



Off Limits ALPHA
DADDY

JOSIE HART

Off Limits Alpha Daddy

An Enemies to Lovers Surprise Pregnancy Romance

Josie Hart

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EPILOGUE - JACKSON

GRUMP DADDY'S BABY SNEAK PEEK

KAI

MOLLY

LENA

“You look about as fun as hanging upside down until your nose bleeds,” Jackson muttered. “And I still think I’d rather do that.”

Asshole.

I stared into the face of Mr. Superstar-Rockstar, Jackson Whiss, my arms folded across my chest and eyebrow cocked. “Why would you say that? You don’t even *know* me.”

“I know your type. And well, most fans are usually a little more excited for a meet and greet,” he continued, his razor-sharp jaw tensing. “You just seem uptight. Like, smoke a joint and relax or something.” He then let out a chuckle that would almost be endearing...if he wasn’t so...*rude*.

“I *am* relaxed, but I guess I’m not most fans,” I snapped as I reluctantly leaned in for some random photographer to snap our picture together. I froze as Jackson draped his arm around my shoulders, and suddenly all I could smell was the scent of his cologne.

A musty, woody, and almost intoxicating scent.

The moment the camera dropped, I shrugged him off of me, ignoring the way my heart was racing a little faster than usual—and the smirk painted across Jackson’s face.

“Thanks,” one of the photographers said, giving us a grin. “Enjoy the meet and greet. You’re one lucky lady to have your package upgraded for free. That doesn’t happen often—and you’re getting Jackson’s attention. That’s a big deal.”

I nodded, smiling instead of sharing how I really felt about it. “Yeah, thank you.” My eyes flickered around the room backstage, searching for my best friend—the reason we had accepted the meet-and-greet package for Bad Man’s Land in the first place. She was obsessed with them, and while I loved their music...

I was not in awe of a rock star’s way of life, no matter how good Jackson Whiss might smell.

“You want a drink or something?” that deep, eerily arousing voice asked from behind me, igniting something in my core that was embarrassing. “We have anything you could ever want. You know, because we’re—”

“Uh-huh, yeah, I know. You’re rich and famous,” I cut Jackson off, turning to face him. His dark hair fell slightly in his face but it wasn’t overly long by any means. He had a five-o’clock shadow too, but in reality, it was more like a midnight shadow...

And maybe that was why I was so cranky.

It’s way past my bedtime.

“So do you want anything or not? Because it seems like your friend is having a hell of a time, so you’re gonna have to just chill.” Jackson motioned behind me, and I turned to see Maeve, lip-locked with the rhythm guitarist/keyboardist.

My shoulders slumped at the sight of my platinum-blond best friend. “Great,” I muttered, running my fingers through my own dirty-blond hair, and then looking back to Jackson. “Can I have a water please?”

He gave me a funny look, shaking his head. “You can have anything you want, and you want water?”

“Yeah. I do.” I didn’t bother to give him an explanation, because a guy like him wouldn’t understand the fact that I don’t really drink that often—and definitely not when I’m

surrounded by a bunch of rock stars and their posse. The room was loud and there were a lot more people than I'd expected there to be...

As soon as we'd taken our pictures, the other band members had mostly split off to socialize with the rest of the star-studded room, leaving me with the front man, who apparently had nothing better to do than bother me.

However, as I glanced around, I realized he had finally left me alone.

Now maybe I can find Maeve and get the hell out of here.

I slipped through the small crowd of people, realizing it wasn't so much that there were a ton of people—it was just a small room. Music blared from the speakers, and while I considered myself knowledgeable about music, I didn't recognize the pop-rock tune.

Where is she?

Irritation burned in my chest, mostly just because I wanted to go home. I had to teach class tomorrow, and there was nothing worse than trying to keep control of a bunch of five-year-olds when I felt like a zombie.

Finally, I spotted her again, sitting with Tyson—I thought that was his name—on one of the couches. He was wrapped all around her while she nursed a beer, sipping on it and giggling. The sight would be cute if I wasn't so ready to go.

"Hey," I called out, waving my hand.

"Oh, hey!" Maeve beamed, bouncing on the couch. "I was wondering where you'd gone off to...but Tyson said it looked like you were getting close with Jackson." She wiggled her eyebrows, and I shook my head.

"No, no, I wouldn't say we were getting close. He's just the only person that didn't leave when y'all did," I said, giving her a weary look. "Are you about ready to go?"

Her shoulders fell as she pouted her thin lips. "No...not yet. Tyson and I are *really* getting to know each other."

“Just hang out for a while,” he chimed in, shooting me a grin beneath his blond hair. “Get yourself a drink, relax, and enjoy the night. It’s all good, uh...”

“Lena,” I said, feeling defeated.

“Yeah, Lena.” He smiled. “I promise it’ll be worth your time, just hang out. We never let the meet-and-greet groups stay this long, so consider yourself lucky. It’s a privilege.”

The ego of these guys...

I nodded and turned around, eyeing an empty couch a few feet away. I made my way to it, plopping down and adjusting my black skinny jeans. Taking a deep breath, I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. I wanted to be excited to be backstage, considering I was a musician myself, but in truth, the band wasn’t exactly all that friendly. Well, Jackson Whiss wasn’t.

“Here.”

My eyes fluttered open to see Jackson standing over me. He held out a water bottle, an unamused look on his face. Reluctantly, I took it from him...

And then he plopped down beside me on the couch.

Great.

“My publicist says I have to entertain you, since you look like you might leave a bad review of the meet and greet.”

“I have no idea why my opinion would matter,” I laugh, shaking my head. “I think you have plenty of fans who wouldn’t care one way or the other.”

“That’s what I said,” he grunted, popping open another beer. “But here we are, so enjoy your water. It’s one of the best.”

I made a face at him. “It’s Aquafina.”

“Yeah, the best.”

“All right.”

“Must be a Dasani lady,” Jackson chuckled.

“Something like that.” I pulled out my phone, staring down at my screen with no notifications. *Ugh. I just need something to entertain myself with.*

“You’re really going to sit there like this isn’t the opportunity of a lifetime?” Jackson’s voice is dry. “Interesting.”

I glanced up at him. “You’re seriously going to sit there and tell me you consider socializing with you to be such a great thing? Maybe I’d be having more fun if you weren’t so rude to me when we met.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You looked *miserable*. So yeah, I pointed it out.” Jackson peeled at the label of his IPA.

“Well, for the record, I wasn’t miserable, but because of that, I now am,” I admitted, ignoring the fact that his first impression had left a sting. I mean, sure, maybe I was overreacting a little bit, or maybe it was just an insta-hate kind of thing.

It happens.

“So you’re blaming your shitty attitude on me?”

I eyed him, actually amused by how self-centered he really was. “Yeah, I am.”

Gosh, I’m glad I don’t have to see him ever again.

“What do you even do for a living? I bet you’re like a corrections officer or something. That would make sense, since you’re so—”

“I’m a music teacher for elementary-aged kids,” I cut him off, glaring.

He shrugged. “Same thing.”

“No, it’s not,” I argued, angling my body to face him. “A corrections officer watches inmates at a prison.”

“Yeah, same thing.”

I rolled my eyes, not even sure why I was being so rude. Normally, my patience for ignorance was pretty strong—I *was* a teacher after all. I dealt with all sorts of kids. But this...this

was just obnoxious. I expected Jackson Whiss to be some kind of moody, intelligent type...not just...snide and mouthy.

How can he write the songs he does when he acts like this?

“Do you actually write your own music?” I blurted, instantly regretting it when a look of offense filled Jackson’s face.

“Uh, *yeah*, I write my music. Tyson co-writes a lot of it, but still. It’s just us.”

I nodded, going quiet instead of asking any more questions. Jackson was an incredible musician and singer, but after meeting him...

I wasn’t sure I would ever listen to his music again.

“What do you play?”

His question caught me off guard. I was surprised he was still interested in having a conversation with me. He must not have anything better to do at the party.

“Um, like musical instruments?”

“Yeah, obviously. You said you’re a music teacher.”

“I play a lot of instruments,” I answered him, my tone brightening as I thought of the little kids thumping on their drums earlier that day. “I can play the piano, guitar, clarinet—”

“Got it. You’re the jack of all trades, master of none.”

My mouth dropped open. “No, I can play the piano very well, thanks. I majored in it during college. Now I’m working on my master’s. Well, planning to,” I added, thinking of the schooling that at the moment, I wasn’t sure I could afford.

“Right. Good for you. You’re the academic type of musician. Can’t stand those. You all are no fun.”

“And you have *nothing* nice to say to anyone who isn’t just like you.”

He burst into laughter. “You’re seriously as much fun as a stick in the mud.”

“I’ll tell you where you can shove that stick,” I retorted, setting my phone in my lap.

“Now, *that* sounds like a good time.” He shot me a wink, and my stomach flipped at the way he was looking at me...

And I had no idea why.

“You’re gross.”

“Thanks.”

God, when can we leave...

I shifted on the red velvet couch, leaning against the back. I was no longer angled toward Jackson, and I hoped that would stop our conversation from continuing. My eyes drifted back to my phone, and I opened my social media page. Maeve had already tagged me in a couple of concert photos, including the initial ones we took with the band...

Before Jackson was a huge asshole to me.

I sighed, liking the post, and then exiting out of it.

“I don’t use social media,” Jackson’s voice said from beside me—much closer than before.

I startled, realizing he had scooted closer to me. “Thanks for that information.”

“Yeah, that’s a good picture.”

“Okay,” I said in a flat tone, halfway annoyed that he’d been looking over my shoulder. Just as I was thinking of getting up and wandering somewhere else, Maeve appeared, tugging Tyson along behind her.

“Hey, hey, hey!” she greeted me, her eyes bright and cheeks flushed. “Tyson invited me to a party at his place. I guess it’s like a huge after-party.”

“Okay, I can just—”

“You *have* to go with me. You know the rules. We don’t *ever* go to parties alone.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know...” As much as I wanted to argue with her, I also knew that we had established those rules back when we were just nineteen—and we *always* stuck to them. “How long do you think it’ll last?”

“Oh, we party till the morning hours, baby,” Jackson stated, bursting into laughter. “It’s gonna be a *long* night for you.”

Yes. Yes, it is.

JACKSON

“Dude, she was *so* uptight,” I laughed, standing next to Tyson and Maeve at the after-party.

Her friend made a face at me. “Are you talking about Lena? She’s literally the *most* down-to-earth person I’ve ever met. I don’t know how you can call her uptight at all. She’s so sweet.”

“I don’t think we’re talking about the same person,” I chuckled, shaking my head at the blonde. I could already tell that Tyson was *really* into her, but unlike him, I wasn’t looking for anything serious—at all. Seriousness just led to women *leaving*.

“Her kind of fun just isn’t *this* kind of fun,” she continued. “Speaking of, we probably should find her...” Maeve’s voice trailed off as she glanced around, Tyson’s arms wrapped tightly around her waist. “I don’t want her to get lost or upset with me.”

“Yeah, go find her, Jackson.” Tyson nodded to me. “You don’t have anything better to do.”

“I could be getting shit-faced right now,” I reasoned, shrugging my shoulders. “That sounds a hell of a lot better than babysitting some chick who hates me.”

Even if the feeling is mutual.

Though, I have to admit, she is hot as fuck, and in a different way than most girls I'm around.

“Just go find her,” Tyson snapped at me, giving me a warning glance.

I let out a dramatic sigh and wandered off, slipping through the crowd of models, influencers, and other important people—as some would call them. I didn't necessarily agree with the people who looked at them that way...but it was whatever.

I turned my attention to finding the woman with the hazelnut-blonde hair and jade eyes. I could write a song about the way that woman looked, her freckles dancing across the bridge of her nose. *But seriously...where the hell is she?*

Tyson's house was massive, but he kept the party solely in the downstairs area, and for good reason. It wasn't that uncommon for people to try and use the bedrooms for... *activities.*

Of all kinds.

I downed the rest of my beer, chucked it into the trash, and picked up another cold one as I made my way through the elaborate dining room, completely void of people. My Vans were silent on the tile floor as I crossed a sitting room where a couple people were making out on the designer couch. I rolled my eyes at the way they were acting like animals...

I might've been a party animal, but I was surprisingly *not* into groupies and one-night stands. I just preferred to keep my fucking distance—like I would prefer to be doing with Lena. *God forbid she get the idea that I actually care.* I stopped in my tracks in front of the Florida room, guilt hitting me in the chest.

What the hell?

Brushing it off, I pushed open the door, letting it shut behind me. The room was beautiful, arguably the best place in the house. The stars were shining brightly, and the room was decorated with plants, a wall of wine, strange art, and plush furniture with bamboo framing.

Intricate, but comfortable.

My eyes drifted upward, taking in the constellations. *Damn, it's been a while since I took a moment to soak it in.*

...And then the sound of a light snore ruined it for me.

I squinted in the dim light, my gaze falling on a figure appearing to be snoozing on the couch across the room. *Ha, smart.*

However, as I made my way over to the figure, I let out a chuckle. *Of course* it was Lena, snoozing right there on the couch. Strangely, as the moonlight illuminated her peaceful face, something shifted in my chest. She was *stunning*.

But maybe that was just the alcohol talking.

I wasn't sure how many I'd had at that point.

She stirred beneath me, her eyes fluttering open. I took a step back, not wanting to seem like a fucking stalker. That would be embarrassing.

"Morning, Sleeping Beauty," I said, letting out a laugh.

She startled awake then—and threw a punch *right* in my direction.

It's a good thing I stepped back.

"Easy, killer. Your friend sent me to find you."

"Of course she did," Lena muttered, her voice groggy with sleep. "What time is it?"

I shrugged, my phone having died ages ago. "Hell if I know. The sun isn't up yet though. So, it's still a party."

She let out a heavy sigh, running her fingers through her hair in a way that made her actually adorable in the moment. "Gosh, I'm so tired."

"Happens, I guess." I stood there for a moment longer, and then headed for the door. "You can go back to your nap. I'll go report to your friend and let her know that you are, indeed, still living."

"Thanks," she said, her face and voice surprisingly soft. "I have an early morning tomorrow."

I nodded. “Me too.” I reached for the door, jiggling the knob. *What the fuck?* I jiggled it a little harder and then *jerked* it.

It didn’t budge.

“What’s wrong?” Lena called out, her voice still groggy.

“Stupid door is jammed or something.”

“Right,” she laughed. “Good joke.”

“I’m not joking,” I snapped, beating at it. It was a heavy steel door, more than likely meant to keep out the heat from the Florida room—that had no exit. *Who the fuck came up with this design?*

“Maybe I can help you?”

I ignored her, spending the next five to ten minutes trying to jimmy the door—it didn’t work. Then I was met with the scent of warm vanilla as Lena joined me. And even together, we *still* couldn’t get the door open. Though, it didn’t help that I kept being distracted by her body brushing against mine.

But that was neither here nor there.

“Just text one of your people and tell them we’re stuck,” Lena said, huffing as she stepped back. “I’m sure they can figure it out. They can take the door off the hinges from that side, I think.”

“Totally would, but my phone died.”

“*Ugh.*” She rolled her eyes, digging her own phone out of her black skinny jeans. She clicked the lock button and then tapped the screen. “Shit,” she mumbled under her breath. “Mine’s dead too.”

No fucking way.

“Figures. Guess we’ll just split some wine and chill till someone comes to get us.”

“What if they forget?” Lena suddenly sounded concerned.

“Baby, people don’t forget about me,” I quipped, winking at her. “Go pick out a bottle of wine. If we gotta be stuck

together, we're gonna need it."

"Don't call me baby," she retorted, but then headed to the wall of wine. She must've been thinking that she needed wine to cope with being stuck with me too.

And for some reason, that was a little disappointing.

"Wow, these are so expensive. I don't think we should drink any of it."

I chuckled as I plopped down on one of the couches. "Trust me, we can drink it. I'll replace it. Tyson doesn't keep the really expensive stuff in here."

"Um...okay."

I heard the clanking of bottles as she continued to search, and I began to wonder what her type of wine was. I saw her more as a white wine kind of woman...bitter and dry as fuck. I chuckled to myself just as she made it back to me, making a face.

"What are you laughing at me for?"

"Not laughing at you, I'm just funny as fuck."

She crinkled her nose in disgust and then sat down beside me. "Here. There aren't any glasses in here."

"Cool, we'll just split the bottle."

"But then I won't know how much I drank." She *actually* looked concerned about that as her brows furrowed.

"Sounds like a good thing to me."

She eyed me but didn't say anything as I sat my now-empty beer bottle down and popped the bottle of wine open. Then she admitted, "I'm a lightweight."

"Perfect. Here." I handed her the open bottle of *red* wine. I guess I'd gauged her wrong all along.

I wonder what else I've gotten wrong about her.

I wasn't sure why the fuck I cared, but as she took a long swig of the alcohol, I couldn't help but wonder what it would

be like if I were more like the rest of my bandmates. They'd be all over Lena—just for one night, of course.

Maybe I could try it...

“Why are you looking at me like you're going to eat me?” She handed the bottle to me...as she burped.

I burst into laughter. “Holy shit, you really don't drink much, do you?”

Her cheeks flushed, visible even in the dimly lit room. “Sorry.”

“It's cool. I don't care.” I chugged a good portion of the bottle, mostly just because of the shock on her face.

“And you're an alcoholic.”

“Definitely not.” I laughed, barely feeling a buzz in the moment. “I don't let myself get shit-faced anymore. I always make dumb decisions when I drink.”

“Ew.” She winced. “Gross.”

“Not with women,” I, for some reason, felt the need to clarify. “I just wind up jumping into a fountain or streaking around the yard.”

“Gotcha.” She downed more of the wine.

And twenty minutes later, the bottle was empty.

“Oh my god,” she giggled. “I can't believe we drank *all* of that.”

She's definitely tipsy.

But then again, I was too.

“You're such a jerk.” She poked my arm, her giggle fit growing.

I looked over at her, taking in the delicate shape of her face, her eyes bright beneath the moonlight. *Fuck, she is gorgeous.*

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I'm not going to eat you,” I chuckled. “Promise. No cannibalism here.”

She giggled all over again. “Good to know.” However, then her laugh faded, her eyes holding mine. “No one is ever going to believe I got stuck in a room with *the* Jackson Whiss. This is *so* wild.”

“Is it wild?” I teased her, suddenly becoming very aware of just how close we were. My heart pounded in my chest as her thick, once-painted-red lips curled upward in a sweet smile. I stared at her lips, wondering what she might taste like.

And I couldn’t stop myself.

I leaned forward, brushing my nose against hers.

Her eyes shut, and I tipped her chin upward with my fingers, bringing her lips to mine. A light moan slipped from the back of her throat, bringing my dick to life. My tongue dove between her parted lips, tasting the wine we had shared.

Oh fuck.

I threaded my hand through her hair and put my other on her waist, laying her back on the couch as our kiss grew hot and heavy—borderline desperate. Her leg instantly propped up, situating me right in between her fucking legs. I groaned as my fingertips brushed bare skin, her flowy white tank top having ridden up a little.

My lips broke from hers and I began to make my way to her neck, her nails digging into my back. Her back arched, her pussy grinding against my erection through our clothes.

And I had never been so fucking turned on.

Well, that is, until the sound of the door creaking open ruined the moment.

Shit.

LENA

I shoved Jackson away so fast that he couldn't catch himself and hit the floor with a *thud*.

“What the hell was that for?” he muttered from below me, just as Maeve and Tyson stepped into the room.

“I told you they'd hit it off!” Tyson beamed as Maeve looked at me in total shock—and then excitement.

My face was burning up as I shook my head. “No, I just...I, uh...I had too much wine.” I shut my eyes, completely embarrassed, as Jackson groaned, clambering to his feet.

“We both did,” he grunted, turning to Tyson. “But that fall knocked a lot of fucking sense into me.”

Tyson burst into laughter. “Yeah, they definitely hit it off.”

In what world? How does he figure that?

And yet, I still stole a glance in Jackson's direction, trying to read the blank expression on his face. He let out a sigh, running his fingers through his dark hair. I ran my finger along my bottom lip, still able to taste him.

He's a good kisser; that's all it is.

I swallowed hard, shifting my attention back to Maeve. “We got stuck in here.”

“Yeah, because whoever walked in here last locked y’all in.” Tyson chuckled, looking to Jackson. “Brilliant plan if you were trying to get laid.”

“No,” Jackson snapped as I glared at him. “I was *not* trying to get laid. You know I don’t do that shit.”

Yeah, right.

“Perfect,” Maeve chirped. “Then it won’t be a problem for you to get Lena home safely, right? Because I think I’m going to spend the night.” She looked up at Tyson, blushing.

I furrowed my brow. “That’s against the rules.” *The same rules that led me to this party in the first place.*

Maeve’s shoulders sagged. “Seriously, Lena? We’ve been hanging out with them *all* night. I think it’ll be fine. We’re not babies anymore.”

“But...” My voice trailed off as I realized both men were staring at us like we were a little crazy. “We said no one-night stands.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “Purity pact, how sweet. You got promise rings for each other too?”

“No, we just don’t make *bad* decisions, and choose to keep each other accountable,” I shot back at him, my tone sharp. “I’m just looking out for her.”

“I promise this is no one-night stand,” Tyson said to me, giving me a warm smile.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You could just be saying that.”

“He’s not,” Maeve argued. “We’ve already exchanged numbers and made plans for the weekend—and don’t worry, I checked that it wasn’t a fake number.”

I let out a fatigued sigh. I wasn’t in the mood to keep arguing—and it wasn’t like Maeve was drunk. She didn’t seem that way at all, actually. “*Fine*, just...text me in the morning, promise?”

Maeve grinned. “Promise.”

I wearily shifted my eyes to Jackson. “I can just get an Uber.”

“No, we don’t Uber from here,” Tyson said quickly. “It’s better to have one of our drivers take you. We don’t like people knowing the address. Jackson will take you home. Well, he’ll ride along to make sure you get home safely. Is that good, Jack?”

He nodded. “Yeah, sure. What’s another twenty minutes with the woman? I’ll go hunt down a driver...and a phone charger.” With that, Jackson headed out of the room, and I caught myself staring at his black Levis and white band T-shirt. He was...*fit*.

“I’ll show you where a charger is.” Tyson spun around to join him, trotting to catch up as Jackson speed walked away.

My entire body felt heavy, and I let out a sigh—but I was still worried about Maeve. “Are you *sure* you want to stay here? You don’t have to.”

She laughed, flipping some of her platinum hair over her shoulder. “Oh no, I *want* to stay, Lena. Like, I don’t know if it’s just the fact that Tyson is in a famous band or what, but I am *totally* into him.”

I pursed my lips, holding back my thoughts on the matter. “Well, I hope you have a good night. I have class in like...I don’t even know,” I added, glancing down at my dead phone.

“It’s almost four,” Maeve said in a quiet tone. “You might want to call in tomorrow.”

My shoulders sank. “I can’t call in.”

“I’m sure Melissa would be *more* than supportive of it if she knew who you had locked lips with tonight.” Maeve giggled. “Like, he’s *the* main man of Bad Man’s Land. That’s a huge score.”

I shook my head, catching a whiff of his cologne as I did so. “I don’t think it’s a huge score. I think I just had too much wine,” I muttered, my head still feeling light. “I don’t know what I was thinking, drinking like that.”

“Let me guess, you had two glasses and got a little tipsy,” she teased, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the exit of the Florida room. “But I’m proud of you for letting loose. You deserve it.”

I stayed quiet, not sure that I agreed with her, as we made our way back through the mega mansion. I had been exploring when I’d stumbled across the Florida room, and honestly, I hadn’t intended to fall asleep...

It just happened.

Just like making out with Jackson.

Surprisingly, the crowd had slimmed to just a handful of people, laughing and chatting in the living room. Most of them were familiar faces—ones I’d seen earlier at the concert.

“Let’s go.” Jackson’s voice got my attention, and I spun around to see him standing behind me, unamused. “I’m tired as fuck now.”

Me too.

I nodded, and followed him to the front door, where a black SUV had pulled up. “So...do you just have drivers all the time?”

Jackson shrugged under the moonlight. “Kind of depends. I’ve had way too much to drive.” He opened the back passenger door for me, and I slid in all the way to the other side of the back seat.

He slipped in beside me. “I don’t know where you live, so you’re gonna have to tell him.”

The driver, a man named Phillip who looked to be in his mid-thirties, turned around in his seat. “I’ll just punch your address into the GPS.”

I nodded, but for some reason began to feel *nervous*. “Um... it’s one-oh-two Cottonwood Circle.” I clasped my hands in my lap as he punched it into the vehicle, pulling up a thirty-minute route...

“Ah, so you live on the other side of town,” Phillip commented, putting the car in drive and pulling out of the

circle drive. I knew what he meant when he said *the other side of town*.

He meant the poor side of town.

I glanced over at Jackson, but his head was leaning back against the seat, his eyes closed. For a moment, I was actually jealous—especially if he was able to fall asleep that way. I could never sleep in cars. I picked the lint off my black jeans and flexed my feet to the best of my ability in my Vans. My feet were achy, and I was almost sure I'd never been *this* tired.

We rode in silence, the only sound coming from the radio which was playing a *classical* station. Phillip had strange taste in music for someone who chauffeured around rock stars...and I have no idea how it didn't put him to sleep.

My eyes stayed transfixed on the streets outside the car, mostly devoid of people. There were always stragglers and partiers in this city, but I never saw much of it. I didn't have time with work and school.

"Almost there," Phillip muttered, turning onto my road. I stared at the old art deco houses, once striking in their prime. Now, they were all faded, some falling apart. Maeve and I shared the dark-blue house that sat smack-dab in the center of the cul-de-sac.

"This is where you live?" Jackson rolled down the window as Phillip pulled into my driveway. The grass was a little tall, and the flower bed was overgrown—and I had *never* been more embarrassed about my house than I was right then.

My heart thudded with nerves. "...Yeah...I know it's kind of ___"

"Authentic."

I sat there for a moment, trying to register what that description could even mean. "Um, yeah, I guess it's something like that."

"Cool."

"Well, thanks for tonight," I choked out, pulling at the handle and pushing the door open with my foot. "See ya." I

nearly facepalmed as my Vans hit the pavement, feeling red in the face as I slammed the car door shut. I was pretty sure Jackson said something in response, but I didn't stop to hear it, trudging across my lawn.

I stepped onto the concrete porch as the headlights dissipated, punching in the code on the lock. The door was stuck—just like always—and I lifted up on the handle and shoved. *Ugh. I'm poor. I'm so freaking poor.*

Taking a deep breath, I shut and locked the door, feeling the disparity right then between Jackson's social class and my own. I had never been wealthy—and had never cared that I wasn't—but there was something about walking into an overly modest home after partying at a mansion, full of celebrities.

My eyes drifted to the clock hanging on the wall. I felt like I'd been punched in the gut when I saw that it was nearly four-thirty. "I'm going to be a freaking *zombie* tomorrow," I muttered to myself as I ripped my shirt over my head. My footsteps creaked across the floors, and I caught another whiff of Jackson's cologne.

My stomach did a nervous flip at the heady scent, but I shook it off. Jackson might be a superstar, but he was *not* my type. In fact, he was nothing other than a walking red flag—one that I was glad I didn't go too far with tonight.

Would I have kept going?

I swallowed as I peeled my jeans off and tossed them into the laundry hamper. I knew the answer—and I hated it.

Maybe I need to start dating again.

I shuddered at the thought. It had been a couple years since I'd done more than go on a handful of dates with someone, and honestly, it was because most guys I met were either incredibly immature or just...*not my type*.

My mind always pictured a relationship like my parents had—genuine, and with marriage as the end goal from the get-go.

No one wants that these days.

Especially not a rock star like Jackson.

I wasn't sure why I was even *thinking* about Jackson when it came to dating. I didn't even like him. He had been a jerk the entire night, and it was clear that his only motivation was to play rock 'n' roll and party. What happened between us was a wine-fueled moment—that was it...right?

Right.

It's just a good thing I never have to see him again.

JACKSON

“This is bad,” Genna snapped. “Like, *really* bad.”

I shrugged as I stared up at the screen before me, a celebrity news station harping about how horribly I had treated my ex-girlfriend and supermodel, Artisa Collins. “I don’t get why it matters what she thinks. None of that shit is even true. She’s just trying to get clout.”

Genna, the head of my PR team, glared at me. “Yes, it *does* matter. She’s making big waves about how big of a prick you are, Jackson. You’re a rock star, and while you’d think it might go along with the attitude—to treat people like trash—we don’t support that.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t treat people like trash.”

She let out a sharp sigh, and my manager, Tim, groaned. My eyes bounced between the two of them, not remotely understanding what the hell was going on. I leaned back in the chair, sliding my phone off the table and into my lap. I lit up the screen, checking to see if there were any notifications...

Well, any that were actually interesting.

I scrolled through the hundreds of messages, seeing Tyson’s text pop up. I clicked it open, and then rolled my eyes.

This girl is INCREDIBLE.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard as Artisa's voice came from the TV.

"He never put me first, and the way he treated others around us was just despicable. It was so embarrassing. I'm all about positive energy and giving more than taking. Jackson was just...the epitome of a spoiled brat."

My eyes flickered up, my jaw dropping. "She's the one who cussed out the server that cooked her steak a *hair* too long."

"Ah, so *now* we have your attention," Genna retorted, folding her thin arms across her chest. She came across like a hard-ass—and maybe she was. But her dark afro would make anyone jealous. "We *have* to straighten up this image. The band's record sales have already dipped. We need a banger of an album, but even with that, your reputation is in shambles."

"Nah, she'll get off her high horse soon," I said, pushing back from the table. "I really need to get moving for the day. I'm supposed to be writing with Tyson today."

Oh yeah, and I should probably text him back.

"You're not going anywhere, Jackson," Tim warned me, his dark eyes boring into my skull in a way that made me pause. "We *have* to figure this out, Jack. This shit is *all* over the news. She's also taken on multiple interviews with some of the best publishers in the business. This could really backfire. We have to get this under control before it gets out of hand."

"*Fuck,*" I sighed, relaxing back into the chair. "What do you want me to do? Go work at a food pantry or something?"

"No, you'd never survive at a food pantry," Genna mused, her dark hair bouncing against her shoulders. "In fact, I have no idea what the fuck to do with you anymore. You make scenes, and you need a place where you can be authentically you, while also serving in some way."

"That's gonna be impossible," Tim uttered, rolling his eyes. "We all know Jackson is the one with the loosest—"

"Don't even go there," I warned my manager. "I don't sleep around, and you know I treated Artisa well. The woman was just *never* happy."

“News flash, most women aren’t happy with men that act like you.”

Now, I was offended, gritting my teeth at Genna. “What the hell was that supposed to mean?”

“Well, come on, Jackson. You’re twenty-five years old, and you act like an emo seventeen-year-old most of the time.”

“No, I don’t,” I argued, folding my arms across my chest like a child. “I just want to enjoy life while I can. My brothers are out settling down and shit...and I...I don’t know. That isn’t gonna happen to me.”

Because that just leads to fucking heartbreak.

Genna let out a sharp exhale, taking a seat in her chair with a *plop*. “Well, here’s the thing, Jack. We have to come up with *something* to overshadow the mass chaos that Artisa is causing. I don’t lean toward a fake romance—I think that would just lead to a lot of controversy. I think the best way to go about it is, like I said, finding something for you to do—that you might enjoy—and that paints you in a better light.”

“I don’t know what that would be,” I grunted. “I guess just set up an interview or something. I’ll just tell the other side of the story.”

“Absolutely not,” Tim and Genna said in unison.

“Okay, well, then...I don’t know. I guess schedule another commercial for some great nonprofit, and then I’ll be grand.”

“*No*,” Genna huffed. “That’s way too small-minded. We need something so genuine that people will fall in love with you all over again. We want something *unique*. What’re some things that you like, outside of just partying?” She asked the question like she wasn’t sure if there’d be an actual answer to it.

“I like to play music,” I answered with the *most* obvious answer.

“Yeah, okay, genius,” Tim mumbled. “What about other hobbies?”

“I don’t have any.”

“Doesn’t your father do a lot with yachts? Maybe you could take a bunch of kids out on one, and then play music for them?” Genna suggested, her caramel eyes lighting up. “We could make that work.”

“I don’t like boats.”

Both of them let out a groan of frustration that actually made me cringe. We all sat there in a tense silence for a few moments longer, while I racked my brain for some sort of alternative. I wasn’t a huge fan of kids—well, mostly just because I was never really around them.

But I did like playing music...and kids liked music.

Like what Lena does.

I stopped myself as the thought came to my mind. The woman hadn’t even entered my mind since the party...well, only during my showers...

But that wasn’t important.

The woman was insufferable, *but* she did work as a music teacher for a bunch of little kids, right? It *could* work.

“I know a music teacher,” I said, finally breaking the silence.

“Great, that’s fucking great knowledge, Jackson.” Genna shook her head.

“Yeah, but what if I like...taught a class or something? For like, little kids? Share my love of music or something?”

“Not the worst idea,” Tim commented, his salt-and-pepper hair disheveled from how many times he’d run his fingers through it. “It might work.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Genna sighed. “I just don’t know if a school would be okay with having him there. They might not feel comfortable with it.”

“Can’t their parents just sign a permission slip or some shit? We could also just invite the parents. I’m all about hot moms,” I added with a laugh. It wasn’t even the truth, really, but the joke always landed.

“See, that’s your problem,” Genna scoffed. “Just keep your mouth closed instead of adding comments like that.”

“So you mean be ultra-serious *all* the time.”

“Basically.”

“Or just be *kind*,” Tim suggested, eyeing the two of us. “There’s a happy medium. You can joke appropriately and avoid being a dick.”

“I don’t think Jackson understands how to do that.”

I shook my head but stayed quiet. Did her words hurt a little? Yeah, but that was just the way the industry was. They used our talent and our abilities, and then in return for giving us our dream job, they controlled our every move.

Fucking genius, really.

“What’s the teacher’s name?” Genna asked, clicking her pen. “I’ll reach out to her today.”

“Uh...I have no idea what her last name is,” I said, carefully choosing my words. “I know her first name is Lena, but I can figure out the rest. And also, maybe it would be smart to contact the *school*, not her.”

Genna narrowed her eyes at me. “Why?”

I shrugged. *Because I’m pretty sure she hates me.* “Formalities. Also, *if* you can come up with anything else, that would be better.”

“Right.” Genna nodded. “Get us her last name and let’s get this worked out. You can go now. Don’t do anything stupid between now and then.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I saluted her, standing to my feet and chuckling at her eye roll. Inwardly, I cringed, wondering just how pissed off Lena would be if she had to see me again. I mean, yeah, I didn’t really like the idea of having to hang out with her again, but...

A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.

“Be good, Jackson,” Tim called after me as I slipped out of the meeting room. I knew the two of them would probably sit

and talk shit about me for another hour or whatever, but I had better things to do.

Like band practice.

As if in sync, my phone rang in my pocket, and I pulled it out, seeing Tyson's name.

"Hey, man, where the hell are you?" he said, his tone full of unusual irritation. He never cared if I was late. "I have plans after this."

Right, with the new girl.

"I'm on my way. I had a PR meeting with Genna and Tim," I said reluctantly, bracing for a fucking lecture.

"It's shit what Artisa is doing, man."

Well, that's surprising.

"Yeah, but they're trying to fix it. What's Lena's last name?"

"*Ooh*, you wanting to reach out to her?"

"No, the PR team wants to talk with the school she works at about some stuff." I didn't bother to explain any further. There was no point in trying to. Tyson didn't have an image problem, always coming off as the sweet guy in the band.

"Figures," Tyson grunted. "I'll ask Maeve when she gets here. Should we give her a heads-up that you're going to be popping in?"

"Nah, I don't even know if they're going to go through with it," I said. And the more I thought about it, the more I started to think that seeing Lena again *might* not be a good idea. No matter how fucking annoying I found her, she did something to my body that I still wasn't convinced was just the wine.

And that could really complicate the image shit.

"Maybe you could get in contact with your highly esteemed family. They're all about image." Tyson's voice brought me back from my thoughts.

"Yeah, no thanks. I'm tired of hearing that lecture from them all. It's one thing when Dad or Eli go after me, but lately, Luke

has made it known that he thinks I'm irresponsible...so..."

"I mean, he's not wrong—and the dude is so uptight that it makes sense. He probably thinks the entire world is irresponsible."

I chuckled. "Yeah, he is kind of like that. I don't really know how the hell I'm related to them all. They're all settling down and shit too. Well, Dad hasn't yet—but they're all way more serious about life."

"Yeah, I think you're overthinking everything right now," Tyson said, his tone cautious. "Something bothering you?"

"What?" I furrowed my brow. "Why would you say that?"

"I don't know. Ever since the party at my place, you've just been a little...*off*. Is it all the shit with Artisa?"

I paused, my mind running back to the hazelnut-blonde who was irritating as shit—but who I just couldn't get out of my head. "Yeah, maybe that's it."

LENA

“He’s just *so* sweet,” Maeve gushed, stars in her eyes as she propped her elbow on the table and leaned forward. “I’ve never met anyone like him. I just think he’s incredible.”

I smiled, nodding. “I’m really happy for you. Just be careful, you never know what kind of guy he really is.”

“You’re just saying that because he’s wealthy.” Maeve pursed her purple-tinted lips, shaking her head at me. “Like, you’re just so careful, Lena. I know that you want some churchgoing, family kind of man, but anytime you actually date a guy like that, you hate it.”

“That’s not true...” I trailed off, unable to come up with a viable argument. “I just...haven’t met the right guy yet.”

“Maybe the right guy is a different kind of guy. Maybe he’s like, way more fun or something—not saying that Yahtzee isn’t fun—but come on.”

“I don’t know. What’re your plans with Tyson?” I was desperate for a subject change, because while Maeve had been my best friend for nearly my entire life, her opinions still got on my nerves sometimes.

“I don’t know, I’m waiting for them to finish band practice this afternoon, and then I was thinking we’d just chill.”

“That sounds like fun,” I said, my mind flickering to the image of Jackson, singing and playing his guitar. I’d watched him during the concert, but now, after *knowing* him, something felt...*different* about it.

And I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“Can I be honest with you?” Maeve’s voice settled as she let out a sharp exhale, picking up her water and taking a sip.

“Sure,” I said, eyeing the waitress. My stomach was growling like crazy, and I only had twenty minutes before I needed to get back to class.

“I think I might love him,” Maeve nearly whispered.

I blinked a couple of times, trying to process what the heck had just come out of her mouth. “I...what?”

“Yeah, I know, I know.” Maeve held up her hands just as the waitress sat our salads down in front of us. “It seems crazy, but I just think...it’s only been two weeks, but it’s been the best two weeks of my life.”

I nodded, my mouth growing dry. “I just...I don’t want to see you get hurt. You always fall so hard and so fast...”

“But Tyson *is* different,” my best friend argued. “I *know* he is. And I know that Jackson really rubbed you wrong that night—and maybe *he* is a jerk—but not everyone is a jerk in the band. Just give them another chance,” she pleaded with me.

I let out a sigh, feeling guilty for passing judgment. “I’m sorry, and I’m sorry I didn’t hit it off with Jackson...he’s just...”

“Everything you hate in a man,” Maeve finished, bursting into laughter. “Like, he’s seriously everything you’ve said you wouldn’t be okay with—but he *is* a phenomenal musician.”

“That’s the only thing he’s got going for him,” I said, which was mostly the truth. He was also the best kiss I’d ever had... but that was probably because he’d had so much practice...

Gross.

“I think he’s got that misunderstood thing—like, he’s the type that comes across like an asshole, but deep down, they really have something going for them. Like, he might be a total sweetheart in reality.”

“I doubt it,” I snorted, nearly spitting out my mouthful of salad. “I don’t think he’s got that much depth...”

Though his songs do.

Maeve sighed. “Well, I just hope that you can handle being around him *sometimes*. If Tyson and I get serious—which I think we will—my guess is that you’ll have to see him *sometimes*.”

My shoulders dropped, but I maintained my smile. “I’ll deal with it for you.”

“You’re seriously the best person in the entire world, Lena. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Her phone went off, and she picked it up from the table, giving me a moment to inhale most of my lunch. I watched her as I chewed, her cheeks growing red and the smile on her face bright.

Aww, she must really like him.

It made me happy to see her happy, but it didn’t change the fact that I was still nervous about her being with someone with a status like Tyson. He might be a really great guy, but he had a *lot* of women at his fingertips.

And that was another red flag to me.

Famous guys were just...not trustworthy.

But maybe that was just me.

“So, are you ready for the next semester?” Maeve finally set her phone down, looking at me with genuine curiosity. “You’ve hardly mentioned it at all. I thought you were super pumped for this one.”

My heart sank at the mention. “I don’t think I’ll be going next semester. The master’s program is so expensive, and my scholarships aren’t going to cover enough for me to pay the rest out of pocket.”

Maeve's face fell. "Oh, Lena. Why didn't you tell me? I had no idea you were dealing with all of that. What about your parents? Have you thought about reaching out to them? I know they'd probably help you."

I shook my head. "No, Dad picked up that second job so they could help me finish my undergrad. I can't ask them for more money. He's trying to retire now, and I don't want to ruin that for them. I may just have to teach for a while and then save until I can afford it."

She was hesitant. "But then you'll lose your scholarship, Lena."

I shrugged, defeat flooding back into my chest. "I know, but I don't want more loans. I have enough of those."

"I could help?"

"*Ugh*, Maeve, we can *barely* afford the house that we live in. There's no way you can help me pay for college too."

"I'll sell my body to the night," she joked, giving me a soft laugh. "Though really, maybe we could do a fundraiser or something. You're an amazing pianist and singer—maybe we could arrange a concert."

"Yeah, and then *no one* would come," I snorted, trying to make light of a truth that actually *really* burned deep down.

"Maybe... Tyson could—"

"*No*," I cut her off, my tone sharper than I meant it to be. "I will not mooch off them or use the relationship you have with him to help myself. I don't want handouts, and I don't want someone to pity me. It'll be fine. I'll just teach until I can figure something else out."

Maeve sighed, her smile turning downward. "I just want you to have everything you want, Lena. You've worked so hard, and it hurts to see money being the only thing that's standing in your way."

"That's the way life is for most people," I reasoned, forcing a smile. "Not everyone is like Jackson Whiss, raised by a

billionaire and then making his own fortune with his band—which I'm *sure* his dad helped happen."

"You don't *know* that happened," Maeve said, taking offense.

Jeez, this new boyfriend might cause some problems.

"Okay, well, it's just a guess," I said. "He is super talented, but it wouldn't be surprising if his father helped him get seen by the right people."

"Yeah, that could be true," she finally agreed, picking up the receipt. "This one is on me."

Ugh.

"You don't have to do that," I reasoned, reaching for the ticket to take it from her hands. "I'm not *that* poor. I can afford to eat—I just can't afford school."

She eyed me, holding it out of my reach. "I don't care. I'd have gotten it today anyway. I feel extra generous today."

"If you say so," I teased her, watching her hand the ticket and her card to the waitress. "Thank you."

"Anytime, BFF." She shot me one of her infamous winks. "Do you want to go to the band practice with me? They practice for a *long* time." She giggled.

"I think I'll pass today," I laughed, shaking my head. "And no, it's not just because of Jackson Whiss. I'm just giving some private lessons this evening, so I can't."

"Yeah, yeah." She waved me off, pushing some of her platinum blonde hair behind her ear. Honestly, my best friend was model gorgeous—and she always had been. It had helped carry her in life, mostly just because she knew how to use it to her advantage. She was killing it at the modeling firm she worked for, and I believed it wouldn't be long before she moved from catalogue modeling to something much bigger.

"Are you bothered by the idea of paparazzi? You know, because of Tyson..." I blurted out as we stood to our feet.

She made a funny face. “Girl, I was *made* for the spotlight. I say, bring it on. Granted, I didn’t really want to make my debut in the spotlight as arm candy, but it’s worth it. He’s even planning to take me to the red carpet this weekend—and I am *stoked*.”

I nodded, my own mind going wild. *Would I be okay with that kind of spotlight?* There was a time when I’d considered pursuing a music career similar to Jackson’s, but I had walked away from it when I realized that I didn’t like all the eyes on me.

Which was why I had chosen to teach.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Maeve asked as we stood to our feet. “You just seem like you’re not in a good headspace right now. You’re always so bright and positive. I feel like you’re struggling.”

“You should’ve been a therapist,” I joked, grabbing my water and taking one last drink. I glanced down at my watch, my heart sinking. *Oh shit*. “I’m already late. I really gotta go. Have a good time this evening and thanks for lunch. Love you.” I gave her our usual side-hug embrace, and she kissed my cheek.

“Go kick some ass in the classroom,” she called after me as I nearly ran right out of the restaurant.

I spotted my silver Hyundai a few feet away and picked up my pace. I pulled out my cell phone, scrolling to Melissa, my boss’s name. I hit the call button just as I stepped off the sidewalk, noticing a white piece of paper under my windshield.

I plucked the paper up as the phone started to ring. *You have to be kidding me. A seventy-five-dollar parking ticket?*

“You better be calling me from the classroom,” Melissa hummed, her voice harsh on the other side of the phone.

“I wish.” I cringed, ripping open the driver’s side door. “My lunch with Maeve ran late, and then...I got a parking ticket.”

“Sounds like a day,” she said in a flat tone. “But you know, being here when the kids come in from lunch is really

important, Lena. I know that I harp about silly things, but you need to be there greeting them as they walk through the door. It sets the best mood for the afternoon.”

“I know, and I’m so sorry,” I said, backing out of the parking spot and zipping off down the street. “It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“Good, because I need you here in a timely manner. We have big things coming up.”

JACKSON

I stepped under the warm stream of water, my shoulders instantly relaxing. Band practice wasn't the best, and I usually don't mind company, but Maeve's presence at practice was annoying for some reason.

Probably because she reminds me of Lena.

I knew I was being fucking petty, but no woman had ever gotten under my skin quite the way Lena had. The more time passed since that night, the more frequently she kept visiting my thoughts—and the thoughts that came when it was time to write songs.

Which is why today had been a shit show.

I grabbed the shampoo from the shelf, squirting out a big heaping blob onto the palm of my hand. It smelled of sandalwood and something else...maybe leather? Whatever the hell it was, it wasn't my usual, and I was gonna have to fix that. I massaged my head, lathering it in, and then rinsing it out.

And just like always, thoughts erupted in my head.

I was suddenly right back on that couch in Tyson's Florida room, sitting next to that aggravating, yet fucking *sexy* woman. I shut my eyes, my dick growing erect as I imagined

being in between her legs again, rubbing against her covered pussy.

I kissed down her neck as my hands slipped under the fabric of her tank top, tugging it upward. Lena moaned, and leaned forward enough for me to pull it over her head, revealing a black lace bra...

And full fucking tits.

My lips found her skin again as I set her breasts free. I kissed around her collarbones, not stopping until my mouth was wrapped around the soft mound of her tit, sucking hard on her nipple.

“Ooh...” Her voice trailed off as her back arched beneath me, and her hips ground against my erection. “That feels so good, Jackson.” My name rolled off her tongue like it was fucking meant to be, and I growled with satisfaction. I was going to fuck this woman until all she could remember was my dick inside of her.

Hastily, my hands went for the button of her jeans, snapping it loose and tugging her jeans down around her hips. The black jeans were tight, but she wriggled beneath me, helping me along. I tossed them to the floor and ripped her satin thong, exposing her glistening pussy.

“Fuck,” I murmured, stripping out of my own jeans and boxers, my dick finally free. I lined up with her entrance, letting her squirm and whimper with want as I ran the tip through her wet folds.

“Jackson,” she moaned, her jade eyes meeting mine and sending a wave of excitement down my spine.

I plunged into her, holding her gaze, and...

That was all it took.

“What the fuck?” My eyes fluttered open as I quickly cleaned up the mess and washed myself. Why did I have to think about her again? Ripping my towel down from the hook, I chided myself for being so fucking...weird. I didn't even like Lena, yet every time—she's where I went in my head.

And it was just as much annoying as it was disturbing.

Part of me wanted to consult Google as I picked my phone up from the counter, but I knew it would probably just tell me I was dying of a rare disease called *pervert-itis*. Instead, I found myself on social media, doing the *one* thing that really might confirm that I had a screw loose.

I searched for her. *What's her last name? Shit.* My search led me to Tyson's page, where he had already gone public with Maeve. I went through Maeve's friends until I finally found Lena...*Lena Harris.*

Her profile picture wasn't even of herself, it was some kind of logo for a charity she must've been supporting. However, a few clicks later I was staring at those captivating jade eyes. Her hair was swept back in a half updo, and she had on a plain cream-colored sweater and light-wash jeans. It was basic as fuck...

But my dick was already threatening to get up again.

I'm being so weird.

Shuddering at my own creepiness, I closed out of the app, letting out a sigh as I headed out of the bathroom to my master bedroom. My house was massive, and while that was phenomenal for parties, it didn't work as well when I was alone.

It just emphasized how lonely my life could be.

I slid on a pair of dark-wash jeans and a white T-shirt, falling back on my bed with my phone in my hand. I felt a tug to keep digging into Lena, but I knew I should ignore it.

