

THE BEDROOM  
**TOUR**  
BOOK THREE



# Forbidden Encore

ASHTON BROOKS

# Contents

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Trigger Warning](#)

[A Note from me...](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[The Encore...](#)

[Extras](#)

[Ashton Brooks Books](#)

Forbidden Encore

By Ashton Brooks

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Note: This story may not be suitable for persons under the age of 18.

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# Acknowledgments

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enjoyed every second of it. I hope you do too!

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My Readers- That is a wrap on the Bedroom Tour! Thank you for your support and continuing to enjoy my books. I appreciate and love you all more than you know.

XOXO,

Ashton

# Playlist

Forbidden Encore's playlist is [LIVE](#) on Spotify!

THE BEDROOM  
**TOUR**  
BOOK THREE

A photograph of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a black sequined top, singing passionately into a black microphone. She is looking upwards and to the right. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white. The title 'Forbidden Encore' is written in a purple cursive font over the lower part of the image.

*Forbidden  
Encore*

ASHTON BROOKS



# Trigger Warning

*Forbidden Encore* contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and some situations that readers may find uncomfortable, such as exploitation of a child entertainer, exploitation for money, and domestic violence. Murder, violence and death. These situations do not occur between the main couple.

## **A Note from me...**

The following situations occur between the main couple, which may make readers uncomfortable: stalking and tracking, birth control tampering, aspects of breeding, discussion of pregnancy and babies. The FMC and the MMC have a seven-year age-gap. When she is 16 and he is an adult, they share one kiss. No other relationship occurs between them until she is a legal adult. However, the MMC is very much waiting for her to become an adult to make her his and he is jealous/protective over her until then.

# Chapter One

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Ocean



*14 years old*

**M**y birthday.

Today of all days, I just wanted to be a normal teenage girl, but he's already taken that away from me. I know my uncle Cliff means well and feels that it's his duty to give me all the best things after losing my parents, but this isn't it. When my mom and dad left me in his care in their will, I highly doubt what they wanted was for their daughter to be dressed up and paraded around music executives like a doll. I know I shouldn't complain. I know that this music career has already provided me with a house, clothes, food, and stardom. I've only been in the business for a year, but after my last single went viral, I've been getting more and more attention, and not always the best kind. Which is another reason my birthday party has turned into a networking event for Uncle Cliff and myself. I need a music label. Security. Someone to guide and look out for my image and handle any rumors about me in the media or online. Like the current article claiming I have an eating disorder.

"Try and smile." Uncle Cliff hides his words behind a smile and a nod at one of the guests, who I believe owns a recording studio.

"How much longer do I need to stay?" I try and keep my voice strong, but in reality, the socialization is getting to me. Not to mention the depressing feeling that this is how I'm spending my special day.

When my parents were alive, my mom would have made me breakfast and taken me to school. Then when they got home from work, we would have gone to our favorite pizza joint for dinner and an ice cream sundae while they sang “Happy Birthday.” Now I’m under a microscope and dressed in a soft pink dress that makes me look like a walking loofa.

“Ocean, try and be more thankful. Do you know how many strings I had to pull and the begging I had to do to get some of these people here tonight? Booker Townsend is even coming. If you signed with him, our lives would be golden.” My uncle shakes his head like he’s disappointed in me for not considering all of the things we could be offered soon.

My head falls and I will myself to wash down the disappointment I feel. I really can’t take the time to feel bad for myself. Uncle Cliff is right. I need to be represented by a prestigious music label in order to move to the next level. Not only for my own future and career goals but also because I owe it to my uncle. He gave up his life and his dreams of owning his own company and living the single guy life to move here and raise me when my parents died. I’m not stupid. I can see that my uncle is a good-looking guy and he’s only in his late thirties. He could have an entirely different life, but I stole his chances. It’s up to me to pay him back. I do owe him.

“Oh shit. He’s here and walking over.” My uncle sucks in a breath and my head snaps up. Sure enough, the older man’s face that is currently featured on every music magazine in the country is walking toward us. He actually came to my birthday party.

“Good evening, Cliff. Thanks for the invite,” Booker Townsend drawls in his southern accent.

“The pleasure is all ours, Mr. Townsend. Thanks for coming to my niece’s birthday.” My uncle wraps his arm around my shoulders and gives me a side hug.

Mr. Townsend’s gaze falls to me and I put on my biggest, happiest smile. “Yes, thank you so much for celebrating with us.”

My voice is as sugary sweet as I can make it. The man's eyes turn shrewd as they travel from my dark pink pumps, up my legs, over my dress, to the thick curls of my hair lying around my shoulders. It's a full perusal and I swear I see dollar signs in his eyes by the time he's focused on my face again.

"I wouldn't miss the chance to celebrate your..." He looks up and over to the banner on the wall in the back. "Fourteenth birthday. What a special age."

It isn't really, but I keep my thoughts to myself. I give him a polite nod of thanks before he and my uncle exchange cards, and he makes an appointment to meet us at his office in the city tomorrow. I watch as he walks away, his broad back creating a path through the crowd as everyone turns to move for him, shaking hands, and exchanging business information.

"I can't believe it," my uncle whispers, and I turn to watch him. He's turning the business card over and over in his palm. "I knew he was interested in your voice, but this, this is like the ultimate golden ticket. He's going to sign you. I know it. He has to."

My hands clench at my sides. I want this too. Not for the same reasons as my uncle, but for my own selfish ones. I want to experience being free. I want to have control over my music and my image. With someone backing me, I can have that. Right now, on my own, I'm barely staying afloat and dodging rumors left and right. You'd think adults would have something better to do than pick on a young girl, but they have been some of the most vicious about my looks and my age.

"Can I be excused now?" I ask, and my uncle barely glances at me. He is still watching Mr. Townsend through the crowd.

"Sure. Nice job, kid." He bops me on the shoulder before walking away.

I glance around, and once again, no one really notices me. It might be my birthday, but they aren't here to see me. I pass a waiter holding a tray of champagne and almost stagger when he hands me one. "I can't have that." I shake my head, and he smiles.

“Like anyone here really cares. Wouldn’t be the first time an underage celebrity drank.”

I let my gaze slide past him to the other server, who is holding out pieces of birthday cake. I don’t even bother to excuse myself before walking over to her.

“Piece, Miss?” she asks and holds out one of the small, dainty little plates.

“I’m taking the tray,” I tell her and grab it from her hands. I ignore her whiney voice calling for me to come back on my way up to my room. It’s my birthday. I should be allowed all the cake I want.

# Chapter Two

---

## Ocean



*15 years old...*

***Rise to Fame!***

***A Princess is born!***

***Ocean Heart, Bodyguard Mishap!***

“I don’t understand.” My uncle sputters from his chair, while sitting across from Mr. Townsend in his office. I pause reading over the newest articles on the iPad that was handed to me and glance their way.

Normally, I don’t have to say much these days. Ever since signing with Big Notes Entertainment or BNE, I’ve had to do very little on my own. Uncle Cliff had been right when he said finding management would change my life. I don’t even remember what life was like before last year, when he signed his name on the dotted line as my guardian, saying that I was now property of BNE. We moved out of our top-floor apartment and into a giant house. I personally didn’t see the point of having twelve bedrooms but Uncle Cliff wanted it. He started driving flashier cars, ones he called his dream car, and promised me once I get my license, I could get my own dream car. A chef comes in weekly to prep meals for us and make sure I have all my necessities for long days at the recording studio. There are also many things I can’t do anymore. I had to leave public school and am working on completing my education remotely. I’ve lost the majority of my friends and have been forced to interact with other young stars who are close to my age.

I never thought I would hate not being able to have a choice, but every day I wake up and I have something going on. Recording time, workouts, interviews, charity events, award shows, publicity events, and organizing for the tour I will be starting this summer.

Thirty-six states, seven countries worldwide, and all in eight months. My first and I'm determined for it not to be my last. I love performing. I love feeling untouchable on stage, feeding off of the energy from the crowd. Other performers like to tell me the shine will dull someday, but I don't see how that's possible. I became an overnight sensation the minute my name dried on the contract. Things have been going great, so Mr. Townsend's suggestion that I get a handler for the tour is making me just as confused as my poor uncle.

"But I'm her manager." He looks at me and I nod in encouragement. "So what exactly would someone else be coming in to do?"

Mr. Townsend sighs and runs his hand over his face. I also don't blame him for being as exasperated as he is. My uncle is a lot and very tiring. He often has an opinion on everything and he likes to be the person in charge despite it not being his company. "Yes, Cliff. You are her manager, her representative. I'm talking about a handler. Ocean's job is to sing, to attend meet and greets, and to be as fucking charming as possible. While you're doing the business side of things, the handler would be with her. Keeping her schedule, making sure she's prepped, making sure she fucking ate or didn't eat."

"Oh." My uncle goes back to nodding, his face looking thoughtful. "So this person would be with her just to help her. Not to influence her performances or finances."

"No." Mr. Townsend huffs and crosses his arms. "I'm in charge of the performance and contract stipulations. You, Cliff, you keep making sure our girl is ready to perform. Let the handler do their job and it will be easier on everyone. If she'd had a handler last week, maybe the issue with her bodyguards and the fans wouldn't have exploded in front of the paparazzi and caused chaos."



“No one was expecting the paparazzi that night,” I add in. Not many of the people who work for my uncle and Mr. Townsend talk to me, but Theo and Beth did. They were friendly when needed and they were also good at being solid, immovable mountains over me when needed. I didn’t want them to lose their jobs because we hadn’t been informed that the paps would be aware that I would be exiting the event through the zoning doors.

“Regardless...” Mr. Townsend looks past me and back to my uncle. “This is a needed step. We need all the eyes on her we can get before the tour.”

“Who is it?” My uncle asks, and I’m glad when he does. I know I’m going to want to stalk this person all over the internet before I welcome them into my private life. Or what’s left of it anyway.

“Ezra Hamilton. You know George over at Platinum Records, it’s his nephew. Good kid. He’s been working in the business now for a few years.” Mr. Townsend shrugs and rattles off some more statistics after my last video dropped.

I start to tune them out when they settle into figures and media range for the tour. I already know my schedule, so I don’t really need them to tell me much. After my tutoring session tomorrow, I start my string of concerts down the coast before heading south to begin the tour. Deciding to be proactive, I whip out my phone and start googling Ezra Hamilton.

Right away his affiliation with Platinum Records pops up and there is a few mentions of some clients he’s worked with since he graduated college. I know more than half of them so that feels good to me. I can always reach out and see what they think of him. He’s twenty-four, a workaholic, and likes to party on the weekend. Sounds like every other male in this city. I keep scrolling until the first image of Ezra pops up. My stomach swirls and heat spreads across my cheeks. He’s boxing at a charity event, but it’s the intensity in his eyes that catches my attention. He’s just as beautiful, if not more than, the other men in the business. And he’s going to be my handler? I quickly close down the app and try to focus. Uncle

Cliff is standing, getting ready to leave. I grab my bag and follow him out of the office and down to our waiting vehicle. Today was not what I expected and I need the space to think.

“Don’t you think this is extreme?” I ask my uncle and peer at him sideways in the car.

He huffs. “If Booker thinks it’s a good idea, we have to do what he suggests.”

“But a handler? It sounds like a babysitter. I never get in trouble, that was a one-time incident,” I argue and push my point.

“It shouldn’t have happened at all, Oce. You’re becoming a bigger name, a star. These types of things are bound to happen more often and if a handler can keep you safe and focused over the tour then it’s probably worth it,” he snaps at me.

A blush covers my cheeks and I keep my eyes averted from the mirror where I know Theo is watching. “It’s just another person for Theo and Beth to have to worry about too. It’s not fair to them,” I point out quietly.

“I already talked about that with Booker,” my uncle interjects, his eyes trained on me now. “This guy is already trained. As part of being a handler, he has the basic training of a bodyguard. Essentially, he will hand you off to Theo and Beth. It’s all worked out already. Just let it go, please Ocean.”

He leans his head back against the seat and closes his eyes. I spend the rest of the ride worried about how this is all going to go down. Maybe it’s normal for celebrities to have handlers, but I feel almost embarrassed that a stranger is coming in to judge my life and fix me. Although I’m not sure what he needs to fix exactly. I’ve worked hard to keep my life private and incident free.

When we arrive at the house, Uncle Cliff abandons the car and heads inside, not bothering to wait for the rest of us. I take my bag and my phone and start to walk to the front door when Beth calls my name. I turn to her and she glances around before meeting my eyes.

“Having Ezra as your handler will be good for you. You might not think it right now, but from what I’ve heard, he sounds like someone you need in your corner.”

“She’s right, O,” Theo adds to the conversation, even while his eyes are still focused on the road. “The fact of the matter is that you’re climbing the charts. You’re becoming more well-known and your fans are increasing in their obsessions with you. It will be good for all of us to have someone else around.”

They’re right; deep down, I know they are. Beth and Theo are worried about my safety at all times and I know I can trust them. With a small smile, I turn and head inside, locking the front door behind me. The television is on in the sitting room, but I want to be alone. I climb the stairs to my room and lay my phone on the charger. I change into my favorite sleep shirt, my dad’s college alma mater on the front, before sliding between my blankets to sleep. I can’t shake the feeling that, once again, my life is about to change.

# Chapter Three

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## Ocean



I somehow manage to make it through the next two days before my first meeting with Ezra Hamilton. I have done nothing but scour the internet for information on him. Besides the one picture of him boxing, he's almost a ghost. No social media, no school yearbook pics, nothing from college either. The man would be faceless if it wasn't for that one image. The one that makes my stomach dip in excitement when I see it.

Uncle Cliff set it up for Ezra to meet us at the hotel right before getting on the plane for the first concert the next morning. For the hundredth time, I rub my hands on my jeans and will my nerves away.

"He's here." My uncle stands from the couch and I follow his lead. His business smile pulls at his lips. "Ezra, nice to meet you. We're excited to have you on board."

"Sir." A low, masculine, voice pulls my attention and I stand in response, turning to face him.

One thing is certain, Ezra Hamilton is the most impressive man I've ever seen in my life. He's standing there in a navy suit jacket over a V-neck t-shirt that clings to his muscular body. He looks casual, his hair a few shades darker brown than my own is slightly windblown. My uncle might see him as carefree, a young man who is working his way up the ranks, but one look at him and I think they're all lying. How can they not see the underlying danger in him that simmers under the expensive suit or read it in the sharp angles of his jaw and

cheekbones. He wears the telltale sign of the California sun. He's beautiful and lethal.

"Hi," I manage to say, giving him a small, friendly smile.

His pale green eyes touch on me briefly before giving his attention back to my uncle; yet, it's enough to cause heat to wash over my entire body. My cheeks turn pink and I fight to rein in the feelings I can't name. I'm used to celebrities by now. None of them have affected me so much though as one small glance from Ezra.

"I'm Cliff, Ocean's uncle. Booker spoke highly of you in our meeting, and we're excited to have you with us." My uncle keeps going, his schmoozing voice in full force. I peek at Ezra under my eyelashes and notice he looks bored. Almost angry. His eyes slide to me again, the coolness in them takes the smile right off my lips.

"Booker says a lot of things. I'm here to get this babysitting job under control for him. I think he explained that while I'm involved, I make the calls. And you listen to every word I say." He says the last part to me, his gaze locking with mine. I want to close in on myself with embarrassment. He's livid he has to be here *babysitting* me.

"Ocean," My uncle says to me, but all I can do is blink at him. Wait...he's mad at me? He thinks this is my doing that I need a handler all of a sudden?

"Yeah," I choke out the word, feeling completely lost about what just happened. When we met with Booker, he made it sound as if this was his idea to help my security and for things to run smoother. Did they all think I was a trouble maker because of one incident?

"You will arrive at my airstrip at the new designated time." Ezra hands me a black folder, nodding for me to open the page.

"Four in the morning." My eyes jump to his. "We aren't even expected to be there until ten. Our last flight left at eight."

“This flight, my flight, ensures privacy and security. When you arrive earlier, you throw off fans or anyone waiting because they don’t expect this.” I watch as he picks a fleck of lint from his sleeve before motioning for me to continue reading.

Security check 7 a.m.

Arrival at hotel at 8 a.m.

Leave hotel at 8:30 a.m.

Arrive at location at 9:30 a.m.

Practice 10 a.m.- 12:00 p.m.

Lunch 12:30 p.m.

Secure backstage by 2:00 p.m.

Doors open at 6:00 p.m.

First performance at 7:10 p.m.

The list and details go on and on, each one of my performances is systematically broken down. He even labeled who picks me up and who drops me off from which side of the stage. Names of people I don’t even know. Nothing is missed. I scan the very bottom again, where it details that he will escort me to the secure location to meet Theo and Brenda to go back to the hotel. He even highlighted it and drew a diagram. I shift on my feet. I wish I could explain the frustration growing in my chest. The plan itself is the most thought-out plan of action I’ve ever seen, but I can’t shake the feeling that it’s meant to put me in my place somehow for the incident that happened with the paparazzi.

No matter how many times I think over that night and run the scenario in my mind, it’s always the same. I followed the directions my uncle gave me. Theo and Beth did their best to protect me from the situation. I wasn’t physically hurt; it was more the overwhelming emotion of people rushing us. I was almost separated from them, trying to get to the car. And once I was inside, it took forever to maneuver us to the road. I cried. I know I did. All of the country knows it too thanks to the images in the tabloids.

“This is the new plan. I expect you to follow it, princess.” His firm voice breaks me out of my thoughts. I almost miss that he called me princess. Right. The princess of pop is what I’m being dubbed, though I doubt he’s using the term as an endearment.

“I will,” I say so quietly it’s almost a whisper, but I make myself look him in the eyes. He looks back to my uncle, clearly dismissing me. They shake hands and I watch his back move through the lobby to the doors. That’s when I notice her. A gorgeous woman with red hair dressed similarly in style. Her ripped jeans show off shapely legs and the blouse she wears is haphazardly tucked into the waistband. Elegant yet casual. The heels on her feet are at least five inches and I’m amazed she can stand. This woman is elegant, mature, and definitely older than me. I watch the smile on her lips grow wider as he gets closer. For some reason, I want to think they’re co-workers, but then his hand slides around her waist to her side. The touch is intimate and her cheeks flush. He says something in her ear before ushering her out the doors. I can’t stop watching even as the whole scene makes my heart squeeze in my chest.

“I need to talk to Booker,” my uncle mutters. I glance at him and notice he’s loosened his neck tie and his face is red. “He said this handler is to help keep things in line, not that he was running the whole goddamn show.”

I glance at the black folder in my hand. Four in the morning. If I’m going to even function, I need to get back and finish packing. “We should probably go get ready.”

Uncle Cliff scoffs and reaches for his phone. “You head back. I need a drink and to talk to Booker.” He takes off walking, leaving me standing in the private space.

ME

I’m ready.

I send a quick text to Beth and Theo.

BETH

We're at the curb.

I pocket my phone and make my way quickly through the lobby to the doors. A few heads turn in my direction and in my peripheral vision, I see a phone raised. I quickly dash to the car. Beth is there and holds the door open, so I can slide in.

“Where’s Cliff?” Theo asks. I shake my head at him.

“Just go. He said he needed a drink and wants to call Mr. Townsend.”

Theo pulls the car away from the curb and out into traffic. Beth turns to me and I can see from the way her eyes narrow that she is not happy. “He left you alone?”

I shrug. She knows he does it frequently, and I usually just contact them as soon as it happens. “He needed a break,” I tell her, sticking up for him, even though it feels wrong.

“How was the meeting?” Theo asks, glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

I hand the folder to Beth. “Good. This is the new itinerary that he wants us to follow. We will need to leave earlier.”

Beth glances over all the paperwork and whistles under her breath. “Wow. I’ve never seen something so detailed before. Not even from BNE.”

“That’s good,” Theo adds. “It means he takes his job seriously. This is what we meant by him being good for you.”

“He called his job babysitting,” I mutter and lay my head back. I don’t know why I feel so stuck on it. For some reason, those words hurt. I may be fifteen, but I’ve had to grow and mature faster than most at my age. This career is also my job. It’s my way of paying back everyone who stepped in to help raise me when my parents passed.

“I’m sure until he cleans things up it will feel that way,” Beth adds gently. I hear Theo scoff from the front and mumble something about my uncle. I’m too tired to fight with Theo



today. I know he thinks my uncle should be doing more and I will defend my uncle because he cared for me when I could have just as easily ended up a ward of the state. Right now, I just want to pack. I refuse to be one minute late in the morning. I'm going to prove to Ezra and the world just how capable I am.

---

“WHAT DO you mean he isn't awake?” Beth asks me while I stand at the top of the stairs. I've been packed and ready for the last hour, waiting for Uncle Cliff. I finally decided to check his room. I hadn't heard him come home last night.

“I just went in there and he's passed out,” I tell her, my eyes quickly filling with tears of frustration. I've only known Ezra for twelve hours, but I do not want to disappoint him.

Beth contemplates me and looks to the closed door before lifting her phone up. “No, you need to get in here now.” She hangs up and gives me a small smile. “We'll deal with it.”

Minutes pass and I'm starting to freak out. I glance at my phone again and watch as the hour crawls on. I'm about to break down and call Ezra when the front door opens and hurried footsteps sound in the landing. Gerard, one of our back-up bodyguards to Theo and Beth, finally reaches us.

“You need to wake him up and get ready for the next flight out at 8 a.m. We're taking Ocean now. She can't wait,” Beth explains the situation and I appreciate her no-nonsense attitude. Gerard looks flustered but also nods along. Beth grabs my arm to guide me down the stairs right as Gerard goes into my uncle's room. Once we're in the car and Theo is speeding away from the house, I let myself go. The tears continue to fall while the pressure in my chest eases. Leaving without my uncle shouldn't have made me feel relieved, but it did. It has to be the situation. I want nothing more than to prove myself to my handler, my record label and my fans. My uncle almost ruined my first chance today all because he was mad at having to give over some of the power to Ezra.

Theo drives us to the smaller airfield outside of the downtown area. The clock on the dash is flashing exactly four

when we pull into the garage. The small, white plane sits on the runway. The stairs are still down and I breathe a sigh of relief. With Beth and Theo's help, we carry my bags to the plane. A man in a suit and a captain's hat meets us and helps bring our bags in. His smile is friendly when he shakes my hand. The minute I step onto the plane, the air becomes thick with tension.

Ezra gets up from his chair, a frown pulling at his lips. He eyes Beth and Theo as they move around me to find a seat. I clutch the black folder with the schedule to my chest, holding it tighter. His gaze tracks over me carefully, probably noting my heavier breathing and the way my hands are shaking. I had been terrified I was going to miss the plane because of my uncle. Quickly, his eyes dash behind me and his frown deepens.

“Where is Cliff?”

I shake my head. “He was out late last night. Arrangements were made for him to take the later flight. He'll get in around ten.”

I force myself to meet the angry flash of green in his gaze. “Have a seat,” he says before lifting his chin toward the flight attendant. “Tell the captain we're ready for takeoff.”

Following his lead, I take a seat next to the available window. Once Ezra sits back down, the plane starts to move, and I finally take a deep breath. I made it. My eyes sting with tears, but I blink them back, refusing to crumble. I'm determined to make this work for my benefit as well as the people who work for me. Theo meets my eyes and nods his head in encouragement. I take that as my sign to let myself be comfortable. Well, as comfortable as I can be on a plane anyways.

The interior is a soft, buttery gold that reminds me of caramel. A vase of mixed flowers sits at the front where a large screen resides, presumably for a movie. Besides myself, Theo, Beth and Ezra, there are enough seats for four more people.

“I’ve never been in a private plane before,” I say more to myself than him, but Ezra turns to me anyways. For the first time he doesn’t look angry and instead a small smile settles on his lips.

“I find it’s the best way to travel. On your own time, when you need it, and peaceful for the most part.”

“I don’t usually like flying,” I share with him while my cheeks turn pink.

“The more you travel this way, I guarantee it gets easier. I used to be just like you.” He tips his head.

“Maybe,” I answer thoughtfully, “and maybe if I make it huge, I’ll even have my own plane.”

He chuckles and I feel free to smile with him for once. “I have no doubt you’ll make it. You’re already on your way. Right now, just try and get some rest, princess.”

The smile on my lips falters and I turn to face the window, hoping to keep him from seeing the way my face floods with embarrassment. I need to get through this trial. I just need to keep reminding myself of that fact.

## Chapter Four

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Ezra



The music industry is a tyrannical beast. Despite the glamor, fancy cars, and mansions, it's grueling. Every client I've worked with has been torn down and rebuilt in order to survive the business. Usually, it's easy for me to go in, fix everything, and help a new star rise before making my exit. Usually, though, my clients aren't teenage girls lost in the industry and oblivious to what is happening with their careers.

My first impression of Ocean Heart on paper was that she was a socialite who made the right connection and became an overnight sensation. Then I read her background. I felt a punch to the gut reading about how she lost both parents in the same car wreck. How she was left with her uncle, who drove her around the state to shows and radio stations to hear her sing. How some people observed her crying about this but that she always pulled it together by the time she had to perform. I did my research and I did it thoroughly. There was no way I was taking on a kid who couldn't handle the lifestyle. By the time I actually watched the recording that had her going viral on Tiktok, all my previous thoughts about her went out the window. Not only is this girl a survivor, but she sings like an angel and has the spirit of a fighter. I can work with all of those traits. What I cannot work with is the fact that Ocean doesn't run her own business. She's like a baby turtle with her head stuck in the sand while the world goes on around her. Fixing this is my number one priority.

Around noon, Clifford Heart finally graces us with his presence, mostly sober, not that I had been missing him.

Everyone, including Ocean, seemed to be more relaxed and working hard until he arrived. Once Cliff enters the building, everyone begins glancing around for approval as if there was a secret code they needed to follow that they didn't when he was absent. Ocean immediately becomes a shell of the girl she's been all morning, moving to exit the stage. I stop her with my hand.

"Keep going." She glances under her lashes from me to her uncle then back to me again. I raise my brow at her and she finally turns and goes back to practicing with her dancers and back-up vocalists.

"What do you think you're doing, Hamilton? You little shit." Cliff's face is red, his words are daggers aimed at me. He's close enough that I can still smell the booze from last night on him. The room around us becomes charged with violence. I give the man my full attention and roll my shoulders back. I don't appreciate anyone talking to me this way. Ever.

"Following my schedule," I respond and turn my back to him, my eyes connecting with Ocean. "Everyone can take a ten-minute break." She nods and they scramble to get off the stage.

"You can't kidnap my niece and take over her performance!" Cliff yells, spit flying from his mouth. I take a step back.

"I didn't kidnap her. As part of her contract, she has to follow the rules and schedule I set for her. My job is to improve her performance, her security, and the overall fluidity of her movement and life. So yes, Cliff, I am taking over." I meet his eyes, and for the first time since he stomped in here, Cliff is looking a little wary.

"She still can't perform unless I am present." His chin lifts and his eyes roam the room before settling back on me. I don't miss the spark of triumph he most likely feels. And if I was him, I might have thought I won this round. Unfortunately for Cliff, I already knew that stipulation in Ocean's contract, and I was prepared for it.

“She isn’t performing. She’s practicing for a performance. And if she doesn’t perform, that is a violation of the contract you signed with BNE to ensure my services.” Fucking asshole is what I wanted to say. I glance quickly at Ocean and notice the stricken look in her eyes and how pale her face is. So she doesn’t know what’s in her contract. Interesting.

“I-it’s still a matter of principle. You can’t just call the shots and leave her guardian out of it.” Cliff puffs his chest, refusing to back down. Even though he is incompetent at his job and knowing what’s best for his niece and her career, he refuses to let go. He only wants the acknowledgement of owning her in some way and profiting from her fortune.

I slide my phone from my pocket. “Do we need to call your legal team, BNE’s legal reps and my own team to go over the semantics? Or are you going to give your niece the kudos she deserves for showing up on time and working hard because at the end of the day, that’s what makes her money.”

Cliff’s gaping mouth slams shut. For the first time, he looks around the room and at the audience he created with his tantrum. When he looks back at me again, he’s relaxed, happy, fake. “I think I’ll just help myself to a bagel over there and a mimosa. Looks like you got this covered here, Hamilton.”

“I do,” I remind him, dipping my head while he walks away. From across the room, I feel her eyes on me. There are many things that need to be said and I want to make sure Ocean is on the same page with me. But practice comes first.

“Let’s run that last set one last time,” I call out to the group and they resurface on the stage. Ocean moves slower, unsure of her place now that her uncle is here. I move to the edge of the stage, looking up at her.

“Are you the main vocalist?”

Her eyes widen. “Yes.”

“Then act like it. No matter what happens down here, up there, it’s your world. Command it. Don’t let me or anyone else think this isn’t your show,” I snap at her. Her eyes glisten, and in the next second, her head drops. I refuse to go easy on

her. Ocean needs to be used to taking control. When her head lifts the tears are gone, only the pink smudges on her cheeks remain. She nods to me and turns back to her dancers and the other vocalists. Her shoulders roll back and her head lifts higher. I once again see the performer I know she is.

“Okay, the last set, let’s practice it. Ocean, when you leave the stage, you head in Theo’s direction. He will escort you through the row of your security, who are hidden by the curtains. At the end of that hallway, Theo will hand you off to me. You have twenty seconds to get off the stage, through your security and to me. Everyone got that?” I glance at everyone and all I see are heads nodding.

The music starts and I make my way to the tunnel where I will meet Ocean. She sings through her last six songs of the set and that is when I start the time clock. At twenty seconds on the dot, while the band finishes the last notes of her last song, she makes it to me. Theo nods to me, as I reach for her and usher her into the dressing room. Theo keeps moving, just as we practiced, to the fake getaway car.

“Not bad,” I tell her, pleased with how well it actually went. Transitions were something her small team had issues with in the past. With my vetted crew to assist as her security, I have no doubt a solid plan like this will keep the past mistakes from happening again.

She exhales a shaky breath. “I want this to work, Mr. Hamilton.”

I snort at how proper my last name is coming out her mouth. “Ocean, I may be in charge right now, but my intentions are only good. You can call me Ezra.”

“Okay,” she whispers, and my heart clenches. Ocean’s exterior looks tough, but I’m learning that she is sensitive and purely nice. “I’m sorry about my uncle.”

“Don’t apologize for Cliff,” I tell her with a flick of my wrist. “He made his choice and you followed the directions you were given that I asked of you. He knows what’s at stake, but he also is on a power-trip.”

A laugh escapes her and then her face falls when she realizes what she did. “Sorry.”

I run my gaze over her thoughtfully. “Ocean, do you know if what he said about your contract is true? Can you not perform if he isn’t present?”

She glances away from me, her top teeth burrowing into her bottom lip. “I don’t know.”

Her answer is what I expected. From what I’ve observed of her uncle and Booker at BNE, I’m not surprised. “Did they let you read your contract?”

I watch her swallow and her cheeks blush again. She shakes her head, and when our eyes meet, tears shine hers. “You think I’m stupid, right?”

My gut clenches and anger burns in my veins. My anger isn’t directed at her though. My head tilts back and I run my hands over my face before shaking my head. “No,” I tell her. “No, I don’t think you’re stupid. I do think though that this is a good opportunity to learn about your contract. This is your business, Ocean. Your uncle may be your guardian, but your name is on everything. Anytime you walk in a room, pick up a pen, or sing into the mic, that is your brand.”

“I’m only fifteen though.” Her voice wobbles with emotion. I want to protect her. I want to warn her, but most of all, I wish I could comfort her.

“You may not be a legal adult, but in business, you have rank. You can barter. If you have legal representatives with you, your voice has to be heard. I doubt anyone told you that though.”

Ocean sighs loudly and slumps onto a chair. “Of course not. Do you think if anyone asked what I wanted, I’d be wearing pink?”

I chuckle. “What? You don’t like pink? I thought, with the stage and the album—”

“That it was my favorite?” Her brow pops up. “No. I’m actually not a fan. My uncle and Booker seem to think it sells my records better when I look like Barbie on stage.”



I tilt my head studying her. Her long, wavy hair caught between gold and chocolate. Her big brown eyes, heart-shaped face and plump lips. The pink dress on her sparkles in the light and almost makes her skin shimmer as well. She does look like a real-life Barbie. “What do you want, Ocean?”

Her brow furrows. “I don’t think anyone has asked me that before.”

“I’m asking now. My job is to help you. To make you safe and confident. For everything to move smoothly for you. What is it that you truly want?” I hold her eyes hostage with my own, silently begging her to ask me to help her.

“I want to know what my contract says.”

I go to my bag and pull out the document that was printed from the archive. “Read it carefully. And then, decide what you want for yourself.”

Her fingers tremble slightly when she takes the papers from me. I can sense the fear radiating off of her. She has to do this though. There is no way she will make it if she stays where she is.

“Are you staying here?” Her brow rises when I sit back down in the empty chair.

“We have thirty minutes until the next role play. I need to make sure everyone is ready. Take your time.” I glance at her over my phone. Ocean settles back into the chair, looking more sure of herself, and begins reading.

Every minute that passes, I watch as her face goes from pale to confused to furious. My spine prickles with the need to hold her, but I push it down. She’s my client for fuck’s sake. This is what she needs to do. Knowing that this will take away some of her innocence, though, still kills me.

After twenty minutes, the contract falls on the table. I lower my phone, and her eyes meet mine. “Well?”

“My contract isn’t up for renewal again until I’m eighteen. But I can ask for a one-year check-in meeting. Which, no one told me about,” she whispers, and I nod. I’ve read that part

several times and my best guess is that they wish to get her locked in as an adult by her uncle.

“I want that.” She stands suddenly, pacing the room.

“And what do you want to ask at this meeting?” I push her further, sensing she’s on the cusp of letting it all go.

“I want more control over my wardrobe. I want the ability to write my own music. To be able to pick my security detail, not just use who is assigned from BNE. Not that Theo and Beth aren’t great. I do want them. I want the ridiculous rule about my uncle needing to be present to be able to perform gone. Who thought of that? What if he’s sick or what if he’s drunk again? I could lose millions on missing a performance. I want to collaborate with other artists. Why would they think that’s not a good idea? Just stay in the pop music bubble? I don’t even love only pop music. I love everything,” Her chest is rising and falling and I can see tears gathering in her eyes. My hands grip the arm rests on my chair, forcing myself to sit still. This is Ocean’s moment. This is when it all becomes real.

“What do you want, Ocean?”

Her eyes snap to mine. The intensity in that one look is all I need to know. Whatever Ocean wants, she is going to get.

“I want you to help me.”

## Chapter Five

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### Ocean



“Are you hanging in there?” Beth leans in close, so I can hear her over the roar of the crowd. Since we left the West Coast, things have been a blur. A very calculated blur. I’ve never felt so secure in my performance or in my securities’ ability to keep me safe. I’ve been diligent in following every order and every plan that Ezra hands me. My staff has felt the difference too, which only proves my theory that Uncle Cliff has no idea what he is doing. If I had continued blindly following him, I can’t imagine what would have happened. Or how I would have ended up being more than just a client to BNE. Any violations and they pretty much own me as a repercussion. Something I didn’t want to believe but was starting to think was what Booker Townsend wanted.

“I’m great,” I tell Beth, taking a quick gulp of water, while people wrap around me, fixing my costume change.

I know I have four songs left and then I’ll be exiting stage right with Theo, and after that, I need to be to Ezra in twenty seconds. The end is near and as much as I love this crowd tonight, I am looking forward to a week off until the next performance. Beth waves me to go and stands next to me until I get to my platform. I’m raised to the stage above and the show continues.

Right as I hit my last notes for the night, the crowd is deafening. They’ve been singing along with me all night. I hope Ezra thinks this show was as successful as it feels. I wave toward the side stage and that’s when I notice a commotion in the wings near my exit. One of my dancers glances at me and I

see the way her eyes round. My heart races and I fight to keep the smile on my face. My eyes scan the area for Ezra, while I keep waving and smiling at the crowd. The lights are dimming and that is my cue to move, but I can't find Ezra. I don't know if something is wrong or not. He'd want me to keep to his plan though; I feel that in my core he would stress not deviating from his plans.

