

A romantic couple embracing at sunset over a city skyline. The man is wearing a plaid shirt and a cowboy hat, and the woman is wearing a blue patterned top and a dark hat. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The city skyline is visible in the background, with lights reflecting on the water.

Sangria

New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author

HEIDI MCLAUGHLIN

sangria



New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author
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SANGRIA
NASHVILLE NIGHTS
HEIDI MCLAUGHLIN

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For my Family

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zara

• • •

YOU'RE NEVER PREPARED for *that* moment. It could be anything from finding out you're pregnant or learning that your band, the one you've been in since you were seventeen, has just been nominated for a *Grammy*. I wish my moment were one of those, but unfortunately, mine comes in the form of finding out my husband of ten years, Van Phillips, has been having an affair.

And how does one find this out? Well, if you're me, you walk into your publicist's office to find your husband banging her assistant. I mean I'm happy that it's not my publicist bent over her desk with my husband pounding into her because that would really ruin my day.

There is no recovery for something like this. Even as I stand here with my mouth open with tears streaming down my face, *nothing* fixes this. Not the look of regret that he gives me as he pulls out of her and quickly stuffs himself back into his pants. Not the "oh shit" look she flashes as she hurries to fix her skirt, making me wonder where the fuck her panties are.

You're not prepared when your publicist actually walks into her office oblivious that two people were just fucking on her desk and she asks if you're ready to get to work on your next tour.

What the fuck does someone do in this situation? There isn't a handbook on how to handle your husband when he gets caught cheating, let alone when you find out he has been unfaithful, although there should be because it seems to

happen more often than not in Los Angeles. It's clear that I should've taken some classes on how to handle my emotions by the death glare he's given me. It's as if I'm supposed to "man up" and pretend as if nothing has happened. Like I am somehow at fault here.

Unfortunately, that is exactly what I do because I'm moving on autopilot, still trying to decipher if what I saw was real or an optical illusion because I can't fathom why my husband would cheat on me. It's not like we don't have a healthy sex life. In fact, he had no qualms taking care of my needs this morning. Apparently, I didn't take care of his, though.

I take one of the two seats in front of Laura's desk, cringing when she sets a pile of folders in the spot where my husband had her assistant bent over, the same one who is now scurrying away to fetch coffee. Not that I would drink anything she hands me because for all I know, she's trying to kill me so she can have my cheating-ass bastard of a spouse all to herself. Newsflash, Trina... Trisha... Tanya, whatever the fuck her name is... she can have him. As far as I'm concerned this is unforgivable, and the fact that he's sitting down next to me as if nothing has happened makes my skin crawl.

Oh God, he fucking smells like her cheap ass perfume too. I pretend to gag. Except I'm really gagging since my stomach is doing its own version of gymnastics and I have a feeling that I'm about to lose my breakfast all over Laura's desk any second now. I lean away and not so subtly move my chair farther from him. He reaches out to touch me, but I glare at him. I throw so many daggers that I'm imagining each one hitting him square in his chest. He must understand that I don't want to be fucked with right now because he pulls his hand away.

That is until the tart walks back in with two cups of coffee. Laura doesn't look up from the paper she's reading when her mug is set on her desk, but my husband, he fucking perks up like this bitch is his only means to feed his caffeine addiction. And because I am living in some alternative universe, she has no qualms about brushing up against his arm and making sure

he can see her tits when she unnecessarily bends over to give him his coffee.

“That’s it, I’m out of here,” I say as I stand up.

Laura looks up quickly, she’s confused, and rightly so.

“Sit down, Zara,” Van has the nerve to say. I can’t even be bothered to look at him so I look at Laura and smile as best I can because right now shit hurts inside and all I want to do is break down and cry.

“I walked in a few minutes early for our meeting and found Van and your assistant fucking on your desk. You might want to sterilize it and find a new assistant because if you don’t, I’m walking.”

I don’t need Laura to say anything. The wide eyes and open mouth are enough for me to know that I’ve shocked her. Behind me, I can hear Van yelling my name, but he’s not following me. No, he chose to stay back with the bimbo instead of getting up and chasing after his wife to tell her how sorry he is and that what he did was a mistake. But I know better. I could tell by the look on his face that he was only sorry that he didn’t get to finish before he got caught.

Outside the sun is shining, and it’s hot. So hot that I’m sweating and my breathing is labored because I’m on the verge of a meltdown. I decide to walk, to get lost in the crowd even though that is nearly impossible because people are calling my name. They’re grabbing at me, asking for a picture, an autograph and I can’t stop and give them what they want.

I slip inside a tourist store where I can buy a fake Hollywood star and use the attached stickers to make my name. That would’ve been easier than paying the ridiculous fee that my band, Reverend Sister, paid in order to get a legit star on the Walk of Fame. I keep my head down and pick up a T-shirt that reads “I Almost Got Famous in Hollywood” which is something I would never be caught dead in and snag a hat off the rack. Anything I can do to hide my platinum blonde and purple hair from the people on the street. I’m not expecting it to help much, but a little would be nice.

Thankfully I have enough cash to pay for my items, and luckily the clerk doesn't recognize me, or if he does, he's not a fan and couldn't care less that Zara Phillips is in his store buying ridiculous Hollywood propaganda. Either way, I'm grateful that he's not asking for a selfie because there's no doubt in my mind that I look like utter shit. The last thing I need is my face on Instagram with comments leading to speculation that I'm stoned and on my way to rehab.

On my way to divorce court is more like it. I can't imagine what those headlines will be like. Of course, no one will believe that Van Phillips would do such a horrible thing to his precious Zara, his high school sweetheart, the love of his life and soul mate. Yet he did and did so without giving me a second thought.

Thinking about Van and whatever the hell her name is, sends my heart and stomach in opposite directions. I thank the clerk and don my newly purchased disguise before stepping back out and into the foot traffic. My name is called less, and it's more of people questioning whether or not they're getting lucky and seeing me walking down the street. Any other day I'd be happy to stop and chat with them, but not today. Today I want to get home and figure out what I'm supposed to do, and where I'm supposed to go from here because any decision that I make, is not going to be an easy one.

Our lives, Van's and mine, are intertwined in so many ways. From the time he joined my silly little garage band to the day we took our friendship to the next level. Everything we did, we did as a team with people around us and now those people depend on us. Reverend Sister isn't Van's or mine, it's ours and only works together if we're in it together and right now I don't want to be anywhere near him.

By the time the tears start to fall, and I mean really fall, I'm halfway home, and my phone is ringing with Van calling. The alerts are going off like crazy because the paparazzi are relentless and insist on snapping pictures of people. And when they put them online they add the most ridiculous headlines, except these are spot on, and tell people about my impending breakdown. It's coming. I can feel the gut-wrenching ache, my

heart being ripped out of my chest, and every muscle and bone in my body in pain. The takeover is slow and almost alien-like. I can feel it in my toes, moving its way up my legs. It'll take some time for my brain to really figure it out. For the light bulb to go off that my marriage is over.

And it is over. I can't forget what I saw and if I can't do that there is no way I could forgive him. There is no way that I'd let him touch me after what I witnessed. The thought has me doubled over, and someone is yelling from a passing car, asking if I'm okay. Mentally I flip them off because do I look okay? No, I don't. Nothing about my appearance screams that I am okay.

Van's car is in the driveway when I reach the gate to our house. I stand there, like a celebrity stalker, looking at the property. The half-circle driveway with its pristine concrete leads to two amazing French doors that I chose. Beyond those doors, the marble flooring that I had to have extends up the sweeping staircase and fills the hallway that leads to my bedroom with its balcony that overlooks my swimming pool. Everything about this house is what I wanted, complete with an empty room for a nursery because damn it, Van promised me we'd start trying for a baby.

What a liar he is. What a snake and a cheat. Why would he do this to me? The question is, do I even want to know? Do I want him to tell me that I nag him too much or that he doesn't love me anymore? Could I take those words from the man that I have given everything to? The one that I have been in love with since he walked into my garage and pulled a set of drumsticks out of his back pocket and went to town on the set of drums that were set up. Watching the muscles in his arms flex and the magic he created was an epic turn on.

No, I don't think I could because knowing that my husband thought it was okay to stick his dick into another woman while still married to me... really there's no excuse. I punch the code for the gate and step through, and when I enter the house, it's quiet except for the sound of my heavy footsteps.

There are two choices in front of me: One—go find him and confront him. Two—start packing his shit so he can get the fuck out. Option two is what I choose because it's the most raging action I can think of right now. Kicking him out will give me the satisfaction of knowing I had the last word after what he did today.

Upstairs, I find him sitting on our bed, looking at our wedding photo. Does he feel guilty? I hope so. Without a word, I step into the closet and pull out one of the two suitcases I leave in there for quick travel.

“What are you doing?” he asks because apparently, it's not fucking obvious.

“Packing.”

“Where are you going?”

I come out of the room with an arm full of his clothes and throw them at him. Most land on the floor, but there are a few hangers that hit him in the head. “I'm not going anywhere, you are. Get the fuck out, Van.”

“Zara,” he says, reaching for me but I step away, keeping myself an arm's length from him.

“Don't fucking Zara me you piece of shit. You fucking cheated on me,” I say. “ME! The one you took vows with. You don't get to say my name or tell me how sorry you are because you're not sorry, Van. If you were, you would've figured shit out before you stuck your dick in her.”

I head back into the closet and grab another armful of clothes. When I come back, he's still in the same spot, and when he looks at me, he's crying.

“Why are you crying, Van? Because you got caught?”

“Zara, if you would just listen.” He's able to grab my wrist and pull me toward him before my brain registers what's going on. The stench of her sugary sweet perfume hits me hard and smells, dare I say fresher than it did earlier. The only thing I can think is that he's been with her since I caught him hours ago.

I step away from him and shake my head. This time I won't be able to stop the tears from coming. "Get out," I say, pointing to the door. "Get out of my house right now."

Van doesn't say anything as he grabs his clothes and throws them into a suitcase. Everything goes quiet until the front door slams, and I jump. It's not until I hear his car start up and the gate screech shut do I fall onto my bed and let the ache take over.

levi

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THE ONLY LIGHT in my room comes from my alarm clock as I lift the shirt I placed over it before going to bed. I cover the red numbers almost instantly, but not before I start to see red dots each time I blink. As I lay in bed, the faint sound of the house phone continues to ring off into the distance. My eyes try to focus on what would be my ceiling or my wall, but it's pitch black in here and anything in front of me is purely my imagination.

It's three a.m., and some jackass is calling my house phone. I sigh and think about how I need to change my phone number again and wonder what's the point of having an unlisted number if people can still obtain the sacred digits. The only reason I still have a landline is that cell service is questionable on my ranch. Besides, I like the feel of a phone. I like that I have to sit down to talk to someone, giving the person calling my undivided attention.

The blackout curtains were purchased and hung by my personal assistant and publicist, Barbara, in an attempt to have my mind shut off at night. This was after she received an email from my record label informing her that my late night actions were causing the executives to have minor heart attacks when photos of me, drinking in a bar, were made public.

Her answer was to make sure I had a peaceful place to rest, that and tea. Barbara treats everything with tea. If you have a cold, she gives you tea. If you stab yourself accidentally with a rusty nail, instead of taking you to the hospital for a Tetanus

shot, she asks if you want tea. I love her dearly, but tea can't fix everything.

Ever since, I've been trying to play by their rules and sticking close to home. Drinking alone though isn't as fun as when you have a crowd surrounding you, encouraging you to drink more until you're stumbling into the bar and finding random rides back to your home by complete strangers. Who would've thought that they'd sell the story to the newspapers?

One mistake and I'm being labeled an alcoholic. One incident and it's being suggested that I spend some time relaxing which is industry speak for rehabilitation. I thought about getting away, going to spend some time where no one knows who I am just to escape the scrutiny.

But doing so would mean not speaking to my daughters every day. Stormy and Willow are my life, my reason for living, and I hate that I can't see them every day.

The phone rings again. I count each ring until they stop, only for them to start up again. I sit up and bring my pillow to my face while I tap the base of my bedside table. Slowly, I let my eyes adjust to the light before making my way toward the living room.

My house is quiet. It's always quiet, except for the faint sounds of the wildlife that can be heard. It's often that I can sit in the oversized chair and watch a herd of deer traipse through my yard or hear a pack of coyotes howling in the middle of the night. It was one of the selling points, that and being away from the busy city.

Sitting on twenty-plus acres of land, my view over Nashville is one of the most sought after locations around. Investors want me to sell off my land for development, and each time I tell them no, they come back with a higher offer.

This is my little slice of heaven. It's where I can come and be me without having to be the Levi Austin that fans expect every time they see me out and about. This is where my private life begins, and my public one is put on hold. Behind closed doors, I can write my music, play my guitar as loud as I want, and stare at the assortment of trophies I've won over the

years. My favorite came last year when I won Country Music's Album of the Year. Man, to beat out the stellar artists in that category was an amazing feat and one I am so proud of.

On my ranch, I can walk around my house in my underwear while drinking beer and not have to worry about the paparazzi with their high-powered lenses trying to capture my picture, although it's rare that the paparazzi bother me much in Nashville. It's when I have to go to Los Angeles that they're all over me.

But here, on my ranch, I can ride my horses, shoot my guns, and go muddin' if that is what I want to do. I can have my band over for Bar-B-Que and not worry about my neighbors calling the police on us for being rowdy. This is where I can relax, be free, and live my life. Besides, I'm saving my land for my girls. That is something those big city developers don't understand.

The ringing starts again, but this time I'm there to answer it quickly. "Hello?" I say, my voice is somewhat hoarse from sleeping.

"Mr. Austin?" the voice on the other end says.

"Who's calling?" I'm almost afraid to ask. Knowing my luck, it's some salesperson or a fan turned creepy stalker.

"Sir, my name is Detective Pete O'Brien. I'm with the LAPD."

Hearing those words is enough to send chills down your spine. They cause you to tense up, shake, and maybe sweat a little, but mostly, they scare the shit out of you.

"Okay," I say after he pauses.

"Do you know Iris Austin?"

The sound of my ex-wife's name has me relaxing a bit. I'm not surprised that she's been arrested or picked up for something stupid. When we got divorced, she was adamant that she be allowed some freedom since I had that every time I went on tour, and she was home raising the girls. I agreed. I was happy that the girls were going to live with me while their mother "found" herself in Los Angeles.

That was until Iris started talking to Stormy about all the amazing dance companies in L.A. and how she should move out there to pursue her dream of becoming a dancer. Stormy's dream, of course, is to perform for hip-hop artists when they tour. As much as it pained me to let her go, I did but also didn't like the fact that Willow would be left without a sister so both my girls went to live with their mama. It's not what I wanted, but I didn't want to short-change Stormy on her dream and didn't want Willow growing up without her sister.

Iris is an amazing mother when she wants to be. But she also loves the nightlife in Hollywood, and that sometimes gets in the way of her parenting. I suppose when you're pregnant by seventeen and married at eighteen, you start to miss your twenties and need to relive them in your thirties.

"I do," I tell the officer with an exaggerated sigh as I wait for him to tell me how much her bail money is.

"This is never easy to say. Iris Austin was killed in a car accident earlier this evening on the interstate."

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" There is no way I heard him correctly.

He clears his throat and repeats his words verbatim as if he's reading from a script. I let them sink in, only to realize he hasn't said anything about my girls.

"My daughters? Were they with her?"

"No, the other passenger was a male."

"Do my children know?" I ask.

"You were listed as Ms. Austin's emergency contact."

I nod even though he can't see me. "Please don't notify them or the media. I'll be there as soon as I can."

The officer gives me his number and tells me to call as soon as I'm in town. As soon as I hang up, I call Barbara, knowing that she sleeps with her phone on so she can tend to her needy clients like myself.

"It's after three in the morning, Levi. You better be dying."

My stomach heaves at Barbara's statement, causing me to reach for the trash can that sits next to the table where the phone is. I barely tell her to hang on before I lose the contents of dinner.

"You're sick? You called so I could hear you puking your guts out? A text would've sufficed, Levi."

"Barb," I say in between gagging episodes. "I need a chartered flight to L.A. immediately."

"What's wrong?" her tone changes immediately. I need to get to the bathroom to rinse my mouth and am mentally kicking my ass for not calling her from my cell phone.

"It's Iris. There was an accident, and she didn't make it."

Barbara gasps and mutters "Oh God" before saying, "The babies? Are they okay?"

Since the girls were born, that is how she's referred to them. It doesn't matter that Stormy is about to be fifteen or that Willow is ten. To her, they're her babies. Always have been.

"They weren't with her, but I gotta get to L.A."

"I'll meet you at the airport. There will be a plane ready when you get there."

This is why I keep Barbara around. She's been with me since I signed my first deal, taking me under her wings and guiding me through the trials and tribulations of stardom. Barbara has been my rock and a mother figure to me.

After we hang up, I head into the bathroom to brush my teeth and make myself look presentable. Right now I'm going through a myriad of emotions and can't pinpoint which one is making me feel worse.

Iris was my high school sweetheart, and even though we were no longer married, I hadn't stopped loving her. I always expected that we'd find our way back to each other once she got this "thing" out of her system. Every time she called, I was there for her and never questioned when she was going to start acting her age.

Tears find me quickly as I pack my travel bag. My eyes land on a picture of Iris and the girls. Stormy must've been about eight and Willow three. They were on the tire swing together, and the sun was shining perfectly on them. I snapped the photo without them knowing and had it printed. Even when she left me, I kept the picture on my bedside table.

I don't pack much. Just enough to change my clothes when I get there because Barbara will make sure that I have everything I need when I arrive in Los Angeles. I don't care if that means a whole new wardrobe. I have to get to my girls. Before leaving I jot down a quick note to my housekeeper, apologizing for the mess I left in the trash can.

The drive to the private airport is done in record time. When I pull up, Barbara is there to pull me into her arms. She cries into my plaid shirt while I hold her.

"Leroy is going to take your truck home," she says, motioning toward her son. He tips his hat at me and climbs into the truck, leaving Barbara and me alone. "What happened?"

I shrug and shake my head. "It was a car accident, that's all I really know."

"Do the girls know?"

"No, I asked them not to tell them. I want to do it. They need to hear it from me and not from someone they don't know."

"My poor babies," she says. I guide her to the waiting jet and follow her up the stairs. I don't make it a habit out of flying via a charter, as I like to fly commercial. It's how I come up with my songs, by watching folks. Surrounding myself with different types of people is what keeps me creative.

As soon as I buckle in, the flight attendant is at my side with a glass of whiskey. I down it instantly and hand the empty one back to her. I'm going to need the liquid courage to get through what I'm about to do. Telling the girls that their

parents were divorcing was hard enough. I can't imagine how I'm going to tell them that their mama is gone.

zara

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Three

I FEEL like I have a raging hangover, like I went on an all night bender and drank myself into a stupor. Honestly, that would be better than having a clear recollection of everything that I saw yesterday. No matter how hard I try, I can't get the image of Van thrusting his hips into Laura's assistant. Nor can I get the picture of her face, enjoying every minute while she watched me stand there, watching them, from my mind.

Van called every five minutes for the first hour, every ten for the next, and every twenty after that until he gave up and tried once an hour. He filled my voicemail with what I would consider heartfelt pleas to let him explain, but they've all fallen on deaf ears. There isn't an excuse that I would buy, let alone take as a valid reason as to why he would cheat on me. Of course, the first few messages were the common "it wasn't what it looked like" which quickly changed to "it just happened." Nothing like that "just" happens. Messing up a song lyric, forgetting an appointment, or stumbling down the stairs "just" happens. You don't just happen to decide to cheat on your wife.

Thinking that has me wondering how many other times he's done this. It's a question that I want to ask, but don't want to know the answer. I don't think I could stomach learning that my husband has been unfaithful throughout my marriage. Once is enough to rip me to shreds.

The house is eerily quiet. Even my heavy footsteps lack an echo against the marble floors. I don't know if it's because I'm so used to hearing Van move about the house or knowing that

he'd be here somewhere, either watching television or jamming in the studio that we converted the pool house into.

My phone vibrates in my hand with Laura's number staring back at me. I'm tempted to ignore her call, but she's persistent like Van and won't stop until I answer—if I don't—she'll show up at my door, demanding to be let in.

“Hello,” I say groggily. It's unlike me to have a scratchy voice, as I'm very aware of the repercussions if I don't take care of my vocal cords.

“You sound like shit,” she says, cutting right to the chase.

“I feel like it.”

“Well, I'm not about to make your day any better. I'm fielding calls that you and Van have separated. I really don't know where people come up with these ludicrous accusations.”

Does she not remember me storming out of her office yesterday demanding that she fire her assistant? “It's not an accusation,” I tell her as I make my way into the kitchen. “Van is cheating on me with your assistant. I kicked him out.”

“Let him back in, Zara.”

I pull the phone away from my ear and make sure I'm talking to Laura and not Van. “Hold on,” I tell her as I put the phone down and reach for my teakettle while opening the refrigerator for the filtered water. People say boiling water will kill whatever is growing in the water system of California, but I don't believe them. Once my pot is filled, and the stove is on, I go back to my call.

“I don't think I heard you correctly.”

“You did, you're choosing to ignore me.”

“My husband was fucking your assistant, and you want me to take him back? Excuse me for being a bit obtuse here, but I have no desire to even speak to Van, let alone have him inside my home. He violated my trust.”

Laura sighs. I can hear her adjusting something in the background, but can't tell what. For all I know she's walking

to her car and plans to come over to my house to set me straight, except it won't work. Van knew cheating was a hard limit for me and yet he still went and did it, and showed no remorse or tried to hide the fact that he was cheating on me. He knew I was coming to that meeting and would've seen them.

That's when it dawns on me. Van wanted me to catch him, but why? He'd have to know that I'd kick him out or leave him. My father cheated on my mother, and I never forgave him for tearing our family apart.

"Look," Laura says. "These things happen."

"Laura, are you hearing yourself right now? You're literally telling me that it's okay that my husband cheated on me."

"It is when your husband is Van Phillips."

I couldn't believe what she was telling me. As tears filled my eyes, I shook my head and searched for something to say to her. *He* was nothing when I met him. A scraggly pimple-faced kid who knew how to play the drums. *He* walked into my garage and asked to audition. *He* played songs that I wrote and still does.

"I need to go, Laura."

"Listen, Zara. I know you're upset. I get that. Ari has cheated on me, but I'm a big girl. I pulled up my panties and beat his ass, but knew that leaving him would hurt me in the industry. Van made a mistake, one that he likely won't make again."

"See that's where you and I differ, Laura. I'm not wearing any panties." I hang up before she can respond. I think about shutting off my phone, but then my mom won't be able to reach me. And I really need to talk to my brother, Darian. He needs to know what his best friend did, and he can be the one to break it to the band that Van is out. When it comes down to it, Reverend Sister is mine.

Pressing the phone icon next to Darian's name on my contact list, I pray that he's awake and that I haven't caught

him with some random that he picked up last night. My mom and I have been patiently waiting for him to settle down, but now I can't imagine that I'd encourage him to do that. He's a ladies man, and I'd hate to think that he'd cheat on someone.

"Sup," he says.

"I kicked Van out," I blurt out without a hello, how are you, or anything of the like. Straight to the point is how I'm going to be with my brother.

"Whoa, why? Did he leave his socks on the floor or something?" Darian laughs. I hate that I'm about to tell him what his best friend did, but he needs to know. In my family, blood is thicker than water.

"I caught him cheating on me. As in the act, he didn't seem too fazed by the idea that his wife was watching him screw some random on a desk."

"I really want to ask you to repeat yourself, but I don't want to put you through that sentence again. I'm on my way over. We'll talk when I get there." Darian hangs up, leaving me no choice but to get dressed and look somewhat decent before he arrives. At least he won't care if I don't have my hair done or any make-up on.

After a quick shower in an attempt to be human, I come back downstairs to find Darian rummaging through my kitchen.

"Hey," he says as I walk in. "You left the burner on and almost burnt your house down."

The sound of his words brings a wave of fresh tears to my eyes. Instead of teasing me, he pulls me into his arms and holds me while I sob into his shirt. He doesn't tell me that everything is going to be okay or that he's going to kick Van's ass, all things he said to me once before when Van broke up with me a month into our relationship. Maybe that was a sign, and I missed it, and now here I am ten-plus years later suffering even worse.

"I'm going to kill him," Darian says, but I shake my head and step out of his hold.

“He’s not worth it.”

“It’s not about being worth something or not, Z. You’re his wife and the only one he should be sticking his dick in.”

I shudder at the crass way he describes the situation, but he’s right. I should be the only one.

“When did you and Van start fighting?”

“Huh?” I ask, slightly confused by his question.

Darian motions for me to follow him into the living room. He carries two plates with sandwiches on them that I hadn’t seen sitting on the counter. I grab the bag of chips from the cupboard and two bottles of water even though I’m not hungry. He’ll try to make me eat, and I should, but my stomach is nowhere near ready.

“Most people cheat because of fighting. That’s what Dad did. He and Mom had been fighting for so long that he cheated because he needed an emotional connection with someone.”

“That’s bullshit,” I say in reply. Our father cheated because he couldn’t keep it in his pants, which was something that Van promised me would never happen. “Van and I don’t fight, and this is over the top TMI, but Van and I had sex yesterday morning before I went to the gym. Every day, multiple times a day.” By the time I’m finished, the tears are back in full force.

“Sorry,” he says, leaning into me. “I’m just trying—”

“To make excuses for your friend?”

Darian shakes his dark curls that drive the women crazy. “Fuck no. You’re my sister. He’s known from day one that I would always side with you.”

“What if I was the one to cheat?” I ask him.

He shrugs and picks at his sandwich. “You’re my sister,” he repeats. “So tell me what happened.”

I fill him in on the meeting that we had with Laura to start going over the tour and upcoming schedule. Reverend Sister has a new album that is about to drop which means we’ll be heavy into promotions. Aside from a multi-city tour, we have

to shoot music videos, give radio interviews, make public appearances, and do whatever we can to get our album into the top of the charts.

Darian's eyes go wide when I describe what I walked in on and how nonchalant Van and the chick were, and how he acted like I deserved to be cheated on. I told Darian about what it was like when Van arrived home, and how he smelled like her perfume. That the scent was so strong, it permeated off his skin and clothes and led me to believe he hooked up with her again after I left.

My brother sat there, listening to how Laura told me to grow up and get over it because I'm married to Van Phillips as if it's supposed to be some status thing.

"I'm not going to get over this, Darian. I'm not," I tell him as I lean into his shoulder.

"You shouldn't, Zara. But, I have to ask, what about Reverend Sister?" He angles his body so he can see my face. I try to smile, but my lips barely move. "It's your band, sis. I do whatever you say, but Van is a huge part of it, and he'd be hard to replace."

"We could hold auditions. See who is available that isn't touring right now and bring in a ringer."

Darian nods. "We could."

He doesn't have to tell me what he's thinking. Van is likely irreplaceable, not that it couldn't happen, but it would take time, and that is something we don't have right now.

"Once this tour is over, he's gone," I tell Darian. "We'll put the next album on hold, or we can start putting feelers out now for a replacement. I can't work with him, and I have a feeling the divorce is going to be messy."

"Messy and headline-making," he adds. I have no doubt that my lovely publicist will make sure this is front-page news. She's all about anything that will drum up sales and make Reverend Sister a household name.

levi

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Four

AS SOON AS Barbara and I arrive in Los Angeles, everyone is just waking up to start the day. I tried to sleep on the plane, but each time I closed my eyes I imagined what Iris's body looked like and my stomach dry heaved. There was nothing left after I expelled the drink I had the second I sat down. I couldn't, for the life of me, wrap my head around the idea that my high school sweetheart was no longer in this realm. Even at our worst I never wished her any harm. For the longest time, she was my best friend until my life went in a direction that she felt was leaving her behind. Still, she was my wife and the mother of my children, and this is the last thing I ever wanted.

There's an SUV waiting for us as soon as we step onto the tarmac. It's one of those all black types that you see on television being driven by an FBI agent or someone equally badass. Barbara is on her phone and giving the driver directions while I follow behind in a daze. If it weren't for her, I'd still be in my house trying to figure out what to do. Everything flies by in a blur as the driver speeds through traffic with his hazards on, hurryingly getting me to the morgue so I can identify the body.

As I look out the window at the concrete jungle, I try to find a little of what Iris loved so much about this place. The streets lack trees. There's a haze hovering over the city. Everything is tar, concrete, and brick. Nothing has life. It's nothing like Nashville where we grew up or the ranch that we

bought together. Here, you can reach out and touch your neighbor, giving you little to no privacy.

The house Iris lives in... or I guess lived in, is one that I own. I bought it mostly for the girls, so they had a place to live knowing full well that Iris was living beyond her means when she first moved here and I didn't know how much of her alimony she had left. She wanted the payout in one lump sum instead of having me make monthly payments. I balked but relented because I always gave her what she wanted. I always wondered what she would do if she ran out of money. Would she ask me for more or take from the girls' child support? Both questions I'll never have answers to. Not that I truly need to know. The girls never complained about their mother, and that was good enough for me.

There's an officer waiting for me when I get out of the vehicle that is meant to hide my identity. He shakes my hand and introduces himself as Detective Pete O'Brien with the Los Angeles Police Department, the same man who called to tell me that my ex-wife was dead. I must not say anything because Barbara is instantly talking to him as we walk into the medical examiner's office. The idea of being in a room with other bodies doesn't sit well with me, and I have to find the nearest trash can to dry heave into.

"You have to be strong, Levi," Barb is saying as she rubs my back.

I nod but don't mean it. No one prepares you for this, but it has to be me. Stormy is far too young to have to do something like this. It'd scar her for life, and as her father, I will do whatever I can to protect her.

Barbara hands me a bottle of water from her bag. I take a swig and swish it around in my mouth before spitting into the garbage can. I wish the water was vodka, but I suppose showing up drunk or with booze on my breath probably wouldn't sit right.

"Are there other bodies in the room?" I ask as we make our way down the hall.

“You won’t actually go into a room with her, but see from behind a window.”

“So I can’t touch her?”

Barbara looks shocked at my question. She should be because I am. I can’t for the life of me wonder why I asked that question. I don’t want to touch her dead body. Or do I? Do I need to hold her hand and ask her what she was doing when she got into the accident? And ask her who was taking care of our girls? Do I want to yell at her and ask what was so important about this city that she had to leave me for it?

The medical examiner must sense my need for closure because he motions for me to enter the room. Consciously I pull the brim of my hat down a bit farther even though I’m sure he knows who I am. It’s out of habit when I want privacy.

He joins me on the other side of the steel table. Under the white sheet is the body of the woman who was once the love of my life. Deep down, I had hoped she’d come back, that we’d be a family again, but also knew it would never happen. My life wasn’t one she wanted to live. Not that I could fault her. From the day we met, everything was about my music and me. She was there when I signed my first deal. Stayed up late nursing Stormy to help me write the words that I sing.

The examiner grips the end of the white sheet and looks at me as if I’m supposed to give him some sign that I’m ready. I can honestly say that I will never be ready to see Iris as anything other than being alive and a total pain in my ass.

The sheet is pulled back slowly as if this process needs to be a grand reveal when it should be like ripping off a Band-Aid. It should be in one swift motion, so the agony of knowing you’ve lost someone isn’t prolonged.

But once I can see her face, tears cloud my vision, and my hand is covering my mouth, not because I’m about to throw up again but because my heart is ripping in two.

“Can you positively identify this woman as Iris Austin?” the medical examiner asks.

I nod and turn out of the room, falling right into Barb's arms as she meets me in the doorway. I cry into her shoulder, much like I did when Iris asked for a divorce, and she rubs my back, telling me that everything will be okay. I should believe her, but I don't. Nothing will ever be okay since the mother of my children is gone from our lives forever.

The detective leads us into a room where he sits down with a folder in front of him. Barb and I sit across from him, and while I stare at the gray table, Barbara grips my hand.

"Mr. Austin, our preliminary report indicates that Ms. Austin was a passenger in the car. The driver died on impact, and Ms. Austin expired on her way to the hospital. The car was traveling at a high rate of speed with drugs and alcohol being involved with both occupants."

"Whose car?" I ask.

"Hers," he says.

"Was anyone else hurt?" Barbara asks. I know what she's doing when she asks. She wants to be prepared for a lawsuit. It doesn't matter if the car is in my name or not, once the press gets wind, the vultures will be out.

"No, it was a single car accident."

I continue to stare at the table, wondering what the hell Iris was thinking yesterday when she decided that drinking and mixing drugs was a smart thing to do, let alone drive.

"When can you release the body?" Barbara asks.

"Tomorrow," he says.

I nod and push my chair back before standing. I reach out and shake his hand. "Thank you. We'll make arrangements for someone to pick her up tomorrow," I say as if I've just adopted a dog from the humane society and I can't get it right away.

Barbara follows me out, but this time she's not on her phone barking orders at someone, but holding my arm while she cries. I know she's feeling the loss as much as I am and it's about to get worse. How do I look my two babies in their eyes and tell them that their mother is dead?

The drive to the girls' house is done in silence. Barbara sits in the back next to me. She holds my hand until we pull into the driveway. The absence of Iris's car isn't lost on me. It dawns on me that I'll probably have to do something with it unless the police just keep it. I don't know the protocol for things like that.

Barbara uses her key to let us into the house. The driver sets our bags down and excuses himself. I haven't a clue as to where he plans to go though unless sitting in the SUV is how he waits.

Willow comes running around the corner. The look on her face, before she realizes it's me standing in the doorway, is of anger. She's pissed that her mother isn't home, and once it hits her that her daddy is at her front door her face morphs into a smile, and she picks up speed until she's launching herself into my arms.

"Daddy," she squeals in delight. She's happy to see me, at least until I break her heart.

"Daddy, what are you doing here?" The sound of Stormy's voice has me putting Willow down. She immediately moves into Barb's embrace.

"Is that how you say hi?" I ask, jokingly.

Stormy comes over and wraps her arms around my waist. "Sorry, I'm just shocked and was hoping that you were Mama."

As I suspected, the girls have spent the night fretting. "That's why I'm here. Let's go into the living room and talk."

When Stormy looks at me, there are tears in her eyes. I have a feeling that she knows something has happened to her mother. Both girls sit down with Barbara in the middle of them. She's already doting on them, and neither seems to mind. They're going to need her. Hell, so am I.

I look at my girls, wondering how I'm going to tell them the news that is going to rock their foundation. They both stare at me expectantly as I stand in front of them. Taking a deep breath and running my hand over the top of my hat to adjust it,

I muster the courage to tell my girls the worst news of their lives.

“This is really hard for me to say,” I tell them, choking up. “But your mama... she was...” I pause, needing to catch my breath. I clear my throat and shake my head as I try to find the words. “There was an accident last night, and she didn’t make it.”

I don’t know who cried first or the loudest. Both wails were enough to bring me to my knees as my arms begged for the girls that mean more than anything to me. Both collapse into my arms, both sobbing and asking why. I’ve been asking myself the same question since three this morning. Why? Why was this guy, or life she was trying to live, more important than our children? Why didn’t she call a cab? Why didn’t she stay home with the girls? These are a few of the questions that we will never have any answers to, that we will have to guess about for the rest of our lives.

I don’t know how long the girls and I sit on the floor together, but it’s the sound of the phone ringing and Barbara telling the caller that we don’t have a comment that gets us moving. As much as I don’t want the girls out of my sight, I know they need time alone. It’s Stormy who leaves first, slamming her door multiple times before letting out another wail. When I move to go to her, Barb stops me.

“Give her time, Levi.” I stare down the hall where she disappeared, wondering if Barb is right.

“Daddy?”

The sound of Willow’s voice has me turning to look at her.

“What is it, love bug?”

“Do we have to go to school?”

I shake my head. “No, you don’t. We are going to stay home and... and I don’t know Willow, but no school.”

Barbara takes Willow with her into the kitchen, and that is when I decide that Stormy needs me. She may not realize it, but she does. Or maybe I need her because I too lost someone I loved.

zara

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I **PEER** out my office window fully expecting to find the media camped outside the front of my house. The photographer that is across the street isn't hiding very well as he stands there casually on the corner acting as if he is about to cross the street. I can really only see his side profile, but that's enough to show that he's trying to hide his camera on the other side of his body. I drop the blinds and leave my office.

Darian is still here, unwilling to leave me by myself in the event that Van shows up. I'm not afraid of Van and Darian knows this, but deep down I think Darian is trying to play the big brother card. The thought warms me that he wants to be protective, even if I don't need it. I want it though. I want Van to realize how badly he's fucked up.

It was my brother's idea that I try to remain as normal as possible. As much as I want to sit around and mope, to eat ice cream and potato chips all day with my hair piled in a messy bun and my face devoid of moisturizer, I can't because it makes me feel worse even though I want to crawl into a hole and disappear. The thought of doing that makes it feel like Van has won some unknown battle we were having.

He did win in a way, but he was the only one playing the game. I've never claimed to be perfect, but I have always been faithful to him from the time it dawned on me that I had a crush on him. No one that I have ever come across was enough to tempt me. Too bad he couldn't say the same thing.

Darian finds me in my closet, staring at Van's clothes. He stands in the doorway, watching me and saying nothing. He doesn't need to.

I sigh and glance at him. The smile that plays on my lips is lackadaisical at best, but his isn't. He tells me that he's going to be here for me, no matter what, that he's going to be my rock, the shoulder I need to cry on, and my best friend.

"Want me to pack his shit?" he asks with a smirk.

Shaking my head, I search for something to lounge around in.

"Wouldn't it be funny if we put everything in black bags and set them out front?" he states with a laugh. I quickly follow suit because yes that would be hilarious and front-page news. Laura would love the publicity, although it isn't the type that she wants.

The phone for the front gate rings and Darian rushes to go answer it. The only person I could imagine showing up would be Laura, or maybe Hayden and Freddie, the other two members of my band. I dress quickly and make my way downstairs, only to hear Darian yelling into the phone.

I jump when he slams the receiver down. "What's going on?" I ask.

Darian faces me looking angry. "That was a reporter asking for you to come outside so they can talk to you."

"What? How do they know?" I ask as I run back upstairs to my office to peek out of my blinds.

"The guy on the phone said they were alerted that you and Van have separated."

I turn and look at Darian. "It's been barely twenty-four hours," I say as Darian's arms come around me. "Did he do this?"

"I don't know, Z. It doesn't seem like Van to go to the media, but if he wants you to talk to him, maybe this is his way."

“If he wanted me to talk to him he shouldn’t have cheated.”

“I know,” he says sighing. I step out of his arms and head toward the window with him following. We both lift a slat and peer outside. The crowd is growing, and the photographer who was across the street has now taken up a spot at my gate.

“Bastards.”

“We’re used to it,” Darian reminds me. The thing is, I don’t mind the media for the most part as long as they leave me alone when I’m at home. This is my private residence, where I need to be able to move around freely without an audience. Right now, they’re preventing that. Even if I wanted to leave, I couldn’t. There is no way I could risk someone walking through my gate when I tried to leave.

“I’m stranded.”

“No, you’re not. If we need to leave, we’ll call for the police to come help.”

I frown. “It’s stupid to bother the police because of this. I’ll call a security company and hire them for the time being.”

I can feel Darian’s eyes on me as I leave the room. The only time we have security is when we’re on tour, and that is because the promoters are trying to protect their investments. When we’re home, we like to live like normal people. Come and go as we please, go grocery shopping, and eat at In-N-Out. Of course, people ask for autographs, but it hasn’t been anything I can’t handle.

After locating my cell phone, I groan at the amount of missed calls. Van, Laura, and my mom are the ones that appear the most. I didn’t forget to call my mom. I was waiting, thinking I had more time until the media caught wind of what’s going on. As much as I want to talk to my mom, she has to wait, and as mad as I am at Laura I need her to take care of getting some security sent over to my house, or at least give me a number to call and I’ll set it up myself.

“Zara, are you calling to tell me you’ve changed your mind about Van?” Laura says only seconds after I pressed her name.

“Not even close, but it seems that the media has caught wind and I need security.”

Laura’s quiet for a few seconds before I hear her sigh heavily. “You know all of this will vanish if Van comes home.”

“He’s not welcome, Laura. I don’t understand why you can’t understand that.”

“Because this is bigger than your feelings, Zara. He’s an integral part of Reverend Sister, and you need him.”

I roll my eyes and try to think of a rebuttal, but nothing comes to mind. She’s not saying anything that Darian and I hadn’t already discussed. “Listen, Laura, Reverend Sister was mine long before Van Phillips walked into my garage. I’m not the one who cheated, he was. I didn’t violate the trust of the band. He did. And until I figure out what I’m going to do, band business happens as usual. As of right now, Van can stay, but not in my house.”

