassy eyes.

“Holy fuck,” he breathes out.

“Yeah,” I say on a breath as I nod, unable to take my eyes off him.

“On the bed,” Harley says as he stands up.

I lay on my back on the bed, watching him as he grabs lube from his bag.

“That felt fucking incredible,” he says as he crawls onto the bed, leaning over me. He drops his lips to mine, pushing his tongue into my mouth in a kiss that sends a ripple of anticipation through me. It’s hot and messy, and full of promises of what’s to come. And as he pulls back to lube up his fingers, the look on his face tells me everything I need to know. We’re *fucking* tonight.

He motions with his chin as he says, “Over.”

I roll over, lifting my ass in the air for him and keeping my forehead against the mattress. I take in a deep breath, preparing for the welcome intrusion of his fingers in my ass. But instead, I feel his tongue run over my hole. A shiver rushes up my spine as I moan, and before I can anticipate more, he pushes a finger in.

“Oh, *fuck*,” I groan, pushing my ass back into his hand.

“Damn, baby,” he says, his other hand running over my hip. “You’re so fucking hot.”

I groan, arching my back. “More.”

“Mm,” I feel him shift behind me. “I’d love to... but that’s not how you ask.”

I lift my head and look over my shoulder at him. He’s watching me with a playful smirk. I grind my ass back against his hand again. “I said more.”

The smirk falls from his face, and he pulls his finger from my ass. He keeps his eyes on me as he lowers his chin. My heart skips a beat at the look of him, and hope surges through me. Yeah, I’m a good boy... but right now, I want to be bad.

“You want to try that again?” he asks in a low voice.

“No,” I breathe out. “What are you going to do about it?”

As he continues to stare back at me, his face slowly morphs into a look of amusement. “Don’t get used to it,” he says in the sexiest fucking voice I’ve ever heard come out of him. And next thing I know he is thrusting his fingers into my ass.

I drop my face to the mattress again to muffle my groan as my senses are lit the fuck up. I don’t know how many fingers he has in me right now but holy fucking shit, it feels amazing. He thrusts them in and out with the intensity I was hoping for. I want him to put me in my place and teach me a fucking *lesson*. And as I turn my head back to him again, I wait.

He has his bottom lip between his teeth as he watches his fingers move in and out my ass. And when he meets my eyes, his are alight with need and danger. His free hand moves up my back and curls around my throat, pulling me up onto my knees so his chest is pressed to my back. He keeps his hand on my throat and his fingers in my ass as he whispers in my ear, “You being bad on purpose?”

I nod, a heavy breath escaping me as a feeling of excitement rushes through me.

“Hm.” His breath on my neck makes me shiver. “We’re going to have to fix that.”

I stay quiet, accepting my punishment and trying not to look as happy as I am about it.

He chuckles against me. “But I think you’d like that too much.”

*Damn.*

His fingers slip out of my ass and move to wrap around my cock. “You still want to fuck me?”

I nod again, his hand on my throat keeping me from showing the enthusiasm I’m feeling.

“You going to listen?”

“Yes,” I whisper, my cock twitching in his hand.

He chuckles again, rubbing his thumb over the bead of precum leaking from my tip. He lifts his thumb to my lips, and I lick it off. Then he leans into my ear again. “Good boy.”

I nearly come undone right here and now.

He turns my head, crashing his lips to mine. I moan into his mouth as he kisses me and runs his hand up and down my hard cock. I’m barely able to hold myself up as I melt into him and get lost in the feeling of his touch on me, and his tongue against mine. But as he removes his hands from my body, I nearly whimper at the loss.

I turn around to see him stroking his cock. “Come fuck me then.”

As I turn to face him, he moves onto his hands and knees on the bed. I lube up my fingers and run them over his hole, feeling him open and ready for me. And fuck, I could just eat this ass all night... but, I promised I was going to listen. So I lube up my cock, and push into him.

“Oh, fuck,” he groans as I bottom out, my hips meeting his ass. He drops to his elbows and lets out a breath as I stay where I am, watching him and taking in this beautiful sight and amazing feeling. And also, because I’m waiting.

He lifts his head, looking back at me. “Well, that’s better,” he says with a smirk. “Fast and hard, baby.”

“Fuck, yeah,” I breathe out, pulling back and slamming into him. I’m so fucking close already, I’m not going to last very long. As I fuck him fast and hard, just like he told me to, I feel myself tipping closer to the edge. “Oh my god, Harley,” I mutter, trying to keep going a little longer.

“God, you feel so fucking good,” Harley grunts. His moans are mixing with the sound of our skin slapping together, and it’s driving me absolutely wild. His hand moves to his dick as he pumps himself in time with my thrusts in him, and I fuck him even harder.

“I’m going to come,” I pant, not slowing down.

“Come in me,” Harley says, dropping his hand back to the bed.

My hands grip his hips tight, and the tingles rise from my toes up my body as I come in his ass. My muscles tremble from pleasure as I slow my thrusting, letting the satisfying feeling run through me while my cock twitches in Harley’s ass. He groans his approval, which sends another rush of pleasure straight to my dick.

Once I’ve emptied my load in him, he turns around to push me onto my back. He pours lube on his hand, rubbing it over his cock while he keeps his eyes on mine. I’m breathless, but ready. He can do whatever the fuck he wants to me right now, and I will take it. He moves between my legs, one hand gripping his dick, the other lifting my leg while he pushes into my ass.

“Oh, fuck!” I grip his arm tight, as he immediately starts thrusting in and out of me while he moves his hand to my dick, pumping me with his thrusts.

“You’re not done yet,” he pants. “I still need to ride you, remember?”

I can’t even form words right now as the pressure in my pelvis builds again and the intense pleasure from his cock in



my ass takes over every thought and feeling. I grip the sheets beside me and tilt my head back, grunting as he fucks me.

“Yeah, baby, you’re taking this cock so well,” Harley says in his husky voice. “Such a good boy.”

All the air rushes out of me as I reach for him. “Fuck me harder, please,” I say, grabbing at his arms to pull him down me.

He lowers his mouth to my neck, bringing both hands to either side of me on the bed while he fucks me even harder. The feeling of his hot breath on my skin while he’s in my ass is fucking heaven and I swear I feel like I’m about to see stars.

“I’m getting close,” I pant against the side of his head.

Harley moans and sits up, pulling out of my ass. He climbs over me, straddling my hips as he lowers himself onto my cock. We both groan in pleasure as my cum in his ass helps me slide right in. He moves his hips, grinding hard on my cock and I reach out to wrap my hand around his. Our grunts, pants and moans fill the space around us as he rides me and I’m barely hanging on.

“Fuck, I’m going to come again,” I grunt as my muscles tense and the feeling of intense ecstasy takes over me once again.

“Mm,” Harley leans forward, pressing his lips to mine as he continues to rock his hips. “Fill me up.”

I wrap my arms around him, holding him close as I thrust up into him, hard, fast and frantic. My release is instant, as an intense wave rolls over me and every single cell in my body is screaming in pleasure.

“Oh my god,” I mutter into his neck as my hips stutter and the wave just keeps rolling.

I push Harley back, taking his cock in my hand again and pumping as I finish unloading into his ass. He drops his head on a groan as I feel his cock pulse, and he shoots cum all over my abs. I watch him as he comes, breathless at the gorgeous sight. His face contorts in pleasure, his hair hanging over his

face, while his muscles contract and tremble. Watching him come is so hot it could get me going again, I swear.

He lets out a breath, pushing his hair back and rolling off me to lay on the bed. “Damn,” he says through a heavy exhale.

I just nod, unable to get any words out as my entire body feels drained in the best way possible.

He turns his head to me, and as I meet his eyes, he chuckles. “I have so much of your cum in my ass.”

I laugh and roll over to face him. “That’s so fucking hot.”

“Mm,” he hums as his eyes roam down my body and back up. “Almost as hot as when my cum is in your ass.”

I let out a little moan at the thought. “You know how much I like that.”

The corner of his lips tilt up in a sexy, dangerous smirk. “You know what I would like?”

“What?” I ask, my heart skipping a beat in anticipation. We’re talking about his cum and my ass, and that look on his face means we’re *both* going to like it.

“Next time I fuck you before a show, you keep my cum inside you while you’re on stage.” His fingers trace down my chest, leaving a trail of goosebumps. My pulse thumps as I think of being on stage in front of thousands of people with the evidence of our *forbidden* act inside me the whole time.

I let out a breath and nod. “Deal.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

Ezra

“WHAT THE FUCK?” Callum murmurs as he watches Harley perfectly hit his golf ball, sending it flying towards the green.

Harley turns back towards us and Ollie claps. “Damn, son. You sure you never golfed before?”

Harley shakes his head as he slides his golf club back in his bag.

I smirk, trying not to eye his ass in his athletic shorts as he reaches into the golf cart for his water.

“Ok, so this will probably be three which means he takes the lead, and if Ollie gets par, then I need...” Callum trails off, doing mental math as he stares out over the course.

I poke him with the end of my club. “Dude. Go.”

“Right,” he murmurs, picking up his favourite driver and getting into the zone. He takes golf *very* seriously, and while none of us anticipated Harley to be so good at it, it seems to have really thrown Callum for a loop. We’ve all decided to spend the majority of our downtime as a group to keep PR off our backs, so Callum was originally really excited for me and Harley to come golfing with him and Ollie here in Copenhagen. But now, I’m sensing a bit of frustration since Harley and Ollie are...well, kicking his ass. And me, I don’t really care. I just hit the ball, drink sparkling water, and watch Harley’s perfect ass in his shorts. That ass I was balls deep in, twice, the other night...

“Ezra!”

I snap to attention as Ollie waves his hand in front of my face. “Huh?”

He motions to the tee. “Your go.”

“Yup.” I nod, walking over to the tee, setting up, and whacking the ball. And oh hey, look at that, right in the green.

“For fucks sake...” Callum mumbles, dramatically shoving his driver back in his bag.

“Maybe you just need to loosen up a bit, Cal,” Ollie says, observing him with his hands on his hips. Harley snorts and turns away, adjusting his sexy sunglasses.

Callum stares back at him, his mouth in a thin line as he attempts to keep his frustration in check.

Ollie puts his hands up. “You do you, man.” He starts walking towards the golf cart I’m sharing with him. “You want me to drive?” he asks me.

Callum whips around. “Do *not*.”

“Yeah, no man, I will.” I quickly slide into the driver’s side, not wanting an experience like the fateful Florida golf incident Callum had to endure with him.

Harley and Callum climb into their cart, and we make our way down to the green. Once there, Callum is out, and eyeing up his shot.

Harley looks at his bag and then between Ollie and Callum. “Which one do I use?”

“Well,” Ollie waltzes over to him and points to a few clubs. “You have your wedge, your putter and your iron. Now, typically on the green we use putters, *however* there are times when this may not be the best option. Let me explain.”

I chuckle while I watch Ollie explain what each club does and why, complete with actions, while Callum kneels on the green to figure out angles.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, so I reach in to pull it out. I freeze when I see Ben’s name lighting up my screen with a

text. I look up to the guys and they have their phones pulled out too. I quickly slide my thumb over the screen.

**Ben**

I'm coming out tomorrow.

“That’s it!?” Ollie yells at his phone. “Damn, does he not understand that we are kinda freaking the fuck out over this shit?” He blows out a breath and starts tapping away at his phone.

My eyes slide to Harley, and I see the tension in his shoulders as he lowers his phone.

I carefully take a step closer, knowing there are eyes around. “It could be good news.”

He nods, putting his phone in his pocket. “Or not.”

I glance at Callum, and he quickly blinks away the panicked look on his face as well. “I don’t think he’d come out and not say anything if it was bad news...” he says, but we all hear the uncertainty in his voice.

Harley brings his hands together and squeezes them, taking a deep breath. My heart hurts as I watch him try to calm himself, while we are out here in the open for everyone to see. And I can’t do anything to help him.

“Babe,” I say in a quiet voice, taking another step closer. “You alright?”

I can faintly see his eyes through his sunglasses, frantically scanning the golf course around us. His hands are trembling as he continues to squeeze them, which is one of his calming strategies his therapist taught him. He nods, ducking his head and turning towards the golf cart.

I eye Callum and he nods, heading over to place a hand on his back and talk to him. I *hate* that I can’t be the one to comfort him, but we are literally sitting ducks here on the green with wide open space all around us.

“Listen here, buddy.”

I turn to Ollie, who has his phone to his ear.

“You can’t just drop a bomb on us like that, not explain any further, and then not answer your texts. I thought we were friends!” He puts his hand on his hip and looks down at the ground, shaking his head.

I step towards him, wanting to hear what Ben has to say.

But then Ollie looks up, blowing out a breath. “Anyway, I hope you get this message soon and you do the right thing and call us back. Unless you are on an airplane right now headed towards us. Which...” he tilts his head in thought, “you could be and in that case it’s kind of forgivable, but I’m still not sure exactly where I stand on this because you could have given us more information to begin with.” His eyes slide to mine as I watch him in confusion. “Alright then, talk soon.” He takes the phone from his ear and hangs up. He looks up at me. “That was Ben’s voicemail.”

“I figured,” I say, glancing again to Harley as he leans against the golf cart, talking to Callum.

Ollie follows my gaze. “He alright?”

I sigh. “I don’t know. I just want to get out of here.”

Ollie shakes his head. “Nope. Group hug time.” He opens his arms wide, calling over to Harley and Callum. “I said group hug time!”

Callum gives him a questioning look. “Why?”

Ollie drops his arms in exasperation. “Come on, man, *group* hug.” He widens his eyes and dramatically tilts his head between Harley and me.

I smile once I realize what he’s getting at.

“Oh,” Callum smiles too and walks over to us, Harley following.

Ollie drapes an arm over my shoulders and then Callum’s, letting Harley move in beside me. I’m sure it looks completely weird to be group hugging on the golf course, but at this moment I don’t care. Plus, Ollie has really ramped up *operation touch a lot*, so I guess maybe it doesn’t look so

weird. I take this quick moment Ollie gave us to wrap my arm around Harley and squeeze.

“It’ll be ok, babe. No matter what he says, we’re going to find a way out of this,” I say, as we break apart and I reluctantly let him go.

Harley nods, taking a deep breath. “Yeah,” he says, taking his sunglasses off and rubbing his hand over his face. “I just... what if he couldn’t get them, or if he did and they’re not what we thought...” he trails off, shaking his head and closing his eyes.

“Then we come up with another plan,” Callum says gently.

“Yeah,” Harley says, opening his eyes. “Yeah.” He takes a deep breath in and lets it out, shaking his hands out at his sides. “Ok, you’re right. Let’s... let’s keep playing.”

“Yeah?” Ollie asks, putting an arm around his shoulders. “Well ok, then! Back to our very important lesson.” Ollie steers him back to his bag of clubs to continue his detailed explanation of each one.

Harley looks back at me and I give him a smile. I’ve been so proud of him for doing the hard work to heal and manage his anxiety, and in this moment right here, I get to see just how far he’s come. I watch him as he fidgets with his fingers and his ring while he listens to Ollie. He is still anxious, but he is trying hard to let it go. I wish I could walk over to him right now and wrap him in a hug, taking his worry away so he can go back to having fun and just forget about everything negative.

And yet, in the back of my own mind, frustration is brewing. I’ve been watching Harley use the tools he’s learned in therapy to manage his anxiety, while my therapy has only made me more confused. My therapist continues to push me to explore my feelings, when I have been telling him exactly what they are. I tell him about the worry I feel for Harley, and how I want him to be happy and healthy. I want to keep him from experiencing those negative feelings he’s had his whole life, and to protect him from the dangers of this job. I tell him

about my concern for Ollie and Callum as we navigate this, and the pain they shared with us. And I tell him about my fear for Hannah, that this PR relationship may ruin her reputation for her career, and her self-esteem. But he says I am focusing on everyone around me, and not myself. He keeps asking me what *I* am feeling, but I don't know how else to answer. That *is* what *I* am feeling.

As Ollie finally finishes his explanation of all the golf clubs, Harley picks one and steps up to his ball. And as he putts it in, I shove away all the negative thoughts. Because I have more important things to think of right now.

Like that ass in those shorts.



“Charlotte!” Ollie stands up from the table so fast he nearly knocks the whole thing over.

Charlotte laughs as she walks up to us. “Hey guys!”

Ollie wraps her in a hug, hanging on tight until Harley taps him to let go. “Sorry, I’ve just missed you so much,” he says, reluctantly stepping back with his hand over his heart.

She laughs. “It’s ok, I always enjoy your hugs, Ollie,” Charlotte says with a smile, moving forward to wrap her arms around Harley.

We all get our hugs in and sit down at our table in the golf club restaurant overlooking the course. Charlotte just got into Copenhagen today for the music festival we’re playing at tomorrow, so she suggested coming out here to spend some time with us after we finished the course. We’re excited to finally catch up with her since it’s been a while since we’ve seen her. Except, we’re also a little worried. Charlotte’s label uses Sentry, so William could be stealing royalties from her as well. But we can’t say anything about it yet. Not until we are certain it is happening to us. And, with Ben’s vague text this afternoon, we are all feeling quite on edge.



“So, what’s up guys?” Charlotte beams around at us as she takes her seat. “I feel like we haven’t had the chance to talk much lately.”

“Yeah, we’ve... been busy.” Harley shifts in his seat, looking down at his water in front of him.

Charlotte eyes him. “Everything been ok?” she asks cautiously, looking around the table.

“Better,” I say with a smile. “We’ve been able to find some more bal-”

“Oh my god.”

I turn around in my seat to see three girls, probably in their early twenties, standing near our table staring at us.

Jack, Matteo and Charlotte’s security start to stand from their table but I wave them off. We’re in a high-end golf club with mostly older rich men here, so I’m a bit surprised to see these girls. But they’re harmless, and we like to connect with fans whenever we can.

“Hey,” Charlotte smiles at them.

“Oh my god,” one of the girls says again. “I can’t believe it.”

Ollie chuckles. “Enjoying the course today?”

One of them shakes her head. “Oh, no, we don’t golf. Our boyfriends do, so we just come here to read and drink by the fire in the restaurant and enjoy the view.” She holds up her book and then gestures out over the beautiful view of the golf course.

Ollie’s mouth drops open. “Um, that sounds amazing.” He pulls a chair out beside him. “Sit, we have much to discuss.” The girl looks like she’s going to burst from excitement as she drops into the seat beside him and Ollie asks, “What are you reading?”

As they launch into a discussion about books, Callum shakes his head and turns his attention back to the other girls. “What are your names?”

“I’m Ida, this is Emilie.” One of them gestures to herself and the girl next to her. “And that’s Isabella,” she says, pointing to the girl flipping through her book with Ollie.

“Nice to meet you.” I smile at them. “You coming to the festival tomorrow?”

“We are!” Emilie exclaims excitedly. “We’re so excited to see you all, we love your music.”

“Thank you,” Charlotte says, leaning back in her chair. “Are you ladies from Copenhagen?”

“Yup,” Ida says, nodding.

Callum leans forward. “Denmark is amazing, anything we should try to see or do while we are here?”

“Oh,” Emilie nods excitedly. “The Tube if you are looking for a fun adventure, it’s like an immersive museum. The Little Mermaid statue, the canal tour... or Tivoli Gardens. There are fun rides, but the gardens are quite romantic and a lovely thing to do with your partner.”

I keep my eyes on the girls and try not to look at Harley. The media still seems to think that Harley and Charlotte are some kind of on-again off-again couple, and I don’t know why. Val said she would stop creating this narrative of him being a player now that she has Hannah and I to focus on, but I don’t trust her to have actually done that. The story is still floating around that Harley fucked around on Charlotte with her friend, Everly Jones, and Charlotte keeps going back to him despite his *issues*. So, whether Val actually stopped spreading this shit or not, it’s still out there.

“Oh,” Charlotte says, and I turn to her. “We’re not together.” She gestures between herself and Harley. “Never were.”

“We know,” Ida says cheerfully. She smiles as she looks between me and Harley, sending a little thrill through me. But I quickly shut it down. As close as we may be to the end of this shit, we’re not there yet.

I let my gaze slide to him, and he is looking back at me from across the table with a mixture of fear and confusion.

“Not sure we’ll have time for something like that while we are here, but we will totally check out your other suggestions. Thanks,” Callum jumps in.

“Of course.” Ida smiles at him. “Well, we should go, but thanks for talking to us! We are so excited to see you tomorrow.” She gestures to Isabella that they are leaving, and she gets up from her seat next to Ollie.

“You have broadened my horizons Isabella, thank you. That was very helpful.” Ollie nods seriously as he pulls out his phone. “Looks like I have some work to do on my TBR.”

Isabella giggles and clutches her book to her chest as she joins her friends.

“Enjoy the show,” I say, smiling at them and trying not to overthink the seemingly innocent looks and comments from them about *partners*.

Once they are out of earshot, Charlotte leans her elbows on the table, looking between me and Harley. “Ok, so... did it seem like they knew?”

Harley rubs a hand over his face and looks out over the course.

“Knew what?” Ollie asks, taking a breadstick from the middle of the table and biting into it.

I lean in close to him and say in a low voice, “About me and Harley.”

Ollie’s eyes fly to Harley, then back to me. “Oh.” He then waves a hand in the air. “Well, soon enough we’ll-” He stops suddenly, pressing his lips together with wide eyes. “Uh, well, maybe someday... we’ll... you’ll...” He raises his hands in the air in question, looking to Callum for help.

“My god...” Callum rubs his hand over his forehead.

Charlotte looks between us all in confusion. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Charlotte, why? What’s going on with you?” Ollie says, trying to be cool but looking nervous as he awkwardly slings his arm over the back of his chair.

Charlotte narrows her eyes at him. “Ollie...”

Ollie stares back at her with wide eyes.

Callum leans forward, opening his mouth to say something but Ollie suddenly blurts out, “We can’t tell you!”

Callum drops his head to his hands and Harley sighs. I slowly bring my eyes to Charlotte as she tilts her head, looking between us all.

She’s silent for a moment before she smiles. “Are you guys...” she leans forward, lowering her voice, “getting out of your contract?”

“Dammit, Ollie.” Callum raises his head and glances around the restaurant. “We really can’t say anything more, but...maybe.”

Charlotte smiles widely and bounces in her seat. “Oh my god! That is so awesome for you guys, you definitely deserve to get away from William. He’s such a prick.”

Harley fidgets nervously in his seat and glances at me. He looks uncomfortable, and I feel it too. I wish we could tell her everything and give her the heads up that she also may need to get away from William. But for now, we stay quiet about it. And hope that tomorrow, Ben comes through with good news.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

---

*Harley*

THERE'S a knock at the door, and Callum gets up to open it. I hold my breath as Ben walks into our hotel room, his bag slung over his shoulder as he just came from the airport. I shift my weight on the edge of the bed, and Ezra places his hand on my thigh.

“Hey guys,” Ben says, setting his bag down and taking a seat at the desk.

“Hey? Hey!?” Ollie slams his hands on the coffee table before him. “Dude, you have *got* to get on with it.”

Ben stares back at him and draws his brows together. “I just got here.”

Ollie throws his hands in the air with a huff.

“We are just a little on edge,” Callum says, sitting next to Ollie on the couch. “We’ve been a bit anxious about what you found out.”

“Yeah, understandable,” Ben says, running a hand through his hair and blowing out a breath. My heart rate spikes as I prepare for him to say he wasn’t able to get the reports.

Until he reaches in his bag and drops a binder onto the desk.

“Here they are,” he says.

We all stare at it silently.

“And!?” Ollie stands up. “Seriously, Benny, I’m about to go ape shit on your ass if you don’t get to the fucking poi-”

“You were right.” Ben opens the binder and passes it to Callum. “Your earning reports from digital service providers do not match what is reported by Sentry.”

Ollie sits back down on the couch and Ezra’s grip on my leg tightens.

“Seriously?” I ask.