She's just an attractive woman, nothing more.

And I still had the firm belief that women never did anything other than come into your life, get settled, and then fucking leave, gutting everyone around them. It sounded harsh, maybe, but that was all I had ever experienced.

And that was why I never bothered with girlfriends.

My phone vibrated in my hand, and I glanced back down at it, my heart in my throat for some reason. Who did I think it

was gonna be? Lena?

Ha.

I hit the green answer button beneath Eli's smiling face. "Hey, what's up?"

"Surprised you answered," Eli chuckled on the other end of the phone. "I figured you'd be out partying or something already."

"It's not even six o'clock," I reasoned, rolling my eyes. "I know you think my life is just nothing but one big party—and it is sometimes—but a man does need his rest."

Though resting always seems to lead to me fantasizing about a woman I don't even like.

"Yeah, that's true. Must be hard being such a successful rock star."

"So tough," I joked, leaning back against the black headboard. "What's up with you? Isn't it kind of late over there? Ever since you got with *what's-her-face*, you've been going to bed like you're an old man. I think Dad even stays up later than you."

"Ha ha," Eli grunted. "*Olivia* is her name, and no, we don't go to bed earlier than Dad—not usually anyway."

"That's what being serious does to a man...sucks the fun right out of 'em."

"You know, you're damn near a cynic when it comes to relationships."

"I don't think that's news, bud. I've always been a cynic. That's what makes my songs hits. It's not the feel-good ones that top the charts. It's the ones that people can relate to when they're going through bad shit. At least for me, anyway."

"Yeah, I get that," Eli said, letting out a sigh. "But I still want you to be happy, Jackson. I swear sometimes you get so caught up in the past—and what happened to our family—that you might miss out on the opportunity to fall in love...and not be so alone."

“I’m not alone,” I retorted. “I have my band, crew, friends, whatever.” I was lying right through my teeth, considering I was *feeling* fucking lonely in the moment. “Tyson met a girl though,” I added, hoping to direct the line of sight to someone else.

“Oh yeah? That’s good for him...but he seems to do that a lot. I saw the tabloids on the new one though. Seems serious.”

“Yeah, and he’s only known her for like *two weeks*.” I burst into laughter, shaking my head. “He’s already announced her to the world. It’s insane. Fastest one yet.”

“I guess when you know, you know,” Eli chuckled, a hue of sincerity in his voice that was startling.

“Do you...” I hesitated, my stomach flipping for some reason. “Do you think *Olivia* is the one?”

“Oh yeah,” he said without an ounce of hesitation. “I’ve never been so sure of something in my entire life.”

“That’s intense, bro.” I sighed, running my fingers through my hair. “Must be nice to just fuckin’ know like that though. I don’t even have that kind of confidence about what I’m gonna eat for dinner.”

Though I wish it was Lena’s—nope. Nope. Nope. Redirecting my thoughts.

“You’ll find the right person one of these days,” Eli said.

All the while I’m sitting there just trying *not* to let my brain wander back to Lena.

Maybe I just need to get her out of my system.

“Yeah, maybe. Anyway, are you planning on taking a trip out here any time soon? It’s been ages since I last saw you.”

“You mean like a month, right? Because I went to your New York City show. You were just too drunk to even know we spent the entire evening together.”

I cringed at the sharpness in his tone. “Whoops. Sorry, you know how the tour life goes.”

“Just one big party,” Eli grunted, and I could only imagine that he was shaking his head at me in that moment. “Like I said, one of these days, you’re going to have to settle yourself down before you end up dead.”

“Whoa,” I stopped him. “What the hell, Eli? I’m not doing anything that’s going to get me killed. I’m just having a little fun. It’s not a big deal. I’m only twenty-five years old. I’ve got plenty of time to settle down.”

“You do stupid shit when you drink.” His voice was flat. “You nearly fell when you climbed up the sound tower at the New York show.”

“Meh.” I shrugged. “I won’t do that again. I never realized how slick those speakers are. Turns out they’re not great for rock climbing...” My voice trailed off as there was only silence on the other end of the phone. “Yeah, I won’t do it again. I’ll try to be more careful...*Dad.*”

“Just looking out for you,” Eli muttered. “But seriously, just be careful—and I am planning a trip out there in a month or two, so maybe we can get together then. I really want you to meet Olivia.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said with sigh, my eyes dropping to my hand in my lap. “We might be taking a late summer tour, but I don’t know. It just depends on how things go. They’re really pushing for another album, but I’ve had bad writer’s block lately.”

Ever since that last show.

“That sucks, but maybe you just need to find a new muse. Maybe try to focus on something else for a change. I don’t know. I’m sure you’ll figure it out. I gotta go though, Olivia just got here.”

“Send her my condolences.”

“What? Why?”

“She’s gotta put up with you.”

“Ha ha. Love ya.”

“Right back at ya. Bye.” I ended the call and took a deep breath, dropping the phone to my lap so I could run my hands over my face—and let out a frustrated groan.

Maybe I do need a new muse.

I mulled over the thought, wondering *what* could possibly replace my inner-storm-themed lyrics. My eyes dropped to a text on my screen, and my heart stuttered. “Well, speak of the devil.” I swiped up on the phone and opened the message from Genna.

You’re going to Lena Harris’s class tonight at seven. Get ready. DO NOT BE LATE. I’m serious. Everyone is excited to see you there, so make sure you smile. Oh, and take an acoustic guitar. You’re going to play songs for the kids... APPROPRIATE ones.

I laughed at the message, liking the text and setting my phone down. Though, after a few moments, my chuckle faded.

I was going to have to spend the evening with the *one* woman who I disliked—yet fantasized about constantly. This was going to be interesting.

But maybe I’d just found a component for my next greatest hit.

LENA

“**Y**ou want me to stay for the evening class?” I echoed what Melissa had just told me, the exhaustion already having set in from a long day of classes. “I thought Natalie always taught the evening summer music classes.”

Melissa shot me a gaudy smile. “Oh, *trust* me, you’re going to want to be present for this. Not to mention, *you* were specifically requested. It’ll be a wonderful evening. You might want to freshen up though.”

What the heck is wrong with her?

I blinked a couple of times. “Okay...”

“I just don’t want to ruin the surprise. It’s going to be a great evening, promise.” Melissa clapped her hands together and spun on her heels, heading for the door of my music classroom. She had seriously berated me for being late only hours ago, and *now*, she was telling me there was going to be a surprise.

Life is weird.

My shoulders slouched as I slipped out of the room and made my way to the bathroom. The music academy functioned as an actual accredited high school during the year, but in the summertime, they ran classes for all ages. Honestly, I loved the program.

But Melissa had me on the edge of my seat today.

I pushed through the door of the girls' bathroom and went for the mirror, instantly cringing. *No wonder she told me to freshen up.* The curls in my hair had fallen flat and been replaced with frizz, while my makeup suddenly appeared uneven.

With a sigh, I did the best I could to address the issues. I dabbed a damp paper towel under my eyes to get rid of the smudges and pulled my hair halfway up, in hopes of eliminating the frizz. My loose black blouse was still fresh enough, and at least it didn't have any stains on it from a long day.

I don't even know why I'm worried about it. It's only an hour-long class.

Shaking my head, I made my way back to the classroom to enjoy a few moments of peace before the kids all piled in. The evening class had ages ranging from five to ten, which naturally made for a *lot* of chaos, which is why Melissa usually helped with it.

"Good, you look better." Melissa startled me as I stepped into the classroom. She looked like she had freshened up as well—and switched from a pair of black flats to five-inch heels.

"What is happening this evening?" I urged, leaning up against my desk. "Are there going to be pictures taken or something?"

"Oh most definitely, and there'll be videos taken as well. I've already reached out to the parents for permission, and everyone was more than happy. I invited the parents to stay as well."

"...Why?"

Melissa opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out, her eyes growing wide at the doorway behind me. I whipped my head around at the sound of footsteps...

And then did *exactly* what Melissa just had—only for completely different reasons.

You've got to be kidding me.

“Good evening, Lena.” Jackson gave me an obnoxious bow, like he *actually* could be considered a gentleman or something.

“Hi.” My voice went flat.

He shot me a wink as he slipped past me, his woodsy cologne catching my breath as he went for Melissa, extending his hand. “You must be the director of the music program.” His voice was cool and charming, and the smile on his face was, well, typical. He was sucking up to her—or just putting on an act in general.

My eyes drifted back to the doorway, where a whole freaking camera crew was making their way into the room under the direction of a tall, expressionless woman. She pointed around the room, giving instructions, before her eyes made their way to me.

“You must be Lena,” she said, her chocolate eyes narrowing.

“Um...yeah.” I had no idea if she was scrutinizing me because I looked less than camera ready or because she *might* know that Jackson already knew me.

“I’m Genna.” She extended her hand. “Jackson’s PR agent. He’s here to volunteer, interact with the kids, and hopefully play some music for them.”

Oh. My. God. He’s using my job to help his image.

“Okay,” I managed to mutter through a forced smile. As soon as she dropped my hand, I turned to see Jackson, eyeing me while standing next to Melissa—who was giggling her face off like a little girl.

I had never felt more awkward.

I ripped my eyes from my flirtatious boss and Jackson, turning back to Genna. “So I was requested to be here tonight?” I knew what I sounded like—like an over-the-top fan with a crush—but it wasn’t like that. I just wanted to know *why* Jackson wanted me there.

She let out a long sigh, her lips pursing. “Yes, you were.”

“*Great*,” I uttered, and her eyebrows shot up in an amusing way.

“I see Jackson’s spell hasn’t been cast on you,” Genna chuckled, before slipping off to talk to one of the cameramen.

“*No way*,” I answered under my breath. I made my way to the desk, choosing to take a seat in the chair, while Melissa continued to talk Jackson’s ears off. I had never seen her act that way before, and it was clear she must be a fan of his band...

I was too. But not anymore.

I hadn’t listened to any of their music since the concert—and didn’t intend to either. I had burned that bridge.

“Miss Harris! Miss Harris!” A little voice grabbed my attention, and I turned to see Aliyah, a six-year-old student of mine from the previous year, running through the doorway. “You’re here tonight!”

“I am.” I smiled as she ran straight to me, and I wrapped her up in a hug. “My mom told me you were gonna be here, and I *had* to come. I miss you *so* much. Miss Fleming isn’t nearly as much fun as you are—but don’t tell her I said that ’cause it might hurt her feelings.”

I laughed, forgetting that we were in a room with Jackson. “Well, I’ll make sure not to tell her, but I think she’d agree that I’m a lot of fun,” I added, giving her one last squeeze. “This is going to be a fun night.” As the words left my mouth, I felt eyes on me...

And I realized *everyone* was staring at me.

Oh, and the cameras were pointed right in my direction.

My face felt hot at the attention, especially when I caught Jackson staring the most intensely, a peculiar look on his face. Thankfully, the presence of more kids and parents—mostly moms—started pouring in, and I was able to avoid looking at Jackson for the time being.

“So...” Melissa said in a low voice as she approached the desk. “I think I’m going to lead this class tonight. I’ll have you

on piano for backup—and keeping control of the kids. You know they’re going to be over-the-top excited about this.”

I nodded, actually finding relief in the idea of planting myself on the piano bench and staying there. “That sounds wonderful to me.”

She smiled as if she’d thought I might protest. “Great.”

Pushing back from the old wooden desk, I made my way toward the piano. Some people, especially in this city, might want the chance to be on the camera...but me? Nah. I had no desire to be famous or get my face out there.

I just wanted to survive the night.

“So you’re just an assistant?” Jackson’s snide tone stopped me in my tracks a foot from the piano.

“So you’re just using me to make yourself look better?” I shot back at him, my tone cold as I met his gaze. It didn’t matter that he looked beyond freaking handsome in his dark-wash jeans and white T-shirt, his hair freshly cut and styled. He was still *beyond* irritating. “And for the record, I don’t teach the evening class,” I added. “I’m only here because *you* requested me.”

There was a flash of amusement—and maybe embarrassment—in his expression. “Who told you that?”

I smiled, glancing past him to Melissa, who was giving me a warning look. “It’s time for class, Jackson.” With that, I continued to my spot, sliding onto the black piano bench in front of the upright instrument.

Jackson’s attention shifted to the kids, one of them running up to him with a huge grin on their face. I watched the two of them, noticing that for the first time since meeting him, Jackson looked like he felt—*awkward*. The little boy kept chatting, while Jackson nodded, not saying much more than “yeah” or “that’s cool.”

And then the little boy *hugged* him.

I nearly laughed as Jackson went stiff as a board, his cheeks turning red. *Oh my gosh, he has no idea how to interact with*

kids.

Maybe it *was* going to be a fun night.

“Okay, class.” Melissa cleared her throat. “Everyone take your seats. It’s time to begin.”

The kids slid into the desks, and my fingers began to move across the keys softly, playing a tune that I’d written myself.

“Tonight we have a special guest,” Melissa said, all the kids—and moms—cheering and clapping as Jackson waved to the class. “He’s going to hang out, and maybe play a few songs for you, would you like that?”

“Yes!” one of the little girls shrieked.

I laughed at her reaction, and Jackson, whose back was to me, looked over his shoulder at me. Our eyes locked, my fingers still dancing over the keys, and his lips fell into a flat line.

He was listening to me play.

And for some reason, that made my stomach flutter.

I ripped my gaze from his, dropping it to my hands as Melissa called out for a song to be played. I began to play the tune of *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, and the kids’ voices filled the air. I smiled to myself, and then eyed Jackson, who was now singing along with them.

It was hilarious...and *endearing*.

At the conclusion of the song, one of the crew members handed Jackson a guitar and he walked up to the desk, speaking lowly to Melissa. And for a moment, a pang of jealousy slipped into my chest.

“Okay, let’s move the desk back and form a circle on the rug,” Melissa instructed, and the kids cheered, jumping from their seats and scooting everything out of the way. I watched as Jackson took a seat on the rug, the Martin acoustic guitar in his lap.

“I thought it might be more fun to do it like this,” Jackson began, his voice less confident than usual. He was clearly out

of his element...

And the sight was truly intriguing.

“What song are you gonna sing?” Aliyah asked him, a smile on her face. “I think you should sing one with Miss Harris. She’s the *best* singer I’ve ever heard. My daddy had a crush on her last year.”

My eyes went wide as I looked over to Aliyah’s mom, who was facepalming. Thankfully, the two weren’t together, but the comment was still embarrassing. I exchanged a smile with the dark-headed woman.

Kids say the darndest things.

JACKSON

“**Y**ou think she sings the best, huh?” I asked the little girl —the same one who had run straight for Lena when she walked in. The sight had given me a weird feeling, but I hadn’t picked it apart...

And had no intention to.

Also, it turned out that sitting in front of a class of little kids was way more intimidating than playing on a stage in a stadium full of a hundred thousand adults. Kids were not a forte of mine, especially under the watchful eye of Lena, who had spent most of the evening so far with a smirk on her face.

“Can she *please* sing with you?” another girl in the circle asked. “She really is *so* good. I love it when she sings.”

As irritating as Lena was, I still had this burning curiosity about her, so I turned to the woman, who was sitting at the piano looking *mortified*. “Why don’t you sing with me then?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know...maybe a different night.”

“Oh *please*,” a few little girls urged together.

Lena glanced around the room, cameras still trained on her. “Um...*okay*.”

“Yay!” One girl clapped her hands.

My heart skipped a beat as she stood up, making her way to sit beside me on the bright red shag rug. “What do you want to sing, Miss Harris?”

She eyed me warily, the uncertainty of the moment written all over her face. “I don’t really have a preference. I’ll just harmonize with whatever you have planned.”

“Hmm...” I thought, trying to come up with the most embarrassing song for her—that was also appropriate for the kids.

And that really narrowed down the choices.

I picked on the guitar while I thought about it, and then it hit me. Forget embarrassing her. “*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...*” I looked to her, shooting her a smirk.

“*You make me happy, when skies are gray,*” she sang, her voice hauntingly beautiful in a low alto range.

Holy shit.

I missed the next line, struck by the melodic tone coming from her mouth. *Why is she not fucking famous?*

“You wanna quit gawking at me and start over?” Lena leaned in and asked in a near whisper. “You’re making me feel awkward—and making yourself look a little crazy.”

“Yeah, sorry,” I muttered, shaking my head, restarting the intro and then singing the line again. “*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...*”

“You make me happy when skies are gray.”

“*You’ll never know dear, how much I love you, please don’t take my sunshine away.*” I tried not to look at her as I broke into a riff like the one Johnny Cash always played. My mind was all over the place as I played, everything in my body feeling...*off.*

I’m in fucking awe of this woman right now.

“*The other night, dear, when I was sleeping, I dreamed I held you in my arms,*” I sang, strikingly *feeling* the lyrics as I

held Lena's eyes. "*When I awoke, dear, I was mistaken, so I bowed my head and I cried...*"

She smiled—like, genuinely smiled—and joined me on the chorus, singing a step higher than my low raspy voice...and she *killed* it. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

At the end of the song, the entire room erupted in applause, but I had forgotten they were even there. Lena felt like the only person in the room. She gave me one last half-hearted smile, and then pushed herself to a standing position, returning to the piano bench.

Head still spinning, I turned my attention to the kids, not missing the strange look on my PR team's faces. "Well, I think your teacher, Miss Harris, has a very lovely voice."

"Yes," the little girl swooned. "I *love* it."

Me too.

I pushed the thought away, and the rest of the class passed in a daze. I had no idea what the hell was happening to me, but it was hard work to keep from glancing over to Lena every time she laughed or added to the lesson about the difference between bass and treble.

And before I knew it, the classroom was empty.

"Thank you *so* much for coming." Melissa, the director of the school, shook my hand—holding on *way* too long. "I just can't tell you enough how much it means to us. It'll help us grow our summer program for sure."

Lena nodded, standing back a few feet. However, she stayed quiet, her eyes never fully meeting mine. Something about us singing together must've struck a nerve, and based on the way *I* was feeling in the moment, I was beginning to think that if I could get her alone...

I'd make good on all those fantasies, just to hear that heart-stopping sultry voice.

"I was thinking..." Genna appeared, placing her hand on my shoulder. "This was such a good experience and take, that I

think the three of you should go to dinner tomorrow night. It'd seal the deal when we release this to the public."

"I..." My voice trailed off as I began to accept the idea. However, something like warning bells rang in my head. *No. This is the way to getting hurt. She doesn't even like me.* "Instead of that, why don't we just invite them—and the entire class—to an exclusive band practice and concert? We could maybe let some of the kids play with us. I noticed some have real talent," I added, focusing on the kids. After all, that's what the whole thing was about, right? Not the fact that the musical chemistry Lena and I had together had my mind running.

"I love that idea," Genna remarked, her expression filling with surprise. "I'm impressed with you, Jackson. I was a little worried about this whole thing, but as it turns out, you had a great idea."

"And we would love to have you back any time," Melissa said eagerly, her hand brushing my arm again. The woman had to be a solid ten to fifteen years older than me, but that never seemed to slow them down.

And for some reason, instead of being entertaining, I found it beyond annoying.

I pulled my arm away but tried to do so in a nonchalant fashion. "Well then, let's set it up for Friday."

"Perfect, and are parents invited?" Melissa pulled out her phone, typing away.

I shrugged. "Sure."

"Well, perfect, I'll send you the location details," Genna said, before looking to Lena. "You have quite a voice. I have to say, that wasn't what I was expecting."

Lena blushed and it made my heart do that weird stutter again. "Thank you." Her voice was timid. "I don't really sing much anymore."

"She gets *total* stage fright. It's crazy." Melissa inserted herself into the conversation again. "If she could've overcome that, I have no doubt she would have been famous."

Ouch.

Lena just shrugged. “Maybe so. Anyway, I better get home. I have a morning class I need to get back for.”

And just like that, she left.

My eyes followed her out of the room, until she was no longer in my sight. If I was fifteen again, I would say that my dislike for the woman had turned into a crush...but after everything, the feeling only made me dislike her *that* much more.

Because she was the kind of woman who could destroy me.

“I think I’m going to head out,” I said, clearing my throat after a few minutes of not listening to Genna and Melissa’s conversation. Everyone nodded and, feeling conflicted in so many ways, I left the room without another word.

I just need to get this whole thing out of my mind.

Digging my phone out, I hit the call button beside Tyson’s name. I held it to my ear as I slipped through the doors to my car, parked in the lot. *Thank God I drove myself here.*

“Hey, how’d tonight go?” Tyson answered, his voice brighter than usual.

“Uh...it went fine, I think,” I muttered. “I was just wanting to know what you were up to tonight. I was thinking maybe we could hit a couple dive bars or something. I could use a drink.”

“Aw, man, I can’t. Not tonight,” Tyson said, his tone dropping. “I promised Maeve we could watch a couple movies. We’re having a taco night. It’s a new thing we’ve started.”

“Are you serious?” I asked incredulously. “You’re already making *traditions* with her? You’ve known her for what? Three weeks, maybe? That’s fucking crazy.”

“I guess when you know, you know.”

“You sound insane right now. Stop that.”

“No,” Tyson snapped. “That’s the thing, Jackson. If you’d ever see the good in people, you might actually have a shot at finding love and someone for yourself. I don’t want to live my entire life alone. Yeah, the fame and money are great—but what’s it worth if you don’t have someone to share it with?”

“Yeah, I don’t need some woman to come in and fuck me up, just to take off with the money that I worked hard for. No thanks.”

“Damn, you’re so bitter.”

“Yeah, well, better to be bitter than destroyed. Love doesn’t fucking last. It’s just some fleeting infatuation that comes and goes—and mostly goes.”

Tyson sighed. “You’re a cynic.”

“And you’re a nutcase for falling in love with a girl in three weeks.”

“I haven’t told her I love her...yet.”

I laughed sarcastically. “You don’t have to say it. You’ve implied it just by having a taco night with her. You’re skipping out on making solid memories with your friends—your family—all so you can meet the clingy needs of some chick whose only goal is to probably take you for your money.”

“Just...no. Call someone else to hang out with.” Tyson’s voice grew sharp. “I’m done with this conversation.”

The phone went dead in my ear as I started my Lamborghini. As much as Tyson was like a brother, he was an idiot for falling so hard for Maeve. And to make it all worse, the guy had gone through heartbreak after heartbreak, always falling hard for women. He wanted a serious relationship and a family so bad that he didn’t care what it did to his emotions.

But not me.

I’d rather spend the rest of my life alone than get used by someone who never loved me in the first place.

Before leaving, I scrolled through my phone to my other bandmates, Aaron and Nel. I called Aaron first, hoping like hell he hadn’t caught the same crazy virus that Tyson had.

“Hey, man,” Aaron greeted me, a bunch of chatter in the background.

“Hey, what are you up to?”

“I’m out at O.C.’s,” he said, referencing a bar downtown.

“Fucking *perfect*,” I said with a sigh of relief. “You there with anyone else?”

“Yeah, Nel is here. We figured since we don’t have practice until late tomorrow, we would spend the night having some fun. Fucking tour has left me having withdrawals from our crazy nights.”

“Hell yeah,” I agreed. “I called Tyson and he’s all hung up on Maeve.”

“Eh, who cares? If she makes him happy, I’m happy.”

Huh. Wish I could be like that.

LENA

After a long, hot shower and changing into comfy clothes, I *still* hadn't shaken the way it felt to sing with Jackson. Maybe it was the fact that he was just...*good*. I had played and sang with a lot of guys who had that natural ability to suck you in on stage...

Though, I had to admit that Jackson felt *different*.

It's probably just because I can't stand him.

I grabbed up the remote, glancing at the time. It was nearly midnight, and Maeve *still* hadn't come home from hanging out with Tyson. It was frustrating, mostly just because I missed my best friend...

And I couldn't help but wonder if Jackson had said anything to her about us.

The sound of her key in the door made me jump, and I turned to see her come in, looking a little sexed up—which was unsurprising. “Hey, you're super late. Don't you have a shoot tomorrow at like five o'clock in the morning?”

She raised her brows at me. “Um, yeah, but since when are you my keeper, Lena?” Her tone was playful, though there was a hint of annoyance there too.

“I was just worried about you, that's all.”

“I told you I was with Tyson.”

Letting out a sigh, I nodded. “I know. I just...”

“You think we’re moving too fast, I know. We’ve had this conversation a million times since I started seeing him.”

“He’s just...he’s had a lot of girlfriends,” I said quietly. “He strikes me as the kind of guy who falls super hard, and then once the infatuation passes, he’s no longer interested in the relationship.”

“It’s different this time.” Maeve folded her arms across her chest after tossing her purse onto the couch beside me. “You seriously are being *so* judgmental right now. Can you not be happy for me?”

“I *am* happy for you,” I reasoned. “I’m just...*worried*. It’s always better to take things slow, you know?”

“You mean like be friends for three years, and then *nothing* ever happens?”

My mouth dropped open in shock. “That’s a low blow, Maeve.”

“No, it’s not,” she shot back. “That’s the whole problem with you. You’re *never* willing to just take a fucking chance and fall in love. You want it all done in some kind of perfect fashion—like your parents. You want friendship, then dating, then *courting*, then love, then engagement, marriage, and *then* babies. Or whatever.”

“Why are you being so rude?” I snapped at her, hurt and offense filling my chest. “All I want is for you to be careful. I don’t want to see you get hurt, Maeve. You’re my best friend...”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to see you sit around and wait for Mr. Perfect, who doesn’t fucking *exist*, Lena. You’ll end up lonely. You think you have to have everything just right, and then even when that kind of guy comes around, it never works out for you.”

“I don’t want to be with someone I don’t feel strong feelings for.”

“But somehow, you want to start out as friends.” She laughed. “To be just *friends* means that you *don't* have strong feelings, and you know what, I think you wouldn't know intense love if it hit you across the face. You'd probably just think you hated the person or something.”

“Okay, you're being over-the-top now.” I shook my head, feeling the lump in my throat growing. “Just because I don't ever have any freaking relationships that ever work out, doesn't mean that I wouldn't know it if I loved someone. That's just...*mean* of you to say that.”

Maeve let out a heavy sigh, her face softening. “You know what, you're right. I'm sorry. It's just that...*everyone* seems to think that Tyson and I are crazy. But it just—it feels *right*. I can't explain it, and you're my *best* friend. I want *you* to support me.”

Guilt thrummed through me. “*Ugh*. I'm sorry. I just don't want you to get heartbroken. He's just rich and famous...it seems like such a big risk.”

She nodded. “I know, it *is* a big risk...but even if he *does* break my heart, I think it's worth it.”

I smiled, admiring her ability to love so fearlessly from the beginning. “Well, then I guess I should just shut up and be happy for you.”

She giggled. “Yeah, let's do that—and I'm sorry for being such a bitch to you. I know you're just trying to find a love like your parents have. I admire your tenacity when it comes to sticking to it, I guess...I just don't want to see you miss out on something really great, just because it's not what aligns with your ideals.”

I bit my lip but nodded. “Yeah, I don't want to settle.”

“And speaking of all that...” Her voice trailed off as she plopped down in the armchair across from me. “I have some pretty big news...”

I shifted on the couch, bracing for whatever news she had to share. “Okay...”

“I'm moving in with Tyson.”

I laughed. “You’re joking.”

Her lips fell into a straight line. “Not at all, actually.”

A tense silence fell between us, and suddenly all the apologies that had been spilled a few moments ago drifted from my mind.

“How...why...Maeve...” My head fell to my hands, and I tried to take a deep breath. As dumb as I thought the decision was, there was one *glaring* problem with her decision that I couldn’t ignore. “I can’t afford rent without you here.”

She blinked a couple of times, like she hadn’t thought of that fact. “You’ll have a month to find a new roommate...”

I shook my head. “I seriously...I don’t even want to talk about this right now.” I pushed off the couch, feeling like I was on the verge of losing it on her. She seriously came home and berated me for worrying about her getting hurt—and all her *very* questionable decisions—and then she had the nerve to come back at me for my own choices...

All the while hiding the fact that she was moving out with short notice.

What the hell am I going to do?

I slammed my bedroom door shut, trying to force myself to take deep breaths. Forget the fact that I felt something other than irritation when I sang a song with Jackson, this clusterfuck of a situation with Maeve just overshadowed *all* of it.

And I don’t want to be here right now.

Swallowing hard, I threw open my closet and grabbed a black tank top and a pair of faded mom jeans. I got dressed, slid on my vans, and then hesitated.

It’s almost half-past midnight...where the hell am I even going to go?

Pulling my phone out, I scrolled through my contacts until I got to the number of one of my good friends, Mason. I hit the call button—which is something I *never* did—but hoped that

he would pick up anyway. He was always out playing the bars late, and maybe he would be able to distract me.

“...Lena?” Mason answered, his voice only slightly louder than the chatter behind him. “Are you okay?”

“Um...” My voice trailed off as tears threatened to form in my eyes. “I just need to get out of the house for a while, and I was wondering if you were playing anywhere tonight...”

“Yeah, I am.” His voice dropped in volume, like he had stepped outside. “But are you sure you’re okay? It’s a weeknight. Don’t you have work tomorrow?”

I smiled, touched by the way he cared—he always did. “Yeah, I do, but it’s a long story. We can talk about it tonight? Where are you playing at?”

“A VIP place called O.C.’s. You wanna come? Do I need to come and pick you up? I don’t mind.”

I shook my head like he could see it. “Nah, I can just Uber there. You must have a late set?”

“Yeah, of course,” he chuckled. “There’s a pretty star-studded crowd here tonight though. I’m surprised. Well, surprised they’re all still here late. Maybe tonight will be the break I need.”

“Yeah, I hope so.” I grabbed up my purse and put him on speaker as I scheduled a ride. “Anyone interesting?”

“No, not that I can tell. You’ve been really distant lately,” he added, catching my attention. That was the way he was, though, and there was a time when I thought Mason had liked me as more than a friend...

But there was just never a spark between us.

“I’ve just had a lot going on,” I said carefully. “And you’ll never believe who showed up to the class I had to stay for tonight.”

“Let me guess...Reba?”

I laughed. “No, it was Jackson Whiss from Bad Man’s Land.”

“Oh hot damn, that’s cool as fuck. He’s a hell of a musician, you know. There were rumors that he and his band were here earlier, but I looked all over the place for them.”

My heart stopped. “And you’re positive they’re *not* there, right? I don’t want to run into him.”

He was quiet for a moment. “You got a crush on him or something?”

“Try the polar opposite of that.”

“Yikes. He must really live up to his reputation as an asshole then.”

“Something like that,” I muttered. “But you’re certain he’s not there?”

“Yep. But if it helps, I think I saw Catie McHeron in the back VIP area, and she’s a wicked singer. That should make your night better, right?”

“Yeah,” I laughed, thinking of the talented singer. “If I could get her autograph that would be amazing.”

“Might get you kicked out,” he joked. “But seriously, hurry up and get down here. My set starts at one, and if you want, you can join me, yeah? We always made a good duo, you know.”

I hesitated, wondering if that was *exactly* what I needed to shake off my duet with Jackson earlier this evening. “Are you playing anything I know?”

“Um...I think so. I’ll send you the set list and then you can make your decision on the way. That’s probably the best way to do it. I still need to have at least another three shots before I go on.”

“Deal, text it to me. My ride is almost here,” I added, glancing at the map with the blue dot pulling onto my street. “I’ll see you in a few.” I hung up and headed to the bathroom, dabbing on just enough makeup to make me look a little less than homeless. My hair had naturally dried hours ago, and while it was a little frizzier than I’d have liked, it looked good

enough—even if I had to get on stage and once again combat my stage fright.

It didn't bother me to play the piano in front of people—it never had—but the moment I had to open my mouth and utter a song, it was nearly impossible for me to do it without feeling like I might pass out.

But tonight, it was worth another try...even if it was just to forget Jackson.

I headed out of the bedroom, relieved that Maeve was nowhere in sight. We would have to have a long talk at some point, but tonight wasn't the night. The hurt was too fresh for me to keep from saying something I might not mean...

I still had Jackson fucking up my head too...

And I needed to fix that.

JACKSON

“Do you really want to go back?” Aaron looked over at me, his blue eyes glazed over from a night of drinking. “I’m thinking we should just have a party of our own at your house.”

“Hell no,” I shot back at him. “I don’t want a bunch of idiots tearing up my shit tonight. I’m not in the mood.”

“Since when?” His voice slurred a little. “You’re always into making a fucking ruckus wherever we end up.”

“I haven’t had enough to drink,” I admitted, my eyes landing on my hands in my lap as the SUV took us back toward O.C.’s. I just...wasn’t in the mood to drink or something...

Because *she* was all I could think about tonight.

“I think we should go back,” Nel said, much more sober than Aaron. “There’s always some of the best hidden gem musicians after midnight. I like to find the good ones and send them to Tim. You never know what might happen. We could be the reason someone makes it big.”

Maybe I should tell them about Lena...

Except there was a big part of me that *hated* that idea for some reason. It wasn’t that I thought she shouldn’t be fucking

famous or something. It was just that...for some reason, I wanted to keep her voice a secret to myself.

And that was just weird.

“What’s your problem tonight?” Aaron punched me in the shoulder. “You’re moping around like you got a big problem.”

“He always does that.” Nel burst into a fit of laughter. “That’s how he writes kick-ass songs.”

I chuckled as the car pulled up outside the bar. It was still really crowded for a weeknight, but then again, this was a city that seemed to never sleep anyway. Our driver unlocked the door, and I shoved it open, the noise from inside penetrating the air around us. I headed for the entrance, not even bothering to wait on the other two. I pulled my baseball hat down to mostly cover my eyes. Don’t get me wrong, it was a shitty disguise, but at this time of night, most people were too drunk to put it together.

“Wait up, asshole.” Aaron came trotting up behind me, his hand landing heavily on my shoulder. “I’m fucking *dying* to hear this great music that Nel won’t shut up about.”

“You should probably switch to water,” I said, sounding damn near foreign to myself. “Or something.”

Fuck me. I’m really off tonight.

“Take it you guys are back for more?” the bouncer said at the VIP entrance. “There’s a really good dude just starting his set. He always gets the shit slots, but he’s got some real talent.”

“All right.” Nelson pumped his fist behind me. “Maybe we can make his night and get him discovered.”

“He’s been working hard at it since he was eighteen,” the bouncer said. “His name’s Mason Howard. Enjoy.”

I shrugged, knowing that I would more than likely forget the name in ten minutes. As I stepped into the back VIP area of the bar, I blinked my eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. The smell of smoke was suffocating, but it was whatever. I took a hard right and trotted up the steps to the celebrity area—the

place you go to keep from getting ran the fuck over—and headed for the bar.

“You’re back,” the brunette bartender beamed, flashing me a flirty look. “Same thing?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said, eyeing the dark-headed guy getting his stuff ready on the stage. “That’ll work fine.”

“Same for us too,” Aaron shouted from somewhere behind me.

I let out an irritated sigh. He’d be blackout drunk within the next hour—that was for sure. *I really should be too.*

But nope. There I was, taking a seat at one of the tables closest to the railing, without even a fucking buzz. I trained my attention on the guy almost ready to go. He was maybe my age? I couldn’t really tell from a distance, but seeing him for some reason made me think...

What would have happened if Dad hadn’t been able to afford an agent? Would that be me up there? Just trying to get someone to notice me?

Something that felt a lot like guilt slammed into me like a ton of bricks, and I did my best to push it away. It was like one visit to some janky classroom and singing a stupid overplayed tune with Lena Harris had triggered something *weird* inside of me.

And it was not welcome.

“Hey, y’all, I’m Mason,” the guy spoke into the microphone, his voice deep.

Country singer?

Aaron and Nel joined me at the table, pulling out stools and taking a seat—though Aaron nearly faceplanted on his first try. The bartender brought our drinks, mine a Jameson on the rocks, and set them down for us. I swept mine up and gulped it down like it was water...because, well, it basically would be if I let the ice melt.

“This guy looks like he might not fit in here.” Nel laughed, downing his beer. “Maybe that’s why they keep giving him the

last spot.”

“Maybe,” I muttered, just as he picked up his guitar. He started to strum some sort of folksy tune. However, the moment the guy opened his mouth and started to sing, I changed my mind.

He was fucking good.

“Holy shit,” Nel commented, immediately pulling out his cell phone and beginning to take a video. The guy’s voice had a deep gentle rasp that made my eyebrows rise. This guy definitely deserved a record deal, and the more he sang, the more I *really* fucking believed that.

“Damn...” Aaron said. “We need to meet this one.”

I nodded, entranced by the tune. I didn’t even notice the bartender had given me a fresh drink until I lifted it to my lips, surprised by the fresh burn. I tapped my foot against the rail of the stool, eating up the acoustic set.

He needs a band—or maybe not.

The guy—Mason Howard or whatever—was really making it work for him. As he finished the first song, the crowd applauded, but not with the vigor the guy deserved.

So I did.

I stood to my feet and clapped, shouting out loudly. Aaron and Nel joined me, following suit.

“You deserve to be famous!” Aaron belted across the now mostly quiet bar. The guy looked up at us, squinting in our direction.

And even from up here, I saw a flicker of recognition in his face—but he didn’t seem all that excited to see us.

Must not like our music.

I shrugged and sat back down, not even offended by it. Everyone liked different things. However, just as I thought that, he leaned into the microphone.

“I hope it’s all right that I have a special guest.”

Everyone clapped.

“She’s been a good friend of mine for years, supporting me way before I was landing decent gigs like this.”

Decent? No way. Place is a shithole.

“Anyway, come on.” He waved to someone sitting at the front table. “Let’s show ’em what we can do.”

My eyes drifted back to my drink, my mind wandering back to Lena—just like it had all night. *Fuck me.* It was as if I could hear her singing again in my head.

Except it *wasn't* in my head.

“Holy shit.” Aaron beamed, slamming his fist into the table. “That’s the girl from the meet and greet—Tyson’s girl’s friend!”

No way.

I whipped my head around to see Lena standing next to Mason, the two of them engaging in a cover of the song “I Remember Everything”, originally by Zach Bryan and Kacey Musgraves.

And it was fucking *amazing*.

“They should be together.” Aaron drew out a sigh. “Like, man...”

What the hell...? So much for stage fright.

I swallowed hard, removing my hat to get a better look at her. She was dressed as casually as ever...but just as before, it worked for her. She was gorgeous with the lights glinting off her red lips.

And as if she could feel my eyes on her, she started the second verse staring *right* at me. Her expression shifted to near shock, and she looked back to Mason, who shrugged.

Why is she looking at him?

Why the hell was I *bothered* by it? My head started spinning as their two voices meshed the way *ours* had only hours ago. It felt like...it felt like she had just betrayed me.

And that was fucking *crazy* of me.

“Where are you going?” Nel called after me as I headed for the stairs, leaving my second empty glass on the table.

“He’s jealous,” Aaron laughed. “I saw the video of him singing with her earlier—but in his defense, she’s got way more chemistry with him than this guy on stage...”

I couldn’t even process what he was saying as my shoes thudded down the stairs. I needed air. The woman had infected every crevice of my mind...

And I didn’t fucking *want* her there.

As I turned the corner to head for the door, they ended the song, and I stopped in my tracks, catching sight of Lena leaning in and placing a kiss on Mason’s cheek.

Fuck this!

Rage rolled through my body, causing my hands to shake. It had to be all the whiskey hitting me all at once. I never cared what women did, especially the ones that I didn’t. Even. Like! But all I could think about was her body under mine in that Florida room, and the way she’d looked at me when we sang that song earlier tonight.

And then she went off and sang with someone else.

I shook my head, suddenly engaging in an absolutely ridiculous war with myself. I could hear Aaron and Nel laughing still, and I was sure they were getting a kick out of me storming off like a little kid. I spun around and continued toward the exit...

I need to just go home.

“Hey,” a voice called from behind me.

I shut my eyes, willing myself to keep control, and turned around to take in the sight of Lena up close. *Why the fuck is she so attractive to me now?*

“What?” I snapped through gritted teeth as I held her gaze.

She raised her brow. “Um...I was just wondering if you listened to Mason. What did you think of him?”

Oh my god. She's trying to get me to do her boyfriend a favor.

"I don't play this game," I said in a sharp tone. "I'm not some fucking talent scout, Lena."

"I...sorry..." Her voice trailed off. "I thought...you guys seemed so into it."

And he seemed too into you.

"Hey, Lena!" Nel's voice echoed. "Why don't you two come up and drink with us? Mason can too, once he finishes his set in fifteen minutes. I already sent his video to my manager—it's got you in it too. You're really fuckin' good."

"I think I'm going to head home for the night," I said, glancing over to Nel.

"Nah, you're not." Nel burst into laughter. "You're just jealous you had to share your singing buddy, but I think she and Mason are damn good together."

I winced internally as Lena gave me a peculiar look. It looked like I needed to stay—just for damage control. The last thing I needed was for her to start thinking that I *actually* thought about her.

She didn't need to know the truth.

LENA

I stared across the table at Jackson, who hadn't so much as even *looked* at me. *What's wrong with him? Why did he look at me like that while I was singing? Why won't he look at me now?*

It had been hard to pick him out while I was on stage, but once I had, it was easy to read his expression. He was *bothered* when I started to sing, and then he stormed off. Did he think I was really bad or something?

I was *so* confused.

"Want another drink?" Nel offered, a smile on his face. "We'll buy a few rounds for Mason too, once he gets up here."

"Thanks." I took a sip of the watery mixture at the bottom of my Jack and Coke. I was going to be *exhausted* in the morning, but singing with Mason—and potentially getting him a deal—was worth whatever the hell I was going through with Jackson in the moment.

"So..." Aaron drew out the word in a slur. "You two sleeping together?"

I glanced over at Jackson, who rolled his eyes. "No."

"Why the fuck would I wanna sleep with her?" Jackson shot back, much sharper than my answer had been. It was...

startling.

“You *look* at her like you wanna sleep with her,” Nel pointed out, chuckling as he put his beer to his lips.

“Like you wanna *marry* her.” Aaron burst into a fit of drunk laughter.

“You guys are dumbasses,” Jackson retorted. “I can’t even stand to be in the same room with her.”

I whipped my head around to glare at him, ignoring the hurt his words brought. “What’s wrong with you tonight? I mean, you’re always rude, but this is just...ridiculous. I’m having a bad freaking night, and I’m just trying to deal.” I shouldn’t have admitted that in front of the entire table, but the alcohol always affected my filter.

Jackson held my gaze, and I *swear*, for a split second, there was remorse in his green eyes. “Okay.”

Okay? Seriously?

“I’m gonna go get more drinks,” Nel said, eyeing the two of us. “Don’t murder each other before I get back.”

“I gotta fuckin’ piss,” Aaron blurted, sliding off the stool and heading for the bathroom. I watched him go, shaking my head. It was not a good look for him.

“What happened?” Jackson asked suddenly, his tone soft enough to cause my heart to flip in my chest.

“What?”

“What happened tonight?” His face was expressionless, but his eyes were as soft as his voice.

I hesitated, trying to decide if he would just throw whatever I said right back in my face. “Maeve told me tonight that she’s moving out in a month, so I only have a month to find a roommate.” I felt stupid saying it, because it was a problem he would *never* understand.

He’d always had more money than he’d ever needed.

“That fuckin’ sucks,” he said, his eyes dropping to his drink. “I bet she’s moving in with Tyson.”

“Yeah,” I scoffed. “And I don’t know why she’s jumping into that whole thing so fast.”

Jackson shrugged. “Me neither. Tyson is an idiot. It’ll just lead to a bunch of heartbreak in the end.”

I nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I know. Stupid to fall so fast like that.”

“Stupid to fall at *all*.” Jackson looked up at me, holding my gaze.

And we stayed in that moment, his eyes locked with mine. My heart beat senselessly in my chest, something burning in my core.

Just the whiskey...it's just the whiskey.

Jackson let out a sigh, running his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know why—”

“Hey!” Mason’s voice interrupted us, and Jackson immediately went silent, angling back toward the stage where the closer was starting to play.

“You sounded great,” I greeted him, patting the stool next to me. “You really killed it.”

“So did you.” He shot me a smirk.

I heard Jackson sigh, but I ignored him. He was clearly back to acting like a child again. I kept a smile plastered on my face and thankfully, it was only a few moments before Nel and Aaron were back at the table again.

“You’re really good,” Nel commented, throwing one of his drinks back as he handed more of them out.

“Thanks.” Mason beamed. “I’ve got some music out that I did independently, but you know how that works. It’s just a game of algorithms and all that stuff. It’s hard to figure out how to turn that into genuine views and fans.”

Nel nodded. “Yeah, I’m glad we don’t have to worry about that. I know that we still have a social media presence—and we have access to it—but thankfully, our PR team handles all of that.”

“That’s the dream,” Mason chuckled, his eyes bouncing from me to Jackson. “So you went to Lena’s music class?”

I braced for Jackson to act out or say something rude, but surprisingly, he didn’t. He just nodded, swooping up his drink and taking a long swig. “Yeah, I did. It was cute. Kids are cool.”

Mason laughed. “Yeah, they are. They make you wanna settle down.”

“For a minute,” Jackson added, his eyes on *me* for some reason. I shifted in my chair and glanced down at my smartwatch.

Ugh.

The fatigue pulled at my body now, and suddenly my *I don’t care* attitude about being out late when I had to work in the morning was shifting. “I think I’m gonna head out.”

“Already?” Mason frowned. “You used to close the bar down all the time.”

Jackson raised his brows. “You did?”

“Yeah, before I had a job that I had to be at first thing in the morning. Times are different, and besides, getting adequate sleep at night is important.” The table chuckled, and I knew I sounded like a nerd...but whatever. I needed my sleep.

“Well, damn,” Mason sighed. “I’ll make sure you get home then.”

“Thank you,” I said to him, sliding off the stool and turning to the rest of them. “And thanks for the drinks tonight. It was fun.” They all nodded. However, before Mason could join me on my feet, Jackson was out of his chair.

“I’ll take her home,” he said to Mason. “You enjoy the rest of the night. I was actually planning to leave earlier.”

“Dude, thanks. You’re the best,” Mason replied, swooping up his drink and downing it. “I appreciate it.”

We took a few steps toward the exit, and I still couldn’t process the decision. “*You* are going to make sure I get home?”

“Yeah,” he said with a shrug, gesturing for me to head toward the staircase. “I’m tired, and you saw earlier I was about to leave. I’m ready to go home.”

“That’s surprising,” I laughed, shaking my head. “You’re the one who stays out and parties until lunchtime the next day, right?”

He grimaced. “That might be a little much.”

Laughing, I took the stairs to the bottom level, noting there weren’t many people left. Jackson was on his phone as we walked, and I stayed focused on not tripping over my own feet from how freaking tired I was.

“The car is right outside,” Jackson said, looking up from his phone just in time to open the door for me. “I think he might have been napping or something. Took like twenty texts to get him here.”

“Rough life. I just use Uber,” I snort, making my way to the black Tahoe parked alongside the curb.

“Yeah, Uber isn’t always safe,” Jackson commented, opening the passenger door for me. The night was silent, and there were no paparazzi in sight—or really anyone for that matter.

“Uber is safer than walking home or driving drunk,” I said to him as I climbed inside, sliding across the leather seat to the far side.

“Well, yeah, but I never even think about doing shit like that,” Jackson chuckled, slamming the door shut.

The driver eyed both of us in the rearview mirror. “Where to?”

Jackson popped off my address like he’d said it a million times, and then turned to me. “Is that where you wanna go? Or is there somewhere else since you and Maeve are in a fight?”

I blinked a couple times, yet again taken aback by this... *friendly* behavior—and the way it was working for him. “Home is fine. I’m sure she’s asleep right now.”

“Or back with Tyson.”

“Touché,” I grunted, clicking my seat belt in place and leaning against the door panel. “I’m just so ready to go to bed now.”

Jackson laughed. “Not the night owl you used to be. I can’t actually imagine you being that kind of fun.”

Ah, asshole Jackson has returned.

I shrugged, turning my head to meet the green eyes that were fixed on me. “Well, I was never at *your* level of fun, but I did used to get out a lot more than I do now. Now, I just have priorities...and a job. Plus, I don’t like being hungover.”

“Sounds like a *fuddy dud* to me.”

“Did you seriously just say *fuddy dud*?” I burst into laughter, running my hands over my face. “I can’t with you.”

He *smiled*, and it was probably one of the most genuine ones I had ever seen grace the rock star’s face. “Yeah, I know.” Jackson leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes. I admired him there, his muscular arms, jagged jaw, and the relaxed expression on his face... He *was* handsome.

And maybe the little bit of alcohol had me feeling a little daring.

“Here.” The driver’s voice cut into my thoughts.

I snapped out of it. “Thanks for the ride.” My fingers grabbed ahold of the handle and pushed open the door, the cool morning air tickling my skin.

“I’ll walk you to the door,” Jackson said, jumping out before I could protest.

What the hell?

I met him around the front of the SUV, unable to hide my surprise. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why do you ask so many questions?” he retorted, his heated gaze sending a shiver down my spine. I tried to shake off the excitement mixed with nerves filtering into my chest, but it didn’t work...and the closer we got to the door, the more I was starting to feel a warm sensation in my core.