“Zara—”

“No, you listen, Laura. If you want to stay on as our publicist, you will remember who you work for. You know, you’re starting to make me think you’re sleeping with my husband too.”

There’s a long silence that falls between us, making my stomach drop to the floor. “That’s fucking wonderful,” I say as I hang up. Fuck her and Van, and every other bitch he’s slept with. I’m tempted to break my phone, but I can’t bring myself to let it fly out of my hand although the crunching sound it would make as it hits the wall would be somewhat soothing, but then I’d be pissed that I broke my phone and have to buy a new one.

“Darian,” I yell as I turn my phone off and put it in the drawer.

“What’s up?” he asks, running into the kitchen.

“Can you call Mom? I just can’t look at my phone anymore.” Tears fall quickly, and I find myself being pressed against Darian’s chest.

“I’m going to beat his ass,” he says. This time I don’t tell him no because maybe that is what Van needs. I don’t think I can bring myself to tell Darian that Van has slept with our publicist. The thought makes me ill and hits me like a ton of bricks. I have to get myself to the doctors to be tested for whatever disease he could’ve given me. As much as I don’t want to think about catching him yesterday, I don’t remember seeing a condom.

I close my eyes and continue to cry while my brother holds me. In the blink of an eye, everything that I knew my life to be has been nothing but a lie. I have devoted my life to that man since I was seventeen and this is how he shows me what I mean to him, by destroying my trust in him.

I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do now. How do I proceed knowing I can’t trust my publicist? Her betrayal is just as bad as Van’s. We pay her to work for us and if she’s sleeping with Van that makes her a whore.

It all makes sense now, her pushing me to just brush this all under the rug. If Van isn’t married, the likelihood that they continue their affair is out the window. That’s my logic at least. If he were single, why would he choose to be with someone like her? He wouldn’t. He’ll have so many women falling at his feet that Laura and her assistant will be nothing but a blip on his radar.

I’m tempted to tell Darian about Laura, but hold back. I need to tell the group as a whole and save myself from having to repeat the same story over and over. Darian lets me go but keeps his hands on my shoulders.

“What do you need, Z?”

“Food and for Hayden and Freddie to come over. We need to have a meeting.”

He nods. “I’m on it.”

I head back upstairs and look through my blinds again. Not only has the media sustained its presence outside my home, but also it seems that fans are starting to gather. Unfortunately, a press release is going to have to be issued, or I can let the

speculation grow. It won't take long to confirm what they already know, especially once I file divorce papers.

Speaking of divorce, if I wasn't certain before, I am now. One incident I might be able to forgive, but not two, and not one with a woman that works for us. With one last look outside I head back downstairs to find Darian sitting at the island and chatting on his phone. He smiles at me as I pass by and pull out the drawer where I thought I could keep my phone hidden. Powering it back on, I scroll through the contacts until I find the one for my agent and press his number.

"TMZ says that you and Van have separated?"

"Doesn't anyone say hello anymore?" I ask Asher Greene, the man who secured our first record deal.

"Hello, Zara. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I need a lawyer. The best."

"So the rumors are true?" he asks.

"I don't know what you've heard, but if it's that my husband can't keep it in his pants, then yes."

"Shit," he mutters.

"Yeah."

"Hang tight, and I'll send one to your house."

"Wouldn't it be easier if I go there?" I ask.

"It would be, or you can have her come to you. This would save you from having to make a public statement later. I'm going to send the best celebrity divorce attorney. This will be easy."

But not painless. "Send her," I say before hanging up. At this point, I don't even care about the damage done to Van's reputation because he clearly didn't care about any of my feelings when he was sticking his dick in whatever pussy he could find. If he didn't have any respect for me, why should I for him?

levi

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NEVER IN MY life have I been the guy who stands against the wall and watches everyone. It's never been in my personality to sit back and observe. Front and center is how I like things, except that isn't who I am now.

At this moment, I'm observing. I'm paying attention to the way my former in-laws dote on Willow. I can't remember the last time the McCalls came around. It was probably right about the time I won my first Grammy, long after they wrote Iris off as a teenage mother.

When we—you bet I went with her—told her parents that she was pregnant I expected them to be pissed. Hell, my parents were livid but told me to man up and make sure Iris and our unborn baby were taken care of. What I didn't count on was her parents kicking her out of the house. They didn't even give her a chance to pack before her daddy's boot went right up her ass as she walked out of their house. I caught her before she could hit the ground and took her promptly home. My parents opened their door wide for Iris and never cast any judgment on her for being pregnant or on me for knocking her up.

Yet, her parents are in mourning, and they're making sure every single person around them knows that they've lost their daughter. The very same one they hadn't spoken to, unless it was to borrow money, since she was eighteen.

I hadn't wanted to tell them, but my moral compass forced me to make the call that I dreaded more than anything. On the

phone, they acted like they had no idea who I was, but once they arrived in Los Angeles, they expected the star treatment, demanding that a limo pick them up and that they stay in the best six, not five-star hotel money could buy. Too bad they don't have any money, and I knew this would fall onto me. I was tempted to be a dick, but Barbara told me to suck it up for three days, and once the funeral and reception were over, the Austins could go back to pretending the McCalls never existed. Easier said than done. They wasted no time filling Willow's head with lies about how it was because of my fame that they'd been kept apart.

My parents are across the room from them, and every so often I can see my mother throwing daggers at my ex-mother-in-law. The whole situation is comical since my mother is the nicest person you will ever meet. She even smiles when people tell her they don't like a new song of mine.

Barbara nudges me and hands me a fresh bottle of water. I want something harder, but not in front of my girls and definitely not in front of the in-laws. The last thing I need is for them to get any notion that I'm not a fit parent. It doesn't matter that they've been absent since before Stormy was born. They wouldn't hesitate to take me to court for custody.

"It was a beautiful service," Barbara says.

"It was. Stormy spoke very well in front of everyone."

My eyes catch Stormy as she carries a tray of food over to my parents. Even though we have caterers here to do that, she's been trying to keep busy. Anything she can do to stay away from the McCalls without coming off rude.

"Stormy and I had a long talk this morning while she was getting ready."

"Oh yeah?" I ask.

"Have you thought about what you're going to do, Levi? With the girls?"

"What do you mean?" I turn and look at her. She looks like she has the weight of the world weighing on her shoulders right now.

Barbara sighs and offers me a sweet smile. “Stormy has been trying to make a name for herself here with her dancing, and she has a couple of auditions coming up that she doesn’t want to pass up. If you take the girls back to Nashville...” She doesn’t need to finish her sentence for me to understand what she’s saying.

I raise the bottle once more to quench my thirst. It’s not nearly as strong as I need it to be to numb out everything that I’m feeling right now. Returning to Nashville is high on my priority list. It’s important to me, but may not be to my girls. The natural course of life has them dropping everything for me since I’m their sole provider, but Barbara is right about Stormy and the life she has been building. It was Iris who enticed her to come here for a career, and I can’t take that away from her.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she says.

“Doubt it,” I reply as casually as possible. Nashville is my home. It’s where I’m comfortable, although it has been nice to be here and not have the paparazzi hounding me. For the most part, they don’t have any idea who I am. My music and the L.A. music scene don’t exactly mix. There have been a few times that we’ve attempted to have a concert here, but the ticket sales were so measly that the promoter pulled the plug and sent me outside the city to perform.

We thought for sure the media would hound the shit out of us once Iris’s death was made public and prepared for it. I had nightmares of what the headline would be, but some potential divorce was overshadowing the untimely death of my former spouse. Truthfully, I was okay with that. The less exposure for the girls, the better I felt.

That’s not to say there hasn’t been an article or two or the occasional photographer hanging around. The last time I looked outside one was talking to the security guard that we have stationed out front. That wasn’t my idea, but Barbara’s. She wanted to be prepared for whatever the media threw at us.

“I know you don’t want to stay here, Levi.”

“Our home is in Nashville.”

“And their home is here. You need to think about what’s best for them.”

Barbara leaves me with those parting words and heads over to my parents, no doubt telling them about our little conversation. Barbara and my mother are like best friends and often gang up on me. It’s horrible, but thankfully my father is usually in my corner, except I don’t know if he would be in this situation.

I don’t know if I’d be able to survive here, especially in this house. There is too much Iris everywhere I look. This was her town, her dreams that had nothing to do with me. Unfortunately, her dreams webbed right into our girls, and now I’m faced with being the bad guy by wanting to take it all away from them and head back to Tennessee. It’s the smart thing to do, get them acclimated back where we are going to live.

When Stormy disappears down the hall, I use this to my advantage. It’s clear that she’s been more open with Barbara than she has me and if something is going on or bothering her we need to discuss it.

I knock softly on her door before turning the knob. Stormy is sitting on her bed with tears in her eyes. My feet move swiftly until I’m sitting beside her and her head is nestled into the crook of my neck. Her arms are instantly wrapped around me. I can’t imagine what she’s feeling right now.

“It’s going to be okay, Stormy.”

She shakes her head. I get that she doesn’t think so, but she has to know that I’m going to do everything I can to make things better for her and her sister. I can’t bring their mama back, but I can make sure that they know how much I love them.

“I’m so mad at her,” Stormy mumbles into my shoulder.

I start to open my mouth to tell her that I am too, but I think better of it. I’m mad at her for entirely different reasons than Stormy is. I’ve been angry with Iris for years because of her selfishness, but I would never wish this upon her.

“I am so sorry, baby girl.”

“Why did she have to get into that car?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been asking myself the same question since...” I don’t want to say since I had to identify her mother’s body, so I trail off and hug her tighter and let her cry. Both Stormy and Willow will have questions about their mother’s death that I won’t be able to answer. It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to figure out the way Iris’s mind works.

“She always messes everything up.”

Hearing Stormy say that about her mother really makes me pause. Did I make the wrong decision when I let the girls move here to live with her? I thought I was making the right choice for Stormy so she could follow her dream, but there’s a lingering thought in the back of my mind that is telling me I made the worst mistake possible. Maybe I should’ve put my foot down when Iris started hinting that Stormy should move to California. Second-guessing isn’t going to get me anywhere, though.

“We need to talk about what we’re going to do. You, Willow, and me.”

“About where we’re going to live?” she asks.

“Yeah. I know you have things going on here, but our home is in Nashville.”

“I know, but—”

I pull away so I can look my daughter in the eyes. She needs to see that I’m sincere with what I’m about to say. “No buts, Stormy. Our home is in Nashville, but we’ll stay in L.A. until you finish the school year. Barb told me that you have some auditions coming up and either I’ll go with you, Memaw will, or Barb. But once school is over we go back to Nashville. I know you want to dance. There are schools there that are just as good, and if not, I’ll hire someone to teach you.”

Stormy doesn’t say anything. She nods and wipes away her tears. Again, I find myself internally asking why Iris got into that car the other night. If she had just taken a taxi home, I

wouldn't have a disappointed daughter sitting next to me, or a house full of people pretending to mourn someone they really didn't know. It doesn't matter how many times I ask the same question. The answer will always be out of reach. No one will ever know what was going on with Iris when she got into that car.

“When are Pawpaw and Memaw going home?”

“Pawpaw is heading back at the end of the week so he can take care of the ranch. Memaw is staying until we kick her out.”

“And the other ones?” There is no mistaking the tone of her voice or the look on her face. She doesn't care for her other grandparents, not that I could ever blame her or tell her to feel otherwise. It's not like they know who the girls are, other than what they've gotten off my website. Unless Iris was in touch with them recently, but even if she were, I think she would've told me. We may have been divorced, but that didn't mean we didn't talk. Plus, she was still close with my mother, and I can't fathom that Iris would make an effort with her own mama.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees and sigh. “Their hotel stay ends tomorrow. After that, I want to act like I don't know what they're going to do, but the truth is, I'm scared of not knowing where they are.” The McCalls scare me. It's always about money with them, and I have a feeling they're going to do anything they can to exploit the passing of Levi Austin's ex-wife.

zara

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YOU'RE ONLY ALLOWED to hide out in your house for so long before you have to at least open the garage door and drive your black Range Rover with tinted windows out onto the streets of Beverly Hills. Of course, once you accomplish that, it's a mad dash by all the paparazzi to chase after you in hopes of getting that elusive picture because for the last month you've stayed in your house with your blinds closed.

That's me in a nutshell. For the most part, I felt like I was on house arrest, but the truth is I couldn't face the public. Not that thirty days behind closed doors is going to make a difference in the matter, not when Van has been seen out and about with his rumored girlfriend according to TMZ. When I see segments like that, it makes everything ten times worse. I don't know why I expected him to wait until the ink was dry on our divorce papers since he had been cheating on me. Clearly, that was a sign that he had moved on from our relationship. I guess I thought he'd offer me that courtesy. I was wrong.

Our divorce is moving along swimmingly or as smoothly as humanly possible. Asher, my agent, kept good on his promise to send the best divorce lawyer he knew. To say that Alana Guinn is a shark would be an understatement. I swear she eats men for breakfast. After our initial meeting, she had papers drawn up and served to Van the next day. He called, and I ignored him. There wasn't anything that he could say that would change my mind.

The only problem that remained was the band. After a long conversation with Darian, Hayden, and Freddie, we decided that Van would stay in the band to finish out the album. I'd play nice as long as Van kept his space. We'd finish out the tour, complete our obligatory commitments, and go from there. The guys weren't exactly thrilled with the idea of replacing Van, and honestly, neither am I. I don't know if I can work with him.

Which leads me to where I am now, behind the wheel of my car and backing out of my driveway, not paying attention to who is in my way. I figure if I hit them, they deserve it for not moving out of the way.

Today, we're filming the music video for our recent release. I'm not over the moon excited about having to spend the day with Van, but the guys have promised they'll run interference. Of course, I have a tremendous amount of anxiety right now, and driving is probably the last thing I should be doing. The idea of seeing Van... it does things to me. While my heart aches from missing him and breaks from the damage he's done, my brain is telling me that he's a piece of shit and that I need to kick him hard where his family jewels are. That's what I should've done when I caught him in the act instead of standing there and watching. It took forever for me to process what I was seeing and by the time I did he was scowling at me.

The thought of seeing him today has me torn. I can't shut the love I feel for him off like a light switch even though that is what he's done. I mean, you don't cheat on the ones you love so clearly he's no longer in love with me, but failed to give me the memo, despite what his numerous voicemails say.

I'm followed steadily by the paparazzi who were able to hop in their cars and not lose me in traffic. Fortunately for me, they can't see through my tinted windows. Unfortunately, though, a few have decided to get in front of me so they can get a picture of me driving. You know, because that will sell so well. I don't even want to know what sort of bogus headline they'll come up with to try and sell copies. For the most part, each time Van and I have been in the media it's been for what

I'd consider fun stuff. Pictures of us shopping, looking at puppies, or on vacation would appear, but never anything that led to a controversy. Now we're front and center, and our lives are being played out in the media like a real-life soap opera.

With my current dilemma, the only saving grace is that our video shoot is being done in a production lot, which means security. I sigh heavily as I signal to turn in knowing full well the cars in front and behind me can't follow me in.

"Good morning," the security guard says.

"Hi. I'm Zara Phillips," I tell him, handing him my driver's license. "We're shooting on stage twelve today."

He does his due diligence and checks his clipboard, using my ID as a ruler as he goes down the list of names that are allowed through the gates without proper identification.

"Thank you, Ms. Philips," he says with a smile as he hands my license back to me. I open my mouth to correct him, but the words fail on the tip of my tongue. My eyes begin to water behind my dark glasses as I offer him a strained smile.

Once the crossbar is lifted, I pull through and follow the directions I was given to the sound stage. I've opted to leave my window down for a little bit of fresh air knowing full well that no one on this production lot gives a rat's ass about me and what I'm going through.

As soon as I put my car in park, Darian is at the driver's side door and opening it. "You're late," he says. "Caleb didn't think you were going to show."

"I'm here, and maybe if the label had sent a car, I wouldn't have had to drive and be mindful of the paparazzi that have been camping outside my house for a month." My tone is snippy and not meant to piss Darian off, but I can see that I have. "Look, I'm sorry. I don't mean to snap at you. I'm just angry at this whole situation."

"I know. C'mon." Darian puts his arm around me and leads me to the sound stage door where Caleb Gilbert is standing and taking up most of the space with his hulking frame. Caleb is an executive from the record label who tells us

what to do and when. His job is to make sure the label doesn't suffer, and I have a feeling he's none too happy with Van and me right now.

“Zara, it's nice of you to show up.”

Mentally I'm flipping him off. Physically, I'm smiling as brightly as possible while my eyes are throwing daggers into his.

“Traffic was a bitch,” I tell him. I feel Darian tap me on my back. It's his subtle way of telling me to be nice. I cock my eyebrow at Caleb and motion toward the inside of the studio. Obviously, if I'm late, you'd think he would want to get started.

When he finally does move, it isn't without great effort and a dramatic sigh. His antics aren't lost on me. He's a diva. I'm a diva. It's what makes us money. He's also a huge fan of Van's and probably feels like I'm overreacting.

As soon as Darian and I step in, there are gasps and murmurs from the galley of extras that will be in the video. Funnily enough, the song is very *West Side Story* with a girl falling for a guy from the wrong side of the tracks. The dancers are supposed to tell the story through their interpretation while Reverend Sister sings in the background. I tried to get the label to agree that we didn't need to be on set for this to happen, that the dancers could perform to a recorded version, but the big wigs wanted live. Every production nowadays has to be live, and that can be exhausting for an artist.

The personal assistant on set intersects with us and pushes Darian and me toward the dressing room. The closer I get, the more stalled my steps become. Knowing Van is behind that door really does a number on my psyche and I'm not sure I can handle seeing him.

“It's okay,” Darian whispers in my ear. “He's not in there.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I asked Caleb to make sure you had your space before the shoot started. He's here though, Zara, and he looks

like shit.”

We stop right before the door marked “dressing room” and I turn to face Darian. Slowly I lift my sunglasses so he can see that I too look like shit. This past month hasn’t been all sunshine and rainbows for me.

Darian sighs and nods toward the door. “Let’s go get ready.”

I’m sure in the back of his mind he thinks that I’ll need extra time in the chair to eliminate the dark bags and puffy eyes. He’s right to think that. As much as I wish I could say my nights have been filled with sleep and I haven’t cried since the day I caught Van, I’d be lying.

I’m trying to remain strong, but it’s hard. Van is the only man I have ever been with. He was my first kiss, my first love... I gave him everything and only asked that he love me in return. Lately, I’ve been wondering what the triggers were or what they might have been. We didn’t fight, rarely argued over anything that would cause either of us to seek solace in another person, and genuinely loved spending our time together or at least I thought we did, but clearly I was mistaken.

The make-up artist and hair stylist get to work once I sit down. Oddly enough I find this very relaxing. Neither of them says anything about my disarrayed look. Probably fearing they’d get fired if they were to open their mouths and ask what the hell have I been *not* doing to myself. These women are professionals though and can handle anything that sits in their chair.

Some rank-smelling cream is put on my face, right under my eyes. The scent cleans out my nasal passage rather quickly. I don’t even have to ask her what it is. I’ve been a victim of bags under my eyes before and already know she’s put hemorrhoid cream on me to curb the swelling. I tell myself to suck it up. I knew this shoot was going to happen and I could’ve prepared better.

I’m poked, prodded, and painted to look somewhat human and more like the Zara Phillips that everyone knows. The one

that showed up today is not how I usually leave the house and know I need to make a conscious effort to be better about that. I can't let Van have this much control over me.

Looking at myself in the mirror, the girls stand beside me, marveling at the job they've done. In a matter of seconds, they turned me back into the person that I'm used to being. They brought life to face and hair with a few strokes of their personal magic.

"Beautiful as always."

I freeze at the sound of Van's voice and slowly turn my head to find him standing in the doorway, looking as sexy as ever in his leather pants, combat boots, and ripped T-shirt that probably cost a few hundred dollars.

The young girl who fell in love with him wants to run to him and collapse in his arms, but the woman he scorned has a stronger voice. Van takes two steps into the dressing room, and I shake my head while taking steps toward him. We're almost torso-to-torso with him looking down at me.

"You don't get to say that to me," I say through a clenched jaw.

"You're still my wife." He casually points out.

"The day you stuck your dick into someone else is the day you stopped being my husband." I side-step him and rush out the door, not watching where I'm walking and run smack into a man and his hot cup of coffee. "Ow, mother fu..." I let my f-bomb trail off as I jam the part of my burnt hand into my mouth. Tears begin to form, but I refuse to cry knowing that Van is right behind me.

"Z are you okay?" he asks, pulling on my hand while the man in front of me looks on with larger than life eyes at the scene that is playing out in front of him. If I had to wager a guess, I'd say he's an extra for the shoot, but he's dressed wrong in his trucker hat, plaid shirt, tight jeans, and from the looks of it, cowboy boots.

"Don't touch me," I mumble and step away from him.

“Are you all right, ma’am?” the man who burnt my hand says in the nicest southern drawl I have ever heard. Not that I’ve heard many, but a few.

“I am... sort of.” My hand is burnt, and for some dumb reason, I show him where. He softly takes my hand over to the craft services tables and puts together a napkin with some ice.

“I am very sorry. I should’ve been watchin’ where I was walking,” he tells me as he holds my hand gently in his.

I am completely dumbfounded by this man, and for the life of me, I can’t put my finger on as to why.

“It’s okay. I should’ve signaled before I left the room.” My joke is corny, and I don’t expect him to laugh, but he does, and soon I find myself laughing right along with him until someone steps next to me and takes my injured hand out of his and applies cream and a bandage. Before I can thank him, he’s disappeared, but Van is there to continue to ruin my day.

levi

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Eight

I AM as smooth as they come. Of course, I would be the one to spill my coffee on the lead singer of Reverend Sister, burning her hand in the process. With how my luck has been going this month, it's likely the hand that she holds her microphone with and for all I know I've ruined the video shoot today.

That's the reason I'm here, drinking coffee and trying to ease the pain of the beautiful woman who has cautiously given me her damaged hand. If it wasn't for Stormy, who spent days gushing about the lead singer and her epically cool hair, I wouldn't have a clue as to whose hand I'm currently holding and trying to ice.

Weeks ago, I held onto the promise that I made Stormy and made sure that she was at every single audition that had been set up for her. Some of them—mind you—made my skin crawl and we promptly walked out, but others seemed legit. At the end of each night, I wanted to dig Iris up and strangle her for committing our daughter to some of these auditions. My feelings toward Iris only worsened when Stormy told me that most of the time her mother didn't even bring her, that she took an Uber or asked her dance teacher to accompany her. I wanted to ask Stormy why she didn't tell me but knew that nothing could change what happened in the months prior so why even bring it up?

I apologize to the woman, whose name I can't remember as I place a makeshift ice pack on the burn. Her hand, in comparison to mine, is tiny.

“It’s okay. I should’ve signaled before I left the room,” she says, trying to hold back laughter. I can’t and bark out so loudly that others are staring at me. She, in turn, does the same and ends up snorting.

She quickly covers her mouth in total embarrassment. “I can’t believe I just did that,” she says.

“I thought it was cute.” The words are out of my mouth and to her ears before I realize that I’ve said the dumbest thing ever. Here I am, holding this uniquely beautiful woman’s hand and I tell her that her snorting was cute. And Barbara wonders why I’m single.

Our moment, or lack thereof, is cut short when someone takes her hand from mine. They immediately tended to the burn I caused leaving me no choice but to head back to the waiting area. I think about looking over my shoulder to get one last look at her, but I don’t.

As soon as I’m back in the waiting area, Stormy’s eyes are wide, and words are tumbling from her mouth before I can even sit down. “Did you hear that someone burned Zara’s hand and the shoot may not happen today? I mean, how could someone do that to her?”

Two things happen here for me. The first is my mind repeatedly says Zara’s name, and for the life of me, I can’t understand why. The second is acknowledging the fact that I may be public enemy number one if this shoot doesn’t happen and by looking around the room full of dancers, they’d have no qualms about maiming me.

“I’m sure everything is fine,” I tell my overly anxious daughter. Never mind the fact that I’m shaking in my boots, wondering if I have ruined everything. I’ve been on the other side of production and can understand everyone’s disappointment when shoots get rescheduled. It’s nothing for a guy like me to move my schedule around, but for others, it can be a downright nightmare.

Not willing to divulge my involvement in the situation, I sit back and pull my cap down a bit farther and close my eyes. I really needed that coffee to stay awake. Since arriving in Los

Angeles, I haven't exactly been sleeping very well. Iris plagues most of my thoughts at night. Then there's the lingering voice in the back of my head asking me what the hell I'm going to do with two teenage daughters. My mama will be on hand, as will Barbara, but I'm now in a situation that I never thought I would be in. Even with Iris being flakey, I always thought she'd be around to help me out.

The beauty of being here is that no one knows me. I've taken both girls to school, walked through their halls, and haven't been noticed. I even ventured out to the grocery store and looked at all the rag-mags on the newsstands to see if I'm anywhere in there. I haven't been asked once for an autograph or picture at any of Stormy's auditions, but I have been propositioned by a few of the other mothers. You know, these nice ladies are very sorry for my loss as their fingernails trail down my arm. Honestly, though, it's been nice to stay under the radar and just go with the flow.

"Shoot's on, I gotta go," Stormy says. By the time I lift my hat to watch her leave, she's in the mix of a sea of other dancers heading into production. This soundstage isn't anything that I'm not used to, although most of my music videos are shot in airplane hangars or warehouses.

It's not long before the music starts and I swear my ears are starting to bleed. For a brief moment, I feel like my mother used to when I would strum my guitar and sing out of tune. God bless her for putting up with me.

I sigh when the music stops, only for it to start up again, this time it's much smoother. If I had to guess, someone was way off-key with the first go round, but not this time. From the first beat of the drum, I'm tuned into listening and the riffs that follow on the guitar really have my attention, but it's her voice that has me sitting up and listening a bit more. I won't even talk about the goose bumps that have formed along my arms or the fact that my heart is racing a bit more.

"I take it this is the first time you've heard her sing?" A woman across from me says. I glance at her and smile.

"It is. This isn't my type of music," I tell her.

“Where are you from?” she asks. “I like your accent.”

The inner boy in me turns bashful. I have no doubt that if the lighting was better, she’d see that my cheeks are red. I don’t even know why I’m embarrassed by her question.

“Nashville,” I tell her, hoping that my answer doesn’t give away anything. I’ve rather enjoyed no one knowing who I am.

“That was your daughter with you earlier?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, that’s very admirable of you to bring her all the way out here for this. Not many parents would.”

I nod a thank you to her and sit back, letting the vibrations of the music work their way through me. The lady smiles before she reaches into her bag, pulling out two knitting needles. I watch as she weaves in and out of her stitches, working on what looks like a scarf but is probably something else. I remember my memaw and how she used to do this every day. My memaw tried to teach me how to knit, but I was too focused on teaching myself how to play the guitar. And before Stormy and Willow moved to L.A. with their mama, she tried showing them, but they weren’t interested.

After a bit, the redundancy of the song takes its toll. The other parents who are still here have all occupied their time by reading or sleeping with headphones on, watching their iPads, or yammering on their phones. I’m the only one sitting here with nothing to do except people watch. Thankfully the brim of my hat shields my eyes so no one can really tell if I’m staring at them or not.

It’s about lunchtime when Stormy returns. She looks exhausted but has a beaming smile on her face.

“Y’all done?”

“Nah. It’s lunchtime,” she says and motions for me to follow her outside. There’s a tent set up across the way, and the dancers are all in line, waiting for lunch.

“We can go over to the cafeteria,” I tell her knowing full well that one call to Barbara and I’ll have access to the finer

foods on the lot.

“But this is where we’re supposed to eat,” she tells me. I want to give her credit for putting herself in the same light as the others, but also want to shake her because I work my tail off to make sure she has the finer things in life. I know if my mama were here, she’d tell me that Stormy is teaching me a lesson in humility, and she’d probably be right. Stormy is trying to make a name for herself and hasn’t used me to do it.

“You’re right. However, I don’t think they want your daddy eating here, so I’m going to run over to the cafeteria. I’ll be back though.” Much to my surprise, Stormy kisses me on the cheek. It’s the first real emotion, that isn’t part of the grieving process, that she’s shown me since I broke the news about her mother. I’m taken aback briefly, but try not to let her see how much that simple gesture has affected me.

I don’t have to walk far to find a food truck, which will serve its purpose and is better than having to call Barbara to get me a pass into the lot’s café. Honestly, the fewer people that know I’m here the better.

With a burrito in one hand and a bottle of water in the other, I head back to the sound stage and choose to sit outside for a bit so I can enjoy the sun. It’s funny to be on this side of things. The side where people aren’t catering to my every need, making sure that I’d have a seat to sit on as opposed to getting my jeans dirty from the concrete.

Oddly enough I find myself laughing at the situation. Here I am, a mega superstar with a boatload of Grammys, number one hits and sold out tours, and not a single person today has recognized me. It’s either that I’m fugly and no one has had the nerve to tell me, or I’m doing a damn good job staying incognito. I’m going with the latter because my mama would never lie to me and she tells me I’m handsome all the time.

“Do you always eat alone?” The melodic voice of the beauty with wild hair stands before me with her pants tucked into her combat boots and a tight shirt that accentuates every toned muscle of her abdomen. But it’s the gloved hand that

diverts my attention. I swallow hard and adjust the way I'm sitting on the ground.

“How's your hand?”

She lifts it and shrugs. “It burns, but it'll be okay.”

“I'm truly sorry,” I tell her as I stand, instantly towering over her.

“It wasn't your fault,” she says, laughing. She quickly covers her mouth and looks away, making me wonder if she's afraid to snort again. “I'm Zara.”

“Levi,” I tell her as I shake her non-damaged hand. “My daughter is in your video.” I nod to where Stormy is standing and gawking at me. Normally, she'd come over, but I have a feeling she's tongue-tied. That would definitely be a first for her especially since she's grown up under the spotlight.

Zara looks over her shoulder and back to me. “She's our lead in the video. I hope she makes you proud.” She winks before walking away, leaving me a bit speechless at not only her comment but the fact that I don't think I was done talking to her.

It's only a matter of seconds before Stormy is in front of me, trying to block me from watching Zara climb the steps that will take her back into the studio, except she doesn't go in. Instead, she stands there and looks at me. I can feel her penetrating gaze as if it were boring into my soul.

zara

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“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Darian pulls me down the hall toward our makeshift dressing room by my arm. People stare but quickly divert their eyes, probably chalking this up to a brother/sister quarrel. Darian and I are known to have those from time to time.

“What’s your problem?” I ask, pulling my arm from his grip.

“Why are you flirting with that man?”

“Excuse me?” I ask incredulously. The last time I checked I was a grown woman free to do whatever the hell I wanted.

Darian points and because I feel like mocking his insolent behavior I follow his finger and stare at the wall. “I don’t see anyone.”

He scoffs and throws his hands up, much to my delight. “Grow up, Z.”

“Darian, I’m having a hard time understanding this protective brother shit. Fill in the blanks for me, so you and I are on the same page.” And because I want to be defiant, I cross my arms and make sure my foot is tapping on the floor with my lips pursed.

“Van is flipping the hell out because you were flirting with that extra.” My face must morph into something dangerous because Darian steps back and raises his hands as if *that* is going to protect him from the beatdown he’s about to receive.

“In case you’ve forgotten Big Brother, Van cheated. Not just emotionally but physically in the worst way possible. If he had kissed another woman, I’d probably be able to forgive him after he groveled for a year, but he gave himself to someone else when he vowed that I would be the only one. If Van has a problem with me talking to the father of the girl who is the lead in our video, he can take it up with Laura... oh wait, he’s sleeping with her too, not to mention he has a girlfriend already.”

“I’m just saying—”

“What exactly? That I’m supposed to open my arms and let that piece of shit back into my life?”

“What? Hell no,” he says, shaking his head. “We’re at work. I told him he needs to remain professional, and so do you.”

I roll my eyes, but he’s right. Not that I was flirting with the man outside, but even if I were, that’s my choice and my business. Darian pulls me into a hug and rests his chin on top of my head.

“I know shit’s hard, Z. We’re all feeling it.”

That was something I didn’t want to happen, for the band to suffer. I know the easiest thing is for me to forget that Van has destroyed our marriage, but I can’t. If he wasn’t happy all he had to do was say something but had to go and do the more hurtful act out there. We could’ve easily parted amicably and saved ourselves a lot of pain. Although I can’t imagine the pain being any less than it is now.

“We could kick him out.”

“Caleb would never go for it,” Darian says. He’s right. Honestly, I think the label would probably prefer that I quit than to lose Van.

A loud voice booms outside the dressing room, announcing that lunch is over and it’s time to get back to work. Reluctantly, I follow Darian out of the dressing room and find myself looking down the hall to see if I can spot Levi. For the life of me, I can’t understand why I would do that. I don’t

know if it's because of his accent or because he sticks out like a sore thumb. He seems to be so out of place with this plaid shirt and cowboy boots. I look down at my gloved hand and smile. It hurts like a bitch, but the way he tried to take care of me stands out clearly in my mind.

It's another two hours when we finally wrap. I catch wind that the dancers are all going back to Stormy Austin's house for a party and that everyone is invited. Everyone that is except for Reverend Sister because honestly, why would they think to invite the band knowing full well we'd tell them no.

Still, I'm curious and ask one of the choreographers to point out who Stormy is. Call it a hazard of the job or whatnot, but I've never learned any of the extra's names prior to now. When he points to Levi's daughter, a small smile plays on my lips. The urge to ask for directions is pressing, but I refrain and head to the dressing room instead to grab my bag so I can head home.

I quickly change back into the shorts and tank top that I arrived in and cover my eyes with my sunglasses. At least now when the paparazzi take my picture, I'll have make-up on and won't look like death warmed over.

Outside, the dancers are all chatting about the shoot and how they thought it went well. One comments that he didn't like the song and if I wasn't in a hurry to get out of there, I'd grab his name and make sure he never worked another day in the industry again.

"Can we talk?" Van says when I'm halfway to my car. In front of me, Levi and his daughter are handing out pieces of paper, which I'm assuming contain their address. Levi looks over and smiles, but it quickly fades. No doubt because of the look on my face that has nothing to do with him and everything to do with Van.

"No, we have nothing to talk about." I step to move around him, but he blocks me.

"At least let me explain, Z. You owe me that."

I raise my glasses so he can see my eyes. Unfortunately for me, tears that I have held back all day decide this is the time to make their appearance. “I owe you? I didn’t do anything to warrant you cheating on me, Van,” I grit out, trying to keep my voice low. “Get out of my way and out of my life.” For emphasis, I jab him in the chest with my finger.

“I’m done playing around Zara. I’m heading over now so we can talk about this shit.”

“I won’t be home.”

“Yeah you will,” he says as he heads toward his car. I hate that he’s right, that he knows me so well to know that I will be home because I’m afraid to go anywhere else. I could go to Darian’s, but Van would go there next.

I glance back at the crowd around Levi and Stormy and catch him looking again. This time when he smiles, I return the gesture and head toward him.

“So hey, I don’t usually invite myself to other people’s parties—”

“Oh! My! God! You want to come to my house?” Stormy says, interrupting me. The people around her seem thrilled, but I can’t grasp whether it’s fake or not.

“I thought that maybe... you guys seem cool,” I say to the group of them. By now they’ve all pasted on their phony smiles and are happily agreeing.

“Here’s our address,” Levi says, handing me a piece of paper. “This is very low-key and last minute.”

“Thanks.” I hold the piece of paper up like I’m reaffirming an appointment. The only thing that is keeping me from going is the fact that I don’t know these people and they will likely have their cell phones out. The last thing I want is to have my picture plastered all over social media or have to explain myself to Laura, not that we’re on speaking terms. Although going to their house seems like a better option than sitting home and having Van show up with the paparazzi lingering around out front.

As odd as it sounds, being at the Austin's house where everything is normal seems to be my best option right now. I feel awkward standing there with Levi looking at me and my hand suspended in the air, and before I can make a bigger fool out of myself, I pocket the slip of paper and head toward my car. The quicker I can get out of there, the better.

But because I'm a glutton for punishment, I figure I'll stop at the store, so I don't show up empty-handed, and while I sit in my car I place a ridiculous order and pay for rush delivery... out in the parking lot. I use the time that I'm sitting there to contemplate my life.

I'm thirty-two years old and separated. My soon-to-be ex-husband can't grasp the idea that I want a divorce. No, want isn't a strong enough word. I need, or I'm adamant that it happens. He also needs to stay away from me because my body still desires his, even though the sight of him makes me ill. I will never get the images of him and that assistant going at it on the desk out of my mind. She touched what I deemed mine a long time ago, and no amount of groveling from him will ever be able to change my mind.

It's an hour or longer until the delivery boy drives his car from one end of the parking lot to the other, where I'm parked under a couple of palm trees.

"Ms. Phillips?"

"Yes." I push the button to open the back hatch and watch through my rearview mirror as he loads an obscene amount of food into the back of my car. My excuse for doing this is because I want the Austin's to have an enjoyable party and because I can. Maybe this is my way of saying thank you, although I don't know what for. He's the one who burned my hand, yet if he hadn't, I wouldn't be on my way to his house to hang out with the dance crew from my video.

"Something is really wrong with me," I say to my reflection.

After the last bit is loaded, the boy appears at my window again and hands me a slip of paper to sign. I leave him a ridiculously stupid tip and thank him. With the Austin's

address in my navigation system, I head in their direction, quickly realizing that they live in a nicer part of town not far from Bel Air.

By the time I pull up to the curb in front of their house, I am completely dumbfounded. It's not at all what I expected. The front yard is beautiful green shrubbery with a small brick wall encasing the yard. The driveway is long, somewhat steep, and full of cars, leaving me no choice but to fill my arms with bags.

I maneuver my hand to reach the doorbell, only to have the door swing wide open. The woman who answers looks a bit confused but offers to take a couple of the bags from my hands.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting another delivery," she says as she motions me into the home. The dark cherry floors look vibrant against the white walls and wainscoting. "You can follow me into the kitchen."

I do as she suggests, finding myself tongue-tied. I made an assumption about these people, and I was clearly off base. The open floor concept is warm and inviting, vastly different from how I feel in my home right now. In the kitchen, another woman smiles and takes the remaining bags from my hands.

"Why on earth did Levi order so much food?" she says as she starts taking the pre-made food from the bags. "Do you have a slip?"

"A slip?" I ask, slightly confused. Don't these people know who I am?

"For us to sign?"

It hits me that they don't have any idea who I am and I rather like that. "Oh, I'm with the crew," I say, nodding my head toward the open patio door where I can hear people splashing in their pool.

"You came?" It's the sound of Levi's voice and his accent that has me turning around so quickly that I almost give myself whiplash. "And you brought food?"

I avert my gaze and look at only a smidgen of the food I brought. I shrug and stick my hands into the pockets of my shorts. “I uh... ya know there’s more in the car,” I say with a smile. I might as well own my mistake.

“Let’s go get it then,” Levi says, motioning toward the door. He waits for me to pass by him before he follows. We walk silently down his driveway to my Range Rover, and once the back hatch is lifted, he starts laughing.

“Wow.” He takes his hat off, and for the first time, I get a glimpse of his chestnut hair. It’s shorter around the sides, but slightly longer on top. It’s almost as if he just had it cut.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I thought... you know what I’ll just say it. I assumed that by having the crew over it’d be putting a burden on you and I didn’t want that so I stopped at the store.”

“Darlin’, I think you’re trying to feed the whole neighborhood.” He reaches into the back and grabs every bag, leaving nothing for me to carry.

“I can help,” I say as I close the back.

He pauses halfway up his driveway and gives me a smile that has me questioning why I’m here. “You already are,” he mumbles. I don’t think he intended for me to hear him clearly, but I did.

levi

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I NEVER EXPECTED Zara to show up at Stormy's makeshift afterparty, but not only did she show up, she brought enough food to feed the entire Bel Air block that we live on. I don't have the heart to tell her that I am more than capable of providing enough food for everyone.

It seems that when she's around, I'm saying some ridiculous things, mostly for my own benefit and not for hers. I have a feeling she has stealth hearing because after I tell her that she's already helping I hear a tiny gasp. Now that could be from some critter roaming through the bushes or the scuff of her shoe as we walk up the inclined driveway, but if I had to bet my prized Stetson that the sound came from her, I would.

As soon as we step onto the concrete porch, she brushes by me to open the door. "Thank you, ma'am," I say with a wink and hear yet another audible gasp. I sort of like this game, and it makes me curious as to how many times country boy Levi Austin can make this woman lose her breath. Honestly, probably not too many once she realizes that we have absolutely nothing in common.