With a final wave to the crowd, I half skip and half run off the side stage and come face to face with a nightmare I wasn't expecting. It is absolute chaos. Somewhere the security broke and the area is crowded with fans and paparazzi. Flashes from the cameras practically blind me and I almost stumble toward the only available person there which is not Theo. Someone grabs my arm to usher me through the space. Hands grab at my skirt, my body, my hair while the screaming and yelling of my name goes on. The security guard at my front comes to a standstill in the middle of the crowd, trying to defend me while also getting me to where I am supposed to be. I can feel my time ticking down in my head. He has to be here soon, right? He has to know what is happening? All the air in the room feels like it's being sucked out and I'm fighting to keep a smile on my face when all I really want to do is break down and cry, but I refuse for that to be posted on any gossip sites again.

Suddenly, the crowd starts to disperse. I peer around my guard and notice a crew of Ezra's private security has arrived and they're pushing the crowd back, so I can get through to him. Because Ezra is here. He finds me through the chaos and the flashing lights. The intensity in his eyes is enough to buckle my knees in relief. I keep my gaze on him while he barks orders at his security guards on how to gain control of the crowd. I'm amazed by his calmness and the authoritative way he handles the situation.

He reaches for my hand the minute my guard has me within reach and I go to him willingly, my hand sliding into his. He holds on tight and maneuvers me into his side as we walk down the crowded hallway. Usually the hallway isn't this crowded, but I'm assuming he's taking extra precautions.

“Beth,” he calls her name, and she quickly throws on my warm up jacket and pulls it up around her head. She sets off in another direction with guards, hoping to make people believe it’s me.

Ezra shoves open a different room than my previous dressing space and follows me in. Only one guard steps in with us. He stands at the door, arms crossed in front of his body. For the first time in minutes, I feel like I can breathe again. This is what Ezra does for me. He makes it so I can thrive.

He sweeps his hands through his hair; the longer locks look messy. I notice now that the top buttons on his collar shirt are undone and gone is his usual vest or suit jacket. This is the least put together I’ve seen him since we started this tour. He takes a few deep breaths while I sit and try to stop my hands from shaking.

“Are you okay?” He finally speaks. I raise my head and find him watching me intently. I manage to nod my head yes. “Someone came to Theo and told him I said to go meet with your uncle.”

His voice is hushed; his words send shivers down my spine. “Who?”

He shakes his head, his hair falling down over his brow. “It was one of my guys, but he said he got a phone call from BNE. The shift in security allowed the formation to break. I’m sorry, Ocean.”

“You couldn’t have foreseen that,” I rush to reassure him, my head shaking in denial. “The plan was flawless. We need to find out who made that call and I want them fired.”

Ezra’s steely eyes jump to mine. He stands straighter in front of me. A spark of the respect that has been growing between us flares to life. “It’s my first priority once we get you out of here safely.”

I get to my feet and manage to stand before him without swaying on my shaky legs. “I trust you, Ezra. You came for me. You saved me before it got worse.”

His throat bobs and he looks to the guard quickly before looking back at me. “What do you think? Of course I would get to you.”

A smile cracks on my lips and a small giggle escapes. “Of course.”

He sighs and his hand reaches out for mine. He tugs me into his arms, catching me lightly about the waist. I feel his chin rest on top of my head and realize we’re hugging.

“Are we friends now?” I ask him, my voice caught between joking but also being serious.

He sighs and his grip on me tightens before pulling away. “Allies. Friends. I’ll always protect you.”

“I know,” I tell him, this time letting the sincerity in my tone push through.

“Boss, they’re in position,” the guard in the room announces. Ezra’s arms fall away from me and with them his warmth. The room feels chilled once again and I realize how badly I just want to get to my hotel. I want to take a bubble bath then sleep for twelve hours straight.

I take the extra jacket that is handed to me and follow Ezra to the door. The guard opens it, glancing left to right before motioning us out. The hallway is completely empty now. Ezra leads me in the opposite direction we came from to a different exit door. Once we get out of the dimly lit tunnel, more of his security files in around us; yet, he never drops his arm from around my back. I keep my face void of emotion and remind myself to appear relaxed. On the off chance any cameras are hidden, I do not want the paparazzi to know how badly they flustered me. I don’t want whoever orchestrated this to see how on edge I am or how unsafe I felt before Ezra found me.

We make it to the car and I gulp in air. Arms reach out, wrapping around my shoulders, and Beth’s familiar scent and material of her jacket engulf me. “I’m so sorry, Ocean. I have no idea what happened. Theo is beside himself.”

“Where is he?” I ask, looking to the front of the car where he is usually stationed, but I only recognize Ezra and his

driver.

“He’s being questioned at the hotel,” Ezra answers, his words stiff. Tension leaks into the small space of the car cab.

“You said he was told to change the plan.”

Ezra doesn’t move. Beth’s frame goes still and her face looks pained. “He shouldn’t have moved if the alert didn’t come from Mr. Hamilton.”

“Beth?” I question her. Theo and Beth have been with me since the beginning, and for some reason, I feel like she’s betraying him.

“Theo will say the same thing, Ocean. It was a stupid mistake and something terrible happened.” Beth calmly pats her hand against mine.

I glance up front toward Ezra and back to Beth. It seems they’ve all already talked and I’m the last to find out. “I just don’t want to lose him.”

“This is a good lesson for everyone. Theo and the guard under Ezra’s instruction,” Beth adds, and I realize that she is right. Theo is like family to me, but he knew better. Ezra’s own people should have known better and maybe this is a time for retraining.

“Okay,” I mutter the words and my gaze falls to my lap. I’m so tired. I just want this day to be over.

“We’ll get you to your room, princess.” Ezra’s voice floats back to me. I’m already slipping into darkness though. My body sags into the seat. I’m warm. Beth, Ezra, my team, they have a plan. I don’t have to do anything tonight. My eyes flutter open and land on the back of Ezra’s head before closing again. Everything is okay. I’m safe.

## Chapter Six

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### Ocean



### *16 years old...*

One more piece of pizza and I'll be done. It's what I should be saying to myself before I perform on stage at tonight's music award show, but the pizza is cheesy, greasy, and delicious.

"You're still eating?" Ezra walks into my backstage room and eyes me sitting in my chair, holding the pizza box hostage.

I raise my brow at him. "I need to fuel up. Right after my performance I have two minutes to change then I'm up for the next award. This is all that is keeping me calm right now." I pop the rest of the piece into my mouth. A little sauce hits my chin and I quickly dab it away with my napkin. Ezra's eyes widen, but I can tell he's only holding back his signature smirk. After a year of having him as my handler, and being on tour together, I know him inside and out, frontward and backward. Just as much as he knows me. I once joked that we were besties, but these days he's become my family. Beth, Theo, Ezra and even Ezra's right hand security enforcer, Kyle, and myself have created a functioning pieced together family. When Ezra swept into my life and fixed the shambles I was in, he soon became my favorite person. The only one I realized I could actually trust.

Uncle Cliff was taking every opportunity he had to trap me in a lifelong contract that belonged to him. He had been depleting my money faster than I was earning it. Once Theo was able to help, he and Ezra teamed up and discovered that



most of the things that went wrong for me, the incidents that caused the most publicity, were orchestrated by my uncle or Mr. Townsend at BNE. Thankfully Ezra was able to help me get a meeting once I turned sixteen where I had legal representation present. With the updates to my contract, I was able to make some changes.

I was able to help pick my own songs and started playing with some lyrics of my own. I wasn't collaborating with other artists yet. The rule about my uncle needing to be present for me to perform was changed as well. Surprisingly enough, Mr. Townsend understood my concerns with that as my uncle's drinking was becoming more and more of an issue. My wardrobe was still sickly pink, but I did have some say over the styles. Ezra was in charge of vetting my security, but they now answered to me, and they were not all BNE associates. I did keep Theo and Beth as they were still under contract. Everything was done as part of Ezra's ideas in order to keep me safe before he leaves. Because as everyone keeps reminding me, he can't stay my handler forever, and every time it gets brought up, my heart feels like it's shattering my chest. Not only has Ezra become the most important person in my life, but I've also developed a hopeless crush on him.

My eyes settle on Ezra, who is sitting in the chair across from me, with his phone in his hand and a small scowl on his lips. I've seen that look a thousand times now. It's the face he makes before any performance as he goes over my exits again and again. I trace my gaze over every line of his face, the sharpness of his cheekbones, the hardness of his jaw, where every now and then the muscle clicks under his skin. He runs a hand through his messy hair that is such a rich brown it's almost black. Hair that has run through my own fingers when he fell asleep in the chair next to me on his jet. I had thought Ezra was attractive since the moment I met him. Now after a year of having him in my life, I realized how simple the word attractive is. There are no words to describe the perfection that is Ezra Hamilton.

"After your award, we need to head out." His words distract me from ogling him. I wonder if he can feel how often my eyes are on him, observing everything he does.

“Okay,” I agree with him, before wiping my fingers off with my napkin. “Do we have any time for me to stop in at Salish’s party? I was invited this year.”

His gaze jumps to mine this time and butterflies swirl in my stomach. I could write a whole song about the color of those eyes and the expressive way they change colors depending on his moods. Right now the green is icy, almost mint in color, like my favorite ice cream flavor.

“Since when do you want to go to one of her parties?” His brow furrows and his head falls for a second. He runs a hand through his hair again. “I mean, is this something you really want to do? We didn’t plan security for it, but I can make changes.”

And he would. Ezra would do anything I really want as long as I was protected. Even if his first reaction is distaste for something and Salish’s award parties usually are terrible. And not terrible as in boring but usually at least a handful of people walk away from there with a new scandal in their wake.

“No.” I smile big at him. “I was just joking to see what you would say.”

His lips turn up in a grin. “Well, I was going to come up with something before the party anyways as to why you couldn’t go.”

“Ezra!” I laugh and throw my balled-up napkin at him.

“Kidding.” He sighs before putting his phone in his pocket. “It’s time to go.”

He holds his hand out and helps me up from the chair. I quickly shed my robe and make sure the skirt on my dress is pulled down. As far down as it will go anyways. Ezra’s eyes flick down over my outfit and he pulls back, using my hand to spin me around. “You look beautiful, princess.”

I fight the urge to blush, even though his words mean everything to me. I no longer associate the nickname with him thinking I’m spoiled or that he’s here to babysit me. Mostly because Ezra hasn’t made me feel that way with how he treats me now. He’s open and honest with me, whether I like the

truth or not. He allows me to be with him most of the day, so I'm learning how to run my business. He's teaching me the ways of the industry and how to earn the respect of my employees and security just as he does.

"Thank you," I finally manage to get out and run my free hand over the glittery material one more time. There's a knock at my door and it takes his attention off of me.

"Yeah?"

The door cracks open and Kyle's head pokes in. "They're ready for her."

"On our way," Ezra tells him, and the door clicks quietly shut again. "Ready?"

I nod. "Yes. I'll do the performance. Meet you at the same spot you drop me off. Then I have two minutes to get back here, change and Kyle will get me to my seat."

"You're sitting between Booker and Salish, so if she gives you grief about not coming, you can remind her we have a show this weekend and you are a guest on the night show tomorrow. It's common knowledge. Just make sure anytime you talk to her you're smiling. The cameras like to pan to her frequently," he reminds me while we're walking to the stage.

I listen the whole time while also making eye contact and politely nodding and smiling at anyone working backstage. At all times I need to look approachable and friendly, while also paying very close attention to what my security is doing and what Ezra is saying. It's another skill he's taught me to help me survive this industry. It all comes down on how to read people and how I want people to read me; even if I'm annoyed or angry, I do not want anyone to be able to use my emotions against me.

We make it to the side stage where I'll walk out. No eyes are on me for a few seconds, so I let my shoulders relax and take a few deep breaths. Ezra glances over and I see the concern in his eyes. I give him a smile, my real smile. "I'll be fine."

He hums under his breath and nods like he doesn't really believe me. "I hate award season."

A small laugh escapes my mouth. "It's not my favorite either. I'm fine though. Really."

"If you need more time in between we can build that in," he reminds me again, and I roll my eyes at him dramatically.

"You already built me in too much time. Mr. Townsend and my uncle were questioning if I was sick." I slap him gently on the arm. He cracks a smile, and his hand squeezes mine. He's still holding onto me even after we're through the small crowd of workers. It's moments like this I wish I could have this forever. Just me, Ezra, and him holding my hand.

"Ocean!" The stage director calls my name, indicating it's time for my performance.

"I'm up," I tell him and look at him reassuringly. He nods and only then does he let go of my hand. But not before raising it to his mouth, where his lips gently brush my knuckles.

"Give them hell."

I laugh and head out to my spot. Heat tingles up my spine and the feeling is so unfamiliar that I have to look back over my shoulder. Ezra is still there. Watching me. The heat in his gaze is there and gone before I can even be sure it was real. His normal protective stare takes over. I shake my head and run out on the stage the moment my name is called, right as the crowd goes wild and the stage lights hit me. I let my daydreams of Ezra and the way he makes my heart race fall away. It's performance time.

## Chapter Seven

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Ezra



Every day for the past half year, I've gotten used to wearing more than one face. Always professional on the outside, then cold and hard when I'm pissed off. There's the face I use with my friends and family, namely my uncle who is still insisting being a handler is giving me the leg up on what I really want to do, which is manage. In the past year though, I don't feel the ever present need to do anything other than what I'm doing, handling Ocean.

Ocean. The only person I ever show my other half to. I smile around her. She jokes with me, she trusts me, and she touches me in a way no one ever has before. And I don't mean physically, even though a few times I have caught her running her fingers through my hair when I'm sleeping. And somehow her hand always finds its way into mine backstage, in the car, or on my jet. I mean the way that I now trust her with everything. We've become so in tune with each other that we've raised a few eyebrows along the way. Not that I give a fuck. My guys know better than to ask or question anything I do. She's become my pride and joy, both in business and in private.

The minute Ocean asked for my help, she has done everything I've asked. It wasn't difficult to convince her that cutting some of her uncle's influence out of her life was a good thing. Cliff is steadily going down the wrong path of fame and fortune. He spends more time drinking and gambling than he does at his niece's shows. The company he's keeping is known for being shady in the entertainment world, and often

is under fire for having underage celebrities at its parties where drug-use scandals occur. Ocean sees it and is handling her disappointment with him as well as she can. With my guidance, she's keeping her distance from him. When he does contact her, she brings the problem to me or Kyle and we all figure out how best to handle Cliff's current predicament without BNE finding out. If she needs a break, I make it happen for her so that she is always in a healthy state of mind. While I want to bury Cliff for the way he's leeching off of Ocean, I manage to keep my dealings with him professional for her.

She never shies away from asking questions, begging me to teach her every facet of my work so that she can protect herself and her brand. I've never been more proud of a client before. Who she is now is a far cry from the lost girl she was when I first jumped on board. And she knows it. She basks in the praise I give her. She lives to learn what we can do better next time. She enjoys the new and exciting things that come with her time with me. Like shopping around for her own private jet. Or planning the house she wants someday with trellises of Moon flowers. I couldn't be prouder of her and her accomplishments. For the first time, I enjoy being a handler. Having complete control over her security, her media, and of her life gives me purpose. Ocean is my priority.

Even now, walking into a studio where I know she's getting her make-up retouched for her television interview, my eyes seek her out, needing to see her. She feels me right away and her head swivels in my direction. Her face is masked, but I can sense the underlying tension in her features and the way she's holding her shoulders. I watch as she excuses herself, gets up and hurries to my side. I'm already prepared to inflict harm on whoever has upset her.

"Who do I have to crush today, baby Heart?" I ask her, hoping I was able to gloss over my mistake of words. In my mind, calling her *baby* is one thing. Speaking the pet name out loud and to a room full of strangers is not smart. Thankfully, she doesn't think twice about it and no one else seems to be paying too close attention.

She sighs in frustration. “I had the chance to look at the interview questions.”

“Mhmm.” I keep my eyes trained on her face and fold my arms over my chest, waiting.

Her eyes roll. “They plan to ask about who I’m dating. I don’t understand why that is at all relevant to the tour for next year.”

My back tightens and I fight to control the words I want to say, which is that she’s not available to date anyone. The idea that I’d have to share her time and her big moments with some faceless idiot makes my stomach clench and my skin prickle. Ocean belongs to me. My fingers itch to pull her into my side, wrap my arms around her and take her out of here. Of course I know I can’t do or say the things I want to. I realize how insane and possessive I sound, obsessing over every little thing about her. And the fact that she is only sixteen. I’m fine in the role I’m in. I’ve got all my shit locked down tight.

I glance down at her, marveling again at the fact that even in the high heels she wears for these appearances, she only comes up to my shoulder. She is forced to look up at me when I’m this close to her, when she’s talking to me. “No comment. That is how we have been fielding those questions and how we will continue to do so.”

“Until I am seeing someone then it will change, you mean.” She glances around the room at the crowd of people who are thankfully still too busy to pay us any attention.

And thank fuck because her words just sent a jab of jealousy right to my chest. My jaw clenches just imagining someone trying to take her. “Are you trying to tell me you’re seeing someone, princess?”

She scoffs and turns her big brown eyes up to mine. “No. I just assume someday maybe there might be.”

Over my dead fucking body. I will have to be buried in a concrete grave before I let her date anyone. Even if she wanted to or thought she did, none of the men she meets in this industry would be worthy of her. I can’t tell her how this

conversation is making me extremely jealous or that my eyes have flicked down to her glossy lips more than once. In my head, I give myself a mental warning that I can't kiss her here or ever. That would be messed up. Some lines just can't be crossed. I'm not actually going to haul her back into the dressing room and run my hands all over her either. So I lie to her instead.

“Well, when maybe-someday happens we'll prepare more.”

Seemingly satisfied she turns back to the stage, her shoulders now relaxed and a simple smile playing on her pink lips. The room soon falls silent and dark and she's called onto the stage. Ocean moves gracefully across the area to the guest chair and takes a seat. She's become so natural at making everyone in the room feel like she is solely focused on them. I can tell from the sighs and the smiles in the crowd that they love her. The talk show host is even mesmerized by her and only uses her best storylines and images for the interview. Only once does her gaze find me before looking back to Ocean before commenting about how far she's come. Pride swells in my chest.

*“And what comes next for you, Ocean? You've been so busy preparing for your tour, making new music, and doing charity work. How about dating? Has anyone caught your eye?”*

My hands fist inside my pockets and I have to force myself to breathe in and out. She's young and in the entertainment business; I'm not sure why this is always brought up in her interviews. I shoot the host a hard, sarcastic smile when she looks at me again.

*“I have been very busy doing what makes me happy and what I find enjoyment in. This time of my life just isn't right for finding someone I want to be serious with.”*

Once again, Ocean answers flawlessly. Pride and resentment battle inside my body for space. Her words shouldn't cut; they aren't meant for me. She has no idea the



obsession I have for her. I'm also the one who coached her on how to answer.

Before I know it, the hour-long segment is coming to a close, and Ocean walks back across the stage, right to me. As always, I tuck her hand in my arm and lead her back to her dressing room, keeping her body shielded with mine. Beth is waiting at the door and helps her inside while I go and thank the production manager, the host and work crew. By the time I'm done, Ocean is dressed more comfortably and ready to leave. Kyle, Theo and myself escort her out to the waiting vehicle. I jump in the back with Ocean and Beth while Theo sits up front. Kyle gets in the car behind us and trails us to the hotel.

"You did amazing, Oce." Beth and Theo congratulate her and talk about the interview. For the few minutes we're moving through the city and Ocean is surrounded in protection, I take my phone out and go over my messages and plans for this weekend's double night show, which is part of the reason for the interview today.

CLIFF

I'll be in tonight. Booker is trying to reach you.

It's the first text that greets me followed by a slew of others from Booker Townsend and one from my uncle. My molars grind and my hand tightens on my phone. I know what they all want and I am so far from being ready to give in.

BNE

You can't renew your contract again. I already renewed it on the six-month term when you should have been done, and on the one year. You have three months left. You need to start the termination paperwork.

BNE

It's been a year, Ezra. Her performance, her social media, is all operating well. The world loves her.

BNE

I have a new client I need you to take.

BNE

Ezra, this isn't up for debate. You will be removed from Ms. Heart's handler position or you'll be in breach of contract.

ME

What contract?

BNE

The one I just signed with Clifford Heart. He's ready to take more on as her manager now that the mess has been sorted.

I scoff under my breath. I can feel red, hot anger creeping up my neck. My tie feels too tight. The dress shirt is too constraining, and suddenly, the closed space of the SUV cab is making me feel claustrophobic. Fucking Clifford Heart. I wish I could take care of him for good, to keep him away from Ocean. I'm sure he does want more control. He's been slowly losing it since I jumped on board. I can't even tell Booker about the extent of Cliff's issues because then he'll know I had him investigated. It was on my own dime, but he'll see it as a betrayal of trust. That I didn't trust his judgment. But when it comes to my girl, I trust no one but me.

I swipe on my uncle's text, hoping it's the answer I wanted. A different way I can make this all work out.

UNCLE

I'm willing to help you put some down, but you'll have to come up with the rest of the money yourself.

ME

Would I have your full support if I was joining Platinum Records?

UNCLE

Yes. But we both know you aren't so why bother offering.

I run my hand over the back of my neck, knowing he's right. If I get out of this role, I'm going back in with my own company. It's the only way I can work around Booker Townsend and Clifford Heart. I'll have to leave Ocean until her contract ends on her eighteenth birthday. It might kill me to walk away, but I'll pull some strings to help her along the way. Once she's an adult, she can sign with me, and I'll have her under my control again and in my life.

"Ezra?"

I glance up and find Ocean watching me, her brow raised. Beth is also looking at me like I've lost my mind. I never zone out or get lost in my thoughts around her. Ocean's safety is always a priority. My brain quickly scrambles to remember what they had been talking about.

"Your uncle will get in tonight, late. He'll be at both shows this weekend. After Sunday's show we had planned to leave right away, but I think one more night to rest would be good. I'll debrief everyone during tomorrow's planning meeting."

Ocean smiles at me so I must have answered something right. Theo is the only one who I catch some side eye from, but I shrug him off. I just need to get to the hotel, figure out how I'm going to set this plan into motion, and how the hell I'm going to tell Ocean.

# Chapter Eight

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## Ocean



The vibe is wrong tonight. I can feel it, and no matter how much I'm trying to not let it affect my performance, Ezra keeps shooting me looks of concern. I want to slap him with his concern. He's the reason I'm feeling this way. Ever since Uncle Cliff joined us for the weekend shows, it's been tense between him and Ezra. Both are being amicable toward each other, but I can sense that something is brewing under the surface.

For the first time since I can remember, I'm actually looking forward to my show ending, so I can get out of here. I need to make Ezra talk to me. I need him to make me feel better about whatever it is that happened. I'm so caught up in my mind, I miss a step but manage to recover before anyone realizes. Or so I thought. Ezra is standing so close to the stage, I collide with him, right as I run back there. His hands land on my waist, keeping me from toppling over. I quickly reach to my back and unplug my mic and battery pack.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his green eyes gleaming emerald as they sweep over me from head to toe. A flush works its way over my exposed skin. I can feel the heat from his hands against my skin and it makes my knees weak. I fight the urge to press my thighs together. Why does he have to be so devastatingly handsome?

All I can do is nod my head, and when I stand straighter, he lets go of the grip he has on my waist. I hate it the minute his hands aren't on me anymore. It's not right, and I'm probably sick in the head for wanting him, but I can't help it.

If I had to pick out my dream guy, it would be Ezra. Anytime I'm asked about my dating life, I want to answer that regular guys my age don't cut it for me. I want my broody, overbearing, protective, dangerous, too old for me handler. Somehow I think that would get me plastered all over the tabloids again and not in a good way. The one thing Ezra has been protecting me from is bad publicity, but I'm willing to invite it in if it means I could have him.

"What happened tonight? You missed a few beats and almost exited the stage wrong before the acapella sequence." He talks close enough so only I can hear him while ushering me down the hallway to my dressing room.

"You're what happened," I snap at him, another first. His face switches from shock to anger to another look that I swear I would say is smoldering, except that there is no way he would look at me that way. Frustrated with my own thoughts and feelings, I keep lashing out. "Despite how smart you think you are, I can tell there's something wrong. The whole day hasn't felt right and it's all I can think about."

His eyes narrow, and he spins me to face him, right outside my door. My back hits the door with a soft thump and a thrill shoots through my core. Ezra towers over me, his stance protective. He uses his two fingers to lift my chin, so I'm forced to meet his stare.

"I'm not trying to make this difficult for you. I do have something to tell you later, but it's fine. There isn't anything to worry about."

My shoulders relax and curve in. I wrap my arms around my waist. "You promise?"

"Have I ever lied to you?" His head cocks to the side. I get lost in his eyes and the truth shining in them. No, he's never lied to me or let me down. I shake my head.

"Okay. Now that we have that cleared up. Go get dressed, then we need to leave for the hotel." His hand slips behind me and my dressing room door opens.

“Got it, boss.” I smirk at him before ducking into the dressing room. Once the door shuts behind me, I have a chance to kick myself. Of course Ezra wouldn’t miss any of my changes in moods. I will die of embarrassment though if he finds out how I feel about him. That I think about him all the time. That I love him.

I quickly change into my leggings and baggy t-shirt before pulling my black sweatshirt over the top. I wipe my makeup off the best I can for now and wrap my hair up in a ponytail. I can’t wait to get to my hotel room and shower and sleep.

Ezra is still in the hallway when I’m done, only now Kyle has joined us. Everything is on track as they lead me out of the back tunnel and into the underground parking space. Beth is waiting by the SUV and we all get in. The car is silent, and again, I have this sinking feeling in my stomach.

“Cliff made it to the hotel.” Kyle looks up from his phone, speaking to Ezra. Ezra’s emotions cool and his eyes flash. I glance between the two men, but they avoid my gaze.

When we pull up to the hotel, the first thing I notice is the flashing red and blue lights on a cop car.

“What the fuck?” Ezra growls, sitting up further in his seat. “Go and park around back,” he instructs, and we keep moving.

Kyle keeps scrolling on his phone and shows Ezra. “He didn’t mention anything about this.”

Ezra takes the phone and reads through Kyle’s conversation with my uncle. “Let’s be alert when we go in.” He looks at all of us and we nod, complete silence surrounds us.

I get out of the vehicle and am automatically surrounded. Ezra and Kyle at my front and Beth at my back. Without any issues, we make it to the elevators and on our way up to the private penthouse floor. The minute the door opens, the first thing I see is a flash in my face. I drop my head and brace myself as Ezra and Kyle manage to move us through to the

door. My hotel door is propped open and uniformed officers are stationed outside and inside of it.

“Who the hell let reporters up here? Get them off this floor!” Ezra commands and his security jumps away from the officers talking to them. They start herding people toward the elevators.

Ezra and Kyle are pulled in by an officer in plain clothes with a clipboard. Whatever has happened has caused Ezra’s face to turn to stone. Anger flares in his eyes and is directed at every person in the room.

Beth is standing next to me when my uncle walks over. His pale face looks sweaty and his hands are shoved deep in his pockets.

“I’m so sorry, Ocean.”

“What happened?” I meet his eyes, my chin lifted. Everyone keeps bustling around us. Ezra is still in a heated discussion with the police officer.

“Didn’t they tell you anything?” My uncle asks, his brow raised. I can tell he wants to be the one to deliver the news.

Gritting my teeth, I shake my head no. “We just got back here and saw the lights. Why didn’t you give us the heads up?”

His mouth drops open and he has the gall to look offended. “I just got here and when I opened the door, some masked freak ran out. He destroyed your room and everything in it.”

I feel the blood rush from my face and my heart hammers in my chest. I run to the bedroom, ignoring the people protesting behind me. More officers in CSI get-up are walking in the room, taking pictures and slipping things into evidence bags. The room is destroyed. My bottle of perfume and personal makeup is smashed across my vanity table. The bedspread is torn and what looks like red paint is splashed on it. On the wall above the bed, the word POSER is painted in bright red as well. I rush to the closet and open it. My heart crumbles in my chest, and I choke on a sob. Every single costume for tomorrow’s show lies in scraps on the floor or barely hangs on the hanger. Thousands of dollars in fabric,



material, beads, and glitter are wasted. Not to mention the time and energy that my seamstress put into these. They were incredibly expensive and one hundred percent loaned to me from BNE. My contract states that I can be fined for ruining them. “No!”

Strong arms circle around me. Ezra half carries me out of the room and into a separate, private area. The whole time he’s holding me, he’s telling me it’s going to be okay. But the damage is done. Not only do I feel violated that my space was broken into, I’m in breach of my contract, and I’ve haven’t felt this unsafe in a long time.

“Let me go.” My chest heaves and the struggle to breathe is real.

Ezra sets me to my feet and turns me to face him. His hands cradle my face. “It’s okay, princess. I promise. I’m going to take care of it. We’ll get everything fixed. You’re safe. You’re safe with me.” His lips press against my forehead and the crown of my head. I can’t stop myself when I lean into him. He doesn’t hesitate, his arms wrapping around me and pulling my body into his. I hold onto him, my arms wrapping around his waist. I don’t even care how it would look if someone walked in on us.

I can feel Ezra’s heart beating strong against my cheek. One of his hands is on my head, tangled in my hair. The other holds me around my waist. There is no space between our bodies, his heat sinks into my chilled skin.

I don’t know how long we stand like that, him holding me, but eventually, he sits on the bed, my body cradled to his. My eyes get tired, and everything in me calms down. Ezra never leaves; he never disentangles himself from me. I can feel the soft kisses he places on my hair, my forehead, my temple, and I bask in it. My fingers clutching his jacket, keeping him with me and I don’t think he minds. I close my eyes and all I hear is his gravelly, strong voice telling me to sleep.

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“YOU WILL WAKE her up over my dead fucking body.” I hear Ezra’s voice and I jolt awake. I’m alone in the spare room in

the middle of the bed, and Ezra's jacket is draped over me like a blanket. The events of the evening come back and I glance at the clock, noticing it's already almost midnight. I passed out for three hours. I quickly get off the bed and pad over to the door.

"Sir, we need to ask Ms. Heart if she was aware of anyone wanting to harm her or her performance."

"And I already told you. I'm in charge of her security and we've never had any threats or incidents like this. I suggest doing your job and finding out who did it rather than waking up my client to ask your ridiculous questions." Ezra is practically seething.

His client. For some reason that hurts more than anything. More than learning that someone might be trying to harm me. Obviously, stalkers and obsessed fans aren't unheard of. It has just never happened to me before because I have Ezra keeping me safe.

I crack the door open and the officer is the first to see me. Ezra whips around and scowls. "See you woke her up."

I give him a small smile. "I'm fine." I touch my hand to his arm. His client. I know I need to let it go, but it hurts. Not that I expected anything different. His friend. It's not like he can say *My girlfriend. My wife*. A girl can dream, I guess.

"Ah, Ms. Heart." The officer shuffles on his feet. "We're sorry to bother you but I do need to ask you a few questions."

"It's okay." I open the door to the room wider and flip on the lights. The officers and Ezra follow me in and I take a seat at the sitting table. Ezra stands by the door and the officers sit on the couch across from me. "What are your questions?"

"Ms. Heart, have you ever been made aware of a stalker or an overzealous fan?"

I shake my head. "No. My security is very thorough and if there were threats or incidents, I would know."

"Right. Has there ever been an incident before tonight where your property was destroyed?"

“No.” I shake my head again. My gaze slides to Ezra. “Mr. Hamilton supplies my security and we’ve never had any issues before tonight. I’m still not sure how this happened.”

“Well, it appears that someone was able to get past the security you feel so highly of. It also seems, from what your uncle has told us, that you’ve received many letters at home from a fan who might have taken this too far. We’re starting to investigate them now,” the other officer responds.

“My uncle is rarely on my tours and I haven’t been home in months. He has never brought this to my attention.” I feel the need to defend Ezra and his company.

“Which is also what I told you.” Ezra jumps in, moving toward me and away from the door. “We’ve never had issues in any hotels or with the security plans we have set up. I suggest you start looking at what happened in this hotel room first rather than some supposed letters at her house that I’ve never been made aware of.”

I glance between the officers and Ezra. None of them blink, intent on winning the war. Eventually the officers cave and nod then leave.

“Here is my card, Ms. Heart. If you think of anything, please let us know.”

“Sure.” I nod my head and take the card. The door shuts behind them and Ezra rips the card from my fingers.

He paces the room, his hands running through his hair repeatedly. I stand waiting patiently, silently supporting whatever he is feeling. I feel bad about my panic attack earlier. After the shock wore off, I realized that I’m safe now with Ezra here.

“It’s not a breach in our security,” he says, his words quieter.

I nod my head. “I know.”

“We’ve never been made aware of letters either,” he throws out.

“I know.”

“Not even Booker was aware that there were any issues and he handpicks these hotels the majority of the time.” Ezra huffs and glances at his phone.

“I figured.” I shrug.

Ezra stops pacing and comes to stand right in front of me, his green eyes bright and intent on mine. “You sound completely sure, just agreeing with everything.”

My head tilts to the side and I can’t help the smile that plays on my lips. “You’re in charge of it so I’m not worried. I’m sorry I panicked earlier; I think it was just the surprise. And the reporters.”

Ezra scoffs. “Yet another thing that the officers and detectives messed up on. I’m sorry this happened. I’ll figure it out.”

“I know you will,” I tell him, my head tilting back as he moves closer.

“You trust me so much.”

“Of course I do. Everything you do is for me and to keep me safe.” I repeat to him the mantra he was saying earlier to help me calm down. The phrases he has been whispering in my ear since that first plane ride.

Ezra’s hands cradle my head. His touch is almost intimate with how closely he’s standing to me. If I breathe, my chest will brush against his abdomen. My heart races in my chest, my hands resting on his sides. I can feel his breathing becoming deeper. His pupils dilate. My tongue pokes out at my bottom lip and his eyes follow the movement, as if he’s entranced.

The temptation is too much. “Ezra, don’t you know that I trust you. I know you’ll always do anything for me. You’re the one person I trust with my life. I love you.”

His breath hitches in his throat and I start to panic, not letting myself believe that I said those words out loud. His hands tighten on my face. Before I can give him a chance to reject me, I do the next reckless thing I can think of. I. Kiss. Him.

I rise up on my toes and brush my lips against his. The second our lips touch, I lose my nervousness. Nothing has ever felt this right before. Tightening my hands on his sides, my fingers pulling at his shirt, I bring myself closer to him. In response, he takes over the kiss and when my lips part for him, his tongue darts out to swirl with mine. This kiss was given in innocence but quickly becomes frantic. His hands grip my scalp, holding me hostage, our mouths moving in sync as we kiss, peck, taste, devour each other. My knees go weak, and I sway further into him. I'd rather die than take my mouth away from his. I'm lost in Ezra and the feelings he's creating in my body and my heart. Until a knock outside the door sends us flying apart.

"I'll debrief in five," Ezra calls back to whatever the question was. I never heard anything except for the heartbeat in my ears and our heavy breathing. I meet Ezra's eyes and am met with anger, confusion, and then he shuts down altogether.

"I'm sorry," I rush to tell him, but it's too late. He takes a step back from me, his hands falling to his sides. Heat rushes up to my cheeks and tears fill my eyes.

"Ocean—"

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that, maybe. Not now anyways. I know this is going to sound weird, and maybe messed up, but I can't help it. I can't help that I love you," I blurt out again. His face softens for a second and I think things might be okay.

Then he steps back again. His hands running over his face before I'm presented the void mask he wears around everyone who is not me. Silence stretches between us and my declaration fills the space, unanswered. "I have to go."

My feet can't move to stop him. My voice stops working. Every fear and insecurity I have rushes in and floods me from the inside out. I'm drowning in my broken heart. Ezra leaves the room, and the second I hear the door click, I collapse.

# Chapter Nine

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## Ocean



Ezra didn't come back after the debriefing. I didn't seek him out either. I crossed a line that neither of us can go back on. I told him my true feelings. I quoted all the sweet things he says to me when he thinks I'm not paying attention. I didn't make it up that he kissed me back, held me tighter. But then he left and I haven't heard from him since.

