



Wrong
for me.

But so right.

Reverb

ROAD KINGS, BOOK 4

JULIE KRISS

REVERB

JULIE KRISS

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Untitled

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Also by Julie Kriss

“Nobody ever said a positive thing to me, ever, in my life, until they heard me play music.”

Chris Cornell

PART 1

NOW AND THEN

ONE

THEN

Sienna

The driver's seat of a rented ten-year-old Toyota, parked in a New Orleans parking lot, was not where I expected my nervous breakdown to begin. I hadn't planned to have a nervous breakdown at all. But here I was, scrolling through the app on my phone that showed hotel after hotel with sold-out status, feeling panic rise in my chest.

Sold out. Sold out.

This hotel had a room available. For sixteen hundred dollars.

The next one: *Sold out.*

I was almost halfway through a ten-week tour with the Road Kings, the legendary band that had reunited after five years apart. I was the journalist assigned to cover the tour and write about it exclusively for *Soundcheck* magazine. I was—supposedly—given transportation, hotel, and tickets to every show on the tour. I was given four days of bus access with the band. I was put on the list to get backstage at every show. I was being given all the access any journalist could ask for, and there was no question—it was my dream job.

Since the day I first saw *Almost Famous* at age thirteen, I'd wanted to be doing exactly what I was doing right now. Touring with a legendary band, writing for seventies-era *Rolling Stone*—okay, not quite, but I could imagine—and learning life lessons along the way. I dreamed that I'd create great writing, live my passion for music, and have an experience that was nothing less than extraordinary. And here I was, living that dream.

Everything about it sucked.

Exhibit A: The band hated me. They'd hate any journalist, because they were famous for loathing publicity, but they most definitely hated me. Not one of them wanted to talk to me, and they avoided me like I had a particularly hideous type of infectious disease.

Exhibit B: Because the band hated me, they struck my name from the credentials list to get backstage every night, so I had no special access. I was stuck watching the shows from the audience with everyone else.

Exhibit C: Because the band hated me, I was not allowed to travel on either of the tour buses. Instead, I had a jarring, lonely, exhausting schedule of airports and rental cars, while the band bonded on the bus rides, talking (I imagined) about all of the things I was supposed to be writing about.

Exhibit D: As a result, the pieces I was turning in were terrible. I tried, but they were still terrible.

I could just about deal with all of this. The music business isn't for weaklings, especially female ones, who everyone assumes can't hack it. I didn't care if the band didn't like me—I had a job to do. So I'd sit in airports and follow them around like a bad smell, and if they wouldn't talk to me, then I'd write whatever I wanted about them, whether it was true or not. If they didn't like what *Soundcheck* was publishing, they could damn well give me an interview and set the record straight.

Also, the music was good. Really good. The Road Kings were a legendary live band for a reason. They had devoted fans who followed them from show to show just to soak in the brilliance of each night. The guys were in the second half of their thirties, at a point at which their musical skills and their attitudes were hitting a maturing point—it was no longer the raw, undisciplined playing of twenty-year-olds, but it wasn't fossilized into “classic rock” status, either. Even from where I sat in the audience, I could see what was happening with the changing setlists, the new arrangements, the new songs. Those assholes were at the top of their game.

And god, I *loved* writing about that stuff. I lived for it. I wanted to pick

those jerks' brains apart and listen to them jam and know everything about what they were thinking about next. Those dumbasses thought I wanted to intrude into their private lives and ask them about their outfits or their childhoods or their sex habits or something, and all I wanted to talk about was *music*.

The Road Kings didn't trust me. That was fine. I would *make* them trust me. I was determined to stay on the tour.

Except, Exhibit E: I now had nowhere to stay.

I'd landed in New Orleans, where the band was to play three sold-out shows, to find I had no hotel room booked. I had no idea why. I only knew that I was stranded in my rental car, scrolling through a booking site, seeing that every hotel in the city was fully booked unless I was a millionaire. Was every convention in town on the same days? What was going on?

I kept scrolling, feeling the panic close in. I was weeks into this shitty disaster of a tour, and I could feel it: this was the thing that would break me. Not the loneliness, the hatred from the band, the creeping certainty that I was failing in my career. I was either going to have to spend thousands of dollars of my own money, sleep in this rental car, or go home to Portland.

I didn't want to go home.

I pressed a palm to my forehead and closed my eyes. I was hungry, I needed a shower, and I needed to do a few hours of work. "Think, Sienna, think," I chided myself out loud. I'd already called the *Soundcheck* office, where I'd told an admin assistant about the cancelled booking, and he'd promised to "check it out" and call me back. I didn't hold out much hope.

I could stay outside of town, maybe. Or find a youth hostel. Even the hotels by the airport were booked up. Airbnb only had sketchy single rooms in some dude's house, and even those were overpriced.

Whatever I chose, I'd be paying for it myself, at least until I could sort this out and claim back the money. I had maybe a few hundred bucks' room on my credit card and another few hundred in the bank. If I spent it all staying in New Orleans—then what? The tour had almost six more weeks to go.

I had no friends or contacts in town, no one who owed me a favor. I hadn't been in this business long enough to have a network. This tour with the Road Kings was supposed to be my big break.

I put my phone down, then picked it up again. Put it down. Started to panic again. Even if I wanted to give up, I had no way to get home unless I

drove to the airport and bought a ticket. Which I couldn't afford. Maybe I'd try the *Soundcheck* office again. In the meantime, I was starting to understand that it was possible I'd have to sleep in this rental car tonight.

I picked up my phone again, then dropped it with a screech when someone knocked on the passenger window, two sharp raps.

Framed in the window was a pair of male hips clad in black jeans and adorned with a belt with a silver buckle. Above the belt, the soft cotton of a dark green tee draped over a perfectly flat stomach.

My heart squeezed up into my throat in panic. I recognized those hips, that stomach. I'd watched them onstage for every show of this tour. It was Stone Zeeland, the Road Kings' guitarist.

What the hell is Stone Zeeland doing knocking on my window?

As if to compound the question, Stone leaned down and peered in at me. He had to lean pretty far down, because he was a big guy. Tall, built, and muscled. One of those men that never seems small, in any way, in any circumstances. It wasn't just his shoulders or the granite of his thighs. It was his presence, his rock star attitude, his scowl. His talent. His status as a guitar god.

His scowl was in full force now, his dark eyebrows drawn down, his mouth frowning through his short, dark beard. He looked intimidating, which was—as far as I could tell—his usual mode. Frankly, if I didn't know who he was, I'd wonder if I was about to be mugged or carjacked by a member of a biker gang. Instead, I waved at him to go away.

Stone blinked once, and instead of obeying, he grabbed the door handle. Too late, I realized the car wasn't locked, and before I could reach for the lock button, he'd swung the passenger door open, dropped in next to me, and slammed it shut.

For a second, I was too shocked to react. In all the weeks of this tour, I had exchanged less than ten words with Stone. His loathing of me came off him like a smell. I had never been alone with him, and never this physically close. He loomed enormous in the small space. I wasn't even certain he knew my name.

He glared at me in silence for so long I eventually said, "Yes? Can I help you?"

His voice was gravelly, as if with disuse. "You're sitting in your car in the parking lot," he said. He pointed out the windshield. "The hotel is right there."

My hackles went up. “So? There’s no rule against it.”

There was another long beat of silence. I hadn’t even known the Road Kings had arrived in town, because I wasn’t on their bus. I didn’t know the precise moments they arrived anywhere. I was constantly chasing the band, hoping to catch them at a good time.

“You’re also freaking out,” Stone said.

Was it that obvious? Obvious enough to be seen from a distance through a car window? I wasn’t crying. So how did he know?

The humiliation of my situation came back to me again, and it made me mad, so I said, “I am not freaking out.”

Stone glared at me. There was silence for another minute.

And another. And another.

This guy was very good at silence, but he wasn’t going to win. I glared back at him, getting angrier by the second.

Finally he said, “Go freak out in your hotel room.”

“Why?” I snapped.

“Because the fact that you’re sitting here is bothering me.”

“*Bothering* you?” I couldn’t quite believe that I had to deal with this shit on top of everything else. Forgetting that I was talking to one of the musicians I would normally give my left arm to interview, I half shouted, “Stone, that is *too bad*.”

Do you know how many women were in my music journalism course at the beginning of the first semester? Four, including me. Do you know how many actually finished the course? Take a guess.

Yes, one. Me.

It doesn’t matter what year it is, the music business is a boys’ club through and through. The big record producers are men, the executives are men, the promoters are men, the people making all the money are men. The musicians, still, are also mostly men, and the groupie scene might have changed form since the *Almost Famous* era, but it’s alive and well. It’s a business in which Mick Jagger still gets to do whatever the hell he wants in his seventies, while Taylor Swift’s dating life is scrutinized endlessly and a bunch of guys on Twitter think she’s past her prime at thirty. Take a look at Lizzo’s replies sometime. If you feel the need for a dose of good old toxic masculinity, the music business is the place to be.

I learned, early on, to fake it. I was twenty-eight, and I knew I was still green, but I could put on an attitude, make like nothing bothered me. Since

entering this business, I'd been hit on, looked down on, and outright ignored, but I could play tough.

Stone Zealand didn't scare me. Or if he did, I wouldn't let him know it.

"What's the problem?" he barked at me now, as if I'd come bothering *him* instead of the other way around.

I adjusted my glasses. "There's no problem," I lied.

"Then go to your hotel room. It's getting dark."

"I will."

Stone waited, staring at me.

"Well?" he said.

"I'll go in after you leave."

"No, you won't. Go now."

"What is *your* problem?" My voice rose, and I remembered to modulate it. It wouldn't do to come across as hysterical, now, would it? That would just play into his sexist prejudices. "I'm minding my own business. Since you detest my existence, I suggest you leave me alone and mind yours."

"This is stupid," Stone said, once again as if *I'd* started this. It was getting harder not to scream. "Just tell me the truth. You don't have a room, do you?"

"Of course I have a room," I lied again.

"Right." Stone pointed to the hotel. "If I go in there right now, go to the front desk, and ask them if you have a room booked, they're going to say yes."

"I hope they don't tell you anything, because that would violate my privacy."

"Be honest." He sounded mad now, and he leaned toward me. It was only an inch, but it was enough. He enunciated clearly. "You. Don't. Have. A. Room." I was going to argue again, but he didn't give me the chance. "I can tell by the look on your face that I'm right. So where are you going to stay, Penny Lane?"

For a second I just stared at him in shock. Had he called me Penny Lane, the groupie character in *Almost Famous*? It was like he already knew what my favorite movie was. "I'm not Penny Lane!" I shouted at him, not caring if he saw how livid I was. "My name is Sienna Maplethorpe. *Maplethorpe*. If you want to talk *Almost Famous*, then I'm William, who is based on Cameron Crowe, who wrote the movie! *The journalist!* I'm not a groupie, you ass!"

“Jesus, just answer the question,” Stone said. “If you don’t have a room, where are you going to stay tonight?”

“I have somewhere to go.”

“You don’t, or you’d be there by now.” He pointed at the hotel again. “You went in there, you went to the front desk, and they told you there’s no room booked for you. Then you came out here, got in this car, and scrolled on your phone for half an hour. You’re still here, which tells me you have nowhere to stay.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“I’m waiting.”

“I can’t think with you staring at me like that.”

His eyebrows rose. “Really? You’re supposed to be so smart, and you have a hard time thinking? I thought thinking is what you do for a living.”

I made a scoffing noise. “Like guitar players are such experts on thinking.”

What was I *doing*? Stone Zeeland wasn’t just a guitar player. He was a rock star. *Rolling Stone* had called him “one of the unsung heroes of the rock scene, carrying the mantle of Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck while pushing their legacy kicking and screaming into the next century.” Heady praise, if you didn’t look too closely into Jimmy Page’s personal life.

Stone could make or break my career, and he was sitting here in my car. While I insulted him.

He shrugged his big shoulders, letting my insult roll off his no doubt gigantic ego. It must be nice in there, where no form of criticism or self-reflection could penetrate. “You think,” he commanded me. “I’m gonna sit here and wait.”

Silence again.

I looked around. Night was falling fast, like a blanket. I wasn’t the type to jump at shadows, but there was something cold and unpleasant about sitting in this parking lot in a strange city while the light died. I’d have to find a hostel with a bunk in a room full of strangers. Or try to sleep in this parking lot, find a gas station that would let me use their dirty bathroom. I tried not to feel despair. At least no one would mug me with Stone’s giant, silent bulk sitting here.

“All right,” I grudgingly admitted when the silence had drawn on for what seemed like a year. “I’m a little stuck. My room seems to have been cancelled. Even if I had the money, everywhere else is sold out. Okay? Since

you have all the answers, what do you suggest I do?”

Stone made a *hmm* sound deep in his throat and looked out the passenger window. He scratched his beard with his big hand. It was like sharing a car with a bear. I couldn't see his eyes, so I couldn't figure out what was going on in his stupid head. Was he going to suggest something? Or was he just going to sit here all night in silence?

Nothing. No sign. This man had less than zero social skills.

“Well?” I asked when I couldn't take it anymore.

He spoke abruptly, still not looking at me, his voice rough. “Stay in my room.”

What? Had he actually said that? I couldn't even speak. Instead, I made a strangled noise of outrage.

Stone raised a hand, palm out, as if I'd spoken. “I'm not trying to screw you, all right? My room has two beds. I'll barely be there, anyway. I'll get a second room key, and we can mostly avoid each other. That way you have somewhere to stay until this mistake gets worked out. Okay?”

“Absolutely not,” I practically shouted in his face.

“Why not?”

Was this a real question? How egotistical could one spoiled rock star be? “Journalistic integrity, for one.”

“This won't affect your journalistic integrity, because I won't be talking to you.”

“Well, that's great. Congratulations. It's me that has to maintain integrity, not you.”

“You will,” Stone said, because life was infuriatingly simple for men like Stone Zeeland. “We're just sharing a room, not talking or sleeping together.”

I sighed, leaning back in my seat and briefly closing my eyes. “My god, are you actually this dense? It doesn't matter if we're sleeping together, Stone. Everyone will *think* we are. *That's* what matters.”

It seemed, incredibly, that this had not occurred to him. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, the rasp of his beard loud in the quiet car. I tried not to let the sound annoy me.

“No one will know anything if I switch my room to a different floor,” he said.

“You can't,” I shot back. “The hotel is fully booked.”

Stone gave me a look that said, *Do you think I can't get what I want, whenever I want it?* I felt the urge to scream all over again.

“I’ll talk to them,” he said. “They’ll swap me with someone. Let’s go in.”

“I’m not going in with you,” I snapped. “Were you listening to what I just said?”

“Just sit on a chair in the lobby while I talk to the front desk. No one will know you’re with me.”

“What about my luggage?” My suitcase was in the trunk. Too late, I realized I seemed to be actually negotiating this, as if I was considering it. Then again, it was either this or I slept in this car.

Besides, it was just for a night, two at most. There had been some mistake at the hotel. When I got it cleared up, I’d have my own room again.

“Bring your suitcase,” Stone said. “Once I get things settled, we’ll go up separately. You’ll have your own key card. Got it?”

He put his hand on the door handle, but I said, “You can’t be serious about this. What if you want to bring someone back to your room after a show?”

Stone turned to me, and if anything, he glowered even harder than he had before. “That’s enough outta you, Maplethorpe,” he said. “Now, get the fuck outta this car and go sit in the lobby until I get you a key.”

He got out, slamming the door behind him. I watched, still in a sort of shock, as he circled the front of the car, those familiar black jeans and that familiar belt buckle. Then he opened the driver’s door and stood there. Waiting.

I sighed. “Fuck my life,” I said.

“That makes two of us,” Stone said. “Let’s go.”

TWO

NOW

Stone

There was glitter. Too much fucking glitter.

I thought I'd gotten rid of it all. I'd showered multiple times, washed my clothes. Combed it out of my hair. Rinsed it from my beard. I'd found it in my socks, my armpits. Now, two weeks after I'd been glitter-bombed, as I lay on a weight bench at the gym ready to lift, I found a speck of glitter on my biceps.

I stared at that shiny pinpoint on my skin with murderous rage, my workout forgotten. Someone was gonna pay for this. That someone would be the members of Seven Dog Down, the band that had sent the Road Kings a glitter bomb hidden in a bottle of champagne backstage at the final show of our tour. We'd opened it ten minutes before going on, and we'd had to play the entire show covered in glitter, all four of us.

I didn't care about that, at least not much. It took more than a shot of glitter to keep me from playing a killer show. It was the fact that, weeks later, I was still living with this shit, finding it in random places—it made me mad. I could not fucking get rid of the glitter. Seven Dog Down were on tour in

Europe right now, but that didn't make them safe. At this point, I'd gladly hire a hit man and buy him a plane ticket.

A guy waiting for me to finish my set was glaring at me from where he was doing biceps curls in front of a wall of mirrors. He was six five and absolutely jacked, but I glared at him until he looked away. I'd been contemplating the speck of glitter for too long, so I turned my attention back to what I was doing and channeled my rage into my workout.

When I finished with the weights, I did thirty minutes on the treadmill, then grabbed a mat and did pushups and situps. Sweat dripped onto the mat. I'd been doing monster workouts since the tour ended, pushing myself to my limits. Trying not to think.

Finally I stopped, sitting on the mat, breathing hard. I dropped my forehead to my knees and closed my eyes. I could feel my heart pounding and the pulse in my neck. The rhythm echoed the same words in my head, over and over: *Do not think about her. Do not. Do not.*

I had a lot of other shit to think about. With our reunion tour finished—ten weeks of sold-out shows—the Road Kings were more popular than we'd ever been. We were writing an album, and we were building a studio to record it in. Instead of selling ourselves to a record company, we were putting our own money in, along with funding from Will Hale, the millionaire who'd funded our tour. Apparently he liked our music, and he wanted to see more of it, so much so that he'd go into business with us. So we'd gone into business.

The deal was brokered by our new agent, Angie, who had come on board when our old agent—Angie's father—died. The four of us Road Kings were now home in Portland, flush with cash, busy, writing and refining new songs. Things were looking really, really good.

Do not think about her. Do not.

She hates you, anyway. And who could blame her?

Still, as I stripped in the locker room, Sienna Maplethorpe crossed my mind, like she always did. Dark hair falling softly to her shoulders. Gray eyes fringed with dark lashes behind glasses. Lips of natural pale pink, whether she wore makeup or not. Wardrobe from the nineties, complete with Doc Martens and black skirts, even though she was a baby in the nineties. She was nearly ten years my junior.

So—no, I shouldn't think about a woman younger than me, smarter than me, more educated than me, nicer than me, nerdier than me, and much, much more innocent than me. At all.

I stepped into the shower, blasting the water and remembering that every time Sienna looked at me, her pretty brows drew down in an expression that was part confusion, part disgust. The memory of that expression, of how repulsed she was at just the sight of me, made my pulse calm down.

When I got into my car in the parking lot, I finally looked at my phone, which I kept on Silent. I hated these fucking things, but there was nothing I could do about owning one. After five years of self-imposed isolation while we were disbanded, I had bandmates again. And business associates. And there was always Mom.

There were text and call notifications piled up, because apparently no one got the message that I wanted to be left alone.

From Denver, our lead singer, sent to our (just kill me now) Road Kings group text:

DENVER

I came up with this a few hours ago. Is this anything?

He'd attached a voice memo.

I listened to it. It was Denver singing a few lines of a new song, a melody. It was good, because of course it was. It was Denver.

A reply from Neal, our bassist:

NEAL

I like it. How about this?

He'd sent his own voice memo, which I played. Neal had taken Denver's clip and added a bass line to it.

A reply from Axel, our drummer:

AXEL

Sounds good, but we can't nail down an entire album like this.
We need to get into the studio.

There was more conversation about the studio we were creating, as well as the rehearsal space we were renting to work in while we were waiting. About schedules, timelines, plans. I scanned the thread, only half paying attention. I put the key in the ignition, powered down the window, and opened the glove compartment. I took out the pack of cigarettes that lived in there and put it on the passenger seat, but I didn't take a cigarette out. I just stared at the pack for a second, then went back to my phone.

The band would start to rehearse in a few days. I'd show up when I was supposed to show up, play whatever I wanted to play. Planning too much wasn't how I worked. When I got a guitar in my hands—that moment, right then, was the only time I knew what I was going to play. Whatever thoughts and feelings traveled up my spine and down into my hands. After so many years together, the guys knew how I got it done.

The cigarettes stared at me from the seat next to me. They'd lived for so long in my car that they were probably turning to dust and tasted like shit. I took them out nearly every time I drove, stared at them longingly, but I wasn't going to smoke one. Just like I wasn't going to think about Sienna Maplethorpe and the color of her lips.

The next set of notifications on my phone was from Mom, which had the effect of driving thoughts of sex from my brain while ramping up my desire for a smoke. She'd called me first, though she knew that I didn't pick up the phone for anyone, ever. Then she'd switched to texting. Mom's spelling and punctuation, as usual, were on point.

DIANA

Stoney the electrick says I owe 200?? Is that right

Were u in the basement? I can't find the detergent

Never mind I found it

Where are u?

Come for dinner tonite and meet Anthony, k?

Why don't u answer ur phone?

There's a dent on my back bumper??? Was that there before

How do I fix that?

Where are u??

Oh yeah, I definitely wanted a cigarette. I put my hand on the pack next to me, as if that alone had the ability to make me feel better. Then I texted Mom a reply, because if I didn't, she'd never stop.

STONE

I'll come by tomorrow. Talk later.

She didn't need an answer to each individual text, because by now, she'd forgotten all about them. I'd drop by her house, check over her electric bill,

look at her back bumper, and leave. I would *not* come to dinner and meet her newest boyfriend, whose name was apparently Anthony. If I waited a few weeks, Anthony would be gone, anyway. Mom wasn't known for her long-term relationships. Her four marriages, and every relationship between and since, had been short.

Her first marriage was to my father, and that had lasted all of ten months before he bailed and moved away after I was born. Child support was a nonexistent joke, and I had no idea where that asshole was now. I'd never bothered to keep track of him.

The final text on my phone was from the Road Kings' new agent, Angie Miller-Gold. Angie was in her early forties, tall and blond, a former *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model who had retired from modeling to become an agent for other models. She'd also gotten married, had a kid, and been widowed a year ago. Now she'd taken over her late father's agenting roster, which included only one client: the Road Kings.

Stone, she wrote, her text as formal and businesslike as her speech. She used text because she already understood that I never answered my phone.

ANGIE

There is a problem with the Soundcheck magazine deal. It seems that you are that problem. In order for the deal to go through, you will have to agree to at least three interviews with Sienna Maplethorpe.

And there she was—back in my brain again. The woman I was trying to avoid.

But Angie had sent a second text, one that made me stare at it in shock for a long minute, trying to absorb what she was saying.

ANGIE

We should meet to discuss your reservations about the deal. I'd like to get to know you better. How about dinner on Saturday?

Was that—? No.

Was she—?

Was she asking me out?

Maybe I was wrong and she was only talking about business.

But you don't spend half your life playing guitar in a band without having some idea when a woman is coming on to you. Frankly, it happens a fuck of a lot, and you get experience with it fast.

I'd like to get to know you better, she'd said.

My new agent was asking me out.

"Fuck," I said to the empty car, the first word I'd uttered out loud in hours. And I reached for my lighter.

THREE

THEN

Sienna

I was almost positive Stone was sneaking cigarettes. I caught a whiff last night, when we rode the elevator to our shared room. It was a faint scent, and it could have been transferred from someone else and lingered in his clothes, but I didn't quite think so.

"I don't smoke," I'd said to him.

"Neither do I," he'd replied.

Those were the only words we'd spoken.

Stone had avoided any awkwardness about sharing a room by dropping his bags on one of the two beds, handing me a key card, and leaving again like his ass was on fire. There was no show, so I had no idea where he was going, and I didn't ask. He hadn't come back until hours later.

I'd thought I wouldn't be able to sleep with him in the room, but after the day I'd had, I must have been exhausted. I didn't remember anything after I closed my eyes.

Now he was gone—without a word to me, of course—to sound check for tonight's show, and I had the room to myself.

It was a nice room—nicer than any I'd been given so far on this tour. The band was given the best rooms in the hotel, of course. Since Stone would be gone for the rest of the afternoon, I changed into comfy clothes, set up my laptop at the desk, and worked on my next article.

In the quiet of the room, I could grudgingly admit that Stone had done me a favor. This was much better than working in my car, in a coffee shop, or in a hostel.

I studiously did not look at Stone's bed, did not think about it. As promised, Stone hadn't come on to me. He hadn't even spoken to me. I didn't seem to be his type, which was a relief because he definitely wasn't mine. We had successfully tolerated each other during the hours he was here.

When I got hungry, I ordered room service—screw it, it could be paid on Stone's bill—and when I took a writing break, I tried calling the *Soundcheck* office again. The assistant I'd talked to yesterday said there was “no news.” So I wrote until it was time to get ready for tonight's show.

Why had Stone made me such a generous offer when he hated me? Ego, probably. It made him feel like a big deal to let me use his room. Or maybe he thought my gratitude would buy him my loyalty when I wrote my articles. Who knew what kind of thoughts went through a spoiled rock star's head?

I put on black jeans, a white tank top, and my trusty Doc Martens for the show. It would be sweaty, crowded, loud—and fun. Live music was the reason I'd gotten into this business, and it was still the highlight.

There was a reason the Road Kings were known for their live shows, and as much as they frustrated me, I could admit that they were geniuses onstage. Denver Gilchrist, the gorgeous lead singer with the killer voice. Neal Watts, the flawless bass player. Axel de Vries, the brilliant blond drummer. And, of course, Stone Zeeland, guitar god.

Stone wasn't a showman who played to the crowd, yet he was a big presence onstage—focused, intense, easy in his body. I was still processing exactly what he was doing up there—the playing speed he was capable of, the highs and lows, the variety of sound, the sobbing emotion he could produce. It was hard to reconcile that with the scowling man, incapable of feeling, that he was in real life.

But I was going to forget all of that for a while. I might not be allowed backstage, and I might not get interviews with the band, but I could still go to the shows and listen to the music. I grabbed my bag and left to see what the night would bring.

AT TWO THIRTY in the morning, I came back to the room to find Stone standing there, his muscled arms crossed as he watched me come through the door. He was, as usual, scowling.

“Where the hell have you been?” he barked.

I was surprised. It had been a crazy night, but I’d had no idea Stone had even noticed I was still gone. “I was at the show,” I said.

His gaze traveled down me and up again, assessing. It wasn’t a leering look. His eyes were dark brown, like chocolate, his lashes dark. “Are you hurt?”

This was a valid question. Tonight’s Road Kings show had been cut short when the power was cut to the venue, sending much of the crowd running out of the exit doors in panic. I’d been one of them.

“I’m not hurt.” I bent to unlace my boots. “Someone bumped into my shoulder—hard—and it’ll probably bruise, but that’s it.”

“Did you get it checked out?”

I let out a disbelieving laugh. “And rack up an urgent care bill because someone hit my shoulder? Not all of us are rich rock stars, Stone. I’m fine.”

This seemed to make him mad. “If you weren’t at the hospital, where were you since the show ended? I heard that some people got hurt.”

“Nothing serious.” I kicked off my boots and walked to my suitcase, unzipping it. “The paramedics treated a couple of sprains and a couple of panic attacks. No one was admitted to the hospital. It could have been a lot worse.” I rifled through my suitcase, looking for my pajamas. “As for where I’ve been, I was covering the story. Also known as doing my job.”

“What does that mean?”

I glared at him. He was starting to annoy me. “What are you asking? Are you asking what my job is?”

He rolled his eyes, and I wanted to punch him. “I’m asking what exactly you were doing. The question is pretty clear.”

Oh, he made me mad. I yanked my pajamas out of the suitcase. “You’d like a forensic accounting of where I’ve been? Fine. I talked to a paramedic, two of the venue’s security guards, and two cops. I got the names and ages of the guys who cut the power—two drunk fans who apparently thought it would be a funny prank. They were put in custody in jail overnight, though they’ll likely be released tomorrow. I went to the jail to try and talk to them

but got stonewalled. It turns out that I need better police contacts, which was something I didn't know I needed for a music journalism career."

Stone blinked. "You went to a New Orleans jail at two o'clock in the morning?"

"Yes, and it was delightful," I replied sarcastically. "I also got one of the security guards to show me how the guys got into the power room as well as show me the security footage. It seems that one of the doors malfunctions and doesn't close all the way sometimes. The venue had a work order in to get it fixed, but it hadn't been filled yet. I plan to find the status of the work order in the morning. The tour with the security guard was also delightful, since he wanted me to come 'party with him and his roommates' afterward. I have no idea what that meant and did not ask. My only dinner came from a hot dog vendor. Tomorrow I'll write the story and turn it in. I have everything I need, unless you'd like to make a statement?"

Stone looked, again, like I'd said something that had never occurred to him. I wondered what it was. Had it never occurred to him that I did an actual job? That I was a sentient being and not a pebble he was trying to dislodge from his shoe?

Whatever it was, I had no patience for it. Also, he was standing there staring at me, and I needed to change my clothes. When the silence stretched on too long, I left my words hanging there, turned, and walked into the bathroom.

When I came out, Stone was no longer standing there. The balcony door was open, letting the night air in. I could see his large silhouette sitting on a chair outside.

I should have gone to bed and tried to sleep through this weird arrangement of ours, but it didn't even cross my mind. Instead, I walked onto the balcony, pulled up the second chair, and sat. We were eight floors up, and the lights of New Orleans were laid out beneath us. The city was still awake this late, though it was starting to wind down. Cabs cruised the street below, and on the corner, someone shouted while another person laughed.

Stone was like a monument, sitting with one ankle crossed over the other knee. He took up half the balcony in that pose. He was still wearing the black jeans and black tee he'd worn onstage, and I was a little self-conscious about my pajama pants, tee, and sweatshirt, even though I was fully covered. He was looking straight ahead, but he glanced at me.

"Beer or wine?" he asked.

“What?”

He spoke more slowly. “Beer. Or. Wine.”

“Beer.”

He reached next to him, grabbed a bottle of beer, twisted the cap off, and handed it to me.

I took it. After the night I’d had, it was welcome. I noticed he didn’t have a drink for himself, though. Had he brought both beer and wine onto the balcony so he could offer me one or the other?

I took a swig of my beer. “You’re not drinking,” I pointed out. “None of the band is drinking on this tour. No pot, nothing.” I’d talked to roadies, hotel workers, drivers, venue staff, and other people working the tour. They’d all said the same thing. Also, I’d spent four days on the tour bus with the band, a contractual obligation during which they’d frozen me out. They hadn’t touched any substance stronger than coffee.

Stone shrugged.

“Care to tell me why?” I’d heard rumors that Axel de Vries had been through rehab, but no one could confirm that. Even if he had, it was pretty extraordinary for the whole band to agree to ten weeks without a single drink—even when they were alone in their hotel rooms, like now.

Stone gave me a look that said he knew I was fishing. “We’re too old for that shit.”

“Stone, you’re thirty-seven.”

He looked pained. “Thanks for reminding me.” He shook his head. “Since you’ve barely graduated high school, I’m going to assume you’ve never covered a tour.”

I took a swig of my beer. “I’m almost thirty. But you assume correctly.”

“Then you don’t know what it’s like, but you’ll learn.”

He realized, after a second, what he’d said. If I got fired—or if I quit—I wouldn’t make it to the end of this tour. I’d go home with my tail between my legs instead. For a second, Stone’s gaze met mine, and instead of his annoyed scowl, I saw his emotions as if through clear glass.

He hadn’t meant to say that. He also wasn’t the one behind my missing hotel booking. Whatever was going on with this job—however he felt about me being on this tour—he wasn’t the one causing this problem. If he were, he wouldn’t have let me stay in his room.

“What will I learn?” I asked. “Since I’m staying on the tour.”

He gave me another look, this one harder to read, then he looked away.

“It’s tiring. It seems great at first, like you can go forever, but it takes everything out of you by the end. You think you need to be either fucked up or hungover all the time, but that makes it worse.”

“But that’s what you used to do.”

“When I was younger than you, even, yeah.” He gave me a side glance. “Too stupid to know better. We all did it. But this tour isn’t about partying. This tour is about playing.”

I thought about that as I took another swig of beer. “Well, it’s working. Tonight’s show was amazing before it got shut down.”

Stone rubbed his fingers over his beard, the sound surprisingly loud. He took one of his long pauses before speaking. “It was pretty good. I slipped up during the ‘Starshine’ solo, though. I don’t know why.”

I gaped at him. I’d nearly wept during the ‘Starshine’ solo. “It sounded good to me. To everyone.”

Stone shook his head, and it wasn’t an act or a ploy for compliments. He was displeased with himself. “I had the same problem at sound check. I’ve been playing that song for fifteen years. Tonight wasn’t good enough.”

So he was a perfectionist, then. I knew the feeling. He also seemed talkative, so I pressed my luck. “What’s your favorite song to play?”

“Why do you want to be a music journalist so bad?”

I blinked. “What?”

“There are easier jobs.” Another glance from him, unreadable. “Jobs that make more money. Jobs you could probably do. Jobs that don’t require weeks on the road, eating fast food while dealing with a bunch of assholes.”

I’d been asked this question before. My parents thought I’d make a great teacher, like them. The guys in journalism school thought I was there because I wanted to fuck rock stars—or fuck them. Every job interview I’d had, every meeting with an editor, had had the same question running beneath it as a subtext. *What the hell do you think you’re doing in this business?*

But Stone’s question was different. He wasn’t asking why a woman would want to do this job. He was asking why *anyone* would want to do this job. So—because I was tired, because I’d downed a whole beer, because for once, he wasn’t condescending—I gave him an honest answer.

“Music is the only thing I’ve ever loved,” I said.

Stone scratched his beard again. He didn’t reply, the bastard.

I put my beer bottle down. “I’m going to bed,” I said. “But before I do, I’m going to ask you one last time. Are you going to try to sleep with me?”

Stone turned his dark eyes to mine, and I knew he understood. We'd spent one platonic night together, but that didn't matter. I was still here. He was famous, he was much, much bigger than me, and we were alone in his room at three o'clock in the morning. I was broke, a nobody, with nowhere else to go. I wasn't stupid about how the world worked.

And neither was he. He didn't bother with performative outrage. "I'm not going to try and sleep with you," he said. "But I'm going to stay out here for a while. I can never sleep after a show."

I held his gaze with mine for a moment, and then I nodded. And I went into the room to bed.

FOUR

NOW

Stone

The band met in the studio in downtown Portland where we'd recorded two of our three albums years ago. I was the last to arrive, which is saying something when you play in a rock n' roll band, where no one is known for being on time.

This wasn't a recording session—we'd just come off a ten-week tour and we were nowhere near being ready to record yet. It was a jam session, where we'd play with ideas, test arrangements, and generally fuck around. This kind of thing is a musician's favorite pastime. Fans see us when we're onstage, or they hear the final product of a recording, but they don't see all the hours we spend goofing off and making noise, spitballing riffs and lines and beats.

No one watches musicians do that kind of thing because it's boring to anyone but us. But today, for the first jam session of the new album, our engineer, Roy, was there, sitting in the booth. I poked my head in. "Hey, Roy."

Roy raised his giant takeout cup of coffee. "Stone! Hey, man!" He grinned behind his big, bushy beard.

There was another man in there, sitting in a chair in the back. I hadn't noticed him before. I frowned. It was William Hale, the big-money venture capitalist who had bankrolled our tour and was going partners with us on the new studio. He was also partly bankrolling the album. He was wearing dark sweatpants, a tee, and sneakers, as if he'd just come from a workout. He was staring down at his phone, typing something.

I waited him out. As my irritation rose, I kept my body still and my gaze level, directly on him. I did *not* like the money guy—who wasn't even a musician—sitting around while we wrote songs. He didn't intimidate me. I didn't care how important he thought he was. I wanted him gone, and I wanted him to know it.

He finally finished what he was typing and glanced up. His expression was a little startled. Hale was in his early thirties, fit and clean-shaven, kind of nerdy. I could take him.

"Hey, Billy," I said.

He blinked. "It's Will."

"Sure." I let the word hang there, sucked in by the silence. I held Hale's gaze. I thought he'd cave immediately, but instead he stared back at me. I gave him a little credit for that.

"We good?" I asked him.

He was definitely uncomfortable—I had that effect on people—but he still didn't drop his gaze. "I'm fine. You?"

"I'm peachy," I said. "You look kinda busy. Maybe you should go do whatever it is you do."

"I'm fine here, thanks."

I narrowed my eyes. On cue, his phone buzzed in his hand, and he looked down at whatever message had come in.

I looked at Roy, who shrugged. Hale was the keeper of the paycheck, so no way was Roy going to kick him out. Roy motioned to the guitar case in my hand. "What are you playing today, Stone?"

"The Strat." One of the benefits of getting our own studio—and there were many—was that we'd have a secure place to keep our instruments. This studio was a rental, and I'd rather leave my dick here overnight than leave one of my precious guitars.

Roy grinned again. "Can't wait to hear it. Don't mind me, I'm just doing my thing."

I nodded. He had to be here because the money guy was here. I got it.

I strode through the connecting door to the studio proper. Denver was astride a turned-around chair, his head bent over his notebook as he turned a page. Axel was lying on the floor with his legs up the wall and his hands folded over his stomach. Neal had his bass and was working something out on it.

“Wakey, wakey,” Axel said, grinning up at me. “Good morning, O Great One.”

“What’s up with Billy?” I asked, putting down my guitar case and unlatching it.

“We can’t get rid of him,” Denver said without looking up. He turned another page. The Road Kings had never been big on formalities, but after spending ten weeks on the road together, the word *hello* was no longer in our vocabulary. “I figure he’ll get bored soon and leave.”

“He didn’t look bored,” Neal said, moving his fingers over the frets. “He looked like a permanent fixture.”

“Don’t piss him off, Stone,” Axel said, because he knew I was thinking of doing just that. “We’re supposed to be business partners, remember?”

“Is he gonna write the songs for us?” I took my beloved Fender Stratocaster out of the case and ran my fingers over it as I attached the strap. I fucking loved this guitar. I had four others, too, but I could still remember the day I bought this one. I would legally marry it if I could.

“Ignore him,” Denver said. “I plan to.”

I was coming up with ideas for getting rid of Hale as I tuned my guitar, my mind wandering, when Axel swung his legs down and stood up. “Speaking of business partnerships, Stone, you need to call Sienna.”

That name sliced through my thoughts like a razor blade, *again*, and I looked up. “What?”

“The interviews,” Axel said. “We’re all doing it. You need to do it, too.”

I hated this. One of the conditions of our deal with Hale was that we all give interviews to Sienna for publication in *Soundcheck* magazine. Since the Road Kings never gave interviews, it was an exclusive for Sienna and the online magazine. In return, we’d get publicity for the album. It was how the game was played, and if we wanted anyone to know we had a record out, we had to play by the rules.

