

Tapping THE
ROCKSTAR

RUBY WILDE

TAMING THE ROCKSTAR

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS AGE GAP ROMANCE

RUBY WILDE

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INTRODUCTION

One rule: Never fall for a playboy rockstar.

But when I land the dream gig managing the hottest rock band on the planet, all bets are off.

In comes Vince Exter.

Lead guitarist.

Tatted temptation drenched in the smoky allure of cigars and whiskey.

He's every bit the bad boy, with an ego that's outlived countless tour managers.

And he's convinced I won't make the cut.

But every chord he strums, every lyric he croons, feels like they're meant for me.

My defenses crumble.

Every stolen glance, every sizzling touch, has me second-guessing my rule.

I crave the wild taste of rebellion, the thrill of his lips on mine.

But in this high stakes game of love and rock 'n roll, one wrong note could end my career.

And yet, Vince might just be the encore I never knew I needed.

CHAPTER I

LYNDSEY

Philadelphia, PA. 3:06 A.M.

Present Day

Vincent Exter is a sex-crazed, walking STI with a Stratocaster. And for the next three months, he is my problem.

When I signed on to work as tour manager for the Imposters, I was starstruck, wooed by the dream of consistent pay and a tour budget big enough to accommodate hotel rooms.

I thought it would be easy; the Imposters have been touring for decades, but how wrong I was.

I got what I wanted, and it sucks. That's what Priya should have called this tour—the *Imposters Present: Lyndsey's Dreams Suck*.

I'm in another nondescript hotel room, desperately trying to get some sleep. I punch the pillow for the tenth time and flip

onto my stomach when I hear him. Vince is giggling and stumbling; I hear the unmistakable awestruck coos of a nameless groupie.

“I can’t believe it’s really you!” She swoons.

“Well, believe it, baby doll,” he shoots back; his accent, once endearing, now grates. He sounds like a coked-up cousin of the Beatles. His combat boots shake the floor outside my room as he fumbles for his key card, probably deep in the depths of his skintight leather pants.

“One second, love,” he mutters. I hear his oafish knuckles knocking against the key card slot as he attempts to jam his keycard into my room. I don’t bother to get up and tell him he’s next door. I hope he can figure it out.

I flip my pillow over again. Vince’s scrawny elbow rams into the door.

“Maybe flip your card the other way around?” the groupie suggests.

“Great idea, Cynthia. Are you sure you don’t work in ... what would this be? Hotels?”

“Hospitality.”

“Well, you are quite hospitable.” Cue the wet, sloppy mouth sounds and me trying not to barf. They make out for what seems like hours until Vince jams his key card into my door for the twelfth time. I groan and flip on the bedside lamp before sulking over to the door and opening it.

He stares at me as if I’ve just performed a magic trick.

“Lyndsey! What are you doing in my room?” he asks.

“Hi,” the woman, who I presume is Cynthia, squeaks. She wears a velvet jumpsuit, and her bleach-blonde hair is piled in an artfully messy bun.

I’m clad in an oversized wolf shirt I found at a Minnesota truck stop and men’s track shorts. I also have in the mouth guard my dentist prescribed due to my incessant teeth grinding. I try to be as subtle as possible, placing the mouth

guard in the pocket of my shorts while Vince and Cynthia stare at each other.

“Vince, this isn’t your room. It’s my room. This is 1412. You’re 1416,” I explain.

Vince’s blue eyes expand, and it looks like a cartoon lightbulb is about to appear above his shaggy, dark hair.

“Is that so?” he asks, completely oblivious to the fact that he’s the reason I grind my teeth.

“Yep,” I say.

“Now, which way is that?” he asks.

“To your left, past the ice machine. You were just there ...” I mentally calculate, “...eight hours ago.”

He shrugs. “Time’s an illusion, innit?” Then he pats me on the shoulder like we’re teammates.

“Thanks, Lynds. I’ll see you tomorrow morning!”

“See ya.” I groan.

Some days, tour management feels less like exploring the inner workings of the music industry and more like wrangling a bunch of fifty-year-olds with the libidos and attitudes of overgrown teenagers.

They say people mentally stay at the age when they become famous, so in the minds of Vince, Priya, Apollo, and Henry, they’re forever twenty-two—even as they approach fifty-two. But Apollo has a wife and kids. Priya probably knows the universe’s secrets, and Henry is so polite he could converse with a brick wall.

Vince is the only one who lives up to his wild rockstar reputation, with exorbitant bills of hotel damages to prove it.

Tonight, I’m grateful all he did was bring a girl back to the wrong room rather than chuck a TV out the window.

Rock and roll is all fun and games until you’re the person explaining to the front desk that the band decided to take ‘shrooms and peel off the wallpaper because they thought they found a portal.

But I love tour management. I love seeing the world and seeing how music is made without the added pressure of facing thousands of expectant faces every night.

I'm hidden in plain sight.

No one ever stops me for an autograph. I look simple enough with shaggy blonde hair, brown eyes, and wire-rimmed glasses. I'm five-nine, and I can't walk in heels to save my life. I stand as a stark contrast to the occasional glamour around me, and that's just the way I like it.

When I got the phone call to work for the Imposters, one of the most iconic rock acts of all time, I had no idea how much my life would change.



Pasadena, CA.

Three Weeks Ago.

“Fuck, Tori, you’re breaking up!” I hissed into my phone as I jimmied the portable printer.

Lola, the lead singer of Oli June, applied a liquid blush to her stark cheekbones. She was petite, prone to wearing rainbow-colored bomber jackets, and sprinting around onstage with her guitar; like a rock’ n’ roll Tinkerbell hopped up on Adderall and kombucha.

I wore my usual uniform of a black hoodie, gray tank top, and black jeans. Unlike seventy percent of the industry, I wasn’t here to be noticed. I kept my shaggy, blonde hair in a loose ponytail and tried to offset the fact that I was 5’9 by wearing the same pair of beat-up Converse sneakers.

We were finishing up a month-long stint along the East Coast before heading back to L.A. I landed the gig as Lola's tour manager through her cousin I knew in college. Fast forward, and what began as a summer fling with American gas stations became my career and legitimate livelihood.

"I said, I have good news for both of us!" she howled into the receiver. Tori was the only other "industry" friend who wasn't a musician. She managed a couple of different bands.

"What news?" I asked, slapping the printer with my palm. It came alive with a screech and started to print out the setlist at a painfully loud crawl.

"I got! I-I-I—" It sounded like Tori was in a tunnel, but I knew I was the one deep underground at the Canyon Club. Who decided that green rooms had to have the same energy as medieval dungeons? I leaned back against the cool cement wall and pressed my phone closer to my ear.

"I got into grad school!" Tori finished. The setlist was warm in my hand. I passed it to Lola, who nodded in approval before passing it to KD, the bassist.

"Since when are you going to grad school?" I stepped outside into the small hallway; the reception was much clearer.

"Just got in two days ago. Urban Planning at UCLA, with a stipend!"

"Dude, that's amazing!" I knew Tori wanted to return to school. She started looking into graduate programs during COVID, but I figured she'd put the application process on hold once touring picked back up. Touring isn't exactly the most conducive environment for academic success.

"It is, but—okay, this is going to sound insane, but you listen to the Imposters, right?"

"Yeah, Tor, I have ears and a mom who listens to NPR; I know who the Imposters are. I had a poster of Priya on my bedroom wall growing up."

The Imposters were prolific, sonic sorcerers, with the funk edge of the Talking Heads and the kinetic energy of early Patti

Smith. They'd been touring since the early eighties. Music journalists compared Priya to Poly Styrene of the X-Ray Spex for her bombastic stage presence.

She could do a cartwheel onstage and make you cry in the same breath. The band's interpersonal history was equally intriguing; trying to sort out who slept with whom and when would make the most hardcore tabloid devotee pop an Advil and reinvest in red string.

So yes, I loved the Imposters. I grew up listening to the Imposters; their Christmas album (a psychedelic cash grab with more than one sitar) was my mom's favorite.

"I was supposed to TM for them for the North American run of the Glass Eyes reunion tour, but the tour starts the day of my orientation."

"Oh, shit! I forgot that was happening!" Their first record, Glass Eyes, was turning thirty in the fall. Though Priya disliked touring, her management released a statement saying she was excited to return to the road and 'get the band back together', as they say."

"Yeah, and I was supposed to TM! I know this is crazy! It starts in two weeks, and you're with Lola right now." I nodded, and my stomach clenched in anticipation at what she was about to say.

"But would you like to TM for them?" Tori asked.

I nodded vigorously and without hesitation. I could think of few things I wanted to do more than traverse the country with the number one slot on Rolling Stone's "100 Rock Acts Who Changed the Game." Plus, with prolific album sales comes prolific accommodations.

The days of me sleeping in the passenger seat of a four-seater Honda Civic with the neck of a guitar digging into my skull were ending. Even though touring was exhilarating, I was still living paycheck-to-paycheck, thanks to my student loans. Working for a band as big as the Imposters would change my life. I wouldn't have to sublet my apartment during

the tour! I could pay rent up front! I could stop worrying every time my bank sent me an email!

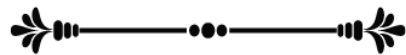
“I’d love to,” I said breathlessly. I checked my watch; the show was about to start.

“Great, I know you have to go but check your email when you have WI-FI tonight, okay? I’ll link you up with their A&R guy, and he can send over a contract.”

“Awesome, thank you!” I hung up the phone and hustled back into the dressing room, where Lola and the band were getting ready to go onstage.

“What’s with the phone call?” Lola asked, shoving an in-ear monitor into her eardrum.

“Um, I think my life just changed.”



Two weeks later, I was about to embark upon what I was pretty sure was the rest of my life.

To celebrate, my mom, my best friend Allison, and her mom Abbie arranged a going-away dinner for me. How they managed to find a life-size cut-out of every member of the Imposters was beyond me.

My mom, Mikki, lived in a ranch-style bungalow in Pasadena, though she’d tell anyone who asked she lived in L.A. She was a typical hippie mom: a devout fan of NPR, farmers’ markets, and reusable tote bags.

She decided to celebrate my departure by cracking open a bottle of natural wine and grilling veggie skewers. The four of us sat around a wooden picnic table she found at a yard sale. The air was heavy with the scent of blooming flowers. She’d strung fairy lights between the treetops.

“I wonder what they’ll be like,” my mom said. She was a petite woman in her late fifties, with a silver shag haircut and vibrant green eyes. Tonight, she wore a pair of track shorts and an old Imposter’s T-shirt that she’d cut the sleeves off. She struggled to light the grill.

“Hot. I think the answer is hot,” my best friend Allison replied.

We’d been best friends since elementary school, and our moms became best friends as well. While I was quiet and reserved, Allison was naturally outgoing. She wore her bleach-blonde hair in a blunt bob that framed her large, blue eyes. She was studying fashion.

Today, she wore a crop top that she’d crocheted herself and denim cut-off shorts. Allison walked over to my mom’s side and helped her light the grill. It sparked, and they high fived.

Allison’s mom, Abbie, hooted as she poured herself a glass of wine. Abbie was both mine and Allison’s elementary school art teacher. She never met a cardigan she didn’t like and swore by using egg cartons as paint pallets. Her house was a riot of color and plants, and she staunchly refused to retire.

“Well, Al, we know they’re hot! We all have eyes!” Abbie gushed. It was not lost on me that my mom and Abbie became friends because they were, essentially, middle-aged Imposters fangirls. I’d been reminded of that fact more and more as they begged me to FaceTime them while I was on tour.

“They’re just people,” I reminded them for the umpteenth time as I poured myself a glass of wine.

My mom stared at me like I’d cussed her out. “How dare you!”

“Priya is a goddess!” Abbie asserted.

“And that guitar player, what’s his name? Vince?”

“Oh, Vince,” Abbie cooed as she mimed swooning.

Though admitting it would make my mom disown me, I was unimpressed by Vince, the Imposter’s guitarist- a sex-crazed shithead with a Stratocaster. My plan for him was to steer clear; the last thing I needed was to get involved with a walking STI wearing leather pants.

“Don’t get me started! He still looks so good!” my mom squealed.

I rolled my eyes.

“He’s just a person,” I reiterated.

“How is it that I’ve raised the most boring person in rock and roll?” my mom mused as she set the veggie skewers in front of us.

“I’m not boring! I’m being realistic. We all know you have a highly romanticized version of the music industry,” I shot back.

“I think you can romanticize this a bit. This is cool as hell!” Allison said.

“What if you fall in love on the road?” she added. I rolled my eyes. Touring made maintaining romantic relationships a living hell. I hadn’t dated anyone seriously since college. And while I’d been guilty of fucking an errant roadie here or there, I wasn’t looking for anything serious.

“The road’s the best place to fall in love! Just stay away from drummers,” Abbie warned me.

“I don’t care about drummers! They’re my colleagues! That’d be like telling you to stay away from Principal Sackler!” I said, growing exasperated.

“She’s got her dumb rule!” my mom added.

“Oh, who could forget?” Allison said.

Together, Allison, my mom, and Abbie took a deep breath before trilling: “Never fall in love on the road.”

“Again, honey, I love you, but you’re so boring,” my mom said.

“I’m sorry you think having boundaries is boring,” I grumbled, dipping a grilled piece of red pepper into the container of hummus my mom had set out on the picnic table.

“Besides, it’s not drummers you should stay away from; it’s guitarists,” Abbie added.

“Duly noted,” I deadpanned.

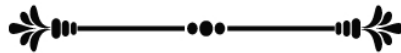
“That’s how you were conceived,” Abbie said, elbowing Allison. We both mimed gagging.

The identity of Allison's dad had been shrouded in mystery since we were kids. My parents were divorced; boring, according to kids' logic, but Allison's dad could be anyone. According to Abbie, he was a rock God, but she was prone to exaggeration, and we were banking it was a bassist in an Eagles cover band.

"Not this again," Allison mumbled.

I sighed. "I know it's an amazing opportunity, and I am excited, but I also don't want to get distracted. I want to enjoy myself and have fun, drumsticks or no drumsticks."

My mom rolled her eyes. "When you talk like this, it makes me wonder if they switched babies in the hospital," she muttered.



The walls of the hotel are thin. I can hear Vince and Cynthia giggling. I slap my palm against the wall behind my headboard, hoping to signal that I can hear them. For a moment, the giggling stops. It's finally silent.

"Did you hear that?" Vince asks.

"Hear what?"

"That banging noise. I think we've got a ghost!" he exclaims.

I stuff the pillow over my head and scream.

"She's angry," he remarks, trying to sound wise.

"I bet her spirit is trapped," Cynthia adds.

I slam my back against the wall, reveling in their screams, before drifting off into a fitful sleep.

CHAPTER 2

VINCE

Boston, MA

Time loosens on tour. Days either feel like minutes or weeks. My sense of internal geography dissolves.

America blends into fields, truck stops, and rows of corn until it feels like I no longer have a body. That's why, if I'm relatively relaxed at home, I maintain a strict schedule on tour.

The bus pulls into the venue around two, and Lyndsey's the first person out the door. I know she thinks I'm annoying. I looked like an asshole when we met, and now, every time we interact, I only seem to fuck it up further, playing into the image I've built for the media.

I can't help myself. I try to keep it cool, but a "love" slips out anyway. I lose myself in her eyes, dark brown with thin strands of gold.

"Get going, Vince," Priya mumbles, snapping me out of my reverie.

She's wearing yoga pants and a loose linen blouse the color of marigolds that accentuates her dark skin. She sneers at me

with her massive dark eyes as she ties her long, jet-black hair into a ponytail. Priya lived in India with her parents until they moved to Manchester when she was eleven. When she's irritated with me, her accent peeks out.

"I am," I mumble, feeling petulant. Priya and I haven't dated in over twenty-five years, but she still makes me feel like a useless boyfriend sometimes.

"Look alive! It's Boston! Isn't that where the American Revolution happened?" Apollo asks, unbuttoning the collar of his Hawaiian shirt.

"Dunno, probably," Henry adds.

"You realize the lot of us barely finished college," I quip.

We started the band when we were twenty. Priya was eighteen, still finishing up her GCSEs. By the time Priya turned twenty-two, we were on the cover of every music magazine and playing shows on every continent, except Antarctica-where we had to turn down a gig.

"Doesn't mean we can't be life-long learners," Henry adds.

"For the last time, if you want to get your writing degree online, apply!" Priya calls over her shoulder.

Despite his current lack of a permanent address, Henry has been investigating online writing programs and droning on about how it's never too late to learn new things. He has always been the most studious among us. It makes sense; as the drummer, he's the logical and literal beating heart of the band. He keeps us in time and in line.

Priya's on vocals and keys while Apollo plays rhythm guitar, and I play bass. My sound is most prominent in our first two albums since that's when we were exploring funk fusion.

Since it's our reunion tour for our first record, *Glass Eyes*, I need to bring my A-game. For this tour, I'm the beating heart of the band. I'm the one responsible for moving us through sound and genres. It's a lot of pressure, and I'm already starting to feel the stress.

Lyndsey pops her head back into the bus. “Y’all ready?” she asks, glasses slipping down onto the bridge of her nose.

I watch her as she shoves them back up, then zips up the black hoodie she always travels in. I like how nonchalant Lyndsey is. It’s refreshing. Most twenty-seven-year-olds would throw themselves at my feet the moment we met, but Lyndsey just shook my hand and asked me to confirm if my rider was a case of Kombucha and red hots.

As tour manager, it’s her job to ensure each venue reads over our contracts and provides us with the supplies we need to put on a show, which includes our favorite candy. It’s weird how fame makes normalcy feel like a luxury.

When normal transforms into luxury hotels and complimentary bottles of champagne, someone not actively fawning over me feels like a treat. Lyndsey is the first person to make me feel normal in three decades.

The venue is cavernous. Our footsteps echo into the rafters as we make our way onto the stage for soundcheck. Lyndsey assured us that the last of our gear was loaded in and ready for us. I grab my guitar, a seafoam green Fender Squire, and find comfort as the worn strap settles on my shoulder.

No one ever expects tour to be monotonous. While the thrill of the crowd is exhilarating, I find comfort in the quiet consistencies that lead up to a show. I strum a couple of scales and feel the metal strings vibrate beneath my fingers; the same feeling since I was fourteen.

Playing bass always feels like Christmas morning. Maybe I’ve spent my whole life trying to recreate the awe of unwrapping my first Stratocaster on an overcast Christmas morning fraught with emotions in Manchester.

We each put in our in-ear monitors, and Jeni, our sound girl, waves from her seat at the sound booth.

“How is it so far?” she asks into the microphone.

“I’m gonna need more vocals from Priya!” I say.

Jeni nods and fiddles with the levels. Henry plays a lazy beat while Apollo tunes his guitar. We play covers of the songs

we loved as teenagers: seventies punk songs, John Denver, Bowie. We play for each other, and it almost feels like we're back in Priya's brother's basement, trying to mold a cohesive sound in a room dominated by a waterlogged washing machine and bright orange shag carpet.

When we finish soundcheck, we hustle back into the green room: a cinderblock cave with cool tile floors and a velvet couch. Lyndsey crouches in the corner, eating complimentary root chips and answering emails.

"I'm going to grab a coffee; come with me?" Priya asks Lyndsey. Lyndsey looks up and blinks in a daze.

"You're sure you want to risk it?" she asks.

Priya shrugs. "I want real caffeine more than I don't want people to bother me." She grins conspiratorially at Lyndsey, who passes Priya her hoodie to reveal her surprisingly toned arms.

She's wearing a black short-sleeved T-shirt. She sports a pigeon tattoo in the American traditional style on her bicep. On closer inspection, I see it's carrying a realistic heart in its beak. I catch myself staring as Priya shrugs the hoodie onto her shoulders and zips it up to her chin before stuffing her hair into a baseball cap.

Lyndsey hands her a pair of oversized sunglasses. "Now, it's a real disguise."

Priya grins. She's loved having another woman on tour. She says that she's officially no longer outnumbered thanks to Lyndsey and Jeni.

"Do you want anything, Vince?" Priya asks out of habit.

I wave her off. "I'm good. I'm gonna get a run-in before I have to get ready."

Back on the bus, I change into red track shorts and running shoes before heading into the parking lot behind the venue. Thankfully, there's a field with a trail behind the arena. I feel relief as soon as my feet hit the dirt. I stretch my calves, take a deep breath, and ease into a light jog.

Exercise is one of the only things that keeps me sane while touring. The venue may change, but if I can get half an hour to work up a good runner's high, I'll be alright. I wind past trees and pick up the pace as I reach the crest of a hill. My life is surrounded by sound, so I like to run in silence. I zone in on the sound of my heartbeat ringing in my ears and let the world fall away.

According to the app on my phone, I've run an oval-shaped blob that encompasses three miles by the time I reach the bus. I'm soaked in sweat; my heart is pounding. I walk onto the bus, which is thankfully empty. I know Apollo has his "Zoom Date" with his wife. I figure Henry's scrounging through whatever bookstore he can find within a ten-mile radius of the venue.

I take a long, cold shower and gleefully realize that no one will chastise me for using our limited hot water supply. I wash the sweat from my hair, then I towel off and wrap a towel around my waist. I grab some curl cream and run it through my hair. I scrunch it in my palms to give the curls some definition.

Then, I dig through my wardrobe to find my adversaries for the night. I don't remember why or when I started wearing leather pants.

Priya found my first pair for me at a charity shop when we were still dating, buried deep in a cardboard box of cast-offs. They were soft to the touch and stained with bleach. I was always the quiet kid growing up, but something changed when I hefted them onto my body. I felt something electric course through my veins, the undeniable, raw energy of sex appeal.

My days of thrifting secondhand leather goods are long gone. Tonight, I'm wearing a wine-red pair with snake-print along the seams, an original gifted to me by a young designer who started working with Vivienne Westwood.

When I have the budget to do so, I prefer to support up-and-coming designers rather than the established fashion greats. Gucci doesn't need my money. But Eve Sweeney from Belfast paid off her student loans when I bought out her sample sale.

I lay the pants flat on the bed and take a deep breath. It feels like we're sizing each other up. I apply a liberal amount of "anti-chaffing" gel between my thighs and along the back of my legs. It comes in a roll-on tube-like deodorant and smells like vanilla. I believe it's designed to prevent thigh chafing for women wearing dresses in the summer, but clothing casualties know no gender.

I gingerly grasp the waistband, laying the pants flat on the floor, and carefully slide one foot in. I point my toes until my foot appears out the end, then insert the next. Slowly, millimeter by millimeter, I inch the pants up my body. I feel like I'm donning a wet suit for a leather daddy—the leather squelches when it meets my skin. I grunt again.

Priya once told me that when I do this, it looks like a birth in reverse.

Then, using all my strength, I grab the waistband and hop upward, wrenching the pants over my ass and praying Vince Exter Jr. won't get caught in the fly.

The pants refuse to budge past my thighs. It's visceral. I jump again, this time with a grunt. They've moved a quarter inch. I try again, but nothing. Twenty minutes of sweating, grunting, and lurching later, the pants are firmly on my body. I walk out of the room to find Lyndsey looking shell-shocked.

"What were you ..." she mumbles, then I blush, realizing it must have sounded like I was having energetic sex. I did try to jump off the bed and let gravity do its thing at one point. There's no doubt the mattress groaned.

"I was getting ready," I admit sheepishly.

Lyndsey searches my face for any signs of a lie. "You know what? I don't want to know." She shrugs and walks away. I start to follow her, but she stops me. "Hey, Vince?"

"Yeah?" My breath catches in my throat as I realize this might be the first time we have an honest conversation without me making an ass of myself.

"You've got something ..." she trails off. Her thumb brushes along my cheek, removing a crusted hunk of hair gel. Her

touch is electric.

“Thanks,” I mumble, suddenly shy. For the first time, Lyndsey smiles in my direction. I feel like I can redeem myself after making a fool of myself almost daily for the past three weeks.



Los Angeles, CA.

Three Weeks Ago.

Since this tour celebrated the 30th anniversary of our debut album, ‘Glass Eyes’, our A&R guy suggested we re-record some tracks that didn’t originally make the cut.

The band and I entered the studio at 7 a.m. sharp. My house in Laurel Canyon was just a short drive away.

We were all wearing comfortable clothes when we walked in. Priya wore a linen romper, while the guys opted for shorts and tank tops. Studio days were hard work, and though we’d been working with our friend and producer, Al Vanzandt, for thirty years, he never sprung for central air.

The sound booth was hot and claustrophobic, but as I slipped the massive headphones over my ears and strummed a few scales so I could focus. Today we’re recording “Mal-Haze,” a fan-favorite that’s never had a proper release.

Priya wrote it about her struggles with depression in her twenties. It described the sense of urgency that occurred when someone snapped out of a depressive episode—the sudden need to clear weeks of rotting food and dirty clothes from one’s bedroom. Like most things Priya wrote, it was naturally frenetic, thanks to the bassline I wrote when I was first getting into a funk.

We went through one take, then another, and then a third. Eventually, we were all hot and frustrated. We broke for lunch. Al provided smoothies. I grabbed a mango one and took a hearty sip. Priya's phone buzzed, and she grinned as she fished it out of her pocket.

"Lyndsey's on her way!" she exclaimed.

"Who the hell is Lyndsey?" I asked.

"She's our new tour manager," Priya explained, pocketing her phone.

"What happened to Tori?"

"She's going to grad school."

"I told you so! If she can do it, so can I! See?" Henry declared, jabbing his drumstick in the air to prove a point.

"What the hell would she do that for?" I asked.

Priya shrugged. "She applied on a whim and got offered a stipend. It's a fantastic opportunity."

"Well, then, how are we supposed to trust this new broad?" I asked. I loved Tori, and I trusted her with my life. She was the one who brought me miso soup in bed when I had the stomach flu in Toronto and kept the green room stocked with snacks and Ibuprofen. How was I supposed to trust a brand-new person?

"Tori recommended her! They've worked with a lot of the same bands. She's great. Her resume's a novel. And before you start anything, she passed both background checks. I also talked to Oli June about her, and they had nothing but good to say."

I huffed and returned to my smoothie.

Priya's phone buzzed again. She clapped her hands together. "She's here!" Priya got up and ran around to the entrance of the bungalow.

Priya returned, holding onto Lyndsey's wrist, resembling a child excited to show her parents she'd made a friend.

Lyndsey was tall. Her shoulders were hunched to accommodate a lifetime of being told to make herself smaller. She wore ripped jeans, dirty Converse, and a moss-green t-shirt. She held a backpack in her free hand.

She looked up, inquisitively glancing around the studio space, taking in the sound booth we had wrapped in a sound-proofing tarp and the half-drunk smoothies on the table. Her eyes were large, brown, and doe-like with strands of gold and feathery, inky lashes. A pair of wire-framed glasses slid down her nose, which rounded at the end. I could see a smattering of freckles dusting her cheeks. Her lips were peony pink. They looked soft. I told myself to stop staring; they were so plump, as were her pert tits that strained against the soft fabric of her t-shirt. I wondered what it would be like to—

“And that’s Vince; he’s the bassist,” Priya said, pointing to me.

“Hey, Vince,” Lyndsey said softly. Her voice was lower than I thought it would be, a dulcet alto I felt in my bones. It was sexy.

“H-h-hey, hi. Hi.” I mumbled quickly.

I’d never been at a loss for words in front of a woman before. If anything, I always said too much, regaling them with stories from tours or run-ins with various rock stars in venue bathrooms across several continents.

I’d cock my hip and lament that Mick Jagger was a great guy, but really, he needed to stop texting, then before I knew it, we’d be in bed. I prided myself on being suave, a skill often credited to my profession. While music didn’t provide dental insurance, it certainly taught me the art of conversation with women... until Lyndsey.

I felt my shoulders stiffen. I was acutely aware of my hands hanging limply at my sides. I picked up my melting smoothie and took a sip. The straw screeched against the top, punctuating Lyndsey’s curious silence.

“Y’all are taking a lunch break? I hope I didn’t interrupt,” Lyndsey said, glancing at the smoothies.

“Yeah, we needed a minute. I got you one, too! You said you liked strawberries?” Before Lyndsey could answer, Priya thrust a smoothie into her hands.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked.

“I stashed it in the fridge earlier,” Priya replied.

“That’s so sweet. Thank you, Priya,” Lyndsey said. She sat down at the table and reached down into a ratty black backpack. Pulling out a manilla folder.

“I thought we could take a minute to go over everyone’s rider before we hit the road,” Lyndsey suggested.

Priya nodded enthusiastically. “Wonderful idea,” she said, sitting beside Lyndsey.

Lyndsey passed a piece of paper to each of us, with our rider requests typed out in a neat bullet-pointed list. I should have known Tori would have our backs, even if she wasn’t still on the road with us.

“How’d you get to be a tour manager?” I asked as I read over my rider. It was correct: one box of Red Hots, Paul Mitchell mousse, Kombucha (lemon or chamomile), and some sort of ice pack or a heating pad.

“I went on tour with Oli June doing merch the summer after I graduated college, and it snowballed. Now it’s been five years, and this is pretty much what I do.”

“You’re not a musician?” I asked. Oftentimes, musicians worked as tour managers when their touring schedules allowed them to make some extra cash.

Lyndsey shrugged. “I hate to say it, but it’s never appealed to me. I’m not a fan of being in front of crowds, and I couldn’t carry a tune to save my life,” she explained.

“Fascinating,” I mumbled, leaning forward and resting my elbows on the table to get a better look at her. She was pretty, in a subtle, unassuming way, like a foreign film or a book of poetry. She was the opposite of anyone I’d ever been attracted to. I tried to quiet my brewing hard-on, placing the folder on my lap. Priya noticed and kicked me under the table.

“Hands off,” she mouthed.



“There’s sushi in the green room if you want some,” Lyndsey adds, snapping me out of my reverie.

“Thanks. I’d love some. I’m a sashimi guy. D-do you like sushi?” Again, Lyndsey seems to obliterate my ability to form complete sentences.

“Yeah. I like a good spicy dragon roll. You better get there quick, before Henry and Apollo eat everything good. No one touched the Philadelphia rolls.”

“Why they thought it would be a good idea to include cream cheese in sushi is beyond me,” I say, walking past Lyndsey. My stomach tenses as I feel her body heat painfully near me.

Lyndsey laughed. “For real, though. What’s next? Dessert sushi? Wait, that might be kind of good.”

To my surprise, Lyndsey keeps pace with me as we walk back to the green room together. I grab the last spicy tuna roll and stick my tongue out at Henry, who mouths, “Asshole!” in my direction.

“You snooze you lose, Henry!” I say, stuffing an entire piece of sushi into my mouth to prove a point.

Lyndsey shakes her head.

“Oh! I meant to ask. So, you have a plus one for tonight,” Lyndsey starts.

I stopped mid-chew. “I do? I don’t remember adding anyone to the list,” I say.

“Yeah! It’s ...” Lyndsey says as she walks over to her printer and pulls out a piece of paper, “Eve Matthews. Isn’t she on that werewolf show?”

“Oh, Vince, for fuck’s sake! I thought you broke up with her! Quit stringing that poor girl along. Put her out of her misery,” Priya laments, yanking a curler out of her hair to get the perfect seventies feathered look.

“I thought I did, too,” I mumble. A cloud of dread settles in my stomach. Suddenly, I’m not hungry.

“What do you mean you ‘thought’ you broke up with her? That’s usually something someone’s pretty clear about!” Priya exclaims.

“We talked last week. I assumed she got the point,” I grumble.

Priya shakes her head, causing her curls to bounce. She’s wearing a diaphanous golden gown with a vee that goes down to her belly button and nude go-go boots.

“Well, clearly, she didn’t because she flew across the country to see you! This is a disaster! If the press gets wind of this, we’ll have paparazzi on our tail again. God, you have never brought me a single moment of peace in thirty years.”

Lyndsey stands there, the guest list crumpling in her hand. “Do you want me to tell her she’s not on the list? I can lie.”

I shake my head. “No, no. I’ll talk to her. Is she here?”

Lyndsey nods. “She’s at will-call. Follow me.”

“I made it clear we were done,” I explain as we walk down the massive hall.

“What were your exact words? Did you mention ‘taking a break’ or was it a clear ‘breakup’?” Lyndsey asks.



Calabasas, CA.

One Month Ago.

“So, it’s, like, at this new sushi place on Sunset that’s also a spa? Sah-steamy or whatever? They’re catering our wrap

party,” Eve rambled on, stabbing a piece of lettuce with her fork before signaling for the waiter.

“Could I get more edamame, please?” she asked. The waiter nodded, and I picked absentmindedly at my acai bowl.

Once you’ve had one smoothie bowl in one of those revamped industrial garages with an up-and-coming actress, you’ve had them all. I ate a spoonful of pulverized blueberry and granola and chastised myself.

Eve was nice enough. She was still young—which meant the industry had yet to chew her up and spit her out—with wide blue eyes, a trim waist, and perky tits.

We met at the wrap party for season one of the hit teen drama, ‘Were Are They Now’, following a wily gang of entrepreneurial teenage werewolves. Eve played the love interest and wore a Missoni jumpsuit that showed off her sumptuous ass.

The only reason I was even there that night was because of Apollo’s gig as a music supervisor for the first season, and I wanted to be supportive. The fact that I slipped her my number was a bonus. I wanted to have a little fun.

Contrary to popular belief, my job as a guitarist did not mean I ended up with a different woman in my bed every night, at least not when I was home from tour.

Things with Eve had been fun. She was great in bed, but as she prattled on, biting her plump lips that she insisted were free of lip fillers, I realized we had absolutely nothing in common.

I studied a print of a persimmon tree on the wall behind her and begged my phone to buzz.

“So, do you want to go?” she asked.

“Where? Oh, right. Sah-steamy. When is it again? I’m so sorry, love. I’d lose my head if it wasn’t screwed onto my shoulders,” I apologized and then mentally chastised myself for making fun of Eve for getting lip fillers.

I was a formerly coked-up entertainer in my mid-fifties. No shit, I'd done Botox. Now I felt like an asshole. I was an inattentive asshole, but oh God, I realized as a clod of dread settled in my stomach:

Eve was an actress, but she was fucking boring! Actresses were boring! They were all-night shoots and ten-step skincare routines. I hated that shit! I'd rather stab my eye with a fork than hear about the benefits of glycolic acid.

"It's next Tuesday," Eve said.

"Shit, love, that's when the tour starts," I said. Now was my chance. I reached across the table and placed my hand on her wrist.

"Oh, baby! I'm so excited for you to get back out on the road! How cool!" she squealed.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that," I started, trying to tread lightly.

Eve's face fell, and her perfect brows crumpled. "What do you mean?"

"Eve, you're a great girl, but I think we need to end this," I said, gently, still questioning in my head if we were even officially a thing. Eve sniffled. Tears threatened to spill from the corners of her eyes.

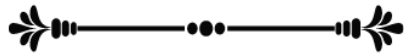
"B-b-but why? Long distance isn't a problem for me!" she insisted. The waiter reappeared and wordlessly placed a wooden bowl full of edamame beside her.

"I know you think that, love. But it's so much harder than it looks. In three weeks, when I'm calling you from a gas station at 1 a.m., you won't be thinking that. I don't want to trap you. I don't want you to be stuck waiting by the phone for me to call; that's not fair to you," I explained. For the first time in two weeks, I was being sincere with Eve.

Eve was crying now, full-on blubbering. Fat tears stained the white tablecloth. "I won't just let us go," she stated, determination in her voice.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I was stunned.

“We can’t just end things. We’re... we’re meant for each other,” Eve declared, her lips setting into a stubborn line.



“Can a breakup be one-sided?”

“I think we’re about to find out,” Lyndsey says. I panic and grab her hand. To my surprise, Lyndsey didn’t wrench it away.

“Lyndsey,” I ask. “Would you do me a favor?”

“It depends on the favor,” Lyndsey says.

“Pretend to be my girlfriend,” I beg. I know it’s a harebrained scheme, but I’m desperate.

Lyndsey stops in her tracks. “What?! Are you insane?”

“Not insane, just desperate. Please? I’ll do your laundry for a month. I’ll switch bunks with you! I know the bottom one is like sleeping on a brick. I slept on it on the last tour!” I beg.

Lyndsey’s brow furrows in concentration. “Yes, but you have to do the grocery shopping for the bus for the next month.”

“Fine, deal. Now, c’mon, pretend you love me.” I grab her hand as I spy Eve leaning against the will-call counter. She’s wearing a lavender sun dress with cut-outs on the sides. Her silky blonde hair is tied in a neat braid.

“Vinny!” she squeals when she sees me. Before I can say something back, she ricochets toward me, jumping into my unwilling arms. I catch her on a reflex and stumble back. Lyndsey grabs my elbow.

“I’m so happy to see you,” she mutters on my cheek. She smells like citrus, and she’s so soft. I push the thoughts away; I need to be firm.

“It’s great to see you, too,” I mumble before setting her gently on the ground.

Eve shoots a look at Lyndsey. “And who are you?”

“I’m the tour manager,” Lyndsey says.

I elbow her side and mouth, “Please help.”

She straightens her spine and grabs my hand. “And, uh, Vinny’s girlfriend,” she grits through her teeth.

Eve’s demeanor quickly shifts. “His what?!” she shrieks.

Lyndsey nods. “Yeah, I mean, I started this tour, and I ... couldn’t resist him,” Lyndsey stutters. Even I can tell she’s lying. Eve looks skeptical.

“Oh, look, Lyndsey! You were right, you left your keys behind the Will-Call counter!” I lie and elbow Lyndsey she catches on.

“Oh, yep!” Together, we walk behind the counter, and I yank her down so we’re kneeling out of Eve’s line of sight.

“Kiss me,” I whisper. Lyndsey looks at me like I asked her to give me a kidney.

“Why?” she hisses back.

“Eve’s not buying it. Please? I’ll do your laundry for the whole tour. I’ll pay you!”

“You don’t have to pay me, dumb ass!” Lyndsey hisses back.

Before I can reply, she grabs the side of my face and plants a kiss on my lips. My knees turn to jelly. To my surprise, Lyndsey kisses me back. She slips her tongue into my mouth and threads her fingers through my hair. I let out an involuntary groan. When we finally pull apart, we’re both blushing, but no one’s face is as red as Eve’s, who looks like she’s about to explode.

“How fucking could you?!” Eve howls.

“Eve, I mean, we’re not together. We broke up, remember?”

“Oh, I remember, and I refuse to accept it! I’m not the one who gets dumped,” Eve shoots back, her eyes darkening.

“No one got dumped. I was trying to let you down easy,” I clarify.

“Well, if you’re letting me down easy, how come you let me come all this way?”

“I didn’t! You didn’t text me you were coming to the show!”

“I did!”

“No, Eve. You didn’t—” I fish my phone out of my pocket to show her. A text pops up on my screen from when I was on my run.

Eve: Great news, baby! I’ll be at the Philly show tonight. I can’t wait to see you :-)

It had only just come through—fucking venue cell service.

“Shit. Eve, I’m so sorry. I just saw this. Eve. We’re broken up. We’re done. I mean, you can still come to the show tonight as a fan,” I say. I didn’t want to turn her away at the door.

Eve laughed humorlessly. “You’re a piece of shit, you know that? All my friends warned me about you! They said you’re a womanizing dickwad who uses women to feed your petty, ancient ego. But I said, ‘No. He’s not like that.’ I guess I was wrong.” Eve turned on her heel and stormed toward the door.

I jog to catch up with her, leaving Lyndsey behind. The lobby is massive, and the first fans are starting to file in.

“Eve! Wait!” I cry. A woman catches me by the wrist. “You’re Vince! Can I get a Selfie?” I nod mutely and smile as I fumble with an iPad to get a photo of us. Eve’s making her way to the parking lot. I sprint to catch her.

“Eve! Wait! I’m sorry!” I howl.

“I don’t want your apology!” she yells back.

I dodge a gaggle of teenagers and catch up to her. “Seriously. Stay for the show at least,” I beg, feeling genuinely bad.

Eve rolls her eyes. “I don’t like your music,” she says with venom.

“Wait, what?”

“I never liked it. It sounds like it should soundtrack a theme park about rainforests or some shit. It’s tacky. It’s the kind of music my mom listens to. They play your songs at the

Dentist's office. Face it, Vince, you're washed up. That's why you were using me. You're an energy vampire."

"Eve, I never meant to hurt you," I say softly. I reach out to touch her, but she shies away.

"Well, you fucking failed! You hurt me, Vince."

"Eve, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

Eve sighs and shakes her head. "Keep telling yourself that. Good luck, Vince," she says before walking away.

It feels like my feet are glued to the asphalt of the parking lot. I am shocked. I stand dumbfounded. Someone touches my shoulder. "I'm not really in the mood to take a photo right now," I say morosely.

"Well, good. You need to get ready; you're on in thirty minutes." I look up; it is Lyndsey; she looks oddly sympathetic. I can see the pity in her eyes.

"Right, I am." We walk back to the backdoor entrance in silence.

"How'd it go?" Lyndsey asks tentatively.

"It wasn't the worst breakup I've ever gone through. No one threw anything on me or lit my curtains on fire. Thanks for saving my ass back there."

"No biggie. It wasn't exactly in my job description, but I'm happy to help."

I laugh. "You could add 'good kisser' to a resume," I say.

My heart drops when Lyndsey winks back at me. "Hey, so could you. It wasn't the worst thing I've had to do during a tour. I am sorry about Eve, though. I know how hard it is to date while touring."

"Thank you. Yeah, and she didn't get it, nor did she understand when we broke up the first time." I sigh, then run my fingers through my hair.

"You're not ... on tour ..." I babble.

“Nah, I don’t really date. I mean, last summer I dated this random drummer from this So-Cal surf rock band called High Tide, but that was just a fling. I’m not a huge fan of ...” Lyndsey searches for the word, “commitment.”

“You might be the first woman who’s ever said that.”

Lyndsey laughs. “Shit, I guess I am in the minority. What about you? Other than Eve, was there anyone else you were uh ...”

“Going steady with?” I finish in a cartoonish Elvis-inspired accent.

Lyndsey guffaws. “What the hell? Did the spirit of the fifties possess you momentarily?”

Her laugh is gravelly and sweet. I quickly catalog it in my list of favorite sounds. “You could say that, ‘lil lady,” I try again, cocking my hip to the side.

Lyndsey snorts. “Okay, now you sound like you’re either going to invite me to a sock hop or accuse me of being a communist.”

“I hope you know I was never welcome at any sort of sock-hop or milkshake-slurping adjacent activity.”

“Is that so? Were you too busy causing a ruckus?”

“Pretty much. But to answer your question, no. I haven’t seen anyone other than Eve.” I sigh, awash in sudden sadness.

“So much of touring feels fundamentally incompatible with companionship. You’re in a different city every night. You never know what time it is. You’re living off stale crackers and hummus buried deep in a fridge somewhere. It doesn’t exactly give you the tools you need to build a life.”

Lyndsey looks at me with her eyes full of sympathy. “I know the feeling.”

For an imperceptibly small moment, her hand hovers above mine; she places her palm over my hand. Her palms are rough from hauling gear, but they are warm. She runs her thumb along the top of my hand, and my breath catches in my throat.

She holds the door to the venue open for me, and I slip into the green room.

“You should get your in-ears,” Lyndsey suggests.

I nod. “Good idea.”

That night, I played better than I had in years, fueled by a noxious emotional cocktail of heartbreak and confusion that I poured into my instrument. I anticipated Priya’s every move; our harmonies melded together seamlessly.

Apollo and I grinned as we wielded our instruments, dancing around each other perfectly in sync. This was why I loved playing music, the feeling of perfect synchronicity, of being right where I was supposed to be when my personal life was in shambles. The stage lights pounded onto my shoulder blades.

We decided to close each show with “Mal-Haze,” as the encore. Our label released a special vinyl 7-inch to commemorate it, which was available at the merch table.

I chug a water bottle while Priya thanks Philadelphia and stomps on my loop pedal to prepare for the next song. I strum the opening chord and wink at Apollo, who nods back. We play back-to-back, flipping to face each other just as the chorus hits. We walk, matching our strides to meet Priya at the microphone so we can harmonize as she sings:

It’s just one of those days/

Break me out of this constant/

Mal-haze/

It gets me feeling like my mind is in chains.

I end the song with a power cord and breathe a sigh of relief as the house lights go down.

“Thank you, Philly! We love you!” Priya yells, blowing kisses to the crowd as we run offstage.

Lyndsey stands in the wings and hands us a water bottle, which we all promptly chug. Lyndsey crouches down and

helps Priya unzip her boots and step out of them. She grabs the boots and grins.

“I think that was your tightest show yet,” Lyndsey notes. “Y’all were a machine.”

“We had band-brain!” Henry says. He is vibrating with excitement and adrenaline.

“We sure did.” Apollo sighs, high fiving each of us. Lyndsey hands him a towel to wipe the sweat off his head. “You’re the best. Thank you so much,” Apollo says.

“Anytime,” Lyndsey replies.

“Well, I’m glad we made it work, especially with Vince’s little tiff out in the lobby,” Priya notes.

“It wasn’t a tiff! Vince got dumped!” Henry hoots.

“I was the one who broke up with her, for your information,” I say.

“Keep telling yourself that, man,” Apollo says.

“Well, if you broke up with her, you did a shit job considering she flew across the country to see you,” Priya adds.

“That wasn’t my fault!” I lament.

“It did seem like a genuine misunderstanding,” Lyndsey says.

“Thank you, Lyndsey.”

“She has tried to text me a couple of times. She’s pretty mad at you,” Lyndsey adds.

I sigh. “That’s the first stage of a breakup, isn’t it?”

“I did set your curtains on fire when you dumped me,” Priya says, laughing.

“That’s why we’re no longer allowed in a Best Western hotel or any subsidiaries. I always forget,” Henry says.

Lyndsey’s jaw hit the floor. “Wait, that’s why? Do you know how hard that makes booking hotels?”

“I do now! I wasn’t thinking of my future accommodations when I was twenty-three, and I had my first big heartbreak,” Priya says.

Lyndsey did the math. “Yeah, well, *Heart-Crossed* is a banger of an album.”

“You know what they say, the more bitter the breakup, the better the art!” Priya jokes, punching me in the shoulder. I spin around and lock her in a headlock. We tussle until she trips over a cord.

I still love Priya, just in a different way. Though our romantic relationship lasted just over a year, it gave way to a lifetime of artistic collaboration. To this day, she’s still the first person I send songs. She’s always been the one to tell me if I have a terrible idea. We’ve seen each other at our worst, so we know how to bring out the best in each other.

I always thought it was odd when people didn’t stay friends with their exes. Granted, we broke up right around when we started touring full-time, so our friendship grew out of forced proximity and a genuine desire for the band to succeed even if our romantic relationship failed.

“So does that mean Eve will write her breakup into the werewolf show?” Apollo asked.

“How could you do this to me?” Henry mocked with a fake howl.

I shoot him a look. “You’re the one who binged her show in three days flat! Don’t make fun of it!”

“Well, the talent show was scheduled for the night of the full moon! I had to see what happened!”

“It was a pretty gripping season finale,” Lyndsey adds.

“Wait, you watch *Were Are They Now*?” Lyndsey seemed so chill and detached from any cultural entity that generated a media frenzy. For some reason, I could only picture her watching nature documentaries or movies with subtitles.

“I watch it when I need to turn my brain off. It might not be the most well written show, but it’s still entertaining.”

“See, now you’re making me want to watch it,” Priya grumbles.

We were all back in the green room now, packing our things to prepare for another long night of driving. Lyndsey throws the half-empty containers of hummus and cans of sparkling water in the trash and texts our bus driver, Dave. Priya changes into sweats and a T-shirt, and we all pile onto the bus. Each of us patiently waits for the other to get ready for bed, taking turns brushing our teeth in the tiny bathroom.

Lyndsey wears a tie-dye shirt and track shorts, with her hair gathered in a messy bun on the back of her head. Her face is shiny with moisturizer. She looks pretty, I think, as I study her face in the dim light while Dave pulls out of the parking lot.

Lyndsey stretches before launching herself into the narrow bunk bed above mine. I take my vitamins and try to get comfortable in my new bunk. It feels like sleeping on concrete, but I owe Lyndsey big time.

CHAPTER 3

LYNDSEY

An Hour Outside of Washington, D.C.

The soft orange light of early morning peeks through the tiny window of my bunk, connecting me to the outside world.

We're barreling down the highway; the whoosh of other cars makes my ears ring. The bus screeches a bit as we graze the median.

I crack my neck before gripping the sides of my bunk and slowly making my way to the ground. I steady myself before going to the black, plush leather couch where Priya's curled up eating oatmeal from a mug.

Apollo and Henry play cards at the tiny kitchenette booth, each sitting on one side of the Formica table, with a jug of iced coffee between them. I wave, and they wave back.

