



Strawberry
SNOWFLAKES

L. ANN

strawberry snowflakes

A Forgotten Legacy Christmas Novella

forgotten legacy

book 6.5

L. Ann



STRAWBERRY SNOWFLAKES

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dedication

For Vikki. You know what you did.

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a note

It's been a while since we checked in with Forgotten Legacy, so I thought to myself ...

Self, maybe we should write a Christmas short. I haven't written one before. It could be fun, snappy, full of snark and a little Christmas gift for Forgotten Legacy fans.

Self (and Gabe) had other ideas, and what was supposed to be a 10,000 word short story became what you are holding in your hands .. an almost 30,000 word novella.

Welcome back to Forgotten Legacy.

Merry Christmas!

Lee Ann

chapter **one**

GABE

I WAS SPRAWLED OUT ON THE COUCH IN DAMNATION'S VIP room, with my feet propped up on the arm, rolling a Twizzler between my lips and pretending to listen to the discussion going on above my head.

"Will you stop eating those things?" The exasperated demand was followed by a hand sweeping into my line of sight and snatching the strawberry-flavored treat from my mouth. "You'll rot your teeth."

I squinted up at Seth. "Pickle my liver, barbeque my lungs, and now rot my teeth? You have an unhealthy obsession with my innards. My dental hygiene is just fine, thank you."

"What's got you so agitated, anyway?" He ignored my comments and strode around the couch. "Move your head."

I huffed, but lifted my head so he could sit, then dropped it back down to rest on his thigh, looked up, and blew him a kiss. He rolled his eyes at me, but didn't shove me off.

"I'm not agitated."

"Bullshit."

"I'm *not*. I was just thinking, that's all."

"About?" One dark eyebrow rose.

"Christmas."

"What about it?"

“This will be the first year we’re all in a good place. We need to mark the occasion.”

“You don’t celebrate Christmas.”

I rolled my head sideways, looking toward the window, and lifted a hand to scratch my jaw. “Yeah, well, maybe this year we should.”

Seth was silent for a moment, and then he nodded. “Okay, I’ll bite. What do you have in mind?”

“A Christmas party. Here in Damnation. We’ll do one for all the kids currently registered with the foundation during the day, then have one for the adults in the evening.”

“Two parties in one day?” I could hear his opinion of my idea in the tone of his voice.

I laughed. “Come on, Seth. It’ll be fun.”

“Fun ...”

I pushed up on one elbow, peering over the back of the couch to where Luca and Dex were watching something on a cell phone.

“Hey,” I raised my voice. “Christmas Parties at Damnation—yes or no?”

“Fuck, yeah,” Dex said.

Luca’s response was slightly more reserved. He gave a half-shrug. “Don’t see why not.”

I let my head drop back onto Seth’s thigh and smirked up at him. “See?”

He rolled his eyes. “Like it matters what anyone else thinks, anyway. You’ve decided you’re having a party, so we’re having a party. So, what do you have in mind?” He bounced his leg, jostling my head, when I didn’t reply.

“We need to go and buy a tree ... a *big* tree. And since we’ve got the Christmas season off from touring, I think it’s time we remind everyone who owns Damnation.”

“You want to do a Christmas gig?”

“Yeah, but not just us. I’ll see if Marley has any plans. If not, we can get Black Rosary to perform, and I’m sure Gage will bring Jaded Souls along. He’s in L.A. for Christmas this year.”

“You’ve really thought about this, huh?”

I smiled, eyes sliding closed again.

“Harper loves Christmas.” My voice was soft. “She would get crazy excited when she was a kid. Drove her mom insane. She’d turn the apartment upside down looking for gifts.” I chuckled. “She’s been trying really hard to act like it’s not a big deal, but I know her. She wants nothing more than to get covered in fucking glitter and tinsel.”

“Then I guess we need to add decorations to the shopping list as well as a tree.”

“*Two* trees. I need one for the house as well.” I fell silent when the door to the VIP room opened and female voices drifted inside, laughing and talking.

“I assume you want to surprise her?” Seth kept his voice low, and my lips twitched into a smile. “Alright. We’ll go tree hunting tomorrow.”

chapter two

HARPER

I DIDN'T SEE GABE WHEN WE FIRST ENTERED THE VIP ROOM at Damnation. I spotted Luca and Dex first as they both turned to watch Everleigh and Siobhan, then I saw Seth's dark head on the couch. He seemed to be talking to someone, so I assumed it was Gabe and moved across the room. When I rounded the couch and found him sprawled across Seth's lap, while the guitarist talked to him, I stifled a laugh.

It was no wonder there were so many fanfiction stories about the two of them being in a relationship. Anyone walking into this scene would have been forgiven for believing it. They looked ridiculously comfortable together, with Gabe's head resting on Seth's thigh as the singer of Forgotten Legacy laughed at something the guitarist said. There was the hint of a smile on Seth's lips as he looked down at Gabe, a brightness in his dark eyes as he listened to the other man talking.

"You two look comfortable." At my voice, two sets of eyes focused on me—one pair of almost-black and the other gray.

"Hey, Frosty." Gabe rolled off the couch and onto his feet. He waited for a moment, testing his leg to make sure it would take his weight, and then moved toward me. I stepped toward him and his arm wrapped around my waist. "Had a good day?"

I rose up on my toes to kiss him, and nodded. "We stopped for lunch at Charlie's." Before he could reply, I lifted up a paper bag. "She sent you this."

He took it from me and looked inside, a smile breaking out over his features. "Gingerbread cookies."

“Not just gingerbread. Take it out.”

He shot me a puzzled frown, but dug into the bag and pulled out one of the cookies. When he finally realized what it was, he laughed. “A Forgotten Legacy branded gingerbread cookie.”

“Cookies? She better have sent enough for all of us.” Dex called from across the room.

“She did. You might have to wrestle Gabe for them, though.”

“Naked,” Siobhan added. “You should definitely wrestle naked.”

The two men traded glances, and immediately reached for the back of their shirts.

“No!” I slapped one hand to Gabe’s chest. “No stripping in Damnation.” I threw a glare at Siobhan. “What are you *thinking?*”

She smirked. “I’m thinking about watching two hot men wrestling for our entertainment. Come on, Harp. You know you’d watch it. We could record it and post it on social media. Forgotten Legacy fans will love us for it.”

“I think Gabe’s been naked on social media enough times, don’t you?” I gave Gabe an arch look.

His chest moved under my palm with his soft laughter.

“Forgotten Legacy fans would disagree, Frosty. I’m pretty sure some of them are waiting to see *you* naked with me.”

“Never going to happen.”

He pulled me closer and lowered his head until his lips brushed against my ear. “Never say never,” he whispered. “I have a bucket list of things I want to do to you. We’re bound to get caught at some point.”

My cheeks turned so hot, I was surprised I didn’t burst into flames. His laughter was wicked in my ear.

“I think they called the wrong band member the devil.”

“Why do you think they call me the fallen angel? It’s not because I sit on a cloud playing a harp all day long.” His eyes danced as he looked down at me, that wicked grin firmly in place. “There is *something* I’d like to strum, though.”

Was it possible for my cheeks to get any hotter? I didn’t think I’d ever get used to the things Gabe said, in public or in private, or how they affected me.

“Okay. Stop.” I slapped my hand over his mouth, then snatched it back when he licked my palm.

Somewhere behind me Seth laughed. “Makes a change to see him licking *you* instead of me.”

“Oh, I lick her *all* the time.”

My eyes closed. “Oh my god.” The words were a fervent prayer for any deity watching to open the ground and swallow me whole.

chapter three

GABE

THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF PERKS WHEN YOU'RE A RICH ROCK star lusted after by thousands of people, but along with that fame comes some downsides. One of those downsides is that it's almost impossible to keep something secret, especially when it involves being outside.

Working out a way to go Christmas tree shopping with the rest of the band, while keeping it a secret from Harper was like arranging a covert military operation. So, like any good commander-in-chief, I delegated the task to Remy, and waited for him to come back to me with details.

I was sprawled out on a lounge beside the pool, watching Harper swim laps, when he came out of the house. He cast a glance at Harper, then jerked his chin at me, and walked back inside.

"Frosty, I'm going to grab a drink. Do you want anything?"

"No, thank you. But could you order food? I'm starving."

I stood and walked to the edge of the pool. "Sure, I can do that. Anything in particular?"

"I'd say surprise me, but we both know what you'd do."

I didn't crack a smile. "I have no idea what you mean." My tone was lofty.

She snorted. "Of course you don't. Can you see if Tallorico's would deliver? I have a hankering for their ravioli."

“A hankering, huh?”

She splashed water at me. “Just ask them.”

“Whatever my queen desires.” I gave her a flourishing bow, blew her a kiss, and turned and went inside.

Remy was leaning against the kitchen table, and straightened when I walked through the doors.

“I’ve found a place that sells trees and is willing to open early for you guys to go and pick one out. You’ll need to be there at five a.m. Instead of having to disturb everyone, I said I’d drive. So, I’ll pick you up at four, then we’ll drive around and get the rest of the band. Everleigh is going to text the girls and ask them to help out at the store tomorrow. Diesel will collect them all and take them to her. Her excuse is that she needs help decorating the store for Christmas, so none of them will argue. That gets Harper out of the house for the entire day, and you can have the tree in place before she comes home. Once you’ve picked the tree, Ryder and Carter will arrange delivery, and we’ll move on to find decorations.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I crossed to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of lemonade. “We also need to go shopping for gifts.”

“I thought you’d do that online.”

Twisting the cap off the bottle, I turned to smile at him. “Usually, I would, but this is a special occasion. I don’t *do* Christmas, Remy. I fucking hate this time of year, but if I’m going to give Harper a tree, then I need to go all the way. Buying her gifts online doesn’t have a personal touch to it.”

“Do you know what you want to get her?”

“Yeah, I do. It should be easy enough to arrange. The hard part will be keeping everyone quiet about it. But there’s something else I need you to do for me.”

“Oh?”

I walked back to the doors and checked outside. There was no sign of Harper, but the door to the pool house on the opposite side was open.

“I need you to find out who lives there.” I took one of the many notebooks scattered around the house from the countertop and scribbled down an address.

He looked down at it. “That’s not an L.A. address.”

“I know.”

“Who do you *think* lives there?”

“Someone I need to speak to. But you know I can’t just turn up. It would become a media circus ... and I don’t want to scare them into hiding ... or a heart attack.”

“I can send someone. I have family out that way.”

I shook my head. “Get me confirmation of who lives there first, *then* we’ll decide on the next step.”

“You’re being very secretive, Gabe. I don’t like it. When you do things without talking about them first, you have a tendency to fuck up.”

“I appreciate your faith in me.” My voice was dry. “But that’s exactly why I want to confirm who lives there before I do anything else. Find that out, and then I’ll explain.”

chapter four

HARPER

AS SOON AS GABE DISAPPEARED FROM VIEW, I CLIMBED OUT of the pool, grabbed a towel and my cell from the lounge and rounded the pool to the pool house on the opposite side. I needed to make a call, but I didn't want Gabe to overhear me.

Seth picked up on the second ring.

“Got rid of him, did you?”

I laughed. “He’s talking to Remy. He *thinks* he’s being all sneaky. Remy should keep him busy for a little while. How did you get him to agree?”

“I didn’t. I let *him* convince *me*.”

“He thinks having a Christmas party is *his* idea?” I covered my mouth with my hand so I didn’t laugh out loud.

“That’s right.”

“That’s hilarious. How did you do it?”

“Dropped the odd comment here and there and let it simmer in his mind for a week or two. You know you could have just asked him, and he’d have done it for you, don’t you?”

“I know, but he wouldn’t have enjoyed it. You know how Gabe feels about Christmas and his birthday.”

“Well, now we have Christmas green-lit. What are you doing about his birthday?”

Butterflies took off inside my stomach. “I’m going to do something so that he will never think about his birthday without smiling ever again.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Yes, because I need your help to make it happen.”

“We’re not having a threesome, Harper.”

“Ew, gross. No. Why would you even say that?”

His laughter sounded down the line. “Aren’t you the one always reminding me about the fanfiction written about us?”

“I don’t want to re-enact it, Seth!”

“Then what did you have in mind?”

I stuck my head out of the door to check and check whether Gabe was there. The pool area was still empty.

“This is my plan ...”

chapter five

GABE

I WAS AWAKE, DRESSED, AND READY TO GO WHEN REMY CAME into the kitchen. A lifetime of insomnia meant Harper wouldn't question why I wasn't in bed if she woke up, and I planned to leave a note explaining I'd gone to meet up with Seth.

I was sipping coffee out of a travel mug when my bodyguard walked through the door. His gaze landed on the mug and he smiled.

"I think my favorite thing about you is the fact I don't have to drag your ass out of bed to get you to places on time."

"What's your least favorite?"

He snorted. "Like I'm going to tell you that so you can do it all the more."

I laughed. "You know me so well. Let's go."

"Wait a minute. I have that information you wanted." He held out a manila envelope.

I stared at it but made no move to take it from him. Instead, my leg started to bounce up and down beneath the table.

"You're sure you want to commit to this?"

"Contrary to what's reported often in the news, I'm not afraid of commitment these days. And it's just a tree. Not like I can't just burn it, if it starts to annoy me."

"That's *not* what I'm talking about."

“I know.” I didn’t want to say anything more in the house, in case Harper overheard. I was pretty confident she was still asleep, but sound traveled in the early hours of the morning.

He stared at me for a second longer, then nodded. “Alright. Then are you going to take it off me?”

I snatched the envelope out of his hand, and ripped it open. The contents caused my heart to skip a beat. I lifted my gaze to meet Remy’s.

“You’re sure?”

“As sure as I can be without actually turning up and verifying the information directly.”

I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth and chewed on it.

“Here.” Remy handed me a Twizzler. “Your record label might complain if you gnaw through your lip.”

I stared at it for a second, then nodded. “Let’s go and collect the rest of the band and get this day started. Can you keep hold of this?” I handed the envelope back to him, and we walked out of the house.

Seth’s place was our first stop. He was sitting on the edge of the fountain when we pulled up. He stood up and walked toward the car, and I leaned across to open the door.

“Looks good.” I nodded toward the fountain.

“It’s not quite finished yet. Eli said it’ll be a couple of days, and then I can get the plumbing finished.”

We both looked at it. The design was very clearly an Eli Travers creation—a demon, wings arching up over his head, with a woman standing in front of him, his clawed hand resting on her stomach as they both stared out toward the gates at the end of the drive.

“Eli’s still in town?”

Seth nodded. “They’re spending Christmas in L.A. with friends this year.”

“We’ll have to drag him to Damnation’s parties. Arabella can bring the twins to the kids one, then hopefully they can find a sitter and come to the adult one.”

“I’ll speak to him when he gets here tomorrow.” He climbed into the car, and settled on the seat beside me. “Who are we picking up next?”

“Remy?” I raised my voice. “Where are we heading now?”

“Dex.” He drove in a circle around the fountain, down the drive and out through the electric gates.

“Riley thinks you should let Harper decorate your tree instead of having it all done before she gets home.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Apparently, she thinks you’ll earn way more brownie points that way.”

I thought back to when we were kids, the joy on Harper’s face as she decorated the tiny tree her mom had in the apartment, and gave a slow nod.

“She might be onto something actually. Okay, slightly new plan. Pick up the tree, decorations, and gifts. Decorate the house, but leave the tree for Harper.” I nodded again. “Yeah, I like that idea. I’ll order food, all her favorites, and we can make a night of it.”

Seth laughed softly. “And so the grinch became a fan of Christmas.”

“Hey.” I punched his arm. “I’m not a grinch.”

“No fighting in my car.” Remy’s voice stopped Seth from replying.

I caught Seth’s eye, and we both grinned.

“Sorry, Dad,” we said together.

chapter **six**

HARPER

I WOKE UP ALONE. NOT AN UNUSUAL OCCURRENCE. LIVING with Gabe opened my eyes to how deeply ingrained his childhood trauma was in almost everything he did. I'd always known about his sleeping habits, but actually living with it on a day-to-day basis really brought home how all those years of light sleeping in case his dad came home drunk had defined his sleeping habits. He could go days without sleeping at all, and then crash for almost twenty-four hours, and used to do that *all* the time. Now, after almost a year of being in therapy, he had learned to snatch an hour's sleep whenever it was quiet. Thankfully, it seemed to work for him.

So waking up in our bed and him not being there didn't surprise me. What *did* surprise me was the single red rose on the pillow, and a folded note with my name scrawled across the front in Gabe's big, bold handwriting.

Frosty,

I'm out with Seth and the guys for a few hours. I'll pick you up from Chapter & Verse later. I have my cell with me if you can't get through the day without hearing my voice ;)

Gabe

I laughed quietly at that last line, and scooped up my cell to check the time. Eight-thirty. Depending on what time he crept out, I doubted I'd get to nine before he called me. My cell lit up as the thought entered my head, and Gabe's face flashed up onto the screen. Smiling, I connected the call.

"Hey."

"Hey, Frosty." That raspy voice brought my nerve endings to life, the way it always did.

I rolled onto my side, wedging the phone between the pillow and my ear. "Where did you go?"

"I'm with the band. Are you still in bed?" His voice dropped. "What are you wearing?"