So we’d agreed. The guys had all softened on Sienna over the course of the tour, anyway. Of course they had, because she was good, and they weren’t stupid. The problem, as always, was me.

“At least talk to Angie about it,” Denver said. “She’s working hard to get this deal in place.”

I wasn’t gonna answer that. The last thing I needed to think about was our new agent and the fact that she’d asked me out to dinner. And that I’d said yes.

I didn’t intend to date Angie. They wanted me to talk to her, right? So I’d talk to her. I didn’t date, and I’d never had a girlfriend for any discernible length of time. I’d been asked out by a former swimsuit model, for fuck’s sake. I could at least not pretend that dinner with her was a hardship.

“Just do the interview,” Neal said, giving me a look. “Sienna is really not that bad.”

“Shut it, Watts,” I said.

“We talked music for over an hour,” Axel said. “The woman really knows her stuff.”

Denver had raised his head and was looking at me, his gaze intent and tinged with amusement.

“What?” I barked at him. “You talked to her, too, Gilchrist?”

“I did, and so did Callie.” He looked even more amused. Callie, Denver’s girlfriend, was smart, intensely private, and gave no shits what anyone thought of her, so for her to give an interview to Sienna was a big deal.

“Do you want a gold star?” I asked him.

Instead of getting annoyed, Denver said, “We all know, so I guess I’ll just say it. It’s weird that you don’t want to give Sienna an interview, because you’ve spent more time with her than we have. You were her roommate on the tour.”

There was a beat of silence. I turned my glare to Neal. He was the only one in on the secret, because he’d seen Sienna come out of my room one morning. I’d made him swear not to tell anyone.

“Watts,” I growled.

He rolled his eyes. “It wasn’t me. I kept my mouth shut, okay? Denver figured it out.”

“I didn’t figure it out.” Axel, sitting behind his drum kit, raised his hand. “I had no idea the whole time. Not until Denver told me on the way back to Portland.”

I felt a bolt of discomfort. I wasn’t worried about myself, because nothing was going to happen to me except for some disapproval and ribbing from my bandmates. It was Sienna who looked unprofessional if the wrong people

knew, if the wrong people came to the wrong conclusions. It was Sienna who could lose her fledgling career.

I decided to go with the basic facts, my usual tactic. “Nothing happened,” I said. “She needed a room.”

“Right,” Neal said. “Because Hale wanted her gone, but he didn’t want to fire her because of his contract. So he deleted her from the hotel roster instead.”

I shrugged. Hale had admitted to us that he’d thought we wanted Sienna gone, so he’d done his best to get rid of her from the tour. If he’d fired her outright, the magazine could sue him because they wouldn’t get their promised articles. But if Sienna quit, then the blame fell on her.

The truth was, we *had* wanted her gone at first. Very, very badly. But she’d somehow stuck it out, and then I’d seen her get turned away at the front desk of the hotel in New Orleans, and I’d seen her sit in her car, scrolling her phone in panic. And even though I saw her as the enemy, something about that had bothered me a fuck of a lot.

Part of it was seeing a woman stranded alone in a strange city, with nowhere to stay as night closed in. And part of it was the realization that maybe, just maybe, we’d been dicks to someone who was just doing a job.

We were dicks—that part wasn’t in question—but we specialized in being dicks to people who deserved it. Bloodsucking record companies, greedy tour promoters, shitty sellout bands like Seven Dog Down—we were dicks to people like that. But when I watched Sienna sit alone in her car as she figured out where she might have to sleep, I’d decided she wasn’t one of those people. And before I knew it, I’d offered to share my room.

And after that? I couldn’t have said why we kept going. Only that she drove me nuts, and she hated me. But she had no one to look out for her on the tour, no one at all, and the only person willing to do it was me.

“She was stranded,” I said. “It didn’t sit right with me. I helped her out. We barely even talked.” *Not true, not true.* “We didn’t fuck around. Nothing happened.”

That part was true.

“I actually believe that,” Axel said. “Not that it matters. But she isn’t your type.”

I turned my glare on him, wondering exactly what he thought my type was.

“She’s good-looking, though,” Denver said, so I glared at him instead. He

grinned his shit-eating grin. If he didn't have a girlfriend, he could probably snap his fingers and get any woman he wanted, including Sienna. Lead singers were like that, and Denver wasn't exactly hideous. "I mean it," he said. "She's got the sexy librarian thing going on."

"Definitely," Neal agreed. "Sexy librarian, but with a dark goth edge. The glasses and the Docs are a killer combo."

"Smart chicks are always hot," Axel added.

"She's ten years younger than us, you creeps," I said. Axel laughed, and I realized they were ribbing me. Of course they were. I sighed. "Can we fucking play now, or are we doing high school gossip all day?"

I didn't wait for an answer. I flipped on my amp and started playing a familiar riff. It was the opening to "Baba O'Riley," by The Who, a sequence that's played on keyboards in the recorded version, but which I'd adapted for my guitar when I was nineteen. It was the first song the Road Kings had ever played on the day when I had posted for auditions and these three idiots were the only people to show up.

We hadn't played this in years, and we'd be rusty at it, but that was the point. We'd played at the top of our game for ten weeks while on tour, and that was good, but we weren't supposed to be great while we were working alone in the studio. You gotta play shitty every once in a while to remember your roots, remember why you do this in the first place. You gotta play like no one's ever going to listen to you again.

So I played the opening riff, and Neal and Axel came in on cue, and Denver started belting the lyrics about teenage wasteland, and we let it go, mistakes and all. Everything was right in the world, even if just for a little while, because I was playing with my band again.

FIVE

THEN

Sienna

If it was desperation that had put me in Stone's room that first night, I couldn't say exactly why I was still there a week later. The front office hadn't put me back on the hotel roster, but I could have come up with another solution—made a big stink and threatened to sue, maybe, or asked my parents to loan me money, or begged Brit Creighton, the only other woman on the tour, to let me bunk with her instead.

I did none of those things. I had a list of excuses. I didn't want to start an argument on the biggest job of my career; my parents weren't rich and I was too broke to ever pay back a loan; Brit, who was Axel's friend and neighbor, and had been hired as the band's assistant, would get in trouble or fired if she roomed with the evil journalist. Brit's job put her in the way of a lot of the band's secrets, and if they thought she was spilling those secrets to me, they wouldn't trust her anymore.

Still, I could have done *something*. Yet I found myself falling into an easy routine with Stone Zeeland, one of the most difficult men on the planet. He still wouldn't give me an interview, but he let me use his room. He'd get on

the bus with the others and head to the next city, and I'd drive my rental car, because the front office had stopped booking me flights. He'd text me the address to the hotel, and after he'd checked in, he'd text me the room number.

I'd get a single line of text—*1410*—and nothing else. No chitchat, no emojis, no memes. When I was in a salty mood, I'd reply with a thumbs-up, a wink, or a message like *Nice talking to you*. Stone never replied.

When I got to the hotel, I'd go straight to the allotted room and knock on the door. Stone would let me in, give me my room key, and—more often than not—immediately book it out of there, to where, I knew not. Maybe he liked to sightsee. Maybe he had a woman in every city, waiting around to have sex with him. He was a guitar god, after all.

Still, if he was doing booty calls, they didn't last all that long. He never spent a night away from his room, and he certainly never brought a woman back with him. I'd never met a man so insanely impenetrable, as if he was a human made of granite. He didn't tell me *anything*. The only things I knew about him after a week of rooming together were that he took a lot of Advil and that in a hotel room, when one person gets up to pee in the middle of the night, it's *really loud*. Hardly headline-worthy stuff.

"It makes no sense," I said when we were in Cincinnati. Tonight's show had ended an hour and a half ago. I was in my pajamas, sitting cross-legged on my bed. Stone was sitting on the edge of his bed on the other side of the room, unlacing his badass black boots.

"What makes no sense?" he grunted, not looking up at me.

It was an actual reply, which was more than I'd expected. "There's no afterparty after the show?"

His tone implied that I should have observed the obvious. "No."

"Why not?"

"I told you, we're too old."

"Sometimes the four of you go to an all-night diner," I said.

Stone grunted, acknowledging that I had correct information from my sources. "We're not hungry tonight."

"There's not even any alcohol stocked backstage," I said. "No women on the access list, either. Nothing. Why not? Why is this tour different from the ones before?"

Stone kicked his unlaced boots off and glared at me. I'd negotiated for backstage passes for the rest of the tour a few days ago, in Charlotte. I'd

made a deal with Denver and Neal that in exchange for the passes, I'd do a research dive to figure out their anonymous tour backer's identity. Denver and Neal had made Axel and Stone agree, probably under duress in Stone's case. I didn't care, because it was a victory. I'd started watching the shows from backstage instead of from the crowd.

"Stop looking at me like that," I said after he glared at me for too long across the room. "I swear, it's like rooming with Sauron."

"Well, rooming with you is like rooming with a toddler. Do you ever stop asking questions?"

"It's my job. How about you ask a question instead?"

"I thought I just did."

Do you see what I mean? Insanely frustrating. "I'm starting to see why so few people put up with you."

"Plenty of people put up with me." Stone stood and crossed the room to the bathroom, tugging at his tee.

I blinked hard and looked away. Stone and I hadn't caught each other naked yet—a small miracle considering our close quarters. We had a bit of a system. I always showered after he got up, usually late in the morning, while Stone went downstairs to pick up coffee for twenty minutes. He always showered after a show, in the middle of the night. Since there was nowhere for me to go so late, I'd stay in my half of the room and he'd shower and change in the bathroom with the door closed. But when he started to tug his shirt off, I caught a glimpse of the happy trail on his lower stomach, then the muscles of his lower back.

The man was built. He was aggravating, but he was built. I'd have to be blind not to notice it. The shoulders, the biceps, the thighs. Some of it was from working out, but he was also a naturally big guy, tall and solid, the hair on his lower stomach dark and thick. Stone Zeeland was not the type to manscape.

When he wore a tee, it wasn't just the muscles on view that were hypnotic, but also the magical tendons in his forearms and the dark hair that dusted the skin. When he got into bed at night, the mattress always made a groaning sound, and when he sprawled out to go to sleep, he made a queen-size bed look like it belonged to a child. He was basically made of testosterone.

All of this was certainly hot, but it was also *a lot*. Too much for me.

When I dated, which wasn't often, I chose intellectual types—guys who

had college degrees and had never seen the inside of a gym in their lives. I wanted a man who could talk for hours, who could debate music, philosophy, and ideas, whose ideal date was to sit in a coffee shop and have an intense conversation. Sex was a secondary concern, happening several dates in, if at all. And when it did happen, it was...*fine*. Pleasant, kind of quick, a tad disappointing, but quickly forgotten. I didn't mind sex, guys expected it, and if the stars aligned, we'd both get what we wanted.

Stone was the stark opposite of this. He was huge, he was a rock star, and every aspect of him was purely physical. He could go days without talking. When he wanted a woman, I imagined, he simply had her, like a caveman. No conversation, no wooing, no romance. He'd just strip her and toss her down with no need for niceties.

I got under the covers and slid down in bed, tamping down my curiosity about what that would be like. I probably wouldn't like it very much.

Probably.

I took my glasses off, put them on the nightstand, snapped out the lamp next to my bed, and averted my eyes when I heard the bathroom door open. I knew, without looking, that Stone was crossing the room to his bed, probably wearing cotton sleep pants and a tee. His hair and short beard would be damp from the shower, and he wouldn't look at me, tucked in bed, as he passed by.

We were like a couple of virgins, the two of us. I felt awkward, but he gave no sign that he felt the same. He just drew the covers back and got into bed, making it groan, as casual as if rooming with a strange woman was something he did all the time.

Oddly enough, despite the situation, I'd slept like the dead every night I roomed with him. Maybe some lizard-brain part of me knew that if danger approached in the night, my roommate would be able to drop-kick it into next week. My nervous system went off high alert and was able to fall straight into slumber.

I was starting to drift when Stone said in the darkness, "Maplethorpe."

My eyes opened in surprise. We'd never had bedtime conversations. "I'm here. Where else would I be?"

He sighed, as if I was annoying him yet again. "We broke up for five years. The Road Kings did."

"I'm aware."

"When we finished the last tour, we were burned out. Finished. We went our separate ways. It took a while before I missed it, but eventually, I did."

I was silent, keeping my snark to myself because I didn't want him to stop.

"What I missed wasn't drinking. It wasn't getting fucked up. It wasn't even the women who came on to us every night."

"Oh, gross. Please spare me."

"Zip it for once, would you? I'm trying to tell you something here. You'd think someone who asks as many questions as you do would listen to an answer for once in her life."

I pressed my lips together in the dark, staring at the ceiling.

"I'm trying to explain that I didn't miss any of that shit. What I missed was playing music in front of a crowd. With my bandmates. The fans and the fucking music—those were the only things I missed. And the other three felt the same. We're weeks into this tour, and we still don't miss any of that shit. We just want to play. Does that solve the mystery for you? Does that explain why there's no party backstage?"

"A little." I sounded grudging. "I'm starting to understand how exhausting this schedule is. Are they all like that?"

"Yes," he said. "Now go to sleep."

"But I have more questions."

"No."

I let out a sigh. "Stone, come on. I'm not the enemy."

"The jury's out on that. Still—no."

"You are such an ass." I punched my pillow and rolled onto my side, away from him. "You know, when I interviewed Travis White, he was very forthcoming."

It was an excellent dig. I knew now that the Road Kings hated Seven Dog Down, and everything they stood for—chart domination, sellout status, commercial success—with a passion. They hated Travis White, the band's lead singer, the most. The interview I'd published with Travis had been my first big break, which had led to the opportunity to write about the Road Kings.

Travis White was in his twenties, a multimillionaire, and drop-dead gorgeous. He had dirty blond hair, cheekbones that could cut glass, a smoky singing voice, and a lithe, flawless body. The perfect guy to needle Stone with.

It worked. "I *bet* he was forthcoming," Stone grunted, making the last word sound positively filthy. I felt amused and turned on at the same time.

“He was such a gentleman,” I said, making my voice sound a little dreamy. It was easy to act when Stone couldn’t see my face. “So sweet. So charming and vulnerable. So open. I still have his number. Maybe I’ll give him a call.”

“Definitely do that,” Stone said, “if you want a venereal disease and a coke habit.”

“He doesn’t do drugs.”

“Is that what he told you?” He sounded amused. “Sure.”

“He doesn’t.” I hadn’t seen or heard any evidence of it, anyway. “He doesn’t sleep with groupies, either.”

“My god.” I heard a rasp as Stone rubbed his hands over his face. I couldn’t see him—both because of the dark and the fact that I didn’t have my glasses on—but I could picture him lying on his back, looking pained. “Listen, Maplethorpe, I can’t believe you’re this naive. You can’t be so dense if you’re going to cover the music business. The first thing you need to learn is that every musician is a dirtbag and a liar. Every single one.”

You aren’t. The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I realized in time that it wasn’t a good idea to say them. If I did, it would sound like a compliment and go straight to his already-oversized head. “I’m not naive,” I said instead. “If Travis was coked out, I would be able to tell. Give me a little credit.”

“How would you know? Based on all of the coke you’ve done?” When I was silent, Stone continued, “I didn’t think so. Look, I’m just giving you some advice here. In this business, the musicians are dirtbags, and so are the promoters, the producers, the venue owners, the roadies. Everyone.”

“One of the roadies brought me coffee yesterday.”

“He was trying to fuck you, or he was trying to sell you drugs. Probably both.”

“That’s not true.” Okay, maybe it was a little true. The roadie who had brought me coffee had given me a slightly creepy vibe. Still, roadies were one of my best sources, so I’d been polite and we’d talked for a while.

“You’re too trusting,” Stone said. “You need to assume that everyone in this business is a piece of shit.”

“Is that really how you see the world?” I asked. “That’s sad. I know there are some dirty people in the music business. But I have to make friends, get people to trust me, cultivate sources. I can’t just treat everyone like I hate them. I’d never get anything written. Besides, you’re telling me not to trust

anyone—especially musicians—when you’re the one who invited me to stay in your room.”

He grunted. “Well, you probably shouldn’t have trusted me. You’re just lucky I’m nice.” I laughed, and he paused, surprised. “What did I say?”

“Stone, I haven’t talked to everyone you know yet. But of the people I’ve talked to, I don’t think any of them would describe you as nice.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Stone said, “Of course you’re missing the point. You specialize in it.”

What the hell did that mean? “You know, you forget that I’m in an excellent position to cross the room and smother you with a pillow in your sleep. It doesn’t matter that everyone sucks up to you as a rock god. I think there’d be a lineup of people to thank me.”

“Try me, Maplethorpe.”

I was stunned into silence. Because those three words, growled into the darkness, had unexpectedly sent a shiver down my spine. My skin grew warm and I could feel my pulse in my throat. I fought the urge to shift restlessly under the sheets. Even though he was across the room, Stone Zealand suddenly seemed far, far too close to me.

“I’m going to sleep,” I managed after a minute, when I thought I could make my voice sound normal.

Stone didn’t answer. He had rolled over and turned his back to me. He was probably out cold and had completely forgotten I was in the room.

I sighed, got comfortable, and closed my eyes.

SIX

NOW

Stone

I parked my car on the street near the foot of my mother's driveway. My boots squelched on damp leaves when I got out, and I could see that fall had brought a dump of leaves onto the lawn, growing wet in the drizzle. The eaves would need checking out, too.

My mother said that when she married my piece-of-shit father, she only got two things: this house and me. She was twenty-one the year they got married, then divorced.

She got the house with no mortgage on it—my father told her his family came from money, though she didn't know whether he was lying. In any case, the house was the one constant in the years that followed for both my mother and me. There were three marriages after my father, as well as an endless string of boyfriends in between. Mom worked as a checkout clerk in a supermarket, eventually working her way up to manager. I got my first job at thirteen, cleaning toilets for cash under the table. The fact that we had a roof over our heads, debt free, was what kept us from starving.

I had enough money now to pay the bills, but Mom still managed the

grocery store. She said she didn't know what she'd do with herself if she wasn't working.

There had been some bad times here. Mom and I didn't always get along. And I'd come back here after my time in L.A. at eighteen. It was the darkest time in my life, but at least I'd had somewhere to go.

Mom opened the front door and waited for me on the porch as I came up the walk. She tossed the butt of her cigarette into the damp soil of the garden.

"You're supposed to quit," I grumbled at her.

"I will," she said. "Starting now."

Neither of us believed it. She grinned at me.

I came up on the step. I towered over her, but she patted my bearded cheeks with her palms like I was a little kid. "Stoney."

"Diana."

"Oof, don't call me that. It reminds me that you're not a little boy anymore. It makes me sound like an old lady." She was fifty-eight.

"It's your name, ain't it?" I brushed past her into the house.

"Grammar," she chided me, following me through the door and closing it behind her. Mom had a thing about me speaking properly. She didn't want the other kids at school to think I was "low class." The teachers nagged me about my speech, and the kids teased me. One of my stepfathers had been an asshole about it. I got so weird about it, wondering if I was saying the wrong thing, that I stopped talking at all. When I was silent, people left me alone.

I walked down the hall to the kitchen, noting that the cupboards looked worn and the stove was getting old. I'd need to do some upgrades soon. "You said there's an outlet not working?" I was no electrician, but I could Google. Or call someone. If I left it to Mom, she'd get ripped off by some smooth-talking repairman, and the problem still wouldn't be fixed. It was faster just to take over.

"Oh." Mom followed me into the kitchen. "It works again. Isn't that weird? Must have been some random thing."

I turned to look at her. She was wearing jeans with sparkly thread in the seams, a braided leather belt, and a T-shirt that said *Rock N Roll Mama* on it. Her hair was tied up messily on top of her head and she had her reading glasses perched in it. She was crazy vain about those glasses. She was wearing mascara, shiny eyeshadow, face powder. She was a good-looking woman, but a lot of people judged my mother, took one look at how she dressed and how much makeup she wore and decided she was trash. Anyone

who did that in front of me did it with their teeth kicked in.

“If you want me to visit, just say you want me to visit,” I told her. “You don’t have to make stuff up.”

“It wasn’t working,” she argued stubbornly. “Now it is. Besides, I don’t like living alone. You know that. I liked it better a few months ago when you lived here.”

“I was under house arrest, and this is my address on record. I *had* to live here or go to jail.”

“Still.” She frowned, her penciled brows lowering in annoyance. “It was better. We had some good times.” That was debatable, but I didn’t bother to argue. “I don’t know why you have that apartment when you could just live here. Your room’s just like you left it.”

“Diana, I don’t live in my old room because I’m *almost forty*.”

“Jeez, you don’t have to get mouthy. You didn’t come to meet Anthony.”

“No, I didn’t. I don’t want to meet Anthony.”

“That’s okay.” She patted her pockets, an automatic gesture of looking for her cigarettes, though she wasn’t supposed to have any. “He and I are having a fight right now, anyway. He said my cooking’s bad, can you believe it? I said he was an asshole, and now we’re not talking. Do you think my cooking’s bad?”

Her cooking was terrible, just the worst. I’d learned early to feed myself to avoid yet another recipe involving canned cream of mushroom soup. If I ever saw that stuff again, I’d throw up. “Your cooking is fine.”

“Damn right it is. So you’ll stay for dinner?”

I’d been here two minutes, and already I was fucking exhausted. “No, I can’t stay. I have plans.”

Her eyebrows shot up, but this was the truth. I was glad I’d accepted Angie’s dinner invitation, because it gave me an excuse to leave without having to lie.

“A date?” Mom asked.

“Not a date. Dinner with my new agent.”

“The blond?”

I blinked at her in surprise. “How do you know what my new agent looks like?”

Mom looked a bit smug. “You don’t know everything, Stoney. I met Miller, remember? He was nice to me, and we talked a few times. He told me about his daughter, the model who became an agent, like him. He was proud

of her. I looked her up. She's a looker." She waggled her eyebrows. "You could do worse."

Holy hell. I'd never regretted anything the way I regretted telling Mom that I was having dinner with Angie. I had no idea she knew who Angie was. "I told you, it's not a date. It's just dinner. She's our new agent and we need to talk business."

"If it's business, are the other boys coming?" She smiled when I didn't answer. "I didn't think so."

"Mom, knock it off."

"I can't help it. I want grandkids."

"Not happening."

"Stoney!" Now she pretended to be hurt. "You don't have to be rude."

She was my mom, and she'd done the best she could—was still doing the best she could—but the thought of her babysitting any kid of mine gave me hives. Almost as much as the thought of me being a father gave me hives. Given the examples I'd grown up with, I could no more be a father than I could walk on the moon.

"Give it up," I said, a little roughly so she'd get the idea. I headed down the hall toward the door. "I'm gonna be single forever. Get used to it."

"Some girl's gonna snap you up!" Mom called after me, laughing. "A smart one, I bet!"

I winced as I closed the door behind me. Mom had no idea. I already knew a smart girl, had spent weeks sleeping a few feet away from her, and she didn't want me.

As I walked to the car, the old couple who lived a few doors down walked by with their dog. They gave me a frosty look. This was a nice neighborhood—not rich, but decent—and the neighbors never took to me and Mom. They never gave us a chance from the beginning. Especially me.

I'd been trouble for all of my teenage years, and I'd loved to play guitar in the garage at full volume. I'd learned to play that way, which meant that the neighbors had been subjected to my shitty practicing. Instead of being ashamed, I'd found it fun to piss them off. I'd done it again just a few months ago, when the Road Kings had played a free concert in the garage before we left for the reunion tour. There was a crowd of hundreds of fans on the street. We'd played for twenty minutes before the cops shut us down.

One of the first things I'd learned—from Mom, from her various boyfriends and husbands who sometimes smacked me around, from the kids

who made fun of me at school—is that no matter what you do, you can't please everyone. So why please anyone?

Fuck 'em all.

I gave the old couple the finger and they hurried away.

I got in my car, my bad mood finally lifting.

I LIVED in a small rental apartment in one of Portland's less-trendy neighborhoods, far from the hipsters and the nice restaurants. The people in my building were overworked parents and guys who worked as night custodians. The lobby smelled like weed most nights. I could have afforded better, but no one here bothered me, and this was the kind of place where I felt at home.

I rode the stuffy elevator to the fourth floor and let myself into my place. I hadn't furnished it with much—just a sofa, a TV, and a small kitchen table with chairs. A laptop. A bookshelf lined one wall. My bedroom contained a bed and a tall dresser. My most precious possessions—my guitars, pedals, and amps—were kept in a rented storage unit that had security cameras and three locks on it. I didn't trust them here. If anyone wanted to rob me, all they'd get was a few pairs of ripped jeans and the six pack in the fridge.

I unlaced my boots, kicked them off, and walked into the bedroom, where I opened the closet and stared into it. I ran my hands through my hair in despair. I'd fucked myself good, because I had no idea what to wear to this dinner.

It wasn't a date. Then again, it was a business meeting, and Angie was a classy woman, so I shouldn't dress like a slob. Then *again*, I was a rock star who wore his only sport jacket to funerals and no other time, and Angie knew that.

In my back pocket, my phone buzzed on Silent. I took it out and saw a text.

SIENNA

I don't know which one of us is supposed to apologize. I lie awake at night thinking it might be me.

My throat went tight and something hard squeezed inside my chest. Only

this particular woman would write a text like this: wordy, nerdy, straight to the point. Fucking painful. I wanted to turn my phone off, ignore her, but I was incapable of ignoring Maplethorpe. Instead I typed a response.

STONE

What do you want, Maplethorpe?

Her reply came in seconds.

SIENNA

You know I did an interview with Axel, right? He told me about his addiction and his rehab.

My defenses went up. A reflex. I didn't like the thought of anyone fucking with Axel.

STONE

So?

SIENNA

So, now I know why it was a sober tour. You were all staying clean for Axel's sake. And not one of you talked behind his back. I think about that.

I didn't reply, but apparently, she wasn't finished.

SIENNA

Another thing I think about when I lie awake at night is that first night in New Orleans.

I blinked at my phone. What about New Orleans? Why was she thinking about it? Why wasn't she sleeping? She'd slept perfectly while she was staying with me. It was me who had stayed awake those nights while she slept, my thoughts running rampant in my head.

The dots moved, and another text came up.

SIENNA

I was sitting in my car, and you came up and said that I didn't have a room. I thought you were being an asshole.

Even though she couldn't see me, I winced. It was a known fact that I was an asshole, but something about hearing it from her stung.

Another text arrived.

SIENNA

But I'm thinking back now and you knew. You said that I'd gone to the front desk, and then I'd gone to my car and panicked for thirty minutes. You said that because you saw it happen. You didn't come out to my car to taunt me. You came because you already knew I had nowhere to go. And you sat there, refusing to leave, because it was getting dark.

I remembered standing at the back of the lobby and watching the front desk turn her away. I'd thought that I should go up to my room and forget about her, maybe even celebrate that the journalist was finally gone.

Instead, I'd watched her go back to her car, her shoulders sagging, then watched her sit there, her face illuminated by the square of light from her phone as she scrolled in panic. I knew I wouldn't be able to get that sight out of my brain.

STONE

So?

SIENNA

So in New York, I started to see how much I was wrong about. And now I can't stop seeing it. Was I wrong about everything?

STONE

Maplethorpe, I don't have time to ponder the meaning of life right now. I'm busy.

SIENNA

Sure you are. Someone has to polish all of those silver-studded belts you own and shoo the groupies away. And you need a solid hour of practice doing rock star poses in the mirror.

This was familiar ground, insulting each other. I texted again.

STONE

I guess it doesn't compare to your wild lifestyle. Oh wait, you live with your parents.

SIENNA

Bold words from someone whose mom's address is still on his driver's license.

STONE

Maybe you should get laid by one of those nerdy professor types you find so hot. Draw him diagrams, I'm sure he'll figure out what the fuck to do.

SIENNA

So sue me, I like men who can spell.

STONE

Complete this spelling: S-U-C-K-M-Y-

SIENNA

Goodbye, you pig.

STONE

Sleep tight, baby. Dream of me.

I tossed my phone on the bed. My pulse was pounding, my breath tight. The apartment was too quiet. I had the urge to break something, the urge to get wasted, the urge to play in front of a crowd and feed off their energy while I ripped their hearts out. I wanted to find Sienna Maplethorpe, rip her clothes off her, and do everything to her. *Everything*. This was the worst, and she was right. I was a pig.

For a second, I was so riled up and turned on that I forgot where I was. Then I remembered: I was about to go out with Angie, and I was trying to figure out what to wear. How fucked up was that?

I turned back to the closet. I settled on black jeans, a black sweater, and black Chucks. It wasn't an outfit that screamed business, but it wasn't one that said *Hey, let's fuck* either. It would have to do.

Time to see what my new agent really wanted from me. I turned and walked out the door.

SEVEN

THEN

Sienna

Every tour, I learned later, has a low point. There's a moment when it seems endless, monotonous, almost hopeless, like you're going to live in a hotel room and eat half-warm greasy eggs for breakfast forever. The exhaustion catches up with you and you can't stand any of the people you've been cooped up with for weeks.

My moment came as we were leaving Chicago. I woke up fighting off a cold, my head fuzzy and my throat sore. I wanted to sleep, but instead I had to get in my rental car *yet again* and drive myself to Cleveland, where *yet again* the Road Kings would refuse to talk to me. I was tired, deeply sorry for myself, and I wished I'd gotten on a plane home all the way back in New Orleans, when I could have salvaged some dignity.

Stone dumped his few belongings in his bag. He was somehow very good-looking today in the cloudy early morning light coming through the window. "You look like shit," he commented when he saw me sitting on the bed, dressed and trying to make myself get moving.

It was the last straw. Yes, I looked like warmed-over crap, but he didn't

have to comment on it before he got onto his cushy bus and napped all the way to the next city. “Is that the line you use on all of your groupies?” I snapped at him.

He grunted, unperturbed. His shoulders flexed beneath his T-shirt as he zipped his bag. He didn’t answer the groupie question. “Toughen up, Maplethorpe,” he said, as if he had a psychic ability to say exactly the wrong thing. “There’s still a long way to go.”

“Toughen up? Toughen *up*?” I stood and began jamming my belongings into my suitcase. “I’ve lasted this long. I’m in testosterone hell, and I have to drive, and I’m sick—”

“You’re sick?” Stone took a second glance at me, his gaze taking me in more sharply. “Get over it,” he said, shrugging. “This is the nicest tour we’ve ever been on, by far. The others were rougher and longer. I’ve played shows with the flu more than once. We’ve never even had a tour where we got our own rooms before.”

“Wow, Stone, that’s interesting. Just fascinating. You know, the kind of thing we could talk about *in a fucking interview*.”

“You’re not getting one. You want a Flintstones vitamin or something, kid? They make them chewable for people your age.”

“You’re such an asshole!” I shouted it at him, but Stone didn’t flinch, didn’t even get angry. He just stood there like the wall of granite he was. “I want to write a good article! I want to earn my way in this business! I want the same opportunity you’d give me if I were a man!”

I kept jamming my belongings into my suitcase. My eyes were watering, but it might have been the low-grade fever. After a minute, I realized he hadn’t spoken, so I turned to look at him.

He had finished packing and was watching me, his gaze speculative. It was like he’d never seen me before.

“What?” I shouted after a minute, because even his silence was getting on my last nerve. Honestly, couldn’t he say *anything*?

Stone blinked, then looked down at his zipped-up bag. “Nothing,” he said, picking it up. “See you in Cleveland.”

“I’m not going to Cleveland!” I was in full meltdown mode now. “I’m getting in my car and driving back to Portland. Your stupid band can rot for all I care.”

He didn’t react, just walked calmly to the door. It was so enraging that I picked up the sneakers I was about to put on and threw them at his huge,

retreating back. He ducked one of them nimbly, and the other bounced off his shoulder. He didn't even flinch and left without another word.

I groaned and flopped on the bed. My head was throbbing. My body cried out for sleep. Shame washed over me, followed by abject embarrassment. That had been, without a doubt, the most juvenile, unprofessional thing I had ever done. I had no idea who this woman was, but she wasn't me. She was a shrieking, awful shrew, every sexist cliché in the book. If Stone made fun of me or snubbed me now, I wouldn't completely blame him.

After a moment of self-pity, I got up, retrieved my shoes, and put them on. I left the hotel and got in my car. The Road Kings' bus had left the parking lot, leaving me to ride their dust as usual. I found two Tylenol at the bottom of my purse, dry-swallowed them, and picked up my phone so I could plan my route out of town.

A notification popped up, and it took me a second to recognize what it was. It was from the app I used for music on my phone. Someone who used the same app had just shared their entire library with me.

I tapped the notification. Stone Zeeland had shared his music library with me, and it was an embarrassment of riches. There were well over four thousand songs here, everything from the sixties to music that had been released last month. I recognized some of the bands, others not at all. I also saw things that weren't on any streaming platform—live recordings, bootlegs, and B-sides that Stone had probably acquired in physical media and digitized to his phone or to a hard drive. For a music lover, it was the same as if I'd been given a key to the Smithsonian and permission to wander around all I wanted.

As I was staring at this, processing it, a text popped up.

STONE

For listening on the drive.

You don't get an interview. You get this.

I read the text again, my slow brain finally understanding. This wasn't just Stone's music library—this was him. The music that he loved, that moved him, that influenced his own work. The music he listened to, studied, maybe even emulated. He wasn't going to talk to me, but then again, words weren't Stone's forte. Music was. Instead of giving me an interview, he'd opened up a window straight into his brain.

I'd told Stone that I was a journalist because music was the only thing I'd

ever loved. It was the only thing he'd ever loved, too.

My heart speeding up in my chest, I navigated around the app until I found the Share function. Then I tapped it and shared my own library with Stone. I only had about seven hundred songs in there—a number I'd thought impressive until a few minutes ago—but my music library was my most precious digital possession, obsessively curated and listened to over and over. It was a bold move, thinking that Stone was even slightly interested in the same kind of insight into me that I now had into him. But I made it anyway.

I had six hours to make even the smallest dent in Stone's library. I synced my phone to the car speakers and started the drive.

EVEN THOUGH THEY'D done this many times before, the band was hitting their low point, too. I noticed it when we got to Detroit, where the heaviest rainstorm in years was beginning to hit. With my cold retreating—I'd slept for most of my stay in Cleveland—I could see the guys were tired, their moods were fraying, and the weather wasn't helping.

The Road Kings' first Detroit show was rougher than any I'd seen so far. The rain was bad, the crowd was rowdy and hard to please, and the band were obviously disagreeing about something. Stone and Neal were shooting each other death glares—they rarely got along, so this wasn't new, but they weren't having it tonight.

Still, the music was amazing, and the band played long, taking the time to completely win over the crowd. I was starting to understand not only how good this band was, how dedicated, but also how professional they were. The experience of following them from the beginning of the tour gave me an understanding of just how much it could take out of a person to do this day in and day out—and I wasn't the one playing the shows.

Raine Baker, Neal's ex-girlfriend who was the mother of his thirteen-year-old daughter, had joined the tour for a few days. Whether that meant she and Neal were a thing again, I had no idea, and aside from a polite greeting, she wasn't going to talk to me. She probably saw me as a soul-stealing villain just waiting to invade her and her daughter's privacy and write about it. The whole thing was depressing.

My mood picked up a little when I got a call from my parents an hour

into the show. I wandered into a hallway backstage to take the call. “Hello? Mom?” I put my hand over my free ear so I could hear better.

“Hi, honey!” Mom said brightly. My parents weren’t night owls, but Portland was a few hours behind Detroit. “Are you at one of the shows right now? How exciting!”

“Yeah, I’m sorry if it’s loud,” I said. Onstage, I heard Axel do a familiar intro, and then Stone’s distinctive guitar soared into “Kickback.” Damn, it sounded good, no matter how many times I heard this song. The crowd of three thousand roared. “How are things?”

“Just fine,” Mom said, and with the sound of her voice I was back in their living room again, the TV on, an old knitted afghan thrown over the arm of the sofa, a bowl of snacks and a cup of tea on the coffee table. I knew it made me a loser to still be living at home at twenty-eight, but journalism wasn’t a big-money career and Portland rents were insane. My parents were the best people, and they wanted me to stay. Why would I leave?

“Where’s Dad?” I asked.

“Tinkering in the basement. He bought some speakers at a flea market and he’s determined to make them work. Oh, here he is—Peter! Sienna’s at a concert right now.”

There were muffled voices, then the sounds of shuffling against the phone, and then Dad’s voice came on. “Hi, honey! How are the Road Kings treating you?”

“Great. Just great, Dad.” I hadn’t told my parents anything about the band shutting me out, about being deleted from the hotel roster, about how hard this was. I certainly hadn’t told them about my strange roommate arrangement with the Road Kings’ guitarist. “Everything’s going well.”

“I read the latest piece you wrote. You’re knocking ‘em dead.” A pause as Mom’s voice said something in the background. “Your mother wants to know if you’re eating okay.”

“I’m eating great.” My diet consisted of eighty percent granola bars at this point, but that wasn’t bad, right? I was going to pretend that wasn’t bad. “I’m getting incredible experience.”

“Of course you are—you deserve it. Hey, I’ve been listening to the Road Kings and I think they’re pretty good. Did you know they put out their last record on vinyl?”

I smiled to myself, there in the dark hallway as the music roared onstage. Dad was a music buff, but anything past 1984 or so didn’t interest him. He

wasn't old—he just thought that the best music was made before Reagan was president, and the best way to listen to that music was on vinyl. He wasn't an elitist, just a nerd who was way too enthusiastic about his favorite music.

“I think I knew that,” I said.

“Listen, if they make another record, you should tell them to release it on vinyl. It's in fashion again, I hear. Your old man would buy a copy for sure. You probably have influence on them by now. Put a bug in their ear, would you?”

I could have laughed at the idea that the Road Kings—who wouldn't even admit to me that they were planning a new album—would take my advice on their career direction. But Dad didn't need to hear the truth, so I simply said, “I'll mention it if it comes up, Dad.”

“Okay. Your mother is asking me if she needs to send a care package.”

That made tears sting my eyes. I knew a care package from my mother would include pajamas, clean underwear—she was likely fretting that my underwear was dirty—and some kind of homemade food that didn't travel well. Soup in a jar, maybe? I really wanted that care package, but it wasn't practical and I was trying to be a grownup here. “No need,” I said to Dad. “I'm fine. I'll be home in a few weeks, anyway.”

IT WAS LATE when Stone and I got back to the room. I felt like I'd spent a few hours in a sauna fully clothed. Outside, the rain pounded down. While Stone showered, I peeled my damp clothes off and put on my sleep tee and shorts. I pulled the covers over me as he came out of the bathroom.

“What were you and Neal fighting about?” I asked.

“Nothing much,” Stone grumbled. He didn't notice how surprised I was that he actually answered the question. “I wanted to change the setlist when I saw what the crowd was like. Win them over earlier. Denver said no, and Neal sided with him. They were both wrong.”

