



THE
SPOTLIGHT

SOVEREIGN KINGS BOOK ONE

ANN EINERSON

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*To achieving your dreams—no matter how big or small,
they're yours.*

I think I was born strong-willed. That's not the kind of thing you can learn. The advantage is, you stick to what you believe in and rarely get pushed out of what you want to do.

— *Joan Jett*

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PLAYLIST

She Don't Like The Lights - Justin Bieber

Pretty Boy - Lennon Stella

I Know Places - Taylor Swift

Secret Valentine - We The Kings

Photograph - Def Leppard

Terrible Thing - AG

Got My Mind Set On You - George Harrison

Lovesong - The Cure

I Want to Hold Your Hand - Beatles

Angel - Aerosmith

Don't Save Me - Haim

I Hate Myself for Loving You - Joan Jett

She's a Rainbow - The Rolling Stones

God Only Knows - The Beach Boys

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hey Reader!

Thank you for picking up *The Spotlight*. I can't wait for you to dive into Conway and Sienna's story.

The Spotlight is a best friend's brother, opposites attract, rockstar romance. This is the first book in a series of interconnected standalones about the members of the Sovereign Kings, a world-famous rock band. Found family plays a central part in this book, and I hope you fall in love with the supporting characters just as much as you do with Conway and Sienna.

The term "sample size" is used in this book when discussing the modeling industry. This term was chosen due to my research of traditional modeling standards and to highlight the demanding body standards models have historically been expected to maintain. This is a work of fiction and in no way represents the modeling industry today and/or my agreement with the term.

CW/TW: explicit sexual content, profanity, mention of parent(s) death, mention of absentee parent(s), mention of drug abuse, mention of child neglect, body-shaming by other characters.

1

CONWAY

HUNDREDS OF FANS LINE THE street outside Empire TV studios. Pulling up to the curb, we're greeted by the large crowd chanting our name, the air buzzing with anticipation. There are people holding up signs, some with the Sovereign Kings logo and others that say *I love Conway Danvers*. A smirk of satisfaction crosses my face knowing they've all come to catch a fleeting glimpse of us on our way into the building.

Over the past five years, Sovereign Kings has risen to global stardom. Our fans can't get enough of our unconventional and rebellious style of entertainment, inspired lyrics, and tributes to the early days of rock 'n' roll. *Rolling Stone* named us the most notable rock band of our generation last year, and we're just getting started.

Our critics view us as conceited troublemakers with no musical talent, claiming we believe we're entitled to success because of our worldwide popularity and cult social media following.

That's a load of shit. We spent years performing to empty venues and being told by dozens of record labels that we were too young, inexperienced, and unpolished to make a name for ourselves. Against all odds, we proved them wrong.

"Con, we just passed another dude with our logo on his arm. That makes an even four hundred in the past year," Wells proclaims.

He's grinning from ear to ear as he playfully slugs me on the shoulder. For some reason, he gets a kick out of keeping track of the number of fans who have a tattoo paying tribute to our band.

“What can I say? People either love us, hate us, or want to be us. We’re living the dream,” I reply confidently.

Grayson lets out a low grunt from the backseat. “Some dream,” he scoffs.

Wells and Grayson might be twins, but when it comes to both appearance and personality, they’re complete opposites.

Wells is a ladies’ man with shaggy blond hair, blue eyes, and a mischievous grin. His charming nature makes him the life of any party. As a kid, he spent countless hours practicing on their dad’s vintage Gibson Les Paul acoustic guitar. He’d always known he was destined for a life of fame and fortune, and he was determined to be prepared when the opportunity came to claim his title as a famous musician.

In contrast, Grayson is a literal genius who keeps to himself. Referred to as a modern-day Clark Kent by the media, he has short brown hair, hazel eyes, and wears thick, black-rimmed glasses. He was accepted into MIT but reluctantly turned it down when Wells and I presented him with our plan to tour after high school. He’d prefer to spend his time writing code in front of his computer rather than performing in front of millions of people. And now, years later, I can sense Grayson’s lingering regret for trading in his education for being paraded around like a prized peacock.

“We’re tracked like dogs and every move we make is scrutinized,” he says with disdain. “Last week, I stopped at the drugstore to fill a prescription. The next day, the front page of every tabloid was dedicated to my supposed cough syrup addiction and my impending rehab stint, all because a fan swore they saw me drink a bottle in the parking lot.”

“And that’s why you should have Emerson send an assistant to run your errands for you,” I suggest with a shrug.

“That’s not the point, Conway. I miss the days when I could go to the library, eat out, or walk down the street without the

vultures constantly watching over my shoulder.”

“Everything comes at a cost, you know that. It’s been well worth it, wouldn’t you say?”

Grayson shoots me a skeptical glance.

“Fine, I’ll do what I can to keep the spotlight off of you from now on. The media is far more interested in the lead singer of a band anyway,” I tease.

“You’re so full of yourself,” he taunts back.

“Thank you, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

I may be a cocky son of a bitch, but it works in our favor. My public persona is a combination of confidence, arrogance, and determination. The energy I present on stage is electrifying, enticing people to attend our shows in cities all around the world.

“Let’s get this over with,” Grayson mumbles as Jay, our head of security, opens the door to the vehicle.

“This is going to be epic,” Wells pipes up as he gets out of the SUV.

I’m about to exit the vehicle when Grayson stops me with a firm grip on my shoulder. “Emerson wanted me to remind you to keep your hostility toward Griff to a minimum today. He had to pay off five reporters last night after they saw you pin Griff against the wall and threaten to break his nose if he suggested another change to our set.”

“I might not have had a choice in him joining the band, but I won’t stand by and let him try to fix something that isn’t broken. He’s here to play the drums, not to write music. As long as he stays in his lane, we won’t have a problem,” I say through gritted teeth.

Grayson rolls his eyes, unimpressed by my dramatics.

“He’s been with us for five years, Con. It’s time to get over your petty grudge already. He’s a John Bonham in the making, and we’re damn lucky to have him. If you keep this up, you’ll have to deal with the fallout when he decides he’s had enough of your shit.” With those parting words, Grayson hops over the seat, slipping out the door before I can argue.

Sovereign Kings started with me and the three Phillips brothers—Emerson on the drums, Wells as the guitarist, and Grayson masterfully performing the bass guitar and backup vocals.

I met the twins, Grayson and Wells, in middle school and quickly became friends with Emerson, their older brother, when I started spending every day after school at their house.

Their parents, Melissa and Rick, welcomed my sister Lennon and me with open arms, inviting us to move in with them my sophomore year of high school due to our circumstances at home. Shortly after that, Sovereign Kings was born.

When we signed with Edsel Records five years ago, they had two conditions. First, they insisted on replacing Emerson as our drummer, deeming his skills mediocre at best, and suggested bringing someone on who could take us to new heights. The second condition was to enlist a seasoned music industry professional to manage the band. Despite being in our early twenties, they thought we required supervision.

I was ready to give the label a piece of my mind and tell them to shove their impractical demands up their ass, but Emerson intervened before I could jeopardize our music career. He skillfully negotiated favorable terms by agreeing to step down as the drummer as long as he could become our manager.

Todd, a producer from the label, still comes with us on tour and attends events, but he’s not a part of the band’s business

entity, and therefore doesn't have voting rights when it comes to the important decisions. Ultimately the original four members of Sovereign Kings maintain the power to determine what music we make and how we create it.

I was disappointed when the label introduced us to Griff a week after we signed with them, and whether I like it or not he's become a permanent fixture.

Jay sticks his head inside the car, checking if I'm ready to enter the studio. He's a rugged ex-marine, covered with tattoos, and is built like a tank. Emerson hired him shortly after we signed with the label, and he's been with us ever since. He gets a kick out of babysitting a group of young, entitled rockstars half his age—his words, not mine.

“You coming, boss?” he asks.

I inhale deeply, taking a moment to switch my mindset to my public persona. Being a world-famous rockstar comes with certain expectations, including concealing any weaknesses. The world views me as fearless and untouchable, so that's what I become anytime I step outside.

“Let's do this, old man,” I announce when I'm ready.

“Watch who you're calling old. You'll be my age before you know it,” he says with a smile.

When I get out of the vehicle, I'm welcomed by the bright flash of cameras and my name being shouted from every direction.

“Conway, I love you!”

“I want to have your baby!”

“Conway, you're so sexy!”

It's mid-June, and yet it's not surprising that all these people have braved the scorching heat to watch the Sovereign

Kings perform live on *The Daybreak Show*. Our fame has no limits, and our fans always show up for us.

I better make it worth their while.

I pause mid-stride, tug my black-and-white-striped crewneck over my head, and toss it into the crowd to my left. My unexpected action is welcomed with catcalls, whistles, and shouts. I soak up every ounce of attention as I slowly spin in a circle, giving the spectators a full view of the skull tattoo with a snake winding its way across my back, the head peeking up over my shoulder.

It represents my mortality and desire to live for today, to never forget that I've worked relentlessly to heal from my past. And while it's a well-guarded secret that I'm afraid of snakes, the tattoo is a daily reminder that my fears don't hold any power over me. I won't let them.

"You can't resist, can you?" Jay asks in a clipped tone.

He's scanning the crowd, his posture rigid as he stands next to me. He's repeatedly asked me to stop my impromptu stunts on our way into venues, citing safety concerns and the ensuing commotion they cause, but I can't help myself.

"The fans came to be entertained... Who am I to deny them?"

"I think you've provided plenty of excitement to tide them over until you get on stage," Jay says as he ushers me toward the entrance of the building.

I glance to my left and spot Emerson helping Lennon out of another SUV parked behind ours, holding her close as they approach.

Unlike the band's casual attire, Emerson stands out in a three-piece suit, his hair neatly styled and his brown eyes laser-focused. He takes his role as manager of the Sovereign

Kings seriously and he believes in dressing the part even though we tease him mercilessly for it.

Next to him, Lennon's wearing a form-fitting white summer dress that accentuates her baby bump, her long brown hair pulled into a high ponytail, and camel-colored high heels. She might not be an official member, but she's as much a part of the band as the rest of us.

Once we're safely inside, I casually stroll over to her.

"How's my niece doing in there?" I croon, affectionately patting her belly.

Lennon swats my hand away. "I'm not a genie in a bottle, Con. You can't go around touching my stomach whenever you damn well please," she snaps.

"Someone's in a foul mood this morning," I tease, holding my hands up in surrender.

"Don't take it personally, Conway. We were running late this morning so *someone* had to settle for a bowl of cereal instead of her preferred pancakes and a side of cottage cheese," Emerson interjects, pressing a kiss to Lennon's hair when she glowers in his direction.

"*Your* child kept me up all night, kicking like a pro soccer player." Lennon jabs a finger at Emerson. "And I swear to god she's going to break a rib one of these days. I deserve to indulge my cravings when I'm sacrificing so much."

"She's feisty like her mama," Emerson says affectionately. "Don't worry, baby. As soon as we're finished, I'll take you back to the hotel and whip you up a giant plate of pancakes with as much cottage cheese as you want."

"And pickles?" Lennon asks.

"And pickles," Emerson promises with a chuckle.

Lennon might be my kid sister, and I enjoy getting a rise out of her, but I've learned my lesson that it's best to let her be when she's like this.

Emerson kisses Lennon once more before turning his attention to the band. "Come on, boys. Let's get this show on the road."

I spot Griff a few feet away but ignore him. Grayson asked me to avoid confrontation, he didn't say I had to interact with him.

Griff drove over with Emerson and Lennon, and I can only imagine how that went considering Lennon's foul mood. She holds him responsible for Emerson losing his spot as the Sovereign Kings' drummer and refuses to forgive him for altering the band's dynamics. Just like me, she's fiercely loyal and hasn't accepted the change.

"It's almost showtime!" Wells calls out, slapping me on the back. He's always jittery before a big performance.

Our new album, *Brutal Intentions*, dropped last night, and we're playing on the outdoor stage of *The Daybreak Show* as an official kickoff.

The demand for our upcoming world tour has been unprecedented. The originally scheduled tour dates sold out within an hour, and we had to add an additional twenty concerts to our lineup to make sure everyone who wants to attend our concert is able to get a ticket.

With the exception of Taylor Swift, we're the most sought-after act in the music industry. That could change in a New York minute if we fail to stay relevant, which is why we release a new album every year and tour extensively.

We follow a production assistant back to a massive dressing room where we are greeted by a team of stylists. I change into my preferred performance attire: black jeans, a

white T-shirt, and a pair of my signature Chuck Taylors. After getting dressed, a stylist fastens a leather cuff on my wrist and gels my hair to enhance its natural wave.

I'm keenly aware that every woman's gaze in the room is fixed on me, and I revel in the attention.

To the public, I'm portrayed as a player with commitment issues, and that's exactly who everyone believes I am. They don't know that there's more to me than meets the eye.

2

CONWAY

“CONWAY, ARE YOU LISTENING TO me?”

I snap my head up to find Lennon blinking down at me with a concerned expression.

“What did you say?”

“I said you have about twenty minutes before you need to be on stage for a mic check.” She gestures toward the clock on the wall and the empty room for emphasis.

“Do you want me to stay?” she asks.

Despite her cranky attitude when we arrived, she’s back to her warmhearted nature now. She asks the same question before every performance, and I always give her the same answer.

“No, go catch up with Emerson. I’ll meet you guys out there.”

“Okay, if you’re sure,” she says hesitantly.

“I’m positive,” I assure her.

She kisses me on the cheek before leaving, locking the door behind her. The last thing the band needs is news of my unconventional pre-show ritual to become public knowledge and invite the media to speculate about my state of mind. The tabloid’s ability to dramatize and distort the truth is remarkable, and there are some things best kept hidden.

Lennon and I have maintained the same routine since the band started touring. She might be suspicious, but doesn’t know what I do before a public performance when I’m alone. And even if she asked, I wouldn’t tell her. As her older brother, I’ve taken on the responsibility of protecting her, not

the other way around. The demons from my past are mine alone, and I refuse to burden her or anyone else with them.

Once Lennon's footsteps have faded, I muster the courage to rise from my chair and approach the small closet in the far corner. The sound of its creaking hinges assaults my senses. Each breath feels like I'm sucking air through a narrow straw as I start to wheeze. I force myself to fix my gaze forward into the looming darkness.

It's an eerily familiar space, strikingly similar to the one that has plagued my nightmares since I was a kid. No amount of exposure therapy can erase the haunting memories that I would give anything to forget.

I painstakingly walk into the closet, collapsing onto the ground. I partially close the door with trembling hands, leaving a sliver of light to shine through and ward off the imminent panic attack.

One day I'll be able to sit in complete darkness, free from the suffocating grip on my chest. But for now, I've accepted this as my temporary solution while I work through my past.

I fumble for my phone and headphones in my back pocket, my hands shaking as I place the buds into my ears. I search for my classical music playlist and press play. The ethereal melody of a Beethoven piece transports me to a momentary place of peace and solitude.

I surrender to the timeless tune, closing my eyes to invite its calming presence into my mind. With each deliberate inhale and exhale, I release the lingering tension from my body. My hands rest at my sides as my fingertips instinctively tap against the ground to the rhythmic beat of the music.

"I'm in control, and I won't let what happened in my past define my present." I repeat the mantra that hypes me up before a performance.

I have the strength to overcome my fears, and I've come to realize that confronting my inner demons head-on is the only way for me to move forward. I'm perceived as the fearless and untouchable frontman of the Sovereign Kings, and I strive for those expectations to be a reality.

As the song's final notes fade away, I slowly open my eyes, directing my gaze ahead to the shimmer of light streaming through the slight opening in the door.

You have the power to step out of this closet. No one can stop you.

With one final breath, I push open the door. Stepping out, I leave the confined space without sparing it a backward glance. I vigorously shake out my hands to suppress the persistent tremors. It doesn't matter how many times I put myself through this, the ghosts of my past still plague me.

I grin when I catch sight of the shot of whiskey sitting on the coffee table, knowing Emerson left it there for me as part of our pre-show tradition. Each band member takes a shot before hitting the stage, and he knows I prefer to indulge after my own ritual. Without hesitation, I down the shot in a single swig, slamming the empty glass on the table with a satisfying thud.

Right on cue, my phone buzzes, signaling a new text from Lennon, reminding me to get a move on.

With a sense of urgency, I make my way into the hallway and follow the signs to the outdoor stage. I'm about to turn left when a woman stepping out of her dressing room captures my attention from the opposite end of the hall.

I notice she's slightly taller than the average woman, though still several inches shorter than me. Her flowing golden blonde hair cascades down her back. The hint of frustration in her emerald green eyes sparks my curiosity, leaving me to wonder what caused that reaction. Her lips are painted a ruby

red, tempting me to stroke her jawline while smudging her lipstick with my thumb.

She boasts a stunning hourglass figure, her alluring curves and well-toned arms telling me she's physically fit.

I wrinkle my nose in disapproval at the unattractive skirt suit she's wearing. It's a shade of sickly green and is tight in all the wrong places. It clearly wasn't designed to enhance her natural beauty, and judging by her sour expression, she agrees. Despite the ugly outfit, I can't tear my gaze from the captivating woman before me. I confidently stride toward her, my upcoming performance now the last thing on my mind.

"You look stunning," I say as I approach her.

The stranger snaps her head in my direction and a flicker of disgust flashes across her face when she sees that I'm talking to her.

"You need to get your eyes checked if you think there's anything attractive about this," she scoffs, motioning toward her suit.

"Touché. I'd much rather see what's underneath it if you're offering," I state bluntly.

She blinks up at me with a blank expression. I patiently wait for the initial shock to give way to uncontrollable excitement when she realizes *the* Conway Danvers is propositioning her to a night in his bed. It's only a matter of time before she breaks into a wide smile and showers me with a passionate kiss on the lips, wanting to serve as my good luck charm and reassurance that she'll be eagerly waiting for me when I've finished with my set.

I'm shocked when she doesn't make a move to approach me. Instead, her lips thin, turning into a scowl as she clenches her fists.

“If that’s the best pickup line you’ve got, you’re clearly out of practice,” she sneers. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

Shit.

I do a double take, racking my brain to recall where we could have met, but her face doesn’t ring any bells. While it’s possible we might have hooked up during a drunken escapade in the past, I’m certain I wouldn’t forget spending the night with someone like her.

“Should I? I think I’d remember if our paths had crossed.”

“No. I’m no one of importance,” she replies harshly.

“I disagree. Let me buy you a drink tonight. It’ll be my treat, and we can get a hotel room after.” There’s no way she’ll turn me down now.

Her face turns bright red. “I’m not one of your groupies who is going to worship at your feet. In fact, there isn’t enough money in the world to entice me into sleeping with you,” she seethes.

I step back, my mouth gaping open. Is she seriously rejecting me? Who the hell does she think she is to turn me down? *Me*. Women flocked to me in droves even when I was a struggling musician without a penny to my name. Now as a famous rockstar, it’s never been anything but a no-brainer when women see me.

“You’d be lucky to spend a night with me,” I voice my frustration.

A blazing light of fury ignites in her eyes. “You’d be the lucky one. You’re nothing but an entitled ass who thinks he’s the greatest thing to walk the planet and can’t handle rejection. Newsflash: not everyone has fallen under your spell, Conway Danvers, so get over yourself.”

“Are you a fan of the Sovereign Kings?”

“Nope. I’m a supporter of authentic rock ’n’ roll, not the synthetic shit you play,” she deadpans.

What the fuck?

I stand in place, rendered speechless as the audacious woman spins on her heels and storms back inside her dressing room.

A mix of fury and embarrassment consumes me as I realize the magnitude of her rejection. Thank god no one from the band witnessed that because they’d never let me live it down.

A third emotion sneaks its way into my consciousness—admiration. The woman I just encountered wasn’t intimidated by my arrogance and stood up for herself despite me acting like an *entitled ass* as she put it and I can’t help but respect her for that.

“Conway, what the hell are you doing? You were supposed to be on stage five minutes ago.” I look up to find an impatient Emerson at the other end of the hall.

The unexpected encounter with the mystery woman had me momentarily forgetting why I was here.

“Sorry, I lost track of time,” I explain as I jog toward him.

“Was that Sienna Cartwright?”

“Who?”

“Lennon’s best friend from high school.”

I didn’t know Sienna well, but from what I remember, she was a gangly teenager with bangs, braces, and thick-rimmed glasses.

Her words, “*You don’t remember me, do you?*” echo in my mind, but I quickly dismiss them. There’s no way the woman I just encountered could possibly be Sienna. No, that woman has to be a delusional B-list celebrity who’s severely overestimated her fame.

“No, it wasn’t her.”

“If you say so.” Emerson shrugs.

SIENNA

I SLAM THE DOOR SHUT behind me, causing the mirror on the opposite wall to shake. I raise my hand to my cheek; I find it hot to the touch. It's no surprise that Conway doesn't remember me, but it doesn't diminish the sting of feeling inconsequential.

Running into him was unexpected. I didn't know the Sovereign Kings were performing on *The Daybreak Show*. I've been so preoccupied with my own problems that I didn't bother paying attention to the other guests who were set to make an appearance on the show this morning.

I was practically joined at the hip with Conway's sister Lennon back in high school, essentially becoming a regular fixture at the Phillips' house where they lived. I spent countless afternoons silently observing the boys who would eventually become global sensations. In those days, they were aspiring musicians practicing their skills in a cramped garage and performing in local venues, playing for anyone who would listen.

Conway is three years older than me, so aside from the occasional teasing about my straight A's and love of reading, he hardly noticed me back then. That didn't stop him from becoming the first boy I ever had a crush on. I admired his unwavering loyalty to his sister, his bond with the Phillips family, and his relentless pursuit of his music career. And let's be honest: he was the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome that every teenage girl fantasized about.

I used to dream about the day when he'd finally *really* notice me and sweep me off my feet, but that was crushed when the Sovereign Kings secured a record deal during my

senior year of high school. The band moved out of the Phillips' house, and Conway's reputation as a playboy was born. According to Lennon he had a new woman by his side whenever he made a public appearance, and there was no way I could ever compare to the endless rotation of supermodels, heiresses, and actresses on his arm.

That's when I saw him for who he truly is: a conceited, self-centered jerk who lives life by the seat of his pants and won't commit to anything or anyone if it doesn't benefit his career.

Sovereign Kings has a reputation as the new generation of rockstars living an unabashed life of fame and fortune. Although I don't have a social media presence or check the gossip rags very often, I've heard the rumors from the models at the agency where I work. Every woman knows that the only things you take away from being involved with Conway are a night of mind-blowing sex and a dozen orgasms.

It doesn't help that the adult version of Conway is sexy as hell, making me wonder if maybe that would really be so bad.

Given my daily horoscope from this morning, I should have known the universe would play tricks on me today.

Be open and honest about your feelings toward others today, Virgo. Allow yourself to trust in the universe. Unexpected events may occur without warning, so be prepared to adapt quickly. New growth opportunities in love and romance are on the horizon, so prepare to receive them. Don't force the connection if the time and place aren't right. You'll get another chance.

Thankfully, I still have the rest of the day to form a romantic connection because a proposition for a one-night stand from an egotistical jerk is decidedly *not* what I had in mind. I'm not about to give my virginity to someone who's

only going to leave me behind the next morning without a second glance.

I've always believed that someday my path will cross with the man of my dreams. The one who will be my first and only love. However, as I've gotten older, I've come to realize that's an unrealistic notion considering I don't have the time to search for my mystery man. Yet, a part of me clings to the whimsical idea of divine intervention, that one of these days he'll fall from the sky and right into my lap.

I brush aside thoughts of fictional men, shifting my focus back to the dilemma at hand.

I'm an assistant with no prior modeling experience, getting ready to strut in front of a live studio audience and millions of viewers watching from home, wearing business attire that's too tight and I could never afford.

I glower at my reflection in the full-length mirror, the ill-fitting, paisley skirt suit with padded shoulders mocking me mercilessly. The buttons on the blazer strain against their stitching, threatening to pop apart at any given moment, and the skirt clings uncomfortably to my every curve. Plus, my toes are being pinched by the sky-high black heels I have to wear. Whoever decided fashion is worth the pain must have been a masochist. In my humble opinion, no article of clothing, regardless of its label or price tag, is worth sacrificing one's comfort.

While some girls grow up dreaming of strutting down a stage, basking in the spotlight, and gracing the cover of glossy magazines, billboards, or park benches, I've always had a different vision for myself. I wanted to be a teacher or a social worker, finding purpose in helping kids who don't have any support in their corner.

Unfortunately, the reality of paying rent, the ever-growing pile of medical bills, and general living expenses required me

to get a full-time job right out of high school. It was slim pickings for someone without a college degree who needed to earn above minimum wage to make ends meet. The best offer I got was as an assistant at a mid-level modeling agency located in downtown L.A. The salary was decent, and the potential for professional development appeared promising.

The job wasn't as good as it seemed.

The past four years working for David Montgomery have been an absolute nightmare. I haven't been given a single raise during my time as his assistant, and my attempts to apply for a better position within the company have all been rejected. On top of that, I have to travel at least one week out of every month, following David and his models wherever they have a show.

Prior to my employment at the modeling agency, I had idealistic beliefs about the fashion industry. I naively assumed that it had progressed, now placing a strong emphasis on inclusivity and representing all body types. I've found that to be anything but true. The majority of brands and designers cling to the ideology that being a size zero is the only acceptable standard for models, some even going so far as to outwardly express their discontent when asked to work with models who don't fit into their sample size.

David believes it's better for business when I look the part too, so he makes me follow a similar regimen as his models. I've had to make significant changes to my lifestyle, including cutting sugar from my diet and rigorously exercising twice a day. My last order of business each night is to record these details online, enabling David to track my progress.

I follow most of his guidelines, but I do alter the number of calories I consume. I maintain a healthy diet like he expects, but I refuse to compromise my health for his unethical standards.

Beyond that, I follow his rules. This job is my family's sole source of income and the only way I'm able to keep a roof over our heads, and I won't compromise that. I can't afford to.

So, when David notified me earlier this week that we were heading to New York for a last-minute photo shoot, I plastered on a phony smile even though I didn't want to go.

Cora, one of the models slated to appear on a segment of *The Daybreak Show* today, threw up on my shirt this morning when I went to check on her. That should have been my first clue that today would be a disaster.

With no alternate model available on such short notice, David insisted I fill in for her, threatening to fire me if I didn't. I would have walked out if it hadn't been for the additional \$3,000 he promised to add to my next paycheck. It's the only reason I'm standing in this stuffy dressing room thousands of miles from home.

The biggest problem with this entire situation? Cora's a size zero, and I'm... not. I may be in the best shape of my life thanks to David's demanding standards, but I'll never comfortably fit into a sample size, which is a challenge given that that's what I'm currently squeezed into.

I glance over at David seated on the velvet sofa in the corner, furiously typing away on his phone.

"David," I say, waiting until he lifts his head to acknowledge me. "I can't wear this monstrosity on national television. This design will go viral for all the wrong reasons. I barely made it across the room without splitting a seam." I gesture toward the skirt. "Can we ask Gianni's team to put me in something more suitable?"

"Sienna, darlin', do I need to remind you every piece is sample-sized? It's not Gianni's fault you don't fit into any of them," David mocks as he narrows his eyes at me. "Consider yourself lucky that Cora has the stomach bug or you wouldn't

have gotten this opportunity in the first place. Gianni is a world-class designer. Models sculpt their bodies to fit into his creations, not vice versa. Be grateful I convinced him to let someone like you wear one of his masterpieces.”

I bite my tongue at his insult, knowing it's nothing more than an attempt to get a rise out of me. David Montgomery is a snake, and I refuse to give him the satisfaction of an outburst. I'm damn proud of my body, and I would love nothing more than to tell him to shove his misogynistic views where the sun don't shine, but I refrain.

I'm on the verge of a meltdown until I think of Ruth and Leola. They took me in as a kid when I had no one else, and now they rely on me financially. We're barely making ends meet as it is, and I can't afford to let my emotions compromise my next paycheck.

“Stop pouting,” David scolds. “Trust me, no one cares if your suit is too tight. It makes your tits look spectacular, so stop whining and do your damn job.”

When I don't make a move to leave, he stands up, towering over me.

“You can either get your ass out on set or change back into your street clothes and kiss your job goodbye. The choice is yours.” A sleazy smile takes over his face, tempting me to knee him in the balls.

I bite down on my bottom lip until it bleeds, fighting the urge to snap back. “Fine,” I mumble under my breath. “But Gianni isn't going to be happy when he sees me,” I assure David with a defiant glare.

Turning on my heels, I storm out of the room, though it's more of a slow shuffle to avoid tearing my skirt or taking a spill.

“Don’t forget, Sienna... Assistants are a dime a dozen. You’re nothing special,” he shouts after me. “Screw this up and you’re finished.”

Fuck off, you jerk.

I may not be able to say the words out loud, but it doesn’t stop me from thinking them.

I leave the room, giving myself a pep talk. It’s only a five-minute segment, what could possibly go wrong? Within the hour, I’ll be three thousand dollars richer and have enough money to pay next month’s mortgage, plus a sizable portion of the balance for Ruth’s latest hospital visit.

I’m grateful my horoscope warned me to prepare for the unexpected today because the morning has been chock-full of unforeseen events so far, and I suspect it will only get worse from here.

4

SIENNA

I HAVEN'T EVEN GONE ON stage yet and this is already a disaster.

A few minutes ago, a member of the show's production team announced that we're behind schedule because the Sovereign Kings played two new songs that weren't included in their original setlist and went over their allotted time slot.

Leave it to Conway to mess with my meticulously mapped-out timetable.

I'm pacing the small waiting area next to the stage, relentlessly chewing on my fingernails. There's nothing else to keep my mind busy while I wait for my turn to walk on stage.

When David announced that I was taking Cora's place, my mind went into overdrive, spending the hour I had to prepare outlining every detail down to the tiniest fraction of a second. I envisioned myself striding confidently onto the stage, visualized the exact spot where I would stand, and practiced how I would pose. I've never modeled in any capacity, I've only ever watched from the sidelines.

Now my focus has been disrupted because Conway and his self-centered bandmates can't follow a simple schedule.

This is a well-established TV station. Why don't they have a better system in place to avoid unexpected delays?

The crew is captivated, their eyes glued to the screens as they watch the Sovereign Kings dominate the outdoor stage. The women gawk at a shirtless Conway and the men are jamming out with Wells as he rocks out on guitar, imagining they're performing alongside him. Why is everyone under the Sovereign Kings' spell? They're nothing out of the ordinary.

Says the girl who's an assistant for a living.

As if the delay wasn't enough, the air conditioning has decided to call it quits, leaving me drenched in sweat. My once perfectly straightened hair is now a matted mess, my makeup is melting off, and my outfit might as well be painted on. At this point, I'm better suited to portray the Corpse Bride at a cosplay convention than a model for professional workplace attire.

My stomach churns with anxiety as the realization sinks in that I'm about to parade around on live television. The thought alone is enough to make me queasy.

I'm not necessarily shy, but I am an introvert who finds peace in solitude and values my privacy above all else, making this experience challenging to the very core of my identity.

The silver lining of this catastrophe is that Leola religiously watches *The Daybreak Show* and will get a kick out of seeing me on TV, regardless of the circumstances. I can already imagine the barrage of missed calls and voicemails I'll have when I return to my dressing room, reprimanding me for not telling her in advance so she could record it.

The longer I'm forced to wait, the more my nerves unravel. I'm cursing Cora under my breath for getting sick and leaving me in this predicament. I'm on the verge of convincing myself that walking away would be the best course of action when David's sharp voice startles me from my internal struggle.

"Sienna, you're up!" he barks, waving toward the stage.

He's overly enthusiastic about having a front-row seat to my modeling debut, probably secretly wishing he'll get to witness my humiliation when something inevitably goes wrong. He's never liked me much, and my intuition tells me he's been itching for a reason to fire me. Placing me in a situation where I have no formal training will give him an excuse to finally get rid of me if I mess this up.

"Here goes nothing," I whisper to myself.

I awkwardly stumble onto the stage like a newborn calf attempting to find its footing. I throw my hands up to shield my face from the glaring lights, and I'm caught off guard by the intense heat radiating off my skin. Why didn't I talk to one of the production assistants while I was waiting and ask about the stage conditions? I take a moment to collect myself before moving forward.

The show's host gives her undivided attention to Gianni as he stands beside her, enthusiastically waving toward a model donning a rainbow tweed jacket. Gianni rambles on about the inspiration behind the fashion atrocity, boldly claiming it as one of the top summer trends for women in the workplace. I can't help but notice the host subtly pursing her lips, likely thinking the same thing as me.

No one in their right mind would be caught dead wearing that thing in public, especially considering its designer price tag.

As I move toward centerstage, the sweat in the insoles of my shoes starts sticking to my heels, causing me to nearly topple over—*great, something else I didn't plan for*. I slow my pace to avoid losing my balance. When I glance up, I see Gianni impatiently tapping his foot, a silent order for me to get a move on.

Within arm's reach, he seizes my elbow, yanking me to his side, evidently unwilling to wait a second longer for me to reach my destination.

My eyes widen in horror when I hear the unmistakable sound of my skirt tearing, leaving a slight draft to brush against my legs. I'm grateful I wore boy shorts today, sparing me from further embarrassment.

The vein on Gianni's forehead bulges and a flash of rage crosses his face. Given that he's not the one being humiliated in front of millions of people, I don't know why he's so angry.

Before I can gain my bearings, he turns his wrath to me. “You did this on purpose,” he spits in my face. “It took me weeks to perfect that design, and you fucking ruined it. This is what I get for agreeing to settle for a no-name model who can’t fit into my sample sizes.”

He inhales sharply, preparing to unleash a second round of insults, but I don’t let him continue ridiculing me. If he thinks he can publicly body shame me without any repercussions, he’s mistaken. I’m confident in my own skin, and I won’t let this patronizing jerk make me feel otherwise. Preserving my self-respect is far more important than any job.

“Didn’t you get the memo, Gianni?” I question, making sure that he’s listening before I continue. “No one wants your outdated designs that are only flattering in a size zero.”

I kick off my heels, making a mad dash across the stage, not even caring if the audience can see my underwear. I come to a halt midway, turning back to face Gianni. I might as well go out in a blaze of glory while I’m at it. “Did I mention your designs are ugly as shit?” I smirk.

“You little bitch,” he seethes, clenching his fists in anger.

The host gasps in disbelief at Gianni’s response and I hear someone backstage shout, “Cut!”

I don’t stick around to see what Gianni comes up with in retaliation. I’ve already done enough damage for one day.

As soon as I get backstage, David storms toward me, blocking my path. His enraged expression makes it abundantly clear how he feels about my stunt.

“After everything I’ve done for you, this is the thanks I get?” he roars. “You’re finished, Sienna. Once I’m done, there won’t be a reputable company in the industry that’ll hire you. And don’t even think about using me as a reference.”

He means every word, and I anticipate it might prove difficult to find another job that pays this well without having a recommendation from my previous employer. But it doesn't matter. I know I'll manage to get a new position without him. Anything is preferable to being treated like this.

"Goodbye, David," I say tersely, forcefully pushing past him. I won't give him the courtesy of a rebuttal. Engaging further would only fuel his rage.

Once I'm back in the safety of my dressing room, I quickly remove the suit, carelessly tossing it into the trash. If Gianni intends to salvage it, he'll have to fish it out himself. I wipe the residual makeup from my face, gather my hair into a messy bun, and change into the black yoga pants and green tank top I have stashed in my bag.

I push aside the panic building inside my chest. My adrenaline rush is finally subsiding, the harsh reality sinking in... I no longer have a job. I can only hope that David's bark is bigger than his bite and that his threat of sabotaging my job search is an empty one.

In spite of the looming uncertainty, I'm choosing to remain positive. I'm confident in my ability to make sure that everything works out for the best.

Once I'm ready to leave, I peek into the hallway and make a run for it when I don't spot David or Gianni waiting to pounce. I'd like to avoid another heated conversation if I can help it. I'm near the exit when I hear my name being called, and am shocked to find Lennon waving at me when I spin around.

"Oh my gosh, Sisi, it's really you!" she exclaims as she pulls me in for a hug. "I had no idea you were here."

It's then that I notice her protruding belly pressed against my front. She told me she was pregnant the last time we spoke, but that was months ago.

“Lennon, hi,” I say. “Look at your adorable baby bump. Do you know if it’s a boy or girl?”

“A girl.” She beams. “Emerson and I are thrilled.”

I peer over her shoulder to find the entire Sovereign Kings entourage has joined us. When I spot Conway, I avoid eye contact, not wanting to see his reaction the moment he realizes who I am.

“Sienna, it’s nice to see you again,” Emerson says as he strolls up next to his wife, wrapping his arm around her waist. “I thought I recognized you earlier.”

“It’s me,” I lamely reply.

Lennon was always certain of her future with Emerson. Despite the five-year age difference, their bond is undeniable. To know them when they were young was to know they were destined to be husband and wife. They got married the day after our high school graduation, not wanting to wait another minute.

The week after the wedding, the Sovereign Kings left for their first world tour. Lennon invited me to tag along, but I had to cancel when Ruth was unexpectedly hospitalized the day before.

Over the years, Lennon and I gradually drifted apart with her traveling the world and me staying home to care for Ruth and Leola. We went from seeing each other every day to catching up on the phone a few times a year. The distance between us amplified my insecurities of being left behind, of feeling like she no longer needed our friendship. That she no longer needed *me*.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were modeling?” Lennon asks. “I saw what happened out there... I can’t believe how that man treated you. If I had been on set, I would have given him a piece of my mind. He should be fired.”

“I’m not a model. I’m an assistant at a modeling agency,” I tell her. At least I was until a few minutes ago. “I had to fill in for a model with the stomach flu. Unlucky for me, Gianni de Santis owns the clothing label, so he can’t be fired.”

“In that case, we need to convince his clientele to boycott his brand,” Lennon announces like it’ll be an easy task.

I’ve always loved this side of her. The crusader who’s prepared to take on the world when someone she cares about is in trouble—consequences be damned.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but Gianni is a well-loved designer in the fashion community. If anyone is going to be left dealing with the aftermath of his outburst, it’ll be me.”

I decide not to tell Lennon that I was let go. If I do, she’ll insist on leveraging her connections to find me another job. I don’t want her to think I’m using her ties to the Sovereign Kings for personal gain, especially considering we’re not as close as we used to be.

“That’s bull, Sisi. You were standing up for yourself. Most people are going to find that admirable.”

“I appreciate you saying that.”

Emerson gently nudges Lennon, a sign they need to get going.

“Listen, I have to go, but can we grab lunch when I’m back in L.A. next week? We can catch up and plan Gianni’s demise,” Lennon jokes.

“I’d really like that.”

“Great.” She claps her hands with enthusiasm.

Lennon was the one person I could share anything with, and it would be nice if things could go back to how they used to be.

“I’ll text you, and we can set a date,” I say.

As long as I find a way to pay my phone bill by the end of the week.

“Sounds like a plan,” she exclaims, giving me another hug.

Emerson waves at me as they exit the building hand in hand—the rest of the band following closely behind them.

I brace myself for Conway to pass by but am caught off guard when he stops in front of me. When I look up at him, I find he’s... grinning?

“Sienna, it’s good to see you again.” He tucks his thumbs inside his pant pockets like he’s planning to stay awhile.

“Danvers,” I reply curtly.

“No one’s ever called me by my last name before. I think I like it,” he goads, that stupid smile still plastered on his face.

“In that case, I’ll be sure to never use it again,” I snap.

“You’re very hostile. Is that because of me or Gianni?”

“Both,” I say without skipping a beat.

Conway lets out an exasperated sigh. “Listen, I owe you an apology.”

No shit, Sherlock.

“I shouldn’t have approached you earlier,” he admits. “If I had known who you were, I would never have asked you to sleep with me.”

I cross my arms, fixing him with a scowl. “What the hell does that mean? Is little old me not good enough for you?” I ask with a hint of disdain. I’ve had enough of egotistical men belittling me today. “How is it possible that you found me attractive an hour ago and now you’re declaring me an unsuitable candidate? Is it because you overheard me tell Lennon I’m an assistant? If that’s the case, damn you for judging me based on my career.”

“No, I—fuck, I’m screwing this up.” He nervously runs his fingers through his hair. “That came out wrong. What I meant to say is that you’re my sister’s friend, and she’d kick my ass if she found out I disrespected you.”

Okay, as far as apologies go, he’s headed in the right direction.

“Trust me, if you were anyone else, I’d drag you to the nearest dressing room, bend you over the couch, and fuck you until you saw stars,” he states bluntly.

Oh... my... god.

I take back my earlier statement. He’s terrible at apologies.

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m me then.”

Is it, though?

“If you say so.” He chuckles. “You should know that Lennon means it when she says she’ll make Gianni pay for what he did to you.”

“I don’t need anyone to fight my battles for me. I can hold my own,” I assure him as I take a step back, putting some much-needed distance between us.

“I don’t doubt that, Ace,” he says with a wicked smile, using the nickname he gave me back in high school. He used to tease me for always having my nose in a book and for being a straight-A student, but I’m surprised he remembers that.

“Nothing’s wrong with accepting help once in a while. You’re Lennon’s friend, which means you have the Sovereign Kings in your corner.”

“I don’t need the Sovereign Kings in my corner,” I snap back.

“No need to be so hostile,” he says, holding his hands up with a smirk. “Regardless, Gianni will get what’s coming to him. You’ll see.”

Before I can ask any more questions, someone from Conway's security team tells him they need to go.

"See you around, Ace," he calls out as he walks away.

It's unlikely Lennon and Conway will remember their promised retribution by the end of the day. It doesn't matter much what happens to Gianni considering my own career is already in smithereens.

As I watch Conway jog toward his waiting SUV, I shrug off the foreboding feeling that my horoscope was a little too accurate this morning.

I may have turned down a night of electrifying sex with a rockstar, be out of a job, and am unsure about what comes next, but I know everything will work out. It has to.

I walk outside, stretching my arms as I gaze up at the sky, and soak in the sun's warmth. I decide to spend a few hours exploring New York City on foot before returning to the hotel. I pull out my phone to scroll through the itinerary I created on the airplane in hopes I'd have some free time while I was here.

The agency splurged on this trip, meaning I have a room at the Ritz until tomorrow morning, and I fully intend to take advantage of one last night in the luxurious hotel. And who knows... Maybe I'll get lucky and run into my future husband while I'm here.

A girl can dream.

5

CONWAY

I MASSAGE MY TEMPLES, TRYING to ward off the pulsing headache from a night of heavy drinking. I let out a groan as the elevator begins its ascent, gripping the handrail to steady myself. I used to be able to party until dawn, catch a few hours of sleep, and wake up feeling good as new. Now anytime I get plastered, it feels like I've been hit by a dump truck, the effects lingering for days.

“Looks like someone got carried away last night,” Jay taunts, his expression smug.

I mutter an incoherent reply, motioning for him to leave me alone. It's far too early to put up with his antics, and he knows better than to pester me before I've had my coffee. What I really need right now is a hearty breakfast followed by an uninterrupted nap.

After our performance on *The Daybreak Show* yesterday, we made appearances on several local radio stations, filmed content with a collaborating influencer, then wrapped up the day with *The Late-Night Show*, playing one of our new songs from *Brutal Intentions*. Afterward, we were invited to an exclusive party at a club on the Upper East Side to celebrate. My memory becomes hazy after downing my tenth shot of whiskey.

I was pleasantly surprised when I woke up sandwiched between a blonde bombshell and a brunette vixen this morning. It seems that even in my intoxicated state, I had the good sense to invite the two most beautiful women from the club back to my hotel.

I never take hookups back to the band's suite. Emerson always books me a second room wherever we're staying so I

can use it as my temporary bachelor pad. I don't mix pleasure with my personal life. Anyone I take to bed knows my terms—one night of pleasure, no strings attached, and no misconceptions of a long-term commitment. And I always leave long before they wake up.

The ding of the elevator brings me back to reality and the door slides open to the penthouse. Jay gestures for me to exit first and when I get to the Sovereign Kings' suite, I give him a nod of appreciation. He prefers to stay out in the hall to avoid the constant chaos brought on by the band living in close quarters.

As I step inside, I'm met with the smell of sex and a path of discarded clothes near the entrance, including a pair of gold stilettos and a red thong. It looks like I'm not the only one who had a wild night. Now if only Wells and Grayson would take my lead and move their conquests somewhere other than our private space...

The gentle notes of *Swan Lake* float through the hallway as I make my way to find Lennon in the kitchen. She's hunched over a bowl of pancake batter, her tongue poking out as she vigorously mixes. She's left a hurricane in her wake, per usual. Flour is coating every available surface, milk splatters decorate the counter, and a few stray eggshells lie inches away from the trash on the floor.

After signing with Edsel Records, money began pouring in and Lennon insisted on staying in hotel suites with fully equipped kitchens, claiming it would give us a semblance of normality amid the chaos of our unconventional lifestyle.

As the music's tempo intensifies, Lennon gracefully moves to the rhythm. She's a strong believer in the benefits of classical music for her baby's growth, hoping to counterbalance the perceived negative effects of the rock music. Wells often jokes about having to suffer for the greater

good of the next generation, which only encourages Lennon to play it more often when he's around.

"Emerson is going to be pissed when he wakes up to find you gone," I call out.

"Oh shit!" Lennon shrieks and I watch as the bowl slips from her grasp, flying across the room and leaving a trail of pancake batter splashing across the cupboards and my pants.

"It's a good thing I haven't taken a shower yet," I say with a scowl, using my hand to wipe away the remnants of the mixture from my legs.

"Serves you right, Con. You know better than to sneak up on me when I'm concentrating. Now my breakfast is ruined," she grumbles, frowning at the empty bowl on the floor.

"Shit, Len, I'm sorry," I offer. "I thought you heard me come in."

I suppress the urge to laugh at her pout. It's probably better that her ruined breakfast ended up on the floor rather than in our stomachs, but I keep that observation to myself, not willing to risk her wrath.

She shows her love through acts of service. Whenever the band is on tour, she takes it upon herself to try to make sure we're well-fed. The problem is that cooking isn't her strong suit—not by a long shot.

Despite spending many nights assisting Emerson's mom, Melissa, in the kitchen and attending numerous cooking classes over the years, she tends to undercook, burn, or overly season her dishes, no matter what she's attempting to make.

We're fortunate that Emerson attended culinary school so we're not stuck with inedible meals all the time. Whenever Lennon tries to cook, he's usually at her side, subtly placing the correct ingredients on the counter, checking the dish's temperature, and adding in the missing seasonings. It's a win-

win situation if you ask me. Lennon maintains the illusion that she's the one responsible for cooking for everyone while the rest of us can enjoy our meals without the risk of food poisoning.

“What’s with all the racket? It’s too early for a wake-up call,” Wells whines from the hall, shaking his tousled blonde hair away from his face. He’s trailed by a leggy redhead dressed in a red sequined mini dress and sky-high heels, who he’s showing the exit. “Thanks for one hell of a night, Kate. I especially loved that thing you did with your tongue,” he says in a flirtatious tone.

He pushes her up against the wall, his hands on either side of her head, effectively caging her in while leaning in to give her a passionate, open-mouthed kiss. Kate lets out a gleeful squeal at the welcome intrusion. When Wells eventually breaks away, Kate’s eyes are filled with lust and she offers him a bashful smile as if she didn’t just have his tongue shoved down her throat.

“If you need a cab, Jay can call you one,” Wells offers as he opens the front door.

I don’t miss the tinge of disappointment on Kate’s face at not being invited to stay for breakfast. Most women who spend the night with us secretly hope they’ll be the *one*—the woman who makes an honest man out of a Sovereign King. I, for one, like my life the way it is and don’t plan on ever settling down.

Once Kate leaves, Wells announces that he’s going back to bed and retreats to his room.

In a matter of seconds, Emerson’s voice booms from the opposite hallway.

“Lennon, where are you?” he shouts, bursting into the kitchen.

He's shirtless, with disheveled hair and black joggers hanging low on his hips, clearly not wasting any time tracking down his wife when he woke up to find she wasn't in bed.

He stops short when he sees the state of the kitchen. "What the hell," he mutters before directing his attention back to Lennon.

"I couldn't sleep. Your daughter won't stop kicking me in the ribs," she confesses. "I was hoping she would settle down once I got up, but she's in the middle of another acrobatic performance." Lennon affectionately rubs her belly.

"Is there a reason the kitchen looks like a tornado passed through?"

"I was minding my own business making pancakes, when this one"—she points in my direction—"scared the living daylights out of me, and now I'm no closer to eating," she complains.

Emerson marches purposefully over to Lennon, tilting her head upward to kiss the tip of her nose. Lennon gazes back at him, her eyes filled with admiration as if he's offering her the moon in the palm of his hand.

"Don't worry, my love, I'll take care of breakfast," Emerson assures her with a warm smile. "Why don't you have a seat and relax while I clean up this mess?" Aware of my lack of skills in the kitchen, he refrains from asking me to assist. "Once I get the place back in working order, I'll whip up a fresh batch of pancakes. How does that sound?"

"That's perfect. Thanks, Em." Lennon beams.

Before she can move of her own accord, Emerson scoops her up in his arms, setting her down on the counter next to him, stroking her cheek affectionately.

"Since you're cooking, I want scrambled eggs too," Lennon tells him.

“And bacon,” I add.

“And bacon,” Lennon repeats.

“Don’t encourage her, Conway. This woman is a bottomless pit where breakfast food is concerned.”

“She’s carrying your child, Emerson. I’d say she deserves an entire breakfast buffet if that’s what she wants, don’t you agree?” I don’t miss the tic in his jaw, annoyed at my interference.

Lennon grins like a cat that ate the canary. “What he said,” she chimes in.

“Hush, you,” Emerson playfully whispers, his lips lingering against Lennon’s as they share a teasing kiss.

These two have absolutely no boundaries when it comes to public displays of affection, regardless of who’s present. You’d think Lennon would be uncomfortable making out in front of her brother, but it doesn’t faze her. I usually leave when they start getting handsy, but I’m not missing out on breakfast.

“The sooner you two stop pestering me, the sooner you can eat,” Emerson informs us.

Lennon gestures to her mouth, zipping her lips and throwing away the key.

Neither of us speak while Emerson cleans up, transforming the disarray into an immaculate space before preparing a culinary masterpiece that could rival any Michelin-starred restaurant. I don’t miss the irony that we’re staying in a five-star hotel and could easily order room service, but when Lennon wants a homecooked meal, that’s what she gets.

While Emerson cooks, his attention remains focused on Lennon. He constantly leans over, tracing his fingers along her exposed thigh and gently massaging her growing belly. One

would assume that after five years of marriage, they would have moved past the honeymoon stage, but I don't think they ever will.

I remember the day I found them kissing on the Phillips' back porch for the first time. Emerson was home for a weekend visit from culinary school and Lennon was a senior in high school. In a surge of uncontrollable anger, I punched Emerson in the face, breaking his nose. If you look closely enough, you'll notice that it's still slightly crooked.

Before I could get a second swing in, he was declaring his love for Lennon and his determination to marry her as soon as she graduated. It took me a while to come to terms with their relationship, but now I know no one else deserves her more than him.

Lennon's face lights up when Emerson places a plateful of warm pancakes, crispy bacon, and fluffy eggs in front of her.

"Mmm, this is delicious. Thanks, babe," she says, her mouth already full.

"My pleasure, beautiful," Emerson replies.

"Where's Grayson?" I ask.

"I'm guessing he's still asleep. He left the club with a woman before the party was in full swing. You know how much he hates those things."

That explains the panties and heels in the foyer.

"What about Griff?"

"He's staying on another floor. You've made it clear he's not welcome," Emerson says in a biting tone.

"He's not," Lennon pipes up. "Only family stays with us."

"Here, here," I agree.

“Cut the shit, both of you,” Emerson orders. “Griff is the most talented drummer I’ve ever met, and we’re damn lucky to have him. Your childish grudge is getting old. If he decides to leave for a band that treats him better, I’m holding both of you accountable.”

“You’re the only drummer the Sovereign Kings ever needed, Em,” Lennon says. “You’ve sacrificed everything for this band, and it’s not fair that he gets a free ride to fame and fortune because of it.”

“She has a valid point,” I add.

“You’re both insufferable. I think you’ve had enough sibling bonding for the day. Come on, Lennon. You owe me another hour in bed.”

“But I’m not tired,” she mumbles.

“Who said anything about sleeping.” He winks and grabs Lennon off the counter, pulling her toward their bedroom.

Thank god my room is on the opposite side of the suite.

I lean back in my chair, releasing a lengthy yawn. We’re set to perform at Madison Square Garden tonight, but I have some downtime before I need to get ready.

I can barely function until I’ve had my caffeine fix, and I mutter in frustration when it dawns on me that we don’t have a coffeemaker in the suite. Emerson’s strict no-caffeine-during-pregnancy policy for Lennon means he removed it altogether to avoid temptation.

Heading out the door to the café in the lobby, I grab a pen from the entryway table, knowing there’s a good chance I’ll run into some fans who will want my autograph. I’d hate to disappoint them.

SIENNA

I STEP OFF THE ELEVATOR, cursing my suitcase's broken wheel as it drags behind me.

Since I left *The Daybreak Show* studio yesterday, I've avoided the news. I'm not quite ready to hear what people are saying about the incident with Gianni.

Ever the optimist, I have a gift for seeing the glass half-full, even during the most challenging of times. However, my string of bad luck has been going on for a while now, and I'm struggling to keep my spirits up, wondering when I'm going to catch a break. Today, I'm trying to put good vibes out into the universe, hoping for a boost of positive energy to come my way.

When I enter the lobby, I head straight for the front desk. Luckily, I'm here before the morning rush, so I don't have to wait in line. I grab the invoice from my purse and place it on the counter.

"How can I help you?" the receptionist asks politely.

"I found this slipped under my door this morning," I say, nudging the piece of paper toward her. "It appears there was a problem with the card used to pay for my room, but I'm confused because it should have been prepaid."

Despite getting a good night's sleep cocooned in organic cotton sheets, my eyes are now bloodshot and my stomach is in knots. It was a mistake staying here last night. I should have figured David would pull a stunt like this, but I honestly didn't think he would stoop so low as to revoke payment for my hotel room. Not when he knows my funds are limited.

“I’m sorry, miss, but the card used for your reservation was flagged as fraudulent, so we’re unable to process the payment.” the receptionist explains, her expression filled with sympathy.

“Wouldn’t the card have been flagged when the room was initially paid for?” I ask, trying to stay calm.

“I-I’m sorry,” she stammers. “I’m not familiar with how the backend process works, but our systems indicate there is a remaining balance for your stay.”

Well, isn’t this fantastic? The hotel has my driver’s license on file, so it’s not like I can leave without risking them calling the police.

I clench my teeth, trying to maintain my composure and not direct my frustration at the kind hotel employee. It’s not her fault that David is a grade-A asshole who is determined to make my life a living hell.

“What’s the total?” I mentally crunch the numbers to determine how much I can charge on my personal credit card before exceeding the limit.

“Three thousand sixty-five dollars and fifty-two cents,” the receptionist says, reciting the total on her computer screen.

I let out a strangled gasp. “Did you just say three thousand dollars? Are you kidding me? Did I fail to notice a solid gold toilet in my room?” I scoff, unsure whether to burst into laughter or tears. I don’t have that kind of money.

I rack my brain for a solution, but the possibilities rapidly dwindle until I find myself back at square one.

The only feasible option that remains is to swallow my pride and reach out to David. If I apologize for yesterday’s incident, there’s a slim chance he’ll agree to cover the outstanding balance. Considering that he owes me a similar

amount for the hours I've already put in the past two weeks, maybe we can negotiate a trade.

I blink back tears as I swallow my pride and summon the courage to make the call, but a familiar voice catches my attention.

“Ace, we've got to stop meeting like this.”

I pivot on my heels to see Conway Danvers approaching the counter, a cup of coffee in hand. Clad in black jeans, a black crew-neck shirt, and a pair of Chuck Taylors, he exudes sex appeal. It doesn't help that he has a chiseled jawline and a captivating caramel-brown gaze that intensely locks onto mine.

It's criminal how attractive he is, especially this early in the morning.

“If I didn't know better, Danvers, I'd think you were following me,” I say sarcastically.

“If I were following you, I wouldn't have let you know I was here,” he retorts with a smirk. “I just came down for a quick caffeine fix. When I saw you here with that sour expression on your face, I couldn't resist coming over to say hi.”

“Hi,” I say, my voice dripping with mockery. “There, now you can return to your room. I'm sure your beauty sleep is much more important than standing here with me.”

I really need him to get the hint that he should leave so I can sort out this mess on my own. I've had enough embarrassment over the last twenty-four hours to last a lifetime, and I don't need Conway Danvers to witness any more of my humiliation firsthand.

“I'm perfectly fine right here with you,” he replies, his voice calm and collected. He leans against the counter, taking

a leisurely sip of his coffee, seemingly undeterred by my dismissive attitude.

“Excuse me, miss, but how would you like to settle your outstanding balance?” the receptionist interrupts, drawing my attention away from Conway.

Talk about bad timing. Now Conway knows about my less-than-ideal circumstances, and I dread the thought of word getting back to Lennon. Not that I’d accept her help anyway, but I don’t want her to think she has to come to my rescue like she tried to do yesterday.

The receptionist’s eyes dart back and forth between Conway and me, realizing her mistake a little too late.

Wordlessly, Conway takes out his wallet and pulls out a black credit card, holding it out to her.

“Charge her room to this card,” he commands.

“No,” I all but shout. “You’re not doing that.” I grab his outstretched hand to keep him from handing the card to the receptionist.

“Why not? You and Lennon are best friends, right?” he questions with a hint of irritation. “She’d want me to help you.”

I feel like he’s turned this into some sort of test and I’m not in the mood for it.

“I’m not a damn charity case,” I snap back. “I can handle this on my own.”

He looks at me intently, his gaze unyielding. “I never said I saw you as a charity case, but it doesn’t seem like you’ve got any other options from where I’m standing. What’s your alternative?”

I pause, taking a moment to collect my thoughts. The longer we’re here in this awkward standoff, the more my

anxiety builds. I shift restlessly, desperate to escape this uncomfortable exchange. When I finally speak, my voice is shaky.

“The only option I have is to call my boss—*ex*-boss and apologize for what I did yesterday. I’m hoping he’ll agree to pay for the hotel room.”

“And how do you think that’s going to go?” Conway asks. “What if he says no?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I admit with a shrug. “I don’t have a backup plan, but I will figure things out.”

“Why didn’t you call Lennon to foot the bill? You know she would.”

“She’s my friend, not my personal ATM,” I answer curtly. “I would never burden her with my financial problems.”

A look of relief washes over Conway’s face, leaving me confused. I’m not sure what he expected me to say, but I can tell he’s surprised by my response. Deep in thought, he seems torn as he considers his next move. In a decisive gesture, he places his coffee cup on the counter, focusing his undivided attention on me.

“Listen, I owe you another apology,” he admits. “Most people use their association with Lennon to get to the band or take advantage of her generosity. When I overheard your conversation with the front desk, I figured you were trying to exploit your connection to us. It seems I was wrong.”

“Damn right you were,” I say with conviction.

I’m offended by the accusation, and although my initial reaction is to be angry, I can see where Conway might have assumed that. What are the odds that I crossed paths with him and Lennon yesterday and happen to be standing in their hotel lobby the next morning, trying to settle a hefty bill at the exact time he walked by?

Apparently, the odds are great all around, because it's a coincidence that I'm even in New York at the same time as them.

"You should know Lennon cares about you, and she really would kick my ass if I didn't intervene," Conway says with a chuckle. "What are friends for if not to help each other out of a sticky situation?"

He can't be serious. There's no way I could accept his money. Unless...

"I'll accept your offer on one condition: it's a loan that I have to pay back by the end of the year."

I'm not sure how I'll be able to repay the debt, but I'll find a way. I won't accept his charity, especially not after he accused me of taking advantage of Lennon.

"That's not nece—"

I cut him off before he can finish his sentence. "It's non-negotiable. If I accept your offer, I'm paying you back. End of story."

"Okay, fine," Conway reluctantly agrees.