Moments later, Vince emerges from his bunk. He's shirtless. Not that I'm staring or anything. I can see the faded tattoos covering his chest, a vine snaking up his neck, a faded skull, and crossbones on his right bicep.

He flops onto the couch next to me and grins.

“What, you don’t want to play cards?”

“I don’t use my brain before noon; you should know by now.”

We’ve established a steady rapport over the past three weeks. If I told Allison about it, she would classify it as flirting. My mom would start planning the wedding. I’m sure she once put me marrying a rockstar on a vision board.

After that, I stopped letting her go to college night at the community center. My mom can manifest all she wants, but Vince and I are just friends, plain and simple, even if the early morning light is bringing out the blue hues in his hair, which looks extra silky today.

When Vince catches me staring, he grins. “What? Dreaming about me?”

I make a fake gagging noise. “In your dreams.”

Priya scrapes the last bits of oatmeal from her mug, then licks the spoon.

“Contrary to what you may believe, Vince, not everyone spends every hour of the day thinking about you.”

“Well, they should!” Vince declares in mock indignation.

I grab the wall to steady myself and walk to the front of the bus, where Dave focuses on the road.

“Are we stopping at all this morning?” I ask.

He nods. “We’ll grab gas and whatever else in ten.”

“Perfect. Alright, gang, you heard him! We’re stopping in ten!” I holler to the back.

“Please tell me there’s real coffee. I want a matcha latte in a little ceramic cup painted by an old lady. I want a flaky croissant,” she laments.

“We’ll see what we can find,” I reassure her. Surprisingly enough, Priya is a homebody, contrary to her bombastic personality onstage. On the nights when the Wi-Fi is strong

enough, she has her girlfriend, Jamie, FaceTime her with all three of their cats: Do, Rae, and Mi.

Dave pulls into the gas station and lines the bus up with the diesel filling station.

When the bus comes to a halt, we walk out into the morning air, fresh, but tinged with the scent of gasoline. There are no coffee shops in sight, just a truck stop attached to a combination fast-food joint—a monstrous conglomeration of fats and fried food as a monument to America.

“Sorry, Priya,” I say, squeezing her shoulder.

“It’s fine,” she mumbles.

The bell above the door dings as we enter the gas station, one of the only familiar parts of the tour. No matter where we are in the country, the foamy thunk of coolers closing sounds the same. Apollo makes a beeline to the multicolored cooler full of sodas and energy drinks before selecting an energy drink.

I grab a tall can of orange-flavored seltzer water and a tiny jar of cold brew with a label that boasts small batches and looks vaguely promising. The cashier peers from behind the drink cooler, doing a double-take, and smooths out the blue polyester of her uniform polo.

Priya brushes against her as she walks over to the carafe of burnt coffee, selecting a paper cup.

“Are you Priya?”

Priya nods and smiles gracefully as she poses for a photo.

“My mom’s gonna freak out! I grew up listening to your music!” the cashier gushes.

“That’s lovely to hear. Thank you so much. What’s your name?” Priya demurs.

“I’m Nora! Let me get you a fresh batch of coffee,” Nora says, reaching for the black plastic container.

“Oh, don’t go out of your way,” Priya insists.

“Nah, I’ve gotcha. I was going to change it in a couple of minutes, anyway. It’s no trouble at all.”

Nora returns moments later and hefts a fresh container of coffee onto the counter. Priya grins as she fills her paper cup to the brim.

“Nora, you’re a saint. You made my day,” Priya says.

“Well, you made mine!” Nora gushes. It’s sweet watching Priya interact with her fans. She’s always the picture of poise and grace, unlike some people.

Vince fixates on the rotating hotdog skewers, watching the grease shimmer.

I deadpan, “Is this your new favorite show?”

“I’m trying to select the right one. It’s like fishing. It’s all about timing.”

“Is it now?” I goad.

“Yes, it is! Aha!”

With a paper plate and bun ready, he reaches in, ignoring the tongs beside the case, and grabs a hotdog from the skewer. He holds it up high like a prize before watching in horror as the grease lubricates his hand, causing the hot dog to slip out of his hand and land on the beige tile floor with a SPLAT.

Vince’s face falls. His eyes look downcast before he shrugs and reaches down onto the floor, grabbing the hot dog and depositing it on his plate.

“Five-second rule!” he declares, wiping his hand with a nearby napkin and doctoring up the hot dog with mustard and relish.

“No, no! Not the five-second rule! Henry? Apollo! Anyone, help!” I exclaim.

“What’s this now?” Henry asks. He’s perusing a nearby rack of Sudoku booklets.

“Vince is trying to eat a floor hot dog!”

“It was on the floor for approximately three seconds,” Vince clarifies.

“The floor of a gas station!” I hiss in a whisper.

“I’ll be fine!” Vince declares. To emphasize his point, he stuffs the hotdog into his mouth, takes a huge bite, and then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

“He will be fine,” Henry reassures me. “The man has an immune system of steel, seriously. He needs to be studied.”

“What happened?” Apollo asks, grabbing a pack of sunflower seeds.

“Vince ate a hot dog off the floor, and it’s disturbing Lyndsey.”

“Oh, he’ll be fine.”

“Well, is no one going to talk about how it’s 9 a.m. and he’s eating a hot dog for breakfast?”

Apollo shrugs. “No time for brunch.”

Vince finishes the rest of his hot dog. “I needed the protein!”

“Well then, eat a protein bar like a normal person!”

“Those taste like sawdust.”

“That is true,” Henry adds.

We pay for our snacks and pile back onto the bus. Vince sprawls on the leather couch, his head resting on my laptop and legs spread out.

I begin, “Um ...”

He jolts upward as the bus pulls out of the parking lot. He grumbles, “Shit, sorry, love. I mean, Lyndsey. Sorry.”

“It’s all good. I just need to check some emails and confirm our time for load-in,” I explain.

Vince scoots over, and I wedge myself back onto the couch. Our thighs are touching. I could feel the body heat radiating off him. I am close enough to see the stubble on his cheeks and the spots where his neck tattoo has faded.

Despite myself, I hold my breath. Whatever product he uses in his hair smells like citrus, maybe lemon? His curls brush my shoulder as I open my laptop.

Calm down! He's your co-worker! I chastise myself as I open my email. I confirm our load-in time with the venue and then email Liza, my friend who's a makeup artist and stylist, who is doing Priya's hair and makeup tonight.

I watch the blue of the sky blend with the grey of the highway, the colors smudge like a watercolor painting.

I elbow Vince. "That's a good one!" I point. We've started keeping track of our favorite unhinged billboards. Driving for such long periods can get monotonous, with books and podcasts.

"Call 1-877-WHYGOD?" Vince reads.

"Do you think it'll tell you you're going to hell or that you need Jesus?"

"Hmmm, if I called, they'd know I was going to hell," Vince quips.

"Why? Are they psychic?" I taunt.

"Not that. It's an aura thing. I went to a Catholic school, and all the nuns hated me on sight. Granted, I did break a statue of the Virgin Mary and then glued her head on backward."

I laugh. "Okay, so it makes sense if you weren't their favorite person. How old were you?"

"Seven. And I used one of those shitty glue sticks, not actual craft glue. The Blessed Mother didn't stand a chance."

"I bet you were a terror when you were a kid," I say.

I keep telling myself to keep my distance from Vince: a scatter-brained, womanizing himbo. But we're spending eighteen hours a day in close proximity. It would be weird if I didn't get to know him.

Plus, once I push past his manic scatter-brained energy and questionable eating habits, Vince is cool. He's sweeter than I expected he would be. He misses his dog, a retired racing

Greyhound named Violet, and the hours I thought he would fill with booze and women are usually spent meditating or running.

Vince shrugs. “I feel for my mother if that’s what you’re asking. What about you? What were you like as a kid?” he asks.

“I was quiet. My best friend Alison did most of the talking. We were in the same kindergarten class, and then that summer, she moved into the apartment building where I lived, and ... I tour-managed her through elementary school.”

Vince laughs. “What did that entail?”

“Um, a lot of running around and keeping a tally of how many Girl Scout cookies she sold while I stood there silently clutching the order forms.”

“I bet you had a spreadsheet.”

“I was nine, but if I had access to Excel then, you bet your ass I would have made a spreadsheet.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I peek at the screen; it is Allison trying to FaceTime me.

“Speaking of,” I say, getting up and carefully making my way back to my bunk.

“Hey, Al!”

“Hey! I’m on my break at the market.” My phone glitches as Alison appears, wearing a white cowboy hat and sipping something out of a Styrofoam cup.

Allison works selling up-cycled vintage garments at various art markets in California and as a contract designer for Thistle Threads, an up-and-coming indie band that recently dressed the cast of *‘Were Are They Now’* for their season two premiere.

“What are you selling today?” I ask.

“Here, I’ll show you.” Allison jostles her phone and flips the camera around to show me a rack full of denim jackets; the sleeves are fashioned out of various vintage bandanas.

“Those are sick!” I say.

“And then these have the back panels.” Allison shoves some clothes aside and zooms in on denim jackets with embroidered tulle backs; the fabric is thin and gauzy, almost translucent.

“Did you embroider those?” I ask.

“Yeah, my friend Ivy let me borrow her machine at work.” Allison is a genius when it comes to any fiber art. She learned how to crochet in less than forty-eight hours when we were kids.

“I love it! Save one for me when I’m back in L.A., okay?”

“I already did. I miss you. How’s tour?”

“It’s good so far! I mean, the bus is tiny; I wish I could shower and not have to hunch over. You know how it goes!”

“How’s Priya?”

“It only took you thirty seconds; that’s a record,” I deadpan before continuing, “Priya’s wonderful. I love working with her. The rest of the guys are super sweet, and Vince is,” I suck in air through my teeth, “Vince.”

“You talk about Vince a lot.”

“I do not!”

“Yes, you do! You text me about him at least once a day. Don’t make me show you our conversations.”

I pause. “Do I?”

“Yes! You complain about him constantly.”

“Because he’s a nuisance! I watched him eat a hot dog off the floor this morning!”

“Okay, that is gross, but I don’t know, Lynds ...”

“What do you mean you ‘don’t know?’”

“I think you like him,” Allison says.

My stomach drops to my knees. Do I like Vince? Why do I suddenly feel like I am in middle school? Vince is fine. His eyes are green as spring grass, and if he wasn’t a musician, his hair would make him a shoo-in for a romance novel cover

model, but I don't like him like that! I could appreciate him in an aesthetic sense, like a painting.

He is hot. I had eyes. It would be weird if I didn't notice how hot he is.

"Okay, Lynds, your silence is deafening. Let me know how it goes," Allison teases.

"I'm just- I- there's not ... no way!"

"Oh, I broke your brain, didn't I? Lyndsey, he's hot as hell. It's okay if you like him."

"I don't!" I protest.

"Keep telling yourself that."

Henry poked his head in. "Hey, Lyndsey? We're five minutes out!"

"Shit, Al, I gotta go."

"Okay, same here! But wait! I decided I'm going to try and find my dad!"

"Shit, way to drop a bomb! When?"

"Well, I've been thinking about it for a while now, so I bought one of those test kits online. It's not like I need a dad, but I'd feel weird if I went through my whole life without knowing him, you know?"

"Yeah, I get it," I say. This is a big deal. Allison has never expressed explicit interest in tracking down her dad before this. I am happy for her and excited.

"Let me know how it goes, okay?"

"Sure. You let me know when you kiss Vince."

"We already did," I snap.

"When?!"

"It was a joke!" I say.

"So, a whimsical spit-swap?"

"No, Vince was going through a breakup! I was the decoy girlfriend."

Allison is laughing so hard tears are streaming down her face.

“At this rate, you won’t be just the decoy much longer,” she says.

“Shut up,” I grumble, jamming my thumb into the screen to end the call. We pull up to the back entrance of the amphitheater, and I shove my way to the front of the bus to get ahead of everyone.



Priya’s trailer is a welcome escape from the dense end-of-summer humidity of D.C. in August. I sit cross-legged on the cool, speckled tile floor as Liza finds a pair of scissors in her apron pocket.

Tonight’s show is at an outdoor amphitheater, and we’ve taken over the vast field behind the venue, which is now overflowing with trailers and crew. Vince and the rest of the guys are lounging outside on a green vinyl couch that would usually be used for patio furniture.

Fatima, one of the roadies, set up an orange outdoor umbrella for shade, and there’s also a tiny patio table. It’s days like these when everyone is running around in shorts and t-shirts, tossing a frisbee at each other, where tour feels like glorified adult summer camp.

Liza examines Priya in the full-length mirror, her bleached eyebrows furrowing. “Do you want me to texturize your bangs? Just do a little dry cut?”

She shaved her head for the summer, which made her wide blue eyes more striking. She’s tiny, at five foot one, but today she’s wearing platform sandals that only make her brush my elbow. She’s wearing high-waisted jeans, a black t-shirt, and an apron full of hair supplies.

“That would be wonderful, especially if you could get them out of my eyes,” Priya says, settling back into the salon chair Liza brought with her.

Liza nods and brings two pieces of hair forward to meet at the bridge of Priya's nose, studying the length.

"I'm gonna spritz them a bit," Liza says. Priya nods and closes her eyes, humming contentedly as Liza mists her bangs with a spray bottle.

"So, how's the tour going?" Liza asks me before adding, "Are you sure you don't want a chair?"

"Tour's going great so far, wouldn't you say, Priya? And I'm good. The floor feels nice, and I need to stretch my legs."

Liza jokes, "Oh right, you're a giraffe. I keep forgetting." She grabs a tiny pair of scissors and starts to snip at Priya's bangs.

"I do think there is something especially magical about this tour. I think we're all excited to be back out on the road," Priya muses.

"That's awesome! What about you, Lynds? How do you feel about everything?"

"Good! I feel like I'm managing everything," I say.

Three weeks in, and I am finally starting to get the hang of the flow of this tour: Wake up, drive, call will call, load in, run around putting out various tiny fires while everyone else soundchecks, and wrangle bras during the show.

Priya scoffs. "Lyndsey, you're not just managing; you're excelling. I don't want to jinx it, but every show so far has gone off without so much as a hitch. You're killing it." Priya beams up at me with her wide eyes as Liza texturizes some layers in her hair. She reaches out and grabs my hand, squeezing it.

I don't see Vince until show time, where he's pacing backstage, draining a ginger shot and cracking his neck. For the first time all tour, he seems nervous.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

He jumps when he hears my voice. "I'm fine, yeah. Uh, do you have Tums?"

“Always,” I toss him a container of travel Tums, and he downs a handful before throwing the container back to me so he can continue to pace.

“What’s up with Vince?” I whisper to Priya as she admires her new haircut in the mirror and the shimmering eyeshadow Liza dusted over her eyelids. Tonight, she’s wearing false eyelashes over her real ones, which make her lashes look more luscious than usual. She’s going to be glowing all night.

Priya sighs. “Nothing. Sometimes his brain short circuits. He’d never tell you, but he gets anxious sometimes. You have to let him work through it. Hey, Vince, buddy? You okay?” Priya calls.

“I’m fine!” he snaps.

Priya whistles. “Okay then.”

The show that night is electric. Vince channels his anxiety into raw energy, flawlessly hitting every note and swaying his hips to the beat of Priya’s harmonies without batting an eyelash. No one would be able to tell he’s anxious. But I saw his nervous tick. He pushes his hair behind his ear, locking eyes with me as he sings the chorus of “Later.”

“I’ll tell you to leave without me/ but I will want you still.

I’m alone at this party/ searching for a thrill.”

My breath quickened, a flush of warmth spreading throughout my body as I felt the molten pool of desire slowly gathering in my belly and radiating between my legs. I could feel my heart racing as the intensity of the sensation grew.

I tell myself it is a matter of circumstance as his forest-green eyes bored into mine.

He was looking for a focal point outside the blinding lights and landed on me. He’s not singing to me, and if he is, like I would ever fall for that! I’m not a groupie.

He can’t just maintain eye contact with me and expect me to fling a bra—fuck!

A large lavender bra smacks me right in the face.

CHAPTER 4

VINCE

Three Hours Outside of North Carolina

I first realized my feelings for Lyndsey when she peeked her head out from the top bunk, like a bat to say goodnight.

Nah. I realized I liked Lyndsey when I watched her kick Henry's ass at a Checkers when we were stuck in traffic outside of Boston, or possibly when I watched her eat sunflower seeds, and the mid-morning light brought out the golden freckles on her cheekbones.

I can't pinpoint the exact moment when my affection for Lyndsey transformed into a full-grown schoolgirl crush, but it's here.

I've masturbated in enough terrible hotel showers thinking about her luscious tits and how her thighs would feel against my cheeks to know that this isn't going away.

It's 2 a.m., and I can feel my boner stiffening against my thigh as the bus rumbles down the highway.

I think of Lyndsey's eyes and how it would feel to palm one of her tits. I think of slipping one finger, then two, into her

entrance and finger-fucking her as I slip my hand down onto my cock and work out my hard-on.

I imagine me finally entering her, how she'd groan with pleasure as she tightens around me, and I come within minutes, grabbing a tissue from the little net basket on the back of my bunk.

We can never happen. But that doesn't stop me from dreaming. When I wake up the following day, I avoid eye contact with Lyndsey as she pours granola into a bowl.

"What's with you?" she asks, grabbing a banana off the counter and slicing it. The bus's movement causes her hand to shake.

"N-n-nothing," I mumble.

Lyndsey hums. I watch as a piece of her hair falls onto her face.

We stop at a truck stop with a laundromat an hour outside of Myrtle Beach. We're playing a festival nearby. I'm not prepared to contend with the sand while onstage. We stuff piles of our dirty clothes into laundry bags and haul them out off the bus.

The laundromat is beach-themed, like most things in the Carolinas. There's a spray-painted scene of a beach on the wall. The air smells like mildew, and the fluorescent lights hum loudly over the muzak, but I'm excited to have some clean clothes finally.

Lyndsey digs around her tote bag and pulls out a roll of quarters. "Bam!" she says gleefully.

"Lyndsey, you're a lifesaver," Priya exclaims.

"Tour essentials, y'know?"

We head to our respective washing machines. I'm both thrilled and nervous to find myself next to Lyndsey. She shoves her laundry into the massive metal drum and sprinkles some chalky laundry soap into the dispenser.

"I think tour laundry is worse than regular laundry," she comments.

“Agreed,” I add, pressing the start button on my machine.

“You know I didn’t start doing laundry on tour until I was thirty.”

“What did you do until then?” Lyndsey asks, wrinkling her brow as we watch our clothes transform into a soapy kaleidoscope.

“I just bought new ones. Who needs laundry when you have money?”

Lyndsey elbows me, and I try not to hold my breath as her elbow connects with my rib cage.

“Vince! That’s so wasteful! Did you know that millions of pounds of clothes end up in landfills every year?!” she lectures.

I love watching her get indignant like this. Her eyebrows wrinkle, and the tip of her nose gets red like a cartoon. It’s cute. She shoves her glasses up further along the bridge of her nose, a telltale sign of her irritation.

“I wasn’t thinking about the environment when I was stranded in Germany, and I needed new underwear, y’know?” I joke.

She makes a decisive humph noise. “Well, maybe you should have been!”

We settle onto two sage green chairs near the washing machines. Lyndsey checks her watch and grumbles as she tries to get her phone to connect with the shoddy Wi-Fi.

“So, have you ever been to Myrtle Beach?” I ask, trying to make conversation.

I’ve developed a game out of prying every personal detail I can get out of Lyndsey. She’s guarded. Every time she tells me about something she and Allison did when they were kids or any other tours she’s worked, I feel lucky. I get the sense that she doesn’t let many people into her world.

Lyndsey sighs and shoves her phone back into the pocket of her shorts, “Once before, with Oli June. We played at a tiny festival outside of Charleston. It was a good show, but it was

hot as balls. I'm talking about the sort of day where you resign yourself to the fact that you're going to feel sweaty and gross all day. But I'm worried about this."

She shows me the weather radar on her phone. We're heading into a deep purple spot, the color of an eggplant, denoting a massive thunderstorm.

"Shit, when is that supposed to start?" I ask. We're playing at an outdoor amphitheater with millions of dollars' worth of gear and equipment that cannot get wet, not to mention the thousands of fans who have traveled to see us.

"At four, and they said it'll maybe last an hour?"

"So, if we were supposed to go on at eight and we push it back an hour," I start.

"You can go on at nine, but that's if there's no lightning."

"Fuck!" I hiss.

Lyndsey nods. "I know. But I'll figure it out; that's my job."

"Lyndsey, no amount of spreadsheets can grant you the power to control the weather."

"And here I thought you believed in me," Lyndsey jokes. The washing machine dings, and Lyndsey gets up, transferring her sopping wet clothes into the dryer.

"Neither of you needs to separate your laundry into colors and darks, do you? It's your little goth corner!" Priya exclaims.

Lyndsey blushes. "Listen, I know what looks good on me."

"And I'm allergic to color," I add.

"Not true, you wore red yesterday!" Lyndsey replies.

"That was a fluke," I mumble.

We load our mountains of clean laundry onto the bus and settle back into our seats. We're not stopping until we get to Myrtle Beach. Lyndsey's glued to her phone, her eyebrows scrunching as she jams her index finger onto the screen repeatedly.

“Refreshing it won’t change it. You might as well read a book or something,” I say.

“Bold of you to tell me to read a book!” Lyndsey huffs.

“Hey! I like to read!”

“Alright, smarty pants, what’s the last good book your read?”

I pause. “Hmm, I’ve been revisiting the works of Chogyam Trungpa recently; that’s been great for tour. I think meditation is great in general. I think a lot about using beginners’ minds when it comes to touring. It’s easy to feel like I’ve done this before and slip into autopilot instead of absorbing the experiences around me.”

Lyndsey looks up from her phone. “You know Trungpa?”

“Yeah! You do?”

Lyndsey sighs and tucks her phone into her pocket. “My mom’s a yoga teacher. She teaches at the community center in Pasadena, so I know a lot about meditating by proxy.”

“That’s cool! How long did it take for her to get her certification?”

“Six months or so? I don’t remember; I was on tour at the time.”

“That’s wonderful. What’s your favorite book, then?”

“I can’t focus enough to read big novels, so I mostly stick to short stories and graphic novels. I like *Saga*, Chekov’s short stories, Carmen Maria Machado, that sort of thing. I have a Raymond Carver book in my bunk right now.”

“*What We Talk About When We Talk About Love?*” I guess.

Lyndsey’s eyes sparkled. “Shit! You’re the last person I would have guessed to know that book.”

I shrug. “I get that I don’t have the most erudite persona, but I’m full of surprises.”

“Wow, ‘erudite’? Someone’s been using their word-a-day calendar, or did someone teach you a new word?”

“Henry taught me that one,” I replied.

“That makes sense.”



When we pull into the venue, the sky is bruised and green with violent streaks of dark purple interspersed.

The air is hot and heavy. It feels swampy, like the whole world is a sauna. Sweat drips down my back. Priya finishes her bottle of water in one gulp.

“It’s not looking good,” Apollo says, glancing up at the sky.

Lyndsey rubs her hands against her jeans and then claps. “Okay, I’m going to help with load in and talk to the venue about their policy for rain delays. The four of you chat amongst yourselves!” Lyndsey dashes off the bus, a blur in denim.

I find myself staring at her ass. I can’t help it. Everything I learn about Lyndsey Vynse only makes me like her more.

“You like her, don’t you?” Priya teases as we hustle into our dressing rooms. The sky breaks moments later, and we can hear the rain pattering against the window.

I sigh. “Is it that obvious?”

Priya pauses.

“Yes,” Apollo says.

“Hey, it’s cute!” Henry adds, checking out his face in the mirror. “I’m going to shave unless you lads need to first,” he says.

I shrug. “Go ahead.”

“I’m fine. It looks like I have to counsel Vince about his love life again,” Apollo groans.

I shake my head. “You’ve never steered me wrong.”

“Except for the leaver’s ball where you asked Marianne Duvall to dance, and she called you a sod.”

“Hey, ninety-nine percent accurate is pretty accurate. So, what do I do?” I ask, turning to Priya and Apollo, who are now perched on the plush gray sofa. Priya crosses her legs at the ankles, and she has a notepad in hand. She looks like a psychologist.

“I’m going to go first and say that if you break Lyndsey’s heart, I will kick your entire ass. Lyndsey is the best tour manager we’ve ever had, Vince. We. Need. Her.” Priya leans forward and punctuates her sentence with a jab to my sternum.

“And I’m going to be the nice one and say, good for you, buddy! I know it’s been a while since you’ve had feelings for someone,” Apollo says gently. He reaches over and pats my hand before turning to Priya.

“Would it be so bad? Think about it; we all like Lyndsey.”

“I love Lyndsey. Lyndsey’s a godsend. Lyndsey makes the three of you bearable! We’re a month into this tour, and I have yet to get a migraine. Do you know when the last time I was migraine-free for a whole month? Because I know. It was the Fall of 1990! Right before I met all of you!” Priya snaps.

“Priya’s right. Lyndsey’s a great tour manager, and we wouldn’t want your ...

“Dick,” Priya finishes, “We wouldn’t want your dick to wreck this tour.”

I groan. “But that’s the thing, though, it’s hopeless! Lyndsey has her whole thing about not getting involved on the road! I’m fucked!”

Priya and Apollo nod sagely. “Oh, that’s right. Y’know, I forgot about that. It’s a good rule, but I can see how it’s a challenge for you.”

“But maybe things will change. I think Lyndsey likes you too,” Priya consoles.

“Wait, really?”

Priya nods. “Yeah, she’s softer around you. It’s cute. And she looks at you like, I don’t know, with more grace than you deserve, I’ll tell you that. So, keep the faith and don’t fuck it

up,” Priya declares, slapping my knee. “I have to go steam my jumpsuit for tonight, and I need to put extra product in my hair so the humidity doesn’t ruin it.”

“Thanks, Priya. Maybe I’ll talk to—” Just then, Lyndsey rushes into the dressing room. She’s damp, her hair is frizzing at the ends, and her hoodie is clinging to curves I didn’t know she had.

I note the dip where her waist tapers and the swell of her tits. Her nipples are pebbling beneath her ribbed tank top. I can feel myself getting hard.

“So, there’s a rain delay. For now, you’ll go on at 9:30,” Lyndsey pants.

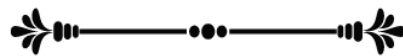
She peels off her wet hoodie and sets it on the couch, then shakes her head like a dog getting a bath—droplets of rain mist my chest. I suppress the urge to gawk as she flips her hair back and tussles it with her hands. When did she get buff? Has she always had arm muscles? I study my pecs and remind myself to incorporate more arm days into my tour workout routine. I guess she does lift a lot of—

“Vince?” Lyndsey asks. I blink, and she’s hovering in front of me, “Are you okay? You look dazed. Are you nervous?”

“Nah, I’m good. Just thinking.”

“About what?”

“Nothing, nothing at all,” I reassure her.



Hours drag on. By 11:00pm, we still have yet to go onstage, thanks to lightning delays and a verified torrential downpour that flooded part of GA.

“At least it’s not like, a field, then we’d be looking at trench foot,” Henry says.

“Make that a t-shirt,” Apollo adds. “I got trench foot at the Imposters 2023.”

“I got wet at the Imposters,” Lyndsey deadpans. I expected her to be more nervous, but she seemed to have accepted the

rain. Now she sits cross-legged on the floor of our dressing room, alternating between reading Raymond Carver and talking Priya off a ledge.

Priya's getting antsy. As time passes, her elaborate shag expands to cloud-like proportions thanks to the humidity. She keeps sweating her makeup off. Her hands are shaking as she paces the length of the dressing room. Her wedge sandals make it sound like we're trapped with an anxious horse.

Lyndsey hands Priya a mug of tea. "Here you go. Wanna—" She glances around the dressing room, landing on Priya's vanity, where she spots a nail polish bottle. "Wanna paint my nails?"

"You don't like having your nails done!" Priya cries.

"I do if you're the person painting them, c'mon," Just then, another bolt of lightning lit up the dressing room from the tiny window. "We've got another half hour."

Lyndsey curls up on the chair and presses her hands flat on the vanity as Priya shakes the cobalt blue nail polish bottle and unscrews the top. Lyndsey talks to Priya in a low, soothing voice. I can sense that she's an excellent person to have in a crisis, steady and calm.

By the time we finally go on, it's 11:30. The fans are ravenous.

They howl in ecstasy as Priya walks out onstage; the boys and I follow as Priya gives her best pageant wave. We rip through the first song, and it's thrilling to be on stage, feeling utterly alive with the people I love, with the humidity bristling against my skin.

When we're done, we take generous gulps of water and let the applause wash over us like rain. It feels good in a way that reminds me why I put my body through hell to sleep in a moving coffin.

We play the first three songs without so much of a glitch in our monitors. But just as we're about to start our fourth song, the sky opens. A torrent of sideways rain unleashes upon us and our gear. Priya freezes mid-stomp, and her eyes dart

around frantically. My first instinct is to protect my guitar and amp and unplug the hundreds of electrical wires surrounding us.

I look around desperately for a tarp when Lyndsey sprints onstage and passes me a large, blue tarp. I use it to cover my amp first. Then I scrounge around and find a second one. Lyndsey's passing out tarps to everyone. She runs up to the platform where Henry sits with his drums and helps him disassemble the cymbals before he can ask. I run up to the platform and drape a tarp over the kick drum while Lyndsey takes apart the second cymbal.

"How'd you get here so fast?" I ask.

"I dunno! Adrenaline! Unplug Priya's mic for me, will you?"

"Got it," I say.

Lyndsey is a paragon of efficiency and speed. While everyone else panics around her, she hops over wires and unplugs pedal boards without as much of a shiver as the rain pours down around us.

Finally, everything is covered, and we take refuge backstage.

Lyndsey leans back against the concrete wall that separates the seats from the stage, panting.

"That was incredible," I say, breathless.

Priya, Apollo, and Henry are on the other side of the tunnel, trying to dry off, but I'm drawn to Lyndsey's frantic energy.

"Thanks," she pants.

"Seriously, I could kiss you right now," I joke.

I'm absorbed in her eyes, the droplets of rain hanging off her lashes. Lyndsey smiles, and I notice the gap in her teeth. Then, time stops as she slips her hand around my neck and wrenches me close, kissing me fiercely. I almost stumble backward from shock. I'm paralyzed by pleasure.

Unlike our kiss at the will-call counter, this one's real. I can feel the passion radiating off Lyndsey in waves. Lyndsey's lips are soft and pillowy. She slips her tongue into my mouth, and I slip mine into hers. I lean forward, pressing my palms against the wall as I shift my body toward her. She groans and tilts her pelvis forward, grabbing the belt loops of my pants.

Briefly, I pull away, and she tilts her head up. I kiss the soft skin of her throat as she cups my ass. It's hot and frantic. Part of me thinks I'm dreaming. Lyndsey kisses me once more and then pulls apart with a smile. "I hate to say it, but I've been wanting to do that for a while."

"Well, you sure know how to make a guy feel special."

CHAPTER 5

LYNDSEY

Atlanta, GA

In the days following the kiss, the bus transforms into a haunted house where the jump-scares are the consequences of my actions.

Vince is everywhere: strands of his hair coat the bus's minuscule shower, and the refrigerator is littered with half-empty kombucha bottles. I can't look at a box of red hots without thinking of him and then immediately thinking I fucked up, I fucked up, I fucked up.

I fucked up, and it felt good.

Kissing Vince was revelatory. He tasted like Marlboro reds, and his lips were warm and soft, tinged with rainwater.

Blame the venue layout, but when he shoved me up against the wall, it was hot. More than hot, it was sizzling, electric, and erotic. Every dumb adjective that's volleyed around in pop songs to describe tonsil hockey suddenly became inadequate.

I wanted to kiss Vince forever. I wanted to throw my life away so we could fuck in the green room, which is exactly

why we can never happen.

Thankfully, Vince is still sleeping as I confirm the guest list for Atlanta. Apollo's wife is coming. His daughter opted to go to a different show with her college roommate. Either way, I'm grateful for the distraction.

"Tell Charmaine she's all set," I tell Apollo. He grins, flashing a row of perfectly white teeth.

"Wonderful. Thanks for being so prompt, Lyndsey." He keeps grinning and looks dreamily out the window, resting his head against the glass.

"How did you meet, anyway?" I ask.

"She did costumes for our Europe Tour in 1998. The moment she handed me a custom-made silk shirt, I was gone."

"Truly! She handed him a shirt, and then when she left the room, he turned to me and said, 'I don't know how, but I'm going to marry her,'" Priya confirms.

"That's so sweet! So y'all," I pause, choosing my words carefully, "Worked together?"

"Oh yeah, if she didn't do costumes, we never would've met. The universe has a way of placing the right people in your life at the right time." Apollo stares at me for a beat too long, his brown eyes peering into my soul.

Does he know about me and Vince? Did Vince blab? Suddenly, I picture Henry, Vince, and Apollo trading secrets like they're at a sleepover, and it warms my heart. My heart needs to be impervious to all of this.

"Well, I'm sure you'll have a great time tonight." We'd been on the road for six weeks, with three off days. I booked us a hotel for the night to give everyone a chance to sleep in a real bed, and I booked Apollo and Charmaine's room on a different floor to give them some privacy.

I turn to Priya. "Apollo and Charmaine are on the fifteenth floor, and the rest of us are on the sixteenth," I clarify.

"Oh, thank God," Priya mumbles.

Just then, Vince emerges from the dark, cool cave of his bunk, sleep still crusting in his eyes. It's almost noon. His hair squishes to one side. He's shirtless, and I catch myself staring at the smooth plane of his abs. He's so much less scrawny up close, not that I notice.

"What's new?" he asks.

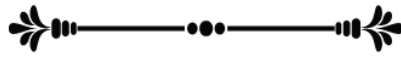
"Um," I pause. I'm speechless because I keep imagining his tongue in my mouth.

"Char's coming tonight, and Lyndsey booked us a hotel," Apollo exclaims.

"Lovely. Atlanta tonight, yeah?" Vince looks over at me for confirmation, and I nod.

Vince claps his hands together, and I jump. "Great, well then, I'm grabbing breakfast. Do you need anything?"

"Nah, I'm good," I manage to choke out. The awkwardness between us is palpable.



When we check into the hotel, it smells fancy. The air smells like lavender and wisteria, with no hint of mildew or antiseptic like the bus.

The lobby is spacious, with vaulted ceilings and post-modern paintings dotting the walls. The band spots a container of cucumber water next to the check-in counter and makes a beeline.

"Hi, I'm checking in for the Horowitz party," I start. The receptionist nods and then quickly realizes it's a fake name as Priya swoops her hair up into a bun and elbows Henry. "Quit hogging the cucumber water!" she hisses.

I give the receptionist a look before she can say anything. She hands me a pile of keycards.

"So, Alfred's in room 1431. Pauline's in room 1520, Harold's in room 1516, Victor's in room 1517, and Lyndsey's in 1518."

My stomach falls. I thought having walls between us would make it easier to avoid Vince, but I guess not.

I grimace and remind myself to keep things professional. “Perfect, thank you.”

I corral the band into the elevator, and we stop at our separate rooms. Vince lingers outside his door, staring at me like a wounded basset hound.

“What?” I ask as I slip my keycard into the door.

“Go for a run with me,” he says softly.

“What?” I repeat.

“I said go for a run with me. Soundcheck’s not until four. You seem cagey. I asked the concierge, and there was a big park across the street. It’ll be good.” For some reason, he sounds remorseful, but why?

I pause. My calves cramp. It would be good to go for a run. I need fresh air, and Vince doesn’t strike me as the sort of person who would try to gossip and run simultaneously.

“Sure. Meet me in the lobby in half an hour,” I suggest.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Vince says. He smiles in my direction, and I can’t help but smile back.

Once I’m inside my room, I dig through my suitcase to find my running clothes. I settle on a sports bra and track shorts. It’s almost eighty degrees outside, and I can’t fathom wearing any extra fabric.

For a moment, I wonder if it’s too sexy, but then I stop myself. Vince and I are still friends. If he’s too “tempted” by my torso, that’s his problem.

We meet in the lobby, and Vince grins when he sees me. I blush as I pull my hair into a ponytail.

“Ready?” I ask.

“Sure thing.”

He matches my stride with ease as we walk out onto the bustling Atlanta streets.

“Is that a tattoo?” he asks, pointing to my thigh as we wait for the light to change. I can see the green expanse of the park across the street.

“Yeah, it’s the outline of the lake where I grew up. I know it’s cheesy. Al did it with a tattoo gun,” I explain.

“Oh, so it’s a meaningful oval,” Vince jokes.

I laugh. “Yeah. It’s ... the reason why Allison didn’t go into tattooing.”

“I’ve got you beat,” Vince says; he lifts his ponytail and cranes his neck forward. Three black bars cover the back of his neck.

“The Black Flag logo? For real?” I start to chuckle. Every punk dude is the same, no matter how famous they get.

“Hey! When I got it, this was the pinnacle of counterculture! None of the repurposed hipster crap it is today!”

I roll my eyes as we cross the street and stand at the park’s entrance. I start to stretch my calves and try not to focus on how I can feel Vince staring at my ass. I’m staring at his, too.

We’re sizing each other up as we stretch, rolling our shoulders and wondering who will be the first to cave and address the sexual tension between us.

Instead, Vince grins as we set off into an easy jog. I up my pace for a bit, needing to work the tension out of my muscles and feel the fresh air burn in my lungs. Vince matches me stride for stride.

Unlike Allison or my mom, he doesn’t try to get me to talk. We listen to the steady thud of our footfalls, and I watch people mill around the park. The anonymity of the park is a welcome change to the sometimes-claustrophobic sense of recognition that follows the band around the venue every night.

I see a slight incline ahead, “Mind if I pick up the pace a bit for this hill?” I ask.

Vince nods, and I lengthen my strides until I reach the top. My lungs burn. It feels good. I pause at the top, and Vince

pants as he catches up with me.

“How’d you get to be so fast?!” he huffs.

I shrug. “I was captain of the track team in high school.” I unsheathe my water bottle from the slim pocket on my thigh and drain it in one gulp.

“Wanna take a breather over there?” Vince points to a nearby bench, and I nod.

“Oh, you need a ‘breather’?” I tease as I sit down.

“I didn’t expect you to fucking bolt!” Vince says, “I didn’t know I was running with a track star.”

“Former track star. I stopped running when I got to college. What about you? Did you ever run in high school?”

“Nah. I didn’t have time for anything like that,” Vince said. “Before the boys and I met Priya, we were in a ska-fusion three-piece called the Tossers. It was terrible and time-consuming.”

I looked at him skeptically. “No amount of rehearsing could have made you a functioning band?”

He huffed, his eyebrows drawing together slightly. “We tried. I didn’t start running until after our first big Europe tour. That’s when I realized I was having panic attacks somewhere deep inside my body. It felt like my skeleton was trying to fight out of my own skin.”

A pained expression crossed his face as he continued, “The worst one happened before our first show at the O2 Arena—big stuff. As musicians, this is what we grew up hearing about, this is what we told our parents we wanted to be. So, I was getting ready for the show while I was dry-heaving air because I hadn’t eaten all day—I was so nervous. My head was in the toilet until fifteen minutes before I went onstage.” He shook his head, incredulous at the memory.

“I was shaking and my brain wouldn’t stop. I felt like everything was slipping away from me even though I knew this is what I wanted.”

“So, what happened then?” I prompted gently.

Vince sighed heavily, relieved to finally tell someone about it all these years later. “Finally, Priya made me choke down a stale croissant and a Xanax. I played the show propelled by the sheer relief that I wasn’t shitting myself onstage.”

I thought of Vince’s main-lining antacids before every show now and couldn’t help but marvel at how seemingly unfazed he seemed by performing on such a large scale— nothing like the anxious wreck he just described himself as being moments ago.

“But you seem so confident on stage now,” I note, recalling how he played a sold-out amphitheater for fifty thousand people last night without batting an eyelash.

Vince nodded confidently and smiled knowingly at me. “Let’s just say that Priya showed me how to handle stage fright.”

Then he shrugs. “You know the old saying ‘Fake it ‘til you make it’? Well, Henry’s mum Lucy, who was at the show that night is an elementary school gym teacher. She told me to go for a run when I feel anxious - which I’ve been doing ever since. It’s not as grand as being a track star but I accept that you’re the cool one in that respect.” He laughed, then finished off his water bottle.

He pauses, studying the scratched black metal arms of the bench, refusing to meet my gaze. Again, Vince is the last person I would describe as vulnerable. Part of me is stunned he opened up to me in the first place. Even weirder, I know how he feels.

“I get it, though. It’s hard to feel calm on tour because it changes quickly.”

Vince glances over at me and grins slyly. He reaches over and detaches a sweaty piece of hair clinging to my bottom lip.

My stomach jumps as he rests the pads of his fingers on my bottom lip, calloused and warm. He runs his thumb along my jaw and stares at me, not in an investigatory way like he’s trying to figure me out, but like he sees me. The recognition

that floods my body is heady and warm; I move to kiss him again before stopping myself.

Vince sighs. “That and the fact that I’m plagued by the incessant fear I’ll ruin everything good that ever happens to me,” he laughs humorlessly. I find myself nodding.

“Honestly, same here. I mean, I recognize that as far as my life goes, things have worked out pretty well. But there’s always this lingering fear that if I—I dunno. It’s like if I want something or someone badly enough, then it’ll be doomed from the start because I want it so badly. If I admit I want someone, I’m relinquishing control. It’s like I’m giving the universe permission to fuck with me, and that’s terrifying because my life feels so precarious. Until this tour, I was one bad tour away from moving back in with my mom, y’know? I ___”

The last thing I thought our run would result in is a heart-to-heart about my deepest insecurities. But Vince has that effect on me, and I trust him despite myself. He blinks, and I wonder if he’s searching his mind for platitudes, but instead, he closes the distance between us and kisses me.

Our lips touched carefully at first, like a feather, each of us testing the waters, but soon our bodies collided with a force like gravity. My body responds to his touch on its own, my head spinning as I slide one hand into his hair and the other onto his back. His fingers wound their way through my hair as I leaned into him.

His calloused fingers graze my collarbone before they dip down and cup my breast, sending a shiver of pleasure down my spine. His other hand slips to my waist and pulls me closer while I taste the salty warmth of his skin. There is an animalistic intensity between us that I’d never felt before, and I can barely contain it as we break apart, panting for breath.

“You’re too good for the universe to fuck with,” Vince reassures me, soft and low.

“What?”

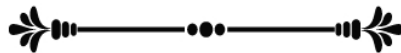
“You’re a good person. I’ve met a lot of people in my life, and you’re one of the best. Lyndsey, you’re amazing.”

“You too,” I choke out. No one’s ever complimented me so directly before. I think I’ve spent my entire life avoiding the sort of attention that would garner this level of careful attention, and I can’t help myself as I admit it feels good.

I gather my hair back into a ponytail. “But I’m still faster than you,” I tease. I take off in a sprint before he has a chance to put two and two together.

“Lyndsey! What the hell?” he yells as I race forward. He catches up to me and loops his arms around my waist, pulling me toward him and kissing my neck. I laugh.

“That was an unfair advantage. You didn’t give me time to prep.”



Apollo and Charmaine are disgustingly cute in the dressing room. Apollo is grinning from ear to ear as he shows Charmaine his station. Tonight, he’s wearing an extra special purple silk shirt, a departure from his usual rotation of Hawaiian shirts.

“Have you been taking your cholesterol meds?” Charmaine asks. She’s one of the most beautiful people I’ve ever seen, with waist-length box braids and wide brown eyes. She wears a deceptively simple orange silk wrap dress that’s probably worth half my paycheck and orange lipstick contrasting her dark skin.

Earlier tonight, she was talking with Priya about how they both “missed Prince,” Apparently, she did costumes for him the summer after she met Apollo, and I’m pretty sure she had an unopened text from Beyonce on her phone.

“Yes, dear. I’m about to call in my refill.”

Charmaine grabs her bag and digs through it, unearthing a bottle of pills. “I beat you to it.”

“You’re the best,” Apollo says, pulling her in for a kiss.

“Did you talk to Tasha?” Charmaine asks when she pulls away. Their daughter Tasha was a freshman at Georgia State University.

“I still can’t believe she didn’t want to come tonight, but I guess I can understand. This is significantly less cool when it’s your dad,” Apollo grumbles.

“Oh, you’re being way more forgiving than I am. I chewed her out on the phone in the Uber over here,” Charmaine says. She asks me, “Do you know what a ‘Soundcloud Rapper’ is?”

“Yeah, I’ve never worked for one, but I know about it.”

“Well, I’m not trying to be a bitch, but I think it just proves not everyone should have access to Garage Band. Tasha’s going to see someone’s dusty son spit subpar bars over a drum pad instead of her father! Can you believe that?”

“Unfortunately, I remember what it was like to want to distance yourself from your parents when you’re a teenager. My dad’s an accountant, and I refused to let him help me with my taxes until last year just because I didn’t want to listen to his advice.”

“See? Kids ignore their parents. It’s part of growing up! Besides, we’re all getting breakfast tomorrow morning. Tasha found a spot and everything. I can’t wait to hear about college!” Apollo gushes.

“You make it sound like you’re the one going.” Charmaine laughs.

“Well, it’s not like either of us had a chance to go! We can live vicariously through her for a bit.” It’s cute watching Apollo be so proud of his daughter. It makes me sympathize with my mom a bit. I mentally promise to FaceTime her this week. She got the autographed poster I sent her in the mail and sent back fifty heart emojis.

“He’s not the only one! When Tasha graduates, I’m going to lose it. I remember when she was a baby!” Priya calls as she curls her hair.

“Remember when you went through a whole box of tissues at her high school graduation?” Apollo asks.

“I knew I would lose it, so I brought an entire box!”

“And then they had to tell everyone to hold their applause until all of the names were called because Vince was cheering so loud,” Priya adds.

“Hey! Forgive me for being proud! We’re not the most book-smart bunch,” Vince says.

“Henry’s reading Tolstoy,” Charmaine points out.

“Yeah, obviously. Henry’s, Henry. I’m talking about us, regular people.”

Charmaine sighs and grins. “I’ve missed you, buffoons,” she says quietly.

“Lyndsey, how are they treating you? Does your therapist need to bill them?”

“Tour’s been great so far,” I say, trying to remain nonchalant. I can feel Vince staring at me.

That night before he goes onstage, Vince pulls me into a closet near one of the industrial amps and kisses me like he’s going off to war.

“What’s with you?” I ask with a giggle as his lips work my collarbone.

“It’s good luck, Lynds,” he says, grinning like a kid. I melt a bit as I pull him in for another kiss, slipping my tongue into his mouth and running it along his teeth, “Well, good luck.” I say.

I wonder if I will ever tire of watching Vince and Priya sprint around the stage. The band is on fire that night, perhaps revitalized by the combined horniness of Vince and Apollo. Vince swaggers across the stage like he knows I’m watching him. And when the band takes their final bow after the encore, his eyes wander until he finds me side-stage, leaning against a pole. Then, he finally smiles and takes his bow, leaning forward as he clutches Apollo and Priya’s hands.

The ride back to the hotel is silent. Apollo and Charmaine took a separate car, so I’m crammed between Vince and

Henry. Priya sits up front next to the driver, who looks too frightened to ask her if she is who he thinks she is.

We sneak into the hotel through the back entrance; this morning was different, but post-show, who knows how many of their fans also accidentally booked a room at the same hotel?

In the darkened tunnel of a service elevator, Vince grabs my hand and squeezes. The elevator groans up to the fourteenth floor, and Priya and Henry shoot us a look before making their way to their rooms.

Vince and I pause in front of the doors to our rooms. The tension between us is palpable. I could cut it with a knife. I'm acutely aware of every muscle in my body, how my hands hang awkwardly at my sides, how my weight shifts from one foot to the other.

"Vince," I start. His lips crash into mine before I can finish. I step back from the force as I shift my pelvis forward. He fumbles around for his keycard, and retrieves it from his pocket, before continuing to suck on my bottom lip. I pull away momentarily.

"Hang on," he whispers.

He loops his arm around my waist and pulls me close, kissing the soft skin of my throat and nibbling on my earlobe as he jams the keycard into the slot. I turn to face him again as I open the door and step back into the room, fumbling blindly to turn on a light as I slip my tongue into his mouth. He groans.

He tastes like cinnamon gum and lemon. His arms are solid and well-defined as he traces the curves of my waist with his palms and holds me tight. I can feel the callouses on his hands, built up from decades of playing guitar. His eyes tell me all I need to know: he's wild, and so am I.

For the first time, I let go as we tumble back onto the king-sized bed. I flip over onto my knees and pin Vince's wrists above his head as I straddle him, grinding down onto his

growing erection, as a growl escapes his throat. He looks at me like I'm the only person on the planet.