He said this matter-of-factly as he threw back the covers on his bed. He didn't get in, though. He walked to the hotel minibar and grabbed a small bottle from it. “Want one?” he asked.

“Stone, I'm so tired that if I drink alcohol, I'll pass out in a few minutes.”

He gave me an incredulous look. “How old are you? Eighty?”

“Twenty-eight, and not a rock star, apparently.”

“Apparently.” He twisted the cap off the bottle—it was a mini bottle of white wine—and downed the contents in a few gulps. “I’m stopping at one,” he said, putting the empty bottle down. “I don’t need you writing about what a drunk I am.”

“Readers are salivating to know that Stone Zeeland drank an ounce of terrible hotel wine,” I said sarcastically. “It’s breaking news. I’ll call my editor immediately.”

“Sarcasm isn’t sexy,” Stone said.

“I’m not trying to be sexy,” I shot back.

“Well, you’re succeeding.”

“How did you even get one groupie?” I asked. “You’d think even the drunkest, dumbest girl would be turned off by your personality.”

“You’d be wrong. But I don’t do groupies anymore. Or haven’t you noticed? You’re not very observant for a journalist.”

“I’m plenty observant, and what I’ve observed is that you’re a woman repellent. I haven’t seen even one woman make a pass at you on this tour. Have you ever thought that maybe it isn’t them, it’s you?”

“Oh, it’s me,” Stone agreed. He sat on the bed, making it emit the familiar groan. “It’s definitely me. You know the difference between you and me, Maplethorpe? I could get a woman if I wanted. But I think you couldn’t get a man to save your life.”

I sat up in bed, keeping the covers at my neck. “I’ll have you know, men find me very attractive. I’m just focused on my career right now.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Stone said as if I hadn’t spoken. “You’re good-looking. That part’s fine.”

“I can’t believe I’m listening to this right now.”

“Relax. I’m not trying to fuck you, and you know it. I’m trying to make a point here.”

“Please don’t.”

Again, he spoke as if I was on mute. Apparently he was talkative tonight. “You need to loosen up,” he said, his eyes lighting on me. He looked me over, though he couldn’t see much, since I was under the covers. “You’re so goddamned serious.”

“I’m serious?” Was he actually saying this? “You’re walking depression. I don’t think you even smiled as a baby.”

“I didn’t.” He kept looking me over, and I couldn’t read his expression.

He didn't look turned on. He couldn't be, looking at what was basically a pile of blankets with my head sticking out. "But see, when I'm in the mood for it, I like to fuck. Just like I like to play guitar. I can let go when the situation calls for it. It's how I survive. You?" He gestured to the lump on the bed that was me. "You're wound too tight."

"I'm wound just fine, thanks. And I can let go." There was disbelieving silence, and for some reason, I felt the need to fill it. "It's been a little while since I had a boyfriend, I admit. I've been busy. But my last boyfriend studied music theory at Juilliard. He was smart and eloquent. And yes, we had sex. He was very proficient."

Stone laughed. I stared at him in shock. Not only was I amazed that he was laughing—I'd never seen it, never even imagined it—but I was amazed at the sound, the low rumble of it, the lazy way it came from deep in his chest. His laugh was like rocks tumbling down a hill, and even from across the room, I felt it down to the bottoms of my feet.

Proficient. Had I actually said that? Sex with Stone wouldn't be *proficient*. It would be wild and uninhibited in some way I couldn't imagine, and suddenly I recalled the way he'd sink into a solo when he was onstage, his legs braced, his eyes drifting closed, his head sometimes tilting back as he let go. Was *that* what it was like? My body flushed hot and I squeezed my knees together under the covers, my thighs tensing. I was glad he couldn't see it. I wished for yet another blanket.

"Fine, Maplethorpe," Stone said, switching out his bedside lamp and swinging his legs into the bed. "Keep your skinny, brainy boys who don't know how to fuck and make music *in theory*." The bed groaned as his big body got comfortable. "I'll have to take your word for it."

I stared into the darkness, trying to think of a rapier-sharp comeback, but I was distracted by a thump through the wall from the next room. Then another.

There was a pause through the wall. Then a giggle, a man's low laugh. Then more thumps.

"Oh, my god," I whispered. This was a nightmare, a literal nightmare. There was no way we'd just been talking about sex, and now the couple next door were—

More thumps. These ones were rhythmic.

Yes, yes they were.

"This can't be happening." I grabbed a pillow so I could stuff it over my

head and block the sound out. “Someone please kill me.”

Stone’s voice was unperturbed. “From the sound of it, it’ll be over soon,” he said conversationally. “He’s going too fast.” He paused, listening, assessing, and I pressed the pillow harder to my ears, though I could still hear the sounds.

Stone twisted in bed and banged on the wall above his headboard. “Slow down, man!” he barked. “Jesus, she can barely breathe!” The sounds paused at that, then continued, and he banged again. “Slow the fuck down!”

Was this funny? Maybe someday I’d find it funny. Right now, in this moment, I wanted the bed to split open and become a portal to another dimension so I could disappear, hopefully forever.

Stone was right. It didn’t take long. I fell asleep with the memory of those sounds in my head, wondering what it would be like if, for once, I was with someone who slowed the fuck down.

EIGHT

NOW

Stone

The restaurant where I met Angie was classy, the lighting dim, the tables sparse. The hostess who led me to the table wore catlike eyeliner and a dress that was a sleek dark sheath. She gave me a look like melting caramel. Maybe she knew who I was and maybe she didn't. I quirked an eyebrow at her but didn't encourage her. She shrugged and turned away.

Angie Miller-Gold was already here. She stood up when I approached the table. She was wearing sleek black pants, high waisted and wide in the leg, with a silky top. Her blond hair was tied up neatly, and tiny diamond studs gleamed in her ears.

She was pure, hot class, this woman. The kind of woman who didn't have to give any man the time of day. She had money, looks, a killer body, brains. She didn't need me, or any other man, to have dinner with her. I should be eager to chase her, to get her attention, to see if I could get her naked. Instead, I just felt wary.

"Thanks for joining me," Angie said as we sat.

I shrugged. "I didn't have much else to do."

“Would you like some wine?”

“Sure.”

She signaled, and a waiter appeared from the shadows. We ordered wine. The waiter faded away again.

“I don’t know how often you get recognized,” Angie confessed. “I chose this restaurant because I didn’t think it would happen here.”

“Because this isn’t my kind of place?” I looked around, squinting through the dim lighting at the people at the other tables. The kind of people who owned summer homes and multiple Lexuses. They’d put up with forty years of married misery for all that money. Not my scene.

“That isn’t the reason at all,” Angie said. “This is the kind of place where they’re too polite to bother you, even if they know who you are, that’s all. I don’t have any preconceived notions about you, Stone.”

I turned back to look at her. “Everyone has preconceived notions about everyone,” I said. “And a lot of them are right.”

Angie blinked. “That’s a dim view of humanity.”

I’d heard that before, or variations of it. “I don’t get recognized often, anyway,” I told her. “If we went to a music store, it would be different. But this seems like more your crowd.”

The wine came, and when the waiter left again, Angie leaned back in her chair, her shoulders sagging a little. She glanced away, seeming to think for a minute, her perfect brows creased, and then she looked back at me. “This was more my husband’s type of crowd, to be honest. I looked you up, you know, before I decided to take on the band as a client. I looked all of you up. I wanted to know what I was getting into.”

I didn’t know where she was going with this—she seemed to be following a trail of logic in her head. When she paused, I said, “I’m pretty sure you had no idea what you were getting into.”

Angie gave a faint smile at that. Rock bands were a lot to handle, especially when you weren’t used to them. She’d been a good sport, though, when she’d been blasted with glitter at our first meeting. “I’m learning,” she said politely. “But what I’m getting at is that there isn’t much online about your past, but I know that you were raised by a single mother. That you didn’t come from money.” She gestured briefly to the restaurant around us. “I was born poor, too, and my mother was single. And both of us have money now. So we have that in common.”

I wasn’t going to talk about my childhood or my mom, so I said, “Your

husband was the rich one?”

“Yes.” Her cheekbones went a little red, but she held my gaze. “He was thirteen years older than me, wealthy, and I married him when I was twenty. I was a model. Feel free to judge me all you like. I’m used to it.”

That was actually amusing, and I almost laughed. Instead, I took a sip of my wine, which was expensive and delicious. “On our second tour,” I said, “I got so drunk, and so hungover, that I puked every few hours. We played White Plains, New York, and I kept a bucket just offstage. I puked before we went on, puked after every other song, puked again when we finished. The only toilet backstage didn’t work, so we couldn’t empty the bucket. The stage manager was furious and made us take the bucket with us. He charged us ten dollars because we were taking the venue’s property.” I looked at her shocked face, her parted lips. “So, you see, I don’t judge people. You married a guy who could give you security. You ever puke in a bucket, then pay ten dollars to drive off with it?”

“No,” Angie said faintly.

“Okay, then. Can we move on?”

She took a deep sip of wine. “Are all musicians like you?”

“No one is like me,” I said. “But musicians are all dirtbags. You should have nothing to do with us.”

“I don’t believe you. Part of this—” she waved a hand up and down in my direction— “has to be an act.”

“You think I read Dostoevsky in my spare time? I don’t. I work out, I jerk off, and I play guitar. That’s my life. It isn’t very interesting. Frankly, I’d rather hear you talk.”

Angie looked thoughtful again. I wasn’t sure why I’d told her that story. Maybe I was trying to scare her off. It hadn’t worked. Sienna was the only other woman who had seen through my type of crazy. At least for a while.

“My life isn’t all that interesting, either,” Angie said. “I married Charlie when I was twenty, got pregnant, and quit modeling. I raised our daughter, Jess. I was a wife and mom for a long time. I started agenting part-time when Jess was twelve. She’s twenty-two now, and she’s in Lyon, France, in cooking school there. She’s going to be a chef.”

I sipped my wine. Lyon was nice; I’d been there a few times. Good food. But I wasn’t going to interrupt. I always liked it best when other people talked.

“Charlie got cancer,” Angie continued, dropping her gaze and running a

fingertip along the edge of her folded cloth napkin. “It was quick, seven months. He was only fifty-five. There wasn’t much they could do. He died a year ago.”

I was supposed to say the polite thing here, make the sad noises. But I could see real grief in the angle of her face, the line of her shoulders. She was carrying this. She was doing a good job of it, but she was carrying it all the same.

“I get it,” I said. “I’ve lost people.”

Angie raised her eyes, and our gazes locked. Even though she was beautiful, there was nothing sexy about that look between us. Nothing at all.

“I think that’s the truth,” she said softly.

And it was right there. The words, the sentences. I could just tell her.

I wasn’t going to tell her.

But I understood Angie in that moment. And, finally, I understood what this evening was all about, even if she didn’t realize it herself.

“We shouldn’t date,” I said to her.

She blinked in confusion. “We shouldn’t?”

“No. Want to know why?”

She was slowly regaining her cool composure. “I’m not sure I need it spelled out.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, please. You need reassurance that you’re a smokeshow? Angie, you’re a smokeshow. Okay?”

“I don’t need you to tell me that.” There was a little fire in that sentence, which was good. Angie needed some fire.

“Okay, fine. You’re not only bangin’, you’re smart and successful and probably a great mother. Whatever. And it isn’t that I don’t want to fuck you, because it would probably be hot. That part’s basic science.” Her cheeks flushed, but before she could speak, I continued. “First, I’m your client. I’m fine with breaking rules, but my band would be furious, and I don’t disrespect my band. Second, we wouldn’t last, so the breakup would be awkward. Or were you looking for guy like me as husband number two?”

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “Are you done?”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so. But mostly, we shouldn’t date because that isn’t what you’re looking for. Your husband died and your kid moved out. Then your dad died. It happened all at once. You got no one to talk to right now, is all. You wanna talk? Then talk.”

Shit, my grammar was slipping. She didn’t seem to notice, though. She

looked at me for a long moment, like she was stunned. Then she blinked a few times. I had a brief flash of panic that she'd start crying in this restaurant, which I was not okay with. But she got it under control. Angie had some guts.

"I suppose I do want someone to talk to," she said. "I didn't think of it that way. It's been a lot. My old friends dropped away after Charlie died, and they weren't very good friends, anyway. I went to a grief counselor, but no one understands how I *feel*. Not until I met you and your band. Not until I listened to your music. Some of those songs—my god, the honesty. The pain. You just *get* it."

I nodded. Of course we fucking got it. You learned a few things early when life threw you in the trash. Writing and playing music was what got us through.

"So," Angie continued, "strangely, I like your company, as rude as it sometimes is. Even the rudeness is a little refreshing. But I'll also admit that you're sexy, Stone. And I haven't kissed anyone but my husband since I was twenty years old. It's getting a little pathetic."

I smiled at her. "Baby, it's only been a year. Give it some time. You'll find a guy to do it proper, who'll be happy to give you whatever you need as often as you want it. A guy with his head in the game. That guy ain't me."

Angie tilted her head, assessing me. She'd recovered from her shock, and she didn't seem very disappointed by my rejection, which only told me I was right. "That's the real reason, isn't it?" she said. "Your head isn't in the game. There's someone else."

The rush of feeling was so intense that I couldn't speak. My chest squeezed. My throat closed. I felt the urge to get up and walk out of there. To get drunk. To do any number of stupid things. Anything that would just make it stop.

I could tell Angie that I'd spent weeks sleeping a few feet from a woman who made me certifiably insane. I'd watched her get pushed down, disrespected—not least by me and my band—and left behind. I'd watched her keep going, and I'd watched her fight—for the career she wanted, for the life she was determined to earn. I'd watched her believe in herself. I'd spent my days worrying about her, my nights after every show wondering if she was okay. I'd kept tabs on her, offered her my room because I couldn't quite leave her the fuck alone.

I'd looked at her and seen every mistake I'd ever made, every wasted

night with a woman, every hard blow I'd taken that had knocked the life out of me, and I'd regretted all of it. I'd seen someone who was a thousand times better than me. Someone I didn't deserve. Someone who never looked twice at me, someone who would find a nice guy someday and settle down, and she would deserve it, and every second she was with him would kill me, and *she had no fucking idea*.

I didn't say any of that, but I owed Angie honesty. "Yeah," I choked out. "There's someone."

That seemed, for some reason, to make her feel better. "Well, then. Let's have dinner." She motioned, and a waiter appeared from the shadows. We ordered—I instantly had no memory of what I'd told them I wanted—and Angie signaled for a refill of our wine. Then she turned to me again. "We may as well talk business," she said. "The *Soundcheck* deal. Since you've dealt a blow to my self-esteem tonight, you owe me, Stone. I'm giving you an assignment."

I stared at her. I had a bad feeling about this.

Angie made no comment on my silence. "You're going to call Sienna Maplethorpe," she said, unaware that that name sent panic down my spine, "and you're going to *talk* to her."

"Angie," I managed. "I don't—"

"No excuses," she insisted. "The deal is that each of you gives Sienna at least three interviews. It's unprecedented for the Road Kings. In hindsight, it was a canny move for all of you to avoid the press for so long. There's an air of mystery about you, and you aren't overexposed. The tour was a huge success, and there's a new audience finding you, ready to devour whatever comes next." She smiled, in control now, and sipped her wine. "The new album is going to be amazing, and your new fans will be waiting. The icing on the cake will be the first-ever in-depth profiles of all four of you, written by the journalist who was there for every day of the tour. She's getting access to some of the recording sessions when they start. She's getting access to everything. It's a done deal."

I leaned back, running a hand over my face. I desperately wanted a cigarette.

"I get it," Angie said, as if she understood anything at all about how I was feeling. "You hate the press. You've made that clear. But Sienna is an incredibly talented writer, and she's proven time and time again that she's sensitive to what the real story is. She isn't a sensationalist looking for dirt."

She's got the makings of a great music journalist, and your bandmates agree with me. Each of them has already started their interviews."

"Fuck," I said. I drained my glass.

"Tomorrow, Stone." Angie tapped one flawlessly manicured nail on the table. "Tomorrow, you are going to call Sienna, and you're going to set up a day and time with her. Then you're going to go talk to her. And you are going to tell her everything."

I opened my mouth to argue, to tell her off, and then something just clicked. Deep in the base of my brain, deep in my chest.

Maplethorpe.

Her gray eyes, her smart mouth, her sweet body that she didn't bother to show off. The way her brows drew down when she was mad. The way she lit up from within when she listened to good music. The way she burrowed under the covers every night, then couldn't stop herself from staring at me as I walked past her bed. The way she'd never caught on that I'd had to go out and buy clothes to wear to bed when we checked into our room the first time, because I was embarrassed by the boxer shorts I usually slept in.

It had taken her until today to figure out that I hadn't just happened upon her in the parking lot in New Orleans. That I'd already been watching her by then. For longer than I cared to admit.

Jesus, Maplethorpe.

Fuck, I missed her.

She had no clue.

Maybe, just maybe, it was time that I gave her one.

"You're right," I said to Angie. "I should tell her everything."

"Really?" Angie smiled. "I'm glad we agree. Or are you just telling me what I want to hear so I'll leave you alone?"

"No." That tactic was one I wasn't above using, but not this time. "I'll actually do it. I'll talk to Sienna Maplethorpe. I'll tell her anything she asks me, anything she wants to know. Even the bad stuff."

She looked thoughtful. "Well. I don't want to give advice, but maybe leave the bucket story out. Okay?"

I smiled at her. "Sure," I said. "I'll find plenty of other things to say."

NINE

THEN

Sienna

After the humiliation of the stay in Detroit, in which I'd found Stone embarrassingly sexy, I had no choice but to rationalize. He was a musician, I reasoned. Years of studying music had taught me that musicians had some kind of black magic when it came to women. No one understood this problem—the musician problem—but even the creepiest, ugliest musician could cast a spell. Stone was a guitar god, and he was neither creepy nor ugly. Hence, it was inevitable that as a straight woman, I would at some time feel sexually attracted to him.

I really had no control over it.

Everything would be fine.

Those thoughts gave me an idea for my next article. From my nights spent in the audience at Road Kings shows, I knew that they attracted a lot of women fans along with the men. I'd observed those women—because I observed everyone—and they weren't just there because the band was hot. They came in groups and had a good time. They'd taken the trouble to buy a ticket and come to a concert because the music moved them. Because it

transported them, just as it did the men.

That led me into a deep dive of Road Kings lyrics. Plenty of bands appealed to both sexes, but how exactly did the Road Kings do it? How much of it was calculated? What were the songs actually about?

It was a great concept, and I couldn't work on it in the hotel room where Stone could walk in anytime, glaring at me and distracting me. After the second Boston show, I found an all-night diner and set up in a booth with my laptop, my earbuds in and a snack at my elbow as I typed up a sketch of the article.

I was deep into the work when a shadow crossed the edge of my vision—a large, familiar shadow. I blinked away from my screen as Stone dropped into the seat opposite me in the booth.

I took one earbud from my ear, pausing the music I was listening to. Tonight's show had been great—the band had their energy back. They'd stopped arguing, and they'd been so in sync that tonight's crowd had nearly hit the rafters as they danced and sang along. For a second, it was hard to reconcile the man who had so brilliantly whipped up the crowd with his playing with the man who sat across from me, scowling at me under the fluorescent light.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

He took his time staring at me before he answered. “It's a diner. I'm gonna eat.”

“Did you know I was here?” I asked.

Stone shrugged.

“Are you tracking my phone or something?”

“Nope.”

So he wasn't going to talk. What else was new? “Well, I'm busy. I need to work.”

“So work.”

“I will. Can you stop glaring at me, please?”

He rolled his eyes, and then the waitress came over. I heard him order a burger before I put my earbud back in, blocking him out. I looked back at my screen again.

I wrote some more, but I was starting to get mad. Here I was, trying to figure out the meaning of Road Kings songs, when a Road King was sitting right across from me with all of the answers in his stubborn, gorgeous head. He could tell me everything I wanted to know, but he refused to.

I stopped my music and took my earbud out again. Stone's burger had arrived, and he was devouring it, casual as all hell. Like he and I hung out together after every show.

"Where are the other guys?" I asked.

Stone shrugged, his mouth full.

"This is insane. Don't you have a woman to sleep with after the show?"

I brought this up far too often, and I was embarrassingly aware of it. Stone was never the one to bring up groupies, only me. I refused to ask myself why it mattered.

He ignored the question as he swallowed his bite of burger. "What are you writing about?"

"You and your stupid band, what else?"

That amused him. He didn't exactly smile, but the corners of his eyes crinkled, which was big for Stone. It made him even better looking when he did that. "What exactly?"

Fine. If he was going to interrupt me, he could help me get this article done. "Why do so many women listen to the Road Kings?" I asked.

"Because the music's good," Stone said.

"Other than that."

"There ain't anything other than that." Stone's grammar was sometimes off. It was rare, but it happened. I had no idea why I found it charming and sexy. The musician problem. "Women like good music, just like men do. 'Cause, you know, they're people."

I watched him take another enormous bite of hamburger. There was something to that—that the Road Kings saw women as people, not sex objects—but I wasn't about to delve into feminist theory with him. "There's something universal about the lyrics," I said. "Pain, grief, loneliness. Almost none of your songs are about sex, about scoring."

Stone shrugged, swallowing again. "Lyrics are Denver's thing."

"Ah, yes. Denver." I nodded. Denver Gilchrist was undeniably a big appeal to women, even though he didn't try to be. Gorgeous, poetic, dreamy, with a voice that could turn you on and make you cry at the same time. "He's part of the appeal."

Stone looked annoyed. "Jeez, Maplethorpe, keep your pants on. Denver has a girlfriend."

I sighed. "I'm trying to make a point here, not moon over your lead singer. I know intellectual discourse isn't your strong suit, but get your mind

out of the gutter and try to keep up.”

“Ouch,” Stone said, picking up the last piece of his burger. “Nice one. You’re getting good at this.”

Why did I feel warm at the compliment? I’d just insulted him. This man turned everything backward and upside down. “It isn’t just the lyrics, though,” I continued. “It’s also the sound. The way you mix the blues influence with the heavier edge. But the beat borrows a lot from funk.”

“The beats are all Axel,” Stone said. “You have a crush on him, too?”

“Gosh, why would I?” I said sarcastically. “Tall, blond, blue-eyed men who look like models and have perfect rhythm aren’t my type. I mean, gross.”

“Too late,” Stone shot back. “If you aren’t Brit, you won’t get anywhere with him.”

I frowned. “Brit is his friend and the band’s assistant, not his girlfriend.”

“I’m talking about sex, here, Maplethorpe,” Stone said. “Two people who are dying to fuck each other, if only they would admit it. Try to keep up.”

I gaped at him. How had we ended up talking about sex? And what, exactly, *was* he talking about?

“Some of the songs I understand.” I steered the conversation away from his hot bandmates. “At least, I think I do. ‘Precious Metal’—that one is open to interpretation, which I think is intentional. The singer is desperate for the precious metal, and the listener can fill in what they think that is. ‘Killing Me’ is very clearly about sex, but he’s singing about how the woman has all of the power in their dynamic, how she could crush him if she chose to, and there’s nothing he can do about it. He’s even happy about it. It isn’t about a woman becoming a man’s possession at all. I hope to God that song is about Callie Whitmer, because if a man I was seeing sang that song about another woman, I’d be furious.”

Stone had gone very still. He watched me, silent.

His gaze made me uncomfortable. I cleared my throat. “Here’s the interesting thing,” I said. “This song, ‘Fuck You, California.’ The credits state that you wrote this one yourself.” I called up the lyrics on my laptop and quoted them. “I shot my shot/I blew my load/I did it all/I’m on the road/Fuck you, California.” I looked up at him. “That sounds personal. When did you live in California?”

“Before the Road Kings.” Stone said the words softly, without his usual growl. “It was my first band. We went to L.A. to try and make it big.”

I frowned. “The Road Kings formed when you were nineteen. You must have been—”

“Seventeen,” Stone supplied. “We were there just over a year. Then I came home.”

“What happened?”

I couldn’t read his expression. I had no idea what I was seeing in his eyes. What kind of parent lets their seventeen-year-old kid move to L.A. alone? What kind of childhood did he have?

“We didn’t make it big,” Stone said after a pause. “So I started over.”

“This song is so angry.” I dropped my gaze to the lyrics on my screen again, quoting. “‘We’d have gardens on Mars, you swore/But we were just kids, going to war.’ War? That line is so sad. It doesn’t sound at all like kids partying in a band.”

Stone rubbed a hand over his face. I listened to the rasp of his palm over his beard. “Maplethorpe,” he said, and there was something in the syllables of my name that gave me chills. Like he was repeating it to himself, a mantra. “Maplethorpe. I’m not talking about L.A., okay? If I wanted to talk about it, I’d have called the song ‘Hey, Let’s Talk About California Because It’s My Favorite Topic, It Was So Great.’ Right? Now I’m in a shit mood. I’d rather talk about something good.”

“Like what?”

“Tell me about your parents,” he said. “Your life. Whatever you want. Just talk.”

I shifted in my seat, uneasy. He was changing the subject, and I didn’t feel the usual angry frustration at his refusal to talk. He wasn’t being petulant or rebellious this time, and I was chilled by what he wasn’t saying. It disconcerted me, frightened me even. There was something I was missing, and I had the feeling it was something bad.

“My parents are both high school music teachers,” I said. For once, I wanted to talk about something pleasant, just like he was asking me to. I didn’t want to dig anymore. “Not at the same high school, though. They met at a teachers’ conference. I’m their only child. They’ve been married for thirty years.”

Stone leaned back in his seat, and I saw his shoulders visibly relax. He was listening. He didn’t interrupt.

“I guess the most interesting thing about my family is that my aunt was a TV actress,” I continued. “She starred in a show a few decades ago called

Avery's Place."

"I've seen it," Stone said, surprising me. "I should have connected the names. That's your aunt?"

I nodded. "She married my dad's brother. She doesn't act anymore. My two cousins, Olivia and Gwen, married rich guys who are kind of terrifying, but it seems to be working out. That's the exciting side of the family. Then there's my side, plain old Peter and Maggie. Two music nerds who got married and had a music-nerd daughter. I was raised listening to the bands of the sixties and seventies. My dad's record collection fills the entire attic of our house, and the basement is full of stereo equipment. My mom gets excited by choir every year, and I still live at home. Pretty sad, right?"

"No." Stone sounded...fascinated, maybe? "It isn't sad at all."

"They would have preferred if I became a teacher, but they're supportive of my choice of career," I said. "Not that I would have picked anything else. I love music, but I can't play, and my singing voice is a crime. I have no patience for teaching. Writing is what I do." I felt myself smiling. "My dad would lose his mind if he saw your music library, by the way."

"So share it with him," Stone said.

"Oh, he doesn't have the app. Dad believes fervently in the gospel of vinyl."

"He's not wrong." Stone pulled his phone out of his pocket. "There's no way you listened to the whole library, Maplethorpe."

"Do you have any idea how much time I've spent driving?" I pulled my own phone out and opened the music app. "I could have listened to every song in existence by now."

"No more driving," Stone said, scrolling through his music. "You're on the bus, as of now."

I stared at him in shock. "I'm supposed to get a week of access." Denver and Neal had agreed to give me a week on the bus in exchange for my work uncovering their backer, but no one had talked to me about it since. They'd probably forgotten. Musicians were like that.

"Not a week," Stone said. "For the rest of the tour. And you get on the plane home with us, too."

"Says who?"

"Says me." His tone was final.

I had so many questions. Why? Why now? Was it something I did? If so, what? What would the other members of the band say about this? Had he

talked to them already?

Stone's dark brown gaze rose to meet mine, as if he was reading my mind. "Don't ask questions or I'll change my mind," he said in his familiar growl. "Now let's talk music."

TEN

THEN

Sienna

When I thought back on it later, everything at the end of the tour seemed to happen fast. Then again, maybe it didn't. Maybe it was only the terrible finale, at the end of everything, that made it seem that way.

We were on the East Coast now, doing a series of dates that would end in New York City, then we'd fly back to Portland for the final show. I'd finally ditched my rental car and was riding the bus with the band, and this time they didn't put on a fake show for me.

On the bus, the Road Kings did what, apparently, they'd been doing all along: ate, slept, watched TV, listened to music, played video games (this was Axel and Brit), read books. Sometimes they talked, usually about the previous show or plans for the next one. Sometimes they ribbed each other, made each other laugh, or bickered like an old married couple that happened to consist of four guys.

Stone talked the least. He was caustic to all of them, but most of his criticism was directed at Neal. For some reason he was harder on the band's bass player than on anyone else. He was almost harder on Neal than he was

on me.

Every day I set up my laptop at the bus's table, connected to the wifi, and got more work done than I'd achieved the entire tour. I wrote articles for *Soundcheck*. The band had played an off-the-schedule free show in Detroit on a whim, and news of it had gone viral. As a result, my articles were getting more traffic than they'd ever had—each one higher than the last, since no other writer had access to the tour. *Soundcheck* had finally remembered I was alive, and they were happy with what I was turning in. They wanted more, as much as I could write, to feed the machine. So I wrote.

The Road Kings had been moved from their smaller venue in New York to Madison Square Garden, which they'd never played before. They were to do four shows there for the first time in their career, and the extra tickets were on their way to selling out. In other words, after all these years, it looked like the band was about to get big for the first time.

Then their longtime agent died suddenly back home, and they were left wondering how their future career would be handled. I watched them work through these ups and downs from my place behind my laptop, quietly observing.

This setup wasn't the same as the interview I'd done with Travis White, but in some ways, it was better. The Road Kings had decided that I was all right to have around, and they let me observe how they truly were when they were alone instead of psyched up and rehearsed for an interview.

Axel and Brit were in love with each other—I could see that now—and hadn't told the rest of the band. Denver missed his girlfriend, Callie, and was counting the minutes until she flew to meet him in New York. Raine had just flown home—I thought maybe she and Neal had had a fight—and Neal was unusually subdued, as if he was worried. I observed everything and wrote notes. I would have felt invisible except that I frequently looked up from my laptop to find Stone's gaze on me, his expression unreadable.

Aside from my writing about the band, I did research. I'd promised them that I'd find out who their rich, anonymous tour backer was, and through the magic of persistence, nosiness, and a journalism degree, I found William Hale. He was a young multimillionaire who had made part of his fortune with a hip company that made turntables, a fact that immediately endeared him to me. Dad would love this guy. Hale had sold that company and now worked for a venture capital firm in New York. He also, apparently, had financed this tour.

I needed to verify a few things when we got to New York before I told the band what I'd found, but I was pretty sure Hale was our man. Why was he so interested in the Road Kings? That, I didn't know yet. I couldn't find a connection, and I didn't think any of the band members had met him. If I had any luck, I'd eventually land an interview with Hale and ask him myself.

With that task tucked away, I returned to the mystery of Stone Zeeland. Something about what he'd told me niggled at the back of my mind—about his first band, about going to L.A. and coming home in failure. There was nothing on the internet about Stone's first band, no abandoned social media pages or old show listings. But I only had Stone's name to search with, because I didn't know the name of the band.

There was that itch again, in the back of my mind. As the bus traveled to New York, I let my thoughts focus on it. Axel and Brit were playing their game, Neal was reading, and Denver was asleep in his bunk, the most exhausted of any of us. Stone was slouched at the back of the bus, wearing headphones and scrolling on his phone. I stared at him long enough that he must have sensed something, because he looked up, his brown eyes meeting mine.

Why was he such a mystery? Why did I have so many questions about Stone Zeeland? Why couldn't I let them go? Why was he so determined not to answer them, to shut me out?

Why couldn't I stop staring at him?

I was used to him now—his size, his intimidating bulk, his mostly black wardrobe, his bearded scowl. I didn't know when it had stopped intimidating me, but it had. I'd slept in the same room with him for weeks, and despite our prickly conversations and frequent mutual annoyance, I could admit that he had actually been a gentleman. He might have blunt opinions about my personal life, but he'd never laid a hand on me, never gotten too close, never pushed the boundaries he could easily have pushed as a famous rock star. He'd never made me uncomfortable, even for a minute.

Of course, that was probably because he wasn't attracted to me, and a nerdy girl like me wasn't his type. The flutters I'd gotten in his presence were an inconvenience on my part, signifying nothing. And yet as I took in the familiar lines of his face, his hard jaw beneath the trimmed beard, the well-shaped lips pressed together in bemused annoyance, the deep chocolate of his eyes as he kept our gazes locked, I felt a little crazy. I had the urge to cross over to him and straddle his lap. I'd feel those hard thighs beneath mine

through the denim of his jeans, and I'd put my hands on those big, warm shoulders. Maybe if I shook him, he'd talk to me. Maybe if I kissed him, he'd do something else.

I blinked, and for a second Stone's expression softened, his pupils going dark. He knew what I was thinking.

He knew *exactly* what I was thinking.

I jerked my gaze away from him and back to my screen. What the hell was I doing? I couldn't look at him again. I picked up my earbuds and jammed them in my ears, the universal signal for *leave me alone*. I clicked through the windows I had open on my laptop browser, hoping to look busy. The page I'd called up with the lyrics to "Fuck You California" appeared, and as I looked at the words in front of my eyes, the answer came to me, just like that.

*We'd have gardens on Mars, you swore,
But we were just kids, going to war.*

Following my hunch, I opened a new tab and typed in a search: *gardens on mars*. I got pages of results about the possibilities and methods of growing plants on a hypothetical Mars base, as well as the novel *The Martian*. I changed my search to *gardens on mars band*. The first result was an old online music mag piece about a gig at a tiny club in L.A. by a band called Gardens on Mars. The year was the same year that Stone would have been seventeen.

Stone had written the name of his first band into the song, made it part of the lyric.

I risked a glance at him. He was looking back down at his phone, reading something there, his headphones on. The moment between us had passed. He'd forgotten about me.

I turned back to my screen. For a second, I hesitated. Stone hadn't offered this information; he hadn't wanted to talk about it. Still, if he'd put the band in the lyrics to one of the Road Kings' most famous songs, wasn't that fair game? Anyone could do the same search I had done. There was nothing wrong with reading public information.

I clicked into one search result, and then another. And I went down the rabbit hole.

“HOLY SHIT,” the man on the other end of the phone said into my ear. “This is a blast from the past.”

“I’m glad you decided to talk to me,” I said. I was in a small lounge on the eighth floor of our hotel in New York. The Road Kings were doing their second sound check at Madison Square Garden, and I could have done this interview in the room I shared with Stone, but I wanted complete privacy, as if he could somehow know about this conversation if I did it there.

Darren Pinsent—married father of two in Seattle, long-ago bassist in Gardens on Mars—laughed. “Stone isn’t telling you all the details, huh? Something tells me he hasn’t changed much.”

“He’s a man of few words,” I said.

“Yeah. Did he give you Kenzo’s number, too?”

Kenzo Fujimoto had been the drummer all those years ago. I decided not to correct Darren’s assumption that I’d gotten his number from Stone. “Kenzo lives in Australia now,” I said.

“Oh, right—I think I heard that. It’s been so long. And, you know, we don’t keep in touch. I guess we’ve lost track of each other.”

“It happens.” I wondered why Darren hadn’t asked about Chase Mackay, Gardens’ lead singer. I’d found almost nothing about him online, and no Facebook account, which was how I’d tracked Darren down. “I’m following the Road Kings on tour and writing about them for *Soundcheck*. I’d love some of your insight into Stone and your experience with him in L.A.”

“Our experience in L.A.? That’s easy,” Darren said. He seemed like a sociable guy, pleasant and gregarious. He’d said yes immediately when I’d messaged him on Facebook and asked for an interview. He’d said that no one had ever asked him before. “We went to high school together, Stone and me—at least, we did whenever he went to class. We got a band together with the other guys. We thought we were the shit. We thought we were Guns N’ Roses. We got in the used car that Chase’s dad gave him for his sixteenth birthday and drove to L.A. We were gonna be huge.” He laughed.

“I guess it didn’t turn out that way,” I said.

Darren’s laugh trailed off. “Look,” he said, more seriously. “The way things turned out—I don’t know. We would never have made it big, even if it didn’t end like that. All of us sucked, except for Stone. The thing you need to know about Stone, as a player, is that at sixteen he was better than most people would ever be. He practiced for hours a day. He had a shit family life—his dad left when he was a baby, and his stepfathers used to hit him. So we

—”

“Wait, what?” I wasn’t sure I’d heard right. “They used to hit him?”

“I saw it myself with one of them,” Darren said. “Whenever Stone swore, or used a wrong word, or sounded stupid, he’d get hit. It was why he wanted to leave home so bad. As a kid, it scared me, but I’m a dad now, and it makes me sick. I can’t imagine what kind of shithead does that to a kid. But that’s the life Stone had. It’s why he escaped by playing guitar so much.”

I had been writing notes along with recording this conversation, but I put my pen down, my thoughts banging through my brain.

“Anyway, we sucked,” Darren went on. “I was the worst bass player you’ve ever heard, and I’m not just saying that. I was so bad. I’m better off selling landscaping equipment, which is what I do now. Kenzo sounded like he was playing drums for some other band, not ours. Chase was a half-decent singer, but he didn’t care about the music. Chase wanted to be rich and famous, that was all. By any means necessary. He was desperate for it.”

“So, you went to L.A.” I tried to sound normal. “How, um, how did it end? I’d like to know from your point of view.”

“Oh, man.” Darren sighed. “Whatever Stone told you, I can’t add much to it. We played clubs for over a year, but we didn’t get anywhere. We were broke. We fought all the time. Chase was in a bad way—he didn’t want to give up and go home, he blamed us, and he was using drugs. Stone and Chase were roommates, and one day Chase didn’t show up for rehearsal. He was still in bed when Stone left, said that he’d be there, but he never showed. We rehearsed without him for a few hours, then went for something to eat, then went home. I was going to meet some girl I knew. I’ve always felt bad about that—that I didn’t go home with Stone that day, that he had to find Chase alone.”

“Find Chase?” I didn’t like this, not at all. My body was tense, my hands sweating.

“Yeah.” Darren’s voice was sorrowful. “It was bad. Chase had hanged himself inside the closet. The cops said he’d probably done it within an hour or two of Stone leaving. He’d been dead all day.”

The sound that came from my throat was half surprise, half anguish. “Oh, my god,” I whispered.

“I’m sure Stone hasn’t told you too many details,” Darren said. “He hates to talk about it. I do, too, but I feel like so much time has passed, it’s time to admit it happened, you know? It’s time to come to terms with it.” He sighed.

“So that’s how it ended. We packed our bags and came home. It took me a long time to even process all of it. I mean, Jesus, we were just kids.”

We were just kids, going to war, I thought. Oh, Stone.

I talked to Darren for a few more minutes, scrambling to keep my thoughts together. “Tell Stone hi for me,” he said when we ended the call. “Tell him to text me when he’s home in Portland. I’d love to drive in and have a beer with him.”

