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# Out of the Box

THE COMPLETE  
HUNTE FAMILY  
SERIES



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# ARELL RIVERS

# OUT OF THE BOX

A ROCKSTAR AND CELEBRITY CONTEMPORARY  
ROMANCE COLLECTION

THE HUNTE FAMILY SERIES

BOOK FIVE



# ARELL RIVERS

## **OUT OF THE BOX**

A Rockstar and Celebrity Contemporary Romance Collection in **THE HUNTE FAMILY SERIES**

ARELL RIVERS

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- **Out of the Shadow** ©2019 Tarnished Halo Publishing LLC
- **Out of the Gold** ©2020 Tarnished Halo Publishing LLC
- **Out of the Blue** ©2021 Tarnished Halo Publishing LLC
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## **ARELL’S TEAM**

### **OUT OF THE RED**

Editing: Angela Polidoro, [Polidoro Editorial Services](#)

Proofreading: Virginia Tesi Carey

Angel Nyx, [Proofreading Bayou Queen](#)

Cover design: Dar Albert, [Wicked Smart Designs](#)

### **OUT OF THE SHADOW**

Editing: Angela Polidoro, [Polidoro Editorial Services](#)

Proofreading: Virginia Tesi Carey

Angel Nyx, [Proofreading Bayou Queen](#)

Cover design: Dar Albert, [Wicked Smart Designs](#)

Synopsis: Jennifer of Romance Rehab, [www.romancerehab.com](http://www.romancerehab.com)

### **OUT OF THE GOLD**

Editing: Trenda Lundin, It's Your Story Content Editing

Emily A. Lawrence, [www.lawrenceediting.com](http://www.lawrenceediting.com)

Proofreading: Roxanne Bluin

Angel Nyx, [Proofreading Bayou Queen](#)

Cover design: Dar Albert, [Wicked Smart Designs](#)

Synopsis: Jennifer of Romance Rehab, [www.romancerehab.com](http://www.romancerehab.com)

### **OUT OF THE BLUE**

Editing: Theresa Leigh, [The FairyPlot-Mother](#)

Trenda Lundin, It's Your Story Content Editing

Stacy Juba, Shortcuts for Writers

Proofreading: Roxanne Bluin

Angel Nyx, [Proofreading Bayou Queen](#)

Cover design: Dar Albert, [Wicked Smart Designs](#)

Synopsis: Jennifer of Romance Rehab, [www.romancerehab.com](http://www.romancerehab.com)

### **OUT OF THE VOID**

Proofreading: Roxanne Bluin

Cover design: Dar Albert, [Wicked Smart Designs](#)

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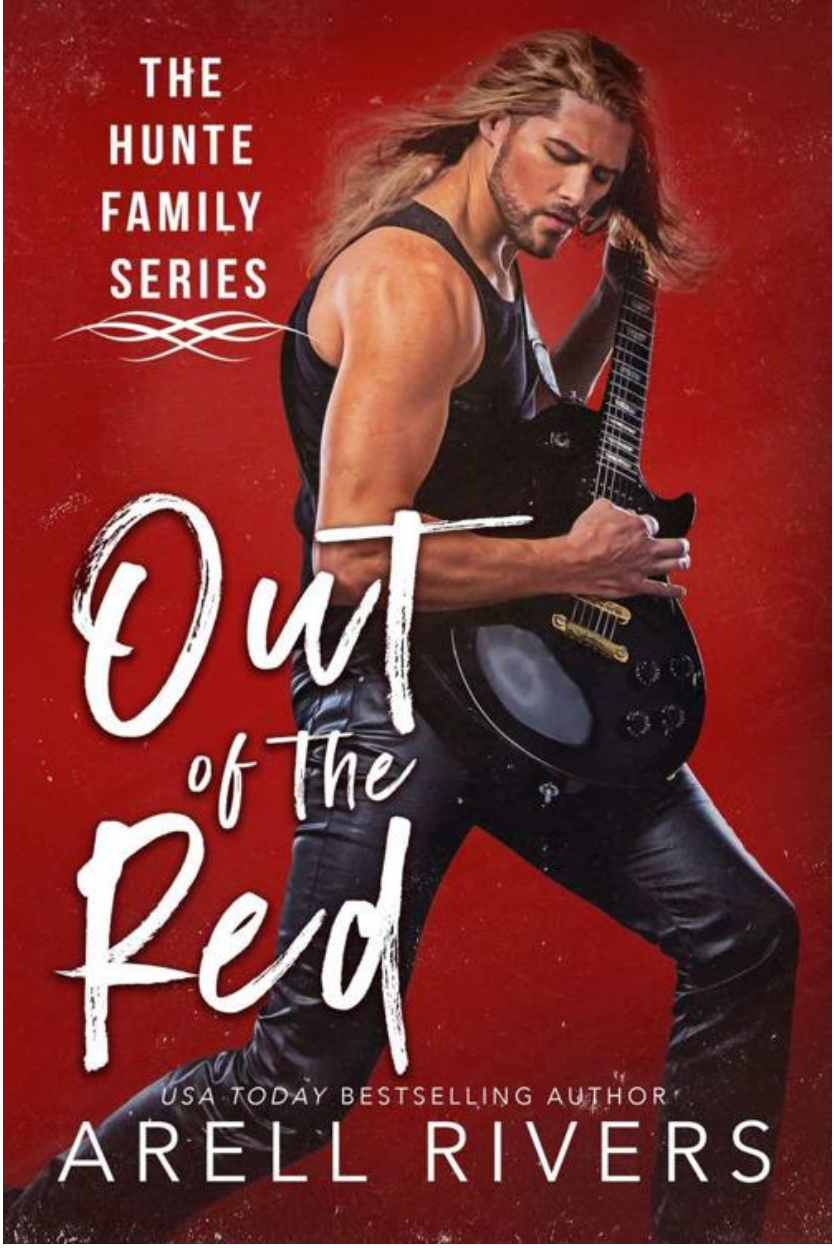
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THE  
HUNTE  
FAMILY  
SERIES



Out  
of The  
Red

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ARELL RIVERS

## SARA



**A**s usual, I start my day at the office by listening to a couple of songs on my Discman. Today, like most days, my choice is Hunte. Ever since they hit it big eight years ago, they've been my favorite band. They're one of our accounts here at A&L, a notoriously difficult one, but I prefer to think of them like they were at the beginning—a group of young bad boys who stumbled their way into success. Brash and bold and in your face.

The sound of Braxton Hunte's raspy voice fills my ears, my mind, and my body. It doesn't matter if Hunte hasn't had a Number One hit in a few years, or he's actually my junior by four years, or even the truth the band hasn't learned not to outspend their earnings—as long as they keep putting out albums, I'll keep on buying them.

My body bounces in time with the fast beat as I complete my other morning ritual, watering the plants in my office. Something to pep me up, and something to calm me.

After checking the jade plant's soil—still perfect—I return the watering can to its place behind my credenza and my Discman to the bottom drawer. Morning ritual complete.

I boot up my computer and, while I'm waiting, pull out the various files I'll need today. Smiling, I look over my manila

folders—finals for the Chicago Symphony’s tour, the Windy City Ballet’s monthly balance sheet for last month, and a few smaller clients.

I’m studying a stack of receipts for the Symphony, inputting all of the information into a spreadsheet, when a knock lands on my door.

“Can I come in?” My guest walks in without waiting for a response.

I place my eyeglasses on top of the receipts and square the pile. Donna Gardner, one of only two women partners here at Adler & Lomell Accounting and my self-described mentor, enters my office and takes a seat in a blue-upholstered visitor chair.

Donna tucks some strands of her fine, dark hair behind her ear, exposing diamond studs. “How are you doing today, Sara?” Her eyes have a sparkle, like she has a secret to share.

“I’m good. Finishing up the Symphony’s tour books.”

She nods. “Great. Anything unusual?”

“No. They’re right where they want to be. Actually, a bit ahead. I think this season was their most successful.”

“I’d expect nothing less. Your projections always are dead on, if not slightly conservative. Just what we here at A&L like to see.”

My stomach flips. Next month is October, the time when new partners are named to the firm. I want it so badly I can nearly taste it. I’ve made sure to work twice as hard over the past year to show my dedication. Six days a week, no vacations. The sparkle in her eyes tells me all my efforts have paid off—I’m going to be named the third woman partner. A satisfied smile skims my lips before I school my features into a

more appropriate professional mask. I incline my head. “Thanks.”

“Listen, you know I’ve been pushing for you to make partner.”

I bite my lip. Clearing my throat, I reply, “Yes.”

“Your work is stellar and you’re dedicated to A&L. Don’t think your efforts haven’t gone unnoticed.”

“Thanks, Donna. I really want to join you and Margaret in the ranks.” At the mention of the other woman partner, and *her* mentor, Donna smiles. Margaret blazed the trail as the first woman partner ten years ago. Took four more for Donna to make it. “I hope it’s my time.”

Donna nods. “Your billable hours have been impressive.”

No one else, not even my number one rival, my ex-boyfriend, Max Silver, can touch what I’ve accomplished at the firm this year. I’m ready for the next step. I cross my hands across my lap to contain my excitement.

Donna leans back in her chair. “Well, there’s just one more test for you to complete and I think you’re going to get your wish.”

Not caring what they’ll throw at me, I puff up and reply, “I won’t let you down.”

“I’m sure you won’t, Sara.”

“What’s the new project?”

Her eyes bounce around my office, land on my diploma from Northwestern, then refocus squarely on me. “Hunte.”

I draw in my breath. “Hunte” falls out of my mouth. Yes, I love their music, but they *really* are infamous here at A&L.

The account has bounced around more than a bad check. Their lead singer, Braxton Hunte, is a total wild card. He does as he pleases and ignores his tour accountants. Some have had more success with him than others, but every accountant at the firm knows the bad boys of rock are a lost cause.

Donna's eyes narrow. "I know what you're thinking."

Without my consent, my head shakes in the negative. "The account is—" My voice trails off.

"I know. They're a nightmare. Believe me, this wasn't my idea. I think it actually could be good for you."

My eyebrows rise to what feels like my hairline. "I take it I'll only make partner if I survive them?"

Was someone setting me up to fail? Perhaps the male partners had decided two women in their ranks was enough?

"I know this is a difficult assignment."

"Difficult? Difficult was when you asked me to right the Riverdance account. Difficult was when you wanted me to fix the Actor's Theatre books. Hunte is not 'difficult.' They're impossible." Placing my elbows onto my desk, I steeple my fingers.

Donna huffs a breath. "I tried to find someone else, but the other qualified accountants have all already worked on the account. With the Symphony's tour ending, you were the logical choice."

Even though she starts babbling about the opportunity this will give me to shine, I tune her out. I don't need a pep talk right now, I need a plan. One that will help me turn the bad boys good. Or at least less depraved.

Donna stands up, bringing my attention back to her. The look in her eyes makes me believe she, at least, wants me to succeed. “Their file is on its way to you. Remember what I said. Try to keep them out of the red, don’t be a hero.” She taps on my desk. “And send me whatever other accounts you’re working on. I’ll redistribute them so you can focus solely on Hunte.”

I swallow a sour taste in my mouth. “Thank you.” I list off all of my accounts. “I’ll keep At Your Door, though.” This one’s personal for me. My mother used to volunteer with the charity that builds homes for the homeless, and I did the same starting in high school. Ever since, I’ve volunteered quarterly, and when the opportunity to join the board was presented to me five years back, I jumped at the chance. No one else will get this file.

“Of course.” On perfect three-inch heels, Donna walks toward my door. “I’m rooting for you.”

My office door remains open when she leaves. Thoughts rumble through my head, fast and furious, gaining more steam as I stew over this latest development. It’s clear A&L doesn’t want me to make partner. I’ve done everything they’ve asked over the past nine years, since graduation. Heck, I’ve dedicated my life to this place, and outlasted every single woman associate accountant who started with me.

I square my shoulders. The bad boys of rock are in for a surprise. I’m not about to back down now.

I *will* become A&L’s next partner.





Happy with all aspects of the Chicago Symphony's books, I press save on the spreadsheets, print everything and back it up to our mainframe server. The Symphony heeded my advice and turned quite the profit this year. Their tour was a smashing success. A satisfied smile stretches across my face.

If only Hunte will be as easy.

My smile falls as I survey the band's file, which arrived an hour ago. Sixteen boxes are stacked along the far side of my wall. However, I'm not tackling them yet. I must do each item on my to do list in order, not jump ahead. I refuse to leave half-completed files for Donna to babysit.

The Windy City Ballet's monthly statement takes me another hour. Like the Symphony, they're also right on track. I start a new file for them for the upcoming month, but a whistle halts my progress. Closing the manila folder, I turn my head toward my door. Max Silver waits like a vulture, hands in his trouser pockets, eyeing the boxes.

"Hunte, huh?" My rival's cheek twitches as if he's trying to conceal his glee.

My ex wants a reaction, and I'm determined not to give him one. Forcing a bland façade, I nod. "I've been assigned to right their ship, since no one else here has managed it." I pause. "Including you."

Back in college, it felt like a natural progression to go from study partners to lovers, but it's hard to remember what I ever saw in him. He's handsome, certainly, although he always was more into himself than me. When I broke up with him, I swear his ego was hurt rather than any feelings he had for me. Only bad luck brought us to A&L together.

He strolls into my office, adjusting his cufflinks, and then runs his hands over the tops of the boxes. “I dealt with these bad boys back when there were only two boxes.” He surveys the chaos of boxes the mailroom dumped on me.

Not about to be intimidated, I join him beside the voluminous file. “Too bad you weren’t able to keep them as your client.” My fingernail taps the side of one of the boxes. “But don’t worry, I’ll clean up your mess.”

He barks a laugh. Jerk. “Go right ahead.” He knocks on a lid. “I’d better get back to my own accounts, while you handle *your* bad boys. Good luck. Hope they’re into your ways, Prissy.”

Outwardly, I don’t move a muscle as Max saunters away from my office. I’m thankful no one can see the way my stomach clenches at his use of the derogatory nickname he gave me after our breakup.

Dismissing him from my mind—because he’s not worth it—I glance at the pile of boxes filling my office. How on earth did their file get so big? They hired A&L in 1986, eight years ago, when they first burst onto the music scene. My files usually take up about a quarter to a third of a banker’s box per year. What have they been doing?

Determination squares my shoulders. No one else has managed to fix their numbers, however, this fact doesn’t mean I can’t. Donna’s taking all of my other accounts from me, so I’ll be able to devote my entire focus on the band. I’m the accountant who will finally domesticate them.

Hours after the rest of our colleagues left to be with their families, Donna pops back into my office. “Got your delivery.”

I nod. “Good. Everything’s in order.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” she teases, trying to lighten my mood. “Why don’t you go on home and tackle this,” she nods toward the boxes, “tomorrow?”

“Yeah. I probably will.”

“Good. See you then.”

Alone again, I put the At Your Door file into my briefcase. Standing, I wander over to my new account and find the single box marked 1986. My light reading for the night.

An hour later, I step out of my Mercedes—hey, if I’m going to be partner, I have to look the part—and bring the box into the house. I take a moment to pause and inhale.

Calm.

Serene.

Perfect.

I leave the box on the dining room table and go about my usual routine—changing from my skirt suit to a sweater and jeans, and making a simple chicken dinner. As I eat alone in the kitchen, listening to the radio, my eyes wander over to the solitary box.

Before ripping open the top and tearing into the file, I force myself to clean up from dinner, wipe down the counters and carefully place my chair back under the table. Everything must be done in its proper order. Only when the kitchen is spotless again do I head over to Hunte’s file.

Two hours later, my bleary eyes lift off the final page. 1986 was a stellar year for the band. They had their breakout hit and made a million dollars. But they spent nearly three-quarters of it on necessary items like tour equipment and travel, and on frivolous things like new video game consoles

every month and an appalling number of VHS tapes. Seriously? Are these men or boys?

The next several days pass by in a blur of numbers. By the end, I've catalogued all of Hunte's profits and losses and reviewed the personal accounts of each band member. Hell, keeping track of the number of houses Braxton Hunte has purchased could be a full-time job. The man has places all over the globe. No wonder the band runs in the red almost every year.

I spend the next two days formulating a strategy to right the Hunte account by reducing ridiculous expenditures on video games and movies, food, and liquor. Especially the liquor. I've triple-checked my figures. If they follow my advice, they'll be in the black in no time.

Taking a deep breath, I dial Hunte's tour manager's office. After being connected to Todd Reese's voicemail, I leave him a detailed message to call me back as soon as possible. My phone rings an hour later and, after pleasantries, I explain my strategy for the band.

His rumble of laughter reaches through the phone and twists around my gut. "Todd?" I refuse to call him "Mr." because it would put him in an elevated position. I am his equal, and I want him to know it.

"Sorry, Sara, I didn't mean to laugh. Your strategy is very sound. If only Hunte were rational. Tell you what, send me over the changes you want implemented and I'll inform the band."

My eyes narrow. "You do know Hunte is barreling toward bankruptcy, don't you?"

“Oh, they’ll pull out of it, they always do. I have to go, but I’ll share your plan with them right away.” He leaves me with another chuckle before disconnecting our call.

After I place my handset back into its cradle, the first inkling of doubt assaults me. Am I really up to this task? Why was he laughing?

## SARA



**T**wo weeks have passed and Hunte's spending remains unchanged. If anything, it's worse. Holding back my rage, I pick up my office phone and dial Todd. Again. When he answers, sounding weary of me and my budgets, I go straight for the jugular. "I got the latest rounds of receipts. What the hell? I told you to let the band and their entourage know about the cap on after-party spending."

Who the heck is in their entourage, anyway? Ivana Trump?

He sighs. "I know. I told them and they nodded like they agreed. As you can see, they went ahead and spent like usual."

"Todd," I modulate my voice lower. "You did give them the new budget I sent over, right?"

"I did."

My red pen bounces on my desk. "In writing?"

"Yes."

"The band members can read, am I correct?"

"I believe so." His tone turns mocking.

My lips purse. I'm getting nowhere with him—like he's getting nowhere with them. "Okay, thanks Todd. I know you're trying your best."

“Keeping these guys focused on their tour is hard enough. Handling their expenses as well is above my pay grade.”

My temper flares at his remark. Aren't tour managers supposed to keep their eye on the whole shebang? “Remind them of their daily budgets. It can't be *that* hard for them to follow the line items.”

“Yeah, sweetheart. I'll take care of it in addition to their press, concerts, pre- and post-show activities, and a million other things.”

This call is going nowhere, and I need Todd on my side if I have a hope to turn around the Hunte account. Biting the inside of my cheek, I end the call before words escalate.

“I'm no one's sweetheart, *honey*,” I seethe after I lower the phone.

I'm staring at my computer, my fingers steepled in front of me rather than on the keyboard, when Max lopez into my office. *Great.*

He perches on the corner of my desk, picking up the stapler from its rightful spot. “Did Hunte put that look on your face?”

I didn't realize I *had* a “look.” At his comment, the tension in my jaw constricts. I relax it, allowing my features to slide into their normal position, and drop my hands to rest on the keyboard. Max plunks the stapler on my desktop, horizontally, and picks up my ball of rubber bands, tossing it between his hands.

“If you're looking for something to do, I'm sure I can scrounge up an assignment for you.”

He drops the ball next to the stapler, purposefully putting it into the wrong spot too, and runs his hand over his smooth

cheek. “Nah. Got a full workload of my own. But, hey, if you need help getting your work done, I can scare up a first-year for you.”

After my phone call with Todd, I need Max around me like an IRS auditor. “Just wanted to make sure you made your hours this month.” Take that.

“Appreciate your concern.” He takes a paperclip from its container and starts to unfold the steel wire.

Resisting the urge to scratch his eyes out with it, I offer him a sickeningly sweet smile. “Max, I’m busy. I got off the phone with”—an uncooperative jerk—“my client, and I have a lot of follow-up.”

He plants his shiny loafers onto the floor and towers above me. Not letting him intimidate me, I rise to my full five-foot-nine height. With my two-inch heels, I’m nearly as tall as him.

He holds up his hands. “Whoa. I only stopped by to let you know the partners have set a date for their annual retreat. They’re meeting on October thirty to decide who makes partner this year.” His gaze bounces to his hands and he tosses me what’s left of the paperclip, saying, “Good luck.”

I catch the thin piece of steel and press the sharp end into the fleshy part of my palm to stop my snark from coming out. With as much sincerity as he showed me, I say to his retreating back, “Yeah. You too.”

Collapsing into my chair, I throw the erstwhile paperclip into the garbage can under my desk. I have a little more than a month to make my mark on Hunte and show A&L that Max isn’t the right pick for partner—I am.

My thoughts wander back to my conversation with Todd. How can I get the band to comply with my new budget if their



tour manager won't help me? I'm going to have to do something drastic. Ideas come and are discarded as I right the mess Max made of my desk.

My eyes widen.

Without stopping to reconsider my crazy idea, I head to Donna's office and pitch it to her.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

No. "Yes. It's the only way to keep them in check."

"Okay. We're having a partners' meeting after work today and I'll talk to the others."

"Thanks." I trudge back to my office. If Hunte won't come to the mountain, I'm taking the mountain to them. Namely, me.



I smooth tissue paper on top of my blouse, fold the silk over it and tuck it into the suitcase laid out on my bed. Selecting a navy blue suit from my closet, I balance the unwieldy cordless phone between my ear and shoulder. "I know it's a crazy idea, Father, but no one else has done it. And the partners approved it right away. By going on tour with Hunte, I'll be able to keep a much closer eye on them and prevent their frivolous spending before it even happens."

He sighs. "How long will you be gone?"

"A week. Two, tops." How hard can it be to give the band members spreadsheets of their daily expenses and get them to curtail their spending? My presence alone should have an impact.

“I’m going to miss you at our Sunday dinners. As will Billy and Jessica and the baby.”

My younger brother—famous for his video gaming prowess and sucking me into his addiction—got married two years ago, and he’s a new father. Stacey is adorable, with the way she curls her little fingers around mine. And her baby smell... My voice turns soft. “I’ll miss you all, especially Stacey. I’ll be sure to pick her up a teddy bear or something on the tour.”

My mind starts racing, and I find myself tidying—moving out of the bedroom and squaring up the papers on my desk, then tackling my magazines and catalogs. I’m fairly certain I’ll never have kids. For one thing, my career is my number one priority. My mother forfeited hers to have me and Billy, and I’m determined to succeed for her. Besides which, I’m thirty-two and have never met a single man whose baby I’d consider having. Besides, babies equal chaos. No, I’m not going to be a mother.

My father’s voice pulls me out of my head. “Stacey’s getting baptized on the fifteenth. You’ll be back by then, right?”

I clear my throat. “Of course, Father. I wouldn’t miss her baptism for the world.”

“I know you wouldn’t—I can always depend on you. Sara, you’re going to pass this test. They’d be fools not to make you partner.”

“Thank you. I’ll make you proud.” He’s a retired partner from a rival accounting firm, Jones, James and Anderson—he was the titular Anderson. Because of their anti-nepotism policy, I took the job at A&L. Plus, I wanted to prove I could stand on my own two feet.

“I’m already very proud of you.” He pauses. “And your mother would’ve been as well.”

My chest tightens, but I don’t want to talk about my mother. Even after all these years, the guilt and grief have a powerful hold on me. “Thanks.” Wanting to redirect my thoughts, I march back into my bedroom and finish folding the suit, zipping my suitcase shut. “Well, I’d better take care of a few more things. My plane to Albuquerque leaves first thing in the morning.”

After we hang up, I water and feed all my plants. If I’m only gone for a week, they’ll be fine. Any longer, though, and someone will have to come in and care for them. Heading into the second bedroom, which serves as my home office, I pull out a legal pad and begin writing instructions about how to attend to them. Each requires different amounts of water and sunlight.

With both tasks complete, I consider who to ask to do this favor. Ha! Like I have many choices.

I dial my best friend since elementary school, Joanna. She saw me through my mother’s illness, high school stresses and college, where we both majored in accounting. Even though she recently married, I’m sure she can make the time to look after my eight plants. I’ll even throw in a bottle of wine for her and some Scotch for her husband.

Joanna picks up her phone on the third ring. “Hello?”

“Hi! It’s me.”

“Oh, hey, Sara. You caught me at a good time. I just put a roast in for dinner.”

I switch my cordless phone to my other ear. She *never* cooks. “Who are you, and what have you done with my best

friend?”

Her laughing voice bounces over the line. “My husband—I love calling him that...” She giggles. “He’s been encouraging me to find my inner Martha Stewart.”

“Does he know about the Great Cake Debacle?” She baked a birthday cake for me a few years ago. It kept collapsing, so she propped it up in the middle with Necco wafers before icing it. Both of us laugh, which eases some of my tension away. “I know where all your skeletons are buried,” I manage after pulling in some air. We burst out laughing again.

“Well, you’re no Julia Child yourself,” she counters. “One word. *Omelet*.”

Memories of the egg disaster—which had somehow managed to both be runny and burnt—make me laugh harder. “Thanks. I needed this laugh.”

“Anytime!” She giggles again. “I only wish you had more skeletons in your closet I could use to torment you.”

I shake my head. No, I’ll take boring over outlandish any day. I’ve learned the hard way it’s better to be predictable. No one dies this way.

To change the subject, I ask, “Is it safe to say you’re both loving your jobs now?”

“Oh, yes. He’s doing so well with his company I don’t really have to work.” She’s not telling me anything I don’t already know. Her husband works in the area’s largest construction company and has been moving up the corporate ladder. “He was promoted to Regional Vice President.”

I bounce on my tiptoes at her exciting news. “Oh my goodness, how wonderful. I’m happy for him.” My imagination wanders from our conversation, and I picture

myself receiving my own hard-earned promotion to partner at A&L.

She discusses her husband's new role, and her job as an in-house accountant at Chicago's leading roofing company. After taking a breath, she says, "Okay, enough babbling about me. What's up in your life?"

I fill her in about Hunte and my brilliant strategy to bring them to heel.

"Oh my gosh, Sara, Hunte is to die for! You are one lucky chick."

Even though I know what she's talking about, I feign ignorance. "It's work, not play." I pause. "So can I count on you to watch over my plants if I have to stay away longer than a week?"

"Sure."

"I'll drop off the instructions, plus a copy of my itinerary in case you need to reach me, in your mailbox on my way to the airport."

"Sounds good." She giggles. "Geez, we both wouldn't kick Braxton Hunte out of bed for eating crackers. Of course, that was before I got married. So now, it's all on you."

Even if I used to agree with her, my promotion rests on the band now. I open the hall closet and grab a roll of toilet paper, filling the holder in the guest bathroom. "Joanna, I'm going to be their tour accountant, not their groupie. No one from A&L has ever joined them on tour. I'm convinced if I spend a week or two with them, I'll sort out their crazy spendthrift ways. Then the partners will have no choice but to invite me into their ranks."

When I finish, she's silent for a long pause. "Hunte's been around for years now..."

Having restored perfect order to my house, I collapse onto my sectional sofa. I kick my legs up on the soft fabric and lean back against the headrest. "Eight years."

"Have they ever been in the black?"

I place my left foot on my right knee. "Yes. Their first couple of years were good. If they didn't spend like drunken sailors—or rockstars—they would've been profitable every year."

"Isn't that what rockstars do? I mean, don't they spend as much as they make?"

"I don't know, Joanna. I've never met one."

A giggle floats through my handset. "Well, seems to me you're going to be meeting a few. Tomorrow."

Rats. I thought I had successfully diverted her thoughts. I switch up my legs so my right foot now rests on my left knee. "Whatever. They're only a job."

Full-blown laughter assails my ears. "Oh, honey, don't try to pull such crap with me. Braxton Hunte is all that and a bag of chips. And he's a free agent now, since he got divorced. With a son who's his spitting image, which we both know only ups his appeal. I'm impressed—you've figured out a way to be with him. Brava."

Both my legs crash down onto my sectional and a scowl crosses my face. "First, this *client*—emphasis on client, Joanna—is going to make me partner. Second, Hunte is a rock band, not a 'he.' Third, I enjoy their music, but I certainly do *not* have a crush on them."

More laughter ensues. “Sure. You keep telling yourself whatever you need to hear. When you’re face to face with Braxton Hunte, remember my words. All your tingly bits are going to be singing his songs.”

“Joanna!” I take a deep breath. “Hunte is just another account to me,” I bite out. “I’ve worked nine years to make partner, and this is my final test. Nothing more.”

Noise in the background pulls my best friend away from the phone. “Shit. The timer went off and I have to tend to the roast. Don’t worry about your plants. Go and have a good time with Hunte. A *real* good time.” The line goes dead.

She’s wrong. True, I did find Braxton Hunte sexy when he first burst onto the scene. And the band’s songs, which he co-wrote with the bass guitarist Colton Frontage, spoke to me. So what if I own every disc they’ve put out?

If not for A&L, I would never be going on tour with the band. And I certainly did not devise this strategy as an excuse to do so.

*No way.*

Heck, I’ve never even seen them play live. They could suck for all I know, their music a product of studio recording magic.

I walk over to my shelves of games and discs, bypassing the *Mortal Kombats* and *Super Mario*’s, and go straight for my music. Standing in front of the H’s, four CDs from Hunte peer out at me. I pull them all out. The first two went platinum, while the last two didn’t receive as much attention or acclaim.

The cover of “On the Hunte,” their first album, shows the four band members walking on a boardwalk somewhere in New Jersey, their home state. My eyes go to Braxton, with his

long, curly blond hair flowing in the breeze. He's wearing his signature gold chains around his neck and staring off to the right beneath sunglasses, a slight smirk gracing full lips.

So what if I used to fantasize about this man?

Surely I've become a woman immune to fantasies.

I shake my head to clear Joanna's teasing words. I don't even like gold.



## BRAX



I hand a twenty-dollar bill to the clerk and take the spoon with the word “Albuquerque” written across the handle. Ma would’ve loved this one with the state’s bird, a roadrunner, on it. Crushing it in my palm, I say, “Keep the change.”

When I get back to my floor, Todd Reese, our tour manager, waits in the hallway outside my door with his boot-covered foot anchored against the nondescript beige wall. I keep one eye on him, and the other trained on the navy blue carpet.

“There you are.” He pushes off the wall and hands me a couple of papers, stapled together. “Here’s the itinerary for tonight’s show, plus the budget.”

I skim over the first page. Sound check at five, dinner at six, followed by an interview with a local radio station, the concert and after-party. “Routine stuff.”

“Pretty much. Make sure you study the second page. And stick to it this time.”

The letterhead on the next page is enough to shut my interest: “Adler & Lomell, Accountants.” I want to toss the document, but Todd’s staring at me.

“It’s part of being on tour,” he says, holding my gaze.

“We’ve never had a budget before now.”

Todd chuckles. “Actually, you’ve always had a budget. You’ve ignored it.”

“I see no reason to change my M.O. now.” Giving in to my inner demon, I rip the second page off and crumple it up, aiming for Todd’s mustache. Two points.

“Brax, c’mon. You have to try to stay within budget. Just tonight. This new tour accountant is persistent. She keeps harping about the numbers and I want to shut her down.” He opens up the paper, smooths it out on his leg and thrusts it back at me.

I roll my eyes and grab the wrinkled paper from him. “I’ll get right on it. See you in a couple for the sound check. I need some shut-eye before it all starts up again.”

Once inside my suite, I head over to the mini bar. I skim over the budget as I reach for a Pepsi. No line item for mini bar items. This can’t be right.

Leaving the Pepsi where it is, I straighten and study the budget. The line item for “Hotel” has a comment beside it. *Studies show some mini-bar items have a 300% markup. Avoid outrageous charges by using vending machines.*

For Christ’s sake, if I want a friggin’ Pepsi, I’m taking it. From the mini bar. I’m not going to scour the hotel for a freaking vending machine. Crumpling the stupid budget again, I toss it into the trash and retrieve the soda. Plus a Snickers bar. So there.

My alarm goes off at four, and I begin the process of transforming into Braxton Hunte, rockstar. My on-stage persona has a harder edge, something I’ve purposefully

cultivated to achieve a separation between my private life and the one I portray on a stage.

After showering and taking the ten minutes needed to blow-dry my hair, I dress in my typical black T-shirt under a flannel shirt, blue jeans and black boots. I hang three gold chains plus my cross around my neck and I'm good to go by four-thirty. As I pass the mini bar, I grab another Pepsi for the road. Take that, fun police.



“Hey, Brax, pass me the carne seca.”

I take some of the jerky before passing the container to my best friend and the band's bassist, Colton, who scarfs down a handful of the chip-like dried meat. We're all in a private room in a Mexican restaurant, gearing up for tonight's radio interview and gig. Even though our latest album stalled at nineteen, one of the singles actually made it up to fifteen. The best showing we've had in years. I had high hopes for the song—if only it had gone higher. I tamp down my feelings of disappointment with a big bite of jerky.

The waitress brings our meals. When she gives me a plate of stacked enchiladas smothered in green chilis, she leans down brushing her boobs against my arm. “Take it easy on the chilis, Braxton, they're hot. If you want me to blow on it, I will.” Her brown eyes bore into mine.