Our lips crash together in a frenzied kiss, like the world is ending outside the door: hot, frantic, and hungry. I tear off my tank top without embarrassment; my black-and-white tattoo of a vine is adorned across my chest, directly under my breasts. Vince's mouth drops open as he takes it all in.

"Are you trying to kill me?" He pants, completely awestruck, as I peel the black ribbed tank top off his torso.

I let out a delighted giggle and toss his shirt across the room. His hands are warm on my skin, massaging my curves with a gentle yet firm grip. His mouth wraps around my tender breast, his tongue tracing circles against my sensitive skin. I arch my back, pleasure radiating through me as he kneads my other breast with his palm. I can't help the moan that escapes my lips.

His tongue sent shivers throughout me as I feel myself getting wetter for him. I reach down and unzip my jeans as I subtly rock my hips upward, my body already yearning for him as I capture his lips again.

"Lynds," he whispers. "Lay down." I grin as I lay on my back, and he peels off my jeans.

"I want to taste you," he says, his voice heavy with want.

Vince's gaze seems to linger hungrily on my body, and I feel a flutter of anticipation in my core. A deep blush rises to my cheeks. I can feel a pool of wetness grow between my legs. Vince's smirk broadens as he slides my panties down. He fingers lightly touch across my inner thigh as he looks up at me with a playful grin before testing my entrance with one finger, then two.

My eyes flutter shut as a bolt of pleasure shot through me as Vince kisses my stomach, his tongue tracing the thin line of hair that trails from my belly button, pausing just shy of my lower abdomen. My breath comes out in ragged spurts as his tongue continues its assault. He moves down further,

positioning himself between my legs, and I spread them wide, bracing them onto his shoulders.

He nips at the soft flesh of my thighs, teasing. I shudder with anticipation as he parts my entrance with his tongue, giving an exploratory lick. Already, my hips buck. I long for him to taste me. He dives in, licking with gusto and sucking on my clit like his dreams are coming true. A ripple of pleasure races up the backs of my thighs as he quickens the pace of his tongue licking my pussy.

My hips move in time with him, shaking and shaking until I accidentally clench his face with my thighs as I come, jerking upward as I rocket to the height of ecstasy, giving into the idea that Vince might have a reputation as a lothario for a reason. When my heart rate finally steadies, he kisses the insides of my thighs and trails back upward along my stomach and chest before finally landing on my lips. I slip my tongue into his mouth and tilt myself toward him.

“Do you have a condom?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he whispers.

I have an IUD, but I heard Vince call Chlamydia “The Clap” yesterday, and he’s still the same person who ate a hot dog off the floor of a gas station. I have no idea where he’s been or who he’s been with.

Vince laughs at the hard-on tenting in his boxers as he rolls the condom. I resist the urge to make a joke as I pull him toward me.

“Lay down,” I instruct as I straddle him.

I kiss him slowly at first. He clutches my hips as he eases his way inside me; I feel him lengthen, and my muscles instinctively tighten around him. I pick up the pace, letting my hips rock forward as he expands inside me. It feels like I’m drowning in a pool of absolute pleasure.

Vince flips me around so he’s on top and plunges deeper into me. I cry out in pleasure as he kisses me, harder this time. I feel his body tense as he’s about to come, sending me over the edge. I think back to what Vince said at the park; how

could the universe want to sabotage something this good? When we come, it feels cosmic. I scream his name, not unlike the thousands of women every night: but he is mine. He's here with me, his sculpted torso illuminated in the moonlight.

"Lyndsey," he murmurs, pressing kisses along my neck when we disentangle our bodies. I nestle into his side and make no motion to tell him it's a one-time thing. I don't want it to be. Sometimes, rules are meant to be broken.

I wake up in Vince's hotel room. We're tangled in each other's arms. For the first time in weeks, I feel at peace. The tension between us is gone. I no longer feel like I have to watch myself every time I step onto the bus. Maybe all we had to do was bang it out. I stop myself from laughing, then nestle deeper into Vince's side. He's snoring softly with his arm snaked around my torso. I realize he held me all night.

I jolt up with a start when I hear Priya walking down the hall. "Vince?" She jiggles the door handle. Fuck. Priya. The band. They can't know about us!

"What?" Vince says sleepily.

"It's Priya!" I balk.

Vince jolts up and looks around, then looks at me like he's wondering if I'll fit under the bed.

"What do we do?" he asks as if I'm the one who's done this before.

"I don't know! What do you do when you have people over?" I whisper-scream back.

"I tell them to leave! I don't want you to leave!" He grabs my wrist, and I pause. Since when does Vince Exter ask people to stay for the morning after? I was stunned when he woke up beside me.

"Vince, I can't leave. Who do you think is checking us out of the hotel? Fuck! The band can't know about us," I say firmly.

"What do you mean?" Vince's face falls; it's sort of sweet.

“It’ll make things weird! We can’t tell them until we know what’s happening,” I say.

“Besides, it’ll throw off the vibe of the bus if we suddenly emerge as, like, a couple,” I explain, “It’s giving me whiplash.”

“Oh, um. Okay,” Vince says quietly.

“Hey,” I crane his head toward me and kiss his lips, “We can still have fun. We just need to keep things professional around people, yeah? Besides, it’s not like this has to mean anything! We were blowing off steam. No strings attached.” I reassure him.

Vince is the last person I could picture wanting a relationship with, and I’m grateful for it. I can’t have anyone tying me down, especially when we’re on tour together. It’s a logistical nightmare, but that doesn’t mean I won’t take the opportunity to have a little fun occasionally. I’m a tour manager, not a nun.

Priya pounds on the door. I fish my jeans and tank top off the floor and hop into them, desperately trying to find an excuse.

“Vince! What the hell?” I open the door, and Priya’s jaw hits the floor. She takes in the sight of my wrinkled jeans, my tousled hair, and the fact, I realize, that my tank top is on backward.

“Hey, Priya,” I start.

“We were just going over the press schedule for the day,” I lie. The band has a couple of interviews with some Atlanta radio stations today, and tomorrow they have a phone interview *with NME*.

“Sure,” Priya says tacitly. Vince appears behind me. I know how he’s hovering behind me, willing our bodies not to touch.

“Hey, Priya,” he mumbles sheepishly.

“Vincent,” she says primly. “Can I talk to you in the hallway for a second?” Before he can respond, Priya drags him into her room.

CHAPTER 6

VINCE

Atlanta, GA

“Vince, you can’t ruin Lyndsey. You can’t. She makes touring an absolute breeze. She’s a genius. I, we can’t lose her! What the hell? Lyndsey? Of all the women in the world, you choose Lyndsey for your tour fuck?” Priya’s yelling now at familiar decibels of Vince-only rage.

“It’s not like that. Besides, Lyndsey just told me she wanted to keep us a secret because she wants to keep it professional,” I say.

However, I am starting to wonder why everyone around me thought me dating Lyndsey was such a horrible idea. I wasn’t that bad, was I? Okay, granted, the breakup with Eve didn’t go so great. But Lyndsey’s not Eve! She’s Lyndsey! She’s brilliant, hot, and cool!

“Well then, what is it like, Vince?”

“I like her,” I admit. “Fuck! Priya! I like her. It’s fucking awful. She’s amazing. I can’t stop thinking about her,” I whine.

Priya shakes her head. “That bad, huh?”

“Last night was, no exaggeration, one of the best fucking nights of my life.”

Priya clapped her hands over her ears and scrunched up her face. “Ew! I don’t want to hear this.”

“I’m trying to tell you that I don’t want it to be a fling!” I snap, slapping my hands against my thighs.

Priya studies me. Her eyes brighten as her brow furrows. “You like her, don’t you? That’s why you’ve been so fucking weird around her this entire time. You had a crush!” Priya laughs, then starts to guffaw.

“Is it so unbelievable that I might like someone because they’re a cool person and they’re hot? I’m not a soulless monster.”

“I know, it’s just you’ve gone on record as, oh God, what was it? ‘An equal opportunity tits and ass man’ in several publications.”

I sigh. “I know.” I never intended to make my living as a thoughtless sex god, but the persona grew and overtook everything around it, like ivy crawling up the wall of an old house.

When I first started giving interviews, I was twenty. So, I talked like a twenty-year-old who suddenly had access to excessive amounts of money and mainly thought with his dick. I had zero prior media training. Couple that with a slew of wild flings and the fact that I supposedly ‘broke Priya’s heart resulting in arson,’ and no one could mention me in the press without adding that I was a womanizer.

I was, but I’d hoped that Priya and the people who interacted with me daily knew I’d changed.

I guess not.

It was strange; when Lyndsey told me she wanted to keep us a secret, I felt hurt. I felt like she thought she had to hide me. Or maybe, Lyndsey was on guard because she couldn’t see beyond the tabloids.

Part of me hoped that she would look beyond the headlines and know that I wasn't the person the media made me out to be, but I couldn't blame her for being cautious.

It felt karmic; I spent years cultivating a hedonistic personality filled with meaningless sex, and now the first person I liked only wanted to use me for meaningless sex. I was, quite literally, fucked.



Lyndsey checks us out of the hotel without so much as a glance in my direction and digs out her laptop the moment she walks onto the bus. I can't help but feel like she's ignoring me as she sequesters in the kitchenette, hunched over her laptop.

"What are you doing?" I ask. I grab onto the cabinet to steady myself.

"Making sure we're set for Nashville," Lyndsey mumbles. We're playing a headlining show for the Human Rights Campaign, and a cut of the ticket sales will go to the HRC's Nashville chapter. It's a great cause but a massive gig, with a dozen other bands taking over Centennial Park for the weekend.

"Well, are we?" I ask.

"We will be if you let me finish this email to the sound guy," Lyndsey mumbles.

"Sorry," I say, skulking over to the couch.

"Hey, Vince," Lyndsey calls. I look up, full of hope.

"Lynn just texted me to remind you to finish that email interview for GQ. Try not to send your publicist chasing after me when you don't do your homework," Lyndsey snaps.

"Fuck! I was supposed to do it last night," I look around; Henry's absorbed in an audiobook and Priya's napping. Apollo is staying in Atlanta an extra day and meeting us in Nashville. But I can't help but feel like I'm about to blow our precarious cover.

“Vince,” Lyndsey says, clearly exasperated. I walk over to the booth where she’s sitting and slide next to her, but she blocks me with her knee.

“You can’t tell me you’re not doing your job because we’re too busy fucking; this is exactly why we can’t be together. We have the tour to think about! I’m not going to lie and pretend like last night wasn’t amazing, but it can’t impact the tour, okay?”

“Okay,” I mumble. Lyndsey has a point, but it’s an annoying point. I mumble something about needing space and answering emails in my bunk. If Lyndsey wants to pretend that last night was some huge mistake, then two can play that game.

By the time we arrive in Nashville and park the bus at the edge of the park, everyone’s too exhausted to say anything about it. It’s close to 1 a.m., and I can hear Lyndsey tossing and turning in her bunk.

Suddenly, her breathing becomes shallow as the bunk starts to creak forward. Her breath hitches. I feel myself harden.

Is she touching herself?

My suspicions are confirmed when a soft moan peels out of the back of her throat, the same noise she made last night. I long to touch her.

My dick hardens against my belly. I flip onto my back and grab the shaft, thinking of Lyndsey’s soft and muscular thighs and how I want her, but I can’t have her. Then, I realize we were being ridiculous.

“Lyndsey?” I call.

She startles. I hear a thump as her head hits the ceiling.

“Vince! What the fuck?”

“Are you touching yourself?” I ask.

I can feel the embarrassment radiating off her.

“It’s none of your business.”

“It is. I’m right here. I can help,” I offer suggestively.

Lyndsey hangs her head over her bunk. I crane my torso around and kiss her, feeling utter relief as her soft, warm lips find mine. I slip my tongue into her mouth, and she smiles. Gently, I clutch the back of her neck. Lyndsey kisses back harder this time.

“You make it so hard to stay away from you,” Lyndsey grumbles.

“No, that’s not because of me. That’s because we’re living together on a tiny bus,” I point out.

“We’re not doing anything together!” Lyndsey says defensively.

“We don’t have to be together. We can just, I dunno, exist. I like you. You like me. What if we just acknowledged that, and that was it? No strings attached. No scuttling around to avoid each other and snuff out our obvious attraction,” I suggest.

I can feel the gears turning in Lyndsey’s brain. Finally, she speaks. “Okay, but when I say ‘no strings,’ I mean ‘no strings.’”

“You do tend to say what you mean,” I joke.

“I’m serious, Vince.”

“I know you are! I’m not exactly looking for anything serious either, love. Now, come here,” I say.

Lyndsey flops out of her bunk and crawls into mine, sliding on me hungrily.

I’m already so hard it’s painful as she reaches into my boxers and cups the shaft of my dick, working her hand upward.

The bunk is cramped, hot, and close. I am absorbed in her scent, patchouli, probably. She tastes like the chalky wintergreen organic toothpaste she keeps in the bathroom, and her hair is soft against my cheek. Lyndsey consumes me, and I’m not complaining.

She winds her hand along the length of my dick, and I grunt in pleasure. I kiss her, sliding my tongue along the back of her teeth as I cup her breasts, playing with one of her nipples. She

groans and grinds her pelvis down toward me. The heat radiating off her makes me harder.

It's clumsy; her elbow bangs on the narrow ceiling of the bunk. We can barely fit, but there's something so carefree and almost funny about it. I'm fucking the tour manager, and it feels like we're two camp counselors who snuck off for a quickie.

"Vince," Lyndsey groans as I kiss her neck. "I want you inside me," she begs.

"Is that what you were thinking about?" I tease.

"Yeah! Until you interrupted me." Lyndsey retorts.

"For good reason!"

My hands wander down toward Lyndsey's ass, and I realize she's not wearing any underwear. I slip two fingers into her glistening entrance and begin to work her clit until her hips buck with pleasure,

"Vince. I want you to fuck me. Hard." Lyndsey demands.

Already I know I'll do anything she asks. I grab a condom from the little net basket on the end of my bunk, slide it on, grab her hips, and position her over me before thrusting upward into her with a grunt, gripping her hips for leverage. A low whine escapes Lyndsey's throat. I feel her muscles tense, and her toes curl as she tightens around me, riding me hard.

Lyndsey fucks with a level of athleticism that I am unaccustomed to, with frantic quick thrusts that shake the bed as she grips the back of my neck and kisses me. I'm enraptured by her pert tits bobbing as she rides me. I lift my head and lick the underside of her breasts, taking her nipple in my mouth and pulling until it pebbles.

Lyndsey squirms and I plunge deeper into her, coming with a grunt as I release, drowning in her scent, her sounds, and the feeling of her skin. Lyndsey continues to kiss me before baring down with a grunt and coming, peeling her sweaty body off mine. I look to the left; the curtain that separates the bunk from the rest of the bus is separated from its rod and piled on the floor.

“Did we?” I start.

“Um, there’s no ‘we’ I think that was you.”

“No! It was you! You had your hand in my hair, and your other hand was drifting,” I say.

“No! You had your hand in my hair,” Lyndsey corrects before dissolving into laughter. I peel the condom off and slide it out of my bunk to deposit it into a nearby trash can. When I get back, Lyndsey is already back in her bunk.

“What, you’re not gonna stay?” I joke.

“We both know it’s cramped in there,” she says. I kiss her and realize that Lyndsey Vynse will be the death of me, strings or no strings.



The next morning, I roll out of bed and slip some track shorts on before realizing the bus is empty.

I walk outside and see Lyndsey curled up on a lawn chair in the sun, with a laptop on her lap, wearing sunglasses. She looks as relaxed as she can be while in the middle of work.

All around us, the crew bustles in and out of trailers, and bands yell greetings to each other. I love playing festivals because it reminds me of a block party, especially during the summer. There’s something wonderfully communal about being less than five minutes away from a bunch of your friends.

Ivan, the bassist from a ska band I like, waves to me, and I wave back. I run into the bus and dig through the refrigerator until I find a container of iced coffee; then, I plop two handfuls of ice into two glasses and pour some coffee into each one. I pour some of Lyndsey’s weird vegan creamer into one.

I balance the two cups carefully as I make my way off the bus before handing one to Lyndsey, who looks up and grins.

“What is this, room service?”

“Nah. I was grabbing myself a coffee, and I thought you’d like some, unless ...” I trail off.

Lyndsey grabs her cup and takes a sip before nodding and grinning, “This is perfect. You read my mind.” She flashes me a generous smile and gestures to the empty chair beside her. I take a seat.

“Did you just wake up?” she asks.

“Yeah, like ten minutes ago. What about you? You’ve got a whole little outdoor office here,” I say.

“I got tired of working on the bus. Plus, it’s a nice day out.” Her phone buzzes, and she types something quickly before putting it down.

“That was Apollo. He’ll be here in ten.”

“It’s nice that he could spend an extra night with Char,” I say.

Lyndsey nods. “Again, I have no idea how people who are, like, married go on tour. It has to put a strain on the relationship, y’know?”

“Yeah, but doesn’t everything?” I ask, not meaning to sound philosophical. Lyndsey stops mid-sip and smirks at me.

CHAPTER 7

LYNDSEY

Nashville, TN

Sometimes the sound booth feels like a crow's nest on a pirate ship.

I watch The Imposters set from above, perched next to a grisly old dude named Mark wearing the world's biggest pair of headphones. A cameraman swivels the cyclops-eye of a camera around and zooms in on Priya's velvet Gogo boots.

The performance in Nashville tonight is being live-streamed on the HRC's website, as well as a couple of music websites. Priya's amped it up to eleven now that she knows she's being filmed. I can only hope to be that limber when I'm in my fifties.

As the last song ends, she slides into the splits, and the crowd goes wild. Vince jumps up and throws his guitar forward as he hits the final note. A cameraman zooms in on his hands, working the fretboard. If they only knew what those hands could do.

Ugh. Jesus! I need to stop sounding like such a fucking fan girl!

Sure, Vince has given me earth-shattering orgasms every night for the past three nights, but I'm not swooning over him or anything just because he's a musician. Although, I'm sure he would make a significantly less hot accountant.

When the band exits the stage, I climb down the sound booth and make the long trek back to the side stage. I start to jog, and I swear Vince's face lights up when he sees me.

"Great set," I say. I mentally catalog all the ways I could touch Vince without seeming weird: a side hug, a handshake, a high-five. Instead, we both stand frozen in our respective spots as Priya shrugs off her turquoise silk blazer.

"I know it was great, which is why I propose tonight we hit the town!"

"You want to go out after this? You just played a two-hour set in ninety-degree heat, and you want to go out?"

"Yes! It'll be fun! We don't leave until one tomorrow, right?"

I did give everyone extra time to relax tomorrow morning because I knew this would be a big show. I nod, and Priya rubs her hands together like she's scheming.

"What do you say?" she asks.

"You mean, like, go down to Broadway?" Henry asks.

"Yes! Exactly! We can go to shitty country bars, wear bolo ties, and drink cheap beer! We can be so quintessentially American that it stresses out Bruce Springsteen! C'mon boys, what do you say: Will you be the yee to my haw?"

"I'm intrigued, but Priya, I didn't pack a bolo tie," Vince starts. While the band is distracted, arguing amongst themselves about where we should go, Vince slips his hand around my waist and whispers in my ear.

"I'd love to take you out on a real date."

I can't help myself. My stomach flips. Who knows what will happen in a loud, dark bar?

I'm curious to see what Vince is like in the so-called "real world," So many of our interactions have been delegated to the rare moments of normalcy on tours, laundromats, and gas stations. I want to see what Vince is like at a bar. I want him to buy me a beer.



Priya didn't pack a bolo tie, but she went thrifting today.

Back on the bus in her Master Suite, she gestures to four embroidered button-downs folded neatly on her bed.

The shoulders of each shirt are covered in elaborate designs: roses snake along the sternum of one, ochre thread forms a galaxy on another, a sage-green serpent pops against black linen with gold cufflinks, and finally, silver horseshoes flank the chest of a black top.

"Boys, I know your size, but Lyndsey, I had to guess yours. Although, I suppose they're unisex."

"Did you get one for yourself?" I ask.

Priya nods and unsheathes a hot pink blouse with lime-green vines forming a corset design along the front. An embroidered canopy drapes across the shoulders.

"Do we have to wear these?" Henry asks, thumbing the material of one.

"Henry! C'mon, when in Rome! Don't be such a sourpuss; take your pick!" Priya begs.

"Dibs on the snakes," Vince declares.

"I picked that out for you; good choice," Priya nods and hands it over to Vince. Who promptly discards his tank top and runs to his suitcase to find a new one.

"Apollo?" Priya prompts.

"Um, the stars, I guess?"

"I knew it. And Lyndsey?"

Priya's staring at me now with her wildly persuasive brown eyes, and I sort of hate costumes, but I try and remember the last time I did something new on tour, and nothing comes up.

"The roses." I decide.

Priya hands me the shirt; the linen is soft and tough. I like the beveled feeling of the embroidery. I run into the bathroom and slip the shirt over my tank top. It fits like magic, the shoulders are structured but still roomy, and the embroidery highlights my tits.

I look good, cool even. I tie my hair into a messy bun and fold the sleeves back to my elbows. When I walk out of the bathroom, Vince whistles.

"Well, howdy, partner." He cocks his hip to the side, and I drink him in.

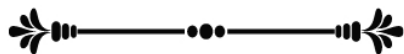
The embroidered snakes wind down the arms, accentuating his buff arms while the serpent's head sits squarely on his firm chest. The dark linen brings out the blue tones in his hair, making it look more lush than usual.

His green eyes pop against the dark fabric. He's beautiful. I can't tell him to quit it with the phony country accent because I'm speechless.

"Howdy," I start before bursting out laughing.

"I can't believe Priya found our shirts."

"She's never met a theme she doesn't like," Vince says.



I've passed through Nashville half a dozen times on various tours, but I've never had the chance to go out at night.

Tourists flood the streets stomping in their cowboy boots. Each bar has a neon sign boasting a cowboy boot or critter flashier than the last. We pass dozens of bars advertising open mics, and live music of every genre pours out each doorway: blues, reggae, funk, and a lone singer-songwriter add to the eclectic musical tapestry that forms the city.

Priya studies each bar like she's on a mission. But if she stays for a beat too long, a drunk fan wanders up to her, and she graciously stops to take a selfie.

“Priya! Just pick one!” Vince begs.

“Alright, what about ... the Tankard?” Priya points straight ahead to a neon sign shaped like a bull, which blinks as the neon flashes. She runs up to the window. “They've got dollar beer! And peanuts! Let's do it!”

Inside is dark and loud; I can barely see in front of me. My foot crunches on dozens of discarded peanut shells. Soon, my eyes adjust to the dark, and I see wizened old men wearing cowboy hats playing darts in the corner.

It's not a tourist bar. I can tell by how the patrons curve their bodies toward the bar like it's a second home; this is the sort of bar where no one cares who you are or what you do. It's perfect.

The beefy bouncer checks our IDs and does a double take when he sees Vince's.

“Could I get a photo, man? I started playing bass because of you.”

Vince pauses. While he's plenty used to being asked for photos, I overheard him telling Henry that he wanted to have a normal night.

“I'll take it,” I suggest.

Vince leans in next to the bouncer and smiles, a huge grin that overtakes his whole face. I take a couple of photos, one with flash, and hand the phone back to the bouncer.

“I'm not supposed to have my phone on me during my shift, but this is fuckin' worth it!” He exclaims.

“My pleasure,” Vince says. “Have a good night, man.”

We wander into the dark pit of the bar, and Vince grabs my hand as we walk up to the bar.

“I'll have a club soda with lime, and for the lady,” he pauses and looks at me. I feel like an idiot. How could I forget Vince

doesn't drink? That fucking *GQ* interview was about how he's been sober for twenty years!

I pause. "Is this okay?" I whisper.

He gives my hand another squeeze. "Yeah, love. You can drink around me if you want. It doesn't bother me. I've been sober since before you could spell your name," he jokes.

"Okay. I'll have a PBR," I say. I don't usually drink, but it's hot, and I haven't been out properly in ages.

"There's a new mocktail menu, too. I can make you a non-alcoholic Mule if you want," the bartender suggests to Vince.

"That sounds great. With extra lime if you have it."

He hands over his card, and the bartender hands us our drink. Vince lights up when he sees the copper mug, "I get the real mug and everything! Priya, look! It's a ... what did you call it?" He glances back at the bartender.

"A mocktail."

"Priya, look! It's a mocktail!"

Priya walks over to us and rolls her eyes; she's sipping on what looks like a Mai Thai, "I told you so!" Priya quips.

"You did not!"

Priya rolls her eyes.

He sighs and loops his arm around my waist, pulling me close, "Do you want to find a table?" He asks.

"Sure." I realize for the first time all night that this is technically a date.

My palms start to sweat. I wipe them down my jeans, then chastise myself for being ridiculous. Last night, Vince fucked me so hard I ripped the curtain down, and now I'm nervous?

We circle the bar, and people watch. I see a pool table in the corner, and I elbow Vince, "Do you ever play?"

"Hell, yes! Let's do it. I'm about to kick your ass," Vince taunts.

I rack up the balls and grab a cue, handing the other to Vince.

“Well, if you’re so good, you can go first.”

Vince leans over the table and steadies the cue. We match each other game for game, almost telepathically anticipating each other’s moves. Finally, at the end of the second game, Vince says, “If you lose, you have to kiss me.”

“What is this, elementary school?” I ask.

I aim my cue for the final ball, and I miss, but I don’t care. I walk around to Vince’s side of the table and loop my arms around his neck, standing on my toes. He cranes his face down toward me and captures my lips in his. He tastes like lime and the ever-present cigarette smoke. His hand finds the small of my back. I groan as I suck on his bottom lip. He slips his other hand into the back pocket of my jeans and squeezes my ass.

“Oh, I knew it! Apollo, you owe me \$50!” Henry calls. We jump apart with a start.

“I lost a bet!” I accidentally yell.

“So that’s what the kids are calling it these days?” Apollo teases.

“Good for you two!” Henry says with a happy nod.

“I’m happy for you,” Apollo adds.

“But it’s ... we’re,” I try to find the words, “... nothing serious,” but my mind is on the fritz.

“Keep it on the DL,” Vince supplies.

Henry and Apollo nod. “Obviously. The press would have a field day with this one, especially with what happened with you and Eve!”

Fuck. The press.

I only interact with the media in the most tertiary way, through cc’d emails for upcoming shows and fielding the occasional media request. But I keep forgetting that the lore surrounding the Imposters is a veritable media machine encompassing decades of gossip that their hungriest and most

loyal fans crave. I wonder if I'll have to invest in a pair of oversized sunglasses.

I rarely check social media, but I saw that the press eviscerated Vince after his breakup with Eve. Every third post says something about his 'womanizing' past, and my mom texted me the next day asking if he was 'really that bad.' Suffice it to say, the last thing I want is a dozen journalists probing into my and Vince's 'relationship,' if you can call it that.

"Our lips are sealed," Henry reassures us.

"Thank you," I reply.

For a moment, Henry stares at me like he's trying to figure out how and why Vince and I got together in the first place, but the neon jukebox in the corner quickly diverts his attention.

"Oh, no way!" Henry exclaims.

He and Vince rush over to the corner, and Vince starts digging through his pants pockets for quarters. They load up the jukebox queue with a ridiculous array of songs about sex, tractors, and sexy tractors.

As the twang fills the room, Vince grabs my waist and spins me around. We stumble onto the small dance floor in the center of the bar. Priya tries to teach us all how to line-dance, and we fail miserably.

Vince stomps on my toe, and I hop around, accidentally kneeing Henry. Soon, the three of us can't stop laughing. Priya is grumbling about how this is why she never had a chance as a pop star.

The rest of the night is a blur of laughter and music. When a slow song comes on, I rest my head against Vince's chest and listen to his heartbeat beneath the linen. I don't have the energy to contemplate what will happen next. I love where I am now, drenched in the hazy light of the bar, enveloped in Vince's solid frame.

CHAPTER 8

VINCE

New York, NY

We have a rare day off in New York, and I fully intend to take advantage of it.

I start the day with an ever rarer, exciting interview with a meditation magazine I enjoy. It's the fastest I've ever said yes to a media request. I give the journalist my email at the end and tell her to reach out if she's ever in California.

I flop back onto the king-sized bed and let my arms splay out, stretching fully for the first time in days. Lyndsey booked us a hotel to correspond with our off day, so now, not only do I have time to myself, but I also have enough space to turn around when I shower. I can't comprehend the luxury of it all.

The hotel room is massive, with vaulted ceilings and a New York City Skyline view. I did my interview at a polished oak wooden desk that looked like it would chastise me for putting my feet on it. The bed is soft, with floral-scented downy pillows. I can't wait to stay here for another night, but I also hope Lyndsey will be with me.

We've been on the road for six weeks, and this is our first day off.

I change into a pair of track shorts and a t-shirt, mentally thumbing through my options for the day. I knock on Lyndsey's door and see if she wants to go for a run in Central Park.

Her rooms down the hall; when I knock, she answers, wearing yoga pants that accentuate her curves and a sports bra.

"I was gonna see if you wanted to go for a run?"

"In Central Park?" she replies. "I was just going to see if you wanted to join me."

"Well fuck, we're fully telepathic now," I say.

We walk to the park, and I slip my fingers through hers. For a moment, we feel normal. We're just another couple going for a run. Then, a paparazzi appears like a whack-a-mole.

"Vince! Vince! Who's this? What are you doing?"

"This is Lyndsey, and we're going for a run, you shithead!" I growl. I know everyone needs to work for a living, but I'm significantly less sympathetic to people who pay their rent by selling other people's details to tabloids. I'm a person, too.

Violet hates loud noises and flashing lights. When I first brought her home, she hid under my bed for a week. I can deal with people being assholes, but when they come for my dog and the people who are important to me, I fight back.

"Lyndsey! Who are you?" the paparazzi continue.

"I'm his tour manager!" she yells back, shooting him a steely glare.

"You look pretty cozy for a manager," the paparazzi taunts.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I grab his cyclops-eye of a camera with my free hand and smash it onto the ground. I stomp on it with my running shoe. The glass crunches under my feet.

"Fuck off," I snarl.

“Hey, man! I needed that!”

“Well, get a fucking new one, and stop badgering people with your invasive bullshit questions,” I reply.

The paparazzi scramble around on the ground for his broken camera, and Lyndsey and I take the chance to run for it.

“Sorry,” I say when we’re finally out of his earshot.

“No worries. I mean, it comes with the territory, right?” Lyndsey asks, trying to be sympathetic.

“Yeah, but it shouldn’t have to. No one wants to know when their dentist sees someone new,” I say.

Lyndsey shrugs. “I mean, Dr. Heimann at Pasadena Dentistry’s a catch, but I know what you mean. There’s a lot less mythology surrounding other professions,” Lyndsey says. I laugh humorlessly and feel a wave of relief as I see the green expanse of Central Park in the distance.

“But let’s not let those assholes ruin our day,” Lyndsey says. We walk into the entrance of the park and start stretching. I watch Lyndsey’s body, all sensuous lines and curves, as she stretches. She’s beautiful.

But she takes advantage of my distraction, “Race you!” she calls before darting off onto the trail. I follow her, but by the time I catch up, I’m panting.

“Unfair!” I say.

Lyndsey laughs. “You need to realize that you can stare at my ass after we work out,” she teases.

“Were you trying to teach me a lesson?” I ask.

“Maybe. Did it work?”

“No.” I slap her ass and take off in a sprint, leaving Lyndsey in the dust. We spend the rest of the morning jogging and observing a coterie of New Yorkers.

When we return to the hotel, we’re both sweating.

“I need a shower,” Lyndsey says with a devilish twinkle in her eye. “Join me?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” I say.

Lyndsey grabs my hand and pulls me into her hotel room, locking the door behind us with a click. She grins as she pulls off her sports bra, laughing as I ogle at her gorgeous tits. Her nipples are large and dark, almost mauve. I take one in my mouth and suck.

She presses her hand to the back of my head and threads her fingers through my hair. Before she can protest, I scoop her up and carry her to the bathroom, continuing to ravish her chest. She groans.

“I should work out with you more often,” she murmurs as we stumble into the bathroom.

The shower is gigantic, concealed by glass planes, and plenty big enough for two people. We strip out of our clothes, and I turn on the water, amazed by the pressure. Lyndsey walks in first and groans as the conveniently placed jets pulverize her sore muscles. “The bus could never. Jesus Christ.”

Lyndsey tilts her head back, letting the stream of water wash over her, tracing her curves. I’m already hard. She grins when she notices before taking my dick in her hands and slowly teasing the shaft. I groan in pleasure as she continues to work the shaft and kiss my neck, nipping occasionally. She wraps a leg around my waist, testing.

I clutch her ass. “I’ve got you,” I whisper as I capture her lips. I step back as she shifts her weight toward me, and I hoist her upward. She settles over me, ready to receive me as I thrust into her. She cries out in delight and clutches my shoulders, sinking her nails into my shoulder blades. Pleasure and pain mingle. It feels wonderful.

“Fuck, Vince,” she cries. I continue to thrust, establishing a steady rhythm. I can see Lyndsey’s ass bobbing in the reflection of the shower door.

She’s so wet; it’s maddening. Her muscles clench around me, and I’m dizzy with ecstasy as she bares down, enveloping me in the soft flesh of her thighs and stomach. She’s a

goddess, shaking the rafters as she comes, yanking my hair back. It feels so good. I'm so close.

We continue, and Lyndsey cries out, knocking the complimentary shampoo off the tiny shelf as she leans back against the wall. I fuck her harder and harder, and she yells in delight, clenching her legs around my waist.

I come in a burst. Then I kiss her temples and her neck as we disentangle. I can see a bruise forming on the back of Lyndsey's shoulder that looks suspiciously like the shower tiles. Lyndsey laughs it off while we soap ourselves clean,

"I like it a little rough, y'know?" she says.

She pulls me in for a kiss and bites my bottom lip, teasing her fingers along my back. I trace the line of her jaw, feeling the hot point of her pulse. Lyndsey pins my hands above my head and grins, stretching her legs.

"You can be such a tease sometimes," I say.

"Look in the fucking mirror," Lyndsey replies.

She steps out of the shower and grabs a towel, wrapping it around her waist.

"I only tease you because it's fun," I say, kissing her neck. I find two complimentary hotel robes hanging off the hook on the door. I towel off and slip one on before handing the other to Lyndsey. The fabric is luxurious enough for me to ignore the hotel's hefty price per night.

"Did you eat breakfast at all? I'm starving," I say as we walk into the main room and flop onto the bed.

"No, not yet. Do you want coffee or something?"

"What do you say we maximize our day off and order room service?" Lyndsey's brows burrow in thought as she reaches over to the bedside table and grabs her glasses.

"I'm not about to spend thirty dollars on pancakes when there's a diner down the block," Lyndsey starts.

"I know. But if I do this at a diner, I might get arrested for public indecency again," I say, capturing her lips in a fierce

kiss. Lyndsey groans and shifts toward me. Our foreheads bump as she threads her fingers through my hair.

“Fine,” she grumbles as we pull apart.

“Plus, we can’t wear our robes to the diner. I love this robe. It speaks to me.”

“It is the comfiest thing I’ve ever worn,” Lyndsey admits.

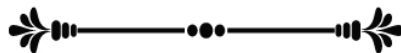
We order room service: cinnamon rolls the size of dinner plates and egg benedicts. We spend the rest of the morning alternating between eating in bed and fucking. Lyndsey scratches the headboard. I nip the soft flesh of her inner thighs, breakable and sweet like fresh plums. It’s delightful.

By 2 p.m., Lyndsey insists we put on clothes and starts ranting about ‘wasting the day.’ She’s pacing around the room, refreshing her email for the umpteenth time, a tornado of worry.

“I mean, we’ll be fine for the show tomorrow, but still.” I get up and cross the room, grabbing her waist and stopping her in her tracks.

“You’re right. The show will be fine,” I whisper. I kiss her temple and feel her relax against me.

“Lynds,” I murmur, “Have you ever been to the MET?”



We walk to the MET, and it feels like a real date. Lyndsey wears high-waisted jeans and an army green crop top; one of my chains sits loose around her neck. She’s gorgeous. I’m wearing shorts and an old Descendants T-shirt.

It’s early September, and the first hints of fall fill the air. The few trees that line the streets are starting to lose their leaves. Lyndsey grins when she sees the iconic steps of the MET looming in the distance, and I know it’s taking all her effort not to sprint up them like Rocky.

We walk up the steps hand-in-hand, and Lyndsey’s jaw drops when we enter the lobby.

“This is insane,” she mutters as I pay for our tickets.

“Are you not a fan of museums?” I ask.

“I love a good museum; it’s just I’m realizing that we’re in a building that probably contains a billion dollars’ worth of fine art. And it’s all just sitting there, y’know?”

“It’s waiting to be appreciated by someone as hot as you,” I joke.

Lyndsey elbows my ribs, and we wind our way through the galleries. We pause to observe Van Gogh’s and Duchamp’s pieces that, until this point, Lyndsey has only seen in books.

My favorite part is the Rothko room. I saw it the first time I ever went to New York, and I’ve thought about it ever since. Something about the wash of colors lapping over each other feels like how it feels to play music, this odd kaleidoscope that a person’s been tasked with translating. Lyndsey studies each painting intently, placing her hand on her hip.

“I wish I could paint,” she says.

“What’s stopping you? You’re still young!”

“I can’t draw a stick figure,” Lyndsey says.

“Well, you don’t know until you try!”

“What’s making you so optimistic?” Lyndsey asks as I sneak up behind her and loop my arms around her waist.

“I dunno. I’ve just been feeling good about things lately,” I murmur into her hair.

CHAPTER 9

LYNDSEY

New York, NY

After the MET, Vince begs me to let him take me out to dinner.

“C’mon! Everyone else is busy tonight! We can finally have a proper date!” He exclaims.

“I don’t have date clothes!” I say, again suddenly nervous.

“Whatever you wear, you’ll be the hottest person there by a mile. C’mon, let me show you a good time. Please?” Vince begs, clasping his hands together.

“Fine,” I say. I want to go, but part of me is terrified.

I’m not exactly a fine-dining person. I think of the dozens of other women Vince has dated in the past, the socialites and actresses who grew up going to prep schools and galas.

What if Vince takes me out and realizes I’m a nobody? What if it’s a painstaking comedy of errors where I use the incorrect fork because I’m a glorified California hick?

Still, Vince looks so excited. When I returned to my hotel room, I dug through my suitcase, unearthing the one dress I had packed in case we ever went anywhere nice.

It's black, with cut-outs along the sides and an open back. The skirt hits mid-thigh, and I tug it closer to my knees. Unwillingly, the structured top pushes my tits up. I can't tell if I look hot or if I look like this dress took me hostage and stuffed me inside.

I don't wear a ton of makeup, if any. I almost consider knocking on Priya's door and asking to borrow some eyeliner, but that would require telling Priya that Vince and I are going on a date.

I dig through my bag until I find a tube of mascara. I cram contacts into my eyes for the first time in months and swipe mascara on my lashes. I apply a coat of tinted lip gloss and run my fingers through my hair.

Vince knocks on my door. "Are you ready, Lynds? I made reservations at a little trattoria down the street."

"Yeah! One second!" I call.

Fuck, what shoes am I supposed to wear? I dig through my suitcase, unearthing a pair of black sandals, and shove my feet inside. I don't give myself time to look in the mirror and chicken out. I shove my phone, wallet, and room key into a black clutch and open the door.

"Wow," Vince hums. He's wearing a black blazer and black jeans. His hair is artfully ruffled, curls lapping his shoulders, and his green eyes are shining with ... awe. Is he impressed? For the record, he looks hot, emanating the exact ease of an off duty rockstar, down to the scuffed matte black combat boots he's wearing.

"Is this, okay?" I ask.

"You look amazing. You look stunning. You look—" I hold my hand up to stop Vince from waxing poetic. "I mean, for the restaurant. Is there a dress code or something?" I clarify.

"Nah. I don't think so. You look lovely," Vince mutters, pulling me in for a kiss.

I relax as I slip my tongue into his mouth. Already, I can feel his hard-on stiffening against his jeans. I don't know why I was nervous about tonight. It's only Vince. He's not going to transform into a completely new person the moment we go on a date, is he?

When we pull apart, he fishes his phone out of his pocket.

"I need a photo," he says.

"Of me?"

"No, of us. We have no photos together," he says. He flips the phone camera around and takes a Selfie of us. I can't help but smile. He grins. Then he takes another, pressing his lips to my temple.

"You don't strike me as sentimental," I say.

"I'm trying to experience tour, y'know? It's important. You're important. I want to remember this."

My heart melts as I grab his hand. We walk to the elevator and then spill out onto the street. It's dusk; the city lights contrast with the cornflower blue of the sky. Around us, couples emerge from bars and boutiques, holding hands and stopping for photos.

We could be any one of them. We're just another pair of New Yorkers going out on a date tonight.

Vince leads the way to a small trattoria with a bright red awning. Inside is dimly lit by dozens of fairy lights and candles. The walls are a pale yellow. The air smells like oregano.

"I called in a seven o'clock reservation for Vincent," Vince tells the host, who nods and leads us to a tiny table in a dimly lit corner. It's perfect; no one can see us. Even better, as we walk back to the table, I note dozens of actors and actresses also trying to maintain a modicum of normalcy over massive plates of fresh pasta.

Vince pulls out my chair and gestures for me to sit. I blush. The waiter runs and grabs a loaf of piping hot focaccia and

sets it on the table along with a plate of fresh olive oil. Vince and I grab a handful. The bread is warm to the touch.

I order an Aperol spritz, and Vince orders a seltzer water and some calamari for the table.

“I hope you like Italian food,” Vince says, squeezing a lemon wedge over the calamari. I nod and quickly give up on transferring the calamari onto my plate delicately and instead grab a spoon and plop a spoonful onto my plate.

Again, I’m surrounded by actresses who wear toddler-sized dresses. I can’t help but feel a little out of place. I nibble on a piece of fried squid. The breading is delicate and crumbly, enhanced by the bright zest of the lemon. I take a sip of my spritz as Vince grabs another handful of bread.

“More places should give you free carbs,” he muses before adding, “We should put this on the rider.”

I laugh, “So you want me to add one loaf of fresh focaccia?”

“Yeah, I can pack my own olive oil.”

“Got it. I thought you didn’t want to talk about work on our big day off.”

Vince shrugs, “I’m surprised I brought it up. But really, it’s nice to feel normal for a day, or at least, as normal as we can be.” Vince leans over and points over my shoulder, “Don’t make it obvious, but that guy over there is part of the Academy,” he whispers. I pretend to stretch and glimpse an older gentleman in a three-piece suit.

“How do you know?”

“I met him at a party once, and that’s how he introduced himself to me. Did you know all you have to do for that is watch the movies? Like, that’s his job.”

“And here we are running ourselves ragged in a different city every night,” I say, “When other people get to stay home with popcorn.”

The waiter comes to take our orders. I order Caccio e Pepe, and Vince orders penne a la vodka.

“Fair warning, this pasta will make every other pasta seem like a depressing, paltry comparison for the rest of your life,” Vince says.

“Thanks for setting me up for a lifetime of disappointment.”

“It’s what I do best.”

I laugh, “I beg to differ. Today’s been amazing,” I reach across the table and grab his hand.

“It doesn’t have to stop here. Do you like dancing?” Vince asks.

I pause, I’m not much of a clubbing person, but it would be fun to go with Vince. “What kind of club?” I ask.

“If I tell you it’s the kind you’d like and that I want to surprise you, would you trust me?”

I thought back to my previous boyfriends and their attempts at surprises: Diego, who took me mountain climbing when I was afraid of heights; Joey, who tried to surprise me on tour last summer, but the reservation fell through, so we ended up eating at a shitty diner.

I didn’t have the best track record with romance or surprises, but Vince was different. I wanted to see what he thought I liked; I was curious.

“Sure,” I say.

The waiter brought out our food. I stared at the gorgeous, glistening mountain of spaghetti dotted with bits of pepper. My stomach growled. Vince dug into his Penne.

“Okay, when I eat this, I’m going to look unhinged,” I warn Vince.

He shrugs, “Go for it. You don’t have to impress me. Enjoy your pasta.”

I take a forkful and shove it into my mouth. It’s mind-blowing. The sauce looks deceptively simple, like an alfredo. Still, I can taste a fantastic medley of fresh, gooey cheeses: parmesan reggiano, alfredo, and a hint of fontina, all blending with hints of fresh pepper. Vince is right; it’s revelatory.

“Okay, now I’m adding to the rider that we need to stop here at least once a week,” I say.

“Right?!” Vince exclaims as he scrapes more sauce onto a noodle.

“I must admit, growing up in the UK, we didn’t have the best Italian food. The first time I went here, I practically lost my mind. I ate two servings of spaghetti. They gave me a T-shirt. I think I still have it.”

“You grew up without pasta? That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard. What’s next? You’re an orphan?”

“Nah, Loretta and Alan Exter are 91 and still kicking.”

“That’s amazing. Any siblings?” I ask. I realize this is the first opportunity I’ve had to ask Vince basic questions about his life uninterrupted and how I barely know him.

“Just one. I’ve got an older brother named Michael. He used to work Merch for us back in the nineties. Now he owns a screen-printing company in Bristol.”

“Does it get lonely having your family back in the UK?” I ask. My mom can be a handful, but I can’t imagine not being on the same continent as her.

“It was at first, but Priya and the guys are my family now. You can have a family in all sorts of ways, y’know?”

“Yeah, my best friend Allison is basically my sister.”

“So, you don’t have any siblings?”

“Nope. Just me. My parents are divorced. My dad’s a tax accountant; he loves to text me and beg me to set up a 401k.

“And your mum?”

“Oh, Mikki Vynse would pee herself if she knew we were on a date,” I say. I can feel a blush creeping up my cheeks.

“So, she’s a fan then?”

“I grew up listening to your music. That shitty \$5 greatest hits compilation you put out was my first CD. I bought it with my own money,” I admit.

Vince grins, “And you’re telling me this now?”

I shrug, “It never came up. Plus, it’s kinda embarrassing.”

“That’s not the word I’d use,” Vince says.

“Well, what would you call it?” I ask.

“Fated.”

I laugh and spear another forkful of pasta, “For a guy who thrives on chaos, you seem to put a lot of stock in fate.”

“I have a healthy respect for the supposed randomness of the universe. And I don’t think it’s embarrassing that you like my music. I think it’s sweet. Would it help you if I told you I spent my youth lusting after whip-smart tour managers who also seem to thrive in chaos?”

“There’s no way!” I say.

“So, what’s a bit of revisionist history? I should’ve. It would have saved me a lot of heartache,” Vince reaches across the table and grabs my hand. His hand is calloused and warm. I’ve grown to find comfort in the permanent callouses that decorate his fingers.

Vince signals for the check and pays. When we walk outside, a slight chill hangs in the air. I shiver involuntarily, and Vince slips off his blazer, draping it over my shoulders. It smells like pine and smoke. I slip my arms through the sleeves and secretly delight that I have to roll the sleeves up. At 6’4, Vince is the only person who’s ever made me feel petite.

Vince grabs my hand, and we wind through the busy streets. “It’s up to your left,” he says, pointing at a concrete staircase.

“Is it literally underground?”

“Yep. Welcome to the Spiral Jetty, the oldest goth club in the city.” Vince says. He leads me down the concrete steps, and I can hear the dreamy baseline of a no-wave song echoing through the tunnel as we step into the club.

The music draws us in; I recognize the electronic drone tones of a dark wave beat. All around us, couples in varying degrees of black leather and velvet twirl about the dance floor.

Some women wear corsets. Some wear capes. Others are topless, save for leather harnesses and pasties. I see a woman leading a man around on a leash with a spiked collar.

“Is this a BDSM club?” I yell over the music.

“Only on Thursdays! The rest of the week, it’s the number one place for goths in all five boroughs!!” Vince yells back.

I laugh out loud as I notice a leather switch on the wall next to a signed photo of Siouxi Sioux from Siouxi and the Banshees.

“This is amazing!” I yell, “I love a good goth night! I used to go to a vinyl night in Pasadena that only played no-wave!”

“See? I knew you’d like it!” Vince yells back.

He grabs my hand and points out the photos on the wall: an alphabetized and autographed pantheon of goth greats: Robert Smith from The Cure, Peter Murphy from Bauhaus, and the Cocteau Twins. It’s like the world’s horniest music museum. I love it.

“This might be better than the MET,” I admit.

“It felt like this would be a bit more your scene. Do you want a drink?” Vince asks.

“Um, sure.”

We belly up to a glass bar that glows blue in the neon light. I ordered something with activated charcoal and violet-infused whiskey. Vince orders a mocktail called the Nosferatu.

“I think this might be a glorified Shirley Temple but fuck if it isn’t good!” Vince yells.

