

SHOTGUN
WEDDING
COWBOY

WEST PROTECTION SENTRY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EM PETROVA

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Shotgun Wedding Cowboy

WEST Protection Sentry

Book 3

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**Marriage vows weren't part of his employment contract.
Until now...**

Julius Abel was thrilled to join Sentry, the FBI's newest task force. He had no way of knowing one of his first assignments would involve touring with country music's hottest sweetheart. Or that protecting her would require a fake marriage proposal. But it's too late to turn back now. Especially since she's become so much more to him than just a job...

Avalynn Ray was at the top of her game...until a sex tape surfaced. One she didn't even realize existed. Clearly, this was the work of her stalker. But thankfully, her sexy cowboy bodyguard had a plan to safeguard her reputation and career. Now all she has to do is *not* develop real feelings for her fake fiancé...

They're about to find out just how thin the line between real and make believe is — and how easy it is to cross. But with a dangerous predator lurking in the shadows, can Julius keep Avalynn safe long enough to take a shot at happily ever after?

***Shotgun Wedding Cowboy*, book 3 in the WEST Protection Sentry series, is a spicy rockstar romance that can be read as a standalone. Download today and get ready for the steamy, action/adventure story you never knew you needed.**

**SHOTGUN
WEDDING
COWBOY**

by

Em Petrova

Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Chapter One

“There’s a sex tape.”

Julius Abel adjusted his cowboy hat. “Then you know I have nothing to be ashamed of.”

His boss’s chuckle filtered through the phone into his ear. “It’s probably not you. I mean, I’d be shocked if it was.”

Julius stopped moving around the hotel room and focused on what Clay was saying. “Okay,” he said slowly. “There must be a reason why you’re telling me about a sex tape. What’s going on?”

He shot a look at the door leading to a much larger grand suite, where the biggest artist on the country charts right now was still sleeping. She also happened to be under his protection.

“I think you can guess. It’s a tape of your ward.”

Outwardly, Julius gave no indication that he registered Clay’s words. Completely still, he continued to stare at the closed door.

Avalynn Ray.

The sweetheart, the apple of everyone’s eye, a wholesome role model to screaming little fangirls all over the world.

On a sex tape.

Anger swelled in his chest. “You don’t think it’s coincidence that the tape’s popped up now, do you?”

“No. The FBI believes it’s the work of her stalker.”

Julius’s throat clamped. “So, she slept with her stalker.”

“Not exactly.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You need to see the tape to fully understand, Abel.”

Watch the woman he guarded in the throes of a private act like that? It didn't just go against the grain—it chafed him raw.

But if he was going to continue to protect her from the threats bombarding her these past six months while he'd been responsible for her safety, he *needed* to see it.

“Send it to me.”

“It's already in your inbox.”

Julius scrubbed a hand over his face. “Fuck. Okay. So give me the rundown. She slept with her stalker and he released the tape. Why wait six months when he's already been sending her death threats? Why didn't he just send it along with the first threat?”

“The stalker's been silent for how long now?”

“Twenty-nine days.” Twenty-nine days since Avalynn had begun to relax. When Julius accompanied her to the next stop on her tour, ushering her into a waiting car or to a hotel room in yet another city, she had stopped looking over her shoulder. She let him do that for her.

Now her spell of peace would end. Her lovely brown doe eyes would glimmer with fear once more.

“This will help us, though,” Julius said. “Could be the break we've been waiting for. Can the tape be traced?”

“We're working on it. The bureau has agents analyzing everything now.”

“And the tape is leaked.”

The line went silent for a moment. Then Clay said quietly, “Yes.”

A sex tape in the hands of the media. Fuck. It spelled disaster. Avalynn was going to be frantic.

Julius's brain was already racing ahead to how to calm her down and ease her fears, but her reputation was on the line, and *that* wasn't in his wheelhouse. Her manager and public relations team should be notified ASAP.

He pushed out a heavy breath. "This is a doozie."

Clay made a choking noise. "A doozie?"

"You makin' fun of me? My momma says it. I'm a Southern boy."

The joke lightened the moment enough to galvanize Julius into action. "Avalynn doesn't know yet. She's still asleep. Concerts wipe her out for at least ten hours, but this can't wait. Fuck. I can't believe I have to wake her up for this."

"Unfortunately, no amount of bodyguard or task force training could prepare you for this. You're on your own, Abel."

He bobbed his head in agreement even though Clay couldn't see him and scraped his fingers over his jaw.

Over the past twenty-nine days, he had begun to relax too. Lost a bit of his edge maybe. Now he would sit the soft, sweet woman down and share something that would scare the shit out of her. His top priority was keeping her alive, but knowing her, she'd care more about the threat to her career.

He returned his attention to the call. "Now we're facing more security risks. We're in the middle of the tour. There are a lot more stops to make."

"Which is why the Sentry team will be meeting you at the next venue."

"The team?"

"The *whole* team."

He'd been working alone for six months. It would be good to have someone watching his back while he watched Avalynn's.

"See you when you get here, Clay." Ending the call, Julius moved toward the door that led to his charge. He couldn't

waste another second. He had to wake up Avalynn and inform her of the situation.

He pushed open the door, prepared to fight her battles, the same as every other day on the job.

* * * * *

Avalynn woke to the deep, dulcet tones of her bodyguard speaking. Her exhausted mind drifted on the currents of sleep and his voice. She always wondered if Julius could carry a tune. Surely a voice as buttery as fine leather—and gritty too—would make beautiful music.

His voice changed. Tension made it slightly brittle. His words grew clipped.

She lifted her head from the plush pillow covered in the silk pillowcase she traveled with. She strained to make out what he said. Then she heard a door shut.

With her bodyguard having access to her suites at all times, she was accustomed to hearing him moving about, but did he slam that door a little harder than usual?

Over the past six months that she'd been traveling with her bodyguard, she'd started reading his moods. With a stalker and the kidnapping threats, she *had* to take Julius's moods seriously. If he showed even the slightest shift, she had to believe that her stalker was at work again.

Sure, she had plenty of people she could call overenthusiastic fans. One guy regularly sent photos of himself making out with her image on a flatscreen. Crazy came with the job, but her stalker had taken things to the next level and gained the ;'notice of the FBI.

Then Julius arrived to oversee her personal protection. Leaving her safety up to him meant that she'd begun to relax. Maybe she'd grown *too* relaxed.

The sound of that door slamming had her on edge.

Julius's voice changed pitch again. After all this time together, she recognized that as his "speaking to the boss" voice. She stared at the closed blinds, trying to make out what

time of day it was, or even what city she'd slept in. With so many more dates on her tour ahead of her, it was easy to lose track. Where she was, ceased to matter. She just left it up to her people to move her where she needed to be.

And protect her while she did it.

Her job, was to be at peak performance at all times. She didn't *only* perform music to huge, sellout crowds. Little girls looked up to her. She was a role model to generations younger than her and she used her voice for bettering the world. When she wrote lyrics, she thought about how the world would interpret them and translate them to their own lives.

A low grumble from her bodyguard had Avalynn sitting up in bed and listening harder. Something was wrong.

When the soft rap came at her closed bedroom door, she drew the covers up to her waist.

"Come in," she called out.

First thing she noticed when Julius entered was the position of his hat. The brim was pulled low over his eyes in a ticked-off, don't-mess-with-me vibe. In one hand he carried a computer tablet. In the other, her morning cup of peppermint tea.

As he strode toward the bed, she reached out to take the cup. She had no clue when the daily ritual of Julius bringing her tea had started, only that he kept it up and she looked forward to it each morning.

His dark brown eyes fixed on her face. "Mornin', Avalynn."

She curled her fingers around the mug and brought it to her lips. "Hi, Julius. What's going on?"

He didn't answer her right away. He walked to the corner of her suite and dragged an armless chair over to the bed. The chair didn't suit a big, masculine guy. As he dropped to the seat, she studied the set of his jaw.

Reading him this morning wasn't so easy. Whatever was wrong, the firm line of his lips told her that he wasn't ready to

tell her, either.

With the tablet still gripped in one rough hand, he waited for her to lower her teacup before speaking.

“There’s a sex tape.”

His words didn’t immediately register. Her gaze met his. The very serious expression he wore drove those four words home.

She moved to set the cup on the nightstand. Tea sloshed over the side. She whipped back the covers. The T-shirt she slept in was long enough to provide enough modesty when she swung her legs over the side of the bed.

Julius watched her with the same intensity he always did. Only this time, something moved in his eyes.

Worry.

Perched on the side of her bed, she stared at him. “A sex tape,” she repeated.

He nodded.

Her stomach bottomed out and her heart gave a painful squeeze. “Of me?”

He nodded again.

Her lips popped open on a gasp. How? When? With whom? There was no way she had a sex tape. The sweetheart of country music didn’t have sex, let alone film herself in the act.

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

Julius shifted forward in his seat. Close enough to reach out and lay a hand over hers. “A sex tape of you was leaked to the media late last night.”

She blinked at him, wishing he’d push his hat back so she could see his eyes better. “How?”

He shook his head. “The FBI’s looking into it. Tracing the path of the tape.”

“A physical tape recording? Of me?”

“Yes.”

Searing pain sliced through her chest. “There’s no way,” she whispered. “I...” All of a sudden, the cracks in her dam whose holes she always plugged whenever it came to rumors about her, burst. Tears spilled out, and she buried her face in her hands.

“Avalynn. I’m so sorry.” His soft, crooning voice didn’t offer the fix she needed. The water was flowing now, and there was no stopping it.

Her shoulders shook with a sob. “I can’t have a sex tape! I’m the sweetheart of country!”

“I know, honey.”

She dropped her hands and stared at him. Tears streamed down her face, and she was starting to form a snot bubble. “Do you understand this is going to ruin my career? I’m in the middle of the biggest tour of the summer! I’ve had sold-out venues for the last six months!”

He got up and walked into the bathroom. A cry broke from her, and then another. When Julius’s cowboy boots appeared in front of her vision, she stuck out her hand, and he pressed a handful of tissues into it.

She mopped at her face and blew her nose. He held out a wastebasket next, and she dropped the destroyed tissues into it. He passed her some new ones.

“Thank you,” she said on a tremor.

He took his seat again, facing her. Watching her crumble.

She could not crumble.

Lifting her head, she met his steady stare, relieved to see his eyes without his hat tipped so low. “I’d never allow someone to record something like that. I wouldn’t do this. It’s so out of character that I can’t even fathom how it happened!”

“I believe you, Avalynn.” His dark eyes offered an anchor in a wild, turbulent sea. She latched on tight. He may be her bodyguard, but right now he was being a friend.

Her gaze dropped to the computer tablet resting in his lap.

“I forwarded it to you,” he said.

She couldn’t quite meet his eyes. “Have you seen it yet?”

“No.”

The quiet word provided a bit of calm. She used it to gather herself. She had to get her crap together. There was no time for mistakes. Not with tens of thousands of seats sold out across America.

He held the tablet out to her.

Reluctantly, she took it and then smashed the wad of tissues to her eyes again so she didn’t have to see that look of sympathy Julius must be wearing. “I’d like to be alone.”

“Of course.” His boots moved out of her line of sight. Seconds later, he returned and set a box of tissues on the bed next to her.

Without another word, he left the room.

That choppy ocean called life pitched her around like a ship in a storm. This *couldn’t* be happening. Couldn’t be real. There must be a mistake—someone who looked like her was on that video.

She swiped a clean tissue over her eyes again and set the tablet on her knees. Julius had the video queued up and ready for her to view with a touch of a finger. At first, all she made out was flesh and movement. Then came the sound of a rough groan.

Oh god. Could her bodyguard hear that from outside the door? Where was her manager and PR team?

Heart thudding erratically, she lowered the volume and stared at the scene unfolding before her eyes.

So far, the camera didn’t capture her face. Or the face of the male either. Just his...

Oh god. She was not one to size shame, but he was... smaller than average. *A lot* smaller than average.

Where did this take place? Nothing about the room gave away the location.

When did it happen?

Who was her supposed lover? She could count them on one hand and didn't recognize the guy.

The man grabbed the woman's hip and turned her body toward the camera. Avalynn squinted harder at the screen. Her heart plummeted when she saw the *one* mark in the world that could identify *her* as the woman in the video.

It couldn't be. She didn't buy that somebody didn't doctor her face or have a similar tattoo.

The tiny bird tattoo on her outer thigh, low enough that it peeked out beneath all her short skirts. The small, puffy bluebird with two music notes floating from its beak was a play on her name, which meant beautiful bird and nodded toward her passion for singing.

But...it looked too real.

"No," she whimpered as she watched the rest of the video that would forever damage her reputation, sully her name and end her career.

It really was her on the tape. And that tattoo gave her a reference point. The tape had been made after her twenty-third birthday, the date she got the tattoo from a well-known artist in Las Vegas.

Problem was, knowing the timeframe still didn't identify who the lover could be.

Chapter Two

Julius mentally shook himself, but there was no forgetting the look on Avalynn's face when he handed over that computer tablet. It took everything in him to walk out of the room and give her some space to watch the video alone.

He was helpless. His hands tied. He could contain threats and make sure nobody laid a finger on her, but he couldn't protect her from what she would see on that tape.

With a sigh of resignation, he grabbed his laptop and sank to the bed in his own room. If he was going to keep her safe, he had to know what he was up against.

Opening his email in a secure window, he scrolled to the most recent message in his inbox and clicked.

The video opened for him, and he enlarged it to view on the full screen. With one ear on the door to Avalynn's room, he hit play on the video.

After a minute, relief filled him. It wasn't that graphic. It pissed him off that the guy's face was completely obscured from the camera, but thankfully, so was Avalynn's.

However, that tattoo on her leg was a dead giveaway as to her identity. Then again, that tattoo had been splashed across every social media channel and most of the tabloids in the world. A lot of girls probably ran out and got the same tattoo.

Julius froze the screen and made the tattoo even larger.

"Fuck," he ground out.

It was definitely Avalynn on the sex tape. How did he know that the teeny tiny freckle by the bird's foot belonged to

his ward? *It's your damn job to know every little detail about her, including distinguishing markings.*

He watched the rest of the video, taking in the fact that the male had a dick almost as small as that freckle...and one more thing that made his fist bunch.

She wasn't moving in the video. All that movement was her body being jostled around. Those sounds weren't coming from her either.

The man's torso moved over top of her bare breasts and stomach. The guy obviously worked out. He didn't get muscles like that from sitting around plotting against his famous lover.

His body actually looked a lot like Julius's.

However...

That dick is definitely not like mine.

The video ended, and he let out a silent breath of relief that his ward's face never visible in the video.

Loud banging on the door of Avalynn's suite made him slam the laptop shut and toss it on his bed. In a few strides, he reached the door adjoining his room to hers and threw it wide.

As he reached the entrance to her suite, more loud banging rattled the door. He yanked it open and looked down on the person he expected to see sooner—Avalynn's manager.

Heidi leveled him in her gaze. "I'm so going to fire you."

He smirked at her and returned to Avalynn.

She sat on the edge of the bed in the same spot, the tablet on her lap. She stared down at it, but the screen was black.

"Oh, honey!" Heidi rushed in, dropped to the bed and took Avalynn in her arms. She endured the embrace but sat stiffly. Lana, Damon and Freddy crowded around, offering her words meant to comfort.

Avalynn peeked at Julius around her manager's shoulder. It was a cry for help if he'd ever seen one.

“Okay, give the woman some space to think and breathe.” He broke up the team and they fell back at his command.

Lana whipped out her phone. “We have to get on top of this. There’s no time to lose! Avalynn, are you ready to give your statement?”

He crouched in front of his ward. “Avalynn, do you want them here?”

Her watery blue eyes met his. “You care about my feelings?”

His chest burned. “Of course I do.”

She didn’t need to speak—he read her wishes on her face.

“Everybody out!” He swiped a hand through the air, sending three rushing to the door. Heidi left more reluctantly, spitting more oaths to fire him that held the weight of a baby hurling itself at a giant.

Once he firmly shut them out, he walked over and picked up her teacup. It only took seconds to return to the coffee machine and dispense hot water into a fresh cup with Avalynn’s favorite morning blend. The peppermint drink woke her up and soothed her vocal cords, but what he really thought she could use was some chamomile.

The water drizzled into the cup, and the scent of mint filled his nostrils. Keeping her favorite things around meant she didn’t have to leave the room and nobody had to enter to bring them to her. He could protect her better.

When he returned to her side and held out the cup, she took it from him. Her glassy eyes burned up at him.

“You okay?” He sank to the chair, aware that as soon as she gave the word to see her team, all hell would break loose again.

“Let me have a few sips of this. Then I’ll see them.”

He watched her for a moment. She appeared composed. Her shoulders weren’t slumped under the weight of what she faced. She was handling this better than he expected considering her age and what was happening.

But she had a natural fragility that she never exposed to the outside world. Seeing it now worried him.

His phone dinged with an incoming message. He glanced at the screen.

“My boss is here.”

Another text popped up.

“And your manager is threatening to fire me. Again.”

Avalynn’s gaze met his. Suddenly, a soft laugh broke past her full lips.

He met the sound with a crooked smile.

“Thank you, Julius. I needed that laugh. And I need ten minutes before I see my team. Can you make that happen?”

He looked her in the eyes. “You can count on me.”

* * * * *

Avalynn sipped her peppermint tea. The mint soothed her strained vocal cords, and the heat soothed her dry throat.

Knowing that Julius had her back one hundred and fifty percent helped more than she could ever express. In times like these, it was scary how on top of everything he could be.

That her bodyguard made the perfect cup of tea was a bonus.

Something she appreciated even more than the tea was Julius’s ability to just sit in silence with her. No expectations. No chitchat. No nervous chatter. Just his solid, strong presence that made her feel safe and comforted—two things she needed in this crazy business.

She’d held her breath, waiting for the terrifying threats against her life to start again after the silence of the past month. Now this.

Julius shot a text to someone and slipped his phone into the pocket of his black dress shirt. He always wore black. A black shirt and jeans, sometimes dress pants, with black cowboy boots and a black Stetson.

Usually he wore a black expression to match, and she liked that he could send people running with a single look.

After sipping half a cup of the fresh, hot tea, she set it on the nightstand. She stood, and the oversized sleeping tee she wore dropped to her knees. “You can let them in now.”

He caught her eyes. “You’re sure?”

She nodded and reached for her terrycloth robe draped over the foot of the bed where she’d dropped it the previous night before crawling between the cool, crisp sheets and letting sleep claim her.

If she’d known how disturbed she’d be this morning, she never would have slept a wink.

Julius preceded her to the sitting room. She took a seat in the corner of the big, modern sofa as he let the crew in.

A low oath came from her manager as she passed him. “I’m going to get you fired, Abel!”

Julius only grunted. Under other circumstances, their rivalry would amuse Avalynn. But not much could pull her out of this pit of despair.

Everyone took up positions around the room. Heidi sat next to her on the sofa, trying not to appear frazzled. Avalynn had been with Heidi for many, many years now—she knew when the woman was frazzled.

Dressed in a very uncharacteristic track suit instead of designer duds, Lana perched on the edge of an overstuffed armchair, while Freddy balanced on the arm like a bright bird in a teal shirt. Damon draped himself dramatically in a low-slung chair made entirely of leather. His sullen expression said it all.

Unsurprisingly, Julius placed his back to the wall of windows overlooking—what city was this again? She still didn’t know. She couldn’t care less what buildings the sun was peeking over. All she could think about was the tape.

“You saw it?” she managed to whisper.

“Not yet,” Heidi said.

“Not in its entirety,” Damon added.

“Just bits and pieces on social media.” Lana offered her a wobbly smile.

Damn.

Heidi drew Avalynn’s attention. “I recommend that we cancel the rest of the tour.”

Avalynn stiffened. “Absolutely not. Not happening.”

“Avalynn—” Heidi began.

She cut her off. “I would never disappoint my fans! Little girls scream and cry to see me. No way am I letting them down.”

Heidi’s eyebrows creased. “You think parents will let their little girls see someone who made a sex tape?”

Avalynn’s gasp was drowned by Julius’s angry rumble.

“Stop right there,” he barked. “She wasn’t even moving. She was drugged.”

Avalynn jerked her head toward him, jaw dropped. “Oh my god...”

He looked at her.

You watched? she mouthed to him.

He didn’t need to respond. The only way he’d notice such a thing was if he’d seen the tape. In its entirety.

Then it hit her—he was right.

She had been oddly...unresponsive on the tape.

Heidi threw her hands in the air. “That’s it! That’s what we tell everyone. Avalynn Ray never made a sex tape. Just let everyone know—”

Julius broke in, “Know what? That she wasn’t consenting? We can’t release information on what is now a federal investigation. What happened here was a crime any way you look at it, consenting or not. We have to claim no comment.”

Everyone went silent, processing his announcement.

Lana stared at her phone. “The public is weighing in now. They’re commenting.”

“Oh god.” Avalynn buried her face in her hands. Her hair fell over her face, and she took refuge in the thick mass of light brown waves, just like when she threw herself on her bed as a child.

Freddy gasped. “So many people are supporting Avalynn. Actually, the support coming in is *crazy*! If we just thank her fans—”

“She can’t comment on anything.” Julius’s firm tone echoed like a door slam on the subject.

Slowly, Avalynn raised her head. “This isn’t how I pictured my career ending. I always thought I’d be inducted into the Grand Ole Opry in my golden years and then quietly retire someplace warm surrounded by the love of a good husband and a big family who got to live well on my legacy. Now I’m looking at fleeing the public eye for the rest of my days, changing my hair color and pretending that isn’t me singing that song on the radio!”

Heidi rested a hand on her arm, but Avalynn didn’t want comfort. She was mad.

Angry, even. And she was *never* angry.

Actually, “pissed off” was the term she’d use, and she didn’t cuss.

She shifted her gaze to Julius. He stood with his legs braced apart and his arms folded over his broad chest. His thick arms threatened to pop the threads of his shirt sleeves, but the blazing anger in his eyes was what she needed right now.

An avenging angel—or bodyguard, in this case. Someone to stand with her and fight. Or at the very least, fight against her PR team’s decision to end the tour or post comments that would only spur more attacks.

Avalynn pressed her hand over her mouth and listened to the group who cared about her career trying to salvage what was left of it.

“Avalynn, what do *you* want to do?” Julius seemed to be the only voice of reason in this dark grave she’d fallen into.

She shook her head. “My reputation is wholesome. Everyone wants their daughter to grow up to be the girl next door—my persona.”

He gave her a single nod. “Go with no comment. No more discussion on the matter.”

“I’m on it!” Lana’s thumbs flew over her phone screen as she made the social post that the world would either read firsthand or hear about from anybody who did.

After a minute, Lana lowered her phone, a triumphant smile on her face. “There. This will buy us time.”

Damon slumped lower in his seat. Freddy crossed the room to fix himself some coffee. He probably needed to calm his nerves. Heidi and Lana spoke quietly, putting their heads together about what the next move would be.

And Julius and Avalynn locked gazes for a long moment. The connection severed only when his phone buzzed.

“Turn on the TV,” he read aloud. “Goddammit.”

Her stomach plummeted as he stalked across the room and grabbed the remote. After flipping through a few channels, he landed on one and cranked the volume.

A pretty redhead in a power suit stood at a podium, addressing a group of reporters. Camera flashes lit her pale complexion so constantly that Avalynn had to wonder just how big the crowd was.

“Damn, it’s Lark.” Julius stared at the screen. He spoke quietly, but he stood close enough to Avalynn that she heard it.

The woman on TV spoke with confidence. “What happened to Avalynn Ray is a federal crime. The FBI can’t reveal too much, but we can tell you that there is an ongoing investigation involving a similar matter that we believe to be

related. The person responsible will be facing charges and when they're found, will be prosecuted under the stiffest penalties of federal law.”

Avalynn was so busy staring at the TV that at first she didn't realize that Julius had crouched in front of her. His eyes were on the same plane as hers.

“Avalynn. That list of men you've dated that you gave us previously...is there any chance at all that you forgot someone?”

She shook her head.

“Now that you've seen that guy on the tape, is anything at all familiar?”

“No.”

“There were only seven guys on that list.”

She sank into the safe cocoon of his warm brown gaze. “I don't date a lot. My body count is even lower. I just don't sleep around.”

His stare pinned her to the sofa for an endless heartbeat. Then he finally nodded and pushed to his feet. “We're going to get this guy. I swear it to you.”

What her bodyguard didn't say but she heard loud and clear: “This is personal.”

Chapter Three

“Check. Check.” Avalynn’s sweet voice carried across the venue.

These sound checks were part of normal operations, but today Julius was even more on edge. Avalynn stood not twenty feet away from him in the center of the stage, and his mind was already working out ways to rescue her if it came to that.

He’d spent the entire ride to this venue watching out the tour bus windows, on the lookout for strange vehicles following them. Oh, they were followed plenty. Avalynn Ray’s bus wasn’t exactly inconspicuous with her face and name on the side, larger than life. Most people were harmless fans waving at the blacked-out windows hoping that she saw them and waved back. But he wasn’t taking any chances with her.

Next, she ran through a few bars of her latest hit song, the slow tune that had been sitting in the number one spot for four weeks. He’d heard her sing it countless times—onstage, for film crews of late-night talk shows, on the bus, in hotel rooms. Even in the shower.

Tonight the sweet words about heartbreak seemed to come with a new rasp in her tone. No doubt she’d been crying those times when she slipped away to the restroom. The rest of the hours she’d spent sleeping, but he knew a depression nap when he saw one. Who could blame her for trying to shut out the world?

As the sound crew mixed her vocals to perfection, Julius scanned the area repeatedly. When he shifted his stare from the empty stadium seats to the wings off to the side of the stage,

his hand automatically twitched toward the weapon holstered on his torso.

Two members of the Sentry team stepped out of the shadows and gave him twin nods of greeting. Julius let his hand drop and walked across the back of the stage to meet the guys.

Clay Lexis and Julius's own brother Jennings gave him room to keep watch over his ward. He stared at Avalynn for a heartbeat, taking in her pose—head thrown back, the long note spiraling on and on. Her long hair in a ponytail reached to her ass that was clad in light gray, low-slung sweatpants she usually wore for these soundchecks.

“How's she holding up?” Clay headed the Sentry team and had personally recruited Julius and Jennings. Few men were as dialed into their roles as Julius's boss. Having him present for the first performance since the world saw that sex tape made Julius feel a bit more relaxed than he would be otherwise.

He scoured the side of the stage and the sound booth. “As well as can be expected. It hasn't been easy.” Thank god her PR team split off into a separate bus. They'd spent so much time in that hotel suite discussing every single terrible post written about Avalynn after she declined to comment that Julius just about lost his shit on them.

“Her team seems to be keeping her reputation intact so far,” Jennings drawled out.

Julius cocked a brow at his brother. “Be better if they didn't text her nonstop as things unfolded all goddamn day.”

Each time her phone chimed with an incoming text, she'd read it and then hurry to the back of the bus to lock herself in the restroom.

He pushed out a sigh through his nostrils. Suddenly, another teammate, Quaide Livingston, joined them in the wings. Right behind him was Lark.

Stunned, Julius gazed at each member of the team. “You dropped everything to be here?”

Quaide brushed his knuckle under the brim of his black Stetson, tipping it back enough to make out his eyes. “My wife didn’t like the idea of me leaving Colorado, but she’s holding down the fort at the Sentry office.”

“Don’t forget Dove is overseeing the rebuilding of your home after the fire,” Lark interjected. The house fire had been set by some guys they were after, and the entire team had felt that hit.

Just then, Avalynn released one of her long, powerhouse notes. She didn’t use vocals like that as often as many female singers did, but when she did, people stopped what they were doing to pay attention, just like Lark was right now.

“Wow. She’s even more amazing in person.” Lark shook her head.

Julius’s attention shifted to the striking woman all alone in the center of the stage. So small compared to him. Dainty, even. Yet every time he looked at her, he saw the strength of ten men. It hadn’t taken him long at all to spot the trait in her and even less time after that to admire it.

Clay made a grunting noise that brought Julius’s head around. “Lark? Can you stay with Avalynn while the guys and I talk?”

“Sure thing. And don’t worry—I’ve got my sidearm.” She patted her hip. She was trained the same as they were, but Julius was still reluctant to walk away from his charge.

As if understanding his unspoken reservations, Lark met his stare. “I got this, Julius. Really.”

He reluctantly offered her a nod and moved offstage with the others. When Clay led the way to a secluded spot, Julius’s mind remained with Avalynn for a few more beats until Clay spoke.

“Any new developments since we spoke last?” he asked Julius.

He shook his head. “I’ve told you everything I know. Someone knew exactly what they were doing when they leaked that sex tape. Now the world is having a field day at

Avalynn's expense." His tone came out rougher than he planned.

Clay folded his arms across his chest and broadened his stance. "The bureau's doing some digging into the list of men she dated, but it isn't much to work with. You're sure—"

"I'm sure," he cut him off. "Believe me, I asked—again. She swears there aren't any more guys."

"Whoever it was got close enough to drug her," Jennings added. "We're here to dive deeper into the case. From this moment on, every single guy is a suspect."

Quaide snorted. "Should be easy enough to find him. Just make him take off his pants."

If Julius wasn't so invested in this case, he might get a chuckle at the son of a bitch's inadequate size. But every time he thought about that footage, he saw red at what the bastard had done to Avalynn.

"I'm assuming you guys have worked out a plan. Care to let me in on it?" He knuckled the brim of his hat lower.

Clay gave him a nod. "We stick close. Like Jennings said, everyone is a suspect until they're cleared."

"We need to get her off that fucking tour bus and onto a plain, an unmarked one. It isn't safe," he growled.

"We'll let that ride for now."

He jerked his head around to fix his gaze on Clay. "For now? She's a sitting duck in that thing with her name and face on the side like a goddamn target!"

"Which is why we'll let it ride," Clay said evenly. "We're going to escort you to the next venue. Sentry will have an eye out for anyone sniffing around. Meanwhile, WEST Protection is monitoring all her emails. The FBI is doing a deep dive into her social media and running checks on every single person who's ever worked for her."

"Don't bother with her personal team. I already did that."

Clay bobbed his head. “I know that. So the next step is to carry on as planned. Avalynn Ray performs tonight. Her schedule stays the same. Her routine too.”

“Shit—her routine.” The last note of her sound check had carried through the stadium at least two minutes ago. “I gotta wrap this meeting up. I have to bring her water for enhancing her voice. And grapefruit juice.”

Jennings flashed that grin that always put Julius on edge, since he could guess what was coming. Sure enough, Jennings’s teasing drawl followed a split second later. “You’re crushin’ on your ward, big brother.”

He leveled a scowl on him. “You know better.”

“I would...except I never thought I’d see the day you play fetch. Are you the water boy during her concerts too?”

Stepping back, he broke from the group. “I like making things more comfortable for her. It’s just how we operate, and Clay just said to stick to the routine.”

He strode toward the short run of stairs leading onto the stage, hoping Lark had Avalynn waiting for him.

“You didn’t do this for that football player!” Jennings called after him. Several chuckles trailed behind him as he mounted the steps.

He swept his gaze over the open arena. Avalynn and Lark stood off to the side, talking. He immediately assessed Avalynn’s body language. She wasn’t exactly relaxed, but she wasn’t smiling a bit too brightly like she did when speaking to a reporter or fans. She was wary.

In time, Lark would win her over the same way she had Clay despite how grumpy he usually was.

As if she sensed him standing there, Avalynn looked up.

Their gazes locked.

Relief washed over her lovely face. He saw her chest rise on an intake of air.

“I got it from here, Lark,” he roughed out, reaching for Avalynn. Now that he was closer to her, he felt hot anxiety rolling off her in thick waves. But the instant that his hand met her lower back, she relaxed into the safety of his touch.

* * * * *

Avalynn had talked to a lot of people in her life. From the time her first album hit the charts, everyone vied for her time. After those first death threats came in, the authorities got involved, and she talked to them too.

Her former bodyguard wasn't enough, the authorities told her. But they knew a guy.

Julius came on board, and over time, she left her safety up to him and concentrated on her career again.

Now a team from the FBI was just outside her tour bus, asking for a few minutes of her time.

She stared at the closed door, dread rolling over her.

“Avalynn.” Julius's deep voice pitched low.

She didn't turn to look at him standing behind her.

He moved closer. “I promise they won't bite. That redhead you were talking to onstage—she's part of their team, and she wasn't remotely scary, was she?”

She twisted her head to look at him. The upward quirk of his lips were for her benefit alone—the worried creases around his eyes told another story.

“She gave the statement on TV,” Avalynn said.

“Yes. Her name is Lark.”

“She told me. But how do *you* know her?”

Something shifted in the set of his shoulders. All of a sudden, she sensed he was keeping things from her.

“I've worked with this particular task force.”

“I see.” When the FBI sent her a bodyguard, she didn't question who signed his paychecks. Did it matter that he

worked with Lark and the others she'd seen lurking offstage? To her, Julius was a friend and sometimes even a confidante.

He searched her eyes for a moment and then let out a slow sigh. "Avalynn, I can't lie to you. I'm part of the FBI task force known as Sentry."

Her spine stiffened. She stared at him, reeling from his admission.

"You already knew that the FBI placed me here to watch over you. But remember that not even your manager or PR team know."

Her mouth opened. "You're not just a bodyguard?"

"I work for Sentry. Lark is part of my team. As soon as we open that door, you'll meet the others. Avalynn, I *promise* you there's nothing to be afraid of. They're the good guys. And most importantly, they're here to help us."

Understanding slipped into place like tumblers on a lock. "Of course. This is such a big deal, I don't know why I didn't realize that you'd require backup."

Again those firm lips, set in the five-o'clock shadow around his mouth and covering his cheeks and jaw, quirked at the corners. "It's not your job to think of that—it's mine. Now, are you ready to speak with them?"

She steeled her spine even more and nodded.