He passes his card to the receptionist, and when she hands him a receipt to sign, he pulls a pen from his pocket.

"Why are you carrying a pen around?" I ask.

"It's a good thing I am, wouldn't you say?" he says with a wink.

I don't attempt to taunt him further as he scribbles his name across the signature line and slides the paper back to the receptionist.

"Conway?"

"Yeah?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention this to Lennon."

I'm already embarrassed that he found out about this in the first place, not to mention the false assumptions about the situation. The last thing I need is for Lennon to do the same.

"What am I telling Lennon?" he asks slyly. "That I came down for a cup of coffee, signed a few autographs, and went back up to my room?"

"Exactly that," I say with a smile.

"Don't worry, I won't say anything," he assures me. "I better head back upstairs before they send out a search party. I'll see you around, Ace."

He ambles toward the bank of elevators without a backward glance. I spot his security guard a few feet away and he gives me a polite smile—a silent promise that my secret is safe with them.

I grab my luggage, ready to exit the hotel. As I pass through the front entrance, a swarm of photographers push past me to get inside. When they spot Conway across the lobby, they descend on him like a pack of ravenous wolves prepared to tear apart their next meal. To my surprise, Conway greets them like they're old acquaintances, engaging in friendly banter and answering their rapid-fire questions with ease. He seems to revel in the spotlight, embracing his role as a celebrity.

I let out a sigh of relief, grateful for my timely escape. The last thing I want is for the media to assume I'm Conway Danvers's latest conquest, and to plaster my face across every tabloid in the country. That is precisely the kind of attention I've never had any interest in.

"I missed you and Ruth," I tell Leola, leaning in to give her a hug as I walk through the door.

The ride from the airport was long, and I'm glad to be home. I've lived with Ruth and Leola since I was a kid, so they've been my family for as long as I can remember.

My mom passed away during childbirth, and in a way, my dad died alongside her. He couldn't cope with the immense grief of losing his wife, and the overwhelming responsibility of raising a child on his own was too much for him to bear.

When I was nine, he met someone on a business trip and left to start a new life with her on the east coast. He wanted a fresh start, and that didn't include me. I haven't heard from him since, and a part of me knows that I never will again.

Leola and Ruth were our next-door neighbors, always having me over for dinner and helping me with my homework. Despite Ruth's health struggles, they were thrilled to adopt me when my dad left, and that meant taking on their last name.

Shortly after, we packed our bags and relocated to Los Angeles, where we moved into a two-bedroom condo in a 55+ retirement community. Despite the community's no-children policy, the board made an exception because of our unique circumstances.

I spent the second half of my childhood playing bingo, taking water aerobics classes, mastering the art of driving a golf cart, and walking our neighbors' dogs.

This condo has been their sanctuary for the last twelve years, and part of why I work so hard is to make sure they never lose it.

I follow Leola into the living room, and once I'm seated on the couch, she sets a plate of my favorite cookies in front of me.

"These are better than I remember," I moan, savoring the taste. As I take another bite, the blend of nutmeg and

cinnamon dance on my tongue, reminding me it's been way too long since I had one of her molasses spice cookies.

The upside to my career being in shambles is that I no longer have to cut sugar from my diet. To celebrate, I plan to indulge in Leola's homemade cooking as often as possible.

Leola's laughter fills the air. "I haven't changed a thing about my recipe. Your body must be in shock from being deprived of sweets for so long."

I nod my agreement as I take another cookie from the plate, and brace myself to ask an overdue question. "I've been avoiding the news. Give it to me straight... What is the media saying about what happened yesterday?"

"Sweetheart, you're being praised for what you did," Leola says with admiration.

My eyes widen in disbelief, trying to make sense of her statement. She must be mistaken. "How do you mean?"

"It's common for wardrobe malfunctions to happen, often at the most inopportune times. The general consensus is that as a seasoned fashion icon, Gianni should have improvised and continued with the show rather than throw a tantrum on live television.

"His colleagues are appalled, and many have condemned his behavior. Several models have also come forward alleging that Gianni subjected them to verbal abuse and preferred to only work with those who fit into his sample sizes. One news station even aired footage of celebrities publicly burning his designs."

I'm at a loss for words. I never anticipated this type of media coverage. I didn't confront Gianni to make a statement. I was simply standing up for myself because no one else would do it for me.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Leola adds, her excitement palpable. “The Sovereign Kings’ stylist made a statement on behalf of the United Council of Fashion Designers. She’s the co-chair of the board, and announced Gianni’s immediate removal from the council.”

“Did you say the Sovereign Kings’ stylist?”

“Yes, that’s the band managed by Lennon’s husband, right?”

“That’s right,” I confirm. “I ran into Lennon yesterday after everything happened. She hinted at taking action to make Gianni pay, but I didn’t think she’d follow through.”

“Well, she most certainly did,” Leola assures me.

“Yeah,” I murmur, still in shock.

“Sienna, are you sure you’re okay? You’re dealing with a lot right now.”

“I’m managing just fine,” I lie. “You and Ruth have sacrificed so much for me, it’s my turn to repay the favor.”

“Oh, sweetheart, we love you so much. You know we don’t expect anything in return,” Leola says affectionately.

“How’s Ruth doing today?”

“I let her sleep in because she had a rough night, but she’ll be so excited to see you when she wakes up.”

Ruth was diagnosed with Parkinson’s when I was fifteen and has been battling several other underlying health conditions for decades. Over the last few years, her health has rapidly declined, leading to limited mobility on her left side, uncontrollable spasms, and slurred speech. She’s now in a wheelchair and needs help with almost everything—showering, getting dressed, eating. As a result, Leola stays home to care for her during the day.

Ruth and Leola were in their late fifties when they took me in. Since then, they've drained their retirement funds and depleted their savings. Their modest social security checks barely make a dent in our monthly expenses, leaving me responsible for ensuring their financial stability.

They constantly tell me I'm giving up too much and insist they would get by without me, but I'd never abandon them. We're family, and I'll do everything I can to make their lives easier, just like they did for me when I was a kid. That's what you do when you love someone unconditionally.

Unfortunately, insurance doesn't cover the cost of the home health aide who visits Ruth twice a day, the alternative medicines prescribed by her doctor, or the organic health food diet Leola swears by.

Just as I'm about to retreat to my room and dive into my job search, my phone buzzes on the seat next to me, displaying an unknown number. There's a chance it could be a reporter, but against my better judgment, I answer anyway.

"Hello, this is Sienna speaking," I say with an upbeat tone before immediately chastising myself for saying my name before I know who I'm talking to.

"Sienna, it's a pleasure," an unfamiliar female voice coos. "My name is Becky and I'm with the modeling agency, Elevation. I saw you on *The Daybreak Show* yesterday, and I'm impressed. I don't know anyone else with the balls to stand up to Gianni de Santis like you did."

"Um... thank you?"

Elevation is the crème de la crème of modeling agencies in Los Angeles. Every model in the industry aspires to be represented by them, but very few get the opportunity. I highly doubt they're searching for an outspoken assistant to add to their team.

“I’ll cut right to the chase. Elevation wants to represent you.” Becky pauses before continuing, “I’ve worked with hundreds of models, and I can say with surety that you have a successful career ahead of you as long as you hire the right agent. Consider this my shameless pitch.”

She can’t be serious.

“I think you’re misunderstanding...” I stammer. “I’m not a model. I was David Montgomery’s assistant up until yesterday. I just had to replace one of his sick models at the last minute.”

“David Montgomery wouldn’t know exceptional talent if it hit him in the face. He’s old-fashioned and doesn’t understand that the business is evolving whether he likes it or not. Customers crave authenticity and want to support brands that promote that. It starts with advocating for models who embrace body positivity and aren’t willing to conform to impractical standards that create an unhealthy body image—someone like you,” Becky states.

Me? Become a model? There’s no way I can do that.

“I’ve already had our lawyers review your non-compete agreement, and nothing says that you can’t model for another agency. If you stick with me, I’ll help you become one of the most sought-after models in the country within the next six months.”

Becky’s proposal is a double-edged sword. No matter what I do, I’ll be sacrificing something. If I accept her proposal, I’m exposing myself to the relentless media and could have my face splashed across every social media platform, billboard, and television—something I’ve never wanted. I don’t have any desire to be in the limelight, especially not after seeing how Lennon’s privacy has been compromised by Sovereigns Kings’ fame.

However, if I refuse Becky’s offer, I’m gambling with Ruth’s healthcare and potentially face losing our condo if I

can't find another way to make the payments.

“Sienna, the incident with Gianni has created a buzz,” Becky says when I don't reply. “It's an opportunity we can't let pass us by. How about you come to my office tomorrow and we can discuss the details then? My team will throw in a five thousand dollar signing bonus if you sign with us by the end of the week.”

My mouth drops open in surprise. A signing bonus? David never offered those to his models, and I didn't know other agencies did either.

That amount would cover my missed paycheck from David and my first installment to Conway.

“I'll stop by tomorrow, but I can't promise I'll sign the contract,” I tell Becky.

“That's all right. We'll discuss it when you get here. Talk soon,” she says, the line going dead immediately.

“Who was that?” Leola asks.

“Her name's Becky. She offered me a job as a model,” I manage to get out.

“Oh sweetheart, I'm so proud of you!” Leola says, embracing me tightly.

Nestled in the comfort of her arms, a sense of clarity washes over me, making my decision an easy one.

7

CONWAY

SINCE RETURNING FROM NEW YORK last week, my days have been packed with nonstop interviews, countless hours in the studio, and preparations for the band's highly anticipated world tour. *Brutal Intentions* is dominating the charts, promising to be our most successful album to date.

To boost record sales and connect with more fans, we're collaborating with a few other artists to create alternate versions of several tracks from our album. We're dropping a new featured song each week until we start the tour, so I spent the afternoon recording vocals for a new take of our intro track, "Fearless Dreams," with a Grammy-winning pop artist.

On top of her musical accolades, she's a social media sensation, which will work in our favor when we're ready to promote our collaboration. However, I would prefer jamming out with the band and creating our own music.

When I'm finished for the day, I'm relieved to find Jay waiting outside the studio with the car running. I climb into the back seat, welcomed by a blast of cool air, and lean back against the headrest, needing a moment to recover.

"Long day?" Jay asks.

"The longest," I say with a sigh. "I had to spend the day with Cora Lynn, and she was a total nightmare. When she arrived, she demanded we find an extra chair for her Birkin bag, at lunch she made her assistant fly in a salad from a specialty vegan restaurant in Las Vegas, and she insisted she could only sing if the temperature was an even seventy-two degrees in the recording studio. She was such a diva."

Jay bursts out laughing, looking at me through the rearview mirror. “Boss, I hate to break it to you, but you’re just as high-maintenance.”

“The hell I am,” I snap back, refusing to let him compare me to someone who carries around a hot pink handbag worth fifty grand.

“You stick your nose up at any restaurant that doesn’t have a Michelin star, you own a private jet, and you have a personal driver. If that’s not considered pretentious, I’m not sure what is.” He cocks his brow with amusement.

The great thing about Jay is he’s not afraid to speak his mind, even when it’s at my expense. He knows I don’t offend easily.

I do have expensive taste and specific preferences, but I won’t apologize for that. It comes with the territory of being a celebrity, a rite of passage if you will, and I’ve damn well earned it.

But there are some things he got wrong with his statement and I’m in the mood to correct him.

“First off, I’ll eat anywhere, so long as it’s classified as an upscale restaurant. Second, the Sovereign Kings own a jet—not me personally. Lastly, you’re technically our head of security, who just so happens to drive me everywhere, so a personal driver seems a bit of a stretch,” I tell him.

“All right, smart-ass, you win this round.” Jay chuckles. “Where are we headed tonight?”

“Lennon’s place. She invited me over for dinner.”

“Got it. Oh, and I almost forgot,” he says, reaching for something from the middle console. He leans back to hand me a letter.

“This came in the mail for you.”

“What is it?”

Jay and his team screen the Sovereign Kings’ mail that’s sent to the studio, and not once has he ever hand-delivered a letter to me.

“It’s from one Sienna Cartwright,” he says. “She’s Lennon’s friend, the one you ran into in New York.”

As if I don’t remember her.

How could I forget the woman who rejected my proposition, called me an *entitled ass*, and referred to my music as *synthetic shit*, all in the span of a single conversation? She’s made a lasting impression, for better or worse.

I take the piece of mail from Jay, examining it up close. I tear it open to find a single sheet of paper neatly folded into thirds. Five crisp hundred-dollar bills fall into my lap when I open it, and there’s a short note scrawled in perfect handwriting.

Danvers,

Here’s the first installment. Another to come soon.

Thanks for your assistance.

Ace

Could she be any more proper?

I can’t help but chuckle at her use of our nicknames though. It was a smart move considering there were no guarantees I’d be the first person to read it.

I’m assuming she sent it through the mail to avoid asking Lennon to give it to me, not wanting to explain why she was sending me a letter in the first place, which makes it all the more interesting.

Back in high school, Sienna spent a lot of time at the Phillips' house with Lennon. I never paid her much attention apart from engaging in occasional banter or teasing her when I found her reading in the corner.

In hindsight, I regret not getting to know her better, as it would have given me a glimpse into the person she's become.

I never expected her to pay me back. Sure, she seemed sincere at the hotel, and I believed her when she said she wouldn't take advantage of Lennon, but that doesn't mean I didn't have lingering doubts.

I suspect this is Sienna's way of sticking it to me and proving that she is always true to her word. I'm officially impressed, and that doesn't happen often.

Although I don't usually carry cash, I tuck the money inside my wallet, figuring I'll find a good use for it eventually.

We hit rush hour traffic on the way to Lennon's, so it's nearly dusk by the time we arrive. Jay pulls into the circular drive of the European-style villa to drop me off.

"Thanks for the ride," I tell him. "See you tomorrow."

"Sure thing, boss," he says.

This place is a modern masterpiece, and yet to me, it's a symbol of what a home should feel like. There's a reason I spend so much of my time here.

Walking through the front door, I'm met with harmonic notes of classical music floating through the house. The upbeat rhythm nearly drowns out the blaring sound of the smoke detector, but not quite. My heart rate speeds up when I step farther inside and find smoke coming from down the hall.

"Fuck," I mumble.

I jog to the kitchen to find Lennon bent over the oven, yanking out a casserole dish that contains what appears to be

burnt lasagna. A cloud of black smoke surrounds her as she drops the dish haphazardly on the counter.

“Jesus, Lennon. I thought we agreed you weren’t going to cook when you’re home alone anymore,” I call out to her.

She jumps in the air, surprised by my presence—again. “Oh my god, stop sneaking up on me like that,” she shouts over the shrill beeping.

I leap onto the kitchen island and turn off the smoke detector on the ceiling. I sigh in relief when the house finally falls into silence. It’s a good thing Lennon doesn’t have any neighbors close by or they’d be demanding to know what all the commotion was about.

“Come on, let’s get you outside. This smoke can’t be good for the baby.”

I usher her out onto the terrace overlooking the pool and help her get settled into a lounge chair.

“I can’t believe I burned dinner again,” she says, deflated. “I wanted to surprise you and Emerson with a homemade meal, but I fell asleep on the couch after I popped the lasagna in the oven and forgot to set a timer.”

“It’s all right, Len. I’m just glad you’re okay,” I assure her.

That doesn’t mean I won’t be having a conversation with Emerson about having an automatic shutoff system installed, though. They exist—I checked last month when Lennon burnt a whole chicken to a crisp while she was in the shower.

“Why don’t I go ahead and order pizza? I’ll have Emerson pick it up on his way home,” I suggest.

Lennon nods enthusiastically at the idea. “That sounds amazing, and should time out well with his tour meeting wrapping up soon. Just make sure the pizza has pineapple, olives, and spinach on it.”

“Sure thing.”

I turn my head in the opposite direction so she can't see me wrinkling my nose in disgust. She better have a big appetite tonight because she'll be eating that entire pizza by herself.

I place an order from the best upscale pizzeria in the area and shoot a text to Emerson to have him pick it up.

“Conway,” Lennon calls. “I wanted to give you something,” she says, patting the cushion next to her for me to sit down.

When I get closer, I notice she's holding out a black-and-white sonogram similar to the one she showed me several months ago when she announced she was pregnant.

“They did another ultrasound at my doctor's appointment today. She wanted to check on the baby since I traveled to New York so late in my pregnancy.” She hands the photo to me. “I realized that I never gave you a copy of the first one. Granted, you'll be able to take a picture of her soon, but still.”

“She's a very cute blob,” I say jokingly.

Lennon playfully smacks me on the shoulder. “Don't be mean. You can clearly see her fingers, toes, and cute button nose.” She points to the image to emphasize her words.

“She's beautiful, Len. I appreciate this,” I say. “I'll put it in my notebook so it's the first thing I see before I start writing music every day. And when she's born, I'll add a photo of her next to it.”

I lean in and wrap my arms around Lennon for a hug, causing her to momentarily stiffen before surrendering to my embrace. We're not usually outwardly affectionate with each other unless you count roughhousing.

“Where's this coming from?” she asks softly. “You're never this sappy, Con.”

“Exactly, so shut up and appreciate it while it lasts,” I tease.

We’ve come a long way since growing up near Skid Row in a one-bedroom apartment above a strip club that doubled as a prostitution ring.

Lulu, the woman who called herself our mother, spent her days unapologetically taking her clothes off for unsavory men, her nights warming their beds, and her spare time pumping herself full of drugs.

She resented Lennon and me. We were the result of slip-ups during her early days as a working girl, and she blamed us for never escaping her own grim existence.

I was three when Lennon was born but quickly became her primary caregiver since Lulu had no desire to be a parent. Lennon gave me a purpose, a reason to keep going when things got tough.

Lulu had a nasty habit of locking us in the closet when we’d make noise, she needed to feed her drug habit, or she had a *special* friend over. She would blast cringeworthy music to drown us out and leave us inside that dark room for hours.

Lennon and I have very different perceptions of our childhood.

For me, the closet was my personal hell. A place I was constantly trapped and alone in the dark. When Lennon came along, I promised to protect her from the same fate. By the time she was old enough to remember, I had hidden a flashlight, library books, and snacks in there for us. For her, the closet holds mostly happy memories because I tried like hell to make sure she didn’t have the same experience as I did. I wanted her to think of it as nothing more than a special place where she got to play pretend with her big brother.

As I look at Lennon now, basking in her pregnancy glow, I’m grateful that she has the picture-perfect life she deserves—

that I fought hard to make sure she got.

“I wanted to run something by you,” she says, leaning away from me.

“What is it?”

“Emerson mentioned that the Sovereign Kings need a model for the “Love is a Savage” music video. We thought Sienna would be perfect, especially with how she handled things with Gianni, but I wanted to run it by you first.”

“Sure, I don’t see why not. As long as the rest of the band is cool with it.”

And just like that, I’m looking forward to seeing the blond-haired beauty again.

SIENNA

THE INDUSTRIAL BUILDING LOOMS IN front of me and a nervous lump forms in my throat as I step inside.

You can do this.

It's been a month since I signed with *Elevation*. Becky made a powerful impression the second I stepped inside her immaculate office the next day, everything perfectly in its place and giving off positive vibes. Her personality is a blend of vibrant energy and well-coordinated chaos. It's clear she's dedicated to the success of the models she represents, going the extra mile to secure the best collaborations and campaigns on their behalf.

Her love of vintage fashion intrigues me because I share a similar sentiment for secondhand pieces. While I tend to favor neutral tones, Becky prefers bold colors and patterns to match her energetic personality.

The decision to work with her was solidified the moment she handed me the signing bonus I was promised. The offer was too tempting to pass up.

Since news broke that I officially launched my modeling career, Becky has had a steady flow of inquiries from brands and publications wanting to collaborate with me. In just the last month, I've been involved in twenty photo shoots, which is virtually unheard of for someone with as limited experience in the industry as I have.

I've earned enough money to pay the mortgage through the end of the year, make my first payment to Conway, and put a substantial dent on my debt. However, that hasn't lessened my

anxiety whenever I strut in front of a camera. Becky promises it'll get easier, but so far, it hasn't.

I stand in the entryway of the massive room I was directed to, taking in my surroundings. The space has been divided into three distinct sections, each meticulously crafted to bring the scenes in the music video to life. A flurry of activity unfolds as several crew members scramble to add the finishing touches before filming begins.

I glance at my watch to see that I have fifteen minutes before everyone else arrives, so I take the opportunity to familiarize myself with the space.

The first section is a replica of a 1970s glam rock afterparty. Two temporary wooden walls have been stained black and splattered with neon paint. A leopard-print, wing-backed couch has been positioned at an angle with green velvet armchairs on either side.

As I venture to the next area, I'm met with an expertly constructed police interrogation room. The temperature drops when I step inside, making me shiver. A metal table is positioned in the center with a steel chair tucked underneath it. A solitary bulb dangles from the ceiling, creating an eerie ambiance. I'd believe this was an actual holding cell if I didn't know better.

I stifle a laugh when two assistants lug in a lineup wall, complete with height markings.

I stroll over to the last set, which has been transformed into a platform stage. I climb the steps along the side to get a closer look at the band's equipment, noticing that even the lighting has been arranged to recreate the atmosphere of a live concert.

The only things missing are the Sovereign Kings and their fans.

Within the hour, this scene will come alive, giving the illusion of a real performance in front of a captivated crowd.

I don't belong here.

The thought sweeps through my mind like a virus. My apprehension runs rampant as I struggle to tamp down my unease at knowing that I'm only standing here because of my friendship with Lennon.

That's not true. You've earned this.

Two weeks ago, Emerson reached out to Becky with a surprising opportunity for me to be featured in the Sovereign Kings' upcoming music video for "*Love is a Savage.*" I was hesitant to accept, worried that Conway had spilled the details of the hotel incident to Lennon, or worse, that he had suggested they include me out of pity.

I've struggled with self-doubt since childhood, my insecurities of falling short and not measuring up to people's expectations a constant source of anxiety.

When my dad left me, I convinced myself I must have done something wrong. I figured I had let him down somehow, and if I had only been better, he would have stayed.

The struggles I faced in school when it came to connecting with kids my age and making lasting friendships was always a challenge. I reached a point in middle school where I withdrew completely, shielding myself from the pain of rejection that was all too familiar.

When Lennon and I became friends in ninth grade, I couldn't help but question her motives. Doubt clouded my judgment, and I was convinced she was only being nice because she felt sorry for me. She proved me wrong as our friendship grew over the years, but there was always a lingering sense of uncertainty in the back of my mind.

When she invited me to tag along with her and the band the summer before I started college, I was excited to experience the adventure of a lifetime. After Ruth's hospitalization, I decided it was more important to stay close to home and get a full-time job.

The Sovereign Kings became a worldwide sensation after their first tour and spent most of their time on the road. Eventually, with her being gone so much, Lennon and I drifted apart, the occasional phone call or meet-up when she was in town only going so far to maintain our friendship.

Since running into each other in New York last month, we've gone out to lunch several times while she's been back in L.A. I forgot how much fun we have together, so it's been a blast reconnecting with her.

"Sienna, I'm glad you could make it." Emerson greets me with a warm smile. "Lennon wanted me to tell you she's sorry she couldn't be here. She had a doctor's appointment that she couldn't reschedule, and I had to convince her that our O.B. would notice if I showed up for an ultrasound in her place."

"That's okay, I understand," I assure him with an easy laugh. Although, I have to admit that I'm a little disappointed. I was hoping Lennon would be able to show me the ropes since I've never been on the set of a music video before.

"Emerson, be honest with me," I start.

"Of course. What's up?"

"Did you ask me here as a favor to Lennon? I don't take handouts, and I want to know now if that's the only reason I'm here," I bluntly ask.

"I can see how you might think that, but it's not the case at all." He pauses briefly. "The Sovereign Kings are known for smashing barriers and challenging social norms. It's why our fans fucking love us. You became a source of inspiration for so

many people when you stood up to Gianni, and *that's* why we asked you to be here."

"Okay, I swear I wasn't digging for a compliment, but it does mean a lot to know I'm here because of my own merits."

"Damn right you are. Plus, Lennon sings your praises, and we're all excited to get to know you better. Is that so bad?" Emerson adds.

"We?"

"I think Emerson is referring to me," Conway interjects from the opposite side of the room.

I whip my head toward him, my mouth hanging open in disbelief as I take in his outfit. He's wearing flare-legged pants, black suspenders, and glittering platform boots. And a thunderbolt has been painted over his right eye.

"Enjoying the view?" he asks, a mischievous glint in his gaze.

Yes, I am.

I'm drawn in by his well-defined abs, glistening under a layer of oil. A surge of unexpected desire courses through my veins, causing me to stiffen in response. Why does he have to be so undeniably attractive, even dressed like *that*?

"You look..." My voice trails off as my mind goes blank. All I can seem to do is stare at Conway's sculpted washboard stomach.

I'm beginning to question why I turned down a night of sex with this man, because from the looks of it, he would have rocked my world.

You turned him down because it wouldn't have meant anything to him. You deserve more than that, especially for your first time.

“I think the appropriate word you’re looking for is *sexy*,” Conway playfully suggests, snapping me out of my runaway thoughts.

Without thinking, I blurt the first thing that comes to my mind, waving my hand up and down his body. “To be honest, this whole thing is a tad pretentious, but hey, if you were in a Halloween costume contest, you’d be a shoo-in for first place,” I say with a playful grin.

Conway responds with a light-hearted chuckle, seemingly unaffected. “The team might have gotten carried away, but it’ll make for an epic music video. Add in one hell of a beautiful model”—he points in my direction—“and we have a guaranteed hit on our hands.”

“Thanks,” I squeak, cringing at giving what must be the lamest response in history.

What is wrong with me? Just a few weeks ago, I had no problem giving this man a piece of my mind, and now I can’t even muster a response when he offers me a genuine compliment. It must be his chiseled abs—they’re far too distracting. At least that explains why the Sovereign Kings are so popular. Who wouldn’t want a front-row view of a shirtless Conway?

I know I do.

From what I’ve been told, The Sovereign Kings have made a name for themselves by creating eye-catching music videos and posting short clips of them on social media. They’ve had hundreds of videos go viral, and with or without me, this next one will break the internet too, particularly when women worldwide watch Conway perform in those suspenders.

“Emerson has a few other things to take care of, so I offered to introduce you to Sammy before taking you back to wardrobe and makeup.”

“Sammy? Is there another band member I don’t know about?”

I don’t miss Conway and Emerson’s silent exchange of confused glances. Or the fact that Conway takes several seconds before answering my question.

“Sammy’s the python that you’ll be working with today. Her handler wants to introduce you before we start rolling so she’s more relaxed while we film.”

The thumping of my heart intensifies as I’m overcome with fear. The only plausible explanation is that I misheard him.

“Woah, hold up. Did you say python? Like, as in a *snake*?” The mere thought of my lifelong phobia is enough to give me chills.

I quickly scan my surroundings, petrified that someone is going to pop out of thin air with a giant python and force it around my neck.

“Lennon never mentioned that we perform with snakes?” Conway frowns.

“No, maybe, I don’t know.” I bury my face in my hands. The Sovereign Kings didn’t perform with snakes when I was in high school, but they also weren’t famous back then.

“Lennon knows about my aversion to snakes. Why wouldn’t she have warned me—”

Then it hits me. If she had told me beforehand, I wouldn’t have agreed to come. She must have figured that once I got here, the band could convince me to stay, but that’s not happening.

“You haven’t watched any of our other music videos?” Conway asks.

“No, I don’t have social media or stay up to date on celebrity news. There weren’t any snakes when you performed

on *The Daybreak Show*,” I remind him.

“Right, because we only use them during our concerts and music videos.”

“I can’t do this,” I say to no one in particular. “I need to get out of here.”

I’m ready to bolt out of the building when Conway grabs my elbow.

“Sienna, what’s the problem?” He appears annoyed by my reaction.

“There’s no way in hell I’m letting you or anyone else put a snake around my neck. It makes me physically sick just thinking about it,” I bite out.

“You need to get over it,” he snaps.

“Excuse me?” My eyes widen in surprise at his inconsiderate response, surprised he’s not even pretending to be sympathetic.

He takes a step closer, his voice barely above a whisper to avoid the crew overhearing our conversation. “I’m not a fan of snakes either,” he admits. “Their beady eyes and scaly skin give me the creeps.”

“If you don’t like them, then why the hell are they part of your show?”

“Because our fans absolutely lose it when we bring them out, and it’s a tribute to the early days of rock ’n’ roll.”

“You know how crazy that sounds?” I scoff. “Why would you put yourself in an uncomfortable situation just so you can please others?”

“It makes perfect sense,” he says with a shrug. “I don’t let my fears dictate how I live my life, and neither should you.”

Conway's a risk taker, but I don't think I'll ever understand his desire to put himself in danger or agree to do something he'd rather not. His flawed logic apparently extends as far as draping a massive python around his neck every night just to sell more tickets.

"Who will be held liable when *it* goes rogue and decides it'd rather have me for lunch?" I ask, dead serious.

"Sammy isn't going to hurt you. She ate a few rats a couple of days ago so she's plenty full," Conway says.

"That's the problem, Conway. In my opinion, snakes shouldn't be referred to as *her*, and *she* doesn't have feelings. The thing is more concerned about eating me for a mid-afternoon snack than giving me a cuddle."

Conway bursts into laughter, but his amusement falls short when he catches sight of my panicked expression and sees me eyeing the exit.

"You're really ready to walk out because of this?"

"Yes," I admit, straightening my spine.

It's not easy telling him that I'm willing to pass up on this opportunity because of my fears, but I also won't apologize for my decision.

"In that case, I think you're right. You should leave," he says nonchalantly, his expression now stone cold.

His words feel like a sharp slap to the face, causing me to stagger backward. He was practically flirting with me a few moments ago and now he's threatening to kick me out because I'm standing my ground? Didn't he praise me for doing the same thing with Gianni?

This is different, and you know it.

Conway isn't trying to hurt me or put me down. If anything, one could argue that he's trying to help me with a

tough-love approach. That doesn't mean I have to appreciate it.

He leaps from the stage, his determined strides taking him toward the exit. He forcefully swings the door open and sharply turns his head toward me.

“You can walk out that door right now, and no one will stand in your way. But I can guarantee if you do, you'll regret it,” he promises, his gaze locked on mine. “Believe in yourself, Ace. Take the leap of faith. If you don't push your boundaries and step outside your comfort zone, you'll miss out on a world of opportunities. Don't let this be one of them,” he encourages as he slowly closes the door.

There's nothing I want more than to take this chance, but I can't. Conway might view me as a coward, but it's much more than a risk to me. I've had this phobia since I was a kid and it's not something I can flip on and off.

If circumstances were different, I would have the courage to ask Conway if he magically overcame his own fears overnight. My guess is that he didn't, or maybe he isn't truly afraid of anything, making it difficult to empathize with those who are. If that's the case, lucky him.

“What if we could meet in the middle?” Emerson suggests, surprising me with his presence. “What if Conway had Sammy around his neck instead, so she'd be lying next to you on the couch. Is that something you could do? Consider it baptism by fire on a much smaller scale.”

I nibble on my lower lip as I consider Emerson's idea. I appreciate him being willing to make a concession for me, and it makes me wonder why Conway didn't mention this option earlier.

“Yeah, I think I can handle that,” I say hesitantly.

I involuntarily flinch when Conway storms outside without a word, slamming the door shut behind him. Clearly he's not happy about Emerson intervening, and I wish I knew why.

"I'm sorry, Emerson. I'm not trying to be difficult," I say after standing in silence for a couple of minutes.

"Don't worry. It's common to have to make last-minute adjustments. This isn't the first time, and I guarantee it won't be the last."

Before I can reply, I notice an unfamiliar man marching angrily toward us. He's dressed in a three-piece suit, his hair is slicked back into a comber, and beads of sweat drip down his forehead. I can already tell I don't like him.

"Emerson, what is this I hear about changing the direction of the music video because some diva came in making demands?" My hackles rise at his insult, but the stranger doesn't realize I'm the *diva* in question.

Before I can react, Emerson interjects, "Todd, what are you doing here?"

"This is the most expensive music video the Sovereign Kings have produced. I wanted to supervise to ensure everything goes according to plan," Todd says, acting like he owns the place. "We can't afford any mishaps or last-minute changes."

Why do I get the feeling that Conway just tattled on me like we're in elementary school? This is mortifying.

"Todd, I'd like you to meet Sienna," Emerson introduces me. "She's the model who will be joining us today."

Todd's eyes widen when he realizes he just insulted me to my face. He must have thought I was on the production team since I'm not in costume yet. He reaches out his pudgy hand to shake mine, and I cringe when his clammy fingers make contact with mine.

“Sienna, it’s my pleasure.” The lie effortlessly passes his lips. “Forgive me for asking, but it’s my understanding that you signed the contract we sent over, agreeing to all the terms the band set for the shoot today. Is that correct?”

Is he seriously threatening me because I refuse to do something I’m uncomfortable with? He’s worse than Conway.

“Actually, I didn’t,” I inform him. “I signed the non-disclosure agreement, but the terms in the contract were ambiguous, so I refused to sign it. My agent spoke with Emerson earlier, and he said it wouldn’t be a problem.”

Todd glares daggers in Emerson’s direction, and I immediately regret what I said, not meaning to throw him under the bus.

“Emerson shouldn’t be making those decisions without running it by me first,” Todd barks. “My team manages the contracts with third parties, not him. The terms for this video were set in stone weeks ago and it’s too late for anything to be changed. I’m sorry to inform you, but if you won’t cooperate, you can leave.”

“Todd, do I need to remind you that you don’t have any power here? The band voted weeks ago to feature Sienna in this video. She’s not going anywhere,” Emerson says, clearly trying to rein in his anger.

“Fine,” Todd sneers, deciding not to push Emerson any further. “When this goes sideways and the video falls flat, I’ll make sure the label knows why.” He storms off like a petulant child.

“He’s very intense,” I observe.

“That’s putting it mildly,” Emerson says. “Let me show you where you can get changed and get your hair and makeup done. We’ll start filming soon.”

“Great, thanks.”

I can only hope my day gets better from here and that Conway's mood improves. If not, it's going to be a very long day.

CONWAY

“I DIDN’T THINK YOU WERE childish enough to sic Todd on me,” Emerson yells as he storms outside.

I’m leaning against a concrete pillar in the shade, wishing I were a smoker so I had a distraction right about now.

“He was heading inside when I was coming out, so I gave him a heads-up about the change to the script, that’s all.” I attempt to downplay the situation, but I know I fucked up.

“That’s bullshit,” Emerson says, calling me out. “You knew exactly what you were doing. I thought we agreed not to use him against each other. He’s already on a power trip because I won’t be joining most of our upcoming tour, and the last thing he needs is to believe you’re on his side.”

“Damn, you’re right,” I mutter, raking my fingers through my hair. “It was a stupid move on my part. I’m sorry, man.”

Todd has been a thorn in our side since the day we signed with the label. He’s been pining for Emerson’s job from the get-go, resenting the fact that he doesn’t have more power and influence over the way we operate. His net worth has quadrupled since working with us, but it’s never enough for him.

For some reason, he believes he deserves credit for our success even though all he ever does is trail behind Emerson, barking orders and demanding explanations for our decisions. Anytime one of those choices proves to be effective, he takes the credit when reporting back to the label.

The band has been waiting for the right opportunity to bring up firing Todd. We’ve shown that we can handle our

own, more than proving that we don't need a babysitter. The day we're finally rid of him can't come soon enough.

"It's all good, Con. I put him in his place." Emerson's never been one to hold a grudge, and I've always appreciated his quickness to forgive me when I'm being a pain in the ass. "So, you want to tell me what that outburst with Sienna was really about?" he asks, steering the conversation toward a topic I'd rather avoid.

"Nothing, really." I look down at the ground. "It just seems like she's stuck living in the safety of her comfort zone. I thought I was doing her a favor by encouraging her to try something new," I explain.

It was an impulsive decision to give Sienna an ultimatum, but the second she shrank inside herself when she was asked to do something she wasn't comfortable with, I couldn't help but push back. Plus, I didn't like watching her cower in fear because of a snake—even if Sammy and her friends are terrifying.

Thankfully Emerson intervened before I went too far, or Sienna might have actually left.

"Hmm, that's interesting, because usually you don't have any interest in speaking with the models until after a shoot, and even then, there's not much talking going on," Emerson retorts.

"This is different. She's Lennon's friend."

"Cut the shit, Con." Emerson's tone is firm. "I saw you ask Sienna to sleep with you while we were in New York last month. I admire her for resisting your charm. She deserves a medal."

I groan into my hands. I was sure no one had witnessed my humiliation.

"Did you tell Lennon?"

“Fuck no. She would find a way to blame me, and I’d prefer to stay on her good side. You do realize she’ll come after you when she hears about your little stunt back there.”

“Sienna isn’t going to say anything, at least not until after the shoot. I’ve challenged her, and she’s going to prove she can handle it, even with the modifications,” I bite out. “The last thing she’ll do is complain to her friend—that’s not her style.”

Wells pokes his head out the door, interrupting our conversation. “What are you guys doing out here? It’s time to get started. This video is going to be epic,” he says enthusiastically.

In the middle of setting up my microphone, I sense a shift in the air. When I glance up, Sienna is making her entrance in a skin-tight leather miniskirt, an animal print bralette, and a fur vest. She clutches the top tightly to her chest, her discomfort with the amount of skin she’s showing clear. I watch closely as she takes a quivering breath, gathering the courage to let her hands drop to her sides, revealing her stomach.

It’s impossible not to notice that every other man in the room is watching her. She’s as beautiful as they come, but her innocence is what sets her apart. There isn’t a hidden agenda or ulterior motive behind her actions, and that authenticity is what draws people to her.

Sienna lets out a throaty laugh at something the director says, and I have the sudden urge to throw her over my shoulder and demand she change into something that shows less skin.

Why do I care?

“All right, everyone, take your positions,” the director calls out. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Sienna's back is pressed against the opposite arm of the couch, her long slender legs outstretched across my thighs. I grit my teeth as she shifts in her seat for the hundredth time—she's wrigglier than the snake. Aside from being antsy, she'd maintained her composure up until now, but I can sense a crack in her facade.

"It's touching me," Sienna cries out.

Sammy's midsection is draped across my shoulders, her tail resting on the floor. Her scaly skin slides across my neck as she shifts positions, searching for warmth.

"Snakes are attracted to body heat. If you'd stop moving so much, maybe Sammy would too."

"I told you that it wanted me for an afternoon snack," Sienna squeals, paralyzed in fear.

I'm about to reprimand her when I notice Sammy resting her head on Sienna's lap.

"Oh god, I'm going to die," Sienna says, panicking. She squeezes her eyes shut, probably hoping if she wishes hard enough, the snake will disappear. It won't. "Help," she squeaks.

I don't make an effort to intervene just yet, and nobody else is around at the moment to remove Sammy either.

By the time I finally glance over at her, she's shaking like a leaf. With one eye cautiously open, she shoots me a glare when she sees that I haven't made a move to rescue her.

Just as I'm about to make a snide remark, Sammy slithers across Sienna's exposed abdomen.

A knot forms in my stomach when Sienna lets out a soft whimper and a solitary tear trickles down her cheek. Her hands are clenched in fists, but she doesn't utter a word.

Why isn't she calling out for help again?

Because you were a jackass before, and she doesn't want to risk you getting mad again.

Silent tears are streaming down her face and she's gasping for air. If I don't do something soon, she'll go into shock. I can recognize the telltale signs of someone mentally shielding themselves from a distressing situation.

I mutter a string of curse words, realizing I let this go too far. If the tables were turned and Sienna had locked me in a dark closet, I wouldn't be nearly as accepting of her unwillingness to understand my fear.

"I'm going to move the snake off your lap, Ace. I promise nothing bad is going to happen to you." I try to offer words of comfort, hoping it'll settle her down, but it does the opposite.

"The snake slithering up my body is proof that your promises are shit," she snips back. "If you would have helped sooner, I wouldn't be in this predicament in the first place." Her eyes are still closed and she's holding her hands to her chest, protecting her vital organs.

I lean across the couch and cradle Sammy's head, bringing her back to my side. I'm calm and collected on the outside, but it takes every ounce of willpower not to panic. I wasn't kidding when I said I'm not a fan of snakes either.

"She's gone, Ace," I say triumphantly. "Why don't you open those beautiful eyes now?"

Sienna cautiously opens one eye at a time, instantly relaxing when she finds her lap is empty but tenses up again when her gaze meets mine. "I'm not thanking you," she mutters.

While Sienna may have a reserved temperament, she shouldn't be underestimated. Behind her seemingly delicate exterior lies a spine of steel that I'm growing to admire.

The director comes back, completely oblivious to what just happened.

As the hours pass, I play my role as the arrogant lead singer of the Sovereign Kings well, sitting on my throne with a beautiful woman by my side. In between takes, I discreetly wrangle Sammy and reposition the slippery snake closer to me. Sienna appears to be the only one who notices, thank god. The last thing I need is for anyone to perceive my kindness for something more than it is.

Well, isn't it more?

Once the director finally calls *cut* on the last take of the scene, the handler rushes over to free me from Sammy's grip and returns her to her cage. Once she's gone, Sienna lets out a long exhale, slumping in her seat as the tension drains from her body.

She tilts her head toward me, pointing a slender finger in my direction. "I hate you."

"Sienna, I'm sorry. If I had known it was that—"

"Danvers, it's fine," she cuts me off. "I don't need to be coddled. I admit it felt liberating to prove to myself that I could do it, but just so we're clear, I'm never doing it again."

"Noted."

"That's a wrap, everyone," the director announces, prompting a wave of cheers throughout the room. "Sienna and Conway, I need you to stay for one last scene, but it shouldn't take long."

I stand up to stretch my legs, not sure what the final scene is but agreeing all the same, and bump into Griff who's walking toward the exit.

"Watch where you're going," I seethe, stumbling back a step.

“Me?” he retorts. “You were the one who wasn’t paying attention.” He rises a brow when he sees my side glance toward Sienna, suggesting my attention is elsewhere.

“Whatever,” I grumble. “Just stay out of my way.”

Griff doesn’t say another word as he moves past me.

When will he learn that he doesn’t belong here? The band would be better off without him, although it seems like I’m the only one who thinks that anymore.

I notice Wells and Grayson exiting the room, completely absorbed in conversation with a group of stunning extras from the shoot.

Lucky bastards.

Sienna slips out to go change and as soon as she’s gone, Emerson approaches me.

“Where’d Todd go?” I ask.

“He stormed out halfway through the shoot when he realized things were going fine without him.”

“Good riddance.”

“I couldn’t help but notice you had a change of heart,” Emerson says, raising an eyebrow in curiosity.

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

“Yes, you do. I saw you protecting Sienna from the big scary snake,” he says smugly.

Of course he did. Emerson doesn’t miss a thing.

“I figured it wasn’t worth facing Lennon’s wrath if Sienna passed out on set from a panic attack,” I say nonchalantly.

“Why does it seem like we’d be having a completely different conversation if we were talking about anyone else?” he asks.

Because we would be.

I never would have intervened for anyone else.

“Believe whatever you want,” I reply curtly. “Don’t you have a wife to get home to?”

Emerson chuckles at my feeble attempt to deflect. “You’re right. I’m heading out now, have a good time with Sienna.” His tone is laced with amusement, leaving me wondering if he knows something I don’t.

The studio has cleared out so the only ones remaining are the director, a couple of stagehands, Sienna, and me.

For this last scene, I’ve been instructed to forgo the suspenders and boots. Sienna’s bralette and vest have been replaced with a red corset, black lacing running down the length of her back. The tops of her breasts spill out from her corset, conjuring an image of her lying back on a bed while I hover above her.

This woman is toying with my mind. One minute I’m irritated with her and the next I’m consumed by an overwhelming desire to explore every inch of her.

The leopard-print couch has been switched out with a suede chaise lounge, the walls have been replaced with plain black ones, and a crystal chandelier has been hung above the space, creating a “sensual atmosphere”—those are the director’s words, not mine.

“Sienna, I want you to sit down, facing away from Conway,” the director instructs. “He’ll take a seat behind you. Once we start filming, he will slowly untie the top laces of your corset.”

Sienna’s eyes widen in alarm, but I’m the only one who notices.

“Once Conway gets to the fourth grommet, he’ll stop to make sure the corset stays in place. Remember the lyrics, you’re star-crossed lovers who have finally reunited after months apart, so amp up the passion.”

Fuck me. I don’t remember this being in the script.

This explains Emerson’s odd behavior before he left. He knew this was going to happen.

Sienna’s gaze pings between me and the director, and she discreetly leans in to whisper-hiss in my ear, “Did you know about this?”

I hold my hands up in defense. “Emerson told the director no kissing, nudity, or beds. I guess this is his definition of a loophole to make sure he gets the passion he’s looking for. Are you okay with it?”

“Are you going to threaten to kick me out if I say no?” she bites back.

Touché.

She tries to turn away, but I gently grab her arm to keep her attention. “I deserved that,” I admit. “Tell me if you’re uncomfortable, and we’ll stop.”

Sienna pauses before shaking her head. “No, I’m fine. Let’s just get this over with.”

Ouch.

Guess she’s not looking forward to being so close to me.

Once we’re both in position on the chaise, “Love is a Savage” starts blasting through the speakers and the director shouts, “*Action!*”

Sienna’s back is to my front, and she’s nearly a foot away from me, unintentionally keeping space between us.

“Closer,” the director calls out. “You’re supposed to be in love. Where’s the intimacy?”

I band my arm around Sienna’s waist, pulling her against my chest. I don’t miss the hitch in her breathing when we make contact. The sound of my racing heart reverberates in my ears, its steady rhythm grounding my senses.

I lean in closer, burying my face in Sienna’s hair, and inhale the scent of lilac and oranges. She smells heavenly, and I suddenly have the urge to make her writhe against me with pleasure.

I grab her blonde locks in my fist, pushing them over her shoulder, wondering what her mouth would feel like wrapped around my shaft as I held her hair like this. Would she hum in delight or cry at having her mouth full of my cock?

That’s not an appropriate thought to have about your sister’s friend, dumbass.

That doesn’t stop my cock from pulsating with excitement. I use my newfound daydream to keep me in the present. I gently caress Sienna’s neck in a hypnotic fashion—back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

She is still as a statue but holding tightly to the fabric of the lounge, proof that my touch is affecting her—no acting necessary.

This knowledge pushes me forward and I drag my fingers along her spine, making her shiver at the contact. I pause for effect at the top of her corset, and just as she’s letting out her next breath, I go off script, bending down to plant several kisses along her collarbone as my hands loosen the ribbon of her bodice. I move leisurely, pulling the black lace through each grommet, the crackling tension between us irrefutable.

I place my mouth on the divot above her shoulder and lick my way up her neck, nipping at her earlobe. She arches her

back against me, an innocent moan escaping her lips. I grin when her hands clutch my thighs.

I tug her closer, making sure my erection is hidden from the camera. I'd like to think this moment is between us and us alone. Sienna doesn't react to feeling my cock pressed against her.

I'm not thinking straight when I grab hold of her chin and tip her head back toward me. I'm pleased when I come face-to-face with her wanton expression, her emerald green eyes blazing with desire. Her plump lips are begging me for a kiss, and I lean in to slant my mouth over hers, our intermingled panting the only soundtrack I'm focused on. I'm a mere inch away, eager to finally get a taste, when the director calls, "*Cut.*"

What the fuck?

"Holy shit, that was some good stuff. We're not going to get better than that," he exclaims. "I'm telling you, this is going to be the best music video the Sovereign Kings have ever released."

Part of me wants to demand that this scene never sees the light of day. It didn't feel like Sienna and I were acting, and I'm angry at the thought of millions of other men seeing her like this.

Get it together, Danvers.

Great, now I'm calling myself by my last name too.

"I think you can let me go now," Sienna whispers.

I'm still gripping her waist, holding her against my chest.

"Right, sorry about that." I reluctantly release her, instantly missing her warmth.

"Sienna, it was great working with you," the director says, strolling over to shake her hand.

I wrinkle my nose when he presses a slobbery kiss against her hand, and I make a note to tell Emerson we're never working with this guy again.

"Thank you," Sienna replies politely as she discreetly wipes her hand on her skirt.

"Well, that was... interesting?" she says once the director walks away. Her voice is filled with uncertainty and her cheeks are tinged with a faint blush. "I'm going to head out now."

"I'm hungry." The words tumble out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"Okay?" she says, obviously confused.

"The rest of the band already left, and I hate eating alone. Go to dinner with me?"

Real smooth, Danvers.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Sienna says, nervously biting on her lip.

"Lennon would never let me live it down if I let you go home hungry. Plus, wouldn't you say I owe you for how I acted earlier?"

"Just dinner?"

"I promise."

"You won't try to get me to go back to your place?"

"Only if you beg me." I wink.

"Conway," she warns with a raised eyebrow.

"Dinner as friends," I reiterate. "You in?"

"Fine, but only if I get to pick where we go."

"Deal," I agree.

Although, I'm not sure I should have promised not to make a move. I'm not sure how long I can ignore the burning chemistry between us. What I do know is that I can't stop thinking about what it would be like to kiss her.

10

SIENNA

“THIS PLACE IS A COMPLETE dive. Most people would have chosen a fancy restaurant in Beverly Hills. Not... this,” he says, gesturing to our surroundings.

I brought him to a '50s-style diner in La Mirada. It's outside of L.A. and is the last place anyone would expect to find him. Back at the studio, there were dozens of photographers waiting outside. Someone must have tipped them off that Conway hadn't left with the rest of the band. Thankfully, my name is being kept under wraps, so the public won't find out I was featured in the music video until it drops next month.

When we pulled up to the gravel parking lot and were welcomed by the glowing Car Hop Diner sign, Conway wasn't amused, but he reluctantly followed me inside.

We're seated across from each other in a worn vinyl booth. Our shoes stick to the floor, there's ketchup bottles on every table, and a jukebox hums in the corners. Lennon mentioned Conway has expensive taste and prefers the finer things in life, so this is a stark contrast from the upscale restaurants he's used to.

“Danvers, when will you learn that I'm not like most people? You'll thank me once you try the food. They have one of *the* best burgers in Southern California.”

“A place like this? Not a chance.” Conway's disapproval is written all over his face as he glares at the cheap plastic tumbler in front of him. “You want a sensational burger? The Bistro on Rodeo Drive serves a gourmet slider course featuring A5 Japanese Wagyu beef. It's one of the most

expensive dining experiences in the world, but it's unlike anything you'll ever taste."

"Yes, but do they serve your Wagyu beef on a grilled bun with gooey cheese and their famous fry sauce?" He subtly shakes his head. "I didn't think so. There's nothing wrong with expensive cuisine, but you should consider expanding your horizons. More money doesn't always mean better quality."

"I like my horizons exactly where they are, thank you very much," Conway states, leaning back in his seat with his hands laced behind his head. "There's something special about having a meal cooked for you by a Michelin-starred chef. That alone is an experience in and of itself—a luxury I could never afford before becoming famous. For me, eating in nice restaurants is proof of my success, a reminder that I escaped poverty," he offers. "And while I enjoy my lifestyle, every decision I've made has been to guarantee security for my family."

Describing Conway as *complex* would be an understatement. He effortlessly transitions between personas, namely a conceited asshole and a decent person, wearing whichever mask fits the situation.

To his adoring fans, he's the untouchable rockstar who captivates them with his undeniable charisma and bad-boy charm. To Lennon, he's her fierce and loyal protector, willing to go to great lengths to ensure her safety. To the Sovereign Kings, he is both their fearless leader and a trusted friend.

I find myself curious about the *real* Conway Danvers, the man behind the facade. Who is he when the spotlight fades and the world isn't watching? What fuels his desires, what nightmares keep him up at night, and what drives him to do what he does?

I refrain from vocalizing my intrusive questions and offer a lighthearted response instead. "You make a good point.

However, something tells me I'd be sent packing if I showed up to a restaurant like that dressed like *this*." I motion to my pink sweat shorts, baggy T-shirt, and flip flops. "I always—"

I trail off when two news vans pull up outside the diner. Panic seizes me and I frantically scan our surroundings to find an escape plan. My mind goes blank, and I instinctively duck under the table, disregarding the less-than-sanitary conditions.

"Sienna, what the hell are you doing? Is this part of some strange pre-meal ritual that models participate in and I'm just not in on the secret?" Conway teases from above.

When I don't respond, he lowers his head so our faces are on the same level, his expression turning serious. "Ace, what's wrong?"

"The paparazzi are here. I can't be seen with you," I whisper urgently.

What was I thinking, agreeing to go out in public with a Sovereign King? I should have known better. Now my face will be plastered all over the tabloids by morning and any hope of privacy will be gone.

I'm spiraling in my own thoughts, but I don't miss the brief flash of hurt in Conway's eyes, even though it's quickly replaced with a determined glint. His head disappears and seconds later he's on his feet, bending down to take my hands and help me up from under the table.

"Let's go," he says.

"Where?"

"Somewhere they won't find us."

We weave in between tables, keeping our heads down. Several patrons glance at us as we pass by, but no one pays enough attention to recognize Conway.

It occurs to me that he doesn't bother with disguises or hiding his identity when he's out in public. He's unfazed by the prospect of photographers entering the diner and snapping his photo. In fact, he'd probably make it worth their while by posing next to the jukebox or finding a Sovereign Kings fan and asking them to dance.

He pushes past the swinging doors leading into the kitchen, quickly pulling me in after him. I peek out the service window a moment later to find the paparazzi entering the diner, searching for Conway. I let out a relieved sigh, grateful we managed to escape in the nick of time.

Unlucky for us, the server who took our drink order, Sarah, storms into the kitchen right behind us.

"You can't be back here. This area is for employees only," she firmly states.

Conway reaches into his back pocket and pulls out five hundred-dollar bills, holding them up in front of her. "This money is yours if you'll take us somewhere we can eat in private and let us know when the photographers leave."

Looking at the cash in his hand, I can't help but wonder if it's the same bills I sent him for the first payment on my hotel debt. It was probably reckless to send it through the mail, but I didn't have his home address, and I wasn't about to tell Lennon that I owed her brother money.

I was surprised when I got a text message from an unknown number a few days after sending the letter.

Got your note, Ace. The nicknames were a nice touch. P.S.: I got your message loud and clear, but you really don't need to pay me back. –Danvers

Expect the next installment soon. –Ace

Conway had liked my message, a confirmation that he understood I had every intention of settling my debt.

The sooner I pay him off, the better.

I'm drawn back to the present by Sarah's voice as it rises with excitement. Her eyes are wide as she looks back and forth between the wad of cash and Conway's face, her face lit up in recognition.

"You're Conway Danvers."

"The one and only."

"Oh my gosh, I can't believe it. Can I get your autograph?"

"I'll do you one better," he tells her with a sly smile. "If you show my friend and me where we can hide out for a while, I'll make sure you get backstage passes to our next show in L.A. so you can meet the rest of the band. What do you say?"

"That would be incredible," Sarah says gleefully. "If I agree, do I still get the money?"

"Absolutely," he assures her, extending his hand with the bills.

"Thank you so much," she murmurs as she quickly pockets the cash.

This is when I'd usually cast judgment on Conway for paying Sarah off and assuming he can buy favors by waving around a stack of cash. However, in this particular instance, I have no problem with him bribing her if it gets us out of here before the paparazzi find us.

"Follow me," Sarah says, leading the way through the bustling kitchen.

We descend a creaky staircase that leads to the basement and at the far end of the hallway, she opens a door, revealing a small, dimly lit storage closet. The space is cramped, shelves lining the walls stocked with ketchup bottles, salt and pepper shakers, napkins, and other supplies.

“It’s not much, but no one else is allowed down here, so you won’t be disturbed. There’s no room for chairs, but that doesn’t mean you have to sit directly on the floor.” She leans down to one of the lower shelves, pulling out a disposable tablecloth and laying it on the ground.

“There,” she exclaims. “Do you know what you want to eat, or do you want me to bring you a menu?”

“We’ll have two cheeseburgers with fries and two chocolate shakes,” I say, my voice echoing in the confined space.

Sarah scribbles down our order, her pen moving hurriedly across the notepad, before scurrying down the hall and disappearing up the stairs.

I spin around in the tight space, chuckling at the absurd situation we’ve gotten ourselves into.

“Come on, Casanova. I hope you’re prepared for the finest dining experience of your life,” I quip.

When Conway doesn’t respond, I turn around to find him standing in the hallway, his complexion pale as a ghost. His hands hang lifeless by his sides and his face is void of emotion as he repeatedly murmurs, “I’m in control, and I won’t let what happened in my past define my present.”

I’m not sure what triggered this reaction from him or how to bring him back.

I know from what Lennon has told me that she thinks Conway carries trauma from his childhood. He won’t tell her all the details, wanting to shield her from the sordid past. She has mentioned that their mom was a drug addict and they grew up above a strip club, practically raising themselves.

Careful not to make any sudden movements, I extend my hands to cup Conway’s face. As my fingers make contact with his warm skin, the memory of his hands wrapped around my

waist and his tender kisses along my collarbone flash across my mind.

I'm almost certain that what happened in the studio didn't mean anything to him, but it was the most erotic moment of my life.

"Danvers, it's Ace," I whisper, stroking his cheek gently. "Can you hear me? You're safe."

He places his hands on top of mine but doesn't acknowledge me otherwise. I keep offering soothing words of comfort in a low voice until his vacant gaze gradually fades, replaced by a flicker of recognition. His eyes dart between me and the cramped closet as he finally grasps the situation. He leans his forehead against mine and takes several deep breaths.

"I don't do well in small dark spaces. When Sarah brought us down here, it caught me off guard," he admits, showing a vulnerable side of himself.

"It's okay, Conway," I empathize.

"You can go ahead and gloat now."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I reprimanded you earlier for admitting your fear of snakes, while I pretend to be the fearless and daring lead singer of the Sovereign Kings who isn't afraid of anything."

I come to an important realization: Conway genuinely believes what he's saying. He doesn't think he's allowed to have feelings or display his emotions, and becomes consumed by self-loathing when his weaknesses are revealed.

"Bullshit, Danvers," I say, tilting my head back to meet his gaze. "You're the most courageous and self-assured person I know. Sure, you have your moments, but don't we all? Don't be so hard on yourself. If it weren't for you, I would have missed out on a once-in-a-lifetime experience today all

because I was too afraid to step outside my comfort zone. Although, I would have preferred if you hadn't been a jerk about it."

He blinks slowly, probably wondering why I'm not using the opportunity to give him a taste of his own medicine. But I won't do that to him.

"Sienna, I—"

"Please don't apologize. You more than made up for it by keeping the snake on your side of the couch. Don't worry, you haven't lost your edge. You're still the formidable frontman of the Sovereign Kings who everyone adores," I assure him. "Why don't I call Jay and have him pick you up around back? We should be able to get you out of here without being noticed. Once you're gone, I'll take a taxi home." I lift my hands away from Conway's cheeks, but he surprises me by pulling them back to where they were, tracing his fingers lightly across my lips.

"No, I don't want to go yet," he insists, nuzzling his nose against my palms and inhaling deeply. "I've always had a weakness for lilacs and oranges."

My pulse quickens as I imagine bringing my lips to meet his, the memory of our almost-kiss replaying through my thoughts for the second time tonight.

I breathe in deeply, reminding myself that he isn't himself right now. No matter how much my heart secretly hopes there could be something more between us, I'd do well to remember that Conway Danvers is a player. He doesn't do commitments or relationships. I can't let this single moment of vulnerability blur my judgment.

"We should get in the closet before someone sees us," I whisper, pulling away before we do something we'll both regret.

“Okay,” Conway says hesitantly.

He follows my lead when I enter the small space and sit cross-legged on the white tablecloth.

“The next time we go out, I’m not letting you choose the place,” he informs me, reclaiming his usual confident demeanor as he settles in beside me.

He said next time... Does that mean he wants to see me again?

I push aside the ridiculous thought and remind myself to focus on the here and now. I’m not naive enough to believe there will be a next time.

“Where’s your sense of adventure? This is far more exciting than eating in a booth or dining in a stuffy restaurant,” I say with a wink.