I take a sip of my drink; the whiskey tastes floral. There’s a real violet floating at the top. I’m tempted to fish it out and save it.

We finish our drinks just as a fast song starts, and Vince pulls me onto the dance floor. He dances like one of those inflatable tube men that decorate used car lots, waving limbs and body rolls. It’s somehow both silly and enchanting.

He closes his eyes to feel the music. I loop my arms around his neck and move my hips in time to the beat. His hands wander along my waist, cupping my ass before he pulls me in for a kiss.

I lose all inhibitions as I realize we're deep underground; no paparazzi would imagine going here. The woman next to me wears a halter top made up entirely of safety pins. It's both the coolest and most intimidating thing I've ever seen.

I kiss Vince hard, gripping the back of his head. He squeezes my ass before breaking the kiss to suck on my neck, razing the skin of my throat. He bites hard, and I moan in pleasure, tilting my pelvis toward him. I grab the belt loops of his jeans and pull him closer as we continue to kiss. I'm already wet, enthralled, and curious. Vince pulls my hair, and I groan a bit, willing him closer as his other hand sneaks under my dress to cup my ass.

We are a blur of sound and want. I can't form coherent thoughts. All I can do is feel the heat between us, the bass thumping so loud it shakes the floor. Vince shoves me up against a wall, and I kiss back like a challenge, giving him a hickey that will last a week.

By the time we exit the club, I'm tipsy and dying for him to take me right there. We stumble into a cab, where we continue to make out.

When I unlock my hotel room, we tumble into the room, a mess of lips and limbs. Vince tries to unzip my dress and accidentally rips it in two; I don't care. I'm wearing the only lingerie I own, a delicate black lace bra and matching thong with vines and snakes etched in the lace.

"What the fuck, Lyndsey? You've been holding out on me," Vince exclaims as he pushes me back onto the bed.

I flip over to straddle him and unzip his jeans, springing free the hard-on that's already tenting in his boxers. Vince rolls on a condom, and I peel off my panties. We continue to kiss as our clothes fall into a puddle at the edge of the bed. I lay down on my back and wrapped my legs around Vince's waist, tilting up my pelvis to receive him. I groan as pleasure laps at my

nerve endings as he enters me. It's luxurious. He kisses my neck, then takes one of my nipples in his mouth as he continues to thrust.

"Pull my hair," I whisper into his neck, and he obliges, yanking my hair back so my nerve endings fizzle with pleasure and pain.

I move my hips in time with him as I feel him lengthen inside me. My hands form claws as I rake them down his back, scratching along the divots in his spine. My hips buck, and I come, letting the warm, enchanting waves of my orgasm wash over me.

Vince grunts, his face twisting in ecstasy as he comes. He looks like a painting. I reach up and move a sweaty piece of hair off his face.

He's so beautiful.

I feel another orgasm building, teasing me, biting my ankles. My toes curl as it builds. Vince thrusts deeper, and once again, I'm gone. I sink my hands into his back and wrench my hips upward, letting out a cry of pleasure. We disentangle ourselves, and I rest my head on Vince's chest.

"You should take me out on dates more often," I say.

"Oh, don't worry. That's the plan."

We fall asleep naked and tangled together.

I wake up early the next morning, my body aches in a decadent way, and a hickey is blooming under my left boob. I laugh it off as I pull on a pair of track shorts and a t-shirt. I jump in the shower and wash my face with an overpriced complimentary cleanser. I can't shake the feeling that things are good. I can't remember the last time I woke up feeling optimistic. I brush my teeth and towel-dry my hair.

Then, I settle at the desk in the hotel room and open my laptop, ready to nail down the final details of tonight's show at CBGB. It's an intimate gig with a hefty price tag of fifteen hundred bucks per ticket; by the looks of it, we only have ten tickets left.

I email the venue to confirm who will be working Merch that night. Then I check my email to see that Priya sent me an updated setlist.

Feeling confident, I decided to take a break and scroll through my phone to see if Allison or my mom had posted any updates from back home. I have a minimal social media presence. All my accounts are private. But I enjoy checking in with everyone while I'm on tour; it helps tamp down the homesickness to see overly filtered photos of the overnight oats my mom makes.

I like a photo of Allison's new cat, Biscuit. Then, I see a sponsored post by an innocuous music gossip website boasting, "VINCE EXTER'S NEW GIRL?" And a blurry photo of Vince and I leaving the club last night. I'm grinning from ear to ear, and my bangs are brushed to the side, obscuring my face. The journalist circled me in red and wrote, "MYSTERY?"

My thumb clicks the comments as if possessed. The only person I know who has commented is my mom:

Mikki_V444: Omfg, what a lucky bitch! I'd give anything to date him #hottie #mancrushmonday

I'm mortified. I bite my lip to stifle a scream, but it spills out anyway. Vince bolts up and rushes to my side, wearing only his boxers.

"Lyndsey! Is everything okay?" He asks.

Wordlessly, I shove my phone into his hand. Then I clasp my hands over my face and shriek.

"Oh, shit," Vince mutters.

"What am I supposed to do? It's only a matter of time until people online figure out it's me, and then what? People on the internet are insane! The members of Olli June had to deactivate their Facebook because people kept digging up their photos from fucking middle school and posting them online! I had braces in middle school *and* scoliosis! I don't want anyone to see that!" I'm panicking now.

My palms are starting to sweat. It feels like the walls are caving in on me. My throat is closing up to the size of a pinhole.

“Hang on, love. I think you’re having a panic attack. Try to breathe,” Vince says softly.

“Don’t tell me to breathe!” I wheeze. I can’t breathe. Vince grabs a water bottle from the mini fridge and twists the cap open before handing it to me.

“You’re okay. It’s okay. No one knows that it’s you yet. We can keep things on the DL for the next few weeks. It’ll be fine. If anyone asks me, I’ll just say no comment.” Vince, to his credit, is surprisingly calm.

“I’m gonna get ready for the day, and then we can strategize,” his voice is level and soothing, “Okay? You ... you have emails to check, right?”

I nod mutely. “I always have emails,” I mumble.

“The third constant in life, right? Death, taxes, and emails,” Vince jokes. He kisses my forehead and squeezes my shoulder before returning to his room.

I take a deep breath and re-open my inbox. It takes a few minutes, but soon I’m consumed by the steady monotony of my job. I email a local coffee shop to see if they’re still good to cater for load-in, then I check back in with the vegan bakery that’s agreed to make a cake for tonight since it’s, according to the media, “a historic show.” It’s going to be okay.

Later, there was a knock on my door. I open it, surprised to see both Vince and Priya standing before me.

“I called in reinforcements,” Vince explains. Priya looks sympathetic, wearing a red wrap dress.

“Fuck the press,” she mumbles before pulling me into a hug. I melt against her. She’s surprisingly strong, and she smells like jasmine.

“Now, do you have any social media accounts?” she asks primly before setting up shop at the desk.

“Yeah, but they’re all private,” I say.

“Excellent. Now, is your phone number anywhere that would be considered public? Do you have it in your email signature?”

“Yeah, but that’s for work,” I start.

“Remove it. And, while you’re at it, get used to getting a new phone number every six months or so,” she explains.

“Okay,” I mumble. If anyone knows how to survive online vitriol, it’s Priya. At the moment, I can’t help but be grateful for her.

“Oh, and while you’re at it,” Priya starts; I look at her with bated breath, “Did you two little love birds have fun at the Spiral Jetty last night?” Priya coos.

Vince elbows her. I can’t help myself. I start to laugh. “Yeah, we had a good time.”

“And no one can take that away from you, okay? At the end of the day, the two of you are the only people in your relationship, got it? Not the press, not the fans, just you and Vince, okay?”

“Okay,” I say. My heart rate finally returns to normal. Priya’s right. Fuck the press! Everything’s going to be fine.

The rest of us troop down the block to meet at a diner for breakfast. Henry and Apollo shoot me sympathetic looks. I assume they’ve seen the photo, but I don’t care. I guess that’s what happens when you sign up to date a public figure; you learn to drown out the noise.

Wait, *fuck!*

Are we dating? And why do I feel like I don’t care if we are? Last night was a turning point for Vince and me. It was the best first date of my life, and nothing can ruin that.

We pile into a seafood green vinyl booth and order a pot of coffee. Vince reaches for my hand beneath the table. I grab it and squeeze it. I order blueberry pancakes. Vince orders eggs and toast. Apollo and Henry dig into omelets the size of their faces. Priya poses for a photo with the waitress when she

brings Priya her oatmeal. Just like that, we're back to normal. Vince and my relationship isn't so much as a second thought.

After breakfast, we decided to get coffee down the street. My phone buzzes as we walk along, looking for a promising coffee shop. I fish it out, expecting it to be the venue, but it's my mom. My stomach plummets. I almost consider not picking up, but that would be weirder. I always pick up the phone when my mom calls if I'm on the road. If I don't pick up, she'll expect that something is up.

"Hey, Mom," I say.

"Is that your mum?" Priya asks.

I nod.

"Hey, Lynds! How's it going?" she asks.

"Good! We're at breakfast right now."

"We, as in, you and the band?" I can hear the excitement creeping into her voice. It took a record-breaking ten seconds.

"Yeah, who else would I be getting breakfast with?"

"Can we say hi?" Apollo asks.

"I wanna say hi," Vince adds.

I roll my eyes and press my phone into the crook of my shoulder. "You can say hi, but you have to play it cool," I instruct.

"We will," Vince says.

"Especially you," I say, poking Vince in the chest.

"I'll behave!" Vince promises. "Gotta make a good impression," he adds.

I pick the phone back up. "Hey, Mom?"

"Yeah, Lynds? Do you have to go? I'm sorry if I interrupted."

"No, no. It's not that. Um, they want to say hi to you."

"Who? The Imposters? The imposters want to say hi to me?" Her voice inches up into an octave that only dogs can

hear.

“Yeah, is that okay?”

“Mhmm!” She squeaks.

I sigh as Vince grabs the phone out of my hand and puts it on the speaker; this had to happen sooner or later.

“Hello, Mikki?” Priya says.

“Hi-hi! Hi! Holy fuck, is that Priya?”

“Yeah, it’s Priya! It’s so lovely to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“I’ve heard so much about you! I had a poster with your face on it in my bedroom when I was in my twenties!” my mom gushes.

“Well, thank you! Thank you for raising such a brilliant daughter. Lyndsey saves our asses daily.”

“We love Lyndsey! This is Apollo, by the way!”

“Lyndsey rocks,” Henry adds. My face is beet red.

“Lyndsey’s an angel,” Vince quips, pulling me close.

“Vincent, by the way.” I shoot him a look and mouth, “Vincent?”

My mom giggles. “I’m so glad you think so. You let me know if she gives you any trouble. How’s the tour going?”

“It’s a breeze! We’re playing CBGB tonight,” Priya says.

“Aw, no way! Lynds, FaceTime me!”

“Mom, I don’t know if I can,” I start.

“She can! I’ll bug her about it,” Vince says.

“Thank you, Vincent. Lynds, he’s a sweetie. Ask him who his mystery girl is!” my mom blurts. I almost drop the phone. Henry claps his hand over his mouth to stifle his laughter.

“We don’t talk about personal things like that,” I lie.

My mom scoffs. “Oh, you’re no fun! Vince, tell her to loosen up!”

“I’ll go ahead and tell her to get loose,” Vince mumbles, his cheeks reddening—Apollo snickers like a schoolgirl.

On the other line, my mom squeals. “Oh, I forgot how charming British people sound! You could tell me to fuck off, and I’d take it as a compliment!”

Now, it was my turn to blush. “We should get going, Mom,” I say quickly.

She sighs, “Oh, of course! You with your rockstar agenda, barely making time for your dear old mom.”

Priya laughs. “I’ll tell her to call you more,” she adds.

“Maybe if you think I’m cool, she’ll finally think I’m cool,” my mom says.

“We do have to go, Mom,” I urge.

“Fine. Fine. Go wrangle the fans and haul some amps or whatever you do.”

“That’s not close, but bye, Mom.”

“Bye, Lyndsey. I love you.”

“Love you, too,” I says as I hang up the phone.

Priya claps her hands in delight. “Your mom is such a sweetheart!”

“Something like that,” I mumble.

Vince thumped me on the shoulder. “Oh, come off it. She’s cool. I can’t wait to meet her.” He pauses momentarily, realizing what he said, before adding, “If that’s what you want.”

“I meant to tell all of you my mom invited you to Thanksgiving,” I explain.

While Thanksgiving was still over a month away, my mom concocted the convoluted scheme, known to her and Abbie as “Operation Rockstar Thanksgiving,” the day after I signed the NDA. This was the first time I felt comfortable telling the band about it. However, I had a feeling that once the band was

physically in front of my mom, her fangirl antics might be a bit more intense.

I expected everyone to list pre-planned excuses. Apollo and Henry had existing family plans, but Priya and Vince's eyes lit up.

"I'd love that! I always forget about American Thanksgiving and spend it alone, feeling weird," Priya says.

She turns to Vince. "I can be your buffer; make sure you're on your best behavior."

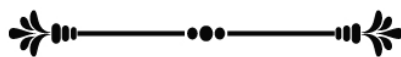
"Okay, rude of you to think I'll need a buffer, but yes, Lyndsey, tell your mom we'd love to come."

"Should I call her Mrs. Vynse? Oh, fuck, Priya, should we bring something? Can you cook? I still can't cook for shit," Vince is spiraling. I can see the nervous crease forming between his eyebrows.

"Hey, you've got a month to figure it out, and you can call her Mikki," I say, grabbing his elbow. Vince smiles at me before looping his arm around my waist. "Wait until she finds out that my mystery girl has been under her roof this entire time," Vince jokes.

I rolled my eyes. "Don't remind me," I groan.

"Give it forty-eight hours, and it'll all blow over,"



Two days later, we're back on the bus heading to Montreal, and my morning social media browse includes zero mentions of Vince or his love life, just the way I like it.

My phone buzzes, and Allison's name flashes across the screen. "Hey, Al, what's up?" I ask.

"Hey! So, I hear you'll be home for Thanksgiving with the band?" She squeals.

I roll my eyes; the Hollywood rumor mill had nothing on Mikki Vynse.

"Yeah, it'll be a good time. You'll be home, right?"

“Yes! And I want every last bit of gossip you can give me, NDA permitting.” She begs as I move to my bunk for some privacy. “About that,” I start. “I’m the mystery girl,” I blurt. “With Vince. It’s me. We’re, uh, dating.”

Allison screams so loud that I have to hold the phone away from my ear.

“Lyndsey Eliza Vynse! You naughty, naughty girl, going for an older man! And your boss, too!”

“Um, technically, at this point, I’m his boss. I’m in charge of the hotel keys,” I say.

“Semantics! But still! How? When? Where? Is he good in bed? Tell me everything!”

“Um, I dunno. It just sort of happened. Like we’ve been spending a lot of time together, and then he kissed me one night during this rain show, and now we’re happy. We’re really happy,” I say.

“You sound happy! Is he rocking your world?”

“Stop.”

“No, but I need to know. On a scale of one to ten.”

“It’s an eleven,” I admit.

Allison screams again, “This is fucking wild. I mean, you’re well, you! And Vince is, well, I’ve never seen him with a shirt on!”

“Well, I have, and he looks nice.”

“Nice? That’s all you can give me? Come on, spill! How is he...”

“Keep it between you and me, but I’m very satisfied,” I say primly, hoping to shut her up.

“Wow. I mean, I always knew you had it in you. But also, you’re so strict about these things.”

“I know. I tried to fight it for a long time, and I don’t know. Vince gets me. Like, he gets me like you get me, and he’s great in bed. I don’t have to pretend around him. He doesn’t

have to pretend around me.” It’s the first time I’ve articulated this out loud, but it’s true.

I think Vince and I work because we see each other as people outside of our jobs, and he’s got forest-green eyes that burrow into the depths of my soul. It’s thrilling, and the fact that we must keep it a secret from the media somehow makes it sexier. It’s like we’re pulling a fast one on the whole world.

I can hear Allison’s hair rustle against her phone as she nods. “That makes sense. I mean, he probably understands touring, right?”

“Yeah. I don’t need to explain myself to him, y’know?”

“That’s amazing. I’m so happy for you.”

I sigh and shake my head. “Enough about my love life. How are you?”

Allison hesitates, “I’m okay.”

“Just okay? Why?” Immediately, my mind flashes to the dozens of misfortunes that could befall my best friend.

“Well, I got my results from my DNA test,” she starts.

“You did! Al, that’s huge news! You should have shut me up twenty minutes ago.”

“No, no. I love hearing about you and Vince. Besides, I haven’t opened them yet. It’s sitting on my dresser.”

“Why not?”

Allison sighs into the phone, “If I open that envelope, my life will change. There’s no going back.”

“Well, tell you what, I’ll open it with you. We’ll both be home for Thanksgiving, anyway,” I suggest.

“You’d do that for me?”

“Of course, Al. I’d do anything for you.”

CHAPTER 10

VINCE

Detroit, MI

I strum the final note of our encore and shoot a grin at Priya, who winks back at me.

We're deep in the throes of the tour, and for once, it feels good. The past two nights in Detroit have been electric.

In an unprecedented move, Lyndsey and our booking agent negotiated to split our Thanksgiving break into two halves if we added an extra show at the United Center in Chicago. So, after tonight, we have the next week off.

Invigorated by the prospect of sleeping in our beds, we sprint through the set list like we're still in our twenties. We're a band again; every action synchs perfectly as if we can read each other's minds. We are a well-fucking-oiled machine.

I let the sound of thunderous applause wash over me, through the din of my In-Ear monitors. It's the sort of noise that transforms into action; I can feel the howls burrowing into my body. I can feel the crowd transform into a living organism; this is the power of live music, and though I've sold

out hundreds of amphitheatres in my life, I never want to lose this feeling.

Priya runs up to Apollo and me and loops her arms around us, pulling us close.

“Thank you, Detroit! We love you!” She yells into the mic.

That’s Jennie’s cue to start up our exit music. We bolt off the stage. Adrenaline pumps through my body. I feel fiercely alive. I spot Lyndsey backstage, toss my guitar off, and run to her, scooping her in my arms.

“Watch your guitar!” She chastises me as I kiss her.

I slip my tongue into her mouth before she can call me irresponsible, and she groans in response. I slip my hand under her tank top, grazing her boob.

“Get a room!” Priya calls.

“Already taken care of,” Lyndsey replies. I set her down, and she ran over to her tote bag, fishing out four room keys from her tote bag and passing one to Priya. Lyndsey and I have started sharing rooms, unable to keep up the charade that we’re not fucking any longer. The band doesn’t care. If anything, I think they’re happy to see that I’m happy. I swear I heard Priya whisper, “Thank you,” to Lyndsey the other day.

“We’re down the hall from you,” Lyndsey adds before Priya can protest.

“Oh, the glory of love,” Henry coos, snagging his key from Lyndsey.

“It’s great, as long as we can’t hear it,” Apollo adds.

“You and Char were just as bad!” I say.

“At least put it in the stand,” Lyndsey mumbles as she fishes my guitar off the ground, depositing it in its rightful place. “This thing costs more than my rent.”

“I was excited to see you! I’ve got some adrenaline to burn off,” I say, walking behind Lyndsey and pressing a kiss to the back of her neck.

Lyndsey rolls her eyes and turns to face me. “Do you now?” Lyndsey asks, raking her fingers across my chest. My cock stirs as she loops her finger around my chain necklace while she walks away with a devilish grin.

“The two of you are insufferable. The level of horniness is unmatched,” Priya grumbles.

“You’re just jealous!”

“Hey, I am not! Besides, I’ll be seeing Jamie in less than forty-eight hours, and they’re coming to the Chicago show.” Priya gushes.

“Good for you!” I say as we troop back to the green room. Lyndsey’s already perched on the green room couch, laptop open, finalizing the details for our Chicago show.

“Why are you working so late?”

“I’m ensuring everything’s all set so we can relax next week. I’m finalizing the guest list. Priya, Jamie’s all set for Chicago. Also, Priya, you’ve got that interview with the Trib on show day.” She squints as she checks the screen. “It looks like you all do.”

“Lyndsey, you’re an angel.”

“Thanks, Priya!”

“I could’ve told you that,” I grumble.

Lyndsey laughs. “Are you jealous?”

I shrug. “Nah, I get you all to myself tonight,” I whisper.

Lyndsey lets me hold her instead of thinking of a joke. I like this side of her: softer, almost, her jibes have transformed into observations rather than deliberate attempts to keep me at bay. Still, most of the time, I can’t untangle the knot of worry I can feel forming in her brain. I wish she’d let me.

I’ve never dated someone so complicated before. Priya can keep a secret for approximately five minutes. And I can’t recall the details of two decades’ worth of groupies, except for the occasional mole on someone’s tits or the odd glee people possess when they tell me we’re fucking in their hometown.

Lyndsey's different: there's a whole world behind her eyes. I want to see it all.

She kisses me, and I grip her hair, tugging at it. She flashes me a smile and offers me her hand as we walk to the car waiting for us to take us to the hotel. I grab her hand, and our fingers intertwine effortlessly.

She flips Apollo off when he makes a gagging noise. We slide into the backseat, and she rests her head on my shoulder. I wrap my arm around her and pull her close.

In the lobby of a pristine yet bland hotel, with another jug of cucumber water waiting for us, Lyndsey doles out the rest of the key cards. She confirmed that we get an early check-out time with the front desk.

After tonight, we booked it to Detroit International Airport to finally go home. I've been trying to convince Lyndsey to crash with me instead of at her mom's place. I want to show her what I'm like when we're not crammed into a bunk like sardines.

"Come home with me, please," I whisper when we enter the elevator.

Lyndsey hums. "I'm considering it. Crashing in my childhood bedroom isn't exactly glamorous," Lyndsey says.

"Exactly. Come and see me! You can still visit your mom; Laurel Canyon can't be more than an hour away from Pasadena.

In the elevator, Lyndsey hooks her fingers through the belt loops of my pants, and our hips crash together.

"This is our floor!" Henry blurts as he, Priya, and Apollo depart.

Lyndsey and I get off to the next floor. Already, I've captured her lips. I'm ravenous for her. We stumble to our room, unable to bear apart from each other for a moment. I pin her up against the wall by her wrists, and she instinctively tilts her pelvis toward me.

“Give it five minutes,” she hisses as she fishes the key card out of her pocket.

“Too long,” I insist, kissing her neck and toying with the waistband of her jeans as she slips the key card into the slot and opens the door.

We stumble to the bed as Lyndsey fumbles for the light switch. She reaches down to peel off her tank top, and I grab it for her, casting it onto the floor as she grabs my tank top and whips it off. Her hands roam my chest, squeezing my pecs before looping together behind my neck.

Thanks to the power of modern medicine, Lyndsey’s IUD, and a clean STI panel, we’ve been fucking like rabbits. I don’t think I’ll ever tire of hearing her scream my name or the feeling of her miraculously sculpted thighs squeezing the sides of my face.

She moves over to the bed and pulls me down with her. I move down and take one of her breasts in my mouth, sucking as the nipple pebbles. Lyndsey whimpers and tilts her pelvis upward so she can peel off her jeans. I help her peel off her jeans and free myself from my pants. I’m already rock-hard.

She reaches down and grabs my cock, working her hand upward along the shaft. I groan in pleasure as she slips her tongue into my mouth, sucking on my bottom lip. With her other hand, she reaches to turn off the lamp with a frantic motion. Then she stops.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

Lyndsey grins sheepishly as she holds up a pair of handcuffs.

“Did you pack those?” I ask dumbly.

“No! Why would I? They were just here.” She fumbles around the tiny bedside table, retrieving a small silver key.

“Either housekeeping’s slutty, or they missed something,” I say.

Lyndsey studies the handcuffs and turns her head to the side. “Shall we?” she asks, her eyes glinting with mischief I haven’t

seen.

“Now?” I ask.

“I mean, I’ve never. I understand if that’s not something you’re into—” Lyndsey starts, a blush creeping up her cheeks.

“No, no. Yes. Let’s.” The idea of Lyndsey in handcuffs has reduced me to a pre-verbal state. Hell, I’d let her handcuff me up any day.

“Well, in that case,” Lyndsey closes the first handcuff around her wrist. She firmly sits the key on the bedside table where we can see it. Then, I helped her put the second handcuff on the headboard. It’s modern, built from polished metal. The handcuff slides around the rod with a satisfying clink.

Before I can ask Lyndsey what she wants to do next, she captures my lips again. I kiss her, slower this time.

She whimpers as I move down, kissing her neck, chest, and stomach. Her hips buck with desire as I trail my tongue along her navel. She’s wearing red, lacy panties. They cling to her sculpted thighs.

I grab them and peel them off. The entrance to her sex is glistening. I part her entrance with two fingers and slip them inside her, curling my knuckles.

Her hips start to shake as I increase my rhythm. A whine builds in her throat. I kiss her thighs and remove my hands. My fingers are slick.

I scoot down on the bed, so I have a better angle. Lyndsey rests her feet on my shoulders as I open the entrance of her sex, taking a long, luxurious lick. I lick upward toward her clitoris and suck on the bud. I keep sucking, and Lyndsey’s thighs start to shake.

She clenches my face. I’m enveloped in her. It’s my favorite feeling: the raw heat and want that radiates from her as I suck on her clit, reducing her to incoherent moans of pleasure as she comes.

Tonight, as her hips buck, I hear the handcuffs clinking against the headboard. I keep licking, and Lyndsey comes with a jerk. I kiss her stomach and pull her close.

“My turn?” I suggest.

I’m genuinely curious. Despite my decades of frequenting goth clubs and a solid decade dodging drunk and disorderly charges, no one’s ever handcuffed me to anything. I’m curious, and if Lyndsey does it, it’ll be hot. I can already feel my hard-on stiffening.

“You sure?” she asks, eyeing the key.

“One hundred percent,” I reassure her. I fish the key off the nightstand and uncuff her with a grin.

“Okay,” she says. She slips the cuff around my wrist, and it clicks shut.

“Now remember,” she instructs, “the key is right here.” She places the key next to the digital alarm clock.

“Got it, got it,” I mumble, capturing her lips.

Lyndsey throws her leg over the top of me and straddles me. She shifts her hips upward as I enter her, moaning with pleasure as I fill her. I feel her tighten around my cock as she rides me. Her hips and tits are heaving with pleasure. I kiss her tits and lick the underside of her left breast as I thrust.

She clutches my shoulders, moving closer to me so that her luscious tits absorb my field of vision. I’m in heaven as we fuck. The handcuff rattled beside us. I’m close. She scratches her nails down my back, and I come in a burst. Lyndsey follows soon after, howling as she bares down on me before peeling herself off me.

I pull her close with my free arm and kiss her forehead.

“Maybe next time you can tie me up,” Lyndsey jokes.

“And then what? Hang you upside down like Spiderman or a bat?”

“How goth. I feel like you’d be the one who would excel at fucking acrobatics,” Lyndsey notes. She reaches across my

chest and paws around on the bedside table, groping for the key.

Her face pales.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“The key! It’s gone!” Lyndsey chokes out.

She scrambles up out of bed and yanks her clothes back on. Then, she hefts up the alarm clock and moves the lamp over, hoping to reveal the key where we placed it last. There are only bits of dust.

“Fuck,” Lyndsey mumbles as she shoves the bedside table to the side. She gets down on her hands and knees and scrounges around on the ground, lifting the bed skirt. She gets up, grabs her phone from the desk, and turns on the flashlight.

I’d offer to help her, but I’m more than a little incapacitated.

“What do we do?” I ask dumbly.

“Shit! I don’t know, here.” Lyndsey walks over to her suitcase and starts digging. She pulls out a small black bag and rustles around until she finds what she needs.

“Scoot over,” Lyndsey instructs. I move over as best I can, and she slides onto the bed on her knees, peering at the cuff as she maneuvers a bobby pin into the lock.

“Good idea! This always works in movies,” I say, trying to be optimistic.

Lyndsey’s brow furrows in concentration as she jams the bobby pin into the lock. Nothing happens. She tries to insert it from a different angle, and the bobby pin snaps in two.

“Fuck!” she screams.

“Should we call a locksmith?” I suggest.

Lyndsey’s face reddens. “Vince, I don’t think they make locksmiths for sex handcuffs!” She snaps. She starts digging around in the drawer beneath the bedside table.

“What are you doing? Looking for the hotel bible?” I joke.

“No! I’m looking for a receipt. If we can find out where these handcuffs come from, we can call the place and ask if they have replacement keys.”

Lyndsey unearths two crumpled-up mint wrappers, a golf pencil, a bible, a hair tie, and zero receipts or hints about the sex handcuffs’ origins.

At this point, I’m starting to panic.

The skin on my wrist is starting to feel clammy beneath the metal. My elbow hurts from my arm being wrenched upward for the better part of an hour. I started to feel trapped. Then, I started to panic. What if I’m trapped here forever? I have a show to play tomorrow!

“I’m gonna check the drawers in the bathroom, too,” Lyndsey says. She’s in problem-solving mode. She sprints across the room, and it occurs to me that for most emergencies, I would contact Lyndsey. What the hell am I supposed to do now?

Lyndsey emerges from the bathroom moments later. Her eyes look wild and panicked. She’s picking the skin of her cuticles into bloody nubs, her nervous tell.

Fuck, if she’s nervous, I’ll crack, too!

She’s supposed to be the resourceful one! If I am going to be trapped here forever, how the fuck am I supposed to pee?

My mind runs wild with eventual headlines: IMPOSTERS’ VINCE EXTER HANDCUFF HELL, HOW ONE NIGHT IN HEAVEN WENT WRONG. Or maybe: VINCE EXTER SUCCUMBS TO STARVATION BY SEX HANDCUFF. IT BEATS ELVIS FOR THE MOST BIZARRE ROCKSTAR DEATH.

“Maybe, instead of a locksmith, we can ask someone who might have been in a similar situation?” I suggest.

“Oh, so I’m just supposed to knock on Priya’s door and ask her how kinky she is?” Lyndsey snaps.

“I don’t know what else to try!” I wail. I try to wave my arms for emphasis, momentarily forgetting my precarious

position, and I nearly wrench my shoulder out of my socket.

“Fine,” Lyndsey mumbles. She throws something at me first: my boxers.

“Please, at least put some underwear on,” she begs. She walks over to my bedside and helps me into them. If that’s not love, I don’t know what is: in sickness and in sexcapades.

Lyndsey’s either gone for ages or five minutes. Time has started to blur during my captivity. When Priya walks in, her jaw hits the floor; then, her shoulders start to shake. She’s laughing so hard tears stream down her face. She’s wheezing.

“Y-y-you!” She starts, “Y-y-you kinky bastard! How did you get handcuffs through airport security?” She guffaws.

“He didn’t. We found them,” Lyndsey says.

“Did you just happen upon them?”

“Yes!” Lyndsey and I cry in unison.

“Vince, I expected this from you, but Lyndsey?”

“It seemed fun! The key was right there!” Lyndsey pointed to the bedside table.

“Good God,” Priya muttered, whipping out her phone.

“I don’t think they have locksmiths for this,” I start.

“I know, dumbass. I’m googling sex shops within a ten-mile radius of the hotel. Maybe we can call them and see if they have.” She glances at my cuffed wrist. “Those.”

“But it’s ten at night!” I yell.

“Yes, on a Saturday. If there’s any time for a sex shop to stay open late, it’s tonight,” Priya points out.

I glance over at Lyndsey, who shrugs and grabs her phone. “It’s worth a shot. Priya, give me a list, and I’ll start making calls. We can divide and conquer.”

Together, Priya and Lyndsey form a sort of citizen-detective task force, jotting phone numbers down on hotel stationery. The first call is a bust. But when Lyndsey calls the third place, a smile blooms across her lips.

“Yeah, so they’re like black metal. The serial number? Let me see.”

She walks over to me and presses her phone against her chest, “Lift your wrist as best you can. I need to try and see the serial number so they can find out the make and model.” Lyndsey says. I do as I’m told, and she peers at the dark metal, barely making out a series of six numbers.

“I think I’ve got it. Yeah, so it’s 851233,” Lyndsey says. She repeats the number, slower this time, then nods into the phone.

“You do? And it comes with the key? No, no, stupid question, I know. It’s been a stressful forty-five minutes. My uh boyfriend, yeah, he’s... he is chained to the bed,” Lyndsey squeaks out.

“You can hold a pair for me? When do you close? Yeah, I can get there within a half hour. My name is Lyndsey, with a Y. Perfect. Thank you so much.” Lyndsey hangs up the phone and fist pumps. She turns to me. “Hang tight,” she says.

“That’s all I can do!” I snap.

She walks over to me and kisses my forehead. “I’m getting you out of there. Priya, what do you say we go on a little field trip?” she asks.

“I’ll call us a Lyft. At this point, I’m invested,” Priya says. Lyndsey gives her the address, and Priya types it into her phone.

“I’ll be back soon,” Lyndsey promises. She hands me my phone. Thank God Face ID is something I can do one-handed.

“Do you want me to turn on the TV?” she asks.

I laugh. “Nah, I’ll be okay. I wrap my free hand around the back of her neck and kiss her. She smiles into the kiss.

Priya coughs. “Uh, the Lyft is here,” she mumbles. Lyndsey blushes and pulls away.

CHAPTER II

LYNDSEY

Detroit, MI

On the way to the Pleasure Emporium in a Chevy Impala

Priya and I slide into the back seat of the Lyft. When the driver asks us where we're heading, I blush.

"We're in a bit of a pickle," Priya says without elaborating.

The driver notes the name of the destination and falls silent. A generic Christian rock song plays on the radio. The Pleasure Emporium is fifteen minutes away from our hotel, and I have a feeling this is about to be the longest fifteen minutes of my life.

This is exactly why I keep my personal and my romantic life separate when I'm on tour. One minute, everything's fine, and the next, I'm stuck on a wild goose chase to free my boyfriend from mystery sex handcuffs.

“So, you and Vince, it’s going well then?” Priya asks.

“Yeah, great, actually,” I admit.

“I’m glad to hear it. You look amazing, by the way. The glow of young love and all that,” Priya says.

I try to say something eloquent and end up choking on my spit. I hack into my elbow, and Priya thumps my back.

“I’m happy to see Vince happy,” she adds.

“Me too. I don’t know Vince as well as you do, but still.”

Priya sighs. “He’s got a good heart. I think people mistake Vince’s anxious interview persona for how he actually is. But he’s so much more sensitive than he lets on. It’s good to see him with someone who appreciates him fully,” Priya says.

“I do. He’s a great guy. Which is not what I expected when I met him,” I admit.

“I told him to drop the macho facade in 1995, and he never listened to me,” Priya quips.

“He should know better,” I joke.

“But he doesn’t. That’s what makes Vince, well, Vince. But with you, he’s so caring. It’s sweet to see. When we were dating, all we did was fuck, argue, and write songs. It made for a great record but a terrible relationship.

He’s so fucking stubborn, it annoys me to no end, but you don’t let him get away with any of that crap. You’re exactly what he needs,” Priya says sincerely.

“Thank you,” I mumble.

I know I don’t explicitly need Priya’s approval, but when you’re dating one-half of rock and roll’s most tumultuous couples with the other half still in the band, it’s nice to get some form of green light.

“He wants me to come home with him next week,” I say.

Somehow, it feels like a bigger step than my mom inventing a hare-brained scheme to invite her favorite band to Thanksgiving. I could at least convince myself that Priya and

Vince are humoring another fan, but Vince seems unusually sincere with this.

He's been showing me pictures of his dog all week long and talking about his favorite trails to run. He wants to take me to brunch. I didn't know he knew what brunch was. It feels like a lot and fast.

We spend most nights together, but it's different when the proximity is intentional rather than forced. Other than our weekend in New York, I don't know what Vince is like when he isn't touring.

I don't know if he'll like the version of me that isn't wrangling his schedule. When I'm home, I transform into an elderly woman. I crochet for fun!

Priya quirks up an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yeah, but I don't know. It feels like a big step."

"Oh, it is," Priya confirms. "Vince is super private. If he wants to show you his house, he wants you around for good."

My stomach plummets when she tells me this. "Is it moving too fast?" I ask.

When I started hooking up with Vince, I thought I was blowing off some steam at most. Now, sitting in the back of a Lyft, waiting to free him shitty, surprisingly durable handcuffs, I realize that I genuinely care about him.

Priya shakes her head. "I don't think so. You both care about each other. If anything, I think the two of you should stop pretending that you don't fucking love each other. Take the leap! Stop lying to yourself! You found someone who understands you; that's wonderful. That's all anyone could hope for, really," she says.

I sigh. "You're right."

"I know I am." Impulsively, she hugs me as the Lyft driver idles at the curb. His jaw drops when he takes in "THE PLEASURE EMPORIUM," written in gothic script.

"Have a great night," the Lyft driver blurts as we exit.

“You too,” Priya calls, giving him a wave.

The interior of the Pleasure Emporium is covered in wall-to-wall sex toys and dildos with varying aspects of realism. I start to blush as I observe a girthy dildo (with veins!) guarding the register.

Priya’s eyes light up when she sees a wall full of “discreet” pocket vibrators. “It’s like they were made for tour!” She exclaims before adding, “Although I won’t need it when Jamie comes to town.”

I walk up to the register, being watched by a disaffected twenty-something wearing winged eyeliner. My palms are sweaty; why the hell am I nervous? I’m a grown woman!

“Hi, uh, I think you’re holding something for me. My name is Lyndsey,” I stutter.

The cashier nods. “Yeah! We talked on the phone. Here.” She hands me a pair of handcuffs, and I can see through the plastic packaging that they are identical to whatever’s currently keeping Vince chained to the bed. I feel like I can relax for the first time all night.

“Amazing, I think this is it!”

“Yeah, those keys are hamster sized. You’re the third person to have lost one this week. Luckily, this pack comes with an extra one. Try and keep it somewhere you’ll remember.”

“Oh, after the night I’ve had, I’ll never forget.”

The cashier laughs as she rings me up and hands me the handcuffs in a discreet purple bag with no text on it.

I turn around to find Priya behind me in line, arms loaded with lingerie and a pair of hot pink furry handcuffs. “When in Rome!” she says. I guess she wants to make it up to Jamie after not seeing them for three months, and I can’t blame her.

We wait for another Lyft outside beneath the neon glow of the sign. This time, our drive back to the hotel is blessedly free of questions.

Back at the hotel, Priya hugs me when she exits to her floor. “I’m going to put all of this away, but let me know if you need

any help, okay?”

“I will. Thanks for coming with me tonight.”

“Of course, that’s what friends do.”

I can’t help myself; my heart glows when Priya calls me her friend.

Vince is exactly where I left him an hour ago, absentmindedly scrolling through his phone.

“My arm’s numb,” he complains.

“Well, give me five minutes.” I hold up the bag with a grin.

“You found ‘em?”

“Yep! And there’s an extra key!” I exclaim.

I fumble around in my suitcase until I find a pair of nail scissors. It takes some sawing, but I free the handcuffs from their plastic packaging. The key falls into my palm with a plink.

I walk over to Vince and slip the key into the tiny lock, careful not to misplace it again as I rotate it around. The handcuffs open with a click, and Vince frees his hand and waves it.

“Thank, God! I’ve had to piss for like an hour!” he yells as he jumps off the bed. I laugh and stow the handcuffs and keys in the pocket of my suitcase.

I feel Vince before I see him. He presses his lips to my cheek, my throat, and finally, my lips.

“You’re a lifesaver; you know that?” he mumbles, pulling me in for another kiss, “I fucking love you.”

I stop.

My heart plummets to my knees. Does Vince love me?! Why is that terrifying and exciting at the same time? Why don’t I mind it? The answer floods my mind: I fucking love him, too.

Vince pulls away and immediately tries to backtrack, thinking he scared me off. “I mean, you saved my ass tonight.

I love—”

“Vince, it’s okay,” I cut him off. “I love you, too.”

“Really?” Vince grins.

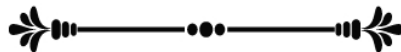
“Yeah, I love you,” I say. I take a deep breath and think about what Priya told me: *take the leap*.

“I’ll come home with you,” I say.

Vince’s face lights up. “Really?”

I nod. “Yeah. I’m excited to see your place.”

Vince kisses me harder this time. I’m careful of his sore wrist as I press my body against his, noting how well we fit; and how he’s never made me feel like I’m too much. I think about what Priya said; maybe Vince and I are genuinely good for each other. Maybe we’ll work out.



Los Angeles, CA.

Vince lives in a sprawling estate in the belly of Laurel Canyon.

The smell of weed and eucalyptus hangs heavy in the air as I take in the sight of his massive estate. I knew Vince was rich when I met him, but this is something else.

The stucco facade is three times the size of my mom’s house. Palm trees dot the sprawling drive. The lawn is perfectly manicured. Vince parks his matte black escalade and hangs out the window to punch a code into an iron gate.

The gate opens with a creak, and Vince drives up before punching in another code to reveal a garage that’s roughly the size of my first apartment.

When I told Vince I’d stay with him two days ago, I expected a mansion at best; this place could be an entire

commune. He could start a cult. The floor of the garage is so clean we could eat off it.

“Let me get your suitcase,” Vince says as he turns off the car.

I’m too stunned to speak.

Vince grabs our suitcases and holds the door open to reveal a grand marble foyer with polished floors and a spiral staircase. The foyer is open and airy, with gigantic windows allowing buckets of natural light to filter in and reveal dozens of potted plants hanging from the ceiling. It looks like a combination of a greenhouse and Jay Gatsby’s manor. I reach up and touch a string of pearls.

“Holy shit,” I whisper. It echoes. I’ve never known anyone with a big enough place for an echo.

Vince shrugs. “This is the place! Make yourself comfortable. *Mi casa es su casa*, that whole bit.”

“Vince? Is that you?” a voice calls.

A young woman emerges from a different room, wearing a loose sundress. She’s tan and fit, with long blonde hair. She looks like a prototype of a Laurel Canyon girl like she’ll be working on a folk song after this.

“Yeah! Good to see you, Leah.”

“This is Leah; she’s my groundskeeper,” Vince explains.

Leah extends her hand to me. “Lovely to meet you,” she pauses.

“This is my girlfriend, Lyndsey,” Vince supplies.

Leah quirks up her eyebrow. “Girlfriend?”

“And tour manager,” I add.

She smirks. “Shit, Vince! An interoffice romance?” she jokes.

“I find it hot when women tell me what to do, and she’s in charge of the schedule. What can I say? It was a downright aphrodisiac,” he jokes.

I blush. “It just sort of happened,” I mumble.

“Oh, don’t feel like you have to explain yourself to me. Although Violet might be wondering why she has a new stepmom.”

My palms get clammy. “Who’s Violet?” I ask as my mind draws a blank. I briefly wonder if Vince has a secret kid he’s never told me about.

The answer to my question careens into the foyer and makes a beeline for Vince: a gorgeous, sleek silver greyhound, approximately the size of a small horse. She whines as she nudges Vince with her giant head.

“Vee Vee!” Vince coos. Violet whines and hefts herself up to her full height, placing her paws on Vince’s chest as her nails skitter along the marble floor.

Vince scratches her bunny-sized ears, and she whips her head around in delight. Vince sits down on the floor and lets Violet crawl all over him. Her tail thumps my thigh on accident. It’s ropy and dense; it feels like a whip. I’m glad we’re nowhere near any table or priceless vase.

Violet continues to whine as she licks his face with a giant purple tongue.

“Hi, Violet,” I offer. She looks up at me and tilts her head to the side. I hold my hand out, and she gives it a cursory sniff. She comes up to my waist.

“She missed you,” Leah tells Vince.

“The feeling was mutual,” Vince pipes up from the floor. He pats the ground next to him, and Violet trots over to him before settling her gigantic frame onto his lap.

“She thinks she’s a lap dog,” Vince grunts as Violet settles onto him, covering his entire torso with her slick velvet frame.

Violet flops onto her belly, and Vince gives her a belly rub.

“Vee, is being away from you the only shitty part of a tour?” he asks rhetorically.

Violet whines.

“Affirmative,” Vince coos.

“Don’t worry; I’ll make it up to you this week. We can go hiking if you want, or to the beach. Your pick. Although you’ve got to stop eating sand, it’s not good for you. It’s not for puppies.”

Violet huffs in contentment as Vince continues to pet her. She moves her head onto his lap and makes a human-sounding sigh.

“They’re inseparable,” Leah explains.

“Can you believe some fucking asshole was working her to the bone? Making her race five days a week? Then, he ditched her at the fucking pound when she got arthritis like an asshole. I was looking for a cat, actually, but she caught my eye, and the rest is history.”

“How long have you had her?” I ask.

“Five years. She’ll be nine in May. She’s not as spry as she used to be, but she still loves to run for like a mile. You’ll see,” Vince says adoringly.

“Oh, Violet Micaela Exter,” he coos.

“Micaela? She has a middle name?!”

“Of course, she does. She’s distinguished.”

“That dog lives a better life than ninety percent of L.A.,” Leah scoffs.

“She deserves it!”

Leah laughs. “She’s a sweetheart. Okay, if you’re home, I’ll head out for the day.”

“Sounds good. The good news, we both get the week off. Then, the tour starts up again a week after Friday.”

“So, October 21st?” Leah asks.

“Yes?” Vince looks over at me for confirmation, and I nod.

“Perfect. The two of you have fun. Nice to meet you, Lyndsey.”

“Nice to meet you!” I call as she walks out the front door.

“So, can Violet and I give you a tour?” Vince asks.

“Uh, sure!” I’m still taking in the scope of the place.

There’s a difference between knowing mentally that someone is rich and seeing undeniable physical evidence of someone’s wealth as a sprawling mansion.

Logically, I know Vince and the Imposters have sold millions of albums. This tour alone is raking in nearly four million dollars in ticket sales, but Vince seems so casual about everything.

He’s nothing like the pompous L.A. tech millionaires who try to woo Allison with promises of Rolex’s and beach vacations. His wealth is unassuming.

He told me last week that he mended his pants until he was thirty to avoid buying new ones. The majority of our first month together was spent in a rotating cast of gas stations and laundromats, where he would fist pump with glee if he saw Slim Jims were on sale. To be honest, Vince’s sprawling backyard with a view of the literal canyon in the distance gives me whiplash.

I think of Allison’s mom’s cottage in Pasadena, with the same faded moss-green carpet that’s been there since I was five and her eclectic collection of thrifted kitchenware. Briefly, I consider asking her to call off Thanksgiving or lying and saying that Vince has an unexpected family engagement back in the UK. Our lives seem paltry compared to his, with the most cursory glance.

Vince grabs my hand and leads me to an open-concept kitchen filled with stainless steel appliances. He points to a cavernous refrigerator. “Do you want sparkling water or anything?”

“Uh, sure,” I sputter.

He opens the refrigerator to reveal rows of neat bottles of fresh-squeezed juice, ginger shots, Perrier, various hot sauces, and fresh fruit. He hands me a Perrier, twisting open the cap for me. I take a sip.

“What kind of host am I? Do you want a glass or anything, ice?” He opens a drawer below the refrigerator showcasing half a dozen different forms of ice, not only cubes but pebbles, sticks, and round pink balls.

“The pink ones are grapefruit infused.” Vince blurts.

“Sure, I’ll take some ... grapefruit ice,” I say.

He grabs a glass from the cupboard and a handful of ice, pouring the rest of the Perrier bottle in.

“Now, do you feel right at home since you’ve got a complimentary sparkling water?” He jokes.

“All I need is for your bed to move on its own, and I’ll be all set,” I volley back.

“Shit! That reminds me! What’s on your rider?” he asks. I think he’s joking for a minute, but he’s serious.

“For real, if you’re staying here all week, I want you to be comfortable. What kind of snacks do you like to have when you’re at home? I know you like that weird vegan creamer for your coffee; I can run out to get some tonight, but what else?” he’s rambling again.

He wipes his hands down the front of his jeans, and it occurs to me that Vince might be nervous.

“Oh! Wow. I really should have thought this through. Y’know, no one’s ever asked me that in five years. Um, I like fruit in the morning. Coconut yogurt, a good smoothie bowl, oatmeal, that kind of thing. And, snacks-wise.”

“Red Vines!” Vince interjects, “You like Red Vines! And salt and vinegar chips! And fruit leathers!”

“Are you listing every single snack you’ve seen me grab from a gas station?”

“Maybe.”

“Vince, I don’t think anyone’s ever paid this much attention to me in my entire life,” I say.

Once I turned seven, my mom taught me how to make Mac and cheese and set me loose on the world to wreak havoc at

Allison's. I'm not used to being doted on.

"Well, they should! You're amazing! Right, Violet?" I turn around to see that Violet follows us into the kitchen, her serpentine tail thumping against the granite kitchen island.

"I want this week to be special for you. You deserve a break." Vince says sheepishly. I close the distance between us and kiss him, slipping my tongue into his mouth. He moans.