I know I have to leave my hotel room and get some food before tonight's concert, the last one in New York before we head down south. I give myself a big-girl talk and pump myself up before opening the door. The living area is quiet. Something isn't right. I keep walking and make it to the kitchen. I notice that Kyle is on the balcony. Theo is stationed by the front door. Nothing in the room suggests that last night the area was swarming with law enforcement. Something I'm sure is due to Ezra.

I grab a bagel and some fruit before sitting at the table. Beth looks up for the first time, and I notice her eyes are rimmed red. "What's wrong?"

She reaches across the table and takes my hand with hers. "I have to tell you something."

"Good morning!" My uncle calls as he gleefully enters the room. My eyes widen in shock that he's still here. After a night of partying, he usually heads home or on to the next place. He never stays with us.

"You're still here?"

Uncle Cliff's eyes fall on me and I don't miss the spark of annoyance. He glances at Kyle, Theo and Beth before giving me one of his fake smiles. "Of course. It's my job to be with my niece and as her manager to make sure the day runs smoothly."

My vision turns white and I swear the silence in the room is deafening. He looks so proud of himself and the words he said. But I've learned how to read the underlying messages. He would never say it's his job to make sure things go smoothly for me. It was always that my job was to make things easier for him. His words are textbook Ezra Hamilton.

My eyes dart from Theo to Kyle, whose head is bowed, to Beth who meets my own teary-eyed gaze. "Where is he?"

"Who?" My uncle questions, setting his plate full of food down across from me. "Hamilton?" he asks before biting into his egg sandwich.

"Yes," I manage to breathe out, my fingers clasping together in my lap. I know what he's going to say. I could tell he wasn't nearby the minute I walked in here.

"He took a flight this morning back to California." My uncle shrugs his shoulders, oblivious to the fact that he just shattered my heart and soul.

"What?"

"Come on, Oce. You remember that his contact was minimal. He was only supposed to be here for so long. He fixed you so now he can move on." I watch as he chews and swallows.

"Fixed me?"

Uncle Cliff's eyes jump to mine. "Yes. Fixed the mess you were in. You were his client. He was your handler and now he's moving on to the next client BNE wants him assigned to. He's known all week that his time was limited. Booker gave me a new contract as your manager for the next business quarter to see how it goes."

My body wants to fold in on itself. My arms wrap around my middle, protecting myself from my uncle's painful words.

Ezra left. He knew for a long time he was leaving and didn't say anything. He didn't prepare me. He just up and left in the middle of the night after I told him I loved him and kissed him. I remember the ruthlessness the first time I met Ezra. I guess it was my imagination that we were at least friends in the past year. Even if he couldn't reciprocate my love, he could have at least had the decency to tell me he was leaving. And that he was leaving me in this situation with my uncle. Ezra broke his promise. He wasn't keeping me safe at all.



# Chapter Ten

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Ezra



*Six months later*

I kissed her.

I devoured her.

I didn't falter or stop myself. She might have pressed her sweet lips to mine first, but the sick part was that I wanted her to. I invaded her space. I let the need to taste her, to feel her, to imagine myself laying her out on the bed and making her mine overrule the rational part of my brain. That need I had for her could have been exposed. We were in a hotel room that wasn't safe. Anyone could have walked in, could have seen what I was doing to her. I could have been ripped from her life and created a scandal that could have ruined her career forever.

Even now, I can still taste her on my tongue. It's been six months since I walked away. Her birthday passed. She's now seventeen. I missed holidays and celebrations with every award she takes home. I still wake up in the middle of the night remembering the heat of her skin from that night and the silkiness of her hair when it wrapped around my hand. She was so pure, so beautiful, I had wanted to rub up against her. Mark her with my touch. It takes daily reminders to keep myself from going back to her, from kissing the shit out of her and letting her ease my throbbing cock. My heart pounds in my chest; my whole body aches from just thinking about it. From remembering her. If I hadn't left then, I would have never left at all. I would have made things worse for her. We were in our own little world in that room, and eventually,

reality outside the door would have come in to bite us. Leaving her meant saving her. I just hope she can forgive me.

“Boss.” Caleb, my new Kyle, knocks at my door. Turning front the window, I see him hovering, waiting to be let in. I push down the slight irritation. Kyle would never hover. After six months though, I’m still getting used to Caleb, but I couldn’t take Kyle with me and leave her alone.

I wave him in. “What do you have for me?”

Caleb closes the door behind him and walks over to my desk. I can see the flicker of unease in his eyes and I’m instantly on edge. “I got word that BNE is looking to add a new stipulation to their contracts. If it’s passed and she misses the time frame, she could end up there for the next six years.”

Ocean can’t be in BNE’s care for another six years. She isn’t even eighteen yet, and I know her uncle will do whatever is necessary to ensure she stays with his money-cow for as long as possible. The whole point of leaving her now and keeping my distance publicly was to keep anyone from suspecting how in deep I am over her, so there is no ammunition against her when she is able to leave her contract with BNE. I have my best people scouring all of Booker Townsend and Cliff Heart’s emails and private messages; their meetings are bugged even, just waiting to hear their plan. And making sure that Ocean stays far from it.

“Just keep proceeding how we have been. I want Morgan to pay extra close attention to any off the books meetings these two have. Even if they so much as share a glance at an award ceremony, I want to know about it,” I instruct him. Caleb’s head bows slightly.

“Yes, sir.” He turns to leave and I’m left alone again in my new office. As far as Booker and Cliff believe, I left to start my own handler company that is subcontracted with my uncle. The word around the entertainment business is that if I do that for six months, I’ll be able to move up in his company to a manager. They believe it because I let them. I want them to think my aspirations are bigger and that that is why I left Ocean Heart.

Only I know I left because if I didn't, I would end up murdering Cliff Heart, and then I'd have buried myself so deep in his underage niece that even a priest couldn't exorcize me from her soul. It would have hurt her in more than one way.

But I won't stay away forever, and when I return, it will be to steal her from them with a new contract that makes her mine. Until then I'll keep tabs on her the best I can without appearing too interested. I'm two months away from my uncle writing off that my company is sufficient on its own. He'll bow out right on her eighteenth birthday, and I'll slip in to have her sign with me. A public announcement will be made that I decided being a handler was where my passion was and now that Ocean is eighteen and independent, she'll need my help. And I'll never give her back.

Her career.

Her money.

Her life.

Her goals.

Her heart. It will all be mine.

# Chapter Eleven

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## Ocean



*Seventeen years old and one week away from being eighteen...*

I only have one chance at this today. It's one week until my birthday and I need to get out of the hell I've been living in. Turning sixteen had been life-changing when *he* had been by my side, guiding me, making sure I was getting the best treatment possible and keeping my uncle away from my business. When I turned seventeen, he was no longer in my corner. I've lived the past 358 days in fear. My security has been top notch. The media has still been in a frenzy over me. The Princess of Pop. Little did they know, though, that my soul dies a little more inside every time I get up on that stage to perform.

Every performance is more money to the company that doesn't care about me and the uncle who drinks and gambles away what I get, and then sends the people who owe him money after me.

*"Ocean, you have to help me out," he begs and twists his hands in his hair. Cliff Heart used to be a good-looking man. These days he looks as if he lives at the bar. His eyes are always red and bloodshot. He's sickly thin and his skin is yellowish. His clothes are always rumpled and on more than one occasion, he hasn't even changed out of what he wore the day before. "I promise it's the last time!"*

*I back away from him, trying to stay out of his reach, fearing his hold on me. "You said that last time. When that*

*person came to collect, he almost hit Theo with a baseball bat before knocking my headlights out.”*

*He nods his head. “I know. I know. That’s why if I pay them now, they won’t look for you.”*

*My eyes narrow on him, wondering how much of this is a game. I’ve been too scared to tell anyone, fearing his behavior will get back to BNE and leak to the news. “I’m leaving for the next show in a few hours then I’ll be in the studio. They won’t be able to find me.”*

*His face reddens. “You’re going to leave me?”*

*“It’s not safe, Uncle Cliff,” I tell him, practically pleading with him to let me off the hook.*

*He scoffs and his eyes fill with so much rage. “You’re so ungrateful, Ocean. Everything I do is to make you who you are and give you the best with BNE and you can’t even help me out of a tough spot?”*

*My head shakes in denial. I hate that I feel so helpless around him. “Come with me then to get away from them.”*

*“They will find me anyway! If you don’t help me, they’ll kill me. What would your poor parents think about that?” he yells in my face, his body postured to fight.*

*My heart races then drops when I hear the door open and my security walks in. I peer at Uncle Cliff and he’s smirking. He knows I’m trying to keep his extracurriculars as under wraps as I can. Kyle, Theo and Beth all believe he is getting help. That help only lasted a day before he was back home. I keep hiding it. I don’t want them to think I can’t handle my business or my uncle. I especially don’t want Ezra to find out, not that he’d care. This is the mess he left me in when he decided to leave with no warning. I’ve sworn Kyle, Theo and Beth to secrecy for my own wellbeing. I’m probably being stubborn, but I’m determined to take care of it without anyone’s help. To prove that I can be alone and still protect myself.*

*I walk back into my room and write the check for him to cash. “This has to be it, Uncle Cliff, please.”*

*He doesn't answer. He pockets the check and sneaks out of my room. A few days later, I'm accosted outside the arena I'm performing in. Acting as reporters, his bookies let me know my uncle owes more than he let on. This time Theo, Beth and Kyle witness as I cave again and give my hard-earned money to pay off another one of Uncle Cliff's debt.*

These days, I am never without Kyle, Theo or Beth. I can't even walk into a restaurant without being accosted and taken out back. And these people aren't gentle. My makeup artists have craftily covered bruises on my arms before. I never sleep and I barely eat. My body is being held together by energy drinks and caffeine, fake smiles and frilly dresses. That's why today is going to be the day. I need to save myself because I have been cruelly taught that I can only depend on myself.

Rise Above is in town and performing at a smaller nightclub in the same city where I have back-to-back press conferences this week before my stadium concert in New York. I want to meet their new manager and hopefully convince her to sign me to her new record label.

Mia Rosen is quickly making a name for herself in the music scene. Not only is she managing one of the hottest up-and-coming bands and signing The Kid, she is also young, gorgeous, and talented. Right out of college she started her own record label, Rosen Records. I've been following her on social media as well as Rise Above since their debut on the West Coast. The guys are hot, sure, but it's the lyrics to their songs that grab me in a chokehold. Raw, sensual, and full of longing. I feel it. I listen to them on the nights I can't block out the nightmares or the feeling of being abandoned by the one person who said he would never leave me. Mia's the one who really drew me in. I want to be her when I grow up. Creating my dream out of thin air, and being my own boss. I want to be free and deep in my gut, something is telling me that Mia is the one who can help me. I just have to get her to listen to a seventeen-year-old.

I heard my uncle leave his hotel room about fifteen minutes ago, going out to party and drink away his payday, I'm sure. With him gone, it means he took his security, which

put me in the clear to sneak out and get back before they notice. Kyle, Theo, and Beth will do anything for me. The security under them is under my thumb and we have mutual respect for each other. They wouldn't bat an eye if I told them I was sneaking out. It's my uncle's clowns at BNE that would snitch, and I do not need anyone knowing what I'm out doing. Not even Beth, Theo or Kyle.

I slip from my bed and throw on the pair of jeans I snagged from Theo on our last overnight trip before grabbing the gray hooded sweatshirt of *his* that he had left behind. I don't know why I kept it or why I thought maybe tonight it would give me the confidence I need to do this, but it is worth a try. I grab my navy baseball cap from under my bed and pull it on over my head, shading my face, before pulling the hood over it. From the back, I guess I can pass as a guy. My curves are pretty hidden in the baggy clothes. It's my height that I worry about. If anyone gets too close, they can tell right away I'm a woman.

With one more check to make sure my hair is tucked back far enough, I sneak out. And it's way easier than I thought it would be. Probably because Beth, Theo and Kyle trust me and think I'm napping in our joined suite. As per usual, my uncle's security is gone from the hallways, tailing him. Once again, he has made me vulnerable and didn't think twice about it. I take the elevator down to the main floor and manage not to have anyone get in my car. At the front of the hotel, the bellman gives me a second look but continues to call me a taxi anyways.

My knee bounces the entire ride and I'm thankful I have enough cash to cover the cost. "I just have to run inside quick. If I pay you for your time, can you wait for me?" I ask the older gentleman.

He glances back in his rearview mirror. "Sure kid."

Good enough for me. I bound up the steps of the club and let myself inside. It's one in the afternoon and no one is around except for the cleaners and the barbacks, who are preparing for the concert. I start to move toward the back rooms when I'm stopped by a man wearing a t-shirt with a rose badge printed on it.

“We’re closed. Is there something I can help you with?”

I look at him, our gazes meeting, and I can tell he recognizes me. His eyes widen a fraction before slipping back into business mode.

“I’m here to see Ms. Rosen.”

His brow quirks. “Does she know you’re coming to see her?”

I shake my head, my teeth snagging on my bottom lip. This was what I was unprepared for. “I just need two minutes of her time. I won’t cause trouble. Then I’ll leave.”

Big, scary security guard looks me over before glancing around. “Come with me.” He motions for me to follow over his shoulder.

I follow him down the dark hallway, silently wondering if I made a mistake, when he knocks on the farthest door from the front. “Ah, Ms. Rosen?”

“Yes?” I hear a woman’s voice from inside and my pulse quickens.

“There is someone here to see you, ma’am,” he says, glancing at me one more time.

There’s a beat of silence and I’m terrified she’ll ask me to leave. “Let them in.”

My legs shake, but I manage to squeeze past the big guy, giving him an appreciative smile. Mia Rosen is standing at her desk, hands on her hips, looking as professional as I’ve seen her in images on Instagram. “I’m sorry to just barge in on you without an appointment, Ms. Rosen, but this might be the only chance I get.”

Her eyes widen and her brow cocks slightly. “Do I know you?”

Carefully, I raise my hand to my head and pull the hood down before lifting the baseball hat from my head. My long, brown hair with ashy-brown highlights falls in waves around my shoulders. I meet her gaze with my own. She instantly recognizes me. “How can I help you, Miss Heart?”



My chest aches and I want nothing more than to release the angry, frustrated tears inside me. Blowing out a shuddering breath, I let her see all my brokenness. “I want to join your record label.”

Her hands fall off her desk and she tucks them into her pant pockets, her eyes assessing me. “You’re in a contract with Big Notes Enterprise. I can’t steal you and the damages you would have to pay would be problematic for your savings and your reputation, if you break with them.”

My heart starts to crack further down the middle. My head shakes back and forth, “My contract ends on my birthday, which is next week. At 12:01 a.m., I’ll be a free agent and I want to sign with you before my uncle gets the chance to sign behind my back again.”

Her head tilts, and she studies me, but her eyes are warmer this time. “Does anyone know you’re here?”

I can feel my cheeks blush and my hands tremble slightly. I’m really risking everything now. “No, I snuck out. I heard you were here and that Rise Above was playing at the Hibiscus tonight. I took a chance you might be here.”

“Why are you here?” Her brow rises and confusion is etched into her features. I can tell she’s confused as to why I would seek her out. Or why I would choose her above all other options.

Tears fill my eyes at the thought of being rejected. My body shudders with fear. “I was fourteen when my uncle first signed me with BNE. My parents died the year before and left me in his care, so he did the only thing he knew to do with me: used me to make money. I know it sounds crazy. Yes, I have money, my own house, cars, a private jet, and I’m famous.” I take a deep breath, reminding myself that this is my last chance at happiness. I can feel it. I catch my top lip with my teeth. Tears roll down my cheeks. “But I’m also extremely lonely. I’m invisible. I’ve been singing about love and relationships since I was fourteen, and I’ve never been in a relationship. I get dressed up in pink dresses, things that sparkle, and get made-up like a doll, but I hate the color pink.

No offense.” I feel bad saying it as her hair is a golden rose color. It suits her, whereas for me, the color is a symbol of my imprisonment.

“None taken.” She shrugs it off and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“I don’t get to make my own decisions. I hardly get the chance to rest or take a break and when I do, my uncle uses it to his advantage to exploit me, so I have to go back to work. I do everything I can, stay as busy as I can, so I don’t have to be around him. No one at BNE listens to me or shares my vision for my music or my brand. It’s the Princess of Pop or nothing. I turn eighteen in one week. I will have a two-hour window to sign a new contract, without my uncle or BNE being made aware, or my uncle forging my name and giving my consent again.”

“Why don’t you turn him in?” she questions. It’s a logical solution, and I know others might have thought the same thing.

“I’m underage. No one listens to me. They think I’m whiny and ungrateful. BNE doesn’t want to lose me because I make them huge money.” I shrug, wishing the answer sounded better. It’s pitiful and I feel so weak anytime I think about it.

“Surely someone has tried to help you,” she responds, but I shake my head in denial. I can’t. I won’t think about him.

“I don’t talk about that person. All it took was a little push from my uncle and a better offer and that person was out of my life too.”

Mia moves around her desk. Her brow is furrowed while she watches me, like I’m a problem she can’t figure out. “Are you sure you want my record label? I’m hardly as big as BNE. I’m just starting out.”

Little does she know that is exactly why I want her. She’s fair. Untainted from the industry and she’s known for her powerful, all-female employees and partners. “You signed Onyx Kiddrick. And Rise Above has been gaining attention since you brought them here. They’ve sold out all their

venues. I can do that for you too. I refuse to wear pink dresses, and I want to sing my own lyrics, but I promise, people will come.”

Mia steps away from her desk, approaching me. “When is your birthday?”

“A week from today. At 12:01 a.m., I am free from BNE and free to make my own decisions.” I lay out all the details for her.

“I need to check with my attorney,” she responds, and I instantly go stiff. If anyone finds out, I’ll be finished. I don’t trust anyone in the industry not to talk, especially if a legal representative is looking into my contract. “If BNE tried to slap some fake paperwork to stop this, I need to be prepared ahead of time,” she adds gently.

“Okay, yeah. I’ve never seen a clause about anything, but I respect that you want to check. When will I hear from you?”

“Leave me your private email to send the contract. If everything checks out, Rise Above will play one of your songs this week. If not, then something was wrong, and I’m truly sorry, Ocean. I will try my best, but I can’t make any promises yet,” she tells me, honesty and pain laced in her words.

My body deflates and the hope I had been holding onto seems to turn to smoke and blows away. I knew this was a long shot. I was hoping I could make it work if I laid my cards all out. Exhaling the breath I had been holding, I try and give her a smile, letting her know I’ll be okay. Somehow I always push through. “Thank you for listening to me, Ms. Rosen. I really hope to be part of your team.”

Before I break down in a puddle in the club’s office, I slip out the door. Her security is still there, arms crossed and minding his own business. I give him a small nod and rush from the club. The taxi is waiting for me. At least there are still some decent people in this world. I get in and direct him back to the hotel. Back to my prison. All I can do is wait and hope my fate can be changed.

# Chapter Twelve

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Ocean



*Present day*

*“Did you hear what happened at BNE records today?”*

*“No, what happened. Wait, are you going to tell us? Is this the news?”*

*“Ah it’s the biggest news of the day, boss!”*

I turn the tv off in my room, unable to listen any longer. The news has officially broke, and I’m waiting for the fight that I know is coming. I’m eighteen. It’s my birthday. And I signed with Rosen Records before my uncle or Mr. Townsend were even aware.

Mia had surprised me when she came through as quickly as she did. She didn’t play around. When I walked away from the club that day, I was shattered. I didn’t think I stood a chance. I became obsessive with listening to clips of all of Rise Above’s shows and looking for any mention of my name. I managed to make it through my own shows in New York when I got the news. A clip was sent to me from Tabbi in New Zealand. Rise Above sang my song to their sold-out show and the crowd went crazy thinking they were just fans, but I knew. She had done it. And at 12:01 a.m. this morning, the email came through in my private inbox. I read it over, as fast as I could, like he had taught me, before signing my name and sending it back to her lawyer.

I was back at home in California for my birthday, which hadn’t surprised anyone. My uncle went out last night and

probably got wasted, thinking he would have something to celebrate today. I knew he had a meeting this afternoon with BNE. But the announcement was already made public and my new agency was already trending with my name on social media. Just as Mia and her lawyer had planned.

Pacing around my room, my eyes fall on the bag I have packed and ready to go in case I need it. My uncle has never hurt me physically, but he yells, and with his paycheck being cut off, as part of my new contract, I have no idea how he will react.

Theo and Kyle are downstairs and ready to intervene if needed. Beth is outside my door and checks on me every couple of minutes. They're all on edge.

"He's home." Beth pokes her head in, her eyes round with worry. "Are you sure you want to talk to him?"

I nod my head. "I won't run scared."

Her eyes dart around my room and fall on the manila envelope on my desk. "What was it that Kyle gave you last night? A gift?"

I want to laugh or cry, I'm not really sure which. Kyle had handed it to me without much to say and that was when I knew. When I pulled the papers out and saw Platinum Records on the top, I saw red. I sent Ezra's uncle's contract right through the shredder. After over a year without hearing from him and how he left me, he had the audacity to hand his uncle's company's contract offer to me through my bodyguard.

"No." I shake my head, refusing to say more or less or to discuss it at all.

Beth is about to say something else when the door slams downstairs.

"Ocean! Where the fuck are you, you fucking bitch!" My uncle's voice breaks to the point it sounds like he's almost crying. I move to the door and Beth follows closely behind me.

I let my face relax, forcing indifference into my features. I've practiced this speech to myself over a hundred times this

week, keeping to the points that the lawyer from Rosen Records insisted upon.

“I’m here,” I say, as I walk down the stairs. Theo is posted by the door and Kyle is watching with concern in his eyes from the kitchen. We all know how this is going to go. Kyle will be the only one who gets to leave with me.

“How can you explain this? You ungrateful little whore!” Uncle Cliff yells, stomping over to me. Kyle moves to come near, but I stop him.

“I’m a legal adult and I can make my own decisions,” I start with the rehearsed speech. “I chose Rosen Records because I want to work with them. I’ll be leaving first thing tomorrow.”

My uncle’s eyes bulge, his face turns beet red and sweat starts beading on top of his head. “You will do no such thing. I am your guardian. You have a commitment with BNE. You can’t leave.”

“I’m a legal adult. You aren’t my guardian anymore. My contract with BNE was fulfilled. I’m leaving first thing in the morning.” I repeat the mantra over and over again, willing myself to believe it. To feel it.

Uncle Cliff reaches out, his hand banding around my arm. “You listen here. You aren’t going anywhere. Go to your fucking room and later we’ll go to Booker and you can grovel and plead for him to take you back.” He ushers me to the stairs and I twist my body, throwing him off. The backhand slap across my face was not something I expected or planned for. Theo and Kyle rush to intervene, which only works Uncle Cliff up more. Beth comes rushing downstairs with my bag and my wallet in her hands.

“You need to go now. Come on, baby girl.” She takes me gently; her arm wrapped around me and leads me to the door. Kyle is hot on our heels. I glance back and see Theo is restraining my uncle. He keeps yelling and screaming, cussing at me and telling me how ungrateful I am. A small twinge of sadness blooms in my chest then quickly fades. He made the

choice to be my guardian when he didn't have to. But he hasn't acted as a responsible adult in my life ever since.

Kyle jumps in the driver's seat and Beth tucks me gently in the back. "I already gave your pilot the heads up. Go to the air strip. Ms. Rosen is expecting you early at her hotel."

"Beth." I turn in her hold and wrap my arms around her. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be, Ocean. You deserve to be happy. As soon as I can, I'll come see you." She smiles at me and slowly tugs my arms down. The door is closed and Kyle starts driving us away.

"Should I call—"

"No." I rest my head in my hands, cutting off what Kyle was about to say. I refuse to talk to him. He made the choice to leave, so my life isn't his concern anymore. He made it abundantly clear how he felt after I kissed him and told him how I felt. There were a hundred other options than the one he chose. "Just to the airfield, please."

"Okay," Kyle answers and relaxes more in his seat. Guilt nags at my stomach again.

"I know why he left you with me. Now that I'm out of BNE, I would understand if you want to return to his company." The words out of my mouth feel hollow. The idea of losing another person who matters to me pierces my heart. I glance at him and he is already shaking his head.

"I'm happy where I am. I like protecting my Princess of Pop." He shrugs and I can't help the small laugh that escapes. "Where you go, I go. We have a nice little thing going. I'll let all the others know where to report once we get on the plane. Besides, he'd kill me if I left you."

I ignore his last comment and wipe the tears from my cheeks. I didn't even realize I had been crying until now. My left cheek is tender and I remember why. After all this time, my uncle laid hands on me. He had it in him to hurt me physically and I can only imagine how many other ways he has without my knowing.

When we reach the airport, my plane is ready just as Beth said. Kyle helps me on board and to my seat for takeoff. I have no idea where I'm going, but I assume he'll know when we get there. Once I'm seated, I pull out my phone and go through my texts and missed calls.

SALISH

You really left BNE?

MCKENZIE

You broke up with BNE?

TABBI

Happy Birthday and welcome officially to RR!

MIA

Welcome to the team! Happy 18th Birthday! You deserve all the best.

## **25 missed calls Uncle Cliff**

## **10 missed calls Unknown Number**

I frown at the last on the list. Unknown Number? Sighing, I close out of the app. It's probably a news station or someone looking for an interview. I'm newly with Rosen Records, so no one has figured out who will be in charge of my media accounts or publicity yet. The overhead light dings and I'm able to move around the cabin. I head back to the private bedroom and close the door before collapsing on top of the comforter. My chest squeezes and a sob rips its way up my throat and out of my mouth before I can cover it with my pillow. I'm free. I lost my remaining family member. But I'm



free. My phone vibrates in my hands and I glance down at the message from Unknown Number.

UNKNOWN

It's Ezra. Where the hell are you, baby? I'm in California, let me help you.

# Chapter Thirteen

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Ezra



She vanished. On her birthday, all the carefully crafted plans I had were laid out perfectly. I had slipped Kyle the new management contract and was ready with my arsenal of information to fight for her. All she had to do was sign and she would be back under my care. Somehow, she ended up signing with Rosen Records.

Somewhere she met Mia Rosen and they were able to sneak her a contract to sign before her eighteenth birthday. I had no knowledge of this happening; therefore, Kyle was also not aware, which means he has to answer to me. I'm impressed with the way Rosen Records has handled the media and speculation. They were ahead of the story before BNE was even aware it had happened.

I had worried about how Cliff would take it, knowing he's been continuously spiraling, and judging by the fact that Ocean was spotted in Philadelphia later that evening, I had my answer. I got my jet ready and after sending her a text, I flew to where she was. Maybe I couldn't get her under contract yet, but I could feel out how dedicated Rosen Records was to her. One wrong move and I wouldn't hesitate. Only she was unreachable.

I left two years ago to keep her safe. I know I have a lot of explaining to do and a lot of groveling. I've been absent from her life. I've missed too many special occasions and birthdays. Even though it was the right thing to do, she won't see it that way. All she remembers right now is that she kissed me with the sweetest kiss of my life and the words she told me...those

three words have the power to bring me to my knees. I need to hear them again. I will make her say them again, and this time, I won't hesitate to tell her exactly how much obsessively in love with her I have been since I met her. She'll put up resistance at first. Eventually we'll get to the point where our time apart will only be a small blip in our life together. I have to get her to talk to me first.

Talking to her has been a battle on its own. I tried playing nice. But then she dodged my text and my call to Ms. Rosen.

*"This is Amelia Rosen." She answered the phone so professionally with a hint of cheerfulness.*

*"Hello, Ms. Rosen. My name is Ezra Hamilton. I'm a talent scout with New Image Media. I'm calling because I'm trying to get ahold of Ms. Heart." My heart thudded in my chest with every second that was met with silence until she responded, her voice teasing.*

*"For an interview or to poach her?"*

*I chuckled at her questioning. She had no idea that I planned to take her newest client to possess her, trap her, and keep her. I would do whatever necessary to keep Ocean with me after being without her for so long. Even if I had to do things unconventionally. Images of her gazing up at me with her dark, beautiful eyes, while my hand splayed over her belly, pregnant with my baby, played on repeat in my head. "I know Ms. Heart from her early BNE days. I just want to check on her and make sure she's doing alright."*

*"I will let her know and give her the information," she finally says. In other words, she won't budge until she talks to her client. And if that is the case, I won't be getting anywhere near her. Yet.*

*"That sounds good, Ms. Rosen. Thank you for your time."*

That conversation was almost a month ago. Since then, I've been tracking the shows Rise Above has and paying attention to any and all information on Ocean that I can get. Kyle tries to respond, but he's with a new manager. They're at new venues. Ocean appears to be going to a recording studio

and the gym a lot. He's been busy, and I'd rather he take care of her than be at my beck and call. I've noticed all my men, who now seem more dedicated and loyal to her, have joined her. Except for Beth and Theo. They are under BNE contracts and I can only imagine the pain that is causing my princess. I want to hold her. Tonight might be my best opportunity. She's in Atlanta and then all of Rosen Records is taking a break and she'll be out of the country for a few weeks.

I bought tickets to Rise Above's last show at the club downtown. It was already being reported that The Kid and Ocean would both be there to support them in their VIP box. It was a good thing I knew the owner of the club, and he owed me a favor. Making sure to arrive before the crowds, I settle into my own VIP area, ready to wait and watch. I don't have to wait long. The noise from the crowd grows louder, and soon, the room parts down the middle, making room for The Kid and Ocean.

Seeing her again after all this time, in person, is a punch to the gut. Tight, black jeans mold around her legs like a second skin. She's wearing a Rise Above T-shirt that is cropped at the waist, showing a sliver of her bronzed, silky skin. I haven't felt her skin against mine in forever and the urge to go to her and claim her publicly rises in my chest. I want my hands all over her. She's beautiful, perfect. That girl is my beginning and my end.

I watch as they head up to their reserved seats. It's been speculated that there is a tour in the works for the performers. Ocean going on another tour without me isn't something I can sit through again. The guitarist from the band looks at them, and when his eyes find Ocean, he smiles. One of those smiles. One I'm sure the female population in this club wet their panties over. She offers him a smile back and a little wave. My hands grip the arms of the chair while anger and frustration coil my insides. I should be the one who gets all her smiles. I glance right at Kyle as he finds me in the crowd. His eyes widen and he looks to Ocean. To his credit, he doesn't flinch or even move from his spot. I send him a quick message. I don't plan to leave here tonight without talking to her. I won't

leave Atlanta until I make a few things clear about our past, the present, and our future.

The concert itself isn't bad. Each of the guys have their roles and their strengths. I have no doubt that with polish and practice, they will be a big success. It's evident that Becks and Spyder lead the group. Except little Spyder boy can't keep his eyes off of my future wife, and that is a problem.

It's finally their last song and I need to place myself where I know Ocean will pass. I've studied the club, and thanks to the favor from my friend, I know the ins and outs of the building. If Kyle has kept his training and security how I taught him, I know exactly how he plans to get her out of here tonight.

ME

You will give us a few minutes.

I send him the message and watch as he discreetly checks it before glancing at her. I see the subtle nod of his head and continue on my way. From below the area, I can hear the crowd roar when the band is done. Followed by the stampede of leaving guests, the laughing, the crying, and the ruckus from the paparazzi. It doesn't take more than a few minutes and I hear a small crowd moving toward the alcove I'm in. I recognize one of my guys pass by first. My heart thuds in my chest knowing how close she is to me. I catch her right as she walks by. Her mouth opens in shock, to scream, but I'm already pulling her into the small, private space. Kyle calms everyone down and stands guard. I hear very little protest from them but a few throats clearing, indicating they aren't comfortable with her out of their sight.

Her eyes widen when she finally realizes who is holding her captive. I smirk at her in the shadows, my hand gliding to her hip and pressing her against the wall. "Shhh," I murmur as I take my hand back from where it's clamped over her lips. Her chest rises and falls against me. With our height difference, and the realization she isn't wearing high heels, my

body curves over hers. The predatory feelings I have for her love it.

“Let me go.” Her chin angles up and she raises a hand to try and put some distance between her body and my own.

“I will,” I promise her, “but first, I need to know that you’re alright. You left BNE, you’re ignoring me. I want to make sure you’re safe here.”

She glances away from me with a huff. “I don’t need you to be worried about me. I’m doing fine without you in my life.”

My forehead drops to hers and I feel her intake of breath. Being this close to her again after all this time is doing things to me. I can’t get enough of how she feels pressed against my body. I can’t take any deeper breaths of her scent into my lungs. “Ocean.”

Her lips purse together and the unmistakable shine of tears coat her eyes. “You said you’d let me go.”

“Baby, don’t ask me to yet. I need to hold you. It’s been so long and I’ve been dying to get back to you.”

She scoffs and her hands try again to push me back. “It’s been so long? And whose fault is that? You left me, remember.”

My hand slides up and cups her face. I hold her so tight she has no choice but to see me, and I let her see it all. “I did it to protect you.”

“You did it to protect yourself. Congratulations. I hope having your own company makes you very happy. Now, let go of me. I’m so angry with you and I never want to see you again.”

“I know you’re angry. If it had been up to me, if we were never in the public eye, if there was a way that it wouldn’t reflect badly on you, I would have stayed. I’m angry too, Ocean.” I place a gentle kiss on the crown of her head, as I have many times in the past. Her body softens and her hands quit shoving at me, but she doesn’t say anything.

“I’m going to make it up to you.”

“How?”

I glance down at her and tilt her face up to mine. “I’m going to give you everything you ever wanted.”

I place a kiss on her cheek, so close to her lips it’s intentional. But I won’t press her tonight. I’ve already pushed past her limit. I can feel it. The last thing I want is for her to shut down on me completely. Plus, if I kissed her now, it wouldn’t stop until I was buried inside her where I belong. “Go back now. Before your security comes in here.”

I step back from her and she flees into their safety. I wait and listen as they guide her out of the building before stepping out of the hidden nook.

“I thought they were joking when they said you came to our show.”

I glance over my shoulder and find Spyder aka Riggs Mitchell. “Along came a Spyder,” I reply, cocking my head to the side.

He chuckles and takes a step toward me. “And he sat down right beside her.”

The easiness falls off my face as I regard him. “Do you have something to say to me?”

His large shoulders shrug, but I see the way his jaw works. If he thinks he can tell me to stay away from Ocean, he’ll be sadly mistaken. I intend to fight for her until she’s mine in every way possible.

“I don’t know her well and I don’t know what happened, but I can see that she’s fragile. She broke and has been slowly pulling herself together. She would never breathe your name to anyone, but I think you’re smart enough to know what could happen to her if things get out of control. You were her handler what? Two years ago? She just turned eighteen.”

My eyes flick around us. “The only one putting her in danger right now is you, saying things you have no clue about.” I start to turn and continue my way out of the building.

I wonder if I can get to the boxing gym before my flight. Rage is creeping in my veins and I need to unleash it somewhere.

“I might not know what happened. But at least I know what she wants.”

My hands clench into fists as I take in a few deep breaths. “So do I. And I’m in the position to give it to her. Are you?”

His lips smash together. Shaking my head, with a low chuckle, I get out of there before I bust his hand. He’d never play guitar the same again. If I wanted to, it would only take one call to the right people and I could destroy his music career before he even uttered the word sorry, and we both know it.

I slide into the vehicle waiting for me. “Take me to KO Gym,” I order, and like always, my driver obeys without asking questions. My muscles physically ache to release the tension in them. My phone vibrates in my pocket and I pull it out.

CALEB

Mason Namara is willing to meet with you and talk negotiations.



## Chapter Fourteen

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### Ocean



“Do you want to talk about it?” Jade asks, her hand running up and down my arm. Mia is sitting nearby and leaning toward me with the calming patience in her eyes that I’m getting used to. When I first signed with Rosen Records, I wasn’t sure how it would go, being the youngest and the newest to a group of people who had history with each other. What I didn’t expect was to find the family I had been missing. Since losing my parents, my life has been caught in a weird limbo of being lonely but also surrounded by so many people that I couldn’t breathe.

Then there was Ezra. And the time he spent in my life felt different. He made me a priority. My security, my happiness, everything good and special about my life he made sure I had. I felt loved again. I felt safe and able to dream. He was the first love of my life. When he left that way, it was a pain I had only experienced once before, but somehow it almost hurt more. He chose to leave. My parents didn’t. I also believed he loved me the way I loved him and his rejection of those feelings twisted and broke something inside me.