Jackson stepped up onto the porch behind me and didn't stop until he leaned against the doorframe. "So...this is your house."

I giggled at how awkward he sounded. "Yeah, it's my house. How many times have you walked a woman to the door? Because your conversation is awful."

"Never," he answered.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Never awful or you've never walked a woman to her door before?" I wasn't sure why I had the courage to ask the questions, but his reactions were... *exciting*.

His eyes lingered on my face, and he let out a sharp exhale. "Both. I've never done either." His fingers reached out suddenly then, pushing some of my hair from my face.

"My hair's a mess." My voice wavered, my heart beating wildly in my chest.

Jackson's brow furrowed, his finger lingering in a way that made my thighs clench, taking me back to the night at the party. "I don't think so."

Did he just compliment me?

"Thanks..." I went for the doorknob, but he stopped me, pulling my lips to his.

And my body freaking exploded with desire. His hands cupped the back of my head, holding my mouth to his as my fingers trailed down his T-shirt, feeling the warmth of his body beneath. He nipped at my bottom lip, and I let out a moan, letting his tongue caress every inch of my own.

My breaths grew ragged as his mouth slid from mine, his hands already slipped down to my waist. "What...what're you doing?" I managed to choke out as he pinned me against the door.

He paused, removing his lips from the nape of my neck and pulling back to look at me. "Do you not want to do this?"

"I...is this...is this why you wanted to bring me home?" I was embarrassed to be asking the question, but the insecure

girl in me was suddenly questioning *everything*. We didn't even *like* each other.

“No, *this* is not why I brought you home, or walked you to the door.” His gaze was soft. “I just can't get you out of my head, Lena—and you look hot as fuck tonight.”

Warning bells were ringing in my head as I mulled his words over, not completely sure how to take them. I wasn't even sure how drunk Jackson was—or wasn't.

“I can just go,” Jackson muttered after a few moments. “The guys probably need the car anyway.” He turned to go, loosening his grip on my waist.

And I felt disappointed. I could never just *live* a little.

“No, wait.” I grabbed his forearm, tugging slightly. “Don't go.”

He spun around and without warning, lifted me up off the ground and buried his face into my neck, picking right back up where he'd left off.

Oh. My. Gosh.

My fingers threaded through his hair as I felt his erection press against me through my jeans. I tipped my head back against the door, my fingers reaching for the knob that I'd already unlocked. I rolled it in my fingers, and it swung open.

Jackson chuckled darkly, pulling back to meet my gaze. “I was waiting for that invitation.”

JACKSON

My cock throbbed as I carried her through the house, not stopping until she had directed me to her bedroom. I didn't even bother to take in the room before laying her down on the bed. I just wanted to pick up where we'd last left off.

I ripped her shirt over her head, and she bit back with the same level of eagerness, tearing mine off as well. Unlike before, I didn't hesitate, unsnapping the hook of her bra and *finally* setting eyes on her perky tits.

And they were even better than I'd imagined.

"Fuck," I muttered, unable to resist the urge. My lips landed on her chest, her back arching as I sucked the soft skin into my mouth. She cried out, and I ran my hands along her hips, still clad in jeans.

I need to get these off.

I'd never felt so desperate to see a woman naked in my entire life, and my fingers fumbled with the button of her jeans, like I'd never taken someone else's clothes off before. But in the moment, it didn't feel like I had.

Something about this woman made everything feel new.

And it was a fucking *high*.

Her hips wiggled beneath me, squirming as I peeled the denim down, revealing a black lace thong and an eyeful of creamy skin. I threw the jeans across the room, and the sound of them hitting the wall caused Lena to pause.

“I don’t want to wake up Maeve.”

“I hope we do,” I growled, hooking her underwear with my fingers and dragging it downward, my heart racing with excitement. “I don’t care if we wake up the whole fucking city.”

Her eyes darkened with that comment, and I wasn’t sure if she had any clue as to how incredibly sexy she was. I stripped the rest of my clothes off, making less noise. It felt good to let my cock free, but all I could think about was tasting the woman in front of me.

Leaning over her, I took her lips in a savage kiss again, determined to take my time. There was no rushing this ecstasy.

I knew that more than likely, this was it. I wouldn’t see Lena again—it wouldn’t be good for my psyche. She was heartbreak in the form of one of the most intriguing and annoying women I had ever met.

I took my time when I made it to her breasts, palming them as I indulged, sucking and licking her until my cock was about to explode. She whimpered as I continued downward, my hands sliding down her silky skin.

“*Ooh...*” Her moans filled the room as I made my way to her inner thighs, kissing both before gliding my tongue right across her clit. She shivered against me, her fingernails digging into my shoulders.

I swear to God, I could’ve come right then and there.

She tasted like heaven, and I sucked her into my mouth slowly at first, two of my fingers pressing into her pussy. Her hips bucked against me and I savored every second of it.

“*Jackson,*” she whined, driving me fucking *crazy*.

I picked up my pace like my life depended on it, and she began to move with me—but that wasn’t cool.

No, *I* was going to be the one to drive her right over the edge.

I latched onto her thighs, holding her still. She cried out in surprise, but I stood firm, holding her pussy against my mouth and growling. Her moans grew in volume, and I was pretty fucking sure the whole neighborhood would be able to hear her...

And I hoped like hell it was my name that rolled off her lips.

After a few beats, her body trembled, legs shaking in my grasp—and she orgasmed, doing *exactly* what I wanted.

“Oh my god, Jackson!”

I held her against me, riding out her orgasm with my tongue inside of her. My shoulders burned from her nails, but I held her still, the pain only serving to turn me on more.

Her breaths came in heavy pants as she recovered, and I loosened my grip.

“I’m so sorry.” Her eyes went wide as I stood.

“For what?”

She pointed to my shoulders, and I glanced down, seeing blood seeping from a couple of places. I shrugged.

“I don’t care. I just want to be inside of you right now,” I growled, dragging her legs to the edge of the bed. “And that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

She squealed, and I leaned down, swooping up my jeans.

I need a fucking condom.

“Come on,” she whimpered as my cock brushed her entrance.

Feeling frantic, I finally landed on the foil wrapper of what I was looking for. I had no fucking clue how old it was, but there was no way in hell I was about to miss this opportunity. I’d never wanted someone so fucking bad.

I ripped it open and stretched it over myself, and all the while, Lena was still squirming against me.

And so I gave her exactly what she wanted.

Plunging deep inside her, I had to catch my breath, her pussy gripping my cock like a glove. “Holy—” I groaned, as she moaned out at the same time. I stayed there, lodged inside of her, for a few beats while I got my wits about me. It would’ve been nothing for me to explode right then and there inside of her.

But I was a rock star—and it would’ve been a damn shame for me to be a two-pump chump.

“Oh my...” Her eyes were closed, her thick lips swollen from all the heady kisses. And yet, even still, it felt like I hadn’t kissed her enough...

So I leaned over, taking her lips with mine. She clung to me desperately, and I met her fervor. This woman knew how to make passionate love, and I didn’t care if I was just a one-night stand or not...

She fucking moved my soul.

My arms wrapped around her, our bodies skin to skin as I began to rock my hips, filling her over and over. Her lips trailed from mine, moving down my jaw and pausing to nip at my earlobe. I growled with satisfaction, thrusting into her with more intensity.

I held onto her, hardly able to breathe as the pleasure rolled through my body and something shifted deep in my chest. I had no idea what it was, but the moment was borderline spiritual—I finally understood why people wrote songs about shit like this.

“I’m going to come again,” she whispered into my neck, just before sucking skin into her mouth. Her tone was sultry and lustful, sending me over the edge.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I exploded right as her pussy bore down around my cock, a deep growl escaping from the back of my throat. I collapsed downward, catching myself with my elbow. Her chest heaved against me, and I buried my head in her neck as she tussled my hair.

What the hell just happened?

I didn't move, shutting my eyes and breathing her in. The scent of warm amber and vanilla mixed with our sex filled my nostrils, and I committed the entire thing to memory. I wouldn't forget this version of Lena, *ever*.

"I can't breathe," she mumbled, followed immediately by a giggle.

I pushed myself up off the bed, meeting her gaze. There was a twinkle there that I hadn't ever seen before, and I wondered if I had just missed it...

Or if I had caused it.

Could I make her happy?

I shook my head and cleared my throat. I was thinking like an idiot—one that would end up heartbroken. "Sorry for smashing you..." I said, rolling off her and onto my back. "Kind of, anyway."

"Don't be sorry," she said, sitting up and sliding her legs off the bed. She stood to her feet and glanced around the room.

"Wear my shirt," I blurted out, not even realizing what I was saying until after it had come out of my mouth. I had *never* let a woman put on one of my shirts. It was like a rule I had.

But obviously, tonight was full of bad decisions.

She picked it up off the floor and slid it over her head...and *fuck*, she looked incredible. "I'm officially a groupie," she teased, striking the goofiest pose.

"I don't think so," I said, taking in her messy, sexed-up blonde hair. "You'll never be a groupie."

She frowned. "Why?"

"Because most of the time, groupies have no problem being passed around—and there's no way in hell I'd share you."

Lena crinkled her nose. "That's gross."

I rolled my eyes, sitting up. "I've never slept with anyone my bandmates have slept with. Don't worry." I stood to my

feet, shot her a wink, swept up my boxers, and headed to the bathroom to get my shit together. My head was a mess with all these emotions swirling around.

And I had no idea where they came from.

Is this what Tyson feels when he falls so hard?

“Are you okay?” Lena peeked into the bathroom, giving me a weird look as I stood in front of the mirror in my boxers.

I turned to her. “Yeah, why?”

“I don’t know...but I looked outside, and the car is gone...”

Great. He probably went back to Nel and Aaron.

“Yeah, it’s good. I can call an Uber or whatever.”

“It’s like three in the morning.” She bit her lip in a way that made my heart flip in my chest. “You...you can stay if that’s easier.”

Fuck me. I never stay. I. Never. Stay.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, I’ll stay.”

It’s just one time. It’ll be fine.



My eyes fluttered open at the sound of my phone going off. My head wasn’t pounding. My stomach wasn’t nauseous. And as I looked over at Lena, sleeping soundly in my T-shirt, I realized that neither of us had been drunk last night.

I can’t write this off as a drunk mistake.

I ripped my phone up from where I’d plugged it in only a few hours before. It was almost six o’clock in the morning, and I knew Lena had set her alarm for six-thirty. I needed to get the fuck out of there before I ended up sharing breakfast or some shit with her.

I had already broken all my rules.

Clumsily but quietly, I slid on my jeans and Vans—and scheduled an Uber. I needed a shirt, but there was no way in hell I was waking up Lena to get it back. *Talk about the walk of shame.*

Creeping out of her bedroom, I closed the door behind me and then ran my fingers through my hair. I had made a major mistake. We didn't even *like* each other, and now I'd gone and not only fucked up my own feelings, but Lena's too.

I mean, we cuddled last night.

Jackson Whiss doesn't cuddle.

I stepped into the living room, surprised to see a light on, and whipped my head around to the small kitchen, my jaw dropping as Maeve stood there with a cup of coffee in her hands...looking equally shocked to see me.

“What...*you* are the one who stayed over?” Her eyebrows were sky-high. “I can't...oh my god...”

“Yeah, can we *not* make this a big deal right now?” I cleared my throat, still sounding groggy as hell.

“Um, this *is* a big deal. My best friend doesn't do one-night stands.”

And *that* comment only confirmed my suspicions.

“Well, I guess there's a first time for everything,” I said unevenly.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “You like her.”

“Nope,” I quipped, heading right for the front door.

“Where's your shirt?”

I shook my head as she giggled at me, ripping the front door open just as the Uber pulled up outside. Maeve knew exactly where my shirt was. And normally, I wouldn't even care, but there was just one problem. I *would* have to see Lena again...

Friday night at practice.

I'm so fucked.

LENA

“So...do you wanna talk about what happened last night?” Maeve said carefully when I stepped into the house after a long— *very* long—day at work.

My shoulders slouched and I dropped my bag on the floor beside the door. “I don’t...I don’t know. Like, I’m so mad at you for leaving me to try and find a roommate.”

“Listen,” Maeve began, pushing her hair behind her ear. “I don’t want it to put a strain on you financially. I’ll pay my share of the rent until you find a roommate. It’s not that big of a deal.”

I sighed, catching a whiff of Jackson’s cologne still on me. “I don’t want you to have to do that...”

“Just until you find a roommate. That’s perfectly fair.” Maeve gave me an apologetic smile.

Reluctantly, I nodded. I really didn’t have any other choice. I couldn’t afford to live there without her. “Okay, fair enough.”

Her eyes brightened. “So...we didn’t have a chance this morning to talk about what happened last night.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “We just did...”

“No, I’m not talking about our fight,” she said, crossing one of her tan legs over the other. “I’m talking about the visitor I

ran into this morning when he was bailing without a shirt on.”

Oh. My. Gosh.

I facepalmed. “You *saw* him?”

“Oh yeah, and I’m pretty sure he was just as shocked to see me as I was to see him. I *knew* you had something going on with him.”

My heart sank. “It’s not like that. It was just a one-time thing.”

Maeve frowned. “How do you know?”

“Uh, he made it pretty clear last night that it’s stupid to fall for anyone,” I said carefully, recalling our conversation at the bar. “He’s just...*very* good at sex,” I added, feeling my cheeks flush.

“Yeah, well, that’s not surprising. I’m sure he’s had lots of practice,” Maeve laughed, but the comment made me shudder.

And then feel *so* dumb for feeling like we actually had some kind of connection last night.

“Just a one-time thing,” I choked out, like I hadn’t been checking my phone all day. I was pretty sure he didn’t even have my number.

Maeve sighed. “Are you sure? Because you look super put out.”

“No. It’s just...I don’t know. You know how it goes for me.”

“Don’t let yourself fall for him.”

“You’re the one who made a comment about the two of us,” I pointed out, loosely remembering something like that as I plopped down on the couch beside her.

“Yeah, but that was before I learned a lot more about him. He’s apparently *never* been serious about anyone. He’s got major commitment issues, and I don’t think they’re going anywhere.”

“Great,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. “Good thing the only chemistry we have is the kind in the bedroom.”

“Right...” Maeve didn’t seem convinced. “Maybe we should set you up with someone else. I saw Mason post the video of the two of you singing together. Maybe you should think about him. You always said you wanted friendship first.”

“Nah.” I dismissed the idea. “I don’t like Mason like that. I never have.”

“Okay, well, maybe we should set you up with someone you’ve never met? I’m sure Tyson knows plenty of guys who would love to go on a date with you.”

“Yeah, maybe...” My voice trailed off. “I’ll have to see Jackson again on Friday.”

“For the band practice thing with the kids, huh?” She gave me a sympathetic look. “Just suffer through it, and you won’t have to see him again.”

“You’re moving in with one of his best friends.”

“So? We can def avoid him, Lena—until you’re well over it all. It’ll be fine. Just get through this Friday, and Jackson will be nothing but a memory.”

I nodded. “Right. Okay.”



My heart was pounding as I pushed through the doors of the auditorium at the school. They had decided to set the band up there for the evening to make it more intimate for the kids, and while that was great for the kids and parents, I was *not* in the mood to be up close and personal with Jackson.

I hadn’t heard from him since the night we slept together—and I kind of hated him for that. It didn’t matter that we didn’t get along or whatever it was between us...but he didn’t even check in.

That’s how a one-night stand works.

And that’s what I kept telling myself. It was the first time I had ever let myself do something so stupid, and it was showing. My emotions were a total mess.

“All right, so the camera crew wants you up front,” Melissa, my boss, said to me, catching my attention as I entered the place. “The band isn’t here yet.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“You don’t look very excited.” She furrowed her brow. “What’s up? Do you feel okay?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine. It’s just been a long week. I’ll be all smiles for the camera, don’t worry.”

“Perfect.” She patted my shoulder and gestured to the very front row. “Right down there will work the best.”

I followed her instructions, joining a group of students already sitting in the front row. The place was fairly crowded, but the school had limited it to only students who were a part of the summer program. The students sat in the front section and the parents were in the back to give a more intimate experience for the kids.

Sipping on my third iced coffee for the day, I flipped down the seat of the chair and took a seat next to Aliyah. “How are you this evening?” I asked her, forcing a smile.

“Oh, I’m *good*,” she told me, wiggling her brows at me in a way that made me laugh. I swear, kids were the perfect solution to every shitty day I’d ever had.

“Great—”

“Good evening,” a deep voice said into a microphone, sending my head swirling all over again. I hadn’t even noticed that the band had walked on stage, and slowly I lifted my eyes to the short stage right in front of me.

And there he was.

Jackson wasn’t looking at me, but he looked as good as ever in a black Henley rolled up to his elbows and a pair of black jeans. He was in all black.

And *damn*, did it work for him.

He was like a moody, sexy rock star—all the things I swore I wasn’t attracted to—but my mind went wild, flashing with

intimate images of the night we'd shared a little over a week ago.

Ugh.

“Are you all ready for us to put on a little show for you?”

The whole auditorium erupted with applause, but I didn't budge. Cameras were pointed at Jackson, not me. I didn't have to pretend to be happy to be there until there was a lens in my face, and now that I was in the middle of it...

I wasn't sure if it was something I could fake.

Keeping my eyes down on my lap, I didn't look up as the music began to fill the auditorium. Aliyah jumped up from her seat, like most of the other kids had, and I let out a sigh, knowing that Melissa might have my head if I didn't join them. Slowly, I pushed myself to a standing position, wishing like hell she hadn't put me in the front row.

My eyes floated to the kids, watching them dance to the music. They were smiling and singing along, and honestly, it was infectious.

“Isn't it so wrong, isn't it so wrong, for this to feel so right?” Jackson's voice sang with the heavy chorus, and I finally got the nerve to look up again.

And *this* time, I was met with his intense gaze.

I swallowed hard as he sang the words again, telling myself that the song had been written long before he ever met me—and not even by him. It was written by his bandmates.

I'm just one of many one-night stands.

The thought rooted me back in reality, and I turned my attention back to the kids, ripping my eyes from his. He didn't deserve to get the vulnerable side of me anymore—that's what I would keep telling myself.

“Dance with me!” Aliyah grabbed my hands, jumping up and down. “Please!”

I laughed, at first shaking my head.

“*Please*,” she pouted, sticking out her bottom lip. “It’ll be *so* fun.”

Ugh.

“Okay, okay.” I finally gave in, swaying to the music with her. She giggled with delight, and we made a spectacle—one big enough to grab the attention of a camera. I kept my attention on Aliyah, just letting myself enjoy the moment.

And it worked.

Relief rolled through my shoulders as I genuinely laughed, enjoying the beat—and ignoring the fact that Jackson was watching.

Let him watch. Let him see that he doesn’t get to me.

And once I took that to heart, I found myself belting out the words to all the songs I loved with Aliyah, enjoying the evening...especially noticing that Jackson kept staring.

That felt really good.

“So, we’re going to play one more song this evening,” Jackson said after a thirty-minute set. “However, I thought it might be fun to have some help. Who wants to come up and join me?”

Aliyah bounced up and down, screaming and raising her hand. “Me, me, *me!*”

I laughed, and Jackson waved to her.

“Come on, you look like you have some fierce energy.”

“I do!” Aliyah shouted as she ran up to the stage and took Jackson’s hand. “What are we gonna sing?”

“Your choice,” he said to her, grabbing a microphone. “What do you want to sing?”

“Um...I want to sing...*Elsa!*”

His brow furrowed. “Elsa?”

“*Let it go*,” I called out to the stage, and Jackson whipped his head around to me. “The song,” I clarified, giving him a half-hearted smile.

He held my eyes just long enough for my heart to stumble over itself. “Thanks, Miss Harris.” Jackson turned back to Aliyah. “All right, let’s sing some Elsa.”

She jumped up and down as the band began the Disney power hit. Jackson *actually* knew the freaking song—and he *belted* it with her.

All the while, *dancing* with her on stage.

And I *hated* how cute it was.

My heart was in a million pieces the entire time, and for the first time, I was seeing a side of Jackson I never knew existed. He *was* great with kids...

Ugh. Why can’t he just be a horrible asshole?

As the song came to a close, my lips stayed in a flat line. Jackson kneeled down, and Aliyah gave him a huge hug.

“Thanks for singing with me,” he said to her, his smile so genuine it hurt to see. “You’ve got great pipes.”

She blushed, handing him back the microphone. “Thanks. But I like it better when you and Miss Harris sing songs together.”

He chuckled but didn’t say anything else as she skipped down the steps.

And he didn’t look at me for the rest of the night, either.

JACKSON

“Why the hell did they call a meeting?” I asked Tyson as I entered the record label office. “I was planning to hit the gym this morning.”

Tyson shrugged, looking as tired as ever. “I have no idea, but I was really hoping to sleep in past ten on a fuckin’ Saturday. This sucks, man. I have big plans this evening, too.”

“Yeah, I get that,” I said, my eyes scouring the office as we made our way toward the conference room. “I thought everything was good since we did the thing for the school last week.”

“Me too, but knowing them, they’re probably trying to come up with some other shit while you’re on an all-time high.”

“All-time high of what?”

“Dude, the press has been so amped up over that whole thing you did with the little girl at that thing. Have you watched any of it?”

I shook my head. “Nah, I haven’t.”

I don’t want to see Lena dancing again.

There was something about seeing her with kids that had hit me in the strangest way, and it was *not* good. I was avoiding her like the plague, having typed out multiple texts to her and

then erased them—and for that very reason, I hadn't been out drinking either. I'd just end up back in bed with her.

That's what always happened in my head.

"You should watch them," Tyson continued, leading the way to the conference room on the third floor. "You look like a saint. It's a way different image for you. There's also been some pictures from the other night that surfaced last night. Maeve found them."

"What night?" I asked. "I haven't been out in weeks."

"The night you guys caught up with Mason Howard. Did you know they're signing him? I guess Nel worked that whole thing out. Pretty big deal for the guy. I think he's gonna open with us."

Great. Never-ending reminder of the woman I need to forget.

"Anyway, let's see what they have up their sleeve." Tyson pushed the door open, revealing a whole damn room full of people.

I let out a heavy sigh, and took a seat in between Tyson and Aaron, who looked hungover as shit. Quite frankly, I was envious. It would be nice to go out and actually enjoy myself like I used to.

"So—" Genna stood to her feet, clearing her throat. "Now that everyone is here, we can get started."

"Is there a reason you gotta talk so loud?" Aaron groaned, his head falling to his hands. "*Jeez.*"

Genna rolled her eyes. "Really? I know it's a stretch to have you here on a Saturday morning, but come on. This is important."

"Let me guess, it's about *Jackson* and the *mysterious* woman he shacked up with after the bar—which we all know is Lena," Aaron grunted, his head resting on the table. "Can someone get me some ibuprofen? Because I'm already over this meeting."

I shook my head. "What the hell is he talking about?"

“Yeah,” Tyson echoed. “I haven’t seen anything about that.”

“Well, then you two obviously haven’t been keeping up with the media.” Genna clicked on the projector, and right there, *on the screen*, was a photo of Lena and me getting into the Tahoe outside of the bar.

Oh shit...

“Then...” Genna continued, clicking to the next article. “This.”

A video of the little kid concert we put on began to play, a video of me singing to Lena—both of us looking like we’re lost in the moment.

“People are *buzzing* about this budding romance,” Genna said, her voice bright. “And it’s adorable. We went ahead and leaked the video of the two of you singing together,” she added. “It should air tonight sometime. This is *exactly* what we need to get your image all spiffed up. No models doing tell-alls, just good old-fashioned sweet romance.”

“But it’s *not* anything,” I countered, my stomach feeling suddenly *very* nauseous. “It’s nothing at all, actually.”

Genna looked surprised. “It’s not?”

“Definitely not,” Tyson said quickly. “We set Lena up with one of my friends. They have a date tonight.”

What?!

My head whipped to Tyson, and I couldn’t decide if I was pissed or just shocked. “Why did you do that?”

“Because she’s Maeve’s best friend, and we want to be able to double-date. We’re hoping it’ll also maybe smooth over the party this evening. Maeve wants her to come, and we thought it might be cool for her to have a date. It’ll give her someone to hang out with.”

I felt like a bear in a cage, and I gritted my teeth as I tried not to punch my best friend right in the fucking face. *Why does it bother me so bad? I haven’t even talked to her.*

“Hey.” Genna’s voice cut right in between us, and she snapped her fingers. “You two can duke this out later. We need to ride this high of your image. It’s completely trampled everything else that’s been said. I want you to consider a relationship with the woman—fake or otherwise.”

“I’ve *never* played that fucking game. It’s a horrible idea. You know that.”

“And I also know that your album sales are at an all-time high, so maybe for once take the hint to settle down.” Her voice was cold and unforgiving as she glared at me. “If you want to keep to public events only, that’s fine—and this party tonight will need to be kept under wraps.” She turned to Tyson. “There needs to be an album that comes out of this as well.”

Tyson nodded, glancing over to me before going back to her. “Are you sure this is the best idea? Putting Jackson is some kind of public relationship? We know what usually happens...”

The room continued to stay silent, and I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. My concerns about the entire thing had *nothing* to do with my ability to behave—and everything to do with being around Lena again.

I don’t know if I can do it...

My mind filled with the memories of her body beneath mine, and the feelings that had followed. I mean, the woman still had my shirt—well, maybe, anyway. I couldn’t blame her if she threw it out. I had pretty much ghosted her at this point.

No wonder she doesn’t want to come to the party. Maybe she’s trying to make me jealous with a date.

For some reason, that thought kind of put out the fire burning in my chest. However, whoever Tyson had picked for someone like Lena would be high caliber, since he cared so much about Maeve.

And that was kind of intimidating.

“Listen, it’s something that you need to think seriously about.” Genna folded her arms across her chest. “If you don’t

want to do it, that's on you. However, it's important to remember that your momentum is full steam ahead—and it's picking up more than it ever has. You can either ride this all the way to superstardom, or you'll burn out like all the rest of the rock 'n' roll guys.”

I was slightly offended, mostly just because I couldn't understand how the hell being with some normal—but insanely talented—music teacher would do my *stardom* any good at all.

I need to get out of here.

All the information thrown at me had put my mind in overdrive, and all I could focus on was the brewing jealousy deep in my chest.

“I'll give you until tomorrow morning to make your decision.”

I shook my head in repulsion. “What about Lena? What if she doesn't want to? I'm not going to put her in that predicament. That's just fucked-up.”

Her eyebrows shot skyward. “Since when do you care?”

Aaron snickered in the background. “Since he met her.”

Fuck this.

“I don't know, it just doesn't seem right. But yeah, whatever. I'll have my answer to you sometime tonight.” I pushed back from the table, unable to get control of my thoughts in the moment.

The thought of being around Lena was exhilarating and horrible—but nothing was plaguing me more than thinking about her in the arms of someone else.

“We're not done with the meeting,” Genna called after me as I headed for the door, shaking my head. “We still need to talk about that upcoming release—and a possible surprise end-of-summer tour.”

“Nah, no we don't,” I snapped, shoving the door open. I could hear them all grumbling and murmuring about me as I exited. I knew they thought I was dramatic.

Hell, I *was* being dramatic.

But it was all just too much.

“Hey, wait,” Tyson called after me as I headed for the emergency stairway exit. “I know you’re pissed at me...but I had no idea you were—”

“I fucked her,” I growled, spinning around. “And your girlfriend *knows* I did.”

Tyson’s eyes went wide. “What? Maeve didn’t tell me that. She just said that Lena was going through some stuff and probably wouldn’t come tonight unless we gave her someone to hang out with. I thought about having Mason Howard come since they’re friends, but he was busy—and Maeve mentioned setting her up with someone who wants to settle down—and so I called Colt—”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” I exploded, thinking of our old lead guitarist. He was off being a private teacher at some esteemed classical music college after saying that the rock star life didn’t line up with his values anymore. “Why would you do that?”

They’re a match made in heaven.

And I *hated* that.

“Dude...” Tyson held up his hands. “You haven’t mentioned anything about her. How was I supposed to know that you cared about her?”

“I don’t care about her,” I reasoned, shaking my head. “I... just...do whatever the hell you want. I’m not coming tonight,” I snapped, shoving the door open.

“No, you gotta,” Tyson argued, chasing after me. “This shit is really important. I *need* you there tonight.”

“Then Colt better not be there.”

“*WHY?!*” Tyson threw up his hands. “Jeez, Jackson, you’re making *no* sense right now! I seriously don’t even know what you want. I already invited Colt.”

Fuck!

I stood there, fuming for a moment—and also knowing that I had *no* reason to be fuming—it was the most confusing feeling I'd ever had. "I'll just...I'll talk to you later."

"Okay, well, I'll see you there, right?" he called after me as my Vans thudded down the stairs and I reached the bottom, feeling like a borderline psycho.

"Yeah, you'll see me there," I shouted back up the stairwell. "Just send me the information and I'll show up."

Maybe trashed as fuck, but I'll show.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see the details for the party flash across the screen. I skimmed over the info, seeing that I had a solid ten hours before it started. I blew out a breath and opened the car door, sliding into the driver's seat. I punched the steering wheel and groaned, letting out a moment of frustration.

Women had *never* gotten under my skin, and seeing a woman again after I'd slept with her had never bothered me in my entire life...so why did the thought of an old friend touching Lena make my stomach so sick? Wouldn't it eliminate the problem?

Maybe I should see a doctor. Something is wrong with me.

LENA

“I really don’t understand how you think me having a date to the party is going to make it any better,” I groaned, standing in front of the mirror.

“It’ll just give you someone to talk to. No one said it has to go anywhere, though he *is* stable—and he wants to settle down. That’s the total opposite of Jackson.”

“I’m over that,” I commented, glancing over at Maeve before taking in my figure. “This dress is over-the-top.” The tight, black bodycon ensemble paired with red stilettos made me feel as though I was *far* out of my element. “This isn’t me.”

“Yeah, but this is a star-studded party.” Maeve smiled, ignoring the part about Jackson. I knew she wasn’t convinced. It had been weeks, and I still avoided anything that might put us in the same room—even if it meant spending less time with my best friend. Not to mention, life had taken a dramatic shift once my face hit the media.

I hadn’t caught anyone taking pictures of me, but people *were* staring.

And that was beyond awkward enough.

“You look *hot*. Just enjoy the fact that you have the curves to pull this whole thing off,” Maeve laughed.

“Yeah, and show all the curves in the *wrong* places too,” I mentioned, eyeing my stomach. It wasn’t exactly flat, and for some reason, the black dress seemed to accentuate that.

“That’s seriously all in your head,” Maeve dismissed me, her flawless red dress hanging on her thin frame. “Anyway, we need to get going—well, *I* need to get going. Colt will be here to pick you up in about thirty minutes.”

I nodded, apprehension building in my stomach. “Okay. I guess I’ll see you there.”

“Perfect.” Maeve gave me a side hug. “Trust me, you’re gorgeous. Don’t let yourself worry about Jackson. He’s just another asshole in a city of many. You’re going to have a *phenomenal* time tonight, and it means so much to me that you’re coming. Tyson said it’s important.”

I laughed. “Right.” I gave her a little wave as she slipped out of my bedroom—the same one that Jackson had slept in, before he ghosted me. I swallowed hard, not sure why the thought still stung. We hadn’t gotten along from the get-go, there was no reason for it to do anything other than confirm that it was better off that way.

Still, he was all I could think about.

And I *still* had his stupid shirt.

My shoulders slumped as I exited the room, grabbing my purse and heading toward the living room. My hair was fashioned in sideswept waves, my lips a dark red, and honestly, I *did* look good. I needed to focus on getting to know the guy who Maeve had been determined to set me up with...

Even if I didn’t feel like it.

I sat down on the couch, tempted to just text Maeve right then and there, telling her I’d suddenly gotten sick and couldn’t make it—but she’d know I was lying.

And that wasn’t the kind of friend I was.

Maybe Jackson will have a date.

The thought was bothersome, but I ignored it. I knew I had no right to worry about it. He could do whatever—and

whoever—he wanted.

Gross.

The doorbell chiming was a welcomed distraction, and I stood to my feet, walking to the front door and peeking through the peephole. There, on the front stoop, was my date—and he was handsome. His dirty-blond hair was fashioned with a hard part, and his muscles were obvious through his tux.

But it didn't make my stomach flutter.

Oh well.

I opened the door, a smile on my face. "Hey, you must be Colt."

"That's me," he said in a Texas drawl. "And you're Lena."

"Guilty." I held up a hand in the dorkiest way.

He held out his arm, and I took it, letting him guide me to the car parked just outside. "I have to say I was surprised that Tyson's party is this kind of dress code." Colt opened the door for me, his six-foot frame hovering a solid six inches over me.

"I've only ever been to one of his parties," I said sheepishly, sliding into the passenger seat. *And I spent the night locked in with Jackson Whiss.*

"Not necessarily a bad thing," Colt laughed before trotting around to the driver's side. "You look beautiful, by the way," he added as we pulled away from the curb.

"Thanks."

And that was the extent of the conversation for the entire drive to Tyson's mansion. I had never been more relieved to be at Tyson's, and nearly flung the door open as soon as Colt had parked alongside a black Ferrari. I eyed the car as Colt joined me on the passenger side.

"That's Jackson's," he commented, offering his arm. "It's kind of surprising he drove himself here. Usually, he has a driver so he can get shit-faced."

"Naturally," I muttered under my breath.

“What was that?” Colt asked, furrowing his brow at me.

“Nothing.” I smiled up at him, walking as confidently as I could toward the party. My stomach was churning, and I couldn’t decide if it was the awkward tension between Colt and me—or the fact that Jackson’s car was almost as handsome as he was.

Ugh.

I wanted to facepalm at the reminder that I was so hung up on a guy who couldn’t care less if I existed. Not to mention, he probably had *tons* of women who felt exactly like I did...

And that only made it that much more embarrassing.

“Thanks for coming,” Tyson greeted the two of us, dressed in his best. It suddenly felt like I was at a formal event, which was the polar opposite of the party I had gone to weeks ago.

And that had me wondering what was *really* going on tonight.

“Thanks for inviting me,” Colt answered like a polite gentleman. “Your place is as nice as always.”

“I’m sure it’s got nothing on that house in the Hamptons.”

“Nah,” Colt chuckled.

He has a house in the Hamptons. I should be attracted to this.

“You want something to drink?” His eyes turned to me. “You look a little tense.”

I nodded, ignoring the strange look from Tyson. “Yeah, sure. Something to drink sounds *really* nice right now.” My laugh afterward was beyond awkward, and they both raised their brows at me.

I’m failing this assignment.

Colt waved down a waiter for champagne while I scanned the crowd, looking for whoever else might be there. I noted quite a few of Maeve’s model friends—friends that I didn’t know—among some A-list celebrities.

Intimidating crowd.

“Here.” Colt handed me a glass of champagne. “Shall we go find somewhere to sit and chat?”

I nodded, taking a *long* draw of the liquid. I followed him to a couch in the same sitting area I’d passed through to get to the Florida room. There were people *everywhere*. I took a seat on the couch, angling my body to try and focus on Colt.

“So, Maeve told me that you start your master’s next semester.”

“Um...” My voice trailed off. “I...yeah, maybe. It just depends on if I can come up with the funds.” I decided to just be honest, knowing that there was no point in hiding anything from him. I knew this was going nowhere.

“Oh, I see.” He lifted the champagne glass to his lips and *downed* it.

Well, looks like that’s that. He’s not into this either.

“Colt, haven’t seen you in *forever*.” A deep voice rattled my ribcage from behind me.

“Jackson!” Colt jumped to his feet, reaching out and shaking his hand. “How are you, man?”

“Great,” Jackson answered him, and I didn’t bother to turn around. I didn’t want to see him. I knew I’d just be left wondering why the hell I came in the first place.

“Can I have everyone’s attention?” Tyson clinked a spoon against a glass. “I know you’re all wondering why you’re here.” He stood across the extravagant room, holding Maeve’s hand...

And then it *hit* me.

No...

“I haven’t known this woman long, but I didn’t have to. I knew immediately she was the one for me.”

“No...” Jackson’s voice echoed what I was already thinking. “Dude, don’t...”

And then Tyson got down on one knee.

My eyes went wide as I took in the sight, no longer able to process what was coming out of Tyson's mouth as he looked up at my best friend...

Who said *yes*.

The crowd burst into applause, Colt included. But I couldn't bring myself to move. This was...this was *insane*. Everyone rushed around the two of them, offering congratulations, and I forced myself to smile when Maeve met my eyes.

And I gave her a thumbs up.

It was the only thing I knew to do, because there was no way in hell I was going to try and be a voice of reason in the moment. I glanced over to Colt, who was already off congratulating Tyson. I used the moment to escape the chaos, swiping a fresh glass of champagne from one of the servers.

And into the Florida room I went.

"Oh my gosh." I took a deep breath, feeling *off*. The proposal was a great distraction from the fact that things were going *awful* with Colt—and the fact that Jackson had made his appearance.

But the fact that they were moving so fast made me feel...

Sad.

"It must be nice to be so in love," I said to the window, looking out into the night and then laughing. *They're crazy. Maybe I'm crazy.*

"Picked up talking to yourself, I see," a deep voice said from behind me, startling me sideways.

I looked over my shoulder, seeing Jackson standing there, stunning in an all-black tuxedo. "Keeps the crazy away."

"Maybe I should try it," he chuckled, holding his own glass of champagne, though I noticed that it was full.

"Maybe *they* should try it." I gestured toward the door.

He laughed, taking a few steps toward me. “Maybe. That’s wild. I had no idea Tyson was going to propose tonight.”

“Yeah, me either,” I said, catching my breath as I caught a whiff of his cologne. “But I guess all I can do is be happy for them.”

He nodded, glancing out the window. “I don’t know why they don’t spend more time in here.”

“Probably because they might get locked in,” I said uneasily, taking a step away from him, feeling my heart pounding in my ears. “I’ve heard it can happen.”

“Yeah?” His eyes fell to the floor. “So...you’re here with Colt? He’s a solid guy, ready to settle down and have a family.”

I hesitated, seeing the same expression cross his face as when I’d sung with Mason. “Yeah...”

“He was our lead guitarist for the longest time, and then he bailed.”

“Maeve told me.” I recalled the conversation we’d had. Honestly, on paper, the two of us should’ve been damn near perfect for each other...

But it just wasn’t there.

However, I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell Jackson that in the moment. I liked the way he was acting so unsure of himself.

“Probably a dream man for a woman like you,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “You both are the equivalent of no fun.”

“You sure had fun with me,” I shot back, my tone sharp.

“I didn’t mean anything by that,” he reasoned, rocking back onto his heels. “You *are* fun, just not the kind of fun that I like to have.”

“Oh right, you mean getting shit-faced and not remembering what you did for days on end.” I snorted, rolling my eyes. “And here I was, wondering why the hell you didn’t text me after that night—well, now I guess I’m glad you didn’t,” I

snapped, finishing the rest of my champagne and setting it down on the table.

Jackson blocked the doorway. “What are you talking about?”

“You slept with me, stayed the night, snuck out, and then *never* bothered to even talk to me afterward.”

“Yeah, that’s how a one-night stand works, Lena.” He made a face. “What did you expect me to do, ask you to be my girlfriend?”

“Obviously not,” I snorted, stepping to the side of him. “I guess I just thought you could at least be cordial.”

“I *am* being cordial. I don’t know what you want from me. I...I don’t know...I don’t know how—”

“How to do what?” I cut him off, growing angry with all the excuses. “I get it. It was just sex to you, and that’s fine. I know that’s all it is. But instead of just making all these stupid excuses, just *say* that.”

He went silent, studying my face. “I don’t go sleeping around, Lena.”

“Right,” I laughed, tipping my head back.

“I don’t do relationships, either. I don’t fall for women. I don’t bother with all the stupid shit that comes with it—and *this* is why.”

“Because people might have feelings about being ghosted? I mean, I have no problem with you being unattached, but at least say it, so we don’t have to be so...*awkward* around each other. My best friend is engaged to *your* best friend. We’re going to see each other more.” I folded my arms across my chest, hating the way that Jackson was suddenly looking wounded.

“Okay, fine,” Jackson muttered. “I’m sorry for ghosting you. You wanna be friends now?”

I pursed my lips, my heart thudding in my chest at his answer. “Yeah. We can be friends.”

“Friends don’t date each other’s friends.”

I furrowed my brow. “Are you talking about Colt?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a funny rule, but it doesn’t matter. It wasn’t going anywhere, anyway,” I laughed, shaking my head.

“Not exciting enough for you?”

I shook my head, side-eyeing him. “I don’t know.”

“Nah, you do know, don’t you?” He took another step closer to me, his eyes holding mine in a way that made all of my insides come to a screeching halt.

“No...I don’t think so.” I swallowed hard as Jackson pushed a strand of hair out of my eyes. I almost swatted him away, but didn’t, the trace of his touch feeling warm on my cheek. No matter how much I hated Jackson, I *wanted* him to touch me.

And that was the most dangerous and infuriating feeling I had ever felt before.

JACKSON

I had given myself one rule for the evening: *Don't be alone with Lena.*

And well, I was a rulebreaker, so I guess it was only natural that I found a way to get her alone—and away from her date—but now all the sirens were going off in my head...

And there had to be some way to settle it.

By running away as fast as I can.

I dropped my hand from her face, the thought enough to break my brain away from her potent gaze. I had told her we were friends, and honestly, I didn't fuck anyone I called a friend.

So that fixed that.

She let out a heavy sigh as I shifted my eyes to look out the dark window—like there was something to see other than just darkness.

“I should probably go...” Lena's voice came out timid, and maybe even a little disappointed. “I don't want Maeve to think I'm trying to avoid talking to her about the whole...getting engaged thing.”

I nodded, fighting the urge to grab her and do all the things my body wanted me to do. “Yeah, you should probably go.”

The last thing I needed to do was complicate this awkward relationship any further. My eyes drifted toward her, and I nearly smiled as she looked at me with pursed lips. “What?”

“Nothing,” Lena quipped, shaking her head and slipping right past me. “Have a good night, Jackson.”

“You too, Lena,” I called out as casually as possible. I had a mixture of feelings swirling around in my chest as I watched her disappear out that door...

But it was better to let her go.



“Wow, do we have a lot to discuss this morning.” Genna clapped her hands, and the screen lit up with Maeve and Tyson, their engagement plastered on one of those tabloid pages. “You know, I thought this was a joke at first.”

I chuckled, leaning back in my chair as Tyson’s face went beet red. It was about time for the spotlight to be put on someone else in the band for once—not to mention, I was too fucking tired from the party last night to be in the mood for a lecture. Lena left right after she gave Maeve some personal congratulations, and that left me with nothing to do but try to pretend like it didn’t bother me she was gone.

“What do you want me to do about it? I’m not taking back the engagement. I don’t care what the tabloids say.” Tyson’s voice brought me back to the moment. “Who gives a shit if the tabloids think I’m crazy? Anyone who spends their whole life following and documenting—and *judging*—the lives of others is stupid, anyway.”

Genna nodded, her hair bobbing. “Yeah, but events like this affect your sales and that’s why I’m here. I don’t want this to come back on you and the band.”

“How would it?” Tyson shot at her.

“Yeah, I gotta say, I don’t get this one,” Nel echoed his thoughts. “Who gives a shit? He could’ve gotten married off in Las Vegas. Everyone would’ve just thought that was funny.”

Genna's dark eyes bounced between us like we were all missing something—and I thought we probably were. “You guys don't get it. If you would've been off in Vegas eloping under the direction of Elvis, that would've been a mess...but it would've actually fit the rock 'n' roll vibe. However, I actually don't think this engagement is the catastrophe the media is saying it is—I think it's the perfect theme for the new album.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “I'm not writing an album about a fast engagement and wedding.”

“You don't have to. But I think the album should reflect deep relationships and love. That's the era you guys need to be in.”

“Just shoot me now,” I groaned, shaking my head. “I'm having writer's block as it is. Now you expect me to dredge up some love songs? I don't think so.”

“So work on it with Tyson.” Genna was not amused. “You're a *band*. You can write about something other than just *your* experiences, Jackson. Besides, the record label is going to be coming up for sale...and you all want to be something worth buying.”

The record label is up for sale? Why?

“Why?” Aaron beat me to the punch.

Genna shrugged. “Just business, I'm sure. I don't know much about it. It just came up.”

I could buy it.

And then what? I shook my head at the crazy thought. Running a record label would mean I wouldn't be able to spend as much time having fun or touring with the band. I didn't get much further with that thought either before my phone started to ring, so I pulled it out of my pocket.

Dad.

“I gotta take this,” I said to them all, pushing back from the table and slipping out of the room.

“Hey, what's up?” Dad's voice sounded strained on the other line.

“Uh, just doing what I do. I don’t know. Having some lame PR meeting about the fact that Tyson is engaged after like a month of dating.”

“Ah, yeah, I saw that article. I didn’t think it was real.”

“Yeah, well, it is. The tour is over for now too, but there *might* be a surprise tour at the end of the summer—if we can come up with a good single,” I grunted, grimacing at the thought of a love song. “What’s up with you?”

“Sounds like life is going well for you, son. I’m happy for you...” His voice trailed off. “But you don’t sound very happy.”

“I’m always happy,” I snorted. “You’re not answering my question about you.”

He chuckled. “There’s not much going on here. Do you remember Troy?”

“Everyone knows Troy, he’s your best friend.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking about heading out there to work on a business with him. I don’t know if it’ll actually happen—or *when* it’ll happen—but it’s about all I have going on right now. I’m starting to get old...and lonely. I’m tired of living by myself.”

Well, this just got really fucking deep.

“I guess you can always come and stay with me for a while,” I suggested awkwardly. My dad *never* talked about shit like this. He was always stoic and generally positive about most things.

“Nah,” he laughed. “I’d just be one big hamper in your game. I know how you are, even if I don’t necessarily like that you party so much.”

“I really haven’t been lately,” I admitted, thinking back to one *long* sober night at Tyson’s party. “I don’t know why though.”

“I don’t want you to spend the rest of your life like that, you know.” Dad’s voice softened in a way that surprised me, and I found myself eyeing everyone who passed me in the hallway

—like they might suddenly be able to hear the entire conversation.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’m happy with my life.” *Mostly.*

“Right.”

“I am,” I urged. “I’m fine. I got a lot of shit to do though. They want us to push out a new album before the end of the year, which is damn near impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible for Jackson Whiss.”

Except getting Lena out of my fantasies.

“Also, I saw that woman at the music class thing you did—is she your...are you...?”

“Uh, no. We’re just friends,” I said before he could awkwardly get the question out. “I don’t want to be anything more than just friends. You know women do nothing but make your life harder.”

He let out a heavy breath. “You know, Jackson, I regret harping on that for all those years. When your mom left, it really broke me, but I never wanted it to hurt you and your brothers. The complications that women and love bring can be a *good* thing.”

My jaw tensed. “I really don’t have time to talk about Mom. I don’t know what she’s up to, and I don’t care.”

“I wasn’t trying to make this about her—”

“Yeah, okay,” I said flatly, thinking back to our last conversation about her. Dad had mentioned reaching out...and we both knew that was never going to happen. She treated all of us like we didn’t exist anymore.

So I saw no point in trying to beg her to see me.

“I just don’t want her to ruin you by preventing you from finding someone who makes you happy. I want you to find love—and be happy.”

“Okay, well”—I ran my fingers through my hair—“I will keep that in mind. I need to get back to the meeting. We can

talk some other time—or maybe you can line up another one of those great therapy sessions or something.”

He let out a grunt. “Right. Okay. Love ya, son.”

“Yeah, love ya.” I hung up the phone, shaking my head. The last thing I needed was my dad harping on about how I needed to find love. He probably was just feeling all hunky-dory about it because Eli had fallen for Olivia—and they were having a baby.

His life was all wrapped up in a perfect fucking bow.

Fuck love.

And fuck Lena for getting under my skin.

I shoved my phone back in my pocket and whipped open the door to the conference room, stopping in my tracks as all eyes shifted to me.

“What?”

LENA

“I can’t believe you were able to make it.” I smiled as I greeted my mom with the biggest hug. Her familiar scent of warm vanilla sugar filled my nostrils, and it was as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

“Well, you know, I had the day off, and I thought it might be nice to get lunch with you.” Mom beamed, her gray hair pulled up in a bun. “And I know you love this place.”

“I do,” I admitted as I followed her into the Tex-Mex restaurant. “It’s really good to see you today.”

“It’s good to see you too.” Mom shot me a weird, suspicious look. “Is everything going okay with work? You don’t seem like your normal self. You’re not usually *this* relieved to see me,” she added with a laugh.

I swallowed the sadness welling up in my chest. I had received an email this morning letting me know that I was running out of time to pay the first part of my tuition for the next semester...

But I didn’t want to tell her that.

“I guess the job is just a little stressful with all the publicity,” I said, opting to discuss another irritating part of my life. “I mean, it’s good for the school, because they’re getting a ton of interest in their program, but the whole thing

has been a headache.” *And by whole thing, I mean Jackson Whiss.*

Mom nodded as the hostess guided us to our booth. “That wouldn’t have anything to do with that rock star who’s been hanging around?”