"It's already so fucking special," I say.

"And I'd love any of what you listed; just don't go out of your way, okay? We have all week."

"That we do," Vince mumbles against my lips. We press our foreheads together, and I lose myself in his green eyes. He grins goofily.

"I gotta show you the rest of the house ... and the bedroom."

"Oh, I want to see the bedroom. Let me guess, you have a mirror on the ceiling."

"I'm a rockstar, not a porn star."

"Same difference."

"Rude."

"And true; now show me the rest of your magic mansion or whatever." I peek into the dining room. Vivid wallpaper showcasing vines and forest creatures adorns the walls, a sort of whimsical goth nineties vibe that would be right at home in a Tim Burton movie, with a stately oak dining table tying together a vast assortment of vintage chairs, some with wooden backs, and some with embroidered re-upholstered forest scenes.

For a moment, I think Vince has a bear head mounted on the north wall, but when I step into the room, I realize it's a jackalope.

"You kill that thing yourself?" I ask.

"I found it in a vintage shop in Scotland in the nineties."

“What about Nessie? Did you hunt her for sport?”

“No! I’m not fucking Moby Dick.”

“You realize that’s the name of the whale, right?”

“No fucking way.”

“Yes, way.”

“Strange. However, I never got past the first page. Speaking of,” Vince leads me up the spiral staircase down a narrow hallway to an unassuming yellow wall.

“Pull that sconce,” Vince instructs, pointing to the elaborate sconce shaped like a vine. I tug at it, and the wall swings back to reveal a room full of floor-to-ceiling books sitting on polished oak bookshelves.

“No fucking way! A secret library? I’ve always wanted one!” I can’t help myself; I speed walk into the room, taking in the cozy nook near the window, a perfect reading spot. I run my fingers along the spines of the books. Vince has them organized by genre: Poetry and plays on one shelf, fiction on the next.

“Sociology’s to your left,” Vince adds.

“Since when do you read sociology?”

“When I have time to think! Which isn’t often when I’m on tour. I like when reading occupies a solid hunk of my time and my brain; it sways me away from some of my less aesthetically pleasing vices, like whiskey and narcotics.”

We walk through the library hand-in-hand, and he swings open a door on the East-facing wall. It’s a room full of soft silk cushions and cozy lamps. There’s an incense holder shaped like a snake and a tiny ceramic cup full of different types of tea sitting on a small, round wooden table in the center of the room.

“This is my meditation room. I also use it to do yoga sometimes; that, or I go outside.”

“I’ll do yoga with you,” I say.

“Really?” Vince beams.

“Yeah, that sounds great. I love doing yoga in the morning when I’m home.”

“Me too!”

Vince looks at me like I told him I could fly, and the anxious knot in my gut settles. Maybe this week will prove what I already suspect: Vince and I work. If we can get along on tour, which is an understandably strange environment, we can play ‘house’ for a week.

Vince shuttles me through the rest of the house. There’s a pool in the back as well as a state-of-the-art recording studio. His closet is the size of my bedroom, and his collection of leather pants forms a pleather rainbow on the back wall, as well as an army of backlit combat boots, each sitting on their plastic shelf.

I thumb the seams of his collection of vintage band T-shirts and a few statement button-ups by avant-garde British designers. I contemplate snapping a photo for Allison. The carpet in the closet is so soft it feels like I’m walking on a cloud.

And his bedroom ...

“Are those silk leopard print sheets?!” I exclaim.

I’m standing before a massive four-poster California-king-sized bed outfitted in leopard print sheets and a plush burgundy comforter. I press my palm against the mattress to confirm that it isn’t a fucking waterbed. At this point, I wouldn’t put it past him.

In a way, Vince’s bedroom feels like every other musician’s bedroom. There’s a Les Paul propped up against the dresser, which is littered with bottles of cologne, spare hair ties, and a tattered copy of *Zen in the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

The only thing that separates this bedroom, other than the pristine French doors that lead out to a small balcony overlooking the pool, from my exes is the Grammy that’s casually sitting on the dresser.

“You don’t have a room for that?” I ask. Vince and the band have won plenty of awards, probably enough to necessitate a

room or at least a dedicated mantle.

“I ran out of room on the mantle. Besides, this one’s my favorite because it’s just for me,” He hands it to me. It’s dense, way heavier than I expected. My wrist jerks to accommodate the weight. I squint at the inscription: “VINCE EXTER. BEST ORIGINAL SCORE”

“It’s for a documentary I did the soundtrack for a few years back when we were on hiatus. It was the first time I felt like I could be someone outside of the band.” He shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans and studies the floor.

“Well, you’re a person outside of the Imposters, right?”

I try to be encouraging but I’m still shell-shocked that I’m holding a Grammy on a Saturday night. And that it belongs to my boyfriend. My last boyfriend played bass in a hardcore band. His prized possession was an ancient jean jacket he never washed, which he claimed belonged to Sid Viscous. I’m pretty sure Sid Viscous was a crust punk who lived near the boardwalk where he worked, seeing as the godfather of punk had been dead for the better part of two decades.

“Yeah, but it was like, you ever do something for so long that you don’t know who you are without it? I already went through that with drugs and alcohol in the late nineties, and I leaned on the band during that time. Then, when we went on hiatus, I was lost all over again, and I couldn’t get shit-faced to cope.”

I delicately place the Grammy back on the dresser and cross over to Vince, pulling him into my arms. He relaxes against me, placing his chin on my head.

“You’re fucking wonderful no matter what you’re doing,” I mumble into his chest.

He kisses my forehead. I tilt my face up and capture his lips, deepening our kiss. He threads his fingers through my hair, and we stumble backward to the bed. I lay down, letting Vince straddle me. I tilt my hips upward, unzipping my jeans. Then I burst out laughing.

“You told me there was no mirror!” I say, swatting his chest.

“Well, that was here before I bought the house! Then, when I got an estimate to see if they could remove it, it was double the cost of the mirror itself because it fucked with the structure of the ceiling. It’s like melted in. It’s been there since the ’70s. I should’ve warned you.” he says.

He kisses my neck and reaches down to peel off my tank top, tossing it to the side. I ignore the mirror and let his hands explore my body, no longer denying that I melt when he touches me. His hands are calloused and strong, containing an unassuming tenderness as his rough palms roam my stomach, cupping my tits and squeezing them. He thumbs my nipple.

“So, I guess this is why you never made a sex tape,” I joke as he trails kisses down my neck and chest.

“No, that’s because of my superior moral compass,” he mutters before taking my boob in his mouth and sucking. I inhale sharply.

It feels wonderful. His tongue traces the underside, and my hips shift upward instinctually. I kiss him again, reaching down to free his dick from his pants. I peel the pants off his legs, fumbling until my hand grazes his already rock-hard cock. I cup the shaft and start to stroke. He groans into my lips, sucking on my bottom lip.

“You like that?” I tease, flicking my wrist upward as slowly as possible. I love to watch him squirm.

“Yes, fuck Lynds, yes,” he pants.

I tilt my hips upward to receive him, wrapping my legs around his torso as he enters me, filling me to the brim with him. It feels so fucking good. The cool silk sheets combat the heat building inside me as he thrusts. I tighten my legs around his waist, and he groans, sinking deeper into me.

I rake my nails across his back, feeling his muscles ripple as he moves, increasing his speed. He is lithe, lean, and so fucking eager. He reaches up and tugs my hair back, exposing the skin of my throat, which he kisses.

I’m enraptured by the scent of him and the sound of the mattress creaking as our bodies collide. I come, my legs

cinching around his waist as I rock forward, and he moans with pleasure as he releases. I glance upward, grinning at the sight of our tangled bodies projected above us, Vince's sweaty fist tangled in my hair, my legs akimbo.

Vince rolls over and takes me with him. I lay my head on his chest and listen to the steady pounding of his heartbeat.

"I love you," I whisper.

It's the first time I've said it first.

Since Vince told me he loved me, I've been more cagey than usual. I can't help it. Every time someone loves me, I prepare to be crushed under the weight of their expectations. I don't know what it is. Once someone loves me, I set them up for disappointment.

I am the Carney who hands a kid a rubber basketball and asks them to shoot a three-pointer, knowing they'll never win. Most of the time, I can use tour as an excuse, jet across the country, and put my phone on airplane mode. But with Vince, I want to stay. I want to stay with him at this moment, on this ridiculous bed on the first cool night of October.

Vince kisses my forehead. "I love you, too. But I have a question for you."

"What?"

"Wanna go for a swim? I know it's late, but—"

"Vince, stop right there. I'm from California; I love night swimming!" I exclaim.

I get up and dig through my suitcase that Vince brought up earlier, uncovering the swimsuit I packed in case a hotel pool called to me. It's a simple black bikini.

Vince walks over to his massive closet, slips on a pair of red swim trunks, and grabs two towels from what must be a linen closet.

We race downstairs out to the pool. The pavement feels cool beneath my feet. It's a little cold out, but I don't care. I race out to the deep end and dive. My body sluices through the

water with ease. I open my eyes despite the sting of the chlorine.

Vince follows suit with a cannonball. When I emerge, I flip over onto my back and paddle lazily, staring at the night sky. Vince has done the impossible. He's found a place in California where he can see the stars.

I hear a splash beside me and look up to see Vince, also floating on his back.

"Did they have a swim club in the UK?" I ask.

"No, what the fuck is that?"

"It's like, for the summer. Like, when you're a kid, you sign up for a swim team at the local pool so your parents can get you out of their hair for the day. Then all the other pools in town compete against each other," I explain.

"Nah. We didn't have any supervised activities. My brother and I mostly terrorized the neighborhood and smoked cigarettes."

"How old were you?"

"13. That's why It's been so hard for me to quit," Vince explains. I think of the Nicotine gum Vince keeps on his person as an extension of his physical body at this point. Now I know why.

"That's crazy."

"Yeah. I blame my brother. He's a tosser. But I love him. You'll meet him the next time he comes to the States."

"I'd like that."

"So, what about you? Were you in the swim club?" Vince floats by lazily, moving his massive arms in long, slow strokes.

"Yeah, but I was terrible. I was about as coordinated as Violet would be if you threw her into the deep end of a pool and told her to do the Butterfly. I came in dead last every time."

“Oh, you poor thing. Did you at least get a trophy for being consistent?”

“No. Allison got most improved because, by the end of the summer, she cut her time down by half.”

Suddenly, I remembered what I had texted Allison when we landed.

“Shit, I’m supposed to meet up with her for coffee tomorrow afternoon. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, of course! Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Well, I didn’t know if you had anything planned.”

“Nah, I thought we could take the day to adjust to not being stuck on a bus, y’know? Priya always tries to sprint back into normal life the moment we get off tour, but I like to take things slower.”

“That’s perfect. I want to do yoga with you tomorrow and maybe take Violet for a walk?”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Vince paddles over to me and plants a kiss on my lips.

“I’m feeling pretty tired,” I say with a yawn. The fact that I spent seven hours traveling suddenly hit me like a ton of bricks.

“Let’s go to bed then,” Vince says.

I swim back to the ladder, sticking out of the pool, and haul myself back onto dry land. Vince hands me a towel as he towels off himself.

“Now, there is a guest room,” Vince starts as we walk back into the house.

“Don’t even,” I kiss him again.

We fall asleep side by side on his ridiculous bed, Violet draped across his torso like a third person. She’s heavy and dense, almost like a weighted blanket. The pressure feels good. I fall asleep almost immediately.



When I wake up the next morning, the bed is empty. I pad downstairs to find Vince in the kitchen, wearing only track shorts. He hands me a bowl full of yogurt and granola.

“I’ve got strawberries, too, if you want,” he says. “And there’s coffee in that pitcher on the counter.”

“You’re the best.” I pour myself a cup of coffee and join Vince at the kitchen table. To my surprise, he’s reading a newspaper.

I shoot him a look.

“I like the Arts and Culture section! It’s a treat for when I’m home.” He sips his coffee, looking surprisingly peaceful.

My phone buzzes; it’s Allison.

Al: Coffee at like 2 today? Should I pick you up at your mom’s?

Me: 2 sounds great. I don’t need a ride. I’m in Laurel Canyon with Vince. I’ll meet you wherever!

Al: OH.

Al: MY.

Al: FUCKING.

Al: GOD.

Al: CAN I MEET HIM?

“Who’s blowing up your phone?”

“It’s Al. We’re getting coffee today. She, uh, wants to meet you.”

“Well, that makes two of us! I was going to ask when I got to meet the famous Allison!”

“I figured you would meet her at Thanksgiving.”

“But she’s here now, c’mon!”

Me: Sure. He wants to meet you, too!

Al: No way! He asked for me?

Me: Yeah. TBH, I might regret this.

Al: We're the two great forces of chaos in your life :-)

“She says you and her are the two great forces of chaos in my life,” I tell Vince.

“Exactly, that’s why it’s imperative that I meet her.”

“Did you learn a new word?”

“Yeah. From the crossword, see?” He shuffles the paper in my direction.

I laugh and kiss his cheek. “You’re full of surprises. I’m gonna get ready, and then we can walk Violet.”

“Excellent! She wants to show you the neighborhood.”

“Does she now?”

“Yeah, she told me this morning.”

I laugh as I get up and toss my empty bowl and mug into the sink.

Vince’s bathroom looks like a one-person spa, all Italian marble with a waterfall shower and a vast bathroom counter. I dig through my suitcase and find my face wash, a fresh pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

The shower feels like heaven after months of subpar water pressure. I take my time, washing my hair with his mint-scented shampoo that I’ve grown to love. To my surprise, there’s a half-empty jar of a sugar scrub that one of his exes must have left behind. I sniff it; it smells like mimosa flowers or oranges, something with citrus. I rub an experimental glob along my thigh, and it sloughs away the dead skin.

For a moment, I feel insecure. Will I be another ex, reduced to random trinkets around his house? I push the thought out of my head and focus on conditioning my hair with a bottle of leftover hotel conditioner I packed; why I forgot shampoo and body wash is beyond me.

When I’m done, I towel off while standing on a soft bathmat. I brush my teeth and get ready for the day, slipping

on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and tying my hair up into a low ponytail. I'm out of contacts. I need to order more while I'm home. I clean my glasses with my t-shirt and slip them on.

"You look lovely," Vince calls when I walk down the stairs.

"Thanks," I mumble.

He's wearing dark jeans and a deceptively simple white t-shirt that probably costs four hundred bucks. It clings to his torso in all the right places. His biceps ripple as he pulls me into a hug.

"You smell good. Did you find my sugar scrub?" he asks.

I pull away for a moment. "That's yours?!"

"Yeah. Okay, don't tell Apollo or Henry, but I love a good excuse to exfoliate. It makes me feel fresh, like when snakes shed their skin. It's satisfying."

I can't help myself. I start laughing. "I won't tell. God, I thought it was your ex's or something."

"Oh no. I don't let anyone into my house," Vince quips. "I don't want Violet to get too attached. Speaking of ..." he nods to his left, and I see Violet sitting politely at the front door, wearing a hot pink collar.

"Ask her if she wants to go for a w-a-l-k," Vince stage-whispers.

"Okay, um. Hey, Violet. Do you want to go for a walk?"

Violet whines in affirmation and scratches at a nearby closet.

"She knows where her leash is because she's a genius," Vince supplies. He walks over to her and strokes her ears, opening the closet to pull out a long, black leather leash.

"Vi, sit." Violet sits at Vince's side and leans her head against his thigh as he clips the leash to her collar. Her tail thumps against the ground.

Violet pulls Vince out through the front door, and I follow behind, watching as Violet intently sniffs each plant that lines the driveway.

She goes to inhale a mouthful of grass, and Vince yanks her leash, “Violet, no!” he chastises.

“I swear, I drop so much money on her food, but all she wants to do is eat plants and wood chips,” Vince grumbles as we walk down the driveway.

The houses in Vince’s neighborhood look more like castles made out of stucco with landscaping budgets that would rival most botanical gardens. We pass houses with fountains of Greek Gods in the front, houses with Ferraris lining the driveway the way, and elaborate curlicued iron gates. I spot an actress walking her pug, and she gives Vince a dirty look as Violet approaches him; her head’s approximately the size of his body.

“She’s friendly,” Vince supplies as Violet’s tail wags, almost knocking the pug over.

“Is she?” The actress shoots back as Violet places her human-sized paw on the pug’s delicate head.

“She’s trying to play! Gentle, Violet,” Vince says, tugging at her leash.

The pug stands on his hind legs. At his full height, he barely hovers above Violet’s paw. He leaps up and yips. Violet licks him, coating his body in slobber.

“Can I get a picture?” Vince asks. The actress grimaces and starts to pose.

“Oh, sorry, ma’am, not you. Of Vi and her new friend,” Vince clarifies.

“What’s his name?” Vince asks as he snaps a photo of Violet and the pug.

Violet’s lying on her back, and the pug is clamoring around on her like she’s a playground. It is cute, but the actress looks genuinely offended.

“His name’s Reginald,” the actress says.

“Violet and Reginald, how lovely. Here,” Vince hands her his phone, “What’s your number? The dogs should play

sometime. Violet needs more friends in the neighborhood, and there's that dog park on Wysteria."

"Well, now that I have your number, I'll have to call you sometime so we can go somewhere without our dogs," the actress coos as she types her number into his phone.

Vince shrugs. "Nah. I'm taken. That's my girlfriend, Lyndsey!" Vince says, pointing to me.

The actresses' brows furrow, "Girlfriend? I thought she was your dog walker." I feel my cheeks start to burn.

"Nope!" Vince presses a kiss on my cheek. And now I'm blushing.

"Well ..." the actress is stunned, but Vince is oblivious.

"I'll text you about Reginald. Have a nice day," Vince calls, tugging at Violet's leash. As we walk away, he slips his hand into the back pocket of my jeans for good measure.

"Reginald seems nice, but his mom's a bit of a bitch. I don't know if I want Violet around all that negative energy," Vince muses.

I laugh so hard tears prick the corner of my eyes.

"She thought she was going to get some!" I say, elbowing his ribs.

"Can't a man ask a woman for her phone number without it being a date?" Vince grumbles. His brow crinkles. He's genuinely perturbed.

"I get worried about Violet. I don't want her to get lonely," he adds.

"You're a great dog-Dad." I slip my hand into his, and Violet nudges my knee with her head when she's done sniffing a pile of trash. Vince beams. "She likes you! You're friends!"

"Are we, Violet?" I ask, scratching her ears.

"I'm so relieved," Vince says with a sigh.

"Was that your deal breaker?"

“Well, yes and no. Violet’s a great judge of character. No wonder the two of you get along.”

We keep walking, stopping every five minutes to give Violet the chance to dunk her head in fresh dirt or fail to eat a leaf. When we arrive back at Vince’s place, he unclips her leash and lets her sprint up the driveway. E

ven though she’s older, she still runs with the prowess of a cheetah. It’s beautiful to watch. Eventually, she lays down in the front yard and thumps her tail happily as Vince approaches and gets down to her level. He flops onto his back, and they lay side by side, looking up at the sky. It’s precious. Vince holds her paw in his hand.

“I’m happy to be home, Vi Vi,” he says as she licks his face.

He gets up, and Violet follows us back into the house before settling for a nap on the cool marble floor of the foyer.

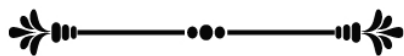
My phone buzzes with a text from Allison with a link to a nearby coffee shop.

“Have you ever been to Moonrise?” I ask.

“Yeah! The coffee’s great there.”

“Cool, I think that’s where Al and I are going to meet. Do you want to come through at like 3:30?”

“That would be great. I’ll see you then.” Vince kisses me, and we continue to make out after I call a Lyft.



Moonrise is a tiny but chic coffee shop.

Murals of different tarot cards decorate the walls. There are a few tarot decks for sale on the ship-lap counter.

I spot Allison at a corner table. She’s wearing flowy linen pants and a white crop top with chic platform sandals. She cut her long, blonde hair into a blunt bob. It looks good.

“Hey!” I call, pulling her into a hug. She hugs me so hard my ribs hurt.

“You’re dating a rockstar, and you can’t deign to update your wardrobe. You’ve had this T-shirt since high school!” she chastises.

“Have Vince take you shopping!”

“No way. This isn’t a fucking movie. Besides, you know I hate shopping. I’m gonna grab a coffee. Do you need anything?”

“Nah,” Allison gestures to the tiny blue mug next to her. “I’m good.”

I walk up to the counter and peruse the chalkboard menu; all the drinks are named after different tarot cards.

“Can I have an Empress?” I ask the disaffected barista. It’s an espresso tonic with fresh thyme and lavender syrups.

I pay for my drink and join Allison back at the table. She’s sitting with one leg tucked underneath her, absentmindedly texting.

“I’m telling my mom that the fame has yet to go to your head.”

“Yeah, cause I’m not the famous one, you goofball.”

“But still! What’s it like?”

“Exactly like every other tour I’ve been on, but with triple the budget, so we haven’t had to sleep in a parking lot in the bus this run,” I say. I don’t know what people are so interested in. No one was this invested in my tour with Oli June.

“Yeah, but this is like ... historic! And Vince?!”

“I did not plan on that to happen at all.”

“Still!”

“I dunno. Al, I hate to break it to you, but he’s a pretty chill guy. He’s got a greyhound. We took her on a walk this morning. I don’t know what you want me to tell you.”

“What’s his house like?”

“Bougie. There is a mirror on the ceiling, but he claims it came with the house.”

“Did you?”

“Jesus Christ, Al! Yes, we’re having a good time.” The barista sets my drink on the table, and I take a sip.

“So that’s what you’re calling it these days.”

“I refuse to give you a play-by-play of my sex life.”

“That was fine when you were dating Connor, but now it’s interesting! Is he as wild as everyone says he is?”

“Yes and no. He’s adventurous, but he’s kinder than I expected.”

“The plot thickens.”

“There’s nothing to thicken!” I insist, my cheeks burning.

“I’m gonna get you to crack one day,” Allison declares, sipping her coffee.

“What about you? Is the envelope still on your dresser?”

“Yep. I still haven’t opened it. I like the idea of opening it on Thanksgiving. That way, if we end up having a terrible time, we have something concrete to blame.”

“If that’s what you want. You know I’ll support you every step of the way,” I reassure her. Allison reaches over and squeezes my hand.

My phone buzzes. It’s Vince.

“Vince is here,” I tell Allison, who immediately straightens up in her seat.

“Oh, shit! How do I look? How’s my hair?”

“You look great, seriously. Don’t stress about it.”

Allison still gives her bangs a firm pat. I watch Vince walk into the coffee shop and glance around; I wave him over to our table.

“Hey, babe,” he says. To my surprise, he drew me close and kissed me in front of Allison. I notice that Allison’s jaw is on the floor when we part.

“You must be Allison!” Vince beams, extending a hand.

“The one and only,” Allison mumbles. Her cheeks are flushed as she takes his hand.

“It’s an absolute fuckin’ pleasure to meet you. I’m gonna grab a coffee, and then you tell me what Lynds was like when she was a kid because she refuses to tell me anything.”

Allison grins. “That I can do.”

Vince orders and returns, sitting in the chair next to me and flinging his arm around my shoulders. He seems so comfortable being out together in public. I figured there’d be paparazzi in Laurel Canyon, but he doesn’t give a shit.

Allison studies with a look of bonafide awe.

“Lynds, do you remember when we did that dance in the 5th grade talent show to “Heartbreak?” I could never forget the time Al and I choreographed a dance to the Imposter’s greatest hit. I was hoping Allison wouldn’t bring it up today.

Vince slams his hands on the table. “You did *what?*”

“It was for the fifth-grade talent show. I wanted to dance, but I was way too nervous about doing it alone. So Lyndsey agreed to be my backup dancer.”

“It was more of a duet,” I say.

“We choreographed this whole dance,” Allison continues, “In my bedroom. And we rehearsed the day before onstage just to get a feel for it. But then, the day of the show, Lyndsey — “

“I tripped over the microphone wire!” I blurt, getting it over with.

“We’re talking a total face plant. In front of the entire school.”

The barista chooses this moment to hand Vince a massive glass of iced coffee and give him a double take.

“Oh, Lynds,” Vince says.

I refuse to make eye contact.

“Wait, is that why you’re so tape-happy all the time? Every gig, Lyndsey triple-checks to make sure everything’s taped down, like all of the pedal boards and the setlist. She goes above and beyond.”

“Maybe,” I mumble, my face reddening.

Vince squeezes me. “It’s okay. I tried to perform “Blitzkrieg Bop” for my talent show in secondary school, with Henry. We got booed off the stage because they didn’t understand punk, and I didn’t understand basic chords.” Vince offers. He looks at me and smiles, and I smile back.

“But that’s not nearly as embarrassing!”

“True. Embarrassing is the time I ripped my pants in half in Glasgow.”

Allison guffaws, “Lynds, at least your pants stayed intact.”

“Now, I have two questions for you. Can you still do the splits, and do you have a copy of the video?”

“No, and I bet my mom does! Oh, shit, we should ask her to find it for Thanksgiving.”

“Priya would lose her entire mind. Priya would pay you for it. I will pay you for it. How much do you want? One thousand? Two?”

“I don’t need anything. Look at Lyndsey’s face!” Allison squeals.

Vince and Allison hit it off immediately. Time falls away as I watch the two people I love most hang out for the first time.

“So then, Lyndsey put one across, and that’s how she annihilated Henry at Connect Four!”

“Wow. So, that’s what you do on tour? Like, between shows?” Allison asks.

“Yeah, that or we read. Lynds, how was that Raymond Carver book?”

“It was a good time. I’m starting *Siddhartha*.”

“Hell yeah!”

Allison looks confused. “So, that’s what you do, you ... play board games and read?”

I almost don’t want to ask, “Al, what did you think we do?”

“I dunno. I figured there’d be at least one orgy. Maybe like, a groupie sneaks onto the bus in the laundry basket.”

“You stole that from *Annie*.”

“Well, I dunno! I expected more debauchery!”

“Oh, I can tell you about debauchery,” Vince starts, “Lynds, shall we tell her about—“

“We’re not telling my best friend about the time you got handcuffed to a fucking hotel bed!” I hiss. Allison hears it anyway.

“Handcuffs! Lyndsey! I didn’t know you had it in you!”

“Me neither, but they were there.”

“See, thinking back on it; I think our first mistake was finding a pair of handcuffs and thinking, ‘let’s give this a go.’ Where did they come from?” Vince muses.

“They weren’t yours?” Allison volleys back.

“I’m ruining my mystique here, but no. Before I met Lyndsey, I never would have agreed to an experience that kept in a singular location with no means of escape.”

Allison starts laughing, and soon, I’m laughing, too. Suddenly, I feel a presence behind me. A familiar voice calls out, “Vince? Lola? You’re still together?”

“It’s Lynd—” my voice falls away.

Fuck! Eve.

She stands before us, looking gorgeous as ever. I don’t think she has pores. How does she stay so naturally fucking dewy? She looks like an elf goddess. Her tan skin glows, her dark hair reaches her waist, and she dyed it since I saw her last. She wears a two-piece matching set of a pink crop top and skirt.

Vince startles. His chair tips forward with a thud.

“Eve! What are you doing in Laurel Canyon?”

“My acupuncturist has an office down the street. I like to go here for a refreshing cold pressed juice afterward. It helps me relax. But that’s a moot point now.” She glares in my direction.

“I still don’t know how you sleep at night after stealing my boyfriend right out from under my fucking nose. That’s, like, against feminism. We’re both women in the industry. How could you stab me in the back like that?” Eve says, her voice rising two octaves. Her hands are clenched into fists at her sides, sparkling pink nails looking more like talons.

“I didn’t steal him,” I start.

“We were dating when tour started, and then I went to visit him, and all of a sudden, his tongue’s down your throat. What else do you call that?”

“Eve, I tried to break up with you before tour.” Vince is trying to keep his voice level.

“Right! Because you met *her*! Eve jabs a pink nail in my direction.

“No, because I didn’t want you to have to wait around for me.”

“Well, you did a terrible fucking job! You better watch out, Lyndsey.” Eve sneers, her voice dripping with venom.

Her eyes narrow into slits as she glares at Lyndsey, her fists clenched tightly at her sides. “This man does not know how to handle a woman’s heart!” she yells, clutching her chest in anguish.

A solitary tear escapes from the corner of her eye and rolls down her flushed cheek. She hastily wipes it away with a delicate hand before tipping Vince’s coffee directly into his lap.

“Oops,” she quips before turning on her heel and walking away.

“What was that?!” Allison exclaims as I grope around for napkins.

“Nothing. I’ll get you another coffee,” I tell Vince.

When I return with a fresh cold brew, Vince is regaling Allison with the tale of Eve's disastrous appearance on this tour.

"So, I didn't know what else to do, so I asked Lyndsey to pretend to be my girlfriend," Vince explains.

"And she said yes?"

"Well, she looked at me like I asked her to fork over a kidney, but yes."

"That's because we'd known each other two weeks, and you were like, 'help me! Let's make out!'"

"Was this all part of your master plan to win Lynds over?" Allison asks.

Vince blushes. "A bit, yeah."

I turn to him, "You never told me this!"

"Well, I knew I liked you. I knew I wanted to kiss you. I knew I wanted Eve out of my hair. I was trying to be utilitarian with my problem-solving skills."

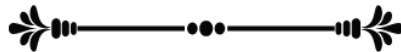
"You, sly bastard," I say, shoving him in the ribs.

"Wait, when did you know you liked me?"

"That first day, when you came to the studio, and you were all business with your color-coded folders with everyone's riders," Vince admits.

"What?" I'm shocked, but Allison is grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

"Love at first sight. Damn, Lyndsey!"



I've been avoiding my mom's calls for three days.

The week before I returned to California, she texted me a photo of the cleaned-out guest room. She put new sheets on the bed and everything.

My initial plan to conceal the fact that Vince and I are dating is faltering. Moms always know, especially when they're as

nosy and invested in celebrity gossip as Mikki Vynse.

It doesn't help that Vince has been practically begging to meet her.

Two days later, at breakfast, my phone buzzed for the third time in two hours. Vince sees the word 'MOM' flash across the screen.

"You've gotta let me meet her!" he begs.

"Let me pick up the phone first," I say.

"So, is that a yes?"

"A firm, maybe."

Vince looks hopeful, but the truth is, I've never brought anyone home to meet my mom. I get up and leave the table to give us some privacy.

"Hey, Mom, what's up?"

"Lyndsey! Where the hell are you? Al told me you two got coffee the other day in Laurel Canyon. What the hell are you doing out there? Is it a work thing?"

"Um, I'm staying with Vince." My palms are already sweating.

"So, it is a work thing."

"Not exactly." I need to do it now, or I'll never say it, and Vince will be relegated to a Bert-and-Ernie-level roommate for the rest of our lives. "We're dating—Vince and I. We're together romantically. As well as professionally. I mean, I'm still working on the tour. Tour comes first."

"LYNDSEY!" My mom shrieks. I can't tell if she's irritated or excited.

I wait for a beat.

"This is the best news ever! Oh my God. I have never been more proud of you! Wait, does this mean I get to meet him?!" my mom gushes. She starts talking a mile a minute, throwing around words like 'son-in-law' and 'Vegas' and 'wedding.'

“Mom, slow down! It’s still fresh. But yes, you can meet him. We’re here until Saturday, and he’s been asking to meet you.”

“He has?”

As if he’s been summoned, Vince pops his head into the room. “Is that your mum?” I nod.

“Can I talk to her?”

“He wants to talk to you.”

My mom starts screaming again as I hand Vince the phone. He paces and nods, genuinely gushing about me, and I’m touched.

He hands me the phone again.

“So, you’re good to go to yoga on Friday and then come over?” My mom asks.

“Oh, sure!”

“It was Vince’s idea. I told him about my class. I’ll make vegan chili afterward and everything; Vince can see the house!” My mom gushes.

“Sure, we’ll see you then.”

“I gotta start cleaning! Bye, Lynds, love you!”

“Love you, too.”

I hang up the phone and turn back to Vince, “You want to go do yoga at the Pasadena Community Center on a Friday night?”

“Well, I told you we’d do yoga together! And I’m excited to meet your mum; it’s a win-win.”

CHAPTER 12

VINCE

Pasadena, CA

On Friday, I don my nicest pair of track shorts and a clean, black tank top with no profanity.

I pack a pair of black jeans and a button-down into a tote bag for later. I tie my hair back in a ponytail and do some light stretches as I dig out a spare yoga mat for Lyndsey in the closet of the meditation room.

I can't help myself. I'm nervous.

It's been a long time since I've met a girlfriend's mom and a longer time since I've known anyone as important to me as Lyndsey is quickly becoming. I want to make a good impression. But at the same time, Mikki's a fan.

What if she's read the interviews where I've put my foot in my mouth over and over? What if I say something dumb? What if I fall asleep in Shavasana like an asshole, inadvertently insulting her skills as a yoga teacher?

"Vince, are you almost ready?" Lyndsey calls from the other room. She pops her head in, looking gorgeous as ever, wearing

a moss green workout top and leggings.

“Yeah! Here you go.” I hand her a yoga mat.

“Also, I picked up some flowers for your mum, too. They’re in the kitchen. I also found some of that good incense from the health food store. Is that a weird hostess gift? I figured she’d like it since she’s a yoga teacher.”

Lyndsey’s face softens. “You didn’t have to do that,” she says.

“Yes, I did! I need to get off on the right foot.”

Lyndsey is silent on the drive over to the community center, contemplatively glancing out the window as she clutches the bouquet of wildflowers I found for her mum.

“You okay?” I ask, trying not to pry.

“I guess I’m a bit nervous. I’ve never brought anyone home to my mom before.”

“Really? Ever?”

“Nope. I mean, most of my previous boyfriends weren’t exactly long-term partners. So, feel free to gloat.”

I can’t help myself. I smile when Lyndsey says, ‘Long-term.’ No one’s ever made me consider the future as much as Lyndsey. I used to say that I lived life by the day. I started touring full-time when I was twenty-one, and it impacted my sense of time.

Time became truncated: weeks separated into days, hours, and then green rooms. Then, I got sober, and I had no choice but to take things day by day. Now, almost thirty years later, I can see a future for the first time, and I hope Lyndsey will be by my side.

“It’s up on the right here,” Lyndsey says.

I pull into the parking lot of a nondescript terra cotta building with a marquee spelling out “PASADENA COMMUNITY CENTER” to the side.

I park, and Lyndsey leads the way into the building, pointing to a concrete staircase off to the side. “It’s on the second

floor.”

I watch her ass bob as she walks upstairs, giving it a playful slap with my yoga mat.

Lyndsey laughs. “Behave! What happened to making a good impression?”

“I can’t help myself,” I say.

Lyndsey opens a clear glass door into a long, carpeted hallway, then opens the third door on the left to reveal a softly lit room with polished wooden floors. It looks like a dance studio; soft music pipes through the speakers as various students lay their yoga mats on the floor.

A woman with a silver shag haircut sits serenely at the front of the room; legs crossed as she perches on a meditation pillow. Lyndsey walks up to her and taps her on the shoulder. She pulls Lyndsey into a hug, and then Lyndsey gestures to me.

“Mikki? Or, er, Mrs. Vynse?”

“Oh, call me Mikki!” She coos, her voice is calm.

“It’s so wonderful to meet you! I’ve been a fan for years, although I’m sure Lyndsey’s told you.”

“Well, wouldn’t you know I’m a fan of Lyndsey?”

Mikki laughs. “That makes two of us. Thank you so much for coming tonight.”

“Of course! Lyndsey and I were going to do yoga this week anyway.”

“Well, not to brag, but this is the best class in town.”

Lyndsey rolls her eyes.

“I don’t doubt it!” I say as the last students file in.

“Just you wait.” Mikki has the same smile as Lyndsey, who gestures toward two empty spots near the back of the studio. I follow her, briefly impressed by the power of genetics. Lyndsey and her mom have the same mannerisms.

Mikki is an intense instructor. She powers through the first flow before walking around the room and helping students adjust their warrior poses.

The class moves at a steady, invigorating pace. Once it's time for Savasana, I'm exhausted.

Lyndsey shakes my shoulder. "Vince, wake up!"

"Fuck, did I fall asleep?"

"Almost," Lyndsey says as she rolls up her mat.

"There's a back room if you want to change," Lyndsey says.

"Yeah, that'd be great." I follow Lyndsey into a room that must moonlight as a supply closet and pray that my shirt won't look too wrinkled. I roll the sleeves of my button-down up to my elbows and smooth the fabric. I wish I had a mirror.

"You look great," Lyndsey says when I emerge. She's wearing a pair of jean shorts and a crop top. I resist the urge to cup her hip with my hand.

"Lynds, do you want to give Vince directions back to the house, or do you want to follow me?" Mikki asks.

"I can follow you," I volunteer.

The three of us hike downstairs and out into the parking lot. Mikki gets into a beat-up silver Toyota. Lyndsey and I hop back into my car.

Lyndsey grew up in a one-story elongated ranch with a persimmon tree blooming in the front yard. Mikki planted a variety of flowers, including hydrangeas that dot the driveway. She parks and hops out, waving me forward.

Lyndsey grabs the flowers and exits the passenger side. I follow her up the driveway. Mikki unlocks the door; the interior of the house is cozy. It smells like incense and herbs. The living room and the kitchen are divided by a Formica countertop.

A floral-print couch dominates the living room, and photos of Lyndsey dot the walls. I slip my shoes off and take a closer look: Lyndsey smiling without two front teeth, Lyndsey and

I'm assuming Allison, striking a pose at the pool wearing swim caps and goggles, a high school portrait of Lyndsey wearing pounds of eyeliner, with one side of her head shaved.

"Don't!" Lyndsey leans forward and covers the photo with her hands.

"I'll do you one better!" Mikki enters the room with a massive, brown leather photo album in her arms.

"Jesus, Mom! Baby pictures? Really?"

"Well, I think it's a great idea," I say.

I walk over the counter and flip open the album. A photo of Lyndsey as a toddler wearing a light blue dress falls out. She has the same determined expression. She's glaring at the camera with her mouth pressed into a determined line.

"She hated being photographed," Mikki explains with a laugh.

"And I still do! Put that away. I'm begging you!" Lyndsey plops the bouquet next to the album, "These are for you, Mom."

"Oh, Lyndsey, they're gorgeous. You shouldn't have!"

"It was Vince's idea. Here, I'll go find a vase."

"You're a real gentleman," Mikki gushes.

"That's the first time anyone's ever called me that."

"Well, there's a first time for everything. I thought I'd be eighty by the time Lyndsey managed to buck up and bring home a boyfriend."

"Mom! I'm twenty-seven! I'm not a spinster!"

"All I'm saying is the rest of the guys you've dated make Vince look like he won the Nobel Peace Prize."

"They were fine!"

"They were despicable, which is why you wouldn't let me meet 'em, you knew!"

"To be fair, I've dated some less than outstanding women," I say, hoping to the playing field a bit.

“Oh, I know. I read all the good tabloids when I get my nails done,” Mikki says, leveling me with a steely gaze.

Now, it’s my turn to blush. My palms start to sweat.

“You pull any of that shit with my daughter, and I’ll—”

“Mom!” Stop! Also, how many times do I have to tell you, don’t believe everything you read on the internet! I wish you’d take that Internet safety class at the library.”

“I don’t need an internet safety class! I need to get this chili out of the crock pot. It’s been cooking all day. Are you vegan, Vince?”

“No, but I’ll eat just about anything.”

“I saw him eat a hotdog off the floor once,” Lyndsey adds.

“Five-second rule?” I say sheepishly.

“I mean, you work up an appetite playing shows,” Mikki says as she spoons chili into three bowls.

“Lynds, put some silverware out for me, will you?”

I follow Lyndsey into the kitchen; its airy and crowded by a round wooden table situated in the corner. There’s a bird feeder outside of the kitchen window. I can hear wind chimes whistling as well.

When I take a seat, I notice that Mikki has a miniature herb garden planted on the windowsill. This place is delightful. I go to many places on tour, but I rarely have the chance to eat a meal at someone’s house.

We talk as we eat, and I answer every single one of Mikki’s detailed questions about touring and the band.

“It’s still so wild to me that you’re sitting in my kitchen. It’s like one of my acid dreams came true.”

“When did you do acid?!” Lyndsey exclaims.

“When I was in college, don’t look at me like that! I was trying to expand my mind.”

“It will open up your consciousness,” I say.

“See, Vince knows what I’m talking about!”

The night progresses, and I realize that not only do I love Lyndsey, but I love her family. I could see myself bringing Mikki flowers during the holidays, and knowing she'd be there during Thanksgiving calms my nerves.

However, Lyndsey's Dad is another story. Lyndsey doesn't talk about him much, but from what I've gathered, their relationship is fine. Still, I doubt that I'm the kind of man he pictured his daughter bringing home.

"Now, Lynds, I talked to your dad, and he will be here for Thanksgiving with Cheryl."

"Oh, fucking hell," Lyndsey murmurs.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Cheryl's a bitch," Lyndsey explains.

"She's an interesting woman," Mikki says diplomatically.

"She's only three years older than me, and she acts like she's my mom! She only started dating him last summer. Plus, she's a fitness influencer," Lyndsey scrunches up her face. "She doesn't believe in carbs. I have no idea what she sees in Dad."

"Dollar signs," Mikki says, grabbing our empty bowls.

"Now, I have vegan angel food cake for dessert. How does that sound?"

"Delightful."

I get up and help Mikki cut the cake; she gives me a pat on the back. "You're such a fuckin' sweetheart. I'll have to tell Mark to withhold his judgment. He's not exactly sympathetic toward rockstars."

"He's a tax attorney. He thinks I'm throwing my life away," Lyndsey explains as she sneaks up behind me.

"Oh, fuck. Should I like, what should I do?"

"Well, do you own a sports coat?"

"Yes."

"Wear it."

“Is that what people wear to Thanksgiving? It’s barely a thing in the UK.”

“It’s what Mark’s going to wear, and he’s going to come into this expecting you to put a lampshade on your head. I’m warning you now because I like you,” Mikki says gravely.

“It’ll be fine. He’ll meet you, realize what a great guy you are, and then we can listen to Cheryl rant about how pie is the devil’s dessert. What could go wrong?”

CHAPTER 13

LYNDSEY

Pasadena, CA

One Month Later. Thanksgiving Day.

The last month of tour was a blur.

Now Priya and I are hauling Vince up to the front steps of Allison's house, and he's glancing around like he might make a run for it.

It's a bright, sunny day. Priya's wearing a bespoke silk blouse and high-waisted trousers. Knowing that my Dad would be there, I decided to put on a knee-length red dress. I feel like a secretary.

Vince looks like he's running for office. He keeps loosening his purple tie like it's strangling him. His curls rest on his shoulders. He's wearing a paisley silk shirt, black pants, and dress shoes. I never thought I'd see the day when he'd wear anything but combat boots.

Priya's clutching a ceramic dish full of vegetarian stuffing. I've got a tin full of cranberry pie resting on my hip. Is it a direct 'fuck you' to Cheryl? Maybe.

And Vince, poor Vince, is white as a ghost pacing along the doorstep of Allison's mom's tiny cottage.

"It's Thanksgiving, not a group execution, Vincent!" Priya hisses, yanking him back by his tie.

"You don't know that!" Vince snaps back.

"It'll be fine," I say for the millionth time, although I'm starting to doubt myself.

I take a deep breath and ring the doorbell. Allison's mom, Abbie, answers seconds later.

"Lyndsey, my little superstar! Come here," she exclaims before wrapping me in a bear hug.

"Hey, Abbie, it's good to see you," I say. I hand her the pie, "This is for you. I found the recipe online because I know you hate pumpkin pie. It's cranberry."

"Oh, that sounds delicious! You've always been so thoughtful! And who are your friends?" Abbie prompts, though she knows full well who everyone is.

"I'm Priya! It's lovely to meet you. Thank you so much for opening up your home to us wayward Brits," Priya gushes, effortlessly charming. "I made vegetarian stuffing. I hope that's okay."

"Oh, my God! I'm vegetarian! This is a dream come true. I, fuck, I've been a fan of your music for the better part of thirty years!"

"That's so lovely to hear. Thank you," Priya says graciously.

"Nah, thank you! I told everyone at school that I was having you over for Thanksgiving, and they didn't believe me. I had to show everyone Lyndsey's text as proof!"

"Abbie's an elementary school art teacher," I explain as we step inside.

“That’s what I was going to do if music didn’t take off! I always wanted to be an art teacher. They were the best part of school. You’re making a difference; you know that?”

Abbie basks in the glow of Priya’s attention. She wears a floral print wrap dress, and her graying hair is swooped up into a signature messy bun.

“You’re too kind! Now, who’s this handsome fellow?” Abbie shoots a glance at Vince.

“This is my boyfriend, Vince,” I say.

“Lovely to meet you,” Vince shakes her hand vigorously.

“Y’all can come on into the living room. We’re just getting started with appetizers. Vince, Lyndsey told me you’re sober. I am, too! I have some of these zero-proof gin cocktails that Allison bought for me, and they’re wonderful. Would you like to try one?”

“I’d love one,” Vince says, relaxing at my side.

“Lyndsey, Priya, do you want anything to drink? Lynds, I know your mom bought natural wine.”

“I’d love a glass of that,” Priya says.

“Same here,” I echo.

We take our seats in Abbie’s living room, settling onto the green velvet couch. The decor is eclectic, with paper chains hanging from the chandelier, a leftover from a “100 days of school project” from last year. The walls are full of paintings from local artists and Abbie’s former students.

“You have a lovely home,” Priya says.

“Thank you so much! Would any of you like a mini quiche or some fruit?” Abbie gestures to the spread of snacks dominating the coffee table: charcuterie, mini quiche, a fruit plate, and tiny puff pastries.

“I can’t believe we’re the first ones here,” Vince notes, grabbing a plate.

“Lyndsey’s always been the punctual one out of all of us,” Abbie says. She hands Vince a chilled can and then makes

another trip to grab Priya and me our wine. I rarely drink, but I take an anxious gulp.

“Abbie, these quiches are delightful! Where on earth did you get them?” Priya asks.

“The frozen section of Whole Foods,” Abbie says sheepishly. She sits across from us, then darts up when she hears the doorbell. “That’s probably Allison!”

She’s correct. Allison looks great. She wears a hot pink silk dress and lime green heels.

“I baked a brie!” She exclaims, plopping it down on the coffee table next to the other appetizers.

“It only took you twenty-seven years to learn how to cook,” Abbie laments, sitting next to her.

“Hey, I still can’t cook,” Vince says.

Don’t sell yourself short, you’re really good at making that salmon bake.” I can feel the nervous energy radiating off of Vince.

“It’ll be fine,” I whisper.

“What’s that?” Abbie asks.

“Vince is nervous about Mark,” Allison explains.

“Oh, Mark’s fine. Cheryl’s the one you’ll have to watch out for. Lynds, I met her for the first time on Halloween, and all I’m saying is that I tried to go into it free of judgment. Your Dad’s getting back out there; that’s great. It’s a new relationship! They’re in that honeymoon phase.”

“But?” I prompted.

“But trying to have a conversation with Cheryl is like trying to talk to one of those cheesy motivational posters come to life.”

“Truly, whatever did Cheryl do?” Priya asks. “That’s all these two could talk about during the ride over here.”

“Don’t say her name so often; you’ll summon her like Bloody Mary.” I hiss.

And just like that, the doorbell rings.

“Speak of the devil,” Allison says.

Abbie gets up to unlock the door. I hear her before I see her, the grating girlish voice that floats to octaves only dogs can hear.

“I mean, when you think about it, pie is just... unnecessary!” She chirps.

My nostrils fill with the powdery scent of perfume. Vince stands up. Mark Vynse gives him a once-over. My Dad doesn't look intimidating. He's 6'1 and newly skinny thanks to Cheryl's no-fat, no-fun macrobiotic diet, with warm brown eyes and a silver comb-over he orchestrates to conceal his bald spot.

Today, he's wearing his usual uniform of khakis and a pastel dress shirt. He was a great dad; after my parents divorced, he always made an effort to be a part of my life. But he's never seen my job as a tour manager as a viable career path.

“Lyndsey! Hi, dear!” he says. He opens his arms for a hug, and I cross the room. He squeezes me.

“Glad to know you finally cleaned up a bit, although it is a holiday.” He's also never approved of my wardrobe. He thinks I dress too casually. I smooth the fabric of my skirt and try not to feel constricted as the fabric squishes my thighs together.

“Although, it's a little short, don't you think?” The skirt's ridden up well above my knees. I try and yank it down.

I resist the urge to tell my dad that I look fine. Something about him immediately transforms me into a petulant teenager, insisting that twenty pounds' worth of eyeliner is a stylish look. But before I can open my mouth, he turns to Vince.