I haven’t been able to look at myself in the mirror. I get panic attacks if I’m alone. I haven’t slept a full night in two years, constantly punishing my body with energy drinks. Working out and eating less and less, trying to find an ideal type that isn’t me. I didn’t feel good enough. Then I felt so stupid that one man could make me feel this way about myself and the cycle started all over again.

“There isn’t much to say. He showed up, he took me to a private area and said he didn’t want to leave me. He wants to apologize.” I shrug my shoulders. Jade’s eyes narrow as if she can sense how much I just downplayed the interaction between Ezra and me a few weeks ago after the show. I didn’t even know it was on their radar until after the break when Mia showed up wanting to know what was happening.

“Spyder said it seemed intense. He said Ezra made a comment about giving you everything you wanted.” Jade’s words are almost a whisper.

Those exact words did come from Ezra, and just like then, they send shivers over my skin. “I think he’s just sorry he left the way he did.”

Mia snorts and her eyes narrow. “The man is unhinged. He’s trying to do a hell of a lot more than just say he’s sorry. Ocean, once he found out you weren’t with me in New Zealand over the break, or staying with Jade and Onyx, he went ballistic. Becks said he showed up to a show to see if you were there. He called my phone a million times and the company. Tabbi took all the calls but still.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell them, feeling the tears well in my eyes. My heart is racing in my chest. I don’t know how to make it better. I purposefully made it hard for him to find me or talk to me because I couldn’t face him again. I almost caved against him, feeling his body against mine, being caged in his arms for the first time in years. He’s still devilishly handsome, more so even now. His frame is bigger, stronger, I could feel the hardness of his chest when I pushed against him. He obviously never stopped boxing in our time apart. I can still feel the ghost of his kiss on my cheek.

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” Mia scoots forward and takes my hand. “I just want you to know that you can talk to us about anything. If you’re unsafe, I can help you.”

I shake my head violently. “It’s not like that. He wouldn’t hurt me.”

Jade tilts her head. “What happened?”

I blow out a breath and realize I can't run from this forever. I also have two girlfriends who would never judge me and only want the best for me. They're each going through their own relationship trial right now though. Mia and Zander seem to have turned a page, but Jade and Onyx are still dancing around each other. I can sense that it's just a matter of time until my friend caves to her rap god.

"Ezra was my handler at BNE. He was with me for a year and he transformed my whole life. He made sure I was safe, that I had people I could trust, that my money, my name, my assets were safe. It's thanks to him that I have most of the things I do. He was my friend." I shrug, my throat hitching from the emotions of remembering. "He's handsome. He's nice. He was always so nice to me. He made me feel like a priority and safe. He gave me all the things I wanted and then I fucked it up."

"What do you mean?" Jade asks, handing me a tissue.

"I told him I loved him and I...and I-I kissed him." The tears fall down my cheeks rapidly. "He left after that. He didn't say goodbye. It was like he couldn't get away fast enough. And then things fell apart again. My uncle somehow took over. The only thing my uncle couldn't bully me on was my security or my schedule. Not that it mattered with how far gone my uncle was already."

I glance at Jade and Mia who share a look. "I promise nothing else happened. We just kissed."

Mia grips my hand. "I can't fault you for liking someone older than you. But there is a pretty big age gap. Seven years. Plus, he was an adult. If anyone found out, he could have got into legal trouble. It could have destroyed your career too."

"I know. And I know it sounds bad, but I didn't feel like a sixteen-year-old kid. You both have to remember that most of my childhood was singing. I became famous young; I've been singing about love for years. I've seen and heard things a kid really shouldn't. When I lost my parents, I had to grow up and become the breadwinner of my family. I know it sounds young that I was sixteen, but I felt older and more mature than any

real teenager. I still do.” I sigh and finally let myself face them. To my relief, neither of them are looking at me with judgment or disgust.

“So now he’s back and he wants to apologize.” Jade glances between me and Mia. A mischievous smile plays on her lips. “I’m not sure I’m buying it. I’m with Mia on this one. He’s going to great lengths just to apologize to a client that used to be his.”

My cheeks flame red. “It was weird. He knew where I was. He waited until I was leaving before he pulled me into the room. I know he wants to explain and apologize, but I can’t get sucked in. Even though my crush was one-sided when he left that way, it destroyed me. I just want to move on and forget that I ever did and said those things to him. I want to move past this.”

Mia bites her lip, and she watches me carefully. But she doesn’t say anything or call me out on anything. Jade wraps her arms around me while we just sit there. “I think I could go for one of those watermelon smoothies.”

She hops up to make a batch. My phone vibrates in my hand, and as always, I silence it, ignoring the ever-growing stack of texts and calls from Ezra. I really hope that eventually he’ll give up. I could forgive him for leaving me. But my heart will never forget the pain or the way my world crashed down after he did.

“Should I just keep telling him you’re busy and will return his call when you have time?” Mia asks me quietly, and I nod. “Okay. I do like your place here. Will you miss it once we’re on the road?”

I glance around my newly-furnished, five-bedroom house, that’s tucked away and completely private. I bought it myself with my signing bonus from Rosen Records. I knew I wouldn’t be staying with my uncle any longer once I got out from under his control, and I didn’t want a place where he or his numerous bookies could find me and show up. He hasn’t tried reaching out to me either, which I’m grateful for. Nonetheless, no one besides the girls and my security know

where it is. It's my solitude. My place to escape when I need it. A constant to come back to when life on the road comes to an end. "I will. But I know it's here and waiting for me."

# Chapter Fifteen

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## Ocean



Watching Jade's body hurdle to the ground with only silk scarfs to hold her up makes my eyes twitch. I'm not really sure how she does it or how she manages to make it look so graceful. I love watching her in between my own rehearsals. Onyx is lucky to have her on his team for the tour. The Bedroom Tour is coming along if we can manage to get out of the spot of bad publicity. My heart breaks every day for Mia and the shit she is going through. I didn't peg Zander as the type of guy to hurt her again, but he did. And the whole world found out about their dark past.

Ezra went ballistic when it happened. He hasn't stopped trying to get ahold of me since Atlanta. Like always, I keep ignoring the pile of texts and phone calls. Most guys would have taken the hint or backed off, not him. My will to avoid him only seems to provoke him more. I thought Rosen Records was just really nice to their artists when my favorite coffee or lunches kept showing up at the recording studio. Or my favorite smoothie after a day at the gym. Mia knew I was having issues sleeping and finding time to eat. I made sure to thank her right away and I'll never forget the way her brow raised and a teasing smile played on her lips.

"Sorry to say, Ocean, but I'm not that kind. That is not the company sending those."

My eyes darted to Kyle, who at least had the decency to look guilty, before adjusting his tie and avoiding my glare. "Am I your boss or is he?"

“You, Miss. But Mr. Hamilton did make a good point that it is my job to take care of you and missing lunch isn’t good for your creativity,” he said back. My eyes burned and I couldn’t explain the knot of emotion stuck in my chest. “He also said you should cut back on energy drinks but didn’t want to take away your coffee.”

Ezra is being his normal, controlling, bossy self, trying to take care of me while I avoid him. I’m busy. He never shows up unannounced though, something I attribute to the fact that he took on a huge new client. Mason Namara is a male pop-icon, known for his genre-melding artistry and modern-day popular music. He is also a rumored bad boy and dances sexily on stage. His popularity is off the charts and he jumped from his previous label right to Ezra.

My own show for the tour is still a work-in-progress. The songs are pouring out of me, that is never the hard part, but I want my set to be different. I refuse to go back to the style I was forced to conform to for BNE. I’ve opted instead for blacks, dark purples, sparkles, and some fog to give it an ethereal feel onstage. Sections of the stands will be given purple neon glow sticks to hold up which will create heart shapes in the crowd. Something is missing though. Something like my best friend rolling out in silky black scarfs.

“Girl, when you swing from the ceiling like that aren’t you scared your arms are going to give out?” I call to her from the floor where I’m sitting.

“It’s actually a lot easier than pole dancing.” She winks at me before sliding down the rest of the way to the ground.

I laugh and hand her a bottle of water. “You’ve made miracles with this set, Jade. I don’t know how you do it.”

“Yours looks pretty good too.” She shuffles me with her elbow right into my side and I jump, laughing again.

“True, you did exactly what I wanted.” I think about all the changes she helped me with. Once I explained to both Mia and Jade my vision and the need to separate myself from how I used to be, Jade was more than willing to help me. I’m nervous though about how my fans will react.

“It’s going to be great, Oce.” Jade tells me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders in a hug. I hope she’s right but doubt still creeps in.

Tears spring to my eyes. “He said it won’t be.”

“Who?” She turns to me and her protectiveness flares.

“Ezra.”

Jade scoffs and shakes her head. “Fuck him. What does he know? You’re going to kill it and then you’re going to knee him in the balls.”

I smile at her words; the image is very tempting. Branching out and trying something new is difficult enough for me right now. Ezra had apparently seen the concept for my new show and sent me a text about how things on stage didn’t flow together and the lighting was drastically dark. I was upset that he had any idea at all, which was probably thanks to Kyle, but I also hated that when I thought about it all, he was right. I have very little experience with designing a set. I was never allowed. And even though I keep trying to remind myself of that fact, it doesn’t seem to matter.

“I’m going to go work on it some more. There’s something missing, but I just can’t figure out what it is.” I sigh, rubbing my temples, before walking out.

I grab the iPad on my way to the practice stage. Thankfully, no one else is in there while I walk around and picture how it will all look live. I’ve spent a lot of time on my wardrobe choices as well. Even with Jade’s help, the space just seems unused. Frustration rips through my chest. I need to show everyone I can do this, but mostly, I want to prove to myself that I can. They all want the girl with the ribbons and sparkles. I’m not her. She isn’t coming back. Being eighteen isn’t just an age, it’s a level of maturity, and the need for that to be reflected in my work is important to everything I do going forward. The world will see that BNE didn’t make Ocean Heart.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, like I’m being watched. I spin in a circle, looking at the exits, but don’t see



anyone. It's been a while since anyone has come looking for me because of my uncle, but this feeling reminds me of those times. Like being hunted. When it first happened, I thought it was just because Ezra was gone and I felt vulnerable. Then people started meeting me by my car or watching me from across the street, threatening me and constantly reminding me that they needed their money. My spine prickles with the memory, and I reach for my phone.

ME

You're outside the doors, right?

KYLE

Affirmative.

ME

And someone did a sweep today of the practice stage?

The dots dance and stop and dance again before he answers.

KYLE

I checked with Pierce and he confirmed. Is everything okay?

I breathe out a sigh and glance around. The feeling I had is gone now and I wonder if my mind is just too preoccupied.

ME

I'm fine.

I set the iPad down on the piano and sit on the stage. I let the silence settle around me, closing my eyes and focusing on the air in my lungs. I run through my routine in my head twice before I feel calm. My phone vibrates with a new text.

KYLE

Are you sure?

ME

Yes, I promise.

KYLE

Ok. Cause I don't feel like dying today.

I find myself chuckling at his message and my heart squeezes. In very roundabout ways, Kyle has proven that he filters information to Ezra. I don't doubt his loyalty to me, but I do think he keeps my ex-handler involved in many aspects of my life. I just don't get why now? Why does Ezra care so much all of the sudden? Maybe his new business venture is up and running and he wants a good relationship with Rosen Records, I don't know. *You could just talk to him.* The pesky voice in my brain keeps reminding me. I know I could and maybe everything would get answered, but I'm scared of what he will say.

I pull up my own playlist of music to get lost in and lie back on the stage. My mind relaxes when my favorite Sia song comes on. The minute it hits the chorus, my eyes snap open and it hits me. *Chandelier.* I need a huge chandelier and candles for the stage. My cheeks hurt from smiling so big, while I send an email to Mia and Jade with my idea and request. Then I Pinterest some ideas of what I'm looking for. My heart races with excitement. It will be perfect. Haunting,

charming, and a hint of romance with ethereal charm. *Take that, Ezra.* I figured it out myself.

## Chapter Sixteen

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Ezra



### *The Bedroom Tour is still facing backlash...*

More headlines. No matter how much I try to work with the press, they still keep this story alive. Throwing my phone down, I run my hands through my hair. The only good thing about this story is that my client's image is skyrocketing, which is what I need for business, but Ocean is struggling. I could personally care less about what happens between Mia Rosen and Zander Knight, except for the fact that the media has latched on and the story is being used to try and bury her new business. I have a lot of respect for Onyx Kiddrick, The Kid, speaking out on this as well as urging the press to move past it. Their music, their tour is completely separate from a romantic scandal.

"Caleb!" I shout, and a second later, my office door opens. He walks in, steady and ready to take action.

"Sir."

"Up Mason's press conference to this week. Leak the questions about artists he would consider collaborating with. We're going to start pushing for a collaboration with Ms. Heart." I look up from my computer to him. His brows rise a fraction, but he continues typing on his phone.

"Let his security know he'll be moving more this week and they need to update locations."

"Got it," he responds.

“And how are things going with keeping Cliff occupied with BNE’s legal mess? I heard Booker went after him when he saw the pictures we sent of Cliff snorting cocaine from the underage waitress’ ass at one of the busiest clubs in the city. I’m assuming Booker is trying to get him under control for the sake of his image. Everyone knows how close Cliff and Booker were when Ocean was with BNE.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I want him nowhere near Ocean or her performances. Where is he currently?”

“Mr. Townsend is trying to get repercussion payments from Cliff, but I think he must have something on Mr. Townsend because BNE isn’t pushing much. They seem to be trying to sweep it under the rug for Cliff rather than slapping him with more fees for breach of contract. And as of this morning, Mr. Heart is still in California. As far as we know, he has no intentions to travel this week.”

“Good. Keep on his whereabouts. I want to know if he leaves the state.”

“Anything else?” Caleb asks, and I shake my head no. He leaves and I push back in my chair.

Grabbing my phone, I pull up my latest conversation with Kyle. The poor guy probably deserves a raise for all the double work he does: keeping Ocean safe and managed and reporting everything to me while helping me protect her as well. His last message was updated information on her stage set. I hadn’t meant to upset her when I told her the previous set-up was dull, dark and basic. If she was my client, I would have told her to her face while being able to explain. With her being out of reach, the message didn’t get across like I had expected. According to Kyle, she cried and spent a whole day just doing design work when she should have been recording. She needs to get her new record out soon. After this tour, her audience will want a new album. I’m hoping she’ll also have a collaboration song on there like she’s always wanted. I just need to keep dropping the crumbs for Mason to pick up on. If he makes the offer then she’ll have to accept.

ME

Send me a picture of it when you can. And don't forget her chai-tea today. She'll be in the recording studio a lot.

I have her schedule memorized. She's never deviated far from what I set up for her. I built it entirely around her moods and when she works the best, so it's not surprising. What was surprising to learn about was the skipped meals and energy drinks. All of which I blame on the stress from her previous situation and my not being there for her. It's all changed now and I'm happy to see some of the life coming back into her eyes and watching her focusing naturally again.

KYLE

Already on it. She booked the studio tomorrow too.

I didn't want her pushing herself too much in her down time, but I also wanted to respect her work ethic. Rosen Records's clients were all doing everything they could to keep the tour alive and the focus on the artists.

CALEB

Mr. Namara wants a word with you.

Sighing, I type a quick response to Caleb to let him in. After all, I need to keep him happy to get what I really want. The end goal is always going to be Ocean in my life. In my bed. And wearing my ring on her finger.

Mason Namara walks in a few minutes later, looking like he just walked out of the gym. His shirt is drenched and his long black hair is wet. At twenty, he barely has any facial hair, but a dusting of a five o'clock shadow is present.

"Mr. Hamilton." He greets me with respect, which is always a bonus for this kid. Despite his reputation, I've never

had a complaint about him and I suspect it had more to do with previous company trying to paint him in a bad light.

“Mason. What can I help you with?”

He shoves his hands into his pockets. “I saw that an additional three press meetings were added this week. I also heard that The Kid is taking a huge hit because of his record label.”

My eyes narrow on him. “And?”

He shrugs, “I’m just letting you know I’m on board to help drum up more publicity to help divert. He’s a great artist and I hate that they’re all taking a hit.”

I lean back in my chair, my fingers turning my phone over and over. I study him, wondering if he just gave me the answer I had been looking for. “They are all being hit with bad publicity because of this. How about a collaboration with one of the artists?”

His eyes widen and he runs his hands together. “I don’t think The Kid usually collaborates much.”

“I was thinking of Ocean Heart. You two on a track with a music video possibility.” My brow rises.

“Ocean Heart? Like the...Ocean Heart?” His face lights up, and for a second I forget he’s my client. His interest in working with her strikes a chord in my gut and I hate his enthusiasm.

“The one and only,” I answer, keeping my voice even and bored.

“I’m interested,” he jumps in, “Let me know what you need from me and when. Thanks, Mr. Hamilton.”

“Just call me Ezra, Mason,” I direct him. He smiles and practically dances out of the room.

That went better than I had anticipated and the fact that Mason is willing to help out makes things somewhat easier. I send another message to Caleb, letting him know the plan, before bringing up the contract to Rosen Records for Ocean and sending that off. My plan is falling into place. I’ll make

myself indispensable in her life. I'll help further the career she wants. I'll be her protector and eventually her lover. She'll have all the success she wants and needs, and at the end of each day, the man who loves her, craves her, would kill and die for her, is waiting at home.

Standing from my chair, I fix the lapels of my jacket and adjust my tie. The plans are in motion, which means I have a lot of work to do. I refuse to let any more time go by where Ocean isn't seeing and thinking about me. I'm keeping her safe and she'll repay me with her unconditional love.



# Chapter Seventeen

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## Ocean



It's the opportunity of a lifetime...

The words have been on repeat in my head since Mia sent me the document early this morning. I hated that she couldn't be here in person to sit with me, while at the same time understanding that she needed to escape from here while the media continues to drag her. Even though Zander had started to publicly speak out in support of Mia, the damage had already been done; therefore, she was conducting business virtually for the time being.

We chatted over Zoom right after and she gave me her absolute most professional opinion before her personal one. This is the opportunity of a lifetime for my career to start collaborating with an artist such as Mason Namara. The conditions are reasonable enough that his management would oversee the production of the music video and mine would cover the recording studio time.

Mia's personal opinion was that Ezra was doing this as a way to get to me. I refuse to see her point, however. Then she really dropped the bomb on me that Ezra and Mason would be here later this afternoon to sign contracts. This was moving at warp speed and I wasn't quite sure how to handle it. It was just after the winter holidays and I didn't think many people were working very hard right now. I guess I shouldn't be surprised Ezra was. I don't think I remember a time the man ever took a break for anything.

I quickly slip into the shower and change into a stylish pair of jeans and a sweater before drying my hair and styling it in loose waves. With a few minutes to spare, and wanting to make a professional first impression, with Mason that is, I put in my lucky diamond earrings and slip on a matching watch. After sliding my feet in my most comfortable pair of boots, I grab the contract that Mia sent and my favorite signing pen. I've signed all my biggest deals since being with Rosen Records with this pen and I'm hoping the good luck continues.

I arrive at the office with plenty of time to spare and make sure to set up the room so that it's comfortable for me. Kyle is stationed outside the door and Tabbi is on standby, should I require assistance. I'll check in with her once we're ready to sign. If this is what I choose. Working with Mason is a dream of mine. I'm a fan of his music and talent. It will also help me branch out to other genres. It's the working so close with Ezra part that bothers me. Ever since he pulled me into that alcove, I haven't been able to function. His words, the way he held me, I don't know what they mean or if they mean anything at all. Then there is his constant interfering in my life and the tasks he gives Kyle. I don't know what to make of it all. My cracked little heart gives a small thump in my chest. It still believes in true love while my mind and soul fight desperately to remind it that it's better to be alone and not expect things from people so we don't get hurt.

I check to make sure that Tabbi is on the line before sitting down to wait. The hand on the clock ticks slowly in response to the racing blood in my veins. The meeting time creeps nearer and I'm honestly surprised they aren't here already. From what I remember, Ezra's motto was always ten minutes early is already late.

At exactly ten on the dot, I hear footsteps coming down the hallway, getting louder and louder. My fingers grip the edge of the table, fighting the ridiculous urge to run and hide. How do I greet him? Do I shake his hand? Just get up and invite him to sit? It all seems too detached. Two years ago, if he hadn't abandoned me and broken my heart, I would have hugged him. Joked with him. This contract signing would not have been nearly as formal and I would have done it with a gracious

smile on my lips. And he would have wanted it that way as well. Now I am not sure what he wants or expects of me.

My cheeks are tinged pink and my heart is racing in my chest when the door opens and Ezra walks in. I swallow down my fear, force a smile on my face and make myself walk over to stand in front of him to greet him. He stands just inside the conference room wearing a dark gray, three-piece suit that clings to his muscular body and black tie. It looks good on him. The color offsets his dark, chocolatey brown hair and those intense, pale green eyes. His style has changed somewhat over the past two years, and I wonder if it has to do with his change in position.

A smile graces his handsome face. “Morning, princess.”

My body stops short of reaching him, and my eyes quickly dart around him, making sure that Mason Namara did not just hear his manager call me the pet name he had for me back when I believed I was special to him. When he made me believe he considered me important to his life.

“Where is Mason?” The space behind Ezra is empty.

His eyes narrow, the look he gives me is intense, predatory and possessive. My belly flutters in response and my brain shouts at it to calm the fuck down.

“Do I not get a hello in return anymore?”

I want to roll my eyes, but I promised myself I would be nothing less than professional in this meeting. I let my smile relax and gesture to the table. “Good morning, Mr. Hamilton. Let’s have a seat and discuss the contract.”

Ezra’s eyes linger on me and the grin on his lips turns into an evil smirk. “Sure, baby. Let’s discuss the contract,” he says right as I go to sit.

His term of endearment catches me off guard and I almost bang my leg on the table. Once again, I shoot a panicked glance at the door, wondering if someone will hear.

“Mr. Namara couldn’t attend today. He had a last-minute interview come up, so it’s just me today. You can quit looking

at the door like you're about to be caught in a compromising position.”

I let myself relax more in my seat. “Okay, Let’s get started, shall we?”

His head tips to the side. “Not even a hug or a kiss for me today, princess?”

My eyes practically bug out of my head. “You just said —”

“I said you wouldn’t be caught in a compromising position, not that I didn’t want you in one.”

“Ezra—”

“I always loved when you said my name, princess.”

I roll my lips together, fighting to hold in any words I might say that I won’t be able to take back. He has always been able to rile me up and calm me down, the perfect antidote to my moods and feelings. As if he could read me like a book. I used to thrive on our connection, now I find it almost alarming. He leans back in his chair, the almost swaggery way his body moves is his signature position. He’s in charge even if you think you are. I’ve seen him close many deals in this way behind a desk.

“Can we focus please?”

“I’m very focused, Ocean.” He slides the contract over to me. “I have everything I want in front of me. There is no way I would come to this meeting unprepared or willing to lose.”

I refuse to reply to that or address the way my stomach swoops at his words. Instead, I take the contract and look it over to make sure it is the exact same as the one Mia sent me. It appears to hit all the same points, except the number on the back is larger than the first one.

“Why is Mr. Namara paying almost double for the time in production for the music video?”

Ezra leans back and brushes his fingertips over his lips. “For my time of course.”

“Your time?” My brow rises.

“Yes. His time was included in the original contract, but since I’ll be present and personally overseeing the project, my time is now accounted for too. Mr. Namara is aware of this change and signed off on it already.”

I glance down at the paper and notice his initials are indeed on it. I make sure to look over all the details again and pay attention to the wording, which is exactly what I was taught to do. I tap my nail on the table, very unsure all of a sudden. This minor change isn’t a huge deal and isn’t exactly unheard of. The suggestive way Ezra made it sound is what is giving me pause. I’m signing up with more time with him.

“Something wrong, princess?”

Shivers work their way over my skin with his words and I lift my gaze to his. Suddenly, I’m aware of how close we’re sitting together even with the table between us. It’s like I can feel the heat of his body still, and every time his gaze runs over my body, it’s like a bold caress.

“It’s just different, I guess.”

His eyes burn into mine. “What is?”

“This. You, me, how much time has passed, and we’re once again sitting at the table making a deal. But everything has changed. You look different too,” I answer, hating the faint stinging sensation in my eyes. I don’t know why this realization makes me want to cry, but it does.

“You look different than I last saw you too. Your hair is longer, you look stronger, healthy, even more beautiful,” he murmurs.

My hands clench in my lap. “Two years will do that, I guess.” And just like that the little bit of reminiscing is over for me. I pick up the pen and scrawl my name on the appropriate line before getting up from my chair and scanning it through for Tabbi. I don’t speak the entire time it takes me to complete the task, but I can feel him watching me. I keep my back to him and contemplate how I can just skip out of the room without needing to say goodbye.

I sense him before I feel him. Ezra moves so quietly, there isn't even a chance for me to move out of his grasp. One of his hands grips my hip, and the other runs the long strands of my hair through his fingers. A rush of heat runs down my spine and my eyes close. "I've missed you, Ocean."

"You made the choice to leave," I remind him, and feel the hollowness slide back into my heart.

His grip on my hip tightens, and he pulls my body into his. "Let me explain. Please let me show you why I had to leave."

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask how he can show me when my phone starts vibrating like crazy. Paranoid it's Tabbi and I messed up the contract somehow, I move away from Ezra and grab my phone. Jade's name flashes on my screen with a 9-1-1 in the text and a bunch of exclamation points. She calls a second later and I answer on the first ring.

"Are you alright?"

Her next few words take my breath away and my heart breaks for our friend. Mia has been absent for so long since her heartbreak was made public all over the media. It was terrible and I knew she needed to escape just to survive. I didn't realize however just how much more she had kept from us.

"Mia had a baby?"

## Chapter Eighteen

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Ezra



Groaning, I knock my head against the wall again, staring up at the ceiling rather than what is happening in front of me. I know I'm partly to blame, putting the bug in his ear, setting the contract up and insisting I be here, but I was not prepared for the music video. I damn sure as hell would not have signed off on it knowing all the ways they would be touching each other and climbing into the back seat of a car. Neither of them know I already told the director they won't be kissing at all. This is just rehearsal and planning and I already want to chop my client's hands off and carve his eyeballs out of his skull. Seeing her with another man makes me want to commit murder, whether it's acting or not.

After a moment, I take a deep breath and get my shit together. The faster we get this part done, the sooner I can send Mason home and finally have Ocean to myself. It's been slowly driving me insane that she keeps disappearing. She all but fled from Rosen Record's offices that day to go see Mia and her baby. She barely let me arrange the car to take her to the airport; she was in a rush and panicking. I couldn't get in contact with her while she was away. I didn't even know she was back until the notification from Kyle hit my inbox. The need to see her, touch her, talk to her is a building frustration. I can't even think about the pictures from her trip until we're alone. Dozens of pictures of my beautiful girl holding a baby had me undone. She looked so happy, natural, sweet, and fucking sexy as hell.

My mind is so lost in the memory, I almost miss Mason's arms wrap around Ocean, and when he tilts her head back, his mouth lowering toward her. My vision turns red and the real possibility of this guy's death is becoming a reality. A growl escapes my chest, and in the next second I'm next to her, getting in his face. "If you kiss her, I will end you in more ways than one."

Mason's eyes widen and the shocked expression does nothing to help me reel in my emotions. "The hell, Ezra, it's part of the script."

"I don't care, Mase. Back the fuck up."

"Can you two keep it down?" Ocean glances between us both, trying to keep her smile in place, while eyeing down any workers nearby. "We're not alone."

Mason glances from her to me and back to her again before taking a step back, his arms unwinding from around her body. "I guess we'll cut that part out." He jokes and the tension leaves her shoulders. I wish I could say it was the same for myself.

"I think we're done for the day." I call to the director and sparse crew. Everyone looks a little lost, but they start picking up and clearing out.

"You should head back." I shoot my gaze to Mason. "Caleb will take you back." He nods silently and leaves shortly after.

"What was that?" Ocean turns on me, her eyes throwing daggers.

I take her hand in mine and lead her to the private conference space we'd been using. "We need to talk."

"Ezra," she whisper-shouts my name, while twisting her hand in my grip, "there is nothing to say."

We reach the room and I push us both inside, before closing the door and locking it. Her eyes wide.

"Are you out of your mind?"



“I might be. I feel like the longer we keep going around in circles, the more unstable I become.” The restlessness inside my body has been flipping and churning since I first saw her again. I could care less if anyone knows about this or saw me drag her in here. I don’t give a damn what anyone says, what they think, what all of the music industry will think or say. Ocean Heart is mine. She’s always been meant for me. The continuous need I have to feel her lips on mine, to shove her against the door and taste her in all the ways I want to while she screams my name as she comes has reached its limits.

Her shoulders round and her arms fold across her body like she’s protecting herself from me. “There really is nothing else to say. I know you’re back. We’ll obviously be crossing paths. You said you’re sorry and you didn’t want to leave me, but it doesn’t change the fact that you did. If you’re looking for forgiveness, fine, I can forgive you, but I can’t forget.”

I stare at her wondering where I’ve gone wrong in making her understand. “Ocean, I can’t keep crossing paths with you or letting you think I’m okay with seeing you around in the business.”

“Then what do you want from me, Ezra?” Her voice shakes and tears fill her eyes.

“I want you.” I eat up the distance between us, needing to feel her skin on mine. My hands slide up her arms, glide over the sensitive skin on her neck and cradle her face. I don’t give her the option to focus on anything else but me. “Baby, I want you. I’ve always wanted you, even when I shouldn’t have. Even when you kissed me and told me you loved me, I wanted you. It killed me to walk away from you, Ocean, but I had to. I had already pushed the boundary of my contract as your handler. Your uncle was asking questions and making noise to BNE that you were getting preferential treatment.” Her eyes widen with the truth. Deep down I think she knows she did and that she still does. Everything I do is for this girl. I live and breathe Ocean Heart.

“If I had stayed, I would have devoured you in that hotel. I almost did. Taking my lips off yours was the second hardest thing I’ve ever done. It would have been all over, Ocean. I

would have ruined your career because those officers, your security...they would have come running back into that room thinking I was murdering you from how loud you would have been screaming from underneath me.”

Her knees shake and I manage to push her against the wall, taking all her body weight against mine. She feels fucking amazing, all soft and pliant in my arms. My thumbs skate across her bottom lip, her cheeks, her chin, memorizing every part of her.

“I wouldn’t have cared.” She breathes the words, and every little breath is a small touch of her lips against mine.

I grunt in response. “I would have. I broke my rules for you. I wasn’t about to let you break everything you worked so hard for, Ocean. I wanted more for you than that. I couldn’t be the one to destroy you, not when I loved you so much. Love you. Because I love you, Ocean, so much it’s painful not being in your presence. I waited for two years for the right time to have you again.”

The tears fall down over her cheeks and soak into my skin. I groan and press my forehead to hers. I tilt my head so that our lips nearly touch, I’m almost kissing her.

“Please, let me back in, Ocean. I’m sorry I hurt you. I promise I will make it up to you every day, forever. I’ll never leave you alone again.”

She hiccups on a sob, and her entire frame shakes in my hold. I take her arms and wind them around my neck, giving her my strength, nudging her to hold on to me.

“I’m scared, Ezra. I don’t think I can do that again. I loved you so much; you were so deeply embedded in my life, my every waking moment. Losing you broke me. Having you reject me felt like you plunged a knife in my chest. You left me alone and vulnerable.”

I shake my head in denial, because no, this is not what was meant to happen. I set up everything I could to protect her. I never wanted her to feel the pain she’s describing.

“I’m sorry. Forgive me, please. Let me make it up to you. Tell me what happened and I’ll fix it. Can we please start over?”

My gaze drops to her lips once more and I can’t hold back. I brush my lips against her softer ones. My mouth teases hers, tasting, dipping down until she’s kissing me back. I slide my hand behind her head, fusing my mouth to hers, kissing her like I’ve dreamed about for the past two years. She moans in surprise, her hands gripping my forearms before moving to my shoulders. I kiss her like my life depends on it because without Ocean, nothing else matters.

Ocean breaks our kiss first and I watch helpless as her eyes go from soft and horny to pissed and then blank. My heart sinks in my chest. “We can’t do this.” She drops her hands from me, and I reluctantly take a step back.

“Ocean—”

“No.” She takes another step away from me. “I. This won’t work. I’m not the same girl I was two years ago, Ezra. I’ve changed, we’ve changed. I learned to make it without you. We can’t go back. There’s too much damage.”

She turns to leave, but I have to touch her one more time. My hand closes around hers on the handle. “I will fix it, Ocean. I won’t stop giving you everything you deserve. I love you.”

She inhales before yanking the handle down and escaping the room and me. I’m missing something, something important that I’m starting to think Kyle had been keeping from me. Her words, the lost and broken way she looked at me, it goes deeper than what happened in that hotel room. I can feel it. I can read Ocean like a book, front to cover, with my eyes closed. She is hiding something.

**ME: We need to talk.**

**Kyle: I’ll drop her off then I’ll be over.**

He’s not surprised, which means he knows. He’s held vital information from me for two years. I’m glad he’s loyal to her,

but part of him protecting her is making me aware of everything about her while I protect her in the shadows.

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IT'S dark by the time Kyle finally arrives at my office. The tense lines of his body make me aware that what he is about to say could piss me off.

“What happened?”

He blows out a breath. “Going right for the kill.”

My brow rises. “I want my girl back. I want to show her how much I love her, how much I have always loved her, and all the things I do for her. But I'm missing something. There is something in her eyes, a tinge of darkness she didn't have before. So tell me, what am I missing.”

“She made Theo, Beth and myself not speak of it. Not to you or to anyone because if it got out, things would be worse than they were. Her uncle...he didn't get better once you left with his new title, like Mr. Townsend thought might happen. He became worse. And when his collectors couldn't find him, they started going after her. Outside her home, in the back alley of restaurants, they hounded her. She paid them all back.”

Anger like I've never felt grips me by the throat. My entire world goes up in flames, wanting to destroy, hurt, kill who threatened her or made her unsafe. “You should have told me.”

His eyes flare and he shakes his head. “She was a mess. I knew what you were doing in the background, but she didn't. There were days she didn't eat or sleep. Then you add on this thing with her uncle. She kept herself so busy, she worked herself into exhaustion. I know you would have rushed in to help, but then you wouldn't have left, and you both would have been at the same crossroads and set to lose everything.”

I hate his words and the fact that he's right. I would have said fuck-it to my plans, the deal I made with my uncle, anything to be with her again. “I still should have known.”

Kyle sighs. “We kept her safe. There was nothing you could have done. She didn’t want you to know.”

“This is going to be more difficult than I thought. She’s built a tower of steel around her heart.”

“Good.” He laughs. “You should have to work hard. Just because I know why you left doesn’t mean I think she should just cave. You deserve to grovel some.”

“I can’t lose her, and I’ll never give her up. Even if she begs me, it will never happen.”

He clears his throat, adjusting his tie. “We get it. So show her what you mean. Words aren’t always enough.”

With a final nod, he leaves. Once again, I’m with my own thoughts and the truths and knowledge of what life for Ocean was like without me. Knowing her hurt goes deeper than I had thought isn’t a deterrent. If anything, I’m more determined to win her over.

# Chapter Nineteen

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## Ocean



**Y**ou won't find me until the stars come out and the sun goes down.

*Until the shadows like to play around,*

*I won't dance for you when you call.*

"*Mhmm–mmm.*" I hum the melody and tap the piano keys in frustration. The plan is to work on the song all day, but I'm struggling to find the connection today. Sighing, I look over at what is left in the white to-go cup from my favorite coffee shop. My tea drink of choice is long gone, of course. The cup itself is now just a representation of the conflict between my heart and my stomach. *Let me back in Ocean. I'm sorry I hurt you. I promise I will make it up to you every day, forever. I'll ever leave you alone again.*

"Ugh." I slam my pen down on the top of the piano and push away as frustration grips my heart. I replay that day in my head over and over. Ezra said all the words I had wanted to hear in the past two years. I understand his reasons for leaving, even though I think they're shit. I was so in love with him back then that I would have been consumed by him. Maybe he was right that eventually we would have been caught. I like to think we're smarter than that but I also know my uncle is ruthless.