In the kitchen, Barbara and my mother rush to ease the burden of carrying so many bags. I could've made more than one trip, but I'd rather spend some time talking to Zara. It's been entirely too long since I've felt drawn to a woman, let alone one like her. Outside appearances tell me right off that she'll never fit into my world, nor would I fit into hers. But that doesn't mean we can't talk, share a beer, and maybe laugh a little.

“Mama and Barb, this is Zara. She’s the lead singer of Reverend Sister. Stormy was in her video today.”

“The lead, actually, and she did an amazing job.” Zara smiles as she steps forward and shakes their hands. It occurs to me that I didn’t even give her my mother’s name and I feel completely awkward blurting it out now.

“That’s our girl,” my mama says, beaming at the accolade that Zara just bestowed onto Stormy.

“I was really impressed with her,” Zara adds, making my mother even more proud. If this were a date, I’d say that Zara is racking up the quality points with my mother.

“Levi should give you a tour of the house. Go on now we’ll get the food out to everyone.” My mother winks at me, and all I can do is shake my head. With the height difference between Zara and me, there’s no doubt in my mind that she saw my mother’s not too subtle actions. Sometime later I’ll have to school my mother on the art of the pick-up, not that I’m a pro because as Barbara will happily point out, I’m always single when I need to have a woman on my arm.

Zara turns to me with a glint in her whiskey-colored eyes. I can already tell that if I’m not careful, I could be opening myself up to a world of hurt. It takes everything in me to break eye contact with her and not reach out and hold her hand.

“Follow me,” I say, tilting my head toward the hallway. Never in my life have I given another woman a tour of any home that I own. Iris helped design the house that I live in now, and I bought this one for the girls. I suppose it doesn’t help that I really never submerged myself in the dating scene.

“This house is beautiful, Levi.”

“Thank you. I think it’s rather small.”

Zara shakes her head. “Nah, I love how wide and open everything is.”

“So I think my mama just wanted us out of the kitchen. There really isn’t much to see,” I tell her as we walk down the hall toward the bedrooms. “This is Willow’s room.” I open the door to her bedroom and Zara walks in. Willow’s room is

everything a pre-teen's room would be. It's pink and girly with stuffed animals piled on her bed. There's a corner dedicated to me, but either Zara doesn't see it, or she's already figured out who I am.

"I take it Willow must be..."

"My daughter.

Zara steps in and turns in a slow circle. "I had a room like this when I was ten."

"That's how old she is. As soon as we go outside, I'm sure you'll meet her." Zara tries and fails to mask her indifference about going outside, which sort of boggles my mind. If she didn't want to hang out with the crew, why is she here?

We continue down the hall and go into Stormy's room. Now that I know who Reverend Sister is, I'm slightly embarrassed to be showing her this room. Zara chuckles when she steps in and is immersed with pictures of herself.

"She's a fan," I say, shrugging. When Stormy was told she would be in the video, she yelled at the top of her lungs, dancing around while her agent was on the phone trying to give her details. Luckily for her, I was able to gather all the information necessary, otherwise she probably would've missed the show.

"Levi Austin," she says my name as if she's out of breath or as if I've done something wrong. Zara is staring at one of the posters that Stormy has up in a montage of me. I've told the girls repeatedly that they didn't need them, but they assured me it was their way of having me with them all the time. "This is you?" she asks, pointing at the larger than life picture of me on stage with my guitar.

"Yes, ma'am," I say, suddenly bashful about who I am.

"I had no idea. I can honestly say I've never heard of you."

This should be an insult, but I don't take it as one and tell her the same. "I had no idea who you were until today. I mean I've seen the posters and such, but never really paid attention."

“How famous are you?” she asks. I find the question odd, and my facial expression must tell her as such. “I mean... actually, I don’t know what I mean so just forget it.”

I couldn’t if I tried. “In my world, pretty famous.”

Her cheeks turn red as she looks away from me. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“Why?” I ask, stepping into the room. “The way I see it, we’re in the same boat. I didn’t know you, and you didn’t know me.”

“But this is Hollywood. I should know everyone.”

“Ah yes, Hollywood. I live in Nashville,” I tell her. I motion for her to follow me and continue the tour.

“So you split your time?”

Shaking my head slightly, we step outside onto the patio. I purposely avoided showing her the master bedroom or the last guest bedroom where I have been sleeping. With my hand on the small of her back, I guide her up a small flight of stairs to a pergola that overlooks the pool. I don’t know if she purposely avoids looking at the pool where a few of the people in there all know her name or what, but I gather she’s much like me when it comes to attention. Less is far better in some cases.

“I rarely come here. The girls,” I say nodding toward the pool where both are, “live here with their mother. Or they did.”

“What does that mean?” she asks.

I sigh and readjust my hat. “She died last month.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Zara places her hand on mine, and I have no desire to pull away from her. I realize that I could play the broken-hearted widower right now, but that’s not me. I wear everything on my sleeve and lying is not a quality that I’m fond of unless it means hiding my identity.

“We were divorced,” I tell her just as my mother arrives with a tray of drinks and a copious amount of food. Zara laughs as she thanks my mama who once again winks at me. I can’t help but frown, wondering what she’s thinking.

“How long?” she asks.

I take a long sip of the ice tea my mother brought out, instantly missing this and the sweet tea that I’m used to. “Almost three years.”

“Was it hard?”

Shrugging. “At first, maybe, but mostly because of the girls. I have full custody of them, but Iris, their mother, moved out here and told Stormy about the dance school here. I didn’t want to hold Stormy back from following her dreams, so I let the girls move out here with their mother.”

“And now you’re living in her house?”

I look over my shoulder at the house before meeting Zara’s gaze. “It’s my house. I bought it for the girls, so they had a place to live. Iris... she was unstable after our divorce. She wanted to relive her teen years because they had been taken away when we got pregnant with Stormy.” I shrug and finish off my drink. “I let her go because I just wanted her happy.”

“She was your soul mate?”

I ponder her question for a few seconds before shaking my head. “No, she wasn’t. I thought she was until she died. Her death made me realize that our days were left back in high school and we were vastly different people. I was hurt when she asked for a divorce, but let her go and gave her whatever she asked for because...”

“Because you wanted her happy?”

I nod and find myself smiling even if it’s barely touching my lips.

“I’m married...”

And for some reason hearing her say that plummets my heart into the depths of my stomach. It’s not that I thought we were going to start dating, but hearing that she is attached to someone else doesn’t sit well with me.

“He cheated on me a month ago. I kicked him out and filed for divorce, but he’s not handling it well.”

And now I want to kick his ass.

“He’s in my band. He plays the drums. My publicist is telling me to get over it. The label is pissed, and I’m angry that no one is siding with me.”

“Did you cheat on him?” I ask although it’s none of my business.

She shakes her head rapidly. “God no. Up until about two weeks ago, I was walking around my house like a zombie, determined to forget everything. Except the paparazzi are camped out in front. I’ve been a prisoner in my own home until today, but anyway, it was like a light bulb went off. My husband...or soon to be former one, was in the paper with another woman and I thought ‘why the hell am I moping around when he’s not’ and decided that the man I once considered my soulmate isn’t because people don’t do that to their soul mates.”

She’s right, although to my knowledge Iris never cheated. I don’t know what I would’ve done if she had. Letting her go was hard enough, but to learn that she had given herself to another while married to me would’ve probably been devastating.

“I’m sorry you’re going through such a hard time. The door is open whenever you need to escape.” Why on earth I just invited her to come over whenever she wants, I have no idea. I can’t even promise that we’ll be here once school lets out. This isn’t my home, and I want to get back to Nashville. Songs have to be written, recorded, and produced.

But I find myself wanting to know more about her and plan to spend some time surfing the web to read up on the enigma that is Zara Phillips. I know for a fact she would never encourage me to do it and deep down I’m hoping she does the same with me. I have nothing to hide, and there isn’t anything scandalous about me online.

Zara meets my eyes, and for a moment I feel a connection. It’s stupid to think that there would ever be anything between us other than a brief friendship because of our backgrounds. I don’t believe that mumbo jumbo about opposites attracting.

You're normally drawn to people in your category, especially in the music industry.

Yet, I feel something, a current or a bond that is bringing us together. She didn't have to come over here today, but she did, and clearly, it wasn't to spend time with the crew. I reach across the table and place my hand on hers, careful not to bother the burn from earlier.

"I know our divorces aren't the same, but if you need anything, I'm here."

She squeezes my hand back and doesn't let go nor do I pull away. The gesture isn't lost on me, and I honestly like the feeling of her small hand being encased by mine. It isn't until my name is yelled that I'm pulling away and while I may not be touching her, I am looking at her and smiling.

zara

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AS I NEAR MY STREET, my stomach feels like I have swallowed a rock and it's now thrashing back and forth, threatening to destroy my insides on its way back out. It's not because I regret going to the Austin's house tonight, or that for a brief moment I felt like an idiot for not knowing who Levi truly was. It's because I don't know what to expect when I get to my driveway.

Is Van inside waiting for me? What about the paparazzi? Have their numbers increased because Van showed up? These questions run rampant through my mind as I maneuver around the corners, driving as slowly as possible. I don't want to see him, not tonight at least. This evening was... nice. It was pleasant and relaxing.

I don't want to say it's been a long time since I've had a meaningful conversation, but that is what it felt like tonight. Everything that Levi and I discussed had a different depth to it. He told me about his ex-wife, which of course prompted my big mouth to open and spill about Van being an epic douche. Levi didn't look at me like I was damaged, but he did offer to be there if I needed someone.

And maybe I do need someone. I don't necessarily mean him, but someone to talk to. The idea of going to a therapist, though, doesn't sit high on my priority list, especially being here. One leak to the press and the vultures will descend and invade my life. They have a way of turning something that should be positive into something negative. The last thing I

want is to be labeled with a stigma because once that happens, it'll stay with me forever.

The disturbance in my stomach eases up a bit when my house comes into sight. Seeing it darkened doesn't do anything to dissipate the unease I feel wondering if Van is inside, waiting for me. I suppose I am somewhat childish by avoiding him, but honestly, what am I going to say? There is no way in hell I'll ever tell him that it was okay for him to cheat or that I forgive him. To me, that action, of taking another into your sacred space, is unforgivable. Never in a million years would I think that Van would do that to me, but clearly I was wrong.

As soon as I press the button that will open my gate, two photographers appear out of nowhere and start snapping pictures. One yells my name and quickly follows up with a question about Van. I'm tempted to roll down my window and ask them "what about me?" but playing the 'woe is me' card has never been my forte.

When the garage door starts to lift, the rock that was in my stomach is back with a vengeance. Van's car is in the garage like it belongs there. He knows that I don't want him here so the fact that he is, really twists the knife he's stabbed in my back even harder. I had hoped to end my day on a high note, but that doesn't seem like the case now.

I wait in the driver's seat until the garage door is down and the voices from the photographers are all but non-existent before I find my way into the house. It's dark except for the colors flashing on the television.

"Where ya been?" I jump and place my hand against the wall to steady myself. Van is sitting at the dining room table, and I imagine he's staring at me. Only after I press the button on the wall do I see him and his red-rimmed eyes.

"What are you doing here?"

"It's my house," he says even though I'm shaking my head.

"You should leave, Van. We have nothing to discuss."

He picks up the papers that are in front of him and clenches them. “We have everything to discuss.”

As hard as I try, I can’t hold back the tears. Unfortunately for me, Van mistakes my weakness as a sign that I’m willing to let him hold me. Once his hands reach for me, I’m pushing him away. “Don’t touch me,” I tell him as I stagger back.

“Zara, you have to let me explain.”

“There is nothing you can say to change what I saw you doing, Van. Nothing. So how could there be an explanation? Are you going to tell me that you fell into her? That you’d think I’d be stupid enough to believe that? I saw the look you gave me when I interrupted you. You were pissed off that you couldn’t finish.”

“You don’t know that, Z.” His voice is weak and lacks the confidence he usually has.

“Are you for real, right now? Of course, I know it because I know every single expression that you have. I’ve seen that face before.”

I brush past him and head upstairs. He follows, which I knew he would, causing me to immediately regret my decision to leave the main floor.

“Zara, you need to hear me out. She means nothing.”

“Ah,” I scoff as I turn to face him. “Means nothing, huh? So you’re still banging her? You disgust me, Van. You must think that I’m naïve or so desperate for you to love me that I’m willing to believe your bullshit. Even after I caught you, you went back and finished the job.”

“Zara,” he says, reaching for me, but I pull away.

“Get out, Van,” I say as I walk into the room we once shared and into the closet. He still has a pile of clothes hanging in the closet, and I promptly start pulling them down.

“What are you doing?” he asks as I set an armful down on the bed.

“What don’t you get?” I ask, facing him. “You cheated. You destroyed our marriage with a single act and every day

since I question how long you've been unfaithful to me. I throw up thinking about how you've put me at risk for diseases. My heart breaks at the betrayal that I never thought you were capable of. You did this, Van. Not me."

"I'm sorry, Z. I am. I want to stop, but I think I'm sick. I think I have a sex addiction."

"Well, you better seek help before your dick falls off," I tell him before I head back into the closet. "I don't know what you expect from me, Van, but you knew that cheating was a hard limit for me and yet you did it anyway. You know what Darian and I went through when my dad did this to my mom, how it hurt that he could throw his family away like that. I have never been more thankful that we don't have children as I am now."

"You don't mean that, Z."

"I do," I say as I hand him a pile of clothes. "I can't imagine going through this with children. It's bad enough that the band is suffering because of it."

"The band..."

Van pauses, and for a brief second, I think he's about to tell me that he's quitting. But calmer thoughts prevail, and while this would be what I want, the timing is wrong. We're about to embark on a tour in a few months and losing Van would definitely hurt the band, but he is replaceable.

"What about the band?"

He shakes his head and leaves me standing in the closet while he goes and sits on the bed. After he sets the pile of clothes down, his fingers are pushing through his hair. "There isn't an easy way to say this."

"Just spit it out. It's not like you can shock me any more than you have."

"Laura thinks it's best that I take some time off."

"Of course she does because you're fucking her, too."

Van meets my eyes, and for a minute I think he's about to deny it, but doesn't. Instead, he breaks his gaze and looks

everywhere but at me.

“I’m going to check into rehab, Z. That’s why I’m here. I want you to wait for me, to hold off on the divorce. To give us a chance when I get out.”

I swallow hard at his words but shake my head. “I can’t, Van. What you did...” I turn around and head into the bathroom, shutting and locking the door behind me. I turn on the water to drown out the wave of tears that is about to take over my body. Van and I had so much going for us, and he ruined it. One mistake and our world came tumbling down around us. If he’s addicted to sex, that means he’s been doing this longer than I know. I can’t bring myself to ask him how long he’s been cheating because I don’t want to know the answer. It’s hard knowing that I wasn’t enough for him, that he had to seek pleasure elsewhere. I have loved that man since I was seventeen and this is how he shows me what that love has meant.

When I feel as if the tears have subsided I look in the mirror at myself and wonder how the hell I got here, to where I am now in life. Over a month ago I was happy, ready to start a family with the man I love, and now look at me. I’m a shell, barely able to function, and all because I allowed that man to break me.

Van is still sitting on the bed when I return. He looks up at me and stands. I’m tempted to go to him, to ask him to ease the pain he’s caused, but know that it’ll only cause more in the end.

“What you’re asking of me is unfair. What you’ve done to me, I will never be able to forget and right now forgiveness is not in my vocabulary.”

“I made a mistake, Zara.”

“But how many times, Van? Because I caught you and you haven’t stopped. Not to mention I know you’ve been with Laura, who I might add is someone we employ. I can’t trust you, and it hurts to say that because you’re someone I have loved for a long time. If you have a problem, get help. Do

what you need to do for yourself, but don't go in thinking that I'm going to be here waiting when you get out."

I leave Van in the bedroom and head back downstairs. It's my hope that he'll use the time to gather the rest of his belongings and take them with him. I need to move on and not seeing his stuff every day will help that.

It's an hour or so later when he comes downstairs, looking for plastic bags. He finds me sitting in the dark and whispers into my ear that he's sorry. I believe that he is, but it's too late. I don't know if there will ever be a time that I won't close my eyes and see him with Laura's assistant on her desk or even picture him with Laura.

When Van leaves, I let the tears flow freely. It's not a hard cry where I am hyperventilating and doubled over in pain, but one that proves that Van and I are over for good. The high school romance has finally come to an end.

I scour the house for my phone, desperate to send off a message to Laura that she's fired, only when I find it, there's a message from Levi thanking me for coming over earlier and asking if I'd like to have coffee with him sometime.

My reply to him is immediate with a resounding yes, and I tell him that tomorrow morning would work. I even go as far as to suggest a place to meet and at what time. It's only after I send the message, when I realize that maybe I look a bit desperate, but I don't care. I like his company, and I love that our lifestyles are exact opposites of each other's, and yet we seem to have a connection. He's someone that I feel comfortable with, and it's my hope that he'll become a good friend.

levi

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Twelve

I DON'T KNOW what came over me, asking Zara for coffee. My intent was to thank her for coming over and once that sentence was typed out my fingers took over, adding the part about getting coffee. I didn't even think about it until I looked at the blue bubble and felt a bout of anxiety start to take over as I realized that I probably overstepped the imaginary line in a new relationship. Not that we're in one or ever will be, but I want to be her friend because I think she could use one right about now.

My mama saw the horror on my face as I was looking at my phone and took it from me. I expected her to chide me, to remind me that the mother of my children had just died and that I should be thinking about them, but she didn't. She smiled and said that she liked Zara.

Thing is, I like her too and I can't figure out why. She is nothing like me or the women I've dated in the past and the complete opposite of Iris. Truthfully, that scares the shit out of me because after talking to her yesterday, she is nowhere near ready for any guy, let alone someone like me.

I have never understood why people cheat. My parents, both sets of grandparents, and Barbara and her husband have all been married forever. That was what I wanted when I married Iris. Even though we were young, I was determined to make it work. She said fame changed me and she was probably right, but it changed us. She never complained about the money that was coming in or the fancy clothes she got to buy. Iris never worried about buying the girls everything they

needed or wondered if she'd have money to buy groceries. My fame took care of all that. It wasn't until she decided she wasn't happy that it became a problem for her.

Still, sitting in the back corner of the coffee shop, I wonder if I made the right decision by asking Zara for coffee. Even with her immediate response of yes, I'm still second-guessing everything every time the door chimes bang against the glass as the door is pushed open, only to have this instant let down that she hasn't shown up yet. And still, my heart picks up pace when I see someone with platinum hair walking by the window, only to notice that the purple on the end is missing. My leg bounces anxiously each time I check the time, only to realize that I am very early and she still has five minutes until our set meeting time.

Of course, I start thinking about what happens when she doesn't show. Do I text her again? Call her? Walk out of here with my tail between my legs and tell myself I gave it the ole Boy Scout try?

Or do I get all excited and embrace my rapidly beating heart and sweaty palms as she stalks toward me with a smile so bright that it could light up Music Row? What I end up doing is stumbling over the leg of the table, jabbing my thigh, and biting my tongue to keep from crying out as I walk toward her to give her a kiss on the cheek. I'm as smooth as they come, I tell ya.

"Are you okay?" she asks. I'm slightly embarrassed that she saw my epic blunder. I nod as casually as possible and take a few deep breaths, hoping to push away the throbbing pain in my leg. I pull out her chair and wait for her to sit down before I gingerly return to my seat. Zara is dressed as inconspicuously as possible. Her long hair is hidden under a beanie and the make-up she wore yesterday is nothing like what she has one now. The bold, vibrant colors are gone and replaced by subtlety. She looks angelic and completely different than the woman I met yesterday, and I have a feeling that I like both.

"I wish I could say I'm as graceful as Stormy when she dances, but that would be a fib."

Zara laughs, and the sound shoots straight to my heart. I like the way it makes me feel and have a feeling that I may be blushing. “It’s something I’ve done many times, and I’m sure it’ll happen again,” she says, trying to ease my awkwardness. She doesn’t, but I don’t let on. I have a feeling anything that she does, is done so with as much elegance as humanly possible.

“What can I get ya to drink?” I ask her, and as I do, I find myself leaning forward so that we’re closer.

“Just black.”

“Really?” I’m slightly shocked by this. “None of that fancy crap women are always drinking?”

Zara shakes her head and in the process pulls her lower lip between her teeth briefly. “Too much sugar and it seems so unnatural. I never go into the trend of drinking coffee like that.”

“Two black coffees it’ll be. I’ll be right back.”

As I stand in line, I casually glance at her to see what she’s doing. I figured she’d pull out her phone to pass the time, but she doesn’t. Her hands are folded and resting on the table, and she’s watching me. I keep my eyes on her, trying to figure out why I’m so drawn to her until the woman behind me asks me to step forward because I’m next in line. I place my order and step aside, casually looking back at where Zara is sitting, but turning away before she can see me gawking at her.

With two cups of hot coffee in hand, I carefully make my way back to our small table. I’m pleasantly surprised that there isn’t a line in front of her asking for her autograph. Last night after she left, Stormy and Willow filled me in on how insanely popular she was and how I was way out of her league, not to mention that she was married to her high school sweetheart and I’d never stand a chance. I didn’t bother filling the girls in about Zara’s marital woes because it’s not my place nor did I tell them their daddy is fairly popular on the country music scene and that if we were back in Nashville things would be different. I just let them go on thinking that I’m ordinary. I

suppose to them I am because I'm their daddy and they don't see me the same way they see Zara.

"Here ya go," I say as I set her mug down. She wraps her hands around the ceramic and pulls it toward her, bending her head slightly. "Smell good?" I ask as I sit down.

"Very. This is my favorite place."

"It's my first time here. Tell me why you like it." I change the way I'm sitting so that I'm somewhat closer to her. I don't know if I'm flirting or not. Or whether I should even let that word into my thoughts. I know she's not ready to be hit on, but I can't help myself.

"They don't allow paparazzi in here or allow them to take pictures through the windows."

"Are you bothered a lot by the media?" I ask.

Zara shrugs. "Sometimes. Right now I'm top news because of what Van did, but normally they take my picture if they see me shopping or something. Right now they're camped out in front of my house, making me miserable."

"I'm sorry."

She smiles softly. "It's not like that for you in Nashville?"

I sit back and fiddle with the handle on my mug. "Life in Tennessee is laid back. If I'm walking down the street, people say hey like we've been friends for years. The paparazzi really don't bother us unless there's something big going on. Plus it probably helps that I live on over twenty acres of land away from everyone else."

"Wow, that must be so nice. The solitude."

"Or it's boring. Honestly, unless I'm on tour my life is fairly monotonous. I eat, sleep, write, and record. I rarely leave my land."

"Do you have horses? I've always wanted to ride one."

"I do. Want to take a trip to Nashville and learn to ride?" I look away quickly and wish I could take my question back. To avoid looking at her, I pick up my mug and take a drink,

wishing I were anywhere but here right now. The last thing I want to do is put her in a position to turn me down or find some excuse as to why she can't randomly take a trip to Nashville.

"I'd actually like that, Levi. I like the idea of getting away where no one would bother me, where I could walk outside and not worry about the paparazzi hiding behind my bushes to take my photos." She too picks up her mug and drinks, almost as if she's avoiding my response.

"As I told you last night, I'm here, Zara."

"When can we leave?" she asks, throwing me off a bit.

"Um..."

Zara looks around before she leans closer and motions for me to do the same. "Here's the thing. Van told me last night that he's about to enter some rehab for sex addicts and I'd really like to disappear when he does that. I don't want to be here when that happens. I don't want the press hounding me for a reaction nor do I want to have to deal with my label. I want to disappear," she says barely above a whisper.

As much as I want to tell her that we can leave in an hour, I can't do that to the girls. I promised them we'd wait until school was out before I made them go back to Nashville.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm overstepping."

"You're not," I say as I reach for her hand. Once again, I rest mine on top of hers for a brief second, hoping to convey that I'm okay with her asking to go to my place in Nashville.

"Maybe I'm the one overstepping," I tell her. "I assumed you'd want me to go with you and right now I can't leave because I promised the girls that I'd let them finish out the school year. Believe me I would love to get the hell out of Hollywood and be back on my ranch."

"I expected you to go with me," she tells me with a smile, and now I feel like she's flirting with me, but I know better.

"I want to, but Stormy and Willow..."

“I understand, Levi. But if I disappear, know that I’ll be back after he’s out of rehab.”

I don’t want her to disappear. I know I’ve only known her for two days but can’t imagine not seeing her a few times a week, even if it’s only for coffee.

“Let me talk to my ma and see if she doesn’t mind staying with the girls for a bit. We can fly to Nashville, and once I have you set up on the ranch, I can come back. I’ll let you know later today. Is that okay?”

Zara smiles brightly and just like that, the gloom that was lingering over us for a moment is gone. She finishes her coffee and motions toward the door. I do the same and quickly follow her out.

“I apologize now if they take your photo.”

“I’m used to it,” I tell her as I pull my cap lower. She does the same with her hat and takes off toward the park with me by her side. We get about ten feet away before her name is being called and a slew of questions are being tossed her way, asking about Van, their divorce, and whether they’ll reconcile. She just walks faster and keeps her head down. I realize how bad it must be for her, especially with everything that is going on with her husband.

zara

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Thirteen

WALKING side by side with Levi through the park is refreshing. It's a change of pace from my normal everyday routine. With Van, everything was about making sure we were getting the attention we deserved. I think some of that stemmed from Laura and her desire to have her clients the center of attention. That works for Van, but not me. I've always been the reserved one, the one to hide in the shadows or wear a disguise, which makes being out here with Levi so different. I knew the second that he pulled his hat down that he likes it this way too. That he, like me, prefers anonymity while trying to be normal.

Reporters have often commented on me being an introvert, asking why I shy away from the spotlight. I've never considered myself to be anything other than outgoing. Just because I want some normalcy in my life outside of my job doesn't mean I suffer from any form of social anxiety. There are days when I like to shut everything down and be "off." To not have to worry if my make-up is perfect or if my hair is out of place.

Levi stops and tilts his head back, letting the sun beat down on his face. There was a time when I used to lay out in my backyard and tan, but those days are long gone. It's not that I'm afraid of the sun, it's because the label wants me to keep a certain image. They like the porcelain skin look, and it's my job to make sure I bathe in sunblock daily. Of course, I'll reap the benefits when I'm sixty and still look like I'm twenty, but I do miss the tan lines I used to have.

Every so often Levi's hand will brush against my arm, or I'll find a reason to place my hand on his forearm to show him something rather ridiculous along the trail. I pretend to be taken by a bird or flower, hoping he can't see through my bullshit because I haven't a clue as to what I'm talking about. I've always lived in the city and am probably making a fool out of myself by pointing out naturist things that he likely already knows about. I can't even explain why I'm doing this because I am nowhere near interested in anything with him other than friendship, but everything with him seems natural, and touching him seems like the right thing to do.

The fact that he's offered to take me to Nashville is monumental not only because he's helping me out, but also because he's taking time away from his children. When he told me that he made a promise to his girls, my heart swelled. My dad used to do that. He'd make promises and follow through with them until one day he decided I was no longer worth his words.

When I was little, I thought I had the best dad in the world. One of my favorite things was to build the most elaborate sandcastle we could think of, or he'd have me ride on his shoulders when we went to the county fair. There was a certain joy in being taller than everyone else—being able to see what was ahead—without having to look through the gaps between bodies. Or knowing that because my dad was an architect, I would always have the most outlandish castle on the beach.

I don't remember exactly when everything changed. He went from being the best to just being someone that came home late every night or sometimes not at all. I do remember the nights that my mom would pace in front of the window, waiting for the headlights from his car to shine through. She would weep silently but mask her emotions the second he walked in the door. My parents would never fight in front of Darian and me. They'd never raise their voices either. I think now that I look back on it and try to compare what my father did to what Van did, there were signs that I should've known something had changed with my dad, but I was too young to understand what they meant. Sometimes he tried too hard,

forcing Darian and me to hang out with him. With Van, there was nothing.

Levi is putting his daughters before everything else, and that is what stands out to me the most. My father didn't. He chose his mistress over his own family. He walked out and never turned around to say goodbye even with Darian and I crying at the window. If it weren't for our mother, I don't think we'd be where we are today. She guided us, believed in us. She's our number one fan.

There aren't too many parents in the industry that put their children first. They depend on nannies to take care of their children. It's refreshing to see that Levi does, which makes me want to tell him that he should stay with his girls and I'll be fine, but there's a part of me that wants him to show me around Nashville, and that part makes me seem selfish.

When Levi stops to take a picture of a shrub that is in full bloom with various flowers I can't help but giggle.

“What's so funny?” he asks as he pockets his phone.

“That's like the tenth photo you've taken since we started walking. Why do you keep taking so many?”

He shrugs and looks away. I immediately feel like crap for embarrassing him. “I'm sorry,” I say to him. “I was only curious.”

“It's probably stupid, but I thought if I could plant some of these around my house, the girls will feel more at home and not pressure me to move to Los Angeles.”

I think I am officially feeling emotions that I shouldn't right now. Not only am I mesmerized by his accent, but the fact that he's willing to try to make his home more like this park, for his girls, really has my heart racing a bit faster than it should be.

“That's probably the nicest thing I have ever heard someone say.”

Levi smiles. It's not one of those ear-to-ear ones, but the cock-eyed grin that is meant to knock a woman's socks off. I quickly look down at my red-painted toes and laugh. It's

probably a good thing I'm wearing flip-flops because my normal combat boot attire probably wouldn't feel very good on my bare feet.

"You're a good man, Levi Austin," I add to curb the pregnant pause that is happening between us.

"You don't know me that well. You may change your mind after we get to Nashville," he says as he steps closer. If I were in the right frame of mind I would move toward him and maybe reach up and kiss him, but that isn't me nor do I see myself doing that anytime soon. What Van has done... It's going to live with me for a long time. Having someone break your trust like that isn't going to be easy to overcome.

To anyone walking by we probably look like a couple about to fall in love. To me, I see two people who met by chance with one of us trying to pick up the shattered pieces of his children's hearts and the other completely broken. I guess that is the beauty of perception.

"I should go," he says, breaking the warming tension between us. I automatically step back even though I hadn't moved an inch. "I want to talk to my ma about the girls."

"If it's too much trouble, Cabo will accept me," I tell him, wanting him to know that I have other alternatives, which honestly is what I should do. I shouldn't be asking a man I just met to whisk me away from his family in their time of need when I'm perfectly capable of hiding out on my own.

"If I didn't want to take you to my ranch, I would've told you no," he says, closing the gap between us. My reflexes take over, and I launch myself into his arms. It takes him a moment before he's cocooned me to his chest. It feels nice, but a bit overwhelming, to be hugging a man other than Darian or Van. But the difference is good. It's welcoming.

"Thank you, Levi."

"You're welcome, Zara."

We both pull away and shyly straighten our clothes. Not that they're rumpled, but more out of awkwardness.

“I’ll call you in a bit,” he tells me. “I’ll have my publicist charter a flight, so no one knows you’re leaving.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I do,” he says with a grin. “Wait for my call.” He turns, leaving me standing on the edge of the pathway as I watch him walk away. Not once or twice, but three times I catch him looking over his shoulder at me until he disappears out of sight.

I find the nearest bench and sit, pulling my knees up to my chest and wrapping my arms around my legs. Joggers run by. Mom groups with strollers power walk by, chatting animatedly among themselves, unaware and not caring that I’m sitting on the bench here. That is why I like this park. No one cares who you are. To them, you’re just another person, enjoying the beauty of nature.

My eyes focus on the ground, as I get lost in my thoughts. My mind drifts to the day that I caught Van and the assistant going at it. The scene plays out like a technicolor dream, followed by him and Laura, even though those are completely made-up. I can’t help but picture him with every female I know after that. My stomach lurches and tears fall down my cheeks, but my heart doesn’t ache. The burn I had before is gone. I am angry though. I’m so pissed at Laura and her assistant for putting me through this. It’s not like they didn’t know he was married. Even if he came onto them, they should’ve said no.

But they wouldn’t. That doesn’t happen here. Everyone is out for themselves. Anything they can do to advance their career or social status. They don’t care who gets hurt in the process. I bury my head in the gap between my legs and chest and let the tears flow. Crying is supposed to be therapeutic, and maybe it is. This could be my way of purging Van from my system so I can move on.

I hadn’t thought about moving on until now. There are things I want out of my life and children are one of them. I’ve always seen myself as a mother, and if it’s not Van creating a

family with me, there will be a man out there worthy enough of my love.

Is there a predetermined grace period that I have to wait before seeking out love? It's not like I'm going to sign up for a dating app or start posting on social media that I'm an eager beaver looking for love. But I'm not going to hide either. If someone wants to take me on a date, I'm going to do it. And if I find someone I like, I'm going to ask him out. Van is doing it, so why can't I?

Pulling my phone out, I take a picture of the scene across the pathway from me. The way the sun is beaming through the trees and hitting the flowery shrub that caught Levi's attention earlier shows how beautiful life can be. With the image uploaded to my social media accounts with the caption of "Life is good," I sit there and watch the comments roll in. Most of them are fans telling me that they love me. Some call Van a jerk, which makes me laugh. They truly have no idea, but will soon. Others are negative, telling me that Van is the best man out there.

My reading is interrupted by a phone call. Levi's name is in black and white, and lacking a picture, which I must remedy as soon as possible.

"Hello?"

"Hey Zara," he says.

"Hi." I interrupt him before he can say anything else. I'm smiling, and I don't know why. Levi and I are complete opposites and would never work outside of a friendship, yet I'm excited that he's called me even though I knew that he would.

levi

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AS SOON AS I walk into the house, I call out for my mama. When she doesn't answer, I follow the sound of happiness into the backyard where I find Barbara, my mother, and daughters having a grand ole time in the swimming pool. I glance at my watch to verify the time, knowing full well that the girls should be in school, and yet they're not.

"Daddy," Willow says as soon as she spots me. I step out onto the patio as she climbs out of the pool. The wet hug is welcomed, despite my clothes getting damp. "What are y'all doing home?"

Home... I sigh. I am torn about putting down roots in Los Angeles when we have a perfectly great home in Nashville. That is where I live, but understand that the girls are established here, especially Stormy.

"My meetin' wasn't intending to last all day. More importantly, why aren't you both in school?" I cast a stern look over her shoulder at Stormy then to my mother. Barbara is happily sipping on some sort of drink and ignoring me.

"I wasn't feeling well this morning is all," Willow says. It's only when she's about to get into trouble, or she's sad that her accent comes out. She has spent far too long out here and has all but lost a bit of charm in the way she speaks. Her voice dips down into that sweet child-like whine that was so effective when she was a toddler. Not so much now, except all I want to do is coddle her.

“But you’re feelin’ better to go swimming?” She looks at me sheepishly and shrugs. “And what about you, Stormy?”

“Menstrual cramps,” she yells loud enough for the neighbors to hear. “The water is helping ease them.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I suck in a deep breath of the California smog. This is stuff I never had to deal with because Iris managed everything. When we divorced, I was set to hire a nanny so that the girls had a woman around all the time to help. I may have to consider that now, although both girls are a bit too old for that.

My mother finally looks at me. The smug look on her face is enough to tell me that she made the decision and I have to live with it. She has to know that something like this won’t fly. I get that she’s here to help, but the girls need to attend school, or there’s no reason for us to be here.

“Go back and swim,” I tell Willow before asking my mama and Barbara to follow me into the house.

“I know what you’re going to say, Levi,” my mama says in the most dramatic fashion possible.

“You do?”

“Of course I do. You’re going to lecture me on keeping them girls home,” she says as she pours herself a glass of lemonade. She offers Barb a glass, but not me, and honestly, I’m feeling a bit left out. “But honestly, it was one day.”

“Willow already missed a week after Iris died, and the whole point of us staying here is so they can finish out the school year,” I tell her.

“Son,” she says as she comes over to me. “It was one additional day. She’ll go tomorrow.”

“And Stormy too, right? Because again, we are here because of the school she attends. If she doesn’t want to go here, she can go back in Nashville,” I point out.

“I promise, no more hooky with Memaw.”

I go over and kiss her on her forehead. “Actually, the reason I asked you two in here is because something has come

up and I need to head back to Nashville and want to know if you can stay with the girls.” I look directly at my mama, so she understands that I’m talking to her. If I’m in Nashville, it’s likely that Barb will follow me back, although I’d prefer for her to stay here to keep my mother company.

“What kind of business?” Barbara asks, knowing all too well that she knows everything there is to know about me.

“Um...” Instantly my hand pushes over the top of my hat as I try to come up with something good to tell them. I have never been much of a liar, and by the way, my mama and Barb are eyeing me so they can tell something’s up.

“What’s her name?” Mama asks.

“It’s not what you think,” I say defensively.

“You don’t want to know what I’m thinking,” Barbara adds while rolling her eyes at me. I have a feeling she’s going to be shocked when I tell her who I’m heading back home with. For as long as I can remember she’s been trying to get me to date anyone from our circle. Not that Zara and I are dating, but that’s how it’s going to look as soon as I drop the bomb.

I glance out the door to make sure the girls are not only okay but not within hearing range of what I’m about to say. All this while two of the most important women in my life stand side by side with their hands on their hips with a look that tells me that they’re onto me.

“I had coffee with Zara Phillips this mornin’.”

“And now you’re whisking her off to Nashville?” my mother asks.

“She’s married, Levi,” Barbara adds.

I hold my hands up in a silent plea to let me finish. “She’s separated, and as I said, it’s not what you think. Her ex cheated on her, and he’s about to enter rehab for sex addiction. She wants to disappear and this mornin’ while we were talking about the ranch, she asked me to take her there.” Barbara looks very skeptical while my mother is smiling. Two very mixed responses.

“She has money to go anywhere in the world, why Nashville?” Barb asks.

I shrug, knowing that Zara can definitely go anywhere in the world, but I want to take her to my house. I want to show her around and let her get lost in the land. I want to take her horseback riding and sit across from her while we watch the wood burn in the bonfire.

“Because no one will know her there. Just like no one knows me here. She can hide out on the ranch in peace and quiet, probably go into town and shop and no one will bother her.”

“She’ll stand out like a sore thumb with her wild hair,” Barbara says. I happen to agree with her, but it’s not like I can tell her to cut or dye her hair.

“This mornin’ she had a hat on, no one really paid attention.” That was until we left and the paparazzi hollered her name until we stepped into the park. I don’t know if they ever caught up with her since I had to leave her there. Thinking back I probably should’ve stayed with her until she reached her car.

“I don’t like it, Levi. Her troubles aren’t yours, and the last thing you need is to be in the middle of a divorce or have some gung-ho reporter tag you as the problem between Zara and her husband.”

Barbara’s right, but my mind is made up as long as my mama can stay with the girls. If not, I’ll take Zara to my ranch and come right back, even though I want to spend time at home where I’m comfortable. Plus this would be a good time for me to get the girls’ rooms ready for when school is out, and we return for good.

“She’s a friend,” I tell Barb before turning my focus to my mother. “Can you stay with the girls? I won’t be gone long.”

“Of course I can,” she says. She comes over and gives me a hug. It’s long and much needed. When she pulls away, she goes back outside, leaving me with Barbara.

“Can you call and get a plane ready?”

Barb nods and pulls out her phone. She doesn't say anything, and I find her silence a bit unnerving. I filter around the kitchen, waiting for any sign that we're going to have an adult discussion.

"Pilot will be ready to fly at seven. That will give you time to have dinner with the girls," she says without making eye contact.

"Okay, thank you." I begin to leave the kitchen, but turn back so I can talk to her. "I know you don't approve—"

"It's not that, Levi."

"What is it then?"

Barbara walks over to me and brushes imaginary lint off my shoulders. "You come from different worlds and are a very unlikely pair."

"We're just friends, Barb."

She shakes her head but smiles softly. "When people find out, it won't matter what you say. They will spin this every which way possible. You need to tell Stormy and Willow what you're doing so they don't see you in the papers."

As much as I don't want to admit it, she's right. It should be easy for me to tell Stormy that I'm helping out a friend, but I'm worried her reaction will be similar to Barbara's. It seems like I'm in a no-win situation with these women of mine.

I kiss Barbara on her forehead and retire to my bedroom so I can pack. Since I've been here, Barb had most of my clothes shipped over because she couldn't find a store that carried what I liked, at least not in some decent quantity.

The sound of the girls laughing has me walking right to my bedroom window. To watch them splash each other and be happy after losing their mother warms me. My phone vibrates and I pull it out of my pocket.

Badass Barb Plane at 7. I'm going back with you.

Barb heading back with me isn't a shock, even though I prefer she stays here. She does have other clients to tend to. I feel like I'm doing the right thing. I guess only time will tell. It

would be easier to text Zara, but I said I'd call, and I'm trying to keep my word, especially when it comes to her.

"Hello," she says on the second ring, not that I was counting.

"Hey Zara, it's Levi."