When he swung the door open, she saw so many people clustered there. He twitched his head for them to enter, and one by one, they filed onto the bus. So many people made it feel so cramped.

Besides her own team and the pretty redhead named Lark there were three other big, intimidating men wearing the same black Stetson that Julius wore.

Her gaze cut over each member of what must be this task force he spoke of. Later when they were alone, she'd ask him what a task force did and how he became part of one. She had so many questions for her bodyguard, who wasn't really a simple personal safety officer after all.

Freddy, Damon and Lana crowded in one corner, and Heidi came to stand next to Avalynn.

She reached a hand toward her manager, and Heidi squeezed her fingers.

Julius caught Avalynn's stare. "Find a spot to sit, stand or lean."

Avalynn curled up in her usual spot in the corner of a bench seat. Everyone else took up the built-in sofa or found a spot to stand. Not surprisingly, Julius stood with his back to the wall, bulging arms folded across his chest.

"Miss Ray, my name is Clay Lexis. I'm with a task force that operates under the FBI. My team and I are here to address the situation with you and help form a plan of action that works for you."

"You're with the FBI," Heidi repeated in a slow manner. She turned her head to look at Julius. "Are *you* with *them*?"

He only cocked a brow at the woman who had gotten on his nerves since day one.

Avalynn flashed a look at her PR team and saw them all sizing up Julius and making the easy connection between his black hat and the Sentry team's.

Scooting to the edge of the seat, Avalynn addressed Clay. "Julius filled me in. What do you suggest? How do we go forward with all this?"

Lana jumped in. "The media is going nuts. Fans are acting out with very negative accusations about Avalynn."

Clay spread his hands, palms up. "That's what we're here to discuss. Our first priority is ensuring Miss Ray is safe with the hope of luring out the person responsible."

His words hung in the air, and all she could hear was what he *didn't* say—the person on that sex tape.

She twisted her head aside and fixed her gaze on Julius's boots. Rough black leather with square toes. Above that, legs clad in black denim. If she kept going, she'd see the cotton of his shirt stretched across his broad chest and finally, that black

Stetson. If the rest of the team sported the hat well, Julius looked born to wear it.

Clay addressed Lana. “You’re in charge of publicity?”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to ask you to only state the things we tell you. Our plan is to draw the perpetrator out by first making him feel confident that he can’t be caught. Then we’ll tighten the noose.”

“We’ll do anything to help end this for Avalynn.”

Her gaze shot to Lana’s. The emotions that hadn’t been far away ever since Julius walked into her suite and told her about the video hovered near the surface. The hot, tight ball in Avalynn’s throat spread downward through her chest too.

Clay waved a hand, almost hitting the redhead in the cramped quarters. “This is Lark. She’s going to instruct you about what to say online.”

Lark offered the PR team a soft smile. “Can we all talk over here?” She waved toward the built-in table that would never seat all of them. Her tour bus was large, but there were only a few of them on it.

She sought out Julius and found him staring at her.

After they all moved to the table Clay nodded at the other two men. “Livingston and Abel will be working with Julius to form a plan for your safety, Miss Ray.”

Her attention flashed to the man Clay referred to as Abel.

“You have the same last name,” she remarked to her bodyguard.

He nodded. “My brother.”

His brother shot her a wide grin. “One of them, anyway. There are five of us.”

Five brothers. Looking at the man, she saw the family resemblance. Did they all look so similar? And why hadn’t she ever thought to ask Julius about his life when he wasn’t

hopping from city to city protecting her? Suddenly, she felt like the most self-centered human being ever.

Heidi redirected Avalynn's attention. "What should we be doing?"

Clay assessed Heidi. "Why don't you join the others?"

Heidi gave her hand a last squeeze before standing and joining the PR team and Lark. That left Avalynn sitting alone on the bench—but not for long. Julius took the vacant spot, scooting close enough that she could grab his hand if she needed the support.

But she didn't and kept her hands folded in her lap.

The three men began to ask Avalynn questions, first about the men she'd dated and ended with the list—a short one—of the ones she'd slept with. The entire time, Julius remained at her side like a hunk of granite or a living piece of Stonehenge, solid and stalwart and exactly what she needed to get her through this ordeal.

Talking about her personal life always came with a measure of difficulty, and spilling it to the FBI task force was far from simple. But she took strength from Julius's presence and told them everything and anything she could think of that might help.

Clay looked at Julius and then slid his gaze to her. "Do you have any memory of what happened?"

She shook her head. "None."

"You don't remember waking up? Perhaps feeling odd or out of sorts?"

"No."

"Do you remember having any...evidence...of the incident?"

"That's enough," Julius cut across Clay.

"We have to know, Julius."

He extended a hand to press into her lower back in that same protective way that always made her feel safe, even

though her cheeks were burning from the question.

“She would have already said something if she were aware of any *evidence*, as you put it.”

“All right. So the next move is just to go about your business. Attend concerts and fulfill your obligations to your fans. But if something unplanned or unscheduled pops up, you won’t be taking those on. We need to keep a tight rein on the situation.”

“What about the man on the tape? You believe it’s the same one who sent me death threats?” Her voice wavered, and Julius’s fingertips pressed tighter into her flesh, leaving five warm half-moons on her back.

“We believe that, yes. He’s bold enough to send those threats and release this video to the world.” Clay’s voice raised higher to be heard over the chatter taking place toward the front.

Her PR team was going crazy, each of them on their phones. Heidi and Lana were deep in conversation. Even Lark was flipping frantically through screens.

Julius’s brother stood and strode over to them. “What’s going on?”

Lark grabbed him by the arm and pulled him in to look at her phone.

“Excuse me a moment.” Julius’s voice at Avalynn’s ear left her feeling hot and cold and shivery all at the same time.

His hand left her back, and he squeezed around the other people to join them. Before long everyone had their phones out and were reading every post, tweet and word from news channels. She listened to their discussions about photos and screenshots of the video being leaked to the public, but she had no desire to look for herself.

She dropped her face in her hands and tried to find some semblance of calm in a tumultuous world. When someone gasped, she jerked her head up.

Lana held out her phone and ran the few steps to Heidi. “Fans are boycotting the concert! Tonight Avalynn’s going to be playing to an empty stadium!”

Avalynn’s blood ran cold even as the walls of the bus began to close in on her. Her stomach plunged to what felt like the soles of her feet. She must have made a choking noise because suddenly Julius dropped to the sofa next to her, close enough that his body heat washed up her side.

“It’s all right, honey. Just breathe. That’s not going to happen.”

“Everyone remain calm!” Lark’s voice carried over the loud talk. “Start deleting the comments, and everything will be fine.”

Julius stared at Clay. “The no comment thing isn’t working. Avalynn’s image is wholesome. This is destroying her.”

The room fell silent.

“So what makes a sex tape acceptable?” Clay asked.

A heavy heartbeat ticked by. Then Lark said, “When it’s not sex and they were making love.”

Avalynn’s jaw dropped.

Lark went on, “I think they were secretly dating.”

“But still not married!” Heidi burst out.

“No, but they got engaged. This is the night of their engagement.” Lark’s red curls seemed to bob around her face as though set in motion by the energy of their owner.

“Who do we say Avalynn is engaged to?” Clay’s question came with another long pause of silence.

Julius cleared his throat. “Me.”

Avalynn jerked her head around to pierce him in her stare. “What?”

Dark brown eyes burned into hers for a split second before Clay redirected Julius’s attention.

“How are we going to convince the world it’s him?”

“Their bodies do look the same,” Lark hedged.

Oh god. Did they? Avalynn had no idea what her bodyguard’s body looked like other than he was a badass hottie in black.

“Julius, stand up and take off your shirt.” Clay’s demand brought him to his feet.

Without hesitation, Julius clamped on to the hem of his T-shirt and stripped it slowly over his head. Each inch of muscled torso he revealed had the ladies gasping, and Avalynn’s mouth hanging open even more.

Wow. Just wow.

Lark and Heidi came over to inspect him, walking around him in circles to check out every angle.

“I think this is going to work,” Heidi said.

“I know it will.” Lark’s eyes glimmered in victory.

Julius’s brother grunted. “Now you’ll have to take off your pants and see if the rest of you matches the guy on the tape.”

“Not a match. Trust me.” Julius’s hard tone sent a flutter low through Avalynn’s belly.

Lark came to a stop in front of Julius. “Her PR team will explain that Avalynn’s secretly been dating her bodyguard. The recording is from the night they got engaged.” Lark’s words brought everyone to heel.

Lana and Damon nodded enthusiastically like two bobble head figures. “This could actually work!” Lana exclaimed.

Julius met Avalynn’s stare. The longer he looked at her, the more his eyes seemed to soften.

She pulled in a deep breath. She couldn’t believe what she was about to say. She must be insane.

“We need a ring.”

Chapter Four

Julius knocked on the door between his and Avalynn's hotel rooms. When he heard her muffled: "Come in!" he entered with her morning cup of peppermint tea in hand.

He stopped in his tracks.

Over the past six months, he'd seen her in various states of exhaustion, but never like this. She lay on her back, unmoving and unblinking, staring up at the ceiling.

He set the cup on the bedside table. "Avalynn, are you feeling all right?"

"Yes." Her voice came out as a rasp.

"Honey, you don't sound okay. Is your throat sore?"

"No. Well, no more sore than after any performance."

A weight had been sitting on his chest all night. When she sang her heart out to a half-empty stadium, it had been hard. But when she rushed off the stage toward him, her face pinched in pain, it damn near brought him to his knees.

Jennings poked fun at him for crushing on his ward, but this had nothing to do with how amazing, talented, smart and beautiful he thought she was. He didn't like seeing her hurting.

And when he got his hands on that motherfucker who drugged her and recorded himself having his way with her, he was going to wrap his hands around his throat and slowly squeeze the life out of him.

He forced air through his lungs and sank to the mattress beside her. Something he never, ever did before. He always

held himself safely on the side of propriety when it came to his wards, but this was different. Avalynn needed a friend.

“Talk to me, honey.”

She closed her eyes.

“Is it about the concert?”

Her delicate throat worked on a hard swallow. “No.”

She had every reason in the world to be upset, but what was bothering her more? He racked his brain and landed on the only other thing outside of her normal routine.

“Is this about ring shopping?”

Her eyes popped open. The chocolatey-brown depths burned with tears. “We can’t even *go* ring shopping! This isn’t how I pictured my engagement at all!”

“Of course it isn’t. First of all, it’s fake.”

She moaned and flipped onto her stomach, face buried in the silk-covered pillow.

“We don’t have to do this today. Or at all. It’s your call, Avalynn. You still have control over everything that happens.”

“Do I though?” Her voice was muffled so the words were difficult to make out.

His fingers twitched toward a spot on the small of her back he spent so much of the past six months touching that he knew the curve without even laying a hand on her. Without looking, he knew how high to raise his hand to touch that spot and guide her to a tour bus, onto a stage, into a crowd of people. He’d guided her around the country and halfway through Canada. If this case wasn’t solved soon, he’d wrap up the US tour with her and travel through Europe at her side.

He pulled his hand back. “You always have a choice. I mean that.”

She twisted her face to see him.

His heart gave a sharp tug.

Okay, his brother wasn't completely wrong. Julius *did* have a crush on Avalynn, but so did ninety percent of the men in the world. She was as close to perfect as any woman could ever be.

After the concert she'd sequestered herself in her room with her therapist on the phone for two straight hours. He hoped to hell she got some of the weight off her chest. Not only was there a sex tape of her, but the non-consensual part could really fuck her up. And it would take time to heal from.

His chest burned with fury, but he stomped on the coals for now. All that mattered was he would end this once and for all. One way or another.

"The jeweler will be here in half an hour, Avalynn. Do you want me to cancel the appointment?" His voice came out with a tenderness it never had before.

Whatever urge had made him step up and suggest that he stand in as her fake fiancé, he had no regrets about it. He'd vowed to protect her, and dammit, he would.

This went beyond an act of duty. He *wanted* to.

When she rolled onto her side, her pale brown hair fell across her cheekbone. Without even pausing to think about what he was doing, he reached out and brushed it away.

Her eyes widened. Slowly, he retracted his hand.

"I don't want to cancel the jeweler. I'll get up."

He nodded and stood. "Here's your tea."

As he walked out of her room, he clamped his hand into a fist. The feel of her silky hair and her even softer skin—

Fuck, he had no business touching her unless it was in the line of duty.

Maybe he'd let the idea of standing in as her fiancé go to his head. Very soon he'd be *pretending* to touch her the way a man touched the woman he loved. But that private moment that just happened back there? Not acceptable.

In his room, he paced back and forth for ten minutes before the text came through from his brother that the jeweler had been thoroughly checked out by Sentry and was on his way up to Avalynn's suite.

When he knocked on her door again, she called out in a much stronger voice. The tone belonged to a woman who knew who she was and where she was going in life—and it was not in a sinking ship.

She would make the best of this situation. For herself, for her career. And for the millions of people who loved her.

He let the jeweler in, along with her PR team and manager. A second rap on the door had him admitting the entire Sentry team.

The jeweler took a place of honor on a chair in the sitting room. He carefully unpacked the locked case he'd brought with a selection of engagement rings. Clay had already warned him not to talk, and Heidi made him sign a non-disclosure agreement—and probably doled out a threat or five before ever allowing him to come up to Avalynn Ray's suite.

Avalynn had changed into a pair of worn jeans that flattered her curvy figure and a simple white T-shirt that clung to her breasts. When she moved, the cloth rode up her tight abs to reveal the barest sliver of golden skin.

She'd left her long hair loose. His gaze caught on the lock that he'd stroked off her beautiful face, forcing his hand into a fist for the second time in an hour.

He filled his lungs with air and slowly let the breath trickle out as she held his stare a beat longer than usual.

Waving toward the sofa, he invited her to sit. Once she did, he lowered himself to the cushion beside her.

She was right—this wasn't how ring shopping should be. This shouldn't be how people got engaged. Without love, it was simply a transaction, another contract to be signed.

As soon as they caught her stalker, this could end. Lark's plan to extricate them from the fake engagement kept running through his head. It could work. It *would*. All they had to do

was catch the stalker before he did anything else that was awful. Then he and Avalynn could break off the engagement without any lingering damage.

She would be free to find someone she *really* loved.

And so would he.

He focused on the sparkling diamonds nestled in black velvet the jeweler had laid out on the modern concrete coffee table.

Next to him, Avalynn was completely still.

The jeweler was middle-aged with silver hair that swooped off his forehead with all the pomp of a man who pimped diamonds worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Thankfully, her manager would be writing *that* fat check. Julius's bank account couldn't handle it.

"Do any of the rings catch your eye, Miss Ray?" the jeweler asked.

She cast her gaze over the rings. Silver, gold, white gold, platinum. Diamonds of all shapes, but none of them small. Julius's palms were beginning to sweat.

"Uh..." She unfurled her delicate finger from her fist and pointed at one. "I guess this one."

The jeweler snatched it up, and with a hand sporting a white cotton glove, he removed the ring from the velvet and held it up to Avalynn. "May I?"

She nodded, and he slid it onto her ring finger.

Julius felt the air being sucked out of the room on a collective gasp. He'd stopped breathing a long time ago. Hell, probably the minute he offered to stand in as the body double to a guy on a sex tape.

Avalynn held out her hand and studied the ring. Then she shook her head.

The ring came off and went back into the velvet for some other bride to choose. This went on and on until finally Avalynn let out a loud snuffle.

She plastered her shaking fingers over her face.

Julius placed his hand on her spine. “Everybody out!” he barked.

The room cleared in seconds, leaving only him, Avalynn and about thirty million dollars’ worth of diamonds.

“Oh, Julius. This is all wrong!” Her cheeks wore blotches of red.

He took the chair the jeweler abandoned and twisted toward her. On instinct, he took her hands in his.

Their gazes met.

“If we’re supposedly engaged, we’d better get used to this.” He squeezed her hands lightly.

She held them tighter.

Just breathe, honey. We’re going to make this all better very soon.

Or I’ll die trying.

He chafed his thumbs lightly over hers. They needed to sell the story that they were engaged. They needed to save her image.

He also liked touching her.

God, he’d been wanting to touch her this way for *so damn long*.

Until now, he never realized how much.

Her voice came out thick. “I’m so sorry. This isn’t how I pictured getting engaged.”

He held her stare. “You do know that we have to go *all* the way on this marriage. People can search the documents. We need that authentic wedding license.”

She huffed out a breath. “That just upped the stakes.”

“Yeah...”

“It’s just... I wasn’t going to be like other famous people who marry and divorce all the time. I want to do it *once*. Now

my dream is ruined. And it's ruined for you too." Her eyes shone brighter with tears. "I'm *so* sorry for everything, Julius."

He brushed his thumbs over hers again. "There's no need for that, Avalynn. We're going to make the best of the situation that we can. And we're going to be the best fake married couple in the world."

Ten minutes later, the jeweler packed up his entire case of diamond rings and left disappointed. Lark rushed Avalynn off to an interview downstairs in the hotel. And Clay cornered Julius.

"What are you going to do? This is important. That ring was an important step of the plan. The PR team is losing their minds."

All at once, a total calm settled over Julius. "I know exactly what to do. I need a minute alone."

He went into his room and shut the door. Then he took out his phone and dialed his mother.

As soon as she answered, he didn't let her get a word in to ask what he'd been up to or give him hell for not calling her sooner.

"Mom. Send me Grandma's ring."

The call was short and succinct. He didn't have much time to waste because the next call would take a bit longer.

He dialed Dove, Quaide's wife. "I'm going to say this as quick as possible, Dove, so be ready to take notes. I know you're not an event planner, but I need you to throw together an engagement for me. In the desert. Flowers. A picnic. Wine. Plenty of wine—we'll need it. And I need the best photographer too. Someone who can change the timestamps on the photos to make it look like it happened before that sex tape was released."

* * * * *

Avalynn never experienced stage fright. As a child her natural ability to stand up in front of an audience at church or school and belt out a tune had gained a lot of praise from her momma.

Her choir teacher placed her front and center in every program because she was the one kid up there who wasn't fidgeting.

But tonight she had *more* than a little hesitation about getting out there. How big was the crowd? She only hoped the lights blinded her so she couldn't see all those empty seats. On the first night in this city, she'd performed to a half-empty stadium.

Plus, the added security from Julius's team gave her the jitters. She didn't want to know *why* they felt the need to raise security. What she didn't know couldn't drive her crazy.

On top of all that, she *really* didn't want to think about that disastrous ring shopping experience.

Although Julius...her bodyguard...her *fiancé*...was super sweet about it all, she wasn't sure he understood. After all, she was a woman sitting in front of about a hundred diamond engagement rings. She should be thrilled, right?

But none of the rings were right. This whole thing was off. Of course she couldn't expect perfection, but having her engagement orchestrated as a publicity stunt left her feeling like a note sung off-key.

She shuffled her feet around on the side of the stage, testing them out. In high-heeled boots, she always made sure that she could strut back and forth in front of the audience without falling on her face.

The sequined skirt she wore caught the lights from backstage and sent sparkles over the black floor. She shook out her hands to rid herself of any nerves lingering in her system, causing the fringe on her top to shimmy.

Julius stood feet away from her, his solid presence the only thing holding her feet in place.

Her heels tapped as she walked to center stage. Drawing a deep breath, she curled her fingers around the mic and peered into the pitch-black darkness.

Behind her, the drummer in her band counted out the beats, and right on time, Avalynn started to sing.

The crowd screamed. The lights came up. Stars of light blinded her so she couldn't see the front few rows of the crowd. Were they empty? She couldn't tell. The crowd didn't sound as strong as it usually did when she played to a packed stadium, but it was okay.

This was okay.

She just needed to get out of her head.

The first song of the evening was about the boy next door and how friendship blossomed into love. She'd written it on the tour bus while traveling to the next venue, and it had poured out of her in the purest of forms that later got enhanced, with more instruments added in studio. But onstage, she liked to keep it simple with only the drums, an acoustic guitar and her voice.

The rhythm got into her. She swayed with the words and threw herself into her voice inflection to evoke the emotions of the story she was telling to her audience.

When the song ended, the three heavy drumbeats exploded behind her, and Avalynn moved into the next song, an upbeat tune that hit number one on the day the album dropped.

The crowd screamed. Encouraged, she lost herself in her music. Each stomp of her boots as she crossed the stage punctuated that she would *not* be cowed by the person attempting to knock her down. She would stand up, stand tall.

All of a sudden, a microphone stand fell over on stage right. She whirled at the sound in time to see two big men lunging at a third guy who was scrambling across the floor. He never made it to his feet before Julius's men hauled him away.

Shaken, she missed a line of her song and went straight to the chorus, which messed up her band. They recovered quickly, but she didn't.

Her heart was thundering. She darted a look at the side of the stage where they'd dragged that guy off. Who was he? Could it be her stalker? The one on the tape? The one who drugged her to have his way with her?

She swung around and headed to the opposite end of the stage. Her gaze landed on Julius's back. What was going on? He *never* faced away from her.

Then she saw his arm jerk back and forth.

Her blood ran cold. Her voice...was she even singing anymore?

Her bodyguard was beating someone up. He shook the man like a rag doll and then another guy who she guessed to be his brother by their similar build, joined him.

“Avalynn! Over here!”

The male voice made her spin. Several feet away from her was yet another guy. How were they getting past security?

His hand moved toward his fly.

Oh god. No.

He unzipped and began lowering his jeans. “Why don’t you try some of this!”

The drummer hit the kick drum with the hardest beat she’d ever heard. It boomed out, drowning the man’s words until three other security guards employed by the stadium grabbed him and dragged him off.

Tears burned in her throat. But she never cried—ever. How those three men had made the same attempt to reach her within only a few minutes stunned her. If she didn’t need to keep singing, she’d be speechless.

The ingrained memory of her song lineup carried her through several more until the end of the set. When it was time for a break, she couldn’t get off that stage fast enough. She looked up and saw Julius waiting for her. She took one step and then another. Quickening her pace, she reached him in a few strides and his arm banded around her.

She ducked her head against any photographers that might be lurking and allowed her bodyguard to lead her away.

“I got you. This way.” His deep voice broke over her, making her mind reconnect with what was happening inside

her body. She was shaking.

“Here.” Julius led her to a door. Her manager whipped it open. She started to follow Avalynn, but he grabbed the door out of Heidi’s hand and shut it in her face.

Avalynn didn’t know what to do anymore. She fisted her hands, battling a heavy case of the shakes.

Julius’s dark eyes loomed in front of her face. The familiar touch of his hand on her spine brought her back to reality.

“What in the world happened out there? The fans were going crazy! Three men tried to jump onstage with me!”

His jaw was tight. “There were more than that.”

“More!”

“It’s all right, Avalynn. We stopped them, and in ten minutes the concert will go on. You will be on that stage finishing out the night.”

She started to shake her head that no, she couldn’t do that. She wanted to go home to her small bungalow in Texas and her comfy bed. The only place she could hide from the world and process her downward slide.

“Maybe we need to make that statement to the press.”

He studied her face. “Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know anymore. It’s all so confusing. I didn’t consent. I have no memory of the tape being made. I don’t want to be another one of those poor women in the industry who don’t come forward and tell their story. But on the flip side, I love my privacy. I’ve always wanted to stay out of the drama of being famous.” She gnawed her lip. “What do you think I should do?”

“I think we need to discuss this all more. And speak to both our teams about how that would change your public image as well as the way we provide security. Right now, there’s no time.”

He was right. She steeled her spine. The show must go on. *She* would go on, stand tall and proud. She had nothing to be ashamed of.

Despite what happened to her, she was not, and never would be, that person. She was still Avalynn Ray. And yes, that was her real name. She was no fake.

“Julius?” She didn’t know what she wanted him to do, but he seemed to understand.

For the first time ever, her bodyguard wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him. The chiseled lines of his body molded to hers. His big hand moved up her spine to cup the back of her head.

She slipped hers around his waist and leaned into him, drawing from his strength.

And he smelled good.

Early on she noticed the citrus and fresh grass notes of his cologne. But being this close to the scent, enveloped by it... Well, it comforted her more than anything else could at that moment. Not even the arms of her biggest supporter—her momma—would do what Julius’s did.

His fingertips moved over her nape. She shivered again, but for a new reason.

Her nipples were starting to tingle where they were pressed so tight against his hard chest. And her breaths were coming faster.

He bowed his head over hers. “We won’t let anyone get to you. I promise.”

“That guy tried to unzip his pants.”

He brushed the hair off her cheekbone the same way he had the other day when she lay in bed. The memory of that touch had lingered with her for a solid day, and now it sent a spike into her lower belly.

“That dude had nothing to brag about.”

Shock hit. Then a giggle broke from her. Even though it came with a little snuffle of the tears she locked up in an unreachable place, the sound surprised her enough to laugh again.

Julius's eyes crinkled at the corners with amusement.

"It was terrible," she said.

"I know, honey."

"When will this all end?"

"I can't say, but I promise you that I will do my best to see that it *does* end."

She let her head drop to his shoulder. Neither of them moved or spoke. She absorbed more of his strength and determination, two things which she had never lacked before this all happened.

A rap on the door made his fingers tighten on her as if he weren't ready to let her go. "Yes?" he called out.

Heidi's voice came muffled and slightly shrill—probably with fury. "Avalynn's got three minutes."

She pulled free of Julius's hold. He stopped her with a hand on her arm. When she tilted her head to meet his gaze, he shocked her more than those guys rushing the stage...and hooked a callused finger under her chin.

"Okay?" His rumbled question was a vibration she felt in parts of her body she had no business feeling for her bodyguard.

He'd soon be her fiancé too—not *just* in the public eye. He was right. They did need to make this official for the sake of her career. Which meant he'd be tucking her against him more and more often in the weeks to come.

She nodded, resisting the urge to lean into his hand and let her eyes slip closed on the sensation of him touching her.

He dropped his hand. "Good girl. Let's show them what Avalynn Ray is made of."

He started to turn, and she caught his sleeve. When he swung back, their gazes collided.

“What do you think I’m made of, Julius?”

He offered that crooked smile. “Why, sugar and spice, of course. And the strength you need to get through the rest of the concert, and the next and the next after that.”

Her eyelids fluttered on his words that touched her beyond anything yet. Then she did something she never thought in a million years that she’d do.

She went on tiptoe and brushed a kiss over his beard-roughened cheek. “Thank you.”

Chapter Five

“She brought up whether or not she should give a statement about what really happened on the tape.” Julius watched his boss’s reaction. He already had thoughts about how that would affect her. Her worry for her career aside, Avalynn was above all a private person.

“What’s your take on that?” Clay asked.

“That she’ll regret it as soon as it’s out. Then it will be too late to take it back.”

“All right, then until she tells us she’s giving that statement, we stay alert. We can’t afford to let down our guard at this point.” Clay’s command had the Sentry team nodding in understanding. They broke from the ring they’d gathered in, and Julius headed straight for Lark.

She gripped a small shopping bag and bounced on the toes of her Converse sneakers as he approached.

“You got it?” he asked.

“Right here.” She held out the bag.

He took it like a junkie accepting a kilo of coke. The knowledge of what was inside didn’t scare him the way he expected it to.

He glanced around the corridor. The Sentry team was still hanging around, except for Jennings, who’d escorted Avalynn to her interview. Long after she walked away from him, that look that she’d sent etched itself on his mind, an imprint like the brightest sun after he shut his eyes.

He must look much like how Quaide was staring at Dove, who, at Julius's bidding, had been called in from Colorado. She stepped toward him with an amused smile.

He gripped the bag tighter. "I guess we're committed to this."

She and Lark traded a look. Dove leaned in, her voice an urgent whisper. "Are you *kidding*? Do you know how much work went into this plan? How can you even think about backing out?"

"I do know how much work went into the plan. And I appreciate all you did. *We* appreciate it," he corrected. He stared at the closed door ten feet away. "She's still in with the reporter from *Rolling Stone*?"

Lark nodded. "You were right, too. She doesn't even know what city she's in. She won't have any idea about the surprise in the des—"

He cut her off. "Good. Stick to the plan."

The plan involving him and Avalynn, a picnic in the desert and the item inside this bag.

The door cracked open, and Heidi exited first. She gave him a haughty look that might have made him laugh if his nerves weren't snapping.

"I wish I could get her alone. There are too many people hanging around," he muttered to Lark. The press conference was in the hotel ballroom. The lobby was packed with reporters and VIPs who'd been given passes hoping to get a minute alone with Avalynn. It was a security nightmare, and one he wanted his ward out of ASAP.

Through the open door, he spotted Jennings standing within reach of Avalynn. The *Rolling Stone* reporter had been interrogated at length by Quaide, so Julius knew the man was no threat to Avalynn.

The guy from the magazine shook Avalynn's hand. She clasped it with a warm smile lighting her face. Not many would know how forced that expression truly was.

She saw Julius, and eagerness lit up her big brown eyes. She rushed toward him, with Jennings right behind her.

Several lights flashed as people snapped photos of her. Julius strode forward, and Jennings handed her off with a nod. Something in her expression sent tenderness burning through his chest.

Before he acknowledged what he was about to do, he looped an arm around her back and drew her close the same way he had during the concert. She melted into his arms.

He dropped his lips to her forehead.

A few gasps sounded, and more cameras captured the moment.

Avalynn didn't move out of his embrace. "Oh my god." Her whisper came out as a slow rasp. "This is perfect."

He didn't want to pull his mouth from her soft skin but forced himself to. "It does seem to be working in our favor."

She smiled up at him. So many more people jumped at the chance to snap photos of them. These photos would be plastered all over the internet within seconds.

He had to get them out of here. Now.

He swept her back into the room she'd just vacated. When he slammed the door and positioned his back to it, their gazes met.

"After that exit, we definitely look like the happy couple seeking privacy!" For days, she'd been paler than usual with dark shadows beneath her eyes. Now enthusiasm shimmered off her like a fairy's glow. "If only I'd picked out a ring, they'd have a fat diamond glinting in all those photos."

The handle of the shopping bag seemed to scorch his hand. Slowly, he lifted the bag to her eye level.

Plump lips sporting a trace of girl-next-door pink popped open on a gasp.

"What is that?"

He *wanted* to do this differently. She wasn't the only person who dreamed of this moment. Never in his life did he think he'd be pulling a ring out of a bag and doing what he was about to do on two feet rather than on bended knee. But he had to keep alert in case the paparazzi burst through that unlocked door.

With a hard lump blocking his airway, he reached into the bag and closed his fingers around a small cardboard box. When he withdrew it, Avalynn pressed her hands together like a prayer and covered her mouth.

Thumbing the lid off the box, he took a step toward her. Her eyes flared wide and then turned glassy with tears she didn't let fall.

She stared down at the contents of the box. "Julius! It's *perfect*. This wasn't part of the collection the jeweler brought yesterday. Where... Where did you get this ring?"

He didn't need to glance at the ring to know it would look lovely on her delicate finger.

He leveled her in his gaze. "Don't freak out."

"Okay ... " Her eyes widened even more.

"It's my grandmother's ring."

Her eyes grew even shinier. She blinked rapidly against her tears. "You are not going to make me cry, Julius. I rarely cry because, well, I ugly cry. There's no risking that in a paparazzi shot."

"That's why I showed you now. So you don't cry later."

"What comes later?"

He couldn't quite keep the smile off his face. When she saw what Dove had arranged for this special moment, he was sure it would suit her as much as his grandmother's ring.

He replaced the lid on the box and slipped it into the bag. "You'll have to wait and see. Now, are you ready to step out there and face about a dozen reporters asking you about us?"

Her fine brows shot up. "No comment?"

“No comment,” he echoed. “Not until it’s official.”

When he opened the door, he slid his arm around Avalynn and directed her toward Quaide, who led the way out of the hotel to a waiting car. Julius and Avalynn jumped in the back.

“Drive,” he ordered, and the car took off.

“I hate hiding so much. Since that sex tape dropped, I feel like all I’ve done is hop from hotel to hotel, hide on the bus... I’m usually out in the public eye much more than this.” She rested her head against the seat back.

“I know, honey. I’ll do my best to make your life what it was before all this happened.”

Avalynn sat next to him in silence for the rest of the ride. His hand was beginning to sweat where he gripped the handle of the shopping bag, replaying her reaction to seeing the ring over and over in his mind. Eyes wide and tears lingering in the beautiful depths. She was touched, that much was evident.

And most of all, she liked his grandmother’s ring.

It was going to work out. Even though they weren’t *really* in love, he’d make this all as special and perfect for her as possible.

The sun was setting on the horizon, leaving a rusty glow over the land. Avalynn didn’t ask where they were or even where they were going. She patiently waited until the car stopped before sending Julius a questioning look.

He popped open the door and then folded his fingers around hers, tugging lightly for her to follow him. His boots ground on the hard-packed earth where the driver had let them out. The place Dove had found for where he and Avalynn would have their engagement photoshoot.

Just as Dove had told him, a large rock stood as a landmark to guide him. Keeping Avalynn’s hand in his, he circled the rock.

She stopped dead. Even when she made a soft cry it was musical and sweet.

He turned to see her face and imprint this moment on his mind.

“Julius!” she gasped. “How did you manage this?”

He squeezed her hand. “I have people too.”

“What is it all for?” Her wide eyes sucked him in, urging to not only protect her but shield her from the crueler parts of the world and keep her trusting and sweet forever.

“It’s our engagement, honey.”

Her lips formed an *O*, and the sound she made touched a secret spot in his chest that he didn’t know had her name on it.

* * * * *

Avalynn might have traveled to foreign cities and seen beautiful places. But what Julius had done for her... It left her speechless.

In complete awe, she allowed him to lead her across the hard-packed earth of the desert to a glowing ring of candlelight.

All sizes of pillar candles had been set up in the shape of a heart. The flicker of flames added even more ambience to the enchanting scene. Julius seemed to have called on the sky to add to the beauty too because it was painted with sweeps of orange and yellow.