I laughed. "You *know* what I'm wearing."

"Hmmm. If I video-called you, do you want to—"

"No, I do *not*. I can hear people around you."

"You're no fun, Harper."

"That's not what you were saying last night."

"You know a man will say anything to get laid."

"Oh, I see. I'll remember that the next time you come at me with that dirty mouth of yours."

He chuckled, the sound skittering over my skin. "Are you still meeting the girls today?"

"Yeah. Siobhan is coming over at ten. Riley should already be at the store with Everleigh."

"Luca thinks she's determined to have the babies in the bookstore."

"That wouldn't surprise me. What time did you leave?"

"Early. You were snoring, so I didn't wake you."

"I was *not* snoring!"

"How would you know? You were asleep." Someone shouted Gabe's name in the background.

"Who was that?"

“Seth. Or maybe Luca. Probably both. I’m supposed to be helping instead of talking to you.”

“Helping with what?”

“I better go before a fight breaks out. Love you, Frosty.”

“Gabe, wait. Helping with *what?*”

He cut the call.

“Asshole.”

chapter

seven

GABE

I SHOVED MY CELL INTO THE BACK POCKET OF MY JEANS AND turned back just in time to see Luca aim a punch at Dex's head. Our bass player ducked, laughing, and danced back a step.

"Now, now. You don't take a swing for your best friend."

Luca took a step toward him, and Dex backed away, hands held up in front of him. "You need more sleep. You're getting irritable way quicker than you usually do."

"Isn't it supposed to be me he's punching?" I stepped between them, and faced Dex. "What did you do?"

"*Nothing!*"

"Fuck you." Luca's hand hit my shoulder and he shoved me out of his way.

I spun to look at him. "From the look on your face, he did something."

He glared at me, then sighed, rubbing a hand down his face. "No, not really. I'm just tired. Ever isn't sleeping well."

I laughed. "So, therefore, *you're* not sleeping well either."

He shrugged. "Every time one of the babies kicks, she jabs me in the ribs. I swear, being pregnant has made her violent as fuck."

"And I'm sure you don't love that." I arched an eyebrow.

His laugh sounded a little begrudging. “I mean, I’m *not* complaining.”

“Sounds like you are to me.”

“I’ll just be glad when the babies are here, and I can take some of the pressure off her.”

I reached out and ruffled his hair. “Awww, who knew the big bad Luca Tallorico would be such a soft touch?”

His eyes narrowed. “Fuck you, Mercer.”

I laughed, then threw one arm across his shoulders. “Let’s go make sure Dex and Seth don’t ruin the tree.”

We walked back to the corner of the dance floor, to the left of the stage where the tree had been delivered.

Seth was up on a ladder, fixing lights to the top half of the nine foot high tree. Dex was kneeling in front of it, fiddling with a train track. We saw it while we were shopping—a Christmas themed steam engine and enough track to go around the base of the tree.

“Can’t we just pay someone to decorate it?” I asked.

Three sets of eyes glared at me.

“What?”

“Part of the fun of Christmas is decorating the tree.” Seth was the one to reply ... through gritted teeth.

“You don’t *sound* like you’re having fun.”

“Maybe if *someone* helped instead of just standing there?”

“I *am* helping.”

“*How?*” Dex joined the conversation. “You’re just fucking standing there.”

I grinned. “I’m coordinating, and ...” I pull out my cell. “I need to make calls to get the bands lined up for the Christmas gig.”

“So, you’re not helping with the tree?”

“Fuck no. I bought the fucking thing. I said I’d celebrate Christmas this year, I didn’t say I’d do the decorating.”

I skirted around the back of the tree and walked up the steps leading onto the stage. “Do we want to make the stage more Christmassy? We could probably fit a garland across the front. Maybe work out some Christmas scene for the screen at the back? I can—” The cell in my hand started to ring, cutting me off. “Hey, Marley. What are you doing on the day before Christmas Eve?”

“I don’t think I have any plans. Why?”

“We’re doing an impromptu gig at Damnation. I thought you and Jaded Souls might like to come along.”

“Let me check NFG’s schedule for Black Rosary and Jaded Souls. Give me a minute.”

There’s a short silence, and then he was back. “Looks like we’re clear. Have you spoken to Gage yet?”

“No, but I’m confident he won’t say no. He loves to perform as much as I do.”

“Why are you putting on a Christmas gig? I thought you didn’t like Christmas.”

“I don’t. Bah Humbug, and all that. But I think it’d be good for the club, for the band, *and* it’ll make Harper happy.”

“You’re not making her happy already? Shame on you.”

I laughed. “That’s not what I mean. She’s happy, but she’s a Christmas junkie. And she’s put up with all my shit and bad behavior. She knows how I feel about Christmas, and hasn’t complained about it ... but she *loves* Christmas, and *I* love seeing her smile.” I cringed at how pathetic I sounded, and waited for Marley to laugh.

He didn’t. “You’re a good man, Gabe. A little fucked up sometimes, but good. We’ll be there. Send me the details. I might try and convince Rain to get up on stage with us.”

“She still stage shy?”

“A little bit, but we’re working on it. I better go. I’m driving and had to pull over to take your call.”

“No problem. Catch you later, and thanks.”

I ended the call. “We have Black Rosary signed up.”

Acknowledgment in various forms was thrown back at me from the rest of the band. I hopped down off the stage and walked over to look at the tree.

“The star on the top is wonky.” I danced back a step, and ducked Seth’s incoming punch. “What? I’m just saying.”

“If you think you can do better, get up there and do it yourself.”

“Man, you’re so irritable. What’s wrong with you?”

“You. You’re what’s wrong with me.”

I laughed. “I love you, too. But seriously, fix the star. I’m going to call Gage.”

chapter eight

HARPER

CHAPTER AND VERSE, EVERLEIGH'S BOOKSTORE, HAD A HUGE Christmas tree just inside the entrance. It wasn't decorated, other than a silver star at the top, but there were boxes at the base, with tinsel, garlands, and baubles clearly visible.

"I know what we're doing today." Siobhan nudged one of the boxes with her foot.

I grinned. "It'll be fun."

"Siobhan? Harper?" Everleigh called from further inside. "Is that you?"

We traded smiles and walked through the store. Everleigh was seated on one of the corner couches, while Riley stood behind the counter. Customers wandered between the shelves, and Christmas music played softly over the speakers. Movement near the back of the store caught my eye, and I turned my head just in time to see Ryder come out of the store room.

"Not with Luca today?"

He tossed me a smile on his way to the coffee machine in the corner. "Rowan had to be somewhere for a family thing, so Luca asked me to be store security today. He has the rest of the team around him while he's with the band."

Everleigh snorted. "Store security."

Ryder's gaze moved to the heavily pregnant blonde. "Am I not keeping shoplifters away?"

“If you had your way, you’d keep paying customers away.” She poked her tongue out at the burly bodyguard.

“It’s easier to keep you safe that way.”

“Like I said ... *store* security, my ass.”

“As you can see, she’s a little grumpy right now.” Ryder ignored her comments and turned his attention back to me.

“You try being the size of a small elephant for an eternity and see what your mood is like.”

I covered my mouth to hide my laugh. Siobhan wasn’t so subtle. She sat beside Everleigh and leaned down until she was close to her stomach.

“Your mom is tired of waiting for you guys. And she’s starting to scare us. So, maybe you should be Christmas babies instead of New Year ones?”

“Do *not* give them ideas.” Everleigh swatted Siobhan away, then laughed. “Oh my god, could you imagine? I can’t wait to not be pregnant anymore, but Christmas day would be the *worst* timing.”

“Or the best.” Riley said from her position at the counter. “Everyone will be there, so you’d be whisked to the hospital with everything you need, and no worries about Luca forgetting everything in his panic.”

“Luca panic? Have you *met* him? Nothing rattles him.”

Riley smiled. “I think you’re in for a shock. I will bet you *money* that he falls apart the second you tell him the babies are on their way.”

“How do you think Seth would react if it was you?”

Riley shuddered, then laughed. “I don’t even want to imagine being pregnant.”

“No? Don’t you and Seth want kids?” A couple of years ago, asking that question would have killed me. Now, I’m just genuinely curious. I made my peace with not being able to get pregnant, and no longer saw it as the end of my world. There were options, if we wanted to do something about it. Options

that I never really considered back when I was in the depths of depression and despair.

“It’s not something we’ve really talked about, but right now I feel confident in saying it’s not on the short-term plan.” Riley’s voice was serious. “Seth definitely isn’t ready, and I don’t want kids right now.”

“What about you?” I looked at Siobhan.

“Oh, absolutely not! Me and Dex are content to be the favorite aunt and uncle. We’ll stuff them full of candy, and send them back home with naughty ideas to drive you crazy.”

I turned to look at Everleigh. “Looks like your twins are going to be the focus of everyone’s attention for a while. At least it means you have lots of willing babysitters for when you want to escape and remember what it was like before you had kids.”

She laughed, then glared at Ryder. “*If* I’m ever allowed to go outside again, anyway.”

Ryder took a sip of coffee, and eyed her over the rim of the mug. “You can go outside. You just have to tell us where you want to go, so we can make arrangements.”

I knew enough about Forgotten Legacy’s bodyguards to pick up on the nuances of their words. I frowned at Ryder, whose expression didn’t change. Had there been some kind of threat to Everleigh? I made a mental note to ask Gabe about it when we were back home.

“Why don’t we go and decorate the tree?” I changed the subject. “We don’t have one at our house.”

I could have told Gabe I wanted one, but I didn’t want to make him uncomfortable where he lived. It was a miracle that Seth managed to get him to agree to a Christmas party at Damnation. That, and decorating Everleigh’s tree would be enough for me. Plus, with Gabe’s birthday only days away and my plans for it, I had other things to think about.

I walked back to the tree and kneeled down to open the box and look inside. A decoration caught my eye and I lifted it out.

“Where did you get this made?”

“Which one? Oh, *that*.” Everleigh laughed. “I found a place online, sent them photographs and they made them.”

“They’re amazing. You got the entire band?”

“I did! I put Gabe in a Santa hat.”

My entire body shook with my laughter. “He’s going to lose his shit over that.”

“I know.” Everleigh sounded smug.

I *loved* the friendship Gabe and Everleigh had built between them. She’d been there to help him when I left, and I was thankful ... *so very thankful* ... for that. She wasn’t afraid to call him out on his shit, and in return he teased and tormented her the way I always imagined he’d do with a younger sibling. I’d been asked, more than once, if I was concerned by their relationship. So had Luca. We both reacted the same way. With laughter. Neither of us were concerned that Gabe and Everleigh were anything more than friends, even though the media tried to insinuate otherwise.

And speaking of younger siblings ... I took out my cell and called Tate.

“Hey, Harper. Yes, it’s done. No, I didn’t forget. Yes, we’ll all be there. Stop bugging me.” The amusement in his voice was clear.

“I’m *not* bugging you.”

“Harper, you’ve called me *six* times over the past twenty-four hours. I’m pretty sure that counts as bugging. I’ve got this.”

“I just want it to be perfect.”

“It will be ... *if* you stop bugging me. Now go away, I’m busy.”

“You’re as much of an asshole as your brother.”

He laughed. “I love you too, big sister. Now fuck off.” He hung up on me.

I shook my head.

“He’s right, though, you know.” Siobhan said from behind me.

“You could hear him?”

“Tate isn’t quiet. But you do need to calm down a little. Everything is going to be fine.”

chapter **nine**

GABE

“WHAT DO YOU THINK?”

I looked up from the guitar I was strumming at Seth’s question. “About what?”

“The tree, asshole.”

“Oh.” I shifted my gaze from him to the Christmas tree behind him. “Very ... sparkly.”

He sighed. “You better sound more enthusiastic when you present Harper with the tree at home.”

“Harper won’t give a fuck. She’ll dive into the glitter and won’t resurface for days.”

“For someone so attuned to everything concerning the woman he loves, you are a dumb fuck.”

“Wow. That’s just rude.”

“What’s rude is you deciding to do the Christmas thing, and then sitting your ass down and watching while *we* do all the work.”

I waved a hand toward the tree. “But look at what a good job you did with it. I’d have just been in the way.” I smirked at the dark look on his face. “What? You don’t think you did a good job?”

“Remind me again why I didn’t kill you years ago?”

“Because you love me, Seth.” I stretched my legs out in front of me and grinned at him. “And you like making me

happy.”

“You’re such a fucking asshole.”

I blew him a kiss. “I love you, too.”

The screen on my cell lit up, a second before it started to ring. I connected the call.

“Remy.”

“Why can’t you answer a call like any normal person with *hello*?”

I sighed. “Is it pick on Gabe day or something today? I’m sorry. Call me back and I’ll do better.” I cut the call. It immediately began to ring again. Laughing at Seth’s eye roll, I reconnected it. “*Hello*. Gabriel *fucking* Mercer speaking. How may I direct your call?”

“One day I’m going to quit, you know.”

“No, you won’t. You love me almost as much as Seth does.”

The man in question shook his head and turned away.

“You seem *extra* rock star today. Don’t bother trying to explain. I don’t need to know the reasons why. I’ll be at Damnation in fifteen minutes. I have everything you need, but we need to go tomorrow. Have you figured out how you’re going to make that happen without raising questions?”

“No fucking idea.” I smiled. “But I have some fantastic distraction methods at my disposal.”

“I don’t want to know about those either. What time are we picking Harper up?”

“We need to go back to the house and decorate the hall, then we can pick her up and present her with her tree. After that, I’ll work on those distraction techniques.”

“I told you, I don’t need to know about those.” Remy’s voice was dry.

I laughed. “I know you’re curious really.”

“Don’t forget she has a tree to decorate.”

“That won’t take her long.”

“Might take her three hours just to get over the shock of you putting a tree up.”

“Why is everyone being so mean to me today?”

“We don’t have enough time to list the reasons.”

I snorted. “You might not have to quit, I might just fire you for being disrespectful.”

“Never going to happen. You’d be lost ... or dead ... without me.”

“Alright, you make a good point. Did you pick up everything else I need?”

“Of course I did. I should remind you that I’m your bodyguard, not your shopping assistant, though.”

“Noted. How far away are you now?”

“Shouldn’t be more than ten minutes.”

“Excellent. The rest of the band are bullying me, so I need protection.” I ended the call.

“Are you fucking high or something?” Seth’s voice came from my left.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’re very ...” He blew out a breath. “I don’t even fucking know. I can’t deal with you while you’re in this weird mood.”

“I’m not in a weird mood.”

“You’re definitely in a weird mood.” Dex added his unwanted opinion.

I glared at him, then swung around to look at Luca. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re always in a fucking weird mood, but you’re definitely far too happy right now. You’re never this happy at this time of year.”

chapter ten

HARPER

“HAND ME THE STAR.” I KEPT ONE HAND ON THE LADDER, AND held out my other for the tree topper. “Tell me if it’s crooked.” I set it on top of the tree, and waited.

“It looks beautiful.” Everleigh is the first one to speak.

“It really does. You have a talent for tree decorating.” Riley lowered her camera and grinned at me. She’d been taking photographs of us all the entire day.

“When I was a kid, the apartment we lived in was so tiny. We only had a little tree. I remember being able to reach the top even when I was little, so it can’t have been more than three feet high. Mom always insisted we had to wait until twelve days before Christmas. It couldn’t go up any time before that. As soon as December arrived, I’d count down the days until she’d get it out of the closet.” I smiled at the memory. “We didn’t have a lot of money, but Mom always managed to get *something* I wanted, and every Christmas morning, I’d creep into the living room in the hopes of catching Santa.”

“Unfortunately for Harper ...” Warm hands curved over my hips and pulled me back against a solid chest. “Instead of Santa, she caught Krampus.” Lips pressed a kiss to my throat. I turned and Gabe looped his arms around my waist, smiling down at me. “You have glitter in your hair.”

I leaned against him, and lifted a hand to run it through *his* hair. “So do you. What have you been doing?”

His head tilted, and he ran his tongue over his bottom lip. “Would you believe me if I said I’ve been working hard?”

Someone snorted behind me. Gabe rolled his eyes. “Don’t listen to them.” Taking a step back, he dropped his arms, then took my hand. “I want to talk to you.” He led me to the little office set back behind the counter.

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Nothing is wrong.” Closing the door, he turned to face me.

“Gabe.” Concern filled my voice. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

He crossed the room and palmed my cheeks. “Absolutely nothing, and I’m fine. Why does everyone keep asking that? Stop worrying.”

“You’re acting very strange.”

He perched on the edge of the desk, and grinned at me. “We’re having a Christmas party at Damnation.”

“We ... are?”

He laughed. “You’re so fucking bad at lying. I know you know, Harper.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Frosty, don’t even bother. You and Seth have been about as subtle as a fucking sledgehammer to the side of my head with your hints about Christmas.”

My cheeks heated up. “I just—”

He covered my mouth with his hand. Unlike him, I *didn’t* lick his palm.

“Don’t apologize.” His voice was soft. “Baby, I know how much you love Christmas, and you shouldn’t miss out on that because I’m an asshole.”

My protest was muffled.

“You’re not really going to stand there and deny I’m an asshole, are you?” He lowered his hand. “I know you love me,

Frosty, but you're not blind."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Get to the point."