I froze, hovering just over the opposite side of the booth. “What do you mean?”

She slid in, giving the hostess a polite smile as she sat down two menus. The moment the hostess slipped out of earshot, she gave me a knowing look and continued. “I saw the pictures.”

I hesitated, suddenly *very* confused. “What pictures?”

“The ones from last night—and the ones from the night before. You don’t have to be secretive about it...” Her voice trailed off. “I just...you know that I want you to be with a good man.”

My jaw dropped. “I am *not* with him, Mom. We *might* be friends, at best. I haven’t really hung out with him either...but what pictures are you talking about?” My heart began to beat senselessly in my chest.

“I don’t...I don’t know.” Mom’s brow furrowed. “Let me see if I can find them on the internet again. It wasn’t anything bad, but it just looked like a whole lot more than just friends.”

Oh my gosh. What is out there?

I watched, my knee bouncing anxiously under the table. I had *no* idea what pictures were floating around out there—and I hadn’t even bothered to look into anything about Jackson recently. I knew that if I continued to dig into him, I might *actually* find myself feeling something beyond indifference... or friendliness.

Whatever the two of us were right now.

“Here,” Mom finally said, sliding her phone across the table. “It’s these.”

I swooped up her phone, narrowing my eyes at the pictures. *Oh.* “Yeah, this is just when he took me home after I went to

see Mason play.” I scrutinized the picture of him helping me into the black SUV. She didn’t need to know that it had led to a complicated one-night stand—and then being truly ghosted.

“What about this one?” Mom reached over and scrolled to the next picture.

What the hell?

“I...” My voice trailed off as I took in the secretive shot of the two of us in the Florida room at Tyson’s party. Jackson’s hand was on my face, brushing away my loose strands of hair. “This is *not* what it looks like. I wasn’t...he was just getting my hair out of my face. We were talking about Maeve and Tyson.”

“I see...” Mom’s voice was full of disbelief, and honestly, I understood. It looked like it was a lot more than what it really was.

“Nothing happened,” I reassured her, giving her a smile. “I don’t think Jackson is my type, either.”

She nodded, just as the waitress showed up to take our order. We both got waters, but as we ordered our food, suddenly *nothing* felt very appetizing. The last thing I needed was my mom worried about a love interest that didn’t even exist.

“The media will manipulate things to be whatever they want it to be,” I said as the waitress walked away. “You can’t believe what you see or read.”

“I know that,” she said with a sigh. “I just...I just want you to find someone who’s going to treat you the way you deserve. I was just worried that you and he had gotten involved—and if you have, it’s not that I don’t support you. I just don’t want to see your heart get broken.”

“Well, no worries about that,” I grunted, my eyes falling to the table. “I’m not involved with Jackson Whiss. I don’t know that I’ll ever see him again—other than with Maeve and her new fiancé.”

“Yeah...” Mom’s serious façade broke as she began to laugh. “I really thought that article was a lie...but then I saw

on Facebook that it wasn't! That's just crazy."

"I know," I agreed. "But I guess there's nothing I can do other than be happy for her—and find a roommate."

Her smile faded. "But she's paying until you find one, so that's helpful."

I nodded. "Yeah, I just hope I can find one soon—and that they're nice."

"And clean."

"Yeah, that too." I shrunk back in my chair. I'd honestly been putting off the roommate search, limiting it to just word of mouth to people I knew. However, it hadn't been fruitful, and I knew it wouldn't last forever.

Just like my master's class dilemma.

"I'm sorry that you're having to find a roommate at all," Mom said, reaching across the table and squeezing my hand. "The cost of living in this city is through the roof. Will any of your scholarship money help cover rent? It would be nice if you could wait for the right roommate—not just take whoever is willing to move in."

I let out a sigh and pulled my hand away. "Mom..." *Here goes.* "I...I probably won't be taking those scholarships for this fall."

Her mouth dropped open. "What? Why?"

"I didn't get enough to cover the entire semester, and I can't afford to pay for the rest out of pocket. It's impossible, actually. I think I'm just going to have to work for a while, and then maybe once I've saved up enough, I can go back to school."

"No..." Mom's face fell, and it gutted me. "No, I don't want you to have to put it off. That's how you'll get the raise—and make enough to live on your own."

"Yeah, but it's just not feasible right now. I can find another teaching job now that I have my certificate, and working for another school full-time will really help. With a roommate, I should be able to put some of it away. It'll take a while, but

there isn't much else for me to do. Loans won't even cover the entire cost."

"Well, let me talk to your father and see what we can do to help you." She reached for her phone, swiping at the screen. "I'm sure we can figure something out."

My stomach knotted up. "No," I said. "I don't want you to."

Her shoulders slumped. "It's not that big of a deal. We're serious about your education, Lena. We want you to finish your education."

"Okay, but I don't want you to have to be put under all that stress like you did before. Dad picked up a second job, and I *don't* want that. He's getting too old to work all the time. You guys need to just focus on your retirement."

She waved me off. "Oh, we don't mind. We're still a good twenty years from retirement, anyway."

"I don't want your help," I said through gritted teeth. "I just don't. I'm tired of relying on you to foot the bill—and it's not that I'm not grateful, because I am—but I just...I want to figure this out on my own. And if I can't afford it, then I just can't afford it."

"But we want to help you." Her voice was small, and the defeat on her face rattled my heart. "We really don't mind."

"I know you don't," I reassured her. "Which is why I just...I just need to be honest about all this. I need to find a roommate too. It just might not be the right time for me to start my master's."

Mom was quieter after that, and it only made me feel that much more guilty for even talking about it at all. I never wanted to burden her with my schooling, and I knew the lengths they'd gone through to put me through my undergrad—and I was so incredibly thankful for that—but I couldn't ask them for any more. In fact, I refused to.

So, I just had to deal with it.

"Well, I guess you have to get back to work then?" Mom said as we stepped out of the café into the early afternoon Los

Angeles bustle. “Is Melissa treating you well?”

“Better than she used to,” I snorted, thinking of the way she’d changed after Jackson showed favor toward me. “I actually think they might be offering me a full-time teaching position for this fall,” I added. “I put in my resume last week.”

“Oh.” Mom nodded and smiled, but I could tell it was forced. “Are you...are you *sure* you don’t want us to help you with school?”

“Yes.” I put my hand on her shoulder. “I’m sure. I’ll try to make it out of the city to visit sometime soon.”

She nodded as we hovered between our two cars. “That would be nice. I’m sure your dad would appreciate not having to come right into the city. You know how he can be about that.” Mom rolled her eyes but laughed.

“Yeah, I know,” I chuckled with her, finally reaching for the driver’s side door. “I’ll call you later. Love you.”

“Love you, Lena Loo.” She gave me a wave and we parted ways, my mind still feeling heavy from the lunch conversation.

Not everyone can be filthy rich like Jackson.

“Ugh.” I started my car, hating the fact that my mind even threw that comparison at me. It wasn’t like I cared. I wasn’t bitter about how I was raised. I was loved more thoroughly than a lot of kids—and that made me *feel* rich.

It was just too bad that it didn’t translate to paying for my school.

Or paying for the house I lived in.

I really need to make a post about a new roommate. The thought had been hanging at the back of my mind since Maeve told me she was moving out, but I still hadn’t brought myself to start interviewing strangers. Honestly, I was almost leaning toward moving myself. I could maybe find a studio apartment closer to the school.

And that would potentially save some money.

Maybe.

I made my way back to the school lost in a mixture of thoughts, my endless list of things to do growing longer. Not to mention, I now had to throw a wedding for Maeve and Tyson into the mix.

Yuck.

The moment I made it to my afternoon class, I knew the day was only going to get more complicated.

“Hey, Lena,” Jackson greeted me, a wicked grin on his face.

Freaking great.

JACKSON

Something is wrong with her.

I couldn't put my finger on what it was—and maybe it was just that she wasn't stoked to see me in her classroom again—but still, Lena was acting...*off*. Her smile didn't reach her eyes, and the way she moved around the classroom made it seem like she was carrying a ton of bricks on her shoulders.

“Are you gonna sing us another song?” one of the kids called out to me, a big smile on his face. “I like it when you sing us songs.”

I shrugged, looking over to Lena. “You'll have to ask Miss Harris.”

She smiled. “Sure. If he'd like to play a song, then he's more than welcome to.” Lena addressed the little boy rather than me.

I nodded, grabbing the guitar from the stand. “I'll play you all a song. We'll give Miss Harris a break from all the hard work she does.” I shot her a smile, but she didn't return it. Instead, she just kind of *didn't frown* and made her way back to her desk, leaving me with a group of twenty little humans.

Cool. She's definitely having a bad day.

I took a deep breath, trying not to stare at her ass in those black skinny jeans as she walked away. I turned back to the kids, smiling. “So...how’s your day been?”

The group, all sitting cross-legged on the carpet, began to talk at one time—and I couldn’t make out *anything* they were saying. But damn, it was so endearing to see them so excited to talk about their day.

I bet it’d be fun to have kids.

The thought was startling, so I cleared my throat and pushed it away. “So, what song do you want me to play? And *raise your hand* to answer. I’ll call on you.”

I swear *all* the hands went up in the air, and I chuckled, ignoring the camera right in my face. They’d sent me here with just one cameraman—and that was a relief, though what I had to talk to Lena about...

Yeah, that was *not* a relief.

“I think you should play Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” a blonde-headed girl said in the back row. “I’ve been singing that song for, like, *ever*.”

“Alright, I’ll keep that one in mind,” I said, then pointed to the next kid. “What about you? What do you think I should sing?”

“I think you should sing that song with Miss Harris again.” The little boy beamed. “It was just so pretty. My dad thinks Miss Harris is a really good singer and she’s hot too.”

I blinked a couple of times. “Okay then.” I glanced over my shoulder at Lena, who was only shaking her head. I bet she got that a lot from the dads in the school. She was fucking drop-dead gorgeous...even when she was having a bad day.

“Can we sing something fun? Like Barbie Girl or something?” A girl chimed in from the back.

“Ew, no!” A boy beside her nearly fell over. “He’s not gonna sing that. That’s a *girl* song.”

Oh shit. Don’t argue.

“Let’s just go with Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” I said quickly, warding off the fight before it ever began. I didn’t know how to handle kids going at it. That would end in a disaster...

And Lena would probably laugh the whole time.

Then again, I wasn’t sure anything could make her laugh.



“Thanks for coming again today,” Melissa said to me hours later as the cameraman packed up his gear. “You’re welcome back anytime—and we mean that.”

“Yeah, for sure. I really enjoy it,” I admitted, not even having to lie. My eyes drifted toward Lena, and I couldn’t stop myself from asking, “Is she okay?”

Melissa glanced over to Lena, who was packing up her things. “Oh, Lena? I’m not sure, actually. She put in her resume for a full-time position here, and we intend to extend a job offer to her.”

I nodded. “But isn’t she going to school or something?” I couldn’t fucking remember, but either she had told me, or Tyson had.

“Well...” Melissa’s voice trailed off and then picked up again, this time a few notches lower. “She was intending to, but the master’s program is really expensive. She received a handful of scholarships, but it still wasn’t enough. She doesn’t come from a wealthy family either. She doesn’t have anyone to foot the bill. It’s a shame, really. She’s incredibly talented.”

“I see,” I said, not knowing what else to even offer up about it. I felt bad for Lena, though. And *that* was something I wasn’t all that used to. “Well, thanks for letting me come barge into the classroom.” I nodded to her and headed off toward Lena, who was walking out of the classroom. “Hey, wait.”

Her shoulders visibly fell. “What?” Lena spun around outside in the hallway, now devoid of kids. “I’m really not in the mood, Jackson.”

“In the mood for what?”

“*You.*”

“Ouch,” I chuckled, giving her a grin. “You wanna get drinks or something?”

“Um...” Her facial expression shifted, and she glanced around us, like I was playing a trick on her or something. “I don’t know...”

“You just look like you could use a drink, that’s all.” I tried to sound as nonchalant as possible, but I had to admit that my stomach was full of nerves for some reason.

And it was annoying as fuck.

“Okay,” she said with a sigh. “But you’re buying.”

“Always.” I shot her a wink, and then gestured for her to lead the way to the parking lot. “I can have someone drop your car off at your house? You can ride with me.”

“You can drive?” Lena joked, though her eyes didn’t light up the way they usually did.

“Ha ha.” I led the way to my Lamborghini sitting in the parking lot. “Are you brave enough to trust me?”

She eyed me warily. “I’m not in the mood to die, but sure.”

I hit the button on my key fob and the suicide doors lifted. Lena rolled her eyes but slid into the passenger seat. I laughed to myself, amused by her reaction. There was just something about the way she loved to hate me that made my freaking day...

Besides, the offer I had for her *might* make her life a lot better.

“So, where are you taking me?” Her voice was flat as I started the car and backed out of the parking spot. “I don’t want some high society place today, please.”

“Uh...I am *not* high society,” I laughed, giving her a weird look.

“Yeah, *okay.*” She shook her head and leaned back against the black leather interior. “Whatever you say.”

“Just because I’m rich and famous doesn’t mean that I’m high society. Half the people in that upper-crust circle just piss me off.”

“Why’s that?” Lena looked over at me, raising a brow. “That’s how you grew up, right?”

I tilted my head at her as I made my way to my favorite bar. “I think you might be really surprised at what I thought about the way I was raised. It wasn’t exactly sunshine and butterflies.”

“Okay.”

Damn, she’s rigid today.

I drove the rest of the way in silence, hoping that maybe after a few drinks she might lighten up a little—or a lot. At this point, I was already starting to wonder if I’d made a mistake inviting her out. But I also thought we were *friends* after Tyson’s party. I mean, that’s what we said we were.

But who the fuck knew?

I killed the car as I parked in front of Lemony Cricket, a dive bar that was really just a hole in the wall. Not many people knew about the place—the band and I kept it in business most of the time.

“Where is this?” Lena asked as she looked around, wrapping her arms around herself. “Are you bringing me here to kill me or something?”

“No, just come on,” I said, grabbing her elbow and leading her to the staircase leading down to the basement bar beneath a small boutique restaurant. “It’s cool, I promise.”

“There’s nothing cool about an underground bar.”

“Oh, lighten up, Lena. It’s seriously just a quiet, small place we can have a few drinks and go undisturbed.”

“Right.”

I led her down the cracked concrete steps and then pushed the door open, gesturing for her to walk into the dark bar.

Smoke was hanging in the air, but it was mostly empty, just a few of the regulars playing pool in the back.

“Hey, Jackson,” Larry, the white-headed bartender, greeted me. “Good to see you. Want the usual?”

I nodded, and smiled as I caught Lena scoping out the place. It was clean for what it was, and there was just this charm about it that I liked. There were old pictures from the eighties hanging on the walls, and I was pretty sure that was how long it'd been since it was updated. Beyond that, there were just tables and a few pool tables.

And no crowd.

“Let's sit over there.” I pointed to the far corner table, tucked away and out of sight. “That's where I prefer to sit.”

She didn't say anything, letting me lead her to the table. I pulled out her chair for her and slid in the opposite one. Her eyes stayed down on her hands, and I had to admit that seeing her still down was bothering me.

“What can I get you to drink?” Larry asked Lena. “Gotta say, you're the first person other than the band to come here with Jackson.”

That got her attention. “Oh? Well, I'll just have a Crown and Coke, please.”

“Is that your usual?” I asked her as he walked away.

“Something like that,” she said, running her finger along the top of the table. “This is an interesting place.”

“Yeah, but what's up with you? You've been mopey ever since I saw you today,” I said, reaching across and poking her arm.

“Mopey?” She met my eyes, and my heart flipped at the defeat in them. “I guess it's just the day. I had lunch with my mom today.”

“That's enough to ruin a day,” I grunted, shuddering.

She furrowed her brow. “I love my mom. My parents are amazing, but they're just...” Lena closed her eyes and let out a

sharp breath. “They’re trying to pay for my school, and I don’t want them to. My dad already took on a second job to pay for my school the first time, and I don’t want him to do that again. He’s wearing himself out. My mom picked up extra shifts too, and it’s just...it’s just not fair for them to do that.”

Damn. Talk about loving your kid.

“That’s wild.”

“What?”

“Just the fact they’d do that. My mom hasn’t even called me in over five years—I don’t think she gives a shit that I even exist.” My voice dropped at the end. It was the first time I had admitted it to *anyone*.

Lena’s face fell. “I’m so sorry, Jackson. That’s awful. No one deserves that.”

“Not even me, huh?” I joked, relieved as Larry sat our drinks down on the table. I swooped up my gin and tonic and downed it in one move, handing the glass back to Larry for a refill.

Lena’s eyes were wide as she sipped on her own drink. “So...your mom...”

“Left us when I was young,” I finished for her. “It’s fine now, but it broke my dad. Our family never really recovered, I don’t think. We’re all close, but I don’t know. Just feels like something is missing. We went from holidays at home to spending them on yachts and never having a Christmas tree anymore.”

Why am I telling her this shit? This is supposed to be about her.

But then her hand landed on mine, electricity beneath it. “I bet that was really hard. I can’t imagine it.”

I held her gaze, flipping my hand over beneath hers and running my fingertips along her palm. Her breath audibly hitched, and my body jolted with excitement. “Fuck it. Let’s get out of here, Lena.”

I know something that can make us both feel better...

She bit down on her lip, her eyes alighting with a desire that rocked me internally. “Okay.”

LENA

This is stupid. I shouldn't be doing this.

But I didn't care. Jackson's lips on my neck in the entryway of his massive freaking house made the defeat and disappointment fade—and he made me feel *seen* today.

“You want a tour of the house?” he murmured into my neck as he sucked more skin into his mouth, his hands trailing down my sides.

“No,” I panted, just as he unbuttoned the button on my jeans. I didn't care where he lived. I just wanted him to keep making me feel like this.

He chuckled, ripping my burgundy blouse over my head and tossing it onto the black tile. Once I was clad in just a black bra and my matching skinny jeans, he lifted me into the air. I wrapped my legs around him, and he carried me to the next room, a dark crimson-and-black themed sitting room.

Jackson laid me down on the black leather couch, his hands sweeping down my bare abdomen, not stopping until he'd stripped me of both my jeans and my underwear. “Fuck me,” he growled, his eyes raking over my figure.

Leaning down, he caught my lips with his and slid his hands around my back, unbuttoning my bra. I tugged up at his T-shirt,

and he caught the gist, quickly ripping it over his head and shedding the rest of his clothes.

And then he climbed onto the couch, his knee working my legs apart so he could position himself in between them. As he leaned over to snag my mouth with his again, the tip of his cock brushed my entrance, sending a wave of arousal over me. I let out a moan that filled the room, realizing the only thing I *really* wanted from him was to be fucked.

I didn't want to feel the emotions that I already knew were tangled up with him, I just wanted him to sex me up and leave me breathless. He deepened his kiss, his hands palming my breasts. It was hot and heady between us, my pussy burning to feel him deep inside of me.

"You're so beautiful," he panted, pulling away for a breath and looking me in the eye. "The most."

I blinked, my heart stuttering. *He doesn't mean that. It's just sex.*

His lips landed on my neck after that, pausing to bite at my earlobe. I threaded my hands through his hair, tugging as I squirmed beneath him. Jackson took his time, slowly working his way down, pausing to kiss my collarbones before moving to my chest.

My moans filled the room as he sucked one of my erect nipples into his mouth. His hand glided down my stomach, not stopping until he was running it through my folds. He sucked harder just as two fingers slipped inside me. I bucked in response, a loud cry escaping my lips.

"*Oooh...*" I couldn't hold back, the arousal building faster than I expected it to. He continued to run his tongue around my nipple, pausing to make long hard sucks on it while he slid his fingers in and out. The pad of his thumb rubbed against my clit, and I squeezed my eyes shut, my hips rocking against his body. The sensation of his skin against mine was suddenly all I could feel, and I found myself feeling as though there was no one else in the world...

And it was as terrifying as it was exhilarating.

My orgasm crashed around me, and I cried out, his name rolling off my tongue like I'd said it a million times. He groaned in response, leaving his fingers in my pussy as it bore down around them. I clung to him as I rode out the high, my nails digging into the skin of his neck. He didn't move until I'd come all the way down, my senses returning.

My eyes fluttered open to meet his gaze, and in it, something had shifted—though I didn't know what it was. "What?" I managed to nearly whisper, my voice strained from all the moaning.

"Nothing," he replied, his voice husky. "You're just something else when you do that."

Before I could say anything, he was leaning away from me, lining himself up with my pussy. He ran his fingers through my moisture once, his eyes focused between my legs.

And then he pressed his cock all the way in.

I let out a moan right as he growled in pleasure.

"You're always so fucking good," he uttered, pulling out and shoving his entire length into me again. He backed out again, running the tip through my folds.

I shivered, feeling the loss of his girth for a second. But it was fleeting, and he filled me once again. His hands gripped my waist as he thrust into me over and over, nothing between us. My body tensed as he picked up force, my breasts bouncing against the intensity. His eyes devoured me, and I felt myself flush beneath his gaze.

No one has ever looked at me like that.

The thought was as unwelcome as the feelings blooming in my chest. It must've just been the day, and I pushed them away, reaching up and digging my nails into his biceps as he continued to fuck me, grunts and groans escaping through his parted lips. His eyes held mine, and my face contorted with pleasure.

Until he pulled out.

“I wanna see that ass,” he growled, reaching down and flipping me onto my stomach. He gave a slap to my backside, and then plunged his cock in, a loud growl filling the room.

His hands gripped my ass as he pounded into the back of me, his cock feeling even deeper than before. I held on to the leather, my hands growing sweaty as he rammed his body into the back of mine. I tilted my head back, my hair spilling free from my hair tie and falling down my back.

He loosened one of his hands and fisted it, tugging gently as he continued to fuck me. It was *everything* I needed, my mind going hazy with pleasure. I felt my second orgasm coming on as his cock rubbed against my pussy in all the right ways, and I shut my eyes as it rolled over me. I shuddered with arousal and pleasure, all of it heightening as Jackson let out a powerful growl.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned, releasing my hair and slapping my ass again. “It’s fucking *heaven* when you cum on me like that.”

I moaned in response, unable to say anything at all as I rode it out, feeling full with his cock lodged deep inside of me. He stilled while I finished, and then he pounded into me even harder.

“*Jackson!*” I cried out, my eyes watering from the lingering sensitivity from my orgasm. He replied with only a grunt, his body leaning into my back as he used his weight.

And just when I thought I couldn’t take it anymore, he pulled out quickly, releasing himself all over my backside with a guttural groan. He nearly collapsed on top of me, his fist landing on the black leather material beside me.

“Shit,” he panted. “I’ll get something to clean that up with. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I laughed, shaking my head and burying it into the material. I lay there on display while he hurriedly jumped up, the sound of his feet on the floor all I could hear.

I shouldn’t have done this.

But I had to admit...I felt...*lighter*. Maybe it was all the cryptic compliments. Or maybe, it was the fact that Jackson Whiss had given me a glimpse of something more tonight. It felt like he'd let me in for once.

And I liked that feeling.

A warm, damp sensation brought me out of my thoughts, and I smiled to myself as he ran the washcloth along my lower back, cleaning up the mess he'd made.

"Heat of the moment," he said, clearing his throat like he was a little embarrassed. "Sorry."

"Stop apologizing," I said with a sigh, rolling onto my back once he finished. "You're making a good thing weird."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "So you thought it was good then?"

"Don't let it feed your ego." I rolled my eyes, sitting up and reaching for my clothes. "But yeah, it was good."

"We have phenomenal sex." He shot me a wicked grin and a wink before picking up his clothes and pulling them on. However, once we were both dressed—Jackson grabbing my blouse from the entryway—something shifted.

"So...I didn't show up to the classroom just to hang out," he began, running his fingers along the black denim of his jeans. "There was more to it."

I paused, sitting on the couch that he'd just fucked me on. "What do you mean?"

"Well...it's just that..." His voice trailed off in a way that made my heart sink. "I don't know if you've seen those pictures out there on the internet of us."

I chewed the inside of my cheek, unsure of where this was going. "I don't think I follow you...they're just stupid pictures."

"Yeah, but see, the public is starting to make assumptions—and we do have some real chemistry."

“What assumptions?” I folded my arms across my chest, fighting with the glimmer of hope in my chest. *Is he going to ask me out or something?*

“You know what assumptions,” he snorted, the old, annoying Jackson suddenly appearing again. “They think you and I are...*together.*”

“Um, okay. Well, tons of rumors float around, so I don’t see how this is surprising. I’ve seen plenty of dating rumors before. I don’t understand.”

“Yeah, but it’s turning out to be good publicity.”

Good publicity. Oh my god.

“What are you trying to get at, Jackson?” I demanded, swallowing the lump forming in my throat. “Just say whatever it is that you want to say.”

“My PR team wants you to be my fake fiancée.”

WAIT. WHAT?

“You have to be freaking kidding me, right? This is a joke.” I shook my head, pushing myself to my feet. “Not a funny joke, Jackson. Not funny at all.”

His head hung low. “It’s not a joke, Lena. That’s what they wanted me to offer you tonight.”

“No,” I snapped, heading right for the freaking door. “I’m not going to play some stupid PR game with you.”

He seriously just told me all that stuff, just so I’d agree to a fake relationship with him. He’s playing with my feelings—and he probably knows it.

“It’s not like that.” Jackson gently grabbed my wrist. “It wouldn’t just benefit me, but you too. It’d pay for your school—buy your house. Whatever you want. I’ll pay you. I’ll pay for you to get a doctorate, go on vacation, whatever.”

I couldn’t decide if I was offended or just freaking pissed off. “I don’t want your charity, Jackson. I told you all that shit because I thought...I thought...I don’t even know what I thought.” I ripped my hand away, hating the hurt flashing in

Jackson's eyes. But also, what about me? This was just...*all wrong*.

"Please, Lena. Just consider it. I...I didn't...it wasn't my idea—neither was paying you for it—but you really could take advantage of the opportunity."

I *hated* that he was right.

"Please," he repeated at my silence and the way I ripped his front door open. "You don't even have a ride."

"I'll fucking walk!" I shouted at him, the realization only serving to piss me off more. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and immediately scheduled an Uber, which was thankfully only two minutes away.

All the while, Jackson stood quietly behind me.

"I can't believe you bought me drinks, *fucked* me, and then used my money situation as leverage to get me to do what you want." I spun around, tears in my eyes. "We're not *fucking* friends, Jackson."

"Lena—" His voice cracked. "I didn't...I didn't mean to—"

"Just save it," I cut him off. "I'll consider your stupid offer, okay? Just let me go home." I turned away from him, just in time for him to catch the tears that fell from my eyes.

How freaking embarrassing.

And ugh, I had never been happier to see an Uber arrive.

JACKSON

I put the car in park outside of the record label office and let my head fall against the steering wheel. Genna was expecting an answer, and I hadn't heard a *word* from Lena... not even when I'd texted her to check in on her after our fight.

She thinks I'm a shallow piece of shit.

And rightfully so.

I couldn't even argue with her about that. The whole situation was set up like I had tried to manipulate her into accepting the offer—and that wasn't it at all. I had just been trying to figure out the right time to ask her.

And my timing fucking sucked.

No surprise there.

As rough as I knew this meeting was going to be, I forced myself to get out of the car and make the walk to the building. It wasn't the first time I hadn't come through for the PR team, and I highly doubted they'd be surprised in the slightest. I pushed open the door and made my way to the conference room, keeping my head down.

I was already five minutes late anyway.

As soon as I pushed the door open, I froze. *What the hell?*

“Good morning, Jackson.” Genna beamed, standing behind *Lena* as she sat there, signing NDAs. “I’m glad you finally arrived, even if you’re late.”

“Uh...”

“Lena gave me a call last night and let me know that she was accepting the offer,” Genna continued at my stupor. “I think the terms you set up with her were very thoughtful. Most of the time, we have to take care of things.”

What did she tell them I was offering?

I walked around the table, expecting her to have done something crazy, like taking half of my net worth or some shit like that. But as my eyes scanned the negotiation page, my heart sank.

Just finishing school.

“That’s not enough,” I said, looking up to Genna, who looked confused. “I also intend to pay for the house she’s living in—or buy her one that she wants.”

Genna made a disapproving expression. “Um...you’re talking about a *lot* of money, Jackson...”

“No need for the house,” Lena said, not looking up at me as she continued to flip through, initialing and signing her name. “I can figure that out.”

“*No*, that’s part of the deal.”

“I’ll have it written up,” Genna said, catching my warning glance. “It’ll be an additional bonus.”

My jaw tensed. “Do it *now*.”

Genna nodded and slipped from the room, leaving Lena and me alone. I stared down at Lena, frustrated and hurt by the way she had ignored me.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were taking the deal?”

She shrugged. “It’s really none of your business. It’s just between me and your PR team—and lawyers.”

“But I texted you...I *called* you.”

“Okay.”

“What the fuck, Lena?” I seethed, trying to keep my voice down. “You can’t just ignore me.”

“I can.” She finally looked up, meeting my gaze with daggers. “This is business *only*. I will do whatever is asked of me, and nothing else. I don’t want to be friends. I don’t even want to be acquaintances with you, Jackson.”

I blinked, painful emotions filling my chest. I didn’t even know what to say to her, so I just pulled out a chair and took a seat. My bad timing had led to her *actually* hating me.

“I’m only doing this because it alleviates my parents’ guilt about not being able to pay for my school,” Lena said, her voice suddenly much less cold. “If I had any other way, I wouldn’t be doing it.”

“Right.” My voice was quiet—and almost timid. “Whatever you wanna do, Lena.”

She looked up at me, finally signing the last line. “Thanks.”

I couldn’t tell if it was genuine, and it didn’t matter either way. I took my gaze elsewhere, my mind filling with memories of her beneath me, calling out my name like I meant something to her.

I should’ve asked her some other way.

But it was too late for that. I had royally fucked this up.

“Okay, here’s the add-on,” Genna said as she stepped back into the room. “You can sign that while I tell you what we’re thinking.” She sat the paper down in front of Lena, who scoured it.

“This is too much,” Lena said before Genna could start. “My house is a rental—and I don’t even know if it’s worth half a million.”

I beat Genna to the punch. “Leave it. Just sign the fucking paper, Lena.”

She glared at me, but actually did, giving me a little relief. The least I could do was make sure she was set up for success

in one way or another. It just seemed like the right thing to do after everything...

“Okay, so what we’re thinking is that we want the proposal to happen at the wedding.” Genna’s comment stopped Lena in her tracks.

“I don’t want to ruin my best friend’s wedding by putting the spotlight on us,” she said, her voice tinged with worry. “That’s not fair to them. Besides, *their* wedding is *real*. They really love each other.”

So they think. But I do agree.

“At the very minimum, we need to have their permission—and why do we have to get engaged?”

“Because an engagement is a testament that you’re *actually* serious about someone. You’ve had a lot of girlfriends over the years. We need something more rock solid, not just a timid distraction. We want the world to think that Jackson Whiss has finally fallen in love.”

Genna’s reasoning made her sound like a lunatic.

But I guess they knew way more than me.

“We have to get this okayed by Maeve and Tyson...” Lena looked to me, her expression asking for help.

“She’s right,” I said, trying to do anything to make her not hate me—and she did have a point. “I don’t want to agree to this until we talk to them about it.”

“Okay,” Genna sighed. “Give me just a minute.” She slipped out of the room again, and this time my mind went wild with thoughts, picturing Lena bent over the conference table, my dick deep inside of her.

Jeez. Fucking pervert.

I cleared my throat, pushing the thought away. “I don’t want this to cause any issues between you and Maeve.”

“It won’t. I won’t ruin her freaking wedding,” Lena snapped at me. “No amount of money is worth destroying a relationship over.”

I winced, pretty sure that was meant to refer to more than just Maeve. “Yeah, I get that.”

“Do you?” she retorted, shaking her head. “Because I don’t think you see *anything* other than yourself.”

“Why are you being so fucking cold, Lena?” I demanded, my irritation finally overshadowing the hurt. “This is ridiculous. I told you that I’m sorry. I wanted to *help* you. I never meant for it to come across like I was being a dick.”

“Yeah, right,” she muttered. “You should’ve known how it would go over. You act like you don’t even know me or something.”

“I...I don’t really know you.”

Fuck, that must’ve been the wrong thing to say.

Because she *glared* at me after that, and then her eyes were dropping away—and not coming back.

Shit, shit, shit.

Before I could come up with anything to say, the door swung open, and in walked Genna, Maeve, and Tyson.

“Okay, you two, have a seat,” Genna instructed. Maeve sat down right next to Lena, putting her hand on her shoulder—all the while sending me another glare.

Great. Now they both hate me.

“They’ve been briefed on this arrangement as well as the plan.” Genna rolled her shoulders, giving us all a look like she was more annoyed by us than anything else.

“And we’re fine with it,” Tyson said blankly. “We don’t like all the attention being on us about how soon we’re getting married. It’s really fucking annoying, to be honest.”

Maeve nodded. “It is.”

“Are you sure?” Lena turned to her best friend, worry in her voice. “I *really* don’t want to mess up your big day with this... *stunt*. I don’t even know if I can pretend to be surprised, either.”

“Well, to keep it as genuine as possible, we’re not going to tell you *when* or *how* it’s going to happen. So, you’ll know that the question is coming, but you won’t know the rest of the details. That usually leads to genuine shock.”

Lena made a face. “So this has been done before?”

Genna laughed. “More times than I can count. It’s a great tactic, and we keep some celebrities engaged for years if it doesn’t affect their personal life. Many of them don’t mind it. It lets them do whatever they want, and the media eventually grows tired of the story. It’s nothing exciting or new after a couple of years. Then, about the time when either of them is losing their relevancy, we break them up.”

“Wow.” Lena looked disgusted. “That’s...that’s a lot.”

“You won’t be engaged for years.” Genna placed a hand on her shoulder. “There’s no way we’d subject you to that. We just need the stability of it for Jackson, and we think it’ll coincide nicely with their new album releasing at the end of the year.”

“Oh?”

I couldn’t tell if Lena was actually surprised or just faking it.

“Yeah, it’s a *love* album.” Maeve beamed, looking over at Tyson with stars in her eyes. “I can’t wait to hear it. Tyson is going to sing one of the songs at the wedding.”

And I think I might vomit.

“Lovely,” Lena said, and *this* time, I could tell she was faking it.

LENA

“You don’t have to do it,” Maeve said, wrapping another one of her ceramic plates in newspaper.

I shook my head. “I do. It’ll make things so much easier on my parents, and honestly, I get to pursue my dreams.”

“And get a new house.”

“Yeah,” I laughed, eyeing her. “You can go with me when it’s time for house hunting.”

“Deal,” she said, placing the plate into the box. “Sorry it’s taken me a while to come and get all my shit. I’ve just been busy with all this wedding stuff.”

“I get that.” I forced a smile and reached for another cardboard box to put together. “It’s nice of Tyson to hire a moving company to come and get it all.”

“Yeah, he wanted to hire people to pack it too, but that was a little too much luxury for me. I don’t like people touching my stuff.”

I nodded. “I don’t blame you. I don’t even know what I would do if I had that kind of unlimited funds. I’d probably just continue to live the same way I am now.”

“You’d give it all to your parents,” Maeve pointed out. “I’ve already seen the houses you’ve been looking at. They’re not

priced nearly as high as the money you're going to get."

I hesitated. "Well, I just thought it would be nice to pay my parents back for everything. So, if I go with a cheaper place, then that makes it better for them. I don't want them to not benefit from this at all."

"But this is *your* life," Maeve countered. "They wouldn't take the money, even if you tried to force them to."

"I could pay off their house though," I said with a shrug. "I can do that without them even knowing until it's too late for them to put up a fight about it."

She sighed, closing up the box and taping it shut. "I don't know."

I eyed her as she left the kitchen, joining me in the living room. "What is it?"

My best friend ran her fingers through her freshly done platinum blonde hair and took a seat on the couch in front of me. "I think something is up with you. I know you told me a little bit about what happened with Jackson that night...but I think you're leaving something out. Like, I don't understand why you're so bitter about him..."

Ugh. I hadn't told her that we'd slept together again right before—or that I'd caught some feelings in the process.

"Just tell me what's going on in your head, Lena. We've been best friends a long time, and I *know* when something is up with you. Don't shut down...it just makes things harder to deal with."

"I know..." I paused, setting the box and the tape down. "It's just...I feel so stupid for it."

"For accepting the deal with Jackson? I mean, I understand it's a little weird, but it happens more than you think. You heard Genna."

"It's not *that*." My voice dropped a few levels, and I avoided her gaze for a few moments. "It's...it's more than just the surface part of pretending to be with him."

"What do you mean? Can you really just not stand him?"

I pursed my lips. *How am I supposed to admit to hating him and feeling so many other things?*

“Just tell me what’s going on.” She placed her hand on my knee. “It doesn’t matter what it is. I won’t judge you for it.”

“I...I thought I had feelings for him,” I finally admitted. “And it felt like he really saw me for me. He opened up a little bit about his own past and the struggles that he faced. I thought there might be something there...”

Her face filled with understanding. “Oh shit, Lena...I had no idea.”

“It was stupid of me to even for a moment think that it might be something more. I’m an idiot for it.”

Maeve shook her head. “No, you’re not. Falling for someone doesn’t make you an idiot. It happens. That’s really all there is to it. However...”

Uh oh.

I bit down on my lip. “However...?” I echoed her, giving her a knowing look.

“Jackson is a mess.”

“Obviously,” I said in a flat tone. “But what do *you* mean by that?”

“You’re so loving and sweet. When you fall for someone, you’re always there for them, no matter what. I don’t think Jackson is that kind of person. I’m worried that you’re going to end up even more hurt than you already are.”

I sighed, pulling at the tangles in my hair. “You don’t have to worry about it. I had a brief moment of thinking I felt something for him, but he *quickly* reminded me that I can’t stand him. It’s fine. I promise.”

At least I think I promise...

Maeve pressed her lips together tightly, studying me for a few tense moments—and then relaxed. “Okay. I know you can handle yourself. But know that the moment Jackson is too much of an idiot, I’ll totally kick him in the shins for you.”

I laughed. “Thanks. I’ll keep you on speed dial then.”

“I better already be on speed dial.”

I rolled my eyes. “You know you are.”

We went back to packing for another couple of hours, talking mindlessly about the house or work. Maeve ranted about who *she* wanted to invite to the wedding, and what would happen if her mom’s side had to sit next to her dad’s side. All the while, the *only* thing I could think about was Jackson—and the fact that once Maeve had her wedding...

The whole world would think I was Jackson’s fiancée.

They’d all think I had *chosen* to be with him. I had signed the NDAs and contracts. Other than Maeve, *no one* in my circle could know that it was just a ruse. I figured that maybe after it was all over and I got a lot of money, it’d be okay to tell my parents...

But how were they going to take the engagement?

Maybe they won’t find out.

The thought only served to give me more anxiety about it all. I didn’t want them to find out through anyone other than me—which meant that I’d probably have to tell them. Because if they were to find out from the headlines...

That would just be bad.

“Okay, I think this is good enough.” Maeve wiped her brow, setting down the last cardboard box full of knickknacks. “If I missed anything I can just come back for it some other time.”

I nodded. “That’s fine. We’ve been living together so long, I’m not always sure about whose is whose.”

Maeve’s face softened. “I know. It’s going to be so weird.”

“But it’ll be okay. I’m happy for you. I am.” As much as I thought what she was doing was borderline insane, I *was* happy that she was happy. I wanted it all to work out for her. “But just so you know,” I added. “I will kick Tyson in the shins if I need to. I have no qualms about it.”

Maeve giggled. “Oh, I know. I can’t count the times you’ve threatened my past boyfriends. But...” Her eyes went starry. “I know this time is different for me. I know Tyson’s the one. I don’t even know *how* I know. I just do.”

“Good,” I managed to say, glancing down at my phone on the coffee table. I’d kind of expected to hear something from Jackson after planning to become his fake fiancée, but nope... nothing.

“So, speaking of all this,” Maeve began, grabbing my attention. “Tyson wants me to have a bachelorette party. He’s going to do something with the band, and I know it’s last minute...so, he hired someone to plan it for us. He knows that you have enough going on.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, because obviously you’re my maid of honor.”

My heart lifted. “Aww! Really?” I headed right for her, pulling her into my arms. “That means a lot.”

“*You* mean a lot.” Maeve gave me a squeeze. “And you’re going to have a hell of a job dealing with all my old high school friends. You’ve never even met them...but *ugh*, they are a handful. Plus, I wanted to invite a few girls from the agency.”

I hesitated as I pulled away from her. “So...how many bridesmaids are you having, Maeve?”

“Twelve,” she squeaked. “I know, I know. It’s a lot. But I have a lot of friends—and Tyson wants me to have whatever I want. And you know...my mom...”

“*Oh*. You mean *your mom* wants you to have all those bridesmaids then.”

“Yeah, pretty much. It’s annoying, and you know that sometimes I think about telling her no...”

“But the drama isn’t worth it,” I finished for her. I knew her mom enough to know what kind of drama went along with her. Last summer, when her mom came to visit, she’d insisted we

rearrange the living room—and when Maeve said she didn't want to, her mother had broken down.

So, we rearranged the living room.

And then moved it back once she'd left.

“One of these days, I'm going to figure out how to deal with her, but I'm so excited for the wedding that I just want to enjoy it.”

I nodded. “I don't blame you at all. So, what're we doing for this bachelorette party?”

“Well, Tyson and the band are going out to the bars and whatever else. I told him he could even go to a strip club if he wanted—it's the last hoorah he's getting of seeing other women. He said we could do whatever we wanted too...”

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. “And so, what are we doing?”

Maeve gave me a wicked grin. “Oh, all you need to know is that it's going to be *wild*. I had an unlimited budget.”

“Are we at least staying here in the city?” I asked her. “Because I don't know if I can get off work to recover.”

She laughed, waving me off. “Oh my god, Lena. Only you would worry about work. But *yes*, since everything is so last minute, we're keeping *both* parties here in Los Angeles. It's too hard to travel when we have so much planning left to do.”

I sighed in relief. “Okay, well then I can handle whatever you throw at me...probably.”

“Oh, I'm sure our entertainment for the night will *love* that.”

My heart dropped. “I take it there will be adult entertainment there...”

Maeve's eyes glimmered with mischief and excitement. “Girl, we're gonna have *all* the adult entertainment. It's going to be a *blast*.”

Inwardly I cringed, but I maintained my smile. “This is going to be wild.”

“*So wild!*”

JACKSON

“So...what’s the difference between a bachelor party and our usual night out?” Aaron asked, leaning back against the leather seat of the limo. “Aren’t we just doing the same shit we always do?”

Tyson glared at him. “The *difference* is that I’m going to be married once this is all over.”

“But not tonight,” Nel added.

I chuckled, running my hands along my black-denim-clad thighs. *I really need to hit the gym more consistently. I’ve gotten lazy.*

“You guys are assholes,” Tyson snapped, shaking his head from beside me. “I just want to have a few drinks with you. Nothing crazy.”

“No strippers?”

“No, Aaron,” Tyson groaned. “No freaking strippers.”

“But Maeve is hiring one.” Aaron really wouldn’t let it go.

Tyson’s frustration was borderline amusing. “Yeah, but that’s because it’s different for women or something. She’s just doing it to be funny—and I’ve never been into strippers.”

“Damn. It would be funny for us too,” Aaron grunted. “Might as well go to the bowling alley or bingo night or some

shit.”

Shaking my head, I turned to him. “Why are you in a shit mood tonight?”

He shrugged. “I’m not.”

“You definitely are.”

“Yeah...well...” Aaron’s voice trailed off as he reached for the mini bar in the limo. “I started liking this chick and then she ghosted me.” He paused, downing a big swig of something with a label I couldn’t read. “And who the hell ghosts *us*?”

“It’s a blessing not a curse,” I reasoned. “Women are nothing but problems.”

“Says the guy who’s hung up on the rando music teacher,” Nel snorted. “We’ve all noticed how much you’ve changed since meeting her.”

“I haven’t fuckin’ changed,” I spat back, glaring at him. “If anything, she’s made me even more set in my ways.”

“You hardly drink anymore,” Nel pointed out.

Fuck these guys...

“Give me one of those.” I motioned to a small bottle of tequila.

“Dude, you don’t have to—”

“Shut up, Tyson.” I grabbed the bottle from Aaron and undid the lid. In one big gulp, I downed it, ignoring the hellacious burn. *Man, I really haven’t drunk much in a while.*

“This is gonna be an interesting night,” Nel chuckled from the other side of me. “I can already tell.”

Yeah, well, the old Jackson is coming back. Lena hasn’t—and won’t—change me.

—

“Oh shit...” Nel muttered, leaning against the bar of the club. “You know what, we’re only like, two hours in—and I’m feeling it.”

“You’re a wuss.” I burst into a fit of laughter, reaching for another shot. I downed the fiery liquid like water, no longer feeling the burn...

No longer feeling *anything*.

“Guess I was wrong about you.” Nel patted my shoulder. “You’re drinking more than ever. But...” His voice trailed off as he glanced around. “Do you know where Aaron and Tyson are? I feel like we should’ve seen them by now.”

I shrugged, my head spinning. “I’m not their keeper.” I turned to the blonde bartender, who’d been giving me googly eyes all night. “Can I get another few of those?”

“Anything for you.” She winked at me.

Yeah, I bet.

I snorted to myself. *This* was how women usually responded to me—not the way Lena did. Lena had always acted like she hated me...from the very beginning.

Fuck that.

My hand dug into the front of my jeans, searching for my cell phone. “Shit,” I muttered as I tried to find it.

“Can I have one of those?” Nel shouted over the music bumping.

“Sure,” I yelled back, checking my other pocket. *Ah, there it is.* I clicked the lock button to light up the screen. Tonight was Maeve’s bachelorette party, too...which meant that Lena was gonna be entertained by a stripper.

Yuck.

If I was her real boyfriend, I might have actually been a little bothered. But I wasn’t. It was all just a game. My fingers hovered over the message thread to her.

“You want my number or something?” the bartender asked, her voice much closer than before.

I looked up to see her leaning over the counter with four more shots than I’d asked for—but that was fine, since Nel was already downing more. “I don’t get women’s numbers.”

“You taken?” She made a pouty face, her red bottom lip jutting out.

I blinked a couple of times, not sure how to actually fucking answer that. “It’s complicated.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “That doesn’t sound like you’re taken.”

Yeah, but the paparazzi would think I was cheating if I showed any interest in someone else...

And I didn’t like this lady anyway.

“I’m taken,” I finally said. “Let up. My woman can throw a good punch.”

She made a disgusted face and pushed off the counter, fixating her attention elsewhere. I reached for one of the shots. Better to down these, because any others would probably be spit in.

Though I’d still drink them.

“Damn, you are pounding those tonight,” Nel commented. I had almost forgotten that he was still standing next to me.

“Yeah, well, you know what? I deserve it.” I wasn’t even sure what I was saying.

“Who’re you texting?” He pointed to the phone in my hands.

“Fuck knows,” I laughed, even though I knew *exactly* who it was. My eyes dropped back to the screen as my fingers started typing away.

Are ouy having fUn?

I hit the send button and put it back in my pocket, because I didn’t really care if Lena texted me back. It was just me pretending to be a good boyfriend to her—or whatever.

“We really need to find Tyson and Aaron,” Nel said, his voice more insistent this time. “I’m ready to head to the next place. “This one is too loud.”

“It’s a *club*. They’re always loud as fuck,” I mumbled, reaching for the last few shots. I couldn’t remember how many I’d ordered or how many she had brought, but I finished them all. No need to leave anything to waste.

Nel eyed me warily as we started through the crowd. It was star-studded, since it was one of the elite VIP places—and we were in the most exclusive part of it. No one ever bothered to document what happened in places like this.

“Are you looking for them?” Nel shouted, elbowing me.

“Uh huh.” I nodded my head—a little too vigorously—and felt like I gave myself whiplash.

Yeah, I’m drunk. I wonder if Lena is drunk?

As best I could, I pushed the thought out of my head. It didn’t fucking *matter* if Lena was shit-faced. It didn’t matter if she went home with someone.

Well, actually. It did.

She didn’t need to be doing that shit.

Irritation that I didn’t even know I could feel bubbled up, and I wanted to text her, asking her what the hell the rules were while we were doing this fake relationship thing. I didn’t want *anyone else* touching her.

And it didn’t matter the reason. She was mine for now.

“There they are!” Nel’s voice sounded distant.

I whipped my head up, seeing that it was because he *was* a long way away. *Shit*. I picked up my pace and slid through the crowd, no one trying to pull me onto the dance floor. Which was a good thing. I didn’t dance.

“Oh man…” Tyson looked me over as I made it to the three of them. “You’re fucked-up already, Jackson.”

“No,” I lied, barely able to see straight. “I haven’t had that much.”

“Okay.” Aaron burst into deep laughter. “I want whatever you had though. You look wrecked—and that’s what I wanna be before this is over.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I blew him off. “Where are we going next? Because I’m tired of the music here.”