“It’s *stunning*,” she whispered.

His eyes were partly in shadow under the brim of his Stetson, but his lips revealed his emotion when they curved upward in a soft smile. His hand wrapped around hers, he continued drawing her toward the candles. A small gap between pillars had been left for them to step through and enter the space.

In the middle of that, someone had laid out a thick satin blanket in her favorite blush pink color, and it was weighted down with a wicker picnic basket and a silver ice bucket of wine.

“Julius!” She gaped at the scene. “This is extraordinary. And so unexpected!”

“It suits you. Do you want to sit?”

She nodded and then sank to her knees on the satin, taking a minute to arrange her short dress around her thighs. Julius paused for a moment, looking down at her. Then he rubbed his finger over his upper lip and sat next to her.

She stared at him. “What’s in the basket?”

“A picnic dinner. A romantic one, of course.”

“Of course.” A laugh bubbled up, again unexpected. She never thought she could laugh when under as much duress as she’d been in the past few days. “And you’re going to... propose to me?”

“I’m going to pour you a glass of wine and feed you. Then we’ll see what happens.”

She darted a glance at the bottle. “Wine *would* loosen us up.”

He reached for the bottle and then used an opener provided to uncork it. When he let the rich red wine tip into a glass as thin as a soap bubble, he flicked his gaze up to hers. As he passed her the glass, their fingers brushed, taking her back to the feel of his arms around her...his hard body against hers.

No one could orchestrate such a perfect moment in time without caring at least a little bit.

“You know”—she toyed with a lock of hair—“when you kissed me on the forehead, it almost seemed...normal. Not just a role you were playing for the cameras.”

He didn’t speak, just poured his own wine. Then he raised his glass. She clinked hers against it and they both sipped.

The flavors melded on her tongue and transported her to another world. “Wow! This is fantastic wine. What is it?”

He swirled the wine in his glass and buried his nose in it to catch the rich scent. “It’s a lovely little cabernet from

Northern California. A winery called Chez Nous.”

“At Our Place,” she translated from French.

“*Oui.*” He flashed a smile. “I’m afraid my French accent is horrible.”

She laughed. “Mine’s pretty awful too. But we Texans can bless your hearts in the most syrupy drawl.”

“I bet I can out-drawl you any day,” he responded in his deepest Southern twang.

They shared a laugh and finished their wine. He poured them more. By the time the bottle was empty, the sun had gone down, leaving them in the center of the heart created by lit candles.

He tapped the picnic basket with the toe of his cowboy boot. “I suppose it would have been smart to consume food before the wine.”

Her body was pleasantly warm. “Probably.”

They stared into each other’s eyes for a never-ending heartbeat.

“Avalynn...”

“Yes?”

He shifted his weight and in a graceful move, slipped onto one knee. Her mind caught up to what was happening, but not before he withdrew the ring—his grandma’s ring—and held it out to her.

“Avalynn Ray...will you be my wife?” His voice came out thicker than usual. Gruffer.

Her stomach flip had nothing to do with the wine and everything to do with the way he sounded and that look in his eyes.

She plastered a hand over her mouth and stared down at the ring. It truly was *so* beautiful, an old-fashioned setting with a diamond in the center and small ones circling it. The gold setting had intricate filigree between each diamond.

She was beyond touched that he'd thought to offer her a family heirloom. He'd done this for her. To make her happy. Going forward, she wanted to show him the same care.

Oh no. Tears swam in her vision. He'd seen her shed a few tears right after that sex tape hit, but he wasn't even ready for her ugly cry. She was *not* about to unleash *that* on him, especially in the middle of such an important moment in both of their lives. It may not be forever, but it was for *now*. And for what it was worth, it was real.

She extended a shaking hand. Julius slid the ring onto her finger.

"It fits," he grated out.

She could only nod.

Their gazes caught again. All of a sudden, she was in his arms, dragged across his lap. His firm lips she'd felt so fleetingly on her forehead crushed down on hers. With a gasp, she threw her arms around his neck to haul him closer.

He tasted of man and wine, the citrus and fresh grass notes playing in her nose as he angled his head and plundered her.

God, this man could *kiss*.

Sparks like fireworks burst inside her and trickled through her limbs, heating her from the inside. Her nipples were hard, pressed so tight to his chest. And his fingers wove into her hair, raising chills down her spine, as he held her *right* where he wanted her.

His other hand landed on her waist. Then he skated it up her ribs in slow, maddening increments before stopping *just* shy of her breast.

A tiny mewl of disappointment escaped her, and she dug her fingers into his shoulders. "Julius!"

A low growl emitted from him a split second before he claimed her mouth again. Harder this time. With more force and all the passion. Her insides melted into a molten puddle, and her pussy began to throb with want.

All that from a kiss? That never happened to her. And under these circumstances—plus the influence of too much wine—it was pretty shocking.

His tongue darted past her lips. When he sank into her mouth and swept across her tongue, her need spiked. She wiggled against him, needing to be closer...wanting...*more*.

His hat tumbled off, and she sank her fingers into his thick hair. “I wish it had been you on that tape,” she said in a hoarse tone.

“Christ, honey.” He plunged his tongue into her mouth again and again and again until she was dizzy and her panties were soaking wet.

Finally, he tore from the kiss, breaths rough. His erection bulged against her hip where she was nestled in his lap.

“It never would’ve been me on the video.”

She wiggled against him. “Because you’re too big.”

“That...and I would *never, ever* disrespect you like that.”

Chapter Six

It was done. He'd popped the question. They were engaged. She wore his grandmother's ring.

Now everything in him wanted to lay claim to Avalynn's body.

He'd tried to slow things down by putting her in the car and ordering the driver to take them to the hotel. He even attempted to leave her at the door and walk away.

But she bunched her hand in the front of his shirt and looked up at him with those wide, beautiful eyes filled with desire and he lost his goddamn mind. His good intentions went up in a blaze as he closed the door and locked it.

Her hair was disheveled from his fingers and the desert wind, the mass of waves so mussed that he could only imagine how it would look after she crawled out of his bed.

His cock surged against his fly. The entire ride, she'd tormented the hell out of him by tossing him loaded looks. And touching the ring he'd placed on her finger with so much ease that it felt real as hell.

When he asked her to be his wife, he fucking meant every word.

And that scared the living hell out of him.

Jennings was right. So was Clay. They all had seen what he ignored all this time—that in six months he'd done more than guard Avalynn with his body. He'd guarded her heart, but forgotten his.

Darting her tongue over her plump bottom lip, she took a step closer to him.

He settled his hands on her hips, thinking to hold her at bay. But then she rocked her body against his and ripped away the last of his control.

He swept her up into his arms. She nuzzled his jaw, her lips brushing downward to his neck.

He groaned and took one step toward that big bed that would soon be the first place he ever took her.

“I want this, Julius.” Her voice came out as a shiver.

God, she felt so damn good in his arms. So right.

He had to shake that thought loose of his head before it grew roots and he stopped seeing any other path in his life but one with Avalynn.

But breaking up was in the plan.

“You’re certain?” he rasped.

Her sweet lips moved over his throat and up to his jaw. At the corner of his mouth, she whispered, “Yes.”

His cock was bursting. His heart even more swollen. Making it to the bed took mere steps.

Laying her down with all the tenderness that a treasure like her deserved, he braced his arms on the mattress and gazed deep into her eyes.

“We don’t need to do this to make the act look convincing.”

“It’s not that.”

“What is it then?”

Her soft fingers worked down his chest. “I like your kisses.”

A growl built in his throat. Up until now he’d been what most people would call a man whore. He fucked women and walked away, never calling them again. He took no interest in them besides what they had between their legs.

Once he had Avalynn, he didn't know if he could ever *stop*.

"You can have my kisses." He swallowed around a hard lump in his throat.

She curled her fingers into his shoulders, drawing him closer. "This isn't the wine talking."

He cocked a brow at her.

"Well, *some* of it might be the wine." When she laughed, the throaty, smoky sound unhinged him.

His jaw clamped on another growl. His muscles locked in an attempt to keep from taking her hard and rough and fast.

"Julius." His name was a plea on her lips. She searched his eyes.

His eyes slipped shut and he gave in to temptation. Lowering his mouth, he found hers. She cried out and pulled him down on top of her. The dark twist in his gut made him rock his hips, nudging his bulging cock against the *V* of her splayed thighs.

Angling his head, he kissed her long, deep and thoroughly. He wanted her aching by the time he slid inside her. And thank Christ he had a single condom in his wallet, because he did not want to call on his brother to slip one under the door of her suite.

He trapped her hand beneath his on the mattress, and she meshed her fingers with his.

What could only be called lovemaking began.

He devoured her with his kisses. She returned every caress with more and more passion. When he coursed his hand up to cup her breast, she arched into him.

With a swipe of his thumb over the center, her nipple crested, a small, hard pebble that made his mouth water at the thought of tasting it.

Holding her gaze, he closed his fingers over the bud and pinched it lightly.

Her eyes shuttered on a soft gasp of pleasure. Unable to stop now, he plunged his tongue into her mouth and drank from her as he pinched and teased both her nipples and she was begging him for more.

She stripped off his shirt, fingers scraping his flesh. She raked her stare over him too, gazing at his body with an awe on her face that he'd take to the grave even if another night like this never happened.

“My god,” she whispered. “You’re all muscle.” She let her fingers play over his shoulders and biceps, to his pecs and down to his abs.

When she placed her hand over his fly, he bowed his head. “Tell me to stop now,” he grated out.

“I don’t want you to stop.”

“This changes everything between us.”

“I don’t care.”

He kissed her. Desire exploded between them. He swore he saw bright lights arcing through his vision like at one of her shows.

Running his hand down to the top of her thigh exposed by her short dress, he swished his thumb over her warm, bare flesh. When she pressed her leg into his hand, he explored further, learning the curve of her thigh.

And just how far under her dress he had to go before he reached her pussy.

As he slipped his finger over the seam of her damp panties, she bucked.

Fuck, he was going to lose it in five strokes if he didn’t get a grip. But she was too perfect. Too lovely. In all ways.

Hooking his finger into the elastic along her thigh, he edged a finger under it and stroked her wet folds.

“Julius!” She made a grab for his fly. He wasn’t going to let her get far—not until he’d made damn sure she’d experienced every pleasure possible. Then—if—she still

wanted him to take her, he would strip faster than a twister tore through a trailer park.

Shoving onto his knees, he held her gaze and reached for her panties. In one hard yank he stripped them off.

A trill of laughter burst out of her, and she pressed the back of one hand against her lips. Her engagement ring flashed in the low light in the room.

He cast aside her panties—a scrap of white lace that totally went with her good-girl image—and stripped off her dress next. His gaze roamed over her supple curves and his cock pounded even harder.

Slow, Abel. You have to make this right. You have to erase what happened on that tape.

He kissed her again, tongue tangling with hers until moan after moan escaped her. Then he moved to her throat, nipping and teasing a line down to her collarbone. He worshipped every inch. When he cupped one breast and drew her straining nipple to his lips, she came unglued.

Rocking, bucking, pleading in incoherent words. He sucked on her nipple, teased it with his tongue and sucked some more. Moving a hand between her legs, he strummed her clit in time to the soft pulls of his lips.

She flooded at his touch. He worked one finger inside her and buried it to the first knuckle.

She jerked her hips, and he gave her what she wanted—he slid his finger in all the way.

“Oh god!” Her sharp cry tore at his control. So did the tight, clenching heat of her walls surrounding his finger.

He went back to making love to her, spending what felt like an hour kissing and nipping at her breasts and fingering her until she began to shake.

Her short, manicured nails were painted blush pink—her favorite color, he knew. She dug them into his shoulders, let out a cry of surrender...and came apart for him.

Julius lost his goddamn heart.

* * * * *

Waves of ecstasy blasted through Avalynn's body. God, were those noises coming from her? Did she even care?

The need inside her didn't stop when her release faded. One look at the desire blazing in Julius's eyes made her grab his jaw and pull him in for another kiss. A primal grunt rumbled in his chest, vibrating her bare breasts, and he supported his weight on one arm to reach behind him.

Seconds later, he broke the kiss and held up his battered black leather wallet.

Her breaths came fast and rough as she watched his display of gorgeous muscles when he pushed off the bed and stood beside it. His shoulders flexed with every move he made to remove his jeans. His tight black boxer briefs clung to the outline of his impressive cock.

"You really are *nothing* like that video."

His teeth flashed with his grin. Then he stole her every last thought when he pushed his boxers down his strong thighs and revealed his cock.

Long, hard and thick. The mushroomed head shiny with evidence of his want.

She ran her tongue over her lips, and he let out a rough breath.

In jerky moves, he located the condom in his wallet and tore it open. The veins and tendons in his strong forearms rippled as he slid it over his erection.

Their gazes collided.

A question still lived in his, though how he could question whether or not she wanted him, she had no clue. He'd just tormented the strongest orgasm of her life out of her, with only his fingers.

She reached out a hand to him.

He took it—and tumbled into bed with her. His strong body on top of hers sent her into overdrive. She locked her

thighs around him, found his lips and kissed him as he entered her for the first time.

And ohhhh, it wouldn't be the last. He felt *so* good.

Passion swallowed her. Their lips met in fervent kisses as he sank deeper and deeper, stretching her to accommodate him.

The wine haze was long gone, leaving only her and Julius...and a magical night that would forever be etched in her mind as one of the best of her life. Even after things went back to normal and nobody cared about her sex tape anymore, she would still think of Julius as he was in this moment.

He slid one hand under her. When his fingertips touched the spot on her spine that he had countless times before, they both froze.

She searched his eyes. A heartbeat hung between them like both their hearts stopped.

Then he was pressing harder into that spot, lifting her hips to meet his thrusts. His short beard scraped her skin as he captured her lips and ravished her like no other.

His muscled body jerked into hers, sending her higher and higher. When she felt his entire frame harden, she knew he was close. Knowing it put her on the very precipice with him.

He lifted her into him once more and she was lost, coming on a sharp cry that he echoed with his low groan of release.

Her nerves shuddered and shook. Her pussy clamped on his length as he poured his cum inside her.

Long minutes passed while he brought her down bit by bit with gentle kisses trailed over her lips and down her throat to the tops of her breasts.

"I'm tingling all over," she breathed out.

"I can't feel my legs at all."

They broke into laughter. He rolled off her and pulled her against him. She draped her thigh over his and rested her head on his broad chest.

Suddenly, she felt very shy with him. This man had been there for her in ways no other human being had. Yet in a very short time, she felt as though she'd leaped across a gorge—and she placed all her faith in him saving her.

His thumb brushed over her ring finger, startling her. She glanced at her hand and realization flooded in.

“Your grandmother must have been very special,” she whispered.

“I know everyone says they had the best grandma, but we really did. Having five grandsons in one family couldn't have been easy.”

“You never told me you had four brothers.”

“Yup. You know Jennings. He's the youngest. My other three brothers work together for a security agency.”

“I don't know how I didn't know this about you, Julius.”

His smile was soft. “We're supposed to retain a professional distance from our wards.”

“A little late for that.” She trailed a fingertip over his nipple, causing him to growl.

“I'm going to take care of this condom. Then we need to talk.”

She nodded and rolled away enough to allow him to get up. When he walked away from her, it was impossible not to appreciate the carved planes of his ass. Every step he took was a display of danger and power.

She got up too and searched for a sleep shirt. Finding a small stack in her open suitcase on the luggage rack, she took her vintage Bruce Springsteen shirt off the top and slipped it over her head. She didn't have a chance to pull on panties before the bathroom door opened.

Swinging around, she felt her jaw go slack at the sight of the gorgeous man strutting out of the bathroom.

He saw her face and stopped. “What is it, honey?”

“Your body...is actual...*art*. You could get paid a lot of money for displaying it.”

He waved a hand. “If you mean being a live model for artists, I’ve done that. It’s not as exciting as it sounds, but the money filled some gaps after... Well, after.”

Panties forgotten, she padded over to the bed and crawled back in. He pulled on his boxer briefs and settled next to her.

The gap between their bodies felt like a bridge she wasn’t sure if she should cross. But he decided for them both when he slid his arm around her to gather her close.

Rubbing her nose against his shoulder, she allowed herself to drown in the fresh scent of his skin and the feel of his velvety skin covering steely muscles.

“Better?” he rumbled after she’d relaxed.

“Much. How do you always read me so well?”

His dark eyes flickered with a fire that he quickly concealed. “It’s my job.”

“This part isn’t.”

“No.”

“What did you mean by...after? After what?”

He grew silent for a moment, and a few creases appeared at the corner of his lips. She started to tell him it was all right if he didn’t wish to share with her, but he started to speak in his deep drawl.

“Before my brothers worked for a protection agency, the Abels had a protection agency too. Something happened to one of the women we were guarding. Hell, I shouldn’t tell you this. I can’t have you thinking I’d ever, ever let down my guard with you. I won’t, Avalynn.”

Her heart fluttered at the vehemence in his tone. “I know that.”

His chest moved with his deep inhalation, making her cling to him tighter or risk being rolled off his body. “After the incident, our company went under. We had a rough patch, and

then three of my brothers, Judd, Jaren and Jace all moved to Montana to join a new company. Jennings and I stayed behind taking on what work we could.”

“It must have affected your morale quite a bit.”

He pierced her in his stare. “Is that what’s happened to you after that video released?”

Ugh. She didn’t want to be reminded of what she faced, but the very reason she was lying in this bed with Julius right now was because that tape existed.

“Do you really think this will work? This supposed engagement?”

He cradled her hand and brought it to his lips to brush a kiss over the ring he’d just put there. “It was real, honey. It actually happened.”

Her stomach flipped on his words. She drifted off, aware of the slow rise and fall of his chest under her cheek.

What felt like moments later, something vibrated from the floor.

They’d fallen asleep. The light of dawn crept over the white sheets and the planes of Julius’s carved body.

“My phone.” He jostled her to the side and made a dive for the device in his jeans. The move branded a view of his backside in her memory. She was just admiring it when his voice broke into her thoughts.

“Fuck. Avalynn.”

Her gaze darted to his in alarm.

“It’s my momma.” He hit a button on the screen, shocking Avalynn by putting it on speakerphone.

“Hi, Momma.”

“Julius. Arlo. Abel,” she punctuated each of his names the way all mommas can when riled. “When were you going to tell me?”

He darted a look at Avalynn. She widened her eyes. What was she supposed to do? She didn't know how to handle his mother.

He scrubbed a finger between his brows. "Uh..."

"The paparazzi were here asking if I have met your fiancée!"

Avalynn plastered a hand to her mouth to stifle a gasp.

His mother continued, "I opened the door to get my mail and ten people snapped a picture of me. Now you tell me what is going on. When you asked for Grandma Houser's ring, I thought you were just putting it in a safety deposit box for safekeeping like we always discussed. Julius, what have you *done*?"

"Momma," he choked out. "When you say you went out to get your mail, were you by chance in your—"

"Bathrobe? Yes. And hair curlers."

Avalynn's mouth hung open to form a wide oval. So she really *was* dealing with a Southern momma who wore curlers to bed and got her mail in her bathrobe. She tried to picture an older female version of Julius and failed.

He issued a low sound of complaint, which his mother took as an invitation to go on.

"I couldn't even drink my coffee on the porch with all those reporters from *TMZ* milling around. It was *not* a good start to my day, Julius!"

"Sorry to hear that, Momma."

"Do you have any idea what your father is doing right now? He's working on setting *cement*." She said the word with the emphasis on the first syllable, so it came out as CE-ment.

"What in the world is he doing with cement?" Julius said it the same way, which made Avalynn shake with silent laughter.

He flashed a grin and grabbed her hand with her new engagement ring, squeezing it.

“He’s putting up a privacy fence! Thirty years here, first time we’ve ever needed a fence. We’re in the middle of nowhere. What do we need privacy from? Cows?”

He gave Avalynn a look of apology for his mother’s rant.

She flicked her fingers at Julius. *Let me talk to her*, she mouthed.

He gaped at her for what felt like a full minute while his mother continued to rail about paparazzi, how they surely got photos of her looking like the back end of one of those neighbor’s cows and the hard work his poor father was putting in mixing the ce-ment.

“Momma, I’m putting Avalynn on the line.”

“Ava—Oh my stars!”

Avalynn grinned at the expression and focused on the woman on the line. A woman who would temporarily be her mother-in-law.

“Hi, Mrs. Abel. This is Avalynn Ray.”

“*The* country music star?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She and Julius exchanged a grin. Why did it feel like they were two kids making prank phone calls?

He continued to hold her hand, occasionally sweeping his callused thumb over her knuckle. Her body liked that a little too much. It was too easy to remember just how that hand felt on her breasts...and between her thighs.

Shaking herself, she said, “I’m awful sorry about the paparazzi, ma’am.”

“No need to call me ma’am! You just call me Laurel. So...the rumors are true? You and my son...?”

She sobered, staring down at her hand clasped in his. Her fiancé.

“The rumors are true, Laurel.”

“Well! When was that little shit son of mine gonna tell his momma that he fell in love and done got engaged?”

Julius dropped his face into his palm, and Avalynn's laugh bubbled out. "It all happened really quickly."

He lifted his head and fixed her in a stare that sent shivers low.

"Oh! A reporter is speaking to Julius's father now."

"Crap." He took over the call. "Momma, tell Dad to get inside and not to say a word to anybody. I'm real sorry for the trouble."

She barked out a laugh. "Who do you think you're talking to, Julius? I've been putting up with you and your brothers' antics since birth!"

"It will blow over soon, I promise," he assured her in the same calm voice that had soothed Avalynn more than once.

His momma drew in a big, noisy breath as though gearing up for a tirade. "Since that sweet young girl is off the phone now, I can give you a proper tongue lashing. I am so embarrassed! Why didn't you tell me she was sitting right there?"

Laurel was still on speaker.

Their gazes met. She dipped her head to hide her smile.

His momma went on, "This is her first impression of me! I'm your momma. I can't believe you didn't tell me anything about this."

"Don't worry—Avalynn likes you just fine, Momma."

"Oh lordy. I better go help your father before they snap more pictures of him. I just realized he's wearing his shabbiest shirt!"

"All right, Momma. I'll call you later."

Julius ended the call and grimaced. "I'm sorry about that."

"I like your mom. She's like mine. I should be getting a call anytime."

As if on cue, her phone rang in a tinkle of soft bells.

“And there she is.” She centered her stare on Julius’s dark eyes they melted her each time she looked into them.

He pointed at the bathroom door, indicating he was going to sit this one out.

She couldn’t blame him really. Avalynn nodded and then took the call to find out that her mother experienced a similar incident with the paparazzi. She woke up to men standing on her front lawn, snapping photos of the front of her house.

Avalynn listened intently, half a smile on her face at knowing her bodyguard was in the shower. She climbed off the bed and padded to the coffeemaker. Usually it was Julius fixing drinks for her, but this time, she wanted to do something nice for him. After what he’d put into planning and executing the *perfect* engagement, the least she could do was fix him coffee while chatting with her mom.

Chapter Seven

Julius's mind kept returning to the way the early morning light of dawn crept over his sleeping lover's body while she slumbered in his arms.

No, not his lover. His fiancée.

It hit him hard. What had he done?

I did what was needed to save her from ruin.

This wasn't some medieval land where a knight in shining armor rode in on his steed with colors flying. He was just a bodyguard. Any man could have stood in his place.

He didn't like the thought of her feeling desperate, of being forced to make a decision everybody else pushed her into.

He pushed out a sigh and exited the bathroom to the sight of Avalynn rummaging through her handbag. She located a bottle and shook two pills into her hand. Then she set them on the small table next to a paper cup.

The fragrance of coffee had his veins surging to feed his caffeine addiction. She always had tea.

Her neck was tilted to the side, her device wedged between her ear and shoulder as she talked to her mother. She swung toward him.

His heart stopped when he saw her in that sexy T-shirt.

With a wave at the items she left for him, she slanted a look over his body. Clad in only boxers, he was sure he left *nothing* to her imagination. His hard cock hadn't begun to go down. One look at her made him painfully aware that he was

also out of condoms. If they were going to play around more—and make this engagement night into a morning to remember—then he'd need to get creative between the sheets.

She pointed to the coffee and pills, indicating they were for him.

He paused. How did she know that he'd woken with a headache from that wine? In his early years he'd learned that anything but whiskey left him with a nagging headache and avoided it. But that wine had gone down too smooth with Avalynn drinking too.

In measured steps, he crossed the room and picked up the cup of coffee. Light cream. Just the way he liked it. How did Avalynn know?

She gave him a questioning look and he brought the cup to his lips. After a sip, he gave her a nod. *Perfect*, he mouthed.

Her wide smile lit up the whole damn room—and flooded his day with spotlights too.

She padded across the room and hitched one hip onto the bed. She wiggled her bottom until she was perched on the edge with one leg tucked beneath her.

He had to scrub a hand over his face to wipe his mind clean of the images revolving through it. Like how he could take her phone from her and toss it aside before pressing her onto the mattress, hooking her legs over his shoulders and burying his tongue in her sweet, hot, tight, wet pussy.

She set the phone on the bed and put it on speaker so he could hear the conversation.

He drifted over, coffee in hand.

“You need to avoid the paparazzi, Mom.”

“They're standing right here on my front porch, Avalynn. I'm not sure how they found me, but you know I'm more than willing to talk about my little girl's rise to fame!”

He couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm.

“*Really*, Mom. Stop talking to them and go back inside.” Avalynn didn’t sound huffy in the least. In fact, her lips tilted with amusement, and her eyes danced.

“I can’t be rude now, can I, Avalynn? But you’re saying I need to tell the nice young man with—who did you say you work for?” she asked someone.

“*TMZ*.”

“Argh, Mom! Stop! Do *not* get out those pictures of me with that terrible hair!” Avalynn dropped her face into her palm.

“Oh, honey, you were adorable.”

She groaned.

“Here!” Her mother spoke to someone on her end. “Come take a look at this photo album.”

Avalynn moaned in horror.

“Look at her. Isn’t she the cutest? She was so talented, even then. This is the church where she got her start.” Pride echoed in her voice.

“Mom, please tell me that’s not the pink scrapbook!”

“Of course it is, sweetheart! Remember your first performance at church? You were always so great in front of an audience! I’d be scared to death.”

Julius couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket, and while he wasn’t shy, he wouldn’t have the guts to stand up in front of a crowd and sing songs he’d written himself. Things about love and emotions.

Avalynn stared at him.

He pitched his voice into a low whisper. “I’m stealing all your firsts. The first time you got to tell your mom about a big life event, and it’s all made public.”

She shook her head and leaned in to whisper back. “I don’t feel like you’re stealing my firsts.”

There was a change in the way she looked at him. It was easy to spot the difference in her now. His job entailed picking up on her every move and mood. Their dynamic had changed. The intensity between them changed.

“Mom, please take the scrapbook back into the house and don’t talk to any more reporters! They’re not there to talk about my rise to fame.”

“Well, then why are they here, honey?”

Avalynn froze for a long heartbeat. Finally, she rasped, “They want to get a story about my engagement!”

“Your *engagement*? Avalynn Adele Ray! You got engaged? To whom? Please tell me it isn’t that guy from the tape! The one with the small—”

“Mom! Please go inside. Do it now!”

“All right, all right. I’m inside.”

“Now slam the door so I hear you do it.”

“Avalynn! Tell me what is going on right now!” The door slammed. “Are you really engaged?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Well, that is...just...wonderful! Who is this lucky fella who swept my perfect little angel off her feet?”

“His name is Julius, Mom.” She rubbed a hand over her face. “Look, I have to go right now. I promise to call you later. Swear to me that you won’t open the door and share anything else with the paparazzi.”

“You know I am eager to talk to the Devil himself about my little girl. Avalynn, you best not keep me hanging about this mystery man of yours!”

“I’ll call you back, Mom.”

“Oh, all right then. Call me back. I love you!”

She hurriedly ended the call and flopped back on the bed with a gusty sigh.

He stared down at her. Under that shirt was her toned stomach and her navel. Both made his mouth water to kiss them.

She slung her arm over her face, so at least she couldn't see the lust on his. "I'm sorry about that. My momma is really proud."

He chuckled and moved close to the bed. "I heard."

"I'll have to call her back and tell her everything."

"You will." He couldn't tear his gaze away from the line of flesh bared by his half-buttoned shirt—or the treasure it led to. A pair of white cotton panties had him on edge more than he'd ever been for the sexiest thong worn by some other nameless, faceless conquest.

He battled with the urge to call his brother for those condoms. Thank god at that moment, a knock on the door jolted him out of his thoughts, of all the twisted things he wanted to do to the country music star.

She jerked into a sitting position, her eyes wide. "That's probably my team."

"I bet."

"They're going to see you like that. And me like this." She waved a hand to indicate his state of undress, plus the fact that she was wearing his only shirt.

He pointed to the door between their rooms. "You tell them to come back in ten minutes. We'll both get dressed."

Relief flitted over her beautiful face. Then she stood and shocked him by hooking a hand around his nape to pull him down. When she brushed her lips over his, it stunned him speechless.

"You always know what to do. You're the best pretend fiancé a girl could *ever* ask for."

* * * * *

Julius faced Avalynn exactly ten minutes later. They were both dressed. She'd pulled her hair into a loose bun on top of her

head, and he'd dragged his fingers through his own to bring it to order. When it came to appearances, they were ready to face her team, and his too.

Emotions might be another story.

"Ready?" he asked her.

On the surface, she looked serene. Her usual poised self. After seeing her unwind for him, coming apart in his arms, his mind kept returning to that image in his head.

"I'm ready."

He opened the door. Everyone in the corridor looked up from their phones. Her team entered first to take up their positions around the room. Sentry trailed in behind. Jennings closed the door and leaned against it, arms folded, as an extra layer of security.

Avalynn stood in the middle of the room, looking from person to person. "What do you have to share with us?"

Julius's heart lurched in his chest. She used the word *us*. She'd included him.

Heidi stepped up. "The photos of the engagement have been released."

"The photos..." Avalynn glanced at him. He read the surprise on her face and realized that she didn't have a clue that the engagement had been planned down to Lark shooting photos of them in order to leak them.

Lark's cheeks grew pink. "Do you want to see them?"

"Yes." Avalynn's voice sounded with its usual strength.

Lark produced her computer tablet and moved to Avalynn's side. As she flipped through the photos of their special moments in the desert, Julius watched her closely.

Finally, she nodded. "Thank you, Lark. Who took these?"

"I did."

Avalynn's head whipped around, and she pierced her with her gaze. "They're very well done. Tasteful enough." She

looked to her manager. “What response are the photos getting?”

“We’ve been watching social media all day, Avalynn. So far, it’s looking very favorable. The fans are so excited about the news of your engagement. And the media’s going nuts asking how they missed it all these months.”

“Months?” she echoed.

“I changed the timestamps on the images,” Lark said.

Avalynn glanced his way. “So clever of you, Lark.”

“Oh, I can’t take credit for that. It was Julius’s order.”

Again, Avalynn sought him out. Automatically, he wove through people to reach her side. He guided her to the sofa, and she sank into her usual corner spot.

He hovered over her. “Do you want some tea?”

“No. Thank you, Julius.”

He nodded.

She patted the seat next to her, and he sat. As her PR team began filling her in about the response to her engagement photos—and how they were now connecting them to that sex tape—he watched her reactions. If she even started to look remotely upset, he was calling this meeting and kicking everyone out.

Avalynn’s hands were in her lap, and she toyed with her ring, sliding it up and down her narrow finger.

When she began twisting it, he reached over and rested his hand over hers. She shot him a sideways glance and stilled.

“Oh, this is such a great comment from the *New York Times*!” Lana bounced on her seat. “Avalynn Ray’s music will live on in the hearts of people across the world, and we will join them in wishing her every happiness with her impending nuptials!”

Avalynn’s full lips he’d spent half the night kissing tipped at the corners, and the glow of happiness in her eyes was unmistakable.

“It really is working!” she said.

“The tides have turned. It looks as if your reputation is restored.” Clay’s statement had everyone nodding and Avalynn looking even more relieved.

Lark cleared her throat. Everybody looked at her, but Avalynn’s brows pinched as if she knew something big was coming.

“Uh...there is one little thing.”

“Just say it, Lark.” Julius’s tone took on an edge.

She offered him an apologetic look. “Some people think she shouldn’t marry you. Some worry that you won’t be able to...keep her satisfied.”

Jennings stuffed his fist against his mouth, probably stifling laughter. That bastard.

Lark went on, “And there’s more than one comment on the post for enlargement suggestions.”

Julius coughed. Damn, that burned.

His brother wasn’t as controlled. “Take this herb. Guaranteed to work.”

“No, the pills are better,” Clay put in. “FDA approved.”

“Christ,” Julius muttered.

Avalynn caught his eye, her cheeks bright red. “At this time I say no comment!”

He couldn’t help but smile, but everyone was staring at them. He could almost feel their speculation pressing down on them.

“That’s enough about my impressive endowment,” he said.

Avalynn snorted out a laugh. His teammates were all grinning, and her team exchanged raised brows.

“We need to think about what’s coming.” Julius squeezed Avalynn’s hand, a gesture that didn’t go unnoticed by pretty

much anyone in the room. “Next stop, Vegas. We’ll be facing lots of security issues. The whole city is erupting.”

She swung her head toward him. She probably had no clue about what was really happening.

“It’s true,” Lark added. “People think you’re getting married there.”

Avalynn stiffened. “Absolutely not! Not Vegas.”

Before he could stop her, she yanked her hand out of his grasp and popped up to her feet. He didn’t get a chance to stop her before she rushed out of the room. The bedroom door slammed.

Her manager stared after her for a long minute, her expression tormented. As much as he disliked Heidi, and the feeling was mutual, the woman really did care about Avalynn. That was enough reason for Julius to keep the peace between them.