First, he grabs Vince by the shoulders. He says nothing. He takes a step back and furrows his brow. Vince is frozen in the spot; hand extended mid-greeting. They look like two statues about to come to life and face off.

“Is it just me, or am I being appraised?” Vince hisses through his teeth.

“I think so?” I genuinely have no idea what my dad is doing. He’s never been like this with any of my boyfriends. Granted, he’s never been in the same room long enough to judge them.

“He’s looking at you like you’re a piece of meat,” Priya affirms.

“Is this what it’s like to be objectified?”

“Welcome to the club,” Priya jokes.

Finally, after an agonizing silence, my dad clears his throat.

“You must be Vince.”

“Yes, and you’re Mark, right? Lynds has told me so much about—”

My dad puts his hand up to stop Vince, “Flattery will get you nowhere. You don’t have to pretend that Michelle or Lyndsey was singing my praises because they probably weren’t.”

“Well, I have heard a lot about you,” Vince starts again.

“I could say the same about you. I recall a particularly enthralling tabloid article Michelle showed me where you were; oh, what was it? You were drunk in Greece, and you tried to charter a yacht despite zero boating experience?”

Vince’s face reddens. “Yeah, that was a long time ago. The nineties, y’know! It’s all a blur.”

“I actually don’t know. I was busy being a young father and shouldering the twin responsibilities of fatherhood and my recent promotion.”

“Mark’s always been a smarty pants,” Cheryl coos, circling her arm around his waist and protectively draping her palm across his chest. She gives him a scratch like he’s a particularly docile lab, and I resist the urge to throw up in my mouth.

“Right, right,” Vince mumbles. “Well, I’m sober now! The yacht sealed the deal. It’ll be twenty years in February.”

“And I think that’s great! It’ll be six months for me in January,” Abbie adds.

“Congratulations,” Vince says.

Abbie grabs his elbow. “If you want to hit a meeting with me after this, I won’t blame you,” Abbie whispers into his ear. Vince’s face softens, “That ... might be a good idea. I’ll let you know.”

My dad clears his throat and refocuses on Vince, “I have to admit when Lyndsey finally brought a boyfriend home, I did expect it to be some sort of wayward bohemian.”

“Yeah, she’s so creative she—”

“She sure knows how to pick ’em! Lynds, remember that guy you dated in college who never took his denim jacket off? I swear, he showered with that thing!” My dad hoots with laughter.

“Well, I shower naked!” Vince declares.

“Oh, Jesus,” Priya mutters before turning to my mom, “Do you have any more of that natural wine?” My mom hands her the bottle, and she refills her glass before draining it in one gulp.

I’m too paralyzed with abject terror to chug the last dregs of my natural wine. It’s like I’m watching a car crash in slow motion, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. I can only watch from the side of the road. I reach down and squeeze Vince’s hand.

“He’s got a more complex skincare routine than me,” I offer with a laugh.

“Well, you wash your face with bar soap. I at least spring for a moisturizer. Gotta keep the mug camera ready. I’m approaching fifty.”

“No fucking way,” Abbie exclaims, “You look twenty-five! I gotta say, Lynds, I don’t blame you! I’d climb him like a tree!”

I’m resisting the urge to melt into an embarrassed puddle on the floor when my mom adds, “You know, you were my celebrity crush for a large part of the nineties.”

“Wow, like mother like daughter!” Cheryl squeals. Now, I want to die. I spy the cheese knife teetering on the edge of the coffee table and wonder if Allison would make sure that Vince finds love again.

Vince turns to my mom, “Thank you. I’m flattered. All I can say is Lyndsey has excellent genes.”

“She gets it from me. All Mark gave her was a penchant for spreadsheets.”

“Microsoft Excel is—” my father and I exclaim in unison. Vince laughs, and the tension loosens from his shoulders. He kisses my temple.

“Abbie, these appetizers are an absolute delight,” Vince says, loading up a plate to change the subject.

“I don’t believe in refined sugar!” Cheryl says. She fishes a Tupperware container out of her massive red leather bag.

“Babe, I made us some keto lettuce wraps.” She hands a slimy-looking lettuce wrap to my dad.

“Wonderful, that’s so thoughtful of you, babe.” He nibbles on the edge.

“Wait, refined sugar will still be there whether you believe in it or not,” Priya mumbles. She takes a mini-quiche and shoves it into her mouth.

“I’m surprised you eat carbs, Priya,” Cheryl says.

“What’s the surprise? It’s a holiday!”

“Right, but that doesn’t mean it’s an excuse to gorge ourselves. Although, I suppose rock and roll does lend itself to a life of excess.” Cheryl wrinkles her nose.

“I could never be with someone who travels all the time. I need stability.”

“Actually, with tour, it’s hard to find someone who understands, so it’s cool that Vince and I get to work together.”

“Wait, that’s how you met?” My dad exclaims.

“She seduced me with her spreadsheets and meticulous keeping of hotel check-in times,” Vince deadpans—Abbie, Allison, and my mom all cackle. My dad and Cheryl remain stone-faced.

“Isn’t that sweet?” my mom prompts.

“It sounds like an HR violation.”

“Oh, we don’t have HR!” Priya exclaims.

The tension between Vince and my dad hangs thick in the air. I can feel his judgment seeping through the room like noxious gas.

“You know, I think the turkey’s ready! What do you say we take this party to the dining room?” Abbie suggests.

“That’s a great idea!” I say.

We follow Abbie to her vintage dining room table. A different China plate sits in each spot. The candle holders are shaped like ears of corn. Allison and I help Abbie fill up glasses of water in the kitchen for everyone.

“So, my dad hates Vince.” No one goes to reassure me.

Abbie sighs. “Oh, honey. Your dad is such a fucking stickler. He’d find a problem with a Nobel-prize-winning physicist because you’re his little girl. He’ll warm up to Vince once he sees how well he treats you.”

“Vince looks at you like the sun shines out of your ass,” Allison reassures me.

I swat her with a cloth napkin I grabbed for the place settings.

“Allison, you should find a gentle rock’ n’ roller to settle down with.”

“I’m too busy finding my dad.” She turns to me, “If you don’t kill Cheryl tonight and our evening frees up, would you like to open the envelope with me?”

I grab her hand. “I’d love to.”

We walk out into the dining room, where Priya is regaling my mom with tales from the tour. My mom hangs on to her every word.

Allison and I place a glass of water at every seat, and I take my seat beside Vince.

“So, Allison, what have you been up to?” My dad asks.

“I’m trying to find my dad. I signed up for one of those websites where you spit in a tube, and it tells you if you’re related to anyone nearby.”

“Did you now? Same here!” Vince crows.

I shoot a glance at him. “You did? Since when?”

Vince shrugs, “I dunno; I signed up on a bit of a whim. Who knows how many accidental relatives I have running around stateside?”

“Right? It’s like, I’d rather know than wonder at this point,” Allison exclaims.

“Well, Allison, all I’m saying is don’t get your hopes up,” my dad says.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Allison asks pointedly.

“All I’m saying is, if the guy knocked up your mother and ditched, I doubt he’s the most upstanding guy,” Cheryl says.

“Oh, right, Cheryl, like you know anything about upstanding men,” Allison shoots back.

“Mark is a great guy!” Cheryl practically shrieks.

“No, he is. I know because I grew up with him. But all I’m asking is, how did you guys meet again?”

“The turkey’s ready!” Abbie declares, hoping to cut the tension. Later, Allison continues to give Cheryl the third degree after she asks Priya to pass the green beans.

“I mean, it’s not every day you meet the love of your life in spin class!” Cheryl gushes, gripping my dad’s wrist.

“So, you were teaching a spin class, and you saw Mark Vynse in a sweatband and athletic shorts, and you said, ‘That’s

the one.”

“I approached her first,” Mark says sheepishly.

“And then, we went to Le Fontaine Bleu for our first date. It was the most romantic first date I’ve ever been on. I don’t usually eat red meat, but their filet mignon is to die for.”

“There it is,” Allison grumbles.

“Excuse me?” Cheryl asks.

Vince, Abbie, and I make a show of placing the food in the middle of the table, but Allison is undeterred.

“All I’m saying is it makes sense that you only wanted to give Mark the time of day when he took you to a Michelin-star restaurant.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, come on, Cheryl,” my mom adds.

Cheryl rolls her shoulders back until her spine is ramrod straight, “I will admit that dating an older man comes with certain advantages. But I am with Mark because of his heart, not his Amex. Lyndsey knows,” Cheryl turns to me.

“I don’t know much about your and my dad’s relationship, Cheryl,” I admit.

“No, but you know that dating an older man comes with certain advantages that might not be available to... people our age.”

My face is frozen in a slack jawed expression. I look like *The Scream*.

Vince starts scooping green bean casserole onto plates, desperate for something to do with his hands. We can’t handle our combined nervous energy.

I’m disgusted that Cheryl would think to compare her relationship to mine. Cheryl took advantage of a lonely accountant who went to a spin class as part of his midlife crisis regime.

What Vince and I have is nothing like that! But then, I start to think of the actress's look when she thought I was his dog walker and the stares we get when he pulls me into his arms backstage.

What if we're just the touring version of my dad and Cheryl? What if people look at me, see a gold digger, and see Vince hanging onto his youth like one of *Peter Pan's* lost boys?

If Vince and I stay together, I won't need to tour from a financial perspective. What if I become a trophy wife, then, desperate for excitement, I get weirdly into Pilates or one of those vegan restaurants that operate as a front for a cult?

"Cheryl, with all due respect, Lyndsey and my relationship is a bit different than yours. For one thing, we met at work, and I didn't pursue her. It just happened."

"I always say that age is just a number!" my dad barks.

He dabs his forehead with a napkin, and it comes away brown. I realize that he's coated in a thick layer of self-tanner. I look at my dad for the first time all day, and I realize that his forehead is placid, with his surprised expression. The bags under his eyes are gone. He must be getting Botox.

For a moment, I feel genuinely bad for him, chasing desperately after Cheryl's youth and beauty. The other guys at his firm must have done a double take when he showed up with Cheryl at the company Halloween party.

"Yes, there's that, and when I met Lyndsey, yes, I thought she was gorgeous, but I didn't think it would turn into anything romantic."

"But you're a fucking catch!" Abbie hollers.

"Thank you, Abbie, but I also have my baggage to deal with. Now, I'll admit my relationship with Lyndsey is unorthodox, but I love her deeply and plan on loving her for the rest of my life." Vince says, his voice adopting a somber timbre.

My heart plummets into my stomach. No one's ever publicly declared their love for me before my family. I can't help

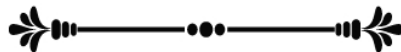
myself. I kiss Vince in front of everyone.

Abbie and my mom hoot. “Get married already!”

Abbie fakes swooning, “Oh, Mikki, think of the bonafide arsenal of A-listers at that wedding! It’s our dream come true!”

“I bet we’ll get to dance with so many rockstars,” Abbie exclaims.

“No one’s getting married yet!” I say when I pull away from Vince. I look over at Cheryl and savor her shocked expression.



After dinner, Vince and I linger behind to help with the dishes. I load the plates into the dishwasher as Vince plops potatoes and green bean casserole portions into Tupperware containers.

“Would you believe that was only the second most hectic Thanksgiving I’ve attended?” Vince asks Abbie.

“Shit. Do I want to know what the first one was?” Abbie asks.

“1991. Back in Bristol. My brother brought home his first serious girlfriend, and my mum got all emotional about her youngest child growing up and cried into the casserole. Priya was there. She called it a colonizer’s holiday. My dad started going off about India. I got too drunk to cope and barfed in my mum’s garden.”

“Well, see! This is way better,” Abbie gives both of us a hearty pat on the back, but for the rest of the night, I can’t shake the feeling of unease that clings to me, as Cheryl watches in horror as everyone devours the pie I made.

By the time everyone finishes coffee and dessert, it’s way too late for Al and me to open her envelope.

She hugs me, and we promise to open it tomorrow.

My mom pulls Vince and me into a group hug, “Now, are you two sure you don’t want to stay back at the house? It’s a long drive back to the Canyon.”

“We’ll be fine, but thank you so much, Mikki,” Vince hugs her again, then Abbie, then Allison. He turns to my dad and

extends his hand, and my dad gives it a hearty shake.

“You’re a good man, Vince,” My dad says.

Vince beams, “You too.”

He waves at Cheryl, who is espousing the virtues of organic cotton yoga pants to my mom.

“Nice to meet you, Cheryl,” he calls. To my surprise, Cheryl waves back.

“Bye, Lyndsey! We should hang out sometime, now that we have so much in common.”

“Bye, Cheryl,” I grunt. I cringe as I grab Vince’s hand and book it out the door. Outside, Priya gives us a quick hug as she unlocks her car, a lime-green Volkswagen bug.

“Good job keeping it together, Vincent. Lyndsey, you know it’s always a pleasure. Do you think if I asked her, your mom would be my friend?”

I laugh, “I think she’d implode on the spot. I’ll text you her number.”

Back in the car, I’m silent as Vince merges onto the highway.

“You’re nothing like Cheryl, you know,” he starts as if he’s reading my mind.

“Is it that obvious that I hate her guts?”

“To most people, no. But I know what you look like when you’re worried. Your nose gets all scrunched like a pug. It’s cute.” He reaches down and places his hand on my knee, rubbing soothing circles on my shin with his thumb. My heart breaks.

“I can’t stop thinking about what she said, about how we like older men like it’s some sort of fucked up sisterhood or something to be proud of.”

“Are you ashamed of me?” Vince stiffens.

“No, no! I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that I look at Cheryl and my dad, and it makes no sense. She looks like

she's his fucking secretary, and I can't help but wonder if that's how people see us."

"Since when have you ever cared about what people think of you?"

"Since that actress called me your dog walker the other day."

"That actress was a right bitch."

"But what if she had a point?" My voice breaks. All of a sudden, my dress feels much too tight. I want to rip it off of me. My knee is bouncing nervously.

"Lyndsey, I don't give a shit about what people say about us. I know that I love you, and that's what matters."

"But what if love can't fix it? Vince, no offense, but you're a guy! You've been fucking strangers with impunity for thirty years because that's what you can do! People look at us, and they immediately think I'm a gold-digger or some symptom of your mid-life crisis."

"I had no idea you thought so poorly of yourself or me! Lyndsey, you're not a crisis. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I don't know what I need to do to prove it to you," he huffs. The air is thick with tension. I realize this is technically our first fight if I can call it that.

"You don't need to prove anything! Vince, what you did today was amazing!"

"And you don't need to prove anything either. I'll fucking fight anyone who looks at you sideways."

"But you shouldn't have to do that! You shouldn't have to go after people like some sort of knight in shining armor! I don't need saving." I can feel myself withdrawing. Vince reaches for my knee again, and I move it away. His hand thuds limply against the passenger seat. Suddenly, this car feels much too small. I need to be alone.

"I'm not trying to save you. I'm trying to love you!" Vince is yelling now.

“But you make it fucking impossible sometimes. Lyndsey, you need to let people in. Who gives a fuck about what they think or what your dad’s girlfriend thinks?” His voice is breaking now. I look up and see a single tear tracing his cheek.

“Vince, I’m trying!” I yell, exasperated. “I took you to my fucking family’s house! What more do you want from me?”

“I don’t know,” Vince says quietly.

He rolls down the window, punches in the gate code, and silently drives into the garage. I get out of the car the minute he unlocks it, taking furious gulps of fresh air.

Vince reaches for me when he exits the driver’s side, but I dodge his touch.

“I think it’s best if I sleep in the guest room tonight,” I say stiffly as I walk into the foyer.

Violet’s tail thumps happily when she sees me. She settles on my feet and leans against me. She’s a trained emotional support animal. She knows how to watch out for people exhibiting signs of emotional distress. I scratch her ears. Vince stares at me, finally breaking the silence.

“If that’s what you want,” he says numbly.

I march upstairs, retrieve my toothbrush from his bathroom, and grab a pair of pajamas from the drawer he designated for me. I get ready in the guest bathroom, silent, furious tears streaming down my face. I wish I knew why I was like this, why I feel the irrepressible urge to push people away the moment they get close to me.

The guest bed is plush but cold. I’ve grown accustomed to sleeping cocooned by the warmth of Vince’s wiry frame, in our bunks. We wake up as a tangle of limbs, his hand cupping my hip or my ass. I never knew what it was like to wake up feeling loved first thing in the morning. But he runs his fingers through the knots in my hair and calls me beautiful. Why do I want to push that away?

I toss and turn all night. I use a cushy pillow to muffle my screams. I give up on sleeping and glance at the digital clock beside the table. It’s 3 A.M.

I grab my pillow and tip-toe up to Vince's room. I test the knob, and the door's unlocked. It opens softly, and I can see the moon reflected on that ridiculous mirror on the ceiling. Vince is snoring. I slowly crawl onto the bed and wrap my arms around his torso, pulling in close and breathing in his earthy scent.

I kiss the back of his neck, and he stirs.

"Please, tell me this is Lyndsey."

"Who else would it be?"

"Dunno. I'm pretty sure this place is haunted." He rolls over to face me, pressing his forehead against mine.

"How are you feeling?"

"Weird. I'm not trying to make excuses, but that was a bizarre day, and I'm sorry I took it out on you."

"You don't have to apologize. I shouldn't have snapped," Vince mumbled.

Tentatively, I kiss his lips. The tension fell away from my body like a heavy winter jacket I could leave piled on the floor. Vince leans closer. I loop my arms around his neck and toss my leg over his side, feeling his erection press against my inner thigh. He slips his tongue into my mouth, and I groan.

I still loved the taste of him, the subtle mint of his organic toothpaste. I deepen our kiss and grind my pelvis against him. He reaches down, toying with the waistband of my underwear.

"Is this, okay?" he whispers. I watch as the moonlight illuminates the chiseled curves of his abs, making his hair shine ocean dark.

"Of course, it is," I mumble against his lips.

To prove my point, I place my hand over the top of his and peel off my underwear. Vince palms the underside of my thigh before sticking two fingers into my entrance and starting a forward motion. He arches his fingers toward my clit, and my hips bucked in response. I hook my legs around his waist as he reaches his fingers deeper inside me.

He bends his head down and sucks on my nipple, which pebbles in pleasure. I missed his touch, how he knew my body's machinery on instinct now. I kiss him; I let him hold me, placing his palm on my shoulder blade.

I grab his hard-on, feeling him stiffen as my hands grasp his shaft. I lift my hips as Vince guides himself underneath me. I let him take me.

We fuck at a furious pace, exorcising mutual frustration in ourselves and each other as he thrusts deeper into me. I scratch my nails down his back and dig the half-moons of my nails into his biceps.

We kiss with hunger. We kiss like we want to swallow each other whole.

Our lips crash together as I slip my tongue into his mouth. I am open, wide, and aching for him, and it's not like I am unfulfilled alone, but I have to ask what it would be like to let myself be filled by someone else. Vince grips my hip bone, and I jerk upward. I grab a handful of his hair and pull him close. We toe the thin line between fucking and fighting. We hold each other like this time might be our last.

CHAPTER 14

VINCE

Laurel Canyon, CA

One Week Later

Eventually, Lyndsey stops glancing around my house like she's casing the joint for emergency exits.

Things are good between us, but it feels fragile somehow, almost like when we first met, and I thought one wrong move would scare her off.

Allison's talk about finding her family inspired me to reopen my account. I sent my spit off in a tube before tour started, hoping to find another distant Exter who made their home in America, but I quickly forgot about it once I hit the road.

I bring my laptop to the kitchen table and reset my password half a dozen times. Lyndsey's making coffee in the kitchen, her hair still a mess of knots. There's a blob of toothpaste drying on her chin, and as the light pours in from the kitchen

window, I realize this is how I like her best. Watching Lyndsey be comfortable feels like a movie like I'm the hapless, bumbling love interest with a sordid past.

“What’s giving you trouble?” Lyndsey asks as I hunch over my laptop. She places a cup of coffee next to me.

“This fuckin’ find your family website! I can’t find my fuckin’ family if I can’t open the account!”

“Did you reset your password?”

“Yes! Dozens of times! They didn’t send me the code.”

“Check your spam,” Lyndsey suggests as she pops a piece of toast into the toaster.

“Oh.” I open my spam folder and find half a dozen reset links. I click one, and like magic, my accounts are restored.

To my surprise, I have a message.

Hello VExter6,

My name is Allison, and I believe we might be related. It says here that you are a close familial match. I would love to meet up with you if possible. I live in Pasadena. My phone number is (901)552-1864.

I message her back, and she responds almost immediately. We make plans to meet for coffee later today. For a moment, I wonder if it’s Lyndsey’s friend Allison, but California must be chock full of twenty-somethings named Allison. Her profile only has what looks like some senior picture, and Lyndsey’s Allison has bleach-blonde hair.

I push it out of my mind and help Lyndsey make a scramble to go along with our eggs. I find a couple of peppers in the refrigerator from our recent trip to the Farmer’s Market and get to work slicing them up while Lyndsey cracks an egg into a skillet.

“Hand me the feta?” she asks.

I grab the container of feta out of the refrigerator and hand it to her. She sprinkles a handful on top of the egg sizzling in the

pan; then I add a handful of chopped peppers. When the scramble's done, we eat in comfortable silence until Lyndsey's phone buzzes.

"Hey, Al! Sure, I'll go with you, what time? Perfect." Lyndsey and Allison talk for a bit longer, and she hangs up the phone.

"I'm going to run some errands with Allison today," she explains.

"Sounds good; I was going to write a bit and then grab a coffee," I lie, though I have been meaning to start working on some new songs, so it's not a total lie.

"Oooh! You'll have to show me what you've got."

"I will," I lie again. Why am I lying? Why is the room suddenly ten degrees hotter? Why can't I tell Lyndsey where I'm going?

I get ready for the day and try to look slightly classier than usual, once again pondering how close a 'close familial relative is?' A daughter? A cousin? Fuck me, am I someone's dad?

Erring for the side of sudden fatherhood, I go with my most subdued button-down shirt, a pale purple linen material that suggests I own a yacht or at least a 401k. I tie my hair back into a ponytail and shave.

Lyndsey kisses me before she leaves, and I hold her close. Our fight the other day made me realize that our relationship is more precarious than I thought. It also made me realize that I don't want to lose her.

Mystery Allison drops a pin at a nearby coffee shop. Lyndsey has my car, so I drive the Audi, which spends most of its life in the garage.

The coffee shop is located on the North side of town, a cozy spot I've never heard of called Harvest, with a chalkboard sign out front boasting fresh matcha. I walk in and see a blonde woman incessantly checking her phone. She's young, around Lyndsey's age, wearing a plain black dress.

She glances up, and her gaze zeroes in on me:

It's Lyndsey's Allison.

Fuck.

My heart is crawling up my throat. I don't know whether I should run, barf, or hide behind the potted plant in the corner. Before I can do anything, Allison zeroes in on me, and she's not happy.

"Nice try, Vincent, if that is your real name!" She sneers.

I can't think of a response before she powers forward in her monologue, "You know, I thought it was you. I did, and it makes sense. You're an up-and-coming rockstar; fans throw themselves at you every night. One of those fans is Abbie Meyers. You two have a night of passion that I don't want to think about. Nine months later, I appeared. My mom contacts you. You don't want the responsibility of fatherhood, so you change your name and pretend I never happened. But guess what, *Vincent*? DNA doesn't lie!"

If Allison needs a job, she should audition to be a television detective. At the same time, I'm deeply confused.

"I- I Allison, I'll admit, the nineties were a bit of a blur for me, but I never changed my name. What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you know!" Allison declares, prodding my chest with her index finger.

"I really don't. Please, let's sit down." I gesture to an open table. Allison sits with her back ramrod straight and whips her phone out like she means business.

"See? Michael Exter, father! That's your real name, isn't it?" She shows me the app with my brother's photo, staring back at me.

"Allison, I'm not your dad. I'm sorry, I'm your uncle. Michael is my brother. Quick question: When were you born?"

"Fall of '95. I'm a Scorpio."

“There you have it. My brother worked merch for us from the Fall of 1993 to the Winter of 1995. Did your mother ever have a passion for T-shirt design, or perhaps, screen printing?”

“I think she tried to design a t-shirt for you guys once. It had the Lovers Tarot card on it for—”

“Heartbreak. Allison, she didn’t try to design a T-shirt. She won. She got backstage passes to our show at the Wiltern! Fuck, it’s all coming back to me now. Did she have, like, a blunt bob?” I ask.

The memories are hazy thanks to the constant deluge of drugs and alcohol that once populated my system, but I remember Michael being smitten with our contest winner.



Los Angeles, CA.

March 1994.

“Michael, for the last time! Quit flirting with the fans. It’s unprofessional!” Priya exclaims as we troop into the venue for the night.

Michael is holding a massive box full of our latest merch design, and the contest winner whose design is featured is coming to the show tonight.

He plops it down onto a table with a thud and scrounges around for a box cutter.

“What fun is working for a band if you can’t flirt with the groupies?” He whines.

“Well, just keep it together tonight. It would be best if you didn’t scare away the contest winner,” I say. I fish around for

the flask in the inner pocket of my blazer and take a pull. The whiskey burns in my throat.

We get ready for the gig while Michael finishes setting up merch. I gave him this job as a favor. It turns out an art degree won't guarantee you a job after graduation, and our last merch guy quit.

Despite his lackluster work ethic, Michael's surprisingly good at this job. We're drawing up a contract so he can design some of our holiday merchandise. Priya wants to make a throw blanket with her face on it for Christmas.

I finish off my flask and wrestle into my leather pants for tonight. Thankfully, the dressing room's stocked with Maker's Mark on ice. I pour two shots and hand the second one to Priya, who downs it in one gulp.

By the time I get onstage, I'm just tipsy enough to play the show without having to contemplate that a thousand people are staring at me.

Backstage, I'm surprised to find that Michael abandoned his post at the merch table. His arm is looped around a woman wearing bike shorts and a leather jacket. One side of her head is shaved, and long, jet-black hair brushes her chin on the other. She's got large brown eyes and a heart-shaped face.

She's pretty. I'll give Michael that.

"Michael, aren't you supposed to be doing your fucking job?" Priya slurs.

"I'm taking a siesta."

"Well then, who the fuck is watching merch? We could get robbed blind!"

"Relax, Corey's got it."

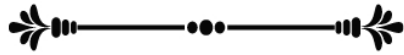
Corey's our tour manager. He wanted to get a job working for Microsoft with his business degree. He wound up working for four degenerate rock stars.

"But that's not Corey's job; that's your job," I say, hoping to illuminate the problem.

“We’ll be gone ten minutes tops. I swear. I wanted to introduce you to someone.”

The woman at his side blushes, “I’m Abigail Eisley. I won the T-shirt contest,” she explains.

“Well, lovely to meet you, Abigail. I’m sure I’ll see you around.”



Allison shows me a photo of her mom in the nineties, and it’s like I’m looking at a time capsule. I knew she looked familiar! But I thought it was a case of Deja vu.

“Why didn’t your mom say anything at Thanksgiving?” I ask.

Allison shrugged. “My mom’s shy about her art stuff, and Lyndsey sent everyone like ten text messages warning us not to ‘be weird. So, I bet she just kept it to herself.”

“I wish she’d told me! I feel like an asshole!” I say.

Allison laughs, “It’s okay. But tell me about your brother. Is he alive?” Her voice is small. My heart breaks a bit as I pull up his contact on my phone.

“Very much so. He owns a T-shirt shop in Bristol. This is his number. You can go ahead and call him if you want, or I can give him a heads up, whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“I’ll call him,” Allison types the number into her phone, and I study her face.

When I think about it, she does have the classic Exter nose, with a bump along the bridge and everything. I can’t believe I have a niece. This rules! My brother had no other children that I know of, and I’m not exactly a family man.

“Can I hug you?” I ask suddenly.

Allison leans across the table and hugs me.

“Welcome to the family, I guess? Lyndsey’s going to lose her mind.”

Allison pulls away, and her face pales, “Oh, shit! Lyndsey! I left her in the parking lot in case you were a serial killer, and I needed to make a break for it.”

I pause, “Wait, I was your errand? Why didn’t Lyndsey tell me?”

The door swings open, and Lyndsey walks in, fuming, “Allison! It’s been half an hour! Did you get my text? I thought you were getting zip-tied and shoved in a trunk somewhere! Do you have any idea how worried I was?”

Then she sees me and pauses, “Vince? What are you doing?”

Her eyes flit between us, and her face pales, “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Are you? Fuck. I can’t do this. I’m out.” She turns on her heel to leave, and I grab her wrist, “Lyndsey, it’s not what you think.”

Lyndsey freezes mid-step, “You’re not her Dad?”

“No, but he is my uncle! Does that make you my aunt?” Allison quips.

Lyndsey grabs a chair and pulls it up to the table, “Wait, so your brother with the print shop ...”

“Had a one-night stand with Abbie approximately twenty-seven years ago, resulting in your best friend? Yes.” I finish.

Lyndsey sighs and buries her face in her hands, “Fuck. That’s wild! What the fuck? How are both of you feeling? Does anyone want a coffee? I need a coffee.”

“I’ll take a drip,” Allison says.

“Same here!”

Lyndsey walks away, and I turn back to Allison, “I’d go for something harder after news like this, but us Exters have addictive personalities. Oh, and be careful with psychedelics. We have bad trips. I dropped acid once, and it was great, but I thought I was a pelican for four hours.”

“Got it. What about your parents?” Allison asks.

“Oh, they’re great! 90 and 91, healthy as horses.”

“Really?”

“Yeah!”

“I ... I don't have any grandparents, at least I thought I didn't. My mom's parents died when I was three and five.” Allison explains.

“Well, my mum's going to shit herself when she finally achieves her lifelong dream of being a grandmother. She's, like, made for it. She crochets. If you send her your measurements, she'll make you a sweater.”

“I crochet, too!” Allison exclaims. She looks at me, and I realize that her eyes are shiny with tears.

“She's going to love you. She's not great with technology, but if you want, I'll set up a Skype call with all of us,” I say.

“That would be amazing,” Allison whispers.

I hug her again, partially wondering how I'm going to break the news to Michael that he's someone's dad — and that someone happens to be my girlfriend's best friend.

Fuck, Christmas is going to rule! Maybe we can all go to Bristol and have a proper English Christmas. I haven't been home for Christmas in years.

Lyndsey returns with our coffees, and I'm relieved she's smiling. She settles into the seat beside me, and we spend the rest of the afternoon with Allison. Lyndsey follows me to my house in the car. And we make dinner together, but there's this sort of morose air in the house that we can't seem to shake.

We take Violet for a walk, and when I reach for her hand, Lyndsey steps to the side, acting like she is avoiding a crack in the sidewalk. I ask if she wants to read at night, and she nods. We settle into opposite chairs in the library. She's ten pages into her book when she sets it down and says the worst sentence in the English language:

“Vince, we need to talk.”

My stomach plummets. I take a deep breath and cross the room until I'm sitting beside her.

“What’s up?” I ask, offering her a smile. My face falls when I see tears streaming down her face. I start to panic.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. “Are you okay? Are you pregnant? Do you have cancer? Is this some sort of *A Walk to Remember* situation?”

Lyndsey shakes her head and sniffles. “No.” She says, her voice cracks, “I think we need to break up.”

Time stops. The room shrinks. My palms start to sweat as my heart pounds in my chest, battering against my ribs, desperate to escape. I can feel the pressure building behind my eyelids. My mouth is dry. I swallow nothing.

“Why?” I croak out.

“What’s wrong? Is it me? Who am I kidding? It’s probably me. I—“Now I’m crying, “I’ll do anything for you.” I say. I contemplate begging on my knees, and I’ve never been a man who’s had to beg.

“It, it’s complicated. Vince, ever since Thanksgiving, I’ve had this feeling I can’t shake. It’s like, I look at our lives from a birds-eye view, and I can’t see how they fit together.”

“What do you mean? We have the same job! We want the same things! At least, I thought so.”

“Vince, we’re in different places in our lives,” Lyndsey says. Tears are streaking down her face. It’s devastating.

“No! We’re in the same place!”

“But today, there was a solid twenty minutes where it occurred to me that you’re old enough to be my father. Granted, you’d be a young dad, but still. We’re in completely different places. I don’t know how much longer you want to tour. I’m just getting started.”

“So, this is about Allison?” I ask.

“No. Don’t pin this on her. It’s not her or you; it’s me. I know that’s the oldest fucking cliché in the book, but it’s true. I need space. I need some time to myself. I’ll keep working on the tour, and I hope we can keep our working relationship

separate from our personal lives.” Lyndsey sniffles, the cool, calm managerial facade returning to her face.

I hate it for a moment. Then I realized that I could never hate her. She has a point, terrible and clear: we’re in completely different stages in our lives. Even though I won’t be fifty until next July, I was starting to think about retirement or at least slowing down.

Touring takes its toll on your body. Lyndsey’s right. She’s just starting, and the last thing I want to do is hold her back.

I try to picture our future. What would Lyndsey do if I was decrepit, and she was barely forty? The truth breaks my heart. In a moment of desperation, I reach for Lyndsey, and she evades my touch.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers, snot dripping down onto her upper lip. I get up and grab her a tissue. She blows her nose with a honk, and it endears me to her. Fuck.

“I- fuck. It’s okay. I mean, it’s nowhere near okay. Fuck, Lyndsey, I love you so much! I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you.”

“I know,” Lyndsey sobs, “That’s how I feel about you. But Vince, I can’t. I just can’t. I’m so sorry.”

“I think I’m gonna stay at my mom’s place until we get back on tour on Friday,” Lyndsey says, trying to steady her breathing.

“Are you sure? It’s a bit of a drive. Are you okay to drive? You can stay in the guest room if you want.

Lyndsey shakes her head, “I’ll be okay. I need to pack. I’ll see you on Monday, I guess.” She sniffles and crosses the room in long strides before closing the door behind her. I want to beg her to stay, but I’m frozen in the spot.

I walk downstairs and pace in the foyer, hoping to catch her on her way out. Lyndsey hauls her suitcase down the stairs. I move to help her, but she waves me away.

“I’m all good.”

“How are you getting to Pasadena?” I ask.

“I’ll take a Lyft.”

“That’s an expensive Lyft.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Do you want to do this?” I ask. I wait for a beat and hope this is some sick joke, that the inches of space between us will stop feeling like barbed wire digging into my torso. Lyndsey looks at me. I lose myself in the stands of gold in her brown eyes, and my heart plummets again when she shakes her head no.

“I know it’s hard now,” Lyndsey says, “But I think it’s for the best.”

CHAPTER 15

LYNDSEY

Two hours outside of Tuscon, AZ

One Week Later

I've never backed out of a contract.

I worked a show with Olli June with unbearable menstrual cramps that turned out to be appendicitis. I was back on the road when my scar was still tender to the touch.

I'd work a dozen shows with my organs in various states of disrepair if it meant Vince wouldn't look like he's about to cry every time he looks at me.

This week has been agonizing. The sadness that lingers between us like a magnetic pull makes it impossible for me to fall asleep. I toss and turn.

The bunk that once was a cozy reprieve now feels like a coffin, a claustrophobic boxing ring between me and my terrible decisions. At night, I hear Vince shifting

uncomfortably in the bunk below me. We don't talk anymore. He doesn't say good morning to me. I was hoping we could still be friends, but it's still too fresh.

The band knows about the break-up because the bus is a minuscule rumor mill, and Vince cried himself to sleep while listening to Elliot Smith every night last week.

I take my crying jags in less public places, like gas station bathrooms with faulty locks. I slam my foot up against the door and sob. I blow my nose with a scratchy brown paper towel and tell Priya I'm fine when she asks me if I need anything. Other than that, I've managed to keep it together.

Shows are a welcome distraction. Instead of waiting for the band backstage, I've taken to sticking to the green room. I respond to emails within minutes. Ironically, I've never been more productive in my entire life. Heartbreak is the ultimate amphetamine. I can't stop moving, or else the hurt will leak out of my pores, and I'll melt into a puddle of sadness.

Henry and Apollo keep leaving trinkets on my bunk, inexplicably girly things that are supposed to make me feel better: a bottle of hot pink nail polish, tabloid magazines, a magnet shaped like a bear that says "I had a BEARY good time in Salt Lake City."

I've been avoiding all phone calls outside of work. I haven't talked to my mom in over a week. When I showed up sobbing at her doorstep with my suitcase in hand, she was nice enough not to ask any questions, but now her patience is wearing thin.

Mom: Lyndsey, seriously. What's going on? Are you okay? I'm getting worried. I talked to Allison, and she said she hasn't heard from you either. This isn't like you.

I silence my phone and place it face-down on my lap. I'm sitting in the booth by the little kitchen table. Vince is fuming on the couch, scrolling through his phone, tapping the screen so hard it might break in two.

We're on our way to Arizona for a show. I watch the desert landscape pass us by.

Suddenly, the bus chugs. Something thunks, then scrapes. A shrill, metallic dragging sound pierces the air. It can't be a good sign. I hop out of the booth and make my way up to the front, where the bus driver is white knuckling the steering wheel.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"Um, I want to say yes, but I genuinely don't know." The bus lurches forward with a jerk.

The driver flicks the hazards on and pulls over just in time for the bus to screech to a halt. When he tries to turn the key in the ignition, nothing happens.

"Fuck."

"Um, okay. Shit."

Priya walks up to me, "Is everything okay?"

"The bus is dead!" The driver yelps. He opens the center console and hands me a tiny business card, "Can you try and call Triple-A?"

"I guess," I say. I dial the number and press the corresponding key for each menu that the automated voice tells me to. When I finally make it to "buses and large vehicles," it puts me on hold. I put my phone on speaker and hopped out of the bus. The driver is peering beneath it.

"I'm trying to see if something caught. I heard scraping. Did you hear scraping?" He asks.

"Yeah."

The rest of the band troops out onto the road. We can't turn the bus on, so there's no air conditioning. The sun is high in the sky. It's barely past noon. Already, I'm starting to sweat.

To entertain themselves, Henry and Apollo strike up a rousing round of the license plate game. Vince sulks with a book in hand, sitting on the ground and leaning against one of the wheels. He says nothing to me.

Priya's the last person to emerge from the bus.

"Jesus, it's hotter than Satan's crack in there!"

“It’s not much better out here,” I tell her. I’ve been on hold for forty-five minutes.

“You’d think they’d have more human workers for emergency services,” Priya grumbles.

“I know.”

I turn to Vince and address him directly for the first time all week, “What are you reading?”

He wordlessly shows me the cover. It’s a meditation book.

Priya sighs, “Vincent, can I ask what you did to Lyndsey?”

Vince places his book on the ground next to him, “What makes you think it was something I did?” He asks.

“Well, you don’t have the best track record.”

“What the fuck do you know about my track record?” Vince hollers.

Priya cringes. I sent her an email about the break-up when it happened, and luckily, she hasn’t asked any questions until now.

“All I’m saying is,”

“What? You know everything about my failures and shortcomings because we fucked around for a few months thirty years ago?” Vince yells.

“No! I’m just saying you can be an asshole sometimes, like right now!”

“Well, so can you!”

“How am I an asshole?”

“You’ve dug your claws into my personal life ever since we broke up! You can’t fucking stop! That’s the thing about you. You push, and push, and push when you really should leave well enough alone.”

“I’m trying to help you! All I’m saying is maybe I could provide some insight!”

“Priya, you’re not a therapist! You didn’t graduate secondary school!” Vince hollers. His face is red in the heat.

“Well, neither did you!”

“At least I know when I’m not wanted,” Vince snaps.

“Real mature, Vincent.”

“Oh, because digging into your ex’s business is what maturity is all about. Stop being so fucking nosy!”

“I’m not being nosy. I’m trying to help! When will you get that through your thick skull?!”

“Never! Because you’re not being fucking helpful!” Vince shrieks. He flings his book into the road in frustration before he can get up and retrieve it; a semi-truck honks and barrels over it.

“You’ve done it now, Priya.”

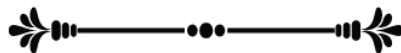
“I struggle to understand how you freaking out and being a fucking baby about this is my fault.”

“I struggle to understand why I put up with you in the first place!” Vince snaps back.

“You think you’re the one putting up with me?! Oh, that is fucking rich! If you didn’t have me, you and Henry would be in a fucking Ramones cover band in Bristol. You would be nothing without me!” Priya’s shrieking now.

“Your ego’s so big you needed a whole fucking band to carry it! But no matter how talented you thought you were, you couldn’t make it as a pop star. So now you’re washed up and bitter, digging your claws into places they don’t belong, you fucking harpy!” Vince howls.

“Fuck you,” Priya hisses. She turns on her heel and stomps away toward the desert. I don’t have time to tell her to wait because the AAA agent finally picks up.



Two hours later, the bus is on its’ way to a repair shop, and the band and I are in an Uber on our way to the hotel.

The tension between Vince and Priya is still palpable. I’m stressed because the bus will be in the shop for at least two

weeks, so I need to book our flights and hotels to all the places we were planning on driving.

The Uber pulls up to our hotel, and we exit in an exhausted heap.

I check us in and hand everyone keycards, ignoring the spark that still fizzles inside of me when Vince's hand accidentally brushes against my palm.

Henry and Apollo yawn; it's only four, but we need to be at the venue by five. It's going to be a long night. Everyone shoves their suitcases into their rooms. Then we booked it to the venue.

Vince sits beside me. I can feel his thigh pressed up against mine. I don't know why, but I want to tell him I'm sorry.

However, right now, he's too busy shooting death glares at Priya to notice.

When we walk into the green room, Priya slams her makeup bag down onto the counter. In turn, Vince shoves his backpack into an empty chair. They're petulant and pouting like children while I'm stuck on the phone with Delta explaining that they better not lose \$10,000 worth of equipment when we fly to New Mexico on Wednesday.

"I assure you, ma'am, your luggage will be regarded with the utmost importance," the customer service representative drones.

"It's not luggage. It's equipment."

"And what is your profession exactly?"

"I work with a band."

"Are you a teacher? Is it a marching band?"

"No," I snap, my frustration mounting.

"Give me back my eyeliner, asshole," Priya hisses.

"No, let me see it!"

"Why? So, you can keep up your emo act?"

“No, I was looking to switch things up a bit,” Vince mumbles.

I gesture to Vince and Priya that I’m on the phone, hoping they’ll take the hint. Vince pauses, and Priya takes the opportunity to wrench the eyeliner pencil out of his hand.

I finished on the phone, and Vince and Priya are still going at it. The next three hours are an agonizing montage of complete chaos as we all discover what we left behind on the bus.

That night, Henry winds up onstage wearing swim trunks and a T-shirt because he forgot to grab pants. Apollo’s wearing his last clean pair of jeans and a red polo, and Priya looks amazing, though she looks like she’s plotting Vince’s murder. Vince is morose in his leather pants, hunched forward as he plugs his bass into the amp.

The lights dim, and the crowd goes wild, but tonight, it doesn’t feel magical. It feels like a never-ending series of problems that I’m left alone to solve because the people I thought would support me are too busy fighting.

Briefly, I’m furious at Priya. I know Vince loves to sulk, but Priya’s been the picture of composure and poise this entire tour. That pop star comment must have hurt her.

Then, I’m pissed at Vince. He can’t just go around lashing out at everyone around him because he’s miserable. I don’t get the luxury of complaining or sulking. If I stop doing my job, the tour stops.

Priya and Vince channel their grievances into an electric set. The tension between them only ups the theatrics of Priya’s performance. She’s determined to prove him wrong, so she doesn’t miss a note. During the assortment of break-up songs about absentee lovers, Priya stares Vince down the entire time, silently asking him what he did wrong.

CHAPTER 16

VINCE

New Orleans, LA

New Orleans is one of my favorite cities in America, and I can't enjoy it.

The beignet Henry brings me the morning after we get there tastes like sawdust. The sun's too bright, and I'm sweating through my clothes.

They had to order an extra part for the bus, so we're still stuck flying everywhere, and if one more security agent pats down my hair, I will snap their neck.

I would say I'm angry, but anger requires effort and passion.

I'm numb.

I feel like I'm watching a movie about my life from above, yelling at the screen and asking the main guy why he's being such a dick to everyone. But I can't stop being a dick.

I snap at everyone. My short fuse is now non-existent, probably because I haven't slept a wink in the past three weeks.

The minute I close my eyes, I dream of Lyndsey, but we're always separate. We're in separate lines at the airport. We're running on two separate trails, and I can hear the sound of her footfalls, but I can't find her, no matter how hard I search.

But when I wake up, it's more depressing because Lyndsey's there, and she's *fine*. She's annoyingly calm about everything. I haven't heard her cry once. Her strategy is to pretend I never existed. If only it were that easy, there's no going back to my life before Lyndsey Vynse.

I pass her in line at the buffet for breakfast at the hotel, accidentally elbowing her as I reach for the granola.

"Sorry," I mumble.

"It's fine," she replies, filling her plate with fruit.

The band sits together at a long wooden table. Lyndsey picks at a stale croissant. I can't help myself. My eyes focus on her lips.

We eat, and an uncomfortable silence descends upon the table, only punctuated by fans who can't read the room and ask for pictures.

I smile with closed lips, but part of it feels good to have women still fawning over me when I feel like garbage. One woman slips her number into the pocket of my shirt. I find it later when riding the elevator back up to my room.

There's a knock on the door; I open it and wonder if I'm dreaming when Lyndsey's standing before me.

"Wanna do laundry?" she asks. It's a peace offering.

"Um, sure thing," I mumble. I stumble into my room in a daze and grab my suitcase full of dirty clothes.

We call a car to the laundromat. The car ride is painfully awkward, worse than when Lyndsey and I met. At this point, I'd almost prefer if she was a stranger. But then again, would I?

Lyndsey and I pick washers on opposite sides of the laundromat. I load my dirty clothes into one and throw my

shirt in for good measure. I'm still wearing a tank top underneath, and when in Rome.

Lyndsey and I orbit each other in silence, like ghosts. She tosses her wet clothes into the dryer above my washer.

"Hey, Lynds?" I ask. The pet name slips out, and Lyndsey blushes.

"I mean, uh, Lyndsey. Could you do me a huge favor and throw my clothes in the drier, too?"

CHAPTER 17

LYNDSEY

A Laundromat in New Orleans, LA

I reach in the washer to throw Vince's wet clothes into the drier next to mine when a tiny scrap of paper falls out of one of his shirts.

I peer closer, guessing it's a receipt, but I recognize it as a phone number. Anger surges through me like wildfire. My heart crawls up my throat. My stomach clenches. I can feel tears building behind my eyes.

What an asshole!

It looked like Vince was having a tough time with our break-up, but I guess not. With each item that goes in, I slam them down with force, relishing in the satisfying thud I load his clothes into the drier and "forget" to press start. It's an honest mistake.

Eventually, Vince notices, but by the time he starts the load, our Uber to take us to the venue is arriving. He shoves his damp clothes into a suitcase and follows me out the door.

“The fucking drier didn’t work. Was your stuff okay?” he asks.

I shrug, “Oh, how weird. Yeah, my stuff was fine.”

Later that night, in the green room, Vince squelches whenever he moves.

“Vince, you’re pruning up, man. Your feet look shriveled.”

“It’s my pants,” he huffs, “The drier fucked up.”

“Damn,” Apollo says, “It sucks to be you.”

“Thank you, captain, fucking obvious,” Vince grumbles. I can’t help but feel a little vindicated.

My phone buzzes with a text from Allison, and I contemplate ignoring it. We’re in a bit of a fight right now. I thought Allison would be on my side during the break-up; Vince is her uncle, after all. Instead, she’s stupidly optimistic about the whole thing. She gave me her “blessing” and said that no one ever hangs out with their uncles anyway.

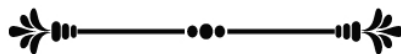
I hoped she would’ve seen my logic, that Vince and Allison were now simply too close, and that this only proves that Vince and I are in different stages of our lives. But no, she had to go ahead and be insanely well-adjusted and “believe in love,” and now I look like an asshole.

I checked the text.

Allison: I think you should at least talk to Vince. You work together. It’s not healthy to avoid him like this.

I groan and shove a handful of complimentary trail mix into my mouth. Allison’s right, but confronting Vince would be unbelievably painful.

When Vince’s pants dry, the leather constricts. He walks stiffly onstage and tries his best only to move his torso. He’s moving like Gumby, and it’s a bit funny, but I still feel like shit.



Las Vegas, NV.

One week later.

Our final show of the tour is in Las Vegas. The band's been doing this for decades.

However, their jaws still drop when they walk into the opulent hotel, taking in the kaleidoscope of colors and sounds provided by the chic chandeliers illuminating the slot machines below.

"Vegas, Baby!" Priya hoots.

Henry and Apollo high-five

I try to lose myself in the magic of Vegas. Instead, I lose \$20 on a slot machine shaped like a cowboy boot and eat some lukewarm fried shrimp at a buffet.