"Hi, Levi," she says my name softly, and I find myself grinning from it. I shake my head, clearing away the ridiculous thoughts.

"The plane will leave at seven. I'll pick you up if that's all right?"

"Yeah, that would be fine. I'll be ready."

I feel like I should say more like maybe tell her what to pack or tell her that she doesn't have to worry, but my tongue feels rather thick. Besides, it's not like she can't buy things when we get there, like boots. She'll need those.

"Okay. Can you text me your address?"

"Already did."

"Okay. Bye." I hang up and immediately curse myself for being so stupid on the phone. It isn't like I've never spoken to a woman before, but there's something about her that makes me feel eighteen again.

Instead of dwelling on the fact that I'm an idiot, I change quickly so I can join the girls in the pool. With my shorts on, I run through the house yelling, getting a dirty look from Barbara as I breeze by her.

The girls are frozen when I step out onto the patio. Their eyes wide as I run toward them. "Cannonball!!!"

The muffled screams I hear are from Stormy, Willow, and my mama, making me wish I had videoed them getting soaked. Not that the girls should care since they were in the pool, to begin with. But seeing my mama get drenched would've been fun.

It takes me a few seconds to surface, but when I do, I'm met with three pairs of angry Austin women.

“What?” I say, shrugging my shoulders.

“Levi Austin, how dare you do this to me?” My mother looks like a drowned rat. Her usual perfectly styled hair is matted to her face, and her clothes are clinging to her body. “And to think I said I’d watch your children for you,” she huffs and turns back toward the house yelling something unintelligible.

“Where are you going? Why does Memaw need to watch us?” Willow asks as she swims toward me. She climbs on my back, much like she used to when she was little before she was comfortable in the water.

“I gotta head back home for a bit.”

“Why? What’s in Nashville that you can’t do here?” Stormy asks.

If I didn’t know any better, I would think I’m in the middle of an inquisition by the way she’s staring at me.

“First of all, it’s where we live, Stormy. Second, I have some business I need to take care of, and third, I have a friend who needs some help.”

“What friend?” Willow asks. Her question is so innocent and yet causes so many ripples. I motion for the girls to follow me to the hot tub where we can at least sit, and the noise will keep our voices muffled. I don’t know much about the neighbors, but know that I’ll never trust them.

“You know Zara Phillips?”

“Oh God, Daddy! You didn’t!” Stormy throws her hands up in the air, confusing Willow and me.

“Didn’t what?”

“I don’t know, but you said her name, and I freaked out a bit,” she says awkwardly. Despite how mature she is on the outside, she’s still fairly young and gets rather excited at the littlest things.

“Right, anyway. She’s the friend who needs some help. She’s going through some stuff and needs to get away, so I’m

taking her to the ranch for a little bit. Zara wants to learn to ride the horses and see why we love the ranch so much.”

“And she’s just a friend?” Stormy asks.

“I promise you she’s only a friend. I’m going to get her settled then I’ll be back.”

“Can I go?” Willow asks.

I look at her confused. “I thought you wanted to stay here?”

Willow shakes her head. “Only if you’re here.”

How am I supposed to leave now? I pull her into my arms and Stormy follows suit. “You girls are the most important people in my life, along with Memaw and Aunt Barb. So I’ll tell ya what. I’m going to go tonight but will be back next week to bring you back to Nashville. Okay, Willow?”

She nods.

“And Stormy, let’s start interviewing dance teachers who are willing to move. Maybe your current teacher knows someone. I’m willing to let you travel, but I think it’s about time we move home.”

She nods too, but I have a feeling she’s going to hit me with some resistance soon. I know Stormy is going to be a hard sell, but it’s what’s best for our family.

zara

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I HAVE NEVER HEARD SO MUCH

quiet before until now. My life, up to this point, has been crazy, noisy, and running so fast that I could barely keep up, and yet, the moment I walked onto Levi's deck, the noise stopped, and the peaceful calm that he described to me took over.

Before I arrived, I can admit that I thought I was coming to some far off cabin without running water and electricity. Deep down, I knew better, but my mind still pictured a rustic way of living. To say I was shocked at Levi's home would be an understatement.

The cathedral ceilings, along with the skylights let an obscene amount of natural light in, and when I walked into his home, the sun's rays created a magnitude of colors and designs on his hardwood floors. For a moment I wanted to bask in the glow.

It didn't take long once we arrived for Levi to go to work. After he had shown me to my room, he disappeared, leaving me to entertain myself. Not that I need him around, but a little conversation or tour would've been nice.

With the open concept of his home, a tour has been unnecessary. Everything is out in the open, a free-for-all for the eyes to take in. The biggest attraction is his wrap-around deck, and that is where I find myself, staring at him now.

Even as my eyes droop from the lack of sleep, I can't seem to tear myself away from watching him work. Hay bales are

lifted effortlessly and set onto his bare shoulder as the muscles in his back strain from the weight. With each bend, his jeans tighten around his ass, making me wish I could take a closer look. I never thought I'd find manual labor sexy, but it is.

“Excuse me?”

I jump slightly at the sound of a voice behind me. I turn and find a young woman standing there with her hands folded in front of her. She's dressed somewhat casually with her hair pulled up into a bun. If I had to guess I'd say she's younger than I am and for whatever reason, that sets me off a bit. Levi didn't mention that anyone else would be at the house while we were here. Truthfully, I'm not sure how I feel about sharing space with another woman.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

“Sorry to bother you, Ms. Phillips. Mr. Austin asked that I check on you while he's working. Would you like something to eat? Coffee?”

She's his maid? Is that the right word to use to describe her? Instantly I feel like an ass assuming that she's more than an employee. As I look over her shoulder to try and mask my embarrassment, it dawns on me that his house is massive compared to mine, not to mention he has land to tend to. He likely has multiple people working for him at any given time.

“Um... coffee would be good. Maybe some toast?”

“Yes, ma'am.” She nods and disappears into the house through the side door. I find myself leaning toward that direction but realize I'm being stupid. Why does it even matter that he has a maid?

Of course, my mind wanders to places it shouldn't with Levi. Does his maid live here? Have they been intimate? All the while I'm mentally kicking my ass for even thinking these things when I shouldn't be. I should be focused on healing, setting my mind free from the damage that Van has caused, and finding myself again. I am here to learn how to be Zara without Van. How to survive in a world that worships the ground he walks on. My time away from Los Angeles is meant

to be peaceful. Not a time filled with self-induced drama over whether my friend, a man I barely know, is boning his housekeeper.

By the time I'm done with my musings, she's returned with a tray that she sets down on the small table between two Adirondack chairs, and also sets down a blanket. I'm chilled, but not cold as the sun is doing its job to try and warm everything up.

"Thank you," I tell her as I move closer. The aroma of the coffee has my taste buds begging for a sip.

"You're welcome. I'm June, and I'll be in the house if you need anything else. Just give me a holler." She's gone in a flash, not willing to hang out and see if I do, in fact, need anything else. I suppose, since I only asked for coffee and toast, it isn't that hard to mess up, and she probably figures I'll be fine for now.

As soon as I sit down, I regret it. While the chair is hard, it's not uncomfortable, but my view of Levi is now limited due to the slats on his deck. I can only see glimpses of him, and while I shouldn't be focused on him while he works, I am. For whatever reason, I can't seem to get him off my mind.

After I finish eating, I cover my legs with the afghan and wish that I had a book to read, something to take my mind off Van, our divorce, and Levi being shirtless. I lean back and let the mid-morning sun warm my face. Even the sun feels differently than it does in California. Brighter and dare I say more cheerful. There isn't an abundance of noise, buildings, or smog blocking out the rays. No wonder Levi prefers it here rather than Hollywood. I haven't been here a day yet, and I can already see why. It's not long until sleep finds me before it takes me away from my viewing pleasure and turns my sights into dreams.

My name is being called, and I can't tell if it's part of my dream or if someone is trying to wake me up. I stretch and yawn, only to hear a small bit of laughter. It takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. Standing before me, shielding part of the sun is a still shirtless Levi.

“How long have I been asleep?” I ask as I sit up.

“At least a couple of hours. June came out to get me for lunch, and this is how I found you.”

Instinctively I cover my face with my hands and groan. I hadn't meant to fall asleep outside, but between the sun and being exhausted, I couldn't help it. “I'm sorry,” I tell Levi.

“For what?” He sits down in the chair next to me, but instead of sitting back, he positions himself, so he's facing me. “You're on vacation. Sleep all you want. No one will judge you here.”

“Speaking of... how many people do you have working here?”

Levi takes his hat off and runs his fingers through his damp hair before replacing his cap. “June manages the house, but it's mostly when I'm gone. Since I'm the only one who lives here, I'm really not that messy, so she only comes in once a week or so. With you here, she'll be on hand to make sure you're comfortable, and I have one guy who manages the land. He often brings others in to help, but it's at his discretion.”

“But you were working today?”

“I like to. It keeps me in shape.”

I want to tell him that it's noticeable, but I don't. He doesn't need to know that I was checking him out. Leading him on is the last thing I want to do.

Lunch is served, and for the most part, I feel like an invalid sitting on this chair with my legs wrapped in the afghan, but it's chilly, and the idea of being in the house right now makes me feel a bit claustrophobic. Every day that I'm not working, I'm holed up in my house, confined to the walls that keep me safe.

I shiver, and I swear it's from the wind and not the look that Levi is giving me. When he smiles, it's the perfect type with his head bent slightly, and his eyes focused on me. My breathing hitches and my heart skips a beat or two causing me to shyly look away. He hands me my plate, and when his

fingers brush against my flesh, they cause the same reaction as his smile.

I shouldn't feel anything for him, and frankly, I don't understand why my body is having this type of reaction. But it has been since the day I met him at the video shoot. There is something about Levi that I can't put my finger on, nor do I want to even try. I am in no way ready to pursue anything with anyone. The emotional heartache that Van has put me through is enough to last me a lifetime. What I want, though, is a chance to enjoy the serenity he's offering me with his home until I'm left with no choice but to return to my life.

"If you don't like what June made, I can have her make you something else." Levi points at the plate of food I have yet to touch. I've been far too lost in my own head to realize that he's eaten lunch while I've sat here contemplating my reactions to him.

"No, this is perfect," I tell him as I quickly take a bite. He watches me for a second before he sits back in the chair and closes his eyes. The growling in my stomach keeps me from staring at him for too long, though.

But once I've set my plate back onto the table, the sliding glass door opens and June appears, causing Levi to wake up. She is either watching us or has an amazing ability to predict when she's needed.

"Thank you, June."

"Yes, thank you," I add. She smiles softly as she gathers the dishes and returns inside. "Does she know who I am?" I ask Levi once the door is closed.

"Unfortunately, she does, but she's been a stellar employee for years and has signed a non-disclosure agreement. June met with Barbara this morning to go over it again.

"Barbara... I like her." I spent most of the flight talking to her about Nashville and the music industry here. She's vastly different from Laura, whereas she only cares about publicity and Barbara cares about the quality of life. It was her son who met us at the airport with Levi's truck. She told me to call her

anytime I wanted to escape the monotony of the ranch. As I look around, I can see what she meant. I'm surrounded by the same view in every direction that I look. I imagine that after a while, it'll become rather boring.

"Barb's amazing'. She's family. I don't know what I would do without her."

"I was surprised she went to California with you?"

Levi nods. "She goes everywhere with me, except on tour. Although she's been known to show up a few times."

"My publicist is nothing like her. In fact, mine slept with my ex."

Levi looks at me sharply, causing me to look away. "Stupid man," he mutters. I don't know if he intended for me to hear him or not, but I did, and honestly, I like that he said it because yes, Van is a stupid man.

"What are you in the mood for?' he asks as he stands up. "I don't know if you're tired or not or if you'd like to take the horses out for a bit."

I am tired, but I like the idea of spending some time with Levi. "I've never ridden a horse before," I remind him.

He extends his hand, and I easily slip mine into his. "I won't let you fall, Zara."

Somehow I know he means what he says and it makes those words mean more to me than anything I've heard in a long, long time.

levi

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IF I DIDN'T KNOW any better, I would guess that her hand was made to fit in mine, but I do know better and know that Zara and I are two very different people from vastly different worlds. She's here because she needs a friend and that is what I am going to be to her.

Knowing this, though, doesn't make me release her hand once we've walked down the wide plank steps, through the yard, and into the barn where the horses neigh for attention.

We have three, one for each of us. Back in the day, I used to think that Stormy would be a barrel racer or a show jumper. She loved her horse so much that she would beg to stay home instead of following me out on tour just so she could ride her. That was until she started dancing and her passion changed. I don't blame her, but I do miss watching her ride, and I miss having her at home.

We stop in front of Willow's horse. "This is Abby," I tell Zara as I hold her hand out to pet the bridge of Abby's nose. Abby moves her head up and down, asking for more.

Zara laughs and continues to pet her. "She's beautiful."

That she is with her light brown coat and dark mane. "Abby's an American Quarter horse and very easy to ride. She's easily the best horse I have ever owned." My hands run through her mane, but she seems more interested in getting to know Zara. Not that I can blame her. Horses have a keen sense when it comes to people. "This is who you will ride."

"Okay," she says, but I sense some hesitancy in her voice.

“She’s gentle, and I’ll be right beside you the whole time.” I want to offer to ride tandem, but know that doing so would be inappropriate.

“Okay, if you say so.” Her voice wavers, but I can hear a bit of determination in there.

Abby moves her head up and down rapidly, causing Zara to laugh. “I think Abby agrees with me.” I leave Zara there so she and Abby can get acquainted while I ready my Tennessee Walking Horse. His name is Night because of his jet-black coloring. There isn’t a speck of another color anywhere on his body and when people first meet him, they’re scared and automatically assume he’s mean.

As soon as he sees his saddle, he’s bouncing, ready to get out and stretch his legs. Being in Los Angeles has really put a damper on our rides together, which is another reason I want to get back here permanently.

“Whoa, boy,” I say as I run my hand over his back and down his leg. It doesn’t matter how many times I’ve been in his stall with him. I treat each time as if it were the first. Anything can spook the best-behaved horse, and I’m trying to prevent that.

Once he’s saddled, I guide him out and head back to Zara. Her eyes are wide as Night, and I approach. “He’s huge,” she says as Night comes to rest near her. “And gorgeous.”

She reaches her hand out to pet him, and he lowers his head. I’m rather shocked by his gesture toward her since he’s normally standoffish. Maybe he senses that Zara’s someone he can trust. “This is Night,” I say as I pet him. “He looks scary, but deep down he’s a big softy. Extend your hand,” I tell her, placing a sugar cube in her palm. Before she can give it to Abby, Night takes it from her like a little thief.

“Oh, that feels funny.”

I can’t help but laugh at the face Zara makes. It’s a cross between nervous and excited because Night has a massive tongue with very large teeth, but he’s gentle with her. Maybe

he knows that I like her and is the only one to admit any true feelings.

I take Zara into Abby's stall and repeat the same process I did with Night, making sure it's Zara who is touching Abby, so they get used to each other. When Abby is saddled, I give Zara more sugar cubes, and she doesn't hesitate to feed them to Abby.

"Not all horses are like this, right?"

"No, their temperaments can vary. It really depends on how they were raised and trained. Because of the girls, I made sure our horses were fully trained before we bought them. Stormy's horse is a sweet girl but used for racing, and I don't think you're ready to have the wind in your hair just yet." I wink at her as I take Abby's reins and pull her out of her stall. I take hold of Night's as well and lead them out of the barn and into the sun. Both horses dance around, eager to go for their walk.

"Am I dressed okay?" Zara asks, giving me the opportunity to gawk at her without being caught.

"You're dressed fine," I tell her even though she could put on jeans, but seeing her bare legs turns me on, and I don't want her to cover them up. Besides, we are riding out in the open, and the chance that she gets any scratches on her legs is minimal. Still, I pull my flannel off the nail by the door and hand it to her. "Just in case you get cold."

Zara takes the offered shirt and slips it on immediately, causing a stirring that I have been trying to ignore since the day she came over to the house. I shake my head and tell myself that it's only a shirt and nothing more, that we'll never be anything more than friends.

"Okay, put your right foot in the stirrup and your hand on the horn. You're going to pull yourself up and swing your left leg over. The first time won't be easy, so I'm going to help you." I try to clear my mind of any impending thoughts that are threatening to surface about how my hand is about to touch her. It's for her benefit. Otherwise, she'll struggle and give up, and I can't have that.

“Like this?” she asks as she pulls on the horn and her leg swings out.

“Yes,” I say, trying not to laugh. “Move closer to Abby. She won’t move.”

Zara does, and as she tries to pull herself up, I place my hands just under her ass and hoist her up. Of course, as hard as I tried not to imagine anything perverted I failed once I touched her bare skin.

I stay behind her so she can’t see my erection while I give her basic instructions. The last thing I want is to send her the wrong message. She’s here to recover, not get hit on.

Once I’ve mounted Night we start off toward the back portion of my land. I have a man-made pond that I usually let the horses drink from and make that our destination point.

We move along with a slow trot while I point out specifics about my property. If she continues to ride, I’ll take her up the ridge where she can see the city. I’ve always thought about taking someone special up there to look at the lights below. Iris hated horses and didn’t care much for hiking.

I keep pace with Zara and Abby, much to Night’s displeasure. I know he wants to get out and run, and I make a mental note to take him out again in the morning, along with Stormy’s horse. Abby couldn’t care less if she ever ran.

“Are you having fun?” I ask as we draw closer to the pond.

“I am, but it’s hot out.”

She’s right, and I hadn’t thought about making sure I was covered, but she is, and I guess that’s more important to me right now.

“Are you wearing sunblock?” she asks.

I nod but also grimace. “Most of my torso is.”

I can tell by the way she’s looking at me that she doesn’t like my answer. I like that she cares though.

“We’re coming upon the pond. The horses will drink, and then we’ll head back.” I’m pissed that I didn’t plan ahead. If I

hadn't been so eager to get her out here, I could've made sure that I had water and snacks for us, plus a shirt for me.

Abby starts to trot faster when she sees the pond, causing me to react. I reach over and grab her reins to hold her steady. The last thing I want is for Zara to be scared and never ride again.

When we get closer, I hop off Night and let him meander to his drinking hole while I help Zara down. With her hands on my forearms, she slides down my body, pressing herself into me. As soon as I feel my body reacting, I step away expecting her to let go of my arms, but she doesn't. I chalk it up to her needing to steady herself, but she looks pretty sure-footed. *Nothing but friends* I remind myself.

Abby moves toward the pond causing Zara to watch her. She goes to follow and reaches for my hand in the process. I could easily play this off and say it's because of the terrain and the flimsy tennis shoes she's wearing, but the land is fairly flat, and even the clumsiest person couldn't fall.

"This is so beautiful, Levi."

I open my mouth to tell her that it's not nearly as beautiful as she is but quickly change my mind. "Thank you. It took us about two months to dig out and run the pipes. There's a natural spring not far from here, so the water is fresh."

"Do you swim in there?"

"Yeah, we do. The middle is about eight feet deep, and the sides have a gradual decline."

"Is this why you don't have a pool?"

"I have a pool," I tell her as I try to control my laughter. "It's on the other side of the house. You just haven't seen it yet."

Zara looks at me, her expression unreadable. This would be a perfect time to kiss her if our lives were on the same path or if we had one thing in common aside from our love of music.

“You’re right. Once I sat on the deck, I didn’t move. I guess you owe me another tour when we get back.”

“That can be arranged,” I say, winking at her again. I have never been much of a winker until I met her. I think it’s because I like watching her cheeks turn red when I do it.

“I think we should go swimming.”

“We can later.”

“No, now,” she says, stepping away from me. The first article of clothing she removes is my shirt, followed by her own and when her hands start to shimmy her shorts off, I tell myself to turn away, but I don’t. I stand there, watching as she undresses in front of me, killing me slowly.

“Are you coming?”

Not yet, I want to bark out. “I... uh...”

“It’s fine, Levi, no one can see us, right?” She doesn’t wait for my answer as she steps into the pond nor does she test the water before she dives in. When she disappears under, I adjust myself again, knowing full well that I can’t take off my jeans without her seeing the issue I have growing.

Yet, when she surfaces, she beckons me with her finger, and I find myself quickly shucking off my boots, tossing my hat to the side and undoing my pants. I think about anything from planting a garden, working on my truck, to witnessing my parents going at it. That right there curbs my erection.

I dive in and swim toward her, popping up behind her. The cool water does exactly what I need it to do and keeps my hard on at bay. I’m going to have to learn to control myself around her mostly out of fear that she’ll think I have her here for only one reason.

“This is nice,” she says, turning around. Our legs touch often as we tread water and each time there’s a stirring of excitement.

“It is.”

Out of the blue, her hands grip my forearms. Her blue eyes bore into mine and her tongue darts out to lick her lips. There’s

a slight tilt to her head, and for a brief moment I think she's going to kiss me, but Night and Abby make sure that doesn't happen when they start neighing.

zara

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Seventeen

I DON'T KNOW what I'm thinking or what has come over me, but the urge to kiss Levi is growing day by day. I don't know if it's the thought of kissing someone new that has me trying to make it happen or because I know that Van would be hurt if he ever found out. Thinking about Van's feelings is enough to know that I can't make a move on Levi. It wouldn't be fair to either of us, and I can't be certain that I wouldn't be doing it as some sort of rebound.

But I can see it in his eyes that he wants to kiss me, and that makes the urge to follow through so much heavier.

The horses make my decision easier with their neighing. Once eye contact is broken with Levi, I swim back toward the shore, angry at myself for putting either of us in this position. It's not long before I can hear him behind me as I struggle to put my shorts on over my wet underwear and pull my shirt over my head. Levi is there to help, though. I turn to face him and step back. He looks hurt and I know I'm the one that made him feel this way.

"I'm sorry," I tell him as I shake my head. "Are you ready to go?" he asks. His voice is sweet and calm without a hint of anger toward me for ruining the mood. I don't know what I was thinking, stripping down in front of him to go for a swim. I put us in an awkward situation that will likely be hard to overcome.

I nod and step back into my shoes, pocketing my socks. I am doing everything I can to hold back my tears. They're out

of frustration more than anything. It's easy to say that I know better, but the truth is, I don't. I have never been put in a situation like this because I have always been with Van.

Levi dresses as fast as he can, but since he has to put his boots on, it's taking him a bit longer. I have to turn my back on him. I can't watch him struggle with putting dry clothes on over his wet body especially when it's my fault that he's now in this position.

"I'll help you up," he says from behind me. As much as I want to tell him that I can do it myself, the truth is I can't. There is no way I can get up on the horse or find my way back to his property without his help.

Levi instructs me to put my foot in the stirrup and to hold onto the horn like I did last time. I try to pull myself up, but my body is dead weight, and each time I try, Abby seems to want to move away from me, causing my legs to do the splits.

"Let's try again," Levi says patiently. We try multiple times until I inadvertently fall to the ground in a heap. There is no holding back the tears now though as I bury my face in my hands and sob as quietly as possible.

His strong arms wrap around me and pull me to his chest. Levi cradles me, keeping his hand pressed to my head as I cry into his shoulder. I can't even begin to explain what has come over me other than frustration.

Yet, Levi doesn't seem to see it that way. He maneuvers me onto his lap and rocks us back and forth, telling me that everything is going to be okay. He doesn't even know what's wrong with me and yet, he's here, reassuring me that I'm going to be fine.

I wish I could believe him, but I can't. Any day now Van is going to enter his rehab program, and people are going to start looking for me. They're going to wonder where I am and when they don't find me at home, the rumors will start flying. Coming here was the right decision, but being this close to Levi is not.

When my tears have stopped I pull myself away from him. I'm unable to look him in the eye as I stand and wipe the dirt off my now wet shorts.

"I'm sorry."

Levi steps in front of me, so I have no choice but to look at him. "For what, Zara? Are you sorry that you're going through a divorce? For hurting because the man you trusted destroyed the life you had built? I've been there before. I watched my high school sweetheart accuse me of ruining her life. I let her go because I loved her. She never saw my tears or cared that I went days without sleeping. I know our situations aren't the same, but the pain is or was. I was heartbroken when Iris left and downright sick when I made the decision that the girls would go live with her. I get that you're hurting, but you don't have to hide it from me."

He leaves me standing there, wishing I could tell him that not only am I hurting because of Van but that I'm also hurting because I'm attracted to him, and there isn't anything I can do about it. My life... for what it's worth, is a mess. It's in shambles, and likely won't be put back together anytime soon.

So why is my heart telling me to move on with Levi? Shouldn't it be shutting down or putting a wall up? Instead, it beats excitedly when he's near. My skin prickles with anticipation that he's going to touch me with the words I want to say to him getting caught in my throat. These are not the signs of a woman who should be nursing a broken heart by taking time away for herself.

I find Levi petting the horses when I have finally gathered my wits about me. Maybe I should've followed Van's path and checked myself into some sort of rehab, although there really isn't one that helps you heal a broken heart. But is it broken?

I don't feel like I did when I first found Van cheating on me. Those days that followed were my worst and brought up so many memories of my father walking out on us. I finally understood what my mother went through, how much pain she was in, and why she couldn't eat or sleep.

I definitely don't feel like that anymore, and I haven't since I met Levi. It's almost as if he's opened my eyes to something better, greater even. And maybe it's because we have nothing in common that I feel this way and this could be my mind telling me that Levi is the one for me, the one that is going to help me heal and move on from Van.

"That breakdown you witnessed..." I start to say but pause when he looks at me. One would think that he'd be angry that I ruined the moment, but he's not. He's concerned, and it shows in his eyes and the way his stance softens when I'm near. "I think it was a combination of heat, exhaustion and—"

"You don't have to explain yourself to me, Zara. I'm here for you, just like I told you I would be." He doesn't let me finish, and I'm fine with that because it's clear that I'm in the friend zone with him. That is probably the safest place for me to be.

"Thanks, Levi." I step into him and wrap my arms around his waist, not giving him a chance to push me away. It's an eternity before his arms cocoon me. I feel safe and warm and feel like this is where I'm meant to be.

"Are you ready to head back?" he asks as his hands rub up and down my arms.

I nod against his chest and slowly peel myself away, but don't fully step out of his grasp.

The sun continues to blaze behind him, and the horses stand next to us. Levi looks down at me, and that's when I know it's now, or never, friend zone be damned.

I rise up on my tippy toes and press my lips to his. His lips don't pucker by the time I pull away, but the back of his hand brushes lightly against my cheek, and he bends slightly, letting his nose ghost against mine until he finally kisses me.

His lips are soft, yet firm, and his mouth covers mine hungrily. A wave of heat spreads through me when his tongue touches mine causing a desire that I haven't felt in so long. My fingers push into his hair, knocking his hat to the ground, to feel the silky locks that I have been thinking about since I met

him. Levi's hands trail down my sides until they hook under my legs and I'm suddenly wrapped around his waist as he lowers us to the ground with me sitting on his lap.

His hand pulls on my ponytail, bringing my head back and my lips away from his. I'd cry out in protest, but he's kissing my neck, and while he's surprisingly gentle the roughness of his stubble is not. It burns, and the sensation causes a deep ache in my core. I'm tempted to move closer to him, to rub myself against him, but I hold back so I can enjoy his masterful lips against my heated flesh.

He stops and slowly looks at me. His eyelids are hooded, hiding the lust in his brown orbs. Levi runs his thumb over my lower lip before using the strength in his hand to open my mouth full for him. I rejoice fully when he plunges his tongue back into my mouth not because he's kissing me but because he wants this too.

Once again, the horses interrupt us, but this time they're stomping their hooves, and we're right in their path if they decide they've had enough. Levi kisses me softly before he helps me stand and follows suit immediately.

There's an awkwardness surrounding us, neither of us knowing what to say. I feel like it should be me speaking since I made the first move, but words escape me. I want to thank him, mostly for not shunning or turning away from me or reminding me that we can only be friends.

I don't know that I'm looking for anything other than friendship right now, but I knew I had to kiss him to answer the questions in my mind. I was right to make that move.

"I'm not sorry that I did that," I blurt out.

Levi smiles, and again it's that shy one that has been making me weak in the knees.

"I'm not sorry either, Zara." He pulls me to him and kisses me again. This time it's chaste, but could be seen as a sign of things to come later.

Levi helps me back onto Willow's horse and much like the ride out here, he's right by my side. Before his house comes

into view, though, he takes Abby's reins and holds on to them. I look at him questioningly, wondering why he would do that.

"They tend to pick up speed once they see the barn. I don't want Abby to start running. You'll likely get scared and spook her, which will make her buck and run faster."

"Thank you for looking out for me."

"Of course. Do you want to go a bit faster?"

I think about it for a minute knowing that if we did we'd get back to the house sooner, but the thought of falling off scares me. I shake my head, and he laughs.

"Maybe next time you can ride with me, and I'll show you what Night can really do," he says, winking at me.

"I'd like that." It's not that I'm looking forward to letting his horse run while I'm sitting on it, but looking forward to riding with Levi. The way I see it, we'll ride out into the sunset with him sitting behind me. That is the type of romance that songs are made from.

levi

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Eighteen

AS SOON AS we get back to the barn, I tell Zara that I can take care of the horse if she wants to go inside and freshen up. She takes me up on the offer and quickly rushes back to the house, but not before I stand and watch her leave.

Truth is, I need some time to comprehend what just happened. I'm beyond thrilled that she kissed me but don't want to assume that this means anything. She's hurting, her life has been flipped upside down, and her wounds are fresh. Not that there is any predetermined time limit on when you think you're ready to move on, but I'm the type of guy who doesn't throw caution to the wind because I have too much at stake. My daughters are always my number one priority, and they just lost their mother. Somehow, I think that jumping into a relationship might not be the best idea right now.

I take my time with the horses, making sure they are hosed down, brushed, and fed. I even go as far as taking Stormy's girl out and giving her the same treatment, minus the long ride she's probably been missing. What she really wants is Stormy to come home, and I know that I have to make that happen.

It's well after dinner when I finally make my way into the house. There's a note on the counter from June saying my dinner is in the refrigerator and that she'll see me in the morning. The rest of the house is quiet, making me feel like the biggest dick in the world.

Any man would be blessed to have a woman like Zara kiss him, to make the first move, and believe me I was until my

brain started warning me about rebound sex and the complications of screwing your houseguest.

With my dinner now warming up in the microwave, I pull out my cell and call the girls.

“Hi, Daddy,” Willow says on the first ring. It warms my heart knowing that she was waiting for me to call and hearing her voice really puts me at ease.

“Hey, baby girl. What are you doing?”

“Watching Memaw try to dance. Stormy is teaching her some hip-hop moves.” She laughs, and it’s the most calming sound in the world.

“Oh boy,” I say, laughing right along with her.

“What’d you do today?”

“Zara and I took the horses out for a walk, and I just finished giving them a bath.”

“I miss Abby.” Her voice changes from chipper to solemn in a second.

“She misses you too, but you’ll be here soon.”

There’s a long pause, and for a minute I fear that Stormy has convinced her that living in California is best for them. Not that I can blame my oldest for thinking that since her career choice is heavily present there, but in my eyes, they’re still growing up and need to be in their home.

“Daddy?” Willow’s voice drops to a whisper.

“What’s wrong, Willow?”

“I want to come home now.” Hearing her say this, tugs at my heartstrings. I want nothing more than to bring both my girls home now.

“I know you do, and believe me, Willow, this is where I want you.”

“I won’t bother Zara if that is what you think.”

“It’s not. I promise. I’m trying not to disrupt the lives you’ve been living.” Knowing that Willow is ready to move

home is a relief.

“I’ll be there next week. I’ll tell Memaw to have the moving company drop some boxes off, but you start packing.”

“Okay, I will. Who do you want to talk to?”

“Stormy, please.”

Willow pulls the phone away and yells for her sister. There’s laughter in the background, which puts a smile on my face. I’m happy that the girls aren’t wallowing and are enjoying their time with my mother, although I can’t imagine she’d let them mope around all day either.

“Hey, Daddy.”

“Hey, Stormy. So I wanted to talk to you about selling your horse. With me traveling and you living there, she’s not getting the attention that she needs.” I hate saying this to her, but feel that it has to be done. She’s skirted her responsibilities with her horse for far too long, and it’s not fair to the animal, although I can’t imagine I would sell her.

“Um...”

“She needs to be ridden, Stormy, and I just don’t have the time.”

“I don’t want to sell her, though, Daddy. I mean... she’s mine, and I love her.”

“What do you suppose we do?” I ask, putting the ball in her court. I want her to make an adult decision here. Granted, she’s only fifteen.

“Well, you talked about us moving back, right?”

“I did, but you didn’t seem too thrilled with the idea.”

“I’m not, but... you did say we could find a dance company out there.”

“I did. In fact, I believe Barb is already looking.”

“It’s just... I don’t want to be stuck doing country music videos. No offense.”

“None taken, Stormy. I’m sure Barb knows this and considering that she loves you like her own child, she’ll find the best for you. Before I left, I told you that I want you and your sister back here. This is your home, regardless of where you’ve been living. Do you have any auditions coming up or a recital?”

Stormy laughs. “We rehearse a lot, but we don’t have recitals.”

“Oh,” I say, clearly not in the know.

“But I don’t have any auditions coming up either.”

“So maybe now is a good time to move?” I should be ashamed of this tactic, but I’m not. I have no shame when it comes to helping my oldest see that being in Nashville is where she belongs. When she’s done with school, if she wants to move back and pursue dancing, I’ll gladly pay her way, but until then I want her home.

“Stormy, I know you’re having doubts, but look at it as a fresh start. Your mama... she’s not there to help you. I can’t be there all the time, and neither can Memaw, and you’re far too young to live by yourself and too old to have a nanny.” The father in me wants to tell her that she doesn’t have a choice, but I can’t bring myself to say those words to her. It’s not her fault that her mother made a bad decision.

“Willow really wants to move back.”

“I know she does.”

“You promise I can still dance?”

“Of course. I would never take that away from you.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

I have no doubt the smile on my face would be classified as super cheesy, but I don’t care.

Stormy and I say goodbye, and she hands the phone to my mother. I share the good news, much to her enjoyment, not that she doesn’t love being with the girls, but having them home will be so much nicer I tell her that Barb will arrange for

a moving company to come in and take care of the house if she can start packing the essentials that the girls will need.

After I hang up, I text Barb the good news, and while I expect her answer to be cheery, she replies that she'll take care of everything. I know she's still upset with me about bringing Zara here and know she's looking out for me. Honestly, even though it's been a day, I like knowing someone is in my house.

My food is somewhat warm when I pull it out of the microwave. I'm hungry and eat it as is while my mind contemplates knocking on Zara's door. No sooner do I finish, does my doorbell ring.

Much to my surprise, standing on my front porch are a few of my buddies and their wives.

"We brought beer," Buck says as he lifts up two cases, one in each hand.

"And food," his wife Lori adds.

"Come in," I tell them, slightly upset that they didn't call first, but why would they? They don't know that I have a guest here and we often drop in on each other. Quaid and Maylene follow in behind Buck and Lori. We all went to high school together, and they are the few that have stuck around because they like me and not my fame. A fifth person walks in, and she's someone I have never met before.

"Levi, this is my cousin Holly," Maylene says as she introduces us. We shake hands, and it dawns on me that this is a set-up.

"I'm going to go get the fire started," Buck says, taking Quaid with him and leaving me alone with the women. Normally, I wouldn't care, but right now I feel a bit awkward.

Maylene and Lori head right to the kitchen and start filtering around in there, leaving Holly and I standing here like two teenagers at a middle school dance.

"If you'll excuse me," I say as I quickly disappear down the hall. I knock softly on Zara's door, hoping that she's awake. The waiting almost kills me though. My heart is beating so fast that I can feel it in my throat. She put herself

out there earlier, and like an ass, I closed the door after I tasted what she had to offer.

Zara opens the door wide and inviting. I think about stepping in, but I'm not so sure I'd come out in time to entertain my friends.

"Hey." My voice is soft and quiet, almost as if I'm trying to hide her. "Some friends stopped by. They brought beer and food, and the guys are outside starting the bonfire. Do you want to join us?"

She shakes her head and starts to close the door, but I reach for her hand. "I'm sorry I took so long with the horses. That wasn't my intent."

"Okay." That's all she says as the door closes, effectively locking me out. I deserve it.

Left with no choice, I head outside with the guys and help put the chairs around the bonfire. I add a seventh for Zara just in case she decides to come out.

"One chair too many," Quaid says as he points to each one. I can see him counting to make sure.

"I have a friend staying here. I put it out just in case." I don't bother to tell them who she is because they likely wouldn't know her nor do I mention that my guest is a female because they'd turn into vulgar boys and I don't want to chance Zara hearing them.

With the fire roaring, beer bottles open and laughter carrying over my property, it feels good to be among friends even though I know they're here to ask about Iris.

When we all sit down, I'm hoping that one of the chairs is left open next to me, but as luck would have it, Holly takes one while Maylene takes the other. I can already feel the tag team coming on.

"Where are the girls?" Lori asks.

"They'll be here next week. It was a tough sell tryin' to get Stormy back here."

“I can’t believe Iris is gone,” Maylene says. She takes a long pull off her beer and stares out into the fire. When we were growing up, they were best friends. But when I became famous, Iris found new friends and didn’t have time for Maylene. It wasn’t until Iris moved out that Buck, Quaid, and I started hanging out again. I hated how Iris ruined friendships, but thankful that my friends saw through her bullshit.

I keep glancing back at the house, wondering what Zara is doing. I should be inside, groveling for forgiveness, but instead, I’m outside with my friends, who happen to think I’m lonely. They must’ve conveyed as much to Holly because she’s leaning so far over her chair that she’ll likely be on my lap after a few more beers. That is something I can’t have happen.

“You know, Levi,” Maylene says as she leans toward me. “Holly is dying to tell you that she’s a huge fan.”

“Shut up, Maylene.” I can tell by looking at Holly that she’s embarrassed. Holly’s cute with her shoulder-length blonde hair and blue eyes. She’s dressed like every other female around here with tight jeans and boots. Truthfully, Holly is the type of girl that I would go for, which is probably why Maylene brought her over.

“It’s okay, Holly. Maylene likes to embarrass me as well.” My comment gets Holly to smile. I find myself smiling back, but it quickly goes away when I realize that I want it to be Zara who I’m smiling at.

zara

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I HAVE NEVER FELT like someone on the outside until now. Listening to Levi and his friends laugh and carry on really makes me feel like I'm the odd man out, and maybe I am. Part of me is angry that he invited people over, knowing that I'm here hiding out from the world, but I get it because this is his house. It's not some cottage in the middle of nowhere, and I shouldn't expect him to live like a hermit because I'm here. The other part of me wants to get dressed and go outside to join them, to get to know his friends and see this side of him. I want to hear what makes him laugh, be there to witness what makes him smile, and see if I can fit into his circle because I don't think he'll fit into mine.

I can't imagine Levi sitting around the table with Darian or talking music with Hayden and Freddie. The only person I think Levi fits in with is my mother, and that's because she loves everyone.

I dress quickly, slipping on a pair of jeans and a long sleeve shirt, along with a pair of boots that don't match anything that Levi would wear. Standing in front of the mirror I realize that my platinum and purple hair likely stands out among Levi's friends and quickly pull my beanie off the mirror and tuck my hair away. If I'm going to go out there, I want to make an impression on his friends through my personality and not the way I look.

I expect the house to be dark when I step out into the hallway, but there's a soft glow coming from various lights, making sure that you are safe from stumbling your way

through the darkness. From the kitchen, I can hear their laughter and hurry toward the door. The problem is I don't want to startle anyone by approaching them in the darkness. I could call Levi, but what are the chances that he has his cell phone with him and how awkward would that be?

I hesitate before opening the door, moving away and going back until I finally find the courage to open the sliding glass door and step out onto the deck.

If they hear or sense me, they don't stop talking nor is anyone turning around to see who is coming near them.

From where I'm approaching, Levi's back is to me. He's sitting between two women, and instantly I'm jealous. I'm not hurt like I was when I found Van with that assistant, but I'm upset because I thought that what Levi and I shared today could be the beginning of something special. I know I'm stupid to think like that. Neither of us is in a place to pursue anything romantic.

"Are you lost?" I hear a stern male voice. He's standing on the edge of the circle with his arms crossed. "This is private property, and you're trespassing."

"I'm Levi's—"

"Nah, that isn't how things work around here sweetheart. I suggest you leave before I help you."

"Zara?" Levi's voice pierces through the darkness.

"Hi," I say.

"Do you know this intruder?" the man asks.

"She's not an intruder, Buck. She's my friend."

Friend could mean anything, but it's better than saying she's a woman I know or someone I kissed earlier today. Friend, I can live with.

"Are you joinin' us?" Levi asks.

"If it's okay?" I ask.

"Of course it is."