Ben looks at me and nods. “Yeah. I went through it and made sure I wasn’t just missing any payouts that made up the difference, but no... there is a large percentage that is taken right off the top with no explanation of where it has gone. That, plus the payouts to these so-called *employees* that are no longer current employees of Capture Music.”

“Oh my god,” Callum murmurs as he flips through the folder. He then looks up at us with a sparkle in his eye. “Guys... this is it.”

I feel a surge of hope rush through me. We have a way out. There is an end in sight. I turn to look at Ezra and he smiles with a light laugh. I feel like I could cry with relief right now, at the thought of finally being free.

“Holy shit...” Ollie brings his hands to his head and blows out a breath. “But, how did you even get these reports?”

Ben leans back in his chair. “I went to the distribution coordinator at Sentry. I told him I was hoping to make a change in my career and was exploring music distribution. He was more than happy to show me what his job was all about. Which basically is planning and organizing music for distribution with providers and collecting sales and streaming reports from them. I managed to convince him to show me your reports, and I took pictures of them with my phone when he went to get us coffee.” He sighs and shakes his head. “I’d say that he has no idea what Sentry is really up to though. When he collects these reports, he sends them to another department within Sentry that includes a royalty administrator for payouts. I asked him about this department, and he couldn’t answer any of my questions. And not because he didn’t want to, but because he didn’t know. Every department within Sentry is closed to others, it’s a very disconnected

system. Which is perfect for hiding information and pocketing money.”

“Jeeze...” Ezra rubs a hand over his face. “This is fucking unreal...”

“We better act on this fast though.” Ben leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I had to sign a waiver to just be in there, so if William finds out I was sniffing around, it’ll be game over. Who knows what he could do to fuck up this plan and get to us before we get to him.”

I nod, feeling the anxiety creep in again at the reminder of just how big this really is. “How did you convince him to show you our reports if everything is so locked down?”

Ben shrugs with a slight smirk. “I’m not above shameless flirting to get what I want.”

Ollie holds up a hand. “With... him?”

Ben ignores him, gesturing to the binder. “So, this is your proof. This is happening. William is embezzling your royalties. He is stealing straight off the top, and we know of at least one instance where he is diverting funds away from Capture Music that would otherwise be paid to them in an accounting division.”

“So, what does this all mean now?” Ezra asks, looping an arm around my waist. “What do we do with this?”

“Well,” Ben glances around at each of us, “you guys need to decide what you want to do. I will bring this to the Music Group that oversees the label. William will be fired, and they will replace him. Sentry will go under, and it will be a complete overhaul of the system.” He looks to Callum. “But, as I read in your summary report Callum, you have the option of terminating your contract.” He slides his gaze to me and Ezra. “Is that something you all want?”

I get a pang of guilt as I look back at him. Ben has done everything for us. He is the reason we are even making and creating music at this level. He has supported us this entire time, and now he has risked his own job to help us get out of it. If we were to leave Capture Music, we would be leaving

him. But I also can't do this all again. I can't stay in a contract where there are vague clauses that can be used against us whenever someone doesn't like something about us. And what if we end up with a director that is even worse? But the alternative, to walk away and not own any of our music, is also awful. We would be free, but our story would still be stolen, by the monster who caged us in the first place.

"I don't know..." I say quietly, glancing at Ezra. "I love creating music, and I'm just finally getting comfortable being on stage again..."

Ezra nods, bringing his hand up my back to squeeze my shoulder. "Yeah. I know. It doesn't feel good to stay in this contract and not know how they are going to act on it."

"Well," Callum says, "Emma said we *may* be in a position to renegotiate a contract with a new director-"

Ezra's eyes fly to Callum. "When did she say that?"

I turn to look at him too, and Callum's eyes dart between us. "Um, when we were talking, wasn't it?"

Ollie shakes his head, leaning back on the couch and observing him with interest. "Nah, bro, she didn't."

Callum shrugs, leaning back on the couch as well. "Oh, maybe she mentioned it when I was checking in on some details about all of this..."

Ezra's grip is tightening on my shoulder, but I don't think he realizes. "She didn't tell *me* that..."

"Anyway," Ben stands up, clearly not wanting to be in the middle of whatever this is. "I'm dead tired. I'm going to check into my room and sleep for a bit so I can come see you guys play this afternoon. Just think on it for now and let me know what you guys decide. Ideally, I'd like to have an answer when I bring this to the Music Group. Things move fast, and they'll want to know."

I sigh, nodding as the rest of the guys murmur their agreement. I guess it's time we really do face this question and decide what to do. Walk away and leave everything behind, or continue on and hope for the best?





Jack leads me backstage at the music festival after we've finished boxing, so I can join the guys as they watch Charlotte. As I join them at the side of the stage, Ezra flashes me a smile. I smile back at him, letting my eyes roam over him as I appreciate how fucking good he looks. He's in a backwards Snapback with his wild blonde hair poking out the sides, a black t-shirt, and faded jeans, and I want to rip everything except the Snapback off him. But I quickly look away from him, and not only because we are side stage at an outdoor music festival, but also because cameras, and Anna's eyes, are pointed directly at us. Apparently, Val wants a *Behind the Scenes* video of us playing at this festival. Why? Who knows. I don't see what's so exciting about us standing around watching other artists before we go on. But it's a way for her to keep her control over us, so, here we are.

I reluctantly turn away from Ezra and bring my attention to the stage, watching as Charlotte struts down the length of it in her sequin outfit and sky-high heels while belting out an insane high note. Every time we see her, I'm blown away. She is fucking *good*. She has this incredible energy that never seems to run out as she gives her all with every song, and dances like each one is her favourite. I smile as I watch her, loving how much she loves this. I think back on what she said to me the night we met, how everything negative about this industry is worth it for her to do what she does. And seeing her radiating happiness on stage, I can see that. This is where she belongs.

Callum nudges me and I turn to look at him. His eyes slide over my shoulder, and I follow his gaze. There's a camera pointed right at me. *Fuck*. And Anna is standing beside the camera watching me, looking pleased. I sigh, turning back around. So, because I smiled while watching Charlotte, this will be strategically used in this *Behind the Scenes* video to

perpetuate the idea I'm still, or once again I guess, dating her. Awesome.

Callum pats my back and leans into my ear, "The people who matter won't believe this shit."

I nod, knowing he's right. I think about the fans who stopped to talk to us yesterday at the Golf Club. I don't know if maybe we were just reading into it too much, but it did really seem like they knew. They knew Charlotte and I never were a thing, and the way they looked between Ezra and I...

As Charlotte wraps up a song and starts chatting with the crowd, I can't help but once again think of the decision we have to make. If we walk away, I don't have to feel like this anymore. I don't have to hide my smiles or my looks towards my boyfriend. We won't have to hide. And as good as that feels, I also feel conflicted. Watching Charlotte on stage, and seeing how happy she is... I felt that once too. And I am slowly getting it back. Will I have to give that up so we can be free? Does this all boil down to a choice between our music or our love?

"Alright boys, let's go," Ian says from behind us. "You're on in fifteen."

I take one final glance at Charlotte as she starts in on another song, bouncing up and down as the crowd jumps with her. I wish we could watch the rest of her set, but unfortunately we overlap and we are playing on another stage. I turn to follow Ian and the guys as he leads us to the other stage, trying to stay focused on the show, and keep my mind from running in every other direction it wants to go.

We get our guitars on and in-ear monitors in, and I feel the familiar anxiety start to rise. But I close my eyes and breathe deeply. I remind myself of what I've been working on with Lauren lately, which is to not fight the anxiety, but to acknowledge it. She says it will help me gain control over my thoughts, and not be at the mercy of my anxiety. By accepting it, I am taking back that power and not letting it take over *me*. But it's *so* hard to do, and every time I try, I just end up fighting it again and wishing it would fuck off.

A hand lands on my arm and I smile. I know it's Ezra before I even open my eyes.

"Ready?" he asks, smiling.

I nod, taking a deep breath in. His hand is still on my arm, and I cast a quick glance to the camera aimed at us. Anna isn't paying attention, but at any moment she is going to turn around, and there are many eyes around us who don't belong to our crew. I look back at him and try to pull my arm away, but he keeps his grip on me. "Ez, they're going to see," I whisper to him.

"Let them." He looks right into my eyes. "This is ending, babe. Soon, I'll be able to do more than just touch your arm." He drops his hand with a smile as Ollie and Callum approach us for our pre-show huddle. I stare back at Ezra, hope flowing through me at those words.

"Alright, boys!" Ollie beams at us. "Let's burn so fucking hot!"

Callum chuckles, sticking his hand out, and we all follow, stacking our hands in the middle of our huddle. I look around at my band mates, and I can feel a general happiness to us now. We have a way out of this, and this *is* ending. But there is also a sadness. We have created something beautiful. No matter what happens, I know these guys will be in my life forever. But to potentially not be Send Help anymore? I know we are all struggling with that thought.

Ezra nudges my shoulder and smiles. "Real fucking hot."

I smile back at him and nod, as we all call out, "Burn hot!"

As we break apart and get ready to walk on stage, I take one more deep breath, shaking my hands and trying to keep my anxiety from ramping up. But as we walk onto the stage and the crowd cheers, I feel the anxiety start to fade away. The cheers are electrifying, and I'm blown away by the size of the crowd.

As I play the first few chords of *Silhouette*, my shaking hands settle and my mind finally focuses on what's really important right now. Which is the music. Each show I am

feeling better and better, and I feel myself getting closer to the day I can step on stage and really let go. I let the sensations flow through me as we work through our set, feeling our music and letting it soothe me.

And by the time we are playing *Find My Broken Heart*, and I hold the mic up for the crowd to sing... it hits me. A thrill courses through my body unlike anything I've felt before as they sing out our lyrics and I scan the crowd, taking in the smiles, the signs and the t-shirts. In this huge music festival with many A-list artists playing, this crowd is here for *us*. The love our fans show us, whether it's during a sold-out show in a stadium or during a quick chat in a restaurant, is unlike anything I ever could have imagined.

And in this moment, I realize how much I have missed this. I have been shut off from truly feeling this love as my anxiety took hold of me. But right now, I feel it. I feel the love, I feel the music, I feel the excitement. It's like I am experiencing this for the first time, and I want more. I feel *alive*.

I turn my head to look at Ezra, and lock eyes with him. The man that I love, and will love for the rest of my life. This is what I want, with him. With Ollie, and Callum. It's with them that I have learned to love and be loved. We're family, and we will fight for what's ours.

As I stare into Ezra's eyes, I know. I know we need this. William is done, and we will not give up what we have created. We will no longer be controlled, hidden or abused. We're Send Help, and we're going to stay that way.

William, Val, Anna, Stephanie... they've been landing hits on us all along. But not anymore, and no one else ever will again.

We're a step ahead, and we're controlling this situation.

I'm done taking punches.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

---

*Harley*

“SO, I just want to know why you told *Callum* this and not *me*. *Your own brother*.” Ezra says into his phone, which is laying on the coffee table on speaker, while shooting daggers at Callum across from him.

“Because he’s been doing all this work on figuring this out, Ezra, it’s not a big deal,” Emma says through the phone. “He was confirming some details with me, so I told him.”

Ezra leans back against the couch with a huff and murmurs, “Still could have told me.”

“Or all of us,” I smirk and nudge him.

Ezra waves a hand in the air, gesturing to me, Callum, and Ollie. “Yeah, I mean, all of us.”

“Well, you know now, and at the time we didn’t even know what we were doing anyway,” Callum says.

Ollie sits up on the bed where he is laying in our hotel room. “Can we just get on with the details of this? Emma. Enlighten me. You say we can potentially renegotiate our contract... how?”

“Not necessarily *re*-negotiate. You are able to terminate your contract based on the proof you have that William is embezzling your royalties, which means you are free to sign with another label if you wish. Or you could sign again with Capture Music, with the new director. So, you terminate, and then sign a brand-new contract. You are then in a position to negotiate the finer details of that contract.”

I nod as she explains this. “And under a new contract, what does that mean for our music?”

“It would remain the same,” Emma says. “They remain as copyright holder and author on all your master recordings regardless of what happens. My professor said that under a new contract, the artist and company remain the same. You’re still the artist that recorded that music, so you still have access to that music.”

*Access to our music.* I internally roll my eyes at that. *We* wrote it. But *they* get to own it. Since we’ve decided that we want to keep creating and playing music, we unleashed Emma on our contract, and she took the entire thing to her professor. We ended up hiring her to oversee all of this to make sure we are doing it right this time, and Emma gets to be a part of it all and learn along the way. Win for the professor, win for Emma... and hopefully a win for us.

“That makes sense...” Callum says, thoughtfully staring out the window. He then brings his attention back to the phone. “And I assume that if Capture Music doesn’t wish to sign us under a new contract, our only option is to walk away?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Once you terminate, a new director could just say no to signing you again. You *may* be able to renegotiate your current contract if you don’t terminate, but that’s a whole other ordeal that could be a messy, drawn-out process that we wouldn’t recommend. Renegotiation means they still hold power, since you remain under the current contract while doing so. I think it’s in your best interest to terminate since you have the grounds to, and then attempt to negotiate a new contract on re-signing.” She pauses. “Just... be prepared that they could say no, and you will have to walk away from your music.”

I sigh and spin my ring on my thumb. It seems like for every step forward, we face more hurdles and have more tough decisions to make. Ezra wraps his hand around mine and I look up at him. His soft smile is everything I need to remember why we are doing this. So we can be free, and can

love without constraints. So we can have control over our lives.

“We need to try,” I say, and Ollie and Callum turn their attention to me. “It’s all we can do. Ben is meeting with the Music Group this week. So, I guess for now, we watch William go down and just enjoy the show.” I smile at them and Ollie whoops in excitement.

“Yes!” He claps his hands together and points at me. “That’s what’s up.”

I laugh, and I hear Emma chuckling through the phone as well. “Sounds like a great plan,” she says. “You only have a few more weeks of this tour left, so enjoy it, and take that fucker down.”

Callum smiles at the phone. “Thanks, Em, for everything. You’ve been amazing.”

“My pleasure,” Emma says. “But it’s not done yet. You’ll still be hearing from me lots.”

“Looking forward to it,” Callum chuckles.

I glance at Ezra, and he is watching Callum through squinted eyes. He opens his mouth to say something, but I nudge him. He turns to face me, and I smile. “She’s right. We need to enjoy these last few weeks,” I say in a quiet voice, just for him.

He smiles back at me. “Oh, we will.”

“Yeah we will!” Ollie plops between us, draping his arms over both our shoulders.

I laugh as he nuzzles into us, and Callum thanks Emma again, letting her go as she has a class soon. As he passes Ezra his phone, he checks the time. “We need to be down in the boardroom in a few minutes.”

“Ugh!” Ollie throws his head back dramatically. “Dudes, I just want to stay here and read my book. It’s *so good*.” He lowers his head to look at me, his arms still around our shoulders. “Like... so good.”

Ezra chuckles. “What’s this one?”

“Oh my god.” He turns his head to him. “Isabella opened my world to... wait for it... multiple partners! Our FMC - that’s female main character by the way - has *two* dudes. TWO! She’s trying to choose, but like... why? Personally, I think she should just keep doing both. They are both hot, they treat her *so well*, and if she ends up breaking one of their hearts I’ll probably riot.” He nods seriously. “Yeah, I would. And my god. The spice. And the relationship dynamics that I never really thought of before with more than just two people involved, it’s really made me think about-”

“Ok,” Callum stands up. “We can talk more about this later, Ollie, but we have to go.”

Ollie checks his watch and sighs, standing up as well.

My heart rate starts to pick up, and I rub my hand over my thighs, blowing out a breath.

William and Val are here to discuss our album launch.

Ezra holds out a hand and I take it, letting him pull me up off the couch. He wraps me in a hug and kisses the side of my head. “I’m right there with you, babe,” he says.

I nod into his shoulder, hanging onto him tight for this brief moment we have before the chaos begins. And as I breathe him in, I remind myself once again why we are doing this. Even if this doesn’t work out and we do end up having to walk away from everything... we will have each other, and we will have our freedom.

“It should be pretty quick,” Callum says as Ezra and I break apart. “We’ll stay quiet and just let them yammer on about whatever they need to talk about, and we’ll be out of there before we know it.”

“Yup, and it will be awesome because they’ll never suspect a thing.” Ollie wags his finger in the air with attitude.

“You,” Callum says, turning to him, “should just not really say anything. You will totally let something slip.”

Ollie widens his eyes and looks at him in horror. “Not true, I am an excellent secret keeper.”



“Uh, no. No, you are definitely not,” Ezra chuckles. “You keep secrets as well as I can lie.”

Callum nods seriously, walking to the door, muttering, “Maybe everyone just don’t say anything at all...”

As we head out of our room and towards the boardroom in the hotel, Callum and Ollie continue to quietly bicker about Ollie’s inability to keep a secret. And I try desperately to keep my heart from beating straight out of my chest. I can feel myself falling deeper into that dark hole of panic the closer we get to the boardroom, and I just want to turn around and leave. My mind tries to grab onto the calming thoughts and strategies I’ve learned, but I can’t hold onto them long enough.

Ollie can’t keep a secret, Ezra can’t lie for shit, and I can barely function in the presence of these people... this will be interesting.



“We’re talking big numbers here guys, we are very pleased.” William beams at us as he sits back in his chair. “With the anticipation of this second album, it already looks like we are going to surpass expected revenue.”

I drop my eyes to the table before me, unable to look at his smug face anymore. Knowing what he is doing, while he praises us for surpassing revenue, is sickening. My anxiety is hovering, threatening to completely take over me, and I am trying everything I can to keep it away. To keep it from taking *me* away.

“So, we’ve planned your next tour.” His booming voice echos around me. “After this leg of the tour is complete, you have one week for rehearsals in New York, then the album launch concert. Following that...” he trails off in anticipation, and I raise my eyes to see him smiling widely, “you’ll be headed out on a world tour. You’ll begin in Australia.”

We're all silent, while we process this information. While I know we will be getting out of this before that actually happens, I still can't help the anger that rises in me. The fucking audacity of him, to plan this without any input from us and just assume we would be ready and willing to go right back out on tour. And for how long? By the time we complete a world tour, we would have been touring for two years straight. But all he cares about is lining his pockets at our expense. And now I can't help but wonder if he has plans to take money from our tour revenue as well, and that's why he's pushing it so hard.

"That sounds wonderful," Callum eventually says. "Looking forward to it."

William casts a look over each of us as we sit across the boardroom table from him, and I feel sick. I hate having his eyes on me, but I especially hate it when he gives us that assessing look. It feels like he can see right through us, and my leg starts bouncing as I fear just that. What if he knows. What if he has caught wind of what's going on and he knows Ben got those reports... what if he is doing something behind the scenes, just like we are, to somehow fuck this all up for us...

Ollie's hand lands on mine under the table and I squeeze it back. Ezra and I didn't sit beside each other, since Val is here, and we want to avoid any conflict. But right now, I regret that decision. As my anxiety rises, so does my need for him. I try not to look down the table at him, and instead focus on Ollie's hand on mine, keeping me grounded and focused. I take a few deep breaths, focusing on the feeling of his hand. I nod slightly to him in thanks, and he gives my hand one more squeeze before pulling it back.

William looks to Val beside him. "And media, in preparation for the album launch?"

"Yes," Val nods, looking down at her tablet. "We have interviews and appearances lined up over these last few weeks of tour, and a few during rehearsal week." She looks up and glances between me and Ezra. She looks a bit confused as Ollie and Callum sit between us, and I feel a smirk tug at the

corner of my lips as I watch her try to figure this out. “We do continue to face the same problem however.”

*Wait, what?*

“While we are happy you have finally chosen to work with us on your image,” Val says, shooting a glance towards me, “everything you have done previously to harm this image, is continuing to haunt us.”

I swallow hard, my heart slamming against my ribcage. *Shit, what is she going to do now...*

“Your fans are adamant you are together. *Still.*” Val shakes her head as she observes us. “We need to set the record straight once and for all.”

I rub my hand on my thigh and feel the tingles creeping up my arms and legs. I start to feel lightheaded at the memories of everything they did to us when we were fighting back to gain some sense of freedom. *It could get worse...*

“How?” Ezra’s voice cuts into my thoughts, pulling me back to the present. I don’t look at him even though I want to. Because if I do, I don’t think I’ll be able to stop myself from grabbing him and running out of here.

But as I bring my eyes to Val, I see something I’ve never seen in her before. She doesn’t know. She doesn’t have the answer to that question. And really... what can she do? We are doing everything they ask. But our fans still know. And there is nothing she can do about it.

“Well,” Val shifts in her seat and crosses her hands on the table before her, “the good news is, Hannah’s contract has been extended for another year. So that should certainly help.” Her eyes once again find me, and it’s like she is waiting for me to panic or be upset. It’s like she *wants* that... so I smile and nod. I know what Hannah’s contract extension really means. She negotiated payment for the year upfront. And in a few weeks, the contract will be null and void at no fault of her own, so she gets to keep that very generous pay.

Val’s eyes widen slightly in surprise at my reaction, and she glances to William. His eyes move to Ezra as he nods and

says, “That’s great.”

Val adjusts her tablet before her, seeming to think on something. Her lips then curve up in an evil smile. “We’ll be doing a behind the scenes shoot today, by the way. Sorry it’s not on your day sheets. I didn’t realize we were behind in footage, so we’ll have to make up for lost time.”

I try not to roll my eyes. So, because we didn’t fight with her, she needs to see just how far she can take this. But that’s ok...we can do this. It’s just a few more weeks...

“Ok, that’s probably a good idea.” Callum nods.

William suddenly stands up, buttoning his suit jacket and eyeing us all. He then slaps on a huge, fake smile as he picks up his briefcase. “Excellent work, boys. Keep it up.”

As William and Val leave the room, I finally look to Ezra. The anxiety fades as I find my comfort in his beautiful blue eyes. It’s going to be hard to wait while this plan unfolds, but even with the anxiety, it feels good to be fighting back. Because it’s a *need* now, and I’ll do anything to end this.



The cameras face me as I watch Ollie and Ezra play FIFA in our dressing room, and I want to crawl out of my skin. What is so special about us playing video games while we wait until show time? They’ve already followed us around to interviews after our meeting with William and Val, not giving us even a moment to breathe afterwards. My muscles feel twitchy and I’m biting my thumbnail while I try to focus on the screen, and not the cameras in the room.

My eyes flick to the open door as I see Jack walk by and I jump up, heading out to the hall.

“Jack,” I call to him.

He turns around, coffee in hand. “Hey.”

I glance behind me to make sure the cameras aren't following as I walk towards him. "Hey, um... you busy right now?"

Jack slowly shakes his head, observing me carefully. "No."

I nod, my eyes flicking behind him to the workout room. "Can we box?"

His brow furrows as he checks his watch. "We have a little over an hour before our usual time, would you be ok with that?"

I nod, shifting my weight between my feet and squeezing my hands. His eyes soften as he sees the anxious energy in me and nods, gesturing with his chin to the workout room.

"Excellent, this will be great footage."

Jack and I both turn to see Val, Anna and a cameraman. I glance back at Jack and he raises his eyebrows at me. I nod, taking a breath in and turning my attention back to them. "No, no cameras in here."

Val narrows her eyes at me, and Anna rolls hers, muttering something about me being difficult. But I also don't miss the flash of excitement in Val's eyes. She's getting her fight after all. "Harley, this isn't up to you. May I remind you-"

"You don't need to remind me of anything, Val. Trust me, I know it all," I say, my hands shaking and my heart thumping. "But this has nothing to do with the band, it's for me and me only. It's... my therapy. So no, no cameras."

I turn around and walk past Jack into the workout room, holding my breath the whole way. Once I hear the door close, I turn around to see Jack beaming at me.

"That was-"

"I want to learn to block," I say, the words rushing out of me with a fierce need.

Jack's smile falls and he sets his coffee down.

