



**CRAZY TO  
LOVE YOU**

*USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**J. SAMAN**

CRAZY TO LOVE YOU

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*If you've read the Wild Minds duet - Love to Hate Her and Hate to Love Him - then you do NOT need to read chapter 1. It is the same as epilogue 2 from the duet. Please make sure you read the prologue though!*

*Love is a journey with highs and lows and just when we think it is lost to us forever, it shows us its luminous colors and we're born again.*

## Prologue

*Naomi*

“YOU TOLD ME YOU QUIT.” The words fly out of my mouth before I can even fully comprehend what I’m seeing. Florian’s deep brown eyes lined with a twinge of annoyance glide slowly up to mine. The partially filled syringe is still poised at the ready in his right hand, his left foot propped up on his opposite knee, his bare toes patiently waiting.

He doesn’t respond. He doesn’t move. He just sits there, on the edge of the king-size hotel room bed, staring at me as if I’m the ultimate buzzkill, which in this case, I suppose I am. His aggravated expression makes me want to strangle him. He doesn’t even look upset that I just caught him about to shoot up when he promised me he was done with that shit. No, the son of a bitch looks like he wants to shove me out the door and get back to business.

“Flor?”

He lets out a weighty sigh, his head dropping before his shoulders raise in a shrug. “Nai, this doesn’t have to be a thing, okay?”

“No. It’s not okay.” I walk over to him, lowering myself to my knees and placing my hands on his legs while doing my best to ignore the drugs in his hand. “You need help, baby.”

His eyes narrow, instantly hardening, and for a half second, it scares me. He scares me. Because at this moment, this is not the man I’ve been in love with for the last four years. Not the man I thought I knew better than anyone. Better than I know myself even.

No, this man is a stranger to me. A full-blown junkie who cares more about the high than anything else.

I know this look intimately.

It’s broken my heart more times than I can count.

“Don’t start that shit with me again,” he snaps, practically shoving me off him. “I don’t have a problem. You know I don’t. I’m not an *addict*,” he sneers the word. “I only use it when I need to mellow out for a bit. You don’t know what it’s like for me right now. The stress I’m under.”

Now it’s my turn to narrow my eyes. I fall back onto my haunches, folding my arms over my chest. “Oh, I don’t?” He blusters out a loud growl at my accusation. “Because all of this” —I wave my hand around our hotel suite— “isn’t my life too?”

He lets out a sardonic laugh, rolling his head around on his neck like I’m stressing him out. Like I’m the last thing he needs or wants to deal with. Like I’m being overly dramatic about the fact that he’s about to shoot poison into his veins, seeking a high that will never be enough.

Well, fuck him.

“You handle this shit better than I do and you know it,” he says in that barking tone of his. The one he famously used



when I was too weak and too fragile and needed the strong force of him to guide me through. “You don’t have a band you have to answer to. I’m the lead singer. I’m the frontman. I’m it. The image of the band and sometimes it’s too much. Sometimes I just need to escape, too mellow out for a bit without the world and the people who surround me, hounding me asking for something. Can’t you understand that? It doesn’t have to be the big deal you’re making it out to be.”

“The people who surround you? Meaning me, right?”

He growls. “So much drama. Still so much a teenager.”

I ignore the dig as my eyes burn into his. “Flor, I can’t sit around and turn a blind eye to you shooting heroin into your body. It will *kill* you. Do you not see that?”

He rolls his eyes dismissively at me. “I’m not your dad.” My breaths lodges in my chest, my hand flying up to rub that burn away. It’s useless. That pain is there for life. “He couldn’t control it. I can.”

“Do you really believe that?” I’m incredulous. He can’t actually be that naïve.

“Nai, Claw By Night is number fucking one. Our album is number one. Our song, yours and mine” —he waves his finger back and forth between us— “is number one. And goddamn Robert Snow is already hounding me about the next album. It doesn’t end, babe. There is no pause to this, and right now, I need there to be one.” He’s begging, and part of me bleeds for him. I get it. This is my life too. It is exhausting. Mentally and physically draining. Emotionally taxing. All of it is and yeah, it takes its toll.

The constant hounding. The road. The travel and lack of your own personal space. The negative reviews and trolls. The

haters. Even the lovers and obsessed fans.

But...

“Heroin isn’t the answer. It doesn’t solve or fix anything. We’ll take a break.” I reach up, cupping his stubble jaw. I love his face. I need his face. I need him. “We’ll go on vacation. Somewhere exotic and private. Just you and me. Screw the wedding, we can do a pre-honeymoon, honeymoon.”

He smiles at me, his eyes softening. It’s the same smile he gave me before he got down on one knee and proposed. It was just the two of us, a beach and the sunset. It was perfect. We’re perfect. Florian loves me. I love him. That’s all we need—just us.

God, doesn’t he know how much I need him?

He’ll stop for me. He promised me he would.

Please, I need him to stop.

I can’t watch someone else I love die. Especially not from that stuff. I just... I just *can’t*.

“That sounds amazing. It does. But you know it’s not a reality. I have another album to get going on and the Grammys in two months. Maybe after that. I don’t know.”

“That’s precisely why you don’t need this stuff. Why you should stop.”

“No, it’s why I *do* need it.”

“Florian, please let me check you into rehab.”

“Rehab!” he belts out. “Are you insane? Did you not just hear all the shit I have to do. I don’t have time for rehab. I barely have time for myself. For you.”

I shake my head. “You need to stop,” I plead, reaching a breaking point with the back and forth.

“And what if I don’t?” he challenges, his head tilting. “You gonna leave me? You gonna stop loving me?”

I shake my head at him, so lost and scared, I can hardly think straight through the panic as it ripples across my skin. Tears well up in my eyes, and I press my hand into his face a little more. Needing him to see what this is doing to me. To us.

He barely acknowledges it.

He reaches out, brushing a stray tear away, and part of me breaks. Shatters before him. He’s been my constant for the last four years. Through everything. And I’ve been his. I’ve given him everything I have, living a life that hasn’t been mine just so I can be with him.

“I love you. God, Flor, I love you so much. That’s why I need you to stop. That’s why I can’t let you do this to yourself.”

“Christ, you’re being unreasonable.” He pushes me away, harder this time, and I know I’ve lost him. Florian Heart has never pushed me away. Ever. He’s always pulled me toward him.

He stands up, tossing the needle on the bed and pacing an angry path toward the window that overlooks Paris and then back again. He sits on the bed and levels me with a look I’ve never seen on him before.

“I don’t want to hear any more about this. I’m not your father. I’m not an addict. I can stop, I just don’t want to. I *want* to do this. End of fucking story, Naomi. I mean it.”

Tears stream down my face, pouring helplessly from my eyes. My throat swells and my chest clenches so tight I can

hardly breathe. I've only ever felt this helpless once before, and no matter what I did or said or tried, I lost. That's how it is with this. I know it better than most. If he doesn't want to stop, he won't. Nothing I say or do will change that. That change has to come from within, and he's not there. Nowhere close.

Panic consumes me as I absorb the enormity of that.

"I can't turn a blind eye to it. I can't pretend like it's not everything. Because it is. Please," I beg, my voice beyond desperate.

"I love you," he whispers softly as he dips his head, his lips brushing against mine. Our foreheads meet as he stares deeply into my eyes. "I love you so fucking much. Since the first moment I saw you all those years ago, I knew you were it for me. You were so young and beautiful. These last four years have been the best of my life. I want to marry you, Naomi. I want us to be together, make music together, forever." I swallow past the lump in my throat, hopeful that his love for me is enough only to have that thought ripped from me with his next words. "But I need you to accept me. Accept who I am and what I do. Including this." He reaches out and taps the needle laying pathetically on the bed.

My eyes slam shut as my breath stutters in my chest. My heart beats wildly, consumed and sick with this burgeoning fear.

"And if I can't accept this?" I squeak out, my voice cracking.

"Then we're done, baby."

I sob out, unable to understand how we got here. We're supposed to get married in four months. Four. I have a dress. I booked the venue, which has remained a secret to not only the

world but to our guests as well. All they know is a date and a general location. We've been so happy. So full.

It's been a fairy tale. My dream come true.

And now I'm stuck in a nightmare, and I don't know how to wake up.

I don't know how to walk away from him, but I have to.

I *have* to.

Because I cannot accept his drug use. I cannot accept that he won't get help for it. I can't. I lost my father to that. Drugs took everything I've ever had away from me. Music has taken everything I've ever loved away from me. I can't watch Florian die, helpless to stop it, the way I did with my father.

He used to say the same things to me that Florian is saying to me now.

I just need a break. I just need to escape. It's not a problem.

But it was and it is.

"Is it really that easy for you? If I don't accept that you're injecting fucking heroin, then we're done?" I sob, reaching up and holding his head against mine.

"No. It's not. It fucking hurts. You're my world, but so is my music. So is this craziness. If you loved me the way you say you do, you'd understand this piece of me. Every piece of me. I need it."

Christ. No words have gutted me more. "And if you loved me the way you say you do, you'd stop. If you cared about us, our future, your future, your music, you'd stop."

“Goddammit,” he yells, jerking away from me. “Screw this. Go. Just go. I can’t do this with you anymore.”

The finality in his voice tells me he knows that we’re already done. He’s known this was my hard limit all along, and part of me wonders if ending it was what he was after all along. It didn’t exactly take him much to get here. Heroin over me. That’s what just happened.

I reach out, grab his face, and press my lips to his. I kiss him with everything I have. Every ounce of love I’ve ever felt for him, I force into his body. “I love you,” I whisper against his lips.

Then I stand up, look him in the eyes one last time before I turn around and walk out the door. He lets me go. Makes no effort to stop me. In fact, I bet he was grabbing for that needle before the door even closed behind me.

I leave the hotel without speaking to anyone. I just get into a waiting cab and go to the airport.

Home.

I need to go home.

But I don’t even know where that is anymore. Florian was my home.

But now that life is over.

## Chapter One

*Gus*

*2 years later*

I SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED THIS.

And maybe part of me did. There was an element of dread locked low in my gut. But not to this extent. I didn't anticipate standing up there, beside my brother, feeling like my heart was being ripped out of my chest.

I let him have her. I gave him the girl who has owned my heart since we were kids. My first girlfriend. My first everything.

The only one who has ever given me life and love and hope. Who broke through a darkness most know nothing of and few suspect.

It's rough. Feeling like you're split in two and the only one who has ever made you feel whole is no longer yours.

Viola looks beautiful.

Exactly the way I used to picture her looking on this day. Only, instead of me being the groom, the man by her side,

kissing her lips and saying ‘I do,’ it’s my brother.

Jasper, being the intuitive bastard that he is was onto me from the first moment.

He offered to have Henry or Keith take over for me. To make the speech. To walk her down the aisle, since there was no one else who could do it, and then stand beside him as best man.

But there was no one else I wanted to have do it. Any of it. It’s why I volunteered in the first place.

So, I told him no.

He’s my brother, and they love each other, and she’s carrying his baby, and it’s all as it should be. It’s. All. As. It. Should. Be.

I know this. But still...

The heartbreak was on his face. The worry for me on a day when he shouldn’t have any. The man deserves some peace and happiness, and I’m sucking it from him because I’m nothing if not a selfish prick.

A man who should not be picturing himself with the bride but is and has been all day.

Slender arms wrap around my waist, a warm, soft body hugging me from behind draws me momentarily out of my dark thoughts. My eyes close, and I blow out a slow, even breath.

“You’ve been quiet all day,” Vi says, face pressing into my back the way it used to when we were teenagers. I set down my drink on the nearest table and take hers, the ones pressed into the center of my chest, in mine, intertwining our fingers.

“I know.”



“You want to tell me about it?”

“Nothing left to say that hasn’t already been said.”

She makes a humming noise, and I’m just fucking up this wedding all around.

“I’m so happy for you...”

My words trail off only for her to pick up where I left off with, “But this hurts.” I swallow hard and silently nod. I wish it didn’t. It honestly shouldn’t at this point. I was the mastermind of Viola and Jasper becoming Viola and Jasper. I set it all into motion.

I *wanted* this for them, dammit.

I still do. I wouldn’t change the way it all turned out. The only thing I’d change is myself. Something I should have done so long ago. And maybe that’s it.

The wonder: If she knows I only slept with those women to make the loneliness without her a little more tolerable?

The lingering question: If I hadn’t cheated and broken her heart and trust, would it have been me today instead of my brother?

I hear her snuffle, her body starting to tremble against mine, and Jesus, how many different ways can I fuck up one woman?

“Aww, Vi. Shit. Don’t cry, babe. I didn’t mean to upset you, sweetheart.” I spin her around in my arms, and she shakes her head furiously, sucking in ragged breaths and forcing out a watery smile.

“No. It’s fine. It’s just hormones, right?”

Except a tear falls, and I didn't think I could feel worse. Hurting this woman, again, after all I've done to her, is like the ultimate knife to the gut.

She lets out a self-deprecating laugh and asks, "Dance with me?"

"I would love nothing more."

I take her into my arms, tucking her in against me, my hands on her lower back, hers around my neck. "Just like when we were kids," she laughs as I start to sway her a bit on the outskirts of the dance floor.

"I remember a lot more grinding, actually."

She laughs some more, smacking the back of my head. "Always with the dirty mind."

She has no idea.

I open my eyes and immediately lock on my brother, who is standing by the bar talking to Lyric Rose, but his eyes are on me. And in them, I see so much. So much love for me. For the woman in my arms. So much hope that one day I'll have this too.

Just not with her.

And that's what I have to tell myself. Because it's one thing to know it, another to see it, but finally accepting that the one you love is lost to you forever is a brutal, crushing reality that defies logic and rationalizations.

"I love you, Gus."

I smile, turning away from my brother so I can kiss his bride on the cheek. "I love you, Vi. Always."

She pulls back and meets my eyes, her hand sliding along my head until she's cupping my jaw. "No, Gus. You won't," she states simply, but the conviction in her voice pulls me up short. "Not the way you think you will. You don't love me that way now. The woman who will truly own your heart will tie you up in knots." She rolls her eyes. "Knowing you, probably both literally and figuratively." I smirk, despite the serious mood and tone she's pushing on me. "This woman will consume you. She'll be the one you fight everything and everyone for. That's not me, babe. It never was."

Something in her words, in her quiet truth, hits me hard. Steals the breath from my lungs. Forces a shudder from somewhere deep within.

No one has ever consumed me like that. Not even the woman in my arms.

She smiles brightly up at me, almost as if she's reading my thoughts. Leaning up on her toes, she plants a small kiss on my lips. "Go find her, Gus. You're ready."

## Chapter Two

*Gus*

*Two Months Later*

“I CAN’T SING THAT SONG.” I stare at my brother and think, I sorta already knew he was going to say that. But it’s a song I had to write, and writing is not my thing. Singing one isn’t exactly either. It’s why I handed it to him in the first place. Jasper is our lead singer. Our lyricist extraordinaire.

That’s never been me.

I can write the hell out of some notes though.

“It’s shit, right?”

Jasper leans back in his chair, rubbing at the beard he felt the need to grow. I guess when you get married and have a kid on the way, you can start to let things like that go. It’s not the best look on him, but he doesn’t seem to care what I have to say or think on the matter. Viola likes it, and whatever Viola likes, he delivers.

“It’s not shit,” he murmurs absently, staring at the words on the half-crumpled paper in his hands. I think I gave him the

right draft. I only wrote ten. “That’s not why I can’t sing it.”

“It’s not shit,” Keith, our drummer, agrees earnestly, swiveling around in the roly-chair behind the soundboard in our studio in Jasper’s music room. He knocks into it and Jasper growls out his annoyance, leveling him with a what the fuck glare. Keith throws his hands up in surrender, but like a little kid, keeps going the second Jasper’s focus drifts back to the paper.

Honestly, we’ve been sitting here too long without a break, and I think at this point, we’re all just a bit nuts with it.

“Then why can’t you sing it?” I ask, a touch of frustration in my tone as I run my hands across my face and through my hair. I want him to lay it out for me. I’m hoping, praying, he’ll reconsider.

Jasper stares me down as if I’m speaking to him in Russian, which is one of the few languages he actually can’t speak a word of. “How about because it’s a love letter, an apology, and a goodbye, to my wife written by my brother?”

“Right.” I shrug. “So, it’s a little awkward?”

Jasper rolls his eyes, an incredulous chuckle bursting from his chest. “A little?”

“A lot, brother.” Keith points at me with his drumstick. “That’s actually a lot awkward if Jasper sings a song you wrote for Vi.”

“I didn’t write it *for* Vi. I wrote it for me *about* Vi.”

I wrote it for me. I wrote it as my goodbye. My I’m sorry I fucked up so many things for you. For me. For us.

Three sets of eyes land on me, and I bluster out a sigh. They’re right. I know they’re right, but this song... I want this

song. No, scratch that. I *need* this song. How can these bastards not know that when they know me so well?

I need to move on already. I'm ready for it, I think. But it's like it's not possible unless I put this out there. Set the words and sentiment free. Let them drift off and become the words and notes for someone else to take in and make their own. There is no closure for me otherwise. It's the only thing I can think of to end this crazy shit that shouldn't still be crazy shit, so here we are.

I thought maybe writing it would be enough, but it wasn't. Like I said, I'm not a writer. I'm the farthest thing from a poet. I make music. That's how my mind makes sense, and until I put this down with the band, it will remain unfinished.

And so will I.

Dramatic? Maybe a bit, but isn't love dramatic? And heartbreak? Come on, man. Doesn't get any more dramatic than that.

The fact that I even showed it to my brother, felt comfortable enough to share it with him and the guys, says I'm ready to try to move beyond my now sister-in-law. No more lies between us. About anything. Including this. *Especially* this.

Viola and I dated for four years in high school. But it's more than that. I stole her from my brother before they even got started. In my head, in my heart, she was always mine. Even though I knew Jasper loved her as much, if not more, as I did. Then I fucked up the best thing to ever happen to me by cheating on her the second we started to get famous and girls looked in my direction.

Losing her was the mistake of my life.

She went her way and we went ours.

It wasn't until seven years later, and we were set to go on tour, that all the pieces of my past with Viola Starr fell into place. She's a special education teacher, and Jasper needed a nanny for his daughter, Adalyn, who has autism. And the moment Viola stepped foot in his house, I saw how they looked at each other. The way they both secretly felt, though they did everything they could to try to hide it.

And I knew she belonged with him and not me.

So yeah...this song.

Jasper isn't upset about it. Or even jealous.

He's Jasper and he knows the score. He has Viola and I don't. I let him have Viola and she chose him. That's how our story goes. It's the way it's all supposed to be. But just because something is supposed to go down one way, doesn't mean that all feelings are magically erased.

After all, I've loved Viola my whole life.

Same as my brother.

But I'm trying to move on. I'm trying to start over again.

And this song is part of that process.

"You realize that's just semantics, right?" Henry asks, shaking his head back and forth so the long, red licorice string in his mouth will hit his cheeks with an annoying *smack, smack, smack* sound.

"It's more than that. This song..." Jasper trails off, staring at the words I wrote, his eyes scrolling line by line. That's all he's been doing since I handed it to him yesterday, and that's all he's been doing since we sat down in the studio over an hour ago. "It doesn't feel finished to me, Gus."

“How so?” I rub my hands over the top of my head, along the strands of my short sandy-blond hair, staring down at the ground between my parted knees, my elbows digging into my thighs.

“Well, it feels like you’re singing *to* someone. Not about them. Almost like a duet,” Jasper utters that last part thoughtfully, and everyone stops. Everyone freezes whatever the hell they were doing and stares over at him, dumbstruck.

“A duet?” Henry repeats, resuming his chewing on his piece of Twizzlers. “We’ve never done that before.”

“First time for everything,” Keith interjects, spinning around again to the point where he’s starting to make *me* dizzy.

Jasper raises his head, his green eyes locking with mine. And for a moment, we do that twins thing. Where we don’t need to speak to know what the other is thinking. He’s saying it needs a counterpart. I’m saying I can’t write that. He’s saying I need to be the one to sing this. I’m saying I don’t think I can. He’s saying I have to be the one because it really can’t be him.

I’m saying fuck my life because he’s probably right about all of it. He always is.

“I have no idea who would even be able to write the other half of this, let alone sing it. I don’t have the voice, Jas. That’s always been you, man.”

“Not true,” Keith disagrees. “Not true at all. Plus, if you have a woman singing with you, she can take the lead. Inject the stronger voice with more range and depth. But I think I agree with Jas. It needs more. It’s short right now, yeah. But it’s more than that. There’s a lot of emotion to this. A lot of



feeling and soul and damn...” He trails off, gripping the back of his neck, an awestruck grin on his face. “Just think how fucking epic it would be with a woman’s voice. With more heartache. I don’t even know if you should have drums or bass with this. I’m hearing piano and acoustic guitar only. It needs to be raw and rough and all about the voices and lyrics.”

Jasper hums something out as if he agrees.

Jesus. What the hell have I done?

“Has Vi seen this thing yet?” Henry asks, and I glance up at him and then over to Jasper.

“Yes. I showed it to her first,” I tell him because I’m not sure whether he knows that or not.

“And she’s okay with you singing this? With us producing it?” I turn back to Henry and nod.

That’s it. Because Vi is still my girl. She’s just not *my* girl. We’re still close and best friends, and she’s the most loving, supportive, and accepting woman I know. She cried and I held her. We talked and laughed. And at the end of it, she told me to go for it.

To set my soul and heart free because it’s so beautiful, the whole world should experience it.

That’s freaking Viola. Only she’d say something like that and mean it.

“Then we all agree on a duet? On Gus singing it?”

I think on this. Like really freaking hard. Because it’s my song and it’s ultimately my call as such. Do I want to sing this with, *to*, another woman? That’s what happens with a duet like this. You’re not just singing with them, you’re sharing it all with them. Every word and emotion.

It's an intimate experience from what I've been told.

Like Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper.

But if I want this song out there, these words and feelings set free from my heart and mind, I think I have to do it.

“Alright. But who do we know who can write and sing and would be willing to do it?” I ask, and we all fall silent, exchanging lost looks, hoping someone comes up with a brilliant idea.

“What if you run it by Lyric?” Jasper finally suggests, intertwining his fingers and tossing his tattooed arms behind his head. “That woman knows absolutely everyone in the music industry, and she's our producer. The goddamn owner of our label.” He glances at each one of us before landing firmly on me with a look I cannot deny. “Yeah. Go find Lyric. She will absolutely know the perfect woman for this.”

## Chapter Three

*Gus*

“KNOCK, KNOCK,” I call out in sync with the rapping of my knuckles on Lyric Rose’s open office door. She starts, her blonde head flying up, her hazel eyes meeting mine. The second they do, and she registers who is ingratiating themselves upon her busy afternoon, a full, bright smile lights up her face.

“Gus!” she yells, rushing around her orderly desk and throwing her arms around me. Lyric is a shorty. She has to get up on her toes to reach me, so instead, I scoop her up in a bear hug. She laughs, planting a kiss on my cheek before I set her down. “This is an awesome surprise. Come in.”

“Am I interrupting? You look busy. Your assistant wasn’t here to tell me to fuck off and make an appointment.”

Lyric laughs. “Gus, I’m always busy, but you’re an interruption I’ll gladly take.”

She sits behind her desk and points to the chair on the opposite side. Lyric Rose is Gabriel Rose’s daughter. Gabriel Rose as in the lead singer for Blind Tears, one of the biggest

bands in history. They're up there with The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. But Lyric is an incredible producer, and she's now the CEO of Turn Records since Robert Snow, the former CEO, passed away last year.

Lyric is all of twenty-six if I had to guess, but she makes this daunting job look easy and does it all with a kind heart.

She leans forward in her chair, tilting her head, studying me intently. "So, what's up? I don't think in all the years we've been friends and I've been producing your albums, you've ever come to my office. If you have, it wasn't alone." She throws her hand up in the air as if she's just had the most horrible thought. "Shit. If you tell me you're here because you're leaving the band, I swear to God, Gus, I will call Marco and have him come here and kick your ass."

I laugh, leaning back in my comfy seat and propping my ankle up on my knee. "You do realize you could likely kick Marco's ass, right?" Marco is our manager, and he's like Rudy. Five-foot nothin', a hundred and nothin'. But still, I wouldn't fuck with that man on a bet. I know Lyric and everyone else feels the same.

"Marco lays a better smackdown than any WWE wrestler out there. But I guess I'll have to have Ethan do it if you think Marco can't. But Gus..." She trails off, her eyes growing wide and I shake my head, cutting her off before she gets carried away.

"No. I'm not leaving the band. In fact, we're working on songs for our next album and this happened." I slide my now very crumpled piece of notebook paper across her desk and resume my previous position. "Jasper thought I should bring it to you."

Curiosity paints her features as she leans forward and picks it up, dropping her elbow to her glass desk and reading over what I wrote. My heart picks up an extra few beats, and I realize I'm nervous. It felt different when the guys read it. Even when Jasper and Vi read it. They're my family and love me no matter what I throw at them. There's a certain amount of strength and confidence that comes with that knowledge.

But Lyric is a different story altogether.

She's a producer. She's a record executive.

I hold in a breath, trying to rein myself in as my gaze casts away from her and out the window. This is what art is, right? Putting yourself out there and allowing others to watch you bleed.

I tap my foot on the carpet, listening to the incessant ticking of my watch. It's been minutes and this isn't exactly a long song, so I know she's reading it a few times. I shift in my chair, unable to handle the silence a second longer and blurt out, "Jasper thinks it should be a duet."

The paper drops, floating from her hands to her desk as Lyric's stunned and steady gaze meets mine. "A duet?" she parrots, and I nod my head. She pushes back from her desk, the wheels on her chair rolling her in the direction of the window, and the Los Angeles skyline beyond. She spins in its direction, staring out at the same view I just was. "You're singing this, aren't you? I mean, it's why you're here alone."

That last part wasn't a question, but I answer, "Yes," all the same.

"Fuck," she hisses out, scrubbing her hands up and down her face.

I chuckle. "That bad?"

She spins back around to face me, shaking her head adamantly. “No. It’s so beautiful and heartfelt, and it will wreck everything else that’s been done before. I mean that. I can already hear music with this, and I’d be willing to bet you can too. Like, I hear a cello, something low, mournful, and hypnotic in the background.” She lets out a self-deprecating laugh and shakes her head. “I digress. Ignore me. Do you have someone in mind to work on this with you? Add some more to it, maybe?”

Damn, I love Lyric. I love how her brilliant mind works.

“That’s why I’m here, babe.”

“I figured that much. Okay. But...shit.” She taps her lip and then slams her hand down on her desk. “It’s freaking insane, Gus,” she practically yells, and I feel my eyebrows pinching in. I have no idea what she’s talking about.

She presses a button on her phone, and two seconds later a man’s voice comes through the speaker. “My lovely Lyric,” the man says in a sing-song voice.

“Ethan, are you busy?” she asks, a touch of urgency in her tone. Ethan is Lyric’s best friend and second in command here at Turn Records.

“No,” he deadpans. “I’m sitting in my office jerking off.”

“Fantastic,” she retorts dryly, rolling her eyes at me, and I can’t help but smile. “How about you tuck your dick back in your pants and get your ass into my office. I have Gus Diamond here.”

“Oh?” he says, his voice rising an octave. “Well, in that case, I’m coming right now.” Then he lets out a loud laugh. “Pun fucking intended.” He laughs some more as he disconnects the call.

“I’d apologize for that, but it’s Ethan and there are no apologies for him.”

I throw my hands up, chuckling lightly. “It was pretty funny, actually.”

Lyric bursts out laughing. “Yeah. It really was.”

A moment later the door to Lyric’s office slams open and in walks Ethan, tall, fair, and brawny. He’s still laughing to himself, and all I can do is shake my head as I stand up and give him the bro hug and shake. “Sup, brother. How’s it going?”

“Fantastic. Only, I wish you had asked how’s it hanging. Would have fit this whole moment that much better.”

I laugh, rubbing the top of my head. “You’re making me blush, Ethan. You already know it would be you if it were to ever be men.”

“From your mouth to God’s ear. Until then, a man can dream.” He perches himself on the edge of Lyric’s desk and she scowls, reaching over and trying to push him off. He scoots on it further and I’m guessing this is a thing between them. “But something tells me you called me in for reasons beyond staring at my hot bod and listening to my inappropriate sexual banter. What’s up?” he spins around and poses that question to Lyric.

Lyric thrusts my paper into Ethan’s hand. “Read this,” she demands, rocking back in her seat and watching as Ethan lifts the paper to his eyes. “Gus is going to sing this one and he’s thinking a duet,” she says, but there is something in her cadence when she mentions duet. Almost like she’s leading Ethan on to something she has in her mind and is waiting to see if he’ll come to the same conclusion.

He reads it through and then clutches it in a tight fist, wrinkling the goddamn thing more. He pins Lyric with a look. A look I can't fully see and certainly don't understand. "A duet?" She nods her head. "You're thinking—"

"Yes," she interrupts, her enthusiasm growing. "Do you think she would—"

"She hasn't done a duet since—"

"I know. But I think she's perfect—"

"But—"

"I thought of that."

Ethan fans himself dramatically, his eyes wide and bright. "Her voice with his?"

"Incredible, right? That's totally what I was thinking. Plus, the emotion of what she can bring to this?"

"No doubt. But I'm worried about—"

"You two are driving me up a wall," I snap, interrupting their back and forth. They're talking without having a conversation. At least not an understandable one and it's annoying as all sin. "I have no idea what the hell you're even talking about."

Ethan turns back to me. "Oh really? Like you and Jasper are any better?"

"At least we're twins."

"Bitch, I'm her sister from another mister." The three of us crack up, some of the intense energy that had been building between them ebbing. "Back to this." He shakes the paper still clutched in his hand. His gaze drops back to it, reading it once more, and nodding his head. "Yeah. A duet. And yeah...she'll



be perfect.” His eyes lock on Lyric’s, pinning her with a wary look. “If she’ll do it at all.”

Lyric throws her hands up helplessly, but there is a wicked gleam in her eye. One that tells me she’s a woman on a mission. “Only one way to find out.”

“She’s here today. Down in studio six.”

“Then let’s go.”

Both of them stand up like this is all a done deal. I do too, because it feels like the thing to do, but I don’t follow them as they head toward the door. “Hold up a second here. Who are you talking about? I think I’m entitled to know who you want me to work with on this. It’s not just any song to me. I think that’s fairly obvious.” I blow out a breath, scrubbing my hands across my face before they fall to my waist, locking around my hips. “Look, I trust you guys. I’d just like to have some input in this decision before you march me down to meet some woman who *you* think will be perfect for this.”

They exchange glances again before Ethan grasps my shoulder, giving me a small shake. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.” I open my mouth, ready to argue when he continues with, “Just shut up and come with us. You just said you trust us. So...*trust us*,” he emphasizes. “I think it’s easier if you two meet first and figure everything else out after.”

“You’re serious?”

“I am actually. The person we have in mind is absolutely perfect for this. Doesn’t mean it’ll all fall into place.”

“Okay...” I draw out the word, not at all comfortable with this. “Fucking Jasper and his goddamn ideas,” I mutter under my breath.

I should never have written the goddamn thing in the first place. I should have stuffed it into some random journal I don't keep and left it to waste away. Me and my impulsivity. Me and my fucking mouth. Me and my need to scrub myself clean of the woman who has stained me for longer than she should have.

All I have to do is meet the woman they have in mind. I don't have to say yes, I remind myself.

I take a deep breath and reluctantly follow.

The elevator carries us down to the studio floor. "This way," Lyric says as we meander down the long corridor until we're practically at the end. "Now," she starts, stopping me before we can enter, her eyes piercing mine, "the key is going to be getting her to agree."

I open my mouth to ask why this woman wouldn't agree, but before I can get it out, Ethan's pushing me through the door and into the recording studio.

This room is large. Larger than many of the previous ones I've used. There are two gray leather couches on the left side of the room with a coffee table between them. On the opposite side is a bank of plush black leather recliners. A producer is working behind the massive soundboard with headphones on, tapping things into the board's touchscreen. He must hear us enter because he looks over his shoulder with a smile and a nod.

"How's she doing?" Lyric asks. My eyes scroll up to the person in the booth behind the glass. A woman with dark brown—nearly black—hair wearing headphones of her own, is singing into a large microphone that's obscuring the majority of her face. The only part of her that's visible, other than her hair, is her closed eyes.

“Good,” the producer says. “Really good. She’s totally on point. Here, check it out.” He flips a switch and then the room fills with a voice that instantly gives me chills. It’s exquisite. Full, rich, powerful, and unbelievably sexy. It’s the sort of voice that makes you stop whatever you’re doing just to listen. The words or genre don’t even matter. She’s just that good.

And familiar.

I’ve heard her before somewhere I can’t place.

Lyric doesn’t say anything as the three of us stand here in silent awe, flanking the producer while this woman sings her heart out. It’s not even the lead on the song. She’s singing backup on some country ballad, but God, I can’t imagine a voice like that won’t overpower and steal the song.

After she finishes singing, she clears her throat and asks, “Do you need me to go again?” in a raspy voice.

The producer looks at Lyric over his shoulder before pressing a button on the soundboard. “That was beautiful, honey. I laid it down and I think it’s set. Can you come on out? You’ve got company.”

“Sure. Just give me a sec.”

I twist to face Lyric and Ethan, who are both grinning like deranged lions who were just let loose on a pack of Zebras. I see the thrill in their eyes. And after hearing this woman’s voice, I understand why. But I also see the nerves, the non-verbal conversations they’re having with each other, which gives me pause. They intimated more than once that she might not do it. The fact that a voice like that is singing backup and not solo tells me there’s a story here, and the last thing I need right now is someone else’s drama dropped in my lap.

But still...*that voice* .

“Hey, Lyric!” the woman exclaims, stepping out of the booth.

“Naomi!” Lyric returns equally as exuberant, suddenly all warm smiles. “You were killing it!”

The girl named Naomi laughs as she walks into the room to join us. She throws her arms around Lyric’s neck and then Ethan’s, standing on the balls of her feet to reach him. “I didn’t know I was going to see you two today. This is such a nice surprise.” She laughs lightly, warm and genuine, and even though I don’t want to like anything about this woman, I feel her laugh.

“I’m so happy we caught you before you finished up. I have someone I want you to meet.” Lyric steps back, and I’m suddenly face-to-face with the woman. “Naomi, I don’t know if you’ve met Gus Diamond from the band Wild Minds. Gus, this is Naomi Kent.”

My breath lodges in my throat as I stare into the most beautiful blue eyes I’ve ever seen. Brighter than firecrackers, they’re almost electric. Her coffee-colored hair is thick and glossy, curling just under her perfect tits. Her full pink lips turn up into a smile, and I realize I’ve seen her before. In person, yes, despite never being introduced, but that’s not why I recognize her.

I know her face—hell, everyone in the world does.

She’s been famous forever, but looking at her now, all I can think about is the last time I saw her. She is not only famous, she’s infamous.

What happened to her at the Grammys two years ago slingshots to the forefront of my mind, and I instantly frown despite my efforts not to.

Fuck. Naomi Kent. *The Naomi Kent*.

Roger Kent's daughter. Amaya Kent's daughter. Not only did she have her own insanely successful career, but her father was a famous singer/songwriter. He wrote songs and played with absolutely everyone who was anyone in the nineties and two thousands. Her mother was Amaya, a pop queen. She had a bunch of number one hits before she died, I forget how.

But that's not what's really sticking in my mind. This woman was Florian Heart's fiancé. The one he publicly humiliated that night at the Grammys. I was there. Everyone was there. It's all people talked about for months after.

Naomi Kent is an artist. A true one. Music royalty. Brilliant and capable and talented so far beyond me, we're not even in the same stratosphere.

And beautiful. Damn, she is *so* beautiful.

No wonder Lyric and Ethan don't think she'll agree.

Before I can even make sense of what I'm doing, I take a step forward and reach out my hand, for no other reason than to touch her. "Hi," I say, wondering if she can hear the wonder in my voice. The way my heart is suddenly beating off-rhythm. "We haven't been formally introduced until now, but I definitely already know you."

And wow, that sounds really fucking creepy.

"It's nice to meet you, Gus," she says with a pretty smile and a small laugh, likely at my blunder. "I really love your band. I think I listened to your last album on repeat for months. Especially that song..." She tilts her head, gnawing on her bottom lip as she thinks. "Oh, it was *Time Surrender*. That song is incredible."

Holy Christ.

“Thanks. That means a lot,” I tell her, still a bit dazed.

I don’t know if I’m starstruck, overwhelmed by the idea of her singing this song with me, or over-the-top attracted to her. Maybe all of the above. Definitely all of the above, because I can’t help but smile like a fool at the idea that she actually knows our music and listens to it.

My eyes flitter around her face, feature by feature, my voice dropping a notch. “You were really great in there. I didn’t know you sang country. Not my favorite genre, but you make it sound good.”

She smiles in a way that makes her blue eyes sparkle as she stares up at me, and I instantly feel it. A pulse between us. An infectious kinetic energy that draws me in just a bit closer, watching as her smile grows just a touch brighter as I do.

“I don’t usually, but Catherine Strong and I go way back, and once I heard that song, I couldn’t say no to being on it. Are you and your band recording here today? I’d love to meet them too.”

She glances past me, searching for the other guys, and I shake my head. “Nope. Not today. It’s just me.” I take another step, wondering what the hell I’m doing as I encroach just a bit more, my eyes feasting down on her as an impish grin I should not be giving curls my lips.

And yet, I can’t make myself stop.

Is she feeling this the way I am?

“Naomi,” Lyric interjects, grabbing her attention away from me. “We need to talk to you about something.”

“Sure,” she agrees, clearing her throat and dragging her gaze away from mine. “Just give me a second to get my things.” She turns around, walking back toward the couch, and

Christ... She's goddamn exquisite. The thrumming of my heart in my chest is the rudest of awakenings.

She cannot sing this song with me.

I'll devour her. I'll strip her bare like the most delicate of flowers before I eat her whole.

I want her.

Insanely so.

I practically choke on my own laugh. This woman has the voice of an angel and the allure of a siren. What is any sane, rational man supposed to do with that? Not go near her? Not indulge in the fantasy placed before him? Not realize just how incredible a gift she is?

I rub a hand at my mouth, trying to wipe the smirk from it.

Life has a real fucked-up sense of humor.

I can't remember the last time I was this instantly attracted to a woman.

And yet, she is everything I never imagined I desired for this song. The lingering notes of her voice in my head remind me she's the *only* one who can sing this with me. The smiles of Lyric and Ethan are the smack in the face I evidently need.

I am meeting this woman for one reason and one reason only.

And that officially makes her off-limits. No matter what my dick might think.

## Chapter Four

*Naomi*

“I NEED to talk to you about something.”

I hear Lyric say the words, but all I can focus on are her eyes. I’ve known Lyric forever. Her father and my father went way back. But sometimes, she falls into this space. This record executive space and I lose sight of the girl who used to dance around my playroom in braided pigtails.

“Okay,” I draw out the word, and something in her tone has me flicking back to Gus for a moment. His gaze meeting my own, he offers me a smile that despite the sudden shift in the tempo of the moment, makes my chest flutter a little. I quickly look back to Lyric.

“Gus has written a song. Not his usual style and he needs some very specific help with it.” I nod my head impatiently, waiting for her to follow that up with whatever she’s about to try to push on me. There’s more to it than needing help with a song, I can feel it. “We’re thinking it would be brilliant as a duet—”



“No,” I interrupt, the word flying out of my mouth without conscious thought despite the truth behind it. “Absolutely not.”

“Nai, let me finish.”

“No, Lyric. And honestly, we shouldn’t even have this conversation in front of Gus.” I glance in his direction again because he seems nice enough and I don’t mean to be rude or a bitch to him. “Please don’t take this the wrong way...” I blink at him, tilting my head. “You’re not the lead singer of your band, right? So why are you here with this and not your brother?”

“Because I wrote it,” he states simply, those gray eyes doing things to my insides I wish they wouldn’t. “And my brother won’t sing it.”

I take a second to think that through. To try to remember what I read about him and his brother and his band last summer. There was a lot of drama. A lot of contradictions. A lot of false stories and lies. I’ve lived my fair share of those and then some, so I don’t exactly read much into tabloids or entertainment rags. They had a field day when my life fell apart, so as far as I’m concerned, they can all screw off.

“I don’t understand,” I admit when I come up empty.

“I’m in love with my sister-in-law,” Gus continues without missing a beat. Like it’s nothing to admit such a forbidden, taboo, troublesome thing. “I’m trying to work past it because, well, it’s time. So, I wrote a song that Jasper cannot sing because it’s my goodbye to his wife. I need to put this song out there. It’s just how it is. But fucking Jasper being Jasper thinks it’s meant to be a duet. I trust him because he’s better at this than I am. That’s how we got here.”

He pans his hands around the studio and then over in my direction.

I smile before I can stop it. “I don’t think I’ve ever encountered anyone as forthright and honest as you are.”

He shrugs. “It’s no secret and I have nothing to hide.”

God. He’s like a freaking black rhino in my world. Extinct. Honesty and the music industry are nemeses. Fiercest rivals. They do not mix words or mingle blood. But Gus is just there. He’s just laying it all out for me to take in and make my own. No judgment. No fear. He’s a man who owns his soul and emotions and damn, I think I want to be him when I grow up.

So...if we’re being honest.

“I can’t do it, Gus.”

“You haven’t read it, Naomi,” he challenges, stepping forward once more and raising an eyebrow. Damn him. I don’t like him in my space like this. It’s intrusive as hell. A little intimidating if I’m honest with his size and heat and overwhelmingly gorgeous face.

His gray eyes, a smoky gunmetal, sear into mine, imploring me. It catches me off-guard, momentarily weakening a resolve I have no desire to weaken. He smirks, tilting his head, and when he does that, I catch a hint of his cologne—ocean, sunshine, and summer breeze. It might as well be my own personal brand of kryptonite.

I clear my throat and straighten my spine. “It doesn’t matter. My answer won’t change.”

He frowns in confusion, and I just don’t have it in me right now to explain my life to a total stranger. He may be comfortable being that open and honest, but I’m not.

He doesn't understand. He hasn't lost all that I've lost.

He hasn't had his heart torn up and his soul shredded. He hasn't been raked over the coals in such an extreme way that the very fabric of his being is forever altered. He thinks he knows pain, but he's never experienced it the way I have.

I've been burned alive, and the last thing I want is for my remains to be back on display for the vultures to peck at.

"I get it, you know. Your hesitation."

I shake my head. He really doesn't. No one does. "It's not hesitation."

"Then tell me why you're saying no."

Jesus. He wants my pound of flesh too? I just met him five minutes ago.

"I'm sorry, Gus. I truly am. I think it's beautiful what you're doing. That you're putting it all out there. But I just..." I puff out a strained breath, propping my hands on my waist and steeling my nerves. "I can't do it. That isn't my life anymore. I appreciate the offer and the interest, but it's a hard no for me. I'm not the woman to do this duet with you."

Another step and suddenly Gus is right before me, practically toe-to-toe. My chin tilts up, my neck arching back so I can meet his eyes, refusing to back down. He can stare at me all day long if he wants, my answer won't change. He reaches out, tucking a strand of hair behind my ears and my eyes pop open wide at the intimate gesture. His thumb lingers on my skin that's suddenly humming with some strange, long-forgotten energy. Something deep and intrinsic.

Something wholly unexpected and most certainly unwanted.

I jerk back and his hand falls, but his smile doesn't. If anything, it grows as if he felt that tingle too.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, chuckling awkwardly and shaking his head like he can't believe he just touched me like that. Running a hand over his cropped light-brown hair, he takes a small step back, but his eyes never leave mine. “You're not even willing to think about it?”

“No. I'm sorry, I'm not.”

Gus blows out a breath and turns around, walking toward the large chairs and then twisting back again, staring at me in a way I can't read, but yet still somehow feel. Gus is hot. That is no joke and no lie. He's sexy as hell—a tower of strength and dominance.

But I stopped succumbing to men with alluring faces, sexy bodies, and off the charts charisma a long time ago, so...

“If that's all—”

“I know you miss it,” Lyric quickly inserts, coming in and standing closer beside me. “The music.”

I make a growling sound in the back of my throat, tossing my head back in frustration. They're working me hard and if it were anyone else, I would have walked out of this room five minutes ago.

“Tell me you don't.”

I shake my head, staring off back into the booth I was just singing in, because yes, I do miss it. I miss the hell out of it. How could I not? Music has been my life since the day I was born. And yes, part of me—a larger part than I want to admit to—is tempted to say yes if for no other than reason than to feel that rush again.

I like Wild Minds. I like their sound and their music, and I have a feeling singing a powerhouse duet with Gus would be an out-of-this-world experience. Especially knowing that his words are not written for me and anything I contribute is not written for him. We're simply singing words and conveying sentiment.

It's the musical equivalent of emotionless sex.

But I haven't sung or written with anyone since Florian.

And Gus's song is clearly all about love. A lost love at that. And I'm terrified what I'll feel, what I'll experience if I go down that road. It's taken me so goddamn long to get to this place. To get to the point where I can finally take a deep breath without it hurting.

"I'm sorry," I say again, this time on a whisper.

"Can I add something here?" the producer who I forgot was even here asks.

"Steven, don't, okay? I know what you're going to say," I clip out.

"Actually, you don't." He stands up to join us. "What I was going to say is that you're far too talented to continue singing backup. Your place is front and center, honey. Always has been. Take the risk with this. Regain this part of you. Show the world that you're still the same star you've always been."

"Right," Ethan agrees with a small hum. "It's like flipping Florian the fuck off, but in a super cool, badass, classy way."

Only my heartache is about more than just losing Florian.

I shake my head because this is getting out of control. I hold up my hands, stopping all of this. "I appreciate what you're all saying. I do. But this is not a debate or even a

conversation.” I turn back to Gus, who is still staring at me with those magnetic eyes of his. “There are so many other extremely talented vocalists who could work on this with you, Gus. I think you would be far better served with them.”

“That’s not true and you know it,” Lyric says, placing her hand on my wrist. “The moment I read this song, I *knew* it was meant for you. I just felt it, Nai. I truly did. Ethan did too. It was just...*there* .”

I swallow down so much emotion it’s threatening to choke me. “I haven’t...” I trail off. Clear my throat. “I’m done with duets.”

Ethan sighs and turns to Gus with a look that says he’s past the point of bullshit. “Does anyone in your band use drugs?”

“What?” he huffs out, completely taken aback.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Ethan. Just stop,” I snap, running a hand through my hair and over my face. “It’s not even about that.”

Lyric throws Ethan a look that says back the hell off. Ethan tosses his hands up in surrender and steps back. He should have known better. That was a low blow if ever there was one.

“Just do me a solid and sing with him,” Lyric pushes, stepping directly in front of me and blocking everyone else out. Gus scowls at her, but she throws up her finger, telling him to shut up and give her a minute. “If your sounds don’t work together or there is no chemistry or if it’s still a no after that, cool. We’ll back off and find someone else. All I ask is that you sing whatever the hell song you want with Gus.” I hesitate and she sees it. “One song, Nai,” she hums under her breath. “I’ve never been wrong when it comes to music. I’m not wrong about this either. I love you. Trust me.”

“I feel like I’m being ambushed.”

“That’s because you are,” Ethan laughs, throwing his hands back up when Lyric looks like she’s about to kill him with her bare hands. “What? That doesn’t make us wrong on this. We wouldn’t be pushing so hard if we didn’t know it was a perfect fit. We’re the best at this shit for a reason, cookie, and you know that for a fact.”

Lyric’s eyes bleed into mine, forcing her love and sincerity and fierceness into me. It’s a look that says you can do this. It’s a look that says you have to trust me. And I do. I trust Lyric. And the dark part of me, the one who wonders if I’ll ever be whole again, if I’ll ever allow myself to *feel* again, agrees.

Dammit! “One song.”

Lyric smiles softly, gives my arm another squeeze and then steps back.

“Come with me,” Gus commands, inching forward and reaching out for my hand. I stare at him, deliberating.

He’s going to fuck up my tower.

I’m an empty shell wrapped in titanium. A fortified abandoned city.

It’s how I’ve survived.

And I will not let anyone tear that all down.

So yeah, he may be gorgeous. And give looks. And smell good. But I’m not going there. Touching his hand is like taking a bite of the poison apple.

“Do I look like Snow White?”

“What?”

I wave him off, stalking off toward the booth on my own, leaving his hand there. He doesn't look all that bothered by my brush off. No, the flirtatious bastard winks at me. "Let's do this."

I suppress my eye roll and follow his lead. "What song are we going to do for them?"

"Crazy Crime?"

"Nooooo," I sputter quickly. "I don't sing any of my father's songs. Or my mother's."

"Okay." He gives an unconcerned shrug. "How about one of mine then?"

"Sure."

"You said you liked '*Time Surrender*?' Do you know the lyrics, or should I have Steven put them through into the tablet?"

"I don't know them off the top of my head," I reply as we step into the booth. It's not typical to have more than one person singing in here at the same time. Usually, it's a one person at a time process, but I think we should sing together because that's how it would be on stage. I speak into the microphone, putting the cans on my ears. "Steven?"

"Yeah?"

"Play '*Time Surrender*' for me."

"You got it."

Gus glances over at me, his eyebrows pinched together. "You can remember the lyrics from hearing the song? You don't need to read them?"



I just shrug at that because I usually can. Not always, but I've heard this song a few times before. It was all over the radio about six months back, so I should be able to pick it up after a refresher. Besides, reading lyrics sometimes throws off my rhythm.

The sound of a heavy drumbeat comes through the headphones into my ears and I close my eyes, absorbing the sound. I'm not only listening for the words, but for how they play together. How Gus and Jasper sing together.

Damn, Gus rips the shit out of that guitar. Jasper does too, but he lets Gus rule on that. He has a distinct edge when he goes at it, and that's not the way I typically play. Jasper's voice comes through and wow, he's so good. Absolutely incredible.

It's one of the reasons that Wild Minds is who they are. Plus, their sound and lyrics are just phenomenal. I don't think I've ever heard a song of theirs I didn't like, and the fact that their songs and albums consistently hit top ten speaks to their talent.

I do my best to cut Jasper out, focusing on Gus. His tone is sort of smoky with decent range and tight control.

I listen to the song in its entirety and then nod my head at Gus. He addresses the microphone, standing very close to me and whispering in that same smoky tone he sings with, "You feel like you got it?"

I ignore the flutter in my chest and grumble, "Yep. I'm good. Steven, play the instrumentals only, please."

"I'm going to sing Jasper's part," I tell Gus, looking up into his gray eyes. He's staring at me with that same expression I can't discern, so I soldier on. "I want you to sing

your part. Not just listen to me. I want to hear what we both sound like on the track when we sing separately and together.”

“Agreed.” He smiles, his face inches from mine, our eyes tangling in such a way that makes unruly butterflies erupt in my stomach. “For someone who said they didn’t want to do this, you’re giving a lot of orders and suddenly very interested in the way we sound together.”

Heat begins to crawl up my skin, tingling in my fingertips and toes.

Steven’s voice comes through my headphones, bringing me back, and saving me from any rebuttal I was useless to give. “I’m ready when you are.”

I wave my finger in the air, making small circles and the music begins again and mercifully, Gus is all business. He sings, standing even closer to me, and when it gets to my part, I join him. Our voices float through the room, harmonizing seamlessly. Gus doesn’t hold back. He sings this song like it’s the last one he’ll ever sing, his energy strong, his passion infectious.

I take over, forming the lead while Gus comes through as backup. There are no other voices right now. It’s not the way the song is meant to be sung. But Gus and I make it our own as our words mingle, coming through our headphones in perfect orchestration.

His eyes burn into mine, our gravity shifting from singing independently, to singing to each other. I twist to face him. His body is practically against mine, his warmth caressing me. I brush my hair back from my face, desperate to feel more of it on my bare skin. I smile and he smiles too, and I don’t even know how this happens, but suddenly, there is nothing else but us.

Just these words and this sound that flows from us like a rushing river.

Adrenaline courses through my veins. A swell of power rises up from the pit of my stomach, surging from me in a gust of breath and notes. There is an aura to this. A tangible haze. I taste its flavor on my tongue.

It's erotic and spicy and fucking hot.

Gus's eyes devour me, turning from a light gray to a smoldering charcoal. He's feeling this too. This unfathomable high. This incredible rush. His fingers reach out, brushing mine, toying with them, and I shift once more, letting him.

And when the song comes to a close, we're both panting with flushed cheeks and glowing smiles. It's like those first few moments after really amazing sex. There really is no other way to describe it.

"Holy shit," he whispers. "That was..." Words fail him as he shakes his head in awe, his smile only growing.

And suddenly, everything that just transpired crashes down on me, submerging me beneath cold, brutal waves. I haven't felt anything that closely resembled that since the last time I sang with Florian. It's as beautiful a sensation as it is tragic and suffocating.

This is why I didn't want to do this. This is why I said no and should never have allowed them to manipulate me.

This...

"I'm so sorry," I tell him, my voice catching.

I bolt for the door of the booth and plow past Lyric, Ethan, and Steven. I fly down the hall and slam my fist into the elevator button. The second it comes, I step on and hit the

close door button. Just as it's about to close, I see Gus's panicked face, his eyes meeting mine as his lips dip down into a frown.

But it's too late. The doors close.

*He ran after me.*

The elevator car descends along with what's left of my heart.

I lean back against the wall, trying desperately to ground myself and rein in my erratic thoughts. But I'm useless to stop them. To prevent the toxic poison as it seeps through my black soul.

"What did you write, Gus?" I whisper into the empty elevator. Because suddenly, all I want to do is sing it with him.

## Chapter Five

*Naomi*

CHEMISTRY IS A BUBBLE. If it exists between two people, that bubble grows, expands. Or if it doesn't, that bubble deflates, occasionally popping. That's what my father always told me. He had it with my mother. She was a teenage popstar. Like me. She wrote and produced and sang incredible songs all before the age of twenty. Like me.

And then she met my father.

Together, the two of them wrote more love songs than I can even count. Their music has been covered and reproduced by hundreds of artists in every single language. Even redone into operas and Disney movies. Their love headlined news shows and took over glossy magazine covers.

And then I was born.

Destined to be a star before I even knew it was my dream.

At fifteen, I hit number one and stayed there for six straight weeks. At sixteen and seventeen, too. Three albums in three consecutive years to hit number one. It was something no other artist had ever done before or since.

My albums spanned the globe. My songs on every radio.  
My face everywhere.

Then I met Florian.

I was seventeen and he was twenty-six. Illegal and illicit? Without a doubt. But damn, did we fall so fucking hard. We wrote together. Sang together. Played together. The moment I turned eighteen, we came out as a couple and created albums together. I collaborated with his band and he performed on my solo albums.

Then my mom was diagnosed with end-stage breast cancer and died three months after that.

Then my father turned to heroin to dull the pain.

Then I found my father overdosed in a hotel bathroom.

And the only one capable of dragging me out of that most gruesome darkness was Florian. His love. His light. His strength. His words. I clung to him. Absorbed everything he was willing to give, feeling so lost and alone and hopeless. He pulled me through. Kept me going.

Then he started using drugs.

Then he chose those drugs over me.

Two months after I walked out of that hotel room, I saw him at the Grammys with some woman with platinum hair and triple E tits plastered to his arm. I even had to accept the award for song of the year with him because I wrote it, so they announced my name with his. I went up there, stayed in the back, and didn't say a word while Florian, the man who wrote that love song with me while we were naked in bed, tangled in each other's bodies, thanked everyone under the sun.

Except me.

Nothing could hurt worse than that moment, especially when the malevolent prick turned and smiled at me. Nothing could have hurt worse...

Until it did.

And when that happened, when I went through all that alone, I knew I would never be the same person again. That I likely wouldn't ever fully recover from all that I'd endured. I accepted that Florian was truly gone to me. That our love, our life together, was over.