The man who tried to kick me out stares down at me as I pass. I half expect him to follow me, but he disappears into the darkness. The two women next to Levi are watching my every move and neither of them is offering up their seats. Not that I expected them to but figured one would make the gesture. There are two open seats, one next to the cooler and one next to a man who doesn't seem to give a crap that I'm here, which is fine by me.

"There's beer in the cooler," Levi says before I sit down. I take one out and pop the top. "Anyone else need one?" I offer as a good faith effort to fit in with his friends.

"Yes, I'll take one." The blonde next to Levi says. Taking one to her, my mouth drops open when she hands it to Levi and asks him to open it. I try to hide my surprise, but Levi catches my eyes. He doesn't say anything as he twists the lid off and hands it to her. Her sugar-sweet smile is enough to make me sick.

Walking back toward the open seats, I take the one next to the cooler, which could prove to be rather annoying if people think I'm going to be their gopher.

The blonde next to Levi curls her legs underneath her and leans toward him, clearly marking her territory. It hits me hard in the chest that he might have a girlfriend or someone he's been seeing, although he didn't tell me he was, not that I asked either. I assumed he was single.

"Zora, how do you know Levi?" she asks.

"Zara," I say, correcting her. "We met at a video shoot." I leave out everything important, like his daughter being the lead in my new music video or the fact that since I met him earlier in the week I have made excuses to see him every day and now I'm staying at his house.

I have never really felt jealousy before, until now. Not even when I watched my husband screw another woman. But watching this woman act predatory toward Levi really irks me. Clearly, she sees me as a threat, or she wouldn't be acting this way. And Levi, what's he doing? Nothing, except sitting there and sipping on his beer.

When the burly man who tried to kick me off the property returns, he has a guitar in his hand. Levi perks up and reaches for it, causing the blonde to move.

“Now that you’re back, allow me to introduce everyone to Zara, she’ll be staying with me for a while. Zara this is Buck, Quaid, Lori, Maylene, and Holly,” he says, pointing to everyone. Most say hi except for Maylene and Holly, and I’m fine with that. The message being sent is loud and clear. Too bad I don’t care. If Levi has a significant other, he can tell me himself.

“Are you going to play?” I ask.

“Yes, he is,” Holly says. “He’s the best.”

“I’m sure he is,” I say smugly.

“Haven’t you heard him play before?”

“No, she hasn’t,” Levi says. “We’ve been spendin’ time away from music, getting to know each other.” There’s a collective gasp that I figured is coming from Holly and Maylene. I lean forward and notice that Levi is watching me. The bonfire is playing its part in making sure we can see each other.

He continues to hold my gaze as he starts to strum and tune his guitar, but as soon as he starts playing and the words to his song flow between his lips, his eyes are on mine.

I easily get lost in the sound of his voice and the lyrics from the story he’s telling us. It’s easy to imagine that there isn’t anyone else surrounding us, that it’s just Levi and Zara, along with a roaring bonfire, sitting in the middle of his yard, playing music for one another. That vision is quickly altered when people start clapping, and Holly has suddenly put her arms around his neck and is pressing her lips to his cheek. He smiles, and I hate thinking that he does so because he likes it and it’s not because he’s polite.

This is how the rest of the night goes. I sit across from the man that I want to be next to and watch a woman flirt with him. Every time he says something funny, she laughs obnoxiously and touches him. It bothers me and it shouldn’t.

When Quaid announces he's calling it a night, everyone stands except for Holly. It's clear to me now that they're an item or have been in the past and she's intending on staying, at least it's a good thing that his room is at the other end of the hall and I won't have to listen to them all night long. Levi stands and stretches, and thanks everyone for coming over. He pulls his friend Maylene into a hug, and once he releases her, she goes right to Holly. I try to hold back a smile, but it's clear that she was told to take Holly home. Of course, I know better than to get my hopes up, but they are. They're soaring high and blowing in the wind.

Levi comes over to me and leans his hands onto the arms of my chair. "I'm going to walk them out. Are you ready to go in?"

I shake my head. He grins. "I'll be back in a minute or two."

I'm tempted to lean forward and kiss him, but I don't want to cause any issues with his friends.

As soon as he's gone, I pull my legs into my chest and relax against the chair. The fire warms my face, and while it isn't a cold night, it feels good. The slamming of doors has me counting the seconds until Levi is back. He calls out my name before he appears and takes the seat next to me.

"I'm sorry about my friends."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not," he says. "They weren't very nice to you, and it's because of Holly."

"Girlfriend?"

Levi gives me a sideways look and shakes his head. "No, definitely not. I only met her when they showed up tonight. I knew they were up to something though because they rarely bring people over."

"They're your friends. They're looking out for you."

He laughs. "Maylene likes to meddle. She used to be friends with Iris... it's a long story, but the four of us have

been friends since high school.”

“They didn’t seem too upset that Iris had died.” Levi looks at me quickly and turns away. “I’m sorry that was out of line. I just thought... well, I don’t know.”

“You’re not out of line, Zara. Maylene came out to LA for the funeral, but relationships were strained, and they’ve been trying to get me to move on since Iris walked out. They were likely here to cheer me up. Not that I need it,” he says, giving me a wink.

“Do you need cheering up?” I hedge.

“No, but I need to apologize for earlier,” he tells me while shaking his head. “I got a little lost in my head.”

“Why?”

Levi picks up my hand, interlocking our fingers. He holds them up so that they glow next to the fire.

“I like you, Zara. I can’t explain it, but when I think about how different our worlds are I wonder—”

“Wonder if we’d survive?”

“Something like that.” He sighs.

Changing the way I’m sitting, I turn to face him but do so in a way that we’re still holding hands. “I like you, too, Levi. None of it makes sense. You’re not my type. I’m not sure we have anything in common. Our jobs, while they are the same, are completely different. And I’m damaged. I don’t know if I can trust anyone, and yet all I could think about today was how I wanted to kiss you.”

“I’m glad that you did.” He smiles and brings the back of my hand to his mouth where he presses a kiss.

“I am too, except for what happened when we came back here. That had me thinking I’d made a mistake, that because we’re so different, maybe it’s a turn off to you.”

“There isn’t a single thing about you that is a turn-off, Zara.”

Everything in me is screaming that I hop over the arms of the chair and climb into his lap, but I did that today and didn't like the aftermath. Not that I expected Levi to drop his pants and go to town, but I expected... something, anything like the tour he promised me that could've ended up in his bedroom for a sweet make-out session. Levi watches me, waiting for me to crack or run. I don't want to. I may not be thinking clearly most of the time, but I do know this. I like Levi Austin and want to see where things can go between us.

Before I can make up my mind on what to do, he slowly pulls my beanie off and runs his fingers through my hair. "How about that tour I promised you earlier?"

"I'd like that," I tell him right before his lips touch mine.

levi

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THE DESIRE I have been feeling for Zara increases each and every time she's near. Never mind the reaction I have when we're holding hands, or I'm lucky enough to steal a kiss or two from her. I'm torn with the idea of staying outside by the fire or finally giving the tour that I have promised her. Both have potential rewards of getting closer to her, along with the nagging fear that neither of us is in a position to pursue anything. I do not relish the thought that I'm a rebound, but I'd be a fool to think otherwise, which makes the idea of sitting by the fire more appealing because nothing can happen here. Inside, everything can happen, and that's what I want.

I want to know Zara, to learn what turns her on, and find out what makes her happy or mad. I should know what makes her smile so that when I see her down, I know how to make her day better. Not that I plan to ever piss her off, but I'd make a conscious effort to avoid those situations.

Every kiss we share is slow building, causing me to fight the urge to pull her onto my lap and push my fingers through her hair. The only things separating us are the arms of the chairs, making everything we do awkward and clumsy. It's safer this way, the gap between our bodies, because I don't know what I'll do if I have her pressed against me again. Earlier, it was pure torture riding Night back with an erection. Each trot caused the saddle to jab into my hard on, making the ride almost unbearable. In fact, I'm not convinced I didn't do any damage and that's another reason Zara and I can't take this inside. What if I'm broken? Except I'm not and I know that

because my buddy is rising to the occasion, ready for some action.

The fire continues to burn much like the heated sensation that moves through my body each time Zara leans over and kisses my neck, cheek, or nips at my ear. Her intentions are clear while mine are still murky even though I return each sentiment. I can't have her thinking that I'm not interested because I am, without a doubt, ready to take her into my bedroom and show her the differences between a cowboy and a rocker. Right now, it feels like we've known each other for weeks, months even, and not less than a week. Even with those feelings, I am still hesitant to push her for more even though it's what I want. I need her to be sure—to not have any doubt in her mind—that she wants to pursue something with me.

Very little words are exchanged between us as we watch the red embers glow underneath the night sky. Every so often there will be the howl of a coyote or a rustling in the woods from who knows what. I don't bother to tell her that there are bears or snakes out there. That conversation will have to happen later before I leave to go back and get Willow, which I need to tell Zara about.

“How about that tour, Levi?” she suggests, but that's not what I hear. Instead, I hear her soft, seductive voice asking me to take her to bed, to show her body the love it's been lacking.

“Okay,” I say as I stand and make my way to the bonfire. I bat it down as much as I can and pour the bucket of water I have sitting nearby. It's not nearly enough to put it out, and I find myself refilling it three times before there isn't any sign of red. “I'll have to check on this before we go to bed.” The words are out of my mouth before I realize my mistake. I never meant to imply that we were going together, not that I'd tell her no. I rather like the idea of having her in my bed pressed up against me. Even if we only sleep, having her there would be a welcomed reprieve from the loneliness I feel at night.

Zara stands, making the next move for both of us. She seems so sure of what she wants and yet I continue to hesitate.

Even though I extend my hand toward hers and our fingers lock, I'm second-guessing what's going to happen once we walk inside my house. Yet, those lingering feelings aren't enough to keep me away from her. We climb the steps of my deck one by one and walk a few feet to the sliding glass door. The soft lights that I have set up throughout the house illuminate the inside, making it easy for us to see where we're going.

"This is Willow's room," I say as I open the door. The style is similar to her room in California except she has a massive window that looks out over our land.

"Her view, though." Zara walks in and heads right to the window to look out. "I can't imagine waking up to this every morning."

"You can switch rooms if you'd like?"

She glances at me from over her shoulder. "My room is fine."

So is mine, but I don't say that to her because my heart and mind aren't even close to being on the same page right now. I motion for her to follow me to Stormy's room, which is decorated in her pre-teen mode of life and will probably have to be cleaned out and redone when she moves back home.

"I think I like Willow's window better," Zara says. I happen to agree with her, but Stormy would never.

"The night Stormy was born... Well, you can imagine we were in the middle of a storm. Iris and I were young and thought that naming our child after the weather would be cute. The older she got, the more I realized it was foolish, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. However, because of her name, she's deathly afraid of storms. She hates hearing about them, especially if they're destructive."

"She could always change it." Zara laughs, making me wonder if she's changed her name since she came into the industry.

I walk toward her, but stop and grab onto the post of Stormy's bed. "Is Zara your birth name?"

“It is,” she says, coming closer. “But a lot of people in the industry change their names.”

I don’t know how I feel about Stormy changing her name. I know Iris and I were young and foolish, but it’s who she is to me.

Zara’s close, much too close for my liking considering where we are. Instead of kissing her like I want to, I take her hand and lead her out of the room and down the hall to another door.

“The room you’ve been waiting for,” I tell her as I open the door. She gasps as she steps inside the glass-enclosed room that contains the full-size pool, Jacuzzi, and dry sauna. Until the girls moved out, this used to be my favorite room. We used to spend hours here, swimming around, splashing, and having a grand time.

“Levi, this place... it’s amazing.” She’s looking up at the ceiling, staring into the night sky.

“It hardly gets used,” I tell her. She doesn’t respond. Instead, she strips down to her bra and panties, a different pair from what she wore earlier, and dives in. I push away from the wall and watch as she swims the length of the pool, and when she surfaces, the water drips away from her skin painstakingly slowly, accentuating over the top of her breasts. She splashes me, catching me off guard and calling me out on my ogling.

“Get in the pool, Levi,” she demands. There isn’t an option of saying no or suggesting we do something else. My hands know what to do and work quickly to rid me of my clothes. Clad, yet again in my boxers, I jump in and stand in front of her.

“Is this better?” I ask, knowing full well that I’m about to open myself up for something that I fear she’s not ready for. Standing here now, I know I’m going to give into temptation, give her what wants.

“I really love your house, Levi.” She trails her wet fingers up my arm, letting the water trickle over my muscles. “Thank you for letting me stay and giving me an opportunity to escape

my reality for a little bit.” Each word she speaks brings her body closer to mine. On instinct, my hands find a resting place on her hips as I pull her flush against me.

“I thought you wanted the full tour?” I ask.

“Sometimes detours are meant to happen, right?” she asks as her lips barely graze mine. I swallow hard and nod, but even to me, the action is incoherent. I can’t think straight with her like this, with her lips brushing against mine, with the heat between us increasing despite the fact that we’re surrounded by water.

“Zara,” I say, trailing the back of my fingers over her cheek. “I really want you to be sure about this.”

“I am Levi. Don’t ask me how I know, but I am. I can feel the connection we share. It’s strong, and I don’t want to deny it.”

“We hardly know each other.”

“In our worlds, we’ve known each other a lifetime.” Zara presses her lips to mine before I can even mutter a response. The smooth feel of her tongue pushing against mine spurs me into action. I crouch down and pick her up, carrying us to the deeper part of the pool so I can use the wall to my advantage. I have no qualms about taking her here, under the cloak of darkness but not for our first time.

She hisses when her back comes in contact with the wall, either from pain or the coldness of the tile. As much as my hands want to explore her body, I place them behind her back for comfort and push myself into her center, letting her feel exactly what she’s doing to me.

Zara arches and her eyes flutter as she pushes herself into me. I lean down and kiss her breast, moving from one to the other, wishing that my hands were free to touch her. In a flash, her bra is being taken off and tossed over her head, leaving her puckered nipples exposed and ready for my mouth.

“Mmm,” she moans when my mouth latches on her flesh. My teeth tease her, biting on her taut bud while her nails dig into my back and arms. I alternate between her breasts, paying

each one equal attention until I feel her hand push into my boxers and then I'm the one gasping as she grips my erection.

"We can't do this here," I tell her as I pick up her weightless body and carry her out of the pool. She doesn't seem to care or notice that we're walking down the hall with water dripping off our bodies, wetting my floors. Nor do I care that my comforter is getting soaked because as soon as I set her, my hands are gripping the sides of her panties and pulling them down her legs.

I step back and admire the beauty that is Zara Phillips, naked and wet on my bed as I slowly peel my boxers away from me and palm my erection. Nothing about us makes sense, yet everything seems right. I want her touch, her mouth, and her body. I want to feel her body pressed against mine. I need to have her writhing under my touch, to submit to me, to give me something that is so sacred to her. I believe that somehow we were brought together and meant to be in this moment, at this time.

zara

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MY FINGERS TRAIL UP and down Levi's chest while he does the same against my arm. My leg is hitched over his with my knee resting in what could be a dangerous place, yet he doesn't seem to mind. I rise onto my elbow to look at Levi and find him with his eyes closed, his free hand placed behind his head and a soft smile spread across his lips. I know that if I kiss him, I'll taste myself there.

Levi is only the second man I have been with. I wish I could say that I didn't compare him to Van, but I did. I couldn't help it. It's not that I wanted him to be better than my soon-to-be former spouse, but I wanted everything to be different.

And it was. From the moment Levi put his mouth on my core, I knew that I was in for a wild ride. He wasn't rushed, eager, or lazy in what he was doing to my body. It was like he knew every inch and how to bring me to the edge. He made me teeter, only to pull back and focus on another spot that pushed me until I was about to fall over. Every move had a purpose, an end game, that game being my pleasure and eventually his. When he finally entered me, it was as if we had been dodging this connection for years, not days. The ache I had been feeling wasn't from missing Van, but from missing Levi. He gave me something that I didn't know I wanted until that moment in the pool when he had me against the wall.

"Do you have regrets?" he asks me even though his eyes are still closed. I reach up and kiss him, pushing my tongue into his mouth greedily. Levi responds instantly and rolls us

over, pinning me to the bed and moving between my legs. He's hard and ready.

"I want this," I tell him in between kisses. "I want you."

He opens his eyes and finds me staring at him. It should be awkward, being this close, but nothing ever is with him. That's how I know this is real. That's how I know that what we're sharing is going to last. This isn't some May/December romance for me, and I don't think it is for him either.

Levi leans over me and reaches into his bedside table and pulls out a condom. I long for a day when I can tell him one won't be needed, but until my test results are back, I can't do that to him. I would never put him in any danger, unlike what Van has done to me.

He hovers over me, breaking my thoughts on the negative in my life. I widen for him, and he pushes in slowly, languidly. My eyes roll back, and I imagine that he does so as well.

"Open your eyes, please?"

I do as he requests and watch his face as he pushes into me, never breaking eye contact. The muscles in his arms strain as he holds himself up, even though I want to feel his body pressed against mine, I feel that right now he's testing me, making sure that this is what I want. Each push brings him deeper than before. Our first time was hard and fast, nothing like now.

My legs rest on his hips and my ankles push into his ass with each thrust. He's setting me up for a mind-blowing orgasm and just thinking about it has me on the brink already. Levi looks down at where we're connected and groans before settling himself on top of me, changing the angle that he's hitting. I cry out when his pelvis rubs against my swelling bud.

"Don't stop," I beg of him only to have him pull out and flip me onto my side. I almost cry because he's done it again. He's masterful and showing me what's in store, only to change and start over. I think he enjoys the game otherwise he would just do the deed and be done with it.

But now he's hitting it from the backside, and his thumb is playing my clit like it's his own personal piece of musical equipment. I cry out when he hits my g-spot and arch away from him only to slam into his chest when he pushes into me faster.

He pulls my leg over his hip, exposing my core to the cool air of the room. Instantly, the heat within takes over, and I find myself thrusting back into him, needing more friction.

“Do you need more, Zara? Tell me what you need, baby.”

How he knows my body so soon, I'll never understand. But I nod yes and squeal as he flips us once again, but this time my back is to his chest, and his hips are raised. It's the sound of him smacking into my center, and the creaking of the bed that has me so turned on I can barely think straight. It's my hand that is rubbing my clit, pushing my orgasm to the point of no return, and when it finally hits, Levi is there to catch me.

He slows down and rides out the waves of my body before moving us back to our original position. He looks at me again, while he moves in and out, and kisses me deeply. I pant into his mouth while he moans into mine. We stay this way until he's come.

I don't know if I'm the type of woman who adds labels to anything because I've never had to, but I'm going out on a limb here and saying that Levi Austin just made love to me, and while the thought should scare me, it doesn't.

I want him and more of what he's willing to give me.

Levi kisses me before he rolls off the bed and disappears into the bathroom. I decide to follow him, and for what reason, I don't know, but the idea of having him out of my sight for even a minute doesn't sit well with me.

“Hey,” I say as I catch him cleaning himself up with a washcloth.

“Hey, yourself.” He hands me a matching cloth, already wet and warm. He did that for me, and that thought has my

throat closing briefly. I didn't know that a simple act of kindness could affect me so.

I clean up quickly and toss my washcloth on the floor next to his. Levi pulls me into his arms and peppers me with kisses. "Are you okay?"

I nod. "I am. I'm more than okay, Levi. You don't have to keep asking."

"I'm sorry. I just worry about you..."

"I know." And I know it must plague him... the thought that I'm rushing into something with him, but I'm not. We could wait, but what is the predetermined waiting period for moving on? There isn't a chance in this world that I'll take Van back, so why do I have to wait? "I'm right where I want to be," I tell him. He smiles and pushes my hair behind my ear. I can't imagine what my hair looks like with the combination of chlorine and sex, but it doesn't matter because I'm in his arms and that's all that matters.

Levi spins me in a half circle so that my stomach is pushed into the countertop. For a brief moment, I think he's about to take me from behind and make me watch until his arm covers my breast.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I want to look at us, and I can't do that if I'm staring at your glorious tits," he says, whispering into my ear without taking his eyes off me through the mirror. He rights himself and stands behind me.

It's then that we become one. I don't see him as an outsider in my world, but someone that I want to spend every waking minute with.

"Do we fit?" I ask him.

"Unbelievably so," he replies.

Only people on the outside won't see it as we do. They'll see the rocker, Zara Phillips, with her platinum and purple hair with the country god, Austin Levi. Women will see me as

someone crossing the line and taking one of the good ones. But I don't care.

Levi scoops me up into his arms and carries me back to bed. He pulls the somewhat damp blankets over the top of us as we both settle onto our sides.

"Tell me about your career. I saw some Grammys earlier," I suggest. Levi and I are long past the *getting to know you* stage, but there are some things you can only hear from the person instead of reading them online.

Levi smiles shyly. "Instant stardom," he says. "My mother taught me to play the guitar when I was younger and always insisted that I sing in the choir. Then one day, I'm down on Broadway singing a cover song, and I get noticed. By then, Iris already had Stormy, so I signed the contract. I won Best Country Song and Album my first year. I got a lot of hate, but I've been on top ever since."

"That's amazing. My dream really, but the band has never had that monumental breakout hit. We're always at the top of the charts, but never number one."

"Have you ever thought about having a solo career?"

His question gives me pause. Truth is, it's always been the guys and me. I don't know how to do what I do without Darian. I shake my head. "I haven't, at least not until you just mentioned it. The band is made up of my brother, two friends from high school, and Van. Darian, that's my brother, Hayden, Freddie, and I have known each other for so long. I told them one day I wanted to be in a rock band so Darian bought all this foam for our garage and covered the walls so the neighbors wouldn't complain and we'd play.

"For our first garage gig, my mom made food for everyone. It was great. By the time I was seventeen Van walked into the garage and said he could play drums better than Freddie. He was right, but now..."

"Things are strained."

I shrug. "More or less. The record label loves him, but it's my band ya know? And I don't want him taking it from me."

Levi pulls me into his arms and soothes away the despair I was starting to feel. “You know if you ever want to record while you’re here, you can use my studio.”

“Where is it?” I ask after pulling away from him.

He nods over his shoulder. “Go past the bathroom and through the door. It’s in there.”

“This house... it is absolutely amazing, Levi.”

“Thank you,” he says, pausing. “I have to go back to L.A. Willow... She wants to come home, and I promised her that she could. Stormy too, but she’s doing so reluctantly. I have to spend some time finding her a dance teacher who either lives out here or an instructor willing to move. I don’t want to take that away from her.” He swallows hard, and I can see the agony in his eyes, but for the life of me, I don’t understand why.

“I don’t want you to think you have to leave or that the girls will bug you. They won’t. You still have free reign over the house, the land—”

“Your body?” I hedge.

“My body,” he says with a grin so wide that I can’t help but giggle. “But they’re my babies, and I need them here.”

“I understand, Levi. Honestly, I’d like to be around your family for a while. I miss mine, and lately all Darian wants to do is talk about Van and the group.”

“Oh, I hope you don’t regret those words in a few days.”

Never, but I don’t tell him that. Instead, I snuggle into him and close my eyes, letting the scent of the both of us carry me off to sleep.

levi

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I FINALLY UNDERSTAND what it means to be on cloud nine. Still, it's hard to describe how I'm feeling as Zara and I walk hand-in-hand down the streets of Nashville. Each look we receive has me wondering what that person is thinking. Here I am in my cowboy boots, jeans, and a t-shirt while she's dressed in combat boots, fishnet stockings, denim shorts with my flannel tied around her waist, and a tank top. If we aren't polar opposites, I don't know what you'd call us. But, from the moment we got out of my truck, she reached for my hand and hasn't let it go, unless it's been so I can open the door for her, or if she's trying on some clothes.

Yes, that's right. Rocker chick Zara Phillips has tried on some countrified clothes today and even allowed me to purchase her a shirt or two. She drew that line at boots, but I still have time to get her to change her mind. I told her if anything, they're a fashion statement and someone like her could bring them back in full force. She, however, didn't buy a single word I was trying to sell her.

Now, we're sitting in a quaint little bistro, not far off the Row. It's quiet, the staff recognized me but hasn't said anything, which is why I love Nashville so much. Although I have to say after being in Los Angeles for a month and not being hounded by the media, the quiet was nice as well, except I know they can be relentless.

Zara and I spent the better half of our morning surfing through gossip sites, looking for articles about her. I told her I didn't think we'd find much of anything, but she assured me

otherwise. She was right, and each article we clicked on and read, my heart broke a bit more for her. The media is demanding to know where she is, and what she's been doing. They're invasive, interviewing anyone who might know her whereabouts and whether or not she's with Van. One site even went as far as to call the rehab center her ex is in to get a comment from him. Of course, he didn't have any idea where Zara was, and that has really spurred the "Where's Zara Phillips?" frenzy.

She's with me, and I couldn't be happier. I try not to think about the fact that I've only known her a week because it feels like she's been in my life for years. Zara just fits. Watching her walk around my house this morning, I could easily see her there, every day, helping me get the kids off to school. My only concern is Stormy, and how she's going to feel once she finds out that Zara and I aren't content with being just friends. The last thing I want to do is upset her, to make her feel uncomfortable around Zara, or to think I used her in any way whatsoever.

"Do you know what you want?" I ask, looking at her from over the top of my menu. Her hair is hidden under her knit beanie, something she was insistent upon doing before we left the house. Truth be told, I like her hair. I like the way it stands out against her creamy skin.

"I don't know. What's good?" she asks, taking a sip of her water.

"I'm a meat guy." I found out quickly during breakfast that Zara rarely eats meat if she can help it. I admire her for sticking to her convictions and not giving in to the temptation of bacon that I was waving in her face this morning. "I'm going to go with the turkey club."

She scrunches her nose and shakes her head. "Salad?"

Now I'm the one shaking my head. "Get something real. This isn't our first date." Of course, as soon as the words come out of my mouth, I realize that yes, this could be considered a date.

“Okay, how about I get a BLT minus the B, with a cup of soup?”

“Sounds good, and for you Mr. Austin?” the waitress says. I hadn’t heard her approach, but it seems that she was within earshot of Zara’s order. I tell her what I want and hand her the menus.

“Does everyone know you in town?”

I shrug and grimace. “Sort of, I guess. I mean it’s kind of hard not to, ya know?” Zara reaches across the table and fiddles with my fingers until I take her hand in mine. It feels damn good to be connected to her like this. “I’m willing to bet a few people know you too.” As the words tumble out, I fear that she’s going to let go of my hand. She doesn’t. Instead, she leans toward me with her lips somewhat puckered. I’d be a fool to not kiss her, but am also fearful of our surroundings.

The wrong brain takes over, and I find myself locking lips with the gorgeous woman across from me. The kiss is sweet, tender, and slightly erotic as she slips her tongue into my mouth and moans. She pulls back, all too soon for my liking, and has a wicked smile on her face.

“That was evil,” I tell her. “But I enjoyed it.”

“I’ve wanted to kiss you for hours. There’s no one around so I thought now would be a good time.”

I rub my thumb over the top of her knuckle while gazing into her eyes. I’ve never been one to keep eye contact for very long, but staring at Zara is like learning a new song. I can’t get enough, and I want more. Each and every day, I want more.

“You can kiss me anytime, darlin’.” This time I’m the one initiating, and she’s all too eager to meet me in the middle, except now I’m cupping her face and turning my head at such an angle that if anyone is looking, they see mostly my ball cap.

When we part, the smile that is spread across her wet lips is worth all the stares we’re likely getting from the staff. The door chimes, causing me to sit up straight. The group that walks in is young and looks like they should still be in high

school. I pull my hat down a bit lower and try to avoid making eye contact.

It doesn't work because one of the girls is walking toward us. "Sorry," I mutter to Zara.

"It's okay. If anyone gets it, I do."

Maybe that is why we've connected so well because she understands this life, even if I don't understand the magnitude of hers.

The teen girl approaches our table. I smile and prepare myself to answer all her questions, stand to pose for a picture, and give her whatever autographs she wants, as long as it's done quickly so I can go back to Zara. But she's not looking at me. She's focused on Zara.

"You're Zara Phillips, right?" the teen asks.

My eyes bug out at the mention of her name as Zara's face goes even paler than she already is. I open my mouth to say something, but words escape me. It wasn't moments ago that I told her I thought someone would know her, but I honestly never expected this to happen.

"I am," Zara says softly. I try to decipher if she's upset or put off like I am, but I can't tell.

"OH! MY! GOD!" The girl squeals in a high-pitched tone that has my ears bleeding. "I am so in love with you and Van. I mean, you're like the perfect couple, and I just know this separation is nothing more than a publicity ploy because your new album is coming out. But seriously, why are you in Nash?"

My blood boils at this chick's onslaught toward Zara, not to mention the bullshit statement about her separation from Van being a publicity stunt. The expression on her face is a mixture of hurt, anger, and disgust. It's fans like this that make us want to stay home and live the life of hermits.

And Nash? Is that some hipster term that I'm not aware of?

"Hi, it's nice to meet you," Zara says as she extends her hand to shake that of the teens. She's more humble than I

would be right now.

“You too, it’s like... this is like my dream come true and stuff.”

And stuff? What other stuff could there be?

“Is Van here?” she asks, looking around the bistro. I look too because surely someone is playing a cruel joke on us right now.

“No, sorry,” Zara looks at me and pleads for help. Of course, I’m going to give it to her. I signal for the waitress and hand her twenty.

“Sorry, we’re fixin’ to leave.” I reach for Zara’s hand and hold it firmly in mine.

“Wait, you’re not with him, are you? That’s like...”

We don’t hear what it’s like because we’re out the door and I’m helping her into my truck. I rush to the other side and get in, and quickly start it.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her, knowing nothing I say right now is going to make things any better.

“It’s not your fault. I probably shouldn’t have kissed you.”

As soon as I’m out in traffic, I look at her. “Don’t say that.”

She grimaces and shows me her phone. Sure enough, there’s a picture of us kissing while inside the place. It was taken from one of the other patrons or staff. I shake my head and take her phone from her hand, setting it on my dash as I pull her to me. Zara rests her head on my shoulder, not caring that we’re in traffic and that people can see inside my truck.

“So maybe venturing out in public isn’t what we do just yet,” I say as I navigate us home.

“I’m not embarrassed to be with you if that’s what you’re saying, Levi. I like you a lot, or I wouldn’t be with you right now, and we definitely wouldn’t have slept together.”

“I know I’m just—”

“Worried?” she asks.

I nod. At the same time, both our phones start going off. My console tells me that Barbara is calling and when Zara takes her phone off the dashboard, she shows me that the name is Laura.

“That’s my bitch publicist,” she says with a sneer.

“I’ll answer mine,” I tell her, pressing the button on my steering wheel. “Hello, Barb.”

“Levi, what have you done?”

I look at Zara and wink. “You’ll have to be a little more specific. The past few days I have done quite a bit of stuff.”

“With Zara? It’s all over the wires. My email is going crazy. My phone is ringing off the hook. I thought she was just a friend.”

“She was,” I say. “And now she’s not.” I kiss Zara on her temple and return my eyes to the road. The last thing I want to do is put her life in danger or leave my children without a father. Although, there’s a good chance that Stormy may hate me after this.

“Levi, believe me when I tell you, this has disaster written all over it. No one is going to understand how America’s Country star ended up with a rocker from Los Angeles who is heading for a nasty divorce.”

“No one needs to understand anything, Barb. This is the stuff my songs are about, finding love when you least expect it. I can tell you right now, Zara and I didn’t expect to have a connection.”

“No we didn’t,” she says softly.

“Wait, is she in the truck with you?”

“Yes, ma’am. Why don’t you come over for dinner and let’s chat? See you in a few hours.” I don’t give Barbara a chance to reject my invitation before hanging up. I pull over to the side of the road and turn to face Zara.

“I don’t care about what others say,” I tell her. “I want to be with you, to explore where we can take this. I haven’t been this happy in a long time.”

“Me either,” she says, pulling me into a kiss.

zara

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FOR A BRIEF MOMENT I think about running away, finding someplace to disappear where no one will know me, but that means leaving Levi and the thought of not being with him or even near him puts an ache in my chest.

I shouldn't feel this way about him so soon. Days... that is how long we've known each other, and I've already given him more in a short amount of time than I did my own husband. Granted, Van and I met when we were teens, and I made him wait a year before I slept with him, but not Levi.

No, I threw myself at Levi. I never backed down and bore all for him to take or leave. He took and took greedily as if I were the fountain that kept him fed for all eternity. Yet, here I am contemplating an escape because someone took a photo of us and put it on social media.

Deep down I knew that would happen, despite what Levi said about people being cool in Nashville. No one in their right mind isn't going to post a picture of Levi Austin out and about with some wild-looking woman on his arm. I wasn't shy about holding his hand either. Hell no, I wanted to stake my claim. Let all the women staring at him know that he chose me.

And it backfired. I let my guard down. I knew better than to kiss him in public. Holding hands is one thing, but sealing the deal is another. The moment his publicist's voice echoed through the cab of his truck, I knew it was only a matter of time before mine would start calling. Sure enough, Laura's deceiving face lights up my phone. Her smug smile mocks me,

reminding me that I need to fire her but can't do it unless the band is on board. Somehow I doubt that will happen.

Levi gives me a sideways glance, no doubt hoping I won't answer the call. Nothing good can come from Laura and me speaking, especially about the picture online. As much as I don't want to talk to her, I should, because if I don't answer now, she won't give up.

"Hello, Laura," I say in a snide voice that is very unlike me. I make sure to have her on speakerphone so Levi can understand the difference between her and Barb. I know Barb isn't fond of Levi hanging out with me, but I'd take her any day over the publicist I have.

"Playtime is over, Zara."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"This whole eye for an eye thing you're doing to Van. He gets it. He's sorry and wants you to come home. He expects you to be there when he checks out of rehab."

I roll my eyes as my thumb hovers over the End button on my phone. One would like to think that she would side with me, just once, over this Van bullshit, but she never will because she was all too happy to spread her legs for him.

"Is there a reason you called, Laura?"

She laughs as if I'm wasting her time. "Zara, I know you're hurt, but this is reality. Shacking up with some random, ahem, cowboy isn't going to make things change between you and Van."

"He's not random," I say, feeling the need to correct her even though I don't care what she thinks.

"Come home, Zara. Everyone knows you're there now so you might as well face them on your own turf, with your own people."

I look at Levi, who has his eyes focused on the road. I lean my head on his shoulder and sigh. He is my person. He makes me feel safe, loved, and perfect. I can be me when I'm around

him. He hasn't asked me to change or to be someone I'm not, even when he tried to get me to buy cowgirl boots.

"Zara, are you there?"

I almost wish I wasn't, at least on the other end of the phone. "I'm here, Laura. Is there something you want? Unless it has to do with Reverend Sister, we really don't have anything to talk about."

"This attitude you have, and you wonder why Van left you," she pauses, waiting for me to correct her, but I don't. "The label isn't happy, Zara. They're afraid that your inability to forgive Van will hurt the band."

"It's my band." I point out.

"But he's the star, and you know it. If Van walks, Reverend Sister is no more."

She's right, but I refuse to believe her. Levi kisses the top of my head as we pull into his driveway. There's a car there, likely belonging to his housekeeper.

"Come home, Zara. You know it's the right thing to do. No man is worth losing your record deal or band over." She hangs up, leaving me speechless. I'm afraid to look at Levi, unsure of what I'll see when I do.

He opens the truck door and slides out, bringing me with him. I'm flush with his body as he presses me up against the side of the truck. Levi's arms encase me. "Close your eyes, Zara."

I do as he says and pucker my lips, but his lips never press against mine.

"Now pretend I'm not here, that what we shared last night and into this morning hasn't happened. Think about the day before you met me, and what it would've been like if I hadn't spilled my coffee on you. Think about your home in Bel Air with your swimming pool and favorite coffee shop down the street. Think about your brother and other band members."

I do as he asks and hate the way I feel. Something deep down tells me that I'm supposed to know Levi, that he and his

girls are meant to be a part of my life.

“Now, tell me how you feel.”

“Empty,” I say with my eyes still closed. “Alone.” This time I open my eyes and find Levi even closer. My hand instantly goes to his cheek and my thumb brushes over his lips. “Not happy.”

“Are you happy here?”

“I am. It’s peaceful, tranquil, and most importantly, you’re here, and this is where I want to be. I have no regrets, Levi.”

He kisses me fully, pulling my legs up to hitch around his hips so he can grind into me. The hardness of the truck pushes into my back, and I cry out but hold on to him because I don’t want him to stop. We’re all hands, tongues, and dry humping until someone behind us is clearing their throats.

Levi sets me down, waiting until my feet are firmly planted on the ground before turning to face the intruder.

“Barb, I didn’t see your car here.”

“It’s in the shop,” she says as she leans slightly to the left to see me. I feel like I’ve been caught by my mother doing something I shouldn’t be doing. “Hello, Ms. Phillips.”

“Please, call me Zara.”

“Very well. I’m here to do damage control or something,” she says, giving off a flippant wave before returning to the house.

Levi faces me again with a shit-eating grin on his face. “When I was seventeen my mother walked in on Iris and I having sex. I wasn’t as embarrassed as I am now.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Me either. She’s definitely a mother hen.”

“You have no idea.” He takes my hand and leads me into the house. Barbara is sitting at his large table with her hands folded as if this were a parent/teacher conference. Levi and I take seats next to each other, holding hands under the table.

“Right, let’s get started. Zara, I took the liberty of looking up your publicist. I’ve been around a long time and haven’t had the privilege of working with her—”

“You’re not missing anything.”

“Right... anyway, sign this for me, please. It’s consent that I can contact her on behalf of you and Levi when something like this arises.”

“Can you be her voice when it affects us?” Levi asks. “We’d much rather have you speak on our behalf than her publicist.”

“Is that what you want?” Barbara looks at me, and I nod. “Very well. We are releasing a statement. I know it’s early, but I want to beat the vultures.”

“Saying what?” I ask.

“Mr. Austin and Ms. Phillips met last month in Los Angeles while he was tending to his children after their mother’s untimely death. Ms. Phillips is vacationing in Tennessee at this time.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes, simple and to the point. I can add something about your divorce if you’d like,” Barb says. Her pen is poised and ready for action. I look at Levi, who shrugs.

I think about having her add something about my divorce, but I don’t know what. The last thing I want is for people to think that Levi is a rebound because he’s not. I shake my head, letting her know that what she has is okay. Although, I’m not sure she believes me because she gives me a skeptical look that has me questioning my sanity.

“Will you be traveling back to Los Angeles when Levi fetches the children?”

He looks at me with a soft smile. I hadn’t decided, but imagine arrangements need to be made. “I think I’ll stay and make sure the girls’ rooms are ready.” Levi kisses me quickly and whispers “thank you” over my lips.

“Fine,” Barbara says. “Your flight is ready to leave at six a.m. Your mother says the girls are packed and ready.”

“When is my return trip?”

“The red-eye,” she says, making me realize that I will only be without Levi for a day. I think I can handle that.

It doesn't take long for Barb to excuse herself, except she doesn't leave. She disappears down the hall. “Where'd she go?”

“To my office,” Levi says. “She'll finish up what I need her to do while she's here.”

“Oh...” For some reason, I feel let down that she's still here. Secretly, I think I was hoping for some alone time with Levi, not that we need it right now, but it would be nice. I'm not shocked when he takes my hand and drags me out of the house and toward the barn. In fact, I'm downright giddy, thinking that we'll roll around in the hay like a couple of naughty school kids.

It's only after he stops in front of Night's stall that I realize what we're doing. I look down at the way I'm dressed and shake my head. “I'll be right back. I'm going to change.”

He pulls me to him, placing his lips against mine. “Hurry,” he tells me as he releases me. I do hurry, running all the way back to the house, grateful that Barbara isn't sitting there. Once I'm out of my fishnet stockings and dressed somewhat appropriately for horseback riding, I run back outside to find Levi standing there with just Night.

“No horse for me?”

He shakes his head. “I thought we'd ride tandem.”

I go to him and rise up on my toes to give him a kiss. “Are you sure?”

Levi chuckles. “I have never been so sure before.”

He helps me onto Night, who moves slightly under my weight. When Levi settles in behind me, I wish that I had changed into a thinner fabric so I could feel him behind me.

With his arms on my sides, he motions for Night to start walking.

“This is different.”

“This is the best,” he says as his lips press against the curve of my neck. I pull my hair over to the side, giving him as much space as possible.

“When we get to the pond, we’re going skinny dipping.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

He nips at my skin and laughs. “I’m sure you know what will come next.”