He hooked an arm around my waist and drew me forward to stand between his legs. "So, Damnation Christmas parties. The first one will start at ten in the morning, and—"

"*Two parties?*"

He slanted a laughing glance at me. "For the kids from the foundation."

My eyes widened. "You're having a Christmas party for the kids?"

"If you'd let me talk without interrupting, you'd have all the details by now."

"Continue!" I pressed my lips together.

"As I was saying, while the guys decorated Damnation with all the Christmassy shit you love, I was busy arranging other things. The kids party will run from ten until two. I have Santa coming with gifts, Charlie is organizing the food, and Ray," he mentioned one of the club's doormen, "has offered to be the sacrificial DJ to the over-excited kids."

I bit my lip. He arched an eyebrow at me, daring me to speak. I shook my head.

"Good girl." He smirked. My eyes narrowed. "Once their party is over, the clean-up crew will descend and perform their magic, then we're having a private invitation-only party for the adults in the evening. There will be live music." His grin broadened. "Black Rosary. Jaded Souls. And, of course, yours truly."

I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him.

chapter eleven

GABE

“I SWEAR, IF THIS IS SOME WEIRD SEX GAME YOU’VE DECIDED you want to try, I’m going to kill you.”

Harper’s hand lifted to the blindfold covering her eyes for the tenth time since climbing out of the car.

“It’s not a sex game. Although ...” I injected a thoughtful note to my voice.

“Right. That’s it. I’m taking the blindfold off.”

I trapped her fingers with mine and pulled them away from her face. “Frosty, *trust* me.”

“You *say* trust you, but I *know* you.”

“We’re almost there.” I kept hold of her hand and walked backward toward the front door of our house. “Okay, up two steps.”

“Are we at home?”

“Maybe. Stay there, while I open the door.” I groped for the door handle behind me, and it swung open silently. Reaching for her hand again, I guided her forward. “Okay. Stop there.”

I took the opportunity to look at her while she couldn’t see me. Her lavender hair was coming out of the high ponytail she’d worn it in, and it sparkled under the light from stray glitter fragments. I couldn’t stop a smile. She was so fucking beautiful.

Crossing the floor, I crouched, picked up a long silver garland, and walked back to her. Draping it around her neck, I untied the blindfold, tugged the black fabric away from her eyes, then stepped to one side, so she could see the ten foot tree, and Christmas decorations spilling out of boxes in front of it. I kept my gaze trained on her face.

She frowned, blinking at the sudden change from dark to light, and the moment what she was seeing finally registered was clear on her features. Those gorgeous eyes of hers rounded, her bottom lip dropped, and she stopped breathing.

Moving so I could stand behind her, I ran my fingers lightly down her arm, and rested my chin on the top of her head.

“Merry Christmas, Frosty.”

“Gabe.” Her voice was choked.

I lowered my head to press a kiss to her hair. “Do you remember the first Christmas after we met?” I didn’t wait for her to reply. “You’d lived in our apartment block for four months.” I slid my arm around her waist and pulled her back against me. “Your mom was working a late shift and asked if I’d stay with you until she got home. We sat and watched ‘It’s A Wonderful Life.’ After it ended, you hopped off the couch and ran over to the tree in the corner and took the little bell ornament off it.”

“Gabe.” There was a tremble to her voice.

“Shhh.” I rubbed my cheek against her hair. “You looked so serious, with that shitty little bell from the Dollar Store clutched in your fingers. You brought it back to me and held it out. Do you remember what you said to me?”

Harper spun around and buried her face against my chest, her shoulders shaking. She wrapped her arms around my waist. I stroked a hand up her spine.

“Do you remember, Harper?” My voice was soft.

When she lifted her head, her eyes were shining and her cheeks were wet with tears. “I told you that ...” She paused to

sniff, then started again. “I told you that all angels deserved to get their wings, and if you rang the bell, you’d get yours.”

I wiped her tears away with my thumb. “Don’t cry, Frosty.” Tipping her chin up, I brushed my lips over hers. “I got my wings, baby. You made sure of that. They’re just a little on the dark side.” I kissed a path to her ear. “And that’s just the way you like me,” I whispered.

Her laugh was tearful. Stepping back, I placed my hands on her shoulders and turned her back to face the tree.

“Go on, then. Get to work, Ms. Jackson.” I gave her ass a gentle slap. “Also, you should check out the little purple box first.”

I followed her across the floor and watched as she dropped to her knees in front of the boxes.

“I wasn’t sure what you’d prefer so I ...” I shrugged. “I just bought some of everything.” I toed the small purple box closer to her. “That one first, though.”

She picked up the little box, and plucked at the velvet ribbon around it. It fell free. I propped one shoulder against the wall, and waited while she carefully peeled back the tape holding it closed, and lifted the lid.

Her brows drew together, bottom lip caught between her teeth as she carefully eased out the little velvet bag inside.

“What is it?” She glanced up at me.

I shrugged. “Open it.”

Pulling the drawstring, the bag opened. She tipped it up and emptied the contents onto her palm.

Her sharp intake of breath told me that she recognized what she was holding.

“Gabe .. How ... where ... I don’t ...” She stammered to a stop and stared at me.

“You know, everyone thinks I hate Christmas because of my da.” I reached down and took the cheap and worn silver bell from her, and gave it a little shake. “But that’s not the

reason.” Lowering myself to my knees in front of her, I brushed my knuckles down her cheek. “The reason I hated Christmas, Harper, is because you weren’t fucking there.”

chapter twelve

HARPER

FOR ONCE GABE WAS IN BED WHEN I WOKE UP. SPRAWLED ON his back, the sheets twisted around his hips, his eyes were closed and his breathing was regular and even. I propped myself up on one elbow and stared at him. I was ninety-nine percent sure he was asleep, but with Gabe it was hard to tell sometimes.

For the past three days, Seth, me, and Remy had kept him on the go, in an attempt to exhaust him to the point he'd actually sleep. From the way he didn't stir the entire time I looked at him, I thought it was safe to assume our plan had worked.

Carefully I reached for my cell. Six a.m. I had three hours before the day's events *really* began.

I smiled. Time to wake up the birthday boy with his first gift.

Sliding down the bed, keeping a cautious eye on my sleeping rock star, I eased the sheets down his body, baring inch after inch of tattooed skin. I licked my lips. I never tired of looking at him, at his tattoos, at the scar from the almost fatal accident that ended up with him breaking his femur.

I ran my finger lightly over the scar. The surgeon had done a great job of lining the tattoo back up, but I knew it bugged Gabe that there was a break in it. I pressed a kiss to it, and wrapped my fingers around his semi-hard dick.

A sleepy groan escaped him. I held still, eyes on his face, but his lids didn't open. I waited for a second longer, and when he didn't move, I gave his dick a long, slow, stroke, then slid my mouth over the tip.

"Fuck." A hand tangled in my hair as I bobbed my head up and down, taking him as deep as I could before dragging my lips back up to the top and swirling my tongue around him before swallowing him down again.

"Jesus ..." His hips jerked when I pulled my mouth free and lapped a circle around the tip.

Using the flat of my tongue, I licked a path down one side and then back up the other. The fingers in my hair clenched, and a delicious sting of pleasure danced across my nerve endings.

"Harper ..."

I ignored the rough demand in his voice, and kissed the tip of his dick, lifting my lids so I could meet his gaze. His eyes were dark, lids at half-mast as he stared down his body at me, and I slowly opened my mouth, pressed my tongue against his hard length and lowered my head until he hit the back of my throat.

"Fuck. Harper. You need to stop. Come up here. Let me ... Jesus ... Fuck ... *Fuck.*" I reached down between his legs to cup, stroke, and squeeze his balls gently.

His grip on my hair tightened, but he didn't pull me off and I sucked and licked, squeezed and stroked, until his breathing became harsh, and curses spilled from his mouth ... and then he was coming, and I *still* didn't pull away.

His cum hit my tongue, a mixture of sweet and salty, and I could almost imagine the slightest hint of strawberries. The thought made me giggle, and I hiccuped, swallowed, and hiccuped again.

Gabe laughed, the sound low and husky, and I eased his dick from my lips carefully, and looked up at him.

"Did you just nearly choke to death on my cum?"

I crawled up his body, and nuzzled my lips against his throat. “Maybe.”

“What were you thinking about?” Callused fingertips stroked circles over my ass.

“How your cum tastes like strawberries.”

He laughed again, and rolled, tumbling me to the mattress and pinning me beneath him. His head lowered, and he kissed his way along my jaw, over my cheek, and stopped by my ear.

“Harper and strawberries ... my favorite thing to eat.” He nipped my lobe, sending a shot of pleasure through me, and I was all ready to wrap my legs around his waist and beg him to fuck me, when the doorbell rang.

“Ignore it.” Gabe’s fingers stroked down my body.

I threaded my fingers through his hair, and tugged his head up. “We can’t.”

“Why not?” He stroked a circle around my nipple. “We could stay here. No one will even know we’re home.”

My head fell back against the pillows, and I sighed. “Unfortunately, they do. You should go and answer the door.”

“Remy can get it.”

“Remy isn’t here yet.”

He nibbled his way down my throat. “If they got through the gates, then it’s someone with a key. They can let themselves in and wait.”

I pressed a hand to his shoulder and gave him a gentle push. “Go and answer the door, Gabe.”

He sighed, and rolled off the bed.

“Put some pants on first,” I yelled after him as he disappeared, naked, through the door.

chapter **thirteen**

GABE

I WAS HALFWAY DOWN THE HALLWAY WHEN HER WORDS registered, and I looked down.

Yeah, I probably should put some pants on ... just in case.

Turning back, I went into the bedroom. Harper was still in bed, propped up on her elbows. She smiled when I entered, her eyes dipping downward. I fisted my still semi-hard dick and cocked an eyebrow.

“Sure you want me to go and open the door?”

Her tongue swept over her lips, but she nodded. “I’m afraid so.” She climbed off the bed, completely naked, and walked across to the bathroom. I gave brief thought to following her, but the doorbell sounded again, three short, sharp, almost angry-sounding blasts.

“Who the fuck is here at this hour? It’s only seven.”

She tossed me a smile over her shoulder. “You’re never going to find out if you don’t go and answer it.”

Muttering beneath my breath, I grabbed the sweats from on top of my dresser and pulled them on.

“Oh, and Gabe?” Harper’s face appeared from around the bathroom door.

“Yeah?”

“Happy birthday.”

“It *would* have been if some fucker wasn’t trying to get into my house.”

Her laughter was cut off by the sound of the shower running, and another blast from the bell.

“Fuck’s sake! I’m fucking *coming!*” I threw a dark glance toward the bathroom. “Just not in the way I hoped.”

“I heard that.”

The prim note to her voice made me smile, and I was still laughing to myself by the time I reached the front of the house. The main entrance doors were made of a combination of thick oak and frosted glass, so as I crossed the hall, I could make out the shapes of two people outside but I couldn’t *see* who they were. My steps slowed, while I considered opening the door or calling Remy.

Contrary to popular opinion, I didn’t take risks just for shits and giggles these days. But Harper seemed to believe it would be someone ... or more than one, anyway ... I knew. She hadn’t seemed concerned by someone calling at the house so early.

My head swung around to peer down the hallway toward our bedroom, then back to the door, and my eyes narrowed.

Obviously, the blowjob she gave me had short-circuited my brain ... which I’m sure was on purpose.

I strode over to the door and threw it open.

“What the *fuck?*”

Two grinning faces stared back at me.

“Surprise, Brother.” Both men spoke at once, and then I was hauled forward into a three-way hug.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I demanded the second they let me go.

Deacon grinned at me. “Harper got in touch and said you were going to be a miserable fucker and didn’t want to celebrate your birthday.” His head tilted. “I told her I didn’t see the point in birthday celebrations, so I agreed with you.

She screeched down the phone, then Gemma told me I was a neanderthal, so ... here I am.”

Shaun laughed quietly beside his twin. “The girls are in the hotel. We thought we’d surprise you first, then bring them over later. They’re looking forward to meeting Harper.”

I stepped back. “Get your asses in here! Who else knows you’re here? Does Seth?”

They traded glances, then issued me with identical smirks.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. *Everyone* knows, don’t they?”

Deacon slapped my shoulder. “Harper wants what she wants. Who were we to stand in her way?”

chapter **fourteen**

HARPER

I COULD HEAR VOICES WHEN I WALKED OUT OF THE BEDROOM half an hour later, freshly showered and dressed in a pair of black jeans and a Forgotten Legacy tour t-shirt. The voices grew louder the closer I got to the kitchen, and I took a moment to compose my features into something that didn't look like an idiotically happy grin, and stepped through the door.

“Pipsqueak!” Arms wrapped around me, lifted me off my feet and spun me around. “You look a lot better than the last time I saw you.”

I grabbed Deacon's face between my palms and planted a kiss on his mouth. “You disappeared before I really got a chance to thank you for finding me.”

“Couldn't let my boy down, could I?”

His arms dropped and I was turned and pulled into another embrace. Shaun's greeting was less boisterous than his brother's, but no less welcome. I leaned into him, and the peace that always surrounded him washed over me. He tweaked the end of my ponytail.

“You did good, Harper.” His voice was low, close to my ear. “He looks happy.”

I pressed a kiss to his bearded face, and stepped out of his arms, and turned to face Gabe. He lifted a hand and crooked a finger at me.

Smiling, I crossed the room and stopped in front of him. He hooked his fingers into the waistband of my jeans and pulled me toward him.

“You’re going to pay, Little Miss Devious.”

I rose up on my toes and wound my arms around his neck. “Happy birthday, Gabriel.”

“What do I have to do to get offered a coffee?” Deacon’s voice dragged Gabe’s gaze away from me.

“Coffee machine is behind you.”

“Fuck, no. We’re your guests. *You* get to make it.” Deacon dragged a chair out and dropped onto it, propping his feet on the one beside it, and hooked his hands behind his head. “Black and strong.”

Gabe released his grip on me and walked across the room. “You know I’m a multi-millionaire rock star, right? People wait on me, not the other way around.”

“I knew you when you were broke as fuck and wore the same jeans for six months. So, don’t pull that bullshit on me.”

And that started an argument that took me straight back to our childhood, where the three of them would bicker constantly about *everything*.

“Some things never change.” Shaun’s voice was a low murmur beside me.

I turned to him, smiling. “It doesn’t. It’s like being in Molly’s all over again, while those two argue about what they want to eat.” I reached up to tug gently on his beard. “I like this. It suits you.”

“Cassie says the same thing.”

A tattooed hand moved between us, holding a coffee mug. Shaun took it from Gabe with a smile. A second mug was handed to me.

Gabe’s arm slid around my waist. “I should have refused to make you one.” He squeezed my hip, kissed my cheek and

moved away again. “So, what’s the plan? You’re just hanging out here for the day or ...”

“No,” I said before the others could speak. “We’re going to Charlie’s for lunch.”

“How long are the two of you in town for?”

“We’re going back the day before Christmas.”

“We thought you could put on a disguise and we’ll go and explore our old haunts. Work up an appetite.”

“I don’t think Remy will approve.”

Deacon snorted. “Leave him to me. I’ll be your bodyguard for the day.”

“Oh my gosh.” All eyes turned to me. “I forgot you were involved with Disperser Security.”

“Involved?” Deacon’s eyebrow hiked. “I *own* the company.”

“*Co-own.*” Remy’s voice joined the conversation.

“Semantics.” Deacon waved a hand. “I can still be Gabe’s bodyguard for a few hours.”

“If you think you can remember how to do it.”

“Really, Remy?”

Gabe’s bodyguard smirked. “You’ve been out of the game for a while. Too busy playing house with your mate.”

Deacon laughed. “You’re brave. I bet you won’t say that in front of her.”

“You’re the only one with a death wish in the room right now.”

Deacon unfolded himself from the chair and strode over to Remy. The two men clasped hands and bumped shoulders, laughing. When they separated, Remy turned to Gabe.

“Can I speak to you for a minute?” He waited for Gabe’s nod and then walked out of the room.

chapter **fifteen**

GABE

REMY CLOSED THE KITCHEN DOOR, LEAVING HARPER WITH Shaun and Deacon, and walked along the hallway until he reached the intersection where one path led toward the bedrooms, and the other down to my studio.

“I’ve picked up first class tickets on a flight to Portland for tomorrow. It’s the only day we’re going to have semi-free between now and Christmas. The flight leaves at ten in the morning, and takes a little under three hours. Then it’s a twenty-minute drive to the house. The return flight is at seven tomorrow evening. We don’t have time to stop over, since the Damnation parties are the day after and you need to be present for both.”

“Okay.” My mind is already trying to think up reasons why I need to go to Portland. I don’t want to lie to Harper, but I also don’t want to say anything until I know for sure what I’m looking at.

“Karl is coming with us, and Marley will be meeting us there.”

“What? Why?”

“Karl thinks it will look better, that way you can tell Harper you’re traveling with him on music-related business. He’s even lined up a small signing at a record store while you’re there.”

“How can I do that without the rest of the band?”

“Luca doesn’t want to leave Everleigh, in case she goes into labor early. Seth is still laying low after everything came out about his past. It’d look stranger if it was just you and Dex, and as you’re the frontman, it doesn’t look so unusual for you to do this. Especially as you also have a solo album with Marley away from Forgotten Legacy and Black Rosary.”