"I'm ready," I say, nodding at him. "I need it. I need to learn to protect myself, to be a step ahead, to fight back and-"

“Ok,” Jack says simply. “Ok. Let’s do it.”

A rush of air escapes me and I nod again, squeezing my hands at my sides.

Jack is silent as he wraps my hands and slides my gloves on. He finishes strapping them on and takes a step back. He looks into my eyes and smiles slightly. “Breathe.”

I release the breath I was holding, and then take another deep breath in, and out.

“Good,” Jack says softly. “In an ideal world, you would avoid every punch your opponent sends your way. But some are going to land. It’s impossible to predict every move they will make.”

I nod, taking another deep breath.

“So, the best thing you can do for yourself, is to learn to defend. Even though the hit is still landing, you can lessen its impact, and you have control over it.” He smiles at me. “You just blocked your first hit out there.”

I glance at the door and huff out a laugh. “We’ve been trying.”

“I’ve noticed.” He smirks at me and gestures to my hands. “Hands up.”

I immediately lift my hands and get into my stance.

“There are four types of blocks. The high block, the low block, the catch and the parry.” He moves into stance beside me. “Blocks are lower risk, as there is less of a chance for your opponent to get a hit on you. But, they don’t leave you much of an ability to counter punches against your opponent. Catches and Parries do, but they are higher risk. We’ll start with a high block.”

I watch him as he slides his hand up to eyebrow height. “By placing your glove here, you protect your face from punches, but the impact can cause you to basically punch yourself in the face. So,” he moves his hand higher and to the side of his head, “this way, your arm blocks the punch and you can absorb more of the hit.”

I try to ignore my racing heart as I follow his movements and practice moving from my stance into this type of block.

“Good,” Jack says, moving in front of me. “Do you think you can try to block my hand?”

I nod, but it feels like I’m moving in slow motion and against my will.

He walks over to his duffle bag and slides on a pair of gloves. “I’m not going to touch you. I’ll go slow, and stop just before I make contact with your arm. If at any point you want me to stop, you tell me. Got it?”

I nod again. “Yeah,” I say, shifting my weight on my feet as my breathing quickens and my pulse thunders in my ears.

Jack stands before me. “Breathe, Harley.”

I take some deep breaths, while Jack nods and murmurs, “Good.”

Once I’m done, I move into my stance and swallow hard. My eyes immediately lower as Jack moves into his stance as well, raising his hands.

“Eyes up,” he says.

I raise my eyes and look at his glove.

“Ready?” Jack asks, and his voice sounds like it’s miles away.

My entire body feels like it’s going to lose control at any moment. I don’t know if I’m going to run out of the room, freeze, fall down, fight back... I don’t know. I don’t feel in control. I don’t know if I can do this.

“You got this Harley. You are in control here. You tell me when.”

My ears are ringing, and I can’t take my eyes off his glove. I’m waiting for the hit, the pain, the shame... but it’s not coming. He’s not doing anything.

My eyes slowly slide to his, and he is looking back at me with patience and understanding. He’s right. I am in control.

I'm no longer at the mercy of angry fists, and I never want to be again. I *can* defend myself. I want to learn. I *need* to learn.

I drop my eyes back to his glove and say, "I'm ready."

Jack slowly moves his glove towards me, and I fight every instinct I have to freeze, and shut down. To just take it, because it's easier. But I don't. I raise my glove to the side of my head and close my eyes.

And nothing happens.

I open my eyes and lower my glove to look at Jack. He smiles and nods to me. "Again."

A rush of pride courses through me. It seems so simple, to just raise my arm and protect myself. But it's far from it.

I block again, and again, and again. And each time it gets easier, and I move quicker.

And for the last block, I tell Jack to hit me. When his glove lightly lands on my arm, I don't run away, I don't freeze, and I don't lose control. I block it... and hit him back.

"Damn," he says, laughing. "Now we have a fighter."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

---

Ezra

HARLEY SIGHS against my chest and I smile, pulling him closer.

Eric Clapton is playing on Harley's record player while we lay in bed and take some time for ourselves this morning. We have a few hours before we need to be anywhere, and we know the second we leave this hotel room the cameras will be on us. So, we're not going anywhere. And as I lay here with him in my arms, I think about what the future holds. And that we will be able to do this a lot more.

"What are you thinking?" Harley murmurs, tracing his fingers down my bare chest.

I let out a content sigh. "How much I love you."

He chuckles adorably and tilts his head back. "I love you, too."

I bring my lips to his and kiss him gently. When I pull back, I look into his beautiful green eyes, and rub my thumb over his bottom lip. "And how much I love seeing you happy."

He smiles softly. "You make me happy."

"Well, I know *that*," I chuckle as I push him onto his back and he laughs. I lean over him and place another kiss on his lips. "But this is more than just happy. I can see that you are... healing." I push his hair back. "It's amazing to watch."

As he looks into my eyes, I notice how soft they are. I think back to a few months ago, and how every time I looked into his eyes, I wasn't sure if I was going to see him or not.

And those times I *did* see him, he was barely hanging on. But he's here now. And I couldn't be more proud of him for the progress he's made.

He raises a hand to lightly run his fingers over my arm. "I really needed the help," he says softly. "Thank you for making it happen."

I shake my head. "You did it. I just gave a gentle nudge."

He's quiet for a moment as he seems to think. "I've been learning lately about why I am so anxious, and why I tend to think the way I do."

I watch him as he looks at his fingers, trailing over the skin on my arm. "Yeah?"

He nods. "Obviously it's my dad, I knew that. But to understand why and how it affects me..."

I feel his heart beating harder under my hand on his chest, and I hate that even the mention of his dad makes him feel anxious. We are still waiting to see if he tries anything else in his quest for more money, and Harley is trying hard to forget about him. But he's this dark shadow that is always looming, while we simply wait for him to strike. It's an unsettling feeling, not knowing what he is going to do and when. Which is heartbreaking, because this is only a fraction of what Harley has had to deal with growing up.

He takes a breath in. "Lauren says because I always had to be aware of his mood, it led to a hyper-vigilance in order to protect myself. Which is why I have such high anxiety now... and she said that..." his face contorts a bit as he looks uncomfortable. He keeps his eyes down, not looking at me.

"You don't have to say it if you don't want to," I say gently.

He blinks a couple times and swallows. "She said that... the things I went through can... permanently change the brain." He pauses for a moment. "I'll probably always be like this. I will always be anxious... it's never going to fully go away. I will have to work at this for the rest of my life and learn to live with it and manage it." He finally raises his eyes

to mine. “So... while I’m healing, I’m never going to be truly healed...”

I drop my lips to his and keep my hand over his heart. His fingers wrap around my arm, holding on tight. I gently pull back and look into his eyes. “I’ve told you this before, and I will tell you every day if I have to. I. Love. *You.*” I tap his chest with my fingers with each of those words. “If you have a panic attack every week, day or hour, I will be there with you to hold your hand. I don’t need you to be anxiety free, Harley. I need you to just be you. I’m so proud of you for all these steps you have taken. Therapy, boxing, finding your voice and being comfortable with yourself... it’s all paying off. But it’s so *you* can feel good. I want this for you, I don’t need a single part of you to change. I fell in love with every part of you, remember?”

His lips slowly turn up in a soft smile while he stares into my eyes. “How’d I get so lucky?”

I bite my lip and shake my head as I run my hand down his bare torso. I trace my fingers over his defined abs, and up the muscles in his arms. All that boxing is *really* paying off... “I think I’m the lucky one,” I say with a smirk.

Just as I bring my lips to his for a kiss, there’s a knock at the door. I smile against him. “The only reason I’m not rioting at this interruption is coffee.” I jump off the bed while he laughs, and I pull on sweatpants and a t-shirt.

I retrieve the breakfast we ordered and bring it into the room, setting the tray on the bed. Just as I’m about to climb into bed with him he holds a hand up.

“No.” He shakes his head, shooing me away. “Nu uh. No pants in this bed.”

I laugh as I stand up again, dropping my pants with a little dance and seductively pulling my t-shirt off. Harley rolls his eyes, and pours some milk into my coffee, handing it to me.

“Mm, heaven.” I smile as I slip back under the covers and take a long sip of the delicious coffee.

I take the plate of eggs, bacon, toast and fruit Harley hands me. I pluck the honeydew melon off my plate and plop it on his. I think it's gross, he thinks it's delicious. One of the few things we've had strong disagreements about. It's like a cucumber, pear wannabe. It's weird. I cringe slightly as he takes a bite of it.

"Does Lulu know yet if she's coming out this weekend?" I ask after I take a bite of my toast.

Harley narrows his eyes at my mouth. "Sorry, was distracted by the wad of half chewed bread in your mouth."

I stick my tongue out at him, and he rolls his eyes with a smile. "Yeah, she said she can."

"Good," I say, smiling. Then huff out a breath. "So stupid Hannah even has to come with just a couple weeks of tour left. I feel awful she has to take a day off her internship right at the end of it for this shit."

Harley nods. "Yeah, I know. I'm sure this isn't how they were planning to spend their last weekend before school starts."

I feel anger bubbling as I think about it. Even though we were going along with everything they said, knowing this contract wouldn't actually be a year, it's still an insane contract. We looked at it with our lawyer, and they hid so many ridiculous clauses and stipulations in there that gives Hannah no control at all over this schedule. If they say come out, she has to. They were expecting us not to notice and just sign it. But we did notice... and we didn't say anything. Hannah signed it, because it's all going to be over soon. It's a risk, but we trust Ben. He said everything is going to plan, and there is an end date. So for now, we do as they say.

I look up at Harley and he is eyeing me warily. I smile, shoving the angry and worrisome thoughts away. "Well, at least they'll be in Italy."

Harley's brow crinkles as he sets down his coffee. "You don't have to do that," he says.

"Do what?" I ask.

He softens his look at me. “You can tell me what you’re really feeling.”

I shake my head. “It’s nothing, really. I just like looking on the bright side.” I shrug with another smile.

He doesn’t smile back, instead reaching out to take my hand. “You know, you haven’t really told me anything about how therapy is going.” He looks up at me. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to. But if you do want to talk about it... I’m here.”

I nod, looking down at our hands. He’s right, I haven’t said anything. Because I don’t know what to say. Honestly? I hate it. I know I tend to shove my feelings away and try to make everything better. I know I need to feel my feelings. But right now, there are other people in my life who are going through much bigger things and what I am doing just feels so unimportant. My therapist told me to paint him a picture of where I am right now, emotionally. He suggested doing this through writing, but every time I open my computer I just stare at a blank screen. I don’t know if I just don’t know how to do it, or if there is literally nothing there. But I’m getting frustrated with it.

I nod at him with a smile. “I know you are, babe. And thank you. If I need to talk about anything, I will. I promise. You have much bigger things to deal with right now, though.” I squeeze his hand.

He shakes his head. “Don’t minimize your struggles.”

Those words hit me somewhere deep in my chest, but I can’t quite figure out why. “I’m not,” I say, rubbing my thumb over the back of his hand. “I’m doing what I need to do. I promise.”

He pauses for a moment before he says, “Ok.” He takes a sip of his coffee and then looks at me again. “So, I have a question.”

I shift slightly to face him. “Yeah?”

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Having *Details* out there for everyone to hear has been... exciting. It’s about

us. And because of that, it's also a pretty weird feeling. Our other songs have also been about us, but this one is more..." he trails off, biting his lip in thought.

I smile at him as I think I know where he is going with this. "This one is more direct?"

He nods. "Yeah. I guess it feels like it's one step closer to really telling the world who we are."

"Babe, we don't need to tell anyone," I assure him. "Just because we are away from William and don't have to hide anymore, doesn't mean we need to shout it from the rooftops."

"Yeah, I know..." he says thoughtfully. He turns his head back to me. "But, what do *you* want to do?"

I suddenly realize I haven't even thought about it. It's been a struggle for Harley to feel comfortable sharing he is gay after what his father did to him. And now with everything the label has done to continue controlling and hiding who he is, I can completely understand his apprehension to tell the entire world.

But, for me? I have no idea. I don't know how I feel about it, as my only concern all along has been Harley. I've always thought that if I had the opportunity to, I *would* shout from the rooftops that I love him. But now, I feel a need to protect our love and keep anyone else from trying to hurt it.

We want freedom... but how do we know what that is?



"That fucking bastard."

I watch Charlotte through the computer screen as she processes everything we just told her. We got the green light from Ben to share this with her, as the Music Group is doing a full investigation and found out Sentry is in fact embezzling royalties from other labels, Charlotte's included. So, we decided to video call her, as this is too big to share over a

simple phone call and we don't have plans to see her before this is all going to come out.

“Like, the fuck!” She stares back at us in shock, and I can definitely understand how she's feeling.

“I know, it's wild,” Callum says from behind me, leaning over the back of the couch to peer at the screen.

“So, he's been taking royalties from me and other artists in my label... which *he doesn't even run.*” She shakes her head and huffs out a breath in exasperation. “What is the Music Group doing about this?”

“We haven't heard any specifics yet, but Ben said they have a plan in place to deal with it,” I say, leaning forward. “William doesn't know yet as I guess they are still investigating. We shouldn't even really know any of what's going on, but Ben shared it with us since someone,” I turn to look at Callum over my shoulder, “was going to *die* if they didn't know what was happening.”

Callum shrugs at me simply and Ollie nudges him with a nod. “It's true, I thought you were going to like, stroke out or something.”

Harley chuckles beside me on the couch, but then leans forward to speak to Charlotte. “So, you know nothing. Not until your label tells you.”

“Got it.” She nods. “Thanks for telling me. Now I see why you couldn't share that with me. Ollie...” she shakes her head at him. “Terrible secret keeper, my friend.”

Ollie gasps in horror. “But I didn't tell you, I successfully kept the secret!”

“Not... really...” I say thoughtfully. I mean, it's true, he didn't spill the actual secret, but... he came close enough.

Charlotte chuckles. “So, what does this mean for your contract?”

Harley sits back on the couch and fiddles with his ring. We're all silent for a beat until Callum says, “We can terminate.”

“That’s amazing! So, then you’ll be shopping for a new label?” she asks.

“Uh, maybe.” I nod, glancing at Ollie who leaves to go sit on the bed. Which is a good call. He will absolutely give this away, as we decided not to share the specifics yet while we figure out how to get back in with Capture Music so we can still play our music.

“Well, whatever happens you guys will finally be able to live your ideal life, and you deserve it. That is awesome.” She looks over her shoulder and then back to us. “I have to go guys, but thank you again, so much, for telling me this. I’m greatly looking forward to watching that asshole go down.”

I laugh. “Yeah, we are too.”

“Have a good night, and hopefully see you soon!” She waves to the camera as we all say our byes and Harley reaches out to close the laptop.

Callum sighs as he walks over to a chair and plops down. “An ideal life,” he says. “What do you think that is?”

I lace my fingers in Harley’s and think on that. Harley and I have talked about it before, what sort of life we want, but we never talked about it with the guys. About what an ideal life is for Send Help.

“It’s a good question actually,” Callum continues. “We should probably talk about this, so we know what to ask for when negotiating a contract.”

Ollie nods. “So, if we are signed with Capture Music without any insane image clauses or any other bullshit like that, and we get to play our music... what else do we want?”

“Yeah,” Callum leans forward with a smile. “I know what I want more of. I want to see these places we travel to. We are always so busy, it’s rare we actually get time to see anything. We’ve had a few days here and there in some places, but I would have loved to see more of Germany. We were in and out so fast.”

“Oh man, yeah, I super wanted to see and do more in Scotland and the Netherlands,” Ollie agrees, smiling widely.



“And I want to see more of our fans.”

“Yes, agreed.” Callum nods.

“It just feels like we only ever get to talk to them when they approach us during our time off, which isn’t that common to begin with, and I just want to talk to them and hug them and take pictures and be their friend, you know?” Ollie asks. “Rather than signing a photo and sending them scurrying after fifteen seconds.” He makes a running motion with his fingers.

“And maybe separating tour and recording? Like actually getting writing and studio time and *then* tour. Not all at once,” Callum says while Ollie points at him, nodding vigorously.

Harley and I sit, listening to them dream of an ideal life in this job. I keep my hand in his, gently rubbing my thumb over the back of it. He leans his shoulder against me and sighs.

Ollie peers over at us. “Guys?”

“Yeah?” I ask.

“What do you want?”

And there’s that question again. I glance at Harley, and he shrugs slightly.

“Well... more free time would be nice,” I say, still looking at Harley.

He nods and hums his agreement. “Yeah, I’d take that.” He looks down at our hands and says quietly. “And to just be us.”

Ollie smiles. “Sounds perfect.” He then turns to Callum. “Bungee jumping.”

Callum gives him a quizzical look. “Huh?”

“I saw it in Switzerland, and it looks like it would have been really fun, and I wish we could have done it,” Ollie says simply.

Callum stares back at him. “You could barely function on a *Ferris wheel* as you have a fear of heights, and you want to go bungee jumping?”

Ollie shrugs. “I mean, what better way to beat the fear, right?”

As they continue to bicker about Ollie’s lofty goals, I turn to Harley. As I look into his eyes, I think about his question from this morning. And truth is, I do want everyone to know I love him. I’m proud of this love and I *don’t* want to hide it. But when I think of the negativity we have faced as we just try to *be*, I can’t help but feel worried about letting others into our bubble. And when I think of everything Harley has been through to get to this point, I know that I will support him in whatever he wants to do. If he wants to keep it private, we will. If he wants to share it, we will.

I smile at him. “You know what I really want?” I say quietly.

“What?” he asks.

“Goats in the mountains with you.”

He flashes his gorgeous smile, and my heart leaps in my chest at the sight. I lift our joined hands to my lips to kiss the back of his. “I think, for me, what I am most looking forward to is building a life with you,” I say. “I will always love creating and playing music with you and the guys and sharing it with our fans. But it’s not everything. We will always, no matter what, have a life outside of all of this. And it’s going to be only ours. No matter what happens anywhere else, that is just for us where we can escape and just... be.”

He leans in to kiss me, his hand cupping the side of my face gently. He then rests his forehead against mine and smiles. “Now that sounds fucking perfect.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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*Harley*

I WRAP my arm around the girl next to me and smile for the camera.

“Thank you!” She beams at me and bounces down the line to see Callum.

I rub a hand over my chest and take a deep breath, looking over the crowd of fans waiting to take photos with us. This was a last minute addition before the show tonight here in Verona, and I barely had time to prepare myself for the onslaught of people and camera flashes. But as I look out over the sea of fans, I’m blown away by how many people are here. It’s a weird feeling to know that all of these people listen to and love our music, but they also want to see and get to know *us*. Even after doing this for almost a year, I still get goosebumps at the thought of just how big this whole thing is.

As another fan approaches me for a photo and to sign a t-shirt, I see movement out of the corner of my eye. I glance towards the camera pointed at me and try not to sigh in frustration. Ever since Val was here, we have cameras capturing footage of *everything*. They were even at breakfast this morning. While it’s beyond frustrating, it’s also worrisome. I wonder if Val might know something is up, and she’s putting these cameras everywhere to try to catch us in something. Or, she’s just taking advantage of the fact we are agreeing to everything. I turn my head and take a deep breath, needing to continue on, no matter what the reason for this invasion of privacy is.

“Hi!”

I turn to see a guy and a girl approach me with big smiles. “Hey,” I say, slapping on a smile for them.

“Would it be weird to ask you to sign this?” The girl holds out a t-shirt that has a band logo on it for *Haphazard*.

I breathe out a laugh and take the shirt. “No problem. Who is this?”

“It’s us,” the guy says, smiling. “That’s our band.”

I look up at them with a smile. “Oh, no way. What do you play?”

“Mostly covers, we’re in the wedding circuit,” the girl says, watching me sign the shirt. “But we recently started writing and playing our own music too as we’ve been inspired by Send Help. Specifically, your song *Today’s Life*.”

I smile down at the shirt as I finish signing it, and pass it back to them. That song was written when we were in New York recording the first album, and is about how exciting it was to start something new with the people you love. “That’s one of my favourites from the album.”

“Mine too,” the guy says. “I love the bluesy undertone in the guitar.”

I nod, my smile widening. “I’m a huge blues lover, so that riff was-”

“We have to move along.” Stephanie appears beside us, ushering them to move down the line.

They look surprised as they glance back at me, and I give them a sympathetic smile. But really, I feel extremely disappointed. This is exactly what we were talking about the other day. We *want* to connect with our fans, talk about our music and get to know them. But we’re just props, used to make money.

“Thanks for coming,” I say to them. “Hopefully we’ll see you again soon and can continue this conversation.” I make eye contact with Stephanie as they step down the line and she glares at me.

“This line needs to keep moving,” she says curtly. “We don’t have time for this.”

I bite my tongue and nod, fighting the urge to look down the line up to Ezra.

But I suddenly feel an overwhelming need for him. And as I continue to sign things for fans and take photos, I feel myself getting restless. It’s been so hard doing all of these things without Ezra by my side. All along, I’ve needed him to get through all of this, and now I don’t have him here at all. I can’t even look at him. I’ve been managing as best as I can by using everything I’ve learned in therapy and holding onto the fact that we are doing this for a reason, and it’s all going to be over soon. But there are times it really catches up and just hits me. And now is that time. The noises from the crowd, the brightness of the lights above us, the cameras pointed at me, Stephanie’s watchful eyes... it’s all too much. I’m trying not to focus on the anxious feeling in the pit of my stomach, but it keeps trying to force its way in. I take deep breaths and squeeze my hands, thinking of what Lauren said. Don’t fight it. Accept it. I can control it. My thoughts brought it on, which means my thoughts can send it away. But whenever I try to *accept* it, I get anxious about accepting it... which is just fucked. In theory, I understand the idea of it, but in practice, it’s fucking hard. And if I had Ezra by my side, I think I could do it. He calms me in a way nothing else can, and I just want to see him, even for a minute...

“Hi Harley.”

I snap my attention back to what’s happening around me and see two girls standing before me.

“Hi,” I say with a weak smile, reaching for their photo to sign and trying to hide my shaking hands.

“We’re so excited to meet you.” One of the girls smiles and gestures to herself and then the girl next to her. “I’m Bianca, this is Caterina.”

I smile and pass their signed photo back to them. “Nice to meet you.”

“*Details* is our favourite song,” Caterina says. “It’s actually our song.”

I look between them, and I must look a bit confused as Bianca chuckles. “We just recently came out to our friends and family. We were friends but fell in love a while ago. We hid it for a long time, not sure how anyone was going to take it. But *Details* helped us find the courage to just do it and tell them. And it was all ok.”

I stare back at them, processing this. *Details*, a song Ezra and I wrote about our love, helped our fans come out? I don’t really know what to say, so I simply ask, “How?”

Caterina smiles. “It’s a song about a secret love, right?”

My eyes slide to Stephanie, and I see she’s not looking or listening. I don’t know if the cameras are able to pick any of this up, but I don’t really care. I want to hear this. So I nod.

Her eyes follow mine and her lips press together in a thin line as she eyes Stephanie. She turns back to me and gives me a soft smile. “We identified with it, because we were hiding something out of fear for what others would think. But I think *Details* helped us realize that those beautiful details that make up love shouldn’t be hidden. They should be shared and celebrated. And if someone doesn’t like it, then we don’t like them.” She shrugs and Bianca giggles.

“I really like how the song is about those details of love belonging to the people *in* love,” Bianca says thoughtfully. “But while those details belong to us, we don’t need to hide our love. If we share it, it’s still ours and we can be proud of it. So, thank you.” She laces her fingers with Caterina’s, and I drop my eyes to their joined hands.

“Thank you,” I say softly, raising my eyes to meet theirs again.

Caterina glances towards the camera nearby and says, “Everyone should be able to love openly, and how they want to, don’t you think?”

A smile tugs at my lips as I nod slightly. “I do.”

As Stephanie turns her attention back to me, Bianca tugs Caterina down the lineup. “We’re coming to the show tonight. Excited to see you!”