No do-over. No apology. No, I'm so fucking sorry Naomi, I didn't mean it, and it'll be okay, and I love you forever the way I promised you I would. He doesn't even know what happened to me after the Grammys. He didn't even care enough to try to find out or pick up his fucking phone.

I haven't heard from or seen him since that award show, though I know he's around. Whether he's clean or not is a mystery to me.

I lost the love of my life. I lost everything.

And there is no rebounding from that.

So, yes, I safeguard myself. I sing backup. I do voiceovers for audiobooks. I don't get involved. I don't date... I don't fucking live. Because goddamn, living is impossible after you've experienced the all the beauty of it, and subsequently had it ripped away from you.

I hit the street and walk down the four blocks until I reach my car. I bought a Tesla SUV and honestly, this car is too smart for me. I start her up and drive out of town, down toward the Pacific Coast Highway. Toward my house, but that's not where I want to go right now.

I need air.

I need water.

I need nature to remind me just how beautiful the world can be when all I feel is its ugliness.

So, I drive to some random beach with a long boardwalk. Parking my car, I climb out and drift toward the sand and the waves.

The sand is packed with people, natives and tourists, as they take in the California setting sun. It's not cold, but it's definitely not warm. Mild, I guess you'd call it, but with the breeze hitting my face, I almost wish I had a sweatshirt. I drop into the sand, tucking my knees up against my chest, wrapping my arms around them. The leather of my pants clings to my skin, sticky against the moisture of the salty air.

All I can think about are Florian's eyes the last time I saw them at the Grammys. Cold. So freaking cold and angry. Hateful. Spiteful. The man used to infuse my every cell with his love. I'd feel his smiles all the way down in my toes. He made me feel connected and precious and taken care of.

The words we would write and sing together...

That's why I cannot sing this duet with Gus.

I don't even know what he wrote, but it doesn't matter. I know the concept. The heartache. I know all of it.

*And yet you can't stop wondering about it. Or thinking about him.*

I growl under my breath, shaking away my useless thoughts. My hands glide through the rough grains of crumpled shells and sand, allowing them to seep through my fingers. The crowd begins to clap, as they always do when the sun finally descends beyond the horizon, disappearing into the water, and the sky grows darker and the air cooler.



One by one, they depart, leaving me here, and I can't force myself to follow.

I hate how I still question if Florian actually hated me the way he demonstrated to the world that night at the Grammys. If it truly was the drugs he loved more or just the fear of letting them go that drove his actions. If he ever wonders about what happened to me.

I sit here in the looming darkness and let go. I cry in a way I have not allowed myself to cry in years. Not since those first few weeks when I didn't think I'd ever be able to stop.

But I did stop.

I forced myself to survive.

But am I actually doing that?

Or am I surviving on stagnant air and faded memories and old heartache?

Am I the survivor or the cautionary tale?

Wiping away at my face, I stand up, walking toward the dark waves. I bend down, drawing up the thick, heavy sleeves of my leather pants until they're past my knees. I slip out of my flats and take a step and then another, wading deeper into the frigid water.

I love the ocean. The tang on my tongue and the wind on my face and the mist on my body. It's what truly grounds me to this life. I suck in a deep breath and let it out slowly, closing my eyes as gentle waves crash against my legs. My mind clears and with it, thoughts of Florian Heart.

I take another small step only to have strong, unrelenting hands wrap around my waist, tugging me back and twirling me around until I'm facing the opposite direction. My eyes pop

open wide, blinking against the harsh streetlights out ahead as startled squawk crosses my lips. I smack at the hands clutching to me, ready to belt out a scream, just as a furious Gus Diamond appears in my view.

“What the hell were you doing?” he bellows.

I gasp only for it to turn into an incredulous laugh. My eyes narrow. “Me?” I snap. “What the hell are you doing following me?”

“I didn’t mean to,” he admits, picking my shoes up out of the sand and dragging me toward the stone steps and the highway, as far away from the water as he can. He stops, standing right in front of me as he searches my face, his expression stricken yet contrite. “I don’t know. I left immediately after you did, wanting to find you so we could talk. You ran out so quickly, I felt terrible. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I ended up following your car. By the time I parked and found you, I realized just how much of a creeper that made me seem. So, I didn’t come and talk to you. I just watched the sunset and thought, but then it got dark, and then I saw you go for the water.”

The accusation in his tone when he says that last part forces me to push him off. I shove him back as hard as I can, irate beyond all measure, and taking it out on him when the one I’m really angry with is myself. “How dare you! You had no right to follow me. Creepy doesn’t even cover it.”

“I know that, okay? I know that. And I wasn’t going to bother you. But...it’s fucking dark out, Naomi, and I didn’t feel right leaving you here. It’s not safe.”

“I was fine, Gus.”

“You scared the shit out of me going into the water like that. Were you trying to kill yourself?”

I make some sort of deranged noise in the back of my throat. “No. What the hell?” I shove him again, only this time, he grasps my shoulders, holding me tight. Tight enough to tell me he’s good and pissed. His gray eyes are wild, his jaw locked. “Do I look that goddamn unstable to you?”

“My mother died in the ocean. Drowned.”

“Oh.” I pause. Take a step back and forcing his hands to fall to his sides. I allow that to sink in. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know she...” I trail off, unable to finish that.

He shakes his head, his fierce eyes and light hair reflecting the bright lights of the highway. “She didn’t kill herself. It was an accident. But I didn’t like...”

Hell. I step into him and place my hand on his chest, over his pounding heart. I stare up into his eyes and even though I just met him today, it doesn’t feel weird that I’m touching him. Gus, for some reason, doesn’t feel like a stranger anymore.

I guess it’s true what they say. Sometimes you meet people you already know. Ones you were always *meant* to know.

One song. That’s what one song has done to us.

Because nothing with him right now feels awkward or strained. It feels like our truths amidst the darkness. And for whatever reason, that doesn’t scare me as much as it should.

“I get it. I lost my mom too.” And my dad. And my fiancé. And so much more.

I’m alone in this world while he has his brother, his band, and even his sister-in-law whom he still loves—and who I know he is still close with even if the tabloids never get

anything right. The love and relationship he shares with his brother must be unbreakably strong for them to remain this close even after all they've been through. He has people and I have no one. Lyric, maybe. But that's it.

I let my hand drop.

"Come have dinner with me," he says out of nowhere, his eyes bouncing back and forth between mine, still a bit wild. "I'm supposed to go to Jasper's. You should come, but if you do, be warned, I might have to kiss you before we walk in."

"What?" I burst out, totally at a loss with this man. "Are you high right now?"

"No. I don't do drugs. I think it's the ebbing adrenaline from you scaring the shit out of me, but that doesn't change the facts."

"Which are?"

"I can't let you have dinner with Henry and Keith unless they think you're with me. They'll hit on you relentlessly if I don't, and then you'll never agree to the duet."

I shake my head. "I seriously have no words for that. But thanks for the invite and that crazy offer, I guess?" I shrug, my lips in a thin line. "I'm gonna have to pass. On all of that."

He laughs. "I'm not really going to kiss you, Naomi Kent. I'm just trying to lighten this heavy moment. Obviously, I'm doing a piss-poor job of it."

"No kidding."

He rubs his hand across his jaw, trying to wipe away his smirk and failing. "Damn, you make me nervous, and I don't think I've been nervous around a woman ever."

My heart beats out an erratic thump as a swarm of butterflies erupt in my belly. “I’m not trying to make you nervous.”

“No. But you’re doing it anyway.” He sucks in a deep breath, reining himself in. “Bottom line?” I nod. “I want you to do this song with me. The moment I heard you sing, even before I saw you or knew who you were, I wanted that. But then we sang together and now...now, I need you to do it. It’s why I ran after you. It’s why I followed you here.”

His confession has me swallowing hard, the intensity in his eyes or the ferocity of his expression almost too much. I look down, not necessarily uncomfortable, but fidgety all the same with his unerring scrutiny and bold honesty.

His hand reaches up, cupping my jaw and lifting my face back up to his. His fingers linger, brushing the sensitive skin under my chin and sending goosebumps skating down my neck and shoulders.

“Just come have dinner with me. Forget Jasper’s. There is a place near here that cooks up some really amazing southern food and we’ll talk. Get to know each other a little better.”

I stare at him, blinking up into his eyes through the muted light. I don’t think I’ve ever encountered a man quite like Gus Diamond, and I can’t figure out what it is about him that’s drawing me in. He has an energy about him that my body seems to respond to. Recognizes.

His charming smile doesn’t hurt either.

“Just dinner, country boy. I’m not agreeing to sing with you, and this is most definitely not a date. I don’t date musicians anymore, so no more talking about kissing me or anything else you’ve got cooking up in that brain of yours.”

He releases my face and takes my hand, leading me up the steps and away from the sand and water. "I'll work on it." He grins, catching my eye. "And you will agree to the song," he tells me as if he's never been more certain of anything in his life. "You know what they say about the right person coming into your life at the right time? That's us, babe."

I don't respond to that. This all happened a little too quickly and my mind is still reeling.

And yet I'm following him to dinner. Knowing full well I'll listen to everything he has to say about this duet. Because part of me thinks he might be right. And that's what's scaring me most.

## Chapter Six

### *Naomi*

“WHAT’S GOOD HERE?” I ask as we peruse our menus. The owners seem to know Gus well. They hugged and laughed, and he introduced me as his friend. They’re also very respectful of who Gus is as they immediately ushered us to a secluded booth in the back, away from all the curious onlookers.

I haven’t been in public much in the last two years. Mostly behind the scenes. No award shows, that’s for damn sure. No new albums. So, my face isn’t as widespread or as recognizable as Gus’s is. His was everywhere last summer. And if that’s not enough, the man has a massive billboard of him in his underwear taking up ten stories in downtown LA.

“I usually get shrimp and grits or chicken and waffles. But Jasper swears by the chicken and dumplings.” I’m insanely curious about his relationship with his brother, but it’s not my business, so I won’t ask. He glances up, tilts his head, staring me up and down. “You eat, right?”

“What?” I bark out, taken aback.

“I’m not judging.” He shrugs. “I know a lot of women who don’t.”

I glance down at myself and then meet his eyes with a raised brow. “Do I look like I don’t eat?”

I’m definitely on the curvier side. I work out hard but I enjoy eating and this is just how my body is. I’ve never made apologies for that, nor do I feel like I should. I like the way I look. I like having breasts and an ass and a softer belly.

I’ve been called fat a lot by the media and hateful trolls over the years.

But the truth is, there is no winning the body image game in this industry. Either you’re too thin or too fat. Have too many curves or not enough. When I was a teenager, approval was everything to me. Approval by strangers, fans, record executives, you name it. So much of my happiness was dictated to me by their praise.

And when people start to make negative comments about everything and anything they can, it wears you down. It affects your self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Especially for a teenage girl who didn’t exactly have the most typical teenage life. It took a long time for me to love and accept who I am and how I look. It was certainly not an overnight process, despite what I claimed publicly.

He smirks, doing a long, languid sweep of my body, and when he finds my eyes again, there is a touch of heat in his. “I am not going to tell you what I think of your body because it will likely either get me smacked or that water tossed in my face. But since you brought it up, I think you’re probably one of the sexiest, most beautiful women I’ve never seen.”



My eyes burst wide, a stupid blush crawling up my face. “Gus, just because you can say everything that’s on your mind, doesn’t mean you should. They call it a filter for a reason.”

“You’re pretty when you blush.”

“Gus!”

He laughs, leaning forward and planting his forearms on the table. “Sorry, you’re just kind of fun to rile up. Keeping secrets is not exactly my thing anymore. I used to filter everything, and it wasn’t so great.”

I want to ask more about that, but I let it go.

“But if I’m making you uncomfortable, I’ll stop. It’s just that I’ve been out on dates with women who only order a side salad with no dressing and that shit makes me nuts.”

“I am definitely not a side salad for my dinner girl.”

“Thank god.”

“And this is not a date.”

That smirk grows into something devious and playful. Something loaded with temptation and sin. “Right. Not a date. I almost forgot there for a second.” I roll my eyes and his smirk grows. “So, tell me what happened in the booth that had your running?”

I shake my head because I’m not entirely sure. It was just this rush of emotion that overtook me. A panic that set in and all I knew was that I had to get out there. Away from the man sitting across from me who is pushing me to feel so much more than I’m comfortable with.

“I just don’t think I was expecting it,” I murmur, my voice coming out as a soft whisper.

“The chemistry, right?”

That’s certainly part of it. I nod, feeling myself blush all over again.

“I wasn’t expecting it either. Certainly not with someone I had just met who was reluctant at every turn to even be in there with me. But even now, I can’t get what happened in that booth between us out of my head.”

Jesus. This man. It’s getting to the point where I can hardly maintain eye contact and my stomach is sloshing about like a freaking washing machine. “Do the people in your life find you as aggravating as I am?”

“No,” he laughs. “They find me endlessly charming, unmistakably endearing, and insanely hot. Same as you do.” I shake my head, laughing lightly as I lean back in my seat, folding my arms over my chest. He mocks my pose, smiling widely at me. “This afternoon caught me by surprise just as much as it did you. And now that I’m sitting here across from you, I feel a bit out of my depth. I’m not sure what to do with all this.”

“Meaning what?”

He reaches out, taking a sip of his water and resting his elbows on the small table. Then he gives a bewildered half-shrug. “I wasn’t exactly sold on the whole duet thing the way Jasper was. All I knew was that I needed to get this song out and he wasn’t going to be the one to do it. But the second I met you, I felt something I wasn’t expecting. And I’m not being a creep by saying that. I’m really not. All flirting aside, when we sang together, it was like I couldn’t imagine singing like that with anyone else.”

The waiter comes by and I can't help but breathe out a sigh of relief. Gus is intense. The type of intense you pulse with. It's a delicious thrill and a terrifying jolt. Like jumping out of a plane without knowing if your shoot will open when you pull the cord.

We order our dinners, and the moment the waiter is out of earshot, Gus reaches into his pocket and pulls out a worn piece of paper. I eye it harshly, knowing precisely what he holds in his hand.

“Not so fast there, buster. We're still talking.”

“Sure.” He sets it down on the table beside his Coke and leans back in his seat, intertwining his fingers and resting them on his flat stomach. “Can I ask what your hang-up is?”

“Do you really not know?”

He shrugs. “I have my assumptions, but I'd like you to tell me if you don't mind.”

“The last duet I sang was with Florian. The last duet I wrote was with Florian. And you're telling me this song is written for your ex who is now married to your brother. I have to imagine there is a lot of heartbreak and emotion with that.”

“And?”

I throw my hands up in the air. “And I'm in a good place, Gus. It wasn't easy to get here, and it wasn't overnight, so the idea of dredging up my ugly past and putting it on paper and singing it out loud doesn't sound all that enticing.”

He nods, already knowing that was my answer, but wanting to hear it from me anyway. “I can work with that.”

I let out a bitter guffaw. “Oh yeah? Teach me your trick because I still haven't figured it out.”

“Babe, you’re getting this all wrong. I’m not part of the problem. I’m part of the healing. This will work for both of us. You just have to trust me.”

I angle my head. “I don’t know you well enough to trust you.”

“You’re right. You don’t. But you will because you want to do this song with me. You wouldn’t be sitting here across from me otherwise. Especially since you already gave me the whole, ‘this isn’t a date and I don’t date musicians,’ speech. So that tells me this dinner is all about the song. Or was that all bullshit and you actually just want to jump my bones?”

I laugh before I can stop it, biting into my lip and shaking my head. There is no winning with him. “I don’t know why I said yes to dinner. None of this is a good idea.”

“That’s a lie,” he retorts quickly. “You know exactly why you agreed to dinner and why you stepped into that booth earlier. There is nothing wrong with missing it, Naomi. No shame in wanting that piece of yourself back. It’s a beautiful piece and the world should have it, same as you.”

I look down, staring at the table as I run my fingers over the fine wood grain. “It’s more than just that —more than just Florian. And you’re right. I do want that piece of myself back. I’m just...” *Fucking terrified*, I don’t say.

After everything that happened, for a while, I thought I’d never be able to make it out of the darkness. But I did. And I did it all on my own with a promise to myself never to fall into that abyss again. So yeah, I distance myself. I safeguard my heart. I protect all that I have left because there is no one else to do it but me. What happens to me if I open myself back up again to all that old pain that nearly ruined me the first go around?

“You have your baggage, and I obviously have mine. I need to finish getting over Viola once and for all, and I know you tell me you’re in a good place, but are you really? Or is that something you say because ignoring whatever happened between you and your ex is a hell of a lot easier than facing it.”

My eyebrows shoot up to the sky. The freaking nerve on this guy. I think I take back all that I said on his honesty. His honesty is a freaking weapon.

“You realize that was an insanely shitty thing to say, right?”

He puffs out a breath. “Yeah, I get that. But you’re missing how alike we are in this. You wanna talk shitty? Try giving the woman you let get away, the woman you always planned to marry, to your brother. She’s pregnant with his kid. Did you know that?”

I shake my head. I didn’t know that.

“Yep. But I’m trying to work through this, and I think you could use some of that too. I get your heartache, and I think you get mine, and I think this can be like therapy for both of us.”

Except my heartache stems from more than just my ex.

He shifts, dropping his forearms back on the table and leaning against them as he slays me with a look that says he’s got me, and he’s not letting go. “Do this duet with me, Naomi. I can’t take away time or the past. I can’t change the unchangeable. But I can give you a piece of yourself back. I can help you give your pain a proper voice and an outlet. I can give you the music. That thing you still live and breathe and wake up for. And after that, what you do with it is up to you.”

“You say that like it’s all so simple.”

“Did you ever consider you’re the one making it complicated?”

No. Actually, not really. But he might have a point. Motherfucking cocky bastard.

“Come on, beautiful. Try me.”

I cock an eyebrow at him, angling my head in his direction in warning. “I’m not sleeping with you. If we’re doing honesty, that’s my hardline.”

His eyes flicker to my mouth for a long beat before falling to the table between us. He grins wryly, a strained chuckle passing his lips. He reaches out, nudging at his place setting until it’s perfectly straight, and then finally, his eyes come back up and lock on mine. “Agreed.”

“Looks like it took you a second to get there.”

He gives me a shameless shrug. “It might have,” he admits. “But I can’t have sex with you and make this song. Besides, you don’t strike me as the type of woman who would be interested in what I offer.”

I cup my water glass, enjoying the cold wetness on my suddenly overheated skin. I’m the one who just drew the line in the sand about sex, but that doesn’t seem to stop my wayward thoughts. That doesn’t mean I don’t feel the way his charcoal eyes are feasting on me with a hunger that has nothing to do with the meal he just ordered.

“And what is that?” I ask, my voice just a touch huskier. If he catches it, for once, he doesn’t comment.

“Sex.”

His eyes darken as he says that, and I can feel my pulse starting to race.

“And nothing more?”

“No. Just sex. At least that’s how it’s been for a while.”

“And women don’t complain about that?”

He shakes his head slowly, watching me closely for a reaction I try desperately not to give him despite the rave going on inside my body. But he knows. He has to know his words, the way he says *sex* in that deep, suggestive tone, are affecting me.

“You’re right. That’s not what I’m about,” I finally manage once I have control over my nerves and my voice.

His eyes dance about my face, his expression suddenly so very serious. “Figured as much. Besides, you don’t date musicians. I’m assuming that means you don’t sleep with them either?” I shake my head, because right now I don’t sleep with anyone, musician or not, which is likely why my body feels like it’s on fire at the moment. He leans in further, ensnaring me with those gunmetal eyes. “Now that we got that out of the way...what do you say? Will you do this song with me?”

## Chapter Seven

*Naomi*

MY HEART PICKS up a pounding rhythm, a torrent of blood rushing through my veins, making it difficult to take a deep breath. Before I can think twice about it, I reach across the table and snatch that piece of crumpled paper he intentionally left there like a weapon to taunt me with.

“What are you, twelve?” I question as I unfold it, half expecting to see a note passed to his girlfriend in trigonometry. It’s that’s old-school. I mean, all the songs I’ve worked with have been written on computers or phones or something more technologically advanced than thick lined paper and number two pencil.

“Fourteen. Don’t judge.”

He’s right. I am in no place. I’m deflecting and turning my scared into bitchiness. I scroll through the stanzas, word by word while he not-so casually sips his Coke, his eyes glued in my direction. “You’re watching me,” I murmur, and he chuckles.



“Just admiring your beauty,” he quips, and I smile, shaking my head.

I wave my hand out at him, shaking it back and forth. “Seriously, I can’t concentrate with you staring at me like that.”

“Fine. I’ll pretend to stare at my phone instead.” I roll my eyes but immediately go back to reading, trying my best to block out the sensation of his penetrating gaze on me.

*I came to, realizing what I had done.*

*That I had given up on so much love.*

*So many lies and mistakes.*

*Yet you showed so much grace.*

*So tell me how this goes.*

*How our song comes to a close.*

*How much time does it take*

*To end this heartache.*

*This love has no bounds.*

*No restrictions I have found.*

*Except for one.*

*Now it’s time to shift the tide.*

*To regain a life that hasn’t been mine.*

*It’s no longer you and me.*

*No more wondering what’s meant to be.*

*Because what was once is now gone.*

*What should have never been is done.*

*A heart beating.*

*A new life creating.*

*It's time.*

*You've heard my rhyme.*

*Darkness shifts into gray.*

*Every day I watch you fade.*

*So tell me how this goes.*

*How our song comes to a close.*

*How much time does it take*

*To end this heartache.*

*Because what was once is now gone.*

*What should have never been is done.*

I read the words again and again and again. It's short. Some of the verses need a little help. But...it's so raw. So pure. So goddamn real and ready to become something incredible. A duet. A convergence of two voices. Jasper was right. It cannot be him singing this. It has to be Gus.

And goddamn him. I should have never picked up this paper. Never agreed to dinner or going into that booth.

I want this song. I want its emotion and lyrics. I want it to become part of my story. My heartbreak. My legacy. My next chapter.

Gus is right about me.

I've ignored and pushed aside without entirely dealing with my past because dealing with it felt impossible and ignoring it easier.

But who am I now because of that? Am I still that woman? The one stuck in limbo who never healed because she never

got closure on anything?

“It’s beautiful, Gus. God, so beautiful. But I don’t know if I can be her,” I admit. And the second the words leave my lips, I hate the way it sounds. *Her?* Who’s her? The woman singing the song, writing the words, and letting herself bleed until she’s dry? Or the woman who was loved and lost? Forsaken.

I’m terrified of allowing myself to become the counterpart to his heartbreak. What will be left of me after that? Am I ready to face this midnight, wild and dark, anxious to take back the dawn?

Or is it too late for something like that?

Am I eternally stuck in this purgatory, drawn between night and day—a muted light bright enough to see by but too dark to navigate through?

He shakes his head adamantly. “You’re not her, Naomi. You’re charting a new course.” I blink at him, stunned at how he seems to read my mind when I’m positive I kept my thoughts hidden. “The point is, we’re singing about the heartbreak because we can. Because it’s our past, and we refuse to let it live on as our future.”

I clear my throat, pushing all that away and focusing on the work. On the business of it.

“It needs more. If it’s a duet, it needs another side to it.”

He nods emphatically. “Yes. It does.”

“Is this the chorus?” I ask, pointing to the repetitive lines. Honestly, they feel like they could almost be part of the bridge, but there isn’t a real chorus to this. It’s a bit disjointed. The words mean different things in different places. But I want the chorus to slay listeners to pieces. To rip them to shreds. This song has that potential. Everyone thinks music lyrics must

rhyme, but it's more about the timing and spacing of the words, especially when paired with the complementary notes.

That might be something he and I work on.

“I don't know, babe. I might leave that for you to figure out. Jasper is the poet, I'm the music and that's just how our shit goes. I never know from verses or bridges or choruses until we work that out together with it all in front of us. I've never done something like this before without him.”

I have to wonder how much Jasper and the rest of the band will be involved with this song or if this is a solo that Gus will put out instead of being on a Wild Minds album.

“Can you give me whatever is missing?”

Can I?

I swallow a world of shit down and say, “Yes. I can.” Because writing is in my blood. So is creating music. And I can already hear and feel things about this song. It's coming to life in my head. A brewing storm. A percolating thought. A flurry of disjointed words and sound.

A smile illuminates his face. And with it comes some burgeoning hope. Some swell of exuberance. Some hint of... life. Not of tragedy. Is this song going to hurt? Fuck yeah, it will. But that's not what it's about. It's about starting again. About rebirth and refitting yourself after you've lost all your pieces.

At least that's how I'm going to sell it to myself.

He emits a small chuckle, leaning forward as far as the table between us allows. His eyes sear into mine, smoldering charcoal with a hint of mischief. “As much as I'm desperate for you to say yes, suddenly, there's a part of me that wants you to say no.”

My eyebrows knit together. “Why’s that?”

“If you say yes, it’s like we said. I officially cannot hit on you? No awesome sex between us.”

“I don’t remember anything about awesome sex. Just meaningless intercourse.”

He grins like the devil. “I can’t imagine anything between us ever being meaningless. It could never be *just* intercourse.”

A nervous bubble of energy pools low in my belly, and I can’t stop the smile as it blooms across my face. I tilt my head, narrowing my eyes. “That alone is reason for me to say yes to the song.”

He laughs louder now, shaking his head. “That’s such crap. We all know you want me.”

“Sure. Yeah. Especially when your arrogance is *so* appealing.” I roll my eyes dramatically, and he grins smugly in return. “Knock it off. You’re just trying to get a rise out of me again.”

“I can’t help it if your reaction to the simple suggestion of sex between us is the greatest thing ever. Have you seen the way you blush, babe? It’s fucking gorgeous.”

Ignoring everything else that he just said, I ask, “Do I strike you as the babe type?”

“I don’t know. You’re as dark and beautiful as they come. Deep cerulean blue.” His eyes meet mine. “Fire red.” My lips. “Rose gold.” My cheeks. “Delicious espresso.” My hair. “A babe you most definitely are. But if you don’t like that particular term of endearment, I have a lot of material to work with.”

“Gus,” I warn.

He groans playfully. “Professional only?” I nod. “Shit.” He laughs, rubbing at his jaw. “Does this make us friends?”

I grin at that. Kinda big and bright. Being friends with Gus almost feels like a joke when I need it to be anything but. Attraction is funny that way. Doesn’t change the facts as they are. “I suppose it does. Can you live with that or should I get up and walk now?”

“Killjoy,” he grumbles, and I laugh. “I can live with that, *friend* . Does that mean you’re saying yes?”

“It’s not so simple, *friend* . We need to discuss expectations.”

He eyes me warily. “Such as?”

“Such as, I’m not going on tour with you.”

“We’re not going on tour for a while. The last one took a toll on all of us, and with Viola being pregnant, I can’t imagine us going anywhere anytime soon.”

Well, that’s a relief.

“So, it’s simply writing and recording?”

He tosses his hands up helplessly. “I can’t make that promise for the future. I have no idea if we’ll ever be asked to perform live somewhere. If we’ll do a random show and want you to be there to sing it with us. But for now, I’m asking you to work on this song with me. To help me write some more to it because clearly writing isn’t my thing, and to sing it with me.”

I don’t know about writing not being his thing. I think he sells himself short on that.

Our dishes are delivered, and I stare at mine for a minute as I try and think this all through.

It's a lot to say yes to. But more than that, I'm scared of where it will take me. Do I want to step back into this life? Into the limelight? Because that's what will happen. I know it. When I was with Florian, the press was obsessed with us. So were the fans. And Wild Minds is huge, despite us sitting in a small greasy spoon café off the beaten path of Huntington Beach. Their band is no joke.

And the questions will inevitably arise.

The speculation will be off the charts.

I don't care so much about that necessarily. It's more the giving up the anonymity and privacy I've enjoyed for the past couple of years. It was a nice breather after the media storm. In the past, I've had people break into my parents' house to come after me. I've had a stalker and been threatened in hate mail. I've had people scale walls to try and snap a picture.

"Can I have a couple of days to think about it?" I glance up only to realize that Gus is staring at me, his food untouched as well.

"Of course," he says, but there is something in his eyes. In the way he looks at me. Almost as if he has more to say, and is, for once, holding it back.

"What?" I ask, tilting my head.

He shakes his, rubbing absently at his scruffy jaw, his eyes darkening ever so slightly. "Nothing. It's nothing. Yes, you can have a couple of days. I don't want you to say yes to me unless you're fully ready to make this happen. But Naomi." He pauses and then smiles confidently. "You're going to say yes. I can feel it."

*We'll see*, I think. We'll see.

## Chapter Eight

*Naomi*

“THIS IS the last time I’m doing this,” Ethan yells, practically at the top of his lungs, his arms panned out wide around him, gesturing boldly at the party that surrounds him. In his house, no less. It’s a Hollywood shindig. One of those things that’s loaded with Instagram models, actors, musicians, probably a Kardashian or two, and a lot of drama.

No one is eating any of the expensive food, but they’re definitely drinking all the premium, top-shelf alcohol.

It’s the sort of event that I used to love being a part of, engrossed in, but now take a back seat to and watch with a smirk and a laugh.

“You say that every time.” He does. Ethan has these types of parties on a quarterly basis. As the COO of Turn Records, his parties are the ‘it’ parties of the season. LA’s finest come out if for no other reason than to network and get their faces on the internet.

And once upon a time, I attended these with Florian.



Tonight, I'm flying solo, and it's empowering in a way since I'd all but stopped going out to parties.

I've had a lot to think about since my dinner the other night with Gus Diamond.

I spent a lot of time at home, playing with the strings of my guitar, and the keys of my piano. A lot of time writing—something I haven't done, again, since Florian—and even though I'm still not sure about that song or dragging myself back into this world, a tide has shifted within me.

One I welcome and revel in and smile at. At least so far.

"I know," Ethan groans. "It's become my thing, and once you start a thing in this town, it's impossible to stop it. But this time. I mean it. I'm moving to New York."

I shake my head. "That's not something to rejoice over or celebrate. That's me losing a shopping partner who has better taste than I do."

"Honey, everyone has better taste than you do." He waves a long, sharp hand over my dress, twirls it around my head, and then snaps it to his hip, cocking an eyebrow and making some sort of condescending noise in the back of his throat. "Purple went out like two years ago. So did this half-up, half-down hippie crap. What are you, an Olsen twin?"

"Don't even go there. And purple is purple, and it is always fashionable. Don't fuck with my primary color."

"The only thing purple you should be entertaining is a dick on ya."

I snort out a laugh. "Aw, come on, Ethan. Now you're just poking at all my soft parts."

“I’m not even going to follow that up because that one is too easy.” I roll my eyes, folding my arms over my chest. “Have a drink, Naomi. Loosen up. It’s my going away party.”

“I’m loose. I’m here, aren’t I? Progress is progress. And besides, do you actually know any of these people?”

His gaze dances about the room, bouncing from person to person, then back to me with a pinched brow. “Like in live-action or via SM?”

“SM?”

He huffs out an exasperated breath. “Social Media, Naomi. Get with the times. You’re twenty-three, not fifty-three. Be like Jesus and resurrect yourself already.” My eyes pop out of my head. “What? Don’t look at me like that. If he were alive, he’d totally agree with me. Now go mingle. There are a plethora of straight, single, highly interested men here tonight. Believe me, I’ve seen some of the looks they’ve been throwing your way. Fuck one and report back. I love hearing about straight sex if for no other reason than to laugh at all the ways your kind does it wrong.”

I stare blankly at him. “I have no words for you, Ethan. You’re fucking crazy.”

“I know. But it’s a party. So, act your age and live a little.”

I would bristle at that if he wasn’t one hundred percent on point with the dig. “Who should I be tonight?” I ask instead, striking a pose and tilting my head while fish-facing my lips as if I’m taking a selfie.

He belts out a loud cackle. “Shit. Come here.” He grabs my dress before I’m capable of even taking a step. That’s when I hear fabric ripping. The dress I was wearing suddenly becomes several inches shorter. The motion so quick and

unexpected I practically topple over in my heels as he spins me around to complete the destruction.

A gasp screeches past my throat, my hands and eyes landing solidly on my upper thighs, which are now exposed.

“You’re such a prick,” I manage once I’ve gained control of my voice. “I can practically feel air brushing my ass.”

“Stop. You look hot, and it’s not showing off your ass. Just don’t bend over.” I scowl harshly, but he’s grinning like the Cheshire Cat, so very pleased with himself. “When was the last time your pussy had a friend?”

Um. Two years? Is that considered a long time or something?

I roll my eyes because it’s derisive and deflective. His question is rhetorical anyway. “I hate you,” I go with instead, tearing away from him and tipping his glass of whatever the hell is in his hand onto his designer shirt. He squeals and I take a lot of enjoyment in that sound. “You ruin mine, I ruin yours.” I cock an eyebrow and stalk away from him only to be jostled and splashed with something very wet that stinks of what can only be white wine not even ten seconds later.

Ethan bellows out a laugh from behind me. “You totally deserved that.” I extend my hand and raise my middle finger in his general direction as I stare helplessly down at my dress that is somehow even more ruined than it was seconds ago.

“OMG. I am legit, like, so sorry.” My eyes unwittingly glance back up toward the petite blonde teenager with breasts larger than her entire frame. “Like, totes. For real. So sorry.”

I glance back down at my dress and rock back on my heels. This dress was once one of my favorites. So pretty and made me feel even more so.

That's why I wore it tonight.

"It's fine."

It's not fine. I'm lying through my teeth. I'm not even sure what to do at this point. I look ridiculous. I should probably just go home.

"You're like...Naomi Kent, right? I totally worshiped you in middle school and high school."

I think I just vomited into my mouth. I look back up at this girl and force a smile. "Thank you. That's very sweet of you to say, and it means the world to me."

"Can we take a selfie? I'd love to post it."

"I—" I blow out a breath. "Sure."

She takes out her phone, makes fish-lips and snaps a pic. Okay then. I'm not even sure if I was in that at all. Probably better that way given the state I'm in. "Can I ask what it was like when Florian Heart dumped you like that at the Grammys? I mean, that had to hurt. I felt so bad for you. He's really hot too. For an older guy."

Right. Time to go. "Have a good night." I push past her in the direction of the entrance when an arm wraps around my waist, spinning me around until I crash into a hard, strong chest.

"Fancy seeing you here," Gus says with a playful lilt and a gleaming smile on his lips that makes his eyes sparkle. "Why does it look like you're going instead of coming. And before you smack me, that was not meant to be as dirty as it sounded."

I laugh despite myself and the night I'm having. I take a step back, pointing down at my dress. "It's already been a long

night for me.”

“Don’t let IG Barbie or a little wine knock you down, doll. You still look stunning. Dance with me?”

“Dance? I’m a mess.”

“Nah. Come on. Let’s start some gossip.”

I laugh at his smile, snaking my arms around his neck, and groaning as my torn-up dress rides up higher.

“I’m soaked, you know?”

“I can feel it. It’s also soaking me. How about we dance to this song, and then we go somewhere and dry off?”

I stare up into Gus’s pretty gray eyes. At the smile he has on his lips just for me. At the way he holds me so close and so tight and I feel...crazy, excited butterflies. Like lightning bugs. Like bolts of electricity zapping through my body and across my skin.

It’s his smile, I decide. His smile is just so...everything.

But his eyes are right up there too. And the way they look at me...

After we left the restaurant the other night, he walked me to my car, and we spent another twenty minutes or so talking beside it. Neither of us seemingly able to say goodnight. Instead, we laughed and couldn’t shut up. So different than anything we had going in the restaurant. This was not about the song or our heartbreak or even sex, but about regular stuff. Where we grew up and what that was like because our worlds were so different back then. It was easy and comfortable and *nice* .

I’ve tried not to think about him since. To only think about the song. About what I want with it and for it—if I even want

to do it at all. What I want for myself. Where I want to go and how to push myself there.

But he was there, always lurking in the background of a quiet moment.

He crawled into my mind and planted himself there. It happened so damn quickly, so unexpectedly, and now I don't know what to do with it.

"I didn't expect to see you here, though I'm hardly surprised you are."

"I'm here with a couple of my bandmates."

I glance around the room, but honestly, I'm not even sure who I'm searching for. "Where? I'd love to meet them."

"Not now, Naomi. They're not here and you are. So, dance with me." His face drops into the crook of my neck, holding me even closer as my fingers suddenly decide to play with the bristly ends of his cropped hair. He hums into my neck as I smile into his chest and wonder why am I dancing with Gus Diamond like this?

"Are you trying to seduce me into agreeing to your song with this dance?"

He laughs, the sound flirting with my skin like a lover.

"When you say yes to me, it will be because you can't say no."

"I bet that's what you tell all the girls."

"I never had to before. You're the first to ever make me wait for it." His face draws back, his eyes meeting mine in a heated stare that makes my blood smolder. "The first to ever make me work for it."

“That explains the cocky grin on your face and the challenge in your eyes.”

His eyes ghost across my face, feature by feature. “No, it doesn’t.”

My face warms, and all I can do is tuck it back into him. I blow out a breath, wondering why the hell I’m doing this. We said this sort of thing couldn’t happen. No crossing lines. Professional only.

But right now, that’s more like a long-forgotten memory. Just a passing flicker of words that are gone just as quickly as they were spoken.

Gus’s hands are on my waist, tickling at me over my dress. Gooseflesh pebbles up and I like it. I like it a lot. His touch. His scent. The way he makes me smile and feel. The way he came to my rescue in a way. I’m soaking him with my destroyed dress, and he doesn’t care, and again, *what am I doing?*

I pull back and smile up into his eyes. God, those eyes. “I should go. I’m a mess and the cold wine against my skin is uncomfortable.”

“No. You should stay. If you leave, I’ll want to come with you, and I promised you I wouldn’t, so I can’t.”

I laugh. “I’m not sure that made a whole lot of sense.”

“It did. Trust me. Instead, how about we go find a quiet place to hang out.”

I stare down at my dress, uncomfortable in so many ways in it. “I’m going to find something of Ethan’s to put on.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“No.”

“Yes. I won’t look.”

I nod because I suddenly have no words. No argument.

Gus realizes this and takes my hand, much the way he did on the beach the other night, and leads me through Ethan’s house. Releasing my hand, he snatches a bottle of champagne and two glasses and waves me toward the back stairs and up them. Directly into Ethan’s dark, quiet, empty bedroom. I’ve been in here before, but because it’s Ethan, I don’t dare go near his sacred closet. Instead, I find his dresser and open up the top drawer, tugging out a white shirt.

Then I spin back around and tilt my head at Gus, who is watching me from across the room, hovering by the door with his hands locked behind him.

“Bathroom?”

Bathroom. Sure. Yeah. Right. Let’s go into the bathroom. Makes total and complete sense.

I nod and turn my back to him, walking into the bathroom and pulling the ripped, soiled dress over my head. Gus didn’t follow, and for a second, I frown at that. Until I remember that I shouldn’t frown at that. If I do this duet, it’s business only. Isn’t that what he said? That he wouldn’t hit on me? Wasn’t that my hardline? That I wouldn’t sleep with him?

Gus does sex only and I don’t fuck musicians?

Isn’t that the promise we made to each other?

I slip on Ethan’s white tee and it hits my mid-thighs—only a little longer than that goddamn dress after Ethan ripped it. I didn’t bring any shorts into the bathroom with me. Why didn’t I bring in shorts?



I twirl around to go back out into Ethan's room to find some.

But that's when Gus steps into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

## Chapter Nine

*Gus*

I HAVE no idea what came over me. Why, when I saw her downstairs, I stood back and watched her. I watched as Ethan ripped up her dress, and she mouthed off to him. I watched as that girl doused her with white wine.

I watched her when I shouldn't have.

And now, now I shouldn't be up here in Ethan's bedroom, watching her walk into the bathroom to change.

I clutch the bottle of champagne in my hand while debating turning around and walking out. Instead, I suck in a deep breath and move toward the closed bathroom door.

I won't touch her. I won't. I won't. *I won't.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of something unexpected in Ethan's bedroom and pick that up, bringing it with me. I tap lightly on the door, but she doesn't answer, so I turn the knob carefully, using the hand holding the flutes to do so.

Naomi is standing in front of the large double vanity wearing a white undershirt and nothing else. I mean, I'm sure she has on panties and a bra. And I realize this shirt actually hits her thighs a little longer than the dress did, but her wearing this shirt feels so different than her wearing that dress.

I can't even explain what it is. But damn...it's so sexy I can hardly breathe.

I set the bottle and glasses on the counter and she catches my reflection in the mirror before scrolling down to the newly acquired item in my hand. "What are we going to do with that?"

"Play it."

She snorts out a laugh, rolling her eyes. "I assumed that. But why?"

"Because I want to play while we sit in Ethan's mammoth bathtub drinking his expensive champagne."

And if I'm busy playing, I'll keep my promise to her. And to myself. It's that simple.

I could let her go home and I could stay here. I could push all this crazy chemistry between us away. Lock it up and throw away the fucking key. That's the smart thing to do.

But the simple truth is, I want to spend more time with her.

So here we are.

"Hop on in the tub, beautiful. Let's have our own party."

"Beautiful?" I shrug my shoulder, trying not to follow her with my eyes as she heads over to the bathtub, swinging one long leg over and then the other before she sinks in. "Is that my new nickname? Wow," she looks around, touching the tub. "This thing could fit a dozen people in it."

“Beautiful is better than babe, right?”

Her deep blue eyes cast up to mine and she smiles. “Anything is better than babe.” I laugh at that. It never bothered Vi when I called her babe, but maybe that’s a southern, country, high school thing. Then again, I shouldn’t call Naomi anything I ever called Vi, now should I?

I release the cork on the champagne with a loud *pop*, grateful that it didn’t suds over the way it does in the movies. I pour us each a healthy glass, handing them both to her so I can join her in the tub with the guitar.

“Cheers,” I say, taking my glass back and clinking it against hers.

“Cheers.”

I take a sip and swallow down the dry bubbly stuff. Champagne is far from my favorite, but I can tell Naomi likes it by the way she smiles and licks her lips.

“What are you going to play for me?”

She slinks down the side of the white tub, stretching her legs all the way out until her feet rest beside my hip. I stretch out mine too, but even though this tub is huge, as Naomi said, my feet press into the opposite side and my knees are still a little bent. She laughs lightly at that.

“That’s what you get for being giant-sized.”

I raise an eyebrow at that, and she groans. “Jesus. Not everything is an innuendo.”

“I know. I just like the way you blush a little when I tease you. And I’m not giant-sized.”

“Compared to me you are.”

I nod my head, conceding that point. I take another sip and set the flute down on the floor of the tub, strumming the guitar and tuning it a little as I do. And once it's the way I like, I set my fingers on the frets and begin to play only to hear Naomi gasp.

I grin, peeking up and meeting her eyes.

“That’s my song.”

“It is. Wanna sing it for me?”

She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, debating this while I continue to play, slowing it down a little, hoping she’ll join in. “How do you know this song?”

“Everyone knows this song.” She rolls her eyes at me and I chuckle. “I’ve been listening to your albums a bit.”

“This is from my first one. I wrote it when I was like twelve.”

“Don’t say it like that. Like that’s a bad thing. Jasper wrote our entire first album about Viola, and some of those songs were written when we were just kids.”

She shakes her head, taking another sip. “Wow. I had no idea.” She eyes me warily and I grin. “It doesn’t bother me, Naomi. You can ask me anything you’re curious about.”

I continue to play, watching her while she watches me play. She’s been avoiding my eyes since I sat in this tub with her and I understand why. The sides of our bodies are practically pressed together despite facing in opposite directions. It smells like her perfume in this tub, the warmth of her skin clinging to mine, even through my clothes, and I’d be lying if I said my mind wasn’t everywhere with this girl.

“Does it hurt to watch them together?”

I shake my head. “No. I like watching them together.”

Her head tilts, her eyebrows knitting together. “But you love her.”

“I’ll always love her. She’s part of my blood. I love Jasper too. And they’re it for each other. I guess you could say my feelings for Viola are complicated, but I honestly don’t know how to explain it, to have it make sense.”

“Wooh. And I thought my shit was a mess.” She laughs. “How old were you when you first started playing?”

“Our parents bought both Jas and I guitars when we were six, I think. We didn’t have a lot in common, though we always got along. But Jasper and I are very different, and I think our parents were looking for a common bond since sports and poetry certainly weren’t it. Anyway, it worked. He and I would jam for hours together. What about you?”

She cocks an eyebrow, giving me a sarcastic look paired with a sweet smile. “My first memory is of playing the piano for my parents. I think I just pounded a lot on the keys, but I was really little. Like three. I’ve been playing music forever. It’s just what we did. I never went to school. I always had tutors following us around, because we traveled so much. One of my mother’s favorite things was to bring me out on stage with her during her encore and sing with me.”

“Do you ever wish you had done something—?”

She shakes her head before I can even finish my sentence. “Nope. Never. Not once. I wish I had gone to school. I wish I had had friends my own age and a bit more of a typical upbringing. But they tried when I was around twelve or thirteen and it didn’t work out. So here I am. I wouldn’t give

up music. After Florian, when music lost its favor in my heart for a while, I still couldn't give it up entirely."

My fingers rest on the strings, the song coming to a close, and silence descends upon us. The thick, heavy kind that has a palpable tension and aura to it. The kind you can't help but feel buzzing around your insides and along your skin.

I pick up my champagne without shifting my gaze from hers. I take a sip, thinking about how her lips and tongue and mouth likely taste just like this. It's the closest I'll come to tasting her.

She hasn't said yes or no to the duet. I haven't asked or pushed. It has to be from her.

But even though I won't cross the line, that doesn't mean I can't enjoy her. Even if it won't go anywhere beyond this...

I hand her the guitar, which she takes, gently resting it down in her lap and adjusting it until it's comfortable and natural against her thighs and chest. I really wish she weren't wearing that goddamn shirt. I figured out that it makes her look like we just had sex. That she's wearing a shirt of mine after.

When she's sitting the way she is, it's insanely short. The collar is just a touch too big as it slouches off her narrow shoulder. And with her sitting in this tub with me...it's hard to focus on anything but her.

"Play something for me."

She sets her glass down, shifting a little more so she's comfortable, and I grasp her feet from the floor of the tub, spinning her a bit as I drop them into my lap. Her eyes burst open wide, staring first at what I've done and then gliding up the seam of her legs until they reach where the hem of the shirt

meets her thighs. I can't see her panties, but all I'd have to do is spread her legs a little, and I know she's aware of this.

"Relax," I tell her softly. "I'm just going to rub your feet while you play unless you don't want me to."

"Um. O-okay." She clears her throat as I press my thumbs into the instep of the bottom of her foot. Her eyes close for a moment and she emits a soft humming noise.

I grin, chuckling lightly. "Good?"

She nods her head. "Yes. Very good."

"Whatever you do, don't say don't stop, or start moaning or anything like that. Because while I can make all the sexual jokes in the world, right now, you can't."

Her eyes open and find mine, a smirk now on her full, red lips. "Too *hard* for you to handle?"

"Naomi—"

She laughs, throwing her head back a little. "Okay. No sexual jokes. I promise. Please continue your ministrations on my feet and I'll play us a song." She starts to pluck out a tune I instantly recognize as one from our third album. I angle my head forward, my expression challenging. "What? You're not the only one here listening to the other's old albums. Do you want to sing it for me?" I shake my head no. "Fine then. I'll get this one."

Then she starts to sing Wildfire and I wonder if she knows it's my favorite of all of ours. If it's just coincidence that she picked this particular song out of all the ones to choose from.

I lean back against the wall of the tub, listening to her play and sing while I continue to rub her feet. Outside this room is a party. Laughter and voices float in from below, hovering in



the air, but right now, it's just us. Just me and her in this room, in this tub, laughing and talking and playing music.

Like two wayward stars who ran off together into the blackest night and I don't want this moment to end.

Her voice carries me to a far-off place. Thrusts me into a hypnotic dream.

Damn, her voice is exquisite. So unreal I have chills on my arms.

She has to do this song with me.

I need to sing with her again. I need more of this feeling. This sensation of breaking through the waves after being submerged for so long.

Which is why the moment she's done singing my favorite song to me in her perfect voice, I set her feet aside and lean forward, kissing the side of her face. My lips hover over her ear as I whisper, "Do the duet with me."

But instead of waiting for her reply, I stand up, grasping her hand and helping her to do the same. She blinks rapidly at me, at the shift in my demeanor. Helping her out of the tub, she slides her shoes back on, all the while watching me cautiously through the mirror.

I step in behind her, my hands resting on her hips as I face her reflection. "Do the duet with me, Naomi. Please." I press my lips to her cheek and then walk out of the bathroom, leaving her behind.

The moment I shut the door, I take a deep breath that doesn't taste and smell like her. It clears my head. A little. Enough. I can't stay in there with her. Not when I'm asking her for that.

Because I know that if I stay...

## Chapter Ten

*Gus*

“ADY, baby, if I let you go in any deeper, your father will gut me like a fish,” I tell my niece, Adalyn, who is walking with me on the beach while simultaneously trying to force me in deeper toward the waves. Just wait till this girl wants to go surfing. I think Jasper will stroke out.

I made the mistake of watching *The Little Mermaid* with her, and now the girl thinks she’s Ariel. At the adorable age of four. She truly believes she can just run into the water and swim like a mermaid.

The fact that she has reddish hair and green eyes isn’t helping that.

Viola, naturally because she’s fucking Viola, thinks it’s the best thing ever and bought her a Little Mermaid dress and outfit and t-shirt. These are the sort of things that happen once Viola gets excited over something, and the fact that Adalyn loves all of this only spurs Vi on.

I know Vi still thinks she has to prove herself to Adalyn. Be the best mother she can be since she’s technically the

stepmother. But come on. You don't actually have to give the girl *everything* she wants. When I told Vi this, that she already has Adalyn's love, I got the scowl and I hate the scowl, so I quickly shut up and minded my own business.

A wave comes crashing in, jumping up and over Adalyn's legs and thighs. She emits a small squeal of delight, her face tilting up toward mine with a smile that lights up her whole face. "Big waves."

"Yep. Big, *wet* waves." I can't help but laugh. She's not the only one who is soaked.

She looks so much like Jasper it nearly knocks the wind from me sometimes. Jasper and I are fraternal twins, as different as night and day, both in disposition and appearance. But Adalyn has my dimple in her cheek. And I seriously think her smile is more mine than Jasper's. We won't even discuss her biological mother because thankfully, that woman was merely a vessel and nothing more.

Jasper would kick my ass for saying that, but it doesn't make it any less true.

"Smile like that at me again and I'll take you to Disneyland tonight. I'll rent out the whole darn park for you, kid."

No smile and Jasper won't kill me dead.

I think he's planning a big Disney World thing for her fifth birthday since that park is bigger and has more Mickey Mouse interaction stuff.

Another wave overtakes the lower half of our bodies and Adalyn is lucky I love her as much as I do because this water is not warm. How all those surfers can handle it, even with

their wetsuits, is beyond me. Then again, I'm a big guy. The one time I tried to surf I wiped-out hard and that was it for me.

I don't want to say that Jasper and I are afraid of the ocean after what happened with our mother, but I don't think it's our favorite thing either. Needless to say, Adalyn has private swim lessons two days a week in Jasper's backyard pool.

"Ady, how about I take you for an ice cream instead of all this water stuff?"

She shakes her head adamantly, looking like she's ready to pummel me for having the audacity to even suggest such a horrible thing. "No. No ice cream, Gus. Say... no thank you, Gus."

What kind of kid says no to ice cream?

"You've got another ten minutes, kiddo. Then I'm calling for ice cream or playing in the sand. Maybe both. This water is freezing my..." I glance down. She smiles up at me. I'm so outgunned. "Alright. Fifteen more minutes, but that's it."

Adalyn tugs again on my hand, trying to squirm out of my grip, and I hold on tighter.

"No, baby," I admonish. "You cannot let go of my hand. It's dangerous."

Next time I think I'll take her to the playground. Her world is a safer place on dry land and I likely won't have a heart attack.

Despite Adalyn's need for water and danger, it is a beautiful California day. The sun is high and warm in the blue, cloudless sky. The wind coming in off the Pacific is gentle and feels nice instead of punishing.

For a while, we debated moving back to Alabama. Going somewhere that wasn't so Hollywood and fake and in your face. But it's hard to deny how incredible it is here, despite all that.

"Gus?" I freeze at the sound of my name, and even though we're on a mostly private beach, I wince. The last thing I want right now is to be recognized.

I turn reluctantly toward the voice only to have my eyes pop out of my head once I take in the vision before me.

Naomi Kent is standing there, wearing a wetsuit that hugs every goddamn perfect inch of her like a second skin. Beads of moisture run down the black and purple material, and I never knew it was possible to be as jealous of droplets of water as I am right now. Her long, dark hair is wet and pushed back off her face, which is glistening and glowing and so fucking beautiful it literally, physically, hurts to look at her. She's holding on to a purple and black surfboard, something sleek and cool looking, and all I can think is...

I want that.

And I'm not talking about the board.

"Hey," I somehow manage, though my tongue feels thick in my suddenly dry mouth. Maybe if I lick the water off her neck, that will help. Jesus. This is not the time for an erection. At least it won't be insanely obvious I'm springing wood through the thin material of my track shorts. And yes, that's total sarcasm.

Shit. How messed up is this? I'm holding Adalyn's hand for pervert's sake.

Adalyn. Right.

“I thought that was you.” She smiles brightly, and I stare, and...

I clear my throat. “How were the waves? Adalyn and I have been having our own fun in them, but they look pretty big out there.”

I nod my head toward the open ocean, but I can’t look away from the goddess in front of me.

I haven’t seen or spoke to Naomi since I walked out on her in Ethan’s bathroom the other night. That was two days ago. I’ve been giving her space. I’ve been giving myself space. I know I initially told her she could have a couple of days to think about it, but it’s taken every ounce of my restraint not to stalk her ass down at her house and demand an answer.

Though admittedly, I’d likely have to drug Lyric or Ethan to get that information. It’s not exactly as if Naomi Kent is listed.

“They were amazing,” she praises, taking her free hand and running it back over her face and hair, brushing more water away. She licks her lips and then bends down on one knee, still holding the large board stable. “Hi,” she says softly in Adalyn’s direction. “I’m Naomi. I’m friends with your uncle Gus. I really like your shirt, Adalyn.”

Naomi points to the picture of Ariel swimming on Adalyn’s aqua-colored shirt.

Adalyn takes a step back, tucking her little body behind me. “No,” she asserts, a bit on the loud side. “No, hi. Say... I don’t want to say no hi.”

Naomi doesn’t appear put off or even alarmed. She just shrugs, maintaining her smile. “That’s okay. You don’t have to say hi.”

I bend down, scooping Ady up into my arms. She tucks herself into me easily and I stand, holding her against me. “Sorry,” I tell Naomi as I kiss Ady’s cheek. “She’s autistic and not great with people she doesn’t know.”

Naomi stands up too, waving me off. “Absolutely no worries. I totally get it. I didn’t mean to intrude on your date with your pretty lady, I was just surprised to see you out here.”

“It’s purple, Gus.”

And here we go. “Yep. Her board has purple on it.”

Naomi glances over at her board and then back to Adalyn, a smile I’m positive I’ve never seen on her before overtaking her every feature. “Oh, you like purple? Me too. It’s my favorite color.”

Adalyn smiles for a beat, but it doesn’t last.

“What brings you to Malibu?” Naomi asks, still smiling while staring at Adalyn.

I shift Ady to my hip, so we’re both more comfortable. “Jasper and Viola are at a doctor’s appointment. Then I told them that they need a night off together, so Ady is sleeping over at my place.” I turn toward Ady. “Right? It’s you and me tonight, kiddo. We’re going to have pizza and ice cream and popcorn and watch movies daddy and mommy might not like so much. It’s the fun part of being with Uncle Gus even if it does all have to be gluten-free, dairy-free and G-rated.”

Ady blinks at me with those big green eyes of hers and finally relaxes some, smiling before she tucks her head into my shoulder.

I kiss the top of her head and turn back to Naomi, who is staring at me like she has no idea who I am. “Wow,” she muses. “I think my ovaries just exploded.”