I wasn't lying when I told him I wasn't the same person anymore. He wants to start over, to be with me now, and all I have is a voice screaming in the back of my head that no one could ever love me. That he doesn't know me.

“Does the scowl on your face mean the song isn’t working today?” Kyle’s voice fills the little recording studio. I glance up and see him behind the glass, holding up a take-out food bag. My stomach rumbles in response. I hurry over to the room, and he laughs at how quickly I snatch the bag from him.

“Pasta O’Malley’s?” I hold up the carton of my absolute favorite chicken parmesan in the entire city.

Kyle shifts his eyes and runs his hands together. “You’ve been pulling double practices and then long evenings here. You can’t live on salads and air. You need a full meal and a little carbload.”

My brow lifts. “Does he pay you to say these things verbatim? I swear it was like he was just here right now.”

Kyle sighs and shifts on his feet, fully aware that I know he’s been conspiring with the enemy. “Be that as it may, he isn’t wrong, Ms. Heart. With your current schedule and performances coming up, you need substance. Plus, I think the lady at the deli thinks I’m flirting with her because I’m there every day.”

I laugh at the last part, imagining poor Kyle getting hit on by the deli ladies. I take the carton of food and sit at the table. The minute the cheesy, tomato marinara sauce and chicken hits my tongue, I think I actually groan out loud with how delicious it is. It is exactly what I needed. Ezra always knows exactly what I need.

I slide my fork and knife through the meal, keeping my head down. “He is the one picking out my meals and sending the tea and protein shakes, isn’t he?”

“And booking your massages and spa treatments before you leave the city for your tour dates. And pre-planning with James for your plane to be ready when you’ve reached the limit of hotels and need a night at home, even though he doesn’t know about your house and that also drives him crazy. That custom-made chandelier was selected by him. And just so you know, your uncle was slapped with investigation papers. They’re looking at him for embezzlement charges on some side work he did for BNE,” Kyle rattles off.

My eyes sting with unshed tears. My uncle has been unusually quiet when usually he'd be blowing up my phone by now. Deep in my heart I knew it was Ezra all along, but I chose to block it out. It was easier to keep moving, keep living, if I didn't think about it. Because if I think about it then I have to face the reality that he means what he said. Ezra loves me. Even though he's an idiot for doing what he did, he made the decision to protect me. It was the wrong decision. Or maybe it was the right one. But the fact that he made it for us without talking to me hurts. If he had told me how he felt, even if he had to leave, I wouldn't be as broken as I am.

“Where is he now?”

Kyle glances at his phone. “Mr. Namara has a commercial shoot in California.”

And we're in New York for another few days before the wedding. Our schedules rarely line up and it is a few months away before Mason and I start working in the studio together. It's probably better this way. I feel so torn and lost, drowning in my feelings. The tour and my music should come first.

“Don't tell him, okay?” I glance at Kyle while winding my noodles around the fork.

His brow furrows, but he pockets his phone. “Tell him what?”

“That I asked about him. That we talked about this.”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “So don't tell him that you like him taking care of everything or that you might not be as mad at him anymore?”

“I could fire you, you know.”

“But you won't.” He grins at me and then glances at his watch. “Oh, I almost forgot. You have two new security detail starting today. They just arrived, so you can meet them before we leave tomorrow.”

I nod and keep shoveling food in my mouth. The pasta really is good, and my body obviously did need it. As footsteps in the hall come closer, I wipe my mouth and my hand then quickly swallow down my food. Having new



security is not new to me. I feel like it's always doubled when I'm traveling, something I'm sure Ezra is also responsible for. I'm not prepared though for the emotions that slam into me when two familiar faces enter the room.

“Beth. Theo.” Tears spring to my eyes. Beth is already crying when I reach for them both. They wind around me in a group hug, Beth and me crying, while Theo gently rocks us. “How did this happen?”

“They were down to one year left at BNE. Rosen Records was able to buy out their contracts and hire them.” Kyle grins at us. “I'll give you guys a minute.”

Once he leaves and the door clicks behind him, Beth, Theo and I sit on the chairs. “I can't believe it. I'm so happy to see you both.”

“We're happy to see you too, Kiddo.” Theo laughs softly, while Beth continues wiping tears from her cheeks.

“You look so beautiful and healthy. I'm so happy you're here.” Beth gently pats my hand.

I wipe my own tears. The guilt I've held onto for leaving them behind pushes to the surface. “I'm so sorry I just left. I didn't even think about how they would treat you both. I just had to leave.”

Theo and Beth exchange a look between them that makes my stomach coil. I can't help feeling like I let them down.

“Your uncle didn't handle it well. I think the bigger issues were hidden from the press by BNE. It was rocky for a while until BNE was reminded that he was their subordinate. They took him on and he was representing their name. Then things cleaned up a bit,” Theo admits. The truth sends a pang to my heart. I don't want to feel bad for my uncle, not after all he has done to me and taken from my name, my business, and my fans. He doesn't deserve the pedestal that Mr. Townsend or anyone at BNE put him on. In the same breath, I still feel guilty for abandoning him when I remember that he had to step in and take care of me when my parents died.

“I'm sorry I wasn't there.”

“Oce.” Beth shakes her head and takes my hand in hers. “We are glad you weren’t there. He would have done anything to keep controlling you. And we didn’t stay long past when you did. I was moved to Florida and finished my year working with that retired opera singer, Leslie Marigold. And Theo went to Chicago and worked with one of the stunt doubles on a television show. Don’t feel bad for us. We did not want you to feel responsible. I’m glad you were safe and far away.”

Ezra’s words echo in my mind when he said my uncle would have done anything to hurt me if he thought it would get him more money. He knew my uncle was a ticking time bomb from the moment we met. Maybe he is right, that if we hadn’t stopped back then, my uncle would have found a way to exploit things. He still probably could.

“I feel like I need to tell you.” Beth looks from Theo to me. “Ezra was the reason we were able to move. And I can’t prove it or it wasn’t said out loud, but I think he’s the reason BNE had to take a better look at what your uncle was doing to their business.”

Theo clears his throat. “I know you always felt when he left that he sort of abandoned us, but I think he was always watching; there just was nothing else he could do.”

Tears spring to my eyes again, and I blink them back. More proof that Ezra was still trying to help me even while he was gone. I hate that part of my heart is softening toward him. I feel so torn between how it happened and what happened after. I wish he thought I could have handled the truth. Maybe then it wouldn’t have hurt so much when it felt like I had no control over my life anymore.

“Okay, well, we were promised a tour of the space and then we’re jumping in to training for your upcoming shows.” Beth stands and she and Theo start toward the door.

“You’re off for a wedding this weekend though, right?” he asks.

I nod. “Yes, Mia is getting married. I’m happy to have you both here. I hope you know how much it means to me.”

Theo smiles. “Like you’d get away from us that easily.” Beth winks and they both hurry out the door.

I twist in my seat and stare at my music board. My mixed emotions and the conflict in my head about Ezra stirs again. Lyrics fill my head and music fills my heart. I need to write these feelings down.

---

MIA IS the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen so far, because the way Jade and Onyx have been acting, I think it’s only a matter of time before my other best friend is tying the knot too. I glance quickly around the tented garden and make sure no one is watching me before stealing a sip of champagne. Not that underage celebrities drinking is unheard of, but I try my best to always avoid public ridicule.

I watch while Mia and Zander float among their guests, smiling at each other and looking more in love than I’ve ever seen. I’m glad my gut was right about those two and that Zander was able to pull his head out from his ass. He leans in to whisper something in her ear and I feel like they’re trying to get out of here as fast as they can. I giggle at the thought.

“I’m glad they worked out,” Spyder says, suddenly standing right next to me. His brow rises conspiratorial when he sees the drink in my hand.

“This is a judgment free zone. You’re my friend so don’t even think of ratting me out.”

He laughs, his head tipping back. “I would never rat out my little heart.”

I roll my eyes at his nickname and also hit him with my elbow in the ribs. “Liar. You are usually the first one to take my drinks away.”

“That’s when we’re at band parties. I don’t trust any of them with you or Mia. Or Jade, but she always had Onyx around.” He shrugs.

“Sure.” I pretend to agree with him and tip more of my drink back. Right as he whistles under his breath.

“And now I don’t have to be so worried about you anymore either Heart. It looks like you have your own protector and he’s coming this way.” Spyder grabs his beer and hustles away, leaving me floundering.

I know exactly who he is referring too. I saw him slip in the back row of chairs during the ceremony, looking absolutely devastating in his all-black suit and button-down shirt. He unbuttoned the first three buttons leaving his neck bare. My attempts to dodge him all night have not gone unnoticed by him, judging by the way he’s staring at me now, as if daring me to try and hide. I set the champagne flute down and run my hands over the silky, lilac colored material of my bridesmaid’s dress.

“Ezra,” I greet him once he’s standing in front of me, blocking my view from the rest of the crowd.

His dark brow lifts, surprised at my friendly greeting for once. “Ocean.”

“Lovely wedding, isn’t it?” I ask, keeping a smile on my face and faking niceties. My insides are rattled. Ever since I heard from Theo and Beth about what he did for them, I’ve been even more torn than before. Part of me wants to give into what he’s offering, while the other is fiercely guarding what is left of my heart.

His head tilts as if considering my words. He takes a sip of his drink before saying, “Our wedding will be lovelier.”

I gape at him, my mouth opening and closing. I’m caught off guard, but his words make my heart race and butterflies swoop in my stomach. “You can’t say things like that to me.”

He shrugs. “Why can’t I? I love you. I know you love me too, but your heart is broken right now. I’ll show you that you can trust me again, that all I do is for you and all I ever will do is try and make your life everything you want. In return, I’ll put a ring on your finger and eventually fuck my baby into you.”

My cheeks are scorched red and I feel light-headed from his words. Ezra had never even mentioned being fond of me,

now he's declaring his love and talking about marriage and babies. As if it's casual conversation and not a drastic change in lifestyle.

"You've never said things like this to me before," I murmur and glance around the party to make sure no one heard him.

Ezra steps closer to me, his hands circling my waist and pulling my body into his, gently, as if asking permission. His pale green eyes flare with triumph when I easily rest against him. "You are all that has occupied my thoughts since you were fifteen years old. I barely understood it, and there was no fucking way I would hurt you or act on it. When you kissed me in that hotel room, it changed everything. I realized you wanted me too. I haven't so much as thought of another woman besides you since then. I've been waiting for you and doing everything in my power to give you what you deserve. I love you, Ocean. I want you. I need you."

The whimper that escapes my lips at his words is all he seems to need, before grasping my hand in his and leading us out of the tent. No one stops us as we pass; they all seem to be enjoying their drinks and talking about the happy couple. No one can tell that my heart is thundering in my chest, my breaths are becoming quick little pants and wetness is pooling in my core. Something about his unyielding devotion to me and the dirty words coming out of his mouth have my head spinning. I need him to do something, to touch me, to ease this ache he's creating.

We walk quickly up the path and into the mansion of a house that I now know was Mia's grandfather's home before his death. I try not to think about it though while Ezra searches for the first door that will open, a small and bare sitting room. He closes the sliding door behind us and that's when I realize that we're alone, pressed together, and my body is tingling all over in anticipation.

"Ezra," I say his name and notice how breathy and strained my voice sounds. I want this, to be with him this intimately. The one thing that was denied me years ago.

“I want to kiss you, Ocean. If you aren’t ready, I’ll keep waiting. I’ll wait for you forever if that’s what it takes.”

I shake my head no, my eyes dropping from his eyes to his lips and to his mouth again. I can feel my body straining to be near him as if it’s known all along it belongs in his hands. Ezra needs to make the first move though. I need him to take the choice from me.

His hand slides through my hair, gripping hard enough that my head tilts back but not so much that it hurts. My lips are offered up to him, his eyes zeroing in on them, his pupils bleeding out.

“You look fucking beautiful tonight. All I could think about since I got here was touching you, kissing you. I need to kiss you, princess. I need to make you come on my tongue, on my fingers, on my cock. Say you want this too.” His lips whisper over mine with every word. My thighs shake and my hands grip his shoulders.

“Yes.”

His mouth slants over mine in a powerful kiss. I grip that fabric of his coat tighter, moaning in response to the way his lips feel on mine. His other arm wraps around my waist, pulling my body flush against his. The feeling leaves me gasping, my mouth opening in surprise, which he takes advantage of. Ezra’s tongue parts my lips and dips inside, plundering and tasting. He pulls away and our eyes meet for a heartbeat before he uses his fingers to angle my head for another searing kiss. This time, it’s deeper, and he groans before shoving my body back into the wall. My arms wrap around his neck, while his hands slide over my hips, up the sides of my waist and across my chest before his hands cup my breasts, squeezing them in his large hands. The heat of his skin against the silk of my dress makes my nipples pebble even harder.

I break away from his kiss, moaning his name. He chuckles and the sound is dark and full of sinful promise.

“I love you, princess.” He presses his forehead to mine, and I feel his hand start to slide the skirt of my dress higher,

the material fluttering against my skin. “Rub your pretty thighs together. Tell me how wet you are for me.”

I groan in response to his command, my hips pushing out from the wall, angling toward his hand. He hands me the material of the long skirt and I clasp it, eagerly holding it up for him. His fingers hook on the material of my thong and slide it down until he’s kneeling at my feet. He gently touches my ankle and lifts, so my heeled foot rests on his thigh, opening my hips wider. His eyes flare with victory, and he grips my thighs with his hands, holding me in place.

“You smell fucking decadent, baby.” His breath is hot against my skin while he trails his lips up my calf and to the tender skin on my inner thigh. I cry out when his lips latch on, sucking the skin and gently piercing it with his teeth. I know without a doubt I’ll have marks there tomorrow and I’d be lying if I said that wasn’t hot. I’ll wear his marks like a brand that I’m proud of. I brought Ezra Hamilton to his knees. He repeats the same routine on my other thigh until my legs are shaking. The muscles tremble, and I’m almost scared of teetering in these high heels.

His hands land on my waist before spinning me toward the wall. “What are you—”

His hand smacks against my ass cheek, but before I can even blink, he’s chasing the sting away with his lips, kissing, and then sinking his teeth into each fleshy cheek. “Mm, all mine now.”

My face heats and I have to rest my forehead against the cool wall. My free palm reaches back and holds onto his shoulder while the other continues holding up my dress as he requested. His hands dip between my thighs, parting them and shoving my feet farther apart. I gasp at the first feel of his tongue against my core, and I practically melt when he licks me from there all the way up to my ass.

I chant his name over and over in the small enclosed space, while his tongue runs over me again and again before his tongue lashes against my tiny rosebud. “Ezra!” I call his name

and practically feel the smirk of his lips against my swollen skin.

My dismay doesn't divert his attention; instead, he buries his face deeper, stroking harder until I'm almost balancing on my tiptoes, my entire torso pressed into the wall.

"That's it, baby, keep calling my name. Tell everyone who's making you feel good." His hands guide my body around so he's pressed to my front again, his lips placing kisses all over my upper thighs, my mound and against the softer flesh on my lower stomach.

I jump when his skilled fingers first touch my clit. I'm so over sensitized, surrounded by every smell, feel, taste, and thought of Ezra. He starts stroking and massaging with his fingertips, and my eyes flutter shut. My free hand delves into his perfectly-styled hair, gripping the silky strands with my fingers. He growls against my skin before replacing his fingers with his mouth.

"Ahh!" I gasp as his fingers slide along my inner lips, gathering the wetness there before pumping his middle finger inside of me.

"You have no idea how many times I've fantasized about this Ocean. Feeling your pussy gripping me," he murmurs. I force myself to look down, my eyes latching onto his heated ones. "You're fucking magnificent. And now you're mine. Every part of you belongs to me. I'll never leave you again. If anyone wants to take you away, they'll have to pry my cold, dead fingers off of you.

I moan louder, my breathing getting harder and harder. I'm so close to coming all over him. As if sensing how close I am, Ezra stands and repositions his hand so that I'm grinding against his palm, while he continues pumping in and out in shallow thrusts. He adds another finger, stretching my tight channel, and that's when I come, my inner muscles gripping and flexing around his fingers. "Ezra!" I cry out into the space, while my body shudders in his hold.

He buries his face in my neck, his lips sucking and biting. "Fuck yes, princess. You're so fucking perfect."



I can hear how wet I am while his fingers keep pushing in and out of me. My body coils tight, ready to work for another orgasm, and Ezra seems set to deliver. His lips find mine and he gives me a hungry kiss. I can taste myself on him and my skin burns. I bite his bottom lip and he grunts, his lower body colliding with mine. I can feel how hard he is through his dress pants against my stomach. My hand reaches out, stroking him through the fabric.

“Ocean, if you keep doing that, I’ll end up taking you right here.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?” I raise my brow, enjoying the look of distress that passes his eyes.

“I’d rather have you laid out in my bed.”

I’m about to respond when a door slams in the house.

“Zander!” Mia’s voice carries down the hallway. It sounds like she’s running and soon someone is running after her.

“Two minutes to get to your bedroom, Mrs. Knight. Or I’ll fuck you wherever I find you.” Zander’s voice calls after her.

I quickly cover my mouth from either shrieking or giggling. My eyes meet Ezra’s and I see the disappointment in his as well as a flash of humor. “We need to get out of here. I can’t be here listening to my best friend getting busy with her new husband on her wedding night.”

I drop my dress, once again covering my legs. My legs still feel unsteady when I go to reach for my discarded underwear. Ezra bends at the same time I do and he swipes them off the floor before I can.

“Wha-”

“Souvenir,” he says while pocketing it, a salacious grin on his lips.

“That’s my favorite one.” I hold my hand out for it. It really is too. The light lilac lace matches my dress perfectly.

“Mine too,” he says before dipping down and placing a kiss on my cheek and taking my outstretched hand in his. “Let’s get out of here.”

I can't keep my lips from curling in a happy grin. He leads me out into the hallway, and we sneak quietly out of the house just in time, right as the thumping of the headboard against the wall upstairs starts.

# Chapter Twenty

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## Ocean



EZRA

Where are you?

EZRA

Kyle is pissing himself for how much I'm threatening him.

EZRA

ANSWER YOUR PHONE OCEAN!

EZRA

Baby, can you please just tell me if you're okay?

EZRA

I swear to God I am going to spank you when I find you.

EZRA

ANSWER YOUR PHONE PRINCESS!

EZRA

Onyx said you're in Aruba??? Ocean, can you just text me back so I know you're alive. Please, baby.

EZRA

Just wait until I find you again, Princess.

I throw my phone down on my bed in frustration. Ezra had messaged and called every day that I was in Aruba with Mia and Jade. In my defense, we all swore to turn our phones off. Jade needed the time to herself to fully understand her feelings for Onyx and how much she loves him. Mia and I were there for emotional support, and if I am being honest, I needed some time too.

After Mia's wedding, I had performances lined up and the tour to finish. Ezra went back to being busy with Mason Namara and then news of his new company hit. We're both so busy that we barely saw each other. It was almost like a long-distance relationship without the relationship piece because we still haven't talked about it. Sure, he gave me the best orgasm of my life and I could live off his kisses, and he is absolutely my first love, but things are still in the gray for us.

I could have seen him this week, but I jumped on the opportunity to escape with Mia and Jade instead. I don't know how to handle Ezra's intensity and I need to sort out my feelings of what he wants from me without his influence. Of course Onyx was the one to snitch on us. His family connections allow him to find out things like where we are, even on private property in Aruba. Our flight just got in tonight. I know I should message Ezra, but I'm emotionally drained.

I jump in the shower and rinse the travel and the rest of the sand from my skin before getting out. I complete the homework Mia assigned me to choose the outfits for my next performance before sliding under my covers. My phone sits there and the guilt suddenly becomes too much. I open up the string of messages and quickly type out a reply.

ME

Hi! Yes, sorry I was in Aruba and we decided not to have our phones on. I'm safe, I'm back now and we can chat tomorrow. Good night 😊

I wait and watch when the message says delivered and then read. Knots tighten in my stomach, wondering if he's going to reply or if I hurt him by ignoring him. I don't want him mad at me. I wish everything was easier. Confusion, heat, pleasure, sadness keep bouncing around in my chest, fighting to be dominant. When I think about Ezra, my heart races. I get giddy and I want to see him. Then my brain flashes warning signs and I get scared to get too attached to him. As if putting distance between us will save me. Our schedules are already keeping distance between us.

My phone lights up suddenly. I pick it up like it's a live grenade and gently tap open the text message waiting for me.

EZRA

Open your door.

Oh shit! I hear a knock on my front door and I jump from the bed, racing down the stairs in my sleep pants and tank top. I never told Ezra about my new house. I haven't shared the information with anyone except for Mia and Kyle. The knock turns to a pound on the door and I rush over, sliding the locks open and finally cracking the door open.

Ezra's eyes blaze with anger and a hunger that has my core aching for his touch and his kiss. He pushes his way into my home, walking past me into the small entryway. My home is

modestly large, just perfect for me and the trusted handful of staff I keep. I know he would have needed a code to get into the neighborhood, and sure enough, Kyle is standing outside and gives me a hesitant wave before driving off. Wait, did he have a black eye?

“Did you hit Kyle?”

Ezra grunts and takes off his shoes before walking into the kitchen. “Fucker deserved it. He decided to wait until now to tell me about your house. I thought you were living in hotels in New York. “

“That doesn’t mean you should hit him. He’s my security advisor. He should be keeping all my secrets.”

Ezra shoots me a look that says I’m delusional if I really believe that. “He knows what he did. Is this place even safe? Has it been checked out by my computer guy? You only need a code to get in the community, how often do they change it? Do you have a panic button?”

I cross my arms over my chest and huff in annoyance. “For your information, this place is very safe. Only Mia and Kyle know about it, and well, now you. Kyle had Jerry installed cameras and a door alarm. The code to the gate changes every day.”

His eyes narrow on me before glancing around the kitchen. “I see you have the giant island countertop you always wanted.” Before I can answer, he walks to the living room and checks all the window locks before drawing up short. “You planted the Moon Flowers. You did everything you wanted.”

“I learned to go after what I want and someone gave me the courage to never settle for less than what makes me happy.”

The space between us crackles with energy. One move will ignite a fire that will consume us both. I’m sure of it.

“You disappeared again.” His words are soft and filled with blame.

“Jade needed us. We promised to turn our phones off so Onyx couldn’t track us. Not that it did much good anyway.”

Ezra crosses the room to stand in front of me. His fingers trail down the side of my face until he cups my jaw in his hand. “I almost tore down Rosen Records to find you. I left Mason’s tour early because I didn’t know where you were and my security guy wasn’t answering.”

Guilt builds in my chest for the fact that he was so worried. I know I could have texted him earlier or before leaving. I don’t know how to navigate these waters with Ezra. “I’m sorry.”

His green eyes darken and he squeezes my face. “Why do you keep running from me? The real reason, princess. Not just because your friend needed you.”

My tongue darts out to lick my lips and his pupils expand. “I didn’t know I had to tell you. I don’t know what you are to me after...after the last time.”

“The time I had my tongue inside you and then you came on my fingers?”

A blush spreads to my cheeks and my core tightens at the memory, wanting to be full of Ezra again. “Yes.”

We stare at each other and the intensity in his eyes bleeds into the space around us. I gasp when he bends and lifts me into his arms. I quickly wrap my arms around his neck, holding on while he walks us through the house and back to the stairs.

“I’m your protector, your security, your provider, your lover, your everything. I fucking love you, Ocean. That’s what I am to you. And you, you’re my fucking wife.” He moves up the stairs and finds my room easily enough.

Having Ezra in my room has always been a fantasy of mine, one that I pushed down deep inside and refused to believe in. Having him here among my things, in my safe space, is a heady feeling. He sets me on my feet and tears spring to my eyes, but he refuses space between us. My hands land on the solid muscle of his chest that I can feel through the soft navy t-shirt he wears. His forehead presses against mine.

“I can’t live without you. You undo me in every way. I don’t think you realize how obsessed I am with you, baby. You own me, Ocean. My heart, my soul, my money, my life depends on you.” He reaches behind his head and grips his t-shirt, pulling it off in one smooth motion.

My mouth goes dry at the sight of his naked torso. His tanned skin stretches across his broad shoulders and the muscles of his stomach. Ezra is achingly beautiful. I run my hands over the ridges on his chest and his eyes close at my touch. He groans low in his throat. That sound alone sends shivers over my skin. I drink in the stubble on his jaw, the ink on his arm and chest, and the fine lines that are starting to form by his eyes. I’ve never cared about our ages. Right now, he looks every bit of his twenty-six years and it’s sexy as hell.

Before I know what I’m doing, I’m reaching for him, and I catch the dangerous, hungry look in his eyes as they flash with victory. My arms wrap around his neck, and he hooks his hands on the back of my legs, under my ass, hoisting my body up and forcing my legs around his waist. Ezra carries me farther into my room until we reach the edge of my bed. His hands lift the end of my tank top and he pulls it off over my head. I feel exposed and lie back on my bed. Ezra wastes zero time and grabs for the waistband on my sleep pants, yanking them off swiftly as well. I shift farther onto my bed, moving toward the middle. Ezra’s eyes watch me with a predatory gleam, taking in every inch of my naked and exposed skin. My nipples harden under his stare and his lips part in response.

He slowly unzips his jeans and steps out of them. He moves slowly, crawling over my body before dropping onto one elbow then the other. My skin burns against his and I press my naked body against his, feeling the weight of him on top of me.

“Tell me what you want, princess. You can have anything. You just have to ask me.”

Desire flows in my veins, my blood sings a song of the love I’ve always felt for this man. A love he once left me for. In turn, I had to dig myself out of a pit of emotional pain and turmoil. But when his hands move over my skin in soft



caresses and he looks at me like I'm his world, it's easy to forget that time. He makes me forget. All that I really want is already at my fingertips.

“I want you.”

He drops his lips to mine, gently pushing them against mine, tasting, gently worshiping. “You already have me, Oce. What else do you want?”

My chest shudders with emotion. “For you to make me come.”

Ezra pulls back, his eyes locking with mine. “With my tongue?”

“Yes.”

“With my fingers?” He continues trailing open mouth kisses down my neck and across my chest.

“Mmhm.” I moan, my hands sliding into his hair.

“My cock?”

“Yes, please.” My head tips back and my body presses up against his. I want all of him and everything he is saying. There is just one thing I haven't told him yet.

His hand slides down my body, over my belly, and curves around my sex. He squeezes and the heat of his palm on my sensitive skin makes me yelp in response. Ezra drops his face to my neck, pressing his mouth there, his lips curving into a smile. “I'll take care of you, princess. You aren't just a beautiful fantasy. You're my dream. My heart. My soul. Mine. I'll make everything so good for you.”

With one more kiss to my lips, he pushes himself up so he's straddling my hips, and his fingers hook in my underwear. He pulls them down my legs and tosses them over his shoulder to join the rest of our clothes on the ground. His eyes darken as they drink in the sight of my exposed sex. His tongue runs over his lips.

“I need to taste you again first. I've been starving for your pretty little pussy on my tongue since the last time.”

My cheeks burn and I close my eyes from the intensity of his words.

“Open your eyes, Ocean. Watch what you do to me.” Our gazes lock as he lowers himself between my legs. I can’t help but watch while he runs his finger over my slit, feeling how slippery and wet I am. He growls before using his tongue, circling my clit before sucking the tender bud in his mouth.

My hips thrust toward him, begging for the relief only he can give me. Ezra’s mouth continues its assault on my clit while dipping his thick fingers into my core, pushing and stroking in and out, sending pleasure spreading through my core. One of my hands digs into the sheets at my side while the other plunges into his hair, gripping him hard. “Ezra!”

“Mm, you taste so good, princess. I could eat you every day. I’m always hungry for you.” He stares at me, his lips glistening from my arousal, and it’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen in my life. My heart expands from his praise, bursting with the love I feel for him. *Love*. Yes, I am still in love with Ezra and I probably always will be.

He pumps his fingers inside me once, twice, curling his fingers and stroking that special place inside that I’ve never been able to reach on my own. My body vibrates from his touch. My back arches, I’m so close. “Please.” I moan out loud. Ezra watches me, watches where his fingers start pushing into me faster, harder. My orgasm hits me and it’s quick and powerful. It’s so overwhelming and emotional and when I lock eyes with him, all the love and lust he feels for me is shining in his pale green eyes.

Ezra drags his fingers out of my pussy and holds them up. They’re glistening from my release and he groans before sucking them in his mouth. I change my mind. That is the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen and it makes my body heat everywhere. He slides off the bed and shoves his underwear down before climbing back over me. He kisses his way up my body and slides back between my hips. His fingers trail over my inner lips and I jolt. They’re even more sensitive now. He smirks down at me before capturing my lips in a hard kiss. His tongue parts my lips and plunges inside. I can taste myself on

him and we both moan together. I wrap my legs around his hip, inviting him to do what we both want. What we both need. Him inside me.

He breaks away from our kiss, breathless. “Did you save yourself for me, princess? You were innocent before I left, I made sure of it.”

His words are like a bucket of ice water. He left. He left me and thought in two years no one would take what he left behind. My mouth opens and then closes. I grip his jaw between my fingers and tilt my head.

“I’m not.”

His eyes widen and he pulls back like I struck him. “What?”

I smile, enjoying the myriad of emotions passing over his face. Disbelief. Confusion. Anger. Jealousy. “I’m not a virgin,” I tell him.

His jaw clenches, and he gives himself a shake. “I don’t believe you.”

I lift my shoulders. “I’m not lying.” I grab his hand and hold it up. “You were just shoving these so far and hard inside me, don’t you think there would be blood?”

His eyes look down at his hand, like it’s betrayed him somehow before looking back to me. “Who was it? When was it? I left when you were sixteen and no boy had so much as breathed in your direction because of me. I fucking waited and some piece of shit who probably doesn’t even know how to find your clit had you.”

“Why does it matter?” I raise my brow.

Jealousy blazes across his face. His hand lashes out, gripping my neck and bringing his lips within a breath of mine. “Because I’m going to kill him. I’ll destroy him. No one gets to have you and continue walking around with the image of you naked in their memories. No one except me.”

My hands fist against his shoulders when he reaches down and notches the head of his cock at my opening. His brows

bunch together, his jaw flexes, and god, he looks so damn beautiful jealous and unhinged.

“You shouldn’t have left me.”

Ezra’s control snaps with my words. He plunges inside and pulls out, glancing down between us. “There’s no blood. Who the fuck was it, Ocean?”

My hands run over his back, and I trail my lips over his jaw, kissing and coaxing him to move. My legs wrap around his hips. “Please don’t stop. I want you so bad, Ezra.”

He growls and pushes all the way back in. My mouth drops open, my hands sliding to his sides, gripping him hard.

“You’re so hot and tight around me, princess. Your pussy feels like heaven. It feels like home.”

He pumps deeper into me in a rhythm that sets my body aflame. My soul sings and my heart bursts at the same time. I have him, in all the ways I’ve always wanted. Ezra always wants to know what I want and the answer has always simply been him. I chant his name between each kiss he gives my lips. Moaning when he moves down my neck to my breasts and pulls a puckered nipple into his mouth. The dual sensations cause my thighs to quiver around him and I feel him chuckle.

“You’re going to come so beautifully, princess. I can already feel your pretty pussy latching on to me, pulling me deeper, refusing to let go.”

“Yes.”

“Only me, Ocean. I’ll kill any man who thinks of touching you again. Say it.” He rocks into me roughly, while sliding his hand between our joined bodies.

“Only you.”

“That’s good, baby. And tell me who I am to you.”

My eyes widen, the words on my tongue. His previous declaration that I was his wife still lingers in my mind. I can’t say it yet though. It would be crazy, right?

“You’re mine,” I answer and swivel my hips against his thrusts.

His eyes flare in triumph, and he finds my clit again, rubbing it fast and slow while thrusting his cock hard and deep. My orgasm builds and builds, his thrusts forcefully driving me to the edge. I can’t hold him tight enough, my hands frantic, my nails biting into his skin. Until my body is pitched over the edge of pleasure once more.

I scream his name and feel my inner muscles clamp down on his length. “Fuck, baby you come so beautifully.” His hand flexes on my throat and the other digs into the bed at my side. His eyes are glazed with pleasure. He thrusts once, twice, three times before shoving himself as deep as he can, brushing against my cervix. I feel the hot release of his cum while he says my name over and over, his forehead pressed against mine.

We’re both panting when Ezra pulls out, shifts to his side and props up on his elbow. I go to move with him, but his hands shoot out. “No, baby, just rest. I’ll get us cleaned up in a second.”

I lie there with his large hand on my stomach and guilt starts to creep in. “There was no one else.”

“What?” He glances up at me.

“There were no other guys. I. I did it myself,” I confess.

Shock moves across Ezra’s face and is followed by confusion. “What do you mean?”

I sigh and move to sit up, but he gently pushes me back down, his hard body crowding mine. “I did it myself. I bought a BOB and broke my own hymen. I thought you left me because you didn’t want me. That everything I had been feeling meant nothing. I didn’t want to feel that way ever again. It was the same time that the rumor started of that singer, Mikael, taking that one girl’s virginity started circling, and they said he had pictures.”

“I remember,” Ezra whispers.

“I didn’t want that to ever happen to me. I only trusted you. I would never trust any other man to have sex with me and not think he was a big shot for getting Ocean Heart’s virginity, or getting paid thousands for proof of blood. So I took away that option. I didn’t think anyone would ever find out.” Tears spring to my eyes. “I didn’t think you were ever coming back.”

Ezra pulls me closer to him, tightening his hold around me. “I will never leave you again.” I nod against his naked skin, my fingers brushing away the tears I leave on him. I want to hold him too. My leg rises and that’s when I feel it. The sticky mess between my thighs.

“Ezra.”

He looks down and notices it too. “Oh shit.” His fingers swipe down, gathering his cum, before shoving it back inside me. “Fuck, I love seeing you like this.”

He does it a second and a third time while my brain tries to catch up to what he’s doing, how wrong it is. While at the same time, my body is heating, wanting more, more, more. I shake myself out of the spell he’s putting me under and roll away from him, slipping off the bed and grabbing for my clothes before he can snatch me back.

“Ezra. We didn’t use a condom.”

His eyes darken and glitter, a smirk tugs at his lips. He sits up in my bed, the sheet pooling around his stomach. I can see the outline of his cock from here and it makes my cheeks flame red.

“I haven’t been with anyone for three years and had checkups and physicals in the meantime. I’m clean. I wouldn’t do anything to harm you.”

I gape at him. “Well, that’s great and all, except we didn’t think about birth control at all.”

“You aren’t on the pill or anything still?”

“No.” I slam my hand against my head. “I never had a reason to. And I thought if my life got to this point where I was considering sex, I’d go see my doctor.”

His face shutters and he climbs out of bed, reaching for his jeans. “So don’t.”

“What? Are you crazy?”

He shrugs. “I want you forever. To me that means marriage and babies and I don’t really care which order they come in. You’re already mine.”

“You can’t be serious. I’m on tour still.” He prowls toward me, looping his arms around my back.

“You wouldn’t even be showing yet when the tour is finished.”

“I.” My brain is sluggish and I can’t think while he’s holding me and saying words like marriage and babies. “This isn’t right. I’m eighteen.”

“Nineteen soon,” he reminds me, his hands sliding down to squeeze the fleshy part of my ass cheeks.

“Now is not the time, Ezra. Maybe someday, but we’re just figuring things out—”

“Figuring out what? There’s nothing left to figure out, Ocean. We’re together. You’re going to learn to trust me again and love me. In the meantime, I’ll keep loving you and giving you everything you want.” He says earnestly. Our eyes meet in battle. “Say we’re together.”

“Fine. We’re together,” I respond right as his mouth crashes down on mine, kissing me hungrily. I welcome it, needing it to feel secure. I pull back and eye him seriously. “I’m getting on the pill though. We’re taking this slowly.”

“Ocean, as long as I have you, I can wait.” He takes my face between his hands.

“We’re really doing this.”

