

A black and white photograph of a man with a beard and a ponytail, wearing a leather jacket, sitting on a piano keyboard. The background is a blurred piano keyboard.

ROCK STAR
series
BOOK 3

TOO LITTLE
TOO *Soon*

TAMI LUND

Too Little Too Soon

ROCK STAR
BOOK THREE

TAMI LUND



TOO LITTLE TOO SOON

Rock Star Series Book 3

by Tami Lund

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About this book

Travis Clutcher, drummer for Demigoddess Revival, the band that's poised to be the next greatest rock band of all time, has had a rough go of it since pursuing his dream of becoming a rock 'n roll god.

Not the least of which involved the stalker he picked up last summer, when his band first exploded onto the scene.

That's all behind him now, and he has a new rule.

No relationships.

Especially with someone associated with his band.

Ava Hearsy just got fired from a job that had been her whole life. And honestly, she's okay with that. It was time. Past time, really.

She's ready to reconnect with her two sisters, Maria and Holly, who are both working in the rock 'n roll industry, and she's finally ready to kick back and have fun.

First order of business? A one-night stand. Well, more of an afternoon delight, really. Arguably the best few hours of her life.

Next? Go to her first rock concert.

Where she discovers her one-night stand is the drummer for the band. The band her sister works for.

The band she's been invited to go on tour with.

The band whose drummer has made it perfectly clear that from now on, they can only ever be *just friends*.

This book contains hot rock stars, a determined-to-stay-single drummer, a career-oriented woman who needs to cut loose, a rock 'n roll stalker, lots of flirting and funny banter, a second chance at love, and plenty of steam.

Rock Star Series, in reading order:

Before the Band

Why Can't We Be

A Way Out

Too Little Too Soon

All Keyed Up

Prologue

Rock Me Magazine

The Year in Rock, Demigoddess Revival Style

by Oliver Croll

December 31

The sensual, steamy rock ballad “Desire” is still sitting at number one on the Billboard Top 100 charts today, the last day of what has arguably been a pretty sensational year for new-on-the-scene rock band, Demigoddess Revival.

Was it really only eleven months ago when vocalist Lacey Stokes and bassist Parker Henley showed up in LA and convinced guitarist Oz Garcia to stop wasting his talent playing weddings and quinceañeras and join them in their quest to become the biggest rock band of the century? All they needed was to snag unknown (yet wildly talented) keyboardist, Cash Torrence and everybody’s once-favorite drummer, Travis Clutcher, and the deal with giant recording studio Silver Lining Productions was practically foretold in the tea leaves.

That’s right, folks. For those of you who have been living under a rock since May, a surprise double wedding (Holly McGregor and Sam Stokes from Panic Station as well as Lacey Stokes and Parker Henley from Demigoddess Revival—God, what we all wouldn’t have given to be on that super-secret guest list!) propelled Demigoddess Revival into Silver Lining Production’s orbit. And that’s when we learned Travis Clutcher was back on the scene.

Let me say it again: he’s back, baby!

Travis's first band, Dog Daze, was one of this reporter's firsts, too. As a brand-new reporter for *Rock Me* magazine, I got to cover the Rock the Summer festival. And while I interviewed a dozen bands (including Panic Station, who were also just beginning their path toward becoming one of the biggest rock bands in the world), Dog Daze stood out to me. Most notably, their drummer, Travis, shined as ultra-talented and—dare I admit it now?—potentially too good for what he'd settled for as bandmates.

Looks like this reporter was right, eh? What can I say; I call 'em like I see 'em, and Travis Clutcher definitely fits better with Demigoddess Revival than he ever did with Dog Daze.

CHAPTER

One

GETTING FIRED on New Year's Eve had to be some seriously bad juju. Deciding to walk the six blocks to her New York City apartment, carrying a surprisingly small box containing a decade's worth of personal effects because she didn't want to stand in front of the building and wait for a cab while the person who ended her career watched out the window?

Honestly, that was just pride talking.

Unfortunately, Ava Hearsy had pride in spades.

Shifting the box full of crap she was probably going to throw away anyway to one arm, she dug her key out of her purse and shoved it into the lock on her fifth-floor apartment, giving it a little shimmy so the door would actually open.

Maybe, now that she had time, she'd follow up with the super and have that lock replaced instead of just dealing with it like she had for ten years now.

She refused to dwell on the fact that she'd lived in the city for nearly a decade and a half, had earned an impressive salary at a prestigious graphic design firm for thirteen years, and still lived in a nondescript, shoebox-sized rental in a building with a single camera at the entrance as security.

One existential crisis at a time, *thankyouverymuch*.

As soon as she stepped over the threshold, she kicked off those stupid four-inch stilettos and sighed blissfully when the pads of her feet touched smooth, cool porcelain tile. She was

never wearing those shoes again, which wouldn't be difficult to do, since walking through dirty slush left over from the last snowfall had ruined them anyway.

Maybe it was time to reevaluate her life. Okay, okay, it was past time. But honestly, she'd been happy.

Or she'd been working really, really hard to convince herself she was happy. And she'd been successful at it.

Mostly.

Dropping the box unceremoniously on the tile next to the ruined shoes, Ava shed her coat, hung it in the closet not even large enough to accommodate enough variety of outerwear to get one through all the seasons in this state, and then made her way to the kitchen.

Ava came from money, which had helped get her into a fancy art school here in the city. All she'd needed was the in; after that, her talent had rolled out the red carpet. She hadn't even graduated before she'd been offered the high-profile graphic design job at Demetri's firm. Even though she ran away from her roots, she still had a bone-deep belief that accumulating a lot of money would make all the pain go away.

News flash: it hadn't.

Neither had distancing herself from her family. To make matters worse, after her grandmother passed away two summers ago, her sisters both had revelations that fighting their upbringing wasn't doing them any favors, and now they were both happy and loving life.

And hanging out together on the regular.

Maria had finally divorced that wet blanket she'd married straight out of college and was now dating what she insisted was a super-sweet guy who would walk over hot coals if he thought it would bring a smile to her lips.

How freaking romantic.

Their other sister, Holly, had just gotten married this past spring to a guy who had been her best friend when they were in college. Ava recalled meeting him at her grandmother's

funeral; even to her untrained eye, it was obvious that Sam had been head over heels in love with Holly.

Ava should have gone to their wedding.

She wasn't interested in getting married—ugh, no, thank you. The idea of sharing living space with another person? Yuck.

However, she wouldn't mind loving life. Even just liking it would be nice.

Oh, and hanging out with her sisters for the first time since they were kids would be cool too.

She made herself a Manhattan with practiced hands. She'd started drinking them in college because of the name—yes, cue the eye roll—and continued drinking them because they were delicious and she made a killer one, and this morning, she needed a stiff drink. The fact that it was barely 9:00 a.m. be damned.

Cocktail in hand, she cut through the living room to the bedroom and shed her severe suit, leaving it in a pile on the floor. It wasn't like she was going to need it again anytime soon.

After changing into the single pair of yoga pants she owned and a fitted pullover with Holly's band's logo scrawled across the front, Ava returned to the living room and wandered over to stand in front of the two tall, narrow windows that overlooked an alley and a sliver of the city. If she stood here long enough, she'd likely see something exciting occur, despite how limited the view. This was New York, after all.

Demetri's dismissal this morning had come as a shock, yes, because she was the highest producing designer in the firm. Until a year and a half ago, she'd lived and breathed her job.

Going home to Washington for the funeral had rattled her. She rarely returned to the nest. Each time she did, nothing at all had changed, which reminded her anew why she'd moved all the way across the country in the first place.

This time, however, her sisters had both broken from the mold, had not allowed their mother to mentally browbeat them into submission. Even Maria had rebelled. She was the one who had always been a rules follower, and as far as it looked from the outside, had formed herself into a carbon copy of their matriarch.

Now she was dating a guitar player.

That sister was even more shocking than Holly, who had run away to LA at eighteen, changed her name, and formed her own rock band, which was hugely successful and only getting hotter. Not a single fan had a clue she was tied to the powerful and influential Hearsys until Grandmother's funeral, and even then, nobody had cared.

Because outside of their own circle, the Hearsy name really meant a whole lot of nothing.

Probably why their mother never left her little kingdom up there, just outside of Seattle. She couldn't act like the queen of the freaking world if nobody knew who she was.

Ava glanced down at the cluster of half-melted ice cubes in her glass. Time for another.

Since she hadn't eaten breakfast, she was already feeling a slight buzz, and damn it, she was perfectly okay with that. Had she ever gotten well and truly drunk in her life? No, no she had not.

She'd never been fired before, either.

Today was a day of firsts. Maybe this was a wake-up call.

Maybe it was time to seek that happiness she was finally ready to admit had been eluding her for the last thirteen years. For thirty-five years, in truth.

God, what a depressing thought.

The second drink went down easier than the first. By the third, she was curled up on the couch, cybershopping. Given her recent jobless situation, it probably wasn't the wisest use of her time, except she had been a partner in the firm, so they were going to have to buy her out. Once the ink was dry and

the money transferred, she'd be sitting pretty, for a while at least.

Long enough to take a vacation before she started a new job search.

She had never taken a vacation in her entire adult life.

How sad was that?

She made a fourth drink and switched to travel websites instead. Where would she go? What had she always wanted to do?

Holy crap, she had no clue. She'd never allowed herself the opportunity to think about doing anything other than working. Working had kept the demons from her upbringing at bay.

If she laid on a beach somewhere, would she just think and think and think and drive herself mad?

That didn't sound fun.

She needed a vacation that would stimulate her mind, keep her busy.

Nothing she came across sounded right, and by the time the fourth drink was gone, she was too sleepy to keep scrolling. So she placed the empty glass on the coffee table, let the phone drop onto her chest, and closed her eyes.

Sleeping away the rest of this year wasn't a bad idea.

She'd start anew with the new year.

CHAPTER

Two

TRAVIS CLUTCHER HAD no problem admitting that the rock 'n roll lifestyle was fucking killer. He loved it. He never wanted to leave it.

Again.

Good thing he'd learned from his past mistakes so he'd never have to.

After he woke up on his back in a giant bed in a posh hotel room in New York City on New Year's Eve, he took his time getting his day started. Because he could.

They had a show tonight; they were ringing in the new year with 20,000 of their biggest fans at Madison Square Garden, which was about the most perfect way to celebrate New Year's Eve.

Yeah, his life was pretty much fucking perfect these days.

For some reason, while he lay there basking in all that perfection, memories from seven years ago crept into the forefront of his mind. Well before he met his current bandmates. When he'd been the drummer for a band called Dog Daze.

They'd been on their way up, too. But then he'd gone and screwed it up. He and Suzie Q.

She was a guitarist, he was a drummer, and they'd both been looking to join the rock 'n roll scene. Find a band, make it big. Live the dream.

They met at a bar in LA. Hooked up. Began hooking up on the regular. Played together in a few bands.

Even back then she'd been popping pills, but on the surface, it looked like she had it under control. And she was a great guitarist, so it was easy to overlook a habit that wasn't yet destructive.

Frustrated with readymade bands that weren't good enough to make it out of those dive clubs in the seedier part of town, Travis and Suzie decided to form their own band, hand select the other members. Do it their way.

The only time he ever popped pills with her, they'd come up with the not-at-all-brilliant idea they should get married.

Since they were in Vegas at the time, they'd been able to walk right into a cheesy ass chapel and do the deed. The whole process had taken less than an hour.

Even stoned, he'd been aware that he didn't love her, so what the fuck were they doing getting married?

It was a question he still asked himself to this day.

Especially because, even though they weren't in love, he'd assumed they'd treat the marriage like they were partners.

Hell, she hadn't even treated the band with the respect it deserved, so why would he have believed she'd honor their wedding vows?

As soon as their band became popular and started playing the summer festival circuit, the cheating began.

She, not he.

Unsurprisingly, their constant squabbles—because, yeah, he was dumb enough to take her back after he caught her red-handed—took a toll on the band. Things started getting sloppy. Missed practices, messed up songs when they were on stage.

The best thing he ever did was divorce Suzie. The second best and yet also worst thing he ever did was walk away from that band. Suzie Q was a trainwreck happening in real time for all their fans to watch, but when he quit the band, he quit the industry for a few years there.

And he'd missed it desperately.

Now he was with a new band, and so far, they were all cohesive, all got along. Yeah, Parker, the bassist, and Lacey, their lead singer, were a thing, but they weren't toxic like he and Suzie Q had been.

Like Travis figured he'd be with anyone.

Which was why he didn't do relationships. He also didn't do groupies because, ugh, he'd snagged himself a stalker last summer, and if he never had to repeat that experience again, it would be too soon.

Unfortunately, that meant he didn't get laid very often, but that was okay. He put all his blood, sweat, and tears into drumming. That was all he needed.

Like he said, his life was fucking perfect right now.

His phone pinged, and Travis snagged it off the bedside table. A text from Parker.

GOING JOGGING. Want to join me?

TRAVIS USED to be a strictly weightlifting in the gym kind of guy, but after befriending Parker, who went jogging every damn day, he'd picked up the habit himself. He wasn't as diehard as Parker, but he couldn't deny the way he felt during and after a solid pavement pounding.

Still, he fired off a snarky reply.

WE'RE in NYC in December. It's fucking cold.

TRAVIS HAD BEEN BORN and raised in Texas, and while he had zero desire to ever move back home, he doubted he could be persuaded to move someplace where it

was below sixty degrees for half the year. He'd much rather sweat his ass off jogging in ninety degree weather than feel his lungs burn from the inside as he sucked in below-freezing air.

Parker's reply was quick.

IT'S FORTY DEGREES OUTSIDE. Don't be a pussy.

TRAVIS GRINNED. He and Parker busted each other's chops all the time, all in the name of fun. When they had first formed the band, though, he'd been pretty pissed off at his now-probable best friend. Parker and Lacey had been sleeping together and hadn't told anyone else in the band. It broke Travis's cardinal rule. And he'd damn near left the band before they even got started.

FINE, he tapped out. **I'll go. Maybe I'll meet some actual pussy while we're out.**

PARKER REPLIED with an eye roll emoji.

Travis wasn't really that crude, and Parker knew it. But he had to admit, it would be nice to find a hookup for after the concert. His cock buried to the hilt inside a willing woman who understood this was only a one-time thing would be the perfect end to what had basically been a perfect year.

He admitted as much to his friend while they were jogging through Central Park.

"I'm glad I'm not single," Parker said between puffs of frigid air.

For the record, it was colder than forty out here. If Travis had taken the time to actually look at a weather app before heading out, he'd not have joined his buddy. But now that he

was here, he could admit that the brisk air woke him up and got those endorphins charging probably even better than the hot, dry air he dealt with when they jogged in LA, which was currently home base for the various band members.

“I’m glad I am single,” Travis shot back. “Sure, you and Lacey make love look vaguely interesting, but you’re an anomaly.”

A frosty cloud burst from his mouth as Parker laughed. “What about Oz and Maria?”

“Maria’s not in the band, so it’s not quite as bad, although now that she’s our PR guru, it does make me nervous. Think about her ex and his threat to take away her kid.” It had all worked out in the end, but for a minute there, Oz had thought Maria was going to leave him and go back to her old life.

After Travis and Suzie split, he’d kept tabs on her through social media, mostly because he was curious as to whether the band would be able to continue their success without him.

They should have been fine. They were a talented group of musicians, and they had been big enough to attract a solid drummer to replace him.

But Suzie continued her downward spiral, her addictions only getting worse and worse, to the point where Travis had quit following because he’d been afraid the next headline would be announcing her death via overdose.

“Maria and Oz can overcome any damn thing,” Parker said as their running shoes beat a steady rhythm through Central Park. “And her ex has settled down now. Hell, Oz dropped Riley off for her last visit because Maria had a meeting she couldn’t get out of with Silver Lining. He said Vic was totally chill. Even invited Oz to share a beer with him.”

Thank fuck Travis had never knocked up Suzie. What a mess that would have been, especially given her inability to stay away from substances that were bad for her.

“I know you were burned, man,” Parker said, “but relationships aren’t all bad. Look at it this way: you can’t do any worse.”

Travis snorted, the cold seeping up his nose and damn near freezing his brain for a minute. Fuck, he hated winter. “You’re right,” he agreed. “I can’t do any worse, so long as I stick to one-night stands.”

Whether he liked her relationship with Oz was beside the point; Maria was a fucking fantastic PR person. She’d grown their success so fast in the last six months that Travis couldn’t help but be impressed. He just hoped like hell she and Oz stayed together, because he didn’t think there was a better publicist out there.

Parker shook his head. “That’s what you said before that chick started stalking you last summer.”

“Yeah, well, I only hook up with women who have no clue who I am.”

“You’re the drummer for one of the fastest chart-climbing rock bands in the world. That’s got to be a pretty small number.”

That was true. Which sucked. But it was better than the alternative.

Someone shouted his name, and Travis glanced behind him. Oh shit. They were being followed by a cluster of fans decked out in Demigoddess Revival swag.

“Very small number,” Parker reiterated and put on a burst of speed. Travis followed his lead toward their hotel.

An hour later, Travis was showered and ready. He wasn’t dressed for the concert—not in a pair of slacks and button-down shirt under a cable-knit sweater. First of all, he’d sweat his balls off in this getup—if their fans didn’t laugh him off the stage.

Besides, they didn’t have to be at Madison Square Garden for another four hours.

But Travis was ready to go out in public without being recognized. He added a navy blue fisherman’s cap and hit the streets of New York.

While he wouldn't want to live in this city, he certainly appreciated all it had to offer to tourists such as himself. The food. The people watching. The anonymity. Hell, he probably could go out without a disguise; if he hung out in the right places, there was bound to be some more famous movie star out and about who would overshadow him in an instant.

The first thing Travis did was head over to Brooklyn for some kickass soul food. LA had a lot going for it in the food department, but he had never found a soul food restaurant that could stand up to the one he'd discovered in this borough.

As soon as he tugged open the door, the scent of good old-fashioned fried chicken made his mouth water. Who needed regular sex when there was soul food to devour?

He was seated at the last remaining table and placed his order: fried chicken, collard greens, and macaroni and cheese—he figured he'd burned plenty of calories running from those groupies earlier—along with a bottle of Heineken.

He'd taken only a few bites when the door swung open and a woman stepped inside, paused, and swept her gaze over every person inside the restaurant, like she was judging each and every one of them.

Travis recognized the type. Wealthy, old money. Possibly famous, given the dark glasses she was still wearing despite the dimly lit interior of the restaurant.

Her wavy, chestnut hair was pulled back from her face and secured into a semi-messy bun at her nape. Her skin was dewy and clear, her lips coated with a shiny, nude gloss. She wore a pair of fitted yoga pants and a pullover under a buttoned-up wool coat.

Elegant. That's the word he'd use to describe her.

If she were remotely a stereotype, she definitely wouldn't recognize a rock 'n roll bad boy drummer. Especially dressed the way he was.

Of course, if the stereotype held, she also likely wasn't the sort to be into one-night stands, so why he was even still staring at her was beyond him.

Okay, it wasn't at all beyond him. She was fucking beautiful. It was easy to watch her while he polished off his late lunch.

He nearly choked on a chicken bone when she strode right up to his table and gazed at him through her sunglasses.

"May I join you?" she asked in a voice that wasn't at all native New Yorker.

Shit, was his first impression that far off? Was she a groupie? Damn it, his disguise had never let him down before. "Do I know you?"

She shook her head. "Not at all. It's just that I'm absolutely craving some barbeque chicken, and this restaurant is the best in the area, hands down."

"Okay." What the hell did that have to do with him?

"And I don't want to wait. And I don't want to take it to go. I'm not ready to go back to my apartment yet."

Was she for real? "So you figured you'd just ask some random stranger if you could join him?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I figured. You're clearly eating alone, and to be honest, you look like you're nearly done. I'll pick up the tab if that will help sway you."

"I don't need you to buy my lunch." He waved at the empty chair across from him. What the hell. This could be fun. And seriously, she was *not* hard on the eyes.

The server headed over with a menu, but Travis's new dining partner waved the plastic document off without looking at it and ordered barbeque chicken, tossed salad, fries, and two bottled waters. Clearly, she'd been here before.

"And another Heiny," he added before the young guy walked away.

"I thought I wasn't buying your lunch," the woman said as she started to unbutton her coat. For a moment, he was mesmerized by the way her slender, nimble fingers plucked at the material, slid the buttons out of their holes, and holy shit, he was a freak.

He shook his head and dragged his gaze to her face. “Maybe I’m buying your lunch.”

She hadn’t removed the sunglasses, yet he could tell she rolled her eyes as she pulled her coat off her shoulders.

Travis’s heart sank to his feet. The logo on her pullover. Panic Station. Sam and Holly Stokes’s band. The lead singer for Travis’s own band, Lacey, was Sam’s sister.

Chances were, if this woman was a fan of Panic Station, she was aware of Demigoddess Revival, too, since they were kicking off their joint tour with this show tonight in Madison Square Garden.

Damn it.

She glanced down at her shirt. “What? You don’t like them?”

“I do, actually. And I assume you do, too, if you’re wearing their swag.”

She shrugged and greedily twisted the cap off one of her waters the second the server handed it to her. “My sister gave me this pullover. I wouldn’t recognize their music unless you told me who it was, to be honest.”

No way. He leaned closer. “You don’t listen to rock?”

She shook her head. “Country girl. At least, as far as my musical tastes go.”

Well, hot damn. He lounged in his seat and casually took a pull from his bottle of beer. “My name’s Travis.”

“Ava. Nice to meet you.” She stretched her hand across the table. He shook it, enjoying the feel of her warm, smooth skin.

Her food arrived, and she dove in with the same gusto he’d had.

“Are you from here, or are you a tourist like me?” he asked.

She swallowed and took a drink before replying. “From the West Coast, but I’ve lived in the city for the last fourteen years. What brings you to town, Travis?”

“Work.” He didn’t like lying, but he wasn’t about to tell her who he really was. Because even though he had a feeling that one-night stands were not her thing, he couldn’t help but hope he was wrong.

One dark brow arched over the top of her sunglasses. “You’re stuck out of town over the new year?”

“There are definitely worse places to be stuck than New York City.”

“This is true.” She tore off a piece of chicken and popped it into her mouth. “I’m feeling better already.”

“Were you sick?”

“Hungover,” she corrected. “At one o’clock in the afternoon. I’ve literally never been hungover before in my life, and the first time I drink too much, it’s before noon. I guess I’m into going big or going home, huh?”

He chuckled. “Been there, done that. Did you nap?”

“I did.”

“Smart girl. After this meal, you’ll be ready to go to whatever party you’re attending tonight.”

She sat back and guzzled water. “No party. In fact, if this were a normal New Year’s Eve, I’d still be working right now. But I am turning over a new leaf, as it happens. And that includes actually going out on New Year’s Eve. My sister invited me to a concert.”

“A concert?” They obviously weren’t the only band in town, but they were playing the largest arena in the city, so chances were...

“Who you going to see?”

“This band”—she pointed at her shirt—“and another one called...” She snapped her fingers several times.

“Demigoddess Revival?” he suggested.

She pointed a finger gun at him. “That’s it.”

He took a swig of beer to try to suppress his laugh. “As a matter of fact, I am too.”

“Really?” She eyed him speculatively. “You don’t strike me as the rock concert type.”

His disguise worked. “I could say the same about you.”

“And you’d be right. She’s been bugging me for years, and I’ve never said yes. But new leaf and all that.”

The server came and swept away their dishes. Travis whipped out his card and handed it to the kid before Ava could reach for her purse.

“Oh come on, I totally invaded your space. You can’t pay for my meal,” she protested.

“Sure I can, and honestly, it was way more fun with you here. But how about you make it up to me?”

He could practically see her guard shifting up into place, so he quickly added, “Since you live here, you probably know the best dessert place in the area. Why don’t you show me, and I’ll let you treat me?”

She laughed and tugged her coat over her shoulders. “That sounds like a plan. Come on.”

CHAPTER

Three

INSTEAD OF WALKING down the block to the nearest ice cream shop, they took the train over the river to the High Line. They grabbed hot chocolates—Ava’s treat—and wandered along the walking path while they chatted about mostly superficial things.

That was perfectly fine with Ava, because a plan was formulating in her head. A crazy plan. Something she’d never in her life considered doing.

Until now.

She’d woken from her late-morning nap with a killer headache, a disgruntled tummy, and nothing but unappealing health food in her fridge. Refusing to second-guess her own choices with only half a day left in the year, she pulled on her coat and headed out the door, ending up at her favorite soul food restaurant. Barbeque chicken was exactly what she needed to soak up the result of three too many Manhattans.

She’d almost turned back around after she noted that every table was occupied, prepared to settle for a hot dog from a street vendor.

Until she’d spotted *him*. Travis. She didn’t know his last name, and she didn’t need to know. She didn’t even know what he did for a living. All she knew was, he wasn’t from the city and he was hotter than the hottest shower she’d ever taken—and she liked crazy hot showers.

Longish brown hair, vivid blue eyes, exactly enough scruff to be sexy as all get-out; he didn’t quite match the image he

was trying to portray with his preppy clothes and silly fisherman's hat. As he'd stretched across the table to shake her hand, she'd caught a glimpse of a tattoo, which, yes, nowadays meant literally nothing about one's status, but still, she could have sworn it was the logo from one of the bands she was supposed to see tonight.

She would get to ring in the new year with both of her sisters—something she hadn't done in at least twenty years. Probably more.

Ava was looking forward to making up for all those years she'd blown off her sister when Holly texted to say she had a pair of tickets with Ava's name on them if she wanted to come watch Holly's band play.

New year, new decisions, and one of those was reconnecting with both Holly and Maria. Now that she didn't have work as an excuse, it was time to see if the three of them could actually get along without the influence of their parents.

She had a feeling they could.

But first, she was going to enjoy a little harmless flirting with the hottie who was helping her forget all about what a dumpster fire her life actually was.

He'd mentioned that he traveled a lot for work, and she'd hardly been anywhere except Washington State and New York City. She'd been too busy working to do pretty much anything else.

Heck, When was the last time she'd had sex?

She half listened as Travis extolled the virtues of his buddy's place in the Ozarks and how he was seriously considering buying his own house out there on the lake; he'd been that impressed when he'd gone to his friend's wedding earlier this year.

Matt, the designer who left the firm two years ago.

That was the last guy she'd had sex with. And she'd waited until his last day to seduce him, too, so there would be no expectations, no awkwardness afterward.

“Am I that boring?”

“Huh?” Ava blinked rapidly at Travis, who, she belatedly realized, had stopped talking.

“You tuned me out. What were you thinking about?”

“Oh, it’s way too inappropriate to admit out loud.”

“I love inappropriate thoughts.” He leaned so close, his breath tickled her ear when he whispered, “Now you have to tell me.”

She wished she had a fan for her heating cheeks. She also wished he’d stay as close as he was at that moment, maybe even move close enough to nibble on the shell of her ear.

On the other hand, if she were a proper lady and changed the subject, he’d probably let it go and they’d move on to something totally innocuous.

“I was trying to remember the last time I had sex,” she admitted.

His brows shot into his hairline. She giggled and pressed her fingers to her lips.

“A beautiful and intelligent and interesting woman like you hasn’t had sex in so long you can’t remember? How is that even possible?”

Shrugging, she said, “I work too much. No time for much else.” *My priorities were messed up. I’m trying to fix that.*

“I get that. My job eats up a lot of time too. Luckily, partying is actually part of my job, so I’m doing all right.”

He grinned and winked, and she should ask what he did for a living, but she really didn’t want to know. She liked how easy he was to talk to, but he was from out of town, which meant he’d be leaving at some point, so no reason to get to know each other too well. A relationship definitely wasn’t on the agenda.