I gave a slow nod. “Okay, that makes sense.” I cast a troubled glance back toward the kitchen. “Am I doing the right thing, Remy? Should I just tell her?”

He shook his head. “No. Karl agrees that we need to make sure we have all the right information first.”

“That’s what I did last time someone contacted NFG. Look how that turned out.”

He patted my shoulder. “Gabe, trust me on this. This isn’t the same thing.”

“I don’t like keeping it from her.”

“You’d like how devastated she would be even less if it turns out to be a crazy person spewing bullshit.”

Deep down, I knew he was right. But I’d promised not to keep secrets from her, and I’d worked hard to do that since she agreed to give me another chance. I didn’t want to ruin things. We were in a good place, a *great* place, and I wanted to keep it that way.

“Look at it another way, Gabe.” Remy’s voice was soft and serious. “If it turns out to be real, it’ll be one hell of a Christmas gift. Really, that’s what you’re doing here. Getting her a one-of-a-kind Christmas gift. You’re allowed to keep the details of that from her. It wouldn’t be a surprise otherwise.”

I blew out a breath. “I guess so. I don’t like it though.”

“You’re not trying to do this alone. That’s another big difference between now and then. Karl and Marley both agree that this is the best course of action. Let’s go to Portland, and then we’ll revisit what you want to do.”

“Gabe? Why are you the pair of you whispering out here?” The kitchen door swung open, and Harper stepped out.

I fixed a smile onto my face. “Planning your Christmas gift, Frosty. I have to up my game now.”

She laughed quietly. “Alright, well hurry up. We want to get going.”

I nodded. “Let me go and get dressed. I can’t really go wandering the streets in just a pair of sweats.”

“Hurry up.”

“Yes, ma’am!” I blew her a kiss, then looked at Remy. “I better go and do what she says.”

“You really should. Will you be okay with just Deacon today or do you want me to drive?”

“I think if anything happens, Shaun and Deacon will be able to handle it.”

“I should hope so.” He turned toward the entrance hall. “Okay, I’m going to check in with the rest of the team. If you need me, you know where I am.”

He walked away, and I stared after him. Him leaving me to my own devices, even if it was in the company of the co-owner of Disperser Security, seemed ... off.

What was he up to?

“Gabe? Stop standing there and get dressed!” Harper’s voice distracted me from my thoughts, and I headed down the hallway to the bedroom to get changed.

chapter **sixteen**

HARPER

OUR FIRST STOP WAS MOLLY'S—THE DINER CLOSE TO WHERE we'd lived as kids. Deacon and Shaun climbed out of the car first, and positioned themselves so that me and Gabe were in the center, and we headed inside.

"Hasn't changed much," Deacon commented, looking around.

"No." Gabe's voice was quiet. "We came to visit around ... four years ago?" He glanced at me from under the ball cap. "A few weeks after Harper came home from the hospital after Miles ..." He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to.

"There's an empty booth at the back. Let's take that one." I tucked my hand around Gabe's arm, and squeezed. He patted my fingers without looking at me.

I slid onto the bench seat, Gabe beside me. Shaun and Deacon sat opposite.

"No food. We're going to Charlies later," I reminded them.

Deacon groaned. "But I'm starving and it'd be breakfast. I can't go another three hours without something to eat. I'm a growing boy."

Gabe laughed. "We could get something. If we're not going to Charlie's until after twelve, I could eat now."

I sighed. "Fine."

All three men grabbed the menus and silence fell as they studied their options. Gabe was the first one to choose.

“Pancakes, and coffee.”

“Sounds good,” Shaun agreed. “I’ll have the same.”

“I’m going for a proper breakfast. I need the energy,” Deacon said.

I kicked his shin beneath the table. He grunted. Thankfully, one of the servers stopped beside the table, distracting Gabe from noticing.

“What can I get you guys?” she asked, her voice bright.

“What do you want, Frosty?”

“Just coffee for me, thanks.”

“You should eat something.”

“Later. You guys order.”

He frowned at me. I smiled back at him. It was clear he knew something was going on, but hadn’t quite figured out what. And I wanted to keep it that way.

“Two lots of pancakes, a full breakfast with toast, and coffee all around.” Shaun listed off the order. “Do you still like cream in your coffee, Harper?”

“And strawberries on her Gabe.” Deacon smirked.

“Shut up!” But my cheeks were on fire. I didn’t know how much Gabe shared with the brothers, but the fact Deacon winked at me was enough to make me think he knew more than he should.

“You’ve got that the wrong way around, DJ,” Gabe said, leaning back and stretching one arm along the back of the bench seat so he could toy with my hair. “It’s me who likes to cover Harper in strawberries.”

I closed my eyes. “Why don’t you have a filter?”

“Why are you still so surprised by it?” He tugged gently on my hair.

“Wait.” Deacon’s voice caused my eyes to open. “Are you talking about sex? Because I just meant you had strawberry tattoos and Harper probably likes them.”

“Oh my god.” I covered my face with my hands.

Deacon snickered. “Do you have a food fetish, Gabe?”

“No, he does not.” My voice was muffled.

“No, I have a strawberry combined with Harper fetish.”

“Please, stop.”

“That’s not what you were saying last night.”

chapter seventeen

GABE

BEING AT MOLLY'S WITH HARPER, SHAUN, AND DEACON TOOK me back to my childhood. Not the horrors of living with my da, but the brighter parts, the better memories. So much of my life up until I turned eighteen was dark, shadowed, and spent maneuvering around my da's drunken mood swings, and avoiding his fists, that it was easy to forget the good times.

I was pretty sure that's why Harper had arranged for Shaun and Deacon to visit. A reminder that it wasn't *all* bad, and there were snatches of good times around my birthday.

I pushed my empty plate away, and leaned back in the seat. The noise levels at our table had risen considerably over the past hour, as we talked about our shared past, the things we'd do and the trouble we'd get into, and I slowly became aware of people looking over at us.

I lifted my mug to conceal my mouth before I spoke. "We're drawing attention. If you guys don't want to be plastered all over tomorrow's entertainment outlets, we should think about leaving." I raised my hand to get the server's attention. "I'll get the check."

"No, you won't." Shaun pulled my arm down and raised his. "It's your birthday. This is our treat."

His words flashed me back to so many memories. Of all four of us sitting in Molly's. Of me and Harper counting the change we'd scraped together to see if we could afford to share a daily special. Of Shaun or Deacon telling us to put the money away because it was their treat.

Something must have showed on my face because the hand on my arm tightened. I lifted my gaze to meet Shaun's. The sounds around us—Harper responding to something Deacon said, other diners ordering food, the clink of china as plates and mugs were set down on the tables—all faded away as we looked at each other.

While I'd been friends with both twins for a long time, I was closer to Shaun than I was to Deacon. Our interests had always been more aligned. He'd toured with Forgotten Legacy a couple of times, wrote songs for us, even played piano or keyboards on some of our albums.

He smiled, and my lips tilted in response to everything he was saying without speaking. I imagined what he would say in my head.

I always knew you'd do something with your life. I told you that you were meant for more. Happy birthday, Brother.

The hand on my arm squeezed, and he nodded.

“Alright. *You* pay for breakfast,” I said.

Once the check was paid, we headed back to the car.

“Where are we going on this magical mystery tour next?” I tossed the ball cap onto the seat beside me and leaned through the gap between the two front seats.

Deacon glanced at me, then returned his attention to the road. “You’ll see.”

Shaun chuckled, but didn't reply. Harper ignored me, reading something on her cell. I had to be content with staring out of the window and remembering how the area used to look when I was a kid.

“We're here.” Deacon's voice brought me out of my reverie.

I peered out of the window, not recognizing anything. “And where is *here*, exactly?”

He snorted. “You don't know?”

“I've never seen this place in my life.”

“Make a man a rock star, give him untold amounts of wealth, and he soon forgets his roots.”

“Fuck you, Deacon. Where are we?”

Harper tapped my arm and held out a photograph. Frowning, I took it from her and looked at it, then looked out of the window.

“No fucking way.”

“Took a while to match it up to the photograph but ... in the words of Bill and Ted ... *yes way*.”

I was torn between staring at the place where Forgotten Legacy posed for their first photograph and Deacon referencing Bill and Ted. Deacon won.

“When the fuck did you start quoting pop references?”

“When Gemma decided I needed an education in what *she* terms *classic movies*.”

Harper leaned against my side. “I got the photograph from Seth. He couldn’t remember the exact location, but said it was about a fifteen minute drive from our apartment block. I sent it to Deacon, who got Asher to perform some computer wizardry to figure it out. Look over there.” Raising her hand, she pointed through the window.

Three men were leaning against the wall, dressed in jeans and t-shirts. I looked back down at the photograph, and laughed.

“Where the fuck did you find the same clothes?”

She grinned, eyes shining. “Candice.”

“Jesus fucking Christ. Just how long have you been planning this?”

“A while. Come on. We’re going to recreate that photograph.” She reached past me to throw open the door. “Candice should be waiting with a change of clothes for you.”

“You guys are something fucking else.” I muttered the words, shaking my head as I climbed out to meet my bandmates.

chapter eighteen

HARPER

I FOLLOWED GABE AND THE TWINS ACROSS THE GRASS TO where the rest of Forgotten Legacy waited. The sound of Gabe's laughter when he spotted Remy and Candice swelled my heart.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me? Is nothing sacred? Candice, you're supposed to work for me."

"Why do you think I jumped at the chance to sneak around behind your back?" She handed him a bag. "We've set up a portable changing room over there." She waved her hand to a small tent. "Go and change. I doubt it'll be long before people start sniffing around to see what's going on, and once you're recognized, it'll turn into a frenzy."

He took the bag and turned his head to find me. "Want to help me?"

"Harper is staying right here. If you get her alone in that tent, we won't see you for the next hour." Candice caught my arm.

I laughed. "Sorry, Gabe. We're on a deadline."

He shook his head but made his way to the tent. Remy moved to stand outside. While Gabe was changing, I took the opportunity to make a call. Tate answered on the second ring.

"Harper, you have to stop pestering me."

"I'm not pestering you. Where are you?"

“Exactly where I’m supposed to be. Anyone would think you didn’t trust me.”

“I *don’t* trust you. You’re just like Gabe, and might decide you have a better idea and run with it before talking to me.” I kept one eye on the tent while I spoke.

He laughed. “Well, maybe that’s true, but this time I’m exactly where you told me to be. So is my mom and dad. When will you get here?”

“We’re just doing the photograph, and then we’ll be heading to Charlie’s. Is everyone there?”

“Not quite. But we should be good by the time you arrive. I’ll text you if anyone is delayed.”

“Okay. He’s coming back, so I’m going before he sees me talking to you. Thank Charlie for me.”

“I’ll do that. And Harper?”

“Yeah?”

“Stop fucking pestering me.” He ended the call.

That boy was so like Gabe it was actually quite terrifying.

I pocketed my cell, just as Gabe stepped out of the tent. He was holding the hem of the t-shirt up to his nose, baring the lower half of his stomach, his tattoos on full display. I licked my lips, and his eyes met mine.

“This t-shirt smells like you, Frosty.”

“That’s because it’s mine.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s mine.”

“It *was* yours, then it became mine. Go and stand with the rest of the band.”

“We’re going to need to talk about this devious streak you’re displaying, you know?” he said as he walked past me. “I’m not sure I approve.”

“Can you remember how you posed, or do you need the photograph as a reminder?” The photographer Candice hired stepped forward once Gabe was beside Seth.

“I was crouched down ...” Gabe moved to the left slightly. “... Around here, I think? And I had my Zippo out.” He reached into his back pocket to take it out, then flicked it open, the flame flaring to life. “Seth was to my right, Dex was leaning against the wall smoking a joint, and Luca was twirling a drumstick.”

“We can recreate the joint easily enough.” He raised his voice. “Anyone smoke?”

“Don’t worry about that. I have it covered.” Candice stepped forward and handed him something that looked like a joint. At his frown, she laughed. “Don’t worry. It’s fake. Like a prop they use in the movies.”

He took it from her, and rolled it between his fingers. “Looks real.” He lifted it to his nose and sniffed. “*Smells* real.”

“I promise you, it isn’t. And, anyway, you don’t need to light it. We can get that digitally added after.” She clapped her hands. “Okay, boys. Take your positions and let’s get this photograph taken. You never know, you might be able to use it for the next album!”

chapter **nineteen**

GABE

WE GOT FOUR PHOTOGRAPHS BEFORE PEOPLE STARTED DRIFTING over to check out what was going on. Remy, and the rest of the bodyguards fanned out to keep them at a distance, but once one of them recognized us, the word rapidly spread that Forgotten Legacy were in the area. Before long, there was a whole crowd of people surrounding us.

“Are we on a clock?” I asked Harper, waving at the screaming fans.

“We have a little while. I want to be at Charlie’s by twelve at the latest.”

“What time is it now?”

“Ten-forty.”

“And it takes ... what? About twenty-five minutes to get from here to Charlie’s?”

“Something like that.”

I nodded. “Then we have some time.” I pulled the mantel of ‘Gabe *Fucking* Mercer *Rock Star*’ around me, and turned to face the crowd. “Alright, alright! Stop screaming. We can see you. If you can settle down, we’ll sign some things and take selfies with you guys. But I need you to calm down first.”

The rest of the band moved up to stand around me, and we spent the next half hour talking to the fans, posing for photographs and signing various items they thrust under our noses, including body parts.

“Happy birthday, Gabe.”

The shout came somewhere from my right, and I turned my head in that direction to smile. “Thanks, honey.”

“I sent a gift to NFG for you!”

“Me too!”

“And me.”

The shouts came thick and fast, and I tried to acknowledge every one of them, until it turned into a cacophony of unintelligible shouting again.

“Okay, time to go.” Remy forced his way between me and a slightly over-enthusiastic fan who threw her arms around my neck and wouldn’t let go. “The guys have an appointment to keep.”

Our bodyguards formed around us and forced a path through the crowd and to our cars. I searched around for Harper, spotted she was close behind me and reached for her hand to pull her closer. She squeezed my fingers, and smiled.

And then we were at the car. Dropping onto the back seat, I heaved a sigh of relief, closed my eyes, and tipped my head back.

“I’m sorry about that.”

Harper’s cotton candy scent wrapped around me as she leaned forward and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “We knew it might happen. You make people a little crazy.”

I cracked open one eye at the amused tone in her voice.

“You trying to say I make you crazy, Frosty?”

“I don’t think I was *trying* to say it.”

“I’m glad I didn’t go the rock star route.” Shaun slammed the door and twisted on the seat to look at me. “I don’t think I could deal with that kind of attention every time I left the house.”

I laughed. “It does take some lifestyle adjustments, that’s for sure.”

“I’ll stick with hating people and staying at home.” Deacon banged on his window, growling under his breath. “No fucking boundaries. I don’t know how you keep smiling.”

My grin widened. “I fucking love it, that’s why.”

My therapist said that one of the reasons I loved it was because of the lack of positive attention I got from my da as a kid. That the adoration of the unwashed masses, as it were, was compensation for feeling unloved when I was a child. Maybe he was right. At this point of my life, the reasons didn’t matter. Whatever drove me to become who and what I was, it also brought a lot of good things to my life, and if I had to do it all again, I didn’t think I’d change a thing.

“There’s something wrong with you,” Deacon muttered, and turned back to start the car.

I lowered the window and leaned out to wave at our fans as we drove off.

chapter twenty

HARPER

MY PHONE CHIMED JUST AS DEACON PULLED INTO A PARKING space outside Charlie's Bistro. I angled my cell so Gabe couldn't see the screen and read the message.

Tate: We have a green for go. I repeat. Green for go. Or should that be the turkey has landed?

I bit back a laugh.

Me: We're outside.

Tate: I know. Gabe was the turkey, in case you didn't get the connection.

"What are you laughing about?"

"Just something Siobhan sent me." I pocketed my cell, and unclipped my seatbelt. "Ready to go inside?"

"If you mean have I worked up an appetite for lunch, then yes, I'm ready to go inside. Being photographed and fighting off obsessed fans makes me hungry."

"You love it."

"I do, but it still makes me hungry."

The passenger door beside me opened while he spoke, and Remy ducked down to look inside.

“It’s quiet out here right now, so hurry up and get inside.”

“You heard the man, Harper. Stop keeping me here gossiping and take me for lunch.” His voice was light, a smile teasing at his lips.

I climbed out, fighting to keep my expression neutral. I thought he’d enjoyed the day so far, dealt with the surprises I’d given him with his usual easygoing amusement, but they’d all been small things. What we were walking into wasn’t.

Licking my lips, I caught his arm and pulled him to a stop.

“Gabe?”

He turned to face me, head tilting quizzically.

“I love you.”

His smile was immediate. One hand lifted and he brushed his knuckles down my cheek.

“Always and forever, Frosty.”

I caught his sleeve. “Just ... remember that, okay?”

His brows pulled together. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.” Shaun stepped up beside me. “Let’s go inside.”

“Yeah, come on. Stop standing out on the sidewalk chatting. I’m starving,” Deacon added from where he stood by the doors.