Point taken. “I might take you up on your offer—,” my eyes stray to the nametag clipped to her shirt, “—Dolly. I do like things spicy.” I offer her a wink.

When she delivers our drummer Ricky's dinner, she pulls the same trick. Hey, can't blame a girl for trying. The blonde-

headed woman from our entourage sitting next to me places her hand on my thigh, to reassert her position with the band. The lady next to Ricky does the same. Smirking, I dig into my enchiladas. Once we devour our meals, we sit back and enjoy beers before the night truly starts.

“Guys,” Todd stands. “You’ll be at the radio station for about an hour, then the limo will bring you over to the concert venue. Your opening band will already be halfway through their set by the time you arrive, so get to your dressing room right away. After the show, the limo will be waiting by the side exit to take you to the after-party.”

Which reminds me, I need to tell him who I want waiting for me there. I consider the various groupies in our entourage, including the one at my side. Maybe I’ll go with this blonde tonight. Or a brunette. Or both.

My pleasant thoughts are interrupted when Todd clears his throat and looks at each of us in the band in turn before continuing, “Budget for the after-party was on your sheet. One-hundred dollars per band member.”

Blood races up my torso to my neck. “You’ve got to be shittin’ me. I drink more than a hundred onstage.”

I’m not the only one grumbling. Ricky spits, “This is messed up, Todd. Since when do we have a drink allowance? What am I, ten again?”

The four members of Hunte turn as one and stare down our tour manager. He has the courtesy to look down. “Guys. It’s not me. It’s this new accountant. I’ve already asked Adler & Lomell to give us someone new. If we get lucky, you’ll only have to suffer through her budgeting for another day or two.”

Colton pipes up. “We can do it. Right, guys? Maybe our chicks will buy the drinks tonight.” He pulls the redhead next to him closer.

Lex, our keyboardist and only married man in our band — currently—tosses a chip at him. “Not cool, man,” Colton grumbles. Ricky slaps Lex on the back and we all return to shooting the shit and ignoring Todd.

Soon, we’re being hustled out of the restaurant and over to the radio station, the ladies sent ahead to the venue on the entourage bus. The DJ plays our newest song, then cuts to me. “So, tell me Braxton, what’s next for Hunte?”

As the guitarist and lead singer, not to mention the band’s namesake, I’m used to getting most of the questions. I respond with practiced ease. “We’re finishing out our latest tour in November, then taking time off to enjoy the holidays with our families.” Well, Lex will be with his wife and Colton will be with his parents and brothers. After visiting my son in LA, I’ll probably head out to my house on Ibiza and party, since being around Hilary for the actual holiday is lower on my list than having another flop single. Maybe Ricky will join me.

“Sounds great. And when should we expect another Hunte album?”

I lean closer to the microphone. “We’ve been working on some songs during this tour. I’m hoping to get back to the studio to record early next year.”

“Well, that’s something to look forward to.”

His tone is not sarcastic, exactly, yet it’s obvious he doesn’t mean it. He’s going through the motions. My spine stiffens. So what if we haven’t had a Top Ten song in a few

years? Our concerts are standing room only. We're still a big draw.

"And are you thinking about sticking with the smaller venues?" he asks, studying the blinds.

I suck in a breath. Douche. He could at least look me in the eye when he insults me. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Colton picks up the slack. "We love performing for our fans and the venues we've been doing allow us to really interact with them. They're not as impersonal as big stadiums."

The DJ nods his head in a condescending way. It's obvious he doesn't think we could fill a big stadium crowd anymore. I push away from the table as he cuts to a break. "I'm just going to play 'Your Kiss Destroys Me,'" he says, "so you don't have to stick around. I know you're on stage soon."

As if I want to stick around. I rip my headphones off my head and stalk out of the booth. Colton catches up with me as I head for the exit, ignoring the people who try to step in my path. I should probably play nice, Todd would certainly want me to, but I'm in no mood. "That was bullshit," I spit out.

"Brax," Colton says.

I turn on my booted heel. "What? You can't tell me the frickin' DJ knew anything about us or our songs."

Colton's nose scrunches up. "No. I don't think he did. But he was doing his job. Our interview went out over the airwaves."

"Yeah, so what?" I slash my hand through the air. "I'm sure all two of his listeners figured out he thinks we're a bunch of has-beens." I push the door open and step into the cool night air.

“But he played our music. And you answered his questions perfectly. Even Todd must be satisfied.”

I brush my hair off my face and dive into the waiting limo, heading straight for the bar. It’s empty. “What the fuck?”

The rest of the band slips in behind me, with Todd taking the last seat. My eyes meet his. He shrugs. “Budget.”

“If I ever hear that word again, I’m going to blow.” I’m pissed and I need a drink before we hit the stage. Maybe more than one. “There better be beer in our dressing room.”

The rest of the trip is made in silence. By the time we arrive at the venue, my teeth hurt from the amount of grinding I’ve been doing. Everywhere I look there are signs we’re no longer what we once were—the DJ’s disinterest, the ballbuster budget, and our underperformance in the charts.

“We’re here,” Todd announces as the limo glides to a stop. “Put on your rockstar faces for any fans waiting.”

I know he’s right, and so I do. My mood instantly improves when the limo door opens. Screams envelop us and someone throws a pair of pink lace panties into my lap. A smile lifts my lips. Yeah. A chick and a beer before the show sounds like a good pre-game to me.

Before exiting the vehicle, Todd tells us, “You’re on in forty-five.”

Crap. Not enough time for me to pick up a girl and go in for a proper screw. Quickies don’t do it for me anymore. The guys get out and wait for me to join them. Our name is written in lights across the marquee, which normally makes me strut, but the “u” isn’t lit. I can’t suppress rolling my eyes at Colton, who shrugs and heads into the venue. Women are lined up by

the grey side door, screaming my name and reaching out to touch me. Someone pinches my ass.

Whipping my head to the side, I stop and catch the culprit. Nice blonde hair down to her waist and pink fingernails. Wonder if they match her nipples. I lean in close and whisper in her ear, “Caught my attention, baby. And I like it. Tell security BH sent you with the password ‘Hickey,’ and I’ll see you backstage after the show.”

Not waiting for her reply—because, why? she’ll be there—I follow my bandmates into the building with a little more swagger in my step, despite the marquee. I greet the workers and am escorted to a small room in the back.

Thank God the accountant hasn’t budgeted us out of our pre-show brews after all. A bucket of beers in ice awaits us on top of the room’s only table. “Toss me one of those, Ricky!”

The drummer flicks his wrist and a can of beer sails through the air. I catch it and open the top to the sound of fizz. Tilting the Bud, I swallow half the brew in one go. Wiping the back of my hand across my mouth, I say, “Now that’s what I was talking about.”

Ricky laughs, drinking his own beer, then sprawling out on one of the room’s four brown cloth sofas. “I know what you mean.”

Colton strolls over, beer in hand, and hands me a piece of paper. “I’ve been working on what you gave me for a little while. What do you think?”

I take the piece of paper from him and review our newest song, humming the tune. I started writing the lyrics to ‘Baby, Give It’ about a month ago and added the melody shortly thereafter. Cal Northville, the producer Apex Records assigned



to us when we started, blessed it already. I turned it over to Colton a week ago.

“I like the riff and the chorus. The bridge needs a little work.” I grab a pen and together we walk over to the one sofa set apart from the others. While the rest of the band shoots the shit, the two of us go back and forth, reworking the song, until Todd’s head pops into the room.

“Hey guys, you’re up in five. Let’s make this another great show.”

Colton pockets the song and we run through our warm-ups, which we have down to a science after eight years. When we’re through, Lex asks, “Are you ready to rock this place?”

“Hell yeah!” we respond in unison.

I shout, “Hands in a circle.” All of us pile our fists on top of one another. “Let’s make Albuquerque shout Hunte to the sky! One, two, three!”

As one, we yell, “We. Are. Hunte!”

Pre-show rituals completed, we walk toward the stage. I jog in place and shake out my hands, getting amped up for the performance. Tugging my sunglasses into place, sweet adrenaline laces through me. Todd gives the signal, and we step out onto the fog-laden stage and take our instruments from our roadies.

Ah. I’m home.

Two hours later, I grab a towel from a roadie, wipe the sweat off my face and tuck my sunglasses into my back pocket. “Great show tonight, man,” Ricky says as we head backstage.

“Thanks. We all rocked it!” I swap the towel for a fresh one and run it over my hair.

“Now we get to reap our rewards. I saw you with that blonde before the show.” He bumps my shoulder. “I got my eye on a redhead.”

My lips curl upward. “Let’s shower and hit it.”

After we’ve all cleaned up and are back in the limo, Todd gives us our parting instructions. “Listen up, guys. The club is next to the hotel, so you can all stumble back there on your own. Remember the one-hundred-dollar limit imposed on each of us by the tour accountant.”

All four of us grumble at the reminder. None of us actually agree. We’ve worked our asses off—we need to cut loose.

Soon we’re on the second floor of a packed club, surrounded by our entourage of about ten women, plus the new faces from Albuquerque. We clink glasses and party, still feeling the high of our performance. The blonde with the pink nails from earlier shakes her ass in front of me to the tune of a new Pearl Jam song. I wrap my arm around her waist and blow into her ear. “Keep shaking like that for me, baby.”

She leans back into my chest, her head tilted toward me. “Anything you want, Braxton.”

*Braxton.* God, I hate my full given name. But it’s what the label chose to use, since Brax Hunte didn’t sound manly enough for them. My real friends call me Brax. This chick doesn’t know that, though.

“How about a blowjob?”

As I speak, “Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana starts up. I touch the cross around my neck in honor of my friend, Kurt, who committed suicide months ago. The thought is like a

black cloud, but her hand wanders down to the front of my jeans, lifting me out of the darkness.

“Sounds good to me.”

Me, too.

## BRAX



The ringing of my cell phone forces my eyelids open. Blinking rapidly, I see the offender across the room and throw the blankets off. Stumbling to my Motorola Lingo, I heft it to my mouth and croak out, “Hello?”

“Jesus, *Braxton*, it’s nearly noon. Are you still sleeping?” Contempt drips from the all-too-familiar voice.

“Hilary.” Shaking my head, I try to jostle the remnants of sleep from the corners of my brain. I need all my wits about me when dealing with my ex-wife. The source of more negative headlines about me than I can count.

“At least you remembered my name and didn’t call me by the slut-of-the-day’s.”

My eyes flit back to my empty bed. Doesn’t mean I didn’t have company last night—we just never made it to the hotel. I rake my hand through my hair. “What do you want?”

“Touchy-touchy. Do you even remember her name?”

My chest expands at her insult. “We’re not married anymore, and I don’t need to listen to your shit. Why did you call, Hilary?”

“I called to remind you that your son’s birthday party is coming up, dropout.”

In the background, a little boy's voice rings out, "Is Daddy on the phone?"

Ignoring her bitchy term for me, my first smile of the day pulls across my face. "Put him on."

The line goes silent except for scuffling as the phone is passed to my son. "Hello, Daddy. Where are you?"

"Hi there, King. Right now, I'm in Albuquerque."

He repeats the city's name and then giggles. "What a funny name."

"It's Spanish." I pull my hair away from my smiling face. "I'll take you here someday."

"I'd like that. It's the least you could do."

My face falls at his words. No, not his words. Hilary's. The need to defend myself rushes to the surface. "King, you know I visit you as often as I possibly can. My work takes me away from LA."

"I know. But before you take me to this funny place, you're coming to my birthday party, right? And Hunte is going to play some songs, like you promised me, right?"

A satisfied smile tips my lips. I was honored when he asked if my band would play at his party. It's the most important gig on our schedule. "We wouldn't miss it for the world."

"It'll be epic! Everyone in my class is going to be talking about it all school year!"

Being the talk of an elementary school never felt so right. I stand and look out over the buildings of the Spanish city. Chuckling, I reply, "Got everything squared away for the tenth." I deliberately give him the wrong date.

“Daddy! My party is on the fourteenth, not the tenth.”

I realize my teasing was lost on him, as his disapproving tone sounds like his mother’s. I correct my mistake right away. “I knew that, King. I was teasing you. I’ve had your date on our calendar for ages.”

“Oh, okay. Whew. Wouldn’t want you guys to come all the way out here for nothing.”

“Seeing my son is never ‘for nothing.’” I make a raspberry noise, and his prepubescent giggle returns.

Hilary says something to King, who pulls the receiver away from his mouth. A moment later, he returns. “Gotta go, Daddy. Great talking with you. See you soon!” With those words, my son disappears and my ex picks up our conversation where we left off. “I need another two grand for his party.”

My high at talking with King vanishes without a trace. This on top of the five I’ve already given her? “Shit.” I sit down on the hotel’s nondescript beige couch and make a note about doing a wire transfer. I also write down the party’s date—October fourteenth—at my former home in Los Angeles, now *her* domain. “What time’s the party?”

“You don’t have to be here. Just send me the check.”

My eyebrows form a V. “I promised King I’d be there, and Hunte’s performing. I always show up for his birthday.” With enough presents to make up for all the time I’ve spent away from him on tour. Her attorney used my work schedule as a frickin’ battering ram on the judge during our divorce, which is how she won full custody of King. But I still try to see my son whenever I can. And call him in-between visits. Even with

such limited exposure, I'm still way better to him than my own father ever was.

“Whatever. It's from one 'til four, if you can swing it.”

“I'll be there for King.” My fist comes down hard on the coffee table. “And don't worry, you'll get your God-damned money.” As I hit disconnect, I find myself wishing I could slam the receiver down into its cradle.

I blow out a breath as I sink into the sofa. How did we go from high school sweethearts to raging hatred in ten years? It's a foolish question, of course, because the answer is so obvious. While Hilary was home taking care of our infant son, I was on the road. Temptation abounded, and I succumbed. Many times. My shoulders sag. She earned her attitude. But not her title as “media source.”

My mind races away from my failure as a husband to my son. It's hard to believe King is turning eight. The thought of everything I've missed leaves a bitter taste in my mouth—at least we keep up over the phone. He tells me about school and all the activities Hilary has him in—even though I tell her to lay off and let him be a kid.

I rip off the sheet from my conversation with Hilary and write “King,” across the top of a brand new one. The accountant wants me to budget? Fine. After writing down Hilary's request for the party, I add a gift for King and airfare to get me and the guys to LA. Shit. Do we have a concert that night? At least the party ends at four. I'll be able to make it to our gig at night, if we have one. If we were on the East Coast, it would be much harder.

I stand and rummage through my luggage but don't find any paperwork with our tour dates on it. After a quick shower,

I head over to Todd's room for an answer about whether I'm working the night of King's party.

An envelope on the floor beneath the door catches my attention. Bending down, I see my name—Braxton Hunte—is written in perfect penmanship. “Must be a nun,” I mutter as I rip open the end and slide out a couple of sheets of paper.

The word “denied” is written in bold red letters across an invoice itemizing my expenses from yesterday. Including the Pepsis and Snickers I swiped from the mini bar, and a bar bill of five-hundred fifty dollars. No one needs to tell me who sent this.

All thoughts about King's party flee.

I'm out of my room faster than I can process the word “denied.” I bang on Todd's door with my closed fist for a full minute before the asshole opens.

“What's up, Mary Sunshine?”

I hold up the invoice and growl, “You better have a good explanation for this.” He takes a step back and I follow him into his room.

“I warned you. I told you about the new tour accountant's rules.”

“This is bullshit. I'm not a friggin' teenager begging for an allowance.” The word “denied” dances before my eyes and I smack the paper onto his chest. “What the hell does this mean, anyway?”

Our tour manager grabs the paper out of my hand. “I think it means you have to repay Hunte this amount out of your personal account.”



“I earn my money and I can spend it however I damn well please.” I pick up the phone and shove it at him. “Get the new tour accountant on the phone. Now.”

Todd probably doesn’t deserve to be on the receiving end of my venom—he’s not the one messing with me—but it’s hard to care at the moment. This freaking assault on my lifestyle needs to end. “Listen, Brax—”

“Don’t Brax me, Todd. We both know this is ridiculous.” I thrust the phone in his direction again. “Make the call. Tell the accountant to back off.”

Todd spins on his heel and walks toward the big window overlooking downtown Albuquerque. “I don’t have to call her. She’s here.”

My thoughts stop swirling at once. I look around, but we’re the only two people in the room. “What? What do you mean, ‘*she’s* here’?”

“Exactly what I said. The accountant is here. In this hotel.” He runs his fingers over his mustache.

Fisting the papers in my hand, I shake them at him. “One, you never told me the new tour accountant is a woman. Two, what right does she have to deny me anything?” I pause to take a breath and my conversation with King pops into my head. “And three, what are we doing on October fourteenth?”

He turns to me, one eyebrow lifted. I waive my hand. “King’s birthday party is on the fourteenth and I promised him we’d play a set. Where are we then?”

Todd turns to his dressing table and hands me a schedule. I skim down to the date. “Awesome. We’re in Phoenix on the thirteenth and fourteenth, playing in Tucson on the fifteenth. We’ll be able to play at King’s party during the day and make

the gig that night, no problem. Book our flights, alright?” I hand the schedule back. “Now, back to our tour accountant. Spill.”

“Like I told you, I’ve been dealing with her over the phone for a couple of weeks now. She’s pretty tenacious. A real bulldog.”

“Why is she here?”

“Hell if I know. She introduced herself to me in the hotel lobby when I got back last night. I had no idea she was coming. It’s never happened before.”

“No shit. Is the accounting firm looking to increase their rate?” I wouldn’t be surprised if smoke was coming out of my ears.

He shakes his head. “No. She promised they’ll charge a ‘flat fee equal to the average of the past three months’ worth of billing.” The air quotes indicate those were her words, not his.

“At least that’s something.” I smooth out the sheets of paper and look at the red word again. *Denied*. “Was I the only band member to get one of these today?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t run this by me. Since you’re the only one who’s come to me about it, I’m guessing yes.”

“Fuck this.” I’m pissed as hell, the blood in my neck pounding a staccato rhythm. I can’t blame Todd for this—for once, it’s not his fault. Inhaling a deep breath, I ask, “Where is she?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know.” He flings his hand. “Somewhere in the hotel.”

A few stray hairs fly up with my exhale. I look at the budget again and flip to the second page. What I had assumed was a continuation of the invoice is instead today's daily budget. Oh, joy. Both pages are on Adler & Lomell letterhead. I stalk over to the hotel phone, put it on speaker and dial. The receptionist puts me through to my *real* accountant, Theodore Adler.

"To what do I owe this call from the illustrious Braxton Hunte?" jokes the elderly man on the other end of the line.

"Checking in. Anything you want to tell me?"

"All good here."

"Great. Then will you explain to me exactly why a—" I mime "what's her name?" to Todd, who scribbles on my paper. "—a Sara Anderson is here with us?"

"Oh, Sara," he chuckles. "She's harmless. Thinks she can take care of you guys better if she's out there with you. She'll only be on tour with you a week. Nothing to worry about."

The hairs on the back of my arm rise in attention. "A week of this girl is going to kill me, Theodore. Bring your dog home."

"Tsk, ts. Don't let a little girl get under your skin. She's harmless. Smart, too. She could be helpful."

My eyes slit. No accountant is ever "harmless." "What are you playing at, Theodore?"

"Me?" He chuckles again. "Nothing. We always let our associates run with their accounts, and she wanted to go on tour with you to evaluate the situation for herself. She'll be gone before you know it."

"I don't like it."

“Then change her mind.”

Realizing I’m getting nowhere fast, I end the call. Returning to the window next to Todd, I say, “He was no help.”

“I heard.”

I skim over the invoice from yesterday again, noting all the red marks around line items exceeding the illustrious Sara Anderson’s projections. Today’s itemized list is even smaller, as if in punishment. If her firm won’t shut her down, I sure will. “What’s her room number?”

“I don’t know.”

“Jesus. What do I pay you for?”

“To get bookings and keep you on schedule, not to wipe your ass.”

Just like that, my anger, which had reduced to a simmer, returns to boiling. “Watch your tone. I’m still the boss around here.”

Todd flinches then stands straighter. “And I’m keeping Hunte on the map.”

We stand in silence for a few beats.

I am Braxton Hunte, I remind myself. I’ve had five Number One hits and three more songs crack the Top Ten. So what if it was four years ago? We’re still writing and putting out new stuff. Another song is going to put us right back at the top. Maybe even my newest collaboration with Colton.

Todd breaks first. “Let me call down to the lobby and see if I can get her room number for you.”

I incline my head and he makes the call. “I’m the tour manager for Hunte and I misplaced the room number for our accountant, Sara Anderson. She checked in last night.” I tune out his half of the conversation, my thoughts swirling around the word “denied.”

“Here.” Todd hands me a slip of paper with the numbers Four-Two-One on it. “That’s her room.”

“Thanks, man.”

Our tiff may be over, but the storm is brewing for little Sara Anderson. I punch the elevator call button and wait. No one tells me what to do with my own money.

Soon I’m in front of her door. I try the handle, which is locked—so much for the element of surprise. I pound on it three times.

A tall woman opens it, steel grey eyes growing wide when she recognizes me. Good.

I take in her perfectly groomed dishwater blonde shoulder-length bob, perfectly manicured nails, and perfectly pressed black skirt suit. She’s perfectly awful. As I walk past her into her room, her light floral scent tries to waylay me, but I won’t be deterred.

Waving her budget in the air, the big red word *Denied* pisses me off all over again. I boom, “What. Is. This?”

## SARA



**S**atisfied with my work, I place my glasses on top of my small, orderly pile of papers and stand. As I slide my feet into my two-inch pumps, preparing to go down to the hotel's restaurant for lunch, someone knocks on my door.

More like pounds on it.

Ready to send whoever it is on their way—after all, no one knows me in Albuquerque—I open the door. My eyes grow big as Braxton Hunte storms into my room, waving the envelope I slipped under his door this morning.

His tenor voice bounces off all the surfaces in the room and skates down each one of my vertebrae. “What. Is. This?”

It takes a moment to process the fact that the lead singer of Hunte stands in the middle of my room, shaking my carefully planned budget at me. He's more imposing than he looks in photographs. His long, curly blonde hair is the only soft thing about him. To buy myself time, I give him my back while I close the door with a quiet snick. My partnership rests on this. On him.

Ignoring the electricity zipping through my body urging the silly fangirl inside me to touch him, I swivel on my heel and square my shoulders. Lunch will have to wait. I extend my

hand. “Hello Braxton, I’m Sara Anderson, your tour accountant. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The world-famous hazel eyes that have spawned a few of my own daydreams—okay, maybe more than a few—cross as he looks down at my hand. “I’m sure you are,” he says, shifting his gaze to meet my eyes.

My arm falls untouched to my side. I’m used to dealing with clients who have an interest in increasing their profitability, not the other way around, although I knew this would be a tough account. Refusing to back down in the face of this rude rockstar, no matter how swoon-worthy I found him *before*, I swallow and start over. To try to gain more command over this situation, I modulate my voice lower. “I see you brought your daily budget with you.”

He takes two steps and stands toe-to-toe with me. It’s a relief he’s slightly shorter than me, especially since I’m in my heels. He rumbles, “This piece of paper means nothing to me.” He moves his large hands with those extra-long, talented fingers into the center of the pages and rips them in half.

The sound of the paper tearing hangs between us.

My blood pressure spikes. How dare he? I grab the two halves of the invoice and budget, march over to my desk and tape them back together. “Acting childish is what got you into this mess, Braxton.”

As I approach him again, he crosses his hands over his chest. I can see his defined muscles through his T-shirt. Ignoring the heady scent of the man—a deep musk invades my nose—I hold the repaired papers out to him. “Take these. You’re going to need to know your limits for today.” I shove the papers at him, but his hands don’t move an inch.

“I don’t need budgets. And I don’t need a babysitter.” He looks me up and down. “So take your prissy ass and remove yourself from my tour.”

*Prissy?* My ire surges at his use of Max’s term. “First, you most definitely *do* need a budget. Your tours are consistently running in the red because of your unnecessary extravagant expenses.” I shake the pages in his arrogant face. I’m tempted to stomp my foot—his childishness brings it out in me, I guess—but I can’t be accused of being an unbalanced woman. “Second, until you learn how to curtail your spending, a babysitter is exactly what you need.”

His hands move to his hips and his stance widens. “We’ve been on tour for eight years. I think we know how to do our jobs.”

Neither one of us speaks. His nostrils flare. I stop my hands from balling into fists, but only because I’m still holding the darn papers.

No one ever has made me feel this out-of-control since I was a teen. I need to regain the upper hand, show him I’m not like all the other hands-off tour accountants from A&L, so I try a different tact. Forcing a conciliatory smile, I say, “I’m not saying you don’t know how to play concerts. I’m here to make sure your tour gets into the black.”

He scoffs. “Theodore was right.”

At the mention of my boss’s name, my eyes meet his. What did Mr. Adler tell Braxton? Raising to my full height, I look down and spear him with my eyes. “About what?”

“That you need taming.”

He smiles, revealing his dazzling white teeth, and the entire atmosphere in the room changes. Air sucks out of my



lungs. My body tingles in anticipation as he licks his lips.

*He's trying to seduce me.* The thought excites my traitorous body, but I shunt it off to the side. No, he's not. He's trying to *control* me. Or "tame" me, which is a godforsaken word I can't imagine Mr. Adler used. "Good luck trying, Braxton."

He shrugs. "What? I'm trying to show you how amenable I can be."

I grind my teeth, my dentist's warnings be damned. "Get your spending under control." I consult the taped-up budget and hold it out to him. "You have one hundred dollars to spend on food today."

Instead of trying to debate the figure, he does something unexpected. He turns his back to me and walks around my room. He runs his hand down the side of the Coach purse I left on the bed.

"Looks like you have a taste for the finer things."

I tilt my chin. "I can afford them." Besides, I picked it up at an outlet center.

"I will not be denied." The affability is already leaking out of his tone.

I shuffle the pieces of paper and hold out the one I scrawled "denied" on this morning. "Looks like you have been."

In a flash, Braxton returns to my side and snatches the papers out of my hand. "I won't be treated like this. I am Braxton Hunte."

If I can't right this account, I won't make partnership, so what do I have to lose? "And I am Sara Anderson. I'm in

charge of the profitability of this tour. And, yes, you will be denied. Pay for the overage out of your own funds.”

He leans closer. “It was a band affair last night. Meaning the band picks up the tab.”

The hairs on the back of my neck rise at being so close to the lead singer. Fighting the urge to back away from his irritatingly compelling scent, I stand my ground. “Not when you go over the band’s budget, it isn’t.”

Braxton looks down at the invoice from yesterday and points to the champagne. “Tour budget. The band always springs for three bottles when we complete a gig, for us and our entourage.”

I point to the line item. “Not when your individual budget for the after-party is one hundred dollars.”

“My guess is all four band members had the same allotment. That’s four hundred. A bottle of Dom is only a buck seventy-five.”

I grind my teeth. He has a point. “I’ll make a new line item for Dom Perignon on the night of gigs.” He smirks. Not a smile of happiness, rather one communicating he won. Not so fast. “Just one bottle. And I’ll deduct it from your collective budgets, so you’ll each have—” I do a quick mental calculation, “—fifty-six dollars and twenty-five cents to spend at your after-party.”

His smirk morphs into shock. “You can’t do that. You’re nuts. It’s our friggin’ *job* to go to parties and be seen.” He shoves the papers back at my chest. “And your food allowance is shit, too. A hundred per day? Breakfasts alone can top thirty bucks. What planet did you fall from?”

“The planet that is going to put this tour into the black. For the first time since your last big hit four years ago, might I add. You’ve been living on borrowed time for years.” I push the papers at his chest to emphasize my point. “You spend and spend and spend on tour, barely making enough money to cover your past credit. Why you’re always in the red.”

He tears the papers from my hand and throws them to the floor. I debate the merits of stooping to pick them up—which would require me to bend down. Not going to happen.

“We always cover our debts,” he says in a softer tone. “I’d never allow Hunte to miss a payment.”

I’m too worked up to acknowledge his admission. “By some miracle you do. However, dipping into future earnings to pay past debts isn’t how things should work.” I catch my breath. “You have to face facts.”

“And what type of *facts* are they, do tell.” His hazel eyes have taken on a deep amber hue and anger sparks off his skin.

He’s not going to like what I have to say, but I don’t care. My usual controlled, calm demeanor fled the room the moment he called me “prissy.” “Hunte’s songs aren’t topping the charts anymore. The *fact* is your career is on the downswing.”

Braxton turns and walks away from me, toward the bathroom. When he reaches the door, he grabs the knob and slams it. Then he turns and glares at me, his blazing amber eyes skewering my feet to the floor. “I don’t know what you think you know, but listen to me. My career is just fine. Our songs hit the charts. Our concerts are sold out. Our CDs sell very well, and our merchandise usually runs out at the shows.”

My right eyebrow lifts. “Hit a nerve?”

He inhales as if trying to conquer a difficult calculus problem and stalks toward me. For a split second, I picture us a gazelle and a lion in the Sahara. Or is it the African wilderness? Whatever. He stops inches from my face and all my thoughts take a hike.

“This right here.” Braxton holds up his pinky. “I have more talent here than you have in your entire body.”

What a cliché. He needs to be taken down a peg. Or ten. “At least I spend within my means.”

“I can always go out and do another gig or two, and the money’s replenished,” he continues as if I didn’t say anything. “Your job, for as long as you have it, is to be the bean counter. Nothing more. Don’t tell me how much to spend or on what. Plug numbers into your fancy spreadsheets. I bet they fuck you real good at night.”

To think, I used to find him enticing. I suck in my breath and hitch my head up higher, so he has to look up at me. I’m too close to being named partner to run back to the office with my tail between my legs because of some short, blond ego-trip of a man-boy. “My job is to count the expenses, forecast future profits and losses, and keep your tour out of the red.”

Once again, we engage in a staring match.

A flush spreads across his cheeks, giving me a hint of how mad he is. “I’ll spend my money how I see fit. Right now, I’m not seeing the value in spending it on your accounting firm.”

He’s not mad, he’s vindictive. My fury ratchets up. Two can play this game. “You’re not firing us.”

“Watch me.”

He pulls a cell phone out of his back pocket. I’ve never seen one of these in person before. Only executives and

celebrities have them. Shoot, I guess Braxton qualifies. And his expenses show he certainly likes his toys. “Nice status symbol you got there. Overcompensating much?”

His finger pauses before he can hit another number on the phone. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

I can’t let him make this call. I’m not losing my career at the say-so of an overindulged adolescent. Hating I’m giving into a bully, I do a quick mental calculation. “I can increase your daily food budget.”

His finger stalls. “Keep talking.”

If I decrease the expected profit to ten instead of twenty percent, Hunte will still be in the black. “And raise your budget for the after-party by fifty dollars.” Another five drinks. More than enough.

“And yesterday’s *denied* is erased.”

“No.”

He takes another half-step forward, almost enough for his chest to push into mine. “Yes.”

I refuse to back away. I’ve already compromised as much as their tour budget will allow. “You were informed of your daily allotment and you chose to overspend. My concessions are only for future spending.”

“No one denies Braxton Hunte.”

“Get used to it.”

“Not on your life.”

Aware of the heat of his body, I fight my urge to step back. He needs to be shown who’s boss. And, in all matters finance,

that would be me. “I’m in charge of your money. What I say goes.”

“You work at my pleasure.” His eyes narrow and he growls, “For my pleasure.” He licks his lips again and returns his phone to his back pocket. “And I can think of a much better use for your mouth than prissy words, Tour Accountant.”

There’s Max’s word again. I open my mouth to call him on it, but before I can comprehend what’s happening, Braxton snakes his hands behind my head and pulls me to him, covering my lips with his. I’ve never experienced such a brutal kiss. Hard lips press against mine in a show of dominance.

I should push him away. It’s nothing more than his way of ending an argument he’s losing. Yet no one has ever kissed me like this. I’m awash in a confusing maelstrom of feelings and, on their volition, my lips move against his.

The pressure against my mouth changes. He’s no longer punishing but rather questioning. Molding. Sculpting.

A low moan surfaces from deep in my chest and is greeted with a similar sound from him. With little caresses, his arms slide down my back, pulling my willing body closer.

Sanity returns in a burst of furor. I shove him off me with a snarl. “What are you doing?” I swipe the back of my hand across my mouth.

He smirks. “What I should’ve done in the first place.” His eyes rake me up and down.

“Fuck you.” I never use this sort of language. How has he reduced me to such bad manners within minutes?

His eyes flick to my bed. “That’s an idea.”

Enraged, I grab his forearm and drag him to the door. “Get out!”

I don’t care if my voice sounds shrill. He needs to get out of my space. Now. I swing the door open and push him toward it with enough force, causing him to stumble.

“Stay away from me, you, you”—I search for the right word—“pig.”

“You stay away from our tour accounts, and I will,” he challenges. “Now try and erase my kiss from your frigid memory.” He saunters off without a backward glance.