Vince still won't look me in the eye. Instead, he buddies up with Henry, and they play poker for hours.

I checked my phone and saw that someone had left a voicemail. I slip away to listen. It's the repair shop. The bus will finally be ready next week, a week after tour ends.

"Great," I mumble. I lean back against the rococo-patterned wall and sink onto the floor, shoving my head in my hands. I think back to how excited I was when I first got this job.

The Lyndsey from five months ago would be laughing in my face right now. She'd tell me that she was right; tour-mances never end well.

I don't know why I thought Vince and I were different, that we could make it work, when I've seen dozens of my friends in the industry fall prey to the same heartbreaks.

"Not a poker fan?" Priya asks when she spies me hiding in the hall.

“Nah, gambling’s not my thing.”

“Mine, either. But you look glum. What’s wrong?”

“I can’t stop thinking about Vince,” I admit. I wait for a beat and wait for Priya to ask me why I can’t make it work, like how my mom and Allison have been pestering me.

Instead, she sits beside me on the floor and pulls me into a hug, letting me rest my head on her shoulder. Her silk blouse is soft against my cheek.

“The two of you did a number on each other.”

“Yeah,” I mumble.

“But I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I think it shows how much you care about each other. And I know for a fact that Vince still cares about you.”

“Does he, though?”

“He’s not the most articulate guy, but he doesn’t look at just anyone the way he looks at you. I’d be a massive hypocrite if I told you to give him another chance. If Vince isn’t your cup of tea, welcome to the club. So, I’ll leave it at this: You never know what can happen with someone until you give them a chance.”

“Thanks, Priya.”

“Anytime, love. Now, let’s get ready to rock.”



I’m printing out the final tour setlist when someone knocks on the greenroom door. Apollo and the guys are already backstage, so it’s just Priya and me.

“I’ll get it!” Priya says abruptly, though she’s in the middle of putting on her earrings for tonight.

Priya hops up and opens the door. Only then do I hear a familiar voice.

“Hey, Lynds.”

I turn around and practically tackle Allison onto the ground. She squeals.

“What the hell are you doing here?!” I ask.

“I figured you could use a friend,” Priya says.

I look back at Allison for an explanation, “I gave Priya my number at Thanksgiving. I told her to text me once she had the dates for your December shows, and I’d never been to Vegas and... I just missed you. You were doing that wounded animal thing when you’re hurt where you try and run into the woods so no one can find you and see how bad you’re hurting. I knew you wouldn’t talk to me about it unless I were right in front of your face.”

I hug Allison again, “I’m so sorry I’ve been such a flake. It’s been hell,” I mumble.

“Well, have you tried to talk to Vince about it?”

“No!” I groan.

“Oh, Lynds. You’ve gotta learn how to communicate,” Allison exclaims.

“That’s what I said,” Priya echoed.

“He won’t talk to me! He just sulks and looks depressed!”

“Then, be brave! Talk to him!” Allison begs.

I sigh, “I dunno, guys.”

Suddenly, there’s another knock on the door. Allison runs to the door and flings it open to reveal a tall man with a long, silver shag and familiar green eyes.

He’s taller than Vince. He has a bit more of a dad bod. A belly pokes out of his faded black T-shirt. But they have the same eyes. It’s uncanny. When Allison grins, and he mirrors the smile down to the gap in their front teeth, I put two and two together. This is Michael, Vince’s brother, and Al’s Dad.

“Prodigal daughter, as I live and breathe!” His accent is thicker than Vince’s. To my surprise, Allison hugs him like she’s known him for years.

“Did you find the place, okay?” She asks.

“Well, the lady at Will Call gave me shit directions.”

“Michael, I told you to text me!” Priya exclaims.

Now I’m genuinely confused. I turn to Priya, “You knew about this?”

“Priya paid for my flight to Pasadena last week. It’s been a strange time. Vince called me to let me know I had a kid,” he glances at Allison, “I mean, y’know. And then, strangest thing, he disappears off the face of the planet. So, I texted Allison.”

“And then, I told my mom and asked her if she would be open to Michael visiting, and she said yes. So he flew out to Pasadena last week, and he spent the week with my mom, and he got to see my job and everything!” Allison gushes.

A wave of guilt washes over me. I promised Allison I would be there for her throughout her journey of finding her family, and I was too wrapped up in my bullshit to check in and see if she’d talked to Michael.

“When?”

“Last Thursday! I tried to call you, but you said you were busy with bus repairs.” The phone call flashes back to me. I’d been short with Al, because I had spent two hours on hold with the repair place, and Delta lost Henry’s drum set. He’s been playing on a loaner all week.

“Fuck. Allison, I am so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I know you’ve been going through a lot.”

“It’s not okay, though. I need to make a better effort to be a better friend.”

“Well, it’s not like you won’t have any more chances. You’re still my best friend.”

“Really?”

“Obviously. Lyndsey, I’ve known you since we were five. Do you think I’m going to let one bad week decimate twenty-plus years of friendship? No way.”

I gave Allison a bear hug, and Michael laughed.

“You know, Lyndsey, I’ve heard so much about you from everyone. It feels like I’m meeting a celebrity. Al and Priya

haven't stopped gushing about you all week. Although, I hear my brother did a number on you, and I'd like to apologize on his behalf."

I wave my hand away, "It's okay. I actually ... uh, broke up with him," I admit.

"Fuck, you're smart and sensible? I almost wish you could be my sister-in-law!" Michael jokes.

"It's great to meet you," I say.

"You as well. I give you props for putting up with Vince's neuroses on a personal and professional level. Working merch for him was almost as bad as growing up with him."

Vince bursts through the door as if he's been summoned, "Lyndsey, have you seen my guitar picks? I—"he stops and takes in the scene before him, his brother, niece, and ex-girlfriend gathered together in a huddle.

"What is this?" He immediately turns to Priya, "Did you orchestrate this little father-daughter reunion? Are you trying to be Oprah or some shit? Priya, you can't be a talk show host! Remember what that cable network said back in 2004? You lack the journalistic chops!"

"Well, I wanted to meet my kid, and you weren't being any help, you sly bastard! Come here!" Michael crosses the room, picks Vince up, and spins him around.

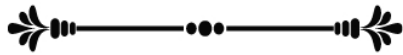
"What the fuck? Put me down! You're going to give me vertigo five minutes before I go onstage, you shithead!" Micheal places him on the ground and immediately locks him in a headlock.

"Don't touch the hair!" Vince yells as Michael ignores him.

I walk over to Vince's bag and look into the front pocket, where, sure enough, his spare guitar picks remain. I grab a handful and give it to him.

"Thanks, Lynds," he mumbles, caught off-guard by the sudden influx of family members and vertigo.

I can't help it. My heart still clenches when he says my name. I want to talk to him, but I don't know what to say.



Allison and I watched the band's final show from the side stage.

Michael's in the front row. He wanted to be by the barricade. After the first three songs, Vince steps up to the microphone. This is unexpected. He doesn't usually do the talking during sets.

"So, um. Tonight's a special one," Vince begins, "It's our last show of the tour!" The crowd whoops and Vince waits for them to quiet down.

"My brother's here, along with my friend Allison, who is coincidentally my niece. Genetics are fucking wild. Um. I dunno what else I wanted to say. I guess, well, a lot of people I love very dearly are here tonight, and they love me though I'm an asshole sometimes, so I wanted to say thanks. Thank you to Priya, our inimitable frontwoman." Vince pauses for the thunderous applause.

"Thank you to Apollo and Henry for always having my back since I was seventeen. And thank you to our tour manager, Lyndsey. Um, you all might have seen her running around the venue. She's incredible. She's the smartest person I've ever met, which doesn't sound like much coming from me, but you have to trust me. This is her first tour with us, and it's been amazing. I can't wait to see what she does next. I realize that as a musician, one of the accidental perks of my job is that I get to be around people who are incredible at what they do, and Lyndsey is no exception. I love her a lot, y'know? I'm not much of a public declaration guy, but Priya's on a therapy kick right now, and she told me it's better to get it out in the open. So there you go, Lynds. I love you. This one's for you."

My heart doesn't know whether it should crawl out of my throat or fall out of my butt. I'm in shock. Does Vince still love me after a month of bitter glances and awkward silence? He got pulled into my black hole of depression and thought, "This is cool?!"

Vince grins and winks at Priya, and they launch into a brand-new song with Vince on lead vocals, with lines about

loving someone enough to watch them go. It's obviously about me, and it's working. I can't fucking help myself.

The past month, I've been going over my and Vince's relationship in my head over and over.

What if we make each other better? What if we push each other to grow?

All of my previous boyfriends hated it when I toured, but Vince wanted to be on the road with me. I think about what he said that night at his house, about how we want the same things.

I watch him onstage, commanding the crowd with the flick of his wrist like he's a magician, and I hope he meant what he said.

After the show, I help Priya out of her Gogo boots one last time before handing Apollo the towel that's tossed over my shoulder.

"Great show, everyone," I say.

Michaels joined us backstage, "You've improved," he says dubiously.

"Thanks, Pitchfork," Vince mumbles. He searches aimlessly for his Nicorette, and I hand him the pack on the table.

"That song was.... amazing. When did you write it?" I ask, trying to be casual.

"Last week. I've been writing a lot."

"Oh, that's good."

"Yeah, it's therapeutic. Sorry if that was embarrassing for you or—" Vince trails off.

I shake my head, "No. No, it wasn't. I, I liked it." I stare into Vince's eyes and long to close the space between us, but my feet remain planted on the ground.

While Vince and I engage in a sexually charged staring contest, the rest of the band gathers their things for the night.

“Shit, Vince, and Lyndsey can y’all double-check and see if we left the key cards in the greenroom? They’re clear. They must’ve slipped out of my bag. I thought I had them,” Priya says as she digs through her bag.

“Oh, sure. I guess it’s a good idea to have a second pair of eyes,” I say. Vince follows me to the green room, and we stand there awkwardly.

“Um, I’ll look on the couch if you take the floor?” I ask.

“Sure thing,” Vince says.

Suddenly, the door closed behind us. Vince tries the handle, “What the fuck? It’s locked!”

“And it will remain locked until you idiots talk it out and figure out that you love each other!” Priya yells.

“What?” I shriek.

“You heard me!”

“We could try to break—”

“And don’t try to break it! I’m sitting on the other side!”

“Fuckin’ Priya,” Vince mumbles.

He stares at me, his eyes full of longing. “I meant what I said onstage.” He starts. “I still love you. I don’t think I ever stopped.”

“Okay, you say that, but I found a phone number in your shirt like last week.” I snap.

“That was a mistake.”

“That’s what they all say!”

“No, seriously! A fan slipped it in there while we were posing for a photo. I didn’t do anything with it. Lyndsey, I fucking love you. I adore you. I love you so much it hurts. It’s like fucking growing pains. It’s like,”

“Your heart’s trying to crawl out of your chest because you love someone so much, but you can’t open your fucking mouth to say it?” I supply.

“Exactly. How’d you know?”

“I think we’re more alike than we realize, both good and bad. I, Vince, fuck. I love you so much,” I admit. Already, I’m crying.

“I can’t fucking help it. For the past month, all I’ve been trying to do is keep my shit together and not think about you, but I don’t want to! Vince, I don’t like picturing my life without you in it! I want you in it. You make my life so much better. I’d rather be with you and have a bunch of insane fights and earth-shattering makeup sex than turn into a tour monk! I told myself I didn’t want to fall in love on the road, but I did that because I was scared. Loving people is fucking scary!”

“Because you might get hurt?” Vince asks.

“Yeah. Also, I realized I don’t give a single shit about what people think of us. People on the internet can be more than a little unhinged, but I’m not going to let a bunch of overzealous strangers stop me from living my life. Also, if you were going through a mid-life crisis, I’m pretty sure you’d go to a monastery or something.”

“See, I had my mid-life crisis like five years ago. I went to Tibet for a month, and I shaved my head.”

“Exactly.”

“And, I don’t know. I love you. I want to keep loving you. I want us to be on the road and be a zillion years old.”

“You can haul my oxygen tank onstage.”

“That’s a safety hazard on so many levels.”

“I love you so fucking much, Lyndsey Eliza Vynse.”

Vince crosses the room and grabs my waist, pulling me into his embrace, protectively. He kisses me with the passion of a thousand screaming fans in a thousand stadiums. His taste is intoxicating and familiar, and I feel myself melting into him.

Pleasure fizzles up through my body like a power cord, striking deep and reverberating throughout my bones. I slip my tongue into his mouth, and he sighs with pleasure. I grab a handful of his hair and yank. I suck on his bottom lip. His

hand roams my body hungrily, tracing my curves and cupping my ass. I need him now.

He reaches his hand beneath my tank top and cups one of my breasts. My knees buckle as he thumbs my nipple. I tilt my pelvis toward him and feel his growing hard-on. He reaches down for the zipper of my jeans.

A loud thunk jerks us out of our reverie.

“Lyndsey? Vince? Are you alright?” Priya asks.

To my horror, the door clicks open while Vince’s tongue is still in my mouth. We jerk apart, blushing. My jeans are unzipped. Priya observes the scene with a satisfied smile, knowing that her plan worked.

“I told you to talk it out, but this works, too!” She quips.

“Priya!” Vince hollers.

Priya laughs, “All that I ask is that I get an invite to the wedding. I am legally able to officiate weddings in the state of California, y’know.”

“We’ll keep that in mind!” I squeak, mortified, as I zip my jeans back up.

“But, for real, we were thinking of grabbing dinner somewhere to celebrate the last show. Are you love birds coming?” Priya asks.

“Sure thing,” Vince says. He grabs my hand, and we walk out together.

CHAPTER 18

VINCE

Laurel Canyon, CA

One week later

Usually, when I get home from a tour, I sleep for a week.

Lyndsey and I don't leave my bedroom for a week. We order pizza and eat it in bed. We watch movies. We fuck all hours of the day. We use every excuse to touch each other, brushing hands when walking Violet and cooking.

She puts her feet in my lap as I sit on the floor and write. I'm writing up a storm, completing two songs in one week, which would usually take me two months.

Today, Lyndsey's scrolling through her phone, looking at apartments. I told her to move her stuff in here, but she says it's too soon. Instead, we compromise, and Lyndsey's looking for a one-bedroom in Laurel Canyon.

“I love you. It’s just I’ve never been able to afford to live by myself, you know?” Lyndsey says.

She passes me her phone to show me a listing. It’s a spacious one-bedroom, only a ten-minute drive from my place. There’s a balcony.

“That looks great. I’ll go with you to a showing if you want; vet the place for you,” I suggest.

“That’d be great. Thanks, babe.”

She kisses me, slipping her tongue into my mouth. I press her back against the kitchen counter, and her elbow hits the miniature decorative Christmas tree she put out the other day.

I found a bunch of Christmas decorations in the attic when I first moved here, but I don’t usually decorate. It seemed pointless when it was just me and Violet, but to my surprise, Lyndsey loves Christmas.

“I told you that’d get in the way,” I mumble against her lips as the tree clatters.

“And I told you to stop being such a fucking Scrooge! Also, I got my flight to Bristol, and so did Al. We’re flying out together. I talked to my mom and Abbie; they’re down to do an early Christmas with just them on the twentieth, so we can get to Bristol on the 23rd.”

“Brilliant. I told my Mum I’d fly out on the nineteenth if that’s okay. She needs some help with the house, and my dad’s getting old. I don’t want him climbing on a ladder and shattering a hip. The last thing we need is to spend Christmas in a fucking hospital.”

“That’s so sweet of you.”

I shrug, “I haven’t been home in years. I kind of owe her one.”

“I bet she appreciates it. I’ll watch Violet until I fly out, so you don’t have to board her for the whole week.”

“Lynds, you’re an angel.”

“It’s nothing. Besides, it’s the perfect excuse to escape my family if they get to be too much. I’ll give you one guess about who doesn’t believe in Christmas cookies,” Lyndsey says with an eyeroll.

“So, that’s still going on?”

“Oh, Vince, they’re engaged.”

“What?”

“He proposed in spin class.”

“I can’t decide if that’s cute or terrifying.”

“All I’m saying is, if you propose to me onstage, I will say no.”

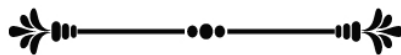
“What makes you think I want to propose?” I tease, although flying out to my Mum’s place early is a bit of a double mission.

I plan on asking her if she still has her grandmother’s engagement ring. It wouldn’t be for a while, but I don’t know how much time my Mum has left, and she’s always joked that she wants to live long enough to see me finally stop fucking around and settle down.

Lyndsey rolls her eyes and kisses my temple, “I gotta go, but I’ll see you tonight, okay?” We’re not touring until Spring, so Lyndsey’s interviewing for an interim gig as a booking agent for a new club that just opened up in the Canyon.

“Good luck with your interview,” I say, giving her a good luck kiss.

“Thanks, babe,” she calls over her shoulder as she slips her shoes on.



I spend the rest of the afternoon writing and taking Violet for a long walk. I work best when I give myself breaks to wander and move.

By the time we loop back to my house, there’s a fully formed chorus in my brain. I unclip Violet’s leash and run up to my room, where my guitar and my notebook lay against the

bed, and I quickly jot down the words before fucking around with the chords for the better part of an hour.

A few hours later, Lyndsey unlocks the front door while I'm in the kitchen, cracking open my third sparkling water of the day.

"Vince?" She calls. She walks into the kitchen and plops a white paper bag onto the counter.

"I got us sushi," she says, kissing my cheek.

"Oh, that was nice of you! I'm starving."

"Yeah, I thought we could celebrate since I got the job." Lyndsey tries to be nonchalant, but a smile breaks across her face. I pick her up and spin her around, capturing her lips in a passionate kiss.

"Of course you fucking did! Who are you going to book?"

"I dunno yet. They gave the links to a couple of bands they're deciding on for their New Year's Eve show. We can listen tonight if you want. I'd love your feedback."

"I'd love that!" I say as I open the bag, pulling out two containers of spicy tuna rolls and some miso soup.

Lyndsey grabs bowls from the kitchen cabinets and evenly distributes the soup into each one.

After we eat, Lyndsey shows me the club's website on her laptop and gushes about her new office space.

"Can I get you a succulent for your office?" I ask.

"Sure. I'd also like a framed photo of Violet and a tasteful nude Polaroid of you," she jokes.

"I can get you the Violet photo, but my Polaroid stopped working in 1995. Our tour bus ran it over."

Lyndsey shoves my shoulder, "I'm just kidding. Although, shit! I have to show you something. It's in the library." Lyndsey grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet.

She enters the library as if she's been going there for years. But now, it's my turn to look shocked. There's a fire going in

the fireplace, the mantle of which has been decorated with all of the creepy vintage elves that once resided in the attic.

“When did you do all of this?” I ask.

“When I told you I had to answer emails,” Lyndsey explains. My foot brushes something soft. I realize we’re standing on a Bearskin rug.

“Where the fuck did you find this?” I ask.

“In the attic with the rest of the decorations. Don’t worry. I had it cleaned.” Lyndsey says. She captures my lips and loops her arms around my neck, “I was thinking we could have a little fun,” she whispers, her breath hot against my cheek.

“I like the way you think,” I reply.

Lyndsey steps back and pulls me onto the ground with her. I carefully unbutton the first button of her blouse, and her breasts spill out. She’s wearing a red lacy bra that’s tantalizing.

“Are you trying to drive me insane?” I tease, grabbing her nipple between my teeth through the lace.

Lyndsey’s breath hitches as I kiss her chest, ripping open her blouse. The buttons bounce onto the floor, and Lyndsey laughs, hitching her hips up to peel off her jeans.

“You’re buying me a new one,” she teases before capturing my lips.

I toss her blouse off and reach behind to unhook her bra, which I’m a bit more careful with. She reaches down and unzips my fly, toying with my hard-on.

“Vince,” she pants.

I get harder when she says my name.

“Yes?” I ask, kissing her neck.

“I want you,” she says, wrapping her legs around my waist. I want to tease her first. I scoot down, razing my teeth against her inner thighs as she kicks off her underwear.

“I want to taste you,” I say, letting her rest her heels on my shoulder. I glance at the hair tufting her glistening entrance,

which I open with my tongue. I take a bold lick, then another. Lyndsey's hips buck.

"Fuck!" She exclaims.

I take that as a good sign and lick and suck a bit harder, tracing the curve of her clit with my tongue. Her clit was swollen with desire. I take the bud in my mouth and suck, relishing in her heat. I feel Lyndsey's muscles tighten as her thighs clench around me.

I'm in love.

Fuck it. I lick harder, bringing Lyndsey to the height of ecstasy. She whimpers and moans before coming with a gush. It's amazing.

My mouth is still glistening with her when she grabs my hair and kisses me, reaching down with one hand to guide my cock inside her. She takes me with a grunt, and I don't know how long I'll be able to last. Lyndsey's hips buck and I match her rhythm, grinding down into her as I come with a grunt. Finally, we collapse against each other. The fur of the rug tickles our backs, and I start to laugh.

"What?" Lyndsey asks, snuggling against my chest.

"You think I would've found this fucking rug," I say.

"Well, it's not like you're ever in the attic."

"But it's a bit cliché, right?"

"Oh, like the utterly groundbreaking mirror on your bedroom ceiling?"

"You got me there." I kiss her forehead.

"You get me," I add.

"Hey, it goes both ways. You get me, too." Lyndsey says.

EPILOGUE

LYNDSEY

Fall

One Year Later

“Hey, Lynds?” Vince calls from the attic.

I could see his legs sticking out from the entrance as he teetered around on the ladder, looking for his box of trusted Halloween decorations.

It’s early October in California, and though we don’t have changing seasons, that doesn’t stop Vince from buying every plastic pumpkin he sees at the drugstore.

He’s turned the front yard of his house into a graveyard with Styrofoam tombstones inscribed with terrible puns and plastic zombie arms sticking out of the lawn.

He bought pounds of fake cobwebs and strung them across the entrance, pressed decals that look like bloody handprints in the windows and propped a life-size Frankenstein in the foyer

that gives me a heart attack every time I walk into the room at night.

Now, for some reason, a dozen fake bloody limbs aren't enough, and he insists on grabbing another box, though we're both on a schedule.

The Imposters are in the throes of recording their eighth studio album, and I'm still booking shows for The Gateway Club. To my delight, the club's grown exponentially since I started working there in January, and we're starting to attract bigger-name bands.

But that's all about to change since The Imposters are about to start touring again, I'm letting my assistant take over booking for the month. I sweetened the deal by securing an "exclusive acoustic set" with The Imposters next Wednesday, the night before we leave for tour.

While my boss knows that Vince and I are together, she's still impressed that we managed to book them, with Vince slowly becoming a fixture himself at the club. He likes to watch the shows and says it's refreshing to be another face in the crowd instead of the person onstage.

On nights when I'm sprinting around trying to check mics and contracts, he'll slip into the greenroom and kiss my forehead, wrenching whatever pile of paper I'm white knuckling out of my hands.

Even with his anxieties, he keeps me feeling grounded and steady. I never knew that love could be like that; and though I grit my teeth every time a rogue paparazzi snaps a photo of me leaving the club and labels it "Vince Exter's girlfriend," I'm proud to be with him.

I hear the sound of cardboard scooting across the wooden floor. Vince huffs as he grabs the box. I walk over to the ladder and hold out my arms, grabbing the box and setting it on the ground.

"Thanks, love," Vince says as he dismounts from the ladder and wraps his arms around my waist.

He starts to kiss my neck as I start to dig through the box of zombie limbs.

“What was so important in here anyway? You’ve got twenty minutes to get to the studio, and I need to be at work in an hour.

“I uh, just really needed that box.”

“Enough that you’re gonna be late to record? You know you won’t get there in twenty with traffic.”

I pull out a handful of dusty fake cobwebs and wipe my hands on my jeans.

“Well, you never know,” Vince quips.

“The way you were talking about it made me think you were hiding a family heirloom or literal body parts. Is there something you want to tell me?” I joke.

Suddenly, something catches my attention out of the corner of my eye. A small, intricate silver band that looks like ivy twining together, sitting on the ring finger of a plastic skeleton.

I pull the arm out and look closer, realizing it’s a ring. My heart drops, and when I turn around Vince is down on one knee.

“I know it’s cheesy,” he starts.

He’s blushing. “I, uh. Fuck. I had a whole speech but then I got sidetracked because I lost the box with the ring and it was really hot in the attic.” Vince rambles.

He runs his fingers through his hair, his nervous tell. He clears his throat and fixes his green eyes on mine.

I smirk, “Vincent, are you asking me to marry you?”

“Well fuck! You’re stealing my thunder. But Lyndsey, my life is better with you in it. And I want people to know that, and if this is the way that legally we can get the state of California—” he’s rambling and trying to justify his actions.

I kneel on the ground across from him and take his face in my hands, running my finger along his jaw. I kiss him, so hard that he leans back a bit. His tongue finds its way into my

mouth and one of his hands squeezes my breast while the other grabs my neck. He sucks on my top lip and I moan. When we finally pull apart, I'm flushed and grinning.

"Vince," I say, "Of course, I'll marry you." I kiss him again to prove it.

Vince exhales a sigh of relief, "Really? Listen, I know it's old-fashioned but,"

I put my hand out to stop him, "You don't need to explain it! I want to marry you! We're about to have the coolest wedding of all time. And this is so sweet. Where did you get the ring?" I ask.

I slowly slide it off the skeleton's finger and examine it when it's in my palm. It's white gold, and the gold is twisted together to look like vines and roses the size of a toothpick, it's breathtakingly intricate. Emeralds and tiny diamonds glint in the band.

"It was my grandmother's. My mum saved it for me. She gave it to me for you last Christmas. If you don't like it I can find another one. Henry told me to get you a diamond and I told him that was the dumbest idea of all time but if that's what you want," I kiss him again.

"Don't even! This is perfect, Vince. It's so beautiful." I can't help myself, I feel the tears building behind my eyes, and a stray tear trails down my cheek. Vince brushes it away with his fingertip.

We press our foreheads together, and he slips the ring onto my finger. I move my wrist back and forth, watching my ring catch in the light, "It's beautiful," I say again, my mind simultaneously blank and consumed by the idea that Vince and I are getting married.

"We don't have to get married right away," Vince says reassuringly.

"A long engagement is a bit of a power move," I muse.

Vince grins, "You and your power moves." We start kissing again, but we're interrupted when Vince's phone buzzes. It's a FaceTime call from Priya.

“Shit,” Vince hisses. He accepts the call.

“Vincent! Where the hell are you?” Priya yells.

She’s wearing overalls and her hair is in a messy bun at the top of her head. The massive headphones are still looped around her neck, she’s in the middle of recording.

“Something came up,” Vince says sheepishly. I shove my hand into the screen and Priya’s jaw drops.

“She said yes? Lyndsey, you said yes? Vince, what the hell? I didn’t know you were going to do this today! Apollo, Henry! Vince and Lyndsey are engaged!” Priya squeals.

“I told you I was doing it this week!” Vince says.

“Yeah, and it’s Monday! You’ve never been timely in your life!”

“I was too excited,” Vince admits.

Now, Apollo and Henry show up onscreen crammed in the tiny recording booth with Priya.

“Show us the rock!” Apollo hoots.

“There is no rock, it’s an heirloom. We discussed this, remember?”

“You’re no fun,” Apollo scoffs.

“Don’t blame Vince. I’m the one who’s no fun!” I say.

“Well, congrats love birds, but Vince still needs to get his ass down to the studio. We’re tracking bass today!” Priya says.

“I told him that while he was digging around in the attic. Besides, I need to get to work, too so I can set up everything for your show on Wednesday. Priya, email me the time when you want to soundcheck.”

“Got it, boss. And seriously, congratulations, you two.”

Priya waves as she clicks off the call and I get up, realizing that we’ve been kneeling on the ground clutching each other for the better part of twenty minutes. I’m hit with a sudden swell of dizziness.

Vince grabs my elbow to steady me, “Are you okay?” he asks. I nod and take a deep breath to steady myself.

“I’m fine, just dizzy,” I say.

“Did you eat breakfast, or are you still not feeling well?” Vince asks.

For the past couple of weeks, my stomach has been bothering me like nothing else, and I’m exhausted regardless of whether I go to bed at eight or midnight. I’ve been trying to stick to a bland diet, but yesterday I barfed up a sleeve of saltines.

“I’m still not feeling well,” I mumble.

“You look pale, Lynds. Are you sure you want to go to work?” Vince asks as he walks into the kitchen. He returns and hands me a banana. I peel it and take a bite, willing my stomach to settle.

“I’ll be fine. I probably just have a bug or something.” I grab my bag from the foyer and shove my feet into a pair of black boots.

“I’ll let you know if I need anything,” I reassure him with a kiss on the cheek, “Good luck in the studio today.”

“Thanks, love. Have a great day at work.” Vince says.

He waves as I walk out the door and unlock my car, a small silver Toyota I bought with the money from tour. It’s nothing like Vince’s penchant for matte black luxury vehicles, but it gets the job done, and it’s the first time I’ve been able to buy a car without panicking about the rest of my bills.

While I drive, I turn the radio up as I listen to a local Indie rock station, and roll a window down hoping it will help with how terrible I’ve been feeling.

The Gateway Club is a tiny, red two-story brick building off the highway, with a vintage repurposed marquee hoisted on top boasting the week’s lineup. Booking was slow to start, but now we’re consistently booking two, sometimes three bands a week.

I pull into the parking lot and park, grabbing my large leather bag with my laptop shoved into it off the passenger seat. When I walk into the venue I wave to Amy, our intern for the fall.

How we have enough infrastructure to support an intern is beyond me, but she goes to UCLA for marketing and she loves music enough to do it for college credit alone. Plus, she's eager, which is a win for our budget and our Outlook Calendar, which has never looked better.

"Hey, Lyndsey!" She calls when I enter. She's wearing jeans beat-up Converse sneakers, and a faded band T-shirt. She's wearing her red hair in two loose braids.

"Hey, Amy. What's up?" I ask.

I'm still nauseous, but my mouth is dry. I swallow and try to quell the nausea, wondering if I should dip into Vince's stash of antacids.

"Um, I want to go through the schedule with you for while you're on tour one more time if that's okay with you."

"Of course! Follow me into my office," I say.

Calling it an 'office' is beyond generous, it's a windowless storage room behind the stage to the left of the green room, with musty carpeting and an Ikea desk from my old apartment. I tried to fix it up with a vintage lamp, a refurbished desktop MAC, and an area rug, but it still looks like I'm trying to turn a concrete bunker into a place of business.

I sit at my desk and swallow again. My stomach cramps. My palms are sweating.

I push the feeling away and focus on Amy, who's peering over my shoulder as I power up the computer. We go over the bands who will be playing while I'm tour, and I make sure she has the email for all of their tour managers.

"Now, for Wednesday, when's the sound check?" She asks.

She's more on top of it than me, I created a monster. At the same time, it's fun having a protege, though she's only eight years younger than me.

“I still need to check with Priya and company. They’re recording today, so it might be a late night, but I will let you know as soon as I do, and it should be a pretty easy night.”

“It sold out in five minutes!” Amy exclaims.

“Shit, really?” I’d expected tickets to go fast, but not that fast.

“Yeah, people are crazy for them. How is it touring with them?” Amy asks.

“Chaotic in a good way,” I say. I’m starting to sweat again. I grab a hair tie off my wrist and pull my hair back into a ponytail.

“Hold up. Lyndsey is that a ring?!” Amy asks.

I can feel the blood flooding my cheeks, “Uh, yeah. Vince proposed this morning. There was a skeleton, it was a whole thing.”

“No way! Tommy! Alex! Lyndsey’s engaged!” Amy calls. The other two promoters, Tommy and Alex pop their head into my office.

“Lemme see! Congratulations! Holy fuck, how’d it happen?”

“Um, he stuck it on a plastic skeleton.”

“That’s romantic and seasonal,” Tommy quips.

“When’s the wedding?”

“No idea. We have to get through tour first,” I say. My stomach lurches and I can feel the vomit crawling up my throat, there’s no stopping it.

“Excuse me,” I say before trying my best to seem like I’m not darting out of the room as I sprint to the tiny bathroom at the end of the hall. I throw up what little food I had in my stomach and cough into the toilet bowl.

“Fuck,” I grunt, thankful that my hair is in a ponytail.

I try not to lean against the toilet bowl too hard, my tits have been uncharacteristically sensitive lately. I get up and flush the

handle with my foot before washing my hands, wishing I was one of those people who brought a toothbrush to work. My mouth feels disgusting. I splash some water in my mouth and hope that it'll work.

The workday passes by quickly. I manage to choke down a sandwich from a deli down the block for lunch and spend the rest of the day sipping on a ginger ale to help my stomach. Sometime around four, Amy knocks on my door.

“Hey, Lyndsey?” She asks.

“Hey, Amy, do you need anything?”

She hovers at the door and blushes, “This is kind of embarrassing, but do you have a tampon?” She asks.

“Not embarrassing at all,” I say. I open my desk drawer and dig around until I find one and hand it to Amy.

“Thanks so much,” she says.

“No problem,” I say as I close the drawer.

Amy walks away and the realization hits me like a ton of bricks: I don't remember the last time I had my period. I'm pretty regular, but it's not like it's something I track.

I got my IUD out over the summer, but Vince and I had been using condoms since, and it'd been working great, or so I thought. Except, there was that one time in Berlin, where we danced all night and got too swept up to remember the German word for “condom.”

Vince and I had talked about wanting kids in the future, but when we talked about the future we meant years down the line, not months! I felt another wave of nausea rise in my gut and barfed into the trash can beneath my desk.

Unlike Vince, who will run for miles when he gets anxious, my anxiety is task-based. So, I spend the rest of the day making sure my calendar is spotless and confirming set list times with Priya over email, keeping things professional.

At the end of the day, Alex, Tommy, and Amy all congratulate me and I thank them with a smile. But when I get

to my car, I close the door and press my forehead against the steering wheel.

Can I be someone's mom?! Does Vince want to be a Dad?!

I have zero experience around kids or babies, what am I supposed to do? My brain's booked a one-way ticket on the panic attack express, so I do what I've done since I was nine and felt so worried I couldn't breathe: I call Allison.

She picks up on the first ring.

"Hey! How are you, Lyndsey?"

"Um, engaged! And maybe pregnant?!" I blurt, before I can get the words out, Allison is screaming with glee.

"Wait, when?! And, are you sure?!"

"He proposed this morning and, Al, I haven't had my period for like two months."

"Well, you've been safe and everything right?"

"Yeah, I mean we use condoms, but condoms break!" I squeak. I take a deep breath,

"And, uh, we got a little carried away in Berlin last summer," I admit.

"Okay, okay. Um, here. First of all: Congratulations, and dibs on being your maid of honor. Second: where are you?"

"I'm still in the parking lot at the Gateway Club. I finished work like half an hour ago, had a panic attack, and called you."

"Classic. Okay, I'll be there in ten and then we're gonna get you a pregnancy test, okay?"

"Okay," I say.

My voice comes out small. I'm terrified, not because I don't want kids, but because I can't think of a bigger change in my life than suddenly being engaged and pregnant within twenty-four hours.

Ten minutes later, Allison pulls into the parking lot in her beat-up Chevy Impala. She honks the horn.

“Get in you goof, let’s go see if you’re pregnant. Aunt Al has a nice ring to it.”

I smile at that and get out of my car, hopping into the passenger seat. I’m too anxious to drive right now.

Allison hugs me and hands me a bottle of water. “Drink up, you’re going to need it.” I open the water bottle and Allison takes the opportunity to admire my ring.

“It’s perfect for you,” she says.

“I know,” I say.

I don’t know why, but suddenly I’m crying as I realize how completely Vince understands me. There’s no one else in this world I’d rather have a kid with, but I’m still terrified.

“Why are you crying?”

“I don’t know. I—” I hiccup, “I know Vince will be supportive and excited and all of that but, we talked about having kids in the next couple of years, not months!”

“Well, that’s true, but you know as well as I do that things rarely happen when we plan them.”

“But I love to plan!” I wail as we pull into the parking lot of the pharmacy.

“I know you do. That kid is going to be incredibly organized,” Alison notes.

She unlocks her car and offers me her hand. I let her hold it as we walked into the pharmacy. Together, we find the pregnancy tests and grab a couple.

“Do you think brands make a difference?” I ask.

“Nah, I mean they’re all ... doing the same thing, hopefully,” Allison says.

With those words of encouragement, I pay for three and the pharmacist gives me a nod. When we’re back in Allison’s car, we pause.

“Now what?” she says.

“Well, I should take one.”

“Should we go to my place or yours?” Allison asks.

My time in my studio apartment didn't last long, I moved with Vince last winter after realizing that between touring and the amount of time I was spending at Vince's, I was losing money. I found a fantastic subletter: an older woman hoping to live out her retirement days by the ocean.

“Um, we can go to my place I guess,” I say.

“Okay. Do you want me to drive you back to your car first?”

“Yeah, I'm feeling better now,” I say. It helps to at least have the pregnancy test in my possession, I always feel better when I establish the next steps.

“Okay, I'll follow you back to your place.”

Allison tails me as I drive home and waits for me to punch the code into the gate. I roll up the driveway as the gate swings open.

When we walk through the door, Violet makes a beeline for me and nudges my hand with her nose. I scratch her ears and get her some fresh water.

Vince takes her to daycare during the day so she can socialize with other dogs when he's recording and I'm working, she's always exhausted by the end of the day. She harrumphs as I refill her water bowl and slurps up water contentedly.

It doesn't look like Vince is home. His car's not in the driveway, his combat boots aren't strewn across the foyer, and there's no half-crushed pack of Nicorette on the kitchen counter. I check my phone and sure enough, there's a text from him.

Vince: Hey, Love. The recording's going late tonight, but I'll be home around 8ish hopefully. I hope you had a great day. x

Allison pokes her head into the kitchen, “Are you ready?”

“As I'll ever be,” I mumble. I grab one of the pregnancy tests out of the bag and lock myself in the bathroom.

Allison and Violet guard the door in tandem and I try my best to quiet my nerves so I can successfully comprehend the instructions and pee on the stick.

I set it on a wad of toilet paper on the bathroom counter and stare at it like it's a bomb readying to explode. I gulp as I wash my hands. When I unlock the door, I nearly ram into Allison and Violet.

"Do you want me to set a timer on my phone?" Allison asks.

"Yeah, that'd be great," I say.

"Hey, it's a win-win either way, right? If it's positive you and Vince get to be the coolest parents and then you can like, be retiring on a beach somewhere by the time you're fifty and everyone else from high school is wrangling their kids. If it's negative, then, like, it gives you and Vince the space to discuss when you want kids."

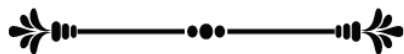
"Ugh, you're right," I say. I lean back against the wall and slink down onto the floor.

Allison hugs me and Violet rests her head on my lap. I let the two of them comfort me until the timer goes off.

"Moment of truth," Allison says, pulling me onto my feet.

I grimace and pull her into the bathroom with me, where we are met with two positive pregnancy tests sitting on the bathroom counter.

The pink lines might as well be neon signs.



Vince got home a bit after Allison left, she had to be up early the next day because she was styling a photoshoot.

When I heard Vince's key turn in the door, I jumped as Violet galloped toward the noise.

I was feeling cagey. I sat on the couch in the living room and tried to relax, but I couldn't get comfortable. I tucked my feet under my legs and clutched a pillow to my stomach for some reason.

I knew it was irrational, but part of me feared that people could tell I was pregnant though I'd only known for roughly three hours.

I wondered if I looked different; I certainly felt different and the exhaustion and inability to keep down my breakfast made a lot more sense. It occurred to me that eventually, I would look pregnant.

My hand grazed my stomach, I didn't know what I expected to feel, but it was flat as ever. I tried to picture mine and Vince's child.

What would they look like? What would their personality be like? I was lost in thought, almost in a daze.

"Lyndsey?" Vince calls.

"In here!" I reply.

Vince walks into the living room and sits down beside me, pulling me into a kiss. I slip my tongue into his mouth and move to straddle him. I'd missed him during the day, and I wanted to celebrate our engagement.

"I missed you," he whispers when we pull apart.

"I missed you, too. How was recording?"

"Same old, same old. We had a screaming match at three before we all realized we were just hungry. I re-did the mix for the first track. It was a pretty standard studio day. However, the band is beside themselves about our engagement. Henry and Apollo are fighting over who gets to be the best man. I don't have the heart to tell them it's Michael."

I laugh, "Allison already called dibs on Maid of Honor."

"I knew she'd be excited. My mum's over the moon, too. She said to let her know when it is as soon as possible."

My heart sank. *Fuck.*

In all of the excitement of today, I'd forgotten to call my mom! If she found out I was getting married through Allison instead of me, she'd never forgive me.

Vince took one look at my face, “You forgot to call Mikki, didn’t you?”

“Work was insane today and I felt so horrible all day I—fuck! I’m a terrible person!” I groan and peel myself off Vince’s lap, burying my head in my hands.

“It’s okay. We can call her now if you want,” Vince suggests.

I shake my head and lean back against the couch, “No, she’s at that pottery class on Monday nights,” I grumble.

“Oh, true. I hope she makes us a vase for our wedding present,” Vince quips.

“Don’t encourage her!”

My mom’s pottery looks like it was made by an overzealous kindergartner who loves the Grateful Dead. Her artistic calling cards tie-dye paint jobs and the fact that she can’t get any of the vases to stay flat on the bottom.

“Hey, everyone has to start somewhere. I like that she’s picking up a new hobby. It’s inspiring. Maybe I can start sculpting.”

“Do you want me to model for you?” I ask.

“Yes,” Vince pulls me in for another kiss, and as I reach to peel my top off, my stomach heaves. I pull away, climbing off of him.

I press my face against my hands and try to regulate my breathing.

“Lynds?” Vince asks quietly. “Are you alright?” He loops his arms around my shoulders, and I can’t repress it any longer, I sprint to the bathroom and barf for what feels like the millionth time today.

Vince follows me to the bathroom and crouches down beside me, rubbing my back.

“Food poisoning again?” he asks before continuing, “I didn’t know it could last this long.”

I wipe my mouth with a handful of toilet paper and shake my head.

“No, it’s not that. I’m pregnant,” I pant.

Vince pauses. For a moment, he’s still as a statue, his hand hovering mid-pat. I can feel the gears turning in his brain as he attempts to comprehend this information. I think a visual aid might help.

“The test is on the counter,” I add.

He gets up and walks over to the bathroom counter, studying the tests intently.

“Wow, that’s a big plus sign,” he says.

I pause, get up from the toilet, and walk over to him, waiting for him to say something.

“I know we said we didn’t want to start trying for another couple of years like that’s a pretty solid plan. If you don’t want to um, do this now, well, I get it. I mean,” I’m talking so fast I can barely comprehend what I’m saying.

Vince places his hands firmly on my shoulders, the same way he does when I’m freaking out about an upcoming gig. I look up to meet his eyes, and that’s when I notice that he’s beaming. He’s smiling so big it looks like his face is going to break in two, and I’m immediately flooded with relief.

“Lyndsey, this is wonderful! This is the best day of my life! You’ve made me the happiest man on earth, fuck probably the galaxy itself!” He gives me a bear hug, squeezing my ribs so hard it hurts and I find comfort in his wiry frame as he laughs into my hair. Soon, I’m laughing too. We’re both guffawing and holding each other.

“Shit! I’m gonna be a dad to a literal human being!” Vince hoots.

“Well, let’s hope so.”

“Does anyone know?”

“Al bought the test with me.”

“Of course, she did. Fuck, that reminds me, I need to tell Michael he’s not the only cool Dad in the family now.”

To his credit, Michael has managed to cram twenty-seven years’ worth of parenting into one year. He built an entire Ikea catalog worth of furniture for Allison when he was in town last, including the bookshelf that’s been sitting in her hallway, partially constructed for the last three years.

“So, you’re excited? You’re not worried about tour or anything?”

“Well, the kid’s not going to show up next week, are they?” Vince reasons.

He pulls me into a hug and kisses my temple, “We’ve got plenty of time to prepare. I’ll read some books and ask Apollo a thousand questions. It’ll be great!” I’ve never seen Vince so hopelessly optimistic about anything.

He looks like he’s plotting how to build a treehouse and open a college fund simultaneously. There’s a manic, joyful glint in his eyes, and it allows me to be excited as well.

Vince pauses, “But really, how are you feeling about everything?”

“Nauseous and excited,” I say with a sigh. I rummage through the drawer beneath the bathroom counter and fish out a spare toothbrush and tube of travel toothpaste we keep in case of guests.

“That makes sense,” Vince says as I brush my teeth with more vigor than I have in my entire life.

“We should probably get you a doctor’s appointment, right?”

“Fuck! Probably!” I say after I spit in the sink.

Vince pulls me into his arms, and I relax against him. “If the show’s Wednesday night, and we leave for tour Friday morning, I can probably get an appointment on Thursday, yeah?”

“I don’t see why not!” Vince says.

My shoulders drop below my ears for the first time all day, “Okay, cool. We have a plan.”

“You feel better now that you have a plan, don’t you?” Vince teases.

“Yeah,” I admit.

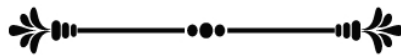
“This kid is going to grow up thinking Microsoft Excel is a video game.”

“Or that a corn dog is an acceptable breakfast.”

“Or both.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ, we’ve got our work cut out for us, don’t we?” I say.

“Yeah, but it’ll be great,” Vince reassures me.



Wednesday night, I keep a plastic bottle of ginger ale glued to my side as I run around the venue preparing for the show.

I check the greenroom for the tell-tale signs of an Imposters gig: Red Hots, hair pomade, loose go-go boots, and I’m pleasantly surprised to see Priya lounging on the couch, scrolling through her phone. She’s here an hour before the rest of the band.

“Priya! What’s with the timeliness?” I exclaim.

“I wanted to double-check everything. You’ve inspired me to be more organized,” Priya says, with a forced cheeriness. I can tell that she’s lying through her teeth.

“Tell me the real reason why you’re here,” I say sternly.

Priya groans, “Fine! Vince told me about,” her eyes dart around the room conspiratorially, “The untitled Exter-Vynse project.” She stage-whispers.

I burst out laughing, “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Well, I figured you could use the help! You probably shouldn’t be hauling amps and guitars around all night if you’re,” her voice dips into a whisper, “With child.

Congratulations, by the way! I will be knitting you a baby hat!”

I sit down next to her and give her a fierce hug, “Since when can you knit?”

“I learned how this summer, and I’m obsessed. I’m working on a scarf right now, and it’s technically just a very long square.”

“Good for you, but I should be fine tonight,” I say.

“Really? Lynds, you look green.”

“That’s what the ginger ale is for,” I explain.

“Well, don’t try and be a hero. I already went over our sound stuff with the front-of-house guy. Henry’s bringing his drum kit around five, he just got it refurbished for tour.”

“Thank you so much,” I say as I take a swig of ginger ale.

“Any time. And I’m serious, the moment you need something,”

“I will let you know,” I tell her firmly.

There’s a polite knock on the door. I open it, it’s the opener for tonight: Sierra Reese, a singer-songwriter from New York. She just signed to the Imposter’s label, though she’s only around my age. Her long red hair rests on her shoulder in relaxed waves, freckles dot her face.

“Hey! Random question, but do either of you have extra guitar strings? Mine snapped this morning because my guitar got a bit banged up on the plane, and then my son decided to ‘play’ this morning, which didn’t help.”

“Yeah, I do have some.” Priya digs around her tote bag, and I inhale through my nose as another wave of nausea hits me.

“Here you go,” Priya hands her a fresh pack.

“Thanks so much. Lyndsey, is it okay if I set my stuff over there?” She nods toward the empty desk in the corner, with a tiny, thrifted mirror.

“Yeah, sure thing, do you need anything else?” I choke out.

“Maybe a bottle of water?”

I get up off the couch and walk over to the mini fridge in the corner, trying to focus on the task at hand, but it’s no use. I empty my stomach into the tiny trash can next to the mini fridge.

“Lyndsey!” Priya yelps rushing to my side. I try to swat her away, but another wave of nausea hits me, it’s mostly bile this time.

“Fuck!” I bark. Sierra winces as I straighten up and wipe the back of my mouth with some paper towel.

“I’m not sick. I promise,” I try and explain weakly as I open the mini fridge. Sierra walks over to me and grabs herself a bottle of water.

“It’s okay,” she says before I can come up with a better excuse, “I was like the *Exorcist* during my first trimester, but it gets better, I promise.”

I pause, “Wait, what gave it away? Do you think people can tell?” My heart starts to pound.

“Well, you’ve been white knuckling that ginger ale all night, and let’s just say, I’ve also been there. It’ll be okay, though. Being a mom is tough, but it’s super rewarding and it also gifted me a bit of a renaissance. I finished tracking my first EP when my son was six months old, and now it’s coming out in November, right around my son’s first birthday.” Sierra walks over to her black leather bag and digs through it, finding a pack of gum and tossing it to me.