Although sex, well, that was tempting.

Very tempting.

“It’s been two years,” she blurted.

“That’s criminal,” he responded.

“I agree.”

The air between them was electric, static, heated. Possibly because he was still so close. Close enough that she could lean into him and press her lips to his.

“If you want to change that status, I’ve got a few hours before I have to be at work,” he murmured, his gaze stuck to her lips.

She swallowed.

There it was, the invitation she had been angling for. Now all she had to do was open her mouth and agree.

And why shouldn’t she? The guy was hot with a capital H-O-T. And he was funny. And down-to-earth. And they had only a few hours before he had to go to work, and after that, he’d go home to wherever he was from and she’d go to the concert and hang out with her sisters and promise herself that from this point forward, she would do things that made her happy, not things that her parents expected her to do.

Twenty-eight hundred miles away with a maximum of two visits a year and she still let them control her life.

No more.

She gently touched her fingers to the scruff on his cheek. It was surprisingly soft.

“Is the appropriate response my place or yours?” She hoped he said his; she never had people over to her apartment. It didn’t exactly fit the image she worked so hard to maintain.

“How about yours? My ban—work mates are all at the same hotel, and it could get awkward.”

That was considerate of him. If she was about to embark on her very first fling, she certainly did not need an audience.

As if pulled by an invisible force, she leaned forward and pressed a soft, tentative kiss to his lips. He responded but didn’t push for more.

“Yours then?” he whispered. She’d swear there was an undercurrent of fear that she might say no in his tone.

“Yes.”

He stood, bringing her up with him, and twined his fingers with hers. “Lead the way, sugar.”

No one had ever called her sugar before. He, on the other hand, probably called every woman he ever dated sugar. She decided not to care. It didn’t matter anyway. This was a one-night thing. Really, just a few hours this afternoon.

She took him home.

After shoving the key into the lock and rattling it like she did every single day, the door wouldn’t budge. It happened a second time. Was this a sign that she should send him back to his hotel and call it a nice try?

He gently extracted the key from her hand and worked the lock, and a moment later the door popped open. “You’re nervous,” he murmured in that rusty Texas drawl.

“I’ve never done this before,” she admitted, stepping inside and sweeping her critical gaze around the interior. It was clean—other than the ruined shoes and the box filled with her former life resting on the tiles just inside the door—but it was sparsely furnished and even less decorated. It had no personality. God, was her apartment a reflection of her, after all, and she’d only just noticed?

“Had sex?” he asked, a teasing lilt to his voice.

“With a perfect stranger,” she replied, shedding her coat and sunglasses and kicking off her boots.

He pushed the door closed and flipped the lock before hanging his fisherman’s cap on the handle. He dragged his fingers through his longish locks, setting it into delicious disarray.

She licked her lips.

Cupping her cheeks, he said, “I don’t think we are perfect strangers. I haven’t talked to someone like I’ve been talking to

you in years. There are probably less than twenty people who know more about me than you do right now.”

She felt her eyes widen.

“Ava, if you’ve changed your mind, it’s cool. I’ll take off.”

“No.” She grabbed a fistful of his shirt. “Don’t go.”

He smiled. God, the man was sexy.

“Keep talking,” she said. “Your voice is definitely turning me on.” She couldn’t believe she was being so bold even as she reveled in being so bold.

He chuckled. “True confession: when I was in high school, I deliberately worked to make my Texas twang more prominent because it got me into way more girls’ pants than I probably would have otherwise.”

She laughed. Walking backward, she pulled him along with her. “You have only a few hours, right?”

“Oh, I can make a lot happen in a few hours.”

“I’m counting on it.”

His grin spread from cheek to cheek before he reached for her, grasped her backside. Suddenly, she was in his arms, her legs wrapped around his waist.

He wasn’t even breathing hard as he carried her down the short hall to her bedroom. They came to an abrupt stop when his feet became tangled in something. Glancing down, she noted her rumpled power suit.

“Kick it out of the way. It’s just the remnants of my former life.”

He arched his brows but didn’t ask. Instead, he turned toward the bed. She half expected him to toss her unceremoniously onto the soft surface, but he surprised her by laying her down gently. First, he flipped off his cable-knit sweater, then unlatched the buttons on his shirt, one at a time, slowly. Her gaze tracked each step of the process.

“When you unbuttoned your coat in that restaurant, that was the point I decided I wanted to sleep with you,” he rasped.

She glanced up at his face. “Really?”

He nodded. “Sexy as fuck.” Rolling the shirt over his shoulders, he let it drop to the floor and climbed onto the bed.

“No, wait,” she said as he started to lower himself on top of her.

She pushed him to the side. He rolled onto his back, furrowing his brows. “What’s wrong?”

She crawled on top of him, straddling him. “Nothing.” She traced his tattoos with her finger. “So beautiful,” she murmured, soaking in the detail, the colors, the artwork drawn onto his chest, his arms.

His body relaxed under her while she continued her ministrations. Well, it didn’t entirely relax. A certain part of his body was swelling and getting stiffer and stiffer, right between her legs. She shifted her hips. He groaned, his gaze latched onto her face.

So, so sexy.

“Come here,” he whispered, crooking his finger.

She leaned down, and he wrapped one arm around her back. The other delved into her hair while his lips absolutely devoured hers.

She whimpered when he nibbled his way across her cheek to her ear.

Oh yes, still an erogenous zone.

“You like that,” he said after a nip that made her cry out.

Biting her lip, she nodded.

“Let’s see if I can make it even better.”

He continued to nip and nibble while his hand skated down her body, slipped between them, his fingers wiggling underneath the waistband of her leggings.

“Oh.”

She widened her legs. His digits stroked through her folds. His thumb found her clit while his lips continued that sweet

torture against the shell of her ear. She grasped a fistful of his hair, breathing heavily, her body wantonly rocking against his hand, faster and faster, until he bit down on her lobe, and she shot into orbit, crying out as the orgasm slammed into her.

Slipping his hand out of her leggings, he rolled her onto her back and then proceeded to lick her arousal from his fingers. Good Lord, her body was heating all over again.

Caging her with his arms, he lowered himself and pressed a hard kiss to her lips. “Now I want to see what I’ve been touching.”

He tugged her pullover over her head, his gaze all but stroking over her lacy red bra. Just because no one else had seen her lingerie in years did not mean she didn’t enjoy wearing sexy undergarments.

He managed to drag his attention to her pants, rolling them down her legs and tossing them over the side of the bed. As he trailed his fingers up her thigh to the edge of her panties, she shivered.

“They’re so wet,” he murmured. “I think we should take them off.”

Yes, please.

He skimmed them down her legs, then balled them in his fist. “Part of me wants to shove them in my pocket as a keepsake.”

“All of me wants you to hurry up and take the rest of your clothes off.”

Chuckling, he sent the panties flying across the room and rolled onto his back so he could wiggle out of his slacks, taking whatever he wore for underwear with them. She blatantly stared at his beautiful, naked form while he wrestled his wallet out of a pocket and extracted a couple of foil squares.

Holding them between forefinger and thumb, he said, “We can only go two rounds. After that, we’ll have to get creative.”

Only two rounds?

She shivered again and snatched the condoms from his hand, dropping one on the comforter and ripping open the other. His hands stroked up and down her thighs as she straddled him and worked the protective layer over his erection.

After he was successfully sheathed, she grasped the root and lowered herself, gasping as she slowly took him deeper and deeper, his approving groan sending tingles through her body.

Once she was fully seated, he dragged his hands up and massaged her breasts over her bra, rotating his hips once, like he was testing the way they fit together.

It was perfect if he was wondering.

One hand slipped around her back, and with a flick of his fingers, her bra fell away from her breasts.

“Come here,” he practically growled, pressing against her spine to encourage her to lean forward. At the same time, he thrust up, and she gasped at the unexpected sensation, then gasped again when his mouth wrapped around her nipple and he suckled.

Hard.

He continued to torture her, focusing on one breast and then the other, slowly pumping in and out, not letting her increase the pace even when she impatiently shifted her hips.

Finally, mercifully, he rested his hands on her hips. “Grab the headboard,” he instructed, “and hold on.”

She obeyed. His fingers curled into her flesh, pulling her down as he thrust up, suddenly hard and fast, over and over.

“Yes,” she cried out, clinging to the wooden headboard. “More. Harder.”

He accommodated her wishes, not letting up until her body tightened around him. She threw her head back as the second orgasm tore through her. He began thrusting even more furiously for a few more seconds, until he grunted and chased her over the edge.

With a blissful sigh, she pried her fingers from the headboard and draped herself across his body, closing her eyes and smiling.

This year was ending on a far better note than she could have ever imagined.

CHAPTER

Four

HIS PHONE VIBRATED against the surface near Travis's head. He promptly curled into the soft, warm woman dozing next to him.

The phone started jumping and bouncing again. He groaned as Ava stirred. Damn it, he wasn't ready to burst this little bubble.

What a fucking perfect way to wrap up what had more or less been a perfect year. Sex with Ava had been...spectacular. To say the least. So much so that he was practically ready to break his one-night stand rule.

She had no connection to the band. She was a country music fan, for crying out loud. She was too busy to pine away for him while he was out on tour. If he were going to give another relationship a try, she was about as perfect an option as he could possibly find.

He'd have to tell her his real identity. Hell, she was going to figure it out anyway; she said she was going to the concert tonight. Maybe, if he told her now, he could let her know he'd hook her up with backstage passes—and front row seats—and they could meet up after the show.

The idea of heading back here to her place to ring in the new year naked, between the sheets, had serious merit.

His phone started up again.

"Somebody is really trying to get ahold of you," Ava murmured. Her lips were next to his ear, reminding him how

she enjoyed it when he nibbled on hers while his fingers chased a trail over her skin and down between her thighs.

Fuck, he was getting hard again. Snatching up his phone, he said, “I’ll get rid of them and then we can go back to—shit. Hello?”

“Where the hell are you?” Parker practically yelled across the cellular lines. “The bus should have left ten minutes ago.”

“Oh fuck.” He shot into a seated position and pulled the phone away from his ear to look at the time. He and Ava had dozed off after the second round. Apparently, they’d slept for much longer than he intended.

Rubbing his hand over his face, he rolled out of bed and began gathering his clothes. “I’m not at the hotel,” he admitted.

“Where the fuck are you?”

“Uh...” He honestly had no idea. He hadn’t paid attention as they walked to Ava’s apartment. He’d been too busy picturing all the various sexual positions he’d hoped they could try.

“You’re with a hookup, aren’t you?”

He gave Ava a swift glance. She was sitting up, her back resting on the headboard, the sheet pulled up and tucked under her armpits. He could practically see the doubt creeping into her gaze, and all he wanted to do was crawl across that bed and kiss her until she believed his intentions were true.

Except they weren’t. They’d both agreed this was a fling, a few hours together, nothing more. And right now, he didn’t have time to analyze why he suddenly wanted more. Besides, it didn’t matter. He had to get to the venue. He had a show to play.

Grabbing his slacks, he swore again. He wasn’t dressed for the concert. “How far is Madison Square Garden from here?” he asked Ava.

“About a ten-minute walk.”

Oh, that wasn't so bad. He might even beat the tour bus there. "Parker, grab me a change of clothes, would you? I'll meet you there."

"A change of clothes? Like, to wear on stage?"

"Yes, exactly that."

"I can't wait to hear this story."

Travis shoved the phone into his pocket before pulling his shirt over his shoulders and fumbling with the buttons.

"I gotta go," he said. "I'm late for work." The band was supposed to be inside the arena before they let audience members in. There were usually press conferences and sometimes meet and greets, warm-ups, photo shoots.

"You work at Madison Square Garden?"

Just as he'd envisioned doing a few minutes ago, he crawled across the bed and caged her with his arms. Dropping a swift, hard kiss onto her lips, he said, "Yes. Listen, I have connections. Is it just you and your sister going to the show tonight?"

She nodded.

"I'll make sure there are two front row tickets in your name at will call. And if you want to, we can meet up after the show. Totally up to you."

Another kiss and he was out the door, hurrying down the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator, and then, after he programmed the arena into the GPS on his phone, he hung a right and jogged down the sidewalk.

As soon as he walked on stage later tonight, she'd figure it out. And if she stuck around after the show—he'd make sure she had backstage passes too—then he'd know that she was as interested as he was.

He sure as hell hoped she was.

Because he really wanted to see her again.

“AVA!” Maria shouted her name a scant moment before Ava was enveloped in a breathtaking hug.

They hadn’t hugged like this since Maria turned five.

“Wow,” Ava said, pushing her sister to arm’s length so she could look her over. “You’ve changed.”

No longer was she a carbon copy of their mother. She was still petite, still had smooth, dark hair—Ava had always been jealous of how easily Maria could tame her locks into submission, whereas Ava almost always kept hers in a bun to combat the volume—but that was all that remained of Elaine Hearsy Junior.

The pearls and conservative, refined outfits Maria used to wear had been replaced by skinny jeans, suede ankle boots, a skintight T-shirt with a ripped neck and Demigoddess Revival—her boyfriend’s band—scrawled across her chest. She wore shiny onyx earrings and a Goth looking necklace and a jacket with gold brocade detailing.

“You look fantastic,” Ava added.

“Thanks.” Maria beamed. “Now that I’m the band’s publicist, I have to look the part. Well, Holly says that’s not true at all; her band’s previous publicist looked like a Bond girl, but I am so much more comfortable like this than I ever was as a socialite.”

“You’ve also become a hugger.”

Maria scoffed. “I always was a hugger. There just wasn’t anyone in my life who liked to be hugged.”

“I like it,” Ava said. It was true, although she hadn’t realized it until this moment.

Laughing, Maria hugged her again. “You look fantastic as well.”

She'd had no clue what to wear to a rock concert, and when she'd Googled it, she'd realized she had nothing in her wardrobe that would work. So she went with the most understated, simple thing she had: a pair of slim fit linen slacks and a stretchy Ralph Lauren top. She wore diamond studs in her ears, and she'd traded the pearls for a chain link gold necklace. Against her better judgment, she'd even left her hair down around her shoulders, although she'd stowed a hairband in her pocket, just in case she couldn't take it when the locks started to grow in volume, like they always did.

"If you're in town for a few days, maybe we can go shopping. I could use a wardrobe adjustment," Ava said. And some quality time with her sister.

"I assumed you'd have to work. To be honest, I couldn't believe you accepted my invitation."

"As a matter of fact, I do not have to work, and I've recently had a revelation that involves spending more time doing things I actually like instead of the things I'm supposed to do."

"Wow. How did this come about?"

"I got fired."

"What?" Ava swore she could hear the sound of tires squealing as Maria came to a halt in the middle of the sidewalk and stared at her with her mouth hanging open.

They'd met at a coffee shop that was only a block from the arena. Ava hadn't been ready yet to let her sister see the inside of her apartment. The fact that Travis hadn't made any snide comments when he saw it had given her a small boost of confidence, but one step at a time.

"Explain," Maria demanded, crossing her arms.

"Are we going to be late?"

"We have plenty of time. Spill the tea."

Ava sighed. "Apparently, it's been a long time coming. Since Grandmother's funeral."

"Why?"

“Because for the last thirteen years, I’ve given Demetri 300 percent, and since the funeral it’s been more like 150 percent, and that is not good enough, as it turns out.”

“That’s absolutely ridiculous. You should sue him for wrongful dismissal or something.”

“Honestly, I’m okay with it. They have to buy me out, so I’ll end up with a plenty big enough nest egg to get me by until I figure out what I want to do next. In the meantime, I’ve also decided to learn how to have fun and enjoy life.”

It felt good to say it out loud. Like that made the idea more real.

Hell, she was already well on her way to enjoying life. An image of Travis, crouched over her, naked, his muscles glistening and damp with sweat, popped into her head. And he’d said he wanted to see her again after the show.

Squee! That was an appropriate internal response, right?

“Seeing both Panic Station and Demigoddess Revival live is definitely a step in that direction. They are fantastic bands, and I’m not just saying that because our sister is in one of them and I’m in love with the guitarist from the other.”

“Or that both bands now pay you to make sure they stay in the headlines.”

“That too.” Maria laughed and hooked her arm through the crook of Ava’s elbow, and they finally started walking again.

“So all’s well in the land of love?” Ava asked. “Started wedding planning yet?”

She hadn’t gone to their other sister’s wedding, an action she’d regretted the moment the day came. She’d have to figure out a way to make it up to Holly. And she’d definitely go to Maria’s nuptials. No matter what.

“Not quite,” Maria said with a laugh. “Although I’m pretty sure Oz would be all for it if I suggested we get married.”

“Do you want to? Is he the one?”

“Considering at one time I believed Vic was the one, I feel like I should take this one a little slower.”

“You knew Vic wasn’t the one,” Ava argued. She hadn’t been close with her sister back when she met her ex-husband, but it hadn’t been hard to figure out that Maria had been trying to emulate their mother by marrying Vic.

“You’re right,” Maria said with a sigh.

“So when’s the wedding?” Ava teased again.

Maria laughed. “Let’s get through this tour first. Although Holly already suggested we do it at her place in the Ozarks.”

Travis had mentioned how much he loved that area and may want to settle down there someday.

Ava had never thought about settling down. Hell, she’d been renting a tiny one-bedroom apartment for more than a decade. Maybe it was time for her to start thinking long-term. What did she want for her future?

That was too broad. Where did she want to live? How about starting there?

She had no clue. She’d never been anywhere, so she had no perspective.

That needed to change, effective immediately. Well, maybe in the next few weeks. Once Demetri’s lawyer gave her a decent enough offer to buy her out, she’d book her first trip.

“It may be kismet,” Maria continued. “Demigoddess Revival decided they are going to record their next album at Panic Station’s new studio in the Ozarks. So we could just have a quiet wedding while they are working out which songs to record. Or maybe right after. Practically everyone we’d want at the wedding would already be there.”

Sounded like Ava’s first travel experience was going to be to the Ozarks.

They’d reached the venue’s parking lot. Maria flashed an important-looking badge hanging around her neck, and the burly security guy waved them through. As they approached the building, Ava spotted the sign for will call. Travis had

promised to leave her two front row tickets. He'd taken off before she could tell him that her sister worked for both of the bands, so she was pretty sure she already had the hookup.

"How good are our seats?" she asked Maria.

"We're going to watch from the wings. We'll practically be on stage. Your sister has connections," Maria said with a laugh.

"This is going to sound crazy, but I managed to secure front row seats."

"What? Are you kidding? You were planning to come before I invited you?"

Ava shook her head. "I met someone who works here. He told me he'd leave them at will call."

Suddenly, she was nervous. Travis was here, somewhere. What were the chances that they'd bump into each other? He had implied they'd be pretty good.

She hoped so.

"Okay, I'm going to need *all* those details, but first, let's get those tickets, and we'll go up to the nosebleed section and find some seriously rabid fan to give them to," Maria said. She headed toward the ticket booth.

Ava couldn't wait to get inside.

She couldn't wait to see Travis again.

CHAPTER

Five

TRAVIS'S SMART-ASS friend provided him with a pair of jeans and a concert T-shirt two sizes too small, with Pink's face on it. He managed to get it over his biceps and chest, and even though it was practically painted on, he planned to wear the hell out of it tonight if only to spite Parker.

"Whose shirt is this, anyway?" he asked, twirling a drumstick through his fingers while they waited in the backstage lounge area until it was time to go on stage.

"I don't know," Parker replied, his eyes dancing over the pink shirt. "Maybe Maria's."

At thirty-three, Maria had only just discovered the glory that was collecting concert T-shirts.

"Where is Maria?" She was usually backstage with them before shows. As this was the kickoff for their first official North American tour, it seemed like she'd definitely be here.

"She finally convinced her and Holly's other sister to come to one of our shows," Oz replied. "Dragged her along while she picked someone in the nosebleeds and presented them with front row tickets."

"I hope she videoed it," Lacey said. "It's always fun to watch the expression on their faces when they realize it's not a joke."

Ava had said she was coming to the concert with her sister. Travis was admittedly nervous about how this was all going to play out. As much fun as they'd had earlier this afternoon, and

despite the tiny apartment with almost no personal touches, he knew he wasn't wrong about her type. So there was a reasonable chance she'd thrust her nose up at the idea of carrying on an affair with a musician.

He should have thought of this before he'd offered her tickets and not told her who he really was.

Ah well, too late now. Nothing he could do but hope. And if it didn't work out, well, he'd had one hell of a fantastic day, and he'd have to be content with the memories.

"Showtime, folks," the show runner called out.

The band rose as a unit. Travis checked them out, one by one. Lots of fidgeting, which was to be expected—this was the largest venue they'd ever played—but no one was high or inebriated. Not that he expected everyone to be teetotalers before shows, but yeah, he was still jaded from his experience with Dog Daze.

For practically every show at the end there, he hadn't known if they'd be able to go on. It always hinged on how trashed Suzie was. They'd taken to assigning a lackey to be her shadow on the day of shows, to report back to the band manager if she was popping pills, how many, and how close to showtime.

There was none of that here. He didn't have to worry about these guys. They all wanted this as badly as he did.

Which was exactly why he'd do whatever it took not to fuck this up. Because they were gonna be stars. Demigoddess Revival was opening for Panic Station on this tour, but one day soon, they could be co-headliners.

Wouldn't that be something?

Their sophomore album, which was their first full-length, had debuted at forty-nine on the Billboard 200, which was really fucking impressive for a brand-new rock band. Since then, every single they'd released had landed in the top ten of the Billboard Hot 100.

The sexy-as-fuck ballad, "Desire," Oz had penned when he'd been lusting after Maria last spring had debuted at

number one and was still there, three months later. If it hung around for another few weeks, they'd start breaking records.

They were unstoppable at the moment.

The pressure would be on in the fall, when they headed back to the recording studio. They'd need to create a stellar follow-up album if they wanted to keep climbing.

And of course they did. Who wouldn't?

They were about to walk onto the stage. This was it.

He'd be able to spot Ava the minute he stepped out from behind the curtain. It would probably take her a few seconds for realization to dawn, since she wasn't expecting to see him up here. Would he be able to tell how she felt before he jumped behind the drums, or would he have to wait until after the show?

As expected, the crowd went nuts when Lacey and Parker made their appearance. Fans screamed their names; Travis even heard a few "congratulations" shouts, which made him chuckle. Lacey and Parker had unexpectedly gotten married back in May, when the band had gone to the Ozarks with the intent to attend Holly and Sam Stokes's wedding and then play at their reception.

Everybody else was on stage now. It was Travis's turn. He did a little jog in place, rotated his neck to make sure his muscles were loose, and then he burst through the curtain with his fists in the air.

He zoned in on the crowd, specifically right in front of the stage, where mostly scantily clad young women were hanging over the temporary barriers set up to keep fans from rushing the stage.

He searched for a certain dark-haired woman who loved to have her earlobe nibbled, who had responded so wantonly to his touch that he was getting hard on stage just thinking about it.

She wasn't there. Why wasn't she there? Where the hell was she?

He was not as cool about this as he'd convinced himself he would be.

Someone screamed his name. His gaze automatically zipped toward the sound.

And he found himself staring at his fucking stalker, standing in the front row, claiming one of the seats he'd left for Ava and her sister.

"THAT WAS SO MUCH FUN," Ava gushed from stage left, waiting for the band to enter from the other side. Maria said she normally hung out backstage with them until they started their shows, but she thought Ava would appreciate the experience from here, where they had a bird's eye view of their entrances.

"Those two girls were beyond excited to receive those front row tickets," she added.

Maria laughed. "Hands down, more over the top than anyone I've ever given tickets to. I thought the one was going to pass out for a minute there. Oh, hey, surprise!" She spread her arms and Ava watched a woman walk right into her embrace.

It took probably far too long to realize who the woman was. Which was all on Ava, and something she had already vowed to change.

"Holly?"

"Oh my God, Ava!" their youngest sister shrieked and dove at Ava like they hugged all the time. Guess both of her sisters were closet huggers.

Ava clung to her, holding on like Holly was a raft that might float away. When they finally stepped apart, Holly swiped under her eyes.

"Damn it, now I'm going to have to redo my makeup before I go onstage."

“I’m sorry,” Ava said automatically.

“Pfft. Totally worth it to see you here. I can’t believe you really are here, in the flesh. You do know we don’t play country, right?”

Ava laughed. She had no idea what songs they did play, but she knew it wasn’t country. “Fully aware. I’m here to see you. And Maria.”

Holly flapped her hands. “I’m going to need another hug.”

Laughing again, Ava grabbed her and pulled her into an embrace. Maria joined them and the three sisters danced around side stage like they hadn’t seen one another in years.

The last time they’d spent any time together was at Grandmother’s funeral; the three of them had gathered for their own private goodbye.

“Okay, we need to make a pact, right now,” Ava said. “We will never again go more than a year without seeing each other. Preferably a lot less than that.”

“Deal,” Holly and Maria said at the same time.

“We need to celebrate,” Holly said. “We have champagne backstage, since it’s New Year’s Eve and all. Let’s go open a bottle, just the three of us.”

Ava pointed at the stage. “Don’t you have to go on?”

She shook her head, bright blue and midnight-black hair swaying. “We’re the lead act. Demigoddess Revival is opening the show.” She pulled out her phone. “They’ll be hitting the stage any minute now. We have probably an hour before I have to be ready. Or do you want to stay and watch Oz?” she asked Maria.

“I’m torn,” Maria admitted, “because this is Oz’s first time playing a venue this size.” Then she shook her head. “You two go ahead. I got to spend quality time with Ava earlier, and I see you all the time now. So you two go reconnect, and the three of us will ring in the new year together after the shows.”

“Excellent idea,” Holly proclaimed, guiding Ava deeper backstage. “Let’s go hide out in my dressing room.”

They made a stop at a room that, Holly explained, was for meet and greets with the bands. Members of their fan clubs paid big bucks for the opportunity to be back here.

There was a broad-shouldered bodyguard blocking the entrance, but as soon as he spotted Holly, he pulled open the door and stepped to the side.

Inside were a few clusters of people, most of whom rushed up to them as soon as they entered. Holly smiled and chatted and signed passes, tickets, notebooks, T-shirts, even one girl's arm, while Ava stood to the side, clutching her hands behind her back, resting bitch face securely in place.

She'd always acted aloof, especially when she was with her family. It had been a defense mechanism. If she pretended like she didn't care, maybe someday she wouldn't.

So far, it hadn't worked.

Now all she could do was watch her youngest sister in all her glory, and think, *I wish I had half this much happiness in life.*

Finally, when no one else thrust something at her to be signed, Holly headed over to the bar in the corner, where the bartender produced a bottle of champagne and two flutes. She winked, accepted the gifts, and hurried back to Ava.

"See you all after the show," she called out before they slipped out the door again.

They hurried down the hall, Holly keeping her gaze straight ahead as person after person realized who she was and called out to her.

"Thanks for ignoring all your fans to hang out with me," Ava said once they were ensconced in Holly's dressing room with another massive bodyguard blocking the door.

"The fans were in the meet and greet room. Most of those people in the hall are either reporters or bloggers or they work here or for one of the bands."

Ava darted her gaze around, searching for Travis. He was here, somewhere. Hopefully, she simply hadn't passed him,

instead of him dodging her because he'd lost interest.

God, how disappointing that would be.

“Okay,” Holly said as the cork exploded from the bottle,
“let’s celebrate!”

CHAPTER

Six

WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED? How had that woman, who was supposed to be banned from their shows, not only gotten in but managed front row tickets?

Those tickets were for the band to give to whomever they wanted—family, friends, girlfriends, the chick the drummer had spent the afternoon with and hoped to get to know even better.

Those were the tickets Travis had left at will call with only the name Ava on them because he didn't know her last name. How had his stalker ended up with those tickets?