“You’ll never get away from me, princess.” He kisses my lips with the darkest promise shimmering in his eyes.

## Chapter Twenty-One

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### Ocean



The crowd's cheers are deafening when I dance across the stage, the gauzy, black dress from the previous performance falls away, revealing the black lace bodysuit underneath. It's shiny and catches all the lighting just right. The material hugs my body like a second skin, while almost being modest at the same time. It covers my breasts and arms, but it ends just a few inches below my ass cheeks, giving the illusion that I'm covered in only a little bit of lace. Just like I wanted, to draw the attention of the man who believes he owns me.

*There's nothing wrong with being bad.*

*"There's nothing wrong with drinks out, nights out that turn into early mornings.*

*When they ask if I have a man, I smile and wave.*

*No one can hold me down..."*

The fact that I changed up my whole performance tonight to include my newest single, Nights Out, shocked most people. Except maybe Kyle. He looked like someone just kicked him.

I'm lifted onto the grand piano while my dancer kneels between my legs and the crowd eats it up. My finger trails down his face, but it's the camera I'm giving all my attention to.

*"I'd be bad, bad for you.*

*But I can be a real good girl too. "*



I step onto the piano, while the male dancer unzips the back of my bodysuit and reveals my last and final change. Black booty shorts that shimmer and a black bikini cut halter top of the exact same material, that exposes my torso. Never have I felt more powerful than I do right now commanding the stage.

I have a few twists of my hips before dropping low, where another dancer picks me up and I slide down his front, much like I imagine doing for Ezra.

My boyfriend.

My lover.

The man who wants to marry me apparently. The need to rile him up to see how long his new found infatuation for me cuts through my heart. I want to believe him, to give in. I also want him to have to fight for me, to prove to me he's as sorry as he says he is.

*“If you love me let me know, I don't have time to put on a show.*

*There's no shame in being hungry for one another.*

*I want to know. You want to know.*

*Kiss me now and let me take you to the place where all the dreamers go...”*

My heart beats wildly in my chest and I smile, real, genuine, flirty the whole time. I hope that Ezra hears about this. I hope it makes its way across his socials, texts, videos, all of it. He's closing an agreement with a client in Toronto tonight, and in my every growing persistence of driving him crazy, I'm leaving right from Arizona to Atlanta.

So far every time I tease him, Ezra has come running. The man is persistent, I will give him that. Every time I complain about our distance, or question if we can balance his job with my tour, he has an answer. It usually involves showing up at whatever city I'm in and giving me an orgasm as well. Just like two weeks ago after the show in Austin.

*“What are you doing here?” I quickly close the door to my dressing room, cautious of anyone who might walk in. Kyle escorted me off the stage and dropped me off. He gave us both an annoyed look before turning to stand guard. I only have a quick twenty minutes before my final set of the night.*

*“You’re here, why wouldn’t I be?” he replies, stalking toward me with his hands still tucked in the pockets of his suit pants. My eyes take in his fitted vest over the white button-up. His sleeves are rolled up and the veins in his arms flex under my stare. I never thought I would be a girl who finds arm veins sexy but I am. I moan a little harder when I see them working while his fingers plunge inside me.*

*“I thought you said Mason was doing back-to-back shows in Minneapolis?” My brow rises, while shivers run through me. He watches me with a predatory glint in his eyes as he reaches for me and guides me over to the chair.*

*I can’t take my eyes off of him when he positions me in front of him before lifting my leg and placing my heeled foot in his lap. Ezra’s hands run down my naked thigh to the buckle on my shoe.*

*“Mason is a big boy. He’s making millions. Nothing comes before you princess. You sent me that naughty little text earlier, how could I not respond.”*

*My cheeks ting pink thinking of the little private dance I sent of myself earlier while not wearing much. Still, I didn’t think he’d fly to see me after sending it.*

*“Were you missing me, Ocean? Did you need my attention?”*

*I swallow the emotion clogged in my throat. Yes, I did need him. Ever since his declaration, I want him to keep proving it to me that this is real. That I won’t lose him tomorrow.*

*“Yes.” My voice is breathless and needy. Ezra’s eyes darken. He gently sets my leg down before grabbing the other one, repeating the same process and taking my heels off.*

*“Turn around, baby.”*

*My body acts at his command, turning to face the door, and my gaze catches on us in the mirror at my makeup table. I can see Ezra's muscled legs spread wide, bracketing my body. His large hands slide from my hips and up my waist, squeezing my breasts. I moan, never taking my eyes off of us.*

*I feel the zipper on the back of my deep purple dress being pulled down, his hands guiding it off over my body until I'm completely naked. I like how it looks with him completely dressed and put together while I stand with nothing on. I feel empowered. I hear him groan, his hands moving to my ass cheeks, where he squeezes them before spreading out over my hips, guiding me backward.*

*"Sit over me." He arranges my legs so that I'm positioned over his lap, my back to his chest. I can feel his heart beat erratically in his chest. One of his hands moves to my front, cupping my breast before his fingers tease my nipple. I moan into the room loudly and he chuckles.*

*"Remember everyone is outside the door, princess."*

*I clamp down on my lips, resisting the urge when his other hand slides down my front, finding my clit and feeling how wet I've been for him since the minute I walked in the door. His lips touch my back, my shoulder and my neck, sending shivers over my skin and chasing it with a wave of heat. I melt into his grip, letting his hold on my body lead me where he wants me.*

*I'm panting as he plays with my clit, rubbing it fast then slow, my hips jerking, chasing his hand for relief. My legs shake from the strain of pushing them to open wider for him. My mind barely registers the sound of his zipper being lowered before I feel the thick head of his cock bump against me. His hands push my body down and then he thrusts into me, swift and deep. I cry out and clutch the arm rests on the chair, my head falling back.*

*His hand grabs the hair at the back of my head, forcing my head up, my eyes back on the mirror, where they lock on his ferocious expression. "You're going to watch us, princess. You're going to look until this image is imprinted into your mind. Watch how well you take my cock, how wet you get for*

*me. How hard I get for my girl, only for my girl. You're so fucking beautiful up there. On that stage."*

*He continues whispering dirty things into my ear as he works himself deeper with every stroke, making my core tighten around him, gripping him. He places open mouth kisses all over my back, sucking my skin, and nipping until I'm sure I'll be wearing his mark the rest of the night.*

*"Ezra," I whimper his name, needing more, needing the relief I know he can give me.*

*With one hand secure on my hip, he slides the other around my front, his fingers finding my clit again, rubbing me so that I'm drowning in pleasure and hurtling into my orgasm. Ezra's hips snap harder, bouncing my body in his lap. I keep my gaze on his in the mirror, watching his eyes become hooded, blazing with a look bordering on possession and love.*

*"There is nowhere else I ever want to be than here with you. Inside you. My cock belongs here. And so does my cum."* He growls, thrusting up and driving his cock even deeper, climaxing at the same time he clamps down on my shoulder with his teeth.

*"Ahhh!" I cry out and I swear he jerks even more violently inside me.*

*Ezra's arms wrap around my torso, holding my body against his. The buttons on his vest pinch my skin, but I don't want to leave his embrace, and I definitely don't want to go back out and entertain the crowd. Eventually, Kyle knocks on the door and I'm forced to leave his lap. Ezra lifts me up and places me back on my feet. He shoves his still semi-hard cock back in his pants and stands. I feel absolutely wrecked and somehow, he looks even sexier, with his hair messy but nothing else on him out of place.*

*He smirks at me before bending down and placing a hard kiss on my mouth, his tongue parting my lips and sweeping inside. My hands flutter against his shoulders. "I like this. I like knowing you're going back out there with my cum dripping down your legs. I hope all your fans can see it. Can see that you're mine."*

*His words cause a flare of panic within me. We didn't use protection again. I did visit my doctor about birth control and started taking the pill, but it's new. We really need to stop being so reckless.*

*"At least I'm on the pill now."*

*Ezra pulls away and an emotion I can't name flashes in his eyes before he nods. "Yeah. That's right, princess."*

*I swear he sounds almost disappointed but that would be crazy. I grab for a pair of underwear and my baggy pants and crop top. One look in the mirror and I blanch.*

*"I look—"*

*"Like you just got fucked hard in your dressing room."*

*I elbow him away from me. "Ezra. This isn't funny." I throw my top on.*

*He moves me to the mirror before grabbing my makeup wipe and swiping under my eyes. I go completely still when he takes my glitter lipstick and applies a new layer to my lips. It's then that I realize his own have a hint of shimmer now too. I lift my hand to wipe across his mouth, but he shakes his head. "Don't."*

*"But—"*

*"No. I want to taste you later when I'm flying back to Ohio."*

*"You're leaving?"*

*He nods. "Our schedules won't match up again for a few weeks. I'll find you again when I can."*

*My eyes fall and my heart feels crushed. I'm so gone for him again that it's scary. I depend on him so much. We just declared being together and I already hate being without him.*

*That memory was two weeks ago and I've been missing him again. The show ends, and as always, I find Kyle, who ushers me off the stage and toward my room. The small twinge of disappointment in my stomach flares to life when I*

don't find Ezra waiting for me inside. Glancing down at my phone, I have no new messages or missed calls.

Holding back tears, I slip out of my outfit and quickly wash the makeup off my face before throwing on a t-shirt and sweater and a pair of leggings. When I open the door, Beth is waiting for me, and we move in the opposite direction before taking an elevator to the highest level of the parking garage on top of the building. Theo is already waiting at the elevator.

“Great show tonight, O,” he says, and we bump fists.

“You looked gorgeous. Whoever is helping design your new outfits is perfect for you,” Beth adds. I give her a quick side hug. We reach the top and when the door opens, Kyle is waiting. They all usher me to the vehicle and I jump in the back. Kyle slides in next to the driver and soon we're speeding away. I twirl the phone in my lap, willing it to ring. The more miles that creep between the moving vehicle and the airport, I realize I was too hopeful. Even if Ezra did miss me too, he was busy. I feel almost childish for trying to bait him.

The car takes a sudden left turn into another parking garage. I whip my head around and see Beth and Theo keep moving past us. No other vehicles appear to be tailing ours. “Kyle, what is happening?”

He glances back at me, a hint of unease on his face. “The boss wanted a word.”

We pull onto the top level where another all-black car is waiting, the headlights casting an eerie glow in the night. Everything hits me full force: my attitude, the performance, and I gulp. It's one thing to provoke the lion, it's another to lure him in for a battle.

“Any chance he's in a good mood?”

Kyle looks at me and his expression is anything but positive. “We'll meet you at the airstrip, Ms. Heart.”

My fingers tremble slightly, but I manage to grab the handle and open the door. I start walking, startling when my car turns and leaves. Ezra gets out of the back door, holding it open for me to get in. Our eyes meet and I feel my stomach

sink at the anger blazing in his. His jaw is clenched and so is his free hand at his side. I might have really messed this all up. I can't think of any other reason for him to be here other than to scold me. Despite his glare, my heart beats faster. He looks dangerously beautiful in his black dress pants and jacket over a white button-up shirt that has a few buttons open at the top. His dark hair is perfectly styled in that signature messy look of his.

"Hi," I start to apologize, stopping short of the vehicle. Ezra eats up the distance to me, his hand wrapping around my elbow.

"Get in."

I wince at the hardness of his tone but slide in the vehicle. I want to apologize to the driver too, and notice that there isn't one. Ezra climbs in next to me, closing the door and the lock clicks.

Right as I turn to him, his mouth slams on mine, hungrily. His tongue parts my lips urgently, his tongue sweeping in to caress mine, brutally. He feasts on my mouth, his hands tangle in my hair, and yet he helps maneuver my body until my legs are straddling his lap. He breaks away, breathing hard, and wraps my ponytail around his fist.

"This is what's going to happen. You're going to get on your knees and apologize for being a little cock tease. You're going to suck me off quickly because we're on a time crunch. Then I'm going drive you to the airfield and if you're a good girl, I'll escort you to Atlanta and rail you up and down the bed in your jet. It's about time you broke it in, isn't it?"

My brain is mush from the hot, dirty words coming out his beautiful mouth, but somehow, I manage to nod my head. Ezra's free hand reaches down to undo the zipper on his pants. "Take my cock out, princess."

My knees land on the floor of the car and my hands work expertly to hold his hard length. I take him in my hands, pumping them up and down his swollen, veiny length. I love the way his eyes glaze over, some of the earlier tension leaving his features.

“Put my cock in your mouth, baby.”

Heat and pleasure slide down my body and pool between my legs. My lips part and open wider to take him into my mouth. I begin sucking him up and down, slowly, until his head tilts back against the seat, but his eyes remain on me.

“You’re perfect, princess. You look good taking my cock in your pretty mouth,” he murmurs through gritted teeth, his hand tightening on my ponytail.

Once I have a good motion going, he groans, his stomach muscles tense against his shirt and his thighs feel like granite under my palms. His icy green eyes burn fiercely. “We don’t have much time left, Ocean. Unless you want Beth and Theo looking for you, you better finish.”

He pushes deeper in my mouth and I panic, holding back when I feel myself about to gag. His reminder triggers my competitive streak instead. I want to bring him to the best and quickest orgasm of his life. I want him to remember this for days.

I relax and renew my motion, faster. He starts thrusting deep again, taking charge. “Fuck yes, wrap those lips around me tighter. You’re so fucking perfect.”

My heart beats rapidly from his praise and the need to make him fall apart thrums in my veins. My hands clench his thighs while he steadily fucks my mouth. “You’re going to swallow every drop I give you.” He groans, his whole body wound tight.

A heartbeat later, he gasps, his hips stuttering. Warm liquid floods my mouth and I swallow automatically, keeping my eyes shut and breathing in his scent. There is more than I thought and some leaks out the side of my mouth and onto my chin.

Ezra draws his cock out of my mouth and tucks himself back into his pants, buttoning them back up, before leaning forward so we’re eye level. His fingers run along my jaw and his thumb scoops up his cum before slipping inside my mouth. “Suck it clean, Ocean.”



I follow his command, completely at his mercy. “Are you wet for me?”

I nod my head yes. This whole experience was hot, and witnessing Ezra like this makes me ache. I need him.

“Climb in the front and buckle up.”

Ezra lets me go and slides out of the vehicle. Tears sting my eyes, but I swallow down the emotion. I won’t let him see how his denial has hurt me. I climb in the seat and buckle in by the time he rounds the car and gets into the driver seat.

We don’t speak the entire drive to the airstrip where my private jet is waiting. I worry about my hair and try to discreetly adjust my ponytail. I can feel Ezra side-eye me, so I must not be as sneaky as I thought. True to his word, we make it there by the originally planned time. Kyle, Beth and Theo are all waiting. I also notice that my matte black jet isn’t the only one on the airstrip.

My gaze jumps to Ezra. He smirks at me before getting out. “Kyle, Beth and Theo are taking my jet to Atlanta. As I have client-related things to discuss with you, only myself and my first hand, Caleb, will be flying in your jet. He has ear plugs, don’t worry.”

“You’re actually coming all the way to Atlanta with me?”

Ezra’s hand gently rests on my lower back while he directs me toward the entrance stairs. I try and ignore the questioning looks from Beth and Theo and give them a reassuring smile and wave.

“If I don’t, I can only imagine the show you’ll put on.”

My cheeks flush. “I just—”

“Wanted my attention, baby? Needed me to come fuck you? Or you wanted to show the whole world what’s mine?”

I don’t get the chance to answer as we head inside. James frowns at the travel arrangements but thankfully doesn’t say anything. We shake hands and he goes to the cockpit. A man, similar in build to Kyle but with blond hair, sits in the chairs.

Ezra points to his ears, and in the next second, the man slips earphones on.

“Are you crazy?”

“You didn’t answer my question yet,” he says and shrugs.

I clamp my lips together and take my seat, waiting for takeoff. Now that Ezra is here and with what we just did, I can’t remember exactly why I felt the need to act out. At the time it was just in fun, I wanted him jealous maybe? To miss me? It’s not like we haven’t had distance between us, and I can’t explain why it felt so different. I liked when he surprised me the last time. It felt powerful to have him running after me. More so I felt loved and cherished. I love Ezra still and not seeing him, feeling uncertain, is making me feel reckless. He claims I’m his and it should be enough, but I thrive on seeing the action.

The second the seat belt light is off, Ezra takes my hand and leads me to the back of the plane where the bedroom is. He closes the door behind us, locking us in. He turns to me and our gazes lock. “Tell me.”

“Yes. I missed you. I want all of your attention. I like when you’re waiting for me, tracking me down. I wanted you to make love to me.”

His hand reaches out and grabs my neck, forcing my back into the wall. “I was already planning to meet you in Atlanta, so we could go to Jade and Onyx’s engagement party together before your little strip tease hit all of social media. I almost killed every single man in the room watching it.”

“I’m sorry. I just wanted you.”

His forehead presses against mine. “You can have me anytime you want, Ocean. All you have to do is ask for me. I love you with my whole soul. I want to be your husband. I want to be everything to you.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him how I feel before his mouth slants over mine. Ezra kisses me wildly, passionately. His lips taste, lick, bite, devour mine. My body aches all over for his hands. He senses what I need, and soon,

my leggings and underwear slip down my legs and are pulled off. The sweatshirt and t-shirt follow before he scoops me up and places me on the bed. I reach for the button on Ezra's pants while he shrugs out of his jacket and unbuttons the other shirt. I push his pants down and grab for the band of his underwear to push those down as well. Ezra's hands land on mine and we do it together. Once he's fully naked, he climbs over my body, pushing me back into the mattress.

Our lips dance together, while Ezra's hand slides down my body and between my thighs. His fingers slide through my outer lips, feeling how slippery I am after sucking him in the car. He moans into my mouth, loving how wet I am for him. I feel the head of his cock at my entrance. He breaks our kiss, his lips hovering over mine, his body braced on his forearms. Ezra gently eases his thick length into me, slowly giving every inch. My mouth parts and I'm practically panting against his lips.

Our eyes stay locked and I watch heat, devotion, obsession, possession and love burn in his gaze. It shakes me to the core how deeply his feelings run. My nails scrape down his back with every hard thrust he gives. My legs twine around his waist, pulling him deeper. His head falls forward between my neck and shoulder. He praises me with how much he loves me, how beautiful I am, how he never wants to leave, and how I own him as much as he owns me.

I moan his name over and over, which only makes him thrust deeper. His fingers dip between us, dragging through the wetness and circling my clit. I cry out into the small space, the sensations too much yet not enough at the same time. I never want this to end. I never want to be without him.

"You can be a tease on stage, Ocean. As long as you remember who this pussy belongs to off stage," he grits between clenched teeth. It's enough though to send me spiraling into my climax. I scream his name, my pussy clenching down on his length, and I come harder than I ever have before. I see stars behind my eyes and my hands grip his back.

Ezra thrusts wildly with my name on his lips when he climaxes hard inside me, one of his hands fisting in my hair and the other gripping the side of my neck. My chest sticks to his from sweat, but I don't care. I should get up and change, but exhaustion suddenly creeps in. It's a short ride to Atlanta and we can't sleep here, but I really wish we were already in my hotel room.

He shifts us to the side, keeping his cock still inside me. "Rest, Ocean. I'll wake you up with plenty of time to get cleaned up before we land."

My eyes drift shut even though I should stay awake. Instead, my body melts into him, my head pillowed on his bicep. I breathe in his scent and fall even more in love with him.

---

"SO NO ONE knows they eloped already?" Ezra leans in and whispers to me. I glance around to see if anyone has noticed our close proximity. No matter how much I tried to tell him no, he insisted on escorting me to the engagement party.

I shrug my shoulders. "You know how celebrity marriages are. Once they're public, they rarely last."

His eyes burn the side of my skull, but I don't dare look at him. I fear one look and everyone will be able to see my feelings for him. I can't decide if or when we'll be ready for that. I won't push, taking our time is probably for the best.

"Our marriage won't be that way."

The sip of champagne I took burns down my windpipe when I sputter in response. My eyes widen. "You can't say things like that. What if someone hears you?"

Ezra glances around with a smile on his lips. "I don't care. Why do you?"

Unable to answer, I walk away, trying to clear my thoughts. I shouldn't be surprised. It's not the first time Ezra has said things about our wedding or marriage and a baby. It's just that every time butterflies erupt in my stomach, but I don't

know how serious he is. It seems so far off to be talking about it right now. Then there's our age gap and the fact that I'm eighteen. Even though I feel older after growing up the way I did, I worry about what people might say. I don't want them to think that I'm too naive and immature for a man like Ezra. Plus, we haven't even talked about a plan to navigate the media response or releasing a social media announcement. I'm surprised he isn't as concerned about it as he was a few years ago.

“Why do I feel like you're denying the inevitable?” He slides next to me, his hand resting gently on my hip and giving an almost possessive squeeze.

“I'm not denying anything, I'm just wondering if we're moving too fast. It might be better to be more discreet with the public.”

“I don't care what they think. We know nothing happened back then. We're both consenting adults now. I've loved you for years, Ocean. I want you to be my wife. I want to be your husband.” He's watching me, drawing me in with his magnetic gaze.

My cheeks blush when our gazes catch. “Maybe we should plan how this will go. Don't you usually need a solid plan before you act?”

His lips curve into a smile. “Award season is coming up. I'll be your date and not your bodyguard or handler. That will be enough to start making the discussion happen. Others will remember that I've shown up to your shows recently. And Mason and others will be able to recant how jealous I was on the set of your music video.”

My mouth opens and closes.

And opens again.

“You. Was that all part of your plan?”

He shakes his head. “No. It was divine luck that paid off in my favor.”

I blink up at him, wondering who this man is. He doesn't talk or act like he did back then. This person is playing with

fire and taking a risk that could destroy everything if it's not handled properly. "You mean this award season? Not next fall when we've had more time?"

"I don't need more time, Ocean. I've waited long enough. We've waited. If I could have, I would have made you mine back then."

"No, you wouldn't have."

His hand reaches out and pushes some of my loose hairs behind my ear. His touch lingers, while his fingertips brush down my cheek to my chin. "You underestimate the depth of my obsession for you. It was only out-ruled by my devotion to give you everything you wanted. I kept you safe until I could say all of these things to you and make you mine."

"What do we have here?" Jade's teasing voice breaks up our moment and I am glad for the reprieve. I take a step back from Ezra and smile at my friend.

"Nothing, just some business talk."

Her brow rises. "Right. Business. Uhm, actually Ezra, I think Mia's husband is looking for you. Something about a company he's thinking of investing in. They're in the entertainment industry."

Ezra dips his head and gives me a smile that can't be taken as anything less than flirty. "I'll go find him. See you later, baby. And congratulations to you and Onyx, Jade."

He walks away and Jade takes the opportunity to grab my hand. "Baby?"

I groan once he's put enough distance between us. "Don't say a word."

"Oh, I won't," Jade snickers. "You're the one who will be doing all the talking. It's time you spill all your dirty little secrets, Ocean Heart."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

---

Ezra



“This is today’s headline.” Caleb places the image on his tablet down in front of me. I’m not at all surprised it happened. When I took Ocean out for her nineteenth birthday, we weren’t as discreet as I promised her we were. I hadn’t lied to her when I told her I was ready to go public with our relationship. The world needs to know that she is mine and I have always been hers. I know she worries about how the public will take it, given our ages, and that she used to be my client. I’m not worried, but then again, I’ve had more time with these thoughts that we’ll be together.

“It’s a good shot.” I study the image and the way we’re looking at each other in it. Ocean may not have said that she loves me, but the truth is in her eyes every time her dark eyes meet mine. I’ve always been able to read her like an open book. “What is the running narrative?”

“Spotted again, out and about dining in NYC for the singer’s 19th birthday. Ezra Hamilton and Ocean Heart, heating up for the summer? A real like Bodyguard movie deal!” Caleb rattles off.

“Everything sounds positive so far.”

He nods. “Yes. Sir. It sounds like there has been some input from Rosen Records on this as well.”

“This is news to me.” I lean back in my chair. It’s not terrible that they would work with us to promote the better side of publicity; it just wasn’t something I expected given Ocean’s reluctance.

“I was just given the information,” Caleb responds. “Also, since you asked earlier, Ms. Heart arrived back home this afternoon.”

“She wasn’t scheduled to be back for three more days.” I glance at my calendar, knowing it’s written on there.

“That is all Kyle would tell me on the phone, Mr. Hamilton.”

“You can go.” I excuse him and he closes the door to my office. I grab my cell and shoot a text to Ocean.

ME

Why are you back early? Is everything okay?

Then I call Kyle who answers on the first ring. “Sir.”

“Is everything okay? Why is she back three days early, that’s not like Ocean.”

“My understanding is that she has an appointment with her doctor.” Kyle sighs and mumbles something about women’s stuff under his breath. My blood runs cold when I realize what she’s doing again.

“Have her call me when she is done.”

I hang up with Kyle and call for my driver to bring my vehicle around. I can be to her place in under an hour, which should be as soon as she’s done seeing her doctor. My phone vibrates in my hand and I look down to see a reply from Ocean.

OCEAN

I wanted to see my doctor, not that it’s your business ☐

My fingers itch to reply and demand what happened, but it would be better to have the conversation in person. I’ve been keeping a secret from Ocean, something that could change the



direction of our lives, something I want more than anything. I knew about her appointment to see her doctor for birth control pills. I paid the good doctor a large sum to give her a pack of only sugar pills instead. It's amazing what the right amount of money can get you.

Last week she got her period, and while I was sad about it, I knew better than to be too hopeful that it would happen after one month. I wasn't deterred from my goal. I just planned to try harder. But if she's meeting the doctor again, I'm worried she'll try something different.

By the time I get to Ocean's gated community and enter the passcode at her door, I drive up the driveway. The bottom level lights are on in the house and one is on upstairs in her room. Parking my car, I get out and walk up the walkway to the front door and let myself in. The TV is on in the living room and her voice is coming from upstairs. I follow it until I get to her room.

"He just said it might be because my body is getting used to it— Oh my god!"

She jumps when she sees me and quickly ends her phone call. "Ezra, what are you doing here? How did you get in?"

My head tilts. "Is that the way you greet your husband?"

Her cheeks turn adorably red like they always do when I talk to her this way. I walk over to her and take her face in my hands, bringing my lips to hers. She's warm and I can smell the vanilla scent from the gel she uses. "What's wrong, baby?"

She pulls away and runs her hands down her face. I notice she's wearing one of my t-shirts and a pair of shorts. "Everything. Did you see the picture that leaked? I've been trying to get with Mia and Tabbi to look into getting it down or at least controlling the narrative."

My eyes narrow on her. "I don't care about the picture; it's a great picture."

"Ezra, people are already commenting that we're a couple and making comments about that you used to be like my bodyguard," Her eyes widen and fear crosses her face.

I'm livid. If she thinks she can erase or try to downplay our relationship, I haven't been doing my job right. Maybe I should just cancel all of her upcoming shows and keep her underneath me and full of my cock until she gets it. I'm not going anywhere and neither is she.

My hands slip in my pockets and I force my face to remain calm. "I told the reporter where we would be. I had the picture taken and sent out."

Her arms cross over her chest and she takes a step back. "Why?"

"I'm not scared for everyone to know you're my world, Ocean. I want it out. I want everyone to know you're mine and that I love you. What are you worried about?"

"I don't know. I guess about what people are going to say about our ages or that you used to be my handler. My uncle could get brought up and I just worry this could be bad for you too."

I watch her pace around the room, feeling the anger coiling tighter and tighter inside me. I understand why she is worried if her uncle decided to get nasty. Thankfully, I've been able to keep him away and keep BNE's focus on him. Ocean doesn't need to worry about any of this. I would never let a scandal touch her.

"Does my age bother you?"

She looks appalled I would ask. "No. It never has."

Well, that's fucking good because I can't change it any more than she can. "It doesn't bother me either, Ocean. I don't care what others say because they don't know us, they don't know you."

Her eyes start to shine with tears and it pulls at my heart. I don't want her crying about stupid shit.

"Why were you at the doctor's office today?"

She stops to face me and her cheeks turn pink again. "I. I've just not been feeling the best on the pills I'm taking. I wanted to talk to the doctor."

“What did he say?”

“He said it might just be my body getting used to them,” she mumbles and won’t meet my eyes.

“Did he give you anything else?” I need to know, so I can figure out how best to get rid of it. My worst fear is that she got an implant.

Ocean shakes her head no. “I’m just going to see if it gets better.”

I can’t even hide the triumph that lights up my face. It might be a challenge to get her on board with my plans, but I plan to give it my all. I won’t stop until the world knows, when my ring is on her finger and my baby is in her belly. The urgency to lock her down blazes up my spine.

“The Gold Disc Music Awards are in two weeks. We’ll attend together and a week later, we’ll make the announcement that we’re together and the relationship is serious,” I tell her, my fingers running over my tie before loosening it. “Kyle has been updated on protocol for your security to keep an eye out for your uncle. And I already have someone undercover in Vegas looking for the bookie who came after you before. That will never happen again. I will never let anything your uncle does or says affect our life together.”

Her mouth opens in the most delicious looking ‘o’ shape. Her eyes shimmer with tears and a hint of rage. “So that’s just it then? I don’t get a say in any of this?”

“You can say thank you, Ezra.” I smirk and undo my vest, folding it neatly and placing it on the chaise lounge by her bed. I stalk over to her, watching the way her breaths get deeper, her lips purse, her nipples harden beneath the fabric of my t-shirt, calling for my attention. “There isn’t anything I can’t do for you, including protect you and your name. I have a plan for everything, and a contingency plan for backup just in case. I won’t keep hiding the fact that I’m so fucking in love with you I’m desperate to do anything I need to in order to keep you.”

“What if it’s too much and you decide I’m not worth it in the end?”

I pull back as if she struck me across the face. I knew it would take time to heal her broken heart, to prove I'm all in. It kills me that we make progress and then her fear comes firing back. I take a breath in and calm my frustration. I'm playing the long game. She will be mine. The thought of her being with any other man shreds my insides and I see red. Blood red. Because I would bleed him out slowly and quietly, making him disappear forever.

“You are everything.”

Her head tilts back and a glint of frustration lingers on her features. “Why me, Ezra? I'm not even your type, aren't you more into gorgeous redheads?”

Confusion rolls through me. “My type is you.”

Ocean gives me an angry look and moves farther out of my reach. “When you first started, you had a revolving door of women throwing themselves at you. At our first meeting at the hotel, you came down with a gorgeous redhead. You left with her too.”

My brow lifts, trying to remember three almost four years ago when I first met her. I remember the hotel and seeing her the first time was like a sledgehammer to my chest. She was beautiful, sweet, and scared. She blushed anytime I looked at her and I have no idea how I managed to keep my concentration on her uncle. All I could think about was protecting her. Saving her. After that, I took on the role of her protector, fixing everything for her and giving her what she wanted. I didn't realize until later that I was memorized by her.

Sure, I was used to women showing me attention. In my early twenties and college, it wasn't unheard of to hook up with one or two women a week. I dated a few of them randomly for a month or so, but nothing felt right. Once I met Ocean, I found myself less and less looking for a woman to take home, becoming less and less interested in a casual hookup. It wasn't until I was using my hand in the shower and Ocean's name ripped from my chest that it really hit me what was happening and who I really wanted.

“From the moment I realized you were the one I wanted, I haven’t been with anyone else. No one has held my attention. I remember that day, because it was the day my real purpose in life started. Her name is Joey. She was a college friend of mine’s girlfriend. She had spent the day drinking with some of her girlfriends. I told her after my meeting I would get her an Uber so she waited. On our way out, she almost tripped on her heels so I held onto her, trying to save her dignity by not getting kicked out of a prestigious hotel. I put her in an Uber and sent her to his house.”

She leans against her vanity table and I cage her in, my arms on both sides of her body. “Were you jealous, princess?”

Ocean is quiet for some time, lost in her thoughts. I rest my forehead against hers and run my thumb along her chin and down her neck to the collar of her t-shirt. My fingers hook inside and I gently pull her forward, her lips a breath away from mine. I crowd her space and hear her inhale when she feels my rapidly hardening cock against her stomach. “Did you hate seeing me with someone else?”

“Yes.” Her lips move against mine, gently. Not yet a kiss. My heart roars with pleasure at her admission.

“How do you feel about me, Ocean? Am I a dirty little secret or do you still love me like you claimed all those years ago in that hotel room. I’ve been moving heaven and earth to be with you, to find my way back to you. Do you still feel the same way? Or do you want me to walk away now?”

I ask her, pretending she has a choice. I’ll never give her the option to walk away from me. I can see it in her eyes, the way she looks at me, watches me when she thinks I’m not aware. “Tell me, baby. And then for being such a good fucking girl, I’ll make you come harder than ever before.”

Her pupils bleed into the dark chocolatey irises. Her breaths become little pants against my mouth. “I love you.”

I slant my mouth over hers, devouring her, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her hips against me. She moans at the contact and my tongue takes the opportunity to

part her lips and sweep inside her mouth. She tastes like her favorite lavender tea drink and I growl in response.

“I need you now or I’m going to lose my goddamn mind.”

She reaches for the hem of her t-shirt and slips it off her head. My fingers hook on her shorts and underwear, pulling them both down her legs and dropping them to the floor. Her hands are busy unbuttoning my shirt and I help her take it off over my shoulders. Her arms wrap around my neck, forcing my lips back into another needy kiss, where we both fight to get closer to each other. One of my hands slides between us, unbuttoning my pants and shoving them and my underwear down. I then swipe my fingers across her slit and find her soaking wet for me. I need to be inside her.

The heavy head of my cock slides between her folds, coating in her slickness and teasing her clit in slow circles. Her eyes roll back and she thrusts her tits into my chest. I bend and lavish her pretty pink nipples with kisses, lashing my tongue against them and sucking the sensitive buds into my mouth. She cries out and her hands dive into my hair. I groan in response, and shivers of pleasure roll down my spine. This woman is everything to me.

I pull my hips back and thrust into her, swift and deep. My name falls from her lips and her hands clutch at my shoulders. With each stroke of my cock, I work myself deeper, longing to get as far inside her as I can. I cover her lips with mine, kissing her the entire time, with hungry open-mouth kisses, my tongue teasing hers.

I can feel when her inner walls tighten around me, dragging me deeper, and I know I can’t hold off much longer. My hand slides between us and I rub her clit in pace with my cock. Her legs hitch around my waist, squeezing and shaking until her head throws back and she screams my name into the room.

“Fuck, that’s it, princess. I love you so much.” I groan into her neck, my body folding over hers. I need more. I need to get deeper. I pull out and turn her around roughly, bending her

over the vanity counter, her legs splayed, and thrust back inside her.

“Ezra!” Her voice breaks around my name.

“That’s my good girl. Tell me again, Ocean.” I push her, needing to hear it.

“I love you.”

She pants while my hips drill into her. Her hands grip the edges of the vanity and she moans my name over and over. Telling me how much she loves me. Fire races up my spine and I feel my own release coming. “I’m right there, princess. So deep inside you, right where I’m meant to be. I love you. Only you. Take my cock and my cum. Fucking let me get you pregnant.”

She clenches around my dick and I come inside her so hard and fast, I swear my vision turns white. I hold her tightly in place for several minutes, her body boneless in my grasp. I can feel my seed welling up and trying to leak out. I give a few lazy thrusts and swipe my fingers over her opening before pulling out and pushing everything back inside. I’m not sure how long my swimmers need to stay put, but those eager fuckers better swim, swim, swim. Especially when I know she isn’t protected.

Ocean pushes back on her arms and her face turns towards mine. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing for you to worry about, princess. I’ll take care of it.”

She looks down before sliding out of my grasp and grabbing for her clothes. “You aren’t actually trying to get me pregnant, are you? This is just a kink, right?”

I keep my face blank and take her hand, leading her into the bathroom. I turn her shower on and step inside, taking her with me. The hot spray lands on my back. Ocean’s hands land on her hips and her eyes are conflicted. “I don’t see what the big deal is. I’m almost thirty and ready for a family. You love babies and kids and want your own family someday. Why wait?”

Her mouth opens and closes and I see I've shocked her again. Sighing I reach for her, pulling her body under the spray with me. Eventually her arms wrap around my waist and she clings to me while I wash her hair, running my hands over her scalp with conditioner before washing her body with soap. After I wash her, I wash myself up quickly, and Ocean never moves far from me. We get out and wrapped in towels, each of us silent. Her lost in her thoughts and me dying to know how she's taking the news.