“I hate to break it to you, Ace, but this isn’t an adventure.” Conway chuckles.

“What is, then?”

“Skydiving in Bora Bora, ziplining in Costa Rica, cliff diving in Hawaii... Eating on the floor of a sketchy diner is just plain reckless,” he teases.

“Oh Danvers, what am I going to do with you?”

We are polar opposites.

He’s a thrill-seeker, constantly pushing the boundaries without a care for the consequences. He doesn’t seem to fear the unknown, living only for today, and makes the most out of every opportunity that knocks at his door.

I’m a rule follower, adverse to taking unnecessary risks. My life is planned down to the second, and I evaluate every option before making a decision. I thrive off of stability and knowing what’s coming next.

On the surface, we have very little in common, but an undeniable connection draws us together on a deeper level.

Sarah comes in holding a tray piled high with our food. “Here’s your order,” she says, carefully placing the plates and milkshakes on the tablecloth. “There are still a few photographers lingering in the dining area, but I’ll have them out of here soon. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No, this looks great. Thanks so much,” I tell her.

She gives a slight nod before exiting and leaves the door ajar.

My mouth waters at the feast before me: a giant cheeseburger, a mountain of golden fries, and a chocolate shake topped with whipped cream and a cherry.

I watch with amusement as Conway dubiously picks up his burger to examine it. He studies each layer of ingredients before testing a bite. A subtle moan escapes his lips, and I grin at his reaction.

“You were right, this is incredible,” he declares around a mouthful.

I giggle as juice dribbles down his chin. Without thinking, I reach out to gently wipe it away with my finger, freezing when I realize what I’ve done.

“I-I’m so sorry,” I stammer, feeling a blush rise to my cheeks. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

“Don’t worry about it. I didn’t mind.” He smirks before taking another bite of his burger.

I find myself balancing on a tightrope of conflicting emotions: desire and denial.

I’m captivated by Conway’s magnetic presence, wicked grin, and playful demeanor. He’s everything I’m not, and I

can't help but be drawn to him like a moth to a flame despite knowing I'm bound to get burned.

If I'm wise, I'll use every last ounce of self-preservation to maintain a safe distance between us.

CONWAY

THE LAST TIME I SET foot inside a diner, I was seven. Lulu had locked Lennon and me in the closet for two straight days, having forgotten we were in there in the first place. When she finally remembered to let us out, she thought taking us out for breakfast would make up for it.

She took us to the nearest diner and ordered the biggest stack of pancakes on the menu, topped with strawberries and whipped cream. While Lennon and I ate our breakfast, Lulu told us she had a quick errand to run and to stay in the booth until she got back. We waited for what felt like hours, and when we finally went searching for her, she was slumped against the back-alley wall, lost in a drug-induced haze. Her priorities never changed.

Needless to say, I haven't stepped inside a diner since then.

When Jay pulled up to the Car Hop Diner earlier, I was prepared to tell him to turn the car around, but one glimpse of Sienna's smiling face, and I knew I couldn't do it. Especially not after my outburst earlier today.

I take another bite of my cheeseburger, deep in thought. Sienna's touch still lingers even though she's pulled away.

"Ace," I whisper.

"Yes?" She looks at me with innocent doe eyes.

"What you saw... How I acted in the hallway..." I pause, trying to gain my composure.

I don't usually get so rattled, but in this instance, I am. I've never discussed this with anyone, not even the Phillips brothers. Everything they know is from what Lennon has told

them, and her version is a fairytale compared to what I endured.

“I’m not sure if Lennon has told you or not, but our mom Lulu was a stripper and a drug addict. She often left us locked in the closet. It was worse before Lennon was born since I was trapped in the dark by myself.” I let out a long exhale, needing to get this out. “My childhood isn’t something I talk about much, but I wanted you to know why I reacted the way I did.”

She has a somber expression on her face as she takes in everything I said.

“Conway, I’m sorry you had to go through that. I know it doesn’t fix anything, but I am.” Sienna’s voice is filled with compassion. She extends her hand to pat my leg in a show of comfort, but it sets me off. The last thing I want is for her to feel sorry for me.

“I don’t want your pity.” I jerk away from her touch.

“It’s called empathy, Danvers. What kind of person would I be if I wasn’t sorry for the pain and suffering you endured? I can’t begin to comprehend what you’ve been through, but that doesn’t mean I won’t be here for you in silent solidarity or be a listening ear if you ever want to talk about it.”

Sienna’s words mean more to me than they probably should, and something about that is both comforting and concerning.

“I assume I can trust that you won’t go to the press with this?” My voice is void of emotion, like I’m negotiating a business deal.

Sienna’s demeanor shifts from calm and collected to a blazing inferno. She folds her arms across her chest and scowls at me, clearly not pleased by my question.

“Are you kidding me?” she says with a raised voice. “Have I given you any indication that I would betray your trust? Hell,

less than an hour ago I practically ran away from the paparazzi instead of openly flaunting my connection to you. If that doesn't tell you where my head's at, I don't know what will."

"Fuck, you're right. It's a habit to be overly cautious. In my line of work, one misstep with the wrong person and it goes viral."

From the beginning, the Sovereign Kings have kept a close-knit circle, not fully trusting anyone besides each other. We all have secrets we want to protect.

"Are you going to publicize my phobia of snakes?"

"Of course not." I'm offended she would even ask.

"Why not?"

"Frankly, it's nobody's business. It's not relevant to your work as a model, so why should the public be involved? You dealt with it the best way you saw fit today, and that's all that matters."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Sienna says smugly. "That's the same reason you can trust that your secret is safe with me, Conway. Your past shouldn't shadow your accomplishments."

I'm at a loss for words. My interactions with the public are superficial at best. Despite being an extrovert, I've drawn a line between my public and private personas. I'm deliberate in which sides of myself to share with people outside my inner circle. Yet, during the short time I've spent with Sienna, she has blurred that line without even trying.

Sienna Cartwright is my antithesis.

I carry a chip on my shoulder the size of a boulder. She views the world through rose-colored glasses.

I live for the moment with no regard for tomorrow. She meticulously maps out her future.

I dive headfirst into a situation, consequences be damned. She abides by her self-imposed boundaries.

I have an insatiable appetite for the limelight. She keeps a low profile at all costs.

On the surface, we might not have much in common, but if you look closer, you'll find that we're both resolute in our goal of shaping our own destinies, free from the constraints of our past.

Sienna seems to understand my unspoken need to drop the subject and turns her attention back to her meal. I watch with fascination as she polishes off her burger and fries in record time.

“What?” she asks when she catches me staring.

“Nothing.” I chuckle.

“Would you be shocked if I told you this was my first burger in four years?” Sienna pushes her plate aside and tucks her legs beneath her, settling into a more comfortable position. “As a modeling assistant, I had to keep a similar diet as the models. When I joined Elevation, I refused to sacrifice my well-being for the sake of unrealistic standards.

“The brands my agent Becky has me working with all promote body positivity, offer inclusive sizing, and appreciate the beauty of all body types. She set me up with a nutritionist and trainer, so I can maintain a healthy lifestyle while still eating what I want.” She gives me a small smile as she brings her chocolate milkshake to her lips for a drink.

“You never cease to amaze me, Ace,” I say with admiration.

Sienna is a beautiful woman, and it's a fucking turn-on that she has the positive self-image to match. I hold my tongue though, not wanting to scare her off by saying something she would deem inappropriate.

“Truthfully, modeling isn’t my long-term plan. Someday, I’d like to back to school and become a teacher or social worker, but I’m open to other possibilities as long as I get to work with kids.”

“Don’t you have better opportunities as a model? Especially considering you’re a hot ticket item right now.”

“Money doesn’t buy happiness, Danvers.” She gives me a pointed look. “I’ve never enjoyed being in the spotlight; it’s not for me. I’m only modeling right now because of Ruth and Leola.”

“Those are your parents, right?” I confirm. Lennon has mentioned their names before, but I’ve never asked for details.

Sienna bites her lip and hesitates, eyes darting to her lap.

“Yes,” she finally says. “For lack of a better word, they’re my surrogate grandparents, but they’re so much more than that. My mom passed away during childbirth, and my dad...” She pauses briefly. “He left when I was nine. Ruth and Leola were retired teachers who took me in when I didn’t have anyone else. Ruth has several health problems, and I’ve become responsible for their financial well-being. Modeling might not be my first career choice, but it pays the bills.”

“They’re lucky to have you.”

“That’s really sweet of you to say, but I’m the lucky one.”

I have the feeling we’re only scratching the surface of the struggles she’s facing, but I don’t pry further, giving her the same courtesy she gave me.

“So, Ace, where do we go from here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the way I see it, we have a dilemma on our hands.”

“What kind of dilemma?”

“There’s no denying the chemistry between us. Hell, we almost kissed twice today, and the second time *you* initiated it.”

“But I resisted,” she chimes in, proud of herself.

“Much to my disappointment,” I quip back. “Who’s to say that it won’t happen again the next time we see each other? You’ve made it clear that you don’t want to spend a night in my bed”—I don’t miss the blush that rises up her neck at the mention of sleeping with me—“but I have a feeling we’re going to be seeing more of each other with how much you and Lennon are hanging out. How do you want to avoid any more *almost* kisses?” God that sounds so cheesy. Definitely not something I thought I’d ever say out loud.

Sienna picks up her discarded napkin and starts twisting it around her finger.

“I’d like to be friends,” she says after a while.

I stare back at her, disappointment clouding my mind. A part of me secretly hoped she’d admit she wanted to spend the night together, no strings attached. Now I’m barreling toward a future where every encounter with her will mean suppressing the urge of dragging her to the nearest unoccupied room and fucking her brains out.

I suppose being friends is better than avoiding each other altogether.

“I think you’re right. It wouldn’t be fair for Lennon to have you all to herself,” I say with a wink.

“No, we wouldn’t want that.” Sienna giggles. She lifts up her empty milkshake glass in a toast. “To being friends.”

“To being friends,” I parrot, tapping my glass to hers.

Jay enters the passcode Sienna gave him, gaining access to the gated community where she lives. We drive down several roads lined with cookie-cutter condos, whose residences have all went to bed hours ago.

Sienna and I lingered at the diner, exchanging embarrassing stories about Lennon and talking about my travels. The paparazzi were long gone when we made our exit. On our way out, I expressed my appreciation to the cook for making one of the best damn burgers I've ever had.

Despite my objections, Sienna insisted on paying for her own meal. She adamantly reminded me that that's what she would do if she were out with any other friend.

When Jay pulls up to Sienna's condo, I peer out the window. The warm glow of the porch light illuminates the entrance, and I notice the three rocking chairs lined in a row and an array of potted plants, adding a touch of charm.

I glance down at Sienna, who drifted off to sleep on our way here. I didn't want her to wake up with a stiff neck, so I moved to the middle seat and laid her head so it was resting in my lap.

She starts to shift, sensing that the car has stopped. She blinks away her drowsiness and gasps in horror when she spots the damp drool mark on my pants.

"Oh my god," she exclaims, covering her face with her hands. "I can't believe I fell asleep in your lap and drooled on you."

I don't bother correcting her that I was the one who placed her on my lap after she fell asleep. It's best to avoid an argument before she leaves.

I reach out to lower her hands from her face so that I can look in her eyes. "I'm going straight home from here. It's not a big deal."

“If you say so.” She doesn’t seem very convinced.

“Thanks for the ride.” She smiles at Jay.

“My pleasure,” he replies, grinning right back.

I let out a snort at his display of politeness. He’s never been this nice to the other women I’ve had in the car. Granted, most of them are just hookups and never bother to thank him.

“Goodnight, Conway,” Sienna murmurs as she gets out.

Before she can close the door, I call out to her.

“Sienna?”

“Yeah?” She turns back to face me.

Fuck, what was I going to say?

“Have a good night, Ace,” I say lamely, struggling to find my words.

“You too, Danvers.”

She shuts the car door, and I watch her jog up the drive and disappear into the house.

I have a feeling that agreeing to be her friend is going to prove far more challenging than I anticipated.

12

SIENNA

“BECKY, FOR THE LAST TIME, I’m not joining social media,” I declare. My voice is resolute as I lock my car and switch the phone to my other ear. “I’m not giving strangers access to my personal life. Protecting my privacy is important to me, and I’m not willing to compromise that.”

I exit the parking garage and join the crowded streets of L.A.

“What if my assistant manages your accounts?” Becky pleads. “We can focus on posting professional content, like behind-the-scenes shots from recent campaigns and sneak peeks of upcoming collaborations. People are dying to know what you’ve been up to since the Gianni incident, and once the music video for “Love is a Savage” drops, you’ll be all anyone is talking about.”

That’s the last thing I want.

Even though I’m modeling, I’ve remained relatively unknown to the general public. The fact that I don’t have a social media presence helps keep me under the radar, which is why I’m standing my ground on this.

I know I’m fortunate to have this opportunity, that countless models would give anything to be in my shoes right now. But this will always be a means to an end, and once I’ve paid my debts and saved enough money to go back to school, I’m quitting.

And, after Conway and Jay dropped me off at home the other night following our time at the diner, I emailed Emerson directly and told him to deposit my paycheck from the music

video right into Conway's account. It's almost the same amount I owe him, and I want to be paid up in full.

After a week of email exchanges with Emerson, mostly from him trying to talk me out of it, I finally got confirmation this morning that the deposit had been completed.

If Conway and I are going to be friends, I need it to be on equal footing. I might have been the one to suggest things stay platonic between us, but I still have mixed feelings about it.

He was right when he said the chemistry between us is undeniable, but I'm determined to resist it. I won't settle for being another notch in his bedpost.

Deep down, a small part of me still clings to the teenage fantasy that he'll choose me and leave his playboy lifestyle behind. It's a silly concept, and I'm quick to dismiss it whenever it pops into my head.

That hasn't stopped me from making myself come every night to images of Conway's strong arms wrapped around my waist as he does sinful things to my mouth. What happens alone in the dark stays in the dark, right?

Keep telling yourself that.

"Sienna, are you listening?" Becky interrupts my thoughts. "You wouldn't have to lift a finger—my assistant will take care of everything."

To Becky's credit, she can be very persuasive, and I find myself considering her suggested compromise. If someone else sets up and runs my social media accounts, I wouldn't be pressured to post or check in regularly. I'm close to caving in until I recall the warning in my daily horoscope this morning.

Things might be going well for you at work, Virgo, but don't let your values be jeopardized for a business deal. Stand up for what you believe in. Chances are the stress is taking a physical and emotional toll.

While some may think horoscopes are a load of nonsense, I have a different perspective. Mine are accurate more often than not, and it seems today is no exception.

“The answer is no.” I’m confident I’m making the right decision. “I understand the business reasons behind it, but I can’t do it. It’s the principle of the matter. If I start posting professional modeling photos, my followers will expect details of my personal life—what I eat for breakfast, who I’m dating, what I’m wearing. They’ll think they’re entitled to an opinion on every little thing, and I refuse to give anyone that kind of power over me.”

I enter the restaurant with the cheerful yellow awning and flower boxes nestled in the windows, exactly as Lennon described it, and retreat to a corner to finish my conversation.

“You’re proving to be quite the challenge,” Becky says with admiration. “I appreciate your honesty and respect you for sticking to your guns. Let’s table the social media discussion, but don’t be surprised if I bring it up again.”

“I can live with that.”

Becky is a well-respected modeling agent with a knack for persuading clients to discover their untapped potential while still respecting their boundaries. In the short time we’ve worked together, she’s treated our contract like a partnership and she genuinely values my opinions, which I appreciate.

“Are you still interested in collaborating with Delvoni? They reached out this morning to offer you a deal for an upcoming collection. It’ll be a tight schedule, but I’ve reviewed the compensation package, and after we negotiate, you’re looking at a substantial payout.”

“No way. Are you serious?” I yell, unable to contain my excitement. This is definitely an opportunity I’m interested in.

Delvoni is a popular clothing brand known for its inclusive sizing and an emphasis on affordable luxury. They take pride in designing each piece in-house, ensuring the quality of their fabric is flawless, and offer reasonable pricing. From my time working with David, I know it's one of the most coveted brands every model wants to work with, so being offered a collaboration with them is like hitting the jackpot.

“Dead serious,” Becky says enthusiastically. “I spoke with the CEO directly, and she told me anyone willing to put Gianni de Santis in his place has a home at Delvoni, regardless of their modeling background. Should I schedule a call with them to discuss the details?”

“Yes, please. This is the best news. I can't thank you enough for making this possible,” I say, brimming with gratitude. “I apologize, but I'm running late to meet a friend for brunch. Keep me updated on the meeting time.”

“I will. Go celebrate, you've earned it.”

Today is going to be a great day—I can feel it.

Lennon is seated at a table tucked in the back corner of the dimly lit restaurant. She might not be an official member of the band, but she still attracts the paparazzi's attention during a slow news cycle.

“Sienna, you're here.” A joyful expression lights her face as she stands to give me a hug.

Her sleeveless, white bodycon dress is proudly showcasing her baby bump, and the way she's paired it with low-top sneakers and an understated gold, curb-linked bracelet embodies classic fashion.

“Sorry I'm late, my agent called on the way here with some fantastic news,” I squeal with excitement.

“Well... Don’t leave me hanging! What is it?” Her eyes are lit with curiosity.

“Delvoni wants to collaborate with me on a collection. Can you believe it?”

“Oh my God, Sisi, that’s fantastic. I’m so happy for you.” She pulls me in for another heartfelt hug before we settle into our seats. “I’m completely obsessed with their latest line and will definitely buy two of everything from your collection.”

One of the things I’ve always admired about Lennon is that she’s willing to dive wholeheartedly and without hesitation into supporting the people she cares about.

“I hope you don’t mind that I ordered for us. You won’t believe the amazing brunch sampler this place has. I’ve been craving it for months. This little one”—she gently pats her stomach—“was protesting that it’s been too long since we’ve eaten.”

“That’s perfect, thank you,” I say.

Our waiter brings over our drinks—an herbal tea for Lennon and a cappuccino for me. I pick up my cup and inhale the rich aroma before taking a sip.

“Bless you for choosing a place with excellent coffee,” I praise Lennon.

“There’s no need to rub it in my face,” she says with a fake pout. “Emerson is making me cut out coffee while I’m pregnant, and I’m counting down the days until this baby is here so I can finally have a latte.”

“Speaking of Emerson, I have to ask... Why didn’t you warn me Sammy and her friends would be making an appearance in the music video last week?” I’m not mad at her for it, but I am curious about her reasoning. “I was surprised by it, and Conway wasn’t happy when I had concerns.”

Lennon remains silent as she sips her tea, carefully considering her response. She finally sets her cup down and gives me a soft smile. “If you had known, you would have backed out. It was a career-changing opportunity whether you want to admit it or not, and I couldn’t let you pass it up. Plus, I knew Emerson wouldn’t force you to do anything you weren’t comfortable with.”

Lennon and Conway are so much alike. They’re both fiercely loyal to those they care about but also believe they know what’s best for them. While they have good intentions, their overbearing personalities can be difficult to deal with.

“I’m sure Emerson already told you, but we were able to find a solution. Conway had the snake on his neck, and I’ll admit I was pleasantly surprised when he made an effort to keep *it* on his side of the couch.”

“Huh, that’s interesting.” Lennon smirks. “Are you sure you’re not mistaking my brother for someone else?”

“What do you mean?”

“That doesn’t sound like Conway. He never goes out of his way to help make someone’s job easier, especially after he’s taken a stand.” She shifts in her seat so we’re facing each other. “I’m just going to come right out and ask... Are you sleeping with my brother?”

I spit out a mouthful of coffee. She has never been one to mince her words, but I was not expecting that.

“What? No. Where the hell did that come from?”

“Emerson might have mentioned that Conway took you out to dinner. In his world, dinner is always followed by sex.”

I wrinkle my nose in disgust. “We went to the Car Hop Diner and hid from the paparazzi when they showed up. There was nothing romantic about it. In fact, you’ll be pleased to know that we even agreed to be friends.”

I leave out the almost kissing on the set of the music video, Conway's blackout, and the second *almost* kiss that I initiated. They're not important.

Lennon gives me a wry smile. "Friends, huh? This just keeps getting better. Sienna, my brother doesn't have friends aside from the guys. He particularly doesn't have any friends of the opposite sex."

"Well, now he has me," I say with a shrug. "There has to be a first time for everything. Are you okay with this?" I'm rambling now, uncomfortable with the topic. The last thing I want to do is compromise our friendship because of my complicated feelings toward her brother.

Lennon reaches out to place her hand on mine. "You don't need my permission to spend time with Conway. Hell, if you told me the two of you were exclusively dating, I'd be ecstatic. It's just that you're total opposites. He has always been flighty and has no plans to commit to anyone or anything other than his career. You, on the other hand, thrive off planning ahead and you've always needed stability. I don't want to see you get hurt, that's all."

"Conway and I are strictly friends, end of story," I assure her. "I have no intention of getting tied up with someone like him."

"Uh-huh," she says skeptically.

I don't have plans to sleep with, date, or otherwise engage with Conway Danvers, so there's no point in continuing this conversation.

Maybe if I say it enough times, I'll actually believe it.

I deflect, shifting the conversation to less a less complicated subject.

"Enough about me. I want to hear all about how the preparations for the baby are coming along."

She claps her hands, eyes sparkling. “We went with a woodland theme for the nursery. I found the cutest forest animal prints and decals. The baby is all Emerson can talk about. He’s going to be best dad—I can’t wait.”

I offer her a warm smile, genuinely pleased to see her so happy.

Lennon and I spend the next several hours stuffing our faces with eggs benedict, quiche lorraine, and mini blueberry coffee cakes while sipping on virgin mimosas. We reminisce about our high school days, and Lennon shares stories about what her life is like on tour.

“That meal was delicious, I’m stuffed,” I say after my third plateful of food. “I haven’t had this much fun in years... I’ve missed this.”

“Me too,” she agrees. “That reminds me, Emerson and I are having a small get-together with the rest of the band tomorrow and I want you to come. Bring your swimsuit.”

“I appreciate the invite, but—” Before I can tell her that I don’t want to intrude on a family gathering, I’m startled when I spot two attractive and brooding men storming toward our table.

“Um, Lennon, is there a particular reason why your husband and brother are stalking toward us with scowls on their faces?”

Her guilty expression causes a twinge of unease in my stomach. I wonder what she did this time. Back in high school, she had a knack for getting in trouble, and more often than not, I found myself inadvertently caught up in the messes she made.

“I might have given Emerson the impression that we were having brunch at the house and I accidentally left my phone on the counter,” she confesses.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because he won’t let me out of the house without a security detail and I wanted to spend an afternoon with my best friend without causing a scene.” She takes a leisurely sip of her drink, knowing it’s going to be her last before Emerson arrives at our table. “Besides, the band was supposed to be at the studio all day. I didn’t think anyone would notice if I was gone for a few hours.”

“They noticed, all right.”

Before I can utter another word, Emerson looms over Lennon, his previously stern expression transforming into one of concern.

“Where the hell have you been?” he demands in a hushed tone. “I forgot something at the house and got worried when I found your phone on the counter and your car gone. I panicked when Jay told me you hadn’t asked for a security detail to go with you. You know better than to go anywhere alone, especially with how aggressive the paparazzi can be.” He kneels on the ground in front of Lennon, resting his hands on her belly.

Conway, who’s been quietly observing until now, chimes in. “How come he can touch your stomach but anytime I try, I get scolded?”

“Because he’s the father of my child and you’re not,” Lennon quips back.

“Yeah, but—”

Emerson cuts Conway off. “Now is not the time or place to argue about this.” He stands up and helps Lennon out of her seat. “Baby, the place is swarming with paparazzi. Someone must have recognized you and leaked your location. We need to get out of here before the situation gets worse.”

My heart skips a beat as Conway's hand lands on my shoulder, catching me off guard.

"You're coming with me," he insists.

"Okay," I squeak. My hands are clammy and my stomach clenches.

"Come on, Jay is waiting for us out back. We should leave before the photographers think to check the alley."

He cups my elbow, helping me to my feet. His touch ignites a surge of electricity through my veins. I'm confronted with the undeniable truth that my feelings for Conway Danvers are far more complex than I'd care to admit.

"Wait, what about Emerson and Lennon?"

"They're more than capable of handling themselves, believe me. My main concern is getting you out of here unnoticed, unless you've changed your mind about having your face plastered on every tabloid?"

I shake my head, unable to find the right words.

"See you tomorrow," Lennon calls out as Emerson guides her toward the front entrance.

"Bye," I murmur, not even sure she heard me.

What on earth have I gotten myself into?

CONWAY

I PLACE MY HAND ON the small of Sienna's back as I guide her through the crowded restaurant, aware that a group near the front has spotted Emerson and Lennon. It won't be long until someone notices me too. Time is of the essence if I want to get her out of here without alerting the paparazzi, so I pick up my pace.

We're near the kitchen entrance when the doors swing open abruptly and a server rushes out, carrying a tray of scalding hot food, oblivious to the people around him.

Reacting on instinct, I move Sienna out of the way just in the nick of time, narrowly avoiding a collision. She gasps in surprise as her hands clutch my shoulders for balance. The rhythmic thud of her quickened heartbeat sends a shiver of satisfaction down my spine. I surrender to temptation and nudge my nose gently against her ear, feeling the softness of her cheek against the stubble of my five o'clock shadow.

"I'm getting a sense of déjà vu," I confess.

A faint smile tugs at the corner of her mouth. She tilts her head upward, allowing her striking emerald green eyes to meet my intense brown ones, an electrifying connection passing between us.

"Does chaos follow you wherever you go?" she whispers.

"Always." There's no sense in sugarcoating the truth.

I can't help but steal a moment to appreciate Sienna's beauty. She's casually dressed in high-waisted sailor shorts, a fitted blank tank top, and sandals. Her hair is piled into a messy bun, and aside from a swipe of mascara, she's not wearing a stitch of makeup.

Our agreement to be *just* friends hasn't prevented her from consuming my thoughts over the past week. Every lyric I've jotted down and every musical note resounding through my head has been inspired by her.

Visions of us on the chaise lounge haunt me, her lithe body pressed against my chest while I kiss the column of her neck. Every night I dream of her gentle hands, cupping my cheeks as she soothes me with whispered words of comfort. Her enticing lips lure me in for a taste, but every time I lean in to claim them, I wake up, alone in my bed with a raging hard-on.

Over the weekend, I went to several clubs with Wells and Grayson, searching for someone who could give me some temporary relief. No one even piqued my interest enough for me to offer an invitation to spend the night. I've convinced myself that once the Sovereign Kings are back on the road, Sienna will become a distant memory and I'll revert back to my casual sex routine.

If only that were possible.

When Emerson called, letting me know that Lennon had left their house without her phone or security, I offered to help find her. I love my sister, but she can be reckless sometimes, her need for independence often outweighing safety concerns.

After she ditched her security guard for a day at the spa last year, Emerson had a tracker installed on her car. She mentioned that she was seeing Sienna today, but didn't say they'd be leaving the house. Thankfully, Emerson was able to locate her car parked outside her favorite brunch spot.

I had an ulterior motive for tagging along. I've been wanting to see Sienna in person and haven't been able to find a justifiable reason to reach out to her.

I have no idea how long we've been standing in place when the sound of glass shattering on the other side of the restaurant jolts me back to reality.

“Shit, we need to keep moving.” I reluctantly release her from my grasp.

I take hold of her hand and pull her along, not stopping until we’ve exited the back of the building. I’m relieved to find Jay waiting with an idling SUV. He opens the backdoor for Sienna, and I slide in behind her.

If Sienna were anyone else, we would have gone out the front with Lennon and Emerson. Most of our acquaintances and so-called friends aren’t fazed by the media. They’re all looking for something to gain, and being seen with us in public always furthers their pursuits.

Sienna is different. She’s all but begged to avoid being associated with the Sovereign Kings in public and refuses to accept any form of handout.

I couldn’t help but notice the signed receipt in front of her inside the restaurant. She paid for the meal, even though it would have been a drop in the bucket for Lennon to cover the bill. While I don’t know the extent of Sienna’s financial situation, it’s unlikely she’s in a place where she can afford to drop hundreds of dollars on brunch.

Her actions have more than proved that her motives are pure, and if that weren’t enough, the latest stunt she pulled this morning has left no room for doubt. Emerson told me that a balance of two thousand five hundred and sixty-five dollars and fifty-two cents was deposited into my bank account this morning. Evidently Sienna refused to accept compensation for her involvement in the music video.

My immediate reaction was to have Emerson send the funds to Sienna’s account regardless, but he assured me that would only make her angry. He tried talking her out of declining the money, but she was adamant that she pay off her debt, and she felt this was the easiest way to do that.

I might not be able to give her back the money, but I'll find a way to make it up to her tenfold.

The sound of a car door shutting has me looking forward. Jay slowly starts to drive down the abandoned alley with no one in sight, but I know better than to think we're in the clear.

As soon as the car makes it to the end of the drive, a horde of photographers ambushes us, their flashing cameras aimed at us from every direction. The blacked-out windows provide privacy, but the front windshield is a vulnerable spot, leaving a slim chance for someone to snap a picture of Sienna.

Knowing that's the last thing she wants, I move to sit beside her. She doesn't resist as I gather her in my arms, shielding her face against my chest to hide her from the cameras.

Jay continues to honk as the vehicle inches toward the road. It does nothing to deter the paparazzi, but a new development soon diverts their attention. The front door of the café swings open, revealing Emerson and Lennon stepping out onto the sidewalk with an air of confidence.

They embody the picture-perfect couple, and the media adores them. They're a rarity in Hollywood—childhood sweethearts still madly in love after five years of marriage, an exciting addition on the way. Their hands are intertwined as they greet the crowd with a regal wave, like a presidential duo making a highly anticipated public appearance.

"Is this how they typically handle these situations?" Sienna's voice quivers, her grip tightening on my shirt.

"Nah. They're putting on a special show for the occasion." I chuckle.

Right on cue, the last person blocking the exit steps out of the way and Jay seizes the opportunity to pull out onto the main road, speeding away from the chaos. The photographers

quickly turn their heads toward us, realizing they've been played, but it's too late for them to chase us down.

"Holy shit, that was awesome. Thank god for Lennon and Emerson." Sienna giggles beside me.

Fuck, that's a beautiful sound.

Jay maintains his focus on the road, skillfully maneuvering through traffic, leaving no chance for anyone to tail us. It doesn't take long for Sienna to catch on that we're heading away from the city.

"Hey, where are we going? My car is back at the parking garage a few blocks from the restaurant. You need to drop me off there," she states.

That's not happening. Now that I have her here with me, I don't want to let her go.

"Jay will have someone drive it to your place. Going back now would only increase our chances of someone seeing us together," I tell her.

Jay raises an eyebrow in the rearview mirror. We both know the crowd has likely already dispersed now that Emerson and Lennon are gone, but Sienna doesn't need to know that.

"You didn't answer my question, Danvers. Where are you taking me?"

"My place."

Her head snaps up to glare at me as she shoves away from me.

"Like hell you are. If news gets out, rumors will spread like wildfire. Going to your house is out of the question."

Damn, she's cute when she's angry.

“My place is a fortress. Trust me, unwanted guests don’t have a chance of getting inside. Besides, Lennon just sent me a text to say she’s worried about you and wants me to keep you company this afternoon.”

She did no such thing, but I’m not above bending the truth to get what I want.

“Fine, but just so we’re clear...” Sienna warns. “There won’t be any funny business. Got it?”

I chuckle at her attempt to scare me off. If anything, she’s making it even more difficult for me to keep my distance.

“Got it,” I acknowledge her, amused.

Almost an hour later, we arrive at the first gated entrance leading to my mansion. There are three security checkpoints, which is one of the reasons I chose this place. It was my first major purchase after signing with the label. It was an impulse buy, a way for me to flaunt my newfound wealth.

As Jay passes through the final gate and follows the curve leading to the mansion, Sienna presses her nose against her window, bursting into laughter when the house comes into view.

“That”—she points to the sprawling estate—“isn’t a home. It’s a carbon copy of Tony Stark’s place. I can already imagine it—five bathrooms, toilets that wipe your ass, and a lazy river.” Her voice drips with sarcasm.

Jay barely manages to suppress a laugh of his own, and I glower in his direction. He’s been giving me shit for buying this estate since he started working for the band, calling it impractical, especially considering how rarely I stay here.

“If we’re being exact, it has eight bedrooms and eleven bathrooms, with bidets installed in every toilet. Although, I’m afraid you’ll have to wipe your own ass unless you’d like some help with that.” I give her a teasing grin. “There’s no

lazy river, but the infinity pool has a panoramic view of the Santa Monica Mountains. Plus, the place has a fully equipped spa and a bowling alley on the lower level, which I would say more than makes up for the lack of a lazy river, don't you agree?"

"Wait, you *actually* have a bowling alley?" Sienna squeals. "Leola was in a bowling league when I was in middle school and whenever I went with her, the owner blocked off a lane for me to play. I always loved going there."

I glance at Sienna, wondering if I heard her right. While most girls would be drawn to the idea of a spa and pool and asking when they can move in, Sienna is most intrigued by the bowling alley I've never even stepped foot in.

As the car rolls to a stop, Jay wastes no time getting out of the vehicle to check the perimeter on foot, leaving Sienna and me on our own.

Sienna trails behind me into the house. Her jaw drops as she takes in the soaring thirty-foot ceilings and the massive light fixture that hangs in the entryway.

We move through to the large living area with its built-in fireplace, an art piece hanging on the wall that cost me a fortune, and a white leather sectional positioned to take advantage of the view from the floor-to-ceiling windows.

"Who did your decorating?" Sienna asks.

"I hired an interior designer. It didn't matter to me what the place looked like since I'm hardly ever here."

"What do you mean you're *hardly ever here*? Isn't this where you live?" She gives me a quizzical look. "Do you have another place in the city?"

"We're on tour the majority of the year so I spend most of my time in hotel suites. When I'm in L.A., I usually crash at Lennon's or at a local hotel close to where I'm partying."

“Let me get this straight, you bought a multimillion-dollar home just because you can?” She raises an eyebrow.

“That’s one way of looking at it.”

I wanted to have a place to call my own. I may not come here often, but I like having a safety net; somewhere I can come when I need to be alone.

“Just think, Sienna... If I didn’t own this place, you wouldn’t have the chance to bowl in the private bowling alley,” I say.

Her face lights up like a Christmas tree. “You mean it?”

“Why not?” I shrug. “We have some time to kill.”

SIENNA

“TO THE LEFT. NO, THE left!” I shout in frustration as the bowling ball rolls down the edge of the lane.

Conway shakes his head in amusement. “You do know the ball’s an inanimate object, right? It can’t follow your directions.”

My disappointment is clear when the ball lands in the gutter, failing to knock down a single pin.

“Didn’t you say you used to be in a bowling league?” he taunts, making a valiant effort to get a rise out of me.

“Don’t be a smart-ass, Danvers. It doesn’t suit you.” I shoot him an irritated glance. “Cut me some slack. Leola was in the league, I was an eleven-year-old kid who played with bumpers.” I saunter over to him, pointing at the screen. “You’re up, hot shot. Don’t expect mercy from me when you get a gutter ball too.”

When Conway mentioned he had a bowling alley, I wasn’t expecting *this*—a four-lane alley with two lanes on either side of a clear partition. Each one has a TV suspended from the ceiling, and two large circular couches provide a cozy spot to relax in between turns. The racks in the corner display an impressive array of bowling bowls. Last but not least, there’s a fully-equipped concession counter tucked in the back corner.

I was baffled when Conway admitted he’d never used the alley before. Apparently the only people who ever come down here are employees from the cleaning agency and the yearly maintenance crew responsible for inspecting the machinery to make sure it’s running properly.

Conway steps up to take his turn and as he positions himself and takes hold of the ball, I can see he's struggling to find the correct finger placement. It takes him a few tries but he finally gets it. He takes two steps back, trying to emulate the bowling technique he watched in a tutorial video an hour ago.

With a determined expression and his tongue sticking out, he swings his arm forward to release the ball. I watch as he loses his footing, causing him to stumble forward. The ball slips from his hands, dropping directly into the gutter.

I burst into a fit of laughter, unable to contain myself.

"Oh my God, Danvers. That was priceless." I gasp, trying to catch my breath. "Are there cameras in here? I need a replay."

"It shouldn't be this complicated." He lets out a frustrated growl.

"Bowling takes a lot more skill than most people think."

"Oh really? Let's put your theory to the test."

He walks over to the ball rack and selects a neon green bowling ball. With a confident stride, he stands in front of the lane, cradling the ball in his hands. He casually tosses the ball down the lane without a visible plan or strategy. My eyes widen as the ball effortlessly slides down the middle of the lane, knocking down the pins in quick succession until every last one is on the ground.

"Strike!" Conway hollers as he pumps his fists in the air.

"That doesn't count. It was dumb luck."

"It totally counts. There aren't any rules on how to throw the ball as long as I don't cross the line, and I didn't." He's enjoying this far too much for my liking.

“Leola would be mortified if she knew you weren’t playing by the rules.”

“Ace, I think she’d be more concerned that you got three gutter balls in a row,” Conway points out.

“Shut it.” My tone is tinged with amusement.

“You can’t be serious.” Conway’s jaw drops in surprise. “You’ve never traveled outside the U.S.? *Ever?* How the hell is that possible?”

We gave up on bowling hours ago. It turns out we’re both terrible at it. In its place, we raided the concession stand and brought our stash back to the couch, where we’ve been taking turns asking each other questions.

We’re seated side by side but have successfully avoided any physical contact. See, we’re doing great at this *friends* dynamic we have going on.

Then why can’t you stop thinking about kissing him?

“The last thing on my dad’s mind was a vacation. When Ruth and Leola took me in, we stuck to local day trips. I was content spending my childhood in L.A. I had unlimited access to a swimming pool, learned to drive on a golf cart, and made friends with retirees from around the globe. They all had incredible stories to share and always brought me souvenirs when they’d get back from their trips.”

“I hate to break it to you, Ace, but living vicariously through others isn’t the same thing as doing it yourself. There’s a certain thrill that comes from exploring a new city and immersing yourself in the culture,” Conway says.

He mentioned earlier that the Sovereign Kings have visited over fifty countries since they started touring, and I can’t comprehend the limitless adventures he’s experienced.

“What about after high school? Why didn’t you take a gap year or go somewhere with Lennon after graduation? I’m surprised she’s let you go this long without insisting you tag along on one of our international tours.”

“She did invite me. I was supposed to join you guys during your first tour, the summer after my graduation.” I fidget with my hands in my lap, trying to suppress the nervous energy coursing through me.

“I don’t remember hearing about that. Why didn’t you come?”

“Life got in the way,” I admit with a shrug. “Ruth was hospitalized a few days after I graduated high school and spent months in a rehab center. The medical expenses started piling up, so I got a full-time job to support us.”

“That must have been really hard for you.” Conway’s voice is filled with compassion and understanding.

“Yeah, it wasn’t easy watching Ruth go through all that and not being able to do more for her.”

I feel a twinge of guilt when I recall the conflicting emotions I had back then. Part of me resented being left behind while my best friend got to travel the world. I felt inadequate and I was frustrated to be missing out on the opportunity of a lifetime, even though I knew I was making the right decision for my family.

“You’re incredible, you know that?” Conway wraps his arm around me, drawing me to his side. My pulse quickens at the unexpected touch. He holds still, like he’s expecting me to resist, but I surprise him *and* myself when I lean in instead.

I catch a hint of his cologne—a subtle blend of tobacco and smoky vanilla—enticing me to lean in closer to him, placing my head on his shoulder.

What am I doing?

This isn't acceptable physical contact for friends, but I can't will myself to pull away from Conway's embrace.

"If you could visit anywhere in the world, where would you go?" he murmurs in my ear.

"Anywhere?"

"Yeah."

"Paris," I say without missing a beat.

"Really?" He sounds surprised. "I figured you'd want to visit the world's oldest library, build houses in a third world country, or help kids in a village somewhere."

I nod with enthusiasm. "I'd love to do all of those things, but Paris holds a special place in my heart. It's where Leola and Ruth went on their honeymoon. They got married shortly before Ruth was diagnosed with Parkinson's. They wanted me to tag along, but I insisted they go by themselves. It's the only extended vacation they've had since adopting me.

"Leola brought me home a postcard with a picture of the Eiffel Tower on the front. I keep it on my nightstand and often wonder what the view of the city looks like from the upper deck. Ruth assures me it's far too crowded and that I'm not missing out on much, but I'm going to experience it for myself someday. Plus, Becky tells me that France has the best vintage shops in the world, and I've always had an appreciation for second-hand clothes. I'm certain the antique stores in Paris have some incredible fashion gems that can't be found on the runway."

There's no telling how long I'll have to wait to make my dream come true, but it'll be worth it when I do.

"You know," Conway says with a hint of mischief. "I've been to Paris plenty of times, but I've never made it to the Eiffel Tower."

“Conway, I’m not going to Paris with you.” I sit up and give him a stern look.

“Why not?”

“For starters, I have a job, responsibilities, and bills to pay. I can’t drop everything for a pipe dream. And we’re friends, remember? I’m not going to the most romantic city in the world with my male *friend*.”

What if he wants more, too?

I shove the idea back into the recesses of my mind before it can take on a form of its own.

Conway opens his mouth to speak but I beat him to the punch. “And just so we’re clear, you’re not allowed to ask Lennon to plan a trip for me. When I visit Paris, it’ll be on my own terms and when the right opportunity presents itself.”

Conway laughs softly.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was just going to tell you that Paris is one of the stops on our upcoming tour.”

“Oh.”

Silence fills the room and I gasp in surprise when Conway reaches out to tuck a stray piece of hair behind my ear. I’m acutely aware that I’m still pressed against him as he slides his hand down my cheek.

The tension in the air is thick as I gather my courage and lift my gaze to meet his. His intense brown eyes are brimming with desire as he lightly traces my lips with the pad of his thumb.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful,” he utters.

“Thank you,” I murmur, my heart fluttering at his admission.

“Sienna.”

“Hmm?” I hum absentmindedly.

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

In an instant, he tilts my head forward, capturing my mouth with his, causing a soft moan to escape my lips. The smoldering desire that has been confined within me bursts to life, igniting like a fuse.

Lost in the intensity of the moment, I entangle my fingers in Conway’s hair, holding on tight to keep him close. In response, he grips my hips in a firm hold, drawing me onto his lap and positioning me so I’m straddling him. As I settle into his embrace, his thumb presses into the supple flesh of my thighs, and I secretly long for him to leave faint bruises as reminders, tangible proof that this wasn’t a dream.

My groan of pleasure reverberates through our kiss as Conway’s skilled tongue ravishes my mouth, leaving me breathless and yearning for more. Our electric chemistry is all-consuming, and I’m so lost in the moment that I nearly fall off his lap when his phone buzzes in his pocket.

“Fuck no.” Conway’s voice is laced with reluctance. “Ignore it, Ace.”

He attempts to bring my mouth back to his, but my reflexes kick in, causing me to pull away.

As my haze of desire dissipates, I’m acutely aware that my body is plastered against Conway’s and that we kissed. No, we were doing much more than that. We were fucking with our mouths, and the realization utterly mortifies me.

We agreed to keep things uncomplicated by remaining friends. This is literally the opposite of that.

I scramble out of Conway’s lap, needing to disentangle myself from him as quickly as possible.

“Sienna, where are you going?”

I practically sprint toward the stairs leading to the main floor, my heart pounding inside my chest.

When I reach the top, I come to an abrupt halt, a mix of anxiety and confusion taking over. This place is a maze, and I’m not sure how the hell I’m going to find my way out.

When Conway finally catches up to me, he gently wraps his fingers around my wrist, compelling me to turn to face him. “Will you please tell me what’s going on?”

By this point, panic engulfs me completely, rendering me unable to think clearly.

“This can’t happen.” I motion between us. “I don’t want a fling or a casual affair, and you’ve made it clear you won’t commit to anything beyond that. There’s a reason we agreed to be friends, and what just happened shot all our boundaries to hell.”

Confusion clouds his expression, and I don’t fault him for that. I was as much a participant in our make-out session as he was, but I can’t dwell on that now.

“I have to get out of here,” I blurt out, feeling like a caged animal.

“Take a deep breath, Ace,” Conway says, his hands gently rubbing my arms in comfort. “I’m going to show you the way out of here, and then Jay will drive you home, okay?”

I nod, unable to find the words to respond.

I should have suspected that my horoscope would be far too accurate today.

You may find yourself at a crossroads today, unable to decide which path to take, Virgo. Someone else may be just as undecided which way they should go. There may be pressure for you to make the first move. The answer is in simple

solutions. Remember, there's always more than one correct way to do things. Make the choice that is best for you.

The trouble is I know which choice is best for me, and it's not the one I want.

15

CONWAY

“ARE YOU THINKING OF LEAVING the Sovereign Kings for a solo career?” Emerson’s question comes out of left field.

We’re at the recording studio, and I’m supposed to be outlining new songs for our next album, but I haven’t been able to concentrate. Emerson finally got sick of my lack of effort and sent the rest of the band to get lunch so he and I could talk.

The only thing occupying my mind is Sienna. I’ve replayed our kiss from last night a hundred times, and I can still feel her fingers intertwined in my hair and her sinful mouth mingling with mine.

“Are you listening to me?” Emerson snaps his fingers in my face. “I’ll ask again. Are you leaving the band?”

“What? Hell no. Why would you ask me that?”

He’s had some hair-brained ideas in the past, but nothing as far-fetched as my abandoning the band. That’s ludicrous, and I’m not sure what brought this on.

“You’re acting strange, even stranger than normal. We’ve been in the studio for hours, and your notebook is empty.” He points to the blank pad of paper resting in my lap.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s *never* empty, Con,” he emphasizes. “You usually have several pages full by mid-morning, and we’d be jamming out to our new hit song by now. You *never* bring your phone to the studio, yet there it is on the table, so you obviously don’t want to miss any notifications. And even though it’s right there, you keep checking your texts and call log.”

Damn, this man sure is perceptive when he wants to be.

“That leaves me to suspect you’re waiting for something time-sensitive, and since I’m always the first one in the loop on anything newsworthy, the only logical explanation is that you’re leaving the band.”

I get up to offer him a mocking standing ovation accompanied by a slow clap.

“Wow, Nancy Drew, that was impressive,” I deadpan. “Has someone been binge-watching Lennon’s detective dramas again?”

“Don’t change the subject. I swear to God, if you try to leave—”

“I kissed Sienna last night,” I blurt out, interrupting him before he blows a gasket. “She panicked and ran out of my house like it was on fire. I was hoping she’d text me today, but she hasn’t. That’s why I haven’t let my phone out of my sight.”

“What did you just say?” Emerson’s expression shifts from hysterical to explosive.

“I took Sienna back to my place after we left the restaurant yesterday and I kissed her,” I repeat, giving him the shortened version.

“Fuck, I was hoping I heard you wrong the first time.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Have you had a sudden change of heart about wanting to settle down or being in a committed relationship?”

“No, of course not,” I lie.

The truth is that it’s crossed my mind, but based on Emerson’s initial reaction, I’m not about to tell him that.

He smacks me upside the head.

“Ow. What the hell was that for?”

“You’re such an idiot. Stop toying with your sister’s best friend. Lennon is thrilled she’s been able to rekindle her friendship with Sienna, and you’re going to fuck it up. If you scare Sienna off now, it affects all of us. Who do you think Lennon will blame when things go to shit?”

He’s voicing the same concerns that I’ve been thinking about since last night. I’m Conway Danvers, the lead singer of the Sovereign Kings. My lifestyle isn’t conducive to a relationship, and that isn’t going to change anytime soon.

Emerson and Lennon stayed together primarily because they fell in love before Sovereign Kings became famous, and now they’re both an integral part of the band. It’s an entirely different situation when you get involved with someone after becoming famous, especially if they’re unfamiliar with the complexities of fame.

Sienna has made it explicitly clear that she wants more than a casual hookup, and I’m not sure I can give her that. There’s a reason she asked that we remain strictly friends, and I screwed that up... again.

I just couldn’t resist when her lips were so close to mine. Not when I’ve waited so long to kiss her. Our chemistry has been explosive from the start, and the more time we spend together, the harder it is to keep my hands to myself.

“Fuck, you’re right.”

“Hell yeah I am.” Emerson gives me a toothy grin. “This is why I’m the one who deals with the important business decisions. You always go in guns blazing without any concern for the final outcome. The question is, how are you going to fix this?”

“I have no clue,” I answer honestly.

“Why don’t you start by apologizing?” Emerson suggests. “That’s always a good place to start.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.”

I’m not usually one to freely offer apologies, but it seems like whenever Sienna is involved, I find myself saying sorry at every turn.

“Now that we’ve got that settled, can we please get back to work?” Emerson asks.

“Yeah, sure,” I reply absentmindedly, still preoccupied with thoughts of a certain golden-haired beauty.

We’re all having dinner together tonight, and Emerson mentioned earlier that Sienna said she’ll be there.

I’m counting down the seconds until I get to see her, even if I have to keep my hands to myself.

The band came straight to Lennon and Emerson’s house after we finished at the recording studio.

Lennon likes to hold weekly family dinners when we’re in between tours, claiming it’s much less chaotic than when we spend time together on the road.

The guys’ parents, Melissa and Rick, join us when they can, but they’re traveling right now. Melissa’s been a mother figure to Lennon and me for over a decade, and I’m grateful Lennon has her, to help guide her through this pregnancy.

Our mom died of a drug overdose my senior year of high school, and Lennon was devastated. We were living with the Phillips’ at the time, but she always held out hope that Lulu would turn her life around so they could reconcile.

I never had any intentions of forgiving Lulu, and her death didn’t affect me much. If anything, it helped me move on, knowing she was gone.

I'm lounging by the pool when Griff steps onto the deck. I grit my teeth, immediately annoyed by his presence. He might be part of the band, but these gatherings are supposed to be strictly reserved for family, and that doesn't include him.

My resentment stems from the label's interference with the band's dynamics when they replaced Emerson as our drummer. Overnight, Griff became an easy target, bearing the brunt of my anger ever since. While my grudge may seem unjustified to some, I can't change how I feel, and I make no apologies for how I've acted toward him over the years.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I snap, striding over to him.

"Emerson invited me. Since he'll be absent for most of our upcoming tour, he thought it would be nice to have everyone together. Plus, my mom has been looking forward to meeting you. It's been five years, and I'm running out of excuses as to why she's never been officially introduced to the lead singer of my band."

"What the hell do you mean your—"

Out of nowhere, I'm pulled into a bear hug by a petite woman with fiery red hair.

"I'm Claire, Griff's mom. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Conway," the stranger says in a singsong voice. "Griff speaks very highly of you."

I raise an eyebrow in surprise. I'm sure Griff has plenty to say about me, but I doubt any of it would be considered positive.

"It's nice to meet you, too." I give an awkward wave.

Griff shoots me a smug look before sauntering off, leaving me alone with his mom.

Bastard.

“Have you ever been to one of our concerts?” I ask Claire.

“Oh yes. I travel with Griff as much as I can. He doesn’t like traveling by bus, and it can get tiresome traveling the road alone, so I keep him company whenever possible.”

“I’m sorry, did you say bus?” I’m confused.

“Yeah. Griff told me you boys don’t mind that he travels separately. I hope that’s the case. I wouldn’t want him to get in trouble.”

“Nah, he’s not in trouble,” I say absentmindedly.

The band has a private jet, so only the crew tours on the bus. We have hub cities in every country we tour in that allows us to stay in the same hotel for weeks at a time and makes it easier for security purposes. I’ve never noticed that Griff hasn’t been on the plane in general, I always just assumed he was keeping his distance.

Griff returns with a bottle of sparkling water and a beer, handing the water to his mom.

“Thanks, deary,” Claire says.

“I must admit, Conway, my favorite part of every concert is when you rip your shirt off and toss it into the crowd. You should be very proud of your physique.” She has a twinkle in her eye.

I officially love this woman, despite her being Griff’s mom.

Griff covers his eyes with his hands. “Ma, we’ve talked about this. You shouldn’t say those kinds of things out loud.”

“I don’t mind.” I smirk. “I appreciate the ego boost, Claire.”

“It’s not like you need it,” Griff mumbles.

I’m about to tell him off when Emerson cuts in, hugging Claire and saying, “It’s so good to see you. Can you help me

with the seasoning for the macaroni salad you sent me last week? I followed your recipe, but I think it's missing something."

"Of course, deary. It was nice to meet you, Conway," Claire calls out, Griff following close behind.

When they've gone inside the house, I pull Grayson aside on his way to the cabana at the far end of the pool, his laptop in hand.

"Why didn't anyone tell me Griff had a mom? And why doesn't he take the private jet like the rest of us?"

"Take a wild guess. You and Lennon haven't exactly made him feel welcome. I specifically remember you lecturing him the month after he joined the band about how the private jet was for family only. You made sure he knew that 'family' didn't include him."

"How is his mom so nice?" I purposely deflect his remark.

"She's an incredibly kind-hearted person. She worked three jobs to support them while Griff was growing up. When he signed with the Sovereign Kings, he paid for her to attend culinary school. Now she owns several food trucks in Santa Monica and hires someone to run them while she travels with Griff."

"I had no idea."

"Well, maybe next time you won't be so quick to judge," he states matter-of-factly.

He leaves me alone, giving me time to contemplate if my behavior toward Griff over the past five years has been justified.

I'm in the middle of a pity party when I raise my head and catch sight of Sienna as she walks onto the patio. She's dressed in shorts and a tank top, the strap of her bathing suit

peeking out. With a tray in her hands, she appears uneasy, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

Without thinking, I head in her direction, my desire to be near her overpowering my common sense.

“Sienna, hi,” I call out.

She frowns when she hears my voice, taking a cautionary step back. I stop short to avoid scaring her off. The last thing I need is for her to run out of here before we’ve had the chance to talk.

“Lennon invited me,” she blurts out. “I think it might be best if I give these to you and leave.” She holds out a plate full of cookies.

“Lennon wants you here, and so do I. But you didn’t need to bring anything,” I tell her.

“Leola taught me to never go to a party empty-handed. My shoot ran long today, so she was sweet enough to make these for me to bring.” She lifts up the platter for me to see.

“Are those Leola’s molasses spice cookies?” Lennon shrieks from the kitchen before waddling out to greet Sienna, snatching the tray from her. “I’ll take those off your hands.”

Lennon grabs a cookie and takes a bite, moaning in satisfaction. “It’s been ages since I’ve had one of these. They’re just as good as I remember.”

Agreeing they look delicious, I reach out to take one, but Lennon swats my hand away.

“Get your own best friend to bring you treats,” she snaps.

I frown but stop short when Sienna giggles. God, her laugh does me in every time.

“It’s a pool party. Why is everyone still wearing clothes?” Lennon shouts. She marches back inside with the plate in her

hands. Soon after she disappears, classical music starts filtering through the speakers.

“Is that...”

“Classical music at a pool party? Yes, it is,” I finish for Sienna. “Lennon’s convinced it’s good for the baby’s brain development, but at this point in her pregnancy, I’m pretty sure she just does it to annoy the shit out of Wells. It drives him insane.”

“It’s a party,” Wells exclaims from his spot by the pool. “We should be listening to a pop coast hits playlist, not Mozart.”

“If you have a problem, take it up with the boss.” I jerk my head toward the house.

He lets out a huff of frustration but doesn’t make a move to get up. He would never confront Lennon about it, and even if he tried, Emerson would shut him down.

“Come on, I’ll show you to the best spot to lay out,” I say, turning my attention back to Sienna and hoping she drops the I’m-still-mad-at-you routine.

Thankfully, she follows as I lead her to two empty lounge chairs next to Wells.

She hesitates, nibbling her lip. Sensing her discomfort, I turn around, assuming she doesn’t want an audience while she changes out of her clothes. In the meantime, I pull off my shirt and toss it to the ground, not caring if it gets wet.

“Fuck me,” Wells mutters.

I turn around... and *damn*.

Sienna is neatly folding her shorts and tank top, leaving her in a cut-out, one-piece swimsuit that leaves her cleavage and the sides of her stomach exposed.

I'm completely spellbound by the alluring vixen in front of me. I used to think women in bikinis were hot, but Sienna in this one piece is my newfound obsession.

"You're staring," she snaps.

Startled, I blink rapidly, quickly averting my gaze. "Sorry."

I try my best to keep my focus on literally anything else, but Sienna's magnetic pull is too strong. Unable to resist, I glance back and find her checking me out.

Her eyes travel over my bare chest, down to the line of my defined V.

"Now you're the one staring," I tease.

"Shit, sorry," she mumbles.

She digs around in her bag and takes out a pair of aviators and a book before settling into her chair. She slides her sunglasses on and opens the book to her bookmarked page.

"You came to a pool party to read?"

"Yes. Now leave me alone."

"You wanna play chicken?" Wells asks, saving me from this conversation.

"Fuck yeah," I say, grateful for the distraction.

Grayson begrudgingly joins us, and with Emerson occupied in the kitchen, we're stuck with Griff as our fourth. I thoroughly enjoy when it's our turn to fight, finding it therapeutic to have a legitimate reason to push Griff into the pool.

An hour later, I'm climbing out, soaking wet. Sienna's engrossed in her book, but I stand in front of her and playfully shake my head, droplets of water splashing her legs and her pages.

"What was that for?" she shrieks.

“Giving you a little taste of what you’re missing out on.”

“That wasn’t very nice.” She pulls her sunglasses down to the tip of her nose, glowering at me.

“We’re friends, right?” I proceed with caution.

“Yeah, so?”

“If you haven’t noticed, I mess around with Grayson and Wells too. I want you to feel comfortable, and I figured you’d prefer I treat you like I do my other friends instead of openly gawking at you in your swimsuit again.”

Sienna’s face softens in understanding, giving me the courage I need to lean in, keeping my voice low so no one else can hear.

“I’m sorry about last night, Ace. I really am. If you haven’t noticed, I’m insanely attracted to you, and it’s proving difficult to keep my hands to myself. I swear I won’t try to kiss you again unless you beg me,” I try to joke, adding a wink for good measure. “I leave for tour in a few days, and I’d really like to spend more time with you before we go. As friends, of course.”

Emerson was right: keeping things platonic with Sienna is the right decision. That doesn’t stop my visceral reaction when she looks up at me with wide, innocent eyes, her lips nervously caught between her teeth. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear she was tempting me on purpose. It’s a true test of self-control not to give into temptation and pull her close.

“You might have initiated the kiss last night, but I kissed you back,” Sienna says quietly. “Yesterday was fun, so as long as we keep things friendly, I’d like to hang out before you leave too.”

“Great. Glad we’re on the same page,” I say, playing it off as if I wouldn’t have been groveling on my knees if that’s what it took to convince her.

“Do you have plans tomorrow night?” she asks.

I was expecting to be the one to have to invite her out, but I’m glad she’s taking the initiative and not trying to avoid me anymore.

The band is scheduled to do promo for a local club tomorrow night, but Wells, Grayson, and Griff can handle it. I *never* skip events, but there’s a first time for everything, and I’m not missing a chance to hang out with Sienna.

“I’m free,” I tell her. “What are we doing?”

“It’s a surprise,” she says mischievously.

“Great, I love surprises. Just as long as you’re not taking me to another diner,” I tease.

“No diners, I promise,” she reassures me with a laugh. “Let’s plan on meeting at my place. Oh, and Ruth and Leola will be home, I hope that’s okay.”

“That’s no problem.”

I’ve heard all about Leola and Ruth, but this will be my first time meeting them in person. Sienna and I may be just friends, but I’m looking forward to meeting her family.

SIENNA

I'M STUCK IN BUMPER-TO-BUMPER traffic, grateful for having the good sense to leave a half hour earlier than usual. I'm heading to a photo shoot for a collection of eco-friendly handbags, and I want to familiarize myself with the set before the shoot begins.

I can't stop yawning, already needing a second caffeine fix. I'm usually in bed by nine and up by five—a habit ingrained in me from growing up in a senior community where everyone gets up with the sunrise and goes to bed before it sets. However, I didn't get home from Lennon's house until midnight last night. The band was still going strong when I left, and I wouldn't be surprised if they pulled an all-nighter.