The team clustered together, speaking in hushed whispers. He got up and joined his team.

Jennings met his gaze. “You look good together.”

He’d tell him to shove it, but it would only make his kid brother break into a laugh, and he wasn’t giving the jerk the satisfaction.

Clay directed their attention from each other as if he saw a sibling argument about to break out. “We’ve had no new threats. Push for a quick wedding. It could draw out the stalker. This case has been open long enough.”

“I wouldn’t think you’d be so eager to end things already, Julius. I see the way you’re looking at each other,” Lark jumped in.

Clay’s brows pinched when he looked at his significant other. “The sooner they get married, the sooner we get that stalker. Then they can hurry up and end this fake relationship. It can’t go on forever.”

Lark’s brows shot up. “You don’t think so?”

“I don’t mean you and me, Lark.”

“We looked at each other exactly the same way.”

Julius’s head bounced with what they were saying. Comparing them to him and Avalynn? Clay and Lark were a real couple. Their love was real.

They planned to stay together for the rest of their lives. Avalynn was waiting for the day she could be free of their arrangement.

A vision of her loomed in his mind, her eyes wide and filled with emotion when he slid that ring onto her finger.

That wasn’t at all the same.

Was it?

Chapter Eight

Avalynn paced along the wall filled with tall windows. The view from these hotels were different and yet always the same. Buildings, a city stretching across the landscape. It might be raining or baking hot. People were always tiny specks on the ground below.

And Avalynn never truly felt a part of it.

Oh, she had plenty of times when she felt grounded. She went home to Texas to her bungalow or stayed with her momma for weeks at a time. She rubbed the dog's ears and refilled his water bowl. There might be song lyrics sparking in her mind while she did those things, but they were *normal* things.

Nothing about her current situation was normal.

She paced to the last window and whipped around to head the other direction. The photos of their engagement were released. Photos she didn't even know existed.

How silly and naïve of her to never consider *why* Julius chose to create such a magical moment for their engagement. Now she saw the reasoning behind it. The world would never believe it if they didn't see it in some dramatic technicolor display. He gave them that.

The reason behind it did put a damper on the whole thing, though. While she didn't have regrets over what happened back in her hotel room, she did feel a little sad that it wasn't *only* for them.

Which was plain silly. This was a transaction, she reminded herself. A means to an end, a way to get the horrible

monkeys off her back and send them running with a rumor that Julius was her lover in that video...and they were in love.

She'd made this choice. Now she had to live with it.

She spun again. The knock on the door made her jump even though she'd been expecting it. After all, she'd stormed off like a spoiled prima donna, something she never did and was kind of embarrassed about.

The last thing she wanted was Julius thinking of her like some silly, emotional child.

"Come in." Her tone reflected the misery she felt.

A set of broad shoulders filled the doorway. Julius shut the door and twisted the lock.

She blinked at the move. He'd been in her hotel rooms plenty of times but never locked the door before.

That was before they'd shared a night of passionate, bone-melting sex.

Her nipples pebbled, and she snapped her arms over them to conceal her reaction to the man striding toward her like he was coming to sweep her off her feet...

"Let's talk."

She sucked in a breath. Nobody ordered her around, but the way he said it sent a ripple of desire through her entire body. *Everywhere.*

She wet her dry lips. "What about?"

Dark brown eyes burned into hers. "About Vegas?"

"Okay, I know that I overreacted in there. It's just that—"

"You don't want your wedding to be quick and meaningless."

"Exactly!" She was glad he understood, because she hardly did herself. Her shoulders drooped.

"Honey, we don't have to get married in Vegas."

"You're being super giving. I know this whole thing is a big blow to your ego. Pretending you're the guy on the

video...”

“I don’t care about that.”

He really was so sweet and he always seemed to know the right thing to say.

“I want my wedding to be special.” Her statement came out on a quiet lilt.

He reached for her but when someone knocked and then tried the door handle, he dropped his hand to his side. “Dammit. We can’t talk now.”

“What? Why? What’s going on?” Her stomach bottomed out. What if her stalker was here and he’d really come into the room to get her to safety and then she sidetracked him with unimportant worries?

He wrapped his fingers around her upper arm. “The big press conference. Did you forget?”

The warmth of his touch was an instant balm smoothed over her jumping nerves. Okay, press conferences she could do with her eyes closed. Fleeing her hotel room with a madman on her trail wasn’t.

She touched the messy knot she’d thrown her hair into. “Will you tell my team I need my stylist and glam squad in here—now. I can’t attend the press conference looking like...”

His lips twisted at one corner. “Like you crawled out of bed after a very...very...satisfying night?”

Her breath came faster. She leaned toward him. He cupped her face in his big hand and moved in to kiss her.

The door handle jiggled as someone tried it again.

“Damn.” He dropped his hand and stepped back. “You get ready. I’ll be waiting to escort you.”

In a few strides, he reached the door and was gone. The whirlwind of the next half hour was spent primping her and creating a glowing look that included a trace of lip gloss and mascara, and brushing out her hair until it waved over one shoulder and was tucked behind one ear.

Her stylist selected a boho-style sundress that fell to the tops of her thighs not unlike what she'd worn in those engagement photos.

Like the dress Julius had stripped off her.

She drowned in memories of their night together as her team stood back to examine her appearance. After a hasty stamp of approval, Julius was allowed in. And with his hand splayed over her spine, he directed her downstairs to a banquet room set up with a long table where she would sit with her manager and talk to everyone who wanted to know more about her personal life than the new album she'd soon be recording.

The minute the door opened, they were swamped by paparazzi. The press thrust microphones in front of her and Julius's faces and fired questions at them about their engagement.

Out of nowhere, two men in black Stetsons flanked her. She felt Julius's hand leave her spine and looked around frantically.

"Keep walking," Clay said.

"But—"

"Don't say anything," Jennings advised from the other side of her.

With no choice whatsoever, she let them lead her to the table at the front of the room. Heidi was there to guide her to a seat, and she took it. The Sentry team stood at her back, watching over her. But where was *her* bodyguard?

She craned her neck to see over the crowd swarming in front of her and at the back of the room, around Julius.

"Oh my god!"

Heidi leaned close to her. "It's okay. Things are going just as planned."

"As planned? This is insane! It's never been like this before," she whispered back.

She looked up to see Lark moving in on her other side. She offered Avalynn a smile that didn't help calm her at all.

"I don't want to do this," she told Heidi.

"It's going to be all right, Avalynn. You're an old pro at these things."

She was. But she'd never had a sex tape out or a new fiancé—who was fake. What if she slipped and mentioned that those photos were all faked too, that it happened the previous night and the dates were all changed to make it look as though it took place—

Her mind screeched to a halt as the date imprinted on those photos clicked in her mind.

The exact same date as the one on that sex video.

They really made it all happen. They made it look as if that tape was filmed on the night of their engagement and that it really could be her with Julius.

After mere moments, Heidi brought the conference to order. The crowd silenced. Avalynn sought out Julius once more, but her gaze only skimmed over him before Quaide led him out of the banquet room.

She yanked on Lark's arm, drawing her attention. "Where is Quaide taking him?"

"Don't worry, he's safe. So are you."

"That isn't what I asked!" Her voice rose a notch too high, and Lark gave her a sympathetic look.

"We don't want him distracting you. This is all part of the plan, Avalynn. I promise you that it *will* work out." The conviction in Lark's tone forced her to focus on what was about to take place.

The questioning began. Avalynn wasn't surprised that none of them were about her new album or when it was planned to drop. And ohhh, the things these people were saying...

She was glad her momma wasn't present to hear them or she'd have her claws out for her little girl. Whenever an embarrassing question was aimed her way, Heidi thwarted it with a tense smile and "Next question!"

"Avalynn, are you concerned about your fans boycotting your concerts?"

"Avalynn, when you made that tape, did you think about how your young fans would be watching?"

Her heart began to beat too hard and fast. Her palms were sweating.

By the time the Sentry team led her out of there, she felt almost desperate to be with Julius again. She needed to talk to him. There was so much to say.

As soon as they returned to her suite, Julius was there, hand on her spine, whisking her away to her bedroom and firmly shutting the door and locking them in.

She spun on him. "That was horrible!"

In one step, he brought his heat up against her body and cupped her face. "I know, honey."

She trembled. "What happened to you?"

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine. I'm pissed the fuck off that my team made me leave that conference, though. I couldn't stand up for you the way I wanted to." The harsh fury in his voice sent shivers through her.

He pulled her into his arms, and she buried her face against his shoulder, taking gulps of his masculine scent she never realized was as familiar to her as the smell of honeysuckle growing off the front porch at her childhood home.

"Maybe we shouldn't be doing this," she said. "Maybe we shouldn't..."

"Be doing what?"

"This engagement!"

He drew back enough to meet her stare. “I’m worried about what I’ll do to your career, Avalynn.”

She shook her head. “I thought I was so worried about my career, but I realized I have plenty. But now that the world knows we’re engaged, we can’t go back. Oh god, Julius! Reality is setting in. I just realized that the past couple days, I got caught up in this plan and a whirlwind romance. Even the desert...” She broke off, struggling.

“And I’m stealing all your firsts.” The tender caress in his voice undid her.

She buried her face against his shoulder again, drinking him in and shaking her head too. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any of what I said. You can’t steal what I’m willingly giving, Julius.”

He slipped his knuckle under her chin and lifted her head to look into her eyes again. A riot of emotions played in his, each more complex and important than the last.

“I know you’ll protect me, Julius. Me and my heart,” she choked.

He issued an enormous sigh and cradled her against his shoulder again, resting his chin on top of her head. “Damn right I will, honey.”

“Was there any sign of my stalker at the press conference?” What should be her first fear seemed to take a back seat to her worries about her engagement.

“No sign of him that we could see. But we’re going to comb over the camera footage in the room just to make sure.” He brushed his lips over her forehead in that sweet way that made her curl her fingers into his shirt and hold on even tighter.

Of all the men she could think to ride this crazy train with, she would choose Julius.

It was hard not to get caught up in all the emotions when he was so perfect.

* * * * *

As soon as Julius stepped out of Avalynn's bedroom, everyone stared at him.

He had to question how soundproof these doors were. He'd spent quite a bit of time studying hotels like this one, and the doors were never thick. A swift martial arts kick could probably break through the walls too.

From the looks they were all giving him, he could guess they'd heard a hell of a lot. A couple people on her PR team gave him a look like they held him personally responsible for the entire mess. Or maybe just for stealing her firsts.

"Don't you all have something better to do? Like *work*?" If they weren't smart enough to remove themselves, he hoped his tone would clear them out.

Lana turned toward the guys on her team. "Heidi, we'll keep monitoring social media in my room. If you need me, you know how to get in touch."

Heidi nodded.

"I'll be making arrangements for the next press conference too."

Heidi slid her stare to Julius. He sent her a flat look. The last thing he could deal with right now was the manager's attitude.

Heidi barreled over to him. "You leaving the conference looked bad!"

"That wasn't my call."

She bobbed her head. "But everything that has to do with *Avalynn* is."

"That's right."

"Do you even know what you're doing? How trained are you?" She jutted her chin in a challenge.

In general, Julius didn't dislike Heidi, but he wasn't in the mood for her accusations either. "Look, Heidi, I know that you've got Avalynn's best interests in mind, and that you've

been with her a long time. But in this case, I have a reason for the things I do. I ask that you trust me.”

“I’ll never trust you, especially in this matter. You think you’re standing up for Avalynn’s honor, but who’s to say that you’re not just riding on the prestige of all this? After all, you’re going to be marrying her!”

He held the woman’s stare for a long beat. “That’s right. I will make her my wife to protect her from ridicule and damaging rumors. So never question my loyalty to Avalynn. I’d even claim that what I’ve done—and will continue to do—is bigger than what you will do to protect her. I spend my days and nights thinking up ways to keep her safe and to find the bastard who’s stalking her!”

Heidi glared in the face of his anger but didn’t back down. “I care enough to worry about what this will all do to her when it’s over!” She held his stare for a heavy minute before his glare must have become too much. She twisted her head aside.

He already bore a huge responsibility for Avalynn’s welfare, and she was right. Dealing with a divorce was probably just as scandalous if not worse than having sex out of wedlock and making a sex tape about it when her reputation was snow-white and pure.

He also couldn’t forget the fact that she was passionate about not being another one of those celebrities who had multiple marriages. The thought that he’d be racking up one smudge on her reputation was difficult enough to live with.

But he was doing this all for her.

Through his nostrils, he let out a sigh. A few feet away, Clay sliced a hand through the air. Seeing that he was close to his snapping point, he signaled for everyone to clear out of the suite.

Julius watched the four members of her team leave first, followed by Sentry.

When they were alone, Julius scrubbed his knuckles over his jaw. “She’s calmed down.”

Clay heaved a sigh. “This is one of the most complex cases I’ve been involved in, and you know that’s saying a lot.”

He did. Months ago he would have said that the most complicated case Sentry had dealt with involved a crooked church pastor on the run after Sentry discovered several crimes he committed.

“What do you want to do, Julius? Do you want to call it? Throw in the towel?”

He had to think of Avalynn. His ward. He’d sworn to protect her, but now he didn’t know if he could do that, not with her heart involved. He knew she didn’t mean that she had feelings for him, only that she didn’t want to lose all those opportunities she would have gotten with a man she *did* love.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. Christ, he wished things were different, but there was no way to turn back now — not without a second, larger-than-life scandal.

Clay thumbed his hat up a bit. “I see how you look at her.”

“And?” He wasn’t even going to deny it. Not after the previous night. As soon as Clay was finished with him, he’d go out and find more condoms so he could do it again.

“What’s your motive?”

He squared his shoulders. “I will go to any lengths to get the guy stalking her and keep her safe. This means flushing out the bad guy.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess we’re planning a wedding.”

Clay’s lips quirked at one corner, but his brows knitted with the confusion Julius felt. “Do you have any idea what the FBI budget is for a fake wedding?”

Julius grunted. “I at least get a plane, right?”

“I can probably manage a plane.”

An idea formed in Julius’s mind, more focused and detailed than the engagement in the desert had been. As soon

as one part materialized, another and another followed.

“I need to talk to Avalynn’s PR team. And Lark.”

Clay nodded. “Go on. I’ll stay here and guard your bride.”

That word should make his stomach sink. Instead, it felt as if he’d drunk far too much champagne and the bubbles were popping inside his chest and making the hair on the back of his neck prickle.

What the hell was the matter with him? None of this was real.

It fucking *felt* real, though. Too real. So real that he’d completely forgotten about Lark snapping photos of them. In those moments, all he knew was how the candlelight played in the depths of Avalynn’s beautiful eyes and how her face lit up when she saw his grandmother’s ring.

How she looked when he carried her to bed, undressed her and slid between her thighs.

Being dragged out of that press conference by Quaide today had damn near crushed him. He never lost his shit on the job, but he’d been damn close today.

Avalynn didn’t *feel* like a job.

Fuck. He was in deeper than he thought. He wanted to protect her *and* worship her body with his.

Wasn’t that the definition of a...husband?

Chapter Nine

New city. New venue. Another press conference.

Avalynn didn't often wish that her fast-paced life would slow down, but she could use a minute to just *breathe*.

So much had happened. So much more was on the horizon. And to make things worse, Julius was keeping things so...professional.

She lay in her hotel bed, too aware that only a door separated them.

They should talk. There must be something to say, right? Some way to break this silent streak between them.

Back in ninth grade, she had a crush on Tatum Freeman. He liked her too. But after having a great time at the school dance, things got weird between them. Awkward.

That was happening with her and Julius right now, and she could only guess it was because she'd drunk so much wine and thrown herself at him. Maybe he'd seen her naked and couldn't look at her now.

She needed to be at her very best for this upcoming press conference. She couldn't act shifty or nervous, and she needed to say *all* the right things so she passed as credible.

She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the mattress. She had to hitch herself up into the high bed, so when she got out now, she had a few inches to drop before her feet touched the thick area rug.

Slipping on her robe, she headed to the door that connected her room with her bodyguard's. Nerves struck, and

she chewed on her bottom lip, trying to decide whether it really was a good idea to knock. After all, he might still be asleep. She wasn't typically up this early, and he always brought her tea to help get her going in the mornings.

Biting down on her lip, she rapped softly on the door. No sound came from the other side. Instead of knocking again, she twisted the handle.

And it opened.

Heart throbbing in the base of her throat, she pushed it inward and tried the second door leading to Julius's room.

When it too opened, she stifled a noise of surprise that turned into a gasp when her gaze fell on the bed.

Julius lay on his stomach.

Completely nude.

Not a stitch of fabric concealed his glorious, chiseled body from her.

Rock-hard shoulders led to his spine layered in muscle. That tapered to his waist and finally the sculpted planes of his backside that she knew were like pure steel under her hands. Long, muscled legs ended in bare feet. On the back of one thigh was a small, puckered scar that made him even hotter.

Want pooled low in her stomach. Her panties were no barrier from the man lying not ten feet away from her.

She wanted him.

His face was turned away from her, so she only saw his short brown hair against his tanned nape.

Before she knew what she was doing, she'd crossed the room to the bed. When she unfurled her fingers from the fists she'd clamped them into in order to keep from latching on to his toned ass, she reached out and stroked his shoulder.

He exploded off the bed, saw her and lunged for her. She stumbled back a step, but his arms locked around her and he hauled her into bed with him.

He pinned her underneath him. Chest heaving, his warm breath washed over her throat. “What are you doing in here?”

“I just...thought we should...” Make out? Have wild, passionate sex until her manager came to drag her away to that press conference? “Talk,” she concluded.

“Mmm.” What she felt poking against her thigh didn’t indicate he was in the talking mood, though.

She was under a naked hunk whose stiff cock revealed just how much he wanted her.

“Is that...uh...usual in the mornings?”

“You mean this?” He rocked his hips into her, and the head of his cock edged beneath her robe, arrowing toward her pussy.

“Yes.” The word came with a shiver.

“Some of it’s from waking up. Some is finding you in my room, half undressed, in this silky little thing.” He skated a hand down her side and lifted her hip to meet his.

“Oh god! Julius!”

He sucked on the pulse point in her neck and moved downward in a sweep. Roughly parting her robe, he found the camisole she’d worn to bed and groaned. “You’re so damn beautiful, honey.”

Her breath came in sharp rasps. “You’re pretty—” Any words died on her lips as he closed his lips around her nipple through her camisole. It pebbled at the pressure and heat of his mouth. Like a cable ran from it to her spine, she arched upward for more.

He nuzzled her for a long, dizzying minute before sliding his hand down the flat of her stomach...and right between her thighs.

She was wearing plain cotton panties because they were much more comfortable than having floss up her butt crack, especially while she slept. Now she wished she’d selected any other pair from her suitcase.

Julius didn't seem to mind one bit when he slipped a long, callused finger under the elastic and found her soaking center.

She cried out. He thrust his finger inside, pulsing it in a slow rhythm that stole any inhibitions she had at opening his door. If this was what she could expect, those doors between their rooms could stay *wide* open.

Like her thighs right this minute.

He wedged his body between them and pumped his finger in and out of her sheath until she was writhing.

“What did you want to talk about?” He stared into her eyes.

“I...” She choked on her tongue when he added a second finger to her pussy and stretched her until she drenched his hand. They shared a moan.

She tried again, but her mouth was too dry. She darted her tongue over her lips, and still no sound came out. How did he know where the perfect point inside her was? Bumping his fingertips against that spot over and over and over...

She bucked into his hand.

“Avalynn...”

“I wondered why we...weren't...speaking!”

“Because this is the only thing I've thought about doing to you ever since our night together and I couldn't” — he thrust his fingers deep — “risk” — and pulled them free with a dark promise in his eyes — “doing this to you.”

She dug her fingers into his sides, fitting them into the perfect spots between thick bands of muscle. “I should have come...sooner!”

His eyes twinkled. “Oh, you'll come, honey.” He withdrew his fingers and stroked up her soaking folds to her clit. As soon as his wet digits met her bundle of nerves, she stopped thinking. Breathing, too.

Her lungs screamed for air that she couldn't remember how to give them because she was too busy taking every

ounce of pleasure he had to give her.

Her body tensed. She shook.

“Now, Avalynn. Come now!” He watched her close. Her mouth parted on an *O* of bliss, and her eyes shuttered as a powerful orgasm swept through her.

Contracting fast and hard, she grabbed on to him, but he slipped through her hands on his way down her body. He tore off her panties and threw himself between her legs, mouth fused to her pussy in a sucking pull that yanked a roughened cry from her.

Her release pounded through her. Her heart hammered in her chest, and her nipples begged for the same attention he was giving the rest of her.

His tongue speared inside her. A low growl rumbled from his lips through her pussy and stole the last of her orgasm. Sucking in a breath of oxygen, she shuddered and collapsed.

“Please tell me you have condoms!” she managed to pant.

“Believe me, I might have been trying to stop this moment from happening, but I’m prepared for it.” He did a manly pushup off the mattress and landed on his feet like a gymnast. All she saw were those carved ass cheeks moving as he strode to his bag and pulled out not one condom but an entire box.

Her insides clutched with fresh want.

As he pulled one out and began to roll it over his thick erection, his gaze pinned hers. “Take off that robe.”

She tugged her arms free of the loose, silky sleeves.

“The camisole and panties too.”

She stripped faster than ever before. As he approached the bed, she held out her arms, and he tumbled into them.

His lips found hers, tasting of herself. Need sent waves of desire through her. Growing bold, she hooked her legs around him and pulled him into her.

His cock nestled at her entrance. Their gazes met—and he filled her in one shove.

“Yes!” Her insides gripped at him.

“Christ! I want to see you coming on my cock.”

No man had ever spoken like this to her in the bedroom. She realized with a shock that she never would have accepted it either. Not from them.

But from Julius? She wanted to hear more.

His muscles flexed. Every thrust sent her higher and higher, on the verge of something bigger than she’d experienced a minute before. One hand cupped her breast, his thumb riding along the crest of her nipple and brushing against it with every move they made. His cock tunneled deep.

“I shouldn’t want you so damn bad,” he bit off, jaw tense, as though he was in pain. “But goddamn if I don’t want you in my bed every night.”

A thrill went through her. Pulling him down, she kissed him with everything she had to give. When she stroked her tongue over his, a primal noise rose in his throat. He stiffened and began to jerk into her in long, hard plunges that rocked her with their force.

Her insides locked around him. A dark ecstasy swirled deep in her pussy and she started to come on his cock.

* * * * *

“I don’t know if I can do this again so soon.” Avalynn twisted away from the door leading to the press conference. This one bigger with even more reporters and photographers waiting to get a piece of the sweetheart of country music.

Julius only had to see that glimmer of fear in her eyes to act. Catching her by the hand, he towed her several feet away and around the corner to a private spot.

When he stopped walking, she turned to face him, head tipped back, her lip trapped in her teeth.

“Listen, it’s going to be okay. I’m going to walk you in there and stay right by your side the entire time.”

“Last time your team forced you to leave.”

“So I didn’t make things worse.”

“How can you possibly make things worse?”

He offered her a twisted smile. “I have a habit of runnin’ my mouth when I should stay quiet. You can ask my momma.”

She linked her hands. He watched the knuckles go white from squeezing them so hard.

“Let’s do it this way, honey.” He gathered each of her hands in his and held them gently while staring down into her beautiful eyes. “You’re nervous as a kitten.”

“Touching you helps.”

The admission punched him hard in the gut. So hard that for a moment, his mind blanked, any response lost in the thump in his solar plexus that could only be from his heart.

Footsteps sounded, and he quickly stepped in front of her, one hand still in hers and the other reaching for his weapon. The clack of high heels made him groan.

“It’s Heidi.” Of all the times for her manager to interrupt, this was one of the worst.

Or maybe it wasn’t terrible timing as much as it was him wanting to hear more about how his touch made Avalynn calm down.

Heidi rounded the corner sporting creased brows and the gleam of sweat on her forehead. She spotted them and threw up her hands. “There you are! What is going on? You”—she jabbed a finger his way—“were supposed to have Avalynn in that room three minutes ago!”

She stepped around him to face her manager. Battling the instinct to shove her behind him again, he retained his grip on her hand.

“It’s my fault,” she said to Heidi.

“Avalynn, you’ve never done something like this before. You’re always on time.”

“Well, my life isn’t exactly easy right now, is it? Three minutes is nothing in the scheme of life when some performers show up hours late to the stage, hung over or high!”

Heidi opened her mouth, but Julius cut across her. “She’s right.”

“I’m *so* getting you fired from this position.”

“Good luck on that,” he fired back.

You can’t fire me from being her husband.

His chest welled again with that bubble of emotion. Hell, he didn’t even know what to call the sensation, but he wasn’t going to ignore its existence either. Later, when he was alone, he’d analyze it more. Sit with the feeling and figure out where it was stemming from.

Avalynn broke up the tiff between them. “I’ll go with you now. I’m ready. Let’s not keep them waiting.” She took a step toward Heidi, and he pulled her back.

Heidi gasped in outrage.

He turned his back on the woman and placed himself between her and Avalynn. Taking her hands again, he gazed down at her. “You’re okay, Avalynn. I got you in this. Every step of the way.”

A masculine throat cleared, and Julius grumbled at the knowledge that now his boss was stepping in.

“I’m taking it from here, Abel. You go with Livingston.”

He clenched his jaw so tight that his teeth began to ache. Much more of that and he’d pop them right out of his head. He wouldn’t make a very pretty groom then, would he?

Avalynn reached up and stroked her fingertip over the corner of his mouth. She searched his gaze before stepping back from him.

He whirled to watch her go with Heidi and Clay. His boss shot him a raised brow before the trio disappeared out of sight.

Julius raked his fingers through his hair. Dammit, this felt wrong. He didn't like being separated from his ward.

His fiancée.

She was his responsibility, even if the sentiment behind putting that ring on her finger was fake. He'd vowed to play his part and he would damn well see it through to the end.

He just prayed that during the wild ride, he and Avalynn could both hang on to their hearts.

Then it hit him—what this emotion was.

He was already dangerously close to losing his in this deal.

Chapter Ten

Avalynn took a seat to loud applause from the group of people gathered to talk to her.

She clasped her hands in front of her and made sure to meet several people's gazes and retain a serene expression for all the photos being snapped.

"Avalynn! How do you feel about heading to Vegas?"

She managed not to let her smile slip. "I'm so excited to perform for my fans in Vegas!"

"Is your fiancé with you, Avalynn?" another reporter fired at her.

Heidi began to answer on her behalf, but she gave her manager a nod to stop her. Then in a poised manner, she responded to the question.

"He is traveling with me."

"Your new album you're about to record, did you write any of the songs for him?"

The question brought a brittle smile to her face. She had to make this look real, didn't she?

"Now if I tell you that, it will be giving away too much!" she said to several laughs.

She'd started writing songs for the album before Julius came into her life. He'd been on that bus with her for at least the last three songs she'd written. While she picked at chords on the acoustic guitar and sang notes and scribbled lyrics on a notepad, he had heard and seen it all.

He didn't comment on her process, and his stalwart presence faded into the background then.

Now he was in the spotlight, standing right beside her.

Only he wasn't here right now, and she wished he were.

"Avalynn!" another person called out. "When did you know he was the one?"

Her stomach fluttered. What to tell them? She racked her brain for reasons that a woman might fall in love.

She touched her tongue to her eye tooth in thought. An idea came to her, bringing a genuine smile with it.

"Well, he gets me drinks."

A collective laugh filled the room.

"Usually tea."

More laughter.

"It's not just any coffee or tea!" she argued. "I have a whole way of taking both drinks that involves a lot of detail. Julius cared enough to learn how I like it."

The crowd gave a collective: "Awwww."

"Can you share anything else about how you spend your time with Julius?" someone called out.

She located the person in the crowd and gave all her attention to them. "As you might have seen from those engagement photos..."

A cheer cut off her words, and she had to wait for them all to quiet down.

Heidi reached over to touch her arm in a display of approval. She might not like Julius, but the woman had to appreciate how much his being in Avalynn's life helped her.

Once the crowd silenced, she went on, "You can see how much he spoils me." Tiny sparks flitted around in her stomach. "And when he looks at me..." She shook her head.

"Avalynn Ray is blushing!" someone called out.

Dozens of cameras flashed to capture the moment.

“I started to notice how he looked at me. He saw the same things in the looks I gave him...” She shook her head again, her smile private and genuine as she thought of so many of those moments.

Moments that were *so real*.

Her mind flipped through a mental album filled with snapshots in time, and for the first time she realized that she wasn't making up a story to get her reputation back on track. She said these things because she meant them.

So many thoughts and emotions plowed through her head. All of a sudden, her fingers itched for her guitar strings. There was only one way to get these feelings out—in a song.

She leaned close to whisper to Heidi. “I need to wrap this up. I need to write.”

She blinked at her. “Now?”

“*Right now.*”

Heidi took the floor. “Okay, everybody, Avalynn Ray has a lot of engagements today. Thank you all for coming, and we hope you'll attend tonight's show!”

Avalynn popped out of her seat. Before she could take more than two steps, Clay was right behind her, guiding her out of the room.

As soon as she reached the bus, she kicked off her high heels that pinched her toes but looked killer with her outfit and reached into the overhead compartment for her guitar.

When she pulled down the case, a melody already swirled in her mind like cream in hot cocoa. A sweet tune. Sweeter words. Her cheeks were warm with excitement as she unlocked the case and drew out her guitar.

It was the first guitar she ever owned. Oh, she could afford better ones and instruments that came with all the prestige that someone with her status should own. But she preferred her tried-and-true.

Each ding and scratch in the blonde wood had been placed there by her love for music. As she sat down in the plush seat and began to strum, the vibrations of the strings shivered in her soul. Words poured out of her, and the song wrote itself.

She didn't even need to write it down—it was that imprinted on her soul.

As the final note faded away, a tender smile claimed her lips.

“For Julius,” she whispered the title of the song she planned on performing for him.

Tonight.

* * * * *

Julius firmed his mouth into a line. Dammit, despite all their efforts, not much progress had been made to find Avalynn's stalker, and they were no closer to identifying the man on that video. Whether or not they were one and the same was yet another concern.

Just knowing that someone had abused her that way made his fists curl. The entire situation was fucked up, far from okay. But he would do everything in his power—and whatever power he gathered from his team—to make whoever was responsible pay for it.

Lark was tapping away nonstop at the computer keys, and Jennings hadn't looked up from his phone once since Quaide led Julius to the room where Sentry was gathered. Quaide then disappeared to make some calls, leaving Julius at a loss for ways to contribute to finding the bastard terrorizing his fiancée.

Bracing a hand on the desk next to Lark, he leaned in to see the screen. “What are you digging for?”

She didn't glance up as she entered another jumble of numbers and letters. “I'm trying to hack into a system.”

“Whose system?”

“There’s a rumor going around that one of Avalynn’s ex-boyfriends is the responsible party.”

His arm tensed from wrist to shoulder. He felt his back muscles lock. “Which ex?”

“Leon.”

“Leon? That dude from the surfer movies?”

“Yup.”

He ran through the guy’s movies. The body in the video wasn’t even close to the one he saw onscreen.

“Unless that guy has a body double for every minute the camera is rolling, he’s lying.”

“It could be a publicity stunt,” Lark agreed. “He did get turned down for every role he tried for in the past two years.”

“That’s because he’s a drunk. The son of a bitch probably thinks fucking Avalynn Ray will give him back his popularity.”

Jennings stirred in his spot in an armchair. “He’s also high on coke all the time. He isn’t thinking straight about what it would do to his career.”

Lark stopped typing and looked up at Jennings. “I don’t for a minute believe that a guy with a sex tape wouldn’t be congratulated on every street corner and be given a bunch of contracts. The woman is the one who always suffers in these stories.”

“She’s right,” Julius concurred. “So, Lark, you’re hacking the actor’s personal computer?”

“Uh-huh.” She hit another button. “I’m in.”

“Just like that?”

She sliced a look his way. “Not just like that, no. Getting through those encryptions and firewalls took a lot of work, Julius.”

“Of course. I know how it works.”

Jennings didn't hide his chuckle. "Technology isn't your first language like it is our brother Jaren's."

"No, but I can hold my own." He examined the screen closer. "Have you found anything yet?"

"I'm just searching his files for the video. Emails too."

"Good, since we know that whoever had the video in their possession sent it to the media."

"Right." She whipped through folder after folder.

"Julius."

He jerked around at the sound of his voice and spotted Quaide in the doorway.

"Clay took Avalynn back to her tour bus. You can resume your duty with her until the concert. Then Clay and I will be with her."

Resume my duty...

By cupping her beautiful face and drawing those sweet, luscious lips to his. Kneading her breasts and toying with her nipples until she shook for more. Then plunging inside her tight, gripping heat.

He drowned in his imagination for too many seconds. Quaide noticed that he'd checked out.

Straightening, he tapped the desk beside Lark's computer. "Let me know if you find anything on the douchebag's system."

"Will do," she said in a distracted manner and then stopped.

He zeroed in on the screen. "Did you find something already?"

"No. It just hit me that we're all birds."

He, Quaide and Jennings all gave her a sharp look.

"Birds?" he repeated.

She nodded. "Lark and Dove." Her gaze shot to Quaide. "Avalynn's not a bird, but... Let me check something." She

quickly opened another screen and typed in a search.

“A-ha! Just as I thought. Avalynn means ‘beautiful bird.’”

He let the meaning sink in. “Well, she *is* beautiful.”

When he realized everyone was staring at him, Lark wore a wide grin and his brother was shaking his head.

“I have to get to the tour bus and make sure Avalynn has everything she needs before the show.”

Quaide issued a dry cough that was obviously faked. “You mean her special comfort items? Drinks? Maybe her fuzzy slippers to soothe her tootsies?”

Julius’s brother cracked up laughing. He swung toward Jennings with a glare that would send any other person to the emergency room, but not his hard-ass brother. Oh, no. He just sat there laughing at Julius.