Tyson raised a brow at me. “Um, I figured we’d just go to the place next door.”

My phone vibrated against my leg, and I instantly reached for it, falling in step behind the guys as we made our way to the exit. I narrowed my eyes at the bright light. Sure enough, Lena *had* texted me back.

Having a blast.

I furrowed my brow. Was she not even gonna ask if *I* was having fun? How fuckin’ rude. But as I shoved the phone back into my pocket, it went off again. I almost ignored it, figuring it would be someone else—but I didn’t.

Are you drunk?

I stared at her message, taking a deep breath to steady my heart rate. The alcohol must’ve made it get out of hand—though that had never happened before.

Why dios it matter

Hitting the send button, I looked up, noticing that I had come to a stop just before the exit of the club—and all three of my friends were staring at me. “What?”

“Put your fuckin’ phone up,” Aaron said, folding his arms across his chest. “Leave her alone for the night. She’d probably have more fun without you badgering her with texts that don’t make any sense.

“He’s got a point,” Tyson added, shrugging. “And we almost left you because you stopped walking. So, come on.”

I frowned, but put my phone up, following them out into the night air. My ears were ringing from the loud music, though I hadn’t realized it until the door fully shut behind us.

The streets were *packed* with people. Some of them were pulling their phones out to take pictures, and others acted like we didn’t exist.

My phone buzzed, but I ignored it. I didn't want to lose sight of the guys. That would just piss them off more. My mind wondered what Lena was doing in that moment, and if some slick-chested dude was shaking his banana hammock in her face.

Fuck, that's gross.

But would Lena think it was gross?

Most definitely.

I laughed at the thought of her, shrunk back against a chair while some dude got all up in her space. She would probably think it was pure torture—just because she'd be so embarrassed. I stepped through the door of the next bar, a much quieter, dive kind of place—though it was still pretty crowded.

“Fuck, I need more to drink,” Nel muttered as we headed toward the bar.

“Karaoke starts in ten minutes,” a voice said over a PA system. Everyone cheered and I joined them because well, why the fuck not?

“We'll have six shots of your best tequila,” Tyson said to the bartender.

I dug my phone out, leaning against the counter for support. My heart pounded in my ears as I fumbled with it, nearly dropping the stupid thing a couple of times. My finger finally connected with the lock button, lighting up the screen. I opened the text message thread, squinting down.

Have a good night.

“What the fuck,” I grunted under my breath. She basically just decided that she didn't want to talk to me. And why? Because of everything that happened? Gritting my teeth, I texted her back.

I tld you ai was sorry for what happened. I am sorry

That was the truth, too. I waited for her response, and it immediately showed that it had been read...

But she didn't respond.

Fuck. She hates me. Fuck this.

An elbow connected with my side. "You gonna have a couple shots or not?"

I looked up at Aaron. "Fuck yeah, and then go ahead and order another few rounds."

"Hell yeah!" he cheered, passing me my two shots.

And then we ordered a few more.

And then everything else was a blur.

Except the sirens. The sirens were loud and clear.

LENA

“Who here likes a good show?” the male stripper, dressed in some sort of cop outfit, called out from the center of the circle we were sat in. I tried to avoid eye contact, already weirded out by the private room we’d been taken to. My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out discreetly, reading the drunk text from Jackson.

I sighed. *Why is he apologizing still?*

“You, in the red dress,” the stripper’s voice called out. “Put your phone up, or I might have to *arrest* you.”

My eyes ripped from the screen and upward, meeting the chocolate-brown eyes of the guy. He couldn’t be much older than me—if he wasn’t even *younger* than me. *Yikes.*

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“Arrest her!” Maeve shouted, bursting into a fit of giggles as she downed more wine. “I think she deserves it. Get her, Officer Sexy.”

Officer Sexy. Oh my gosh. That’s gross.

“Well, you *are* the woman in charge tonight,” he told her, shooting her a wink and focusing his attention on me. “You better not try to run...though I do love a good chase.”

“She’s the bride.” I pointed to Maeve. “You’re supposed to get at her.”

“And I want you arrested!” Maeve stood to her feet, barely able to get the words out through her laughter. All her friends—most of which I had just met—joined her.

And *ugh*, I hated it.

I had spent the whole night barely talking, since most of them droned on and on about how wonderful high school had been and how close they all were. The few of her model acquaintances that had showed stayed to themselves.

And that left me, the odd best friend out.

“I’m going to need you to put your hands behind your back,” Officer Sexy, who I didn’t think lived up to the name, instructed me.

“I don’t want to,” I said urgently, but he was suddenly on top of me, reeking of cheap cologne.

“I’ll handcuff her if you don’t,” Maeve shouted, and I shot her a glare. “Loosen up a little.” Her voice dropped down a notch. “It’s just fun. Let him do it...for me.”

I let out a sigh, looking up at the guy. “Fine. Handcuff me.” The girls burst out in cheers, and he shot me a wink.

“Don’t worry, you’re in safe hands,” he murmured in my ear as he pulled out a pair of pink fuzzy cuffs.

I laughed nervously as he leaned over me, his body against mine as he cuffed my hands behind the chair. He was smooth with the technique and as I tugged my arms afterward, I realized—fuzzy or not—those handcuffs did their job.

“Around here, we give a certain kind of punishment to cute lawbreakers like yourself,” he began, music filling the room.

Oh my god.

He started dancing and I felt my face growing red as he unbuttoned his shirt. I didn’t know where to put my eyes, feeling like it was a sin to watch him undress.

And then he came closer.

“You’re not watching the show, you naughty girl,” he chided me teasingly, bopping me on the nose.

Please let this be over fast.

He leaned over me and started writhing and thrusting, while my body got warmer and warmer with embarrassment. I shrunk back into the chair as far as I could—and I knew one thing was certain...

I would *never* choose to do this for my own wedding.

Officer Sexy kept stripping down and I kept thinking about anything other than his dick swinging in my face. As I let myself zone out, my thoughts ran to the one person I wish they wouldn’t.

Jackson.

Were they seeing strippers? He would probably enjoy it more than I did. *Ugh.* Maybe I wasn’t any fun.

Officer Sexy flipped around, doing some sort of fancy move that made all the women applaud. His head was now right at the nape of my neck, and I just kept trying not to hyperventilate. Thankfully, he wrapped up the dance at the end of the song and reached around me, uncuffing me.

“Your punishment is over. Your choice of who goes next,” he said to me, barely even out of breath. This guy had to be in phenomenal shape to do this for a living.

“Her.” I pointed to Maeve. “And I think it should be *extra-long*. She’s been a *very bad girl*.” I couldn’t hold back my laugh, and neither could anyone else, as Maeve’s eyes went nearly as wide as her face.

But I could already see the excitement building in her.

She was going to enjoy every freaking second of it.

Good for her. She deserves it.

Now that the attention wasn’t on me anymore, I pulled my phone out of my pocket. I read Jackson’s apology and let out another sigh. Chewing my lip, I texted him back.

Stop apologizing. It is what it is.

And that's all I could think of to say. None of the rest of it really mattered. The tiny snap of feelings I had felt for a brief moment were gone. Jackson was, well...*Jackson*. It would never happen for real between us. I wasn't even sure if we could be friends.

Everyone laughed and shouted as Officer Sexy gave Maeve the same treatment as me—only it lasted twice as long. Her face stayed bright red the entire time, but unlike me, she egged him on. I laughed as she seemed to enjoy every moment of it, while I waited for Jackson's drunken reply...

But it never came.



“Come on, ladies.” Maeve waved us toward the limo. “I think we should finish up at the hotel.”

Thank God.

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning, and the buzz I'd gotten after the whole stripper thing was long gone. I was stone-cold sober—and freaking *tired*. I fell in line with the other eleven women and slid into the limo when it was my turn. I got stuck between Maeve's high school friend Lindsey, and Maeve herself.

“So, did we all have fun?” Maeve asked drunkenly.

We all cheered. It had been pretty entertaining, minus the fact that I'd spent most of it wondering why Jackson hadn't texted me back.

“Girl, you are living the high life,” Lindsey said from beside me. “It's everything you ever wanted.”

I smiled. She wasn't wrong. This kind of life *was* what Maeve wanted.

“Thanks.” My best friend beamed back at her. “I never thought I would get here. Back in high school, it seemed possible, but then when I moved here, it seemed like it would never happen.”

“And now you're marrying a rock star,” another one of them called.

“Yeah, movin’ on up in the world.” Lindsey shot her a smile. “Oh, I totally meant to ask, how did you meet Lena?”

Maeve turned to her. “I’ve told y’all a hundred times. We met our senior year of college. She was a music major—and she was *way* more fun back then. Now, she’s had to be all uptight since she works a big kid job.”

“What do you do?” Lindsey turned to me.

“I’m a music teacher.”

“*Oh*. I thought she meant you were like a doctor or lawyer or something.”

Right. Of course.

I smiled anyway. “Yeah. Not for me.”

“But you know who *is* for her?” Maeve leaned over me, placing her hand on my thigh. “*Jackson Whiss.*”

Lindsey giggled. “Uh, he’s like, for everyone. I would *die* to have a night with him. Set me up, Maeve.”

“I can’t,” she replied plainly. “He’s in a serious relationship.”

What is she doing?

“What? I haven’t read that *anywhere*...but I also don’t keep up with the tabloids.”

Most of the women had grown silent as Maeve started looking through her phone, all of them interested in the conversation happening between the three of us.

“Are you seeing him?” one of them asked me.

“Obviously,” Rashida, one of the models, snapped. “Their pictures have been all over the place. They just haven’t made it official.”

My face heated up, and I swallowed the need to correct her...but according to the contracts I had signed, I *was* with Jackson now.

“See?” Maeve held out her phone to Lindsey, showing the picture of Jackson and I getting into a car outside of the bar.

“But beyond that, he’s totally crazy about her.”

“Really?” Lindsey raised her brow. “I thought he wasn’t the kind of guy to settle down. I figured he was like, a *bad boy*.”

“He *was*,” Maeve continued, like she was telling the truth. “And then Lena tamed him right down. Tyson said he doesn’t really drink that much anymore, even. He used to get hammered every time they went out.”

I stayed quiet, trying to decipher how much of what she was saying was the truth. Because lately, I hadn’t noticed Jackson getting drunk at all. Was he really cutting back because *he* wanted to? Or was it just his PR team?

It doesn’t even matter. I shouldn’t even care.

“Anyway, I think he’s just as serious about her as Tyson is about me,” Maeve continued. “You should see the way he looks at her. It’s so romantic. She’s changed everything for him.”

“Well, damn,” Lindsey sighed. “I guess I’ll just have to find another rock star to be obsessed with then.”

I laughed, though as I took in the sight of her, a beautiful blonde with baby-blue eyes, I wondered if she was Jackson’s actual type. She was a lot wilder than me—and the two of them would probably get along better.

Hell, I think just about anyone would get along with him better than me.

“So what do you think of him, Lena?” one of the others asked me.

I whipped my head up from my hands. “I think he’s...I think he’s like a puzzle with a lot of complicated pieces.” *Okay, maybe I am a little drunk.* “He’s got more of a past than I thought he did—and I think he’s got a really good heart deep down.” *If you could ever get to it.*

“Oh, she’s totally smitten over him.” Lindsey beamed, leaning her chin on her hand. “That’s so fucking cute. I hope I can find a mysterious bad boy to tame. It’s so hot to watch

girls reel in some guy like Jackson and then make them into civilized men.”

Ha. I don't think he'll ever be civilized.

“Yeah, I don't think you should ever try to change someone,” Rashida added to the conversation. She looked a little annoyed, and had the entire night.

Maybe I'm not the biggest party pooper.

I smiled at that and got my phone out again, hoping to see a message from Jackson—but there wasn't anything. Maybe he'd decided that our conversation wasn't going anywhere...or maybe he was too drunk to text back.

It was hard to say which was more likely.

However, just as I was about to close out of my phone and put it up for the night, an article flashed across the screen.

Jackson Whiss, the infamous rock star frontman of Bad Man's Land, has been arrested in Los Angeles.

I ran my hand over my face as I clicked on the article. Looked like none of my guesses were the right one.

JACKSON

“Let’s go.” My lawyer, Sam, looked pissed as I stepped out of the jail, still holding my plastic baggie of shit. “I can’t believe you did this. Genna is going to rip us *both* a new one.”

“I don’t know why it took you all fucking night to come and get me,” I grunted, ignoring the splitting headache. “I don’t even remember what happened.”

Sam laughed without humor. “The same shit that *always* happens, Jackson.”

The driver of the Tahoe opened the back passenger seat door, and I ignored the flashing of cameras around me as I joined Sam inside. I couldn’t remember anything after we left the club. I pulled my phone out of the Ziplock bag and tried to power it on, to no avail.

Dead. Figures.

“Just when we thought you were cleaning up your act,” Sam began, shaking his head at me. He’d been my personal lawyer for a while now, my dad having found him—specifically for dealing with me when I got drunk. “The media is going to have a field day with this.”

I shrugged. “Not like it matters. Just the same shit, different day.”

“Yeah, but this is your life.” Sam turned to me, his face stone-cold. “You punched some guy out because he made some comment about your girlfriend.”

“My...what?” I muttered, completely confused.

“Yeah, the fake girlfriend, and I think that’s going to be the only way we salvage this mess. So, good on you for picking a topic.”

“What’d he say?” I asked, wondering what the hell would’ve gotten me that riled up over Lena. “I’ve never gotten in a fight before.”

“Nope, and you’re lucky you haven’t. We’ve convinced the guy not to press charges.”

“Oh fuck,” I groaned, my head falling to my hands. “What’d that cost?”

“Too much, Jackson. Too much.” Sam leaned forward and grabbed his coffee, the mere smell of it making my stomach churn. “Hopefully, you can keep your head on straight this weekend at the wedding. It’s a star-studded crowd.”

“I won’t drink at all.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.” Sam didn’t look back over at me as we headed away from the jail.

I glanced out the window, watching as we headed toward the record label office. I knew they’d more than likely called a meeting about what happened. That was what they always did. Damage control. It was time for damage control.

And I’d be stuck giving some stupid statement about how sorry I was.

I wonder what Lena thinks of me...

My stomach knotted up at the thought, already knowing she had thought I was a mess from the beginning—and now she had proof that I was exactly what she’d assumed I was.

But why did that bother me?

I spent the rest of the ride in silence, bracing for what was to come. I had fucked up, and I knew I was about to hear about it.

I didn't even bother to charge my phone. It would be full of similar messages...

And none would be from Lena.

"Alright, let's get this over with," Sam mumbled, pushing open the door as the Tahoe pulled up under the awning. "You're about to be in big trouble."

"Thanks for the heads-up." I slid out of the car, feeling even more of my hangover as I headed into the building. The pungent smell of pine and lemon hit me in a way that made me want to throw up, but I swallowed it. If I vomited all over the floor, it would just lead to more cleaners.

I ignored the stares as I followed Sam, still wearing my clothes from the previous night. My head played my heartbeat in my ears, and I fought to keep my heavy eyes open as I followed Sam to the same conference room where Lena had signed all the papers.

"Here we go." Sam pulled the door open for me.

I squinted at the bright fluorescent lights, wishing I'd brought a pair of sunglasses with me. As my eyes adjusted, I took in the three people in the room. Genna, Tim, and...*Lena*.

You have to be kidding me. Why is she here?

"Well, look who the cat dragged in." Genna's tone was sharp and cold. "You have blood on your shirt."

"What..." I glanced down at my white T-shirt. Sure enough, right there on my chest was a splatter of dark liquid. *Great. They probably had to pay up for this.*

"Take a seat." Tim glared at me as he gestured to the chair beside Lena.

I avoided everyone's gaze as I pulled out the chair, but as I eased down, I met Lena's bright eyes, full of...*amusement*. "Guess you're not hungover this morning."

She smiled. "No."

"Right." I looked away from her and up at Genna, who was standing, her arms folded over her chest.

“Why could you not go and just *behave*?” Genna asked through gritted teeth. “What the hell were you thinking?”

I took a deep breath, exhaling sharply. “Well, I guess I wasn’t thinking, but in my defense, it *was* my best friend’s bachelor party. People get drunk all the time at those.”

“You’re not most people,” Tim cut in. “That’s the problem. You have a reputation, and we’re trying to break that image. You’re supposed to be proposing tonight.”

I shut my eyes for a minute as the room fell into silence. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“You can start by telling us why the hell you punched some guy in the face,” Genna snapped.

“He doesn’t remember,” Sam spoke up for me. “He barely remembers anything at all. We got all of our information from the guy he decked last night. It’s been settled though. NDAs were signed. No need to stress, Genna. It’s going to fade.”

“Until the press gets ahold of it,” she seethed.

“Then we need to release a statement before they make up whatever narrative they want,” Sam said in a flat voice. That was the thing about him—something I’d always liked—he might give me an earful of shit, but he was always on my side.

Well, because I paid him to be.

“So what happened?” Lena’s voice was like a hammer to my brain, making my heart stutter.

I turned to her, meeting her potent gaze. “*You.*”

She looked confused. “What...?”

“He’s just being a prick.” Sam leaned over to look at her. “The guy said he made a comment about you—and I’m not sure what that comment was—but it riled Jackson up. He punched him right in the face, knocked him out cold.”

Oh shit. I must’ve been pissed.

“Oh...”

“But this isn’t your fault,” Genna chimed in quickly, her voice much softer. “This has *nothing* to do with you. Jackson knows that comments are bound to happen. People have opinions—and when you’re famous, you have to deal with a lot of them. He knows to keep his head on straight.”

“Unless he’s drinking,” Tim muttered. “All reason goes out the window the moment he gets drunk enough.”

“I’ve never gotten in a fight before.”

“Well, I guess there’s a first time for everything,” Genna snapped at me, her eyes alight with irritation as they met mine. “And tonight, you propose, so you better not act too hungover at the wedding. Take what you need to deal with it.”

“Yeah, okay.” My eyes fell to the tabletop as Lena stifled a giggle.

She would think this is all funny.

“So, what should the statement from him be?” Tim’s voice picked up. “I think we should use the fact that he was defending poor commentary about his girlfriend. It’ll soften the blow. A lot of his fans will admire the fact that he stood up for her.”

“I agree,” Sam added.

“And the NDA covered that the man he punched cannot release any other statements, correct? It covers us handling the narrative?” Genna’s focus was now on Sam, thankfully.

“Of course. Just like always.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “Then we need to get going with this statement. I think it should come straight from Jackson himself. No videos or anything. We’ll just do a social media post and that should clear the air. It’ll also set the stage for the proposal. I think you should have something about that in your speech.”

I made a face. “What? Why?”

“Because it makes it romantic that you stood up for me.” Lena’s voice was timid as she spoke. “It shows that you really care.”

My stomach flipped and I eyed her. “It was just some dumb comment. I don’t know why I knocked him out.”

“He said, and I quote,” Sam began, suddenly feeling the need to give details, apparently. “*I said something about how hot his new girl was and that was as far as I got before he knocked me the fuck out.*”

Lena giggled.

Genna let out a heavy sigh.

And Sam met my gaze with pure amusement.

“He must’ve said more than that,” I reasoned, ignoring Lena’s continuous snickering beside me.

“Nope,” Sam chuckled. “Nel, Aaron, and Tyson were able to back the guy up. He told you Lena was hot, and you punched him.”

“What an idiot,” I muttered, mostly talking about myself.

“No sense in continuing to harp on it,” Genna said, frowning. “Let’s get this statement written up. It’s a good thing Lena’s social media presence is just about nonexistent.” She shifted her attention beside me. “Don’t accept any new followers. You never can tell the fans from the haters—or know if they’re media, out to sniff around. You don’t want to accidentally let the wrong person see anything.”

“Okay, no problem.”

“And don’t read anything you see come out,” Tim added. “They’ll spin shit however they want to.”

I eyed Lena, her face showing signs of stress. *Damn, I really am bringing her right into the middle of my life—and right under the bullseye of the media.* A pang of guilt hit my chest, but then I reminded myself that she’s not without compensation. She was being paid very well.

“I’ll plug in your phone so you can leave the statement.” Sam held out his hand and I gave him my phone, figuring it was time to face whatever had come through anyway.

Thirty minutes and some BC Powder later, I finished typing out the statement and we all stood to leave. My head was still pounding, but at least I could now go home and take a nap.

“You’re going to drop Lena off at her house on the drive back to your place,” Genna instructed me. “It’ll look better if anyone is tailing you.”

“I don’t want people to know where I live.”

“Well, too late for that,” Genna quipped. “I’ll have a bodyguard sent over later.”

“Great,” Lena muttered, her shoulders falling as she followed me out of the room. She didn’t say anything else to me as we made our way out of the building to the Tahoe still parked outside. The driver opened the door, and I let her slide in first, crawling in beside her.

I glanced down at my phone, now blowing up with notifications.

“You might not want to look at any texts from Maeve,” Lena commented, her cheeks slightly reddened.

I took the moment, now that we were mostly alone, to really observe her. Her hair was pulled up in a messy bun on top of her head, not even a little makeup was on her face, and the oversized T-shirt and leggings confirmed that she’d had a rude awakening this morning. *Oops.*

“Why are you just staring at me?”

I shrugged, not having a good answer. I went back to looking at my phone, navigating through all the messages to a text from Maeve. Tyson had made me put her number in my phone in case of an emergency, and as I clicked on the message, revealing a video...I was glad she had my number too.

“This is gold,” I chuckled as I played the video—Lena handcuffed to a chair as some dude dressed like a shitty Halloween cop started dancing.

She grabbed for it. “Oh my gosh, don’t watch it!”

“He was all up in your space.” My words came out flat, and suddenly, *I* didn’t want to watch it. *Fuck this*. The guy’s face was buried in her hair, his hands nearly touching her hips.

And the fact that she looked so fucking hot in a tight red dress made it that much worse.

I exited out of the video and set the phone down.

“It was disgusting,” she commented from beside me, her voice quiet.

I didn’t look at her. “Yeah.”

LENA

“Are you nervous?” I asked Maeve, stunning in her lacy, mermaid wedding gown.

“No way.” She waved me off, though I saw right through her. She was totally nervous...but true to herself, she wouldn’t admit it. “I’m so ready for this. I think it’s going to be amazing.”

“There’s a lot of press here.” I peeked through the window out into the lobby, watching as the guests were screened. A lot of them had passes, and others were just dressed to the nines—some identifiable as celebrities.

“Don’t tell me that.” Maeve tugged at my arm. “I seriously don’t want them to catch me from the wrong angle. I look like I have a big nose sometimes.”

I shook my head, smiling warmly at her. “You’re *always* beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she nearly whispered. “There’s a reason you’re my best friend, you know. I have all these friends, but I feel like you’re the only one who really knows me. They just know the old version of me—or the work version of me.”

I nodded, noting that all the other women were MIA from the suite. They were socializing in the lounge with the groomsmen. “I’ll always be here for you.”

“Are you nervous about the proposal?” Her question caught me off guard.

“Oh...” My voice trailed off. “I...I’m just trying not to think about it.” Which was the truth—I didn’t want to think about what was to come at the reception. “I know I just have to say yes.”

“Yeah...” Her eyes held mine. “And just remind yourself that it’s not real.”



The wedding was gorgeous. Tyson cried when he saw Maeve. I walked with Nel since he was Tyson’s first best man—and then Jackson with Rashida. Jackson kept his eyes on his feet the entire time...and I wondered if he was nervous about what was to come, too.

Probably not. This is just a game to him.

I sipped on a glass of champagne, watching Maeve and Tyson share their first dance. Her mom was filming it with her phone like there wasn’t a professional camera crew there.

“They look happy.” Jackson’s voice was low.

I turned to see him. “I guess they made you come talk to me since you’re supposed to be proposing.”

His brows shot up. “Damn, okay.”

“Sorry.” I pulled my gaze from him and back to Maeve and Tyson. “But yeah, they do. I think they’re better matched than I thought.”

“Yeah, maybe. She had to sign a prenup.”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t mean anything. It’s just formalities.”

“I wouldn’t make my wife sign a prenup.”

“Why?” I turned to him. “I thought you hated women.”

He made a face. “I don’t *hate* women, but yeah, I think they’re out to break men into a million pieces...but *if* I ever got married, she’d have to be some sort of anomaly.”

An anomaly.

“Well, maybe someday you’ll find her.”

He met my gaze. “Who knows.”

We stood there for a few beats, both clapping as the dance finished. Tyson and Maeve shared a sweet kiss, looking as in love as ever.

And I felt that all too familiar pang of jealousy.

“Wanna dance now?” Jackson’s voice cut into my thoughts, and I glanced down at his extended hand. “Only makes sense.”

“Yeah...” I eyed him, taking his hand and letting him lead me out onto the dance floor. My floor-length dark red dress swept across the black floors, my heels silenced by the beginning of a slow ballad.

“Gotta make them think we’re in love or some shit,” Jackson muttered, swinging me around in his arms. He pulled me to his chest, holding me tightly, his arm threading around my waist. I caught my breath, inhaling the now-familiar scent of him.

And instinctually, I leaned away.

“I’m not going to bite,” he murmured, his voice tinged with something that almost sounded like disappointment. “Just pretend like you don’t hate me...just for tonight.”

I met his eyes, studying the complexities in the hues of his deep forest-green irises. “I’ll do my best.”

“That’s good enough for me.” Jackson leaned in, his head pressing against the side of mine. “It’s just a show.”

Just a show.

I swallowed hard, trying to keep my breaths even as we swayed on the floor. The shutters of cameras around us were apparent, even over the live music, and Jackson held me tighter to him.

As the song ended, someone tapped on my shoulder, and I turned to see Maeve, holding out a microphone. “Ready?”

“Yep,” Jackson answered before I could.

“Can I have everyone’s attention?” Maeve’s voice boomed over the PA system, and the music faded to the background. As the crowd went silent and everyone turned to stare at us, she continued. “This is my maid of honor, and she’s an incredible person. Tonight, her special someone asked for permission to do something incredible for her, and I agreed to it. I think weddings are a place where we celebrate all love—not just mine and Tyson’s.”

My heart sank at the lies, and at just how real it sounded.

“And so, without further ado, here’s Jackson.” Maeve smiled at me and then passed the microphone to Jackson. “I know you can do this,” she leaned in and whispered before walking away.

Jackson cleared his throat, taking a step back from me but holding my hand. “So after some thought about tonight, I decided instead of drawing it out, I wanted to get straight to the point.” He let go of my hand, slipping his into the pocket of his tuxedo and pulling out a box.

It’s not real. It’s not real.

But the way my heart was pounding in my chest *was* real. My eyes searched Jackson’s face as he knelt to the ground. He flipped the box open, revealing a beautiful pear-shaped diamond on a rose-gold band.

It was stunning.

“So, Lena, you and I haven’t known each other very long in comparison to what some do—and our start was a little rocky. I think we disliked each other more than we liked each other.” He paused, everyone chuckling. “But I realized that maybe the best relationships are the ones that challenge us to be better—and that’s what you’ve done to me. You’ve made question a lot of things, and you give me a new perspective on life.”

He’s such a good liar. Despite the thought, I kept my eyes on his, feeling a vast array of emotions thrumming through my body.

“And you know what, I also learned last night that you’re the kind of woman I’m willing to fight for—literally—and I’ll

keep fighting for you, Lena. Always. Will you marry me?" I blinked a few times, the crowd gasping when I didn't immediately say something. Jackson dropped the microphone slightly, his expression urging me.

"Of course I will," I finally choked out, my hands over my mouth to hide all the things I felt in the moment. I couldn't decide if I hated him more in the moment for making it sound so personal, or if it actually made me think we might be friends. But as he stood to his feet and leaned in, grabbing my lips with his, everything faded...

And it was just *us*.

He threaded his fingers through my hair as our kiss deepened, applause in the background. As he pulled away, I tried to avoid his gaze, knowing that everything I was feeling was written all over my face...

And I wasn't sure if he'd be able to see that I was *really* feeling something.

"Here," Jackson said softly, pulling the ring out of the box. "I, uh, I picked this out for you. I thought it looked like something you'd appreciate. I don't know."

I smiled, catching his eye finally. "*You* actually picked this out?"

"Yeah, don't be weird about it," he chuckled. "Everyone is still watching us."

"It's beautiful."

He slid it onto my left ring finger, and it fit like a glove. "There. Now the world knows you're really mine."

No, I'm not.

He grabbed my hand and held it up, everyone applauding again. "Here's to another wedding," Jackson commented into the microphone. "Though I think we'll give this one a little more time."

"Ha ha," Tyson said, slapping him on the shoulder and shaking his hand. "Congrats, man. I'm happy for you." He hugged Jackson like it was the real thing, and I found myself

backing away from the entire scene. It was all playing out so *real*. But it wasn't.

And it was fucking with my head.

"I just need to use the restroom really quickly," I said, my eyes meeting Jackson's. "I'll be back."

"Don't be gone too long, baby." He shot me a wink with amusement all over his face as more people came up to congratulate him. They didn't really care about *me*. I wasn't the famous one—and in that moment, I was so freaking glad.

I spun on my heels, heading for the bathroom and nodding with a smile as people gave me their congratulations. But the smile faded as soon as I was safely in the bathroom... *alone*.

All the emotions hit me at once, bubbling up in my chest, throat, and then spilling from my eyes.

Why am I so upset about this?

I didn't have an answer for my own question, glancing down at the ring on my finger. Maybe it was the fact that *this* was all I really wanted in my life. I wanted love, the ring, the family that came after.

And now faking it made it that much more heartbreaking.

"Lena?" Maeve's voice came from the other side of the bathroom door. "Can I come in?"

"It's unlocked," I choked out, sniffing.

She pushed through, entering the three-stall luxurious room. "Oh, *Lena*." She rushed toward me, wrapping me up in her arms. "I knew it was too much."

I leaned into her embrace. "It's just...I don't know. I don't know why I'm being so emotional about it."

"It's because it was so...his speech was so charged."

"Yeah, I guess, but it's more that it's a glimpse into what I *want* in my life—and this is all just fake." I pulled away from her, dabbing at my eyes with the side of my hand. I glanced down at the black smears of mascara. "I want the real thing so bad."

Maeve met my gaze, her face full of sympathy. “I’m so sorry, Lena. I know you’re going to find the right person someday. You’re only twenty-three. You’re not out of time—and someday, someone is going to say that kind of stuff to you and tell you they *love* you.”

I froze, recalling the speech. Jackson hadn’t told me he loved me. Maybe there was something he couldn’t lie about—and that made it a little better, surprisingly. “Thank you. Thank you for being here for me.”

“And thank *you* for being here for me.” She squeezed my arm. “Also, just a heads-up, he’s out there.”

“What?” I furrowed my brow. Of course Jackson was out there.

“I mean, he’s out *there*.” She gestured to the bathroom door. “He’s waiting on you.”

Oh. Great.

JACKSON

I tapped my foot anxiously against the floor. *Why did she take off like that? What did I say that was wrong?* My head was spinning. I thought it all had gone smoothly. I mean, yeah, it took her a second to get the words out, but she had accepted. Everyone probably wrote it off as shock, anyway.

Leaning against the wall, I counted the seconds, making it all the way to over two hundred before the bathroom door finally opened. Out stepped Maeve, who had a complex expression on her face. I couldn't tell if Maeve was about to cry—or if she might murder me.

And that was a terrifying look to get from a woman.

“She’ll be out in a second,” Maeve said curtly. “And be gentle with her.”

“What?” *That’s confusing as fuck.*

“Listen.” She lowered her voice, pointing her finger at me in a borderline threatening way. “She is my *best friend* and whether you can’t stand her or not, she’s got a freaking heart of gold. She’s always wanted to find true love—and have someone get down on one knee, vowing to spend the rest of their life with her. Not everyone can just brush off a big lie like you people in this industry can.”

Oh shit.

“Right.” My voice dropped, and the guilt I’d felt earlier came rushing back in. “I guess I never really thought about it like that.”

“She’s only doing this because she doesn’t want her parents to pay for her school—and she’s using the rest of the money after school costs for them too. Lena loves hard and she’s the most selfless person I know.”

I nodded, not knowing what else to say.

“If I were you,” she continued when I didn’t say anything, “I’d offer to take her home. Don’t make her keep up the façade for the rest of the night.”

“Okay,” I muttered as she walked away, leaving me there alone in the hallway. I checked my watch and then typed out a text to the driver, letting him know to pull the car around. I didn’t blame Lena for wanting to leave. It wasn’t all that easy for me, either.

Especially the shit I’d felt when I started rambling about her.

I had a completely different generic speech planned, and instead, I went way off of it—and I wasn’t even sure where it all came from.

“Sorry for bailing,” a timid, sweet voice said, bringing my eyes up from my phone. Lena looked at me sheepishly, her mascara still slightly smeared beneath her eyes. My heart sank at the sight.

Fuck, I made her cry...

“It’s fine. I think everyone is drunk out there anyway.” I tried to keep my tone indifferent, but the sight of her emotionally disheveled was pulling at my heartstrings...

Ones I didn’t even know I had.

“Yeah, maybe,” she sniffled, running her hands over the bridesmaid dress as if to smooth it out. “I’m good though.”

“How about I take you home?” I suggested, giving her a slight smile. “I don’t think anyone will blame us for wanting to go home.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind staying if you’d like to.”

I laughed. “Trust me, I’m good. Let’s go. I already texted our driver.”

“Ugh, thank you so much. I don’t know if I can face all those people again. I mean, they were just looking at us with such...admiration or something. It was too much.”

“Well, that’s because they thought it was real. I was even caught up in it.”

“Yeah...” Her voice trailed off as she kept her eyes focused ahead of us. “It’s just part of the whole deal though. The hard part is over.”

No, the hard part is just beginning.

My eyes took her in, the way her dark-blonde hair fell past her shoulders and how her chin stayed tilted up. “You did really great.”

She looked over at me then, stopping just as I reached for the door. “Thanks. Sorry I took a minute. It was just a lot. Your speech was so...” Her eyes dropped from mine.

“I just rambled,” I said quickly as I pushed the door open for her. “They actually gave me something to say, but it just didn’t feel like it would be authentic to the outside world.”

“I see.” She turned away and walked out into the night air.

And then the cameras started flashing.

“Aw, shit!” I jumped into action as the paparazzi surrounded us, getting up in Lena’s personal space. “Back the fuck up!”

Our driver and security guard did their best to help me wave them out of the way, but Lena’s eyes were still wide with shock.

“What do you think about being engaged to such a high-profile rockstar?”

“How do you feel about Jackson’s arrest?”

“Do you worry that he’ll get into more trouble?”

“Don’t say anything to them.” I kept my voice low as I leaned into Lena, wrapping my arm around her shoulders and guiding her to the car.

“We just want a comment!”

She ducked her head, holding her purse up to shield her face, and I held onto her tightly, fighting the urge not to punch some of them for making her feel so fucking uncomfortable.

But then again, *I* had made her cry.

I helped her into the back seat, sliding in beside her as the driver slammed the door shut. “Just take a deep breath. It’s okay.”

“They’re gonna follow us,” the driver said with a groan as he climbed into the front seat.

I looked over at her and then back at him. “Then just take us to my place.” I knew that probably wasn’t where Lena wanted to go, but it would at least keep the paparazzi from seeing her place.

For now, anyway.

I stole a glance over at Lena, who was silent and staring out the window. I couldn’t tell if she was still upset or just tired. Maybe both. It only took about fifteen minutes before the driver punched in the code at my gate, and we were home. Well, I was home.

“Have a great night,” he said as we climbed out of the SUV.

“Yeah, you too.” I offered a hand to Lena, and she took it, letting me help her out. I led the way to the front door, and let us in, relieved to have some privacy. Even though Tyson’s wedding was all about him, the moment I’d proposed, all eyes were on Lena and me.

And I didn’t like that when it came to faking a relationship.

“You wanna see the music room?” I offered as we hovered in the entryway.

“Um, yeah, but it’d be kind of nice to change.” She gazed up at me warily. “But I left my bag with Maeve.”

“Ah, right...” I shifted my weight onto my heels. “You can wear a T-shirt and boxers of mine. Will that work?”

She shrugged, but the red hue on her cheeks made me smile. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Come on then.” I offered my arm, and she made a face but took it. Guiding her through the front part of the house, I led her to the stairs, and together we climbed to the second floor.

“This is such a big house for just one person,” Lena commented, laughing softly.

Relief filled my chest at the sound. “Yeah, I know. It’s kind of excessive, but I used to throw a lot of parties. Now, I think I’d prefer to just keep the people away from my house. Too much shit got broken or stolen.”

She nodded. “Makes sense.”

“It really doesn’t,” I chuckled. “I invited mostly rich people. Why would they wanna steal my stuff?”

“Maybe they just have sticky fingers.”

“Maybe.” I pushed open my bedroom door, trying not to remember the last time she’d been in my house. Everything had gone so wrong. *Please don’t let that happen again.*

I mean, I didn’t know if Lena and I were friends or just acquaintances...but I was starting to get used to the idea of us *not* hating each other.

“I like the skylight.” Lena pointed up to the large window on the ceiling. “But doesn’t it freak you out that someone could climb up there and look in?”

I laughed, pulling out a band T-shirt from the drawer and a pair of black boxers. “No, I don’t think about that, but there’s a screen that can be used to cover it—to keep out the light,” I added. I slid out of my shoes and jacket, and then walked back to Lena and held out the clothes. “You can change in the bathroom if you’re being modest.”

She pursed her thick, red lips. “I can’t unhook and unzip the back of this dress without help. Maeve’s friend had to do it.”

“Were none of her bridesmaids also your friends?” I asked, gently guiding her to face away from me.

“Um, not really. Most of them were from her childhood—and I didn’t know her then. They were never really around, either. The others know me, but they’re from her modeling agency, so they’re usually busy. Maeve is a private person for the most part, and we’re kind of each other’s only close friend. Her mom just wanted a big group.”

“That sounds exhausting,” I muttered, trying to keep my breath steady as I unhooked the latch at the top of the dress. My fingers brushed her skin, and my body reminded me just how good it felt to touch her.

“I think weddings are exhausting,” Lena continued as my fingers rested on the zipper. “I want a small wedding someday.”

“Small weddings are better,” I agreed, dragging the zipper downward. The material parted, exposing her bare back, sprinkled with freckles.

Fuck me.

I didn’t stop until it was all the way down, the top of her black underwear peeking out. Unable to stop myself, I ran my fingers down her bare skin. There was just something about this woman that drove me mad with lust.

Stepping closer to her, I slid the dress forward on her shoulders, expecting her to stop me. Her breath hitched at the movement, but she didn’t say anything or reach out to stop me. I pressed my body to hers, swooping her hair to the side and breathing her in as my hands pulled the dress the rest of the way.

I let it drop to the floor, revealing her bare breasts and black thong. “God, you’re gorgeous, Lena.” My lips landed on her skin, my cock roaring to life. I pressed into her ass, and she moaned, grinding her hips against me.

I guided her forward to my bed, then broke away from her, stripping off the rest of my clothes before leaning her over the side of the bed.

“Oh my god,” she murmured as I ripped her underwear down around her hips and then spread her legs. My eyes took in her glistening pussy, and I dropped to my knees.

LENA

I felt his tongue glide into my slit, and I moaned out, mostly in pleasure but also in surprise. My legs trembled as his hands ran over them, spreading me wider for him. I'd *never* been bent over and eaten out this way before...

"Your taste is so fucking addictive," Jackson growled, just before burying his face in between my legs. He covered every inch of me, licking, kissing, and caressing me. I began to whimper, my pleasure already rising. I hadn't come into his home with any intention of letting him touch me like this.

But then he unzipped my dress in a sensual way.

And that was all it took for me to break down and let him have his way with me.

"Jackson..." I cried out as his tongue dove inside of me, nearly sending me over the edge right then and there. He growled in response to his name, which only served to turn me on even more. I rocked my hips against him, desperate to feed the ache building between my legs.

"Oh fuck, baby," Jackson groaned, leaning back and slapping my ass. "You're so good."

Heat rushed to my cheeks and I flushed, loving the words—and not questioning them in the moment. I ground my hips

against his face, and he once again shoved his tongue inside of me, gyrating against my entrance.

And I couldn't hold it back any longer.

My orgasm exploded from deep inside of me, rolling through my entire body. My toes curled into the hard floors as I fisted the white comforter, hanging on and riding out the intense wave of pleasure. My pussy pulsed as Jackson continued to cover the entrance with his tongue, the sensation almost too much.

"Ooh," I panted, my legs nearly giving way as I came down from the high. Jackson leaned away and stood to his feet. His cock brushed against me, and I shivered, apprehensive for what was to come.

But instead of shoving inside me, he pulled me back to standing, spinning me around to face him. His eyes were dilated as our gaze locked and he ran his tongue along his lips. Threading a hand through my hair, he dragged my mouth to his, giving me a taste of myself as he kissed me with a possession he hadn't before.

His hands roamed my body, taking in the curvature of my hips. I probably should've worked out more, but I pushed the insecurity away as he lifted me into the air. He stumbled backward, not stopping until I was pinned against the wall.

"I wanna fuck you like this," he growled into my mouth, my legs wrapped around his waist. He reached down between us and within seconds, his cock plunged deep inside of me. I cried out in surprise, but Jackson didn't stop, thrusting into me harder.

I clung to him, threading my fingers through his messy hair. Our bodies were covered in sweat as he moved, my legs trapping the heat between us. I leaned my head back against the wall as he slammed into me, rattling the pictures so hard I thought they might fall.

My nails dug into the skin of his shoulders, but if it hurt him, he didn't say. His head stayed buried in my neck, kissing and sucking on my skin as he fucked with sheer force. My

pussy stretched, taking every inch of him over and over, and as much as it felt like almost too much, it was also driving me right toward the edge of another orgasm.

“Fuck,” he groaned, leaning away from me. He locked into my gaze as he continued to thrust his hips, and my chest swirled with emotions as I saw the desire there in his eyes. He came closer, brushing his nose against mine.

And I let out a whimper, coming a second time as his hot breath tickled my skin. “*Jackson...*” I moaned, and he responded, taking my lips with his as he continued to fuck me, never slowing. The sensation was intense, and I found myself breaking from a moan to a near scream as he finally came to stop, his entire body shuddering from his own climax.

“Lena,” he murmured into the nape of my neck as we stayed in the moment, still intertwined. His lips pressed against my sweaty skin, lingering as our breaths deepened and slowed.

My heart stuttered in my chest as I realized the gravity of sleeping with Jackson again. It was such a high, but the aftermath always had me feeling a mixture of complicated emotions—and I blamed my lack of flings for it. Jackson probably could sleep with someone and never have an attachment, but I had to battle myself not to create one.

Even if I didn’t like him.

“I should probably get dressed,” I finally said, tapping his shoulder lightly.

“Yeah, probably,” he chuckled, gently setting me down. “If you stay naked like that, I’m just gonna fuck you all night long.”

My eyes widened as I blushed, but I dismissed him. “Yeah, right.”

“Yeah, it is right,” he teased, grabbing my hand and pulling me back to him as I tried to walk away. “You’re like a drug, Lena. I can’t get enough sex from you.”

“Good to know.” I tugged my arm from him, sweeping up the clothes and heading for the bathroom. I shut the door and

locked it, needing a minute to get myself together. I cleaned up and got dressed, stopping to stare at myself in the mirror.

I looked *tired*. And definitely sexed up.

Doing my best, I smoothed out my hair and then stepped out of the bathroom, his T-shirt nearly making it to my knees and hiding the boxers underneath.

“That’s a good look on you,” Jackson said from the bed, where he’d slipped on a different pair of boxers. “You hungry or anything?”

“Aren’t you supposed to take me home?” I eyed him uneasily. Every time we’d ever had sex, that seemed to be the solution—leaving like it hadn’t happened at all.

“Uh, I can.” He sat up from where he was leaning on the black wooden headboard. “But I was kind of hoping to show you the music room. I think you’ll really like it.”

I nodded, smiling. “Okay, yeah. Show me the music room.”

That seemed to make him happy, and he bounded off the bed, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the door. I laughed as Jackson nearly dragged me down the hall a couple of doorways.

“I don’t usually let people in here—except for Nel, Aaron, and Tyson. But most of the time we do stuff at Tyson’s place. But this”—he opened the door—“is where I write most of my songs.”

I stepped into the room, my mouth dropping. “Oh my god, it’s heaven.” My eyes took in the rows of guitars hanging on the walls, the recording booth in the corner, and the grand piano in the other. There were a few posters of his band, but other than that, it was nothing but music.

“It’s soundproofed in here,” Jackson said, sounding like a tour guide as he shut the door behind us. “I had it designed for the best acoustics too. The flooring came from a small company in London.”

“That sounds expensive,” I giggled, making my way toward the piano in the corner. “I’ve always wanted to have a grand

piano of my own.”

“You don’t have one? Seems kind of crazy given how talented you are.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “Thanks...but no, you’ve been to my house. I can’t afford a piano like that. Plus, even if I could, it wouldn’t fit.”

“I’ll buy you a bigger house.”

“Stop,” I laughed, shaking my head. “That’s ridiculous. Can I play this?”

“I was hoping you would.” He held my eyes as I sat down on the bench, adjusting myself. I wiggled my fingers, hovering over the keys. “Why don’t you play that tune you played at the school? I didn’t recognize it.”

“I wrote it,” I said softly, starting out in the key of C. “A while ago. It doesn’t have any lyrics though. I’m not so great at that.”

“Here.” Jackson slid onto the bench beside me, his hands falling on the keys with ease. No matter how big of a asshole he was, he was incredibly talented—and that’s why I’d always liked the band. He began to play the tune I had written, and I leaned back in surprise.

“You *really* listened to it, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did,” he laughed. “It was really good. I was hoping that you had some words for it.”

“I don’t...” I frowned. “Every time I try, they don’t seem to do the music justice.”

“I understand that.” Jackson’s shoulder pressed against mine. “You know, any time you want to come up here and use this room, you can.”

My hands stopped. “What?”

“Yeah, you know, we’re engaged now, so you should probably be around here more often. Otherwise, it’s going to look weird. So, you can hang out and use my music room as

much as you want—even if we weren't, you know...you can still come here and use it. I'll give you a key."

"To your house?" I couldn't hide the shock from my voice.

"Yeah," he laughed. "Stop making it weird."

"That's just a lot—and you *just* said that people steal stuff from you. How do you know I'm not going to do the same?"

He raised a brow at me. "Well, I highly doubt you'd steal anything. You won't even take the money that I offered you."

"Touché." I shrugged, and then began to play the song again. I hummed along with it, stopping at a riff to look at Jackson. "That's kind of the melody I was going for."

He nodded. "I like it. Keep going."

I blushed, but did as he asked, making my way through the second verse, chorus, and then bridge. When I made it to the end, I held out the last note. "It seems so stupid to just hum along."

"That's how you eventually come up with words—sometimes."

"I guess, but I've never had a problem coming up with words until *this* song. It just feels like nothing is good enough. Maybe you can come up with words." I suggested it with caution, not sure how he would respond.

"Really?" He looked surprised. "You want me to help you?"

"I mean, if you can come up with some words, that would be great," I laughed, shrugging. "I seriously wrote this years ago, and while I've perfected the music, I just can't get the lyrics."

He nodded slowly. "Okay. I'll see what I can come up with...but that means you have to come over more."

My heart flip-flopped in my chest. "Well...I guess I could..."

"Good, you should." He leaned in, and for a moment I thought he might kiss me, but then his head dropped away to the keys. "In the meantime, I'll see what I can do."

My gaze shifted, suddenly realizing that he wasn't staring at the keys. No, Jackson was staring at the *ring* on my left hand. It'd been on the entire time tonight, as I'd forgotten to take it off.

JACKSON

“This is going well.” Genna beamed, filling the screen in front of us with images of Lena and me getting into the car at the wedding. “Choosing to leave early kind of solidified the relationship. And you got a little heated with paparazzi. I think that was a good move as well.”

Well, holy shit. She’s actually complimenting me.

“We can’t be too careful with it.” Tim looked over at me with concern in his eyes. “We know that these kinds of fake relationships often get leaked. All it takes is someone mentioning that they’re suspicious and it all goes downhill from there.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Genna answered him before I could. “We just have to keep the momentum going. The arrest situation has fallen to the wayside and that’s where it needs to stay. Stir online has fans saying that he was just protecting his woman, and they’re *swooning*.”

“Perfect for the album release,” Tyson commented, rolling his wedding band around his finger. “I think that it’s good we’re all growing up and falling in love.”

I made a face at him. “Yeah, never mind the fact that my relationship is fake as fuck. I’m not head over heels for Lena.”

“Yeah, okay. She practically lives with you.”

“No, she doesn’t,” I snorted, shaking my head. “She comes to use the music room. That’s it. She loves the grand piano, not me.”

Genna laughed at that. “You sound a little bitter about it.”

“No.” I glared at her. “I don’t mind her being there. I know it helps with all the fake engagement shit. They’re basically camped out, snapping pics of her every time she’s there.”

“Which is why she needs to start spending the night,” Genna said flatly. “I need her to be there overnight. They keep catching her leaving your place at dark. That doesn’t look realistic.”

“Maybe she’s traditional.”