I told him I’d do that. I ended the call, picked up my things, and left the lounge. By the time I got back to our room, I was crying.

I closed the door behind me as sobs escaped my throat. I sat on the bed, took off my glasses, and put my face in my hands. I was crying and crying. I couldn’t stop.

It didn’t make sense. What had happened was tragic, but it was twenty years ago, and I hadn’t known Chase Mackay. I hadn’t even known he existed until a few hours ago.

My tears were partly for Chase, but they were mostly for Stone. How could I have been so wrong about someone I had spent so much time with? Stone wasn’t quiet because he was an asshole, he was quiet because someone had *hit* him. I wanted to find the man who had done that to a lonely, abandoned kid and strangle him myself.

Stone didn’t want to talk to me about his life, not because he was being contrary, but because he’d seen things no seventeen-year-old should ever see, things he didn’t want to relive.

I’d insulted him and thrown things at him. I’d been shitty to him. Okay, fine, he’d been shitty to me, too—but that was because he didn’t trust me. Stone didn’t trust anyone. Life had taught him not to.

I got myself together, washed my face in the bathroom, and looked at myself in the mirror. I could fix this, and suddenly I needed to, urgently. I had to make this better, right now.

I didn’t solve problems by tucking them away and pretending they weren’t problems, letting them fester. I hated secrets. I talked things out. It was why I had the career I did, why I was the way I was.

I needed to talk to Stone.

Whether he wanted to or not.

The Road Kings would be finishing their sound check at Madison Square Garden, and I had a backstage pass.

ELEVEN

THEN

Sienna

There's really no feeling on earth quite like being backstage at Madison Square Garden. Behind the scenes, concert venues aren't very impressive—lots of hallways, fluorescent lighting, unromantic concrete loading docks for the tons of equipment that come in and out. But when it's the Garden, even the loading dock is pretty exciting. Or maybe that was just me.

Each band member got a dressing room here, and they'd separated to their own spaces before the show. Their mood was tense with nerves. Callie had arrived in New York, and Denver was preoccupied with her presence. Neal was in a funk because Raine had left. Axel was also in a low mood, because Brit had caught a last-minute flight out of New York last night, an unexpected departure. I had no idea what had happened between them, and I needed to call her and talk to her about that. But I had other business first.

I knocked on Stone's dressing-room door. For once, my mind didn't wander to the possibility that he had a woman in there. It had been ten weeks. There were no groupies on this tour.

The door swung open, and Stone stood there. Big and dark, wearing black

jeans, black boots, a black tee. My eyes were level with his collarbones, and I could see the rough stubble on his throat. I was suddenly more aware of him than I'd ever been, his scent, his presence. I had the urge to throw my arms around his neck.

I raised my gaze to find his eyes on mine.

“Maplethorpe.” That word, said in his low growl. My heart stuttered behind my ribs.

His pupils went dark for a second, and then his brows drew down in a scowl. He suddenly looked enraged. He grasped my arm in his big hand and tugged me into the dressing room, closing the door behind me.

“You’ve been crying,” he said.

“No, I haven’t.”

“For fuck’s sake.” He pressed me back against the dressing room table—I barely had time to take in a chair, a mirror, a small sofa—and got into my space. I could smell him now, a leather and warm-skin smell. A black leather jacket was thrown over the back of the chair. In the light from the lamp on the table, he looked more closely into my face.

“What happened?” he said. It sounded like annoyance, but I knew it was concern.

“I’m fine,” I protested.

“You’re not.” He reached for my glasses and gently removed them, placing them on the table so he could more clearly see my red eyes. “You’ve been fucking crying. Did someone say something to you? Do something? Tell me, Maplethorpe. Spill.”

He was so close. My blood was pounding in my ears. “Stone,” I managed.

His thumb, rough from playing guitar, brushed the corner of my eye. “Who did this?”

I couldn’t think. I was suffocating in his presence, and there was a thudding in my temples, an answering beat between my legs. His own mood seemed to be as wild as mine. I scrambled for the first words I could find. “You did.”

He went very still, his hand on my face, his eyes on mine. He was so close I could hear the intake of his breath. Everything between us cracked, like a pane of glass that had given way after weeks of strain. There were only shards between us, then nothing. For the first time, nothing at all.

“Fuck,” he murmured.

Then he cupped my face more securely in his hand, leaned in, and kissed

me.

I expected it. I wanted it. And still I felt the shock of it, the feel of Stone against me for the first time. I was terrified and turned on at once. My logical brain said this couldn't be happening, and my body said that it definitely was. I leaned in, curled a hand around the back of his neck, and kissed him harder.

Stone's kiss was intent, deliberate, just on the edge of harsh. He explored my mouth, tasting me, slick and strong, but he didn't grab me. He didn't have to. Even without his hands on me, my body flushed hot all over, as if he already had me naked.

I'd never been kissed like this before. Not even close. I was wild for him. I pressed my body into his, seeking him, and he responded by running his big hand down my back, resting it on my ass over my jeans as he kissed me. His palm was hot, and I could feel it through my clothes, though his grip wasn't pushy or insistent. He just let his hand stay there like it belonged.

Alarm bells went off in my head. If I wasn't careful, I'd do something completely crazy, like beg him for sex right here, like undo his jeans and shove my hand inside, like—

I broke the kiss, taking my mouth reluctantly from his. "We need to talk," I gasped.

Stone made a sound in his throat that was a lot like frustration. How frustrated could he be? It wasn't like he'd thought of doing this with me before a few minutes ago. Maybe it was just the pre-show tension. But he removed his hand from my ass and his other hand from my jaw. He gave me a few inches of room, no more. I watched him drop his gaze and bite his lip for a second. Then he said, "What is it? Tell me what's wrong."

I took hold of my spinning thoughts. "I talked to Darren Pinsent on the phone this afternoon."

I had never seen anything like Stone's reaction to those words. He shut down—there was no other way to say it. I watched as his shoulders squared, his spine straightened, and his gaze went distant. He stepped back.

"I figured it out," I said, filling his silence with words. "Gardens on Mars. The line from the song. That led me to Darren, and he agreed to an interview. He told me everything, Stone. Everything that happened in L.A. Everything that happened with—with Chase."

At the sound of his friend's name, Stone closed his eyes. He looked, in that moment, like a man bearing a tremendous amount of pain, but his voice was calm when he spoke. "Fuck you, Maplethorpe," he said. "Fuck you."

“I was trying to write about you!” My voice threatened to crack. “I was trying to learn about you! That’s the assignment. You wouldn’t talk to me, so I figured it out. That’s the job, Stone. You may not like it, but that’s the job.”

Stone opened his eyes again, and their expression was cold with anger. “That’s the job, is it?”

“Yes, it is! That experience is part of who you are. It’s part of what made you, made the Road Kings. And when Darren said what happened with your stepfather, I realized—”

“Oh, my god.” His voice was a low roar. He turned away from me, paced the room, turned back. “Is that what you wanted? All this time? The shit that happened in my *childhood*?”

I stared at him, speechless.

“It isn’t a story!” He was furious, his big body unnaturally still. “It isn’t an assignment or something you use to impress your bosses. It’s my fucking *life*! My business. My fucking soul. And all you want is to extract it, to use it for clicks, to give it to everyone to consume. You want to sell it for *money*.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“You do. Of course you fucking do. That’s the job, right? You just said so. Just take my friend’s death, his suffering, my nightmares, and *sell* them. That’s the job. And you have no fucking right.”

“It’s your story.” I tried to stay calm, logical, when I wanted to scream at him. “I’m not your enemy, Stone. You get a say in how you tell it.”

“I don’t want to tell it *at all*. Why don’t you get that? Why the fuck can’t you see? You come from a nice life, with nice parents, and this is just a project to you. You get to look at my shitty life like you’re looking through a microscope, write your story, then throw me away. I rip my guts out playing every night. Every time we play that song, I think about Chase, how it’s my fault, how it was my idea to go to L.A., how I should have stayed with him that morning instead of leaving. It’s *my fucking fault*, and I feel it every time. And that still isn’t good enough for you. Nothing will *ever* be good enough for you.”

There was a brisk knock on the dressing room door, and a man’s voice called out, “Ten minutes.”

“Got it,” Stone said back. He ran his hands over his face, through his hair, taking a deep breath. He was getting into show mode. Switching off his emotions. I couldn’t imagine how hard that must be in this moment, how much skill it must take. He must have to do it all the time.

“You have it wrong,” I said.

He shook his head. “I’ll get a message to the hotel. You’re getting your own room. The tour will pay for it. You can’t stay with me anymore.”

For some reason, that hurt like a punch to the gut. We’d been nothing but reluctant as roommates, but to have him let me go—I wasn’t ready. “Stone, please.”

He shrugged, shutting down. I could see a deadly calm come over him, his stage persona, the face he showed the world. The quiet one who rarely spoke. The big, silent, scowling guitar god. The white-hot anger and hurt were gone.

“Tour’s over, Maplethorpe,” he said, his voice hard. “Write what you want. We’re finished anyway. Everything’s done.”

Then he was gone.

I sat there in a daze for a while, collecting myself. Wiping my tears yet again. Somewhere far off, the show started.

When I left Madison Square Garden, the sounds of Stone’s guitar followed me, the anguished notes reverberating from the rafters.

PART 2

NOW

TWELVE

NOW

Stone

I'd told Angie that I would call Sienna the next day and set up a meeting, but I didn't. I never intended to. Like everyone else in my life, Angie needed to learn early that I don't follow orders.

Instead, I let a few days pass. Then a week. The Road Kings found a new rehearsal space to rent, one that was bigger and cheaper than the by-the-hour recording studio downtown. The building had once been a car dealership, but it had moved to more upscale pastures. The huge, empty showroom, big enough to hold a dozen cars, was the perfect size for us. We got the space for cheap and were set up within a day.

We had new songs that we'd been working on over the tour, playing them to see how audiences reacted. Some of them were good, but all of them needed work, and we needed new ones besides. Also, we'd played fast and loose with them during the tour—the best way to write songs, in our opinion—and we hadn't written very much down. We needed to figure out what the songs were, what the lyrics would be, what the songs would be called, how we would play them on the record. Eventually, we'd figure out what order

they'd go in. And we'd need band consensus on every decision. Considering the four of us, it was amazing any record ever got made by the Road Kings at all.

We'd only ever made two studio albums—our third was a live album—and we'd made them years ago, so though we were pros, we had to figure out a routine all over again. We were different guys than we'd been back then. We were older, and because Axel was sober, when we were rehearsing the rest of us were, too. I thought back to the cases of beer, bottles of liquor, and giant bags of weed that had accompanied our first two recordings, and all I felt was surprise that I'd been able to fuck myself up so consistently and still make music. Even for rock stars, your late thirties are no joke.

Musicians aren't morning types, so we'd convene at the dealership around noon, eat some lunch, shoot the shit, and get to work. The dealership had left two sofas behind, and we pulled them into the room along with coffee tables, an old filing cabinet—we used it to store cables and other junk—and the familiar mess of mics, guitars, a bass, amps, pedals, Axel's drum kit, a keyboard, and Neal's acoustic guitar. Takeout containers filled the garbage. Sheets of paper with Denver's handwriting littered the floor. I felt more at home here, in this makeshift musical mess, than I had in any house or apartment I'd ever lived in.

Through all of this, Sienna Maplethorpe was never far from my mind, though I never talked about her or mentioned her name. Something had shifted in me during that conversation with Angie. I was no longer avoiding Sienna, and the thought of her didn't send dread up my spine.

We'd left things badly. I'd kissed her. I hadn't been able to help myself. She'd showed up at my dressing room door, her makeup rubbed off and her eyes red from tears, and I'd lost my mind. I'd never seen Sienna cry, and the thought of it made me crazy, and when she'd said that her tears were my fault, I'd stopped thinking. I had just wanted to show her—what? That I wasn't that guy, maybe. The guy she thought I was. That it was her, only her, who made me a different guy altogether.

Then she'd brought up Chase. I did not talk about Chase. I thought about him plenty, but I'd followed one rule for twenty years—*do not talk about Chase*. The only exception was when I'd talked to Denver about him, late one night a long time ago when we were halfway drunk. Denver knew everything. Denver understood pain, loss, and loneliness like no one else alive.

But Sienna dropped Chase on me like a bomb, right before I needed to go onstage at Madison Square Garden, right after I'd kissed her after wanting to for weeks. I'd reacted badly. I'd yelled at her—I owed her a thousand apologies for that—and I'd kicked her out of my room. I'd paid the price by lying awake for the next few nights, wondering what she was doing, wondering whether she'd finally decided she hated me forever.

Then I'd come home, and I'd tried to bury it. And what do you know—it hadn't worked. I was going to see Sienna, and we were going to have everything out. I was just going to do it on my own time.

She hadn't texted me, so I sent her one message. *We're going to talk, Maplethorpe.*

She hadn't replied.

That was just fine.

We had a few days off from rehearsal, because Axel had flown to L.A. to get Brit. Brit was there dealing with a bunch of legal issues to do with her old life. She'd asked him for some time and space to work it out. Axel had waited as long as he was capable of, and then he'd gone to get his girl back.

Denver was using the days off to be with Callie. Neal was using them to be with Raine and Amber. And me? I was alone. So I got in my car and drove to Sienna Maplethorpe's house.

I knew where she lived. She'd told me once what neighborhood it was, and I knew her parents' names, and from there it wasn't hard to find. It turned out to be a nice house on a quiet old street, not too big, tidy and well loved. This was the house Sienna's parents had bought thirty years ago, the house she grew up in. The yard was neat and there was a Toyota hybrid car in the driveway, the practical choice of two socially conscious teachers.

As I parked on the street and got out, two people came out of the house. Sienna's parents, I assumed. They were both in their fifties. Sienna's mother was dressed up in a pretty navy-blue dress with a pashmina shawl over her shoulders, and her father was in a neatly pressed dress shirt and dress pants. They were going out somewhere.

They caught sight of me in my jeans, boots, and faded Grateful Dead tee, my beard and my silver rings, and to their credit, neither one of them gave me the "who's this degenerate escapee from a motorcycle club" look. Instead, Sienna's dad smiled as they came down the driveway. "Hi there," he said.

"Hi," I said. "I'm here to see Sienna. Is she home?"

Sienna's mom gave me a warm smile, as if she welcomed guys who

looked like me all the time. “She is. Are you one of the band?”

I nodded. “I’m Stone Zeeland.” I held out my hand.

Sienna’s dad shook first. “Nice to meet you, Stone. I’m—”

“Peter,” I supplied. I looked at Sienna’s mom. “And Maggie. Sienna talked about you.”

They both looked delighted. “I told you she’d make friends, Peter.” Maggie elbowed her husband, then shook my hand. “He worried about our daughter on tour with a rock band,” she explained.

“Me? *You* worried. I’ve always said that Sienna would hold her own.”

“She did,” I said.

“We weren’t *too* worried,” Maggie hedged. “A little, at first. But Sienna had nothing but nice things to say about all of you. I want to thank you and the rest of the band for treating her so well.”

I blinked at her. We’d treated Sienna like absolute shit, especially at first. But it seemed she hadn’t told her parents that. “We were jerks,” I said. “She shoulda told us to go to hell. We would’ve deserved it.”

My grammar was slipping in front of two teachers, and I sounded stupid. I braced for impact, but nothing came. Maggie only laughed.

“Nice try,” she said. “I know Sienna, and I know when she’s upset. She has a fiery temper when she’s mad. She came home tired, but otherwise she has nothing but good things to say. Are you here for an interview?”

“Yeah.” I felt myself scowling as I tried to sort out my confusion. Neither of them seemed to care that I looked like an angry asshole. “The *Soundcheck* thing.”

“It’s exciting. You’re the guitarist, right?” Peter said. “You’re really good. Have you ever listened to classic Clapton?”

“Sure I have. I heard Cream when I was twelve or so. ‘Crossroads’ was one of the first songs I tried to learn, just by listening and imitating.” I smiled. “It was over my head, to say the least. I still can’t play it the way Clapton did. I don’t think I ever will.”

“Cream!” Peter lit up, and I watched him go into full nerd mode. “Did you hear that, Maggie! Only the greatest band of all time. Have you heard them on vinyl?”

“Only way to listen to them,” I replied. “Everything else is sacrilege.”

“Oh, you’re talking my language.” Peter rubbed his hands together. “Come over sometime when you’re not doing an interview and we’ll listen to records.”

“Please ignore him.” Maggie put a hand on Peter’s arm. “Don’t frighten him off, hon. He’s here to talk to Sienna.” She turned back to me. “She’s upstairs in the attic, I think. It’s where she likes to work. We’re going to Meet the Teacher night, then out for dinner, so we won’t be home until later. The front door’s open. Just go in. And have fun!”

They got in their hybrid and drove away, waving at me. I waved back. I turned and looked up at the house, but there was no one in any of the windows. There was nothing for it. I walked up the front steps and into the house.

Inside the front door, I looked around. A cozy living room, a front hall lined with discarded shoes and folded umbrellas. There was no one down here, and it was quiet except for a clock ticking somewhere. I walked to the stairs, then realized my boots were thumping on the worn hardwood. I unlaced my boots and took them off, placing them with the other shoes.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, the steps creaking loudly in the silence under my weight. There was a hallway lined with bedroom and bathroom doors. At the top of the stairs, right in your line of sight as you climbed, was a framed family photo on the wall. I paused and took it in.

Peter, Maggie, and Sienna were posed together, all of them dressed up. Sienna looked to be about ten. She wore a floor-length dress of ruby-red fabric that made her look like a childish Snow White with her dark hair and pale skin—except for the tortoiseshell glasses she wore. She was smiling broadly. Maggie’s hand rested on Sienna’s shoulder, and Peter stood next to his wife, smiling as he leaned in. The photo was lovingly framed, hung in a place of honor.

I stared for longer than I should have. I couldn’t help it. The people in that picture were alien to me, their life so far from mine we could be from different planets. This house that was so lived-in and welcoming, these people who loved each other—I tried to imagine what it was like to grow up like that, but I couldn’t. I may as well imagine what it was like to live as a giant squid, miles under the ocean. I had no clue.

That thought made something sharp slide through my chest. Pain, maybe. Envy. At the same time, I was glad that this was Sienna’s life, her childhood. I was glad she didn’t have a life like mine.

At the end of the hall was another small, winding set of stairs. The attic, maybe. I walked to the bottom of the steps and made my voice work. “Maplethorpe?”

“Up here,” came the reply.

I set my stockinged feet on the steps and climbed carefully so I wouldn't break my neck. The steps led to an opening in the ceiling, and I fit my head through, then my shoulders. The whole thing was awkward, especially for a guy my size. It was like climbing into a submarine.

When I was waist-deep in the steps, I looked around. The attic wasn't a dusty storage space; it was a cozy living area with a sofa and coffee table. The walls were lined with shelves, all of them filled with vinyl records. A turntable sat on a cabinet with speakers on either side. The lid of the turntable was open and a record was on it, though it wasn't playing.

Sienna sat on the sofa, a laptop in her lap. She was wearing black leggings and a hip-length tee, her feet bare. Her dark hair was unstyled and messy, as if she'd run her fingers through it and not bothered with anything else. She had no makeup on. She was staring at me from behind her glasses, and she didn't look even the least bit surprised to see me.

I made myself look at her. It was fucking painful, because she was so wildly beautiful in that moment—her hair mussed, her body relaxed, her knees up, her eyes fixed on mine—but I made myself do it. I put my hands on the railing. I looked, at the moment, like a man who had been cut in half. “Can I come up?” I asked.

She shrugged in answer.

I grunted and climbed the rest of the way into the attic. I couldn't quite stand up in here without cracking the top of my head against the sloped ceiling, so I crouched like a monster in an old movie. The window on the front wall let in the evening light, and Sienna also had a lamp on next to her elbow. “You hiding up here, Maplethorpe?” I asked.

“It's the best place in the house to work,” she replied.

“It's a fucking hobbit house.”

“It only seems so for people who are freakishly large.”

“Or it's made for people who are freakishly small, except for their brains.”

“A nerd house, then,” she said, which was objectively funny. I barked a laugh.

“My god,” Sienna said. “Actual laughter. I should document that somehow, like they do on nature shows.”

“I may not be a laugh riot, but at least I don't live in a nerd house,” I said. “You gonna move your legs so I can sit, or are you gonna make me crawl on

the floor?”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” she shot back, but she closed her laptop and moved her feet off the sofa, making room for me.

I tried to sit gently on the sofa, but it still groaned when I put my weight on it. She probably thought I was an oaf. “You don’t seem surprised to see me,” I remarked.

Sienna put her laptop on the table, and for the first time, I noticed that her cheeks were flushed. Anger? Embarrassment? Lust? The burning desire to tell me to fuck off? I had no way of knowing. “You said we were going to talk,” she answered me with another shrug, not meeting my eyes anymore. “So here you are.”

“Yeah, sure.” I pointed at the window. “But that window looks over the front driveway. You were watching me like a stalker, Maplethorpe. Admit it.”

She blushed harder, her gaze still downcast. She parted her lips to say something, then decided against it, pressing her lips together and shaking her head.

She was so close. I wanted to lean over, take her face in my hands, breathe her in, taste her. She’d kissed me back—I hadn’t mistaken that. It felt like a dream now, that this woman had kissed me back.

“What?” I asked her. “What were you going to say?”

She shook her head again, ran a hand through her hair. She looked tired and smart and like she just woke up, fucking beautiful. “I don’t know where to start,” she said.

I scratched the back of my neck. She was right; there was too much to say. “Here’s where we start,” I told her. “You said you didn’t know which one of us is supposed to apologize, Sienna. The answer is me.”

She looked up at me, her gaze wide with surprise.

“I yelled at you,” I said. “It was shitty of me, and I shouldn’t have done it. I know you think I’m—” She was still staring at me, her expression unreadable, and the feelings rose up in me. My throat choked closed. My words left me. I scrubbed my hands over my face, leaned my elbows on my knees, and closed my eyes. She hated me, and I was tired, so tired of being that guy. The guy that pissed everyone off, the guy that everyone hated. It was fucking exhausting, being him, and it was Sienna that made me feel it, made me wish that I was someone else. Someone better.

“I shouldn’t have yelled at you,” I said again, starting over, then realized

that, like an idiot, I hadn't said the right words yet again. "I'm sorry. I came here to say that. I'm really fucking sorry."

I heard her exhale a shaky breath. I was still too chicken to look at her. I kept my hands over my eyes, massaged my forehead with my fingertips.

"I'll do the interviews," I said. "All the interviews you want. We can talk about my stepfathers. We can talk about Chase. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"Stone," she said.

"I don't like to talk about it," I went on. "I mean—fuck. No one likes to talk about that stuff, right? No one wants to hear about my shit. But I get worked up if it comes up. It's an old habit, I guess. I'll get past it. I'll answer all of your questions." I pressed my hands against my forehead, wincing at myself. I wasn't a poet like Denver, I wasn't a nice guy like Neal, and I wasn't friendly and sociable like Axel. When I was with those guys, I leaned on them to be all of the things I wasn't. When I was alone, my faults were more glaring.

"Okay." I felt Sienna shift on the sofa beside me, and her bare feet lowered to the floor. "I accept. And I'm sorry, too. I crossed a line. Not by interviewing Darren," she clarified, because she was always a journalist. "But the way I talked to you about it was insensitive. I knew it would upset you—talking about that would upset anyone—and I sprang it on you without warning before one of the biggest shows of your career." She sighed, taking her glasses off and tossing them on a side table. She glanced at me. "How did the show go that night?"

I shrugged. I'd been off-balance when I went onstage, but I'd locked it down. "I played it. I always do."

She nodded. "Right. Stone Zeeland, the pro."

Her cheeks were still flushed, and she looked like she wanted to say words she wasn't saying. There was something going on in that brain of hers, and I had no idea what it was. For once, I got a taste of what she'd experienced, trying to figure me out for all of those weeks. She ran her palms over her knees nervously, then stood up and walked to the turntable.

When the tour started, Sienna's dark hair had been long down her back. But Brit had given her a haircut—none of us escaped Brit's scissors during the tour—and her hair was shoulder length now, with a light curl to it and pieces falling around her face. It made her look younger somehow and yet very grown up. Sexy, but Sienna was always sexy. The subtle way her hips

moved under her tee was unmistakable to me. Sienna could wear a potato sack and I'd not only recognize her, I'd be unable to look away.

With her back to me, she took the record off the turntable and put it back in its sleeve. She leafed through the other records sitting there, her weight shifting to one hip. I didn't even pretend I wasn't staring at her, that simple movement, while every part of me ached.

She was perfect, at least to me. I'd been a rock star for half my life, and I'd never seen a more perfect woman. I had the same mix of feelings I always had when I looked at her: the crushing desire to touch her, the need to listen to her talk about anything at all, the urge to protect her. If anyone even looked at Sienna wrong, I'd rip him apart.

When had this started? I'd first laid eyes on her at the second show of the tour, in San Francisco. I'd only heard her name before then. She was trying to get backstage, but we'd taken her off the list, and security was sending her away. I'd glimpsed her and thought, *She doesn't look like I thought she would.* I hadn't pictured that hair, those glasses.

Every time I glimpsed her after that, I'd noticed something new. The way she dressed. The way her nail polish was chipped, then gone, so she must have removed it. The far-away look she got on her face when she was thinking. The sound of her voice, smooth and somehow soothing, even when she was mad. The set of her narrow shoulders, the dip of her waist. That unvarnished pink of her lips. Each thing had lodged in my brain, one after another, unwelcome. Images hooked in like fishhooks. I'd told myself I hated her, but it only got worse and worse.

Then I'd seen her in New Orleans, and I'd acted almost without thinking. It had gotten even worse from there, unbearable. And now this.

"I've been going through my dad's blues collection," she said, oblivious as always to the fact that I was on fire. "It's been fascinating. Educational. You had some stuff I'd never heard in your library, so I've been doing research." She picked out a record. "I like this one." She put it on the turntable and gently placed the needle. The sound was low, slow, smoky. That mix of anguish and sex tinged with sly humor that was the hallmark of the best blues. Songs of oppression layered with nonstop sexual innuendo.

"Yeah, this is good," I said.

She turned around, facing me and squaring her shoulders. "You haven't mentioned the fact that you kissed me."

Ah. So that was what this was about? "I did." I let my gaze fall to her

lips. “You wondering if I regret that part? I don’t.”

“Was it an impulse?” she demanded. “Or had you been thinking about it?”

She had to analyze this, too. Of course. “I’d been thinking about it.”

“For how long?”

“You want a precise timeline?”

“If you have one, yes.”

I shrugged. I had already come this far—I may as well be honest. If she rejected me, I’d just take my crushed soul and go. “Since I got into your car in New Orleans.”

Sienna’s lips parted in shock, and her skin flushed darker. “That long? But I thought—” She rubbed a hand over her eyes, as if she could physically rearrange her memories. “You didn’t let on. You didn’t try anything.”

“Journalistic integrity, remember? Besides, you were stranded.” I frowned. “Come on, Sienna. I do have a few morals.”

She dropped her hands. “That’s the second time you’ve used my name.”

“What are you talking about? I use your name all the time.”

“My first name. You keep using it.”

“You want me to stop?”

“No, I don’t.” She looked shocked that she’d said it. She’d admitted something out loud by saying that, something she hadn’t admitted to herself. “I want you to keep saying it.”

I glanced above my head. I wanted to get up, cross the room, and grab her, but if I did, I’d crack my head on the ceiling and this would turn into a Marx Brothers act. “Come here,” I said instead.

“This is an awful idea,” she said.

“The worst,” I agreed. “Sienna. Come here.”

THIRTEEN

Sienna

I wasn't sure what I expected when I crossed the room to stand between Stone's knees. When I'd thought about sex with him—which was more often than I'd wanted to admit while we were rooming together—I'd imagined he'd be gruff, ready to get down to business. He'd yank my leggings down and get the job done with no need for romance or flowery words. A straightforward exchange. Maybe he'd call me *good girl* once or twice before it was over.

Okay, that part was kind of hot.

But as I stood here, now, I realized for the millionth time that I hadn't seen who he really was. I'd pictured a man who was blunt about sex, but what I'd actually thought was that he'd have no finesse.

I was wrong.

As the music from the record player curled through the air like smoke, he put his hands on the backs of my knees. His big palms warmed me through the fabric, and he squeezed. With that single touch, I lost my breath.

Slowly, ever so slowly, his hands moved up the backs of my thighs. My skin tingled everywhere. Looking down at him, I could see that his gaze was lowered, focused on my body. My T-shirt wasn't tight, I was showing no skin, and I wasn't wearing sexy lingerie. My hair was tousled and I wore no makeup because ever since I'd come home from the tour, all I'd done was

sleep, work, and listen to music. I looked nothing like a seductress, and yet I could have sworn he looked at me as if I were one.

His hands moved higher. He was exploring the feel and shape of me, memorizing it.

I had been thinking about Stone, unable to keep myself from texting him. Now that the tour was finished, and after that awful scene in New York, we should be over. We were incompatible. We could do nothing but insult each other, peppered with the occasional fight. We should be interviewer and subject, bound by a contract, and nothing more.

But we hadn't felt finished, at least to me. To me, after New York, our story felt like it ended abruptly, midsentence, like a book with the last pages ripped out. I wanted to know if he was okay. I wanted to tell him I was sorry. When I drifted to sleep at night, I could still feel his kiss against my mouth, see the look in his eyes when he took my face in his hands and saw that I had been crying. I went back over every conversation we'd had, every time he'd sat silent while I waited for him to say something. The words, I knew now, had been going around and around in his head every time. I wanted to know every one of them.

And now that the pressures of the tour were over and I was in my own bed, I felt something physical for him. I'd had to keep a lid of denial on it, but I let some of that denial go, and now my body went warm when I thought of him, when I thought of that kiss. The only word I could put to it was *craving*. I wanted him in a physical way I hadn't wanted anyone else. It was part of my fascination with him, my desire to know him, to have a piece of him.

So he'd barely left my mind. He'd texted me that we would talk, and I couldn't think of a reply. And then I'd heard a car pull up, and my parents' voices on the driveway, and that familiar grumble. And I'd thought, *He doesn't think it's finished, either.*

I'd watched from the window as he talked to my parents, completely delighting them. He had no idea how easy he'd been in those moments, how relaxed his posture was, how gorgeous he was when he smiled unselfconsciously at my dad because he liked him on sight. Watching him with my parents had made a piece of my heart break off and become his forever. I'd never get it back.

Stone's hands brushed up over my ass, taking in its contours, and his fingertips hooked gently into the waist of my leggings. He hesitated there, as

if giving me the chance to tell him no. In response, I grabbed the hem of my shirt, preparing to lift it. I wanted this.

His hands grabbed my wrists, stopping me. “I want to do it,” he said.

So I let go, and he slowly pushed my shirt up, exposing my bare stomach, then my bra. I lifted my arms and he pulled the shirt off, his movements sure as he tossed it aside.

My bra was the basic cotton kind, but Stone made no comment. He brushed his fingertips down my belly, making my skin shiver, and hooked them into my waistband again. Then he slowly peeled my leggings down, unwrapping me.

I lifted one foot, then the other. He gripped each ankle and tugged the leggings off, then threw them aside, too. Now I was in my cotton underwear, navy blue with stars and crescent moons on it—an old pair I’d found balled up in my dresser drawer. There was nothing of the sex goddess about me, and yet this was the most rawly sexual moment I’d ever had in my life. Standing between Stone’s knees in my attic, with the music playing and the soft twilight coming through the window as he stripped me naked. I couldn’t get enough of the way he looked at me. I wanted him to see me, all of me, and I wanted him to touch me the same way he looked at me.

Only him.

His hands slid to my hips, his thumbs pressing into the soft spots beside my hipbones, and he leaned forward. I thought he’d kiss me, but he paused instead, his breath touching the skin below my belly button. He hovered there, inhaling me, as if he could scent how aroused I was, as if the smell of me was driving him wild. I wanted him to hurry up, and at the same time I wanted this to go on for hours, days.

I put my hands to the back of his neck, felt the warm skin there, and then I tangled my fingers up into his hair. Stone let out a long sigh that was half a groan. His breath fanned over my skin, down between my legs. He leaned in and rested his forehead against me, his hands squeezing my hips as I moved in closer, urging him.

He’d thought about this. He’d admitted it. He hadn’t been indifferent, all those nights he’d let me sleep without worrying. He could have used his power over me in a million different ways—physical, psychological, the power of his fame and prestige. He could have pushed me, seduced me. He could have gotten what he wanted, using a hundred different manipulations to make me give in. I knew now that if he’d been persistent, if he’d said and

done all the right things, he could have worn me down and taken something from me that I knew it wasn't right to give.

But that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted me to give him this freely, because I wanted to, and he was willing to wait for it. If I never wanted it, then he'd walk away and leave me none the wiser.

Now we were in my place, at the time of my choosing. He'd come to me. I put my hands over his and placed his fingers on the waist of my underwear. He pulled them down to my ankles, where I stepped out of them.

I was completely exposed to him now, and he let out another harsh breath. One hand went to the inside of my knee, then moved slowly up the skin on the inside of my thigh, parting me. I made a sound in my throat. I put my hands on his shoulders—they were big and warm, just like I'd imagined—and levered one knee onto the sofa, then the other, straddling him. I lowered myself into his lap.

We were face to face now, eye to eye. I was sitting on his hard thighs, feeling their heat beneath the denim of his jeans. He swallowed, and I watched his throat work. I lifted my arms, a wordless invitation, and he leaned in, reaching around to unclasp my bra at my back. It slid off and I dropped it.

I was completely naked on his lap. I felt vulnerable and incredibly powerful at the same time, and I liked it. I wiggled my hips, adjusting to get more comfortable, and Stone winced, making a pained sound. I realized he was hard, and the knowledge thrilled me.

It was my turn to grasp the hem of his shirt and tug. He lifted his arms, letting me strip it off him. He was glorious under there, an expanse of perfect male skin marked with whorls of unapologetic dark hair, his pecs solid, his shoulders broad. He wasn't skin and bones, this man. He was thick and strong. I put my hands on him, fascinated, my palms just below his collarbones, where I could feel his chest rise and fall with his breath.

"This is a terrible idea," I said again, as my fingertips pressed harder into his skin.

"The worst," Stone repeated, and his big arms came around me, pulling me in close as he kissed me.

It was a rush, kissing him this time. He was everywhere—the rough fabric between my legs, his powerful arms, his hands on my skin. He kissed me deeply and I was ready for it, ready for him, as if we'd done this so many times. Why *hadn't* we done this? I couldn't remember. I felt weightless.

He kissed me for a long time, and a hand smoothed down my back and over my ass, cupping me gently, that possessive gesture he'd done before. It did crazy things to my insides. My skin was oversensitive and my pulse was racing. I'd never done anything like this, but here I was. I'd stripped naked and thrown myself into this man's lap in my parents' attic, and I couldn't shake the feeling that, bad idea or not, I would never regret it.

Stone broke the kiss, and his hand trailed over my hip, over my thigh to brush between my legs while his other arm banded around my back, holding me steady.

"I'm done waiting," he said in my ear as his fingertips rested against my tender skin. "Give me this, Sienna. Right now."

It was spoken as a command, but his hand didn't move. It wouldn't, I knew, unless I gave him permission. I answered him by rising a little on my knees, then pressing down—a wordless, dirty invitation.

He made a pained sound against the skin of my neck, and his fingers breached me, sliding over me, though he still went slow. There would be no fumbling with Stone, no clumsy probing. Oh, no. For the first time in my life, I was in the hands of a master, a man who could give me any sensation he wanted with the brush of a fingertip in just the right place, a man who could make this go as fast or as slow as he pleased. He was a genius with his hands—I'd seen it a hundred times when he played onstage. Now my body was going to experience it.

"Let go," he said as he got into a rhythm that made my brain turn into nothing but white noise. "I want to see it."

So I did.

I would have come fast, but he wouldn't let me. He got me close, then drew me back. Again, then again. The third time, when my nails were digging into his shoulders and I had a sheen of sweat on my skin, he finally sent me over the edge. I cried out so loudly it echoed through the empty house. If anyone had been home, they would have no illusions about exactly what Stone was doing to me up here.

I slumped forward, resting my cheek helplessly against his shoulder. His skin smelled good. My god, what was happening to me?

Stone's arm left my back and he moved a thumb over my temple, gently brushing my damp hair from my face. I felt that touch everywhere in my body. "I'm not gonna fuck you," he said, his voice thick.

"Okay," I said because I had no willpower. Then I realized what he'd

said. “Why not?”

“Lots of reasons.” His thumb brushed my temple again, and I wanted him to do that over and over, forever. “I don’t have a condom. But even if I did, I wouldn’t do it. You want me to fuck you, I will. But today isn’t that day.”

“Okay,” I said again, because he’d made me certifiably stupid. But that touch of his fingertips...it was doing something to me. Shifting everything around inside me. I wasn’t done yet.

I lifted my cheek and looked at him. His eyes were dark, his expression unreadable. I trailed my hands down over his chest, his stomach, watching a muscle in his jaw twitch and listening to his breath grow harsh.

I pressed a palm over the crotch of his jeans and felt his body jump beneath me, his muscles tense. “Fuck, woman,” he cursed.

I was turned on all over again. I had him exactly where I wanted him, at least for the moment. I rubbed my palm up and down, feeling the shape of him in there. Then I unbuckled his belt, undid his jeans, and rubbed him through the fabric of his boxer briefs.

Stone made a sound like agony and leaned back on the sofa, his chin tilted up. He rubbed both hands over his face. “Finish it or stop,” he said. “Pick one.”

My own breathing was getting short, my pulse picking up again. “Which one do you want?” I asked him.

“Pick one, Sienna,” he said again, a note of desperation in his voice.

I remembered that this wasn’t a whim, an impulse to fool around for him. He’d wanted this—wanted me—for weeks. Instead of intimidating me, the thought made me hot all over again.

“I pick the first option,” I said. I got off his lap, stood between his legs, and lowered to my knees.

I’d completely robbed him of speech. He said nothing as I tugged his jeans and boxers partway down his thighs, then leaned over and took him in my mouth. He cursed once, pressing his hips up, and then he had no more words.

I explored him, learning his shape. He tasted good. This wasn’t an act I did very often—men liked it, so when I was dating someone, I tried to be obliging. But it wasn’t something I’d ever been excited to do. Until now.

I liked every part of this with Stone. The taste and feel of him, the heat of him, and most of all, his reaction. I had Stone completely helpless, capable of nothing but lust and want. Every small thing I did with my lips, my tongue,

made him crazy. I might be able to draw it out, like he'd done for me, but I didn't want to. I wanted him to lose control.

It didn't take long. His breath got harsher, and then a hand tangled into my hair, brushing it back from my face, gripping it. A warning that he was close, because he didn't have any more words.