I took a deep breath, then nodded. “Okay, let’s have lunch.”

I could feel Gabe’s eyes on me as we walked across the sidewalk to catch up to Deacon. He pushed open the door, and we followed him inside. The inside of the bistro was quiet, the lights dimmed. All the usual chatter from customers was missing, the tables empty.

“Harper ... it doesn’t look open.”

“It’s just quiet, that’s all.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s—”

“Surprise!” A multitude of voices called out and the lights above our heads brightened.

“What the fuck?”

chapter **twenty-one**

GABE

MY HEAD TURNED AT THE SOUND OF HARPER'S LAUGHTER. She was standing over in the corner, chatting with Siobhan, Tate and his stepdad. Every so often, her head would turn and she'd seek me out. There was a slight furrow between her eyes, and I knew she was worried about what I was thinking about the surprise party she'd arranged.

I was sure she could recognize when I was hiding behind my rock star mask, and she probably thought the reason was because I wasn't happy with what she'd done. The reality was I ... was fucking overwhelmed.

Everyone I considered to be a friend or family was here—Harper, obviously; Tate and his parents; Marley, Rain, and the rest of Black Rosary; Gage Conrad and Jaded Souls; Deacon and Shaun; Karl Daniels; and so many other people. Looking around, it was hard to believe I knew this many people *or* that they'd given up time out of their day to share it with *me* and celebrate a birthday, even knowing that I never usually bothered with it.

And ... I wasn't sure how to react. At all. So, I pulled out the Gabe Mercer charm, and hid behind it.

There was a pile of gifts set on top of one table. Food covered three more, drinks—both alcoholic and not—filled another table. Voices and laughter washed over me, and every so often someone would come up to shake my hand, kiss my cheek, pat my shoulder, and wish me a happy birthday.

It was all a little surreal.

I had a vague memory of a birthday party before my mom died, but once she was gone, that was it. I learned fast to keep out of my da's way on my birthday, on Christmas, or on my Mom's birthday. Birthdays or holidays equaled pain, and all these years later, it was a hard habit to break.

I was trying ... so fucking hard ... by giving Harper a tree in the house, arranging parties in Damnation, but those were for her and other people. I managed to keep the negative thoughts and feelings about it away by repeating that to myself.

But this? This was for *me* ... and ...

My throat tightened, and breathing became difficult.

Pushing away from the wall, I weaved my way through people, throwing smiles and nods at those who spoke to me, and kept my eyes trained on the exit at the back. I needed to get some air ...

My fingers wrapped around the Zippo in my pocket, and I stepped out into the alley at the back of the bistro. Keeping my hands in my pockets, I walked forward. Not far enough to lose sight of the door, but just enough to give myself a minute to get my breathing under control.

"Hey." A recognizable voice spoke from behind me.

I didn't reply, concentrating on my breathing.

A hand rested on my shoulder. "I wondered how long it would take. Do you want me to take you home?"

I shook my head. I wasn't sure I could speak, not yet.

"Here." Seth's other hand appeared in front of my face, a Twizzler between his fingers.

I laughed, the sound a little thick.

"I ... I d-don't ..." I shook my head again.

He hooked his arm across my shoulders and drew me further into the alley. "Do you remember when my mom and dad tried to celebrate my birthday, that first year I lived with them?"

I nodded.

“I threw the birthday cake at the wall. Made a fucking mess.”

My laugh came easier that time.

“I didn’t know how to respond to them doing it. It was such a small gesture, a *normal* thing for parents to do for their kids, but for me it was such a big deal that I didn’t know how to deal with it. I had all these fucking confusing emotions inside, like a bomb waiting to go off, and no understanding of how to work through them. You gave me a lecture, and suggested that they make me lick it off the wall.” He ruffled my hair. “Such a fucking asshole, even back then. Luckily, my dad knew me well, and they had a backup cake.”

My shoulders shook with my laughter.

“Harper doesn’t have a backup cake, Gabe. So, don’t throw it at the wall when she presents you with it, okay?”

“Sh-she has a cake?” I scrubbed a hand down my face and sucked in another breath. “Fuck.”

“Take a minute. You’ll be okay. For some reason, everyone loves you. Fuck knows why. You’re a fucking asshole.”

“You said that already.”

“Just making sure I got the point across.”

I turned to face him, and for a second, I saw the boy I first met outside the principal’s office instead of the man he now was. I reached out and took his hand, turning it over so I could push up the sleeve of his shirt to reveal the faint white scars littered across them. Then I turned my arm and lined our wrists up. With one finger, I stroked over both sets of scars. So similar. Almost matching.

“Like attracts like,” I whispered.

His arm moved, hand wrapping around mine, and he pulled me into a hug. We stood there, foreheads resting against each other for a long, silent moment, then Seth stepped back.

“Come on. Harper’s going to think you’ve run away if we stay out here. She’s already convinced herself you’re going to leave her for arranging it.”

chapter

twenty-two

HARPER

RELIEF WASHED THROUGH ME WHEN SETH REAPPEARED WITH Gabe close behind him. His gaze met mine and he gave me a small nod, turned to say something to Gabe, then pointed at me. Both men walked over to where I stood.

“Have your boyfriend back.” Seth bumped his shoulder into Gabe’s, then walked away.

“I have no idea how you managed to arrange all of this without me finding out.”

I bit my lip. “Are you mad at me?”

He didn’t reply straight away, and the silence accelerated my heartbeat until I thought it was going to break through my ribs.

“Gabe?”

The serious expression on his face faded, and he smiled. “I’m not mad at you, Harper.”

“But?”

He shook his head. “There is no but.”

“Are you sure?”

His hand lifted, thumb brushing across my lips as he curved his hand over my cheek. Cupping the back of my head, he drew me toward him.

“I’m sure.” His lips covered mine in a light, barely-there kiss, over before it really began. His voice was soft when he

next spoke. “But it’s been a long day, and I’m ready to go home and unwrap the gift I really want.”

I looped my arms around his neck.

“Break it up, you two.” Dex’s voice intruded a second before he appeared behind Gabe. “Charlie wants everyone over there. *You* need to stand here.” He turned Gabe toward the table holding all his gifts.

“If you think I’m going to open them while you’re all watching, you’re going to be disappointed.” There was a smile on Gabe’s face, but the tone in his voice was a little odd.

Dex seemed to notice it as well, because he patted Gabe’s shoulder. “No one expects you to do that. Just stand there and look pretty. Harper, I need you to come with me.”

Gabe’s hand caught mine as I moved to follow Dex, and he pulled me back to face him. His eyes tracked over my face, and then he smiled.

“Every day is a new adventure, Harper.” He released my hand. “Better catch up to Dex before he realizes you’re not with him.”

I hesitated for a second.

“Harper!” Dex bellowed. “Get your scrawny ass over here.”

“I’ll be here when you get back,” Gabe said quietly. “I’m not going anywhere, Frosty.”

While logically, I *knew* he wasn’t going to run away, his words settled the crazy nerves twisting my insides. He wasn’t angry with me. He wasn’t upset that I’d arranged a birthday party for him. He wasn’t putting on a performance, while inwardly he was furious over what I’d done.

When Dex shouted a second time, I jumped and hurried across the bistro, Gabe’s soft laughter following me.

“There you are. We need to get this cake up in flames before Gabe bolts.” Dex led me into the kitchen, where Charlie waited beside a huge cake in the shape of Forgotten Legacy’s winged logo.

“He’s not going to bolt.”

“He has that edgy look to him. Believe me, he’s going to bolt if he has to stay here for much longer. For someone who adores being the center of attention, he fucking *hates* being the center of attention.”

I frowned. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Being adored by strangers is easy, Harper,” Dex said, moving around the counter and lighting the candles on the cake. “Being adored by the people you love is harder, especially when you’re not used to it.”

“But he knows you all love him.”

“Knowing it and then having all that attention centered on you at once are two very different things, especially when you haven’t braced yourself for it. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to spend half the night searching L.A. for him.

“So, let’s get the cake out of the way, then take him home.”

He hefted the cake, and jerked his chin toward the door. “Let’s do this.”

Charlie moved ahead of us, dimming the lights as we walked, and as soon as our friends saw the cake, they all launched into the words of the birthday song.

We came to a stop in front of Gabe, who lifted his gaze to meet mine.

“Make a wish,” I told him.

His lips curled, and then he blew the candles out.

chapter

twenty-three

GABE

IT WAS ALMOST AFTER SIX BY THE TIME WE GOT OUT OF Charlie's. It felt later, like we'd been there for days. I was exhausted, but it was more like the tiredness after I came off stage, and not the kind of exhaustion where you feel like life has been sucked out of you.

Remy had taken back over as driver, while Shaun and Deacon went back to the hotel with Cassie and Gemma. They promised they would be staying in town, and would be at the party in Damnation, before driving home on Christmas Eve. The drive back to our home was made in silence. I might even have nodded off at some point, because Harper saying my name brought the world back into focus around me.

I blinked, rubbing my eyes.

“Are we—” My voice came out as a croak. I cleared my throat and tried again. “Are we home?”

“You fell asleep.”

I covered my mouth, yawning. “I'm sorry.”

Soft lips pressed against my cheek. “It's been a long day.”

I threw open the car door, climbed out, then reached in to take Harper's hand. Once she was standing on the driveway, she slid her arm around my waist and leaned against my side.

“Did you really hate it?”

“I didn't hate it at all. The amount of effort you put into today blew me away.”

We stopped while Remy opened the door to the house and walked in ahead of us. The lights on the tree sparkled in the darkness. I drew her across the floor to stand in front of it. Her head rested against my shoulder, and silence washed over us, broken only by the sound of Remy's footsteps as did his regular check of the premises.

"Everywhere is clear. I've left the food Charlie boxed up on the kitchen table, and your birthday gifts are by the door. I'll be here at seven to pick you up."

I waved a hand but didn't turn around. "Thanks, Remy."

The door closed softly behind him as he left.

"Pick you up?" Harper lifted her head and turned to me. "Where are you going?"

"I have to go to Portland with Karl. Marley's meeting us there. It's only for a few hours. I'll be back tomorrow night. With everything you've done today, I haven't had a chance to talk to you about it." I stroked my knuckles down her cheek, then smiled.

My fingers trailed down her throat, over her shoulder, and down her arm, until I could link them with hers. Keeping hold of her fingers, I tugged her toward me.

"Thank you for today." I kissed the tip of her nose. "Thank you for yesterday." I kissed her cheek. "Thank you for tomorrow." I kissed her lips.

Hers parted beneath mine and her free hand lifted to run through my hair. I raised my head. The reflection from the lights on the tree danced across her skin as I pulled her t-shirt up.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I whispered, and she laughed softly.

"You always say that."

"Because it's true." I drew the t-shirt over her head and tossed it to one side, then crouched to pop open the button on her jeans and drag them down her legs.

Wrapping my hand around one ankle, I eased off her sneaker, repeated the action with her other leg, then pulled the jeans free. They joined the t-shirt. I rose to my feet, taking in the vision of Harper, dressed only in a matching lacy bra and panty set. A smile tugged my lips up when I spotted what the pattern on the light purple material was. I flicked the clasp of the front-opening bra with one finger, and it parted, her breasts spilling out.

“Snowflakes.”

“Snowflakes,” she repeated.

Curving my hand over one breast, I squeezed. “I want to fuck you in front of the Christmas tree.”

Her lips curved up. “I thought you’d never ask.”

“Stay right there.” I dropped my hand and walked along the hallway to the bedroom, and grabbed one of the thick throws Harper liked to drape across the bed.

Strolling back to the hall, I spread it out and stepped back.

“Make yourself comfortable. I’ll just be a minute.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m pretty sure Charlie put some chocolate covered strawberries in one of those boxes.”

Her laugh was soft, husky, and sparked my nerve endings to life.

chapter twenty-four

HARPER

HE WASN'T GONE FOR LONG, AND I WAS STRETCHED OUT ON the thick blanket when he strolled out of the hall leading to the kitchen. There was a small box tucked beneath one arm, and as he came toward me, he reached back to pull his t-shirt over his head.

His strides weren't quite steady, a slight limp that I doubted anyone but me would notice. I frowned. He'd been on his feet a lot all day, and I hadn't really considered the ramifications of that to his leg.

A finger smoothed over my forehead.

"Stop scowling." Gabe was crouched beside me.

"You're limping."

"I'm fine."

"I didn't think—"

"Harper, I'm *fine*." He settled onto the blanket, and propped up his head on one hand. "Lie back."

"Gabe—"

"If you want me to rest my leg, you need to distract me. Lie back."

His hand smoothed over my stomach, up between my breasts and pressed down gently, until I was lying down. He leaned over me, stripped me out of my panties, then stretched out one arm to flip open the box.

“Open.” He tapped my lips with the strawberry, smiling when I bit into it. He licked the juice from my lips, then nibbled his way along my jaw and down my throat.

When his lips closed over my nipple, a contented sigh escaped me. His chuckle vibrated across my skin.

“I haven’t even started yet, Frosty.”

My fingers found the top of his head and threaded through his hair, guiding his mouth back down, and I lost myself under the touch of his mouth and tongue as he licked, nipped and sucked at my nipples.

“I’m not sure you’re going to make Santa’s good girl list, Harper.” His amused voice broke through the delicious web he was weaving around my senses. “I’m pretty certain he’d be horrified by what we’re doing in front of the tree.” He kissed his way across my stomach, hands stroking over my sides, my hips, my thighs and finally to where I wanted him most.

When one finger pushed inside me, I arched up, clutching at the blanket beneath me.

“Do you think he’s watching? Maybe he has a grip on his dick and is stroking himself while he watches me fuck you.” His lips brushed across the top of my pussy. “Do you think coming all over my fingers would put you on his naughty list?”

Something cool touched my clit. Another raspy chuckle danced over my skin.

“Your pussy is so hot, it’s melting the chocolate off the strawberry.” His tongue swept over my clit. “Your clit tastes like chocolate.” He made a sound deep in his throat, almost a growl, and his tongue licked at me again. “Chocolate, strawberries, and Harper. If I could bottle it up and sell it, I’d be a multi-millionaire. Everyone would want a taste.”

He ran something over me—another strawberry—dipped it inside then drew it out. Crawling up my body, he pressed it to my lips.

“Bite.” The word was a growled demand.

I sank my teeth into the strawberry, juice dripping down my chin, tasting myself mixed in with the flavor of chocolate and strawberry. He straddled my hips, hand braced beside my head as he watched me. I took another bite of the strawberry, holding his gaze. His eyes darkened, his tongue snaking out to wet his lips.

Taking a fresh strawberry from the box, he held it out. "Take it."

I took it from him. Sliding down my body, he kneeled between my legs.

"Run it over your clit."

His eyes followed the movement of my fingers as I rolled it over my clit.

"Now push it inside. Don't let go."

I reached down, pushed it inside my body, and held it there. Gabe lowered his head, and licked a path from my clit to where my fingers held the strawberry. His tongue curled around them, licked them, and then pushed past the strawberry. He fucked me with his tongue, taking bites out of the strawberry until there was nothing left, then sucked my fingers into his mouth. Pushing his fingers deep inside me, he thrust them in and out until I was panting and begging, and sobbing with the need to come.

"My favorite strawberry-flavored snowflake." I almost missed the whispered words as my orgasm crashed over me.

chapter

twenty-five

GABE

HARPER FOLLOWED ME DOWN TO THE CAR, DRESSED IN nothing but my Nirvana t-shirt and holding a mug of coffee. She looked tousled, still sleepy, and thoroughly fucked, and I couldn't hold back a grin at the teeth marks covering her throat and shoulder, where the t-shirt fell down her arm.

Wrapping one arm around her waist, I pulled her against me and kissed her.

“Call me when you land?”

“I will. I should be home before midnight. Wait up for me?”

She buried her face against my throat. “I will.”

“Good girl.” I turned my face so I could whisper in her ear. “Maybe Santa will bring you something nice.”

“Maybe I'd prefer something naughty.”

“Maybe I don't want to hear any of this,” Remy said dryly as he rounded the car to the driver's side.

She laughed, and stepped back. I opened the back passenger door. “I love you, Frosty.” Settling onto the seat, I clipped the seatbelt in place, and closed the door, lowering the window.

Harper leaned through the gap. “Don't get into trouble in Portland.”

I forced a grin. “I'll try to behave.”

Remy started the engine and I watched Harper through the back window as we drove away, until the drive curved and she disappeared from sight.

“There’s still time to tell her.”

Turning to face the front of the car, I shook my head. “Not until we’ve checked everything out.”

I reached down to the backpack on the floor at my feet, and took out a notebook and pencil, and flipped it open to a blank page.

“I’m going to play some music and write. Let me know when we get there.” I popped my earbuds in, tapped play on my music app, and bowed my head over the pad.

When we reached the airport, Karl was waiting for us in the first class lounge. He was on his cell when I walked in, so I waited for him to finish his call before going over to him.

“I have a lawyer meeting us when we land. He’s worked with Matthew Carmichael on a few cases.”

“You think we’re going to need a lawyer?”

“Better to have one and not need one, than to need one and not have one.”

“I don’t like it. I promised Harper I wouldn’t keep anything from her. Not telling her about this is eating me alive.”