“Enjoy, and...” I pause for a moment as I glance back at Stephanie, while she looks right at me. I look back to the girls. “Thanks again.”

They smile, moving to see Callum, still hand in hand. I watch them for a moment, but then move my gaze to Ezra. I let them rest on him, not caring in this moment if anyone sees. He turns his head to me, giving me a thumbs up with a smile. That beautiful smile that makes my heart melt. The beautiful details of our love... that shouldn’t be hidden.



I run a hand through my damp hair as I read over what I just wrote. I smile as I let the words sink in and think about what it would feel like to share these. Maybe someday.

The door to our dressing room opens and Ezra comes in with a backpack slung over his shoulder. He glances down at my lyric book and then his eyes sweep over my face and hair while he pouts. “Damn, I was hoping to catch you in the shower.”

I laugh, closing my lyric book and leaning back on the couch. “And why’s that?”

He glances over his shoulder into the hallway and looks back at me with a mischievous smirk. He closes the door and locks it.

I sit up quickly. “Oh. Well, ok then.”

He drops his backpack on the floor and straddles me on the couch, bringing his lips to mine in a deep kiss. My hands run up his back under his t-shirt as he slowly grinds his hips against mine.

He trails light kisses down my jaw and neck. “We’re running out of shows on this tour. And there’s still something you want.”

My heart rate spikes as I realize where he’s going with this. “Yeah, there is...”

His lips are curved in that sexy smirk as he sits back and reaches down to his backpack. I watch as he unzips it and pulls out... a buttplug. My eyes fly back up to his and my cock hardens instantly. “Fuck off...” I say in amazement.

He laughs. “I mean, you want me to play a show with your cum in my ass, so I have to keep it in there somehow.”

I laugh as well. “Where did you get that?”

“Oh god.” Ezra closes his eyes and shakes his head. “You don’t want to know the horrors I went through this afternoon to get this without anyone noticing. Let’s just say Ian is probably scarred for life, but...” he shrugs.

I laugh again. I definitely want to hear all about those horrors but right now I need to sink my cock into his tight ass, so story time can wait. “That’s fucking hot,” I say running my hand up his thigh and over his cock in his jeans.

“Well, then,” he lets out a breath as I squeeze him through the fabric, and he grabs a bottle of lube from his backpack. “Fuck me, baby.”

I smash my lips to his as I unbutton and unzip his jeans, freeing his hard cock and stroking it. But I pull back, and glance to the door. “Where are Callum and Ollie?”

“Hair,” Ezra says, tipping my head back so I’m looking up at him. “Olivia did mine early because I told her we had *something* to do. She didn’t ask questions...”

I smile, continuing to stroke him. “Then get these pants off.”

He immediately stands up, taking off his shirt and kicking his pants off as I slide mine down over my hips. As he straddles me again, he lubes up my fingers for me.



“Up.” I nudge him, so he moves up onto his knees, bringing his cock closer to my mouth.

As I wrap my lips around him, I bring my lubed fingers between his legs and rub his hole. His groans are fucking perfect as he places one hand on the back of the couch and brings the other down to rub lube over my cock. As I suck him, he moves his hips to thrust into my mouth with need.

I pull off his dick with a smile and look up at him, still rubbing my fingers over his hole. “You’re desperate.”

“You fucking know I am,” he says seriously.

I nod in understanding and thrust a finger into him. *I am too.*

“Oh, fuck!” He drops his head and I watch as his chest rises and falls while he adjusts to the sensation. I move my finger in him, and he grinds back against my hand, his eyes closing with pleasure.

“Hmm,” I lean forward, kissing his chest. “You love having your ass filled, don’t you?”

Ezra moans in appreciation as I put another finger in his ass and thrust them in and out.

“And you’re going to be filled with me all night,” I say as I move my lips down his chest, fucking him harder with my fingers. I feel his muscles tense under my lips, and I smile against him. “Does that make you a good boy, or a bad boy?”

A large breath escapes him, and I pull my lips from his skin to look up at him. His face is flushed, and it looks like he is barely keeping it together.

I smirk. “I’ll tell you what it makes you.” I reach up and curl my hand around the back of his neck, pulling his face down to mine while I continue to finger fuck his ass. “You’re a bad boy for disobeying orders to keep your distance, and instead fucking me in a dressing room when there are cameras out there looking for us.”

He swallows hard and presses his forehead to mine.

“And you’ll be a bad boy for taking your cum filled ass on stage when we’re supposed to be *hiding*.” I push him back, slowing the pace of my fingers. “But, to me, that’s not being bad. To me, all of that makes you good. It makes you *my* good boy.”

He lets out a large breath and pushes my arm, pulling my fingers from his ass. He moves frantically as he drops back down to his knees, grasping my cock and lowering himself down onto me.

“Yeah, baby, you’re *so* fucking good,” I say in a low voice as his ass meets my hips, and he immediately starts riding me with a desperate need.

“Oh fuck, Harley,” Ezra moans as he grinds on me, increasing his pace and thrusting his hips hard and fast.

I let my hands roam up his thighs as I sit back on the couch and watch him ride me, the muscles of his abs flexing with each thrust and his gorgeous cock just begging for my attention.

As I wrap my hand around his dick and start pumping, he places his hand over mine to stop me. “I am so fucking close already, I won’t last.”

I smile, loving how much some dirty words and praise can affect him. I sit up, wrapping an arm around his torso and bringing my lips to his. I kiss him as I urge him to ride me harder, grinding my hips up into him as I get close to release as well.

“You ready for me to come in your ass, baby?” I say against his lips.

He nods frantically. I tighten my arm around him and flip us, so he’s lying on the couch. His legs wrap around me as I thrust into his ass and pull delicious moans from him. And with each thrust I get closer and closer.

I drop my head as my balls tighten and bring my hand back to Ezra’s cock. “Come with me,” I pant.

Ezra groans as he tilts his head back, his dick shooting cum up his abs. The sight alone has me falling over the edge,

my dick pulsing in his ass as I come hard. I stay in him, making sure every last bit of me is inside him. And as I pull out, I grab the buttplug and swipe it over his hole. The combination of cum and lube allows me to slide it right into him and he groans in satisfaction. I then drop my head to his stomach, and lick up every last drop of his cum.

He pulls me up to him, pushing his tongue past my lips as I let him taste himself. And my god... I could fuck him again right now.

I reluctantly pull away from him. "Come on. We have a show to do," I say with a smirk as he looks back at me with bright eyes full of mischief and pleasure.

He nods, biting his lip. "And quite the show it will be..."



Ezra turns away from the mic and lowers his head, pressing his lips together. I watch him, and try not to get fully fucking hard right here on stage.

We're nearing halfway into the show, and I've been fighting the urge to grab Ezra, run off stage and fuck him again, and again, and again. Knowing my cum is in his ass and he's wearing a buttplug right now, while we play a show in front of 50,000 fans, is driving me fucking *wild*. I know I'm going to get in shit for it, but I can't keep my eyes off him. Every chance I get, I'm watching him squirm and attempt to adjust himself. It's so fucking hot.

As we close out our song, Ezra walks to the drum riser and I can't help but smirk after him.

Ollie comes out from behind his drums and walks over to me to take my mic. Usually he'll chat with me a bit as part of his routine, since he always takes my mic, but he seems to sense my attention is elsewhere. He turns to Callum instead, and thank god, because I have something I need to do.

I walk to the drum riser and sit, eyeing Ezra as he stands beside it.

“Sit down,” I say to him.

His eyes widen as he quickly glances at the crowd.

“I said sit.” I narrow my eyes at him, trying not to smile.

I see his chest rise as he takes a large breath in and does as he’s told.

As he sits beside me, he awkwardly adjusts his weight while pulling his bottom lip between his teeth. I glance at the side of the stage to see Anna watching me with a threatening glare. I keep my eyes on her as I reach up and pluck Ezra’s in-ear monitor out. Then I lean into his ear. “When we get back to the hotel, I’m going to be replacing that plug with my cock.”

He turns his head to look at me, cheeks flushed and eyes bright. “Thank god.”

I smile at him as Callum sits next to us. He leans over and furrows his brow at Ezra. “Dude, what’s up with you tonight?”

I turn to look at Ezra expectantly and he blushes. “Just... distracted.”

“With what?” Callum asks, glancing between us, looking a bit concerned.

I smile at him. “Nothing too serious.”

He gives us one more confused look and then settles back on the riser to watch Ollie continue his segment of the show. He is making his way down the stage, reading out funny signs until he stops and backs up a few steps.

He points to a couple girls holding a sign. “I know you.” He then smiles widely. “Hey! We’ve talked before! You’ve been to a bunch of shows in the US! Kate and Lisa, right? Your last few signs were dirrrty...” The crowd laughs and I smile. I remember them. They’ve travelled to quite a few shows in North America, and it’s wild that they are here now in Italy. I look out over the crowd and think about how many fans are in this space right now that love us, and that we will never meet. I don’t know what we could ever do to show them

how much we appreciate them and thank them for being there for us. And as I bring my attention back to the fans Ollie is speaking to, I think about how amazing it is that these girls have been with us since day one, and have stuck by us, right until the possible end...

“You came all the way to Italy for us!?” Ollie drops to his knees before them on the stage and holds his hand to his heart. He waits for their answer and then turns to us, looking like he’s about to cry. “They did.”

Callum blows a kiss to them, and I wave with a smile while Ezra tries not to move too much, but manages an adorable double hand wave.

“Alright,” Ollie turns back to them. “Let’s see what the sign says this time, shall we ladies...” he’s quiet for a moment as he reads it, and then glances back to us. He smiles, turning back to the sign and raising his mic to read it out loud. “We’re into it, we’re losing it. You’re in the dark, we want the light. We make sense of what we see. Love is love, don’t you agree?”

The crowd cheers loudly, as my heart races. They’ve taken the lyrics to *Silhouette* to tell us they know. They know we’re in the dark. They know what they really see.

I turn my head to Ezra, and he is trying to hide his smile. He raises his eyebrows at me playfully, and I get a thrill as everyone can see us. My eyes slide to Anna again, as she glares at Ollie. Which makes me angry. No fucking way will she be getting mad at him for this. There are only a few shows left, and we will be done with this. Soon, Anna, Stephanie, Val, William... none of them will have *any* say in what any of us do.

So, I turn back to Ollie and let a smile creep onto my lips. Then, I wink.

And the crowd *erupts* in cheers.

Even though it was the smallest hint at who we really are, I am blown away by this love and support our fans show us, despite what we have kept from them.

I smile as I let this feeling wash over me, taking in the cheers and smiles.

Plus knowing my cum is in my man's ass right now... this is a great fucking show.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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*Ezra*

“YOU SENT your fans into a frenzy last night,” the interviewer says cheekily, shoving the microphone in Harley’s face. “There are some... *fan theories* out there, that some think you confirmed?”

Harley shakes his head, looking thoughtful. “I’m not really sure what theories these are, but love *is* love. That’s what the sign said. We support all love.” He shrugs.

Callum, Ollie, and I nod in agreement, and I see Anna tapping away at her phone behind the interviewer, looking stressed and frazzled. She’s been in overdrive ever since the show, and by now I’m sure Val has heard of this so she’s likely getting heat to fix it.

Callum leans into the mic and the interviewer turns it to him. “Many of our fans belong to the LGBTQ+ community, and we love and support every single one of them. Everyone has a right to love.”

The interviewer smiles widely and nods. “Beautiful. In a world with so much hate, it’s lovely to see that.”

Anna quickly looks up from her phone and I smile sweetly at her. I know they won’t want to spread any information about Send Help not supporting said community. *Even though that’s exactly what they’re doing...*

She tucks her phone away and walks up to the interviewer, tapping her gently on the shoulder with a smile. “Time’s up.”

The interviewer turns back to us. “Well, thank you all. It was great chatting with you.”

“You as well.” I smile at her as we all shake hands.

The interviewer leaves and Anna narrows her eyes at us. She gestures towards our dressing room, as we’re in the arena where we are playing tomorrow. “Ezra, you and Hannah are due to go out soon, go get ready.” She then huffs and heads off into another room, once again tapping away at her phone.

Ollie laughs and makes a beeline for the dressing room. Hannah and Lulu are waiting for us in there, as they got in this morning right before we had to do some media. We only got to see them for a minute, and Ollie has been itching to get back to *his girls*.

We follow him into the room, and he is already seated between them on the couch, arms around each of them while they laugh.

“We won’t even have time to hang out while you’re here,” he pouts, pulling them into him even more. “Why do you only have to be here for one night? And Harley and Ezra will have you the *whole time*.”

Harley closes the door, and Callum snorts as he takes a seat on one of the chairs. “Dude, Hannah is here for a reason, she has to go out with Ezra.” He then gives him a pointed look. “We’re going golfing in a bit anyway and we have to leave soon.”

Harley sits next to me on the other couch and Ollie looks between him and Lulu with excitement. “You guys want to come?”

Lulu scrunches her face up. “Uh, no. Golf is not my thing. And I have a hard time picturing Harley enjoying that.”

Harley shrugs. “It was actually pretty fun when we went before.”

Callum mutters as he taps at his phone. “Yeah, because you won.”

Harley shares an amused glance with me and says, “But no, I think Lu and I are going to go out somewhere.”



Ollie sighs dramatically. “Ok, suit yourselves. But just so you know, I’ve adapted how I do things. I’ve taken a page out of Isabella’s book – pun completely intended – and read by the fire while I enjoy the view between rounds.”

Hannah smiles. “That sounds nice. Are you still reading your MFM book?”

He presses his lips together in a sly expression. “No...” he releases Hannah and Lulu from his hold and holds his hands out in suspense. “Ok. So. It checked all the right boxes, but there was still just... I needed something *more*. And it kind of made me wonder because all along I was like, oh... the dudes are totally going to fall in love. But they *didn't*! They just became close friends. It felt like a missed opportunity.” He looks around at each of us. “So, I’m reading an MM romance now.” He smiles widely. “That’s male male romance, by the way. And I’m...” he looks between Harley and I with wide eyes, “learning things...”

A laugh escapes me as Harley rubs his forehead muttering, “Jeeze.”

“Well, you enjoy that,” I say, trying to remain serious. “Hopefully that’s the one for you.”

Ollie nods, looking thoughtful. “I feel like we’re really getting closer to finding it.”

“Ok.” Callum stands up. “Let’s go. Matteo is waiting for us.”

Ollie hops off the couch and blows kisses to us all, making us promise to text him throughout the day as Callum pulls him out of the room.

“So,” I look between Harley and Lulu, “I was thinking, why don’t you guys join us? You’re only here for one night, let’s go out together.”

Harley furrows his brow at me. “And you think Anna’s going to allow that to happen? She is *pissed* about last night. I’m positive she’s planning some intense damage control.”

I shrug. “And that will never actually happen. We have two shows left on tour, and then we’re in New York for a week

with only a few media obligations while we're in rehearsals." I nudge him. "We can be sneaky."

Harley glances at Lulu and she nods eagerly. "Let's date crash."

He looks back at me. "She is going to lose her shit on us. She'll know immediately once those photos are out. Which happens like ten minutes after they're taken."

"Hm." I lean over and kiss him on the cheek, then whisper in his ear. "Chicken?"

He narrows his eyes at me, and they flash with a challenge.

"Ah, so we're doing this." I smack his knee and stand up. "Let's go."

Harley stands with a grumble and Lulu loops her arm in his as we exit the room to find Jack so we can go. "Oh sunshine, this will be fun."

But before we find Jack... Anna finds us.

"And where are you going?" We hear her shrill voice behind us in the hallway. We turn around, and she is glaring at Harley.

I see him fidget with his ring on his thumb. "We're going out with Ezra and Hannah."

Anna scoffs. "No, you're not."

Lulu steps forward. "But this could help you."

Anna looks back at her in confusion. "What?"

"Yeah." Lulu shrugs one shoulder. "You have an image to fix." She tilts her head towards Harley and nods knowingly. "I mean, we all know they made some poor choices last night, engaging with that sign." She sighs and shakes her head. "But... since you can't connect Harley with women in the media anymore, we could... what was it Val said?" She turns to us, snapping her fingers, waiting for an answer.

I smile. "Let them perceive this how they wish?"

She points at me with a smile. “That’s it.” She turns back to Anna. “Maybe this is a double date? Maybe Harley and I are rekindling our brief but steamy romance everyone was so interested in a few months back... or, maybe we’re just friends. But either way, it would probably give everyone something to ponder. And that’s better than everyone focusing on the disaster that was last night, am I right?” She nudges Anna with a smirk.

Anna’s eyes slide to Harley and then me, then back to Lulu. “I suppose that could help divert some attention...”

“I agree.” Lulu nods. She starts to turn away so we can continue down the hall, but she then turns back to her. “Oh, and I *did* actually date Harley at one point, so don’t you worry your pretty little head. If needed, I can sell it.” She gives her the finger guns with a wink and then waves over her shoulder. “Bye, Ava! Always a pleasure seeing you!”

I try to hold in my laughter and feel Hannah vibrating beside me as she does the same. Harley ducks his head and scurries after Lulu, leaving Anna looking *very* shocked, and confused.

Well. That’s one way to do it.



“Mm, Italian pizza is unlike anything I’ve ever had before.” Hannah closes her eyes as she takes a bite of her pizza, a soft smile forming on her lips.

“Fucking delicious,” Lulu murmurs, pulling a laugh from Harley.

“Such a lady,” he says, nudging her.

She rolls her eyes at him, then peers out the window to where the paparazzi are starting to dissipate. “Well, maybe my crassness is what sent them away. So, in that case, you’re welcome.”

Hannah also glances out the window. “I don’t know how you guys do this all the time, having cameras capture everything you do.”

I blow out a breath. “It’s harder now since they’re around *all the time*.”

“That’s awful,” Hannah mutters. “Good thing you won’t have to deal with all of this soon. Do you know yet when you’re terminating the contract?” she asked in a hushed voice.

I glance around and lean in closer. “Ben has been letting us know what’s happening, but he told us to continue with the album launch as he has something in the works.”

Harley takes a deep breath and pushes his pizza around on his plate. There are still some unknowns about what exactly is going to happen, one of those being who is going to replace William. We’re all cautious to sign with Capture Music again, if they want us to, without knowing exactly who we are signing with.

Lulu squeezes Harley’s arm and smiles. “Hopefully it’s soon.”

I feel Hannah shift beside me, and I look over to her as she nods in agreement, looking down at her plate.

“You ok?” I ask her.

She looks up at me and smiles. “Yeah. It will be much better now that we start school next week and this internship is over.”

I furrow my brow at her. “I thought you liked it.”

She nods slowly. “I liked the work. But the people sucked. All they cared about was me being the rockstar’s girlfriend and no one took me seriously.” She sighs. “And then I had to leave early to be here, so they had a field day with that. But your contract is ending soon, which means mine is too.”

Lulu holds up her glass in cheers to her, which Hannah does with a smile.

But I feel a sharp pang of guilt. She was so excited for this internship, and she was hoping it was going to open doors for

her future career. And because of me, she didn't get that.

"I'm sorry, Hannah," I say. "We shouldn't have extended this contract, even if it was for a short amount of time. I feel awful."

Hannah shakes her head. "And the alternative would have been worse. We've discussed this. So, no. It's done, don't worry about it." She smiles and gestures to my pizza. "Eat, and shut up."

I force a smile and pick up my pizza, but the guilty feeling lingers. I know it was the best option, but I hate that this had such a large effect on her life. And I should have done something about it. I should have told her no, and then did the PR relationship with the other girl. Like we said, it was a short amount of time anyway. But then, what would that have done to Harley...

I look across the table to him to see him watching me. I smile at him, playfully taking a bite of my pizza. But he doesn't smile back. He almost looks... disappointed.



The second our hotel room door closes, I wrap my arms around Harley from behind him and kiss his neck. "I've been thinking about this all day."

His hands find mine on his waist and he pulls them off, turning around to face me. I'm taken aback by the seriousness of his expression.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," he says.

I look back at him in confusion. "What do you mean?"

He lets go of my hands and sighs, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Ezra, why won't you talk about anything?"

"What do you mean? I do." I stay standing, looking down at him as he shakes his head.

“No, you don’t. You don’t talk about how you feel, and what you are going through. You just focus on everyone else and their problems.”

I scoff, looking away from him. “You been talking to my therapist?”

“Well, maybe he has a point.”

I look back at him and he is watching me with concern.

“You always tell me to talk,” he says. “Will you please talk to me?”

I lean against the desk and sigh. “I don’t know what you want me to say... I’m worried about Hannah? You heard her tonight, something she was so excited for was ruined because of me.” I let out a breath. “So, yeah.” I shrug. “I feel bad about that.”

Harley shakes his head. “That wasn’t because of you.”

“Yeah, I know,” I rub my forehead with my hand. “It’s because of William, Val, Anna...” I drop my hand. “But I could have stopped it.”

He sighs. “Why do you think everything falls on your shoulders?”

I stare back at him, not sure what to say. Because I don’t know.

“It doesn’t,” he says softly. “You’re constantly worried about me, Hannah, Callum, Ollie... but never about yourself. And yeah, I’ve given you plenty to be worried about... but right now, I’m worried about you.”

I shake my head. “You don’t have to-”

“Stop!” Harley stares back at me, and I see the pain in his eyes. I feel a swell of emotion rise within me, but I’m not quite sure what it is. I swallow it down and stay quiet, not trusting myself to speak right now.

He lets out a breath and stands up, walking over to me and taking my hands in his. “I see you shove everything aside and

slap on a smile to make everyone else feel better. You said you wanted to learn to feel your feelings. Are you?”

I blink back the threat of tears as I look into his eyes. I know the answer to that, but I can't admit it.

“Have you worked through anything that we have been through in the last year?” he asks softly. “The abuse that has been slung at us from every direction when we're just trying to be ourselves? Or have you just been trying to hold everyone else together, while forgetting about yourself?”

I drop my eyes to our hands, as my vision turns hazy from unfallen tears, his words taking hold of me and refusing to let go.

“Ezra, please.”

A choked sob escapes me as I finally let the emotion surface. Harley lets go of my hands and wraps his arms around me, as I fall into him. The tears stream down my face as I cry against his chest, my body releasing months of pent-up emotion, and my mind taking me in multiple directions all at once.

I think of the manipulation and control that has ruled our lives, and how much fear I have actually been living in for the past year. I'm overwhelmed by sadness as I picture Harley fading away while I felt helpless and stuck. I feel anger as I picture William using us to line his pockets while we suffer, and Val treating us like pieces in some sick game. I feel heartbroken as I think about the deep love I have for Harley, that has barely seen the light of day and has constantly been challenged and tested.

And as Harley tightens his hold around me while I finally face everything I've been hiding, I feel shame that I didn't help myself. He's been so strong to face his anxiety and work on healing, while I've fought against my own journey every step of the way. I wouldn't allow myself to work with my therapist, or do anything that would help myself, as I put all of my energy into focusing on Harley and everyone else instead.

I press my forehead to his chest and take in a deep breath as my tears start to slow and he rubs his hand over my back. “It’s ok.”

I shake my head. “It’s not.”

He gently pushes me back and wipes the tears from under my eyes with his thumbs. “It will be.”

I push myself off the desk and wrap my arms around his neck, burying my face in his hair and breathing him in. He is so strong, and I need to be strong too. For him, for me and for us. And in order to do that, I need to take care of myself. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he says softly, holding me tight. “What do you need?”

I release a breath and pull back, wiping my eyes. “To talk to my therapist,” I say with a light laugh.

He smiles and runs his thumb over my bottom lip. “We’ll get you an appointment tomorrow.” He leans in and kisses me softly. “You know what has really helped me process a lot of this?”

“What?” I ask.

“Writing,” he says. “I’ve been writing lyrics whenever I have those overwhelming feelings about how shitty this whole thing is and can’t do anything about it. It’s helped to work through some of what’s happened.”