“Thank you so much,” I say, popping a piece in my mouth.

“Is your son here tonight?” Priya asks.

Sierra shakes her head, “Nah, he’s at the beach with his sister and my husband. We’ve never been to California.” She grabs her phone and shows Priya and me a photo of a smiling baby wearing tiny swim trunks, “This was yesterday. He doesn’t quite know what to think of the ocean.”

“Oh, how lovely.” Priya gushes. It does make me feel a little better to see someone who’s also a working mom in the music

industry. My stomach settles, and it's not just because of the ginger ale.

Sierra grins. "Yeah, he's a handful but he's the best. You'll see." I hand Sierra's gum back to her and ask her to email me the file with her setlist. I think about how Vince said it's going to believe him, and that night, watching Sierra charm the crowd with stories between songs about her son and Schnauzer, I start to believe him.



Thursday morning, Vince and I stare at the entrance of a Laurel Canyon OBGYN's office like it's a puzzle we're trying to solve.

"You go first," Vince suggests. He waves his hand forward and the door opens automatically.

"Why me?" I retort like a frightened child.

"I dunno! You've been to the doctor for your lady bits, yeah?" Vince blurts.

"Up until a couple of months ago, most appointments centered around the idea of me not getting pregnant in the first place! This is different!" I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans.

"Okay, uh, well, your appointment's at 10:30 and it's 10:15, one of us will have to go," Vince mumbles.

"And it's gonna be you," I catch him off guard and shove him forward into the entrance while he's checking his phone.

Vince stumbles into the entrance way and I follow suit. "Since when did you get so fucking sneaky?" He teases, spinning around and grabbing my hips. He pulls me to him and kisses me.

"I'm a woman of mystery and stealth," I tease back.

"That you are," he replies, kissing me again. I feel my nerves start to calm. It suddenly occurs to me that I have no logical reason to be nervous about this. Yes, I'll be someone's parent, but I'll be doing this with Vince. He loves me like nothing else in the world, and if he's half as good as a parent

to our human child as he is to Violet, he'll be the father of the year.

I sigh and grab his hand as we walk up to the reception desk. The receptionist is a young woman in her twenties with a septum piercing. She gives Vince a triple-take as she hands me a clipboard.

I fill out my information and a chipper nurse calls my name fifteen minutes later. Vince and I walk back to an exam room.

Twenty minutes and two vials of blood later, it's confirmed that I'm pregnant, and the OB hands me a gown to change in for the ultrasound.

I strip after she closes the door and Vince whistles. I swat his chest, "It's a hospital gown! We're talking industrial-strength polyester."

"And yet, you still look ravishing," Vince says. I laugh and scoot back up onto the table, the paper crinkles beneath my thighs.

"Hi Lyndsey, my name is Claire and I'll be doing your ultrasound tod-Oh, my God," the ultrasound tech stops as soon as she enters the room, a large industrial cart trailing behind her.

Her jaw hits the floor as she does the mental calculations to confirm that the bassist for the Imposters is standing in front of her. She pulls the cart up next to her with a loud screech and takes a deep breath.

"I see you've already changed into your gown, that's great. Now, if you want to go ahead and lie back and put your feet in those stirrups for me and you," she glances at Vince, "Your partner can um, hold your hand. I'm sorry, are you?" She's stumbling over her words.

"Yeah, I am," Vince says. He walks over to my side and grabs my hand as I place my feet in the stirrups.

"This is my fiancée, Lyndsey," he says.

"Oh, how wonderful! Congratulations. Now, Lyndsey, I'm going to insert this wand into your vaginal canal, and we'll see

how far along you are.” Claire grabs what looks like a massive plastic wand that’s somehow supposed to fit inside of me. I stiffen involuntarily.

“That’s a bit medieval, isn’t it?” Vince balks. “Seems a little cruel and unusual.”

“It’s a standard procedure and don’t worry, it doesn’t go past the cervix,” Claire says diplomatically as she spreads a glob of lube across the tip of the wand.

I take a deep breath and squeeze Vince’s hand as she inserts the wand. I will my muscles not to clench.

“And if you look to your left, you’ll see your baby,” Claire says. She does measurements and then declares, “It looks like you’re right at eleven weeks.”

Vince and I crane our heads to the side and sure enough, the fuzzy gray ultrasound screen shows a distinct skeleton.

“Whoa,” I say.

“That’s fucking wild,” Vince says, utterly awestruck. He kisses my forehead, “Lynds, we did that!” He beams.

“Yeah, we did,” I squeeze his hand. When we listen to the heartbeat, Vince starts full-on bawling and it’s hard for me to not tear up, too.

When I change out of my gown, Claire prints out ultrasound photos for the two of us and asks if I have any questions.

“Is she okay to tour?” Vince blurts before she can get the words out.

“I mean, I’m just a tech, but what does that entail for you?”

“I’m the tour manager so I make arrangements for all the shows while we’re on the road, keep track of scheduling, etc.”

“Okay, so to clarify, you’re not like a roadie, like, you’re not hauling amps or anything?”

I shrug, “I mean, I do sometimes.”

“Well, I’d advise you to stay away from any heavy lifting, but other than that, as long as you stay on top of your prenatal

vitamins, you should be fine,” she says.

She hands each of us an ultrasound photo and tells me to schedule another appointment as soon as I’m back from tour.

We FaceTime my mom in the parking lot, and she picks up on the first ring.

“Hey guys, what’s up?”

Vince immediately shoves the ultrasound photo in the camera, and she gasps. “No way! First an engagement, now this? The two of you wasted no time,” she laughs.

I called her last night about the engagement, and while I wanted to give her some time to process it, I was too excited to keep this news to myself.

“It wasn’t exactly planned,” I admit.

My mom shrugs, “Well, neither were you.”

“Mom!”

“What? I thought my unfiltered opinions about motherhood would be welcomed now that you’re going to be someone’s mom. Hot tip: They’re gonna hate both of you from the ages of 14-17 but that levels out into deep gratitude once they go to college.”

“Duly noted, Mikki!” Vince whips out the tiny notebook he keeps in his pocket that usually stores song lyrics.

“Why are you writing this down?” I ask him.

“I’m doing research,” he grumbles, crossing the ‘t’ in “hate you.”

“God, the two of you are going to be way more prepared than me and Mark ever were. Let me see the photo again!”

I show her the photo. “They have your nose,” she says.

“It’s just bones!”

“Well, they’re your nose bones! Remember, I knew you when you looked like that. Oh, that reminds me! I still have a bunch of your baby clothes in the attic. I was going to give

them to your cousin for her baby last Spring, but something told me to keep them. Call it mother's intuition."

"Mom!"

"You'll understand now that you're a mother," my coos self-satisfyingly.



Friday morning, I discovered that pregnancy gives me motion sickness.

"I fucking hate this," I grumble from my spot on the couch.

My head is in Vince's lap. I'm wearing motion-sickness goggles we found at a gas station, little plastic glasses with pods of water on the side that are supposed to trick my eyes and brain into not dissolving into a dizzy mess. It's working, but I look like an idiot.

I breathe through my nose and focus on responding to my text messages. One of the booking agents for tonight texted me asking when we'd be there.

Vince strokes my hair. "You just have to make it to next week, then it'll get better! We'll be in second-trimester territory!"

His relentless optimism about fatherhood is both endearing and incredibly annoying, seeing as he's not the one with his head in the toilet for seventy percent of the day.

"I never thought you'd know what a trimester is," Apollo says.

"Well, you learn when you need to! I seem to recall you made all of us read a bunch of books when Char was pregnant."

"Those diagrams haunt me to this day," Henry says, "I salute you, Lyndsey."

I groan and fight another wave of nausea, "Thanks, Henry."

My stomach calms when we finally get off the bus and walk into the venue. The band's playing one last outdoor Festival before the weather turns for the Fall. Everyone sets their stuff

in their outdoor trailers. I run back onto the bus to grab my printer, hitching it onto my hip until someone grabs my wrist.

“Nuh-uh,” Vince says. Before I can protest, he grabs it from me.

“A printer’s not heavy! I’m fine!” I protest.

“No way, Lynds. Let me help you.”

I groan, “Fine, but only because I need to go check what time you’re sound checking,” I insist. Vince kisses my cheek.

Later that night, I watched the show from backstage feeling grateful that I’m fine as long as I’m not in a moving vehicle. While the other bands played, I managed to catch up on the work I would normally do on the bus.

“Thank you, Washington!” Priya exclaims as they finish the last song.

They run offstage and I hand them their post-show essentials, grateful to feel normal for a bit. Vince rushes at me and scoops me up, capturing my lips with gusto thanks to the post-show adrenaline.

My tongue finds his, and I groan as he cups my ass. I’m finally feeling well enough to get some of my sex drive back, and I’ve missed Vince. He smells like pine. He runs his tongue along my lips as his hand squeezes my breasts.

“Your tits are bigger,” he whispers.

I swat his shoulder, “They are not!”

“Yes, they are! I know them well, I know when they’ve changed,” Vince jokes.

We keep kissing, and Priya coughs, “Save it for your suite!”

Even though I insisted that I’d be fine in my bunk, Priya gave Vince and me the bedroom on the bus for this tour. She insisted it would help my “condition” and I was too tired to argue. Now, I’m thrilled that Vince and I have access to a bed and a door that closes.

Back on the bus, Vince accidentally elbows me in the ribs as we attempt to brush our teeth in tandem in the tiny bathroom.

When we're ready for bed, I settle back into his arms, stunned that I'm sleeping on an actual mattress on a tour bus. Vince kisses me, lazy and sweet.

I turn to face him and wrap my arms around his neck. He thumbs the hem of my T-shirt, and I nudge my crotch toward him encouragingly. He tosses my T-shirt up and to the side, and grins when he sees my (supposedly) bigger tits. I guess they have been feeling sensitive lately, and my nipples are larger.

"Has anyone ever told you you're the hottest person alive?" Vince asks.

He takes a nipple in his mouth and sucks, it feels divine as his hand squeezes my other breast. I whimper, pressing his head against my chest.

"Lay back, love," he whispers, "I want to taste you." I can't say no to the prospect of laying back and luxuriating in the feeling of Vince between my legs. I lay back and kick off my pajama shorts and underwear.

Vince trails kisses down my abdomen, stopping near my belly button. "I swear, you've got a bump already," he says.

I shake my head, "Nah, you're just seeing things. It's still too soon."

"Well, regardless." Vince kisses my stomach and caresses it,

I fight the urge to laugh. But before I can make a joke, I feel his breath hot between my thighs, wafting into the hair tufting against my entrance. Vince tongues my entrance carefully, pressing his tongue against my clit. I gasp. I'm extremely sensitive. My hips buck,

"Yes, please!" I say.

Vince starts to lick harder, twirling his tongue upward. The back of my thighs starts to shake as I feel an orgasm start to build. He keeps licking, pausing to suck on the bud of my clit. My thighs clench. I squeal as the heat builds, starting at the bottoms of my feet. Vince grips my hips and sucks harder, my hips buck but he rides the motion, his tongue meeting the crest of my mound as he licks. I grunt, moving my hips and Vince

keeps licking, clutching my thighs with his palms as the heat builds and builds within me.

I'm so close. I reach down and press Vince's head closer, feeling his soft hair beneath my thighs. He licks again, and I burst, bearing down to meet the oceanic wave of my orgasm. My body is alive with pleasure, every nerve ending is transformed into a firework, and pleasure laps at the space behind my knees, my elbows, and the space between my eyebrows.

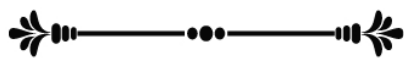
I cry out as my thighs clench Vince's head.

When I come back down, I wrap my legs around Vince's waist and our lips collide. I want more. I reach down and free his hard-on from his boxers. He grins, "More?"

"Yes," I pant, working his cock. He's already throbbing in my palm. I rub the small dots of pre-cum from the head along the shaft. I'm already wet. We kiss, and I lift my hips, letting him fill me. Vince moans, deep and guttural as he lifts his hips upward plunging into me. The mattress heaves beneath our combined weight as we establish a frantic rhythm. I clutch Vince's shoulders for leverage as I ride him, reaching the mountainous peak of my orgasm. Vince comes with a cry, his face twisted in ecstasy. When we part, we're both sweaty and satiated.

Vince kisses my forehead, then he kisses my stomach again.

"I love both of you so much," he mumbles as he falls asleep.



Vince

Winter

In the nineties, my Bachelor party would have resulted in at least three arrests and catapulted the careers of a dozen strippers.

Now, Henry, Apollo, Michael, and I sit silently on a party bus after eating approximately ten pounds of sushi at Sah-Steamy, unsure of what to do next.

Lyndsey, Allison, Priya, and some of her tour manager friends rented a beachfront Airbnb last weekend for her bachelorette party. They got facials, watched at least three romantic comedies, and decorated cookies shaped like dicks.

According to Lyndsey, it was a wonderful time, but it made me a little jealous. I wanted to have one last wild weekend with my friends! Granted, I only have three friends, but still!

So, I rented this party bus, convinced that though we are older that doesn't mean we're unable to have fun. The party bus is fully stocked with everything one could need for a bachelor party: a mini-fridge full of snacks and beverages, with a case of non-alcoholic gin and tonics for me, several stripper poles, and the ability to change the neon lights with a tiny remote.

Henry hums anxiously as he observes the strobing neon lights dancing on the sleek interior of the party bus. It's silent, except for the blaring techno that the driver's playing. I don't feel like booking any strippers, so the poles are empty and barren.

"So," Apollo starts, "I have an idea."

"I told you playing strip poker would feel weird if it's just the three of us!" Henry insists.

"I'm up for anything," I say sipping my non-alcoholic gin and tonic.

"Okay, guys, who here's done edibles?" Apollo fishes a long rectangle out of his shorts pocket. I peer closer at the label, it's a THC-infused chocolate bar. I haven't smoked weed since the '2000s, but I know a lot of my friends use edibles to sleep at night.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Apollo assures me, “But Char and I tried this the other day and let me tell you! The kids have it so easy today, I’m talking about the best version of being stoned: no panic, just a nice ever-expanding calm. We ordered McDonald’s off the internet and watched *Great British Bake Off*, it was amazing.”

Michael grabs the candy bar from Apollo and flips it over, peering at the ingredients, “What do you think Vince?”

I pause, every other illegal substance and alcohol, I never had a problem with weed. At most, it made me want to eat French Fries and take a nap, but it’d been years since any sort of mind-altering substance entered my body.

“You can split it in half,” Apollo adds, “That’s the nice part. You start with half a piece and go from there.”

“Since when did you know so much about edibles?”

“We found this in Tara’s room when she was home on summer break, and instead of getting mad at her about it, we stole it. We tried it for ourselves and had such a good time we bought some of our own. I go to the weed store now!”

“I think it’s called a dispensary, yeah?”

“Semantics! All I’m saying is, it’s a surprisingly good time.”

“Alright, I’ll try it, anything to get this party going, you dullards!” I exclaim. Henry and Michael hoot in glee.

I grab the candy bar and break off a piece. “Break that in half,” Apollo suggests.

“Apollo, do you remember how knackered I was back in the day? I can handle a tiny weed candy!”

“You say that, but the shit is different now. It’s strong.”

“I’d listen to him,” Michael adds.

I roll my eyes and break the piece in half, “Fine, I’ll be safe,” I grumble.

“My, how you’ve grown!” Henry quips.

Half an hour later, I'm not feeling anything other than an intense fascination with the party bus's neon lights, "I'll be fine if I try more. Besides, what's the worst thing that can happen?" I reassure Apollo, popping the rest of the piece into my mouth.

"Sounds good, man," he says dreamily. He grabs my hand and squeezes, "Thanks for being such a good friend," he murmurs, a goofy smile sliding around his face.



I am acutely aware that my teeth are bones, and while the rest of my bones reside beneath my flesh, my teeth are outside in the open.

I can feel each tooth resting in each groove in my mouth. My face is fizzing like I'm wearing a cleansing mask, but I'm not. I just have fireworks for a face now. I think this is my life. I'll go through the rest of my days, painfully aware of how vulnerable my teeth are, how they're left out in the cold during the winter, and how they're forced to chew my food. And what do I give them in return? Nothing.

"You okay?" Michael asks me.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"You just ranted about your teeth for ten minutes."

"Shit, I said that out loud?"

"Yeah, man."

"Am I the only one who can feel every bone in their face right now?" I ask.

"Yeah, man!" Apollo calls. He's lying on his back on the party bus couch, absentmindedly munching on a bag of chips.

I run my hands across my face and expect my flesh to melt into globs like butter on a hot pan. My hands come back clean.

"Are you alright?" Henry asks. His voice comes out slow and distorted.

"I, uh, yeah. You don't think these things can kill you, can they?" I grab the candy bar wrapper again and study the

servicing size, trying to do the math in my head.

“No one’s ever died from weed,” Apollo yells.

“You say that, but what if I’m the first?” It feels like the walls are closing in on me like we’re shrinking. My throat tightens to the size of a pinhole. Am I wheezing? Wait, why can I feel my blood moving in my body?

“Vincent, you’re okay!” Michael barks. He shoots a look at Apollo, “He’s wiggling, man.”

Apollo pauses and grabs me a bottle of water from the mini fridge, “Drink this. It’ll help you feel better.” My foot is shaking so hard that the seat is vibrating. I accept the water bottle from Apollo and take a shaky sip. This isn’t fun anymore.

Eventually, the guys haul me back to Lyndsey, unsure of what else to do.

Apollo knocks on the door of our house, and Lyndsey opens it. Her solution to maternity wear has been to order a bunch of men’s button-ups online.

Tonight, a black button-up hugs her growing baby bump, and she’s wearing loose jeans. Her hair’s in a messy bun. I thought she’d be asleep by now.

“What are you doing back here already? It’s only nine!”

“Vince is on one! Apollo gave him a weed candy and now he’s on one!” Henry yells.

“Don’t blame me!”

“Well, it was your idea!” Michael adds.

“You encouraged him!”

“I did not!”

“You did, too!”

“I did not!”

“Guys!” Lyndsey yells, “Show me the edible.” She holds out her hand and Apollo hands her the offending candy bar like he’s a kid who got caught with contraband by the teacher.

She studies the label, “Okay, so it says there’s 10 mg per piece, how much did he take?”

“One piece,” Henry says.

“Okay, that’s not so bad,” she grabs my elbow and I get lost in the myriad of colors in her brown eyes.

It’s much too simple to call them brown, so dull and dreary. Her eyes have strands of gold, inky black ... her lashes are feathery like a peacock.

She’s so beautiful! And I get to marry her next week if I ever come down.

Oh, fuck. What if I’m like this forever?

When I was in secondary school the gym teacher who taught health class would always warn us against drugs by saying that bad trips are a train we can’t get off of; is that what this is?

“Vince,” Lyndsey grabs the sides of my face with her hands.

I love the heat of her hands, it’s warm and soothing. I can feel the flesh of my cheeks settling against the callouses on her palms.

“Vince, look at me,” Lyndsey demands. No problem. I lose myself in her eyes again.

“You’re gonna be okay,” Lyndsey says slowly. She enunciates every syllable as if she also knows that her teeth are forced to live their lives defenseless against the elements.

“Am I, though?” I mumble.

“Yeah, babe. Let’s get you inside,” Lyndsey says softly.

She loops her arm around my waist and ushers me indoors. Violet whines when she sees me. She sniffs my hands, and I pet her long nose. She has such a weirdly shaped head. God, I love her. Violet sits on my feet. The weight of her body feels good against my legs. She wraps her tail around my feet, grounding me. My heart, once frantic trying to claw its way out of my chest, starts to slow.

“Good girl, Violet,” Lyndsey says, “Way to help your dad.”

“Now, why don’t you tell me how your night went? It’ll take your mind off it,” Lyndsey suggests. She and Violet shepherded me over to the couch. I sit down, but it feels like I’m about to melt into the couch cushions.

Lyndsey brings me a glass of water from the kitchen, “Drink this, and then tell me about your night.” I down it in one gulp, desperate to flush this feeling out of my system.

“It was great, but now my face is melting and you’ll have to marry a faceless monster next week. Oh, Christ you’re marrying a fucking lunatic,” I lament.

“Hey, your face is still firmly attached to your head, and I knew I was marrying a lunatic when I told you yes,” Lyndsey jokes.

I smile at her, but I can feel every muscle in my face.

“What if it’s always like this?”

Lyndsey sighs, “Well, you’re not gonna feel stoned forever, but I will always be there to help you out, got it? In sickness and in health or whatever.”

Lyndsey kisses my forehead and musses my hair, I duck out from under her hand, “Watch the hair!”

“If you’re still protecting your hair, you’re not too far gone,” she says.

She rests her hand on her baby bump. I place my hand over the top of hers. The baby kicks and it feels trippy without the edible. I can’t believe that Lyndsey and I are going to be parents.

“I feel floaty, do you think the kid feels floaty in there?” I ask.

While pregnancy tracker apps refer to our growing child as a variety of fruit-adjacent euphemisms, we’ve been referring to them as “the kid,” like they’re an old-timey actor in Western movies. It fits, somehow.

“I don’t know, maybe,” Lyndsey says.

I yawn, and she hefts herself off the couch, offering me her hand, “I think you should get some sleep.”

“You’re a genius, Lynds,” I mumble.

“Thank you, babe.”

“And, I love you.”

Lyndsey surpasses a grin, “I love you, too.”



We get married in January on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean.

Violet is the ring-bearer. She gallops down the aisle with her massive paws, sitting politely at Lyndsey and my feet as Priya says, “And now, the rings!” Violet nudges Priya’s hand with her nose, she’s been practicing all week.

Priya unclips a small box from Violet’s black velvet collar, revealing two rings. Mikki is sobbing audibly. Abigail blows her nose loudly. I look over to see Michael and Allison trying and failing to keep it together.

Allison and the rest of the bridesmaids are wearing short lavender dresses, with matching shawls. It’s in the mid-fifties, not cold but still not hot. Thankfully, it’s a sunny day after a week of rain. We can hear the ocean lapping at the shore in the distance.

I look over at Lyndsey. She’s radiant, wearing a long vintage lace dress from the ‘70s, with a deep v to show off her now ample tits. A crown of gardenias sits on her head, she looks like a goddess. She and Allison found her wedding dress while thrifting one day, by some thrifting miracle, it fit. All Allison had to do was let the bust out a little bit.

I’m wearing a black silk suit with a lavender tie. Apollo and Henry are wearing matching ones, we look quite dapper, or at least more so than we did when we met as acne-ridden teens.

I can see my mum in the front row, holding a handkerchief in a ball in her hand, dabbing the tears from the corner of her

eyes. I'm sure that, at the reception next month? She'll waste no time telling everyone that she's a grandmother.

"Vincent, take your ring," Priya instructs. Thanks to the power vested in her by the internet, Priya's pulling double duty as a bridesmaid and the officiant.

I take the small gold band and smile up at Lyndsey while Priya talks about love and commitment and Lyndsey grimaces as Priya refers to us as "two vagabond souls who found each other on the road."

I slip the ring onto Lyndsey's finger. I promise, firstly, to keep my promises. I promise to love her and our kid, to collaborate with her, and to stand by her side as we grow and change.

My voice breaks, tears are streaming down my face, I don't try to hide it. When it's time for Lyndsey's vows, she's also sobbing.

We promise to love each other, and when Priya says it's time to kiss the bride, I swoop her back with a flourish and our lips meet. She threads her fingers through my hair and we kiss with gusto as our friends and loved ones cheer us on.



Lyndsey

Spring

I love being married. I love how kitschy and seamless it feels to have a kitchen full of congratulatory toasters, and matching towels with Violet's face on them.

I love telling people that I'm married and feeling weirdly sophisticated when I call Vince my husband, though he's Vince. I love the sound of my new name (we were going to

hyphenate, but Vince Vynse-Exter was too much of a mouthful).

I'm not a huge fan of being pregnant.

I know, it's the miracle of life or whatever, but who knew it would be so sweaty? I'm not glowing, other than the constant sheen of sweat that covers my forehead. It's impossible to sleep because I can't get comfortable, and the minute I do get comfortable, I have to pee.

None of my jeans fit, and every "maternity" section is convinced that motherhood equals easter-egg pastels and the most unflattering cut shirts I've ever seen. I live in a pair of overalls and old men's work shirts, plus leggings.

Every morning, I open my dresser drawer and gaze lovingly at my favorite pair of jeans, remembering how the holes hugged my kneecaps so perfectly, how they accompanied me through countless tours.

I ripped the crotch once on accident in Arizona, and I patched it myself with a sewing kit, it survived until I hit five months and no amount of begging would close the top button.

I count to three and heft myself out of bed, it's a production that requires more effort than most of my former workouts. My center of gravity is non-existent, my belly is a planet now, skin stretched taut, stretch marks carved into my thighs. I feel a kick and place my hand there.

"Hey," I mumble.

I heard somewhere it helps to talk to the baby, and I won't lie, it's established a camaraderie between us. A foot presses into my palm at the sound of my voice. I throw on some overalls and a T-shirt and waddle downstairs.

"Hello, darling!" Vince says.

Since I'm due next month, we're both taking time off to prepare, but I still work from home for the Gateway Club a couple of days a week to prepare for my maternity leave. The Imposters have put off touring until next Spring, they're dropping their ninth album (8th, or is this a new one, so the 9th?) in the Winter.

Seismic Shift is a herculean feat, fifteen songs clocking in at ninety minutes. It's their most daring experimental record yet, and preorders have already skyrocketed them to the top of the alternative charts.

Now, Vince is using his time off to prepare for fatherhood by reading countless books and wrestling with various pieces of baby furniture. He's surprisingly good at assembling furniture, and claims he got his handy side from his dad.

Vince circles his arms around my belly and kisses my neck, "How are my girls?" He asks.

"We're good. Tired and sore," I say with a yawn. A foot presses into my ribcage.

"I don't blame you, it's getting cramped in there."

"You don't know the half of it," I say.

I make myself a bowl of cereal and settle down to eat. I'm starving and exhausted. My belly bumps against the edge of the table.

Vince kisses my cheek and sits across from me, "I know it's hard! But only three weeks to go," he says reassuringly.

"They can't come fast enough," I say. I'm already sweating through my shirt and it's barely seventy degrees out.

"But it'll all be worth it," Vince says — it's been astounding to observe that he has no doubts about becoming a parent. On the other hand, I'm a ball of nerves, but I'm trying not to let it show.

My phone buzzes, it's Amy from the club asking me to look over her proposed lineup for the fall.

I clean up my dishes and retreat into my office, happy to lose myself in a familiar routine. My home office is conveniently located across from the nursery.

Hopefully, I can eventually split my time between touring, working from home, and occasionally commuting to the club once our daughter is born. I know that I'm going to love being a mom, but I love my job, too, and I don't want to give it up.

Vince is enthralled to try his hand at being a stay-at-home Dad for a bit. He says it'll be the longest he's ever stayed in one place at one time. We're already looking into bigger tour buses for future tours that are easier to childproof.

My mom thinks I'm crazy for wanting to back to work so soon after I have the baby, along with everyone else I talk to. Everyone talks about how different it'll be once I have her, and how my life will change. I know that's inevitable, but there are parts of my life right now that I love and would like to keep. Still, part of me already feels guilty.

Sometime around four, I decided to take a nap upstairs. I'm at a good place to stop for the day, and I'm exhausted. I fall asleep instantly, and when I wake up, Vince's arms are circling me.

"Did you sleep well?" Vince asks.

"Surprisingly, yes," I say snuggling into his side.

"Well, I just got back from a run and I was going to shower, wanna join me?"

We've found recently that shower sex is the only comfortable way to still have sex.

"I'd love that," I say.

In the steamy bathroom, Vince and I strip down. He kisses me and cradles my stomach with one hand, caressing my body and gently massaging my breasts as he trails a line of kisses along my neck. A moan peels from the back of my throat as Vince cups my ass. I reach down and grab his rock-hard cock, enjoying the feeling of the cool water.

I've always loved that Vince's shower is big enough for two people. His mouth trails down my cheek and neck, making me moan out loud again, before trailing back up and resting briefly against my ear. The water cascaded over us both, and I could smell a faint hint of peppermint from Vince's shampoo.

He takes the lube from its hiding spot behind the conditioner and slathers it onto his cock and fingers with ease. I lean forward, trying to steady myself. He grabs my belly and holds me firm, relieving me of some of the pressure as he kisses my

neck and shoulders, sucking on my neck. He slides his fingers up and down between my legs.

I gasp as I feel his hard-on press against the back of my thigh. My swollen clit begs for attention with every stroke of Vince's fingers. I continue to moan as he strokes around my clit, before he sinks his fingers into me, sending shivers through me with each pass.

His other hand finds its way back around to my belly, holding me steady. I turn my head to face him, cursing my belly for putting so much space between us as we laugh and kiss beneath the water.

His hands continue moving as he teases me with long, tantalizing strokes. My body quakes with pleasure as he reaches down and parts my glistening entrance with his fingers. He strokes my clit in long, tantalizing strokes. My clit is swollen, sensitive and engorged from pregnancy.

"Vince," I gasp, "Fuck me."

He obliges and I turn around, he cradles my belly helping ease some of the pressure. I sigh and my breath hitches as he enters me, slow to start before going deeper. Desire floods my body as he lengthens inside of me. I gasp, reaching out to grab the wall as he continues to thrust.

"Faster," I pant, and he speeds up. I'm so close.

I reach down and touch myself as he ramps up his speed. I curl my fingers toward my clit and that sends me over the edge. I come with a cry, which makes Vince come, too. We are both panting as the water washes over us. Vince climbs off of me and continues to wash my body, soaping my back and washing the come the backs of my thighs. He kisses the space where my shoulder meets my neck.

"Feeling better?" He asks.

"Well, I'm in a better mood now," I admit, letting him pamper me as I bask in the afterglow.

We finish up in the shower and I change into a pair of track shorts and a T-shirt. We decided to order a pizza for dinner. We

eat on the couch and Violet sits at our feet, hoping to catch a piece of pepperoni.

“Not for puppies!” Vince says for the thousandth time. She glares at him.

I rest the pizza box on my belly and marvel as it stays put.

“Look!”

“Now that’s a talent,” Vince says, grabbing another slice.

He slings his free arm across the back of the couch and rests his cheek against my shoulder. We’ve been trying to savor these last few nights as just us, and it’s working. I’m finally starting to relax, and then I blurt out, “Am I doing it wrong?”

Vince’s brow crinkles, “Doing what wrong? Being Lyndsey? Hell no, you’re exceptional.”

“No, I mean, am I already a bad mom?”

Vince puts his slice of pizza down and turns to face me, “God, no! What makes you think that?”

“Whenever I tell my mom or other people that I want to go back to work after she’s born, they look at me like I’m insane. And I’m starting to wonder, what if they’re right? What if I’m being selfish? I love the Gateway Club and I love touring, but do I think I’ll love them as much as our child?”

“Lyndsey, do you want to go back to work after she’s born when you think about it only from your perspective?” Vince asks.

I pause, “Yeah, I mean, after like three months but—”

“No buts. We’re talking about you, and no one else. That’s the thing. You’re not going to be like every other mom on the planet, you’ll still be Lyndsey! And the Lyndsey I know is the fucking queen of a work-life balance. You can go back to work, and if you don’t like it, that’s fine! You can stay home if you want. But if you do like it, we will figure out a way to make it work. I will support you every step of the way, because I love you, and I love how passionate you are about your job. It’s sexy, not to mention you’ll be an excellent role model for our daughter.”

I blame the hormones, but tears are prickling against the back of my eyes. My cheeks are hot.

“You think so?”

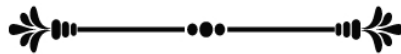
“Yes! You’ll be an excellent mother, but more so, you’ll still be Lyndsey. Who you are isn’t going to disappear the minute you have a kid. Things will change, but you’ll still be the woman I fell in love with. That’s kind of why I married you.”

Now I’m crying, “Thank you.” I mumble.

“Any time, Lynds. I love you. And I’ll fist-fight any mommy blogger who makes you feel bad for going back to work.”

I laugh, “I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

“I’d still do it, though.”



Vince

Summer

Ivy attends her first Imposters show when she is five months old.

We’re playing an outdoor festival in San Francisco. It’s a beautiful summer night, breezy and clear. I strum the notes of the first song and look over to the side stage, where Lyndsey holds Ivy on one hip, and a clipboard in the other hand. Ivy swats at the clipboard.

She’s got my eyes and Lyndsey’s passion for office supplies, with curly dirty blonde hair that makes her the spitting image of Lyndsey when she was a baby.

She’s wearing large, noise-canceling headphones approximately the size of her head. Lyndsey sets the clipboard

down and turns her attention to Ivy, pointing to me and trying to explain what's happening.

I focus back on the crowd and adjust my in-ear monitor so I can hear Priya singing as I play along. It feels good to be playing live shows again, and better to have my family with me. When Lyndsey had Ivy, the whole band might as well have had a baby.

Apollo, Henry, and Priya stocked our refrigerator with salads and easy-to-make foods during those early months when Lyndsey and I were both sleep-deprived and deliriously happy. I'd never been so excited to wake up at 3 A.M.

Lyndsey stayed home with Ivy for the first three months, then she transitioned to working for the Gateway Club two days a week on-site, and from home for the rest of the week.

I watched Ivy during the mornings and afternoons. At first, it was daunting being alone with someone I created.

What the hell do people talk to babies about?

Then, I slowly started to narrate my day. We talked about her best friend, Violet, I showed her my guitars and sang her to sleep, went about my days with her strapped to my chest. Suddenly, we were best friends. I don't want to brag, but she might have the best music taste of any baby ever. I think she's got a real thing for The Kinks and Joy Division.

Mikki told me to try the ABCs first, but I ignored her; despite my infinite gratitude. I can text her a question about babies at 2 A.M., and she responds within minutes.

Despite Lyndsey's initial hesitations, she's a wonderful mother. She looks at Ivy like she created the universe itself in her tiny fists. Every night when she comes home from work, she makes a beeline for Ivy who squeals in delight and demands to be picked up. They bop around the kitchen together, and Lyndsey talks about her day while I make dinner; it's a laughably domestic scene for two people who fell in love in truck stops and greenrooms.

Apollo and I face each other for our solos and I slide across the stage on my knees, leaning onto my back as I hold out the

final note while Priya strikes a pose. The crowd goes wild. It's our first live show since Ivy was born, and damn, does it feel good to be back.

We play two encores to satiate the crowd's demands, then we rush offstage the same as ever. Only Lyndsey could orchestrate the post-show circus one-handed. This time, instead of ripping off her boots, Priya holds out her arms for Ivy, who's already reaching for her.

"Hello, angel!" Priya coos as she scoops Ivy up into her arms. She kisses her forehead and Ivy gurgles contentedly, grabbing one of Priya's necklaces.

"Did she like the show?" Priya asks Lyndsey.

"I think so," Lyndsey says.

"How could she not? She's got rock and roll in her blood!" I declare. Ivy's still fixating on Priya, who takes her Godmother duties very seriously. She carries Ivy around, bouncing her softly as she narrates what's happening backstage.

"After this, we're going to go to the green room and put comfy clothes on," Priya explains, "Then, we can walk around the park for a bit and see some other bands, but you've got to keep your headphones on."

"Great set," Lyndsey says.

"It's 'cause my good luck charms are with me," I joke, stealing a kiss.

Lyndsey hums and runs her fingers through my hair as we kiss.

"You guys, little eyeballs!" Priya yells, covering Ivy's eyes.

"It's probably good for her to see that her parents like each other," Lyndsey says.

"It is! We're just sick of watching you two make out all the time," Henry says.

"What Henry means to say is that we're very happy for you," Apollo cuts in.

“It’s been a long time coming, but it was worth the wait,” I say.

Lyndsey leans back against me, and we watch our friends play with our daughter, basking in the certainty that our future is bright.

The End.

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SNEAK PEEK

One rule: Never mix business with pleasure.

But when Mr. Grumpy Billionaire becomes more than my boss,

All rules are thrown out the window.

I came for the world of publishing, hungry to leave my mark.

Leo. My icy obstacle. Always doubting, always dismissing.

Vulnerable and lonely, I find unexpected solace in Leo's arms.

In the heat of the moment, clothes are discarded, and rules are broken.

His touch ignites a fire I never knew existed,

And those devilish lips promise more than just a fleeting passion.

I tell myself it's just a slip, a one-off mistake.

His touch? *Intoxicating.*

But reality bites hard.

He crashes my family gathering,
Arm-in-arm with his ex,
And a son I never knew existed.
Biggest shocker? He's also my dad's closest friend.
Forgiving him might save my heart, but it'll sure spice up
family dinners...

[\(Click here to get **Bossy Silverfox**\)](#)

Chapter One of Bossy Silverfox

I settled into my desk with an iced Americano in hand and began sorting through my inbox.

Even though my desk was crammed in the very back of the office, it was next to the window, so I got to look out at the Chicago skyline as the sun rose, a sight that never failed to take my breath away.

Nora plopped down in front of my desk when I was mid-way through my first of a dismal manuscript featuring a talking tree.

“I have some bad news,” she said.

Nora was in charge of memoirs. She had the same swagger as a vintage news reporter and was prone to wearing trench coats non-ironically.

She wore her vibrant red hair in a neat bun and framed her brown eyes and a heart-shaped face with a rotating cast of chic clear glass frames that she ordered online. At almost five-feet-ten, she made me look like a shrimp.

I was five-foot-two, if you counted my bun. I started last June, and I’m finally getting the hang of curating a business casual wardrobe that doesn’t make me look like Frog and Toad’s long-lost cousin.

It was one of the first chilly days of fall, so today I swapped out my rotation of office-appropriate sundresses for a corduroy skirt and a black turtleneck.

I covered the tattoos on my hands with a couple of rings, and tossed my long, curly hair into a messy bun. The refill for my contacts was still on back order, so I framed my blue eyes with clear glasses.

“What? Am I fired?” I joked only partially.

“No, never. You’re my favorite co-worker. It’s just, you know, the MPA conference in a couple of weekends?”

Nora and I had been planning a luxurious, literary weekend away at the Midwest Publishers Association conference since the line-up was announced last Spring.

This week, as the newest hire at Wrought Iron Publishing, I was stuck fielding children’s book queries.

While children’s literature was far from my genre of choice, part of me hoped I would be able to help inspire the next generation, which brings me back to my excitement for the conference.

“Yes...”

“I can’t go.”

“You’re kidding me!”

“I wish I was, but my sister literally just had her baby yesterday and my mom and I are driving down to the suburbs to stay with her for the first two weeks.” Nora looked genuinely bummed.

“I guess you can ditch me, but only because you’re the world’s greatest aunt.”

“I have a reputation to keep up. Thanks for understanding.”

“Wait, does this mean I get to go to the conference alone?” Already I was dreaming of a luxurious weekend with a hotel room to myself and unlimited access to the brightest minds in literature.

“No, someone else will be with you.” Nora’s nervous tell was evident as she bit her bottom lip.

“Who is it?”

“Leo,” Nora blurted. She barely got the word out of her mouth before I let out an audible groan.

Leo Cacciatore was not only my boss, but the most pompous jerk that I had ever had the displeasure of knowing.

At 45 years old, Leo got away with his outdated belief that literature was a bona fide boys' club by using his movie-star good looks and amicable demeanor.

He was known to charm even the most obstinate and possessive post-modern greats into handing over one last great manuscript.

My coworkers called him a "titan" but if you ask me, the phrase, "a misogynistic bag of dicks" would be a more accurate representation.

"Nora, no!"

"I'm so sorry. He overheard me saying that I couldn't go, and he volunteered to take my place. I couldn't say no! He's basically in charge of us."

"Nora, I would rather scoop my eyeballs out using a melon baller than spend an extended period of time with him!" I hissed.

"Glad to see that you hold me in such high regard, Jones," Leo snuck up behind me, and my face immediately reddened.

Here's the thing about Leo. He may be a jerk, but his physical appearance is nothing short of mesmerizing—he could easily be mistaken for a Greek god carved in marble.

He's got that whole superhero jawline and sparkling blue eyes combination going, not that I've ever noticed that or the way you can see the outline of his biceps through his dress shirts.

"I didn't mean—"

He turned to Nora, "So I see you told Jones about our little road trip. Come on Jones, no need to look so glum. It's not a funeral procession. We'll be gone for less than forty-eight hours. It'll be fun. Ever heard of it?"

"Yes, Leo, just because my definition of fun doesn't involve an eight-ball of speed and a gaggle of Russian strippers doesn't mean I've never heard of fun."

Leo grinned. "I wasn't aware that you also went to the MPA conference in 1997."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “That was a guess. You’re despicable.”

“Tell that to the strippers. They loved me.”

This time, I couldn’t suppress the eye roll.

For the rest of the afternoon, Nora tried to express her remorse via forlorn glances from across the room and an invitation to get cupcakes on our lunch break.

We walked to a bakery on LaSalle Street, and I conned Nora into also buying me another iced coffee.

We sat at a tiny two-top table in the corner of a bakery. Inside, the pastel walls were decorated with framed vintage baking advertisements.

I licked a layer of dark red frosting off my red velvet cupcake before taking a bite. It was the perfect combination of sweet and rich.

“You can’t just buy me off with cupcakes. I’m still mad at you.”

“I know. That’s why I threw in the second iced coffee. But seriously, Maggie, it won’t be that bad. Think about it. When was the last time you left the city? If nothing else, you’ll get a weekend away in a fancy hotel that you don’t have to pay for. I doubt you’ll even see Leo. Those conferences are packed. You’ll be at panels and meetings all day.”

“I know. He just gets under my skin. He’s the exact kind of misogynistic jerk who made it big twenty years ago and decided that means he never has to change or read anything new. And then he’ll justify it by saying that he voted for Obama twice.”

“You know, he’s pretty cool if you take a chance to get to know him. Think about it Maggie: Would I work somewhere if my boss was that insufferable? The whole exec-macho facade that he has going on is just that, a facade.”

I huffed, “It’s an annoying facade.”

“That’s true, but did I ever tell you how Leo and I met? We met in Philly in the ‘90s when he was touring with a couple of

authors from his small press. He arranged the whole tour like they were bands. He sold chapbooks out of his trunk to pay for gas.”

“That is cool,” I begrudgingly admitted.

“You should ask him about it when you’re in Milwaukee. Maggie, you’re a young but wise 25-year-old, and you’re gonna hate to hear this, but you and Leo actually have a lot in common.”

“First, you buy me a cupcake, and now you’re trying to insult me?”

“This is exactly what I mean! The two of you are the most stubborn people that I have ever met. You decided to be mad at me at like 9:30 this morning, and now you’re the first person I’ve ever seen angrily eat a cupcake.”

“I am not,” I insisted as I wolfed down the last bite.

Nora rolled her eyes. “Just promise me that you’ll give him a chance, if not for Leo, then for your sanity. You’re not going to make a point of being miserable all weekend, are you?”

“Fine, I’ll try. But, if he ends up being a dick the whole time, then you get to go through the rest of the children’s books queries for me. Also, you owe me \$20 for adequate gas station snacks. That part’s non-negotiable.”

“Deal, and what do I get if I’m right?”

“The satisfaction of knowing that you’re one of the three people who have proved me wrong. Plus, I’ll take over on that mystery novel about the talking cat who solves crimes. I’m intrigued.”

Nora pursed her lips for a moment. “Deal. You’re gonna hate *Cat Napped at the Cabana*.”

“Nora, it’s a campy masterpiece. I can feel it.”



By the end of the day, I was feeling significantly better. On my train ride home, I paused my glowering to resume my usual routine of reading on the train. I dug through my backpack

until I found the short story manuscript that Nora slipped on my desk.

The walk to my apartment was brisk. Chicago was on the precipice of early fall, and the trees scattered around my neighborhood were starting to lose their leaves. It was my favorite time of year.

My best friend Ellie and I lived on the top half of a yellow duplex at the edge of Humboldt Park. We met at freshman orientation at DePaul University and quickly bonded over the similarities in our record collections.

I unlocked the door to my apartment and kicked my combat boots off. My cat, Lobo, quickly wound his way around my legs. I narrowly missed kicking his tail.

Ellie and I found Lobo in the dumpster behind our first Humboldt apartment during the fall of our senior year.

He was just one of the half dozen midnight-black kittens nestled in an Amazon box, but he was the only one who let me pick him up. Despite Ellie's insistence that she was allergic to cats, I took him to the vet the next day, and he's been the love of my life ever since.

"Hey, buddy," I said as I scooped him up in my arms. He nudged my chin with his head. "Did you have a good day?"

"He ate my headphones again!" Ellie called from the kitchen. She stood at the kitchen counter, intently chopping a tomato.

Ellie worked from home as a recruiter for a tech company, so most of her wardrobe consisted of stylish athleisure pieces that cost more than half my paycheck.

She wore a lavender tank top and a pair of black leggings. Her bleach-blonde afro was piled in a messy bun at the top of her head.

Ellie possessed an easy, unassuming beauty. We'd been best friends since the day we met at a postmodern literature seminar at DePaul University.

"Well, did you put them in your desk drawer?"

“No, why would I do that?”

“So, Lobo doesn’t eat them. What are you making?”

“Caprese grilled cheese. I just remembered that I still have a bunch of basil from the farmer’s market and that mozzarella. Want one?”

“Sure, thanks, Elle,” I grabbed my bread from the refrigerator and began buttering a couple of slices.

“Do you still want to hang with Cam tonight?”

“Shit, that’s tonight?”

“Yeah, his record release show is this Friday!”

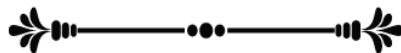
My boyfriend, Cam, was the bassist for, in his eyes at least, Chicago’s premiere prog-rock band: the Junctures. He was lanky and goofy, just as likely to spend his lunch break skateboarding as he was to come up with a brilliant, psychedelic bass groove.

Much to my relief, his music was genuinely good, and he had booked his first headlining tour. The band decided to mark the occasion with a headline gig at the Beat Kitchen before embarking on a three-week tour along the East Coast.

Though I usually steered clear of the Junctures practice sessions, I told him I would stop by tonight. It felt corny to admit, but I would miss Cam during his tour, and I wanted to spend as much time with him as possible before he hit the road.

“Shit, I totally forgot. I’m not sure I can make it tonight but will try. If I don’t make it, tell him he’s my favorite straight guy and that I’m excited for Friday.”

“I’ll pass that along.”



The Juncture’s practice space was located in the back of a wig shop in Pilsen. So, I hopped on the pink line and weaved my way through a sea of plastic mannequin heads.

I found Cam sitting on the beat-up couch shoved against the back wall, lazily tuning his bass.

I could see the muscles ripple in his forearms, which were extra tan from the summer, and covered in stick-and-poke tattoos. Cam's parents immigrated to Chicago from Mexico when he was two years old, and he spent most of the summer with his grandmother and cousins in Mexico City.

When Cam saw me, he smiled. He had the kind of smile that overtook his entire face, and dimples to match, with kind large brown eyes.

While he was six-feet-four inches and seventy percent of his body was covered in tattoos, he was also a big old softie. He named Lobo because he thought Lobo's meows sounded like a baby wolf.

"Hey babe," I slid onto the couch next to him, pulling him in for a deep kiss.

He tasted like watermelon gum and Gatorade. He grabbed a handful of my hair and slid a warm hand under my shirt, cupping my breasts.

I groaned, "Not on this couch. You know it's an STI-incarnate."

"Later then," he teased, "I missed you."

"I missed you too." Cam laid his bass on the couch beside him, and I plopped my feet in his lap.

"Where are the rest of the guys?"

"Late as usual."

"You really need to start telling them that band practice starts an hour before it actually starts."

Cam sighed, "I know. But, hey, it gives us some time to hang. How was your day?"

I shrugged, "It was fine."

"You're making a face. Tell me what happened."

"Okay, so you know that conference I was supposed to go to with Nora?"

"Yeah, your little nerd weekend in Milwaukee?"

“Well, Nora can’t go.”

“So, you get to go alone? That’s actually kinda sick.”

“No, Leo’s going with me,” as soon as I said it out loud, another wave of dread washed over me.

“Ugh, that Don Draper dick?”

“The one and only.”

“Well, maybe it won’t be so bad....”

“You too? Ugh! Cam, I’m going to be trapped in a car with this man for at least three hours. I’m gonna be choked to death by the scent of Tom Ford! He’ll probably mansplain literature to me the entire ride. He probably doesn’t even listen to podcasts! He’s his own podcast!”

“Well, bring headphones. You can listen to the record and tell him that your boyfriend’s in the next Twin Peaks.”

“True.” I pulled him in for another kiss.

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