“She needs that tea for her vocal cords.”

“No doubt having it hand-delivered by her favorite bodyguard helps too. Oh wait!” Jennings clapped his palm to his cheek in faux realization. “You’re her fiancé now.”

“Jerks.” Without sticking around any longer, he rushed out of the room they’d commandeered for their use while in Vegas.

When he reached the bus parked near the building, he spotted Clay with his back to the door.

“I’ll take it from here.”

“I’ll be back to escort our ward to the concert.”

He didn’t like the sound of that—our ward. Avalynn was *his* ward. His—

He broke off that thought and typed in a passcode to trigger the door lock and enter. As soon as he stepped into the bus, Avalynn unfolded herself from where she was curled up on the center of the big bed in the rear.

His gut clenched with desire. His balls were suddenly bursting to have her.

“Hi.” She threw him a small wave.

“Hi, honey. I’ll just fix your tea.”

She bobbed her head in agreement and returned to jotting down notes in the notebook she cradled on her crossed legs.

As he moved to the small kitchen area, he listened to her hum a few bars. Then she sang softly under her breath.

She was writing. At a time like this, when she was under more stress than she’d *ever* experienced in her entire life, that was a huge deal.

Did she sound a little hoarse too? Instead of selecting the usual box of tea, he reached for a canister. After heating water on a hot plate, he poured it over the tea strainer, then added honey for her throat.

As he carried the mug to her, each step closer sent desire washing over him. And his chest had that heavy, tight pressure again, like his body was gearing up for something big to happen.

Reaching the threshold between the rest of the bus and her sleeping area, he waited for her to look up from her notes.

He glanced at the scribbling, but she slammed the book closed.

“It’s the Chinese variety. With honey.” He held out the mug.

Her jaw dropped on a puff of air. “You remembered.”

“I remember everything where you’re involved.”

Her tender smile only made that tight tug in his chest more pronounced.

“It’s really important to me that you’re there tonight at the concert. I want you to listen, Julius.”

He leaned in the doorway. “I promise I’ll listen.”

She brought the mug to her lips and sipped. When she lowered it, he fixated on the way her tongue darted across her full lower lip to swipe away that drop lingering there.

Meeting his stare, she lowered the mug. “When you look at me that way...”

“What way, honey?”

“*That* way. Like you’re about to rip this tea out of my hand and have your way with—”

She never got the final word out before he did just that.

Chapter Eleven

“Avalynn, ten minutes until showtime.”

Julius had pressed her down on the bed in the back of the bus and blown her mind. Every single place he touched her still burned like he'd *branded* her. And she knew from looking in the mirror while getting dressed for the stage that she bore more than one pink mark from him raking his rough beard over her sensitive skin.

“Avalynn, five minutes until showtime.”

Her insides clutched at so many memories dancing through her head. She swore each one of those memories wore a pair of cowboy boots, kicking it up like a night at the bar where she'd sung her first gigs before making it big.

Julius had delivered a kiss to her lips that she wouldn't soon forget—if she ever did. Then he'd given her that crooked smile that melted off panties she wasn't even wearing at the time.

“You'll be more relaxed after that.”

“I just might make this my new pre-concert routine,” she'd said.

“Avalynn, four minutes.”

She hugged herself but felt her lover's arms as he pinned her to the bed and did unspeakable things to her body that made her scream his name...

“Avalynn? Did you hear me?”

She jolted and looked around.

Expecting to see her manager or one of her PR crew, she was surprised when only Lark stood in front of her.

The pretty redhead gave her an amused smile. “You good?”

“Yes.” She still felt dazed by all the things she and Julius did—and she wanted so much more of. Was it possible to skip the concert?

Lark cocked her head. “Why don’t I buy that?”

She dug her teeth into her lip but remembered she was wearing full-on glam makeup with a red lip to accent the white leather jacket and the white rhinestone pants that hugged her like a second skin.

“Because I’m lying!” she burst out.

“Oh dear.”

“This is my first time performing since the engagement photos hit. My mom is wrong! I’m not so fearless.”

“Oh, honey.” Lark slid her arm around her.

She leaned against her new friend. Funny thing was, she’d only known this woman for a few days and already considered her a person that she could confide in. Someone who could keep her secrets.

There were even fewer people she’d talk openly with. For all her popularity and fame, her world was pretty small.

And right now, Julius—and what she was about to do—was at the center of it.

Lark gave her a small squeeze. “What changed? You know we’ll keep you safe.”

“I’m not worried about that—well, not much, anyway. It’s just that...”

Lark’s big eyes urged her to spill.

“What am I doing? I can’t believe that I wrote him a song!”

Lark blinked. “Who? Julius?”

She gave a miserable nod. “The worst part? I mean every word of it!”

“Ohhh, *honey!*”

“What if he hates it? What if he doesn’t get it? What if...”

Lark’s expression was calm. If this woman had a billboard selling calm, it would sport a picture of her current expression.

“This could be your only chance.”

To tell Julius she was falling for him?

Lark continued, “The whole world has their eyes on you. We could get this guy tonight.”

It took her mind a beat to catch up and understand what Lark was talking about.

Her stalker. Or the guy who made that tape of her. It could even be the same man.

“Two minutes!”

She and Lark spun toward the entrance of her dressing room to see Heidi standing there looking more exasperated than she did when Avalynn was late to the press conference.

With no choice left in sight, she rushed to the door. Heidi grabbed her by the arm and towed her a few feet. She was aware of the Sentry men falling in step behind her, guarding her life.

Too bad they couldn’t guard her from what she was about to do.

She hurried up a short run of stairs and stepped foot onstage. The lights were out. The crowd chanted. And it didn’t sound like most of the seats were empty like the last stadium.

Her heart gave a hard throb in her chest. She didn’t *have* to sing that song she’d written only hours before. She told her band she was opening with a solo performance, but she could change her mind.

She moved to the center of the stage, glancing between the members of her band. Was she really going to do this?

She headed toward her beat-up old guitar on a stand and picked it up. The familiar weight in her hands gave her the courage to loop the strap over her neck.

With her heart in her throat, she pulled in two big, cleansing breaths, stepped up to the microphone...and sang the first note.

Chills broke out from the top of her head to her pinky toes. She curled them inside her boots. The crowd went wild.

Her voice grew in strength as she cut open a vein of emotion and began to bleed her feelings all over the audience. Knowing that Julius was out there listening made tears rush to her eyes, but she refused to let them fall.

No ugly crying tonight.

She sang her heart out to a packed stadium of fans...for one man.

And she meant every word.

A prickle of heat swept up her side. She automatically pivoted to glance in the side wings of the stage.

Julius was there. Staring at her.

Their gazes locked, and she continued to sing—to him.

This wasn't any song about love. It was one soul speaking to another. Did he hear it in her voice? Feel it in the way she looked at him?

His eyes glowed. She swore she saw his chest heave.

When the final word fell from her lips, total silence followed.

Then all of a sudden, the world erupted. Screams deafened her.

She looked from the audience back to Julius. He brought his hands up and began to clap for her. Then he blew her a kiss.

No one could stop her grin. The drummer hit it, and she was off and running, performing like she had hundreds of

times in the past, only this felt different.

She'd never been in love then.

When the concert ended, Julius was waiting for her. She ran into his arms, and he whisked her off the stage. Getting backstage was impossible with all the fans with VIP passes trying to touch her, screaming for her to sign their T-shirts.

But Julius hooked an arm around her shoulders and dragged her close.

“Avalynn! Are you going to get married in Vegas?” someone shouted above the din.

Another few steps and Julius shoved her into her dressing room. He slammed the door shut and locked it.

She threw herself at him, surging onto tiptoe and crushing her lips against his in a kiss that reached a fever pitch in seconds. He yanked her flush against his hard body and kissed her until she was breathless. Their tongues entwined. Need erupted.

He dragged his mouth away, panting.

She cupped his jaw. “You wanna?”

“Wanna what?” he asked.

“You know... Vegas.”

“Honey, it isn't your dream.”

She dropped to the heels of her boots, brought down to earth and embarrassed she'd suggested it. “You're right. I guess I got swept up for a minute.”

He pressed his lips between her brows, and she let her eyes slip shut on the sensation he roused with so much tenderness. “Thank you for tonight. For the song.”

She drew back to search his eyes. “You liked it?”

“Do you even need to ask? Yes, I liked it. And as soon as we're back on that tour bus, I plan to get you underneath me and show you just how much.”

* * * * *

Julius stepped out of the tour bus onto solid earth. What state were they in? He hadn't gotten much sleep on the road.

Parked beside them was a black SUV with tinted windows. He knew Clay was sitting behind the wheel just waiting to speak to him.

He approached the vehicle and tapped a finger on the glass. The window rolled down, and Clay came into sight. Lark was in the passenger seat, flipping through screens on her tablet.

He gave her a chin nod of greeting. "Anything on that actor you hacked yesterday?"

"All clear. Not a thing."

"That's not surprising."

It wasn't exactly disappointing news either. The sooner they found Avalynn's stalker, the faster this would all be over. And Julius would be leaving her.

"You ready for this?" Clay brought his attention back to him.

"Of course." He didn't need to ask what he referred to—he'd spent the early morning hours of travel texting back and forth with Lark, hammering out all the details of their wedding.

They were on their way to California, that much he did know—because he'd made the decision.

"My head is in the game," he told his boss.

Clay cocked a brow. "It's not your head I'm worried about."

He held in the grunt he'd love to give in reply. "Family will be there. What's going on with security?"

Lark spoke up. "I've arranged for tents to protect everyone from the paparazzi and I've got extra security lined up."

He gave her a look. "The WEST team?"

“No. Sorry. They’re all engaged in contracts at the present time. But I’ve got very good people already en route to the venue.” She offered him a grin that seemed to brim with excitement. “Great choice, by the way!”

He scuffed his boot on the ground. “Thanks.”

Lark glanced toward the bus. “She’s—”

“Still sleeping.”

“Oh yeah. She’ll wake up at approximately nine a.m. and you’ll be there to greet her with her special tea.” Clay’s tone walked the line between annoyance and amusement.

Lark smacked her man in the arm. “Give the guy a break.” She waved a hand. “Come around to this side and I’ll show you what Rain sent for you to choose for the wedding.”

His brows shot up. “Rain?”

“Yeah, when Dove told her sister that you asked for her help with planning a wedding, Rain jumped at the chance to help.”

“I’ll get in the back seat.” He opened the door and slid across the soft leather to peer between the seats at the screen that Lark held up.

He shook his head. “I can’t believe I’m planning a wedding in an SUV.”

“The bureau thinks news of the wedding will send Avalynn’s stalker off the rails. We’re going to get him,” Clay told him.

“And selecting a wedding for her off a screen is nuts.”

“I know! Isn’t it great?” Lark beamed.

“You are such a different generation, Lark,” Clay mumbled.

“Just because you’re *years and years* older than me doesn’t mean you can’t get in touch with your inner techie, Clay, honey.” She spoke with the sweetest tone that had him griping in response and Julius chuckling.

“Okay, let’s get to it. First...here are the tents.” She held up the tablet.

“Nice. Simple.”

“Yes.”

“Now I’m going to show you two styles. You choose which one you think will suit Avalynn’s vision of her wedding day best.”

He didn’t know her vision. That was the problem. But after six months, he did know her pretty well.

“I’m ready.”

“This one...” She presented two types of wedding looks. One had an elegant wood arch for the couple to stand under. White pillars stood at intervals all the way up the center aisle. Chairs were placed in neat rows on each side.

“And this one.” She swiped her finger over the screen to show him vintage oriental rugs scattered down the center aisle where the bride would walk to an arch created by loops of yarn.

“What do you call this?” He pointed at the yarn.

“Macrame. It’s very boho.”

“I have no idea what that means, but that’s it. This is Avalynn.”

His chest grew tight with that emotion he didn’t get a chance to examine yet. He didn’t have time now either because Lark was on to the next screen.

“These colors...or these?”

He stared at several choices and shook his head. “Go back to the last screen. With the rugs and macrame.”

She did.

“These colors.”

“Yes! So perfect.”

At that minute, the other back door opened and a black Stetson preceded Jennings into the vehicle. He landed on the

seat next to Julius.

“What are we doing? Oh, picking wedding stuff!” He made a swoony face.

“Yes, we are! Now shut up and learn something from your brother, smart ass.” Lark put him in his place, and they all laughed.

“Okay—this bouquet is what I’m thinking,” she said.

He stared at the bunch of posies. “No. That’s not right. You don’t know her at all. It needs to be sunflowers and those tiny white things. Dog breath or…”

“Oh my god. Do you mean baby’s breath?” Lark’s voice echoed with horror.

“That’s it.”

Clay lost his shit, his laugh booming through the vehicle.

Jennings clapped Julius on the back. “You only have a first wedding once, brother.”

“Cute.”

Clay managed to stop cracking up. “Don’t worry. As long as you don’t fuck up and consummate the marriage, we’ll have no trouble getting it annulled.”

Julius dragged in so much air into his lungs that they felt ready to burst. It was that or unload the fact that he’d already been with her. Several times now.

After seeing her on that stage, singing a song he knew was written about him, with her eyes lit up like a trillion stars in the galaxy...how would he ever not feel just as caught up in the moment when she finally walked down the aisle to that yarn thing he’d be standing under?

Then he’d take her hand and say his vows in front of his friends and what few family members he could get there in time.

After all that...after he kissed his bride...

How was he going to ever resist making love to her?

Chapter Twelve

Avalynn lay in bed, eyes closed. Every day she was on the road, she played the Where Am I? game.

Vegas to California, that much she knew. Without getting out her list of tour dates, she couldn't recall if she was in San Francisco or Los Angeles this week.

Her mind drifted to her last performance. God, she hadn't been *that* nervous in many, many years. Not even when her first album dropped and she had no idea how the world would receive a wholesome girl from small-town Texas.

Since that sex tape released, her life had been a blur. She'd ridden plenty of rollercoasters in her career, but this one held the most peaks and valleys by far.

Through them all, she had people who cared about her. Heidi and Lana. Damon and Freddy. The musicians in her band. Her momma was only a phone call away.

And Julius.

Her body tingled just thinking about him. He'd told her that he wanted her in his bed. That hadn't happened last night, but the fact that he even *thought* about it made her pussy clutch with desire.

How would it be to wake up next to him? To open her eyes to his handsome face, made rugged by the short facial hair he sported plus more five-o'clock shadow. The black ink of a tattoo encompassing his shoulder and biceps all screamed bad boy.

While the thought of Julius taking down that guy who rushed her onstage shot fear through her, it also made her

stomach leap in awareness. He possessed so much strength and skill she never got a chance to see.

And the things those callused hands could do to her...

She curled her toes against the sheets and gave a languorous stretch at the memory of her lover taking her to the screaming breaking point.

But she meant every word of the lyrics she'd sung. She loved the ways he showed that he cared. Loved the way he made her melt when he glanced her way. Those things she didn't pay him to do, and neither did Sentry. He did them because...

Well, she could only guess at the level of his feelings. But there was no way she was reading him wrong. There was no possible way he could be playing a role.

During a short stop en route to California, he'd left her locked in the tour bus, probably thinking her asleep. But she'd watched out the bus window and saw him climb out of the black Sentry vehicle after being sequestered in there for a good half hour. What the team discussed about her case wasn't something she liked dwelling on. She left those matters up to people who knew how to do their jobs. Fussing and fretting about who had made the sex tape only sapped her energy and drained the creative well that she needed every single day.

Maybe someday she'd feel the need for therapy over the whole thing, but for now...she felt strangely serene.

The calm before the storm?

She didn't have time to think about it. Right now, she needed to get out of bed and get ready for...

Well, whatever interviews, live radio shows or photoshoots were written in her calendar today.

She rolled out of bed and padded barefoot across the floor, which was a rich honey-colored wood, distressed in places as though it had been reclaimed from some ancient building.

They'd rolled into the venue in the dark. A writing streak had struck her on the road and by the time Julius led her to her

room, she'd fallen straight into bed, exhausted. She didn't get a chance to do much more than acknowledge the big, comfortable bed before her eyes slammed shut.

Now she got a chance to inspect the room. White hand-plastered walls made her feel as though she were in a French country home. Along one wall was a fireplace in the same plaster. A single brass jug of fresh-cut greenery sat on one corner of the mantel. The bed linens were pale rose and the patterned carpet looked worn in spots, which only lent to the charming aesthetic.

Across the room there was a set of glass doors with black accents. When she brushed the sheer drapery aside and saw the view, she let out a gasp. The doors led onto an iron balcony and opened into a stunning...vineyard?

She gaped at the landscape for a moment. This was not San Francisco nor Los Angeles.

"Julius?" she called out, twisting away from the doors. "Julius!"

The door that joined their rooms struck off the inner wall as he blasted through it. His gaze swept the space, his jaw set and hand on his spine where she knew he tucked his weapon in the waist of his pants.

"What's wrong?" He stalked to the open doors and peered out.

His shoulder muscles unlocked as he twisted to face her. "Thank Christ."

She stared at him. "What did you think you would see out there?"

Silence beat between them for five full seconds before he shut the doors and twisted the lock.

"Julius?" Why was he avoiding her question?

She looked past him. "Where are we? It looks like a vineyard!"

His brows creased. "You're right. We're at a winery."

“But that’s not on my tour. Did something change and Heidi forgot to tell me?”

He stepped toward her and took her hands. His touch always calmed her, but she was too keyed up for it to work its usual magic.

“What is going on?” Her voice rasped on the question.

His gaze sharpened. “Tea. You need your tea.”

She clutched his hands harder so he couldn’t move away. “I don’t need tea, Julius. Tell me what is going on. Did we reroute here because I’m in danger?”

He groaned. “No, honey. I’m sorry if you were worried.”

Her gaze shot to the table where a single-serving bottle of complimentary wine was placed. She’d spotted it before, but now that she examined it closer, the label looked familiar.

She released his hands and rushed over to get a closer look. As soon as she saw the label, she whirled on him. “This isn’t just *any* winery. They produced the wine from our engagement! Chez Nous.”

He nodded.

A huge grin broke over her face, and she nearly swooned at the plans he’d obviously made to go along with their ruse.

Only at this moment, as she grinned at him and his eyes sparked that way, it didn’t feel like a ruse at all.

He dragged his gaze away from hers and darted a look at the bathroom door. She followed the shift in attention and everything in her froze.

A long white garment bag hung there.

She stopped breathing. *Oh god.* What was really going on here? That bag looked important. She’d bet her Grammy for Best New Artist that it didn’t contain a dress for her to wear to the next awards show.

With a thumping heart that threatened to make her keel over, she drifted over to the garment bag. Even the zipper pull

felt smooth and extravagant pinched between her thumb and forefinger.

When she unzipped the bag, intricate, gorgeous white lace swam in front of her vision.

“Julius!” she breathed. She spun to look at him. “What is this?”

“Our wedding will take place today. Here at Chez Nous.” His brow crinkled. “If you still want to go through with it.”

Her jaw dropped and a soft gasp emitted from her lips. “You’re ... You’re kidding me! Our wedding? Did you arrange this? How did you even have time, when you’ve been with me nonstop?” The only time he’d stepped away was when he got into the Sentry SUV. But surely he’d been talking about her case with the team, not planning nuptials...

“I took care of everything, Avalynn.”

“When you say everything...”

He stepped forward and grasped her hands again. “All you need is the people closest to you. We’ll have each other, our parents—”

“Our parents!” Her mind spun that he’d contacted her mother...and possibly brought her here.

“And the FBI.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed.

She latched on to that cold word that left a chill creeping over her skin. “FBI? Do you mean Sentry won’t be the only security for the event?”

Before he could respond, a knock on the door interrupted.

Julius broke away from her. She spun to watch his muscles rolling with each stride he took to reach the door. As he cracked it to see who was interrupting them, his hand twitched toward his weapon.

Then he swung it wide, and her mother stepped in.

A cry burst from Avalynn. Her momma opened her arms, and they met in the center of the room, hugging and crying.

Just behind her mother, Julius looked on with a tender smile on his face.

“Mom, I can’t believe you’re here!”

She clasped Avalynn tight. “I wouldn’t miss this!”

Over her mother’s shoulder, Avalynn met Julius’s warm stare. *Thank you*, she mouthed to him.

He gave her a small nod in return. A gesture that would read as insignificant to most people, but to her, it meant so much.

Suddenly, her mom pulled away and turned to Julius. With a shooing motion, she ushered him to the door. “You won’t see Julius until you walk down the aisle.”

He swung to the door and paused in the opening to look back at Avalynn. “See you there.”

Her heart hitched and then flew even higher. Emotions sparked inside her like a thousand twinkle lights. When he sent her one last long glance, her own song played in her head.

Left alone with her mom, Avalynn landed again on the flat ground of reality. “Mom, you know why this is all happening, right?”

Her mother tilted her head. “A lovely woman named Lark filled me in.”

She gulped. “And what exactly did she say?”

“That this all needs to happen quick to settle the rumors.”

Her cheeks tingled with relief. At least her momma would witness her only daughter’s wedding under the delusion that she was marrying Julius out of love.

“Honey, he may be *tiny*—if you know what I mean—but that boy has a huge heart.”

She choked on her own shock, which sent her into a coughing fit. That couldn’t be good for her throat. Her mother hurried to a mini-fridge and withdrew a bottled water. She passed it to Avalynn, and she uncapped it to take a sip.

After the first swallow, she asked the number one question burning on her tongue since Julius told her what was going on.

“How did this all happen?”

“Your fiancé took care of everything.”

“But...don’t I need to sign a license?”

“I guess he found a way around it. Maybe your manager signed in your stead.”

Or the FBI she knew would be an added layer of security to the event. They had their ways.

“This is happening,” she whispered.

Her mother’s grin turned watery, and she laughed through some motherly tears. “He’s surprised you with a wedding!”

Her focus slid to the garment bag revealing the gown she was supposed to wear. Julius probably got her stylist in on the matter—but knowing his alpha tendencies, he would have given his approval.

Another knock at the door shifted her attention again.

“Oh, that will be Lark and Dove.” Her mother went to answer it.

Dazed, Avalynn shook her head. “Dove?”

“She’s friends with Lark. Between the two of them, they’ve handled all the details. Just relax, Avalynn.” Her mother opened the door and two women stepped in.

For a heartbeat, her gaze met Lark’s. She read a hint of hesitation in the beautiful woman’s expression—and almost heard the question.

Are you holding up?

She bustled forward to embrace her new friend. Having that sisterly squeeze was so damn appreciated at this moment that tears sprang to her eyes.

No ugly crying. Stop.

“I hear you’ve been very busy, Lark. How can I ever thank you?”

The stunning blonde woman with her moved forward. “You can help keep her from losing her mind when she plans her own wedding to Clay.” She stuck out her hand. “I’m Dove, Quaide’s fiancée.”

Red curls bounced around Lark’s face as she nodded. “He’s very old-fashioned and set in his ways. But what can I do? I love an older man.”

Dove laughed. “You spend enough time reminding him of your age difference.”

“But love doesn’t know any bounds.” Lark turned to her. “Does it, Avalynn?”

Her heart gave another little blip like champagne had hit her bloodstream. Why did it seem as if Lark saw more than she knew herself? She searched the woman’s face, hoping to find some answer to questions she didn’t know how to formulate yet.

This was all happening so fast. Could she really go forward with their scheme to get married?

The engagement had been whirlwind yet mind-blowing. She couldn’t imagine the lengths Julius had gone to for their *wedding*.

She recovered enough to squeeze Dove’s hand. “Thank you for being here to share this day with us.”

Her mother beamed at all of them. Then she pointed to the gown. “Should we take a look at what you’ll walk down the aisle wearing?”

Now she felt like someone shook her up, and she was about to burst. “Yes!”

Suddenly, with so much excitement hanging in the air it felt like a real celebration.

With a grin, her mother drew the gown out of the garment bag. When she held it up for all to see, Avalynn clapped both hands over her mouth. Tears stung her eyes. “It’s perfect!”

“I knew that you’d choose that for yourself.” Dove’s smile was yet another ray of sun on the day.

Judging from the romantic and slightly bohemian design of the lace gown, Avalynn could guess at the theme of the wedding.

A tear hovered near her eyelid, on the verge of tumbling down her cheek. She held her eyes wide to keep it in.

Lark fondled the lace and shook her head. “I have to admit, I did not see Julius beating Clay to the altar!”

The ladies shared a laugh. When Dove looked to Avalynn, her smile softened. “In all seriousness, relationships with Sentry men work.”

Avalynn held out a hand, and Dove squeezed it. “Thank you all for being around me today.”

“You’re going to be the most beautiful bride,” her mother said.

What Julius had done to make this moment special for her was enough to tell Avalynn that if it actually were real...that she’d be the happiest bride.

* * * * *

As the string quartet struck up the lovely classical piece he had selected out of at least two dozen options, his heart contracted.

Pivoting toward the end of the aisle, he waited several loaded seconds for Avalynn to appear.

And when she did...

Christ, his heart was thundering so loud. Her gaze found his, and the expression she wore had his fingers curling with the urge to run to her and touch her.

“She’s stunning,” he choked out.

At his side, Jennings murmured his agreement. He knew that his parents and her momma occupied the seats at the front. His team stood guard at the entrances to the tent, and extra security had been hired to guard the gate of Chez Nous.

As Avalynn took her first step toward him, then another and another, it struck him that this was *really* happening.

He was marrying this woman.

Fact was, he'd marry her even if it didn't mean saving her from being maligned and keeping her safe.

He was in love with her.

She moved forward with Clay on her arm. No one present questioned his boss's role of stand-in for her father figure.

The closer she came to the arbor where he waited, the more color bloomed in her high cheekbones. Her face glowed. Her eyes shone.

And he lost what was left of his heart.

When she reached him, he noted that she was shaking. He'd know. He knew her reactions, her expressions, her body...

She came to a stop in front of him. As he held out his hands, she did the same. Their fingers brushed. He closed his around her silky fingers and squeezed as their gazes held.

Her chest heaved.

So did his.

We're really doing this. I'm making her mine.

He wasn't going to let his mind slip to the truth of it all—that he would only have her until this case was over and arrests were made, then what? The marriage annulled or a divorce.

She took a step closer, and the officiant began to speak in a soft, low voice that was only amplified by a microphone on the lapel of her jacket.

He heard a snuffle from the audience. He didn't need to look out to know his momma was crying. The woman might be tough enough to raise five boys and deal with an ornery husband, but she did have a tender side too.

His heart filled with love for not only his parents and his brother for being present but every single person here to witness this moment.

A strange moment, but no less magical. From the venue to the dress his bride wore that hugged her tantalizing curves, that he couldn't wait to run his hands all over, everything was perfect.

Candles glowed. The scent of vanilla wax mingled with Avalynn's perfume to create a memory that he'd never, ever forget.

If someone had told him a year ago that he'd be standing here reciting his vows—and fucking meaning them—he would have laughed in their face and asked if they were drunk. Or if he were drunk. Because only too much alcohol would get him here.

Now, he couldn't think of any other place he wanted to be.

"I invite you to seal your love with a kiss as we all look on as witnesses."

He and Avalynn's stares connected for a throbbing heartbeat. Slowly, he leaned in. She moved a step closer, head tilted up with those pretty lips on offer.

Lowering his head, he brushed his mouth over hers, all the sensation and emotion burning inside him as bright as those candles dotted around the tent. Her taste flooded him, and he deepened the caress, angling his head and possessing her mouth in front of all the people that mattered.

She parted her lips, her soft tongue darting against his. A growl seared in his throat, but he swallowed it. He'd save that for the bedroom.

Julius had no intention whatsoever of heeding his boss's advice. He would consummate this union every way, in every position—and for hours on end.

Chapter Thirteen

Despite the wedding reception being small and simple, there were still a lot of people to speak to. With a whiskey in one hand, he kept his gaze trained on Avalynn as they both mingled with the few family members he'd had flown in for the event as well as the Sentry team. The private photographer and staff at Chez Nous added to the number of people he wanted to personally thank.

"The winery couldn't be more perfect for us," he told the owner, a forty-something woman with a quick smile and an obvious mind for business. "We appreciate everything you've done."

She nodded and smiled. "It's my pleasure. And when you want to return for your anniversary, the stay is on us."

His chest tightened. Their anniversary. In a year, they probably wouldn't be together. This would all be over, and Avalynn would go back to having a normal bodyguard rather than the FBI and a task force.

Heat also flooded his chest at the idea of returning to this beautiful place and spending time with...

With my wife.

His gaze sought her so often that it was as natural as breathing.

She stood with Dove and Lark, her skin lit by an inner glow he'd only seen a couple times. Once when she performed the song she wrote for him. When she looked over at him and their gazes locked, she'd been incandescent.

The other time he saw the glow was just a few short hours before, when he sprang a wedding on her.

He couldn't look away from her. Every detail he branded on his mind. The way her brown hair waved off her face, pinned back in places with long tendrils falling to skim over her shoulder or her collarbone. The shell of her ear and a tiny diamond stud in the lobe that glinted whenever she moved.

His fingers curled at the thought of touching her, drawing her up against his body and capturing those sultry lips that every guy in the world lusted after when he saw them. Only Julius had a right—or at least her permission—to claim a smoldering kiss while he explored her with his tongue and hands.

The thought was making him hard. Getting an erection of his size in formal pants always made for an uncomfortable few minutes, but he'd spent most of the afternoon and evening hard for his new bride. If anybody snapped a photo of his not-so-little problem, they'd know for a fact that he wasn't the man on that video, but his ego took zero hits from claiming it was. He only cared about keeping Avalynn safe.

As she talked, she had a way of leaning toward a person and making the conversation so much more personal. It was shocking how small-town she'd managed to remain despite her fame. It was one trait that he'd admired about her from the start.

And god, those curves in that lace. His hands itched to skim over her ribs to her small waist and to the flare of her hips...right before he tugged them against his.

The thought of sinking into the woman he was bound to in a new and unexpected way had his balls aching and his chest swelling.

Jennings and his father approached. They'd both congratulated him after the ceremony, so now they just launched straight into talk of bike engines. He kept one ear on the discussion while watching Avalynn joke and laugh with Lark and Dove.

It wasn't lost on him that she fit in well with those women. He couldn't help but wonder if she could learn to love the Sentry family as much as he did.

“What are your thoughts, Julius?” his father interrupted.

He gripped his dad's shoulder. “I'm going to talk to my bride.”

Their chuckles followed him. As he passed a table, he set down his shot glass and walked up to Avalynn.

Her back faced him, but as if she felt his presence, she turned, her gaze fixed on him.

A blast of need mixed with the love building inside him like a goddamn forest fire, and every second that she stared at him like that was more gasoline.

Whatever she saw on his face made her excuse herself from the ladies and drift to him on those sky-high heels that made her taller than usual.

She gave him a small nervous smile. “Hi.”

“Hi, honey.” Touching always put her at ease with him. He took her hand.

She curled her fingers upward around his. “Julius...I love everything you've done for me—for us.”

He smiled. “I'm glad you like it. Now...I've always wanted to dance with you.”

Surprise lit her brown eyes. “Always?”

He nodded. Gripping her hand, he led her to the center of the dance area off to the side of the tent.

When he stopped and took her in his arms, he turned her toward a big flatscreen on a stand behind the string quartet. The musicians were at rest for this first very special dance between the bride and groom.

The screen lit up with photos, and music began to play through speakers scattered around the tent.

She gasped and a hand fluttered to her chest. “Julius! What did you do?”

He held her close. “Just watch.”

The slideshow had been his own idea, and one he was pretty proud of. Images of her stepping out of a limousine with her hand in his. Julius guiding her through a massive crowd, his hand on her spine, each snapshot in time set to the song that she’d sung live for him.

More and more photos of him right behind her, protecting her always. And that switched to their stolen moment where he dropped a kiss to her forehead to comfort her.

Projecting through the speakers, her voice was poignant with the lyrics of her song that talked about discovery and surging hearts and a bond of the soul...

Photos slid by faster now, moments caught in time of them staring at each other from across the room at the press conference. When he’d seen that photo, he’d almost lost it. She was looking at him like...

Well, like she could love him too.

Like this might not all be fake.

He took her in his arms and began to sway to the music. She twisted in his hold to keep watching the slideshow of their engagement, so he twirled her into a position so she could see.

When the final notes of the song vibrated through the tent, the photo of her face as she sang this very song for him filled the screen...followed by *his* expression of sheer desire as he moved forward to lead her offstage at the very end.

She sniffled.

He ducked his head to see her face. “Are you crying?”

She buried her face against his chest for a moment before lifting her head to meet his gaze. “I don’t cry.”

His lips quirked up. “Of course not. What are you thinking right now?”

Her eyes sparkled in the twinkle lights and candles burning in the tent. “This is my first best night.”

His smile widened. “What’s your second?”

“The engagement. Of course.”

He was stunned. Not the night she won a Grammy. Nor when she signed a deal with her label.

Her best nights were the moments she’d spent with him.

From the corner of his eye, he caught movement and spun Avalynn again so he could see what was going on. He might be her husband—for now—but he was still her bodyguard, and protecting her was his top priority.

When he caught sight of Clay widening his stance and folding his arms over his broad chest, he arched a brow at his boss. Was he trying to catch Julius’s gaze to send him a warning?

Clay’s pointed look in return definitely seemed like a warning to keep his distance from the woman in his arms. His attempt to remind Julius that he shouldn’t get too close or make this marriage real in any way came through loud and clear.

Julius had no damn intention of listening to him. The minute he could make his getaway with Avalynn, he was going to whisk her away to their suite, wrap his arms around her hips and pull her against him while whispering dirty promises of their night to come.

All propriety ended now, because from this moment forward, they were on their honeymoon.

* * * * *

Julius led Avalynn out of the tent. Two men from Sentry were already there, flanking them for added safety as they strolled from the tent to the beautiful quarters where they were staying.