“You?” I say, turning slightly to give him a wink.

levi

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THERE ARE a few things I can do without in my life. One of them is Los Angeles traffic. The constant bumper-to-bumper, horn-honking congestion is what keeps me grounded in Tennessee. Besides, it's home. I never really understood what Iris loved so much about this area, but could grasp that she needed a change. Living next to me, in my shadow and whatever else she threw at me when she left, had to be hard.

I was foolish to think that I could keep Zara free from the media and fans if we were wandering the streets of downtown together. It was dumb of me to bring her out, only days after her ex entered rehab. She's very recognizable, especially among the younger crowd. I guess that's the beauty of L.A. for me because no one knows who the hell I am unless I make myself known.

Pulling up the driveway, I shut the rental off and glance out the front window. I have every intention of putting this house on the market, to finally be done with it, but the more I think about it, the more I feel like I should keep it. If Stormy's career flourishes, she'll need a place to live or we will as a family when we have to come back here for her work.

The front door opens, and my mother stands there, resting against the door jamb. As soon as I'm out and around the vehicle, she closes the door behind her. I can tell by the look on her face that she has news that I'm not going to like.

"Hey, Mama." I pull her into a quick hug and kiss her on her cheek. She has been a rock for the girls and me, dropping

everything to come out here and stay with them, to help me out so I could take Zara to Nashville. Of course, I failed to inform her that my relationship with Zara turned a page.

“You have news to share?”

I grimace and shake my head. It’s not that I don’t want to divulge what’s going on between us, it’s that I’m not entirely sure. Given the chance, I’ll stand proudly and tell everyone that Zara Phillips is my girlfriend, but is she? Does she do labels? Hell, I know I do, but she and I are different, and what I may think is the appropriate way to handle something may not be her way.

Granted, she doesn’t have the best examples. Her publicist is the epitome of the devil as far as I’m concerned, and mine... while I love Barb, her distaste for Zara is already wearing thin on me.

“Stormy is very upset,” my mother says. “You promised her that you and Zara were only friends and now people are telling Stormy that the only reason she got the lead in the video is because you’re sleeping with the lead singer, which honestly, I find laughable.”

“Why would that be so funny?”

“Because you’re you and she’s... we’ll she’s not what I expect to find on your arm, that’s all.”

“Looks don’t define a person, Ma.”

“I’m just sayin’ y’all are different, is all.” My mother fumbles through her words, trying to right the wrong she’s done. I pull her into my arms and give her a hug, letting her know that it’s okay.

“Here’s the deal,” I say, pausing to run my hand over my hair. “I like Zara, and she likes me. In the time we’ve known each other, we’ve grown closer.”

“But Stormy?”

I look at the front door and wonder if she’s on the other side, listening in. I know I would be, but knowing my

daughter, she's probably sulking in her room or plotting my demise.

"Mama, Stormy's career is her own just as my personal life is mine."

She shakes her head. "She doesn't see it like that."

"Ma..." but my plea falls on deaf ears as she walks back into the house. Thankfully she doesn't slam the door in my face, but walking into the house feels anything but welcoming.

"Daddy!" Willow screeches as soon as I step into the living room. She launches herself into my arms and hugs me tightly. I've gone months without seeing her when I was on tour, but knowing that she's coming back home to live with me has made me miss her even more than before. "I'm all packed."

"That's good. We're leaving tonight."

"I don't want to go." Stormy's voice breaks the moment between Willow and me. I set her down and kiss her forehead.

"We've been through this, Stormy."

"Well, that was before you decided to suck face with Zara. I mean, really, Daddy?" She turns down the hall and slams her bedroom door. I sigh and glance down at Willow who has a beaming smile on her face.

"Why are you smiling?"

She shrugs. "I think Zara is pretty."

"She is," I say, agreeing instantly. I motion for Willow to sit on the couch so I can talk to her before I go see if I can fix things with Stormy. "How would you feel if Zara and I were more than friends?"

"Does she make you happy?"

I can't help but smile. "She does. I have never met someone like her, and she really wants to get to know you and your sister." I push a tendril of her blonde hair behind her ear. More and more she's trying to be like Stormy, growing up faster than she needs to be. It's another reason I want both of

them back in Nashville, so I can make sure they're still acting their age and not this preconceived notion that fifteen is the new twenty-five. With Willow only being ten, I want her to experience everything a child should and then some.

“Will Zara be at the house when we get there?”

“Yeah,” I say with a small sigh. “Is that going to be okay?”

Willow nods eagerly. Her enthusiasm is great, but it makes me wonder how much time Iris spent with her or if she was left with a babysitter most of the time. I have to push those thoughts away though because there isn't anything I can do about it if my suspicions are correct. It boils down to the fact that I made a mistake as their father when I let the girls come live with Iris in the first place.

“I'm going to go talk to your sister. Why don't you double-check your luggage and make sure you have everything you need. It'll take the movers a bit of time to get everything sent to us.”

“Okay, Daddy,” she says, following me down the hall. I knock lightly on Stormy's door and wait for her to answer. As much as I want to barge in and be the alpha dad, I can't do that to her. I will never experience what she's going through. I have both my parents, who are still married and happily in love. She's been through a divorce, living thousands of miles away from one parent, and now her mother has died. My gut is screaming for me to get her into therapy.

She opens the door with a huff and a teenage attitude. The scowl on her face must be painful. There is so much strain on her forehead to keep up the façade she has going on right now. I smile, trying to ease the tension that is building between us. The last thing I want is for this mole hole to turn into a mountain.

“May I come in?”

“You own the house, don't you?”

Her snide remark has me biting the inside of my cheek. I could lash out, yell at her for being a brat, but that won't solve anything. The inside of Stormy's room is bare, with boxes

piling along the walls. Some are marked for storage, while others are marked *donation* or *bedroom*. It warms me to know that she's considering giving away some of her stuff.

"What do you want to do with your mother's belongings?" I ask, studying the now empty corner that used to be dedicated to me. Seeing her bare wall where my poster used to hang hits me square in the chest. I won't have a shrine in either of my daughters' bedrooms anymore because they'll be home with me, but that doesn't mean I won't miss seeing them.

"I thought that maybe we could come back once everyone is settled and the three of us could go through it."

"That's fine," I tell her, agreeing that right now is probably not the best time. "I thought about selling the house, but am going to keep it. We'll keep the house stocked for right now so that when we have to come back here for auditions and whatnot, we have a place to stay."

The previous set scowl starts to ease up, but not by much. I know I have a long way to go until I can get a smile out of her. I move a few of her things over to her bed and sit on the edge. Stormy stands off to the side, fiddling with the hem of her shirt.

"About Zara... I know that I told you earlier this week that she and I were friends, and we are, but we're also attracted to each other. We're exploring a relationship, Stormy."

"But, Dad—"

"There are no buts, Stormy. We're adults who have a lot of chemistry, and we like each other. I know it's hard to take in because of your situation, but believe me when I tell you this—I never thought in a million years that I'd have anything in common with a woman like Zara."

"But you do?" she asks.

I shake my head. "It's different. Whereas I had everything in common with your mom, Zara and I are learning to adapt to each other. Up until we met, neither of us had any idea who the other person was. I'm country. She's rock and roll. I'm quiet. She's loud. Her fans are crazy. Mine are subdued."

“She’s more punk than rock and roll,” Stormy says, cracking the death glare she’s been giving me with a quick smile.

“Right, see! I don’t even know her genre, but I do know that I like her and she likes me.”

“She’s married,” Stormy points out, causing me to hang my head. This is my biggest fear and one that I haven’t admitted to anyone but myself. She and her soon-to-be ex have a history, one that is deep. There isn’t anything holding Zara to me.

“I know, but they’re getting a divorce.” At least that is what I’m telling myself until Zara proves me wrong. I know she’s filed, but with Van disappearing into rehab that has put everything on hold. Still, there’s a part of me that wonders what’s going to happen when he’s out, cured, and wants Zara back. Where does that leave me or us?

Stormy finally decides to sit by me. Her shoulder touches me, and I take that as a sign she’s willing to forgive me. “Here’s the thing, Daddy. All the dancers think I bought my way into that lead and they’re pissed. They don’t understand that you didn’t know Zara until the day of the video shoot.”

“Baby girl, that is going to happen no matter what. If you get a lead in a play or get accepted to a school that is hard to get into, people are going to say you bought your way in because of me. Even as you make a name for yourself with your talent, which I might add is very impressive according to Zara, but everyone is going to say things were handed to you because of me.”

“That’s not fair though. I’ve worked hard.”

“I know you have, and I’ll never dispute that, but when you hear things like that or come across something that upsets you, you can’t let it get to you. In every aspect of life, you need to have thick skin.”

“Easier said than done, Dad.”

“I know, and I’m sorry you had to find out about Zara and me like that. It wasn’t our intention.”

“I thought that by Willow and me moving home, it would just be us, and now she’s there.”

“I thought you liked her?”

“I do, but as Zara Phillips, lead singer of Reverend Sister but not my dad’s girlfriend or someone living in our house.”

I try to imagine myself in her shoes and can easily see where she’s coming from. I can’t exactly tell Zara to leave, not that I’d want to do that and I think deep down Stormy doesn’t want that either. But I have to be conscious of my girls’ feelings and make sure they’re my priority. Zara will understand that.

“I understand, Stormy. Zara won’t be in the way or always around if you don’t want her there. She’s there to hide, relax, and regroup.”

“And be your girlfriend?”

I shrug and find that I can’t keep the wide grin from spreading across my face. I like the idea of her being my girlfriend. It makes me feel like a teenager again.

zara

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WHEN VAN AND I SPLIT, I had trouble sleeping. I knew it was because I had spent so much time sleeping next to him that with him gone and the damage that he had done to me, sleep evaded me for weeks. The last two nights have been the best night's sleep I've had in a long time. Admitting that, though, breaks my heart because it makes me realize that there were signs with Van that I was missing or too naïve to see. I thought what we had was a perfect marriage, and on the outside, we did. We were always affectionate to each other, especially when we were out in public. We rarely fought or argued, and now that I look back, I see that we rarely spoke about anything that wasn't band related.

I honestly can't remember the last time he asked me about my day or complimented me on what I was wearing. Every conversation revolved around music, the band, and an upcoming album release or tour. Side chats about dinner or what party we had to attend.

As I sit outside on Levi's deck, I wonder how I missed the complete shutdown of my marriage. The signs were there, but love blinded me from seeing what was right in front of my face. Of course, thinking about it now makes me wonder how many times Van cheated before he got caught. I know of one other or at least suspect that he and Laura have been together, but how many more are there? I'm not sure that is the answer that I want to know. I don't know if I could stomach knowing that Van was disrespecting me any longer than I already know.

Sifting through my phone, I find myself smiling at the picture of Levi and me, even though I hate that it's out there. I was stupid to think that no one would have a cell phone handy, but I couldn't resist kissing him. It's hard for me to pinpoint my attraction to him. Be it the trucker hat that he wears, his cowboy boots, the jeans that hug his ass perfectly, the smile he seems to have every time I'm near, or the fact that when I'm with him, I don't feel like I'm competing for attention. I loved walking down the street with him yesterday, perusing the shops and acting like every other couple on the sidewalks. No one was bothering him or me, asking for autographs or pictures. Our names weren't being called out. We weren't being questioned about what we were doing together. Yesterday was perfect, despite our private moment being caught and shared on every social media channel. If I had to do it all over again, I would because I loved every minute of being with Levi.

The headlines hurt though, calling him a rebound. I suppose from the outside that is what he looks like, but that isn't how this feels. Everything feels real as if this is the first time I'm falling in love, which I know isn't possible because I haven't known him that long. I have never been one to believe in love at first sight. Lust, sure, and that is definitely there between us, but feeling the other L word just isn't possible.

Missing him is, though, and he hasn't been gone that long. Waking up to an empty bed felt like what we had been sharing the past few days was nothing more than a dream, except his cologne covered his pillow and quickly became something I could wrap my arms around.

Levi left me notes throughout the house, each one reminding me of simple things like where the mugs were for coffee, how to turn the pool lights on, and what the code is for the security system. The best one though was the one I found sticking to the bathroom mirror telling me that he's going to miss me, but that he'd be home soon.

It was the word home that really made me smile. Ever since I arrived there has only been one instance where I felt out of place, and Levi apologized for that. I was too forward

and scared him. Truthfully, I scared myself too. Kissing him was not part of the plan, but I'm so thankful that I did and that he reciprocated because it's been the most amazing feeling, being wrapped in his arms.

Darian's face pops up, taking over the images of Levi and me together. I contemplate letting him go to voicemail but know that this conversation has to happen regardless of it being now or not. Putting it off isn't going to change the fact that everyone knows that Zara Phillips was caught making out with Levi Austin.

"Hello, Darian."

"Ah, my sister is alive and well... oh, wait. I know she's alive because she's sucking face with some country music star." Darian says the last part with some bite. I honestly don't care if he has a problem with Levi's profession.

"I wasn't aware that there were rumors about my death. I must've missed those."

"Surely you saw where you were caught kissing another man?"

I roll my eyes. I thought for sure Darian would stay on my side with this divorce, but maybe that isn't the case right now. "I was kissing a man, not another. In case you've forgotten, I'm single."

"And ready to mingle, I take it. Who is this guy?" he asks before I can respond to his stupid pun.

"Levi Austin. You should look him up."

"I did, Z, and seriously, a country star? What on earth could you have in common?"

Nothing and that's the beauty of it all. I like that we have to ask each other questions because we don't run in the same circles, that we have to take the time to communicate and not already know everything about each other because we have the same background. Sitting with Levi and asking him about his town, his music and career, learning about the girls, the horses, and being immersed in his life has proven that two people can connect when they're opposites.

“It’s not all about what you have in common with someone, Darian. You can’t honestly tell me that each time you hook up with someone, you stop and think about stuff like that.”

“That’s different. That’s just sex. Are you saying this is just sex between the two of you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Right. And from what Laura says, you’re shacking up with him?”

I look behind me at the house and smile. If this is a shack, sign me up. “I like him, D.”

“This is nothing more than a rebound fuck, Zara. The band, hell, even Van, we don’t understand what’s going on here.”

My throat tightens, and I close my eyes to ward off the tears, but it’s too late. Everything around me turns blurry. He’s my brother. He’s supposed to be on my side through everything. “Van cheated on me, Darian. He took the trust I had in him, the vows that he promised to me, and violated them in the worst possible way.”

“He’s sick, Z.”

“So he says. It’s a likely excuse to claim you’re a sex addict when your wife catches you in the act. Do you grasp that, Darian? Do you realize that I walked in on my husband fucking another woman and he didn’t stop right away? He continued while I watched him and acted as if I was inconveniencing him. Not to mention that after I left, he went and finished the deed. He came home smelling like her. Who the hell does that?”

“A man who is sick and suffering.”

I balk at his comment and dig deep within me to keep him on the line. “I have to know, what changed? Because a month ago when I told you, you were team Zara and now you’re team Van.”

“I’m team Reverend Sister, and right now we’re falling apart because you’re off sucking tongue with some Podunk dude who isn’t your husband. I’m trying to look out for us, the band that is your family and you seem content to throw it all away because Van made a mistake.”

“I have to go, Darian,” I tell him before I hang up. He calls me right back, but I send him to voicemail. If he can’t understand where I’m coming from, then there is no need for us to talk.

I think about sulking or drowning myself in a bottle of booze to numb the nagging voice in the back of my head, but realize that doing so will only increase the pain when I’m sober. I’m here at Levi’s and happy. He’s given me a safe haven, away from the media spectacle that was my life in Los Angeles, and offered me peace and quiet in his home.

Staring at my phone, I realize that holding it in my hand is only making me edgy. I shoot off a text to Levi, telling him that I’m powering down but that I’m making breakfast for him and the girls for when they arrive in the morning. I have no preconceived notions about what happens when the girls get here. For all I know, they’re not happy. Not that I can blame them. I know what it’s like to be replaced by another woman, except my father took it one step further and created a whole new family, forgetting about Darian and me.

That’s the last thing I want to do to his girls. I never want to come between him and his daughters, especially with the recent passing of their mother. I can’t imagine what they’re going through. My mom is my best friend and aside from Levi, the only one on my side. She deserves a call though, to let her know what’s going on with Levi, but I know I’ll unload my conversation with Darian onto her shoulders and that is something I don’t want to do. This is my battle and one that I need to figure out. I have a feeling the band is going to give me an ultimatum. It’s going to come down to whether or not I can forgive Van enough to continue performing together or if I call it quits. There’s no doubt in my mind that the band is going to side with him.

Instead of burying myself in a bottle of Jack, I decide a few laps would be better for me except by the time I have my suit on, I can hear someone turning off the alarm system.

“Hello?” I call out as I try to cover myself up. As luck would have it, Barbara is standing in the hallway, looking over my shoulder and through the door, almost as if she suspects someone is in Levi’s room. “Hi, Barbara.” I’m trying to be sweet, but the look she’s giving me makes me feel uncomfortable.

“I brought lunch,” she says, holding up a couple of white bags. As if on cue, my stomach growls, and she cracks a smile. “I told Levi that I would stop by and make sure you didn’t need anything.”

“And to prove that I’m using him?” I hedge.

Barbara shrugs. “I may not like that you’re here, but Levi does, and he’s important to me,” she says, opening the bags. “I’m paid to protect him... even from himself.”

I sit on one of the stools across from her and wait for her to push a plate toward me, contemplating what she means about Levi. I wish Laura was more like Barbara and looked after me as a person and not just my checkbook.

“Levi likes you, Zara, and because of that, it’s why I’m here. He asked me to look after you, even though he’ll be back this evening and I’m sure you’re capable of caring for yourself.”

“I am,” I tell her. “But I’m glad you’re here.”

“Why’s that, exactly?” she asks.

“For one, I want to know if you’ll take me on as a client —”

“And the other?” she asks, interrupting me.

“I told Levi that I would make breakfast for him and the girls. I know they’ll be home early, but wanted something ready for when they got here.”

“And you need my help?”

“Or thoughts on what the girls like to eat,” I say with a shrug.

“Their mama wasn’t much of a cook so I can’t imagine they’ve been eating very well...” she trails off, almost as if she remembers a different time. She clears her throat and gives me a curt smile. “It’ll be early, so I imagine they’ll appreciate French toast. It’s Stormy’s favorite, and from what I can gather she’s not very thrilled that you’re here.”

“It’s my favorite too.” I ignore the jab about Stormy not liking the idea that I’m here.

Barbara nods. “As far as me working for you... Levi told me about your publicist. That’s not how I work and would gladly take you on as a client.”

“Thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

“Just don’t hurt my boy,” she says, her demeanor back in place. I nod and turn my attention toward my lunch without saying another thing.

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IT'S after we land that I bring up the text from Zara telling me that she'll have breakfast ready for us as a simple reminder of what's waiting for us when we get home. The fact that she's concerned about my girls and me, at this early hour, really hits home for me. Normally, I'd feel bad about not texting her right back, but I was busy with the girls and my mom, plus she indicated she was shutting her phone down, and I feel like she would've let me know that it was back on. I'm fairly new at this dating thing and could be completely wrong on the whole subject matter.

The girls are tired, yet oddly hyper for it being this early in the morning. I want to say it's because they're back where they belong, but I know that's not true. I have a feeling that while I was sleeping, they were ingesting copious amounts of caffeine. Flying the red-eye is great in some cases, except right now all I want to do is go home and sleep. Actually, I want to crawl into bed and hold Zara. I know it's ridiculous to think that I've missed her after one day, but it's true.

All throughout the day while I was helping the girls pack and settling everything up at their schools, Zara was never far from my mind. I felt like a giddy schoolboy with his first crush, wondering when I was going to run into her again "by chance." Knowing that she was in my house, treating it as her own only sent my feelings into overdrive.

I can't tell if we're moving too fast or not. We've both had limited love lives, both having married high school sweethearts, and both have suffered because of them. Granted,

I casually dated—if you can call dinner out—dating, but stayed away from the hook-up game. That wasn't a road I wanted to travel down, especially having two daughters. I didn't want to set a bad example, even though I have no doubt that Iris did.

Which makes me think that I need to ask Zara to sleep in the guest bedroom. As much as I don't want her to, I don't want the girls to see the same lifestyle that they saw with their mother. Something tells me that Zara will understand.

With some of our luggage in hand and the rest being pushed on a trolley by a porter, the two chatty Kathy's trail behind me as we make our way out of the terminal and into the parking garage where my truck is waiting. The girls haven't stopped yammering since the plane landed, both going on about all the things they want to do.

“What about taking the horses out sometime today?” I suggest as I load their luggage into the back of the truck. I don't bother looking at them to see their expression, but their quick silence has me wondering what they're thinking. “I know it's been a while since you've ridden, but I can tell you that Abby and Blaze will love it if you take them out.”

“What about you, Dad? Will you take Night out?” Stormy asks. I can't say I much like her tone though. I brought up Stormy's attitude with my mother, and while she didn't experience anything teenagerish with her while I was gone, she did say that Stormy's demeanor changed about an hour before I arrived at the house.

It's unsettling to know or even think that your daughter has an issue with you or maybe it's not with me, but with parental guidance. The more I think about her life, the more I realize that Iris let Stormy do whatever the hell she wanted, and Stormy has to know that she'll have rules that must be followed.

“Of course.” My back is still to them as I continue to load the suitcases.

“And Zara? What will she ride?” This time I look at Stormy and shrug.

“I’m sure Zara is busy doing her own thing, Stormy. It’s not like she’s attached to my hip.”

Stormy scoffs and finally opens the truck door and climbs inside. I try not to let her attitude rub me the wrong way, but it pisses me off. I take a deep breath and climb out of the back of the truck, tip the porter, and make my way to the driver’s side where Willow is standing.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. Her face is pensive. Sad.

“I don’t want you and Stormy to fight.”

I crouch down so that I’m looking up at her. “Stormy and I are just butting heads right now. She’s mad because she’s here. Her life in California is important to her, but she can do that here too. Everything will be fine, Willow.”

“Okay,” she says, quietly.

I help her climb in and send Stormy a glare that should tell her that I’m not happy with her attitude. I get being angry and hurt because of the situation, but taking it out on me, Zara, or her sister won’t fly.

The drive home is fairly quiet with only Willow asking questions about new buildings that have been constructed since the last time she was here. She asked about going to her grandparents, which I thought was a bit odd considering she just left my mother until she told me that Pop told her they were going to go shooting. Hearing her say that solidified my decision to bring them both back to Tennessee. They need a place where they can grow up with their family around them.

As soon as we pull in, I half expect the front door to open. When it doesn’t, I don’t let it bother me too much, but damn if I didn’t want to see Zara there, looking domestic. Willow rushes to the front door and pushes it open. I’m hot on her heels with Stormy dragging feet behind me.

It’s Willow’s gasp that has my eyes opening wide. The living room is completely decorated with balloons, streamers, and a giant sign welcoming home Stormy & Willow that is strung over the hearth, along with the smell of cinnamon wafting through the air.

“What’s all this?” Stormy asks.

I shrug and look from her to Willow, who has a beaming smile on her face. “I don’t know.” Out of the corner of my eye, Zara appears. She looks shy and reserved as if she’s testing the waters.

“Zara,” Willow screeches as she runs toward her, only stopping when the two have collided with their arms wrapped around each other. If there was any hesitation in Willow’s acceptance of Zara being here, it’s definitely gone now.

“You remember Willow?” I ask, directing my question at Zara.

“I do. Did you have a nice flight? Are you hungry? I made French toast.”

“I’m not hungry,” Stormy says before she turns toward the hall that will lead to her bedroom. The three of us watch her go and all jump when the door slams shut.

“She’s PMSing,” Willow says. Zara and I both snicker at Willow’s assumption. “I’m starving.”

“Come on, let’s eat.” I motion for them both to follow me into the kitchen, where it’s decorated almost the same. I look quickly at Zara, who shrugs. I didn’t leave her a car, not that she couldn’t have one delivered to her, so I’m curious as to how she had all of this done. Barbara could’ve helped, but she still has reservations about Zara and me, and I can’t imagine she would extend services too much.

Zara takes over in the kitchen, plating up food for all of us. I half expect her to sit down at the table, but she disappears down the hall with a plate of food. I sit quietly and listen as she knocks on Stormy’s door. Surprisingly it opens, and a few words are exchanged, but I’m unable to decipher them.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I tell her as she returns to the kitchen and sits down.

“I did,” she says. “Barb and I had a long talk about everything: you, the girls, and business. The last thing I want to do is upset Stormy.”

“Stormy’s attitude is mine to deal with, Zara.”

She shakes her head. I catch her smiling at Willow, who is sharing the same sentiment. “If I’m going to be here, they both need to know that I’m here for them as well.”

My eyes pin to her eyes, but only briefly. I have to look away, afraid that I might shed a tear. Days... that is how long I’ve known this woman, and I’m already falling head over heels in love with her.

Glancing back at Willow, she’s still smiling as she stuffs her face with French toast doused in syrup. I shake my head, and they both laugh as if I’m the last one to get the joke. I’m not. Believe me. I know when I’m being ganged up on, and honestly, I love it. If Zara wants to be a part of our lives, she’s more than welcome.

Since Zara prepared breakfast, I man the cleanup duties in the kitchen while Willow cleans off the table. I turn on some music, making it loud enough to carry throughout the house, and start a dance party with Willow once she’s completed her chore. In the corner, Zara is snickering, commenting on my moves, but Willow is laughing. She’s giggling so hard that she has tears rolling down her face.

And when Stormy comes out to see what all the fuss is about, I take her by her hands and pull her into the kitchen, and dance with her. She balks at first, but gives in soon enough and starts shaking her hips right along to the music. When I look at Zara, she’s videotaping us and if I’m not mistaken, bobbing her head up and down to the beat of the song.

When it’s over, I collapse in a heap, onto the counter, panting as if I’ve just run a marathon.

“Daddy, how do you expect to go on tour if you’re an old man?” Stormy says in between fits of laughter.

“Daddy’s not old, Stormy.”

“Thanks, Willow,” I say, half out of breath.

“He’s ancient,” Willow says, giggling even louder.

“You guys are very funny.” I try to concentrate on loading the dishwasher, but the disc jockeys on the local country station are mentioning my name. I go to turn it off, but Zara tells me that she wants to hear what they’re saying.

“Are the rumors true regarding Levi Austin and Reverend Sister’s lead singer, Zara Phillips?”

“Could be. He spent a month out in Los Angeles, right about the time she filed for divorce, and now she’s here. I’d say it’s pretty serious.”

I scoff at the radio, but Zara laughs. “We’ve known each other for a week,” she points out as I nod.

“Daddy says never to listen to anything you hear on the radio, and that only if it comes from the horse’s mouth should you believe it,” Stormy says.

My mouth drops open in shock. I thought for sure she would storm out of here, mumbling something about how I’ve ruined her life.

“Zara and I met at the video shoot, not any time before that. You know I wouldn’t lie to you, Stormy. I know that things are movin’ fast for everyone, but if I wasn’t sure about Zara, I wouldn’t have you and your sister here right now.”

Stormy smiles as she looks from Zara to me. It’s the first genuine smile I have seen on her face since before her mother passed away. I’m not going to take it for granted either because I know women... well, at least the Austin ones, and their attitudes can switch on the fly.

I pull Stormy into my arms and kiss the top of her head before scooping up a handful of dish soap bubbles and blowing them on her. She squeals and proceeds to do the same, but doesn’t throw them at me, but at Zara. It’s from that point that the first annual Austin/Phillips bubble war starts.

zara

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IT'S BEEN JUST over two weeks since Levi brought the girls back, and while most everything is good, there are times when Stormy and Levi butt heads. I imagine that this is normal for dads and teenage daughters. Willow, though, is probably the coolest kid I have ever come across. If I'm outside reading, she sits next to me and reads. If she wants to go swimming, she asks me. Not Levi or her sister. If I'm cooking, she puts on an apron and helps. I always thought that Van and I would have kids, and being with Willow has solidified my need to be a mother.

When the girls first arrived, Levi and I discussed our sleeping arrangements. They were home, and he didn't want them to get the wrong idea. The wrong idea is that it's okay to start sharing a bed with someone that you just met. It definitely wasn't how I was raised. I had only spent two glorious nights in his bed, and yet I was comfortable there. I understood where he was coming from, even if I craved him every moment of the day. When we could be together and give in to desire, we were off the charts hot.

His house went from quiet and peaceful, to loud, crazy, and fun. I have never laughed so hard in my life and have grown accustomed to their dance sessions when it's time to do the dishes. Right from the first day that the girls arrived, Levi has made sure to be the one to clean the kitchen. The first couple of times I thought he was singing and dancing to keep the tension away, but quickly figured out that this was his way

of getting the girls to let loose. My phone is full of videos of them that I find myself watching daily.

When I come out of my bedroom, the house is quiet except for the light sound of music coming from Willow's room. I knock lightly on her door, and she tells me to come in. She's sitting on her bed with a guitar with sheet music spread out on her bed.

"What are you learning?"

"One of my daddy's songs," she says, scooting over so I can sit down. "Do you play an instrument?"

"I do. My mom is a music teacher, so my brother and I can play the piano and guitar, but I don't when I'm on stage."

"How come?"

"Um..." How does one tell a child that even though you're following your dreams the label wants to leave the instruments to the men for sex appeal? I sigh and smile. "I guess the songs don't really call for it."

"Daddy says that I can do whatever I want when I'm bigger."

"He's right," I tell her. "What do you want to do?"

Willow shrugs. "Stormy says she wants to be a dancer, but she also loves Blaze and has been riding every day."

It dawns on me that Stormy has dominated Willow's life and that everything she has done has been to accommodate her sister. "But what do *you* want to do, Willow?"

She looks at me for a long minute before her eyes drop down to her bedspread. It hurts me to think that her opinion has never mattered, and now that she's being asked, she seems almost unsure of herself.

"Willow, do you want to be a musician like your dad?"

She nods. "My mom says it's stupid though, and ruins lives."

That's because, to her mother, it did, at least that is what Levi has shared with me. I run my hand over Willow's hair,

smiling softly at her. I tell myself that no matter what happens with her father, I am going to make it a point to keep in touch with her. She needs a friend that isn't her sister.

“Music can be many different things. It all depends on what you want from it. When I was a little older than Stormy, my brother and I started a band. We asked a few of our friends who could play instruments to join us, and we started playing in our garage. We found five or six songs that we really liked and learned for a few months, and finally had a concert.”

“Did a lot of people come?”

“Our whole neighborhood and a lot of our classmates. My mom made food for everyone. She was so proud.” Willow looks away. The action breaks my heart. I would hate to think how she would be if things hadn't changed for her. It's clear to me now why she's so clingy when Levi is around. He's been the only parent to see her as herself and not a shadow of Stormy. “We continued to play. Learning a new song each week until we had a full two-hour set. My mom started taking us to gigs, and we'd put demo tapes together. Once we got noticed, everything took off for us.”

“Do you love singing?”

“I do, but I'm also happy for the break I'm taking.”

“Because your husband is a douche?”

I blanch at her words and wonder where she heard that. If I had to guess, it would be from the pool party because I know Levi would never say anything like that in front of her.

“Van made mistakes and those mistakes hurt me.”

“And now you love my daddy?”

I think I do, but I don't know. I think there's a part of me that is shut off completely to the idea of being in love, but when I think about going back to my house, alone and without Levi, the thought sickens me. I know I told him I needed a month, but with an end date looming the last thing I want to do is leave, and leave him behind.

“I care for him a lot, Willow. Love is a pretty strong emotion.”

“But you like him?”

I can't help but smile. “I do. Now, why don't you show me what you're practicing, and maybe I can help.”

She grins and turns back toward the sheet music. She starts playing the song on her guitar and softly singing the lyrics. Even after spending the past few weeks with Levi, neither of us have sat each other down and shared our music with each other. That is one of the major differences between us, but it's also nice because there's zero competition. At least I know if we're ever up for awards, it won't be in the same category.

Willow sings a song about finding love and hanging onto it. It's something I can easily relate to because I have been there, and feel like I'm heading down that path once again. Every few chords, she has to stop and find her finger placement again, but she picks right back up.

When she's done, I clap loudly for her and am awarded the most beautiful smile I have seen yet. “So beautiful,” I tell her, and I find myself once again brushing my hand over her hair.

“I'm going to play it for my daddy.”

“He's going to love it, Willow. Speaking of, do you know where he is?”

She nods eagerly and sets her guitar down. “They took Blaze to the track, so Stormy could get her out to run.”

“And where is that?”

“Come on. I'll show you.” She takes my hand and leads me out of the house and toward the barn. Abby neighs as we walk by causing Willow to stop and show her horse some affection. I pet Abby's mane while Willow feeds her an apple. “This way,” she says, taking my hand again.

I thought I had seen most of Levi's land, but clearly, he was hiding another portion from me. Out behind the barn and down a path is a fenced area with my cowboy sitting on the

top rail. Stormy is in the middle of the field, on her horse, leaning over to talk to someone.

“Daddy,” Willow yells the closer we get. He turns and looks at us over his shoulder and gives us a smile that makes me weak in the knees. She lets go of my hand and runs to him, climbing up over the fence.

Willow only gets her foot on the slat before Levi is pulling her up and over. I stand back and watch them interact. The way he holds her, the way he lights up when she is near. He takes my breath away. This is the kind of love I wanted from my father. I hope that when we have children, he is like that with ours.

Those thoughts pull me up short and give me pause. I don't know why, but I can picture Levi with a son... our son, and he's teaching him how to be a cowboy and I like it. I like it a lot. Levi turns again as if he's waiting for me. His lips turn into a wide grin as if he knows what I'm thinking.

I'm left with a decision. I can either stand there next to them, or I can join them. I can honestly say I haven't climbed many fences in my life, but I have a feeling sitting next to Levi is going to be worth it.

“This isn't very comfortable,” he says when I finally angle myself next to him. His arm rests on my back with his hand gripping my hip. “I can get you a chair.”

I shake my head. “This is perfect.” I glance over at Willow who is watching us intently. I think she knows that I'm in love with her father and is urging my brain to catch up with my heart.

“What are we watching?”

“I finally convinced Stormy to try barrel racing again,” he says. There is so much pride in his voice that you can't help but feel happy right now. Just then, Stormy leaves the person in the middle of the field and trots down to the end.

“When you're ready, Stormy,” the voice yells out. I am still unable to determine if it's a male or female out there helping her.

In a flash, Stormy and her horse lurch forward, racing toward where Levi, Willow, and I are. She breezes past us and Willow yells out encouraging words for her sister as she heads toward another barrel. This goes on until she's rounded each one. When she's done, I'm left with my mouth hanging wide open.

"Whoa."

"She's good, right?" Levi says. I nod, but honestly, have no idea if she is good, but I do know that what I just witnessed was one of the neatest things I have ever seen.

"I mean, yeah. Whatever she's doing is really impressive. That takes a lot of skill. I am in awe."

"Have you never been to a rodeo?" he asks. I turn and look at him, wondering if he's serious. By the set look in his eyes, he is.

I slowly shake my head. "I can honestly say, everything country is new to me, Mr. Austin." My words were meant to be playful, yet came out rather seductively. His eyes lower to my lips, and on instinct I lick them.

He leans in, kissing me briefly before moving toward my ear. "I need some Zara time," he whispers, causing my back to shiver. I need Levi time too, but with the girls here our time has been sparse. "I want you in my bed tonight."

"What about the girls?" My voice is as low as possible, praying that I don't alert Willow.

"I'll talk to them," he tells me. Levi kisses me again under my ear and chuckles when another set of the shivers overtakes my body. "God, how I've missed you."

I'm forced to clench my thighs and grip the side of the fence when he pulls away. He really has no idea what he does to me, not only with his hands, mouth, and body but his words as well.

levi

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Twenty-Eight

SINCE THE DAY that Zara and I got caught kissing, we've stayed out of the public eye. Mostly, we've held up at the house, having groceries delivered and just being a family. That is all about to change because tonight, I'm taking her to a party at Buck's, and everyone will know that I'm serious about her.

Yes, after a few weeks, I can easily say that I'm in love with Zara Phillips. I can't explain it and each time Barbara or my mother asks if I'm sure, I just smile and nod. I know I need to tell her, but I want the moment to be right. Lately, I can feel the words sitting on the edge of my tongue, and all I have to do is open my mouth, but something stops me. I don't know if it's because she catches me off guard with how motherly she is with the girls, or if it's when I find her staring off into the sunset and the wind is lightly blowing on her hair. I do know she's who songs are written about, and has become my muse.

I'm scared, though, to show her my music, afraid that she won't understand or grasp the emotion behind it, but I want to share everything with her, especially after watching her reaction to Stormy's racing today. She had no idea what Stormy was doing, but that didn't keep her from showering my daughter with admiration and praise. I stood back and watched the two of them converse and could see it in both their demeanors. Whatever Stormy had against Zara in the beginning has dissipated, and I couldn't be happier.

I don't want to call tonight a test for us, but in a way, it will be. Even though my group of friends had already met

Zara, they didn't know the magnitude of what was developing between us. Hell, I didn't even know that night when we were sitting by the fire. After they left, we sat together, and she kissed me, or I kissed her. I don't think it really matters at this point because the deed was done, and we were well on to something amazing.

That is how I feel when I'm around her. I feel like a shy schoolboy with his first crush and the horny high school kid trying to get into the hot girl's pants at school. Every look, subtle touch, and every minute that we're together as a family, it all increases my desire to be with this woman, fully committed and without reservation. My friends are going to think I'm nuts, but I don't care. I'd be stupid to let her slip away because of what others think.

I finish getting ready by slipping into my boots and grabbing my trucker hat. I thought about wearing my cowboy hat, but I want everything to be casual. When I step out of my room, Willow is curled up on the couch, watching television and Stormy is busy typing on her phone.

"What are you doing?" I ask Stormy.

"Looking at dogs," she says without looking away from her screen.

Willow sits up suddenly and looks at me all wide-eyed. "Are we getting a dog?" She rushes from her spot to sit next to her sister who is agreeably sharing her phone, so they can look together.

Shaking my head, I rest my hands on the back of the couch and peer over their shoulders. The image Stormy has up is of a litter of black lab pups. Each one is as adorable as the next.

Stormy looks up and smiles. She already knows that I'm going to say yes, and instead of giving her an answer I strut down the hall with my shoulders square and knock on Zara's door. Tonight is the last night she's sleeping in the guest room. The girls and I had a long talk while we were giving the horses a bath about how much Zara and I care for each other, and how much I love having her around. I didn't exactly come out and say that she'd be sleeping in my bed though because

honestly, that is awkward and not an easy conversation to have.

Still, I didn't give Zara enough time to move her stuff into my room before I announced that we were heading out for the night. Willow was none too happy, but when I told her that her Memaw was coming over, she pepped right up. I've seen her growing closer with Zara, and know it's a good thing for both of them.

Zara opens the door and greets me in a form-fitting dress, heels, and her hair in a sleek ponytail. I can't even lie, when I'm alone at night and missing her, I look her up on the web. I've seen pictures of her in just about every outfit, but they pale in comparison to the live version. I don't hide the fact that she's turning me on when I have to adjust myself. I lean against the door jamb and stare as hard as I can at every curve, from her neck down to her toned calves.

"I've changed my mind," I tell her.

She steps forward, angling herself, so all I have to do is look down to see the perfect valley of her breasts. "About what?" she asks, her voice dripping with honey.

"About takin' you out with my friends. I think we should stay in and lock ourselves in my room."

"And turn the music up really loud?"

My head moves up and down rather slowly. "Or I'll have my mother take the girls to her house so I can fuck you all over this one."

"Levi..." her breath catches as her eyes flutter. "Don't tease."

"I'm not." Sexual deprivation is an illness. I have it. So does Zara. Since the girls have been here, we've had to sneak around: the laundry room, sauna, and outside on my deck when the girls were asleep. I'm not complaining, but quickie sex is just that... quick. I want to lay her out and worship her body. I want to taste every inch of her creamy skin and feel her writhing under me. None of that can be accomplished when you're already in the 'hurry up and finish' mode.

My hand rests on her hip as I pull her to me until her lips are pressed against mine. My tongue trails along her lower lip until she opens for me, giving me exactly what I'm seeking. She moans and cups my ass until my erection is pushing into her.

"If we don't stop, I'm takin' you right here." The words are rushed as I trail a path down her neck. Every moan spurs me on. She needs this as much as I do.

"We have plans," she says breathlessly.

"Everyone will know you're my girlfriend because I'm not letting you go all night." I remind her of what we're about to do.

"Thank God," she says, but I can't tell if it's because of what I said or the fact that I'm groping her tits. Either way, I find it hard to stop what I'm doing, especially since she's grinding against me. "Levi..." She says my name in a way that has me ready to pull down my zipper and let myself free, but she's pushing me away. Zara is taking a step back. Her chest is heaving, and her lust-filled orbs are telling me everything I need to know. We're treading on dangerous ground tonight, and it's going to be a race to the finish line. "The door is open, and I don't want the girls to see us like that."