And where was Ava?

Had she not come? Had his stalker somehow tricked the box office into giving her the tickets instead?

Shit. Had Ava really not come?

Despite all that fucking stress rolling through his mind, when Oz opened the show by shredding his guitar to “No Sleep Till Brooklyn”—a homage to playing in New York for the first time—Travis slammed his sticks against the drums and pushed everything else out of his mind.

Turned out, it was easy to do. Yeah, sure, he'd played large venues when he was with Dog Daze, so theoretically he should be used to the thrill.

But the truth was, you never got used to this thrill. It was a high without ingesting a damn thing. It was the greatest feeling in the world.

Well, almost. Sex with Ava rated pretty damn high too.

Fuck it, he wasn't going to think about her anymore. At least not until after the show.

Lacey announced their last song—which wasn't really their last song because they had built in two encores—and the lights dimmed almost to nothing while the spotlight focused on Parker, who plucked the first deep notes of “Why Can't We Be.”

The crowd went nuts. This song didn't have a drum beat, so Travis got to sit this one out. He rested his sticks on his thigh and scanned the crowd, searching for a particular dark-haired beauty he tried to tell himself he didn't care about and yet really wanted to see.

His gaze landed on a woman standing in the wings, swaying to the beat, and he did a double take. For a split second there, he'd thought he saw Ava, but no, that was Oz's girlfriend. Although they did look a little alike. Same dark hair, similar features and stature.

Like they could be sisters.

Hey, hadn't Maria said her sister would be here tonight? The third one, the eldest of the three.

She was probably with Holly, who was no doubt backstage, getting ready for her own performance once Demigoddess Revival was done.

The acoustic duet ended and the lights faded to nothing. The crowd went ballistic, calling for more.

It was Travis's time to shine. They'd decided to cover one of Panic Station's songs and hadn't told the headlining band, which he figured would be good for a laugh later. This particular song was heavy hitting and drum forward, aptly named “Drum Me Away.”

He slammed his sticks onto the skins, and the lights flashed on, throbbing red and orange and green and blue. Oz joined in with his guitar, Parker stepped up with his thrumming bass, and Cash tapped on the keys, building and building and building until the spotlight flashed onto Lacey,

and Travis by default, since she was standing behind him on his kit.

It was a fast-paced, hard-driving song. Travis loved every minute of it. It was a great way to get the crowd pumped for the next act and would hopefully leave them believing Demigoddess Revival was one of the best bands they'd ever seen live.

Once again the lights went out, and once again the crowd roared, begging for more. After a few minutes' buildup, they gave their fans what they wanted, ending the show with the second single from their first album, "A Way Out."

Finally, it was over. The band said their goodbyes and left the stage, and the lights came on so the strike crew could flip the set for Panic Station's show.

Maria met them backstage, throwing herself into Oz's arms despite how soaked in sweat he was.

"Hey, Maria," Travis said as they made their way toward their shared dressing room—they weren't big enough yet to warrant individual rooms like Panic Station—"remember that stalker I had a few months ago?"

"We *all* remember that," Parker said, walking backward to face Travis while he talked.

"Yeah, well, she's here," Travis said. "She was sitting in seats I'd left at will call for someone else."

"What?" Maria yelled, already pulling out her phone and tapping on the screen. "Hadn't we put a ban on her ever coming to another concert?"

Not that something like that was truly enforceable, but shit, she shouldn't have been able to snap up tickets that had someone else's name on them.

"She was right in the fucking front row," Travis bit off. He didn't mean to take out his frustration on Maria, but damn it, that stalker had really fucked with his life for a few months—spreading a rumor about him knocking her up when he hadn't even touched the girl came to mind—and he wasn't in a hurry for a repeat performance.

A door opened behind Parker, who was still walking backward. Before Travis could say *watch out*, Holly stepped out of the room and Parker walked right into her.

While the two of them attempted to untangle, another woman stepped out of Holly's dressing room, and Travis's attention tunneled on that single person standing in the crowded hallway.

It was Ava. And she looked fucking amazing in tight linen slacks and a stretchy shirt that made her boobs look incredible. Her hair was down, tumbling over one shoulder in a mess of waves. Diamonds winked in her ears.

She was almost painfully beautiful.

And she was walking out of Holly's dressing room.

"Hey," Maria called out, grinning from ear to ear. She swung an arm around Holly and another around Ava's shoulders. "Everybody, I want you to meet our oldest and coolest sister, Ava Hearsy. Ava, this is the band. Well, Oz's band. Have you met Holly's band yet? Anyway, that's Oz, and Lacey, and Parker, Cash, and that guy who's staring at you like he's seen a ghost is our drummer, Travis."

Ava's eyes widened to comical proportions while her mouth fell open. "Drummer," she said before snapping her mouth closed.

"Sister," Travis said dumbly.

No wonder he'd thought she looked like Maria.

Because they were fucking sisters.

Well, son of a bitch, this sucked.

TRAVIS WAS A DRUMMER IN A BAND?

That was not the image he'd portrayed when they'd had lunch

together, when they wandered the High Line, sipping hot chocolate and talking about their lives.

When she'd taken him back to her apartment and he'd made love to her so thoroughly her body was still tingling, hours later.

Hadn't he said he worked at Madison Square Garden? Although to be fair, she supposed he really was, at least for tonight.

Wow. Had she been duped or what?

"I gotta go," Holly announced and hugged her before turning to Maria. "Your turn to hang out with her."

And then she was gone, hurrying down the hall and out of sight. Ava automatically turned to Maria. She needed a buoy in this sea of uncertainty. Normally, she was the most self-assured person in the room—or at least she was an expert at portraying as much—yet this was even worse than when Holly had been signing autographs and Ava stood next to her feeling incredibly out of place.

Maybe she should step into Holly's dressing room and grab that bottle of champagne they hadn't finished. She could really use a drink right now.

"Um, hi," she said, because what the hell else was she supposed to do? "Nice to meet everyone."

"You all go get cleaned up, and we'll meet you in the meet and greet room," Maria said before guiding Ava in that direction.

As soon as the band was out of earshot, Maria said, "Wow, that was some kind of crazy tension between you and Travis. You guys don't know each other, do you?"

Actually, if one were only looking at physical references, she'd say she knew Travis better than anyone else in her entire life. And she ought to be able to say as much to Maria. That was the sort of relationship sisters were supposed to have, right?

"Um, he's a drummer?"

“A fantastic one at that,” Maria confirmed.

She could say it was cool that she’d slept with the drummer from a rock band. Right?

“He’s kind of a manwhore, too.” Maria paused. “No, that’s not it. He’s actually super selective about who he sleeps with.”

Was Ava supposed to feel flattered?

Maria continued, “It’s just he never sleeps with the same woman twice. So you should steer clear, especially given the way he was looking at you.”

She certainly had chosen well when she’d convinced herself she wanted a one-night stand. But then the rest of what Maria said hit her. “How was he looking at me?”

“Like he wanted to eat you for lunch.” Maria laughed and flashed her credentials at the guy guarding the door.

This time, the place was packed with people. Most of the gazes in the room shot up when they stepped through the entry, just as quickly dismissing them when they realized Maria and Ava weren’t part of either band playing tonight.

“Want something to drink?” Maria asked as they wove through clusters of groupies toward one of two bars.

“God, yes. Champagne.”

Flutes in hand, Maria guided them over to a seating area near the windows. It was cordoned off by red velvet ropes and yet another security guard with gigantic arms who only allowed them to pass after Maria once again flashed her credentials.

“The band will be escorted over to this area, so they can receive guests in a controlled environment,” she explained. “It will be pretty hairy and crazy until the security teams gets them over, so it’s best to hang out here until the initial crush dies down.”

Ava glanced around, trying to be objective.

Black pipe and draping had been set up to hide whatever was normally on the walls. There were high-top tables with

stools set up haphazardly, no tablecloths to hide the scratched and worn steel poles holding up the tabletops. Those stools looked like they'd been collected from a dumpster and had received a cursory wipe down before being placed in this room.

The roped off seating areas—there were two of them—contained cracked, faux leather sofas along with old coffee tables that looked like they hadn't been resurfaced since the '70s.

In truth, the space wasn't bad, although it certainly could use a better decorator. Someone with a smidge more attention to detail.

A screen had been set up on the far end of the room, where concert clips were being played in a loop. She had no idea where the current clip was from, but she became riveted.

“Tell me what I'm watching,” she demanded of her sister. She hadn't thought anything of missing the opening act in favor of being in Holly's dressing room, getting reacquainted—or, in all honesty, getting acquainted for the first time in her adult life—with her sister, but now...

She suddenly, desperately wished she could go back in time and stand stage left with Maria so she could watch what was happening on the screen in person. How much stranger would it have been to realize who Travis was as he was walking up to his drum set, instead of bumping into him backstage after the concert?

“Lacey and Parker,” Maria said, pointing at the screen. “She's the lead singer and he's the bassist. They're a couple, just got married in May.” Maria poked her arm. “You would have met them if you'd come to Holly's wedding. Lacey is Sam's sister.”

Ah, there was the connection. Ava knew there was one, besides Maria's role with Demigoddess Revival.

“And that's Oz,” Maria said, her voice going all soft and gooey. There were probably hearts in her eyes too.

A Black guy with white-blond dreads walked onto the stage, waving at the crowd, looking more like a politician than a member of a rock band. Well, besides the dreads and tattoos, anyway. It was something in the way he carried himself.

“Cash,” Maria said. “Our keyboardist. He used to be a classical concert pianist.”

Ah, that was it. His stance was left over from a different time, a different world.

“And that’s Travis—”

“The drummer,” Ava murmured, staring at the screen as he jogged out onto the stage, wearing a too-tight T-shirt and a pair of mouthwatering jeans and holding his drumsticks high above his head.

God, he was gorgeous. Maria said he never slept with the same woman twice, but he’d insisted he wanted to see Ava after the show. He’d known she was attending the concert, which meant he’d known she would have figured out his real identity. And he’d still insisted he wanted to see her again.

That probably didn’t truly invalidate his status as a guy who never slept with the same woman twice; after all, he was in a band, and he said he wasn’t from New York. Oh, and Holly had said this concert was kicking off a four-month tour. Both bands would be traveling from one end of the country to the other.

So probably, he just wanted to get laid one more time before he took off.

Was she against this idea?

No, not really. In fact, she very much approved. God knew, she wasn’t in the right headspace to start up any sort of relationship.

But God also knew that the sex had been off-the-charts spectacular, and if she had one more shot at such an incredibly good time, why not take it?

CHAPTER

Seven

THERE WERE two showers in the band's shared dressing room.

Even when there was only one, Lacey always went first; she could complete her beauty routine while the rest of the guys took turns cleaning up.

Travis didn't like to think too hard about it, but more often than not, Lacey and Parker showered together—guess it was a kink of theirs—which they insisted saved time, except everybody knew they banged while they were in there, so really, how much time were they saving?

At any rate, with the double showers, they were all cleaned up and ready to greet the groupies in record time.

Too quickly, in Travis's opinion. He wasn't ready to go into that room. He'd been assured that security had done a sweep and his stalker wasn't there—smart of her because there was a good chance she'd get arrested if she had been—but that wasn't his problem. Not now.

It was Ava. Maria's sister. And Holly's sister. God, she was connected to his band *and* Panic Station.

And this afternoon he'd fucked her six ways from Sunday.

Not only that, but he'd told her he wanted to see her again. And he had meant it—when he said it. Before he knew who she was.

Maybe he still did want to see her, but then again, he was not about to carry on anything at all with his publicist's sister.

No fucking way.

Because even if he did want to see her, he didn't want a relationship, which meant it would end at some point, probably badly, and then what? He liked Maria. He didn't want her to hate him. And since it was pretty much guaranteed that Oz and Maria were going to end up married, that meant Ava would eventually be Oz's sister-in-law.

Not going there.

Travis stuffed his shit into his duffle bag and swung it over his shoulder. "I'm going to bail on the meet and greet," he announced to the room at large. "Gonna go chill on the tour bus."

The next concert was on Friday, in Boston. Since they had nearly a week off, everyone was heading their own way tomorrow. He and Cash were flying back to LA; the others were taking off to stay with their families.

Travis had known all this when he'd told Ava he wanted to see her after the show.

Now he wished they were heading out of town tonight.

Damn it.

"Make sure you have an escort," Lacey called out.

He gave her a backward wave as he left the dressing room. Normally, he wouldn't need an escort from the venue to the tour bus, since it was parked in an area off limits to anyone who didn't have credentials hanging around their neck, and there was always a security guard posted at the venue door leading out to the bus. But now that his stalker was back, yeah, he was nervous enough to heed Lacey's advice.

He snagged the security guard at the door, convinced the guy to escort him uneventfully to the bus, and then he had to pound on the door to wake the driver so he could climb on board. Guess Teddy wasn't in the mood to celebrate New Year's Eve. Although there were still two hours to go, so maybe he was taking a power nap.

Whatever. Travis didn't really care. He just wanted to collapse on the surprisingly comfortable couch in the living area and chill. Maybe write. Everybody was expected to bring fresh, new music to the table when they began producing their next album, and so far, he hadn't written much they could work with.

He wasn't too worried though. Touring meant long hours on the road doing a whole lot of nothing. It also meant lots of opportunity for inspiration, as each city they visited would be different crowds, different feels. While Parker and Lacey tended to write songs about love, Travis tended to write more about life. Being a rock star. Being on the road. Being alone.

He'd just laid down, had just plopped his reading glasses onto his nose, when his phone rang. He tugged it from his pocket; Maria's name was on the screen.

"Yeah?" he answered.

"Oz says you're on the bus," she replied.

"Yep."

"I need a favor."

He groaned, even though yes, he'd do whatever she needed.

"It's easy, I swear."

"What is it, Maria?"

"I forgot to bring in the party favors with the band's logo on them. I wanted to give them away tonight. Can you please grab them and bring them to the meet and greet room?"

Well, hell. His entire purpose for heading to the bus early was to avoid Ava, and now he was going to have to see her after all.

"Please," Maria whined into his ear. "They're the perfect way to kick off this tour. Demigoddess Revival's logo will be all over social media after tonight."

He couldn't say no, no matter how much he wanted to avoid Ava. Promoting the band was too important at this

juncture. They were on the cusp of breaking out. The show they'd just done had been top notch; they needed to keep the momentum going.

Hell, Maria had already helped get them into Madison Square Garden on New Year's Eve, a huge North American tour, and they hadn't even yet celebrated a full year together as a band.

So when Maria said she needed a bunch of party favors, Travis really had no choice but to comply.

"Where are they?" he asked with a sigh.

She squealed, burred her thanks, and then told him they were in the luggage compartment in a black roller bag.

He found what he was looking for and headed toward the venue, no security escort this time. There wasn't anyone around anyway. Everyone was either hanging with the rest of the members of Demigoddess Revival or watching Panic Station up on stage. If his stalker were still here, she was likely sitting front and center watching Holly and Sam's band.

"Travis."

He turned toward the unexpected sound of his name. A woman stepped out of the shadows behind the temporary fence set up to keep people from milling around this entrance to the venue.

She was short, a couple pounds on this side of chubby, with big eyes and dark hair mostly stuffed under a stocking cap. Maybe that was how no one else had recognized her; she'd changed her hair. It used to be blonde. She'd lost a little weight, too.

But Travis recognized her. Short of plastic surgery, he was pretty sure he'd recognize her no matter what.

And he never, ever wanted to be alone with the woman who had become his first stalker.

"Shit!" He should have called someone to escort him from the bus.

Grasping the handle of the luggage containing Maria's party favors, he kicked into a run, reached the door, and flashed his creds before she could do something crazy like scale the fence.

She'd done it before.

"You all right, man?" the security guy asked when Travis burst through the door.

"Yeah, fine, just, ah, need to get up to the meet 'n greet." No idea why he didn't tell the guy who he saw, other than maybe a little bit of male pride. He'd totally looked like a wimp running scared like that.

A second security guard didn't ask questions either, just fell into step with Travis, which Travis appreciated. Sometimes, having someone dogging his steps pretty much everywhere was annoying.

Not today.

When he reached the meet and greet, he kept his head down and barreled straight toward the roped off area where the rest of the band was hanging out, mingling with fans in small clusters.

A murmur went up in the crowd, which he was pretty sure was due to his unexpected presence. Panic Station hadn't yet left the stage, so it wouldn't be any of their members. He ignored it too; he just wanted to hand over this stupid bag and—hell, he didn't even know what he wanted after that.

He didn't want to go back to the bus, not until the rest of the band was heading that way. Which he knew wouldn't be anytime soon. They'd stay until the Panic Station show was over. They'd probably celebrate the new year right here in this room. And that was almost two hours away.

"Hey, thanks," Maria said, tugging the bag out of his grip. She frowned. "You okay? You look freaked. What happened?" She scanned the room. "Oh no, is that stalker here after all? Security assured me—"

"She's out in the parking lot. Don't tell Lacey, but I didn't have an escort when I came back, and she caught me unawares

just before I walked inside.”

Maria had done a whole lot of damage control during those two months when that chick wouldn't leave him alone. First, to counteract all the crazy stories the woman had posted on social media about her and Travis, including the one insisting he'd knocked her up. Then, after Travis secured a Personal Protection Order against her, after she'd gone a little nuts and publicly blamed it all on him.

So yeah, he was perfectly fine admitting to Maria what had happened, because she'd been there with him every step of the way.

“Okay, sit here.” She guided him to one of the couches. “I'll go grab you a drink. Ava, can you make sure no one approaches him, just for a little while? He needs a minute to breathe.”

Ah hell, he hadn't even realized she'd seated him right next to the only other woman he wanted to avoid.

“Sure,” Ava said from his right.

He didn't look at her. He couldn't. His eyes probably reflected his fear right now, and what kind of image would that portray?

Not that he should care what sort of image he portrayed to a woman he never intended to talk to again after tonight.

A fan got brave enough to approach him, and before Travis could remotely attempt to put his game face on, Ava stood, smoothly guided the guy away, promising that the drummer would come to him as soon as he was ready. The kid didn't even look disappointed.

Huh. Guess the PR gene ran in the family.

She came back and sat next to him again, a champagne flute in her hand. “Want some?” she asked, offering it to him.

He did, but Maria would be back in a minute with something much stronger, so he shook his head. “I'm good.”

“I don't mean to argue, but you sure don't look good.”

He snorted. “Gee, thanks.”

“Not like that. I mean, you look...terrified.”

He swiped a hand over his face. Where the hell was Maria with that drink? “I, uh, yeah, it’s pretty fucked up.”

“If you want to talk about it, I promise not to say anything to anyone else.”

“It’s actually public knowledge, although your sister’s so good at her job that it’s pretty much disappeared from the news now.” He sucked in a breath. She offered the champagne again.

This time he took it, finishing it in one mildly satisfying swallow. “Thanks.” He placed the empty flute on the low table in front of him. “I have a stalker. Used to. Well, I thought she was in the past, but apparently, she’s back. She was in the front row today. In the seats I reserved for you.”

Ava’s eyes went huge. “Oh no. I-I gave those tickets away because Maria told me I could hang out backstage with her. So we took them up to the nosebleeds and gave them to a fan. I had no idea.”

“How would you?” he grumbled, although at least now he knew how his stalker had snagged those seats. There was, admittedly, some comfort in knowing it hadn’t been planned.

“What about Maria? Shouldn’t she have realized?”

He shrugged. “The chick changed her hair, lost a little weight. And it’s been months since we’ve heard from her. Plus, the stalking started in Phoenix, so we had no reason to suspect she’d show up here, in New York City.”

“Wow. I’m really sorry.”

She wasn’t looking down on him for being afraid. That was nice. “It’s fine. I’m starting to unwind now. Just took me by surprise.”

Maria finally returned, bearing not one but two bourbons on ice. “Just in case,” she said, handing them both to him. “Do you want another?” she asked Ava. “I’m going back to grab one for myself.”

“I’ll come with you,” Ava said. Travis wanted to press his hand to her thigh to hold her in place. He didn’t want her to leave. Not yet.

“No, I’ll be right back,” Maria said, and Ava stayed put.

“You shared yours—want some of mine?” he asked after a heartbeat of silence.

Ava shook her head. “After this morning, I don’t think I should drink hard liquor anymore. At least not again today.”

He chuckled, remembering how she’d told him she was recovering from her very first hangover at one o’clock in the afternoon. That conversation had led to...no, not going there.

Another fan approached, but Ava turned her away. Travis took a couple of fortifying gulps of his drink, appreciated how the burn pushed away his tension. Or maybe it was Ava who eased away the tension. Either way, he was finally feeling up to greeting his fans.

This was what being a rock star was all about, right?

CHAPTER

Eight

IF THIS EVENING could go any more sideways, Ava would have to call it *Top Gun: Maverick*.

After she'd made the decision that she was perfectly fine hooking up with Travis again, he'd not shown up to the meet and greet with the rest of the band. Oz said he'd gone to the tour bus to chill. Apparently, this was entirely normal, as no one blinked over that explanation.

Ava had been so disappointed, she'd actually considered asking for Maria's credentials so she could slip out to the tour bus herself.

Except, yikes, what kind of woman would that have made her? Might as well call her a stalker.

Oh no, she wasn't that bad—as it turned out, Travis actually did have a stalker. And she'd turned up here, tonight.

Worse, Ava and Maria had given the woman front row tickets. Practically dumped her in his lap.

She must have been the one who had been so giddy that Ava had thought she might faint.

It was nice of Travis not to be upset with her, however inadvertent it had been.

Now here they sat, side by side on a faux leather couch in a room behind the stage at Madison Square Garden, and was it weird that she'd taken pride in keeping his fans at bay when it was obvious he wasn't ready to interact? Or that she'd enjoyed

the fact that he'd opened up to her, had seemed to take comfort in her presence?

Yes, she knew it was weird, and she didn't care. She liked feeling needed. She never knew she liked that, as she'd never actually felt needed before.

Her job designing cool or pretty or fancy building interiors—it wasn't a need, it was a desire. Mostly a desire to one up the building next door. Demetri's clients were extremely high-end; they all had money to burn and a deep-seated desire to show off for their quote-unquote friends.

She'd thrown herself into it because she was exceptionally good at it, and frankly, she had nothing else in her life. And that had been enough, for more than a decade. Now...

Now she found herself with zero desire to go back to that career. Yes, it had only been twelve hours since she'd been fired, and maybe tomorrow she'd feel differently, but right now, in this moment, she couldn't care less if she ever stepped foot in a graphic design company again.

Right now, all she wanted to do was reconnect with her sisters and maybe get to know the guy sitting next to her a little better.

Except he had calmed down enough to realize he had a job to do. He patted her leg, thanked her for helping him, and then he wandered over to where the rest of his band was hanging out with their fans.

Ugh. She hated feeling useless and awkward. Earlier, before Travis had arrived, she'd fetched drinks for the rest of the band. It had given her a little thrill at how outrageously offended her mother would be if she knew her eldest daughter was "fetching drinks" for people.

Ava had been enjoying herself, though, so she stood, made her way over to Lacey and Parker to see if they needed anything.

They were holding court with a handful of fans who were all staring at them with googly eyes as Lacey and Parker

flirted and teased each other; cheeky banter that was probably some sort of love language.

After they confirmed they were good, she checked on Oz. She loved how much he adored her sister. It was almost to the point of ridiculousness, to be honest, and that was utterly adorable.

“Do you need anything, Oz?” she asked during a lull in fans.

“Yeah.” He grinned at her. “I like your idea of blocking off a path from the door to the cordoned off areas so the bands can get into the room without being mobbed. It’s brilliant. I think we should set up the meet and greets like that moving forward.”

“I’ll tell Maria. She’ll make sure it happens.”

“That she will.” He fist bumped her, and she wandered off, still looking for a way to keep herself occupied.

Cash, the quiet and reserved one, was her next victim. He took her up on her offer to get him a drink. When she returned and handed it to him, she said, “So, concert pianist.”

The poor guy practically curled into himself, hugging that drink to his chest for a moment. She almost apologized for even bringing it up, but then he admitted, “Yes, in a former life.”

“I used to take clients to shows in New York. What are the chances I’ve seen you perform?”

He cleared his throat. “Reasonably good.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a classical pianist in dreads and with so many tattoos,” she teased.

He raked his hand through those white-blond dreads. “Like I said, it was a different life. A lot has changed since then. I’ve even changed my name.”

She considered prodding for more, but the poor guy was looking more miserable by the second. He did not like talking about his past.

Instead, she said, “I bet you’d look stunning in a tux.”

He tugged at his collar. “I don’t think it would be good for my image if our fans ever saw me like that.”

Ava shook her head. “I beg to differ. In fact, a photo shoot with all of you guys in tuxes and Lacey in a ballgown, surrounded by your instruments, the band’s logo as a backdrop—your fans would go nuts.”

He arched his brows and finally didn’t look so uncomfortable. She added, “It would make a stunning album cover.”

“Maybe,” he allowed.

A cluster of girls wandered over then, the boldest in the group asking for his autograph, Ava left him to it and sought out her sister to mention her thoughts.

Maria grabbed onto the album cover idea like a dog with a bone, and begun furiously tapping on her phone, probably making the arrangements.

Ava caught movement out of the corner of her eye; Travis was trying to grab her attention, so she hurried over.

When she reached his side, he swung an arm around her neck, a lowball glass full of nothing but ice dangling from his fingertips. She plucked the glass from his hand lest he lost his grip.

“We need your assistance, Ava,” he said.

A young man and woman stood before him, the man with stars in his eyes, while the woman was trying hard not to look impressed by the fact that she was talking to the drummer for one of the greatest up-and-coming rock bands of the moment.

“Oh God, you aren’t going to ask me to list your songs, are you?” Ava joked, although it wasn’t really a joke. She had no earthly idea what songs his band played. She’d watched clips on the big screen set up across the room, but that was it.

They were just clips.

“Easier than that,” Travis said, waving his hand and brushing her breast in the process. *She* noticed, but it didn’t appear that anyone else—including him—did.

“This lovely fan right here thinks a rock ’n roll drummer couldn’t sit in for a country band.” Travis used the hand hanging near Ava’s boob to indicate the woman standing in front of them. “And as you are also a country fan, I figure you’re the best person in the room to settle this argument.”

Ava wasn’t a music guru. She enjoyed country music, but that was the extent of it. Although, now that she thought about it, a lot of country, especially older, more traditional stuff, did not showcase the drums nearly as much as rock music did. But she certainly wasn’t knowledgeable enough to argue that point.

Instead, she said, “With your talent, you could sit in for any band, regardless of the genre.”

He turned his head slightly to give her a look that morphed from surprise to something else she wasn’t sure she could define, although she suspected maybe it was lust. Or maybe that was hopefulness on her part.

The male fan started gushing, extolling Travis’s virtues like he was indeed a god, while the girl rolled her eyes with a smile tugging at her lips.

The fans were escorted away, and a young guy who wanted a selfie with Travis took their place. Travis complied without taking his arm from around Ava’s shoulders, which was a little awkward to say the least, since she really didn’t think she ought to be in the picture.

The room erupted into chaos when Panic Station made their entrance. Instead of letting the security team usher them to their own sitting area, with Holly in the lead, the band headed over to where Demigoddess Revival was holding court.

Holly’s hair was naturally a deep, chestnut brown, like Maria and Ava’s. At the moment, her roots were a dark, dark blue and the rest was an ombre of blue to silver. She’d piled it

in a knot on top of her head to show off the darker roots, and she'd paired the look with a blue tank top, her band's logo on the front, layered under a sheer white shirt. To finish the look, she wore a white jean miniskirt and a pair of white combat boots.