Rage bubbles up from the pit of my stomach and I slam the door shut with an audible growl. I kick off my heels and pace around the room. “That man.” I walk from one side of the space to another. “That jerk.” I fling open the bathroom door and stalk inside. “He’s such an *asshole*.”

But I have to settle down, no matter how much I want to tell Braxton Hunte exactly what I think of him. I have to rein in his spending before the Hunte account becomes redder than a blazing inferno and my hopes of partnership are burned in its wake.

But his kiss...a shudder rakes through my body.

## BRAX



“**T**here is no excuse for this!” Miss Priss stands in the aisle of the tour bus, waving a hotel bill she dramatically removed from her leather briefcase. The incident in question happened a week ago—before she arrived—but the official bill apparently arrived today. “Why on earth would you throw a sofa out of your room and into the pool, for goodness’ sake? Who does that?”

The tour bus bounces along another highway, this time headed toward Denver. The bus has been retrofitted with a dining table, leather couches and chairs, a bathroom—including a shower—and a bedroom in the back. No longer do we have bunk beds, as we always sleep in hotels, a luxury I’ve insisted on ever since “Your Kiss Destroys Me” hit Number One. Sleeping in the tour bus feels too much like being homeless. A feeling I never want to revisit.

I nudge Colton, who’s sitting on the sofa next to me. In a stage whisper, I say, “Yeah, Colton, who does that?”

My best friend gives me a dirty look. “I don’t know, *Braxton*, maybe you should look in the mirror?” I smirk at his use of my professional name, which he reserves for when I’ve pissed him off. But hell, it was a fun night. My eyes skim over



the members of our entourage here with us, two of whom were active participants in the evening's activities.

She continues, "There's no need to waste money like this. Understood?"

"Mhmm," my voice joins in with the muttered responses of the rest of the band.

I roll my eyes while she continues her lecture. Turning my back to her, I ask Todd, "Who let *her* on here?"

Our tour manager shrugs, as if he doesn't have a clue, and maybe he doesn't. She was waiting outside the bus this morning, a stack of paper in hand, and she handed each of us a new budget and invoice as we boarded. Turns out the other guys all got envelopes, too, yesterday—they just woke up even later than I did.

From the front, she tries a different line of attack. "Come on, guys. Follow the daily budgets I gave you today, all right? It's not too difficult."

Grumbles rise up around me. Colton places his hands on his knees and leans forward. "It's like we're on some austerity budget." In response to my puzzled expression, he amends, "She makes it sound like we don't have any money."

"This is over the top," Lex chimes in.

My mind wanders back to our meeting yesterday and my fingers rub over my lips. What was that kiss, anyway? She riled me up and I lashed out at her the only way I knew how, and she...well, she didn't back down, for sure. Like she's not backing down now. In that moment, she *tamed* my attack on her, and made me feel alive. Like I was onstage. Only in four-dimensions.

Something tells me Miss Priss is dangerous, which forces my chin up. No. I refuse to be told how I can spend the money I earn.

I zone back into the conversation when Ricky says, “The daily budgets are one thing, but the next day review of all the ways we fucked up is too much. Who the hell wants to live like this?”

I glance toward the front. “Not me,” I agree.

Miss Priss’s eyes catch and hold mine, their steel grey color shining with determination. She waves her hands. “All I want is for your tour to be profitable.”

Todd walks to the front of the bus and wraps his arm around her shoulders. “C’mon, guys. Sara here is only doing her job. One you’re paying her accounting firm to do.”

“Let’s dump ’em,” Ricky suggests. I huff out a laugh.

Our accountant steps out of Todd’s one-armed embrace. “Believe it or not, I’m here to help you. I want you to succeed.”

“Guys,” Lex says. “Listen, I know it sucks to be monitored like we’re kids again. But I’ve heard rumblings MC Hammer’s in debt up to his eyeballs. We don’t want to be mentioned in the same breath as him. At least when it comes to money.”

The air in the bus becomes heavier as we absorb what Lex said. “Fuck.” I rake my hand through my hair, snagging on a knot near the bottom.

Obviously sensing victory, Sara suggests, “Why don’t you guys turn this into a game? See who can spend the least. The winner can—I don’t know, get an hour extra of sleep or something?”

“Or skip soundcheck,” Colton pipes up.

“Or pass off his dirty laundry,” offers Ricky, who always is trying to pawn off the task.

My nose scrunches up at the thought. “How about he gets an extra hundred dollars to spend the next day?”

My suggestion is met with a chorus of “Hell, yes!”

We all stare down our new accountant, whose eyes widen. “All right. The band member who spends the least today will get an extra *fifty* tomorrow.”

Sensing victory, I lean back into the sofa. “A hundred.”

She swallows. “Fine.” She pulls a notepad out of her briefcase and scribbles something down.

Dismissing her now we got what we wanted—sort of—we grab our Nintendo game console and play *Mortal Kombat 2*, the ladies from the entourage crowding in. Since the game only released last month, we’re all still learning the levels. Lex has the upper-hand, but the rest of us put in a good showing.

When the bus finally rumbles into Denver, Todd gets out and registers for us while the ladies in the entourage blow us kisses and disappear into the hotel. When Todd returns, we pour out of the bus, overnight bags slung over our shoulders, and claim our keys.

“Got four-fifteen,” Lex says.

“I’m in seven-oh-two,” Ricky states. We all stop.

I glance at my key. “Three-twenty-five.” Colton says he’s also on three—three-forty-seven.

I turn and glare at Sara, who has the grace to blush. I shout to her, “What’s going on? The suites are always on the same

floor.”

Todd and she exchange glances, then the annoying tour accountant squares her shoulders. “Because you wanted to keep the tradition of a bottle of Dom after every gig, I instructed Todd to reduce your hotel allowance. The hotel assured me your rooms are more than satisfactory.”

Now she’s roped Todd into her nonsense? I’ve had enough. “We’re friggin’ Hunte. We don’t do ‘rooms.’ It’s suites or nothing.” I march away from the group and head toward the hotel’s side entrance. Screw cooperation. I’m getting our suites back.

Colton grabs my arm and stops me. “Listen, Brax, we can give up our suites here.”

“This is bullshit. I was in her room yesterday. It was a frickin’ shoebox. I’m not staying in a shoebox, Colton.”

His eyes widen, then he shakes his head. “Look, let’s deal with it for one night. Let her think she’s won. I’ll talk with her after our gig. I’m sure I can get her to see reason.”

“I’m not so sure. She’s a total bitch. Worse than Hilary.”

At the mention of my ex-wife, Colton blanches. “Accountants are linear thinkers. I’m sure I can explain, logically, why her figures are off. We’ll be back in suites in no time.”

He looks very sure of himself. Maybe he’ll be able to get her to come around. My shoulders drop back into their normal place. “Okay. Give her a go. But if you can’t talk reason to her tonight, all bets are off.”

He squeezes my shoulder and we all trudge into the hotel. As Colton and I exit the elevator on the third floor, I tell the others, “See you back on the bus in two hours. I don’t want to

spend any more time in my *room* than I have to. Maybe I'll hook up with a groupie tonight and go to her *suite*."

Sara has the good grace not to look at me.

When we hit the main hallway, Colton and I split up—my room is to the right, while his is down the left corridor.

I open the door and enter the smallest room known to mankind. All right, it's not *that* small, but it's certainly not the penthouse suite I'm used to. I pull the drapes apart to check out the view. Of the parking lot. "You've got to be shittin' me." I yank them closed again.

After dropping my luggage onto the only chair in the room, I fall onto the bed. At least it's comfortable. I flick the television on, only to find most of the channels are extra. In my suites, all of the channels are included. I'm about to order HBO, but my eyes land on the paper budget stuffed into the pocket of my bag.

I toss the remote control across the room. "Fuck!"

Alone in my room, I take a shower and change for tonight's gig. At least getting onstage will save me from this room.

I glance in the mirror as I put on my gold chains, pausing to kiss the cross Ma gave me. For some reason, tonight I look less like Braxton and more like Brax from a decade ago. Hungry for recognition. Eager to show my loser teachers they were wrong about me. Maybe it's the room. Although back in high school, I would have killed to have this kind of space for myself.

I shake off the thought. I now own five homes. I'll never be homeless again.

"Hey, Brax, you ready?" Colton raps on the closed door.

Glad to leave behind the stench of the past, I pocket the key and join him in the hall. “Yeah, let’s get out of here.”

As we walk to the elevator, another door opens and two twenty-something ladies dressed in red miniskirts emerge. They wobble in their fuck-me pumps. I wiggle my eyebrows at my bass guitarist, who nudges my shoulder.

One of the girls looks at us. Her mouth drops open, yet nothing comes out. Her friend has no such hesitation, screaming, “Oh. My God. You’re Braxton Hunte!” She turns to her friend and they squeal.

I’m about to introduce myself to the ladies when two other doors burst open. Soon the hallway is filled with seven more fans. More people emerge as they bustle toward us, calling our names.

Next to me, Colton mumbles, “Shit.”

His eyes lock with mine. This is another reason why we always get suites. The floor’s secured, and our anonymity is preserved. We don’t have to wear our public faces. Forcing a professional smile, I raise and lower my hands.

“Ladies!” I yell, trying to get the crowd to dial it down.

Someone yells my name in an ear-splitting decibel. Suddenly, they rush Colton and me—some of them are waving cameras or pieces of hotel stationary, wanting photographs or autographs, but others have outstretched hands reaching for our bodies, our hair. Everyone wants a piece of us. Literally.

“Shit, we have to get out of here,” Colton murmurs for my ears only, eyes wide.

I search for and find an Exit sign. “Three o’clock, Colton. With their heels, we can outrun them down the stairs.”

As one, Colton and I start pushing toward the stairs. We have to save our own hides. If we stick around here, we'll be reduced to Man Meat.

"Excuse me," I say as I push one older teenager out of the way. Her hand slides down my arm as I brush past her.

Next to me, Colton tries to get away from a couple of women, but I have my own problems. Three new women pop out of another doorway, cameras pointed at me. Flashbulbs daze me. Great.

One of them pulls my hair, causing me to stop in my tracks. "Ouch!" I rub my head.

"Sorry," the woman coos. "You're so hot. Want to come inside?" With her free hand, she motions toward another room. "Let me show you how your kiss could destroy me."

The offer is tempting, and her play on the title of our first Number One is cute. I can duck out of the hallway into safety. For how long? I shake my head, thankfully dislodging her hand from my hair. "Thanks, but I have a gig to get to."

I half-run the final few feet to the Exit sign and shove the door open. Behind me, Colton urges, "Go! Go! They're following us!"

"Shit!" I take the steps two at a time, and when we reach the bottom, the herd's about a floor above us.

"Can't stop now!" Colton thrusts the outside door open, and we explode into the waning sunshine, the heavy metal door crashing closed behind us. Our heads turn left and right in contemplation of our next move. "That way!" Colton points toward our bus and we take off at a full gallop as the door behind us opens and shouts of "Hunte!" filter through the air.

Colton and I bolt up the steps to the bus. “Shut the door! Shut the door!” I instruct, looking back at the mob of women closing in on us.



## SARA



I stake out my spot in the front of the bus a full twenty minutes before Todd said to be here. My eyes wander over to the second bus, which, according to the manager, transports Hunte’s entourage. Namely, groupies. They cart around an entire busload of freeloaders, who, I’m guessing, pay for their services with sex. Unbelievable. Not to mention expensive.

Lex interrupts my thoughts when he boards the bus. He nods at me—his black hair skimming his shoulders—and takes a seat on the sofa next to the Nintendo. I smile and ask, “How was your room?”

“It was nice. Small though. No view.”

“Well, you won’t be in it for too long.”

“True.”

Our conversation is cut short when Ricky bounds onto the bus in a whirl of noise. His footsteps are loud, and his hands bang out a drumbeat on his legs. I guess he was born to be a drummer. I’m about to engage him when Todd hops up the steps and sits down next to me.

“Hi, Sara. Enjoying the tour so far?”

“It’s very eye-opening.”

He chuckles. “It sure is.”

Determined to get some clarity about the second bus, I begin, “So tell me, Todd, what exactly does Hunte’s entourage do?”

His lip curls upward into a smile that makes me want to take a shower. Something about this guy is smarmy, and it’s not only the mustache. Before he can respond, Braxton and Colton race onto the bus screaming, “Shut the door! Shut the door!” They dive onto two couches, panting as if they ran a marathon.

Noise from outside—banging and screaming—brings me to my feet. A group of at least fifteen women, if not more, rush the bus. Ricky joins me at the front and stares out the window, whistling in an uh-oh kind of way. Todd passes us and speaks to the driver, Ike, instructing him to head out to the Denver Dome. We start moving slowly.

From the sofa, Braxton pants, “Shit.”

“You can say that again,” Colton pants.

Lex, game console forgotten, asks the question that’s been running through my head. “What the hell happened to you two?”

“Some women found out we were staying on their floor.” Braxton runs his hand through his hair, wincing and then rubbing his head. He looks...unnerved, which makes something in my chest twist. Did I put them in danger by changing up their accommodations? No way.

Ricky whistles again before ambling back to the sofa and lowering himself down next to Colton. “Dude, did you see the number of women in their crew? It was pretty funny seeing you run from a bunch of ladies in heels.”

“Yeah, well, it wouldn’t have been funny if it were you.” Colton rubs the back of his neck.

Todd walks away from the stairwell once we’re out of the hotel parking lot. We’ve left the crowd behind. “Damn. You guys all right?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Colton answers. He takes a hand towel from Lex and runs it over his face, removing some sweat.

Ignoring Lex’s offer of a fresh towel, Braxton stands, puts his hands on his hips and stares me down. “This is your fault. If we were on our own secure floor, like we always are, this never would’ve happened.”

It’s the glimmer of panic in Braxton’s eyes, rather than his belligerent words and body language, which gives me pause. He must mistake my hesitation for weakness on my part, as he presses, “I’m not going back to that room. Get our suites back.”

My back bristles, but Todd heads off a clash between us. “Okay, settle down. Brax, I see your point. Sara didn’t intend to put you in any danger.” The tour manager looks at me and I nod. Safety must be top priority. There must be another way to offset the expense. The entourage tour bus passes us and I make a mental note to discuss ending their gravy train.

The ride to the venue is completed in silence. When the bus stops, Braxton is the first one off. A perky woman with long, dangly earrings greets us. “Welcome to the Denver Dome. Please follow me.” She leads us through a door into a long hallway. It’s a lofty name for a small event space.

Lagging behind, I follow the band into a large, open room with sofas and chairs scattered about. Metal racks with clothing stand along one wall, and a long table stacked with

wine, beer, and food is pushed against another. The guys devour everything on the table within minutes.

“Let’s try to forget what happened back at the hotel and make sure we put on a good gig tonight,” Colton announces.

The band disappears for soundcheck and I stay back. I feel guilty for—however inadvertently—being the reason Braxton and Colton were mobbed. For the first time it hits me that not everything is black or white when it comes to the band’s expenses. Needing to rethink their budgets, I pull my notepad and ledger books from my briefcase. While I’m working, catering sets up a nice dinner spread for the band. The guys return, having finished their soundcheck, and eat together.

Although I continue to work, I soak in their pre-concert excitement, my own heartrate accelerating as they change their shirts and finish their final preparations. For years, I’ve listened to their music, and I’m about to see them in action.

My throat gets tight as Colton shouts, “Hands in a circle!” When all of their fists are on top of one another’s, Colton says, “Let’s give Denver a show to remember. One, two, three!”

The guys chant, “We. Are. Hunte!” Clapping, they break and make their way backstage. Like a child enthralled by the Pied Piper, I follow.

Shouts fill the air—fans demanding they take the stage—and when I peek out from behind the curtain, the audience is doing the wave. What an adrenaline rush. No wonder the guys live to tour.

Todd calls out, “Ready guys?”

They nod and take their places at the side entrance. Their intro music starts. Ricky goes onstage first, followed by Lex. Colton and a sunglasses-wearing Braxton take their guitars

from the roadies and join them. Into the microphone, Braxton shouts, “Good evening, Denver!” He places his hand to his ear and the crowd goes all in on their answering roar. My breathing accelerates when the guys hit their first notes.

Todd touches my arm and leans in. “The band’s all set. Let’s go talk.”

It’s like my body gained a hundred pounds. I’ve wanted to see Hunte in concert forever, but I guess I can wait another day. It wouldn’t be professional to turn him down. My reluctant feet follow Todd back into the backroom.

We grab drinks then sit across from each other in a couple of armchairs, me with my Diet Coke, him with his beer. Music from the stage is muted, tantalizing my ear. “I know you’re all about the numbers,” he says, “but sometimes you have to take other things into account. Like today at the hotel. I warned you.”

“Yeah, you did. I had no idea they’d be mobbed.”

He reaches across and puts his left hand on my knee. His wedding band catches the light. “Don’t beat yourself up over it. I’ve been with the band since the beginning and know how things go.” He squeezes.

My skin tightens where he’s touching me. I pick up his hand and remove it from my person. He acts like nothing happened.

“Well,” I say, “they’re not as hot as they once were and I need to make some cuts to keep them out of the red. It’s for their own benefit.”

He nods. “I get it, but don’t do anything too drastic, all right? What do you have in mind?”

I take another sip of my Diet Coke and let the strains of Hunte's last Number One filter through my limbs for a moment. Tuning out the music, I address his last question. Might as well start with the obvious. "Eliminating the entourage."

Todd's eyes bulge, then he bursts into laughter. "How funny." He wipes tears from the corners of his eyes. "Here I thought accountants didn't have a sense of humor."

After his mirth subsides, I press cutting the entourage's food bill, to which he finally agrees with some exceptions—they're now only being fed before a concert. We move on to discuss my other ideas. I try to ignore the music coming from the stage and stay focused on our conversation, with more or less success. In the end, Todd's not too enthusiastic about my changes, but agrees to a few more. While I'm still making notes, the band bursts back into the room, drenched in sweat, high-fiving each other. Todd rises and slaps each one of them on the back. "Great show!"

I blink, and for a split-second, I'm not Sara Anderson, Tour Accountant and aspiring partner. Rather, I'm a Hunte fan in heaven. These talented guys are sweaty and oozing buoyant energy. Braxton takes off his sunglasses and lifts his hair off the back of his neck, causing his T-shirt to pull across his fit chest, and I suck in my breath. My little noise captures his attention and his gaze roots me to my spot. Something sparks between us, but then he looks away and his features close down. When he turns, I let out my breath.

After they all change clothes again—now I get why Ricky's so eager to get someone to do his laundry—we load onto the tour bus to head out to the after-party. Lex asks, "How many people were there tonight?"

“About four thousand,” Todd replies.

Lex continues, “And how much per ticket?”

“Average price was fifty dollars.”

Lex nods, eyeing me. “So, we made two hundred grand tonight, plus merch.” He rubs his hands together. “Not bad, Sara.”

Even though he’s the only member of the band who seems to be making an effort with finances, I need to make sure he understands. Although I don’t want to alienate a possible ally, I weigh in, “Minus expenses, Lex. Don’t forget them.”

His face falls. “Right.”

Lex—and the rest of the band—needs to have the full picture, but his reaction makes me feel bad. I steeple my fingers on my lap and keep my own counsel for the rest of the drive.

Once inside the club, I hug the wall and sip my Diet Coke—the bar didn’t have any Riesling, and I’d do better to remain vigilant anyway. Across the room, Braxton raises his champagne flute and clinks it with the glass of the woman beside him. She’s around his age and petite, with her hair cut into a short bob, like mine. They’re locked in conversation. A handsy one.

Ignoring the unusual hitch in my breathing, I force myself to look around the club. Ricky has two women hanging off of him, while Todd has his arms around a brunette. No surprise there.

This is not my scene. Not my life. There’s no place for me here, but I tell myself I don’t have to fit in. Not my job. No. My *job* is to get this band out of the red and get myself into a

partnership. I'm not here to be their friend. Or their fan, for that matter.

I blink and shift my focus to Lex, who's talking with Colton, not a woman to be seen between the two of them. After a while, Lex goes to the bar and Colton makes his way over to me. "Thanks for caving on the suites, Sara."

I incline my head. "It's about safety, not your comfort."

"I get it. I guess we've become a bit spoiled." He offers me a lopsided grin, and I can't help but respond. Colton is extremely good-looking, with his long brown hair and chocolate brown eyes. I guess I never noticed the bass guitarist before because I was under the thrall of the band's namesake.

Because I want to make a second band member understand why I'm on their case—Lex seems to get it—I launch into my spiel about saving for the future rather than living hand to mouth. Or, in their case, gig to gig. He seems to understand and even agrees to stick to his budget. He seems to mean it, although he could just be saying so to shut me up.

One of the red-headed groupies—members of their entourage, I correct myself—sidles up to Colton and places her hand on his stomach. Right above his belt-buckle. He hesitates, his eyes landing on mine, and I say, "We've had enough serious talk, Colton." I wave my hand. "Have fun."

I walk away and swallow the last of my Diet Coke. Although I've purposefully ignored him all evening, my eyes zero in on Braxton, who's now alone. I close my eyes and breathe in and out through my nose. Why is he beyond handsome?

When I reopen my eyes, he's approaching me. My heart starts racing, but I'm determined not to let him get to me. I



can't let anyone—not even Braxton Hunte—stand in my way to partnership. This man is the embodiment of chaos, and no matter how seductive that can be, it has no space in my life.

A couple of steps away, he stops and stares at me, hands bunched into fists at his hips. His chest puffs as he inhales. Keeping my posture open and friendly, I greet him, “Braxton.”

“We need to come to an understanding.”

I force a smile. No small talk with this one. “I’m happy to hear you’re seeing things my way.”

He shakes his head, his blond hair flipping from side to side. “If you think I’m coming around to your way of thinking, you’ve got another think coming.” He tucks a long, curly lock behind his ear. “I understand you’ve relented about our hotel arrangements.”

My stomach drops to the floor, but I don’t let him see my reaction. Time to eat some humble pie. “I’m sorry you were chased by a bunch of women.” I cock my head as I replay my sentence in my head. Smothering a wayward giggle, I continue, “I didn’t understand the possible safety issues that could arise from putting you into rooms. My mistake won’t be repeated.” Many suites have two bedrooms, so I’m investigating the possibility of having the guys double up. I don’t think he needs to know this little fact yet.

He drops his hands from his hips and something tells me I made the right decision to withhold the last tidbit. “Good.”

A new Top Ten song from a band who started around the same time as Hunte starts playing. I tip my head upward. “I like this song.”

Braxton listens for a moment, then shrugs. “They’re a bunch of stuck-up assholes.”

Something about the comment rubs me the wrong way, as if he can't appreciate anyone else's success, and my mouth runs away from me. "Well, your observation may be true, but they're still selling out stadiums."

"Listen here, Sara," he says my name like it's lower than dirt. "Keep your opinions to yourself. You don't know shit about my industry. I repeat—*my* industry. When it comes to money and budgets, you can go crazy and spew whatever you think we need to hear." His arms cross over his chest, causing his biceps to bulge. "Nothing more."

Ignoring an unwanted sense of awareness crawling up my spine, I focus on the fact he didn't say he'd follow my instructions. "I'm stating facts, not opinions."

He raises his index finger and shoves it toward me. "Do you want some facts? How about these—one, this band is named after me, which gives me the last say on all decisions. Two—" he adds his middle finger, "—you can give us daily budgets until you're blue in the face, but you can't make us stick to them." His ring finger completes the trio in my face, a nasty smirk marring his otherwise perfect features. "Three. You're only still here because I allow it."

Reaching out, I flick his three fingers away. "I'm here because A&L tasked me with making your tour profitable and no other accountant had the balls to go on tour with you to make sure it happened. If you all tighten your belts a little bit, this could be your first profitable tour in years."

"I. Don't. Like. You."

"You don't have to. All you have to do is stop spending money you don't have." Under my breath, I mutter, "Arrogant asshole."

“What did you say?”

I square my shoulders at my adversary. “I said you’re an arrogant asshole.”

His large hand reaches out and skims the side of my face. “You weren’t complaining in your hotel room yesterday, baby.”

My heart flips at his term of endearment, then wraps itself in a protective case of metal. “You wish.”

He moves his fingers behind my head and pulls. “Want to test that theory?”

My chin rises. “No.”

He grins and takes another half step toward me. “Really?”

His breath, lightly scented with beer, tickles my nose. The fact we’re in public fades away as my vision tunnels to the rockstar standing within touching distance. My left foot slides forward, bringing me closer to him. My breathing hitches. Pressure on the back of my head coaxes me forward another inch. *This is not a good idea.*

His hot breath skates over my cheek as his pupils dilate.

I can’t get enough air into my body.

His fingers curl into my hair.

*Oh, God, I can’t stop myself.* My eyes close and I lean in to him.

Just like that, the pressure’s gone.

My eyes snap open and I watch as Braxton rubs his hands together while taking two steps backward. “Remember what I said.” Then he turns and walks away.

Arrogant asshole.



“O h my. And he didn’t kiss you?”

I dump the coffee into the little coffeemaker in my hotel room, leaning my neck to balance the phone receiver against my shoulder. Why did I tell Joanna what happened last night? “No,” I tell her again, my irritation rising.

“But he did agree for you to stay on tour with them, right?”

After pouring water into the back of the coffeemaker—to my annoyance, I had to guess the measurement with the hotel mug—I turn it on. “He did. Told me he was in charge though.” I huff. “As if.”

“I know your tone of voice, Sara. Don’t do anything rash.”

“When have you ever known me to do anything reckless?”

“Well, true. But now’s not the time to start. Oh, hold on for a sec.” I hear her muffled voice ask her husband to pull pork chops out of the freezer. Must be nice to have someone to shoulder the burden of everyday chores. Especially since I’m here in a hotel room, making my own darn coffee. “Okay, I’m back. And I’m not letting you off the hook so fast, Sara. I know you’ve had the hots for Braxton Hunte for years now. It really sucks he’s such a jerk.”

I pour some freshly brewed morning joe into the glass mug sporting the hotel’s logo. After doctoring it with some creamer, I sit on the room’s only chair. “I don’t have the hots for him.” I take a sip, grimace at the bitter taste and place the mug onto the side table.

Her giggle reaches through the phone. “Yeah. Right.” She pauses. “So, tell me about the rest of the band.”

“Well, Lex is the quietest. He’s married and, from what I can tell, faithful. He’s also sticking to my budgets and seems to have the best financial head on his shoulders. Ricky is his exact opposite. He vies with Braxton as to who can spend the most. And Colton, well, he’s nice.”

“Nice?”

My fingers steeple. “I like him. He’s a good guy. But he’s walking a tightrope between wanting to play and be good, you know?”

“You can show him how things are done.”

“You always had a way with words, Joanna.” I move the coffee mug. “And then there’s their tour manager, Todd. I don’t like him. He cheats on his wife, and even though he talks big, he’s not interested in helping me keep the band in check. Something’s off there.”

“You better keep your eye on him. If anyone can read people, it’s you.”

“I think I have all of their numbers, true. All except Braxton.”

“Give yourself more time to play around with that one.” She giggles. The sound of her snapping her fingers comes over the phone. “Hey, I got it.”

A prickle of unease washes over me. Whenever she uses this tone, it usually spells disaster. With caution, I ask, “What’s it?”

“I know what you need to do! You have to woo them.”

I take another sip of my coffee and almost choke. “Woo them?”

“Yeah! Beat them at their own game. Get them to see you as something other than an accountant. Make them *like* you. They’ll want to curb their spending to please their new friend.”

I shake my head. “No way. You know I don’t drink like a fish. Or throw sofas out hotel windows into the pool. Who does that stuff?”

She laughs. “You don’t have to do any of the crazy stuff, but I bet you can join in on their reindeer games. Just consider it. Have a little fun with this.”

More to appease her than because I think it’s a viable plan, I reply, “I’ll consider it, Joanna.” My eyes land on the desk. I finished going through yesterday’s numbers—Lex “won” their game and got an extra hundred dollars today, while Colton came in a close second. Ricky and Braxton each blew their budgets. Again.

I sigh. “As much as I’d love to keep chatting with you, I better get going.” Stay the course, head down. Never cede control.

“Remember, play their games. Show them what Sara Anderson is made of. You’ll be partner in no time!”

## BRAX



“**N**o, I think it should go like this.” As we rumble down the highway to our next tour stop, I play the revised riff for “Baby, Give It” on my guitar. “What do you think?”

Colton adds a few more embellishments, making it even stronger, and I make note of the corrections on the sheet music.

Nodding, I look up at the guys and grin. “Let’s play it once more, with the new riff.”

We launch into our new song, Ricky banging on the table with his sticks. When we finish, the final notes hang in the air, and there’s a feeling of magic.

Lex breaks the hush from his portable keyboard. “That’s great,” he says, echoing my thoughts. “I think it’s ready.”

I nod. I’ll run these final changes by our producer Cal, and we’ll be good to go.

Colton catches my eye and blinks twice. “I think you’re right,” he agrees with our keyboardist. “Tomorrow, we’ll debut ‘Baby, Give It’ right here in—” He stops talking, waiting for someone else to supply the name of the city we’re playing in tomorrow.

Hell if I know.

“Rapid City,” Todd supplies. “South Dakota.”

“Right,” Colton says. “We’ll debut it in Rapid City and get a rapid response.” He smirks at his play on words and Ricky tosses a drumstick at him, catching his shoulder. “Ow!” Colton yelps, rubbing his arm.

“Bad pun, dude,” Ricky replies, grabbing another stick from his never-ending supply.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Sara reaching up to cover her face. Why? Frowning at the fact she even caught my attention—let alone I’ve started thinking of her as *Sara* and not Miss Priss—I address the band, “Bad jokes aside, I think it’s a good idea. I have a good feeling about this one. It’ll put Hunte back on the top.”

“You say that about every song, Brax,” Lex tosses in, but his smile lets me believe he agrees with me this time.

I rub my hands together to cover my nerves. This song *will* be our ticket back. “We’re due.”

“Overdue,” our stick-throwing drummer adds. “I like it. It sounds like us.”

Colton rests his bass guitar on his knee. He nods. “We’ve worked really hard on this one. I bet the audience will eat it up.”

Lex and Ricky voice their agreement and migrate over to the sofas, where Lex picks up one of the Nintendo controls. Miss Priss takes hesitant steps toward them.

Colton inclines his head toward the bedroom and I follow him inside, both of us carrying our guitars. Sitting on the bed, he plays an intricate rhythm. I copy it and add my own touches, which he repeats with more embellishments at the



end. It's a game we've played since kids, and it calms both of us down.

When we've finished our impromptu jam session, he returns to our previous conversation. "What are you getting King for his birthday?"

"I haven't decided yet. He was really into Legos the last time I saw him."

"I remember reading a brochure about the resort we're going to in South Dakota. It's big. It must have a toy store somewhere and I bet they have Legos."

"Good idea." I rest my guitar on the floor. "But they'll need to be the biggest, baddest Lego sets ever."

He chuckles. "Never half-assed with you, Brax."

"You know me." And he does, like no one else.

While he puts his bass down, I go over our new song in my head. Magic steals over me. I like the promise of it—I want to count on it.

"I really think 'Baby, Give It' is going to shoot to the top of the charts."

Opening a dresser drawer full of our stash of junk food, Colton takes out two bags of chips and tosses me one. "I hope you're right, but something Ricky said worries me."

My eyebrow rises. "What?"

"He mentioned it's like our other hits. Do you think we're getting stale, man?"

My face scrunches up. "No way. This is a new song."

"But is it a brand new sound?" Colton challenges.

“It’s solid. Don’t go looking for trouble where there isn’t any.”

He munches on a chip. “Guess you’re right. Sara must’ve gotten into my head.”

At his mention of our tour accountant, my whole body zings. What the fuck was that? Ignoring my body’s response, I ask, “What do you mean?”

“When we were talking last night, she mentioned we need to get our spending under control and not count on future earnings to pay off our current debts.” I focus on opening my bag and shoving a couple of chips in my mouth. He continues, “Do you think she has a point?”

Swallowing, I tip my head. Damn. I glance at him and his body language tells me he wants my agreement. Sara got to him. “I can try to do better. I’m not promising anything, though. And the accountant is a total buzzkill. Her numbers are not connected to reality.”

“Maybe not our current reality, but her overall strategy is sound. After all, she *is* looking out for our best interests.”

Lifting the bag to my mouth, I pour the remaining chip dust into my mouth. “Yeah, well, so am I. This song is going to put us back on top, I can feel it.”

“Hope you’re right, buddy.” He tosses his empty chip bag into the garbage, and I do the same. “I’m heading out there. Maybe I can beat Lex in *Mortal Kombat 2*.”

I laugh. “Good luck.”

Left alone in the bedroom, I take the opportunity to call King. After we hang up, I find myself thinking of our tour accountant, and not because she wants to set us on a path to a

stable financial future. I see her as she looked last night. Eyes closed, lips parted, waiting for me to kiss her again.

She needs to get out of my head.

I stomp into the main part of the bus and come to an abrupt halt. Everyone's crowded around, watching the video game. Two players do battle, while three guys and two women in our entourage cheer. Wait a minute...

I see Colton, Ricky, and Todd.