“Huh?”

“Never mind.” She waves me away. “I was actually going to call you tonight. I got your number from Lyric.”

“Oh.” It’s all I can manage because suddenly, I’m insanely nervous she’s going to tell me no. I played the recording of us singing together for the guys and they flipped the fuck out over it. Especially Jasper who was beside himself with this. I think he’s secretly always had a crush on Naomi Kent, but then again, every guy in America and beyond does. She was every boys’ fantasy. But now, she’s so very grown up and so am I and—

“Yeah,” she says, cutting off my thoughts before they can get the better of me. Again. “Do you have time to talk? I live a few houses down from here, and I have popcorn that I’m pretty positive is gluten and dairy-free, and I have Disney Plus we could put on for Adalyn while we work some stuff out. If now’s a bad time, I can just give you a call tomorrow.”

“You have Disney Plus?”

She nods her head as a big smile erupts across her face, lighting up her ocean-colored eyes, and for a second, I think I stop breathing. Something about this girl makes me feel like a teenager all over again. Christ, a few pretty smiles and my heart is racing.

“I like Disney movies and shows. Don’t judge.”

God, she’s so adorable and sexy I just want to devour every inch of her.

“I just did, so it’s too late for that.” Her eyes narrow, her fist going to her hip, and damn, she’s adorable. “I’d love to talk this out, but...um...” I trail off thinking about this. Not knowing how comfortable Ady will be with that. Then again,

we can try to and if she can't handle it, we'll leave. "Yeah. Sure. Great. Lead the way." I turn to Ady. "Ady, baby, you wanna go watch a movie and eat popcorn with my friend Naomi?"

Ady looks over to Naomi, who is still smiling and then back over to me. "Popcorn?"

Naomi looks right at Adalyn and takes a small, tentative step toward her. "You like popcorn?" Ady doesn't respond, but she's not yelling either, so I know she's intrigued and listening. "I have the really yummy stuff you make on the stove. It's the best popcorn ever. What's your favorite show?"

"Mickey Mouse," Adalyn replies, and I can't help my prideful smile at how easily she just answered that. I know they work with her on answering questions appropriately at her school and she just did it like a fucking champ.

"Oh, girl. You and I are going to be such besties. I love Mickey Mouse. Do you want to watch Once Upon a Christmas even though it's not Christmas anymore? It's fantastic."

"Mickey Mouse," Adalyn states firmly like it's all a done deal.

"Awesome. And wow, just how beautiful are you? I worry for your uncle and daddy when you get older."

I choke on absolutely nothing. "Watch it there, Kent." Naomi winks at me and we start off down the beach toward her house. And I do my very best not to watch her ass as we go. Especially after that comment about Adalyn and future admirers. "You actually watch Mickey Mouse?"

Adalyn squirms in my arms and I set her down in the sand, holding her hand tightly so she doesn't get any ideas about running off toward the water. The older Adalyn gets the more

impulsive her behaviors have become. Jasper and Viola work with a BCBA—a behaviorist who specializes in autism—but there is only so much you can do with that aspect of her autism. The scary part? She doesn't even realize what she's doing is potentially dangerous.

Naomi glances over her shoulder in our direction. "I think I already told you not to judge. You can blame my Disney obsession on my lack of a traditional childhood and leave it at that. But yes, I actually watch Mickey Mouse. When you're having a hard day, I suggest you put on something Disney with music and try not to smile. Plus, my mother, father, and I have all written songs for them in the past."

That I did not know.

"What's your favorite?"

"The original *High School Musical* movies. Zac Efron." She fans her face dramatically.

I roll my eyes at her.

"Hey," she says, slightly indignant despite her playful tone. "I never went to high school, remember? I was living vicariously."

"Well, real high school is not like that."

She laughs, her head tossing back. "You totally watched it! I knew it!"

"Viola loved it. I watched it for her," I grumble under my breath.

"And I bet you liked it too, so don't even lie, Gus. It doesn't suit you. But yes, I love Disney. Cheesy teenage drama and all."

"Whatever gets you through, sweetheart."

She winks at me before turning back to the beach, adjusting her board under her arm.

“Can I take your board?”

“Nah. You’ve got your hands full and Alice is pretty light.”

“Alice?”

“Yep. She’s *my* favorite girl. We don’t all have adorable nieces to spoil.”

We pass by five or so more houses until we reach a large, three-tier home, lifted up on cement stilts. The side facing the ocean is all balconies—one for each level, spanning the entire width of the house. Naomi directs us toward the side of the house to a hidden staircase that leads up to the first-floor entrance. She punches in a code, presses her thumb against a touchpad, and we enter a mudroom of sorts with composite floors, open to the sand and ground beneath, almost like a deck, but inside. She walks her board over to the wall and sets it gently beside a few other boards and along a faucet and sprayer.

“I’ll clean Alice later,” she tells us, waving her hand in the direction of the door that leads into her house. “Feel free to go on in. I’ll just be a second.”

I take a step in the direction of the door only to freeze mid-stride as Naomi unzips her wetsuit, leaving her only in a tiny, black bikini that’s all strings and triangles and not nearly enough fabric covering her absolutely gorgeous body.

*Jesus, God in Heaven.*

She hangs up the wetsuit on one of the many hooks, opens a cabinet and grabs a towel only to catch me eye fucking the shit out of her as she wipes down the salt and water from her

body. “Tongue in your mouth there, Gus. I thought we discussed this sort of shenanigans.”

We did. We totally did.

“Forget whatever we agreed to. I no longer care about the song.”

She laughs, shaking her head, thinking I’m joking, but I’m not entirely sure I am.

Naomi mercifully wraps the towel around her body, tucking a corner into the cleavage of her amazing rack, and I think I’m in lust with Naomi Kent.

I mean, I knew I wanted her.

That was so obvious and a given from the moment I laid eyes on her. She’s beautiful. No denying that.

But I’m starting to realize there is a hell of a lot more to her than that, and so far, I can’t think of anything I don’t like.

Maybe it’s the fact that I’ve never really spent a lot of time with any woman since Viola. I never got to know the women I slept with or even cared about their names. I didn’t date all that much. Just sort of screwed my way through life.

In truth, I had no interest in any of those women because they weren’t Viola.

It was that simple.

Sex was fun and easy to come by, and so I did it whenever I could with whoever was willing. That may make me a pig and it may not, but it’s how my life has been.

And none of those women complained. They were all too willing and eager—even after they knew the score.

I don't know what's happening here. Where my mind is going. The thoughts it's having.

Maybe I'm just latching on to the first hot woman to cross my path since I let go of Vi.

But I sang that song with Naomi.

I followed her to the ocean and watched her watch the sunset. Pulled her back from the water and took her out for dinner. Held her in my arms as I danced with her and then hung out in the bathtub with her.

I don't really know her.

Not well anyway.

But... yeah, there's something about this girl. Something I want. Something I'm already fighting hard to keep in check.

## Chapter Eleven

*Gus*

“MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME,” Naomi says, leading us into her out-of-this-world beachfront home. I’m thinking it’s time I grow up a bit more. My house is really a simple three-bedroom bungalow in Venice. But between Jasper’s, Lyric’s—who also has an amazing house about a mile from here—and now Naomi’s place, I’m starting to realize they have things figured out that evidently, I don’t.

Other than Ady’s bedroom, my mancave, and my bedroom, nothing in my place is done. I don’t think I’ve ever even turned on the stove. But looking at this place, it’s a home. One Naomi actually lives in and cooks in and watches television in. I expected girly. But other than some of the art on the walls, it’s not.

The floors are all dark wood, the kitchen is white and top-of-the-line and enormous. Everything is gray and white and decorated for both comfort and design. But it’s the view that is obviously the showstopper.

It’s all fucking ocean.

I whistle through my teeth as we make our way past the kitchen and into the family room that has a long, sleek fireplace with a huge television set above it that actually makes my cock twitch. The wall of glass leads out onto one of those balconies, and while it's tempting to go out and watch the sun slowly begin to set, that's not what I'm here for.

The room behind us reminds me of that. It's what is likely meant to be an office, but is a music room instead, complete with keyboards, an upright piano, multiple guitars—both electric and acoustic—a cello, and a large desk topped with computers and monitors and now my dick is hard.

“Thanks,” she says, taking my whistle for exactly what it is. “I'm gonna go grab a quick shower, if that's cool, and then I'll make the popcorn. I also know of a place nearby that delivers pizza with gluten-free crusts and dairy-free cheese if you're interested in that.” She points to the television and hands me a crazy-ass remote. I stare at the thing in awe like she just handed me a lightsaber for the first time. “You're a man. Do you think you can figure this out?”

I look up, directly into her cerulean eyes, and I have to remind myself to breathe. The ocean has nothing on these puppies.

“Are we being sexist now?”

She smirks, dropping a hand to her towel-covered hip. “Only if I were implying that a woman couldn't. Obviously, I have no trouble with it. Do you think you can manage?”

“I think you're insanely hot.”

Her eyes pop open wide as saucers, her teeth sinking into that full bottom lip. “Right. So, um...yeah. I'm going to take a shower. You can man the television. Sexist reference and all.”



She slides back a step and then spins around on the balls of her bare feet, taking the stairs at a quick pace up to what I assume is her bedroom.

“You’re blushing!” I call out after her, smirking like a bastard.

“Am not!”

I stare at the empty steps for a few moments, my grin uncontained.

This girl. Damn.

I chuckle under my breath. “Yes, you were,” I whisper, even though she’s gone.

I peek down at Adalyn, who is still holding my hand, staring around the strange-to-her home with cautious observation.

“Ady, can I ask you a question?”

My girl looks up at me like I’m fucking with her time and I realize I likely am. I figure out how to turn on the television, and since Naomi’s setup is intuitive, I find Disney Plus in no time. I put on Mickey Mouse Club House because that’s Adalyn’s favorite.

“Mickey!” she squeals in delight, and I drop onto the sofa beside her, tugging her little body into mine.

“Back to that question, babe. Do you think Naomi likes me?”

Adalyn does not even so much as glance in my direction.

“I think I like her, but I don’t know. I haven’t liked anyone since your mommy, as weird as that may sound. The problem is, I know I shouldn’t like her. Naomi, not your mom,

obviously, though I shouldn't like her either." I sigh, scrubbing a hand over my face. What the hell am I even saying? Adalyn throws me a curious eye before just as quickly returning to Mickey. "But yeah, I think I have a not-so-small crush on Naomi and that's just crazy, right? Completely stupid? It makes no sense. In fact, I think your daddy would smack me upside the head for it."

"Daddy," she says simply. Then she twists onto my body, her head on my shoulder and her cheek on my chest as she angles herself to watch and goddamn, I love this baby. "Gus. It's Mickey Mouse."

"I know, doll. I know. He's the man. Or mouse, I suppose." She leans in and plants a deep kiss into my neck and that's actually when I become misty-eyed. "I love you too."

"Love you, Gus."

A smile erupts across my face as I hold my best girl tight. My chest swells and a levity I've never experienced claws its way through me. It's not the first time Adalyn has told me she loves me. But there's something about this time, something about her voice that sets me off. I think the girl is turning me into a pussy and I can't exactly find it in me to care.

"I want a dozen just like you, kid. Do you think you're having a brother or a sister? It's a strange thing to know your mommy is having a baby with your daddy. This is likely not making any sense to you, but it's like therapy for me. Your mommy was supposed to carry my babies. But..." I bluster out a sigh and sag further into Ady. "No. I'm really wrong about that. Your mommy was always supposed to carry your daddy's babies. And you were always meant to be a big sister to those babies."

I think this is the moment it truly hits me.

I want what they have.

What my dad had with my mom before she died.

Maybe not yet. But eventually, I want it all.

It always felt very abstract to me—marriage, kids. But now?

Adalyn kisses my face again and I know she gets me. This girl feels other peoples' emotions even if she cannot express them or verbalize her own. She feels it all.

I didn't really know how to understand the fact that my niece is autistic when I first found out. I studied a lot. Read a lot. But it's not the same as experiencing it. She scares the shit out of me with her behaviors and impulsivity and sets my fucking heart on fire with her smiles, enthusiasm, tenacity, smarts, and exuberance.

It's impossible to think of Adalyn any other way, and other than making her life easier, I wouldn't change her. Jasper feels the same. This is our Adalyn.

And she is perfect to us.

But right now, I could use some girl advice and the only girl I know besides her is Viola.

The doorbell rings, stirring me out of Mickey and Adalyn's comfort. I sit up, glancing around for Naomi, who is nowhere to be found. "Naomi?" I call out. But she's not answering.

The bell rings again and I get up off the couch and find my way to the front door that actually feels like the back since it's not on the ocean but on the street. There is a touchpad with a screen beside the door and I tap on it. It immediately illuminates with the picture of a guy I somewhat recognize but

cannot place. The bell goes off a third time and I decide to open the door.

The second the door jars open, the man jolts back, shock replacing his persistence when he catches sight of me. Then he frowns. “Oh. Hey,” he exclaims. “Is Naomi here?”

He’s trying to look past me into her house, and for some reason, I step to the side to block his view. “And you are?”

His eyes cast back to mine before he gives me a long once over. “An old friend. Who are you?”

“A new friend.”

“Huh,” he says with an edge, giving me another hard look.

I’m wearing a t-shirt and track shorts. He’s wearing a dark blue dress shirt rolled up to the elbows and dark gray slacks. His arms are covered in tattoos, sort of like Jasper’s, but his are harder looking—a lot of skulls, birds, and black ink. His blonde hair is on the longer side and his dark eyes tell me he doesn’t like me at all.

The feeling is very mutual.

“Okay. Well, *new friend*, how about you run along and tell Naomi that Casper LaCroix is here to see her.”

Casper LaCroix. I knew I recognized him. He’s the bassist for Claw By Night.

I reach a hand out to him. “Gus Diamond. Nice to meet you, Casper.”

He takes it, giving me a hard shake before tilting his head, searching for my name in his memory. The moment he comes up with it, his expression alters completely. Instead of being annoyed by my cock-blocking presence, now he looks angry.

“Gus Diamond. Yeah, sure. I’ve read about you on Entertainment. Or was it E-Buzz?”

Yep. I really don’t like this guy.

“Casper?” I hear Naomi’s voice reaching us, her tone incredulous. “Hey!” She laughs, brushing past me and throwing herself at the guy. Literally. He actually has to catch her, taking a small step back to accommodate the intrusion and everything. She wraps herself around him like a monkey, holding on tight, and I get a smug grin from the bastard over her shoulder.

“Hey, love.” He gives her a kiss on the cheek, and she pulls back, dropping from his arms. “I’ve missed the hell out of you. Look at you,” he steps back to admire her. “You look incredible.”

He’s not lying about that. Her hair is still wet from the shower, but thankfully she’s no longer wearing just a bikini or a towel. Unfortunately, she’s in tight as sin black yoga pants and an off the shoulder, oversized tee. She looks hot, something I know he doesn’t miss.

An unexpected knot forms in my gut at the way he looks at her.

It oddly makes me want to break his fingers, so he’ll never touch her again.

“Thanks. You do too. What are you doing here? I haven’t seen you—” Her words cut off abruptly, her voice dying in her chest.

“Yeah,” is all he can say back, and my guess is the last time they saw each other was at the Grammys the night his bandmate, Florian Heart broke hers for good. “We’re in town recording a new album.”

She nods but doesn't say anything, and since her back is to me, I can't see her face enough to assess her reaction to this news.

I likely should go.

Step back and return to Adalyn so these two can talk and catch up. But I don't move. The thought of leaving her here alone with him sets my blood ablaze.

Especially when I know that if they're in town recording a new album, it means Florian is in town as well. I have to assume it's been just as long since she's seen him as it has been since she's seen Casper the not-so-friendly asshole.

Their band being in town, recording a new album that can take months to do, is not my favorite news. It's likely only a matter of time before she sees Florian, and I know she's aware of that.

I hear her clear her throat. "That's fantastic. I can't wait to hear it." She clears her throat again and steps back. "Did you meet Gus? He's the guitarist and second vocalist for Wild Minds."

Casper's dark gaze reluctantly crawls back over to mine. "Yup. We met."

I smirk at him and his eyes narrow ever so slightly. *Yes, you can eat a dick that isn't mine any time now.* He doesn't like that non-verbal suggestion.

Instead, he quickly turns back to Naomi. "Look, I won't keep you since I can see you have company, but how about dinner some night this week? I'd love to catch up."

A smile spreads across her face. "Sure. I'd love that. Just text me where and when and I'll be there."

“Great. See you soon.” He leans in and presses another kiss to her cheek, gives me the hard eye again, and then without another word, steps back and leaves.

The moment the door shuts, Naomi blows out a heavy breath. “Shit,” she mutters under her breath. “I was hoping to go the rest of my life without seeing those guys. Casper is essentially my uncle, though not by blood. He’s the last of my family. But those other guys? Yeah. This kinda blows.”

I take her hand, holding it firmly in mine, urging her to look up so I can see more of her face. “You could have said no to dinner.”

She shakes her head and finally, fucking finally, slowly raises her head. “No. I couldn’t. I cannot let that prick of an ex of mine know he got me. That even after all this time, I’m still hurting from all the things he did.” She lets out a strangled laugh, staring at me and shaking her head. “It’s weird, right? I mean, we barely know each other, but it’s like we’re passing our darkest secrets back and forth.”

“Not weird. I knew we were something different the second I laid eyes on you.”

Her breath stalls, her eyes vacillating back and forth between mine. “I felt that too.”

I knew she did.

“I haven’t told you all of my dark shit yet.”

She smirks. “I haven’t told you all of mine either.”

Her expression falls, and I tug gently on her hand, pulling her into my chest. Her arms encircle my waist and mine go around her upper back, and for a second, I just hold her. I breathe in the scent of her shampoo and the warmth of her body and the feel of her against me.

“You’re insanely brave, Naomi Kent. Thank you for showing me both parts of you.”

“What do you mean?” she murmurs against me. “Both parts of me?”

“The brave face you show the world and the sad one you keep hidden.”

She sighs into me and I hold her just a little tighter. The wild part? She lets me.

A surge of some strange and unfamiliar, but no less intense, emotion swells in my chest. I want to shield this girl. Protect her so nothing and no one can ever hurt her again.

“That’s because I am both parts, Gus. I think everyone is. And truly, most days, I’m good. Most days I’m happy with me and my life.” She shakes her head. “In fact, it’s this duet that’s throwing me off-kilter.”

I nod against her because I already figured that out. “If you say no, I understand. Hell, I even respect it. Regardless, I like you, and I want to continue being friends.” And I have no idea why I just said that last part. I can’t be friends with her.

I feel her smile against me. “Is that what we’ve become? Friends?” NO! NO! “Because I’ll be honest, I don’t have a lot of those in my life, and I could really use one. A true one.”

That’s a motherfucker, isn’t it?

“I will always be true with you, Naomi. That’s a fucking promise.”

She falls silent, just leaning into me as I hold her so close my heart starts to beat in sync with hers, and it’s only then that I realize it’s beating fast. Hers likely because of what we’re



talking about. Mine? Because the woman in my arms right now feels...*right* .

I mentally shake myself. I just promised I'd be her friend. That I'd be true to her.

So, I lock those other thoughts, the dangerous ones, down. Shove them into a box and seal up the lid. What good has lust ever gotten me anyway? That's how I lost Viola in the first place—letting my dick do all the thinking.

Time to mix things up. That's what I'm trying to do with this duet.

No one likes dwelling in their pain or their past. When people look back on their lives, it's either with regret or nostalgia. I have a lot of regrets I'm wading through and so does Naomi. It's likely why I'm drawn to her the way I am. It's also why we have such good musical chemistry together.

We're not opposites she and I.

We're cut from the same cloth.

It's an alluring drug when you meet someone who you feel can see the real you, and not only do they understand it, but they accept it. Especially when most don't.

But I don't hide the way she does.

She holds so much of herself back, I wonder if she ever feels calm in her skin.

"I'm saying yes to the duet, Gus. I was planning on saying yes, even before Casper showed up. But seeing him..." She trails off and sighs again. "I don't want that bravery to be a face or a façade. I want that to be who I am once again. It's time to put the past behind me. To find the girl I used to be and have her become the woman I've always wanted to become."

I pull back and cup her face, gazing deeply into her eyes.

God, she's so pretty.

I should be so relieved she's saying yes. So excited. But staring at her, up close like this...my thumb brushes along her skin, my eyes tracking the movement, locking on her lips. I hear her breath catch, but she doesn't ask me to stop or let her go.

And I know I need to.

She's saying yes to this song. That means she's officially off-limits. The guillotine has dropped. The line severed.

I cannot get involved with her.

That's rule fucking one, right? Don't fuck where you work? Business not pleasure? I don't exactly have the best track record with women. Plus, I'm not sure what I'd want with her anyway. She's not a quick and dirty fuck in a back room after a show, that's for damn sure. She's not a groupie who doesn't care.

My head and my heart are all over the place.

I let my hands drop and I step back. Even if it's the last thing I want to do.

I won't be another guy who screws her over.

I force a smile I do not feel. "Then that's what we're going to do."

She returns my smile, gives me a small wink, and heads back toward her kitchen to start making Adalyn the popcorn she promised her. But in the back of my mind, I can't help but wonder if I'm making yet another mistake I'll live to regret.

## Chapter Twelve

*Gus*

“SO...” Naomi trails off as she addresses the piano in her music room. “What do you think of this.” Then she launches into a whole musical arrangement. I’m sitting in an oversized chair, listening as I stare out the glass wall into the living room where Adalyn is sleeping on the couch.

The three of us ate popcorn and pizza and watched a couple of Mickey Mouse things before Adalyn passed out. Naomi told me that her music room is soundproof, and I think that’s the coolest thing ever.

Then again, everything about this woman is.

I nod my head as I listen, taking in how she’s building it up, heading for a crescendo, but isn’t overdoing it either. We talked a little about it while we were eating and watching only for Ady to say, “Shhh. Stop talking, please.” The girl has manners in spades. Both Naomi and I agreed that the music is meant to be more of a background. A complement.

But it’s difficult to focus when I think about tonight.

The three of us laughed and sang along and cheered and answered Mickey's questions—and it was so fun. Just hanging out. Just being us without any pressure or obligations. Adalyn really warmed toward Naomi, who was nothing but gracious and excited that we were in her home, taking over space, and making a mess.

She didn't care.

She was just so happy that Adalyn seemed to like her.

I texted Jasper and Vi a selfie we took just so I could show them that Ady was having a good time and doing well. And fucking Jasper being the dick that he is, wrote back, **Wow, it's amazing how good camera phones are. They can even see into the future.** He added to that by sending a big fat smirk of an emoji. Then Viola got in on the action by texting, **Seriously, it's crazy how much yours and Naomi's future daughter looks so much like Adalyn.**

Sigh.

"Gus?" Naomi's voice breaks through my reverie and I come to, realizing she's stopped playing. "What do you think?"

I honestly have no idea. I don't think I heard much of it at all.

I spin around in the chair and face her. "Sure. Great."

She rolls her eyes, setting her hands on the black bench on either side of her hips. "Were you even listening?"

"I liked it."

"You didn't listen," she admonishes with a smile in her voice that tells me she's not angry. "I started to realize you were zoned out and switched it up to Metallica."

Shit. Busted. I laugh, rubbing at my jaw. “I’m sorry. I think I’m just wiped. How about you come over to Jasper’s tomorrow, and we work some of this out with them? It feels weird writing music without the guys.”

She gets up from the bench and walks toward me, all gorgeous curves and sweet smile and eyes the color of the sapphires. She climbs up onto the large rounded arm of my chair, tucking her feet beside my thigh and pinning me with a stare not to be ignored. “You didn’t have to stay, you know. You could have left when the movie ended.”

I know that. But I haven’t wanted to leave, and I can’t tell if it’s because I’m worried about who else might show up after I’m gone or because I like her company or because I’m just that sort of masochist.

Or maybe it’s the bathtub.

All I can think about is the fucking bathtub!

“What time is it anyway?” I scrub a hand over my face and grin into my hands as I hear Naomi giggle.

“Eight-fifteen. Your reputation as a party man precedes you.”

My hand drops to my thigh, my lips forming a tight line. “Do I really have that reputation?”

She nods. “Yeah. At least you did last summer when all that crap was going down with you and your brother and sister-in-law. Sorry. Maybe not the best subject to bring up.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s true. I was out partying a lot on that tour. Secretly trying to drive Jasper crazy.” Her eyebrows pinch together in confusion as she angles her head in my direction. I reach out, brushing some of her dark hair back from her face,

my fingers gliding down the long strand until I find the end, curling it around my finger.

“I don’t understand,” she admits when I don’t follow that up.

“Jasper and Viola belong together, Naomi. They always have, but I was too selfish and stubborn to care, and Jasper’s heart was always too big to deny me. He thought I was trying to win Viola back, and it pissed him off like nothing else that I was going out and sleeping around the way I was behind her back.”

“Were you?” she asks with something extra in her tone. Indignation maybe? I can’t blame her for it. None of my behavior on the tour is something to be proud of.

“Yes and no. I was sleeping around, but not as much as Jasper or the media believed, and never on Viola. Well, not since I was an asshole teenager. She hasn’t been mine for nearly a decade. My actions were mostly my attempt to compel Jasper into action by letting him think I wanted her back.”

“Mostly?” she challenges with a quirked eyebrow.

I shrug and grin and shrug again. “Mostly.”

“The women who used to swarm Florian made me crazy. He and I didn’t fight much, but any time we did, it was about them. They were everywhere. Sneaking into our hotel rooms, mobbing him anywhere we went. They were brutally nasty to me always, as you’d imagine. I was so young, a bit insecure, and even though I knew he wasn’t cheating, I hated the fear and jealousy those women instilled in me.”

I think about Viola for a moment. She was young, like Naomi was, when I was cheating on her all those years ago. It

makes me sick that I did that to her. Absolutely fucking sick.

“I know I don’t need to be the one to tell you this, but Florian is insane for letting you go. Obviously, I don’t know what happened between the two of you, but I can’t imagine it was because he wanted any other woman than you. That seems far too impossible.”

She shakes her head, her eyes glassing over. They drop, watching my fingers as I continue to toy with her hair. She doesn’t say anything about that, and I can’t find it in me to stop. Her hair feels like spun silk in my hand.

“That’s not why we ended,” is all she says, and I don’t push her with that. It’s none of my business. And really, I shouldn’t still be here. We’re not working on the song. We’re sitting very close to each other, our bodies touching, as we talk in low intimate tones.

But there is something about her that makes me want to open up. Makes me want to bare my soul. I can’t even place what it is about her. It’s this strange intrinsic connection we seem to share. An odd force of nature that draws me to her and keeps me rooted in place when I should be anywhere other than here with her.

“I cheated on Viola. It’s why she broke up with me all those years ago. It’s the regret of my life. Cheating on her. Hurting her like that.” I meet Naomi’s eyes as the words slip from my lips. “It’s not a mistake I’d make again with any woman I was ever with.”

Her eyes bounce back and forth between mine and I hold them so carefully, so intently.

I clear my throat and change the subject. “How old were you when you started dating Florian?” I ask because I’ve

Googled her. Hell, I've fucking internet stalked the shit out of her. She doesn't do all that much on social media anymore, but there is no shortage of pictures of Naomi Kent.

She's young. I know this.

But she was even younger when she was with him, and he's a solid nine years older than her.

Her eyes are still locked on mine when she whispers, "Seventeen."

A stuttered breath exhales from my lungs. I have nothing to say that won't come out sounding insanely judgmental, but what the fuck? She was a teenager—a minor. I think of Adalyn out there and my fist involuntarily clenches along with my jaw. Where were her parents when that was happening?

"You're judging me again."

I shake my head, reaching out and cupping her cheek with my hand. "No, beautiful. I'm not judging *you* ." But I am judging the shit out of him. If I didn't like the guy before, I most certainly want to kick his cradle-robbing ass now.

"It's okay if you do," she says, smirking at me. "I was judging the hell out of you. I hate players."

I smile, big and wide before I can stop it and some of the tension that had been weighing me down, eases. "I think all women do, but that doesn't stop them from screwing one."

Her cheeks tint up with color. "Is that really all you're after? Screwing your way through one woman after another?"

"Not anymore." Only, it comes out all wrong. Instead of being light or playful or even defensive, it comes out full of suggestion. Laced in an unmistakable undertone. No, I'm not after fucking my way through one woman after another



because I'm suddenly only interested in fucking you. That's what my tone just intimated, and she does not miss that for a second.

It sure as hell wasn't conscious.

Shit. I should go. I should scoop up my little miss out there and bring her back to my place so she can get a full night's sleep. I absolutely should not inch in a little closer to Naomi, who is staring at me with wide, beautiful, terrified eyes. I most definitely should not love the way her breath hitches the closer I get.

My eyes dip down to her lips, full and pink and moist, and then back up to her eyes. She hasn't moved or said anything, and loud, screeching alarm bells ring through my ears, reminding me all this woman represents. Just how untouchable she is.

My forbidden fruit.

My heart pounds out and I lick my lips, coming in closer and dropping my forehead to hers. I exhale a silent breath, close my eyes, and rub my nose against hers. She's still and quiet, hardly breathing and I've already promised her a million things. A million things that contradict everything I'm doing now. Every thought I'm having.

Because all I can think about is kissing her.

It's the mutiny in my mind that I cannot gain control over.

I open my eyes and shift to the side, kissing her cheek and forcing myself to pull away. I smile a bullshit smile and rise up off the chair. My dick is already slightly hard just from the thought of her lips on mine, so I covertly adjust myself with my back to her. I walk over to the piano because if I leave

right now, like this, it'll be awkward tomorrow, and I cannot have awkward between us.

Especially when I'm the one who made it so.

“Play for me what you just played.” I roll my head over my shoulder. “I mean our song, not Metallica,” I smirk. “Then, I'm taking Ady home.”

I sit on the piano bench, which is probably stupid to place myself so close to her, but again...awkward.

Naomi rises off the arm of the chair and creeps around until she's sitting beside me. She sucks in a deep breath and twists to face me. “It's just a rough idea. I like the idea of meeting with your bandmates tomorrow. It's your song, Gus. I'm just here to help, so I'd never want to alter your sound or vision. But when I read what you wrote, this is sort of what sprang to my mind. I've been toying with lyrics for my end of it, and I think if you have time later in the week, we should work on those together?”

She ends it like a question, and I say, “Sure. Yeah, I think that makes sense to do.”

Because this is business...all business. Nothing more.

Naomi plays the song and I close my eyes, listening to what her amazingly gifted mind has created. It's not exactly what I had come up with on my own, but I can also see where she was going with it and how she got here. I think maybe a blending of our two would be sinisterly beautiful.

Like her.

When she finishes, I open my eyes and twist toward her, scooting back on the bench a bit to give us some space. “That was beautiful. Will you play it again tomorrow for Jasper?”

And Keith and Henry too, but I especially want Jas to hear this.”

She nods. “Of course. Just shoot me a text in the morning and let me know what time. I was hoping to get out on the water early, but I should be done by late morning.”

“Perfect. I’ll see you tomorrow.” And because I cannot help myself, I lean in and press my lips to her cheek, inhaling her soft fragrance as I do.

My fix.

It’s been days since I tasted her. Held her deep in my lungs.

I get up and walk out, scooping a still sleeping Adalyn up into my arms and heading for the front door. Naomi doesn’t show me out, and I force myself not to glance over my shoulder in her direction. I’m too busy mentally locking myself down. Because by tomorrow, when we really get started on this duet, I need to have myself in check where Naomi Kent is concerned.

There just is no other option.

## Chapter Thirteen

*Naomi*

“I OFFICIALLY HATE YOU,” I tell Lyric as I hop in my car and drive off toward Jasper Diamond’s house. Gus texted me this morning with an address and told me to come whenever it was convenient. Who says something like that? I mean, how freaking unhelpful?

I texted him back, informing him that the devil is in the details, and all I got back was that devil smiley emoji. Again, so freaking unhelpful.

Lyric laughs lightly into the phone. “What did I do now?”

I roll my eyes because the tone of her voice tells me she clearly knows exactly what she did and is wholly unrepentant for it. “Gus Diamond, Lyric Rose. Gus Motherfucking Diamond.”

Silence.

“So, I’m confused here. Are you angry because you think he’s hot as fuuuuck,” she sings, “and you want to jump his bones? Or are you pissed because you’re super over the moon excited about working on his duet and you think he’s hot and

you want to jump his bones, but now you can't because you're working on his duet?"

I shake my head, growling out something indiscernible under my breath.

"Casper Goddamn LaCroix came to my place yesterday when Gus was there. And no, I don't want to jump Gus's bones." I totally do.

"But you think he's hot," she states with a certainty I wish she didn't have.

"His looks mean nothing."

"Ha!" she laughs exaggeratedly. "His looks mean everything. He's sinfully gorgeous and you should be on that. Like all the time, if you can manage it and still complete the duet. He's single. You're single. It's kismet."

I roll my eyes as dramatically as I can without crashing my car off the side of the highway.

"Lyric, babe, you do realize he's still in love with his ex, right? And for real, did you miss the whole Casper Goddamn LaCroix came to my place?" I ask because I cannot think about me being on Gus Diamond like that. I mean, I *can*. And I think that's part of the crux of my problem here. He's in love with another woman. A woman I'm on my way to meet at this very moment.

Talk about a smack in the face.

I shouldn't be thinking about Gus like this. I shouldn't be lying in bed at night, reminiscing about the way he looks at me. Or the things he says. Or the way he touches me in seemingly innocuous ways that are anything but. I shouldn't be fantasizing about Gus Diamond because though Gus

Diamond may think I'm pretty, he made his position on our situation clear.

Off-limits. Friends only. He's all about meaningless fucks.

I'd have to be an utter moron to even contemplate being anything more with him than friends. I've been hurt enough for one lifetime, thank you very much.

She breathes out a loud sigh. "No, I didn't miss it. I heard the other day they were planning on recording in LA. I'm sorry, Nai. I would have warned you if I had known sooner. I'm on the east coast for the rainbow ball and to deal with my piece of shit ex, Jameson." Another sigh. "Exes fucking suck. At least it was Casper and not Florian who showed up. What did he want?"

"Just to catch up, I think. He said he wanted to have dinner some night this week."

"Could have been worse. What did Gus do?"

I take a right and head toward the Hollywood Hills where Jasper's house is. I hate this part of the city. Florian talked about us getting a home up here and therefore, it's evil. That's how my mind is working today, and I won't change my defense mechanism. It's keeping me sane and strong and whole.

"Nothing. He said hi to him or whatever. Casper was a total dick as always and I think- it's time I move to Alaska."

Lyric sputters out a cough. "Alaska?"

"I hear it's beautiful up there. It's one of the few places I've never been."

"It's also dark and cold this time of year. Listen Nai, you knew you were going to have to face this eventually. Maybe

you'll get lucky and Florian won't seek you out." I frown at that. I can't decide which I'm hoping for. To avoid him forever or have him want to talk to me. Neither feels particularly good. "In any event, you're working on this song and this song is going to be so good. I mean, just soooo good. And Gus is amazing and so are all the guys in Wild Minds. You're in great hands with them. Otherwise, I wouldn't have even considered you for this. This is your song, Nai. Your. Song."

My song.

A song about heartbreak and loving someone you can never have and trying to move past it. Yep, I suppose it's my song. Only, over the years, my heartache with Florian isn't so much based on him per se as what he did to me. Or didn't do.

Maybe that's why I'm still reeling after all this time.

I feel no sense of closure where he's concerned.

"We'll see. I haven't met with the band yet. They could tell me to screw off."

Lyric laughs loud into the phone. "You're forgetting I heard you and Gus sing together. Jasper and I already talked on the phone about it. You and Gus have that thing. That amazing chemistry that only comes around once in a lifetime. Like your parents."

A rush of air expels from my lungs.

"Too far?"

"Yes. Way too far."

"Fine, but Naomi, remember what I'm telling you here. Write this song with Gus. Make this song with Gus. And start your life again. Start writing music again. Start creating music again. It's what you were always meant to do."

I let her words hold me captive for a very long minute. My eyes glisten with tears that I know better than to let start to fall. She's right. It's what I was always meant to do. It's where my heart and passion reside.

This duet is my path forward.

Now I just have to make it through this without jumping Gus and climbing him like a tree.

I won't let myself get in over my head with him. I won't do that to myself again.

I won't.

"Okay. Go deal with Jameson and have fun at the ball. I donated a couple of items so hopefully, they'll help."

"They always help and thank you. I love you and shit."

I grin. "I love you and shit too. Bye now."

I disconnect the call and shortly after, I arrive at Jasper's beautiful mansion in the Hills.

Time seems to stand still as I hover outside the gate. I haven't pressed the buzzer yet, and even though he likely has motion sensors and knows I'm here, no one has done anything about it.

His home reminds me of my parents' house from my childhood. I was sixteen when they sold it after what happened to me in it. For a while, my father, mother, and I just sort of lived out of hotels and rented homes across the country and throughout the world.

I was making albums. I was singing and headlining tours. My mother had retired when I was fourteen, deciding to focus her efforts on my career instead of hers, and my father could write songs anywhere.



So that's how it went until I met Florian.

He seemed to ground all of us in a way. I was only seventeen, but the moment he came along and swept me off my feet, that was it. I basically moved in with him—minor status be damned—straight into his 90210 mansion. My mother and father rented a place nearby, and that was just our life. No one talked about how young I was to be with a man so much older. For us to be so serious so fast. It was just how it was with us, and I think when my father looked at Florian, he saw himself. I often wonder what my father would have said or done if he were still alive when Florian and I ended.

A year after I met Florian, my mother died of cancer. A year and a half later, my father was dead.

These last years have been filled with a lot of heartache. It was bam, bam, bam, one thing after the other, and all of them shattered me until I was nothing more than a pile of dust on the ground. There was no glue that could mend my broken pieces. No salve to heal my wounds. I had no choice but to pick myself off and keep moving.

I guess that's how I find myself here.

My phone vibrates in my purse and an uneasiness settles in my chest. Since Casper showed up at my door, a burning anticipation has been eating away at my gut. Corrosive and brutal, it won't be denied even when I do everything I can to push it all down.

My fingers automatically hover over the lower left side of my belly, lingering over the thin one-inch indent in my skin that resides beneath my blouse. This is the worst scar of all and not because it's visible, but because it serves as a daily reminder of all I'll likely never have.

My phone vibrates again, and I bluster out a loud sigh.

I don't know what I'm more afraid of—that it's him or that it isn't.

“Just give a girl a goddamn second.”

Fishing through my oversized purse, I locate my phone and practically belt out a laugh when I see what's waiting for me.

Gus. I should have known.

A bubble of energy inflates low in my belly.

***Vagina up and get your pretty ass in here.***

Followed by.

***Come on. Don't let our fucked family dynamic scare you. Viola is going out of her mind waiting on you. She's probably your biggest fan. Did I mention that already?***

Viola. The woman Gus Diamond loves. The woman Jasper Diamond is married to. I have to admit, I'm beyond curious about her. About the way they all interact with each other. How does a family recover from something like that? From two brothers loving the same woman and only one of them being able to have her?

I guess I'm about to find out.

***Buzz the gate for me.***

A second later the wrought-iron fortress swings open, beckoning me to enter. I pull into the circular driveway, park my car, and erupt into a crazy grin when the front door flies open with Gus standing there, his arm around a woman who can only be Viola. He's holding her back, I realize, a dopy, amused grin on his face as he watches her excitement, and I

think Gus is the most amazing of men. One I've most certainly never encountered before.

He's insanely likable.

Hell, who am I kidding? The man makes my heart thunder in my chest every time I think about him, let alone see him. But he called us friends, and it doesn't take much to see where his heart still lies.

I get out of the car, grab the bottle of wine, flowers, and candy, tucking all of them into my arms as I go.

"Hi," I say as I round the front of my car and head in their direction.

"Holy shit," I hear her whisper. "She's here. Gus..." Viola's voice trails off, grabbing his arm in a tight grip, making him laugh, and I can't stop my huge smile.

How fucking adorable is this woman?

I mean, she's a stunning thing, slender with long blonde hair, wearing a short black skirt and a purple snug-fitting t-shirt that accentuates her perfect baby bump.

Gus finally sets her free and Viola Diamond rushes toward me, stopping short just as she reaches me, a smile glimmering in her eyes and cheeks. "Wow. Hi. I'm Viola."

"Naomi."

"I know," she beams. "I never gave a crap about any of this rock star stuff, but meeting you..." She fans her face. "Yep, total fangirling right now."

I belt out a laugh. "Is it weird that I feel the same about you?" Her eyes pop open wide in shock, but it's true. "I realize you cannot drink wine, but my father brought me up to never go to someone's house without a nice bottle for them. But, in

consideration, I also brought flowers and chocolates. Really good chocolates, but they're also dairy and gluten-free so Adalyn can have some."

And that's when this chick launches herself at me, crushing me in a hug. "Sorry!" she exclaims. "I'm fangirling for more than just my absolute adoration of your music—though I am a HUGE fan—or for the fact that you brought Adalyn-approved chocolates," she whispers in my ear. "I haven't seen Gus smile this much and mean it in a very long time. Few things make me happier than seeing Gus happy." She pulls back and wipes away at a stray tear. "Stupid hormones," she grouses, rolling her eyes at her emotions. "Please come in. Adalyn has said your name over and over again, and you're going to have to tell me where you ordered that pizza from because she keeps asking for it. You got my baby girl to eat mushrooms and eggplant. I think you're my hero."

And the fact that she just called Adalyn, who is not biologically hers, her baby girl makes me love her more.

"Vi," Gus yells out, cupping his hands around his mouth, a lightness glimmering in his eyes. "You'll scare her off before she crosses the threshold, babe."

Viola flips him off without turning away from me, tossing a wink in my direction as she does.

I don't want to be jealous of her, but it's impossible to be anything but. I can already see why the Diamond boys are so enamored with her.

Viola takes all the goodies I brought from my hands and waves for me to follow her. The moment I reach the front entrance, Gus steps forward and wraps his arms around me like hugging me in this way is the most natural thing in the

world for us to do. He plants a kiss on my cheek and meets my eyes with an unmistakable enthusiasm.

“You ready for this? The guys are waiting.”

## Chapter Fourteen

*Naomi*

I DON'T THINK I am ready for this. For some reason, I figured we'd just all chill out a bit. Shoot the shit. Get to know each other.

But that's stupid, right?

I mean, Gus told me last night he wanted me to play for his brother and bandmates.

I said yes to doing this duet.

Now I'm sitting in a music room that's *almost* as cool as mine, sipping on a Diet Coke and staring at Jasper, Keith, and Henry who are all staring back at me with a mixture of awe, intrigue, appreciation, desire, and concern.

I feel like some strange specimen on display, and I can't decide where I'm supposed to look. Who is safe. Their scrutiny is unnerving. Especially as they continue to trade meaningful glances coupled with severe frowns with each other in between long stares at me. The silence is stifling—and it's starting to grate on my already fragile nerves.

Viola and Adalyn were playing this charming game with shapes and colors, and I think I'd rather go back up there and chill with them. I glance longingly toward the door and then mentally shake myself.

*Don't show fear, Naomi. That's bullshit and useless and you're better than that.*

Right. Totally. I'm like fifty-eight percent there with that.

The problem I'm having is, I want them to like me. I realize that makes me sound like a nine-year-old, but so be it. I do. I'm an all or nothing girl, and since deciding to be all-in with this duet, my mind has been a disaster. A fluctuating mess between trying to write words that I cannot force to come because I'm reluctant to dredge up the feeling and emotion behind them and sitting behind my piano or with my guitar, plucking out notes until they're perfect for hours.

I know I require their approval, because let's face it, I do.

Gus is not a one-man army.

He's part of a hugely successful band, and part of that band is his brother. But what they're doing with me right now is a mystery, and I have no words to break this strange swirl of tension because I don't know these guys.

Gus is no help. He's just sitting in his chair, staring at me while rubbing absently at his chiseled jaw. I frown at him, widening my eyes, but he gives me nothing back in return. *Seriously?*

Suddenly Lyric's words churn in my stomach like bad sushi. Because his face is like a piece of priceless art in a museum. Gorgeous, thought-provoking, and totally untouchable despite how badly you might want to own it.

He teases and flirts and... yeah, I could like Gus Diamond.

I could like him a lot if I let myself.

We have that pull. A magnetic draw that buzzes between us, shooting back and forth like fighting nemesis, tickling my skin and zapping up my spine. It's heady and dangerous and so goddamn sweet I just want to lick it off my lips.

The way he looks at me sometimes could set the whole room ablaze and yet, right now, he's different.

Closed off.

Warm and friendly, sure, but it's not the same as it was last night, and instinctively, I know it's because of where we are and who we're with. I know this attraction is ill-fated. Illogical. CRAZY! But it makes me miss things I once had. Things I want to have again one day.

Things I know I'll never have with Gus.

Viola left us to ourselves almost immediately, Adalyn gave me a sweet smile but that was all the loving I got. I seriously wish Lyric or even Ethan were here. I could use an ally and Gus, for whatever reason, right now doesn't feel like it.

Finally, one of them clears their throat. "We heard the track of when you and Gus sang Time Surrender." That's Henry and all I can do is nod. "It was good, but I think I need better."

Um. *Okay*. What the hell does that mean? I frown, my eyebrows pinching in. My hands find my hips, and I just stare at him, wondering...does he not realize it was only the first time Gus and I sang together? And if memory serves, that first time was unbelievable.

I have a feeling I'm not going to take criticism from them well.



“You understand the importance of a song like this for Gus.” That’s Keith and again, all I can do is nod. “But it’s not just his name on the line. As Henry said, we heard the song. But yeah...” He trails off, folding his large arms over his chest and giving me a pinched scowl. He shakes his head in dismay. “You can understand why we’re not as sold on you as Gus and Viola are.”

Right. Not really, actually. And when did this become the Spanish Inquisition?

“Are you seeing anyone?” Keith again, and I find myself glaring at him as I try to read into something that’s eluding me. The fuck is going on here? “If not, is that on the table with this? Because if you say no, that’s a no-go for me. I think you’re hot and really sexy, and I think I’d like to make some babies with you soon.”

Jasper hasn’t so much as said two words. He’s just been sitting in his office-like chair, leaning back in it with his hands clasped behind his head, quietly observing me.

“Um.” I shake myself out of this, turning back to Keith and away from Jasper since he’s no help.

Keith cannot be serious with that ridiculousness. I peek over at Gus who sits stoically like a guy watching a forced rom-com with a bag of popcorn in his lap as his girl constantly dips into it as she chews with her mouth open. That doesn’t even make sense, but it feels like it does in my warped mind.

“Did you infuse this Diet Coke with LSD and suddenly I’m tripping out?” No response. “Right. Well, let’s go with I’m fucking Mother Teresa and holy and virtuous where your man parts are concerned. This girl” —I point in the general direction of my pussy— “is a no-go for you men.”

Keith is nonplussed.

“She would have never said fuck before she died. So, I’m thinking you’re not as virtuous as she was. Which also means you’re saying there’s a chance.”

“Slow it down, baby cakes. I saw *Dumb and Dumber* too.”

Keith grins like the devil, his blue eyes sparkling. “That right there.” He points at me.

“Can we get back to this? We’re here about the music. Not our big dicks,” Henry snaps at Keith with an edge before turning on me “What are your intentions with this song?”

And that’s when I turn to Henry, tilt my head in his direction, stare him down before each of the other guys and then crack up. “I honestly can’t say. I mean, I hardly know it at this point. But if it’ll take me,” I wipe at my dry eyes with sarcastic emotion, “I might want to marry it one day. Possibly spawn its offspring. Not yours, Keith. Sorry about that.” I give him a sorry not sorry shrug.

“You can’t mean that,” Keith says. “You have to want me too.”

A smirk quirks up Jasper’s lips and I know I’m on to something here. The most stoic is always the one to crumble first.

“Were you hoping I’d one night it? Hit it and quit it? Is that what you want with me, Keith? The Mother would be so disappointed.” He grins. “How about you? Are you cool with my super-secret love affair with this song given my penchant for monogamy?” I ask Henry, who is still holding on tight. “Meaningless sex isn’t really my style. I wouldn’t exactly call it love yet, it’s still too new, too unfinished, but I think given some time I might get there.”

Gus takes a sip of the beer he's been nursing so he doesn't laugh.

Henry stands up tall before me. He reaches a hand out for me and I reluctantly take it. I'm not really used to initiations. But clearly, this band of brothers needs me to pass whatever weird test they've designed for me. Henry tugs me upright, straight into his arms before he hugs me fiercely. "If you don't marry the song, would you consider marrying me?"

I grin, laughing lightly. "I'm a lot of work."

He pulls back with a shrug. "That doesn't bother me the way it bothers Keith. I like work."

"Hey," Keith stands up, reaching out and grasping my arm. He jerks me away from Henry until I'm forced to face him, practically nose to nose. This guy is tall with a lot of muscles. "Don't listen to him, honey. That's total bullshit. I like work. I like the hell out of it. And believe me when I tell you, I'm by far the best at it."

I roll my eyes at him and the blatant sexual undertone of his voice.

I shove both Keith and Henry away. "Tuck your dicks away, boys. I didn't come for a cockfight."

Gus points at me, but his eyes are on Jasper's and Jasper nods his head as the two of them have some sort of conversation without words.

"I think I'm in love." That's Henry.

Keith growls something out in the back of his throat. "I already called dibs the second her car pulled in. You can't call dibs after that. It's against the rules."

“This isn’t shotgun, dude. I can call dibs whenever the hell I want. And I seriously do not remember you saying shit when her car pulled in.”

“That’s because you were too busy drooling all over the window to listen.”

I pivot to Gus, looking for a little help or direction with this. He hitches up a shoulder, an arrogant, content grin on his handsome face. “Now you understand why I told you I’d have to kiss you if you came here.” Gus rubs at his jaw, appearing as casual and unaffected as Gus always appears unless he’s talking about the song. Then he’s a very different animal.

Gus may be smiling, thinking this little back and forth is funny, but I do not. Well, maybe I do a little. “Whatever happened to letting the lady choose?” All eyes turn on me. Why am I indulging in this? “You realize I can file a complaint with the record label and get all your sexist, sexually harassing asses in trouble, right?”

“You’re the one who first talked about sex. We just kept it going. And for the record, Keith and I are professing our love, not our lust.” I roll my eyes, but now I’m smiling. Henry reaches out and squeezes my shoulder before releasing me just as quickly. “Thanks for putting up with our little game. We’re really happy you’re here.”

Keith throws his hands up when I narrow my eyes at him. “I’m actually kinda serious about calling dibs.” I shake my head, jabbing a finger into his chest. He puffs out a laugh. “We’re a million times worse with Vi if that makes you feel better. You should hear the torture we’ve put that poor woman through over the years. But yeah, what Henry said. We’ve all been really excited you’re on board and doing this song for Gus.”

Finally, Jasper stands up. It's crazy how different he and Gus look. They're opposites in every way. Jasper is so very serious, quiet and broody, where Gus is all smiles and jokes and easy-going disposition. "I'd apologize for them, but since it wasn't my idea and I actually had nothing to do with it, I won't. But it's nice to know you can hold your own. Gus is a handful." Gus flips Jasper off, but he's still smiling. "I'm a big fan, Naomi. Truly, I cannot wait to work with you. But you understand why I cannot sing this?"

I nod. "Of course. It's Gus's song."

He hums out an affirmative. "It's Gus's song," he parrots with a big smile. "And I think it's going to be absolutely incredible. I cannot wait to hear what you're bringing to it."

I stare at Jasper Diamond and I think he might actually be one of the most amazing people I've ever encountered. I have to admit, I was nervous about today. About meeting him. About seeing how Gus, Jasper, and Viola are together. But there is no tension. No animosity or jealousy.

It's just...love. Just pure love between these people. Even with Henry and Keith.

I wonder if they're aware how rare that is. How special and beautiful. A pang of longing hits me square in the chest. What would that feel like to be a part of? I once thought I had that, but seeing this band, this family together...

"Gus said you wrote some tunes for it. I'd love to hear them."

"Yeah. I wrote something."

Taking a seat at the piano, I glance up at Gus, who gives me a slight nod, and then I launch into what I played for him last night. It's not complete, obviously. My lyrics aren't fully

formed, and I haven't gone over what I've worked on with Gus yet. Instead, I just play the melody that's been floating in and out of my head, waking me up at night and begging for attention. That's how it is with me. Once my mind gets going on something, it doesn't stop until it's satisfied it's perfect, and this song is a long way off from that.

After I'm done playing, I spin around to face the guys. Jasper and Gus are looking at each other again. Henry and Keith are joining in, all with thoughtful expressions.

"Christ, you guys are worse than the judges on The Voice. If you hate it, just tell me. I'm a big girl, I can take it."

"Honestly, I think it fits better than anything I've come up with," Keith says, and Jasper nods.

"Yeah. I think that might actually be perfect," he agrees. "But..." He trails, staring straight at Gus and something passes between them.

Gus turns on me, his eyes dancing around my face. His gaze drops to the ground for a beat as he swallows hard and then forces himself back up until he's staring directly into my eyes with a determination I don't think I've witnessed on him before.

"Right," he murmurs. "I think it's time we get going on those lyrics."

My heart starts to pound in my chest. Shit. This is really happening. And it's going to hurt like hell.

## Chapter Fifteen

*Gus*

“NAOMI, I think that sounds good, but it’s tough to really hear it over the phone,” I tell her, tugging off my sweat-soaked sports shirt and tossing it in the general direction of my closet. My body is sore. I punished the hell out of it with a run and then weights.

It was supposed to help center me a bit. Help keep my head on straight where Naomi is concerned. But then she called, wanting me to listen to some things she came up with and suddenly, it’s like all that hard, mind-numbing work went right out the window.

She huffs into the phone. “Gus Diamond, why the hell do you think I’ve been trying to get you to do this in person with me? We have a deadline, right? Why do I feel like you’re suddenly blowing me off after Jasper’s the other day?”

I pause, standing in the middle of my room and close my eyes.

She has been trying to get me to do this with her in person. She asked if I wanted to come over to work on the song with

her today, and I said I couldn't.

Because I can't.

Her house smells like her. And her bed is upstairs. And her couch is pretty comfortable too, and even her damn kitchen counters are enticing. The more time I'm alone with her in secluded places, the more I want to do very dirty things to her. Especially when she sings, or we sing together because something about that gets me hard like nothing else.

Or maybe it's just her that gets me hard like nothing else.

"I'm not blowing you off, beautiful girl. It's just..."

I tuck my phone in between my ear and my shoulder and slip my shorts off next, standing naked in the center of my room as I think. I need to man the hell up. It's my song, my duet, and I brought her into it.

She's right—everything she just said. I just didn't expect...

"How about we meet up tomorrow at a coffee shop and work on it there?"

She huffs again, the sound of her heavy breath coming through the phone, and my cock jerks. I glance down. *Not helpful, buddy.* But when it comes to Naomi, my dick has a serious mind of his own. He is undeterred. Angry at me for trying to rein him in.

And absolutely hates it when I tell him he can't have her.

I've been trying to be good. I've been working on not fantasizing about Naomi Kent in all the ways my mind is desperate to go. It feels like a slippery slope. Like once I truly allow myself to go there, I'll never be able to stop.

"What's up, beautiful. You sound unhappy."



I smile as she makes that sound again. Only this time, she tacks on a groan at the end of it and my smile slips. My cock hits me in the stomach as if to say, see, I told you're as screwed as I am.

“A coffee shop? This is not a novel or a college essay, Gus. This is a song. It needs to be done in a space where we can record it. Where we can play around with instruments. Where we can sing and not draw attention to ourselves doing it.”

She's right again. I know she's is, but I can't exactly come out and tell her the reason I can't work at her house and mine isn't any better. I'd say Jasper's, but Jasper already made it clear this is my song and not his.

“There's this place over in Santa Monica. It's cool. You'll like the vibe. We'll focus on writing and can always play it out later.” She mutters something under her breath that I can't hear. “What was that?”