A crescent moon hung as a sliver in the deep black velvet sky, and the air was scented with the tang of earth and grapes.

The soft strains of the concerto that the string quartet played drifted on the light breeze teasing her loose tendrils of hair.

Julius walked slowly and supported her with an arm around her waist to keep her steady, on her spike heels, over the uneven ground. She drew in a deep breath of fresh air and let it trickle out in a happy sigh.

This day had turned out so much better than she ever could have dreamed, even if she'd planned it herself.

She tipped her head back to stare at the stars twinkling down at them like they were blessing their union.

But it wasn't real, was it? It was a temporary fix for her problems. It wasn't true love ... or any love at all.

Was it?

Her mind sank into heavy thoughts of what she'd just done. Getting married was a huge step in anyone's life. But binding herself to her bodyguard was the craziest thing she'd ever done.

His arm was solid around her back. His fingers rested on her hip. The scent of his cologne and the warm notes of the whiskey he'd drunk in celebration both made her feel dizzy with desire.

He'd done so much for her, shown how much he cared...it was impossible not to open her heart to him and let him in.

They reached a walkway leading to the side door. After a few short steps and a flight of stairs, they'd be in her suite. What then?

To have sex would make this marriage unbreakable without a divorce.

"I'll take it from here, guys. Thanks." Julius's deep voice jogged her from the darker path her thoughts had taken her down.

Quaide and Jennings stopped at the entrance with twin nods at them.

Julius opened the door and took her up to her suite.

As soon as they entered, her attention swung to the door that adjoined their rooms. Would that be a thing of the past going forward?

There would be a time when she didn't require security this tight at all.

And Julius would be gone.

As soon as he shut and locked the door behind them, he gave her that look. The one that told her he was assessing her mood, taking stock of her nerves.

He arched a brow. "Wine?"

"Yes!" Relief poured through her like the bordeaux that she'd come to link to their faux love story.

He threw her a smile that was just a softening of his lips and strode to the bar across the room. When he drew a bottle from a bucket of ice that had obviously been chilling in their honor, she homed in on the quick, efficient, masculine moves he made to uncork the bottle and tip the liquid into two goblets.

The black cuff of his tuxedo jacket tugged upward to reveal a pristine white cuff and a small diamond cufflink. Her insides knotted even more watching him serve her.

When he turned, glass extended, she wrapped her fingers around the glass stem. He lifted his glass, and she brushed hers against it.

For a moment, awkward silence fell between them. How did they toast an occasion like this?

She worked with words. They were her life.

Suddenly, it came to her.

"To the most beautiful wedding a woman could ask for."

He brought the wine to his lips and sipped. So did she. When the flavors washed over her tongue and the alcohol warmed her, she relaxed.

Being with Julius was always easy.

She tilted her head toward the sofa. “Should we sit?”

“Yes.” He waited for her to take a seat before settling a few inches away from her. Close enough that they could touch if they chose to, but he provided her distance to make the next move too.

The more she watched him draw that glass to his lips, the more aroused she got. When he finished half the glass, he set it aside on the coffee table and extended an arm across the back of the leather sofa.

Her insides coiled with want. The memory of the roughness of his hands moving over her needy flesh had her burning for things she didn’t know how to ask for.

Did he plan to make this union real? Could she bring herself to ask that question?

His gaze locked on her lips. She ran her tongue across the bottom one, gathering a trace of wine.

A low groan rumbled from him.

“Julius...” His name came out a little breathless.

“Avalynn.” He brushed his fingertip over her earlobe, raising a shiver inside her and drawing her nipples into tight buds. “You are so beautiful. The most beautiful bride in the world.”

Her breaths came faster.

Could she take the next step? Take what she wanted and needed like air?

She leaned forward and set the goblet on the table. As soon as she twisted toward him, his arms were open to catch her.

A gasp escaped her throat. His arms locked around her, and he dragged her against his side as he crushed his mouth over hers.

The heady taste of wine and man mixed to create an intoxicating combination. Need splashed through her, and she

clenched her thighs together as he plundered her mouth over and over.

He feasted on her lips and tongue, thrusting his inside her mouth, taking and giving, until she shook.

“Take me to bed,” she rasped.

“Yes, baby.”

Her stomach dipped. He always called her honey, but the word was only a Southern word reserved for pretty much anybody, from the waitress who brought your burger to the policeman who only gave you a warning.

But baby...that was *more*.

Her core squeezed. Her lace wedding panties flooded with want.

He slipped to his feet and drew her up with him. Before she knew his plan, he swept her into his arms, bridal-style, and carried her to bed.

His lips never left hers as he set her on her feet. Gliding his hands down her shoulders and over her spine, he caught the zipper pull on her dress and eased it down. Shivers took hold. She clutched his lapels and clung to him, trying not to collapse.

When he had the dress open at the back, he stretched all his fingers across her spine and slowly drew the lace off her shoulders. Slowly, he guided the fabric down her arms and stopped, leaving her arms trapped.

Dropping his head, he latched his lips on to her throat. She cried out at the sudden liquid heat pooling inside her and tried to loop her arms around his neck, but the dress prevented her from moving.

As he skated kisses up and down her neck to her collarbone and down again to wash his tongue over the crest of her breast, she panted for more.

He whipped off his jacket and tossed it toward an overstuffed chair but it missed and hit the floor. They left it

there, and he went for his cuffs. In a few quick moves he had them open and cast off his bowtie too.

He worked the line of buttons down his chest. As the light spattering of hair on his chest came into sight, she licked her lips.

A growl burst from his throat. He kicked off his shoes and she did the same with her heels.

When she curled her flat feet into the floor, he stopped to study her. "That's better," he rumbled.

"What is?" Her voice wasn't her own.

"You without those heels. You fit me better." To show her, he tucked her against him, under his chin.

She shuddered. "Julius, I want..."

Drawing back, his eyes seemed to grow even darker as he stared down at her. "You want this?" He cupped one breast.

The center spiked to a sharp point, sending need south between her thighs.

"Yes!"

In one swift tug, he peeled the lace off her body. The cloth puddled at her feet.

And Julius froze.

"Do you...like it?" Her words escaped on a breath.

His gaze raked over her body, taking in the white lingerie she wore under her gown. A sheer bra that scooped low over her breasts, a thong with lace and miniature gold beads on the hips, a garter belt and stockings.

His eyes slipped shut, and she saw his lips move as if he prayed for control. At least she hoped that she stripped that control from him. If they didn't have love, at least they had desire and smoldering lust.

Even if they wanted more from this arrangement...it would end. For now, they had each other and a lot of honeymoon to experience. There was no way she would let

their first night as man and wife be anything less than *amazing*.

Chapter Fourteen

Julius wasn't going to live through the wedding night. The sweet girl next door was standing before him in the sexiest damn lingerie he'd ever set eyes on.

Intricate lace, gold beads and sheer mesh left nothing to the imagination and yet covered all those parts that he wanted to tease, suck and bite.

He took a step back, his hard cock twitching against his abs, making it no question that he wanted her bad.

"Christ, baby. You're..." He shook his head, beyond words when faced with the striking, sexy beauty standing in front of him.

Her eyes blazed up at him, making his cock surge more. Then she stepped up to him and rubbed her body against his.

He couldn't take it anymore. He slammed his lips over hers. Her muffled cry and the way she dug her fingers into his shoulders as he lifted her stole his goddamn mind. Two steps and he had her on the bed.

He peeled her lingerie down over her breasts. Her breath rattled in her chest. The scent of her need and the small, sharp cries of her pleasure filled the suite as he sucked and nibbled her breasts.

When he ran his tongue down the center of her body, he took a second to plan how this would go. He wanted nothing more than to take things slow, to make her wedding night something to remember, with all the sweet emotions a woman like Avalynn deserved.

But she wasn't letting him do that.

She raked at his shoulders. Dug her short nails into his flanks. She tore open his fly faster than he ever thought possible. Flattening her hand to his stiff cock, she broke from another never-ending kiss to stare into his eyes.

“I want you.”

“I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you.”

Her lips popped open, and her beautiful eyes softened at his admission.

In a swift jerk, he rid her of the rest of her bridal lingerie. Cupping her pussy, he hovered over her, heart tripping.

She rocked her hips, pushing her pussy into his hand. He curled two fingers upward, and with the next rock of her hips, she pushed against them.

Watching her face, he sank them deep inside her. Her inner walls flooded, and she tossed her head on the silk pillowcase she traveled everywhere with.

“Julius!”

He finger-fucked her nice and slow, watching her face contort and her nipples grow pinker and stiffer. His cock seeped precum, wetting his boxer briefs. He wanted nothing more than to bury himself inside her, to lose himself in her and never turn back.

She jerked her hips, taking his fingers over and over. He felt her release building. The pink flush coating her skin and the way she bit her bottom lip told him just how on edge she was.

He brushed his thumb over her clit, and she went wild. He dropped his mouth to suck it while fingering her, and he didn’t get two laps in before she was coming.

First best night of my life.

* * * * *

Avalynn’s body hummed with need. Her mind was so far gone with bliss, ecstasy and desire for this man who’d just made her come apart that she didn’t realize, he’d divested her of her

garter belt and stockings or that she'd given consent to do anything at all he wanted to do to her body until it was too late and her hands were bound to the bars of the headboard.

She gave a light tug on her bonds. The stretchy stockings allowed her enough room to move, so she didn't panic, but dear god. Never in a trillion girlish fantasies about her special day did she think her husband would blow her mind this way.

He stood at the bedside, totally naked. His long, impressive cock was stiff and purple with want.

"Julius." It came out as a plea, but she had no idea what she wanted from him. Only knew that he'd give it to her.

His eyelids drooped over his smoldering gaze as he climbed onto the bed. His muscles bulged and rolled with every move. When he hovered over her, his lips a breath away, she shivered.

"Please!"

"I'm going to kiss you until you can't think straight. Then kiss every inch of your body until you can't see straight. Then I'm going to lick your sweet pussy until you come. After that, I'm going to slide my cock in you and I won't stop until your pussy is pulsating around me."

"Oh god!"

"The entire time, I won't look away from you. I want you to see how bad I want this—you. And that I'm not playing around, Avalynn. You're my wife now, and however that happened doesn't matter. Because I'm going to show you—" He cut off, but whatever he was about to say didn't matter because he made good on his first promise by kissing her.

By the time he worked her to that promised frenzy, her cries were growing hoarse. When he dipped his tongue into her folds and stroked her clit with the hot, wet tip, she clung to the cliff of reality.

No man ever made her feel like this. No lover made her so wild.

Her orgasm rocketed through her system. He clamped his hands on her bucking hips, holding her in place as he licked her from her entrance to the hood of her clit, and he owned every last cry.

As she was still convulsing from her release, he unbound her hands and kissed her long and deep.

The lovemaking started all over again. By the time he reached for a condom, she was quaking. He slipped between her thighs, and she hooked her ankles behind his back, pulling him in.

Every inch stretching her blew her mind. Her heart got all tangled up too, pushing words to her lips she wasn't ready to say.

But if she couldn't say them to her husband, who could she say them to?

He jerked his hips into her over and over again, punctuating each thrust with a growl. "Feel...so...good. So...damn...right!" His thick cock head bumped over her G-spot, pulling a long moan from her to match his primal noises.

"Don't stop!" Her brain hazed over with sexual desire.

"Look at me." His command brought her stare to his. He locked her in and took them to the finish in a wild churn of hips and nails biting into flesh.

When his jaw locked, her body reacted too. As Julius began to spurt on every thrust, her body let go too and she came again. Flooding his length. His mouth crashed over hers and they shared waves of pleasure that lasted longer than they ever had before.

Coming slowly back to herself, she skimmed her fingers over his jaw. "I can't think of a better way to end today."

His lips tipped upward. "Neither can I, baby." Suddenly, his expression grew faraway. Was it her imagination or were his eyes a little sad?

After he kissed her again, taking his time to show her just how tender a hard man like him could be, he got up and went

into the bathroom.

Avalynn drew the covers over her naked body and did something that centered her whenever she was the most out of sorts. She took stock of her emotions.

She'd caught that strange look on Julius's rugged features. The sadness in his eyes *surely* wasn't connected to the bliss they'd just shared.

All she felt at this moment was contentment after the long, emotional but amazing day. Having her mom and her new friends surrounding her with help and love had gotten her through most of it.

But just knowing that she would walk down that aisle to Julius had sent her heart pattering for other reasons.

She was falling for him. Now it was so easy to see that she had been for months.

What was she going to do? If he didn't feel the same for her...

The bathroom door opened, and he walked out in all his naked, muscled glory. She darted a look below his waist and saw his erection didn't seem to have gone down.

With each step he took, the chiseled lines of his body made her hot and bothered all over again. By the time he crawled into bed with her, she was more than eager to feel him against her.

She felt a little shy about cuddling up to him, but he rolled onto his side and tucked her under his chin without any pause.

She let out a low sigh.

He kissed her forehead. "Better, baby?"

She nodded.

"What do you suppose other couples do after their wedding?"

"Hmm." She tipped her head up to look at him. "Take a shower, have a snack and fall asleep? Or talk about all the wedding guests?"

He chuckled. “Probably. So what would you like to start with?”

“Let’s talk about Jennings.”

He gave a start. “My brother? Why him?”

“Because every time I looked at him, he was giving you this big grin.”

He snorted. “Little brother teasing me. He’s the last Abel without one of these.” He held up his hand to show off the thick gold band on his ring finger.

The dusting of dark hair on his knuckle made her shiver with fresh desire. “Your turn. Who do you want to talk about?”

“I’d say the woman who married us.”

“Are you saying you’re surprised that a woman did it?”

“Not at all. I had to question why she was wearing two different boots, though.”

She gaped at him. “You’re kidding me.”

“Nope. One brown, one black. Looked to be the same style.”

A giggle rose in her throat. She twisted her face into his shoulder to stifle it.

“Your turn.” He brushed his fingers down her spine.

She hesitated but only for a heartbeat. She had to get this off her chest. “Lark.”

“Okay, what about her?”

“Well...she said something.”

“What was it?”

She swirled a fingertip over his pec. “She said she’s surprised it was you who got to the altar before Clay.”

He blew out a breath through his nostrils. “I haven’t known most of the guys on the Sentry team or the women they’re with for very long. But in the time they’ve known me, I’ve never been with a woman.”

She blinked at him. “Never?”

“No. Had no one important to bother bringing to chicken wing nights or card games. I guess that since they haven’t seen me with a woman, they assumed I wasn’t going to fall so easily.”

She sucked in a quick breath.

Understanding his slip of the tongue, he looked at her.

“And did you? Fall?” she asked.

He lightly pinched her jaw and brought his lips down to hers, stamping it in a soft kiss. “I did.”

“Do you have any regrets?” She searched his eyes.

He shook his head. “My only regret is that I won’t get to marry you every day.”

Chapter Fifteen

Julius moved quietly around Avalynn's suite, trying not to wake his sleeping...

Well, he was going to say "ward," but she was his wife.

He grabbed his boots to put on at the door, but before he walked out, he glanced at her beautiful face on the pillow. His chest tightened, and little embers flitted inside it from the fire she lit in him.

Waking to her every day was something he could get used to. Having her curled up naked against him was definitely a bonus. And three rounds of mind-blowing orgasms on their wedding night seemed impossible to beat.

That didn't mean he wasn't going to *try*.

He slid his boots on and pulled out his phone. He shot off a text to Clay, and seconds later received a knock on the door.

Julius cracked it, prepared for a siege, but saw worse—his boss's glare.

"You fucking slept with her," he growled.

Julius stepped aside to let him in. "She's sleeping. Keep your voice down."

Clay grunted. "I told you—"

He widened his shoulders. "I know what you *told* me, Lexis. It wasn't a direct order."

A challenge volleyed between their gazes, and their glares fired missiles that never touched down.

Finally, Clay heaved a sigh and looked away. “What did you need when you texted?”

“A breakfast tray.”

Okay, maybe one missile landed. Even Clay’s cocked brow was pissed off. “Do I look like room service to you?”

“Just get us a damn tray. *Please*,” he added through gritted teeth. “I don’t trust anybody else. I already gave Avalynn’s food preferences to the chef. He’ll know what to send.”

“Fine.” He whirled to leave.

“Thank you.”

He grunted. “Next time, don’t fall for your ward.”

After his boss disappeared through the door again, Julius scrubbed his knuckle over his upper lip, creating a rasping sound. Damn, he didn’t have any answers for how he’d allowed this situation to progress so far other than it felt good and right to him, and his gut instinct hadn’t let him down yet.

After he deadbolted the door again, he started toward the bedroom to check on Avalynn, but his phone buzzed.

When he glanced at the screen, a grin settled over his face. Surprise had it widening even further.

Kingsley Jordan. Now *that* was a name he hadn’t seen in a while, but he thought about the guy at least once a week whenever he watched pro football.

Accepting the call, he brought the phone to his ear. “Kingsley, my man. To what do I owe this honor?”

“Heyyyy! Abel!” The athlete’s voice filled his ear, conjuring a complete image of the man he was talking to. “I’m glad you’re up. I wake up early on this new training regime.”

“And you thought of how I always bust your balls about staying vigilant about your safety?”

“Not even close. I opened my phone and saw my old bodyguard *all over* social media.”

He didn't question why. Heidi and the PR team made certain the wedding photos were leaked. And Lark played her role too, by tossing the images into every corner of the dark web in an attempt to lure out the stalker.

"Abel, you sly guy! You didn't tell me you were getting married."

His heart gave a hard squeeze at the word. How could that word even be attached to him? He'd never, ever planned to bind himself to one woman, let alone in this manner.

"Few knew."

"I guessed after that sex tape hit you'd make an honorable woman of her. I mean, it's the least you can do to make up for your small package."

He gave a discreet cough but *damn*, his ego didn't like staying quiet on that particular matter with *this* particular friend.

"Congrats, man. I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, Kingsley."

"I don't know if this photo of you looking at your bride is filtered through an app or if it's real. What I did notice is you never looked at *me* that way."

Kingsley was six-two and two hundred twenty pounds, and a linebacker in the NFL. Julius had called him a friend long before he stepped down from his role of bodyguard.

He let out a snort. "For good reason too. You've got a face only a mother can love."

"And it looks like you got a small dick!"

They shared a laugh, but he kept his voice low to keep from waking Avalynn.

"Look, Abel, I didn't call to give you shit about your size. I called to see if you have honeymoon plans."

Julius tripped over that question. "Not yet."

“Well, say no more, my friend. I’ll set you up in my private home in the Caymans.”

“Dude...” He hooked his hand around his nape.

“Look, you saved my *life*, man. I wouldn’t be talking to you right now if you weren’t there at that exact moment. You took a damn *bullet* for me, Abel. The least I can do is let you stay in my house.”

His mind shot to the Cayman Islands and the place Kingsley was offering as a honeymoon getaway. And damn, would it be the perfect place to slip away with Avalynn.

If Chez Nous was sentimental and transported them to what felt like a foreign land, the photos Julius had seen of Kingsley’s home in the off-season was modern and fresh with nothing but stunning views of turquoise water, sand and sky.

He opened his mouth to accept the offer, but a scream vibrated from the bedroom. His heart rocketed into his throat. Adrenaline punched through him like a sniper bullet.

He spun. Shoved the door open and scanned the room.

Avalynn stood next to the bed, her thick long hair sticking out in a wild mane and her arms locked around her body. Her shoulders shook, but the terror on her face hooked him in the gut.

He skimmed her for blood and saw none. Whirling, his gaze hit the French doors just in time to see a man’s leg vanish through one as he leaped off the balcony.

Julius whipped out his weapon and fired, but it was too late—the guy was gone. He stormed to the balcony and looked down. The man was sprinting away.

A cracking noise alerted him that Sentry busted down the door to get into the suite. Avalynn shrieked again, and every fiber of his being shifted to go to her, to settle her.

Not yet. He hung over the balcony rail, watching the motherfucker who breached her room—their room—disappear from view.

If he was within shooting range, the guy would be staring at the sky full of buzzards in a heartbeat.

“What’s going on?” Clay demanded as he skidded into the room.

“My stalker!” Avalynn cried before Julius could respond.

“He got away into the vineyard! Go!” Julius roared.

He rushed to Avalynn and yanked her into his arms as Clay and Quaide shot out of the room on a manhunt.

Her stalker had come *far* too close to Avalynn. And Julius hadn’t been ten steps away from the bedroom door.

His chest heaved, and she clutched at him tighter.

When they find you, I will make damn sure you never walk again, you bastard.

Oh yes, he’d make *damn* sure her stalker would never walk again, let alone scale a wall and enter through a balcony. He would break both his kneecaps...right before he snuffed the life out of him.

* * * * *

Avalynn attempted to swallow, but it felt as if she’d tried to force down broken glass.

She looked to Julius for help. “Water.” The request sounded as a squeak.

“Of course, honey.” He released her only long enough to stride to the nightstand and grab the bottle she’d left there the previous night.

People surrounded her, but she hardly took notice of them as he uncapped the drink and placed it in her hand. When she brought it to her lips, her hand shook. Julius wrapped his fingers around the plastic to steady it enough for her to take a sip.

He held her stare until she lowered the drink.

She swung her gaze from Julius to the rest of the people in the room. Lark and Heidi were both staring back at her,

concern pinching their faces. Lark rushed across the space and wrapped her arms around Avalynn in the most sisterly hug she could ever ask for.

“My god, Avalynn. What happened?” Heidi rubbed her arm. In her own mother’s absence, she was always grateful to have her manager on the road with her, and now she was more glad than ever she had solid people.

A shiver tore through her at the memory of being jarred awake by a brush of cool air on her face. Then opening her eyes to find a man in a black ski mask staring down at her.

Julius shot her a look before he strode to the door. “Don’t answer that question just yet, Avalynn. Jennings!”

His brother entered the bedroom, looking as pissed-off as Julius sounded.

Looking closer, she realized that wasn’t just anger she saw on her new husband’s face—it was *wrath*.

Another shudder ripped down her spine. Lark hugged her tighter.

“Come sit on the bed, Avalynn,” the woman urged.

She allowed her to lead her to the bed and sank to the edge. “When will this nightmare end?” she muttered.

Julius’s fingers curled into fists. “We’ll find him. We’ll get him. And when we do, I’ll fucking break his neck with my bare h—”

“Brother!” Jennings barked.

He shook himself. “My fury won’t help you. I’m sorry, honey.”

She reached out to him, and he gripped her fingers before taking a seat on the other side of her. Lark released her hold, relinquishing her care to Julius. When he cradled her head in his big palm and drew her against his chest, she sucked in breaths of his manly scent.

“Tell us what happened, Avalynn.” He spoke calmly, but she detected the rattle of rage still ripping through his system.

Her bodyguard—husband—was barely clinging to control.

“I felt cool air on my face. I thought you’d opened the door or window to get some fresh air in the room. But when I opened my eyes, a man was...s-standing...over me.”

His fingers bit into her spine before he swept her into his lap. “Did you see his face?”

“He was wearing a ski mask.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I can’t even remember the color of his eyes. I was too terrified that he’d kill me.”

“Did he speak to you?”

“He started to, but I screamed.”

Julius made a low, grating noise. Now that her focus shifted from her own fear, she noted how his muscles strained. They were so tense, she swore she heard them vibrating.

He looked up. “Jennings. Get the footage from the security cameras.”

“On it. I’ll fill in the other guys.”

Lark stood. “I’ll dust for fingerprints.”

Avalynn shouldn’t be surprised that the woman knew how to do that, but she was grateful to have such an efficient team around her. Yet even an entire task force couldn’t be everywhere. They hadn’t been able to stop that man from scaling the building and entering through her balcony door.

Her hands were icy, and she wrung them in her lap.

Julius touched one. “She’s freezing. Heidi, get a blanket.”

Seconds later, a heavy throw blanket surrounded her. Julius enfolded her closer to his body. With her ear pressed over his heart, she finally felt safe again.

And loved.

“I should take her away for a couple days.”

Heidi spoke first. “Where will you take her?”

“Somewhere even more private.”

She could only guess once her team leaked those wedding photos that her stalker had followed the trail straight to her.

“You’d only go for a couple days?” Lark asked.

“Like...four at most. She has the time in her schedule before the next stop on the tour. I don’t even think she should go to that.”

She roused. “I can’t miss it. It’s the music festival!”

He pushed out a sigh. “Then you won’t miss it. But we should do RVs. That tour bus stands out. A lot.”

Her face was plastered on the side of that bus so everybody they passed knew who was inside.

“We managed the plane tickets, but the FBI doesn’t pay for honeymoons, Julius,” Clay said.

Avalynn lifted her head from the pillow of his chest. “I could.”

Suddenly, the idea of being alone with her new husband lifted her spirits. Excitement fizzled inside her, replacing some of the icy fear she’d woken to when she saw that man leaning over her. All she recalled was the cold stare on her but couldn’t make out his eyes at all. Why couldn’t she remember the color or shape?

“I can pay for a honeymoon,” she repeated.

He stroked a hand down her back. “Not necessary. I made a friend on my last op. He offered us his island mansion.”

She lifted her head and met his gaze. Concern lines etched around his eyes and hard mouth. When he stretched his fingers along her spine, the tips brushed the spot that she now was certain was branded with his name.

“So we’re going?”

He nodded.

“On a honeymoon.”

“It will be a getaway too. A place to hide you while we hunt down that stalker and regroup.”

“But it’s on an island.”

Again, he nodded.

“Which island?”

“The Caymans.”

She hopped off his lap. “I’ll need to pack for the tropics.”

Julius’s eyes crinkled with amusement now. “You’ve recovered quickly.”

Lark and Heidi laughed, but Avalynn was zoned out of reality and focused solely on the man sitting on the bed they’d just made love in hours before.

Lifting a hand, she brushed her fingers over his angled jaw. “I know I’ll be safe with you.”

Chapter Sixteen

Julius gripped Avalynn's hand as he led her down the small flight of steps from the aircraft. The private crew who'd piloted the plane had their luggage waiting on the tarmac, and a short walk away, a car sat idling for them.

Lark herself had run background checks on everyone involved in this trip, from the pilot to Kingsley's personal waitstaff at his island mansion. If the FBI deemed them safe, then Julius trusted that.

He just didn't trust anyone else, which meant he needed to sweep Avalynn into the back seat of that car with all haste.

A warm sea breeze blew a long tendril of hair across Avalynn's cheek. When he brushed it away with a fingertip, she smiled up at him. The fear on her face had been replaced by a warm summer glow. The one she was known for all over the media.

If he'd seen her picture in a magazine a year ago, he would think it was airbrushed. Now that he knew her, he realized it was an inner glow.

He didn't like standing out in the open like this, but he studied her beautiful face for a heartbeat longer. "You have never been lovelier."

Her lips popped open in surprise. Then the corners tilted into a soft smile that mirrored the joy in her eyes. "You sweet talker."

"I'm just trying to get in your pants."

Caught off guard by his raw statement, she tossed her head on a laugh. The tinkling sound was swept up by the wind

and carried across the landing strip.

Unable to stop his own smile, he took her by the hand and led her away from the plane. The copilot grabbed their luggage and tailed them to the waiting car.

Before handing Avalynn into the back seat, he focused on the driver. “Thompson?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What is Kingsley’s mother’s maiden name?”

“Jacoby, sir.”

Satisfied with that answer, Julius assisted Avalynn into the vehicle. She slid across the seat to make room for him.

After they were both inside and the suitcases stowed in the trunk, he gave his full attention to the woman at his side.

Thompson spoke. “Welcome to the Cayman Islands. We’ll arrive at your destination in ten minutes.”

“Thank you, Thompson.” Avalynn offered him a smile that would melt the heart of the cruelest hardened criminal.

As they drove, she directed her attention to the landscape rolling by. The sky was a deep blue that mirrored the water. White sand beaches promised relaxing hours spent in the sun, and palm trees swayed in the breeze.

“I haven’t been to many beaches.”

He squeezed her hand. “Neither have I.”

“Then we’re both in for a treat.” Her eyes glimmered with the promise of something else—steamy nights and twisted sheets.

It was easy to get caught up in fantasies the of Avalynn, but the truth was a bitter pill to swallow. She might be his wife, but she didn’t bind herself to him out of love. She did so out of fear and desperation. He spoke those vows to keep her safe...

Except they meant *far* more to him.

His chest burned with the need to whisper all the sweet things in his mind for her. What good would any of that do either of them? Any admission he made would only burden her.

When this was all over, he'd have to force himself to walk away. He considered himself to be a man of strength as well as skill, but even the thought made his chest tighten.

He relaxed against the leather seat of Kingsley's car and watched the scenery fly by. Avalynn seemed so at ease, her hands relaxed in her lap rather than knotted. That glow in her face said it all, but so did the stillness within her. It spoke of a calm that he'd never seen.

Of course, she was under a lot of duress after a stalker sent her death threats. At that point, the authorities alerted the FBI about the situation, and her case was passed on to Sentry.

He was damn glad his punk little brother Jennings hadn't been given Avalynn's case. He liked his brother—he didn't want to have to mess up his pretty-boy face for putting his hands on Avalynn.

As they rolled up to a massive, sprawling home made of light stone and surrounded by beautiful gardens and more palm trees, she let out a gasp.

“It's beautiful!”

“It really is.”

“What did you say this friend of yours does again?” She tore her gaze from the beautiful house to look at him.

“I can't disclose much. But we became friends, and he offered this place for our honeymoon.”

Her smile grew even softer. It flipped his heart.

“I can't wait to explore the inside.”

He reached for the door handle. “Then let's not waste any more time.”

When he accepted Kingsley's offer, he put in a request. He was interested to see if that had come through to the staff.

With Avalynn's hand in his, he led her up a curving garden path to the impressive wooden door. The dark modern wood gave them a peek at what to expect inside. But when he opened the door and they were greeted by the sweet scent of candles, he knew that his friend had passed on the request to his staff.

A soft glow lit the interior of the home. Candle flames danced, inviting them in.

Avalynn let out a gasp. "This is—"

Hooking her around the middle, he swung her against his chest. He stared down into her eyes and slowly leaned in. Inch by inch, he closed the gap, giving her time to protest. After all, here they didn't need to pretend they were married. No one was around to see. She could lock herself up in her room for four days and the world wouldn't be any wiser.

But the tender expression on her face made his heart thump faster.

"I can't resist you," he whispered.

"Don't try." She pushed onto her tiptoes, her breasts crushed against his chest, and he captured her mouth.

The soft moan escaping her tempting lips sent his libido into overdrive. Deepening the kiss, he locked her to his body and kissed the hell out of her.

She rocked against him, parting her lips to invite in his tongue. When he teased the tip against her bottom lip, she breathed another throaty moan that just about unhinged him.

Plunging his fingers into her hair, he hauled her closer and eased his tongue between her lips.

Passion spread through his entire body, hushing any questions he had about what to do with her here. His only plan was to get her safe and keep her here for a few days to give Sentry time to find the guy who broke into their room.

Cupping her face, he slowed the kiss and finally pulled away. He searched her eyes. The depths of her eyes burned with a softness that made his heart squeeze.

“We don’t have to do this, honey.”

Her sculpted brow arched. “Who says I don’t want you?”

“*Do you want me?*”

Flattening her hands on his chest, she rocked into him again, hips bumping his. “I want you,” she whispered.

He didn’t have any arguments left. Sweeping her up into his arms, he carried her through the path of floorspace that the candles didn’t speckle. When he reached a thick fur rug in the center of the room, he didn’t immediately let her down. He stared into her eyes and made a silent wish unlike any he’d asked for in his entire life.

He asked for her.

* * * * *

Julius’s rough fingers brushed upward from Avalynn’s waist to her ribs. She arched into his touch, and he kept walking his fingers up her body, over the crests of her breasts before cupping them.

He spent the scantest moment teasing her nipples into hard buds before sliding his hands back down again, over her ribs...her belly. He skipped her pussy and latched on to her inner thighs instead.

She gasped as he spread her wide. The whisper of his breath washed over her soaking folds only a moment before he fused his mouth to her pussy and sucked her clit.

“Julius!” Need zapped her. She thrust her fingers into his thick hair and gave it a tug.

He murmured against her flesh and slipped his tongue in a slow circle around her stiff bud. Dark heat nestled in her lower belly. She thrust her hips upward, seeking more of that exquisite pressure. Needing it.

On the second revolution of his tongue, she was shaking. Her lover seemed to know every inch of her body. Which parts to touch to calm her. And this one that hyped her to a frenzy.

Another gasp left her as he skated his tongue over her bundle of nerves. She needed more. More of him. This man exhilarated her at every turn. It was hard to remember this was a case and he was her bodyguard when he made her body bow this way.

Her insides clutched. As if he understood what she was missing, he eased his fingertip down her drenched seam to her entrance. One fingertip slipped inside her right to the base. When he curled it upward into her G-spot, she issued a sharp cry.

His tongue softened over her clit, lapping in a slow pattern back and forth as he strummed her body like he knew the music by heart.

“Julius!” she panted, pulling air into her starved lungs. “I want you inside me. Stretching me. Filling me...”

His primal rumble spiked her desire. She latched on to his shoulders, aware of the flex of chiseled muscle, and drew him up her body.

His lips glistened with her juices. Candlelight played over his rugged features.

Just like the words of that song she’d written for him days before, these ones tumbled out from the well of her soul.

“I love you, Julius. I’m so in love with you.”

There. It was out. She couldn’t take it back and didn’t even want to.

His eyes hooded, then slipped shut. His muscular chest heaved. The light played over the lines of his naked body. The urge to run her tongue along every inch took over.

She looped her arms around his neck and levered herself upward. Her lips met the velvety steel of his chest. Flicking her tongue out, she tasted his salty skin.

The growl he made erased all worry about his reaction to her admission of love. Pressing kisses across his pec, she located his nipple and stroked her tongue over it too.