If I'm standing here, who is Lex playing?

I creep up closer and Miss Priss's face comes into focus, her hand wrapped around the control, her face intent. Lex is equally focused. He's ahead, but not by many points.

She leans to the side and takes the lead. Oh, hell no.

Lex's character shoots past hers on the screen. She immediately counters his move and jumps a level. A minute later, Lex makes a wrong move and loses the game. Groans echo throughout the bus.

"Pay up," Colton says, reaching out his hand to Todd. He bet *against* Lex?

Frowning, my gaze moves to Sara, with her flushed cheeks and shining eyes. My breath catches in my throat as my cock stirs in my jeans. How did I miss how beautiful she is? *No way*. I turn my head, fists at my side. She's only a plain, ordinary, boring bean counter.

Besides, who does she think she is, coming in here, changing everything up and taking over *Mortal Kombat*?

Turning my back on the scene, I return to the bedroom and open the dresser drawer Colton first opened. Bingo. Grabbing the bag of dried lentils I had one of the entourage ladies pick

up for me, I stuff it under my shirt. Miss Priss's briefcase sits abandoned on a table in the back. With cheering from the sofas as my background music, I slip the leather case open and dump the beans around her file folders, notepads and John Grisham novel.

I'll give our bean counter a mortal combat.

## SARA



**S**tanding next to Todd backstage, I watch as the crowd claps along to one of Hunte's previous Number Ones. When Ricky strikes up the beat for the next song, Braxton struts across the stage. That's the only word for it—struts. A couple of women in the front fan themselves. Bet they wouldn't be so excited if they knew him like I do. I *know* those beans stuffed into my briefcase were his handiwork, even if I can't prove it. What a confounding overgrown man-child.

Onstage, Braxton approaches Colton. They stand back to back and shred their instruments, the sight and sound electric.

Darn, if only the spoiled child wasn't one of the most talented rock musicians on the planet.

When the riff ends, they separate and Braxton moves to the opposite end of the stage, like he owns it. He ends the song with a growl. This man is Braxton Hunte. A sunglasses-wearing rockstar with a voice that slides all over my body and dips into the crevices.

Not *my* body. His fans' and groupies' bodies.

Whistles and the stomping of feet erupt from the crowd. Braxton stands on the stage, looking larger than life. He sings with his whole heart, which makes more than a couple of

women toss their bras onstage. I roll my eyes and scan the crowd.

From my research, I understand groups like Bon Jovi and Soundgarden draw in younger crowds, but Hunte's fans look like they skew a little older. Still, these fans aren't as old as the audience members at events for the symphony or ballet.

Up on stage, Braxton gives the audience his back and catches the other guys' attention. Before the concert, they debated where to put the new song in the lineup and I think it's next. Braxton mouths the word "Ready?" and each of them nods. Yup, it's time. I rub my hands on my jeans-covered thighs, and whisper a prayer for their P&L. If this goes well, it'll make life easier for all of us.

After taking a swig of the Bud hidden behind the bass drum—I now know it's his drink of choice, God help me—Braxton wipes the sweat off his face using the bottom of his T-shirt and takes the mic. "How are you doing tonight, South Dakota?"

A few unintelligible words rise above a chorus of claps.

Nodding, he continues. "So, my guys and I have been working hard on some new songs." He pauses as the crowd cheers. "We have one ready for you guys." He takes a longer pause this time, riling up the crowd. Finally, he asks, "Do you want to hear it?"

Screams of "yeah!" reach my ears while Lex runs a scale on the keyboards. Braxton flips his hair back and puts his hand to his ear. "I can't hear you!" This time, the audience's reaction is deafening.

Braxton's laughter filters through the sound system. "Right answer, folks! This one is called, 'Baby, Get It.' Enjoy our

next Number One!”

I really hope he’s right. So does their bank account.

Once again, Braxton gives the audience his back and shares a look with his band. He’s bouncing on the tips of his booted toes, his excitement contagious, and I strain forward to catch his every move. He points the neck of his guitar toward Lex, who starts the intro on the keyboards. I’ve long admired his talent on the keys, and this introduction is no exception. The melody has a slightly haunting feel. A hush falls over the audience until Ricky starts in with the pounding beat. The clash of cymbals ushers in the guitars and lights bathe the band onstage.

Swinging toward the seats, Braxton belts out the first verse. His voice is pitch perfect. The music is not quite catchy, sounding more like rock of the last decade than the alternative, grunge music ruling the airwaves today. Of course, this doesn’t bother me, yet something tells me the song’s not going to make it to the top like Braxton thinks.

I peel my eyes away from the show to take in the audience’s reaction. Many of the fans are looking at the stage with a type of worship in their eyes, yet their hands remain at their sides. Others seem to be talking amongst themselves. The tune sounds great, better than on the bus. Solid. However, it’s not capturing his fans.

This won’t be the hit they need.

When they near the end of the song, the music crescendos, like the rest of Hunte’s songs.

“Get it,” he growls.

“Get it,” he screams.

“Baby, get it! Oooh!” The microphone falls away from Braxton’s face. His chest expands as he looks out into the audience, seeking validation but only receiving polite claps. To call the response “underwhelming” would be an insult to the word. My heart sinks for them. Maybe they can rework the song?

Onstage, Braxton gestures for the audience to increase their applause, resulting in a mild uptick. Colton motions to continue with the set, but Braxton shakes his head and grabs the microphone again. “We’re really proud of this song. C’mon, let me hear how you loved it!” He places his hand to his ear again.

Behind Braxton, the rest of the band makes uncomfortable eye contact with one another. Colton approaches his mic and asks, “How about a little ‘Hard to Bare’?” The crowd screams its approval and Ricky launches into the hit song.

To say the concert goes downhill from this moment would be an understatement. Braxton spent the first half prowling the stage like a panther, but barely leaves his spot in the center of the stage for the rest of the night. While he sings all the lyrics flawlessly, his spark is gone. For some reason, I want to rush the stage and give him a hug.

Right. As if he would welcome one from me.

As soon as the set ends, Braxton’s the first one off the stage. Colton squeezes his shoulder. “Lighten up, Brax. It was our first time rolling it out.”

“We played it like we’ve been doing it for years,” he shoots back.

Todd appears and tosses fresh T-shirts to all of the guys. “Get into your new shirts and go do your encore, guys.”



Braxton balls up the material, but Colton places his hand over the wadded up shirt and says something to him. After a brief back and forth, Braxton bumps his bassist's shoulder. He changes his shirt and shouts, "Ready to rock?"

Lex, Colton and Ricky return, "Let's do this!"

I exhale at his change of heart.

Braxton leads them back out onstage, where he takes his spot in the center of the stage. The spotlights train on each one of them, and they start sweating right away. My lips quirk. So much for fresh shirts.

The light bounces off Braxton's blond head when he grabs for the microphone. "We have a couple more songs for you folks. Who wants it 'Sunnyside Up'?"

Whistles join the claps and stomps, and the concert ends with a trio of their biggest hits. Since Todd disappeared again—coincidentally, as has the tall brunette from the entourage—I let myself sing along with the music. Their encore is everything I had imagined it would be, and more. These are the songs that made me fall in love with their music, and there's no denying they're even better live.

All too soon, the guys return backstage and the house lights come back on. At least thirty women are present, myself included, but the guys start stripping off their clothes without a thought for our sensibilities. I stare at the floor while they change, although the groupies seem to be helping. Okay then, *my* sensibilities.

"I got it, doll," Braxton's voice floats above the din. My head jerks up to see a bottle blonde with bright red nails "helping" him with his pants. Geez. Don't these women have any shame?

Todd enters the room, his arm wrapped around the tall brunette. “Great job tonight, guys.”

“Hell, yeah,” Ricky responds. The others tip their chins at their cheating tour manager, who’s stopped next to me.

Braxton makes his way over to me, his bearing tight, sunglasses tucked into the neck of his shirt, and I brace myself for whatever he’s going to say. Instead of addressing me, he asks Todd, “Hey, was this a sell-out crowd?”

Todd pulls on his mustache. “They ate you guys up.”

“That’s not an answer.” He crosses his arms. Braxton has a point, and I turn to look at Todd. “Was it?” he pushes.

Todd kisses the brunette and sends her off to get him a drink, patting her ass as she leaves. Fig. “It was a good house.”

“How many seats were open?”

Todd shrugs. “Not too many.”

“‘Not too many’ as in ten? Or ‘not too many’ as in a few hundred?”

“Maybe a hundred or so seats were unsold, okay?”

From my vantage point, I couldn’t see any open seats, but the squirrely way Todd answered the question indicates there were closer to two hundred empty seats. Or more.

Braxton punches a wall. “Shit!”

Colton pops up at my side. “Hey, what’s going on here?”

Todd smiles at the bass guitarist. “Only going over the evening with Brax here.” He reaches out and slaps Braxton on the back. Lex and Ricky join the group.

Braxton closes his eyes for a moment, then licks his lips. “Yeah, Todd was telling me how well the encore went.”

He holds the tour manager's gaze, daring him to say otherwise. I bite my lip to keep my mouth shut. I wonder what prompted his question—maybe now Braxton will pay attention to my budgets? Somehow I don't take any joy from the thought.

Ricky flips one of his drumsticks. "Our last songs always bring them to their feet."

Lex joins them, wrapping an arm around Ricky's shoulders. "Why don't we take this to the after-party? I know there's a bottle of Dom with our name on it." They all high-five each other, and Ricky says, "Let's go." Everyone but Braxton heads out the door. Tonight, the after-party's an easy walk away—the club's located within the resort.

From the threshold, Colton asks Braxton, "Coming?"

He shakes his head. "I'll meet you there."

Colton knocks on the doorframe. "Don't be long, okay?"

Braxton turns on his heel and sits heavily on a couch. He takes a hard candy from a bowl on the coffee table and sucks on it, the wrapper crinkling as he rolls it between his long, talented fingers.

For the first time, he doesn't look like the confident—downright arrogant—jerk he's been around me. He appears... insecure.

Human.

Without thought, I sit down next to him. "Hey."

He jerks his head as if startled I'm still here. "Hey."

"I loved your show. It was my first Hunte concert, and you guys lived up to all the hype."

A slow smile overtakes his face, although it doesn't reach his eyes. "Thanks."

I'd much rather confront an egotistical rocker than deal with this downcast version of the man. On impulse I say, "I'm going to the Comedy Club tonight to see Kenny Delgado. He's great. I only have one ticket, but would you like to see if you can buy one at the entrance?"

I bought a ticket as soon as I found out I'd be here for the performance. Joanna was right—why shouldn't I have some fun? I never imagined inviting Braxton to come with me, but something tells me he's not up for partying tonight. Or at least he shouldn't be. If he goes with them, I have an inkling another sofa will end up hurtling out of a hotel window.

His hazel eyes search mine. "Even after what I did to your briefcase?"

I *knew* he was behind the stupid bean joke. I sit up straighter and smile. "That little prank? It was kind of funny."

His return smile is more real. "Maybe you're not all bad." He claps me on my back. "Sure, why not. I'd like to hear some comedy."

Together, we leave the room and head toward the Comedy Club, which is across the resort. Braxton keeps his head down, probably to avoid another unwanted stampede. Silence hangs between us, yet it's not as uncomfortable as it should be. When we step inside the dark, smoky room, a perky hostess greets us, gushing, "Oh my. Braxton Hunte, right? I saw you were playing tonight, but I had to work. Welcome!"

He rests his elbow on the hostess stand. "Hey, doll. How are you doing?"

Her eyes widen. "Good," she squeaks.

I roll my eyes and shove my ticket under “doll’s” face. “I have one ticket, but he’d like to join my table.”

“Oh, right. Of course.” The hostess consults the papers in front of her. “Sure, not a problem.” She leads us through the room, which is set up like a dinner theater. We pass several tables and stop at a small one tucked into a back corner. He slips her a tip and she licks her lips. Oh, brother.

Because I’m not really sure what to do next, I pick up the menu, and he does the same. “See?” he says. “This proves my point that your daily budgets are unreasonable.”

At least he’s brought us back to familiar ground. I put my menu down on the table. “They are not unreasonable.”

He looks at the items on the menu. “If I ordered a drink, soup, entrée and dessert from here, I’d go over my allowance for the *day*.” He tosses his menu on top of mine.

I skim the menu again. These prices *are* astronomical. “You could choose different items,” I protest without much heat.

We’re interrupted by a waitress wearing a skin-tight black minidress and a little apron branded with the comedy club’s logo on it. “What can I get you? Two drink minimum, per person.”

He shoots me a look and holds up two fingers. My jaw clenches. I order two glasses of Riesling, to be delivered one at a time. Braxton orders two Buds, and the waitress scoots away.

Time to face facts. “I have to admit, you may have a point. I didn’t realize how expensive food would be on tour. I was using Chicago’s prices as a benchmark.”

“Resorts raise their prices because they can.”

“Yeah. Figured that out.” A small smile plays on my lips. “You guys could stay in your luxury suites and order pizza.”

He bursts out laughing at my suggestion, and I can’t help but join in. I’m actually *laughing* with Braxton Hunte? When we quiet, I glance at the still empty stage. “I’ll rework the numbers for you.”

“Wow.” His eyebrows rise. The waitress drops off our first round of drinks and he holds his up to mine. “Maybe you’re not such a tightwad.”

I frown. “I’m not a tightwad. I’m realistic about money.”

He returns the beer to the table—I refuse to drop his gaze. He raises his glass again and tilts his head. “How about we drink to relaxing and enjoying some comedy?”

Relieved not to be fighting with this man, for once, I incline my head. “I can get behind this idea.” I lift my wineglass and we clink. As I savor the first sip of the smooth drink, he asks, “Is it a good year?”

“Yeah, it’s good.”

“I don’t know much about wines. I’m more of a beer guy.” He takes another long pull, then sets the half-empty glass on the table.

“I’ve never liked beer. In college, all the frat parties only had kegs, and I swore I’d never drink it again after I left school. And I haven’t.”

His hand tightens around the beer. “Guess I’m not surprised we don’t like the same drinks.”

I play with the stem of my glass. Until tonight, we’ve been on opposite ends of the spectrum on everything. Doesn’t he know I’m not his enemy? “I’m only trying to help Hunte out.”

“You know,” he says, looking thoughtful, “I think you’re telling me the truth.”

I catch my breath. “You do?”

“Not saying I like it.”

The already dim room plunges into darkness, ending our conversation. The announcer runs through all the preliminary warnings—no pagers, no flashbulbs on cameras, no videotaping—then Kenny Delgado takes the stage. His act is hysterical, and both Braxton and I wipe tears away on more than one occasion.

When the lights come back up, my cheeks hurt from laughing so much. “Told you he was great.”

“You weren’t lying.”

His relaxed smile makes him look younger, not that he’s old. *He’s four years younger than you.* Another good reason to keep my distance.

As if I needed another.

He finishes up his second beer. “I’m still not feeling up for the after-party. Would you like to go out for a nightcap?”

“Oh, I...” My fingers touch my parted lips.

He blinks, his gaze following the motion, stands and offers me his hand. “Let’s go have some more fun.”

My gaze lands on his proffered hand. Do I dare spend more time with this kinder, gentler version of Braxton Hunte? I deserve to cut loose a little, and Braxton sure seems like he knows how. What could it hurt?

I cut off the wayward thought, reminding myself my job is to bring the band into the black. If I do it well, I’ll make

partner. That's all this is—no more, no less.

But Joanna suggested I befriend them, didn't she? Maybe this will help me get through to him.

He curls his fingers in a “come hither” motion, then he winks at me. My heart flips at his playfulness, sending an endorphin rush throughout my entire body leaving tingling sensations in its wake. Knowing I'm a lost cause, I place my hand in his and rise.

When he squeezes my hand, I run my finger over calluses formed by years of guitar-playing. He closes his hand around mine and together we walk to the front of the comedy club.

As if we were a couple.

What am I thinking?

The wine I drank churns in the pit of my stomach. Murmuring I need to use the ladies' room, I make a break for it.



## BRAX



I wait by the water fountains for Sara to emerge from the bathroom. A guy standing next to me does a double-take. “Hey, are you that rockstar?”

My eyebrows raise. Since I don’t feel like being Braxton Hunte tonight, I play along. “I wish. Waiting for my girlfriend.” I hook my thumb toward the ladies’ room.

He shakes his head. “I hear ‘ya. Me, too. Sorry about mistaking you.”

When he leaves to join his girlfriend, it hits me like a cymbal clash that I’m waiting for my tour accountant. And I called her my *girlfriend*.

I suck in my breath when Sara emerges from the bathroom, taking a moment to appreciate the fact she’s wearing a blouse and jeans instead of her normal, buttoned-down skirt suit. Her pink lips, silky blonde hair, and pink fingernails make a very potent combination. Not to mention her boobs, which my palms itch to caress. She’s not small and dainty. She’s strong. Capable. *Educated*.

Shoving the last thought away, I approach her. “There you are.”

A light blush starts at the base of her neck and drifts to the tips of her earlobes. Well, well, this could become a very interesting evening. I point down a hallway. “There’s a bar down this way. Let’s go.”

I consider trying to hold her hand again, but she looks nervous, so we walk side by side instead. Whatever this is between us is way too fragile—best not to press it. We pass gamblers trying their luck on the one-arm bandits. Bells go off in the distance, announcing someone’s lucky win.

Next to me, Sara rolls her eyes.

“What?”

She stops. “I can’t get into gambling. Everything’s rigged against the player. All they do is lose money.”

An older woman jumps up and screams as her machine’s bells go off. My eyebrows rise. “Not everyone.”

She looks like she wants to say more. Even though I wait, she keeps whatever she was thinking to herself. “So, where’s this bar?” she says, a deflection if ever I’ve heard one.

I tap my index finger on my lips. “Not sure. It’s here somewhere.”

We continue walking in silence, leaving the casino’s raucous noise behind. Shops line both sides of the hallway and a window display of spoons catches my eye. I slow down without realizing it.

“See something you want?”

I take my time looking her up and down, a slow grin overtaking my face. She is quite something tonight. *She’s the bean counter.* I motion toward the shop. “I do, actually. Would you mind?”

“Sure.”

Together, we enter the store filled with knickknacks covered in the resort’s logo. I stride over to the table displaying collectible spoons and pick one up with the city’s name in fancy script. Ma would’ve liked this one.

“You collect spoons?”

Heat infuses my cheeks. Shit. I do *not* want to explain this to her, so I widen my stance and place my hands on my hips. She’s not the only one who can deflect. In a gruff voice, I say, “Something like that. Do you want anything in here?”

She shakes her head, so I pay for the spoon and we head out to the bar. When we arrive, we’re seated in a corner booth. Instead of sitting across from her, I slide in next to her. After placing our orders—another Riesling for her and a Bud for me—I pop some of the pretzel mix on the table into my mouth. It’s stale, but I don’t care.

“Tell me about you, Sara.” Her name still feels unfamiliar on my tongue, yet I like it. It’s like her—pretty and also straight-laced. This woman intrigues me despite myself.

“Oh, there’s not much to tell. I’m an accountant and I love my job.” She sits up straighter. “And I’m good at it.” She leans closer, a sparkle in her eyes. “I’m even going to make a rock band profitable for the first time in years, despite their best efforts.”

We laugh together. “I like your positivity,” I say. “Hope it works out for you.” I continue to chuckle as the waitress places our glasses on the table.

When we’ve both sipped our drinks, I say, “Okay, other than work, tell me about yourself.”

She toys with the stem of her glass. “Well, there’s not much else to tell. I’m an aunt. My niece, who also is my goddaughter, is going to be baptized on the fifteenth of this month.”

I nod. “My son’s eighth birthday party is the day before.”

She raises her wineglass in acknowledgment. “You must be looking forward to it.”

I take another long pull. “My ex is going to make it a big spectacle. So no, not really. King deserves better. From both of us.” The mood at the table takes a nosedive.

Sara looks around the room and her eyes end up on the small package I put on the table. “Never would’ve pegged you for a guy who collects spoons.”

I place my beer down and shrug. “It’s something I do.” I pop more stale pretzels into my mouth.

After a lengthy pause, her eyes widen as if she solved a big puzzle. “You give them to King? He must appreciate getting fun packages from you while you’re on the road.”

A harsh laugh escapes my mouth. “Yeah. That’s not it.” Her face falls and she bites her lower lip, which prompts the words to spill out of me. “It’s actually in honor of my mother.”

“Oh, that’s really nice.”

“She used to love these things.” I pick up the bag. “So I always pick up a spoon from wherever we go.” My mouth opens and closes and I reach for my Bud and drink deeply. Then I hear myself say, “Ma had it rough. We went through a lot when I was young...”

Her head tilts to the side. “I can’t imagine you as anything but a rockstar.”

I swallow three times in a row. My early years were as unglamorous as they come. I tug on my ear, then nod twice. Once for what I'm about to say and once to confirm she's the right person to tell it to. I'm not sure why, but I need to get this off my chest tonight. Maybe because Ma's been on my mind a lot lately. Maybe because the financial troubles with the band has made me think about how it all began.

"I certainly didn't start out as a rocker." I chomp on some more stale pretzels. "Nothing much has been written about my childhood, and there's a reason. Colton knows everything, because he lived it with me. Other than him, no one else does."

Her fingers fiddle with her wineglass. I've made her nervous. "It's okay, Braxton," she says in an undertone. "You don't have to tell me anything more."

I run my hand through my hair. "I don't know. For some reason, I want to share this with you. You're...different."

She inclines her head even as her fingers curl around the stem of the glass. She downs more than a quarter of her wine in one gulp. "Okay." Her posture firms up, some of her steel returning.

I take a deep breath. "My parents had what you could call a rocky marriage. My father had a drug problem, and he used most of our money to feed his habit. By the time I got to middle school, he started selling. I begged her to leave him, but she refused. Finally, he was sent away to prison and we were left alone. Then the economy tanked and Ma got laid off." I finish my Bud. My voice drops as I reveal my shame. "We lost our apartment."

Her hand reaches out and covers the top of mine. "What did you do?"

I gain strength from the warmth of her capable, smooth hand. “We were homeless. Ma and I lived in and out of shelters while I was in high school. The only thing that kept me going was playing music with Colton. We’d practice our music in the garage for hours. His parents were very supportive.”

A small smile tips her lips. “Sounds like a good thing.”

I look down. “They told me I could move in with them, but I couldn’t do it. I had to keep Ma safe. Shelters can be ruthless.” I shake my head. “Anyway, Colton and music became my life. Lex joined the band in our senior year. I met Hilary—my now ex-wife—then, too. Got signed before high school ended. Most of the rest *is* public knowledge.”

She takes a small sip of her wine. “I’m on the board of my local At Your Door chapter in Chicago. Do you do any charity work?”

My head pops up in surprise at her admission. “Nah. We’ve been too focused on...other things.” I’ve never thought about doing anything like this before. Life has always been about what’s next—what concert or song or party. Perhaps I’ve been going about this all wrong. If she’s involved with the charity, one whose mission is near to my heart, maybe I should explore what I can do for them?

Licking her lips, she asks, “And the spoons?”

It’s public record my mother died three years ago from complications of pneumonia. In the end, not even my money could save her. Since Sara does her homework, always, I don’t need to tell her. “When Hunte first went out on tour, Ma and I started this tradition. Everywhere we played, I’d buy her a spoon to put in the house I bought her.”

She sits straighter. “You bought the New Jersey house for her?”

I place my hand over my heart. “Guilty.”

“I’ll let you keep that one,” she teases.

“Ah, shucks. Thanks.” I blow her a kiss.

She plays with her glass. “Where’s your father now?”

My chest expands on my inhale. “When he got out of jail, he came back to Ma. I was already on tour by then. Prison changed him. Made him harder. He started hitting Ma when she wouldn’t turn over her paycheck. As soon as I found out, I kicked his ass out of her house and paid for the divorce. He died five years ago. Overdose.” Good riddance.

She looks at me through a sheen of unshed tears. “You were a good son to you mother.”

*A better son than you are father.*

Unaware of my inner turmoil, she says, “We have something in common.”

I raise an eyebrow at this highly educated, perfectly proper woman sitting in front of me. I can’t imagine what our thing I common could be.

When I don’t say anything, she blurts, “I lost my mother when I was in middle school. We both grew up in one-parent households.”

Pain is written across her face, even after all these years. Of course, I know from personal experience how losing a mother is the kind of pain that doesn’t go away. “I’m sorry.”

She purses her lips. “Breast cancer. I was a rebellious teenager, always causing havoc.”

Try as I might, I cannot create a scenario where she's anything nearing unruly. "I find this hard to believe."

She sits back. "I was. Really. Always mouthing off to my parents, never doing my chores. I was a real brat." She rubs her arms and continues, "I knew she was sick, but I always thought there'd be more time. Until one day there wasn't. Everything changed after Mom died. I stopped being obnoxious and became the dutiful daughter. Took over cooking and cleaning for my father and brother. Never stepped out of line again."

I get it. She wanted to become a perfect person to help her overcome her guilt, like I buy houses never to be homeless again. Both of us trying to fill our own personal voids. "Did it work?"

"Did what work?"

"Becoming the model child?" This conversation's getting way deep. I toss more pretzels into my mouth, discomfited by an unseen bridge building between us, whether I like it or not.

"For me, it did. The house ran like clockwork after I set up a schedule. I got straight As in school. I even commuted to college so I could keep everything in order. Father's work life wasn't interrupted and my baby brother finished high school with good enough grades to go away for college."

"Did you ever move out?"

She takes another sip of her wine. "Yeah, when I got my job at A&L. I rented an apartment as a first year, then bought my house when I was a fifth year."

"So very orderly of you."

She looks off to the side and shrugs. "Things work out better for me when I create a plan and stick to it."



Noticing her wineglass is empty, I motion for the waitress to bring us another round. Shit's gotten too real. Time to lighten things up. "What do you do for fun? Outside of creating plans, of course."

She ignores my smirk. "Other than my charity work, I hang out with my best friend, Joanna. Although she got married not long ago and we haven't had as much time together as we used to."

When the waitress drops off our drinks, I guzzle about half of my beer to soothe my nerves. I review what she's told me, which has all been about her family. "What about a boyfriend? Haven't heard you mention one of those."

She takes a sip of her new glass of wine. "My last relationship ended a couple of years ago."

"Was he a bean counter, too?"

She examines her immaculate nails. "He wasn't." She lifts her chin. "He was in sales."

Why am I not surprised? Under my breath, I mumble, "Figures."

She leans back. "Cliff was a nice guy. We just weren't meant to be."

"With a name like that, no wonder."

She tosses a stale pretzel at my face. "Yeah, it's so not *Braxton*."

She exaggerates my name like some of the girls in our entourage do. Damn, I could get used to hearing her talk in this tone of voice. Something tells me she's not as prissy and buttoned-up as I first imagined—and I'm surprised by how

much I'd like to discover this truth for myself. "Well, I bet Cliffie liked the lights off."

Her eyes narrow to slits. "This topic is totally inappropriate."

The bartender shouts, "Last call!"

I pick up my beer and point it at her. "Another?"

She shakes her head and checks her watch. "Shoot. I didn't realize the time. We have to be on the tour bus in only eight hours."

She needs to loosen up. And maybe even curse a little. I down my drink and motion for the waitress to come to our table. "We'll have one more round, doll." She nods and takes our glasses away.

Sara crosses her arms over her chest. "Hey, this is how you go over-budget. Why'd you order me another?"

I chuckle. "Gotta live dangerously sometimes, Sara Baby."

"Don't 'Sara Baby' me, Braxton. I'm your tour accountant." Her statement ends with a hiccup, which totally ruins her outraged mojo.

"Don't I know it. Can't wait for tomorrow's envelope under my door."

When the waitress drops off our last round, along with a refill on the pretzels, I bring my beer to the top of Sara's wineglass. "Cheers!"

I'm surprised when she takes a sip of her new glass of wine, followed by another. Her hand even finds its way into the new bowl of pretzels and she munches on the salty junk food. Yeah, I'm liking this more laid-back side of our tour accountant. "I'm corrupting you, and I like it."

“I’m a big girl, Braxton. Believe me, you’re not corrupting me.”

“Says the woman with a plan for everything. Except fun.”

“I can be as fun as the next girl.” She chugs the rest of her wine, wiping her mouth with the back of her palm. “See?”

“Oh yes. You really showed me.” I take a long, slow pull of my beer.

“So, why’d you skip the after-party tonight?”

“Wasn’t into it.” I take another pull. “And I’m glad I didn’t go. This has been a much more entertaining evening.”

She giggles. Actually *giggles*. “Yeah, hooking up with your groupies seems like such a chore.”

My lips smile around the beer glass, which I place back down on the table. The alcohol and the hour have finally caught up with her. She looks like she could pass out at any time. “Time to go, Sara Baby.”

“Stop calling me that. I’m not a baby.” She slings her designer purse on her shoulder and stands. Then wobbles.

I place my hand on her arm to give her stability. “Hey, I’ve got ‘ya.”

She pulls my arm away from her. “I’m fine.”

She starts out in the wrong direction, and I turn her toward the exit. Chuckling, I say, “I can see that. C’mon, bean counter, let’s get you to your room.” I slap some cash on the table, then wrap my arm around her shoulders and lead her out. I tell myself I’m only doing it to keep her upright, but there’s no denying I like the feel of her body next to mine. Many of the women I hook up with are shorter than me, and being with someone taller is an unexpected turn on.

She frowns. “Why aren’t you drunk?”

Because I’m used to a steady liquid diet. “Seems to me someone had to keep their wits about them tonight.” I direct her toward the elevators. “Are you on our floor?”

She tries to tuck some hair behind her ear but misses, so I help her out. Her locks are silky soft. “No. Out of my budget. Feven, please.”

I pull my eyebrows together.

“Seven, I meant to say I’m on seven. Seven-ten.”

I can’t hold back a chuckle. She’s cute when she’s tipsy. I press seven.

“And you’re in the Penthouse. Press ‘P’ for yourself.”

No way am I not seeing her to her room. “What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn’t walk you to your door?”

She giggles. “That’s you. Such a gentleman.”

Ignoring her sarcasm, I hold out my hand, palm up. At her confused look, I say, “Your key, madam?”

“Oh, right.” She opens her purse and fumbles with the key, which she manages to hand over. “Here you go.”

When the elevator pings on the seventh floor, we walk down the hallway. Her body careens to the right, so I wrap my arm around her again to keep her safe. She leans into me—the gesture trusting—and I’m flooded with a protective streak I’ve only felt before for Ma and King. What the hell?

We stop in front of her room. “I don’t want to do my job tonight.” She says it with an adorable lisp.

“I think your only job is to sleep this off.” To divert my crazy thoughts about sleeping—and doing other things—with

her, I open the door and motion for her to go in first.

Her foot lands on some papers, crinkling them. “Shit.” Her hand flies to her lips and she retroactively corrects herself. “Shoot.” Then she tries to bend down.

Sara’s body weaves and I grab her around her waist. The feel of her body in my hands intensifies the inappropriate thoughts swirling in my head. “Why don’t you let me get these for you?” I right her and tell her to stay put while I pick up the papers and look around for a place for them.

“Over there.” She points to the desk.

I walk over and spy an At Your Door envelope and drop the paperwork on top. “There. It’ll be waiting for you in the morning.”

She shakes her head. “No, I have to get started on it tonight.”

Stubborn woman. “Sara.” The tone of my voice makes her still. I take two steps and stand in front of her. Unable to stop myself, I reach out and cup the side of her face. She’s beautiful, but in such a different way than I’m used to. Instead of stick thin and highly made up, she has real curves and a natural beauty that doesn’t need eyeliner, eyebrow pencil or even lipstick.

Her head leans into my hand. The atmosphere between us turns charged, electric.

“Sara,” I repeat.

“Yes.” She licks her lips.

God, I want this woman. Hunte’s tour accountant. Who grew up without a mother and has turned herself inside out to

atone for her preteen rebelliousness. I want her in a way I haven't wanted a woman in years.

When she lets out a little sigh, my eyes close and I guide her to me. Our lips meet and something detonates deep inside me. My lips caress hers, molding them, making me want more. My tongue traces the seam of her lips, seeking entrance. She opens for me, our tongues tangling and I taste the wine. My free arm snakes around her waist while my other hand drops around to her back, pulling her softness into my hard body.

Her soft moan makes me want to rub her pebbled nipples against my chest. To open her thighs and drink from her sweetness. My cock has more ideas about what it wants.

In my arms, she loses her balance and reality rushes back in. I step back.

“Braxton.” She reaches for me again.

Not this way. I don't want her drunk. I want her wanton and willing—and sober. Not that a girl's level of sobriety would've stopped me in the past, but with her, it's different. I'm different. I touch my forehead to hers. “Goodnight, Sweet Sara.”

Before I can change my mind, I slip out of her room, her floral scent playing havoc with my equilibrium. How is it possible our bean counter has twisted me into such knots, and it has nothing to do with budgets?