I nod, as I’ve noticed he’s been writing quite a bit lately. “I’ve been told to write,” I say. “But I haven’t been able to... I don’t know what to say.”

He smiles and steps back from me, taking my hand and leading me to the bed. “Well, it’s been a bit since we wrote a song together.” He pulls out his lyric book from his bag as I sit on the edge of the bed. “Let’s write one. We can let out all of these feelings, and everything we want to say to the world. We never have to do anything with it, but... at least for me, it really does help.” He places the lyric book in my hands. “Might as well try it.”



I smile at him, feeling the tears well again.

This man... fuck, I love him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

---

*Harley*

I LOOK out the large window of my apartment, watching the busy New York City street below me. The same window, in the same apartment we had ten months ago, when life seemed simpler. At a time when we had just signed with Capture Music, were recording our first album, and felt excited to start our journey. I remember feeling hopeful about a new start to life, and thinking I was going to finally find some sense of freedom. And now, as this journey comes to an end, I feel those same hopeful thoughts. That after the control, fear and anxiety, I can finally find that freedom I've been seeking my whole life. So I can actually experience... *life*.

Ezra appears behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and kissing the side of my head. "Hey."

"Hey," I say softly, shifting my gaze to us in the reflection of the window.

"You ok?" he asks.

I turn around and grasp his face, kissing him. "I am. Are you?"

He nods. "I am." I search his eyes and he smiles. "Honest truth."

I smile, bringing my lips to his again. He parts for me, and just as my tongue slides past his lips, there's a bang at the door.

Ezra rolls his eyes. "Seriously?"

I chuckle, and place a quick kiss on his lips before heading to the door to let Ollie in. I open it to see him rubbing his elbow and giving the door a dirty look. He leans down to retrieve his bag of chips from the floor and sighs. “I thought you knew I was coming?”

“Yeah, we did,” I say as he comes in, and Ezra takes a look at his elbow. “But it’s also New York, I don’t think leaving our doors open for anyone to walk in is a good idea.”

“But we’ve lived on this floor before and we’re the only four apartments, we’re totally safe with not a thing to worry about.” He looks around my living room. “When does Emma get here? And wait... Callum’s not here?”

Ezra shakes his head. “Not yet. Kind of figured he’d be coming with you.”

“He wasn’t in his apartment,” Ollie says. “I knocked on his door a lot and he didn’t answer.”

I pull out my phone. “That’s weird, we just got back from rehearsal like an hour ago, where would he go...”

Just as I’m about to tap on his name, there’s a knock at the door.

Ollie jumps up to whip the door open, pointing a finger at Callum on the other side of it. “Where did you go!?”

Callum looks at him in confusion. “Nowhere? I was in my apartment.”

“Lies!” Ollie yells dramatically. “I knocked. You were *not* in your apartment.”

Callum peers past him in the doorway to me and Ezra. “Yes, I was. I had headphones in, I must not of heard you. Can I come in now?”

Ollie narrows his eyes at him and is about to step aside when he looks down the hallway. “Oh hey, Emma, you’re here!”

Callum pushes past Ollie into the apartment as Emma appears in the doorway. Ezra perks up beside me and checks his phone. “You didn’t buzz?”

Emma waves a hand in dismissal. “Someone let me in the front door as they were leaving.”

Ollie leans against the kitchen island and pops a chip into his mouth, shaking his head. “This is *New York*. That is so dangerous, people shouldn’t be opening the door for just anyone. That’s how murder happens. Trust me, I would know.”

I turn my head to look at him, waiting for him to make the connection. But he just nods at me knowingly, like he gave some excellent advice.

“Ok, well, hey Em,” Ezra says, opening his arms for his sister. Emma hurries into his embrace and hangs onto him tight.

When they break their hug, she beams at me and throws her arms around my neck. “I missed you.”

I hug her tight and smile. “Missed you too.”

Ollie clears his throat, and we all turn to him. He is holding his arms out wide with an expectant look on his face.

Emma laughs. “Obviously I missed you the most, Ollie.” As she steps into his hug he nods seriously.

“Ok,” Callum taps Ollie on the shoulder when he doesn’t seem to be letting her go. “Let’s get the business part of this over with so we can have some fun.”

“Yes,” Emma says as Ollie releases his hold on her, and she sits on the couch. “You have a meeting with Holly tomorrow?”

Callum nods as he sits next to her. “Yeah, but we don’t know what it’s about. We haven’t seen her or even really spoken to her since that meeting with William at the end of the US tour.”

“It’s obvious William is keeping her away from us, since she’s been the one to support our needs and actually fight back against him,” Ezra says, sliding his hand onto my thigh. “So it’s surprising that she arranged this meeting.”

Emma nods thoughtfully. “Does Ben know?”

“Yeah, he’ll be there too,” I say, placing my hand over Ezra’s and intertwining our fingers.

She looks between me and Ezra. “And William?”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” Callum says, leaning back on the couch. “We’re meeting here.”

Emma smiles. “So, this could be it? You think they have everything you need to end this?”

We all look between each other and smiles slowly form on all our faces.

“Seems that way,” Ollie says, beaming and nodding excitedly.

“So, we want to be prepared if that is the case,” Ezra says. “We’re hoping the Music Group has someone lined up to replace William, and we will be discussing terminating and re-signing. So, we want you, acting on behalf of our lawyer right now and not as my sister, to review everything we had discussed to include in a new contract.” Ezra sighs and squeezes my hands slightly. “I don’t want to miss anything. We *can’t*. I’m feeling a bit on edge about all of this, so I think reviewing it all before will be helpful.”

I squeeze his hand and lean over to kiss the side of his head. He’s been working so hard to acknowledge his feelings and his wants and needs. And I’m *so* proud of him.

Emma nods with a soft smile to Ezra and turns to Callum. “Alright then. Where’s the whiteboard?”

Callum glances around to us all excitedly. “Well, actually, I’ve already categorized all of our needs and demands into potential sections of the contract.” He pulls out a tablet and opens up a complicated looking chart. “If you look at this pivot table you will see that our requirements are grouped based on specific criteria related to sections of the contract.” He clicks on something and another chart opens. “And here, I have further broken down these sections to anticipate potential clauses.”

Emma swallows hard and runs her fingers through her hair. “Wow, that’s...” she shifts her weight and licks her lips,

“wow.”

Ollie leans over her to squint at the screen. “This is some complicated shit.”

I chuckle as Callum shoots daggers at Ollie. “Well, it’s what’s going to hopefully get us control over our lives again.”

Ezra smiles at me and rubs his thumb over the back of my hand. I smile back and give his hand a squeeze. But as he turns his attention back to the tablet, while Emma goes through the charts to ensure we have everything we need, my mind is stuck. On that one word... *again*.

I’ve never had control. My dad had it, my anxiety had it, William had it... I’ve never had it. But I am slowly taking it. I’m doing the work to control my anxiety rather than let it control me. And we’re doing the work to strip William of his ability to manipulate and abuse. But as my heart starts beating faster at the thought of my dad, I know there’s still some work I have to do.

“It looks like you have everything,” Emma says, looking at the tablet and... is she blushing? Over... charts? Jeeze, Ezra’s right, they are both nerds. “All your demands are here, along with everything your legal team has suggested.” She nods, looking up at us. “This is everything you’ll need to negotiate exactly what you want.”

“Awesome!” Ollie claps his hands together and stands up. “So, now that the boring stuff is out of the way, I propose a Street Fighter tournament. I got it all fired up in my apartment. What do we say?”

Emma laughs. “I’ve never played, but I’m in.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Em, I’ll be kicking your ass anyway,” Ezra says, smiling at her.

She narrows her eyes at him. “Ok, I’m definitely in, let’s go.”

Callum taps away at his tablet and murmurs, “One sec...” he then looks up to us with a smile. “I’ve created a bracket system. I feel like eliminations will work best in this type of tournament.”

Ollie rolls his eyes and walks towards the door. “Do you think one of these days we can just *play*, Cal?”

Emma stares at the tablet and releases a breath. “That’s hot.”

Ezra snorts. “Only you would think charts are hot. Come on, let’s go.” He stands up and holds out his hand for me. I take it, and he pulls me up and into him for a kiss. “Something else is pretty hot though.”

I smile at him. “Yeah. You.”

“Adorable.”

We turn our heads to see Ollie resting his elbows on the kitchen island, chin in his hands watching us. “You kind of remind me of the main characters in my MM book.” He then raises his eyebrows. “*You* could be an MM book. I bet people would read that.”

“Yeah, there’s enough drama in our story, that’s for sure,” Ezra says with a smirk. “But you’re the reader, what book would you be?”

He sighs. “Who knows... who knows...”

Callum walks over to him and nudges him towards the door. “Come on.”

Ezra kisses me again and takes my hand to lead me to the door, but I gently pull back. “I’m just going to change my shirt. I’ll meet you over there in a minute.”

“I can wait,” he says, stepping back into me.

I shake my head. “You go... I... need to do something first.”

He draws his brows together. “What?”

I take a deep breath. I don’t want to keep anything from him, but I can’t say it out loud right now. I need to just do this, and I need to do it now. And I need to do it alone. “I promise I’ll tell you as soon as I come over to Ollie’s. I just... need a minute.”

He looks into my eyes with concern, but he nods. “Ok. But... text me if you need me.”

I nod, my heart pounding in my chest. “I will.”

Ezra slowly releases my hand and steps back, still watching me with both concern and confusion. But he turns to head towards the door, the others already gone to Ollie’s.

“Ezra,” I say before he opens the door.

He turns around to face me.

“I love you.”

He smiles softly. “I love you, too.”

Once the door closes behind him, I turn around to face the window and once again stare out over the city lights. I take a deep breath and pull out my phone. I dial the number with shaking hands, not giving myself time to back out and let my thoughts win. This needs to happen. Now.

I raise the phone to my ear and listen to it ring.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

“Hello?”

My pulse thunders in my ears as I fight every instinct to hang up.

“Hi, Ray.”

There’s silence on the other end of the phone, and I stay quiet, waiting.

“You got my money?”

My hand shakes as I squeeze it by my side, trying to calm my nerves as every single one of them feels like it’s on fire. I take another breath to add strength to my voice. “No, I don’t.”

“You piece of fucking shit. You wait this fucking long, leaving me with barely anything, and then you call me to tell me-”



“I’m calling to tell you your payments will be stopping soon, and you won’t be getting a dime from me ever again.” I keep my eyes focused on one of the streetlights outside, needing to stay grounded and not let this anxiety completely take over. It’s threatening, building under the surface and trying to tell me to give in. *It’s easier, it’s not worth it.* But fuck that. This *is* worth it. *I* am in control.

He chuckles darkly. “Yeah, I don’t think so. I’m your fucking father, whether you like it or not. After everything I did-”

“After everything you did for me?” I ask incredulously. “You’ve done nothing but shit all over me, and you think I owe you something? For what exactly? Beating me? Making me fend for myself when I was child while you drank yourself into a coma every night?”

“Listen here you fucking-”

“No, *you* listen. I know you’re fucked. I know you sold your business, and I know the entire town is now starting to see you for who you really are. And you can’t afford to leave. You’re living off of my money right now, but that is ending this week. So, better find a job.”

I hear something smash in the background, and it sounds like a liquor bottle. “You ungrateful fucking bastard! Are you forgetting that I have some information your label wants kept private? I’ll tell-”

“Go for it.”

He’s silent.

“I don’t care, but you do. You can tell everyone I’m gay, but I know you don’t want that because it reflects so poorly on you, right?” I feel the anxiety subside as a strength takes over. I don’t quite know how to describe this feeling, but it feels like I am finally speaking up for a smaller version of myself who never could. And I have *so* fucking much to say.

There’s still silence on the other end of the line, but I hear his heavy breathing.

“So, I don’t think you are actually going to do that,” I continue. “But you know what I could do?”

He doesn’t say anything, and I smile.

“I could charge you with breach of your no contact order, which has a very heavy fine. Plus, you’d have to pay back every single penny you received from me.” I pause, giving him a moment to fully appreciate the reality of this. “I could also go to the media and finally talk about my family and my home life. I could tell them that my father, Ray Scott from Lyons, New York, beat me, neglected me, manipulated me, and so much more. You’d never get a job ever again. All that respect you worked so hard for in the community, with your fake niceties and saviour attitude... it would be gone. Although, sounds like maybe it already is.” I pause again, but he still doesn’t say anything. “So, basically, I could destroy you.”

I hear him blow out a breath. “You don’t have the fucking guts, you’re too scared of-”

“Nothing. Not anymore.” I finally break my focus on the streetlight and look down at my hand, which is now steady. “And I guess, in a way, I can thank you for that. Even though you made me scared and anxious in the first place, you’re also a big reason that I fought so hard to get out of its hold on me. And now, I’m in control.”

He’s quiet again, and the sound is music to my fucking ears.

“But I’m not going to do any of that,” I say.

He scoffs. “See, I knew you-”

“Because you are going to live your own words. You always told me that I’m worthless, useless, nobody will love me, I will end up alone, and I will have nothing. But that’s you. I have a family that loves me, a thriving career and everything I could ever ask for. You, have nothing. You, are alone.” I raise my eyes again to look over the New York skyline, and all its beauty. And right now, as I take in this view, it’s once again filling me with hope. “So, we’re going to

part ways forever, and I am going to live the life I have created for myself. The life I love, with the man I love. And if you try anything, ever again, just know that I can very easily set the record straight, and make you pay. In more ways than one.” I take one more deep breath and release everything with it that I’ve held on to for so long. “Bye, Ray.”

I hang up the phone and tilt my head back, closing my eyes.

I am in control.

I own my life.

And I feel fucking *good*.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

---

Ezra

AS WE START in on the last song for rehearsal and soundcheck, I look around the empty space that will be filled with fans tomorrow night. Our crew is bustling around to finish setting up and there's an excited energy in this large space. And while I feel it too, I also feel a prickling of nerves deep inside me. We've played shows just as big as this on tour, and we've had an album release concert on this exact same stage before. But this one... this one is different.

I turn my head to Harley as he sings the lyrics to *Favourite Nights*, one of Callum's songs. And as I watch him effortlessly sing, his body relaxed and a slight smile on his lips, I know we'll be ok. It's like a massive weight has lifted from him as he is no longer living in the unknown and in fear of what his father will do to him. Now Harley has that control ... and he did it all on his own. Even though he knows I would have been there to support him through that, he made the hard decision to face it by himself. And I understand that. He's had to endure everything his dad did to him alone, unable to seek support from anyone to escape it. But last night, he put an end to it. On his own. And there's something really beautiful about that.

As we close out our last song, my eyes slide to William and Val who are standing side stage. They are talking excitedly, which is never a good thing. Seth, our head live sound engineer, comes out from behind the sound booth and makes his way to the stage. As he approaches us, he eyes William and Val, motioning for us to come over to him.

“We’re all good for tomorrow,” he says quietly. “For the whole thing.”

I smile widely. “Awesome.”

Ollie holds out a fist for him to bump. “You the man.”

Seth awkwardly bumps his fist and Harley chuckles. As Seth smirks at Harley, I get a little zing of ugly jealousy. They connected over music a few months ago, and even though I know it’s just a friendship, I can’t help it. I just really love my man and I’m possessive. There’s nothing wrong with that...

“We appreciate it, man,” Callum says, glancing towards William and Val as Ben joins them.

Seth follows his eyes and nods. “Anytime.” He then ducks his head and makes his way back to the sound booth.

Ollie stares after him. “I think I should be friends with him. He just seems like maybe he needs one.” He then looks at us, nodding seriously. “This will happen.”

Harley smiles, patting him on the shoulder. “Good idea.”

“Yeah, great idea,” I say, a little too snarky.

Harley raises his eyebrows at me, and I shrug. “I’m feeling my feelings.”

He chuckles and nudges me. “You’re cute when you’re jealous.”

Callum motions with his chin towards the side of the stage. “Ben wants us.”

We all turn to see Ben motioning for us to join him, William and Val. And that unsettling feeling sets in once again.

“Hey, guys, sounding great.” Ben smiles at us, hands in his pockets. He tilts his head towards William and Val. “We were just talking about how successful this album is going to be for you and Capture Music.”

Our heads all turn to William and he beams at us. “Pre-orders have surpassed start date purchases for your first album.

So, we anticipate double the sales when this album drops at midnight.”

“Wow,” I murmur, glancing at Ben who nods knowingly.

“The concert sold out in minutes,” William continues, looking proud. *Of himself, I’m sure.* “The anticipation for this is unlike anything we could ever imagine, and we need to tap into this potential, give your fans what they want.”

Ben nods seriously. “Yes, we must. Val, you must have some wonderful ideas to make sure these boys are front and centre in the media moving forward?”

Val keeps her eyes on Ben a beat too long as she attempts to figure out what he’s up to. She eventually turns to us and nods curtly. “Yes, after the album release, we will be announcing your world tour of both albums. We are still finalizing the details of the tour, so we are anticipating an announcement next week-”

“Next week?” Ben asks, shocked. “Wow, that seems so far away. Why not sooner?”

Val stares back at him. “Because we need to let the album have it’s time to-”

“I mean,” Ben shrugs, “I may not know everything there is about PR, but if this is such a highly anticipated album, I think an announcement of the tour sooner would help those sales even more, don’t you think?”

I narrow my eyes at Ben, wondering what the fuck he’s doing. He slyly winks at me. And of course, he’s up to something.

William hums in agreement. “I like this. Great idea, Ben. Let’s move it up a few days.”

“Why not the morning after the concert?” Ben smiles. “Let’s not waste time. Sales will skyrocket as fans prepare to know each and every song for this tour. I know it will be a lot of work Val, and will probably mean a sleepless night for you tonight, but... all in a day’s work, am I right?” He smiles at Val.

“But we don’t have enough information on the tour to announce what it will actually look like yet,” Val says, looking between William and Ben. And oh, she’s flustered. Love it.

William shakes his head. “We’ll just announce a world tour and details will come. We know enough to make an announcement. Ben is right, we need to get this information out sooner rather than later to build buzz.” He motions towards the tablet in Val’s arms. “Better get to work.”

Val’s mouth drops open before she quickly closes it and straightens her shoulder. “Right away,” she says curtly, and turns around to leave.

William nods between us all. “Great work. Tomorrow will be a great night.”

Ben chuckles. “Will it ever be,” he mutters as William leaves.

“What the fuck was that, Benny?” Ollie whisper shouts to him. “You know what we’re doing, and a tour isn’t it!”

Callum and Harley nod in agreement, staring at Ben and waiting for an answer. But I smile, when I realize what he’s getting at.

“There *will* be an announcement the morning after the concert,” I say.

Ben winks at me. “Damn right there will be.”



I hear the shower turn off, and I run my palm up my hard cock as I wait for Harley to come into the room. I hear his bare feet pad on the floor, getting closer, and I stroke myself again.

He appears in the doorway, rubbing a towel over his head. I let my eyes drop to take in his gorgeous muscular frame, towel wrapped loosely around his waist, and I get even harder. I continue to slowly stroke my dick as I lay naked on the bed, waiting for him to look up.

And when he does, I smile. He tosses the towel he was using to dry his hair and immediately drops his hands to the one around his waist. “Oh, fuck yes...” he says in a dangerous tone as he walks towards me, his eyes laser focused on my rock hard cock.

He lets the towel fall to the floor and crawls over the bed to me, immediately dropping his head to lick the tip of my cock.

“Mm,” I moan, running my fingers through his damp hair.

He raises his eyes to mine, licking me again and pulling another moan from me. “Do we have time for this before Callum and Ollie get here?”

I nod vigorously. “Fuck yeah we do, now hurry up and get me ready.”

His eyes flash with need and he hooks his hand under my knee, lifting it so he can position himself to drop his mouth to my ass. *Fuck. Yes.*

He licks over my hole and sends a shiver right up my spine. The feeling of his stubble against my skin and the warm, wet sensation of his tongue is already sending tingles throughout my entire body. And as he continues to use his expert tongue to lick long strokes over me, I am grasping at his arm and digging my fingers into his skin at the overwhelmingly pleasant sensation. Then, he pushes his tongue inside me, and I tilt my head back on a loud groan as my muscles all tremble.

“Harley, oh my god...” I breathe out.

He pulls away from my ass just long enough to mutter, “Lube,” before going back in.

I reach to the bedside table next to me and grab the lube, practically throwing it at him. He chuckles as he sits up and takes it, lubing up his fingers and rubbing them over my hole. I keep my eyes on him as he pulls his bottom lip between his teeth, watching his fingers while his other hand runs up my thigh. And when he pushes two fingers inside me, I grunt at



the amazing feeling, and he smiles. “Fuck, I love this ass.” Then he drops his mouth to my cock, taking me right in.

“Oh, god,” I groan as he thrusts his fingers in my ass and sucks my cock. I grind my ass down onto his fingers, needing more. And as he gives it to me, I’m still not satisfied. He feels so fucking good, but I need his cock inside me.

I push him back and he chuckles as he sits up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “You want me to fuck you now?”

I nod as I reach out to grasp his cock, pumping him while I keep my eyes on his. His chest rises and falls with heavy breaths while I stroke his dick faster and I bring my lips down to his chest. I kiss across his pecs and run my tongue over his nipple. I feel him shiver slightly, so I do it again, and suck gently.

His hand finds the back of my head and his fingers curl in my hair. I kiss across his chest to his other nipple, still stroking his cock while he moans in appreciation. But eventually he tightens his grip in my hair and pulls my head back, dropping his lips to mine. He pushes his tongue into my mouth, and I immediately part for him. He kisses me with an intense need, and I release his cock to bring both of my hands to his chest. As his hands slowly move down my back to rest on my hips, our kiss softens. And as we kiss, I feel everything. Our underlying nerves about the show tomorrow and everything that is going to come with it. And the vast array of emotions that came with everything we have been through to get to this point, that has only grown our love and made it stronger. Despite others trying to break it. That love is overflowing within me now, and I know that no matter what we will face in our lives moving forward, we can do it. Because we have each other.

He takes a breath in as his lips lightly graze mine. “I love you.”

I smile, and lightly trace my fingers over his chest, kissing him again softly. “I love you, too.”

His lips curve up into a sly smile, and he pulls back to look into my eyes. “Now can I fuck that ass?”

I laugh and move back from him, rolling over onto my hands and knees, pushing my ass into the air. “Come and get it, baby.”

Harley practically growls as he grabs the lube and gets himself ready while I drop my hand to stroke my dick, more than ready for him to fuck me senseless.

He nudges my legs apart and moves between them, lining up, and pushing in.

I drop my head to the bed and groan. *Fuck, he feels so good.*

His hand runs over my ass and up my back, as he thrusts into me again, slowly. His hands are roaming, and I’m surprised by how... gentle he’s being. I turn my head to look back at him over my shoulder and see him looking down at his dick in my ass, while he slowly thrusts in and out of me.

He raises his eyes to mine, and I smirk at him. “I thought you were going to fuck me?”

He cocks an eyebrow and brings both hands to my hips. “Then grab the headboard.”

My heart skips a beat and I quickly turn back around, raising one hand to grasp the headboard. And the second I do, he slams into me. I grunt hard and drop my head, as he does it again. And again. And holy *fuck* yes this is exactly what I wanted. But...

I turn my head to look at him as he thrusts into me hard and fast. He meets my eyes and smiles, and I know it’s coming. I wait, watching him and letting my eyes trail down over his abs that flex perfectly with each thrust. And when I bring my eyes back up to his, he tilts his head. “What do you want, baby?”

I release a breath and lick my lips.

He stops thrusting, pushing deep inside me and holding himself there. “Tell me.” The corner of his mouth tilts up in a

small smile. He's going to make me work for this. But I know what will drive him absolutely wild...

"Am I being a good boy for you?"

His smile widens and he rubs a hand up my back. "The fucking best," he says in a low voice. "Now you're going to be that perfect good boy you always are and take my cock in your ass until you're screaming my name and begging to come."

All the air rushes out of me as I stare back at him and nod.