I ignored the warning. I kept doing what I was doing, and with a loud curse he came, pulsing hard. I swallowed, something else I'd never done. I liked the taste of that, too.

I got off my knees and straddled his lap again. Stone's big arms wrapped around me, pulling me close, as if he needed me just as much as I needed him in that moment. I slid my arms around him and rested my face in the crook of his neck, feeling his pulse, his breath, the warmth of his body soaking into mine.

We stayed that way for a few minutes, or an hour, I couldn't be sure. Then Stone spoke, his voice a low rumble. "Like you said. A bad idea." As if in reaction to his own words, his arms tightened around me.

"Awful," I agreed, squeezing him and inhaling the smell of his skin. "You aren't my type."

"You aren't mine, either."

"I don't even like you."

"Same. We'll never work."

"All we do is argue," I said. "Not to mention our professional conflict."

"It's profound," he agreed.

"Probably insurmountable."

He stroked the back of my neck. "You're supposed to maintain journalistic integrity."

"And you're not supposed to sleep with the journalist who is writing a story about you."

"Definitely not."

"Everything about this," I said, "is ill-advised."

He didn't answer. But he didn't let go of me.

And I didn't let go of him, either.

FOURTEEN

Stone

I'd always been restless. As a teenager, I'd had no problem packing my things and taking off for L.A. After coming back, I'd spent years touring with the Road Kings, and when *that* finished, I bought a plane ticket and traveled the world solo with nothing but a backpack. You might say it was a bit of a compulsion. A therapist would probably have a lot to say about it. But I didn't have a therapist, because therapy required talking.

I had music instead.

I'd been just fine on the last tour, living half of the time on a bus between shows. Bad food, strange hotel rooms, and weird sleep hours were more tiring on my body than they'd been in my twenties, but they were still second nature to me. It was everything else about that tour that was exhausting.

Playing with my bandmates again. Our increasing popularity. Our new backer. Our next album. The songs we were writing and whether they were good enough. Our agent dying. Our future as a band. The decisions we had to make. All the shit I needed to *think* about.

Sienna. The fact that I couldn't stop thinking about Sienna.

If it had been bad during the tour, it was worse now. I'd made it worse. In my usual, how-can-I-fuck-myself-now fashion, I'd had a taste of the woman I couldn't stop thinking about, and now I was truly screwed. I'd gone to her house, and she'd been soft and sweet and ready, and then she'd been *naked*,

and then she'd—

I was supposed to *sleep* with that image in my head? Jesus Christ. I was only a guy, and a pretty stupid one at that. I wasn't gonna just say, *Well, that was pleasant. I wonder what's on TV.* No, I was gonna lie awake in bed every night, thinking about my existence in the universe and wondering why I'd ever been born, while Sienna probably thought she'd made an embarrassing mistake, if she thought about me at all.

I'm good at doing my own head in.

The band was still on pause, waiting for Axel, but I needed to work, and I couldn't work alone. So I ended up at Denver's house.

I'd texted first. Denver had a girlfriend now, and I couldn't just drop in unexpectedly, rolling him out of bed and telling him to get his ass in gear. All of my bandmates were pairing up, which was good for me, because maybe they'd be less irritable and annoying if they were getting laid regular. It made the domestic arrangements dicey, though.

Denver had told me to come over, which meant he wasn't banging Callie in that particular moment, so I took my chance. I parked at his bungalow. Summer was over, and it was almost October, with the scent of fall in the air.

This neighborhood had been rundown when Denver bought his house years ago. At the time, the house had been a fixer-upper that went for dirt cheap. Like everything else in Portland, though, the area was getting more expensive. The neighbors who had late-night screaming fights, grew weed in their backyard, and smashed beer bottles on the sidewalks were moving out, and nicer people were moving in. Those nicer people were definitely going to hate him.

I knocked, and Callie's voice called to come in. It was a domestic Saturday-morning scene in here. Callie was in the kitchen, looking for something in a cupboard. She waved at me. Denver was sprawled on the sofa in his open-plan living room, a cup of coffee by his elbow and a notebook in his lap. Aside from the sofa and the TV, the rest of the room held Denver's music collection, his stereo, and the equipment he hadn't moved to our rehearsal space. An acoustic guitar sat on a stand. Binders were stacked on the floor. One of Denver's flannel shirts was tossed in a corner. He was wearing plaid sleep pants and a T-shirt, his bare feet up on the coffee table.

"Morning," Denver said.

"Hey." I took my jacket off, unlaced my boots. I didn't stand on ceremony with my bandmates—none of us did. We'd lived together on a bus

for too long, including for the last ten weeks. Still, it changed things with a woman in the picture. I had to be a little polite.

“Want some coffee, Stone?” Callie asked.

“If you got some, yeah.”

“I’m pouring mine now.”

I walked into the kitchen. Callie wasn’t a bombshell, but she had looks that grew on you. She had dark blond hair—currently tied in a messy ponytail—and nice eyes. When she smiled, she lit up. She was quiet, like me, but she had a confident tilt to her chin and a sharp sense of humor. She was a talented pianist who taught piano lessons and played jazz at a club a few nights a week. She dressed modestly, but she probably looked pretty good under there. If she asked Denver to swim to Antarctica and bring her back a penguin, he’d put a jacket on and be out the door in minutes.

She poured my coffee while I dug in the fridge for the milk. Callie reached past me and grabbed a single-serve container of yogurt. “Want some?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Tastes like feet.”

“You’re not wrong.” She stared at the label. “Do you think it’s actually good for gut health, like it says?”

I poured milk into my coffee. “Who cares, if it tastes like feet?”

Callie blinked. “Good point.” She threw the yogurt in the trash. “Freedom.”

I felt myself smiling at her. “You play last night?”

She smiled back at me. “Yes, I did, and I was excellent. You should come sometime.”

“You told us never, ever to come to your gigs, or you’d never speak to any of us again.”

She picked up her coffee. “I may have been a little extreme. Denver and Axel came to one of my gigs, and it wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be.”

“You yelled at me about that,” Denver reminded her from the sofa.

“Because you disregarded my wishes,” Callie replied past my shoulder. “And I don’t yell.”

I took my coffee cup, put it down on a table, and picked up Denver’s guitar. I can’t work properly without a guitar in my hands. “Jesus, Denny, these strings,” I said, running my fingers over them.

He looked up from his notebook. “I know. I haven’t had time to restring it.”

“You got strings?”

“In the cabinet under the stereo.” He tossed aside his notebook and picked up a different one. “You don’t have to restring it.”

“The hell I don’t.” I found the strings and dropped to the other end of the sofa, the guitar in my lap. I had done this so many times, I could restring a guitar in my sleep.

“I’ll leave you guys to it,” Callie said. “I have a student at noon. And I have to go home and hang out with Elmer. He’s lonely.” Elmer was her cat.

I fussed with the guitar while Denver opened a third notebook, looking for something he’d written. Callie got ready to go and ran her fingers through his hair, gently brushing through the long, dark strands as he bent over his notebook. Something about the gesture made my chest hurt. “You’re already in your head,” she said to him. “I’ll talk to you later.”

He looked distracted, but he caught her wrist and kissed the inside of it before letting her go. “I’ll call you. Text me when you get home.”

“It’s daylight,” she said.

“Do it, please.”

Then she was gone. We worked in silence for a while, me restringing the guitar and Denver paging through his notebook. He’d always been a poet, ever since he was a kid. His parents had abandoned him, and he’d bounced from relative to relative, none of them wanting him for very long. He’d been beat up in school, because he was always the new kid, always lost in his poetry. He’d been pretty much homeless when we met. But he always had notebooks. And, fuck, could he ever sing.

It was an easy silence between us, because we’d known each other a long time. But I snuck glances at him when he wasn’t looking. For once, I wanted to break the silence. But as usual, I couldn’t find the right words.

“Callie’s going to play on the album,” Denver said, not looking up from his pages.

I thought that over. We’d never used keyboards live, and we’d used them a couple times on our records, played by Denver or Neal. They didn’t suck, but having someone of Callie’s caliber on keys would be huge. “Keys would sound good in ‘Exile.’”

“Exactly what I thought. And I’m working on something new. I’m calling it ‘Raven’ for now. It’s different, a little trippy. A psychedelic feel.” He found the page he’d been looking for and put a finger on it. “I had some ideas a few weeks ago, wrote them down. I’m ready to start fleshing it out. Keys

would be great with what I'm hearing in my head."

"Fine with me," I said. "Did you talk to the others about it?"

"It was Neal's idea," Denver said.

"And Axel will be in."

That made it a done deal. It's how we handled band business.

Denver showed me the scribbled page in his notebook, and I put down the guitar strings to read it. It didn't make much sense yet, but I let the words flow through my mind, just to see if I heard any music with it. And I did.

I nodded, handing the notebook back. "Let me get these strings done and we'll work on it."

"Okay." He grinned at me. "Now, ask what you want to ask."

I scowled at him. "What?"

"You keep looking at me like you want to ask something."

Fuck him. Fuck people who had known you so long they could read you too well.

But I did want to ask him things. What it felt like to be with Callie the way he was, the two of them together. How it had happened. How they made it work. What it was like to actually be with the woman you were crazy about.

I wanted to tell him about Sienna. I wanted to ask him what he thought I should do.

I couldn't do that. Could I?

I didn't have words for a minute. Denny waited, patient. Then I said, "Is Callie going to move in with you?"

"Nope," he replied. "I asked her, and she's not ready. She likes her apartment and her cat. She has a piano at her place that wouldn't fit here." He looked around. "And she lives in a studio, so if I moved in there, I'd be in her lap. Which she also doesn't want."

"That bother you?" I asked him.

"Nope," he said again. "We'll figure something out eventually. In the meantime, it's probably for the best. I wouldn't want to live with me, either. I'm basically a stray dog."

I nodded. I knew what he meant. I could clean up after myself—I'd learned that early—but I kept weird hours, came and went randomly, and almost never cooked and ate a proper meal. I was trying to get better at showering, but it was taking effort.

I scratched the back of my neck. "Angie asked me out," I said. "On a

date.”

Denver’s eyebrows rose in surprise, but he didn’t say anything.

“I went to dinner with her,” I continued. “I let her down in person. She deserved that. Nothing happened.”

He let out a breath. “Okay.” For once, he didn’t rib me. “That must have been awkward.”

“She’s really fucking nice,” I said. “Her husband died and she’s lonely, that’s all. She’s smart as shit. I think we should let her handle everything for us. Not just the record deal, everything. Get her to manage us. Give her the cut she wants. I think she’s perfect for it, and I think we can trust her.”

Denver nodded. “Okay. We should get something in writing. Draw up a contract.”

“I’m going to give Sienna her interviews,” I said, because I could always dance around what I wanted to say without saying it. “You don’t have to worry about the *Soundcheck* thing anymore.”

Denver blinked, patient. I could kick his ass for knowing me like this.

“She found out about Chase,” I said. “On her own.”

That surprised him. He flinched, looked up at the ceiling. Then back at me. “I’m sorry, man,” he said. “That must have flipped you out.”

I shrugged, my throat tight. “It was twenty years ago.”

“Twenty years,” Denver said, “doesn’t mean a fucking thing.”

A weight lifted from my shoulders. Because Denver got it. He just did.

Twenty years or not, I could still see Chase. I could still hear his voice. I could still smell the old car we took to L.A. and hear the music we’d played on the trip down—I’d never be able to listen to the Pixies again.

I could still hear the silence of our apartment the day I’d come home and known that somehow he’d left, even though he was still there. I could still feel the moment I’d known it was too late, that I would give everything I had for a rewind button to take me back a few hours.

I’d written “Fuck You California” because I was angry about it. But maybe I felt other things, too.

“If you ask her not to write about it,” Denver said, “I think she’ll listen.”

He was right. She would listen, and not just because we’d done what we’d done in her attic. She’d listen because she was trying to tell the real story, not just whatever was sensational. I hadn’t understood that in New York, but I understood it now.

“She can write about it,” I said. “I won’t stop her. It’s the truth. If she’s

writing, she may as well write the truth.”

He didn't have an answer for that, and I bent to the guitar again, fixing the last string.

Denver turned the page in his notebook and picked up a pen. “If she didn't like you,” he said, “she would never have stayed in your room. You know that, right?” He glanced at me. “Sometimes, the smart ones, the ones who aren't impressed by fame—they're harder to win. They don't care about bullshit. You have to work at it. You have to be better than you were before. But when they like you, if you earn it, they give you everything. You just have to be patient.”

My throat tried to close again. Sienna was nine years younger than me, smarter than me, just starting her career. Nothing about us would work.

I picked up the guitar and played a few notes. It sounded much better than before, just needed a few minutes of tuning. “Enough talking,” I said. “Let's get this song down.”

“Yeah,” Denny said. “Let's do that.”

FIFTEEN

Sienna

“Of course,” the woman sitting across from me said, “dating a musician is the worst possible idea.”

I looked up from the note I was writing. “Excuse me?”

“You know, the usual.” She ticked items off on her fingers. “The drinking. The drugs. The nonstop cheating. Never home. Irresponsible. Always broke. Unreliable. He’ll dump you and forget you in a heartbeat.” She lowered her hand. “Right? Any woman with self-respect runs the other way.”

I kept my features schooled, willing myself not to show a reaction. This was an interview, and I was a professional. This was my career, not a comment on my personal life.

Besides, Stone and I weren’t dating.

Raine Baker picked up her mug of tea. I’d been trying to pin down the words to describe her while we sat here in this coffee shop, and now they came into my head: Raine had the air of a real, honest-to-goodness grownup.

She was in her midthirties, beautiful, with a slim body and long, toned legs. She had a successful, self-made career as a real estate agent. She was wearing a well-tailored pencil skirt and a silk blouse because we were meeting in the middle of her workday. Her makeup was on point. She was the mother of a thirteen-year-old girl who was already very cool. She’d been

married and divorced, and she owned a house.

She was maybe seven years older than me, and she was a freaking *adult*. She likely didn't work in her dad's attic. She probably knew all about things like under-eye creams and what the price of eggs should be and how life insurance worked. My own mom would probably ask Raine for advice.

It should be intimidating, talking to her. But I'd seen her much messier when she visited Neal during the tour, and the weeks on the road with the Road Kings had given me confidence. They'd been jerks to me, and I'd survived it. I'd driven myself halfway across the country instead of riding on a cushy bus. I'd lived on granola bars, gone without sleep, and driven to Cleveland while sick with a cold. I was a lot harder to intimidate now than I'd been before I left.

I should probably thank the Road Kings for that. But I wasn't going to.

"So dating a musician is a bad idea," I said to Raine, "and yet you just told me that you and Neal are back together."

"That's now," Raine said. "But when we first met, when I got pregnant—we were both so young. And he was on the road. We could never have made it work, settling down together and raising a child. That's why we didn't get together back then."

I nodded. I knew much of this story from Neal, who had told his side in one of our interviews. Neal and Raine had spent years apart while he'd pursued music and she got married, then divorced. Now, during this tour, they'd reconnected at last, and Raine and Amber had moved into Neal's house. It was honestly romantic, two people who had been meant for each other for a long time finally getting together.

"I've always tried to be the responsible one," Raine was saying. "I've always had all the details lined up, a plan. Neal is the opposite of that. He just lets things roll. He makes plans on the fly. He likes to have fun. So it seems like we're too different to work, right? Like we don't have anything in common. But he's more mature now. He knows how to be serious about me and Amber, but at the same time, he's still that carefree guy who's a little bit wild." Her gaze went unfocused. "Lord, he's hot." She blinked. "Don't print that part."

I made a show of picking up my pen and writing *Neal is hot* in my notebook, even though I was recording this conversation on my phone, which was sitting on the table between us.

"Very funny," Raine said.

“It’s the musician problem.” I said the words without thinking too much, but Raine’s eyebrows rose. “You know, the weird pull they have on women. I don’t think anyone can explain it.”

“There’s definitely some black magic where rock stars are involved,” Raine agreed. “But tell me. Are you speaking from personal experience?”

She was looking at me like she knew. But she couldn’t possibly know, could she?

She wouldn’t know what had happened in my attic, unless Stone had gone blabbing—which he wouldn’t do if you tortured him with hot pincers. But did she know about our roommate situation on the road? How?

If Raine knew, who else knew?

If *Soundcheck* found out, my job could be in trouble.

“My job is to write about musicians,” I said, my voice surprisingly calm, considering how much I was panicking. “I’ve observed this problem many times. I don’t need to experience it to know it exists.”

There. That wasn’t a lie at all, and I didn’t have to admit that I’d been naked in Stone Zeeland’s lap, and I’d ridden his amazing fingers, and then I’d gone down on my knees.

The musician problem, indeed.

In the days since it had happened, I’d tried to feel bad about it. I’d tried to let the guilt in, the shame—and nothing had appeared. What we’d done was all kinds of wrong, and yet if I could go back in time, I’d do it all over again. Actually, I’d have gotten to the point much faster, so that Stone and I could have time for a larger variety of activities. That was how much fun it had been.

I wasn’t worried about my professional output when it came to Stone. What was going to happen—was I suddenly going to lose my sense of perspective because I’d had an orgasm? Was I going to ditch all of my principles and write a story about his dick size? If I was honest with myself, I’d never worried about the act of fooling around with Stone. I was only worried about anyone knowing about it.

And what did he think? He wouldn’t tell anyone, especially not his bandmates. *Soundcheck* would never hear it from him. If there was one thing you could count on Stone for, it was impenetrable silence. He didn’t even talk about things that *weren’t* his personal sex life.

But maybe, after thinking about it for so long, he’d gotten it out of his system. Maybe he’d gotten what he wanted and had his fun. Maybe, to him, I

was just another one-time thing.

That thought gave me a sharp pang of panic.

“Look,” Raine was saying. “I know we all mistrusted you at first. The band was pretty hard on you. But I’m coming around to liking you, Sienna. At least in my case, you can see why it took me a while to try.”

I shrugged and turned the recorder off. Neal and Raine were very protective of their daughter, and they didn’t want me writing about her or publishing any details about her. I got it, and yet I said, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but Amber doesn’t interest me. She’s very nice, but she’s not a central part of my story. She isn’t a Road King.”

Raine blinked at me, surprised.

“So maybe,” I continued, “you could trust me to understand what the important parts of the story are, and which ones to leave out. Maybe you could trust that I’m not out to ruin some young girl’s privacy. Maybe, for even a few minutes, just one of you could give me the benefit of the doubt instead of assuming I’m evil, an idiot, or both at once.”

Instead of getting bitchy at that, Raine looked thoughtful. “Okay. I get that.”

But I wasn’t done, because once I got going, I really got going. “I understand that I’m younger than you, and I’m relatively green, and you don’t have any reason to think that I’m good at what I do. But I assure you, I am. I spent ten weeks on the road with your boyfriend—with all of them—and even when they didn’t talk to me, I was very observant. I talked to a lot of other people. I know these guys better than any of you think I do. I figured out who William Hale is. And most importantly, I know their music.” I ran a hand through my hair. “I saw every Road Kings show, and I know their music better than you do, better than Amber does. So I’m glad that you’re talking to me today, but I don’t actually need an interview with you. I’ve done just fine without it so far, and if you don’t talk to me, I’ll still write my piece and it’ll turn out amazing. Because that’s how good I am.”

Raine was smiling by the end of this speech. She didn’t even look offended. “Sienna,” she said, “please, please tell me you talked to the guys in the band like this.”

I picked up my coffee, which was mostly cool. “I may have yelled one or two lectures at them. It was a long tour.”

“No wonder they like you.”

That surprised me. “Do they?”

She laughed. “If they didn’t like you, they would have left you in the dust at the side of the road.”

They almost had—except for Stone. Stone could have ignored me in New Orleans, or he could have driven me to the airport and bought me a one-way ticket home himself.

He could have gotten rid of me. Instead, he’d found a way to keep me on the tour.

So he’d liked me a little bit.

Maybe he still did.

ON MY WAY to my car, I screwed up my courage and texted Stone.

I’d thought about how to text him more than I wanted to admit, wondering exactly what tone to take. I decided to go with our usual mode of mutual insults.

SIENNA

I don’t want to interrupt your busy schedule of self-important rock star navel gazing, but I have a question.

His reply was immediate.

STONE

Are you sexting me, Maplethorpe?

I smiled at my phone, then bit my lips to make myself stop.

SIENNA:

I do not sext.

Also, I did not know you knew the word sext.

STONE

I am aware of words, Maplethorpe. I just don’t use them as much as you do. What do you want?

I got into my car and sat in the driver’s seat, still texting.

SIENNA

Who knows about our roommate situation on the tour?

A brief pause.

STONE

Confession time. Neal saw you leaving my room in Detroit. But he kept his mouth shut, because I threatened to punch his head in if he didn't.

Oh, God. Neal knew? That explained the look Raine had given me. He'd told her.

SIENNA

Who else?

STONE

Denver figured it out.

SIENNA

What? How?

STONE

That one's your fault. You told him they'd stopped booking you a room.

I had said that, when I'd given Denver one of my long, angry lectures. So he'd figured it out, which meant Callie knew, too.

SIENNA

And Axel?

STONE

No one told Axel. But he knows now.

I groaned. Brit had figured it out, and since Axel and Brit were now a couple, that meant everyone knew.

I let that thought simmer for a minute while I strategized. A text came in from Stone.

STONE

Maplethorpe?

What's this about? Is someone messing with you?

Was he worried about me? That couldn't be right. I typed an answer.

SIENNA

No, but I have a meeting at the Soundcheck offices tomorrow morning and I'm wondering if my career is about to crash and burn.

STONE

It won't. Soundcheck won't hear about it from us.

SIENNA

Are you sure?

STONE

The tour is over. Besides, it's band business. We don't talk about band business outside of the band.

I thought about that. None of them had spoken about Axel's rehab until he told me about it himself. If any of the other Road Kings knew about Gardens on Mars and Chase Mackay—and I had to assume they did—none of them had talked about that, either. They were very good at not talking to outsiders. They'd all denied that a new album was in the works, yet here they were, working on a new album.

So it was hard to imagine one of the Road Kings, or their girlfriends, calling up my bosses to gossip about me and Stone.

SIENNA

That's admirable, but I'm not in the band.

STONE

I recall you being there every day of a ten-week tour, at every show. That makes you band business. No one will talk.

SIENNA

That sounds oddly violent. Are you guys the mob?

STONE

If the mob doesn't know what day it is and is currently arguing about bass riffs, then yes, we are the mob.

I was still thinking of a funny comeback when he texted again.

STONE

Come over to my place tonight.

If you want.

I flushed hot, the reaction sudden and intense. I had to suck in a breath. I

hadn't let myself think about the possibility of doing that again, how or where it might happen, or whether he wanted to. And he'd just come out and asked.

But he thought I might say no, which made my heart twist just a little behind my ribcage. And I knew, with a warm rush of certainty, that I wanted to see him again. Whatever this was, whatever we were going to do, I wanted more of it. I wanted to explore it. We didn't make sense, yet it had been really, really good.

SIENNA

I've checked my schedule, and I seem to be free.

STONE

Interesting. What do nerds usually do in the evenings, anyway?

SIENNA

Play chess against ourselves and practice kissing the backs of our hands. But I can do that tomorrow night.

There was a pause, and somehow, I knew he was laughing.

SIENNA

Speaking of nerds, you have to give me your address, unless you want me to show up for a hookup at your mom's house.

STONE

Again, interesting. You don't sext, yet you know all about hookups.

SIENNA

I am aware of hookups, Stone. I just don't do them as often as you do.

God, this was fun. I'd never had fun texting a man like this. I could do this all day. I was sitting in my car, pressing my lips together so I wouldn't grin like a fool.

A text came in with Stone's address.

STONE

If you think I do this often, you have a lot to learn about me, Maplethorpe.

What did that mean? Why was it sexy? My skin flushed hot, then cold, then hot again as I remembered the feeling of being naked against him, his

lap between my thighs, the warmth and tickle of hair of his chest against mine. Based on what I'd seen on tour, I didn't think he did things like that all the time with different women. Then again, he was famous enough to get plenty of offers. And I didn't know him all that well, did I? Stone went to a lot of trouble to keep himself from me. From everyone.

SIENNA

So you're saying I'm not being added to a rotation of regulars?

STONE

You have so many questions. You don't get answers until you come to my place tonight. And I do not care what fucking time.

SIXTEEN

Stone

“Wait.”

I stopped what I was doing. Sienna was pressed against the wall in my apartment, her legs wrapped around my waist, her arms around my neck, her glasses off, her lips ruddy from kissing me. An overnight bag had been dropped at our feet. She’d barely made it through the door.

I was losing my fucking mind.

I paused, but I didn’t let her go, didn’t drop my hands from where they cupped her ass, holding her up. “Talk,” I said.

She licked her lip. She was so close that I could see—was that makeup? Some dark eyeliner, mascara. Sienna didn’t wear makeup often. I’d seen a couple of well-used pieces on the bathroom counter on tour, but she had naturally dark lashes, those perfect lips, flawless skin. Had she worn makeup tonight for my benefit? I had no way to know.

“We should set some ground rules,” she said.

I tried to focus on what she was saying, but she was wrapped around me, and what was that scent? It wasn’t perfume. Some kind of Sienna smell, soft and warm, like a lit candle. I remembered, with the full clarity of a man haunted, what she’d looked like naked, and I needed to see it again.

“Ground rules,” I said stupidly, nuzzling along the warm, perfect line of her neck, brushing my beard along her skin.

She shivered so hard I felt it everywhere. The blood rushing to my dick was clanging like a fire alarm, but Sienna kept talking.

“We keep this between us,” she managed to say.

“Fine with me.” I had no desire to swap gossip with anyone anyway.

“I mean, I’m not ashamed.” Her grip on my neck and my waist stayed tight. “That isn’t why. We’re grown adults. But until the story gets turned in, it’s simpler this way.”

I kissed up her neck, nipped her earlobe. She was talking about this being an ongoing thing, at least for a while. Fuck, yes, I was in.

“And this doesn’t affect what I write in the story.” Her voice was admirably calm, considering I was making her shiver again. “I’m capable of objectivity, no matter what you do to me.”

I smiled against her skin. Did I think she was going to write some moony story about me, just because I planned to make her come as many times as she’d let me? No, I did not. This was Sienna. “Write whatever the fuck you want,” I said. “Write that I’m an asshole. That I’m a shit guitar player. That I’m ugly and stupid. It’s all fine with me. I won’t even ask to read a draft.”

“Stone, you are none of those things,” she chided me.

“What else?” I was getting impatient. I squeezed her ass. The jeans she wore were frustrating, but she looked sexy in them. She wore them cuffed at the ankle with Doc Marten boots, topped with a black sweater in some kind of drapery cut. I could see her collarbones, and her dark hair was down, brushing her shoulders. She looked fuck-hot. I pressed my mouth to the tender spot just below her jaw and sucked gently, running my tongue along her pulse.

“Oh, my god,” she breathed, her nails digging into me through my tee.

“Rules,” I reminded her, then sucked on her skin again, just enough to make her feel it, not enough to hurt. I could sense already that Sienna was not the kind of woman who liked rough. What she *did* like, I planned to find out.

“You still have to do the interviews!” She forced the words out in a near-gasp as I let go and nipped gently, making the skin of her neck go red. I’d stop now, because I didn’t want to leave a mark. But that red was exactly what I wanted.

“I already said I would,” I told her. “Now. Anything else?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I can’t think—”

I shut her up by kissing her, long and deep. She kissed me back, her fingers digging into my hair, her legs squeezing, her center pressing against

me in an unconscious move. She thought she was ready. She had no idea what ready was.

I went slow, kissing her for a while longer. Then I carried her through the apartment to my bedroom, where I dropped her gently on the bed. “I did it for you last time,” I said. “It’s your turn. Strip.”

Her lips parted, but she unlaced her boots and kicked them off along with her socks. She sat up and put her hands on the hem of her sweater.

“I don’t usually do this,” she said, because she was Sienna, and she had to talk through just about everything. That was fine with me. Lately, Sienna was the only person I was interested in listening to.

I raised my eyebrows. “You don’t usually take your clothes off?”

“You know what I mean. I don’t usually do a strip show. For a guy.” Her cheeks flushed. “I mean—oh, screw it. You’ve already seen everything.” She pulled the sweater off and tossed it aside, then unbuttoned her jeans. I watched her lift her hips and slide them down.

She was wearing a black bra and matching black panties. Nothing too over the top, but I still stood there like I’d never seen a woman in her underwear before, like some kid in the 1950s with his first *Playboy*. I could think of nothing to say.

Sienna watched my face and bit her lip. “Okay, I admit I went to a little bit of trouble. This is the best set I own. You know, to make up for last time. I wasn’t expecting last time.”

I cleared my throat. “It’s nice,” I managed.

Her eyebrows rose a fraction. I should probably say something poetic right now. There was no chance I was going to do that. None at all.

Sienna bit her lip again. I was wasting time. I stepped forward to lean over her on the bed, but she brought her legs up, closing them and bending her knees. “Your turn,” she said. Her gaze dropped down me. “I like these clothes, by the way.”

I frowned. I was wearing navy blue sweats and an old tee. After the hours spent at the studio, I’d opted to be comfortable. “I didn’t dress up,” I said. “You’ve seen me wear this plenty of times.” I’d had these exact clothes with me on tour.

“And I like it,” Sienna said. “You look different like this. In a good way.”

I was still confused. I had no idea what that meant, but I wasn’t in the mood for discussion. I leaned over her, past her folded knees, and kissed her, parting her lips and tasting her, savoring her mouth. She went all soft, kissing

me back, but she wasn't gonna open her legs until I took my clothes off. Fine, then.

I broke the kiss, pulled off my tee, and tossed it. I dropped my sweats and my boxers, and when she let out a quiet gasp—I had no idea why, since she'd already seen it—I used that second of surprise to put my palms between her knees and part them. Then I tugged her to the edge of the bed and dropped to my knees on the floor.

Her legs were slender and firm, and I ran my palm over her thigh as I kissed the inside of it, making my way to the juncture where it met her pussy. When I got there, I inhaled, letting the scent of her—Sienna, this was the scent of fucking *Sienna*—fill my mind. I smoothed my palm over her, and then I slid a finger under the elastic of her underwear, finding just the right spot on her clit and brushing over it.

Sienna's back arched, and her hips tried to press up from the bed. "Holy shit," she breathed, but that wasn't good enough. I wanted her speechless for once, like me. I found her clit again and circled it with a light touch, experimenting with how much pressure to use.

Her hips pressed up again. "Stone, what is—What are you—" She wasn't even making sense, but she was *still* trying to talk. This woman. I was going to demolish her until she couldn't say her own name.

I kept my finger circling, hitting her in just the right spot. Moving away, then back again, then away. She finally went silent except for some very satisfying gasps, her hands twisting in my bedsheets. That was a little better.

"This is just the first one," I told her as she built and built. "There are going to be more." I'd drawn it out last time, letting her get close over and over before letting her come. Tonight was different.

I kept up the torture, and after a few minutes Sienna went over the edge, crying out. I slid my hand out of her underwear and pulled the panties down her hips.

"Not bad," I told her as she came down. "Let's see if we can do better."

I tossed her underwear away and slid her up on the bed—she was as boneless as a cat—so I could get on my knees on the mattress. I leaned over her and kissed her deep but not too long. I brushed my fingers over her and she squirmed, almost flinching. She was oversensitized, just like I wanted.

I pulled away and reached for my bedside table, opening the drawer and taking out the box of condoms I'd bought this morning. Sienna was still speechless, catching her breath. She'd never done this with a guy who was

willing to put the work in, willing to do what it took. She'd been with some college kid who had gotten himself off as fast as possible. That guy was not me.

I took out a condom and rolled it on while she watched me with dark eyes. I grabbed one of my pillows and slid it beneath her hips. Then I tugged down one bra strap and took her nipple into my mouth, taking my time, working it up. After a minute I lowered the other strap and did the same thing to her other nipple while she made half-crazy sounds.

I had her where I wanted her, sensitized and wound up. I kissed up her neck and her jaw, inhaling her scent as I slid one inch into her, then another. Then all the way in.

Sienna made a noise that was both a gasp and a sigh. The position of her hips made me go deep, and I went slow and gentle, finding a rhythm while not giving her any quarter. I had to focus, reminding myself not to lose control. I had wanted Sienna for so long, and this was my shot. I had to make it last.

As I braced myself, I leaned down and spoke in her ear, the words finally coming. "I do not," I said to her, "do this often. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she breathed, her nails digging into my back.

I needed her to understand. I had done every kind of mindless idiocy a long time ago, and I was done with it. It had been such a fucking waste. That was not me anymore, not for years, not ever again. "What I want is this," I told her. "You, naked underneath me, just like this. Just you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said again, but I wasn't sure if she truly did. That was fine. If I had time, I could get it through to her. She just had to give me time.

I hooked a hand behind one of her knees and lifted it gently, changing her position, and I felt the telltale pulse of her hips. Again, and again.

"Stone, I'm going to come," she breathed.

"Good," I said, because I was disturbingly close myself. It had been too long. Too late, I realized I probably should have gotten myself off before she got here, but I was in it now. I held on for as long as it took. Until I could feel sweat on my back.

She came again, and with relief I let it happen, let it go. Let the feeling wash over me with just this woman, right here in this moment.

Because this moment might never come again.

And if it didn't, I didn't know what I was going to do.

SEVENTEEN

Sienna

The *Soundcheck* offices were in one of the business buildings downtown. Coffee in hand, I brushed shoulders with banker and lawyer types on their way to work.

I was dressed in the most business-formal outfit I owned: long skirt in dark brown animal print, black sweater, silver necklace and earrings, Docs. I'd done my makeup. I'd showered at Stone's, but I hadn't brought a blow dryer, and of course he didn't own one. I'd had to be satisfied with working my product through my hair and letting it air dry in its natural waves. It would have to do.

Still, I thought I looked pretty good when I checked in the mirror in the elevator. I looked smart with an edge of hip. Professional. I did *not* look like a woman who had just spent the night getting her mind blown in Stone Zeeland's bed.

I took a deep breath and met my own eyes in the mirror. I wasn't going to think about that right now.

I was a writer, a real one. I was going to nail this meeting.

I left the elevator and walked down the hall, past an accounting firm and a logistics company. *Soundcheck* didn't have a large space—the state of magazine publishing dictated that most of the employees either worked outside of the office or only came through once in a while. There was a front

desk with a young woman behind it, and behind her was an open office space with workstations for whoever was coming by that day. Around the edges of the open space were the closed-door offices for the editor, the sales manager, and a few of the other staff.

Davis Dean, the editor-in-chief, welcomed me into his office. He was in his early thirties, with a streak of blond in his dark hair and a small silver earring in one ear. His smile was white against his light-brown skin. “Thanks for coming by,” he said. “It’s great to see you.”

“You, too,” I said politely, sitting on the chair opposite his desk. I sipped my coffee.

“I’m sure you’re wondering what this meeting is about.” Davis circled his desk and sat down. “I’ll get right to it. I wanted to clear the air about what happened on the Road Kings tour.”

I took another sip of my drink. I wasn’t going to wade into that. He would have to go first.

Davis shook his head. “I’m really sorry that you got stranded on the road. Things got complicated. It was very dicey all around. The tour had a backer who approved of you at first, then decided they wanted you gone.”

“I know who William Hale is,” I said dryly.

Davis spread his hands in a helpless gesture. “I’m not going to confirm or deny anything, since we signed a confidentiality thing. But we were between a rock and a hard place. We wanted to keep the backer happy, but we also wanted the pieces you were turning in. Because those pieces brought traffic, and the traffic brings subscribers and advertisers.”

I sighed inwardly. I wasn’t particularly angry at *Soundcheck*. Every music publication still in existence was struggling on the verge of disappearing. *Soundcheck* was one of the good ones, independently owned and determined to publish quality pieces about great musicians. They didn’t publish cheesy gossip about the biggest pop stars—the magazine wanted to have its ear to the ground. Cutting a deal with Will Hale would mean a lot of money to them, and I knew they wouldn’t want to go against his wishes, or worse, get into a legal battle.

“I worked it out,” I said.

“Yeah, you did.” Davis smiled again. He was good-looking, and I vaguely realized that a few months ago, I would have classified him as my type. Now, I was sure that I had never known what my type even was, because apparently my type was Stone.

“You did an amazing job,” Davis was saying as my brain tried to wander back to last night. “It was great to have our writer right there, with the Road Kings, as their popularity took off in the middle of the tour. The pieces you sent us were really good, and the traffic has been better than any of us could have asked for. Fans are really getting turned on to the Road Kings, and so far, the band isn’t cooperating with any other publication. Only us.”

“That’s good,” I said. “Did you get the rough draft I sent you last night?”

“I did, and I’m excited about it,” he replied. I’d sent him around fifteen hundred words of my profile of Denver Gilchrist, based on the two interviews I’d done with him so far and the interview with Callie. I still had one more interview with Denver to do, and the article would need revising and polishing, but I had wanted Davis to see where it was headed. “I’ll get some notes back to you tomorrow—I don’t have many. But these articles are going to be great. Are you having problems getting access to the other guys in the band?”

“No,” I said, trying to sound normal. “They’re cooperating.”

“I heard that Stone Zeeland has been causing a problem.”

“He has, um, come around.” I cleared my throat. “Changed his mind.”

“Yeah?” Davis leaned forward. “Man, I’ve been listening to the *Sidewinder* album on repeat. He’s a genius, but I hear he’s difficult. Kind of an asshole.”

I blinked, surprised at how immediately offended I was. I didn’t like anyone calling Stone an asshole, even though I’d called him that—in my mind and to his face—plenty of times.

Stone was a lot of things, I knew now. Yes, sometimes he was a bit of an asshole. He was damaged. He was an overthinker. He was loyal to his friends. He was witty over text. He loved music. He was surprisingly gentle for such a big man. Sleeping with him was like sleeping with a bear that had the body temperature of a small furnace, and I’d really liked it. And when it came to the female body, he *knew* things. Deep, dark, secret, powerful things. Things no man should be capable of knowing.

I was not going to put that in the article.

Davis was looking at me, expecting a response, so I said, “He isn’t really an asshole. He’s just quiet. He doesn’t talk much. I think he’s kind of shy, actually.”

“Shy?” Davis laughed. “Sure, if you say so. Guitarists are notorious for being self-centered egomaniacs.”

“The Road Kings are different. I think I made that pretty clear in the pieces I wrote from the tour. They weren’t partying with groupies or trashing hotel rooms. If they had, I would have written about it. It was an entirely different scene.”

“And people love it,” Davis agreed. “I think the days of giving a bunch of white guys a pass just for being able to play an instrument might be over. No one has much of an appetite to hear about entitled dudes groping teenagers and acting like drunk toddlers. It isn’t the eighties anymore. That shit has lost its charm.” He folded his hands on the desk, warming to his topic. “That’s why I think we’re on to something here. There’s been such a big response to the Road Kings, and I think it’s because they’re actually authentic. We live in a world where too many of our heroes have turned out to be toxic, pathetic, fake assholes. The Road Kings really seem like the real thing. A band to believe in, you could say.”