Ava was jealous of how well her sister could pull off a look like that. She didn't think she could ever pull off any look other than corporate executive.

Holly wrapped her arms around Ava and pulled Maria into the hug, too. Ava pasted a smile on her face as a sea of arms raised with phones in hand, a series of clicks filling the air as pictures were snapped.

Given what she understood of Holly's status in the world of rock 'n roll, Ava was reasonably certain that picture would be plastered all over social media within the hour. It was a strange feeling. She'd always worked behind the scenes, always stayed in the shadows. Not to mention, what would their mother think?

"This is the best way to wrap up the year," Holly gushed before snagging the arm of one of the guys who had come in with her and pulling him into their little circle. "Ava, this is my husband, Sam."

Ava laughed. "We met, remember? At Grandmother's funeral."

"Oh God, that's right," Holly said with a groan.

Ava offered her hand to shake. "Nice to see you again, Sam. Much better circumstances this time."

With his hand on the small of her back, he kissed Holly's temple. "Definitely better."

Ava hadn't been aware of it at the time—she had done an excellent job of distancing herself from her entire family—but Holly and Sam's relationship had nearly collapsed at Grandmother's funeral, courtesy in large part of the way the three sisters had been raised.

Luckily, Holly had realized her love for Sam was stronger than her mother's influence, and now they were happier than

ever.

Ava glanced over at her other sister, who had her arm tucked around Oz's waist, smiling as if all were right in the world.

Was that all it took? The love of a good man?

Even as she forced her gaze away from Travis, she knew that wasn't *all* it took. Both of her sisters were so much more confident, so much more free than they'd been when they'd been under their mother's thumb.

She'd moved away seventeen years ago and yet Ava hadn't yet figured out what both of her sisters had.

She desperately wanted to, though.

Soon, the countdown began. A fresh champagne flute was thrust into Ava's hand. Midnight hit, and everyone raised their drinks in toast, then suddenly everybody was kissing everybody—or maybe that was just Travis, who really was going around to each of his bandmates, dropping smacking kisses on their cheeks.

He kissed one of the security guards, who rolled his eyes and shoved him away. Then he kissed Maria. And then his arm was back around Ava's neck, pulling her into his side. She canted her head, assuming she was about to be privy to one of those chaste pecks too.

But his hand came up, cupped her cheek and turned her head, and his lips pressed against hers. She blinked dazedly. She'd practically been drunk on those kisses earlier, and she thought she wasn't going to have another chance and—

He pulled away, furrowed his brow, and released her, lifting his glass and shouting at the bartender all the way across the room, asking for another.

It was well after two in the morning by the time the fans were all shooed from the room and the bands were being escorted toward their buses.

The three sisters were walking arm in arm, giggling. "Remember when we used to do this as kids?" Maria said.

“I don’t,” Holly responded.

“That’s because you were so young, you could hardly keep up,” Ava said. “But yeah, I remember.”

So there had been positive memories from her childhood after all. She’d all but forgotten, as the pressure from their mother to be perfect had eventually blotted everything else out.

“Tomorrow is a travel day, and we aren’t leaving until after lunch. Come meet us for a late breakfast, Ava,” Maria said.

“Who’s us?” she asked suspiciously.

Maria laughed. “Me and Holly, silly.”

Who had she thought Maria would say? All of the band mates? Or one specifically? Which was ridiculous, because neither of her sisters knew about her afternoon with Travis, and as he didn’t seem inclined to mention it to anyone, she certainly wasn’t going to either.

“I’d like that,” she responded.

“Excellent,” Maria said. “I’ll start a group text so we can hash out details.”

“Maria’s a big fan of group text,” Holly said, leaning toward Ava like she was conspiring with her. “She uses them to tell everyone else what to do.”

Ava laughed. She remembered that about her middle sister; Maria had always been good at bossing everyone else around. Probably made her really good at her current job.

“Where do you live?” Maria asked. “We’ll get Teddy to drop you off.”

“Only a few blocks from here, actually.”

Holly embraced them each in turn and then headed toward her bus, while Maria guided Ava toward the other one.

Ava gave her address to the driver, he tapped it into his phone, and then Maria led her to a seating area that wasn’t unlike campers people liked to take summer vacations in.

“We should have ridden Holly’s bus,” Maria said, making herself comfortable on one of the wraparound couches. “Theirs is seriously tricked out. We’ll get there, though.” She nodded for emphasis and patted the seat next to her.

Oz came strutting down the aisle, pausing to kiss Maria and tell her he was going to his bunk to sleep. She laughed and assured him she’d wake him when they reached the hotel. He rubbed his head and muttered something about forgetting they weren’t traveling tonight, and then he wandered toward the back of the bus.

Lacey and Parker came next, telling Ava it was nice to meet her and bidding her good night. Cash was behind them and said basically the same.

Travis walked by with barely a nod of acknowledgment.

Maria shook her head. “That man is so hard to read. He gets upset over the oddest things. Like me and Oz sleeping together.”

“What does you sleeping with Oz have to do with him?”

“Nothing,” Maria said with an eyeroll. “But he was in another band before he joined Demigoddess Revival, and he ended up leaving them due to interpersonal relationships going bad. Specifically, him and the guitarist. This was before my time, but Oz said Demigoddess Revival almost didn’t even happen. When Travis found out Parker and Lacey were together, he wanted them to choose the band over their relationship.”

Maria shook her head. “He’s convinced that anything beyond friendship is bad for the band.”

Ava stared down the narrow hall to where Travis had disappeared from view.

Too bad.

CHAPTER

Nine

AVA WAS the one to choose the brunch location—she had lived in the city for more than a decade, after all, so she ought to know the best places to eat.

She walked into the restaurant, spotted her sisters, and came to a stuttering halt. They were both in hoodies and sweatpants. Okay, Holly was in leggings, but still.

Maria threw her slacks and sweater a sympathetic look. “It took me a while to stop dressing like our mother too.”

“I don’t dress like Mom,” Ava protested. She didn’t.

Did she?

“The only hoodie I own has barbeque sauce on it,” she grumbled. “And no one informed me there was a dress code for breakfast with my sisters.”

“It’s a travel day,” Holly explained. “Comfort is the name of the game.”

A server led them to a table. Ava’s eyes suddenly filled with tears. What the hell? She swiped at them as she took her seat.

“What’s wrong?” Holly asked.

She shook her head, prepared to insist she was fine, but no. If her sisters were going to be back in her life, she was going to be honest with them. “I’m just so happy we’re all together again. And having fun. I wish we had more time.”

“Agreed,” Maria said, then ordered them a round of mimosas.

Once they’d decided on food, Ava said, “I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact that both of my sisters now lead a rock ’n roll lifestyle. How do you do it, with Riley?”

Maria chuckled. “Riley is the easy one. Oz has three kids, and they are all school age.”

“*What?*”

Maria nodded. “They’re his sister’s kids. She died, almost five years ago. He and his mom are raising them now.”

“Those poor kids.”

“They’re great, though. Very resilient. And they’ve accepted Riley into the fold like she is their long-lost baby sister.”

“Now I’m really intrigued. Are you and Vic sharing custody?”

What did their mother think of this? Of Maria’s divorce? That was a stain as black as Holly’s decision to leave the nest and become a rock star. God, was Ava’s the only picture left on the mantel? She may skip this year’s trip home. That was pressure she simply did not need in her life.

“We are. And he’s being really amazing about it. Thanks to the divorce, he’s finally realized he likes being a dad. He and Riley went on vacation together last week. Just the two of them. He said they had an awesome time.”

“I’m so glad your divorce story has a happy ending.”

Maria sighed dreamily. “Me too. It’s exhausting, though. This afternoon, Oz and I are flying to Seattle to collect Riley, then flying down to LA to spend the rest of this week with his kids. We have to be in Boston on Friday, so we’re catching a red-eye Thursday night and taking Riley with us.”

“How’s that going to work?” Ava asked. “With you working for both bands now?”

“We hired Oz’s cousin, Carina, to be Riley’s nanny. She’s going on tour with us.”

Ava propped her chin on her hand. Learning about her sisters’ lives was so much more entertaining than her own boring existence. Hers could be summed up in a single sentence: go to work, go home, go to bed, do it all over again.

“What will you do when the two bands aren’t touring together?” she asked. It seemed like that would eventually become a possibility.

Maria grinned. “I’ll clock a whole lot of frequent flier miles, that’s for sure. I don’t actually have to tour with the bands; I’m going on this tour because I need to learn the ropes. Plus, it’s Demigoddess Revival’s first, and I want to be with Oz.”

Ava had never considered herself a romantic, but she practically had hearts in her eyes listening to her sister flex her life around the person she loved.

Ava only vaguely knew her ex brother-in-law, as she’d already moved to New York by the time they met. She’d gone home for the wedding—she’d claimed work as her excuse for not attending the bridal shower and bachelorette party—and saw him when she was home for Christmas each year, but that was it. She hadn’t even flown out to visit after Riley was born, figuring she could meet her niece at the next holiday.

Maria hadn’t taken Riley to the funeral last summer, Ava suddenly realized. She hadn’t seen her niece in more than a year, as she hadn’t gone home for Christmas this year. No reason to, since neither of her sisters had either.

God, she hoped they spent next Christmas together. She had a desperate desire to finally get to know her niece and both of her sisters’ significant others.

Their food arrived; the server placed their entrées before them and then hurried off to refresh their drinks.

“I admit, I’m jealous of the time the two of you get to spend together,” Ava said, waving her finger between Holly and Ava.

Both sisters reached out a hand and squeezed her arms. “You’re welcome to join us anytime,” Holly said.

“Shoot, you could go on tour with us,” Maria said, “since you aren’t working right now.”

Holly clapped and gave a little squeal that caused the patrons at nearby tables turning their way. Someone covertly snapped a picture. Probably a fan of Holly’s band. It was going to take some getting used to, people always checking them out.

Ava recalled feeling like she was under a microscope growing up, but that had only been their mother, always observing, always checking to make sure they were behaving as perfect daughters should.

“That’s a fantastic idea,” Holly gushed.

“Wait. What is?” What had Ava missed while she’d been taking that unintended stroll down memory lane?

“Come with us,” Holly said, “on tour.”

Oh. “I’ve never...” Ava didn’t even know what to say. She’d assumed Maria was kidding, and maybe she was, but now that Holly jumped in, Maria was giving Ava that calculated look she remembered from their childhood.

It was the look she gave right before she declared another one of her brilliant ideas that would involve a great deal of work on the other person’s part.

“It’ll be so much fun,” Holly said like it was already a done deal.

“But—” Ava didn’t even know what she was protesting. It was a crazy idea, wasn’t it?

On the other hand, what did she have here in the city? An apartment that didn’t even feel like hers. No job. No friends. And the moment her sisters left town, she’d feel bereft.

Except, what in the world would she do with herself while they were touring? Yes, hang out with her sisters, but what else? Ava could not imagine sitting around doing nothing for

long stretches of time. She never had; she didn't even know how to relax.

“You can be my assistant!” Maria suddenly yelled. “God knows I need one.”

“Your assistant?” Ava repeated.

Maria nodded enthusiastically. “Just do exactly what you did last night in the meet and greet room. Help take care of the band, point out ways we can improve our processes. There's plenty more, trust me. Oh, Ava, it's a brilliant idea!”

“I...I think it is.” Ava smiled.

TRAVIS AND CASH shared a taxi to the airport. Travis had an empty apartment waiting in LA...and that was it.

His entire family was in Texas, which hardly mattered because he hadn't spoken to them in more than a decade, not since he'd left the fold to become a rock star. The beating he'd received after he'd gotten his first tattoo had set a precedent, so Travis hadn't been surprised at all when his fundamentalist preacher father had disowned him.

He didn't even miss them.

His father, mother, older brother were all so incredibly ingrained in that for-profit church they ran, they probably didn't even notice he wasn't there anymore. And he certainly had no regrets about walking away from that lifestyle. Fleecing people for a living was not his gig.

What he did miss, or more accurately, what he craved—probably because he'd never truly had it—was a family who accepted him for who he was. They didn't have to be blood-related, but they did have to be loyal to one another and not be assholes.

He had that with his band. That craving, coupled with his past in Dog Daze, was why he'd been so adamant that Parker

and Lacey not hook up, why he'd gotten pissed when he found out Oz and Maria were dating.

So apparently, he wanted that sense of family but at arm's length. Man, a therapist would have a field day examining his head.

"You're thinking awfully hard over there," Cash said.

They were at the airport, bellied up to the bar next to their gate, with a good hour and a half to kill before boarding. Travis had barely touched his Bloody Mary, while Cash looked like he was about to order his second.

"Just wondering what I'm going to do with myself this week," Travis said.

Cash nodded when the bartender pointed at his drink from where she stood near the cash register. She'd been throwing them curious glances since they sat down but hadn't approached other than to take their orders.

Travis was in his standard disguise of preppy clothes and a fisherman's cap. He wasn't taking any chances now that his stalker had resurfaced, especially since they were flying commercial, and coach at that, with no security along.

Maybe, one of these days, they'd be able to afford to pay a security guard to join them, but today was not that day.

Cash had done no more than pull a gray beanie over his dreads. He even wore a Demigoddess Revival T-shirt under his overcoat.

"Not worried about crazed fans, are you?" Travis said after the tender refreshed Cash's drink.

"Trust me, I'm hiding, just like you."

"How do you figure?" Travis asked, eyeing his friend's shirt.

Cash sighed. "Do you want to know why you thought I looked familiar when we met?"

When they'd first formed the band, he was sure he knew Cash, but he could never pinpoint how. And it hadn't been

from Cash's concert pianist days; Travis had never been into that brand of music.

It drove him nuts.

Eventually, he let it go. He must have seen his bandmate at a bar or something. Cash had never offered up a suggestion or even acknowledged that he recognized Travis too.

Until now.

"Well, now that you bring it up for the first time in almost a year, yeah, I do."

Cash took another pull from his drink and dug his wallet out of his jeans pocket. He slid his driver's license across the bar top.

Travis snagged his reading glasses from an inner pocket and peered at the small plastic rectangle. The first thing he noticed was—"That's not your name. And that's not your pic—wait, I do know you."

He cocked his head and studied the guy sitting next to him, who suddenly looked really nervous.

"Holy shit," Travis said. "No way."

"Yes way, although I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone else." Cash snatched the driver's license back and stuffed it into his wallet.

"Are the dreads real or a weave?"

A laugh burst from Cash. "That's seriously what you want to know?"

Travis shrugged. "They are definitely a good disguise. No one from our former lives would guess who you are."

"They're real. I looked into changing my name legally, too, except in order to do so, I have to publish my intent in the newspaper, and neither my parents nor I are keen to bring attention to our connection, especially now that the band is taking off."

"Damn. That's a tough spot." Travis hadn't had to go that far; he just had to move to California. His parents' reach only

extended regionally, in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana. And he'd been the black sheep pretty much from day one, so he hadn't been in the spotlight like his brother was. He doubted anyone from his former life even cared about his connections.

Cash's situation was different, though. While yes, his father had once run in the same circles as Travis's parents, his mother was currently a politician. In California.

A conservative one, at that.

"You're telling me," Cash said.

"Me, I took off as soon as I graduated from high school," Travis said. "And never looked back. But you were a concert pianist. Was that part of your parents' grand plan?"

"We figured out early that I was a master on the keys. I used to perform on stage with my dad, playing piano while he sang. I was playing the organ by the time I was eleven. Even so, I wanted out. Religion has its place, but it's too easy to exploit people. I was never comfortable. But it also never occurred to me to truly break free.

"Luckily, I guess, my mom had political aspirations, and somehow figured out that a conservative Black woman would do well in California, so Dad retired from the church circuit and became her campaign manager. We moved to LA just as I was about to start my freshman year in high school. Dad hired a piano teacher who believed I was talented enough to be on stage, which, ultimately, equated to concert pianist."

"But?" Travis prodded.

"I didn't love it. I loved to play, but I didn't love the music I was playing. I wanted to play rock. But I knew I couldn't have the best of both worlds, especially with my mom's career and some of the platforms she stood for."

"So you walked away from your family? To do this?"

Cash shook his head. "We still talk. They don't love what I do, but they aren't willing to lose me entirely. I spent Christmas with them, but when the photographer came to do the shot for Mom's website, I disappeared upstairs."

He shrugged like it was no big deal, but Travis couldn't imagine it wasn't.

“Well, if you want to hang out this week, I'm free,” Travis said.

“That'd be cool,” Cash replied.

There. Now Travis had something to do.

Other than think about Ava.

CHAPTER

Ten

DEMETRI HAD OBVIOUSLY PLANNED

Ava's firing. Come Monday morning, she had a buy-out offer sitting in her inbox.

A pitiful buy-out offer. The man clearly thought much less of her than she had believed.

In a moment of snarkiness that made her feel better than it probably should, she emailed back, "Try again."

She didn't hear from him next until Thursday. He'd increased the number by ten thousand dollars, but it was still a joke. She'd given pretty much every waking hour of her life to that company for thirteen freaking years. He was not getting off easy.

She suggested he go back to the drawing board, and mentioned that she was thinking about contacting her lawyer.

Then she resumed packing.

Packing! For a four-month North American tour.

She didn't actually have to pack for four straight months. Maria said they'd be on the road until the end of January, then take a two-week break. Another month and another break, which coincided with Oz's nieces and nephew's spring break. They planned to take the kids to Disney World. Ava was welcome to join them if she wanted.

She'd tentatively accepted. She'd never been to Disney World. While they could afford it ten times over, her parents had never been the type to take vacations. Her father refused to take time off work, and her mother—well, Ava wasn't sure, but she'd guess the woman was afraid to leave her little kingdom up there in that small town east of Seattle. Outside of Roma, Washington, no one would treat her like royalty.

After the Disney vacation, the bands would tour until early May. They'd have another couple of weeks off, then they were, as Maria phrased it, "hitting the festival circuit," which would last until September, at which point both bands planned to head to the studio to record their next albums.

Even knowing the itinerary, Ava had no clue what to pack. Although truthfully, she didn't have much choice. Her wardrobe consisted of business attire and a handful of items that could be considered business casual.

Despite the lack of variety in her closet, she packed, unpacked, and packed again three different times, all the way up to the moment the car she'd hired to take her to the airport pulled up in front of her building.

In four hours she'd be in Boston, reuniting with her sisters.

And Travis.

What did that make her that she was excited to see him too? They'd spent only a handful of hours together and had shared a kiss at midnight on New Year's Eve. Except he'd shared a kiss with the entire band, so did it even count?

Even if her kiss had been on the lips?

She spent the ride to the airport analyzing that kiss. Not the few hours they'd spent in bed, because that would have been uncomfortable sitting in the backseat with the driver darting glances at her in the rearview mirror.

Okay, maybe she thought about those moments too.

Which was crazy.

She had no idea how he would act when he found out she was joining the tour. It probably wouldn't faze him. He'd

obviously not said anything about their dalliance, and neither had she. If he wasn't part of the band they were traveling with, she might have told her sisters if only to shock the hell out of them at her uncharacteristic behavior.

As soon as she deboarded the plane in Boston, she headed toward the gate where Maria had said her own plane would be landing, thirty minutes after Ava's.

Standing next to a pillar, she watched as the passengers filed out of the little tunnel and poured into the airport.

There were Maria and Oz; Oz in disguise, carrying little Riley on his hip. God, Ava had only seen her niece a handful of times in the girl's short life. She looked shockingly different each time. Ava supposed that was yet another bonus to making this decision: she'd hopefully develop a relationship with Riley.

Maria squealed like they hadn't seen each other in months and rushed over. It felt good to wrap her arms around her sister and hug her back. There was not enough hugging in Ava's life.

There was not enough physical contact with anyone, really. She hadn't realized how much she craved it until that afternoon with Travis, when they'd tangled together in her bed.

Oz offered his hand to shake and then indicated a young woman hovering next to him. "This is my cousin, Carina. She's joining the tour as our nanny."

Carina looked to be in her mid or maybe late twenties, with long dark hair, big eyes, and a beautiful smile.

"Very nice to meet you," Ava said before turning to her sister. Even though they'd already had the conversation, she said, "Brilliant idea, bringing along a nanny."

"It's definitely a mutually beneficial proposition," Maria said with a wink. "Carina needed a change, and we needed help with Riley. Bonus that Carina loves kids."

Ava could relate. About needing a change anyway. She wasn't sure about kids. Besides never considering seeking a

long-term relationship, she hadn't considered having kids either. Or being around kids.

She tried to imagine it now, this concept of being a parent, but before any sort of image could form in her head, Travis stepped out of the tunnel, and for a moment, Ava forgot to breathe.

He was dressed similarly to when they'd met in that restaurant in Brooklyn: slacks and a sweater, with that blue fisherman's cap on his head and, wow, whether those glasses were real hardly mattered because damn, he looked hot in them.

Dropping her gaze and willing her cheeks to cool, Ava smoothed a hand over the front of her cashmere sweater and waited for him to join their little group.

"Travis, you remember my sister, Ava, right?" Maria said.

He pulled the glasses off his nose and tucked them into an inside pocket, hardly sparing her a glance. "Yeah. What's she doing here?"

There was no inflection, no emotion in that question. Exactly as she'd suspected he'd act.

Why was that so disappointing?

"She's going on tour with us," Maria said, clapping her hands. "She's going to be my assistant. I can't wait to boss my older sister around," she added with a laugh.

"Shit," Travis said, and he walked away.

Maria stared after him. "What was that about?"

Ava forced her gaze *not* to stare after him. "No clue," she lied.

He wasn't ambivalent about her joining the tour; he was downright unhappy about it. Maria had told her about the way he'd felt about her and Oz getting together, about Lacey and Parker dating; it didn't take much of a leap to conclude that he was annoyed about sleeping with Ava.

Good thing no one else in the band knew about it. Somebody might have suggested she not join them. And now that she was here, she couldn't imagine being anywhere else.

Despite having to deal with Travis's presence regularly for the next four months.

CHAPTER

Eleven

WHAT THE FUCK was she playing at? Was this on purpose? Had Ava convinced her sister to invite her on tour just so she could be a pain in Travis's ass?

Sure as hell felt that way.

After gathering their luggage at the airport, the group flagged down a handful of Ubers to take them to their hotel. The bus and driver, Teddy, were already there, waiting for them. They'd check in, relax for a minute, and then they'd head over to the arena.

To start their very first North American tour.

It was hard not to be excited about that, but unfortunately, Travis was doing an excellent job.

It was easy to avoid Ava when they had so many people and an excess of luggage and needed multiple cars. And since they'd just come off a red-eye, no one batted an eye when he went straight to his hotel room without a word to anyone.

His relief was short-lived, though. He'd only just laid on his back on the bed and tried to force himself not to think about Ava so he could grab a nap before they had to leave, when there was a knock on the door.

He considered ignoring it, except a rocker in a hotel room alone not answering his door was never a good thing, so he groaned and rolled out of bed to see who it was and what they wanted.

Maria. With little Riley on her hip. Despite his annoyance, Travis mustered a smile. Riley was a seriously cute kid, and it was hard to be mad when she was around.

“Sorry,” Maria said, edging her way into his room and closing the door. “I didn’t intend to bring her with me when I came to talk to you, but she’s a little clingy right now. She’s still adjusting to her parents living in different places. She doesn’t like to be away from me for long stretches of time.”

“Hey, Riley’s cool. I don’t mind hanging out with her.” Travis lifted his hand, and the little girl obligingly gave him a grin and a fist bump.

“I appreciate that, but I wanted to talk to you about Ava, and it would have been easier if we were alone.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Moot point.”

“Oh please. That is so obviously a lie, even Riley knows it.” Maria rolled her eyes for emphasis.

Think fast, think fast, think fast. Travis was not about to tell her that he’d banged her sister and couldn’t get the damn woman out of his head.

“It’s fine. I was just taken by surprise when she was at the airport. You know how I feel about nepotism within the band.”

“What I don’t understand is why you’re still holding to that belief, when every single time there’s been nepotism within the band, it’s worked out.”

It was a valid question. Why did he still hold to this belief? Or was it more personal than that? He’d hooked up with Ava, thinking it would be a one-night stand and they’d walk away afterward and never talk again. Except he’d wanted to see her again. He was the one to initiate making it more than a one-time thing.

But he’d also lied to her—at least, by omission—about who he was. She’d assumed she was hooking up with some schmo with no ties to either of her sisters.

When he realized who she was, his instant reaction had been to freeze her out. Call it PTSD, call it fear, call it

whatever the fuck he wanted; he'd been transported right back to his time with Dog Daze, when he and Suzie had been on the cusp and it had all come tumbling down.

“Just because it worked out for you and Oz and Lacey and Parker does not mean I'll be so lucky,” he said, which, he realized a scant moment too late, was too much.

Maria's eyes went huge. “You're interested in Ava? Seriously?”

He shook his head. Adamantly. “No, absolutely not.”

“The man doth protest too much.”

“Stop it, Maria. I'm not into your sister.”

“Then why did you just say you might not be so lucky? What are you afraid will happen if Ava joins the tour?”

Fuck him, this woman was far too perceptive, and he was too tired to keep sparring with her.

“Fine. I think she's hot. And it's bugging me, because I'm not interested in going there. For a bunch of reasons. Yes, because she's your sister. And yes, because she's tied to the band, since you've now apparently hired her. And yes, because I do not do relationships and how fucking—oops, sorry, Riley—how awkward would that be if, you know, something happened?”

He already knew how awkward it was, not that he planned to ever tell Maria as much.

Her shoulders drooped. “You're a great guy, Travis. I only wish you realized it.”

“Er, thanks?”

She patted his arm and offered up what he thought was supposed to be a reassuring smile. “I'll do my best to try to keep Ava out of your way. And you try to be nice to her when I'm not successful, okay?”

He clasped the back of his neck. It was hot under his touch. “Yeah, sure.” He'd been plenty nice to her on New Year's Eve.

That was the problem.

HE HADN'T MANAGED to grab a nap before it was time to pile onto the bus and head to the arena, but that was okay. Adrenaline would get him through until the show was over, and then he could crash tonight and be ready to go when they checked out and moved on to the next city, the next show.

God, he missed playing huge arenas. He hadn't even realized it until the show in Madison Square Garden. Before that, Demigoddess Revival had been playing clubs and ten thousand seats or less venues. They hadn't been around long enough nor had they signed with a label that could take them to the next level yet.

Maria seriously rocked at getting their name out there for public consumption. And then they'd signed with the biggest record label in the country.

Which all led to tonight, with Travis rushing out onto the stage, his sticks clutched in his hand, waving over his head, nineteen thousand fans going apeshit behind that row of bodyguards down there in front of the speakers.

With his ass perched on the stool behind his drum kit, he popped his earpieces into his ears, his gaze sweeping the front row, automatically searching for his stalker. It really pissed him off that he was back to being paranoid all the damn time.

He wasn't really this much of an asshole, but seriously, sometimes it seemed like women were the cause of all his angst. Was it only a week ago that he'd thought he was on top of the world and all was right in life?

What was next? Was he going to trip over somebody's high heel and break an arm and be unable to tour?

Fuck, he needed to stop with all the negative energy.

It helped that his stalker wasn't anywhere within his range of vision tonight. It also helped that he hadn't seen Ava since they checked into their hotel earlier today. She was here, somewhere, but she'd ridden over to the arena on Panic Station's tour bus, which was just fine with him. And whatever the hell they'd been doing before the show, neither Maria nor Ava had been hanging out in the dressing room.

Lacey stood at the front of the stage, talking to the crowd, building them into a frenzy.

When her arm went up and her head fell back like she was about to call the start to a drag race, Cash tapped his keys, leading into "Dream This." One of the singles from their first album. Parker joined him with the deep, thrumming notes of his bass, then Oz with his guitar riffs, and finally, Travis banged on his drums, really kicking the song into gear. Lacey clutched the microphone and crooned the opening lyrics.