She's right. I nod and take another step back so I can start thinking about granny panties, manure, and any other thing that doesn't associate with the hot rocker babe standing a few feet away from me. Zara stands in front of the full-length mirror and runs her hands down the front of her dress and over her ponytail. My hand didn't even get a chance to wrap around the silky strands of hair, but I plan to tonight.

"I'm ready," she says, giving me a curt nod.

I take her hand and lead us down the hallway. Willow jumps when she sees us and proudly proclaims that we're getting a dog. Zara looks at me wide-eyed.

"I didn't say yes, Willow."

Zara chuckles beside me, knowing all too well that I'm going to cave. Every man who owns acres of land needs a dog,

and apparently, so do his girls.

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow. Memaw will be here shortly.” I kiss both of the girls and watch with apt attention as Willow says goodbye to Zara.

“You look really nice, Zara,” Stormy adds. “It’s nice to see you back to Zara Phillips.”

I gather the comment is meant to compliment Zara and not insult her. I suppose Stormy is used to seeing her differently since she’s a fan.

“Thanks, Stormy.”

Once I have Zara in the truck, which proved to be rather difficult because of her dress, it’s only a matter of minutes before we’re pulling into Buck’s neighborhood. Cars line the street, making me a bit nervous about showing up. It’s a hard line to draw when you become someone that people seek, and you still want to hang with your friends. It’s not like I can put demands on him and Lori, or any of my other friends.

There’s one spot near his house that I take, parking as close as I can to the curb, so Zara doesn’t have too far to step down. “I’ll buy a car,” I say when I open her door.

“Don’t even worry about it. I like the truck.”

“But it’s hard for you to get in and out of.”

She steps to me, placing her hand on my chest. Even in her heels, she’s not even close to my height. “Know what’s not hard?”

“Not me,” I say, winking. I’ve been sporting a semi since we stopped making out in the guest room.

“Hiking my dress up over my hips and riding you in that truck of yours.”

The semi is now a full-fledged stiffy, begging for attention. “Zara...” I draw her name out in agony.

She pulls me down to her level and whispers into my ear. “Keep the truck, Levi.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She doesn’t have to tell me twice. We link hands and walk up the driveway and into the house where I’m instantly greeted. As soon as my name is said, all heads turn. I say hi to a few people as we weave our way into the house. I refuse to let go of Zara’s hand, even when people want to shake mine. The last thing I want is for her to get swallowed up in the crowd. This is a grown-up version of a keg party, and I’m already itching to leave.

“Levi, you’re finally here. I have someone...” Holly stops in front of me and looks at Zara, and then down to our hands. Buck told me that this girl is hung up on me and that Maylene keeps pushing her to try and take me out.

“Hey, Holly. Do you remember Zara? My girlfriend?”

“Oh... I didn’t... um...” She’s clearly flustered, and it’s making me feel like an ass, but I have no interest in dating her. She might have been someone I’d take out if I hadn’t met Zara.

“Austin, you piece of shit bastard,” Buck comes up and slaps me on the back. “And who do we have here?” he asks, pointing to Zara.

I look at him a bit cock-eyed and wonder how much he has had to drink. “Zara Phillips,” I tell him. “You met her at my house not too long ago.” Although it was dark out and she had her hair hiding inside a beanie.

“Buck, you dumbass. This is the chick he stopped screwing Holly for,” Maylene says, stunning us all.

zara

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Twenty-Nine

I TRY to pull my hand away, but Levi's grip tightens. There's a part of me screaming that I knew there was more to him and Holly when I met her, and the other part is telling me not to be stupid, that Levi is *not* Van.

The woman from the other night, I vaguely remember her from the bonfire. Holly I definitely remembered because I've seen the way she was staring at Levi before when women would stare at Van. Shit, even thinking about Van right now has me wondering if he was sleeping with those women too.

"Huh," Levi says as he adjusts his stance. He's not rigid. He looks confident. When he smiles, my confusion grows. Instead, he cocks his head to the side and rubs his thumb over his lower lip causing my insides to quiver. "So let me get this straight, and maybe you can help me out, Buck. Y'all came over to my house after I got back from California and introduced me to Holly, yet I somehow knew her before I started dating Zara?"

Oh, I like this question. Not only does it tell me if Levi was honest about knowing Holly, not that I doubt him, but it puts his friend in the hot seat. Buck's mouth opens and closes a few times before he backs away with his hands up. Levi turns his penetrating gaze onto Maylene, who seems smug and ready for battle.

"I know what I know, Levi."

"You don't know shit, Maylene, and let me tell you why. You see, since I came back, Zara has been at my house and in

my bed. There ain't no way in hell I'm interested in anyone but her, and you can bet your ass it won't be your skanky ass cousin."

Mouths drop open all around us, but it's the gasp that catches my attention. Holly was standing on the cusp of the crowd. I want to fist pump and show her that I won, but the look on her face keeps my reactions more reserved. She either really wants to date Levi or she genuinely likes him. I'm going with the dating part because according to him, they just met.

"Levi, I don't know what's gotten into you," Maylene says.

"What's gotten into you, Maylene? I don't understand why you're disrespecting my girlfriend."

On the inside, I'm smiling like a girl with a fresh bag of pink cotton candy right now. I like that Levi is referring to me as his girlfriend. As childish as it sounds, it makes us official, especially with his friends.

"Levi, you can't be serious?"

His eyes widen, as do mine. "You know there's a reason Iris stopped talking to you, Maylene, maybe I should revisit my memory and see why that was."

"You wouldn't," she says in a voice barely above a whisper, and if I'm not mistaken, there are unshed tears pooling in her eyes.

"I would," he says, shrugging. "Zara is my girlfriend and if you can't accept that then you don't need to come around anymore." He pulls me to him and kisses me square on, in front of everyone to see. This will be on social media before his lips leave mine.

When I look back at Maylene, she's crying and throwing daggers at me. It's not my fault I met Levi at the right time or that she can't grasp that he's happy with me.

"Buck," Levi says as he reaches for his friend's hand. "Tell Lori I said hi."

"You leavin'?"

“Yeah, man. This ain’t my thing. If my girlfriend ain’t accepted, then I have no place here.”

Levi places his hand on the small of my back and points to the door that we came through as our exit. A few people mumble incoherently as we leave, but it’s Maylene who follows us out, begging Levi to stay.

Not me.

Just Levi.

He ignores her and helps me climb into the truck, then runs around front and hops in. Levi reaches for my hand and pulls me until I’m sitting next to him. He places my hand on his thigh, making me smile.

“Sorry about that,” he says as he pulls onto the street.

“I would never blame you for the actions of your friends.” Just like I hope he never blames me for the shit that Darian, Hayden, or Freddie might say to him when they meet. “Can I ask you one question, though?”

He nods. “I didn’t sleep with her,” he says before I can ask. I love how he knew that was on my mind. “The night everyone came over was the first night I met her. She was comin’ on pretty strong, but that didn’t matter because I was already interested in someone else.” He looks at me and winks before turning back toward the road.

I lean into him and kiss his shoulder, leaving my nose pressed there so I can inhale his cologne. Every so often he tilts his head enough so he can kiss me on the top of my head, and for some reason it makes me feel warm on the inside. He makes me feel loved.

Considering I have only been out of the house once, I have no idea where we’re going, but I get the sense we aren’t going in the direction of his house.

“Where are we going?”

“Well, I promised you a night out, and that is what I’m going to do. Besides,” he says as he comes to a stoplight. He

looks down at me and grins. “You’re smokin’ hot in that dress, and I want to show you off.”

I sit up so I can see his expression better. There’s a glint in his eyes. It’s almost mischievous and daring. “What about ending up on social media?”

He shrugs and turns his gaze back to the road. “Are you ashamed to be seen with me?”

There’s a hint of sadness in his voice, and I don’t like that. If we weren’t in a moving vehicle being commanded by him, I’d straddle his lap and show him exactly how not ashamed I am of him.

“Levi, I’d be seen with you anywhere, any day of the week.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah. So where ya takin’ me?” I purposely drop my “g” to sound like him.

Levi chuckles. “I know a place, darlin’.”

Between his usage of darling and his Southern accent, I’m a mess on the inside. If someone had told me that when I went through a major life changing event I would fall for someone like Levi so quickly, I would’ve laughed and called them a fool. But here I am, sitting next to a man who is offering me everything and has asked for nothing in return. He’s let me set the pace on our relationship, making sure that I am comfortable with everything and anything that we’re doing.

It’s not long until he’s parking his truck and rushing around to the passenger side to let me out. It seems silly, honestly, that I didn’t just slide out the driver’s side door since I was closer. He pulls me into his arms. His hand cups my cheek, and his thumb brushes against my bottom lip.

“You’re so beautiful, Zara. I’m the luckiest man in the world right now.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you chose me,” he says, making my knees weak. If he didn’t have his arm around me, I’d be on the ground by

now. “You could’ve had any man begging you for a date, but here you are.”

“And yet, here I am, with the one man that didn’t beg. He didn’t even make a move out of respect for my situation. He didn’t pressure me to do anything that I didn’t want to do. And here I am, happy and falling in love.” If I expected the L word to throw Levi back, I would’ve been burnt. But instead, he smiles. It’s wide and beaming, and perfect.

“Yeah?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I tell him, not needing to know what he’s referring to.

“Keep falling, baby because I’ll be there to catch you.” Levi cradles my head between his hands and kisses me right there, on the street with people passing by and cars honking. Someone yells for us to get a room, but we ignore them and continue to make out. When he pulls away, I want to tell him to get back into the truck and drive us to some backwoods area where I can have my way with him, but I don’t. Being out tonight is important to us as a couple. It may not seem that way now, but it will be. Together, we need to be able to handle the scrutiny of the media and our fans.

When he finally pulls away, he continues to pepper small kisses on my lips until he rests his forehead on mine. “Do you want to go dancing?”

“What kind?”

“It’s country, but I’ll teach you. I won’t let you fail, Zara.”

I smile while my head moves up and down almost frantically. “With you, I feel like I can do anything.”

Levi winks, causing yet another round of fluttering to occur, and motions for me to follow him. As if I wouldn’t. By now he should know I’ll go anywhere he asks simply because that means I get to be with him.

We walk down two blocks, which in heels is tricky. It makes me wish for valet, but this is where the action is, *Music Row*. He leads us into a bar, passing everyone on the street. His name is called, and subsequently mine as well. Out of my

peripheral, I see the flashes from their cameras trying to get our picture.

Levi stops to have a word with the bouncer who seems excited to see him. They shake hands and hug, and when I pass by, he calls me by name and tells me to have fun. Fun is what I'm going to have despite being wrongly dressed. All the women are in jeans or short dresses that aren't skin tight, with cowboy boots. My deadly heels do not belong in a place like this, but I don't care. I'm with my man.

The band on stage is singing their hearts out. The dance floor is jam-packed with bodies. Some are moving to the music, and others are off in their own little world, not paying attention to anyone other than the person in their arms.

My concerts aren't like this, even when we play in bars. People jump around, bob their heads up and down, but don't dance. The more I think about what I'm going through, the more I'm wondering if it's me that needs the change. Maybe the signs have all been there, but I've been ignoring them. Maybe I'm the one who drifted away from the life Van and I were living but was just too blind to see it or too afraid to recognize I failed at my marriage.

Levi doesn't waste any time and leads us out onto the dance floor. The second my feet touch the hardwood he pushes me into a full spin, ending up right back in his arms. It's when I look into his eyes that I can see how happy he is, and that sends me over the moon. There isn't a doubt in my mind that I'm meant to be in Levi Austin's life, and fully intend to stay there until he tells me that I'm no longer welcome.

Thing is, though, we've both been hurt by our exes, and I can't fathom he would do anything to hurt me, and I know damn well that hurting Levi is the last thing I would ever do.

Now if I could convince Stormy and Barbara that I'm here to stay, I'd be all set.

One day at a time, Zara. One day at a time.

levi

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I KNOW SHE'S WATCHING. I can feel her eyes boring into my skin. Her gawking started when I took my shirt off. Frankly, it's too hot to be working outside with one on, and with no neighbors as far as the eye can see, who cares if I'm shirtless?

Zara cares, that's who, and each time I walk by the deck where she's pretending to read a book, I make sure to run my hand over my stomach or flex so she can get an eye full. Guaranteed I'm hotter than any guy she's reading about in that book of hers.

Last night was a game changer for us. After the debacle at Buck's, she opened up when I thought for sure she was going to shut right down and tell me that we're moving too fast. That would've been the conventional thing to do. Put on the brakes, lock feelings down, and go our separate ways. But Zara is anything but conventional and shocked me by telling me she was falling in love. And boy do I want her to fall.

I told her I'd catch her, and I meant it. If she wants to jump with two feet, I'll be right there to hold her hand and take the leap with her. I'm there, and my love for her is growing exponentially every single day.

Every. Single. Day.

I don't care how long it's been, even though I know we haven't reached a month yet, I feel like I've known her for years, that we've been traversing our lives together for eons. Not hours and days. Ridiculous numbers that people think

have to be met can't measure what we have. We're falling in love with each other, and it's the best damn feeling in the world.

I disappear into the barn to muck stalls. It's not fun, but it keeps my mind focused. Right now, I'd rather have Zara spread out on my bed and writhing beneath me. Last night, after the club, I thought about taking her to a hotel but felt that I'd be cheapening what we are building. Instead, we went home and acted like parents who had to tuck their children in. After my mama left, Zara and I met in my bedroom where I helped her out of her dress and heels before I carried her into my shower and made love to her.

Now with Willow being at my mother's and Stormy training, I'm asking myself why the hell I am doing chores when my house is empty, and my gorgeous girlfriend has been eye-fucking me for the past hour or so.

Just as I decide to give up and go inside to find her, she comes trotting into the barn as if she owns the place. She's wearing a cowgirl hat, probably one of Stormy's or Willows, with her hair plaited, along with cut-off shorts that leave absolutely nothing to the imagination to go with a plaid shirt that is tied in a knot, showing just enough skin to make my mouth water.

"Howdy," she says, coming to stand in front of me with her hands on her hips.

I do everything I can to contain my laughter, but none of it works. "You're really fuckin' cute," I tell her as I pull her closer to me.

"And you're sweaty," she says as her hands rest on my chest.

"I think you need to be as well." I pick her up, making sure my fingers are nestled into the opening seam of her shorts, finding out immediately that she's gone without any underwear. "Jesus, Zara, you're killing me here," I say, only for her to place open-mouth kisses along my neck until she reaches my ear.

She tugs gently and whispers. “Yeah?” she asks.

“Ye-yeah,” I grunt, pushing my fingers into her core. She bites down on my ear and starts moving up and down slowly as I fumble our way to the back of the barn where the stairs will lead up to the hayloft.

Each step is more agonizing than the previous. The rough exterior of my jeans is rubbing against my hardened shaft creating the friction I need right now. The caveman in me is tempted to toss her over my shoulders and run fireman style up the stairs.

As soon as I step on the platform, I pull my hand out gently and set her down, only for her to go right for my jeans, working the buckle open and then the button and zipper. Zara pushes my jeans open and grips my dick, pumping me softly. My eyes are rolling back in my head, throwing me a bit off balance. I wobble, only to right myself by grabbing ahold of the overhead beam.

“Have you ever fucked up here?” she asks, bringing out a side of her that she saves for the bedroom. Zara is the most prim and proper woman I have ever had the pleasure of knowing until the proverbial door is closed, then all bets are off with what may come out of her mouth.

“No, but I’m about to.” Reluctantly, I step out of her grip and stagger over to a few bales of hay and rearrange them for what I think will be comfortable for Zara.

“Come here.” I beckon her with my finger. As she draws close, I reach out and pull the knot that is holding her shirt together, loosening it so I can take off her shirt. Her barely there bra makes my mouth water, and as much as I want to make love to her right now, I can’t. Stormy isn’t far from the barn with her trainer and Willow could come back from my parents at any time.

“Put your hands on the hay bale.” My head nods toward the stack I created, and Zara obliges. With her back facing me, she shimmies out of her shorts and looks at me over her shoulder. The sight of this woman that I love, dressed as a

cowgirl, showing me her ass and knowing that her pussy is glistening for me, has my cock leaking.

Bending over and rifling through my pocket to pull out my wallet, I realize that I don't have it, which means I don't have a condom. Zara notices the instant look of contempt.

“What's wrong?”

I shake my head. “No condom. I left my wallet on the dresser.”

Zara pushes off the hay bale and shuffles over to me. Her hand caresses my face, her lace-clad breasts push against my skin, and my dick jumps to attention at the fact that she's so near. “I was tested after I found out about Van. My results came back that I'm clean.” She closes her eyes, and I get the feeling that she's not only berating herself for bringing him up at a time like this but also thankful that he at least saved her the agony of a disease. “What I'm saying is that I'm clean, and I'm on the pill. If you want...”

Hell yes, I want, but I can't exactly say that out loud.

“If you're sure, Zara.”

“I am. I want this between us.” She leaves me standing there and returns to her previous position, again throwing me a look over her shoulder. There is no second-guessing, no apprehension on my part. I saddle up behind her and rub the head of my cock between her folds until she bends down even further, giving me an optimum angle.

I sink into her without abandon, moaning at the feel of her walls welcoming me. My hands rest on her hips, and I slowly move in and out until Zara slams herself into me.

“Harder,” she demands, biting her lower lip.

She could ask me anything right now, and I'd give it to her. My fingers dig into her skin as I use her hips as leverage to pound into her. Her sweet moans and the sound of our skin slapping together fill the barn. I lean forward and pull the cup of her bra down and grasp her nipple, tweaking it between my fingertips. Zara cries out more and reaches between her legs to play with her swollen bud.

The crunching of gravel catches our attention. Zara's head shoots up, and she looks at me. "Hurry up," she says. I do as she says and replace her hand with mine, massaging the hell out of her clit to make her come because I know that when she does, I won't be far behind.

The slamming of not one, but two car doors has me thrusting faster than I ever have before. Zara is watching me, with a mixture of pleasure and fear etched across her face. When she nods, I know she's about to peak, and I pray that once she starts, I'll be right behind her. The thought of walking around with a raging hard-on doesn't seem pleasurable to me right now.

Zara bites her lower lip to keep from crying out as her orgasm takes over her body. Her hand covers her mouth to muffle her sounds. I pound harder and relish in the feeling that I am doing this to her, for her, and that's enough to push me over the brink.

We stay this way, breathing heavily, rocking in and out of each other until I pull out and quickly bring my jeans up. Zara does the same, and before we know it, we're laughing our asses off.

"That was close," she says.

"It was thrilling, but I need to finish the job."

"I'll be waiting."

Zara heads down the stairs before me, and I breathe a sigh of relief when she yells Willow's name. We need to be more careful when the girls are around. We could've been easily caught, and I don't know how I would explain the situation to them.

I stay in the loft, moving hay around until I've created a wall facing the interior of the barn. I fully intend to bring Zara up here again but want to make sure that we are barricaded from prying eyes.

When I finally walk into the house, it's noisy, and I find that I love it. I have missed the constant chatter. The feel the

house has when people are in it and the love that comes with having a family.

I find Zara and the girls in the kitchen, baking. I kiss Willow and Stormy on the tops of their heads and can't help myself when it comes to Zara. I kiss her on the lips, much to the snickering and dare I say, delight, of my children.

"Daddy's kissing Zara," Willow mocks.

"Yes, he is," I can't help but say.

"Does this mean you're like an official couple?" Stormy asks.

I look at Zara for confirmation. "Yes, we are. Are you girls okay with that?"

Stormy shrugs, but nods while Willow yells out a resounding yes!

"Perfect. Let me go fire up the grill." I take the tray of meat that I put together this morning out of the refrigerator and head back out to the deck. The window is open, and I can hear my girls, all three of them talking.

Zara is inserting herself into their lives, asking about Stormy's training and what Willow did with her Memaw. I crack a smile when Zara uses the southern term for grandma, loving that she's trying to acclimate.

When Stormy asks Zara about continuing her dance studies, telling her that she's afraid to bring it up to me, I feel about two feet tall. I never meant for Stormy to only focus on barrel racing, but knew she has a passion for that as well.

"I can make some calls for you tomorrow if that'd be okay," Zara suggests.

"I'd like that. I think I can do both," Stormy says.

"You can do anything you want," I tell her as I stand in the doorway. "You can do both or either one." I shrug. "Or maybe something different. The sky's the limit, Stormy. I will support whatever."

It's at that moment that I know I've finally broken through with Stormy. She comes up to me and wraps her arms around me.

"I love you, Daddy," she whispers in my ear.

She will never know how much I love her. It can never be told in songs, words, or even material things. The day she realizes the depth of my love will be the day that she becomes a mother and can experience the instant connection she has with her own child.

Before I can tell her that I love her, Willow wraps her arms around both of us, joining in the lovefest.

"Come on, Zara," Stormy says, inviting her into our unit.

Right there, in my kitchen I have two of the most important women in my life, welcoming the one I'm in love with into our family.

zara

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Thirty-One

TO SAY the past few months have been a whirlwind would be a gross understatement. I went from being happily married, to finding out my husband was cheating on me, to meeting the most amazing man and his children, to falling in love with them.

I've been in love with Levi for some time now, but falling in maternal love with his daughters has taken me to a whole other level. It's because of the girls I haven't gone back to Los Angeles as planned. I was going to stay a month in Nashville and then head home, back to my life, my music, and whatever else waited for me.

Levi and I even sat down and discussed how our relationship would work long distance. No more than two weeks apart, and with the girls out of school, they would travel to me. We even talked about taking vacations together. On paper, it's a fail-safe way minus the part where we wouldn't be together. That part didn't sit well with me, and I have yet to leave Nashville.

I'm comfortable here. I love sitting on the deck and listening to the birds sing, watching Stormy race, reading with Willow, and of course, watching Levi do his chores. Who would've thought that chores would be so sexy? Not me. I can't recall the last time I saw Van lift a finger. Everything in our lives was contracted out. With Levi, he likes to get his hands dirty and even though he has a crew that works for him daily, he's still outside busting his ass.

And while he's working, I'm inside making lunch for everyone or preparing dinner. I have found that I love to cook and bake, and the girls love it too. We've made it a game of who can come up with the craziest recipe because we know that Levi will try anything, and he loves it all, even when it's the grossest thing ever.

But we laugh, all of us. It's the best sound in the world. And from what I can tell, the girls are happy. Stormy is dancing and barrel racing, which makes her father very happy. Willow has decided that she'll start dance in the fall, but also wants to play sports. Both girls love to shop, like crazy mall shopping once every other day.

That is where we are now because Willow has to have the new something or other that just came out, and of course, I jumped at the opportunity to bring her because we get to bond more. The first time we ventured to the mall, it was crazy. Fans were immediately upon me, scaring Stormy and Willow. That was the last time we went without a bodyguard. There's nothing like a giant three-hundred-plus man walking behind you, glaring at anyone who might look in your direction. Big Joe, as he likes to be called, drew the line at carrying our bags though. We tried.

"What do you think of this?" Stormy comes out, dressed similarly to the way I dress. I like what she's wearing, but not sure her father would approve, but then again, he loves me so he might not care.

"I like it, but do you? It's one thing to dress like that every day, but to change back and forth might give you whiplash."

She shrugs while looking in the mirror. Her head is slanted with her toes turned inward. She looks every bit a rocker chick with the combat boots she's wearing that are similar to mine, a short skirt, and a shirt that has already been cut. I think she looks cute. Adorable even.

"Let me take your picture."

Stormy turns around and poses while I snap the photo and send it off to her dad. She disappears into the dressing room, telling me she has another outfit to try on.

As soon as I see that Levi has read the message, I text him:
Do you like it?

I don't mean to hound him, but if Stormy asks if she can get it, I need to be able to tell her yes or no. Almost instantly, Levi's face appears on my screen.

"Hello."

"Hey, babe," he says, breathlessly. The way he sounds, his voice, it makes me melt. "Stormy looks cute in that outfit."

"I thought so, too."

"She can get it if she wants. I think it'd be pretty messed up for me to tell her that she can't dress like my girlfriend."

Once again, I'm smiling like a fool. I love the label, even more, when I see it plastered all over the web. Those are some of my favorite headlines. The ones I don't appreciate are the ones that talk about Van, me cheating, Levi and I being engaged, or when they circle my belly and announce that I'm pregnant and don't know who the baby daddy is. It's that shit that really sets me off and makes me despise the media.

"I'll be sure to tell her if she asks."

"I trust your judgment, Zara."

"I'm just afraid the girls might take advantage."

"They won't," he tells me. "They love you."

And I love you, but neither of us has had the courage to say those words to each other.

"I love them, too."

"What time will you be home?"

Home. Aside from Levi saying love, home is my next favorite word. There is another four-letter word that I like, but I like saving that for special occasions.

"I think in an hour or so. The girls are trying on clothes, and we talked about getting a treat someplace."

"I'll be waiting."

We hang up in time for Willow to come out of the dressing room dressed in an extravagant ball gown.

“Wow, Willow. Are you going to some ball that your father isn’t aware of?”

She giggles and twirls in front of the mirror. “Nope. I thought I could wear this to your wedding.”

“My wedding?” I try to laugh off what she says.

“Yeah, I saw that you and Daddy are getting married.”

“Oh... you don’t think I’d pick out a dress for you if that was the case?”

Willow spins again, this time knocking into her sister. Stormy glares at her and Willow sticks her tongue out in retaliation.

“I told you that Daddy and Zara aren’t getting married, Willow. You can’t believe everything you read on the web.”

Willow is far too young to be reading anything about her father on the web, and honestly, Stormy shouldn’t be either. As much as I want to say something about their reading habits, I don’t. I know for a fact that Levi has talked to them in the past about how the media will misrepresent things so they can make money.

“Well she’s having a baby, and that means they’re getting married,” Willow says with her hands on her hips.

My mouth drops at her statement, and I slowly look around to see if anyone could hear her. Sure enough, there’s a group of women, some young, typing away on their phones. As soon as I stand, Big Joe is right behind me.

“Girls, I think it’s time to go.” I usher them back into the dressing room and ask them to change quickly. I turn to find Big Joe blocking the doorway so no one can get in right now.

“I really wanted to buy some clothes,” Stormy says from behind her door.

“I know. We’ll come back. Right now I just really want to get out of here, okay?”

“Okay,” Stormy says. I hate feeling like I’m disappointing her and Willow, but right now I’m just not comfortable being out in the open.

As soon as they’re changed, Big Joe clears the doorway so we can leave. He follows closely behind and isn’t afraid to push people who are trying to get our picture out of the way. The girls walk with their heads down, clearly used to being in the limelight. I feel bad for them, sorry even. They didn’t ask to be born into this life, but it’s the one they lead with their father, and now me. Maybe bringing them to the mall wasn’t such a great idea.

We pile into the SUV that Levi has rented, with Big Joe behind the wheel. Thankfully the windows are tinted, but the damage is done. Our photos are up on every social media platform with the headline: Zara Phillips confirms pregnancy. Part of me wishes it were true, while the other part is completely disgusted that this conversation even took place among the girls.

I’m tempted to remind Willow that personal family business needs to stay between the walls of our home and because of her loud mouth, people think it’s true that I’m pregnant. I’m not. Nor do I intend to be, at least while my divorce is still proceeding. That would be a complication that I don’t need.

Halfway to Levi’s, Laura’s face lights up my phone. I haven’t fully fired her yet and know that if I don’t answer her call, she’ll keep calling until I do.

“Laura,” I say, spitefully.

“You need to come home, Zara.”

I close my eyes and count to ten. Her idea of home and mine are two completely different things. The last thing I need is to go home.

“This isn’t anything I can’t handle,” I tell her, knowing that Barbara will issue a joint statement regarding the situation.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Zara. Freddie and Hayden were in an accident, and things don’t look good.”

My heart drops. I haven't spoken to them since the video shoot. Mostly because they sided with Van and I felt like they were looking down on me for filing for divorce.

“Um...”

“I took the liberty of booking you on the next flight, which leaves at three. I'll have a car waiting for you when you arrive at the airport.”

“Okay.” My words are barely above a whisper, not knowing what to say. I have known Hayden and Freddie since we were kids, and they were the first guys that Darian and I thought about when we started our band. We had all been band geeks together.

The rest of the ride is fairly quiet, aside from the radio. I cringe when I hear that I'm knocked up with Austin's kid as if these people at the station know him so well to be crass about the situation.

I try to call Darian, but my call goes to voicemail. I try again, with the same result. His phone is off, which means he's probably holding vigil by his best friend's bedside.

By the time we pull into Levi's driveway tears are streaming down my face. I can't control them anymore. Levi greets us at the door, and his face falls as soon as he sees mine.

“What's wrong?” he asks, holding onto my shoulders with his strong hands. I shake my head, and he pulls me into his arms before leading me down the hall and into his bedroom. “What's going on?”

“Hayden and Freddie... they were in an accident. I need to go home.”

Levi nods and goes to his closet, returning with my suitcase. “Do you know what you want to take? I can help you pack.”

I cry harder, knowing that my heart is breaking for my two friends and because I'm leaving this man behind. I'd give anything to have him come back with me, but it'd be unfair for him to be holed up, waiting for me to come home.

“You’re so good to me,” I say as I collapse into his arms. He rubs his hands up and down my arms and slightly pushes me away so I can look at him.

“I love you, Zara. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you.”

I hiccup and manage to smile. “I love you too, Levi.”

“Answer me this, before you go. Are you pregnant?”

I shake my head and see a bit of life dull in his eyes. He wants another baby or at least one with me. “Just a rumor.” Levi pulls me into his arms again and holds me until my tears have dried.

levi

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Thirty-Two

IT'S BEEN hours since I dropped Zara off at the airport and the ache I feel in my heart isn't even close to subsiding. When I returned home, the laughter that I had grown accustomed to had all but dissipated. The girls were moping, they had the television on, but the sound was muted. Stormy wasn't on her phone like usual, and Willow was just staring out the window, almost as if she expected Zara to show up.

I'm not faring much better, sitting between my girls with each one resting their head on one of my legs. If I couldn't hear them breathing or feel the slow inhale and exhale I'm emitting, I would probably think we're dead or living in some alternate vortex because nothing seems right at the moment.

I'm trying not to be a selfish person here. I know she has friends and family in California, but dammit if I'm not pissed off that something has busted the happy bubble we've been living in. Deep down, I knew it was bound to happen. We both have work that we've been neglecting, but I was hoping that she'd find a way to stay here, to record her music in my studio and not have to run back to Los Angeles.

Of course, she didn't leave because of work, but because of her friends being in an accident, and that is something I can't contend with. I would've done the same, although, after the other night at Buck's, I'm very selective with who gets my time now.

As I look out the window, I decide that is where I need to be. Working with my hands, manual labor, anything to get my

mind off Zara not being here.

“I’m fixin’ to go work in the barn,” I tell the girls. They both pick up their heads and offer me a sad smile. I have no doubt mine matches theirs. “Zara will be back. Her friends were in an accident, and it’s no different if your Uncle Buck was in one. We’d do the same thing.”

“We could always go see her. Maybe she’ll need us if...” Stormy trails off with her mother’s death still fresh in her mind. Hearing her now reminds me that I promised myself the girls would get therapy. I’ve been so caught up with Zara and getting the girls back here that I’ve let them down in that way.

“Do you want to talk to someone about your mom?” I ask them both. Stormy shakes her head while Willow shrugs. “Tell me what you’re thinkin’,” I plead.

“It’s just... she really wasn’t much of a mother,” Stormy says.

“We couldn’t call her Mommy,” Willow adds. Both statements stab me straight into the heart because I could’ve prevented this. I was stupid enough to believe that they’d be okay living with Iris.

“How come you never told me?”

“I thought you would take away my dancing, so I asked Willow not to say anything.” Stormy looks ashamed. Part of her should be, but I’m certain that her mother fed her a great amount of bullshit.

“I would never take away something that makes you happy, Stormy. Ever.” I make sure to look at both girls, so they know that I’m telling them the truth. I may not like the dancing, but Stormy does, and because of that, I will support her. “You girls are the most important... well, everything in my life. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you. That is why I let Willow go to California, so you’d have your sister, Stormy. Hell, even letting you go was hard, but I did it because it’s what you wanted.”

Stormy leans into me and gives me a hug. “There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you girls.”

“Anything?” Willow asks. Her eyes go wide with excitement.

“Well almost anything,” I say, only to watch her face fall. “What do you want, Willow?”

“A puppy!” she bats her eyelashes.

“Yes, oh my God, Daddy, can we please get one?” Stormy begs.

I act as if I’m standoffish, making faces at them to lead them astray. They clasp their hands together, jut out their lower lips, and continue to flutter their long eyelashes at me. I’m a sucker, and they know it.

“Okay, fine. We can get a puppy, but...”

“Anything,” Stormy says enthusiastically.

“No, not anything,” Willow adds. “I won’t pick up poop!” She rolls her eyes in the most dramatic way, causing me to laugh.

“First, we find one that has been left at a shelter. Second, he or she goes to training. Third, all of us care for the puppy. Fourth, said puppy is not allowed on the furniture. If you want to hold or cuddle, you’ll have to sit on the floor.”

The girls look at each other as if they’re contemplating my ground rules. They’re non-negotiable. I refuse to be kicked off my couch by a dog.

“Okay,” they both say in unison.

“Okay. Stormy, you get online and look at the shelters. Decide together. I’m going to go work in the barn for a bit.”

“Thank you, Daddy.” Stormy stands and hugs me, with Willow following suit.

I’ve always wanted a dog, but it didn’t seem right with all the traveling I have to do. Now that the girls are home for good, my tour will be less and less and will have to be scheduled around their schooling. I won’t be like Iris and put myself before them. If anything, her death has taught me how to be a better dad.

Outside, the sun is still blazing, and for some odd reason, I look up to the sky as a plane flies overhead. It's not like it's the plane Zara is on, but something told me I needed to look. Which in hindsight is a good thing because Buck just pulled into my driveway.

Thankfully, he's alone. Not that I mind if Lori comes over, but usually Maylene is with Lori and I don't have anything kind to say to her right now.

"Sup, shit stain?" he says as he walks toward me.

"Not much, just about to head to the barn."

He looks back toward the house and sighs. "Something on your mind?" I head toward the barn, knowing he'll follow me. When I get in, I go right to the small frig that I keep out here and offer him a beer.

"Saw some headlines today, thought I'd stop by and see how things are."

Instead of answering, I take a long pull off my bottle of beer. "You or Lori?"

"Lori," he admits.

"Right, well if you have a question, ask it." There was a time when I considered Buck my best friend, but after the other night, I'm not so sure we're on the same page where our friendship is concerned.

Buck shrugs. "Lori's concerned that you have yourself in a pickle."

"Would Lori feel this way if it were Holly who was pregnant?"

He runs his hand through his hair and grimaces.

"That's what I thought." I walk further into the barn and pick up my tools to muck the stalls. "I don't know why y'all have an issue with Zara."

"I dunno. I mean, she's not one of us. I mean, she doesn't even listen to our music."

“And that makes her some sort of alien?” I can’t even look at Buck right now because I’m fuming. Friends aren’t supposed to be like this.

“No, but come on, Levi. She’s different. She doesn’t fit in.”

“She fits in just fine,” I tell him.

“How much do you even know about her? I mean, Lori’s going on and on about her being hitched up and how there’s a scandal brewing because you got her pregnant. She ain’t good for your career, and the girls just lost their mother. Don’t you think you’re moving too fast?”

“I know plenty about her,” I tell him, purposely avoiding the pregnancy rumor and anything that has to do with her divorce.

“Oh yeah, what’s her favorite movie? Color? Song?”

Unfortunately, I pause long enough to let him know that I don’t know those things. “That’s all trivial.”

“It’s all first date questions that you ask, man.”

I put down my shovel and sigh. “Except I don’t get first dates, Buck. Hell, it’s hard enough to find a woman that wants to be with me, for me, and my fame and fortune. Holly, she wants the fame that comes with dating someone like me. It oozes off her. I could tell from the moment I met her. But with Zara, she doesn’t care about any of that because she has her own.”

“But she’s nothing like you!”

“Exactly, and that’s why I love her.”

Buck takes a step back, almost as if I’ve stung him. It’s true, and she knows it. I’m in love with her despite the differences we share.

“Hey, Uncle Buck,” Stormy’s voice breaks through the tension. He turns toward her as she walks into the barn. She eyes me warily, making me wonder how much she’s heard. I know she had trouble accepting that Zara was going to be a part of my life in the beginning, but they’ve grown close and

over the past few weeks have been inseparable. I'm not trying to replace Iris, but I wouldn't mind Zara stepping into the role.

I also wouldn't mind finding out that the pregnancy rumors are true, even though I know they're not. I'm not opposed to expanding my family, especially if that includes her.

"Hey, Stormy. Glad to have you back home." He gives her a hug, but I can tell she's not really into it.

She pulls away and looks at me. "I found some dogs. There are a few older ones and puppies down at the shelter in Franklin. Willow and I thought maybe we could get an older one too, give him a home since he was abandoned by his family."

"Y'all gettin' a dog?" Buck asks.

I shrug. "Looks like we're fixin' to pick up two." I smile at Stormy, who clasps her hands together. Seeing the excitement on her face is worth it, although I'm not excited about having two dogs running around. "Go get your sister ready, and we'll scoot on down there."

"Thank you, Daddy." She hugs me, which sends my heart racing toward the moon.

"You're never home," Buck points out. "How are you gonna care for two dogs?"

"See, Buck," I say as I scoop up my tools and take them back over to the rack. "If y'all would quit meddlin' and start talking to me like a friend, you'd find out that I won't be touring like a madman with the girls home, and when I do go on a tour, my ma will be here."

"Or Zara?" he asks.

I know the smile that spreads across my face is pissing him off, but I don't give a shit. I love that woman. "Nah," I say. "The more I think about it, the more I'm certain. When I go back on tour, my family is coming with me. Two dogs included. It'll be one hell of a cramped bus, but man it'll be worth it."

I slap him on the shoulder and leave him in my barn, trying not to get royally pissed off at the audacity he has by coming here and second-guessing my life. The last time I checked, I'm an adult and capable of making my own decisions. He should respect that.

Now if he had come to me with concerns that Zara was cheating or not being honest, I may have listened, but he didn't because he and his wife are too busy making a molehill into a mountain over the fact that Zara is a rocker. Believe me there are worse things in the world.

zara

• • •

CAMERAS ARE EVERYWHERE the moment I step into the general population area of the terminal. My name is being called, screamed in order to get my attention. I'm told to look left, right, anywhere but at the ground that I'm currently looking at. Someone tipped the press off that I was arriving because the horde of paparazzi taking my picture is triple what I'm used to. There isn't a doubt in my mind that Laura did this, and she did it on purpose.

Levi's name is said, questions about our relationship are asked. They want to know how Van feels, especially since I'm pregnant. I'm half tempted to take a pregnancy test and post the results online, but that is just feeding into their delusions. I never did anything like that when Van and I were together, and I don't plan to start now.

Thankfully airport security sees my plight and comes to my rescue. This is another thing that Laura should've done, have security meet me at the gate, but apparently, my safety has slipped her mind.

With two guards, one in front and the other flanking me, I pull out my phone and text Levi to let him know that I made it. The entire flight, I stared out the window so that no one would see my plight. Tears clouded my vision while my heart tore into pieces. I did not want to leave Levi and the girls but knew I had to be with Hayden and Freddie. They're my family, just as Levi, Stormy, and Willow are becoming one as well.

This feels like a test, some evil reality that is proving that I can't combine the life I'm starting to build and the one that I've lived for so long. It's like everything is playing out the way the critics have been saying, the way Levi's friends have alluded to—Levi and I can't exist in the real world together.

I refuse to believe that Levi and I can't co-exist together outside of his home because deep in my heart, I was meant to meet the Austins and be a part of their lives. Falling in love with them was the icing on the cake.

The guard taps me on my shoulder, and I look up. "Miss, I believe he's waiting for you," he says, pointing toward a man in a dark suit, holding a sign that says ZARA PHILLIPS. Behind my dark shades, I roll my eyes at the complete bullshit. Everyone in the industry has a pseudonym, but no, my publicist alerts everyone at LAX that I'm arriving today.

"Sure enough," I mutter under my breath but manage to smile at the guard, so he knows to lead me in that direction.

The driver reaches for my bags, and I hand them over easily. He says something to the guard as we fall in line behind him, and head toward the car. I sigh when I see the ostentatious limo parked in the no parking zone, along with the police officer barking out that he's going to have it towed. Of course, he's using much more colorful language and seems rather put off by the fact that it's parked where it is.