He gripped the back of her head, holding her to him. The pressure building inside her seemed to transfer into his body and made him shake too.

She sucked his nipple for a brief moment before moving again, kissing, spattering small bites across his chest to his neck. When she drew a sliver of skin between her lips and gave a sucking pull, he let out a sound that raised the hairs all over her body and urged her on.

Sliding one hand down his washboard abs, she located the stiff length of his cock and wrapped her fingers around it.

“You’re driving me crazy, honey.”

She smiled against his skin. “Good.” She gave his length a slow pump. Feeling the ridges bulge beneath her fingers made her head whirl with power. She wanted to make this man lose control with her. Maybe then his heart would crack open for her too.

When she pumped his length again, he grabbed her wrist, stopping her hand. She drew back to look at his face. Strain around his eyes told her how close he was to losing his grip on control.

“I want...”

His gaze softened as he stared down at her. “What do you want, baby?”

Words were beyond her. She needed to show him.

She shifted her body and pressed a hand on his chest to ease him down on the fur rug. It tickled her knees as she stretched out...

And took him in her mouth.

Swallowing the tip of his cock made her moan around him. Sinking over his thick shaft made her soaking wet.

“Holy fuck, baby. You don’t have to—Fuck!” He worked his hand into her hair, tugging the locks in a way that heightened her need.

She took him to the base. His entire body quaked as she held him inside her mouth for a long heartbeat before gliding back up the shaft. At the mushroomed tip, she licked the rim, which ripped another growl from his throat.

“Avalynn! Hell. Baby. Enough. I can’t—” He gripped her by the sides and dragged her off him. When he positioned her on top of his body and claimed her mouth, she was the one who lost control.

She kissed him like she’d never see him again.

Locking her against him with one arm, he fumbled around on the floor with the other hand. Desperation burned inside her. She wished they could forget precautions like condoms and make love like the newlyweds they really were.

Passion flared.

She pushed off his chest, spotted the condom in his hand and plucked it from his fingers. In seconds, she unwrapped it and rolled it over his length. She didn’t get any further because he rolled her onto her back.

The soft fur underneath her naked flesh, his hard body brushing against her and his heated kisses stole her last thought.

He positioned his cock and slid into her aching pussy.

She gasped. He groaned.

Their mouths slammed together. Digging her fingers into the hard planes of his backside, she rocked upward to take his every inch. That fire he lit just by looking at her drove her on and on. Every kiss, every thrust of his cock took her to another level.

When her insides began to spasm, he let out a low growl and plunged deeper, faster, harder.

The fierce expression twisting his face made her heart race. She cupped his jaw, and he dropped his forehead to hers.

“You love me, Julius. Admit you do.”

He froze, half inside her. “I can’t.”

“You can’t love me or you can’t say it?”

His jaw tensed. “Both,” he bit off.

She searched his dark eyes. “But you do.”

“I—”

She lifted her hips into him, causing him to slide in all the way.

On a shudder, he collapsed on her, faced buried against her throat as he thrust again and again. Her body melted. Her inner walls squeezed his length.

“Avalynn!”

“I love you, Julius. Let go with me. Make me come. Make me—” Her mouth opened wide on an *O* of ecstasy as her orgasm stole the last shred of her heart and she gave it all to him.

He pounded her hard and fast, one hand on her bottom to yank her into his thrusts. “I...love...you!” he gasped out and let go.

Chapter Seventeen

Avalynn curled her fingers around the stem of the wine glass that Julius offered her. She tipped her head to smile up at her husband.

Husband. When had she stopped thinking of him as merely her bodyguard and truly being her spouse? He wasn't an employee but a kindred spirit. After only two days with him in solitude, she never wanted to go back.

The waves crashed on the beach not far away from where they sat. Their chairs on the sand offered a beautiful view of the stars set in a dark backdrop of velvety sky, and the moonlight glimmered on the ever-changing ocean surface.

Julius stared down at her for a long heartbeat, his lips quirked at one corner as if he was about to share a private joke with her.

Slowly, he placed his hands on the arms of her chair and leaned in. His masculine scent surrounded her a moment before his lips brushed hers.

She mewled at the soft caress. She couldn't blame the wine for this desire pooling low in her core. Whenever Julius was close, she could think of little else. She wanted him.

Reaching up with her free hand, she clutched the front of his shirt and drew him closer. As she angled her head to receive his kiss even deeper, the music of the ocean stroking the sandy beach created a background track for their love.

Love...she felt it to the deepest part of her soul. Nothing about their relationship felt forced. Each minute was as easy between them as breathing the tangy sea air.

She swiped her tongue over his bottom lip, raising a low grunt in his throat. He hooked his hand around her nape and held her into the kiss. Dark need and passion twisted in her stomach. She managed to set the wine glass on the wide chair arm and slid her arms around Julius's neck.

He lifted her.

Wrapping her thighs around his waist, she clung to him and swished her tongue back and forth over his until her pussy throbbed.

“Christ, I can feel your want. Taste it on your tongue.” His voice was gravel and grit. Goose bumps skittered over her flesh.

He walked to the blanket that the waitstaff had laid out for the picnic they'd shared for dinner. When they were finished, Julius packed everything away in a basket and weighted the corner of the blanket down so it wouldn't blow away in the beach breeze.

Still holding her, he dropped to his knees and tumbled her onto the blanket.

Passion seared through her. The notes of their song played in the back of her brain as he stripped off her dress. She worked the buttons of his shirt and peeled the cloth off his bulky shoulders.

Raking her fingers down his muscled chest stole her mind. “I want you!”

He withdrew to stare into her eyes. The light from the moon made the depths of his eyes appear midnight blue rather than warm brown. “And you'll have me,” he grated out before claiming her mouth again.

He slid one finger into the leg of her panties. Her breaths came hot and fast as he located her soaking center and stretched her with a thick finger.

A gasp burst past her lips. She clung to his shoulders and rocked her hips to meet his finger thrusts. Waves crashed. Her cries mingled with her lover's.

“Take me, Julius. Don’t make me beg.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners. “What if I like hearing it?”

Her smokey laugh didn’t sound like anything she’d ever heard from herself before. She didn’t care either—how could she be the same Avalynn with Julius? She’d never loved a man like this.

All at once, those old daydreams of a husband, a family, a picket fence, they all meshed and it was his face she saw in them.

He took off the rest of his clothes and she shimmied her panties down her hips. When she parted her thighs to invite him in, their gazes locked and held.

Love thrummed between them. If this wasn’t forever, she didn’t know anything about the world. When Julius had a condom in place and lowered himself between her legs, her heart squeezed with all the emotion blooming inside her.

“Yes, lover. Sink inside me.” Her whisper was trapped beneath his lips, and he filled her in one slick glide.

They shared a moan that soon turned to a gasp when he started to thrust. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. He lifted her to meet every plunge.

“We can make our home in...Colorado,” she breathed against his ear.

“Baby, I love that you’d ever consider following me to Colorado.”

“I can live anywhere.”

He twisted his mouth into hers for a long, soul-wrecking kiss. She threw herself into the moment and stopped thinking, but those images of their future continued to fly by until her pussy contracted around his hard length.

Tossing her head, she gave herself up to the man who’d stolen her heart and bound her soul to his with the final roar of his own release.

* * * * *

Every minute that Julius sat by the pool, the more he realized he was screwed. Avalynn was in the pool, swimming laps. Her sleek curves gliding just under the surface had his cock half hard and his heart in his damn throat.

He *never* should have admitted his love for her. Knowing that he cared and knowing he was head-over-boots for her were two very different things. One he could back out of without causing so much heartbreak.

Clay was going to kick his ass too. Hell, he deserved it.

After the sex tape dropped, several guys had rushed the stage to reach her. If someone attempted to do that now? He wasn't so sure he wouldn't kill them dead in their tracks. And that scared the hell out of him.

Having feelings for her made things even more complicated. No longer could he keep a straight head when it came to his wife.

He would do anything—*anything in this world*—to protect her. Finding the man who threatened her life and did terrible things by drugging her and filming her in an act she did not consent to was his top priority.

If he was smart, he would give up his position as her bodyguard and hunt the motherfucker down.

He watched her reach the end of the pool and break the surface. She slicked her hair back before diving under again.

His fingers twitched toward his phone, and he hesitated only a second before picking it up and messaging Clay.

Where are we at in the case?

Clay's response came within a minute. *A few leads. We're ruling them out.*

What about the camera footage at Chez Nous?

Feed was cut. Didn't get a clear look at the guy.

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath.

Avalynn pushed through the water in a butterfly stroke, moving like an exotic mermaid. He drank her in.

What’s taking so damn long? She needs out of this.

A minute ticked by with no response. Then the words appeared on the screen.

She needs out of this or you do?

SHE does. She’s endured enough.

Now you’re in love with her.

He wasn’t even going to deny it. What was the point? Clay knew. Quaide knew. His brother Jennings did too.

These past four days he’d spent alone with his bride in the islands only made his love for her grow. Each meal they shared, every moment spent under the stars kissing and talking, all dragged him deeper and deeper under. It was as wide and vast as that sea their honeymoon house overlooked.

He needed to let her go. But he couldn’t.

When she broke the surface again, he slipped his phone into his pocket and pushed himself off the deck chair. Streaming water, she climbed out of the pool, and he met her with a towel.

Wrapping the thick cloth around her body sent another pulse of love through him. He liked taking care of her in all ways. Hell, he could see himself doing it forever.

Her gaze fixed on his face. He stared down at her, heart racing. On their second night here, they’d taken a midnight walk on the beach and discussed their future.

She was full of plans and ideas for how they’d make their relationship work like a real marriage.

At the time, he allowed himself to get caught up in the fantasy of it all, but then reality set in. He needed to stick to the original plan. Protect her. Get her safe. Keep her alive. Cast off the rumors and restore her reputation. Never was loving Avalynn part of the plan.

He lifted a hand to her cheek. Her skin was cool from the water.

She covered his hand with her own and leaned into his touch. Small freckles had appeared on the bridge of her nose after a few days spent in the sun.

“Do we really have to leave?” she asked.

He nodded. “Our plane will be ready for us in an hour. Then it’s on to the music festival.”

She brightened. “I’ve been looking forward to the festival. But I can see the idea stresses you. You’re afraid it isn’t safe to continue on my tour.”

They had to keep going with the idea of drawing out her stalker. Eventually he would slip and they’d catch him. If Julius got to him first, the man would be buried the next day.

“We’re going to keep you safe, honey. Trust me.”

She meshed her fingers with his. “Don’t you know that I already do?”

An hour later, they were on the small plane back to the international airport, then transferred to a larger jet that took them back to the States. The first-class seating gave them some of the privacy they’d both grown accustomed to during their honeymoon, which was perfect because keeping his hands off her, even for a minute, was impossible.

That scared him more than all the crazies he’d encountered during the course of his career.

Avalynn curled up with her head on his shoulder and fell asleep. Tenderness washed through him.

God, could the woman be any more perfect? The whole world thought so, but he knew firsthand. And who would think

that watching his wife sleep would make him feel so alive in ways he never dreamed possible?

As soon as they were on the ground, he was on high alert again, one hand on her and one inches from his weapon as he maneuvered her through the terminal to meet Jennings.

The minute he spotted his brother, the blade of irritation he'd been holding off for days slammed into him.

“What’s going on with the case?” he demanded, hoping he knew something new that Clay hadn’t relayed.

Avalynn looked up at him, her eyes wide.

He pulled her into his side.

Jennings glanced around. “Not here, brother.”

“Fine,” he ground out.

Avalynn gave him another confused look.

“This way.” Jennings set off in a brisk stride.

Since she was Avalynn Ray, she received special treatment, and that included a private shuttle straight to the place where Jennings parked the SUV. They bypassed any crowds and baggage claim too. Their luggage would follow them to wherever the tour ended up, not that either of them needed the clothes they’d worn on the island. If they’d worn any at all.

By the time he assisted her into the back seat, he was grinding his molars with tension.

Before he climbed in too, Jennings caught his gaze. “You good?”

“Fine,” he bit off.

“You don’t sound fine.”

He twisted his head away from the open door so Avalynn wouldn’t hear. “I feel something coming,” he said quietly.

They exchanged a glance. Since the time they were kids, he and Jennings had been close. That meant reading each other’s moods—and picking up on undercurrents too. Julius

felt a shit storm looming on the horizon, but neither of them had caught proof of it yet.

He slid into the back beside Avalynn. She threw him another look but didn't ask questions.

After a few minutes on the road, she curled up against him and yawned.

He touched the point of her chin. "Still tired, honey?"

A glance at the rearview mirror showed him Jennings was looking back.

"I can't seem to catch up on sleep today."

He knew why. Their honeymoon had been anything but restful. Staring at her lips reminded him of the stolen moments between them. He'd had her in so many places around that mansion that Kingsley would probably send him a cleaning bill.

He couldn't bring himself to regret that—or the fact he'd fallen even deeper in love with her.

His phone buzzed, interrupting the flow of thought. When he saw it was Clay, he considered putting the call on speakerphone but then thought better of it. The last thing he wanted was Clay to deliver some information that would upset Avalynn.

Shooting Jennings another look in the rearview, he took the call. "Abel."

"You're on the ground?"

"Yes. Jennings is driving."

"Good. Look, you asked what was happening, and we've made some progress since we last spoke."

He tried not to show any reaction. Avalynn was just as attuned to his mood shifts as he was hers. But he managed to keep his muscles relaxed as he listened to his boss.

"There's lots of chatter in an online chatroom."

"Expand on that."

“A few hints of potential threats at the music festival.”

The news was exactly what he'd expected to happen at some point during the course of her tour, but it still punched him in the gut.

“Tell me more.” He kept his voice totally neutral. “What are we doing about security at the venue?”

Clay let out a noisy sigh. “The venue isn't cooperating with the FBI. Our hands are tied on this.”

“That's unacceptable.”

His tone gave away his agitation, and Avalynn's eyes widened.

“We think she should cancel the show,” Clay said.

He looked from her beautiful eyes to the road ahead of them.

She wouldn't like it.

She would fight him.

But her safety came first. If the venue wouldn't help them provide the highest level of security for his wife, she wasn't going to be at that festival.

He made the choice for her. “Do it. I'm making the call.”

Chapter Eighteen

The minute Julius led Avalynn into the suite, her team clustered around her. Behind him, Jennings shut the door. But until Julius heard that lock click securely, he wasn't about to let down his guard.

He swung to double-check that Jennings had done the job right.

“Calm down, brother.”

He pitched his voice low. “You heard what I told you. Something big is coming.”

“Then we'll be more prepared when it does.” His brother held his stare for a moment.

Jennings had never let him down in all their years as brothers and then working for their own security company. Now in Sentry, they were both more skilled and aware of the risks involved in what they did.

That worried Julius—a lot. He couldn't stay on with Sentry *and* be in Avalynn's life, even if she was willing to move. He'd be thrust into the spotlight with her. Staying undercover would be impossible. Hell, he'd already been exposed by the media.

Clay, dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt, circled the cluster of people surrounding Avalynn. As he approached him and Jennings, he looked at them more sharply.

“What's going on?” he demanded when he reached the door where they still stood.

Julius glanced at Avalynn. Heidi and Lana were fawning over her as if she'd been away for a decade rather than just four days. He supposed they were so used to being with her that any time apart felt odd. Her team was her own family.

Holding up a finger to Clay, he turned to Jennings. "Her mother got home okay? And our parents?"

"All settled."

He gave a single nod and then gave his full attention to his boss. "Not here." He sent a look at Avalynn. She probably wouldn't overhear what he had to say to Clay thanks to the women speaking to her excitedly, but he still didn't want to take that risk.

"Avalynn, a photo for social media! Show off those freckles, girl!" Damon held up his camera.

Avalynn stopped talking to Lana and struck a pose.

Clay waved a hand in front of Julius's face. "Jesus, Abel. Focus. You're disgusting."

Jennings chuckled. "Should we take a seat at the table and talk?"

Clay twitched his head toward the far end of the suite where a full dining table and six chairs waited for Avalynn to sip her tea before tonight's performance.

What she didn't know was that she wouldn't be performing tonight's show. Or be on that stage tomorrow for a second performance.

When they dragged out chairs and dropped into them, Clay gave him an appraising look. "You didn't tell her, did you?"

"Not yet. There wasn't time."

"You spent half an hour in the car with her."

He sighed. "If I said there wasn't time, then there wasn't time."

Clay held up a hand in surrender. "Fine. I'd probably put off telling Lark something that would tick her off too."

He shifted his glance from Clay to the beautiful woman across the room. Heidi was next to her, conveying some information. As Julius looked on, Avalynn's head snapped around and she pierced him in a glare.

Jennings huffed out a laugh. "I'd say they just told her about you cancelling her show."

She broke away from her team and stalked over. Flattening her palms on the table in front of Julius, she leaned in, shoving her face in his. "Tell me they're lying, Julius Abel! Tell me that my team is misinformed and you did *not* cancel my performances all weekend at this music festival!"

He slanted a look at Jennings. "Guys. A moment alone."

"Not necessary!" she snapped. A darker red color burned in her very kissable cheeks.

Damn, he shouldn't be getting hard when she was so furious with him, but she looked so cute he couldn't stop it.

Jennings folded his arms and leaned back in his seat. "I'm good right here."

"So am I." Clay extended his long legs and crossed them at the ankles, settling in to watch the argument like it was the national rodeo finals and his favorite bull rider was in the running.

Obviously he wasn't getting any help from his comrades.

"Avalynn. The venue refuses to provide more security than what they already have in place."

She waved a hand at the three of them. "What are you guys here for?"

"It's not enough. You saw what happened in that one stadium despite tight security. People were rushing the stage—and getting through the guards. The festival is huge. The number of guards they have in place to control a crowd of that size isn't nearly enough," he argued.

She shook her head. "Who made this call?"

Jennings had enough brotherly loyalty to bow his head and avoid her gaze. Clay, on the other hand, did not have the same familial feelings. He jerked a thumb in Julius's direction.

He tightened his lips and prepared for the mini-tornado that was Avalynn Ray when mad.

"You did this, Julius?" She shoved off the table and scraped her hands through her hair. "I can't believe the audacity!"

"Honey, listen—"

She jabbed a finger at him. "Don't you 'honey' me. I know this is your job, but this is the biggest concert of the entire year! Do you know how many fans are here just to see me? I can't let them all down!"

He pushed away from the table and stood, facing her across it. "Don't you dare try to tell me not to protect you."

Brown eyes blazed into his. "Don't you dare try to play the overbearing husband card with me!"

Her command slammed into him.

He did think of himself as her husband. Ever since the night of their engagement, he had thought of little else than being with Avalynn, keeping her happy and safe and putting smiles on her beautiful face.

All the things a husband would do.

In a very short time, he'd grown extremely comfortable with his new role. That didn't mean he'd let down his guard. Not even a little bit.

"Can I play the bodyguard card?" he asked.

She sliced her hand through the air in an agitated gesture. "Well, that is your job. Your job is to protect me while I do *my job*."

"There's a dangerous man at large, Avalynn. He broke into our room at the winery. He sent you death threats. He's probably responsible for that sex tape that violated you in all

ways. You expect me to forget about those things and let you walk into a crowd of tens of thousands of people to perform?”

“It doesn’t matter that the guy is at large. Aren’t you going to protect me from him?” She glared at him for an endless second while the entire room crackled with charged silence.

He inflated his lungs with air that was much more difficult to expel with his muscles tensed for battle.

But this battle wasn’t with her.

He shoved out a breath. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he gave in to his first fight with his wife.

“Guys. How can we clamp down on security so Avalynn can perform?”

She straightened, lips parted on a gasp of surprise. She didn’t believe he’d concede to her argument. That made him question if he’d made the right call. Especially when his senses were still locked and loaded for the worst fight of his life.

“Julius. You can’t actually be considering—”

He sent a glare at Jennings, cutting off what he was saying.

“I see you are. Fine.”

“Oh, I’m still going to try to convince my *wife*.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. Across the room, her team had their heads together, whispering about what he’d just said.

“Now you’re pulling the wife card?”

He circled the table to take her hand. She let him have it, but still held herself stiffly. “Avalynn, the venue has sixteen weaknesses. Too many ways things can go wrong.”

“You won’t let anything happen to me.”

Heart tripping in his throat, he searched her eyes. The lines of their relationship, what was real and fake, had

blurred...and then he'd crossed them. These feelings were as real as the sun lighting up the sky.

Whatever she saw on his face made her take a step closer. "Julius...I love you."

Her whispered confession got her team tittering with excitement. Clay let out a groan, and Jennings outright laughed.

Julius drew her up against him, cradling her head to his chest. He pressed his lips to her temple. "I love you too."

He didn't give a damn who heard him or what they thought. This marriage might have begun as a part to play, but to both him and Avalynn, it was real.

* * * * *

The suite bustled with people going in and out. Damon and Freddy were busy packing up all Avalynn's belongings that they'd just unpacked. Lana was on the phone, lining up interviews for before and after her performances at the festival. Heidi was deep in conversation with Lark about those sixteen security weaknesses.

She wished she could make out the low rumble of male voices from the other side of the room where the Sentry team sat discussing all the possible ways to *close* those sixteen gaps and make the place safe for her.

Twisting toward the windows overlooking whatever city they'd stopped in, she stared out at the world and tried to center her mind.

In a short time, they'd board another flight to reach the festival. Times like these, jetlag started to catch up with her. What she wouldn't give to be back on that island with Julius. The closest thing she could get to his arms was the enormous cardigan she'd pulled on.

She drew it tighter around her body and rested her forehead against the cool windowpane. Though she didn't appreciate him trying to cancel the festival she looked forward

to most, she did understand that he was only trying to protect her.

From the corner of her eye, she caught movement. She looked up to see her lover approaching. When he settled his hand on her spine, she relaxed into him with a low sigh.

Concern lit his eyes. “You okay?”

“Yes.”

He peered at her closer. “Why don’t I totally buy that?”

She tipped her head up to study his face. “Are either of us really okay, Julius?”

“I don’t understand, honey.”

She directed a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “I get that you’re scared about me going to the festival. You’re scared the bad guy is going to hurt me. And...I’m scared you’re going to get the guy and then...leave me.”

“Oh, honey.” He kneaded the small of her back.

“Everyone?” Lark broke up the moment as she addressed the entire room. “Our transports are waiting. We’ll be shuttled to the airport. The private jet is prepared for our flight to Phoenix and then on to Tempe.”

Julius stared down at Avalynn. His somber expression reflected her own mood. She really was happy to perform at the festival, but so much was at stake. Now she was starting to question if she’d made the right decision in pushing Sentry to accept her request. Maybe it really was better to let Julius hide her away in a safe spot until this all blew over.

But she couldn’t forget her fans.

The next few minutes were spent getting downstairs in the hotel. She was surrounded by big male bodies as the Sentry team escorted her to a waiting black car with tinted windows. Heidi, Lark, Clay and Julius accompanied her. Then she was offloaded and boarded the jet.

She was used to spinning like a top from city to city. What she wasn’t accustomed to were Julius’s intense looks.

Every move she made, he zeroed in on it as though assessing what she might ask for or need. He made sure she had her neck pillow and eye mask to keep her eyes from getting puffy during the flight. After takeoff, he fetched tea for her.

“Do you need a snack too? I’ll get you a bagel.” He moved to go, and she latched on to his arm to stop him.

Their gazes connected. All of a sudden, lust surged inside her.

He took one look at her and knew. He glanced around the aircraft. She craned her neck to see over the headrest. The ensemble of people traveling with them were all slumped in their seats, wearing headphones or sleeping.

He swung his head to look at the rear of the plane. When he settled his stare on her again, she gave him a nod.

She stood. He made room in the aisle for her to step out of the row. Then she walked to the last compartment of the plane. The space housed a drink cart and some supplies for the passengers. But best of all, it provided a quiet space to be alone.

As soon as he crowded her into the spot, she threw her arms around him, dragging his mouth down to hers. He slammed his lips across hers, tongue seeking and his hands exploring over her spine and down to cup her ass.

Need sent her body into a new rhythm. She pulsed in time to the moves he made. He pushed her against the wall and pinned her hips with his.

“I love you!” she burst out against his mouth.

He thrust his tongue deep in a kiss that quickly spiraled out of control. When he tore free, his chest jerked with the sharp intake of air. “I love you, baby. So damn much it scares the fuck out of me.”

“Oh, Julius...” Emotion burned in her throat and at the rims of her eyes. But she was *not* about to show him the ugly cry.

He grabbed her by the hips and whipped her around to face the wall. A gasp escaped her, but he muffled it by pressing a hand over her mouth and slowly began to drive her mad.

The kisses he pressed up and down her throat and the way he sucked on her earlobe had her soaking wet before they reached ten thousand feet. When he slid a hand between her thighs and cupped her pussy, she stifled a moan of pleasure.

“Push your leggings down,” he urged in her ear.

Shivers rippled up and down her body. She couldn't believe she was actually entertaining the idea of having sex. On a plane. With people she knew and loved within hearing distance.

“I can't stay quiet if you take me, Julius!”

He pressed a kiss to her mouth, soft and sweet. “Try.” He flashed a grin at her that had her heart hammering against her chest. She tore her leggings and panties down. The quiet ripping noise alerted her that he had a condom at the ready.

He gave a rough grunt, and she reached back to grab his hip and guide him into her.

In one hard thrust, he filled her from behind. She bit down on her lip to keep from crying out. Then his mouth was on her neck again as he began to move. Each gliding stroke drove her higher than the next.

“If...passion...fueled this jet...” she panted as her orgasm closed in on her, “we'd have enough to get to...South America!”

His laugh vibrated through his chest and into her back. She arched her back and pushed against him. When he slid a bit deeper, they shared a muffled noise.

Their rhythm changed. A frenzy overtook her, and she couldn't stop the momentum. Another thrust...then two...and she was coming.

Her walls squeezed around his cock. Ecstasy stole her mind as she churned against him, taking him as deep as

possible as he let go and hot spurts filled her.

His fingers bit into her hips, and he delivered soft kisses up and down her throat. When he dropped his head on hers and issued a shuddering sigh, Avalynn lost even more of her heart to this man.

Slowly, he withdrew from her body and turned her into his arms. His eyes blazed with love. Amusement glimmered there too.

“Welcome to the mile-high club, wife.”

Chapter Nineteen

Every top music artist in the country was here for the festival. Judging by the number of tour buses and SUVs in the parking lot, they'd brought entire entourages with them. It made the group traveling with Avalynn look like a small family unit in comparison.

Julius stood under the tent out of the beating Arizona sun. Avalynn was still on her bus with Quaide watching over her while Julius scoped out the site.

A massive open area where the audience would camp out, dance and party for three days consisted of scrubby grass and patches of hard earth baked in the sun. If people felt like wandering, there were hiking trails and even a botanical garden filled with local varieties of plants.

He eyed the head of the hiking trail. That route bothered him the most. Someone could easily slip in from some other starting point and skip the security at the gates where they checked for weapons.

He twisted to look at the enormous stage where the biggest acts would go on. That included Avalynn. It was a good distance from the trailhead, but he still didn't like it.

Smaller stages dotted the landscape, and a village of food trucks filled in the gaps—presenting their own security issues. He wouldn't put anything past the son of a bitch who was trying to hurt Avalynn. Masquerading as a food service worker wasn't much of a stretch for a man who drugged a woman and then made a sex tape with her.

A touch on his sleeve made him swing around. Lark stood next to him wearing an I Love Avalynn Ray T-shirt.

He grunted. “Nice shirt.”

“Thanks! You were looking for me?”

“Yes. I need your help on a matter.”

She bounced on her Converse sneakers. “Hit me with it!”

Her enthusiasm would make anyone grin, and he couldn't stop his. “Adding you to the Sentry team was the best idea Clay ever had.”

“Awww, really? Thanks, Julius.” She bumped her shoulder against him, but it only brushed his upper arm.

“I need some disguises.”

“Disguises...?”

“For me and Avalynn.”

She blinked at him. “You do realize you're creating your own security issues, correct?”

“Got it. But this is important. Avalynn complained that she never gets to watch all the other performances because she's too busy hiding from paparazzi in her tour bus.”

Lark's lips formed an *O*. “And you want to take her out.”

“Just for a little bit. Enough for her to see her favorite group. They'll be on stage two.”

She bobbed her head. “All right. I feel you. I think I know what to do. Give me an hour to figure things out and I'll text you when I'm ready.”

He beamed at her. “You're the best, Lark.”

She threw him a little head bobble. “That's me!”

He chuckled. “I'll be sure to tell Clay to give you a raise.”

She snorted. “I don't need a raise. I need that man to take some time off so we can start a family!”

He stared at her. “Are you considering it?”

“Of course we are. He’s going to make a fantastic daddy. And while I have a lot more time before my biological clock runs out, *he* is in his forties. If I want my baby daddy to have the energy to change diapers and take midnight feeding shifts, we’ve gotta start now!”

He chuckled. “I wish you both the best of luck with the family, Lark.”

Smiling softly, she nodded. “I hope you and Avalynn can work things out after this is all over, Julius. You two are *great* together.”

His heart gave a tight squeeze. Comparing his and Avalynn’s relationship to Clay and Lark’s, he didn’t find them *that* far off. Same with Quaide and Dove. They might have come together in different ways for different reasons, but their love shone through thick and thin, up hills and down.

He loved Avalynn, and whether or not they could make their marriage last, he would still love and cherish her until he drew his final breath.

After Lark left on her mission to find them some disguises, he did a walkthrough of the trailhead just to scope it out for himself. He snapped a few photos of places that he wanted to set guards on before returning to the place where Avalynn’s tour bus was parked.

She would be inside resting. Maybe even warming up. Her performance started at eight after a couple smaller acts on the main stage. As soon as Lark returned with the disguises, he’d surprise Avalynn by taking her out.

He paced outside the bus, his nerves jumping. If Lark couldn’t find anything, if she couldn’t come through with his request...

He was becoming addicted to Avalynn’s smiles. Putting them on her face had quickly become his obsession. Giving her the best first and second nights of her life was a big act to beat, but he planned to try...for the rest of his life.

When his phone vibrated in his pocket, he yanked it out and stared at Lark’s message.

Hot damn, the woman did it! He almost whooped for joy that Lark had managed to deliver.

He responded with a request for her to meet him at the bus. Then he continued pacing, making mental plans to keep Avalynn safe, coming up with exit strategies in the event they were made.

When Lark arrived, he reached for the big grocery bag full of disguises, but she pulled it out of his reach. “Clay can know *nothing* about this. Understand?”

“Got it. I take full responsibility for my actions.”

She held out the bag. When he reached for it again, she snagged it back. Her giggles continued when he yanked the bag from her hand and practically leaped through the bus door.

He gave the driver a cursory glance. “Secure the door.”

“Got it, boss man.”

The door slammed behind him. He looked around and moved to where Avalynn was sitting on one of the short leather benches. When she heard him coming, she looked up, brows pinching.

“Why do you look like you just robbed the ticket booth?”

His grin stretched. “Because I just hit the jackpot. And you’re about to benefit.” He set down the bag on the seat next to her.

She eyed it. “What is this?”

“Look inside.”

“Okaaay,” she drawled and removed the item on the top—a bright blue T-shirt with a band logo on it. “What the...”

“Keep looking.”

Next, she withdrew a long black skirt, followed by a pair of combat boots. And lastly...

“A wig!” She leaped off the bench, the short blonde wig dangling from one hand. “Julius, what did you do? Are we going out? Am I getting off this bus?”

He fished in the bag and came out with a baseball cap and a set of clothes nobody would ever expect to see on his body. “Yeah, honey. Get dressed. We don’t want to miss your favorite artist’s first song.”

She squealed and threw her arms around his neck.

Minutes later, he clutched her hand in his and hurried into the thickening crowd. Since he’d scoped out the venue, masses of people had flooded the field. He centered his hand on Avalynn’s spine and steered her around the groups.

“Where are we going?” She squeezed closer to him as several guys who’d already had more than their share of alcohol stumbled toward her.

He anchored her against his side. “As close to the stage as possible.”

“Is that a good idea?”

He shot her a look. “Now you sound like me.”

Her laugh sent a thrill of happiness through him. The best part was nobody was paying any attention to them. Dressed as they were, they were just two more people in an enormous crowd.

When the stage came in sight, Avalynn let out a disappointed noise. “We’re too late to get close.”

“You don’t have much faith in your new husband, do you?” He brushed his lips over her temple before towing her through the throng of people. The closer they got to the stage, the tighter the groups were, but he managed to wedge himself into a space and make room for Avalynn directly in front of him.

Standing room only meant they were shoulder to shoulder, but he was betting on the old adage of safety in numbers. With her back pinned to his chest, his hips cradling her ass and his arms around her middle, someone would have to take him out in order to get to her. And he was too quick on the draw for that to happen.

As the band took the stage, Avalynn bounced up and down on her toes. He groaned at the dark heat rolling through his groin. Her curvy ass grinding on his cock would be the most dangerous part of this rendezvous.

She screamed with the crowd. The first notes rolled out over the field, and she pumped her fist in the air with everyone else. She sang along. She shimmied.

He only had two regrets—one, that he couldn't see the joy on her face, and second, that they had to cut their fun short so she didn't miss her own show.

Placing his lips close to her ear, he said, "We have to go."

She leaned into him, curling a hand around his jaw. Then he locked her to his side and blazed a path for them through the crowd.

Once they were far enough away from the screaming fans to speak, he pulled her to a stop. She twisted in his arms and tipped her face up to his.

"Okay, what number?" His voice was gritty but not from cheering.

"Third." Her soft lips tilted into a dreamy smile. "Aside from the engagement and wedding nights, this is the third best night of my life."

Her words knocked the wind out of him. God, he loved this woman like none other. He lifted his hands to cup her face, and just then Clay's voice rang in his ear through his comms device.

"We got him! We have the stalker in custody."