“I said men are so stupid and stubborn.”

“Can't argue that one.”

“Fine. I'll meet you at this coffee shop tomorrow. Text me the address.”

“What are you doing now?”

She laughs, and the sound of her laugh never fails to draw a smile to my lips. “Gus, it's like almost nine at night.”

“What are you, eighty? You don't go out at night?”

“Eighty-three and don't be a dick. I was about to go up and take a bath. My back hurts from surfing this morning.”

“A bath, huh?” I say before I can stop it, thinking about her naked, wet, and soapy in the tub. “I just came back from a

workout and was going to shower. We could do that together, you know.”

“Gus,” she says on a warning, but there is something else there. Something in her voice or the way she inhales a breath that has my mind swirling.

“Or I could try a bath,” I continue, knowing I need to shut the hell up but unable to stop the runaway train that is my mouth. “Though I haven’t taken one since I was a kid.”

“You took a bath with me.”

And that’s it. That right there.

I tried. I really freaking did.

But it’s too late now.

She might have said that in jest, but I think I’m already past the point of no return with her. I *want* this woman. Bad.

My hand drifts down my abdomen, lingering just above where I’m desperate to go. I stifle my moan and close my eyes, holding in a breath before I whisper, “Not the kind of bath I wanted to.” She’s silent and I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. “What do you do in the bath? Give me a visual. Are you a bubbles, wine, and a book girl?” *Or do you get yourself off with battery operated, waterproof toys?*

“Bubbles are a must and the glass of wine sounds nice. I don’t usually read in the bath. I like to just sit and relax.”

“Wanna Facetime while you do?”

“Gus,” she laughs my name, her voice slightly tremulous and husky, and I shake my head at myself. I’m supposed to be her friend. That’s what I promised her.

“I should let you go and enjoy your bath. Relax, Naomi. You deserve it, and I’ll text you the address of the coffee shop for tomorrow.”

She says my name again, but I disconnect the call because I’m seriously two seconds from either driving over to her house, or begging for that Facetime, or hell, even trying to have phone sex with her. I glance down at myself and know there is only one way this is going away.

I’m hard as steel.

For her.

And clearly, ignoring my desire for her isn’t getting me anywhere. So maybe if I give in, it’ll help take the edge off and I can focus on the duet and not all the ways I want her? Right. That makes total sense. And even if it doesn’t, it’s too late now.

Walking into my shower, I turn it on to hot, letting the large room fill with steam before I step in. I groan as the hot water hits my muscles, trailing down my body and over my aching cock. I grab myself, running my thumb over the head in slow, deliberate circles. Throwing my forearm on the cool tile wall, I plaster my forehead into it as I stare down, my mind already filled up with her.

At first, I imagine her in the bath, standing naked in the warm, steamy water as she slowly dips down into it, her eyes on me right before they close and she tips her head back, moaning. But I don’t want her in the bath. I can’t see her tits or pussy that way.

Instead, she’s on her knees here, with me, in the shower. Those pretty blue eyes staring up at me with a coy smile on

her full, red lips, licking them before she opens, taking my thick, heavy cock in her mouth and sucking me in.

A growl rips from my lungs as I start to pump myself, her greedy mouth slurping at me, licking the underside of my cock with her tongue, up along my vein before she dives back down on me as deep as she can go. Her head starts to bob up and down eagerly, my hands in her hair, helping to guide her along.

She gags a little, her eyes watering, and fuck, she's so beautiful. My beautiful girl. And as amazing as she is with her mouth, as fucking hot as having her on her knees for me is, I need to see her. I need to touch her.

“Fuck my tits, Gus.”

I swallow and nod because, shit. I want that. So bad. Her tits drive me wild. So full and perfect. I'm dying to taste them. To lick her pink nipples before sucking them into my mouth and biting down until she moans for me.

Just for me.

Naomi cries out as I lift her up, pressing her into the wall and sliding my hand down her body. She's panting. Those pretty tits heaving, and as my fingers find her slick clit she starts to whimper. To beg me to make her come. I slide my fingers inside her warm, wet heat, and I pick up my pace, finger fucking her while I stroke my cock into a frenzy.

“Does that feel good, beautiful? You like the way I touch you?”

“I want your mouth on me. Your cock in me. I need it all now. So bad, Gus. Please. I need you so bad.”

My head flies back as I pull my fingers out of her pussy, sucking them into my mouth so I can taste her while slipping

my cock deep inside of her.

Her body arches, but her gaze remains locked on mine while I fuck her.

Jesus. God in heaven. I fuck her so hard.

She wraps her legs around my waist, her nails scraping down my back and up through my hair as I pound into her. Over and over and over while she screams in pleasure. While she begs for it harder, deeper. While she tells me how close she is and how good I feel inside of her.

How no one has ever felt better.

The need to claim her consumes me. Her pussy. Her ass. Her mouth. Her tits.

Mine. All of her is mine.

Her head falls back, her lips part, and she comes so hard, all over my cock, crying out my name like it's the answer to her prayers. I explode. spurts of white cum shoot out all over my hand and the wall as I yell out, cursing like I never have before. My vision sways, sparks of color splash behind my eyes as I lean against the wall so I don't pass out.

*Jesus .*

I can't remember the last time I came that hard and that was just me jerking off to her.

And instead of leaving me satisfied and content, instead of feeling like I worked her out of my system with that mind-blowing orgasm, it's the complete opposite.

All that did is make me hungrier for her. All this interlude with my palm did is leave me *craving* more.

I unleashed the beast—and now I have no idea how to tuck him back into hibernation when he's demanding to be fed.

And unfortunately for me, there's only one woman who can sate his appetite.

## Chapter Sixteen

*Gus*

“I LIKE THAT LINE, I’m just not sure how well it works with the one before it,” I say, pointing to the page we’re working on. We’re sitting in the coffee shop in Santa Monica, leaning over a coffee table of sorts and shoving the paper with my original lyrics back and forth between us. My back hurts. My eyes ache. My stomach is queasy from the two strong cups of coffee I’ve had.

But I can’t do this with Naomi any other way, so I’ve been suffering through.

The moment she left Jasper’s a few days ago, he immediately began digging into me. He saw that I want her. That I am trying to hold it back. He noticed how my stupid jaw locked when Henry and Keith were going back and forth over her.

Fucking Jasper always has to see it all, doesn’t he?

Always has to win.

“Lock it down,” he said. “If you’re not serious about the girl for more than her body and this song, then lock it down

now and throw away the fucking key.”

“What if it’s more than that?” I asked, and he raised an eyebrow at that.

“Is it?” he threw back, not in a mean or mocking way either. It was a question dipped in skepticism. Dipped in concern. Because he knows me and knows that there has only been one woman I’ve wanted for more than her body. One. And that’s what this goddamn song is about.

So yeah, I get his thinking on this.

Doesn’t mean I like it.

“I don’t know,” I told him because it’s the truth. I don’t know. I like Naomi. I like spending time with her. And since she came along, I haven’t thought about Viola all that much. And she’s all I’ve thought about since I laid eyes on her when we were eight. I’m not even exaggerating. Maybe that’s what is throwing me off the most.

Obsession is a funny thing. It’s one of those bastards that eats at every chunk of your skin. Sucks at every cell of your blood. Consumes every fiber of your thinking. Until one day, you realize your obsession isn’t at all what you thought it was. That maybe, all this time, it was misguided. Confused. Stuck on the wrong person on the wrong path.

I should be ecstatic about that.

Insanely relieved that my heart and mind are finally starting to move past Viola. That she no longer consumes my every waking thought.

But now, all I’m able to think about is Naomi.

Her smile. Her voice that sounds like angels singing. Her laugh that makes me smile like a fool every time I hear it. Her



wit and sarcasm and sass. Her body. Her mind. Her talent. Even her vulnerability and sadness hit me on a different level.

It's like history repeating itself. I'm not looking to get attached to someone new, I'm just looking to get unattached to someone old. I can't tell if this attraction is just muscle memory or if it's something genuine. I don't know if I want this woman because I can't have her, because she's as forbidden to me as Viola is, or because I just *want* this woman.

And my head is a goddamn mess with it.

I'm worried I'm latching on to the first woman to come around, transferring my feelings for Viola onto Naomi, because she's here and seemingly perfect.

I crave her more than my next breath. I inhale deeper just so I can smell her unique fragrance. I stare a little longer to memorize her every feature. I picture her in a hundred different dirty ways, and all of them make me so goddamn hard I don't think I've ever had erections like this.

“If you don't know, then you need to respect her enough to keep it strictly professional and your hands and thoughts to yourself until you do. She doesn't deserve to be used.”

I agreed once more and told Jasper I would keep it in check. Because he's right. Naomi does not deserve to be used. She is not a rebound, and I'm smart enough to realize that that's likely what this is. Isn't that what they say? That when you're getting over someone you love, it's easy to transfer those emotions onto someone else? Doesn't make them real.

So, I've been keeping my distance. Texting her only when needed.

Suggested meeting here in a safe, neutral place instead of her house or mine.

“Gus, I can’t work like this anymore,” Naomi growls in aggravation, shoving the scribbled-up piece of paper back at me. “I can’t tell where your lines begin and mine end and vice versa. Can’t we please just type this out?”

I shake my head. “It’s better like this. It’s easier to work out our thoughts with a pen and paper than a computer.”

She shakes her head in return, heaving out a frustrated breath. We’ve been at this for well over an hour and made very little progress. Honestly, I think we’re starting to get on each other’s nerves. I make a change and she bitches about it. She makes a change and I bitch about it. There’s a tension in the air, swirling around, weighing us down, and it’s all my fault.

She showed up like sunshine and roses, glowing a beautiful smile, and it did funny things to my insides. I can’t look at her. I can hardly talk to her. I have no idea how I’m going to write this duet with her, let alone sing it and record it when it suddenly feels all wrong. Everything about it. The lyrics, the sentiment.

I can’t even tell why.

But it’s too late to back out now.

What felt so fucking important a week ago is now strangling me.

“That’s absolutely ridiculous.” She brushes some of her long, dark hair from her face, sitting back and glaring at me. “It takes me so much longer to write than it does to type.”

I roll my eyes at her, and I think she wants to smack that hat off my head. Or punch me in the face because that’s where she’s burning daggers into me. Is it weird that I’d welcome either of those right about now? I think mentally fucked is my new middle name.

“We could be sitting on my back deck, listening to the ocean and working all this up. But instead, we’re here” —she points to the meager space between us— “and doing nothing but fighting.”

“We’re not fighting.”

“Gus,” she barks, growing even more exasperated with me, which I didn’t think was possible. Her hands fly out around her. “That’s all we’ve been doing since we sat down. If you’re not up for working this out today, then just tell me. It’s an easy thing to do. Naomi, my mind is not in the right frame to be writing this today,” she mocks my voice. “See? Simple. But you keep pushing this godawful paper and pencil at me like it’s somehow going to magically transform into a completed duet and that’s just not happening. Talk to me. What’s up? Why are we here?”

“It’s easier to work here than it is at your place,” is all I can manage.

Doesn’t she get it? Can’t she see? I can’t be alone with her in seclusion because all I want to do is lean in and kiss her sweet lips until she’s breathless with it. Reach up under the hem of her pretty purple dress and find out what type of panties she’s wearing. What sort of sounds she’ll make when my fingers dip inside her pussy and find her wet for me. These are the thoughts that wake me up in the middle of the goddamn night.

That have me jerking off like I’m a teenager all over again.

She stares at me incredulously. “How the hell do you figure that?” I glance up at her, my eyes finally locking with hers as something shifts in my expression. She frowns. “What?”

Should I tell her I want to jump her bones and see what happens? Maybe if we do the deed and it's done, it will help? I won't be so consumed with her, right? We'll be able to go back to a natural baseline and write the song without all this strain?

I inwardly shake my head. God, my dick can be so fucking stupid sometimes.

"It's nothing." I sigh, sitting back in my chair and scrubbing a hand over my face. Christ, my back is killing me. How long had I been leaning in that position? I twist from side to side, trying to crack it or pop it or whatever will relieve the ache. "It's nothing," I repeat. "I think we just need a break. Let's go for a walk."

Get some fresh air that doesn't taste like you.

"Alright," she says like she's suddenly got it all figured out, and when I open my eyes, I realize she's standing and not talking about the song. Dammit. "Stand up. Let's go."

"Where are we going?" I ask warily.

"You're too in your head right now." *Understatement of the century*. "We're going to get a margarita and nachos and eat them on the pier. Maybe go on the roller coaster and barf all that up afterward. I don't know. I haven't decided on that part yet. But we've been so freaking somber and serious since we met, and I think we need to have some fun together."

I have such a crush on this girl, it's destined to ruin me.

"Or maybe we should just drive to Vegas and get married."

"Gus!"

I chuckle. "Okay. Nachos and a margarita for the win."

“Naomi Kent goes for the net. She shoots. Goal!” Her arms fly up in the air and I can’t stop myself from smiling. From showing her all my teeth and standing up and wrapping an arm around her waist and tucking her delectable body against mine. I kiss the side of her face and release her immediately.

“Hockey fan?”

“My father was Canadian.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. Huge hockey fan. Incidentally, my mother was from Boston, and every time the Canadians played the Bruins shit went down in my house.”

Damn. Boston and Montreal. “So you’re a—”

“B’s, C’s, Pats, and Sox fan? Yes. And if you start to hate, this duet is over.”

What was I just saying about a crush? I think this is love.

“You know I’m a southern boy, right? I love my Crimson and my Saints.” She rolls her eyes at me.

Right, because I’m wearing my Crimson Tide hat and tee and fuck all do I love my college football. Vi sent me both of these when she went off to college. At the time, I remember her joking about sleeping in the shirt and when it came, it did smell like her. I wore it for a week straight. Slept with it over my face every night. I missed her so much, but that never stopped me from doing things with other women that should never have been done.

Things I hate myself for.

But that was a million years ago, and this shirt has seen me through a lot. So has this hat.

I stare at Naomi and wonder if it's maturity and age creeping through my head and altering my thoughts. Because I want to kill Florian Heart. I want to shake him and point to this beautiful, sensational, out-of-this-world woman and tell him that he's so dumb, but I'm so grateful for his stupidity.

He let the best thing he'll ever get go, but his loss is absolutely my gain.

"If the Pats ever play the Saints, you and I are there."

"Can we rethink that whole Vegas marriage trip?"

"Come on, Gus. I thought we had this mutual understanding going."

We did and then she turned out to be everything.

She smiles up at me. "My head is already so full. Can we just chill out? Relax some? Enjoy each other? Tomorrow we can write the hell out of this song. I know we can. We're so close. But there is this weight surrounding us. I'm not saying we don't need it, because I feel like we do. This song is all emotion. But for tonight, I just want to have fun."

I cup her cheek in my hand and stare into her incredible blue eyes. "Let's have some fun. But if I kiss you at the end of the night, you can't hold it against me."

## Chapter Seventeen

*Gus*

“HAVE I told you how stupid this is?”

Naomi stares at me with a broad, mischievous, slightly evil smile. “Have I told you how little I care?”

She did. Right after I told her shots of tequila are a mistake. She only ordered one to go with our margaritas and nachos, but still. Shots are dangerous territory. Especially tequila shots.

We’re at a restaurant at the end of the Santa Monica pier, staring out at the Pacific, watching the sun begin its descent and talking about music. Not our music, but music we grew up loving. Music that spoke to our soul and got us started on our journey.

“Strumbellas, Wild Sun.”

“Oh. That’s a good one. But it’s newer.”

I shrug. “Give me a newer one.”

“Easy as hell, guy. OneRepublic’s, ‘Burning Bridges.’ Damn, that song *kills* me. Or, Mumford and Sons ‘Woman.’

Or really any of theirs because Marcus' poetry is epic.”

“Agreed on both. Plus, the beats of Woman are killer.” She shoots me with her finger like I just nailed her thoughts. “Tell me about your first album. Did you write it?”

She gives me a huge nod and a pleased smile. “Yep. Every word. I was a zygote when I wrote it,” she laughs. “Total teenager with a big heart and a lot of romance in my head that was yet to be realized. What about yours?”

I tell her about Jasper's poetry. About the album he wrote for Vi and how that didn't stop me from capturing and claiming her as mine.

“But...” I watch as she tilts her head, scrunching her eyebrows and taking another sip of her drink. Naomi Kent is a lightweight and it's so insanely cute I can hardly stand it. “You knew?”

I nod, offering her a wan grin, feeling just a little more like an asshole for it.

“And...”

I shrug again.

“Wow. Just wow.” Then she leans back and smiles so brightly I wonder if the sun that's setting on the horizon is jealous. “But now...”

I nod. Because there isn't a whole lot else to say. I made sure Jasper got the girl in the end and that's all I can do.

“Does it break your heart, Gus?”

Naomi dips her finger along her salt rim, licking at the brine and pinning me with the saddest of sad eyes, that smile she had going only seconds ago, slipping.



“No. Viola always should have been Jasper’s. I stepped in and messed a lot of things up. I don’t regret my relationship with her. I don’t regret the way I loved her. I don’t regret the time I spent with her as mine. The only things I regret are the way I treated her, the length of time it took me to grow some balls and bring her back into our lives, and the fact that I didn’t tell Jasper the truth from the start.”

Our shots are delivered as these words hang in the air between us, and I think Naomi is grateful for that. Because Naomi has a lot of demons. And those demons broke a lot of pieces of her heart. And those demons still pick at her soul. I mean, think of the freaking songs this girl just spoke about?

Our waitress smiles at me, grins at Naomi, and then walks off. Naomi lifts her slender glass, filled with clear liquid up to me. I do the same, but instead of the cheers I expect, something along the lines of, to new friendships or surviving our pasts, she just tosses it down her throat. I blink at her, slightly stunned and follow after her. Naomi sputters out a dry cough, hacking slightly, and chasing the mild tequila down with large gulps of water.

“Another?” she asks, and I tilt my head, staring at her.

“Beautiful girl, what on earth are you so afraid of?”

She lets off a nervous laugh, taking a large gulp of her margarita and searching over my shoulder in the direction of our waitress. “Those nachos are taking forever. I’m starving.”

“Talk to me,” I implore, reaching across our small raised table on the edge of the railing and taking her hand. “Tell me what has you so jittery right now and wanting to drink like a fish. Why you can write the melody to our duet, but not the words.”

She swallows and slowly shifts until her gaze is back on mine. “He left me because drugs meant more to him than I did. I’ve been alone for a very long time, Gus. And I was doing okay with that—sort of. I mean, it’s not great, but it’s my life and I’m handling it. But then...the other day...I think I’m just a little jealous of the love you and Jasper have for Viola. Of the lengths you’ve both gone to for her. For each other. Stupid, right?”

She lets off a small laugh, but it’s awkward and self-conscious.

And...yep, a part of me just turned into a murderous bastard.

“Where is he now?” I’m not even kidding. I will end him.

She shakes her head, and I stare helplessly as her eyes grow glassy. “I’m serious, Gus.” *So am I, Naomi.* “I knew Florian was using heroin. I had caught him, and he promised to stop. My father died of it, you know?” I nod because everyone knows that. “I found my father in a hotel bathroom and I just...”

My beautiful girl trails off, covering her mouth with her hand so she doesn’t audibly sob, and just what the fuck? Why her?

She clears her throat. Composes herself. “So, when I caught Florian with a needle in his hand after all that, after he promised to stop, I went a little nuts. But,” sigh, “you know...”

I do know. “He broke up with you?”

“He did. Or I broke up with him. I don’t even know anymore. But then the whole Grammys thing happened. And then...”

“Was there more?”

She turns away, staring out into the blue-gray waters of the Pacific that’s on the angrier side today as it crashes into the stilts of the pier, spraying mist up into the air. “Yes.” The tone of her voice tells me instantly not to go there. Not to question. “Shit, this was supposed to be us having fun and I did it again.” She turns back to me. “I’m so sick and tired of being sad. Of talking about Florian and thinking about all the places my life went off track.” She shakes her head, her dark hair flying every which way before she scrubs her hands through it, rustling it up as she blows out a breath. “Okay, no more sad. I promise. We’re writing this song, Gus, but I seriously don’t want to talk about the shit behind it anymore.”

“I ditto that.”

Then something hits me in the chest.

Hard.

Like a goddamn two-by-four.

I want to do this duet, but I’m starting to think that’s only because of the woman sitting across from me. Suddenly, all that was so important, so necessary to get out and off my chest, isn’t weighing me down as it once did.

I could fall for Naomi—and it’s starting to seriously scare the crap out of me.

I flag our waitress down and order two more shots because what the hell. I think I need them, and Naomi obviously does too. I’ll make sure she gets home safe. I’ll take care of her, and really, when was the last time she lost control? Let herself go and put faith in another?

“I’m not marrying you tonight, no matter how drunk you get me.” She laughs after she hears me order those shots.

“Not tonight, but another night, you can count on it.”

She laughs some more, rolling her eyes, thinking I’m kidding. Am I?

*“I-I loved you more than the rest. Our story an endless treasure chest.*

*But you threw it out to sea. Along with it, a part of me.”*

I grin like a crazy man. Hell...she’s composing.

*“My heartache battles time. A broken piece, a shattered lie.”*

I wave my hand out to her. *“And yet here you are. Sitting with me in this bar.”*

She lets off a small giggle and throws me a wink.

*“It’s a risk I’ll take. Our joined hearts make me quake.*

*So, let me see all we’re meant to be. Where this song will carry me.”*

I clap for her and she gives me a small bow.

“I like it,” I tell her.

She bites into her lip and then shakes her head. “We didn’t write it down.”

“Nope. We’ll see if we can remember any of it tomorrow after we’ve been drinking all night.”

Her eyes shoot open wide just as our huge plate of nachos are delivered along with our second round of shots. She eyes everything in front of us before asking, “All night?”

“Could be fun.”

“And messy. I’m mostly a one glass of wine girl.”

“I figured that out after you were buzzing from your first five sips of your margarita.”

Her face pinches in, her lips pursing. “That’s because I haven’t had much to eat today.”

“Right. Sure. Whatever you say. You’re cute when you’re drunk.”

“Not drunk yet, Gus.” Naomi slams down her second shot, and I’m starting to rethink this whole getting us drunk thing.

“I’m officially cutting you off after that.”

“Me too,” she laughs, taking a chip and popping it into her mouth.

An hour later we’re walking along the beach, Naomi’s shoes dangling from her hand, the surf excitedly gliding up along the smooth sand, anxious to tickle her bare feet and legs. I’m holding her other hand, both of our gazes locked on the fire-orange horizon. We’ve been going back and forth, playing a game Naomi likes to call favorites.

Maybe this is what happens when you don’t grow up going to school and parties. You don’t play truth or dare. You play tell me all your favorites. It’s more challenging than I would have expected. Especially since we’re alternating between hard questions and easy ones.

“Favorite memory?” I ask.

She mulls that one over, her expression growing pensive, slightly wistful, and I wonder if that was the wrong question to pose.

“The first time I went to the Grammys as a nominee, both my parents were nominated that night as well. We all won in our categories. I remember standing backstage with them, all

of us linked and holding up our awards, laughing at just how unimaginable and incredible it was. I never expected to win anything that year. It was such a tremendous honor, and I was only fifteen. But to win alongside my parents was a dream come true.”

“Damn. That’s impossible to beat, I think.”

“Try anyway for me.”

She squeezes my hand, urging me on as I think through all my favorite moments. I’ve had a lot. “You’re going to think I’m a total pussy.”

“No more than I already do.”

I frown at her and she grins widely up at me, rocking her body into mine before just as quickly distancing herself. “Now I’m not going to tell you.”

“Yes, you are. That’s how this game is played. I told you mine and now you have to tell me yours.”

“I’d rather you show me yours and I’ll show you mine.”

“Gus!”

“Fine.”

I take our linked fingers, bringing them up to my chest and holding them there, feeling the pounding beat beneath the fabric of my shirt. It draws her in closer, her body beside mine. And even though I have that constant inner monologue telling me she’s just my friend and can’t be anything more and that I’m playing with fire and messing everything up, I can’t stop.

Especially in moments like these.

“I hated Adalyn’s biological mother. Despised her for the situation Jasper found himself in, though I knew he was just as

responsible for it as she was. I knew the type of woman she was. She saw his money and fame, and that's all she cared about. But when Adalyn was born, I went to the hospital and found Jasper sitting alone in the nursery holding a tiny Adalyn in his arms. Karina, Adalyn's mom, wanted to be alone without the baby near her. Jasper didn't want to leave Adalyn, so that's where he was, rocking in a chair and singing softly to her. When he saw me approach, he looked up, pure goddamn adoration in his eyes. Without a word, he got up and I sat down where he had been. He placed my niece in my arms and that was it for me. I was done."

Naomi is silent, staring as far out into the ocean as she can manage. Her breathing has changed, turned from slow and even to short and choppy. And her eyes that were a peaceful blue are now stormy and turbulent.

"Naomi?"

"You make it impossible for a girl not to like you."

I can't help but grin a little at that, despite the somber tone of her voice. "Thank God for that. If I told you how much I liked you, I'd probably scare you."

She clears her throat, ignoring that completely. "My turn and this is an easy one because after that, I need an easy one. Tell me your favorite place you've ever visited?"

I swing her hand between us. I keep taking her hand, waiting for her to comment or ask me to stop. So far, that hasn't happened yet.

"I really love Ireland, though I've only ever been to Dublin and Belfast. I guess that's kind of the shitty thing about touring. We only hit up these cities for a very short time and then move on before we get to really explore them. But I love

the people, the food, the pubs, the vibe. There is just something so chill about it. Other than that, I don't know, maybe Rome. Your turn?"

I slow our pace, pivoting to watch the sun as it finally does hit the water before slowly sinking into it. "Paris is obviously pretty spectacular. Talk about a vibe. Everything there just feels pink and bubbly and magical. But I think if I had to pick a place, it would be Australia and New Zealand. I realize they're pretty different depending on where you go, but the surfing is like none I've ever experienced. I could live in the water."

"With the sharks?"

She laughs. "Yeah, they have those, but I didn't run into any so it's still my favorite."

"I can accept that. Favorite new friend?"

"That's so easy." She tilts her head up, locking eyes with me and smiling impishly. "Keith for sure."

"Fucking brat," I grouse, reaching down and cupping some of the cool water in my hand before flinging it in her direction, getting her right in the stomach.

"Oh my God," she shrieks, her incredulous gaze falling to her now wet dress. "I cannot believe you just did that."

"Maybe you should amend your new favorite friend."

She jerks her hand out of mine, dropping her shoes behind her in the sand and scooping up as much water as she can before throwing it at me. I jump back, dodging the attempt and she lets out a shrill sound mixed with a laugh. "You're so not my new favorite friend. You're more like an ugly, smelly cow I'm forced to babysit." She tries again, kicking and sloshing



water in my direction when she realizes she's not getting far with her hands.

“Ugly, smelly cow?” I point at my still dry chest and she nods adamantly.

“I've seen better looking and smelling barn animals than you, jackass.”

I shake my head, marveling at the way the dying sun hugs her body like a burning halo, making her glow and her skin bright. “Now you've done it.”

I charge her, chasing after her as she screams out, spinning and running in the opposite direction. Water sprays back at me, kicking up from the bottom of her feet. I catch her quickly, scooping her up into my arms bride style and walking her deeper into the water.

“I swear to God, Gus, if you toss me in the water, I will not do this duet with you,” she threatens, her fists balling up the fabric of my shirt as she holds on to me for dear life.

“Take it back.”

“Take what back?”

“You know. Take it back. Tell me I'm your favorite and I won't throw you in.”

“You're such an asshole.”

“Jackass,” I remind her. “And you still haven't told me.” I extend my arms a little, sliding her away from my body and she yelps out, kicking and flailing in my arms. “That won't help you, beautiful. You do that and you'll fall right in.”

“This is extortion.”

“Call it negotiations. Tell me.”

Her wild blue eyes are everywhere, but the smile on her face tells me she's not at all afraid of my threats. If the water wasn't balls cold, I might consider dropping us both in.

My face draws in closer to hers, my lips skimming her flushed cheek until I reach her ear. "Tell me I'm your favorite and I'll tell you you're mine," I whisper against her. "Tell me you haven't stopped thinking about me and I'll tell you the same." *Tell me you want me, and I'll give you everything I am.*

Her breath catches, her fists clenching at my shirt just a little tighter.

"Tell me, Naomi," I demand.

Her face pulls back, gorgeous blue to my gray. "And if I don't?" she challenges, her voice breathy. Restless.

"Then I won't tell you either, and in two seconds, you'll be soaked from top to bottom."

"Gus—"

"What's it going to be?"

"If I go down, I'm taking you with me." She cocks an eyebrow, her cold, wet hand cupping my stubbled jaw.

"I believe you," I rasp, my gaze unflinching. Resigned. Terrified out of my goddamn skull.

She swallows thickly and says, "You're my new favorite, Gus."

"Do you mean it?"

"I don't think I've ever meant anything more."

## Chapter Eighteen

*Gus*

I WAKE up early after an impossible night's sleep. Naomi and I didn't end up going down in the water. Instead, I carried her away from the waves and the perfectly beautiful and romantic sunset. I brought her back up to the boardwalk. Into safe, neutral territory. We ended up going on the Ferris wheel and then ate ice cream, and then we walked for a while more, talking and burning off the rest of the alcohol in our system.

I didn't kiss her the way I had promised I might.

Though I'd be lying if I said I've thought of little else.

As we said goodnight, we agreed to meet at the studio this morning. Again, safe, neutral territory, but infinitely more comfortable and private than the coffee shop yesterday.

My phone buzzes in my pocket as I enter Turn Records. Slipping it out of my pocket, I see it's Jasper and decide I'll call him back later. Stepping onto the elevator, the doors close just as my phone rings again, this time Marco, our manager, and as I try to answer his call, it disconnects before I can even get a hello in.

The elevator doors part on the studio floor that is typically full of sound and action, but right now, it's quiet. Dark. Most people don't get here until at least nine, and it's only a little after eight. I open the door to the room we're scheduled to use, and nearly jump out of my skin when I hear a familiar voice greets, "Hey."

Naomi is lying on one of the couches, wearing black skintight jeans, a black wrap-around blouse thing, and a smile. Her hair is draped over the arm of the sofa, nearly hitting the floor.

"You scared the shit out of me, beautiful."

"Sorry," she says sheepishly. "What brings you in this early? I thought we said ten." she rolls her head in my direction, those blue eyes piercing through any armor I had put up between last night and this morning.

"I wanted an early start," I reply simply. *And I couldn't sleep for shit .*

Walking over to her, I lift her legs, sitting on the couch beside her before I drop them back down on my lap. Her feet are bare, her heels discarded on the floor, and though I half expected her toenails to be black the way they were when we sat in the tub together, they're a pale green today.

She adjusts herself so that her arm is tucked behind her head, propping herself up to see me. "Me too. I like it here at this time of day. No one is around and it's like I can finally make sense of my thoughts."

"Yeah," I agree for lack of something better because she just nailed me with that one sentence.

"Have you seen it?"

"What?" I furrow my eyebrows.

“I’m surprised your phone hasn’t been blowing up.”

I glance down at my phone, remembering Jasper’s and Marco’s calls, and realize I have a few more missed calls and texts. “It has, actually. I just didn’t talk to anyone. We get shitty reception in here. What’s up?”

“Here.” Reaching into the back pocket of her denim, she slips out her phone, unlocks it, and hands it to me. And for a moment, I can’t make sense of what I’m looking at. “It’s us,” she states, clearly reading my confusion. “At the bar last night. On fucking *Hollywood Captured* . It’s also on *Intertainment* . That’s you leaning into me, smiling at me while I smile back, empty shot glasses and nachos between us. It’s innocent as hell until you put it up on a website with the caption, ‘Naomi Kent’s new love interest.’”

“Shit.”

She shoots me with her finger. “You got it there, stud. Shit is right. Because this just went prime time. And truth doesn’t matter anymore. To the world, you and I are a couple. For the sake of the duet and your upcoming album, that’s great. Pre-orders will skyrocket. But after everything you and your band went through last summer, it sucks, and I’m sorry.”

I snort out a laugh. “What on earth are you sorry for? Who gives a shit what they all think?” I stare at the picture a little more, taking it in. Naomi is smiling at whatever I’m saying, our bodies leaned in close, my eyes feasting on her because that’s what they do whenever I look at her.

But it’s true. We look like a couple.

And she’s right. No one will believe us if we deny it.

And I feel just a touch bad about that because I know how much she likes her privacy and anonymity, and I’m pretty sure

that's all over now. "Are you okay?"

She sighs, averting her gaze from mine and finding a spot on the ceiling to focus on instead. "Honestly, I figured something like that would happen. I just didn't think it would so soon." Another sigh. "I don't know. I liked my quiet, but it's not exactly like I'm not used to this either. It shouldn't matter, right? I mean, what the hell do we care if the world thinks we're a couple? But..." And she leaves it at that.

"You don't date musicians anymore."

She nods slimly against the edge of the couch. "I don't date musicians anymore," she parrots softly before dropping her chin and meeting my eyes. "And you don't do relationships. Only sex." She pauses here, almost as if she's checking.

Is that all I do? Suddenly I can't remember why.

"But maybe I'm making too big of a deal out of this? We're not dating. It's just some crap gossip, right?"

It's a rhetorical question I'm mentally trying to answer. Probably because it doesn't bother me that the world thinks she's mine. Maybe it should, but it doesn't. She doesn't date musicians and I don't have relationships.

But the truth is, I like the hell out of Naomi.

If there were ever a girl I'd consider dating, having a relationship with, making mine for good, it's her.

She hit that button.

The one I thought was dead, or possibly still in the hands of another woman. But she hit it the second I saw her, and since then, I've come alive in a way I didn't think was possible again.

“I don’t know,” I say as I rub her feet, thinking of that night in the bathtub when I did the exact same thing. “I feel like this should piss me off, but it doesn’t.”

“Oh,” she whispers, her voice trailing off at the end. “Whatever. It’s done and tomorrow there will be a new story.”

And she’ll be gone after we finish the duet, I realize. I won’t have an excuse to continue to see her as much as I have been unless I create one.

“At least they didn’t get audio of me proposing to you and suggesting we run off to Vegas.”

She laughs, dropping her head back and staring up at the ceiling again. “God, could you imagine? My mother would roll over in her grave if I ever did something like that.”

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Since when do you ask if you can ask?”

“Well,” I hedge. “This one is more personal.”

“I highly doubt that since you know more about my life than most people, but sure, go for it. I’m not exactly a shy girl, am I?”

No, I guess she’s not. Private, yes, but shy? Not so much. “How did your mom die?”

Her smile falls a little, but she’s clinging to it like it’s her lifeline. “She had breast cancer. By the time she was diagnosed, it was already stage four. They did surgery and chemo, but there wasn’t a lot to be done. It had already metastasized to her bones and brain.”

“Jesus,” I hiss, feeling awful for asking. “I’m sorry, beautiful. I shouldn’t have gone there.”

Naomi shrugs up a shoulder. “It’s life and I’m glad you asked. Us being able to talk openly and freely the way we have has been pretty amazing. What about your parents? You mentioned what happened to your mom. Do you still have a dad?”

“Yeah. My dad remarried a nice woman when Jas and I were kids. They’re retired now, living in Palm Desert. We don’t see them all that much.”

“I played the song when I got in here this morning. Tried to remember some of the lyrics we were messing around with yesterday.”

*Nice topic changer .* “What the hell time did you get here?”

“I’ve been here since seven. I’m an early riser and the ocean was too calm for surfing. You wanna go over it?”

“Do I have to move your feet from my lap?”

“You do, unfortunately, though what you’ve been doing is heaven.”

Shifting her feet, I help her stand up and we walk into the sound booth where there is already a guitar and piano waiting. She sits down behind the piano and instinctively, I pick up the acoustic, tuning it as I strum a few chords.

She starts to mess around on the keys, playing Time Surrender, and I pause what I’m doing to stare at her. “You don’t need to look at the notes?”

She shakes her head and I can’t help but marvel at that. She can play a song by ear I’m starting to realize, and I’m insanely jealous. She must be some sort of musical savant or have a photographic memory because she picks up things after



hearing them only once. She did it with Wildfire and I'm grateful that's not the song she chose to play right now.

Naomi adjusts her position, playing with fluency and grace. She knows this instrument well. And as she plucks out the notes to the song, my head begins to spin. She plays differently than Jasper does. He's all power. Even with the piano, he controls it.

Naomi plays it like a lover. Like their bond is symbiotic. Neither taking more from the other.

I can't even say which is better, they're just different, and I wonder if all of this was a mistake. We're not a hard band. We're not soft either, far from hard rock or metal. But Jasper always brings us a certain edge. That's his thing.

And now? Now, I don't know.

"Don't worry," she says, her eyes fixed on the keys. "This is not how I'll play your song. I can play them like Jasper does if that's what you want for the duet. I'm just messing around."

I blink at her. She just read my mind, but I'm glad she understands without my having to vocalize anything. Naomi is unexpected. In so many ways.

I've been in this world long enough to know the entitled culture of artists. They feel that because they can sing well or play an instrument or are considered famous or have a lot of money, that the world should bow down to them.

Frankly, I figured Naomi would be no different.

She's forever been the very definition of all of those things I just mentioned.

But she's sweet, quiet, down to earth, and unbelievably humble. She has this way about her. A natural allure. That

inexplicable *it* factor. Something that goes beyond her looks or her talent.

She's like fire and all available oxygen in the room flocks to her. Desperate to be as close to the source as possible. I'm starting to figure out that I'm no different in that.

Henry called her enchanting last night when I spoke to him on my way home after Naomi and I went our separate ways.

And I think that might in fact be the perfect word to describe her.

So, as she sits here, playing a song I wrote, foreign words find themselves unbidden into the forefront of my mind.

*I want more.*

And everything I ever thought about in terms of being professional or keeping my distance or her being forbidden, suddenly evaporates. I'm not sure they were ever there to begin with.

I set the acoustic down, cross the room, slide in beside her on the bench, take her face in my hands, and kiss her. Her body jolts, the piano banging out a harsh sound as she gasps into me. I don't waste time, my tongue plundering into her mouth, sweeping possessively over hers. Massaging. Coaxing. *Claiming*.

She tastes like cinnamon and coffee and sugar. She's sweet and spicy and so goddamn delicious I can't help but groan into her, so hungry for more my head spins with the need of it. My fingers rake into her hair, cupping the back of her head as I tilt her, deepening the connection and taking more, more, more, as much as I can get from her.

She's still, wooden and edgy for the longest of moments before she emits a soft hum from the back of her throat and

sags into me, kissing me back with equal ardor. Her hands grip my biceps, holding on tight as our lips move together, soft and wet, but with a fierce passion that awakens a sleeping beast, long forgotten.

There is no slowing this down.

No taking it easy.

The second my mouth touched hers, it's as if a series of grenades went off inside my body. I detonated, and now there is no stopping my need for this woman.

She shifts her body, angling in toward me, her hips pressing against mine as her hands slowly climb up my arms, tickle the back of my neck, and dig into my hair. My teeth sink into her lower lip, sucking it into my mouth before I break away, panting and smiling like a punch-drunk fool against her.

“What was that?” she asks breathlessly, a bewildered laugh escaping her chest.

My forehead drops to hers as I close my eyes for a second, trying to rein myself in.

It's impossible, and it has my chest fluttering in a way I'm positive it hasn't in years, if ever.

I open my eyes and find hers, inches away. Too late to go back now. So instead, I grin. Kiss her again. And say, “The first of many, I hope.”

## Chapter Nineteen

*Naomi*

I WALK IN EXACTLY on time, looking around the trendy Hollywood restaurant. It's a lot of sleek blue lighting and fresh modern decor. But it's the large tree growing in the center of the room that steals the show. It's wrapped with thousands of tiny twinkling lights, and for a moment, it holds me captive, unable to tear my gaze away.

A buzzing din and jubilant laughter fill my ears, and without having to look too hard, I've already spotted half a dozen celebrities. Typically, this isn't my type of place. First, it's a steak restaurant and steak is far from my favorite meal.

But it's the seen and be seen atmosphere that turns me off the most.

The host leads me through the crowded first floor and up a flight of stairs. I follow behind him all the way through to the back of the restaurant, toward a set of booths that flank the windows facing out onto the bustling street of Santa Monica Boulevard. I smile to myself as I think about the last two weeks I've had.

Gus. His kiss yesterday was so unexpected.

Amazing and unexpected.

He didn't kiss me again after that first time, and I'm not sure if I'm disappointed by that or not. I should be relieved, if anything, but that's an emotion I'm having a hard time forcing. Even if kissing Gus is like walking blindly into a minefield.

One misstep and it all blows up in my face.

Gus doesn't want a relationship. He doesn't want to date me. He just wants sex.

The thought of being a one-night stand to him turns my stomach. It's not something I've ever done before. And I don't think it's who I am to do that. Probably because I've only ever had sex with one man and that was a man I loved. A two-year dry spell should have me more anxious to jump any man who looks at me, but I just can't.

Gus is a self-proclaimed player, and for that reason alone, I should have never let him touch me.

But the more time I spend with him, the harder it is to maintain that barrier. To not get swept up in him.

Because I could very easily fall for Gus.

And falling for someone who is in love with someone else, who is open and honest about how they do not want more with you, is about as close to emotional suicide as a woman can get.

Especially since today, I didn't hear from him at all.

I mentally shake myself. One kiss means nothing. It was a moment of weakness. A mistake. If I'm going to make it through however long this freaking song takes to write and produce, I need to safeguard myself from him starting now.

“Right this way,” the host tells me with a warm smile. “Casper LaCroix reserved a very specific table.”

I inwardly roll my eyes. Of course he did. Because Casper LaCroix never does anything half-assed.

“Sounds great,” I murmur, but the moment the host steps aside so I can take my seat, I gasp, my body rippling with a sudden burst of nausea as the color in my cheeks drains and my knees start to buckle. Casper looks up as I approach, as does Florian, and both men smile. I stare dumbfounded for the longest of seconds, my mind reeling as I try to grasp just what is happening.

Florian’s gaze is glued to mine. I can feel its weight and hope, but I can’t even acknowledge him.

My eyes burn with scalding hot tears I immediately swallow down. Anger flares from me, burning and electric.

How could Casper do this to me? How could he set me up like this?

And in such a public place?

It’s not the first time I’ve had those exact same thoughts.

Images of the last time I saw Florian flutter through my head like the wrong cut to a bad movie.

*My stomach churns nervously to the point where I have to place my hand over it to settle it down. I caress gently over it, once, twice, tears threatening to moisten my eyes as my heart clenches painfully in my chest. How could he do this to me? How could he treat me this way? And in such a public place? Did he not love me at all? Was everything we had together a lie?*

*I can feel their eyes—full of pity. All of them. I can feel their whispers—full of delicious scandalous gossip—on the back of my neck like an icy breeze. Their patronizing smiles aimed to make me feel ridiculous and pathetic.*

*But I don't acknowledge any of them.*

*I've ignored everyone, the media, the audience—my colleagues, people I called friends until this happened—but most of all, Florian, the man sitting three seats over with his blonde wrapped around his arm, petting his chest like he's a new puppy.*

*I've remained stoic with a forced half-smile plastered on my pristine red lips. My dress is stunning, and my hair isn't too shabby either. But despite my outward appearance that I'm sure isn't fooling anyone, I feel beyond retched. Heartbroken, forgotten, cast aside, next-to-nothing, retched. It makes me miss my parents so much more in this moment.*

*They would have my back. They would be by my side with unwavering support and unconditional love. And God, do I ever need those two things right now.*

*Shifting in my seat, I wait while Cameron Crowley goes through the artists and songs names of the other nominees and when they say, Naomi Kent and Florian Heart for Pieces of Truth, I smile just a touch brighter, knowing those eyes are now glaring and those cameras are trained directly on me.*

*News of our breakup hit the world by storm. Splashed across every tabloid and discussed on every news outlet like my private life is only there to serve others entertainment. Speculations ran amuck, and because Florian is a man and I'm a woman in this industry, he was revered while I was ripped to shreds.*

*“And the winner for song of the year goes to...” Please, dear God, if you love me at all, do not let it be us. “Naomi Kent and Florian Heart for Pieces of Truth.”*

*The crowd doesn't immediately erupt into applause the way they typically do when artists win this award. Instead, they murmur, they gasp, they lean forward on the edge of their seat, desperate to watch the drama unfold.*

*I stand up on tremulous legs and follow after Florian, who kisses his blonde with gusto, knowing I'm standing behind him. My insides quake and once more, my hand falls to my stomach. I don't even know who this man is anymore. He is nothing like the one I fell in love with. Like the one I wrote that song with. This man is a stranger to me and that's what I focus on. That's how I manage to move one foot in front of the other while keeping my head high and my eyes dry.*

*Florian marches up to the stage like he's the king of the world and what meager applause there is dies the moment he reaches the microphone. I stand back, away from him, dying just a little more with every second I'm forced to stand here.*

*“Wow,” Florian starts. “This is such a huge honor. Thank you. It wouldn't have been possible to write such an incredible song as this without having such amazing bandmates.” He pans his hand out in the direction of the seats we just vacated, and I want to reach out and smack the back of his head.*

*The bastard isn't even going to thank me?*

*He continues on, thanking the producer, the studio, God, his parents, everyone and anyone. Except me.*

*Finally, he turns around, his eyes meeting mine with the smuggest of smug smirks. They fall pointedly to my stomach, and that smuggest of smug smirks morphs into a full-blown*



*asshole grin. Then he finds my eyes again and I can see what he's about to do.*

*He's about to go in for the kill shot.*

*Florian turns back to the cameras and the audience and says, "Yup, I think that's everyone who deserves to be thanked. Have a good night!" He waves and I stumble back a step and then another only to be caught by the talent escort. Blood thrums violently through my ears as I'm led off stage, Florian blowing past me as if I'm not even there.*

*I want to reach out to him. I want to shake him and slap him. I want to hurt him for humiliating me like that in front of the world. So grossly. So obscenely. So belligerently. He dismissed me, mocked me, ruined me, and now—*

"Come sit down, Naomi," Casper offers gently, snapping me out of my nightmare of a memory, pointing to the empty chair stuck in between both of them. He's not even trying to defend himself or come up with some bullshit lame excuse like Florian just happened to be passing by and I asked him to join us.

No, this was planned, an ambush, and it makes me sick.

Florian is sitting there, comfortable as ever, leaning back in his chair and watching me with a smile I do not appreciate. The bastard doesn't even stand up to greet me. No, his eyes are too busy raking me in. Covering every inch he's missed out on during the last two years. They pause on my stomach and I nearly growl out at that. What does he think I am, an elephant?

Sorry babe, you're not getting answers that easily.

"Please sit?" Casper tries again.

Sit down? No thanks, I think I'll run away instead.

Only, somewhere in the back of my mind, the pissed off, indignant girl in there is demanding I face Florian. If for no other reason than let him know that he *didn't* ruin me. That I am so strong and so confident and am not afraid to tell him absolutely everything I've wanted to say for the last two years.

That bubble of anger boiling in my belly surges up through me.

How dare Florian do this to me. What could he possibly want with me after two years of nothing?

The host looks confused and a bit uncomfortable, so I snatch my menu out of his hand to avoid the pompous ritual of him placing my napkin on my lap and handing me the menu with flourish. The poor guy still attempts to pull out my chair for me, but I'm ten years old right now and I don't want anyone helping me. Florian's eyes are tight, his gaze never shifting as I sit down, but I ignore him completely, choosing instead to stare defiantly at the man who lured me here under false pretenses.

I shouldn't be surprised.

Casper's loyalty was never to me, even if he liked to pretend he was close with my father once upon a time. That he loved me like a daughter.

"Nai," Florian hums my name, a dark undertone dripping from his maple syrup voice. It quakes my insides after so long without hearing it. "So thrilled you could join us. You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this."

I shoot daggers at his pleased grin before turning my wrath back on Casper. He's easier to deal with.

"You've got two minutes to explain this before I get up and walk out."

Casper lets out a huff of air as if he's the one who has the right to be exasperated here. Florian scoots his chair slightly closer to the table, enjoying the hell out of my tantrum. He places his hand on the table, inches from me and part of me cracks. Fissures right here.

He wants to get to me? He wants to start something?

I've had this war, this fight, built up in my head for two fucking years.

He has no idea. None.

I may be the sad, broken, lonely girl, but I will be fucking damned if he ever sees an ounce of that from me.

"You know what this is, so stop acting surprised. Flor asked me to set this dinner up, knowing that you'd never agree to meet with him on your own. He wants to talk to you, and I talked him out of showing up at your house or stalking you down at the studio. So here we are." Casper waves his hand around the room and pivots to Florian. "That about sum it up?"

"So instead of protecting me from something you knew I wouldn't want to do, you lied to me? Used our tenuous friendship as a weapon? *That* about sum it up?" I ask, throwing his phrase back at him.

"You need to talk to him, Nai. Close the book if that's what you want to do, but at least hear him out."

"What are you, my fucking therapist? This was not your call to make." Casper narrows his eyes at me, before he stands up, buttoning the center button on his suit jacket. A rocker in a suit. "You going on an interview, dad?" I wave a hand up and down the length of him.

Casper is a lot older than me. Older than Florian too. And I know he doesn't appreciate the distinction. He never did.

"I think I'm officially done here. Flor, I'll see you tomorrow. Nai, try to remember the fact that I'm doing you a favor."

And then he walks off leaving me alone in a restaurant with Florian Heart. Liar. Drug addict. Breaker of all things beautiful.

## Chapter Twenty

*Naomi*

I MOVE to stand up too, but Florian grasps my forearm, halting my escape. “Don’t,” I snarl, and he pulls back the offending hand, raising both up in surrender, but his expression is pleading. Nervous. Afraid.

“Sit, please. I just want to talk. That’s all. Please, Nai. Talk to me, hear me out, and then you can go.”

“Talk.”

“Let’s order first,” he says, trying to placate me with a smile, and I realize there is a waiter standing beside us. I glance down at the menu, but I don’t see anything. Florian orders and I have no idea what he got me. I don’t care. I can’t focus on anything right now.

I hate that he’s doing this to me. I hate that he involved Casper. I hate how gullible I am.

“I got you that red wine you like that I can’t pronounce, lobster bisque, and the braised short ribs because you don’t eat steak.”

My eyes slowly raise up to his. I don't even know what to say at this point. How can he act like no time has passed? Like that scene in the hotel never happened? Like I never saw him at the Grammys? Like I never called him or sent him a million texts?

Like I never left him...that voicemail?

He just sits here, orders my food because he knows all my favorites, all the while smiling that heart-stopping smile at me. The one that never failed to make my insides flutter. He knows all the right moves. Every single one designed to reel me in. I was a child when I gave him my heart. A woman when he broke it.

But this? I have no idea what this is.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I need to talk to you, and I knew you wouldn't listen to me if I tried. Don't be mad at Casp. I placed him in an impossible position.”

I let out a derisive scoff at that. “I'm his niece.” That's what he always called me. That's how close he was with my father. Until today. Until he threw that away and chose Florian. I inwardly shake my head at that. He's always chosen Florian over me. Always.

“And he loves you. But this isn't about him.”

I sigh, leaning back in my seat as Florian leans forward, the familiar fragrance of his cologne weakening my resolve. We stay silent while the waiter delivers our wine and after I approve Florian's choice and he leaves, I take a big sip.

Florian's glass is filled too, and I scowl instantly. “You're a fucker.”

He shakes his head, trying to reach out for my hand, but I snatch it away before he can touch me. “Don’t. I’m sober. I swear it, I’m clean.”

Yet he’s got alcohol in his glass. I eye it with a raised eyebrow.

“Alcohol was never my poison. I could either take it or leave it.”

“Bullshit. You’re not sober if you’re drinking.”

He growls, pushing the glass away and practically spills it all onto the white linens in the process. “The wine is not the problem between us.”

*Ain’t that the truth.*

I lean across the table, pinning him with my eyes. We used to do that. Stare into each other’s eyes like a couple obsessed. I guess I was.

“I’d say that’s putting it mildly. We have so many problems between us, I hardly know where to begin. I could have gone forever without seeing you again, Florian, but here you are. So, tell me what’s so important that you felt the need to bring me here of all places.”

He blows out a silent breath, runs a hand through his dark hair, and I see the nerves clinging to him like an ill-fitting mask. “I’m sorry, Naomi.” He reaches out and takes my hand and when I try to pull back, he tugs it closer to him, his expression raw and desperate. “I’m so sorry. For everything.” I shake my head, but at what, I don’t know. “You were right. I had a problem. I had a serious, dangerous big problem, and I needed help.” My eyes close as a sharp intake of air floods my lungs only to be released immediately in a pained gust. “I fucked up. I fucked up so bad. With you. With the guys. With

everything, really. But I'll never regret anything as much as the way I let you leave that hotel room. Or the way I treated you at the Grammys. But most of all—”

“Don't even,” I snap out, cutting him off.

I feel a hand on my cheek, wiping away tears I hadn't realize were falling, but I don't dare open my eyes. I need a minute.

I used to dream of this moment.

Shortly after I left, I imagined Florian coming to find me and groveling on his hands and knees. I would imagine him begging me, saying these exact words to me.

But he never did.

He never sought me out.

Two years. That might not seem like all that long, but for me, for what I went through and endured, it's a lifetime.

And now? Now I don't know how I feel about his apology. I don't feel any...*relief* from it. If anything, I hurt more because of it. I shake my head, feeling more tears as everything inside me begins to tighten up, making my stomach twist and my lungs burn.

“I'm clean. I really am. I've been clean for six months.”

A small smile tugs at my lips. That makes me happy. I'd hate to think he was still using. All this time, I was terrified I was going to hear that he died in a hotel bathroom. Needle sticking out of his vein. Same as my father.

“Look at me, sweetheart,” he whispers, and when I open my eyes, he's right there. Brown eyes shining with love and sincerity. “I'm so sorry. I don't know any other words. But I'll keep saying them over and over until you believe me. God,



Nai.” He swallows hard. “I hope you can forgive me for all the pain I caused you.”

He can’t even begin to grasp the definition of my pain.

“Did you ever think about it?”

He knows what I’m asking. The way he blanches tells me so.

“Did you get rid of it? I wouldn’t have blamed you with the way I treated you.”

*Did I get rid of it? Our baby?*

Bile climbs up the back of my throat that I force myself to swallow down. My eyes pierce into his, my fists balling up as pain slices through me like a hot dagger. “No, you motherfucker. I didn’t get *rid* of it.”

He glances down once again at my belly and heaves a breath. “Then where?” And there is an accusation in his tone. As I knew there would be.

“You thought I was lying. Didn’t you?” I pause, staring him down, waiting for him to contradict it when I know he can’t. “I saw it on your face that night at the Grammys. You thought I made the whole thing up?”

He runs a frustrated hand through his hair again and reaches out, taking a sip of his water. He sets the glass down and shrugs. “You called a lot. Sent a lot of texts—”

“That you never returned.”

“That I never returned,” he agrees, nodding his head sheepishly. “At first, I thought you were just trying to get me back. Then, I listened to your voice message. The only one you left and I...” He clears his throat. “But when I saw you that night, with your flat belly, I just...”

“God, you’re so stupid.”

“Was it real, Naomi? If so, where is our baby you tell me you didn’t get rid of?” he whisper-shouts, and before I can even think twice, I reach out and slap him. Right here. Right in the middle of this restaurant.

He jars, but other than that, he doesn’t react, even as his cheek reddens before my eyes. His impenetrable gaze never wavers, and in this moment, I hate him.

I set my stinging hand back on the edge table and lean forward until I’m inches from his face. Then I smile at the prick. My heart thunders, beating heavily with anticipation.

Two years is a long time to wait to say something that’s been burning a hole through your chest.

“I was pregnant that night at the Grammys. Two weeks later, I woke up in the middle of the night alone in my bed with a pain on the left side of my belly that was beyond intense. I called my OB and her office told me to come into the emergency room. They brought me through the exclusive, private entrance, and immediately into a room. My belly was on fire, my left shoulder aching, and they did an ultrasound.