## BRAX



**T**he bus rumbles down the road to God knows where. After everything that happened last night, I need some time to think—hence I sit by myself in the back. Well, as alone as I can get on this bus with four other guys, a handful of groupies and one Sara. When I saw her this morning, my lips wanted to be reunited with hers. And then I remembered the daily budgets. Shit. I’m all twisted up over this woman.

Ricky stops by on his way to the bedroom, a dark-headed groupie in tow. “Didn’t see you at the after-party last night.”

“Never made it.”

“Way to go.” He high-fives me. “What was her name?”

*Sara.*

I shrug and he bursts out laughing.

“Dude,” he says, then escorts his plaything into the bedroom.

Alone again, my mind returns to last night. Sara the woman is nothing like the hard-ass bean counter I’ve come to know. I can’t believe I shared so much of myself with her. I *never* tell anyone about my childhood. I must’ve been more vulnerable from the audience’s less-than-positive reaction to “Baby, Give It” than I’d thought.

Her laugh from the front reaches my ears. She's more at ease with us now, as if she's let some of her tough façade go. Still, I never would've guessed she lost her mother so early in life. Seems like the type to have come from a "Leave it to Beaver"-type household.

But our kiss...

As if my thoughts called out to her, Sara walks down the aisle toward me. She's dressed in her usual skirt suit, this time in beige. It should do nothing for her coloring, yet it makes her glow. Or maybe I put that glow on her last night? I sit taller.

She stops in front of me, her somewhat bloodshot grey eyes holding my gaze. She's wearing more makeup than usual. Handing me an envelope, she says, "Good morning. Here's your daily budget and actuals from yesterday. I should've had them done sooner, but someone kept me out way too late last night."

I smirk. "How's the hangover?"

"Shhh." She brings her hand to her temples. "The Advil should be kicking in shortly." She quirks her brow. "And you can remove the smirk from your face."

I wink at her and flip the envelope from head to ass.

She crosses her now-empty hands over her boobs, and my movement falters. I picture my hands weighing what I believe to be their perfection and my cock starts to rouse. A long moan from the bedroom fuels my imagination. To cover up my reaction, I resume my envelope twirling.

Sara's eyes flick to the closed bedroom door, then she licks her lips. My traitorous mind revisits our encounter in her room last night. Her sexy bottom lip was between my teeth.



Ignorant of my thoughts, she says, “I found a way to save some money at the hotel we’re going to in Montana so I could increase your daily food allowances to be a bit more”—her voice trails off as another moan issues from the bedroom —“realistic.”

I fucking hate all this talk about money. Penny-pinching should be a relic of the past, of the life I left behind. Success was supposed to buy security. “These budgets blow.”

Sara’s eyes get wider, then she lowers her hand to my shoulder. I wish it would drift lower. “If you make these changes now, think about how much sweeter it will feel when you have your next big hit.”

Her belief in Hunte, whether real or feigned, soothes me. To a point. “I know you’re right, but it doesn’t mean I don’t hate thinking about whether I can afford to buy a buck-fifty cup of coffee. We’re still selling out venues.” Sort of.

“I’m sure one of your new songs will top the charts. This is only an interim measure.”

“It better be,” I grumble, head down.

She takes a seat opposite me and inhales. “Have you ever thought about working with a new producer?”

My head snaps up. “What? We have a producer—Cal Northville. Apex picked him. Colton and I write all of Hunte’s songs, and the rest of the band helps with the finishing touches. Then, Cal signs off.”

She nods. “But I’ve noticed a couple of the same producers have been responsible for a bunch of chart-topping songs lately. Not Cal, though.” She steeples her fingers together on top of the tiny table between us. “Thought it might be a new direction for you guys to try.”

My hackles rise up. “So you don’t think our music is good enough?” Coming from her, especially in her earnest, caring tone, hurts worse than if someone else had said it. My voice carries to the front of the bus and everyone turns and stares at me. I wave them off.

“No. It’s not like that at all. It’s my job as your tour accountant to think outside the box.” Her index fingers tap together. “I wanted to propose the idea to you, no criticism meant.”

Her voice is in a near whisper, probably due to her hangover. And yet, her words drill into me as if she were shouting from center stage up to the nosebleed seats.

*When was the last time we performed where there were nosebleed seats?*

I close my eyes as Todd’s words scream through my head. *Maybe a hundred or so seats were unsold, okay? A hundred or so...*

I might not have graduated high school, let alone college, but I’m no idiot. I know when I’m being sweet-talked and undersold.

Another moan sails from the bedroom, stoking my frustration. I flick the envelope. “Go. Just go.”

“I wasn’t—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

Since she doesn’t stand up to leave, I do—and I enter the only place on the bus she can’t follow. The john.

How dare she insinuate we can’t write our own music? Who the hell does she think wrote all our Number Ones? Cal signed off on everything. I rake my hand through my hair,

pulling on the ends. Trying to drown out Sara's voice, and Todd's, the moans from the bedroom, and even Colton telling me he worried "Baby, Give It" sounded too much like our other songs.

Shit.

I stew in the bathroom, kicking the cabinets with my booted foot, until someone knocks on the door. When I yank it open, ready to lay into Miss Priss again, Lex drops his hand. "You okay?"

I suck in a breath. "Yeah." I toss my hair over my shoulder. "Just needed to get my head on straight."

He nods. "Colton broke out a sleeve of cups."

Yes. The perfect diversion. I fish into my pocket and pull out a quarter. "I'm in."

Lex nods, claps me on the back and we exchange places. "I'll be right there."

I walk up the aisle to the dining table, where everyone—with the exception of Ricky and his groupie—has gathered. Sara tries to catch my eye, but I look away. Someone raises the volume on the CD player, now playing a song by the Stone Temple Pilots, which drowns out the sex noises still coming from the back bedroom.

While he hands out cups of beer, Colton explains the rules we established over a decade ago in his basement. "If you get your quarter in the shot glass three times in a row, you can't shoot again, but you do get to create a rule everyone must follow for the rest of the game. If you don't like the new rule, you can drop out of the game, no questions asked."

I sit down at the table while others jockey for seats. One chair has to remain open for overflow players, which means a

few members of our entourage will have to stand. Sara's off to my right. Annoyed I'm even aware of her presence, I engage with Colton on my left. "Good idea. We haven't played in a while."

He flips his quarter. "We're overdue." Once everyone settles in, he announces, "Since this was my idea, I'll shoot first."

He points to one of the groupies standing next to the fridge. "Brit, you're the bartender. Make sure everyone always has a full beer." She nods.

As he lines up his first shot, my mind wanders to the several times I've fucked Brit. She's creative and very bendy. Maybe that's what I need now. Bendy. Not rigid. The thought fades as my eyes stray over to Sara, who, shockingly, holds a red cup. Well, well, well. This is going to be an interesting game.

Colton makes his first shot and orders me to drink. After I slam my cup and get my refill from Brit, Colton makes his second shot and taps Todd to drink. He makes his third try, chooses his favorite long-haired groupie and looks around the table. "New Rule. Before you shoot, you must say, 'Hunte rocks.'"

His rule garners laughter and I pick up my quarter. Even though Colton's the undisputed king of the game, I can hold my own. I say, "Hunte rocks," then make my shot and choose the lovely Brit to drink. My second shot goes in, and I select Lex.

My third attempt also is successful, and I glance around the table for my next victim. I don't have to look too far. Maybe her hangover needs to be recharged? "Sara." Her mouth purses, but she takes the drink. Of her detested beer.

Huh. Part of me thought she would bail at the first sign of trouble.

My go-to at this stage of the game is usually to outlaw anyone from saying “drink.” I change my mind. “New Rule. No one can say the word ‘budget.’”

My rule is met with laughter. Take that, Miss Priss.

The next two shooters don’t even make one completion, and then it’s Sara’s turn. She’s not the drinking game type, and I bet she can’t even hit the rim of the shot glass. She says, “Hunte rocks,” gives a couple of fake-out throws with her quarter, then releases it. It bounces right into the center of the glass with a clink.

Didn’t see that coming, and from the ohs of surprise around the table, I wasn’t alone in my doubt.

Beaming, she looks around and points to Colton, who lifts his cup to her and drains it. Her second shot is as true as her first, and this time she selects Lex. Her final try also sails in and she tells Todd to take a drink.

My stomach tightens. Why didn’t she choose me?

Ten of us play, and the game continues until we’ve all had at least three turns. I’m enjoying myself, although I can’t shake the habit of glancing at Sara every few minutes. She still hasn’t picked me to drink.

Todd picks up a quarter for his third try and scores. He tells me to drink, which I do, and says, “New Rule. If you get your quarter in, the person you select to drink also has to take off a piece of clothing.”

Strip quarters. My man. Maybe Sara will leave the game now? I glance at her, but she doesn’t look like she’s going anywhere. Shit.

Lex is up next. He says, “Hunte Rules,” then shoots and sinks it. He tells Brit to drink, which she does and then tosses her shirt at him. Grinning, he makes it again and selects Colton.

“Boo!” I hiss, even as Colton takes off his T-shirt. Seriously? Now, I’m sitting next to a half-naked Colton, who flexes his triceps at our entourage, laughing. Peacock.

Lex retrieves the quarter and makes his shot, then signals for Sara to drink. As her cheeks flush, she drinks and removes her blazer, exposing her boobs covered by a white button-down blouse. I rub my hands on my thighs.

Play continues, and a few members of the entourage get bored and migrate to other parts of the bus, as does Lex. Only five players remain—Sara, Brit, Todd, Colton, and me. I’m still in my jeans, but I’m barefoot and both of my shirts are gone, together with my gold chains. I just had to remove my cross. Sara is down to her bra, a pink lacy affair, and her skirt. Her pink toenails match her bra.

“Game’s getting real,” Colton says. “Hunte rocks,” he slurs and shoots. And scores. His glazed eyes zero in on Sara and he points to her with his elbow, since one of the New Rules prohibited us from saying anyone’s name.

Sara’s face has been pink for a while now, but it turns a deeper shade as her hands go to the zipper of her skirt. Will she do it? My eyes follow her fingers as she unhooks the clasp at her waist. My cock stirs as she slowly lowers the zipper, one tooth at a time. As she wiggles the material over her hips, my mouth drops open. I want to be the one pulling her skirt off her body. With my teeth. I catch a glimpse of pink panties, which match her bra and nails. Of course they match. Shit. I don’t want anyone else to see her luscious body. To prevent myself

from doing something stupid, I clamp my mouth shut and sit on my hands.

Colton takes another shot and sinks it. From the wicked grin on his face, I expect him to tell Brit to drop her panties. He shocks me by wagging his eyebrows and uses his elbow to point to a red-faced Sara.

I can't believe she'd take off her bra. Either that or her panties. Christ. Then again, she surprised me by playing this game at all. And now she's a little drunk, who knows what she'll do. Fascinated, I watch as her hands go around her back.

Holy shit. She's going to take off her bra. And expose those boobs I want to suck—to everyone. *Everyone*. Even married and faithful Lex is watching from his seat on the sofa. My breathing hitches.

I turn to Colton. "Not fair. You just called on her." Her hands still.

"Dude. No rule against choosing someone more than once per turn." He pauses. "You could've made it a rule, but you didn't."

Fuck. He's right. I turn my head to see Sara's arms moving behind her back again, like she's fumbling with the hooks.

I can't let her do this. She's *mine*.

I jump up and douse my beer over everyone.

## SARA



**A**s I wait outside the venue for Hunte’s show to end, my mind wanders back to the game of quarters on the bus yesterday. What was I thinking? And *beer* for goodness sake.

Thank God Braxton had that mishap with his beer. I’m still not sure how I would’ve handled taking off my bra, Joanna’s suggestion to “woo them” forgotten in the moment. Although, I’m sensing a change of attitude from Lex and Colton. Guess it doesn’t hurt they’re taking turns at going the most under their budgets and being rewarded with an extra hundred-dollar reward. Which they’re not spending.

But Braxton. My heart speeds up yet my brain tells it to slow down. He’s not into you at all, Sara. His indifferent behavior toward me at the game proved it—he had no interest in seeing me naked. Not to mention he banned the word “budget,” in order to get back at me. The alcohol racing through my system must’ve made me blow the kiss we shared in my room two nights ago out of proportion. It’s fine. A rockstar doesn’t fit into my life.

The concert ends and I join the people flowing out of the venue to do a bit of field research. I’m not the band’s manager, or with their label or even PR company. I’m their tour accountant and my job is to take them out of the red. Still, one



way to do so is to help them sell more records. I already mentioned the idea of working with a new producer to Braxton, which went over like a lead balloon. Maybe he'd be more inclined to listen if I had solid data to back up my suggestions.

I approach a couple of ladies and ask, "So, what did you think?"

They fan their flushed faces. "Braxton is totally hot. He's only getting hotter with age." Her friend nods in agreement.

I don't comment. "What did you think about their new song?"

They exchange a look and shrug. "It was good enough," one of them offers. "I really don't care what he sings, though. I want in his pants. We've heard he's packing something big down there." The two giggle.

Good to know. *Not* the type of research I'm here for, though. After sharing a giggle with them, I step aside to talk to a couple. "Hunte's pretty awesome, right?"

"I've loved them for years," the woman says with a grin. "Had to drag him with me." She hooks her thumb at her date.

I turn my attention to him. "What did you think? Are you a Hunte fan now?"

"They're okay. Their older stuff is way better, in my opinion."

His girlfriend shrugs. "Yeah. Their newer music isn't fresh."

I nod at them. Hunte has to do something to break through in today's market. Braxton might not want to hear it, but the

band needs to change with the times if they don't want to get left behind.

A few women talking behind me catch my attention. "God, he is sexy. If only he'd cut his hair. He'd be unbelievable."

One friend responds, "Yeah. Can you imagine Braxton and Colton with shorter hair? Of course, I'd never kick either one out of my bed."

Deciding not to interrupt their fantasies, I gather some more intel. People say generally the same thing—they loved hearing the band live, yet they wish Hunte's newer stuff measured up to their old hits. There are dozens of votes for a style overhaul.

Perhaps a new look would help?

While most of the people leaving the concert turn right toward the exit, I follow a smaller throng of people to the back of the stage. All of us have special backstage passes. Well, not all of us—two women, about mid-twenties, plead their case to the largest bouncer I've ever seen. They lift their shirts and flash him, which is apparently as good as a backstage pass, because they're immediately allowed to enter.

Ignoring how those two gained entrance, I wait in line for about ten more minutes before allowed into the room. It's filled with wall-to-wall people, but considering it's not too big of a space, I guess it's not hard to fill. A table filled with beer sits along a side wall. My stomach turns sour at the thought, especially after yesterday's quarters game on the bus. With a shake of my head, I walk in the opposite direction.

A door across from me flings open and the band bursts in. Everyone yells when the rockstars appear. The buzz in the

room escalates, and the band members circulate. Braxton's blond head stops mere feet from the door.

Someone nudges me from the side and I turn away from Braxton. "Surprised to see you in here," Todd says, slugging a beer. "Thought you'd still be nursing your quarters loss."

"We all lost when Braxton spilled his beer." Trying to appear nonchalant, I shrug. "I had fun, though."

"Really? I can challenge you to a rematch." Todd takes another long swig of beer, then straightens his mustache. "A private one." He looks at my chest.

I cross my arms. Their tour manager is a real slimebucket. I almost tell him I'm not like him, but it would be a mistake to antagonize him. "Not going to happen. On both counts."

He holds up his hands as if in surrender. "Fine. Then tell me how the guys are doing with your budgets?"

I inhale deeply to calm my anger. "They're getting closer to hitting their goals. The tour is starting to turn around financially."

"Good to hear." He does a double-take as a scantily clad woman passes us. "I'd better go mingle." He leaves me and heads directly for the woman, who probably isn't there to see him. Besides, he's married. Slime.

I survey the scene and come to the conclusion, once more, I don't belong here. Colton approaches me and holds up a beer, silently asking if I want one. When I shake my head, he grins. "Had enough yesterday on the bus?" He winks.

When Braxton does that, my system goes on overload. Now I don't even feel a tingle. I press my hands to my temples.

Colton bends down, his six-foot-plus frame dwarfing me. “Listen, Lex and I would like to talk with you about how we can really change things up. Financially, I mean.”

Excitement chases away my original inclination to leave the party. They’re starting to get it. “Sure. I’d love to.”

“We’re going to blow out of here shortly and head to the after-party. The three of us should meet up there.”

I still can’t believe what I’m hearing. If they’re onboard, maybe there’s hope for Hunte after all. “Sounds good.”

One of the entourage pulls him away and I wander to the side of the room, bouncing on my tiptoes. This could be the breakthrough I’ve wanted all along. I catch a glimpse of long, curly blond hair across the room. Something twists in my stomach, but I make no effort to approach him. He’s surrounded by women. *Not my business.*

After a while, Todd announces the band’s getting ready to leave, and I hang back while people file out. “There you are,” Lex says as he and Colton find me in the crowd. “Can we talk on the way to the party?”

“Sure.”

“We’ll take a separate limo,” Colton explains. “Brax and Ricky already left.”

Hearing Braxton’s whereabouts, my body deflates. I was hoping he’d want to talk with us, too.

*Stop being stupid, Sara. He been playing with you.*

My chin rises. “Sounds good.”

On the way to the after-party, I explain some basic financial theory to Colton and Lex, who pepper me with questions. When I tell them my goal is for the band to bank

their profits instead of using them to pay extravagant bills, they seem excited.

“You really think we can do this?” Lex asks, his eyes sparkling the way they do when he plays his favorite songs.

“Yes, I do. You need to stop doing wasteful things. Like ruining hotel rooms.” I still can’t believe they threw a couch out a window.

Colton chuckles, and the guys’ gazes lock.

“Do you want to tell me what it was about?”

In unison, they reply, “Nope.”

Forcing myself not to roll my eyes, I continue, “Think about it this way. If you didn’t have to tour all the time to make money, you’d be able to spend more time with your wife, Lex.”

He nods.

“And you could spend more time creating music rather than racing to cobble something new together.” Colton’s chocolate eyes look thoughtful as they meet mine.

By the time we pull up in front of the club, both guys promise me they’ll try to make Brax and Ricky see reason. It’s all I can ask. They help me out of the limo and escort me into the club.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Colton asks.

He is so nice. And handsome. He’s taller than Braxton, and his chest and arms are as defined. When I ask for a Riesling, he smiles and heads off to the bar. Even his smile is breathtaking.

And yet no sparks fly when he touches me, and I know why—he's not Braxton. I sigh and drop my head.

Colton returns with Ricky and hands me a glass. "Thanks."

"Hey," Ricky greets me, eyeing me like I'm a curious substance under a microscope. He's not used to seeing me party and drink, even after the game on the bus the other day. Well, he was in the bedroom....

"Hi, Ricky."

He turns to Colton. "There's a pool table over there." He points and I follow the direction of his finger. My heart gives an excited thump. I used to play all the time in college. "Wanna play?"

Before Colton can respond, I blurt, "I do!"

The two look at me in surprise. "Looks like fun," I say with a shrug, not wanting to tip my hand.

Ricky bangs a beat on his thigh. "Sure, why not? Let's go."

The four of us—Ricky invited a brunette in tight jeans from the entourage to join us—make our way to the pool table. Colton racks the balls for the first game between Ricky and me. "Wanna break?"

I decline. "You can do it."

Ricky breaks and chooses stripes. He's pretty good, sinking two balls before missing. I rub chalk on the tip of my cue while circling the table. Choosing my first shot, I say, "Two ball, corner pocket." I take careful aim and the ball does as I predicted.

Colton whistles. "I think we may have a shark in our midst."

I bite my lip to stop from smiling. “Beginner’s luck.”

Ricky taps his cue on the corner pocket. “Let’s see you hit the five ball in here.” As I’m assessing the shot, Lex wanders over and Colton whispers something to him.

Ignoring Lex’s arrival, I hit the cue ball with a topspin, and the five goes right into the pocket. “Yes!”

Ricky’s dark brown eyes narrow. “If you can put the four into the corner pocket, I’ll buy the next round.”

Hmmm. “How about, if I do it, you’ll stick to your budget for one day? And if I miss, I’ll get your next drink.”

Lex grins. I think he knows my game.

Ricky’s hand bangs on his leg for a moment. “Deal.”

The air thickens around me. It’s as if this shot means more than any other I’ve made in my entire life. I take my time, say a quick prayer, and shoot. We all inhale at the same exact same moment.

The four ball sinks.

I jump up and down, excited by my victory. If Ricky can stick to his budget for just one day, he’ll see it’s possible. Colton holds up his hand, smirking a little, and I high-five it.

“You got me,” Ricky admits. “But I’m still buying this round. My budgeting doesn’t start ’til tomorrow. And I’m going for a rematch when I come back.” I laugh as he leaves for the bar, brunette in tow.

“Anyone want to take over for Ricky?” I ask, lifting an eyebrow.

“Hell, no,” Colton says. “I don’t play sharks.” Lex agrees with him and they drift into the club. I hum an early Hunte

tune as I start clearing the table. At some point, Ricky returns with our drinks and we play his challenge game. It's closer this time. I still win.

“You're impressive, Tour Accountant. Not many people can beat me at pool.” He puts his cue back into the holder and leaves me to my own devices.

Alone at the table, I rack the balls for one last game against myself. Coming out tonight turned out to be one of my better decisions. The guys are coming around, and I haven't had to have any face-to-face time with Braxton all night.

I'm lining up the break shot when a rumbly voice says, “Now there's a sight I can get behind.”

I shoot and miss the cue ball altogether. My eyes close. “Braxton.”

“You've got a reputation as a shark. More like a tadpole, from what I see.”

I straighten and turn to face him, taking my time. He's wearing an olive green T-shirt and, in typical grunge fashion, a green flannel shirt over it. It's untucked over jeans and work boots. The green in his shirt brings out the amber in his hazel eyes, which simmer with mirth.

My eyes half-close. I'll give him something to laugh about. Picking up the chalk, I rub it over the end of my pool cue. And blow.

He swallows.

A smile steals across my face as I reposition the cue ball and wiggle my hips. “Want to do this?”

Where on earth did this sultry Sara come from? I've never acted like this before, even when I was out with my exes. I



always remained in control. Yet here with Braxton, I'm not. And I don't care.

Braxton blinks. "More than you know." The rasp of his voice sends the heretofore missing tingle up my spine, like Lex playing his keyboards. He grabs a pool cue and clears his throat. "You can break."

"Such the gentleman."

This time, I do the job and sink a stripe. When I miss my next shot, Braxton walks around me calling for the seven ball. It's the shot I would've taken in his place. When it drops into the pocket, he nods. "Now we're even."

"Oh, we're just getting started."

We play in relative silence, each of us focused on the game. The lead trades between the two of us until only two balls remain, and it's my turn to shoot. All I have to do to win is put the three ball away. It's a complicated bank shot requiring me to stretch across the table, but I can make it.

I turn my head toward Braxton and am rewarded by a seductive perk of his lips. "Good luck, Sara Baby."

At his use of the nickname he gave me the other night, heat pools in my core. *Get a grip.*

I toss my head and concentrate on my shot. My winning shot. I line it up and shoot.

And miss.

Setting up a final shot for him that's so perfect a blind person could get it in.

"Dammit!" I bang my cue stick on the floor.

Next to me, Braxton laughs. “Better luck next time.” With no hesitation, he shoots and the ball drops right in. “That’s how it’s done.” He grabs his bottle of Bud and tosses his hair over his shoulder.

Frustrated over missing my last shot, I follow the trajectory of his hair and blurt, “You guys may want to see a stylist.”

His hand halts mid-air, holding his beer a foot from his mouth. “A what?”

My chest caves in. How could I be such a bitch over losing a stupid game? Well, he does bring out the two-year-old in me. Since he’s waiting for a response, I have to press ahead. “A stylist.” I mime snipping of scissors. “You know, to cut your hair and revamp your wardrobe.”

He tugs on a lock of his curly blond hair, a scowl knitting between his brows. In a very low voice, which resonates deep within me, he repeats, “Cut it?”

I’m mortified by my outburst. Abandoning my cue stick, I leave the pool table. And Braxton. Within two steps, however, he places his hand on my arm. I’m in for it. Swallowing, I turn.

And am struck by the vulnerability written across his face.

“You don’t like my hair?”

I blink. Might as well be honest. “I do, but it feels so... eighties.” I turn my head. “Just a suggestion.”

He lets go and I continue my escape. Within three steps, he’s next to me again. “I’ll take your suggestion under advisement.”

I'm so far out of my depth with him. He's hot and cold. A homeless teen who made it big despite his awful father. A sexy rockstar who commands the stage and thousands of people, then buys a decorative spoon to honor his mother. A prankster who's both vulnerable and passionate. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"Not gonna lie, it came out of left field. I do appreciate your honesty." He pauses. "And I appreciate you."

I trip. "You do?"

"Yes." He taps my nose with his index finger. "You. For some reason, I want to get to know you better, Sara Baby."

I maintain eye contact and remind him of my dislike of his new nickname for me. "I'm not a 'baby.'" Even to my own ears, my complaint sounds lame. Breathily.

His gaze runs my entire length. "I can see that."

I frown. "I'm also not some sort of game. I'm not going to ease up on the numbers, no matter how much you try to..." I slam my lips closed, not sure how to end the sentence. "To..." Is he trying to seduce me? I shake my head. "To sweet talk me."

"Maybe I want to get to know you better. Let's leave it there."

He grabs my hand and tugs me toward a couple of empty barstools in the corner. I hop on one and he rearranges his closer to mine. We sit thigh to thigh, and his arm drapes around my shoulders. It's too much. I make a strangled noise and scoot over, my arms crossed. "You should be with your fans." I gesture around us. "Isn't that what these events are about?"

"Seems to me you're also a fan."

I purse my lips. “I do like Hunte’s music.” A slow smile creeps across his face and I’m compelled to add, “Now you’re my account.”

“So you keep reminding me.”

His musky scent plays in my nostrils, and my body rejoices at his nearness. Which I try to push aside. I don’t like this turmoil within me. “It’s the truth.”

“Then tell me another truth. Tell me *your* truth.”

His question shocks me, and I meet his amber-hued gaze. He reaches out and smooths my hair off my face. This is so confusing. *He* is so confusing.

I squeak, “My truth?”

He nods. “I want to know what makes you tick.”

I need to distract him. “I like order. I like numbers. Things that make sense and fit together.”

“Like a puzzle.”

“Sure.”

He leans forward, both of his hands on my knees, his touch searing me. “What happens if something doesn’t fit into your sense of order?”

I move my legs. “Well,” I lick my lips. “I always manage to get everything the way I want it to be.”

“Must be boring.”

“It’s not. It’s comforting, actually. It helps avoid any potential problems down the line. Take, for example, your daily budgets. I’ve never had to do these for my other clients—the others all followed the monthly plan I set out for them. Since you guys kept blowing past those allocations, I had to

take matters into my own hands. And the band's doing better than ever." The last thought puts a big smile on my face. Hunte will be my own personal Mona Lisa.

"Well, don't get too excited. We haven't had enough time to do real damage to your budgets."

I roll my eyes. "I've spoken with each of you about the budgets. You've curtailed your spending because you understand my cost-benefit analysis. Lex and Colton, especially, see this as a win-win."

"What's in it for you?"

My nose crinkles and my fingers steeple on my lap. "I want to see Hunte in the black. You're my client now, and I'm responsible for you."

"What do you get if Hunte gets in the black?"

He must have ordered drinks on the sly, because a waitress places a glass of white wine in front of me, a beer in front of him. "I shouldn't. Work, you know."

"Yes, but since Hunte *is* your work, I say you need to spend more time with me. To talk some monetary sense into me. Or, I might order a round for everyone in here. Or two."

My hand flies over my mouth, and he chuckles. "C'mon. One drink won't kill you."

"You're a bad influence, Braxton."

"Brax."

I still. Did he invite me to call him by his nickname? I must've misheard. "What?"

He clears his throat. "My real friends call me Brax. Braxton is what I use professionally. Since we've moved

beyond professional, it's time you started calling me Brax.”

My eyes widen. “We're beyond professional?”

He takes a lock of my hair and rubs it against my cheek. Lowering his voice, he asks, “What do *you* think?”

He holds up his pilsner to my wineglass. “A toast. To tossing order away and living in the chaos of touring life.”

When he reaches out to touch my glass, I pull it away and make my own toast. “To bringing order into the chaos and making beautiful music.”

Braxton—*Brax*—clinks our glasses. “I agree on the making beautiful music part.”

I take time to savor the wine, suddenly nervous. What does he want from me? If he's after sex, he doesn't lack for it.

Brax rubs his finger down my cheek. “It seems to me you're a very intelligent woman and a good accountant.”

“Thank you.” Heat rises up my neck.

“You've obviously worked really hard to make it to where you are at the accounting firm.”

Not understanding the direction of this conversation, I reply with the truth. “Getting a job there was my goal since college. Father is a named partner at a rival firm, retired now, and I wanted to show him I'm worthy of being an Anderson.”

He tilts his head. “Why didn't you go to work at your father's firm?”

“Anti-nepotism policy. Besides, I wanted to make it on my own, without anyone thinking Father played a hand in it.”

He takes another sip of his beer. “Impressive.”

I wave my hand. “It's not a big deal.”

“I think it’s a big deal. You’re not a partner, right?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. I’m hoping it’ll happen this year.”

He inclines his head. “Is Hunte your last test?”

My insides quiver. I don’t want this to sound bad. Delaying, I grab my wineglass and take a long sip. Twice. “Well...” I lick my lips. “They did task me with seeing what I could do with your account.”

He smirks. “Good luck with that.”

His response is so unexpected it elicits a surprised laugh from me. A beat later, he joins in. Our laughter catches the attention of a group of women by the bar. One of them screams, “BRAXTON HUNTE!!!!!!”

Next to me, Brax mutters, “Crap,” and I find myself thinking of the crowd of women who chased him and Colton from the hotel the other day. Sometimes being a sex symbol isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, it would seem.

The women descend upon us.

“Ladies,” Brax says, giving them a polite smile.

The tallest redhead spurts, “Oh my God, Braxton, you’re the best. Your concert was amazing.” A pushy brunette drags a stool over next to us.

I want to shove her away. *He’s mine for the night.*

Brax raises his hand. “I wish we could stay and chat, but my girlfriend’s feeling a bit under the weather, and I need to get her back to the hotel.” My thighs tighten at his use of the word. Girlfriend. Is he nuts?

When another woman moseys over from the bar, I get it. I'm his human shield. He holds out his hand to me and intertwines our fingers. Yup, I'm his shield. An expedient prop. He inches away from the women, taking me with him.

The redhead tilts her head in a poor imitation of concern. "Oh, are you sure? You can let her go to her room by herself."

Man, these women are pushy. He brings my hand up and kisses the back of my palm. I play my part and rest my head on his pec. "Yes, I'm sure." Before we can make our getaway, Brax asks, "Do you have anything you'd like me to sign?"

A blonde woman produces the program from tonight's show, but no one seems to have a pen. I free my hand from his, search in my purse and produce a red pen. Our eyes meet as he takes it from me, and we share a secret smile before he signs the program. After kissing each lady's cheek, he wraps his arm around my shoulders and ushers me toward the exit.

Soon we're safely ensconced in the limo, heading back to the hotel. "Thanks for helping me out back there. I didn't want to deal, you know?"

Yup. I was his exit strategy. "Not a problem."

"Appreciate it." He scratches behind his ear. "So, when I was in your room the other night, I saw you had a letter from At Your Door on your desk."

"Yes. We're working on our fundraiser for Valentine's Day. The band we lined up for the event had to drop out and we're searching for a replacement." I've been trying to think of a way to ask him if Hunte would consider replacing them. No time like the present. "Would you like to take their place?"

"Hunte isn't really known for doing charity work."



“So you said the other night. Maybe it’s time to change up your image? I thought you might like to raise money for the cause, considering...” My voice trails off and my cheeks heat.

He finishes my thought. “Because I was homeless?”

I stare at the limo’s carpet. Maybe I was too forward? “Yes.”

He inhales and inclines his head. “I’m not promising anything, but I’ll discuss it with the guys.”

I might have secured Hunte for our Valentine’s Day event! They’re way bigger than the band that dropped out, and this would be a big get. I raise my eyes to meet his. “Thanks. It’s all I can ask.”

“It’s pretty cool you’re on the board.”

“I’ve been involved with At Your Door for years. Mother used to volunteer and I started doing it as a tribute to her. I kept doing it because I like it. Making a house for someone, even my small part in it, is satisfying.”

“All the numbers fit into place.” He smiles at me then, a sweet smile.

I grin back. “Something like that.”

“Very nice. See,” he leans over and pokes me in the chest with his index finger. “A heart of gold is in here, buried under all the spreadsheets.”

I rub the spot Brax touched. “Somewhere, I guess.”

“Oh, come on, Sara. How many hearts have you left broken on your path to becoming a Hunte groupie?”

“I am *not* a Hunte groupie.”

He has the audacity to chuckle. “Right. The Hunte *tour accountant*. Better?”

“Much.” I shift in the seat. “To answer your question, none.”

He appears surprised. “None? As in no broken hearts?”

I shake my head.