* * * * *

"Julius! Tell me what is going on!"

He rushed her faster than her much shorter legs could carry her, forcing her into a jog at his side. The solid arm around her tensed. She swore she could hear the tension humming through him and smell his adrenaline.

"There's not much time. I need to get you to the bus."

“But why? Julius, you’re scaring me.”

“Clay just put out the call to meet him.”

She sensed there was more that he wasn’t telling her.
“Why?”

“There’s a matter to address.”

“One of the security issues?”

“Yes.” He bit off the word.

He propelled her around a food truck selling chicken on a stick. The smell of grease and meat made her stomach knot.

With a burst of speed that made her flat out run, Julius rushed into the maze of buses, vans and RVs parked in the field. Her own bus had been swapped out for a plain one, and she’d lost track of where it was parked. Luckily, Julius knew and led her straight to it.

He rapped on the door with his fist, and the driver who was contracted to always stay with the bus opened the door to admit them. Julius practically shoved her up the steps. The short ends of the blonde wig she wore flipped into her vision, and she tore the thing off her head.

“Julius! Talk to me.”

He took her by the shoulders. “There’s no time. Quaide is on his way to you. I’m just going to meet with the team and take care of this. Then I’ll be back for our new ritual.”

She searched his eyes. Their new ritual of making love before she went onstage was one she definitely wanted to practice after the fun he’d just given her.

“Julius.” She cradled his face. “Come back to me quick.”

“I will, baby.”

“Promise me.”

He leaned in and stamped her lips with his own. She moved to deepen the caress, but he was already moving away from her.

She watched his tall form hurry to the door. The driver opened it for him, and he was gone from sight.

Through the tinted windows she couldn't make out where he was headed. Her nerves were jumping, and she needed to take a moment to collect herself.

She grabbed the wig and moved to the rear of the bus to change out of the clothes that had fit in with the festival crowd. She quickly stripped them off, thinking of Julius's promise to return and how it would feel when he claimed her.

This bond they shared was undeniable. After her troubles were over, she hoped they could strengthen that bond even more. The tour was winding down to the final dates. Then she could return to her bungalow for a lengthy rest. Hopes and dreams that Julius could join her for an extended stay floated through her mind as she donned a pair of leggings and an oversized top, her typical attire before she got dolled up for the stage.

Tonight her team had chosen a red minidress for her. And it wasn't the clothes that excited her—it was thoughts of Julius nudging the short hem over her hips and claiming her from behind the way he had on that jet.

She squeezed her thighs together and reached for her phone. She was just about to send her husband a text when he sent one to her first.

Meet me at the SUV. You know where to find it?

No. Her stomach dipped with excitement.

Look for a white RV with a red flag on the side. The black SUV is next to it.

I'll be there.

Five minutes.

She sent a few heart emojis and grabbed her sneakers. She shoved her feet into them and hurried to the front of the bus.

The driver looked up from his phone he was playing on.

“I need to get off the bus.”

His brows drew together, forming one long furry line. “Your bodyguard didn’t say so.”

“He told me to meet him. I’m sure someone is standing right outside the bus waiting to escort me there.”

He gave her a long, appraising glance before opening the door.

Heart pounding and her pussy clenching with the desire for another secret rendezvous with Julius, she rushed away from the bus. None of the Sentry team was around, but she was safe enough for the minute it would take to find the SUV.

Music from several stages floated on the breeze, combining to make low noise that she couldn’t focus on over the thunder of her own heart. When she spotted the SUV Julius told her to meet him at, she launched forward in a burst of speed.

She had plenty of time for this steamy meeting with her husband and then to get ready for her show. But the faster she reached Julius, the sooner he could kiss her, put his hands on her...slide inside her.

She reached for the door and found it unlocked. It swung open, and she jumped into the back seat.

“You made it.” The male voice raised all the hair on her arms. A sharp sting hit her shoulder.

She twisted. Or at least she started to. She never got the chance to complete it. Her head drooped.

Chapter Twenty

Julius glared at the motherfucker handcuffed to the chair in front of him. “Your days of terrorizing women are over.”

The guy was close to Avalynn’s age. His build fit what Julius and the rest of the world had seen in that video. His brown hair was glued to a patch of drying blood on his eyebrow. Julius stared at it, hand clamping on the urge to drive his fist into his face for a second time and give him a matching shiner.

He reared back, fist cocked.

“No, brother!” Jennings wrapped his arms around Julius and yanked him away before his knuckles could connect.

He fought his brother, shoving at him to get free and finish what he had planned for the asshole who hurt his wife.

“Stop, man! If you fuck up his face too much, he won’t be pretty enough for all the guys in prison.” Jennings barred his arm over Julius’s chest, forcing him back another step.

“I want to kill him!”

“We know that. But you can’t. So back the fuck off!”

Jennings managed to position himself in front of the stalker.

“Tell me your name,” Julius barked at the guy.

He remained silent, his lips compressed.

“Tell me!” He threw himself at him again.

Lark’s voice came from a few feet away. “Avalynn’s manager confirmed that his name is Justin French, and they

dated for a brief time before her rise to fame.”

He broke away from Jennings and he took a menacing step toward the guy before Jennings threw himself between them.

“Just one punch, brother,” he snarled.

“Your one punch will kill him. Stand down. Let us take care of peewee here. Go to your wife.”

Wife.

The one word that could snap him out of the red haze of fury fogging his mind.

“I never had sex with her.”

The guy’s statement had everyone focused on him.

“I couldn’t...”

“Get your small dick hard enough?” Julius roared.

Jennings stepped between them, keeping Julius from killing him. On the other hand, relief swept through him.

He swung his gaze from Jennings to Clay standing feet away. They could handle the stalker. He’d go to Avalynn. He had a lot of making up to do for keeping her out of the loop that her stalker was in custody. At the time he’d made the choice for her own good. She didn’t need to be upset right before a show.

Telling her now that she was free, that the need to fear was gone, would only make Julius’s time with her that much sweeter.

When he made that promise to come to her for their new pre-performance ritual, he knew he would never keep it. He’d be too busy interrogating and punishing her stalker.

“You guys got this?” he asked Clay.

He gave him a single nod and drew aside his open jacket so Julius could see the cold steel strapped to his side.

Seeing that Sentry had it covered, Julius spun around and headed out of the main festival office where they’d stuck the

guy after finding him lurking around the PR team's bus.

In long strides, he hurried away, his only focus Avalynn. All was well now. They really had him.

The sun was setting fast, and his shadow lengthened along the ground as he strode to Avalynn's bus. After only a few steps, he realized that this was over now.

He'd be leaving her.

How did he make an exit plan for extricating his heart?

His steps slowed. God, he couldn't be dragging his feet on this, could he? He operated alone or with Sentry. He couldn't pull a woman into a life like that. Lark and Dove were exceptions. Dove had worked for the FBI with Quaide—she knew how dark the world could be. And Lark was just woven from a different fiber. She'd land on her feet no matter what shape the world took.

But Avalynn... Christ, she was tender and soft and naïve despite the harsh spotlight she stood in.

He couldn't expect her to remain with him—married to him. How would they ever make it work? Her honeymoon dreams of staying together and figuring out their place between worlds wasn't realistic.

A heavy weight in his chest felt too much to carry the rest of the distance to the bus.

When he rapped on the door, the driver opened it.

Julius took one look at his face and knew something was off. "What happened?" he barked.

"She—"

Julius leaped the steps and fisted the driver's shirt. "Tell me what happened!"

His eyes rolled as Julius slid his hand upward to close around his neck. "Sh-she got off the bus! She said she was... meeting you!"

* * * * *

The SUV was moving. Avalynn wasn't going to make that show.

She might not even make it out of this alive.

Oh god...Julius.

Did he know she was missing? He had to be going crazy. Out of his head.

Her brain was foggy, but not so far gone that she couldn't recall exactly how dangerous Julius could be. She'd seen him in action.

She'd been so stupid, believing that text was from him. If they had his phone, did that mean something terrible had happened to him?

Panic swept through her. She didn't proclaim to be the toughest woman on earth, but she would take any heat aimed at her rather than the knowledge that her man had been captured or...worse.

Her stomach knotted, and her breaths started coming in fast pants. The speed of the vehicle changed. It rolled to a slow stop.

Holding her breath, she waited for what came next. Whoever kidnapped her was going to pay. With his life. Once Julius found her, it would all be over.

How would he find her? Where was her phone, anyway? With her hands bound, she couldn't feel around for it. But she'd been holding it when she approached the SUV. Her foggy mind couldn't make out more than that.

She waited for what felt like an eternity before a man flipped on a light, letting her see his face.

Hot hatred burned in her chest. "Kyle!"

She hadn't given the man a thought since they dated briefly three years before. He was a musician in her band when she was first starting out. Things between them heated up. But then he began to frighten her with how fast he tried to move things along toward a relationship that she wasn't interested in.

Not to mention that she found out he was addicted to heroin.

She was tied up, lying on her side on the seat. He stopped the vehicle that was a total match for the one that the Sentry team used. Heart thundering, she listened to the door open and close. His feet crunched on the ground as he circled to the back door.

Cool outside air rushed over her face, reminding her of what happened back at Chez Nous.

He brought his face on level with hers. Disgust rolled through her.

“You kidnapped me!”

He sighed. “Kidnap is a nasty word. I brought you here to talk. I just want to talk, Avalynn.”

“I don’t want to talk to you! Let me go right this minute!”

He wagged his head in a sad manner. “I thought you might be reluctant. After all, you’ve had so many boyfriends since me. You had that celebrity.” He stuck up one finger. “The talk show host, but that only lasted a few weeks, right?”

She glared at him.

“Then the guy on the sex tape. What was his name?”

“I have no idea! But it wasn’t you!” It was true. Kyle was a good deal broader and taller than that guy. Which meant two crazy men had been stalking her.

How many more were there?

It didn’t matter—Julius would stop them all. She was safe with him. Where was he?

Kyle’s stare pierced her, leaving ice around her insides. “I spent ninety days in rehab. You couldn’t even wait ninety days.”

“We were never a couple!”

“But we could have been if you’d waited.”

“You’re wrong!” she spat.

“I went to rehab to get clean for you. I went to rehab so we could be together. Remember our first date? I took you out to that restaurant and bought you ice cream?”

“Yes! Then you decided that I should sleep with you because I owed you for some runny chocolate ice cream in a cup!” She tried to pry her hands apart, but he’d bound them with zip ties, too tight for her to slip free and too strong for her to break.

Julius! I need you!

“You should have slept with *me*, not that man on the tape. I never would have released that to the public. It would be private, just between me and you. My love...”

“Shut up! I’m not your love. You’re deranged. Everything was a transaction with you.”

His glare darkened. “And now you really owe me. You shot to fame. I was in your band. And you left me behind. Then to insult me further...” He ran his finger down her arm, raising chills in the wake of his touch. “You just run off and marry the first guy to pay attention to you.”

He meant Julius. That ice surrounding her heart pierced it with shards. “What did you do to Julius?”

“I carried your guitar offstage for you every night.”

“So what!”

“You should have waited for me. I’m clean now, but you didn’t wait.”

“Let me go! I hate you, and I’ll never be with you, Kyle. Anyone who could do this to a person belongs in a cell!”

He expelled a sigh that sounded far too light and carefree to ease her worries. Fear blanketed her. How was she going to get out of here? Away from him? And where was the man she needed like the music she played?

Chapter Twenty-One

“Julius.”

He ripped his eyes away from the security camera footage and his glazed vision focused on Jennings standing at his elbow, a cup in hand.

“Take the coffee. You need it.”

He closed his fingers around the cup and hurled it to the parking lot. It spilled over the dark ground.

“I don’t need coffee, goddammit! I need a search party. Lights. Dogs!”

Lark appeared carrying a backpack. She unzipped it and started passing out flashlights to Sentry and as many security guards at the festival as could be spared.

“Search the lot where the musicians park first. If she thought she was meeting me, she’d know I wouldn’t go outside that area!” Julius’s bark of authority sent everyone scattering.

The misery in his tone reflected his pain and despair that he’d missed more than one clue in this case. He could only blame himself. He was so damn distracted by Avalynn and hell-bent on marrying her to save her reputation that now Avalynn was going to pay the price.

Please let us find her. I can’t go on if I don’t.

His mind blanked as they combed the parking area. Each of them walking in a grid pattern in search of any clue as to where she could be.

“I’m going to start knocking on the doors of every RV and bus!” Jennings called to him.

With his lips set in a grim line, he did the same. The Sentry SUV was parked farther away to keep the notice off them, while Avalynn’s unmarked bus and the RV her PR team and Heidi traveled in was parked a few rows away.

Flashlight beams panned over the black asphalt. He stared at his own beam, praying with every step he took. He had to find her, but the possibilities were vast. Whoever kidnapped her could be on their way to the Mexico border.

“Julius!” Clay’s call brought him running.

He stood over an object, the beam of light illuminating a phone. It looked to have fallen and landed on top of a rock so it was tilted on its side.

Seeing that blush-pink phone case sent his heart into an arrhythmia that might take him out in the end. He gulped.

“Don’t touch it,” Clay gritted out. “It’s evidence.”

“Fuck that!” He scooped it off the ground. As he brought the device to life with a swipe of his thumb, he encountered a passcode lock. Hands shaking, he fought to guess what she might have entered for the code.

First, he tried her birthday. When that was a failure, he entered the date she signed the deal with her label.

Again, the attempt failed.

“Just give it to Lark. She’ll break into it!” Clay said.

“No. One more try.” His finger hovered over the screen. He punched in another date.

Their wedding day.

The phone opened to reveal the last screen she was on—the camera was open facing the ground.

“Check the pictures!” Clay’s voice brought several other people running their direction.

Nobody spoke.

When he opened the last thing saved in the camera roll, his stomach heaved. “It’s a video.”

Dread tingled in his face and fingers. His knees shook, and he steeled his spine. In horror, he watched the footage. The back of an SUV flashed over the screen, shiny black. Then it hit the ground.

“Stop there!” Quaide said from over his shoulder. “Rewind. Did you see that?”

He couldn’t see anything for the pain racking him. He managed to roll back the footage.

“There!” Quaide grabbed the phone from his hand and stretched the screen, zooming in on half of the license plate before the phone fell from her lax fingers and hit the pavement.

“Run that plate!” he practically roared. “Search for that vehicle!”

People scattered. Julius took off in a dead run, zigzagging through vehicles and pounding on doors, disturbing musicians. He didn’t give a damn. He just had to find Avalynn.

“Julius!” Quaide’s bellow brought him sprinting back. Quaide was holding his phone in one hand and Avalynn’s in the other. He held up his own device. “The plate is registered to one of the guys on Avalynn’s dating history list.”

His gut bottomed out. “Who?” he croaked.

“The musician in her band when she first started out. Kyle Martin.”

“Oh god. Wasn’t he in rehab?” He fisted both hands.

“He was up until about six months ago,” Lark informed them. “I looked into him twice.”

“How did we miss this guy?” Oh god. Julius wasn’t worthy of the Sentry team, let alone of being married to Avalynn.

“Don’t worry about how we missed him now. Worry about how we find him.” Clay’s hand closed on Julius’s

shoulder.

“Guys, I’ve got an address.” Quaide’s statement had him running for the Sentry vehicle.

Julius didn’t want to see if his team was on his six. He sprinted to the vehicle and jumped behind the wheel. Doors slammed, alerting him that more than one member of Sentry was with him. When he stepped on the gas, he demanded coordinates.

Jennings reached over and fixed the address in the GPS. When the map popped onto the screen, Julius’s mind laser-focused on the directions. Left, right. Three miles.

“The guy is living within a twenty-mile radius of the festival. Was that planned?” Lark asked from the back seat.

“Of course it fucking was. He had this planned all along,” he bit off. He was certain the son of a bitch orchestrated the entire kidnapping long before any of them were aware. He knew Avalynn would be at this venue with security risks, and he took advantage of them to get her.

“I don’t understand how he lured her in. She’s smart. She wouldn’t go with anybody,” Lark said.

Quaide’s voice came from the back seat too. “She responded to a text—from Julius’s number.”

Fury swamped Julius. He slammed the heel of his hand off the steering wheel. The cracking sound silenced the team for several heartbeats.

“You aren’t at fault, Julius.” Jennings’s words did nothing to help soothe the irate beast inside him. The one that rattled the cage to be let out, to put his nose to the trail and hunt the bastard and spill his blood.

“It was the third best night of her life, and I fucked it up. I was so occupied with getting to that guy you had in custody that I walked away from her. She never leaves the bus. *Ever!*”

“She knew better, like you said. You told her to stay there and wait for you. She was under the guard of the driver.”

He couldn't even form words. The black fury pounding through him would only serve one purpose.

When he found the man who took his wife, he would use this anger boiling inside him...and he would make sure the bastard stopped breathing the same air as his precious woman.

* * * * *

The tight fist in Avalynn's hair brought a scream to her lips. She opened her mouth and let it loose with all the power inside her. Her ankle twisted as she was dragged across a dirt yard toward a house.

"Help me! Help! I'm Avalynn Ray! This man is kidnapping me! Hllllp!"

"Shut up, you stupid bitch!" Kyle wrenched on her hair more, propelling her across the shadowed earth.

"Help me!" She screamed until her vocal cords threatened to tear. She didn't give a damn. What good was her career if she was dead?

They reached a door, and he shoved her inside. She fell on the floor, palms scraping over tile. The grout lines cut into her flesh, and she let out another scream.

"Help me! I'm Avalynn—"

A hard boot hit her ribs, almost lifting her off the floor with the force of it. The air punched from her lungs, and she collapsed face down, struggling for any air at all.

"I told you to shut up. Now look what you made me do. You'd better make it up to me."

What did he think she needed to make up for? He was beyond crazy. Julius would have some choice words for this guy.

He would find her. He wouldn't rest until she was in his arms again. She knew it like she knew how to pull air into her lungs.

Julius loved her. And she was so in love with him. Their bond was unbreakable. Fake relationship or not, it was real

now and it would last forever.

She shoved to her hands and knees and then made it to her feet. Kyle paced between the door and a window in the living room. He stuck a fingertip between the slats of the blinds. The light from a streetlamp outside beamed over his eye as he peered out.

“What are you looking at?” Her voice sounded strangled. She couldn’t have sung tonight with her voice in this condition. Not after screaming her head off.

Hopefully somebody heard her. This wasn’t the only house on the block. And she was loud. She knew how to project her voice even without a microphone and PA system.

“My neighbors heard you, you stupid bitch! Now they’ll get nosy and come running to see the famous singer. But you’re all mine.”

A sick dread made her skin clammy. Sweat broke out on her face and neck. It poured under her arms and soaked her shirt.

What did victims do to escape situations like this?

What would Julius tell her to do?

He’d tell me to play along. Buy some time for Julius to find me.

“We didn’t date very long,” she said.

He stopped pacing to throw her a look. “No, we didn’t. You dumped me.”

“I wanted you to get the help you needed. The help you deserved.”

He squared his shoulders. “I got the help. You should have waited. You didn’t wait!”

“I’m sorry about that now.”

“I don’t want to hear your lies.”

“You said you wanted me to give you a chance. I’m here now. Tell me what you want out of this.”

He gripped his head. “Damn these voices! Shut up!”

Panic washed over her. All the sweat on her body froze, and she began to shiver. He was hearing voices. How was she supposed to react to that?

He dropped his hands and gave her a cold stare. “They’re telling me to kill you, you know.”

She gulped. Her throat was raw. “W-why?”

“Because you didn’t wait for me. You were supposed to —” He broke off and stuck a finger between the slats again. This time his whole face lit up with lights.

“The cops are outside! You screamed and the neighbor called the cops!” He slammed his palm off his face several times.

She watched impassively. Maybe he would knock himself out.

The thunder of pounding on the door echoed through the house.

“Open up! This is the police!”

“This is your fault!” Kyle bellowed at her.

“I’m here! This is Avalynn Ray! He is holding me hostage!”

The door caved in with a crash. In seconds, Kyle was on the floor and several cops stormed the room.

Her stare shifted to the door and her entire body came alive as she made out a very familiar man silhouetted in the opening.

“Julius!” Her voice gave out on the syllables, but he heard anyway.

He rushed to her. Strong arms lifted her and carried her outside.

Into the flashes of camera lenses belonging to the paparazzi.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Julius's chest heaved. All the adrenaline had solidified in his lungs, and he couldn't even expel the breath he'd been holding since the moment he heard Avalynn scream.

"Get out of here!" he bellowed at the reporters who'd jumped on the story and gathered outside the home Avalynn Ray was reportedly being held hostage in.

He tried to take a step to get her out of the limelight, but they were surrounded by people thrusting cameras in their faces and lobbing questions at them. The cops were trying to push them back to clear a path, but nobody was cooperating.

With one hand, he shielded her face from view. She twisted against his neck.

The cops made enough of a path that he was able to take a step toward the SUV. Jennings would get the door for them. He knew his brother was there for them.

"Move!" the police officer commanded through the bullhorn.

As soon as a few people cleared the area, Julius rushed forward with Avalynn in his arms.

"Get the fuck out of here! I'll break your goddamn camera!" he snapped at everyone who got close to snapping a photo of his wife. They were *not* getting her ugly cry on film and splashing it all over every media source in the world.

She shook in his hold. The black opening of the SUV door loomed in his sight, and he shoved her inside with him climbing in right behind. The door slammed shut, and the vehicle began to move.

He dragged Avalynn into his lap. She buried her face against his chest. Noisy tears escaped her. Not a soul inside the vehicle spoke a word until they reached the hotel.

“Get them inside,” Clay ordered Quaide and Jennings. “I’ll keep Lark with me.”

His brain was hardly present as he moved Avalynn from the vehicle to the penthouse suite. As soon as they got there, her manager and PR team surrounded them.

With her still cradled in his arms, he dipped his mouth to her ear. “Do you want to see them?”

“Not tonight,” she hiccupped.

“You heard her! She’ll talk to you tomorrow.” He carried her into the room and waited to hear the door close behind them. Then he twisted the deadbolt. Only then did he carry her to the bed.

He lay her down gently. Removed her sneakers and drew the covers over her shaking body. He crawled in next to her and tucked her to his chest. “It’s okay now. I’ve got you, honey. You’re safe. Those guys are gone from your life, locked away.”

She shivered. “Then there really were two stalkers?”

“It seems so. Justin French.”

She jerked in his hold. “You’re kidding me.”

“No.”

“My god. I only dated him a short time, back before I even got discovered.”

“I know. Honey...he says he never got it up.”

“What?”

“He couldn’t perform. The tape looked like he was having sex with you, but it didn’t happen. He still violated you, but it wasn’t how it all looked.”

She latched on to his shoulders, fingers digging in. He didn’t care if he wore her bruises. He deserved whatever pain

she gave him for what he let happen to her.

She was weeping again, the pitiful sound gutting him.

“Shh, honey. I’ve got you.” He smoothed the hair off her wet face. “Are you crying because you’re scared?”

She shook her head. “I’m...n-not scared. Not anymore. I’m...sad it’s over.”

He froze. His heart slammed into his ribs. Gently, he hooked his finger beneath her chin and lifted her face to meet her gaze. Her eyes swam with tears...and love.

“Jesus, honey.” He squeezed her tight and kissed her forehead as his own chest heaved with bottled emotion. “I love you, Avalynn. I promise you that is real.”

She issued a low cry and used the edge of the sheet to mop her tears.

“Let me get you some tissues.”

“No! Don’t go. Just hold me. Like this. I don’t want you to let me go for a very long time, Julius. I love you. Bodyguard or husband, it doesn’t matter.”

“I’m so damn sorry I let you down.”

She stilled. A heartbeat ticked by. “You what?”

“I let my ego get in the way. If I hadn’t been so damn driven to get that guy—”

She pressed her fingers against his lips, stopping him from going on. “I left the bus. That’s on me.”

He shook his head. “He tricked you with that text message. About that. Hold on a minute, baby. I’m going to give this to Jennings. He’s just outside the door. Don’t move.”

She nodded. He jumped out of the bed and strode to the door of the suite. He whipped it open. His brother was standing guard outside the door, legs braced and arms folded.

He turned. “What’s going on?”

“Take my phone. If you have to, give it to our brothers in the WEST Protection team to analyze how it was hacked by

that crazy guy so it never, ever happens again.”

“Christ, these guys are getting smarter and smarter.”
Jennings took the phone.

“Then we need to train harder.”

“A trip to the facility in Stone Pass, Montana is in our future, brother.”

He grunted. Then gave a slight smile. “It’s a good time to introduce the rest of my brothers and the WEST Protection team to my bride.”

* * * * *

Avalynn fiddled with the band on her left ring finger. The old-fashioned ring above her wedding band was one that she’d spent a lot of time staring at. The beauty of the setting was striking on its own, but knowing that it was a cherished heirloom from Julius’s family made it so much more beautiful in her eyes.

Now she was about to walk into a meeting with her manager, her PR team and her lawyer to discuss the marriage that they’d all agreed was the only way to save her career.

She stared at the antique diamond.

A fake marriage that might have kept her reputation from ruin, but what about her heart?

She faced the bedroom door. On the other side of it, everybody waited, including Julius.

What was he going to say about this meeting her manager had called?

She stroked her fingertip over the warm metal of the ring, then dropped her hand. Drawing a deep breath, she steeled herself and opened the door.

When she stepped into the main area of the suite, her gaze skimmed the group of familiar faces...and landed on one in particular.

Julius stared back at her, his shoulders squared. His chest moved on a deep inhalation she could only guess at the reason for. Either he was fortifying himself to follow along with what she knew her team had planned for her “best interests” or he would fight to keep her.

He broke eye contact. Gripping the chair, he pulled it away from the table for her.

Aware that everyone was staring at her, she glided to the seat. Julius slid it under her and then sat across from her.

The lawyer shuffled some papers. Heidi avoided Avalynn’s stare, and so did everyone else.

“Miss Ray,” her lawyer began, “we’re here today because the threat to you has been eliminated.”

Under the table, she meshed her fingers to keep them from trembling. She already disliked the path this meeting was taking.

“Specifically, we’re here to discuss the dissolution of your marriage to Julius Abel.”

Not a breath could be heard in the room. Nobody even twitched an eyelid.

She set her hands on the table. “You’re asking me to sign divorce papers.”

Julius bowed his head.

“If Mr. Abel desires a monetary settlement—”

He jerked his head up and cut off her lawyer. “Mr. Abel does not desire that.”

Her heart flipped over.

Catching Julius’s gaze, she searched his eyes for the truth of his feelings.

What she saw there gave her the push to speak.

“You gave me my dream wedding. My first best night of my life.”

A sigh rippled through her team.

She continued, “And a honeymoon that...” Their gazes clung.

After several heartbeats, he gave her a small nod.

He growled roughly. “I don’t know how to do it. I don’t know how to let you go. I’ve been living with you for six months. I don’t know how this will work, but—”

“I do.” She pushed away from the table, circled to where the lawyer sat and picked up the stack of papers. She tore them in half down the middle and then walked to the trash can and dropped the sheaf in.

By the time she turned around, Julius was there, scooping her into his arms, his mouth slamming over hers.

A cheer echoed in the room, but she was only aware of her husband’s kisses and the feel of his arms surrounding her.

When they broke away, he twisted his head to look at the team. “Everyone out. We are still on our honeymoon.”

She giggled as he whipped her into his arms and carried her the few steps over the threshold of the bedroom. He kicked the door closed and continued walking to the bed. When he lay her on the mattress, she hooked her thighs around his waist and dragged him down on top of her.

Need spiked inside her. Those fears of what she might face in that meeting fled, replaced by all the love she saw burning in Julius’s eyes.

Epilogue

“Look at them. All that muscle.” Avalynn stood back with Lark and Dove, watching their men training. The facility was operated by part of the WEST Protection team. After what happened to her, Julius demanded that they all take a trip to Montana every year for the training.

The team had been hard at work running drills for most of the afternoon, and Avalynn was glad for the fresh mountain air. It beat being cooped up indoors. While she appreciated the hospitality of the Wynton family so much, Mrs. Wynton liked to cook. And lately, food smells were bothering her.

She stared at Julius’s back as he launched himself over a wall. Her eyes blurred with the tears that were never far away right now. She knew why, of course. Had known for weeks. She just hadn’t broken the news to her husband for fear that if he knew she was carrying his child, he would never let her come with him on this trip. And there was no way she was being left out.

“Go, guys! Great job!” Lark cheered from beside her.

Dove and Avalynn joined in the applause as all three of their men finished the course and sauntered toward them, with Jennings bringing up the rear of the crew.

Dove rushed forward to throw her arms around Quaide. They’d recently married in a private ceremony and Quaide was still grumbling that he had to cut their honeymoon short for the training.

He wrapped his arms around his wife and lifted her off her feet. At that moment, Clay reached for Lark. She giggled and

wrapped her thighs around his hips. He kissed her laughing mouth.

Julius said something to Jennings and then bumped fists with his brother. When his stare centered on Avalynn, his eyes lit with all the love that had only built between them over the past year together.

“You did great.” She grinned at him.

He swept her into his arms but squeezed her a little too tight. Her stomach pitched.

“Uh...would you mind setting me down?”

He jolted, staring at her hard. “Why?”

“Just do it, Julius. Please.” Her stomach really was queasy all of a sudden. If she tossed her cookies, he’d have her in bed for a week.

“Avalynn—”

“Julius. Set the woman down! Can’t you see her turning green?” Dove asked.

His eyes flared wider and he gently set her down. She held on to his arm, steadying herself and breathing through the nausea.

“Oh my god. Why didn’t you say you were sick, honey? I would have taken you back to the Wyntons’.” He cupped her face.

She dragged in deep breath after deep breath until finally the cool breeze helped her out by forcing some of her nausea away.

His dark eyes loomed close. “Baby? You’re sick. You’re —”

She gripped his hand. “I’m not sick, Julius. I’m...” she moved his hand lower to her flat belly, “pregnant.”

His eyes flew wide. Gasps sounded from the group gathered around him.

“You’re pregnant, Avalynn? So am I!” Lark cried.

Clay just about hit his knees. “You’re what? Lark, why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“You’re both pregnant?” Dove piped up, a laugh in her tone.

Avalynn and Lark turned to her. Now Avalynn noticed the healthy glow in the woman’s face.

“I’m pregnant too,” Dove announced.

“No friggin’ way,” Quaide ground out. He covered her stomach with his big hand.

Avalynn exchanged a look with both ladies, whom she considered sisters. Then she gave Julius her sole attention.

He beamed at her, so much love and affection burning in his eyes. “I can’t believe it, honey. I can’t believe you’re making me a father.”

She spun her arms around his neck and went on tiptoe. As he nuzzled her, her nose filled with his masculine scent of citrus and grass, and her sickness fled as quick as it had come.

“So you’re happy?” she whispered to him.

“Happy? My god, honey. You’ve made me the luckiest, happiest man alive.” He brushed his lips across hers in a soft kiss full of emotion.

She kissed him back, feeling the first stirrings of the lust that had been tying her up in knots the entire time she watched her husband’s muscles flexing all over that training field.

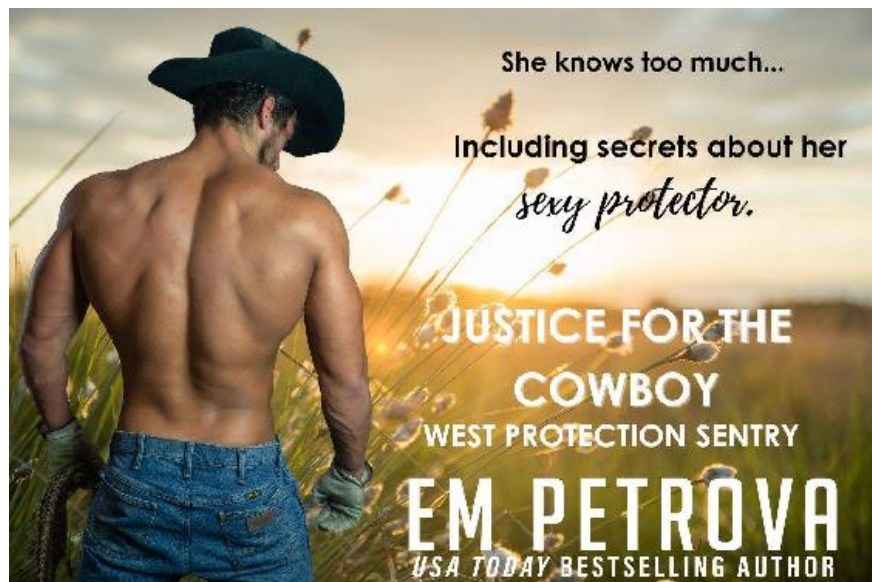
Sensing the change in her, and the way she rubbed against him, he pressed his palm to her lower spine—over *his* spot. “Hey, guys. Congratulations to all of you. We’d stick around, but I’m taking my wife back to the ranch and putting her in bed.”

“Putting her in bed or taking her to bed?” Jennings called out from several feet away where he stood toweling the sweat from his chest.

Julius threw her a wide grin. “Either way, the outcome is the same. Ready, honey?”

“Lead the way. I’ll follow you anywhere.” When their gazes met, she saw that future. The family, the loving husband. All they needed now was the picket fence.

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Em Petrova is a USA Today Bestselling Author who was raised by hippies in the wilds of Pennsylvania but told her parents at the age of four she wanted to be a gypsy when she grew up. She has a soft spot for babies, puppies and 90s Grunge music and believes in Bigfoot and aliens. She started writing at the age of twelve and prides herself on making her characters larger than life and her sex scenes hotter than hot.

She burst into the world of publishing in 2010 after having five beautiful bambinos and figuring they were old enough to get their own snacks while she pounds away at the keys. In her not-so-spare time, she is fur-mommy to a Labradoodle named Daisy Hasselhoff.

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