I nearly backed out of going to the dinner last night. I wasn't sure I was ready to face Conway, not after the way I ran from him the night before, and I wanted to avoid facing him in the aftermath. I wasn't expecting his playful demeanor and heartfelt apology. The truth is, he had nothing to be sorry for.

If I'm honest, I wanted that kiss as much as he did. Mutual attraction isn't the issue... The problem is that Conway Danvers is a playboy, plain and simple. In the past he's been known to spend just one night with a woman before moving on to the next. Meanwhile, I'm searching for the opposite of a one-night stand. I want a long-term relationship that goes beyond a casual fling. Though, I won't lie and say I haven't been tempted to take Conway up on his offer on multiple occasions.

Even if he were open to exploring a committed relationship, I can't ignore the fact that he's a world-famous

rockstar who is constantly under the scrutiny of the public eye, and anyone associated with him is subjected to the same.

We're far better off as friends. It's less complicated than the alternatives.

My brain is on board with the decision, but my body is a completely different story.

I couldn't stop myself from checking Conway out at the pool last night, especially when he stood in front of me with his rock-solid chest and defined abs glistening with water droplets. I was tempted to run my finger across every ridge but determined that was a highly inappropriate response for a friend.

As I pull into the parking lot of the industrial building where my photoshoot is being held, my phone chimes in my backpack. I take it out, a goofy smile spreading across my face when I see Conway's name flashing on the screen.

Seeing I have a few minutes to spare, I swipe open the message.

DANVERS

Are we still on for tonight friend?

Yes. 5:30 at my place. How come you're up so early?

I'll be there. Stayed up playing video games with Wells and Grayson. Going to crash now 😴

Are you going to tell me what we're doing tonight???

Nope.

I thought you were supposed to be the spontaneous one, Danvers. Living for today and all that bullshit 😊

Touché. See you tonight.

5:30 p.m. Please don't be late.



The instant I hit send on my last text, telling him not to be late, I regret it. The three little dots that tell me Conway's typing pop up and then disappear, and when he never sends a reply, it doesn't do anything to calm my nerves.

I tuck my phone into my backpack and head inside, determined to focus on work and not the millions of possible reasons Conway didn't respond.

I repeatedly pace the length of the floral runner, stopping at the edge before spinning around and striding to the other end.

The clock on the wall displays 6:32 p.m., prompting me to double check its accuracy with my phone. Though illogical, there's always a chance the clock stopped working in the two minutes since I last looked.

Aside from compulsively checking the time, there's not much else I can do to tamp down the restlessness stirring inside me.

"Sienna, will you sit down?" Leola calls from the living room. "You're going to wear a hole in the rug if you keep it up for much longer."

I exhale sharply. What does she expect me to do to settle my anxiety?

I drop down to the tufted bench near the entryway, drumming my fingers against the cushion. I wince at the sight of my nails. In the past hour, I've bitten them down to the quick, and I remind myself to book a nail appointment tomorrow. Becky's going to be furious if she finds out. My next photoshoot is in three days, and I can't afford to have a single hair out of place.

This is Conway's fault. If he had shown up when I asked him to, I wouldn't be an anxious mess.

My irrational, obsessive tendencies when it comes to planning and organizing have plagued me since the day my dad abandoned me without a goodbye.

It was the last day of school before the winter break. I stood out in the bitter cold for hours, waiting for him to pick me up, but he never showed. It eventually started snowing, and when I tried going back inside the school, it was locked and all the staff had already left for their own holiday celebrations.

Just as dusk approached, Leola peeled into the parking lot. She scrambled out of the car with a somber expression, kneeling by my side as she broke the news that my dad had left. I can still feel her gloved hands cupping my frozen cheeks as she apologized for not being there sooner, assuring me it would never happen again.

As I got older, there were numerous times when I faced rejection for various reasons and found myself out in the cold, so to speak, amplifying that feeling of abandonment, opening old wounds.

So, while it may seem irrational to some, I've found that when I carefully plan and schedule in advance, it lessens my anxiety to know there won't be any surprises.

I tap the screen to bring my phone to life. The time, now 6:33 p.m., is mocking me. I open up my messages again, hoping to find a missed text and letting out a sigh when there isn't one.

My string of unanswered texts stares back at me.

DANVERS

Let me know when you're on your way.

Are you running late?

Are you still coming?

I'm taking your silence as confirmation that
you've made other plans.

I fire off one more, unable to help myself.

Consider our friendship null and void, Danvers.

Okay, the last one was a little immature considering I still don't know why he isn't here. He could have a legitimate reason, but that doesn't excuse his lack of communication.

Ruth and Leola are patiently waiting in the living room. I should have anticipated this might happen and made arrangements for a nursing aide to be here as a backup plan. It's too late now though, and getting Ruth out of the house is impossible without help.

My stomach sinks and tears well up in my eyes, realizing I have to break the news to her that our plans have been canceled. She was particularly excited about getting out of the house tonight.

I'm trying to gather the courage to go and talk to them when the doorbell rings, causing me to leap from my seat on the bench. Without wasting a second, I march to the front door and swing it open with unnecessary force, met with none other than Conway Danvers. He's wearing a crooked smile and is holding a giant bouquet of wildflowers.

"Hey, I brought these for Ruth and Leola." He lifts the flowers up. "You mentioned yesterday that it's best to never show up empty-handed."

Lennon must have told him those were Ruth's favorite flowers. Still, I don't let his thoughtful gesture distract me.

"Are you lost?" I ask flatly, completely ignoring his remark.

"No?" he says hesitantly.

I can see the confusion etched on his face, failing to understand why I'm not happy to see him.

"Did your phone die?"

“No.”

“Did you get into a car accident on your way here?”

“No...”

“Did you get stuck in traffic?”

“No. What’s with all the questions, Ace?” he asks, perplexed.

I put my hands on my hips, irritated that he doesn’t see a problem with being late and hasn’t even attempted to apologize.

That’s because you haven’t given him the chance.

I ignore the rational part of my brain, deciding to give him a well-deserved earful.

“We made plans to meet over an hour ago. When you didn’t show or reply to my texts, I assumed the worst.”

“Sienna, I’m sorry,” Conway finally says as he runs his fingers through his hair. “I slept until noon and then the band spent the afternoon jamming. I completely lost track of time. Once Jay and I finally hit the road, Emerson called me to talk about our upcoming tour.

“Uh-huh.” I’m still annoyed he didn’t make an effort to tell me was running late.

“I should have let you know when I was on my way. I really am sorry.”

I get that Conway and I have very different mindsets. He embraces a carefree and unabashed existence and refuses to live within the constraints of schedules and timelines in his personal life because he’s never had to. I can’t fault him for that, just like he shouldn’t criticize my need for order and structure.

While I understand, it doesn't change the fact that his lack of time management skills bothers me. But it's not going to do me any good stewing over it any longer.

“What are the chances that you'll delete the text messages I sent you before reading them and conclude that I'm a dramatic oddball?”

He gives me a guilty expression as he leans against the doorway and says, “I'd never think that.”

I let out a groan, not sure how to explain why I overreacted and blew his phone up in a way that doesn't make him question my sanity.

“Do you remember when you froze up outside the storage closet at the diner?”

“Yeah...”

“For all intents and purposes, I would consider this a similar circumstance. I have an aversion to people being late because of some things that happened in my past.” He knows the basic facts, so this shouldn't come as a surprise. “My irrational notions often outweigh logic, and I don't always think clearly before acting. In this case, that was in the form of sending you several nonsensical texts.”

Conway listens intently while I speak, and once I finish, he fishes his phone out of his pocket and taps on the screen, pointing it in my direction when he's done.

“Remind me, Ace... what texts are you referring to?” He gives me a mischievous grin.

Our conversation from this morning lights up on the screen, the thread of messages I sent tonight erased. My heart softens, and I'm suddenly not so upset with him anymore.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

“For what it’s worth, I never meant to stress you out. I’ll be sure to give you a heads up the next time I’m running late.”

He said next time.

Like he plans to see me often, except that’s not possible because he leaves for tour in a few days, and it’ll be months before I see him again.

“Damn, I would have brought a second bouquet if I had known I’d need an apology gift.”

“That’s okay.” I point to the bouquet in his hand. “Those aren’t leaving my house, so I can still appreciate them.”

Before he has a chance to reply, Leola’s voice floats in from the living room.

“Sienna, will you give the poor man a break and let him come inside?”

Leave it to Leola to side with Conway before they’ve even been introduced. I have a feeling those two are going to get along swimmingly.

I notice Conway trying to suppress a snicker, covering his mouth with his hand when he hears her demand.

“I saw that. Now come on, we’d better do as she says before she loses her patience.” I motion for him to come inside. When he walks past me, I catch sight of the blacked-out SUV parked in the driveway. I give a small wave, knowing Jay is inside, before shutting the door behind me.

Conway follows me down the hall into the open-concept room.

As we round the corner, Leola is taking out a freshly baked batch of banana bread. Her long black hair is braided down her back, and she’s proudly wearing an apron Ruth made for her as a Christmas present a few years ago.

“Conway, it’s an absolute delight to finally meet you.” She extends her arms out, welcoming him in for a hug, which he reciprocates without complaint.

When Leola finally releases him, she gives him a once-over.

“I see your band on the news all the time, you’re very famous. You’re all very easy on the eyes. I have to say though, you’re even better looking in person. Now I understand why Sienna can’t stop talking about you.”

“You talk about me?” he asks me with a smirk.

“Only when she asks who I spend my time with,” I tell him before turning my attention to Leola. “Please don’t give him any more compliments. They go straight to his head, and the last thing he needs is to inflate his ego any more.”

“Oh, I definitely appreciate the confidence boost, Leola.” He gives her a wide grin. “I’m beginning to think the Sovereign Kings should start targeting baby boomers. I’ve recently discovered that older women can’t get enough of me.”

Leola chuckles at his humor. “He’s a cheeky one. We should keep him.”

At this rate, she’ll have him moved in by the end of the week. Good thing he’s going on tour.

Is it, though?

“Is that Conway?” Ruth’s slurred question comes from the living room area where she’s facing the TV.

Conway goes to greet her, dropping to his knees next to her wheelchair so they’re face-to-face. Ruth gives him a droopy smile and lifts her hand as a gesture to say hello.

“You must be the infamous Ruth.” He clasps her trembling hand in his and presses a soft kiss to the back. My heart melts

at the sight, and I don't think Ruth and Leola will ever let him leave now.

“A little birdie told me you were a fan of wildflowers so I brought you and Leola a bouquet to thank you for welcoming me into your home.” Conway lifts the flowers closer so Ruth can lean in and smell them.

“Thank you, they're beautiful,” she says, her eyes alight with joy.

“Do you know where we're going tonight by chance?” Conway asks in a hushed tone. “Sienna refuses to give me any hints.”

“We're going to bingo,” Ruth exclaims.

The retirement community hosts a weekly bingo night and Ruth and Leola rarely miss it.

Understanding dawns on Conway's face, and for a brief moment, I wonder if he'll bail. Not many men, especially a rockstar, would be eager to spend an evening with a group of senior citizens.

“Hang on a second. You're telling me I get to take out three of the most beautiful women in the city? Sienna, if you'd have told me sooner, I would have made sure I was on time,” he says with a wink.

A blush spreads across my face and a spark of desire courses through me. Not the most appropriate reaction with Ruth and Leola in the room, but I can't help that he's such a charmer.

“You're right, Leola, this one's a keeper,” Ruth announces.

It's official. The Cartwright women have welcomed Conway into our family.

CONWAY

RUTH AND LEOLA'S CONDO HAS a warm and inviting atmosphere. The space is filled with personal touches and treasured keepsakes, each telling a unique story. A hand-stitched patchwork quilt draped across the back of the couch, a curio cabinet displaying a treasured collection of teacups, and a wall dedicated to a mismatched collage of frames—each holding a picture of Sienna from various stages of her life.

There are several photos of Sienna with Ruth and Leola by her side, and her unconditional love for them is tangible. Others showcase the unique childhood she had—her in a pool surrounded by a group of senior citizens in matching swim caps; behind the wheel of a golf cart with Leola in the seat next to her, gripping the side of the cart for dear life; and walking a massive group of dogs. The commonality in every image is Sienna's radiant smile and vibrant energy.

My eyes gravitate toward a gold frame with a photograph of a young woman who bears a striking resemblance to Sienna. The woman is seated on a swing hanging from an oak tree, her feet planted on the ground as she proudly cradles her swollen belly. An emerald pendant hangs from her neck, shining in the sunlight. Her gaze, brimming with happiness, is directed at the person behind the camera.

“That's Sienna's mother,” Leola points out as she comes to stand by my side. “This picture is the only keepsake Sienna has left of her. That damn father of hers trashed everything else after Monika passed.”

“Did you know her well?” I ask Leola, tilting my head toward the picture.

“Yeah, I did. Monika and Braydon moved in next door a couple of years before they had Sienna. They were newlyweds and very much in love. Monika’s pregnancy progressed smoothly, but there were unforeseen complications during childbirth, and she didn’t make it.” Leola bows her head in reverence as she recalls the painful memory. “Braydon was never the same after that. He treated Sienna like the enemy, wrongfully blaming her for her mother’s death. As a result, he often brought her to stay with Ruth and me, and we considered her ours long before he left for good.”

Sienna and I grew up to be very different people, but we both had parents who didn’t want us. We’ve both faced the devastating heartbreak and rejection that comes with being ignored by the person who is supposed to love and protect us unconditionally. We both have invisible scars that we’ll carry with us forever. The difference is how we cope with our past trauma.

“Sienna is really lucky to have you and Ruth,” I say.

Leola shakes her head, apparently displeased with my comment.

“No, we’re the lucky ones.” I can’t help but smile at her choice of words. They’re the same ones Sienna spoke a couple days ago when telling me about Ruth and Leola. “She has brought so much joy and light into our lives, and we wouldn’t be the same without her.” Leola takes a moment to look at the pictures on the wall before she continues. “When Ruth was diagnosed with Parkinson’s seven years ago, we weren’t sure what to expect. The next morning, Sienna marched into our bedroom with a printed-out plan of action, complete with a list of the best specialists in the area and a new daily regimen.”

“That’s impressive for someone in high school.” I can’t imagine the toll those responsibilities had on Sienna, especially when she was so young.

“She was offered a full-ride scholarship to the college of her choice but turned it down because she thought our burdens were hers to bear.” Leola’s voice is laden with guilt. “We tried to convince her otherwise, but that girl is too stubborn for her own good.”

“That’s the understatement of the century,” I chime in.

“She accepted a job she hated right out of high school to support us, and she never once complained, even though her boss was a total asshole,” Leola says with disdain. “It was a stroke of luck when he fired her if you ask me. Modeling might not be Sienna’s passion, but it’s been good for her to come out of her shell.”

“I agree. I think you’ll like her part in the upcoming Sovereign Kings music vid—” I stop myself short when I remember that if she watches it, she’ll see the scene where I’m practically undressing Sienna.

“I can’t wait,” Leola says with excitement.

I make a mental note to send her a version with that portion edited out. There’s no need to give the poor woman a coronary.

“Listen, Conway, you seem like a good man.” She gives me a warm smile. “That said, I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t warn you that if you ever hurt Sienna, you’ll have to answer to me.” She stands a little taller to prove her point.

“Copy that.”

I let out a sigh of relief when Sienna enters the living room, pushing Ruth’s chair.

“We’re ready to go,” she announces. “Oh wait, Conway, I almost forgot.” She rushes to the kitchen and grabs a plastic bag from one of the barstools. “I got you something to wear tonight.”

Curious, I open the bag and pull out a bald cap and glasses. “What the hell is this?” I ask in horror, holding up the items in question.

“What does it look like? It’s a disguise.” She’s trying to suppress a smile, but I can tell she’s getting a kick out of this.

“I hate to break it to you, Ace, but this getup isn’t going to do me any good if the goal is to go incognito.”

“It’s better than what you currently have on.” She gestures toward me.

“What’s wrong with how I look?”

“I think what Sienna is trying to say, dear, is that you’re sex on a stick,” Leola adds, sans filter. “If you wear the bald cap, no one’s going to give you a second glance, especially since most of the other men in the room will be bald.”

“Come on, Conway, please,” Sienna begs with a dramatized pouty lip.

Ten minutes later, I come out of the bathroom looking like Christian Bale in *Thor: Love and Thunder*.

I’m not used to wearing a disguise. I’ve never felt the need to hide my identity and have always welcomed the public attention. However, I’m happy to indulge Sienna’s request to keep a low profile if it gives her peace of mind.

When I enter the living room, all three women erupt into a fit of laughter.

“Hey, Danvers?” Sienna says in between a chuckle. “What did the bald man say to his comb?”

“What?” I know I’m going to regret encouraging her.

“We’ll never *part* again.”

I have a feeling she googled “bald puns” while I was in the bathroom.

“Can we go now?” I grumble, not happy about this latest development.

“Yeah,” Sienna says, sobering up some. “Is Jay still out front?”

“Yeah, he goes where I go.”

She bites her lip, a sign that she has something to ask but is afraid of my response.

“Ace, what is it?”

“Would he be willing to help get Ruth outside? It’s difficult getting her wheelchair down the porch steps, and it’ll go much smoother if you and Jay do it.”

“Of course, we’d be happy to,” I assure her.

“Thank you,” she says.

“BINGO,” Sienna shouts at the top of her lungs, waving her card in the air. She turns to Ruth and says, “We did it. We won.”

“Well done, sweetie,” she manages to say, her words slow and deliberate through a lopsided smile.

Several other participants cheer Sienna on as she jogs up to the front of the room so the game host can examine her card. Once he’s announced her as the winner, everyone clears their boards and a new game begins.

I opt out of playing this next round, preferring to observe.

“Is bingo night always this intense?” I ask Leola.

“Without fail,” she assures me with a chuckle. “Ruth and I have been playing for over thirty years. This game means a lot to her, but when she started losing mobility in her hands, she was worried she would have to stop playing. That’s when Sienna stepped in and started tagging along so she could help

Ruth. They make quite the pair, especially since they're both highly competitive and usually get carried away, if you haven't noticed."

I've noticed, all right. Sienna is sexy as hell with a neon dabber gripped tightly in her hand, a look of concentration on her face whenever the host hollers out a new number. Her eyes light up with excitement every time she's able to block out another square.

Leola wasn't joking when she said they take this game seriously. Our table is lined with rows of dabbers that Sienna brought along in a tote bag. Each one has a unique pattern or image, from polka dots to cartoon faces, and some even have disco ball caps.

"Hey, Leola..." I lean in so only she can hear me, changing the subject during a break from the game.

"Yes, dear?"

"Why isn't there a ramp at your condo? In a senior community, I'd expect they would make them wheelchair accessible."

"It was an oversight by the developer," she sighs. "When we first moved in, it wasn't a concern." The game picks back up, and she pauses to listen to the next number the host calls out, frowning when it's not one on her card. "The HOA granted its residents permission to install their own ramps, but we'd have to foot the bill. Sienna already has enough on her plate, and I'm not asking her to cover another expense right now. We'll get by—we always do."

She turns her attention back to her bingo card and I contemplate the situation. If this were Melissa and Rick, I would have already taken action. As my best friends' parents, they're important to me, and I want them to live comfortably. Sienna has made it clear that we're friends, so why wouldn't I do the same for Ruth and Leola? Besides, if Lennon knew

about this, she'd be scolding me for hesitating even a moment to fix the problem.

Fuck it.

I take out my phone and shoot a quick text to Jay with instructions to find a contractor who can work on an accelerated timeline and isn't above taking a bribe to expedite this project. I resist getting Emerson involved, not wanting him to lecture me about crossing another line with Sienna.

Leola and Ruth have played an important role in helping her become the remarkable woman she is today. They dedicated themselves to raising her, and if financial resources are the only thing holding them back from making their lives easier, then I'm more than happy to help.

My phone pings almost immediately, so I expect it to be a reply from Jay. Except, when I read the message, I jump out of my chair, slightly panicked.

"We need to go." I don't care that I'm interrupting the game.

"Why, what's wrong?" Sienna asks.

"I'm about to become an uncle," I say proudly.

"Lennon's in labor?" she gasps, her eyes wide with excitement.

"Yeah, Jay will take Leola and Ruth back to the condo when they're ready to go home, and we'll take your car to Lennon's."

"Oh okay, I'm not sure if I should go with you," she admits, staring down at the card in front of her.

I don't give her a chance to explain before grabbing the dabber from her hand and slamming it on the table.

"We don't have much time, Ace, so I'll make this quick. Lennon is having a baby and wants her best friend there. You

happen to be that best friend, got it? You're a permanent fixture in our lives now, so get used to it."

Sienna blinks back at me, surprised by my sudden outburst. I don't miss Leola on my other side, grinning like the Cheshire Cat, though she doesn't intervene in the conversation.

"Um, okay, let's go," she says quietly. "But, Conway..."

"Yeah?"

"You might want to lose the bald cap, or Emerson and Lennon will never let you live it down," she says smugly.

SIENNA

“SHE’S PERFECT,” I COO.

Early this morning, Lennon gave birth to a healthy baby girl.

Indie Rose Phillips is absolute perfection, the most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen. She has a full head of black hair, an adorable scrunched-up nose, and makes the cutest little suckling noises when she sleeps.

She’s currently swaddled tightly in a muslin blanket, snoozing in my arms. I caress her fuzzy black locks and she nuzzles closer into my chest.

Lennon opted for a home birth primarily so she could be in a familiar space and recover at her own pace. Plus, it’s made things easier from a security perspective. According to Conway, the media would have surrounded the hospital, making it impossible to get the members of Sovereign Kings in and out undetected.

When we arrived last night, we treated Lennon’s massive living area like our personal hospital waiting room. We ended up falling asleep on the couch and were startled awake this morning by Indie’s soft cries announcing her arrival.

“I’m happy you’re both here,” Lennon says to us.

I give a half-hearted smile. To be honest, even after Conway insisted that I belong here, I can’t help but feel like I’m intruding on a private family moment.

Lennon glances over at Emerson and they proceed to have a silent conversation, ending with Emerson nodding to Lennon in encouragement.

“We have something we wanted to ask while we’re all together,” Lennon announces.

“Are you sending us on another food run?” Conway asks in mock horror.

We already went to Lennon’s favorite restaurants to get her a cheeseburger and a latte. When I commented on the unusual pairing, she reminded me that anything goes after having a baby.

“Very funny,” she says sarcastically. “In all seriousness, we want you and Sienna to be Indie’s godparents. If anything were ever to happen to Emerson and me, there’s no one else we’d trust more than the two of you to love and take care of her.”

“What about Melissa and Rick?” Conway asks, my mind reeling far too quickly for a response.

“My parents love us, but they’re content with their title of grandma and grandpa,” Emerson says. “Besides, they’re enjoying their time gallivanting the globe without any responsibilities. Nothing is going to happen to Lennon and me. We’re asking as a formality so we can include it in our will, nothing more. The only thing it means for you is that Indie will expect better birthday presents as she gets older.” He chuckles at his own joke.

I’m speechless. I hadn’t considered that Lennon would ask me to Indie’s godmother. Not after we were out of touch for so long. It might just be a formality, but I’m touched by the sentiment.

“Sienna?” Lennon calls out my name to get my attention.

“Yeah?” I snap my head up to look at her.

“You didn’t answer me. Will you be Indie’s godmother?”

“I-I don’t know what to say,” I stammer.

“The right answer is yes.” Lennon laughs.

“Are you sure there isn’t someone else you want to ask?”

Lennon turns to the guys. “Can you give us the room for a minute? Us girls need to have a quick chat.”

“Somebody’s in trouble,” Conway taunts with a wink.

“We’ll wait out in the hall.” Emerson kisses Lennon’s forehead on his way out.

When the door shuts behind them, Lennon turns back to me.

“Girl, what gives?” She frowns at me. “We’ve been best friends since we were fourteen. You’re the only person I’d want to be Indie’s godmother. Why are you hesitating?”

“We’re not as close as we used to be. I just want you to be sure.”

My insecurities and self-doubt come rushing to the surface. I know it’s not the best time, but I need to be sure that Lennon is asking me for the right reasons and not simply out of obligation.

“There’s no one else I trust more than you, Sisi,” she says with surety. “Sure, we might have drifted apart for a few years, but I’ve always considered you my best friend. While everyone else tries to use me as a pawn to get to the Sovereign Kings, you’ve proven that you genuinely care about *me*, and I can’t thank you enough for that. I’m so happy we ran into each other in New York so we could reconnect.”

“Me too.”

“You should know...” Her voice drops to a whisper. “I’ve always secretly hoped that Conway would finally settle down with you.” I have to lean in to make sure I don’t miss her next words. “I’d love nothing more than to call you my sister for real.”

I ignore the butterflies dancing in my stomach. Conway and I are *just* friends, I sternly remind myself. He doesn't have plans to commit to anyone, much less me, so there's no point in entertaining this line of thinking a second longer.

"You sure know how to ruin a beautiful moment, Len," I deflect, not ready to discuss my complicated dynamic with her brother.

"Fine, don't give me any hope that it's a possibility." She pouts, disappointed.

"If it's any consolation, I'd love to be Indie's godmother," I tell her, steering the conversation in a different direction.

"Really?" She perks up.

"Yeah, it would be my honor."

Lennon tears up at my acceptance. "Damn, these hormones are a bitch."

"Can we come back in now?" Conway asks from the other side of the closed door, his voice muffled by the wall.

"Yes," Lennon and I shout in unison.

"Are we officially Indie's godparents?" he asks me, his voice filled with enthusiasm and a wide grin plastered across his face.

"Yes, we are." I give him a smile. "Fair warning, Danvers, I'm an excellent gift giver and will be Indie's favorite godparent in no time."

"It's so on. Just so *you* know, I'm booking a petting zoo for her first birthday."

"I've heard princess-themed bouncy castles go great with farm animals," I quip.

"Oh great, we've created monsters," Emerson says to Lennon, rolling his eyes. "Why don't you start your godparent

duties by watching Indie while I help Lennon take a shower?”

“Of course, I’m content where I am.” I gesture toward Indie still cradled snugly in my arms.

Conway nods in agreement, and Emerson helps Lennon to the master bathroom and shuts the door behind them.

It’s suddenly very quiet aside from the distant sound of birds chirping drifting through the window.

“I’m glad you’re Indie’s godmother. You’ll be great,” Conway says.

“Thanks, you’ll make a great godfather.”

He comes over to sit on the arm of my chair to get a better look at Indie.

“Aren’t babies supposed to come out looking like squishy aliens? She’s almost too cute for her own good.”

“She’s perfect,” I declare as I caress Indie’s chubby cheek.

Conway bends down to get a closer look and I can’t help the hitch in my breathing when his face is only inches from mine.

“She smells like baby soap and fresh linen,” he observes quietly.

“Wait until she starts pooping, then you won’t think she smells so sweet.” I wrinkle my nose at the thought.

“I’ll be in a different country by then, and it’ll be months before Lennon can force me to change a diaper.”

I push back the wave of sadness bubbling up inside me at the idea of him leaving for tour.

“You want to hold her?” I lift Indie out to him.

“Uh...” He gives me a blank stare. “I’ve never held one before.”

“This *one* is your niece, and she’d really like if her uncle held her.”

I don’t give Conway a chance to argue before placing Indie in his outstretched arms. He hesitantly brings her close to his chest and almost immediately relaxes his posture. He starts swaying back and forth while softly singing “Love Is a Savage.” My ovaries nearly explode at witnessing the unapproachable bad boy serenade his newborn niece with his own lyrics. If you ask me, “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” is so last year, because this is in a class all of its own.

He croons several more Sovereign Kings songs while gently rocking Indie in his arms. I admit their music is growing on me. It might have to do with the man standing in front of me.

After sitting in silence for a while, Indie becomes restless, butting her face into Conway’s chest, searching for her milk source. She gets angry when she can’t find it and begins to wail at the top of her lungs.

“Jesus. How can such a tiny person make such loud noises?”

I let out a soft laugh at Conway’s reaction. “It’s easy. The louder she screams, the quicker she gets what she wants.”

As if to prove my point, Lennon bursts through the bathroom door, shuffling toward Conway.

“What did you do to my baby?” She snatches Indie from his arms and holds her close to her chest.

“I think she’s hungry,” I interject, coming to Conway’s rescue.

“You poor thing,” Lennon murmurs to Indie. “Mommy is sorry she was gone for so long. I’m here now.”

She settles back on the bed, adjusting her nursing pillow in preparation to feed Indie. With wet hair and a bare chest, Emerson emerges from the bathroom, taking a seat next to his wife and daughter. They're sharing an intimate family moment, and I decide to leave so they can enjoy some privacy before they get more visitors.

"I'm going to head out," I say, starting for the door. "I'll stop by later this week, but if you need anything before then, text me."

"Thank you. I'm really glad you were here this morning, Sisi." Lennon beams at me.

"Me too."

When she turns her attention to Indie, I take it as my cue to slip out. I'm halfway down the hall when Conway catches up to me.

"You can't drive home. You barely got any sleep last night."

"I'm fine. Plus, I drove my car here, and I need it to run errands later."

"Jay is out front, and I've already lined someone up to drive your car back to your condo."

Of course he did.

"Emerson asked me to take care of some official Sovereign Kings business that needs to be done before the band leaves on tour, so I have to go out anyway. Jay and I will drop you off at your place on our way to the studio."

They're on opposite sides of town, but I'm not about to argue with him. Truth be told, I'm exhausted and not in the mood to deal with L.A. traffic.

"Okay, I appreciate it," I say.

When we step outside, Jay is waiting for us in the circular driveway. As I approach, he offers his hand to help me into the vehicle, but Conway dismissively swats it away and extends his own. I note Jay's amused expression as he gets into the driver's seat.

It's eerily quiet as we pull down the drive, and I half expect a mob of paparazzi to swarm the place despite Indie's birth being a well-guarded secret.

"Emerson is waiting to make an official statement until tomorrow afternoon." It's like Conway can read my mind. "We leave on tour in a few days, which will take the spotlight off the baby. We give the media plenty of material to write about."

I'm well aware of the kinds of things the tabloids publish about the band, mostly related to their revolving door of women. I can't help the pang of jealousy that surges through me at the thought of Conway touching someone else, let alone fucking them. I have no official claim over him, and I'm the one who insisted we remain friends, but that doesn't stop my hackles from rising when I think about him sleeping with other women while he's on tour.

I lean my head against the headrest, trying to calm my nerves and realizing I'm far more tired than I thought I was. Next thing I know, I'm opening my eyes to see that we're idling in front of my condo.

I sit up straight when I spot several construction workers standing around the yard and one drilling a hole into the concrete porch.

"What the hell is going on?" I notice that Conway doesn't look surprised that a bunch of strangers are trespassing on my lawn.

"They're installing a ramp," he replies casually.

“I didn’t hire anyone to do that,” I throw back.

“I did,” he announces, like he’s telling me that he dropped off a gift basket or another bouquet of flowers—not a ramp worth thousands of dollars.

“Conway, you can’t do this.” My voice gets louder with every word. I shift my position, angling myself to face him directly. “You can’t just go around tearing up my porch without permission.”

“The way I see it, you have two choices. I can send these guys packing, but you’re going to have an unusable walkway and the HOA will probably slap you with a hefty fine because of the eyesore.”

“What’s the second option?” I deadpan, not amused by his theatrics.

“You let the crew finish the job they were paid to do, and by the end of the week, you’ll have a functioning ramp. I think I can guess which one Ruth would prefer.”

Oh my god, this man is intolerable.

I turn to address Jay, seated quietly in the driver’s seat. “Would you mind stepping out for a minute? I need to have a private conversation with your boss.”

He lets out a bark of laughter at my request. “Sure thing, Sienna. Give him hell.”

Once Jay is gone, I shift my focus back to Conway. “I can’t afford to have a ramp put in, which is why there’s no ramp.” I do my best to mask the embarrassment in my voice. “You shouldn’t have put me in this position without speaking to me first.”

I’ve done extensive research on the costs associated with building a ramp and the range is anywhere from five to ten grand, depending on the materials, quality, and crew. Based on

the scene outside my window, Conway's little stunt is going to set me back at least ten grand. My stomach rolls at the revelation.

"I have no intention of letting you foot the bill, and you damn well know it," he growls. His unwavering gaze silently dares me to try to challenge him on the issue.

"I've told you I'm not your damn charity case," I yell at the top of my lungs, unable to control my temper.

Conway's eyes darken. "Don't punish Ruth and Leola because your goddamn pride can't take a hit. A ramp will make all your lives a hell of a lot easier. Don't you dare deprive them of that. If you're too stubborn to accept this is happening, then go through the damn window."

Steam is practically coming out of my ears. I want to fire off another rebuttal and tell him to go to hell, but his latest argument keeps my mouth shut.

He's right. This is about making things easier for Ruth and Leola, and I can't let my ego get in the way of that. Conway might have won this round, but that doesn't mean I won't find a way to even the playing field.

"Fine, let the crew finish, but the conversation of payment isn't over."

Conway shamelessly grins at me.

"Has anyone told Ruth and Leola yet?"

"Jay notified them last night so they wouldn't be surprised when the crew showed up this morning."

"Tell him I say thank you," I say sweetly.

"Okay," Conway clips through clenched teeth.

I don't miss his change in demeanor or his tightened fists. Evidently, *someone* is jealous that I'm willing to show my

gratitude for Jay and not give them the credit they think they deserve. Too bad.

The silence in the vehicle stretches on, a sign that I've overstayed my welcome.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye," I mumble in Conway's direction.

It's best to rip the Band-Aid off to avoid making this conversation any more awkward than it needs to be. I don't expect to hear from him over the next few months and I refuse to let him see how that thought affects me. I might be angry with him, but that doesn't mean I won't miss him.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You're leaving in a few days," I remind him.

"Yeah, I'm going on tour, not dying. We're godparents now, Ace. We have things we'll need to discuss that'll require us to call and text every day while I'm gone. We can't drop the ball on our duties now, can we? Plus, I'm going to need someone I can complain to when Wells or Grayson are being a pain in my ass."

A playful smile crosses my lips. He's giving us an excuse to stay in touch without having to tackle the landmine of emotions surrounding our relationship—or lack thereof. We're walking a tightrope and I think we both know we will likely end up facing the fallout if we keep going down this road. That doesn't stop me from agreeing to his terms. I can't let him go... Not yet.

"Godparent check-ins and daily therapy sessions it is. But that doesn't mean I forgive you for this stunt." I wave toward the construction crew.

"I'd expect nothing less." A smile tugs at his lips.

"Bye for now, Danvers."

“Talk soon, Ace. Tell my other two favorite Cartwrights that I’m sorry I had to skip out early last night and that I owe them another bingo date when I get back from tour.”

“I will,” I squeak out, my heart involuntarily fluttering at his words.

I may not be happy with how Conway went about it, but I appreciate him wanting to make things easier for Ruth and Leola.

I’m falling for him, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

CONWAY

Three Months Later

THE BAND IS IN OUR element while we're on tour. Our sales skyrocket for all things Sovereign Kings whenever we interact with our fans in person. We started with a week stateside, then Canada, followed by a long leg in the U.K. Every destination offers a distant cuisine, language, and culture, but what remains the same is the sold-out stadiums and ecstatic fans who can recite our songs from memory.

Unfortunately, I haven't been as emotionally invested in this tour like the others. Since we left L.A., I've been stuck in a state of restlessness. Since we started the band, we've traveled more than we're home, and I've always preferred it that way. Until now.

The Sovereign Kings is a well-oiled machine when we have Emerson at its helm. Without him, things have been in chaos. It's been a fucking nightmare with Todd as our interim manager. He questions every decision we make and has doubled the number of promotional events we have scheduled in every city. The band works upward of sixteen hours a day to keep up with the demand, and we're on the verge of exhaustion.

Emerson, Lennon, and Indie will be joining us for the last few tour dates, and I'm counting down the days until their arrival.

To add to my list of grievances, I've been celibate for nearly five months, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it. Scratch that. I could go out and proposition the first

attractive woman I see for a one-night stand and guarantee a yes. It would work on any woman except the one who called me an entitled ass and is the source of my sexual frustration.

Sienna.

She's been a constant in my life these last three months, even from thousands of miles away. True to my word, we've talked every day since I left for tour. She's become the person I call whenever I have something exciting to share or need a listening ear.

I'll always have Lennon and the guys, but Sienna is different. The culmination of her positive outlook, compassion, and determination has me hooked. It's also a fucking turn-on that she never hesitates to put me in my place when I'm being an ass.

We're both busy, and my time zone is constantly changing, but I always prioritize our conversations. We text throughout the day and FaceTime every night. Often, our chats consist of a quick goodnight and others we stay up talking for hours.

It's never enough.

No one affects me the way she does. While I've been on tour, I haven't spared another woman a second glance. There's only one I'm interested in. We might have agreed to be just friends, and I was okay with that for a while, but things have changed... *I've* changed. Over the last three months, my priorities have shifted.

A loud pounding on my dressing room door catches my attention as the handle jiggles.

"Conway, mic check is in ten minutes, you better not be late." Todd's threat resounds from the hallway.

God, I can't wait until we get rid of him.

I let out a low growl of frustration from my seat on the couch. He treats the band like we're a group of mindless drones here to do his bidding, and I'm damn tired of it. I'm prepared to give him a piece of my mind, but he storms off to his next victim before I have the chance.

I don't waste a second, knowing if I'm not on that stage on time, he'll be back. I grab my phone from the table and call the person at the top of my favorites list.

"Danvers," Sienna answers. "Are you getting ready for mic check?"

Her ethereal voice is music to my ears, but it's not the same as hearing it in person.

I miss watching her nibble her bottom lip when she's nervous, scrunch her nose in disapproval, throw her head back in a fit of infectious laughter, and most of all, I miss the radiant smile that lights up her face when she's happy.

"Yeah. I have ten minutes. I couldn't go out there without talking to my good luck charm."

Sienna lets out a throaty laugh. "I'd better wake up Leola for you then."

She damn well knows I'm referring to her.

It's four in the morning in California, but she doesn't complain about me waking her up in the middle of the night to talk. She never does.

"I miss you," I confess.

"I miss you too," she replies.

I get up off the couch and go over to the small closet. Like always, I sit cross-legged in the center of the cramped space, leaving the door partially open. There's been a fundamental change to my pre-show ritual over the last few months in that Sienna's voice has replaced my music.

With each passing moment in the darkness, the tightness in my chest intensifies.

“Conway? Are you there?” Sienna asks with concern.

A vise-like grip tightens my throat, making each breath a struggle. The only sound that escapes in response is wheezing. Used to my reaction, she doesn’t panic or bombard me with questions. I haven’t disclosed the details, but she recognizes when I’m in the middle of my ritual and, like always, provides a distraction in the form of sharing details about her day.

“Yesterday was hectic. I spent the morning modeling for a new line of fair-trade coats.” She pauses briefly but continues when she hears me gasping for air. “The shoot was in the loft of an old industrial building and it was a hot box in there. We were all sweating buckets. The poor makeup artist was beside herself trying to keep up with all the touch-ups.”

“What the hell makes a coat *fair trade*?” I manage to get out.

“They’re ethically produced by workers who benefit from improved working conditions and fair wages. For today’s shoot, all the coats featured were made with 100% GOTS-certified organic cotton.”

“I don’t know half the terms you just used, but I think it’s great that you’re working with brands who are making a difference.” My breathing has finally evened out, but I’m not anywhere close to being done talking with Sienna. “Tell me what else happened.”

“When I got home, Ruth’s nursing aide was pushing her down the ramp. When I asked where they were going, the aide informed me that Ruth insists they go up and down it at least ten times every day to make sure it’s put to good use.” Sienna lets out a melodic laugh. “Thanks to you, she’s been able to reclaim her independence.”

“I didn’t lift a finger unless you count sending a few texts.”

“You still made the impossible possible, so thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Ace.”

She has tried countless times to pay me back for the ramp. I warned her there’d be consequences if she pulled another stunt like she did with the music video. When that didn’t stop her from reaching out to Emerson to have him transfer more money into my account, I told her it was a gift for Leola and Ruth. At the reassurance that it had nothing to do with her, she’s finally let it be.

We both know that’s bullshit though. It has everything to do with Sienna.

“There is one more thing I wanted to tell you.” She pauses, allowing the suspense to linger. “It was the strangest thing. My passport came in the mail yesterday, which is funny because I don’t recall submitting an application. Any idea how that happened?”

Now would be a good time to plead the fifth.

“I assume it would be easy to submit one on your behalf if the person had an approved photo and your social security number. With you being a model, the picture part would be easy to come by, and Leola can be very chatty... Who knows who she might have disclosed your personal information to.”

“Danvers—”

“Ace, the details of how it got there don’t matter. You have a passport now, which means you’re out of excuses not to travel. There’s a great big world waiting for you to explore, and now is your chance.”

To come visit me.

Sienna lets out an exasperated sigh, and I recognize the shuffle of her feet as she paces back and forth.

“Conway, what are we doing?” she whispers.

“I’m not sure about you, but I’m trying to convince the most stubborn woman in existence to hop on a plane and come visit me in Japan. Do you think it’s working?” I let out a chuckle to lighten the mood.

“No, what are *we* doing?” Her voice takes on a serious tone. “We say we’re friends, but we talk on the phone every day, we text nonstop, and you insist on grand gestures that are far from friendly.”

“You’re right, Ace.” The words escape before I can stop them.

“Explain.”

Fuck, what am I doing?

This is not how I planned on telling her. I was going to convince her to come to Japan so we could talk in person.

How do I tell Sienna that she’s become so much more than my friend? That no matter how hard I’ve tried to ignore my growing attachment to her, I can’t. She’s quickly become my primary source of happiness, and I can’t imagine my life without her. I don’t want to go another day without her knowing how I feel.

She has unknowingly chipped away at my armor piece by piece. I’ve never met another person who can melt away my deepest fears or make me laugh the way she can.

There is never going to be a perfect time to have this conversation, so I might as well bring it up now. Besides, what do I have to lose?

Everything, if she turns you down.

“You want the truth, Ace? Not a minute goes by that I don’t think of you. You’ve pushed past every defense without even trying,” I say with sincerity. “I’m bewitched by your throaty

laugh, captivated by your expressive green eyes and your unwavering loyalty to those you love. I'm haunted by the smell of lilac and oranges, a constant reminder that you're out of my reach.

"I've replayed our kiss countless times, the way your body molded against mine, your slender fingers gripping my hair to keep me close, and the taste of you on my lips. You're so damn sweet..." I groan at the memory. "Baby, you're the only fucking thing that matters. How much longer are you going to deny this thing between us?"

Sienna's heavy breathing is the only indication that she's still on the line, and it kills me that she's not sitting right next to me.

"Are you there?" I ask softly, not wanting to spook her.

After several seconds of silence, she finally replies. "I'm here... Danvers, please don't ask me to risk what we have for a one-night stand. I won't trade our friendship for a single night of ecstasy, no matter how many orgasms you promise me."

I dissolve into a fit of laughter, unable to contain myself. God, I need this beautiful, innocent girl to be mine.

"What's so funny?" she grumbles.

"Nothing, Ace. I'm just imagining what you look like when you come," I say with unfiltered honesty.

"Conway, I'm serious. I won't be your friend-with-benefits or a casual fling."

"I don't want to be friends."

"You're done with me, just like that?" She sounds dejected.

"Oh, Ace, I haven't even started with you yet."

"What are you saying?"

“I want you to be mine.”

“We both agreed to be *just* friends, Danvers,” she reminds me.

“That was before.”

“Before what?”

“Before I knew the sound of your belly laugh when you hear a funny joke. Before you offered me a glimpse of what it would be like to be a real couple, getting ready together over FaceTime, you starting your day while I get ready for bed. Before I knew what it felt like to be away from you, halfway across the world.” I let out an exhausted sigh. “I’m fucking miserable without you.”

She inhales deeply before she finally breaks the silence. “You’re Conway Danvers. You don’t do relationships.”

“Correction, Ace: I *didn’t* do relationships, but I want one with you. I *need* one with you,” I plead with her.

“We’re on opposite sides of the world, how would this even work? You can’t expect me to give you an answer now. I need time to think... to process this.”

“I’m not asking you to make a decision right now, baby,” I reassure her. “We can talk more about it when we’re together in person, okay? In the meantime, can you think about if there’s room in your future for me and everything that entails?”

She wouldn’t just be signing up to be with me. She’d be committing herself to a life in the spotlight, something she’s never once been interested in. But with how I feel, with how I think we both feel... I would spend the rest of my life making it worth her while if she gave me the chance.

“Yeah, I’ll think about it. But what about other women? Are you going to keep seeing other people until I give you an

answer?” she asks with concern.

“There is no one else, baby,” I tell her with conviction. “I haven’t slept with anyone since the night before I ran into you at the hotel in New York.”

“Oh.” She sounds surprised.

“Are you dating anyone?” I ask, feigning innocence.

I already know the answer. I chat with Leola and Ruth every week, and they’ve been very forthcoming about Sienna’s nonexistent dating life, which makes me a happy man.

“No, I’m not.”

“Good, and you won’t.”

“Conway?”

“Yes, baby?”

“You only have a minute left before Todd breaks down the door because you’re late for mic check,” Sienna murmurs gently.

God, she’s adorable. Forever my considerate rule follower.

“Thanks for the warning. Now go back to sleep. We’ll talk soon,” I promise.

“Goodnight, Danvers.”

“Good morning, Ace.”

As I exit the closet, I can’t help but stride out with enthusiasm. I’m one step closer to making Sienna Cartwright mine.

SIENNA

“SIENNA, TURN YOUR HEAD TO the left... a tad more,” the photographer hollers from behind his camera. I tilt my neck slightly, hoping I’m getting it right. I don’t know what I’m doing most of the time, but I like to think I put on a good front when it counts.

“There, that’s perfect. Now hold that pose and gaze out the window, but remember, no smiling,” he warns.

I’m unable to suppress the involuntary grin that flashes across my face.

“I said no smiling,” the photographer says with a frown.

“Sorry,” I mumble.

Why is it that when someone instructs me *not* to smile or laugh, I can’t help but do the opposite? It’s one skill I have yet to master. After a brief pause, I’m able to regain my composure and plaster a neutral expression on my face.

“Much better.” The photographer gives me a satisfied nod.

With his camera in hand, he begins snapping photos, maneuvering around the room, making sure he captures the perfect shot.

Modeling requires a sink-or-swim mentality and it comes with a steep learning curve. Thankfully, I’ve managed to keep my head above water, but it’s been a challenge. I arrive early to every shoot to familiarize myself with the location, setup, and wardrobe.

Today I’m modeling a winter-inspired line amid another unprecedented heat wave. It’s sweltering inside, and we might

as well be in a sauna. My light-wash ankle jeans, white denim jacket, and fleece-lined boots aren't doing me any favors.

My left leg starts cramping, but I manage to maintain my position. I discovered early on that the process of getting into place for a shot takes much longer than actually capturing the image. It's part of the job to grin and bear through the pain, but that doesn't stop me from silently willing the photographer to hurry up.

Personally, I don't see the appeal of modeling. Why do thousands of women willingly subject themselves to years of self-inflicted torture in the hopes of becoming a household name? Most models spend years waiting for their big break, yet few ever get one.

Everyone views me as the girl who got lucky because I was in the right place at the right time. But I would have preferred any alternative to being humiliated on national television by an arrogant asshole.

When the music video for "Love is a Savage" dropped back in August, things intensified.

The tabloids posted several stories detailing my lack of modeling experience and my supposed "precarious financial situation," speculating that I'm sleeping with one or more members of the Sovereign Kings to advance my career. Because how else do you explain them hiring a nobody like me to be featured in their video?

Fortunately, I've managed to stay under the paparazzi's radar and have avoided being followed or having them dig further into my personal life. Without proof of these alleged affairs and given my absence from the Sovereign Kings' tour, their interest in me died quickly.

I thank my lucky stars I had the good sense to turn Becky down when it came to setting up any social media accounts for

me. I can only imagine what people would say about me if they were given added ammunition.

On the other hand, my role in the music video has brought hundreds of additional modeling campaign offers. I've been fortunate enough to hand-pick which brands and publications I collaborate with, making selecting those that will have limited media exposure far easier.

Modeling is a stepping stone, a means to an end. I can't wait for the day when I can pursue a more rewarding career choice for me that doesn't include the pressures of being in the limelight.

My dreams might not pay the big bucks, but they're mine.

The message in my horoscope today seems tailor-made for my circumstances.

You determine your own destiny, Virgo. Do what you know is right for you, even if others disagree with your decision. Only you know what will make you happy. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle suggested, your happiness can be achieved by finding a balance between deficiency and excess.

To me, happiness shouldn't be dictated by a person's financial status, the number of designer labels in their closet, or the square footage of their house. It's dependent on the satisfaction with the life they've created, the contentment they feel in their relationships, and the fulfillment they get from their chosen profession.

I'm unwilling to sacrifice my happiness for fame, fortune, or material possessions, and I'm worried that's exactly what I'd be doing if Conway and I got together.

It's been a week since he told me he wants to date me. We've talked on the phone every day but have avoided that specific topic. The Sovereign Kings are currently in Spain, and though I'm not prepared to fly out to meet Conway just yet,

I'm hoping we can have a follow-up conversation about where we go from here.

The truth is I want to be with him too, despite my reservations. He's not the only one who's been affected by our growing connection. I look forward to our daily conversations and FaceTime calls, and I miss him so much it hurts. I assumed my feelings were one-sided and that my childhood fantasies were acting up again. I never let myself imagine that Conway might feel the same way.

I'll admit it's a power trip having the lead singer of the most famous rock band in the world declare his desire to be with me. He could have anyone, and he chose *me*. I'm the first woman he's willing to put in the effort to commit to, and according to him, the only woman.

If Conway and I were together, our relationship would eventually go public, and every aspect of my life would be scrutinized. Every choice I make would be put under a microscope by the media, find its way into the headlines of every gossip rag in the country. And it's not something that will ease over time. Conway's fame will never diminish. He has no plans to stop touring any time soon, and even if he did, he will always be hailed as the revered lead singer of the Sovereign Kings.

The way I see it, if we're going to give this a go, we need to stay under the radar for as long as we can. It'll be a monumental task, but it's what I need from Conway if we're going to explore this thing between us. I want the chance to grow our connection before inviting in the complexities of outside factors that we have no control over. Our sexual chemistry may be off the charts, but that's not enough for a long-lasting commitment.

"Let's get one more group shot and we'll call it a day." The photographer's booming voice gets my attention and I release

my position, stretching out my legs.

The other models who have been patiently waiting on the sidelines now join me in front of the exposed brick wall.

With graceful poise, Lacie comes to stand by my side. Like me, she's represented by Elevation. Unlike me, she started modeling when she was fifteen. She's one of the few models who hasn't outright snubbed me and has been kind enough to show me the ropes while I find my footing.

"Oh my god, it's like a freaking furnace in here," she whines, fanning her face with her hand. "I can't wait to get out of here."

"Any fun plans tonight?"

We pause our conversation while the photographer snaps a few photos before rushing over to readjust the collar of another model's jacket.

"James is taking me to The Bistro. Have you heard of it?"

"I have."

"There's a three-month waitlist, but James's manager worked his magic and got us a table last minute," she tells me.

The perks of being famous.

Her boyfriend, James Connell, is a rising star in country music, and their relationship has timed up with Lacie's modeling career skyrocketing. The tabloids have accused her of using James to further her agenda, but that's a lie. She's the most talented model I've ever met. She's admitted that having her career and achievements downplayed because of who she's dating has been challenging, and those concerns mirror my own when it comes to Conway.

After what feels like an eternity, the photographer finally dismisses us for the day.

"Thank god," Lacie declares.

She shucks off her fleece jacket and jogs to the makeshift changing station on the other side of the massive space. I'm about to follow when I spot James entering the building. I give him a little wave as he approaches.

"Have you seen Lacie?" he asks.

"She's getting changed. She told me about The Bistro, it's all she can talk about."

He leans in close with a bemused expression. "I'm going to ask her to marry me tonight," he whispers. "Sorry to dump the news on you like that, but I've been itching to tell someone all day and I know I can trust you."

"Oh my gosh, I'm so happy for you." I clap my hands excitedly. "Lacie is going to flip."

I stop short when the woman of the hour comes waltzing toward us. She's flawless in an Italian skater dress with an exposed gold zipper in the front and strappy black heels. She might not be clued in that this is a special occasion, but she's dressed to kill.

"You ready to go, babe?" James asks her.

When she nods, he rests his hand on her back and leads her toward the exit.

"Have fun," I say, even though I can't help the envy pulsing through me.

I wish Conway were here and touching me like that.

"Sienna?" one of the assistants calls out.

"That's me," I say, raising my hand.

"Someone's been trying to reach you. They got ahold of Becky and she had them call the studio. They said it was an emergency," she informs me.

I curse under my breath. We're required to turn our phones off before a shoot, so I haven't had a chance to check mine since this morning. A thousand scenarios cross my mind and I'm hanging on by a thread as the young woman holds out her phone for me. I snatch it from her, placing it to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Is this Sienna Cartwright?"

"Yes, it is."

"I'm Carol Hodge, the Director of Nursing at Alpine Home Health. I'm calling to inform you that Ruth fell this afternoon and was admitted to St. Mercy's Hos—"

I abruptly end the call, not waiting for her to finish. I shove the phone back into the assistant's hand with a mumbled thank you. I grab my things and hightail it to the hospital, not bothering to change.

My feet pound against the floor as I race down the hospital corridor. My breathing is ragged by the time I get to the nearest nursing station.

"Can you tell me which room Ruth Cartwright is in?" I ask breathlessly.

"Sure, hon." The nurse beside the desk gives me a sympathetic smile as she scrolls through her tablet. "She's in room 304."

"Thank you so much," I rush out.

I take the stairs, not wanting to wait an extra second to get to Ruth. When I finally arrive, I'm disappointed when I find an empty bed. I'm ready to track down someone who can tell me what's going on when I hear a sniffling sound. I glance up to see Leola standing by the window, tears streaming down her face.

“Leola?” My voice quivers

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m so glad you’re here.” She rushes toward me, wrapping me in a hug.

“Where’s Ruth?” I prepare for the worst.

“She’s getting an X-ray. The doctor doesn’t think her hip is broken, but he didn’t want to take any chances.”

“What happened?”

“We were watching TV and I stepped out onto the porch to water the plants. A new neighbor stopped by to chat so I stayed outside longer than I planned,” she confesses with a shaky voice. “Ruth wanted to change the channel, and when she tried to reach the remote, she fell out of her chair. Thank god the nursing aide arrived shortly after Ruth fell. She’s the one who called the ambulance.”

“Are you sure Ruth will be okay?” I ask in a shaky voice.

“Yes, sweetheart,” Leola reassures me while giving me another tight squeeze. “She’ll make a full recovery, I promise.”

“I’m so glad.”

“I have a few questions for the nurse. Do you mind waiting here in case they bring Ruth back before I’m done?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Once Leola slips out, I rifle through my purse until I find my phone. With trembling hands, I scroll through my contacts until I get to *Danvers*.

Conway was the first person I wanted to talk with after I got the news about Ruth’s fall, but I decided to wait until I had all the details before telling him.

“Ace?” It’s noisy wherever he is, his voice muffled.

“Danvers,” I hiccup, on the verge of tears. “Something happened to—”

He interrupts me before I can tell him what happened. “Sienna, I’m sorry, baby, I can’t hear you. We’re driving to a yacht party right now and my phone is about to die. I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

He abruptly hangs up so I’m left staring at my home screen, puzzled by his behavior.

A yacht party?

He didn’t mention anything to me about that when we spoke earlier this morning.

He’s never cut me off like that before. I understand he has a busy schedule, but that doesn’t take away from the fact that I really needed his support just now.

I consider calling Lennon, but I don’t have any answers yet and she’d insist on coming to the hospital. I decide to wait until I have an update from the doctor and hope Conway will call me back by then.

I find myself standing in the hospital room, feeling more alone than ever.

It’s been twenty-four hours.

Conway hasn’t called me back in *twenty-four hours*.

I’ve been glued to my phone like a lovesick puppy, compulsively checking for a missed call or text, desperate for a reply.

Ruth’s prognosis is positive, the doctors expect her to be discharged from the hospital in a few days. Despite the good news, I can’t shake off the stress and worry caused by Conway’s radio silence. I’ve put on a brave face for Ruth and Leola, but it’s difficult hiding my true emotions from them.

I finally caved last night and called Lennon to tell her what happened to Ruth. She wanted to come to the hospital, but I convinced her to wait to visit until we get back to the condo.

She knows Conway and I are friendly and talk often, but she doesn't know that we've discussed taking things to the next level. I refrained from asking her where the band is today or why Conway isn't reachable, but I'm really regretting that decision now.

Ruth is sound asleep in her hospital bed while I watch over her from my seat in the corner. I frown at the sight of my jagged nails, a visible reminder of the toll the last couple days have taken. I'm relieved that I canceled my upcoming photo shoots and blocked out my calendar for a few weeks so I can help with Ruth's recovery.

I glance up when Leola returns from the snack bar downstairs. She went to get a few chocolate bars for Ruth, the only food she's wanted while stuck in the hospital. Leola's downcast expression concerns me.

“What's the matter?”

“This was near the checkout line. I figured you should see it,” she says with a trembling voice. She hands the magazine to me, careful to make sure the back is facing up. “Sweetheart, before you jump to any conclusions, you need to get the full story from Conway, okay?”

My stomach drops when I flip the magazine over and find a picture of the Sovereign Kings on the front cover. They're all in swim trunks lying on lounge chairs on a super yacht in Ibiza.

I hesitantly open up to the full article and am met with a multi-page spread including several photos of Conway surrounded by scantily-clad women. In one picture, a platinum bombshell with a barely-there red bikini is draped across Conway's chest, placing a not-so-chaste kiss on his cheek.

I scan the story, desperate for a reasonable explanation. It says that the Sovereign Kings spent the night on the yacht partying until the early morning hours.

While my life's been imploding, Conway's partying in the Mediterranean without a care in the world. If this is his version of me being the only woman in his life, we have opposite views on the subject.

I'm vibrating with anger as I toss the magazine into the closest trash can.

"Sweetheart, do you want to talk about it?" Leola asks.

"No, I need some fresh air," I mutter, forcing the tears back until I'm alone.

I grab my purse from my chair and storm out of the room. As I'm making my getaway, my phone chimes. I check to find several missed calls and texts from Conway.

DANVERS

I'm back. Call me.

I'm so sorry it took so long to call you back.

Ace, are you okay?

I just talked to Lennon. I'm sorry to hear about Ruth. I'm glad she's going to be OK.

Call me.

Baby, why are you ignoring me?

I delete all the texts and turn my phone off.

Out of sight, out of mind.

If only that were true.

CONWAY

“TODD, WHAT THE HELL IS your problem?” I bark in annoyance. “We don’t have another show for two days, and I already told you I’ll be back before then.”

I frantically rummage through the dresser drawer, grabbing the first shirt I can find. I maneuver past Todd to get to the closet and yank a pair of jeans from the shelf, tossing the clothes into my duffle bag. Packing would be a lot easier if he weren’t blocking my way.

“You’re scheduled to make several promotional appearances tomorrow that have been booked for months. You can’t cancel at the last minute,” he snaps.

I glower in Todd’s direction while I rip my phone charger from the wall, shoving it into my bag. I have more important matters to worry about than promoting the tour right now.

The last twenty-four hours have been a shit show.

Several executives from our record label flew to Spain to attend a Sovereign Kings concert the day before yesterday. They invited the band to a yacht afterparty to celebrate, and when I heard that Todd wouldn’t be there, I decided to capitalize on the opportunity. It was the perfect chance to talk with the executives about having him reassigned to another band.

Sienna called just before I boarded the yacht, and my phone died shortly after. Cell phones weren’t allowed on the boat, so I had to leave mine in the car. Despite my nagging suspicion something was wrong, I brushed the feeling aside when I shouldn’t have.