I blinked. “Well, they’re not heroes,” I hedged. “They don’t grope teenagers, but they’re just normal guys.” They were moody, unpredictable, and they hated being told what to do. I’d heard that Axel had gone streaking on the last tour, buck naked, though unfortunately I hadn’t witnessed it. Also, if anyone called them “a band to believe in” with a straight face, they’d probably laugh. Or puke. Maybe both.

“I’m not asking you to lionize them.” Davis waved a hand. “Not at all. That would make for bland reporting. I want to read about their flaws and their screwups. I want to know how they see the world. I want their life stories. I *want* that authenticity.”

I nodded. That was what I’d been going for, anyway. “I can do that.”

“Good. We’re going to run four profiles, one of each band member. We’ll release them two weeks apart so readers keep coming back. I also want an in-depth look at their recording process. Their agent has agreed to get you access.” When I nodded again, he said, “I’ve got a photographer lined up for you—I’ll give you her contact info. Which leads me to the next thing.”

“The next thing?” I asked.

“The Road Kings aren’t the only authentic band in America,” Davis said. “They aren’t even the only authentic band in Portland. I want you to find who’s good, who’s up and coming, who’s on the verge of breaking out. I want you to find who’s doing something fresh and different. Start local, but if you need to travel somewhere, pitch it to us and we’ll try to find the money. And then I want you and Zena—that’s the photographer—to go find them,

talk to them, listen to them, watch them play, take shots of them, and send us the next big thing.”

There was a moment of quiet as I stared at him, realizing that my dream assignment was landing in my lap. It was actually happening.

“That sounds good,” I managed.

“I’m glad you like it.” He grinned.

My thoughts spun. I wasn’t a salaried employee of the magazine, only freelance. “We’ll have to talk rates,” I added.

Davis nodded. “We’ll talk rates, don’t worry about that.”

“Okay. But if all of that works out, then I accept.”

“Good to hear.” His voice was further away than a moment ago, as if I’d receded partway into a tunnel of my shock. “I can assure you, you’ll never be stranded on the road again. Oh, and before I forget.” He opened a desk drawer and took out an envelope. “Our backer—whose name I do not confirm or deny—told us that what happened with the Road Kings was a misunderstanding. Since you had to pay your own way for the second half of the tour, they have issued you a payment for the amount they estimate you must have spent.” He slid the envelope across the desk to me. “Please tally up your receipts and if you’re owed more than this, let us know. I’m sure we can get it for you.”

I took the envelope and risked a glimpse inside. The number on the check was much, much larger than what I’d spent, considering I’d roomed with Stone and hadn’t paid for my hotel.

I should say something, come clean. But that would mean confessing my rooming arrangement.

Besides, this wasn’t *Soundcheck’s* money, it was Will Hale’s. And Hale could afford it, especially since he was the one who had put me through hell and tried to make me quit the tour.

I had thanked Davis, said my goodbyes, and gone all the way back to my car before I looked at the check again. That number was real.

As in, *I could move out real. I could afford rent real.*

“Holy shit,” I said softly to myself.

I’d done years of college. An eighteen-month internship in San Francisco that hadn’t led to a job. Dozens of spec pieces. Twenty or thirty job interviews. The Travis White interview, which had paid me eight hundred dollars, money I was glad to get. Then I’d done the crazy grind of the Road Kings tour, nearly going broke. And after all of that, I was finally starting my

career for real. I was getting regular, paid work at a job I loved, the opportunity to write from the heart instead of selling my soul.

I could *do* this.

I picked up my phone, then paused. I had the immediate impulse to call Stone, to shout the great news at him. He wouldn't be effusive, but he'd understand how big this was. My parents were my cheerleaders, but I'd never told them how hard the tour was. Stone was the one who knew what it had taken for me to get here.

And I wanted to make him proud of me. His approval was so hard to win, and deep down, I wanted it. More badly than I'd thought.

But that was wrong. None of this was about him, or his approval. This was about me.

Last night loomed in my memory, and suddenly it seemed real in a way that terrified me. Stone and I had had no pretenses last night. He'd seen me as no one else ever had, even guys I'd dated. And I had the feeling I'd seen something he'd never shown to anyone else, too.

I didn't know what to do with that.

Unsure of what to do, I defaulted back to our usual communication: insult over text.

SIENNA

I have very bad news for you.

There was a pause, and then the dots moved.

STONE

What do you want, Maplethorpe?

I couldn't help smiling, and my unease drained away. Maybe we'd attacked each other in bed last night, but this was easy. This meant we were good.

SIENNA

The magazine wants to give me regular assignments.

STONE

I get that's bad news for whoever you write about. Why is it bad news for me?

SIENNA

Because it means you have to admit I'm a real journalist.

STONE

I never said you were a fake journalist. I said you ask too many questions. That is not the same thing.

SIENNA

Now someone is going to pay me to ask questions. So I'm not going to stop.

STONE

There's no telling what people will do with their money, I guess.

SIENNA

Exactly. Also, they said something about a photographer. Which means you get to have your picture taken.

STONE

No.

SIENNA

Sorry, you already agreed, so it's going to happen. I'll make sure you look nice.

STONE

Where can I pick up some Ebola? Because I'd rather get Ebola than have my picture taken.

SIENNA

You're so cute, though.

I added a heart-eyes emoji, just to piss him off.

STONE

I am deleting your number, Maplethorpe.

I sent him the heart eyes again. Then the kiss-face, just to make it worse.

STONE

Please stop, or I will throw up on my bandmates. They hate that.

So they were rehearsing, then. When I'd left this morning, Stone had still been in bed, only half awake, sprawled gloriously with mussed hair and the sheet pulled up to his waist. While I'd showered and dressed, the scene had reminded me a little bit of our time on the road—except now he was naked under the sheet, and it made my knees weak, and I'd really wanted to yank that sheet down and do something filthy to him. I'd never wanted to do that

before.

But he was at their rehearsal space now. Which reminded me that I hadn't been there yet.

SIENNA

I'll be there in an hour.

STONE

Why?

SIENNA

Because I have access, that's why. If you don't like it, take it up with the magazine.

Then I added one more heart-eyes. Just because I could.

EIGHTEEN

Stone

I hadn't said anything when Sienna left this morning. I'd still been in bed while she got ready for the meeting with the magazine. I was half asleep, and last night was intense, and I literally couldn't remember the last time I'd spent the entire night with a woman, and I'd never known what to say the morning after, anyway. She was the only woman who had ever spent the night in this particular apartment, and she was Sienna. So—surprise—I had no words.

Too late, after the door closed behind her, I realized I should have come up with something. Something nice, maybe about her beauty or her smarts or—fuck, I don't know. Just something. But no.

I was going over it in my head as I got ready and left the apartment, walking the few blocks to the Korean grocery store. Jae-Sung, the owner, stocked iced coffee, which he only charged a dollar for. His wife also made homemade kimchi, which they sold in sealed jars. I could probably credit their kimchi for the fact that I never got scurvy.

I mixed a cup of Jae-Sung's coffee, paid him, and gave him a silent salute as I left. His English was spotty, so he didn't talk to me, and I didn't talk to him, even though I was in here every other day when I was home. It was the perfect relationship.

I was headed to the car dealership, but I needed to walk first. It was a nice

day, just cool enough for a sweatshirt, and not raining for once. I pulled up the hood of my sweatshirt and walked until I found myself on Hawthorne, heading toward Mount Tabor. My body warmed up and my brain started to calm.

I was used to this. I'd done a lot of traveling while the Road Kings were broken up, always alone. I could land in a strange city and walk for hours in silence, seeing what there was to see. Nature, architecture, museums—whatever was good. I traveled cheap, with only a backpack, staying in dives and taking trains. I ate cheap. When I'd walked enough of one city, I moved on to the next one. A guy my size didn't get hassled much, though I'd been pickpocketed once or twice. I didn't do touristy things and I didn't get drunk. I didn't make friends. I sometimes got attention from a woman, and I'd know that I could let myself have that, just for a few hours, before I was gone again. But I almost never had.

On tour, I'd gone walking in almost every city, because I wanted to give Sienna privacy in our shared hotel room. I was pretty sure she didn't want me around, staring at her and breathing down her neck every second. I'd walked for hours. She'd never asked me where I went.

Walking was my favorite way to think.

So I walked and I thought. About the band, the album, Sienna. Last night with Sienna. What it was, and what it wasn't. She'd come to me, and she'd wanted something, which I had been happy to give her. She would come to me again. What she didn't want from me was some kind of relationship, one where we held hands and went to Ikea together and got a dog.

I wasn't the Ikea guy, the dog guy, but I knew her. I knew what made her tick. I'd never had a serious girlfriend, but then again, I'd never wanted one. Maybe Sienna would meet the Ikea guy someday, but until then, I planned to keep her to myself if I could. Whatever way I could get her. I'd drifted through my life for too long. It was time to start making plans.

I didn't have time for a dog, anyway.

“Hey, Stone Zeeland!”

I tossed my empty cup into a nearby garbage and looked around. I had circled until I was close to home again. A guy was standing on the sidewalk, grinning, a gym bag over his shoulder. He was about thirty and wore a backward baseball cap. He gave me a shy wave.

“Hey,” I said.

“I thought that was you. I knew you live in Portland, and sometimes I

think, *Man, wouldn't it be cool if I ran into Stone Zeeland one day?* But it's never happened. Until now, I mean. I'm a big fan. This is so cool."

He was babbling. It was fine. I'd met Slash once—he showed up to a club that Gardens on Mars was playing in L.A. to see a friend of his—and I'd nearly thrown up. He likely forgot me thirty seconds later, but I still remembered it. I held out my hand.

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"Stuart." He grabbed my hand and pumped it. "I was at the show a few weeks ago. Incredible. You're the reason I play guitar, man. Though I suck compared to you."

Guitar nerds spoke my language, so we talked gear for a while. Stuart looked like a gym bro, but he was all right. We took a selfie. Eventually I excused myself, turning in the direction of my car.

"Is there an album coming?" he called after me.

"Yeah," I replied. "And keep an eye on the local clubs. You never know where we'll show up."

Stuart didn't even answer that. Instead, he gave a *whoop* sound, as if he was already in the crowd at a concert. I walked to my car, fighting a smile.

BY THE TIME I got to the car dealership, I'd heard from Sienna. Her meeting had gone well. Also, she was coming to watch us work for the first time.

The place was messy. The other guys were already here, sprawled in various places on the sofas, Shimmy behind his drum kit, empty cups of takeout coffee abandoned on the floor. I had the urge to tidy up before Sienna got here, but if I did that, it would give away that I knew she was coming. Which would give away that I'd already talked to her this morning. Which was too much to give away. So she'd have to put up with our mess.

"Greetings, losers," I said, picking up my Les Paul and powering my amp.

"Where have you been?" Neal asked, looking up from his bass.

"None of your business, Watts," I shot back. "But as usual, I have come up with killer shit that is going to make this album halfway good. Behold." I did a quick tuning, then played a riff that had come into my head on the drive

over.

Denver sat up straight, paying attention, but it was Neal that I watched. His eyes narrowed briefly, and I could immediately see the thoughts flying through his head.

“Again,” he said.

Fucking Watts, telling me what to do. But I played it again.

“Oh, I like it,” Axel said.

Neal squinted again. “Drop the tuning and it’ll sound heavy.”

“I don’t want heavy.”

“Yeah, you do.”

We were still arguing about tuning when Sienna came in. Axel got up. “Sienna! We didn’t know you were coming.”

She didn’t look at me. She didn’t let on that she and I had texted about it this morning, after she’d left my bed. My bed, which was still unmade, still smelling of her. “Um, surprise,” she said. “I’m just here to hang out. Do what you were doing. Pretend I’m invisible.”

I risked a look at her. Just one. She was wearing the outfit she’d put on this morning, the skirt and sweater and boots. Her laptop bag was slung over her shoulder. I made myself look away, because otherwise I could keep staring and staring.

Neal was still stuck on the tuning thing, and even with Sienna here, we drifted back into creative mode, debating where and how to use the riff I’d come up with. It didn’t belong to a song yet. We’d gotten used to having Sienna as part of the scenery on the last leg of the tour. She took a seat and opened her laptop while we worked.

We spent an hour playing with what I’d come up with, adding drums and bass, trying things, discarding them. Then we got hungry and took a break while Axel and Denver argued over where to order lunch from. I wandered to the back and used the former staff bathroom, and when I came out, Sienna was in the hall. Without paying attention to where she was going, I hooked a hand over her upper arm and steered her into the staff break room, closing the door behind us.

“Hi,” she said. There was a small smile on her lips. She didn’t seem awkward or embarrassed. I felt the tightness in my shoulders ease just a little.

“Are you all right?” I asked her.

She tilted her head. “Sure I am. Why wouldn’t I be all right?”

I glanced at the ceiling, then looked back down at her. “Are we all right?”

That small smile again. “I think we’re more than all right, Stone. I think we’re pretty good.”

Was she...flirting with me? Maplethorpe? I wasn’t sure what I’d expected, but it wasn’t this. I wasn’t prepared for this. “So we’re still good after last night?”

“That depends.” She leaned her weight on one hip in that way she had, still looking at me. “When’s the repeat?”

Who was this woman? It had to be a trick. “You want me to rip your clothes off, Maplethorpe? Then keep going. Because I’ll do it.”

Her eyes went wide. She didn’t back off, though. “What’s wrong, Zeeland? Not sure you can perform so soon after the last time? I hear that happens with age.”

“Age jokes?” I shook my head. “I know I got you drunk with orgasms, but try to use that big brain of yours. You can do better.”

“One of us can do better, and it isn’t me.”

Oh, it was on. I was going to fucking devour her next time. I hadn’t gone down on her yet, and she had no idea what she was in for. “You want a repeat, you’ll get a repeat,” I said. “But I have one question.”

Her eyebrows rose. Her cheeks were flushed. She was enjoying this as much as I was, and she was trying to hide it, but she was turned all the way on. Apparently insults were our foreplay. “You have a question? A momentous occasion. Do tell.”

“Why now?” I asked her. “You were so worried during the tour, when we weren’t fucking. Now that we *are* fucking, you don’t seem worried at all.”

Sienna bit her lip and frowned. This was all her. We could have fucked for the entire tour and it would have made no difference to me professionally. I would always be me. When it came to the timing, the call had been hers.

“You’re very romantic,” she pointed out.

That set me back. I had to go over what I’d said. Was it because I’d said we were fucking? Was that the wrong word to use? I probably should have said something nicer.

I’d said the wrong thing.

And just like that, I spun. Everything shut down. I ran a hand over my face, feeling helpless, waiting for a word to come. Anything at all.

“Stone.” Her voice was soft.

I cleared my throat. The word came hard, not because I didn’t want to say it, but because I did. “Sorry.”

Sienna's brows pinched as she watched me. I had no idea what she saw in that moment. I didn't want to know.

"To answer your question," she said, "During the tour, I was worried that people would think I was sleeping with you to get ahead. And maybe I would let people convince me it was true. Because you're you, and I was stranded."

I waited. I gave her a silent nod to go on.

"And now," she said, "I'm home, I'm not stranded, and who I see is my business. And I know for a fact that I'm not sleeping with you to get ahead. Tell me—if I asked you to do me a professional favor, what would you do?"

"I'd tell you I'd think about it," I replied, "and then I'd do nothing."

"*Such* an asshole," she said, smiling, and I wanted to kiss her. I just wanted to fucking kiss her more than anything. There was nothing about my reaction to Sienna that made any sense. It never had.

"So you see," she continued, "I know I'm not sleeping with you for an advantage. I'm doing it for other reasons."

Did I know what those reasons were? Maybe I did. I caught her gaze traveling down me, then up again, her pupils a little dark. I had some kind of effect on her, like she had on me. Maybe not the same, but it was something.

"My charm, right?" I managed, regaining some equilibrium. "It's definitely my charm."

"So much charm," she agreed, stepping forward into my space. She circled her arms lightly around my neck, rising to her toes. "You have no idea."

She didn't kiss me, which was good. If she'd started, I wouldn't want to stop.

Instead, she leaned in, lowering her voice almost to a murmur. "I like how you talk," she said. She kissed me lightly on the cheek.

She turned and left the room, leaving me in my silence.

NINETEEN

Sienna

Zena, the photographer assigned to me by *Soundcheck*, had bright blue hair, a septum ring, and tattoos on her arms. She also had an infectious laugh—which she used often—and the friendly demeanor of a true extrovert. Even though she was the opposite of my introverted self, we hit it off immediately.

When we first met to get acquainted and go over our plans, we ended up talking and laughing until late. She'd graduated art school and supported herself by selling paintings, custom illustrations, and her skills as a photographer. (Her motto was "I won't shoot your fucking wedding, so do yourself a favor and do not ask me.") She lived in a rundown apartment with two other roommates, and though I didn't ask for specifics, when she talked about her love life she seemed accepting of all forms of gender. She was only four years younger than me, but she made me feel like an old lady by comparison.

Still, I wasn't a complete write-off. Zena said my wardrobe was amazing and she was in awe of the fact that I'd driven myself across the country with a rock band. ("I would have gotten distracted at the first truck stop," she declared. "I'd probably still be wandering the desert in Arizona, looking for pretty rocks.") She wasn't familiar with the Road Kings, but when we listened to them in the car—I wanted her to know their sound so she could get the right feel for their photos—she judged it "decent," followed by, "I'd

do them. I like older guys.”

We met up with Denver Gilchrist on a cloudy afternoon. He drove us around the city, showing us the various neighborhoods he’d lived in during his transient childhood. Since Denver had no family—there were only two distant relatives, neither of whom answered my emails—he could only show me former homes, places he’d once stayed before being pushed out the door again. After listening to him talk about his life for a while, even Zena was subdued.

We ended up at a Walmart where Denver had worked night shifts in the stock room at sixteen, sometimes the only place he had to go at night. We shot him standing in the parking lot, his hands in the pockets of his jacket and the wind tousling his hair, the stark pavement behind him littered with abandoned shopping carts. The look Zena caught on his face was thoughtful and a little bit far away, as if he was going somewhere else in his mind, anywhere but here. It was a great shot, moving and honest.

As we walked back to the car, Zena dropped back and Denver nudged me with an elbow. “What’s up Sienna?” he asked. “Anything new?”

I gave him a side-eye. “Nope. Nothing new.”

“Nothing at all, huh?”

“Can’t think of anything.”

“Interesting. Because lately, I’ve definitely been getting a vibe. A getting-laid vibe.” He affected a perplexed look. “Come to think of it, I’ve been getting the same vibe from Stone. Must be a coincidence.”

Oh, lord. I glanced back, making sure Zena couldn’t hear us. It had been nearly a week since Stone and I spent the night together, and though we texted every day, we hadn’t had our repeat yet. “Knock it off,” I warned Denver in a low voice. “There’s nothing to say.”

He grinned, and too late, I remembered how much the Road Kings enjoyed ribbing each other to death. “Nothing to say, huh? That’s a good line for a song.” His voice rose and he sang, “*There’s nothing to say.*” He turned and faced backward, lifting his arms and letting his amazing voice reverberate through the parking lot as people turned their heads and I wished I could sink into the pavement. “*Sienna says there’s nothing to say.*”

Zena looked at me, frowning. “What’s his problem?”

“Please ignore him.” I lifted one of my boots and hit him square in his jean-clad ass with my toe, making him jump and stop singing.

“Oof,” Denver said.

“That’s for abandoning me on the road, you jackass,” I told him.

“Aw, Sienna.” He grinned his shit-eating grin again. “I think you should thank me. It toughened you up, didn’t it?”

Then he dodged and ran, because I was ready with my boot again. I chased him all the way back to the car.

NEAL WATTS INVITED us to his house to do the shoot, which had the added benefit that I got to snoop through his personal space. Raine and Amber weren’t home at his bungalow, but I took in a girl’s soccer uniform discarded over a chair, Amber’s schedule stuck to the fridge with a magnet, and a well-read, dog-eared book called *Savvy Financial Investments for Savvy Women* lying on the coffee table. One of Neal’s guitars was on a stand in the living room, and Amber’s school photo was propped on top of the stereo. This was a lived-in home, and a happy one.

We shot Neal on his back patio, sitting on a lawn chair that was fraying but holding up. He wore jeans and an old tee. His feet were bare, his brown hair slightly long, his beard trim, his posture relaxed. With his lean build and the understated silver rings on his fingers, he looked exactly like a rock star relaxing at home between gigs. The contrast between Neal, barefoot in his frayed chair, and the serene green of his lawn was striking.

We talked for a while, and I realized I wasn’t exactly doing an interview anymore. Zena and I were doing as much talking as Neal was. Zena had put her camera down and Neal had crossed an ankle over his other knee in his rundown chair. He was easy to talk to, easy to like. I was starting to forget how hard everything had been with the Road Kings at first. They’d been dicks to me, but only because they hadn’t trusted me. They didn’t trust the music business, the backer who wouldn’t give them his name, or anyone who was out to profit off them. The more I knew them, the more I got it.

“Okay,” Zena said when we left. “I don’t just like older guys now. I think I might prefer them. I mean, hello? Maturity and emotional intelligence are hot.”

“You haven’t seen them play,” I told her, and she waggled her eyebrows.

AXEL WAS AT THE CORNER, the coffee shop he co-owned with a friend that was one of his incomes while the band was off the road. We had coffee at a table near the back. It was ten o'clock on a weekday morning, and the pre-work rush had tapered off. The customers in The Corner at this time of morning were the unemployed, the artistic, and the remote-work types who could put in an hour or two at the laptop while good music played on the sound system and their dog sat at their feet. It was a comfortable, easy vibe, the same kind that Axel himself gave off.

Axel de Vries was smart, funny, self-deprecating, and bluntly honest. After he'd injured his wrist on the road years ago, he'd fallen prey to an opiate addiction that had taken a stay at rehab to kick. He'd wanted to keep that part of his history private during the tour because, as he put it, "I wasn't even sure I could do it, and if I talked about it, I'd start to dwell." But he had done it. He'd hired Brit as his sobriety companion. She'd been his best friend at the time. Now she was his girlfriend.

But Axel was more than just a cautionary tale about addiction. We talked about his life, how his parents had died in an accident when he was nine, how his grandparents had taken him and his siblings in. How music had saved him. "You lose part of your identity when you lose both your parents," Axel said. "Music gave me that back."

Music—and the band. Though, in his words, he was "just the drummer" ("we're the useful idiots of the music business," he added). He had keen insight into the Road Kings' music as well as their future direction. As he talked, he absently picked up a stir stick and flipped it through his fingers. He had innate grace and ease in his body that Brit said was due to his devotion to yoga. I tried very hard not to think that was hot, because Brit was my friend.

Zena got her shot of Axel when we left the coffee shop and walked down the street. She captured him standing on the sidewalk, wearing ripped jeans and an unbuttoned shirt over a tee, his blond hair under a dark beanie. His blue eyes looked into the camera as people walked past behind him, completely ignoring him. A man alone in a crowd, surrounded by people but somehow solitary.

I TEXTED Stone that we needed to set up his photo shoot.

His answer was two words: *Make me.*

TWENTY

Stone

It was childish. I knew that. It should be beneath me. But Sienna liked a challenge, and we'd both been busy, and we hadn't seen each other. My days were starting to feel a weird echo of emptiness without Sienna in them. So if she wanted me to submit to having a photo taken, she'd have to make me.

I wasn't sure how she would do it. Her method would likely involve blackmail or some kind of pain. Or both. I was ready. I'd agreed to do it, so eventually I'd give in, but I would make it hard for her for as long as I could.

I didn't like having my picture taken. There was nothing about it that interested me or gave me any pleasure. I didn't like dressing for it, I didn't like posing, I didn't like the fakeness of it, and I definitely didn't like looking at myself. I didn't think I was ugly, but I saw my own face enough in the mirror when I trimmed my beard. I didn't need to see it in pictures. Why would anyone care what I looked like, anyway?

For once, though, my phone didn't start chiming with texts from Sienna, containing her usual arguments, questions, over-analysis, and general provocation. My phone told me she'd read the text. Then silence.

I didn't know what to make of that. Maybe she was mad at me. Maybe she was plotting something. Maybe she was just busy. Maybe she'd gotten what she wanted in bed and was done with me. Maybe she'd rethought things and decided a pencil-necked music theory dipshit was a better idea.

Maybe I'd done something wrong, something I didn't know about.
Maybe it was nothing, and she wasn't thinking about me at all.
I fucking hated this.

I rehearsed with the Road Kings, I worked out at the gym, and then I went home. I ate popcorn and half of a leftover vegetarian burrito. I sat on my sofa, wearing only sweatpants and watching a weird show about race car drivers on TV. It made no sense. I had no idea why anyone would do such an idiotic activity. Who were these guys?

On the coffee table, my phone vibrated with a call. I planned to ignore it as per my usual, but it was face-up and I could see that the caller was Sienna.

I grabbed it and answered. Sienna had never called me before, and my first thought was that something was wrong.

"Sienna?" I said when I answered.

"Stone." She was outside somewhere. I could hear traffic. Was she stranded? "What are you doing right now?"

"Is there a problem?" I meant it as concern, but the words came out annoyed, like she'd interrupted me.

"I can call back," she said.

"No." I barked the word, then made myself regroup. "It's fine. I'm sitting at home. I just thought maybe you had a problem."

She generously ignored the fact that I sounded like I had only learned how to speak English last week. "Why did you think I have a problem?"

"Because this is the first time you've ever called me."

"It is?" She sounded genuinely surprised. "Jeez, I guess it is. I can call you more often if you want. But you have to answer."

I *had* answered. I would always answer if it was her. "What's going on?" I asked her. "Where are you?"

"I'm in a cab," Sienna said. She sounded cheerful, if a little confused by my reaction. She could join the club. "Have you ever heard of Club Grange?"

"Yeah, I've been there a few times. Why are you going there?"

"I'm going to check out a band that's playing there tonight. They're supposed to be a modern rockabilly thing. They're called Mudhole."

I winced, sitting there alone on my sofa. Mudhole was the kind of band name I would have come up with when I was fifteen. "Maplethorpe. Why are you making a trip to see a band called Mudhole?"

"Because *Soundcheck* wants me to write about the local scene here in Portland. They want me to identify which bands people should know about.

They want me to turn in regular pieces about up-and-coming acts. So I'm starting tonight."

"Okay," I said.

"Soooo." She drew the word out a little. "Stone. I'm asking if you want to come with me."

I hadn't heard her voice sound like that before, and I couldn't read her expression through the phone. This was why I hated the fucking phone. I had a hard enough time with people without the benefit of visual cues.

But then it clicked. Sienna was nervous. She was asking me out. She thought I'd say no.

"It's sort of in a professional capacity," Sienna said into the silence. "I'd like your expert opinion on the music. Though I'm perfectly capable of assessing the quality of the music myself, of course."

"Sure," I said.

"But a second opinion is valuable." She couldn't seem to stop talking. "And I'll admit you know a lot about music. But mostly I realized that I'd rather not do this alone. It would be more fun if I was with someone." She gusted out a breath. "With you. If you want. If you're not busy."

She was confusing me again. Since when did Maplethorpe babble like she was asking me to the prom? Not that I'd know anything about prom, since I hadn't attended my own.

The last time I saw her, she had been so sure and confident. She'd flirted like a pro. Now she was tripping over her words.

For once, I realized in time that I needed to say something. "Sure," I said again.

"Please use your words, Stone. What does sure mean?"

"It means I'll come to Club Grange." I glanced down at myself—bare chest, sweatpants. "I need five minutes to change and I'll meet you there."

"You're actually coming?" I couldn't read her tone again. Excited, maybe? Surprised.

Did she think I wouldn't go if she asked me out to catch some music? "Someone needs to do a proper assessment, Maplethorpe," I said. "Also, someone needs to make sure that you are never alone with any member of a band called Mudhole. Ever."

"They're probably nice," she said.

Nice, my ass. I could already smell Mudhole's body odor from the comfort of my sofa. I would lay bets every single one of them had a venereal

disease that they'd happily pass to Sienna if she let them. "Bring mace and bear spray," I told her. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"SO WHAT'S THE PLAN?" I asked her. "Are you here as a journalist, or is this more of an incognito thing?"

Sienna looked up at me from her place next to my shoulder. We'd just entered the club, which was filling with a surprising number of people.

"I'm just here to see the band. I'm not committing to anything." She looked me up and down, taking in my jeans, flannel, and leather jacket. "Though I don't think *incognito* is the word to use for you."

"Why not?"

"Because you're bigger than anyone else here. And you're obviously you."

I scowled and returned her treatment, looking her up and down. She was wearing a denim skirt, tights, her black boots, and a dark green cardigan. Under the cardigan was a black top that was cropped just high enough to show a sliver of skin above the waist of the skirt. I had never known Sienna to show skin, and I already knew it was going to make me insane by the end of the night.

I knew what that belly looked like naked. I knew the firmness of it, the soft curve that rested below the waistband of the skirt. I knew what all of it felt like under my hands.

Fuck.

"I belong here just fine," I told her. "It's you that doesn't fit in."

Her eyebrows rose. "Excuse me? Why not?"

"Because unlike the average Mudhole fan, you look like you have a functioning brain in your head."

She pressed her fingertips to her temples. "I literally never know when you're paying me a compliment. It's so puzzling."

"You should listen better. I pay you compliments all the time."

She shook her head and looked around again. "Let's grab a table. Do you think you'll get recognized?"

I strode to one of the tables at the edge of the room and pulled out a chair for her. "In this crowd?" I checked it out. I saw white suburbanites who had

left the kids with a sitter for the evening, kids in their early twenties who were musician types, a group of women who were already drunk, and a leathery guy in his sixties with his gray hair in a ponytail. A woman with blue hair was getting a drink at the bar. Any one of those people could be a Road Kings fan, or none of them. “It’s hard to say. If someone recognizes me, I’ll deal with it.”

Sienna looked at me, assessing, her head cocked slightly.

“Do not analyze me, Maplethorpe,” I said. “Not tonight.”

“I’m just wondering how you’d react if you got mobbed like Harry Styles.”

“Who’s that?”

I almost had her. Just for a second. Then she laughed.

Two beers arrived at our table, even though we hadn’t ordered any. The waiter told us they were a gift. I turned to see Gray-Haired Ponytail Guy lift his drink to me and give a solemn nod. I nodded back. So there was one Road Kings fan in the house, and it was my favorite kind—the one who knew good music and could mind his own fucking business.

I sipped my beer and said to Sienna, “You were nervous when you called me. You didn’t think I’d show.”

Her lips pressed together, and then color rose on her cheeks. Interesting. Maybe I’d ask the questions tonight.

“I thought you might be busy,” she admitted.

“Well, I wasn’t.”

She parted her lips, as if about to say something, then closed them again. Parted them, then closed them.

I lifted my eyebrows. “You gonna say something, Maplethorpe?”

She looked like she was about to answer, and then the lights went down and the band started.

I couldn’t remember ever doing this, spending the evening in a club with a woman, watching music instead of playing it. I didn’t think I ever had. Like most musicians, this was how I had started out—in the audience with everyone else. This kind of experience was what had made me love it, what had made me sneak into clubs while underage, what had made me want to be part of it.

But I’d always done it alone. I’d never met a woman who loved this as much as I did, who understood it the way I did. Until now.

Sienna got it. We drank beer and we listened to music, and in the pauses

between songs we talked music. Mudhole wasn't bad, but their set was sloppy and I could tell the guy playing guitar was high. They had one or two bangers in their song list, a handful of mediocre ones, and the rest were covers.

It wasn't Madison Square Garden, but Sienna and I forgot everything for an evening and had fun. Toward the end of the set, she leaned back against my chest, and I let my hands slide under her sweater in the dark, moving over the sweat-dampened skin of her lower back, tracing up under her top and over her bra. She pressed back against my hands, shivering a little in pleasure, and I thought, *I get to take this woman home tonight. Just me, and no one else.*

Before we left, Sienna had to use the ladies' room. I stepped outside, leaning against a lamppost on the street, waiting for her, breathing in the fresh air of the night as the rest of the crowd filed past me. I kept my gaze on the door, waiting for Sienna to come out.

"Stone."

I turned my head at the sound of my name. The woman with blue hair that I'd noticed at the beginning of the night stood there, lowering a camera. She smiled at me. She'd just taken my picture.

"No hard feelings," she said. "It's just a job."

I narrowed my eyes at her as it hit me. "Maplethorpe sent you," I said.

She shrugged. She was young, friendly looking. I couldn't be mad at someone like that. "She said it would have to be a sneak attack. Otherwise we'd never get a good shot of you."

I got it now. Why Sienna had seemed oddly nervous. Why she'd looked like she wanted to tell me something, then changed her mind. She'd planned this all along. Maybe it was the reason she'd invited me out at all.

"She likes you," the photographer said, as if reading my mind. "Trust me, I've been watching you all night. I can see it, so don't give up. Also, you two are cute as hell. Just be good to her, okay? I like her." She gave me one last smile, then disappeared into the crowd.

TWENTY-ONE

Sienna

“It was the best plan I could think of,” I said.

“Right,” Stone said. He closed the door of his apartment behind us.

“You said you didn’t want to do a photo shoot.” I untied my boots and toed them off. For the entire Uber ride home, I couldn’t tell whether he was mad at me or not. Happy Stone and angry Stone were alarmingly similar.

If he was mad, he was refusing to actually argue with me. So I argued with myself.

“I was doing you a favor.” I dropped my purse onto the sofa. “Zena and I thought that it was best to get you while you were relaxed, in your natural habitat. Like a leopard on the Serengeti. Stone Zeeland in a club is basically the same as an animal in the wild.”

He said nothing. He had taken off his boots and now he slid off his leather jacket. Scowling, silent, and big. So big. The sight of all that size made me hot and cold.

“How tall are you, anyway?” I asked him. “Six-five? Six-six?”

“Stop changing the subject, Maplethorpe.”

I lifted my hands, like he was doing a holdup. “You told me to make you! It was an invitation. I was already planning to go to the show tonight. And I really didn’t want to go alone. I didn’t feel like being the lame, lonely nerd for once.”

“Knock it off.” He seemed more annoyed than he had about the photo. “Do not call yourself that.”

“It’s a figure of speech. I don’t really think that. I think I’m pretty awesome, actually. You may have noticed.”

“I noticed.”

I crossed my arms, a smile on my lips. “Admit you had fun.”

He crossed his arms, mirroring me. We stood facing each other. He leaned his weight on one hip and I tried not to ogle his legs in those jeans, the line of his sexy, muscled thigh.

I could read his face now, better than I had at first. Stone wasn’t truly angry. This was his I’m-a-little-annoyed expression, his what-the-hell-is-your-deal expression. I’d seen this one a lot, and it didn’t scare me.

“The picture turned out really good,” I said, buttering him up. “Zena texted it to me. Do you want to see it?”

“No.”

The picture was better than good. She’d caught Stone leaning against the lamppost, his big body relaxed. The light from the street and from the club cast moody shadows across him, and the leather jacket gave him just enough of a bad-boy look. But it was his face that was the most arresting part, because he wasn’t scowling. He looked pensive and deep in thought—Stone was maybe incapable of appearing any other way—but without the scowl his expression looked almost hopeful, as if he was anticipating something. I wondered what he was looking at in that moment.

He also looked gorgeous and knee-meltingly hot. I’d take out my phone and look at the photo again, but I was looking at the real thing right now, and that was even better.

“You look really good in the picture, trust me,” I said. “All broody and sexy and irresistible. You look like a rock star. Which tracks, because you *are* a rock star.”

His eyes narrowed. It occurred to me that not many people gave Stone compliments. More people should do that. Probably starting with me.

“That’s not what I am,” he said, his voice low, his words slow, as if he was choosing them. He took a step closer to me. “If you’re gonna write about me, Sienna, write about what I actually am.”

Our gazes locked. This wasn’t annoyed Stone anymore. This wasn’t bantering Stone or onstage Stone, either. This wasn’t the Stone that ribbed his bandmates or played guitar like a perfectionist. This was what he was really

like underneath.

And I liked it.

I felt hot. I licked my lip, and Stone's gaze dropped to my mouth. I remembered his hands on me in the club, his touch sliding over my skin, making my pulse jump everywhere it traveled. When he'd touched me like that, I'd thought, *Holy shit, I get to go home with this guy tonight. Just me.* I'd felt, for a moment, like the sexiest woman alive.

The air grew thick and heavy between us. My heart stuttered in my chest. "I'm going to wash my face," I said, too loudly into the silence. I turned and walked to the open bathroom door.

I turned on the light, twisted the tap of cold water, and plunged my hands under it as I inhaled a breath. I splashed some water on my face and grabbed a towel. I lowered it just as Stone's huge frame filled the bathroom doorway behind me.

His gaze caught mine in the mirror. His words were blunt. "Did you actually want me there tonight, or was it just part of the assignment?"

I nearly dropped the towel. Was that what he thought? That I didn't actually want to spend time with him unless I had to? Why were we so doomed to misunderstand each other?

"I wanted you there, Stone," I said to him in the mirror. "Even if I didn't need a photo, I would have called you."

Stone nodded, as if that satisfied him. "Good." He hit the light switch and the bathroom was plunged into darkness, except for the light from the main room.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Light's too bright," he said. His hands rose to my shoulders, and he slid my cardigan off my arms. He dropped it on the floor. Putting his hands on my hips, he gently turned me to face him. Then he lifted the hem of my jean skirt, sliding it up to my waist.

"Stone?" I asked as my body went haywire.

"You gave the right answer to my question," he said in that deep voice as he bunched my skirt around my waist and hooked his fingers in the waist of my tights in an oddly gentle gesture. "So I'm gonna go down on you."

Oh. Oh *hell*.

I was robbed of speech as he rolled my tights down my legs, lifting one of my feet and then the other to get them off. Then he slid my panties down.

I couldn't think. I couldn't talk. I could barely even stand, which Stone

seemed to realize, because he put those big hands on my hips again and pressed me back to lean against the countertop. Some of my weight left my feet, just enough that my toes touched the floor. While I watched in shock, Stone lowered to his knees and pressed my legs open.

Was I actually going to *stop* him? That seemed inconceivable. There was no universe in which I did not want Stone to do this, right now. And yet I was completely bared to him in a way I hadn't been before, my skirt bunched up, my legs splayed, all of me displayed at his eye level. It had happened so quickly, and it was so incredibly dirty, and I should probably do something about it.

What I did was moan as he ran a palm along my inner thigh, then pressed his mouth against the skin there. His other hand stroked me, gentle but firm.

My eyes closed at the pure pleasure of it. I was getting used to Stone touching me, my body becoming familiar with the feel of his fingers, his hands. I was starting to crave it. I'd never been touched by any man like this, as if he already knew me, as if he worshiped me. As if he had dedicated himself to learning every one of my secrets.