Game on.

Travis was exactly where he wanted to be. Right here, right this minute, nothing else mattered except giving these people the best damn concert experience they'd ever had. Demigoddess Revival was a hundred times better than Dog Daze had ever been, and he was a lucky son of a bitch for falling in with these guys.

Sometimes, he just needed that reminder.

They played a slew of their own songs, plus "Good Times" by INXS because Lacey fucking rocked the hell out of that song and they planned to cover it on their next album. And then the show was over and they were exiting the stage to deafening screams and shouts and clapping.

They were the opening act, so their show was shorter than Panic Station's. But that was okay. Assuming this tour went as well as they anticipated, they'd be headlining by the time they released their next album.

Wouldn't that be something?

Somebody handed him a towel and a bottle of water, and he twisted off the cap, dumped the water over his head, then

used the towel to scrub his face and hair while he followed the security guard down the hall to their dressing room.

He heard the sound of the shower the minute he stepped into the room, which meant he was going to have to stew in his own sweat for another few minutes. He stalked over to the mini fridge and grabbed another bottle of water, actually drinking this one, and finally took stock of who all was in the room with him.

Oz and Maria, Cash, and Ava were all chilling on the couches set up in the corner. Lacey and Parker had snagged the shower first.

Travis was kind of jealous. He wouldn't mind having a shower buddy once in a while. Someone to scrub his back and make sure his pecker was really, really clean...

He turned away from the sight of Ava, sitting there looking far more elegant than anyone attending a rock concert should.

"Hey, Ava, we should get out of here," Maria said.

Travis glanced over his shoulder. She'd jumped up and was reaching for her sister.

"It's fine, Maria. You two can stay. I can handle it."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." He wasn't, but he forced his legs to carry him over to the couch, where he sat on Cash's other side.

Cash and Oz both arched their brows at his weird comment, but neither said a word.

"Bourbon?" Cash offered, nodding at the bottle perched on the coffee table in front of them.

"Yeah, sure."

Cash splashed more than two fingers' worth into a tumbler already filled with ice and handed it to him. Travis took a decent swallow, appreciating the burn that forced him to focus on something other than Ava's soft hair that she'd twisted into a loose braid draping over her shoulder.

Christ, the woman was beautiful. She and Holly and Maria all strongly resembled each other, yet Travis had never looked at either of her sisters the way he couldn't stop looking at her.

“Where's Riley and the nanny?” Cash asked.

“At the hotel,” Maria said. “Riley has had pretty much zero routine for the last two weeks, and now we're trying to work her back into one. As best as we can while being on the road, anyway.”

“Bummer for the nanny,” Cash said. “Hopefully, she's not a fan of our music.”

Oz chuckled. “She's part of my family, so she's a fan. Once Mom here calms down some, we'll see about letting Carina and Riley come to a show.”

Maria turned in her seat to glare at Oz, who leaned forward and kissed her nose. She rolled her eyes, but there was definitely a smile teasing at her lips.

Lacey and Parker tumbled out of the shower, drunk on the performance and each other, no doubt. “Next,” Parker yelled and the two of them disappeared behind the privacy screen.

Cash was the first to jump up, which left a space between Ava and Travis that was both far too wide and too damn close. He took another swig of his drink while she gazed at her empty glass before gracefully lifting her body from the couch and heading over to a cluster of bottles resting on a mirrored vanity.

By the time she turned around with a refreshed drink, Lacey and Parker were stepping out from behind the screen, fully dressed. Lacey flounced over and plopped down at the vanity nearest to Ava, who watched in the mirror as she styled her hair and added makeup to her face. If they were simply heading out to the tour bus, she wouldn't bother, but they were expected to make an after-concert appearance, signing autographs and obligingly taking selfies with fans.

Travis had always enjoyed hanging with the fans. Nothing stroked a guy's ego better than listening to a bunch of people wax poetic about what an awesome drummer he was. The

scantily clad women who were always hovering, always up for a quickie, whether it was a blowjob or a handy or an emotionless fuck, were probably a bonus package for a lot of rockers, although Travis had been married the first time he'd done this gig, and unlike his ex-wife, he'd been faithful.

There should be nothing stopping him from enjoying those extracurricular activities as part of Demigoddess Revival, except he'd managed to gain himself a damn stalker back when they were just starting to play larger gigs, and he'd been afraid to take advantage of what was offered ever since.

That was why hooking up with Ava had been so spectacular. It wasn't some celestial, soulmate shit; it was simply that she hadn't known who he was and therefore had been safe.

She wasn't safe anymore. Not because he was afraid she'd become a stalker but because of all the other shit he kept reminding himself about on repeat.

He didn't want to forget and do something stupid like try to sleep with her again.

Cash finished his shower, and Oz hopped in there next. Ten minutes later, it was Travis's turn. He soaped up and scrubbed his hair and only once imagined Ava in there with him, which was enough for his half chub to go full mast. Since they needed to get the hell down the hall to the fans, instead of taking the matter in hand, he flicked the knob to cut all the hot water and then nearly whimpered as the cold spray smacked against his body.

But hey, at least his dick wasn't inflated anymore.

Although, Christ, this was going to be a long-ass tour if he had to take a cold shower every night after the show.

CHAPTER

Twelve

“HEY.”

“Oh. Hey.” Ava pulled one of the earbuds out of her ear and paused the music on her phone as she slowed her pace on the exercise bike in the hotel’s workout room.

“You work out,” Travis said.

She shrugged. “Mostly, it’s stress relief, although I recognize that in a few years, I’ll be grateful for this habit.”

They were two weeks into the tour. They’d traveled along the East Coast to Washington DC, then cut across to Louisville. Now they were making their way north again—Cincinnati, Columbus, Pittsburgh, Cleveland. It was a grueling schedule, but honestly, Ava was having the time of her life.

Except for whatever was going on with Travis.

Scratch that. Except for the nothing that was going on with Travis.

Speaking of scratching, he scratched his jaw, a habit she’d come to realize he did when he was nervous or uncomfortable. Probably because they were currently alone in the hotel’s tiny workout room, and for the last two weeks, they’d done a remarkable job of avoiding each other as much as humanly possible.

“I prefer to go jogging,” he said, “but it’s too damn cold here for my taste.” He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. “Parker and Sam are probably out there, breathing ice into their lungs, but I’m not fucking crazy.”

She laughed, because for a scant moment, this felt like it did the day they met, before she knew he was a rock star and he knew she was his band's publicist's sister.

He laughed too, and she damn near swooned on the spot. Ava had never swooned a day in her life.

Their laughter faded into uncomfortable silence, save the sound of Travis still scratching his jaw.

“So, listen,” he blurted. “This kind of sucks.”

“The tour? Why?” She'd thought it was going beautifully. They were selling out venue after venue after venue. The fans loved them. Music downloads spiked every time they played live. Maria had to constantly reorder merch.

“Not the tour. This.” He waved his finger between himself and Ava.

Oh.

“I hate that everything is so uncomfortable.”

You and me both, buddy.

“What do you think about calling a truce?”

She cocked her head. “We aren't exactly fighting.” They were circling each other, avoiding each other, refusing to speak to each other. It was maddening, but it wasn't fighting.

“But we aren't getting along either. I just want...I want to go back to the day we met.”

Ava sucked in a breath through her nose.

Lord, yes! She was ready to vault off this bike and into his arms.

“The friends part,” he clarified, and her stuttering heart suddenly deflated.

“Friends,” she echoed.

He nodded eagerly. “Even when you take the amazing sex out of the picture, I had a great time that day. Because of you. I want that back. I want us to be cool with each other again.”

But I want the amazing sex too. Still, it wasn't an unreasonable request. In fact, it was quite the reasonable ask, and she ought to be giving him kudos for being so brave as to make the first move. She'd obviously not intended to approach him anytime soon, despite how frustrated she was.

And he was right; they had gotten along. Smashingly. That had been the most perfect day of her entire year—like he said, even without the sex.

She swallowed thickly a couple times and then said, “Yes. I'd like that too.”

“Excellent.” His grin split his face from ear to ear and took ten years off his age. It also ratcheted his attraction factor up to a fifteen on a scale of one to five.

Well, this should be fun.

He hurried to the bike next to her. “Okay, now let's race.”

She laughed. Was he serious?

He hopped on and immediately started pedaling.

Yes, he was.

CLEARLY, Travis had been onto something when he'd approached her. They fell into a mostly comfortable, casual friendship. They didn't go out of their way to be alone together—Ava was certain she could not handle that—but they no longer avoided each other.

She could hang out in the dressing room before and after the shows and not try to avoid glancing his way. She cracked a joke and he laughed. They actually had full-blown conversations on occasion.

She discovered the glasses were indeed real the day they were sprawled side by side on the couch on the bus, working their way through a crossword puzzle book.

The glasses were definitely hot.

Not a day went by that she didn't wish for the sexual part of their relationship to return, but honestly, she was growing more and more comfortable around him, and that wasn't a bad thing.

Until the show in Cleveland.

"What the heck is up with him?" she asked Maria when Travis stomped off to the shower after their performance. A performance, by the way, that had been outstanding. They left the fans begging for more. They'd even done a third encore, which wasn't typical for an opening band.

Travis should be over the moon.

"No clue," Maria said. "All he told me was that he hates Cleveland." She shrugged. "Maybe his ex-wife is from here."

"Ex-wife?" Ava hadn't meant to blurt it out like that, but seriously. Travis had been married before? How had she not known this?

"Remember, I told you he had some baggage left over from when he was part of Dog Daze," Maria said.

"Yes, but you didn't mention he had an ex-wife."

"One, not my story to tell. And two, I don't know the details anyway. I just know that he hates the idea of interpersonal relationships within the band."

No wonder he was so adamant about them being *just friends*.

He stepped out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his hips, his hair towel dried and sticking up everywhere. Ava wanted to lick those water droplets from his chest.

Just friends, remember, Ava?

His gaze snapped to her like he knew exactly what she was thinking, his frown deepened, and he strode to the screen and ducked behind it to get dressed.

"I don't want to go to the meet 'n greet tonight," he announced as soon as he stepped out from behind the screen, wearing a pair of ass-hugging jeans and a fitted black T-shirt

with the words *I drink and I know things* scrawled across the front. He dragged a hand through his hair, which turned it from crazy, sticking up all over the place to bedhead, and God, Ava needed to get laid.

“You have to,” Maria replied. “The local radio station did a giveaway. Two lucky fans get free hoodies and a picture with the entire band. The station is going to broadcast it live and post it on their website. It’s fantastic publicity.”

“Shit,” Travis said. He snatched a glass, filled it with ice, and topped it off with bourbon. Then he drank the entire thing in a couple of gulps.

A few minutes later, they were ready to head down to the meet and greet. Technically, Ava didn’t need to go, and a lot of times she didn’t, but there was no way she was hanging back tonight. She was worried about Travis. He was like a volcano; the slightest provocation might make him blow.

As they all started to leave the dressing room, she snagged his sleeve and held him back. “What’s the deal?” she asked. If she was going to help him, she needed to know what she was up against. They were friends, right? Heck, at this point, he was the closest friend she’d ever had.

In her life.

The door closed, leaving the two of them alone in the room. Travis stood facing the flat, smooth wooden surface, his fists bunched at his sides.

Finally, without looking at her, he said, “Cleveland is where my last band fell apart.” He paused. “Well, that’s when I quit and walked away.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault. Obviously. You weren’t even there.” He finally glanced at her, gave her a fleeting smirk.

She returned to the little seating area and splashed bourbon into a glass, then handed it to him.

“Thanks.” He tossed it back with a grimace.

“I just found out you were married,” she admitted.

He blew out a breath, dragged his hand through his hair again. “Yeah. To the guitarist for my previous band, Dog Daze. It didn’t end well.”

“I’m sorry.” What else was she supposed to say?

“Suzie was an addict,” he said. “She couldn’t handle the fame. She came from nothing, and we were rising so fast—not unlike Demigoddess Revival is now—and she was a kid in a candy store. Trying every damn thing. And then going back for more. We divorced mostly because of the cheating—her, not me,” he clarified, which was funny because Ava would never have taken him for a cheater anyway. The man had integrity in spades.

“That’s why you left the band? Because of the divorce?”

He shook his head. “It honestly didn’t bother me that we’d split. By that point I was ready to admit that we didn’t love each other. I married her because it seemed like the right thing to do, since we started the band together. Totally stupid reason to do it.”

“Can’t disagree.”

He snorted. “Thanks for the honesty. But yeah, we could have been fine, as a band, even with the divorce. Except her drug use just kept getting worse.”

He strode over and placed the glass on the nearest flat surface. “She constantly missed practices. Couldn’t keep her shit together on stage. She was always high. I mean, *always*. And then there was the Cleveland show. Right here. In this arena.”

He waved, encompassing the entire venue.

“She barely made it through the show and then disappeared afterward. Like, walked off stage and out of the building and kept going. Nobody could find her. We had a show the next night, and we had to cancel it because we didn’t have a guitarist. We even called the cops and reported her as a missing person. We didn’t know if she was still alive.

“Three days later, she called our manager. She was in fucking Buffalo. To this day, I have no idea how she got there

or why she went.”

He stared at the wall like there was something fascinating about the simple, flat paint. “That was the day I quit the band. I couldn’t do it anymore. I wanted to be a serious musician, I wanted to make it big, and we were spiraling into a black hole at the speed of light.”

After a few deep breaths, he said, “I always get edgy when I’m anywhere near Cleveland. Like I’m afraid the same damn thing is going to happen again.”

She stepped up behind him and placed her hand on his shoulder. “You know that isn’t going to happen. Not with this band. The show’s over, and our guitarist is right down the hall in the meet and greet room.”

He chuffed. His hand landed on top of hers. He gave it a squeeze. “You’re right. Thanks.” He cleared his throat. “Okay, I think I’m ready now. Thanks again. For being a friend. Seriously. It means a lot.”

For being a friend. Exactly where she didn’t want to be.

That wasn’t true. She loved being his friend. She just wished there were a few additional benefits to the program.

“Let’s go. I’m sure there are at least a handful of fans who want the drummer’s autograph.”

He chuckled and swung his arm around her neck, guiding her out of the dressing room. He pressed a quick kiss to her temple before heading down the hall.

When they walked in, Oz waved at them to hurry over to the section roped off for the band. There was a guy holding a professional-looking video camera and another who Ava presumed was a DJ from the local radio station, along with two clearly starstruck young people, hanging with the rest of the band. All the other fans were hovering around, watching.

The roped off part of the room was designed to look like a cozy living room. Ava had even coaxed the venue into finding a couple of potted palms to position at either end of the sectional leather sofa. And they’d covered the high-top tables scattered throughout the rest of the room with linens to hide

any imperfections. In the middle of each table was a pile of postcards with QR codes to the band's website, where one could download music or buy merch that wasn't currently available at the venue.

Ava had designed a few different potential new band logos; she and Maria were watching to see which one attracted the most attention from fans. They planned to officially introduce the new logo with the release of the band's next album. There would be some sort of contest around all these postcards, which would eventually make them collectors' items.

The two fans from the radio station were given hoodies, which they obligingly donned, and then the DJ held a microphone and talked at the cameraman, riling up the crowd and hyping the band, interviewing the two winners before letting whoever was watching via the live feed know that they were all going to take a picture with the band now.

One of the kids asked if the bandmembers would autograph the paper tickets they'd won, and someone produced a Sharpie. They all took turns signing, and the winners were escorted away to make room for the next wave.

Ava stood off to the side watching the interactions. The entire process was smooth, controlled. A security guard let no more than six people into the roped off area at a time. The various members of the band chatted them up, took selfies, signed autographs. Sometimes they talked shop if one of the fans played an instrument or was in a garage band and dreamed of being on the other side of this exchange. The security guard clearly had some sort of stopwatch, because, if Ava guessed correctly, every group got about seven minutes with the band before they were escorted out of the roped off area.

There was a joke in there, somewhere. She'd need to point that out to Travis later. He'd either roll his eyes and smirk at her cheesiness, or he'd laugh at her genius.

Travis nursed a single drink, obligingly interacting and signing autographs and smiling. Ava could tell he was still

feeling edgy, but he was hiding it well enough from everyone else.

Panic Station made their grand entrance, and most of the fans in the room rushed over to fawn over them. It was okay; they were the bigger band. They'd been around a lot longer and everything they released became an instant hit.

Demigoddess Revival would get there. Soon. Besides, most of these fans had already gotten to shake hands with Demigoddess Revival, so it wasn't *really* like they were choosing one over the other.

One cluster of what looked like teenagers had remained in line. The security guard unlatched the rope and let them into the band's private area.

The small group of fans all wore hoodies and jeans, and at first glance, Ava thought they were all guys. But then she noticed the shortest one of the bunch; that one had their hood up over their head so Ava couldn't see a face, but the person's curves implied they were female. Maybe one of the other guys' little sister who had become a fan by default.

The hooded girl stepped up to Travis. and Ava could feel the change in the atmosphere from way over on the other side of the seating area.

His eyes went huge, his jaw rigid, his entire body frozen like he was a statue.

What in the world?

The girl reached for him, and Travis shied away, stumbling backward until his calves bumped into the couch and he fell, landing with an *oomph* on the leather cushion.

The girl continued to lean toward him, and Travis's gaze whipped up and locked with Ava's. She hurried toward him without consciously deciding to do so.

"Hey," she said, elbowing her way through the cluster of bodies and grasping Travis's arm, pulling him toward her. "Let's go. Remember that thing...?"

"Yeah," he said, his gaze on the door.

He wrapped his arm around her waist like he never intended to let her go, and she rushed him through the room to the exit.

They were a good hundred feet down the hall, heading toward the tour bus, before it occurred to Ava that the girl had likely been Travis's stalker. She tugged her phone out of her pocket and shot Maria a text, then focused on getting him the hell out of there.

He didn't say a damn word. Just let her lead the way.

CHAPTER

Thirteen

COHERENT THOUGHT STARTED to return the moment they pushed through the arena doors and the frigid late January air hit him in the face.

And then Travis felt like a pussy, because, Jesus, he'd literally froze into a state of shock when his stalker had smiled up at him like all was right in the world. He didn't even want to think about how many cameras had caught what was probably a look of adject terror on his face, and the way he's stumbled and fell on his ass.

One thing broke through all the horror, though. Ava. Her arm around his back, her take-charge attitude, her refusal to leave him alone even when they were on the bus with the door closed and Teddy instructed not to let anyone on except the band.

They didn't have a tricked out tour bus like Panic Station. Theirs was a rental, bare bones. A seating area up front, a bathroom and shower in the back, and a row of bunks in between.

"The only place I can be alone on here is in a bunk," he said. Even then, all that separated him from his band mates was a curtain, but it would be enough for them to get the message. And he really did not want to explain himself to anyone else right now.

"A bunk it is," Ava said, waving at him to roll into the one he'd claimed as his own.

And then she slid in next to him, tugging the curtains closed and draping them in almost total darkness.

For the record, the bunks on the bus were only slightly larger than a single bed, so the only way he and Ava both fit was by snuggling up real close. She had to roll onto her side and face him, while he did the same, blinking at her in the darkness.

“You don’t need to stay in here with me,” he said, even though he really wanted her to. More than he should. He chalked it up to this fucking panic he felt every time that woman managed to catch up with him again. And maybe the fact that Ava had already talked him off the ledge once tonight, when he’d been feeling melancholy about his experience with his previous band.

Why did every bad thing happen in fucking Cleveland?

“Yes I do,” Ava said. “For my own wellbeing.”

If she really wanted to stay, he had zero desire to push her away right now.

“Hang on.” He shifted and slid his arm around her shoulders. “There. A little more comfortable.” At least the band was spending the night in a hotel tonight, so he wouldn’t have to sleep in here with Ava all night long. Not that he didn’t want to; it was more that he really did want to.

Maria and Oz shared a bunk like this when they were on the road, and Travis had always thought it would be uncomfortable, given how small the beds were.

It wasn’t. Not with his arm around Ava’s shoulders and her hand resting on his waist.

“Hopefully, you don’t have to pee before we get back to the hotel,” she said, and he let out a bark of laughter, which did wonders to ease the tightness in his chest.

Ava’s phone vibrated and lit up. “Who is it?” he asked.

“Maria. She wants to know where I am. And whether you’re okay.”

“What are you telling her?” he asked, watching her tap on the screen.

“That we’re on the bus and you don’t want to talk to anyone.”

The truth, then.

She frowned.

“What is it?” he asked. She was so beautiful, even when her brow was crinkled, even in the light from a cell phone.

“The girl who spooked you disappeared.” She caught his eye. “It was your stalker, wasn’t it?”

He shifted his eyes to the side. “Yeah.”

Her grip on his waist tightened for a moment, but she didn’t ask for details. She was surely ridiculously curious about how some random chick could set him off like this, but she cared enough not to press.

“Thanks,” he said. For everything. For getting him the hell out of that room. For hiding him here on the bus. For hiding with him. For not demanding answers before he was ready to give them.

Curtains did not protect against noise, so it was obvious when the rest of the band boarded the bus. Maria demanded to know if everyone was accounted for, and then the vehicle lurched into motion. No one wandered back to the bunks to check on him. He suspected that was because of whatever Ava had told her sister. One more reason to appreciate the woman who was lying in this bunk with him.

When they reached the hotel, Ava received another text. She showed him the screen; Maria said everyone had vacated the bus, there was no one else around, and they were clear to go inside.

As soon as they reached the floor where the band was staying, Ava started to pull away, probably to head to her own room.

Travis twined their fingers and gave her hand a squeeze. “Is it too much to ask you to stay with me for a little while

longer? I swear, I'm really not a wimp. I'm just—”

“I don't think you're a wimp. I think you suffered a traumatic experience that you thought was over and done, and the fact that it is not is really messing with your head.”

“Wow.” He cupped the back of his neck. “You pretty much nailed it.”

She smiled. “And yes, I'm happy to stay with you for a little while longer.”

He didn't release her hand as he led her into his hotel room. After he flipped the security lock, she said, “Not what I expected.”

He hadn't turned on the light, but the curtain over the window was partially open, letting in enough ambient light from the parking lot for him to see his bag resting on the luggage rack, the bed that was made even though there had not been maid service today. The bathroom counter that was free of clutter.

“Guys can't be neat freaks?” he teased.

She laughed. He liked the sound of her laugh.

Finally releasing her hand, he took the two steps to his suitcase. “I'm going to change into sweats. Do you want to borrow a pair?” Her room was probably less than fifty feet away, yet he didn't suggest she pop down there to change.

It wasn't even that he wasn't ready to be alone—okay, that was part of it—but mostly, he wasn't ready to be away from her. She centered him, calmed him, reassured him. If he thought too hard about it, he had a feeling he'd come to the conclusion that he'd never had someone in his life who he felt was in his corner, no matter what.

But he wouldn't think too hard on the subject. Now wasn't the time.

“If you think you have something that will fit me, yes, I'd love to get more comfortable if you're planning on me staying here and binging bad television or something.”

He chuckled and pulled out a pair of drawstring sweats that were cinched around the ankles. “Here.”

She disappeared into the bathroom, and he quickly traded his ripped jeans for warm-up pants. She stepped back into the room, and he bit the inside of his cheek. The shirt she’d worn to the concert was a cream-colored, fitted, button-down with three-quarter sleeves. Paired with his overlarge sweatpants, she was...adorable.

“Don’t even say it,” she warned, giving him a mock stern look.

He let loose the grin. God, it felt good. “It is kind of sexy,” he teased. “Although I admit, I like your normal look.”

“My normal look?” She arched a single, perfectly sculpted brow.

On the outside, she was exactly the sort of woman his family would have rubbed elbows with in Dallas high society. She was elegant yet understated, clearly highbred. On the inside, he couldn’t imagine her having anything at all to do with his family. She’d probably find them repulsive.

Which they were.

“Sure. Elegant. Sophisticated.” He snapped his fingers. “Polished.”

She rolled her eyes and sat on the edge of the bed. “What if I told you it was all an act?”

He sat next to her. “I wouldn’t believe you.”

“Wow. Not pulling any punches, are you?”

Cash was the only person associated with the band who knew anything at all about Travis’s background. He’d been hiding for so long, sometimes he’d go weeks without thinking about his past, where he came from. It hadn’t been hard for him to walk away, but he knew he was an anomaly. Most people couldn’t disown their parents and their only sibling, no matter how cruel or terrible they were.

Look at Holly and Maria. Holly had left home at eighteen and had only gone back a handful of times since, yet,

according to her, she still found herself kowtowing to her controlling mother. Maria had spent her entire life, until only eight months ago, trying to emulate her mother.

What about Ava? She'd moved across the country, established a life for herself, but had she really escaped? Did she even believe there was something to escape from?

"I suspect we come from similar backgrounds," he said, watching her steadily.

Both brows winged up her forehead. "You came from small-town high society too?" She deliberately swept her gaze over his person, and he knew she was taking note of the shaggy hair, the piercings, the tattoos.

"Not small town. More like Southern high society."

Her eyes widened. "No kidding?"

He tapped her knee. "I can usually spot someone with the same breeding from a mile away. I trained myself to, because when I first walked away from that life, I was paranoid I'd get pulled back in. So I learned how to avoid anyone associated with that crowd."

"What are you doing with me then?" Her tone was teasing—on the surface. He heard the edge of worry, though.

Standing, he strode to the window, peered out, swept his gaze over the parking lot. They were on the third floor, and with no lights on in the room, no one down there would be able to see him.

"I need you in my life, Travis," his stalker had whispered right before he stumbled backward and landed on his ass on the couch.

Shit, he was starting to sweat again.

Tugging the curtain closed, he reached over and flipped on the pin light next to the bed; just enough to allow them to see but not enough to change the mood.

Turning to Ava, he admitted, "You center me. I don't know how to explain it. But I feel...comfortable when you're

around. And most of the time, I feel like an impostor in my own life.”

Her smile was brittle. “I completely understand.”

Waving at the TV, she tried to change the subject. “Are we binging something?”

He shook his head. “Can we just lay here for a while?”

She hesitated, probably thought he was going to hit on her again. Which hadn’t been his intent at all. Hell, seeing his stalker was about the most effective libido-killer ever.

Except, when Ava lay back against the pillows and he rolled onto the bed next to her, suddenly, he couldn’t think of anything else. His mind kept replaying the afternoon they’d spent together on New Year’s Eve. Over and over, every single moment. In graphic detail.

“What are you thinking about?” she whispered, like she could read his damn mind.

“My thoughts are decidedly not nice right now.” He stared at the ceiling.

After a small pause, Ava asked, “As in, they’re mean?”

He snorted softly. “Definitely not mean.”

Her breath hitched. “Then...what?”

He should cut this game off at the balls. Instead, he whispered, “My thoughts are very, very...naughty.”

Her entire body went rigid for a few seconds, and she practically breathed, “Tell me. I want to hear your thoughts.”

“No, you really don’t.”

“Don’t tell me what you think I want. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Fuck. This woman. She really was going to be the death of him.

“Tell me, Travis.”

Fine. If that was what she wanted. Hell, maybe his admission would scare her off. That would be best for both of

them.

“I want to twist my hand in your hair and use it to hold your head still so I can plunder your mouth.”

She gasped, followed quickly by a moan, and holy shit, it was such an erotic sound, his cock gave a hopeful jump.

Down, boy.

And then she whispered two words that broke him.

“Do it.”

CHAPTER

Fourteen

TRAVIS ROLLED ONTO HIS SIDE, and for a few quick breaths, Ava stayed where she was, lying on her back, staring at the ceiling. Her heart pounded like mad; her breathing was becoming more and more erratic by the second.