“Oh, come on, Sara Baby. With the pretty little brain of yours, a string of broken-hearted male accountants has to be littered around.”

If this isn't awkward, I don't know what is. “Nope. I'm not the type of woman that men fall for.”

“Okay, this is plain old crazy talk. You're beautiful.” He knocks on the window. “Smart. Funny. You're the type of woman who men want to bring home to their families.”

My eyebrows rise and I run my hand through my hair. Boy, does he have the wrong impression of me.

When I don't respond, he adds, “Of course, when you're not being a total ballbuster over money.”

I stifle the urge to stick my tongue out at him. “You're too kind.”

“No one has ever accused me of being kind before.”

“I guess they didn't know you well enough, Brax.”

He shifts in his seat. “Maybe. Or maybe they knew me too well.”

I don't think he's giving himself enough credit. Buried under the rockstar cockiness is, I'm starting to realize, a man with a heart of gold. “You're smart and very talented. I'll give you a pass if your assessment of me is a bit off.”

He looks behind himself. “We’re even. No one has ever accused me of being smart before.”

“Are you kidding?” How can he say that? He’s a musical genius. “You made the top of the charts before you hit twenty. So many people never hit this milestone. Or if they do, they’re much, much older. You play guitar like no one’s business and your voice is...” I stare into his hazel eyes. “Really good. Plus you’ve continued to keep Hunte on tour long after many of your contemporaries dropped out. If that’s not smart, I don’t know what is.”

His eyes flash with some emotion and he leans in to kiss my cheek. “Thank you, beautiful.”

My hand palms my cheek as if I to keep the sensation of the kiss. “I wasn’t saying anything you don’t already know.”

“Maybe I needed to hear it.”

This man is much more complex than I ever thought. Which makes him dangerous. The limo stops and the driver opens our door. On the sidewalk, I inhale the crisp fall night. “I’m going to call it a night, Brax.”

He inclines his head. “I’m not ready to call it quits yet.”

Everything within my body drops. He’s going to find a groupie, no doubt.

*What did you expect, Sara? For him to stick around and kiss you good-night?*

“I’ll see you in the morning. We have an early wake-up call for our journey to Boise.”

“Boise,” he repeats. “Good spuds.”

My lips tip upward. “I’m sure Boise offers a lot more than potatoes.”

“Let me walk you to your room.”

I need to get away from him before I do something stupid. Like grab him in the middle of the lobby and kiss him. “I’m perfectly capable of getting to it on my own.”

“I’m sure you are. You seem to be very capable of a lot of things. Let me be a gentleman, okay? Something new for me.” He takes my hand again and leads me into the lobby and toward the elevators.

Once in the car, he cocks his eyebrow at the panel. “Five,” I supply.

When the doors close, he stalks me. There’s no other word for it. For each step he takes, I take one backward until my back hits the wall. My heartrate leaps as the air between us crackles. He stops before our chests touch and stares into my soul.

His eyes show his talent and vulnerability and drive. And passion. So much passion.

The elevator stops its rise and dings our arrival at my floor. He steps backward to let me pass, placing his hand on the small of my back, and lets me lead us to my room. His touch sends heat flashing through my breathless body.

He can’t want me the way I think he does. I’m simply Sara Anderson, a nobody. Not flashy like those women in the bar. Not overtly sexy like his groupies. I’m only straight-laced me.

Arriving at my door, I stop and open my purse to look for my key. When he brackets my body with his hands, I need to focus on taking in enough air.

Not turning to face him, I hold up the room key. “Thank you for walking me to my room, Brax. Have a good night.”

He leans in, putting his mouth against the shell of my ear. “I know a way we can make it a much better one.”

A shiver races up my spine, and I shake my head. Because his lips are close to my face, my gesture brings them into contact with my ear. I swallow a gasp, and my left hand covers where his lips branded me. When I twist my head, dark amber eyes meet mine.

His hands land on my shoulders and he turns me, pressing my back against the door. He closes the small gap between our bodies and my key falls to the carpet with a muffled thud. “No going back now,” he whispers.

Then his lips close over mine, molding them. He shuffles forward so our whole bodies touch, pressed together in a way we both want. Need. Our mouths explore and learn each other while our chests, groins, thighs, and feet contact. He moves his hips and I moan into his mouth at the friction. My brain short-circuits.

His hands skim down my body, brushing against my boobs and ending at my waist. He wraps his hands around me and pulls, obliterating any space between us. His tongue traces both my upper and lower lips and he pushes forward. When my mouth falls open, he sneaks inside to tangle with my tongue.

I lift my hands up his back and into his hair, my fingernails scraping against his scalp. He moans and slams me against the door. His hands wander downward, ending by cupping my butt and squeezing. Release. Squeeze. Release.

My hips move in time with his touch on my bottom, bumping against his fully erect cock. Based on this brief contact, I know those girls from the concert weren't wrong—

he's huge. My legs widen and he pushes forward, sliding against the apex of my thighs.

I'm lost in this man. "Brax," I moan.

"God, yes."

He releases my lips and trails blazing hot kisses down my throat. I tighten my grip on his head, arching my chest into him. His right hand moves to the bottom of my shirt, which he pulls up and out of my jeans. His fingers explore my naked torso, up to my bra.

Noise from down the hall reaches my ears. He nips my throat. "Let's take this into your room."

It's too much. He's too much. His words and his touch overwhelm me and I stiffen in his embrace. He takes a step back and I close my eyes in an attempt to regain some sort of control. My hand flies over my mouth, and I search his eyes for the answer to my unasked question. Am I ready for this? Can I survive him?

As if sensing my inner turmoil, he squeezes me. "Sleep well, Sara Baby," he purrs in my ear. "Dream of me. I'll see you tomorrow." With a final kiss to my cheek, he turns and walks away, his gait unsteady.

## SARA



**I**n a daze, I pick up the key from the floor and open my door. Brax never even looks back at me. I felt his hardness pressed against me moments before though, confirming I'm not the only one hot and bothered. I close and lock my door and, with a sigh, toss the key onto the desk.

Wandering over to my bed, I collapse onto the soft mattress. Closing my eyes, I picture Brax in here with me, his hands trailing over my body, ripping my clothes off. Because he's, well, a rockstar, and rockstars rip clothes off bodies. And they kiss and lick and suckle. My nipples pucker into hard buds, anticipating his mouth over them.

Forcing my eyes open, I stare at the ceiling. Alone.

*He's toying with you. If he really wanted you, you wouldn't be in here alone.*

I sigh and let my arms fall open so my body forms a T. No matter how hot the kiss was, he left me standing in the hallway, my whole body alight with want. He was only fooling around.

Right?

After a few minutes, I collect myself and get ready for bed. I call the front desk for a seven a.m. wake-up call so I'll have

time to do my analysis of the band's actual expenditures from today, then fall into a fitful sleep.

The phone rings and takes me away from a wonderful dream involving Brax, no clothes, and lots and lots of heat. I raise and lower the receiver and promptly return to my dream. Ringing wakes me up again, and I blearily glance at the clock. It reads nine.

Shoot! This is the first time I've slept past schedule since college.

I sit up, toss off the blanket and grab the cordless phone. I have two hours to get ready, eat breakfast and do the budgets.

"Hello?" I answer as I run around the room preparing my clothes for the day's trip to Boise.

"Hi, Sara! I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"You didn't, Joanna," I lie. Shaking my head, I select a skirt, blouse and jacket. Where are my stockings? I rummage through my suitcase, destroying the carefully preserved order.

"Good. I wanted to hear your voice this morning."

Joanna's words make me stop in my tracks. "Why? Are you okay? Is everything all right?"

She laughs. "Everyone's fine. When are you coming home?"

Reassured no one's in trouble, I continue laying out my outfit for today, including a matching black bra and lace panties set. "You had me worried for a moment. To answer your question, I don't think I'll be home until Stacey's baptism. Things finally are starting to turn around here, and I don't want to lose momentum. I was going to call you later, but could you please use my key and water my plants?"



“No problem. Don’t worry about your babies.”

Her use of the word “babies” brings me up short. “They’re plants, Joanna.”

She giggles and a frown works across my forehead. It wasn’t that funny.

“I know,” she finally says, trying to get herself under control. “Oh, screw it. I was going to wait to tell you the news in person, but I can’t hold it in. We’re pregnant!”

Her announcement takes the breath out of my lungs. I’m amazed and disturbed by the longing that chooses this moment to present itself—for the first time in my life, I want to have my own little one in my arms.

I shake my head at the absurdity of it. No. I have no room in my life for a baby. Babies are chaos and dirty diapers and crying. Not to mention I’m missing the most important ingredient—a husband.

Even though Joanna can’t see my face, I force a smile. “Oh my, Joanna. I’m really happy for you both! When are you due?”

“We just found out, so not for eight months or so.”

I do a quick calculation “A summer baby. How exciting.”

“I know. Can you believe it? I’m going to be a mommy. Which makes you an auntie, for the second time.”

“Oh, wow.”

Joanna continues her excited babbling, and I join in as much as I can force myself. My best friend’s pregnant, and my baby brother is already a father. I don’t even have a boyfriend. My mind wanders to the kiss Braxton—no, Brax—gave me against the door last night.

*He's a player, Sara. He's not into you. You're a diversion while he's on the road.*

“I can't wait to come home and see your belly getting big, Joanna. But I really have to run now. I'm not dressed and I need to finish up the band's budgets plus get some breakfast before we leave for our next tour stop.”

“Okay. I can't wait to see you! Now, go have fun with your rockstars. Bye!”

I stare at the phone, unable to compute what she said. My life has always revolved around my job, like Joanna's used to before she met her husband. I can't imagine ever not wanting to run numbers and figure out ways to increase the bottom line. Like I told Brax, I genuinely enjoy figuring out puzzles—all the better if I can help people while doing it.

Returning the receiver to its cradle, I jump into the shower. As the conditioner washes down my back, Joanna's words loop through my mind. She's pregnant. Due in eight months. She's going to be a mother.

I want to be a partner at A&L. I do *not* need a baby or a family to make my life complete.

Wrapping my head in a towel, I dry off and pad out to the bedroom area to put on my work clothes, all the while picturing my best friend's stomach swelling as the baby grows. She'll feel it kick inside her. She'll be holding a brand new life in months.

And I'll be the firm's third woman partner. Both Margaret and Donna don't have kids. I'll join their ranks.

Tugging on my blazer, I rush to the mirror to put on my makeup. Not too much because we're going to be traveling for a few hours, but I have to look professional. When I look in

the mirror, I'm shocked to see tear tracks down my cheeks. I dash them away with the back of my palm and get to work.

Ten minutes later, I'm satisfied with the results. Checking the mirror, I say, "Run and get a breakfast, then come back up here to get the band's budgets together. Don't spend any more time dwelling on Joanna's news." Spine straight, I grab my Coach tote and leave for the elevator.

When I get to the hotel's restaurant, a line of people waits to be seated. Great. My fingers strum my arm as a couple ahead of me in line yells for their youngest child to rejoin them. The mother and father appear frazzled, but they succeed in corralling their brood of three children into their seats. Next in line is a couple, and the woman appears to be ready to pop. The hostess asks her when she's due, and the husband pipes up their son will be here in three weeks. They beam as they're led to their table. My eyes follow the couple.

The hostess returns to me. "Are you waiting for anyone to join you?"

"No. I'm alone. And I'm in a rush."

Her lips go up as she adopts a forced smile. She takes a menu from the side slot and leads me to a table, passing both the young pregnant couple and the family of five. "Enjoy," she says and drops the menu on my plate.

I look around the restaurant and spy yet another pregnant woman. What the heck is in the water around here? My appetite deserts me. I signal for my waitress and ask for a muffin and cup of coffee to go. I can't be stuck in this restaurant with so many reminders of my conversation with Joanna.

Besides, I have to get the budgets ready and out before the bus leaves in...I check my watch. Less than an hour.

Todd saunters over to my table, sits down across from me and orders a coffee. Great. “So, how are you enjoying your time with the band?”

I force a smile. “It’s been a real learning experience. I have a much better appreciation for the expenses associated with each line item.”

He accepts his coffee and doctors it. “And with the band itself?” He runs his finger over the rim of his cup. “Braxton.”

“Brax has been very nice. Everyone has been.” I might be stretching the truth, but I don’t know where this conversation is going. Did he see something last night?

“I’m sure *Brax* is being very nice.”

Shoot. I shouldn’t have used his nickname.

Todd continues, “I saw you leave the after-party with him last night. A word to the wise. Don’t get too used to his attention. He’s not the settling down kind of guy, while you seem to be that type of girl. Although—” he brings his finger up to his mouth and licks the tip, “—if you’d like a distraction, I’m sure I could help you out. No strings attached.”

Asshole. “Yeah. I’m sure your *wife* wouldn’t want any strings.”

Smile flattened, he spits, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He leaves the table. What a jerk.

The waitress brings me over a bag with my bill. Of course, I don’t have anything smaller than a twenty, and for once, my breakfast doesn’t even come to five dollars. I ask for change, my gaze flicking around the restaurant as I wait.

Joanna's going to be a mother.

I don't have a boyfriend.

Brax is playing with me.

Todd is a jerk.

Cheering erupts from the family of five and one of the kids takes a bow. He has big brown eyes and curly blond hair. So cute. The parents clap and my heart twinges.

I don't need a family of my own. As long as I turn Hunte's account around, I'll be made partner. The fact I don't have the daily budgets ready yet spurs me to snatch the bill case from my waitress when she returns. I take my change, leaving two dollars in it as a tip and return the folder. She's gawking a bit, but I don't care.

I can't care.

I need to escape.

Grabbing my tote, I start the short trek to the exit. One pregnant woman's hand rests atop her belly. My breathing hitches. The father of another pregnant lady kisses his wife's cheek.

*I don't need a baby.* My feet accelerate.

I barrel directly into a man's chest. His arms go around my body and I jump back. I register long blond hair. Brax. "Excuse me," I say. "I didn't see you there."

His hands run up and down my arms. "Everything okay, Sara Baby?" The other band members stand behind him, all of them looking at me with open curiosity.

Brax's nickname for me is the final straw. I scurry around him, leaving him and his band behind in the restaurant.

When I'm at the elevator, I exhale. Thank God Brax didn't follow me. *Focus, Sara. You have to finish up the budgets. Everything will be okay if you stick to the plan.*

Once inside my room, I toss my tote onto the chair. My shallow breathing warns me I may hyperventilate if I don't regain control soon. I inhale and try to count to ten, but by the time I hit five I need to suck in another breath. Shoot.

I try again and make it to eight this time. On my third try, I count all the way to ten. I repeat the process five more times, running through a mantra in my head as I do so: *I'm all right. I've got this. I don't need a baby to do my job and make partner.*

A sob catches in my throat.

Ignoring my stupid emotions, I put my glasses on and start working the numbers, which calms me down. When I'm almost done, someone knocks on my door. I check the peephole. Of course it's Brax. I open the door a fraction. No need to invite him in and compound this morning's disaster. "I'm in the middle of getting your budgets done. Do you need something?"

"I wanted to be sure you were okay. You looked upset in the restaurant."

I can't do this. Closing the door, I reply, "I'm fine."

He shoves his booted toe into the gap. "Let me see."

"I'm busy, Braxton."

His head tilts at my use of his stage name. He shoves his knee against the door and it swings open. He strides into my room as if he has every right to be here. I don't have time for this. With quick movements, I push past him and return to my

seat at the desk. Plopping the glasses onto my face, I pick up my red pen.

He closes the door. “Hope that isn’t mine.”

“Nope.” I let myself glance to him before I drop my gaze to my work. This is the only constant in my life. Making puzzle pieces fit together. Not the chaos of family life. I toss my pen onto the papers and quash a sob by covering my mouth with my hand.

Brax drops to his knees at my side and pushes my hair away from my face. “What’s wrong?”

His gentleness is the final straw. “Nothing,” is my quiet response.

“Hey. You can tell me.” He strokes my hair.

My head shakes and I pick up my pen. “It’s nothing. The numbers are off and I need to figure them out. Nothing more.”

He puts his hand on my leg. “I may not have an accounting degree, but I don’t think you’re telling me the truth about what has you this upset.”

I push his hand away. “I’m not upset.”

“Sara Baby, I hope—”

There it is again. *Sara Baby*. A low sob echoes through the room. Mortified, I realize the sound came from me.

“What is it? Talk to me.”

I wrap both of my arms around my stomach and fold over so my forehead lands on the desktop. I can’t hold back any longer and ugly sobs pour out of me. Brax puts his hands on my back and rubs, urging me to let it all out.

After a minute, I get a handle on myself and stop crying. Even though I don't move, my spine straightens. He continues his rhythmic rubbing until I sit up in the chair. I look down at the man on his knees at my side and remove my glasses.

Other than sucking in his breath, he remains silent.

"This isn't because of you," I feel the need to say.

"What happened?"

"I never cry." I swipe at my cheeks and rearrange the papers on my desk. "I have to get the budgets done before we leave. I don't have time to discuss this with you now." I retrieve my red pen. "If ever."

He jumps to his feet, arms akimbo. "Why not? Am I good enough to kiss but not good enough to share your problems with?"

I tap the pen against the desktop. In a broken voice, I admit, "It's not like that." My left knee bounces.

He steps closer, placing his hand on my knee, which stops bouncing. "Then what is it like?"

I bite my bottom lip. Why is this happening? Why can't he be the egotistical man-child who I first met? He pushes my hair off my face and I blurt, "Joanna's pregnant." A stray tear slides down my cheek.

"Your best friend?" I nod. "Congrats to her." He catches the tear with his thumb.

"Yeah." My voice catches on the solitary word.

"What's wrong? Is she in danger?" His voice lowers to a dangerous register. "Was she raped?"



The mere suggestion pierces my heart. I suppose he's seen things like that, having lived in shelters. I need to make sure he knows she wants this baby. "Oh, God, no. She got married last year. Nothing's wrong."

"Then why are you crying?"

I wipe the back of my hand across my wet face. "She told me this morning. Her news caught me off guard is all. I haven't had time to process it."

"Because you want a baby?"

For some reason it feels as important for me to squash his suggestion as if it were a big, hairy spider. "No! No way. I don't have any room in my life for a baby. I'm going to become partner at the firm."

"So you've said."

"I was surprised to hear she's pregnant. Now, both she and my younger brother will each have a baby. Her news sort of threw me off. I'm fine." I wipe my cheek again. "Totally fine."

He remains quiet, the inside of his cheek hollowing as if he's biting it from the inside. I continue, "Babies are messy. They take over everything. Toys everywhere. Father dotes on my niece, Stacey, but she's taken over his house, too. No. Not for me." I shake my head as if to accentuate the point. Besides, I'm focused on my career, and won't be sidetracked like my own mother was.

He pats my shoulder. "I'm sure you'll meet some lucky guy and fall madly in love. When you have a kid, you'll be caught up in it all, you won't even care about the chaos."

I let out a near-hysterical laugh.

"What's so funny? The love part, or the baby part?"

In between breaths, I explain, “Love is for other people. And they’re the ones who can have a kid, thank you very much.”

He starts to massage my shoulders. “Oh, come on, Sara. Don’t tell me you’ve never been in love before. Impossible. Even *I* thought I was in love with Hilary. Although the whole world knows how that ended up.”

The tabloids had indeed chronicled the end of his train wreck. Headlines like “Braxton’s Harem” and “The Wilde Hunte” were among the most notable. “Nope. No one has ever swept me off my feet.” Enough of this ridiculous conversation. It feels impossibly strange to be discussing this with him, of all people. Less than ten hours ago, he had me pinned up against my door.

I straighten the papers on the desk once more and put my glasses back on. “You guys are doing well, by the way.” I point to the expense columns. “I’m very proud of the work you all are doing.” I slide the chair backward and stand.

He picks up the stack of empty envelopes, already labeled with the band members’ names. Todd’s is on the top. “Glad to hear we’re making our bean counter happy.”

“I need to get these ready before the bus leaves in.” I check my watch. Where did all my time go? “Ten minutes.”

In a burst of energy, I collate the actual budgets from last night with the projections for today and fold each one into thirds. Without asking, he slips the packets into their proper envelopes.

“We make a good team,” he remarks.

This is what I’m afraid of.

## BRAX



**T**he bus rumbles down the road. For once, it's just us—no members of our entourage boarded in Helena for this leg of the trip. My eyes stray over to where Sara sits, deep in conversation with Todd. What happened earlier in her room plays on a loop. She's so strong and determined. Smart. Beautiful. Yet it's the broken places in her that call out to me. The hurt beneath the lacquered exterior. This Sara reminds me a bit of myself.

I rub my fingers over my lips as I remember our kiss last night in the hall. Damn, I could've taken her right there against the door. *Wanted to.*

“So,” Colton nudges my shoulder, dragging me out of my pleasant daydream. “Heard you beat the shark at pool last night.”

His description of Sara makes me chuckle. “It was a close game.” I crack my knuckles. “But, of course, I was the bigger shark at the table.”

He slides in beside me on the sofa. “What are you doing, man?” he asks in an undertone. “She's a good girl.”

I scowl at my best friend. “I'm not doing anything.” Except I can't deny I want to kiss her. Comfort her. I *want* her. Shit.

“She’s innocent, Brax. She’s not one of your groupies to play with and discard.”

My body tenses. “Are you sniffing around her?”

“Would you care if I did?”

It’s as if he punched me in my gut. Colton with my Sara? My Sara? I throw my head against the back of the sofa and close my eyes, exhaling through my nose.

“Exactly what I thought.”

Ricky ends our uncomfortable exchange when he sprawls out next to me on the sofa, Lex right behind him. Colton coughs and looks at me. “She cleaned Ricky’s clock, didn’t she?”

“Who cleaned my clock?” When Colton points to Sara, Ricky nods. “Gotta give her props. She earned it.” Making a face, he holds up the envelope I helped Sara stuff. “Now I have to stick to this today.”

Taking a seat by Colton, Lex chides, “It’s not too bad. You can do it, Ricky.”

Ricky grumbles, “We don’t have a gig tonight, so I don’t know why we have to follow a budget anyway.” He taps the envelope against his thigh in a fast beat.

My need to defend Sara rushes forward. “Cause we’re going to be spending money, that’s why, dipshit.”

“Whatever.” Ricky slides the envelope into his back pocket. “I lost the game fair and square. She won the bet and I’ll do the time.”

We all chuckle at how unhappy he sounds.

Lex says, “I, for one, like her.” Colton salutes him. When I don’t add anything to the conversation, it moves on to an upcoming video game. Which leads to Lex challenging us to another round of *Mortal Kombat 2*.

Passing on their offer to take a controller, I consider what the guys said. Sara’s won over Lex and Colton, for sure. She even has Ricky’s respect, at least for her pool skills. How has our tour accountant tamed the bad boys of rock so easily? I glance over, unable to help myself, and watch as Todd leaves her and makes his way toward the game.

Her gaze catches mine, and she offers me a small wave. Even though I can’t hear her, I can see her lips form my name. “Brax.”

I didn’t mean to invite her to use my personal nickname, but there’s no denying it feels right. Especially since we’re becoming friends. *Friends*. The way her lips react to mine, the feel of her lush body molding against mine, her ability to make me feel like the king of the world or whip me into a blind rage with a few well-chosen words—what I have with Sara extends far beyond friendship.

Something else strikes me. I haven’t gotten laid since before she joined our tour.

My eyes slam shut.

I’m fucked.

Ignoring her, I force my attention to the game. Make all the right noises. Cheer Lex on when he masters another level. From my peripheral vision, I notice *her* opening her briefcase and pulling out a notepad and a pen. As she scribbles her notes, her pert nose scrunches up. Now all I can think about is

kissing its tip. With a groan, I rise to my feet and am drawn to her side.

I take Todd's vacated seat and tap her knee with my own. "Hey."

A blush inches up her cheeks. "Hi." She puts her notepad on the little table.

I open with something was spurred by our earlier conversation. "So, you said we're doing better with the budgets, Miss Tour Accountant?"

Her eyes widen, then she sits up straighter. Her expression is all eagerness. "Yes. You're mainly sticking to the daily budgets. You and Ricky still go over sometimes—on a whole, though, everyone's doing better. Hunte's still walking a tightrope though." Her lips curve downward, and I'd do anything to tip them up.

"What do you suggest we do to fix this problem?"

"Honestly, you need to eliminate some line items altogether."

"Like booze at the after-party?"

She sighs and looks out the window, her fingers steepling on her lap. "Actually, it'll need to be a much bigger cut." She pauses and my stomach tightens. Something tells me I'm not going to like what she has to say next. "Todd already agreed to limit their food budget. I really think you need to eliminate your entourage."

All the air flees my lungs. I knew I wasn't going to like this. "Any other suggestions?"

"Hear me out, Brax. Why do you have a group of ten women touring with you? In addition to your crew. They

attend all of your concerts—gratis—and after-parties, but they don't add any value to the tour. Other than the obvious.”

Ignoring her snide comment, I reply, “They’re our friends. Part of our family. They’ve supported us for years.”

“I get it. But what do they do to deserve free room and board during the tour? Other than...”

She lets her last sentence hang. “They...” My mind skims over the women she’s calling our entourage. “They come to all our gigs and stand in the pit, singing every song along with us. They chat up other concert goers.”

“The ones who are already in the pit with them.”

“Well, yes. Plus they help out the roadies if they need anything.”

“And for that, they get free food, alcohol, rooms. Even a bus?”

“Our roadies ride on the same bus.”

“Well, okay. Then it’s not an added expense.”

The rest of her words make some sense. But Hunte is more than the four of us who take the stage. When I don’t respond, she continues, “Maybe you don’t have to eliminate them. Maybe slash their budget to only pay for concert tickets and the food and drinks at the after-parties, when they’re your guests. You shouldn’t be picking up their hotel costs.”

I run my fingers through my hair. “They’ve been with us for years.”

“They’re expensive.” She puts her hand on my tense leg. “Listen, I’m not saying you can’t have them around. It shouldn’t be on the band to pay for their living expenses. After

all, they've chosen to hook up with you all. They're not employees."

How much money were we talking here? "They're our friends. You wouldn't cut off your friends, would you? The people who've been with you all along should share in your success."

She steeple her fingers on her own leg. "I don't consider them to be your friends. More like sponges."

"Don't talk about my friends like that," I snap. "You don't hear me shit-talking your friends, do you?" My jaw clenches.

"I'm only being honest."

"Yeah, well look for other 'line items' to cut."

We go about a mile in silence before her hand touches mine. "I didn't offer my suggestion to make you mad. You asked about possible budget cuts."

She has one hell of a way of making herself sound sensible. I refuse to cut off my friends, though. "How about we change the subject?" I'm done with all this accounting bullshit—even though I was the one to bring it up. Looking around, I confirm we're still talking privately, then return to a statement she made this morning. "Tell me how it is you've never been swept off your feet."

She shifts in her seat. I don't think she's going to answer, but then she opens her mouth. "I'm not that type of girl. No one's ever made me feel the way you—" She clamps her mouth shut.

Now I'm intrigued. "The way I' what?"

Blowing air out of her mouth, she sends some of her hair flying into the air. "Nothing. Forget I said anything." She



points. “Look. The bus is taking this exit.”

We park in a rest stop. Standing, I say, “Let’s go eat with the band.” Then I lean over her and whisper, “But this conversation isn’t over. It’s finally getting good.”

My mind keeps conjuring different endings to her statement. *The way you do.* That had to be what she almost said. Exiting the bus, I feel ten feet tall. No way am I letting this confounding woman out of my sight until I get to the bottom of her statement.

Or at least to the bottom of her.

## SARA



I sat between a couple of roadies at lunch, successfully avoiding Brax, but my eyes find him as soon as we're back on the bus. I can't believe I almost told him he's the only man who's made me feel all tingly inside. No way. Only minutes before, he was yelling at me about my suggestion to axe his entourage. *Can't he see they're freeloaders and not friends?*

As the bus rumbles down the road, I notice Brax on his phone. The word "King" floats through the air, so I assume he's talking with his son. No matter what Hilary spews to the press, he is a good father. At least, he's trying.

Colton takes a seat in the chair adjacent to mine. "Hey, Sara, how are we doing from your perspective? Are you happy with all the monetary changes we've made?"

I take in the good-looking man sitting next to me. He's very sweet. Why can't I want to be with him? I query my heart, but its pace doesn't increase. Sighing, I mentally put on my tour accountant hat. "Hunte is making progress. I really appreciate all the efforts you're putting into minding your expenses. Hunte's P&L is improving, which is positive."

My gaze darts to Todd, who stands by the table that hosted the crazy game of quarters. Besides being a philanderer, I continue to get a strange vibe from the band's tour manager.

He's reluctant to cut the line items needed to keep the band profitable, and moreover, he's slow to turn over some receipts. It's as if he doesn't want the guys to make the needed changes.

But I'm not about to say this to Colton. It's not my place. These guys have been with Todd for years.

"I've talked with the others," Colton says, "and we're all working on being more conscientious." He rubs his arm. "How do you like touring with us?"

A smile crosses my face. "You're great. I've always loved your music and now I'm getting a front row seat to your process."

"So, will you be with us through the end of the tour?"

Hunte's tour won't end until the holidays. I shake my head. "I'll be leaving you on the fifteenth of this month to attend my niece's baptism. But I'll still send your daily budgets over to Todd, and he'll pass them along."

"What if we go off the rails after you leave? Will you come back?"

His words strike a chord of longing from an untapped source deep within my body. Part of me wants to scream I'd run back to Brax—to *Hunte*—in an instant. The realistic part of me suppresses my girlish fantasy. I'm only here to fix this sinking ship and make partner.

I lean forward and touch his hand. "Don't you worry. I'll keep a close eye on you."

A shadow crosses over us. I look up and Brax stands with his hands on his hips, feet wide apart. In a commanding voice, he booms, "What's going on here?"

Colton stands. "Talking business with our accountant."

I scramble to my feet. “We were discussing what’s going to happen when I leave you guys to your own devices after the fifteenth.”

“We’d better get our fill of you before then,” Brax suggests.

Colton rolls his eyes and punches his best friend on the arm. “Right.” He fixes his chocolate brown gaze on mine. “Well, I’ll leave you with this one.” He points to Brax. “Holler if you want me to rescue you.”

The two men share a look and Colton walks to the front of the bus. I tilt my head. “Anything wrong between you guys?”

“Nothing to worry your pretty head over. Not like there’s too much room, with all the numbers floating around in there.” He taps my forehead and smiles. His whole face transforms as if he’s dismissed whatever Colton did to piss him off. He’s mercurial like that.

Perhaps it’s part of the creative process.

“Please,” I slide back into my chair. “You don’t have to flirt with me. We’re only...co-workers, of a sort. Let’s be professional.”

He takes the chair Colton vacated. “Professional, huh? What if I want to be myself with you? Is it too personal?”

I slant a look at Brax’s profile. Chiseled cheekbones, long eyelashes. Lips screaming to be kissed. “I want you to be yourself, of course. Just not so—flirty.”

He chuckles. “Can’t be myself without being flirty. But I’ll try.” He offers me a potato chip from a bag he brought with him. I take one and we both munch in silence. He breaks our quiet interlude. “I’d like to finish our conversation from

before. Are you really okay about Joanna's pregnancy? 'Cause, really, anyone can get pregnant."

My heart stutters at his mention of Joanna. "I know. It was a shock is all. It shouldn't have been, considering she's been married for a little while now. I'm happy for her."

"I can tell."

His voice tells me he thinks I'm lying. I set my chin. "I am. She's moving on with her life, while I'm stuck doing what I've always done. Work. Don't get me wrong, I love my job."

Why does it sound as if I'm trying to convince Brax of these facts? Or myself? Could it be my biological clock is starting to tick? I shake my head. No way. My life plan does *not* include the disorder of a baby. My thoughts turn to Stacey, and how my brother dotes on her, and my muscles relax. Despite how adorable she is, I am *not* interested. I sit straighter. Partnership is this close.

"There's more to life than work."

"Says the man who lives on tour."

He gives me a two-fingered salute. "It's not all work."

Shouting from the front of the bus grabs our attention, and we rush up the aisle. "Look at that!" Ricky points out the window. We pass a huge billboard advertising something called Craters of the Moon National Monument. The billboard says the park is roughly the size of Rhode Island, has the largest lava field in the United States and boasts the deepest open rift crack in the world. It offers hiking as well as lava tubes, which I gather are caves based on the advertisement.

"Let's go!" Colton's last words are greeted with shouts of agreement. After some discussions, the bus takes the next exit.

The guys make up a song on the fly, something about moon craters and Swiss cheese and bouncing in a buggy on the face of the moon. I'm caught up in their exuberance.

"Oh my goodness, you're all crazy!" I say through gales of laughter.

Brax leans down and whispers in my ear, "I'm the good kind of crazy. Don't you forget it." Shivers tickle down my spine as I look into his smiling face. I could get used to his kind of crazy. Maybe even savor it.

The bus rumbles to a stop in the parking lot. I do a quick calculation. "Your new song deserves a reward. I'm picking up the band's admission fee to the park." The entourage, if their bus stops, are on their own.