My hands gripped the edge of the counter, growing damp with sweat. I leaned my weight back farther and opened my legs wider, giving Stone an invitation he couldn't misread. I heard him let out a soft breath, which I also felt against my skin. His hand stroked me for a little longer, sensitizing me. Then, ever so slowly, he lowered his mouth to my center.

Pleasure radiated from that touch, down my limbs and up my body, catching in my throat. His tongue was slick and warm, exploring me in the most obscene way, and my brain shorted out. I leaned back, the top of my head touching the mirror with a gentle thump as I gasped. I tried mindlessly to raise my hips for more contact, but Stone used his skilled hands to keep me in place, making me be patient.

With me pinned to the countertop, he kissed me, so deep I could feel the gentle scrape of his beard on the skin of my inner thighs. He sucked gently and then let me go, using his tongue again. It was the most incredible torture I'd ever felt, the wildest pleasure, the intensity almost unbearable. I cried out as he kissed me again, using that gentle suction, then let me go and used his tongue.

I lifted one hand from the counter to dig it into his hair, trying to bring him closer. He ignored me and used his tongue in one dirty stroke after another, right in the *best* spot, in exactly the way I needed, and I came, not

caring how loud I was.

How long had that taken? Minutes? I'd forgotten who I was dealing with. This man could detonate me with the touch of his fingers or a few strokes of his tongue, and I actually thought I had a chance against him? The battle was over before it began.

Stone rose from his knees and lifted me easily. There was no way I could walk. He carried me the short distance to the dark bedroom, sat me on the edge of the bed, and lifted my arms. My top and bra were on the floor a second later. I regained enough brain function to reach for his belt and the buttons of his jeans, working to get his clothes off as he shucked off my wadded-up skirt.

Naked, he got into the bed with me, making the mattress emit its familiar groan. In the semi-dark I watched him, bathed in shadows, reach for a condom and put it on. I had never wanted anything as badly as I wanted him in that moment, the perfection of his big body, the line of hair on his lower stomach, the scruff of his beard. I wanted to devour him.

As if sensing my thoughts, Stone hooked an arm under me and moved my body easily, positioning me on top of him. One hand grasped the back of my neck, his fingers in my hair, and he leaned up to put his mouth close to my ear.

“Ride me,” he said, his voice a growl.

So I did. I pressed down on him, and at the same time I leaned my forehead into his shoulder, closing my eyes, because this wasn't just dirty, it was good. I braced myself on the bed and he gripped my hips, and we moved together. It was filthy, and it was incredible, and it was better than anything I had ever imagined. I had never known it could feel like this.

His hands slid up my body and cupped my breasts, his thumbs stroking my nipples. He was going to make me come again—I knew he was, and I knew he could. He could make me come as many times as he wanted. I let it happen, let his hands move over my body in exactly the right way, touching me exactly how he needed to, until he sent me over the edge. Then he followed me, and both of us spun in the darkness.

TWENTY-TWO

Sienna

I was standing in front of the mirror in my childhood bedroom, fastening an earring, when my mother called up the stairs. “He’s here!”

“I’m coming down,” I called back.

I was very calm about this. I was absolutely fine with Stone Zeeland coming over to have dinner with me and my parents. Besides, it was unavoidable. My parents were not going to let it go.

My parents had noticed, of course, that I spent nights away from home. This was unavoidable when you lived at home at twenty-eight. Eventually I’d had no choice but to have that most awkward of conversations, the one in which you tell your mom you’re having sex with someone.

She’d been calm about it. My dad had, too. I’d had boyfriends before, and my parents didn’t have a caveman, don’t-touch-my-daughter mentality. They were teachers, so I’d had lectures about consent and birth control when I was still young enough to cringe at them. When I told Mom now that I was seeing someone, she’d first asked questions about whether I was safe and happy. (The answers were “yes” and “I’m in a jumble of feelings I have no idea how to sort out,” which seemed to satisfy her.) Then she’d asked, “Who is he?”

I felt my cheeks flush in a way they hadn’t when I’d admitted I was having sex. “You met him, actually,” I replied. “It’s Stone. Zeeland. Of the Road Kings.”

Mom was silent for a beat. She took her toast from the toaster and spread some butter on it. “Ah,” she said.

I couldn’t read that word, her tone. “What?” I asked. “What does *Ah* mean?”

Mom put her knife down and turned to look at me. Her eyebrows rose.

I knew full well that this was a teacher trick—stare at a student with raised eyebrows and let him or her fill in the expectant silence. Still, it worked on me, just like it always had.

“He’s older than me,” I said. “He’s thirty-seven. He’s famous. I’m writing a profile of him for *Soundcheck* that’s important for my career. We’re probably not going to cross paths often after the story runs. We’re very different. We didn’t like each other at first. He isn’t my usual type. I don’t think we’re really compatible.”

There they were, all my doubts spilled out on our kitchen floor like sour milk. I’d never met someone who shot at my equilibrium like Stone did, who sent me from a happy high to a doubting low and back again. I’d started out being more than content to insult him, argue with him, and nothing more.

But now? Now I wanted to climb him and shout at him and follow him around like a puppy. I still wanted to insult him, and I wanted him to touch me. I wanted him to like me. I believed he *did* like me, until I remembered that he was a hot guitar god who could have any woman he wanted, and therefore he probably didn’t like me at all. Then I was mad at him all over again, and he wasn’t even in the room.

“That’s interesting,” Mom said, unaware that I was losing my mind. “The compatibility thing. You’ve always wanted someone who loves music as much as you do. You said that’s all that matters. Even more than looks.”

I opened my mouth to argue, then closed it again. Because Mom was right. I always dated music nerds. I’d pictured myself ending up with a brainy guy who could talk about music with me for hours.

And that *was* Stone. We’d been seeing each other for nearly two months now. I sat in on Road Kings rehearsals. Stone and I went to clubs around Portland for my *Soundcheck* assignment, and we’d taken in all kinds of music—jazz, blues, hip-hop, even country. We listened to each other’s playlists. We’d done his three interviews for the magazine, during which we’d managed to keep our hands off each other in a professional manner. Stone had answered my questions about his life, and then we’d listened to some of the albums that had influenced his sound.

What was all of that if not talking about music? Stone and I had been having a conversation about music for months. Since the day he'd shared his library with me and I'd listened to it while I drove out of Cleveland.

No one understood my love of music, my absolute need for it in my life, like Stone did. No one.

"There are all of the other problems I listed," I said to my mother.

She shrugged, taking a bite of her toast. "Well, I don't see the rush. So you aren't going to get married and have babies right away. You've always said that wasn't in your plan, anyway. And thirty-seven is far from old."

Her logic, in the face of my swirling emotions, was irritating. "You're being awfully casual about the fact that I'm dating a famous musician."

"That's because you're a smart girl with a good head on your shoulders," she said serenely. "But if you want me to give a second opinion, invite him for dinner. Your father and I will assess the situation."

"Mom, no."

"Oh, yes," she said in her inarguable teacher's voice. "You'll invite him to dinner, I believe. Saturday is good. Unless you have plans on Saturday?"

We locked gazes. I could tell her I had plans for every Saturday into eternity, but I would not win this contest. Mom was nice, but she had decades of experience directing teenagers. She was made of Teflon.

"I'll ask him," I hedged, even though Stone and I already planned to see each other on Saturday. "He might not come."

"He'll come," Mom said. "I liked that boy. The scowly beard look is all an act. I've taught plenty of boys like him. He's just unsure in social situations, that's all. If you're nice to kids like that, they open up."

Mom made everything sound so simple.

To my surprise, Stone had agreed to dinner without any argument. Even when I warned him that my dad would make him listen to vinyl records, he'd just shrugged and said, "Sure."

So here he was, striding up the driveway toward my parents' house. I could see him from my bedroom window. By the time I got downstairs, Dad had already swung open the front door and was waving, as if greeting a ship docking at the harbor.

"Hello there!" Dad shouted.

Stone's brows drew down, but after a moment he lifted his fingers in a tentative wave. He'd toned down the rock star look tonight, presumably in honor of my parents. He was wearing blue jeans that fit him like a thirsty

dream and a green pullover shirt with a zipper at the collar. He'd left off his rings and any other jewelry. He'd never looked less like a guitar god, yet somehow there was no mistaking Stone Zeeland. It was in the scowl, the set of those big shoulders, the sauntering grace of his walk. To me, he was obviously a man who could own a stage.

When Stone got close enough, Dad grabbed his hand and shook it. "Nice to see you again, Stone," Dad said. "Come on in."

"Peter," Stone said. He looked past Dad's shoulder at where Mom stood in the hall. "Hi, Maggie."

"It's so nice to see you!" Mom grasped Stone's shoulders in a hug and kissed his cheek. Stone looked startled, and then he politely patted Mom's back before dropping his hands.

"Sure," he said. His eyes locked on me, and when he saw my face, he scowled again.

"Come into the kitchen, Stone," Mom said, and as she and Dad walked away, Stone moved close to me.

"You're laughing at me, Maplethorpe," he said.

"I'm greeting you warmly," I argued back. I fought the urge to touch him. "It's what people do in social situations."

He clasped my chin briefly with his finger and thumb, looking into my face, then dropped his hand. "No. That's laughter."

"My parents can be a bit much." I tried not to give away that the touch of his fingers made me a little dizzy, as did the clean smell of him so close to me. "You dressed up," I commented.

His gaze dropped briefly to his clothes. "You like the suburban dad look?"

I felt my eyes go wide. "Are you *trying* to look like a suburban dad?"

"I am trying," Stone said, "not to look like an asshole. Am I succeeding?"

"You do not look like an asshole," I replied. "And if you actually were a suburban dad, every woman in the neighborhood would ovulate."

"That sounds medically unsound. I guess I'll stay out of the suburbs." He turned away, following my parents into the kitchen. I let my gaze linger on his ass as he went.

I still wasn't sure what exactly we were doing. We were both busy. Stone was putting in long days and nights in the rehearsal studio, nailing down the album, as well as working on the Road Kings' other projects. I was writing my pieces for *Soundcheck* and building my portfolio for future work. I'd also

used my newly stable funds to go apartment hunting, and I'd finally found a place I wanted to rent. I moved in next week.

I'd brought him apartment hunting with me when he was free. He came with me to the gigs I wrote about around town, always coming up with some interesting insight into the music. He spent a lot of late nights rehearsing, but when he wasn't working, I'd pack an overnight bag and go to his apartment.

I was getting used to that big body of his, so much so that I was starting to crave it. I'd never thought of myself as a sexual person, but apparently sleeping with Stone Zeeland on a regular basis could drive any woman out of her mind. At any given moment when I was around him, I had the urge to run my hand over one of his biceps or squeeze his thigh. The rumble of his voice made my blood heat. I liked the scent of him and the feel of his arms around me when he squeezed me, and the sex...my god. That man knew how to *do* things. It was hard not to think about when he was around. The version of me who had huddled under layers of covers in her hotel bed to hide from him? I didn't know her anymore.

And now he was having dinner with my parents, kind of like a real boyfriend. I tried to feel weird about it. But as I watched Stone with my parents, I couldn't pull it off.

They shouldn't have gotten along. My parents had lived the quietest possible life, and Stone was a rock star. They were teachers, and Stone—I knew now—had dropped out of high school and taken the GED in his late twenties. They were two of the most talkative people I knew, and Stone was...not. Stone was sleeping with their daughter—regularly, enthusiastically, and extremely competently. But as we sat down to dinner, none of that seemed to matter.

Instead of interrogating Stone, my parents did most of the talking. They told teaching anecdotes and gave Stone gossip about the people in the neighborhood. They let him talk when he wanted, but didn't force him, and they didn't put him under a conversational spotlight. It was exactly the right way to treat him, because Stone visibly relaxed. By dessert, he'd told a few stories from his own crazy life that were slightly raucous and biting funny. I loved it when Stone told stories. He had no idea how good at it he was, how many of the stories in his head were funny and fascinating and weird. I could listen to him talk for hours, but if I told him that, he'd never believe me.

After dinner, as I'd predicted, Dad roped Stone into listening to records. They climbed the stairs to the attic as Mom and I put dishes in the

dishwasher. “Well?” I asked her when I couldn’t take the suspense anymore.

“I like him,” Mom said, hanging up her dish towel.

I waited. “That’s it?”

She smirked. “That’s it.”

I went upstairs and stood at the bottom of the attic stairs. I could hear Dad up there, talking Stone’s ear off. “Dad!” I called up to them. “Enough! Let Stone go.”

“Ten more minutes!” Dad shouted back, like a kid who has to stop using his iPad.

I sighed and wandered into my bedroom. I’d packed most of my things, except for the necessities I’d use before moving out next week. I’d moved out of here before—for college, for my internship—but this time felt different, as if I was finally an actual grownup.

After a few minutes, I heard Stone enter the bedroom behind me and close the door. I turned to face him. “Sorry about that,” I said. “I warned you.”

He nodded. He looked huge in my small bedroom. “Yeah. It’s fine. Your dad knows his music.” He looked around at my twin bed, my white painted dresser. “This is where you grew up, Maplethorpe?”

He’d been in my house before, but never here in my bedroom. “This is my origin story,” I replied, motioning around the room.

Stone scratched his beard and looked thoughtful. Had I thought the sound of him scratching his beard was annoying? Now I thought it was hot. “Seems about right for a nerd,” he commented.

I put my hands on my hips. “You have no idea how much action this room has seen, Zeeland.”

That amused him. “Imaginary action,” he said smugly. “The boy band guys in your head aren’t actually real, Maplethorpe.”

“I am deeply offended that you think I loved boy bands growing up. I’ll have you know that my Justin Timberlake obsession was *very* short-lived. And the Zac Efron poster I owned was taken down two whole years ago.”

“Yeah,” Stone said. “I bet the guys you brought in here liked looking at that while they got all the way to first base.”

“Very funny.” I hadn’t touched him all evening, so I did it now, moving close and putting my hands on his shoulders, feeling their warm strength under his shirt as I brushed against him. “You could be added to the extensive list of lovers I’ve had in here if you wanted, you know.”

That list was nonexistent, and Stone knew it. I didn't even have to explain. I squeezed his shoulders and pressed my body against his, and he gave me a narrow-eyed look.

"If you think I'm gonna be the first guy to debauch you in this bedroom, Sienna, then think again," he said. Stone had words like *debauch* in his vocabulary, but he didn't choose to use them often. When he did, it was a sign that he was relaxed.

"I exist in a world of disappointment." I leaned in and pressed my cheek on his shoulder. Stone put his hands on my back, rubbing me gently through my sweater, making me shiver. "I guess it's only fair that you experience the embarrassment of my parents, since I'll be experiencing the embarrassment of yours."

I'd written and turned in the first three articles of my Road Kings series, the pieces about Denver, Neal, and Axel. I'd written a draft of my article about Stone, then revised it, then rewritten it again. I couldn't get it right, even though he'd given me my long-awaited interviews. Nothing I wrote about Stone accurately described the man I saw, the man I now knew so well yet was still discovering.

For my final rewrite, I set up an interview with Stone's mother, Diana. Stone had been reluctant, but even after he'd agreed to it, Diana had refused. He must have talked to her, because eventually she'd messaged me back and given in.

Stone sighed, and because I was leaning against him, I felt how deep that sigh went, the product of years of some kind of exhaustion. "Try not to judge her," he said, the words tight with tension because he found this hard to talk about.

"I don't judge people," I argued against his shoulder. "Except you."

He ignored that. "I'm not gonna tell you her story. But when you meet her, remember that I played guitar in the garage for years and she never once told me to stop. Remember that some people had really bad childhoods. Stuff you can't get over, ever. You know what I mean?"

"Yes," I said softly.

"Some people aren't messed up because they choose to be," Stone said. "Some people would be different if they'd been given a chance."

I lifted my head and looked into his brown eyes, which were scowling and serious and honest. I ran my fingers over his beard, then leaned up and kissed him softly. "I understand."

He looked worried. “Do you?”

“Yes, I do.” I kissed him again, and he relaxed against me. How did the world not know how sweet this man was? Everyone was blind.

I kissed his cheek. “We should go downstairs,” I said, smiling. “Otherwise my parents will think you’ve debauched me.”

TWENTY-THREE

Stone

The song that Denver had come up with, which we were still calling “Raven,” was going to be the best song on the album.

It was a weird fever dream of a song, with a bass line that was the best thing Neal had ever come up with. I went through my pedals, trying to get just the right sound to match it.

Then I took a trip to my storage unit and dug out an old amp I’d used in the Gardens on Mars days that somehow made a kind of sound I’d never duplicated with any other piece of equipment. I experimented with that for a while until the guitar sound on “Raven” was exactly right, different from anything we’d done before. Really fucking good.

In endless hours in our abandoned car dealership, the four of us started to make magic. We played, and we played. We had to spend part of our days dealing with business, mostly to do with the new studio we were building and the record we were going to release ourselves, but most afternoons we’d find our way to the car dealership. Going home at three in the morning was pretty common. It was one of the reasons we were building sleeping apartments into our new studio. Making records didn’t follow a nine to five.

Tonight, though, we knocked off at midnight. My bandmates had women to go home to. I texted Sienna: *You still up?*

She replied that she was. This was her third day in her new apartment.

We'd moved her in two days ago.

I'm coming over, I wrote, because I hadn't seen her in two days and I wasn't giving her an option. This was my usual mood now. The longer I went without seeing Sienna, the grumpier I got.

She replied with the heart-eyes, because she knew that drove me nuts. That was fine. Once I got to her place, I'd show her who was boss.

I looked up at my bandmates, who were packing up to leave, and suddenly it seemed strange that they still knew nothing about Sienna and me. Why the fuck hadn't I said anything? Because she was writing about us? I'd known these three guys for half my life. We were making the best music we'd ever made right now. No one knew me quite like they did. Even Watts wasn't getting on my nerves anymore.

I looked at Neal, who was shrugging on his jacket. We'd had our problems, Neal and me, over the years. We'd fought a lot. He was good-looking, charming, funny, easy to talk to. Decent. And he was talented in a way that I wasn't. He could play more instruments than me, he picked up new music faster than me, he could read music, he could switch styles like a pro. He had a good wardrobe. He got along with people. He was a father. He was the guy who could truck through and play a great show on no sleep without complaining. He never got moody or lost in his own head or silent. He always had the right words.

So, yeah. Neal had always been the guy I wasn't. Which was why he'd always made me mad.

He ran a hand through his hair and smiled at something Axel said, and suddenly all of that fell away. Years of getting pissed off at Neal, at resenting him for existing. I didn't see the point of it anymore.

I stood up. "Shut up, all of you," I said to my bandmates. "I have something to say."

They all paused in surprise, turning in my direction. Axel's eyes went wide.

I cleared my throat, and then I said it. "Sienna Maplethorpe and I are dating."

There was a second of silence. And then the room filled with a round of applause.

"Finally," Denver said. "We thought you'd never admit it."

Axel wiped a fake tear from his eye. "Stone finally has a girlfriend. Gosh, they grow up so fast."

Neal put his hands on his hips. "I feel like my virgin little brother finally got asked to the prom. I'm so proud."

"For fuck's sake," I said. "Shut up, all of you."

"Do you need me to explain how condoms work?" Axel asked. "I can draw you a diagram."

"Now, remember." Neal held up his hands. "She's a real, live woman, not a girl in a porn video. If you talk to her, she'll answer. It's pretty wild if you're not used to it."

"They have opinions and stuff," Denver added. "Sometimes they like to say things. Then you say things back. If you need practice, let us know. Also, they like it when you bathe once in a while."

I sighed. "I don't know why I'm in this fucking band."

The door opened and Brit walked in. She'd come to pick up Axel and drive him home. "What's going on?" she asked, looking around at us. "This looks like a band meeting."

"Look, Stone." Axel took his girlfriend's shoulders and moved her in front of him. "If you need to practice talking to a woman, I've got one right here. Brit, say something to Stone. He just admitted he has a girlfriend."

Brit blinked in surprise, then looked amused. "Hi, Stone," she said. "Are you finally going to admit that you're dating Sienna? Because I guessed it a long time ago."

I scowled at her. "You too?"

She rolled her eyes. "I was on the tour, remember? It took me about twenty minutes to figure out you were roommates. Sienna was all, 'Oh, no, nothing's going on, he's so terrible, I hate him.' Like it wasn't obvious she was into you."

"At least you didn't get threatened," Neal said to her. "He almost punched my face in when I learned the big secret."

"It wasn't the most well-kept of secrets," Denver said.

Axel threw up his hands. "Why was I the only oblivious one? I was right there on the tour. I need to pay closer attention. I guess I just assumed no woman would actually choose to come within ten feet of Stone."

"Shut up, all of you," I said. "Jesus, I'm sorry I said anything."

Brit crossed her arms. "So, is it serious or what? Sienna has been all moony lately, but she won't tell me anything."

I scratched the back of my neck. Sienna wasn't moony over me. And she definitely hadn't been into me during the tour. Brit was reading everything all

wrong. “We’re keeping it quiet until the articles are out,” I managed. “We’re not getting married or anything. We’re taking it slow.”

She gave me an assessing look. I liked Brit. She was hot, with pinup curves and a sharp sense of humor. She owned a hair salon, and even when she wore sweats, like she did now, she somehow looked like a million bucks.

I’d spent years worrying about Axel, watching him fade into addiction, then climb his way out again. I’d seen him at the depths of his misery. The fact that he was happy and healthy now, and that Brit was part of the reason, meant that I would owe her a debt forever.

“Maplethorpe just moved out of her parents’ place two days ago,” I said. “She’s just starting her career. It’s too early to do all the serious shit.”

“That’s true,” Brit said. “You should definitely go slow. But try to romance her a bit. No guy has ever done that for her.”

Romance her? Had I ever romanced Sienna? What the fuck did that even mean? And what guys had Sienna talked to Brit about? We didn’t talk about her previous boyfriends. Probably because I’d rather die.

“You’ve confused him,” Axel said to Brit.

“Take her out to dinner,” Brit explained. “Do nice things for her. Don’t bother with flowers or any of that bullshit. Sienna’s too smart for that. She doesn’t need dramatic speeches, either. Just think of something she’d really like.”

I pinched the spot at the top of my nose, between my eyes. “Fuck, this sounds complicated.”

“You’ll do fine.” Brit smiled. “I’m rooting for you, Stone. If you get stuck, you have my number.”

SIENNA WAS SITTING on her new sofa—a secondhand special—typing on her laptop. Coming from her old bedroom, she didn’t own a lot of stuff, so she’d unpacked quickly, though there were still some unopened boxes pushed against the wall. She smiled as I came through the door. She’d already given me my own copy of her key, and I’d given her a copy of mine.

I gave her a look. “What are you wearing?”

She glanced down at herself. “A T-shirt.”

“A T-shirt and nothing else,” I pointed out. The tee came to mid-thigh

and her legs and feet were bare. I had to make myself stop staring as I unlaced my boots.

“I have underwear on,” Sienna said, which didn’t help. “I’m comfortable. It’s the middle of the night.”

I grunted. “You said you were up.”

“I was up. I am up.” She put her laptop on the table and took off her glasses to rub her eyes. “I’m awake.”

I sat next to her on the sofa. “If you need to sleep, you should sleep. Don’t wait up for me. You know the band usually goes late.”

“I was working,” she said. “The article is almost done. Do you want to read it?”

I did not want to know what Sienna wrote about me. “No. Never. Do I romance you?”

She blinked. “What?”

“Romance,” I said. “I’m supposed to do it. I don’t think I do it. Do I?”

She frowned. “Who says you need to romance me?”

“Brit.”

“You told Brit about us?”

“I told the whole band about us.” When I saw the surprise on her face, I said, “Come on, Sienna. They already knew. It was just getting stupid, pretending this isn’t happening.”

“True, but still.” She put one foot on my thigh, rubbing her arch against the denim. “That seems rather official.”

I lost my words for a moment, because her foot was turning me on. There were times when she completely flustered me, usually with some kind of affection. I wasn’t used to it. What did it mean when she rubbed her foot on me? Sex? Friendship? Nothing at all? I’d think I had a handle on things, and then Sienna would hook her knee over my leg or stroke her hand down my forearm, and I’d be confused all over again.

“You didn’t answer the question,” I said.

“About whether you romance me?” She seemed amused. “Like flowers or something? I don’t want flowers, honestly. That just seems awkward.”

Brit had said that about flowers. “Then we should go out to dinner.”

“After this story is turned in, sure.”

“I should say nice things,” I said. “I’m bad at that. You know how I am.”

“Yes, I do.” She was still rubbing her foot on me. “I’ve told you, Stone. I like the way you talk.”

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “I’ll do something.” Brit had said to come up with something Sienna would really like, but I had no idea what that was. I would have to think.

My gaze snagged on the table. “What the hell is that?” I asked.

Sienna followed where I was looking. There was a notebook on the table, sitting open next to her laptop. On one page, handwritten across the top, were the words *Neal is hot*.

“Oh,” Sienna said. “Ignore that.”

“Ignore it?” I didn’t think so. Why the hell had she written that down? And just when I’d started to like him, too.

“It’s a long story,” Sienna said. “It doesn’t mean what you think it means. I mean, he *is* hot. But—”

“Hell, no.” I grabbed the notebook and tossed it on the floor. Then I grabbed her foot from my thigh and tugged her down so she was flat on her back on the sofa. I pressed myself over her and kissed her, long and deep.

“You’re ridiculous,” she chided me when I came up for air.

“Shut up,” I said and kissed her again.

This time, her hands moved down and started working open my belt buckle. Her teeth scraped my lip. I knew exactly how my girl liked it. Just dirty enough. Adventurous, but not crossing any lines. I could be bossy but not rude. If I did it just right, she ran white-hot and was practically insatiable.

As for me, if I could get her like this—pliable underneath me, clear about what she desired, starting to get demanding—I’d do anything she wanted. Anything at all.

I broke the kiss. “We doing this, Maplethorpe?” I asked her.

She nodded. She’d unfastened my belt buckle and was unzipping my jeans.

“Right here on the sofa?” I asked. “We gonna break it in?”

“Yes, please,” she replied. “I’d like that.”

I slid my hands up under her tee and got her panties off. I stripped off my shirt. Sienna tugged my jeans and boxers down.

I braced myself over her again, placing sucking kisses along the line of her neck, under her jaw, behind her ear. Using just enough pressure, using my teeth in the gentlest way. She smelled like shampoo and tasted like Sienna. I used my weight to press her down into the sofa, letting her feel me. She responded with a gasp in my ear.

I’d have to be careful. We’d ditched condoms when she went on birth

control—literally the best thing that had ever happened to me, bar none—and I didn't want to make a mess on her sofa. I should have thought ahead, grabbed a towel to put down beneath us. Now it was too late.

Sienna squirmed beneath me, her heels digging into the backs of my knees. She said my name.

Yeah, it was definitely too late. I'd have to come on her stomach to keep things clean. No one could say I wasn't a gentleman.

I slid into her, and then I kissed her. I kissed her because Sienna was my girl, the only one I wanted. I didn't tell her that I'd wait as long as it took—years, if I had to. I didn't tell her that I thought she was the smartest, hottest woman I'd ever known, that she had a light that drew me in and made me a better person. I didn't tell her that before she came along, I hadn't had a woman at all for four years. Because I'd been wandering the world alone. Because I hadn't met anyone I wanted. I didn't tell her that I'd thought I'd be alone forever. Until her.

I kissed her, and I made it good for her. Really, really good. Because I couldn't think of anything else she wanted, and it was what I had to give.

TWENTY-FOUR

Sienna

Diana Harvey lived in a small bungalow in a nice neighborhood. I knew from Stone that this was the house he grew up in, that Diana owned it, and that Stone now helped her pay the bills and the upkeep.

She greeted me on the front porch as I got out of my car. She was wearing snug jeans, a button-down top tucked in, and a wide belt. She wore long dangly earrings and a layer of makeup. I wondered whether this was her usual look or whether she'd dressed up for me.

She smiled as we introduced ourselves and shook hands, but I could tell she was nervous. She was an inch shorter than me, so Stone didn't get his height from her. I could see a little resemblance to him in her eyes, but not anywhere else. I knew Stone's face so well now that I would recognize it if he looked like his mother.

"Make yourself at home," she said a little too brightly as she led me inside. "It doesn't look like much, I know. You want something to drink? I don't mean alcohol, you know. Like tea or something? I might have some. Where should we sit? I have a sitting room up front but I never sit in it. How weird is that, right?"

She patted her pockets, then fiddled with an earring. She'd definitely dressed up for this. She'd arranged the throw pillows on the sofa and I could see vacuum marks on the carpets.

“We can sit wherever you’re comfortable,” I said. “This won’t take long. We’re just going to talk about Stone.”

Diana barked a nervous laugh, but her shoulders relaxed. “My favorite topic. I can talk about Stoney all day. Are you going to publish that his mom is a wrinkly old bird? It’s true and all, but I don’t think he’d like it.”

“I’m not going to write that,” I assured her. I’d never heard him called Stoney before. “I just want a little background about his life from one of the people who knows him best. I’m not trying to make either of you look bad.”

She nodded and stopped touching her earring. “Let’s sit out back.”

There were a couple of well-used chairs on the back patio. This was obviously one of her favorite spots. I declined a drink and we sat down. She watched as I started the recording app on my phone and set it between us.

“It’s just so I can refer back to our conversation,” I told her. “So I can get your words exactly right.”

“Sure.” She watched my phone warily for a moment, then pulled her gaze away. “I don’t know where to start. Ask a question, honey.”

“Why does Stone have a different last name than you?” I asked.

She brightened, because she knew the answer to this question. “Oh. Harvey was my second husband’s last name. I changed it when we married. Never bothered changing it again, because I learned that lesson. Stoney had his father’s last name when he was born, but we had it legally changed when he was thirteen. It was his idea. We changed it to my mother’s maiden name, because he said he didn’t really have a father. He knew his mind even then. We fought about it of course, but he got his way.” She smiled.

I blinked. It was the first question, and I’d already learned something Stone had never told me. “Zeeland wasn’t his birth name?”

“No. But Michael Roark was a no-good sonofabitch who took off after Stoney was born. I figured out later that I wasn’t the only woman he had in his black book the whole time. I just managed to snag a wedding and a baby out of him before he moved on to the next one. He never cared one bit about his son, not now and not then.” She pointed to my phone. “You can write *that* in the article. That’s facts.”

“Where is Stone’s father now?” I asked.

“Who knows? We didn’t bother chasing him down.” Diana’s gaze darted away, and I had the feeling she might have kept tabs on her ex for longer than she admitted to her son. “He probably had other kids he left behind. If he did, I feel sorry for them. I got this house out of him and I got my son, which is

why I can't say I wish I never met him. But otherwise, he can go to hell."

Something turned over in the back of my mind, a thought I couldn't quite place. I left it and moved to my next question. "What was Stone like as a little boy?"

That got her talking. If you want to get any mother onto her favorite topic, ask her about when her kids were little and she'll talk all day.

Diana's portrait of Stone was a pile of contradictions. He was a good boy, but he was also a troublemaker. He was smart, but his marks were terrible and his grammar was "hopeless." He liked to get his own way, but he also did chores around the house and got his first job at thirteen for cash under the table. He would practice guitar for hours at a time, but he was also lazy. He had attitude, but when he got his first check from a Road Kings tour as they were first starting out, he sent his mother two hundred dollars.

I listened, my thoughts spinning as I tried to reconcile all of this with the man I knew. Lazy? A troublemaker? Those didn't compute. Diana's version of Stone's year in L.A. was that he left home "because he was in a mood," not because his home life was a disaster.

And she made no mention of the fact that at least one of her husbands had hit her son.

I didn't call her on it. Stone had talked to me about it honestly when I interviewed him, and there was no point in bringing it up now, except to make Diana angry, guilty, and defensive. She'd end the interview, and I didn't want that yet. I still had questions to ask.

I wondered what she'd think if she knew I'd been dating her son for months now. That he'd spent the night at my place just two nights ago, and I'd slept curled up against his big, warm body.

We moved on to the topic of present-day Stone. Diana's opinion of her son as a fully grown rock star was much the same as when he was a child. She was proud of him, but she also said he "liked to make her life difficult." When I asked for an example, she just rolled her eyes and said, "You have no idea what he puts me through!"

It wasn't an answer. Diana seemed to find comfort in seeing her son as a lifelong problem. Even her compliments were laced with insults—he was smart but he was stupid, he was successful but he was lazy. It made me angry. Now I knew why Stone had a low opinion of himself. I knew why he'd warned me not to judge her, why he'd told me that Diana had had a hard childhood of her own. It excused her a somewhat, but not all the way. To me,

she still had a lot to answer for.

And I didn't know how much of this to put into my article. Which was why I'd already rewritten it twice and I hadn't turned it in.

Then, as we were wrapping up, she made things even worse.

"Make sure to write that I want grandkids," she joked as I turned off my recording app. "He can start with that gorgeous agent he's dating."

I paused and stared at her. "What?"

"You didn't know?" Diana relished this. "The blond model." She waggled her eyebrows. "Stoney's dating her. She's forty I think, but if they get started soon it could still happen. They could fertilize her eggs or something. Hollywood actresses do it all the time."

I put my phone in my bag with numb fingers as my thoughts spun. "Um, I don't think—"

"She was in *Sports Illustrated*," Diana continued. "I know Stoney doesn't date much. He likes to play the field, like his father. But that one? He should lock her down. I've told him that. But what do I know? I'm just his mother."

TWENTY-FIVE

Stone

Diana was going to ruin it. I could sense it, like the smell of smoke in the wind. She was going to say something during this interview, do something—I had no idea what—and Sienna wouldn't want me anymore. It wasn't a possibility, it was a fucking certainty. I knew my mother that well.

I waited as long as I could while I knew Sienna was at my mother's house, and then I bailed on rehearsal and drove to Sienna's apartment building. For once, I didn't bother calling or texting our usual back-and-forth. This was too important.

Sienna's car wasn't at her building, which meant she could be anywhere. I tried to think of where she'd go while trying not to panic. Then I remembered.

Peter and Maggie were away for the weekend at a teachers' conference, so their house was empty. If Sienna wanted a peaceful place to work, she'd go to her attic.

I drove to the Maplethorpe house, my stomach turning in fear. Sienna's car was in the driveway. I parked on the street and called, but she didn't pick up.

Listening to the call go to voicemail, I knew my hunch was right. Diana had somehow screwed this for me.

I hung up and texted Sienna.

STONE

I'm out front. Let me in.

There was a pause. The three dots moved, then stopped. A curtain flickered in an upstairs window.

The feelings washed over me in a familiar wave, but for once I didn't have the urge to run. I didn't have the urge to get on a plane or get drunk or even to play music. The only thing I wanted to do was talk to Sienna, my girlfriend, about whatever was wrong. To fix this thing right here, right now, while it was still fixable. *If* it was fixable.

I got out of the car and strode up the driveway. As I approached the porch, the front door swung open. Sienna stood there, but her pose wasn't inviting. She blocked my way.

"Don't be mad," I said. "Whatever she said to you, do not be fucking mad. Tell me what it was and listen to my side of it. Please."

Sienna paused, and I tried to read her body language. I tried so hard. She was stiff, unsure, but she didn't look angry. She wasn't frowning. She tilted her head with a speculative expression on her face. Then she stepped aside.

"How did you know where I was?" she asked as I walked past her into the house.

"I guessed."

"You're not tracking my phone or something?"

"No." I literally had no idea how to do that. She overestimated my intelligence.

"You found me at that diner in Boston during the tour," she said. "You never told me how you found me that night, either."

"I guessed," I said.

"Come on, Stone. Tell me the truth."

I paused, looking at her. She'd put on sweatpants and a tank top, probably dug from a drawer in her old room that she hadn't emptied when she moved. I couldn't read her expression, couldn't tell whether she was glad to see me or wished I would go away and leave her alone forever. I needed to know.

"What did she say?" I asked, unable to even say my mother's name in this moment.

"I'll tell you if you answer my question."

"What question?"

"How did you find me in Boston?"

I scratched the back of my neck, thinking back. I had no idea why she wanted to know this so bad all of a sudden. “It was after a show, remember? It was midnight. You weren’t in our room.” I didn’t tell her how worried I’d been when I realized that she was gone. “So what’s open at midnight? You probably didn’t go to a bar. I knew by then that you’d probably looked for somewhere to do work. So a coffee shop or a restaurant. There aren’t very many places like that open all night. So I found the closest one to the hotel and started there. And that’s where you were.”

I didn’t tell her that I’d been prepared to scour the city for her while redialing her number if she hadn’t been in that diner—me, using the phone, which I hated. That I’d worried about her every night because she had no one looking out for her. That it had robbed me of sleep.

“You only said you were there because you were hungry,” Sienna said.

I shrugged. “You hated me. You didn’t want to hear that I was worried. I answered your question. Now tell me what she said.”

My girlfriend sighed, the sound coming from deep in her chest, and looked baffled. “That was the most confusing interview I’ve ever done,” she said, then turned to walk up the stairs.

I followed her. “What does that mean?”

“Don’t worry,” she said as she walked down the hall toward her old bedroom. “I was respectful. I remembered what you said.”

“Sienna, tell me.”

“I don’t even know. My thoughts are all jumbled.” She’d left her childhood bed here, because it was so small, and bought a bigger one for her new place. She got into her old bed and pulled the covers over her head, burrowing in. “I’m so confused,” she said, her voice muffled.

I stared at the lump under the covers, wondering what to do. She hadn’t told me to fuck off, so that was something. She’d let me into the house. It was what I had to work with, so I’d work with it.

I sat on the edge of the bed, behind her back. Her body rolled toward me as the bed sagged. She didn’t come out from under the covers.

“Whatever she said is probably wrong,” I said. “I don’t tell her anything.”

“That tracks,” Sienna replied from her blanket fort. At least she was talking. “I wanted to ask her who she was talking about, because half the time, it wasn’t you.”

“She has a story in her head and she goes with it,” I explained. “If I contradict it, we fight. We’ve been doing it for thirty-seven years, and I’m

fucking tired. So I don't do it anymore."

She was quiet. Even from outside her bubble of covers, I could tell she was thinking that over.

"Let me guess," I said. "She didn't talk at all about Alec." Alec was the stepfather who had hit me when my grammar slipped.

"Not about Alec," Sienna's muffled voice said. "Not about Chase. No honesty about why you left home for L.A. I know she means well, but I swear, Stone, if I see her again I might tackle her to the ground and squeeze some truth out of her. I've never been so infuriated."

I scrubbed a hand through my hair. I'd never had anyone get mad on my behalf, and I wasn't used to the feeling. "Yeah, she's got a lot of denial. What else did she say? 'Cause you aren't hiding under those covers because of that."

A pause. "She said you're dating Angie."

I groaned aloud. Fuck, could this get any worse?

"Also, you and Angie are going to do IVF and have her grandbabies."