“There was no baby in my uterus. It felt like my world was crashing down around me yet again. They found it in my fallopian tube —an ectopic. An unsalvageable pregnancy, the ED doctor called it. I sat there, *alone*, while they gave me medications to induce a miscarriage, hoping it would pass naturally.”

His face falls, his eyes staring unseeing at the white table. His breath come out as a sharp pant, his shoulders rising and falling.

“I sat in that bed for a few hours, bleeding, cramping, and crying. But then, my heart rate jacked up. My blood pressure dipped and the pain?” I puff out a breath, shaking my head. “They rushed me to the OR and removed my left tube along with our baby. Told me I might not be able to conceive naturally again since I had my appendix removed when I was a child, and the doctor did something to my right ovary and tube in the process.

“I lost our baby, and I sat in that hospital room *alone* . I mourned that loss *alone* . I even tried to call you from that room and you never picked up. They had to call a cab to take me home after the surgery because no one was there with me.” I suck in a deep breath and jab my fist into his shoulder, rousing him out of his reverie and forcing his head to snap up, his glassy eyes to lock on mine. “Imagine that? Going through all that alone. Losing your baby, your fallopian tube, your potential shot at future babies. *Alone!* ” I half-yell, my voice shrill. “So, fuck you! You think you have the right to question me?” I punch his shoulder again. “To ask if that baby, the one I called you about, that you never responded to, was real?” Another punch when what I really want to do is strangle him. I bend in, practically until I’m right in his face, ensnaring his fractured gaze so he has no choice but to see me, to hear me. “You didn’t give a shit. You chose drugs over me. You publicly humiliated me. I owe you no explanations. But yes, you callous bastard, that baby was real until it wasn’t. Not like you cared all that much.”

That’s the end of my speech. And I have to say, I delivered it exactly as I had planned. I don’t forgive him. I’m happy he’s clean and appreciate his apology, but the damage he inflicted is long-lasting. Is *unforgivable* . It’s not the sort of thing that can be excused with one speech.

Florian's face falls into his hands, his body begins to shake, and I do everything in my power not to care. To ignore the stubborn, resistant part of me that loved this man like he was my universe. I look away. I stare down at the street. I think about a million other things than his pain. Let him cry, I tell myself. He deserves to feel this. I've cried for years.

“Naomi—”

He never calls me Naomi. Always Nai.

I shake my head, swallowing down my own tears. I don't feel better and I don't understand it.

“Sweetheart. Fuck. I just—” His hand grasps my arm, squeezing me enough to compel me to turn away from the street and back to him, though it's genuinely the last thing I want to do. “I didn't know. I thought—”

He raises his bloodshot eyes and I go in for the kill. “Thought I was a lying, manipulative bitch? Thought I was every other girl you sank your dick into? Yep. I know. Message received.”

He shakes his head adamantly, tumbling out of his chair in the middle of this celebrity-filled, snobby, upscale restaurant in Los Angeles. I know people are watching. But I don't care, and he doesn't seem to either. He falls to his knees, turning my chair and twisting me until he's before me, staring at me, and I shatter.

“You can't...” Another head shake. His hands cup my face, holding me so tenderly, and a tear escapes before I can stop it. “I didn't...” A harsh breath. “I didn't know. I swear to fucking God, I didn't know. You didn't look...that woman at the Grammys? I never touched her other than that one kiss. I never touched any of them. I was trying to hurt you, yes, but

none of it was real. And I'm so sorry. God, Nai. I am so unbelievably sorry I did all that to you. That you lost our baby that way. That I never called you back. That I hurt you over and over again."

I push him off me and he falls back, glances around quickly at all the curious eyes, and then gets back up into his chair, wiping at his face and sipping more of his water. Dick.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"No. I Just—"

"Nope," I interrupt before he can continue. "You didn't call me back. You made me tell you I was pregnant over a voicemail, and then you brought another woman to the Grammys knowing I was. You stared at my belly like it was a joke. Like *I* was a joke as you made a fool out of me in front of the entire world."

"Naomi. No..." Reaching out, he grasps my hand, tugging it straight to his chest, over his pounding heart. "I love you. I've loved you forever. Please," he begs, his voice catching. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I swear I didn't. It was the drugs. They poisoned everything. My mind. My heart. My soul. I was so lost in them. So blind and stupid. Jesus, Naomi. All I know is that I love you. I love you. I love you."

"I hate you," I sneer.

His face crumples, but he recovers quickly, his expression growing smug and irritatingly confident. "You don't. You love me so much. You always have. I know I made a mistake." I can't even with that word. Is he kidding me? *Mistake*? "I want to start over with you."

"Florian—"

“Just hear me out,” he barks desperately, but the waiter comes and delivers bread, my bowl of soup, and Florian’s oysters, and seriously, who gives a fuck about food? I have zero appetite. Just the sight of this heavy, creamy soup makes my stomach roll. Instead, I take a sip of my wine, which is probably stupid, but it’s good and it seems to be settling my stomach.

And strangely, my thoughts drift to Gus.

About his favorite moment.

I think about the type of man he is in comparison to Florian. I think about how Gus is with Adalyn. How tender and soft he is with me. How he listens to me. Hears me and never once judges. How much fun he and I have had these past couple of weeks despite our shared heartache. How he didn’t call me today and doesn’t want me the way I think I want him.

But, that last part, that’s not really what I’m focusing on.

If I were his Viola and he were my Gus...he would have reacted very differently than Florian did. If I were his Viola... if I had called him, he would have called me back and afforded me the benefit of telling him I was pregnant in person. And I would never have gone through that surgery alone. Gus is honest and protective, and he cares so much it bleeds from his every pore.

But... I’m not Gus’s.

And despite the moment I’m stuck in with Florian, part of me aches for that. To be so loved and coveted and worshiped. Christ, why did he have to kiss me?

“I want us to spend time together.” Florian’s voice snaps me back to the moment. “Go somewhere private. Get to know each other again.”

I snort out a sarcastic laugh. “No. I can’t do that. Even if I wanted to, which I’m positive I don’t, I’m working.”

Florian shrugs, unconcerned. “Lyric can find Gus Diamond another duet partner,” he says dismissively, and this just pisses me off.

“You know about the duet?”

“Of course, I know.”

“I made a commitment. I’m on the album. I’m the one.”

“You mean with Gus Diamond.”

Ah. Now we’re getting to it. Why he suddenly showed up. “Yes.” Only, that’s a bit of a lie the way I’m presenting it. I should care. I’m not Florian, after all. But I don’t care, because I don’t care that I want him to hurt.

Florian seethes, sitting back in his chair and tossing an oyster down his throat like the bastard had it coming. “So, you’re with him now? That Gus guy?”

Gus and his band are twice what Crawl By Night are now.

I shrug indifferently, stirring the spoon around in the thick pink soup. Let him extrapolate whatever the hell he wants from that. *Liar, liar, pants of fire*, my inner conscious chides. Screw that. Let Florian stew.

“He doesn’t love you. He loves that woman. His sister-in-law or whatever. It was all over the tabloids. Or did you forget?”

No, I certainly didn’t forget.

“The duet is not the only reason I don’t want to go somewhere with you. You can’t just wipe away what you did to me with one word. I’m thrilled you’re clean, Flor. I am. But

that doesn't mean I want to try again with you. I don't. I never will."

Florian shakes his head. "I wanted to come to you sooner. The moment I got out of rehab, I was headed your way. But both Casper and my sponsor convinced me to give it more time sober before I could try to win you back. And any time I asked Lyric about you, she always said you didn't have anyone serious in your life."

I hate that he spoke to Lyric about me. That she told the truth. "So, Casper told you Gus Diamond was at my place, and you saw pictures of me with him and thought you'd swoop in and win me back?"

"Something like that." At least he admitted it. "Nai, you're too big to do this song with those guys. You're going to come back with me. We'll make music together again. Gus is not good for you. I am. I know you. I know what you need."

Indignation prickles my skin. I met Florian when I was seventeen. I was a child. Not only that, but I was also used to everyone telling me what to do. My whole life was directed for me. Had always been that way since I was fourteen and first started in this business. So, when Florian continued that pattern after my parents died, it felt natural to me.

But now? Now I'm an adult.

A grown woman who has been calling her own shots for almost two years.

"I'll take care of you."

"I'm all set, thanks. I don't need you to take care of me anymore."

The waiter clears our starters, and once again, we're bathed in silence. I should go. I shouldn't still be here. I shift



to leave when he asks, “Do you still love me?”

Shit. I hate that question. You’d think a direct question like that would be easy to answer, but it’s not. It’s festering in shades of gray. “Yes. Part of me will always love you.” He smiles like this answer washes everything else away. “But it’s different now. I’m different.”

“Well, it’s not for me. The moment I saw you all those years ago, I knew you were it for me. You were only seventeen, but you were all I saw. You still are, Nai. You’re it for me,” he repeats with a burning ferocity. “You can go make this duet—if that’s what you really want. But don’t think for a second you’re rid of me. I’m going to call you. Talk to you. I’m going to fill your mind so only I exist there. And before you know it, you’ll be mine again. And Gus Diamond will be a thing of the past.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

*Gus*

I ROLL out of bed and hit the running trail by my house that leads down toward the beach. I'm up and out earlier than my usual. I'm desperate to get into the studio because I know Naomi likes to get in early.

I'm dying to see her.

I haven't stopped thinking about her. Playing it all through my head. Mapping out scenarios and arguments and rationales and...I kissed her...and I...yeah, she's consuming my thoughts.

I haven't messaged her. I haven't called her. I've given her space to work through her stuff. To figure out her mind.

In truth, I've needed that space too to figure out my own. To think about what I'm looking for. I said I would keep my distance. Keep it all professional and I haven't done that. Not once. Not even for a second.

I saw her and that seemed to be it for me.

But...we've both been hurt —her more so than me.

Our hearts and minds have been consumed by others for so long it's hard to find where that ends, and this begins. The last thing I want to do is hurt her more.

And I'm not sure how not to do that.

Naomi deserves everything. Can I do that? Can I give her everything? I'm honestly not sure and that reservation is what's holding me at bay. It's not her. She's magnificent. It's everything else that's standing in my way.

That moment with Viola at her and Jasper's wedding keeps playing on repeat in my mind. Her words haunting me... recycling through my head like a song you can't get rid of.

*"I love you, Gus."*

*I smile, turning away from my brother so I can kiss his bride on the cheek. "I love you, Vi. Always."*

*She pulls back and meets my eyes, her hand sliding along my head until she's cupping my jaw. "No, Gus. You won't," she states simply, but the conviction in her voice pulls me up short. "Not the way you think you will. You don't love me that way now. The woman who will truly own your heart will tie you up in knots." She rolls her eyes. "Knowing you, probably both literally and figuratively." I smirk, despite the serious mood and tone she's pushing on me. "This woman will consume you. She'll be the one you fight everything and everyone for. That's not me, babe. It never was."*

Whether Naomi is that person or not, it's way too early to say. But Viola was right. I never fought everything and everyone for her.

Including myself.

And didn't I just say that Naomi consumes my thoughts? Christ, I could be a special level of fucked, and I don't know

what to do about it or how to stop it.

Venice Beach is a crazy area. The beach is always filled with bodybuilders and weightlifters showing off their muscles. Tourists, vendors, and street performers are typically everywhere. But at this early hour, no one is about. Hell, the sun is barely starting to crack the sky in the east. I find the exercise area and instead of turning back here, which I typically do, I start doing some pull-ups. I can't even say why, other than I have too much nervous energy burning in me.

I'm restless. Unsettled.

And it's not an emotion I'm particularly familiar with.

For the first time in my life, I want things to be different. I'm not even sure how it happened, but here it is.

The cool wind blowing off the Pacific whips across my damp face and hair as I drop down, doing pushups without counting. My mind is too busy. A war raging within me. Adulthood has never been my strong suit. No one would deny that.

But the moment I sat down to write that song, the moment I allowed myself to feel, really feel everything I've never allowed myself to feel, something shifted. Or maybe cracked open is a better description. Maybe that's why this song is so important. I don't know. I just know Naomi seems to have changed everything, and now that I've kissed her, I don't want to go back to how it used to be.

I want more.

A smile spreads across my face as I think about her while jogging back toward my place. It's still early out, the sun just starting to rise, but that doesn't mean that the sidewalks are empty.

Quite the contrary, actually.

They're littered with press. Phones and cameras are shoved in my face. Hordes of people surround me, yelling out question after question in such rapid succession I can barely make them out. I catch the words Naomi and even Florian, but not much else.

What the hell is going on? Did something happen?

And how did they find me?

The one thing I've always managed to maintain was my privacy. No one around where I live has ever given a crap about who I am. Never. So this just makes no sense. My heart starts to spike as I inadvertently freeze, stopping nearly dead in my tracks. Despite them mentioning Naomi and Florian, my mind automatically wanders to Adalyn, and even Viola, after all they went through with the press last year.

I clear that away, needing to get out of here. Stepping forward, I lower my shoulder and head, and begin to push through the crowd that is nothing if not determined.

“Do you have any reaction to the pictures of Naomi and Florian last night? How do you feel about them reuniting?”

*Reuniting?*

I pause and they take full advantage, closing in around me once again and snapping picture after picture. “Did you know that Naomi was having dinner with Florian last night? Did you two already break up? Is Naomi going behind your back?”

Jesus. She had dinner with him last night?

I reach the walkway to my house and hold up my hand, letting them know they can't come any closer. Private property assholes! I take off into a jog until I reach my doorstep, unlock

my door, and slam it shut behind me, breathing hard and fighting a burgeoning anger as it builds within me.

I slip my phone out of the pocket of my shorts and take a deep breath that does nothing to settle me. “Goddammit!” I bark, frustrated at everything as I pull up an entertainment site. Sure enough, Naomi and Florian are plastered all over it. They’re in a restaurant, eating dinner together. He’s touching her face gently in one of them. Like he’s comforting or caressing. In another, they’re both leaning in and speaking intimately. Beneath those two is a picture of Naomi and me walking around the boardwalk, holding hands and looking cozy.

The caption reads, ‘Naomi and her two men. Who will she choose?’

Well, this sucks.

And it hurts more than it should.

And really, how much longer am I going to continue to play this game? This, I want the woman I can’t have, bullshit?

Story of my life right there and I’m sick of it.

She had dinner with her ex the day after I kissed her. And I don’t know how to reconcile that because she doesn’t owe me anything. She’s not mine, and I’m not hers...and it was one kiss and I didn’t call her and...*fuck*, I hate this feeling.

This burning in my chest.

This ache in my bones.

This sense of feeling out of control. This restless tension spinning through me.

I shake my head, pushing it all away as I lock my phone back up and march in the direction of my kitchen. One kiss.

That's all it was. Professional boundaries from now on. I'll tell her it was a mistake. That it should never have happened, and that will be that, and this feeling will be gone.

If she wants Florian back, maybe that's the way it should be. Keeping things professional is the smart play. Evidently the only play I have left with her. *Fuck!*

I turn the corner and come to yet another screeching halt as Jasper, Keith, and Henry are drinking coffee, leaning against the breakfast bar, and staring at their phones like they're not in my house uninvited. Great. Just great.

"I'm taking my key back," I snap at Jasper and three sets of eyes simultaneously fly up to me, their matching wary expressions make me want to punch my fist through the wall.

"You've seen this, I take it?" Jasper asks.

I take in a silent breath and pull my shit together.

"Are you referring to the circus outside my house or the who-gives-a-shit-picture in the tabloids?" They exchange looks and right now, I'm really not in the mood for the intervention. "I'm going to shower and change and hopefully have a cup of coffee if you assholes haven't finished it. Then I'm heading into the studio for the day. Any other discussions about anything other than work are not appreciated."

"Have you talked to her?" That's Henry and I wish he would just shut up. I don't want to talk about this. Not with her or with anyone. Didn't I just say that?

And yeah, I get that makes me a petulant pussy, because maybe all of this can be explained away. Hell, the media was calling her my girlfriend after a couple of crappy pictures. And let's not get started on the bullshit they were going on about last year when we were on tour. They get it wrong constantly.

Does it matter?

No, it doesn't.

My mind is made up and I'm a decisive guy. This was the wakeup call I needed. The thing to get my head out of my ass or the clouds or wherever it's been since I set eyes on Naomi Kent.

"Nothing to talk about," I call out as I walk back toward my bedroom, essentially dismissing them. "She's free to go out to dinner with whoever she wants."

"This could all be bullshit," Keith continues where Henry left off. "Don't you at least want her side of things?"

No. Yes. I scrub my hands up and down my face and slam the door to my bedroom shut. I turn on some music, something loud, and then I shower off the sweat and sand and ocean that's clinging to my skin. And when I step out, I feel a little more in control.

I rejoin them in the kitchen, annoyed that they haven't moved, or better yet left, but now instead of wanting to run out the door to the studio, I suddenly want to avoid it.

"You should let her explain before you shut down and lock her out."

I flip Jasper off because that's sort of a low blow and he knows it. I pour myself a cup of some much-needed coffee and take a sip. "I've known her for two weeks, Jas. Don't make this into something it's not."

"Yeah. But you like her. A lot if your, I-want-to-burn-down-the-world expression indicates anything, which we all know it does. You should let her explain. You of all people know that you can't take anything those assholes publish at face value."



Pressing my back into the granite, I turn toward my brother and best friends. “To be honest, I don’t need the distraction she presents. We’re finishing our album up. My attention and focus need to be on that and not on her. Yes, I like her. I’ll get over it.”

But as the words leave my mouth, I know they’re a lie.

Naomi is the type of woman who gets under your skin and stays there. Right now, that sensation feels more like a festering wound than anything else. Writing and producing with her will suck. Singing with her day in and day out will be rough. Downright painful at times, I’m sure. Especially if that fuck stick Florian Heart is around.

I’ll live. I lived through Viola breaking up with me all those years ago, and I was in love with her. I am not in love with Naomi. I’m not. I’m really not. How could I be this soon?

So, this should be a million times easier. Right?

My fingers dive into my hair, brushing the wet strands back.

“I don’t want shit to be awkward for you. Should we look for someone else?” Keith asks, sipping at his coffee.

I shake my head because there isn’t anyone else who can do this. I know it’s her. It has to be. “It won’t be awkward. She and I will continue to be friends. Just not more.” They stare at me with troubled eyes and I practically roll mine. “Relax guys. Everything is cool. Promise.”

Henry pushes off the counter and stands up with a big smile plastered on his lips. “Then I guess we have nothing to be worried about.”

“Nope.” I swallow hard, locking my jaw.

Jasper joins him as does Keith. “Then let’s go.”

As we make our way down the hall toward the studio, I’m wired. I don’t like the extra emotion all of this nonsense brought out of me. The front of the building had more press lining it and it’s like déjà vu all over again. I didn’t like that shit last year, and I’m not liking it any better now.

“This is my life you’re fucking with,” we hear Naomi yell from inside one of the other studios as we pass it. I don’t know who she’s talking to, but she’s pissed, and for some reason, that thought warms me toward her.

“There might just be an explanation after all,” Jasper mutters under his breath.

I’m silent. I’ve been silent since the moment we got into the car.

Keith opens the door to our studio and once we enter, the three of us stop dead in our tracks, practically bumping into each other as we do.

Steven is here, but he’s not alone. He’s talking to Florian Heart, who suddenly seems to be the omnipresent thorn in my side. “Gentlemen,” the magnanimous prick says as he stands up to greet us, smiling so wide I can see every single one of his teeth. “Glad you could make it to the show.”

*Asshole.*

“Sorry about the little parade outside. Once they get a story going, it’s impossible to stop them. Like pigs in shit.” He steps forward with an outstretched hand aimed directly for me, his dark eyes playful as they scrutinize me. “I don’t believe we’ve met yet. I’m Florian Heart. I’m a big fan. I can’t wait to hear what you and Nai make together. Anything she touches turns

to magic.” He cocks his head, his grin growing. “At least that’s how it is with me.”

“Gus Diamond.” I tilt my head, matching his gesture, and smirk. “But you already knew that. I mean, that’s why you suddenly showed up, right?”

Jasper barks out a small chuckle behind me and Florian’s gaze hardens. “Amongst other reasons.” He introduces himself to the guys before he turns back to me, his eyes searching my face with a satisfied gleam. “It was nice to meet you, Gus. No hard feelings or anything. Nai and I have quite the past, as I’m sure you know. It was only a matter of time before we worked things out.”

Just as I open my mouth to say something, Naomi walks in with Casper hot on her heels. Her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are wild and furious, but when she spots me, she stiffens, her expression growing contrite.

“Morning guys,” she mumbles to Jasper, Keith, and Henry, but her eyes are locked on mine. She tries to smile, as if she’s trying to convey something, but whatever it is, I’m at a loss. She takes a small step and suddenly she’s too close to me in this small room. “Can I um...can we speak out in the hall?”

“Nai, you can do that later,” Florian interjects sharply, sliding in beside her. “You guys have a lot of work to get done and we’re not through talking.”

Naomi’s cheeks flush as she turns to him. “You need to leave. You don’t belong here.”

“It’s fine, Naomi,” I tell her because I really don’t want to hear her brush off right now. Especially when she looks like this. Beautiful with sweet smiles aimed at me. I want to get

this done as quickly as possible and get the hell out of here. “We’ll catch up later.”

She shakes her head, the rose in her cheeks deepening, her eyes scouring my face while her teeth work on her bottom lip. She wants to argue but for whatever reason doesn’t keep up the protest.

“We do have a lot to get done today,” Steven comments to no one in particular. “Guys” —he motions to Jasper, Keith, and Henry— “Mateo is waiting on you in the other studio to work on some of the vocals and things for another song. I’ve got Gus and Naomi. Florian, if you’re staying, you keep quiet.”

“I guess I’m not needed,” Casper announces, and I half forgot he was here. “You’ve got this under control.”

Jasper claps me on the shoulder, giving me a firm fuck-that-asshole squeeze. His questioning eyes meet mine and I give him a slight nod.

And with that, everyone leaves, abandoning me to my own form of hell in a room with Naomi and Florian with only Steven as a buffer.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*Naomi*

“HOW COULD you do this to me?” I seethe at Casper. I’m so mad right now I’m practically on fire with it. Seriously, I’d be shocked if I didn’t have steam billowing from my ears. After I left the restaurant last night, Casper never picked up my calls. And by the time I got home, the pictures were already all over the internet.

He must have had a photographer in the restaurant because those pictures were taken from inside. They were close. Which means this was even more of a setup than I previously thought. Which means my only living person who refers to themselves as my family used me. Played me.

I should have known. Crawl By Night’s last album didn’t do so well. In fact, it pretty much tanked. They have a lot riding on this next album and evidently Casper is using me to stir up some free press and hopefully some sales and pre-orders.

I bet it’s working for them too.

Casper folds his tattooed arms across his chest and tries to use his size to intimidate me. It doesn't work. He's merely my fake uncle and I'm not a child anymore.

"I didn't do it *to* you. I did it *for* you." *He's got to be kidding me with that* . "For all of us. I have a band to make successful and that's exactly what I'm doing. Florian is barely out of rehab and needs this album. Plus, he needs you." He points a stern finger in my direction. "I'm promoting my assets and since those pictures of you with Gus came out, your album sales and Wild Minds' sales have increased. And since last night, *our* album sales have already skyrocketed. Think about that, Naomi. Think about that for everyone involved in this. Think about what this means financially. Think about how *badly* Florian needs this."

I shake my head at him, tugging at my hair, my mind tripping over itself.

And then something awful clicks into place.

"You did this. All of it," I accuse, growing more certain of it by the second. "You saw Gus at my place and then you set up photographers to follow us. Then you set up that dinner with Florian. Didn't you?"

Casper gives me a sanctimonious grin. "Don't look so shocked, Nai. You've known me your whole life. I'm trying to help you and everyone else. Why don't you see that?"

I bluster out an exasperated breath, turning in a circle and pacing the small room. "I'm happy you're getting sales. I'm happy Wild Minds is getting sales. You know I am. Don't play that against me. You've been manipulating me since the very first day. Now it all makes sense how they found Gus and me that afternoon. At first it was just annoying, but now this crap

with Florian? How could you? Did you even consider Gus in any of this?"

He laughs like that's the most ridiculous thing ever. "You think Gus Diamond actually cares about you beyond this duet?" His words pull me to a quick stop, and I pivot to face him, my breath stalled in my chest like someone just knocked the wind out of me. "Tell me you're not that naïve, Naomi. Please tell me you don't believe that Gus Diamond, the man who has been in love with his sister-in-law his entire life, who admits this publicly, likes you for more than your musical talent?" I blink rapidly up at him, because yeah, I was starting to believe that. "Dammit, Nai. I didn't know. I'm sorry." Casper steps forward, placing his hands on my shoulders. "I assumed it was all about the music."

It probably is. That's likely why he didn't call after he kissed me. He regretted it and I'm so stupid and attention-starved I didn't see it for what it was. I shake my head, pushing all that away. "Gus aside, you had no right to shove Florian back into my life. Not only with that dinner, but with the media stuff. It took me a very long time to get myself back together and I know you know that. So again, how could you?"

"How could I what? Florian loves you. You loved him at one time too."

"He broke my heart!"

Casper has the audacity to roll his eyes at me. "Grow up, Naomi. Forgive him already or don't but stop acting like a child. It was one dinner. A few pictures and a couple of headlines."

I can't believe he just said to that me. "A child? You of all people know what I've been through. It's not like you sat us

down for a friendly chat. You ambushed me in a public place and set up photographers to catch it.” I shove him off, pushing him away.

“Something like that. Florian has new songs. They’re good. Very good and he needs you. His muse. The thought of seeing you, of being near you, of being *with* you, is the *one* thing that’s kept him sober all these months.”

Christ, that’s such a fucked-up thing to tell me. Talk about trying to guilt me using my one weakness like a weapon.

“And if I don’t? If I walk away?”

“You won’t,” he states firmly. Confidently. “Like I said, you loved him once too. You can spend time with Florian or not. Hell, you can tell him to fuck off. I don’t care. But this album is happening, and it’s happening with your help because I know you won’t risk Florian falling off the wagon.”

My heart starts to ratchet around my chest, desperate to claw its way out. My skin suddenly feels like it’s burning up, my body angry and miserable in my skin.

“You’re fucking with my life!” I scream.

“No, honey. I’m not.” He takes another step into me, replacing his hand on my shoulder and looking deep into my eyes in that softer fatherly way of his. “I’m reinventing you. I’m giving you the second chance you’ve refused yourself all these years. You had that stalker when you were a teenager. Then your mother died, followed by your father. And it was all very tragic. I know this and I’m not downplaying it. It tore us all apart. Then Florian was too fucked up with drugs to see what he was doing and how he was hurting you. But you let it all push you into hiding. That’s no way to live. I allowed it because I thought maybe it was what you needed. But after



Florian and you broke up, you've been lifeless. I can't watch it anymore. You're too young and too talented to throw your life away. So I'm sending you a life raft."

My eyes burn with tears that I refuse to let fall. It's seemingly effortless for him to say these things from on top of his ivory tower. He can say he's tired of seeing it, but he hasn't been here on the ground with me. I'm the one who found my dad. I'm the one who had to read those letters from that crazy stalker. I'm the one who walked in on my fiancé about to shoot up. I'm the one who lost the baby and weathered that emotional storm alone.

I know he's right to a certain extent.

I have gone into hiding.

I did let my dream die. It's why I said yes to the duet with Gus. But I didn't agree to Florian and I definitely didn't agree to the media drama. I like my life private and Casper knows this.

"He didn't tell you about the baby, did he?"

Casper blanches, his expression growing stricken. "What baby?"

I can't get into it again. I just don't have that in me this morning after last night and everything that's subsequently happened. "Ask him about it. Ask him about it and then tell me if I should forgive him. If I should ever have anything to do with him again."

"Jesus Christ," he hisses under his breath. He takes a step back and runs a hand through his hair. He nods his head and pivots back to me. "I will ask him. But for now, we need to go. You've got a busy couple of days with Gus, and I need your help with Florian and this album."

“I haven’t forgiven you,” I tell him.

“I know. But you will. I’m your godfather and uncle for lack of a better term.”

“Don’t forget that, Casper. You call me your family. At the end of the day, that’s all there is. Don’t put this business before me ever again. I’m not kidding. I don’t give a damn about the money, I’ll walk.”

Ten minutes later I’m stuck in a room with Gus—who can barely meet my eyes and when he does, they’re filled with ice—Florian, who won’t freaking leave despite my asking him to, and Steven who is trying his best to keep his expression stoic. I give him a lot of credit for that because I can’t seem to manage it.

Steven goes over everything we need to get done. He wants to play around with what we have so far, hoping we’ll be able to pull it together along with a few other verses and a stronger chorus if he adds some music to it.

It’s an impossible task right now.

I can’t write this in front of Florian and all that chemistry and connection with Gus feels lost, never to be found again. Instead, we’re rife with tension and awkward silences.

I hate this. I should have called Gus last night. I should have called him first thing this morning. Hell, I should have demanded five goddamn minutes to talk to him, even when he blew me off.

I don’t want him thinking all the things I know he is.

I like Gus.

I think I really like him.

And even though Florian is scrambling my brain, that fact hasn't changed. Even with Casper's words about Gus loving Viola still and the truth behind that. Because I know there is more going on between us than just the music. I know this. And I know Gus does too; otherwise, he wouldn't be reacting this way.

Gus is up in the booth first and this seems to please him immensely as he walks past me without so much as a sideways glance and shuts the door behind him. I blow out a frustrated breath, my belly churning with acid.

"Your new admirer is handling this better than I anticipated," Florian says, and right now, I want to hit him over the head with my guitar. I wouldn't, because I love my guitar more than his miserable life, but still, the temptation is there.

"Why are you here?" I snap without turning away from watching Gus in the booth. I keep trying to catch his eye but to no avail. "Go somewhere, anywhere else. You're trying to hurt him. And me. Gus is a good guy, Flor. He doesn't deserve your shit."

I feel Florian move up behind me, his body heat hitting me in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways. "He tried to take what's mine," he whispers into my ear. Of course, Gus picks this very moment to finally look in my direction. His jaw clenches and his fists ball up, but other than that, he appears impervious.

My elbow flies back, catching Florian in the ribs. "I'm not yours anymore. Go. I'm not kidding."

Florian chuckles, the sound rumbling against me, and I hike my shoulder up, brushing him off.

“I’ll go, but I know you’ve heard the news about the album. We won’t be starting until the end of the month, until you’re done with Gus, but that doesn’t mean I won’t be bothering you, as I said I would. I’ll see you soon, sweetheart. You can count on it.”

The second Florian is gone, I feel like I can finally take a breath.

In fact, I collapse onto the couch, dropping my face into my hands.

“You’re in it with this, aren’t you?” Steven asks as he listens to Gus play the guitar through his headphones. I don’t even know if he’s singing at this point or really what the hell he’s up to in there. I’m messing this all up for him and to say I feel horrible about it is a gross understatement.

“Seems that way. Did you know about Casper’s master plan?”

He shakes his head. “No. I’m just a worker bee. But I’ve known Casper since before you were born, so I’m not surprised. Crawl By Night needs a successful album. They’re teetering on the edge and could go either way. Gus asked you to do the duet. Casper wanted you to restart your career. All the pieces came together.”

“I don’t like being manipulated.”

“No one does. But it’s the nature of this business. We all have a part to play and right now, kiddo, yours is being the monkey in the middle.”

“Awesome,” I deadpan. “Maybe I should just retire.”

Steven shakes his head. “You’ll never do that. You like it too much.”

I sigh, leaning back into the cushion of the couch.

He's right, of course. I do like it too much to retire. It's why I sang back up and did voice coaching and other bullshit, even if I wasn't writing or creating my own music. So, I guess I need to suck it up and deal. I can ignore Florian despite what he says. At least I can put him off. He's lived this long without me, so it really shouldn't be the hardship he's making it out to be.

Gus is another matter.

I can't keep my distance from him. Even if I could, I'm not sure I want to.

But right now, he hates me. Or at least he's super pissed off, not that I blame him in the least. I need to fix this. Now.

"I need to talk to Gus, Steven. Can we take five?"

Steven laughs and shakes his head. "No way in hell. Listen to this." He flips a switch on the soundboard and then the angry strings of Gus's acoustic guitar fill the room.

"Wow," I breathe out because I've never heard him play like that. It's good. No, it's balls to the wall amazing.

"Yeah, wow. So no, you can't take five and no, you can't talk to him. In fact, I'd let him continue to fester. I'd love to see what else I can get out of him."

I roll my eyes at that, but at the same, I can't blame Steven for saying that. When he blends this into whatever track he's going to put it on, it's going to be phenomenal. It's not our song. I already know this, and Steven never said a word to me—or Gus for that matter—to bring him back to it.

This is something new, and it's brilliant.

Gus continues like this for another half an hour. He plays like he's possessed by the devil and when he comes out of that sound booth, his sandy-colored hair is damp with perspiration and his t-shirt clings to his incredible chest and abs like a second skin.

Damn, that's one hell of a sight.

I stand up, but he doesn't even acknowledge me. He just sets his guitar down in the corner and makes for the door, no doubt headed to the bathroom to get himself cleaned up. I know Steven said I should let him fester, but I'm not going to do that.

"Don't," Steven warns. "Let him be. Besides, you're up."

"I just have to pee," I lie. I went to the bathroom like ten minutes ago, but Steven just shakes his head and lets it go.

I fly out of the room practically at a sprint and don't hesitate before I open the door to the men's room. This bathroom has two stalls and two urinals, so I'm fortunate that no one else is in here other than Gus.

Gus who is now shirtless as he wipes the sweat from his body with a damp towel.

Holy sweet baby Jesus in the manger. I may have just drooled a puddle onto the floor. I know for a fact that my mouth is agape. Whether or not my tongue is lolling out, I have no idea.

Gus is cut.

Tall, broad, muscular shoulders, thick arm muscles with unbelievable biceps and triceps—the latter my total weakness—amazingly defined pecks that trail down into a row of bricks in the form of abs. One, two, three...yep, he's got eight. Damn, he has an eight-pack, all the way down to a V that sinks

into his jeans with a small trail of light hair to guide me as if I need directions.

My eyes are practically glued to him, and any attempt at removing them from Gus's body is futile. It's like they're laughing at me, saying, please girl, who are you kidding, you can't look away and why would you want to.

He glances over at me, catches me blatantly staring, and a reluctant smirk latches onto the corner of his lips as he notes the extreme extent of my ogling. "Did I pass? There's a billboard downtown if you need a larger visual."

Now he's just mocking me. I finally drag my gaze up to his and frown when I note the playful yet guarded expression on his face. This isn't the Gus I'm used to. This is a different man.

"No? You want more? I'm more than happy to oblige with whatever you need." The harsh suggestion in his voice cuts me to the quick.

"Don't do that."

"Do what? You're the one staring at me like you're desperate for me to take my pants off next. To see if I'm just as impressive below the belt as I am above. Get on your knees and I'll show you that I am."

I clear my throat, ignoring the biting tone of his voice and fucked up words. "I need to talk to you."

"That's not what I was hoping you were about to offer me." I scowl and he blows out a silent breath. "We really don't have to do this," he retorts briskly, and I find myself crossing the small washroom over to him as he stands in front of the sink.

Sweaty. Half-naked. Angry as the devil. And goddamn divine.

“You need to let me explain everything, so you’ll understand and stop being a disrespectful jerk, talking to me like I’m nothing more than a backroom fuck.”

Gus steps away from the sink, turning to face me and with that, his masculine musky scent hits my nose. I reflexively take a deep breath in to capture more of it.

I want this man, I realize.

So much so that I’m willing to put up with his shitty attitude.

So much so that I’m not going down without a fight.

“I think I understand everything pretty well, actually. Florian filled me in.”

I sigh. Gus is stubborn. A lot of strong, alpha men are. It’s in their DNA or something. But right now, I’m not in the mood to do battle with that. I need him to listen to me and I need him to listen to me now. So, I stride into him, nice and tall in my heels as I gaze up into his stormy eyes that never fail to charge past all my defenses.

Yeah, I like Gus.

How or when it happened is anyone’s guess. But it’s real, and I don’t want to let it go.

He’s the first good thing to enter my life in so very long. He makes me feel seen and heard and I want so much more of him I can hardly think past it.

“You don’t, actually. It’s not what you think,” I explain. “I was ambushed. I went out to meet Casper and Florian was there. I had no idea.”



“Casper tricked you? Is that why you were yelling at him this morning?”

I nod, a small smile cracking my lips. “Yes, he did. And yes, it was.”

Gus nods, not surprised, but then takes a step back, leaning against the counter as a bead of water trails slowly down his throat. I watch it for a beat like a dog trailing a treat, and then force myself to find his eyes again. That smirk is still there, and I feel sort of foolish for being this easy with him. Especially after what he just said to me about getting on my knees.

Especially when I know the score. He kissed me and then didn't call.

And here I am, chasing after him.

Shame suddenly swarms me, and I step back, hugging my arms around my chest as if to protect myself from what I can feel is coming.

“You're back with him now?”

I shake my head. “No, I'm not,” I tell him flatly. “It's not how it looked in the pictures.” I shrug up a shoulder. “Come on, Gus. Give me some credit. I'm not back together with Florian and we weren't having a romantic dinner. I spent the evening mapping out all the ways he hurt me in graphic detail for him. I'm so sorry about you having to see that before I spoke to you. And about being hounded by paparazzi this morning. I know this is not what you signed up for when you asked me to do the duet with you.” I heave in a breath and realize this might not be entirely about me and Florian. “If you want me to pull out, I totally understand.”

His gaze hardens instantly, his jaw popping. “Is that what you want?”

“No,” I jolt at his sharp tone. “Not even close.”

He blusters out a heavy exhale and runs a hand through his damp hair. “It’s fine. We’re cool. You don’t owe me an explanation.”

I prop my hands on my hips, feeling more vulnerable than I’m comfortable with. Did I misread this thing between us? Is Casper right and I’m being foolish?

“Maybe not, but I wanted you to have one all the same.”

“Why?”

One word. One simple word.

And suddenly, it’s like a spring snapping me back into place.

Yet, he’s asking such a complicated question, demanding an answer I don’t know if I should give him. He’s going to break me in half, I can feel it.

But that doesn’t stop me from going with the truth. “Because I like you. And I sincerely thought the feeling was mutual. I don’t know what’s going on with us, Gus. You kissed me and then stopped and then ghosted me—”

“I wasn’t ghosting you. I was giving you space,” he cuts in, and I feel my eyebrows bunching together.

I tilt my head. “What’s that now?”

He grins, shifting into me as he reaches out, grasping a lock of my hair and wrapping it around his fist. He gives it a tug and I willingly oblige, stepping in closer until our bodies are practically flush. And even after washing off all that sweat

and heat, I still feel him, sticky and salty and radiating a warmth I can't help but curl into.

Desire swirls low in my belly. The urge to lick every inch of him somewhere mixed into that.

“Space. You know, so you could think. I didn't want to overstep after I kissed you.”

God, why are boys so dumb?

I shake my head at him, but I'm smiling all the same. “Girls don't like space. We like calls and texts. Especially after a kiss like the one you planted on me. We like it when the guy who gave us said kiss lets us know that we're not the only one thinking and obsessing about it after the fact.”

“Is that what you were doing? Thinking and obsessing about it?”

He has no idea.

“You tell me yours and I'll tell you mine.”

He chuckles. “I thought you didn't date musicians.”

“I thought you were in love with your ex,” I throw back at him and practically cringe at the words.

He doesn't even stir with that one. “I've been thinking lately, how that may not be the case anymore. What about your ex?”

I hate him and I worry about him and I don't want him anywhere near me and I want him to be successful. Why did Casper have to place Florian's sobriety on my shoulders? It's such a heavy weight. He knows what it means to me. The fear and panic drugs and their deathly consequences instill in me. Maybe this makes me weak and a little pathetic, but I can't

help it. The fear is consuming, even if I don't want to be with him and I hate him, I can't handle his death either.

"I'm not with him and I have no plans to be. But Casper asked me to help out with their new album and I haven't decided yet whether or not I'll do that," I admit reluctantly. My head bows. "That's a shit answer, but it's true. He's sober and I..."

"Why did you follow me in here, Naomi?"

Gus grasps my chin, tilting it back up until my eyes are forced to meet his. The intensity in them has my body running circuits. "I don't know what you want me to say, Gus. I don't want Florian. That said, I just... I need to sort everything out in my head. Casper said some stuff and I..." I huff out loud and long. "I just need to make sure he's in a good place." *And won't die*. "That's all though."

Gus emits a ragged breath, his hand rutting through his still-damp hair making the ends stick up erratically. I imagine it would look similar after sex.

Not helping things right now.

"I liked kissing you, Naomi. I don't know what's happening, and I know we both have more baggage than anyone needs, but I was really fucking angry this morning when I saw those pictures. So fucking angry. It's not an emotion I'm all that comfortable wearing. I'm not sure how cut out I am to be the other guy."

Christ, that hurts. He's not the other guy, but in a way, I get his thinking on it.

I stare up into his eyes, hoping he hears me and sees me and believes me. "I understand why you'd think that. But *I* don't think of you that way. Not even close."

He shakes his head and my insides quake. I want him to put up a bit of fight. He's not and it sucks. He's placing all this on my shoulders. Every confession. In fact, I see the retreat all over him. His eyes are shuttered shut. *You shall not pass*, they say.

I look away.

This time, he lets me.

"I know I'm not being fair, and I understand," I mumble, my cheeks heating as I self-consciously and unnecessarily repeat myself. "But maybe—"

"Look," he interrupts. "We really don't have to do this. Of course, we'll still be friends. That won't change. But I'm thinking I need to focus on the band and the album and this duet instead of all this accessory stuff."

*Accessory stuff?* Is that what I am to him?

It makes me feel like a handbag. Something you toss away when the strap breaks or shove in the back of your closet when the season is over. Isn't that all I've ever been to a man. Something no one cares enough about to stick with and fight for.

Then again, all he said was that he likes kissing me. Nothing more than that.

Friends.

That's been his go-to party line.

And even though this hurts, I know he's right. He's probably doing me a favor by giving me a reprieve from some of the turmoil and vacillation.

But still...

“Sure,” I say, doing my best to put on my impervious, nothing gets to me face. “Totally understandable.” I wince at that goddamn word again. “Thanks for letting me explain.” I take a step back and then another. “I’ll let you finish up in here.” Spinning on my heels, I pause for a beat and when he doesn’t follow that up with anything or try to stop me from going, I rush out of the bathroom.

Letting the door click behind me, I release the disappointed breath I was holding.

*It’s for the best*, I tell myself.

But even as I think the words, I know they’re a lie.

Florian is back in my life and I don’t know how to deal with that. This duet is hanging over my head and I don’t know how to finish it. Gus only wants to be friends and that will never change.

Awesome. At least it’s not like things can get worse.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

*Gus*

“DO you know what I hate more than anything?” Jasper asks in a casual tone despite the grueling question. He’s leaning back on his over-stuffed outdoor chair, a beer in his hand, and a fire blazing in the fireplace which illuminates the left side of his face in a warm, orange glow.

I don’t follow that up since I assume it’s rhetorical, but when he doesn’t answer his own stupid question, I find myself rolling my eyes at my twin. “I hate it when you do this shit. Just tell me and stop with all the dramatics.”

Jasper chuckles at me. “You’re still being an angry bitch.”

I might be, but that’s not the matter at hand.

“Bitches ain’t shit but hoes and tricks...”

“My wife will kill you for that one.”

“As she should but spill it already.”

He chuckles some more and then says, “The pool. I hate this pool. Even with the gate we put in and the alarm and cameras and all the other crap.” He points at the sparkling

water that ripples against the in-pool lighting, glowing an enticing bright blue as his wife and daughter swim in it, laughing. “Adalyn and her goddamn obsession with water are keeping me up at night. I’m thinking of moving.”

I stare at Viola in her bikini, her cute pregnant belly popping out in between her top and bottoms and then over to Adalyn, who is trying to swim in her floaty that wraps around her chest and hugs her arms. They’re both so happy here. Viola is finally happy.

“You’re not moving.”

“Autistic children have more than double the mortality rates of neurotypical children and much of that is related to accidents in the home. Almost a third of parents report ‘close calls’” —he puts air quotes around the words— “with near drownings.”

Shit. I can’t even with that. Just the thought of it fills me with dread and has my stomach sinking like lead.

“Then you teach her how to swim,” I say. “You turn her into an Olympic level swimmer. You put locks up high where she cannot reach them, and you live your life.” I point at him with my bottle. It sucks and it’s scary, but so is everything else.

We turn back to the pool as Viola instructs, “Good, Ady. That’s perfect. Move your arms like that. You can do it, sweet girl. Swim to mommy.”

“Viola once told me I couldn’t lock her up in an ivory tower, but I’m starting to think that’s not such a bad way to go.”

“And what about the new baby?”



Jasper's head whips in my direction, his eyes bright and bleak and terrified. "Ady is excited for it. At least she says she is and we're working with her therapists on that huge change in her life. But...I don't know. I don't have the touch Vi has. She's always calm, always smiling. I'm always worrying and afraid. It's why we work."

It's true. It's why Vi's so perfect for him.

The ultimate counterbalance.

He needs her as much as she needs him. And as I glance back toward her in the water, swimming with her daughter, pregnant with Jasper's child, my niece or nephew, I don't hurt the way I used to when I'd think about Vi and all I lost with her. If anything, I feel a sense of wholeness with it. A validation that sits strangely on my shoulders but is no less familiar or welcome.

It warms me that they have this with each other, and I realize I no longer miss Viola.

"Adalyn loves the water, bro. So, you teach her to swim. You take all the precautions you can. But it's life and you have to sleep at night knowing you've done everything to protect your girl. You feel me?"

Silence spreads between us as we watch our favorite girls swim in the pool. My throat is thick, and it's not just because of all that Jasper just said. I feel like a dick and I can't shake it. Naomi's expression when I said the word friends haunts me, sticking to my brain like gum on the bottom of a shoe.

"Did you finish the duet yet?"

Motherfucker went there. "Nope. Nothing more today." And nothing done yesterday other than a lot of angry playing

on my part. It wasn't even related to the duet. It was just me jamming to the notes in my head. Useless.

“And that wouldn't have to do with Florian Heart showing back up?”

I shrug up a shoulder, refusing to answer or meet his eyes.

I don't know what happened in the bathroom yesterday. I'm not even sure what she was after or what she was offering me. I gave her the ultimate way out. Friendship. It's what we should have always been and nothing more. I'm the one who crossed the line. Not her. I'm the one who went too far. Not her. I'm the one who should have never gone there. Not her.

She did nothing wrong.

It took me forever to realize that, but it's true.

“Christ, you're so goddamn stupid. Worse than I ever was.”

I bristle at that. Like hard. “How the hell do you figure that?”

Jasper stares at me, his eyes searching around my face. He takes a sip of his beer, and I'm so angry I want to smack the green glass out of his hand so I can watch it smash on the hardscape. If my pregnant sister-in-law and perfect baby niece weren't close by, I just might.

“Wanna play a game with me, Gus?”

I blink twice at him, watching his casual posture and steely features, and know there is no winning right now with my brother. It makes me want to stand up and walk out of here, but I can't force the action. Probably because part of me wants the burn he's about to deliver. I like the hurt in small,

controlled doses. Everyone does. We all have a bit of the masochist in us.

The self-deprecating, self-hating side.

But somehow, that's not what this moment is about.

This is Jasper about to lay into me, and it's not something he's known for where I'm concerned. If anything, my twin is nothing if not wholly loving and fully accepting of me and my shortcomings. I'm a flawed mess and he's never judged that.

Until now.

"Sure. What did you have in mind?"

"Truth or dare?"

A bark of a laugh escapes my chest. Fucking Jasper. "And we're suddenly kids again?"

"We played it in Italy last summer."

"Barely and that was different."

It was. Everything felt better even though it wasn't.

"Okay then. No games. We're twins having an honest moment. But I get the feeling if I don't force your hand, you won't be so forthcoming."

I sigh, running a frustrated hand across my jaw and finishing off the rest of my beer with a giant sudsy gulp. Storm clouds are rolling in from the Pacific, angry bastards that are promising rain and wind and mayhem, and whatever else they feel like doing.

"You should get your girls out of the pool." I tilt my now empty bottle in their direction. He ignores me, and I growl, in no mood.

“How about you just tell me what’s on your mind. Vi knows when to get Ady out.”

The trust he has for his new wife with his daughter still astounds me. Especially when it comes to water. But maybe it shouldn’t. Viola would die for Adalyn. I know this and so does Jasper. The three of them share a love I never understood before.

And that’s why Viola is not mine.

“I didn’t love her like you do. Not even close.”

Christ, it’s a truth I’ve never admitted to before. Not really. I think I thought I did, but in retrospect...no. And the admission releases a weight I didn’t realize was still sitting on it from my chest.

“No. You didn’t. But you knew that before you met Naomi. I know you did, even if you didn’t admit it out loud. You wouldn’t have let me have her otherwise.”

My face pinches up and I look away, back toward those clouds on the horizon. You can practically see the rain coming, feel the shift in the winds, and I casually watch as Viola urges Adalyn out of the pool with promises of snuggles and Mickey Mouse in her bed, all the while smiling serenely, so content.

My chest clenches.

This is all I’ve ever wanted for her. For both of my girls. No joke.

Viola is a natural at this. At being Adalyn’s mom. It can’t be easy. Adalyn isn’t easy. Adalyn is a lot of work and unpredictable to boot. But Vi does it with so much patience and love it’s impossible to be anything but in awe of her. Kismet is a word I’ve never believed in before but witnessing my ex with my niece makes me a believer.

“I have no regrets.” At least not about stepping back so Jasper could have Viola.

“Not about that, but can you extend that to all aspects of your life?”

No. No, I can't. Not even close.

“I like Naomi, okay. I know what you're getting at and trying to do here. I like her a lot. She's just...” I shake all that away. “I'm not right for her. I can't do it again, Jas. Play the good guy. Want the girl and lose when the better man gets her.”

“That's not what happened with us. You orchestrated my being with Viola. You gave up on wanting to be with her because you knew how she and I felt about each other.”

“You were always the better man, Jas. You always deserved her. You made her happy in ways I never did.”

“Except you're the better man in this scenario.”

I've never felt that way. Never.

“Is that what's happening? Are her and Florian back together?”

“No. Not yet. But he's trying like hell to make it happen.”

“And you're letting it happen. Why are you pushing her toward him?”

“I'm not. She told me point blank that he's not out of her life. I have no interest in being part of that.”

“You're good at pushing it away, Gus. All of it. Something scares you or hurts you and you shut it down. Mom dies and you plaster a smile on your face and pretend like it never happened. You couldn't handle being separated from Viola

when we came out to California and she was still at home, so you cheated. You wanted Viola but saw the two of us together and didn't want to fight for her, so you pushed us together. You're so afraid of feeling. Of getting hurt, that you avoid anything that comes even remotely close."

I swallow thickly, my eyes dropping down to the hardscape, staring sightlessly at the gray stone without words.

He's right.

All of it.

I've never put myself on the line. Not once. Not even for Vi, the woman who I thought was my world.

"But you haven't done that with Naomi. You saw pictures of her with Florian and became consumed with jealousy." *Consumed. There's that word again* . "You couldn't look at her. You were a fuming mess of a man. I know. I heard what you played. Song after song. All new and angry and unbelievable. All about her. You were never like that with Viola. Never once." He stops here and I can't look up. I can't meet his eyes. I know what I'll find, and I'm just too fucking chickenshit. "*I was like that with Viola. You hear me, brother?*"

I do. I hear him perfectly. He's saying Naomi is to me what Viola is to him.

Can something like that be possible so soon?

"Do you actually want Naomi or is she just a placeholder?"

I clear my throat and meet his steadfast gaze. I tell him a truth I've scarcely allowed myself to acknowledge. "I want her."

He nods like he already knew that, which I guess he did, based on everything he just said. Jasper Diamond, everyone. Omnipotent prick and perfect brother.

“I suffered for years with Vi in and out of my life. Don’t do that to yourself, Gus.”

“I can’t go through it again. Letting her go now will hurt less than when she chooses him later.”

“It didn’t for me.”

And fuck. That right there. That’s the goddamn truth, isn’t it?

I took Viola from him when we were teenagers. I’m the reason he was hurting for so long.

And no, he didn’t get over it.

He festered like a diseased wound. He may have Vi now, and I may have never been able to find it in me to regret being with her for those years in high school, but I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself for all the pain I caused Jasper. And yet here he is, sitting beside me, sharing a beer and telling me to man the fuck up for once in my life.

Is there anyone better in this world than my brother? No. Not even close. He’s the man I’ve always wanted to be. My twin, but so very different.

“We’re all afraid, Gus. All damaged and flawed.”

“Me more than most. I’m just better at hiding it.” Or avoiding it.

“Maybe. But did you ever consider that putting yourself on the line isn’t the worst thing that can happen to you?”

I stare, dumbfounded, my eyes blinking and my heart thundering. Pain has always been my enemy. Truly allowing myself to feel has been a very close second. Ever since my brother came home one day and told me that my mother wasn't. It was too much. I was eight, and she was dead, and I couldn't do a damn thing about it.

I couldn't handle the anguish in Jasper's eyes or the pain shredding my heart.

“Stop—”

“—That maybe letting Naomi go is? Life isn't worth living without the people we want in it by our side. It took me a very long time to figure that out, Gus. Sometimes you have to fight like hell to get it, even if it hurts and you're scared.”

My body sags back, the wind starting to howl, echoing my turbulent insides. Viola and Adalyn are wrapped in towels, Ady's purple because if it's not, shit will go down. Vi catches Jasper's eye first and then mine second, and instead of saying anything, the brilliant woman reads things better than I'd like and heads into the house with Adalyn.

I think I want Naomi by my side.

I think it's where she's meant to be.

At the very least, I want the chance to find out.

“You say all that, but what if she doesn't choose me?” I can't do that again. I can't let myself love someone only to lose them. Not again. Not ever.

He grins deviously. “But what if she does? Isn't it worth the fight to find out?”



## Chapter Twenty-Four

*Naomi*

*“WOW, I feel so sad tonight. Thinking everythin’s gone wrong.*

*Dark clouds smokin’ out my horizon tonight. Not sure if they’ll ever be a dawn.*

*Where did you go when I needed you most? Ghostin’ me like this sad song.”*

Lightning cracks across the dark sky, jagged and menacing, and my singing slips into it, fading away. I can see the rain when the bolt illuminates the sky for that flicker of a second. It’s out there in the water, angry and tempestuous, violent and undeterred. It mirrors my insides so perfectly I hardly have the breath to move or shift away from it.

To head inside like any sane person would do in this situation.

Instead, I breathe in its electricity, mocking its crazy, and laughing at its danger.

“Fuck you,” I yell. “I’ve lived through a hundred times worse than you.”

Is this what crazy feels like? I've often wondered if people realize when they've reached that point. If they truly know they're losing touch with reality or if they're actually, finally, seeing things with a clarity they never had before.

This storm is coming and it's beautiful.

I likely shouldn't be standing here any longer, watching from my balcony, staring out at the angry, raging sea, that will no doubt cut out my power, batter my windows, and rearrange my outdoor furniture as it always does.

But there is nothing good waiting for me inside my house.

My phone is there for one. Sitting on my kitchen counter, filled with texts from Florian Heart. Love notes. Poems. Sonnets and songs. Apologies and heartache and remorse and fuck him. I lost my baby. He lost nothing he wasn't willing to lose.

My music room is another. I haven't touched that duet since that scene with Gus in the bathroom, and now it's like all my instruments are mocking me. Reminding me why I should have never said yes in the first place.

Gus. The stupid jerk I cannot stop thinking about.

It's so goddamn ironic, right?