Tim chuckled. “I don’t think that’ll fly for a guy like you.”

“I would respect it,” I said with a shrug. “If she wanted to wait or whatever, that would be fine with me. I don’t care.” Everyone was silent in the room, and I shifted uncomfortably under their gazes. *I’m just gonna shut up.*

“He’s gone soft,” Tyson finally said, bursting into a fit of laughter. “It’s fucking amazing.”

“I’m not soft,” I snapped back at him.

“Okay, okay,” Genna stopped us. “It doesn’t matter. We just need to run this tight, because as you both know, the label is going up for sale. The last thing you want to have happen is to get dropped. We don’t want to be a bunch of drama. We want to be seen as moneymakers.”

“How are we *not* moneymakers?” I asked, throwing my hands up in the air. “We’re the biggest band the label has. I don’t understand why they’d even consider dropping us.”

Genna let out a sigh, pulling out a chair and taking a seat—which was something I could swear the woman never did. “Changing hands can be complicated. New owners come in with all these big ideas, and it’s not that uncommon for them to drop bands and rearrange. They could cancel the album release if they wanted to.”

“They’re not going to drop you,” Tim spoke up, sounding more annoyed. “She’s just trying to drive the point home that we need to ensure we’re assets to the company. That’s all. No one is going anywhere. Besides, even if they *did* drop you, you’d be picked up in no time by another label. It’d be a bidding war.”

“So you’re just trying to scare us into submission,” I chuckled, giving Genna a look.

She rolled her eyes. “Is it working? Because I still just see a bunch of defiant rebels without a cause.”

“Maybe we should just buy the label,” I suggested, looking over to my bandmates.

“No way,” Tyson said immediately. “I don’t want that kind of responsibility. You come from a big business family. You buy it yourself.”

“Owning a label means not much time to tour,” Tim said. “You all thrive touring. None of you have families.”

“Yet,” Tyson chipped in with a grin.

“Great,” Aaron groaned. “Now we’ll have to deal with Maeve *and* a mini-Maeve.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Tyson jumped on the offense. “Are you trying to insult my *wife*?”

Oh jeez.

“I’m not trying to insult anyone. She’s just a lot.” Aaron shrugged.

“Fuck you,” Tyson sneered.

“Okay, boys, you can fight this out later.” Genna took a deep breath, leaning back in her chair. “So, there’s a red-carpet event coming up, and I want the couples present.”

I cringed. “Why?”

“Because it’s important to show that you and Lena are not a publicity stunt. We need more intimacy shown between the two of you. Pack on the PDA while on the carpet, and it’ll help

solidify that it's real. I would send the two of you off on vacation, but we don't really have time for that right now."

"She's going to hate that."

Genna shot me a glare. "She won't hate anything if you'd just pay attention to her. Dote on her. Buy her a new gown. Take her out to an exquisite dinner. You get what I'm saying. Think to yourself, *if this was real, how would I treat her?*"

I couldn't help but laugh. "I don't know the answer to that, because there's no way in hell I'd ever get married."

"You're lying to yourself. Imagine that you met the *perfect* woman, Jackson. How would you treat her?"

I blinked at her, falling into silence for a few beats. "I. Don't. Know." My bandmates snickered beside me, and it only served to prove the point. "I don't care about relationships. I don't want one." *Women leave you broken. Just look at my dad.*

"I guess I'll have to send over some relationship guidelines for you then," Genna grumbled. "This *act* that you're putting on is only going to last so long."

"Fuck you, Genna," I spat, pushing back from the table.

"*Jackson,*" Tim warned me as I stood to my feet.

"No." I stopped him from saying anything else. "I don't give a shit what you all think about me, but don't try to tell me I'm just putting on an act. I don't do relationships because they fuck you up for life if they don't work out."

"I'm sorry, Jackson." Genna's voice lowered. "It just can be frustrating when I have to tell you *every single step* to take in a relationship. I get that it's fake, but we have to portray it like it's real—and that's easier to make the public believe if you do things like you would in real life."

"Yeah, and I'm telling you that I don't know what the fuck I'd do in real life, because I've never done it. I've never even entertained the idea of marrying a woman. I mean, yeah, maybe if the *right* person just walked in and blew my mind, I might consider it. But I don't think that's happening."

“It might.” Tyson’s voice was a near whisper.

I let out a heavy breath. “Is this over now? Because I have shit I need to do.”

“Yeah, we’ll reconvene later,” Genna snapped.

Perfect.

Spinning on my heels, I shoved open the door and took off across the lobby. The whole fucking meeting was a waste—and only put together to hound me about how to be in a relationship.

“Jackson, wait,” Tyson called after me, his Vans squeaking across the floor. “Don’t just take off like that. What she said was low, but she’s just trying to help us.”

I didn’t stop walking, not until I was outside, breathing in the fresh air. Well, mostly fresh air. However fucking fresh Los Angeles air can be.

“Dude, you’re acting ridiculous,” Tyson huffed, grabbing my shoulder. “Seriously.”

“Okay,” I finally snapped, facing him. “I don’t know what you want me to tell you. I’m in a *fake* relationship. I’m sorry I’m not jumping up and down with joy. I just want my normal life back.”

“But you like Lena?” Tyson reasoned, looking confused. “Don’t you think you’d still be hanging out with her even if there wasn’t this fake relationship element?”

I hesitated, trying to picture what it would be like if we weren’t forced together. “I don’t know. I might’ve never talked to her again.”

Tyson sighed. “I don’t believe that. She got under your skin too much. I could tell from the moment you met her. She’s different to you.”

“No, she’s not.” I shook my head. “The only difference between her and all the other girls is that she pisses me off more.”

Tyson laughed. “So yeah, she *is* different. She gets under your skin, and she’s stayed there.”

I didn’t want to argue with him. I didn’t even really wanna talk to him about it anymore. “Everything is always about relationships, and I’m tired of it. You wanna hang out and make music, then come on. Otherwise, I don’t want to talk right now.”

“Jeez, Jackson,” Tyson grunted. “I’ll let you go.”

Okay then.

I stormed off across the parking lot, ripping open the door to my car and sliding in. As soon as I started the engine, my phone started ringing, and I pulled it out of my pocket, seeing that it was my brother...

Fuck.

I hesitated, almost not answering it as I put the car in drive, but guilt got the best of me. “Hey,” I grunted, letting the phone play over the car speaker system.

“Hey, hey,” Eli chuckled. “You sound as grumpy as ever.”

“Fuck off,” I snorted.

“Yep, good to hear you’re doing well. Anyway, I saw some pictures online. Well, let me rephrase that, *Olivia* saw some pictures online. You seeing someone?”

“Seriously? Is that what everyone wants to talk about right now?” My voice came out sharp and caustic.

“Whoa, I was just wondering if it was just stupid paparazzi bothering the shit out of you—and then some proposal video was leaked...”

Oh shit. I didn’t even tell them.

“Dad is freaking out over it,” Eli said flatly. “So, you’re probably going to need to clarify what the hell is happening.”

“Uh...it’s not what you think.”

“Publicity stunt is what I actually think.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief. “Well, that would be the right answer. They’re making me fake the relationship for that very reason. We’ve got a new album coming out—that I haven’t written a single song on—and that’s the vibe they want to give off.”

“Hmm.” Eli didn’t sound enthused. “And how do you feel about having to fake it like that? Doesn’t really seem like something you’d do.”

“It’s not, but it happened...so, I’m just going with it. I don’t really have a choice. The record label gets to make a lot of my decisions for me.”

“So go independent.”

“Yeah, that’s too much work,” I reasoned. “The label’s up for sale though. You could buy it.”

“Yeah, or you could.”

“Or *we* could,” I said with a shrug.

“Yeah, right,” Eli laughed. “Maybe if you were ready to take it down a notch and not live so wild.”

“Ha. Yeah, maybe one of these days.”

LENA

Ugh.

I could already see the cameras and their operators, waiting outside of the school. The moment I became Jackson's fiancée, paparazzi started showing up. *Everywhere*. My heart thumped in my chest as I smoothed my hair out and mentally prepared to take on the herd of people. I'd already reported it to the security of the school, but they didn't have enough security to stave off the reporters.

"There she is!" one of them called out as soon as I slid out of the car.

Here we go.

I kept my face straight and held tightly to my bag as my sneakers squeaked across the parking lot. I used to wear cute heels, but honestly, now I couldn't move fast enough in them to wear them.

"How do you feel about being with Jackson Whiss?"

Ignore it.

"Are you really a student at Berkley?"

Ignore it.

"Were you coerced into being with Jackson?"

What? What does that even mean?

“Are you monogamous or is your relationship open?”

Jeez, these people are nosey.

I butted my way through them, finally reaching the door of the building. I pulled the handle and slipped inside, breathing a sigh of relief. They *never* followed me inside of the school. I let my shoulders slump as I walked toward the classroom, hoping that the crowd outside would find something else to do for the day.

But I knew there’d still be people out there when I got off work.

There always was.

I brushed my hair out of my face as soon as I made it to my classroom. However, I froze when I realized the light was already on.

Who’s here?

I reached for the door handle, not surprised that it was unlocked. As soon as it swung open, my eyes fell on my boss Melissa, and her boss—Lewis. *Oh no. Please don’t tell me this is going to cost me my job.*

“Good morning,” Melissa greeted me with a placid smile. “How are you, Lena? You look a little frazzled.”

“Um, I’m okay, thanks...” I stepped into the room, setting my things down on the desk. “Is something wrong?” I was doing my best to maintain a professional stance, but honestly, my nerves were rattled from everything. My ring caught my eye, and I tried to ignore it.

But Melissa was staring right at it.

Shit.

“So, I’m here this morning to discuss some things with you, Miss Harris,” Lewis began, his deep voice startling me. His chocolate eyes followed me as I sat down in my desk chair, clasping my hands on my lap. “In light of recent events, the school has become a centerpiece for the media, and while

that's not *all* bad, the crowd outside in the front needs to be addressed."

"I'm really very sorry about that..." My voice trailed off as I fought to keep my emotions in check. Unlike Jackson, I didn't have anyone to represent me. I had to take care of my problems myself—and in the moment, I was jealous. "I don't know why they're there."

"Well, I do." Melissa's voice was matter-of-fact. "You're engaged to Jackson Whiss, which I find to be a strange happening, if I do say so myself."

"Things moved very quickly." I squeezed my hands together a little tighter, hoping they couldn't see through the lie.

"They clearly did," Lewis grunted. "And to be frank, it's none of my business what my employees' love lives look like. But this—*this* is affecting my ability to run my school safely. This might just be a summer program, but parents are not happy to see paparazzi hanging around outside of the building. It's concerning."

"I'm...I'm not sure what to do."

"Well, before we do anything, we need to know if you plan to stay working here as a teacher full-time. We offered you the position, but you've yet to give us an answer." Melissa gave me a pained look, and I couldn't tell if she was irritated—or if she felt sorry for me.

Maybe both.

"I'm planning on finishing my degree now that I've been able to come up with the money for it."

Melissa narrowed her eyes at me. "I see."

Oh my god. Did I just say the wrong thing? Does she think that Jackson is paying for it? Would it matter? I mean, he is my fiancé, right? That wouldn't be weird.

"Just take a deep breath, Miss Harris," Lewis said, his tone softening. "We're not here to get you in trouble." He studied my face, his worry lines only deepening. "We just want to make sure you're okay. Melissa says that you've been a little

all over the place, and we value you, Lena. We want to make sure you're all right."

I swallowed, pushing my hair out of my face. "To be honest, the paparazzi are following me around everywhere, and it's very unnerving. I don't know what I'm supposed to do to get rid of them. They make me uncomfortable."

"So maybe you should talk to Jackson about getting a bodyguard. It's not out of sorts to ask for something like that. We've already decided to bring in the LAPD to move them off our property."

I nodded, feeling guilty they had to take those measures. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize my personal choices would cause such a mess. I never intended for this relationship to spill over into all aspects of my life."

Lewis chuckles, patting the top of his dark head like somehow what little hair he had might be out of place. "That's the thing with relationships. They permeate all corners of our lives, and if they don't, then it's probably not love—though I have to say this one is a little different."

"But anyway—" Melissa let out a sigh. "We were just letting you know that after today, you'll no longer have to deal with them here. We want this to be a safe place for you. You need to be able to come to work for the rest of the summer and feel like you are secure here."

"Thank you." The gratitude welling up in my chest nearly brought tears to my eyes. Lately, I'd been an emotional wreck—and I had no idea why—but it was probably all the stupid stress I'd been dealing with.

"Well, I'll let you get to your work. I don't want to keep you from getting things done before class starts in a half hour." Lewis stood to his feet, giving me a nod and patting my shoulder as he exited the classroom.

However, Melissa didn't budge from where she was sitting. "Lena, how long have you been seeing Jackson?"

My stomach dropped. "Um, I don't know. Since I met him at the concert this summer."

“But when he came to the classroom, it didn’t seem like the two of you were together.” She folded her arms across her chest. She didn’t believe me, and I didn’t blame her for it.

“I wasn’t sure if I wanted the world to know I was seeing him,” I blurted out, my mouth running faster than my filter. “I thought it would be unprofessional.”

“But the two of you were very tense. I didn’t think you liked him at all.”

“Well, I guess I achieved the goal of keeping our relationship under the table.” My words came out awkward and lopsided, but at least I was trying.

“Listen...” She leaned forward. “I need you to be honest with me. Is he *making* you do this?” The concern in her voice was palpable. “I had a friend in college who fell into a similar situation. Some big rich actor got his eye on her and he made her be his fake girlfriend for nearly two years while he repaired his reputation. For *two years*, she was stuck playing the part—and missing out on finding real love.”

“Um...no,” I answered, but then hesitated. “Things just... they just *happened* between us, and”—my eyes dropped to my ring—“I think it’s meant to be.” The lie made my stomach nauseous.

“Well, I know there’s NDAs and all that in place that keep you from telling me the truth, but I’m going to give you a big warning, Lena. And it’s not because I’m being mean. It’s because I *care* about you. In truth, it *wasn’t* a friend who went through that. It was *me*. And I fell in love with him.”

I looked up from the ring, meeting her gaze. “Really?”

“Yeah, Collin Wentsworth. He’s not all that big now, but fifteen years ago, he was. I bet you had no idea that I was ever followed by paparazzi.”

I shook my head. “No, I had no idea.”

“Yeah, because we don’t mean anything to those big industry people. We’re just pawns in their game, and if you let them, they’ll eat you alive. Don’t let them ruin your life or take your security. You demand the bodyguard. You tell them

what *you* need out of this, because at the end of the day, they're going to spit you right back out—and in months, you'll be a nobody again.”

I swallowed hard. “Well, good thing I'm not in that situation.”

“Yeah.” She stood to her feet. “I hope that's not the case for you. I hope that proposal I watched on TMZ was the real thing. I hope he meant the words he said to you, and that you two are just madly in love—and stay that way forever. *But—*” She stopped beside me, placing her hand on my shoulder. “If it's what I *think* it is, just be careful.”

I didn't even know what to say, scared that I might confirm her suspicions by saying anything at all.

“Don't worry, I won't tell anyone what I think about it,” she added as she reached for the handle. “But seriously, you need to call your fiancé and ask for a bodyguard. It'll make dealing with the press a lot easier.”

I nodded, checking the time. I still had twenty minutes before class started. I pulled out my phone and scrolled to Jackson's number. Would it be weird if I called him? I wasn't sure. I had a key to his house, but even that seemed different. Before I could change my mind, I hit the call button and put it up to my ear.

He answered on the first ring. “Are you okay?”

“Um, yeah, kind of.”

“You've never called me before.” His voice sounded strained, but not like he had just gotten up. “I just wasn't sure if you were in trouble or something.”

“No, but...um...” I struggled as silence filled the line. “The paparazzi were at the school again today, and my bosses were waiting for me when I got to the classroom—”

“Oh shit, you *did* get in trouble.”

“No, not at all. They're going to take care of the paparazzi problem here at the school, but...do you think...”

“Do I think? Well, I’d like to think that I do.” He burst into laughter on the other end of the phone, and I giggled.

“I *know* you think, I just meant to ask you...” I let out a sharp exhale. “Could you maybe help me find a bodyguard? I don’t know where to find them.” I couldn’t bring myself to ask *him* to supply me with one. I didn’t want him doing anything for me—even if he was the reason for it all.

“Of course,” he said, his voice losing humor. “I’ll have one sent over to the school today. Does that work? Or do you need one sooner? I can come if there’s something wrong. Is someone harassing you?” His voice gained a startling edge.

“No, no one is harassing me.”

“Good, I’m the only one allowed to do that. I’ll send a bodyguard over—and he can bring you to my house tonight. We need to talk about some things.”

“Okay,” I said with a sigh. *Great.*

JACKSON

“So I think the verse should start like this.” Tyson cleared his throat, messing around on the piano. “*When I saw you, I just knew, that there was going to be something there.*”

I groaned. “That sounds fucking ridiculous. We don’t write this kind of shit. That sounds like something that should be played on pop radio or something.”

“I think it’s good,” Aaron commented, messing around on one of the guitars. “I think there can be something heavy in the mystery that comes with love.”

“You must’ve smoked weed before you showed up,” I snapped at him, holding my guitar in my lap. “I just don’t think we’re the kind of band that writes shit like this. I know they want us to put out a love-themed album, but there’s got to be a way to add more grit.”

“Okay, so what do you have then?” Tyson stopped playing, folding his arms across his chest.

“I don’t have anything at all. You know that. You know that I don’t do love.”

“Okay, then I guess we’ll just fucking circle back to what Genna was saying this morning. Hypothetically, what would you do if you *were* in love.”

“I would jump off a cliff,” I laughed, shaking my head and tearing into a riff on my guitar. “And it would be fucking great, letting the water swallow me right up.”

“Okay, well that’s great, but not for this album.” Nel facepalmed. “Come on, we’ve all been in love or thought we were at some point. You gotta dig deep, Jackson. If you’re scared of love, write about that. Write about losing someone you love, or the pain that comes from it.”

“Yeah, I bet we could put that at the end of the album,” Tyson added, running his fingers through the scruffy beard he’d recently started growing. “It could be like the alternate side—bonus track.”

“Can I play on that?” I asked him, nodding to the piano.

“Sure.” He shrugged, switching me places. “Are you going to write something? Or just fuck around?”

“I write things by fucking around,” I chuckled, starting to play a riff—and then without even thinking, I started playing the song that Lena wrote.

Everyone went silent, listening as I worked my way through it.

“Whoa, what’s that?” Tyson asked, his eyes wide. “That’s something else.”

I nodded. “Lena wrote it. I heard her play it when I went to her classroom, and then she played it again at my place. It’s been stuck in my head ever since.”

“Does it have lyrics?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. She’s got a killer melody for it, but she hasn’t put any lyrics to it.”

Aaron perked up. “We should use it and credit her.”

“No fucking way,” I snapped, growing defensive. “It’s *her* song. I don’t want to take it from her. If anything, *she* should get to sing the whole thing.”

“Yeah, so feature her,” Tyson urged. “Talk about the epitome of a love album. The two of you sound so good

together.”

“Then when we break up, it’ll be a reminder,” I grunted, my heart actually dropping in my chest. It was startling. It didn’t belong. I shouldn’t be sad just thinking about when Lena and I would end our *fake* relationship. I bit down on my lip, drifting from the song that Lena wrote to something else.

“That’s good.” Tyson listened closer, picking up the progression on his guitar. “I like the way this is going.”

I broke the new song down to chords, the words coming to my brain in a flood. “*What if you’re someone I can’t go without? What if I’m someone you don’t want to talk about? And what if I’m falling for you...but I don’t want to.*”

“Write that shit down.” Tyson grinned. “Looks like Jackson has the capability to write a love song.”

I shrugged, not sure I agreed. “I don’t think that sounds like a love song.”

“Why not? You’re talking about falling for someone, even though you don’t want to. I think that could pan out to be the perfect love song.”

Nel nodded in agreement. “It’s the perfect love song for the guy who doesn’t want to fall in love—like *you*.”

I rolled my eyes. “The words work. That’s all that matters. Let’s see where can go from here.”

For the next few hours, we worked on taking the song further, and thankfully, Tyson was able to fill in most of the lyrical blanks. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t fucking conjure up what it would be like to actually be in love with someone.

All I could picture was Lena, playing that song on the piano.

And I was pretty sure that was *not* the definition of love. It was just a killer tune that I couldn’t get out of my head. Besides, I *did* know what love was. It was the way my brothers, my dad, and I had worked through life without my mom. But, I’d written plenty of songs about that kind of love.

And I knew that wasn’t what they wanted on this album.

“So, we’ll try again tomorrow?” Nel asked as he hung a guitar back up on the wall of Tyson’s music room. “I think that last song is really gonna be something.”

“I just don’t think Tyson’s lyrics work with what Jackson started,” Nel said, his comment catching me off guard. “Like, I get the gist, but I don’t think they match the tone.”

Tyson let out a sigh. “I was kind of thinking the same thing, honestly. Yeah, it works with the melody, but the tone is all wrong.”

“I think it’s fine,” I muttered, shaking my head as I headed for the door. Lena would be at my house by now, and I was curious to know how the bodyguard had panned out for her. I’d sent over Frank, who happened to be my favorite—and I knew I could trust him to take care of her too.

That was kind of a big deal.

“You’re just saying you think it’s fine because you want it to be.” Nel leveled with me, stopping me in the hallway. “I think you should sit down and really work on those lyrics that you started with. See if you can take it further in your alone time or something. Your best shit has always come from when you write alone.”

“I’ll try,” I said, mostly just to get him off my back. “We’ll see what happens. I didn’t really feel that one going anywhere for me.”

“Okay, well, listen to some Taylor Swift or something. You know, get your head in the game of love. You can do it.” Nel patted me on the back. “Side note though, I got a date tonight with a Russian model. I’m fuckin’ *stoked*.”

“Maybe you’ll be the one with the next love song then,” I grunted as he took off down the stairs. I watched as he burst out the front door, singing loudly off key.

“He’s terrible at relationships.” Aaron smacked my arm. “But I bet he will come up with some kind of song based off her. His lyrics are always fuckin’ wild though. He’ll want to write a song about how hot her body was—and that shit gets old.”

“Since when do you think that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. As stupid as it is, Tyson and Maeve have kind of inspired me. Maybe love isn’t so stupid. Maybe finding the right person is a good thing. I don’t know. Even you and Lena are something else. Yeah, it’s fake, but if you wanted it to be, it could be real.”

“Yeah, that makes no sense,” I lied as I descended the stairs. “But whatever you say, man.”

“You wanna go out tonight?”

“Uh...” My voice trailed off, my mind running back to Lena waiting at home. “Not tonight. I have some shit I have to do.”

“You say that all the time now. You must be starting a new hobby or something.”

“Nope, just trying not to get myself into any more trouble. If I get arrested again, Genna might murder me.”

“She’d enjoy it too, probably,” Aaron joked, letting out a sigh as we made it to the front door. As soon as he opened it, Maeve blew through, a huge smile on her face—but the moment she saw us, she frowned.

“I totally thought you were Ty,” she giggled. “I was all excited for nothing.”

“Gross.” I shuddered, slipping past her.

“Lena is at your house,” Maeve chimed from behind me. “She’s determined to finish that song that she’s been writing now. I think you inspired her.”

That made me stop, and I turned around. “Really?”

“Yeah, you’ve always inspired her—before she ever met you,” Maeve clarified, setting her shopping bags down at her feet. “I mean, I was obsessed with how hot Tyson was, and I like music...but Lena is different.”

“How so?”

“She *feels* the music. You know, I once read this quote that was like, *some people see the sunset, and some people feel it*. That’s Lena. She feels the sunset. So, she was always obsessed

with how much talent you had—and the feeling you brought to the music through your voice and lyrics. She always said she could *feel* what you were feeling.”

“Yeah?” I choked out, feeling all kinds of emotions about it. “That’s, uh, interesting.”

“It is,” Maeve said curtly. “That’s why you need to be careful with her. You think she doesn’t care about you, but she does. She’ll never tell you that though.”

I shook my head. “I think our relationship is clear.”

Clear as fucking mud.

She gave me a look, but I didn’t stay to hear what she had to say, rushing right out to the car. I knew that Lena was warming up to me, but there was no way that she had real feelings for me. She couldn’t stand me. It was obvious, right?

Right. It is.

That’s what had always made things between us safe. We didn’t like each other. Now, we might be considered friends, but people couldn’t hate each other and then fall into a real relationship...

My head spun as I made the fifteen-minute drive to my own place, and I wasn’t surprised when I pulled up to see Lena’s car there. She’d probably made the security guard follow her. I parked the car in the garage and went in the side door, seeing Frank, a burly six-foot-something white-headed guy, sitting on the couch.

“Hey, man,” I greeted him.

“Hey.” He gave me a nod. “Your new fiancée is a piece of work. She’s very independent.”

“Yeah, she’s something,” I grunted, heading up the stairs. “Is she in the music room?”

“I think so,” he called over his shoulder, some old movie playing on the TV. “She’s been up there since we got here.”

I nodded, taking the steps two at a time. For some reason, I was strangely excited to see her, though I wasn’t sure why. I

had to break it to her that we had a red-carpet premiere to go to—and that she needed to stay here overnight more often.

And I had no idea how she was gonna take that.

I caught myself opening the door slowly, the sound of her voice catching my ear.

“I don’t want anyone, I don’t want anyone, but I want you.”
The words flowed perfectly with the music she had written, and my heart jumped at the sound of her haunting voice. I pushed the door open more, and it creaked.

Fuck me.

The music stopped and she spun around on the bench, her cheeks red. “Oh my god. Did you hear that?”

I grinned. “Yeah, I did. Well, the last phrase, anyway.”

“Oh...”

I held her gaze. “It was beautiful.”

LENA

“**Y**ou really think so?” I couldn’t help but ask the question, embarrassed that he’d caught any part of the song. It wasn’t that well put together yet, and I was still struggling with the words.

“I do like it.” He sat on the bench beside me, his body brushing against mine. “I think it was really good. Will you play what you have for me?”

“Oh, no,” I said quickly. “It’s not very far...I don’t think it sounds that great. I’m not getting far with the words, either.”

“I know the feeling,” Jackson laughed. “I worked on the same song for like, three fucking hours, and at the end of practice, they basically told me that we need to redo it. They said my lyrics and music don’t vibe well with what Tyson wrote.”

“Play it for me.” I scooted over, pulling my hands from the piano.

He took a deep breath, looking down at me. “Okay, but you can’t judge me. They’re wanting us to write a love song, and it’s just not...it’s just not working for me.”

“I get that,” I reassured him. “Just sing what *you* wrote, and we’ll see what happens. It’s been so long since I collaborated with someone.”

He pursed his lips. “You sang with that Mason guy.”

“Yeah, but we’ve never really written anything together.” I giggled. “Are you jealous?”

His mouth dropped open. “Me? Jealous? Hell no.” But the way his eyes dropped away from mine made my heart flip. “Anyway...” He began to play a soft, heartfelt intro.

“Wow, that’s lovely,” I commented, catching his eye. “I swear you’ve written some of the prettiest melodies I’ve ever heard. It’s a shame they get covered by all that guitar.”

He grinned at me. “That’s rock ’n’ roll, baby.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sing the song.”

“What if you’re someone I can’t go without? What if I’m someone you don’t want to talk about? And what if I’m falling for you...but I don’t want to.”

“Oh...” My voice trailed off. “I like that.”

“Yeah, that’s all I have.”

“Play it again,” I instructed him.

He laughed. “Yes, ma’am.” He played through it again, and I listened to the confliction in his voice—and I understood it.

“I think I might...I think I might have something,” I said carefully. “But I’m no pro like you.”

“Sing it.” Jackson kept his eyes on me, letting me take the vocals.

“What if you’re someone I can’t go without? What if I’m someone you don’t want to talk about? And what if I’m falling for you...but I don’t want to.” And then I continued, adding my own. *“I catch myself, I tell myself, that we’re not supposed to be. You don’t even like me. But here we are.”*

His eyes widened. “Jeez.”

“What?” Heat flushed my cheeks. “I know it doesn’t exactly fit, but—”

“It’s fucking perfect,” Jackson said, his voice dropping low. “It fits perfect.”

“I just meant with the phrasing.”

“Yeah, I think it works just fine.” He grabbed for a notepad and pen, scribbling down what I’d just sung to him. “Do you think we could keep going? And don’t worry, we’ll make sure to credit you. You’ll get all the royalties from it.”

I made a face. “I don’t care about royalties, but okay.”

“So...” His voice trailed off. “I talked with Maeve today, and she said that you’ve always been inspired by my music.”

My shoulders slumped. “Oh god, you have to be kidding me. Don’t let it feed your ego. Let’s just get back to writing. I’m sure you hear that all the time.”

He laughed but shook his head. “Yeah, but she said that you *feel* what I write. What did you feel when I just played that first part?”

I searched his eyes, seeing that he was being serious, looking to me for some sort of answer. “Um, I guess I just felt the internal conflict of feeling attracted to someone, but not wanting to be with them—and maybe that’s not even it as much as just warring with yourself. The piano was kind of dark, and you threw in the minor chord where I wouldn’t have expected it...”

He looked at me with an awe that I hadn’t ever seen from him before. “Damn, you’re better at reading people than you let on.”

“Yeah, I guess the hypothetical love stuff is working for you,” I joked with him, thinking back to the conversation I’d had with Maeve at lunch. “Tyson told her that you made a big stink in the meeting.”

“Right,” he said in a flat voice, his expression shifting. “It was just dumb.”

I shrugged, giving him a smile. “I think there’s just this expectation that everyone thinks about falling in love at some point.”

“Maybe that’s true, but it’s never really been on my mind.”

“You mentioned it at the wedding,” I said carefully, recalling our conversation. “You said that *if* you met the right person, you might get married.”

He was quiet for a moment, his eyes falling to the keys. “Yeah, maybe. But I don’t think about it all the time.”

“I used to,” I admitted, letting my guard down since he was being so vulnerable with me. “I used to think I had it all planned out, how I wanted things to go—and the type of guy I wanted to be with. But...anytime I got something close, it didn’t work out, and now...” I let out a sigh. “Now I’m not sure what I want when it comes to love. Maybe the reason I haven’t found it yet is because I wasn’t willing to accept it from somewhere different than I dreamed up.”

He pursed his lips, appearing to mull over what I’d said. “So, where did you think you’d find love then?”

I laughed. “I was dead set on finding Mr. Right. I thought he needed to be into the same traditions my family is. They’re very strict in their beliefs and in the way things should go. You know, dating, marriage, baby...”

“Ah, so you want a goody-two-shoes kind of guy,” he laughed, but it was missing something. “Like, fucking prince charming.”

“Uh, I guess so,” I admitted, his eyes back on the piano. “But it never worked out for me.”

“Maybe you just haven’t found him yet,” Jackson said, his tone unreadable. “Who knows.”

“Yeah.” My heart sank in my chest as I took in just how freaking handsome Jackson looked in the moment. “Who knows.”

Instead of continuing the conversation, he went back to playing the same song he had been, his husky voice singing the line that I’d written. And I had to admit, it sounded even *better* when he sang it.

“Yeah, that’s staying,” he commented, nodding his head. “You should’ve been a songwriter instead of a teacher.”

I laughed, leaning back—and then lost my balance. “Whoa!”

Jackson caught me, his arm threading around my waist and pulling me back up. “You should really *not* lean back that far.”

“Ya think?” I giggled as his eyes danced with amusement.

He smiled, his hand still wrapped around my body, holding me closer to him. I breathed in his cologne, my heart thudding in my chest. I opened my mouth to say something, but he cut me off with his mouth.

Jackson’s kiss was soft and sweet, different than the lust-filled kisses he’d given me before. He pulled me into his lap, and I straddled him, feeling his arousal through my dress pants. My hips rocked against him, and he let out a deep groan, his voice rattling my body.

Our kiss stayed passionate, his tongue caressing mine and canvassing every inch of my mouth, even as he wrapped his arms around me and lifted me into the air. I ran my fingertips along the back of his neck, his hair soft against my touch. Jackson kicked open the music room door and made his way down the hall, not stopping until we were in his bedroom—and the door was closed behind us.

“Do you think he’s going to be able to hear?” I asked as Jackson laid me down on the bed.

“Who?” He furrowed his brows as his hands fumbled with my pants, tugging them down around my hips.

“The bodyguard...” My voice trailed off as my eyes flickered toward the door.

Jackson chuckled as he tossed my black dress pants to the floor. “No, he won’t hear. And if he does...oh well? We’re engaged.”

I didn’t have a chance to say anything else before his lips were on my thighs and his hands were gently pressing my legs apart. His fingers were ahead of his mouth, not stopping until they were at the hem of my black satin thong.

My body shivered with apprehension under his touch, and I laid my head back, letting him work my underwear down and off my legs. Every time we hooked up, things felt more and more natural between us...

And I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

Jackson let out a growl as he closed in on my pussy, his lips kissing only an inch away. "Always so ready..." He then ran his tongue through my slit, causing my legs to shake around him. He clamped down on them, wrapping his arms around my thighs and holding me to his face.

Oh my god. Oh my god.

His lips closed around my clit, and he sucked me in, a searing burst of pleasure following. I ran my hands down my still-clothed stomach, not stopping until they were in his hair, pulling at the same rate my hips tried to move.

"*Jackson...*" I moaned as I drew near the edge, my climax threatening to drop down on me like a bomb.

He let out a groan in response, picking up his pace as he covered every inch of my pussy, not stopping until his tongue lunged inside of me. "You taste like heaven, Lena. I swear," he murmured into me, his hot breath leaving me chilled.

I clung to him just as I crested, riding the wave of a heavy orgasm. It pulsed through my body, and I closed my eyes as my toes curled into the soft duvet on Jackson's bed. He lapped up every ounce of me, and then stood to his feet.

Jackson's lips glimmered under the light, and just like always, he leaned over and kissed me, letting me taste myself. As soon as our lips had parted, I tugged my blouse over my head and Jackson stripped down as well. He was faster than me, his hands aiding in unhooking my bra and setting my breasts free.

"You're so gorgeous." His eyes held mine as he stood over me, both of us bare in the dimly lit room. "I don't think I've ever seen anything so beautiful."

I swallowed hard, lost in his eyes as he situated us on the bed. I rested my head back on a pillow for a split second...

And then changed my mind.

“You lie down,” I said, sitting up and tugging him downward.

“Oh?” He shot me a wicked grin. “I like this idea.”

My face grew hot, mostly because I hadn't been on top in so long, but...I figured it was like riding a bicycle...right? Straddling Jackson's hips, I positioned myself above his cock, teasing the tip with my pussy's entrance.

“I knew you were a tease,” he said in a raspy tone, his hands landing on my hips. “This is fucking torture.”

I gave him a smile and then dropped down his shaft, my lips parting as it stretched my pussy to its limit. *Oh my god, he feels so big this way.*

“Oh fuck,” Jackson growled as I took all of him, crying out as I sat firmly against him.

And then I began to move.

At first, I kept my movements slow, my hands braced against his chest, but as I gained confidence in my hips, I picked up my pace. Jackson's eyes raked over my body, his lids heavy with lust and pleasure.

Cries and moans slipped from my throat as I worked, my thighs burning as I felt my own pleasure returning, an orgasm slipping into reach. Jackson's iron grip stayed on my hips and then moved to my breasts, palming them as he watched me.

“Just like that,” he said in a low, husky voice. “Holy shit.” Jackson then sat up, his mouth landing on my neck as I wrapped my arms around him.

And then I exploded.

My pussy pulsed around him as I nearly screamed his name. He came immediately in response, his cock throbbing inside of me. I breathed in the scent of sex mixed with his cologne that had permeated the room as his head rested against my collarbone.

“You’re so addictive,” Jackson finally said as he tilted his head back. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to break the habit.”

I held his gaze for a moment, my heart doing flip-flops in my chest. “Well, I guess there’s always rehab.”

He chuckled, shaking his head at me. “I don’t want to go.”

I laughed as I climbed off of him, trying not to read into it too much. “So...I, um, I heard about some kind of red-carpet event coming up. Genna emailed me this evening about it. She said I’ll be getting fitted for a dress tomorrow.”

Jackson nodded, letting out a heavy sigh. “Yeah, I hate walking the red carpet, but it’ll be fine. I promise I’ll be on my best behavior.” He smiled at me as I reached for his shirt and stuck my arms through it. “Does putting on my shirt mean you’re staying the night?”

I hesitated just as the shirt dropped, covering most of my body. “I...I wasn’t sure...” I waited for his reaction, his smile never fading.

He shrugged. “Sure, but you’re gonna have to sleep in here.”

JACKSON

“**S**he’s been staying the night?” Tyson shot me a curious look as we waited downstairs for Maeve and Lena, both getting ready together with a slew of makeup and hair stylists.

I shrugged. “It helps the whole *engaged* image.”

“I guess...” Tyson said, though I knew he was judging my decision.

“Once this is over, whatever’s happening between Lena and me will have to be over too.” I ignored the way Tyson’s lips dropped into a disapproving frown.

“You know it’s never that easy.”

“Yeah, well, we don’t like each other. It won’t be all that hard.”

“I don’t know why you keep saying—” Tyson never got a chance to finish as Maeve and Lena appeared at the top of the staircase in his house. My eyes immediately went to Lena, who wore a tight-fitted black gown, cut out at the sides. It was *not* what I’d expected the team to put her in...

But I loved the edgy look.

Her hair was swept to the side in waves, cascading over her shoulder, and no offense to anyone else, but no one held a

candle to just how fucking gorgeous she looked...

And I'm not sure anyone could compare even on a normal day, anyway.

"How do I look?" Maeve asked Tyson as she stuck her arms out, posing for him in her red gown.

Tyson grinned, running up the steps to take her hand. "The most beautiful girl in the world."

Lena's eyes hesitantly met mine and the moment had me charging up the stairs like Tyson, not stopping until I was there beside her, offering my arm.

"I might fall on my face in these heels," she mumbled, threading her freshly manicured hand around my forearm.

"It's a good thing I'll be here to catch you then. I'd hate for the most beautiful woman to fall and injure herself." I wasn't sure why I let the words slip out, but the look on her face was worth it, a deep red blush building beneath the makeup.

"Where's Aaron and Nel?" Tyson called up to me—like I had the answer.

"I don't know. They're supposed to be here anytime." I made my way slowly down the stairs, taking my time so that Lena really didn't trip in the heels they had her in. I was pretty sure she could walk just fine, but seriously, I didn't want her to fall. The media ate that kind of clumsy moment up—and their scrutiny always led to memes and stupid videos.

That was fine for me.

But not for Lena.

I would protect her from that.

—elle

"You just have to smile."

"But there are *so* many cameras," Lena whispered just as the limo door opened. "I don't know if I can do this."

"You can," I reassured her, motioning for Nel and Aaron to go first. They didn't have dates, and usually I was a part of

that group...but not anymore.

“You’ve got this,” Maeve added, placing her hand on Lena’s. “This is only my second time to do this, but they’re not out to take horrible pictures tonight. I promise. It’s going to be fun. Just soak it in—and like Jackson said, *smile*.”

“Okay, okay.” She took a deep breath, her eyes focused on all the flashing lights just outside the limo.

“Let’s just go right behind them.” I grabbed her hand, guiding her out of the car.

“I haven’t even had a chance to check my makeup or hair,” Lena said in a low voice, her expression panicky.

“You look gorgeous as always,” I reassured her as I gave the crowd a wave. “You have nothing to be worried about.” I squeezed her hand, looking back at Lena. “*You got this*.”

She nodded, clinging to my hand as we made our way down the red carpet. People were shouting things at us, asking questions and making comments—mostly about what we were wearing. However, I didn’t respond to any of them, and neither did Lena. She knew to follow my lead. I led her to where Maeve and Tyson had just posed for their shots, and then I stopped us, pulling her into me.

“Let’s give them some good shots,” I whispered in her ear.

“You two are so sweet!” someone shouted from behind the cameras. “We love this!”

I reached for her chin, pressing a light kiss against her lips. I heard her breath catch, and as much as I wanted to kiss her deeply, I stopped myself. No one liked that kind of PDA, and it always seemed forced once the pictures were taken. If I was going to pull this whole thing off, I wanted to be respectful. After all, to the rest of the world, this woman was about to be my wife.

And strangely, I found myself enjoying the fantasy. I was *proud* to be toting Lena around on my arm. I tried not to think any more about it as we finished taking pictures, and I led her out of the spotlight, entering the venue.

“How come there aren’t any cameras in here?” Lena glanced around, clearly shocked at the relaxed atmosphere.

“That’s because this is a pretty private screening. They can’t let the press in.”

“Oh...” She followed me to the table where the rest of the band—and Maeve—was seated. I pulled out her chair and then I took a seat, letting out a relieved sigh. It was always good when that walk was over.

“It wasn’t so bad, was it?” Maeve asked Lena, her thick, freshly filled lips curled in a smile. “Once you make it inside, you’re in the clear.”

“Thankfully.” Lena laughed, reaching for my water. “Now what?”

“Now we enjoy the premiere of *The Valiant Quest* for the next two-and-a-half hours,” Nel groaned, but then perked up. “And *then* we get to hit the after-party.”

Not feeling that.

I sat for the next two hours, watching a film that I thought was mediocre at best. Dragons and bloody battles weren’t really my cup of tea.

Lena seemed bored as well, though I had to give it to her—she didn’t spend the entire night on her phone like Maeve did. She paid attention, clapping with the others at various moments.

“Ready?” I turned to her as soon as the screen went black.

She nodded. “I guess so.”

I scrutinized the expression on her face. “Not feeling like a night of partying?”

She sighed. “I know it’s part of the job.”

“Not really,” I said to her, pushing back from the table and standing to my feet. “I have a much better idea.” I took her hand and led her out the back exit, flagging down Frank and one of the black Tahoes.

“Where are we going?” Lena asked with an edge in her voice.

“You’ll see.” I gestured for her to climb into the back seat and then joined her. “Hey, Frank, can you take us to the spot off the pier?”

“Yep,” he grunted from the front seat as he put the car in drive.

Lena gave me a strange look, but I just let it sit. It was okay to have some mystery, and the fact that she was letting me take her somewhere showed that she trusted me—and I liked the way that felt. I glanced over to her, seeing her head leaning back against the seat.

And my mind flashed to what it might be like *if* this was real.

Would I be happy to settle down? To trade long nights of partying for nights like this? I blinked a few times, and then ripped my eyes away from her.

If I could ensure that I wouldn’t end up broken, I probably *would* be willing to give up the high life.

But would I choose to do that with *Lena*?

My heart flipped in my chest, and I pushed the thought away, not even willing to mull it over. *Sometimes things are just better left unanswered.*

“Here,” Frank announced as he pulled up to the curb. “You want me to come along or wait in the car?”

I peered around us, checking for any signs of sneaky paparazzi, but didn’t see anything suspicious. “I think we’re good.” I reached up, patting him on the shoulder. “Have a nice nap, man.”

Shoving open the car door, I slid out and offered a hand to Lena, who looked more confused than ever. “Come on.”

“We’re at the beach?”

“Yeah, it’s one of my favorite spots. I come here sometimes to write. Never brought anyone else, but I thought you might

like it.”

That brought a smile to her face. “Show me.”

I lent her my arm as we made our way to the sand. The moonlight glistened on the black material of her gown, and something about her seemed to glow as she giggled, loosening the straps on her heels.

“Will they get mad at me if I mess up the dress?” She looked up as she held her shoes in her hand.

I shrugged. “I bought it for you. It’s yours.”

“Oh...it’s not like, a rental?”

“Nope,” I chuckled, eyeing her as I left my shoes in the sand and headed for dark waters. I headed for the spot beneath the pier, but before I could make it three steps, Lena took off past me, headed right for the water. “What the...”

She collided with it, bursting into laughter as her dress was soaked from the thighs down. I shook my head at the sight...

And then joined her.

The warm Pacific waters soaked my tux, and I couldn’t think of a time when I had *ever* done something like this—sober, at least.

Lena shrieked as I kicked up salt water at her, soaking her chest. “Oh, you’re totally going to pay for that.” She lunged at me, pulling me downward. I laughed until we both went under for a split second, immediately popping back up on our knees.

“Oh my god, I bet my makeup is toast,” she giggled, wiping the dark smear of mascara under her eyes. She only made it worse, but...there was something about the way she was letting loose that only made the moment that much better.

“It’s fine.” I reached for her, my fingers slipping into her wet hair.

“Is it?” Her eyes searched mine under the moonlight.

“Yeah, I think I like you better like this.” I leaned down, kissing her lips and letting myself feel the magic of the moment.

Until I heard the *snap* of a camera.

Damnit!

I ripped my head away from hers, and we caught sight of a group of three, snapping pictures from about fifteen feet away. Lena peered up at me with wide eyes, and I sprang into action, sweeping her up and heading toward the Tahoe.

“No after-party for these lovebirds!” one of them called after us.

Yeah, and you fucking ruined the moment too.

LENA

“Jackson Whiss and fiancée, Lena Harris, enjoy a sizzling night out at the beach,” the TMZ reporter said from the TV screen.

“Whoa...” Maeve’s voice trailed off as her eyes widened. “You told me you had fun at the beach, but you didn’t mention it was *that* kind of fun.”

I stared at the picture of Jackson and me, lip-locked in the water. “Yeah...”

“Was it staged?” Maeve turned to me, her brows furrowed. “Tyson even mentioned that he thought it might be, since most of the after-parties are pretty locked down. Not much press inside.”

I hesitated, wondering if I should just say that it was. It would be easier to pretend like it was just part of the show, but I couldn’t bring myself to lie to my best friend. “No,” I finally said. “It wasn’t staged.”

Her mouth gaped, just like I thought it would. “*What?!*”

“It’s...everything between us is so complicated.”

“Uh, yeah, it seems to be that way—and I think you need to spill the tea, girl.” She gave me a look, folding her arms across her chest. “Is he playing you?”

I laughed. “No, he’s not playing me. I think it’s pretty clear that it’s just some sort of physical fling for him.”

“But what is it for you?”

“Whatever it is for him,” I muttered, letting out a sigh. “I’m not stupid enough to let myself really fall for him.”

“I don’t think you can decide whether or not you fall for someone,” Maeve said carefully, spinning her wedding ring around her finger. “I didn’t exactly *want* to fall for Tyson. It just...*happened*.”

I shook my head, sinking lower into the plush velvet couch in Tyson’s den. “I think you were looking for something.”

“Yeah, but with someone like Tyson? No way. I said I wanted to marry a wealthy man, but not a rock star. There’s so much shit that I have to deal with now. The women, the fame, the parties, and lunatic fans—you know what it entails.”

“Not for me.” I shuddered. “I don’t think I could do this long term.”

Maeve shrugged, eyeing the TV as more pictures of Jackson and me flashed across the screen. “I think it’s something that I’ll get used to. There’s a lot of fun in it, and the band has a lot of moments where they’re here—like now. Plus, I can go on tour with them some. That’ll be fun.”

“I guess that works for modeling...but not so much for teaching.” The moment I said the words, I realized that Maeve and I were in completely different situations. She was *really* married to Tyson. I was just playing house. “I don’t know why I even said that,” I added quickly, giving her a sheepish look.

Maeve frowned. “Oh, Lena.”

“What?”

“I’m so worried he’s going to hurt you.”

I swallowed hard, forcing a smile. “No way.” But my heart didn’t lie, and deep down, I was already feeling the dread of what was to come. I shifted in my seat as Maeve grabbed the bowl of chips on the coffee table.

“I swear I crave salt so bad when I’m on my period.”

Laughing, I glanced back at the TV. “Yeah, I think it’s about time for me to start craving ice cream. Forget the salt. Mother Nature always brings me mad cravings for sweets.”

Maeve giggled. “Remember that time you pounded an entire package of Oreos?”

“Yes.” I cringed, shuddering. “That one-hundred-percent came back to bite me the next day. I think I haven’t even touched an Oreo since—not the birthday cake kind, at least.” My stomach churned at the thought, and mentally I made a note of it. If Maeve had started her period, it would be about time for me to start mine.

But I was never really all that regular.

“Does your mom know yet?” Maeve’s question pulled me from my thoughts.

“No,” I admitted, bracing for what was to come.

“Oh my god, you have to tell her before she sees this,” Maeve said, nearly spilling the chips as she spun on the loveseat to face me. “You can’t let her find out through the tabloids. That would be *horrible*.”

“I think no matter what I tell her or how she finds out,” I began, sharply exhaling, it’s not going to go over well. You know how she feels about people like Jackson.”

Maeve made a face. “Just tell her it’s fake.”

“But I’m bound by the NDA *not* to tell her that it’s fake.”

“Okay, but she’s your mom, Lena. Who is she going to tell? Your dad? Like, I think being honest is the best way to deal with the shit storm it’s going to bring from back home.”

I sighed, my stomach churning for one reason or another. “Yeah, maybe I should just tell her the truth. I just know regardless, she’s going to be pissed at me.”

“You’re not a child anymore.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to cause rifts in my family just because of some fake arrangement.”