As luck would have it, a group of girls run up to me and ask for my autograph. As much as I want to tell them no, I can't. I sign each one and pose for a photo before telling them that I really must go. A few of them mention Van, but it's the one who mentions Levi that brings a smile to my face.

I'm sure to wave to her before I climb into the car. It's my way of letting her know that I appreciate her support. I thank the guard who is holding the car door and climbing in, closing my eyes, and resting my head on the back of the seat.

"Hello, Zara."

My head jerks up, and my eyes slowly focus on the person across from me. I reach for the door handle and pull, only to

find it locked and the car moving.

“What are you doing in my car, Van?” My heart thunders loudly, the pounding rings in my ears. I’m not scared of him, but the situation. He shouldn’t be here, and if Laura knew... no, of course, she knew. I pull out my phone, only to find the battery dead with my charger in the trunk with my bags. “Fuck,” I mutter.

“I’m doing the same thing you’re doing.”

I shake my head. “I don’t remember agreeing to share a car with you.”

“We’re saving the band money,” he states, shrugging as if it’s no big deal that we’re together. To him, it’s not. He doesn’t feel like he’s wronged me at all. That cheating on me was okay and that I’m going to forgive him because that is what he wants.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in rehab?” I ask. “Wasn’t that your big ‘save me from me’ push you tried to get me to buy?”

“I checked out. It wasn’t for me,” he says as nonchalantly as possible.

“Right, cheating on your wife, the woman you’d been with since you were seventeen is more your speed. How stupid of me to forget.”

“Zara,” he draws my name out in the tone he used to use when I was upset with him or when he would need something. I can’t fathom how this man doesn’t understand that I’m beyond my breaking point with him. “I’ve asked you to let me explain.”

“Explain what, exactly?” I catch him staring. I turn toward the door and look out the side window, only to have the scenery blocked by a semi. Not that there’s much to see between LAX and Hollywood, or whatever hospital Hayden and Freddie are at.

“I know I hurt you, that I destroyed your faith and trust in me. I took advantage of a situation and couldn’t stop.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying. Not because I want Van back, but because I'm angry that I'm here, trapped in this car with him. I don't want to hear his excuses, to be blamed for our marriage failing, to find out that I could've done something to prevent him from straying. I already blame myself, wondering at what point he thought another woman would treat him better than his wife.

Van leans forward, and I adjust in my seat, pushing me closer to the door. I desperately want to try the handle again, but becoming roadkill is not high on my priority list.

"I'm sorry, Z. I'm sorry for everything I did that fucked up our marriage. If it's any consolation—"

I hold up my hand in a silent plea for him to stop talking. "If you're going to finish that sentence with 'she didn't mean anything' or 'they didn't', don't. I don't want to know, Van. I've lost more than enough sleep, wondering if there was only one, and then finding out there were two. I don't want to know anymore." I shake my head to fight off an impending bout of tears. I refuse to cry in front of him, to give him the satisfaction of knowing that he's reached me on an emotional level.

Surprisingly, he stays quiet for the duration of the drive. Without my phone, I've lost track of time. I don't know if we've been driving for thirty minutes, forty-five, or longer. What I do know is that I'm tired, I miss Levi and the girls, and I want to go home. Home, being Nashville, in a house that is filled with laughter and love.

When the car finally pulls off the highway, I'm actively looking for any sign as to what town we're in. There isn't even a hospital sign.

"Where are we going? What hospital are Hayden and Freddie in?"

"I don't know the name," Van mutters as he looks at his phone. I'm half tempted to pull it out of his hands so I can call Levi, but giving Van his number is the last thing I want.

Turn after turn, my concern grows the farther we drive into the desert. I rack my brain trying to come up with what hospital would be out here that would have a trauma unit. Fact is, I can't come up with a single one.

I slowly pull my sunglasses up and glare at Van. He looks away, unable to meet my gaze. "Where are we going?"

He looks out the window, and without looking at me says, "You'll find out."

Sure as the sky is blue, the car turns and pulls into a long driveway. Outside looms a Spanish-style building. People are walking around, all wearing white coats. Nothing but fear takes over my body as images of me being held here against my will flash through my mind.

I contemplate running as soon as I get out of the car, but can't recall a single building from the last five miles of the drive. It's too hot for me to run and with no cell phone, I'm stuck.

My door opens, and a young man reaches for my hand. "Welcome to Paradise Springs, Ms. Phillips."

"What is this place?"

"It's a spa," he says. "Your rest and relaxation are waiting for you just beyond those doors."

Turning, I look through the sliding glass doors, wondering what the hell Van has gotten me into. "Am I able to leave whenever I want to?"

The poor man looks confused, but nods. "Yes, of course."

I still don't believe him though until I see Freddie and Hayden coming toward me. They're smiling, and more importantly, they're alive and seemingly uninjured. If they were in an accident, it was a fender bender, meaning there was no reason for me to come home. It hits me like a ton of bricks. I've been duped. I've been set up and brought back to California against my own will.

Van gets out of the limo and hugs Hayden and Freddie. I angle my head, waiting for Darian to show his face so I can

beat the shit out of him. I know he's best friends with Van, but if he had any part in this set-up, I'm going to kill him. Our mother will understand because blood is thicker than the lying cheating asshole best friend who cheated on your sister guy.

"Hello, Zara."

It takes me a minute to recognize the face of our manager at the record label, Caleb Gilbert, and standing next to him is my agent, Asher Greene, who does not look pleased.

The car pulls away, leaving me standing in the middle of the driveway, almost as if I'm in a standoff. Van, Hayden, Freddie, and Caleb are all staring at me, while Asher's focused on the ground.

"What's going on?"

"We have business to discuss," Caleb says, motioning for me to follow everyone inside. Reluctantly, I pick up my bag and start to follow until I reach Asher.

"You're in on this?" I ask. What this is, I don't even know, but I have a feeling this is some backward attempt at an intervention. You know, because I'm the one screwing up the dynamics of the band.

"Sorry, Z."

My throat tightens, and my heart starts racing as I walk into the small conference room. The sight of food makes my stomach growl, but I can't eat anything. The thought of food makes me want to hurl right now.

I take the lone seat at the end of the table, and the people I once considered my family surround me, except Darian. I look at Hayden and Freddie and shake my head. "I thought you were seriously hurt. You lied to me." Neither of them say anything, nor do they show any remorse.

Caleb clears his throat and folds his hands. "Zara, we know you're going through a rough time, but this..." he waves his hand dismissively. "Whatever it is that you have going on with this guy... what's his name," he says as he shuffles through some papers. "Oh yes, Levi Austin. It stops now."

“Excuse me?”

“Zara, what Caleb is trying to say is that your image is taking a beating right now and that is affecting his ability to market Reverend Sister,” Asher says with a half-assed smile.

“Who I date is none of the label’s business.”

“It is when the label suffers,” Caleb says. “When we signed you, we signed you with the understanding that you were with Van.” He bobbles his head back and forth as if he’s speaking to a four-year-old.

“So you’re saying that I have to be with Van, even though he’s fucking the entire population of Los Angeles, and who knows where else because the label is suffering?”

Caleb sighs.

“You do realize that if he had kept his dick in his pants where it belonged, we wouldn’t be having this conversation, and yet, you’re coming after me because I moved on?”

“It’s not about you moving on, Zara. It’s about who you moved on with. You have an image, and that image screams danger. It’s punk rock, not Holly Homemaker or whatever it is you’ve been doing in Hicksville.”

“Z, what Caleb is saying—”

“Don’t fucking talk to me, Hayden. I thought you were dying. You and Freddie are no better than Van.” Years of friendship, down the drain. “Where’s my brother?”

Van clears his throat. “He doesn’t know we’re here.”

“And why’s that, Van?”

Van shakes his head, refusing to answer because he knows that Darian won’t stand for this. When it comes down to it, Darian will always side with me. “That’s what I thought.”

Caleb slides a paper to Asher, who pushes it toward me. “You have two choices, Zara. End the relationship with the crooner or relinquish your stake in Reverend Sister.”

This time I don’t hold back the tears. People, who have nothing to do with the creation of my band, are forcing me to

choose between the man I love and the band that I created with my brother in our garage.

I look at everyone in the room. Their eyes are downcast, looking at the table, all except Van's. He's leaning back in his chair, staring at me, waiting to see what move I'm going to make.

levi

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MY PHONE WEIGHS HEAVILY in my hand as I look at the picture of the woman I love, holding hands with the man she has sworn to be done with.

VAN AND ZARA PHILLIPS SNEAK AWAY

THE PHILLIPS ARE BACK TOGETHER

WITH A BABY COMING VAN AND ZARA PHILLIPS REKINDLE ROMANCE

Each headline, worse than the previous, and I can't look away from any of them despite the people that keep calling. I know that is why Lori's face keeps lighting up my phone, and when I don't answer, Buck calls. Every press of the decline button brings another wave of intrusion.

I'm tempted to answer just one call, to hear what my friends have to say. Are they going to tell me that I need to stay off the web? Are they going to console me or ask me if I knew? Will they bash her? I already know how they feel about her, so why put myself through the heartache of hearing my friends tell me that this is a good thing?

It's not. There isn't anything good about this. Not for my daughters, and definitely not for me. I'm in love with Zara, and the girls... They love her too. What makes this worse is that Stormy is the one who found the first image of Zara and

Van together. As much as I can shelter Willow from the web, I can't with Stormy. Teens are social media driven, and Zara knew this.

Thinking that Zara planned this sends my stomach into my throat because I know that didn't happen. She wouldn't have left here in a rush, lying to me about her friends being in an accident. No, something happened when she got to California, but what?

That is what I ask myself as I pace my room, racking my brain on what transpired from the time I dropped her off at the airport to the time she texted me that she had landed. Why would she text me if she had planned to see Van at all?

"She wouldn't," I mutter out loud. Zara is not evil, she's far from malicious and wouldn't hurt me the way Van hurt her.

The soft knock on my bedroom door catches me off guard. "Come in," I say.

"Daddy?" The broken voice of my teenage daughter calls out from behind me. I'm afraid to turn around, to see her tears, but have no choice. Stormy stands in my doorway, looking much like she did the day I had to tell her that her mother died. I open my arms as an invite to come to me, and she does, clutching onto me for dear life. Tears that I have fought since I saw the first headline are now spilling over and wetting the top of her hair.

"Does Willow know?"

Stormy shakes her head against my chest. "I hid her iPad."

"Thank you."

My sweet daughter who has gone through so much in these past couple of months looks up at me with her own tear-stained eyes. "You need to go get her, Daddy. You need to go after Zara."

As much as I try to prevent it, I can't help but frown. Stormy steps out of my arms and stares me down. "Listen to me," she says as if she's suddenly become an adult. "Everything was fine yesterday. You don't leave someone

really happy to go back to someone that makes you really sad. He makes her sad, and when she's with you, she's happy."

"People change, Stormy."

"Not like this. I remember from the video shoot. The director kept telling Zara to look at Van when she was singing, and she refused. All their other videos show them together or her singing to him, except this new one. I'm telling you, Zara loves you. She loves us and wouldn't do this."

As if on cue, my phone rings. "It's Barbara." I show the phone to Stormy for some unknown reason, only to have her snatch it out of my hand.

"Aunt Barbara, Daddy needs a flight to wherever Zara is. He has to go after her."

Unfortunately, neither of us hears Barbara's reply because I'm pulling the phone away from Stormy. She glares at me, her eyes determined to burn holes into me.

"Hello?"

"I'm sure you know why I'm calling," she says.

"I do."

"With that said, I agree with Stormy. This... it all seems odd. I spent time with Zara. She asked me to represent her because she felt her current or former, depending on how you look at it, is biased toward her ex. I've also spoken with Zara's lawyer about her divorce proceedings. The judge was waiting to sign off on the decree as soon as Van was released from rehab. Somehow I doubt he was able to con her into a romantic getaway considering he left rehab an hour before her plane landed."

My mouth opens to reply, but no words come out. I'm at a loss, not sure what I'm supposed to say. All this time, I thought Barbara was against anything that I've been building with Zara, yet here she is, telling me to chase the girl.

"Levi, I can hear you breathing."

"Right. I'm here."

“I took the liberty of booking a chartered flight. I’m going with you, and so are the girls.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Barbara sighs. “Disneyland is having a two-for-one special on tickets,” she says, even though I know she’s lying. “Listen, we’re going because we’re your family, and I really am taking the girls to Disneyland. They need it, and you’ll be worried about them while you’re trying to be all knight in shining armor.”

I pull the phone away from my ear. “Do you want to go to Disneyland tomorrow?”

Stormy’s eyes go wide, and she nods frantically. “Can we stay in a hotel there and not at the house?”

“Sure, if that’s what you want.”

“Will you bring Zara home to us?”

Her words hit me hard, but I nod. “I will.” I wait for her to run out of my room and for the screaming to stop before I put the phone back to my ear. “We’ll meet you at the airport.”

“That’s my boy!” Barbara hangs up before I have a chance to say anything. In the other room, Stormy and Willow are happily yelling, and I find myself quickly emptying my drawers so I can pack and be ready to go.

No sooner do I have my travel bag zipped, Willow attacks me from behind. “Is this why we couldn’t bring the dogs home yesterday?”

“No,” I tell her, shaking my head, but smiling. “They have to run a background check before they let the dogs leave the shelter, but we’ll be back in time to pick them up and bring them home.”

“Phew,” she says as she wipes her hand across her forehead. “I’m all about seeing Mickey, but didn’t want to leave the dogs.” Willow all but runs out of my room, hollering at her sister that we’re in the clear.

After Buck left, the girls and I went down to the shelter. It was easy to see why Stormy asked for two dogs. She had

fallen in love with an old timer that was dropped off at the shelter in the middle of the night, while Willow wanted a pup. We paid to adopt both.

Now I get why a background check needs to be done, but since my life is played out in front of the media, everyone knows that I'm a stand-up guy. Everyone, that is, except the hard-nosed clerk at the shelter who didn't even bat an eyelash when the girls and I walked in. No, she didn't care that Levi Austin was coming to the shelter to adopt an animal. Didn't even faze her.

While I was irritated with the policy, I'm thankful though because the last thing I would want to do is leave the dogs behind for June to take care of or ask my parents to watch them when they just got here.

Leaving my bedroom, I find the girls standing eagerly by the front door. As far as I know, Willow doesn't have any idea what is actually going on, and I trust Stormy to keep the secret. We pile into my truck, turn the music on, and sing our hearts out until we arrive at the airport where Barbara is waiting for us at the private terminal.

Once our bags are checked, and we're boarded, I lean my head back against the leather seat and close my eyes. The idle chatter around me is heartwarming and lulls me to sleep.

I jerk awake when the plane touches down. I'm a bit disorientated and not sure of the time. Not that it's going to matter. I'm heading straight to the resort to get to the bottom of... well, everything.

Barbara takes the girls in one car, while I get into another. Willow looks confused, and I tell her that I have some business to take care of, but will meet them at the hotel later. I'm tired but focused on the road ahead as I drive into the desert, wondering what's going to happen. I don't have much of a case to plead. Van and Zara have a history, where we have weeks upon weeks of playing house. Deep down, I question whether I even stand a chance and fear that she's going to tell me that it's over. I don't know what I'll do, other than tuck my tail and drive to the happiest place on earth.

The valet greets me as soon as I put the car in park. The somewhat muted overhead lights give off a soft, romantic glow. Dread fills the pit of my stomach as I walk in the Spanish-style resort.

“Can I help you?” the woman behind the counter says, smiling brightly. She looks as nervous as I do right now.

“I’m looking for a guest, Zara Phillips.”

She types away on her keyboard. “Who can I say is calling?”

“Levi Austin.” I feel as if this is a formality.

“Ms. Phillips, I have a Mr. Austin in the lobby. Yes, ma’am.” The desk clerk hangs up. I’m waiting for her to smile, but she doesn’t, and that pit in my stomach is slowly turning into a crater. “You can have a seat over there,” she says, pointing behind me. “Ms. Phillips will be right down.”

She’ll be down but didn’t ask the receptionist to send me to her room. I sigh and run my hand over my hair. Each step toward the couches is painful, and I opt to wait outside under the stars and the warmth of what’s left over from the sun.

“Levi.” Her voice rips through me like shards of glass. I turn slowly to find the woman I’m head over heels for stalking toward me. Her arms wrap around my waist, and her head buries between my arm and chest.

My reaction is immediate. I pull her as tightly as I can, holding her in the vice grip my arms have become. I refuse to think this is the last time I get to do this with her. It’s minutes later that she’s pulling away. The look on her face doesn’t match the feelings I have about the hug. She takes my hand and leads me around the side where there’s a patio, lit by lanterns, and casting a romantic glow.

We sit, across from each other, and I instantly want to leave. “What’s goin’ on, Zara?” I reach for her hands, as she gives them to me willingly. “I’m really confused here.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I was ambushed. After I texted you, my phone died so I couldn’t call you and tell you that I needed help.”

“What do you mean?”

Zara shakes her head. “Let me start over. Hayden and Freddie were not in an accident. I got off the plane, and everything went to shit very fast. Van was in the limo. He checked himself out of rehab and just kept talking about giving him a second chance. As soon as we got here, I knew that the accident was a ploy to get me to California, and away from you.”

“So you’re not back together with Van?”

“Hell no!” she says rather loudly. “I want nothing to do with him, at all, which brings me to why I’m here. You see, the guys, not Darian, set this up to corner me. The band’s manager from the label and my agent are also here, waiting for me to sign...”

“Sign what?” I ask.

“To sign over my interest in Reverend Sister or sign an affidavit that I will cease all communications with you. The label says you’re bad for my image, that sales are down and it’s because of our relationship.”

I sit back, stunned by this revelation. I’m unable to make eye contact with her right now as the feeling sinks in that we’re done. Her career means the world to her, and I can’t compete with that.

“So, I guess that’s it, huh?”

“I...” she looks at me as tears start to fall.

epilogue

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THERE'S A SOFT MELODY, a chorus of sounds that are drifting through the house. It's mixed with music, laughter, and nature. I smile at the people gathered in my home right now, waiting for me to make an appearance.

The woman who stares back at me looks nothing like I'm used to. Gone are the purple ends that I've had for so long, along with the platinum locks that have followed since my career took off. Now my hair is blonde with low-lights of brown mixed in.

I never thought I'd be the one to make a change, but over the past year, my life has been a whirlwind of changes. Some good, while others have been heartbreaking and shattered my resolve more times than I want to count. But today is going to be different.

The door opens, and my mother steps in. She's dressed in a lavender dress that rests on her knees. She smiles, but quickly covers her mouth as I twirl in front of her.

This time around my dress is different. As much as I love being the belle of the ball, I opted for a champagne-colored sheath dress that sits off my shoulders, to go with my purple and cream-colored roses.

"Levi is going to... well that man will fall more in love with you than he already is," my mom says.

It's hard to imagine my life without Levi and the girls. The day I was given the ultimatum to choose him over the band,

the decision was easy.

After spending time with them, and becoming a family, my life is here. This is where I am meant to be. I couldn't have signed my name any faster than I did that day. My only regrets were I didn't leave right away and fly back to Nashville, which worked out because my hero came to save me anyway, and for not talking to Darian about it.

Reverend Sister was our band, our creation. I hated leaving, but it was the right thing to do. There was no way I could effectively work with Hayden and Freddie, let alone Van after everything he had done to me.

But my brother was a different story. They purposely left him out of the ambush and pitted us against each other. It backfired. Darian left as well, taking with him all the rights to the songs we wrote. In hindsight, I should've called a lawyer and negotiated my way out of the band, but I was hurt.

Darian was not. He was pissed, and his retaliation forced the label to pay him off. Half of which he shared with me. Now, Reverend Sister as it's known, belongs to Darian, not that he plans to do anything with the name.

As for me, I've recorded some duets with Levi, but I am enjoying the stay-at-home mom bit right now. My girls... they're my world and come Monday morning, Levi and I will petition the court to allow me to adopt them. I had always seen myself as a mother, but not to a teen and pre-teenager and two dogs.

Darian walks into the room and shakes his head slowly. "I'm going to have to get Levi really drunk otherwise he's going to be on you as soon as you say he's allowed to kiss you. You know you have to keep it PG out there, right?"

"Darian, I don't know where your mouth comes from, boy," my mom says. Darian takes the scolding seriously and kisses our mother on her cheek.

"All right, Z. Are you ready for me to walk you down the aisle?"

"I am," I say, making sure to grab my bouquet.

My mom leads us out, and as soon as my shoes touch the deck, the music shifts. I glance up at Darian and thank him.

“It’s my honor to walk you down the aisle, Zara. I think you and Levi are the real thing. You’ve shown me what love is supposed to be like.”

“Does that mean you’ll finally settle down?”

“If the right one comes along,” he says winking.

We walk hand in arm down the makeshift aisle toward the expanded portion of the deck that is covered by a pergola with white lights lighting up the dusk sky. I fell in love with the one he had at his house in California and mentioned that we needed one. My man built one the next week for us, attaching it to the pool room, so we have easy in and out access to there as well. It’s become our place. We eat dinner out here. Drink our morning coffee. The girls and I read. Levi and I write songs. Most importantly, it’s where our family gathers so we can just be us.

Our ceremony is small, just friends and family. I smile at Lori, Buck’s wife as I round the corner. We got off on the wrong foot, but once they realized that I was good for Levi, they came around. It wasn’t that quick for me, but in time I have grown to enjoy our friendship.

At the front of the altar, Levi stands there with his hands clasped in front of him, his smile beaming from ear to ear. When he asked me to marry him, it was on horseback during a sunset ride out to the pond. It was my idea to go out because I had to tell him something important that I didn’t want the girls to hear. We both blurted out our news at the same time. I told him that I was pregnant, while he asked me to be his wife.

Finding out I was pregnant was a shock. We were careful, but the days after my subsequent kidnapping and dissolution of my band, I was stressed and hadn’t been taking the pill, and the thought never occurred to me to suggest Levi use a condom to prevent pregnancy. When I revealed my big secret, he grinned so widely that I thought his cheeks were going to rip open. He asked me again to marry him, presenting me with a ring and I said yes.

Of course, the challenge of hiding my pregnancy from the world ensued. The media had already speculated that I was pregnant, even though they were wrong, and I didn't want them to know. Once I started to show, I stayed home. Barbara arranged for a midwife and doula, and I gave birth at home.

Poppy Clementine was born one year to the day that Levi and I met. While I was pregnant, we couldn't decide on a name for her and told the girls they could decide. Stormy got the first name, while Willow got the middle name. It wasn't until Poppy was born that we knew she was a girl. As a family, we decided not to find out. We wanted to be surprised.

Our three-month-old daughter squirms in her big sister's arms. My girls are all dressed in the same color that I am while Levi and Buck are in black tuxedos. I blow the girls kisses as I get closer to them.

Darian and I stop, right before Levi. He kisses me on the cheek and thanks me for bringing Levi into the family before he goes and stands behind Buck.

"You look... I don't even know, Zara. Beautiful doesn't seem to be the right word."

"You too," I say as I give him my hand.

The Justice of the Peace welcomes everyone. He talks about the path that Levi and I took to get where we are, and how some things are meant to be. As if on cue, Poppy lets out a fussy scream, prompting both grandmas to get up and take her from Stormy. I don't turn to see which one won the battle, but I have a feeling it was mine.

Levi and I turn to face each other and join hands. We decided to go the traditional route with our vows, and leave our storytelling in the lyrics of our duets. When the JP tells Levi that he can kiss me, he tilts me down, much to the delight of our friends, and presses his lips to mine. It's a chaste kiss, one that meant to leave me lingering and show me what's to come later.

"It's with great pleasure that I introduce to you for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Levi Austin."

Levi and I turn and put our hands up in the air. Stormy and Willow encase us in a hug before Levi and I take our first steps as husband and wife.

And it'll be from this day forward that I share a last name with my family, not only personally, but professionally as well.

THE END

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. . .

PALMER SINCLAIR SAT at her small table and looked out the grand picture window at the San Bruno mountainside. She saw a black-tailed doe and her fawn grazing on what little shrubbery the mountainside had to offer, and watched as the doe nudged her baby, guiding it to a food source. The sight of a mother caring for her child brought Palmer back to the DNA instructions and test that sat in front of her.

Today was the day, her self-imposed deadline to finally spit in the tube and send it off. Deep in her heart, she knew she had family out there, and desperately wanted to connect with someone. She hoped she had a sibling but would welcome an aunt or uncle or even a cousin, distant or closely related. Someone who could teach her and help her learn about her family, her heritage, and where she came from. Mostly, she wanted to know how or why she'd ended up in the orphanage so many years ago.

Palmer read the instructions aloud, picked up the vial, and began to fill it. Once she'd gone over the designated line, she added the stabilization buffer and secured the the cap. She pulled out the form and printed her name. Palmer Sinclair wasn't her birth name or the name she'd used at the orphanage. The second thing she'd done after turning eighteen was to change her name. The first was to ask for her records. She also didn't know her birth date. The date on her file was the date she arrived. Why the orphanage never asked for her birth certificate still confused Palmer to this day. It was as if

no one wanted her to know she existed. She'd made up everything herself, which made her feel like a fake. She didn't care what her driver's license and social security card said her name was—it wasn't her.

With the package sealed, Palmer set it by her front door and made her way into her kitchen to brew a much-needed pot of coffee. She ran on caffeine. It was her lifeline. While the aroma of coffee beans began to fill the air around her, Palmer thought about the box that sat by the door and how she had put the test off for what felt like eons, and how well her life had turned out despite the odds being stacked against her.

All her life, Palmer had been alone. She'd never had someone in the corner rooting her on, or a mother at home to make sure her homework was done, to kiss her scraped knee or braid her hair. She didn't have a father to teach her about cars or sports or hold her when she experienced her first heartbreak. Growing up, any friendships she'd had never lasted long. It was an inevitable end. Either her friends went back to their homes or they went to another house. School friends were impossible. Telling the other kids she lived in a group home was never fun.

According to what little paperwork she had about herself, she was about three years old when she arrived at the orphanage. She was sure of that, at least in her mind, because of a reoccurring dream she had of a woman in a brown dress, holding her hand. The issue with the dream was she didn't know if what she remembered happened before or after she arrived. Back then, record keeping wasn't the best, and if someone had information about her, it had never made it into her file.

Not until Palmer was older and in elementary school did she realize she was different from the other kids. Her classmates teased her, ridiculed her. The teachers tried to make it stop, but they weren't around during recess or on the bus after school. She dreamed of being adopted or at least finding a foster family, someone to love her, and each day, she'd wait for someone to tell her she was going to finally have a mom and dad. Days turned into weeks, which turned into years.

On her eighteenth birthday, the state moved her into transitional housing until she was twenty-one. Palmer made the most of her situation, and by the time her twenty-first birthday rolled around, she had earned her associate's degree in accounting and secured a job as a teller at Bay Bank. At first, the pay wasn't great, but she managed. She rented a room in a house and then found roommates to share an apartment with, until she had saved enough for a down payment on an apartment.

Her apartment was a nice size, with two bedrooms and an open-concept layout; the kitchen had brand-new appliances and led into her living room. Her favorite part of the apartment was the view she had from her living room—San Bruno Mountain.

Now, she was within walking distance to work, South San Francisco's historic downtown, and all the artisan-enriched cafés where she loved spending her weekend mornings, drinking coffee and eating a scone or cinnamon roll. She was often by herself, which was easier than forging friendships that might not last.

The coffeepot beeped, and Palmer contemplated her next step as she poured herself a cup. She could take her cup of coffee and go sit by the window and admire her view, or she could take the packaged test to the post office instead of waiting until she went to work. Thinking about the box sent her nerves into overdrive. Despite having nothing to lose, she had a long list of what-ifs that plagued her thoughts. She didn't have a family now, and if there wasn't one out there for her, things wouldn't change for her, but she had to know.

Palmer drank her coffee as she made her way into the bathroom. She showered, dried her hair, dressed in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, and made her way to the front door. She picked up the box, tucked it under her arm, and walked toward the elevator.

Outside, the sun shone brightly and warmed her skin. Spring was in the air. Flowers bloomed, trees flowered, and the birds sang louder than the city noise. As she walked toward her destination, she missed the blue mailboxes that

used to be on every other street corner. Those were gone, right along with pay phones and the corner bodegas. The only nostalgic things left these days were fire hydrants. Those would never go away. Neither would her memories of the time the boys at the home figured out how to unscrew the bolt on the hydrant during one of the hottest days of the year. They all played in the water until the fire department showed up, and then still, the firemen let them play a little longer. Those moments were worth remembering.

“Good morning, Palmer,” the post office attendant said as Palmer approached the counter. “I didn’t see a package in your box, but let me check.”

“Oh, no worries. I’m just dropping off today.” Slowly, Palmer extended her hand. She watched as the clerk took the box, scanned the prepaid barcode, and waited for the receipt to print.

“Anything else? Do you need stamps? We received some new ones in. Do you want me to show you?”

“Not today, but thank you.” Palmer took her receipt and stuffed it into her pocket as if it was going to bite her or held bad news. She knew once she was home, she’d read the tracking number, memorize it, and check the website every day. Once the company had it, Palmer would start the countdown. The time between the six- and eight-week marks would be torture for her.

Palmer stopped and bought the newspaper, and then went into one of the cafés near her apartment. She picked up a bottle of water and waited until it was her turn in line. She ordered a cinnamon roll and told the barista she would be outside. She sat in one of the metal chairs, took a sip of her water, and opened the paper. At times, she felt like she’d grown up in a different era, one where reading the paper was the norm, and not the one where everyone read on their phones or tablets. If she stared at the small screen on her phone too long, she’d get a migraine, and never mind working for more than an hour at her desk. Once a migraine kicked in, she was down for the count. Her worst one yet, which happened a few weeks back, had kept her out of work for almost a week. Thankfully, her

boss didn't have a problem filling in for her. She supposed that was because she'd been with the bank for fifteen years and until recently had never used a sick day. It seemed, as of late, she was using them more than anyone else.

Her cinnamon roll arrived, and her mouth watered. They were her favorite treat, and she only ate them on the weekends. The second bite was as delicious as the first, but by the last, she felt a headache coming and wanted to get home. She cleaned her space, tucked her newspaper under her arm, and headed back to her apartment. Her day was ruined, all because she couldn't stop the migraines from coming. She'd done everything she could. She'd changed her diet, increased her caffeine intake, started drinking tea, and bought the most expensive head-and-neck compress on the market. At first, the migraines were manageable. Lately, they were becoming increasingly unbearable.

Palmer made it into her apartment in time to pull her light-blocking curtains over her window and heat up her compress. By the time she crawled into bed, her stomach felt queasy, and she was on the verge of tears. As the pain throbbed, she told herself when it stopped, she would make an appointment with her doctor and ask if there was something more she could do to curb the pain. She didn't want to admit it might be time to seek treatment, and that home remedies and homeopathy weren't working.

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Excerpt From

Before I'm Gone(Uncorrected Proof)

Heidi McLaughlin

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lobster trap**

Caroline

Caroline Taylor stared out of the large train window at the scenery passing by. The train jostled back and forth as it rolled over the tracks. Three more stops and she'd be in the one place she wanted to visit for as long as she could remember, ever since a classmate told her about Seaport and showed her pictures. Caroline couldn't pinpoint what it was, but the imagery appealed to her, called to her, like birds called to their friends. She spent hours looking at photos of the harbor, the yachts, and wharfs. She stared at cobblestone streets and marveled at how each piece had been set down perfectly. The homes dated back to the seventeen and eighteen hundreds. She wondered what it was like to live in one of those. And then there were the mansions, with their expansive yards and breathtaking views of the ocean. She would spend a full summer, by herself, without her parents bugging her about her future. Sure, she could've gone to Aruba or some other tropical island, but she wanted to spend her last summer before adulthood on this quaint New England island.

And then there were two.

The conductor announced the next stop ... *her* stop. His voice was fuzzy over the intercom and difficult to understand. None of that mattered though. Caroline didn't need to hear him clearly to know. Ever since she boarded the train in New Haven, she had the stops memorized.

As soon as they started across the bridge, and with the Atlantic on either side of them, it was as if nature knew she

would arrive any moment. The sky was a swathe of pinks and oranges, reminding her of a tub of sherbet.

The train slowed. Caroline saw people going on about their day. They didn't seem to care about the train or the people coming to their town. Everything she had read about this charming island told her that Seaport welcomed visitors.

She smiled when the train went around the bend, and the land opened to the perfect view of the water. The ocean sparkled like sapphires while the setting sun on the horizon hugged the many boats floating among the waves. Her research showed that this town deserved to be on postcards and calendars with its cobblestone streets, clapboard houses, mansions, and boardwalk.

Caroline couldn't hide her excitement and jumped up before the train came to a full stop. She hit the seat in front of her and apologized profusely to its occupant. Then she stepped out into the aisle, propping onto the seat to give herself the boost she needed to yank down her suitcase.

"Here, let me," a kind man behind her said. He brought her luggage down and set it in the aisle.

"Thank you." Caroline stacked her bag on top of her suitcase, slung her purse over her shoulder, and waited not so patiently to get off the train. She yearned to smell the salty sea air.

Caroline stepped out onto the platform and tipped her head back. She inhaled and let the oceanic essence wash over her. For the first time in months, she felt at peace. She needed this vacation and didn't regret booking the trip despite her father's protests. Seaport was going to be her escape from reality for the next three months.

A recent Yale graduate with honors, she had a cushy job waiting for her at Goldman Sachs in New York City. The idea of it made her nauseous. Caroline needed a break. There was no way she could start her job without clearing her head. Her father failed to understand her desire for a vacation, probably because he rarely took one unless his heart doctor forced it upon him.

The train horn blared as it slowly pulled away from the station. Everyone who had disembarked with her had dispersed and very few people lingered. She grabbed the handle of her suitcase and made her way to the exit where she knew she would find a rideshare with ease.

However, as soon as she saw the town laid out in front of her, Caroline wanted to walk. She wanted to experience everything in the moment and a car barreling down the road wouldn't allow her to take it all in. Besides, if a restaurant or store sparked her interest, she'd be able to stop and explore.

The light breeze wrapped around her, making her want to be outside while the sun still had some life left. She typed the address to her cottage into her phone and set off in the direction indicated on the map. Her decision to walk was the right one. Her path took her along the water and near the boats docked for the night. She walked past the restaurants and nightlife. Seagulls squawked overhead, which made her laugh. Every time she turned a corner, there was something new to take in. Before her was an extensive park where kids waded in the water and parents sat in the sand, and a little league baseball game played. Caroline stood there for a moment, inhaling the scent of summer in a coastal town.

Before the sun said its last goodbye for the day, she reached the cottage. She had every aspect of her rental memorized. Each free moment she had in school, she looked at pictures and imagined herself in the small, blue house with a white porch. All she had to do was go out the back door, walk a few feet, and she'd be in the water. Her rental included a private beach and a dock. Not that she had a boat or any intention to rent one. Caroline was fine walking wherever she needed to go. Rain or shine.

Caroline heaved her luggage up the three stairs, pressed the code into the lockbox on the wall, and waited for it to click. Inside was the key she'd need for her stay. She inserted it into the lock and turned the key to the right, per the instructions she had memorized. The sound of it disengaging brought a smile to her face. "I'm home," she said to whoever could hear her.

Inside, she flicked the light on and took in the space with its classic New England feel. It was even better in person. The exposed beam, white wainscoting, and blue accents appealed to her. She wanted a beach house and not the stuffy apartment she had rented for her city job.

“This ... this feels like home.”

Caroline walked through the small cottage until she reached the back door. She pulled open the curtains and gasped. The view was better than anything the owners could've captured on film. She opened the door and stepped out, ditching her shoes before she reached the beach.

She paused when her bare toes touched the sand. It was still warm, and the surrounding air smelled like sea salt, summer, and fun. That's if fun had a smell. Caroline took her steps slowly, pausing only to run her fingers through the seagrass. When she reached the water, she carefully dipped her toes in and was pleasantly surprised to find the temperature warm enough for her. She went in farther, up to her knees, and played with the waves as they crashed around her legs. In the distance, a horn sounded. She looked out over the horizon at the line of boats making their way into the harbor. A boat tour was on her list of things to do... so was drinking mudslides and piña coladas while she sunbathed.

Caroline had an endless amount of time. That's how she wanted to think of it. As far as she was concerned, September was so far off it would never come.

Caroline fell asleep with the bedroom window open and woke to birds singing, the curtains blowing, and the sun shining. She rarely slept with her window open at Yale. While it was an Ivy League school, the students liked to party, and her dorm room faced the quad. The noise was too much to bear.

After she showered and dressed, Caroline headed into town. Everyone she passed said “hello” or “good morning” to her. While she waited in line at the coffee shop on the corner

for her daily fix, she checked her notes on the things she needed to do today. First on the list was buying groceries. Then she was going to explore. She wanted to learn every nook and cranny of Seaport. Leave no stone unturned, as some would say.

Her phone chimed with a text from her mom. Dread filled Caroline. She had forgotten to let her mom know when she had arrived last night. She apologized and promised to send some pictures later. Her mom was a little more supportive than her dad, but still worried.

When it was her turn, Caroline ordered an iced macchiato with skim milk and a banana nut muffin. When the barista called her name, she took her breakfast outside and walked a block to the park. She sat on the wall, which was the perfect height for her, and people watched.

For such a small town, it was busy. Traffic moved slowly along the cobblestone road, people biked, walked, and some moseyed. It was as if they didn't have anywhere to be, much like her. Being on her own time was the best time.

Today was going to be perfect.

By the time the sun was directly above her, she'd had her fill of people watching and was ready to explore. Each store had something different to offer. There was a fudge shop where she stood watching as they made candy in the window longer than she cared to admit.. Next to it was a liquor store. Caroline would go there later to get what she needed for her piña coladas. She window-shopped at the local jeweler and saw a mermaid necklace her sister, Jackie, would love.

Caroline walked into Seaport Souvenirs and perused the rack of postcards. She had a hard time deciding which ones to buy and bought ten. Her mom would love getting them in the mail every week.

Her next stop was the tourist clothing store. She couldn't quite pinpoint why, but she had always wanted a swimsuit, cover-up, and big beach hat from one of these stores. Caroline chose three different suits: two bikinis and a one-piece. The

sales clerk said she would need both, especially if she planned to go out on the water.

Caroline wore her new hat outside, not caring what the locals thought. She stopped at a rack of pamphlets and took one of each then went into Starboard's for lunch.

"Just one," she told the hostess. "Near the window, if possible."

Caroline followed the hostess to the front of the restaurant and thanked her. She glanced through the menu but had already decided what she wanted to eat long before she walked into Starboard's. She wanted to try their famous lobster roll. According to their website, it was world famous.

A young, dark haired, waiter approached Caroline with a smile, "Hi, welcome to Starboard's. What can I start you off with?"

"May I have one of your frozen lemonades and the lobster roll I've heard so much about?"

The waiter smiled. "Hot or cold?"

"For what?"

"The roll. It comes either hot or cold."

"Oh, I don't know. What do you recommend?"

"I prefer hot."

"Perfect."

"If you're looking for something to do, I suggest Blue Lobster Adventures." He pointed to the pamphlet on top of the pile. "They're the best in the business."

"Thank you."

She handed her menu back to the waiter and picked up the brochure. "Let the Carter family show you around Seaport. Daily tours leave every hour, on the hour. Check our website if it's raining," Caroline read aloud to herself.

"Where are you from?" the waiter asked when he returned with her lemonade.

She looked at him quizzically before answering.

He laughed. “The hat and brochures gave it away.”

Caroline felt her cheeks heat up a little even though she had no reason to be embarrassed. She wasn’t the only out of town visitor. “I arrived from Connecticut last night.”

He nodded toward her stack of pamphlets. “You’ll find a lot of things to do in there, and if you’re unsure, ask a local. We love telling people what they should and shouldn’t see.”

“Thanks.”

“If you’re brave, you can always rent a scooter and go all over the island.”

“I appreciate the guidance. Thank you.”

“No problem. I’ll be right back with your lobster roll.”

By the time he returned, Caroline had separated her travel guides into three different piles: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. That would give her four days to sit on the beach, read, and shop. And maybe rent a scooter and explore the rest of the island. She had almost three months to do nothing but relax, eat food, and enjoy island life. She intended to make the most of it.

Click here to read [The Lobster Trap](#)

about heidi mclaughlin

Heidi McLaughlin is a New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestselling author of The Beaumont Series, The Boys of Summer, and The Archers.

In 2012, Heidi turned her passion for reading into a full-fledged literary career, writing over twenty novels, including the acclaimed Forever My Girl.

Heidi's first novel, Forever My Girl, has been adapted into a motion picture with LD Entertainment and Roadside Attractions, starring Alex Roe and Jessica Rothe, and opened in theaters on January 19, 2018.

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