She turned to face him, her hand landing on his hip, resting there, not squeezing. Waiting.

Hoping he'd accept the challenge she'd just issued.

"You have no idea..." His gaze skated over her face, zoning in on her lips. She parted them, her tongue darting out to lick them before she bit down on her lower one.

His eyes flared.

"About what?" she whispered.

"How badly I want to fuck you right now."

She gasped—again. He needed to quit talking and start doing, damn it.

Grasping his hand, she guided it to her hair. His fingers curled and flexed, tangling in her tresses.

Yes, please.

"Don't tease me," she said, staring him down.

"Fuck me, you make it hard..."

Her gaze dropped to his sweatpants, where an impressive bulge was growing still larger.

He snorted and suddenly rolled, taking her with him, until she lay beneath him, that bulge pressing right between her thighs. His hand tightened around her hair, not painfully, but enough for her to laser focus. On him. On them. On what she hoped was about to happen.

Brushing his lips against hers, featherlight, he murmured, “This is a terrible idea.”

Her fingers curled against his shirt. “No, it isn’t.”

“Damn it.” He slammed his lips against hers, opening, thrusting his tongue into her mouth, clutching her hair, holding her in place.

She moaned, sliding her hands under his shirt, dragging her nails down his back.

“Fuck me,” he grumbled, breaking the kiss and abruptly rolling away from her.

“Travis, don’t—”

He stepped into the bathroom and returned a moment later, dropped a handful of condoms on the bedside table before returning to the bed, covering her with his body again.

“I think what you meant was *yes, please*,” he teased.

She laughed. “Exactly.”

Reaching over his head, he grabbed the collar of his shirt, flipped it off, and let it drop onto the floor before he focused on unlatching the buttons on her shirt. His fingers kept brushing her skin. It wasn’t an accident.

By the time he finally spread her shirt wide, revealing her blush-colored bra, her hips were gyrating like she was practicing to be on stage.

Grabbing a handful of her backside, he ground against her. “Is that what you want, sugar?”

She nodded eagerly.

One side of his lips lifted. “You’re going to have to wait. I have things I want to do first.”

“You—oh.”

He lowered his head and sucked her earlobe into his mouth. She moaned, arching into his touch.

One of his hands slid behind her back and flicked open her bra, and for a moment, she was tangled in loose bra and unbuttoned shirt, until he sat up and tugged off both articles of clothing.

“Might as well get rid of these while we’re at it,” he said, freeing the drawstring on her borrowed sweats before shoving them down her legs.

Her panties were satiny in the front and lace in the back, which he discovered when he smoothed his hand over her backside. After experimentally stroking for a few moments, he nudged her until she rolled over onto her stomach.

“Beautiful view,” he murmured, both hands massaging her lace-covered cheeks.

She fisted the comforter.

His fingers teased at the edge of her panties until she impatiently lifted her hips.

“Oh, oh, oh, even better,” he said and dragged the satin and lace down her legs. “Get that ass in the air and spread your legs, sugar.”

She eagerly complied, glancing down and watching as he lay between her thighs and cupped her hips, pulling her down to his mouth.

“Yes, oh, please, yes,” she encouraged mindlessly as his lips touched her, his tongue flicking out and teasing at her most sensitive nerve endings. He stroked her higher and higher, until one hand snaked up and cupped her breast, pinching her nipple.

She orgasmed so hard she swore she’d levitated for a few moments there before she twisted to the side, collapsing against the covers in a boneless heap.

The whole bed vibrated with his chuckle. Then he kissed her outer thigh. “Seems like you liked that.”

“Mm-hmm.” She lay there with her eyes closed, her body still buzzing, mini aftershocks making her shiver.

“Want more?”

She opened her eyes. He’d taken off his sweats and knelt next to her with a condom poised between two fingers.

“Yes, please,” she whispered.

“I do love it when you say please. Come here.”

With his hand on her waist, he rolled her onto her stomach again, then situated himself behind her.

“Have I mentioned what a fantastic view this is?” he asked after she lifted onto her hands and knees.

She wiggled her hips. He groaned as he removed the condom from its packaging and slid it over his erection. A moment later, she felt the bulbous head nudging at her opening, and she spread her legs wider, her body humming with anticipation.

He pushed into her. They groaned in unison.

“So good,” she said, arching as he gently thrust.

“Better than good.”

He stroked her back, then slipped a hand around to toy with her breast while he kept up a steady rhythm that was both maddening and exhilarating, until she was babbling, “Please, oh please, oh please.”

One of his hands found her nub, and she came apart for a second time. He grasped her hips, thrusting hard, once, twice, three times before he groaned deeply while she felt him pulsing inside her.

Long moments later, he sighed and gently pulled out, dropping a kiss onto her shoulder.

“I’ll be right back.”

He disappeared into the bathroom, returning a moment later without the used condom and with a warm, damp washcloth.

“Thanks,” she said, accepting the gift and cleaning up. When she was done, he lay down and pulled her to him, her back tucked against his front, their bodies touching from head to toe.

He pressed a kiss to her ear and whispered, “Good night, Ava.”

“Good night, Travis,” she whispered back, and then she rested her head against the pillow and stared into the darkness until sleep finally claimed her.

LIKE DÉJÀ VU, a phone rattling against a wooden surface pulled Ava from sleep. This time, it was her phone.

But the rest of the scene was eerily similar to New Year’s Eve. They were in bed together. Naked. Sated. And Travis was wrapped around her like a koala.

Okay, last time he hadn’t been quite so cuddly, but their legs had been intertwined and his hand had been resting on her belly. It had still felt intimate.

More than it should, given they hadn’t defined this... whatever they were doing.

Her phone vibrated again, and she lifted it off the bedside table. A moment later, she gave a yelp that startled Travis awake.

“What?” he said groggily, sleepy eyes trying to focus on his surroundings. On her. “Ava.”

He sounded surprised. Had he expected her to sneak away in the middle of the night? She wouldn’t have done that even if he hadn’t been stressed out about his stalker.

Turned out, she was wrong when she’d thought she didn’t want someone else in her life, in her space.

“I have to go,” she said, sliding out of his grip so she could search for her clothing. “Maria wants me to have breakfast

with her and Riley. I need to get down to my room before she comes looking for me.”

“Right. Yeah. Okay.”

She wanted to ask where they went from here, but she had no clue how. Or if she was ready for the answer.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked instead.

He scrubbed a hand over his face and nodded. “Yeah. I’m good. Thanks for, you know, checking.”

This was getting more awkward by the second. So she escaped. Stepping out of his hotel room, she glanced down the hall toward her own—right at her sister, who was standing in front of the door, her hand poised to knock.

Uh-oh.

Ava stepped away from the door to Travis’s room, like that would somehow hide where she’d been. As she hurried forward, Maria glanced her way, her eyes widening as they took in Ava’s appearance.

She hadn’t brushed her hair or washed the makeup off her face, and she was wearing last night’s clothes. No hiding what she’d been doing since they’d returned after the concert.

At least Maria waited until they were inside Ava’s room before she started asking questions.

“Who did you hook up with last night?” was the first one.

Ava clipped her hair back, washed her face, and brushed her teeth, buying herself time. What was she supposed to say? Should she lie to her sister? How would Travis feel if she told the truth?

“Did you even come back to your room after the concert?” Maria called from the other side of the partially closed bathroom door.

A moment later, she was in the doorway, staring at Ava through the mirror.

“Oh my God, did you spend the night with Travis?”

“How the heck did you come to that conclusion?”

Maria crossed her arms. “You did.”

Ava flung around to face her. “Seriously, how did you figure that out?”

“Get dressed.” Maria pointed at the bathroom door.

Well, at least Ava hadn’t spilled the beans. It wasn’t her fault Maria had guessed correctly.

“Is that bad?” Ava asked, moving past her sister so she could change clothes. Didn’t need anyone else to see her in last night’s outfit and come to the same conclusion.

“I’m not sure,” Maria said while Ava stripped and dressed again in a wide neck sweater and a pair of rayon cargo pants that she’d picked up recently when she and Maria and Holly had slipped away for a shopping spree on the bands’ day off.

“What does that mean?” Ava asked, returning to the bathroom to slick her hair into a ponytail.

“Just hurry up,” Maria said. “Riley and Carina are already downstairs.”

They left the hotel room, headed down to breakfast, and Maria finally answered her question. “I guess it depends on what you’re looking for out of it.”

As they entered the elevator, she added, “He’s a great guy, but he says all the time that he’s not a relationship guy.”

“I know,” Ava admitted. After what he told her about his ex-wife, she couldn’t blame him. She put on her perky face; hopefully, she and Maria hadn’t grown close enough for her sister to see through it.

As they stepped into the restaurant and she spotted her niece and the nanny seated at a table across the room, Ava added, “We talked. And we’ve agreed to just be friends.”

Of course, that was before they tumbled into bed again last night.

So where did they stand now?

CHAPTER

Fifteen

HE AND AVA needed to talk. Travis knew it, and he assumed she did too. They needed to figure out where they stood. With each other. But they needed to do it in private.

They also needed to decide what—if anything—to tell the rest of the band. And her sisters.

See? This was why Travis hated nepotism within bands. It got so fucking messy, and he hated messy.

Okay, there were certain instances when he fucking loved messy. Any time he was naked with Ava, he definitely liked getting messy.

But outside the bedroom? Yeah, he preferred things nice and tidy. No doubt this was a reaction to his life with Dog Daze, because he hadn't been quite the neat freak back then.

Hell, he'd deliberately let himself get messy after he left home, because his dad had been militant with his need for control and dominance, and Travis had hated every fucking minute of living with the man.

Travis was a hell of a mix of contradictions, wasn't he?

Case in point: his feelings for Ava. He wanted her tucked right into his side, both as protection against the outside world—specifically, his stalker—and because he just liked having her near. Touching her.

She made him feel whole, damn it.

And yet, he struggled with a very real urge to push her away, to place her squarely back in the friend zone. Everything had been perfect when they were just friends.

Now it was messy, even if she didn't realize it.

And circle back to needing to talk.

Except they didn't see each other again until they boarded the bus and said goodbye—and good riddance—to Cleveland.

To be fair, spending last night with Ava had definitely softened his view toward that city. From this point forward, Suzie wouldn't be the first thought that popped into his mind whenever somebody mentioned Cleveland.

And no, his stalker couldn't claim that right either.

That honor now officially went to Ava. And probably always would, from this day forward.

Sometimes, Ava rode on Panic Station's bus, and sometimes she rode on Demigoddess Revival's. Probably rotating time with each of her sisters, since that was the reason she'd come on this tour. Her purpose here was not for Travis to dominate her time, which was exactly what had started to happen since they'd had their heart-to-heart in that exercise room in that hotel in whatever the hell city they'd been in.

Okay, so he needed to talk to her about that, too. Tell her they should attempt to spend more time with other people. Except that sounded too much like a breakup. And hell, they weren't even together, other than as friends.

He was already on the bus, sitting in the lounge area, when she stepped on with her sister, Riley, Oz, and Carina. She gave him a quick glance—shit, was that heat in her eyes? He did not need to see that—before settling across from him. Maria sat next to her, and Riley climbed into Ava's lap, handing her a book that she apparently wanted her aunt to read.

The bus lurched forward, and they were on their way to Pittsburgh for tonight's show. Travis settled in and watched Ava read to and then chat with her four-year-old niece.

Okay, maybe he was picturing her with her own kid, and why the hell was that so damn sexy?

Was it because he was also imagining that kid was his?

Jesus, he really was going off the rails. With a shake of his head, he pushed off the couch and headed back to the bunks, sliding into his and flipping on the little battery-operated light he kept in there. And then he perched his glasses on his nose and started writing.

This was all too much—or maybe too little—too soon. Hey, that might be a good song title. Especially given the lyrics flowing from his pen. They were all about wanting too much, taking too little, wishing things were different...yeah, looked like his frustrations were going to translate into a new song for their upcoming album.

That should have been a win, right?

Except he didn't feel any better by the time they pulled up to the arena. But he didn't have a choice anymore. It was time to get his head on straight. It was time to rock out.

And forget, for a moment, what a cluster fuck his life was.

An hour later, they did a sound check. When everything was ready to go, they headed backstage to devour the buffet that had been set up for the band. The food came with a price: some sort of media gathering. Lots of bloggers and photographers and a few people from local radio stations. A rep from their new label was there, too, schmoozing the media on the band's behalf. Talking about the success of the tour, dropping hints that a new single might be released soon.

Travis did his part, chatting, joking, laughing—assuring the press that yes, he did love his current band, and no, he had no intentions of leaving this one. He'd split from Dog Daze seven years ago, and the band wasn't even relevant anymore—were they even still together?—yet they continued to dog his steps, pun absolutely intended.

Ava, he noticed, was absent, but that wasn't conspicuous. Yeah, Maria had hired her, but that was totally separate from

the record label, and they didn't know her or even care if she was around.

Travis did, though. Even if he shouldn't.

Mitch Montgomery, the guy from Silver Lining, sidled up next to him while he was momentarily alone. "Preference?" Mitch asked, displaying the beers he held in each hand.

Travis took the IPA. "Thanks."

Mitch lifted the other bottle to his lips before saying, "So, your stalker is back."

Travis nearly choked on the swallow he'd just taken. "Fuck. Who told you?"

"She did, actually. Not on purpose, of course. But we've kept tabs on her social media accounts after what happened in Denver."

Denver. That was where it all started. Only their second concert after signing with Silver Lining. The nine-thousand-seat venue had been packed to the gills with new fans.

Travis's stalker had secured herself backstage passes. He remembered meeting her. Curvy, blond, way too young for him even if he were into obsessed women. And man, she had been obsessed right from the get-go.

She'd cornered him in the meet and greet room and told him all about how Dog Daze was her favorite band in the world, how she'd been in love with him even back then—Christ, she'd probably only just hit puberty at that point in her life—how utterly devastated she'd been when he left the band. She said she tried to message him through his social media accounts, but everything had gone unanswered.

Probably because he'd shut everything down after leaving the band. It had all been tied to Dog Daze, and for a while there, he hadn't been into the scene at all. He'd left and gone to work at a construction company in LA. He had a nice nest egg courtesy of Dog Daze's moderate success, but he knew he wouldn't be able to live off those royalties forever.

Construction had been the perfect choice at the time. It was grueling physical labor, lots of hours, and allowed him to shut off thoughts of returning to the music scene for occasional days at a time.

When the young blonde chick cornered him at the show in Denver, he'd been polite but aloof, partially because he didn't want to tie his current band back to Dog Daze, and also because the girl had given him the creeps.

His instincts had been spot on, because she came to every show, almost always managed to get backstage afterward; constantly tried to finagle ways to be alone with him.

Then the social media obsession kicked in. She posted constantly on Insta and Twitter and Snap Chat and TikTok, tagging Demigoddess Revival, gushing about Travis and what a great guy he was. Which would have been fine—he didn't manage their accounts, so he didn't have to deal with responding to all those comments—except her posts became more suggestive, and their fans were starting to buy into her crazy little fantasy.

When Maria finally tried to gently tell her to back off, the chick took a turn for the psycho and announced that she was pregnant—and the kid was Travis's.

He shuddered. What a publicity nightmare that had been—and not just because it wasn't true but because the chick had been seventeen at the time.

Statutory rape age.

The label had stepped in, issued a statement denouncing the claim, and made a vague threat to sue for defamation if the girl didn't chill the fuck out, pronto.

Instead, she managed to sneak into Travis's hotel room while they'd been performing in Albuquerque.

Their label had contacted her parents and then helped him secure a restraining order, and finally, finally, she stopped showing up at their concerts, and her social media accounts went quiet.

Until the New Year's Eve show in New York, he'd thought the whole mess was behind him.

"She's starting up again," Mitch said, taking another swig of beer. "And she's eighteen now, so her parents claim they can't control her anymore."

"You already went to them?" Travis asked. Damn, much swifter reaction than their last go 'round with this chick.

Mitch nodded. "I think we all know how quickly and how far she's willing to escalate. No need to play the wait-and-see game this time."

"So what do we do?"

"The restraining order still stands, so that helps, although only if she attempts to do something."

Waiting for her to make some kind of move didn't seem like a great way to handle the situation, given how drastic her previous moves had been. She might try to kidnap Travis.

She might fucking succeed.

Travis rubbed his hand over his face. "Is there anything we can do other than wait around with our thumbs up our asses?"

"I've talked to your publicist, and she's blocking the girl on all the band's social media accounts. You need to do the same on any of your personal accounts."

"Consider it done." Although he didn't think that would be enough. Even with the restraining order, the chick kept popping up at shows and backstage, and Travis was always too rattled to do something about it—like call the cops before she could slip away again.

"If she does make contact, your best bet is to ignore her. Be very deliberate about it."

"Okay." Now that he could definitely do.

"And, uh, there's a less conventional method that's been used in the past with other public figures, and it worked."

The way Mitch said it, Travis had a bad feeling he wasn't going to like this unconventional method. Although to be

honest, unless it involved locking him in a room with his stalker, Travis was game for pretty much anything at this point.

“Lay it on me.”

“It’s kind of out there but simple, and I have a feeling it might work in this case. Especially when you consider the girl says she was obsessed with you when you were in Dog Daze, yet she never contacted you back then.”

Travis had never made that connection, but now that Mitch mentioned it, he was right. Why was that? What changed?

“Stop selling it to me and tell me what you think will get this chick off my ass.” Travis tipped up his beer in a seemingly casual fashion, when really his heart rate had kicked into nervous territory. And he didn’t even know what Mitch was going to say.

“Well, I’m thinking if you get yourself a girlfriend, that might convince your stalker to back off. Let her know you aren’t available anymore.”

Get himself a girlfriend? What the fuck did Mitch think he was going to do, run an ad? That seemed like it had the potential to gain him a few dozen *more* stalkers.

“This is the best solution you have?” Travis asked.

“This is the only solution I have. Aside from just dealing until the tour is over and then disappearing off the scene until she goes away, which, as the representative for your record label, I have to say is not the solution I’d prefer you go with. We need you visible so we can all make lots and lots of money.”

“I’m not really interested in fading away either, don’t worry.” He’d done that once before, and he’d been miserable. Rock ’n roll was in his blood, part of his makeup. Besides Ava, it was the only thing that made him feel whole.

Ava.

“Tell me more about this fake girlfriend idea.”

“It’s simple, really,” Mitch said, finishing his beer. “Find yourself a girl who won’t mind hanging all over you for the rest of the tour. That ought to be long enough for our stalker to get the picture.”

Travis shouldn’t like the idea of Ava hanging all over him as much as he did. “How will this scare off my stalker?”

“If she sees that you have a girlfriend, she’ll feel like she’s lost her opportunity. Based on her past actions, she wants that role in your life. So if we fill the role, there is nothing for her to obsess over. Hopefully, she’ll give up and back off.”

“She was obsessed with me when I was in Dog Daze,” Travis pointed out. “And I was married back then.”

“Exactly. And she didn’t constantly try to contact you like she does now, did she? Did she make posts on social media about carrying your secret baby? Did she confess her love for you? Did she do anything crazy at all?”

Well, fuck. “I didn’t even know she was into me until I was part of Demigoddess Revival,” he reluctantly admitted.

“Exactly. Make it a very public relationship,” Mitch continued, clearly warming to his idea. “Remember when Holly McGregor and Sam Stokes first started dating and their fans went nuts over it? That’s what skyrocketed Panic Station to fame. Hell, you doing this could serve double duty; grow your fan base and get rid of your stalker.”

Could this actually work?

“It’d be cool if you already have someone waiting in the wings.” Mitch gave him a hopeful look.

Travis shook his head. Nope. No one waiting on him, wishing their hidden relationship was public.

“Maybe talk a friend into helping. Someone you can trust. Someone who won’t let the public know the relationship isn’t real. We could look into hiring someone if you’d prefer.”

Travis shook his head again. No way was he going to pretend to be lovey-dovey with some random stranger, even if

Mitch vetted them and assured Travis they were on the up and up.

He didn't really want to get lovey-dovey with anyone. Except...

Okay, yeah, he and Ava were supposed to go back to just being friends—if he could ever find five minutes alone with her to let her know that—but he knew she'd be hurt if he suddenly started spending time with some other woman.

What if *she* was his fake girlfriend? She'd probably say no.

Wouldn't she?

"It's worth a shot, man," Mitch said. "Honestly, I don't know what else to do that won't cause a crazy media frenzy. And a crazy media frenzy could go good or bad. For the band, I mean."

Travis was picking up what he was laying down. It was important to make this go away without any smears on the band's reputation. They were on the cusp of making it seriously big, and therefore making a whole lot of money. For themselves, but especially for Silver Lining Productions.

That fake pregnancy claim had died down pretty quickly because Demigoddess Revival hadn't been huge yet. The stakes were so much higher now. The consequences had the potential to be so much worse.

He really needed to get that woman to leave him the hell alone.

"I think I know someone who can help me," Travis said, slowly, scratching at his stubble.

Now, the question was, did he tell Ava he wanted her to be his fake girlfriend?

Or did he let her believe he wanted them to be real?

CHAPTER

Sixteen

AVA AND MARIA watched the concert from the wings. Her sister was right; this was the best view in the whole arena.

Mostly because she could stare at Travis without him knowing, and she could see all of him from this vantage point. Even in the front row, a fan could only see his upper half. The rest was hidden behind his drum set.

Not that staring at his upper body was a hardship. Especially given, if he wore a shirt at all, it was usually a tight tee that didn't hide any of the muscles on his inked up arms and barely concealed the sharp plains and valleys on his torso.

That said, standing stage left, Ava was also able to admire his muscular legs as they tapped to the beat. Tonight he wore cargo shorts, so she could see the curve of his muscular calves, the thickness of his thighs.

The man's body was a work of art, and Ava had gotten to admire it, every single naked inch, up close and personal.

Twice.

And now they were supposed to go back to "just friends." Or so she assumed. They hadn't actually talked about it yet, but she could see the writing on the wall. Travis had already told her he didn't do relationships, and she understood. Really, she did. She'd always felt the same.

Not to mention, his head was undoubtedly muddled, courtesy of his stalker. He wasn't in a place to consider

changing his own rules. Again, she understood.

She didn't like it, but she understood.

“Come on,” Maria shouted close to her ear so Ava could hear her over the roar of the crowd. “They're about to play the last song. Let's go meet them backstage.”

Ava followed her sister through the halls behind the stage, arriving just as the members of Demigoddess Revival came rushing through the curtain, followed by the screams and shouts of happy fans who would never get enough of watching their favorite band live.

A cooler of bottled water sat nearby, and Maria started handing them out as Lacey, then Parker, Cash, and Oz walked by. Ava snagged one to hand to Travis.

He accepted it, clamping his hand around hers, using the connection to pull her close.

What in the world was the man doing?

That was her last coherent thought before his lips crashed into hers and his fingers came up to thread in her hair. Holy crap, Travis was kissing her!

In public.

In front of the rest of the band and her sister.

He pulled away and grinned before pressing a quick kiss to her forehead, and then he headed down the hall toward the dressing room, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the rest of the band and Maria were all staring at him like he'd just, well, kissed Ava!

“What in the world was that?” Maria asked, not even trying to hide her grin.

Ava touched her fingers to her lips. “I have no idea.”

Lacey snickered. “Something you want to tell us?”

“I think maybe I should go find out what's going on myself, first,” Ava said, then hurried down the hall after him.

By the time she reached the dressing room, Travis was in the shower, and a moment later, the rest of the band came pouring in. They were either chuckling and asking what was up or snickering and giving her knowing looks.

Seriously, what *was* up?

Five minutes later, Travis stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his hips. Lacey and Parker immediately claimed the shower, while Travis ducked behind the privacy screen.

Since Ava was intimately acquainted with Travis's naked body, there was really no reason she couldn't step behind that screen with him, except they were supposed to go back to being friends.

Except he'd just kissed her in front of all his bandmates.

So where did they stand?

"You can come on back, sugar," Travis called out, loud enough for every single person in the room to hear.

Did he just call her sugar? In front of his bandmates?

"It's not like you haven't seen it all before," he added, and screw it, she couldn't wait one more second to talk to him.

She scurried behind the screen, catching him as he pulled his jeans up over his hips and fastened the button.

"Hey, beautiful," he greeted her.

"Travis, what the heck is going on?"

He tugged a plain white T-shirt over his head. The fabric molded to the muscles on his chest, and for a moment, Ava lost her train of thought. Just snug enough jeans and a fitted white T-shirt were so damn hot on him.

By the time she managed to focus on something other than her very strong desire to scrape her fingers underneath the hem of that shirt, Travis was stalking toward her, and then he was wrapping his arms around her, burying his face against the crook of her neck like...like they were officially a couple and it was okay if the whole world knew.

Not just a couple, but that they were in love. This was so... intimate.

She wiggled, and he relaxed his hold, although he didn't let her out of the circle of his arms. She cupped his face and lifted it so she could look him in the eye. "Seriously. What is going on?"

He shrugged and broke eye contact. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. And I realized I don't want to. I don't want to stop being around you. I don't want to stop sleeping with you."

"You know everyone can hear you, right?"

"Yeah, and that's okay too. I don't want to sneak around anymore."

She darted a glance over her shoulder, but the screen kept her from seeing what she imagined was the rest of the band listening intently.

"We haven't exactly been sneaking around," she pointed out.

He smiled, leaned in, and kissed her. "And now we don't have to at all."

"I am so confused."

"Don't be. This is exactly what it seems like. This is me, telling you that I want a relationship. With you. More than a friendly one."

She was certain her mouth fell open and her eyes rounded to comical proportions. Travis tapped her chin, confirming the open mouth theory. She snapped it closed and swallowed.

"You...want..."

"A relationship. With you. I want to date you, Ava. Out in the open. Publicly. And I should probably warn you, I am a big fan of PDA."

"PDA?"

"Public displays of affection."

“I know what it means. I just don’t understand.”

Lacey and Parker stepped behind the screen, towels wrapped around their damp bodies, looking sated and clean, as always.

“I definitely want to do what they just did,” Travis quipped.

“Oh my God.” Ava grabbed his hand and pulled him out from behind the screen. “Let’s let them get dressed.”

They moved over to the couches where Maria and Oz—Cash was in the shower—were sitting, watching them expectantly. Ava had no idea what to say. She didn’t understand what was going on, either.

Travis dropped onto the couch and pulled her down with him—right into his lap. And then he wrapped his arms around her, whether to ensure she didn’t get up or just because he liked to touch her, she really had no idea. This was so out of character for him.

Although, honestly, it wasn’t—when they were alone. The man was definitely a cuddler. It was just so odd that he was doing it in front of other people. She’d had the impression they were... she had no idea what she thought they were.

Because they hadn’t yet talked about it.

“Um, so, I guess we’re a thing now?” The words came out as a question, when really she’d meant it as a response to the unasked question in Oz’s eye.

“We are,” Travis confirmed, nuzzling her neck.

Nuzzling. Her. Neck.

She squirmed, not because she wanted off his lap but because she was enjoying his affections maybe a little too much.

Except he just confirmed that they were a couple, so she didn’t have to worry about enjoying anything too much, right?

“Wow,” Maria said. “Congratulations.”

Ava heard the “Are you sure this is a good idea?” as clearly as if Maria had spoken the words out loud. For the record, no, she wasn’t sure. Mostly because she wasn’t sure what was going on.

Travis was acting as though they’d been carrying on a secret affair and were ready to make it public. They’d had sex on two different occasions, weeks apart—that didn’t really qualify as an affair, did it? And what happened to “just friends?”