Lex says, "High-five!" Within seconds, I'm engulfed in the Hunte band celebration.

We spill out into the park, walking over its unusual volcanic landscape. Ricky lets out a whistle. "It does sort of look like the moon."

Brax replies, "It really does." He points off to the right. "What's over there?"

I squint. "I'm not sure. Looks like some sort of cave."

"A cave! Come on." He drags me toward the opening in the rocks, leaving the rest of the band behind. Todd and the bus driver had already gone off in another direction. It's a Friday during working hours, so not many people are around. The cave, it seems, is empty.

"Let's explore." Brax leads us deeper into the cave, where the air temperature drops and the light dwindles.

Rubbing my arms, I say, “I’m getting cold. Let’s get out of here and check out the rest of the park.”

Instead of agreeing with me, Brax wraps his body around mine, pulling my back to his front. His body heat instantly envelops me. Or is it something else warming me up?

“I can keep you warm, Sara Baby.” He kisses the back of my neck.

I go rigid in his arms. “This can’t happen.”

“Why not? Neither one of us is married.”

I shake my head.

“You drive me crazy with all of your accounting business. Yet I can’t keep my hands off you.” He runs his hands up my torso.

“You’re my account. And you’re—” Chaos. Disorder. Four years younger. *Sexy*.

His hands pull me tightly against his front. The ridge of his erection juts into my butt, making all of my thoughts scatter. *Sexy* wins. He whispers into my ear, “I’m what?”

“*Sexy*.” My hand flies to my mouth in an effort to retract my last word. Brax’s chuckle tells me my efforts are futile.

“Glad to hear you like what you see.” His right-hand skims upward, stopping on my breast. He squeezes it over my clothes. “I’ve wanted to do this forever. But not with so many clothes on.”

His hand drops to my waist and burrows under my shirt. I flinch when he touches skin. “Shhh. I’ve got you.”

His other hand pulls me even tighter against his front as he fondles the cup of my bra. He kisses my jawline, his finger

now dipping inside the lace and rubbing my nipple, which has pebbled at his touch. A second finger joins the first, and he pinches.

The sting ricochets throughout my body. “Oh!”

He kisses my jaw again, then twists me so we’re facing each other, his talented fingers still inside of my bra. “Like that?” He pinches my nipple again, this time causing electricity to shoot directly to my core.

“Yes.” Maybe I can have his attention this one time. Maybe it won’t send me careening out of control. I stare into his hooded eyes for a split-second before giving in. I close the distance between our lips and attack him. The kiss explodes into something I’ve never felt before. My limbs vibrate with energy. I run my arms up and down his back, then skim around his waist and hook my fingers onto his belt buckle.

For his part, Brax has undone my bra and shoved it upward. Both of his hands explore my breasts while his tongue duels with mine. My only thought is how to get more of this man. I want to see him, feel him. No one ever has made me lose touch with my sanity like this...and I like it.

Brax must be thinking along the same lines because he growls then pulls my shirt over my head, taking my bra with it. They land on the ground somewhere. We’re in a public place, for God’s sake, but for once, I don’t care about the rules. All I care about is this man and the sensations he’s unlocking.

He pulls back, his eyes zeroing in on my breasts. “You’re damn beautiful.” Then he latches onto my nipple and sucks. Hard. Followed by nibbling.

He’s taken me to another plane, one where only sensation exists. “Oh, God. Brax!” I arch my back to allow him better



access. As if he needed help.

One of his hands twines in my hair while the other lands on my butt. I need to feel his skin. Explore. I fumble with his shirt. “Off!”

He backs away from me and tosses it off his body. His chest is sculpted perfection—not muscle-bound like those guys who spend all their days at the gym, but sleek and lithe, a physique honed from hours on the stage. I let my eyes explore his chest before I do what he did to me and attack his nipples.

“Sara,” he moans when I nip one. He pulls me up and our mouths fuse again while our naked chests rub against each other. I’m lost in him. The ache between my thighs drives my every move. I want Brax to soothe the throbbing—no, I want him to let it explode.

All of a sudden, I’m not holding anything. I stumble under the weight of my own body, but Brax holds me up and shoves my shirt over my head. He’s wearing his shirt again, too.

I open my mouth to protest when Brax puts his hand over it.

“I think there’s a way out over here.” Colton’s voice reaches my ears.

Oh shit.

Brax diverts my attention when he holds up my bra and shoves it into his back pocket. His smile is wicked.

“There seems to be more light up this way,” Lex says, and the band members’ approaching footsteps echo throughout the cave.

I force myself not to laugh as the other guys come into view. I adjust my pants and smooth my hair as Brax pulls me

in front of him. I giggle, then cough to cover up my reaction.

The footsteps stop. “Oh, hey, Brax!” Ricky calls out. A beat later, he asks, “Sara?”

“Hi,” I say, giving them an awkward little wave. The remnants of Brax’s kisses and touch still hum throughout my body. I take a step forward to join the guys as they walk by us, only to be pulled back into Brax’s arms. He plants a kiss on my throat. We’d be in plain view if they looked back, which none of them do. “This is not over, Sara,” he whispers. “Not by a long shot.” He swats my butt and I stumble forward.

Desire pulses from where his hand contacted my butt, shooting up through my body. Being around the band doesn’t dampen my need for Brax, no matter how hard I try to reason with my body. And I try very hard.

Ricky gives us an assessing look. “What were you guys up to?”

My stomach flips at his innuendo. True, he hooks up with groupies all the time, but I’m the tour accountant. Before I can respond, Brax says, “Exploring the cave, like you guys.” I give him a thumbs up to thank him for covering up what really went down between us.

Colton drops back and slings an arm around Brax. Guess they got over their earlier tiff. Together, the five of us walk through the cave, taking two wrong turns before we find our way out.

Back in the sunshine, Lex points to an unusual rock formation. “Let’s go check that out.” The guys head off, leaving me alone with Brax again.

“Want to get lost in another cave?” he asks with a grin.

His words enflame my body. I want to agree. Reason, like the sunshine, floods my brain. I don't need the band to get any more ideas about something going on between Brax and me. We escaped discovery by the slimmest of margins. It's the most reckless thing I've done in my adult life. Instead, I shake my head. "Let's stay out in the open."

He nods, and we trail behind the band, stopping from time to time to examine some plants and little animals like unusually marked squirrels and chipmunks. Hawks and eagles soar overhead.

Needing something to distract my thoughts from our tryst in the cave, I launch into a totally different conversation. "So, what was it like going from high school to rock royalty?" Because his life has been so different from mine, I'm intrigued. My question has *nothing at all* to do with satisfying my curiosity from all those years ago, when I made up stories about what was going on behind those amber eyes. Maybe I'm back in my own cave after all.

Brax flips his long hair. "Hunte was crazy back then. We were discovered—" He stills and looks at me. "Stop me if you already know this."

"I only know what I've read in the magazines, which I'm sure isn't the whole story. Of course, I'm well-acquainted with all your financials from back then, but it doesn't tell me the true story of Hunte."

"Sounds like a VH-1 special."

"Don't you already have one of those?"

He laughs. "Yeah. We were filmed after our first hit. It was fun."

"Tell me about your first tour."

“Our first tour.” Brax picks up a small rock and tosses it. “It was amazing. Surreal. Months before, we were in high school, playing local gigs. Jack Jefferson was our drummer.”

“I’m very sorry.” Jack OD’d barely two years after their debut, when the rest of the band publicly quit doing any drugs. He was replaced by Ricky, who seems to be a great fit for the guys—spending sprees aside. Keeping my thoughts to myself, I let Brax tell me his story. This is any fan’s dream.

“Thanks,” he mumbles. After clearing his throat, he continues, “Anyway, before we signed with a label, we were out at all the local Jersey Shore bars playing to packed crowds. We had gigs every weekend, sometimes during the week as well.”

“Must’ve been hard to keep up with your schoolwork.”

He makes a strained sound. “Yeah. Something like that. Anyway, one night after we played the Bamboo Bar in Seaside Heights, this guy from Apex Hits, Gregg Mason, approached us. He offered us a deal on the spot. We were too young to think about the implications. We signed right away. I mean, who hadn’t heard of Apex Hits, right?”

I nod. Apex is one of the top record labels in the country.

“They went to work with us right away, teaming us up with our producer, Cal, to fine-tune our songs. We rewrote some parts and were in the recording studio within months. It was a crazy time.”

“I bet.” I watch as he tosses another rock.

“By the end of the school year, all of our tracks were laid down. Apex had released our first single and it was climbing the charts.”

“I remember when ‘Your Kiss Destroys Me’ debuted. It made a huge splash.” I was a first year at A&L back then, working long hours to make my mark at the firm. I always stopped for three minutes when the song came on the radio, even dancing if no one else was around.

“Apex put a lot of money behind it. All the radio stations picked it up. We hired Todd as our manager and our tour kicked off the following fall. Our gigs went from the Bamboo to stadiums. There was no time to think. All we did was practice like crazy.”

His smirk tells me practicing wasn’t all they did back then. Still, I gush, “Wow. It’s a miracle you did all that and graduated from high school.” He deserves all my praise. I can’t imagine doing schoolwork while on the fast-track to fame.

“It was something.” He blows out a breath. His lips drop open like he wants to say something more, then he shuts them. His hands rub his jean-clad thighs before his left one rises to tug on his ear. In a low voice, he says, “Actually, the rest of the guys graduated.”

Meaning what? Staring straight ahead, I don’t dare look at him as I process his last statement. “You didn’t?”

He shakes his head, his long hair shifting across his back. In my regular life—my life outside of Hunte—I don’t know anyone who’s not a college graduate. Brax is blowing my world apart. “I find this hard to believe.”

He cracks his knuckles. “I don’t advertise it.”

Because I have no point of reference, I blurt, “But you’re so smart.”

His mirthless chuckle reaches my ears. “Glad you think so. Too bad you couldn’t have told my teachers back then.”

He’s been harboring this secret for ten years now. It must weigh on him, especially since the other guys in the band earned their diplomas. “Why didn’t you get your GED?”

Brax picks up another rock. “My life is all about touring. I don’t need a stupid piece of paper.”

“Wouldn’t it make you feel better?”

The rock sails past my line of vision. “Why do you assume I don’t feel good?” His words are brash, confrontational.

“Because everyone needs to have at least their high school diploma.” My mind can’t compute why he didn’t get his degree when the rest of his band did. “Why didn’t you get yours?”

The atmosphere between us plummets by at least ten degrees. “I’m doing pretty damn well without it. You’re my accountant. You can see the money we’re bringing in.” He kicks the dirt. “But, to answer your questions, I didn’t do my assignments and failed English. I could’ve gone to summer school to make it up, but by then we were already in the world of touring.” He turns toward the parking lot and lengthens his gait.

Wanting to thaw the air between us, I elongate my own stride and choose my next words carefully. “I see. Yes, you’ve certainly made more money in one year than most people—with college degrees, might I add—do in a lifetime. It seems a shame you missed out on graduating by only one class.”

His chest rises and falls as if he took in a deep breath. “It’s no biggie. Not important anymore, obviously.”

“Did Hilary graduate?”

His hands fist at the mention of his ex-wife. “Yeah. She never misses an opportunity to throw it in my face.”

“How awful. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

An idea sparks and my mind fires up. Excitement zips through me. “You know, it’s not too late to fix this. You’re really smart. I bet you could breeze through GED studies and get your diploma like this.” I snap my fingers.

He shrugs. “I looked into getting a study guide. They’re the size of a phone book.”

So he wasn’t against getting his degree if he looked into a study guide. Interesting. “Maybe you could hire a tutor?”

He lets out a strained laugh. “Yeah, I’m sure the guys would love to relive high school with me so I could get a diploma they’ve had for years.”

“Maybe I could help you.” *What? Am I crazy?* I’m out of here in a matter of days and studying for the GED has to take at least a couple of months.

His hand lands on my shoulder, stalling my forward progress. His amber eyes peer into mine—there’s humor there, yes, but also a flash of something else. “Would you wear a naughty schoolteacher’s uniform to get me in the mood?”

My body sizzles under his touch and the power of his gaze, and my mind wanders back to the cave. Time to regain control. I shake my head. “No, big boy. I meant I could quiz you or help out with anything you didn’t understand while I’m here on tour with you. Maybe we could continue over the phone once I’m back in Chicago.”

As we go up the steps into the bus, he says, “I’ll think about it.”

I count his statement as a win. I board the bus behind him, trying not to fantasize about his butt, which is right in front of me in all of its denim-clad glory. With my bra sticking out of his back pocket. The bus is empty other than Ike, the others still off somewhere in the park. Brax sits on the sofa and pats the empty spot next to him. Wow. It’s the first time we’ve been alone on the bus.

A cell phone rings from the back of the bus and Brax jumps up. He’s the only one on the bus who has one. He strides to the back of the bus to grab it. “Hello?” he answers, returning to his seat.

I can’t understand the other side of the conversation, but it sounds like a woman’s voice. He says, “I’ll transfer another grand into your account tomorrow morning.” More murmuring is punctuated with his angry growl. “I said I’d be there, and I will. With the band.” He disconnects the call and tosses the phone onto the table.

“What—”

Brax cuts me off. With a wave of his hand, he dissipates all the energy that’s built up between us. “Not. Now.” He pulls my bra out of his pocket and tosses it at me. Then he moves to another chair and stares out the window.

The rest of the band climbs onto the bus, laughing and joking about their visit to the park. Grateful they’re here to break the uneasiness between Brax and me, I deposit my bra into my briefcase and join in their animated analysis of the park.



Their antics can't hide the fact Brax has totally shut down. He's hot and cold, although this time I think I understand why. From the snippet of the conversation I overheard, I assume it was Hilary wanting more money for King's birthday party. Doesn't she already get enough from their divorce? I know for a fact how much is withdrawn from his bank account on a weekly basis. I could live on that amount for at least a year.

Colton catches my eye and glances at Brax. It's a silent question—he knows something's happened and wants to know what. I walk over to him and whisper, "He spoke with Hilary."

Liquid chocolate eyes sweep over Brax's form. "I'll go talk with him." Colton takes a chair next to the lead singer, and the two spend the rest of the ride with their heads tipped together.

When the bus stops at our hotel, Brax grabs his luggage and storms off the bus wearing his "stay away" rockstar attitude. The doorman opens the door and he sails through without a backward glance.

Following the rest of the band into the lobby, I don't question why my heart wants to wrap Brax in a huge hug. From an outside perspective, he has it all—but what it actually means is the people around him all want a piece of him.

And, in a way, so do I.

## BRAX



“**T**hank you, Boise! Good night!” I scream into the microphone. The guys surround me, and we take our bows and run off the stage.

Ricky jumps like he’s warming up for a run rather than coming off a marathon. “Another great gig!” He high-fives each one of us with enthusiasm.

While I dole out high-fives, my mind is rooted on Sara. I’m not sure she realizes how much my lack of a degree bothers me. I’ve wanted my GED ever since I skipped the stupid summer school class, but I never talk about it. To anyone. Hilary is the only person who throws my failure in my face, however. I don’t want my son to think I’m lesser than her because she has a diploma.

I don’t want *anyone* to think that.

Still, the whole thing feels loaded. Talking about it with Sara put me in a foul mood, which was compounded by the fucking call from my ex. Hilary already ran through the seven grand I gave her for King’s party and needs another thousand.

He’s only turning eight. A thousand per year. What the fuck did she spend all my money on anyway?

We turn the corner to go into our dressing room. As I pocket my sunglasses, my stomach twists at the sight of Sara talking with Todd, pointing at something in her notebook. She's in her business suit again, which shows off her rounded ass to perfection, although I'm pretty sure she's not wearing it for my pleasure.

I need to apologize for how I ended our outing today. The park was more fun than I've had in I can't remember how long. We laughed. We talked. We kissed. My lips tingle in memory of our time in the cave. She shakes her head at Todd and her bob flows freely. I want to run my fingers through the silky softness again. After I apologize for being a jerk.

Todd turns his back on her and addresses us. "Great gig tonight, guys."

"Thanks," I reply for the entire band. His posture, combined with the expression on Sara's face, brings me to a halt.

Todd smooths his mustache. "Hey, Lex, can you please shut the door? We need to have a quick band meeting."

Band meeting? I give Colton a puzzled look, which he returns. Lex does as he was told and we surround our tour manager. Sara stands off to the side.

I don't like the feeling of impending doom. "What's this about?"

Todd's eyes rise to the ceiling. Shit. It's his tell for when we're really not going to like what he has to say.

"Spit it out, Todd. I want to get to the after-party," Ricky interjects and walks over to the table where beer is submerged in a bucket of ice.

Sara gives him the stink eye. Now, I'm really worried. I join Ricky and take three beers, handing one each to Colton and Lex. I think we're all going to need it.

Todd waits for us to settle down. "Guys. I have some bad news." My hand squeezes around the cold brew.

"I didn't want to tell you until now because I wanted to be sure. Plus, I didn't want to ruin the vibe of your concert tonight."

This has to be bad. Todd never butters us up like this. "Spit it out," I order. I can't take any more suspense.

He licks his lips. "Our next stop, Salt Lake City, has been canceled."

The last word hangs in the air like a mushroom cloud.

Canceled.

"As in our gig—" Lex starts.

Colton finishes, "Isn't happening?"

Todd nods. Sara stares at her notebook.

Colton, Lex, and I stare at each other. We've never had a gig canceled before. I need to know why. "What prompted them to cancel us, Todd?" Please let the venue have burned down.

He smooths his mustache and replies, "Low ticket sales."

Air whooshes out of my body. We didn't sell out. Hell, we didn't even hit their minimum ticket sales—whatever they were. I crack open the beer and drink half in one gulp.

Next to me, Colton says, "Fuck."

"You can say that again, bro," Lex replies.

Todd says, “Listen, guys, it’s just one concert. Everything’s still a go in Phoenix, Tucson and for the rest of the tour. Salt Lake is a fluke.”

We didn’t sell out in Rapid City or last night in Helena either. And our newest song isn’t connecting with our audience. I finish my beer in one gulp.

Banging a fast beat on his leg, Ricky chimes in, “Does this mean we can go to Vegas before hitting Phoenix?” Leave it to him to find a way to party through.

“Uhm, well, I need to confer with your tour accountant.” Todd tips his head to Sara. She stares at him, wide-eyed, although she can’t be surprised he’s thrown her under the bus. Then the two resume talking.

Without waiting for a reply, Colton says, “I’m all in for Vegas.”

Lex starts shooting off casino names, to which Ricky adds a couple of brothels. Colton starts debating him about something, the brothels maybe, but my head can’t get around the fact we lost our first booking.

Todd parts from Sara and says, “Looks like we’re going to Vegas. Listen, why don’t you all head to the after-party? I’ll meet you in there when I’m done with her.” Todd hooks his finger toward Sara. “Don’t say anything about Vegas at the party. We’ll have all the details locked down by breakfast, okay?”

We all nod at him and head for the exit. “Can you believe it?” Lex asks.

Colton shakes his head. “I know. I didn’t realize things were getting this bad.”

“Me neither,” Lex agrees.

“Guys, don’t let one bad gig get you down. We’ll have a night or two in Vegas and recharge for the rest of our tour.” While Ricky’s optimism is encouraging, I feel it in my bones—this could be the start of a downward slope. A long one.

“Good attitude,” Lex says, bumping shoulders with Ricky.

We exit the building and hop into the waiting limo and it takes us to the after-party. Our entourage waits for us at the entrance and we enter the club together. We’re shown upstairs to the VIP room, where champagne is handed out.

I want to talk with Sara. I want to hear her take on our situation. What did she suggest other day? We should look into working with a new producer? Maybe she’s right.

We’re definitely in a holding pattern, and need something to jolt us out of it.

After finishing the Dom, I return to Bud. Colton manages to make me laugh. I’m feeling better when Brit, from our entourage, rests her head on my shoulder.

Perhaps having time off to recharge isn’t so bad. Vegas. Strip clubs and booze. Women and casinos. Maybe it’s what I need.

Brit rubs her body against mine, but it doesn’t feel right. Nothing like the body that was rubbing against mine earlier today in the cave. At the thought of how Sara responded to me, my body hardens. Brit runs her hand down my chest to my belt buckle. She purrs, “Want to get out of here?”

I look down at Brit. She’s always been a good time in bed. I could lose myself in her and slough off any concern about the canceled gig. Or my lack of a GED. Or Hilary.

Or the tour accountant’s budgets.

I glance toward the stairs. Todd and Sara enter the room and any thoughts I entertained about hooking up with Brit fly out of my head.

I glance down at her as she says, “Braxton?”

The one word is like a bucket of ice water has been thrown over my head. *Braxton*. Not Brax. She doesn’t want me, she wants the image. The rockstar. I’m definitely not feeling like him tonight. I could try to forget my troubles for the night, sure, but they always come back. With friends.

“Thanks for the offer.” I kiss her cheek, dipping past her bright red lips. “But I’m going to have to pass. I need to have a chat with management.” I wave my hand toward Todd. And Sara.

She sighs and plays with my hair. “Are you sure? I’m a real good time.”

“I know you are. Maybe later, yeah?”

She shrugs and looks around the room for her next mark. I’m nothing special to her. Nor would she be to me. Sara, on the other hand...

After exchanging my empty for a new brew and ordering a glass of Riesling, I search for Sara, who’s now off to the side of the room, worrying her bottom lip.

“Hey.” I approach her with the glass of white wine extended as a peace offering. “Sorry about what happened before on the bus.” Might as well clear it up right away.

She accepts the wine and takes a sip. I find myself studying her as I wait for her response. She’s not fake like the others. Her boobs are real, and her makeup is understated. Plus she knows me. Well, she’s getting to know the *real* me.

“I appreciate your apology.”

Her acceptance makes me stand taller. “I was kind of a jerk.”

She laughs. “You could say that.” She takes another sip of her wine. “I’m sorry about Salt Lake. I had no idea.”

“Neither did any of us.”

She nods. “Todd tried to save the date for you guys, which is why he kept everything secret. It was played off to the media like there was a scheduling mix-up.”

I hadn’t even thought about the PR implications. Todd to the rescue. “Good idea.”

“Do you really think Vegas is smart? We could lay low in a smaller town along the way, somewhere for you guys to decompress.”

I need the release of Vegas—hell, we all do. Anger rushes up my limbs at the reminder of the lost gig. In a sharper tone than it should be given I came over here to apologize, I reply, “No. The band really wants to blow off some steam. We’ve been on tour for eight months with gigs almost every other day. We need one night of fun.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear. “Todd and I worked up some figures and it can fit into your budget. With their buffets, you might even have lower expenditures.”

So I guess it won’t be a total loss. “Win-win.” I clink the neck of my beer to her wineglass. Her pink tongue touches the rim before she puts it to her lips.

“So, Sara...” I lean into her and inhale her floral scent. “What are we going to do with all of our newfound free time?”

“We?” she squeaks.



I want to bury Salt Lake and all its implications in her body. Judging from the flush staining her cheeks, she's up for it. "I think it's time we finished what we started in the cave."

She lifts her glass to her full lips and swallows. I run my finger down her throat, following the path of the wine, then lean in to kiss the spot vacated by my finger.

"I don't think it's a good idea."

I take another long drag of the beer. "Why not?" She takes a step backward for each one of mine until her back contacts the wall.

"Gotcha." I lean in and press our bodies together.

"Brax. Come on, we can't do this here. In front of the band."

Her words ring true. I, for one, don't want to catch shit from the guys for hitting on Sara. Colton's warnings already are annoying. It's not lost on me, though, that she hasn't said no. I blow a breath directly into her ear. "Then let's get back to the hotel."

Grabbing her hand, I lead her down the stairs and out to the front door, where we hop into the waiting limo. She doesn't hesitate. Inside, I scoot closer to her and let my hand fall to her thigh. "You look amazing."

"Thanks."

I put my face in front of hers and take in her natural beauty. My gaze zeroes in on her mouth and suddenly sipping anything other than her lips is unappealing. "I'm going to kiss you now."

She shakes her head like she's trying to convince herself. "Not a good idea."

“I’ve been known to enjoy bad ideas.”

I close the distance between us and emit a moan low in my throat when her lips move with mine. My body springs to life at her capitulation. I want more than mere agreement. I want her full participation. I lean back.

“Still think this is a bad idea, Sara Baby?”

Her eyes flutter closed and I wait. This has to be as much her idea as mine. It’s hard to tamp down the whirlwind inside my body, but something in me needs this. I want to hear her beg.

“Brax,” she mutters my name as if it’s the only word in her vocabulary. Her eyes open and the steel grey shade has taken on a decidedly darker hue. Passion vibrates off her body. I still need the words. She has to say them.

“What do you want?” I press.

Her hand lands on my cheek in a soft caress. “God help me, but I want you. For tonight.”

Somehow, I don’t think having her for one night will be enough. “One night is a start.”

I close the gap between our bodies again and allow my lips to roam over hers. Pushing her into the leather seat, I explore her mouth with my tongue. Her small moan of pleasure is the best award I’ve gotten in years.

The limo pulls to a stop and I fling myself off her body.

She reaches out for me. “No. Don’t stop.”

The fact I’ve made her unaware of her surroundings makes me smile. “We’re at the hotel. Let’s take our party to my suite. No one will interrupt us there.” I kiss her hand and let her precede me out of the limo, steadying her by her shoulders.

We get on the elevator with a bunch of other people. I shove my hands into my pockets to prevent them from exploring her body. Not because I care about PDA, but because *she* needs to be the one who throws herself at *me*. Most of the people in the elevator get off on the fourth floor, leaving one group of three women plus Sara and myself to continue the slow trek upward.

“Hey, you’re Braxton Hunte, aren’t you?”

For the leader of a band that had its next gig canceled, everyone seems to know my name. “I am.”

The trio giggles. Great. One fishes out a camera. “Can we get your picture?”

I push off the back wall. “Sure.”

Next to me, Sara offers, “I’ll take it for you, if you’d like.” She’s so polite. I wonder if she’ll ask me to let her come with as much politeness.

She snaps the photo before the doors slide open, and the ladies leave happy. I kiss Sara’s cheek. “Thank you.”

She shrugs. “It was nothing.”

I know for a fact it was much more than “nothing.” I’ve been in this same position with Hilary before, back when we were married, and she reacted with jealousy or anger. I don’t say as much. I have more pressing matters to attend to. Like getting her, naked and willing—no, begging—in my suite. The elevator doors finally open on my floor, and I escort her to my room. Opening the double door, I follow her inside, admiring her ass with every step.

The door closes and the silence hits me. We’re alone. I have Sara all to myself for the entire night. My cock stirs behind my zipper.

“I should, um, deal with some paperwork.” She pulls her notebook out of her purse.

I laugh in disbelief and yank the notebook out of her hands. “We’re driving to Vegas tomorrow. It’s a long trip, which means you’ll have as much time as you want to play with your numbers. Tonight, you’re playing with me.”

I toss the notebook onto the entryway table. “The real question is, where do you want me to take you first?”

“Brax—” she turns to me with flashing eyes. “—I’m not this type of girl. I don’t do one-night stands. I don’t know what came over me in the limo.”

“I did.”

Her hand flies to her very kissable lips. “I mean. Well. This isn’t a good idea.”

“Are you worried it doesn’t fit into your orderly life? Because I’m all about putting your life out of order.”

Her hair flies from side to side. “No. Well, yes. And no. I mean—”

“Let me make this easy for you, okay? I want you.” I kiss her left cheek. “You want me.” I kiss her right cheek. “We’re both consenting adults with no attachments.” I kiss her nose. “Your eyes are begging me to rock your body all night long.”

Those eyes cross and she reaches out to steady herself against a chair. She needs one more little push. I place my lips to her ear. “Don’t you want to put your gorgeous mouth on my dick?” I rock my hips toward her.

“Oh, God.” With those words, she breaks—her hands fling around the back of my neck and her lips seal against mine.

I run my hands over her back, causing her to arch into me. My hands go to her blazer, which I remove and toss onto the floor. Next, I take off her sleeveless blouse, all while our lips continue to dance to our own private song. Returning my hands to her naked back, I refuse to take anything else off her body until she tells me what she wants. I'll be more than happy to give it to her.

“Please, Brax, my skirt.”

“With pleasure.” My fingers make quick work of her zipper.

Against me, Sara shifts her weight from side to side and the rustling of her skirt sliding down her long legs is my reward. I smile against her lips and look down. She stands next to me in thigh high stockings, her panties and heels. “Fuck. Me.”

Her hands run up my chest. “I thought that’s what you wanted all along.”

I look around the suite, spying the kitchen area, which will do very nicely. “Make me a snack.” Her mouth drops open. Putting the normally composed Sara off balance is too much fun.

“A what?”

I take her hand and help her step out of her skirt, then lead her to the kitchen. “What can you give me to eat?”

She’s clearly confused, and maybe even a little pissed.

“I’ll show you what I mean.” These kitchens always come stocked with the same stuff. Some bubbly, cheese and crackers, milk, and whipped cream, among other things. I open the fridge and pull out the whipped cream. “Use this.”

I can see—actually *see*—her mind thinking and discarding ideas. I need to give her more of a nudge. “Where would you want to lick it off? Or where do *you* want *me* to lick it off?”

“Oh.” She fiddles with the lid, finally wresting it off the whipped cream, and shakes the can. Her eyes dip to her chest. She places a very small bit onto her bra-covered boob and meets my gaze. “Is that good?”

My control snaps. Her uncertain response leads me to believe she’s never played with her food before. I don’t have the patience to teach her the fun it can bring. Not this time anyway. It’s those thigh-highs. She looks fucking hot. “Do you always wear these?” How did I miss these when we were playing quarters? I let my fingers trace the top band.

Her legs shift. “Yeah.”

Had I known she wore these under all of her skirts, we would’ve been in this position much sooner. “You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?” I lick the teaspoon of cream off her boob, biting her nipple through the flimsy material.

She arches her back. “Brax.”

“What do you want? I need you to tell me.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never felt like this before.”

All her previous lovers must’ve sucked—and not in a good way—if she’s never felt anything approaching the pleasure I’ve given her so far. Neither one of us is even naked. Yet.

My need for her morphs into something even more primal. I need to *claim* her. I grab her around the waist, dipping my hand lower to cup her ass. Then I lift her onto the kitchen counter and stand between her thigh-high covered legs. Her shoes are way too sensible for what I have in mind, so I run my finger from the inside of her right thigh all the way down

and toss it off her foot. I repeat the same thing with her left leg, securing both of her legs around my hips. In no time, her bra joins her discarded heels and I place open-mouthed kisses on each mound.

Her hips rock against my cock, but I angle my body away. No. Now, everything's for her. I take a light bite of her nipple.

"Oh!" Her hands land in my hair and she holds me to her boobs. I give her other nipple the same treatment.

"Ever had someone do that to you?"

"No. I mean, of course, but not the way you do."

Losers. Every last one of them. I'm on a new mission—to give her more pleasure than she ever thought possible. Even as I lick her pebbled nipple, I can't prevent the smile from stretching across my face.

I kiss my way between her boobs and rest my chin on her sternum. I raise my eyes, taking in her obstinate jaw, now slack with pleasure, her flaring nostrils and her head thrown backward. I need to add a pink blush to her cheeks. I know how.

My hands slide to her panties, and I slip my fingers under the elastic waist. I pull on the fabric.

"Take them off," she pleads, her hands still tangled in my hair.

"With pleasure," I reply, then rip them off her body. At the sound of them rending, she sucks in her breath. Guess this wasn't how she envisioned them coming off.

I take the two pieces of her panties and bring them to my nose and inhale. Her aroused, tangy scent plays with my brain,

making me want to thrust into her body. Not yet. She hasn't even screamed for me once.

Shoving the pieces of fabric into my pocket, I drop my hands to her thighs. I make slow circles from the tops to the insides of her thighs, above where the stockings end. Her flesh is so soft, I can barely contain my desire to bite my way to her core. Returning my lips to her other boob, I let my fingers taunt her lower half.

“Yes. More.”

“More what?” I'm curious if it's my fingers or my mouth driving her nuts.

“Everything!”

Apparently, it's not an either-or situation. “Gladly.” I stick my tongue out and trace her erect nipple. As I switch to her other nipple, my fingers dip into her heat and pass across her clit.

She whimpers. “Oh. Yes. That!”

Responsive isn't a big enough word for Sara. I disentangle myself from her body except for my finger, and we both watch as it disappears into her pussy. Her legs straighten and she bites her lower lip.

“Don't stop.”

“Oh, I don't have any intention of stopping. You're fucking amazing.” What kind of douchebag lovers has she been with?

Discarding my preoccupation with the men who came before me, I focus all of my attention on her pussy, which weeps for me. I let my fingers explore for another few minutes before I spread her open and my mouth joins in the fun. Her



legs clamp down around my head as soon as my tongue makes contact with her clit.

“Brax!”

I circle her clit, over and over, all while keeping her spread wide for me. I want to thrust into her—fuck, my cock is downright demanding it—but I need to give this to her first. I want to make her come with my tongue and fingers. I want to own her.