“I know.” My manager took my arm and led me over to seating along one wall. “But this isn’t the same thing, Gabe. Telling her only to find out it’s just another person with delusions or ulterior motives would hurt her more than us making sure it’s the truth first.”

“Do *you* think they’re lying?”

His expression was troubled. “I think if he is, then he’s put a lot of time and effort into making sure the details add up.”

Our flight number was called over the tannoy system. Karl straightened.

“Let’s go and get those answers.”

Flying had been part of my life since I was nineteen years old. Almost a year after signing with NFG Records, Karl organized our first gig outside of L.A. When he overheard the four of us panicking about the thought of getting on a plane, he canceled all his plans and came with us. Sitting in first class with him by my side felt almost like we'd come full circle. Well, apart from the first class part. Back when we started out, we were stuck in economy with everyone else.

My lips twitched.

“What’s so funny?”

“Just thinking how weird life is.”

He gave me a sidelong look. “It would be less weird without some of your crackpot decisions.”

I eased my seat back, and grinned at him. “And you’d be bored as fuck.” Closing my eyes, I tucked my hands behind my head. “Wake me up when we get there.”

chapter **twenty-six**

HARPER

I SPENT THE DAY AT HOME. I COULD HAVE GONE OUT, VISITED one of the girls, but that would have required taking a bodyguard with me. Ever since we got back together the *first* time, after Miles grabbed me Gabe insisted I always have someone with me if I was going anywhere without him. I'd fought against it, of course. One of the many problems our first attempt at a relationship had faced.

When we *finally* worked things out and got back together, we sat down and talked about all the things that we both felt needed to be different. For me, it was needing honesty from him. For Gabe, it was about knowing I was safe. So, I agreed that if I wanted to go somewhere, I would take one of Remy's team with me, and Jonah had been assigned as my official *bodyguard*. He traveled with me when I was going to meetings for the foundation, or if I wanted a day out with the girls. But when Gabe was home, he didn't have a lot to do, so he doubled as head of the security team to make sure our home was safe.

I looked up from where I was lying on the sunlounger. He was probably lurking around somewhere. If I *really* wanted to go out, he could take me. I considered it for a minute or two. *Did* I want to go out?

Between Forgotten Legacy's tour, everything that happened with Seth and Gabe, Everleigh's pregnancy and my own work with the foundation, there hadn't been a lot of downtime over the past year. It would be nice to just relax and have a day where I didn't have to *do* anything.

I settled back onto the lounge, and picked up my cell to open the group chat I had with the girls.

Me: What are you guys up to today?

Everleigh: Still doing a great impression of an elephant. A giant one. The biggest in existence.

Riley: Developing the photographs from Gabe's party yesterday and the photoshoot. Everleigh, you do not look like an elephant.

Siobhan: I might suck Dex's dick, but only if he stops annoying the shit out of me. Can't they go back on tour already? How fucking annoying can one man be? And Riley's right, you don't look like an elephant ... more like a grumpy bear.

I snickered.

Everleigh: What are you doing? How's Gabe after yesterday? Was he mad about it?

Me: I think he was a little shocked, but no, he wasn't mad. He's gone to Portland with Karl today for something. Says he's meeting Marley there, so to do with the album they did together, I think. He won't be home until late, so I'm just going to lie by the pool and do nothing all day.

Riley: How positively decadent of you. I give it an hour before you're bored and looking for something to do.

Me: No. I'm going to relax.

Siobhan: Right. Of course you are.

Everleigh: Do you even know how to relax?

Me: Yes!

There was a flood of memes and images laughing at me. I rolled my eyes.

But they were right. Before an hour had passed, I was on my feet and wandering around, looking for something to do.

Gabe called when he landed, but I could tell he was distracted by Karl and Marley, so it wasn't a long conversation, and by mid-afternoon, I was going stir-crazy. I'd replaced all the vases of flowers in the entrance hall with fresh ones from the garden; I'd rearranged the kitchen; I'd dusted the entire house, *including* the tops of the framed photographs on the walls.

I need a hobby. Something I could do on days like this one. Maybe I should take up crochet ... or knitting.

My lips twitched at the thought of Gabe's reaction to me knitting. Maybe not that, then. Antiquing? It would get me out of the house ... Was there such a thing as antiquing for classic rock memorabilia?

I pulled out my cell, intending to search and find out. The screen lit up before I could even open a search engine, and Gabe's face smiled up at me.

I connected the call.

"Hey, again."

"Hey." All my senses fired to life immediately. I didn't think I'd ever not react to that raspy voice.

"How was your day?"

"Interesting. We're on our way to the airport now. The flight is at seven, so hopefully I'll be home before midnight." His voice was ... odd.

"Is everything okay?" I walked through to the kitchen and turned on the coffee maker.

“I think so. It’s just been a weird kind of day. What have you done today?”

“Mostly died of boredom. How do people just do *nothing* all day, every day?”

“I think that’s why a lot of bored rich housewives fill their days with charity events, and coffee mornings.”

“Ugh.”

He laughed. “Don’t want to join them, Frosty? You run a foundation. They’d love to have you on their charity lists.”

“I’m not a bored, rich housewife.”

“Well, you’re bored and rich, so that’s two out of three. We can fix the third easily enough. Just say the word.”

“I’m bored. *You’re* rich.” I ignored the way butterflies took off in my stomach at his veiled reference to getting married. We were engaged. I wore his ring on my finger, but we still hadn’t set a date to take that next step.

“What’s mine is yours, you know that. When are you going to lock me down for good?”

“Lock you down?”

“Isn’t that what they say? Lock me down, ball and chain me, tie me up.”

“*Tie you up?* Really, Gabe? It’s tie the knot.”

“Same thing. Tie me up, tie you up. They both require knots. Otherwise, it’s easy to get loose.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“Drunk on love, baby.”

I groaned. “*That* was terrible.”

He chuckled. “Maybe. But it’s something we should talk about.”

“You want to get married?”

“That ring on your finger isn’t just a pretty little decoration, Frosty.”

“I know, but—”

“You thought I’d settle for being engaged to you for the rest of our lives? Sorry to break it to you, Harper, but I want it all. I’m not willing to settle. So, we should probably talk about where and when, because we’re getting married, Harper. And soon.” That weird tone was in his voice again.

“Gabe, what happened today?”

“I gotta go. Karl and Marley are waiting for me.”

“Gabe—”

“We’ll talk later. I love you, Harper.”

And I had to be content with that because he hung up.

chapter

twenty-seven

GABE

I RUBBED MY THIGH. THE ACHE HAD GONE FROM MILDLY inconvenient to fucking painful over the last few hours, and being stuck in the air for three hours *twice* in one day made it worse.

“Why don’t you take some painkillers?” Karl’s voice pulled me out of my thoughts, and I turned my head.

“I didn’t bring any.”

His sigh spoke volumes.

“It shouldn’t hurt this much.”

“It wouldn’t if you didn’t insist on pushing it so much. Going on tour so soon after breaking it was a ridiculous decision.”

“I was careful.”

“You backflipped off the stage at almost every show.”

“I forgot.”

“You forgot that you almost died, broke your femur and had to learn to walk properly again? Maybe they should have tested to make sure you hadn’t suffered brain damage while you were in the hospital.”

There really wasn’t much I could say to that, so I continued rubbing my thigh in an attempt to ease the dull throbbing.

“Here.” He handed me two small, white pills and a glass of water. “Unlike *you*, I came prepared.”

I took them. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Have you decided when you’re going to talk to Harper?”

“When I get home. It can’t wait. We have the Christmas parties tomorrow, and I’m not sure whether she’ll want to go to either of them after I tell her. I don’t want to put it off. Not now we know.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

I considered it. Having Karl there *would* help, but ... I shook my head.

“I think telling her without an audience would be best. I don’t know how she’s going to react to the news.”

“Do you know what you’re going to say?”

I tipped my head back against the seat and blew out a breath. “No fucking idea. I’ll figure it out when I get home.”

And the closer I got, the quicker my heart beat. I had absolutely no idea how Harper was going to react to the news I was going home with. There was no fucking way at all to predict what was going to happen. But, no matter what, I wasn’t going to keep it from her, and I was prepared to deal with the outcome.

When Remy stopped the car on the drive, I didn’t get out straight away. I sat and stared at the front door, gnawing on the inside of my cheek.

“You can’t sit there all night, Gabe.”

“I could. No one would stop me.”

“And you’d still have to go in there and tell her once the sun rose. Just go in and rip off the band aid. Dragging it out will make it harder to do.”

“I know. It’s just ... this is fucking big, Remy. I went there expecting to find out it was bullshit, but ...” I gave a helpless shrug.

“Just go in there, and tell her.”

“Yeah ...” I reached down for my backpack, threw open the door and climbed out. “Are you going to stick around and check for dead bodies?”

“I’ll wait out here for half an hour. If I hear screaming, I’ll come and rescue you. If it’s still quiet after thirty minutes, I’ll assume she either killed you quickly, or you’re talking fast, and I’ll come back and check in the morning.”

“Fair enough.” I walked across the driveway and up the steps to the front door. Easing it open, I stepped through.

The lights on the Christmas tree mocked me on my way past, bright and cheerful. There were wrapped gifts beneath it that hadn’t been there when I left this morning, and they reminded me that I had birthday presents I hadn’t yet opened.

I checked the kitchen first. She wasn’t in there, so the living room was my next destination. The TV was on, the soft glow the only light in the room, and as I rounded the couch, I found Harper stretched out watching the screen.

“Hey, Frosty.” My voice made her jump, and she dropped the tub of popcorn she was eating as she scrambled upright.

“Gabe!”

I didn’t wait for her to stand, and sank down onto the couch beside her. Catching her hands in mine, I pulled her onto my lap and buried my face against her throat, inhaling that cotton candy scent which always clung to her.

“Are you okay? What happened today?”

My arms slid around her waist. “I hate traveling without you.” I kissed her neck. “I’m glad to be home.”

“You’ve only been gone a day.”

“It feels like a lifetime.” I lifted my head. It was time to do this. “Weird question, but when you first moved into our apartment block, do you remember where you lived before that?”

chapter

twenty-eight

HARPER

THE QUESTION WAS SO UNEXPECTED, IT THREW ME, AND IT took me a second to realize Gabe was still talking.

“I’m L.A. born and bred. We had a little house before Mom died, and when Da was too drunk to work and couldn’t pay the bills, we moved to the apartment. I know you talked about living in a house. Do you remember where it was?”

“I have no idea.” I answered slowly. “It’s been so long since I thought about that.”

“I remember you describing it to me. I want to show you something.” He lifted me off his legs and stood. “I dropped my backpack somewhere. Let me find it.” He walked out of the room, his limp more noticeable than it was when he left that morning.

“Is your leg hurting?” I asked when he returned.

“A little. I took some painkillers earlier, and they’re starting to wear off.” He settled back beside me and opened the bag he was holding. “Is this the house you grew up in?” He handed me a set of three photographs.

I frowned, and looked down at them. All three were of the outside of a house. The first was taken from the front. The house had steps leading up to a front porch, with a neat white fence surrounding it, and a garage to the left. There were raised flower beds in front. The house was painted a faded yellow, and the roof was pointed. The second photograph showed the house from the side, and the third was taken from

the back where an old swing set was captured at the corner of the image.

I stared at them, memories flooding me of playing in the garden, of my dad pushing me on the swing, of laughter and love.

“Where did you find these?” My voice shook, and I pressed my lips together.

Warm hands covered mine. “Harper, look at me.” Gabe’s voice was low, serious, with that odd note that I’d heard earlier.

I dragged my gaze away from the photographs and searched out his face.

“I was in that house today.”

“What? Why? I thought you were in Portland.”

He licked his lips. “I was. That house is *in* Portland.”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think so. Why would it be there?”

“Because that’s where you lived when you were a kid.”

“But ... no, that doesn’t make sense. Gabe, why were you in that house? How did you get there?”

His fingers tightened on mine. “Baby, I need to tell you something, but I need you to listen, okay? You’re going to have questions, but I need you to wait until I’m done.”

“Gabe ... you’re scaring me. Why were you in that house?” My voice was shrill. I didn’t even know why I felt so anxious about it. It was just a house. It could be *any* house. It wasn’t the one I was born in. It *couldn’t* be. It made no sense.

“A couple of weeks ago, someone called NFG. Like every other crackpot call, they got given the standard line that their message would be passed on, and it was ignored. But they kept calling, and standard protocol is that if it flags up as a potential situation, it’s passed onto a higher level.” Gabe’s voice was steady, calm. “Eventually, it landed on Karl’s desk.”

“Because that’s where everything to do with Forgotten Legacy ends up. What did they want? Is it another baby claim?”

He shook his head. “They weren’t calling about me, or any of the guys, Harper. They were calling about you.”

“Me? But I don’t have anything to do with NFG.”

“No, but you live with me. And the easiest way to get in touch with either of us is through the record label.”

“Why would someone want to get in touch with me?”

“Remember that part where I needed you to listen without interrupting?” He squeezed my fingers. “Let me explain.”

I looked down at the photographs again. Why did they make me so nervous? “Okay. Carry on.”

“When Karl became part of the loop, he did some investigating of his own. Had it been a single call, or even two or three, it would have been put in the ‘ignore it, but just be aware of it’ pile. But these calls were daily, sometimes more than once a day. And it was the same message every single time.”

He stopped talking, sucking his bottom lip into his mouth as he looked at me. “Harper, the messages said that his name was William Jackson. He said that he was your dad, and that he’d been looking for you for a long time.”

There was a roaring sound in my ears. My skin turned cold, then clammy. My vision wavered, dimmed. Gabe called my name, but his voice was faint, as though he was far away. I couldn’t breathe.

“No. No, my dad died. When I was little. That’s why we had to leave. He killed himself. My mom said so.”

“Your mom was wrong, Harper.”

chapter

twenty-nine

GABE

FUCK.

Her face was white, her eyes almost swallowed by her pupils as she stared at me.

“Harper.” I lifted her hands to my lips and kissed her knuckles. “Baby, breathe.”

“No. No. He can’t be. It’s a lie. It’s not true.”

I stroked over her wrist with my thumb. I was the worst fucking person to be telling her this. I should have let Karl come with me. But I didn’t, so I had to see this through.

“When Karl’s quick investigation came back with the possibility that this guy wasn’t lying, he called me into the office. I wanted to tell you, but he advised that we made sure first. Telling you, possibly getting your hopes up, and then having to backtrack ... I couldn’t do that to you. So, I asked Remy to send one of his guys to check out the address the guy left on one of his calls. He’s the one who took the photographs I gave you. Karl reached out to your ... to William, and arranged a meeting. There was no way I wasn’t going to be there for that. No fucking way. So that’s where I was today. I met him and ...” I sucked in a deep breath. “Harper, he has so many photographs of you. In frames around the house, in photo albums. It seems that for a while your mom sent him photographs.”

“But ... but he *died*, Gabe. Mom said he died, and that the insurance wouldn’t pay out so we had to leave.”

“I know, baby. I know.” This was the part of the story that I wanted to hide, to keep from her, but she needed to know everything. “Some people who have early onset dementia show signs long before it becomes really apparent. Just flashes here and there. One of those signs showed when your mom and dad separated.”

“They didn’t separate.”

“Baby, please.” I dropped her hand so I could rise from the couch, and crouched in front of her. Cupping her face between my palms, I tilted her head so I could meet her eyes. “Your mom had ... Well, William called them episodes. Where she’d seem like a completely different person. She’d accuse him of things like trying to kill her, or having an affair. He tried to get her to see a doctor, but she wouldn’t believe there was a problem. Eventually, he agreed to move out, but only if he could see you. She agreed, but every time he came to see you she’d have a reason for why he couldn’t. You were upset with him. You were at a friend’s house. You were at school. He thought that maybe you were blaming him for the separation and didn’t push. He said that he hoped one day you’d forgive him, and reach out.”

“But Mom said he died. That the insurance wouldn’t pay out. And then she found out about the second mortgage, and couldn’t pay it.”

I hated how lost she sounded. Leaning forward, I cupped the back of her head and drew her down onto the floor with me. Her arms snaked around my waist. She was shaking so fucking hard.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered.

“I know. It was her illness, Harper. She convinced herself that he’d died. Maybe the more she said it, the more it became her truth. He was sending her money to pay for the house and for food and clothes for you. From the paper trail we managed to find, it seems she didn’t pay the bills. She looked after you, of course. You were her entire life. Even I could see that. But it’s like nothing else mattered. When the bank threatened to foreclose on the house, she didn’t even try to work it out. She

just packed everything up and left. We haven't figured out how she ended up in L.A. The bank eventually contacted your dad, and he managed to make arrangements so that he didn't lose the house."

"It must be a lie. Someone trying to get money out of you. A scam." There was a clear hint of hysteria in her voice.

"That's why we checked it out, Harper."

"I don't believe it." She pulled away from me.

"When your mom told you he was dead, did you go to his funeral?"

"What?"

"The funeral, Harper. Did you attend it?"

"I ... " Her bottom lip trembled. "No. Mom said I shouldn't go." Her eyes filled with tears. "Gabe, she wouldn't do that to me. She wouldn't lie like that." She shook her head. "I don't believe it. She wouldn't be so cruel. She loved my dad. In the last few months of her life, *all* she talked about was him, asking where he was!"