Lacey and Parker headed their way, fully dressed; Cash exited the bathroom and took their place behind the screen. Oz bounced up and went to take his turn in the shower, while Lacey sat down at one of the mirrored vanities and flipped on her hairdryer, making it nearly impossible to talk.

Travis took advantage of the moment by teasing his fingers along Ava’s thighs while he brushed her hair to the side so he could nibble on her neck.

More squirming ensued until she felt a definite bulge pressing against her backside.

By the time the hairdryer clicked off, Oz was done with his shower, and everyone was waiting on Lacey to finish her beauty routine so they could head down to the after-concert gathering with the fans.

“Okay, so spill,” Lacey said as she lined her eyes with a black pencil. “Since when are you guys a couple?”

“Since about ten minutes ago,” Travis said with a chuckle.

“But how and when before that? Like, I’ve not noticed you two be anything but friends. Plus, are we going to address the giant elephant in the room?”

“Which is what?” Ava asked.

Lacey traded the pencil for a mascara wand. “The fact that Travis has such a hang-up about dating anyone associated with the band. Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s cool, and I think you make a cute couple. It’s just weird how this is all shaking out, that’s all.”

Ava appreciated her honesty. Because she felt the exact same way, but she couldn't seem to put voice to those words.

CHAPTER

Seventeen

TRAVIS CHICKENED OUT. He'd decided to be honest, to tell Ava what was going on and ask her to pretend to be his girlfriend.

Except, real talk, he didn't want her to pretend. Which was its own kind of revelation, and he was having a *really* hard time processing that was how he actually felt.

And if that was how he felt, then he needed to tell her, to ask her for real if she'd be his girlfriend.

Yeah, while he was being honest with himself, he was afraid she'd say no.

He took all these tumultuous thoughts up on stage with him, beat on his drums, and for a little while, was able to forget what a cluster his life had suddenly become. The show had rocked, the fans were more rabid than any before, even Madison Square Garden on New Year's Eve, and Travis had been riding on a high that he hadn't felt in far too long, when he hustled off stage after the concert.

That had to explain why he simply walked up to Ava and kissed her like they'd been a couple forever by that point.

She'd been clearly shocked, but she'd kissed him back, and yep, he ran with it. Because this plan of action needed to start tonight, and he didn't want to "practice" being a couple in front of all those fans waiting at the meet and greet. He'd start in front of the band, see how they handled it, and make sure he and Ava could be believable.

Turned out, they could.

“Come on,” he said, cupping her hips and lifting her to her feet before bouncing up next to her. Snagging her hand, he said, “Let’s go hang with our fans.”

Okay, yes, those incredulous looks from his bandmates were well-deserved, given how reluctant he’d recently been to have any fan interaction whatsoever.

He couldn’t very well admit this whole thing was a ruse—at the very minimum, Ava deserved to be told in private if he could ever work up the gumption to do it.

“Mitch said the label is taking care of the stalker situation,” he clarified.

It was true. Sort of.

Lacey’s eyes widened. “Really? That’s great. How?”

He forced himself not to tense. Ava would notice and figure out something was up. “Uh...not sure.” He cleared his throat. “But Mitch swears it’ll work.”

“What a relief,” Maria said, patting him on the back. “I know that girl was really getting to you.”

She could say that again. And the fact that the rest of the band had been able to tell only reinforced Travis’s decision to do this.

It was better if Ava truly believed they were a thing, wasn’t it? It would come across as more authentic, both in person and in the pictures that would inevitably be splashed all over social media.

Besides, what if he did tell her the plan and she balked because she wasn’t interested in him like that. Yeah, they were great as friends, and yes, they sizzled between the sheets, but there was no guarantee they could make both things work together at the same time for the long-term. It was a lot of pressure, and honestly, deciding to start up a committed relationship was something that ought to take time.

Time they didn’t have.

He needed the public—specifically his stalker—to believe he and Ava were madly in love already, not at the beginning of a romance. That left too much room for interpretation. He didn't need that woman to think maybe she could try to weasel her way between them.

He swung his arm around Ava's shoulders and guided her toward the door. "Let's go." He probably sounded too cheerful, but that was easy to justify.

No more stalker, right? Yay!

They stepped out into the hall, and the security team flanked them, leading them through the corridor swarming with media, fans, employees of the venue, and the bands. He sensed as well as saw cameras being lifted; knew he and Ava were being captured in quick snapshots and short videos.

He grinned and used his arm around her shoulder to pull her even closer to his side.

Twenty minutes later, Ava untangled herself from his embrace. "I need a minute."

"What's wrong?"

She arched her brow. "I just need to use the ladies' room."

"Oh. Right." He leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss. "I'll be right here, waiting."

She rolled her eyes before walking away. Maybe he needed to rein it in a bit. He didn't want her to call him on his bullshit in the middle of a crowd. Not only would that defeat the purpose, but it would also do exactly what Mitch warned they needed to avoid: give the band bad publicity.

Like they'd all been doing since the band entered the room, a fan inched closer and asked for an autograph and a selfie. "I was kinda hoping to get one with you and your girlfriend, man," the fan said after snapping the pic. "She is your girlfriend, huh?"

"She is," Travis confirmed.

"She's hot. Not what I'd expect, though. Nothing like Suzie Q."

Travis was getting really sick of people referring back to Dog Daze. Why couldn't they focus on the here and now? That's what he was doing.

"Yeah, that's the point," Travis replied, hopefully not too tersely.

The guy clapped him on the back like they were buds and moved off to ask for a picture with Lacey and Parker.

He glad-handed for a few more minutes, but Ava had been gone for much longer than it normally took to use the restroom. He ducked behind two security guards so he could have a little privacy and pulled his phone and reading glasses out of his pocket. He'd send her a text.

Instead, he got sucked into his social media accounts.

Holy shit, their fans had already taken off with the idea that he had a girlfriend. Besides the usual shots of the band on stage tonight—some damn good ones, he might add—there was picture after picture after picture of him and Ava. His arm slung around her shoulders. Him kissing her on the cheek. When he'd pulled her into his lap on the couch in the meet and greet room.

That was a cute one. She hadn't been expecting it, and she'd laughed and gave a little yelp at the same time, and he was looking at her with adoration in his eyes. Definitely looked genuine.

Definitely helped reassure him that he was doing the right thing by letting her believe this sudden desire to be a couple was real.

Especially when he checked out the comments and the number of likes or hearts or whatever expression of appreciation that particular platform used.

A pair of sexy legs stepped into his line of vision, and he glanced up, expecting Ava. It was Maria, which was disappointing but also gave him an idea.

"Hey, Maria, come here."

She altered her path. "Yes?"

He waved his phone. “Have you seen all these pictures online of me and Ava?”

She furrowed her brow. “Yes. I haven’t said anything yet because I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about your personal life being exploited online like—”

“I think it’s fucking great,” he enthused. “Do you think you can use any of these pics for marketing for the band?”

Mitch had the right idea. Wouldn’t it be something if his relationship went viral like Holly and Sam’s had? How fucking cool would that be?

There’d be no way his stalker could hide from the reality of the situation. He was taken, and she needed to back the hell off.

Maria canted her head, studying him. “I can, but...are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“Of course.”

“It’s just...this is literally the polar opposite of how you’ve been acting since the band began. Or so that’s what Oz tells me. Not to mention your general dislike of relationships and insistence that you only do one-night stands.”

Shit. He hadn’t thought about that aspect of this little charade. Maria was right; he had been a dick when Lacey and Parker first started hooking up, and then he’d done it again when Oz and Maria started dating.

She was also right in that he’d sworn he was a one-night stand guy pretty much since he split from Suzie. Initially, it had been a reaction to his failed marriage. Then it became habit. Easy. No expectations. From him or whomever he took to bed.

Gaining himself a stalker had convinced him to take his stance a step further. Not just one-night stands, but one-night stands with women who weren’t associated with the band.

And he’d been loud and proud with his stance.

Shit.

With a smirk he hoped to hell she couldn't see through, he said, "Hey, a guy can change his mind, can't he? Especially when the perfect woman comes along and makes it so easy to do."

He sounded incredibly cheesy to his own ears.

Maria blinked rapidly. Frowned. "I mean, I guess..." She shook her head. "Just don't mess with her, okay? Ava has a good head on her shoulders, but..."

"But?"

She shook her head again. "I don't think she's ever had a serious romantic relationship. I mean, ever. So, you know, be gentle."

Probably no surprise that he immediately thought of sex and how very much Ava did *not* want him to be gentle.

He managed to bite back his grin. "Hey, my marriage didn't implode because of me," he reminded her. "Trust me. I know what I'm doing."

But did he? Because this was all supposed to be make-believe, yet the longer Ava stayed away, the more edgy he got.

He wanted her around. He wanted to know she was okay. He wanted her to want to be around him too.

Which didn't sound very make-believe, did it?

CHAPTER

Eighteen

AVA DIDN'T GO to the restroom. She snuck away to the tour bus. The wrong tour bus, she realized too late. She should have slipped onto Panic Station's bus instead of Demigoddess Revival's, but she figured she had a little time before either band was ready to get on the road, so she poured herself a glass of wine and curled up on one of the sofas and practically pressed her nose against the screen of her phone as she stalked—poor choice of wording—Demigoddess Revival's socials.

So many pictures of her and Travis. Good Lord, their fans were certainly obsessed with the bandmembers' romantic lives, weren't they?

She ought to be relieved that no one was angry or annoyed that Travis had unexpectedly gained himself a girlfriend seemingly overnight. Although there were a fair number of comments regarding Ava not being his type. Was that because she didn't dress like a groupie? How did they even know his type?

What *was* his type?

The answer was her.

Right?

That's what he'd implied earlier.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. And I realized I don't want to. I don't want to stop thinking about

you. I don't want to stop being around you. I don't want to stop sleeping with you."

It had been a pretty darn romantic declaration, all things considered. And these pictures were—wow. She stared at one of them walking into the meet and greet room, his arm around her neck, his face turned toward her, leaning in, like he was whispering in her ear. She had what could only be described as a bemused smile on her lips.

Like she liked his attention.

Which she did. It was just still so...odd.

But really, was it? They'd clicked almost instantly when they first met. They definitely clicked between the sheets. And as "just friends," when he was stressed out about his stalker, he'd turned to her, and she'd been more than willing to be his shoulder to lean on.

Click.

If all of that wasn't the definition of the perfect romance, what was?

So maybe this sudden revelation of his wasn't all that odd after all. Maybe it was just how Travis operated. He did seem like an all-or-nothing guy. And Ava certainly liked that when they were in bed together. It wasn't too much of a stretch to think he'd be the same way when they were vertical.

She glanced down at her phone again. Scrolled through the comments on that picture of him nuzzling her cheek. Noticed his name underneath the picture, next to the little heart.

Had he *liked* the image? That meant he'd seen it.

And approved.

Okay, at this point, there was nothing left for her to read into. The man had declared he wanted to be a couple. He hadn't lied about his affinity for PDA. And now he was checking out pictures of them on social media and *approving*.

What else did she need to convince herself he was serious?

The tour bus door whooshed open, and Teddy, their driver, stepped into view. “Hey, Ava.” He waved and smiled. “Travis is right behind me.”

“Um, thanks.” She supposed she was appreciative of the ten-second warning. It gave her time to close the app she’d been in so Travis wouldn’t know she’d been nosing around too.

And then he was striding up the steps and stalking down the short aisle to the sitting area. “Hey, sugar,” he said warmly. “I was worried about you.”

She flapped her hand helplessly. “Sorry. I just needed some air.”

He dropped onto the cushion next to her and pecked her cheek before nuzzling her neck for a moment.

She *really* liked the nuzzling.

“I guess we didn’t talk about whether you like PDA, huh?”

“We didn’t really talk about anything,” she pointed out.

He chuckled while still nuzzling her neck, sending vibrations straight to her clit.

Jeez. She shifted in her seat.

“Wanna go talk in bed?”

That’s right. They were driving overnight to their next stop. Normally, she claimed the previously empty bunk. In fact, her toiletry bag was currently chilling in that particular bunk.

She leaned away to look him in the eye. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely,” he said without blinking.

Okay, she was officially sold. No way could she deny that Travis was serious about a relationship with her. And she was just smitten enough to want it too.

She stood. Offered her hand and tugged him to his feet.

She led him down the hall to the bunks. And climbed into his.

“Hot damn,” he murmured, sounding surprised.

Hey, he was the one who put this train in motion.

He crawled in after her. As he lay down next to her, she smoothed her hand up his bare chest. “What happened to your shirt?”

White teeth flashed in the semi-darkness. “Figured I didn’t need it.”

It was time to lay her worries to rest. “We have a long night ahead of us.”

“I can think of a few ways to pass the time.”

SHE ARCHED HER BROW.

Challenge accepted.

They were lying face-to-face in a narrow bunk hardly large enough for one person, let alone two. His naked chest was inches from her sweater. Despite the bulky, knitted material and the bra she wore, he could see the outline of her nipples, practically begging him to lick them.

No, bite them.

He held up the condom he’d snagged right before sliding into the bunk behind her.

“Where’d that come from?” she asked.

“Oz and Maria’s bunk.”

She laughed. “Are you serious? You stole a condom from my sister?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Mine are in my bag, which is stowed away right now. This was quicker.”

“You are crazy.”

“For you.” He let his gaze sweep over her body, watched her cheeks heat.

“Are you warm?” he asked huskily.

“A little.”

His hand skated along her waistline, his fingers slipping under the hem of her sweater. He pushed the material up and over her head, pausing to massage her tits for a few moments.

“Are you okay with a quickie?” he asked. “I don’t think we have long before the rest of the band is ready to go.”

She cupped his junk through his jeans, gave it a squeeze. “We’d better hurry then.”

“Hell yeah.” He unhooked her bra, shoved her pants down her legs before shimmying out of his jeans. Damn, these bunks were small.

With the condom in her hand, Ava pushed him down onto his back. He lay there, his heartbeat accelerating. Surely, she was about to wrap him, but instead, she lowered her head over his cock and then her lips enclosed him and she sucked him in, and holy hell, this was exactly what people meant when they said, “It feels like heaven.”

“Fu-u-u-uck,” he ground out, his fingers sliding into her silky strands, grasping her head and helping guide her movements. Until he was on the verge of not being able to stop.

Gently, he tugged her away from his swollen, eager cock.

“I need to be inside you,” he more or less growled. *I need to connect with you* was what he meant.

She nodded and sheathed him, her hands shaking, which only heightened the sensation, to be honest. He was practically ready to explode the second he lay on his side and she threw her leg over his hip. He guided himself home, sliding into her wet heat, cupping her ass and pulling her as close as she could possibly get without crawling inside him.

Breathing roughly through gritted teeth, he pumped, straining with the need to hold himself back. He wanted her to

get to the finish line first. But fuck, this felt so damn amazing. She was so damn perfect. They were so damn—gah!

He slipped his hand between their bodies, found her clit, and began thrumming desperately. Her breathing grew erratic; she rolled her hips, scrabbled at the wall, clutched at his neck as she reached for that release he liked to think only he could give her.

“Please, please, please,” she begged. She was close, and thank fuck, because he had officially reached that point of no return, and he could barely keep his thumb pressed to her clit as his balls tightened and his dick pulsed while he filled the condom as her inner muscles flexed over and over again in time with her desperate little mewls.

Hot damn, did he ever like having sex on the bus.

With Ava.

CHAPTER

Nineteen

TRAVIS HAD GOTTEN USED to sleeping on a tour bus. It was a necessity when one spent as much time on the road as a band did. As nice as it was to have a king-sized bed in a hotel room waiting after each show, it wasn't always practical, financially or time-wise.

What he found interesting when he woke the next morning with a slumbering Ava curled into his side was how easily he'd adjusted to sleeping with someone else sharing his bed. Even a bed that was barely large enough for one person.

He knew what that meant. It meant he didn't want to sleep alone. It meant he wanted this fake relationship to be real.

It meant he ought to come clean and tell Ava what was going on. It sure seemed to him that she felt the same way, or at least close enough that they could probably work things out.

But, the little devil on his shoulder whispered, what if she doesn't? This plan to scare off your stalker is brilliant. Don't fuck it up now.

Stupid little devil was right. For one thing, he actually felt calmer around Ava. He wasn't paralyzed by fear that some chick was going to pop up and scare the shit out of him at any moment.

Second, with the way the internet had been flooded with pictures of him and Ava last night, there was no way in hell his stalker wouldn't figure out that he was off the market. And if Mitch's theory was right, she'd finally leave him the hell alone.

They had three more shows before their first two-week break. All he had to do was get through the next week. That ought to be enough time to figure out whether the stalker intended to keep harassing him.

He'd tell Ava the truth while they were on break. That way, if she lost her shit over it—God, he hoped she didn't—they'd have time to hash everything out without the scrutiny of the public eye. And he'd have two weeks to convince her to carry on with the charade when they returned to the tour.

Or maybe he'd wait. Because what if he couldn't convince her to carry on with pretending to be his girlfriend? The minute his stalker figured out he was single again, she'd resume her creepy ways, and Travis didn't think he could handle it.

He *needed* Ava to carry on with this pretense.

Shit. He was so tense and agitated now, he was probably going to wake her up if he didn't get out of this bunk. Luckily, he'd fallen asleep closest to the entrance, so it was easy enough to disentangle himself and slide out.

After a pitstop in the bathroom, he headed toward the lounge area, where the scent of coffee was strongest.

"Morning," he said as he walked past a table where Oz, Maria, Carina, and Riley all sat around eating pastries and yogurt. He poured himself a cup of coffee, snagged a jelly-filled confection, and dropped onto the couch across from the dining family.

"You're up early," Oz commented.

"So are you."

"I'm always up early."

It was true. Once upon a time, Oz had worked three jobs plus playing in the band. Travis had often wondered when the man slept.

Since Oz was still looking at him like he was waiting for a better answer, Travis shrugged and said, "Needed to get up and stretch. Kind of a tight fit in those bunks." He smirked. Oz and

Maria slept together in a bunk all the time, so they were well aware of the cozy quarters.

Maria shook her head. “I still can’t believe you and Ava are together. When did it start?”

Abruptly, he stood and busied himself with refilling his coffee mug, his back to Maria. “I don’t kiss and tell, sorry.”

“That’s okay. I’ll just ask her.” There was laughter in Maria’s voice.

Travis struggled not to cringe. What would Ava tell her sister? Would she go all the way back to New Year’s Eve? He supposed it was a cool meet-cute, even if that’s not what he’d meant it to be.

“Oh, by the way,” Maria said, “there’s a press conference before today’s show. The label scheduled it at the last minute. Like, literally, just an hour ago.”

Jesus, it was still the middle of the night in LA, where the label was headquartered. They weren’t messing around with this plan to scare off his stalker, were they?

Because, yeah, he knew that was why this press conference had been scheduled. They wanted every relevant media outlet to make it known that he was no longer a single rock star.

“Appreciate the heads-up,” he said, and then he retreated to a corner and pretended to be wholly focused on his phone. The good news was, he had lots of practice with telling the media what the band wanted them to know versus what was really going on. How many times had he covered for Suzie Q back in the day, when she was too high to play or too hungover to function?

All this little warning had given him was a solid reminder that he was doing the right thing.

Keeping Ava in the dark about this ploy was exactly what he needed to do.

A WEEK and three more shows under their belts, and the band was finally, officially on break. They had two weeks before they had to be in Jacksonville, Florida, to kick off the next leg of the tour. Travis was looking forward to hanging out in the far warmer southern US for a while.

The best part of the whole thing—besides how much the band’s popularity had grown—was that Mitch reported that the stalker had wished Travis and Ava well on her Twitter account. The last time she’d stalked Travis, she’d simply gone radio silent, but that had been forced by the label and, likely, her parents, since she’d been under eighteen at the time.

Mitch said he was cautiously optimistic that she would leave Travis alone, although, he added, he felt strongly that Travis should carry on with his fake relationship, if his friend was willing, for at least another month or so.

Preferably through the end of the tour.

Early May. Three months away.

If she wanted a break for the summer, Mitch thought it wouldn’t be a big deal if she wasn’t around much while Demigoddess Revival played the festival circuit. That was always a hectic time, he claimed, which Travis knew from experience.

Honestly, carrying on this ruse wouldn’t be a hardship. Not if the last week was any indication.

He and Ava, they simply fit together. Like peanut butter and jelly. Yin and yang. Rum and Coke.

He could go on.

She was classy and smart and sexy, and once she got over the shock, she’d taken to the PDA like a champ. Like she liked it as much as he did.

That part didn’t help his guilt any. She *did* like him, as it turned out. A lot. She was into this relationship—which she believed was real—as much as he might have once fantasized she’d be if it were real.

Not a day went by that he didn't contemplate telling her the truth. Sometimes, he imagined she'd laugh about it and nothing would change except it really would be real.

Sometimes, he imagined she'd be furious and would walk away and never speak to him again.

Those thoughts were the ones that kept him from confessing.

That and Mitch, who texted him daily, letting him know he was doing the right thing, keep it up, don't fret; it was all worth it to get that stalker off his back.

Now, they were about to step away from touring for a couple of weeks. No public scrutiny, no need to be *on* for the fans and the media—and the guilt was riding him hard.

It had been reasonably easy to convince himself to follow Mitch's direction while on tour; honestly, it made sense, shitty as it was to keep Ava in the dark.

But now? Now that he was about to board a plane and go home to New York with her?

Yeah, he really should come clean.

"For the next break, we should take a vacation," Ava said, seated next to him at the airport, waiting for their plane to announce boarding.

They were both dressed like civilians, as he liked to call it; she wore a jacket with a zigzag pattern over a white camisole and fitted black pants, while he wore a blue button-down shirt and brown slacks that hid all of his tattoos, and, of course, his fisherman's cap. No one had approached them. He hadn't noticed any attempts to covertly snap pics. Their disguises worked.

He said "they" because nowadays, courtesy of the record label playing up their public relationship, Ava was almost as famous as he was. Luckily, she found it more funny than frustrating.

"Maria and Oz are taking the kids to Disney World," Ava continued, drawing his attention back to the here and now.

“We could go with them. Have you ever been?”

“Yeah.” His parents had taken him and his brother when they’d been in elementary school. Travis had eaten way too much junk food and had puked on the table during dinner one night.

His dad had beaten the shit out of him, and he’d not been allowed to go back to the park for the rest of vacation. He and Mom had hung out in the hotel room while Dad and his perfect brother explored Disney.

“It hadn’t been a good experience,” he admitted.

“Oh.” Her face fell. “We can do something else.”

He patted her leg. “No, it’s cool. I’d rather go and make happy memories with you.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek, her fingers teasing the hair at his nape. “I love making happy memories with you,” she murmured.

He blew out a breath. Fuck. He needed to come clean.

This was too much. It wasn’t fair. Mitch was going to be disappointed if this went sideways, but he needed to—

Her phone vibrated in her hand. He glanced at her face. She stared at the screen like the device might suddenly turn into a rabid animal and bite her fingers.

“You okay?” he asked.

She shook her head. “It’s my father. He never calls. Like, literally, this is the first time in my adult life his name is showing up on my phone.”

Uh-oh. “You going to answer it?” he prodded when she continued to sit there, unmoving.

“Right. Uh...” She pressed the button on the screen and lifted the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

Travis was sitting six inches away and her volume was turned up plenty loud enough that he could hear both sides of the conversation.

“Ava? This is your father. I-I didn’t know who else to call. I-I need your help.”

Ava clutched the phone so tightly, her knuckles were white. “You need help?” She made it sound like the man never asked. From what little she’d told Travis about her home life, he knew this to be true. They’d both had a shitty childhood. Different versions of shitty, but shitty nonetheless.

Yet another reason they were so perfect for each other. They got it, and they were both in a place to move forward, to make their adult lives better. Happier.

“Your mother...”

Ava’s entire body tensed. Hell, so did Travis’s. This did not sound good.

“She had a heart attack. She’s in the hospital. They said it was mild. That she’ll recover, but...I don’t know what to do. Can you... can you call your sisters? Ask them to come home? And can you come home too? I really think she’d like everyone here. It will help with her recovery.”

Ava glanced at Travis.

He nodded.

Looked like they were about to exchange their tickets.

They were headed to Washington for their break.

CHAPTER

Twenty

“YOU DON'T HAVE to come with me,” Ava said for the tenth time.

Just like the previous nine times, Travis ignored her. The ticket agent announced the total charge to change their tickets, and Travis handed over his Amex.

“And you definitely do not need to pay for our airfare.”

He pushed her hand holding her credit card away. “We’ll work out the logistics later, okay? Just let me do this so we can get down to the other end of this airport before boarding starts.”

She’d called her sisters, and while they’d both grumbled, they were also diverting their plans and heading back to their hometown.

Ava was not looking forward to this impromptu family reunion. Heck, a month ago, she’d made deliberate plans *not* to go home over the course of the next year.

As soon as the agent handed over their new tickets, Travis turned away from the desk. “Okay, let’s go. Boarding starts in ten minutes.”

She wasn’t even going to have much time to stress over this new change of plans. Probably not a bad thing.

They speed walked through the airport, arriving at their gate as boarding was announced for passengers in section two. Since Travis had sprung for first class, they were able to get right into line and were soon situated in their cushy, roomy

seats with cocktails in hand. Her phone vibrated with a message in the group text she'd started with her sisters.

HOLLY: It's going to take us a minute to get there, since we're already in Missouri and there are no direct flights from here. But we booked the treehouse where we stayed for Grandmother's funeral. It's two bedrooms, so if one of you wants to stay with us, you're welcome.

MARIA: Oz and I are already here. We were supposed to drop off Riley and then go back to LA to spend time with his kids. Instead, we're staying here with Vic. There's also plenty of room, Ava, if you want to stay here. Totally your call.

THOSE SEXY GLASSES perched on his nose, Travis read over her shoulder. "Maria and Oz are staying with her ex-husband?"

She shrugged. "It's better than not getting along at all, right?"

"Definitely," he agreed. "So, what do you want to do? Stay with one of them or get our own place?"

"Get our own place, for sure." She started tapping on her phone. "But I'll see if we can find something nearby."

Five hours later—which translated into eight, courtesy of flying over three time zones—they were striding through the Seattle airport, following the signs for rental car pickup. And then they were on the road, heading toward Roma. Ava sat in the passenger seat, fidgeting with the strap of her purse.

Travis slid his hand over onto her thigh and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "We'll get through this, sugar. I've got you."

She believed him. The man was everything she never knew she needed in a partner. She had the fanciful thought that if they ever broke up, she'd be ruined for all men for the rest of her life.

He was that perfect.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He found her hand, twined their fingers, and held it for the duration of the drive.

THEY CHECKED into their Airbnb before heading to the hospital. Ava needed to refresh her makeup, brush her teeth, delay the inevitable a bit longer.

“You look great,” Travis said twenty minutes later. He stepped into the bathroom and stood behind her, watching her through the mirror. “And the sooner you do this, the sooner you get it over with. Sam texted and said we should all meet at the treehouse this evening to decompress.”

“That sounds lovely.” She didn't even question Sam's assumption that Travis would accompany her here, although she'd tried to talk him out of it. Not that she hadn't wanted him here with her, but she hadn't wanted him to feel obligated. Her family was a lot to handle, and their relationship was still so new. What if this experience scared him off?

“Just don't judge me based on whatever happens, okay?” she asked as they left their rental and headed toward the hospital.

Once again, he twined their fingers, this time pulling her hand to his lips. “I don't judge you at all. And I definitely don't see you through the lens of those who raised you. That's like throwing rocks at a glass house.”

That was true. He didn't talk much about his family, but what little he'd mentioned hadn't been good. His father was a bully, according to Travis. Ava called him abusive, but tomato,

tomahto. His brother had been the perfect child, Travis told her, always doing exactly what their parents expected, whereas Travis had rebelled against life choices he did not agree with.