When life closes a door, it opens a window? Yeah, not so much. In this case, everything is flung open. Everything is exposed. I have no defenses. No recourse. I find a guy who makes me smile, who makes me laugh, who makes me feel seen and beautiful, and he's not only in love with someone else, he tells me we're just friends.

*FRIENDS!*

I start to find a place where I'm ready to put my ugly past behind me only for it to show back up again.

"I deserve a break!" I scream out. And that's the moment the rain hits the beach and my back deck. A pounding torrent of water. A deluge that instantly soaks me, stealing my breath as I gasp for it.

I run my hands over my face, pushing my saturated hair back along with it. I'm smiling and laughing lightly at the shock and cold of the water. I've been in this house through several storms. If you live on the California coast, you get used to them. We lose power and the beach is a hot mess for a couple of days after, but we're undeterred.

My hands clasp the thick railing as if I'm staking my territory, and that's when I hear it. A loud, piercing sound that resembles a yell and a fight all bottled up into one. My eyes close, makeup likely smearing down my face in black rivulets.

But his voice.

Why is he here?

Strong arms wrap around my waist, hauling me back into an even stronger chest. Just the way he did on the beach the first day we met. He twists me around, my chest slamming into his with force, my head helpless as it finds the perfect crook between his shoulder, arm, and chest. His lips meet the bare skin of my neck.

"I've been ringing your bell and calling your phone for fifteen minutes."

I smirk at that. Laugh a little too. "Most would have taken the non-reply as a hint."

"Probably. But I'm not most, am I?"

No. Gus Diamond most certainly is not. “What are you doing here?”

“I was wrong,” he says directly into my skin, wet lips and wet tongue kissing and tasting at my even wetter skin. “I lied, I think too.”

No. Not this. Not now.

I shake my head against him. “I can’t, Gus. You should go. Back where you came from. The fact that you broke through my security and force field is terrifying enough.” And I’m not just talking about the perimeter of my house.

“Your lights were on and I knew you were home. You’re not one to ignore people. I didn’t plan on breaking into your house, Naomi. But I got worried and came down to the beach, just to see if I could look in and know you were okay. Then I heard you singing and yelled out to you. You didn’t respond, but your face...” He trails off, shaking his head against me, his mouth dipping deeper into my neck. “I knew your code. I saw you punch it in.” Now he grins into me like a sexy devil. “I think I’m stalking you, Naomi Kent.”

I huff out a harsh, ragged breath. “Why do you think I have all those measures in the first place?” Gus stiffens instantly, his smile dropping into a frown, but I take no relief in his reaction.

He jests about a stalker, but I had a man write me letters for months. Sexual, violent, and full of a passionate love that made no sense to me. I was fifteen. Fifteen! He broke into my parents’ home, into my bedroom, and got himself off in my bed.

I never slept in that house again.

That was the last time I knew what a home was until I bought this place after both my parents were dead, and my fiancé was gone.

What would you do if that were your teenage daughter?

People think invading your privacy is a celebrity rite of passage. A free rein. Something to mock and roll your eyes at when we complain about perpetually being followed and hounded by press. Stalked by deranged men. Brutalized by haters.

Don't become famous. Don't become a musician. Such a hardship in exchange for being rich.

I've heard it all. But at the end of the day, I'm still a person. A young woman. Because I have money and choose to sing as my profession, do I deserve to be attacked in my home? Lose my sense of privacy? Be exploited at every turn for the benefit of others? Have my personal life flashed across televisions and magazines and spoken about freely?

“Shit, Naomi. I didn't... I'm just full of the wrong thing to say and do when it comes to you. I can't think straight. You make it impossible to think straight.” His arms cling tighter and pull me against his wet chest a little stronger.

“Go home, Gus.”

“Not tonight, Naomi. Not unless you really mean it. Because I didn't mean it. I don't want to be your friend. I don't want Florian Heart to so much as breathe in your direction. I'm jealous and angry and fucking crazy for you. I'm crazy *about* you, and I don't know how to deal with that. I'm not good at it, but I think I want to try to be. I want to spend the night in this house, in your bed, inside of you.”

“And what happens tomorrow?” I manage, my voice thick with lust and apprehension and chaos. The storm engulfing us in its fury, mimicking my insides. “What happens when you decide you changed your mind? That I’m too much or not worth the effort? I haven’t told you all my baggage, Gus. I have so much it’ll fill every suitcase you’ve ever owned. And if you pick up my phone and take a look, you’ll see that my ex is just as determined, if not more so.”

“Jasper was kind enough to point out how I run in the opposite direction from real emotion. How anyone or anything that’s ever challenged me like that, I’ve surreptitiously pushed away. But I haven’t been able to do that with you. I’ve tried. I really have. I tried to make you my friend. I tried to play the professional-only card. I tried to keep my distance except for when we were working on the song. I tried ignoring you. Not calling you. But you never left my mind. Not once. You’re not the only one with baggage. I have plenty myself. And as for Florian?” He shrugs. “Well, he’s not here now. I am. And I’m not giving up on you.”

More lightning slashes across the sky, and in that second, I catch his pure, raw intensity. *His* determination. His lack of fucks to give when it comes to Florian or my past or my baggage.

“What about Viola?” I breathe the words because if I don’t get them out now...

His hands cup my face. “I never burned for Viola the way I burn for you. I never needed Viola the way I *need* you. All the things I thought I knew about love and life were wrong. You flipped everything upside down. Righted all my wrongs.” His face dips in closer, eyes searching mine as he infuses me with an unfiltered vulnerability that makes my chest quake. “All

these years I've built up useless walls. No one got in because it was so much easier to keep them out. Tear them down, Naomi. Tear them down once and for all, and I'll do the same with yours."

That's when his lips crash down on mine. When they steal my breath and demolish my resolve. His tongue invades my mouth, demanding and dominant, powerful and full of force. So goddamn passionate a gasp escapes me, forcing its way into his mouth, and burying itself deep inside of him.

So deep he'll never be able to extract it, no matter how hard he tries.

That's right, Gus. I'm inside you now. A permanent indentation.

It's the exact same place I want him to find himself inside of me. A dark cavernous well of truth and lies. Of heartbreak and renaissance.

My leg hikes up his thigh, my body grinding, my hands greedy as I rake over the strands of his soaked hair. Flickers of rain spring off the short spikes, hitting every which way as I find the nape of his neck, holding him close.

I can't remember a time I felt this wild. This...*alive* .

Without hesitation, he lifts me off my feet, spinning me around, and walking me back toward my house. We don't get far before he presses me into the glass wall, rain hitting his back with a vengeance. My feet meet the floor and I lean deeper into him.

His hands grasp my face, drawing it until our eyes lock, dark and lust-drunk. He roughly scrapes the pads of his calloused thumbs along my skin, brushing my bottom lip as his eyes track the motion. My tongue licks at him, taking one

of his thumbs into my mouth and sucking on it before he pries it free.

“Naomi,” he whispers raggedly before his mouth descends to mine in a punishing kiss, licking at the seam of my lips and thrusting inside the second I open for him. I can feel him doing it. Tearing down my walls the way he said he would.

...And I'm scared. Petrified out of my mind.

It never felt like this before.

Florian was an easement. A natural progression. An automatic.

This is fire in my bones. An electricity lighting up my soul. A gnawing, uncontained ache.

All the parts of me Florian never reached; Gus owns.

My soaked blouse hits the patio floor with a wet slap. My bra ripped from my skin. And in return, my fingers scratch at his shirt, feral and angry, urgent and unapologetic. It finds its way near my discarded blouse, and I press my bare chest against his, humming out a harsh expletive when I capture his heat against the cold rain.

Growling into me, he yanks at my hair and jaw until I have no choice but to stare up into his eyes once more. *Own me. I dare you*. Is what his say to me.

“This is it, you know. If we do this, there is no going back. You'll date a musician—me. Because I'm certainly no longer in love with my ex.”

My breathing intensifies as his lips hover over mine, so close my tongue slips out, licking at them. He's waiting for an answer, and I only have one I can give him.



My fingers drag through his wet hair, over his face and along his jaw, memorizing his every perfect feature. He has a small scar on the side of his jaw, thin and slightly raised. I press up on my toes and kiss it. A soft hum emanates from the back of his throat.

“If I go down, you’re coming with me.”

He nods into my hands and I arch up, kissing him. He sighs into my mouth as our tongues tangle. “I couldn’t stay away,” he murmurs into me. “From the second I saw you, I couldn’t think of anyone or anything else. Just you, you, *you*.” His fingers caress along my arms until he’s taken my hands, moving them from his face, and draping them behind his neck. “Hold on to me.” Then he lifts me up again, carrying me into the house as more lightning illuminates the black sky.

Desire swirls in his charcoal eyes as I rub against him, the sweetest of friction in just the right spot sending pulses of pleasure skyrocketing through my body. “You pushed me away,” I gasp into his mouth in between scorching kisses. He stumbles through the sliding patio door, bumping into the couch and cursing under his breath.

“I was so fucking angry.” He tugs at my shorts, shifting them to the side and roughly palming my ass. “If you need me to slow down, tell me now,” he rasps, nibbling on my bottom lip and clutching me in a bruising grip. He stops suddenly and it’s only then that I find we’re at the foot of my stairs.

The choice is mine.

I draw back, meeting his eyes, and it’s in this moment that I realize he’s trembling. And instinctively I know it’s not from the cold rain on his hot flesh. “You’re shaking.”

He grins. “I’m scared. I’ve never...it hasn’t meant anything in a very long time and even then... I was just a kid the last time being with a woman meant a damn. But with you, Naomi, it means everything. So, tell me, do I need to slow down?”

I lean in and whisper into his ear, “Make tonight one of my favorites, Gus.”

“Fuck, Naomi,” he groans, his mouth reclaiming mine in a fevered kiss that ignites my blood, burns my skin, and detonates my soul. “This is crazy,” he hisses when I nibble on his ear and I laugh. Because it is. It’s so soon—only a couple of weeks. But I feel it too. Every inch of it, I’m right there with him.

He carries us up the stairs, stumbling around in the dark since I have no lights on up here. “That way,” I direct when he gets lost. He leads me into my bedroom, but instead of taking me to the bed, he walks me over to the wall of glass that lines the top floor balcony. Rain slams against the glass at my back, thunder and lightning our symphony, matching the tangible heat and lust that’s blazing between us.

“I want to hear what you sound like when I make you come. I want my name on your lips when you do. So bad, my beautiful girl. So bad I can’t stand it a second longer. Only me. From now on, it’s only me who gets to hear it. Who gets to feel it. Who gets to touch you.”

He pushes me up the glass, kissing at my breasts, licking and nipping at my hard, strained nipples. They bunch up at his touch and I moan out nonsensical words, needing so much more. Needing him to take control, to own every inch of my body that has been deprived of touch for so goddamn long.

His face pulls back, watching me from inches away as his fingers dip in under my shorts, rubbing through my slick folds. My breath hitches, a soft moan escaping my lips as he slowly slides one finger inside of me. Testing me.

“More.”

He grins, adding a second finger, slipping in out and out of me. His thumb finds my clit, rubbing it with deliberately gentle strokes that render me a needy, breathless mess.

I arch into him, demanding more, and a smile spreads across his flushed face. “Christ, Naomi. Could you be any more beautiful?”

His face drops into the crook of my neck, licking and sucking on my wet skin and my eyes close, my head falling back against the glass. I succumb as every pleasure sensor in my body teeters on the cusp of detonation.

“I feel like I’ve wanted you forever, and it’s only been a couple of weeks. How? How did I go so long without you?”

Jesus. “Gus,” I hiss as his fingers begin to work me harder. Thrust deeper. Circle faster.

“Yes, baby,” he growls. “Yes. Say it again. Who is touching you? Who is making you so fucking wet? Who is making you feel so fucking good?”

“Oh my god. Oh my god. Gus.”

Tingles shoot up my spine in an explosion that consumes my entire body until I’m gasping for my life, clutching at his shoulders, and falling forward onto him, rocking against his hand as he doesn’t stop or slow.

“So sweet. Holy shit, you’re so sweet,” he pants into me, his face tilting to capture my lips as I quiver against him, my

body clutching his.

When I float back to earth a startled laugh belts out from my chest as I kiss him and hug him tighter. “Holy Christ,” I exclaim, breathless. He chuckles at my reaction, grinning like a boy into my lips. “Why is that so much better when someone else does it?”

“Why do sandwiches taste better when someone else makes them?”

“That’s a seriously good question.”

“It could also be that it’s you and it’s me together.”

I latch on to his bottom lip, sucking it into my mouth. “Could be.”

“I’ve imagined this a million times over. A million dirty things that I want to do to you. Filthy fucking things, Naomi. But right now...” His chest rises rapidly, his eyes at half-mast as they swivel back and forth between mine.

“What? Right now, what?” I push when he falls silent.

“Right now, I’m dying to know what it feels like to be inside of you. I haven’t looked a woman in the eyes in so long, but damn, there is no other place I want to be than inside your eyes when I’m inside your body.”

And that’s it. Maybe it’s the raw vulnerability he’s all about tonight. Or the sincerity in his tone. Or the way he looks at me, burning just for me. This man, this fucking man, owns my heart and I don’t want it back. He stole it and now it’s his and it’s like he said, there is no going back.

What good is a fortress if you never let the prince scale the walls or fight your dragons?

“Then do it, Gus. All of it.”

“You want me to fuck you, Naomi? Is that what you want?”

“God, yes.”

He pulls me in for a hard kiss as he swivels us around, marching us over to my bed. He doesn't release me so I can drop down onto it. His lips are too busy, his tongue too entangled with mine as his kiss grows more urgent, more ferocious. He groans as I press my bare flesh against his, my hands pushing urgently at my shorts and panties, desperate to get them off.

“Gus. Pants.”

My legs unhook from behind his back and I stand on my bed, finally shimmying out of my shorts as his eyes feast on me. He undoes his wet jeans, letting them fall to the floor but leaving his boxer briefs on. Stepping forward, his mouth captures one of my nipples, closing around it and sucking it hard into his mouth. Heat blooms across my body, my fingers raking up through his soft, wet hair. I gasp, shivering as his teeth scrape the sensitive peak.

It's never been like this. So intense. So everything. I melt into him, become one with his touch and burning gaze.

Swooping me back up with one arm, he quickly lowers me down onto the bed, his body covering mine. He kisses me, deep and devouring, his lips skimming along my jaw, the length of my neck, the swell of each breast, down my torso, and over my bellybutton. He nibbles at me, tasting my skin as he goes.

A decadent treat he's savoring.

My back arches, my core tightening, but the second his mouth leaves my skin, my eyes shoot open, finding him

staring down at my pussy. I roll my head to the side, my face flaming. I feel his hand on my cheek, cupping it and urging it back.

“Don’t do that. Don’t look away from me. You’re perfect.” His finger runs up the seam of me. “So wet and perfect.” He bends down, his tongue swiping at my opening, stealing a taste. “So sweet and wet and perfect.”

A moan is ripped from me as he does it again and again and again, lapping at my wetness as it drips out of me. He lingers on my clit, pressing and swirling against my bundle of nerves while my hands fist at the blanket. He drags it between his teeth, sucking it into his mouth.

“Gus. Now. I need you inside of me now.”

Reaching down, I grasp the waist of his briefs, tugging at them to get my point across. He laughs, smiling dopily down at me. So light. So easy. Gah, this man pulls smiles out of me I didn’t know existed.

He removes his briefs, and I take in the sight of him, hard, thick, and large. I can’t stop myself from reaching out and grasping him, giving his cock a squeeze, pumping it in my hand, testing its weight and size. He grunts, his head falling back before he just as quickly meets my eyes again.

I sit up, leaning forward and licking at the wetness on the tip.

I want to suck him so badly and I tell him so, watching as his eyes darken. “You want to choke on my cock?” I nod, licking my lips and taking another taste.

“Fuck. Condom. Shit. I didn’t bring one. I just raced right over here without thinking it through.”

Without a word, I crawl back away from him, scooting toward my nightstand drawer. They're in here. I know they are. After Florian and I broke up, I bought a pack on a whim. If he could be with other people, I could too. Only I never was, and I never used them. They're a hundred years old at least, but what's a girl to do?

His hands shake as he takes it from me, opening it and sheathing himself up.

In the next moment, he's back on top of me, playing with my entrance. He slaps my pussy with his cock, making me gasp before sliding inside of me. My body bows off the bed, his hand on my face, forcing my gaze to his unrelenting one. He holds himself still, letting me adjust to his size, beads of sweat form on his temples.

"I haven't..." He huffs out a strained laugh, dragging his thumb along my bottom lip. "Shit. It's been a while since I was with someone and you're just so..."

I grin, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip.

"Are we having trouble focusing, Mister Diamond?"

He chuckles. "Baby, I'm gonna fuck you all night long. Besides" —he reaches out, cupping my breast and squeezing it hard— "I have plenty to focus on." He juts his hips forward, driving in deeper. I stutter out a breath. "Good?" I hum. *So freaking good*. "Can I move?"

I nod my head, unable to speak.

That's when he takes over, commanding my body with long, deep, powerful thrusts. So confident. So in control. He stares into my eyes, our faces impossibly close. His tongue swipes out, hitting my lips and I reach up, kissing him in return. My tongue dives into his mouth, wrangling with his in

rhythm with his thrusts. Hiking a leg up over his shoulder, I cry out as he hits me at this new delicious angle.

Deeper. Harder. So crazy good.

Skin slapping against skin. The sound of our bodies coming together fills the humid air.

It's so much. Being with him like this...it's so much.

Bending down, he licks the trickle of sweat from between my breasts, latching onto my nipple and biting down. My hands fist his hair as he fucks me over and over and over. He pulls back just enough to stare at the place where our bodies meet. His gaze black with primal lust.

“So many things,” he groans. “Your mouth. Your ass. Your tits. This pussy. I won't ever be satisfied. I'll always want more of you. Every way I can have you, I will.”

I moan, his words driving me up higher, bringing me closer.

He doesn't stop there. Words spill from his mouth. Dirty words. Sweet words. Loving words. He gives them all to me. Infuses my soul with them. His fingers reach between us, finding my clit, watching me as he does, and I detonate. Shattering into him with wave upon wave of pleasure.

“Yes. God, you're so tight. So good. Tell me how good it feels. Tell me how good it feels when I fuck you. When I make you come. When I make you mine. So beautiful. Fuck, Naomi, you are the breath in my lung and the beat of my heart.”

He moves faster, his cock thickening, pounding, his movements more erratic and I claw at him, crying out his name over and over and over until he collapses on top of me, stilling and swearing and kissing my neck as he gasps my name in return.



My arms wrap around him, holding him so close. I can't let him go now. No matter what comes next.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

*Naomi*

MY EYES FLASH OPEN, startled and jostled by a dream that's lingering on the cusp of my consciousness. It was about Florian. Doing. Something...

I shake my head back and forth, unable to grasp at the tiny threads. Blowing out a silent breath, I roll over only to find my bed empty. The spot that had been occupied by Gus when we fell asleep is now vacant. Cold.

I frown, sitting up and taking the sheets with me. I glance toward the windows and balcony and find it's still dark out. The clock on my nightstand confirms it's just a little after three am. I sit here, still and silent, and listen.

Nothing.

No sound.

Drawing my knees up to my chest, I scrub my hand up and down my face, brushing my matted hair back and off it. Trying not to feel wrecked when it's impossible to feel any other way.

He left. Jesus, I can't believe he did that after all he said and all we did last night.

Climbing out of bed, I pee, avoiding my reflection in the mirror and then head downstairs in search of a glass of water. Rain still batters at the glass of the windows and patio doors, but the thunder and lightning seem to have stopped. I meander my way through the kitchen in the darkness, opening the cabinet, and taking out a glass before filling it with water from the fridge door.

I turn to face the front of the house, clutching the glass in my hand.

I want to call him, and I don't.

I'm insanely angry right now—both with myself and him. And hurt. Damn, I'm so hurt right now it's eating at me to the point where it feels like I'm going to crawl out of my skin.

I bring the glass to my lips just as a sound behind me startles me, causing me to jump and the glass to slip through my fingers. I fumble for it, water splashing and sloshing every which way, but it's futile. The glass goes crashing to the floor, shards of glass spraying across the hardwood and over my bare feet.

A sharp pain in my right foot and the burst of cold water on my skin causes me to scream just as the lights in the kitchen switch on, momentarily blinding me. Before I can make sense of anything, I'm suddenly lifted off my feet and dropped bottom first onto the counter.

“Jesus, Naomi. Are you okay? What the hell were you doing?”

“Me,” I shriek, blinking rapidly as I try to acclimate to the light. “What the hell were you doing? You scared the shit out

of me.” I reach out and smack Gus’s bare chest. “I thought you left.” I push him away, staring down at the floor.

There’s glass and water everywhere.

Gus takes my foot in his hand and my breath catches at the flash of pain, the shard of glass sticking out, and the trickle of blood beside it. I groan, my stomach swaying.

“Don’t move. I’m going to clean this up real quick and then take care of your foot.”

He spins me around, grabs a few paper towels, and sets my injured foot on top of them.

“Don’t touch that piece of glass. I need to clean your foot, but the floor is dangerous as hell.”

I stare up into his concerned gray gaze, suddenly overwhelmed. “I thought you left,” I state again, my voice low and a little weak, and I hate that. I hate the power he already has over me. The constant fear I have of being left by people I love. I don’t know how to change that or stop it, and now I’m pushing that onto him.

I assumed the worst of him, and I let it get to me.

And now look.

I’m sitting on my counter with nothing but a tiny camisole, panties, and a bleeding foot.

“Hey,” he says, his voice soft. His hands cup my cheeks, his eyes all over my face. “I wasn’t going anywhere. I woke up and couldn’t sleep. That’s all. I came down to your music room because I think better with a guitar in my hands, and I was afraid of waking you with my playing, so I closed the door.”

And because my music room is soundproof, I didn't hear him at all.

I swallow hard, nodding miserably.

"I'm not going anywhere. Please trust in that." I hate that he just read that part of me so well. He leans in and kisses my lips, sweet and tender, yes, but also firm and commanding. Like he's wordlessly trying to drive his point home.

He pulls back and gets started on cleaning up the mess I made while I sit here watching.

I have no words.

I'm too lost in my head.

This is why I haven't dated in two years. Why I've kept to myself and avoided anything that could potentially hurt me. And all the times I thought I was doing okay, getting by, in control, and strong, now feel like they're crumbling around me.

Simply because I woke up after one of the best nights of my life alone. *But you weren't alone. He didn't leave.*

I don't know how to go through this again.

Gus tosses the last of the glass in the trash and wipes up the last drop of water and asks me where my first-aid kit is. I point him in that direction and suddenly he's beside me, tending to my foot. He warns me before he removes the glass from my foot, cringing for me when I don't so much as register it. He cleans my blood with antiseptic solution and applies a band-aid and I...

"I'm sorry," I tell him. "I thought I was..." I trail off, unsure what to say.

“I think I’m falling for you,” he whispers into me, his tone serious, his words brutal yet tender. “I knew I was crazy about you. I knew I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I knew I wanted you in a way I’ve never wanted anyone else. But then last night happened. And it was everything. And when I woke up with you sleeping in my arms, my heart started to pound, and I just needed to play for a bit. I need to sort through it all, you know.”

His arms wrap around me, drawing my face into his warm, strong body. His scent envelops me and my chest clenches with the strongest sensation of home I’ve ever experienced. He rocks me back and forth, kissing the top of my head, and now *my* heart is starting to pound.

“I’m so sorry you thought I left. I’m so sorry I did that to you. That I scared you and you got hurt and once again, I do all the wrong things with you.”

“That’s not you, Gus. That’s me. You do everything right. I’m the one who’s a mess. I thought I had gotten past all that stuff, but the moment I thought you had left, I began to spiral. It’s not healthy, and it’s time I do something about it. Really face what I’ve been so willing to avoid. There’s more I haven’t told you.” I pull back, dropping my chin onto his sternum, my face tilted back. He brushes some hair off of my forehead as he stares down at me. Patiently waiting. “I was pregnant that night at the Grammys.”

Gus sucks in a sharp breath. “Did Florian know?”

I nod my head against him. “He wasn’t picking up my calls, so I had to tell him in a voice mail, but yes, he knew.”

His jaw locks, his eyes filling with a violent rage he’s trying desperately to keep in check. “So that night at the show...when he...” He trails off.

“Yes.”

Another harsh breath. “I’m really glad I didn’t know that the first time I met him. Okay. Tell me.”

“I had an ectopic. Had to have emergency surgery. I lost the baby and potentially my ability to have kids.” I gnaw on my lip, staring up at him. I realize it’s a silly thing to be worried about given how new this is between us, but I don’t want to hide that from him either. He should know because I know he wants a million kids.

You can just tell.

Gus closes his eyes, his forehead dropping to mine, his hands on my face, holding me like I’m the most precious thing in the world to him. “I’m so sorry, beautiful girl. I can’t imagine what that must have been like for you. He didn’t come, right?”

“No. He didn’t.”

Gus’s arms snake around me, tightening, holding me so close. No close is close enough right now. I can feel his anger and agony with this. I can feel everything from him because he’s not one to hold back.

It’s one of my favorite things about him.

“You in my arms is the one reason I’m still standing here and not out in the middle of the night chasing his pathetic, waste of life, should-not-even-have-the-benefit-of-breathing-let-alone-looking-at-you-or-talking-to-you, ass,” he growls, each syllable of every word pushed out through tight lips, his gray eyes blazing. “I know you’re scared about us. I know it’s new and intense. But I would *never* do something like that to you. Never, Naomi. You hear me? You feel what I’m saying to you right now?”

I kiss his chest. “I do. Thank you.”

“Don’t fucking thank me. I’m incensed. There might actually not be a word invented yet to describe my level of super-sonic pissed. I’m seriously plotting strangling the fucker before beating him to his death if I see him again.”

“I’m not really a conjugal visit type of girl.”

He chuckles and with that sound, some of his rigid tension floats away. His face dips down, his eyes still locked on mine as his tongue sweeps out, tasting my lips. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“What—” Only the words die on my tongue as Gus drops down to his knees. “Gus. The glass—”

“Is all cleaned up.” His stormy gaze meets mine, his hands on my thighs as he turns me, spreading them wide and settling in between. “I’m laying it out for you, Naomi. Do with it what you will.” I blink, stunned, staring down at him. “I need you. Can I have you?”

Jesus. My teeth sink into my lip and I nod my head.

Doesn’t he know? I’m already his.

He drags my panties to the side and licks me, from my very core all the way up to my sensitive bundle of nerves where he sucks it into his mouth. A deep moan slips from my lips. His eyes are on mine. And they’re filled to the brim with emotion. For me. How I found myself here with him is anyone’s guess. But that doesn’t change this reality.

My fingers drag through his soft hair. His eyes. Gunmetal and gorgeous.

And I know I’m falling for him too.



He licks at me more before I'm suddenly dragged off the counter with a loud yelp and a startled laugh. He tugs me into his chest, easing my descent until I'm on the ground and my clothes are stripped from me.

"On top," he rasps, lying on my kitchen floor and lowering me down onto his thick, hard cock. I rock into him instinctively as his hands grip my waist. I test the feeling. The way he's still staring up at me. The desire of being so in control over this man and his pleasure.

The way he fucking *wants* me.

I rock forward and backward. Bounce up and down. My long hair falls over my chest and he pushes it back over my shoulders, staring at my tits as they bounce and sway along with my body. His hands cup me, squeezing me hard enough that I whimper, moan louder as he pinches each of my nipples.

"These fucking tits, Naomi. Christ, I'm obsessed with your tits."

"Harder, Gus."

He slaps one of them before squeezing harder and we both groan, the sensation of it shooting to my clit.

"I want to fuck these tits of yours so bad. You have no idea how many times I've gotten myself off to that. I want to come all over them and then rub it into your beautiful skin. They're mine now."

He slaps them again and I go crazy with that. The sting of the slap and the pleasure of him inside of me almost too much.

"You're a kinky bitch, aren't you? You want that. Tell me so."

I am a kinky bitch. Or maybe that's just him making me so because I think right now, I'd do anything he asked and love the hell out of it. "I'm your kinky bitch."

"Goddamn right. Cup your tits, Naomi. Play with your nipples and tell me how good it feels."

I obey instantly, wanting to look into his eyes as he watches me touch myself. He says he's obsessed with my tits. I'm obsessed with the way he looks at me. I've never been turned on more than when Gus looks at me like this.

"Your hands feel better."

He groans, placing his hands over mine and massaging me, toying with me, driving me insane with how good this feels.

I stare down at the point where we're connected. Where he slides in and out of me, his cock wet, coated with my arousal. He tracks my gaze and growls, moving one of his hands to my hips, the other to my clit that he begins to rub in delicious circles.

My eyes roll back in my head.

Such sweet torturous pleasure zaps up my spine.

My movements falter, the pleasure too intense to keep up this pace. He helps guide me on him until I'm beyond lost in the moment, my head falling back as I let loose. Taking, taking, taking.

God, I never want to stop.

The build-up is so painfully exquisite. I can't stop the moans. The pants. The clawing at his flesh and the begging for more.

My orgasm builds to a flowing crescendo, something liquid and unrestrained. Something that overtakes my cells and

spreads from my core outward. Gus sits up, licking and biting at my breasts, groaning and hissing curses as I clench around him.

It's too much. Too intense. My face plants into his chest and he holds me as he pistons up, exploding inside of me and... "Fuck," he howls. "*Fuck*."

Clutching him closer, I lick up his chest to the crook of his neck. He breathes in the scent of my hair and I open my eyes, staring at nothing. I blink. Smile so wide I can hardly contain it until it bubbles out of me in the form of a giggle.

"Wow. That was..."

"Yeah. It seriously was."

I giggle again and I can feel a small chuckle rumble from his chest. He slaps my ass before pinching it and I yelp. "Are you mad I called you a kinky bitch? It sort of slipped out."

I laugh. "Not even a little."

"Good. I liked it too. Do you have any idea how dirty my mind is when it comes to this beautiful body of yours?"

"No. But I like where you're going with this. I like dirty, Gus. Don't be afraid to give it to me."

He kisses the side of my face and says, "Thank God for that. But for now, we need to talk. Come with me."

Gus helps me up off the floor. We get ourselves cleaned up and dressed, and then he leads me back upstairs to my bed. Only, instead of getting in it and going back to sleep, he sits me on the edge, his expression severe and it makes my heart start to pound in my chest.

The true test of anything real is a challenge that threatens it.

That's what I'm staring at right now. Gus's wary eyes. Something else is coming. I can feel it and it's making me edgy.

"We're not doing the duet together anymore."

I gasp, my eyes widening as my brow pinches in with confusion. "But—" I shake my head, trying to make sense of something that makes no sense to me. "Gus. You brought me in on this."

Hell, he stalked me down to a public beach before begging me to have dinner with him. But that was before and this is now, and now is apparently all the difference.

He cups my jaw in his large hand. "Look me in the eyes and tell me you're good with singing an emotional song together about my ex." I falter and he pushes on. "Tell me you want to write lyrics about your ex and have us both sing about that." More silence that I can't manage to fill with an answer.

I shake my head against him.

"But you said you needed this song. That you needed to get it out there."

He shrugs helplessly. "That was before you came along. Now everything is different."

I blink rapidly, swallowing hard and trying to clear the frog from the back of my throat. "How is everything different now?"

"I don't want to be Florian part two in your life."

"Oh." My lips form a little O shape that makes him smile and rub his thumb over it. I nibble on him gently and something about that lightens this moment. Relieves some of my tension. "And what exactly does that mean?"

“It means I’m not singing a duet with you about my ex. It means I’m going to produce that song as a solo on the Wild Minds album because that song is my before and you’re my now. My future, I’m hoping. It means I’ll still put it out there so I can put it to rest, but that’s the end of it.”

My face begins to fall toward the ground, but he’s still holding my cheek and I don’t get far. He searches my eyes, but I’m guarded. Unsure.

“How long were you in that music room?” I jest and he grins, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Naomi, you’ve been singing other peoples’ songs for too long, baby. You’ve been doing backup and before that, you were singing Florian’s songs. I know you wrote them with him, but they were on his albums. Not yours.” My eyes grow glassy and he leans down, pressing a kiss to my lips. Dropping to his knees, he stares up into me. “I would love nothing more than to write a new song with you. Sing and perform with you always. But tonight, you talked about how you need to work on yourself. How it’s time you do something about that, and I agree. It’s *time*,” he emphasizes. “You have a lot of demons, Naomi Kent, and you need to slay each and every one of them. You need to start writing. You need to create your own music with your own words and no man should be a part of that. You feel what I’m saying here?”

I do feel what he’s saying. What he’s trying to do for me.

And in my heart of hearts, in the very pit of my stomach, I know he’s right. About all of it. About his song and everything else.

It is time.

For both of us.

No more running scared. Time to brave my storm. No matter what's to come.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

*Gus*

NOTES HAVE BEEN COURSING through my veins and out my mouth and fingers since dawn. Naomi fell asleep pretty quickly after we finished talking. I tucked us both back into bed and she was out. Still is.

I wasn't as fortunate as her.

The moment the rain stopped, and the sun started to warm the sky, my eyes popped open and that was it. I came back downstairs and played out some things in Naomi's music room, recording it all on my phone. But even now, hours later as I stand in her kitchen cooking up some eggs and bacon—another reason why I love this girl. She has bacon in her freezer—I still find myself pausing every few moments to scribble some notes down on the pad I have next to the stove.

The smile hasn't left my face all morning.

Because for the first time in my life, I feel like I know what I'm doing with it.

That it's really and truly mine.

I have direction. I have purpose. I have an incredible woman upstairs who says she's mine. I feel like I've put so much of my past behind me. Finally set it to rest, and the lightness that fills me is infectious.

"Naomi," I call out loud. "Get your pretty ass up and come have some breakfast with me." I hear her groan from upstairs and I chuckle. "Come on, baby. It's almost ready."

"Gus," she bellows back with a touch of irritation, groans again, and then whines in resignation, "Fine. Give me a few minutes."

I finish up the eggs, turning off the stove, and covering the pan with a lid just as the doorbell rings. I swear, every goddamn time I'm here, we have an uninvited guest.

"Naomi," I yell, only I catch the sound of water going in the bathroom and she doesn't answer this time.

The bell rings again and I walk over to the front door, tapping on the screen. The second the image comes to life, my jaw tics and my fists clench. I take another second to rein in the sudden explosive fury that rages through me like a tornado, and when I think I've got my shit in check, I open the door.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I resist the overwhelming urge to reach out and punch Florian Heart in the face or break his neck or strangle the air he doesn't deserve to breathe from his lungs.

He stares at me, his expression hardening as the silent seconds tick by while he takes in my low slung jeans, shirtless chest, and sleep—and sex—ruffled hair. "What the fuck are you doing here?" he growls, and I laugh because I'm assuming that's a rhetorical question.



I smile arrogantly at the pick. “Isn’t that my question to you?”

“Where is Naomi?”

“None of your business. In fact, it’s great that you’re here, man. It’ll save me the bullshit hassle of having to deal with you later. I think it’s pretty obvious that Naomi and I are together. So my message to you is simple. Stay the fuck away from her.” I cock an eyebrow, glaring just a bit to drive my point. “I’m not fucking around on that either. It’s a threat. She told me everything, and because I care about her, I won’t kill you where you stand. Even though you and I both know you deserve it. Consider this an act of mercy and leave. And while you’re at it, stop calling her. Stop texting her. Stop arranging dinners or whatever the hell else your creepy, sneaky ass is up to. She’s done with you.”

He grins malevolently. “That’s a cute little speech there. I almost feel bad for you. *Almost* .” He runs a hand through his dark hair, and I know my cute little speech got to him. “You think she’s with you, Gus? You think she’s yours?” Now he laughs and my teeth clench at the smug as shit sound. “You have no idea how wrong you are. She may fuck you to try to get back at me, but you’re not with her. Not really, anyway. Sooner or later, she’ll be back with me where she belongs. She knows it. I know it. And I bet you do too. She deserves better than some second in command, partying, womanizing asshole who is hung up on his brother’s wife.”

I take a step forward and the coward takes a step back. “Scared, Florian?” His eyes narrow, but he doesn’t advance on me either. Probably because the guy knows I could kill him with my bare hands without even breaking a sweat.

I've got a solid twenty pounds of muscle on his scrawny, junkie ass.

"I have nothing to be afraid of when it comes to you."

"Possibly. But the fear in your eyes tells a different story. You let the best thing to ever grace your life go, and now she's moved on to someone better. Deal with it. I know a thing or two about making mistakes. Only I'm smart enough to learn from mine. You're too late and I'm right on time. And I'm not going anywhere."

"We'll see about that."

I open my mouth to say something when Naomi calls out, "Gus?"

"Over here," I yell back. "You've got an uninvited visitor, so I hope you're decent."

Yeah. I can be an asshole like that.

The sound of Naomi's soft steps reaches us, and I feel her hand on my back, gliding along to my arm until she steps beside me and sees Florian standing there. His eyes instantly zero in on her hand on my arm that she hasn't removed. He looks pained, and though I'm familiar with that sort of pain, I don't feel any sympathy for him.

He deserves a legion of pain where Naomi is concerned.

"Hi," she says on a soft breath. "What are you doing here?"

His gaze bounces over to me and then back to her. "Can we talk? In private?" he adds, glowering at me one last time.

I pivot to look down at Naomi because I don't give a shit what he wants.

It's her that I care about.

I meet her eyes, searching them for an answer. She gives me a slight nod, and I lean in and kiss the corner of her lips, dragging my mouth over to her ear. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

I throw Florian a satisfied smile that lets him know I meant everything I said, and then walk back into the house.

The nice thing about Naomi's place? It's all freaking glass on the inside. Every single wall on the first floor is glass with the exception of the exterior ones, obviously.

So, I can see the front entry pretty well, and since Naomi is a short little thing and I'm tall, I have a fantastic view of Florian over Naomi's head. Unfortunately, I can't hear them, so I go about setting out two plates. Forks and knives and popping some toast into the toaster. Anything to keep my body busy and my mind occupied.

I don't like her talking to him, and that's putting it mildly.

It's this stuff that I'm not good at. This scared, out of control, feeling.

The true test of loving someone isn't fighting for them when you think you've lost them. It's fighting for them every day when they're already, still, forever yours.

That's what I'm working with. Because it's like Jasper said. The worst thing that could happen to me isn't getting hurt. It's losing her.

The more time I spend with Naomi, the more I'm coming to face that as my reality.

"Hey," she says tentatively even though I surreptitiously watched her shut the front door, walk over to me, and wrap her

arms around my waist all the while gnawing on her lip.

“Hey,” I say back because love can suck and hurt and rock your world. It’s shattering mine a bit. But as I said before, I’m a decisive guy.

And I’ve already decided I’m all-in with her.

I decided that last night somewhere between two am and a nameless rock ballad.

I clasp her hand on my belly and give it a squeeze. “You hungry?”

“Starving. But—”

“I don’t need to know unless you want to tell me.”

I feel her smile against my back.

“He said you’re hung up on your ex. That you’re going to hurt me. That I shouldn’t let his past mistakes dictate the mistakes I’m making now.”

“Is that all he said?”

“That and he wants to work with me on a couple of songs he’s writing and having some trouble with.”

“And what did you say?”

Her smile grows wider. “That I’m fucking you because you’re hot and that isn’t going to stop. At least until I grow tired and bored of you.”

I laugh. “That so?”

“It is. Amongst other reasons, but let’s be honest, reasons like wanting you and obsessing over you and not being able to stop thinking about you really fall second to your hot bod and face.”

“I can absolutely appreciate that. And if that’s what keeps you naked under me...” I trail off, hitching up a shoulder. “I guess I can live with it. What about the songs he needs help with?”

“I told him I don’t want to do that. That my days of writing with him are over.”

I grin like a son of a bitch.

“Naomi,” I pause. “I have eggs and bacon and toast for you. But if you’d rather me eat you out until you come on my face, I’m so much happier eating you than that. I already know you’ll taste better.”

“I’m not sure how to answer that.”

I chuckle, spinning her around in my arms and capturing her face in my hands. “I applaud your honesty. But tell me, are you okay or are you just trying to put on a brave face for me?” She sucks in a ragged breath and blows it out with a shrug of the shoulders.

“I’m working on it, remember? But I need you to know that my stuff with Florian is very separate from my stuff with you. He is my past and I’m still working on that. But you’re my...future, I hope. Does that make sense?”

I smile, leaning down and pressing my lips into hers. “Sit down at the counter and I’ll dish you out some breakfast. Then we can do the second half of that.”

“Gus—”

My breath seizes in my lungs at the way her wary eyes search mine.

“I’m fine. Really.” I lean in and press my lips to hers.

She smiles, satisfied, but I’m left empty.

This isn't the last encounter we'll have with Florian Heart.  
Of that I'm certain.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

*Gus*

THE WARM WIND rushes through my ears, a loud galloping sound that, in combination with the roar of the Pacific, sounds like a tornado. It's not peaceful. It's not calming. I have zero fucking Zen.

And in truth, I'm a lot terrified.

These waves are no joke today. Something Naomi mentioned to me in warning as we paddled out on our respective surfboards into the deep, dark, life-taking water. She suggested we go back. Try again another day. And I stupidly, arrogantly, moronically, said no.

The shoreline is a solid hundred yards away—at least. And with each swell that approaches me, a fresh wave—pun intended—of panic laced adrenaline slams through me. Pretty soon, I'll either have a stroke, a heart attack, or just pass out altogether.

But I'll be damned if I let Naomi know any of this.

How I found myself here really isn't much of a mystery.

Naomi loves to surf. She does it almost every day. And when you're falling in love—or are already chest-deep in love—with someone, you do stupid, nonsensical, dangerous, shit you would never otherwise consider doing if it weren't for that person.

I have yet to attempt to stand though Naomi has already ridden—quite gracefully, I might add—three waves. Instead, I just ride up and down, allowing mother nature to take me on what I can only equate to a children's-level roller coaster, paddling back in toward the shore in between each ride.

“Try this one,” Naomi yells out to me, pointing over her shoulder at what is no-doubt yet another stupid, fucking wave. Her hair is wet, her cheeks red, her eyes bright with excitement, her wetsuit slick against her skin. If she weren't so stunning, I might have already called this quits.

“No thanks. I'm good.”

She laughs. I don't.

“Come on, Gus. I know you're clucked, but this one is a clean wave.”

“Stop speaking to me in foreign tongues. What does clucked mean? Is that your way of calling me a chicken?”

She laughs some more. I don't. “No. It means scared of the waves. It's a surfing term for a reason. We all get like that sometimes. Do you want to go back? We can call it quits.”

I shake my head. Why am I shaking my head?

“You know how to stand. We practiced and you were great. You can do it,” she encourages, smiling even wider and damn her. Just damn her. Men have died trying to impress their women and evidently, today, I am likely no different.



“Stupid penis-centric brain,” I curse under my breath as I lower myself to my belly against the cold board since I’m not wearing a wetsuit like she is. Simply put, I don’t own one and we didn’t buy one. I’m using one of her bigger boards because I said I’d try it out, but I didn’t see the need to go out and buy shit.

Something I’m regretting a little now.

My feet tuck onto the board and I teeter a little left and right as I try to balance and center my gravity and whatever the hell else Naomi was spewing this morning.

I should have listened better.

I didn’t.

She was moving in a lot of provocative positions and I got distracted.

“Great!” she shouts, doing the same on her board about fifteen feet away from me. She looks over her shoulder, watching the water and then yells, “Paddle, paddle, paddle.” I do. I paddle like my life depends on it, because it likely does, and then when I feel the water start to lift the board, me along with it, I hear her scream, “Stand up, Gus. Stand! You can do it!”

“Shit. Fuck. Stupid motherfucker you’re about to die.” I try to remember what she showed me and jump to my feet, holding my breath so I don’t scream out like a little bitch. I rock forward, nearly plunging face-first into the water. My heart is pounding so ferociously it’s blocking out all other sound or senses. Panic takes over and I look back, staring straight into a wall of blue that is literally peppering me with sharp, cold water bullets.

“Crouch down,” a male voice calls out, and I can only assume they’re speaking to me since I know I’m standing tall and sift. “Relax, dude. Let the water guide you.”

“Right.” Why didn’t I think of that? It makes so much sense.

I roll my eyes only to realize my eyes are now closed. Shit. They pop open and I crouch down like the guy told me to and try to relax my wooden posture, but it’s impossible. Especially as the board coasts along the wave and I nearly fall off a dozen more times.

Water is all around me and I hate this. I hate this. *I hate this!*

But then a sound startles me out of my own mini-panic. Naomi. But it’s not the sound of her regular, sweet melodic voice that has my head spinning on its axis, my eyes desperate to find her.

It’s the shriek.

It’s the *fear* that’s calling me, and the second I locate her, I see why.

Some douchebag is heading straight for her, his board aimed at her like the pin on a compass finding its true north. “Turn,” she screeches as she tries to do just that. Only the guy doesn’t, or he can’t. He looks young—barely a teenager—and helpless.

He just shakes his head, terror gripping his features.

His board collides with hers, the sound a wet thud. Naomi falls onto her board, hitting her head before both of them tumble into the deep swell. For a second, I stand paralyzed, searching the water for her.

The kid comes up, grasping his board and panting for his life.

But Naomi doesn't follow.

*Jesus. Where are you, baby?*

Acting on instinct, I suck in a deep breath, and dive into the water only to be snagged back by the ankle strap tethering me to my board. Reaching out in the murky, swirling water, I unstrap myself and swim in the direction of where Naomi fell.

Only I can't see anything.

The water is too cloudy to see through, the waves too angry, and uneasiness grips my throat as I come up for air, twirling around, searching everywhere I can. "Naomi!"

Off in the distance, two men are dragging the kid and his board out of the water, but again, Naomi is nowhere to be seen.

Fear prickles at my skin, burning a path up my spine. I mentally shake myself out of that, freaking out right now won't help me find her. I take another big breath, focusing my thoughts on the one thing I know to be true: I have to find her.

I dive back under, swimming this way and that until my lungs feel like they're on fire. Just as I'm about to come up for another quick breath, I catch sight of her wetsuit.

I swim toward her as fast as I can move, fighting against the strong current with every inch. Finally, I reach her, wrapping my arm around her waist and coming up. I gasp out, clearing the water from my face with my other hand and blinking against the salt sting in my eyes. It's only then that I realize she's partially on her board, her face above the water as she limply hangs on to it.

“Naomi?” I run my fingers over her face. Over her closed eyes. “Are you okay? Are you hurt? Talk to me, beautiful.”

Her blue eyes blink open and all the available oxygen in my lungs is expelled on a giant puff of air, relief coursing through me like a drug.

“I’m okay,” she whispers hoarsely. “I just had the wind knocked out of me by the impact and then the wave that held me under for a bit. I was just catching my breath, but I’m okay.”

“What about your head? You hit your head.”

“Not bad. Just a bump, I think.”

My face meets the side of her face, my cheek pressed against hers as I hold her tighter than I’ve ever held anyone before. “I thought...” I croak out, unable to verbalize what I thought. I’ve never been that terrified in my entire life. Never.

Her wet hand comes up, cupping the back of my head. “You’re shaking, Gus.” *She has no idea.* “I’m okay. I swear it, I am. But we should get out of the water.”

She’s right, but I don’t want to let her go.

“Where’s your board?”

I shake my head, pressing my lips into her cheek, her neck, her eyes, her nose, her lips. Everywhere. “I had to remove my ankle strap to find you. Can you climb onto your board and I’ll swim beside you?”

“Yes. But you keep one hand on this board. You hear me?”

I grin, chuckling lightly into her. “Yes ma’am. I hear you.”

I help Naomi climb on and between her paddling and my kicking, we finally make it to the shore. We emerge from the

water and I take Naomi's board, dragging it and myself, up until we're just beyond the waterline. Then, I collapse into the sand, the board dropping beside me. I tug on Naomi, bringing her body down gently until she's covering mine. My arms cocoon her back, my legs a vine around hers, her cheek against my chest, nestled in under my chin, and I can finally take a breath.

I can't speak.

I'm not sure Naomi can either, but all too soon, our little bubble of comfort is popped by a shadow looming over my face, eclipsing out the warm sun. I blink open and Naomi shifts, likely doing the same. "I'm so sorry." It's the kid who crashed into her and he's a mess. His face is red, his eyes glassy, and he's crying. I sit up, taking Naomi with me. "I didn't know what I was doing," he continues in between hiccupped sobs. "I was trying to show off for my friends over there." he points somewhere I don't care enough about to look. "I got scared and then I saw you and I-I'm just..."

He blows out a breath, trying to rein it in and failing. His face meets his hands and he starts trembling uncontrollably. Shit. I release Naomi and she stands up, hugging the kid and whispering words I cannot hear into his ear. He nods against her, releasing his face and hugging her fiercely back.

I scrub my hands up and down my face and over my hair.

My body aches so deep I feel it in my bones.

I drag my ass up and off the sand just as Naomi finally extracts herself from the kid. His brown eyes meet mine and he gives me a slight nod, his lips a tight, quivering line. I return the nod because even though I want to kill him for giving me the scare of my life, I can't.

He's just a kid.

And for a second, I think of Jasper. Of what he went through on the beach that day all those years ago when our mom died. *He* was just a kid, younger than this one, and he waded in too deep. Our mom, who could not swim, went in after him and drowned while Jasper sat on that beach all alone.

While they dragged her body out of the water and worked on her.

Emotion paralyzes me, and the moment Naomi turns to find me, she sees it. "Hey," she whispers, her hand covering my face, and her touch is my total undoing. I snatch this woman and tuck her back into my chest, holding on for dear life because it feels like I am. Like, at any second, I could lose her.

And I don't just mean to the water, though that point was driven painfully home.

"I love you," I whisper to her because I've never been more sure about anything in my life.

This woman. The one right here in my arms. I love more than my own life. I would have died out there today for her, and I cannot waste another second without her knowing all that she means to me.

I pull back and I cup her face and I say it again, this time staring into her eyes that own me, body and soul. "I love you. I don't have a lot of flowery words and perfect prose to follow all that up. To drive that point home. I'm a simple guy, Naomi. I'm black and white. And I love you more than I've ever loved anyone or anything and fuck." I shake my head, unable to breathe or swallow or fucking think. "I can't lose you, baby. Not to the water. Not to another man. Not to anything."

Her breath hitches high in her throat, her blue eyes clinging to mine with a desperation I not only recognize but match. “I love you too. So much that I’m terrified of it. It consumes me, Gus. It fills me. And a love that powerful...” She shakes her head in my hands. “It’s such a weapon. It can decimate all it touches if it so desires.”

“Not this love. Not this time. This is the love we’ll tell our grandchildren about. It’s the one we’ll make everyone jealous of. It’s the sort of love that is almost too powerful to be contained, but we make it look easy. It’s just us, Naomi. And I swear to you, I’ll never let anyone break it apart.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

*Naomi*

GUS and I walk up the beach in a daze. Silent. Contemplative. Our bodies are touching, and our minds are scattered. I've never had a close call like that before and I've been surfing since I was a kid. But... I glance up at him, watching as he stares menacingly out at the water as if he has a personal vendetta against it.

Which I suppose he does.

The things that must be running through his mind.

I was watching Gus today. I was worried about Gus and because of that, I wasn't focused on myself. And I nearly got very hurt or worse. I shouldn't have let him go out there. That's on me. I'm the seasoned surfer. Not him.

"My brother sat on the beach while they dragged my mother from the water and tried to resuscitate her. He watched the whole thing while blaming himself." Gus's voice catches, his eyes misty, and I reach out and take his hand, holding it in mine. "I shouldn't have been out there today," he says, echoing the thoughts I was just having. "I was doing it to be



with you. To try to impress you, and it was dangerous and stupid.” He huffs out an angry breath and I can only shake my head at the way he just so clearly read my mind. “I’m sorry, Naomi. It’s my fault this happened.”

“It was my fault, Gus. I shouldn’t have let you go out there. I wasn’t thinking and—”

He shakes his head, stopping me, his tormented eyes meet mine. “I couldn’t have done that with you.” My eyebrows knit together in confusion. “Lost you the way Jasper and I lost our mom. Went through what he went through that awful day.”

And I couldn’t have done that with him.

That’s it, right? The ultimate truth. Losing love, losing loved ones, is meant to be an inevitability. I have firsthand knowledge of that. But what happens when you suddenly realize that’s no longer an option for you?

That you’d risk life and limb and everything in between to prevent that.

I thought I had that with Florian, but somehow, with Gus, everything feels different.

“How old was he?”

“Eight.”

My breath seizes in my lungs and tears form in my eyes before I can even contemplate holding them off. Eight. I think of Adalyn at the age of four. I think of Adalyn if Gus...

I shake my head again, swallowing hard and staring up at the sun so it can do its fucking job and dry my eyes.

“We were lucky today, beautiful,” Gus declares, and all I can do is nod solemnly.

We continue on, up the beach, each carrying boards, and I wish we weren't. I wish I was home already. I wish it was just us alone in my home.

We enter through my mudroom and drop our boards. I don't even get my wetsuit off before Gus is scooping me up into his arms and entering the house. He carries me across the first floor, up the stairs, and into my bathroom at the back of the house. Stripping me down without a word on his lips, his eyes are serious, his expression telling me he's not to be messed with.

He turns on the water of the shower and we both step in.

The second the hot water hits my cold skin, I hiss out in relief. Gus wraps his arms around me, holding me closer than anyone ever has before. His face meets my wet hair, kissing it over and over until he pulls away, going for my shampoo. Pouring some into his hand, he spreads it across my hair and begins to lather it up. The scent of jasmine and vanilla surrounds us as he goes about washing me. I pour some into my own hands, trying to reach his head and laughing when I don't quite get there.

Gus grins down at me, a sparkle in his eyes that hardly covers the desire beneath it.

“You're too tall.”

“You're too short.”

“Then bend down so I can reach.”

“I have a better idea.”

In the next second, he lifts me up, back into his arms and presses me into the tile wall.

“Yes,” he gasps into my mouth as I grind against his hardening length. “This is much better.”

“Show me how much better it can be.”

Lining himself up, he enters my body, a swift, fluid motion that robs me of my senses and steals my breath. His eyes hold mine as he moves slowly in and out of me with deep, powerful strokes. His hand cups my face, his other on my ass guiding my movements, controlling me completely as he imprisons my body, taking me as his.

This isn't fucking.

It's hardly making love.

It's something else altogether. Based on need and instinct.

Some moments surpass love. They surpass words. They're terrifying and raw and *real*.

I look into this man's eyes and I see a love that has no limits and does not surrender to time. It's the love I've been searching for my entire life. The one that grounds me. Makes me feel whole and connected and complete.

Gus continues to pound into me, his eyes my magnet. Our souls collide as pleasure binds us together piece by piece. His wet fingers glide in between us, rubbing at my sensitive clit and I shatter, coming to life as he explodes in me with a harsh growl and a loud groan.

We stand here for a moment in our suspended silence, breathing heavily.

“Tell me again,” he demands.

“I love you.”

“Tell me back.” I nudge him.

He takes my hand, pressing my palm to his lips. Then he leans down and takes my lips for his own. Whispering, “I love you more,” against them.

We wash ourselves off, change into something dry and snuggle on my outdoor couch, eating pizza and drinking wine. The gas fire burns and hissing in the hearth, creating a warm comforting glow and I never, ever, want to move again.

“Tell me about her?” I ask as I wiggle my body deeper into Gus’s chest. The sky is dark, and the waves are still angry against the shore, but everything from earlier today seems to drift farther and farther away with each passing moment.

Gus is silent for a very long moment, watching the orange, blue, and red flames dancing across the furniture and sky. “She was more like me than Jasper. Jasper is like our dad. Serious and kind of broody. But Mom used to try to make homemade crème eggs and marshmallow fluff and cotton candy. She would read us bedtime stories for over an hour because reading was her favorite pastime. I remember my father doting on her. Buying her flowers for her birthday and special cards that would make her blush for Valentine’s day. But most of all, I remember the day she and dad handed Jasper and I guitars and told us to explore them.”