I didn't know that a group of female models and influencers were joining us, but given the executives' reputation for partying hard when they're away from their wives and responsibilities, I should have guessed.

I kept to myself for the most part, only having to tell one model off when she approached me. Thankfully the rest of the women got the memo that I wasn't interested and left me alone.

When I finally got back to the mainland, Lennon had blown up my phone with calls and texts. When I called her back, she broke the news about Ruth's hospitalization and lectured me for being out of reach.

I booked a flight back to Los Angeles as quickly as possible so I could be with Sienna in person.

"Are you listening?" Todd's shrill voice brings me back to the present.

This guy is getting on my last nerve and I'm counting down the days until the band is rid of him once and for all.

"If my math is right, there are four members of the Sovereign Kings," I say sarcastically. "Which means there are three other members who are more than capable of attending those events."

As the lead singer, I've always been the public face of the band, frequently making solo appearances to promote and gain attention for the band. Wells will be thrilled to take on more PR responsibilities in my absence, Grayson will reluctantly agree, and I suspect Griff will say no just to spite me. Honestly, I wouldn't blame him.

I have avoided interacting with him for the most part on this tour, but I did make sure Grayson relayed the message that Griff's expected to be on the jet from now on. When Grayson playfully teased me about my change of heart, I told him my

decision was driven solely by Claire. The woman deserves to travel in style after everything she's sacrificed for Griff.

"You're the lead singer, Conway. The fans want *you*." Todd points his grubby finger in my direction, clearly not getting the hint to back off.

"I'm leaving to deal with a family *emergency*, Todd."

Holy shit, I just referred to Sienna as family. It's a big deal given that up until now, I've only ever included Lennon, Emerson, and the twins in that category. What's even more remarkable is that the thought doesn't bother me. In fact, it's the opposite. Sienna is a part of our family now, and I want a future with her by my side, no matter what it takes.

"Can't Emerson and Lennon handle whatever it is? Since they've been off playing house and avoiding their obligations to the band?"

"Let's get one thing straight, Todd." I'm burning with rage. "You're dispensable. The Sovereign Kings call the shots around here, not you. We've put up with your shit for long enough. If you ever fucking disrespect my family again, there will be hell to pay."

He doesn't heed my warning.

"You better watch yourself, Danvers," he seethes, spit flying from his mouth as he speaks. "I'm not stupid. I know you're skipping out so you can get your dick wet. I'd tell you there is plenty of pussy around here, but from what I've heard, you haven't been able to get it up for a while now. I'm not surprised you would consider that an emergency. Mark my words: you're going to regret this."

Todd's jab has me seeing red. I drop my duffle bag on the bed and storm over to grab him by the collar. I slam him against the nearest wall and get up close and personal so he doesn't miss a single word.

“No, Todd, you’re the one who will regret this. Talk about my girl like that again, and I will end you,” I promise. I shove him against the wall one more time for good measure before dropping him like a sack of flour. He stumbles to the ground, struggling to find his footing. “And my name is Conway, you jackass,” I correct him harshly.

Sienna’s the only one who gets to call me Danvers.

I pick up my duffle bag and storm out of the room. Jay is waiting in the hall with a smug expression, having heard the entire confrontation.

“You want me to take the trash out?” he asks

“Nah, I think I made myself crystal clear,” I say with a smirk.

After our conversation with the label executives, they agreed that we have more than proven ourselves in the past five years and are finally scheduling a meeting to discuss the details of Todd’s exit from the Sovereign Kings team and reassignment to another band.

“Are we ready to go?” I ask Jay. I pick up my pace, ready to get the hell out of Spain.

“Yeah. The pilot is meeting us at the airport and we’ll be ready for takeoff within the hour,” he confirms.

The sooner we get out of here, the faster I can get to Sienna. I’ve tried calling her back, but she hasn’t returned my calls. I’m not sure if she’s preoccupied with Ruth’s recovery or if she’s ignoring me. She has every right to give me the cold shoulder if she is.

She tried telling me about Ruth’s accident when she called, and I dismissed her. Like a fucking idiot, it didn’t occur to me to ask if everything was okay before I hung up. I took her compassionate nature for granted, assuming she’d accept my excuse without complaint once I got back.

Yeah, I'm a real keeper.

To add to my list of offenses, I made Sienna wait over twenty-four hours before calling her back. Granted, I didn't have my phone, but I should have told her where I was going when we spoke. She's told me how important it is to her that we're transparent with each other and that she wants to be kept in the loop when my schedule changes or when I'm unable to call.

My stomach turns at the thought of her pacing Ruth's hospital room, anxiously waiting to hear from me. My role should have been to lighten her burdens, and instead, all I did was add to them.

The only person to blame for this shit show is myself, and I will do everything in my power to make this right. Sienna deserves nothing less.

I'm fucking exhausted by the time we land in Los Angeles. I haven't slept in over thirty-six hours and I'm in a state of turmoil.

Sienna still hasn't gotten back to me. The all-consuming need to hear her voice and make sure she's okay is maddening.

This must be how she felt when she couldn't reach you.

Although Jay is able to get us to the hospital in record time given the early morning hour and lack of traffic, it feels like an eternity before we finally get there.

When we're a few blocks away, he tosses me a pair of green scrubs and a surgical cap. I give him a curious look as I hold out the odd getup.

“What's this for?”

“You need to blend in,” he states. “The last thing Sienna needs is for the paparazzi to get word that you're here and

come snooping around.”

“Good thinking,” I commend him.

Before Sienna came along, I never wore disguises or hid my location. I accepted public attention with open arms, not bothered by prying eyes. I viewed the slew of media coverage as a beacon for the band’s success, and front-page news was crucial regardless of how we were portrayed.

Sienna’s take on the media is the exact opposite. She enjoys her quiet and peaceful life and is willing to defend it at all costs. Now that I have someone worth protecting, I understand the importance of guarding the privacy of my personal affairs, like many other celebrities choose to do, especially if it makes Sienna happy.

“Are you coming?” I ask Jay.

“I’ll park and meet you in the waiting area once you’re ready to leave. We don’t want to draw any more attention than necessary.”

I give him a curt nod as I slide out of the SUV. When I enter the building, it’s relatively quiet. According to Jay, the nursing personnel had a shift change an hour ago and are busy making their rounds, so I should get by undetected.

It turns out luck isn’t on my side. When I get to Ruth’s room, a nurse is stepping out. She gives me a double take before recognition flashes across her face.

I hold my finger up to my lips, signaling for her not to announce my arrival.

“Is this Ruth Cartwright’s room?” I ask.

She nods like a bobblehead, in shock that I’m standing in front of her.

“Is anyone with her?”

“A young woman. Her granddaughter, I think.” The nurse doesn’t take her eyes off me while she responds. “You’re Conway Danvers, aren’t you?” she asks timidly.

“The last time I checked,” I say wryly. There’s no sense in denying it.

“I’m a huge fan of the Sovereign Kings. I have all your albums,” she gushes.

“Thanks, we appreciate your support,” I say with sincerity. “Listen, I’m here to see a friend, and it would mean a lot if you could keep my visit to yourself.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” she says.

I open my wallet and take out the last copy of Emerson’s business card that I have on hand. I’ve told him I need more, but I think he’s intentionally holding out on me. During the last few months, I’ve gotten in the habit of giving away tickets like they’re candy at a parade.

“Here’s my manager’s contact info.” I give the nurse the business card. “Send him an email and he’ll hook you up with backstage passes to our next hometown concert to thank you for your discretion.”

“Are you serious?” Her eyes grow wide. “That’s awesome. I swear I won’t tell anyone that I saw you.” She tucks the card into her pocket before walking down the hall.

I don’t believe for a minute that she won’t spill the beans about running into me to her friends and family once she gets home, but by then, I’ll be gone, so it doesn’t matter.

When I enter Ruth’s room, I’m welcomed by the sound of her soft snoring as she sleeps soundly in her hospital bed. I take an inventory of her outward condition, and aside from a few bruises on her arms, there aren’t any other signs of injury.

Thank god.

My heart squeezes when I spot Sienna curled up in a chair near the window. The golden rays of morning light peek through the curtains, casting a celestial glow around her silhouette. I'm mesmerized by her natural beauty and resist the urge to touch her.

A knot forms inside my chest when I notice her tear-stained face, making me drown in a sea of guilt. Nothing I can say will take away the pain and suffering she's had to endure, intensified because of me.

I can't fathom what she went through when she got the call about Ruth's accident. Sienna's been forced to shoulder the heavy load of her family's troubles for far too long. I've tried to convince her that she doesn't have to carry the weight of her burdens alone. Yet, I wasn't there when she was finally ready to confide in me.

As if she can sense my presence, her eyes flutter open. Her piercing green gaze darts to me hovering in the doorway. She's momentarily confused, trying to determine if she's dreaming or if I'm really standing here.

"Conway, what are you doing here?" she asks, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Lennon told me what happened to Ruth and I got here as soon as I could. Ace, I'm sorry I didn't call you back sooner." My voice falters at the end. "I wanted to be here in person. God, I've missed you, baby." I move toward her, aching to hold her in my arms.

"You should have saved yourself the trip." Her expression turns icy as she holds up her hands to stop my approach.

She has a right to be angry, but I hadn't anticipated this coldness. She knows the lengths I went through to get here. It's not an easy feat for a world-famous musician to travel across the globe without attracting attention, even when using a private jet.

“Can we have this conversation somewhere else? Ruth had a long night, I don’t want to wake her,” Sienna says quietly.

“Sure.”

She rises from the chair, heading toward the bathroom. On her way, she stops at the trash can and retrieves a discarded magazine. Once we’re inside the confined space, she forcefully slaps the magazine against my chest.

“Let’s try this again,” she says in a hushed whisper. “Why the hell are you here? You obviously don’t give a shit about me, so why waste your time?”

I flip through the pages of the magazine until I get to the featured story.

I’m front and center, lying on a lounge chair wearing black swim trunks and aviators, several bikini-clad women nearby. In one picture, a blonde is kissing me on the cheek.

I remember this moment—she was telling me that she wanted to sleep with me. I was pissed at her for getting in my space. Seconds after this photo was taken, I shoved her away and told her that I’m taken and had no interest in her, and then I stormed off the deck.

Fuck, this looks bad.

Someone must have tipped the paparazzi off about the yacht party and they did what they do best—twist the narrative to highlight my supposed playboy behavior, and the media outlets devoured the story. Little do they know I’ve turned over a new leaf, and I’m not the same person I used to be. I’ve changed for the better because of Sienna.

Her stance is rigid as she stares blankly ahead, waiting for an explanation.

This is far worse than I could have imagined.

“Ace, I understand how this looks”—I point toward the spread—“but everything in that article is a lie. The tabloids twist the truth so they can sell more copies and boost clicks to their online articles. I swear to you, nothing happened,” I plead.

“What is the truth then?” she grinds out. “Why the hell were you on that yacht in the first place, and why didn’t you tell me about it?”

“The label executives were at one of our shows in Spain and they invited us to a yacht party. It was the opportunity the band had been waiting for to talk with them about reassigning Todd, so I had to go.”

“What about all the women? Were they a part of your business deal? Because you looked pretty chummy, especially with that blonde,” she fumes.

“Fuck no,” I say loudly. “I pushed her off me when she tried to get close. I told her I was dating someone and wasn’t interested in her. Go ahead and ask Wells, he was next to me when it happened.”

I know I’m asking Sienna for a lot. My past reputation precedes me, and I don’t blame her for having doubts about us. I can only hope that the bond we’ve built and allowing her to get to know the real me is enough to prove that I would never intentionally cause her pain.

“Why did it take you a full day to call me back?” she demands, not shying away from asking the tough questions.

“The yacht owner implemented a no cell phone rule to avoid the party leaking to the press. I had to leave mine in the car.”

“That didn’t stop the paparazzi from finding out,” she mutters.

“No, it didn’t,” I agree.

“If it was a last-minute decision to go to the party, why were you wearing a swimsuit? You just carry one wherever you go?” Sarcasm coats her words like honey.

A small smile plays on my lips, glad to see she hasn't lost her sense of humor.

“They had a bunch of swim trunks on board for the band to choose from,” I inform her. “Any more questions?”

“Not at this time.” She takes on a professional tone, like she's conducting an interview rather than having a personal conversation.

“Sienna, I'm sorry. If I could, I would go back and change things.”

“But you can't,” she's quick to remind me.

“You're right, but I'll do whatever I can to make things right, to make sure you trust me,” I promise with conviction.

“I won't start a relationship with someone who brushes me aside like yesterday's trash.” She pins me with a scowl.

Her statement stings, but I can't control how she's feeling about the situation. All I can do is reassure her that's the farthest thing from the truth.

“Ace, I've never left midway through a tour for anyone, not even Lennon. You're the most important person in my life, and I meant it when I said that I wanted to be with you and only you. Please don't let this jeopardize our future together.”

“I think you're missing the point,” she states with exasperation. “I've made it clear I don't want a casual fling. When I commit to a relationship, I want to be the center of that person's world, and vice versa. We'll weather every storm as a team and prioritize each other above everything else. You had me believing that you could be *my* person... Now I'm not so sure.”

She's allowed to be upset with me, but I'm not letting her give up on us.

“Why the hell not? I'm yours, Sienna. There's no one else for me. Give me the chance to give you the entire universe on a silver platter.”

She rolls her eyes at my dramatic declaration. “I don't want the universe, Danvers. I just want you.”

“You have me, Ace. You have all of me, I swear it. I might not have any experience with romantic relationships and am bound to make mistakes, but let's get one thing straight: I will never do anything to intentionally hurt you,” I say with conviction. “We're just getting started. Please don't give up on us... Don't run this time.”

“Why shouldn't I?”

“Because you've been running since day one, and it hasn't done either of us any good. Can't you see that we're inevitable, baby? There's nothing we can do to stop this.” I motion between us. “I understand that you're scared. I'm an unforeseeable variable, a risk you're afraid to take.” I stride purposefully toward Sienna, caging her against the wall, my hands firmly planted on either side of her head.

“Boundaries are meant to be pushed, to be broken. Be willing to be brave.” I move in closer until our lips are nearly touching and our breathing is in perfect harmony. “Don't make me live another day without you. Say you'll be mine.”

“No.” The word carries a hint of finality, and I jerk back in shock.

“What do you mean *no*?” I say, harsher than I should.

“Before Ruth's accident, I was planning to tell you I was ready to be with you,” she admits with a downcast glance. “I still want you, Conway, but that's not enough. From where I'm standing, you talk a big game, but your actions don't mirror

what you're saying. Stop telling me I'm the most important thing in your life and *show* me," she implores.

This woman is pushing me to my limits. I flew halfway across the world to be here—if that's not *showing* her how important she is, I don't know what is. It feels like Sienna and I are trapped in an endless cycle of one step forward, two steps back.

"How do I do that?"

"You're *the* Conway Danvers... Something tells me you'll figure it out," she retorts with a hint of attitude.

She isn't going to let me off easy, and she shouldn't. If the tables were turned, I'd be just as mad. I'm not sure how I'm going to fix this just yet, especially since I have to fly back to Spain tonight, but she's right. I'll find a way because I'm not losing her.

"I'll prove how much you mean to me, but let's get one thing straight." She inhales sharply when I trace a path down the length of her neck. "You're mine, Ace. *Mine*. You belong to me just like I belong to you. Get used to the idea because that's how it's going to be from now on."

Once she forgives me, I'm claiming her and never letting her go.

God give me patience. There's no question I'm going to need it.

SIENNA

“YOU LOOK INCREDIBLE, SIENNA,” BECKY exclaims.

“Thank you,” I say with a lack of enthusiasm.

She was overzealous about helping me get ready for tonight and thoroughly enjoyed turning her office into a makeshift glam room. She’s worked her magic like my own fairy godmother and has transformed me into Cinderella ready for the ball.

I’m dressed in a vintage, robin-blue, floor-length gown with a plunging neckline, a slit up the thigh, and a cinched waist with a silver bow belt. My makeup has been done and my hair cascades down my back in mermaid waves. This is by far the most I’ve ever dressed up. The majority of the modeling campaigns I’ve been in have been for casual clothes and accessories, never requiring much glam. My own wardrobe reflects my preference for comfort and practicality rather than the latest fashion trends.

The only thing missing is my Sovereign King. He won’t be there to sweep me off my feet or chase me down if I try to run from a horde of paparazzi tonight.

“Are you sure you want to give me this flower arrangement?” Becky asks, referring to the massive bouquet of lilies on her desk. “It brightens the space, but it must have cost a fortune.”

“Yes, please keep it. I have plenty more where that came from.” Every surface in both my living room and kitchen is covered with dozens of bouquets, ranging from red roses to wildflowers. Several fresh arrangements have been delivered every day, all with the same note:

You're my world, Ace –Danvers

It's been a week since Conway came to see me at the hospital. He returned to tour shortly after and has had a concert every night since. We've only had a handful of conversations, and they've all been brief. We haven't discussed our relationship any more, but that hasn't stopped him from doing other things to prove that I matter to him.

I should have suspected that he'd take my request to show me he cares and kick it up several notches. On top of the daily flower deliveries, Conway foot the bill for around-the-clock nursing staff to come to the condo and help with Ruth's recovery. Leola must have told him that Ruth's bruised hip would take several weeks to heal because the day after he came to the hospital, I got a call from Alpine Home Health to notify me of the change to Ruth's care.

The cost for those services is astronomical, but I can't find it in myself to be angry with him. He's formed a friendship with Leola and Ruth, and I appreciate him looking after them like his own family. They deserve his generosity, and it wouldn't be right to deny them that.

"Your man must have screwed up royally to be showering you with such expensive gifts," Becky states. "In my opinion, if you can find someone who's faithful, easy on the eyes, and admits when he's wrong, you've found yourself a keeper."

I haven't told Becky the man in question is Conway Danvers. The fewer people who know, the better.

"Those are some high standards," I say, my voice tinged with amusement.

"You can laugh all you want, but it's a harsh world out there for single professionals looking for their perfect match. I've dated the greater population of single men in Los Angeles, and those worth holding on to are few and far between. Most men I've met can't hold down a job, look

nothing like their profile picture, or aren't looking for a long-term commitment. If you find someone remotely tolerable, Sienna, don't let him slip through your fingers."

Conway's far more than tolerable.

He has a job most people only dream of, is exceptionally attractive, and has practically begged me to be his. He's changed his whole lifestyle because of me, and he doesn't have a problem admitting when he's wrong, at least where I'm concerned. Throw in the endless gifts and dramatic displays of affection, and according to Becky, I have the perfect man.

So why am I hesitating?

Because I don't want Conway throwing money at our problems or sending me things when it's convenient for him... I need to know that he's going to put me first, and I'm still waiting for that.

"The car's here," Becky announces, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I send good vibes out into the universe, hoping I'll get through this evening unscathed.

"Thanks for tagging along with me tonight," James says from his seat on the other side of the limo. He's the picture of leisure with his outstretched legs and a cold beer in his hand.

"No problem," I reply.

We're on our way to the American Music Awards. James has been nominated for Favorite Male Country Artist of the Year. Lacie was supposed to join him and attend as Elevation's representative. However, Valensia, a world-class designer, offered Lacie a personal invitation to headline her winter fashion show in Germany, so Lacie had to fly out last night.

Becky asked me at the last minute to attend the award show in her place. I was going to say no, but I decided anything was better than sitting at home sulking and watching *Jeopardy*. The five grand Becky threw in as an incentive definitely sweetened the deal. She even agreed to let me skip the red-carpet portion if I let her take photos of me in my dress so that she could post them to Elevation's social media account.

It was Lacie's idea for James and me to carpool since our seats at the event are next to each other, and I'm the only person who "*wouldn't try to get in his pants,*" as she so eloquently put it.

I haven't talked to Conway for two days, which was before I knew I was attending the event tonight. He had mentioned that the Sovereign Kings were nominated for several awards but couldn't attend because of a conflict with their tour schedule. It would have been nice to see him tonight, even though we wouldn't be attending as a couple.

"Are you okay?" James asks.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I just have a lot on my mind." I give him a small smile. My hands are tightly clasped in my lap, the pressure turning my knuckles white in an effort to control my impulse to bite my nails and ruin my freshly done manicure.

"You want to talk about it?"

I'm ready to tell him no, but then I think better of it. James is a musician too, and being in a similar position as Conway, maybe he can provide a different perspective.

"I'm sort of seeing Conway Danvers," I say casually. Unsure about how else to define our current relationship.

James's eyes widen in surprise. "Holy shit. I wasn't expecting that. Trouble in paradise?" he asks with a wink.

"You could say that. It feels like we're stuck in limbo," I explain. "He told me he wants a relationship, but while I was

dealing with a family emergency, he was on a yacht in Ibiza with other women instead of at my side. I believe him when he says nothing happened at the party, but that doesn't make it hurt any less. He says I'm the most important thing in his life, but it doesn't feel like it."

"That's a lot to take in," James acknowledges. "I'm sorry you're going through all this."

"Any chance you have some advice for me?" I ask, half joking.

He doesn't respond right away as he thinks about it. "I'm not a therapist or relationship expert. All I can share is from my personal experience," he finally replies.

"I'd like to hear what you have to say," I encourage him.

"It's not easy balancing a personal and public life while traveling nonstop and having the paparazzi constantly on your tail," he says, taking another sip of his beer. "Lacie is my top priority, and I do everything I can to make sure she knows that, but I can't always do that when things are out of my control. For example, last year I missed her birthday because I couldn't get a flight back in time after my concert. And three months ago, the paparazzi took a photo of me helping a backup singer with a wardrobe malfunction. They photoshopped it to make it look like I was caressing her shoulder so they could claim we were having an affair."

"How did Lacie react?"

"Oh, she was mad as hell when she saw the pictures. She chucked a shoe at my head and refused to speak to me for three days." He lets out a lighthearted laugh at the memory. "Obviously, we worked things out, but every couple has their problems. If you can trust each other and are both willing to compromise on certain issues, there's no reason you can't make it work."

“I appreciate you sharing, James,” I say sincerely.

“Anytime.”

Until now, I’ve solely been focused on how I was affected by what happened last week. I didn’t think about how Conway felt when he got the news about Ruth and had to wait to see me or how devastated he must have been when I gave him the cold shoulder when he got to the hospital. We’ve both been hurt, and I’m not doing either of us any good by dwelling on it anymore.

The limo rolls to a stop a couple blocks from the venue entrance and James helps me out of the vehicle.

“Are you sure you want to walk the rest of the way?” he asks.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. See you on the other side,” I tell him.

He slides back into the limo and the driver pulls away from the curb. We agreed not to arrive together to avoid any unnecessary speculation. I’ll meet him after he walks the red carpet.

I stroll down the street, watching from afar as several celebrities exit their vehicles. When I get closer, I spot James exiting his limo and waving to the cameras. He’s like a kid in a candy store, his eyes darting between all the A-list celebrities and musical guests. Several reporters have noted his arrival and are ready to pounce so they can snag a pre-event interview. Similar to Conway, James thrives in the limelight and savors the experience of being the center of attention.

With photographers lined up on either side of the walkway, I deftly navigate through the frenzy of the camera-wielding group, all vying for the perfect shot of some of the most famous people in the country.

Eventually, I stumble upon a secluded spot near a side entrance of the building. A security guard with a muscular

physique stands in front, preventing unauthorized access. I linger on the sidelines while I wait for James to finish his interviews.

I watch as a comedian steps onto the red carpet in a coral notch-lapel tuxedo, winking at the camera after telling a joke to the reporters. A famous influencer is next, donning a black lace corset top, white wide-leg pants, and platform heels. She streams the entire process, briefly handing her phone to her partner while the photographers snap several shots of her in front of the American Music Awards step and repeat banner.

A Grammy-winning pop star strolls up next, but there's suddenly a loud commotion from the street, capturing the attention of every photographer in the place. Their lenses swiftly pivot, completely disregarding the singer standing on the walkway.

An event coordinator hurries past me and I call out to her, hoping to get her attention.

“What’s going on?”

“The Sovereign Kings just made an unexpected appearance,” she shouts back before disappearing into the throng of people.

A sudden surge of excitement envelops me, leaving me breathless. I should have expected they would drop in like this, it's totally on-brand for the band.

Why didn't Conway tell me he was in town?

From my position, I have an unobstructed view as the Sovereign Kings step onto the red carpet, somehow having skipped the line altogether. Grayson, Wells, and Griff stand shoulder to shoulder, all clad in jeans and T-shirts as they smile for the cameras. I spot Jay off to the side, scanning the area for security threats, but disappointment washes over me when I don't see Conway.

I can't help but wonder where he is, knowing there's no way the band would show up without him.

"Looking for me?" Conway says from behind me.

I yelp in surprise, tilting my head back to see him standing there with a teasing grin. He's dressed similarly to the rest of the band, rocking black jeans, a white crewneck T-shirt that shows off his full sleeve tattoos, and his trademark Chuck Taylors. He looks positively mouthwatering.

When I try to turn around to face him, he clicks his tongue in disapproval.

"Keep your attention ahead or someone will notice," he orders. "The last thing we need is to draw the media's attention."

He's right, but that doesn't mean I'm happy with his request. Every moment away from him has felt like an eternity, and I ache to get a better look at him.

"I wasn't looking for you." The lie falls effortlessly from my lips.

"Uh huh," Conway says skeptically. "Who were you searching for then? Because I don't think you were on your tiptoes just for fun."

Damn, he caught me.

"What are you even doing here?" I question, redirecting the topic of conversation.

"What am I... What am I doing here?" His voice is laced with agitation. "We're nominated for several awards tonight. What are *you* doing here? The last time I checked, you hate public attention and avoid these things like the plague. Or is it just me you don't want to be seen with? I couldn't help but notice *another* man helping you out of a limo," he spits out.

How the hell did he see that?

He takes a deliberate step forward, his lowered voice meant for my ears only. I long to feel his hands on my body, but he keeps them firmly at his side.

“Do I need to remind you that you belong to me?” He leans in closer so his front is pressed against my back. “And just so we’re clear, I don’t share,” he growls.

“James is just a friend. I model with his *fiancée*, Lacie. I’m here to represent Elevation, and we carpooled. Not that I owe you an explanation,” I add in an irritated tone.

“I don’t care who he is. In case you didn’t hear me the first time, you’re *mine*, Ace.” His voice is unwavering. “I convinced the band to rearrange our schedule so we could be in town tonight. I went straight to your house after we landed at the airport, and imagine my surprise when Leola told me you were here—with another man, no less.”

Leave it to Leola to stretch the truth to get Conway and me back together. She knows I’m not here as James’s date.

“You weren’t planning to come tonight?”

“No, baby,” he confirms. “I don’t give a fuck about the awards show. I just wanted to see you.”

I suddenly have a sense of clarity, and the doubt that’s been lingering in the pit of my stomach disappears. Conway’s career has always come first. Going on tour and attending public events are his bread and butter, meaning he just put *me* ahead of the most important thing in his life.

“Danvers,” I murmur, turning back so I can look him in the eyes, not caring if anyone notices.

“Yeah, Ace?”

“I want you. I want *us*.”

“You mean it?”

I nod. A shiver runs down my spine as Conway's lips brush against my ear. The unmistakable rise and fall of his chest passes through me as if we're the same person, and I tremble with delight when his teeth graze my earlobe. An involuntary moan escapes my mouth at the delicious sensation.

"Damn, baby. That's a sweet sound, but if you do that again, you're going to get us caught," he says with amusement.

The whispers have already escalated as people take notice of his absence from the red carpet. We're lucky no one has spotted him yet. If they do, the rumors will spread like wildfire when he's photographed cozying up to a relatively unknown model rather than claiming his rightful place in the spotlight.

We must be on the same wavelength because, in the next instant, Conway turns me to face him and firmly grabs me by the elbow as he tugs me along. He easily bypasses the security guard manning the side entrance to the building, as he's preoccupied with an intoxicated reality TV star.

We pass several doors, Conway testing each handle in search of one that's unlocked. Thankfully the last one on the right opens, and he pushes me inside the room, shutting the door before someone sees us. I think we're in some sort of utility closet, but it's nearly pitch-black so it's hard to tell.

I can hear him flicking the light switch on and off repeatedly, but nothing happens. Next, I hear the rattle of the handle as he tries to turn it, but the door is jammed.

"Fuck," he mutters. "Sienna, I think we're stuck."

This isn't good. We're confined in a small, dark closet, something straight out of Conway's nightmares, and there's nothing I can do to fix it.

"It's okay. We're going to be okay." I maintain a composed tone.

I take hold of his hands that are clinging to the knob and gently pry them off. I discreetly try opening the door, confirming that it won't budge. I don't have long to think about what to do next before Conway starts panicking.

A few feet away, I hear a soft thud where he's bumped up against the wall. He's panting heavily as his breaths come out in quick, shallow bursts. Signs that he's trapped inside his mind, losing his grip on reality and slipping into the past.

"I am in control, I am in control, I am in control," he chants. I can make out his silhouette with his hands over his head as he rocks back and forth.

Desperate to do something to help, I cautiously make my way over to him, looping my arms around his waist and pressing my cheek against his chest. I take deliberate and controlled breaths, inhaling deeply and exhaling slowly. I'm hoping he'll subconsciously match my breathing patterns, but when that doesn't work, I resort to talking to him since that usually seems to help when we're on the phone.

"I've missed you, Danvers," I murmur. His body remains rigid with his hands on his head, but his chanting stopped when I spoke, so I continue. "I never thanked you for coming to the hospital or for helping with Ruth's rehabilitation. You've shown up for me in ways that no one aside from Ruth and Leola ever has, and I don't take that lightly."

"I'll always be there for you, Ace, even when you don't want me to be," he rasps out.

I laugh softly, relieved that he's interacting with me.

"I'm yours, and you're mine," I say the words out loud for the first time.

"Damn right, I'm yours," Conway doesn't hesitate to assure me. "You mean it, Ace? You're my girl, no more running?" He lowers his arms to reciprocate my embrace.

“No more running,” I say with conviction. “Does that mean you can stop sending me flowers? Because I don’t have any more space in the house.”

He barks out a laugh. “Sure, but that means I’ll have to find another way to show you how much you mean to me.”

“I’m excited to see what you come up with, Danvers,” I tease.

I reach onto my toes and press a kiss against his lips. My bold action sparks a fuse inside him, and his strong hands sink into my hair, tipping my head back as he plunges his tongue past my lips. His grip remains firm, holding me in place as he ravishes my mouth with abandon. He kisses me until I’m blazing in blissful agony. We’re suspended in time, willingly trapped inside our own bubble.

While bathed in darkness without the ability to see more than a few inches in front of me, my other senses become heightened. The smell of Conway’s musk mixed with tobacco and smoky vanilla permeates the air, enveloping me. The sound of his guttural breathing intermingled with my soft moans fills the room. The taste of mint and a hint of whiskey dance on my tongue. The feel of his hardened erection presses against my stomach as he keeps my body molded to his.

His hand snakes across my thigh until he finds the slit in my dress and shoves the material to the side and hikes my leg around his hip. My hands automatically reach for his shoulders for support as he grips me tightly. He shoves his hand in my panties to find that I’m already dripping with desire, and my breathing hitches when he sinks a finger inside me, stilling for a moment before starting to push in and out at a steady pace.

“Danvers,” I moan, my back arching at the welcome intrusion.

He leans forward, not allowing a single inch of space between us. He runs his tongue along the column of my neck

while peppering kisses along my collarbone. When he adds a second finger, I become keenly aware of the vulgar sound of my arousal blending with our vocalized pleasure. It's the most erotic thing I've ever heard, making me want him—want *this*—even more.

“You're so fucking tight, baby,” he rasps out. “Tell me, Ace, how many men have you let touch you like this? How many men have had their fingers inside your cunt?” His crude words have me grinding into his hand, desperate for more pressure.

When I don't respond, he tightens his grip on my hair. “How many?” he growls, demanding an answer.

“Only you,” I say hoarsely.

“That's right, baby, only me,” he says with satisfaction. “And tell me, Ace, how many men have you let fuck you?”

“None,” I whimper as he picks up his pace.

“I'm the only man you'll ever need. I'll take care of you, always.”

I reach down to massage Conway's cock through his pants, but he shakes his head.

“What about you?” I don't want to leave him in a state of sexual frustration.

“Tonight is for you. Don't worry, there will be plenty more time for that later,” he promises.

My heart swells at his declaration, knowing it's his way of assuring me this is far more than a one-night stand or a fling.

Conway gives me a passionate kiss on the lips, curling his fingers to rub my G-spot in slow strokes while he teases my clit with his thumb, impatient for me to find my release. I'm panting heavily as my climax draws near, and he doesn't relent until I'm sent tumbling into orgasmic bliss.

I shatter around his fingers, letting out a strangled cry of pleasure as I plummet over the edge. I don't stop riding his hand until I've released every drop of euphoria rushing through my core.

"Fuck, baby, listening to you come is the sweetest music to my ears," he declares. "I can't wait to *see* you come next time."

As I descend from my orgasm, my body goes limp and he catches me on my way to the ground. He eases us both to the floor, scooping me up into his arms.

"Meet me in London next week. It's the band's last tour stop. We'll take a few days afterward to explore, just you and me."

"You're serious?" I tilt my head to face him, even though I can't make out his facial expression.

"Yeah, I am," he assures me. "We'll stay under the radar for as long as possible, I promise."

The logical part of my brain warns me to slow down and think this through, but another part is tired of following the rules, ready for an adventure. Today, she prevails.

"Yes," I say enthusiastically, letting the single word speak volumes.

"Thank fuck," Conway says with a sigh. "I wasn't above resorting to throwing you over my shoulder and dragging you along with me."

"Danvers?" I whisper.

"Yeah?"

"How long do you think it'll be until someone comes searching for us?"

"Whenever I call Jay to come rescue us," he says with a laugh.

I sit up straight in his lap, glaring daggers in his direction, wishing he could see my annoyance.

“You’ve had your phone this whole time?” I shriek.

“In my back pocket.”

I can’t be sure, but something tells me he’s grinning right now.

“At first, I was too panicked to remember, and once the mood shifted, there was no way in hell I was going to interrupt to tell you we had a way out.”

“I forgive you.” I chuckle, kissing his lips.

For everything.

Before he has a chance to reciprocate, I pull back.

“Oh my gosh, we need to call someone who can track down James. He must be wondering where I am.” My voice is tinged with panic.

“He’s fine,” Conway says.

“How do you know?”

“I ran into him before I came looking for you. He said I shouldn’t send you back until we made up.”

I hadn’t pegged James as the matchmaker type, but I appreciate him intervening.

“I’m really glad you’re here, Danvers,” I whisper.

“Me too, Ace. More than you know.”

I lean my head against his shoulder, cherishing this private moment between us, still in disbelief that Conway Danvers is officially mine.

CONWAY

THE THUNDEROUS ROAR OF THE crowd is reaching fever-pitch levels, the excitement in the air tangible. Beads of sweat drip down my forehead as the music pulsates through me. Each note sends another hit of adrenaline through my bloodstream, energizing every cell in my body.

The end of the verse builds in tempo, setting the stage for an explosive downbeat, seamlessly transitioning to the chorus of “Your Venomous Lies.”

Wells and Grayson unleash a storm of guitar riffs as their fingers fly across the fretboards of their electric guitars. Griff’s hands come down with precision and force as his drumsticks strike the drums with a resounding impact.

I motion for the audience to sing along with me, and once the stadium is filled with the sound of tens of thousands of unified voices singing the chorus, I take it as my cue to rip off my shirt and toss it into the sea of fans. The crowd erupts when I turn my back to them, my tattoo on display while I rock out to the rest of the song.

We’ve been playing for almost three hours straight, unable to resist doing a second encore. As the final show of the tour, we wanted to end with a jaw-dropping performance. Judging by the deafening applause as the final notes of the song echo throughout the arena, we did just that.

“Thank you, London. Goodnight,” I shout into the microphone.

I give one last wave before jogging off stage. I hand my microphone off to a crew member, who passes me a bottle of water in exchange, and I gulp it down in one swig.

I look around for Emerson but he's nowhere in sight, which is odd since he's been waiting in the wing after every show since he got here a few days ago. Maybe he stepped away to call Lennon. She was here for our rehearsal this afternoon but went back to the hotel before the concert started, not wanting to disrupt Indie's sleep schedule. My niece is an angel, but she gets crabby when she's tired.

"Holy shit, that was an epic ending," Wells exclaims. Grayson and Griff are trailing closely behind him. "You guys ready to party? I really need to get laid," he says unabashedly.

"Brother, you get laid after every concert—tonight's no different," Grayson notes.

"That's very true, and you don't get laid nearly enough. Maybe you should ask me for some pointers." Wells winks, clapping Grayson on the back.

"If I need a lesson on how to increase my chances of getting a sexually transmitted disease, I'll definitely let you know," Grayson quips.

I burst into laughter while Wells and Grayson roughhouse, causing several crew members to duck out of the way as the brothers attempt to tackle each other to the ground.

Griff maneuvers around them, drumsticks in hand. I give him a curt nod when he looks in my direction, and he reciprocates with a polite smile before walking off.

"I'm going to my dressing room," I holler to Wells and Grayson. "See you guys in a bit."

"Tell Sienna we say hi," Wells taunts playfully.

They were both with Jay when he rescued Sienna and me from the closet at the awards show. They helped distract the media while she got to her seat undetected. However, that hasn't stopped them from giving me shit about the whole thing since.

I'm disappointed when I remember that Sienna couldn't be here tonight. I had hoped she could attend one of our concerts before the end of the tour, but Ruth had her first checkup after being released from the hospital that she didn't want to miss, making it impossible for her to get here until tomorrow morning.

God, I can't wait to get my hands on her again. Our moment in the closet wasn't enough. Something tells me it'll never be enough with her.

As I head toward the dressing rooms, I hear raised voices coming from the nearby security checkpoint. It's not uncommon for the occasional concertgoer to attempt to enter the backstage area without a pass, and they usually become rowdy when they're not allowed back here.

I try to tune out the noise when a familiar melodic female voice has me heading in the direction of the heated conversation. I round the corner and stop short.

Sienna is here. She's wearing a sexy-as-sin black leather skirt, a Sovereign Kings T-shirt, and a pair of Chuck Taylors identical to mine. *Fuck me*. She's a goddamn vision in her rock-inspired outfit, my wildest fantasy come to life.

I'm puzzled when I see that her green eyes, usually filled with warmth, are burning with ire. That is until I notice the imposing security guard towering over her, blocking her path.

"I told you, I'm a friend of Conway Danvers. If you'd just tell him Ace is here, he'll vouch for me," Sienna explains.

"That's what they all say, lady," the security guard snaps. "No one is allowed backstage without a lanyard, and you don't have one." He gestures toward her neck.

Sienna's hands ball into fists, and if I didn't know better, I'd think she was about to pummel the guy.

“I’m not going anywhere until I speak with Conway. Please go get him.”

“If you won’t leave on your own, I’ll make you,” the security guard seethes.

A blind rage consumes me when he wraps his meaty hand around Sienna’s arm, his fingers digging into her delicate skin with the intention of dragging her out of here by any means necessary.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I shout, storming toward them. The guard glances in my direction but maintains his tight grip on Sienna.

“Conway,” he says my name like we’re friends even though I barely know him. “This woman claims she’s friends with the band. She says that Emerson had a backstage pass for her but allegedly got caught up dealing with an urgent matter before giving her a lanyard. It’s one of the oldest excuses in the book. Don’t worry, sir, I’ll personally escort her off the property,” he says smugly.

This guy is fucking clueless that he’s harassing *my* girl, doing a damn good job of digging his own grave.

“Take your hands off her,” I spit out.

His face turns ghostly white when it finally registers that he’s messed with the wrong woman. He yanks his hand away from Sienna.

“Did it occur to you to check in with the band and ask if we knew her before carting her off like a common criminal?”

I’m aware that I’m being unreasonable. Security can’t check with us every time someone claims they know us, but the idea of Sienna being manhandled by this brute has driven me past the edge of rational thought.

The security guard hesitantly shakes his head. “No, sir. Todd instructed the team to remove anyone from the premises who tries to get backstage without a lanyard. No exceptions.”

“Last time I checked, Emerson is your boss, not Todd. Apologize, now.” I jerk my head toward Sienna.

“I’m sorry, lady,” he mutters halfheartedly toward Sienna, refusing to look her in the eye.

“That’s all right. You were just doing your job. No harm, no foul,” she adds with a smile.

She’s wrong. The guard did cause her harm, and she’s going to have the bruises to prove it come morning.

“When your shift is over, report to Emerson,” I bark at the security guard. He’ll never work with the Sovereign Kings again. I’ll make damn sure of it.

I place my hand in Sienna’s and pull her toward the back entrance. If we want to avoid the media catching wind that we’re together, we need to get out of here before anyone else spots us.

We’re halfway out the door to the parking garage when Todd’s shrill voice stops us in our tracks.

“Conway, where the hell are you going?” he bellows. “There is a room full of VIP guests waiting to meet you. Your rendezvous with your latest conquest can wait until...” He trails off when he recognizes Sienna. The pieces of the puzzle click into place, and he realizes that she’s the woman I left to go visit while the band was in Spain.

“The rest of the band has it covered. I have somewhere more important to be.” I give Sienna a megawatt smile.

“You can’t leave, Conway. Those VIPs paid good money to meet you,” Todd fumes.

I'm assuming Emerson knows Sienna is here, which means he's already put a contingency plan in place to deal with my absence at the afterparty.

"It's been taken care of," I prematurely reassure him. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we have to go." I usher Sienna into the garage, letting out a sigh of relief when Jay is waiting with an idling blacked-out SUV. He must have been in on the surprise and knew I'd be anxious to get out of here.

"The producers will be hearing about this," Todd shouts behind us.

I wave him off. The label won't give a shit about his complaint. Within the next three days, the Sovereign Kings will officially be rid of Todd once and for all.

Once we're in the back seat of the SUV, I lean back against the headrest and turn to face Sienna.

"Hi, beautiful," I say, reaching out to caress her cheek with my thumb.

"Hey, you," she murmurs. "Don't you need to change before we leave?"

Jay barks out a laugh at Sienna's question and tosses me a T-shirt from the duffle bag in the passenger seat. I always travel with extras since I'm in the habit of tossing mine into the crowd at almost every show.

"Thanks," I tell Jay, pulling the shirt over my head before shifting my attention back to Sienna. "If I had known you were coming tonight, I would have made reservations for dinner, but I'm sure we can drop in wherever we want. What are you craving?"

"You."

"Me what?" I ask, thinking I heard her wrong.

"I'm craving you," she whispers.

“We don’t have to do anything tonight. We have plenty of time for that later. I’m just happy you’re here.” I mean every word.

“I know, but I’d still like to go back to your hotel. We can order room service if we get hungry,” she adds the last part with a grin.

“Jay, can you take us back to Conway’s hotel?” she asks him politely before I have the chance.

“Sure thing, boss,” he says with a wink.

“Hey, that’s my title,” I scoff.

“Clearly there’s a new sheriff in town,” he states smugly.

“Yeah, I’m the new sheriff,” Sienna taunts me.

God I’ve missed our playful banter. It’s not the same over the phone.

I reach out to wrap my arm around her when I notice the red marks on her upper arms. “Does it hurt?” I gently caress the area with the pads of my fingers.

“Only a little,” she says. “Don’t worry, it will be fine in a couple of days.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming tonight?” I draw her close while being careful of her arms.

“I wanted to surprise you.” She beams up at me. “Leola assured me that she and the nursing staff you hired had everything under control and insisted I leave a day early.”

“Who knew you were coming?” I ask.

“I let Lennon in on my plan yesterday and Emerson picked me up from the airport. When we got to the concert, he was pulled aside to deal with a fan trying to steal merchandise from one of the booths. He had to speak with the police, and I didn’t

see him again after that. And Lennon was already back at the hotel with Indie.”

I nod in understanding. That explains why I couldn’t find Emerson earlier.

“Was he able to show you to your seat before he left? I didn’t see you in the VIP section.”

“He offered, but I declined.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I wanted to watch from the nosebleeds.”

“I’m sorry... you what?” My eyes grow wide and I nearly choke on my words.

“I wanted to experience the show like any other fan would. I bought a ticket from someone selling an extra online,” she admits proudly.

I’m about to lecture her about the dangers of buying scalped tickets and demand to know how much she paid, but I stop myself when I see that her expression is lit with genuine excitement.

“Your energy is palpable when you’re on stage,” she says enthusiastically. “Even from a seat at the back of the stadium, I could feel your passion. You perform with your entire being, and it’s pure magic to witness. I regret not listening to your music sooner, but consider me your new number one fan.”

“I’m really glad you enjoyed the show, Ace. But next time, please watch from the VIP section or, better yet, from backstage. If you’re lucky, I might even surprise you with a kiss or two between each set,” I tease her.

Sienna lets out a soft laugh and I reward her with a passionate kiss on the lips—a sneak peek of what’s to come.

“Who says there will be a next time?” she asks with a wry smile.

“I do,” I declare. “Because I’m never letting you go.”

SIENNA

JAY DRIVES THROUGH A GATED entrance at the back of the hotel, revealing an exclusive underground parking garage reserved for celebrities and high-profile guests. He drops us off so he can return to the concert venue to stay with the rest of the band until they're finished with the afterparty.

Conway ushers me into a private elevator. He presses his index finger against a sensor panel that activates the blank screen, displaying the floor numbers. This is the most sophisticated elevator I've ever been in. The doors automatically close but he doesn't make a move to select his floor.

“Conway? Are we going up?”

He turns to face me, clasping my hands in his. “Just to reiterate, there isn't any pressure for us to do anything more than spend time together.” His tone is deep and gravelly. “And if you're not ready to stay with me, I can book you a separate hotel room or you can stay in the extra room in the band's suite if you'd prefer.”

I appreciate him taking the time to check my comfort level with our situation. Most guys would be so concerned with getting me back to their room it wouldn't even cross their mind. That's how I know Conway is *my* person. The one I can fully trust to treat me right but not handle me like I'm a piece of glass.

His critics have labeled him as a playboy who disrespects women, an unapologetic asshole with no regard for anyone but himself. They're wrong. Under his steely facade is a man who is fiercely loyal, protective, and considerate.

My horoscope from this morning comes to mind, giving me the resolve to move forward.

Romance is coming your way, but you have to be willing to take a leap of faith. Trust your instincts and let your heart take control. Be realistic about your relationships with others, but don't be afraid to push the boundaries once they've been established. Remember, with great risk comes great reward.

Conway's hands tremble against my face, unsure how to interpret my prolonged silence.

"Why would I stay somewhere else? I came here to be with you, and I'd really like that to include a romantic escapade. You didn't think I came thousands of miles just to talk, did you?" I blink up at him innocently. "I've waited long enough to claim you as my man, Danvers. Don't make me wait any longer."

I've fantasized about having sex with Conway for months, and my patience has officially worn out. I'm ready for him to make me his in every way possible.

"Are you sure you know what you're asking?" he asks, giving me one last chance to back out.

"I want you to fuck me tonight," I state matter-of-factly, not wanting there to be any confusion.

The air sizzles with an electric charge, creating a magnetic field between us. We're drawn together like opposing poles, unable to escape the gravitational pull that binds us.

"Have you been dreaming about my big cock shoved deep inside your cunt? Is that why you're so desperate for me to fuck you?" he taunts, his mouth brushing against my ear.

I appreciate that he isn't treating me with kid gloves. He knows I can handle whatever he dishes out.

"Yes," I utter softly. "I want your cock."

His eyes darken with intensity, his pupils blown wide. He moves his hands to my hips, effortlessly lifting me into his arms and hiking my skirt up. I wrap my legs around his waist and throw my arms around his neck.

“We’re not having sex for the first time in an elevator, but let me tide you over until then.”

He walks us backward until I’m pinned against the wall, his eyes locked on mine. He grinds his rock-hard dick against my core and I moan loudly at the exquisite sensation. I greedily push back in response, wanting more pressure. Every fiber of my being is on high alert, every movement heightened by my exhilarated state.

I tilt my head back to get a better look at him when I remember where we are.

“Cameras,” I blurt out.

The last thing we need is for a video of us shamelessly dry-humping in a hotel elevator to go viral. I’m lost in a haze of lust and barely hold out long enough for his response.

“Disabled,” he clips out, not pleased with the disruption.

Before I can question him further, he presses against me, trailing kisses along my neck and jaw. I inhale sharply when he sticks a finger inside my panties, swiping through my wet heat. A burst of pleasure sweeps over me at his touch.

“You’re fucking soaked, Ace,” Conway boasts.

My lustful eyes track his finger as he brings it to his mouth and sucks it clean, taking a moment to savor my taste, deliberately licking his lips with a smug smile. He leans forward, his tongue finding its way along the seam of my mouth, teasing me relentlessly before slipping inside. He eagerly explores, and I keep him close by gripping his hair in my fists.

He brings his hand back to the apex of my thighs and thrusts three thick fingers inside my pussy as I shamelessly grind against his hand, greedy for his touch.

“Oh god,” I call out.

“Danvers will do.” He grins.

A tantalizing shiver courses down my spine and I gasp in shock at the unexpected heat that ripples through my core.

“Is it possible to—” A guttural groan stops me short as he relentlessly fucks me with his fingers and thrums my clit with his thumb.

I’m about to have an orgasm in an elevator, and I can’t think of a single reason to stop it.

“I’m going to...” I let out a sharp cry as I catapult over the edge, brilliant bursts of light dancing before my eyes. As I descend from my high, Conway brushes a piece of hair from my face.

“Now I know what you look like when you come.” He flashes a cunning smile. “It’s a beautiful sight.”

He carefully eases me to the ground and pulls down my skirt before scooping me back into his arms bridal-style. I clasp my arms around his neck and rest my head against his chest, finding solace in the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

He leans forward to press the button for the top floor and the elevator begins its ascent. When the door opens on our floor, it reveals a luxurious hallway.

“I can walk,” I say halfheartedly.

At least I think I can.

“I know,” Conway says, not making an effort to put me down. “But you need to save your energy for what I have planned.”

I let out a hum of excitement. If what just happened is any indication, I'm in for one hell of a night.

He strides down to the last door on the right, opening it with his fingerprint. He bypasses a lavish sitting area before marching straight into the master suite, a king-sized bed dominating the space. He gently places me on the edge before sitting next to me.

"Now that we're alone without any distractions, I'd like to take a minute to look at you. I've missed you, baby."

I've missed him too. Since he's been on tour, we've only seen each other in person twice, excluding tonight.

When he came to the hospital after Ruth's accident, our argument ended with him leaving shortly after he arrived, and our exploit at the American Music Awards didn't last nearly long enough. It's about damn time that we're finally together in person and on the same page regarding our relationship.

Holy shit, I'm actually dating Conway Danvers.

And he's staring at me like I'm the only thing that matters.

He reaches out to gently caress my cheek with the back of his hand and places a kiss on my forehead.

"You're irresistible, Ace. You've obliterated life as I know it in the best way possible. The course of my future was altered the day you rejected my proposition, and you've been turning my world upside down ever since."

"Can I ask you a favor?" I ask with a hint of hesitation.

"You just used my cock to get off in the elevator, Ace. Don't get shy on me now," he teases.

"I want to see you with your shirt off again. Up close and personal this time," I say with a grin.

I was jealous of the women who had a front-row seat to a shirtless Conway at the concert tonight. Now that we're alone,

it's my turn for a private show meant only for me.

When he goes to tug off his shirt, I shake my head.

"I want to do it," I tell him, a silent understanding passing between us.

He's stripped his shirt off thousands of times, making it an inconsequential act. I want this moment to mean something more for both of us.

He scoots closer, making it easier for me to grip the sides and lift it over his head. He helps me out by pulling his arms out and tossing it to the ground.

He doesn't move a muscle as I explore his bare chest, touching every ripple and curvature of his well-defined abs. I shift my focus to his shoulder, tracing the head of his snake tattoo, outlining every detail with my fingertips.

"Why did you get this one?" I question with genuine curiosity.

"For the daily reminder that I'm stronger than my fears," he replies without skipping a beat. "The first thing I see when I look in the mirror every morning is something I'm afraid of, but proof that it doesn't have any hold over me."

Conway has spent his adult life thinking he needs to prove to everyone around him—and himself—that he isn't afraid of anything. Every day he chooses to confront the things he dreads the most head-on, but still considers himself a failure when he can't easily overcome them.

His fears don't make him weak or diminish his worthiness. They serve as a reminder that he's not only surviving but evolving, and I wish he could see that for himself.

"That's an admirable reason to get a tattoo," I tell him, understanding now isn't the time for a philosophy lesson. "I wish I had the courage to do something that daring."

He gets a glint in his eyes. “You know, Ace, there is one thing you can do right now that requires grit.”

“What’s that?”

“Our time in the elevator left me with a rather *big* problem.” He points to his raging erection. “I could use some relief. Your mouth or hands will do,” he goads with a smirk.

He’s giving me the chance to step outside my comfort zone in the best way he knows how—by encouraging me to accept his challenge.

Conway must sense my unease because he initiates the first move by getting off the bed and casually taking off his pants and boxers. He’s gloriously naked, his rigid cock jutting out proudly. I gulp at the size, unsure how it’ll fit.

If there’s a will, there’s a way, right?

He takes a seat a couple of feet away from me on the mattress, resting back against his hands.

When I remain rooted in place, he turns his smoldering gaze in my direction, beckoning me to join him. I’ve never done anything like this before, and he damn well knows it. Even the stunt back in the elevator was tame compared to this.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I muster the courage to pull my shirt off, throwing it on the floor. My bra is next, and I unfasten the clasp, freeing my aching breasts from their confines.

I don’t miss Conway licking his lips when he sees them for the first time. His untamed reaction empowers me to stand up and strip off my skirt and underwear in a hurry, enthusiastically looking forward to what comes next.

When I’ve removed all my clothes, he opens his legs in invitation. Without a second thought, I go to him and drop to my knees, settling myself between his thighs. I lift my hooded

eyes to meet his intoxicating whisky-colored ones, ensuring I have his undivided attention.

I tentatively curl my fingers around his thick cock, moving my hand in slow, steady strokes as I get used to his girth. Precum leaks from the tip, and I lick it with my tongue. I take him in my mouth, sucking the crown with fervor.

“Fuck, you look sexy with your lips around my dick,” Conway says in a gravelly tone. “Deeper, baby. Take me deeper,” he encourages, winding his fingers in my hair, pushing himself farther into my mouth. I struggle to take all of him at first, but I’m determined. I inhale deeply through my nose, hollowing my cheeks as I suck until his head is at the back of my throat.

“You’re taking me so good, Ace,” he croons as he strokes the column of my neck.

When a single tear trickles down my cheek, it sets him off. Unable to contain himself any longer, he pulls my hair tight, coaxing me to move, my mouth bobbing up and down on his dick as he growls his approval. I’m heady with the knowledge that I’m in control of his pleasure. I cup his balls, squeezing gently while sucking enthusiastically.

“Fuck, I’m going to come,” he grunts.

He releases my hair, giving me the opportunity to pull back, but I don’t take it. I want to master the full experience of giving my first blow job.

Conway’s body begins to jerk under my hand as his cum fills my mouth. He wraps his free hand around my neck. “Swallow for me, baby,” he orders. I do as I’m told, and his eyes widen when I lap up every drop, licking him clean. When I’m finished, his cock springs free from my mouth with a pop, and I’m grinning from ear to ear.

“Holy fuck, Ace. You’re incredible.” He smashes his lips to mine. “It’s my turn now.”

Thank god.

He lifts me off the ground and places me on the middle of the bed. My legs begin to quake as he pulls them apart, moving his mouth over the apex of my thighs. I let out a low moan when he blows soft puffs of air onto my pussy.

“Conway, I—”

He doesn’t let me finish before he licks along my seam, plunging his tongue inside. My back arches off the bed as I cling to the sheets and buck my hips, grinding against his face.

“I need to come,” I mewl.

I was already on the edge after having my mouth on his cock, and when I lift my head to see his head buried between my legs, I’m a goner. He pinches my clit between his fingers, demanding my release, and I explode at his expert touch.

“That’s it, Ace, come for me,” he commands.

I call out Conway’s name while chasing euphoria, relishing every second. My head falls back against the mattress in exhaustion. I’ve already come twice tonight and we haven’t even fucked.

“I’m not done with you yet,” he promises as if he can read my mind. “Not by a long shot.”

I hope not.

By the time I’ve come down from my high, he’s taking a condom out of its wrapper. Without thinking, I place my hand over his.

“I’m on birth control. We don’t need that,” I nod toward the package.

“You sure, Ace?” Conway’s expression is serious. “I’m clean. I always wear a condom and I get checked regularly, but I didn’t want to assume...” He trails off, his hand twitching slightly under mine.

“I’m sure. I trust you.” I place my hand on his cheek, smiling up at him.

“I’ll do everything I can to make this good for you, I promise,” he says, tossing the unused condom to the floor. “I’m going to enter fast, but once I’m inside, I’ll stop and give you time to adjust, okay?” he says as he lowers himself over me.

I nod rapidly, not wanting to wait another second for him to claim me.

At the last second, I place my hands on his shoulders and grip tightly, wanting to be prepared for whatever comes next. Conway lines his shaft up with my entrance, pushing to the hilt in a single thrust.

Fuck.

I cry out as a searing pain rips through me. My nails dig into his skin, needing an outlet from the throbbing.

Conway remains frozen in place. “Are you okay, baby?” He restrains himself, waiting for my answer.

Just as I’m beginning to think that sex isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, the pain begins to morph into something else entirely, and I’m suddenly aching for *more*.

“I need you to move. Now,” I demand, wriggling underneath Conway, urging him to do something.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Move,” I growl in frustration.

He hesitantly starts to pump in and out, and when I let out a strangled moan, he picks up his pace. I tip my head back,

savoring each time he pushes inside me.

“God, you’re so fucking tight, Ace,” he groans.

“Fuck, Danvers,” I manage to get out.

“You like that, baby? You like my cock in your pussy?” he pants out as he drives into me harder.

I can only whimper in reply, digging my heels into the mattress. He slants his mouth across mine, kissing me fervently as he thrusts faster. I revel in the feeling of him deep inside me, and a wave of heat surges through me.

“I think I’m close.” I say it as a question.

“We’re going to come together,” he states.

He knows exactly what I need to get off, rubbing his base against my clit in quick strokes.

“Yes,” I cry out.

“Fuck, I’m right there with you baby,” he shouts.

My orgasm surges toward me like a tidal wave and I hold Conway close as we tumble into a state of oblivion together. He collapses on top of me, resting his head against my chest.

His weight on top of me brings me comfort, and I absentmindedly run my fingers through his hair as we both regain our composure.

“Let’s do that again,” I say exuberantly.

He chuckles, lifting his head to press a kiss to my nose. “Don’t worry, Ace. Now that I’ve had you once, we’ll never stop.”

CONWAY

I WAKE UP AND AM greeted by the faint scent of lilacs and oranges.

Rays of sunlight filter through the window, signaling my first full night sleeping in the same bed as someone else. Not just anyone... Sienna Cartwright.

We're entangled in a mess of limbs—Sienna draped across my chest, her legs intertwined with mine, her head nestled in the crook of my neck.

After our impromptu preamble in the elevator and warm-up in the bedroom, we stayed up well into the night while I taught her every possible sex position.

I introduced her to the wonderful world of shower sex where I took her against the wall. We fucked on the bathroom counter, unable to wait long enough to get back into bed. My personal favorite was doing it doggy style on the luxurious satin sheets with Sienna's hair gripped firmly in my fist, her head arched back to face me as I drove into her from behind. When we both finally collapsed from exhaustion, I drew her to my side, falling asleep with her securely in my arms.

I used to believe fame and fortune were the keys to my happiness, that without them, I would be nothing. I grew accustomed to people searching for my weaknesses, like sharks drawn to blood in the water, ready to exploit me and my flaws at the earliest opportunity.

Being with Sienna has made me reevaluate my priorities. She's broken through my barriers, redefined the fabric of my existence for the better, and helped me realize that there are far more important things than popularity and financial success.