Holly had been the one who rebelled in their family. She'd left home as soon as she graduated from high school and carved her own path in life, while their mother had decided to pretend she had only two daughters.

Maria had stuck around and had tried to be everything she thought their mother wanted her to be, until she had a revelation and realized she would never live up to their mother's ridiculous expectations.

Ava had gone away to college, much like Holly had, except she'd started a career that was acceptable to their mother, lived a lifestyle the woman vaguely approved of. The problem was, Ava hadn't been happy. Even 2,800 miles away, she'd still felt the pressure to live the way their mother expected.

God, it had been so nice to break free of that trap. Demetri firing her had been the best thing to happen to her. Well, second best. Meeting Travis was definitely number one on that list.

Ava suddenly chuckled. "I cannot even imagine what my mother is going to think when she realizes all three of us are dating rockers. It might bring on a second heart attack."

Travis shot her a swift, concerned look. "My tattoos are completely covered. I'll take out my piercings before we go inside."

She shook her head. "No. It's fine. Be yourself. That's exactly what I lo—like about you."

She whipped her head around to stare out the side window while her face heated to epic temperatures. Holy wow, she'd almost dropped the "L" word! Probably not the best time and place, even if she did feel it all the way to her toes.

Yes, she loved Travis. Madly, deeply, passionately.

It was so freeing to think it; she actually couldn't wait to confess her true feelings to him. Later, tonight, when they

were alone and not driving to the hospital to visit her incapacitated mother. She'd not only tell him; she'd show him how much she loved him.

Right now, though, they had to face the music.

“Ready?” Travis said after he parked the car.

“No, but, like you said, let's get it over with.” She glanced at her phone. “Maria is here.” Ava squinted at the text. “She says it's not nearly as bad as we were all probably expecting.”

“Well, that's good.”

And strange. Although, to be fair, neither of her parents had ever had a health scare before, so there was no precedent.

Travis held her hand all the way through the parking lot, while they stopped at the information desk to ask how to get to her mother's room, as they stood in the elevator and walked down the hall, and even as they entered her mother's hospital room.

Mother looked good. She was sitting up in her bed, wearing makeup, her own silk robe hiding whatever gown the hospital had her in. She was definitely paler and maybe more gaunt than usual, but other than that, Ava wouldn't have believed she'd had a heart attack two days ago if the woman wasn't lying in a hospital bed with an IV taped to the back of one hand.

“...was mild,” Mother was saying as they walked in. “Your father overreacted.”

The fact that he reacted at all spoke volumes. For Ava's entire life, all the man ever did was work and more work. He hadn't attended sporting events or spring concerts or award ceremonies when the girls had been in school; he'd always been too busy to leave the office.

And yet, Ava had always liked him best. Because if he wasn't there, he couldn't criticize every single little thing, like their mother did.

Maria noticed her first. “Ava,” she said, sounding relieved as she hurried over to pull her closer to the bed.

Mother regarded her for a few moments without speaking. Her gaze swung Travis's way. There was no reaction, other than a quick shift of her eyes to Oz and back to Travis.

Ava cleared her throat. "Mother, I'd like you to meet Travis. He is..."

Travis offered his hand for a shake, his sleeve pulling back so that a glimpse of one of his tattoos could be seen on his wrist. "Ava's boyfriend."

Mother's eyes flared when they snagged on the bit of ink she could see, but she slowly lifted her hand and shook. "You're dating someone too?" she asked Ava.

"I am."

Mother's gaze drifted to the window. "Is Holly coming as well?"

"She is," Ava confirmed. "She should be here in a few hours."

"With her new husband, I suppose."

"Yes."

Mother pursed her lips but didn't say anything more.

Wow.

Maria pasted on a bright smile. "Father went to the cafeteria to get something to drink. He should be back in a few minutes."

The four of them stood at the foot of the bed, all fidgeting uncomfortably, while Mother stared at the muted show on the television. Ava glanced at Travis, who gave her a tight smile and squeezed her hand.

About seventeen hours later—or so it felt like—Father walked into the room, a cardboard coffee cup in his hand. "Elaine, I stopped at the nurse's station, and they said—"

His words dried up when he realized there were four other people in the room with his wife.

“Oh,” he said, clearing his throat. “Hello there.” Like he was on autopilot, he stepped forward, arm extended for a handshake.

“That’s the man Ava is dating,” Mother said with a nod in Travis’s direction.

Dad shook his hand and introduced himself.

“And that is the one Maria is dating.” Mother nodded at Oz. The two men shook hands.

Dad said hello but did not hug either of his daughters.

“Where is Holly?” he asked, looking around like he expected her to materialize out of thin air.

“On her way,” Maria said.

“Good, good,” Dad said. “She may have to go straight to the house. I think we’re going to be released soon.”

“I told you it was mild,” Mother said. “Nothing to worry about.”

“If I hadn’t driven you straight here, there would have been a whole lot to worry about,” Dad replied. “And by the way, they want you to follow up with a cardiologist to discuss possibly putting in a stint.”

Mother frowned.

“What does that mean?” Maria demanded.

“It means she needs to take it easy,” Dad replied. “And stop stressing over every little thing.”

“I don’t—”

“You do,” he said with a firmness Ava couldn’t recall ever hearing in his voice before. Mother had always been the one to be firm, to raise her voice when angry. He never got upset, mostly because he was never around to do so.

“We have a two-week break,” Maria said. “If you need someone to stay and help take care of her...”

In all honesty, Ava was the most likely candidate if Dad needed assistance. Holly was the singer in her band; she had to

go back on tour in two weeks. Maria was their publicist; she needed to be there too.

Ava hated the idea of being away from Travis, but she'd do it.

"No," Dad said, shaking his head. "I'm taking care of her."

Maria stared at him like he'd just sprouted a second head.

"What about work?" Ava asked.

"If they can't handle things without me for a few weeks, I haven't done a very good job managing that office."

Whoa. Apparently, this was some sort of wake-up call for Dad. Maybe it would be for their mother, too.

A nurse popped into the room and informed them that he needed to exam their mother, and Ava and Maria used the excuse to say their goodbyes and promised to be back tomorrow.

"At the house," Dad said, again with that firmness she'd never heard before. "Come to the house. I'll have lunch catered in."

"Okay." Ava and Maria exchanged a raised eyebrow glance. "We'll see you then."

Ava left the hospital feeling like she'd just taken a spin through *The Twilight Zone*.

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

“DEFINITELY COVERED my cardio workout just climbing those stairs,” Travis announced as they entered the Airbnb Holly and Sam had claimed for the week.

This treehouse was pretty cool, although Travis was glad he and Ava had booked their own place. He liked that they could all come together to chill after that awkwardness at the hospital, but he could not lie and say he wasn't sorry for the privacy when they'd retreated to their own rental and Ava had begged him to help her forget everything if only for a few moments.

Hell, he'd do anything she wanted at this point. Anything at all.

The six of them were sitting around in the open-air living room, drizzle steadily tapping the roof. A roaring fire chased the chill away. An open bottle of red wine and a bottle of some fancy bourbon from a local distillery rested on the coffee table. Everybody had a drink in their hand.

The atmosphere was relaxed, laid-back. Far cry from earlier in the hospital. The best part? Nobody seemed inclined to bring up the subject. Even better, because he liked it when Ava was feeling chill as opposed to stressed so much he was almost worried she'd have a heart attack next.

Maria waved her phone. “Travis, I think you've managed to get rid of your stalker.”

Well, hell. He didn't want to talk about this subject either. Maybe he should deflect and bring up the hospital visit.

Except he wouldn't do that to Ava.

Instead, he grunted and took a hefty swallow of seriously excellent bourbon. He might have to have a case of this stuff shipped to his home in LA.

“Thank God,” Ava said, massaging his neck. “She was really stressing you out.”

“Anybody would be stressed if some chick they'd never done more than shake hands with accused them of being her baby daddy. Oh, and she was only seventeen at the time.” Christ, what a nightmare it had been. He was so fucking glad the whole thing appeared to be in the rear window.

“I wonder why she backed off?” Maria mused while looking at her phone, idly swiping her screen. “Last time, the record label had to file a restraining order and get her parents involved. This time they didn't do anything, and yet she's obviously decided to leave you alone.”

Travis wouldn't say they didn't do anything...not that he was about to put voice to that thought.

Sam pointed at Travis with his lowball glass. “It's because of Ava. The stalker realized you're taken. Good timing with the two of you starting to date.” He smirked.

Suddenly, Travis could feel sweat beading along his hairline. He glanced at Ava.

She stared back, her hand retreating from his neck.

“That was really good timing,” she said slowly, sounding like she wanted him to laugh and tell her it was totally a coincidence.

And he really, really wanted to, except he was so damn sick of lying to her.

Oz chuckled. “Mitch actually said as much to me when we were in Pittsburgh. He pointed out that she hadn't stalked him when Travis was in Dog Daze, and he thought it was because he was married. He figured if Travis had a girlfriend, the stalker might back off.”

Travis swiped his hand over his face. Fuck. He hadn't realized Mitch had vocalized the plan to anyone else. If Travis had known, he would have let Ava in on the strategy from the get-go. To be safe. And hoped like hell she would have said yes.

"Pittsburgh," Ava said, and damn, he could feel her gaze boring into him.

He tipped up his glass, draining the drink.

"Are you okay?" Maria asked. She was canting her head, watching her sister.

"I'm not sure," Ava said in that same slow tone. Foreboding.

Danger, Travis Clutcher, danger!

He could get up and walk out the door. Would Ava follow? Because he already knew what was coming, and he really, really wished they could have this conversation without witnesses.

"When did Mitch mention that to you, Oz?" Ava asked, her gaze still locked on Travis.

"At the press conference, before the show," Oz supplied obliviously.

Shit, shit, shit.

"You know what's interesting?" Ava asked, sounding deceptively calm.

Nobody said anything for long moments. Probably because she was still looking at him, implying he should respond.

Finally, Oz said, "What?"

"Right after that concert in Pittsburgh," Ava stood and paced over to the window. Maybe she couldn't stand sitting next to him for a second longer. "Right after that concert. That's when Travis decided he was ready to date. We hadn't had a conversation about it. There wasn't any secret relationship. We'd had sex twice. Well, on two different occasions."

Her cheeks went rosy, but her gaze was unwavering.

“That’s it. Both times, I thought it was a one-time thing. We were supposed to be ‘just friends.’ And then suddenly he wants to date. Right after the show in Pittsburgh.” She enunciated each word, saying them slowly, deliberately.

Travis was confident that not a damn person in that room was confused by her meaning.

“Are you serious, Travis?” That was from Maria, already jumping to her sister’s defense.

“Holy shit.” Holly glared daggers at him.

He’d expect no less from Ava’s siblings.

“Seriously, dude?” Oz said, glaring at him. “That’s fucking low. We all thought—I’m sure Ava thought—”

“I did,” Ava confirmed. “I fell for your ploy just as well as your stalker did.” She was practically vibrating. With rage? With sadness?

He had no fucking clue. Just like he had no fucking clue how to get himself out of this predicament. How to make things right with her.

How to tell her that yes, it had started as a ploy, but that was not how it ended. Hell, even as he’d made the decision to play this stupid game, he’d wanted it to be real.

She was definitely not in the right frame of mind to hear that from him. And he didn’t blame her one bit.

“Hey,” Holly said, smacking Sam on the chest with the back of her hand. “We should get out of here. Go into town for snacks or something. The four of us. Except for Ava and Travis.”

She stood, but Ava shook her head. “No. You stay here. It’s your rental. Maria, Oz, would you mind taking me to my rental so I can pick up my things and come stay with you?”

“Not at all,” Maria said, already on her feet.

Holly hurried over and hugged Ava. The two sisters whispered for a moment. Travis had no idea what was said.

Nor did he have any idea what to say. What to do.

Ava stalked over and snatched her purse off the couch next to him. She pointed at him. “I do not want to see you. At all. Do not come after us. I will be out of the rental ten minutes after we get there. Then you can leave.”

She swiveled on her heel, and he watched her leave the treehouse, Oz and Maria in her wake.

“Damn,” Sam said after they were gone. “You really fucked up.”

“Did you really pretend to be in love with Ava so you could scare off your stalker?” Holly demanded, glaring at him.

“No. I never pretended to be in love with her.” Fuck no.

He stared down into his empty glass.

“It was all real.”

“Except for the part where Ava didn’t know the plan,” Sam pointed out.

Travis grabbed the bottle, splashed more bourbon into his glass. “Yeah, except for that.”

“She’s in love with you,” Holly practically snarled. Damn, these sisters were protective of one another. Ava was lucky to have them.

“She’s not—” But she’d almost said it, earlier today.

He heard her.

And he’d smiled.

Because he wanted to hear those words from her.

And he wanted her to mean them.

“Fuck.” He dropped his head against the couch cushions. “I did fuck up. Spectacularly.”

“What were you thinking?” Holly demanded.

“I was thinking that my stalker scared the shit out of me. And Mitch didn’t want any bad publicity for the band. And I

really did consider telling her the plan, but I was afraid she'd say no."

"You're an idiot," Holly snapped.

"You need to tell her," Sam said.

"Uh-uh," Holly said, shaking her head. "You need to give her breathing room. Ava holds a grudge, and if she's really in love with you, you need to give her a wide berth for a while. Let her cool off. Otherwise, you'll only make it worse."

"Shit." He stared at the ceiling.

Yep. He'd royally fucked up.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

AVA STAYED in Washington for three more days. It was all she could take. Between Oz and Maria being nauseatingly in love and Vic being totally cool about it and her parents acting almost human—all combined with Travis’s very obvious absence, she was as stir-crazy as if she were stuck in a four-by-four room with no windows and no doors.

She needed to get out. She needed to go home so she could figure out what the heck to do with her life, now that it was back in her own hands and all entirely her own.

She and Maria headed to their parents’ house so Ava could say goodbye—Mom had been released with strict orders to take it easy and make a follow-up appointment with her primary care physician and a cardiologist—and then Maria agreed to drive Ava into Seattle to catch her flight back to New York.

“You can stay on as my assistant,” Maria said as they pulled into the driveway of their childhood home.

“I absolutely cannot,” Ava immediately replied before climbing out of the car.

Maria scurried around to meet her in front of the hood. “You can be assigned exclusively to Panic Station. You won’t have to deal with Travis at all.”

The idea of being so close to him and yet not... “No. But thank you. I appreciate what you’re doing. I’ll figure something out. And I will stay in touch, with both of you. Just not when he’s around.”

She couldn't handle it. The man had not just broken her heart—he'd ripped it from her chest and stomped on it.

He'd been such a convincing actor. She'd believed everything.

And it had all been a lie.

“Holly says—”

“Don't,” Ava warned. “Let's just go play nice with our parents, and then you can try to talk me around for the entire drive to the airport.” Not that it would work, but at least this spurred Maria to drop the subject as they entered the vast marble foyer and trudged upstairs to where Mother was lying in bed like a queen in waiting.

“You're looking better,” Maria said approvingly.

“But not good enough to push yourself too far,” Ava warned.

“Good Lord, you sound just like your father.” Mother rolled her eyes. “In case you haven't noticed, I'm lying in bed like a good little patient.” She spread her arms wide.

Dad stepped into the room and strode right over to Ava and Maria, hugging them both and dropping kisses on their foreheads.

Weird. But it was a good weird. Ava almost wouldn't mind staying here for a bit longer just to have someone around who expressed affection. She'd grown rather fond of affection over the course of this past month.

Dad dropped onto the bed, forcing Mom to shift to the side to accommodate him. She grumbled, but it didn't look like she really minded.

Amazing how a mild heart attack could cause such a drastic change in their lives. What would their lives have been like if something like this had happened thirty years ago?

No point in dwelling on the past, on what could have been. It was best to focus on the future.

“Where are your other halves?” Dad asked once he was settled.

“Mine is hanging out with Riley and Vic. I believe he’s giving them both guitar lessons,” Maria said.

“That is so strange,” Mom said, shaking her head.

Dad rested a hand on her leg. “Better than none of them getting along,” he pointed out. “And Maria is clearly happy with Oz. She never was with Vic. Even I could see it.”

Mom harrumphed but didn’t disagree.

“And yours?” Dad prompted, giving Ava an expectant look.

She wrung her hands. “Um, I don’t have another half. Not anymore. Things, uh, didn’t work out.”

It didn’t exist at all. The entire relationship had been a lie.

“That’s too bad,” Dad said sympathetically. “You two seemed so perfect together.”

Ava would have snorted—a sound their mother despised—if Maria hadn’t grabbed her hand and given it a squeeze.

“Maybe you’ll work things out and he’ll be back when you come for Easter. You are coming, right?” Dad asked.

“I am,” Ava assured him. *But I’ll be alone.* “I can come back sooner if you need me to help take care of Mother.”

“You’re certainly welcome to come back as often as you’d like. However, don’t feel obligated because you think I need help. I’ve decided to retire, so your mother and I can spend more time together.”

“Oh God,” Mother said with an eye roll and a lip quiver, like she was trying not to smile. Like she actually wanted him around more often.

This really was going to take some getting used to.

Just like Ava was going to have to get used to being alone again.

They said their goodbyes, Maria promised to be back for dinner, and Ava swore she'd visit more often.

And then the two sisters were in the car, heading into Seattle. Maria, much to Ava's appreciation, did not bring up Travis.

Soon, she was on the plane, sitting in first class, drinking champagne. Alone.

Hopefully, it wouldn't be too difficult to get used to it again. Before she met Travis, she'd done practically everything alone.

It was well after dark by the time the taxi pulled up in front of her apartment building. All she wanted to do was change into a pair of the sweats she'd purchased while on the road, pour an oversized glass of red wine, and curl up on the couch and lose herself in some mindless television show. Preferably not a romance.

Maybe she'd binge watch *Criminal Minds*. It wasn't mindless, but the show would certainly keep her mind off a certain tall, dark, sexy drummer whose memory she'd prefer to have ripped out of her head. Better to have loved and lost than not ever loved at all?

Not a chance.

Her shins bumped into someone's knees, and it took her far longer than it should have to realize the owner of said knees was sitting on her front stoop.

"Travis," she said on a gasp, stumbling to a stop on the sidewalk.

"Hey, Ava."

He looked like hell. His hair was disheveled. There were massive dark circles under his eyes. His clothes were rumped, like he'd slept in them. He dragged his hand through his messy locks and plopped his fisherman's cap onto his head as he stood.

"I, uh, heard you were coming home today."

Which of her traitorous sisters told him? Whichever one it was, they were getting a piece of Ava's mind, just as soon as she could get rid of Travis.

"It wasn't one of your sisters who told me," he added. "Holly said I should stay away. Said you hold a grudge, and I should give you some time before I tried to talk to you."

"She's right."

"I couldn't stay away. Three days was too many."

She pursed her lips and tried to step around him. "I have nothing to say to you."

He tugged her rolling bag out of her grip. "Good. Because I have a lot to say to you, and it will probably be easier if you don't interrupt me."

"What I meant was, I don't want to hear anything you have to say." She reached for her bag. He tucked it behind his back like they were playing a game of keep-away. "Seriously? What are you, five?"

"What I am is a desperate man. I can't stand not being with you."

"You should have thought of that when you decided to *pretend* we were dating."

"It wasn't pretend."

"It absolutely—"

"Can we please have this conversation upstairs in your apartment? I'll tell you everything, but I really would prefer to do it without witnesses. You finding out in front of your sisters and Oz and Sam was bad enough."

"You wouldn't have ever told me if they hadn't helped me put two and two together," she snapped, crossing her arms.

He sighed. "Fine. So we're doing this here."

A young couple, probably in their midtwenties, walked by, arm in arm. They stared a little too hard at Ava, who looked exactly the same as she had in every picture splashed across the internet in the last few weeks. Travis's vague disguise was

probably throwing them off a little, but if they worked it out, his preppy disguise would no longer be a disguise—and Ava shouldn't even care.

Except if they had a conversation about their fake relationship right here on the street, it would somehow, some way end up online and potentially affect the band adversely, and while Ava could tell herself she didn't care about Travis specifically, she did care about the other members of his band.

“Damn it,” she muttered, stalking past him and wrenching open the outer door. Travis caught it before it slammed in his face, and followed her up the steps to her apartment.

She shoved her key into the lock, wiggling it like she always did, but the stupid thing wouldn't open. She actually let out a little growl before Travis plucked the key ring from her grip and unlocked the door like *he'd* been the one doing it for more than a decade.

She refused to thank him. If he hadn't shown up on her doorstep, she wouldn't be so tense right now, and no doubt, the lock would have yielded to her touch.

Once they were both inside, she snatched back her luggage and strode into her bedroom, slamming the door for emphasis before quickly shedding the shirt she knew to be one of his favorites and replacing it with the Panic Station pullover she'd been wearing the day they met.

When she returned to the living room, he was waiting with a glass of wine in each hand, which irritated her because it was exactly what she wanted right now.

Accepting the glass he offered, she went into the kitchen and leaned against the counter instead of lounging on the couch in the living room. She didn't want either of them to get too comfortable. She wanted him to say his piece and get the hell out of her life. For good this time.

“Before the concert in Pittsburgh,” he started, “Mitch warned me to avoid bad publicity for the band at all costs. We're so close to making it, to being on top of the damn

world. And the more money we make, the more the label makes.”

“So you lied to me for money?” Ava asked coolly.

“Clearly, yes, but not the way you are assuming.”

“Pray tell, what am I assuming?”

He ignored that snide question. “Mitch also told me he’d been keeping an eye on my stalker’s social media, even after she finally went away last summer. She’d kept insisting she’d been my biggest fan back when I was in Dog Daze. Except she didn’t stalk me back then. I didn’t know she existed. She didn’t start stalking me until after I joined Demigoddess Revival.”

“Dog Daze wasn’t as popular.”

“They actually were, so that wasn’t it.”

She knew the answer. Oz had said as much when they were all sitting around in that treehouse. When her world had quite suddenly and succinctly imploded.

Had it really been only three days ago?

“Mitch theorized that my stalker saw me as unobtainable when I was in Dog Daze,” Travis said. “He suggested that if I had a girlfriend, the same thing might happen now.”

Ava’s hand shook as she took a sip from her glass. “Okay, fine. It wasn’t a terrible plan. But why lie to me, Travis? Why didn’t you just come to me and ask me to be in on the ploy?”

He stared down at the floor for long seconds before finally lifting his gaze to her face. “Because I was afraid.”

She stared back, unblinking. “Afraid of what?”

“I convinced myself that you didn’t feel for me what I felt for you. I thought you’d say no. And I couldn’t imagine pulling this off with any other woman. It had to be you. And I believed the only way you’d go along with it was if I didn’t tell you what was going on. If I just pretended that it was nothing but me wanting to be with you.”

He dropped his hand, and it slapped against his thigh. “It was stupid. Not telling you. I’m sorry. I wish I could go back and handle it differently. But I want you to know, that part is the only part I would have handled differently.”

“What do you mean?”

“All the rest of it was real, Ava. I know it’s hard for you to believe that right now, but I swear, it’s the truth. Every time I kissed you. Every time I hugged you. Every time we made love. Every time we sat around doing nothing but teasing each other or talking about the future. Every single moment we’ve spent together was real. In here.” He patted his left pec.

“I fell in love with you, Ava. Hell, I think I was halfway there when I convinced myself to try Mitch’s tactic. But I wasn’t far enough along to convince myself to be honest with you, and I’m sorry.”

“Did you just tell me you love me?” Her heartrate suddenly doubled as she stared at him with wide eyes.

“I did. I do. I know there’s not a chance in hell you’ll take me back, but I still wanted you to know—”

“Stop talking,” she demanded.

He snapped his mouth shut.

“Come over here and kiss me.”

His eyebrows shot up on his forehead. “Are you sure?”

She placed her glass on the counter and closed her eyes. “Don’t ask me that. Just kiss me.”

“Ava, I—”

She grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him toward her. Their lips practically crashed together, and he wrapped his arms around her and canted his head, licking his way into her mouth, his hands sliding down to cup her backside, grinding her against him.

They didn’t make it to the bedroom. He lifted her onto the counter and introduced her to kitchen sex, and Ava knew,

without a doubt, that she'd made the right choice by listening to her heart.

Epilogue

June

The Desert Rocks Music Festival

Phoenix, Arizona

AVA GAVE a startled shriek as something cold and wet pressed against the back of her neck. She whipped around in her seat to see Travis standing behind her, grinning, holding a sweating bottle of water in his hand.

“Oh God, thank you,” she said, greedily snatching the water and guzzling it.

“You are crazy, for the record,” she said after she caught her breath. “This heat sucks. Give me winter anytime.”

He chuckled. “Now that you have your buy-out from Demetri and you’ve given up your apartment in New York, we need to get serious about choosing a place to live. Which should be fun, considering I hate winter and you hate the heat.”

“There are lots of moderate options, you know. Maybe we should move to the Ozarks, like Sam and Holly. Lacey and Parker are now talking about it too. And Maria told me she and Oz have been looking at real estate listings.”

He bent at the waist and kissed her cheek. “All the sisters together in one place. I’m sure that won’t be crazy at all.”

She laughed. “Imagine it when we add more babies to the mix.”

His eyes went huge as they dropped to her midsection. “Seriously? You want to have kids? With me?”

She felt her cheeks warm, even more than they already were with this oppressive heat. “I’m not ready right this second, but yes, Travis. Whatever happens down the road, in my future, I can’t imagine doing it with anyone but you.”

He kissed her again. “I love you, sugar. I am all in. Anything you want. Anywhere you want to live. I’ll be happy, as long as I’m with you.”

“No wonder you’re a musician. Everything you say sounds like a song lyric.” She smiled. He was also so freaking romantic. And she knew it was real. All of it. Every little insanely romantic thing he did and said.

“Hi.”

Ava turned around, prepared to help a customer at Demigoddess Revival’s merch table. Her job was supposed to be offloading the band’s various sweatshirts and T-shirts and bumper stickers, not flirt with her boyfriend.

She came face-to-face with Travis’s stalker. Without even thinking about it, she grasped Travis’s hand. He needed her support right now.

“Uh, hello,” Ava said cautiously.

The young woman had shoulder-length dark hair and big brown eyes. She was short, probably no more than five-two, hovering somewhere between curvy and chubby.

Her smile was shy, and while her gaze kept darting to Travis, she didn’t have the crazed look in her eye that he’d described when he ran into her in Cleveland earlier this year.

“Um, I’m really looking forward to watching the band play later this afternoon. And, um, I just want to say...I think you two are really cute together. You make the perfect couple. I really hope you stay together forever.”

Not at all what Ava was expecting, but... “Thanks.”

“And, uh, I also wanted you to know that I’m...not going to bother you anymore. I’m...” She cleared her throat while her face reddened. “I’m in therapy. Dealing with some issues I have.”

Ava nodded and smiled. “That’s great. I’m so glad.”

“Yeah, me too,” Travis said, and his tone wasn’t angry or sarcastic. Ava gave his hand another squeeze.

“Okay, I’m going to get back to my friends. Um, good luck up on stage.”

They watched as she joined a small group of young people hovering under one of the few trees that offered a modicum of shade from the unrelenting sun.

“Wow,” Travis said, wrapping his arm around Ava’s waist and hugging her. “Did that really just happen?”

“It did. And she’s right.”

“About what?”

She glanced up at him. “We are perfect together.”

He grinned down at her. “And we’re going to stay together forever.”

THE END

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About the Author

Romcom. Mafia. Suspense. Rockstars. Shifters. Vampires. Demons. Dragons.
Witches. Demigods. And more. Tami Lund writes it all.

With wine.

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Thank you for reading!