“Did she play an instrument?”

“No.” He laughs. “Honestly, I think they were hoping it would keep us occupied for longer than ten minutes.”

“Did it?”

He laughs louder, the sound rumbling through my back. “Jas and I would play for hours.” His fingers run through my hair, his words trailing off in a way that tells me he’s deep in thought once again.

“The first time I stood on a surfboard, I was five. I remember being terrified, but so excited I literally peed in the water.” I laugh before I can stop it and he does too.

“Was your mother the surfer or your father?”

“My father. He used to take me out on the waves and drive my mother crazy. But they never argued about it. At least, not in front of me. The only time I ever heard them argue was whenever my mom would bring me out on stage to sing with her. My father never liked putting me out there like that at such a young age, but then, like he secretly couldn’t resist, he was always standing on stage with me, holding my hand or playing piano, every time I was singing with her.”

“Why didn’t he like it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he was afraid I’d want to be like them. He never told me, and by the time I was old enough to think about it, he was my biggest supporter.”

I grin, rubbing at my lips as if the sensation of it will die the second I let the thought go. I miss them. Insanely so. What would they have thought of Gus? Of where I am and what has happened to me. My father would have liked Gus. Of that, I have no question.

“My earliest memory is walking out onto stage and singing with my mother. I can’t even remember what it was, I was that little. It didn’t matter, I loved it. I thought it was the most amazing thing ever. The crowd. The cheers. The heady vibe.”

“I would love to see that.”

I stare at the flames and swallow my heart. “Me too,” I sigh wistfully. “But obviously, that’s not a possibility.”

His hand runs up and down my abdomen in silky soft swipes, dragging my shirt up higher with every pass. His

fingers bring me to life, each touch makes me tremble and feel hot all at once.

“I’m going to miss you this week,” he hums in my ear. “Being in the studio sucks when you’re not there.”

I smile, twisting on the sofa to face him. His hand slides up my back, tickling my skin. Reaching up, I run my fingers along his stubbled jaw. “I’m going to miss you too, but I can’t work there while you’re working. All I want to do is watch and listen to you guys play, and record and that means I get nothing done for myself.”

It’s been nearly two weeks since Gus decided we’re no longer doing the duet together. At first, I was disappointed, but the more I work on my own music—something that once I sat down and started writing has flowed from me—I haven’t wanted to stop. I already have six or seven songs pretty much written and the deeper I get into this, the more excited I become about turning it into an album.

My album.

Something just for me, about me, and no one else.

“I know and I love that you’re working so hard. I’m not asking to record on your album because this album your writing is going to be so incredible and it needs to be all you on that, but maybe after it’s all done and the guys and I are all done, we can write something together. Not an album, just something to sing together.”

“I’d love that, actually. Singing with you is something pretty special.”

“You’re something pretty special, and I have no idea what I’m going to do without my fix all week.”

I grin, leaning in and brushing my nose against his, licking the seam of his lips. “Maybe you’ll come home one night to find a strange woman naked in your bed.”

He smiles against me, nipping at my bottom lip. “Is that right? A strange woman? Will she have long dark hair and the most beautiful blue eyes I’ve ever seen and curves that drive me insane?” His hand reaches around, squeezing my breast under my blouse to prove his point. “Because I gotta tell you, if not, I’m not interested.”

I bite back a smile. “I’ll be sure to let the escort service know your specific requirements.”

Gus laughs, rolling over onto his back and taking me with him, my cheek on his chest over his heart, his hands running down my hair.

“Are you seeing Florian this week?” he asks after a long silence.

I stiffen against him and his hand freezes in my hair for a moment before resuming its ministrations.

After Florian showed up at my door, I have seen him a couple of times. Once he came here again and I told him to go. Once I was out having a quick lunch and he just happened to be in the same place I was. Another time was with Casper, and that was all business. Me looking over their new songs and listening to what they have because I told Casper I would.

Casper has been trying very hard with me since that blowout we had in the studio over him ambushing me. He’s been trying to make amends. He’s missed a lot over the past couple of years, and I think he’s just now starting to realize and understand how hard it was for me.

Other than that, I haven't been returning Florian's calls or texts. I haven't been encouraging him. If anything, I've been insanely blunt about my relationship with Gus.

But that hasn't stopped him from pushing.

From calling and texting and trying to find me places he knows I'll be.

"I'm not planning on it," I tell him, knowing it's the only truth I can give.

We've been over to Jasper and Viola's house a couple more times. I thought seeing Gus with Viola would bother me now that he and I are together, but it hasn't. That genuinely seems to be behind him, and Viola and Jasper are nothing if not very openly in love with each other.

But I know Florian lurking about bothers Gus.

It bothers him a lot.

Sitting up, I straddle his chest, staring down into his beautiful gray eyes. His sandy-colored hair glows in the firelight. "I don't want Florian, Gus. That part of me is gone. It died the day I woke up in that hospital room alone. Hell, it was likely gone before that. Me wanting him was not what my sadness was about. It was about loss and loneliness and fear. Please know that. Please trust in that."

A small sound leaves the back of his throat, almost like a sigh of relief. Gus takes my hands in his, intertwining our fingers as he holds my gaze steady. "I believe you. And I trust you. I do. I couldn't be here with you if I didn't."

"Then what is it?"

"It's not you who I don't trust. It's him."



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

*Naomi*

MY FINGERS SLIDE across the black and white keys, playing out a melody that's been swimming in my mind all evening. My head is bent forward, tilted to the side with my eyes closed as I play it, thinking each key and note through because something still feels like it's missing with it. It's frustrating me endlessly—and I start to rethink Gus's offer of skipping the party to come here instead.

I could likely use his help. He's so good with melodies.

My finger lands on E flat and I screech out, slamming my hands on the keys and dropping my head onto the next. "Crap." I growl out a frustrated breath, sitting up and running a hand over my face before I let out a loud yawn. I'm suddenly hit with a wave of exhaustion.

*How long have I been working?*

I yawn again, this one even louder, and check my phone.

It's almost two in the morning.

Jesus. I've been sitting here for four and a half hours.

Gus was supposed to come by after the party, so I text him, checking in to see if he's having fun, while I drag my body off the wood bench.

The muscles in my back spasm after being stuck in the same position for far too long, so I twist and bend, trying to work it out as I walk across the house, flipping off lights.

I pause by the kitchen light, wondering if I should leave it on for Gus.

I stare at my phone, but he hasn't responded yet, which isn't like him. Even though it's only been a couple of minutes, he's usually really quick to text me back.

It's probably just loud at the party. He had promised Keith he'd go with him since Henry has been battling a cold and couldn't go, and lord knows Jasper wasn't going.

I grab myself a glass, filling it with water, and giving Gus a few more minutes to see if he responds. But after another five minutes, I text him again, telling him that I'm heading up to bed and asking what his plans are.

I don't want to wait up for him and though he knows the code to my house, he doesn't know my alarm code and I never go to bed without arming it. Setting my glass down on the counter, I hold my phone in my hand, debating.

I haven't seen much of Gus this week.

Not since Monday night and today is Friday.

He's been working really long hours in the studio, trying to finish up this album with the guys, and I've been doing nothing but writing and working on my own music. Our timing never seemed to sync up, and tonight I told him to go so I could finish this stupid fucking song.

But now...

I expected to hear from him by now. At the very least with a yes, I'm coming or no I'm not. I also don't want to be that needy girlfriend who continues to send text after text, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't at least a little annoyed.

Just as my phone starts to go dark and I resign myself to just setting the alarm and going to bed, my phone pings in with a text from him.

*Crashing out at my pad. I'll hit you up tomorrow.*

I stare at it, my eyebrows pinching in. Gus never says pad. Nor does he say, hit you up. He must be trashed.

I roll my eyes, set my alarm, finish shutting off all the lights, and head up to bed, disappointed.



AN INCESSANTLY LOUD, piercing sound startles me awake. I bolt upright, my hair falling across my face, and I quickly scoop it back. My eyes search wildly around, blinking repeatedly against the harsh daylight. I glance toward my bedside table, reaching out and grasping my phone, but that wasn't what that sound was.

Checking the time, I groan when I realize it's well past eight in the morning.

*Did I dream it?*

Staggering out of bed, I search around my room only to find it exactly how I left it when I went to sleep and sigh out harshly. Pivoting on the balls of my feet, I head toward my bathroom only to freeze mid-step when the sound blares again.

My doorbell. Gus.

I toss on a pair of cropped yoga pants and leave on my ratty gray tee and run down the stairs at top speed. My head is still a little fuzzy and I stub my toe on the bottom step. “Ow!” I hop up and down across the room in the direction of the front door. “Crap. Shit. Ow!”

The bell sounds once more, forcing a series of expletives from my mouth.

“I heard you,” I yell out. “I’m freaking coming. Hold your shit, Gus.”

I tap in the alarm code on the touchpad, and when it’s fully disarmed, I fling the door open, a rush of warm wind brushing across me.

Only...it’s not Gus. It’s Florian.

“Hi,” I squeak, taken completely by surprise. “What are you doing here?”

His expression is serious and somber, and my heart starts to beat a touch faster.

“Can I come in, Nai? I know you told me not to come back here, but I have something to show you and it can’t wait.”

“Oh.” I stumble back a step, waving him in only for a zap of pain to shoot up my foot. Glancing down, I see blood all over my toe. Awesome.

Florian’s eyes follow my lead and when he spots the blood on my foot, he steps in, taking me by the hand. “Jesus. What happened?”

“I stubbed my toe.”

“My cute clumsy girl. Come on. Let’s get that cleaned up.” I frown at the indulgent tone of his voice but allow him to lead me back to the main part of the house and into the kitchen. “Does it hurt?” he asks, still holding on tight to my hand.

“Go sit, Florian,” is my only reply. “I need to clean up my mess.”

He frowns but doesn’t argue as I remove my hand from his and cross the island in search of my first-aid kit. I think back to the first night I slept with Gus, the night he cleaned and bandaged my foot after I shattered a glass all over it. I thought he had left me when he didn’t. Instead, he tended to my wound and cleaned up my mess.

And today, a week after trading ‘I love yous’ he’s not here when he said he would be.

It renews my ire considerably.

My toe isn’t bad off and I didn’t split the nail, which is a miracle. I clean myself up, slap on a band-aid, and then turn on Florian, who is patiently waiting with an expression that gives me pause.

“Before I show you what I have to show you, you need to know, I’m doing this because I love you. Not because I want to hurt you. I’m trying to protect you, Naomi, and believe me when I tell you, I haven’t slept because I’ve been debating this all night.”

“Okay,” I draw out the word, gripping the edge of the counter so I don’t topple to the ground.

Florian releases a heavy breath and my thoughts skitter in a million different directions.

He shifts on the barstool, seemingly uncomfortable with the news he’s about to deliver. The suspense is killing me.

“Florian, tell me already. I’ve had enough drama for one lifetime.”

He nods his head solemnly. “Then you really won’t like this.”

Florian takes out his phone, unlocks it, scrolls through until he finds what he’s looking for, and then slides it across the island to me.

I stare at the image, bold and bright, before me. It takes me a couple of seconds to discern what it is I’m actually looking at, but once I gain my bearings, it’s not difficult. With a shaky hand, I pick up his phone, bringing the screen, and the picture, closer to me when what I really want to do is toss it out the window so it can be run over by a passing car.

The phone begins to go dark and I reluctantly tap my finger against it, loathing how I have to touch the image.

“Where did you get this?” I ask, amazed at how steady my voice is.

“I took it.”

“What do you mean *you* took it?”

His dark eyes pierce into mine. “I was at the party, Nai. I saw him getting trashed and all over the blonde. I tried to ignore it. Ignore him, and for the most part, I did. But then I went upstairs to use the restroom and when I opened the door to that bedroom, that’s what I found.” He points to his phone in my hand. “I told him he was a fucking asshole for doing that to you and I took the picture. He laughed and told me to get the fuck out.”

I nod gently, but the longer I stare at this photo, the greater the swell of anger, hurt, and embarrassment rises within me. No, wait...lets up this a notch. We’ll call it fury, outrage, and

total and complete humiliation. Not enough either? I agree, but my mind can't think of proper similes and adjectives to portray this.

I mean, what sort of words should a woman use to describe her emotions when her ex-fiancé hands her a picture of her current boyfriend, shirtless with his pants half-undone, lying on a bed beside a blonde who is only wearing her bra and panties and his hand is cupping her fucking tit?

Gus's eyes are scrunched as if the light of the flash is bothering him. His face is red, slightly sweaty maybe, and fucking cracked out. Hers isn't much better, and a tidal wave of bile floods the back of my throat that is nearly impossible to swallow down.

*How could you do this to me, Gus?*

After everything I told him. Everything we've shared.

I tap on the screen so it doesn't go dark three more times, tears swirling in my eyes. My chest so impossibly tight I can only suck in short, shallow breaths. Before I can stop it, I text the picture to myself.

An ironic, humorless laugh burst from my lips and I drop Florian's phone, not even caring where or how it lands. It's funny, or maybe not, I thought Gus was going to be different. I thought he understood. Hell, I assumed this type of pain had run its course with me. I was convinced I'd had my share and it was ready to move on.

Not so much.

Because this? This. Fucking. *Hurts* .

And it makes me feel so stupid. So weak. So loathsome that I went and fell for Gus the way I did, knowing his reputation, knowing his past, knowing where his heart still

likely lived, knowing that nothing in my life is real or long-lasting.

Another burst of laughter hits my lips, this one beyond bitter.

I knew something this good couldn't last. In the back of my mind, I knew the bottom would drop out. It always has. It always does.

"I bet you're feeling pretty good about yourself now," I snap at Florian because I have no problems shooting this particular messenger. I can be shitty with him all day long.

One night. One motherfucking party. And Gus does this? He texted me. Was he in bed with her when he did that? God, I'm going to be sick.

My hands grip tighter as my back bows, my head falling forward.

"Nai, are you okay?"

Is that a joke?

"No, Florian. I'm not. How on earth could I be okay?"

"I didn't..." I hear his voice catch high in his throat. "I didn't realize it went that deep for you with him."

"Well, now you know!" I yell before I drag in deep breath after deep breath, trying to settle my stomach and my raging heart.

"Then I wish I had killed him," he says resolutely. "I yelled at him. I snapped that picture and then I walked out. But I should have killed him. Punched him in the face. I don't know. But I can't stand you hurting like this."

"Because he's the first person to ever hurt me?"



“Don’t do that.” He rises up slowly, rounding the island and standing before me, tall and earnest. His hand comes up, cupping my cheek and dragging my reluctant gaze up to his. His expression is broken, likely reflecting my own. “I live my every moment in regret. Everything I’ve done since I decided to get sober has been about you. All of it. I love you. That hasn’t changed and it never will. Drugs were a poison in my mind, and they made me do things I would never have done if I had been sober. Can Gus say the same? I doubt it. He’s a notorious player, Nai. A user and a loser to be sure.”

“Does this make you happy?”

“Honestly, no. It doesn’t. I’ve hurt you enough and I know how wretched the stench and taste of it is. Please believe that my showing you this wasn’t to hurt you. It was to get the bastard out of your life because he does not deserve you. You needed to know what he was up to so you can protect yourself. Both publicly and privately.”

I blink up at him. Publicly. I hadn’t considered that. Great. Something more to add on to my misery. “Did you show this to anyone else?”

“No, sweetheart. And I won’t. The last thing I want is for you to be publicly dragged through yet another drama and breakup. I told you, I’m not trying to hurt you. Never again will I hurt you.”

I take a step back, forcing his hand to fall to his side. I can’t think straight right now. My mind is all over the place. “I’m gonna go for a walk.”

“May I come with you?”

I shake my head. “I need to be alone right now.”

Florian reaches out, taking my hand and intertwining our fingers. “Can I come by later? Maybe have some dinner with you?”

“No. I-I need time alone.”

“How about Monday at the studio?”

“Sure. Whatever. I have to go, and you need to leave.”

“Okay,” he hums softly. “I get it. I’ll do whatever you need. Whatever I have to.” I take another step back. Suddenly the walls feel like they’re closing in on me and I can’t breathe, and my vision is dizzy, and I think I’m having a panic attack.

“I gotta go—” I mumble, turning away from him and running toward my back door.

“I’ll call you later, sweetheart,” I hear him yell out to me. “Just to make sure you’re okay. I love you.”

I reach the back door and before I know how I got here, I’m sprinting down the stairs and onto the sand, flying down the beach as if I can somehow outrun the maelstrom of thoughts twisting in my head.

Goddammit, Gus. You fucking motherfucker. I never want to see or hear from you again.

## Chapter Thirty

*Gus*

“WAKE UP, ASSHOLE,” a harsh voice crackles through my ears, followed by a sharp *smack* across my face. I jolt and my eyes blink open only to immediately close again. My head spins like a top, even with my eyes closed, and a groan sears past my lips. My heart begins to pound, a harsh staccato that only seems to fuel the dizziness.

It feels like someone is using a jackhammer in my head. Maybe two.

“Ugh,” I groan, my stomach roiling up into the back of my throat, and I’m frantic to swallow all that’s desperate to come up, down.

Twisting against the unforgiving ground, I raise myself up, grasping something hard and cold, and before I can even think twice about anything else, I heave violently. Strong arms lift me up by my hips and back, shoving my face into what I instinctively know to be a toilet.

And that’s when the fireworks really erupt.

My body spasms, retching and spitting, and so fucking sick it comes out my fucking nose.

What the hell is happening right now? How did I even get...where the hell am I?

My mind races, trying to recall anything of use. It's all darkness with flickers of light in the form of fuzzy, nonsensical images.

A party. Keith and I came to our friend, Damien's house. He was having a party.

Beer. I was sipping on a beer. Keith handed me his bottle of Jack Daniels and I took a swig. That was it.

No.

Someone handed me a glass of something...

I vomit with everything I have, expelling whatever poison my body had taken in.

Something is wrong.

Something is very wrong.

"I didn't drink like this," I grumble, collapsing against the toilet seat, sweating and dazed and foggier than I've ever been in my life.

"Fifty people would say otherwise," a voice I now recognize as Keith's says.

"No," is all I can manage. I didn't. Did I? "No," I repeat, trying to open my eyes. I wasn't drinking a lot because I was going to drive to Naomi's after the party. "Where am I?"

"My place," Damien answers. That's a relief. "I found you passed out on my bathroom floor and called Keith."

And any relief I was feeling is now gone. I've never passed out before. Never.

A glass of water is thrust into my shaking hand and I take a few small sips. It's heavy and harsh against my now raw throat and I wince, wiping my mouth clean with my arm. It's only then that I realize I'm shirtless and my jeans are half-undone.

Sitting up, I set the glass down on the floor and push myself against the wall, my head falling back as I think.

Why can't I fucking remember?

"What happened?" I reluctantly ask, wanting to know and not at the same time.

"What do you remember?"

Christ. I scrub a hand over my face, reposition myself, and look up at Keith's concerned gaze. "Honestly, not much. I was drinking a beer and talking to a couple of people. I took a couple of sips of your Jack. Someone handed me some of the punch and I had a couple of sips—"

"What punch?" Damien asks, leaning a hip against the vanity, his arms folded over his chest. "I didn't make any punch."

"Whatever. I don't know," I snap in agitation. I've never felt so horrible in my whole life, and all I want to do is go to bed and forget this night ever happened. "It was red. Some kind of red drink some girl handed to me."

"Listen, man," Keith starts, bending down into a squat. "All I know is that when I left you were pretty bombed. I just didn't realize how bad. I asked if you wanted me to give you a ride home and you said you were straight. Obviously, you weren't, and I should have stayed or taken you home then. I'm sorry."

I bluster out a loud breath. “I’m telling you, I didn’t drink that much. I honestly didn’t. I don’t know what the hell happened, but I’ve never felt like this before.” Keith glances up at Damien, both trading uneasy glances. “What?”

Damien looks over at me. “Is it possible you were drugged?”

I snort out a half-baked attempt at a laugh, trying to quell the urge to vomit again. “Who the hell would drug me? For what reason?”

“No clue,” Damien continues. “But I’m telling you I didn’t make any punch and you said the last thing you remember is some girl handing you a red drink. Maybe she slipped you something. Some kind of party favor and it hit you wrong. I mean, look at you. You’re already half-naked.”

A sudden rush of dread fills me. What the hell did I do? No. I wouldn’t have.

“Keith,” is all I can manage as my eyes drift down to my jeans, taking in the way the button is popped open and the zipper is half-undone. No. This can’t be happening. I wouldn’t have. I fucking wouldn’t have, goddammit. “Keith,” I try again, this time my tone is urgent.

I meet his troubled gaze. “I didn’t see you with any girl.”

“But I did.”

I look to Damien. “Who?”

He shakes his head bewilderedly. “I don’t know. Some blonde. I didn’t know her, but I did catch her walking out of the bedroom this bathroom leads to.”

“Fuck,” I yell, ignoring the pounding drum in my head. “Fuck!” I slam my fist into the wall. “I didn’t fuck her. I

wouldn't fucking do that. Goddammit!" I kick out, hitting the edge of the vanity, and both Damien and Keith are silent. My face drops into my hands as rage and despair and disgust war within me. "What the hell am I going to tell Naomi?" Naomi. Shit. "What time is it?" She was expecting me at her house. She must be worried like crazy.

"It's a little after six."

"Six?" I bellow, my hands dropping as I stare incredulously at Keith. "*Six?!* " How on earth. "Jesus. She must be going out of her mind." I try to pry myself up and off the floor, but everything in me hurts. Everything feels sick and wrong, and I don't know what to do.

How can I not remember?

Did that chick drug me? Did she slip me something so that I'd get wasted beyond comprehension and then fuck me, knowing I wouldn't remember?

And who knows who this mysterious blonde is.

She could be trying to get pregnant. She could be out to hurt me. She could claim I raped her. Who the hell knows?

"Hey," Keith snaps in my face and it's only then that I realize he was trying to get my attention. "Get a grip." I shake my head. "I mean it, man. We'll figure out what's going on, but you have to get a grip."

"My phone. I need my phone."

I stand up on shaky legs, leaning all my weight against the wall, because my muscles feel weak, like they can't even support my weight. "Here. I found it on the floor." Damien hands me my phone and I unlock it. Scrolling through, I find my text stream with Naomi and open it up. There are a couple of texts from her around two in the morning, but that's not

what's robbing the breath from my lungs and having my heart beat in a way I know it's never beat before.

"I texted her," I whisper, staring incredulously at the words I know, *I know*, I didn't write. Both Keith and Damien hover over me, trying to see what I'm staring at and I hold it out so they can.

"What the hell?" Keith asks.

"That's not me, brother."

"I know."

"Someone texted Naomi from my phone. Someone slipped something in my drink and probably undressed me and maybe had sex with me and sent my girlfriend a text from me."

Before I can stop it, I drop my phone, turn around, bend forward, and throw up into the toilet.

"I'm going to lose her," I mutter when the last of the dry heaves have wracked through my body. "Jesus. I'm going to lose her, and I can't even blame her for that. I don't know what happened. I don't know if I had sex with someone behind her back."

"It wouldn't be behind her back, Gus. If someone drugged you, then that's not your fault. Just as it's not a woman's fault if she's drugged and then raped."

Raped. That sounds like such a ridiculous word to use. It's not something in on all my worst nightmares that has ever occurred to me. How does a woman even rape a man? I have no idea, but God, if I did have sex with someone, it was certainly unwillingly.

But...could she believe me?

She won't.



She's been through so much. Hurt so many times. Lied to and manipulated.

I need to go to her, but how can I? Not like this. "I need to go see Naomi. Can you take me to her?"

"Gus, you can't see her in this state. That won't help anything. I'm going to take you to the hospital. Have them check you out and make sure you're okay. Run some tests."

I shake my head. "I can't go to the hospital." But as I stand up, my world begins to sway once more as a fresh wave of cold sweat covers my forehead. I stumble, falling, only to be caught by Keith and Damien.

"If not the hospital, I'm taking you to Jasper's."

"No," I garble, my voice sounding distant as silver and black spots dance behind my eyes. "Adalyn," I push out. "Home."

I force my eyes open, somehow now sitting upright, buckled into the passenger side of Keith's truck. It's a big truck. A man's truck, as he calls it. But once again, I can't remember how I got here.

What the hell did she give me?

It's bouncing through my body, through my mind, in waves. In torturous, flowing, dark waves I can't see through or think past. It's maddening.

"Where?" I slur, leaning back and closing my eyes once again because keeping them open only makes my vision blur worse.

Keith is silent for what feels like too long before he says, "Your house. But I called a few people."

I have no idea what that means, but I can guess. The sun is just starting to rise, and I hate the day it's bringing with it. "What did I do?"

"We won't know what happened to you until the doctor comes. But *you* didn't do anything. Someone did this *to* you, brother, and we're going to get to the bottom of it."

I shake my head. I appreciate what he's doing, but it makes very little difference to me right now. Whatever happened is done and I'm going to lose the only happiness I've known. "How do I explain this sort of thing to someone like Naomi?"

Keith heaves out a breath but does not answer. He knows as well as I do there is no explaining this away. And the likelihood that she'll believe me, let alone forgive me, is none.

## Chapter Thirty-One

*Naomi*

BY THE TIME I walk into my house again, I'm exhausted, wind-swept, and miserable. I have no idea how far I walked or how many miles I put in between myself and this house, but it's useless. There is no escaping this. I just have to find a way through it as I always do.

As I always have.

When I walked away from Florian that day in the hotel, I thought I was going to die. I didn't think I would survive losing him and then I lost our baby on top of that. That last one is still the worst of it, but losing Gus somehow, even though I've only known him such a short time, hurts worse than losing Florian did.

I can't even figure out why. Maybe it's that I trusted him with my already tender and fragile heart. Maybe it's the profound love and passion I thought we shared. The words we spoke and the promises we made and the hope. Goddammit, that hope was everything to me.

Thank god we're no longer doing the duet together.

I don't ever have to see him again.

My skin is tacky and my clothes cling to it as I run up the stairs into my bedroom. I need a shower. I need to focus on small tasks and block everything else out. I cried my entire walk on the beach, and I can feel just how puffy and raw my face is as I tug my shirt over my head. I'm no stranger to heartbreak, yet it never seems to get easier.

If anything, it's harder to bear.

I catch sight of my phone on my bedside table where I left it this morning, and instantly more tears fill my eyes. I shake it off, heading into the bathroom. I set the water to scalding hot and remove the rest of my clothes, terrified to even so much as glance at my reflection.

My phone rings from the other room and I scream.

I scream so loud.

Because I want to answer it.

I know it's him. I know it. But I'm not ready yet. I'm not strong enough, so I get in the shower instead and cry and yell and wash my hair and body, and cry and yell some more, and then I step out, wrapping myself up in a towel.

My phone rings again, and I pad back into my bedroom, staring at it as Gus's handsome face flashes across the screen. "You're a fucker," I bark at it. Growling out a few other choice expletives, I pick up my phone, but instead of answering, I find the picture of Gus with that woman that I had texted myself from Florian's phone and send it to him.

There. That should shut him up.

And it does. My phone is silent, and I hate that it's silent because I want him to call me and I never want him to call me

again. God, the brain is a twisted, vicious fucking thing.

The second I slip on my panties, my phone blares like it's got a point to make, and this time, I pick up.

"You have so much nerve calling me."

"Naomi—" His voice sounds like complete shit, like he swallowed gravel and washed it down with acid. Good. "I need to talk to you. That picture—"

"Says everything," I finish for him. "Do you have any idea how much that hurt me to see? Can you even begin to imagine? How could you do that to me, Gus?" my voice splinters on his name. "How could you tell me you love me and then go out and fuck some random woman? I gave you everything."

"Naomi. It's not what it—"

"Shut up!" I scream, swallowing down the sob that threatens to leak out with it. "I don't want to hear you try to explain this away. I know all about what you did last night. There is nothing you can say that will erase it. Nothing."

"You don't understand—" His voice cracks like he's crying, and for a small flicker of a second, I crack along with him. Loving someone you hate is the very worst irony.

"How could you, Gus? How could you do this to me? To us? I gave you everything. Everything I swore I would never give another..." I trail off, hating how much of myself I'm revealing.

I'm too vulnerable with Gus. Too open.

And look where it got me.

He doesn't care about me. He just cares that he got caught. Once a cheater, always a cheater. He used me. He made me

believe... I swallow so hard, shaking my head back and forth. Anything to stop this...this *feeling* from exploding in my mind. It's like one grenade going off after the other in a chain reaction.

“Naomi. I don't know what happened.”

“Shut up!” I screech because is he kidding me with that? He doesn't know what happened? “Don't you dare say my name. Not now. Not ever again. None of it matters. I can't take it anymore. I can't.” I don't just crack. I shatter. “We're done. I never want to see you again.”

“No. Naomi. Please, no. I'm so sorry,” he mumbles, his words slightly slurred. “You have to listen to me. I don't...” He trails off, his voice catching, and I sob, trying to cover the sound with my hand. “It's not what it looked like.”

God. He did *not* just feed me that line.

“I swear it's not. I was—”

“Don't ever call me or text me or find me again. I was crazy to love you.”

I disconnect the call and my phone slips through my fingers, falling to the floor. I force myself not to follow after it though the temptation is real. Instead, I get dressed. I brush my hair and my teeth. Then, I head down into my music room because if I get back in bed the way I'd like, I'll never leave it.

Pain shoots through me with powerful devotion, clinging to my skin, and holding my breath hostage. It's a terrorist in my soul, subversive in my every thought, and as I sit here, staring at my various musical instruments, I can't decide where to start.

“Pick one, dammit!”

I eye my cello in the corner, hearing the mournful notes of Requiem Mass in D minor by Mozart in my head. Just as I take a step toward it, my doorbell sounds, and I let out the shrillest sound my lungs can produce. Jesus. Won't this day just give me five freaking minutes?

I debate not opening the door. What if it's Gus? What if it's not Gus?

Then again, there are only so many people who it could be.

It rings again, and I spin on the balls of my feet, determined not to open the door if it is him. Only it's not Gus, it's Casper, and I'm assaulted with a deluge of disappointment and relief. Fucking men.

I swing the door open and the second Casper sees my face, he frowns. "What? Heartache not a good look on me?"

"What the hell happened and who do I have to kill?"

"Not-so-funny story. Come in and I'll tell you all about it. It's five o'clock somewhere, right? Not too early for a drink?" I question over my shoulder as I lead Casper into my kitchen.

He takes a seat at the bar, exactly where Florian sat this morning when he delivered my happy news. I don't actually go for the booze because hootching it up in the face of devastation is not my style. Instead, I get myself a Diet Coke, offer one to Casper who declines it.

"Hold that thought," I tell him even though he's not speaking. "The story is better with visuals." I run upstairs, scoop my phone up off the floor where I dropped it, and head back down. Unlocking my phone, I slide the image of Gus over to him just as I take my first sip of my soda.

He gives it a quick glance and then pushes it away in disgust. "That stupid bastard. Where did you get the picture?"

“Florian. He was at the party. Saw Gus acting like a twat-ass and found him in a bedroom all over that woman.” I nod toward my phone.

“Nai,” Casper starts, and the tone of his voice makes my stomach drop like a lead weight. “I’m sorry, honey. I don’t even know what to say. I know you’ve fallen for Gus.” He pushes out a breath and I finally force my gaze up. “Don’t let what some asshole guy did steal your life away from you again. I didn’t stick around. I know this. I wasn’t there for you when you needed me, and I stayed with Florian. It was a fuck-up and I was wrong to do it. But shit, Nai. I’m here now and I’m not going anywhere.” He stares down at the counter and shakes his head helplessly. “What can I do?”

“Oddly enough, just hearing you say all that to me? It helped.”

“Not enough.”

“I’m thinking of taking orders. Becoming a nun. I look really great in black and white so I should knock that one out of the park.”

Casper laughs, leaning back in his seat just as the freaking doorbell rings again. My heart jumps up into my throat and I freeze in place.

“Expecting more company?”

“No. I wasn’t even expecting you.”

He rolls his eyes at my snark. “Could be him.”

“Could be.”

“Want to find out?”

I shake my head. “Not really. The whole point of telling someone you never want to see them again is because you



never want to see them again.”

“If I answer the door and it’s him, I’m going to kill him and flee the country. You cool with that?” Am I? I suppose that’s not a real question. He cocks an eyebrow. Evidently, he was serious.

“Ugh. Fine.”

I do another teenage huff and skulk to the door with heavy, angry steps. I don’t even tap on the screen. “Go away,” I yell through the door instead.

“Naomi? It’s me, Henry.”

Not Gus, but Henry. Is this a joke? That fires me up even more.

“You’re not welcome. Screw off.”

“Naomi, please. You need to listen to me.”

“No. I don’t. And it’s like I told Gus. I never want to see you again. Bye now.”

I do some wiggly fingers at the door and pivot on my heels. I’m not smiling. I don’t even feel good about my bitchiness. Because Henry? Really, asshole? You sent Henry? *Argh!*

“That picture isn’t what it seems?” I hear him yell, louder now, a touch of desperation in his tone. I don’t care. I head back toward the kitchen, but now Casper is standing up, blocking me.

“Move.”

“Why is Henry here?”

“Ask him?” I shove against Casper’s chest. “You know what? You can go out there with him for all I care. My house

is now a man-free zone.”

“Naomi!”

“Fuck off, Henry. I don’t want to hear it.”

“The plot thickens. And it actually makes me want to kick Gus’s ass more.”

I nod in agreement. “Ya know, I’m getting really tired of my life being a soap opera.”

“Naomi—”

“I’m calling security, Henry. Go back and tell your friend that I meant what I said. I’m done with him. With all of you.” I hear Henry gnash out a bunch of words I can’t make out and then he’s gone. Coward. Just like Gus. Fucking cowards, all of them.

“You okay?”

I shake my head. I don’t think I’ll ever be okay again. But I have to try to be, right?

“Boys suck balls,” I grumble under my breath and Casper laughs.

“Some do.” I roll my eyes at him.

“Come on. Let’s go make some music. You’ll get through this, Nai. You always do.”

I follow after him on shaky legs, a hollow, empty feeling consuming me as more tears threaten. A ragged gasp cleaves from my lungs as my muscles seize up. A heavy, sorrow-tinted darkness settles over me. Making me wonder just how long it’s going to stay or if Gus Diamond finally ruined me for good.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

*Gus*

MY MIND SCRAMBLES through the hazy darkness, trying to force myself to remember what happened with that woman. And no matter how hard I push, I continue to come up empty.

At least with her.

I managed to remember walking up the stairs. The downstairs bathroom was occupied, and I needed to take a leak. I remember feeling dizzy, staggering up the stairs and not understanding why. I entered the dark room, undid the button on the top of my pants and then...nothing.

Nothing until Keith and Damion woke me up hours later.

Keith dragged me into my house and then into my bed. He forced me to stay until the doctor came and then that's when the fun really started. He took some blood and poured some charcoal crap down my throat that made me feel like I was suffocating. He also told me that due to the way my body was reacting to the drugs, it was likely that the lovely woman who did this, gave me multiple things. He said we might have a better idea of what after the tox screen comes back.

He couldn't tell if the woman...if I...if we...I can't even think the words, let alone say them.

And then Naomi.

That picture.

I don't even know who took it or how she got it, but it's so brutal.

Shows so much. Me...with my hands...

Rolling over on the side of my bed, I dry heave into the trash bin that's sitting on the floor. No matter how many times my body attempts to revolt, there is no escaping this nightmare.

Because Naomi is gone to me. Her trust and love annihilated. And really, what can I say to her that would bring her back to me? That I was drugged? That I don't remember what happened with that woman?

*Obviously, something happened with that woman.*

That thought has me flopping onto my back, throwing my forearm over my eyes. My head is pounding, and my mind is fractured. Naomi won't even listen long enough for me to get a word out, let alone that. And anything I said was crap because it's all crap. Even if she did hear me, would it be enough? Likely no.

She's given up on me and right now, I can't blame her.

My body feels sticky and used and so wrong.

I don't deserve Naomi. I never did. I certainly don't deserve her forgiveness. But I want it. God, I want it, and her so badly. It's a crazy thing to love someone so intensely that the very notion of living without them makes it feel like your

life is ending. Like, how can I possibly go on if she's not with me, type of shit.

I never felt anything like this when Viola walked away. Nowhere even remotely close.

How do you fight for someone after fucking up so irrevocably? With so much uncertainty hanging over you?

I hear the door to my room creak open, but I can't be bothered to look to find out which one of my hovering brothers it is. I know they're all worried about me. I know they're not only scared about the fact that I was drugged and the potential future repercussions of that, but also because I feel like my insides are dying and they can't do anything to fix that.

After Naomi sent me that picture this morning, I went a little nuts.

You know, punching walls, shattering glasses, screaming and breaking furniture, nuts. I don't even know how I had the strength when I can hardly move now. Adrenaline is a funny thing. So is fear and helplessness.

"What can I do?" Jasper asks, and I shake my head back and forth, still shielded by my arm. "Henry tried to go see her."

I laugh out at that. Why the hell would he do that? What on earth was he going to say?

"Let me guess, he didn't get far."

"No."

"Awesome. Just go, okay? You guys can all go. I'm fine now."

I hear Adalyn out in my living room and she shouldn't be here. None of them should.

“Are you?”

“Fuck off, Jas. Not now. I really can't with you right now.”

“You should take one of those sedatives the doctor left you.”

So I can numb the pain. So I can stop the spasm my body is overcome with—a side effect of the drugs, he told me. So I don't have a seizure, because apparently, that's still a possibility.

“I need to see her, Jas. I just...” I don't even know right now. I'm a selfish bastard. But all I want to do is make this better for her. For us. To take away all the pain I caused because Naomi hurting is like shards of glass in my heart. Like a knife to the gut.

“Give her time to calm down, Gus. Give yourself time to recover. Then you'll go to her. You'll chase her to the ends of the earth and beyond. But you can't do that right now, brother. Not before you know all there is to know about what happened.”

“And if that woman fucked me?”

“Then you'll deal with that then. The doctor said your dick was clean of lubricants, spermicide or...fluids.”

A wicked scoff-snorting sound echoes from my chest. “All that means is that I didn't wear a condom, or someone wiped me down after. That doesn't mean nothing happened.”

“Give it time,” he says again, like time actually does heal all wounds and fixes everything that's broken. Only he and I

know firsthand that's not the case. Some things are beyond repair. Some mistakes too big to take back.

"Right," is all I've got left. But inside, inside I know I have to fight for her. And I can't let this ride.

A painful spasm rattles my muscles from my bones, and I want to kill the bitch who did this to me. "Take the fucking pill, Gus." I hear Jasper walk across the room before I'm being hauled up into a half-sitting position. A small white pill is dropped into one hand. A glass of water into the other. "Now. I'm not fucking around with you." I blink up, staring into his troubled green eyes. My brother is worried about me and he doesn't wear it well. "We'll figure everything else out after."

I take the pill, chasing it down with a small sip of water because I can't stand seeing Jasper like this, and then I set the glass back on the nightstand.

"I'm going to get her back," I say, not sure if I'm telling him or me or just sending up a prayer.

"I know," he tells me. "I know." Jasper squeezes my shoulder before turning to leave. When he reaches the door, without turning back to face me, he says, "There's more to this story than we know. But it's not over yet. There is no *the end* when it comes to them." I don't have to ask who *them* is. I know he means Viola and Naomi. Our women.

With that, he shuts the door softly behind him and I slink back down, thinking his words through. He's right. There is more to last night than what we know. So much more. Because someone took that picture. That woman drugged me for a reason.

Before I can stop myself, I reach over and grab my phone. I pull up Naomi's name and send her a text. And then I send

her an email with an attachment. It's not how I wanted to give this to her. I'm just afraid I'll never get another chance.



## Chapter Thirty-Three

*Naomi*

MY PHONE PINGS from the edge of the table in my music room where I dropped it when Casper and I first came in. I don't know how long we've been working on this particular song, but my heart just isn't into it.

"Are you going to check that?" Casper asks, nodding his chin in the direction of my discarded phone.

"Nope."

"What if it's important?"

"I highly doubt it is."

"But you don't know until you check."

"Casper!" I yell. "Shut up with my phone already."

"So, I can check it?"

He moves to stand, and I growl, shoving him back down into his seat as I rise up. "I hate all men and wish they would drop dead like fairies do when small children say, 'I don't believe good men actually exist.'"

“What the fuck now?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. Something from Peter Pan.”

“I don’t remember that from Peter Pan.”

Another growl bellows out as I pick up my phone. Gus. Of course, it’s Gus. I try not to read the words. I try to force myself away. But let’s be real, we all know something like that requires a Herculean strength I just do not possess right now.

***Gus : I’ve been told to give you space and I will. Explaining what really happened over text is useless. Especially when I don’t even know if you’ll read this. But you need to know, I’m not done fighting for you. I never will be. I love you. Now. Forever. Always.***

Tears sting my eyes, but I hold them in, rereading his words over and over and over again.

My computer chirps, letting me know I just received an email. The only emails I get are business-related, so I mumble something out to Casper, asking him to check it in case it’s Lyric emailing me back.

“Naomi. It’s something from Gus. A video, by the looks of it.”

I glance up, my eyebrows pinching. *A video?* “Delete it,” I tell him, only he rolls his eyes at me and clicks on it. “Asshole, what are you doing? I said delete it.”

Setting my phone down, I cross the room in three angry strides.

“Cool yourself down. If it’s him being a coward and apologizing over video, I’ll delete it before he can even utter a word.”

“Cas—” Only, my words get cut off as my screen fills with some type of grainy footage. Casper looks to me and I shake my head, both of us narrowing our gazes as we try to figure out what we’re actually looking at.

It takes a few moments. The crowd is loud and cheering. The lights are harsh against the old-school film. But the second my mother comes into focus, I drop into the chair, covering my mouth with both hands. “Gus,” I gasp through my fingers. “He sent this?” Casper nods, his mouth slack. “How?”

He shakes his head in silent awe.

Tears immediately swarm my eyes and I scoot closer, wishing I could reach out and touch her.

“You’ve all been such an amazing audience tonight. I cannot thank you enough,” my mother says, talking straight into the crowd of adoring fans. “But tonight is a very special night. Tonight, my baby, Naomi, turns three. And much to my husband’s chagrin, I’m hoping you’ll all cheer for her and welcome her to sing with me on stage.”

I reach out, clutching on to Casper, balling up his shirt as I watch with rapt attention.

“Happy Birthday to you,” my mother begins to sing and a little doll version of me walks on stage, my hand held by my father’s, and that’s when I lose it. Sniffling and openly weeping. Casper wraps his arms around me, holding on to me as if I’ll fall apart completely if he lets me go for a second.

Both my parents and fifty thousand fans sing happy birthday to me as I turn to the audience, unafraid and wholly curious. I smile and wave and am reward with applause and

more cheers. “I don’t...I don’t remember doing that,” I murmur.

“My sweet darling girl, do you want to sing a song with mommy?” my mother asks, and I twist to her, walk across the stage, and nod yes like I’m a bobblehead doll. I’m wearing a dress I faintly remember. My favorite purple party dress.

“Where...how...” I trail off, full of so many questions but unwilling to miss a second of this by asking any of them.

We watch silently, both of us crying like babies, as my mother and I sing one of her most famous songs. My father plays the guitar along with us, and when it’s over and the video cuts out, I push away from the desk, needing a second to breathe.

“He remembered,” I whisper. I told him about that memory, my earliest and my favorite, and he remembered. I didn’t know it was my birthday. I didn’t know I was only three. I just remembered that I was on stage singing with my mother.

He found a recording for me. He sent it to me.

How do I reconcile this?

The man in the picture I saw, drunk and half-naked and all over an equally half-naked woman, with the man who sent me that video?

Who promised to never stop fighting for me?

The goddamn doorbell rings again, startling me so badly I jump up two feet in the air and practically fall off the chair. “Jesus Christ!” I yell. “Just leave me the hell alone. All of you.”

Casper laughs, wiping at his own emotion in his eyes. “Expecting more company?”

“You go see who it is?”

“You’re very bossy today, Nai. It’s your house. You go look or I’ll let whoever the hell it is in.”

“You’re supposed to be on my side,” I mutter under my breath as I storm over to the door. This time it’s Keith. You’ve got to be kidding me with this. “Go away, Keith.”

I feel like a broken record.

“Can’t do that. Open up so I can talk to you.”

“Nope. Sorry. Naomi isn’t here right now. And her mailbox is full, so you can’t leave a message.”

I turn to walk away when I hear him desperately shout, “He was drugged. Gus was drugged, Naomi.”

“Drugged?” Casper whispers, almost as if he’s testing the word on his tongue. His eyes meet mine. “Do you think it’s possible?” I glare at him. “Did you not just see that video? That video that is *not* available for public consumption. He did a lot of digging and searching to find you that video. A man who does that isn’t looking for a random woman to screw at a party.”

My face drops into my hands. I seriously cannot take much more. I’m hanging on by a thread, and it’s a thin thread at that. “Keith,” I bark, loud enough for him to hear through the door, “I swear to God, I will kill you where you stand if you’re messing with me right now.”

“Gus would kill me worse if I were.”

Before I can stop myself, I fling the door open, coming face-to-face with a serious and rattled version of Keith.

“Can I come in?” he asks, and I nod, stepping back and hating how my traitorous heart is already starting to pick up its pace. Keith follows me back into the kitchen. Casper reclaims one of the stools. I stand against the counter on the opposite side and Keith leans against the slice of counter between us.

My heart trembles at the silence that sits heavy in the room.

“Gus and I went to Damien’s together,” Keith finally starts, and I realize I’m poised on my tiptoes, ready to pounce on him and shake the words from him if he doesn’t speed this up. “You already know this.” He chuckles mirthlessly, noting my expression. “I was drinking Jack and he was sipping on a beer and all was normal. Until it wasn’t. I was talking with a girl for most of the night, so I wasn’t paying attention. The next thing I know, Gus is wasted. And not just wasted for Gus, like really fucked up. I haven’t seen him like that, I don’t think ever, but he was talking and standing up straight, and when I was ready to leave, he said he wasn’t.” Keith’s gaze drops toward the stone. “I shouldn’t have left. But...”

“You’re not his keeper and Gus is an adult man capable of making his own decisions?” Casper supplies and Keith glances toward him and nods.

“Yeah. That. But I still should have stayed. I didn’t know though.”

“Then what?” I ask, unable to help myself.

“I was asleep when my phone rang. It was Damien telling me I had to come and get Gus. That he was passed out, half-naked in one of his guest bathrooms. I raced right over. In all the years I’ve been friends with Gus, and that’s going back to childhood, he’s never passed out anywhere. He’s been fucked up beyond all measure, but he’s always found the line and

never crossed it. I was scared,” he admits, and I can feel my heart softening.

Both to Keith and Gus.

I haven’t even heard the whole story, and yet, my anger and pain are dissipating with each breath I take. That freaking video running through my mind isn’t helping.

“When I got there, I woke him up and he immediately started throwing up. I mean, sick, dude. Like his entire body was in on the action. His skin was sheet-white, he was sweating, and everything he said was slurred. The first thing he said was that he didn’t drink like that. He told us what he could remember, which was nothing. I mean, barely anything. Then he was worried about you.” He points to me. “He was fucking frantic over it, and when he checked his phone, he saw a text he said he knew he didn’t send you.”

I take a step back before I can stop it, crashing into the dials on my stove and nearly turning them on and setting myself on fire. Okay, maybe that’s a little dramatic, but right now, I can see that happening with how today has been.

Because I remember thinking when that text came in that Gus wouldn’t text me in that way. That the words he used weren’t typical of him.

My teeth hit my bottom lip and I nod at him, unable to find words or even utter a sound.

“Long story short, we figured out pretty quickly that someone had slipped him something. He doesn’t know what happened after he took a couple of sips of some punch a blonde gave him. All he knows is that he woke up half-naked and sick with no memory and then you sent him that picture.” Keith throws his hands onto his waist, his expression troubled.

“Let me tell you, Naomi, it took, me, Jasper, Henry, and the doctor I had come over to check him out to hold him down after that text came in. After he spoke to you on the phone.”

Salty-hot tears burn my eyes, sliding one by one down my face. “I...” Only words fail me. Gus. Jesus Christ, Gus.

“He doesn’t know what happened with that woman. Only that it was a setup.” Keith pushes away from the counter and walks toward me, standing before me tall and determined. “He loves you. He fucking loves you more than he’s ever loved anyone or anything before. He would have *never* done anything intentionally to ruin what you two have or to hurt you.”

I swallow hard, thinking back on the things Gus has said to me. The love in his eyes. His touch against mine. He told me once that he hated himself for the way he treated Viola when they were together. That he’d never cheat on any woman he was with. I replay his words from earlier today when he called. The way he sounded.

And I nod.

“I know,” I finally say, more tears wetting my face and blurring my vision. My chest aches like an open wound. Gus. My Gus. But... “Why? Why would someone do that to him?”

“How did you get the picture?” Keith asks, and I jar, my brain working in ways I can no longer stop.

“Florian,” I say resolutely.

Keith’s eyes turn to stone, his jaw matching them.

“Florian took the picture,” Casper says, and Keith steps back, allowing me to see him.

“Yes.”



“And it was a blonde?” he continues, tilting his head, his eyes searching as if this piece of information is everything.

“Yes.”

“Show me again.”

I walk back into my music room to retrieve my phone.

I pull up the picture and slide it across the counter to him. He picks it up, the way he did earlier, only this time, he examines it closer.

“I know her,” he states, a scowl marring his face. “That’s Angelica. She’s been Florian’s on and off casual girl since you walked out of his life.” And surprisingly, those words don’t hurt. There is no jealousy or resentment. Only the budding of an even stronger hatred for my ex. “It was mostly based around drugs,” he continues. “I think she’s where he used to get them.”

“So, if Florian took this picture and that’s his girl who has access to drugs...” Keith trails off.

“Yes. She could have easily drugged Gus, lured him upstairs after he was already completely out of it, and Florian could have taken that picture.”

And that’s when I start to shake.

Because how could someone do that to another person? What kind of man does that? Florian. A man I used to love. A man who I was ready to marry.

He poisoned Gus. Why? So he could hurt him? Break us up?

I must be spewing all this aloud because suddenly Casper says, “Only one way to find out.”

Casper takes out his own phone, setting it down on the counter beside mine. He presses Florian's number and puts it to speaker so both Keith and I can hear. The moment his voice comes through the speaker, my legs threatened to give out on me. I need to hear this from him. I need him to admit to what he did.

"Hey, man," Casper says, staring at me and holding a finger over his lips, indicating that I should stay silent. "I just left Naomi's. She showed me one hell of a picture you took."

Florian laughs and my jaw clenches tighter than a nun's asshole. I get the reminder again from Casper and feel Keith's hand on my forearm, trying to ground me as well.

"What was that, dude?"

Florian is silent before he asks in a somber tone, "Was she really upset?"

"Yeah. She was devastated."

"Then I did what I had to do to bring her back to me."

I turn away from the phone, my back facing the island and the men trying to contain me. I can't. Even though Florian is on the phone. I can't.

"It was Angelica in the picture. You set the whole thing up?"

Florian sighs heavily into the phone. "What was I supposed to do? I knew Gus was going to that party. I knew Nai wasn't. All's fair in true love and war and this is both. Naomi is mine. She was always meant to be mine. I cannot let Gus Diamond have her by default."

"And what about Gus? You could have killed him?"

Florian laughs. "I'm sure the baby is fine."

“Were you using too?”

Florian hesitates for a second, and I can practically feel Casper’s anger at that. Finally, he replies with, “Nothing hard.”

“Florian—”

“I’m fine. I swear. It was just a little Molly. Nothing else.”

My teeth sink into my lip, so I don’t scream. So much for being clean. Once a liar, always a liar.

“I can’t believe you did this.”

“I love her. It’s not the same for Gus as it is for me. No way. But she wasn’t going to end it with him unless something big happened. So, I made something big happen. I can’t have her with him, Cas. I can’t. She’s ours. She belongs with us. Not him. Never him.” Florian’s voice rises with a shrill texture on the last word.

“What did you do to get him in this picture?”

“Angie slipped him some shit. I don’t even know what. He drank it willingly and when he went upstairs to take a leak, we followed him.”

“Did she fuck him?”

Florian makes some sort of strange noise into the phone. “No, man. Angie’s not like that.”

I roll my eyes at that, my fists clenching so tight I can feel the blood draining from them. No, she’s not like that—just a lovely girl who drugs someone without their knowledge.

“He was already half-passed out. Barely put up a fight when we took off his shirt. We snapped the pic and left.”

I shake my head violently. Gus. I yelled at him like a lioness. I didn't even let him speak. I didn't want to hear it...

"Naomi told me she was done with Gus." I spin around and leap forward only to stop mid-launch. Casper's hard eyes stop me dead in my tracks.

"Yeah?" Florian asks with so much hope.

"Yep. So, I think whatever you had Angie do worked."

Florian laughs. Like loud and hard. Like it's all just such a big joke and so very funny, and I want to strangle him.

"I talked her into meeting us at the studio Monday morning. Give her the weekend, but I think it'll all work out the way it's supposed to."

"Fucking awesome. Shit, man. Thank you. I'm there. Yes. I'm so there."

"Perfect. I'll get her there by nine."

"Great."

"See you then."

Casper disconnects the call, his eyes still locked on mine. "He'll be there Monday morning at nine. I'm thinking we need to have something very special waiting for him."

## Chapter Thirty-Four

*Jasper*

I'VE BEEN SITTING HERE, in my brother's house, in my brother's bedroom, staring at his sick as fuck body. His mouth has remnants of the activated charcoal that was poured into his gut and every now and then, his body twitches with spasms from whatever poison that woman gave him. I've been silent so long most would think I was a monk.

But not the people who surround me.

Gus passed out pretty quickly after he swallowed the pill I made him take.

Now I'm standing in his kitchen, unable to go.

Viola has been pacing up a storm. Her worried countenance is wearing a hole in Gus's floor. Adalyn has been jumping on Gus's couch, flipping herself upside down and screaming every time she does it. I tried to stop her. I tried to reel her in. But she doesn't understand I brought her here to her uncle's house when I should not have, so there you go.

"Mickey Mouse, Gus," she yells, her voice light and airy, but the words?

She knows. She knows he's not coming out of his bedroom to put Mickey Mouse on and watch it with her the way he always does. Gus is the best uncle. He loves Adalyn like she is his own and I trust him with my special daughter in a way I trust few others.

And yet...we're here. Invading his home.

The doctor left an hour ago. He cleaned out Gus's stomach. Checked him out and prodded him over and gave us stuff to sedate him. Gus was ready to rip the world apart to get to Naomi after their phone call and he was in no state to do that.

Keith left right after Gus got off the phone with her.

I haven't stopped thinking it should have been me to go this time.

But I wasn't there when he woke up in that bathroom. I wasn't there at the party. I had nothing real to supply. Instead I'm stuck. Watching my wife pace and my daughter jump, and my mind is a motherfucking mess.

Gus. I can't handle this.

He's always been the strong one of the two of us. I'm the emotional bomb. He's the solid brick wall that perpetually sustains the blow.

And then someone went and poisoned him.

"Mommy shark, du, du, did du. Mommy shark." Adalyn kicks one of the cushions off the couch and then pounces on it. "Daddy shark, du, du, did du. Daddy shark."

"Sweet girl, you're wrecking Uncle Gus's couch. Let's pick that up."

"No!" She clings tightly to the pillow. "Gus!"

I sigh. She's a mess. Likely because she can sense we're a mess and doesn't know how to process that.

"We shouldn't have brought her here. It's not fair to her or Gus's house. Why did we bring her?"

Viola's eyes fly in my direction and I can tell nothing inside my wife's head is fine.

"Because we didn't think about it when we raced out of the house and jumped in the car."

It's true. When you hear your brother has been drugged and is sick as hell, you don't think before you run. We piled in the car and that was that.