We haven't discussed what the future looks like for us, and we might be in for a rocky road ahead, but I'm committed to her for the long haul. Whatever difficulties we face, we'll confront them together.

Sienna stirs beside me, and when her eyes flutter open, I'm met with her striking emerald gaze.

"Good morning, Ace," I say, showering her shoulder with kisses.

"Good morning, Danvers," she replies, her voice husky from sleep. "Ready for an action-packed day?"

"Half day," I correct her. "Tonight is mine."

I agreed to let her choose our plans for this morning. After that, I'm responsible for the itinerary for the rest of the trip.

Sienna wasn't exactly pleased when I declined her offer to plan our vacation. If she were in charge, we'd be staying in hostels, wearing absurd costumes, and eating off the value menu at every fast-food joint. There's nothing wrong with those things, but I want to spoil her the way she deserves.

"If that's the case, my half day starts now," she says, leaning in for a kiss. "And I know exactly what I want to do first."

"What's that, baby?"

She wordlessly trails her hand down my stomach, and my cock springs to attention at her seductive touch.

"You're a greedy little thing, aren't you?" I taunt. "Were the dozen orgasms I gave you last night not enough?"

She bats her eyelashes, feigning innocence. "Last night? What happened last night? I think I need a refresher." She grips my hard-on and I groan at her touch.

This woman is insatiable. I fucking love it.

“That can be arranged.”

Without warning, I flip Sienna onto her back, settling above her with my legs on either side, locking her arms in place above her head.

“What now, baby? What do you want next?” She bites her lower lip, considering her next words carefully. “Don’t get shy on me now. Tell me what you want,” I urge her.

“I want your mouth on me,” my brave little vixen murmurs. I lean in to kiss her but she stops me with a wicked grin. “Not there,” she rasps.

God, this woman has no idea what it does to me to hear her ask me to go down on her with those innocent doe eyes.

“Your wish is my command.”

I throw back the sheets and dive between her legs, worshipping her the way she deserves.

“Hurry up, I don’t want to be late.” Sienna picks up her pace, marching across the London Bridge. It’s cold outside, but she insisted we walk to our destination.

Jay is following us closely with the car, just in case we need a quick getaway. I’m wearing a ballcap and glasses, which isn’t the most inconspicuous disguise, but we led the paparazzi to believe that I went back to Los Angeles with the band, so it’ll be a few days before anyone questions my whereabouts.

Lennon wasn’t happy she didn’t get to see Sienna before the band left this morning, but I promised they could talk on the phone and reminded her that they’d be reunited soon. Until then, I have Sienna all to myself, and I plan to enjoy every minute.

After I insisted on breakfast in bed, Sienna finally told me that we were going to a matinee showing of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I've never had the desire to attend a play, but I'll gladly make an exception for her.

Despite my long stride, I'm still walking briskly to keep up with her. She's zeroed in on the Shakespeare Globe Theatre, ignoring everything else around us.

Damn it all to hell.

Once I check my phone to confirm we have enough time for a little detour, I stop in the middle of the sidewalk. It takes Sienna several seconds to realize I'm not following her, and when she does, she halts mid-stride, whipping around with a panicked expression when she sees that I'm not moving.

"What are you doing?" she exclaims. "We're going to be —" I close the space between us before she can finish her sentence and silence her with a passionate kiss. It does the trick, and she melts in my arms.

"Why did you stop?" she pants. I'm not sure if she's referring to the kiss or the unplanned disturbance to her well-laid plan. I'm assuming the latter.

"I'm taking a moment to stop and smell the roses," I explain.

Sienna gives me a confused look and, quick as a flash, her agreeable disposition dissolves when she remembers that I've distracted her.

"What are you talking about? We need to hurry or we'll be late." She tries to tug me along, but I don't budge.

We're not going to be late. She made sure of that when she had us leave a half hour early and practically jog the entire way here. She stomps her foot in frustration when I don't give in to her demand, and although I find it cute as hell, I maintain my serious demeanor.

Wordlessly, I move toward the side of the bridge that overlooks the Thames. I sense Sienna's hesitation, but it doesn't take her long to follow. She stands beside me, resting her elbows on the railing as she huffs impatiently.

I place her hand in mine, lacing our fingers together. "You were so worried about getting to the theater that you almost missed what's right in front of you."

From here, we can see the Tower of London, the Tower Bridge, one of the most famous rivers in the world, and a majority of the surrounding city. Several ferries bob up and down in the water below, and hundreds of pedestrians are strolling through the streets.

Sienna's silent as she takes in the scene from the bridge.

"Take it all in, Ace, because someday you're going to want to look back on this moment and remember every detail."

"Why do you say that?"

"This is the start of something extraordinary." I motion between us. "And whatever comes next, we're going to want to remember every step of the way."

Sienna jerks her head back, staring at me like I've transformed into someone unrecognizable. It's not like me to talk about the future; I much prefer to focus on living for today.

"You mean it?"

"I do," I say with conviction.

I can't predict the future, but I can say with certainty that I'll go to great lengths to ensure that mine includes Sienna.

"You're right about one thing, Danvers... This is a beautiful view," she says with awe. "I can't believe I waited so long to travel. I let my responsibilities, limited resources, and the fear of the unknown keep me from venturing outside my

comfort zone. Now I'm afraid it's too late to learn how to *stop and smell the roses*, as you put it," she admits with a subdued expression.

I lean my head against hers. "Stick with me and you'll get lots of practice." If I have anything to say about it, this will be the first of many trips we take together.

Sienna doesn't reply, absorbed in the moment. I gently caress her hand with my thumb, allowing the sounds of the city to wash over us.

After a few minutes, I discreetly check my phone to find that we really do need to get going so we aren't late for curtain call. The last thing I want is for Sienna to miss the play. If she does, she might never agree to be spontaneous again. It's possible I'm overreacting, but I'm determined to make this day perfect for her, and that starts now.

"Ace," I say, breaking her trance.

"Yeah?"

"As much as I'd love to stay here with you forever, we don't want to be late, do we?"

"You bastard." She playfully swats me on the chest. "You did this on purpose, didn't you?" She drops my hand and moves briskly toward our destination.

And just like that, she's back to her mission. This time I don't argue when she drags me along until we reach the theatre. I keep my head down as we weave through the lobby, wanting to avoid being recognized by anyone looking close enough.

When we step inside the theater, I'm confused when Sienna turns to the right, entering a small boxed-off section without any chairs and a waist-high solid wood partition separating us from the patrons in the seats below.

“Sienna, what is this?”

“The standing-only section. Can you believe the tickets were only ten bucks a pop?” she says with a wide grin.

“I can, actually,” I say sarcastically.

It should be criminal to charge someone to stand to watch a play that’s over two hours long. Yes, I understand the irony of that remark, given how many of my fans pay far more to stand throughout a Sovereign Kings show. In my defense though, a rock concert provides a thrilling and interactive experience with the audience as opposed to silently watching a time-worn play.

“Come on, Danvers, where’s your sense of adventure?” Sienna coaxes. “Besides, no one will ever consider looking for you in this section of the theater,” she says smugly.

Hell, if that was her primary concern, I would have rented out the entire place. No one would have recognized us then, either. I’m looking forward for my half of the day to start so I can show her my idea of an adventure.

Once the lights dim and the curtain opens, I’m pleased to find that Sienna and I are the only two people in the back row. It seems everyone else agrees with my opinion on the standing-only thing.

As the first act begins, it occurs to me just how I can make this *adventure* worthwhile.

I nonchalantly step behind Sienna and wrap my arms around her waist. She leans her head against my chest, thinking I’m being romantic.

I don’t let the fact that Sienna is wearing jeans interfere with my plans. My hand silently roams to the front of her pants, deftly undoing the button and slowly pulling down the zipper with ease. Her body goes rigid when she realizes what I’m doing.

“Conway!” she hisses.

I don't acknowledge her with a verbal response.

After waiting several seconds to build the anticipation, I covertly slip my hand into her underwear. She lets out a soundless gasp as I plunge a single finger inside her, reminding me of our moment in the elevator last night. Only this time, we're playing a little game.

I push my finger in and out in a steady pace while massaging her clit in languid circles, her body coiling tighter with each thrust. Sienna's grip on the wooden banister is unyielding, her knuckles turning white with the pressure.

I'm creating an ache within her that can only be relieved by my hand. When I add a second finger, her head lolls back and her eyes fall shut. Sienna is utterly captivating when she's on the verge of release, but she's going to have to wait a while longer. I'm not done playing yet.

I withdraw my hand and her eyes snap open immediately.

“Why are you stopping?” she squeaks.

“You're missing the show. Keep those beautiful eyes open for me,” I whisper in her ear.

“Conway,” she whines.

“Shh, no talking,” I command in a hushed tone.

She releases an exasperated sigh but begrudgingly obliges, turning her focus back to the stage.

“Good girl,” I say, kissing her forehead.

I return to teasing her with my fingers, pulling out whenever she gets close to a climax. I nibble the shell of her ear, whispering dirty words only she can hear. Despite her silent pleas, I continue to draw out her impending orgasm. Her body is wound like a spring, her tension palpable. She's teetering on the edge, desperate to lose all control.

Seconds before the curtain closes for intermission, I flick her clit repeatedly, giving her the added friction she's been desperately begging for. She detonates like a bomb, her body shuddering from the intensity of her release.

I jerk my hand out of her pants and button them just before the lights come on.

"My new favorite pastime is making you come," I murmur as I usher her into the lobby.

"You're a troublemaker, but I don't mind," she quips with a smirk.

I have to admit the standing-only section has its benefits.

SIENNA

MY CHEEKS FLUSH AT THE thought of our escapade at the theater.

The second half of the play was uneventful as far as public displays of indecent sexual acts go. Despite Conway's initial reaction to my plans, he seemed to enjoy the rest of the show. Although, I have a hunch that my days of buying standing-only tickets are over.

Afterward, I took him to a nearby pizzeria known as one of the country's best budget-friendly restaurants. I might have left out that last part when I told Conway where we were going. While I admit it wasn't the best meal I've ever had, the company made the occasion memorable.

Since lunch, we've been strolling through the bustling streets at a leisurely pace, Conway assuring me that we're not in a hurry to get to our next stop.

London truly is a remarkable city, with an abundance of captivating sights and hidden gems waiting to be explored. I can't believe that I'm here, and with Conway, no less. For the first time in years, I'm truly *seeing* what's in front of me.

"Hold up. Explain to me again why you get daily emails about your zodiac sign? It doesn't make any sense," Conway says.

"They're called horoscopes," I correct him, chuckling at his question. "And they give insight into a person's life based on their sign, which are determined by the position of the stars and planets on your birthday."

"You're the most level-headed person I know, Ace. Please don't tell me you actually believe in that shit."

“I like planning ahead,” I remind him. “My daily horoscope is like a sneak peek into what I can expect to happen on any given day. It offers guidance on how to handle specific situations if and when they arise. You can poke fun all you want, but for me, they’re accurate most of the time.”

All my life there have been so many things out of my control—growing up without my mother, having my dad leave me behind, struggling to make friends when I was younger. My daily horoscopes are almost always accurate, and it feels like I’m getting a glimpse into my future each time I read one. It’s provided a way for me to regain some of the control I’ve lost by giving me a chance to prepare for what lies ahead instead of being blindsided.

“When’s your birthday?” I ask Conway. “I can’t believe I’ve never thought to ask you that before.”

“August first,” he replies hesitantly.

“Oh my god, you’re a Leo,” I utter in disbelief.

“What the hell is wrong with a Leo?” He gives me a puzzled expression.

“Nothing, they’re just not compatible with Virgos,” I say, nervously chewing on my lip.

“Let me guess, you’re a Virgo?”

I nod to confirm.

He takes me by the elbow and ushers me off the main walkway. He cups my chin with his hand and crashes his mouth to mine, searing a hot kiss to my lips. When he finally pulls back, I’m left gasping for air.

“Tell me again how we’re incompatible.” He’s wearing a goofy smile, pleased with his public display of affection.

“There’s more to a relationship than physical attraction, Danvers,” I say with a stern look.

“True, but it’s the foundation to any successful relationship. If a couple doesn’t have chemistry, there’s no hope for a future together, wouldn’t you agree?” He gives me another fiery kiss to drive home his point.

“In this instance, I do.”

“Good.” He smiles before grabbing my hand and leading me back to the sidewalk.

I pull out my phone with my free hand and open my favorite horoscope website to find Conway’s daily reading.

“Want to hear your horoscope for today?” I ask him.

“Sure, why not.” He shrugs. “I’ve got nothing to lose.”

“There may be tremendous changes in store for you, Leo. Expect to have vivid dreams tonight. They could hold significant insights into your current situation. Be sure to write them down. Prepare for potential confusion with your financial matters. It might be necessary to review your records to get clarity on past transactions. Everything will be okay once you have the facts.”

Conway lets out a bark of laughter but abruptly falls silent when he finds me glowering in his direction.

“What’s so funny?” I growl with my hands on my hips.

“Ace, there is no confusion with my finances,” he corrects me. “I spoke with my advisor last week, and I’m sitting real pretty, especially after the success of this last tour. As for tonight, I’ll be living in reality, which will be far more *vivid* than any dream I could have.”

He’s got a good point.

“What about the first part?” I challenge. “Wouldn’t you say being with me is a tremendous change?”

“In the best way possible.” He squeezes my hand with affection. “I hate to break it to you, Ace, but that’s only one

out of three. Things aren't looking great for your horoscopes."

"We'll try again tomorrow."

"Sounds like a plan," he says.

I appreciate him humoring me even though he doesn't have a personal interest in horoscopes.

We keep walking until Conway comes to an abrupt halt in front of a vintage fashion boutique. The lights are dimmed and there's a closed sign in the window. That doesn't deter him from strolling inside like he owns the place.

For all I know, maybe he does.

"What are you doing?" I whisper sharply. "They're closed, didn't you see the sign?" I motion behind me.

He doesn't have the chance to answer me before an elegantly dressed woman strides toward us with a faux smile on her face.

"Mr. Danvers, I presume?" she addresses Conway with a sickly sweet voice, ignoring my presence altogether.

He must have arranged for the shop to be closed for our visit. I tend to forget that he lives by his own rules, exempt from the guidelines set for the general population. In his universe, the sky's the limit.

While he speaks with the mystery woman, I take the opportunity to look around. This place is different from any secondhand store I've ever been to. The walls are painted pastel pink, accented with white crown molding for a more refined appearance, and a gold ornate full-length mirror is positioned next to a dressing platform in the far corner.

I can't help but notice the shop's sparse inventory, which only includes a handful of items on each rack. Upon further examination, I find that every piece is from a luxurious brand or designer. The price tags range from hundreds to thousands

of dollars, and from what I can see, there aren't any men's clothing in sight, meaning that we came here for me.

"Find anything you like?" Conway asks.

I look around to see that the salesperson has disappeared into the back, leaving Conway and me alone in the shop. "Why are we here? Please tell me you didn't purchase the entire lot." I wave around the flashy storefront.

He ambles toward me, where I'm standing next to a gown boasting a fifteen-thousand-dollar price tag.

"You once told me you had an appreciation for secondhand clothes," he recalls. "I know your preference was to visit antique shops in Paris, but I've been told London fashion is all the rage."

"You remembered," I utter softly, recalling when I told him about that in the bowling alley.

"Of course, baby. I listen to everything you say. I want to show you something."

Conway guides me to the fitting room where a single gown is on display—a 1960s Ceil Chapman sleeveless cocktail dress in rose gold with an overlay of tulle and silk embroidery. It's a timeless masterpiece, more beautiful than any modern design. I trace the intricate beading in the bodice, admiring the detail.

"It's exquisite, Danvers," I murmur in astonishment.

"I'm glad you like it, because it's yours," he says with a grin.

"What? No, I can't accept this."

He shakes his head at my dismissal. "You're mine, Ace, and that comes with certain perks, whether you like it or not." I'm prepared for a rebuttal, but he holds up his hand, knowing my counterarguments all too well. "You're not impressed by trivial trinkets or dramatic displays—no, you prefer gifts that

have a sentimental meaning behind them, and even then, it's a pain in the ass to get you to accept."

"I make no apologies," I reply with a smile.

"And you shouldn't, but please accept this one without any more arguments? I'm taking you somewhere special, and we can't go until you've changed."

I notice there isn't a price tag on the dress, and I assume he asked the salesperson to remove it before we arrived so I wouldn't be tempted to check.

"Fine, if you insist." I sigh dramatically, faking annoyance even though I'm actually excited to put on such a beautiful dress.

When I move to take off my clothes, Conway steps out and starts to close the curtain, stopping mid-way. "The only reason I'm not staying is because if I watch you strip, I'll fuck you."

"Would that be so bad?" I ask, batting my eyelashes.

"Of course not, but we'll have plenty of time for that when we get back to the hotel later," he promises, placing a soft kiss on my forehead before leaving me to change.

I find him patiently waiting for me when I walk out. He must have had Jay bring him clothes because he's changed into a pair of dark-wash jeans, a black button-down shirt, and much to my amusement, he's still wearing his Chuck Taylors.

He lets out a low whistle as he takes me in. "You're a goddamn vision, Ace."

"Thank you. You don't look too shabby yourself. I've never seen you dress up before."

"Only for you," he says. "I have something else for you."

Conway strides toward me, causing me to step back inside the dressing room. He follows, drawing the curtain behind him, securing our privacy. He gestures at the upholstered

armchair in the corner, motioning for me to sit. My attention is drawn to the pair of elegant black pumps he's holding, and I can't help but notice the signature red soles, trying to ignore that they must have cost a fortune.

He kneels in front of me, pushing the front of my dress up to my thighs. I inhale deeply when he grips my knee, tracing circles with his thumb. He's barely touched me and my body is already humming with need.

"You're perfect, Ace," he says softly before changing his tone to one of authority. "Now, put your hands on the armrests and don't let go until I'm finished, understand?"

I nod.

"I need to hear your words, baby."

"Yes, I understand." I place my hands on the arms of the chair like he instructed.

"Good girl," he praises.

It's such a turn on when he calls me that. I've discovered that Conway has a thing for taking control in the bedroom, and I've been surprised to find that I actually like his bossy side while we're fucking, especially when it's accompanied by mind-blowing orgasms.

He slowly brushes his hand down my leg, causing a shiver to snake through my spine, leaving the skin he touches covered in goosebumps. I'm mesmerized as he lifts my foot in his hands, placing a tender kiss on my calf. His heated gaze never leaves mine as he expertly slips on my shoe, his hand lingering to caress my ankle. He repeats the process for my other foot with equal precision, and my grip tightens as he teases me with his touches.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met," he rasps. "And you're all mine."

“Yes, yours,” I manage to get out.

“You did so well following my instructions. I think you deserve a reward.”

I inhale sharply when he bends down to plant a kiss on my knee. His stubble rubs against my skin as he moves up my thigh inch by inch. Is he about to do what I think he is? Not that I’m complaining, but I thought we had somewhere to be.

All too soon, he lifts his head and pulls my dress down over my legs before looking up at me with a mischievous grin. Oh my God, the bastard is teasing me.

“You backing out on my reward for being a good girl, Danvers?” I taunt with a scowl.

“Never, baby.”

He raises his head until our mouths are only inches apart. I can feel his breath against my cheek and I’m greeted by the smell of tobacco and smoky vanilla. He nips at my lips before plunging his tongue into my mouth, intertwining with mine. Our mingled moans fill the air as he explores my mouth with fervor.

When he suddenly pulls away, I blink at him in disappointment. “Why did you stop?”

“Because once I start, I won’t be able to stop until you’ve been thoroughly fucked,” he says. He stands up, reaching his hand out to me. “Let’s get out of here. I have another surprise for you and we don’t want to be late.”

When we step outside, Jay is waiting on the curb next to the blacked-out SUV. “You look beautiful, Miss Cartwright,” he says with a small smile.

“Watch it,” Conway growls, placing his hand on my lower back as I get in the car.

“Thank you for the compliment, Jay,” I acknowledge. “You be nice,” I scold Conway.

He grunts in response while securing my seat belt in place and then drawing me close.

The sun has set by the time we reach our destination on the other side of town—a secluded alleyway.

“Should I be worried?” I ask Conway in a playful tone.

“Come on, you.” He leads me to an unassuming black door, enters a code to unlock it, and signals for me to follow. We enter a dimly lit hallway and as the distant sound of laughter reaches my ears, it puts my mind at ease to know we aren’t the only ones here.

He heads the opposite direction of the noise, leading me down several dark corridors until we enter a grand dining room. In the center sits a solitary table, set for two.

The expansive space features candelabras mounted to the walls, an ornate fireplace casting a warm glow, and an opulent crystal chandelier suspended from the ceiling. The ambiance reminds me of the setting portrayed in the live-action *Beauty and the Beast*.

“This place is incredible.” I vocalize my astonishment as I spin in a circle, soaking in every detail.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret. This is the most exclusive restaurant in Europe, with one of the best chefs in the world. I wanted you to have a true fine-dining experience away from prying eyes. You deserve the best of everything.” He speaks in an unyielding tone.

My heart skips a beat when I hear that he planned this for me... for us. He thrives off spontaneity and adventures, but knowing how important a plan is to me, he went out of his way to make these arrangements. It may seem small, but it

means a lot to me. While I may not want his extravagant lifestyle, I'm starting to see the appeal.

A waiter enters shortly after, presenting us with bowls of roasted parsnip soup garnished with truffle oil and crispy pancetta, and pours us each a glass of chardonnay, saying it'll complement the flavors of the soup perfectly. I'll have to take his word for it since I'm not a wine connoisseur.

Conway raises his glass for a toast. "To the first of many adventures."

"To our first adventure," I say, clinking my glass to his.

Over the next several hours, we're treated to a culinary journey featuring a ten-course tasting menu. It's unlike anything I've experienced before. By the time I've cleared my plate of dark chocolate fondant with raspberry coulis and pistachio crumble, I'm beyond full.

"I have to admit, Danvers, that was one of the best meals I've ever had. Although, I still think the diner has this place beat," I tease.

"Don't let the chef hear you say that," he says in a hushed tone. "Now that we've finished dessert, I want to give you something."

"You've already given me multiple *some things* today."

He laughs. "Trust me, Ace, I have a feeling you'll want this."

He places a small blue box in front of me. My pulse starts to race when I realize that whatever is inside no doubt comes with a hefty price tag. I've never been particularly fond of jewelry, and I'm already thinking through how I can persuade Conway to return the extravagant gift.

"I can see the wheels turning in your head," he carefully notes. "Why don't you open it before asking me to return it."

His assessment leaves me speechless. How can he see through me so easily, as if he's skimming the pages of my mind like a book?

I cautiously pick up the jewelry box, my hands trembling as I open it.

Nestled inside is a delicate emerald pendant necklace, a replica of the one my mother is wearing in the only photograph I have of her. My eyes snap to Conway's, filled with both disbelief and appreciation.

"How..." A choked sob escapes my lips as tears flow freely down my cheeks. There is no combination of words that can adequately convey how grateful I am for this gesture.

He rises from his chair, rushing to my side. He takes the necklace from its case and tenderly clasps it around my neck. He doesn't need me to tell him that I'm keeping it; he already knows.

"When I was at your house the night we went to bingo, I saw the picture of your mom," he explains. "Leola told me it was the only keepsake you have to remember her by. I wanted you to have something you could wear that would remind you of her every time you look at it."

My fingers graze the stone resting on my neck. "It's perfect, Danvers. I can't thank you enough."

A part of me has always been missing, having never had the opportunity to meet my mom. When I was old enough to comprehend what it meant not to have any of her belongings, it shattered me to the core. Whether Conway realizes it or not, this small but significant token serves as a way to make me feel closer to my mom even though she can't be here.

He bends down to wipe away a stray tear from my cheek.

"I thought you'd be happier," he confesses with a perplexed expression.

“These are happy tears,” I say, a slight hiccup interrupting my words.

“Good.”

“I feel bad though. You’ve gotten me all these incredible gifts.” I wave toward my ensemble. “And all I’ve gifted you are cheap tickets to the theater, an inaccurate horoscope reading, and a blow job.”

“Oh baby,” Conway says, grinning widely. “Haven’t you heard? That last one is every man’s dream come true.”

The scowl on my face tells him I don’t find his comment very funny.

“I’m serious—I don’t like being indebted to you. I only wish I had more to give in return.” My mood is quickly turning gloomy at the realization that we’ll likely never be on equal footing.

“You’re the most stubborn person I’ve ever met, you know that?” he says sternly. “During the last few months, you’ve shown up for me in ways that no one else ever has. You’ve taught me that gifts and money are trivial compared to being there for someone when they need it most. All of this”—he motions around to the upscale restaurant, fancy outfits, and perfectly detailed dining table—“is just a small token of my appreciation for you.”

Just like that, with a few thoughtful words, he manages to burrow himself deeper inside my heart. If I’m not careful, he’s going to make a permanent home there. But I think I could live with that.

“Danvers?”

“Yeah?”

“Can we go back to the hotel now? I’d like to show you *my* appreciation,” I breathe out quietly.

“I thought you’d never ask,” he replies with a knowing grin.

CONWAY

SIENNA AND I SPENT TWO more days in London, roaming the streets, taking in the iconic landmarks, and wandering into shops that caught her interest. I arranged several private events for us while we were there, including an exclusive visit to the Harrods Tea Room, an unforgettable evening at the London Cabaret Club, and a night at a whiskey lounge that doubles as a piano bar.

This morning, I surprised her with an early morning train ride to Paris, but she wasn't happy when she found out I booked an entire train car. In my defense, it was the easiest way to maintain our privacy and avoid being recognized. Plus, there's no telling when we'll have another chance to travel under the radar like this again, so we might as well enjoy it while we can.

When we arrived in the city, I insisted Sienna put on a blindfold on the way to our next stop. She's been in a sour mood ever since, considering she had to take the elevator and multiple flights of stairs with it on. It'll be worth it when she sees where we are.

"I'm going to fall," Sienna shrieks next to me, gripping the railing for dear life.

She's not going to fall. I have one hand on the small of her back and the other is clasping hers while I guide her upward, one step at a time.

"I would never let that happen," I promise.

"You know what would make this easier?"

"What's that, Ace?" I ask, fighting back a grin.

"If I could see where I was going," she says sharply.

“Where’s the fun in that?” I can’t help but chuckle. “Besides, we’re almost there,” I assure her as we get past the last stair.

I guide Sienna to the scenic overlook and remove her blindfold. She blinks rapidly, adjusting to the sunlight. Her mouth falls open in shock when she catches sight of the breathtaking view of Paris below and realizes where we are.

“You brought me to the Eiffel Tower?” she squeals, casting aside her attitude from earlier.

“The upper deck of the Eiffel Tower,” I specify, taking the credit I deserve.

From here, we can see the Seine effortlessly winding its way through the heart of Paris, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Notre-Dame Cathedral off in the distance.

Sienna moves down the deck and I follow closely behind, not wanting to miss her reaction as she takes it all in. When she turns the corner, she looks around, confused.

“Um, Conway?” she says.

“Yeah?”

“Is there any particular reason why the upper deck of the Eiffel Tower is deserted on a weekend afternoon?” Her voice is elevated as she motions around the empty space. “Please don’t tell me you did something extreme like book out the whole place just for us...”

“Okay, I won’t tell you.” I shrug.

My reasons were mostly selfish. I wanted to avoid wearing a disguise or missing out on the ultimate romantic setting. Plus, it’s been Sienna’s dream to visit this place for years. I had to make sure it lived up to her expectations, and I couldn’t risk ruining her experience with a big crowd, so I took steps to make sure that didn’t happen.

Sienna's cheeks turn pink with embarrassment and she covers her face with her hands. "I can't believe you booked out *the* Eiffel Tower," she says, reeling from shock. "What about the people who came to visit today?"

"Don't worry, Ace," I say calmly. "We only have it reserved for an hour. If it's any consolation, there's an upcoming restoration project in the works, and my generous donation is going toward renovations which will benefit millions of visitors for years to come." I gently tug her hands away from her eyes and place them in mine.

She nervously nibbles on her lip as she considers her options. "I guess if you've gone through all that trouble, we better make the most of the limited time that we have," she says enthusiastically.

"My thoughts exactly."

"Today has been *incredible*." Sienna beams as we walk hand in hand. "Thank you for making all this possible."

After our stop at the Eiffel Tower, we took a boat ride down the canal and had a rooftop dinner with an unobstructed view of the city.

Despite the dark clouds looming overhead and the cold air, she wanted to walk back to the hotel.

"There's no need to thank me."

Six months ago, I never would have believed that I'd be here, wine and dining a woman in Paris. My girlfriend, if we're speaking technically, although Sienna is so much more than that.

"Well, regardless, I appreciate it."

A single raindrop lands on my arm and when I look up, several more splatter my face.

We should have taken a cab.

We're still at least ten minutes away from the hotel, all the shops are closed, and I gave Jay the night off, promising we'd survive without him for a few hours.

While I'm contemplating our options, it starts to downpour. I frantically search for a place to take shelter, concerned with how Sienna is going to take this latest development.

I'm stunned speechless when she bursts into uncontrollable laughter, steps into the empty street with her arms extended, her eyes closed, and tilts her head toward the sky—shedding all her inhibitions as she welcomes the rain with open arms.

I'm cast under her spell, mesmerized by her infectious smile and carefree spirit that is usually kept under lock and key. It's a privilege to observe her like this—golden hair clinging to her back and as she opens her eyes, they're a dazzling shade of green, shining with joy.

“Conway, come on,” she squeals.

As if I could deny her.

When I meet her in the middle of the road, she lifts up on her toes and weaves her hands in my hair.

“I really like you, Danvers,” she rasps out.

“I really like you too, Ace.”

I'm falling in love with you.

She molds her mouth to mine, her tongue passing my lips. I grasp her jaw in my hand, deepening our kiss. Time seems to stand still as we're wrapped in our private haven where there are no expectations, requirements, or judgment. Just two people driven by a shared passion for one another.

As the rain continues its onslaught, I'm lost in the moment with Sienna in my arms while we make out in the middle of a

deserted street in Paris. Her kisses become frantic when she feels my bulging erection.

“Danvers, fuck me,” she gasps. “Please.”

My brain short-circuits at her request. She peers up at me through thick eyelashes, droplets of water falling down her cheeks, silently pleading with me to say yes. We may be soaked to the bone, but all logic is thrown out the window when she looks at me like that.

“Follow me,” I instruct, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her into the nearby alley. I scan the area and am put at ease when there isn’t a single soul in sight.

Thank god.

I hastily push Sienna’s skirt up around her hips and effortlessly lift her into my arms. She wraps her long legs around my waist, winding her arms around my neck. I take several steps forward until her back is pressed against the brick wall.

“You ready, baby?”

“Yes, please.” Her voice is dripping with desire.

“Please what? Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to fuck me, Danvers,” she begs.

I tsk in mock disappointment. “Do I need to remind you we’re in public, Ace?” We both know there’s no one around, but I enjoy taunting her. “Can’t you wait until we get back to the hotel?”

I have no intention of making her wait, but I’m taking pleasure in watching her get worked up as she grinds against me in desperation.

“I need you right now,” she mewls.

“You’re a greedy little thing, aren’t you,” I say.

“Conway, please,” she wails.

Her open invitation spurs me on and I don't wait another second to unzip my pants, yanking out my rigid cock. I shove Sienna's underwear aside and push myself inside her perfect pussy in one thrust. She tilts her head back against the brick wall, crying out as she eagerly accepts me.

The rain intensifies, coming down in torrents, and we're in a race against the clock as I fuck her hard, letting go of all self-control. With every thrust, I revel in the feeling of my dick shoved deep inside her tight cunt.

My senses become heightened and I'm acutely aware of Sienna's sweet groans as she flies higher into oblivion, her fingernails digging into my shoulder blades, holding on to me for dear life. I get a taste of blood seeping into my mouth when I kiss her roughly and she bits down hard on my lip.

She's taken hold of me like a sickness, infiltrating my mind, body, and soul, and I never want her to leave. I'd be nothing without her.

We're fucking like wild animals as I continue pounding into her without restraint. All rational thinking is gone as the primal sound of flesh slapping against flesh resonates in the air.

My impending release barrels forward like a freight train and I reach between us, brushing my thumb against her clit. As we come crashing down together, Sienna cries out and I clamp my hand over her mouth.

“Shh, baby. You don't want everyone in Paris to know you begged me to fuck you in the alleyway like a little slut, now do you?” I whisper in her ear.

Her pupils grow wide and she lets out a soft whimper as she comes down from her orgasm. I hold her against me, my

cock softening inside her as we both take a minute to catch our breath.

“I’m your little slut,” Sienna quips back, the gleam in her eye letting me know she approves of the term.

“Damn right, you’re mine,” I say, pressing a kiss to her temple. “God, I love your dirty mouth.”

“And I love the way you fuck me,” she says.

When she starts to shiver, I quickly pull out of her and set her on the ground. I tuck my dick back inside my pants and pull her dress back down.

“Shit, baby, I’m sorry I don’t have anything to clean you off with.”

“It’s okay,” she says through clattering teeth. “It was worth it.”

“As soon as we get back to the hotel, I’m stripping you out of these wet clothes and running you a hot bath,” I tell her.

“That sounds nice.” Sienna gives me a warm smile.

“Come on,” I urge her, intertwining my hand with hers as we start running toward the hotel.

“The prodigal brother returns,” Emerson says in greeting.

After Sienna got her bath, we fucked in the shower and a second time in bed before she reluctantly retreated to the living room to check in with Ruth, Leola, and Lennon. I figured I’d take the chance to call Emerson since we haven’t talked for a few days.

“Very funny,” I reply with a humorless laugh. “How did everything go with Todd?” I don’t hesitate cutting straight to the chase.

“Oh man, you should have been there,” Emerson exclaims. “The guy was fucking livid. He threw a chair at the window and threatened to sue the label. It turns out they’ve been paying him a generous bonus for every million records we sell, which explains why he’s been so invested in our success. He’s not happy about losing that revenue stream, but it’s official: the label assigned him to another band and he no longer works with the Sovereign Kings.”

“Thank god.” I let out a sigh of relief. “I wish I could have been there to see his reaction. Hell, I would have liked to have been the one to break the news.”

“You totally missed out,” Emerson says. “It was odd, though. Todd was overly interested in your absence. He kept asking why you weren’t there.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That it was none of his business.”

“I’m sure that pissed him off.” A smile tugs at my lips at the thought.

“Yeah, it did,” Emerson confirms. “Hopefully we never have to see him again.”

Todd’s a smart guy. There’s no way he won’t connect the dots and assume I’m hiding out with Sienna somewhere since he saw us leave together after the concert in London. Oh well, it’s not like there’s anything he can do about it now.

“That would be great,” I agree. “Listen, Sienna and I will be off the radar for the rest of our trip. If you need anything, let Jay know, and he’ll relay the message.”

“Sounds good,” Emerson says. “I have to warn you, Lennon is chomping at the bit, wanting to know what’s going on with her brother and best friend. I don’t know how much longer I can hold her off.”

“We’re not talking about this,” I say, shutting him down before he can ask any questions.

My recent conversations with Emerson have revolved around the band, Lennon, and Indie. I’ve steered clear of bringing up Sienna, wanting us to live in our own little bubble while we can, and I’m not ready for that to change.

“Fine by me, but you know how to reach me if you change your mind. I can’t promise that Lennon won’t try and interrogate you or Sienna about it.”

“Thanks, man. And Sienna should be calling Lennon any second, so I’ll let them hash it out.”

“I can hear Lennon squealing in the other room,” Emerson confirms. “*The Bachelor*’s not on tonight, so that can only mean she’s talking with Sienna.”

I bust out laughing at how he came to that conclusion.

“Well, assuming they’re going to chat for a while, I’m going to jot down lyrics for a new song I came up with today,” I tell him, omitting that Sienna has become my muse, giving me some much-needed inspiration lately.

“Can’t wait to hear it. Talk later, Con,” Emerson says, ending the call.

SIENNA

THE PAST WEEK HAS BEEN nothing short of a fairytale.

We drove to Spain from Paris, stopping to visit several small villages along on our way. We stayed in Barcelona, where Conway and I took a private cooking class and learned how to make tapas, sangria, and paella. We spent hours exploring the cobblestoned streets of the Gothic quarter and visited the Sagrada Familia, which was breathtaking.

For our final destination of the trip, Conway whisked me off to Madrid, where we hid out in a luxurious apartment on Huertas Street. He arranged for a team to give me a full-body massage and facial. After, we took advantage of the massive tub, lounged in bed, and indulged in some local cuisine that Conway had delivered.

Our time together has been a nice escape from reality and I'm grateful we got this chance away from prying eyes to get to know each other better. While traveling, we've avoided the topic of what happens when we get home and how we'll navigate the transition to a public relationship. There are plenty of decisions we have to make, but neither of us has been eager to address those just yet.

That hasn't stopped the looming thoughts of concern from building in the back of my mind, warning me that something is on the horizon. We're traveling back to L.A. today and once we're home, we won't be able to avoid the topic of our future any longer.

I'm fighting an internal battle between my deepening feelings for Conway and the stark truth that when the world finds out about us, my entire life could implode. I've made my

choice to be in a committed relationship with him though, and I'm prepared to face the consequences, whatever they may be.

I'm so immersed in my thoughts that I'm confused when I glance up and see that Jay is parking next to a private jet, seemingly waiting for us to board.

"You can't be serious," I blurt out, whipping my head in Conway's direction.

He gives me a shit-eating grin in reply. He said he was handling our return flight home, but I assumed we'd take two different flights or sit separately to avoid drawing attention. I was wrong.

I take another look out the window, shamelessly gawking at the aircraft. I pinch myself on the arm, wanting proof that I'm not dreaming.

"Ouch," I yelp when the pain registers.

"What the hell are you doing?" Conway asks.

"I wanted to make sure this isn't a dream, because this kind of thing doesn't happen in real life." I nod toward the plane. "Why didn't I know my boyfriend owned a private jet? I feel like that's something that would come up during conversation, don't you?" I mumble the last part mostly to myself.

I can't believe I just used the term *boyfriend* for the first time with *private jet* in the same sentence. Neither are things I imagined I'd ever be saying out loud.

"Technically, the Sovereign Kings own a private jet. We bought it after we signed with the label. It makes it a hell of a lot easier to travel, especially while we're on tour."

He opens the car door and helps me out, holding my hand as we climb the stairs to the plane.

I step inside to find that in typical Conway fashion, it's outrageously extravagant. There are ten cream-colored

reclining chairs to the left, in rows of two and three couches spanning the right of the cabin. A large flat-screen TV is built into the far wall and a door separates the cockpit and galley.

He guides me to the seats at the back while Jay settles in at the front.

“Enjoy yourself, okay?” Conway says once we’re seated.

“I will,” I say with a smile. “Danvers?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for an incredible trip. It was beyond anything I could have imagined.”

“Anything for you, Ace. I’m glad you had a good time, because I sure did too.” He grins.

“You should know the more time we spend together, the more I care about you...” I trail off, not sure how to put my emotions into words just yet.

“I feel the same,” he assures me, squeezing my hand.

“What happens when we get home? How are we going to make this work? How long do you think we can hide from the media?” I’ve suppressed my impending questions long enough. Now that we’re heading back to the real world, I can’t stop from voicing my concerns.

“Technically we’re still on vacation until we land in L.A.,” he reminds me. “All that matters is that we have each other. We’ll figure out the rest later, I promise.”

I believe him, but it doesn’t stop the uneasy feeling churning in my stomach.

“Now, I want you to sit back, relax, and if you’re a good girl, I’ll show you the bedroom once we’re in the air,” he says.

“Bedroom?” I ask with a raised brow.

“That’s right, baby.” Conway smirks. “You ready to join the mile high club?”

“Sign me up.” I beam at him.

“Show me you’re ready.”

“How?”

“You’ll see.”

Just then, the flight attendant stops by to hand us both a glass of champagne.

“Thank you,” I say.

I take a casual sip while Conway picks a random book out of the seat pocket in front of him and pretends to read.

“What are you reading?”

He doesn’t respond.

“Conway, are you listening to me?”

He doesn’t have headphones on, and when he turns to the window, it’s apparent that he’s deliberately ignoring me. He doesn’t address me during takeoff, and it occurs to me that this is what he meant by *show me*. He wants me to wait patiently, even though he’s well aware that isn’t my strong suit.

I close my eyes and grip my armrests as I try to ignore my frustration.

By the time the pilot announces that it’s safe to move around the cabin, my panties are dripping with anticipation. I’m on the verge of giving Conway a piece of my mind when he throws down his book, unbuckles my seat belt, and practically drags me to the back of the plane.

He opens a door I hadn’t noticed earlier to reveal a smaller version of a swanky hotel room decorated in shades of gray and white. The bed is positioned against the wall, concealing a bathroom on the other side.

I walk toward the bed, beckoning Conway to join me with the crook of a finger.

“Are you going to keep me waiting?” I ask innocently.

“Ace, let’s make one thing clear. You’re not giving the orders today. Not if you want to come,” he states.

“Oh really? And I assume that means you think you’re in charge?”

“That’s right, baby. What I say goes.”

“Show me,” I challenge, throwing his own words back at him.

“Strip,” he commands.

My eyes widen at the shift in his demeanor. Conway thrives off power and control, and I’ve found that I genuinely like this side of him. Just thinking about our impromptu escapade in that Paris alleyway and how he how he called me his little slut is making me wet.

“I said strip,” he repeats. “Including your bra and panties.”

I reach up with shaky hands to unbutton my blouse. The suspense is nearly unbearable as he tracks my every move with his unwavering gaze. He grunts in approval when I toss my shirt to the ground, revealing the lacy black bra he gave me this morning.

I unclasp my bra, revealing my aching breasts. Conway remains in place by the door, his eyes zeroed in on me. He nods toward my pants and I fumble to pull them off along with my underwear, throwing them on the floor in a haphazard pile.

“Now lie on the bed,” he says tersely.

I scramble to obey, crawling to the middle of the bed and lying down like he instructed. My palms are sweaty and I’m restless, not knowing what he has in store. I peek at him

through my eyelashes with a seductive smile, trying to wordlessly convey that it's his move.

“Hold on to the headboard and don't let go, understand?” he orders.

I respond with a nod, positioning my hands.

“I need your words, Ace. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” I acknowledge. “Now, will you please fuck me already, Danvers? I'm tired of waiting.”

He shakes his head in disapproval. “I told you that you're not in charge,” he says in a sharp tone. “Now lie back, and if you look up again, I won't let you come.”

I grumble but do as he says, desperate for release.

Silence echoes around me while I wait. I finally close my eyes, trying to relax and give myself over to him. As the seconds tick by, the cracking tension in the air intensifies. I might not be able to see Conway, but I can feel his eyes on me as he memorizes every inch of my body like a canvas laid out before him.

During our time together, he's completely exposed me, stripping me of all my defenses. He's helped to reveal a part of me I never even knew existed, and I'm enjoying exploring that side of myself.

After several minutes, I hear his footsteps and the sound of a drawer opening and closing. Shortly after, the mattress dips when he joins me on the bed, hovering above me with his clothes on while I lie beneath him, naked—a clear indication that he's the one calling the shots. The contrast fuels the red-hot arousal racing through me.

“You're a fucking vision, baby,” Conway croons.

He leans down to wrap his mouth around my nipple, gliding his tongue across the areola, and I tighten my grip on

the headboard as a ripple of pleasure passes through my spine.

“Danvers.” His name falls from my lips like a prayer.
“More. I need more.”

“You’ll take what I fucking give you, Ace,” he taunts.

He continues to tease me, intoxicating me with his touch. I inhale sharply when he alternates between flicking my nipple with his tongue and tugging it taut with his teeth.

“That feels so good,” I encourage him, savoring the flash of pain that comes when he bites down.

Conway grins as he ravishes my tits with his mouth, his hand slowly trailing down my chest until he gets to my stomach, drawing patterns with the pad of his finger. When he reaches my legs, they fall open of their own accord and my breath hitches when he reaches the apex of my thighs.

He leans over to retrieve something next to him and holds up a bright pink vibrator for me to see. He uncaps a bottle of lube, pouring the liquid over the device.

“Ever use one of these, baby?” His voice remains steady but his eyes are ablaze with intensity.

“No.” I inhale sharply as several drops of lube hit my stomach.

“Fuck, you have no idea what that does to me, knowing I get another one of your firsts,” he says, planting a kiss to my lips.

I’m already dripping with desire, and he’s barely touched me yet.

He slowly pushes the vibrator inside me, making me groan at the intrusion. It’s not nearly as thick as his cock, but it feels incredible given my heightened state.

A jolt of pleasure shoots through my core when Conway turns the device on and a soft hum buzzes through the air. My

hands release their hold up top to grip his arms, but he yanks the vibrator away, causing me to pause in midair.

“Ace,” he warns. “What did I say?”

“To keep my hands on the headboard,” I whisper, reaching back to grab hold again.

“Good girl,” he murmurs. “Let’s try this again.” He increases the vibrator’s setting before shoving it back into my pussy. I buck my hips at the increased intensity. It’s like an electric surge flowing through my body, stimulating every nerve ending.

“It’s too much,” I whine, wriggling beneath him.

“For the last time, baby... That’s. Not. Your. Call.” He punctuates each word while he continues his punishing assault, biting down on my breasts as he plunges the vibrator inside me in rapid succession. I’m hanging on with sheer determination, sweat dripping from my brow, when he turns the device to the max setting.

“Oh my god,” I yell, trashing beneath him. “Danvers... I have to... I need to...”

“Come now, Ace,” he commands.

He gives my clit a pinch, sending me careening into my release while I scream his name. My entire world is tipped on its side and I’m not sure which way is up. He doesn’t stop his onslaught with the vibrator until he’s rung every last drop of desire from my body.

“Who owns your pleasure?” he demands.

“You,” I mumble incoherently.

“That’s right, baby. Only me.”

I’m vaguely aware of him tossing the vibrator to the floor and stripping out of his clothes. When I finally come down from my euphoric state, he’s back on top of me, lining himself

up with my entrance. Almost instantly, my body thrums with need again, and I wrap my legs around Conway's waist.

He takes hold of his shaft and guides himself inside my pussy. Our intermingled groans fill the room as I take him in, inch by glorious inch. Once he's fully seated, he pauses.

"You're mine, Ace. I meant it when I said I'm never letting you go. No matter what happens, we're in this together," he vows.

"You're mine, too."

"All yours," he reassures me with a kiss on the nose.

He moves in a steady rhythm and I eagerly meet him thrust for thrust, basking in the intimacy of our connection. Conway shines like the sun and I can't resist moving closer, craving his warmth, knowing that he'll shield me from getting burned.

He reaches out to free my hands from their grip on the headboard and intertwines our fingers, spreading my arms above me. He brushes his tongue against my lips before slipping it inside my mouth. I capture it with mine, wanting to give him as much pleasure as I'm taking.

"You're so fucking tight," he groans. "Always so fucking tight."

I moan loudly as he picks up his pace, moving in time with our matching heartbeats.

I give him a look of lust-filled appreciation, sending my silent words through him with each push.

Thrust.

I'm yours.

Thrust.

You're mine.

Thrust.

This is just the beginning.

Thrust.

I'm falling in love with you.

“Holy shit,” Conway calls out as I cling to him. “You almost there, Ace?” He lifts up on the balls of his feet, his cock seated deep inside my pussy, pressing against my G-spot.

“Danvers... I’m going to...” I cry out, gasping for air.

“That’s right, baby. Come for me again.”

He drops his head against my shoulder, putting all his energy into driving home. I shudder as I unravel beneath him, and he roars out in triumph as he finishes alongside me. There’s no stopping the flood of emotions that washes over both of us as we come down from our heightened state of pleasure.

Conway pulls me into his embrace, neither of us ready to move. He peppers kisses along my forehead while he runs his fingers through my hair.

“You okay?” His voice is heavy with concern. “Was that too much?”

I tilt my head, meeting his eyes. “It was perfect. I fucking love your bossy side,” I assure him with a sated smile.

“And I fucking love that dirty mouth of yours,” he says, a devilish smirk passing his lips.

I wouldn’t mind spending the rest of my life getting fucked like that.

As long as Conway’s the one doing the fucking.

CONWAY

SIENNA RESTS HER HEAD ON my shoulder as we drive through the quiet streets of L.A. It's six in the morning, so the rest of the city is fast asleep. It's bittersweet being back to reality after an incredible time away together. The memories we created over the last two weeks will always be some of my favorites.

Our secret relationship is like a ticking time bomb, and it's only a matter of time before it detonates. With my life under constant observation, it's a miracle we've managed to stay undetected for as long as we have, and sooner or later, word will get out that we're a couple.

Once Sienna reunites with Ruth and Leola, we need to decide where we go from here and whether she wants to try to keep our connection under wraps or not. When she's ready to go public with our relationship, we'll need to loop in Emerson to devise a plan. I won't be able to shield her from the paparazzi entirely, but there are things we can do to preemptively lessen the blow.

When we're a few blocks from Sienna's place, I turn on my phone to check for any notifications I've missed. After our first day in Paris, we completely disconnected from the outside world, and I didn't realize how liberating it would be.

Until now, I've never gone off the grid—I haven't had a reason to. After spending years in the public eye, I forgot what it's like to have a sense of normalcy, doing as I please without the media constantly shadowing me. Now that I have Sienna to think about too, and knowing how she feels about being the center of attention, I intend for us to go off the radar as often as we can.

As Jay drives up to the gated senior community, I notice several people milling around despite the early hour. They're all watching our approaching car with wary expressions while Jay leans out the driver's window to enter the security code.

As soon as we turn onto Sienna's street, I know something's wrong.

Vehicles are parked along both sides of the street and her front lawn is swarming with paparazzi. Several reporters have set up camera equipment and are broadcasting live, while multiple photographers are shamelessly snapping photos of the front of the house.

Now it makes sense why the neighbors are so curious, some peeking through their windows and others standing on their doorsteps.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath, bolting up in my seat.

My phone buzzes repeatedly, missed texts, calls, and emails pouring in. The most recent notification is a message from Emerson warning me about the chaos we just drove straight into.

I hit the call button, and he picks up on the second ring.

"What can I do?" he offers in greeting.

"Tell me you're handling this," I say brusquely.

"Yeah, I sent three security guards as backup for Jay and alerted the police. They've received several calls from angry residents reporting a public disturbance."

"How did the media find out about Sienna and me?" I rub my temples to ward off an oncoming headache.

"Someone leaked photos of you and Sienna leaving the concert venue in Paris. We haven't been able to track down who it was, but we'll find out sooner or later."

Fuck.

“How the hell did these people get in here? It’s a gated community, for Christ’s sake,” I bark.

“The HOA traced the access code used to an elderly woman who was walking her dog earlier. A reporter told her he was visiting family, and she gave him her entry code. He posted on social media that he was selling it for fifty bucks a pop to the first twenty people who asked for it.”

I let out a low growl as I scan the area and determine there are far more than twenty cars here.

I’m furious with the reporter who had a part in creating this mess, and I’ll find out who it was. His career is as good as finished because I’ll make sure he never works in the media industry again. He sealed his fate the minute he put Sienna and her family at risk.

“That bastard has to pay,” I tell Emerson.

“I agree. I’ll take care of it,” he assures me. I can hear Lennon’s panicked voice in the background and Emerson trying to calm her down. “Listen, Conway, I have to go, but we’re here for whatever you and Sienna need, okay?”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it,” I say before ending the call.

I’m about to offer Jay a recap and give him instructions on how I want to handle the situation until the rest of the security team arrives when I’m brought to a standstill by the sound of sniffing.

Sienna.

When I glance in her direction, she quickly wipes away a stray tear.

I’ve been so caught up in dealing with what’s happened that I haven’t taken a moment to put myself in her shoes. She’s never encountered anything like this before, and definitely not

with Ruth and Leola involved. The scene at the restaurant a few months back was child's play compared to this.

“Ace, someone took photos of us while we were leaving the concert back in Paris. I don't have all the details yet, but we'll get this sorted out. I wish I could make all these people disappear,” I say. “Emerson sent more security, and the police are on their way. We'll have everyone cleared out within the hour.”

I place her hands in my mine and give them a comforting squeeze. She might not reciprocate my touch, but she doesn't pull away either, which I'm considering a win.

“Okay,” she replies, turning to face the window.

I would understand if she blames me for not putting precautions in place sooner to prevent something like this from happening. I was so immersed in the early days of our new relationship, basking in the private bubble we created during our trip, that I hadn't thought about much else until this morning. Now, we are forced to take a defensive stance.

I wish I could tell Sienna this is temporary, that the paparazzi will lose interest by the next news cycle, but I can't. This could be the beginning of a massive shitstorm that will be an uphill battle to fight, but only time will tell.

“Oh my god,” Sienna cries out, pointing toward her house.

I look up to see Leola standing on the front porch, holding a broom out in front of her as a photographer attempts to wrestle it from her hands.

Sienna leaps from the moving SUV, causing Jay to slam on the brakes. I jerk forward in my seat as Sienna rushes to Leola's aid. The second her feet hit the ground, cameras are thrust in her face and a flurry of rapid-fire questions assault her from every direction, making it impossible for her to take more than a few steps.

“How long have you and Conway been together?”

“How many members of the Sovereign Kings have you slept with?”

“Did you use your relationship with Conway to jumpstart your modeling career?”

“Are you pregnant?”

I swing open my car door and sprint to Sienna’s side as she stands rooted in place, taken aback by the intrusive questions.

I encircle her waist with my arm, drawing her close to my side for protection.

“Back up,” I shout at the forceful photographers, shoving them aside as Sienna and I cross the yard.

When we finally reach the porch, I push the man away who’s harassing Leola, giving Sienna a chance to usher her safely inside the house.

Jay parks in the driveway and get outs of the vehicle, barking threats, ordering the crowd to get lost. Fortunately, he’s a scary motherfucker, meaning most of the photographers and reporters scramble to put their equipment away and get into their cars. When I hear the distant sound of sirens drawing near, I don’t wait around, trusting that Jay has the situation under control until backup arrives. The last thing we need are photos of me standing next to a cop car going viral.

I slip inside the house, locking the door behind me. I double check that all the blinds are shut, making sure that nobody can look inside. When I’m finished, I follow the sound of Sienna’s frantic voice to the living room and find her crouched in front of a visibly shaken Leola.

“Are you hurt?” Sienna asks.

She gives Leola a once-over, sighing in relief when she doesn’t find any noticeable injuries.

“No, sweetheart, I’m fine,” Leola promises. “I was just taken by surprise, that’s all.”

“How long have they been here?” Sienna nods in the direction of the front yard.

“A couple hours. I forgot to close the curtains last night, and when we woke up, a photographer was taking photos through our bedroom window. It nearly gave Ruth a heart attack.”

Sienna gasps, her hand flying up to her mouth. “I’m sorry that happened. Where is Ruth now?”

“She’s resting,” Leola reassures her. “She went right back to sleep even with all the commotion outside.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” Sienna asks.

“I was about to, but then I got sidetracked when one of those pesky reporters broke my favorite flower pot. I went outside to tell them to get lost, but they refused to leave.”

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Sienna exclaims.

“It’s going to be all right, sweetheart.” Leola pats her hand in a comforting gesture. “Conway and his team have the situation under control now. You’re lucky to have him.” She looks up at me with an appreciative smile. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to go and lie down with Ruth. All this uproar has left me beat.”

“Yeah, of course.” Sienna gets up from the floor to help Leola stand.

“Don’t worry. Everything will work out, you’ll see. In the meantime, don’t get yourself in a tizzy, okay?” Leola says with a wink.

“I’ll try,” Sienna replies halfheartedly.

As Leola walks past, she pats me on the shoulder, leaning in close to whisper, “The only way through this is *together*,”

before shuffling down the hall to her room.

Once she's out of earshot, Sienna turns her frustration on me. "How did this happen? Who took those photos of us?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I'm going to find out," I promise.

The media frenzy wouldn't have been as bad if we'd had the chance to publicly announce our relationship on our own terms so that we could control the narrative.

Sienna collapses onto the couch, the weight of the morning's stress finally catching up to her. I move to sit beside her and wrap her in my arms.

"I never wanted Ruth and Leola to get involved in this."

"I know. I'm sorry, Ace," I say somberly.

"Sorry doesn't cut it," she grumbles. "A horde of strangers showed up at my home and harassed the people I love. None of this is okay. We could have prevented this if we had discussed our options sooner. Instead, Ruth and Leola are suffering from the fallout because we didn't."

That's not necessarily true. Even with an airtight plan, the media would likely still have shown up here demanding answers. However, Sienna is right—we shouldn't have put off conversations about what a long-term relationship will look like and how we want to handle the press. She finds strength in having control, and I unintentionally robbed her of that.

"Our situation isn't ideal, but we're going to get through this."

"How?" Sienna mutters.

Together, just like Leola said.

"We have each other," I remind her. "And don't forget, we're not alone. Emerson and Lennon are on our side. They're fiercely protective of us both and they'll do anything they can to help us get through this."

“But we were supposed to have more time,” she says softly.

“I know, baby. I’m sorry.” I press a kiss to her forehead.

We were happy to live in a world where it was just the two of us, without any added complications. Now our relationship has been exposed for the entire world to scrutinize and interpret whether we like it or not.

The way I see it, I have a choice to make. I can allow the toxic negativity to drown us, or I can choose to fight. For the woman I care about more than anything else and will do whatever it takes to protect.

I already know what my life looks like without Sienna, and I have no interest in going back to the way things were before her. So really, there’s only one option, and that’s to figure out how we come out on the other end of this crisis stronger than before.

“I’m really tired. I’d like to go take a nap,” Sienna announces.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” I emphasize. “I’ll come with you.”

Hopefully by the time she wakes up, the paparazzi will be cleared out and things will be less chaotic.

I scoop her up in my arms, carry her to her room, and lay her on the bed. She turns to face the wall and I lie behind her. The familiar scent of lilacs and oranges puts me at ease.

“You’re my world,” I whisper into her hair. “Things might seem impossibly dark right now, but I promise we have countless brighter days ahead.”

I’ll do whatever it takes to make you happy, Ace.

“I believe you, Danvers,” she murmurs as she drifts off to sleep.

SIENNA

“ARE YOU SURE YOU’LL BE okay while I’m gone?”

Conway’s standing in the entryway, clearly uneasy as he has one foot out the door. I spot Jay in the driver’s seat of the idling SUV, patiently waiting for him.

“Yes. For the hundredth time, I’ll be fine.” I exhale sharply. “I have been left home alone before,” I reply cheekily.

“I know, but this is different.”

“It’s only for a few hours,” I remind him.

Conway hasn’t left my side since we pulled up to the media storm on my front lawn yesterday. He had dinner delivered and spent the night with me. Leola and Ruth were thrilled by this development and, on their way out the door for a doctor’s appointment this morning, Leola told Conway he could stay indefinitely.

“I’ll be back by three,” Conway says.

“Uh-huh.” I give him a skeptical look, knowing he has to go into the studio today, which always end up taking longer than he thinks it will.

Since I don’t have another photo shoot scheduled until next week, I had originally planned to go with Ruth and Leola to their appointments, but they insisted they were fine without me since they had a nursing aide with them.

“I promise I won’t be late,” Conway reiterates. “I’m taking you out tonight, and we have to leave early if we’re going to beat rush hour.

“Where are we going?”

I'd rather not go out in public with him right now since the paparazzi are desperate for more photos of us together.

"We're having dinner on the beach, but don't worry, we're going to Grayson's place that's on private property so we won't be bothered."

"I like the sound of that."

"And Sienna?"

"Yeah?"

"Stay away from the internet. In fact, avoid the news altogether, okay? There's nothing being said about us that's worth reading," he warns.

"Okay," I say with a subtle nod.

"Everything will work out, just you wait and see."

"I know," I say with fake enthusiasm.

I'm not ready to admit how difficult this situation is for me. If I tell Conway, he'll insist on staying home, and he's already been away from the studio for too long. Especially considering the Sovereign Kings have the stateside leg of the *Brutal Intentions* tour coming up.