“One that’s going to pay off their debt,” Maeve pointed out. “Maybe you should throw that in there too.”

“Oh jeez.” I facepalmed. “That might make it even worse.”

But she’s right. It’s time to tell her.



I paced the floor of my kitchen. I’d been able to sneak home for a while since Jackson and the band were at practice, and Maeve was busy with a modeling job. Normally, the quiet Saturday night might’ve been exactly what I needed, but my stomach sloshed with anxiety as I hit the call button beside my mom’s photo.

Here we go.

“Hey!” Her voice came over the line on the third ring. “I hadn’t heard from you and was just thinking of calling.”

“Great minds think alike,” I choked out, trying to remember what I had mentally rehearsed ever since Maeve and I had talked.

“Everything okay?”

“Um, well...” My voice trailed off. *Just say it, Lena. Say it.*

“What is it?” Her voice dropped with worry.

“I don’t know if you’ve seen the tabloids, but...” I swallowed hard. “I’m faking an engagement with Jackson Whiss.”

“Jackson who?”

“Jackson Whiss,” I repeated myself. “He’s the lead singer of that band I always liked—”

“The one where you got the VIP upgrade for free,” she said, letting out a sigh. “I take it this is when you met him?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, not sure how to take the tone of her voice. “Yeah, I met him there—and you know, Maeve married Tyson, who’s another member of the band.”

“Of course. I remember you mentioning something about that. You keep so much from me these days.”

I gritted my teeth, trying not to jump on the defensive. “I really don’t. I’m just...I’ve been really busy.”

“Busy dating some rock star.”

“Uh, well, kind of.”

“Yeah, not kind of. Definitely,” Mom snapped, her voice growing sharp. “I just pulled it up right here on my laptop. “You’re engaged, apparently.”

“Yeah, but like I said, it’s fake.”

“Is it *fake* or do you just not want us to know what’s really going on in your life?” Her question stung, and I closed my eyes.

Don’t fight with her. She’s probably just speaking out of hurt.

“It’s fake. I had to sign a bunch of NDAs. I’m not supposed to be telling anyone that it’s not real, but...I can’t lie to you guys. I’m being paid for it.”

“Like an escort,” she snorted.

“No,” I argued. “Not like that at all. I’m not being paid to sleep with him or something.”

“But are you?”

“Mom!” I nearly shouted. “I’m trying to be honest with you about what’s going on in my life, and you’re not making this easy. This is why I hadn’t even bothered to tell you.”

She sighed heavily, like my words pained her. “Sorry. It’s just a shock to the system. I never thought you’d do something like this.”

She makes it sound like I’ve become a prostitute.

I pursed my lips. “I’m sorry. The media had already linked us, because we hung out a few times. He came to the class that I teach to work with the kids. His PR team pushed for it, and they offered to pay for my school, among other things.” I didn’t mention using some of the money to help pay for their house. Or mine.

“So...it’s a shortcut to paying for school.”

“There’s no way you’re not going to be mad at me for this,” I said, plopping down on my couch in my living room. “I guess there’s no reason to keep talking about it then. It is what it is. I just wanted to give you a heads-up for when you saw the pictures online. Well, *if* you saw them.”

“Well, I’ve seen them now. He doesn’t seem like that upstanding of a figure. Seems like a problem, if you ask me.”

I found myself growing defensive again. “He’s not as bad as the tabloids make him out to be. That’s how this stuff works. It’s all blown up.”

“Well, I’m glad this isn’t a real relationship. I don’t know how your father would take you getting involved with someone like Jackson. He’s a disgrace—and that’s what he would be to the family.”

“Right,” I said, unable to conjure up any other thought. “I know what kind of man you want me to marry.”

“Yes, and that’s the kind of man you always seem to date too. This is quite a shock. We want someone who will treat you the way you deserve, and this just...this man just...I don’t know. He seems like a big heartbreak. Or at least an STD.”

“Well, good thing it’s not real,” I snapped, reminding her again. “No need to worry about being disgraced. I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later. Love you.”

“Love you.” She barely got the words in before I hung up the phone, tossing it onto the couch.

A disgrace.

That’s what I would be if I fell for Jackson for real.

I guess it’s a good thing we’re just a complicated fling then.

JACKSON

“How’s Lena?” Genna asked me as I plopped down into my chair in the meeting room. I leaned back against it and shrugged.

“I don’t know.”

“You should know. She’s your fiancée.”

“I haven’t seen her all weekend. We’ve been busy working on songs. She’s been busy hiding away from the shit show I brought to her doorstep.”

“But she’s hanging in there,” Genna commented, sounding more like she was asking a question rather than making a statement.

“I mean, I guess.”

“She’s fine,” Tyson answered for me, ignoring the look I shot him. “Maeve said she was taking the weekend to herself to get away from the spotlight. No one knows where she lives yet, so it’s kind of her safe place. Those beach photos got everything stirring.”

“Yes, and speaking of those...” Genna turned to me. “Good job. We had planned some dates, but I think that was ingenious, really. It was just what the public needed to see. So, smart thinking.”

“Uh huh,” I managed to say, pretending like the whole thing was just another ruse. No one needed to know I’d actually *wanted* to take her there. Or kiss her. Or fuck her, for that matter.

“So was this meeting called because of him?” Nel asked impatiently, gesturing to me. He had dark circles under his eyes from a weekend of partying, and I had to admit...

I didn’t miss the hangovers.

I didn’t really miss any of it.

And that was something I was coming to terms with. Maybe slowing down for a while wouldn’t be such a bad thing. Lena seemed to have a lot of fun without the fast life...and I might too.

“No, we didn’t call you here today about Jackson,” Tim spoke up, sounding nearly as tired as Nel. “We’re doing a surprise end-of-summer revamp tour.”

“Wait...what?” I asked, glancing around. “I figured that was off the table by now. Summer is nearly over. Tyson just got married. Seems a little extra.”

“Since when do you turn down the opportunity to go out on the road?” Genna questioned me, her dark brows raised with curiosity. “You were the initial one pushing for the extra leg of the tour.”

“Yeah, but...” I didn’t have a good reason, and thankfully, I didn’t have to come up with one as Genna continued.

“I think a successful tour could show any potential new owner of the label that you guys are worth keeping around.”

Right, they’re selling the label. I should buy it, and then I can do whatever I want.

The thought swirled around in my head over the next few moments, while the team discussed the upcoming end-of-summer tour. Buying the label didn’t make a lot of sense if I wanted to keep touring like crazy...

But it *would* mean slowing down.

And that brought my head right back to the fact that I was enjoying a simpler life. Besides, all my brothers and my father were businessmen.

“So I’m thinking a solid month should be enough to get the crowds excited,” Tim was saying as I came back to reality. “And we all agree that you should have at least *one* new song ready to go from the new album.”

“That’s asking a lot,” Tyson grunted. “We’re not supposed to start recording until September. I feel like this push might be too much. We don’t have anything ready.”

Genna frowned. “You’ve been practicing nonstop.”

“Yeah, because we can’t come up with shit,” I reasoned, shaking my head. “You can’t force us to write a love album, and then start making more demands. We might have a song ready before the tour, and we might not.”

“Well, the label is saying that you better,” Tim cut in, pursing his lips. “And they’re having me represent them right now. Stan has officially stepped away.”

“Already? Is there a buyer?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. I think he’s just trying to distance himself. He’s been over this company for a long time. He’s burned out. Stan was never creative. He’s just in it for the money.”

And we have to prepare for the buyer not to be creative either, which means we have to prove our worth with dollar signs.

That didn’t set right in my chest, but there was nothing I could do about it. That was how it had always been, and probably how it would always be—unless I bought it.

Hmm.

“Anyway, we leave in five days.”

“Great,” Aaron said. “I’m ready to get the hell out of here for a spell.”

“I guess I am too.” Nel shrugged.

Tyson looked over at me, and I could tell he was less enthused. “Maeve will probably be excited. She missed the last tour, and she’s been dying to see what road life is like. I don’t think she understands that it isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Genna chirped, her dark eyes meeting mine. “Lena will be going with us.”

“Uh...I don’t think so.”

“And why not?”

“Because summer classes haven’t ended yet. They have their final program the week after we leave. That school doesn’t start again until September.”

Genna sighed. “Well, I’m sure they can find a replacement for her. We need her on the tour with you, making an appearance.”

“She’s not going to agree to it,” I argued, growing more and more irritated with every passing second. “It’s not even fair to ask her to go. Significant others miss out on tours all the time.”

“Yeah, but we *want* her there for press purposes. This is working out, and we want it to stay that way.”

“And we think she’ll keep you on your best behavior,” Tim added, pushing back from the table. “So, she’s going. If she doesn’t, then the deal is off. It’ll mean breaking the contract.”

My mouth dropped open. “No way. That’s not fair. Look at what she’s done so far!”

“Okay, she’s attended some event with you and shown her face to the world. That’s not very much for what she’s getting.” Genna made a face.

“Uh, *I’m* the one paying her. It’s my say.”

“It’s in the contract,” Tim grunted. “Do you want me to send you another copy of it? Because I can. Lena needs to go on the tour. Period. This conversation is over, Jackson.”

“Even if I swear I’ll behave?”

Genna laughed. “We know you won’t. You never do.”

Everyone in the room was silent, even as Tim and Genna exited, the door shutting loudly behind them. I stared at my hands, and then pushed back from the table.

“It’s just a month,” Tyson said softly. “It’ll be fine.”

“No, it won’t,” I snapped. “I already know that it won’t. She’s got classes to teach *and* she’s going to start school too. So it really just fucks up everything.”

“She’ll be fine,” Nel snorted as I ripped open the door. “She’s getting fuckin’ paid for it.”

I wanted to deck him in the face for saying it—even if it was the truth. But I didn’t need to cause any unnecessary drama with anyone, especially a bandmate. There was just something about Lena that stirred up my emotions, even when it was all indirectly related to her.

Storming out of the label office and across the parking lot, I whipped open the door of my car and slid in. I started the engine and checked the clock. Lena would be at work right now, and there was no sense in bothering her.

But I would have to break the news to her somehow.

I sat in my car, letting it idle while I scrolled through my phone. My dad’s message thread popped up, and I realized it had been a while since we’d talked. *Maybe he would have something to say about all of this.* I hit the call button and waited for him to answer, backing out and heading home.

“Hey, son,” Dad answered, sounding pretty chipper.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Uh, just fixing to board a plane to South Carolina.”

That’s interesting...

“If you’re busy, I can let you go.”

“No, no. I got time. What’s going on? You sound a little stressed. Everything good? I saw the tabloids, by the way.”

“Yeah, I figured you had.”

“Fake?”

“You know me way too well,” I muttered, somewhat insulted that he never even batted an eye at the articles.

“Well, I know that if your relationship with that woman was real, you would’ve talked to me about it. I know the pressure you’re under with all the fame that surrounds you. I figured your PR manager concocted it all.”

“You’re not wrong,” I said, leaning back in the seat as I navigated traffic. “It’s complicated though.”

“What’s complicated about it? Don’t they just have her show up at certain times to put on a show? That’s how it was done back in my day. She’s a plant, pretty much.”

“Uh…” My voice trailed off as my mind filled with intimate images of Lena. “I might have let it cross the line a few times.”

Dad sighed. “Playing with fire, son. If you don’t have real feelings for her, don’t do that to her.”

“I think I’ve made my stance clear. We don’t really get along.” But that last part felt like a lie, suddenly. I couldn’t put my finger on *when* things had changed, but they had. We didn’t really argue at all anymore.

“Well, all I have to say is that men can break hearts just as much as women can—especially men with a deep-seated fear of love and commitment.”

“You get your therapist license recently?” I snorted, brushing off the way his words hit.

“Ha ha,” Dad groaned. “I think I just realized that I spent way too long hung up and hurting—and I projected it all on you boys.”

Oof. Yeah. Not going there right now.

“Eh, we turned out fine,” I said quickly. “Anyway, I found out the label is being put up for sale.”

“Yeah?” Dad sounded intrigued. “That’s interesting. Got any buyers?”

“I don’t know...but I’m kicking around the idea of buying it.”

Silence.

“I think I might be ready to slow down some,” I admitted, my thoughts going back to the beach with Lena. The simplicity of the moment had been magical.

And I wondered if there was more of that to be found.

Maybe I would look into it...after the tour, of course.

LENA

“Miss Harris?” One of my students, Louisa, raised her hand. “My mom said that you’re in love with Jackson. Is that true?”

I stared at the little blonde-headed girl, wishing that free time in class meant something other than talking about my personal life. “Um, I suppose that’s the truth.”

“You don’t marry someone unless you love them,” Aliyah, sitting cross-legged on the carpet, shot back at Louisa.

“In the movies it sometimes happens that way,” Louisa argued. “It’s called a ranged marriage.”

“I think you mean an *arranged* marriage,” I corrected her, letting out a sigh. “And no, Jackson and I are not in an arranged marriage.” *Just a completely fake engagement.*

“Yeah, ’cause you’re not married at all.” One of the boys, Ben, burst into a fit of laughter. “My mom says that Jackson Whiss is just nothin’ but bad news. She says he’s a man slut.”

“*Ben*,” I warned him, using my teacher tone. “We don’t use that kind of language in my classroom.”

“Sorry, Miss Harris.” He ducked his head.

“So do you love him?” Louisa circled back to the question at hand—one that I had already answered.

“Yes,” I said, the lie rolling off my lips like it wasn’t one at all. Putting on the front was getting easier, though I had to admit that the easier it got, the guiltier I felt...and the more I questioned my own integrity.

I felt like a con man.

“Can we watch a movie?” Brittan, one of the quieter boys in the class, chimed. He looked at me with a hopeful expression on his face—and as much as I wanted to agree to a movie...

“Class lets out in ten minutes,” I said, sighing again. “We’re just going to wait it out. Your parents will be here to pick you up at any time.”

“Does Jackson pick you up?” Aliyah asked me, tilting her head. “My dad picks up my mom sometimes...but they’re not married anymore. I don’t know why he picks her up.”

Well, that’s interesting.

“Jackson is not going to pick me up today,” I clarified, casting my eyes toward where Frank was sitting in the hallway. The bodyguard did a good job of staying out of my way—and half the time, I forgot he was there at all. It was weird.

“Does he pick you up sometimes?” Louisa raised an eyebrow. “It’s not nice if he doesn’t pick you up sometimes.”

“He picks me up sometimes.” *And carries me to the bed.* The thought made me blush, and I pushed it away. I had been staying at my own house lately. I hadn’t been at his since the night we worked on the song.

“Dad says their band is going on tour again,” Ben said, looking at Aliyah. “Jackson will probably cheat on her while he’s gone. That’s what rock stars do.”

Oh my god. The things these kids say.

“He’s not going to do that.” My voice came out sharper than I intended, but regardless, the point was made. “And enough talking about Jackson. You all can find something else to talk about.”

However, Ben's words still stuck in my head as they started to discuss other topics. Jackson and I weren't *really* together. It wouldn't matter what he did when he went on tour...

But it still made my stomach knot up when I thought about him being with someone else.

Would he be bothered if I was with someone else?

Before I contemplated it too much, thinking back on the night with Mason, there was a knock on the classroom door. Sure enough, parents were already showing up to pick up the kids. During the summer program, parents were allowed to enter the school to pick them up versus having to wait in the car line.

I jumped to my feet and headed for the door, opening it and checking the tags for security. I knew most of the faces of the parents by now, but every now and then, someone different would pick up one of the students.

That didn't happen today, however.

I told each student to have a nice evening as they left, and when I'd said my last goodbye, I let out a heavy sigh. I was *over* this day. Mondays were the worst.

And part of me missed seeing Jackson over the weekend.

We hadn't even spoken, which I found to be odd—but it did make sense. I had the chance to spend the weekend at home, so maybe he thought I needed a break.

"You ready to go?" Frank asked as he stepped into the classroom, leaning against the doorframe. "Parking lot looks pretty clear."

I eyed him. "I never trust that. They come out of the woodwork."

He laughed, his deep tone carrying through the room. "They do. That's for sure—and for some reason, they really have their eye on you."

Gathering up my things, I nodded. "I don't know why. I'm not all that interesting."

“Yeah, you are. You’re normal. That makes you interesting to all the people in the world who follow Jackson. It gives some women hope somewhere that someone ordinary can land some rock star like Jackson. You don’t have to be a model or be famous yourself. Everyone loves a fan love story.”

Talk about a false narrative.

“Maybe so,” I said instead. After all, Frank didn’t know that it was all fake between us. I slung my bag over my shoulder and fixed my cardigan hanging on the back of the chair. There was no need to take it home. I’d be back tomorrow. “I’m ready.”

He nodded, letting me step out of the classroom before shutting the door behind us. “Should be a straight shot right to the Tahoe.”

I nodded but didn’t say anything. I just wanted to go home. My heels clicked down the hallway, and just like always, my heart began to pound in my chest. At home, I didn’t really have the anxiety of paparazzi showing up, but at school? Yeah, they all knew that I was there.

“Here we go,” Frank muttered as he pushed open the door leading to the staff parking lot. I stepped out into the evening air, breathing it in—even if it didn’t feel all that clean in the moment. It was still better than the stale air of the classroom.

“*LENA! OVER HERE!*” Someone shouted, startling me, and Frank cursed loudly, wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

“Shit.”

I ducked my head and shielded my face as we headed for the Tahoe, parked in the middle of the large parking lot. After only a few steps forward, a *freaking mob* of paparazzi rounded the corner.

“What the hell is this?” Frank nearly shouted, shaking his head. “We’re going to be bombarded!”

“Lena, show us that smile!”

“Rock star wife-to-be, look over here!”

“You know you’re the most envied woman on the planet right now?”

“Come on, show us something!”

I fought to keep my head down as they surrounded us and Frank latched onto me, dragging me through the crowd. I tensed as one of them bumped into me.

“Get the hell back!” Frank shouted, nearly shoving a few of them. “These aren’t just press. These are fans.”

“Lena!” People kept yelling my name as we tried to weave between cars. A few others blocked our exit, and I felt myself beginning to panic.

Are they going to hurt me?

My heart pounded in my ears as I clung to Frank, desperate to just get the hell out of there. I swallowed hard and looked ahead, seeing that the Tahoe was surrounded.

“This is fuckin’ nuts,” Frank muttered, shaking his head. “We’re gonna have to go back to the school.”

“No,” I argued. “I just want to go home.”

“I don’t think I can get you there safely. I need more help. This crowd is crazy.” Just as the words left his mouth, he was proven right, as someone threw a soft drink at us. The cup exploded against my shirt, soaking my thin blue blouse.

“That’s what you get for taking our man!”

I felt the sobs welling up in my chest as Frank spun us around and nearly lifted me into the air as he broke into a trot back to the school building. I fumbled with my keys, and he shielded me as I unlocked the building. The crowd funneled to the door, but Frank was able to close it.

“I’ll find the director and tell her to call the police. This is just rowdy.”

“What if they don’t leave?” I called after him, feeling a tear roll down my cheek.

“They will. They’re nuts, but the moment the cop car flashes at them, they usually disperse.” With that, Frank disappeared

down the hallway, headed to find Melissa. I unlocked my classroom, slipping out of sight of the people with their phones outside.

This is absolute madness.

I took a deep, shaky breath and glanced down at my shirt, knowing the dark liquid would leave a nasty stain. My phone buzzed in my bag, and I reached for it, wondering if somehow my cell phone number had gotten out too.

But it hadn't.

It was Jackson.

"Hello," I said, trying to sound like nothing was wrong.

"Lena, I'm so sorry. I just heard from Frank. I'm on the way to come and get you."

"Um..." I hesitated. "I think I'll be fine. Frank said the crowd should go away once the police show up. Then I can go home."

He was quiet for a few moments. "You're going to have to come here...I know you had the weekend at your house..."

"Right," I said flatly, wiping the anxious sweat from my forehead. "I forgot about me staying with you all the time."

"Yeah...and we have some things to talk about too."

"So that's why you called?" I couldn't hide my frustration. "It wasn't really to check on me, was it?"

"Lena, I *just* said I was on my way to get you. If all I cared about was talking to you, I wouldn't be on my way."

I shook my head, fighting off the emotions welling up in my chest—emotions that I really had no right to feel. Jackson didn't *have* to care about me at all. It was just business.

"I'll be there in five minutes," he said to my silence. "I'm going to come through a back way, even if there's no one there. I just want to get you out of there without any more problems."

“Yeah, okay,” I said, shaking my head. I hung up the phone before he could say anything more about it. I needed to get my wits about me before he showed up.

“You okay?” Melissa asked, peeking her head into the classroom.

I turned to her, forcing a smile—even as her eyes widened as they took in the dark stain on my shirt. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

JACKSON

“I’ll buy you a new shirt,” I said to Lena as she climbed into the car beside me. “I promise.”

“I don’t want a new shirt.” Her voice was flat as she tugged at the seat belt, pulling it across her lap. “I just want to get away from these people.”

“Well, lucky for you, the police scared them off before I ever even showed up,” I chuckled, trying to make light of the situation.

It didn’t work.

Lena didn’t say a single word as the Tahoe pulled away from the school, Frank and another security guard in the front seat. She focused her attention toward the window, never even bothering to look over at me.

Fuck. She’s mad.

Well, or something. I couldn’t read her in the moment, and I didn’t dare go poking her right now. I knew what it was like to have a crowd try to take over, and the first time it happens, it’s frightening.

“We need a better security team in place at the school,” Frank said to me, meeting my gaze in the rearview. “It’s not okay for her to deal with this all the time.”

“This is the first time it’s been this bad,” I reasoned, glancing over to Lena. She didn’t budge—or offer up anything to the conversation.

“Yeah, but you can’t expect it to just go away. It’s fucking ridiculous.”

“Why do they not do this to Maeve?” Lena’s voice came as a surprise, and it was a nice one, even if she was pissed off at me for whatever reason.

“Because Tyson isn’t the frontman. He doesn’t have the celebrity status that Jackson has.” Frank gave her a sympathetic smile. “He’s the face of the band. Tyson is a major player, but he’s not the face. It’s a big difference. Sure, people still swoon over him, but it’s not at the same rate.”

“That’s stupid,” Lena mumbled under her breath, glancing at me.

“Well, I happen to agree with you.”

She glared at me. “Why?”

“Because the rest of the band does a lot of the heavy lifting. I don’t think it’s fair they get less attention—even though I think they prefer it that way.”

“I don’t blame them.”

For a second, I suddenly felt jealous of the other guys. Maybe Lena wouldn’t be so mad at me if I didn’t have the status that I did. I used to revel in it...

But right now, it just felt like a fucking burden.

“The novelty will wear off,” Frank said, his focus still on Lena. “It might take some time, but it will.”

And then that’ll be it.

My stomach sank at the thought. Maybe we could still be friends once it was all said and done. Maybe we could even write music together. She didn’t have to just disappear from my life...

But she’ll probably want to.

I leaned back against the seat and stayed silent for the rest of the ride to my place, not even saying anything as Lena and I climbed out. I waved to the guys as they backed out, heading home for the evening to have some normalcy themselves. And yet again, I felt a pang of jealousy.

Maybe I should buy a cabin in the woods somewhere so we can escape.

My eyes flickered back to Lena, who was pulling open the front door. Her shoulders sagged and even in the fading light, I could see that her cheeks were tearstained.

Fuck me for that.

“Lena.” I trotted to catch up with her, grabbing the door before it shut me out entirely. I reached for her arm, stopping her before she was too far gone. She spun around to face me, her eyes bleary. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. You’re upset.”

“It happens.”

“It shouldn’t happen because of me. I don’t want to ever be the reason you cry. It fucking kills me to be.”

Her brows rose. “Since when do you care?”

Wow, okay. She’s definitely had a bad day.

“I always care.” It wasn’t a great answer, but she seemed to accept it, relaxing a little.

“They ruined my shirt,” she said, holding it out like I hadn’t seen it yet. “Why did they throw soda on me?”

“Because they’re assholes. They do stuff like that all the time. We’ve had a lot of weird shit thrown at us—but thankfully not *actual* shit. That would be disgusting.” She giggled half-heartedly and it brought me some relief. “Come on, let’s go shower.”

She gave me a funny look, but I didn’t give her a chance to second-guess it. I grabbed her hand and tugged her up the

stairs, not stopping until we were stepping into my master bathroom. I shut the door and turned to her.

“Jackson...” Her voice trailed off as I tugged her blouse up and over her head. “I don’t think...”

“This is a good idea?” I murmured, taking in her figure in the tight white camisole. It was stained too, and I made a mental note of it. I’d have to buy her another one of those. “I just want you to feel better.” I stepped toward her, closing the space between us.

Leaning down, I planted a soft kiss on her lips. “Do you feel better yet?”

She smiled but shook her head. “Not yet.”

“I’m going to have to get creative then.” I chuckled darkly, my cock already alive at the idea. “But maybe we should wash that sticky off of you.”

She bit down on her lip as I tugged the camisole over her head. Her soft skin glistened under the warm glow of the bathroom lights, and once again, I was taken with her figure.

“I know I’ve said it a million times, but you’re gorgeous,” I murmured, my lips trailing down her jaw as my hands slid around to unhook her bra. She let out a moan as her breasts came free, and I tugged off the bra, tossing it to the floor.

My hands found the snap on her pants, and I undid them, letting her step out. I then stripped out of my own clothes, shooting her a wicked grin when her eyes landed on my erection.

“You turn me on so bad,” I said to her, turning on the water in the shower. “You drive me fucking crazy, actually.”

“Mmm.” She pulled at her hair, letting it fall past her shoulders. Her naked body was right there in front of me, and I devoured the sight of it. I didn’t know what it was about Lena, but I wasn’t sure if I’d ever get tired of looking at her. Her curves, her freckles, her bright eyes—I saw nothing but perfection, for the first time in my life.

And as scary as it was, I couldn’t fucking get away from her.

I grabbed her hand and led her toward the warm water, double-checking the temperature before stepping under the stream. The stone-walled shower had been built with multiple rain showerheads, which meant neither of us had to go without.

Lena's heavy sigh caught my attention, and for a moment, I let myself just watch her. Her eyes were shut, her head tipped back, and she was letting the water stream down her face and body.

Damn, she's really something.

I reached for the soap on the rack, squirting some into the palm of my hand to warm it up. I created a lather and then gently reached out, rubbing her shoulders and working my way down her back.

"Oh my god, that feels so good," she murmured, her eyes still shut.

I tried to ignore my throbbing cock as I stepped closer to her, my tip brushing her backside. The animal in me wanted to bend her over and fuck her, but the man in me felt she needed something completely different in the moment.

And that's who I was going with tonight.

"I'm sorry today was rough," I said softly, continuing to wash her back and lower hips. "I really am."

"Why didn't you call me over the weekend?" Her question caught me by surprise as her eyes fluttered open and she tilted her head to look back at me.

"Maeve said you needed some space—well, she told Tyson that. I just...I know we got interrupted at the beach, and I was letting you have some time to cool off."

"Yeah, I guess..."

I hesitated, my hands stopping just above her perfect, round ass. "Did you want me to call you?" The question sounded stupid, but I meant it. I had no idea what Lena wanted from me. This fake relationship on top of being a sexual fling made things...*complicated*.

“I don’t know.”

And that doesn’t clear it up.

“I’ll call you from now on.”

She laughed but there was no humor in it. “You don’t have to call me. This isn’t real.”

“What’s not real?” I asked her, running my fingers down the crest of her outer hips to the tops of her thighs. “Because you *feel* really real to me. I don’t think this is a dream.”

“You know what I mean.” She spun around to face me, and my hands slipped back, landing on her ass.

Ah, fuck.

I had to fight the urge not to squeeze as her eyes darkened. “This *is* real. What’s happening between us right now, Lena. I want you. You want me. I don’t see what’s more real than that.”

She pursed her lips, like she might argue but didn’t. Instead, she stood on her tiptoes, catching my lips with her own beneath the stream of water. A groan escaped my lips as her hand latched onto my cock and she began to stroke me.

“Fuck, Lena,” I growled as her lips traveled down my jaw to my neck. “I wasn’t planning to do this...”

She didn’t say anything as she continued downward, kissing my abs as she lowered herself, not stopping until her tongue replaced her hand.

Fuck me.

She ran it along the tip of my dick, circling it once before drawing me into her mouth. Another growl escaped from my chest, and as much as I had wanted to make this moment all about *her* feeling better, I couldn’t bring myself to pull away.

Lena sucked me in, her hands placed around the base of my cock. She fell into a rhythm that made my head spin, and one of my hands went to steady myself against the wall, while the other threaded through her hair.

God, she’s perfect.

Arousal thrummed through my body as her head bobbed, and it took everything I had not to explode inside of her mouth—but I didn't want that to happen. I wanted to explode inside her pussy.

My hands slipped from her hair to her elbows, pulling her up. Her eyes flickered with a moment of confusion, but I didn't give her any time to express it further.

I picked her up and pinned her against the wall, plunging my dick deep inside of her. Lena's face contorted as she let out a cry, her arms wrapping tightly around my neck. I thrust into her, feeling the warm, tight pulsing sensation of Lena's pussy as she exploded with an orgasm.

"Jackson..." she moaned, her fingernails digging into the back of my neck. "Oh my god!"

I forced my head back, my nose brushing hers as I took her in a hot, heady kiss. She moaned into my mouth as I devoured her, still pumping into her pussy. My chest felt warm against her body—warmer than the water streaming down my back. My back muscles shuddered as I drew closer to my own orgasm.

Fuck, fuck, fuck...

The growl building in my chest rattled my ribcage as I finally came, clinging to Lena like my life depended on her. I came hard and fast and did my best not to crush her against the stone walls as I finished. My head fell into the nape of her neck as I sucked in shallow breaths.

Lena's fingers threaded through my hair, playing with the wet strands. She let out a light sigh, and I pulled my head back to study her cryptic expression.

"What is it?" I asked her, searching her eyes.

She smiled, but it was without much gumption. "Nothing. It's just easy to get caught up in the moment."

"I like being caught up in the moment with you." I set her legs down gently, leaning in to kiss the bridge of her nose. "And speaking of, I have something I want to talk to you about..."

Her eyes narrowed. “What is it?”

LENA

My heart took an extra beat in my chest as I stepped back from him. “Can I at least get dressed first?” I was already on edge from the entire situation at the school, and what little relief I’d gotten from the moment of heat with Jackson had faded... *quickly*.

“Yeah, of course.” He shook out his hair as he grabbed a towel, sending water droplets everywhere.

I slipped out of his bedroom, swooping up the clothes that I’d worn to his house. Despite the conversation about me staying at his house more often, I still hadn’t brought any of my clothes over. It just didn’t feel *right*.

Because we’re not really together.

And I *knew* that. The fact that I had to keep reminding myself about it made my head spin. I was too emotional about us, and Maeve was right...maybe I *was* too attached to Jackson.

“Here, wear this.” Jackson’s voice caught me off guard as he handed me a T-shirt. “Your shirt got a stain on it...”

“Right,” I muttered, taking it from him and slipping the black Rolling Stones shirt over top of my bra. I pulled on my pants and then rolled up the rest of my clothes, setting them on

the bed beside me as I took a seat, focused on Jackson. “So... what is it that we need to talk about?”

The look on his face was borderline troubling as he stood in front of me, wearing only a pair of boxer briefs. I *hated* how attracted I was to him now—not that I hadn’t been before. It was just...more so, now.

“I had a meeting with the PR team,” Jackson began, tossing his towel into the opening of the bathroom. I heard it hit the tile floor with a soft thump but kept my attention on the bright green eyes focused on me.

“And?” I urged, growing impatient. “What happened?”

He let out a worrisome sigh. “We’re going on an end-of-summer tour.”

I hesitated, trying to decipher *why* this was some kind of big deal. “Does this have to do with the fact that I was being weird about you not calling me over the weekend? Because that totally doesn’t matter...I was just being weird,” I said quickly, trying to downplay it. “I know this isn’t a real relationship.”

And I keep feeling the need to remind everyone of that.

Jackson made a face that I couldn’t read for a moment, but then shook his head. “It’s got nothing to do with any of that, actually.”

“Oh...”

“It’s about the tour...”

I bit down on my bottom lip, trying desperately to understand what he was trying to get at—and why he was being so elusive about it. “Just say whatever it is.”

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “They want you to go with us.”

I blinked a couple of times, processing what he said—and still not seeing the big deal. “When do you leave? How long is the tour?”

“Well, we leave *soon*. I think they’re considering as early as next week, which would be fine, but—”

“I’m not done with my summer classes,” I cut him off, my brows furrowed. “There’s no way they’ll be able to come up with a substitute at the last minute, and the kids will be so bummed. I’ve been working to put together their final program too.” My voice fell, and then I realized *this* was why he wasn’t looking forward to talking about it. “I can’t go.”

Jackson let out a sharp sigh. “You have to.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you *do*.”

Frustration began to build in my chest, and I struggled to maintain my composure after *everything* I had been through. “Why do I have to?” I stood to my feet. “It wasn’t written in the contract. *Nothing* was said. It makes no sense at all. I’ve done everything that I’m supposed to do!”

“Lena, calm down.” Jackson took a step toward me, stretching out his hands. “I’ll pay to help find a substitute, and then we can figure out a way for you to start the semester online or something.”

“Oh my god,” I said, exasperated. “You mean to tell me I have to miss out on my master’s program too? Why can’t I just stay here? Plenty of rock stars don’t take their significant others. Can’t I just fly out to see you or something?” My voice shook with anger and frustration.

“Lena, I tried.” His shoulders fell.

“How hard did you try?” I demanded, feeling my emotions slipping up on me. I knew it wasn’t a fair question. I *knew* it. But still, my relationship with Jackson was so difficult to understand. Sometimes I thought he actually cared, and other times I had to remind myself of *why* we were still talking and seeing each other.

It was nothing but business—and a little pleasure.

“I tried really hard.” Jackson’s voice caught me off guard after a moment had passed between us. “I swear. I didn’t want you to come.”

Ouch. It shouldn’t have hurt, but it did.

“So why do I have to go then?” I choked out, swooping up my things in my arms.

“Because Genna thinks it’s a good idea. I don’t know. They were really adamant about it, and I tried to fight it. I tried hard, but they didn’t go for it. I’m really sorry.”

“Well, I’m not going,” I said defiantly. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“Then the contract is broken.”

I shook my head. “That’s not fair.”

“No, but that’s what they said—”

“But *you* are paying me, right?”

“Yeah, but in the contract, it says—”

I stopped him before he could come up with some other stupid fucking excuse. “No, you know what? Don’t worry about it.” I slipped my feet into my black flats by the door and headed out, not stopping even as he called after me.

“You can’t just fuckin’ leave!”

“Yes, I can,” I called back, my feet thundering down the stairs. “The deal is off. I’m *done*.” I pulled out my phone and scheduled an Uber as soon as my feet hit the ground floor. Jackson wasn’t far behind me, but I paid him no attention. Leaving his house pissed off and upset was becoming a thing, apparently.

“Come on, Lena.” Jackson grabbed my wrist, his grip gentle. “Please don’t leave. There has to be something we can do to work this out.”

“Work *what* out?” I ripped my arm away from him, spinning around to face him. “There’s nothing to work out. This—all of this”—I motioned between the two of us—“was nothing but a job. I can’t meet the requirements.”

“But what about your school? What about your house?” He sounded desperate, and I seriously wasn’t sure why. There was no reason it should matter to him.

“I’ll be fine. I’ve *always* been fine—and maybe if this is over, my mom won’t be mad at me anymore,” I added, feeling the tears well up in my eyes.

“What?” Jackson looked confused. “Why would your mom be mad at you?”

“Nothing,” I snapped, shaking my head. “It’s none of your business.”

“Lena...” His face fell. “I thought—”

“Don’t,” I stopped him. “Just *don’t*. We’re *not* friends. We’re not anything. And whatever business arrangement there was between us—it’s *over*. I’ve given up having a normal life for this, and I’m not even respected enough to be allowed to finish my summer job and start my classes.”

“But...”

My phone pinged with a notification of the Uber waiting for me outside. I glanced down at it, and then back up at Jackson, not missing the unreadable but negative expression on his face.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” I said, batting a rogue tear from my cheek. “We hook up, but it doesn’t mean anything. I’m your fiancée, but it’s fake—but we’re sleeping together. I can’t...I can’t do it anymore. And I’m not going to sacrifice my life anymore. There’s no amount of money that’s worth losing my sanity.”

Surprisingly, Jackson didn’t argue.

And he didn’t stop me when I headed for the front door, pushing it open. The air hit my face in a warm and humid rush, my damp hair feeling sticky against the back of my neck. I made my way to the end of the driveway, slipping through the walk-through gate where a black car was waiting for me. I glanced back over my shoulder, but there was no sign of Jackson.

Reaching for the handle, I took a deep breath.

It’s over. It’s really over.

I slid into the car and pulled up my calendar, staring at the month—and the time I would miss from work and school. There was no way I was going to miss out on that. I mean, Jackson didn't even want me to go anyway.

And then my eyes fell on a little red dot two weeks prior.

Wait a minute...

My stomach knotted up at the realization. I was late for my period.

Really late.

JACKSON

*F*orget about her.

The thought echoed around in my head as I climbed onto the tour bus, my bag slung over my shoulder. I loved being on the road. Well, at least I thought I did. Right now, I wasn't sure what I was feeling—but I did know that it was nothing close to excitement.

“Oh my god!” I heard Maeve say from behind me. “This is going to be *so* amazing!” Her voice was like nails on a chalkboard for my ears. I cringed, sliding into the booth and focusing my attention out the window.

“It sucks so bad that Lena couldn't come,” Maeve added as she passed me, giving me the stink eye—like somehow it was *my* fault that she wasn't there.

I chose not to make a comment, mostly because I had nothing nice to say about any of it. Good riddance to Lena. I'd tried to call her. I'd tried to text her.

And nothing.

She never replied to any of it.

I leaned back against the leather seat, peering out into the darkness. It was early, *really* early. However, we had a concert to get to tonight. Management had worked hard to fill the

schedule, and part of me wondered if it had anything to do with Lena falling through the cracks.

“You look like shit,” Nel chuckled to me, raising a brow. “You spend the night out last night? I sure as hell wish I would have. Maybe then I’d be able to sleep on this stupid bus.”

I shook my head. “I haven’t gone out in a long time...but maybe I should.” The thought seemed exhausting, but I needed to do *something* to stop thinking about her. Though, the last time I got drunk, I’d ended up punching some guy in the face—because of Lena.

Fuck me.

“You still heartbroken?” Aaron slid in beside me, patting my shoulder.

I forced a laugh. “I’m not fuckin’ *heartbroken*. I’m just tired.”

“Lies,” Aaron chimed. “I know you’re heartbroken.”

Nel rolled his eyes. “He’s probably just pissed off that he wasted so much time with someone who seriously bailed on him.”

“She had good reason.” I found myself growing defensive, even if I was mad at her.

“No, she didn’t,” Nel snorted, shaking his head as he leaned his chin on his hand. “She forfeited a lot, and for what? Doing some dumb program with a handful of kids? They probably won’t even remember her in a few months.”

My chest *burned* with anger. “Shut up,” I sneered. “She makes a huge difference in those kids’ lives.”

Nel made a face like he might argue with me, but then went silent. He ran his fingers through his hair and leaned his head against the windowsill, closing his eyes.

“He’s just bitter because he’s lonely,” Aaron chuckled, meeting my gaze as the bus lurched forward. “He wants someone so bad, and it never works out for him.”

Nel mumbled something incoherent, and Aaron and I exchanged a glance before bursting into laughter.

“I have no idea how he sleeps like that.”

“Me either,” I agreed with him, though as the laughter faded and the hum of the road filled the bus, reality sank back in. I pulled out my phone, hitting the button to check for notifications. There were plenty.

But none of them mattered.

“It’s okay to admit that you’re torn up about her.” Aaron’s voice dropped. “We all know you liked her—and if you like her, make it right.”

“I’m just mad at her for bailing on me.” I forced out the words, though they didn’t seem to ring true in my head.

“So you’re mad that you don’t have a fake fiancée—one that you didn’t want from the beginning, anyway? You should be jumping for joy right now. You can party and give the world hell like you always do.”

I nodded, considering the idea again as a way of getting past the chaos. “I could...”

“You shouldn’t,” a voice said from above me.

“Why?” I snapped, looking up at Tyson.

He curled his lip in disgust. “Don’t play stupid, Jackson. It’s obvious that you love her.”

“*Whoa*,” I stopped him, shaking my head. “Where the hell did you get that idea? I mean, was the sex good? Yeah. But it’s sex. Sex is almost always good.”

“Don’t downplay her,” Tyson growled, his aggression somewhat surprising me. He *was* Maeve’s husband, which meant he would more than likely take up for Lena if she was around. Or maybe if she wasn’t.

I didn’t see Maeve anywhere.

“She’s sleeping in the bedroom,” Tyson snapped, answering my question. “This has nothing to do with my wife. It’s *really* apparent that you have strong feelings for Lena. You’ve never

cared about any of your girlfriends. You never stopped partying. Lena changed a lot of things for you. I was starting to think you might settle down.”

I swallowed the emotions welling up in my throat. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t give a shit. It was just embarrassing.” Now I was talking out of my ass.

“Right, okay. Well, if you actually care about her, you should tell her how you feel—and that you miss her.”

“I tried to call her,” I blurted out before stopping myself.

Aaron raised a brow. “You do love her then?”

“No,” I said, exasperated. “I never said that, but we are... *friends*. I don’t like the way things ended between us, and I don’t want things to be the way they are.”

“You’re more than friends.” Tyson frowned.

I shook my head. “Nah, we’re not. And you know what?” My eyes bounced between the two of them. “I’m not fucking dealing with this from you two. Whatever stupid emotions got wrapped up in her just goes to show that women are nothing but heartbreak.”

“You’re going to regret not chasing after her,” Tyson scoffed, backing away and disappearing down the aisle.

“I don’t know why he has to be so stupid about this,” I spat, irritation still burning in my chest as I clunked my phone down on the table.

Aaron studied me for a few long beats. “He’s always been like that—and in his defense, you *have* changed since meeting Lena. Maybe it’s partially forced from the PR team, but... there’s no denying that it’s more than friends between the two of you.”

“Well...” I leaned forward, holding Aaron’s gaze. “You know what? It might have caused me to have some feelings, but it’s *over*: She doesn’t return my calls or texts. I need to move on. Women are problems, and the way she’s acting is the proof.”

“Maybe she’s just having a hard time with it too,” Aaron suggested.

I laughed. “No. But I think maybe it’s time for me to find myself again.” I folded my arms across my chest, the material of my sweatshirt soft against my skin. Lena had hurt me—friend or not.

And it’s time for me to forget she ever existed.

Fuck the media, the PR team, and everyone else.

It’s time to get back to being me.

LENA

*A*ugust 28th.

I stared at the date on the calendar. I should've started my master's program by now, but instead I was sitting behind the desk at the school, having accepted a full-time position. It was enough to keep my house without any roommates, and that in and of itself was a win, albeit small. My eyes shifted to the clock.

Mom will be here anytime.

We hadn't really talked all that much in a month, but she'd asked to come and help me decorate the classroom—and I'd accepted. Besides, I needed to talk to her. I needed to fix the bump in the road...

And break the news to her.

My hands fingered the desk drawer handle, feeling the cool brass surface. Gently, I slid it open, my gaze flickering down to the ultrasound picture. It was still fresh, and I knew that eventually I might have to talk to Jackson about it...

But from what I'd seen in the media, he was back to his old antics.

Other than a couple of missed calls and texts in the beginning, he had never reached out to me again, and that

made sense. It was just business to him. He probably didn't even remember me. However, throughout our separation, I'd come to terms with my feelings for him.

And I knew now that I had fallen *hard* for him.

"Hey, you," a small voice said from the doorway.

I turned to see my mom standing there, cradling a box in her arms. "Hey, Mom. You're a little early."

She nodded, eyeing me. "I got you some things for your classroom. It's kind of neat to have full rein of the room."

I smiled, pushing back from the desk and standing to my feet. "Yeah, it is. Not quite what I imagined I would be doing, but I'm happy with it. I like the staff here—and the kids."

"I just hope they don't bother you over what happened..." Mom's voice trailed off as she sat the box down on one of the front desks. "I know that I was too hard on you, and I'm sorry for that. I was just...I guess I was ashamed that you had to pay for school that way."

A lump formed in my throat, and I waved her off. "No, there's no need feel that way. It was a shortcut that I couldn't turn down. It was stupid of me to think it was a good idea..."

Mom's hand rested on the box, falling silent for a few moments. "I think...I think you should know that it's okay if you had real feelings for him. I had a knee-jerk reaction—and I shouldn't have—and I'm sorry it's taken me this long to tell you. I just want the best for you. I was worried that he would break your heart..." She paused, her lips turning downward in sympathy. "But I think he already did, didn't he?"

I wrung my hands in front of me, catching the soft, silk material of my white blouse. "I don't...yeah. He did. But it's my fault, really. I knew what I was getting into, but I fell for him anyway."

She nodded. "It happens, and I'm sorry I haven't been here for you like I should. I should've been here. It has to be hard with Maeve married to the band."

“Uh, well...” I laughed, though it lacked gumption. “It’s not really been all that hard. She’s not around much, since they’re on tour. I don’t think she’ll make me come around Jackson, anyway. I don’t think Jackson will want to be around me. I ruined their entire PR stunt.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of rumors circulating in the papers about the engagement being broken off, based on the way he’s been acting.” Mom pursed her lips together. “But honestly, it kind of seems like maybe *he* is heartbroken too.”

Now *that* caught my attention.

“Why do you say that?”

“Well,” Mom began, leaning against the desk, “when your dad and I broke up once—”

“You *broke up* once?”

She laughed. “It was a long time ago, but yes, we did. We weren’t angels back then, and I probably should’ve been more honest. But anyway, we broke up after dating for a few months—for reasons I don’t feel like sharing—but he went off the deep end. Your dad was drinking like crazy. He even got himself arrested! Can you picture Dad in jail?” Mom burst into a fit of laughter. “That night, I bailed him out.”

“And then you got back together?” I asked, still unable to picture my dad, a stoic man with dark-rimmed glasses, in *jail*.

“Sort of. It took a little back and forth before it finally worked out. The point is, is that love isn’t always cut and dry. Maybe Jackson didn’t care...but maybe he did.”

“Well...” I took a deep breath, unsure how to go about sharing the next part—but I knew that I should, considering things weren’t nearly as tense as I’d expected. “There’s more.”

Her eyes dropped to my hand on my stomach, which I hadn’t even realized I’d placed there. “Oh...Lena...”

I nodded, pulling open the drawer and retrieving the ultrasound. “I found out almost a month ago.”

She took the picture I held out to her, her eyes scanning over it. “I didn’t expect this.” Her voice was cryptic, and I cringed.

“I’m sorry.”

Mom looked up, her brows furrowed. “Don’t be sorry—and I know that it’ll be okay. But does...does he know?”

My shoulders fell as I shook my head. “I haven’t told him.”

“You know you should—and you should also tell him how you feel about him, Lena. If you’ve fallen for him, he should know.”

“Why?” I asked. “I don’t see why it matters. If he felt the same way about me, he would’ve told me. He’s damaged from his past, and I don’t think he wants something serious. I don’t think he wants a kid, either.”

“Well, he can at least help pay for things,” Mom said, shrugging. “But I don’t know, sometimes men are surprising.”

I let out a heavy sigh and leaned against the desk. “I don’t want him to be with me or something just because I’m pregnant.”

“You don’t have to be with him. I just meant...he might be more involved with the baby. A father is a good thing. He might straighten up.”

“I know you’re right, but I haven’t talked to him since the fight. I left. I called the deal off.”

“I know, but it hasn’t been all that long, honey...and he deserves to know.”

I knew she was right, but the fear of telling Jackson—and making him angry—was still there in the back of my mind. The last thing he wanted was a relationship. What would he think about having a *child*? With me, of all people.

Ugh.

“I get to be a grandma,” Mom chirped, a smile spreading across her face. “I can’t be upset about that.”

I laughed, but before I could say anything, my phone went off, ringing against my desk. I reached for it, not recognizing the New York number. Shrugging, I declined it.

But then they called again.

And again.

“Weird,” I muttered as I swooped it up, finally answering—and ignoring my mom’s curious face. “Hello?”

“Is this Lena Harris?” a woman’s voice asked over the phone.

“Um...yeah? Who is this?”

“This is Rachel Dyon with the New York City hospital. I see that you’re listed as the emergency contact for Jackson Whiss. There’s been an accident.”

JACKSON

“I missed you so much,” Lena whispered, her lips brushing against my earlobe.

“I missed you too,” I said to her, pulling her tighter into my arms. “Don’t ever go again. Please. Stay with me.”

She wrapped her arms tightly around me, the scent of her filling my nostrils. “No more drinking and getting crazy on stage.”

“No more,” I repeated, relieved to have some reason to stop being an idiot. I was losing my mind, and the more I partied, the more I just fucking missed her.

But she was here now.

No more being alone...