I carry my girl to the bed and tuck her in before sliding in next to her. I pull her body against mine and feel my heart calm for the first time all day. My hand runs through her hair and her breathing evens out. Her eyes close and she's falling asleep.

I'm about to close my eyes when she says, "It won't work. I'm on birth control pills."

I kiss her head, laughing softly. "They're fake."

She doesn't reply and her breathing gets deeper, her eyes never reopen. I slide my arms around her tighter, holding her close. I feel her heartbeat against my chest, falling into the same rhythm as mine. We're meant to be. She told me she loves me finally, now I just need to prove to her that this, we, are forever.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

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### Ocean



**T**ake my cock and my cum.  
Fucking let me get you pregnant.  
They're fake.

Ezra's confession has been with me all day. Thankfully he was so tired I was able to sneak out without waking him and I made it to the studio. I needed to get away and clear my head.

I told him I loved him. Every time I'm with Ezra, my world is right. It's bliss and butterflies all the time. When he's away, I get sad, clingy, and try to provoke him into proving that he loves me. I'm not sure how healthy those dynamics are, but I wasn't lying when I told him I love him. So easily Ezra has become the center of my world again and I still question when he will walk away.

When he holds me, it's easy to let the insecurity go, to live in the moment, to be swept away in Ezra. His love making is a drug and I'm always wanting the next hit. I knew the first times were a little reckless, not that I did much to stop him. He never even reached for a condom, and I never brought it up. Then I thought it was just a kink we shared. He liked saying it, and my body got off on hearing it from him. Now I know he was doing it deliberately. As often as he can, he's been filling me with his cum. Anxiety spills over in my chest and it feels hard to breathe. I tuck my knees to my chest and focus.

He says he loves me.

He wants to marry me.

He wants our relationship public.

He wants to claim me.

He wants me to have his baby.

I'm so lost in thought, I don't even register that the door to my studio opens and Jade walks in. "Hey, girl. Are you okay? Ocean?"

My tear-filled eyes meet hers. "I don't know."

Concern sweeps across her features, and she hurries into the room, wrapping her arms around me. "Should I get Kyle? Call Ezra?"

I shake my head no to both options.

"Oh, is it about Ezra?" she guesses, and I nod my head.

"I don't know what to do."

We sit with her rocking me while I cry and cry. The urgent need to run, to escape, fills my chest. "I need to get away."

She pulls back and studies me. "Get away, get away?"

I know she knows what I'm talking about. Jade's aunt has a private home in Aruba. We've been there several times when one of us has needed to escape. "Call your man. Tell him it's urgent and it's my turn."

Jade laughs and pulls out her phone. I watch as she texts him then calls Mia.

"Hello?" Mia's cheerful voice fills the room.

"It's us." Jade laughs.

"Hi!" I call to her.

"This is fun, what are we doing? Making music or planning world domination?"

"Ocean needs an escape. Like a private jet escape," Jade answers and my heart beats faster.

"Today?" Mia questions and I hear her mumbling around the phone before she sighs. "Zander said only a few days. We're trying for another baby."

My stomach clenches at the word, and my face pales. “If you can’t, it’s okay.”

“Hell fucking no.” Mia laughs. “I am using this time to get some space as well. Absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

“It’s your time, Ocean,” Jade adds.

“I’ll call James and plan to leave in the next hour,” I tell both of them and we hang up. “I need assistance getting out of here.”

Jade’s eyes light up with mischief and she goes to the door, speaking quietly to Kyle. Whatever she says, he glances at me with concern before hustling away.

“What did you say to him?” I ask, quietly moving to her side.

“I sent him on a run for tampons. Said you unexpectedly got your monthly visitor. Lucky guess that he was a guy who would get squeamish.” She chuckles.

We look out into the hallway and find it empty. I follow Jade down the back staircase and out the stage area where the back exit is. I hold my breath the entire time, hoping we won’t get caught. Once we’re outside, we get in Jade’s car and she drives us to the airfield. I text James and let him know it’s a 9-1-1. I also told him under no circumstances is Kyle or Ezra allowed to board the jet. My luck, he’ll find out somehow and beat us there.

“Jade, we need to hurry.”

My friend slams on the gas and we speed down the highway. The farther we get from the city, the clutch of anxiety around my heart starts to ease. Only the voice in the back of my head telling me this isn’t a good idea keeps whispering, but even that is getting quieter.

Mia is there when we get there, waving her hands and holding her bag. Her pink hair is piled on her head and she has on shorts and a sweater. Jade parks her car and we take off toward the plane.

“Didn’t either of you bring a bag?” she asks, her brow raised.

“Didn’t you pack at least one thing for each of us?” Jade interjects, knowing Mia too well. She lives to take care of everyone and 9-1-1 meant no stopping anywhere else.

“Jade’s aunt’s home has extra toothbrushes and toiletries. I think for a few days we’ll be fine. It’s not like either of your husbands will let you be gone for too long.”

I jog up the plane and we find seats immediately. My phone starts ringing the second my belt is locked into place. Mia looks at my phone curiously.

“I don’t think it’s just our guys this time.”

Jade laughs, but I refuse to answer, calmly waiting for James to take off. A minute later, he steps out from the cockpit.

“Ah, Ms. Heart. Mr. Hamilton is on my phone and he wants to talk to you.”

I shake my head. “No James. Just tell him I’ll call him when I can. You’re my employee and not his. Besides, he’s all talk. He won’t actually do anything to you.”

James’ lips turn up in a smile as he goes back into the cockpit. A few minutes later, we start to head to the runway.

“Okay, spill everything,” Jade leans in and pours some of the champagne from the mini fridge into my glass.

“Yes. I need details on what has rattled Ocean Heart,” Mia responds and they clink glasses.

My hands cover my face, my cheeks turning bright red and heated. “I thought it was just a kink or something. But he’s actually trying to breed me, I think.”

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MANY HOURS later and lots of cocktails and dancing, I finally collapse next to Jade and Mia on the outside patio furniture. We made it to Aruba and our phones are turned off, completely ignoring the outside world. The sun is starting to

set and I don't feel like I have any more answers now than I did earlier in the morning.

I spilled my guts to Jade and Mia the entire flight down and their mouths dropped open in shock. There were giggles and there were tears. I was the only one torn. Jade was lowkey wondering if I did want these things with him and seemed to think it wouldn't be horrible. Mia, her own first pregnancy was a surprise and unexpected, couldn't say anything bad. When I brought up the fact that I'm nineteen both of them pointed out my maturity. Even though our differences in age doesn't bother me other's might be appalled, and that has worried me for his sake. Mia reminded me that careers and families can co-exist when our partners are willing to share responsibilities. Jade pointed out Ezra would take care of everything and always have a plan. Both are on my side though and say that if it isn't what I want then it was wrong of him and I need to take matters into my own hands.

"Did you think about it?" Jade asks and I know what she's talking about.

I shake my head. "I don't know if I can do it."

Mia told me the Plan B pill was right next to the pregnancy tests when she grabbed one a few years ago. It's likely they still would be there. I just don't know if it is what I want. I don't know what I want.

"I don't know what I want."

"But you want him," Jade adds softly, and I sigh. That is the crux of it all. I love him. I've loved him for years and I will forever. Ezra is it for me. Maybe coming out as a couple would be a first step, attending the award ceremony like he asked. I just don't agree that we need to go from one extreme to the other.

"I love him. It's why I can almost, almost look past this behavior."

"I can help with the announcement from your rep when you decide to go public," Mia adds softly and I can already see the hearts and unicorns in her eyes.

“It’s not crazy, right?”

They both giggle. “I mean a little,” Mia says.

“A lot.” Jade elbows her softly. “No one said any of our guys weren’t a little unhinged though. We each went through our own trials and things that were giant red flags.”

“Yeah. I mean Ezra hasn’t murdered someone for me, yet anyway,” I joke with her, and she shushes me while laughing.

“We don’t speak of it.” Mia pretends to zip her lips, and I fall back into my silent thoughts.

“The music awards, I’ll give him that. He’s going to have to wait though for the rest of it.”

“Good luck with that.” Mia scoffs and winks. “That man has been a bulldog chasing after you, trying to get information since you signed with me. I have no doubt he’ll get what he wants.”

My heartbeat doubles and my core aches. Is that what I really need? Do I want him to take the control from me so I don’t have to make the decision? My stomach swoops in response while my brain stays at a firm no.

We end our night with another drink before going to our separate rooms. I slide into bed alone and my first thought is that I miss Ezra. I’m so fucked.

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WHEN THE JET lands three days later, my heart races. The airfield remains empty, except for Mia and Jade’s vehicle. For some reason that makes my stomach drop and I feel disappointment run through my veins. I don’t know what I was really expecting. I hadn’t had my phone on; I wasn’t getting any calls or texts. He knew where I was and respected the boundary, without traveling down there when he could have. All I can hope is that Ezra is letting me have my space to clear my head before we sit down and have a reasonable conversation. Telling myself it will be fine, I turn the power on my phone back on. Mia and Jade do the same and we all collectively hold our breaths.

Their phones vibrate a chirp. Jade's smile and Mia's blush lets me know their men managed to survive but miss them.

My phone vibrates once and three messages from Kyle appear.

KYLE

Ms. Heart, can you please come back?

KYLE

You poked the bear again, didn't you?

KYLE

When you get back, let me know, and I can escort you home.

That's it. My smile fades, and dread fills me. There are no other calls or texts from Ezra.

"What's wrong, Oce?" Mia asks, and she looks over my shoulder.

"He didn't reach out to me."

Jade's eyes widen. "At all? No calls or anything?"

I shake my head no. "What if I really pushed him away this time? I left without even thinking about how he would take it. I just needed to think."

"Ocean," Mia's calming voice settles over me, "he loves you. Ezra wouldn't be pushed away by this."

"What if he leaves me again?" I bite my lip and snuffle back the tears threatening to spill over.

Jade scoffs. "He isn't leaving, Ocean. The man purposefully leaked your date in order to generate discussion about your relationship. He wants to marry you. He is all in."

“My guess is you’re in for a few spankings when you get home,” Mia teases and they both laugh.

“Can we go now?” I ask Jade, and she nods. We head over to her vehicle after hugging Mia and promising to go to lunch soon.

Right as I reach for the door handle, another car drives up to the airfield and over to us. I look over and Kyle rolls down the window. “Welcome back, Ms. Heart. I can take you home, if you’re ready.”

I nod and hug Jade. “It will all work out,” she whispers in my ear before slipping into her car.

I climb in the familiar back seat of my car and Kyle takes off. Silence settles between us and guilt starts to eat at me. “I’m sorry, Kyle.”

He glances in his rearview mirror. “It’s all good, Ms. Heart. Just next time, please give me a head’s up. At first I thought something terrible happened to you before Mr. Hamilton was made aware of the Aruba destination.”

“I didn’t even think of that. I really am sorry,” I tell him and feel like a terrible person. I could have done a few things differently. “How did you know to come and get me?”

Our eyes connect in the mirror briefly before Kyle looks away. “James made Mr. Hamilton aware when you took off. The tracker in your phone is designated to ping even if your phone is off.”

“My phone has a tracker?”

“It always has, Ms. Heart,” Kyle adds and hunches down in his seat.

By the time we arrive at the gate of my neighborhood, my heart keeps sinking. If Ezra knows I’m back, why hasn’t he reached out? My finger keeps brushing over my phone, but my pride keeps me from calling him. I know leaving wasn’t the best option, but his words scared me. At some point, we’re going to have to talk it through and come to an agreement or compromise. If he still wants me. I dip my head down, so Kyle



can't see the tears in my eyes and that is how I miss the fact that my house is lit up when we pull into the driveway.

“Careful of your door, Ms. Heart,” Kyle warns. I glance up and see the pewter gray sports car already parked next to me.

The knots in my stomach tighten. Kyle helps me grab the small bag of things I accumulated during my trip and hands it to me at the door.

“You aren't coming in?” I ask, my brow raised hopefully.

Kyle shakes his head. “Neither of you pay me enough to walk in on that right now.” With a friendly wave, he gets back in his car and leaves.

My hand tightens around my bag and the other grips the door handle. I twist it and it opens. Quietly I kick my shoes off and lock the door before placing my bag on the table. I hear pots move and the sound of the oven door opening. Hesitantly, I walk to the kitchen. Ready to seal my fate.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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Ezra



Even while cooking her favorite meal, turkey gravy and stuffing, I'm livid. I've never been happier about the tracker on her phone for how often she disappears. If I had known she'd use her jet to escape me, I might not have helped her buy it. I panicked when I woke up and she was gone. My head knew that everything I laid out on the table was probably too much for her. She's young. She's still fresh in her career, and right now, in the world of celebrities, she's a hot commodity. I understand where some of her hesitation comes from when she reminds me how old she is. My heart, on the other hand, wholeheartedly disagrees. He's a possessive bastard, and big picture wise everything I told her was what I wanted and true. I forgot again to take a step back and remember that I left her for two years. That's two birthdays, holidays, events, awards, ceremonies. Two years of dealing with her uncle and his gambling addiction. There is so much to make up for.

My gaze lifts to hers when she walks into the room and I'm thankful to see that she's not injured. Her skin holds a golden tan and she looks happy. Until she meets my gaze anyways.

Anger builds and thrashes in my chest. "How was the flight?"

Her cheeks turn pink and she clears her throat. "Smooth."

I nod, my jaw clenching. I would love nothing more than to take her over my knee, spank her peachy ass, and then fuck

her into submission. That won't work with Ocean though. For so long, everything was out of her control. And while she likes me taking the control from her, she also is only willing to do so when it's what she realizes she needs. I have to make her need me, to crave me, to be so enmeshed in me and dependent on everything I give her.

I pull apart the turkey breast and dish some stuffing on her plate before drowning the food in gravy like I've seen her do. "Here. Sit and eat, I'm sure you're hungry."

She eyes me warily as she sits at the kitchen island and takes the fork I offered her. "Thanks."

Moving around the kitchen, I clean up the mess while she quietly eats the food, moaning after the first few bites. I suppress the smile on my lips at how much she enjoys it. Once I'm done, I set her towel on the counter and grab my keys. "See you in a few days."

I move to leave and her eyes jump to mine, her brow frowning in confusion. "You're leaving?"

I nod my head. "Why would I stay?"

Her shoulders hunch, and she pushes her food on her plate. "I. I don't know. I thought maybe you would want to talk or something."

I tilt my head regarding her, trying to gauge her emotions. "I guess the time to talk would have been when you woke up the next morning instead of childishly leaving the country."

Her mouth drops open and her eyes widen. Anger stains her cheeks. "Did you just call me a child?"

I shake my head no. "I said you acted childishly."

"That's the same thing!"

I shrug. "I guess it's something we could have talked about. I have to leave for business. I'll be out of the state for a few days, but I'll be back before the award ceremony. If you need anything let Kyle know." I walk past her and out to the entryway

I feel her presence behind me. “Ask Kyle? Why can’t I just ask you myself?”

“I didn’t think you wanted to talk to me. You made it pretty clear by leaving our bed, ignoring my call, and flying to another country to get away. Your phone wasn’t on and you didn’t bother to reach out to explain,” I remind her.

Ocean’s face falls, and she bites her lip. “I just needed some time and space.”

“You have it, Ocean. Apparently you need more. I’ll be gone a few days, and I’ll plan to be here to pick you up before the ceremony.”

I slip my shoes on and grab my bag from the entryway closet. Her arms wrap around my waist from behind and I feel her head touch the middle of my back. “You really came here to make me food and let me know you’re leaving?”

In my heart I know I’d turn around and stay with her all night if she asked. I want that. But what I want more is for Ocean to need me on a level different than her security or her manager. I want her to want me to take care of her, to love her, to provide for her. My hand slides up to hers and I hold them gently. Turning my head, I’m able to drop a kiss on top of her head. “I’ll see you soon.”

Walking away from her for now kills me. I don’t dare look back at her. I barely manage to lock the door behind me with a key I made from her set. She needs space and clarity that isn’t surrounded by fruity cocktails, sun and the opinions of her best friends. Not that I don’t have reason to trust Mia or Jade. I think they’re perfect friends for Ocean. I want her to choose me on her own though without any outside influence. My drive to the airport is long and many times I contemplate turning around. Big picture. I have to think of the big picture. I take out my phone and pull up Caleb’s name.

ME

Don’t forget to get those receipts. I want to see image proof in 24 hours.

CALEB

Yes, boss.

I LEFT Ocean alone for four days. I didn't call. I didn't text. She had Kyle message me three times asking about her recording time, her grocery delivery to the house and lastly about what time her car would arrive on Sunday to pick her up for the award show. She never reached out to me and I'll admit the silence drove me crazy. I sat in meetings being more worried about my phone than my client. Two of the nights I was gone, I contemplated just going back and following my other plan, which was to just make love to her until she agreed to everything I said and wanted.

Every day was dark and every night I was kept awake. Until last night on my way home when my phone pinged with all the information I had asked Caleb for. Receipts from the girls' trip to Aruba and the one trip Ocean made on her own to the store while I was gone. I scanned the list up and down, feeling my heart ready to drop at any second. Caleb also sent me confirmation logs and security video he watched of Ocean's doctor's office. She never went. And not once did she buy a Plan B pill. Blood rushes in my ears and my heart beats erratically. This is a good sign.

Dressed in a black tux and white shirt, I show up to her house half an hour before we have to leave. Her makeup and hairstylist team is still here and I can hear the commotion from the living room where they must be set up. I enter the room and more than one head does a double take in my direction. Kyle looks up from his phone and nods his head at me.

"Mr. Hamilton."

I nod back and smile at Elga, her resident fashion director. She's been styling Ocean since she moved on from BNE. "Hi Elga."

The older woman comes at me with her arms open. “Ezra, dear boy, where have you been? I haven’t seen you in ages.”

I shrug and slide my hands into my pockets. “I’ve been traveling a lot lately.”

She pats my cheek. “Well, it’s good to see you. Are you here to help Ocean’s team tonight?”

I shake my head and let a playful smile tip my lips. I lean toward her as if sharing a secret. “I’m here to take her. I’m her date.”

The woman’s eyes widen, but she smiles and winks. “She looks beautiful. She needs a man like you on her arm.” Yeah, tell her that.

“Where is Ocean?” I turn to Kyle and he points upstairs.

“Her room, getting her fancy shoes on.”

I take the stairs two at a time, the overwhelming urge to see her again, touch her, pulling my gut. I find her room and stop just inside the doorway. Her long hair is swept back in a large bun at the nape of her neck. Flowered earrings adorn her ears and the dress...Elga knew what she was doing. Ocean looks stylish and old school glam in a white dress that is full and flares from her hips. It’s long in the back and short in the front, showcasing her smooth, tan legs and the fuck-me heels she’s currently trying to step into and buckle. They’re seriously tall with multiple straps that are blinged out.

“Need help, princess?”

Her eyes shoot to mine and light up when she sees me. “Ezra.” She stands from her bent position, one foot bare and the other in her shoe, but it’s not buckled. “What are you doing here?”

I cross the room until I’m standing in front of her. Her lips sparkle, and her eyes are smokey, the color turning her irises to the color of coffee. Two diamond necklaces drape around her neck and a large chunky bracelet is on her wrist. She’s perfect.

“I’m your date tonight, Ocean. I told you I’d be back in time.”

Her bottom lip wobbles before she sucks it between her teeth. She glances off to the side, but I see the sheen of tears in her eyes.

“Hey, baby.” I lift my hands to her face, cradling her cheeks and running my thumb under her eyes before the tears can fall. “Don’t cry.”

She draws in a shaky breath. “I thought you were done.”

“Done with what?” Confusion fills my voice.

“Me.” Her arms open wide. “Us. I felt so terrible when you left, Ezra. I thought you didn’t want to talk or to hear from me.”

“Ocean, what have I been saying since I found you again? I want you. I am never leaving again. I was mad. You were mad. You wanted space and I wanted to give you the time to think everything through. To respect that boundary you drew. I gave you a lot to think about. I’m not happy you fled to Aruba instead of talking to me, but I’m not leaving you ever again.”

I gently kiss her cheeks, her forehead, before brushing my lips across hers, being mindful of her makeup. A sob breaks in her throat and she grabs my wrists with her hands.

“I don’t want space. I just want you.”

Well, fuck her makeup. I capture her lips with mine, desperate to taste her. It’s been too long since I’ve felt her lips on mine. I move slowly until she opens to me, plunging my tongue between her lips to play with hers. She tastes delicious like strawberries, champagne and mint. She pulls back breathless and I smirk a little at how swollen her lips are. No one is going to question if I kissed her up here. My thumbs run around her lips, wiping off some of the color smudged there.

“You’re so beautiful it hurts.”

She moves in closer, her hands dropping from mine to wrap her arms around my waist. “I’m sorry. I love you.”

“You’re my world, Ocean. You are the beats of my heart, the other half to my soul. Saying I love you will never be enough to tell you how much I feel for you.”

My arms wrap around her, holding her close. I wish we could stay here. I'm close to suggesting it, but then remember she is nominated for two awards tonight, including Female Pop Vocalist of the Year and Collaboration of the Year with Mason Namara.

“We should get going, princess.”

Ocean steps back, reluctantly, and it warms my chest. Her hand stays tangled in mine as well. “Can you help me?” She points to her shoes.

“Gladly.” I kneel down and buckle her one shoe before helping her balance with her dress and slide her foot into the remaining heel. Once that one is secure and fastened her head now reaches my shoulders. I take her hand in mine and lead her back downstairs. My free hand helps hold the back of her dress, so she doesn't trip. Everyone is waiting for us in the entryway. Elga gives us both a knowing look, before dashing forward to fix Ocean's lipstick. Kyle motions to my own lips and I run my fingers over them. They come back with some glitter on them and it fills me with pride. The other stylists chatter and keep smiling at us gossiping. By tomorrow, this will be all over the tabloids and social media. I can't fucking wait.

Kyle leaves the house first and we follow behind him. I get in Ocean's car with her, keeping her hand still tucked in with mine. She leans her head against my shoulder in the car when we start driving.

“We're really doing this, huh?”

“I got you. I promise. They're going to know how crazy I am for you,” I promise her and place a gentle kiss against her neck. She hums in her throat.

When we arrive, we join the line of cars. The closer we get, the tighter Ocean holds my hand. When it's her turn on the red carpet, I step out first. The cameras flash and my name is called. I hold my hand out and the second Ocean steps from the car, the crowd is deafening. Lights flash like crazy. We're bombarded with questions. Ocean tucks her hand in my elbow and waves at the cameras and paparazzi with her free hand. I



don't even have to work hard to keep the smug smile on my lips. This moment has never felt more natural to me.

We get to the first group of reporters and Ocean tucks herself into my side. My arm wraps around her waist, my fingers spanning her side, holding her to me. Her head tilts up and she smiles. She looks happy. She looks like a woman in love. I don't even try to hide the heat and longing in my eyes that I have for her. Our picture is taken over and over, our names called from all directions.

When the reporter steps up to ask Ocean a few questions, I step back, giving her, her well-deserved time to shine. I've always admired how she works a crowd. She handles reporters with elegance, knowledge and sweetness. This time is no different.

Once we're inside the room, I hold her hand and whisper in her ear, "Wasn't bad, right?"

She shakes her head. "No. Thanks to you."

"Anything for you, princess." I remind her and watch as shivers run along her skin.

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FOUR HOURS LATER, I finally get to take my girl home. Ocean took home Female Pop Artist of the Year and she and Mason won for Best Collaboration. As a handler and manager, I did well tonight. But the real prize was leaving with Ocean, driving her home and her inviting me to stay.

I half follow, half carry Ocean up the stairs like she's an award I won and I can't let her out of my grip. The good news is that she's just as frantic for me as I am for her. Her hands find the zipper on her dress, and together, we peel it down until she can step out of it, the material spread out on her floor like petals on a flower. Fuck me, she's a sight to see, standing in her heels in only a matching white thong. I drop my suit coat on the chair and prowl closer to her. The back of my knuckles run over her collarbone, down her tits and over her hard little nipples. I slide my palms over the curve of her stomach and hips before kneeling before her. Her breathing

hitches and I press my mouth to her sex, over the lace material. She moans and her hands run through my hair.

I quickly help her out of her heels, until she's standing barefoot in front of me. I place kisses on her hip bones and stomach, while hooking my fingers in her underwear and pulling them down her legs. I notice the wet spot on the material from her arousal. I can practically taste her on my tongue already.

I stand and pick Ocean up off the floor. Her legs wind around my waist, bringing her naked pussy right against my cock that's already hard and ready for her. I drop Ocean to the bed and quickly take off my button-down shirt and shove my pants and underwear down as well. She scoots up the bed and I follow her, taking her leg in my hand and placing a kiss on her ankle, on her calf, then the inside of her knee. I repeat the same on her other leg until she's already writhing under me. I kiss her thighs and the top of her sex. Ocean's legs fall open, and I grab her thighs, pulling her closer to my hungry mouth. I kiss the top of her slit and her whole body jumps.

Smirking against her skin, I kiss her again, and she says my name, her voice husky. Her hands are everywhere, twisting in my hair, gripping the sheets and the edges of her pillows. "You taste delicious, Ocean. I missed you and your pussy so much."

"I missed you," she confesses, her voice sounding almost pained with pleasure.

My tongue slips between her folds and strokes firmly against her clit. She cries out loudly and I groan in response. My tongue surges against her clit, again and again. Her back arches, pushing her body closer to my tongue. I wrap her thighs firmly around my shoulders, holding her close. I lick her and push one of my fingers into her tight core, and then another. Her tight channel grips my fingers and I practically growl against her.

Her hips start thrusting up as little whimpers and noises leave her lips. "That's it, princess. Come for me. I want to taste you."

Her legs tighten and a shudder racks through her body before my name falls from her lips with a cry. I move us both, taking her body up the bed with mine. I position her over my lap. Her hands fall to my chest and I angle my cock so that the tip is at her entrance. Ocean slowly slides down, taking me inside her inch by inch as heat rises up my spine. My hands grip her waist, helping her glide up and down, pushing and pulling. When she clamps down around my cock, stars explode behind my eyes. She's fucking perfect. I love watching her, seeing this view, her tits sitting heavy and full. I reach up and palm them with my hands, squeezing and then rolling her rosey nipples between my fingers. Ocean moans, thrusting her chest further into my hands. I keep one hand on her tit, while my other hand slides to her front, between our bodies. My finger finds her clit and I stroke it.

"Ezra!" She calls my name, her head falling back, her hands tightening on my chest. My abdominal muscles flex under her touch, my skin heats. My fingers stroke her clit in fast then slow circles. My cock continues thrusting up inside her, hitting her g-spot deep inside. I can feel her tightening around me. Knowing she's going to come again, my thumb presses on her clit. Ocean's mouth opens in a perfect 'O,' my name torn from her again. As soon as she climaxes, I lift her off my lap and push her face first into the bed. My knees push hers apart, and my hands hold her hips before I thrust back inside her. I fuck her hard and deep until my own climax rolls through my body. Stars dance behind my eyes. I come so hard, filling her to the brim, knowing she's done nothing to stop me from getting what I want and fucking her raw makes my heart clench and cock twitch, filling her more.

Ocean is soft and pliant. I loosen my hold on her hips and gently lower her body to the bed. Some of my cum slides down her leg, and I scoop it with my fingers and shove it back where it belongs. Ocean groans softly, her walls fluttering around my fingers. "You like this, don't you, princess?"

Pink splotches cover her skin, but she doesn't answer. Smirking, I lie down next to her and brush her hair out of her face. Her chocolate eyes meet mine, darkening. Her cheeks are

pink and her lips are red where she's biting them. I lean in and brush my lips with hers, kissing her softly. "I love you."

She smiles and slides closer, draping her arm across my waist. "I love you back."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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### Ocean



Ezra was right. He kept his promise that everything would be okay and it has been. There has been nothing but flattering and positive remarks and posts after the award ceremony. No one blinks an eye when Ezra picks me up from the studio, attends my shows, or when we're spotted out for dinner. Images and clips make their way onto social media and in the tabloids, but mostly people only want to know what comes next.

*Has the Princess of Pop been locked down?*

*A Millionaire and his Queen of Music!*

I can't help smiling when I scroll TikTok and find a recording of him waiting backstage and wrapping me in his arms after the performance. It's gone viral and has over ten million likes. Things are perfect.

My feelings are becoming less complicated as well. When Ezra left for work, I became a sappy, soft, crying mess. I missed him. I didn't know what to do without him reaching out to me or being at my house. My life still went on, all the things I'm used to continued to happen, but it wasn't the same. I love him. I want a life with him whatever that looks like. I want the future Ezra sees and I trust him enough to know that he will do anything to give it to me. He cherishes me, protects me, and takes care of me like a husband and as my lover. So the fact that he gave me four orgasms last night then came inside me again...I'm ignoring it.

I don't know how I feel about it, but living in the moment with him is more important to me. Things will work out how they are meant to, and as long as Ezra is driving this relationship, I have no doubts I'll be unhurt because he wouldn't allow anything to hurt me.

Glancing at my phone, I realize my time is up in the studio. I grab my notebook and my bag before heading out the door. The hallway is strangely empty. Shivers race down my spine and fear grips my insides. My feet start moving faster when suddenly a hand clamps down on my wrist and I'm pulled into an empty rehearsal room.

I spin around and yank my arm free. The muscles and bones hurt from where they were gripped. "What—"

My eyes widen when the man brushes his hair out of his face. "Uncle Cliff?"

"Oh, so you do remember me? Your poor uncle who's been hung out to dry and living off of pennies. After everything I did for you!" His voice escalates and I shrink back from him. My eyes dart toward the door. Where the hell is Kyle?

"Uncle Cliff, we can talk, but this isn't the way to go about it."

He scoffs and I can smell the alcohol permeating off his tongue. "I call the shots, you stupid bitch! I did everything for you. I raised you. I brought you to all your musicals, your concerts. I introduced you to BNE, ME!" He points at his chest, his eyes glaring.

I swallow past the hurt and the fear lodged in my throat. All the things I learned from self-defense are slowly leaking out of my brain. All I can remember is what Ezra taught me about de-escalation. "You're right, you did introduce me to Mr. Townsend."

"Damn straight I did. You were always a good kid until that fucker Ezra Hamilton showed up and ruined it all. You think they helped you? I made you, Ocean Heart. Not them!"

I nod along and try to calm him, agreeing with him until I can escape. I feel my phone vibrate in my sweater, but I ignore it. “Why are you here, Uncle Cliff?”

His eyes blaze and gloss over. “You owe me, Ocean. For everything I did and for keeping my mouth shut when I should have reported him to the police years ago.”

My throat runs dry. “What are you talking about?”

“This media circus about you and Ezra dating. What fucking bullshit. Does no one realize he’s probably been preying on you since you were little. I remember all the times I caught you alone. All it would take is one story from my side and you’d both face the ridicule of the nation.”

Tears spring to my eyes, but I refuse to let him see. I blink and my feet shuffle. “I take it you didn’t come here to just threaten me, so what is it you want?”

A sinister smile parts his lips and his hands set on his sides. A power move I recognize from when I was little. “I want what you owe me, you spoiled little shit. I’ve been cut off from BNE now and you know how unfriendly Scooter and his boys can be.”

“You want money?” I guess, dread filling my stomach. “How much?”

“I think three million should be good for now.” He looks me up and down. My skin crawls and he sneers. “Who knows, maybe for more I’ll continue to keep your little secret with Ezra hidden.”

“I have to get it ready,” I tell him, lying and trying to buy myself some time. There has to be a way out of this. I can’t let Ezra be ruined. He never did anything wrong. His business and his image can’t be ruined by my uncle. This man has ruined enough good things over the years. I refuse to let Ezra be next on his list.

“You do that, little girl. I’ll find you again,” he says while stepping out into the hallway.

I hear him bump into someone and a gruff, “Sorry,” follows

I exit the room next and come face to face with Kyle.

“Ms. Heart.” He looks to the man who just left and then to me. His eyes narrow. “Was that—”

“Don’t say anything. Please Kyle, I’m begging you. This is one thing I can’t let Ezra take care of. My uncle wants to ruin him. I need to think of something,” I beg, cradling my arm.

Kyle’s eyes dip down and he notices the red marks that are slowly darkening. “He won’t like this when he finds out, Ocean. And he always finds out.”

I swallow, knowing a huge battle is coming my way. He’ll be mad at me later for keeping it to myself, but I have to protect him too. “I know. But right now, he can’t know yet.”

“Is your arm injured? Do you need a doctor?”

I shake my head no, and this time, I can’t hold back the tears. “Can you get me out of here? Ezra isn’t coming back for a few more days, right?”

“He comes back on Thursday,” Kyle replies.

“Okay. I’ll go back to the hotel now and I’ll tell him I was feeling tired,” I order him. “I’ll tell him if I can’t handle it on my own. Ezra does too much for me as it is.”

Kyle glances around the hall before gently taking my bag. “I’ll give you until his plane lands. If it isn’t resolved, I’m telling him. All of it.”

My head tilts, and I glare at him. “You do know you work for me, right?”

Kyle nods. “Yes. But if I want to live that means I listen to him first. And I like living.”

I follow him out of the building, my eyes catching on all of the cameras and security. How the hell did Uncle Cliff get in here? Once outside, I climb in the back of the SUV, and soon, we’re speeding toward the hotel. I’ve been doing some recording down in Florida for my next album, but I miss my own house. The longer I’m on the road these days, the less exciting it gets to be. I’ve been counting down until Ezra returns from Dallas; we’ll both head home the same day. I



miss him so freaking much and now more than ever I need his arms wrapped around me.

I take my phone out of my bag and see that he has now texted me twice.

EZRA

How was practice? Are you meeting friends for dinner?

EZRA

Kyle said you're tired and going back to the hotel. Is everything okay?

I bite down on my tongue until I taste blood. I hate lying to him. But I really am tired and I need some time and space to think.

ME

I'm fine. Just tired. I might take a bubble bath and go to bed early. Should I send you a pic 😊

EZRA

Are you trying to make me hard during my investment meeting?

ME

Alright, so another time then?

EZRA

Ocean...

ME

Sorry! I'm not teasing you. I won't send nudes while you're in a work meeting.

EZRA

This is the worst evening ever. I'm going to be hiding my raging hard-on picturing you in the bath while trying to pretend I care about some new app.

ME



EZRA

I miss you.

ME

I love you.

EZRA

You have no idea, princess.

I pocket my phone and rest my head back on the seat. Butterflies swarm my stomach and my chest squeezes. This man. He is my everything.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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### Ocean



Time is running out on my deal with Kyle. Ezra comes home tomorrow, and I have no idea how to take care of my uncle. The only thing that might work is if I actually pay him. I took the money out of my account on the off chance my own plan doesn't work. Usually Uncle Cliff is a big talker, so my goal shouldn't be too hard. He has already told me where and when to meet him. His texts the past few days are becoming increasingly agitated and unhinged.

I need this to be over. I've been a wreck the past few days. I wake up in the middle of the night, my stomach has been off, and I'm exhausted because of all of it. I hate lying to Ezra and I've done everything I can so I don't have to. I've stayed busy until late at night and scheduled other activities when I would normally talk to him. Every time Kyle just shakes his head at me and reminds me that my time is dwindling. I fear that if he knew the true extent of things, he would have told on me by now.

I stay late in the studio and wait for Kyle to leave to get my late-night smoothie, the only thing I've been able to stomach lately. Once he's gone, I grab my things and head toward the parking garage. I reach for the keys to Spyder's Jeep in my bag that I borrowed earlier today. Thankfully he happened to be in the area.

Right as I hit the fob to unlock it, my arm is grabbed and I'm whirled around. "Uncle Cliff." Shit. I slide my hands into my hoodie pocket and flip on the little recorder.

“Is my money in there?”

I shake my head no. “I was going to pick it up on my way.”

He laughs and shakes his finger in my face. “You must think I’m fucking stupid.”

“No,” I respond and shift on my feet. “I have it, but I had to get away from Kyle first.”