"Good." He gestures towards the headboard. "Now turn around."

I turn around and place my other hand on the headboard, my heart beating so fast I think it will burst. I swallow hard and look down at my cock, a stream of precum leaking onto the bed. I reach down, swiping my thumb over the tip and holding it over my shoulder. Harley's lips wrap around it and suck every last bit off of it.

And as I place my hand back on the headboard, Harley pulls back and thrusts into me hard. I groan and grip the headboard tight as he fucks me, both of us panting, moaning and groaning. With every thrust he slides against my prostate, bringing me closer to ruin and I don't know how long I'm going to be able to hold out.

"Fuck, Harley, I'm going to have to come soon," I say between grunts as he doesn't let up and fucks me harder and harder.

He breathes heavily. "Better start screaming my name then."

I drop my head to my chest and grind my ass back against Harley's thrusts, feeling him deeper inside me and sending waves of pleasure flowing through my entire body. "Oh, fuck," I moan. "Please, Harley. Please, I need to come."

He reaches around me and grasps my cock, which is still *leaking* precum. "Mmm," he moans. "Fuck, baby you are dripping."

I can't do anything but breath heavily and watch as he rubs my precum down my cock while he thrusts into my ass. And as soon as he starts stroking me in time with his thrusts, I'm fucking done.

"Oh, fuck, Harley, fuck." I'm trembling all over as I grip the headboard impossibly tight, my release rushing to the surface.

"Fuck yeah, I want you to come," Harley breathes out as he releases my dick and increases his pace in my ass.

A wave of intense pleasure rolls over me from my pelvis out to every inch of my body. I drop my hands and face to the bed, letting it take over me as I come, and I feel Harley stutter in his movement while he comes in my ass.

The rolling wave of bliss eventually subsides enough for me to catch my breath, and Harley pulls out of me. He flops down on the bed, and I do the same. But I immediately sit up.

"Aw, fuck..." I say.

"What?" Harley says on a breath, looking over to me.

"I just laid in my cum." I pout, shifting off the bed and staring down at the *drenched* spot where a *lot* of my cum has pooled.

Harley laughs and throws the corner of the comforter over it. "We'll deal with it later. Ollie and Callum are going to be here soon, and both of us could use another shower."

I smile, tilting my head to the shower. "Let's go then, baby."



"See, it's the hammer. The hammer is clearly superior to the *suit*." Ollie motions to the tv with a look of disgust.

I turn my head to him and roll my eyes. "Dude. Emma's not even here. I agree with you, Thor is the best Avenger. *Emma* thinks it's Ironman."

Harley huffs and lifts his head from my chest as we lay on the couch. “Except, once again, you are *all* wrong.”

Now it’s Ollie’s turn to roll his eyes and dramatically throw his head back in his seat on the other couch. “Harley. My man. I love you but *Spider-Man? Really?*”

Harley sits up and I groan, trying to pull him back down to me.

“Yeah, really.” He holds up a hand and points to each finger as he rattles off the reasons why he thinks Spider-Man is the best. “He is relatable, has morals, has overcome a lot despite being so young, he has superhuman strength, slings webs, has spider senses, has fought the best villains-”

“Oh!” Ollie sits up as well and points at Harley. “You think he’s fought the best villains? Thor has had to go up against his own *brother* who he also loves, and his *sister*. His own family! And that fire demon he had to fight? And he lost an eye, he-”

“Oh my *god*,” Callum groans and I laugh, pulling Harley back down to lay beside me.

Harley grumbles and shoots Ollie a look. “This isn’t over.”

“It is,” Callum says, tossing a piece of popcorn into his mouth and turning up the volume on the TV.

Ollie glares at Callum and then slides his gaze back to us, pointing at his eyes and then to Harley.

Harley snorts and settles back onto my chest. I wrap my arm around him again and kiss the top of his head. I love how passionate he can get about Spider-Man, of all things. Who would have thought.

We’re all quiet for a bit as we continue to watch The Avengers, until eventually Ollie sighs. “You know what?” he asks.

I turn to look at him. “What?”

“I need something like this,” he gestures to the TV, “in book form.”

“Superheroes?” Harley asks.

Ollie shakes his head. “No. The Avengers have every good aspect of each character and it’s all mashed into one super great movie featuring them all. I need to find a book like that. Everything I’ve read has had good things, but I want it all in one book, you know?”

“Ok.” Callum stands up and walks towards the door.

I sit up, watching him leave. “Hey, where are you going?”

He doesn’t answer and leaves the apartment. Ollie, Harley and I share a concerned look.

“Did I say something wrong?” Ollie asks with wide eyes. “Do you think he’s also a Spider-Man fan?”

“I don’t think that’s-” I start, but then Callum comes back in carrying his portable whiteboard.

He walks back over to us and picks up the remote, pausing the movie. He turns to face Ollie. “We’re going to figure this out, once and for all.”

He unrolls his whiteboard and sets it up on the coffee table.

Ollie’s mouth drops open, speechless for maybe the first time in his life, as he stares at Callum. He writes various headings across the top of the whiteboard such as *tropes*, *characters*, and *genres*.

Harley chuckles beside me and reaches out to the coffee table, bringing the bowl of popcorn into his lap. I take a handful and shove it into my mouth as we settle in to watch the show.

“Ok. What is your favourite genre?” Callum asks, turning to face Ollie.

“Romance. Definitely romance,” Ollie answers immediately, and very seriously.

Callum nods, turning to the whiteboard and writing *romance* under *genre*.

“And what genres have you read within romance?” Callum asks. “And which did you enjoy?”

Ollie thinks for a moment. “Well, I read almost all of them. I didn’t like paranormal, it was scary. They had vampires and wolves and...” he shakes his head and takes a breath. “I liked contemporary. Keep it real, you know?”

Callum writes this under *romance*. “And what tropes did you enjoy most within contemporary romance?”

“Oh, very good question.” Ollie holds his finger to his lips while he thinks. “Well, first of all, I did *not* enjoy miscommunication. Or fake dating.” He makes a face and looks at me. I laugh, popping another piece of popcorn into my mouth.

Callum scribbles away on the whiteboard as Ollie continues to talk about the tropes he’s read. “I enjoyed brother’s best friend. I liked forced proximity. That shit was sexy... all angsty. And I like second chance, but only when it was like a hookup, not a full relationship prior to the second romance. Friends to lovers was also very fun.” He leans back and nods.

Callum looks over the tropes he’s written down. “Ok, so-”

“Oh, and work colleagues!” Ollie claps his hands together.

Callum nods, writing it down. “And characters?”

“All of them.”

Callum turns around to give him a questioning look.

Ollie nods. “I like everyone, except our bad guys. I just want everyone to like each other and be in love. So, I think I’m super into multiple love interests.”

Harley takes more popcorn and sniggers, while Callum writes it on the board.

Ollie turns to me and Harley and shifts his eyes between us and the whiteboard. “And MM.”

I raise my eyebrows at him. “Really?”

“It was hot!” He shrugs. “We like what we like, ok? I don’t know.”

I hold my hands up. “Obviously not judging.”

He then sighs and runs a hand through his hair in frustration. “But, I did miss the FMC in the MM. So... I need an FMC.”

Harley furrows his brow. “So, you want a book that has a female main character, but also has male male romance?”

Ollie looks thoughtful for a moment before nodding. “Yes. I do.”

Callum pulls out his phone and taps at a few things before smiling and sliding it back in his pocket. “Ok, we got it.”

Ollie scoots to the edge of his seat in excitement. “We do!?”

“You need a reverse harem,” Callum says. “One girl, multiple guys, with MM.”

Ollie slaps his knees with his hands and lets his jaw drop. “Oh my god. I *do* need that. Callum! That’s it! That’s the one! And I could get one with all my tropes! It’s *perfect!*”

“Finally,” I mutter to Harley, and he chuckles.

Callum sighs and flops down onto the couch, nodding to us. “Finally.”

“Oh my god, I have so much work to do.” Ollie pulls out his phone and starts frantically tapping away at it. “Goodreads will have some suggestions. It always does.”

“Ok, let’s put the movie back on while he *works*,” Harley chuckles, reaching for the remote.

We all settle in to finish watching the movie and enjoy a quiet and relaxing night together before the chaos that tomorrow will bring. Well, after the chaos we went through trying to keep Ollie from taking a blanket off our very... messy... bed, so he could be comfy.

But overall, it was a perfect night with our family.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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*Harley*

THE ALARM GOES off and I turn my head to see Ezra stir, reaching out to turn the alarm off. He rolls over to face me and smiles. “You’ve been awake for hours, haven’t you?”

I nod and sigh.

“I’m nervous too,” he says, moving in closer to me. I wrap an arm around him as he rests his head on my chest, his fingers lightly tracing my tattoos.

I stare at the ceiling for a bit, and Ezra stays quiet. I smile as I think of how patient he is. He has never rushed me when I’m in my head, and he always gives me time to think and organize my thoughts. I rest my head against his and squeeze him tight. “But I’m also excited.”

He looks up at me and smiles widely. “Me too.”

I kiss him softly, and then we lay our heads back down. We’re quiet again as I continue to stare at the ceiling, and he continues to trace the tattoos on my chest. I lower my eyes to watch him as he traces the bear I got for my mom.

“You haven’t gotten any tattoos since I’ve known you,” Ezra says softly.

I nod lightly. “Yeah, I know.” I think on this for a moment. “All of my tattoos were an attempt to heal some sort of pain. To remind me what I’ve been through, and try to make it better, I guess. And to... remind me to keep going. To not give up,” I say quietly. He stops tracing and looks up at me. I smile softly at him. “But since meeting you, I haven’t needed to put

any reminders on my skin for that. You're my reason to keep going and never give up. You help me heal from the pain."

His eyes move between mine, then he props himself up on his elbow to kiss me. "I'll always heal your pain, baby."

I smile and rub my thumb over his cheek. "We're done with pain."

He smiles and nods, bringing his lips back to mine. But the alarm goes off again, reminding us of the day ahead.

I sigh and hold him tight against me for a moment, before reluctantly letting him go. "I guess it's time."

He rolls off the bed and holds a hand out to me. "I guess it is."

As we make our way through the morning routine, getting ready to head to the venue for the concert, we have an excited but nervous energy about us. I feel like I am right on the cusp between both anxiety and excitement, and I can't tell which is which. It's creating a weird sense of restlessness in my body and mind.

And by the time we are at the venue, my hands are shaking, and my heart is thumping while I think of everything that could go wrong today. But I take my deep breaths, I work through my anxious thoughts, and I try to keep myself calm enough to make it through the media Val set up this morning. I let go of the idea that anything could go wrong today, and I hang on to the thoughts that tell me we need to do this, as it's just one more step. One more step towards the end, and it will all be worth it.

And as we wrap up media and head into the dining room, every bit of that anxiety melts away.

I smile as all of our families are seated around the tables in the dining room, waiting for us. Even though we knew they would be here today, I don't think any of us realized just how much we needed to see them.

"Mama!" Ollie opens his arms wide and rushes forward to scoop his mom into a hug.

Callum's brother runs forward to hug him, and Alice rushes towards me and Ezra.

"Oh, my boys," she murmurs, kissing our cheeks and holding onto us tightly. I laugh and look over her shoulder to see Daniel, Emma, Hannah, and Lulu watching us with smiles.

Alice pulls back and holds us at arm's length. Her eyes roam over me and her eyes widen. "Look at you! Harley, my goodness... you're so... fit!"

I laugh, and I feel my cheeks blush slightly.

"He's a full-blown boxer now," Ezra says, smiling and nudging me.

"Well, I think that's-" Alice starts, but Anna suddenly appears beside us.

"Harley," she says with a bite to her tone. "There are cameras in here all day, you need to keep space here." Anna gestures between me and Alice.

Alice slowly turns her head to Anna. "Excuse me?"

"We are doing a behind the scenes shoot all day for the album launch," Anna says, still looking at me. "So, you'll need to sit at another table."

I look at the table she's gesturing to. The one where no one is sitting.

Alice turns her body to face her, still holding onto my arm. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I heard you correctly." The dining room gets quiet as everyone senses something going down. "You are telling Harley he can't sit with *his family* during a *family lunch* because of cameras that *you* put in here?"

You could hear a pin drop in this room right now, and I swear if my heart beats any faster, every single person in here will hear it.

"I don't think so," Alice says, shaking her head in disbelief. "I am going to be having lunch with *both* of my boys, and if this is a problem for you, then by all means, put the cameras away."

Emma stands up, holding up a finger in a *wait* motion. “Also, I think it’s my due diligence to ensure that everyone in here has provided informed consent to be filmed today?”

Lulu raises her hand. “I didn’t. And I’m so sorry Aurora but I won’t be giving it today... or, wait... for any of those other days I was here and was filmed by your crew without my consent. Aw man, looks like you can’t use a lot of that behind-the-scenes stuff. That’s too bad.”

Emma looks at Lulu and nods. “Unless they already did, and in that case maybe we have to explore this a little further and see what privacy breaches we are working with.”

Lulu nods solemnly. “I am a very private person.”

Emma glances around the room. “So, everyone else good to be filmed today? Consent given?”

“Nope.” One of Ollie’s brothers shakes his head. “I’m camera shy, sorry.”

“No, I don’t wish to be filmed today.” Callum’s mother shakes her head.

One of Ollie’s sisters raises her hand. “I’m underage, so you’ll have to ask my parents.”

His dad just crosses his arms and shakes his head.

As everyone in the room voices their desire not to be filmed, I feel a swell of emotion and look over to Ezra. He smiles back at me and I feel the threat of tears at the back of my eyes. The love and support being shown to us right now is overwhelming, and I never, in my entire life thought I would have this.

“And I definitely don’t.” Alice says, looping her arms through both mine and Ezra’s and leading us over to the table with everyone else.

I cast a quick glance at Anna as she pulls out her phone, and gestures for the cameramen to follow her out of the room. We may be paying for this later... but by then it won’t matter.

Alice sits down and huffs, smoothing her shirt. “Like hell one of my boys is eating alone when his family is here. Who

the fuck does she think she is.”

“Go Mom,” Emma holds up a hand to high five her, which Alice does with a smile.

We enjoy the next couple hours eating and getting to know each other’s families. It is surprising to see how similar Callum is to his brother, and how drastically different every single one of Ollie’s siblings are. The Hart family is big, as Ollie has two brothers and two sisters, and let’s just say Ollie still stands out.

I sit quietly and listen to parents and siblings tell stories about Ezra, Callum and Ollie when they were little, and I just smile. Even though I don’t have anyone to tell those stories for me, it doesn’t matter. Because the most important part of my story is sitting beside me. And as I look into his blue eyes and he smiles at me, I know that our real story starts today.



I raise my glove to the side of my head to block Jack’s punch and immediately deliver a left hook, landing a hit on his right glove as he blocks it. I quickly sidestep left and land an uppercut to his ribs before he can lower his elbow after the block.

He chuckles. “You’re too nimble for me, we may need to get you a new partner soon.”

I smile and raise my gloves again, shifting my weight between my feet. “Or you could work on being more nimble?”

He laughs. “Trash talk, I like it.”

I move back into my stance and block one of his jabs, moving my feet to keep myself away from his hits, and giving me the power to land mine. With each block and with each punch, I feel a power build inside me. I feel the strength of my muscles, the beating of my heart and the calm in my mind. *I am in control.*

“Alright,” Jack says, dropping his gloves. “That’s time.”

I nod, even though I wish we could go longer, and pull my gloves and headguard off. But as I unwrap my hands, I stay quiet. I’m not sure when I’ll be able to box again, and especially with Jack. I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude as I think about everything Jack has done to help me. He recognized what I needed, when I had no idea how to help myself. He understood, and I didn’t even have to explain anything to him. He was a quiet, steady support, and I don’t know if he realizes just how much he has helped me. He taught me to fight back. He showed me how to block the hits and take my own. He showed me my strength and helped me find the courage I needed to be myself.

I drop my gloves and wraps into my bag and glance over to Jack as he zips his and slings it over his shoulder, ready to leave.

“Jack?”

He turns to look at me and I blink back the emotion rising to the surface.

“Thank you. For everything,” I say, trying to keep my voice strong.

He nods, his eyes softening. “Of course.”

I move to pick up my bag, but I stop. And before I know it, I’m closing the distance between us, and wrapping my arms around him. He hesitates for a moment, but he hugs me back. Neither one of us say anything, because we don’t need to. Every night spent boxing, those words have been said. And I really hope we can continue to have those conversations.

As I let go and pull away from him, he eyes me carefully. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

I smile and shake my head. “Just that... next time we box, I expect you to be more... *nimble*.”

He laughs and reaches out to squeeze my shoulder. “Oh, he’s trouble now. Guess I better brush up on my defence.”

I laugh, as I pick up my bag and we leave the workout room. I feel light and happy, like I usually do after boxing, but I still feel that nagging anxiety over what's to come. And I know there's nothing I can do about that. It's out of our hands now, and we just have to wait.

I quickly shower and head into the hair and wardrobe room to see Ezra in Olivia's chair, and Callum and Ollie playing with Luna.

"Hey, love," Olivia says and then narrows her eyes at me. "Are *you* going to tell me why I have to do your guys' hair so early today?"

I look to Callum, and he rolls his eyes. "We've been through this Olivia. We have something to do."

"Hm," Olivia hums, looking between us all. "You're up to something. I can smell it."

Ezra presses his lips together and shrugs his shoulders. "Does it smell like bullshit?"

Olivia snorts and smacks his shoulder. "Get out of here, you're done." She looks to me and gestures to her chair.

As I sit, Luna waddles over to me and holds her arms up. "Up!"

I smile and pick her up to sit on my lap and the guys all groan. "Why does she like you so much more than any of us??" Ollie asks in exasperation, holding a bunch of toys in his hands.

I shrug as Luna looks up at me and smiles. "I don't know..."

And as I sit there, with Luna in my lap, Olivia cracking jokes with Ezra about me eventually being the "favourite father", and Callum and Ollie trying to get Luna's attention, I'm hit with a feeling I've never had before.

I'm going to miss tour.

Boxing with Jack every night, travelling the world with my best friends, spending time with members of our crew like Ian and Olivia... we have learned to find the positives in a shitty

situation. And while I won't miss *many* aspects of tour... I will miss this part. I will miss the fun parts.

Olivia finishes with my hair, and Luna and I make our way back over to Ezra, Ollie, and Callum. As I sit on the couch next to Ezra, he places a quick kiss on my temple and whispers, "Love you, baby."

I smile back at him. "Love you, too."

Callum checks his watch. "It's almost time, guys," he says quietly.

I nod and take a deep breath, rubbing my hands over my thighs.

"You ready?" Callum asks, looking between the three of us.

I shake my head. "No. You?" I look to Ezra.

"Nope." He looks to Ollie who also shakes his head.

"Well. Then let's go." Callum stands up, and we all follow.

My hands are shaking as we walk down the hallway towards the meeting room, where William and Val are waiting for us. Every time I have done this walk, towards these people, I have felt anxious and afraid of what's to come. But this time, there's an excitement weaving within the anxiety, and this time, there's no fear.

We get to the door of the meeting room, and Callum turns to us. "Burn hot?"

I smile at him, my heart racing, but ready to do this.

We all put our hands in and whisper shout, "Burn hot!"

Callum pushes the door open, and we all enter, taking our seats across from William and Val.

William smiles at us. "I'm glad you boys wanted to meet to discuss numbers prior to your press event tomorrow," he says. "We're very pleased to see you working with us on this."



Callum nods. “Yup. We just want to make sure everyone has all the facts, so we can be clear and accurate with the press and our fans.”

William nods, sliding his gaze over all of us. “Excellent.”

I try not to cringe at his smug smile. He thinks he won. He thinks he broke us.

“The release was a much bigger success than we thought,” he says. “I’ve retrieved the sales and streaming reports for the day so far, and the numbers are more than double compared to your release of your first album.” He smiles widely.

“Wow,” Callum says, nodding. “Well, reports don’t lie. That is great success.”

Ezra looks down at his hands to hide a smirk and I shift in my seat beside him, trying not to laugh.

“Yes, and Val has arranged your press conference for the morning,” William says, looking to a stressed and tired looking Val.

She nods, frantically looking down at her tablet. “Yes, we have all major channels and outlets attending to report on the announcement of the tour. Dates still need to be coordinated but we will-”

The door opens slightly and Ben pokes his head in. “Ah, so we’re in here?”

Val gives him a quizzical look and turns to William, who also looks perplexed.

“Uh, yes.” He motions for Ben to come in. “We’re just reviewing numbers and the tour announcement if you wish to join.”

“Oh, that would be great,” Ben says with a smile, and pushes the door open. He walks in with Holly following behind him, as well as several men and women I’ve never seen before. But they look important... *very* important.

William stares at them as they all take a seat around the large table. “What are you doing here?”

“Hello William.” One of the men nods to him. He then turns to us. “Hello. I’m Stanley Bensen, CEO of the Music Group.”

“Hi,” we all say back in unison, awkwardly staring at this very powerful man. He is commanding the room and making even William look small and unimportant.

Ben smiles at us reassuringly, and Ezra reaches under the table to hold my hand. I squeeze it back, thankful he’s beside me right now. Even though this is the plan, I can’t help but feel unsettled and like something could go wrong.

William slaps on a fake smile and leans forward. “Have you come to see the show tonight? Send Help is going to be taking over the-”

“No, William.” Stanley leans forward resting his forearms on the table. “While I *am* looking forward to seeing the show, we have some business to attend to first. It has come to my attention that we have some discrepancies among the royalties reported to these young men here, and the earning reports that Sentry received.”

My heart rate spikes as I look to William, and squeeze Ezra’s hand even harder.

William’s eyes flash with panic, before he quickly schools his expression and draws his brows together. “Oh, is that so? I will look into it with-”

“No need,” a woman sitting beside Stanley says, pulling some papers out of her briefcase. “It’s already been done.” She passes the papers to Ben, who ceremoniously places them in front of William.

William stares down at the paper in front of him, and I can see the colour drain from his face.

Stanley leans back in his chair. “We have a lot to discuss.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

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*Ezra*

HARLEY and I are gripping each other's hands so tightly I swear I hear bones cracking.

"So, you know why we are here now?" Stanley asks William.

William looks up at him and takes a breath in, pushing the papers away from him. "There must be a mistake. One of Sentry's staff must be making errors. Leave this with me, I will get to the bottom of it."

Ben nods thoughtfully. "Probably Mark Caddel, right?"

William shoots Ben a glare. "Perhaps."

"Hm," Ben hums. "Problem is, William, we know Mark isn't at Sentry. We know what you really did to him, and yet," he taps a finger on the papers on the table, "he's getting a salary as a Sentry employee."

"We did a deep dive on Sentry," one of the other women from the Music Group says. "We were able to identify five employees who were previously employed by Capture Music. On paper, it looks like they've simply moved over to Sentry. But we located them and discovered that each one was wrongfully terminated, and their identity was stolen to use as an employee record for Sentry."

William stares back at her. I see him fidget with his thumb and I smile. *Yeah, fucker, you should be nervous.*

"So," the woman continues, "the final royalty reports that eventually make their way to Capture Music, and thus, the

artist, are much lower than they should be.”

Stanley lays his palm flat on the table. “Bottom line is, you have been embezzling funds from every artist at Capture Music, and from the label. You managed to sell us on it, and convinced us it was the best course of action for all labels under the Music Group to manage royalties, and in theory, it was. Outsource and save money, it can be a good strategy. But *you* took that money instead. And then some.” He pauses, watching William squirm. “We looked back over every single report sent through Sentry in the years the Music Group has used this company. You took small amounts, as to not raise suspicion, which is how you got away with this up until now. But you got greedy with Send Help. With the amount of money they were bringing in, you took a bigger piece of the pie. And it was noticed.” He turns to us. “Care to tell him how?”

William turns his icy gaze to us, and I give him one right back.