My eyes fluttered open, the chirp of the heart monitor playing like a metronome beside the hospital bed. My head pounded in rhythm with it, and as I inhaled the stale hospital room air, I realized I was alone. Snippets of Lena kept visiting me in my dreams, and now that I’d been on tour, acting wilder than ever...

I knew it was all just a fucking attempt to drink the real feelings away.

Well, *now* I knew. It had taken a drunken plunge from the stage and being *here*, in a hospital, to make me understand that I was never going to outrun the feelings I had for Lena. Maybe I'd fallen in love with her. Maybe I wished that our relationship was *real*. Maybe I wished that she would've just fucking *answered* the phone so I could hear her voice.

"You look better today." Tyson's voice caught my attention, and I glanced to my right. I hadn't realized he was sitting on the couch by the window, overlooking the city. "You remember what happened yet?"

"I fell off the stage?" I offered up, my mind replaying my loss of balance in the middle of a song.

"Looked more like a jump, but you were too hammered for me to tell the difference. The media is going crazy with it. They think you tried to...you know...since Lena is gone."

"No statement has been released saying that we broke up," I reasoned. "They don't have anything to stand on with that rumor."

"You didn't have to give a statement for the world to know. You've been acting like a lunatic—"

"And it's all been for nothing," I cut him off, my eyes falling to the cast on my right arm. It ran from my shoulder to my hand. *Great. I won't be playing for a long time.*

"You were swearing yesterday that you were back to your old self."

"Obviously, I'm not. I'm never going to be," I admitted, eyeing him warily. "We both know that Lena came in and fucked up my heart, man. She walked out."

"She walked out on a *business deal*. That's all there was for her to walk away from. You never gave her the option for it to be anything else. Well, you added the complication of a *no strings attached* fling for your own selfish gain."

"Okay, I'm an asshole."

"Yeah, you are." Tyson laughed. "But now what're you gonna do?"

I thought about it for a moment, the past with my mom flooding back. “I’m going to let her go. She deserves to be with the kind of guy who doesn’t have the damage that I have.”

“But you’re *not* damaged, Jackson. You just have to come to terms with the fact that not *every* woman is like your mom. Lena has shown up for you.”

“She walked away and never answered my calls,” I argued.

“Because it was *business*! She probably thinks that you have no feelings for her. Why would she accept calls or texts when she thinks it’s just about your image and some stupid PR stunt?”

“I don’t know...” My voice trailed off as I closed my eyes. There was so much to sift through in my head, trying to understand *why* I had fallen for Lena—and what the hell I was supposed to do about it. Part of me dreamed about buying the record label and settling down...with *her*.

But *happily ever after* wasn’t something that happened to guys like me.

“Excuse me, Mr. Whiss?” The nurse’s voice caused my eyes to flutter open. “You have a visitor. It’s your emergency contact.”

“What?” I felt confused, my eyes going to Tyson. “I thought *you* were my emergency contact.”

“I thought I was too...”

“That’s not what you filled out on the paperwork once you were admitted...” She looked at me cryptically, her white hair piled on top of her head in a bun. “Can I let her in? She’s come a long way.”

“Uh...sure,” I answered.

Her? Who did I write down? Surely not...

I waited with bated breath as the nurse disappeared, and I heard a short conversation happening outside the room—but I couldn’t make it out. The heart monitor picked up as I heard soft footsteps slowly enter the room, followed by a light sigh.

And I knew.

I just fucking knew.

“Hey, Lena.” Tyson stood to his feet the moment she appeared. “I’ll give you two some space.” He patted her shoulder and then shuffled out of the room.

I took in the sight of her, dressed in a pair of faded jeans and a black V-neck T-shirt. Her blonde hair was braided half-up, her face devoid of makeup.

Fuck, she’s a sight for sore eyes.

“Are you okay?” She rushed to the chair beside the hospital bed, her voice thick with emotion. “I saw the video...you took a hard fall.”

I stared at her, her perfume wrapping around me. I couldn’t believe that she was so fucking close to me again. “Where have you been?” I choked out.

Her brows furrowed. “I...I took the first flight I could out of Los Angeles, but the layover in Atlanta was ridiculous...I couldn’t find one straight through. I’m sorry. I have to fly back out this afternoon too. I couldn’t get off work for very long.”

“No, it doesn’t matter,” I stopped her, grabbing her hand. “I meant—I missed you, Lena. I fucking *missed* you. I don’t want you to go away again.”

Her eyes filled with moisture at my words, and my heart soared. “I guess maybe we were better friends than I thought.” Her voice came out awkward and strained, and I couldn’t blame her for holding back.

But that didn’t mean I had to.

She’d *showed up* for me.

She had fucking *showed up* when she didn’t have to.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” I said, letting the gratitude show. However, before I could say anything more to her, the entire management team entered the room.

So I grabbed her, and fucking kissed her.

Right in front of everyone.

She was hesitant as my tongue slipped through her lips, but she let me linger in her mouth for a few passionate moments before pulling away. Her eyes were wide as they studied my face.

“Are you on any painkillers?” Lena asked, her tone thick with the rasp of our kiss.

Tyson burst into laughter beside Tim. “Nope. He’s not. I think he just finally knocked himself hard enough in the head to get some sense into him. The nurse did, however, administer some sort of sedative to help his body get more rest.”

“It’s good to see you, Lena,” Tim said to her, smiling. “He’s been a wreck without you—and speaking of, we arranged your flight home direct. So that should make it a little less hectic. Jackson will be released tomorrow morning, and then he’ll be back in Los Angeles.”

I smiled over at her, squeezing her hand. I didn’t give a shit what they thought of me. I was just happy she was there. With me. For me.

And then I fell back asleep.

LENA

My heart pounded in my chest as I opened my door, Jackson standing awkwardly outside. “Have you even gone home yet?” I asked, taking in the sight of his rumpled T-shirt and black sweats. Don’t get me wrong, he looked as handsome as ever. But as happy as I was to see him, I was still nervous.

I didn’t know if his shift at the hospital was because of the drugs he was on, or if he actually wanted more from me. We never had a chance to talk much after the initial meeting with him sleeping. I also had to break the news to him tonight about something *much* bigger—and I had no idea how he was going to take it.

“I haven’t gone home. I just wanted to come here. I’m so fucking glad to see you, Lena.” He stepped through the door, using his good arm to pull me to him—and into a hot and heady kiss. He kicked the door shut as his body loomed over mine.

“Are you sure we should...?” I pulled away to search his eyes. “Your arm.” My eyes flickered to the cast.

“It’ll be fine,” he said, nodding to me. “Just get those fucking clothes off. I need you.”

My face went red as my pussy clenched with need for him. I stripped off my T-shirt, and Jackson watched, his lids heavy as I got down to just my black lace bra and matching underwear.

“I love the way you always wear black,” Jackson growled, swooping in and lifting me into the air with one arm. I squealed in surprise at his strength but didn’t stop him as he carried me to the bedroom. Carefully, he sat me down on my bed, standing above me.

“I missed you,” I said in a near whisper, tugging his T-shirt over his head. “And I’m sorry that I never answered the calls.”

“I don’t blame you for that.” Jackson’s warm hand slid along the small of my back as I balanced on my knees on the bed so I could work his shirt off completely. “I don’t blame you for anything that happened. I was a dick to you.”

“But you were honest.”

He shook his head. “Not entirely.” Instead of explaining, however, he leaned in, his lips taking in the soft skin of my neck. He sucked it into his mouth, and then slid his good hand down my backside. He slipped beneath my underwear, not stopping until he had rounded between my legs. His fingers slipped into the wetness of my pussy from behind, and I pressed my ass into his touch, taking two of his fingers.

“Fuck me,” he growled, nipping at my skin. “Let me have you. *Now*. I’m fucking *dying* for you.”

I unhooked my bra, letting my breasts fall free, and then leaned away from him to strip out of my underwear. He pushed his sweats down, his cock as threatening with its large girth as ever. I shuddered with excitement.

He grabbed for me, bending me over and facing away from him—and then *plunged* into me, not even giving me a chance to prepare. I let out a scream as he filled me entirely, his cock throbbing deep inside.

“*Oh, Jackson,*” I cried out, barely able to breathe. His body curved over mine as he laced a hand around me, lifting me up. My back pressed against his chest as he fucked me from behind, his lips attacking my neck. His hand palmed my

breasts, and the angle put his cock in the right spot, building my pleasure with every thrust of his hips.

“Your pussy is so good, baby,” Jackson groaned into my ear. “You’re always so fucking good.”

I whimpered as he thrust into me harder, the smell of our sex filling the room along with the sound of his body thudding against mine. His breaths grew deeper and more labored as I neared the edge of my orgasm. My hands gripped the side of his torso, my nails digging into his flesh.

“I missed you so much,” he whispered, and even in the middle of the heated moment, my heart squeezed, my own emotions nearly drowning me. I couldn’t manage to get the words out before my body came down around him, my orgasm hitting me harder than ever before.

“*Jackson!*” I sobbed, unable to feel anything other than the explosive pleasure thrumming through me.

“Oh fuck, Lena,” he growled, his body nearly stilling as he followed suit, filling me with his own climax. “I can’t hold back when you do that,” he rasped, his breath hot on my neck.

I clung to him as I finished riding the wave, coming down with pants and heavy breaths. “Oh my god.”

“It’s always like that,” Jackson said softly. “There’s something so special about us. I’ve never felt this with anyone else.”

“Me, either,” I admitted, my eyes dropping to the bed. *But I still have to tell him the truth.*

I pulled away, taking deep breaths to steady my heart. “I need to talk to you about something.”

“What? Is something wrong?” He gave me a weird look as he threaded the T-shirt back up his casted arm. “You have a weird look on your face.” I sighed, choosing to get dressed before I went into the details. “Lena...” Jackson’s voice trailed off, full of concern. “Just tell me. Are you seeing someone else or something?”

I stopped buttoning my jeans to look up at him. “I haven’t seen anyone since you.”

“Well, you *did* have that one date,” he said, his expression difficult to read.

“Yeah, *one*. That’s it, Jackson. I haven’t been with anyone other than you.”

“Okay...” He sounded confused, and then shook his head. “Do you think *I’ve* been with someone?”

I hesitated, not having thought of that, but now that he mentioned it...

“I haven’t been with anyone other than you.” Jackson’s voice was firm—and I believed him, actually. “Is that what you’re wondering?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s just that...I—I’m...I’m *pregnant*.”

He *froze*. “You’re...”

Taking a deep breath, I went to my nightstand and pulled out the ultrasound picture. “Here, this one is yours.”

“Mine?” He hesitated as I held it out to him.

I fought back the tears. “Yes. The baby is *yours*. I just said I haven’t been with anyone else.”

“Baby out of a fucking *fake* relationship,” he grumbled, shaking his head.

I cringed, ripping my arm back and holding the ultrasound to my chest. “What’s that supposed to mean?” I demanded. “It might’ve been all fake to you, but it wasn’t to me. I fell in love with you.”

“Jeez.” He ran his hands over his face.

And that was *not* the reaction I’d expected. Hadn’t he just been telling me his feelings? That he wanted to be with me? Confusion and rejection funneled into my chest, and I could hardly breathe.

“Are you seriously not going to say anything?” My voice shook with emotion.

He shook his head. “I don’t know what to say right now. This is a lot. I just...I think I...”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Then just go.”

“What?” His eyes burst into flames of frustration. “You’re telling me to go?”

“Yeah, you clearly need some time to process all this,” I said, my heart crushed in my chest. “And so do I.”

He blinked a couple times at me, and then without another word, stormed out of my room. I collapsed on the edge of my bed, wrapping my arms around myself. Maybe he was just shocked by it all...

Or maybe it was just too much for him.

Whatever it was, my heart felt like it had been crushed into a million pieces.

JACKSON

What the hell am I gonna do?

I couldn't breathe as I paced the floor of my house, band practice fixing to start in just a few minutes. The band would arrive at any time—and I wasn't in the state to sing. I couldn't play anyway.

I'm going to be a dad.

That was the most shocking part. Well, and that Lena had openly admitted to loving me. And what the hell was wrong with me? I had stood there like a fucking *idiot* while she poured out her heart.

She probably hates me.

I couldn't blame her for it, either. I would hate me too. I pulled out my phone, half tempted to call her up and tell her what was on my mind—but terrified of what she might say to me. It wasn't that I didn't want to be with her, because I *did*.

As I unlocked the screen, I saw a message from my dad.

Hey son, call me.

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I considered putting it on the back burner. I hadn't talked to him since right after the accident, and I was sure he just wanted to check up on me. I hit the call button before I could change my mind.

“Hey!” he answered on the first ring. “How are you? We’ve been worried about you. I know how crazy that fall was. We’ve watched the video a hundred times.”

“And probably laughed your ass off,” I chuckled, though my voice came out strained.

“Maybe a couple of times. How long do you have to be in the cast?”

“Six weeks,” I answered him, having told the same information to I didn’t know how many people. “It’ll be rough.”

“You’ll make it through. But that’s not actually why I’m calling.”

That surprised me. “What’s up then?”

“I was thinking...maybe we should go in together and buy the record label.”

Right. The label.

I’d forgotten all about it—and in the moment, it was a welcome distraction. “So you think it’s worth what they’re asking?”

“Close, I think. I’ve got Eli on board for it too. Well, mostly. I think he’s a little unsure about where you’re at with it. You’ve seemed a little...”

“Unhinged,” I finished for him, letting out a sharp sigh. “Yeah, I feel unhinged.”

“You gotta slow down, son.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Slow down, and we’re in the deal. Also, I guess the PR stunt didn’t work out?”

“Uh...not really in the way that it was supposed to. But I think...I think I might have feelings for her.”

The chime of the door opening stopped me in my tracks. Tyson and Maeve appeared, laughing as they stepped into the

entryway. However, the moment their eyes landed on me, the laughter faded.

“I gotta go,” I said to Dad quickly. “I’ll call you later.”

“Don’t shy away from love because of our past,” he said quickly. “I mean that. It’s worth it. It’s always worth it. Love you.”

“Yeah, if I didn’t fuck it up, but love you too,” I muttered, hanging up the phone.

“Dude...” Tyson looked at me with worry written all over his face. “I figured it would be bad, but not *this* bad. You look like shit.”

“I’m a fucking idiot,” I blurted out to both of them.

Maeve shook her head at me, and I knew that more than likely Lena had already confided in her—and Tyson probably knew too.

“You *are* an idiot.” Her voice was sharp, confirming my fears. “But I also understand that it was a lot to take in at once.”

“That’s no excuse,” I reasoned, my voice growing thick as I felt myself on the edge of breaking down. “I should’ve held her and told her it was all going to be okay. Instead, I was just so fucking shocked, I didn’t know what to do. I never thought...”

“That she would get pregnant?” Tyson offered, taking a step toward me.

I nodded. “It took me so long to just come around to the idea of trying love for real, and then *bam*, now there’s a baby too—and I’m...I’m excited.” The words spilled out like a flood. “But I’m terrified, man. I don’t know how to have kids and raise them and shit. I can barely take care of myself.”

“It’s a reason to slow down,” Tyson said, carefully. “And you’ve always been great with kids.”

“But I don’t want to let her down,” I admitted, the walls crumbling down. “I don’t want to let Lena down more than I

already have. I fucking walked right out when she told me to go—and I should've stayed and fought for her.”

“You’re being really hard on yourself.” Maeve’s voice was surprisingly understanding. “It was a lot to take in, and that’s what I told Lena. We know you care about her, and you’re figuring out how to make it work. It’s a scary thing for you.”

“I love her,” I admitted, looking at both of them. “I fucking love her, and I need her to know that. She’s worth the world to me. And so is this baby we’re gonna have. I’ve *never* felt this way before, and it’s terrifying...”

“But worth it,” Tyson said quietly, reaching out to grab Maeve’s hand. “That’s the thing, Jackson. It’s fucking terrifying, but love is worth all the heartbreak that comes with it. It’s not easy. It doesn’t always feel good, but damn, it’s worth it.”

I pursed my lips as they both gave me soft smiles. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do to fix it with her.”

“You could just go talk to her,” Maeve suggested, shrugging her shoulders. “That’s a good way to start. I know she’s upset, but I don’t think she’d turn you away. She was just really hurt in the moment.”

I shook my head. “That’s not enough. I don’t want to just *talk*. I want to do something that will make this all right.”

Tyson nodded. “I get what you’re saying. You want something that will blow her mind, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, my eyes glancing up the stairs to the music room. “And I think I might know what it is.”

“I had a feeling you did.” Tyson grinned. “And I think we can make it happen. Come on.”

LENA

“I don’t know why I’m doing this,” I mumbled as I stepped onto the stage.

“My partner canceled,” Mason said to me, shooting me a grateful smile. “I need you tonight. I promise you just have to sing a couple songs with me, and then you’re done.”

I nodded, feeling guilty for my reaction. “I’m sorry. It’s just been a long week.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Mason said, slipping the guitar strap over his neck. I watched, setting up at the keyboard and microphone. I normally wouldn’t have offered to play the set with him, but he had seemed pretty desperate...

And I needed a distraction.

“You okay?” Mason asked me, his voice low.

I nodded. “Yeah, just a thick crowd.”

“Crazy, isn’t it?” He broke out into a grin as he took in the audience of the same bar where we’d sung before. I wasn’t all that surprised, since Mason’s single had come out last week. It was good too, but that wasn’t astonishing. He was one of the most talented musicians I knew.

He started to strum as the lights were brought up to the stage. The crowd burst into applause, cheering for him. I

scanned the faces I could make out, most of them women—which also wasn't surprising. I had no doubt that Mason would attract plenty of them...

Just like Jackson.

Ugh. I pushed the thought of him out of my mind. It didn't even bother me to think about Jackson and other women. He had made me feel like I was the only one from the start...even when we hated each other. And I had to give it to him, I wasn't sure I had ever seen him look at another woman when I was with him...

And that only made my heart hurt worse.

I was just too much for him. Or, we were too much, actually.

My hand went to my lower stomach, and I found myself fighting tears.

"So, tonight, as much as I want to play for y'all, I actually have a special guest." Mason's voice brought me back to reality, and I plastered a stupid smile on my face, turning to him...

But that's not who I saw.

My eyes went wide. *What is he doing here?*

"Good evening," Jackson said in a low voice. "I needed some help with tonight, so I brought in the most talented musicians I've ever met." The crowd cheered, and then he looked at me. "But as talented as you are, I'm going to have to ask you to sit this one out, Lena." He gestured to the stool.

I took a seat, swallowing hard as my heart pounded in my ears. "What are you doing?" I asked, but my voice was lost to a switch, Mason strumming a different, unrecognizable pattern.

"Since my accident, I haven't been able to play, but Mason was able to take what I was hearing in my head and bring it to life," Jackson continued. "And this is for you, Lena. But it's also for *us*, and the family we're going to have. It's a bit of a mash-up, so I hope you enjoy it."

Goosebumps ran down my arms at his admission, and I clung to my blouse as he began to sing.

“She’s right out of a dream, and I remember everything. I broke her heart when I should’ve kept it safe. I was too scared to love, but too in love to let her go. And now, I need her to know...I need you to know. You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy, when skies are gray...”

Tears began to fall from my eyes as he played the first song we ever sang together, his deep raspy tone doing it all the justice it ever needed. I batted the tears from my cheek as I held his gaze, feeling the love flowing from him.

“I’ll always love you and I’ll always be true. I wanna build a family with you.” As Jackson sang the words to the bridge, he took a step toward me. Even in his cast, he was right out of a dream, singing to me in a way most girls could only imagine.

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...”

He finished the song, and I slid off the stool, rushing to him. I collided with his chest just as the sob broke loose from my chest.

“I love you, Lena,” he whispered into my ear, his voice wavering as the words left his lips. “And I’m so sorry for how I reacted. I was just shocked, but I’m excited for this...*with you*. I wanna be the man you need me to be—the man *our baby* needs me to be.”

I tilted my head back to look up at him, the crowd roaring around us. “Did you plan all this for me?”

“I did,” he chuckled, pushing some of my blonde hair out of my face. “You’re worth it, Lena. You’re worth the whole fucking world times ten. You don’t even have a price—and we’re going to have a good life. I promise.”

“And I promise I’ll never walk out on you,” I said, my voice quiet but firm. “I’ll never put you through what you watched your dad go through in the past.”

A tear slipped down Jackson’s cheek. “Lena, you could put me through hell and back, and I will *never* regret choosing to love you. Ever.”

EPILOGUE - JACKSON

One Year Later

“**W**hen do you think she’ll crawl?” I asked, watching Lindy as she rolled from her tummy to her back, cooing the entire time.

Lena was lying on the floor with her, her eyes glistening with love. “I don’t know, but I hope she doesn’t grow up too fast. I don’t think I’m ready.”

I laughed, slipping off the side of the couch to sit beside her, resting my hand on the curvature of her hip. “So does that mean you don’t want to have a second right now, Mrs. Whiss?”

She eyed me over her shoulder. “I know *you* want one right now. But I don’t think having two kids sixteen months apart is a great idea. I think I might go crazy.” She burst into giggles, her finger tracing our baby girl’s blonde hairline.

“I want all the kids with you.” I squeezed the back of her thigh. “I want to fill this whole house with a bunch of mini-yous.” I swear, I had never been happier in my entire life—and things had worked out exactly the way they should.

I was a partial owner of the record label, and the band no longer toured—for now—mostly because Tyson and I were

both busy with little ones. But Nel and Aaron had found their own important someones in the downtime.

And it was fucking *nice*.

Lena tipped her head back and looked up at me. “So you don’t want any mini-yous? Because I’d love to have a little Jackson or two.”

I chuckled, running my finger along her jaw, making my way to just beneath her chin. “I’ll take whatever you’ll give me, baby.” I leaned down, planting a soft kiss on her lips.

She sighed lightly, kissing me with a little more fervor. “Maybe we should take that honeymoon first.”

“Absolutely,” I agreed, kissing her again. “I could use some uninterrupted naptime.”

She rolled her eyes, swatting me. “You *never* want to actually nap.”

“Noooo...” I teased her, slapping her ass. “That’s you.”

She burst into laughter, just as the doorbell chimed through the house. She glanced over the couch and then back to me. “Is that your brother?”

“Probably,” I said, pushing myself to standing. “It might actually be both of them.”

“Luke too?”

“He said he was flying in with Layla.”

“Oh, that’ll be nice.” Lena sat up, smoothing her hair. “We haven’t seen them in a while.”

“Well, you know, he’s a busy man with two kids and all that.” I pushed myself to standing and headed toward the door, swinging it open. There in the doorway were Eli and Olivia, along with their two little ones. Behind them were Luke and Layla with their two...

And then my dad, standing alone.

“Hey!” Eli greeted me, slapping me on the shoulder. “Where’s your better half?”

“Ha ha,” I snorted, shaking my head. “She’s in the living room with Lindy.”

“Ooh, I can’t wait to see her!” Olivia squealed, her own eight-month-old baby boy on her hip, and their oldest running past me. “She’s just the *cutest* little thing. I swear.” They slipped past me, leaving me to greet the next set of my siblings.

“I can’t believe we bought a freaking record label,” Luke grunted, shaking my hand. “I’m surprised I’m not down here having to run it myself. I’m proud of you, little brother.” He gave me a genuine smile, and then turned to his daughter. “I bet you’ll love his music room.”

“*Oooh*,” she said in awe. “My mom is trying to teach me to play the piano, but I’m not very good.”

“Well, you’re only six, honey.” Layla squeezed her daughter’s shoulder and then looked up at me, cradling their four-month-old. “How are you, Jackson?”

“Better than ever,” I told her, smiling. I really meant it too. Finally, my fucking life was starting to make some sense and have purpose.

“I’m glad you’ve calmed down a little,” she laughed, shooting me a playful look. “And I love Lena too, so be nice to her.”

“I think you ought to tell her to be nice to me,” I shot back at her, making a face. “She’s the boss in this house.”

“Good, she should be.”

“Just like you.” Luke glanced back to his wife, his voice teasing. I swear, Layla was the only person who *ever* brought that side of Luke out—and it was weird as fuck. But in a good way.

I stepped to the side as they headed to the living room. I could hear Lena laughing and talking from where I stood, and it filled my heart with a joy that I’d never felt before meeting her.

“Son,” Dad greeted me, taking me into an embrace. “I’m really proud of you.”

I nodded as he pulled away, a lump trying to form in my throat. “Thanks, Dad.”

“I’m glad you didn’t give up, and you’ve expanded the label beyond what I thought was possible. Your new artists are doing well.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I said, the only words I could think of. “How are you?” I took in the sight of my dad, his skin more tan than usual. “You must be spending a lot of time on the boats.”

“Uh, yeah, kind of,” Dad answered me, patting me on the shoulder. “You know how it goes. I love a good yacht trip.”

“Yeah? Going somewhere interesting soon?” I asked him, tilting my head. “You hadn’t mentioned it.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Thinking about it. I’m getting a little restless. You all have settled down, and I’m starting to feel like I’m the one who’s the kid.”

I burst into laughter. “Well, you’ve always been young at heart.”

“Something like that,” Dad chuckled, stepping past me. I felt a light hand on my arm and turned to see Lena there, a warm expression on her face.

“You want me to get started on dinner?” she asked, her eyes bright. “My parents are running a little late, but I don’t think Mom will mind if I start without her.”

I smiled, having forged a damn good relationship with my in-laws. “Sounds good, baby. I’ll help you until she gets here.”

Lena stood on her toes, kissing my lips softly. “I love you.”

I gave her a second peck on the tip of her nose. “I love you too.”



Thank you for reading *Off Limits Alpha Daddy!*

If you enjoyed this, you'll love [*Grump Daddy's Baby*](#).
It's an enemies to lovers, surprise pregnancy standalone.

Keep reading for a preview!

★★★★★

“Another brilliant book from Josie Hart, **fantastic story** and I loved the characters. I love how the **sparks fly** and Molly slowly chips away the armor of his heart. This is a **spicy story with lots of dirty talk**. But will anything get in the way of their HEA?”

★★★★★

“Wowza!! Absolutely my favourite book in a long time! **I don't even have enough words to describe how much I fell in love with this story!** Molly is a smart mouth sassy red head who's most certainly proven to be as fiery as her hair! Kai is a hard ass, say it like it is block of stone cold! Add in a fake date, a job offer and a whole lotta sexual tension!! Can this fighter learn to stop fighting and let go of his past heartbreak?”

★★★★★

“A one night stand, turned Nanny job puts Molly and Kai back in each others orbits. After meeting in a bar and hitting it off straight away Molly ends up at Kai's house months later applying for the nanny position. Neither of them have forgotten the amazing night they shared together. But can they have a repeat performance? **Amazing from Josie, captured from start to finish 5/5 stars!**”

GRUMP DADDY'S BABY SNEAK PEEK



**Mr. Tattooed, Dark, and Grumpy was supposed to be a one
night stand.**

So how the hell did I end up becoming the nanny...

Dressed to kill in all black,
Dropping bills like he owns the place.
I'm glad I didn't wear panties because they would
be *destroyed*.

A bit of fun was all I expected that night. End of story.
Until I show up to the nanny interview, and it's *him*.

We clash like oil and water during the day.
And ruin the sheets at night.

He's already got two sweet daughters of his own and would
never settle down.

So where does that leave me and MY baby bump...

KAI

“I’ll give you a hundred bucks if you drink that whiskey.”

Not my best pickup line, but I’m desperate *not* to be approached by the blind date that my asshole best friend set me up with. Just by the looks of her, she’s probably a hopeless romantic, loves long walks in the park, never cusses, and is optimistic as fuck.

Not my type.

Tack on that she’s a blonde, dressed in mixed-match floral, and is drinking water...yeah, *no* one is going to believe that she’s my girlfriend for my ex-wife’s wedding.

“Lay it on the table and you got a deal.”

I barely got a look at her face, and I’m judging this solely off the fact that she has phenomenal sexy red hair that curls down a black leather jacket. And that she ordered a whiskey straight up at the bar.

My kind of woman.

As she turns her head to look over at me for the first time, I realize that my luck just broke for the better. Insanely potent green eyes stare back at me, the remnants of freckles peppering along her high cheekbones and nose. And these fucking mauve-colored lips are perfect for being sucked on and sucking *off*.

Immediately fishing a Benjamin from my wallet, I don’t break eye contact when I leave two on the bartop.

One for her saving my damn life tonight.

And the second because I’m going to end up eye-fucking the shit out of her for most of it.

I’m a man. Not a saint.

I beat the hell out of people for a living so I’m definitely rough around the edges with the way I live and my words. I just conned a woman into sitting down with me for money because the prospect of having to politely sit with a woman who looks like Susie Homemaker makes me want to get knocked out.

And I have enough fucking problems to deal with.

However, now that this goddess just showed up and turned my whole damn night around, I’m looking to at least stay to finish my beer.

Her eyes slide over to the cash I just tossed onto the wooden bartop and she plucks one of the bills with her dainty thumb and index finger before plopping down on the stool next to mine.

“Keep the other one,” she says flatly. “I’m an expensive date.” If she sits her pretty ass next to me for the next hour, I don’t give a shit.

“What’ll it be then?”

“A burger.”

I perk a brow because that’s the lowest-maintenance date request I’ve ever had. “And?”

“I’m sure I’ll eventually want another drink.” She gives me a weak smile and my cock responds in kind because she’s hot.

Like I will gladly get on my knees for her and lick her sweet little cunt for as long as she asks for it hot.

“You’re being too easy on me,” I lightly chide. “Who did I pull you from?”

“Unfortunately, no one.” She inhales with her whole body and slowly lets it fall. “I’m here after a bad day.”

I lift my chin. “Ah, one of those types of bar visits.”

“What’s yours?”

“Blind date mishap.”

She cocks her head to the side. “You’re hoeing out your blind date?”

“The agreement was just to sit with me. Not that I wasn’t an asshole.”

Her eyes take a generous look down my chest which gives me the same opportunity. She’s a woman with balls and I obviously have no clue where she comes from but I can appreciate the hell out of the view.

Her plain white tee is filled out by D cups, at least, and her skin is this perfect shade of cream that—*slow the fuck down*.

I need a savior, not a fuck.

“So, someone thought you needed to get hooked up?” I bring my beer to my lips, more frustrated than before that I allowed my buddy to convince me of this stupid idea. “Which one?”

I take a sip of my drink, studying the face of my new buddy in crime to see if she’s trustworthy or not.

And, since a neon red sign isn't going to pop out of nowhere and tell me if she is or not, I chance it.

"Blonde with the long-sleeve rose shirt and the tulip skirt."

She nods. "Got it. That's my sister."

My eyes practically bulge from my damn skull. "What?" An immediate sea of laughter rings from the lips of the woman who I thought was my savior, and I glower at her. "Are you serious?"

"You're obviously not the only asshole sitting at this bar."

"Apparently not," I mutter, but I can't help the slight heave of my lips. "I'm deducting ten bucks off the rest of that hundred."

She smiles and it's like it glows off her face it's so pretty.

Pretty.

I can't remember the last time I used that word.

"I'm sure I can win it back."

"Not sure how," I reply. "Bustin' your new date's balls within two minutes is frowned upon."

"Maybe it was an ego stroking." I perk a curious brow. "I'll let you think about that one."

I rock my head back and forth because I had to pick the sexy, confident one who knows she looks good. "You're trouble. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to have you come over here and sit with me after all."

She fingers her Benjamin in the air. "I can always leave and you can flirt shamelessly with your new date."

"I don't think she'd pick up the references."

My stranger smiles. "Doubtful."

A few seconds of silence pass between us before I amp up my stranger's identity and learn what a blind date should be like. "I'll give you back your ten bucks if you tell me your name."

She sinks her teeth into her plush bottom lip and, fuck me, this woman is downright sexy as hell. “Molly.”

I scoff in disbelief at the basic-ass name. “Bullshit.”

“Bet?” Her brows lift with confidence which, obviously, she knows her own damn name.

“Molly?”

“Yep.”

“How does someone that looks like she fucks dudes to death on the regular conjure up the name Molly?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “My parents were a little, let’s just say...safe.”

“And are you?”

Molly lifts her drink in salute to me. “I’m sitting here with a stranger for a hundred bucks that I’m not going to take, just hold. You tell me.”

“I think I may have substituted the saint for the sinner.”

“More fun that way don’t you think?” she asks me over the rim of her glass before taking a small sip.

I can’t help but want to continue and play along with this little flirtatious game. I got nothing else better to fucking do and I’m sure as hell not going back to my empty house when something more interesting just popped up.

“Could be,” I deadpan.

Molly licks her lips. “You know...my mama told me about men like you.”

“Oh really?” I lean against the bartop. “And what did she say?”

“Men with tattoos are the absolute devil. And they will destroy all your morals.”

“I’ve shattered a few.”

“Any good ones?”

“Not that I cared about.”

Molly leans forward a bit and, I don't know if she notices, but she's looking to learn really quickly if she doesn't stop. "How many hearts have you broken along with those broken morals?"

"I don't stick around long to find out," I reply honestly. "My work keeps me busy."

She lifts her chin and then drops it. "Ah, a fuckboy."

Her voice isn't accusing, but I find myself defending my actions anyway.

"A good time," I retort. "I don't promise anything."

"Well, at least there's that. I'm sure that's not well received afterward, though."

"I'd have to be around to witness that."

Molly pushes out one of her cheeks with her tongue. "Mhm...you sneak out."

"You act as though I do this every weekend."

She chuckles and leans back, taking her glass with her and tucking it into her chest as she studies me from afar. "Is that what the blind date is for?"

"No," I say slowly. "That was for something completely different."

"High school reunion?"

My brows knit. "Do people actually still go to those?"

"I dunno. It was the first thing that came to mind." She removes her index finger from her glass and points at me. "So...what's the date for?"

"Wedding."

Molly side-eyes me. "*You* need a date to a wedding?"

I bend forward, making up for the lost space from when she was previously closer. "Listen, sweetheart...if you think I'm hot, just come out and say it. Otherwise, yes, I needed a date. It was my best friend's stupid-ass idea and I'm not going through with it."

“You are hot,” she quips without hesitation. “But I’m pondering more on the fact that you seem like a man who doesn’t have a problem going by himself.”

“Ah...well, this is a special wedding. One that I don’t want to go to but am.”

“What would be so special about it?”

“My ex-wife’s.”

Molly’s facial expression drops. “Oh.”

I nod and take a large swig of my beer, avoiding any more questions that Molly may have about what happened to my marriage, and why I’m forcing myself through the shit show after I took the fall for her infidelity.

Olivia gave me two beautiful daughters, and then smashed our lives into pieces when she began fucking my manager and sent the paparazzi on my ass when I was in the middle of a launch party.

The media was sniffing around after a story leaked that my manager, John, was seen with my wife at a five-star hotel and, surprisingly, they showed up the same night while two blondes began making out in front of me.

Apparently, that’s cheating.

However, instead of confirming or denying the story, I just beat the shit out of John and sent him back to my wife.

Now, she’s marrying him.

And our girls are in the wedding, begging me to come with them to watch them in their pretty dresses and to dance with them all night.

The idea is nauseating as all fucking hell and I don’t want to be within the same missile launching distance as Olivia and John on that day.

In fact, I wish them nothing but the worst.

“Sounds like you need someone that’s going to keep your mind off of it,” Molly proclaims instead of prying.

“I just need for it to be done already.”

“Well, since you haven’t displayed any superpowers, that doesn’t seem to be in the cards for you.”

“And what do you suggest?”

“Burning down the church is going to be frowned upon.”

“I’ve thought about it.”

Molly glances down at the hundred-dollar bill in her hand. “Or I can take this money and go buy a dress then go with you.”

My face lifts that she would even offer herself as a tribute even though she definitely doesn’t know what she’s getting into.

However, she fits the bill to a tee.

I’m not into blondes, for one. Maybe because Olivia is one and the idea of touching one makes me sick. Plus, my dick has gone on strike from ever touching one again, going limp in my boxers when one tries to flirt or weasel their way into my bed.

Molly is the perfect version of what my cock has been in the mood for. And, even though fucking her isn’t in the cards or something that I want to give in to, she’d do just fine at coming off as my so-called girlfriend.

“You don’t even know when it is,” I retort, even though I’m not against this idea.

“I got a lot of time on my hands as of late,” she replies simply. “Besides, if she’s an ex of yours she must’ve fucked up something.”

“How do you know it wasn’t me?”

“Because you don’t want to go.”

Observant.

Smart.

And sexy. This girl doesn’t fuck around when she’s subtly learning and studying me, which makes me feel a bit vulnerable.

“Are you a therapist or something?”

Molly wrinkles her nose at me. “Nah, I’m just a woman that knows things. However, it’s your call. I can move my ass off this stool and you can bring the blind date that you were so graciously offered.” She winks at me with a smile. “But I will say, I am more fun.”

I eye her suspiciously because it’d be too easy for the solution to my problem to literally fall right beside me. “Who do you work for?”

“The government,” she deadpans before polishing off the rest of her whiskey and lightly slamming the glass on the bar. “And this girl has an appointment that she needs to get to.”

“A date?”

“With a pizza and the show I’m binge-watching on Netflix.”

“And you’re picking that over me?” That question actually sounds a little jealous, and I realize how pathetic I just sounded.

Yet, that’s how I’m feeling.

That or the conversation just got a little too real for her and she doesn’t want to deal with my drama.

“You need time to think about it,” she replies, and she appears not to care less whether I decide to take her up on the offer or not. I’m sure Molly has plenty of opportunities on a daily basis to hang out with men who salivate after her.

“I don’t.” And those two words just blurt from my mouth without me thinking too much of it. Like I said, she’s the perfect solution to my problem. “You are my type.”

“Am I?” She doesn’t sound flattered by the fact, which only proves that she’s not someone easily won over by a man’s bullshit.

Though, what I’m saying is true.

“You say that as though everyone says that to you,” I quip as she rises from her stool.

“Men aren’t really on my list of things to do right now.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because my boss is an asshole.” And she leaves it at that.

“Seems to be a trend going on here.”

Molly shrugs her shoulders dismissively, alluding to the fact that she’s not an open book that lays out all her problems. “That’s the brakes. However, a nice guy offered me some entertainment for the night so I can’t complain about that too much.”

“If you’re calling this conversation the highlight of your night, sweetheart, I feel bad for you.”

She smiles. “Don’t. My vibrator and I do just fine.”

My cock twitches because thinking of her getting off by herself shamelessly is probably one of the most alluring things I’ve thought about all week. “No boyfriend, huh?”

“Not recently.”

“You’re a tease.”

Molly steps between my spread thighs and she smells like tonka beans and vanilla. Those green eyes shamelessly latch onto me and I can’t say my cock has stopped getting hard since she started talking. “I’d never tease you. I’m just being honest.”

“Then why do I suddenly want to bend you over and show you how entertaining I can really be?”

“You’re a flirt.”

“I’m a realist.”

“You’re being a gentleman because you haven’t suggested taking me home once yet.”

Ugh, right.

That.

It’s overrated.

I place my palm on my thigh to keep from grabbing her hip. “Do you need me to fix that?”

Molly decides to torture me by pondering that for a few seconds before stating, “I think we should solve your problem first, and then maybe if you still like me afterward we can talk about it.”

“Sounds an awful lot like you wanting to see me again, trouble.”

She winks at me with a smirk. “Well, you did call me a tease and I’m just trying to be helpful.”

“By telling me that you get yourself off with your legs spread open when there could be something else I could give you. I’d say you’re testing my limited amounts of restraint in this matter.”

“You don’t seem like someone that makes rational decisions.”

“I’m not, but I’m looking to make an exemption.”

“And *that* was probably the nicest thing you’ve said to me besides the way you just eye-fucked me ten minutes ago.”

“It was definitely a compliment,” I admit with a steady breath to keep myself in her good graces.

For now.

Any other time it’s free game.

Any other time, I would’ve offered a ride in the backseat of my car while I listened to every single moan leave her lips.

Molly slowly places the hundred-dollar bill I gave her on the bartop, and slides it under my hand that rests there. “I have the perfect dress for your little gathering if you’re looking to make an impression.” She frowns then as if something terrible just crossed her mind. “And I never got your name.”

“Kai.” I give her my birth name because if I give her what everyone else calls me, she might look me up on social and I’m definitely going to come up.

I might not be widely in the game anymore, but I’m a four-time boxing world champion. I still make my presence known

in the community by showing up and supporting up-and-coming boxers, but I haven't fought in a while.

My daughters wouldn't appreciate the black eyes.

"Kai," she says slowly, then nods. "Okay then."

I reach behind me and fish my phone out of my jeans. "Why don't you put your number in my phone and I'll text you the details."

I offer up my cell and she promptly plucks it out of my grasp and keys in her digits, then hands it back over.

"Nice meeting you, Kai," she says with one last award-winning smile. "Maybe I'll see you later."

And then she backs out of my personal space and strides behind me toward the exit.

Glancing down at my phone, I look at the number that she entered into my contacts.

With the name *Trouble* above it.

Yeah.

She's gonna be.

MOLLY

I don't do this.

I don't sit with strangers at a bar for a hundred dollars that I don't take, just to talk and take my mind off current events that affect my whole life.

Furthermore, I don't go to a wedding with a plethora of *more* strangers with someone that I've only known for not even a week.

But that didn't stop the way I said yes to Kai at the bar. The way I suggested going because what was I going to lose? I'd already been fired from my job that day because my boss got

pissed that I wouldn't write about the latest mascara brand and how to pull off the perfect ponytail.

I was over the beauty and fashion columns that Jonathan wanted me to write. The multitude of conversations we'd had about it were so many that I couldn't count that high, and he was snubbing out my creativity to write something more.

While *Classy AF* is the latest blog and women's magazine in California, I wished for more. It was a great-paying job, but I put in four years at that place while my retorts and complaints about writing the same things fell on deaf ears.

So, I took a chance.

A chance that cost me my job but, I'd find another one. Jonathan obviously didn't care about how I was feeling because Jennifer had only been working there a year when she began to write pieces on injustice, sexism and racism. It all came down to who could flirt better and that wasn't something I was going to do.

Jonathan was a tool, someone who adored attention from his women employees and I wasn't one who was going to hand him that while keeping my pride intact, so I wrote my piece.

He fired me.

End of story.

However, that chapter of my life isn't even a strong thought right now as Kai arrives to pick me up in his fitted black suit with his hair moussed and his beard perfectly trimmed.

The man is hot as hell.

Absolutely not the type I've dated in the past, but that isn't what this is. I needed something different to do, something to change up my norm because I had a feeling I was going to be doing a lot of that. And so I jumped at this chance just like I did my article for *Classy AF*.

And boy, am I glad I did.

His shoulders fill out his suit jacket and he appears like your typical bad boy that'll break your heart into pieces before you even know you're falling for him.

Everything about him is black.

His hair, the stubble along his edged jawline—everything but his sky-blue eyes, that have already fallen down the length of me.

I went classic tonight. A black dress that drops to the floor with a high slit that comes up to my upper left thigh. The straps on my dress are resting over my shoulders and the material is a sheer satin to keep it lightweight and me from sweating too much.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he muses as his gaze falls to the slit of my dress that exposes some of my thigh. “I’m almost tempted to tell you to put something else on, but this isn’t something that’s easily going to be forgotten.”

I smile, I can’t help it.

This man has made me feel absolutely gorgeous since the first time I met him. I’m not looking for a relationship, but I’m not going to shoot one down if it comes suddenly like this with a man who’s this attractive.

“Thank you,” I reply. “And I don’t think you’d want me to change anyway.” His blue eyes flick up to mine. “Getting out of this dress is going to be hard and I’ll need some help.”

Something like lust forms in those blue depths and I know exactly what he’s thinking. If this man gets me half-naked, we’re never getting to the wedding. I know he’s going to make a move. This man exudes confidence without a fuck given to the world. I know he’ll take what he wants while I pick up the pieces of any emotions I might pick up during or after.

I already have enough stress.

“Might be for the best if we just go,” he finally says, taking the out so that we don’t act on impulses that might get us in trouble later. “Are you ready?”

I nod. “I am.”

Kai waits for me to step down onto my porch before I hit the sidewalk and arrive at the passenger side door of his very sharp black Audi. His hand shoots out around me to open the

door and I actually think I swoon for a second because no one has ever done that for me before.

“Thank you,” I offer up as I take a seat inside. The cool leather seats feel great against my body as he closes the door behind me and rounds the front of his ride, giving me another private moment to soak in this black suit he’s wearing before he’s saddled up beside me in the car.

He starts it up and, before I know it, we’re on the highway in silence. A rock band plays on his radio but it’s so low that I can’t figure out who’s singing before Kai breaks into the silence of the space.

“We should probably have some rules,” he says, resting his left hand on his thigh and keeping his right on the wheel.

“Okay.”

He steals a quick glance at me. “I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.”

I mean, he’s obviously not giving himself enough credit if he doesn’t think that his presence already sets me off-kilter a little bit.

“What were you thinking?” I ask, curious to see what those rules might be.

“Well...” He pauses, and after a few seconds have gone by I realize he’s not entirely sure.

“Holding hands would be fine,” I reply, to help. “I think that would be expected and we probably should get our story straight if someone asks how long we’ve been together.”

“How long do you need to date to bring someone to a wedding?”

No clue.

“I think six months is a good amount of time.”

He nods. “There’s going to be an issue with my kids and them not knowing you.”

My eyes widen a bit and I’m glad he’s not actively looking over at me because never did he mention that he had children.

Not that it's a turn-off, it's not.

However, I didn't expect it.

"How old are they?" I feel pushy asking the question but, again, just want to make sure that we cover all our bases. I would definitely need to know the answer to that question if someone asked me specifics.

"Seven and five," he replies. "I have two daughters. Bria and Lark."

"I love those names."

"My ex found them on Pinterest apparently."

Right.

And she sounds like she left a sour taste in his mouth. Which means this should be easier for me. He's emotionally not able to get attached and I can soak in this night as something to do. Maybe I'll meet someone who's looking to hire a writer or something, who knows?

"Any crazy family members I should know about?" I press, because I don't know who he's going to have here.

"Just a stupid-ass best friend named Myles."

"Ah, the one who set you up."

"That'd be him." I push my lips out and bob my head, glancing out the window. This is going to be awkward. "Is there anything you don't want me to do?"

If this man doesn't stop being so damn respectful, I'm going to make a fool out of myself if I have too much to drink.

"Nothing that comes to mind," I deadpan, feeling my nerves slowly begin to heighten because I walked into this thinking it was going to be something to pass the time when I've never pretended to be someone's girlfriend before.

"Where did we meet?"

"A bar." I steal a glance over at him. "Might as well keep that true."

Kai doesn't react to my teasing but keeps his placid face straight ahead on the road. It makes me wonder if he's nervous walking into his ex-wife's wedding or if maybe he doesn't want to see her married.

I'm obviously ignorant of his feelings on the matter. However, I can't help but feel that I might be the third wheel in a relationship that I don't even know I'm walking into.

"Is there anything you don't want me to do?" I ask, trying not to fidget with my fingers or feet. "Anyone I shouldn't speak to?"

"No."

The air has shifted between us and a small twinge of regret about doing this starts to creep up my spine.

"Any rules that you need me to follow?"

"Just act as though you're madly in love with me and we'll be good."

My brows knit because *that* wasn't exactly part of the plan. "Organically, I hope."

"However it is that you normally act."

I blow out a silent breath because I'm not going beyond the call of duty here. I'm not going to maul this man like a woman with self-esteem issues. The part where I act like I think he's highly attractive won't be hard, but as far as physical stuff, I still don't know what he wants.

"So, kisses on the cheek."

I see Kai glance over at me from my peripheral. "The guys you've been in love with you just kiss on the cheek?"

"Who said I've ever been in love?" I turn my head back over to him, forcing him to give me the play-by-play on how this is going to go down because it's still vague as hell.

"You've had to have been."

"Why's that?"

Kai's gaze drops down the front of my dress again before he turns his attention back to the road. "There's no way no man has tried to wife you yet."

My ex did before I found out he was cheating, but I'm not going to get into that drama-filled story.

"Maybe I didn't give them a chance."

"You're painting yourself to be a hard-ass, Molly, but your name is *Molly*."

"So?" I've never had anyone try to judge my character based on my name before, but I'm not offended. More amused than anything that he's so sure about it.

"So, I'm highly aware that you're sexy as hell on the outside," he vouches, "but you've got to be sweet on the inside."

I scoff even though he's not wrong, but don't respond. My brother is kind of like Kai. He has this unclear way of talking when there's something he doesn't necessarily want to speak about and it drives me absolutely insane at times.

In other words, I'm used to this.

"Aren't you?" I know that I've won when I hear the unsure tone in Kai's words.

"That doesn't matter," I reply, just as hazy. "I need to know if you want to hold hands, and are you comfortable with me putting my hand on your thigh or leaning in to whisper some dirty in your ear when, really, I'm only asking you if you can go grab me another drink in the next two minutes."

A deep rumble that sounds like a chuckle slices through the air from Kai's side of the car and I steal a look to see that it is, indeed, him.

It sounds amazing on him, I'm not going to lie. However, this man sounds like he's suffering some remnants of a bad relationship.

"I'm good with all that," he claims. "In fact, I encourage it."

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