I hauled her back into my arms, holding her tight when she struggled to get free. "Baby, listen to me. She was sick. Even back then. You were just too young to see it. She wasn't trying to be cruel. She believed every word she told you."

"I don't believe it." There was zero conviction in her voice.

I said nothing.

"I don't believe it, Gabe. It's not him. It *can't* be."

"I have more photographs. Ones he gave to me, of you when you were little. Others of him now. Photographs of the interior of the house. He has pictures you drew. I brought some with me."

"No."

"It's a lot to take in. I know, baby. You're going to need time to let it settle and decide what you want to do."

“What I want to do?”

“He wants to see you.”

The tears in her eyes spilled down her cheeks.

chapter **thirty**

HARPER

I WOKE UP, EYES FEELING LIKE I'D RUBBED THEM WITH SAND, and a dull throbbing in my head. Gabe's body was a warm, comforting presence behind me, his arm resting over my waist holding me close against him. When I released a deep breath, his lips brushed over my shoulder.

"Hey." His voice was quiet.

I turned in his arms and burrowed closer to him. His hand caressed my back.

"How are you feeling?"

"I don't know." My voice was rough, like I'd been shouting or smoking, but was most likely from all the crying I'd been doing. My mind shied away from the reasons why. I wasn't quite ready to deal with it. "Will you do something for me?"

"Anything. Name it." His response was immediate.

"Can we just pretend that today is a normal day? There's the kids' party, and then the gig tonight."

"You don't have to go to either of them, Harper."

"No. I want to. I *need* to. I can't explain it. I just ... I need today to be normal. Both parties will be a good distraction."

"Okay. Whatever you need." His hand stroked through my hair. "But you can't ignore it forever, Frosty."

"I know. And I won't. I promise."

“Alright. Then, in that case ...” He surged into movement and tumbled me onto my back, and came down above me. “We need to get up, and get dressed, and go do the adult thing but first ... I need to do a *different* adult kind of thing.”

His mouth found mine, his thigh pushed between my legs, and for the next hour, Gabe distracted me in a way only he could.

The party was already in progress by the time we arrived. The second we stepped through the door, Gabe was covered in excited, sticky kids, all screaming his name and demanding his attention. He threw me an apologetic look when I tugged my fingers from his, and stepped back so they could swarm him.

Leaving him to their mercy, I crossed the floor of the club to where Siobhan stood.

She speared me with a sharp look when I stopped beside her. “You look tired. Everything okay?”

“I’m fine. Things are just catching up with me. It’s been a hectic few weeks.”

“You’re not wrong. I thought the holidays were supposed to be a time to relax.”

“They used to be. Do you remember how we used to celebrate Christmas?”

“By getting loaded on alcohol and food?”

“Well, that’s what *you* did. I spent it watching Christmas movies. But the point I’m making is that they were always quiet. Just the two of us.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Sometimes, but only in the sense of how everything is always chaotic these days. There’s always something to do, somewhere to be. And when we do have downtime ... I drove myself crazy yesterday looking for something to fill the hours. How did we cope?”

Siobhan laughed. “We didn’t, Harper. You’re looking at it through rose-tinted glasses. It was just as fucking stressful. We worked long hours, spent most of our days off sleeping, and

wondering where the money would come from to pay the next bill.”

“Did you ever think about reaching out to Dex in all that time?”

Her headshake was immediate. “For one, I had no contact details for him. Two, I had no idea the fuckwit was a famous rock star. And three, he denied he knew me in front of everyone. I was very much in the fuck him and the horse he rode in on camp.”

“Whose horse are you planning on fucking, Cherry Pie? Is this a new kink you’ve unlocked?” Dex stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“I was talking about you, Rock Star.”

“Oh, that’s okay then. But I don’t have a horse.”

Siobhan rolled her eyes, turned, and rapped his forehead with her knuckles. “You’re such an idiot, sometimes.”

He smirked down at her. “And yet you love every idiotic inch of me.”

I tuned them out, turning to watch as kids unwrapped gifts, played with the toys, and chased each other around the club. Memories of similar parties before I moved away played out in my head. Not quite on the same level as the one hosted at Damnation, but smaller ones. Birthday parties my parents arranged for me; ones I was invited to.

A lump rose in my throat and I swallowed it down. Now was not the time. Tomorrow, I’d think about that.

Tomorrow.

Not today.

chapter **thirty-one**

GABE

THE PARTY WENT OFF WITHOUT A HITCH, AND ALL THE KIDS returned to their homes loaded up with gifts, food, and other treats. I tried to keep one eye on Harper, and was relieved that after the first half hour, she started to smile more. When I heard her laugh, I relaxed a little.

“That’s the last of them.”

I turned at Remy’s voice.

“Diesel and Carter are taking the girls back home so they can get ready for tonight. That leaves me and Ryder in charge of getting you guys to the studio for a final practice, while the cleaners come in and get the club ready for tonight.”

“Give me a minute.” I walked past him and over to where Harper stood with Siobhan.

She smiled up at me and I reached out to brush my knuckles down her cheek. “How are you holding up?”

She nodded. “I’m okay. Siobhan is coming back to the house with me. We’ll stop at hers for her clothes first.”

Relief that she wasn’t going to spend the next couple of hours alone lightened the weight that I felt like I was carrying around. “There’s still time for me to cancel—”

“Don’t you dare.” Her voice was fierce.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

I hesitated for a moment longer, then nodded, tugging her toward me to steal a quick kiss. “Then I’ll see you tonight.”

Her smile was a little brighter than the last one. “I’ll be the groupie in the red dress.”

My eyebrow hiked. “It’s a private party. No groupies allowed.”

“That’s okay. I know the singer from one of the bands.”

“Do you now?”

“Yeah.” She tipped her head back, and the gleam in her eyes took my breath away. “He seems to really like this thing I do with my tongue.”

“Hmm. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Gabe. Stop eye-fucking Harper and get over here.” Seth’s shout ruined the moment, and her smile faded.

“Go. I’ll see you at the party later.” She hooked her arm through Siobhan’s and they headed for the exit at the back of the club.

“Did you talk to her last night?”

“Yeah.”

“She seems very—”

“Apparently, Harper has acting skills worthy of an Oscar. She wants us to pretend that today is normal and she hasn’t just found out her dad is still alive.”

“What the fuck did you just say?”

Fuck.

“You weren’t supposed to hear that.” I faced Seth.

“Well, I did. So fucking spill.”

“I’ll tell you on the ride to the studio.”

I’d updated him on the entire situation by the time we got there, swore him to secrecy before we went in, and then spent the next two hours practicing the set list ready for the gig later

that night. Then it was time to go home to shower and change, as well as picking up our favorite outfits to perform in.

By the time we got back to Damnation, people were starting to arrive. My name was called as we made our way to the front doors, and I stopped to pose for photographs for the paparazzi congregating out the front.

“Gabe! Gabe! Where’s Harper?”

“She’ll be meeting me inside.”

“Seth! Is this your first public gig since the news about your past broke?”

“You’re the fucking stalkers, you tell me.”

I laughed at Seth’s snarled response, and nodded to the doormen when they swung open the doors to let us inside. When the doors closed behind us, it silenced the noise and chaos. I grinned at Seth. He rolled his eyes.

“Can you feel it, Seth?”

“Irritation? Absolutely.”

“No. That buzz. How long has it been since we got up on stage?” I was almost bouncing up and down, already feeling that adrenaline rush that came with performing in front of a crowd. It didn’t matter that most of the people here were friends and family and had been invited. All that mattered was that anticipation in the air; that build up of excitement as everyone waited for the bands to take the stage.

chapter **thirty-two**

HARPER

I PUT THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON MY LIPSTICK THEN straightened to study myself in the full length mirror. The red dress I'd chosen shimmered and sparkled beneath the light. It was short, falling to mid-thigh, with a band of diamonds around the waist. The neckline plunged between my breasts, and the sleeves were nothing more than chiffon bands crossing over my shoulders and back.

I wore the snowflake pendant Gabe bought me, matching earrings, and the only ring on my finger was my engagement ring. Siobhan helped style my hair into a French braid, with tinsel woven through it.

“Are you ready to go?” Siobhan’s question sent me back to the first time I agreed to go out with Gabe, after he crashed into my life. He’d taken me to a movie premiere, a red carpet event. Agreeing to go to it with him had changed the course of my life.

My fingers lifted to touch the pendant hanging around my neck, and I turned to smile at my friend.

“Just need my shoes and clutch.”

“Do you think Dex will like my dress?” She twirled in the doorway. The skirts flew upward as she moved, revealing long, tanned legs.

“I doubt he’ll be able to keep his hands off you.”

She grinned. “That’s my intention.”

I laughed, and slipped my feet into the four-inch heeled shoes. Siobhan wolf-whistled.

“Gabe’s not going to know what hit him.”

“That’s my hope.” I snatched up the clutch from my bed. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

My gaze fell onto the photographs on top of the dresser as I walked to the door, and a tremor went through my body. I stiffened my spine.

Not tonight.

Holding my head up, I forced a smile onto my face, and followed Siobhan out of the house.

The sidewalk leading to the main entrance had been sectioned off by metal barriers, holding back fans and media crews. When we climbed out of the car, camera flashes went off and our names were shouted. We waved, but didn’t stop to answer any questions fired at us by reporters, and Diesel blocked their view as the doors swung open to allow us inside.

“I thought it would be less crazy without Gabe and Dex with us,” I muttered, once the doors closed behind us.

“Really, Harper? You still haven’t figured out that they’re just as interested in us as the guys. We’re clearly special, otherwise we wouldn’t have sexy rock gods devoted to us.”

I slanted a look at her. “Sexy rock gods?”

Her red-painted lips tilted into a smirk. “You don’t think Gabe is a sexy rock god?”

“I mean ... yeah, but please don’t go around saying that where he can hear you. Where *any* of them can hear you. Their egos don’t need to be inflated—” I gasped.

Turning the corner into the main part of the club, we walked into ... an ice palace.

The entire club’s main floor had been transformed. Glittering snowflakes hung from the ceiling. The huge tree in the corner sparkled and shimmered. Ice sculptures decorated the room—of all three bands performing, of Santa Claus

leaving gifts beneath a tree, of reindeers pulling a sled, of elves and nymphs and fairies, and ...

“Oh my god!” Siobhan clapped her hands, then grabbed my arm. “*Look* at that!”

“I’m looking.” I breathed the words. I was torn between awe and embarrassment.

The fairies were *us*—me, Siobhan, Riley, and Everleigh. They were beautiful, stunning in their accuracy ... but inside I was dying because the one of *me* was wearing a crown of snowflakes. She was perched on the edge of a crystal throne, with one hand outstretched. Balanced in her palm, was a strawberry.

I covered my face with my palms, torn between groaning and laughing.

“Hey, Frosty.” Warm arms encircled my waist from behind. “You look fucking stunning.” Gabe pressed a kiss to my shoulder. “I was watching from the VIP room when you walked in. Needed a minute before it was safe to walk out in public. Might have taken someone’s eye out with my hard-on.”

I spluttered a laugh, and turned in his arms, and the breath caught in my throat.

Gabe was handsome. It was a fact that was hard to ignore. He was one of those guys who could wear *anything* and make it look good. On a day to day basis, he was rarely seen in anything other than band t-shirts, and black jeans or sweatpants, but now and then an occasion would call for a suit.

And there was *something* about Gabe in a suit.

His gray eyes danced as he looked down at me, and his thumb swept lightly across my bottom lip.

“Are you drooling, Harper?” There was a teasing note to his voice.

“Maybe ... a little. Let me look at you.” I pressed my hand against his chest and stepped back. His arms dropped to release me, and his head tilted, while I swept my gaze over him. The black suit had clearly been made especially for him.

He'd combined it with a black silk shirt, and a dark purple tie. The tie was loose, his collar unbuttoned, revealing the start of those black flames which covered his throat.

“I'm sure there's a law against looking like you do.”

He laughed. “We can go to prison together, then.” His gaze softened. “You look incredible, Harper.” He held out his hand. “Ready to mingle?”

chapter **thirty-three**

GABE

WE MADE THE ROUNDS, STOPPING AT EACH LITTLE CLUSTER OF people to talk. The turnout had been fantastic—a mixture of friends, family, and some lucky Forgotten Legacy Official Fan Club winners. Those ticket holders were obvious by the fact they were hovering on the edges of the dancefloor, gaping any time someone famous walked past them.

I nudged Harper. “Want to go and blow their minds?”

She followed the direction of my gaze, and laughed quietly. “I can see *you* want to, so let’s go.”

We made our way over to the group of five. “Hi.”

A blonde girl gave a strangled gasp.

“Congratulations on winning the tickets,” Harper said.

I wasn’t so polite. “Who did you have to bribe?”

“*Gabe!*” She swatted my arm, when two of the prize-winners turned red. “He’s just teasing.”

“Mostly.” I grinned at their horrified expressions. “I believe part of the prize is to meet all the bands, right?”

They nodded as one. “I’ll make sure that happens. Jaded Souls should be taking the stage soon. If you make your way over there,” I jerked my chin to the left of the stage. “That’s where they’ll approach from. If you have anything you’d like them to sign, have it ready.”

“Th-thanks!” the redheaded girl stuttered.

“Would you like to get a photograph with Gabe *before* he gets all sweaty on stage?” Harper asked.

There was more rapid nodding.

“Give me your phones then. I’ll take them for you.”

I posed for photographs with each of them, then the redhead gave Harper a shy smile.

“Would you mind having a photograph with me?”

“*Me?*”

The surprise in Harper’s voice made me laugh out loud. “I’m not laughing at you, I swear,” I said to the girl. “It’s just I keep telling Harper that she’s important, and she doesn’t believe it.”

“Oh my gosh,” the girl said. “You’re literally my hero! All the work you’ve done with the Mercer-Jackson Foundation. I grew up being bounced around foster homes, and what you’re doing ...” She bites her lip. “It’s important.”

Harper’s cheeks were bright pink. She reached out and pulled the girl into a hug, kissing her cheek. “Thank you.”

I took her phone, and snapped a couple of photographs, then stood behind them and took two more selfies with all three of us.

“We have open job positions, you know,” I said quietly. “You should apply, if it’s something you’re interested in.”

The girl’s eyes widened.

“Add one of these photographs to your submission, and I’ll tell the admin team to watch out for it.”

“Do you mean it? Really?”

Harper nodded. “As long as you meet the criteria. We try to hire people who lived in the system as much as possible. We firmly believe that the unique insight they have helps.”

The girl threw her arms around Harper. “Thank you!”

“You better go. I can see Gage making his way to the stage.”

As I spoke, the lights dimmed, and Ray, our senior doorman stepped onto the stage and took the mic.

“This isn’t a typical night in Damnation. Everyone here was invited. Looking at some of the faces, I don’t know why.” Laughter rang out. “But here you are, and we have one hell of a line up for you. There’s rock royalty in the building tonight. Three of the best, if not *the* best rock bands in the world. Starting the line-up, we have Jaded Souls, then Black Rosary will be here to entertain, and we’ll be closing with our favorite house band.” His gaze found mine and he grinned. I flipped him my middle finger. “I won’t make you wait any longer. Can I get a cheer for Jaded Souls?”

The lights went off, and a second later the wail of a guitar filled the room.

We stood and watched their set, Harper dancing and singing beside me along with the rest of the crowd. Once they were done, there was a fifteen minute break, while the roadies changed out their equipment for Black Rosary’s, and then the designated King of Rock took the stage.

Midway through their set, I leaned close to Harper.

“I need to go and get changed. Do you want to stay here or come up to the VIP room?”

In reply, she linked her fingers with mine, and we weaved our way through the screaming crowd to the stairs that led up to our private domain.

The rest of the band, their girls, and our friends were already up there. I bumped shoulders with Shaun and Deacon, kissed Cassie and Gemma’s cheeks, congratulated Gage and the rest of Jaded Souls on their performance, then stopped beside Seth, who was at the window watching Black Rosary.

“Marley’s on form.”

“He always is.” Seth turned. “Ready to go down there?”

“Just need to change, and then I’m so fucking ready.”

He nodded. “Fifteen minutes. Go do what you need to do.”

chapter **thirty-four**

HARPER

THE ATMOSPHERE WAS ELECTRIC. BLACK ROSARY LEFT THE stage twenty minutes ago. The lights remained off. Standing up in the VIP room, *knowing* the band wasn't even on the stage yet, I could still feel the anticipation lacing the air.

I was on edge, my heart already racing. It was the same every single time I watched Gabe on stage. There was something about it, about *him*. I loved the boy I'd grown up with, I loved the man he'd become, but there was another side to him. One that only came alive when he was up on the stage and while every single aspect of him made my heart race, there was something *extra* about Gabe *Fucking* Mercer the rock star.

"Let's go." He spoke from behind me, and I could *hear* the change. There was an added element to his voice, an electric charge that made the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and my entire body come alive.

I turned, and my lips parted. He'd changed out of his suit and into low-riding leather pants ... and *nothing* else. His hair was messy, spiked in places. Leather wraps covered both wrists, and rings glinted on every finger. When my eyes met his, he cocked one brow.