Callum leans forward and smiles at William. “It was right there in that *very* detailed folder you gave us. In your attempt to scare and control us.”

William narrows his eyes at Callum. He opens his mouth to say something, but one of the men with Stanley says, “They’re here.”

“Bring them in.” Stanley nods to him.

The man gets up and opens the door, gesturing to someone. The director from Charlotte’s label enters, as well as Charlotte.

Charlotte sits in the seat next to Harley and takes his other hand in hers. She leans in to whisper to us, “I convinced him to let me come too. I want to see this fucker go down.”

William gives the other director and Charlotte a nervous looking glance. And I smirk as I know exactly why.

“I asked Ted to be here, as it has *also* come to my attention that, while you have done this to every label under the Music Group, you have specifically targeted Spectrum Records along

with Capture Music. And more specifically, within Spectrum Records... Charlotte Verlice.” Stanley nods to her. “You went right to the top of the charts, William. You thought you were getting away with it with Send Help, and figured you’d do the same to Charlotte.”

Ted shakes his head at William. “I never quite understood your intense need to compete with me, specifically between Charlotte and Send Help. But now it makes sense. You wanted me to market her in competition with Send Help and drive up sales, so you could pay yourself from her earnings.”

I take a moment to observe Val, who is sitting still as a statue next to a nervous looking William. She keeps her eyes down at her notepad in front of her, not saying or doing anything. It makes me sick to think that this is why they were so stuck on creating an image of Charlotte and Harley dating.

“So,” Stanley says, keeping his eyes on William. “I just wanted to make sure they were here when I say, effective immediately, you are relieved of all of your duties within Capture Music. You are fired, William, and Sentry is being investigated by the FBI for fraud and embezzlement, which means... you are.” He nods to the man next to him, who gets up to open the door for two police officers.

William stands up and points a finger at Stanley. “You can’t-”

“Save it, William,” he says, his voice loud and silencing.

I feel Harley flinch next to me, and I turn my head to give him a soft, reassuring smile. “It’s ok,” I whisper.

He nods, giving my hand a squeeze and Charlotte smiles at us as she keeps hold of his other hand.

William is vibrating in anger as he stands there, staring at Stanley while the police officers put him in handcuffs. And as his eyes move to us, none of us back down from his fiery gaze.

“Anything you’d like to say, boys?” Stanley says, gesturing to us.

I smile. “Yes.” I look at Harley to my left, and then Ollie and Callum to my right. “You tried to take everything from us.” I look back at him, standing there in handcuffs and glaring at me. “But that didn’t work out too well for you. Because you severely underestimated us. You thought we would just roll over and take it. You didn’t expect us to push back. Well, little did you know, you were playing with fire.”

Harley squeezes my hand, and I look at him. He leans forward in his chair, keeping his hands in mine and Charlotte’s. “You tried to destroy me. And you almost succeeded,” he says, his voice low, but firm. “But you could never break us. And I am so relieved that now this world that will finally get to know the real us... the real me... won’t have you in it.”

Callum nods. “I hope you think about this every day, and every night. How all of your attempts to manipulate and control us landed you here. And while you think of us, just know that not one of us will ever think of you again.”

We look to Ollie and he nods, keeping his eyes on William. He leans forward, resting his forearms on the table. “Fuck you. Enjoy prison.”

“We certainly didn’t,” Harley says.

I chuckle and turn back to William, enjoying the show as the police lead him out of the room as he keeps his head down, and mumbles something no one has any interest in hearing.

“Well,” Stanley stands up once William is gone, buttoning his suit jacket. He looks down at the man sitting next to Ben and Holly. “I trust you can take it from here?”

Nate Pearce, the new director of Capture Music stands, nodding with a smile and shaking Stanley’s hand. “Yes, I can.”

Stanley nods to us. “It was nice to finally meet you all, although I wish it was under better circumstances.” He smiles. “Great work.”

“Thank you,” Callum says, and we all do the same.

He leaves with the men and women he came with, and Charlotte leans over to us. “Fucking awesome, guys.” She

smiles between us all. “That was the best thing I think I’ve ever seen.”

Harley blows out a breath and shakes his head. “Fuck.”

I laugh. “You can say that again.”

Charlotte then stands up, glancing to the door where Ted is waiting for her. “I have to go, but we’ll talk later.” She squeezes my shoulder as she scurries away, leaving us alone with Ben, Holly, Nate... and Val.

We all look to Val, and she visibly swallows, shifting to look at Nate. She holds out her hand with a shaky smile. “Hi, I’m Val, I’m the-”

“Can you call your team in here?” Nate says calmly and not taking her offer for a handshake.

“Um, yes, of course,” Val smiles and nods, tapping away at her phone. “We’ve been working very hard on setting up plenty of media appearances for the following week, especially after announcing the tour in the morning. And we will have-”

The door opens slowly, and Anna and Stephanie appear.

Val gestures to them as they make their way into the room. “This is Anna and Stephanie, PR assis-”

“You’re fired,” Nate says, casually leaning back in his chair.

Anna’s eyes widen and she looks to Val. “What?”

Val whips her head to Nate. “Why are they-”

“Oh, you are too.” Nate nods at her. “I’ve heard everything that has gone on for the past year. Hell, I’ve seen it in the media. It’s not a secret how terribly you’ve treated these boys.” He gestures towards us. “So, best of luck finding another job. I have quite a few connections in this industry, which is how Holly found me and figured I’d be suitable for this role. So if anyone calls to ask about you, I’ll have plenty to say. Although,” he tilts his head, “I doubt anyone will even think about hiring you in the first place. Might be best to look

at a career change.” He looks to Anna and Stephanie. “For all of you.”

Val, Anna and Stephanie stare back at him in silence and Ben leans back in his chair with a smile.

I glance at Harley and a smile slowly spreads across his face as well.

Nate looks between them and gestures towards the door. “You can go now.”

Anna bursts into tears and runs out of the room, while Stephanie slowly follows, shooting daggers at Nate the entire way.

And as Val is walking towards the door with a dumbfounded look on her face, Ben calls to her. “Oh, and Val?”

She slowly turns around to glare at him.

“Thank you so much for setting up that press conference in the morning. We obviously have a lot to announce and there’s no way we could hire a whole new PR team by morning to make that happen.” He smiles sweetly at her and her eyes flash with anger.

She spins on her heel and leaves the room, and the collective breath that escapes all four of us is huge.

Holly chuckles and leans forward, placing her hands on the table. “Well!” She smiles at us. “That was quite the show. Now, on to the good stuff.”

I pull Harley’s hand into my lap and wrap both my hands around his. He smiles at me, and I straight up beam back at him.

Holly places a stack of papers on the table and slides them over to us. “I received the final ok from your lawyer, we are good to go.”

I look down at the contract in front of me and smile as I flip through it. Every single one of our requests that we dreamed up and discussed in our meeting with Holly and Ben, is here. Including balance between recording and touring,



reasonable media appearances, and absolutely no image requirements.

“I did add one thing,” Nate says.

We all look up at him, and my heart almost stops. Harley’s grip tightens on my hand. We got the text from our lawyer just before coming in here that we were good to sign, and that he agreed to it all. What did he add and when?

“I added in that Send Help is the full owner of all master recordings recorded with Capture Music.”

We all share a look with each other, and Callum immediately flips to that page of the contract.

Nate smiles at us. “It’s time for a change in this industry. No one should own someone else’s music. It’s their heart and soul, it belongs to the artist. There are fair and suitable ways to work around royalties and master rights, and you should find this is just that.”

Ben smiles at us and nods.

“Wow,” Callum mutters as he reads over the section and looks up to Nate. “Thank you.”

He nods at him and then glances between us. “And it’s been approved by your lawyer, right?” He looks at Holly.

She nods, smiling. “Everything has been.”

We all share smiles between us, with happiness and relief. Then, we all reach across the table, and grab a pen.

“Well,” Nate stands up with a smile and walks around the table to shake each of our hands. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person, and I’m looking forward to working with you.” He starts to head to the door, but stops, turning around to us again. “And I’m really looking forward to the show tonight. My husband and I are big fans.”

He turns and walks out the door. Holly and Ben follow, with Ben giving us a wink on the way out.

We stand in silence, alone in this room, while we stare at the door. I eventually turn to face Harley, the shock I feel

written all over his face. He breathes out a laugh, and I wrap my arms around him.

“We’re free, baby.” I feel a tear stream down my cheek as I bury my face in his neck.

He holds onto me tight, and I feel a soft sob escape him. “Oh my god.”

A body crashes into us, and I laugh as Ollie wraps his arms around us both. “Callum get in here! We burned the hottest we’ve ever burned!”

Callum joins us with a whoop and a laugh, and we all fall into a messy group hug, full of tears of relief, laughter, and complete, utter *joy*.

*We’re fucking free.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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*Harley*

AS I PUT in my in-ear monitors, I feel a hand on my arm. I smile and turn around to face the man I love.

He smiles, and the sparkle in his eyes almost takes my breath away. It's been a while since I saw him shine this bright, and my heart soars at the beautiful sight.

"I love you, baby," he says, moving his hand from my arm to my waist.

I keep my eyes on his as the bustle of backstage fades around me. Nothing else matters right now, as I get to have this moment with him. "I love you, too."

He takes one more step into me, and my heart thrashes.

"Freedom feels good, doesn't it?" he asks in a low voice, almost a whisper.

I nod, still lost to his eyes.

"I know we've had some questions lately," he says, sliding his other hand onto my waist. "But I want to let you know that I am ready for this. To show the world who we truly are." He smiles. "We're taking some big steps and making big changes tonight. So, I just wanted to say that. I'm all in. Always have been."

I swallow down the threat of tears, as I am completely consumed by my love for him. He is perfect. I have had to ask myself almost every day since I met him if this is real... if he is real... as it feels like I am living a dream. Every day with him is a fucking dream.

My hands find his hips, and I pull him towards me. As he closes the gap between us, my heart picks up its pace and I get butterflies in my stomach. I smile at the feeling, as this is the beginning of the rest of our lives. And in this new life, this is our first kiss. Our real story begins now, free of pain, fear and sadness. Because this, right here? It's just pure happiness. Nothing else.

And as his lips press against mine, fireworks go off throughout my entire body. My other hand lifts to the side of his face, and he wraps both of his arms around me. I never want to let him go. And I never have to.

I hear a slow clap behind us, and I laugh lightly against Ezra's lips. He smiles and pulls back to look over my shoulder. I turn too to see Ollie standing behind us, slowly clapping with a huge, teary smile.

"Fucking beautiful guys, fucking beautiful." He wipes a tear from his eye and shakes his head. "Man, I love today."

Callum smiles from his perch on the edge of the riser. "It's pretty great."

Ezra chuckles. "We love it, too."

"Me too."

We all turn to see Ian approaching us with a huge smile on his face. He immediately wraps each of us in a hug. "Damn," he says, shaking his head and looking between us all. "I knew something was happening but didn't question it. I am *so* proud of you guys. Watching everything you have been through... you deserve every good thing coming your way. And I am so happy I am going to be here with you to see it."

I smile back at him. Ian has been so great to all of us, and he has always been so supportive of me and Ezra, finding us time to be together and helping us when we were feeling frustrated over everything. I couldn't imagine touring without him, and I'm happy we don't have to. We get to keep working with all the people that mean so much to us, and I am so grateful for that.

"Aw, Dad!" Ollie wails and throws his arms around Ian.

Ian chuckles and pats his back. “Ok, get ready, you’re on in five.”

Ollie pulls back from him, nodding and wiping his eyes. And as Ian leaves to make sure everything is on schedule, Ollie opens his arms wide.

We all wrap our arms around each other, in our usual pre-show huddle. But this time, we hold each other a little tighter and stay quiet for a moment. Ollie sniffs and leans his head against mine, causing a tear to fall from my eye as well.

“We did it,” Callum says softly.

Ezra nods with a smile and watery eyes. “We did.”

I take a deep breath in as another tear falls. But unlike the majority of my tears I’ve shed this past year, these are tears of joy, happiness, relief, and love. And I welcome every single one of them. “Thank you,” I say, looking around to each of them. “You guys saved my life. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be than right here, with all of you. I love you guys.”

Ollie sniffs again and squeezes his arm around me tight. “Guys, you don’t even *understand* how much love I have for each one of you.”

Callum smiles. “I think we have an idea. And I agree, Harley. This is the only thing I want to be doing, and I want to do it with all of you, for as long as we can.”

Ezra pulls his arm from Callum’s shoulders and puts his hand out between us. “Burn hot forever?”

We all smile and pile our hands on top of each other. “Burn hot forever!”

“Ten!”

We pull away from the huddle, and our guitar techs bring us our guitars. As I slip mine over my shoulder, I run my fingers down the flames etched into the leather strap. And as my eyes land on *Larson* etched on the inside, I smile. The family I belong to. The family I love.

“Five!”

We step onto the riser, and I listen to the loud cheers of the crowd.

“Four!”

I look to my left to Callum as he shifts his weight between his feet, and to Ollie as he twirls his drumsticks in his fingers. Then to my right, to Ezra. And he’s looking right back at me.

“Two!”

I stare into his eyes, as I have so many times before on this riser. Whether it was pining for a moment to show my love for him, or trying to get through the panic, he was always there. And as I look into his eyes now, it’s with nothing but appreciation for this beautiful, perfect soul.

The riser starts to move, and I smile as he winks at me. I turn my attention to the view before me as we rise onto the stage, and the massive crowd erupts in cheers. Adrenaline is coursing through me as I take in the sight, and the cheers almost drown out our opening chords to *Alternate Night*. A song Ezra wrote for us, as we wished for things to be different. For an alternate life. I smile to myself as I listen to Ezra sing the lyrics. These words that were originally laced with so much pain but are now a story of growth. And now, I never want to trade this life.

As we get part way through this first song, I suddenly realize that the crowd is singing along with us. I glance to Callum, and he shakes his head in disbelief. This album was released less than 24 hours ago, and already, our fans know every single word.

The song comes to a close, and Callum steps up to the mic. “Hello New York!”

The cheer is unlike anything I’ve ever heard. It rolls through my entire body and I laugh, scanning the crowd to see the smiling faces, signs and t-shirts. *This* is why we love this. And *this* is what I’ve missed. I’ve worked hard to get back to the point where I can fully appreciate this, and this moment, I do. I close my eyes, letting the sounds of the crowd wash over me as I take a deep breath.

I love this.

For the first time ever, I feel completely relaxed. As I sing, play my guitar, and move around the stage during the show, I feel at ease, with no tension in my body and no worry in the back of my mind. It's like I have finally created space for happy and calm, and it is rushing in. It's been held at the edges of my being for so long, and only bits have been able to get through. But the floodgates are open now. And I am just *happy*.

And the highlight of the show is closing with *Details*. Ezra and I have waited for this moment for so long, to get on this stage and tell the world, in our own words and in our own way, who we really are. But as we play, and the crowd sings along with us, lights waving in the air, I get a familiar feeling. A question that has lingered within me for so long. I look around at the lights and think back to the first time I told Ezra I loved him in front of the fountain in New York. It felt like a stage, and the lights of the buildings surrounding us were telling me to do what I needed to do. And I did it, as I told him I loved him and kissed him, where everyone could see.

I look over to Ezra as we sing the last chorus together, and he smiles at me. He lights up every part of my soul. And as he watches me while we sing the last few words of our song, I somehow feel like we are the only two people in this space filled with thousands.

And I know what I need to do.

As we play the last notes, my eyes find Seth in the sound booth. He nods, turning around to signal to the effects booth, and the lights all go down.

The crowd is cheering and chanting, wanting more. They're not ready for this show to be over.

And neither are we.

Ezra walks up to me, leaning into my ear. "Ready for this?"

I nod, smiling at him in the dark. My light. My silhouette. "So fucking ready."

He smiles, stepping back to his mic, and starting in on a rumbling bass line. The crowd erupts in a wild cheer, and I feel the anticipation rolling off of them as they realize this isn't a song on the album.

My eyes close as I feel the vibration of the bass, and ready myself to take this final step.

I step up to the mic, the lights still down, and sing the first verse to a song that was supposed to just be for us. The words we could never say but were so desperate to. The words Ezra and I wrote to heal, feel, and process. And now, they will share the truth.

*Preyed on our appetite  
Told me who you think I am  
Wore a mask for all to see  
To hide the broken man  
All in how you wish to perceive  
The games, the lies, the truth*

My hands shake slightly as I lower them to my guitar and the lights come up. The screams from the crowd are deafening, and as I scan their happy and excited faces, I feel a sense of relief. They understand. They know exactly what we're saying.

*But now that fire's burning  
And now we're in control  
Set the record straight  
And escape from all the hate  
Turn down the noise and listen up  
Cause now we are remastered*

I bring my eyes to Ezra, and I watch him as he looks out at the sea of fans, jumping, screaming and crying. But as he looks to me, I see the emotion in his eyes. And I feel it too.



Finally being able to tell the world that we were hidden, controlled and suffered at the hands of those who put us here, is empowering. We may never share our full story in true detail, but these words in this song are what helped us through, and is how we can communicate our truth. Through music.

*They always knew the truth  
Of who I really am  
And now that I am out and proud  
He makes me sweat  
He's my silhouette  
And through the fog  
He saved me*

The cheer that comes from the crowd is the loudest I have ever heard. And the second those words come out of my mouth, the final lock on the door that I have always hidden behind breaks, and falls to the floor. A huge breath escapes me, and I take in the happy faces smiling back at me. They're telling me it's ok. They still love us. They still love me.

And as my eyes slide past the fans on the floor to the private area in front of the sound booth, I see our family is cheering for us. Daniel, Alice, Emma, Hannah, and Lulu are all here, showing us the love and support they have since day one. But as my eyes land on Lulu, I can't tear them away. She is holding her hand over her heart as she cries. My best friend, who has been there for me no matter what I was going through, and has been the one to hold me up, and keep me together when I was ready to give up. I owe her everything, and the pride and love I have for her can't even be put into words.

And as I sing the last chorus, my eyes once again travel around the large space before us. The twinkling lights are begging me to do what I need to do. On this stage, for everyone to see.

To finally answer that question.

If I could walk across this stage right now and kiss him.  
Would I?

As the final notes play, I swing my guitar around to my back, and turn towards Ezra. His eyes meet mine, and he smiles.

I cross the stage, raise a hand to the side of his face, and bring my lips to his.

The roar of the crowd is nothing but background noise as his arms wrap around me and we lose ourselves to this moment. Together, but never alone. Not anymore.

Because we never have to hide again.

I will proudly love him, out in the open, without fear.

This is me.

This is us.

This is freedom.

# EPILOGUE 1

6 MONTHS LATER

Ezra

Harley's lips press softly against mine, and I wrap my hand around his arm to keep him here a moment longer. When I eventually release him, he smiles, and I try to catch my breath as I watch the light dance in his gorgeous green eyes.

I feel a hand gently tap my arm, and we both turn towards Grace, one of our new PR reps. She smiles and gestures with her head to the seats lined up in front of the camera. "Sorry to interrupt, but we're ready."

We both smile back at her, and I nod. "Ok, thanks Grace."

We take our seats in front of the camera with Callum and Ollie on either side of us. The interviewer settles into his seat across from us with a warm smile. "Hi, boys. My name is Kevin. Are you ready?"

We all nod, and I feel a thrum of excitement run through me. We've had interviews since everything went down with William, but this is our official *tell all* interview. And we wanted to do it.

The camera turns on, and Kevin introduces us, and the segment. "So, you are now almost one month into your tour after releasing your second album. How is it going?"

Callum smiles widely. "Awesome. We love Australia, and we are so happy we now have more time to spend in these places we visit. For this tour we are doing multiple shows in one location, so now we can explore the cities and really connect with our fans."

“And we are *pumped* for Asia next,” Ollie says, nodding seriously.

I chuckle. “We love our fans, so we are very happy to be back out on tour and doing it all a bit differently.”

Kevin nods with a smile and looks down at his notes. “Quite a bit has changed for you.” He looks up at us again. “Let’s start with the big one. Your label. Nate Pearce has taken over as director after William Mills was arrested and charged with embezzlement. And Nate has put the label through a rebrand. What was once Capture Music is now simply named Volition. What can you tell us about this change? One has to assume and hope that appropriate changes have been made to suit this name?”

I turn to Harley with a smile as he nods.

“Nate has been amazing,” he says. “He’s created an environment that is open, honest and trusting for all artists signed under Volition. We feel like this is exactly where we belong, and we love what we do. Now more than ever.”

“And any changes made within Send Help?”

I shake my head. “None. We have always been strong together despite everything the label had put us through. The forced closeting, the control over every aspect of our lives and the gruelling schedules we endured... none of it ever affected us as a band and as a family.”

Callum nods and smiles at all of us. “We did, at one point, consider changing our name. As we no longer need help. But Send Help is who we are. It’s our story. And we hope that our story can help others who are also trying to escape something that is harming them. And through our music we can send help to those who may need it.”

“Wow.” Kevin looks between all of us. “How amazing that you all have such a positive outlook after so much negativity.”

“We had some time, luckily, after everything went down with the person I refuse to name,” Ollie squints his eyes at the camera, and we all laugh, “to recharge and just live life. I think

having that time off really helped us get back into it with a fresh perspective.”

Kevin nods. “So, life outside of music is going just as well?”

“Oh yeah.” Ollie nods vigorously. “Callum and I moved to New York part time to be closer to the label and these guys,” he gestures towards Harley and I, “and then with our families back home the other part of the time.”

Callum nods in agreement. “It’s been nice to have that flexibility to be in New York to work when needed, but to also spend more time with family.”

Kevin looks to me and Harley. “And you guys?”

Harley and I share a smile and he turns back to Kevin. “Ezra and I bought land in the mountains and are in the process of building a farm.”

Kevin raises his eyebrows. “What kind of farm?”

“A goat farm,” I say with a beaming smile.

“Goats?” Kevin chuckles.

“Freedom goats.” Ollie nods seriously.

Harley laughs. “It’s something we dreamed of at a time when we were really struggling, and we held onto it all this time. Now it’s really happening, and we couldn’t be happier.”

I reach out to grab his hand, smiling at him.

“That sounds well deserved,” Kevin says. “And very peaceful.”

“That’s the plan,” I say, still looking at Harley.

The interview continues with questions of the tour and our plans for future albums. We have a great conversation about our music, and the meaning of some of our songs. It feels good to finally get this all out there, in one conversation... even though we know that our fans support us completely, no matter what.

We wrap up the interview, and as we are unhooking our mics I look over to Grace. “Anything else you need us for?”

She glances down at her phone and smiles. “Nope.” She looks back up at us. “You’re free for the rest of the day. And...” she checks the time, “they’re in your dressing room.”

“Oh my god!” Ollie jumps off his chair, almost taking the chair and his mic with him. He takes off down the hallway and we all chuckle.

“You’d think his reaction would be a little less by now,” Callum mutters as we follow after him.

“Have you met Ollie?” Harley asks with a smirk.

I lace my fingers in Harley’s as we walk down the hall. “How much do we want to bet he has them in a bone crushing hug?”

Callum pushes the door open to our dressing room, and yup. I was right.

Ollie is holding Hannah and Lulu so tightly their faces are squished to his chest as he rests his chin on top of Hannah’s head, eyes closed.

“My god,” Callum shakes his head, entering the room. “Are you ever going to chill?”

“No,” Ollie says, eyes still closed. “You know we’re a triad and reuniting always feels so good.”

Lulu eventually wiggles out from his grasp and fixes her hair, taking a deep breath. She smiles and opens her arms wide. “Hey there, sunshine!”

Harley lets go of my hand as Lulu rushes to him for a hug.

After Ollie eventually lets Hannah go, we all get our hugs in and sit on the couches in our room. I wrap my arm around Harley and kiss his temple. We are totally that annoying couple who always has to be touching each other, but luckily none of our friends care. Because after so long of having to hold back, we don’t have to anymore. And we *definitely* don’t.