She blows out a heavy breath, her body sagging. "I can't handle this." Viola's firm expression cracks like an egg and she falls apart before my eyes.

I take Vi into my arms, hold her close, and kiss her face.

"I want to kill the person who did this," she whispers into me.

"Keith will do it for us."

"What if she doesn't forgive him?"

"She will. You forgave me when I was at my worst."

Vi laughs, rubbing that same spot on her belly that she always seems to rub. "I did. And you were a super ass."

I cup her jaw in my hand and I kiss her lips. These lips. There is nothing better than them.

"We'll take Adalyn down to the beach or something. Get out of here and clear our heads. Gus doesn't need—or want us—lurking in his house like this and Ady really shouldn't be

here. If Gus comes out of his room looking the way he does..." I trail off and Viola nods.

"You're right. We're just in the way. I'll get Ady's things and straighten up the mess. You go tell Gus we'll check in on him later."

That's when the front door opens.

Keith, Casper LaCroix, and Naomi Kent step over the threshold. Naomi's eyes meet mine and the tears instantly start leaking. She's here though. Whatever Keith said to her, it worked. And I can't blame her for the way she yelled at Gus. Viola would have eviscerated me if the roles had been reversed.

Viola kisses my chin and removes herself from my arms, heading back into the living room to try to wrangle our four-year-old.

Naomi crosses the small space and stands before me, stuck in the middle between Gus's kitchen and the living room where Viola is trying to calm Ady down and clean up the mess she made. Keith walks over to try and help Viola, scooping Ady up into his huge arms and chest while pretending to eat her like he's a bear.

Naomi's eyes hold mine as she says, "I can't take any more heartbreak."

And for once, I think I understand someone's psyche completely.

Because Viola is sunshine and rainbows. It's why I love her to pieces. I need that light like nothing else. And Gus is rarely ever serious because he cannot handle being so. But when he is, it's such a powerful weapon. One that rattles you



because you know it's not who Gus feels comfortable being. He's a warm breeze on a cold day. A respite from the storm.

But Naomi has a darkness born in tragedy, guilt, and heartbreak.

So, I get Naomi. I understand her.

And for the first time, I recognize how Viola is Gus and Naomi is me. Counterparts that fit together like a perfectly matched puzzle.

"I love him, but..."

I take her hand and lead her into the kitchen, away from all the curious ears and eyes. She's going to be my family. I feel it in my blood because no one, and I do mean no one, else could be with Gus the way Naomi is. He needs her as much as she needs him.

Despite all that, I see her wariness. Her destructive unease.

She needs reassurance that Gus won't annihilate her.

It's weird, but I can give her that. Like speaks to like after all.

"I have very few truths I can give you with absolute certainty."

She swallows and nods. "Okay. Let's hear 'em."

"I look at Adalyn and I instantly feel this swell of love and pride. Every single time. That's my standard, right? My go-to." Naomi shrugs at me. Like she's not understanding, and I get that. But she will. Patience, I'm learning, is not her thing. "But then I have these moments that consume me. That make me feel dark and awful. That have me questioning what sort of parent I am and if I'm good enough or up to the challenge. Ady will throw something and refuse to pick it up. Ask for

something to eat and then refuse to eat it. Hit me and punch me and kick at me for no reason I can discern other than she's frustrated with something and cannot articulate it. She's impossible to navigate when she's like that. Maddening is the word that comes to my mind most often. Sort of like Gus."

Naomi laughs softly, biting down on her lip to hold her emotion at bay.

"But I love her. She is my blood. My life. The beat behind my heart. And without her, I just don't work. Hell, I wouldn't fucking exist. But that doesn't mean I don't cry or fall apart sometimes. That doesn't mean my insides don't quake with fear or ache in despair. How do you parent a child who does not want to be parented? Who is stubborn and willful and tests every single limit and shred of patience you have?" I pause here, meeting her eyes head-on. "How do you continue to take the risk when this sort of fear eats away at your insides like a cancer?"

Her breath comes out in a choppy stutter. Because I think that right there, that's her question.

How do you continue to love someone, to put everything you are on the line when you're so fucking afraid?

"It's easy," I tell her. "You just do it. Because Adalyn is my girl. Because I love her. And I would not trade her or change her. Even when she pushes me past my breaking point. Because I cannot live my life without her, and she is worth all the risks. She is my reward. The happiness that breathes life into my dark soul. She is worth the ride, the uncertainty, every ounce of fear, because the high I feel when I'm with her is a million times greater than all that other stuff combined." I tilt my head in her direction. "You feel me?"

Tears streak down Naomi's already tear-streaked face. She swallows impossibly hard before nodding. "Yeah. I feel you."

She smiles and with it, I can see some of the heaviness that had been clouding her start to dissipate. "Thank you."

And with that, she blows past me, heading directly for Gus's bedroom.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

*Gus*

FINGERS GLIDE gently through my hair, stirring me out of a heavy slumber. My eyes slowly open, blinking a couple of times as I adjust to the light. Naomi's sweet face covers my field of vision and I blink some more, wondering if now I've reached the hallucination phase of this trip.

She smiles, taking that hand that was in my hair and running it over my jaw. "Hi," she whispers, her red-rimmed eyes trailing across my face, every inch of it. "How are you feeling?"

I lick my dry lips and shift, rolling onto my back so I can see her better. "Um. Better now," I laugh, the sound rusty. "You're really here? I'm not dreaming this?"

She shakes her head, trying to smile and failing miserably.

She's a mess. Her cheeks are red and streaked. Her hair wild. Lifting my hand, I brush back some of the dark strands clinging to her wet face, and the moment my skin touches her, a small sob stumbles its way out of the back of her throat.

"No, baby. Don't cry. I'm okay. You're here, so I'm okay."

She cries a little harder, her face dropping into my neck. Reaching up, I wrap my arms around her, tucking her into me and kissing the top of her head. “I’m so sorry, Naomi. I have no idea how you’re here right now, but I am so fucking happy you are. I don’t remember a lot, but, damn, I’m so—”

“Shhh,” she interrupts, pulling back to meet my eyes. “Don’t. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“How on earth do you figure that? I hurt you. Something I promised both of us I wouldn’t do. And worst of all...” I attempt to swallow past the thick lump in the back of my throat. “Jesus...” I can’t even say it. That woman. That fucking woman. “I was drugged, Naomi. That woman in the picture drugged me. I have no idea why she did that to me or what she was after or what’s going to happen next.”

That picture Naomi sent me was nothing if not incriminating. This woman could say a hundred things and get away with all of them. And she could say I willingly took whatever drugs were given to me. I seriously might be a special type of fucked with this.

“You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Naomi,” I warn because I have no idea if she realizes how serious this all is.

“I yelled at you.”

I shake my head at the rapid switching of gears. “I don’t blame you. I would have lost my mind if I had been you.” God, she’s really here. “Come here.”

I tug her back down onto me, kissing her hair, and breathing in the scent of her. Home. That’s what that smell is. My girl in my arms. Home. That’s what this feeling is. I never thought I’d get this with her again and she’s here. That’s the

only thing that keeps going through my head. Over and over again as if I need the reassurance it's real.

Emotion mists over my eyes.

"I love you. I love you so much. I'm so sorry for hurting you."

"No," she pushes. "You did nothing wrong. No more apologies. I love you and you're okay. That's all that matters to me."

I cradle her tighter against me, cocooning her small body in my large arms.

I was ready to tear down the world to get to her this morning.

I still don't know how to wrap my mind around this. And then that picture?

Which reminds me. "How did you get that picture of me?"

She adjusts herself so she's lying on her side, facing me. I mimic her position, reaching over and wrapping a strand of her hair around my finger. Her eyes begin to water again, and I wipe the moisture away as it falls.

Naomi crying guts me.

"It was Florian," she says, and my eyebrows pinch together in confusion. *Florian?*

"I don't remember seeing him there."

"The girl. The blonde in the picture is a friend or lover or dealer or whatever of his. Casper looked at the picture and recognized her. Florian was the one who came over this morning. He showed me the picture before you even called me." She sucks in a ragged breath, her expression distraught

and dismayed. “He set the whole thing up, Gus. All of it. Casper called him...” She puffs out a heavy breath, trying to rein herself in.

I lean in, pressing my lips to hers. Home.

“It’s okay.”

“No. It’s not okay. Casper put him on speaker. He didn’t know Keith and I were listening, so he told Casper everything. He knew you were at the party and I wasn’t. He had this girl slip you drugs and then stage the picture.” My eyes widen and she leans in, pressing her forehead to mine. “Nothing happened with her.”

I blow out a breath I didn’t even realize I was holding. Nothing happened with her. That’s the relief of my life other than not losing the woman on my bed beside me.

But Florian. I should have fucking known.

I might have to kill him for what he did to me. For what he did to Naomi.

“I’m sorry I didn’t trust you in that. I should have. I should have listened. But—”

“But I have a history of screwing around on girlfriends, and you saw that picture and had every reason to believe this was the same.” I cup her jaw in my hand, tilting her face so our eyes lock. “I don’t have a lot, Naomi. I have my band and my brother and Viola and Adalyn. They’re my people. They’re what matter to me. But you? You’re more than my people. You’re everything about me that matters. I would never cheat on you, beautiful girl, and that’s not because I’m afraid of getting caught or losing you. It’s because other women don’t even hit my radar. They are nothing to me because you are everything.”

She sucks in a breath and smiles. And it's a real smile. One that says she's right here with me.

"When we make it out of this madness intact, I'm marrying you."

Her laugh is light. Happy. Nearly carefree. *Nearly*. "Is that right?"

"Damn straight."

"And what if I say no?"

"You won't. You want to marry me as much as I want to marry you. Think of how cute our babies will be."

Her face falls and suddenly, I feel like a dick all over again. She's not even sure if she can have babies.

"Naomi Kent, whether they're through invitro, surrogate, adoption, or any other method, our babies will be cute because they're ours. End of story, babe."

"What did I tell you about calling me babe?" she challenges, a glimmer in her eyes.

"Yeah. I've been working on baby, but it just doesn't roll off my southern boy tongue as easily."

"Do I look like a babe?"

"You look like my babe. Like my future. Like my life. Thank you for coming. I would have come to you. I would have pounded down your door and demanded you listen. But I'm so happy you're here. That you did listen."

She leans in and presses her sweet lips to mine. I open them automatically, slipping my tongue inside for a much-needed taste.



“Do you think you’re strong enough to get up and come out into the living room?”

“Why? Is Ady still jumping all over my couch?”

“No,” she laughs. “I think they felt bad about that and left.”

I grin, rubbing absently at my jaw. “They didn’t have to. Listening to that girl makes all the heavy stuff lighter.”

“Jasper talked me off the ledge.”

“That’s because you’re him and I’m Vi.”

Naomi laughs. Kinda loud and yet feather-light. “I can see that. Up with you, oaf.”

“Oaf,” I bristle. “Woman, I had a rave pumped into me.”

She rolls her eyes. “You look fine to me.” She gets off my bed, helping me to stand and then we leave my bedroom together, hand-in-hand. My legs feel like Jell-O and my body is still not right, but it actually feels good to be up and moving around.

Casper Motherfucking LaCroix is sitting in my kitchen, helping himself to coffee I did not brew at my kitchen island. Keith is standing beside him and I cock an eyebrow. I get a firm nod for that and decide to let it ride. Besides, it’s easier to focus on poor Henry, sick with a nasty cold, who looks like death warmed over.

“Feelin’ alright there, Hank?”

“Fuck off, Gus. You’re lucky I love you. My bed is a far happier place for me than your ugly-ass kitchen.”

I chuckle with a wink in his direction. “Love you too, brother.”

My gaze darts back to Casper, tilting my head as I tell him, “Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not.”

Thankfully the bastard laughs at my Go-T or GoT or Game of Thrones or whatever the hell you call it, reference. “Welcome back to the land of the living, Gus. Glad to see my old buddy didn’t get the best of you.”

“He tried, didn’t he?”

I look to Keith, walking over to him and slapping him hard on the shoulder with an even harder squeeze. His eyes meet mine and he nods a ‘you’re welcome,’ in return.

“Got any more of that for me?” I ask, eyeing his coffee though I think it’s the middle of the afternoon by now. “Bet you’d never guess it to look at me, but my head feels like someone slipped me a pharmacy last night.”

Naomi rolls her eyes, completely unamused. Keith pours me a cup anyway because he’s a good man, and then I settle in front of Casper, giving him the business with my eyes.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry he did that to you. He is not the same Florian I once knew. I don’t know if it’s the drugs or losing Naomi or just losing himself, but I’ve tried for two years to help him and after what he did last night, I’m done.”

I nod. I can respect that. “Does this mean I can hire someone to kill him and flush the funds through your account?”

He grins. “Not quite. But it does mean I have something in mind for Monday morning at the studio.”

“Awesome. Tell me all about it. I want nothing more than to take the fucker down.”

## Chapter Thirty-Six

*Naomi*

ADRENALINE COURSES THROUGH MY BLOOD, speeding up my heart to a palpable rhythm. It's like Thumper's fucking foot going inside my chest. I glance over to Casper, who has been sitting with a guitar in his lap, plucking at strings without melody. He's just as bottled up and off-kilter as I am.

"Tell me again why I can't punch him?"

Behind me, Gus chuckles. He's back to himself again. It took a full day of resting and rehydrating, but I've come to realize that not a lot holds Gus Diamond back or down. "I never said you couldn't, beautiful, but if anyone is taking shots this morning, it's gonna be me."

"What are you, NSYNC?"

"Huh?"

I huff a breath. "Nothing. Just old boy band fantasies."

"What does that have to do with taking shots? And no, I don't mean alcohol," Gus grouses with an exaggerated

shudder to his voice. “I think my days of that are done.”

“Right,” Henry deadpans through a raspy voice. He still has his cold. “I’ll remind you of that in a couple of weeks when you’re sitting by Jas’ pool, drinking a margarita.”

“Thanks, brother. That will be very helpful. And I’ll remind you that you sound like Kermit the Frog with a fifty-year, two-pack a day smoking habit.”

Keith and Jasper start cracking up, and then Casper and I join in because it’s impossible not to with that.

“Shut up, assholes. You’re throwing off my burn.” I give them all glares because despite the banter, I’m still tense as hell.

I know how this is going to go. Despite the strength in numbers. I know Florian Heart. I’ve read his texts that he’s sent me over the last couple of days. I’ve listened to his voice messages. And I remember the man who would stop at nothing to get what he wants.

Only this time, that’s not an option for him.

He will not win this round.

Even if delivering the kill shot has never been my forte.

The door opens and I freeze in place as Florian enters the room alone. He’s smiling. Almost as if he’s got a secret until his eyes meet mine while simultaneously taking in everyone surrounding me. Then he frowns. His expression now burning with acrimony. That’s when the caged lion comes out. The same one I met that evening in the hotel two years ago.

He’s ready to fight for his cause.

He’s ready to fight dirty.

“What is this, Nai? Cas?” He quickly looks to Casper before turning back to me almost immediately. “Tell me you’re kidding me right now? Did you not see the picture? What he did to you?” Florian points in Gus’s direction and I wonder when this man became so lost.

Is it the drugs that did this to him?

Because for two years, I was nothing to him.

Sure, he said he was checking up on me, but what was he waiting for all that time if he really loved me as much as he claims? I told him I was pregnant with his child, and he thought I was a joke. I realize I’m recycling my thoughts here. I know I’m rehashing old shit that doesn’t change anything about this present situation.

But still.

Why all of this now?

I’m honestly curious.

And then it all sort of clicks into place. The longer I look at him. The more I stare into his dark eyes. He wanted to have his cake and eat it too. He wanted drugs and other women. He wanted his freedom, knowing little old Naomi was sad and alone. Figuring that’s how I would stay since I was a lost little duckling in a big pond. But the moment Gus came around. The moment there were pictures of me getting my life back, well...

He doesn’t really want me. He just doesn’t want anyone else to have me.

It’s pride and ego and some misguided possessive ownership bullshit.

And just like that, I’m not so nervous anymore.

I’m not that girl anymore.

His choices are his own. His sobriety is his own. His life is his own. And I will never be a part of it again. I'm free of Florian Heart, and I don't think anything has ever felt better than this. I've known it for a while, but suddenly, it's all hitting home. That realization is a powerful drug that replaces all my nasty adrenaline with determination.

"I know what you did," I tell him instead of anything else. Everyone told me what to say. How to phrase it. But when faced with him, I can't follow anyone else's rules or script. Not anymore. Never again. "I know everything you did."

Heat crawls up his skin, reddening his cheeks and narrowing his eyes. "Oh yeah? What is it you think you know?"

Suddenly Gus is standing beside me, his hand sliding around my waist and squeezing my hip. I wonder if it's to stop himself from lunging at Florian and killing him with his bare hands.

"Would you like me to spell it out for you?" Gus asks, his voice deadly calm and ice cold.

Florian's dark eyes drag along each of the silent people in the room before they land on mine. It's as if Gus isn't even here. "Naomi, I don't know what lies he's feeding you—"

"You drugged Gus. Or rather had your *friend* do it. You set up that picture. Then you tried to play me for the fool. Did I miss anything?"

I turn and look at Gus, who's expression is so sharp and severe you can feel the aggression and hate pouring off him. How he's still standing here casually beside me is anyone's guess.

"Nope. I think that just about sums it up."

Florian glances over to Casper who is now standing, and in this moment, Florian realizes it's all over for him. He knows there's nothing he can say that will fix this.

Florian clears his throat and steps into me. I don't budge as his eyes dance across my face. Gus stiffens, pulling me protectively back toward him, but in this second, I resist.

I need this showdown to be done once and for all.

"Everything I did is because I love you. Is because I miss you, and I want you back. Please, Naomi. Step outside and speak with me without the audience."

I shake my head. "It's over Florian. All of it. We're done. We've been done for two years. Nothing you do or say is going to change that and drugging Gus to get me to break up with him is not only criminal, it's so fucked up I can hardly stand to be in the same room as you let alone look at you."

"That actually goes for me too, Flor." Casper steps forward causing Florian's head to fly in his direction. "I'm done too. I've put up with so much of your shit over the years." He takes another step, his gaze hard and unrelenting. "The drugs. The women. The lying. I thought maybe once you got clean, that would change. It's why I did what I did to try and help you get Naomi back. I was hoping you'd be you again if that happened. But what you did?" Casper drags a hand through his hair, visibly dismayed. "Fuck, man. You crossed the line and then some. And I can't be with you anymore."

Florian's eyes burn with a barely contained rage. "Then I'm taking Claw By Night with me. You'll be left with nothing, Cas. Nothing." His hand slashes through the air in Casper's direction.

“Nothing without you is better than the lies, drugs, and manipulation I had with you.”

“That goes for us too, Florian,” a voice by the door calls out and all heads swivel in that direction. Lyric Rose is standing in the open doorway wearing a pink sheath dress, matching pink heels, and a pissed off scowl. I didn’t even hear her come in. I had called her Sunday afternoon. She was still in New York since she’s producing an album for Cyber’s Law there, but I told her about what Florian did. Evidently, she hopped a flight back to LA. “You are no longer an artist on the Turn Records label. I have already spoken with our legal department and handed over the physical evidence we have of your *crime* . We have rescinded your contract effective immediately as you have broken several statutes within the contract you originally signed.”

Florian looks stunned.

It sucks when your whole life comes crashing down around you.

“Fine. You want it like that? I could give a shit. There are dozens of labels who want me. And dozens of better guitarists I can find.” He turns back to me. “And obviously I have no issues finding women.”

Seriously? I practically roll my eyes at him.

I shrug. “Good for you, then?”

“Fuck this. I’m out of here.”

He spins toward the door and Lyric steps aside to allow him to go.

“Wait,” Gus says, cutting him off and blocking his path. “One last thing.” Then Gus rears back and plants his fist straight into Florian’s stomach. Hard. You can practically hear



the thud that goes along with it. Florian doubles over in pain, clutching his abdomen and spitting out a slew of curses no one cares enough about to listen to. “That, motherfucker is for poisoning me. And let me tell you now, if you ever come near me or Naomi, or anyone else in this room for that matter again, I will end you. You may be fucking sneaky, but I don’t have to be to destroy you. You feel me?”

Florian spits on the floor by Gus’s feet before he tries to right his body. “Just wait until I release that picture.”

“Just wait until I release the recording I have of you admitting everything you did,” Keith interjects with a big shit-eating grin. “That’s right, asshole. I have it all. And we have the picture you sent to Naomi from *your* phone.”

“Yep. So, if you want to play hard, bring it. There will not be a hole big enough for you to hide in by the time we’re done with you.” Gus folds his arms over his chest.

“Fuck you,” Florian snaps before storming out the room, trying to hold on to his last shred of dignity. Only two seconds later we hear, “Ow. What the fuck?”

“Oh, sorry, honey,” someone says. “Didn’t see your ugly ass there.” Ethan saunters into the room we’re all standing in like deer in headlights. He has a huge, brilliant, white smile gleaming against his tanned skin and when he shuts the door behind him, he starts cracking up. I blink at him curiously. “What? I didn’t *mean* to stick my foot out and trip him. It just happened. Bitch has a mind of its own.”

I burst out laughing and so does everyone else in the room. All the tension evaporates, and I sag forward, only to be caught by Gus. His lips press into my face as he holds me.

“Do you think he’s going to go quietly?” Jasper asks, and I twist my face to look at him.

“I don’t know. If he’s smart, yes. But I don’t know.”

“Don’t ask any questions, but his phone might suddenly be missing a very specific picture. And his home computer systems might all somehow be rid of it too.” We all turn to Ethan, who throws his hands up in surrender. “I just said don’t ask.” I can only shake my head at him, smiling at the relief that crazy notion brings. He sighs dramatically. “I’m so pissed I missed the big gunfight at the O.K. Corral,” he grouses, dropping his arm on Lyric’s shoulder.

“It was some gunfight. Dude got fucked in the ass so many times he’ll be sore for a month.”

“Lovely imagery there, Henry,” I mutter.

“But true all the same,” Keith jumps in.

“Right well, now that you’re all here, I think it’s time you get back to work,” Lyric prompts. “I mean, these albums won’t complete themselves. Casper, I take it you’re working with Nai on hers?” Casper nods. It’s what he and I had already agreed to. And in truth, I’m really excited he’s going to be part of it. “Radstastic. Now, I have to get on a plane and head back to New York.” Lyric wraps her small arms around me and hugs me close. “I love you. I’ll call you soon, okay?” I nod against her. Then she turns on Gus, hugging him as well. “I love you too. And I’m sorry that happened to you. But it’s over now.” She pulls back and meets his eyes. “No more excitement from you guys. I think we’ve all had enough for a while.”

Ain’t that the truth.

## Epilogue 1

*Naomi*

*Nine Months Later*

“IT’S BEEN an incredible night so far. Filled with so many talented artists and big moments. This next one might just be the biggest of them all. It is my distinct honor to introduce a woman who has not played live in more than three years. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming back to the stage, tonight’s artist of the year, twelve time Grammy winner, the incredible, Naomi Kent.”

Applause fills the large auditorium causing a fresh swell of butterflies to dance in my stomach. This is a place I never thought I would ever be again after what Florian did to me on this very stage. Yet, here I am, performing.

Everything is different.

I’m different.

Casper clasps my hand, giving in a quick squeeze before we both take a deep breath and walk out onto the stage. The sound amplifies with everyone in the house on their feet,

cheering and clapping. I can feel my face heating for the second time this evening.

Winning artist of the year was an unexpected and amazing honor. I broke down into tears twice during my acceptance speech. To say tonight has been an emotional one is the understatement of the century.

But this moment? This is the moment I've been looking forward to for months.

My solo album released in September and skyrocketed all the way up to number one on the charts. Not just that, it's received incredible reviews. Now that I've started writing, I haven't been able to stop. That first album was about putting my past behind me. About embracing the heartache only to let it go.

But I'm back at it. And the one I'm working on right now? It's all about love.

It's funny, it wasn't until I started to write again that I really got it.

Because every now and then, I would catch these glimpses. A child playing with their parents. An adoring smile a man gives his partner. A baby laughing.

At first, after all I lost, things like that made my heartache worse. To the point where I couldn't stand to watch them.

But now I realize that these glimpses are what make life beautiful. Those bonds. That connection. The love.

That's what life is.

There is always hope, despite the darkness that can sometimes feel so overwhelming. That if you really look for it, you can see the way out.

That's what hope is. And hope might just be one of the most beautiful of emotions there is.

Tonight's song is my biggest single from the new album. An emotional sucker-punch. A ballad. I cried my eyes out when I wrote it and I'm hoping I don't do that tonight when I sing it live.

I nod my head in thanks to the crowd and as they begin to settle and sit back down, I pick up my gold microphone. Perching myself on the edge of the stool that's waiting for me center stage, I glance over to Casper who is holding his acoustic, ready. Our eyes meet and I nod. He launches into the song, playing the complex musical arrangement he and I wrote together for this.

I open my mouth and start to sing, my eyes closing as the notes flow past my vocal cords, and slide through my lips. And just like that, all those butterflies that had been swarming low in my belly are replaced with a swell of endorphins that glide up through my veins, settling in my cells and pulling me up and off the stool.

Opening my eyes, I allow every shred of heartache to pour out of me. I bleed myself, right here, for all to witness. The heady power rises up from my toes, surging until it's pulling a reluctant smile from my lips and the most perfect notes from my lungs.

I hit the bridge and turn to face Casper who is smiling too because wow, I've never sung it like this before. His eyes meet mine and in them, I see so much pride. So much love.

I went from being alone, lost, to found.

To surrounded with family and love.

Turning back to the audience, I search for Gus. It's nearly impossible to see into the audience with the bright lights harshly shining in my eyes. I find our seats and quickly squint, trying to adjust into darkness without being too obvious about it to the audience here and people watching at home.

Unfortunately, it's too difficult to make out, so I smile in the direction of our seats anyway, hoping he knows that smile is only for him.

The song begins to build, pushing toward the climax and the end of the song. These last few verses, Gus and I wrote together, and I let it all out when suddenly ever so subtly the crowd stirs. At first, I ignore the murmurings, but it grows more persistent and I turn, glancing over my shoulder in Casper's direction without missing a note.

Casper is still sitting there playing, but his expression has completely changed into one of bewildered humor.

Because Gus Diamond is now on stage.

And he's holding a microphone.

Smiling at me with so much love and devotion, my chest clenches.

My eyes widen and I shake my head incredulously. What on earth is this man doing?

Gus walks over to me with long, purposeful strides, lifting the microphone to his lips as he goes. I continue to sing and the moment he reaches me, we face each other, and he begins to sing the final chorus with me. I can't stop my smile as it spreads across my face. I step closer, shifting so our bodies are less than a foot apart as I now sing to him and no one else.

The crowd, restless and cheering in their seats, fades to black.

All I see is Gus, his sandy-brown hair, his piercing gray eyes, his tall, muscular body.

He reaches out with the hand not holding the microphone and takes mine, intertwining our fingers and lifting it up to his chest, holding us there over his heart.

We sing the final line as one, and when we're done, the crowd erupts in thunderous applause. I laugh, shaking my head. I lower my microphone. "Song crusher," I accuse, and everyone laughs because obviously they still all heard that.

Gus chuckles softly before his expression turns serious. He pulls me in a little closer, angling his body so he's only looking at me. "Beautiful girl, I'm a go big or go home sort of guy."

Ain't that the truth.

"Naomi Kent, ladies and gentlemen," Gus belts out, taking our joined hands and raising it over our heads as he steps behind me, giving me center stage once more. More applause, and now my face likely resembles a firecracker.

He winks at the audience and then tugs me along, back off the stage without waiting on the escorts or the lights to dim or any of that ceremonial nonsense.

He drags me along, past the stagehands and lingering celebrities, all the way to the back where it's quiet and dark.

That's when he turns to face me. Our hands still intertwined. Our chests pressed close. Our exaggerated breathing one. Tonight has been one of the best nights of my life. And Gus just made it so much better singing on stage with me.

"Normally I'm not the type of man to pull a Kayne and steal someone else's thunder," he starts, his voice a low hum

as he speaks, practically into my lips. “At least not without good reason. I wasn’t going to do this tonight let alone here, but seeing you up on stage, singing and performing again,” He shakes his head like he’s trying to hold back his emotions, “I cannot tell you how proud I am of you. You amaze me and I couldn’t think of any other way to express just how incredible and precious you are to me. Just how much I love you, Naomi. Other than doing this.”

He lowers himself onto one knee, here, in the backstage of the fucking Grammys.

My eyes bug out of my head and my breath catches.

“Here?” I gasp and he chuckles.

“Yeah, baby. Here is just right.” Gus pulls out a diamond ring from his pocket, takes my hand, and stares up into my eyes with so much devotion and love, tears begin to collect in my eyes, falling gently onto my cheeks. “Naomi Kent, will you make me the happiest man in the world and be my wife?”

Simple. Heartfelt. Perfect.

“Yes,” I cry or scream or laugh. I can’t even tell what that sound is coming from my mouth.

Gus grins like a schoolboy, slips the ring onto my finger and then stands up, scooping me up into his arms as he goes. My arms wrap around his neck as his lips meet mine in a kiss that renders me breathless.

“I love you,” I whisper into him.

“I love you more.”

“I love you most.”

He smiles into me. “Not possible.”



He kisses me again, softer this time, before he sets me down. I drag him back down to me, kissing him once more, unwilling to let him go. God. This man. This moment. How did I survive for so long without him? Love is like that, isn't it? Brutal tragedy one moment and perfect elation the next.

He took this night, this place, the bad memories, and turned them all into something so magical. Something we'll be able to tell our grandkids about.

“This is the best night of my life. I can't imagine anything topping this.”

“That's a dare I fully accept.”

## Epilogue 2

Keith

TIME SEEMS TO STAND STILL, suspended above my head like an angry cloud as I stare up into the starless night through the windshield. It's going to storm tomorrow. I can feel it in my bones. If it storms, I won't have football practice. That means I can sit inside all day and jam with the guys. She'll come for that. She always does.

She loves to watch us play.

"Keith," she whispers, and I smile, turning to her in the passenger seat. She's so pretty when she smiles it makes my chest flutter.

I haven't seen her smiles in so long. Not the real ones anyway, which is what this is.

Her smiles haven't touched her eyes in months. Maybe longer. I don't even know anymore. But tonight feels different—it fills me with a burgeoning hope.

She had fun at the party. She laughed and danced with her friends.

Maybe she's finally starting to get better?

I reach out and touch her face, the bones sharp yet fragile beneath my fingers. The hollow dip of her cheek is more pronounced than it was even a few weeks ago. I frown a little at that before I can stop it, a swell of anxiety filling up my gut.

She catches my expression and pulls away, staring straight ahead and out the car window. I take her hand instead, bringing it up to my lips, and press a kiss into her palm. I need to fix the mood I just soured and any time I open my mouth lately, I practically cringe, petrified I'm going to make things worse not better.

"Tonight was fun."

She nods, turning back to me, and her face has more of that glow it had before I touched her cheek. "It was. I'm so glad I came out with you."

"School starts in a week. Senior year."

"And you're leaving for California when that's all done."

I chuckle at her excited yet insistent tone. "If the Crimson Tide and my father don't get their hands on me first."

She shakes her head, her smile light and playful. "No way. You're meant for the stage, Keith Dawson. Bright lights and drumsticks."

"And you'll be there front row."

"No matter what, I'm forever and always your biggest fan."

I stare into her eyes and kiss her palm again. Knowing she loves it when I do that.

“You should get in before your mama comes out here and tans my hide for keeping you out late,” I tell her though I hate the idea of her going inside and our perfect night ending.

White teeth sparkle as her smile widens, her pale blue eyes glittering against the sliver of moonlight that somehow manages to seep into the car. “She’s asleep. Both of my parents are.”

I laugh, bouncing my eyebrows suggestively. “Are you inviting me in then with you, babe?”

Her smile falters. “Not tonight.”

There’s something in her voice that tears at me a little, and I can’t understand what it is. Did I say something wrong? She hasn’t let me touch her in so long, and all I want to do is touch her. Show her how much I love her. Always.

None of that other stuff matters to me because I’m here with her to the end.

“Goodnight, Keith. I love you.”

I lean across the seat and kiss her lips. She opens for me instantly, her tongue sweeping against mine. Warm. Soft. Wet. “I love you too, babe. See you tomorrow, okay? Breakfast, right? I’ll be back early for you.”

“Night.” She steps out of the car, and it’s like she’s gone. Disappeared. Swallowed up by the blackness of night.

Streaks of her platinum blonde hair ghost across my face and I reach out, trying to grasp at the strands only to have them slip through my fingers one by one. My heart starts to pound.

I can’t find her.

I can’t see her.

I can't feel her.

Now my heart is beating too fast. *Slow down* . But it can't. I try to take a deep breath and a *gasp* ricochets through my skull. *Is that me?* No. It can't be. It was her.

The room is abnormally bright. All the lights are on and it's hurting my eyes. Why are her lights on? Dread clings icily to my skin as I drift toward her bathroom. I call out to her, but she doesn't respond.

*Come on, babe. Answer me.*

*Ring. Ring. Ring.* The blaring sound scatters my thoughts, dragging me away from her room. Away from her bathroom.

I'm dreaming. I need to wake up. WAKE UP!

*I don't want her to die tonight.*

My eyes snap open, my chest heaving in rhythm with the pounding of my heart. Cold sweat covers my body and I shudder, sitting up and blinking as I frantically look around.

Home. I'm home in my bed.

*Fuck!* I haven't had a nightmare in months.

Startling me out of my dark thoughts, my phone rings on my nightstand, and I realize that's what interrupted my dream. I'm grateful for it until it dawns on me that it's only a little after two in the morning and this is the second time they've called in as many minutes.

Scrambling quickly across my bed, I grasp my phone, swiping to accept the call when I see it's Gus. "Hey," I answer immediately. "What's wrong?"

Because Gus never calls in the middle of the night. Not like this anyway.

“She’s in labor,” he announces, and I sag against my headboard in relief at the jubilation in his voice. I rub a hand up and down my face, trying to wipe away the residual heartache and panic of my dream. “Fucking Viola is in labor. Jasper just called. They’re headed to the hospital.”

I grew up with these boys. My bandmates. My brothers from other mothers.

And because of that, part of me is tempted to tell him about the dream I was just having. Always the same dream. Every damn time I dream about her. No matter what.

Only tonight I never made it into the bathroom.

I mentally shake my head. I don’t think telling him would accomplish anything other than making him worry about me. Not to mention, this is clearly not the time for that.

“That’s amazing. Wow. Another baby.” I sit up a little straighter, the residue of devastation slipping away as I think about the new life that will be born tonight. A life that I already love because it belongs to Jasper and Viola and they belong to me.

He chuckles into the phone. “Did I wake you out of a dead sleep? You sound out of it.”

I wince at the description he just used and ask, “Where are you?” instead of answering him because it sounds like he’s in the car.

“On my way to the hospital, dude. Naomi went over to Jasper’s to stay with Adalyn, so Jasper and Vi didn’t have to wake her and drag her along.”

Good. That’s good. I can’t imagine how jarring all of this will be for four-year-old Adalyn, autism or not. Her getting a

good night's sleep and then meeting her new baby brother or sister is the way to go.

“I think it's a boy,” I tell him.

“I'm still going with another girl and if I win, you owe me a grand and so does Henry.”

Speaking of... “Did you call Henry yet?”

Gus snorts into the phone. “He's my next call. Come on. Get out of bed and come meet our new niece or nephew.”

Gus disconnects the call and I climb out of bed, ambling into the bathroom as I force myself to shut my thoughts off. To focus on the new baby being born into our lives. I turn the shower on to hot and the tap on the sink to cold. I splash some water on my face and find my haunted eyes in the mirror.

Guilt swarms through my chest like a hive of angry bees. Will this feeling ever go away? Will the nightmares ever stop? Will I ever be whole again?

Gus has Naomi. Jasper has Viola and Adalyn and now his new baby.

Henry is happy living his bachelor existence having sworn off love.

And I have none of that.

Worse yet, I don't see how I ever will. Not when I've already lost everything.

THE END

DOWNLOAD Keith and Maia's deliciously steamy and forbidden romance, [LOVE TO TEMPT YOU](#) . It's a swoony

romance with ALL the feels!! Plus, you get plenty more of the Wild Love characters including more of Gus and Naomi's story!

Thank you for reading Gus and Naomi. Want to see more of their HEA? **Keep reading [HERE](#) for a bonus epilogue!**



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## End of Book Note

Hey! If you've read me before, then you know this is the part of the book where I sort of lay it all out for you. If you haven't and Gus and Naomi were your first, I hope you enjoyed them and stick around for more from me.

First, to my readers. You are everything to me and why I put all my blood, sweat, and tears into each and every story I write. To my awesome beta readers who helped encourage me and support me, even when I was ready to tear my hair out. To my amazing PA Danielle who dealt with my endless messages about extra scenes and the million other things I added to this book. To my family for making every day better than the one before it and for supporting me endlessly.

Okay, now onto the story. Gus. What can I say. I fell SO hard for him in this story. After the way things went down in Jasper and Viola's story with him, I needed to tell his story. I needed him to redeem himself because let's be honest, a lot of people cannot forgive a cheater.

At first, I wasn't sure how I wanted his story to go. Who I wanted his counterpart to be. Then I dug back through some of my old (and I do mean old) stuff that I wrote and never finished and came across something I had labeled 'duet.'

Then everything started to fall in place and once I started to write this, the words flowed. The scenes were there. The characters sprang to life, often times waking me up in the middle of the night so I could get their voices out.

Gus had so much heartache festering inside of him. He's such a complex guy and I was anxious to start him, to give him a proper voice. While Jasper wore his pain like a protective shield around him, Gus' was a diseased wound inside that he never let the world know about.

Which is why I think Naomi was so perfect for him. And wow, did Naomi have some freaking demons. I mean, she battled through it. I hope you loved them as much as I do.

And seriously, I just freaking cannot get enough of Adalyn, for sure, but also Jasper and Gus together.

This series will conclude with two more books, Keith's and Henry's stories. I'm starting to note that all my books have a common theme of the forbidden to them and with that these will be no different.

Thanks again for taking the time to read my stuff. Please sign up for my newsletter because that's the best way to stay on top of all my stuff. You can also find me in my reader group on Facebook and on Instagram.

Love you!

XO,

J. Saman

## The Edge of Temptation

## CHAPTER ONE

*Halle*

“No,” I reply emphatically, hoping my tone is stronger than my disposition. “I’m not doing it. Absolutely not. Just no.” I point my finger for emphasis, but I don’t think the gesture is getting me anywhere. Rina just stares at me, the tip of her finger gliding along the lip of her martini glass.

“You’re smiling. If you don’t want to do this, then why are you smiling?”

I sigh. She’s right. I am smiling. But only because it’s so ridiculous. In all the years she’s known me, I’ve never hit on a total stranger. I don’t think I’d have any idea how to even do that. And honestly, I’m just not in the right frame of mind to put in the effort. “It’s funny, that’s all.” I shrug, playing it off. It’s really not funny. The word terrifying comes closer. “But my answer is still no.”

“It’s been, what?” Margot chimes in, her gaze flicking between Rina, Aria, and me like she’s actually trying to figure this out. She’s not. I know where she’s going with this and it’s fucking rhetorical. “A month?”

See? I told you.

“You broke up with Matt a month ago. And you can’t play it off like you’re all upset over it, because we know you’re not.”

“Who says I’m not upset?” I furrow my eyebrows, feigning incredulous, but I can’t quite meet their eyes. “I was with him for two years.”

But she's right. I'm not upset about Matt. I just don't have the desire to hit on some random dude at some random bar in the South End of Boston.

"Two *useless* years," Rina persists with a roll of her blue eyes before taking a sip of her appletini. She sets her glass down, leaning her small frame back in her chair as she crosses her arms over her chest and purses her lips like she's pissed off on my behalf. "The guy was a freaking asshole."

"And a criminal," Aria adds, tipping back her fancy glass and finishing off the last of her dirty martini, complete with olive. She chews on it slowly, quirking a pointed eyebrow at me. "The cocksucker repeatedly ignored you so he could defraud people."

"All true." I can't even deny it. My ex was a black-hat hacker. And while that might sound all hot and sexy in a mysterious, dangerous way, it isn't. The piece of shit stole credit card numbers, and not only used them for himself but sold them on the dark web. He was also one of those hacktivists who got his rocks off by working with other degenerate assholes to try and bring down various companies and websites.

In my defense, I didn't know what he was up to until the FBI came into my place of work, hauled me downtown, and interviewed me for hours. I was so embarrassed, I could hardly show my face at work again. Not only that, but everyone was talking about me. Either with pity or suspicion in their eyes, like I was a criminal right along with him.

Matt had a regular job as a red-team specialist—legit hackers who are paid by companies to go in and try to penetrate their systems. I assumed all that time he spent on his

computer at night was him working hard to get ahead. At least that was his perpetual excuse when challenged.

Nothing makes you feel more naïve than discovering the man you had been engaged to is actually a criminal who was stealing from people. And committing said thefts while living with you.

I looked up one of the people the FBI had mentioned in relation to Matt's criminal activities. The woman had a weird name that stuck out to me for some reason, and when I found her, I learned she was a widow with three grandchildren, a son in the military, and was a recently retired nurse. It made me sick to my stomach. Still does when I think about it.

I told the FBI everything I knew, which was nothing. I explained that I had ended things with Matt three days prior to them arresting him. Pure coincidence. I was fed up with the monotony of our relationship. Of being engaged and never discussing or planning our wedding. Of living with someone I never saw because he was always locked away in his office, too preoccupied with his computer to pay me even an ounce of attention. But really, deep down, I knew I wasn't in love with him anymore.

I didn't even shed a tear over our breakup. In fact, I was more relieved than anything. I knew I had dodged a bullet getting out when I did.

And then the FBI showed up.

"I ended it with him. *Before* I knew he was a total and complete loser," I tack on, feeling more defensive about the situation than I care to admit. Shifting my weight on my uncomfortable wooden chair, I cross my legs at the knee and stare sightlessly out into the bar.

“And we applaud you for that,” Rina says, nudging Margot and then Aria in the shoulders, forcing them to concur. “It was the absolute right thing to do. But you’ve been miserable and mopey and very ...”

“Anti-men,” Margot finishes for her, tossing back her lemon drop shot with disturbing exuberance. I think that’s number three for her already, which means it could be a long night. Margot has yet to learn the art of moderation.

“Right.” Aria nods exaggeratedly at Margot like she just hit the nail on the head, tossing her messy dark curls over her shoulders before twisting them up into something that resembles a bun. “Anti-men. I’m not saying you need to date anyone here. You don’t even have to go home with them. Just let them buy you a drink. Have a normal conversation with a normal guy.”

I scoff. “And you think I’ll find one of those in here?” I splay my arms out wide, waving them around. All these men look like players. They’re in groups with other men, smacking at each other and pointing at the various women who walk in. They’re clearly rating them. And if a woman just so happens to pass by, they blatantly turn and stare at her ass.

This is a hookup bar. All dark mood lighting, annoying, trendy house music in the background and uncomfortable seating. The kind designed to have you standing all night before you take someone home. And now I understand why my very attentive friends brought me here. It’s not our usual go-to place.

“It’s like high school or a frat house in here. And definitely not in a good way. I bet all these guys bathed in Axe body spray, gelled up their hair and left their mother’s basement to



come here and find a ‘chick to bang.’” I put air quotes around those words. I have zero interest in being part of that scheme.

“Well ...” Rina’s voice drifts off, scanning the room desperately. “I know I can find you someone worthy.”

“Don’t waste your brain function. I’m still not interested.” I roll my eyes dramatically and finish off my drink, slamming the glass down on the table with a bit more force than I intend. *Oops* . Whatever. I’m extremely satisfied with my anti-men status. Because that’s exactly what I am—anti-men—and I’m discovering I’m unrepentant about it. In fact, I think it’s a fantastic way to be when you rack up one loser after another the way I have. Like a form of self-preservation.

I’ve never had a good track record. Even before Matt, I had a knack for picking the wrong guys. My high school boyfriend ended up being gay. I handed him my V-card shortly before he dropped that bomb on me, though he swore I didn’t turn him gay. He promised he was like that prior to the sex. In college, I dated two guys somewhat seriously. The first one cheated on me for months before I found out, and the second one was way more into his video games than he was me. I think he also had a secret cocaine problem because he’d stay up all night gaming like a fiend. I had given up on men for a while—are you seeing a trend here?—and then in my final year of graduate school, Matt came along. Need I say more? So as far as I’m concerned, men can all go screw themselves. Because they sure as hell aren’t gonna screw me!

“You can stop searching now, Rina.” This is getting pathetic. “I have a vibrator. What else does a girl need?” All three pause their search to examine me and I realize I said that out loud. I blush at that, but it’s true, so I just shrug a shoulder and fold my arms defiantly across my chest. “I don’t need a

sextervention. If anything, I need to avoid the male species like the plague they are.”

They dismiss me immediately, their cause to find me a “normal” male to talk to outweighing my antagonism. And really, if it’s taking this long to find someone then the pickings must really be slim here. I move to flag down the waitress to order another round when Margot points to the far corner.

“There.” The tenacious little bug is gleaming like she just struck oil in her backyard. “That guy. He’s freaking hot as holy sin and he’s alone. He even looks sad, which means he needs a friend.”

“Or he wants to be left alone to his drinking,” I mumble, wishing I had another drink in my hand so I could focus on something other than my friends obsessively staring at some random creep. *Where the hell is that waitress?*

“Maybe,” Aria muses thoughtfully as she observes the man across the bar, tapping her bottom lip with her finger. Her hands are covered in splotches of multicolored paint. As is her black shirt, now that I look closer. “Or maybe he’s just had a crappy day. He looks so sad, Halle.” She nods like it’s all coming together for her as she makes frowny puppy dog eyes at me. “So very sad. Go over and see if he wants company. Cheer him up.”

“You’d be doing a public service,” Rina agrees. “Men that good-looking should never be sad.”

I roll my eyes at that. “You think a blowjob would do it, or should I offer him crazy, kinky sex to cheer him up? I still have that domination-for-beginners playset I picked up at Angela’s bachelorette party. Hasn’t even been cracked open.”

Aria tilts her head like she's actually considering this. "That level of kink might scare him off for the first time. And I wouldn't give him head unless he goes down on you first."

Jesus, I'm not drunk enough for this. "Or he's a total asshole who just fucked his girlfriend's best friend," I protest, my voice rising an octave with my objection. I sit up straight, desperate to make my point clear. "Or he's about to go to prison because he hacks women into tiny bits with a machete before he eats them. Either way, I'm. Not. Interested."

"God," Margot snorts, twirling her chestnut hair as she leans back in her chair and levels me with an unimpressed gaze. "Dramatic much? He wouldn't be out on bail if that were the case. But seriously, that's like crazy psycho shit, and that guy does not say crazy psycho. He says crave-worthy and yummy and 'I hand out orgasms like candy on Halloween.'"

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," Aria says with a knowing smile and a wink.

She swivels her head to check him out again and licks her lips reflexively. I haven't bothered to peek yet because my back is to him and I hate that I'm curious. All three ladies are eyeing him with unfettered appreciation and obvious lust. Their tastes in men differ tremendously, which indicates this guy probably is hot. I shouldn't be tempted. I really shouldn't be. I'm asking for a world of trouble or hurt or legal fees. So why am I finding the idea of a one-nighter with a total stranger growing on me?

I've never been that girl before. But maybe they're right? Maybe a one-nighter with a random guy is just the ticket to wipe out my past of bad choices in men and make a fresh start? I don't even know if that makes sense since a one-nighter is the antithesis of a smart choice. But my libido is

taking over for my brain and now I'm starting to rationalize, possibly even encourage. I need to stop this now.

“He’s gay. Hot men are always gay. Or assholes. Or criminals. Or cheaters. Or just generally suck at life.”

“You’ve had some bad luck, is all. Look at Oliver. He’s good-looking, sweet, loving, and not an asshole. Or a criminal. And he likes you. You could date him.”

Reaching over, I steal Rina’s cocktail. She doesn’t stop me or even seem to register the action. I stare at her with narrowed eyes over the rim of her glass as I slurp down about half of it in one gulp. “I’m not dating your brother, Rina. That’s weird and begging for drama. You and I are best friends.”

She sighs and then I sigh because I’m being a bitch and I don’t mean to be. I like her brother. He is all of those things she just mentioned, minus the liking me part. But if things went bad between us, which they inherently would, it would cost me one of my most important friendships. And that’s not a risk I’m willing to take. Plus, unbeknownst to Rina, Oliver is one of the biggest players in the greater Boston area.

“I’m just saying not all men are bad,” Rina continues, and I shake my head. “We’ll buy your drinks for a month if you go talk to this guy,” she offers hastily, trying to close the deal.

Margot glances over at her with furrowed eyebrows, a bit surprised by that declaration, but she quickly comes around with an indifferent shrug. Aria smiles, liking that idea. Then again, money is not Aria’s problem. “Most definitely,” she agrees. “Go. Let a stranger touch your lady parts. You’re waxed and shaved and looking hot. Let someone take advantage of that.”

“And if he shoots me down?”

“You don’t have to sleep with him,” Rina reminds me. “Or even give him your real name. In fact, tell him nothing real about yourself. It could be like a sexual experiment.” I shake my head in exasperation. “We won’t bother you about it again,” she promises solemnly. “But he won’t shoot you down. You look movie star hot tonight.”

I can only roll my eyes at that. While I appreciate the sentiment from my loving and supportive friends, being shot down by a total stranger when I’m already feeling emotionally strung out might just do me in. Even if I have no interest in him. But free drinks ...

Twisting around in my chair, I stare across the crowded bar, probing for a few seconds until I spot the man in the corner. Holy Christmas in Florida, he *is* hot. There is no mistaking that. His hair is light blond, short along the sides and just a bit longer on top. Just long enough that you could grab it and hold on tight while he kisses you. His profile speaks to his straight nose and strong, chiseled, cleanly shaven jaw. I must admit, I do enjoy a bit of stubble on my men, but he makes the lack of beard look so enticing that I don’t miss the roughness. He’s wearing a suit. A dark suit. More than likely expensive judging by the way it contours to his broad shoulders and the flash of gold on his wrist that I catch in the form of cufflinks.

But the thing that’s giving me pause is his anguish. It’s radiating off him. His beautiful face is downcast, staring sightlessly into his full glass of something amber. Maybe scotch. Maybe bourbon. It doesn’t matter. That expression has purpose. Those eyes have meaning behind them and I doubt he’s seeking any sort of company. In fact, I’m positive he’d have no trouble finding any if he were so inclined.

That thought alone makes me stand up without further comment. He's the perfect man to get my friends off my back. He's going to shoot me down in an instant and I won't even take it personally. Well, not too much. I can feel the girls exchanging gleeful smiles, but I figure I'll be back with them in under five minutes, so their misguided enthusiasm is inconsequential. I watch him the entire way across the bar. He doesn't sip at his drink. He just stares blankly into it. That sort of heartbreak makes my stomach churn. This miserable stranger isn't just your typical Saturday night bar dweller looking for a quick hookup.

He's drowning his sorrows.

Miserable Stranger doesn't notice my approach. He doesn't even notice me as I wedge myself in between him and the person seated beside him. And he definitely doesn't notice me as I order myself a dirty martini. I'm close enough to smell him. And damn, it's so freaking good I catch myself wanting to close my eyes and breathe in deeper. Sandalwood? Citrus? Freaking godly man? Who knows. I have no idea what to say to him. In fact, I'm half-tempted to grab my drink and scurry off, but I catch Rina, Margot, and Aria watching vigilantly from across the bar with excited, encouraging smiles. There's no way I can get out of this without at least saying hello.

Especially if I want those bitches to buy me drinks for the next month.

But damn, I'm so stupidly nervous. "Hello," I start, but my voice is weak and shaky, and I have to clear it to get rid of the nervous lilt. Shit. My hands are trembling. Pathetic.

He doesn't look up. Awesome start.

I play it off, staring around the dimly lit bar and taking in all the people enjoying their Saturday night cocktails. It's busy

here. Filled with the heat of the city in the summer and lust-infused air. I open my mouth to speak again, when the person seated next to my Miserable Stranger and directly behind me, gets up, shoving their chair inadvertently into my back and launching me forward. Straight into him.

I fly without restraint, practically knocking him over. Not enough to fully push him off his chair—he’s too big and strong for that—but it’s enough to catch his attention. I see him blink like he’s coming back from some distant place. His head tilts up to mine as I right myself, just as my attention is diverted by the man who hit me with his chair.

“I’m so sorry,” the man says with a note of panic in his voice, reaching out and grasping my upper arm as if to steady me. “I didn’t see you there. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” I’m beet red, I know it.

“Did I hurt you?”

*Just my pride* . “No. Really. I’m good. It was my fault for wedging myself in like this.” The stranger who bumped me smiles warmly, before turning back to his girlfriend and leaving the scene of the crime as quickly as possible.

Adjusting my dress and schooling my features, I turn back to my Miserable Stranger, clearing my throat once more as my eyes meet his. “I’m sorry I banged into you ...” My freaking breath catches in my lungs, making my voice trail off at the end.

*Goddamn* .

If I thought his profile was something, it’s nothing compared to the rest of him. He blinks at me, his eyes widening fractionally as he sits back, crossing his arms over his suit-clad chest and taking me in from head to toe. He

hasn't even removed his dark jacket, which seems odd. It's more than warm in here and summer outside.

He sucks in a deep breath as his eyes reach mine again. They're green. But not just any green. Full-on megawatt green. Like thick summer grass green. I can tell that even in the dim lighting of the bar, that's how vivid they are. They're without a doubt the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen.

"That's all right," he says and his thick baritone, with a hint of some sort of accent, is just as impressive as the rest of him. It wraps its way around me like a warm blanket on a cold night. Jesus, has a voice ever affected me like this? Maybe I do need to get out more if I'm reacting to a total stranger like this. "I love it when beautiful women fall all over me."

I like him instantly. Cheesy line and all.

"That happen to you a lot?"

He smirks and the way that crooked grin looks on his face has my heart rate jacking up yet another degree. "Not really. Are you okay? That was quite the tumble."

I nod. I don't want to talk about my less than graceful entrance anymore. "Would you mind if I sit down?" And he thinks about it. Actually freaking hesitates. Just perfect. This is not helping my already frail ego.

I stare at him for a beat, and just as I'm about to raise the white flag and retreat with my dignity in my feet, he swallows hard and shakes his head slowly. Is he saying no I shouldn't sit, or no he doesn't mind? Crap, I can't tell, because his expression is ... a mess. Like a bizarre concoction of indecision and curiosity and temptation and disgust.

He must note my confusion because in a slow measured tone he clarifies with, "I guess you should probably sit so you



don't fall on me again." He blinks, something catching his attention. Glancing past me for the briefest of moments, that smirk returning to his full lips. "I think your friends love the idea."

"Huh?" I sputter before my head whips over my shoulder and I catch Rina, Aria, and Margot standing, watching us with equally exuberant smiles. Margot even freaking waves. Well, that's embarrassing. Now what do I say? "Yeah ... um." Words fail me, and I sink back into myself. "I'm sorry. I just ... well, I recently broke up with someone, and my friends won't let me return to the table until I've re-entered the human female race and had a real conversation with a man."

God, this sounds so stupidly pathetic. Even to my own ears. And why did I just admit all of that to him? My face is easily the shade of the dress I'm wearing—and it's bright motherfucking red. He's smirking at me again, which only proves my point. I hate feeling like this. Insecure and inadequate. At least it's better than stupid and clueless. Yeah, that's what I had going on with Matt and this is not who I am. I'm typically far more self-assured.

"I'll just grab my drink and return to my friends."

I pull some cash out of my purse and drop it on the wooden bar. I pause, and he doesn't stop me. My fingers slip around the smooth, long stem of my glass. I want to get the hell out of here, but before I can slide my drink safely toward me and make my hasty, not so glamorous escape, he covers my hand with his and whispers, "No. Stay."

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