After giving me another kiss, he goes down the steps toward the SUV and I give him a wave as he hops into the back seat. I stay in place while Jay pulls out of the driveway, and once they turn the corner, I'm on the move.

A sense of unease swirls in my stomach for lying to Conway.

I have no intention of staying away from the news. Now that our relationship is out in the open, I have a compulsion to know what's being said about us—about *me*. The saying "curiosity killed the cat" comes to mind, but I tune it out. While a simple internet search would suffice, I'm itching to

get out of the house while making sure that I stay under the paparazzi's radar.

I change into leggings, a long-sleeved shirt, and running shoes. As an added precaution, I put on a baseball cap and sunglasses to shield my face. On my way out, I grab a fifty-dollar bill stashed in my dresser drawer, tucking it into the small pocket on the side of my pants.

I slip out the front door and am relieved when I don't spot any inconspicuous cars lurking around. I move along the pathway leading past the back of the gated community. If any photographers are hanging around, they'll be waiting near the front gate. After the incident yesterday, the HOA hired a security guard to monitor the entrance and stop any unauthorized guests from coming inside.

I jog the two miles to the nearest convenience store, taking advantage of the fresh air. When I step inside, I'm pleased to find the place empty aside from the store clerk. I beeline to the magazine rack in the back corner and stop short when I'm confronted with a dozen publications that all have one thing in common: a photo of Conway and me plastered on the front. In every picture, we're holding hands as we leave the concert venue in London. It's irrefutable that we're a couple.

At least they got one fact straight.

I jerk my head up when a faint chime announces the arrival of another customer. They head toward the refrigerated drinks section, and I take it as my sign to get out of there before I'm recognized.

I snatch a copy of every magazine available and head toward the front, pushing my items toward the cashier when I reach the counter. He's preoccupied with his phone, scrolling through social media, too busy to pay me any mind as he scans my purchases.

“Forty-five dollars and ninety-two cents,” he recites the total without looking up.

I slide the fifty-dollar bill toward him. “Keep the change,” I mumble, picking up the magazines and making a quick exit.

I heave a sigh of relief once I’m outside and then I sprint the entire way home, not stopping until I’m safely inside my bedroom.

My mind races as I scour through every article about Conway and me. The only photos are from the concert in London, so whoever took them must not have known about our trip afterward. Although, I’m certain pictures of Conway and me trekking across my front lawn will be tomorrow’s top story.

Once I’ve finished with the magazines, I grab my phone from the nightstand and search for my name in the browser. I’m met with thousands of hits and get lost down a rabbit hole of hatred, speculation, and rumors.

When I can’t take it anymore, I toss my phone on my bed, practically vibrating with anger.

I knew our relationship would eventually go public, but what I didn’t expect was the way the media is portraying me. Hundreds of pictures are being circulated online, most connected to articles with disparaging headlines, including terms like “manipulative,” “power-hungry,” and “gold digger.” Everyone thinks they’re entitled to an opinion about who Conway dates, and the consensus is that it shouldn’t be me.

One tabloid got a copy of my hotel room receipt from New York with Conway’s signature for payment. Another found details about my past financial struggles. And a third figured out that Lennon and I are friends, noting we conveniently started hanging out more once my modeling career took off and I got the role in the band’s music video. Combine these details, and the media has the perfect recipe for a scheming

woman who has the Sovereign Kings frontman under her spell, exploiting him for personal gain.

It's partly true, isn't it?

If the Sovereign Kings hadn't gotten involved in the Gianni incident, it wouldn't have gotten the traction it did, and Becky might have never offered me a job. Plus, my friendship with Lennon was the primary factor in getting the role in the "Love is a Savage" music video.

But still, the media did what they do best and resorted to spreading lies to sell more papers by casting me as the story's villain. They've unknowingly preyed on my insecurities—that I'm not good enough and won't measure up to people's expectations.

To the world, I'm a homewrecker. A nobody who isn't deserving of Conway. What if he starts to believe what they're saying about me and wakes up one day to decide that I'm not worth the effort like my dad did?

I remind myself that Conway promised we'd get through this together.

I usually have a thick skin and could care less about what other people think of me, but it's a different ballgame when a flood of hate is directed right at me. I know that I've faced difficult circumstances before and I have always come out on the other side, stronger than ever. No matter how dire my current situation feels, I'll get through this, because I'm a survivor.

I'm startled from my pity party by an unexpected knock on my bedroom door. When I glance up, Lennon is standing in the doorway with a frown. We talked on the phone last night, and I forgot she mentioned she was stopping by today.

"Hi, Len," I utter with a hesitant smile. "How did you get in?"

“The back door was unlocked. How are you holding—” She falls silent when she spots the magazines in a haphazard heap on my bed.

Shit.

“What the hell are you doing with those?” She erupts with fury, placing her hands on her hips.

“Uh...” I hesitate.

How do I explain why I went out of my way to read vicious rumors about myself? In hindsight, it wasn't the best idea I've ever had.

Lennon glares between me and the magazines before abruptly storming out of my bedroom. I remain rooted to my spot on the bed, catching the sound of drawers slamming open and shut in the kitchen. In less than a minute, she's back with a pair of scissors, rushing toward the bed with a determined glint in her eye. She snatches the closest magazine and tears the cover off with her bare hands, a sadistic chuckle passing her lips.

“What are you doing?” I screech, reaching out to stop her, but she swats my hand away.

“I won't let you keep torturing yourself with this bullshit,” Lennon states through a clenched jaw. She rips out the featured article with the picture of Conway and me, shredding it to pieces. “This is nothing more than lies wrapped in a pretty package, and as your friend, I can't let you jeopardize your well-being for petty gossip.”

She attacks the rest of the pile with the scissors until every last page is destroyed and there's nothing left but a pile of crumpled paper in the trash can. When she's finished, she makes a gesture of wiping her hands clean.

“Feel better?” I tease.

“Much,” Lennon says with a grin, sitting beside me on the bed. “I should have let you rip up a few, it’s quite liberating.”

“That’s okay. Watching you do it was far more entertaining.” I laugh softly.

“I was sure Conway would have told you to avoid the news today. He’s going to get an earful when I see him next,” Lennon says in a vexed tone.

“He did warn me,” I admit, wanting to clarify things before she fully plots his demise. “It might not make any sense, but after all the commotion yesterday, I had to know what was being said about me. I’m confused how so many people can hate me when they don’t even know me.”

Lennon reaches out to squeeze my hand. “Sisi, the media will chew you up and spit you out if you give them the chance. They don’t give a shit about you as a person or how their words might affect you. Their job is to sell gossip, and they’ll go through any means necessary to do just that.”

“Well, they’re doing a damn good job of making everyone believe the shit they’re selling.”

Even me.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret,” Lennon says, leaning in close. “With the right support system, life in the public eye can be manageable. Lucky for you, you’re surrounded by the best people who are used to this kind of thing and will be there for you at a moment’s notice. Mark my words: my brother is going to make everyone who’s responsible for putting you through this pay dearly.”

I believe it.

There’s no question in my mind that Conway will do everything in his power to change the narrative to a positive one and make those people who have spread blatant lies about me face the consequences.

Lennon's right. I'm lucky to have the Sovereign Kings in my corner.

"I'm in way over my head, Len," I confess. "I have no idea what I'm doing, but I care about your brother too much to let him go."

"I have to admit, Emerson and I had whiplash there for a while. I thought you and Conway were content being just friends, but Emerson wasn't so sure. And then suddenly Conway is flying to L.A. during the international leg of the tour, and shortly after that, he told us that you two were traveling around Europe together."

"I shut him down more times than I can count, but he's very persistent when he wants something. Or in this case, someone."

"That's the understatement of the century," Lennon notes. "What changed your mind?"

"At first, I took his reputation at face value." I don't miss the irony in my statement, seeing as how the public has been so quick to stereotype me in the last twenty-four hours. "I thought I knew the type of person he was because of who he is in public and how the paparazzi portrays him, but I was wrong. As we spent more time together, I got to know the man behind the facade—loyal to a fault, incredibly generous, and willing to fight for me."

"Are you sure you're talking about my brother?" Lennon teases.

"Positive."

The turning point was when Conway came to visit Ruth. In the moment, his gesture was overshadowed by the drama caused by his trip to Ibiza, but he was there for my family in a way that no one else had been before. When he came to the

American Music Awards to find me, I knew he was the real deal.

“How was your time away in Europe?” Lennon asks.

“It was magical. Being together was easy while we were wrapped in our private bubble, shielded from the outside world. Now that it’s been burst, I’m worried about finding a way to make this work. Our lives are so different, Len, and it’s hard not to have lingering doubts.”

“You have to decide if you’re willing to compromise. If you decide to stick it out, it’ll be a long and challenging road, but if you ask me, the best things in life are worth fighting for.” Her voice is resolute. “There is no right or wrong answer, Sienna. Whatever you decide, we’ll always be friends.”

Her words hang in the air. It means a lot knowing that she’ll support me no matter what.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“How did you know you loved Emerson?”

Lennon’s eyes widen in surprise, but she doesn’t hesitate to answer.

“That’s simple. My cooking,” she says through a fit of laughter. “I know I’m a terrible cook, but Emerson’s always been my biggest supporter, going above and beyond to help me in any way that he can. I don’t think I ever told you about the time I tried making him brownies back in high school. I burnt them to a crisp, and when he walked in, all he did was laugh and toss them in the trash. Without complaint, he cleaned up my mess and whipped up a fresh batch from scratch.” Her eyes reflect the affection she has for her husband. “Love isn’t a one-way street, it requires you to give as much as you take. Emerson and I have had our fair share of

ups and downs, but there's no one else I'd rather spend my life with."

I think back to a similar conversation I had with James on our way to the awards show. If I want my relationship with Conway to last, I have to be willing to make sacrifices.

"I'm glad you stopped by, Len," I say, embracing her in a hug.

"That's what friends are for," she reassures me. "But I swear to god, I'm not going easy on you the next time I find you with a hoard of magazines on your bed," she threatens playfully.

"Yes, ma'am," I say, giving her a mock salute.

CONWAY

GIVEN THE OPTION, I WOULD have stayed at the condo with Sienna. I don't feel right leaving her alone, especially since we haven't had the chance to talk much since we got back. Unfortunately, I have to go into the studio to record a track for another artist's album that I'm being featured on. We've had this in the works for months or I would have rescheduled.

I might have told Sienna to stay away from the news, but that isn't stopping me from scouring the internet on the way to the studio.

A quick search pulls up several featured stories citing unverified sources who say they have inside knowledge about my supposed "toxic relationship" with Sienna. I expected most of the articles to focus on my commitment issues and checkered past, so I'm surprised to find that the opposite is happening.

The media is relentlessly attacking Sienna, even though they have no proof to back their claims. She is the most kind, thoughtful, and selfless person I know and has done nothing to deserve this hatred.

"How is Sienna this morning?" Jay asks from the driver's seat.

"She's putting on a good front, but I know this isn't easy for her."

"I can't imagine it would be. What are you doing about it?" he asks, knowing I won't sit back while she suffers.

"Everything I can."

I've already fired off several emails to the Sovereign Kings legal team, having them issue cease-and-desist letters to every

media outlet that has defamed Sienna. They may have a right to freedom of speech, but that doesn't extend to blatant lies from unreliable sources. Let it serve as a precaution to anyone who thinks there aren't consequences for causing my woman harm.

I've also had my publicist draft a statement to set the record straight and announce that I'm in a committed relationship with Sienna Cartwright. I'm holding off on having my team publish it until I talk with Sienna about it first, but I feel confident it's the right move.

We need to show a united front in the coming days, especially since the band is about to start our U.S. leg of the tour. I'm hoping I can convince Sienna to come with me because I don't like leaving her and it'll make things easier from a security standpoint, but I expect her to have reservations.

As we approach the next red light, Jay shoots me a glance in the rearview mirror while clearing his throat.

"Out with it, old man," I joke. "Clearly you have something else on your mind."

"I was just thinking that Sienna is good for you."

"I couldn't agree more."

"Don't let her slip through your fingers, Conway. You'll regret it if you do."

"I won't," I assure him.

I meant it when I said I'm never letting her go. For better or worse, Sienna Cartwright is mine, and I'm hers.

The clock on the wall shows that I've been in the studio for several hours. Emerson said he was stopping by, but he hasn't shown up yet. I fire off a text telling him to hurry up because I

have to leave soon. I promised Sienna I'd be back by three, and I want to be on time for once.

I sent my part of the track over to the collaborating artist and have been working on the Sovereign Kings' next album that we'll be dropping in the spring.

When the door swings open, I glance up to greet Emerson but am stunned when I'm met with Todd's red-rimmed eyes. He's swaying on his feet, a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

I stand up from my chair so we're on an equal playing field, not willing to give him the upper hand.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I sneer.

He was given explicit instructions to stay away from the Sovereign Kings, and I have it on good authority that the new band he's been assigned to records at a studio across town. He has no reason to be here, but something tells me he's been waiting to catch me alone.

"Well, well, well... look who's back from his secret rendezvous with his whore," he slurs.

My temper flares and I ball my hands into fists to keep it in check. My initial reaction is to lash out at his offensive jab, but I stop myself at the last second. He's drunk off his ass and clearly isn't in his right state of mind.

"You're not supposed to be here. You need to leave."

Todd doesn't heed my warning and instead, with unsteady steps, he staggers forward, getting in my face.

"I was suspicious that your little boy band had been trying to get rid of me for months. Even after everything I did for you spoiled brats," he seethes.

"It was a hell of a lot longer than that," I say, unable to resist goading him.

“Good thing I decided to give the Sovereign Kings the same respect they showed me then, isn’t it?” He grins like a fool.

“You sent those photos to the paparazzi,” I snarl.

“Bingo,” he says with a smirk. “How did you like my work? That bitch is a fine piece of ass. I wouldn’t mind giving her a go when you’ve tossed her to the side like you have the rest.”

“You son of a bitch,” I bellow, boiling with rage as I charge at him, swinging my arm forward to deliver a powerful punch to his face. I take satisfaction in the sound of the sickening crunch of his nose breaking. Todd stumbles backward in shock, blood dripping down his chin.

“You fucking piece of shit,” he hollers. “I’m going to have you charged with assault.”

Jay and Emerson burst into the control room, taking in the scene—Todd flat on his ass and me hovering above him with my hand still clenched in a fist.

“You’ve got no case. The way I see it, I have two witnesses who will testify that you attacked me first, and I was defending myself.” I motion toward Jay and Emerson. “Now, get the hell out of here before I add a black eye to your list of injuries for what you’ve done to my family.”

Todd ignores my warning and attempts to lunge at me, but Jay intervenes before he can get close, dragging him out of the studio by the collar.

“Fuck, man. Are you okay?” Emerson asks.

“Yeah, I’m fine. It took you long enough to get here,” I mutter, shaking out the hand that I used to hit Todd.

“Lennon went to see Sienna this morning and I couldn’t leave Indie until she got back,” Emerson says.

“It’s okay, I’m glad you got here when you did.”

“What did that son of a bitch want?”

“To brag about being the one who sent the photos of Sienna and me to the media. He figured out the band was going to oust him, and I guess he wanted leverage to use against us once we did.”

“Damn. I’m sorry, man,” Emerson offers. “I should have figured he would pull a stunt like this.”

“Yeah, I wish we could have stopped him.”

One of the reasons Todd was so difficult to work with was because he’s always been so hotheaded.

If he had approached Emerson or me with the photos, we probably would have paid him off to keep them from going public. Instead, he acted rashly, and now he’s going to pay a heavy price for what he did.

“If it’s any consolation, once the label finds out about what happened, they’ll fire Todd immediately,” Emerson assures me. “They can’t risk him causing legal problems with his erratic behavior. His days of working in the music industry are over.”

“Good riddance.”

The trouble is, the damage has already been done. Sienna and I will have to face the aftermath of Todd’s reckless choices for months to come, and there’s only so much I can do to soften the blow.

“So, you and Sienna are the real deal, huh? Whatever happened to being just friends? Or are you still not ready to talk about it?” Emerson teases, grinning like a fool.

I might not have been ready to discuss it the last time we spoke, but I could definitely use his advice now.

“Our time apart during tour made me realize that I wanted —no, *needed* more with her,” I assert.

“Oh shit, you’re serious,” Emerson says with surprise. “I never thought I’d see the day when *the* Conway Danvers was ready to settle down. I’m happy for you, Con, I really am.”

“When did you know that you loved Lennon?” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

His eyes widen in disbelief. “No fucking way. Are you serious? You, of all people, in love?”

“I didn’t say anything about me,” I snap. “I asked when *you* knew that you loved Lennon. Answer the damn question... please,” I bite out, working to rein in my temper.

“That’s easy. The week before Thanksgiving, during her senior year of high school. I came home early from culinary school to visit. She was attempting to bake brownies and burned the batch to a crisp. When I walked into the kitchen, she was cursing up a storm. Her hair was in disarray, her eyes blazing with fury, and her shirt was covered in batter stains. At that moment, I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” he reaffirms. “Do you love Sienna?”

“I’m not having this conversation with you.” I wave him off.

“Hey, you started it.” He holds his hands up in defense.

“Now I’m ending it.”

When I vocalize that particular emotion for the first time, it certainly isn’t going to be to Emerson.

I haven’t been able to identify any one specific moment when I knew. For me, it’s been a gradual change. My feelings

evolved slowly until they were suddenly at a boiling point, catching me completely off guard.

Sienna Cartwright has taken center stage in my life. Her smile lights the darkest corners of my soul, and my heart skips a beat when she looks at me with those dazzling green eyes. I'm ready to plan our future. The guy who used to live only for today and wouldn't dream of committing to a relationship... I'm not him anymore.

SIENNA

“SIENNA, WAKE UP.”

“Go away,” I grumble, tugging the covers over my head. Hopefully whoever it is has the good sense to leave me alone.

After Lennon left, I couldn’t stand to sit alone with my thoughts. I crawled under the covers and promptly fell asleep.

“Come on, get up. We have to leave soon if we’re going to beat rush hour traffic,” the voice says.

Without warning, the comforter is snatched away, and I instinctively swat in the direction of the culprit.

“Damn it, Ace, that hurt,” Conway grunts.

I bolt up to find him standing next to the bed, holding his hand over his nose.

“I’m sorry,” I exclaim. “Are you okay?”

I glance at the clock on the bedside table to see that it’s a quarter to three, pleased to see that he’s early for once.

Now fully awake, I’m momentarily distracted when I notice that he’s dressed in black jeans, a fitted gray sweater, and a beanie. He must have changed after he left this morning, and he looks utterly irresistible.

It’s funny how even a few hours apart feels like an eternity when it’s someone you love.

“I didn’t know you could throw a punch. What goes around comes around, I guess,” he mumbles into his hand.

I gasp when I notice his swollen knuckles. “Why is your hand bruised?”

“You should see the other guy.”

“What happened?”

“Todd showed up unannounced at the studio. He told me he took the photos of us at the concert and leaked them to the press. After he spouted off a few choice words, I punched him in the face. He had it coming,” he adds when my mouth opens in shock. “Jay had to drag him out of the building.

“Emerson called the executives at the label and told them what happened. They immediately terminated Todd’s contract. We’ll never have to see him again,” he says, sounding relieved.

“Did Todd say why he did it?”

“He knew the band wanted to get rid of him, so when we finally severed ties, he released the photos as his way of getting revenge.”

“So I was collateral damage?”

“Yeah,” Conway admits with a downcast expression. “I’m sorry I let this happen.”

“Hey,” I say, resting my hand against his cheek. “You’re not to blame; Todd is. He’s a vile man without a kind bone in his body.”

I have zero sympathy for him, not after he jeopardized my family’s safety for his petty revenge plot.

“Damn right, he is. He’ll pay for what he’s done,” Conway guarantees.

“Good, I’m glad,” I reply with a halfhearted smile.

“You okay, Ace? I didn’t expect to find you in bed in the middle of the afternoon. Emerson mentioned that Lennon stopped by earlier, how was that?”

“It was good to see her. Although she was upset with me when she got here...” I trail off, contemplating how much I

want to tell him. Considering Lennon is worried about me, I have a feeling she'll eventually spill the beans anyway.

“Why?”

“I might have left the house after you...” I confess.

“You left the house alone?” Conway questions in a raised voice. “Sienna, it’s not safe for you to go out alone right now. The paparazzi could have followed you. Why didn’t you tell me you had to be somewhere? I would have made sure you had a security guard go with you.”

“That’s the problem, Conway,” I snap back. “I didn’t want someone trailing me. It only would have made it more difficult to blend in.”

Now I understand why Lennon chooses to sneak out on occasion.

“Where did you go?” he demands. “What was so important that you couldn’t wait until I got back?”

“I jogged to the convenience store and bought all the gossip magazines they had,” I state matter-of-factly.

Conway closes his eyes while holding the bridge of his nose. “Why would you do that when I specifically asked you to avoid those?”

“Because I was curious what people were saying about us. Don’t worry, Lennon already read me my rights and ripped the magazines to shreds. She was having far too much fun if you ask me.” I chuckle, pointing to the overflowing trash can by the nightstand.

“Remind me to thank her later,” Conway mutters in a disgruntled tone. “Ace, none of those things written about you are true, you know that.”

“Let me guess,” I say bitterly. “You told me to stay offline, but you didn’t follow the same advice?”

“Damn right,” he says. “I had to see what was out there to assess what damage control was needed.”

I bring my legs to my chest and lean my head against my knees. “I’m not an insecure person, and I’m trying so hard not to let these things get to me, but what if everyone’s right?”

“Right about what?”

“That I’m taking advantage of you and your generosity.” I don’t dare look at Conway, worried what I’ll see if I do. “And that we don’t belong together. We’re from two different worlds... What if we’re fooling ourselves into thinking we can make this work?”

“Ace.” Conway clasps my hands in his to keep me from fidgeting. “If anyone is taking advantage here, it’s me. Hell, I’ve overstepped your boundaries countless times, no matter how many times you’ve asked me not to.”

“But what if you change your mind? I won’t survive if you wake up one day and decide that you don’t want me anymore. It doesn’t matter how strong I am, it’ll destroy me.”

It’s not easy for me to admit. Conway is familiar with my outspoken and self-assured nature, not the vulnerable version that still carries the scars of her dad leaving her behind. This side doesn’t emerge often, but when it does, the insecurities of my past resurface and it’s difficult to push them aside.

“That’s never going to happen.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do,” he says. “I was going to wait to tell you in a more romantic setting, but I hate to see you questioning how I feel.”

“Wait for what?”

“I love you, Sienna Cartwright,” Conway states. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you and I don’t give a damn

what anyone else thinks.” He leans in to press a kiss against my forehead. “Whatever comes next, we’ll get through it together.”

Tears trickle down my cheeks at his admission. Never in a million years did I think Conway Danvers would be in my room—on my bed, no less—confessing his undying love for me.

“That’s not the reaction I was hoping for. Is being with me so terrible that it makes you cry?” he jokes.

“These are happy tears,” I assure him with a laugh.

“Oh, good, you had me worried there for a second,” he says with a smirk.

I throw my arms around his neck, pulling him into a hug. “I love you too, Danvers.”

“How did I get lucky enough to call you mine?”

“With lots and lots of groveling,” I tease. “You want to know something funny? I had a crush on you back in high school.”

“Are you serious?”

“It was short-lived, but yeah. I didn’t like you for a while there, and I certainly never thought we would end up here.”

“Are you sure you’re ready to be in a committed relationship with an arrogant, cocky asshole?”

“I hate to break it to you, Danvers, but there’s no going back, because I love you so much it hurts. And you’re *my* arrogant, cocky asshole.”

He plants a fiery kiss on my lips before pulling away.

“Come with me on tour next week,” he blurts.

“Wh-what?” I stutter in disbelief.

I knew that the Sovereign Kings had another leg of their tour, but with all the excitement during the last few weeks, I didn't realize how soon Conway would be leaving again.

"I can't drop everything to go on tour with you. What about my job? What about Ruth and Leola?"

I should have figured he would ask me to come with him. It's not like we have many other alternatives. Under normal circumstances, I would have mapped out our options by now and listed all the pros and cons. Instead, I've been so wrapped up with falling in love that I didn't think much about what comes next.

"I'm not asking you to give anything up," Conway clarifies. "You can travel between Los Angeles and whatever city we're performing in. You're welcome to take the private jet, and if the band's using it, we'll charter you a plane. It's as simple as that."

It's not simple at all.

There's no way I would ever accept the band's private plane for my personal use. And although I don't mind taking commercial flights, it doesn't sound ideal to spend hours commuting to and from the airport plus the time it takes to fly.

"What about the paparazzi?"

"I had our publicist draft a statement confirming that we're dating and setting the record straight. And my legal team has sent cease-and-desist letters to all the publications who have printed lies about you. Trust me, our team is the best in the business."

"My pride can't take another hit, Conway," I retort sharply. "I'll pay my own legal bills."

Even if there's a good chance it'll dry up my savings.

“If you think about it, this is my fault,” Conway says, trying to reason with me. “If I weren’t famous, the paparazzi wouldn’t be interested in you in the first place. And remember those perks I mentioned that come with dating me? This is one of those.”

“I want to pay at least part of the fees then,” I say with steel.

“All right, Ace,” Conway grumbles reluctantly. “I’ll have their team send us both the bill and you can decide how much you feel comfortable contributing, okay?”

“Deal. Your publicist can release the statement you’ve put together, but I’m still not sure how I would make going on tour work with everything else I have going on.”

“I want you by my side,” Conway pleads. “I can’t go months without seeing you, please don’t make me. Besides, who knows, maybe if the paparazzi see us together enough, they’ll eventually get sick of us.”

I highly doubt that.

I want to avoid the spotlight, not walk further into it.

I’m about to turn Conway down and beg him to help me find another solution, but I stop myself at the last second unsure of what other options we have.

He is going on tour, and I’d never ask him to cancel—not when he gets to do something he loves—and I don’t think I could survive a long-distance relationship. Especially knowing that he would constantly be surrounded by other women. It was torture enough during the worldwide leg of the tour, and we weren’t even a real couple then.

My conversations with Lennon and James pop into my head again. They both mentioned that a relationship is about give and take. Conway’s already given me so much, it’s my turn to give back.

I'm not willing to risk losing him, and the way I see it, this is the best way to ensure that doesn't happen.

I think about my daily horoscope from this morning.

You've been on a wild ride in your personal life and career, Virgo. Your adaptable nature will be put to the test today, but don't be afraid to take a leap of faith in your love life. Go with the flow for a change. You can float down a river freely, but that doesn't mean you have to give up control. You have a rudder to help you steer—use it.

I have the power of choice, and I am choosing to guarantee my future with Conway the best way I can with the cards we've been dealt.

This might not be the life I imagined for myself, but dreams change. It won't be easy, but I'll learn to adapt.

For both Conway and myself.

“Yes, I'll go on tour with you,” I say on a deep breath.

“Really?” he says enthusiastically, wrapping me in a hug. “This is going to be epic.”

CONWAY

One Month Later

THE LAST FEW WEEKS HAVE been a whirlwind. The Sovereign Kings started the stateside leg of our *Brutal Intentions* tour. Sienna has been able to come to almost every show and accompany me to the after parties and promotional events, which has been great.

The paparazzi have a field day when we're seen together, and there's a constant stream of articles and updates about us going around. However, the cease-and-desist letters did their job, and the media got the hint that I won't stand for anyone to cast Sienna in a negative light.

We spent Christmas with Ruth and Leola in L.A. before getting back on the road. I extended the contract with the home-health agency indefinitely, ensuring a nursing aide is available around the clock to assist with Ruth's care. Sienna and I came to an understanding about letting me pay for this particular expense since it's because of me that she's not home much anymore.

The one downside is that she has to travel to and from L.A. multiple times a week for photo shoots. She stays with Ruth and Leola when she's there, so she's able to see them often. After being in California for the past two days, she flew to Boston to meet me for the show tonight and I can't wait to see her.

I'm sitting on the edge of the couch when she finally steps inside my dressing room, closing the door behind her.

“You’re here,” I say, jumping up and closing the distance between us.

I don’t like going on stage without seeing her beforehand, and I was worried she wouldn’t make it in time tonight.

“Sorry I’m late. My flight was delayed and traffic was a nightmare. Judging by the crowds outside, you’d think the entire city of Boston was coming to your concert tonight,” she says.

“I missed you, Ace,” I state, drawing her into my arms and looking into her mesmerizing green eyes.

“I missed you too, Danvers,” Sienna murmurs.

If I had it my way, she’d never leave my side. While I have the financial means to guarantee that she’d never have to work again, it’s a topic I won’t bring up, knowing how much she values her independence. She has never been shy about wanting her own career, which is something I admire and would never compromise that.

“I ran into Emerson in the hall. He wanted me to remind you that mic check is in ten minutes.”

“We’d better hurry then.” I smirk, reaching out to unbutton her jeans.

“I don’t think we have time to—”

“Do you want me?” I interrupt. “Haven’t you missed my cock in your tight cunt?”

“You have a filthy mouth,” Sienna says in a snarky tone.

I lean in and bite her earlobe. “Not as filthy as you when your mouth is stuffed full of my dick. Remind me, Ace, whose slut are you?”

“Yours,” she utters in a husky tone. “Only yours.”

“You’re all mine. Now strip,” I command. “We don’t have much time.”

My pre-performance ritual is vastly different now that Sienna is with me in person. Typically, we fuck in our hotel room before going to the venue, followed by a quickie in my dressing room, but I’ve never asked her to strip like this before a show.

She stands in place, chewing on her lower lip while she contemplates my request.

“Who owns your pleasure?” I ask in an unshakable tone.

“You do,” she breathes out.

“That’s right, baby.” I reward her with a kiss. “And would I ever ask you to do something that would hurt you?”

“No.”

“Good. Now I want to see that gorgeous body of yours on display while I fuck you from behind. It’ll help calm my nerves before the show... You don’t want me to get stage fright, do you?” I taunt.

We both know I don’t get nervous before a performance. That doesn’t mean I’m above using it as an excuse to get Sienna naked.

“That would be a travesty,” she quips back.

“Do you want me?” I repeat.

“God, yes,” she mewls. “More than anything.”

“Good girl,” I say, stroking her jaw with my fingers. “Strip,” I order harshly.

This time, Sienna doesn’t hesitate to tug her sweater over her head. I grin when I see the lacy black bra I gave her last week. I’ll bet anything she’s wearing the matching panties.

“Here, let me help you.”

We only have a few minutes, but I refuse to skip out on foreplay; it's one of my favorite parts about sex with Sienna. She's always so responsive, and I've discovered that she likes a little pain with her pleasure.

I lean forward and press kisses against the swells of her breasts, her breath hitching at my touch. I reach around to unclasp her bra, letting it fall to the ground as I greedily wrap my mouth around one of her nipples, sucking hard, and with my right hand, I twist her other nipple.

"Fuck, Danvers," Sienna whines, rising to her toes.

I glance up to find her lust-filled gaze staring back at me. I don't take my eyes off her as I tug her jeans down along with her underwear, smirking when I notice she's wearing the matching panties. She steps out of the clothes, pushing them off to the side with her foot. She stands in front of me completely naked, her sinful curves on display.

"You're perfect, Ace." I stand up and move to the side. "Put your hands on the arms of the couch and stick your ass out. But remember, we have to be quiet. We don't want anyone knowing you're a little slut who can't wait to be fucked until after the show."

"I'm your little slut," she corrects me.

Outside the bedroom, I'd never talk to her like this, but damn, it does me in every time she uses that dirty mouth of hers to call herself *my* little slut.

"All mine."

"Fuck me, Danvers," she mewls. "Please."

"That dirty mouth is going to get you into trouble, Ace. Don't worry, I'll give you what you need."

She places her hands on the arm of the couch like I instructed, and I grin at my view of her perfect body arched

and her fine ass presented just for me.

I unfasten my jeans and pull out my bulging cock, pre-cum already dripping from the tip.

I wrap one arm around her waist and with my other hand, I go back to playing with her nipples. She gasps when I give one a hard pinch. Simultaneously, I align my dick with her perfect pussy and push to the hilt in one stroke.

“Oh, Danvers...” she moans loudly.

I clamp my hand over her mouth. “Shh, baby. You need to be quiet, remember?”

She nods absentmindedly, but I don't remove my hand as I fuck her from behind.

I keep playing with her tits as I slam into her tight cunt. She grips the arm of the couch while pressing against me, welcoming every thrust. We're both in a frenzy, desperate to make up for our time apart. I can't get enough of this woman. She's the first person I want to see when I wake up and the last when I go to bed.

She belongs to me.

When Sienna is on the cusp of release, I whisper in her ear, “Play with your clit like a good little slut,” licking along her collarbone while pushing deeper inside her.

“Oh my god,” she groans, muffled by my hand.

She obeys, reaching between her legs and strumming her clit with vigor. It does me in watching the woman I love get herself off while I'm shoved inside her cunt.

“Do you need to come, baby?”

She nods rapidly, gazing up at me, waiting for my permission.

“Come for me,” I urge.

She shatters apart as my own release takes hold. I keep my arm banded around Sienna's waist, holding her up as she rides out her orgasm, nuzzling my nose into her neck, inhaling her scent.

"God, you're incredible," I say in admiration. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." She glances back at me with a soft smile. "But I think our ten minutes are up," she says with a chuckle.

"Doesn't matter. No one will complain if I'm late, and besides, people know not to interrupt us." I scoop her into my arms and settle on the couch, gently running my fingers through her hair as I hold her close.

"I love you, Ace."

"I love you, Danvers."

The last couple of days have been perfect. The Sovereign Kings shows in Boston each went off without a hitch, and Sienna hasn't left my side since she got back from L.A.

This morning, I'm a guest on the notorious radio talk show, *Entertainment Uncensored with Jackie Montana*. Jackie has a reputation for her straightforward interview style, asking blunt questions and dropping f-bombs like their hotcakes.

She starts our conversation off easy, discussing the tour, life on the road, and our upcoming album. It's only a matter of time before she starts asking the hardball questions, but I've come prepared.

"Like I've said before, I'm one of Sovereign Kings' biggest fans, and my listeners fucking love you guys too," Jackie says once we're back from commercial break. "I asked them what they wanted to know about you on my latest social media post

and used their feedback to come up with my last few questions. I hope that's okay," she asks rhetorically.

"Fire away," I reply.

"I've gotta say, I was floored when I heard you were in a relationship... Talk about life-altering news. *The Conway Danvers* in a committed relationship? Like, what the fuck? My mind was blown." Jackie raises her hands to her temples and slowly moves them away from her head while opening her fingers, imitating an explosion.

"I'm pretty sure that wasn't a question," I retort with a smirk.

"You have me there," Jackie says with a chuckle. "You could have any woman, so why Sienna Cartwright? I heard you threatened legal action against several media outlets because of the things they said about her. From my understanding, you've always gotten along great with the press. Did Sienna coerce you into defending her?"

I don't answer immediately. One of the most important lessons I've learned as a public figure is once you say something, there's no going back, so it's best to think before you speak.

"Let's get one thing straight," I state when I break the silence. "Sienna didn't know about the cease-and-desist letters until they had already been sent out. After I read multiple articles claiming to cite reputable sources that I knew were made up, I took action."

"Huh. Sienna must be real fucking special if you were willing to do that for her." Jackie's tone turns brusque.

"Damn right, she is," I declare. "Let me ask *you* a question, Jackie. Are you married?"

She's not the only one who's done her research.

“Yes, I am. My husband and I just celebrated our fifth anniversary,” she confirms cautiously, clearly uncomfortable that I’m putting her in the hot seat.

“Congratulations,” I acknowledge before cutting straight to the chase. “How would you react if your husband’s name and photo were splashed on the cover of every tabloid in the country alongside vicious articles filled with lies, dragging his reputation through the mud all to sell more magazines and boost clicks?” My words are steeped in anger. “Would you stand on the sidelines and make him defend himself, or would you fight tooth and nail by his side?”

“I’d fucking fight,” Jackie passionately shouts into her mic. “Brennan’s the most kind-hearted and thoughtful man I’ve ever met. I’d go up against anyone who said otherwise.”

“So you can understand what I’m doing for Sienna. She doesn’t need me to fight her battles, but that doesn’t mean I won’t be there to support her,” I further explain. “The media played a big role in helping put the Sovereign Kings on the map, and I’m not saying the paparazzi and reporters can’t do their jobs. What I am doing is telling them to get their facts fucking straight and respect my woman’s privacy by not showing up at her home and harassing her family.”

“You should be a salesman,” Jackie says enthusiastically. “I’m fucking outraged for you and Sienna. Hell, I wouldn’t stop at cease-and-desist letters; I would have sued their asses and made them pay through the fucking nose for what they did.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I say.

“Listen, I’m not one to offer apologies, but I just have to say for the record that I’m sorry about my earlier remarks about Sienna. I was quick to judge her, which is no better than how the media has treated her. Tell me, what sets her apart from everyone else? I really would like to know.”

This interview just took an unexpected turn. Jackie Montana doesn't play nice—*ever*.

“Sienna sees *me*, the guy behind the lead singer of the Sovereign Kings.” I cross my left leg over the top of my right knee and lean closer to the mic. “She’s been friends with my sister since high school, but I hadn’t seen her in ages until we reconnected last year. One of the first things she said was that our music was, and I quote, *synthetic shit*. She’s not one to mince words, and I love that about her. She stands up for what she believes in and refuses to put up with my bullshit.”

“She sounds like a ballbuster. I admire a woman who isn’t afraid to speak her mind,” Jackie shares. “I’d usually say that anyone who snagged the frontman of a world-famous rock band is one lucky lady, but based on what you’re telling me, I gotta say, Conway, it sounds like you’re the lucky one in this scenario.”

“Fuck yeah I am,” I agree wholeheartedly. “Sienna’s way out of my league, that’s for sure.”

“We have time for one more question, so I’ll let you off with an easy one. What would you say to your fans if they were in the room?”

This one is a breeze.

“Thanks for your continued support. The Sovereign Kings wouldn’t be the diabolical rock band that we are today without all of you. Can’t wait to see you all soon at one of our upcoming shows.”

As soon as we’re off air, I yank my headset off and set it on the table. Jackie saunters over with a grin on her face. “Thanks for a fucking awesome interview. That was one of the most entertaining discussions I’ve had in a while. You’re welcome to come on anytime; in fact, we should have Sienna on the show. My listeners would love her.”

That's not going to happen.

“We’ll see, but I have to go now. Thanks again for having me on the show.”

I’m out of my seat as soon as I finish replying, not waiting for a response. I tear down the hall to the private guest area. Sienna’s inside, pacing the small space, anxiously waiting for me with a blank expression.

“Hey, are you okay?” I ask. “That was intense, but it went better than I expected. You got an apology from Jackie Montana, that’s more than anyone else can say.”

“I’m fine.” Sienna shrugs with a sigh. “I don’t care about what Jackie said, or her apology. I just wish everyone would stop asking questions about me. I’m tired of it. These interviews are meant for you to promote the tour, not to discuss our private relationship. I literally have nothing to do with the band or your music so I should be kept out of it.” She folds her arms across her chest in frustration.

“Shit, Ace, you’re right. It’s just that I’m so in love with you and want everyone to know how incredible you are,” I tell her honestly. “But I get why you want to keep some things private. Moving forward we can look over all the interview questions beforehand and make it clear I won’t be discussing anything related to my personal life, okay?”

“Thank you, that means a lot to me.” Sienna gives me a weary smile. “I have to say, I didn’t mind so much the part where you stood up for me on national radio,” she murmurs as she leans in for a kiss.

“I’ll always defend your honor,” I say with a wink. “Come on, we have to get on the road or you’ll miss your flight.”

When we exit the building, the courtyard is packed with fans and paparazzi, camera flashes and people shouting coming from every direction. I ignore them in favor of pulling

Sienna to my side. She does a good job of masking her emotions, but it's obvious that she hates the attention she gets when we're out in public. I walk closely behind Jay who's keeping the crowd at a distance. As soon as we're safely in the SUV, he pulls out of the parking lot.

"To the airport?" He directs his question to Sienna.

"Yes, thank you."

"I wish you'd agree to take the private jet," I say to Sienna. "It would be safer and make things go a hell of a lot faster."

"I'm not letting you spend a small fortune whenever I have to go back to L.A. No one pays much attention to me when I'm not with you, and I have a security guard following me around when I travel," she grumbles.

Her schedule isn't available to the public, and as far as the paparazzi is concerned, Sienna goes on work-related trips but doesn't stay in L.A. It's safer if they think she's always with me and won't try and track her down while she's alone. But that hasn't stopped me from insisting she has a security guard with her whenever she's going back and forth between cities.

We pull up to the curb at the airport far too soon, and I wrap my arms around Sienna in a tight embrace, begrudgingly letting her go when Jay tells me that we've been idling for too long.

"I love you, baby," I say with a kiss to Sienna's lips. "I'll see you soon."

"I love you too," she says softly.

I watch as she exits the vehicle, and Jay helps her with her duffle bag. The security guard will meet her in the terminal. I can't get out of the car without risking someone noticing me. Once she gets inside, Jay returns to the car and I lean my head against the seat. It never gets easier watching Sienna leave.

“Is Sienna all right?” Jay asks, glancing at me through the rearview mirror.

“Yeah, I think she’s just tired,” I say, but his question has me wondering the same thing.

SIENNA

MY FLIGHT HOME TWO DAYS ago had multiple delays, I was stuck in the middle seat, and I had to hide out in the bathroom of the airport terminal for over an hour to avoid a swarm of paparazzi. They were all hoping for a glimpse of an A-list actor flying in from Australia who arrived at the same time as me, and I didn't want to chance anyone spotting me.

Charles, the security guard Conway insists travel with me, was texting me a play-by-play while we waited for the media to disperse. Thankfully, he dresses casually and keeps his distance so no one assumes we're together.

Adapting to all the changes over the past month hasn't been easy. I've been trying to put up a positive front and act like everything is okay, but the truth is, it's not—*I'm* not.

Conway hasn't seemed to notice that I'm struggling. He's thrilled that everyone knows we're a couple and likes having me at his shows. I haven't had the heart to tell him everything isn't as perfect as it seems, and I'm worried about what will happen when I do.

My photo shoot today is showcasing eco-friendly handbags. We're wrapping up early, which is a rarity that I'm grateful for as it's giving me time this afternoon to hang out with Ruth and Leola. I haven't seen them much lately in between work and all the traveling I've been doing.

One good thing that's happened is that my collaboration with Delvoni launched this morning. I put in hundreds of hours on this project, including selecting which designs to include, naming each piece of the collection, and modeling in several photo shoots to be used for Delvoni's website and marketing materials.

Fortunately, my side of the collaboration was completed months ago, and their team took care of the preparations and promotion leading up to the launch.

I was expecting a mediocre response to the collab but was stunned when Becky called a few minutes ago to tell me the collection sold out in less than ten minutes. The demand is so high that Delvoni's team is rushing to put together a restock.

I'm on cloud nine as I'm leaving the building where today's photo shoot was held, thrilled with the Delvoni collab success and excited to see Ruth and Leola. I step outside and immediately stop in my tracks when I overhear two other models standing by the curb. This was my first time working with them, but if I recall correctly, the brunette's name is Tiffany, and Johanna is the blonde.

"Can you believe we had to work with *her* today?" An exasperated sigh escapes Tiffany's lips. "She's such an amateur. It took the photographer twice as long to get the perfect shoot because she needs so much coaching."

"Exactly. Just because she's sucking Conway Danvers's dick doesn't mean she should get special treatment. Hell, I guarantee Elevation only signed her to get more exposure." Johanna doesn't look up from her phone once during her tirade, oblivious to the fact that I'm standing nearby.

"You're probably right. God, she's so pathetic," Tiffany cackles. "Maybe if she'd stick to a diet, she could actually fit into the sample sizes and people wouldn't have to feel sorry for her."

What a bitch. Today's shoot featured models of all body types, so the fact that she's singling me out only tells me that she's jealous.

"Did you see the collab she did with Delvoni?" Johanna asks Tiffany.

“What, no? That’s totally unfair,” Tiffany sulks. “I would give anything to work with them.”

“Here, look.” Johanna holds her phone out so they can both see. “Can you believe they sold out?” She scoffs.

“Really? Why the hell would anyone want to buy clothes associated with her? She doesn’t even have a social media presence.”

“It’s not because of her,” Johanna says. “The Sovereign Kings shared a photo of her in a leather jacket from the collection on their social media pages yesterday, and it went viral. It sent their fans running to buy one as soon as the collection went live.”

Suddenly the news from Becky is a bitter pill to swallow. The only reason for the clothing line’s success is because of the Sovereign Kings—not because of the hard work I put into this project.

“That’s ridiculous. She’s done nothing but take advantage of Conway since they got together, it’s sickening,” Tiffany whines.

I wish I could take the high road and walk away, but I won’t stand by and let them continue to say hurtful and degrading things about me.

They exchange worried glances when they notice I’m heading in their direction.

“Did either of you see what happened between Gianni de Santis and me on *The Daybreak Show* last year?”

“Someone’s full of herself,” Johanna mumbles under her breath.

“Yeah, we did,” Tiffany snaps. “What about it?”

“Do you know what happened to Gianni after he said those things?”

She shakes her head.

“The former fashion icon no longer has a place in the industry,” I state flatly. “One of the perks of sucking Conway Danvers’s dick is having his loyalty. When someone offends me, he takes it personally.”

Their eyes widen as shock registers on their faces. I have no intention of getting them fired, but they don’t know that. Maybe they’ll think twice the next time they want to criticize someone publicly.

I walk in the opposite direction, not giving them the chance to apologize or defend their actions. I don’t stop until I get into my car a few blocks away.

My phone rings abruptly and I find Lennon’s name lighting up the screen.

“Hi, Len,” I answer.

“Please tell me you’ve heard the good news?” she exclaims.

“That Delvoni sold out? Yeah, I did,” I say, lacking enthusiasm now that I know why the campaign did so well.

“I wanted to throw you a big-ass party to celebrate, but since that’s not your style, we’ll have to go out to dinner once you’re back.”

She and Indie have been touring with the band, and seeing them every day has been one of the things keeping me going this past month.

“I appreciate it, but I don’t want to make a big deal about it.” My tone is solemn.

“Why the hell not? This is a huge accomplishment,” she says, clearly excited.

“The only reason it did well is because you shared one of the jackets on the Sovereign Kings’ social media pages,” I say,

feeling sorry for myself. “People only care that it was endorsed by the band, not about the person modeling the clothes.”

I’m grateful for Lennon’s support, but it shines a light on the reality that the band has dominated every aspect of my life. It’s made me painfully aware that nothing I have is solely mine, including my relationship with Conway.

“Bullshit. You earned the Delvoni campaign because of what *you* did. Their CEO was impressed by how you stood up to Gianni, and that’s why she chose to work with you. Everyone has commented that they’re impressed with the styles and sizing options available. You’re the one who chose which pieces to include and emphasized the importance of selecting items that would look good on everyone,” she says, raising her voice.

“So what if your connection with the Sovereign Kings boosted sales? There’s nothing wrong with using your network to get ahead. Consider it compensation for the pain and suffering you’ve had to endure by being associated with us,” she teases.

I let out a lackluster laugh. “I appreciate you saying that, Len, I really do. I’m just trying to process everything the best I can. I overheard some models talking shit about me on the way out of my photo shoot, and it got to me.”

“Did you tell them to fuck off? Better yet, give me their names and I’ll handle it,” Lennon demands.

“I took care of it,” I assure her.

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me,” she jokes.

“Listen, I have to go, but we’ll talk later, okay? I really do appreciate you, Len.”

“Anytime, Sisi. Cheer up. Everything will be okay.”

When I get to the condo, I'm emotionally drained. I'm looking forward to spending the rest of my time at home relaxing with Ruth and Leola before I have to fly back to meet Conway in Philadelphia tomorrow.

Leola is there as I step inside, pulling me into a hug. I passed Ruth and her nursing aide taking a walk on my way in, so Leola must have been keeping an eye out, waiting for them to come back.

"I appreciate the welcome party," I note with a chuckle. "What are those for?" I point to a white box filled with dozens of red roses on the entryway table.

"They were delivered this morning," Leola gushes. "Here's the note that came with them." She hands me a handwritten note written in cursive.

*Congratulations on the launch of your collab with Delvoni,
Ace.
I love you.
Danvers*

P.S.: Don't worry, these will last at least a year.

"They're exquisite," I murmur, gently brushing one of the petals with my fingertips.

The last time Conway got me flowers, I mentioned that it felt like a waste having to throw them out after a few days.

"They might not be for us, but Ruth and I are glad the flowers will be here for us to enjoy." Leola grins.

"Who says I'm not taking them with me?" I say jokingly, placing the card next to the flowers.

Leola takes a step back to study me closer, her expression shifting to one of concern. "Sweetheart, you look exhausted,"

she asserts as she ushers me to the living room and motions for me to sit beside her on the couch.

“Gee, thanks,” I grumble. “Every woman in their early twenties wants to hear that she looks worn out.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. You’ve been working yourself to the bone, and I’ve been worried—” She cuts herself off and then asks, “Sienna, have you been crying?”

“No,” I choke out as fresh tears well in my eyes.

I don’t want to admit that I cried on the way home. I’ve pushed myself past my limit, and the last month’s stress is crashing down all at once. Once the waterworks start again, I can’t get them to stop.

“Oh sweetheart, come here.” Leola wraps me in her arms, giving me a bear hug.

“I don’t know what to do,” I sob into her chest. “I love Conway, but this isn’t working for me. I can’t keep flying between L.A. and wherever he is performing multiple times a week. My modeling career is draining me, and I barely get to see you guys anymore.”

“I hate that you’re hurting, I wish I could take away your pain,” she murmurs. “What does Conway have to say about all this?”

My body stiffens, aware she won’t be pleased with my response.

“I haven’t told him,” I admit.

“Oh honey, why not?” she scolds.

“Because the tour is going well, and he loves having me there to support him.” I wipe away a few lingering tears, trying to compose myself. “What happens if I tell him I can’t do this anymore and he gives me an ultimatum? I’d rather suffer in silence than risk losing him.”

“That’s not how healthy relationships work,” Leola informs me. “They require a constant balance of giving just as much as you receive and consistently assessing your partner’s emotional well-being.”

“I think that’s part of the problem. Conway is oblivious to what I’m dealing with. He thinks everything is going great.”

“Men can be thick-headed, sweetheart, and sometimes they need a nudge in the right direction. That’s why I prefer women—we have a higher emotional intelligence,” she says with a teasing grin. “All joking aside, Conway can’t fix a problem he doesn’t know exists. He loves you more than anything, and I have no doubt he’ll jump into action when you tell him what’s going on.”

“Relationships sure are complicated, aren’t they?”

“Damn right they are,” she confirms. “That doesn’t mean you should throw in the towel at the first sign of struggle though. Ruth and I went through a lot in our day. It wasn’t easy being a lesbian in Texas forty years ago. There were days I wasn’t sure we’d make it through, but we dug in our heels and fought for our right to love freely,” she states with a genuine smile. “I think the biggest thing that made us work was that I was always open with her when I was struggling or discouraged. For example, when my family disowned me, I didn’t hide my heartbreak from Ruth. I told her I was hurting, and she was by my side every step of the way. Love is a two-way street, and it demands a mutual give and take.”

Leola and Ruth don’t talk much about the early days of their partnership or the things they’ve went through. What I do know is they stayed together by maintaining a united front and always putting each other first even when it wasn’t the easiest thing to do.

“I love you and Ruth so much, and I appreciate your advice. I’m just struggling to envision another solution.

Conway's career is centered around year-round travel and being in the spotlight. If I ask him to stop touring or to cut back on public appearances, he'll have to give up doing things he loves which could make him resent me in the end, and that's not what I want."

"Haven't you heard the saying 'when one door closes, another one opens'?" Leola asks with a sly smile. "I guarantee there are options available that you don't even know exist yet. The first step is to talk with Conway and tell him how you feel, then the rest will fall into place."

"You're right," I say.

"I always am," Leola jokes. "Now, you better get a move on."

"What do you mean?"

She casts a quick glance at the clock. "You have just enough time to make the last flight to Philadelphia."

"You think I should go tonight?"

"There's no time like the present."

Deciding she's right, I open my rideshare app and request a car to the airport. While waiting, I open my email to check my horoscope for the day since I didn't have a chance earlier.

If something isn't working for you, Virgo, speak up. Don't hesitate to voice your concerns to the person who needs to hear what you have to say. Be strong and confident. Don't let others take advantage of your kind nature. Your general tendency is to give more than you receive, but this may leave you feeling depleted. Break the cycle. Be mindful of how you allocate your energy. Take a moment for yourself.

It seems the universe agrees with Leola that I need to talk with Conway.

CONWAY

JUST AS I STEP OUT of the shower, I hear the front door to my suite being opened. Sienna and I have our own room away from the band to maintain some privacy, but I wasn't expecting her back from L.A. until tomorrow.

After pulling on a pair of sweatpants, I head to the living room and am surprised to find her pacing the floor, wearing a hole in the carpet while anxiously chewing her nails.

"Sienna?" I call out to get her attention.

"Oh god," she shrieks, jumping nearly a foot in the air. "You startled me, Danvers."

"You're back early. Is everything all right?"

When I saw Lennon earlier, she mentioned that Sienna seemed upset when they spoke on the phone, but she wouldn't say why.

I immediately sense that something isn't right, and when Sienna gives me a halfhearted smile, it confirms my suspicions. It's nearly two in the morning, and as I look closer, I notice that her eyelids are heavy with exhaustion and she looks like she's about to fall asleep standing up.

"My photo shoot finished early and when I got back to the condo, Leola suggested I take the last flight out tonight."

"I'm glad you're here, baby. I missed you." I draw her in for a hug.

"I missed you too," she says quietly. "Thanks for the roses, they're beautiful. Ruth and Leola were thrilled."

I've quickly figured out which gifts Sienna will accept and those she won't. She appreciates the sentimental, recycled,

repurposed, or environmentally friendly ones. I try to get her things that fit into at least one of those categories when I can.

“I wanted to send you something to let you know I was thinking of you and your launch with Delvoni.”

“I appreciate it,” she replies, despondent.

“Ace, what’s wrong?”

“Can we talk?”

My pulse quickens at the mention of the last three words you want to ever hear from your partner, immediately putting me on edge.

“Yeah, let’s sit down.” I gesture to the couch. I take a seat and sigh in relief when Sienna sidles up next to me, intertwining her arm with mine. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Some things happened today that made me realize we’ve done a poor job communicating with each other.”

“Tell me what’s bothering you,” I urge her, wanting to be the person she can confide in.

“First, I want to say how much I’ve enjoyed being able to watch you perform at almost every show over the last month. You’re an incredible artist, and it’s been an honor to witness you in action.” She keeps her voice steady while she shifts in her seat. “And I love the mornings that I get to wake up next to you and the days we spend together,” she says with a fond smile.

“But?” I add when she doesn’t elaborate.

Sienna takes a deep breath and places her hands in mine. “But... I’m losing myself,” she admits with a downcast gaze. “Traveling back and forth between L.A. and wherever you are isn’t working for me, and the constant media attention is taking its toll. It’s only been a few weeks and I’m already

drowning. There has to be a way for me to find some semblance of privacy, because I can't survive under these circumstances forever.”

“Why didn't you tell me sooner?” I press as my thumbs absentmindedly trace circles on her palms.

“You've been busy. I figured when things slowed down you'd eventually notice that something was bothering me and ask about it... but you never did.” There's a tone of resignation in her voice, and it's heartbreaking to witness.

I've been so absorbed in the tour and enjoying having Sienna with me that I failed to see she's been miserable. If I hadn't been so self-centered and narrow-minded, I would have had the good sense to find a better solution in the first place.

She will never thrive if she's forced to spend her life in the public eye, away from Ruth and Leola. She needs a balance between her public and private life, and I haven't even tried to help her get that. Instead, I urged her to immerse herself in my world with a sink-or-swim mentality, neglecting her well-being as she ventured into unknown territory.

Show me.

Her words from months ago ring in my ears. I tell her that I love her every day and say she's the most important thing in my life, but I haven't been showing it lately. Not in the way that matters most.

“Sienna, I apologize,” I say as I gaze into her eyes. “It wasn't fair for you to handle this alone.”

“I agree with you. It hasn't been easy,” she says frankly. “It's clear to me now that I should have done a better job of conveying my emotions and told you how I've been feeling. That doesn't take away the hurt I've felt, though.”

“You're absolutely right. I should have been paying more attention. What can I do to make things better for you?”

Nothing matters more than her happiness and I'll do whatever I can to help fix this.

"I wish I had an easy answer, but I don't," Sienna says solemnly. "I know for certain that I can't continue touring with you when it means being away from Ruth and Leola for days or weeks at a time. It doesn't matter that they have help around the house, I want to be close enough to check in often and spend quality time with them," she says, and it's obvious she's given this a lot of thought. "And you might thrive in the limelight, but I don't. There are plenty of celebrities who maintain private relationships with their significant others. I get that my life will never be the same as before, but that doesn't mean we can't find ways to make this new chapter work in my favor."

"What else?" I encourage.

"Modeling might not be my long-term career goal, but I'm always going to work. I need a purpose outside of you and the band, and I can't do that if I'm constantly on the road. I know that's a big order to fill, and I'm not naive enough to think there's a perfect solution. We're both going to have to make sacrifices, but there's a happy medium; we just have to find it."

"You have my word, we will. I'm just sorry we didn't talk about this sooner."

"I wasn't sure there was a way around this that didn't require us both drastically changing our lives. And it scares me to think that if we can't find a middle ground, we could grow to resent each other for the things we gave up along the way."

"Do you resent me now?" I ask earnestly.

"No, of course not," Sienna replies instantly. "I'm frustrated by our situation, and although I wish you had been aware of what I was dealing with sooner, I'm not mad at you. I

think the best thing we can do moving forward is be upfront and honest about how we feel.”

“Agreed,” I assure her. “Is there anything else you need right now?”

“Yeah, I could use a hug.”

I don’t hesitate to embrace her tightly, silently conveying how much I love her.

“Why don’t you go back to L.A. tomorrow?” I suggest.

I’m confused when she abruptly straightens up, her face turning cold and expressionless.

“Are you trying to get rid of me, Danvers?” she demands in an accusing tone. “Because that’s a low blow after the conversation we just had. I will never forgive you if you try to leave me.”

I suppress a laugh at her use of the word *try*. I lift her into my arms and place her on my lap. “Woah, slow down. You have the wrong idea. I hate to break it to you, but you’re stuck with me for the long haul,” I tell her with unwavering conviction. “You’ve been caring for everyone else for so long, you’ve neglected your own well-being. I figured it would be nice for you to have some uninterrupted time with Ruth and Leola. It would also give you a chance to think about what your ideal future looks like.”

“Are you suggesting we try a long-distance relationship? Because I don’t think that will work for me either,” she states.

“No, Ace, never. I would miss you too much for that.” I lean my head against hers. “We’re going to come up with an arrangement that doesn’t involve long-term separation. The band has a few days off next week, and when I get back to L.A., we’ll talk through all our options together and decide how we should move forward.”

“I like the sound of that,” she says with a smile.

My conversation with Sienna last night weighs heavy on my mind. After we talked, I carried her to the bedroom and fell asleep with her in my arms.

Jay and I dropped her off at the airport earlier today, and like always, I hated to watch her leave, especially knowing what she’s going through.

The band’s been practicing in the new venue we’re performing at tonight. I’m halfway across the stage the minute we wrap up, anxious to get back to my dressing room so I can call Sienna, knowing she should have landed by now.

I stop abruptly when Emerson’s whistle catches my attention.

“Conway, can you stay for a few minutes? I want to talk with the band about something while we’re all here.”

“Yeah, sure.” I shrug, moving toward the middle of the stage where the rest of the band is waiting.

“What’s up? Are we finally getting a raise?” Wells asks with a teasing grin.

“It’s more likely the band decided to give you the boot,” Grayson quips.

“Not a chance,” Wells retorts, glaring at his brother. “You’ll be kicked out long before I am.”

I chuckle at their theatrics. Their sibling banter is a constant source of amusement.