Yes. Yes it could.

I turned on the bed and gently tugged the covers down, revealing Sienna's face. She'd taken her glasses off under there and I looked right into those gray eyes.

"Maplethorpe," I said, my voice low. "Look at me and tell me that you think I'm dating my agent."

She blinked, her dark lashes distracting me for a second. "No, I don't actually think that," she admitted. "You'd have to be a magician to be cheating on me all this time while making an album."

My throat was tight and hot. "I would not cheat on you. Not ever. I fucking swear it."

She looked vulnerable for a second. "Angie is very beautiful."

"I don't care," I said. "We had dinner together a few months ago, right after the tour. I'm gonna be honest here and say that Angie was looking for a date. I told her no. I did it in person because she deserved that respect. We ate dinner, we went home separately, and that was it. If you don't believe me, call her and ask."

Sienna bit her lip, thinking. "I'm not going to call Angie. My embarrassment is already acute."

This woman. I was fucking nuts for her. I tapped her forehead. "What's going on in your brain, Sienna? Get outta your head. You think that was bad,

think about how bad it would have been if I'd told Diana you're my girlfriend."

She looked so horrified that I knew she'd definitely met my mother.

"Sorry," I said. "Maybe you see now why I don't date."

"She said you play the field," Sienna said.

"Because I don't tell her anything, remember? Babe, your brain is scrambled. You think I live some rock god life, but I don't. I work out, I jerk off, and I play guitar. That's my life. Or it was, until you came along."

Now her brows drew down, that annoyed frown I was so familiar with. "Stone, you are stupidly hot. That can't be true."

I shook my head. "I was bored of all that a long time ago. A long, *long* time ago. Then I met you, and suddenly I wasn't bored anymore. I think that's why you made me so mad."

Her frown eased a little, and her gaze traveled my face. "Well," she said, "for my part, you made me so mad because you went out of your way to make yourself genuinely infuriating."

"I'm aware," I said.

"Also, because I rather liked you, and I didn't think it made any sense at the time."

I scratched my beard. "Yeah, you hid that well."

"I worked hard at it. Just like you work hard to hide the fact that you're a likeable person." She smiled. "But I figured it out. You're actually adorable, Stone."

"Bite me, Maplethorpe."

She threw back her covers. "Get in here."

I took my shoes off and tried to get into her tiny bed, but I didn't fit. She moved over to make room and nearly fell off the edge. I stretched my legs out, and my feet hit the footboard.

"Jesus, Sienna, this is a hobbit bed," I complained.

"It's a bed for a normal-sized person," she shot back.

"How do you sleep in this thing?"

"It's very comfortable, I'll have you know."

"I beg to differ."

"Just move your knee. It's cutting off my circulation."

I moved my knee. She rearranged her legs and nearly pegged me in the balls. My elbow jabbed into the mattress.

I ended up fully on top of her, which was the only way we both would fit.

Even that was awkward. We were fully clothed, and I was smashing her flat with my weight. I tried to push up on my elbows so she could breathe.

Sienna glanced down at our position. “Is this how married people do it?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Me, neither.” She leaned up and kissed me, and I kissed her back. We did that for a while. It was a lot better than nothing.

“I’m not nailing you in this bed,” I told her when I broke the kiss. “It’s too weird.”

“My god, you’re romantic,” she said.

“It’s what I’m known for.”

She kissed me again. When we paused for breath, her gaze had gone all hazy in that way I particularly liked.

“Stone, could you possibly...” She trailed off.

I frowned. “Possibly what?”

Her cheeks flushed red. She pointed down, between us.

Oh. I bit back a grin. “Say it, Sienna.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t think I do.”

“You’re just...” She bit her lip. “You’re so good at it.”

Yeah, she was going to get what she wanted.

“Say please and I’ll do it,” I said roughly.

Sienna blushed harder. “Please.”

So I did it.

I had to get off the bed and on my knees on the floor. But I was willing to make the sacrifice.

TWENTY-SIX

Sienna

The office wasn't quite finished. The reception desk was empty and had boxes stacked next to it. There were no employees and there was no way, it seemed, to make an appointment to see Will Hale. So I walked right in.

I saw no one in the corridor, but the double doors to Hale's office were ajar. I was too mad to bother knocking. I walked in there, too.

Will Hale, the thirty-one-year-old multimillionaire who had bankrolled the Road Kings' last tour and had now invested in both the new album and the new studio, was sitting behind the desk with a laptop open in front of him. He was texting on his phone. He looked up at me, startled.

I took a second to peruse his face. I'd never seen him in person, only in the few photos I'd found on the internet. He was good-looking, I realized, with even features and dark blond hair. He'd worn his hair longer in older photos, but he'd cut it short now, and he was clean shaven. He wore slim-cut jeans and a casual long-sleeved shirt. A baseball cap was tossed onto a nearby chair along with a light jacket. All of his clothes were expensive, right down to his sneakers.

He looked, on the surface, like a tech billionaire you'd see coming and going from the Google offices. Nerdy, rich, probably an asshole if you spent too much time with him. The kind of guy who owned at least three cars and had a remote system overseeing every aspect of his brand-new mansion.

I took another step into the office, studying him more closely.

“Can I help you?” he asked when I didn’t speak.

“I’m Sienna Maplethorpe,” I said.

His expression gave away that he recognized my name.

“That’s right,” I said. “I’m the journalist. The one who tried to track you down in New York but got turned away at your office. The one who came to the door of your brownstone and left a note. The one you tried to get to quit on the tour.”

Hale nodded. “Yeah, I remember the name.”

“What’s this?” I motioned around me. “Your New York office is closed, but I tracked down your old assistant and she gave me this address, where she’s forwarding your mail. You’re relocating to Portland?”

He put his phone down and leaned back in his chair, though he still looked tense. “I already did. Relocate, I mean. I never liked New York, and I didn’t want to be there anymore. I’d rather be here. I like the music business. So here I am.”

“You moved across the country,” I said, “because you like the music business.”

“Yes,” he replied.

“That’s the only reason.”

He shrugged. “Yes. Is this an interview?”

I couldn’t mask my anger. “No, this isn’t an interview, you idiot.”

Hale looked surprised, and then he frowned. His brows drew down and I felt dizzy for a second. I took another step toward his desk.

“How tall are you?” I asked him.

“What?”

“How. Tall. Are. You.”

I likely seemed like a crazy woman, my hostility completely out of line. But he answered, “Six two.”

“So.” I leaned over his desk, putting my weight on my palms and staring into his face. “Close, but not quite.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“Genetics,” I replied. “I’m talking about genetics.”

Our gazes locked. He could have blustered, could have ordered me out of his office. He could have played a game. Instead, he went pale.

“Oh, shit,” he said.

“Exactly,” I shot back. “Never mess with a journalist.” I pulled a folded

photocopy out of my pocket, unfolded it, and put it on the table between us. “Tell me what this is.”

He glanced down at it, then looked away.

“Tell me,” I said.

“Since you brought it, you already know what it is.”

“I want to hear it from you,” I said. “The truth, for once.”

I’d gotten the idea from the interview with Diana. She’d so casually dropped Stone’s father’s name. *Michael Roark was a no-good sonofabitch who took off after Stoney was born. If he left behind other kids, I feel sorry for them.* I’d followed a hunch, just as I had with Chase Mackay—only this time, I’d ended up somewhere much worse.

It had taken barely an hour to dig up this piece of paper. It had been so, so easy.

I’d never been angrier at anyone in my life than I was right now at William Hale.

Hale sighed, possibly realizing he wasn’t going to escape my fury. “That’s a copy of my birth certificate,” he said. “I was adopted when I was ten months old.”

“Correct,” I said. Hale was his adopted parents’ name. I pointed to a name on the page. “And what name is right here, listed as your birth father?”

Hale glanced down, then away again. “Michael Roark,” he admitted. “My father was Michael Roark.”

The words hung in the air between us.

I stared at Stone’s half brother, unable to believe how calm he was. “Were you going to tell him?” I asked, my voice trying to crack. “Ever?”

“I was. I am. I had a plan.” He looked flustered, then annoyed. He scowled, and the expression on his unfamiliar features was like looking at Stone’s ghost.

Will didn’t look like his half brother—not the hair, not the eyes. Though he was tall, his build was leaner. But he had Stone’s jawline. It was hard to recognize because Stone wore a beard, but it was the same. He had a similar scowl, though his presence wasn’t as big, or as threatening.

Stone had a brother. *A brother.* And he had no idea.

“When were you going to execute this plan?” I asked. I was seeing red, I was so mad. “A year? Five? Ten? My guess is never, because you’ve chickened out this long. You’re nothing but a coward.”

“I only learned it myself a year ago,” Hale said. He ran a hand through his

hair. “I’ve always known I was adopted, but I had never tracked down my birth parents. When I did, when I found out that my father had another son before me—it changed everything for me. I had a stable home life, but I’ve never felt comfortable with those people, in that life. It always felt wrong somehow. It’s hard to explain.” He shook his head. “I thought I was crazy. Do you understand? I was never happy. I was treated for depression, anxiety. Then I learned who my birth father is, and who my brother is, and I saw the Road Kings play in a video online. And I realized I’ve never been crazy at all.” His gaze met mine again, and I saw some of Stone’s fierceness there. “You try it,” he said. “You try living your entire life not knowing who you truly are. Not knowing why you don’t fit into your own life. Not knowing of a single person on earth who is related to you by blood. It messes with your head.”

“I’m sure it was difficult,” I said. “You know what else is difficult? Being lied to by someone who claims to be your business partner but is actually your brother.”

“I just wanted to be part of it,” Hale said. “I wanted to see what it was like, being in his orbit. I think he’s a genius. I think the band is incredible. I thought, this is the best band, and bands need money, right? They always need money. Money is what I have, so that’s what I’ll contribute. I’ll put up the funds to send them back on the road, because the Road Kings need to be on the fucking road. They were just rotting away, doing nothing. I had to do it anonymously. They wouldn’t have done it if they knew who I was.”

I had to admit he was probably right about that.

Will kept talking. “I wanted to see Stone play for real, wanted everyone else to see it, too. I wanted him to go back to doing what he’s meant to do, what he was born to do. I still want that. It’s been worth every penny.”

I bit my lip. Because even as angry as I was, the tour had changed everything—for Stone, for the other band members. For Callie, Raine, Brit. For me. The tour had changed all our lives, and it wouldn’t have happened if the man sitting in front of me hadn’t decided it needed to happen.

“Stone Zeeland isn’t just a genius musician,” I said. “He isn’t just one of the greatest players of his generation. He’s an incredible person. He’s smart and he’s fiercely loyal and his kindness is bone-deep. He’s passionate and he’s funny. He’s grumpy and he’s lived through tragedy and he has feelings that can be hurt. And you,” I pointed at Will’s chest, “*you* are not going to hurt him, ever. Or you will deal with me.”

Will blinked and his eyes went wide with understanding. I gave him a death glare, warning him not to comment. Yes, on the surface Stone and I didn't fit. Yes, I was making my feelings rather obvious in this moment. But I didn't want to hear it.

I wasn't going to hear Will Hale say that I was in love with Stone before I had the chance to tell Stone myself.

Will seemed to get the message, because he didn't ask about Stone and me. "I'm not jerking him around," he said. "I'm not jerking any of them—any of *you*—around. I've uprooted my whole life, my business, to come here. I'm starting over because I like it here. I feel better here, hanging out with a bunch of asshole rock stars who don't like me, than I ever have. I'd rather go broke making music than get even more rich making one more investment deal. I know that makes me crazy, but it's true."

"The musician problem," I said.

He looked confused. "What?"

"The musician problem," I repeated. "Musicians make people crazy. It's a thing. It's usually women who are susceptible to it, but it can affect anyone." When he still looked lost, I said, "Why do you think I'm barely making a living at twenty-eight? Why do you think I followed the tour all the way across the country? I could be a dental hygienist by now."

Some of the tension cracked, and Will gave me a small smile. He was handsome in a different way from Stone, but he was still handsome.

He was Stone's brother, and Stone was mine—or he would be, once I convinced him of it. It didn't seem like Will was going anywhere, and he was part of the reason this record was being made. I could at least try to get along with him a little bit.

"Okay," Will said. He slid the copy of his birth certificate toward me. "You're good at what you do. You're really good, and I mean that. So what are you going to do now? Are you going to tell him? Are you going to write this into your story?"

The story. The piece I needed to turn in any day now because it was weeks late. The story about Stone that I couldn't get quite right.

This *was* part of the story. But I wasn't going to fumble it this time. I was going to do it right. People—especially people I loved—were more important than magazine pieces.

"I'm not going to tell Stone about this," I said. I slid the paper back toward Will. "You are. You're going to call him, meet him face to face, and

come clean. And you're going to do it today."

He sighed, as if he'd expected me to say that. "Or what?"

"Or if you have any secrets, I will dig them up and torture you with them."

He shook his head. "I'm very boring."

"Then I'll find out about the time you stole a marker from the classroom in second grade. I'll find out about the time you watched gay porn when you were sixteen."

"That was *one* time."

I smiled. "I'll find out who you lost your virginity to and interview them about it. I'll find the photo your friend took of you when you were passed out drunk at twenty-one. I'll find the photo your mother insisted on taking when you had a big pimple on your face. And I will publish it."

Will ran his hands through his hair, taking a breath. "My god, you're evil. Pure evil. Like Darth Vader and Lex Luthor rolled into one."

"Do as I say and you will escape my wrath," I said.

"Fine, fine. Is Stone afraid of you?"

"Not even a little bit. Do you want some advice? Don't show fear around him. Don't be fake around him. And try not to piss him off."

Will looked helpless. "Stone is always pissed off."

I gave him a smile that was probably evil. "I know," I said. "Good luck."

TWENTY-SEVEN

Stone

“Well, fuck,” I said.

I was sitting on a park bench by the river, watching people go by. Mothers with strollers, couples, teenagers, women in yoga pants and ponytails. Seagulls called overhead and rain clouds moved over the horizon.

The man sitting next to me shifted in discomfort. “I’m sorry.”

I glanced at him. This was my half brother? This guy? He looked nothing like me. Did he?

When he’d texted me to say he needed to meet with me—alone—I hadn’t known what to think. I’d wondered if maybe I’d pissed him off somehow, even though I couldn’t remember doing it. The best guess I had was that he wanted to bail out of the deal and leave us stranded, and for some reason he wanted to break the news to me alone, which was weird.

This was much, much weirder.

Sienna knew. Hale had told me that, too. Sienna had figured it out, had forced Hale to come clean. I scratched the back of my neck, watching a guy chase his runaway toddler, who was laughing like it was a game.

“I guess you’re angry,” Hale said.

I had to think that over. It was the strangest thing, but I wasn’t. I was confused, sure. Surprised. I had to rethink a lot of things. But my throat wasn’t closing and my words weren’t spinning. I didn’t have the urge to get

up and get the fuck out of here. I wasn't mad at all. In fact, I had the sudden urge to laugh.

"Well, fuck," I said again.

Hale turned to stare at me. "Come on, man, I lied to you. Did the whole anonymous-backer thing. Pretended I was just a big fan of the band. Though I *am* a big fan of the band, but you know what I mean. You must want to kick my ass a little bit."

"That motherfucker," I said. "That piece of shit. Did you ever meet him?"

I didn't have to explain that I was talking about our father. The one who had left both of us like so much trash at the side of the road.

Hale sat back. "No, but I came close. I hired an investigator to dig up everything about the man. He lives in a trailer park in New Mexico and sells auto parts. His current wife is twenty years younger than him. She's wife number four. My birth mother wasn't one of his wives, just a hookup. God knows how many of those he's had."

"Where's your birth mother now?" I asked.

Hale shrugged. "Prison. She's been in and out, and right now she's in. Theft, dealing, that kind of thing. This one's for getting opiates with fake prescriptions. We've been talking on the phone. I'm getting her a new lawyer."

My opinion of William Hale went up. So he originally came from trash, like me. And he wasn't too proud to admit it.

"Anyway, when I found out where Dear Old Dad was living, I flew down to New Mexico," Will continued. "I went to the trailer park, saw him get out of his car and go into his trailer. I decided it wasn't worth it, that I wasn't going to get what I wanted. So I turned around and left."

I let that sit for a second. I had never seen my father face to face. There were a lot of years when that had made me feel like I was missing something.

But I didn't feel like I was missing something anymore.

"I can give you his address if you want," Will said, as if reading my mind. "I can give you the entire file my investigator dug up."

"No," I replied. "I don't want it. Does he look like me?"

For some reason, that was the only question about him that I wanted answered. The only thing that mattered.

"Not much," Will answered, not noticing how important his answer was. "He's tall like you, but lean like me. Gray hair, long gray beard, looks like a mean ex-biker. I got a good look at him, and he doesn't look exactly like

either of us. I didn't feel some cosmic connection because we share genes. I didn't feel anything."

Something loosened inside me. That was okay, then, if I wasn't his clone. I didn't know why, but it was.

Will crossed one ankle over the other knee. His legs weren't as long as mine, but they were pretty long. His sneakers cost over three hundred bucks. We probably looked strange to anyone looking at us, me in my aviators, worn clothes and jewelry, sitting next to clean-cut Will in his expensive, nerdy getup. If this guy wanted to hang around with me and my band, I was going to have to teach him some things about real life.

"You're moving to Portland?" I asked him.

"Yeah." He sighed, relaxing. "I'm done with New York. I'm quitting my job at Tower VC. The other partners are pissed, but mostly they're confused. They can't figure out what I think I'm doing. They keep asking me if I met a woman."

"They aren't music people," I observed.

Will nodded. "Did you know that my first successful business was making turntables?"

"Sienna found that when she learned who you were."

"Of course she did. I came up with that first turntable prototype myself. I built every part of that product. I oversaw the manufacturing, did the marketing, everything. Those turntables were my baby. I lived and breathed them for five years. And that was before I knew who my birth parents were, who you were. I made that company because I loved it."

"Those were good turntables," I admitted. "I owned one for a while."

"Right?" Will leaned forward, animated. "I sold that company because I got offered a massive amount of money for it. Everyone in my circle, everyone I knew, said I'd be crazy not to take that money. It made me rich. And now it's years later, and I regret it."

I frowned at him. "You regret getting rich?"

He shrugged as if it didn't matter. "I would have gotten rich anyway. I just wish I'd done it making turntables all this time."

I'd never heard him talk so much. We had that in common, at least.

"I'm not a musician," Will said. "That's you, Stone. But I can handle some of the other shit. Especially the money. You guys didn't get into this to become millionaires, but you keep saying you don't want to be fucked over, either. That's me. I'm here, I'm setting up an office, I'm hiring an assistant. I

can help get the studio online and I can help get the record out, and no one gets fucked over.”

“That’s what you want?” I asked.

“That’s what I want,” he said.

My life was strange. Really strange. And suddenly, I was good with it. I didn’t need my shitty father, because I’d had brothers all this time. Three of them, even Neal. And now I had Sienna—if she decided to keep me.

And Will? He wasn’t my brother, not yet. But I’d consider it.

“I’m not taking you to your Little League games,” I said.

Will looked confused. “What?”

“You can’t borrow my car,” I told him. “I’ll sneak you liquor underage, because that’s the duty of any big brother. But do not expect me to clean up your puke. You do that yourself.”

He grinned as I continued.

“If you want to try weed, you come to me,” I said. “I’ll make sure you don’t get ripped off. Same with shrooms, but I draw the line at acid. You’re not doing acid. Don’t talk to me about some girl you’re sappy over, because it’s boring. I’m not the brother you pour your heart out to. But I’m the brother you call at three in the morning because you’re in over your head and you need someone to come get you. That’s when you call me. Otherwise, don’t bother because I don’t answer the phone. Got it?”

Will stared out at the river for a beat. He seemed to be wrestling with his emotions. “Got it,” he said finally. “Okay.”

“Good.” I stood up. “Let’s go get drunk.”

He looked shocked. “Stone, it’s four o’clock in the afternoon.”

I gave him a look. “What did I just say?”

“Yeah, okay.” He stood up quickly. “Right. Why the hell not? Let’s go.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

Sienna

I drifted awake when I heard my door open. I had enough time to realize I was asleep on my sofa, my knees pulled up to my chest, and then I felt big, familiar hands on me, touching me gently. “Sienna,” came Stone’s low voice.

“I’m awake,” I croaked. I had no idea what time it was, but it was dark, the room only lit by the lamp in the corner. My laptop had long ago gone to sleep.

The sofa sagged next to my feet where Stone sat down. I started to get up, protesting that I wasn’t sleeping at all, but he surprised me by wrapping his arms around me and lowering me down. Then he wrapped the rest of his body around me, bringing his knees up. He buried his face against my neck and sighed deeply.

I was pinned in the best possible way, and my body relaxed against his, like it always did. I couldn’t see his face, but I dug my nose against his shoulder and the crook of his neck, scenting him like a puppy. I smelled the distinct scent of a bar and the tang of alcohol.

“You’ve been drinking,” I said.

“A little,” he admitted, his voice a rumble deep against my skin and the sofa cushions.

I inhaled him again, shameless. “I don’t smell cigarettes. Were you smoking?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Yes, you do. I’ve smelled it before.”

“I quit.” He hugged me tighter against him. I loved it when he did that. “Threw out my cigarettes weeks ago. It was a big fucking deal.”

I ran my hand along his arm and squeezed his bicep, because I firmly believed that if you were going to date Stone Zeeland, you should take the pleasure of squeezing his bicep as much as possible.

He’d texted me this afternoon that he was going to meet with Will Hale, and then there had been nothing. I’d imagined a hundred different scenarios over the last few hours. It was possible that Stone would never speak to me again, but somehow I hadn’t thought that was the answer. He was being thrown a huge curveball by his half brother. He needed to process. I could give him a few hours of time.

So I’d worked, and I’d waited, and at some point I’d fallen asleep. Now here he was. It seemed he’d processed the news in his own way.

I ran my palm up his shoulder. “You’re not mad at me,” I pointed out.

“Ma’am, I am not mad at you,” he replied formally, and I laughed.

“How drunk are you?”

“Not much.” A pause, this one also formal. “It takes a great deal of imbibing to get me drunk.”

I laughed again. I liked drunk Stone. Though he was probably right and he wasn’t completely wasted. To get a grown man of Stone’s size wasted, you’d probably have to drink half of Switzerland under the table. He was just tipsy enough to be cute.

“Were you drinking alone or with Will?” I asked him.

“With Will,” he replied. He still hadn’t moved, and his body heat had erased the chill of the room against my skin. I liked being wrapped in a weighted guitar god blanket. I should probably sell them on Etsy. “He’s my half brother,” Stone added. “He’s much drunker than me. But don’t worry, I put him in an Uber. I don’t think he’ll throw up, but if he does, he has to clean it up himself.”

“Did everything go okay?” I asked.

“Sure,” Stone said.

“That’s it? *Sure*? You just discovered you have a brother. Did you two talk it out?”

“Sure.”

“Are you going to be friends?”

“You have so many questions,” he groaned. “Want to get naked?”

I squeezed his bicep again. “Stone, I will not take advantage of your body while you are too intoxicated to give informed consent.”

He grunted. “I am informing you that I am consenting.”

That made me laugh again. “Stop distracting me. I want to know everything.”

“You already know everything,” he replied. “You always do. I’m just going to listen to you from now on, because you know more than me.”

“Not about everything.” Like playing guitar, for example. Or about all of the countries he’d been to. Or sex. He knew a *lot* more than I did about sex, and I was very happy about it.

“Still,” he said, his voice low with sleepiness. “It’s the default.”

God, I loved the way he talked. Those words that came out when he wasn’t self-conscious. I loved how he thought. I loved how he treated me. I loved *him*.

I wanted to tell him, but this didn’t seem like the moment. I squirmed under him, twisting and rearranging myself so I could see his face. He blinked at me. He looked relaxed, but his gaze was focused.

“Kiss me,” I told him. “Nicely.”

Obediently, he cupped my face and kissed me. Nicely, as instructed, but he took his time. His beard tickled me, and I tasted beer on his lips.

When we finished, he kept his hand to my cheek. “Sienna,” he said softly, his voice reverent.

The word shivered through me and my heart squeezed. He was telling me he loved me, I realized. Every time he said my name.

“We did it differently this time,” I said. This wasn’t like when I’d found out about Chase. When I’d stormed past his defenses like a bull in a china shop. And he hadn’t reacted the same way at all.

“Yeah, we did,” Stone replied. He stroked his thumb over my cheekbone. He sounded sober. “We both did.”

“I finished writing the story tonight,” I told him. “I added a part about Will being your half brother. Is that okay?”

“Yeah.” Stone stroked my cheekbone again. “That’s fine.”

“I could have sent it in, but I didn’t. It’s ready to go, but I wanted to ask you first.”

“Send it,” he said.

“You don’t want to read it first?”

“No. I trust you.” He winced a little. “No more photos, though.”

He was so gorgeous that he should have his picture taken all the time, but fine. I’d just keep him to myself instead of sharing him. “No more photos,” I agreed.

“Once you send the story in, you’re officially my girlfriend,” Stone said. “That’s the deal.”

I felt a smile on my lips, because he was right. That sounded so, so good. Stone Zeeland’s girlfriend? Yes, please. “That’s the deal,” I said.

“Good. Let’s get naked. Want me to sign something? I’ll do it.”

I kissed him lightly, then squeezed out from under him. “No. Sleep it off and we’ll talk in the morning. I’m going to bed.”

He rubbed his hands over his eyes. “I’ll be sober in an hour or two, Maplethorpe. Then I’m coming to get you.”

He rolled over and was asleep in seconds.

I pulled his boots off and tossed a blanket over him. He didn’t wake up. Then I picked up my laptop, switched off the lamp, and retreated to my bedroom.

I put my laptop on the bed and tapped the keys to wake it up. I stared at the email I’d written to Davis with my story attached. It was ready to send.

Stone was right. Once I turned the story in, I wasn’t a journalist writing about him anymore. We were starting the next chapter. One where we were all in.

I stared at the email on my screen for a minute, thinking about that. Thinking about what was next.

Then I hit Send.

I couldn’t wait.

EPILOGUE

Eight months later

Stone

“We start with ‘Starshine,’” Axel said.

“No way,” Neal retorted. “We start with ‘Epic Landing.’”

Denver crossed out what he’d written on tonight’s set list so far. He pushed an empty coffee cup away and put the sheet back on the table. “We have thirty minutes,” he said. “We’ve changed this three times. This has to be final.”

We were backstage in San Diego, about to play a sold-out show. The crowd was out there waiting. We had no opening act, which was our usual drill. This was the final show of a two-week West Coast tour, and we were going to make it a good one. If we could just figure out what we were going to fucking play.

Backstage was always weirdly quiet this close to showtime, like being in the eye of a storm. There were no strangers standing around, no hangers-on. We were all sober, hunched over a crumpled piece of paper in Denver’s hand. It was one of those moments when the rest of it falls away and it’s just four guys in a band, sorting out this one problem before we went out there to play

as hard as we could.

“Stone?” Denver asked. His pen hovered over the page. “What do you think comes first?”

I thought about the technical aspects—which guitar I’d start with, which sound I wanted first—and then I ditched that and thought about what would work best on this night, with this crowd.

“We start with ‘All the Way Down,’” I said.

“I agree,” Denver said, writing it down. “Next?”

“‘Epic Landing,’” I said. “Then ‘Where Did You Go.’”

Denver kept writing. The other guys didn’t object.

“Then ‘Exile,’” I said. “The crowds love that one.”

Denver nodded, and we kept the list going. We’d released our latest album, *West of Exile*, two months ago, and it was the best-selling album we’d ever released. It hadn’t hit the charts—we weren’t that kind of band—but it sold and streamed more each week than it had the week before. We’d done a sold-out two-week tour in the east, flown home for a break, then played a two-week tour of the west. After another break, we’d play the south, then the midwest.

We’d created and released the album on our own terms, and this was the schedule we wanted, which was the most important thing—to us, anyway. We were all hitting thirty-eight this year, and no one was interested in spending months away from home. Because apparently, we’d finally all gotten lives.

Denver and Callie had bought a house together—one that had a room big enough for Callie’s piano. They’d moved in together last month. Callie had played keys on the album, and she was here tonight, though she wouldn’t be playing with us onstage. She said she had no desire to play in front of six thousand people.

Callie had quit giving piano lessons, and she’d spent two weeks in the Road Kings’ new studio—we called it RKS, one of our less creative moments—recording her own solo piano music. Her recording was making good money on the streaming platforms, because apparently people liked listening to piano while they were studying or gardening or reading. Leave it to Callie to quietly kick ass in the most introverted way, doing something she loved and was wildly good at. That was Callie through and through.

Brit was here tonight. After the show, she and Axel were going to the airport to catch a flight to Amsterdam. They were going on three weeks’

vacation in Europe, visiting Axel's grandparents in the Netherlands, then traveling around.

Neal was going to the airport right after the show, too, but he was going home to Portland. Raine was at home, six months pregnant with their son, and he was away from her as little as possible. He was planning to take a hiatus from the band after the baby was born. We were looking for a fill-in bassist.

His daughter Amber was here tonight, hanging out with Brit and Callie. At fourteen, Amber was our social media strategist, because she was the only one of us that understood it. Since school was out, she'd come to some of the West Coast shows, taken pictures and videos, then done something with hashtags and algorithms that I did not comprehend. Apparently, it was working.

And me? I was busy. As soon as RKS was finished, it had practically become my second home. I'd overseen the production of the new album, and now we were starting to work with other musicians who wanted to record and produce at RKS. Anyone who wanted to work with us had to come through me.

When I wasn't recording, touring, or working at RKS, I was with my girlfriend, who was the best fucking writer in the business. Sienna's pieces in *Soundcheck* had won her a journalism award, and she was in demand. She was still working regularly for *Soundcheck*, and now she was writing regularly for *Rolling Stone*. She was getting a reputation as a skilled interviewer, one musicians could trust, and because she knew so much about all types of music, she'd interviewed every kind of musician from classical to punk.

She traveled a lot. I traveled a lot. I didn't like it, but there was no other way to do it. After tonight, we'd both be home for two straight weeks. I planned to make the most of it.

We finished the set list with fifteen minutes to go. I took a picture of Denver's scribbled list with my phone, then texted it to the lighting and sound techs who needed to see it. Axel took a picture so he'd know what the hell to play behind his drum kit. We were flying by the seat of our pants, but what else was new?

Everything zoomed out, and I felt my brain going into the zone. Then we went onstage and gave it everything we had.

THERE WAS a gathering backstage after the show. You could call it a party, if a group of people hanging out without any drugs or alcohol was a party. It was a bit sentimental. Now that this part of the tour was over and we were going our separate ways for a few weeks, we all wanted to linger for a little while.

I sat on one of the sofas with a soda in my hand and watched everyone. Neal and Amber. Axel and Brit. Denver and Callie.

The sofa dipped next to me as Angie sat down, which was a surprise. I hadn't thought she'd make it.

Since Angie was our manager, she and I talked frequently. She wrote up the deals for our studio rentals and for the bands we worked with. She oversaw everything with an eagle eye, from the T-shirt sales to which sandwiches were delivered backstage. Tonight she was wearing jeans—designer, of course—and an oversized tee that was tucked in artfully and had likely cost over a hundred dollars. Her hair was down. This was Angie's version of a distressed rock n' roll outfit.

"You look exhausted," I said to her.

"You always know just what to say," she retorted.

I shrugged. "Someone's gotta tell you the truth."

She looked away. She really did look tired—I wasn't lying. Tired and stressed. "Since everyone is taking a break, I've decided to take one, too," she said.

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "Axel's family owns a beach house just north of here."

"Yeah, I know. I hear it's nice."

"I hope so," she said. "I'm going to spend the next few weeks there. I'm leaving tonight. I'm hoping to—I don't know, to get some perspective, maybe. If I don't get that, I'll just stare at the ocean for a while. It can't be all bad."

"It won't be bad at all. Probably."

She gave me a small smile at that. "Where's Sienna tonight?"

"She's coming. She had to do something. We have plans."

"Always so mysterious, Stone."

"Not really," I said. "I'm just a guy."

"Sure, you're just a guy," she said with some sarcasm. "A dime a dozen."

There's a Stone Zeeland on every corner."

"I have a few singular qualities. But mostly I'm just a guy. Take a nice break, Angie. Turn your phone off. You won't hear from me."

After she got up, Will took her place next to me. Apparently, I was the Godfather tonight. "Where the fuck have you been?" I asked him.

He ran his hands through his hair. "My flight was delayed, then cancelled, then rebooked. My assistant screwed everything up. The whole thing was a disaster."

"You missed a good show."

"Don't remind me." His dress shirt was unbuttoned at the throat and his tie was loose. "I'll only get a few hours' sleep at the hotel before I go to the airport again. I have meetings in Dallas tomorrow."

"Why are you going to Dallas?" I lowered my gaze to his collar in distaste. "And why the fuck are you wearing a tie to a rock concert?"

He sighed. "I left for the airport straight from a meeting with the lawyers and didn't have time to change."

I shuddered at the mention of meetings with lawyers. "Better you than me."

"You're welcome," Will said. It was universally acknowledged that he was better at meetings than I was. I tended to be an hour late and piss everyone off. "Everything's just fine, in case you were wondering. I have to go to Dallas to wrap up the last few things for Tower VC."

"And then what?" I asked him. "Everyone's taking a few weeks off. What are you gonna do?"

He scratched behind his ear, thinking. I'd never imagined I could like a guy like Will Hale, but it turned out I didn't mind him much at all. The stiff, nerdy exterior was a bit of a front. We'd had some good times since he came into my life. His starched, success-driven side was at war with his wild side. As his rock star older brother, I made it my mission to ensure that the wild side would win.

"I don't know what I'll do," Will said, answering my question. "Rearrange my closets, maybe."

Oh, come on. "Find a woman and get laid," I suggested. Will had had a long-term girlfriend back east, but that was long over. He was good-looking and obviously had money. Women gave him signals all the time when we were out together, but he never picked up on it.

He gave my suggestion serious thought. "I don't know how to pick up a

woman for that sort of thing.”

“You don’t,” I said. “You let them pick you up.”

He looked confused and a little horrified. “No. That sounds complicated. I’ll be fine, Stone. Have fun with Sienna. I’ll see you back in Portland.”

I was going to argue with him some more, but then Sienna walked in. Tank top, dark knee-length skirt, tights, boots. She scanned the room for me from behind her glasses and when she saw me, she winked. Actually *winked*. Damn, she was ridiculous. She made me weak in the knees.

I stood up and crossed the room toward her.

“That’s your happy scowl,” she said when I got close. “That means the show went well.”

“It was all right,” I replied. “There are a few things I need to work on.”

“Well, you’re not working for the next few weeks. We agreed.” She held up the keys in her hand. “The rental car is out back and ready to go.”

I crossed my arms and stared at her, waiting.

“What?” she asked.

“You’re really not going to do any work during this road trip, Maplethorpe? At all?”

“I’ll make some notes.” She looked at my face. “What? I said I wouldn’t do any *writing*, not that I wouldn’t make notes. Notes are allowed. And don’t give me that scowl, as if you aren’t going to bring a guitar with you.”

“Just an acoustic,” I said. “So I can do some practice.”

“See? I’ll make notes while you practice. And I’m going to pitch a few stories. Seven Dog Down broke up, and I’m going to try and get some interviews about it. And there are a few people who are supposed to call me back, and—”

“Maplethorpe.”

“I promised I wouldn’t do any writing,” she said sweetly. “None of that is writing.”

So she’d outsmarted me. I was used to that. I’d find a way to get her back. Besides, this was how she was, and we both knew I liked it.

“Well, you can do all that,” I said. “Me, I’m gonna relax every time we check into a hotel. Mostly naked.”

“Not fair,” she said.

I shrugged. “Too bad. I didn’t pack a lot of clothes.”

She looked me up and down. Like a reflex.

“You need to learn to relax, Maplethorpe,” I said. “I’ll teach you a few

things.”

Her brows drew down. “Stop talking like that. It’s distracting. I’m going to say hi to Callie and Brit.”

The party broke up not long after that, with everyone going their separate ways. Sienna and I walked to the car she’d rented, parked at the back of the lot. I put my bag and my guitar in the trunk. Then I did what I’d wanted to do all night. I grabbed my girlfriend, pulled her to me, and kissed her. Properly and long.

She sighed against me and melted like butter in my arms. I broke the kiss and rubbed my cheek against the side of her neck, taking her in. The feel of her skin, the warmth of her.

Playing a show had been great, but it was only one life. This, right here—this was the other life, the real one. I didn’t care that we were in a parking lot lit with harsh lights and smelling of concrete and exhaust. I had Sienna, and for the next little while it was just her and me, doing whatever we wanted. To me, that was better than a concert. It was the best way to be.

She squeezed me tighter. “You’re being sweet,” she said. “I love it when you’re sweet.”

“I’m not being sweet,” I mumbled against her neck. “I didn’t even say anything.”

“You don’t have to. I can read your mind.”

“Oh yeah?” I nuzzled her. “What am I thinking right now?”

“Hmm.” She pretended to concentrate. “No, I will not be doing that...or that...Okay, that one, maybe.”

“I’ll convince you,” I said, and she laughed.

I dropped my hands and gave her ass a squeeze, just because I could, then reluctantly let her go. “I’ll drive. I won’t sleep for hours.”

She handed me the keys. “I’ll make a schedule for L.A.”

We were planning to take our time driving back up to Portland over the next few days. We’d sightsee and stop wherever we wanted. As we went, we’d take in as many live shows as we could. It was my job to find us a new bassist to take over while Neal was off, and the best way to find someone was to watch them play a show.

It wouldn’t be easy. Everyone wants to be a guitar player—you can find one of those anywhere. But it’s fucking impossible to find a good bass player. I wouldn’t find one as good as Neal, but I’d try.

When we got back to Portland, I had lots of ways to fill my time until we

started working again. I'd make a visit to Chase's grave, which I'd started doing lately. I'd call Darren, who I'd reconnected with a few months ago. I'd see Will. I'd drop in on Neal and see how Raine was doing. I'd hang out with Denver and Callie. I'd take Sienna on dates. I'd write music. When Axel got back, the band would probably play local clubs.

And I'd do some work on my house.

When Denver and Callie moved in together, I'd done something impulsive—I'd bought Denver's house from him. We'd gone for a few beers and made a deal on the back of a bar napkin, and now the house was mine. Sienna didn't live there—yet—but she was there a lot. I had to spend time buying furniture and making it look less like a nomad lived there. I had a lot to learn.

But first, I got to do a road trip. I'd drive until I finally got tired, and then we'd find a hotel. We'd take every day, every hour as it came. The best way to travel, the best way to live.

Sienna and I got in the car, and I started it. Both of us looked at the stereo, then we looked at each other. Our gazes locked.

The battle over who got to pick the music was about to begin.

I was looking forward to it.

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