He slides his hand onto my thigh. “How was the flight here?”

“Long!” Lulu rolls her eyes. “Thank god we are here for a full week, there’s no way I could do that flight again in a couple days.”

“At least it was first class.” Hannah smiles. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Of course. We wanted you guys to come out while you had a break from school.” I give Hannah a sly smile. “I’m surprised you even wanted to get away for a whole week.”

“Oh,” Lulu nods at me, “she has been in constant contact with Liam since the moment he dropped us at the airport. So it’s going to be a challenge for these new little lovers.” She reaches over to Hannah and playfully pats her head. “But we couldn’t pass up a week in Australia with you guys.”

Hannah nudges Lulu’s arm away with a smile, as her phone vibrates on the coffee table before her.

Lulu gives us all a knowing look. “See?”

We all laugh, and I feel a surge of happiness for Hannah. She met Liam a couple months ago at a conference, and they have been inseparable since. I am *so* happy for her. And she even has her own fan base now too. Turns out, fans didn’t hate her. They hated what was being done *to* her. Every time she was booed or given seemingly negative attention, it was our fans knowing the truth and showing their displeasure with how she was being used. And now, they love her, for her. She has a following of young girls and women who are aspiring scientists just like her, and it’s beautiful to see.

We have an amazing afternoon together, going out for lunch in Sydney and seeing some sights. As I hold Harley’s hand while we walk down the street, saying hi to our fans and taking pictures, I am the happiest I have *ever* been. And as we stand in front of the Sydney Opera House, overlooking the water, I reach over to turn Harley’s chin towards me.

“Love you, babe.”



He smiles, wrapping his arm around my waist. “Love you more.”

I kiss him, feeling the soft, warm breeze on my skin and the love in my heart. And as I feel eyes on us, I pull him closer to me.

Because this man is mine, and I want everyone to know.

*Harley*

When we get back to the arena after exploring Sydney, we all fall into our usual pre-show routine.

Callum heads off to hang out with Olivia and Luna, pouting since he can't call home until after the show. It's almost 4am in New York right now, and let's just say if he did call... there would be a not-so-happy, sleep deprived law student making her way through classes tomorrow.

Ollie usually hangs out with Seth, as he was successful in making him his friend. And the drummer for the band that opens for us. When we were told we could pick our opening band, Ollie was quick to use all the tools at his disposal to track down a certain girl band he's often spoke of. Ben is out on tour with us quite a bit now too, and the four of them seem to have created quite a tight friendship... or whatever we want to call it.

Hannah and Lulu go hang out with Callum, Olivia and Luna while Ezra and I make our way down the hall to the workout room. I push the door open, and Jack tosses my gloves at me.

“Figured we'd do some more on defence today,” he says with a smile as I catch the gloves before they smack me in the face.

I laugh. “Nice start.”

Ezra chuckles as he moves to the corner of the room, taking a seat on the mat and opening his lyric book. I smile as

I watch him, while Jack wraps my hands. Ever since we wrote *Remastered*, Ezra has put a lot of work into writing. He's written many songs for Send Help, some just for us, and even some for only himself. He has discovered a talent for putting his feelings into song and has created really beautiful and inspiring lyrics. So much so, that other artists have reached out to him after hearing his songs, requesting he write for them. And I am *so* fucking proud of him.

I get my gloves and headgear on, and Jack has me work through some defence and footwork drills as he delivers hits. And after the drills, we spar. I work on maintaining control as I switch between attack and defence, keeping my attention on Jack and anticipating his moves. And when I get a hit on his ribs and he stumbles back a step, he laughs. "Always the rib shot. You got a hell of an uppercut."

I smile and tap my gloves together. "Shouldn't have taught me so well, then."

He shakes his head with a smile. "Nah, you always had it in there. I was doomed from day one."

As we wrap up our session, I feel the calm and comfort settle in as it always does. While I have a much better handle on my anxiety, it is still there. I know it always will be. And oddly enough... I find a comfort in that. It is a part of me, and it's who I am. I am anxious. I have anxiety. I have trauma. It has shaped who I am, and I can be thankful for that. Because I love who I am. I have learned to love myself, with the help of so many amazing people around me. I have learned to love every scar that was inflicted on me, as well as my strengths that I created and discovered in myself. I've learned to lean on those I love when I need to, and I continue to learn new tools through therapy and boxing to help me keep the control I have finally gained over my life.

And later in the night, when we are on stage, looking out over the singing crowd and feeling the love they have for us, I feel an intense amount of pride for them. Every night we play for our fans, I take a moment to thank them. Both in my heart, and out loud. Because they never gave up on us, and they knew the truth. They saw the real me when I didn't even know

them, and barely knew myself. They helped me more than they can ever know.

But then there's Ezra. The love of my life. He is my reason for everything. When I sing *Silhouette* now, I sing it for him. The details in what used to be such a dark life, which is now bright and filled with his light. And every time we play this song, and I sing the last words, *and through the fog, he can save me*, I kiss him.

I don't think life can get much better than this.

## EPILOGUE 2

6 MORE MONTHS LATER

*Ezra*

*Mmmaaaaa!*

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

*Mmmaaaaaa!*

Harley sighs and turns around to look at me. “Did we make a mistake?”

*Mmmmmaaaaaaaa!*

I shake my head, walking across the barn aisle to wrap my arms around him. “No,” I say, kissing him. “We wanted goats, and we got goats. They’re just loud as fuck and it’s something we’ll have to get used-”

*Mmmaaa!*

I let out a breath and force a smile. “To.”

Harley laughs, grasping my face and pressing his lips to mine. When he pulls back, he smiles and looks down at the little goats bouncing around at our feet. “I mean... they’re fucking adorable.”

He squats down to see them, and they start jumping all over him. He laughs, falling back on his butt on the barn floor while Chester, a little black and white goat, climbs into his lap.

I smile, squatting down with him and scooping up Cash, the brown one trying to chew my shoelaces. “We should finish naming these little guys, though. We’ve had them for a week now, and only these two have names.”

Harley nods and points to the white one who is off on his own trying to knock down the gate to get outside. “Axl.”

I laugh as the name suits the little loner rebel perfectly. I gesture to the four goats who are huddled together eating hay. “Mick, Keith, Charlie and Ronnie.” I smile at Harley, and he playfully rolls his eyes.

“Should have known.” He looks at them thoughtfully, and with worry. “Does that mean we need to get more for previous members of The Rolling Stones?”

“Uh... maybe we’ll start with these ones first,” I chuckle, standing up and setting Cash down to run over to join The Rolling Stones. “We should really let them outside now though, before Axl really does tear that gate down.”

Harley eyes Axl as he bites the gate and tries to pull it back. “Agreed.”

I hold out a hand to help Harley up, and the goats all bounce over to the gate.

Harley pushes the gate open, and the goats all run and jump their way to the space we set up for them with tables to jump on and barrels to roll.

I laugh as we watch the adorable display of insanity from these tiny little goats. And as we stand here, in the doorway to the barn overlooking our land, I smile. This spot where we sat on a picnic blanket and planned our future. And we did it. We bought the land, we built a house and a barn, and we got the goats.

I turn my head to Harley and watch him as he smiles at the goats while they play. He is so beautiful. His brown hair grazing the tops of his strong shoulders, his green eyes sparkling in the sun. I take a deep breath and reach out to grab his hand. He turns his head to me with a smile and my heart skips a beat.

“I love this life with you, Harley.”

He takes a step towards me. “I love everything with you, Ezra.”

“I know it’s been a hard road to get here,” I say. “But I am so happy that we did. What we have built together is everything I could have ever asked for.”

He smiles, and my heart thrashes in my chest.

“Will-”

*Mmmmaaaa!*

We look down to our feet and Mick is staring up at us.

I look over to the other goats who are all happily playing in the field with their toys. “What are you doing? Go.” I gesture to the other goats.

Harley chuckles and I turn back to him. “Uh, anyway,” I take a deep breath again. “Will-”

*Mmmmaa! Mmmmmaaaa!*

I blow out a breath and look down to see Mick, Ronnie and Cash now at our feet.

“My god, what do you need? I’m trying to say something here!”

Harley tilts his head back on a laugh.

They have no plans to leave us anytime soon, and just keep screaming as the others join them, so I decide to just do it. I’ve been waiting for the right time to do this. And honestly, if this is our life now... this is the right time.

“Will you marry me!” I yell over the goats.

Harley’s eyes widen and his lips part. He stares back at me, and a smile slowly spreads across his face. And as the goats continue to scream, he yells over them, “Yes!”

I reach out and grab his face, slamming my lips to his. His arms wrap around me, and we stand in the doorway to our barn, overlooking our land in the mountains, with our goats jumping around at our feet.

Every single one of my dreams has come true.

## EPILOGUE 3



ONE MORE YEAR LATER

*Harley*

I blow out a breath and shake my hands at my side, trying to get my heart to settle the fuck down. My hands are tingling, and my breath is quick and I-

“Hey.”

I look up to see Lulu watching me with a smile.

I let out a long, slow breath and smile back at her.

“Good,” she says, walking towards me and adjusting my tie. “Just keep breathing, Har. You got this.”

I swallow and nod, listening to the voices outside.

As she finishes adjusting my tie, she slips her arms around my waist and rests her head against my chest. “I’m so fucking happy for you.”

I smile and wrap my arms around her too. “Thanks, Lu.”

She pulls back suddenly and adjusts her posture, blowing out a breath. “But now is not the time for crying. I have a very important job to do.”

I smirk at her. “And what’s that?”

She smirks right back at me. “Be the best best woman and make sure the groom doesn’t lose his shit.”

I laugh and nod. “Yeah, fair enough.”

She smiles widely and reaches out to squeeze my hand. “Ready?”

I nod. “Ready.”

Lulu leads me towards the door to the backyard and opens it. All of our family and friends are here, seated in chairs overlooking the view of the mountains just outside mine and Ezra's home. I smile at the sight, and as they all turn to face us, Lulu squeezes my arm before moving to take her seat. Then I turn my head to the left, as Ezra walks towards me, and I nearly lose my breath.

He looks perfect. He's in a black suit that matches mine, his messy blonde hair is tamed but still wild, and his beautiful ocean blue eyes are shining.

He reaches my side and slides his hand into mine. "Hey, babe. Wanna get married?"

I smile and let out a light laugh. "Yeah. I really do."

As we walk down the short aisle, I look over all the smiling faces of our family and friends. Everyone who supported us during this journey is here. Sarah and James, Jack, with his wife and his two girls, along with Holly, Ben, Seth, Olivia, her husband, and Luna. Nate and his husband are also here, as well as some team members from Volition we became quite close with. And in the front rows are our family. Ezra's parents and Emma, Hannah, Lulu, Callum, and Ollie.

At the end of the aisle, we stop in front of Ian, who smiles warmly at us. We asked him to marry us, as he has been such a strong and steady support for not only myself and Ezra, but Callum and Ollie as well. From the day we started touring with Capture Music, until this moment right now, he has been like a father to us. He saw us as more than just musicians that needed to be managed on tour. He helped us through some of the hardest things we have ever been through, and even put his own career on the line for us. We owe him a lot, and one thing we can do is have him as a part of this special day.

Ezra and I turn to face each other, holding hands.

Ian smiles between us. "We are-"

*Mmmaaaa!*

I close my eyes and sigh.

“Just... keep going,” Ezra says in exasperation. “They’ll stop eventually.”

Ian looks over his shoulder to the barn where the goats are still screaming.

Ezra winces. “Maybe.”

Ian looks back at us and laughs. “Alright then.”

The goats eventually stop screaming as Ian thanks everyone for coming and says his beautiful words of how much this means to him to be here, and to be celebrating this moment with us. And as much as his words mean to me, my attention is fully on this man before me. I stare into his blue eyes, as he stares into mine. I can’t look away from him.

And when it is time for us to exchange our vows, Ezra grips my hands a little tighter, and smiles a little wider. “Harley,” he says softly. “I met you at a time when I was lost. I had no idea where I was going, what I was doing... I was stuck. But then you rolled into town, and you showed me how to live.” He chuckles lightly. “We’ve been on a pretty wild adventure together, and I know we are going to have many more adventures in our future. Just,” he widens his eyes slightly, “happy adventures only. I think we’ve earned it.” Everyone chuckles and I do as well. He squeezes my hands. “I had no idea I could love like this. Every day, my love for you grows. And just when I think it’s not possible for it to grow anymore, it does. And I know it’s never going to stop.” He takes a deep breath. “Harley, I vow to hold your hand through this life and stand by your side, to be your anchor when life gets rough and cheer you on when you fight back. You are strong, creative, talented, and brave.” I smile, and feel tears prick at my eyes as I think of those words he said to me the night before Battle of the Bands. When he described what he was wanting, and he didn’t know that at the time I was already falling for him. “I love every single part of you, and I will, for the rest of our lives.”

Ian smiles and turns to me. “Harley?”

I sniff and try to keep my tears at bay. “Oh god,” I mutter as I wipe my eyes, and everyone laughs. I smile as I look at

Ezra and squeeze his hands in mine. “You are absolutely everything to me,” I say. I then laugh lightly. “We wrote our vows separately, but I think we might as well have written them together. Because I also met you when I was lost. I was trying to find my way in a world that had beaten me down at every turn, and I wanted to give up. But you saved me. When I met you,” I glance at Ollie and Callum in the front row with a smile, “and Ollie and Callum, I felt like I finally had a purpose. You made me feel important and loved. You made me feel safe, for the first time in my life.” I sniff and look down at our hands, taking a moment to gather myself. When I look up at him with watery eyes, I see a tear roll down his cheek. “You taught me how to love myself. For that, and a million other reasons, I love you with everything that I am. You’re my reason, Ezra. For everything. You’re my entire world.”

Ezra sniffs as another tear rolls down his cheek, and one escapes from my eye as well. He reaches out and brushes it away with a soft smile.

“Harley and Ezra have chosen not to exchange rings,” Ian says. “As they have done something that is a little more... them.” He smiles between us and looks down at our hands as I rub my thumb over the tattooed ring on his left ring finger, and he does the same to me. These tattoos, a symbol of our love and devotion to each other, can never be taken off. Because we never have to hide again. They are a part of us. And that part, our love for each other, will *never* be hidden.

It was Ezra’s first tattoo, and he says it will be his only one. He says he has thought of this ever since the day he said he wanted me to pick a tattoo for him. In that moment, even while I was crawling over his body and teasing him about where it would be, he knew. And for me, it’s also my last tattoo. Every tattoo I have besides this one, I got in an attempt to heal some sort of pain. But with Ezra, there is no pain. And there never will be again. This is my only tattoo on my left arm or hand, and it is also the only tattoo that represents happiness, healing, and love. It’s for him, and it’s all I need.

And as Ian says, “I now pronounce you husband and husband,” Ezra immediately steps forward and crashes his lips

to mine. I smile against him as I grasp the side of his face and burn this memory into my mind forever while the sounds of clapping and cheers surround us.

Ezra pulls back to look into my eyes and smiles. “Hello, Mr. Larson.”

My breath catches in my chest. I am now completely free of my past as I let go of the name Harley Scott forever, and officially become a part of this family I belong to. Because now, I am Harley Larson.

I pull Ezra back into me with a smile. “Hello, husband.”

## EPILOGUE 4

5 MORE YEARS LATER

Ezra

“Daddy!”

I look out the kitchen window to see Harley’s car pulling up the long driveway. I smile and head towards the front door where Sadie is trying to open it.

“Just hold on there, tiger, I’ll get it,” I say as I turn the handle and pull the door open. Sadie immediately runs out onto the front porch and down the steps, jumping into Harley’s arms as he gets out of the car.

“Hey, wild woman,” Harley says through a chuckle as he picks her up and holds her on his hip. “How was your day?”

“Good,” Sadie says, twirling his hair around her finger. “Papa almost lost a goat.”

“Did he?” Harley eyes me with a smirk.

I lean against the pillar on the porch and shake my head, crossing my arms. “Not true. Axl knocked down the gate, *again*, and Ronnie made a run for it.”

Harley chuckles and turns back to Sadie as she launches into her version of what happened. I watch them with a smile, as my heart swells with love. Sadie came to us two years ago, after Send Help participated in a fundraising event for kids in need in New York. Sadie, at just two years old, was put into foster care as her parents struggled with substance abuse and neglected her, and ultimately, they lost custody. We met Sadie in a facility where she was waiting for a foster home, and we applied that day to take her. Her story was so similar to Harley’s, however he was trapped in an abusive home with no

one to love him. But we could love Sadie, and we could make a difference for this little girl. The day we took her home, she was immediately a part of our family. And last year, we adopted her.

I have to chuckle to myself while I watch them, as I often do. I think back to how Callum, Ollie and I were all so salty that Luna had loved Harley so much more than all of us. But I see it now. He is an amazing dad. He is so good with kids, and especially with ours. He was a bit nervous to foster at first, as he said he didn't know how to be a dad since he never had one. But looking at him now, he's a natural.

As Harley sets Sadie down and they make their way towards the house, I open my arms for him. He walks up the steps and into my embrace, placing a kiss on my lips.

“Hi, baby,” I say, smiling as I look into his beautiful eyes.

“Hi, husband,” he says, smiling back at me.

I push his hair back and tuck it behind his ear. “How was it?”

“It was good,” he nods. “Met with a new label and some of their artists. And,” he smiles, “some LA labels are wanting to work with us too.”

“Really?” I grin, and a feeling of pride rushes through me. “Damn, baby... this is everything we could have wanted...”

He nods again with a huge smile and kisses me. I hang on to him tight, in disbelief that in such a short amount of time, we have actually made a difference in such a tough industry.

About a year ago we had started an agency called Fortitude, under Volition. Nate wanted a way for other labels to gain access to the way Volition is operating, and to create fairness and openness in the industry for artists. And he asked Harley and I to be a part of it. We dreamed up Fortitude, and Nate let us run with it. We provide support and guidance to labels on how to properly market and manage their artists with the artist in mind, to meet the goals and needs of both the label and the artist. And especially, for those artists belonging to under or poorly represented communities. It spread like



wildfire through labels both big and small along the east coast, and now, we are branching into the west coast as well. It's everything we could have hoped for, I can't believe we are actually doing it. We are changing the music industry, for the better.

“Are we going to eat now, or what?”

We break our kiss with a laugh and look down to our feet to see Sadie with her hands on her hips, staring up at us.

“Yes,” Harley laughs. “After that drive back from the city, I am starving. What did you make me?” He picks up Sadie and tickles her, throwing her over his shoulder as she laughs her adorable little laugh.

As they make their way into the house, I stay on the porch a moment longer, watching them. My husband and our daughter, as they enter the house that we built out of love and dreams. As I listen to their laughs, I smile.

This life is perfect.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Harley". The signature is written in black ink and has a fluid, personal feel.

The sun setting over the mountains is one of the most beautiful sights. But as I turn my head to look at Ezra and Sadie cuddled up on the swing with me on our back deck, I smile. *This* is the most beautiful sight.

Sadie rests her head against my chest, and I run my fingers through her hair while I pull Ezra in closer to me. I kiss the side of his head and sigh. I don't think life could get anymore pea-

*Mmmaaaaaaa!*

-ceful.

We continue gently rock on the swing, as we do most nights, overlooking our farm, watching the sunset and listening to the goats scream. Weirdly enough, it's almost

become a comforting sound now and it just sort of blends into the background.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, but I leave it. Nothing is more important than this right here.

*Bzzz*

*Bzzz*

*Bzzz*

*Bzzz*

“That’s Uncle Ollie, isn’t it,” Sadie says simply and Ezra laughs.

“My phone is going off too, so I’d say you’re right,” he says.

I smile, and pull my phone out, unlocking the screen and angling it so Ezra can read too.

**Ollie**

GUYS

I AM SO EXCITED \*partying face emoji\*

I get to see you all this weekend! AHHHH

IT’S BEEN SO LONG \*crying face emoji\*

New album, what whaaaaaat! \*music note emoji\*

I chuckle and Ezra shakes his head with a smile.

**Callum**

Um, I’m excited too, but dude. We just saw each other two weeks ago. And like a week before that.

**Ollie**

WHICH IS TOO LONG!

When we're back out on tour after recording this new album, I'm going to make up for lost time. Just so you all know \*three hugging face emojis\*

**Callum**

Thanks for the heads up...

I laugh and tap out my reply. After all these years, Send Help is the same as it's always been. We are still recording, and still touring, but we do it on our timeline. We have families and other businesses to run, but Send Help will always be an important part of our lives. We do it for ourselves, and for our fans, who continue to stick by us and show us so much love.

We're looking forward to seeing you both too.  
We're ready to burn hot...

Ezra smiles as I tap out my next reply. "You're going to break him."

I chuckle, as I hit send.

\*fire emoji\*

Ollie sends back a string of texts showing so much excitement, I think maybe I did actually break him. I shake my head with a smile and lock my phone. I'll deal with that in a minute. Because right now, I have my husband and daughter in my arms.

I sigh as I look out over our land, as the goats scream, and Ezra and Sadie snuggle into me.

This is everything I could have ever asked for. And I am *so* happy.

This life is perfect.

***The End***



Curious about the horrors Ezra endured to get a certain sex toy? Or what chaos Ollie caused with a blanket? Head to my Instagram [@eve.holmes.author](#) under my links to get your free bonus content!

If you enjoyed *Remastered*, please consider leaving a review!

## A LITTLE NOTE AND A HUGE THANK YOU

I can't even begin to describe how thankful I am for all of you following along with this story and showing your love for these boys. I hope the end of this story brought you just as much joy as it did them.

When I first got the idea to write this story, it was going to be one book, called *Send Help*. But as I started writing, Harley and Ezra became so much more to me that they evolved into a trilogy. And I don't even feel ready to say good-bye to them.

But... we're not really saying bye quite yet. They will appear in some other stories, that were not-so-subtly hinted at throughout this book. Callum and Ollie have their own stories to tell within the world of *Send Help*! We're not done yet!

I want to send a huge thank you to all my ARC readers. Your love for Harley and Ezra is beautiful to see, and thank you so so so much for continuing to follow along!

Some special shoutouts!

RoRo – Oh, twinsie. This was a journey, and you were there every step of the way. You were in the drive waiting for the next chapter before I even had it uploaded, and you don't even know how happy it made me to see you so excited for it. Whether it's our in-depth conversations about cumforters, sex positions or sex acts, I can always count on you to be completely inappropriate with me. Or just on your own. Either way, it is very much appreciated! Thank you for once again always looking out for me, making me take breaks, taking me on writing retreats, talking it all out and just checking in. You're the best cheerleader and the best twin I could ever ask for. Love you!

KMac – The Callum to my Ollie. I think I would actually be completely lost in life without you. Thank you for always bringing me back to reality and helping me see things for what

they truly are – basically, constantly getting me out of my own head. And of course... emotional support potatoes. We can't forget the potatoes. I can always rely on you to sort my thoughts out and give me the feedback I need. You are the logical one, and I lived for your in-depth and detailed summaries of your thoughts after each chapter. Especially Chapter 20. I need to print and frame that one. Thank you for being my lifelong best friend and support – I love you!

Melissa – Thank you so much for joining me on this journey! From ARC reader, to beta reader, to alpha reader, I loved getting your feedback and thoughts. And bonding over spreadsheets and organization! It was so great getting to know you over this process, and I'm excited to continue working with you on future projects!

And once again, thank you to every single one of you. And...

Burn hot!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eve is an avid lover of coffee, getting lost in fictional worlds, crafting and ducks. She lives in a small town in Atlantic Canada with a bunch of animals and plans to get many more, much to her family and friends dismay.

When she's not trying to get ducks to love her, she can usually be found fantasizing about living in a treehouse, riding her horses, drawing, and attending bookclub - which is just an excuse to engage in shenanigans with her friends... but bookish shenanigans.

Eve enjoys a challenge, and will gladly turn the strangest writing prompt into a book. We're just getting started, hold on to your hats!