“Guys, that’s enough,” Emerson interjects, embracing his role as the older brother. “I got an interesting call this morning from Randy Daniels, the general manager of Premiere, the largest casino in Las Vegas.” He takes a deliberate pause, letting the anticipation build. “He’s a die-hard Sovereign

Kings fan and offered us a six-month residency starting in June.” Emerson appears pleased with his announcement while the rest of us exchange surprised glances.

I’ve always considered residencies as the graveyard for bands that have been forgotten, want a slower pace, or have families and are looking to settle down, putting their careers on the back burner.

“Holy shit, are you serious?” Wells exclaims. “That place is massive and has killer acoustics. I’ve always wanted to perform there.”

“How many shows would we play every week, and what kind of profit margin are we talking about?” Grayson asks, adjusting his glasses on his nose.

Leave it to him to ask the serious questions right out the gate. It’s no surprise that his first order of business is to crunch the numbers to determine if it’s a solid offer or not.

“Sovereign Kings would perform three nights a week, and with our track record, selling out every show is likely, which would earn us more than any of our past tours—this one included.”

Grayson lets out a low whistle. “Damn, that’s a hell of a lot of dough. I’m down to take a break from touring. Count me in.”

“Me too.” Wells shrugs. “I always have a good time when we play in Vegas. There are plenty of tourists for me to sleep with, and the best part is they’re all only interested in no-strings-attached sex too.” He flashes a toothy grin.

Those are the famous last words said by a single man who vows that he’ll never commit before meeting the love of his life.

I would know.

“Conway, you’re awfully quiet. What do you think?” Emerson addresses me.

This is the kind of opportunity that could make things right with Sienna. It’s like the perfect offer just dropped into my lap, yet I’m still hesitant to accept.

It should be an easy decision, but it’s not.

Sovereign Kings’ stardom was built around our consistent touring schedule. I’ve been on the road since the band’s inception, albeit back then we were driving around in a rust bucket, begging to play in cafes, dive bars, and anywhere else that would let us through the door. I’ve always gotten a high from performing in different venues around the world and interacting with our fans in person. I’m worried we won’t remain relevant if all that goes away.

“We’ve always toured,” I say, stating the obvious. “I’m not sure I want to give that up.”

“What do you think, Griff?” Emerson asks. The man in question has silently observed from his seat behind his drum set until now.

“I think it’s a great opportunity. We should do it,” Griff says.

I scowl at him, not happy that we’re taking his opinion into consideration.

You’re just upset that he agrees with the rest of the band.

“You’re not an original band member, why should you get a say?” I snap at Griff.

“Are you serious?” His tone drips with anger as he rises from his stool to approach me. “I’m damn tired of being your punching bag, Conway. Why don’t we settle this once and for all?”

“Yeah, let’s,” I say, goading him.

Emerson, Grayson, and Wells watch us, silently observing from the sidelines.

“Why do you have to be such an ass?” Griff growls. “What the hell have I done to deserve you treating me like shit for years? I’m just as much a part of this band as you are.”

He has some nerve making a bold statement like that.

“Sovereign Kings had a perfectly good drummer,” I remind him, pointing at Emerson. “We never needed you.”

“That’s your only reason for hating me?” Griff scoffs. “I get why you were pissed when the label hired me, but that was five years ago. Grow the hell up.” He stands in front of me with his hands balled into fists. “We’re fucking adults, why don’t you start acting like one?”

“We worked our asses off to get to where we are and you just swooped in and got a hefty payday without putting in any effort. You bet I’m still mad about it.”

“Let’s get two things straight,” Griff starts. “The label assigned me to the band; I never asked to work with you guys. And you’re off your rocker if you think I haven’t earned my place as a Sovereign King. You have no idea how many hours of practice I’ve put in over the years or how much experience I’ve had playing with other bands. *Rolling Stones* named me *the* best drummer in the industry last year, and I sure as hell didn’t ride anyone’s coattails to earn that title.

“You might be the Sovereign Kings frontman, but you don’t get to make decisions alone. I get that change is hard, but the rest of us have already said we’re on board with the residency—me included. So you better get used to the idea, because not everything revolves around you.”

What the fuck? When did Griff grow the balls to talk to me like this?

“I didn’t say no, just that I wasn’t sure,” I remind him.

“That’s fair, but it wouldn’t hurt for you to acknowledge what the group thinks about it.” He motions toward Emerson and the twins. “And what about Sienna? Did you consider that going to Vegas might be better than your current arrangement?”

“You don’t know shit about my relationship,” I seethe.

“You’re right,” he says in a mocking tone. “I haven’t noticed that she’s been going back and forth from L.A. more often than not. Or that the media relentlessly hounds her every time she goes out. She’s changed her entire life for you. What are you giving up to be with her? Because the way I see it, she’s getting the short end of the stick.”

My blood boils at the insinuation. I haven’t told anyone about my conversation with Sienna last night. How the hell was Griff able to see that my girlfriend was struggling while I completely failed to notice what was right in front of me? And who does he think he is trying to tell me that I’m not doing right by the band and giving me unwelcome relationship advice?

“You better walk away before I do something to get us both in hot water,” I tell him.

“Gladly. Just know that I’m not going to stand by and let you treat me like shit anymore. I’m a Sovereign King whether you like it or not, and I expect you to start treating me like one,” he states before pivoting on his heel and storming off the stage, not giving me the chance to respond.

“Oh shit,” Wells whispers loudly to Grayson. “Con just got burned.”

“You two, get out now,” Emerson snaps at the twins.

They don’t dare argue, quickly leaving Emerson and me alone on stage.

“Listen, Conway. I appreciate you having my back, but let’s be honest, I was a mediocre drummer at best. The label did us all a favor by bringing Griff on board. Plus, I like being the band’s manager. I’m damn good at it.” Emerson lightens the mood with a grin. He’s always had a gift for defusing even the tensest situations.

“You’re right, you always did have a hard time keeping up with the band during a beat drop,” I taunt with a playful slug to his shoulder.

“Does this mean you’ll put aside your petty grudge? If it makes your decision any easier, Lennon’s officially smitten with Griff’s mom after she helped Indie through one of her meltdowns the other day. That kid clearly inherited her strong vocal abilities from you.” He chuckles. “Griff might be a little bit rough around the edges, but if you give him a chance, you’ll see that he’s a great guy.”

Until today, I’ve been keeping my distance, and I haven’t been provoking Griff like I used to. I guess I can try to be civil, but I don’t plan on being his friend.

“Fine, but I’m not going to apologize,” I mutter.

“You have to tell him you’re sorry sooner or later. It’s not my job to clean up your messes when you’re the one who’s been an ass.”

“Haven’t you heard? It comes with being the manager—you know, the job you like so much?” I mock with a grin.

“I put up with a lot of shit, but you’re on your own with this one,” he says. “Lennon mentioned that Sienna might not join us for the rest of the tour. I’m not going to ask you for the specifics because it’s none of my business,” he reassures me with a sympathetic smile. “With that being said, I would suggest you take a few days to consider the residency offer and talk it over with her when you get back to L.A. The band

will stand by your decision as long as it's in the best interest of your relationship. Family will always come first for all of us.”

“Thanks, man. That means a lot,” I say, clapping Emerson on the back.

He walks away, leaving me alone with my circling thoughts.

SIENNA

THE LAST TIME I WAS in Becky's office, every available surface was covered in hair and makeup products, shoes littered the floor, and there were gowns strewn everywhere in between. The night of the American Music Awards seems so long ago, but in reality, it's only been a couple of months.

I lift one of the spheres from the Newton's cradle on Becky's desk and let it fall. I watch with fascination as each ball clinks against the other as they swing back and forth. It reminds me of how my life is a sequence of actions and reactions, and the decisions I make now will ripple far into my future.

"Pretty fascinating, isn't it?" Becky remarks when she enters her now pristine office, holding a stack of papers.

"Yeah," I say, stopping the metal balls from moving. "You didn't have this the last time I was here." I gesture to the Newton's cradle.

"No, it was an employee gift from Elevation. They think it's comparable to a stress ball, but after a few minutes of listening to that thing clang back and forth, it causes me far more stress than it relieves." She laughs.

She looks flawless in a bright green tweed dress with brass buttons and white trim on the pockets and neckline. She's paired the ensemble with white heeled boots and styled her hair in an elegant low bun. If I didn't know better, I'd assume she was a model, not an agent.

She sits across from me in her office chair and slides the documents to my side of the table. "Here's the information

Delvoni sent me this morning. Why don't you look it over and let me know if you have any questions."

I lean forward in my seat and review the data in front of me, staring at it in disbelief.

"Are you serious? Is this number real?" I blink several times, thinking I see one too many zeros.

"Yes!" Becky bursts with excitement. "That amount will be transferred to your account next month. When Delvoni's team sent everything over, I had their accounting team include the total revenue from the campaign to verify."

It still bothers me that a significant portion of the sales came from Sovereign Kings fans, but at the end of the day, there's nothing I can do about it. Like Lennon said, it doesn't discount the hard work I put into the campaign, and I'm choosing to focus on the positive and celebrate my success.

"I appreciate you doing that," I tell Becky.

"And to think, that's only for the initial launch."

"What do you mean?"

"Delvoni has scheduled two restocks because demand was so high."

I'm speechless, my jaw falling in astonishment. If the next drops generate even a fraction of the original launch's revenue, that's a considerable chunk of money. And that doesn't take into consideration the substantial amount that Becky said will hit my bank account soon.

This changes everything.

"I think I have to quit." The words spill from my mouth before my brain catches up.

I'm not a spontaneous person and I've never been one to make important decisions lightly. I usually stew over my options, and once I've made a choice, I question whether I've

made the right one for days. However, in this particular instance, I only feel relief, like a heavy load has been lifted from my shoulders.

“I had a hunch you might once I broke the good news,” Becky states with a smile.

I blink back at her. “You’re not upset or going to tell me I’m making a mistake?”

She’s invested a considerable amount of time, energy, and resources into training me over the past six months, and I’m surprised she’s taking this so well.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong... of course I’m sad you’re leaving. You’re a natural in front of the camera, and every client and photographer you’ve worked with has sung your praises. Trust me, there will be plenty of people who will be disappointed when they hear you’ve quit modeling,” she says with sincerity. “But your heart isn’t in it. You said from day one that modeling was about a steady paycheck, which I always respected. You’re more comfortable in the shadows than in the spotlight, and I support your decision to embrace that. You should find a career that gives you a sense of purpose and will bring you joy,” she says earnestly.

“I can’t thank you enough. You took a risk bringing me on and believed in me when not many others did.”

“It’s been such a pleasure, and I’ll miss working with you. There aren’t many models that have your work ethic. Most women in your shoes would have quit the day Conway Danvers entered the picture and would never work another day in their life,” she says with a lighthearted chuckle.

“That’s probably true,” I agree. “But like I always tell Conway, I’m not like most people. I’m not sure what’s next for me, but I know I’ll be taking your advice and finding a career that I enjoy.”

“Good, I’m glad,” she says, brimming with excitement. “I’m going to reassign your upcoming campaigns, but let’s wait a couple of weeks to officially announce your departure until after the last restock for Delvoni.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I say.

“And just because you won’t be working with Elevation anymore doesn’t mean you can be a stranger. I expect regular updates about your glamorous life so I can live vicariously through you,” she adds with a smirk.

“Deal.” I laugh. “Although, I can’t promise I’ll have anything exciting to report.”

“That’s all right, keep in touch regardless.”

“I will,” I say as I stand up and head for the door.

“Sienna, I just want to say that it’ll get easier.”

“What will?” I question.

“Adjusting to the lifestyle that comes with dating a celebrity. The paparazzi don’t go away, but that doesn’t mean you won’t find a balance and a way to protect your privacy. Don’t lose sight of what’s important and protect your relationship fiercely. Trust me, you’ll regret it if you don’t.” Her mood shifts, marred by a frown.

“You’re speaking from experience, aren’t you?” I observe.

“Yes, I am. Don’t make the same mistakes I have. There’s always another alternative to achieve the outcome you want as long as you’re willing to find it. And never doubt that Conway will have your best interest in mind.”

The second I got home from Becky’s office, I told Leola and Ruth that I quit my job. Their excitement was palpable at seeing me taking the first step to prioritize myself.

I'm now holed up in my room, rifling through my closet. I squeal with joy when I finally find the rectangle box I've been searching for. Once I've got it down from the shelf, I blow off the top that's covered with dust. When I postponed college to take the job as David's assistant, I packed away the reminders of the ambitions I had to put aside.

I settle on the floor beside my bed and carefully lift the lid. A smile brightens my face when I look at the big blue binder labeled "college" written in cursive. My hands tremble as I flip through the pages. I started compiling the binder the summer before tenth grade, wanting a head start. Although I had intended to stay in California or a neighboring state, I still included options from around the country.

I knit my brows in confusion when I reach the back and find a section labeled "online college." After reading through all the information, I grab my laptop and search for the best online colleges, printing off multiple articles and admission requirements.

I barely notice when Leola walks into my room carrying a plate of chicken pot pie.

"Sweetheart, are you okay? You've been in here for hours. We were beginning to worry about you."

"I'm good." I beam at her. "I've just been working on something."

"It looks like you've been busy," she says. "I can't wait to hear about it when you're finished. It makes me happy to see you smile again. It's a welcome change from your gloomy disposition the last few days."

I've been moping around the house since returning from Philadelphia, not even going to bingo with Ruth could cheer me up. But, now that I've had a breakthrough, my mood has significantly improved.

“I’m doing much better,” I assure her. “Conway flies in tomorrow, and we’re meeting at the Car Hop Diner. I’m hoping that this”—I motion around me—“will make things easier for us.” My voice is filled with hope.

“Oh sweetheart. Don’t worry, something tells me that you’ll figure things out in the morning,” she says encouragingly.

“I hope you’re right.”

“I want you to know that Ruth and I will always be grateful for everything you’ve sacrificed for us, but you’re not in this alone,” Leola reminds me. “It’s time to chase those dreams of yours.”

“Thank you,” I rasp with tears in my eyes.

“I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you too,” I murmur.

“I’ll let you get back to it.” Leola smiles as she leaves the room.

As I dive back into my research, there is one thing I’m certain of: Conway and I are going to make it through this.

CONWAY

THE BAND'S BEEN WALKING ON eggshells around me the last few days while they wait for my decision about Vegas.

My identity has been tied to the Sovereign Kings and touring for so long that I'm not sure who I am without them. Yet, when I talk to Sienna on the phone, she sounds happier, lighter even. It's been a relief for her to stay in one place for more than a few days at a time and get a break from the media's attention.

I let her down once, blinded by the notion that I could have it all—Sienna, the constant touring, fame and fortune—and I ignored the signs right in front of me.

I won't do it again.

I fell in love with her because she's different. She isn't willing to conform to society's expectations and she isn't afraid to stand up for what she believes in, regardless of the consequences. Knowing what she needs to be happy, what kind of person would I be if I ignored them in favor of what's best for me?

I can't escape Griff's unwanted advice—it's on loop, haunting my thoughts.

What are you giving up to be with her?

Not much, if I'm being honest.

My professional commitments haven't changed now that we're a couple. Sienna's the one who's made adjustments to her work schedule to accommodate me. I'm surrounded by my family and friends whereas Sienna's had to forfeit time with Ruth and Leola. I've carried on with my life in the public eye,

while Sienna's had to adapt to the limelight even though she doesn't want it.

It's not fair that I expect her to sacrifice so much when I haven't made many concessions for her. I promised her that I'd find a solution that works for both of us, and the residency is the happy medium we're looking for. That's why I feel so guilty for not accepting it right off the bat.

Even now, a small part of me wonders if accepting the gig in Vegas is the right move.

I glance at my watch to see that I only have a few minutes before mic check. Sienna texted me earlier to say she couldn't call tonight. I told her it wasn't a problem, but now I wish I could hear her voice before I go on stage.

My focus shifts to the closet. It occurs to me that I haven't done my pre-show ritual in months and the longer I think about it, the more agitated I become, angry that I'm still affected by its presence. I finally storm toward it and slam the door shut, determined to prove that my fears no longer have a hold over me. But as the darkness closes in, I begin to hyperventilate, clutching my chest as unease passes through me.

Shit.

I frantically reach for the door handle but come up empty. A surge of panic tightens its grip and I collapse on the ground, curling into a fetal position—taken back to my childhood, alone and afraid of the unknown.

“I'm in control, I'm in control, I'm in control,” I chant repeatedly. The more I say it, the less I believe it.

Suddenly the cramped space is flooded with light. I blink my eyes open to find Lennon standing above me, staring down with a look of horror on her face.

“Conway? Oh my god, what happened?” she exclaims.

“Pre-ritual performance,” I manage to stammer.

Lennon arches her brow. “You lock yourself in a closet before every concert?” she asks with a note of sadness. “Con, why would you do that?”

“I usually leave the door cracked open,” I mumble, embarrassed she found me like this.

“I still don’t understand... Why?” She joins me on the ground and helps me to a sitting position.

“Lennon, I don’t want to talk about it. You’re my little sister, my problems aren’t your responsibility.”

“You’re a stubborn man,” she mutters to herself. “Having a sibling means you have someone to talk to about things you wouldn’t normally share with anyone else.”

She doesn’t get it. I took on the role of her caregiver, provider, and protector when I was just a kid myself. It’s always been my responsibility to look after her—not the other way around.

“Let me take a guess: this is your way of coping with our childhood and something Mom did?”

“Yeah,” I begrudgingly admit. “But my issues are related to things that happened before you were old enough to remember, and I don’t want to bother you with any of the details.”

“Such as?” Lennon asks in a hushed tone.

Knowing her stubborn streak is equal to mine, she won’t stop until I answer her question.

“Lulu used to lock me in the closet with the lights off.” I can’t bring myself to call the woman *Mom*. “She was bitter and spiteful, and when you were born, I swore I’d protect you from the worst of it so you wouldn’t have to go through what I did.”

“I had no idea,” Lennon utters, her face somber.

“This is why I didn’t tell you…” I gesture toward her. “I knew you’d look at me like you are right now, and pity is the last thing I want.”

“I’m your sister. I have every reason to be upset at learning you had to go through years of trauma.”

“It’s been two decades, and Lulu is dead. I should be over it by now,” I state bluntly.

It’s always bothered me that I’ve never been able to escape my inner demons, silently battling them for years and never strong enough to break loose.

“Coping with trauma isn’t a linear process,” Lennon gently reminds me. “It doesn’t follow a strict timeline and it won’t magically disappear, no matter how much you wish it would.”

“Since when did you become a therapist?”

“I’ve been seeing someone for years,” she tells me proudly. “Emerson is the only person who knows, but that’s not because I’m ashamed. I think it’s important to talk to a professional, regardless of what you’re going through.” She leans her head on my shoulder, letting out a shuddered exhale. “My trauma stems from being abandoned by Mom, being left to stay with the Phillips in middle school. It’s been nice to get an outside perspective from someone who can share effective ways to cope with my past.” Her voice resonates with resilience.

“Fuck, Len, I’m sorry.”

“Now who’s the one showing pity?” she jokes.

“Well played.” I grin.

“I think we’ve talked plenty about our childhood for one day, don’t you?” she says with a questioning glance. “Do you have anything else you want to get off your chest while we’re

sharing?” Her voice is high-pitched, like she’s struggling to hide a secret and failing.

“Playing coy doesn’t suit you, Lennon,” I note. “If you have something you want to tell me, just say it.”

“Fine. Emerson told me about Vegas. You might not want my opinion, but I think it’s a great idea. It would be nice to stay in the same place longer than a few days. Now that I have Indie, it’s not easy to keep her on a schedule when we’re constantly in a different time zone.” The intensity in Lennon’s gaze shows that she means business. “And it’s a temporary commitment. The band can schedule shows outside of Premiere if they don’t coincide with dates we’ve committed to. The Sovereign Kings aren’t giving up touring—we’re just trying something different.”

Her words somehow erase the lingering doubt in my mind. They also remind me that I love touring because of the people I’m surrounded by—Sienna, Lennon, Emerson, Wells, Grayson, and Jay. If they weren’t around, it wouldn’t be the same. And as long as the band is together, making music for our fans, that’s all that matters.

“When you put it like that, it sounds much more enticing. Next time we get an offer to play in Vegas, you should break the news, not Emerson.”

“I’m so telling him you said that.”

“I just wish it would have been easier for me to make my decision like everyone else,” I confess.

“Why are you being so hard on yourself?” Lennon asks.

“Because Sienna told me our arrangement wasn’t working for her. She needs more stability than touring year-round, and the residency in Vegas is the perfect solution. I love her so damn much and only want to make things easier for her, so why the hell didn’t I immediately jump at this chance?”

“There’s nothing wrong with thinking through a life-altering change before you decide. Even if this doesn’t work out, whatever choice you make will be the right move for you both. That’s one of the things I love most about you—when you want something, you don’t stop until you find a way to make it yours. And in this case, you won’t rest until you’ve found a way to guarantee Sienna will be blissfully happy.”

“You’re full of helpful advice today, aren’t you?” I reply cheekily.

“Hey, I’ve had enough of being surrounded by testosterone. It’s high time the Sovereign Kings got some girl power around here. I can’t have you jeopardizing our shot at keeping Sienna around permanently,” she playfully teases.

“I hate to break it to you, sis, but she’s not sticking around for you.”

Before Lennon can respond, the light from the dressing room is blocked by an imposing figure. I glance up to find Emerson looking down at us, a hint of amusement on his face as he holds Indie in his arms.

“There’s Mommy and Uncle Con,” he coos to Indie, and she babbles in response. “Is there a particular reason you’re hanging out in the closet?”

“Sibling bonding time,” Lennon replies. “Now let me hold my baby—she missed me.” She stands and exits the closet, reaching out to take Indie from Emerson.

“You mean *our* baby?” he reminds her.

“Yeah, yeah.” Lennon waves him off. “We both know I’m her favorite. I’m going to go feed her before the concert starts. Thanks for the chat, Con.”

In truth, I’m the one who should be thanking her.

With Indie nestled against her chest, Lennon walks out of the room, leaving Emerson and me alone.

“Talk about anything interesting?” he asks coyly.

“Don’t worry, your wife put in a good word for Vegas. As long as Sienna is on board, you can count me in for the residency, but I need to involve her in this decision.”

“That’s great, man,” Emerson says enthusiastically. “I’ll hold off on telling the band until you talk with her.”

“Great, thanks.”

“By the way, you’re running late for mic check, so you better hustle,” he goads.

The chime of the bell gets my attention and my breath catches when Sienna enters the Car Hop Diner. I came here straight from the airport, not willing to wait any longer to see her.

A subtle grin tugs at my lips as I take in her appearance: gray sweatpants, a casual sweater, her hair thrown into a messy bun, and a makeup-free face. Our video chats don’t do her justice. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and no one will ever compare.

She easily spots me sitting in the same booth we did the night we came here after filming the music video. As she approaches, she lets out an irritated sigh.

“Why am I not surprised that you cleared the place out,” she says.

I took the necessary steps to guarantee we were alone and wouldn’t be interrupted. I compensated the staff ten times their usual pay for a shift, plus an additional fee to the owner, accounting for the disruption to the morning rush.

It’s well worth it.

“I want us to have our privacy. We’ve had enough encounters with the paparazzi lately, don’t you think?”

“I couldn’t agree more, but is there a reason you wanted to meet here?” A hint of curiosity tinges Sienna’s voice. “We could have gone to my place.”

“I wanted to come back to where it all began.”

“Where what began?” she asks.

“Our love story,” I say with a smile. “That night, you showed me kindness and compassion after you saw a side of me no one else had, and it set the stage for everything that came after.”

“I felt it too,” she admits. “I think that’s why I was adamant that we be just friends. There was no turning back after I admitted how I felt about you.”

Things began to change for me the moment I experienced Sienna’s comforting touch for the first time in the diner’s basement. From that moment on, my pulse quickened when she entered a room, when she gave me one of her dazzling smiles, or when she looked at me with those emerald green eyes that could see straight into my soul. My heart belonged to Sienna Cartwright long before my mind caught up.

“Danvers, you’re staring,” she says softly.

“Can you blame me? I think you’ll understand when I say I want to hold your hand.”

There’s a fleeting silence before she replies with a smirk. “Did you just quote The Beatles?”

“I sure did,” I say, leaning across the table. “You told me once that you were a supporter of authentic rock ’n’ roll, and The Beatles are as real as it gets, don’t you think?”

I was intrigued when she told me she wasn’t a fan of the Sovereign Kings. She’s never been influenced by my status as

a celebrity, and she's never treated me differently because of who I am. It's one of the many reasons I love her.

"You're right, they are." She nods in agreement.

"So, can I?"

"Can you what?" Sienna questions, feigning innocence.

"Can I hold your hand?" I repeat.

"It's not like you to ask," she responds with a touch of amusement.

Immediately, I reach across the table, placing my hands in hers.

"I love you, Ace. You've taught me that actions speak louder than words, and I appreciate you letting me show you that I'll do whatever it takes for us to get through this. You're my forever."

"I love you too, Danvers, and I can't wait for what our future brings. I have something to tell you..." She beams across at me. "I quit modeling yesterday."

"You did?"

"Uh-huh. I met with Becky to review the details of my collab with Delvoni, and it turns out I earned a lot more than I expected." She's grinning from ear to ear. "When I started modeling, I calculated how much I would have to save up to pay off my debt, Ruth's medical bills, and the mortgage for two years. And what I'm getting for the initial launch with Delvoni exceeds that amount."

"That's great news, baby." I give her hands a reassuring squeeze.

"I did something else last night, which is why I couldn't call you before your show..." She trails off and nervously chews on her lower lip. "I start taking online college classes next week. I'm going to get my bachelor's degree, and then if

and when I decide I want to get my master's, I can attend a local college.”

I'm out of my seat and joining her on her side of the booth, wrapping my arms around her in an instant. “I'm so proud of you, Ace. I'll be the best damn study partner you've ever had.”

“You mean that?”

“Hell yeah. I'll be there for whatever you need. You're going to be the first person from the Sovereign Kings to go to college, and Lennon and I are going to throw you a massive graduation party when the time comes.”

“Thanks for the support, Danvers, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. That's a few years down the road,” she reminds me.

“Doesn't mean I can't be excited about it.”

“I'm grateful to have you in my corner.”

“I'll always be here,” I say. “And since we're sharing, I have something to tell you too.”

“What is it?”

“The Sovereign Kings have been offered a six-month residency at Premiere in Las Vegas starting in June.”

Sienna blinks back in surprise. “What does that mean?”

“The band would move to Vegas temporarily and perform three nights a week. We would keep making new music in our free time and release our next album this spring. The only difference is that we wouldn't immediately follow it with a traditional tour. And if everything went well, we could extend the residency if we wanted to,” I explain.

“How do the guys feel about it?”

“They think it's a fantastic idea. Wells is looking forward to playing at Premiere, Grayson thinks it's a great business

opportunity, Emerson and Lennon want the stability it will provide. Griff didn't say why, but he's in."

"How do *you* feel about the residency?" Sienna asks bluntly.

"Honestly, the offer came out of the blue. Touring has been part of my identity for so long that it worried me I wouldn't be me anymore without it as a constant in my life." There's a slight tremor in my voice as I continue. "When I thought about you and me though, our future and the sacrifices you've made, I knew it was the right decision for us. Lennon also pointed out that it doesn't mean the band won't tour ever again, just that we're trying something new for a while."

"So does that mean you want to do the residency?" Sienna asks for clarification.

"I haven't given the band an official answer yet."

"Why not?"

"Because I told Emerson I had to talk to you first and make sure it's what's best for us as a couple."

"And what if I say no?"

"I'll tell the band I can't do it, and you and I will go back to the drawing board to find another solution."

"Why would you do that?" she practically shrieks.

"You're my main priority, and I'll never ask you to do something you're uncomfortable with again."

"I have a few questions before I can give you an answer."

"Ask me anything," I encourage.

"I guess it'll be easier for me travel wise to go back and forth to Vegas. How often were you thinking I'd come to visit?"

“About that...” I say with a mischievous grin. I meant it when I said we wouldn’t settle for a long-distance relationship.

“What did you do, Danvers?”

“I have it on good authority that Leola and Ruth are in favor of moving to Vegas as long as the new place has a pool, a king-sized bed, and a place to play bingo. The last request should be easy enough, considering we’ll be staying in the world’s gambling capital,” I tell her.

Sienna clicks her tongue in mock disapproval. “Why am I not surprised? What about their place here? It’s their home, I’m not letting them give that up.”

“You don’t have to. Didn’t you just tell me you have enough money saved up to pay the mortgage for the next two years?”

I have no intention of letting her make many more payments on the place. I’ve set up an anonymous foundation for retired teachers who need help paying off their debts. As part of Teacher Appreciation Day in May, Ruth and Leola will each be one of fifty beneficiaries of the foundation. In their particular case, their house will be paid off in full.

Even if Sienna figures out I’m behind it, she’ll have a hard time arguing with me when she learns it’s for a good cause.

“You won’t have to pay for their place in Vegas,” I reassure her.

“If you think I’m going to let you—”

“I want to find a house that can fit us all. There are several places on the market that include a one-level detached apartment that would be perfect for Ruth and Leola.”

“Are you serious?” Sienna questions. “You wouldn’t mind having them live with us?”

“They’re your family, which means they’re my family too. Where we go, they go.”

That doesn’t mean I don’t want us to have our own space. I plan to fuck Sienna on every surface of our new place, and we don’t need an audience for that.

“What about the remainder of the tour?” she asks, knowing we have two months left of the tour.

“For the next few weeks, most of the stops are in the Midwest, and during the last month, we’re making our way along the west coast. I’ll fly back to L.A. when I can, as long as Leola and Ruth don’t mind me staying with you guys.”

When I thought about how to handle this particular challenge, I decided to put my years of long travel days to good use. I won’t mind going back and forth if it means being with Sienna as much as possible. We’ll have some time apart, but I’ll make sure it’s minimal.

“Are you kidding? They’ll be thrilled. You mean it?” She gazes at me in shock.

“Yeah, baby.” I lean in and press a kiss on her forehead. “I’ll attend any promotional events with the band. Things shouldn’t be as intense with the paparazzi once we’re settled in Vegas, and I’ve asked Jay to put additional measures in place to help keep the media at bay.”

“You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you,” she replies in an upbeat tone.

Almost everything.

Before I knew Sienna quit modeling, Lennon and I already found the perfect job for her, but I want to wait to bring it up until we’ve finalized a few more details.

“I don’t expect you to give me an answer now. Take all the time you need to—”

Sienna throws her arms around my neck, drawing me in close. “I don’t need to think about it. We’re moving to Vegas.” Her tone is nothing short of certain. “But we have a dilemma.”

“And what’s that?”

“Leola’s been asking when she gets to go to a Sovereign Kings concert and watch you perform with your shirt off.” Sienna laughs. “She’ll never forgive me if we don’t go to one of your shows before this tour ends.”

“Consider it done.”

I’ll make sure Ruth and Leola get VIP treatment when they come to our show. It’s the least I can do for everything they’ve done for Sienna.

“Thanks for making all this possible, Danvers,” Sienna says as she leans in to kiss me. “Now, please tell me we didn’t just come here to talk, because I’m starving,” she announces.

“I would never bring you to your favorite diner and not feed you, Ace. You okay with burgers and fries for breakfast?”

“Hell yes,” she says.

“Great, I’ll be right back.”

The cook and Sarah, our server from last time, have been waiting for me to come tell them our order. On the way to the kitchen, I smile widely when I think about my horoscope that I got in my email this morning. I have to admit, my daily horoscopes are beginning to grow on me.

Today symbolizes a new beginning, Leo, and some wonderful news could come your way. An unforeseen opportunity may arise, assisting you in starting the new chapter you’ve been waiting for. It might involve love, career goals, or adopting a desired lifestyle change. Your friends could play a major role in the process. Move ahead, but use caution. Breaks like this don’t come around very often.

SIENNA

AFTER BREAKFAST, CONWAY WENT TO meet the band at the studio. We have family dinner at Lennon and Emerson's place tonight, trying to make the most of our downtime before the Sovereign Kings' next show.

I came straight home, anxious to talk with Ruth and Leola and make sure they're actually on board with the upcoming changes in our lives.

"I'm home," I holler, stepping inside from the garage and placing the keys on the hook.

"We're in the living room," Leola shouts.

I find her sitting on the couch with Ruth's wheelchair positioned next to her while they watch a *Wheel of Fortune* rerun.

I take a seat in the rocking chair opposite Ruth, angling myself to face them.

"How was breakfast? Did you and Conway talk about anything interesting?" Leola asks, acting clueless.

"It was enlightening," I reply coyly. "I hear you're moving to Vegas without me?"

Leola and Ruth exchange guilty looks, like two mischievous kids caught with their hands stuck in the cookie jar.

"We were going to invite you to tag along. I'm sure we can find room for you in one of our suitcases," Ruth teases.

"That sounds lovely," I deadpan.

In truth, I'm not upset that Conway reached out to Leola and Ruth. I'm glad he's gotten close to them over the last few months.

"The three of us could use a touch more excitement in our lives, don't you think?" Leola waves between us. "And what's more adventurous than moving to Vegas with a world-famous rockstar?"

"You do realize Conway is *my* boyfriend, right?" I remind her.

"Ruth and I are more than happy to share him when he's not too busy taking us to bingo or out to lunch at one of the buffets on the strip," she quips.

If that's the case, I'll be lucky to see him once a month.

"Conway and the Sovereign Kings are all Leola can talk about these days," Ruth pipes up, speaking slowly. "If we didn't have a forty-year relationship keeping us together and Conway was several decades older, I'd be worried she would leave me for him. I wouldn't blame her. He is sex on a stick with those tattoos and that chiseled jaw of his. Plus, he's rich to boot."

"Now who's the one pining over an unavailable man," Leola says. "Don't worry, dear, I only have eyes for you." She gives Ruth's hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Good," Ruth says with a crooked smile.

"I'm glad we're all in agreement that Conway is taken—by me," I interject with a chuckle.

"So, what's the verdict? Did you give Conway an answer?" Leola asks.

"I told him yes," I reply after a few seconds of making them wait, smiling widely. "Are you sure this is something you're both up for? I'd like nothing more than to have

everyone I love all together, but I don't want you to feel pressured to do something out of obligation to me."

"Sweetheart, since when have I ever let someone *make* me do anything?" Leola questions with a hint of attitude. "Ruth and I are thrilled for this next chapter in your life, and we wouldn't miss it for the world, would we?" She turns to Ruth for confirmation.

"Not a chance. Besides, Conway promised we could play bingo at least twice a week while we're there," Ruth exclaims.

Of course he did.

"The most important question is, do *you* want this?" Leola asks me.

"Yes, I do," I state without skipping a beat.

I want this more than anything.

"It's settled then," Leola replies. "We're going to Vegas."

I'm standing on Lennon's front porch with a container of Leola's famous molasses spice cookies. When I spoke to Lennon earlier, she mentioned she was going to make dessert, but the chances of it being edible are low, so I brought cookies as backup just in case.

When I was here last, Indie had just been born and Conway was getting ready to go back on tour. I was hell-bent on staying just friends, but thank god that plan backfired or we might not be together now. The very thought sends a shudder down my spine.

"You're not thinking of staying out here all night, are you?" a familiar voice asks from behind.

"Holy shit," I yelp, leaping off the ground. Luckily, I have a tight grip on the cookies or they would have gone flying.

After regaining my composure, I spin around to see Griff standing nearby.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” he says apologetically. “You were lost in thought, and I didn’t want to scare you by walking past.”

“It’s all right.” I reach for the door handle but pause when he speaks up.

“Hey, Sienna,” he says tentatively.

“Yeah?”

“For what it’s worth, Conway is lucky to have you. I might not be his biggest fan, but you’re good for him.”

“Why do you say that?”

I know Conway has treated Griff poorly over the years, and I’m genuinely surprised Griff put up with his behavior for so long. If I were in his shoes, I would have read Conway the riot act a long time ago.

“His overall mood has improved since you came along. He’s not as hot-headed as he used to be, and he’s even somewhat bearable to be around,” he adds humorously. “Hell, he even apologized to me for his outburst about the residency the other day, which he never would have done in the past. While I don’t think we’ll be friends anytime soon, your influence has made being in the band much more manageable, so thanks.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I say with a smile. “So, I hear you’re looking forward to going to Vegas.”

“Yeah. My mom’s been wanting to expand her food truck business there for a while now, so it’s the perfect opportunity for her to go for it. Hell, maybe I can finally convince her to open a restaurant while I’m there to help her.”

“That would be awesome,” I say enthusiastically. “Lennon and I will be her first customers if she does.”

“Sounds good,” he says with a grin. “Thanks, Sienna.”

“Sure thing, that’s what friends are for.”

Griff gives me a curt nod and we head inside.

He goes to the living room to play video games with Wells and Grayson. I head toward the kitchen, following the lingering scent of smoke until I find Lennon standing in front of the stovetop, staring at what looks like a solid brick of charcoal.

“What is that?” I ask, wrinkling my nose in disgust.

“You’re here.” She looks down at the box in my hands with a relieved expression. “Oh, thank god you brought dessert.” She rushes to my side, snatches the container of cookies from my hands, and artfully places them on a decorative plate.

“What was that supposed to be?” I point toward the mystery food that’s burnt to a crisp.

“Cake bars.” She frowns. “I put them in the oven before laying Indie down for bed and forgot to set the timer. Fortunately, Emerson got back before any damage was done.”

The charred cake pan contradicts that statement.

“I mean it, Lennon, this was the last straw,” Conway interjects, stepping inside from the back patio where Emerson is grilling steaks. “I’m having an automatic shut-off device installed in the oven.”

“Conway, that’s—”

“Or I’ll make sure Emerson bans you from cooking altogether. It’s an easy choice if you ask me.”

“You’re a killjoy.” Lennon pouts as she goes back to fussing with the cookies, taking one for herself.

“There you are,” Conway says to me, his face lighting up with a grin.

“Here I am,” I reply lamely.

A swarm of butterflies flutters in my stomach when he leans in to place a chaste kiss on my mouth.

“I missed you,” he murmurs against my lips.

“I missed you too.”

I take a moment to appreciate his tattooed and muscular biceps, accentuated by his T-shirt. Damn, I swear he somehow got more attractive since I saw him this morning. Either that or my libido is in overdrive. It’s been a week since we’ve had sex, and I don’t think I can hold out much longer. Unfortunately, I don’t think Lennon would appreciate me dragging her brother away for a quickie in the middle of the party.

“Oh, Conway,” Lennon interrupts my daydream about fucking her brother. Thank god she can’t read my mind. “I almost forgot to tell you that the city council chair called me earlier and said we’re all set for the demolition the day after tomorrow. Please tell me you’re bringing popcorn. We can’t do this without it.”

Conway gives Lennon a sideways glance, clearly not pleased that she’s brining this up right now.

Whatever *this* is.

“Demolition?” I ask with a puzzled expression.

Lennon opens her mouth to speak, but Conway beats her to the punch.

“The strip club where our mom Lulu used to work closed down, and the place has been abandoned ever since. It turns out the owner has been trying to sell the property for years, so Lennon made a few calls, and he sold it to us for cheap. It’s all

happened really fast, but we're having the building torn down."

"How long have you two been working on this project?"

"Since last night," Lennon chimes in.

"I'm sorry, what?" My mouth gapes open in shock. "How did you do all that in twenty-four hours?"

"I'm very motivated," Lennon beams. "And when it comes to situations like this, money does most of the talking."

"I see."

I shouldn't be surprised by the things the Danvers siblings do anymore, but it never ceases to amaze me what they manage to get done in a day.

"What are you planning to build there?"

"The city is working on a revitalization project in the area and has approved our proposal to put in a nonprofit community center," Conway says, clearly excited about the project.

"It was my idea," Lennon chimes in. "We'll offer after-school programs for kids, organize events for the elderly, and provide resources for those who need assistance. And the best part is that we found a fitness center in Vegas that's being shut down because of mismanagement, so once we finalize the purchase of that property, we'll convert it into another center."

"Wow, that's fantastic," I utter in disbelief. "You're going to help a lot of people."

"I told you she'd love the idea," Lennon says gleefully to Conway.

"I knew she would, but I wanted to wait until we started renovations on the Las Vegas location before we told her."

“Well, your timeline has just been accelerated, so you’d better go ahead and ask her before I do,” Lennon threatens.

“Ask me what?” I chime in.

“We’re not having this conversation here,” Conway says through clenched teeth as he walks over to me and grabs my hand. “Come on.”

“Don’t take too long,” Lennon calls out from the kitchen. “Dinner will be ready soon.”

Conway pulls me down the hall, leading us into a spacious bedroom. One of his lyric journals is on the nightstand and a leather jacket is slung over the chair in the corner. This must be the room he sleeps in whenever he stays here.

“Sienna?” His gaze stays fixed on me.

“Yeah?”

“Lennon and I want you to run the after-school programs at the community center in Las Vegas since it’ll be the first one up and running. And when the center opens in L.A., you can transfer to that location if we don’t extend our residency past the six months.”

“I’m sorry... what?” I assume I must have heard him wrong.

“You’re going to run the after-school programs,” he announces, switching tactics. “You and Lennon will also be in charge of interviewing and hiring the Center Directors for both locations, so you can choose who you work with. I do have to warn you, I’m told the pay is pretty shitty, since it’s a non-profit and all.”

Lennon and Conway both know that I’ve always wanted to work with kids, but never in a million years did I think I’d get a chance like this. The money doesn’t matter to me, and Conway knows that. If I accept this position, I could make a

difference and touch people's lives which is all I've ever wanted.

Conway's face turns pale when I don't reply. "We can make the position part-time if you're worried about the workload, and if you've changed your mind and would rather not work while you're going to school, that's fine too."

I gently place my hand on his arm in reassurance. "Of course I want the job. It's just a tad overwhelming to wrap my head around it all. This is my dream job and I can't believe this is really happening." I flash him a broad smile. "Do the centers have a name yet?"

"We were thinking The Cartwright Community Center to honor Ruth and Leola and the positive impact they had on so many kids during their years of teaching."

"Really?" I whisper into his chest, my voice shaking as I hold back tears.

"Yeah, Lennon and I agreed it was the best choice."

"Well, if that's the case, it means we have to host weekly bingo nights," I say lightheartedly.

"Absolutely," he agrees.

"Danvers, I love you," I say, gazing up at him.

"I'm going to kiss you now."

"Thank fuck," I murmur.

"God, I love that dirty mouth of yours."

Conway grips my chin with his thumb and index finger, pressing his lips to mine, devouring me with a primal kiss that's rough and demanding. My hands go to his neck, tangling in his hair as he fucks my mouth with his tongue. Nothing compares to his scorching hot touch, and I'm consumed by the comfort I feel being secured in his arms.

The moment he withdraws, I'm left dazed, and he steadies me by holding on to my elbow.

“As much as I wish I could fuck you right now, we'd better get back out there before Lennon sends out a search party.”

“Do we have to?” I mutter in disappointment.

“I'm afraid so,” he says. “But I'll make it up to you soon.”

“Promise?”

“You couldn't stop me if you tried.”

As we leave the room, I let out a sigh of relief, reassured that my daily horoscope proved to be accurate.

Your morning might start with uncertainty and leave you wondering what your future holds. Trust that things will fall into place by sundown, Virgo. Find the answers you seek in the form of simple solutions. Remember, there is more than one correct way. Your choice is always the right one if you believe it to be so. Do what is best for you and spend time at home with someone you love tonight.

CONWAY

LENNON AND I SIT ON the curb across the parking lot, her arm looped through mine.

She tips the bucket of popcorn in my direction and I grab a handful, plopping a few pieces into my mouth while my eyes remain locked on the scene unfolding in front of us.

The excavator roars to life, and Lennon squeezes my arm as we watch the massive machine tear apart the dilapidated building. A sense of relief washes over me as the place that gave rise to my nightmares, the cause of countless sleepless nights and haunted memories, is now reduced to nothing but a pile of rubble.

It was a relief to confide in Lennon when she found me in the closet. The shackles that once chained me have been broken, setting me free. I'm learning there is power in allowing those closest to me to share my burdens, and my only regret is not doing it sooner. I even took Lennon's advice and scheduled a therapy appointment, figuring it's worth a try.

Construction on the community center will begin next month and the renovations for the one in Las Vegas will be completed before our residency starts. Lennon's enthusiastic about having a project for her and Sienna to work on together and to bring me the closure I didn't realize I needed.

The Sovereign Kings made the first donation for the community centers. However, Lennon is already planning a fall fundraiser to get additional donations from the most influential figures in Hollywood. What's the point of being famous if we can't leverage our network for the greater good?

“I’ve never properly thanked you,” Lennon says, breaking the silence and leaning her head against my shoulder.

“For what?”

“For saving me,” she states. “As a kid, I always thought I was lucky to have an older brother who indulged in playing make-believe with me. It wasn’t until I got older that I realized you had no choice. But it never stopped you from doing everything to guarantee my happiness. I wouldn’t be the person I am today without you, Con.”

Knowing that I made a difference in Lennon’s life, that my sacrifices were worth it, outweighs all the suffering I went through as a kid. We’re lucky to have found a family of our choosing who love us unconditionally, and I couldn’t be more grateful for that.

“We’re family, Len. I’ll always have your back,” I promise.

“Same here.”

“Are you getting excited for the upcoming move to Las Vegas?” I shift the conversation to a lighter topic.

Lennon straightens up with a smile on her face. “I can’t wait. Sienna and I are going to have so much fun while the band is busy getting ready for the residency,” she says enthusiastically.

“You do realize she’s coming to be with me, don’t you?”

“Whatever you say,” Lennon teases. “We all know who her favorite Danvers sibling is.”

“Damn right we do.”

“You know you have me to thank for your relationship, right?” Lennon says in a snarky tone.

“How’s that?” This should be good coming from Lennon.

“Sienna was my friend first. You never would have had a chance with her if it weren’t for me.”

She has a valid point, but something tells me the universe would have intervened to make sure Sienna and I found each other.

“She was your friend first, but she’s mine now,” I declare.

“Since when did you become such a romantic,” Lennon teases.

“I’m not,” I grumble.

Only for Sienna.

“Oh, come on, you’re nothing but a big ole softy,” Lennon taunts, playfully slugging me in the arm.

“You’re going to pay for that,” I warn her.

With a mischievous grin, I tickle her sides and she bursts into a mix of laughter and tears. When she finally evades my grasp, she bolts from her seat on the curb and sprints toward the car.

“I was wrong,” she hollers over her shoulder. “You’re nothing but a bully.” She sticks out her tongue in defiance.

“Ever the drama queen,” I mumble as I trail behind her.

“Sienna?” I call her name in a hushed tone.

I survey the room and stop short when I spot her in the corner, seated in the rocking chair, gently cradling a sleeping Indie. She’s softly humming the chorus of “Love is a Savage” as she rocks back and forth.

She knows our song by heart.

It’s always been a source of pride to hear fans sing along to the songs I’ve written, but to see the woman I love humming

one to our goddaughter... yeah, that takes my happiness to a whole new level.

Seeing Sienna with Indie has me looking forward to our future. We'll have kids someday, but there's no need to rush. Countless adventures await us, and I look forward to all the memories we'll make together.

When Sienna spots me standing in the doorway, she presses her finger to her lips. Once she settles Indie in her crib, she joins me in the hallway, the baby monitor in hand.

"How did it go?" she questions.

I asked her to join Lennon and me for the demolition, but she insisted that just the two of us should go, saying it was important for our sibling bonding, and it turns out she was right.

"Really well. The place is nothing but a heap of debris now," I say.

"I'm glad to hear it." She smiles. "Where's Lennon?"

"I dropped her off at the restaurant to meet Emerson. They're going straight to the hotel after dinner."

"That's great. They deserve to make a night of it."

Tour starts up again in a couple days, and Lennon coerced Sienna and me to watch Indie while she and Emerson went on a date. I agreed on the condition that they stay in a hotel and don't come home until morning. I'm not missing out on my chance to have sex with Sienna. It's been over a week, and I'm not waiting any longer.

"Are you ready to go to bed?"

"I'm not tired," she murmurs against my chest.

"Do you want to take a bath?"

"A bath?" she asks, pulling back a bit and tilting her head.

“You have a problem with that?” I challenge, joking with her.

“Of course not, lead the way.” She waves toward my bedroom.

In a playful mood, I sweep her off her feet, carrying her over my shoulder.

“Conway,” she squeals.

“Hush or you’ll wake Indie up,” I scold her.

The last thing I need is to be cockblocked by my niece.

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SIENNA

CONWAY CARRIES ME TO THE large ensuite bathroom and places me on the marble countertop, kissing the tip of my nose.

“Stay right there while I start the bath.” He pauses. “Is that okay with you?”

I nod my agreement. I didn’t think he was serious, but I figure he won’t be able to resist taking things further once we’re naked.

He goes to the freestanding tub and turns on the faucet, dropping a lavender bath bomb into the rising water. I watch with bated breath as he waits until it’s full, nodding once when the water’s reached the perfect level.

When he finally redirects his attention to me, I keep my eyes fixed on him, silently urging him to come closer. His heated gaze locks on me and I let out a shuddered exhale as he advances toward me, his determination evident.

He’d better do more than look, because I’m all keyed up and need his hands on me soon.

Conway positions himself between my legs, his all-encompassing presence sending a shiver down my spine. He firmly grips my hip with one hand, tilting my chin with the other. His chocolate brown eyes blink back at me, mirroring the longing in my own, conveying our deep-seated desire.

“I love you, Ace.” The declaration spills freely from his lips. “You own my heart and soul, and I’ll spend the rest of my life showing you how much you mean to me. You’re mine, now and forever.”

This isn’t the first time he’s said those three little words, but whenever I hear them, it’s a joyful reminder that this is my

reality. I'm with a man who loves me unconditionally, who I know will always cherish and treat me right. It turns out Conway was my *dream man* after all.

"I love you too, Danvers," I whisper. "I always will."

"You remember when I fucked you on the plane?" he asks, gently brushing a piece of hair from my face.

"As if I could forget."

"I fucked your tight cunt with a vibrator until you were dripping on the sheets, and when that wasn't enough, I drove my cock deep inside your pussy. And then you screamed my name while you came. Does that ring any bells?"

"Yes," I pant, wet just thinking about it.

Conway leans in to nibble the shell of my ear. "Are you turned on, Ace? Do you remember what it feels like to be full of my cock as you cry out in ecstasy?" he murmurs in a teasing tone.

"I fucking love your cock," I announce.

"And I fucking love your dirty mouth."

He plants a chaste kiss on my lips before stepping back, and I groan in protest.

"Don't worry, Ace." He chuckles. "You'll get what you want soon enough." He stands up straight, a sly smirk plastered on his face. He damn well knows he's tormenting me and is enjoying it far too much for my liking.

"Let's get you out of these clothes," he says.

He lifts my right arm, pulling it through the sleeve of my sweater before repeating the same process with my left. He drags the shirt over my head, tossing it in the corner. His hands are back on me within seconds as he unclasps my bra, but I'm sorely disappointed when he doesn't pay my breasts any attention.

Instead, he gently grabs my wrists, tugging me to a standing position, and effortlessly pops open the button of my jeans, pulling each pant leg down until they pool around my ankles. He traces his fingers up my thigh until he gets to my panties, dragging them down my legs.

I can't stand the clinical way he's undressing me when what I want is for him to tear my clothes off and fuck me into oblivion. I'll lose my mind if he doesn't give me more—and fast.

“Danvers,” I whine. “I *need* you.”

“Be a good girl and take what I give you,” he orders.

I inhale deeply as he strips out of his clothes, his eyes glued to mine the whole time. I'm practically drooling when he takes his shirt off, getting a front-row seat to his perfectly sculpted abs.

Once he's naked, he braces himself over me on his forearms and pushes inside in a single, deep thrust, his patience long gone.

Finally.

“It's been too fucking long since I've been inside this perfect cunt,” Conway says in a guttural tone. “I'm never leaving.”

I wrap my hands around his neck, tangling my fingers in his hair as he impales me in quick, frenzied thrusts. I moan in delight, savoring the fact that I'm stuffed full of his dick.

“More, Danvers. I need more.”

His eyes grow wide at my plea and he grips my chin with his hand while he relentlessly pounds into me.

“Who do you belong to?”

“You,” I mewl.

“That’s right, baby. And who owns your pleasure?”

“You. Always you.”

“Damn straight. Now beg me to give you more again.”

“Give me more, Danvers, please,” I rush out, desperate for relief.

He reaches down and alternates between flicking and rolling my clit with his thumb and forefinger, and soon we’re both barreling toward our release.

“I think I’m going to…”

“Be my good girl and come, Ace,” he commands.

I throw my head back as my orgasm crashes over me, riding the euphoric wave for as long as I can. Conway holds me close as we both come down from our euphoric state.

“You’re a fucking vision when you come.” He looks down at me with adoration.

“You don’t look so bad yourself after you’ve fucked me hard,” I tease.

“You and that damn dirty mouth.” He peppers kisses along my collarbone before resting his head on my shoulder, shifting his attention to the tub where the water’s no doubt ran cold.

“Fuck, I promised you a bath,” he mutters before he slowly pulls out of me.

Once he’s refilled it, he helps me into the piping hot water. I welcome the accompanying sting, letting the heat soak through my tense muscles. The smell of lavender envelops the room with a sense of tranquility.

I lean back against Conway’s chest as I revel in this perfect moment between us.

Every muscle in my body relaxes as his lips graze my shoulder. He presses featherlight kisses against each freckle as

he whispers in my ear, "I'm never letting you go, Ace."

"And I'm never letting *you* go, Danvers," I promise.

I break into a goofy grin as I remember my daily horoscope, pleased that it's accurate once again.

Your daydreaming often provides you with an out-of-body experience, Virgo. Your romantic nature wants to escape to a world of its own. Don't hesitate to take a giant leap of faith and follow your dreams. You deserve to shine bright and stand in the spotlight. Plan a romantic encounter with the special person in your life in the evening.

I've always known the spotlight would burn bright, but I've learned that Conway Danvers burns brighter.

EPILOGUE

CONWAY

THE SOVEREIGN KINGS ARE BACK on *The Daybreak Show* in New York, marking one year since we were here last. The same day Sienna Cartwright changed the course of my life when she refused my proposition for a one-night stand.

I anxiously pace the length of the dressing room, my nerves hitting an all-time high. My mouth is dry and my palms are sweaty—an unprecedented reaction for me. I don't usually get nervous before a performance, but this one in particular is undeniably the most important to date, and everything has to go off without a hitch. If I don't get this right, I'll never hear the end of it.

I don't pay any attention to the closet in the corner, as it no longer has a hold over me. Thanks to Sienna, my pre-performance ritual is far different than it was a year ago. Today's the exception since I needed her somewhere else this morning.

Right on cue, my phone buzzes with a text from Lennon telling me it's showtime. I take a deep breath as I head to the door. Once I do this, there's no going back. Things will never be the same.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

I don't wait another second before stepping out of my dressing room. I glance around, a grin tugging at my lips when I see Sienna standing at in the exact same spot she was the day I approached her last year.

She's trying to get inside a dressing room she thinks is mine, and her forehead scrunches when she finds it locked.

I stride toward her and when she hears me coming, she whips her head in my direction, her eyes widening.

She's wearing a sleeveless, light blue tulle dress that hugs her figure perfectly. Her new shoulder-length haircut is styled straight today and her captivating green eyes shine brightly.

Sienna tracks my every move as I approach, struggling to keep her emotions at bay.

"You look stunning," I tell her, repeating the same words I did a year ago. Only this time, I'm saying them to the woman I love, not someone I'm approaching for a one-night stand. "The last time we were in this spot, you told me I'd be the lucky one to spend the night with you." I reach out and grab her hands. "The problem is, I don't want one night. I want forever."

Sienna's breath hitches when I drop to one knee, keeping her hands securely in mine.

"Danvers, what are—"

"Ace, will you please just let me do this the right way?"

Her head bobs up and down, unconsciously tapping her foot on the ground. Despite her best efforts, she's quickly losing her patience.

To be fair, she's never had much to begin with.

I reach into my pocket to retrieve the halo engagement ring with an emerald in the center to match her pendant necklace. The ring is understated yet brilliant, like the woman who will wear it.

"If I were a gentleman, I'd ask you to marry me. I'd give you all the reasons why you should say yes. Instead, I'm kneeling before you to tell you that we're going to spend the rest of our lives together. We'll have it all—a house to call our own, lazy weekends at home, crazy adventures traveling the world, and arguments followed by mind-blowing make-up sex.

And every morning, I'll wake up with you in my arms, wondering how I got to be the luckiest man in the world."

I slide the ring onto Sienna's finger and she sinks into my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck and enveloping me in a warm embrace.

"We're getting married," she utters tentatively, testing the words on her tongue.

"Yes, we are," I affirm as I caress her cheek.

"I love you, Danvers."

"I love you too, Ace."

I wanted to propose the day she agreed to move to Vegas with me, but I had to wait for the perfect opportunity. I knew she didn't want a grand or public proposal. The longer I thought about it, I knew the place where it all began made the most sense.

I'd like nothing more than to whisk her away to our hotel and celebrate our engagement in private. Unfortunately, that'll have to wait since some very special people are eager to share this moment with us.

"You can come out now," I call over Sienna's shoulder.

In a matter of seconds, Lennon comes into view, Indie cradled in her arms, followed by Grayson and Wells. Emerson is next, pushing Ruth in her wheelchair with Leola by her side. Jay trails behind, beaming with pride, a reminder that he's an integral part of our family too.

Griff stands at the back, away from the group, and I give him a nod of acknowledgment. We might not be friends, but Emerson was right—he's not so bad to have around once you get to know him.

I turn my attention back to Sienna, grabbing her hand so that we can greet everyone together.

“I can’t believe you’re all here,” she says through tears.

“We’re honored to be a part of this moment,” Leola chimes in. “It’s about damn time you made it official,” she says.

“Amen,” Lennon agrees.

Sienna might have gotten her low-key proposal surrounded by those she loves, but the celebration to follow will be anything but. I’m treating everyone to dinner at a Michelin-starred restaurant. Then, I’m taking Sienna to the most luxurious suite at the Ritz, and tomorrow, I’m whisking her away to Hawaii for two weeks as an engagement present.

I don’t think she’ll agree, but it doesn’t matter. She’s mine, and I’ll spend the rest of my life spoiling her to my heart’s content.

Not ready to say goodbye to Conway and Sienna? Click the link below to read an extended epilogue for *The Spotlight*.

READ HERE: <https://bookhip.com/VZPGACT>

Thank you for taking the time to read *The Spotlight*. If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review on your preferred platform(s) of choice. It’s the best compliment I can receive as an author.

LEOLA'S CHEWY MOLASSES SPICE COOKIES

MY MOM CAME UP WITH this recipe, and makes these cookies whenever I come home for a visit.

Ingredients

- 2 cups flour
- 1 ½ tsp baking soda
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ½ tsp nutmeg
- ½ tsp salt
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 ½ sticks (¾ cup) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 large egg
- ¼ cup molasses

Ingredients for Rolling

- ½ cup sugar

Directions

1. Whisk together the dry ingredients.
2. Combine the wet ingredients.
3. Mix the dry and wet ingredients together.
4. Roll cookie dough into balls.
5. Generously roll each cookie dough ball in sugar.

6. Bake at 350 degrees for 10-12 minutes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANN EINERSON IS THE AUTHOR of imperfect love stories that will keep you invested until the very last page.

Ann writes stubborn heroines who aren't afraid to put their moody men in their place. Each of Ann's books features a found family, an ode to her love of travel, and serves plenty of angst and spice. Her novels are inspired by the ample supply of sticky notes she always has on hand to jot down the stories that live rent-free in her mind.

When she's not writing, Ann enjoys spoiling her chatty pet chickens, listening to her dysfunctional playlists, and going for late-night runs on the treadmill. She lives in Michigan with her husband.



ALSO BY ANN EINERSON

If You Give a Grump a Holiday Wishlist—a small town, age gap, fake dating, billionaire romance coming Dec 7th, 2023.

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