"There's one thing missing," I said.

I took my compact out of my clutch, found my lipstick and reapplied it, and then to a chorus of catcalls and wolf whistles, I lowered myself to my knees in front of him.

His head canted as he looked down at me. Holding his gaze, I leaned forward, and pressed a kiss just above his hip, then lifted my head to inspect my work.

The print of my lips was clear against his skin. I topped up my lipstick and repeated the action on the other side, then nodded.

“There.”

A smile danced across his lips. “Perfect.”

His knuckles brushed down my cheek, then he spun away and walked out of the door, the rest of Forgotten Legacy behind him.

“Is everyone staying up here to watch?” I asked.

“I am,” Everleigh replied from her seat on one of the couches. “There’s no way I can stand for that long, so I’ll watch from here.”

“Riley’s already down there as the official photographer,” Siobhan said. She linked her arm with mine. “I know you want to be in the thick of it, so let’s get down there and scream like the unashamed groupies we are.”

Laughing, we made our way downstairs and pushed through to the front of the crowd. Movement caught my eye on the left and I squinted through the darkness, trying to make out the band.

When the first thrum of Dex’s bass vibrated through the floor, my heart beat turned rapid.

Lights flickered and flashed, showing brief glimpses of silhouettes on the stage.

A drum joined the bass, merging together to form the sound of a heart beat, echoing around the club.

The lights flashed again, giving everyone a quick glimpse of a single shape in the center of the stage.

The next flash stayed longer.

The third longer still.

A guitar screeched.

Drums crashed.

And the bass continued its rhythmic beat, my heart thudding along in time with it.

Then everything stopped.

I held my breath.

The screen at the back of the stage flickered.

Wings unfurled.

And then a spotlight shone down, revealing a man, head thrown back, arms spread wide, angel wings spread out behind him.

Everyone—friends, family, celebrities, and fans—screamed.

“Merry Christmas, Damnation.” Gabe’s throaty growl shattered the spell, and Seth’s guitar launched into the opening of ‘Forever Broken.’

chapter **thirty-five**

GABE

‘FOREVER BROKEN’ MERGED INTO ‘ETERNITY’, AND I strutted across the stage, one arm thrown out while I sang the lyrics. When I reached Seth, I threw my arm across his shoulder and leaned my head against the side of his, and stopped singing.

Dex’s bass slowed to a halt, along with Luca’s drums, until it was only Seth’s guitar, as he moved flawlessly out of one of our songs and into ‘Yellow Ledbetter’ by Pearl Jam. Slowly the rest of the band joined in, and I dove into the lyrics, pushing away from Seth to stroll across to Dex, who flashed a grin at me. I continued my circuit, until I was back by Seth just in time for the guitar solo.

The lights dropped, and the spotlight trained itself on Seth who stood, head thrown back, eyes closed, while he made his guitar sing. When the song was finished, the crowd screamed. Seth caught my gaze, and he gave me a rare public smile.

I grinned, and the music changed, flowing into ‘Miss Jackson’ by Panic! At The Disco. I bounced to the front of the stage, searching out my girl in her red dress. She was at the front, arms in the air, jumping up and down, with Siobhan beside her.

I pointed at her just as I hit the chorus, blew her a kiss, then spun to Seth. Stalking over to him, I moved up behind him, propped my chin on his shoulder and looked out over the crowd.

With a slow grin, I turned my head, licked my way up his throat, and planted a loud, wet kiss on his cheek. The crowd went wild.

Exhilaration was like a fire burning through my veins. I felt alive, like I was connected to the music, to the band, to the *fans*. Their excitement built mine, until it buzzed like an electric charge under my skin. I was burning up, full of adrenaline, wired, and fucking high as a kite. Being on stage was like a fix, a drug. One I was addicted to and had no desire to stop taking.

One song flowed into another, and we were at the end of our performance way too quickly.

The second the lights dropped, I jumped off the stage, caught Harper's hand and dragged her along with me until we were through the fire exit and out in the secluded back alley. Spinning her to face me, I backed her against the wall, and kissed her, tongue pushing between her lips to tangle around hers.

She met my fire with fire, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me closer. I reached down, curved a hand around her leg and lifted it to hook over my hip, then ground my dick against her.

There was no need for words.

Her hand slid between our bodies, beneath the waistband of my pants and over my dick. I thrust against her palm, and her fingers curled around it and squeezed.

My hand slid over her thigh, beneath the silky material of her dress. I smiled when I encountered no panties stopping me, and I didn't even wait. My fingers plunged inside her. She moaned against my mouth, her fingers flexing around my dick.

"Ever fucked a rock star?" I whispered.

"Once or twice."

"Want to fuck one now?"

"Yes, please."

I pulled my fingers free from her body and stepped back. “Turn around, face the wall.”

She did, resting her palms against the stone. I drew the dress up her legs, revealing her ass. Dropping to my knees, I pressed a kiss to each rounded cheek, then reached around to spread her pussy open with my fingers.

“So fucking perfect.” I flicked her clit. “Spread your legs, baby. Show me what you have for me.”

Her stance widened. I couldn't eat her pussy from this angle, so I settled for licking along her thighs, while I pumped two fingers in and out of her until she was jerking and whimpering as she soaked my hand. When she shuddered and gasped, her pussy tightening around my fingers with her orgasm, I carefully slid them free, I gave her ass a light pat, another kiss, then rose to my feet, pulled out my dick, and thrust into her pussy.

I slid in easily. She was wet, and so fucking ready for me, and I just stood there, savoring how it felt to have her wrapped around my dick. One of her hands found my hip, her nails digging in when I didn't move.

“I swear to all that is holy, if you don't start fucking me, Gabe ...”

My chuckle was thick and raspy. “The mouth on you ... I should keep you on the edge forever. I love how dirty you get when you want to be fucked.”

“Gabe!”

“What do you want, Harper? Do you want my dick deeper? Do you want me to fuck you until your screams echo around the alley? Until people come to see what's happening? What will they see?” I rolled my hips, and she moaned softly. “You bent over with my dick buried in your pussy, cum dripping down your legs. What a fucking sight it is. Your perfect ass, your tits falling out of your dress, your nail marks in my skin.” I stretched out an arm to cover her hand with mine as I thrust into her. “Did seeing me on stage make you wet, Harper? Does it turn you on? Did you want to touch

yourself while I was up there? Did you slip those fingers into your pretty pussy while the lights were off? Did you make yourself come in the crowd, Harper? You're not wearing any panties, so it would have been easy to do."

"Gabe!" My name was a gasp, her nails clawing at my thigh as I drove into her.

"Would you do that for me? Stand in the crowd with your fingers on your clit while I sing to you?"

Her orgasm hit hard, her back arching and body shaking so much my dick almost slipped out. I wound an arm around her waist to hold her steady, and slammed into her, chasing my own high. Mine hit just as hard as hers, my legs buckling, and I dropped my head against her shoulder, bracing myself against the wall, chest heaving, sweat dripping down my back.

My heart pounded against my ribs, the sound loud in my ears, as I fought to regain control of my breathing.

"Fuck." The word was a croak, and I kissed my way along her throat, while I eased out of her body. "I don't have anything to clean up with."

Her laugh was shaky. "There are tissues in my purse."

"Where's your purse?"

"On the ground somewhere."

I glanced around, spotted it a couple of feet away and grabbed it. Finding the tissues, I pressed a couple between her legs, kissing a path along her thigh, and cleaned up the mess.

When I was done, I straightened, and tugged her gently around to face me so I could cup her face and kiss her.

"I fucking love you, Harper Jackson."

chapter **thirty-six**

HARPER

I WAS SITTING AT THE KITCHEN TABLE WHEN GABE CAME INTO the room. He looked tired, his hair in messy spikes from hands running through it. A smile curled my lips as he wandered across the floor, barefoot and half naked. The sweats he wore hung low on his hips, all the tattoos covering his arms, chest and back on show.

“I can feel you looking at me.” His voice held that familiar after-show rasp and it heated my blood ... and my cheeks.

“There’s coffee in the pot.” I dragged my attention from his back, and looked down at the photographs I’d been studying before he came in, and listened to the sounds of him making a drink.

His fingers stroked across my shoulder seconds before he kissed my cheek and dragged out the chair beside mine. Settling onto it, he sipped his coffee and looked at me over the rim of the mug.

“What?”

“I can’t just look at you?”

“Not like *that*.” I waved a hand toward his face.

“I can’t change my eyes, Harper. I always look at people with them.”

“That isn’t what I mean, and you know it.”

He set the mug down and drew one of the photographs over to him. “Have you decided what you want to do?”

“I want to meet him.”

Gabe didn't speak.

“I have to, really, don't I? Otherwise, I'll never know the truth. I'm the only one who can say if he's ... who he says he is.”

Silence greeted my words. I bit my lip, then blurted the words that had been on a loop in my head since waking up.

“I have to know, Gabe. But ... what if he is? What if my mom did keep me from him all that time? How can I forgive that?”

He touched my cheek, then pressed two fingers beneath my chin to lift my head. His face was serious when I met his gaze.

“Your mom was sick long before you realized it, Harper. In her world, she did what she thought was right. She is still your mom, and she still loved you with everything she was. Nothing changes that.”

I pressed my lips together to stop them wobbling.

His thumb brushed over them, then he leaned closer and kissed me, just a quick brush of his lips against mine, before he drew back.

“Where do you want to meet him?”

“I ... don't know. It'll have to be after Christmas. Maybe I should fly to Portland ... but—” I frowned. “What?” There was a strange expression on Gabe's face.

“You don't need to fly to Portland.”

“But that's where he lives ... you said that, right?”

“Yeah, but ...” He blew out a breath. “He's in a hotel here in L.A. He came back with us.”

“He ... You ... He's here?” I whispered.

Gabe shrugged. “I thought that if you *did* want to see him, it'd be easier if he was nearby.” He scratched his jaw. “We can

go there, or bring him here. Whichever you're most comfortable with."

"Now? Today?" My voice rose. "Gabe, I don't—"

"Frosty, take a breath. Whenever you want. It doesn't have to be today."

I stared at him. "You knew I wouldn't want to wait. Not once I thought about it."

He shrugged again.

"Can you ..." I licked my lips and swallowed past the lump in my throat. "Do you think he would come here ... today?"

Gabe unfolded himself from his chair. "I'll call the hotel. Remy will go and get him."

"Now?"

"If you want to do it, Harper, we might as well do it now. No point in dragging it out. It'll only stress you out more." He took my hand and lifted it to his lips. "Look at it this way. He wouldn't have flown all the way out to L.A. if he wasn't happy to drop everything the second you want to see him." He drew me to my feet. "Take a shower and get dressed. As much as I love you smelling like me, it's not the greatest first impression I want to make on my potential father-in-law."

"Are you saying I *smell*?" Worry and concern over meeting a man who might be the dad I thought I'd lost dissolved into outrage over Gabe's words.

"I'm not *not* saying it. I like it. You smell of good sex and *me*. I'm just putting it out there that you probably shouldn't smell like you've had a six-hour sex marathon when you meet him."

I gaped at him, then shook my head. "I already showered, you asshole. I do not smell like sex."

"Maybe that's me, then." His smile was slow and wicked. "Or wishful thinking. But we don't have time. I'll go and make arrangements."

chapter **thirty-seven**

GABE

“THEY’RE HERE.” MY QUIET WORDS STOPPED HARPER’S pacing mid-step.

Her eyes darted to the door, and she shook her head. “I’ve changed my mind. I can’t do it.”

She turned, and I was sure she was about to flee, so I caught her hand and reeled her in until she crashed into my chest. Wrapping my arm around her waist, I secured her in place.

“Baby, look at me.”

She shook her head again.

“Harper.” I injected a firmer note to my voice. “Do you remember when you forced me to acknowledge Tate? Do you remember what you said about it being important, how it would give me something I didn’t know I was missing? That applies here, baby. That man out there has been trying to find you for years. He never gave up, even when he was threatened with NFG lawyers. *That’s* how important you are to him.”

She lifted her head, eyes swimming with tears. “But ... but what if he’s disappointed?”

“Like fuck, Harper. No one could *ever* be disappointed in you.” I rested my forehead against hers. “You are an amazing woman. Fucking beautiful, inside and out.” I summoned my Gabe *Fucking* Mercer persona and pulled out an arrogant smile. “You wouldn’t have caught me if you weren’t something special.”

As intended, she rolled her eyes and laughed. My cell chimed, and I checked the messages.

Remy: We're outside. How do you want to do this?

Me: We're coming out.

I pocketed my cell, and took Harper's hand. "Ready to do this?"

"No?"

I squeezed her fingers. "I'll be right beside you." Without waiting for a reply, I led her across the entrance hall and opened the door.

Remy's car was parked at the bottom of the steps, and as we stepped outside, he rounded the car to open the back passenger door. Harper's breath hitched beside me when the man inside climbed out.

"Daddy?" She whispered beside me, shock clear in her voice. "Oh my god."

She pulled free from my grip and almost threw herself down the steps and into his waiting arms. It was at that moment it dawned on me that she hadn't truly believed it was him. When I heard her sob, I started after her only for Remy to intercept me.

"Give them a minute." He laid a hand on my arm.

We stood together, listening to Harper's sobs while her dad murmured quiet words I couldn't quite hear, and eventually she sniffed and stepped back, looking around and giving me a wobbly smile.

"Okay," Remy murmured. "You can go now."

I closed the distance between us, and held out my hand. "I know we've already met, but it's nice to meet you, Mr. Jackson."

Both of his hands clasped mine. “It’s Billy, son. You can call me Billy. Hell, you can call me anything you like after bringing my daughter back to me.”

“Billy will work just fine.” I laughed quietly. “Why don’t you come inside? I’m sure you and Harper have a lot to talk about.”

epilogue

GABE

WITH A LOT OF FAST TALKING AND CALLING IN OF FAVORS, while Harper reconnected with her dad, I'd managed to arrange for everyone to come to our house for dinner. And when I said everyone, I meant *everyone*.

They'd all descended on the house early, and Harper's face had been a movie reel of emotions. She disappeared twice, and I was certain she locked herself away to cry, but always returned with a bright smile a few minutes later.

I arranged to have Christmas dinner delivered—because I didn't want to cook, and I sure as hell wasn't going to let Harper cook for the amount of people I'd invited—and Luca, Seth, and Dex all helped get everything from the kitchen to the dining room.

It was the first time we'd ever used the room for entertaining ... well, entertaining anyone outside of ourselves, anyway ... and it was almost surreal hearing everyone's happy chatter and laughter as we passed around plates and ate the food.

Afterward, the girls insisted on cleaning up and I wandered across to the piano to tap out Christmas songs.

Harper's dad was sitting in a corner, chatting with Luca's parents and Everleigh's mom. Riley's mom, Karl, Seth's parents, and Tate's were standing beside the smaller Christmas tree we'd put up in the dining room. Seth, Luca, and Dex were all still sitting at the dinner table, deep in discussion. Fuck

knows what was so interesting. Siobhan and Riley were either side of Everleigh, laughing at whatever they were looking at on a cell phone.

And Harper ...

Harper was coming toward me, a smile lighting up her face.

She was so fucking beautiful.

She came to a stop behind me, her hands sliding over my shoulders. I tipped my head back to look up at her, and continued to play.

“Hey, Frosty.”

“Hey, yourself.”

This close, her cotton candy scent swirled around me.

“I was thinking ...”

“Go steady there. That’s a dangerous sport.”

She punched my shoulder lightly. “You were right.”

“Okay, I like where this conversation is going. Tell me more about all the things I’m right about.”

“You’re such an asshole.” But there was no trace of anger in her voice, only warmth and amusement.

“And yet you love me, anyway.”

“I clearly have unresolved issues.”

I laughed. “Ouch. That hurts.”

“Do you think you could shut up for a minute and listen to me?”

I let my fingers slide off the piano keys, straightened and turned on the stool to face her. “Okay, I’m sorry. What have you been thinking about?”

“We should set a date and get married. Soon. No more excuses.”

A smile spread across my face. “You want to make an honest man out of me?”

“I don’t think I’d go that far. It’s a wedding, not a miracle.”

“Someone has their sassy pants on today.” I arched an eyebrow.

“Sassy pants? Really, Gabe?”

“I have it on good authority that a *certain someone* was called that a lot when she was little.”

She planted her hands on her hips. “I can see that putting you and my dad in the same room too often is going to be a bad idea.” Her smile faltered, and she blinked rapidly. “My dad,” she repeated softly, her head turning to search him out briefly before turning back to me. “I never thought ... I still can’t believe it.”

Pushing to my feet, I looped my arms around her waist. “Merry Christmas, Harper.” I dipped my head to kiss her. “I’m not sure how I’m going to top resurrecting your dad as a Christmas present, but I’m going to have fun trying for the rest of our lives.”

If you enjoyed this Forgotten Legacy novella, please leave a review on your preferred site.

As always, if there’s anything you’d like to talk about, you can join the [Forgotten Legacy Discussion Group](#) on Facebook.

afterword

Usually this is where I beg for your trust. But this is just a Christmas story, a brief foray back into the world of Forgotten Legacy ... just to remind you Gabe and the guys still exist.

I hope you enjoyed catching up with them. We should do it again sometime ;)