He nods like he’s contemplating his words. His beady eyes run over me and then go to the Jeep behind me. “Whose ride is this?”

“A friend,” I manage to choke out without looking scared. My plan is already falling apart unless I can get him talking. “Please, Uncle Cliff. I’m trying to get this done right. I know I owe you.”

“Damn straight you owe me! You and that scumbag Hamilton both owe me. You took everything from me when you left. And he capitalized on all of it when he had BNE investigate me,” he yells, getting in my face

I can feel the color drain from my face. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ll be sorry if you don’t pay me back every penny you cost me.”

“Uncle Cliff, you had your bookies track me down. They tried to attack me on multiple occasions,” I remind him of his own transgressions.

“Lucky for you they wouldn’t be getting anything that Hamilton didn’t already get.” He shrugs and I force myself to stay calm. “I’m over this little trip down memory lane. I want my money.”

He goes to grab me again when another figure comes down the stairs. Spyder steps from the shadows, a menacing scowl on his lips. “I don’t think she wants to go anywhere with you.”

My uncle’s wild eyes swing to him then back to me. He shoves me against the Jeep and glares at him. Spyder steps toward me, but I beg him with my eyes to stay away.

“This is family business, son. Why don’t you just walk on by.”

Spyder chuckles. “I’d like to but your little family spat is happening on my vehicle. That’s my Jeep you just shoved your niece into. And look,” he holds up his cell phone, “I just caught the whole thing on video.”

My uncle’s nostrils flare and I recognize the evil in his eyes. He reaches into the band of his jeans right as the sound of people running sounds around us.

“Keep your hands where I can see them!” A woman’s voice yells into the space, the sound echoing off the cement building.

Uncle Cliff turns to me, shoving me harder. “You set me up. You fucking bitch, you set me up!” He raises his hand to swing right as someone slides in front of me, blocking him and shoving his body down to the ground.

“Now arrest him.” Ezra’s voice commands.

My whole body goes still. My worst nightmare is coming true. He found me so he must know. I glare at Kyle, who won’t meet my gaze. There is a flurry of police and investigators. Ezra fills them in on my uncle’s connection to some crime lord in Las Vegas who was responsible for sending Scooter after me. They were still unable to find Scooter but getting my uncle was good enough. The police have a mountain of evidence that my uncle made many unsavory and illegal deals and bets with my money, my property and me during his reign over my life at BNE. They were willing to take what they had seen today, including Spyder’s video and my recording, plus the texts from my uncle as part of their case.

When I hand my phone over, I catch the glaring look Ezra is giving Spyder. “You were going to help her when she could have been in danger?”

Spyder looks from Ezra to me then back to him. “She’s an adult and can make her own decisions. I showed up in case she needed backup because I did think it was weird.”

Ezra's eyes turn molten and his hands flex at his sides. "Take her back to the hotel," he orders Kyle.

"Yes, boss," he answers and helps guide me away.

"I'll call you," I say to Spyder and see the cheeky grin he gives me as I leave. Ezra stares him down before climbing in his own car and tailing behind us.

"Did you tip him off?"

Kyle shakes his head sighing. "No. You did that all on your own when you took three million dollars out of your account. I think he thought you were planning to leave him forever."

Sighing, I lean my head back against the seat. My intentions were good but now that he knows, I don't think I'll be able to dig myself out of this. I arrive first and get into the hotel elevator. Kyle hits the button for the penthouse suite.

"He's staying here tonight too."

I groan and cover my eyes. We reach the top before I can blink again and Ezra is waiting by the door. "You can leave us," he tells Kyle. My bodyguard gets back in and disappears from sight.

Ezra goes to the door and slides his key. The door unlocks and he holds it open. "Get in." My shoulders fall and tears sting my eyes. This feels different from my Aruba trip. Fear that I've finally stepped over the line creeps in.

I take off my shoes and set my stuff down. Ezra ignores me, throwing his tie and his coat on the couch before grabbing a tumbler of liquor and pouring it in a glass. "Did you honestly not think I'd find out."

"I didn't want you to find out that way."

His head snaps up, his eyes wild and filled with fear and panic. "And what the hell were you trying to accomplish?"

My fingers twist together, but I refuse to back down. "I was trying to make him go away. I had a plan."

“Go away,” Ezra scoffs, “the man had a knife in his back pocket, Ocean. A fucking knife. Do you honestly think you would have gotten away with tricking him?”

“I don’t know. I was going to get him to talk and give him the money like he wanted. Then explain it all to you so you could tell me what we should do next.”

“You were actually going to give him three million dollars?” Ezra practically shouts, while unbuttoning the top button on his shirt and taking another drink.

My shoulders shrug. “What is a couple million in the long run if it keeps us safe.”

His jaw clenches, and in the next instance, he throws the glass across the room. Booze and glass shatter on the floor.

“Ezra.”

He holds up his hand. “No. Just don’t. Not yet. You lied to me all week, you had Kyle keep things from me so that you could try and pay off your uncle.”

“I wasn’t lying about everything. The stress was getting to me. I was feeling sick and not sleeping the best. And Kyle is my employee, okay. Whatever I ask him to do, he should be doing.”

“Not if it compromises your safety, Ocean!”

“And who is going to worry about you and your safety? You don’t think I want to keep you safe too? That it didn’t kill me with what he was going to say about you, about us. You’re always the one taking chances and plotting to protect me. I just wanted to protect you too.”

Ezra runs his hands through his hair, his chest heaving. “Ocean, I take the chances because I’m prepared. I have back up plans. I’ve been working on this investigation into your uncle for almost a year, since you told me about what happened.”

“You didn’t tell me that. Don’t you think that is something I should know?”

“Everything I do to protect you is because I can’t live without you, Ocean. If someone comes after me, fine. I can leave this earth knowing you’re safe. I can’t lose you though. It would destroy me, princess. I would die without you. Everything you did was reckless and unsafe, and you kept it from me.”

Before I can stop myself, I’m charging across the room, dropping my sweatshirt and jumping on him. Ezra’s arms open for me, his hands sliding to my back and under my legs. My arms wrap around his neck, and I take his face in my hands, kissing him hard and deep. Our tongues duel and fight for dominance.

“Punish me then. Punish me for loving you so much. For wanting to take care of you.”

He shakes his head and tears glisten in his eyes. “I love you.”

“Show me,” I plead, my voice cracking.

I drop my lips back down and kiss him again. This time, it’s sweeter but still just as hungry. He walks us toward the bedroom and I throw my tank top off and over my head followed by my sports bra. I’m set on my feet just long enough for him to tug the rest of my clothes off. His hands and mouth move desperately all over my body as he manages to get me to the bed.

I reach for his shirt, but he knocks my hand away. “I need you right now. If I have to wait any longer, I’ll fucking explode.”

Ezra bends me over the side of the bed, his fingers slipping between my thighs and feeling how wet I am. He groans and all I hear is a belt buckle followed by the sound of a zipper before he thrusts inside my tight channel. I cry out his name and his arms cage around us, holding me underneath him. Ezra is ruthless. His cock pounds into me and his body restrains my body against the bed. Sweat slicks my back and my brow. I can feel my orgasm brewing deep inside my core yet it feels so far out of reach. “Ezra, please,” I beg and whine, my voice filled with the pleasure he gives me.



Ezra pulls out and flips me onto my back. He pushes my knees to my chest and sinks back in slowly, filling me to the hilt. At this angle, our mouths are a breath apart. His pale eyes hold my gaze with an intense burning look of love. I tilt my chin and bring my lips to his. He groans into my mouth and my tongue teases his with every kiss. We both climax, breathing each other in, my body wrapped so tight around his that I can't tell where he ends and I begin.

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I STARTLE AWAKE in the darkness and reach my hand back. All my fingertips touch are cold sheets and I know Ezra isn't in bed with me anymore. Taking the blanket and wrapping it around my naked body, I leave the bedroom. A light is glowing from the living room space. I follow it and find Ezra sitting in front of the make-shift fireplace.

“Why aren't you in bed?”

He glances at me, his eyes raking over my naked form. Ezra holds out his hand, inviting me to sit on his lap. I go willingly and wrap my arms around his neck, resting on his chest.

“I had a call from Caleb. Just some things to take care of tomorrow before we head home.”

I lay my head on his shoulder and press my lips to his neck. “Are we going home tomorrow then?”

He nods. “I miss our home.”

“Me too,” I tell him and snuggle more on his lap, my gaze transfixed on the fire.

He picks up my hand and kisses the knuckles. He then turns my hand over and places a kiss on my wrist where my pulse point is. “Say you'll never leave me.”

“I'll never leave you,” I promise him.

“You love me?”

My head tilts back and our gazes meet. “With all my heart. Forever.”

Ezra bends and kisses my lips. I'm so lost in him, I almost miss the feeling of something sliding over my finger. I break away and look down at where he's holding my hand. On my left, ring finger now sits a solitaire, four carat diamond. I pull my hand in, inspecting the band of small, amethyst gems.

"I've loved you since the moment I saw you. I waited for you. And now that I have you, I'll never give you up. I'll keep loving you forever. Will you marry me, princess?"

My lips break into a smile and I hug myself to him tightly. Tears fall from my eyes while my heart bursts with so much love for this man. "Yes, I'll marry you."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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Ezra



CALEB

Boss, don't even watch it.

ME

Why?

CALEB

The gist of it is that she was asked about your relationship and she alluded to something happening.

A video clip comes through a few seconds later and I watch as my fiancée, the love of my life, smiles and answers the question on if she is single or taken in a flirty voice. “It’s complicated.” She doesn’t allude to anything and I zone in on the fact that she isn’t wearing her ring. The one I gave her just two nights ago.

I throw my phone on the desk and lean back, rubbing my hands down my face. As always, my two sides war with how to move forward. I want to respect the pace she is setting, but I’m hurt and pissed off that she is choosing to hide things completely. There is nothing complicated about our

relationship. Since the night of the awards show, everyone has been able to see how obsessed I am with Ocean Heart and how in love with me she is. The media knows it, the tabloids are printing it. I want the world to know. Why she keeps denying it isn't something I understand.

Ocean is heading to her show in New York City after the interview today before heading back to our home. I already refer to her space as ours. It's a little small for me, but she loves it. It's the dream house she always wanted, so I'm willing to accept that.

I can't wait for her to get back to talk about this. I'm willing to listen to her, but I refuse to be labeled a relationship that's complicated. After shooting an email to cancel my afternoon interview and letting Caleb know to contain our problem because I'll be in New York, I hop in my car and drive to the venue of the show. I'm granted access backstage where I meet Kyle. He eyes me warily, probably because he saw the interview today as well. I find her dressing room myself before getting comfortable. It will be a while until she takes an intermission.

I listen to her songs one by one, thinking about the lyrics. Thinking about how her sound has matured and changed over the past few days. Ocean having the ability to use her own voice and create her own songs was one of the best things she ever asked for. BNE had been oppressing her talent. They were hiding her magic and never let her live to her full potential. She has that now, and I love how secure she is in herself, thanks to working with Rosen Records.

I listen to the stomping of feet and cheers before a quiet lull fills the area. I glance at my phone before getting to my feet and leaning against her makeup table. A few seconds later, she walks in. Her silver bodysuit catches the lights, her hands reach for the zipper right before she notices I'm here. I see her eyes widen, and her pupils expand. A smile tugs at her lips.

“What are you doing here?”

My head cocks to the side. “I came to see you.”

She walks over to me and loops her arms around my neck. “Why? Not that I mind. It’s a great surprise. I just thought you were planning on being home all night.”

I kiss her forehead and cup her cheeks in my hands. “I missed you. Why? Does that make things complicated?”

The smile slides from her lips and she pulls back. “You’re here because of the interview.”

I let my arms fall and I shrug. “Should I not be concerned that my *fiancée* just denied being with me and the seriousness of our relationship on national television? Or the fact that she refuses to wear the ring I gave her.”

Ocean steps back from me shaking her head. “Unbelievable.” I watch as she unzips her outfit and steps out, throwing it by her bags. “Didn’t we agree to keep things out of the spotlight?”

I shake my head. “I never would have agreed to that. I agreed we can go at your pace for our relationship and you seemed pretty thrilled when I slipped that diamond on your finger. We agreed that I could handle the media and nothing would touch you.”

Her mouth slams shut into a firm line. “Agreeing to go at my pace means waiting. I was fine with putting feelers out there, with the picture you leaked and going to the award ceremony together. That doesn’t mean announcing to everyone that we are getting married. Some of them think we’ve only been dating for a few weeks.”

“If you love me and I love you, why does it matter what anyone thinks or says?”

“I do love you. I said I’d marry you, you asshole.”

My brow rises at her sass and tone. “Then what is the problem?”

Her eyes narrow and she stomps over to me. “You’re the problem. This, this here is the problem. We keep moving at lightning speed. In private, in our home, I will let you control things. I even like it that most of the time I don’t have to plan or think about anything because you take care of it for us, for

me. Out here, though, it is different. You've always taught me to be conscious of my brand. Of what people see and what they believe. I just built my new image. I do think my audience is ready to see me falling in love and being happy, getting married, down the road. You need to let me keep the control of my business that you instilled in me, Ezra. I can't give it up."

I push off the desk and we're standing toe-to-toe. My hands push her hair from her shoulders and run down her arms to her hands. I take her hands in mine, gazing down at her, at how beautiful she is even when she's mad. "I'm not asking you to give it up. I don't want you to give up anything and you shouldn't have to. I'm just saying I refuse to be a complication, a situationship or whatever they're saying these days. Boyfriend seems so immature for what we are, or the depth of the feelings I have for you."

"So what do you want me to call you? My lover? Life partner? Old man? Future spouse?" She smirks and leans in so her lips are almost touching mine.

"I'm your fiancé, Ocean. I'm yours. And you're fucking mine." I kiss her gently and she sways.

"I know, Ezra. I love you." She kisses me back, and it's hard for me to keep fighting.

"I'll have my people contact the television station and issue the new information."

"Ezra!"

I run my hands through my hair and grab my jacket from the chair. "Are you worried because I'm older than you, or about how the media might slander my name and ruin my business?"

Her eyes widen and her cheeks turn pink. I knew there was more that she was hiding. By making it all about her, I couldn't discover that she's really just worried about me. Part of me likes it, while the other part just grows more frustrated. I would give up all I have if it helped her. I stopped caring about myself and my business when I met her. Sure, having money

and notoriety is nice. I do well and I have an eye and ear for talent, but none of it matters without her.

I clutch her jaw in my hand. “You don’t worry about me. I don’t want any decision you make or don’t make to have anything to do with how it might affect me. My business is a front at most, so that I can stay close to you. Am I good at what I do? Abso-fucking-lutely. Would I give it all up for you? In a heartbeat. I don’t care what anyone says. If they push me out, fine. I’ll just be a stay-at-home husband or a roadie. I’ll be in charge of just your show and security. Ocean Heart’s handler for life.”

Her eyes shine with tears, but the good kind. Her chest rises and falls deeply. I lean down and press my lips to hers in one last searing kiss. “Believe me, Ocean. It’s if I don’t have you...that’s when people really need to worry.”

“Five minutes, Ms. Heart!” Kyle’s voice cuts through our discussion.

Ocean’s shaking and her hands keep reaching for me. I kiss her cheeks, her forehead, and pull her into my body, holding her tight. “Go. Be a star. I’ll be waiting for you in our bed when you get home.”

I release her and slip out of the room. It would be so easy to convince myself to stay, to rail her hard over the armrest of the couch, to sink deep inside her and fill her up. Right now, I could have. Her body was willing to listen to me. Her heart was shining in her eyes. Her mind just has to catch up with everything else. My own heart squeezes in my chest. Ocean does that to me. Caring about me, my job, my getting hurt. I’ll never forget how she yelled back at me with tears in her eyes, demanding to know who protects me. Silly, beautiful girl. She is the one who protects me, who keeps me sane, keeps me going. The rest of this world is just noise.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

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### Ocean



I didn't go home last night. And not to teach Ezra a lesson or to hurt him and carry on a childish fight. He wasn't happy with my text message and did try to call, but I explained to him I was with Jade and Mia. He let it go without a fight, but I'm sure when I do get home, he'll want an explanation. I don't know what to tell him except that when I really thought about what my reservations with sharing our relationship are, I realized they do revolve around him. Ezra has done so much for me, I refuse to be the reason he could lose everything. He says he doesn't care, but I do. I would die if later on he resented me for not having the company he fought against his uncle to have. If I'm going to do this then I need to do this authentically.

I called Mia, Tabbi and Jade and let them know I needed a meeting. With almost everyone in a different time zone, it was going to take some time to get together. Mia was willing to make it work though. Just as she promised me almost two years ago, she's always there for me. I'm never alone.

Since I couldn't go home yet, it gave me time to deal with my other problem. I'm late. It's been six days since my period was due. It doesn't sound like much, but I'm never late. I've always had predictable periods. My neck heats remembering how often Ezra has come inside me and the fact that I've stopped fighting him not to. Obviously, this is what can happen. I know if I tell him he'll be ecstatic. It's pretty much what he's hoping for every time he pushes his cum back inside me and makes me hold still for a few minutes when we finish.



The pink box sits across from me in my private ensuite at Rosen Records. I've been staring at it for over two hours now when I should be at home sleeping. My fingers rub my forehead.

Am I pregnant?

What will we do? Ezra is so convinced that just because I've always wanted to be a mom, and I love holding babies, that we'll be perfect parents. I try to imagine us running around the house chasing after kids, giving them bubble baths, and having family dinners. Then I picture the other part of life, taking the kids on tour and seeing the world from where I am when I'm on stage. Ezra would be waiting in the wings, carrying our child to safety while I sing for the world. I know it won't all be easy. I'm going to have to sacrifice the lifestyle I have now. There will be cut backs and I won't be able to keep the schedule I have. Then I picture a baby with bright green eyes and those sacrifices don't seem terrible. They'll be done with love. And let's be honest, with Ezra as the father, sacrifices will be few and far between. He probably already has a plan for it.

When I realized I was late, I didn't feel disappointed. All I felt was a small flare of fear before a very confusing rush of happiness. A joy I never expected. Feeling brave, I open the box and pull a stick out. And then spend twenty minutes pacing the bathroom floor, building up the courage to actually pee on it.

I glance at myself in the mirror. "Woman up, Heart."

Taking a few shaky breaths, I do what I need to do and set the stick on a towel on the counter. Voices from the other side of the door catch my attention. After washing my hands, I step out and I'm immediately swept into my best friend's arms.

"Oce!" Jade squeezes me and I hug her back just as fiercely.

Mia is setting her papers down and pulling up a screen on her computer. Tabbi's face pops on and then our lawyer. I walk over to Mia and she eyes me knowingly.

“Are you ready to do this?”

I nod, and biting my lip, hold my hand out for them to see. Ezra’s diamond ring sits proudly on my finger. I was prepared for the squeals and hugs, but not the tears.

“Why are you crying?” I ask Jade as panic starts to slip in.

She shakes her head, seeing the terror on my face. “No, these are happy tears. I’m just really happy for you. Ocean, you deserve everything good after what you’ve been through in life.”

I pull her in to hug her and we both start crying. I look over at Mia and she is also standing there with tears falling down her cheeks before throwing her arms around us and hugging us tightly. We’ve all made it this far, three best friends, three love stories. Without these two, my life wouldn’t be the same.

“Alright, are we starting now?” I laugh and pull away.

“Yes.” Mia clasps her hands and practically skips to the table. “Okay, Tabbi, we’re ready to start, I think.”

“Wonderful! After some thought, I think it’s best to directly put out the information about how you met. That way we control the narrative and timeline. It leaves less questions or assumptions to be made. We will also highlight that he left for a period of time and how long it was since you were in contact again. From that point of contact to now.” Tabbi reads over her idea and notes.

“What is the current status of your relationship right now that we should be reporting on?” Tabbi asks, glancing at me over the laptop.

The room hushes and all eyes turn to me. For the first time in the public eye, I blush. “He’s my...he’s my fiancé.” And possible father to my child. I leave that out for now.

Everyone starts talking excitedly. Tabbi and Mia hash out the press release from Rosen Records and run it by our lawyers to weigh in on. That part made me nervous, for any backlash that could happen. But our lawyer was professional

and assessed the situation in a way I hadn't thought of. I can see why she is an asset to the agency.

By the time we're done, I feel better and more prepared. There is a plan for every question or comment that may arise. A copy of the plan is ready to be sent to Caleb at seven, and it will hit my social media at nine.

I hug Mia and Jade goodbye as they head home to see their husbands. I'm anxious to get back to Ezra as well. I check my phone and see that it's an hour until Caleb receives the news, in which I'm sure he'll tell Ezra right away. There's just one more thing I need to take care of first.

Once I step into the bathroom, my heart settles. I know whatever happens is going to be okay. I pick up the test. Smiling and with tears in my eyes, my heart bursts with love and happiness. I need to get back to Ezra.

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AN HOUR LATER, I arrive at my house, the smile fading from my lips when I see that the house looks completely dark. I expected that after almost a day, Ezra would be here, waiting for me. I park my car and start heading to the door, right as Kyle arrives.

"Hi," I call to him and wave. His face is grim.

"What's wrong?"

"He's not in fine form today, Ms. Heart," he answers.

My brow lifts. "Does that mean he's inside?"

Kyle hesitates but then nods. I open the door and let myself in, but Kyle doesn't enter, choosing to turn his back to the door. "You aren't coming in."

"Nope."

Shrugging, I close the door and lock it. It might be a good idea if no one hears or witnesses what could possibly happen. My cheeks heat and my core tightens just thinking about it. I'm going to have some explaining to do, but once Ezra hears what I've done, I can only imagine the rest of our day will be spent in bed.

The kitchen is empty and so is the living room. Grinning, I run up the stairs to the bedroom and open the door. The room is dark, and I reach for the lamp. My stomach drops when I notice the bed is empty, the sheets and blankets are perfectly made, as if they were never slept in. Dread swirls in my stomach. I pull out my phone.

ME

Where are you?

I pace around my room and quickly change out of the jeans and shirt I was wearing and into some sweatpants and a cropped t-shirt. I check my phone again and there isn't a text back. I start panicking a little and head back downstairs to ask Kyle. Right as I pass the basement door, I hear a grunt. Stopping dead in my tracks, I turn toward the door, frozen. My hand reaches for the door knob and I quietly walk down the stairs. I hear a few more sounds that sound more like groans. A light is on and I walk farther into the basement. Or what is left of my basement. Huge mats are set up and a boxing ring is in the center. My eyes widen when I see Ezra and another man, who I don't recognize, sparring in the ring. Even more alarming is the deadly look in Ezra's eyes. Hard. Unyielding. Cruel. Red and purple marks mar the skin around his ribs and his lip is swollen and cut. The other man doesn't look much better. They both look exhausted.

"Ezra," I say his name quietly. His attention snaps to mine and everything in the room seems to stop. I can feel the energy around the room heighten while he takes me in from my bare toes, to the end of my freshly washed hair, over my face and to the top of my head.

"Leave."

My heart stutters at the command and I open my mouth to say anything when the other man starts packing up his things and getting out of there as fast as he can. Ezra doesn't move, our eyes stay locked in a deadly battle.

"Can you come down here so I can take care of you?"

His jaw clenches, but he takes his gloves off and sets them down before climbing out of the ring. His legs move stiffly and his arms almost shake.

“How long were you in the ring?”

He slips past me and grabs a water bottle. “Last night maybe.”

“Ezra!”

He shrugs and glances around the room at just about anything but me. “I’m sorry, Ocean. I know I’ve been pushing for things that you aren’t ready for. You’re not ready to be mine and after everything, I need to be fair to you and meet you where you’re at.”

“What does that mean?”

His head drops, and his eyes fall to the floor. “I’ll give you your space. I’ll stop being demanding. If you want, I’ll hold onto the ring until you decide you want to wear it. I even...I even fucking bought condoms. It will kill me to wear them now, after having felt how perfect you feel raw and completely mine, but I will. That’s it, though. I want us to keep moving forward as you’re ready. I still plan to stay here every night and oversee all your security.”

I can’t help the smile that curves my lips. I want to shake him. Slap him. Kiss the shit out of him. “What if that’s not what I want anymore?”

His eyes darken and his shoulders seem to cave in more. A wildness comes over his features. “I won’t give you up, Ocean. If that’s what you’re saying, I can’t do that. If you need space, time, anything, okay. It will fucking kill me, but I’ll leave. Just don’t say we’re done.”

Tears spring to my eyes, listening to the gravely way his voice breaks, and the absolute heartbreak on his face. This isn’t the man I know, and suddenly the weight of my decisions start to catch up to me. “No, Ezra.” I go to him and wrap my arms around his waist, hugging him to me. I don’t care that his sweat soaks the front of my t-shirt. I just want to reassure him.

“That’s not what I meant. That’s not what I want at all.”

I let go of him and thrust my hand in front of his face. “I didn’t come home because I was meeting with Mia, Jade and Tabbi to best share the news that we’re engaged. I wanted to do it on my terms in a way that best protects us. I know you could have done it, but it was important to me that I did it. I wanted to protect you for once.”

Ezra’s eyes flare and he drops his water bottle as he reaches for me. “You’re not leaving me?”

I shake my head no. “I love you. Even when you’re a controlling asshole.”

Ezra laughs. “You like when I’m controlling, princess. Especially in the bedroom.”

My knees feel weak when he says bedroom like that. And when he calls me princess. And when he laughs. Ugh I’m a mess over this man. “I have one more thing to say about the condoms.”

He groans and brings his arms around my body, huddling me close, and presses his forehead against mine. “I promise I’ll do it for you, but I hate it.”

I laugh. “You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“I apologize for switching your pills and threatening your doctor. And even after I knew you didn’t do anything to stop me, I kept purposefully coming inside you.”

“Ezra.”

“I love you, Ocean. I should have—”

“Stop! Just stop talking,” I grab his face with my hands and press my lips to his. “I was going to say they won’t be needed for now. I’m pregnant.”

Ezra’s arms tighten around me, and his green eyes go soft. “You are?”

I nod. “According to the test, I am. You can’t be that surprised though. Not when you’ve been trying so hard.”

Ezra whoops out a laugh, and suddenly, I’m lifted in the air and twirled around. “You’re pregnant with my baby.” He sets

me back down and places his hand over my stomach.

“I’m not far enough along to feel anything yet.”

“I know. I just want our baby to know I’m here,” he says before our gazes catch again. All those feelings and worries from before seem to melt away. Nothing else matters but us.

Ezra’s hand slides along my nape and he brings his mouth to mine. My arms automatically wrap around his neck and I stand on my tiptoes to get as close to him as physically possible. His hands and arms clutch at me like he still fears I’ll leave. He kisses me hard, hungry and full of possessiveness. I moan into his kiss and that’s when his control seems to snap. My legs are hauled up around his hips and he sets me on the edge of the ring. I tilt my hips when he shimmies my sweatpants down my legs, his nostrils flare when he sees I wasn’t wearing anything else underneath.

Ezra pushes my thighs apart, his hands guiding my legs around his shoulders before he dips down and runs his tongue through my slit. My head tips back, and my arms hold onto the ropes. He thrusts his tongue inside me, licking me all over. His tongue lashes against my too sensitive clit over and over. My hips rise, trying to get closer, inviting him to devour me. I come undone for him swiftly, and it feels like it goes on and on. Ezra stands and takes his cock in his hand, lines it up with my entrance and thrusts inside. His name leaves my mouth in a breathy moan. He pulls my body closer to his, wrapping one leg around his waist and the other over his shoulder. I can feel his thrusts deeper and harder, hitting that sensitive place inside me.

I clutch his shoulder, the ropes, the edge of the canvas while he fucks me hard, slamming into me and wringing another orgasm from my body. Ezra’s forehead drops to my chest, and I feel him kiss and lick across my skin, nipping at my nipples. He thrusts deeper and harder with every stroke.

“Fuck yes.” He groans when he comes. Our eyes meet and I see a victorious light dance across his gaze before it disappears. “You’re mine.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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Ezra



I've done a lot of things that most people wouldn't agree with. I've also done things that some would regard as evil. All of the things I've done, though, were for her. Ocean Heart soon-to-be Ocean Hamilton.

I was proud of the announcement she made for Rosen Records about our relationship, her version of the story and how we're now engaged. The world loved our love story because of how she told it. Sweet, romantic, timeless. If it had come from me, it would be laced with possession and jealousy, using wealth to get what I wanted most. To the world, our relationship was a whirlwind romance, ending in a quick trip down the aisle. To me, it feels like decades have led to this moment. The moment where Ocean officially becomes mine legally. The need to claim that last part burns in my chest.

At four months pregnant, she still barely shows, but the slight swell of a baby bump is becoming more visible. Especially in the flowing white skirt of her wedding dress. Her hair is swept back in curls and her hands clutch a bouquet of deep purple flowers while she walks toward me. Since so much of her life is shared in the media, we chose to keep the ceremony to just friends and family. Because Ocean includes Mia and Jade as her family, they're all here with their spouses as well as the band members from Rise Above. Everyone is smiling and happy.

All I see is Ocean. When we say our vows and when I slide her ring on her finger, everything locks into place. This was always meant to be. She was destined to be mine and I'll



forever be hers, the only person she needs. The minute I can, my mouth slants over hers, my tongue parts her lips and slides inside. I kiss her with my whole heart and promise her the happily forever she deserves.

Ocean wanted an intimate get-together after the ceremony and I wanted everyone to know it was official. We compromised at a large-scale party similar to a record release. I keep a smile on my lips while everyone eats, drinks, and gives us their congratulations. All I can think about, though, is getting my wife naked and underneath me.

After some time, I find her and wrap my arm around her waist. Her eyes widen slightly when she sees the look I'm giving her. "Make nice for five more minutes, wife, then I'm taking you home."

Her cheeks flush, but she lets me guide her through the crowd and to the entrance. The car is waiting for us like I planned, and soon after, we're speeding through the city back to our home. I park the car and get rid of Kyle and Caleb before sliding an arm under her knees and carrying her bridal style into the house.

We make it to our room and my hands can't get her undressed fast enough. By the time I lay her out on the bed, my bare skin touches hers and it's like a livewire to my heart. I kiss her over and over until she's breathless, clinging to me, needy and wanting to be full of my cum. Her hands slide down over my back, her nails digging into the muscle and skin so that I arch into her touch.

I kiss my way down her body, gently biting and sucking at her tits, and lavishing her bump with kisses and love. I can't wait until her belly grows bigger and there is no more hiding the changes in her body from the press. Of what I did to her body. Just the thought of it makes me insanely hard, my vision hazy. Coming up over her, I line the head of my cock up with her entrance and slam inside, filling her to the hilt. Heat races over my body while her inner muscles clamp down and suck my cock farther into her tightness..

“You’re so perfect, princess. So soft. So sweet. So fucking mine.”

Her lips open, gasping with each thrust. Her pregnancy is already making her a wet, horny mess for me all the time. “Yes.” She moans loudly. I take her hands in mine and stretch them to the headboard.

“Settle in, baby. It’s going to be a long night.”

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*Two months later...*

“BOSS, IT’S READY.” Caleb arrives in my office and hands me the iPad with the information I requested as well as the surveillance feed to the basement.

“Let’s head down.”

When I left my uncle’s business and started New Image Media, I had two purposes: get Ocean back and keep Ocean forever. I was good at my job. I thrived on it. My clientele did well and I profited. When my office building was being built, I knew it would serve a dual purpose. Money can do very great things. It can also be useful for very necessary but evil things.

I follow Caleb to the basement stairs where we each have our eyes scanned before entering the secret room. The smell of blood and sweat already fills it. Kyle and Lance stand off to the side, waiting for instructions on what to do with the man in the chair.

I step closer, my lip peeled back in a sneer. “Lift your fucking head.”

His shaved head lifts and he looks directly at me. This man is nothing like the smooth talking, carefree criminal who was brought in three days ago. This man is broken, bloody and on the verge of dying. Just like he deserves. Scooter Taylor. The man who made my wife’s life miserable, chasing after her and demanding things from her. He threatened her life and he has to pay for it.

“I’m sorry for whatever I did,” he pleads, and I shake my head.

“You touched what’s mine, Scooter. You plotted with Cliff Heart to hurt my wife and do unspeakable things to her for money.”

He shakes violently. “I didn’t know she was your fucking wife, man! Honest!”

“It’s too late for you, I’m afraid. You made your bed and now you’re going to die here.”

I pull a gun from behind my back and pull the trigger. I enjoy the way his eyes freeze in terror and a spot of red blooms on his forehead.

“How do you want to dispose of him?” Lance asks while I place my weapon behind my back once more, concealing it.

“Throw him in the gulf. I want his body found and reported in the news. Cliff needs to think a little harder while he’s in prison. Plus, Ocean can have the closure she needs.” My only regret is that I couldn’t give Cliff the same ending. Part of me never felt okay taking away Ocean’s last relative, even though he was a stain on humanity. I wanted her to see him taken to prison and that justice was served for her. Not that I couldn’t pay someone inside to take him out down the road. It is still an option.

“What about the other two lackeys we pushed for information?”

I shrug. “They can be shoved in a barrel or landfill for all I care. They’re pieces of shit.”

Lance nods while he and Kyle get to work. I take Caleb back upstairs and check the camera at the studio. Ocean is still writing. I watch her rub her belly and I wonder if the baby is moving.

“Mrs. Hamilton has no clue what goes on here, does she? That you’ve permanently removed every threat to her,” Caleb asks, and honestly, I’m surprised it took this long.

I shake my head no. “This is a legit company that assists clients with managing their image, their tours and brand. That is all Ocean needs to know. She is happy and loved.”

“Did it all start with the stalker?”

My mind dives into the past. I remember the man we found who was responsible for the hotel break-in the night she kissed me. The man who was set up by her uncle. Ocean was so surprised then because none of the threats had ever made it to her attention before. I kept it that way. Over the years, and even while I was away from her, she has never been touched or harmed. She’s my world and I’ll do whatever it takes to make life perfect for her. I love her beyond measure, beyond sanity or what is right. Ocean is my heart, my rhythm, my forbidden fantasy and my saving grace.

“No. It all started when an old colleague wanted to challenge my uncle’s decision to make me her handler.”

## The Encore...



“I didn’t know babies this little could smile.” Ezra holds our daughter against his chest, completely mesmerized and already in love with her.

“It’s gas,” I tease him and rub my hand gently on her back.

“No, it because she’s ours,” he says in her defense. Yup, she already has him wound around her tiny finger.

“That too,” I agree and lean my body into his. His arm automatically wraps around my waist until he’s holding both of his girls.

Melody Hamilton made her appearance during a snow-filled night. Ever since then, our security has been doubled. The house is completely under surveillance. And we’re driven everywhere. Still, the days are filled with joy and business as we each juggle our work and life with a baby. Our nights are rarely peaceful, but there is something special about sitting and cuddling Melody to my chest while the world outside her window is blanketed in silence with the moon casting its glow.

I wish sometimes I could stop time here and now and keep it forever. While at the same time, I’m anxious to create, to sing, to share my love of what I do with my daughter. Mia and I had agreed before I gave birth that I was going to wait at least two years before the next big tour. Not that it has stopped her from planning it already. When I told Ezra, he was prepared and already has made plans for our family to go just as he promised.

I glance up at him and find his icy green eyes already on me. I drink in his handsome face and wrap my arms tighter around his middle. My love for this man has only multiplied and grown, making me as obsessed with him as he is with me. He is mine now and forever. He always has been.

“What are you thinking about?”

“How much I love you,” I respond and rise up to kiss his cheek. He holds me tighter.

“I love you too, princess.” He leans over and kisses me gently, our daughter nestled between us. “I once asked you to tell me what you wanted. I’ve made it my life’s mission to give everything to you. Tell me, Ocean, do you have everything you want?”

I lean in and touch my forehead to the spot on his chest against this heart. Desire, love, courage, all run in my veins thinking about him, our family, my music and the life we’re creating together.

“Yes,” I reply, the answer feeling as natural as breathing. This is my world and I’ll forever be giving him the encore of a lifetime.

The End.

*And the lights go out...*

# Extras

If you enjoyed Ocean and Ezra's love story please consider leaving a review. I'd be very grateful.

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