Her body stiffens, clenches, holds tight. Her breathing comes in little pants. She’s soaking for me, begging for her release. I’m taking her higher and higher, but it’s as if she doesn’t know how to let go.

I move the fingers of my right hand to her entrance, slowly pushing one in while I nip at her clit. Her eyes roll back and she screams, her body spasming around my finger. Her climax continues for what must be a full minute before her body falls limp.

I step back from between her legs and catch her wide-eyed look. Wiping my mouth, I smile at her dazed face. “Good for you, Sara Baby?”

“God. Yes.”

Her body is still on the kitchen counter, and she’s naked except for those frickin’ thigh highs. On the other hand, I’m still fully dressed. With a raging hard-on pushing against my fly. I bring my hand to rest on my zipper. Her eyes trail down my body and freeze on my hand. Her legs snap shut.

“Oh my.” She jumps off the counter, looking around the kitchen as if realizing, for the first time, this was where I made her come.

“Going to help me out here?” I want her mouth or her fingers or her pussy on my body. Stat.

“I guess it’s only fair.” She says with a wicked smile I’m proud to have put on her face.

“Gotta even out the columns.” I hope this is proper accounting terminology.

He giggles while her hand reaches for my shirt and she closes the gap between us. “You’re going to have to tell me what to do.” Hasn’t she ever given a guy a blowjob before? Jesus. Exactly *who* has she been sleeping with?

“Why don’t we go to the bedroom?” Although the sofa looks mighty inviting, I want plush sheets and a soft bed beneath us for the rest of the night.

She nods and I take her hand, flicking on the lights as we enter the bedroom. Sara stumbles and I catch her. Swinging her up into my arms, I carry her to the side of the bed, where I let her slide down my body. “God, you feel good.”

“And you feel so...hard.”

“That’s the idea.” I step back and open my arms wide. “I’m all yours.”

She licks her lips and her face takes on a determined look. She helps me out of my shirts, then traces my muscles with a pink fingernail. Leaving my chains around my neck, she kisses my chest, her tongue circling my nipple. Freaking amazing.

Her hands drop to my belt. She slowly unbuckles it, slides it out of its loops and rolls it into a circle before placing it on top of the dresser. Damn, I want her to rip my clothes off. This slow torture is driving me insane. I resist flinging my clothes onto the floor and let her take the lead. For now.

She meets my gaze and holds it as her fingers unbutton my jeans. It's like a release valve has been sprung when the harsh denim falls away from my dick. I take a deep breath. Sara stands in front of me, her hands dropping to her sides.

I point to my opened jeans. "Want to help me out?"

"Right." Her eyes flick downward. She places her hands at my waist and pulls my jeans down to my feet, then looks at me again, a question in her eyes.

When it doesn't look like she's going to make another move, I instruct, "On your knees. Take off my shoes."

"Oh, right." She falls to her stocking-covered knees and makes quick work of untying my boots. Soon, I'm naked except for my briefs.

I place my hand on top of her head and usher her closer to my dick. "Do you have any ideas from here?"

She swallows. "Um, yeah, okay."

God. Has she had any experiences other than missionary? I picture her on her back, in the dark, with some scrawny, pale accountant thrusting into her. He was probably running through ledgers while doing so. No. More. I need to unlock the goddess lurking inside her.

She places her hands on my waistband, and I cover them with mine. Together, we roll my underwear down my thighs, where they fall to the floor. She's now face-to-dick with my erection.

Her gasp makes me grin. "It's—I mean—you're so big."

Damn straight. I flex my hips. "Why don't you give him a proper greeting?"

She nods and her hand closes around my shaft. Her luscious pink lips open wide and she envelops my dick, stroking in and out. Then she takes me all the way out and licks him up and down, swirling her tongue over the head. Like a lollipop.

I want her to suck, not tease me. Yet the sensation of her tongue on me flips a switch and I can't control my actions. I grab her under her arms and bring her to standing. With a growl, my mouth claims her, plundering her with my tongue.

Walking us to the bed, I keep going until it hits the back of her knees and she sits. I sink my knee onto the bed and go down with her. My hands rush up and down her body, playing with her nipples and bringing her body back up to a fevered tempo. I don't take the time I need to properly explore the dip at her waist, or even to remove her stockings. My hand pumps my cock and it's go time.

I put three fingers inside her and she arches off the bed. Like she's never been properly pleased before.

Shit. She's probably not on the Pill. And my condoms are in my jeans pocket. On the floor.

Keeping those fingers in her slick heat, I kiss my way down her body, ending with the little bud of nerve endings in my mouth again. I curl my fingers from the inside while circling her clit. Her breathing accelerates and she emits a low—and long—moan. She's almost there.

With a single-minded focus, I tear myself away from Sara and walk to my jeans.

“Please. I need you.”

Pulling some condoms out of my pocket, I drop my pants back onto the floor. “Don't you worry. You have me.”

Ripping open one packet with my teeth, I toss the rest onto the side table and sheath myself. One kid is enough, but with a nearly naked woman writhing in my bed, I refuse to let my mind dwell on King and all he represents.

Standing, I watch her body undulate, seeking what only I can give her. I want to ram into her. I also want her to be out of her mind with lust for me. “What do you want?”

“You. I want you to make me feel like that again.”

I growl and lay next to her on the bed, letting my hand explore from her lips to her boobs and down. Her legs open wide without my even asking. I lick my lips. I wonder if she’s ever had someone as endowed as me inside her? I wrap her fingers around my dick. “Like what you feel?”

She slides her hand up and down, causing me to hiss. She’s getting the hang of this pretty fast. “I do. Very much.”

I slip my fingers inside her pussy. “Me, too.”

The way her pussy fits snugly around my fingers warns me to take it slow. Better get her more out of her mind before I slide home. I bite her nipple and thrust in and out of her body with my soaked fingers. Her leg, still in her stockings, rubs against my thighs. “Fuck, you’re hot.”

She gasps and pushes against my hand, trying to keep it inside her, yet I have other ideas. She’s as ready for me as she’ll ever be. I guide my cock to her entrance and push the tip inside. All I want to do is shove it in balls deep, but no, I take a deep breath and steady myself, pushing in excruciatingly slow.

Her tight channel grips me much harder than her mouth, and I almost lose it. I push some more until I’m seated inside

her at last. Propping myself over her on my elbows, I trace her features. “Open your eyes for me, Sara Baby.”

Her eyelids flutter open, her pupils enormous and unfocused. Her mouth drops open, too, and I swoop down for another erotic kiss while my body begins moving. Slower than I want, yet sinfully sweet.

It hits me we’re doing it missionary style. Oh, hell no. She deserves it differently. I roll to my back, keeping her connected with me.

When she’s seated on top, she looks down. “Brax?”

“Ride me. However you want.”

She rises and falls over me, slowly at first, then with increasing speed. “Oh!” She hits her tempo and rocks over me a few more times before exploding. As soon as she starts her orgasm, I let my body do whatever it wants. Which is share in her bliss. My balls tighten and then I release, my world turning white before my eyes.

She shudders and falls on top of me, my arms stealing around her to keep her close while my body continues its path of ecstasy. When I can catch a breath without panting, I brush her wet hair off of her face and kiss her cheek. “You’re amazing.”

Instead of leaning back, she burrows deeper into my body, her face sharing my pillow. Her hand caresses my chest. “That honor goes to you.”

I grab her ass and settle her on top of me. We are so not done.

## SARA



I lay in Brax's arms, my body cooling after the most amazing sex I've ever had. With the lights on, no less. I can't believe I was on top. Up until now, I've only ever done it missionary style. Under the blankets. In the dark.

Brax runs his hand down my back. I've never felt so out of control in all my life.

My breathing catches as sudden fear skates down my spine.

Oh, no, this isn't good. I push back and off of him, still wearing my thigh-highs. Without looking at Brax, I mutter, "I need to use the restroom," and bolt.

After I pee—can't get a UTI on top of everything else—I pour cold water into my hands and splash it on my face. What was I thinking? How could I have had sex with Brax? No, *Braxton Hunte*.

I take a deep breath and unroll a hand towel to wipe the water off my face. I need to get out of here. Now he's had his fun, I'm sure he's asleep, like all of the others. Well, the other men I took into my bed never cared if I came or not. No, I always took care of my own pleasure. Endorphins flood my system as I remember the two orgasms Brax—*Braxton*—gave me.

In the mirror, I look myself square in the eye. “It doesn’t matter. Once and done.”

As I’m leaving, two fluffy white bathrobes hanging on the back of the door catch my attention. It’ll cover up my nakedness until I can get dressed again. Most of my clothes are in the other room. All except my panties, which he ripped in two and stuffed in his jeans pocket.

Dismissing such mortification, I zero in on his form on the bed and tiptoe into the bedroom so as not to wake him. I pick up my bra.

“Going somewhere?”

At the unexpected sound of his voice, I jump and drop my bra. “Oh!” Rustling from the bed calls to me, but I refuse to look at him. “I thought you’d be asleep.”

His chuckle pours over me like warm honey. “I told you we’re just getting started.”

What? I turn and face him. “I said we’d only be together tonight.” He’s pushed the blankets to his thighs, naked as the day he was born. Sexy as hell. My hands land on my hips.

“Night’s still young. We still have hours to go.” He pats the bed.

“We do?” My voice is higher than I’ve ever heard it.

“Oh yes,” he says, standing.

My eyes fall to his humongous dick. *That* was inside me? Man, it felt amazing. He stands in front of me and his hands land on the robe’s belt, undoing the knot. My breath picks up speed with each of his movements.

The belt comes undone and hangs from its loops. “This time, I need to examine every inch of your amazing body.



Starting with these.” He parts the robe and reaches out for my legs.

No one has ever wanted to look at my legs before. In fact, no one has cared about any part of me before, except for my mouth and breasts and vagina—mostly the latter.

While I mull his words, he lowers onto his haunches and touches every part of both of my legs. He presses light kisses behind my knees and it takes everything I have to remain upright. When I feel his tongue lick through my thigh-highs, my knees buckle and my core throbs in tandem with his touch.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs, wrapping me in his naked embrace. His nimble fingers fly to the top of my stockings and he rolls them down one after the other, taking his time getting them off my body. “So damn sexy.”

His words bring me back to myself. I’m not sexy. I’m not beautiful. This is *Braxton Hunte*—a man whose prowess in bed is only rivaled by his silver tongue.

“You don’t have to say that. We’ve already had sex.”

He stands, his eyebrows lowered into a frown. “I’m not word vomiting. You are frickin’ sexy. The way you scream when you’re coming is beyond anything I’ve ever experienced.”

His amber eyes challenge me to refute his words. Never one to back down from a challenge, I counter, “With your vast experience, I find this statement hard to believe.”

His hand slinks into the bathrobe and cups my breast. “Tell me, what do you know about my experience?” His eyebrow rises.

I shrug and break eye contact, trying to ignore the way his warm palm weighs my breast. “You’re a rockstar.”

He chuckles and tweaks my nipple. Even though I don't want to, I moan.

“Can't argue this fact. And I know amazing sex when I have it. You, my dear Sara, top my list.”

He leans toward me. My eyes close and my mouth drops open to receive him. Only he doesn't kiss me. Instead, he bites my nipple. I shudder.

The next thing I know, my bathrobe is on the floor and his hands are on my butt while his mouth captures mine. A sound of capitulation escapes my lips and I wrap my hands around his neck. I'm utterly out of my depth. I'm falling—out of control—swept up in the whirlwind named Brax. He blows in my ear and all rational thought flees.

“On your knees. I want what you started before.”

Without thought, I drop to my knees and am at eye level with his groin. His very large, perfectly formed dick. Which glistens at the tip. I wrap my hand around it and lick, his sweet and salty taste invading my taste buds. Even his flavor is unique, like a very salty mango. I take another lick to confirm. I like it.

I open and he invades my mouth, causing me to adjust to fit his girth. I can't believe he fits inside my body. Or, frankly, my mouth.

“That's it. Now suck.”

At Brax's reminder of what I should be doing with him in my mouth, the familiar feeling of insecurity floods my mind. What did he say? Suck? Right. I hollow my cheeks and close. And open.

“So good.”

His hand lands on the back of my head, and he urges me to move as I suck. I do, and he slides in and out of my mouth. My hand remains at the base of his shaft and I give it a little twist.

“Ah. Yes, Sara.”

Emboldened by his reaction, I continue my suck-and-relax motion with my mouth and let my other hand explore his balls, cupping them like he does with my breasts. His dick bobs in my mouth and I lean back, startled.

My eyes travel upward. “Everything okay?”

He opens heavy-lidded eyes. “The only thing wrong is you’re talking when your mouth should be full.” He winks, and an unfamiliar sense of power emboldens me.

“Can’t have that,” I reply, and resume my exploration of him.

He jerks his hips forward and his dick slides deeper into my mouth, down my throat. I gag and pull away, coughing. His hands reach under my arms and pull me to a standing position. He murmurs, “Sorry. I got carried away.”

My coughing fit stops and I realize I’m wrapped in Brax’s arms, his hands patting my back. His erection pokes into my belly, stiff and wet from my saliva. My hand wanders down between us and I trace an intriguing vein.

His hand envelops mine, holding me still. In my ear, he breathes, “I’m too close.”

I want him to come undone with me, but I doubt he would want my mouth back there after the way I choked. My hand, however, might do the trick. “That’s the idea.”

His head shakes, sending blond curly locks from side to side. “I have a better one.” He steps back and goosebumps form where we used to be connected. He rubs his hands down my arms and turns me to face the bed.

What does he want to do? I can’t give him a blowjob from this position. I turn my head. “Brax?”

The wicked gleam in his eyes is the first thing I see. His tongue stealing out from between his lips is the second. He moves, and his knee comes between my legs urging me to open my legs to accommodate him. I do.

One of his hands caresses my butt before dipping into my sex. The squishy sound of my arousal embarrasses me, causing me to close my legs. With his hand locked inside.

He chuckles. “Let’s walk to the bed.”

As one, we take the five steps to the bed, his fingers doing amazing things to my body with each stride. Instead of trying to push him out, now I’m thrusting backward to get more of him. “I need more.” When did I become this vocal?

“Don’t worry. You’re going to get it. Very soon. Now, let’s get on the bed and let me fuck you doggie style.”

What? I’ve only ever done missionary before tonight. But doggie style? I’m not sure I’ll like it—all he’ll see will be my jiggy butt. I won’t see him at all.

Brax’s knee finds its way to the back of one of mine and he gently taps so I pitch forward. Landing on the bed on all fours, I crane my neck backward. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

His index finger, wet from inside me, goes into his mouth. He sucks it, hard, and when it pops out from between his lips, he says, “Oh, I know it is.” His digit skims between my butt

cheeks and reenters my sex, causing me to shudder. He pushes it in and out, my hips jerking backward with each thrust.

“Don’t move.”

He steps away from my body and my eyes follow him as he grabs a condom off the table and rolls it down his length. I remember Joanna and I doing practicing with a cucumber in high school. Maybe one day I’ll get a chance to do it on the real thing?

He returns to me and smacks my butt. The reverberation zings straight to my core. “Oh!”

“Like that, huh?” He smacks my other butt cheek, and my core throbs in immediate response. Even though I suck in my breath, a moan escapes.

Brax kisses the center of my back as he centers himself behind me. With one forceful thrust, he enters my body. From this different angle, his penetration is even deeper. He’s filling me up so much it almost feels like he’s moving my internal organs. I don’t care. It’s naughty and delicious and—oh my God, he’s circling my clit with his fingers. My arms give out and I collapse, head first, onto the bed. He’s still pounding into me, my hips high in the air, and he now has access to my breasts. A different sort of sensation surges through me as he pinches one of my nipples.

Suddenly, he withdraws his hand and presses it to the middle of my back. I can’t see him at all, even when I turn my head to the side, yet I can feel him. And hear as he thrusts in and out of me, his balls slapping against my butt. I want to move, yet in this position, I can’t. I can only take what he’s giving. Holy Hell, it’s amazing.

Tingling starts at my inner core. I'm going to come. Soon. Brax shifts his position and hits a spot within me I'm only now discovering. I fly out of my body and into the stratosphere.

I scream incoherent sounds because I'm no longer capable of forming words. I'm lost in a vortex of blinding white flashing lights and immense pleasure. More intense than last time.

A girl could get used to this.

It's this last thought that brings me crashing back to earth, in time for Brax to stiffen behind me. He roars like a wild animal and collapses onto my back, his sweat-slicked body fusing with mine.

How am I going to give him up?

*Easy—he doesn't belong to you, Sara. He's a rockstar. He makes all the women he beds feel like this. You're nothing special to him.*

"You're so special, Sara Baby," he says as if reading my thoughts. "I've never felt anything like this with anyone else."

He's a sweet talker to boot. "You must say that to all the girls." He has to.

He kisses the back of my neck and stands, then reaches around my waist to help me sit. "I'll be right back." He disappears into the bathroom to take care of the condom while I unfold my sated body and make my way up the bed.

I'm a bit sore, but my overwhelming feeling is exhaustion. I'm nerveless, relaxed. All because of Braxton Hunte. *Brax*. I climb under the covers and he reappears, still naked. As he walks to me with his cocky gait, I examine every inch my eyes can see, memorizing it for when I have to go without him. Lithe and lean and muscular. Perfect.

He slips into bed and wraps his arms around me. His lips devour mine and I let him.

*One night, Sara. One. Night. Make it count.*

My lips kiss down his throat and my palm lands on top of his beating heart. His hand slides down the side of my body to my hip, which he squeezes, bringing me flush against his body. At the same time, he rubs his nose in my hair. “I love your scent.”

I can’t imagine what he’s talking about. “It’s only my shampoo.”

“No, it’s much more. It’s floral with a twist of spice I never noticed before. Intoxicating.”

“You’re pretty amazing yourself.”

His laugh rumbles from deep within his throat, then he snuggles me close. “I’m sorry about before.”

He’s sorry we slept together? That I gagged when trying to give him a blowjob? I’ve never been any good at them anyway. One of my exes told me so. “No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I know I’m not good at—”

“Shhh.” He puts his finger against my lips. “I was referring to the way I shut down on you on the bus. It was very rude of me.”

Relieved he wasn’t talking about my lack of sex skills, my mind wanders back to the ride. I shrug. “Not my business.”

He ignores me and continues, “You probably gathered as much, it was my ex. Hilary wants more money for King’s birthday party. I don’t know why an eight-year-old needs such a big party, but she put me in a sour mood. I apologize for sulking during the rest of our ride.”

I squeeze his hand. “I accept your apology. It wasn’t necessary.”

He kisses my temple. “You’re very sweet beneath a prickly exterior.”

“I’m not prickly. I’m orderly.”

He laughs. “You have to admit, you came on like gangbusters when you first started with the band.”

Perhaps I came on a little strong at first. It was necessary for me to establish respect right away. “I was doing my job. To *help* you.”

He tweaks my nipple. “I prefer how you just helped me.”

Some of the bliss leaves my body. Was Todd right? Is this why he’s been putting the moves on me? To get me to let up on the accounting front? “I’m here to do a job. I’m not about to let up because we’ve slept together.”

“I’d expect nothing less.”

“As a matter of fact, I need to talk with Todd about your entourage. Since we’re skipping Salt Lake, I think they should meet us in Phoenix. Or go to Vegas on their own dime. The band’s on hiatus.”

As I’m talking, Brax stiffens—and not in a good way. “Our entourage goes with us wherever we go. Plus, it’s not like we’re holding them hostage.” He extricates himself from me. “I don’t have enough energy to talk about this right now.”

My mind races. Is he sending me away? I’m about to get up, to leave with as much dignity as I can muster, when he pulls me to his side. He kisses me—a hot, open-mouthed kiss with plenty of tongue. When he pulls away, my arms are twined around the back of his neck.



“Time to sleep. You wore me out, woman.”

Within minutes, his soft snores fill the bedroom. Even though I’m exhausted, my mind won’t shut off. I lie awake, staring at the ceiling while Brax sleeps beside me.

His last words about the entourage play on repeat. I know what I have to do. I’ve known since before this night started.

Sighing, I slip out of the bed and pick up my stockings and bra and tip-toe to the door leading to the main part of the suite. His luggage is off to one side, with papers and cups and an assortment of things strewn all over like he’s been here for years instead of one night. Here’s another piece of evidence of the strange contradiction at the heart of Brax—he’s at once both all man and all boy.

Shaking my head, I glance at the man who rocked my world. He’s sleeping like he doesn’t have a care in the world. Maybe he thinks he solved all of them by turning my body into mush.

Pantyless, I square my shoulders and leave the bedroom. In the living area, I put on my bra and suit. Slipping bare feet into my heels, I collect my purse and slip out of his suite into the empty hallway. On quiet feet, I walk down the hall to the elevator and press the call button. The ping echoes through the empty hall and I slip into the cab, telling myself I’m not disappointed when the door didn’t open behind me. I get off on my floor, and when I step into my room, I’m greeted by emptiness.

Tossing my tote onto the desk, I rush into the bathroom and strip. I step into the shower and turn the water on hot, letting it run over my sensitive body. Brax introduced me to unbelievable heights in bed, but I can’t shake the thought he

had an ulterior motive. He likely thought I'd let up on their finances. Which I can't. Too much rides on the Hunte account.

When the water turns lukewarm, I shut it off and scramble out of the tub-shower combination. I check, but no warm and fuzzy bathrobe hangs in this room. Guess you have to be in a suite to score one of those.

Wrapped up in a rough towel, I head into my room and snag a nightshirt from my bag. I change into it and slip into my cold bed. For a split second, I wish my night with Brax didn't exist so I wouldn't know what I've been missing for thirty-two years. What I'll likely be missing for the rest of my life. Damn him.

I close my eyes and try to fall asleep, yet memories of what we did replay on a loop. He played my body in many different ways. He put me on top. I actually *rode* him. Plus, I had three orgasms. Has to be some sort of record. My laugh switches to a sob at the realization those amazing feelings won't ever be repeated.

*Go to sleep, Sara Baby.*

Shoot. He's even invaded my private thoughts.

I toss and turn and finally give up. The clock reads five in the morning. Sleep will have to wait. I trod over to my desk and turn on all the lights, squinting until my eyes adjust. I spread out all my notes and get to work on adjusting more of the figures to ensure this trip to Vegas—and the loss of revenue from Salt Lake—won't break the budget.

After an hour, I conclude the only reasonable way to keep the tour out of the red is to cut the entourage loose until Phoenix. Actually, forever would be better. Hangers-on are an unnecessary expense, and one Hunte can't afford. Until their

next song makes it big, at least. “Baby, Give It” is a solid song. Too bad audiences have moved on from this sound. Brax poured so much of his heart into it.

I frown. It doesn't matter *Braxton* worked hard on the song. I'm no music industry genius. My job is to keep them in the black. Nothing more.

It's certainly not about getting naked with the lead singer so he can work his way around the numbers. Figures don't lie.

On the other hand, Brax did lie to me, I know it. I can't possibly have pleased him like he said—I went into this knowing my sexual experience was limited, something even clearer now. He didn't have to pretend I was some porn star, for heaven's sake. It's embarrassing he thought he could manipulate me so easily.

By six, I've gotten the accounting all sorted and take a second shower—to make sure Braxton is truly washed off my body. Scrubbed and a little pink, I wrap myself in another towel and dry my hair. Once I'm dressed in a brown suit, I get patched through to Todd's room. “I think I've figured out how to keep Hunte on the positive side,” I explain.

He yawns. “Were you working all night on this plan?”

I shunt aside images of Braxton working me over. “Something like that. Listen, Hunte can't pay for the ridiculous entourage to go with them to Vegas. No way.”

He whistles. “The guys aren't going to agree. They enjoy their following—Vegas is a perfect spot for them to hang.”

Don't I know it. “Yeah, well Hunte isn't making enough to pay people to follow them.” We discuss this for a while until Todd comes around to my way of thinking. He agrees to tell the band.

After the draining conversation is over, I prepare today's budgets and slip the envelopes under the guys' doors. Since it's only seven-thirty, I'm hoping I can parcel out the budgets without being noticed.

Especially by Brax. Braxton.

I slip into my heels and take the elevator back to the floor on which I spent most of the previous night. None of the doors open as I slip the envelopes under them, and I tap my heel as I wait for the elevator to return and whisk me away to safety. Before it comes, a door opens. I bite my lip. I don't want to know if it was *his* door. Footfalls approach me. I inhale, but it's not Braxton's scent that reaches my nose.

Colton's raspy voice says, "Thanks for this, Sara. Hope it wasn't too hard to adjust for Vegas."

I turn and smile at him. He's wearing a pair of jeans and nothing else. His shoulders are broad, his long brown hair is tousled, his abs are cut and he's wearing a smirk. Does he know about me and Braxton? How could he?

"I got everything worked out. Todd will discuss it with you guys at breakfast."

He nods, his soft brown eyes skimming me from head to toe. "Everything all right?"

I shift my weight from leg to leg, wishing the elevator would hurry up and take me away. The longer I'm on this floor, and talking with Colton, the greater my chance of being caught by Braxton. "Yeah, I'm good. It was a long night."

The elevator finally opens, but Colton's hand snakes around my arm before I can take a step inside. "I hope the long night had nothing to do with Brax. If it did, know he's a good guy."

His words make my breath catch in my throat. I shake my head. “I needed to rework your budgets. Nothing more.”

He lets go of me and I don't turn around until the elevator doors close.

## BRAX



I wake, my limbs heavy and body relaxed. Even with my eyes closed, a smile spreads across my face. I reach for the woman who lit up my night, only for my hand to land on a cold, empty pillow. My eyes spring open.

Sitting up, I cock my head toward the bathroom, but no light emanates from under the closed door. I hop out of bed and knock on the bathroom door anyway. “Sara?” No answer.

I cross the threshold to the main part of the suite and scan the living and dining room. She’s not in here either. My eyes linger on the countertop where I ate her out last night and saliva pools in my mouth. Damn, I want to taste her again.

My eyes wander to the front door. The clothes I stripped off her are gone. Turning, I look for her shoes, and they’re gone too.

*She left while I was sleeping.*

I storm into my bathroom and shower, all the while grumbling she should be in here with me. I’d wash her back. She’d wash mine. The image of her on her knees, my dick in her mouth, makes me stiffen despite being mad she left without a word. Remembering how she licked the head and swallowed my precum with a surprised look on her face makes my erection swell.

My hand strokes my hard cock as I replay how responsive she was. I meant what I said to her, and no one's more surprised than I am. She makes me feel like I can conquer the world. No woman has ever inspired such lust in me—but it doesn't end there. I want to share things with her I never imagined sharing with a woman. I want to bare my soul to her.

I want her again. Now.

I took her doggie style on the bed. Her ass rode high up in the air, begging for more. Oh, I have much more to give her. I rub my hand over the tip of my cock, then continue stroking myself, hard.

My balls tingle, signaling I'm close. With one more hard stroke, I come onto the shower floor, all the while wishing I was coming in her mouth. Or on her amazing boobs.

*She left you.*

This thought brings me back down to earth and I clean up. Why did she leave without a word? I hop out of the shower and put on my jeans from last night. Something's in the pocket, and I reach in and pull out her panties. Well, two halves. I bring them to my nose and inhale her scent, which is more tangy than floral. My mouth waters. My mouth wants her pussy.

I pick up the cordless phone and am connected with her room. It rings several times. The clock says it's quarter past nine, so maybe she's at breakfast? I pull on a shirt and head to the door. An envelope with my name on it catches my attention, which I open. It's today's budget plus last night's review. Sara didn't even write me a note on it. What the fuck? Is it possible she regrets what we did together?

Confused, I leave my room and go to the restaurant. Everyone's already seated around a rectangular table. Everyone except Sara. I pull up a chair and join the band. The groupies and roadies sit around us.

Todd looks me over. "Glad you could join us, Brax."

I grunt and order a coffee. I need to talk with Sara. I'm positive she had an amazing time last night—no way could she have faked her reactions. *No. Way.* There must be some rational explanation for why I woke up alone. The waitress drops off my coffee, and while I'm doctoring it, Todd clears his throat.

"Listen up, I have some announcements. Today, we're heading to Las Vegas, where we're going to be staying at the Lexicon Casino. Due to our late booking, I wasn't able to get us suites, but all of our rooms are together."

His announcement is met by a muffled chorus of grumbles. I stir my coffee, looking around for our tour accountant.

"However, we have to make some changes." He projects his voice so the rest of the group can hear him. "Since we're on a hiatus, it means you ladies in the entourage won't be comped."

It's clear to me who actually made this decision, although Todd's delivering her message. It feels like Sara sucker punched me. We talked about the entourage—I explained they're *family*—but she still found a way to get rid of them. I stir my coffee violently enough to splash some over the top of the cup.

"Sorry," Todd continues. "We'll meet up with you in Phoenix on the fourteenth."

Protests from the women make me want to scream.



When the pressure reaches a boiling point, I say, “No,” and push my coffee away.

“It has to be this way,” Todd rebuffs. “We’re on a break.”

We wouldn’t be on break if the damn gig in Salt Lake hadn’t been canceled. I take another sip of my coffee to keep from screaming out loud.

Ricky doesn’t censor himself. “This blows. Kerri, you’ll stay with me.” Kerri goes and sits on his lap.

I guess he found one way around it. Todd signals for the waitress to bring our meals. My appetite has disappeared, and I stand and toss my napkin onto my uneaten plate. Without another word, I storm out of the restaurant.

“Wait up,” Colton calls from behind me.

I turn on my heel. “I can’t friggin’ believe she did that.”

He frowns. “Who? Todd made the decision.”

“At the tour accountant’s urging. She’s had it out for our entourage from the beginning. She told me so.”

“Brax—” He places his hand on my shoulder. “She has our best interests at heart. She’s doing a way better job of keeping track of our money than anyone else A&L has given us, and you know it.”

“She had no right to cut our entourage.”

“It’s only for a few days. Plus, we’ve got a break and Vegas is a blast. You know how much fun we have there.”

My shoulders slump. I’m not mad at Colton and my anger shouldn’t be taken out on him. Sara, on the other hand...

“Fine. I’m going upstairs to pull my shit together. Knock when you’re ready to go to the bus.”

No way is the traitor Sara riding on the bus with us.

In my suite, I throw all my stuff into my luggage and zip it up. No one would ever guess the wild sex we had in here last night. Well, one night is all she wanted. Her words. It's all I'll ever need from her. Vegas has some wild chicks. I'll take one—or two or three—to my room and fuck Sara out of my system.

My stomach rumbles, reminding me I didn't eat breakfast. Knowing the so-called food on the tour bus is mainly junk, I order room service. I look for an area in the suite that hasn't been invaded by Sara, and end up on the couch. Reclining against the cushions, I turn on the TV and flip through the channels. Landing on the Playboy channel. Where some chick is moaning while she's fucked on a kitchen counter. It's too close to what I did to *her* last night and I turn off the TV.

A knock signals my breakfast is here. I let the pretty waitress roll it in, and the way she touches my arm, letting her fingers caress and linger when she asks me where she should set up the tray tells me she'd be happy to help me forget Sara. I ask her to set up my meal on the dining room table. Thankfully, I didn't lay Sara out on it.

Standing directly behind the waitress, I admire her bent-over form as she places the last dish on the table. In a rough voice, I say, "You did a great job."

She straightens and tucks her long red hair behind her ear. With pink fingernails. Like Sara's. My body revolts and I take a step back.

"Thank you, Mr. Hunte." Her eyes devour me from head to toe, but I can't stop comparing her to Sara. I'm positive she'd stay if I asked her. God help me, I don't want her to.

I smile and walk around to the opposite side of the table. “This looks great.”

“Can I get anything else for you? I’d love to meet all your needs.” She puts emphasis on the last word, leaving little to the imagination.

Her eyes plead with mine, but I shake my head. She sighs and starts back toward the door—which is when I remember I need to tip her. “Wait a sec.”

She turns, a bright smile across her face. I approach her, taking out my wallet, and hand her a twenty. “Thanks.”

Her face falls, but she closes her fingers around the bill and takes her leave. *What the hell is wrong with me?* I trudge back and lift the domes off the plates. Even though I’m no longer hungry, I force myself to eat the pancakes and omelet.

At a knock on the door, I toss my napkin on my chair and cross the room. Colton stands on the other side, luggage in hand. “Ready?”

I nod. Taking one last look around, I grab my bag and join him.

“Everything all right?” he asks. “I didn’t see Sara downstairs.”

At his mention of her name, I stop. *She left you.* “I’m not her keeper.” I change the subject. “So, did I miss anything?”

“Nah. We were making plans for what we’re going to do when we hit Vegas. Ricky and Todd are going to the Ladies Lounge for some sex, while Lex and I are talking about the casinos. We can’t decide where to go, so we’re going to wait to see which ones are nearest our hotel.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

As we make our way to the bus, I debate which of the pairs I want to join. The beautiful ladies of the night are appealing, but I already know none of them would entice me the way Sara does. Did. Of course, they would be much more experienced than her. My dick moves in remembrance of how she gagged. A smirk crosses my face.

“What’s that look for?” Colton asks. We’ve reached the bus, and we load up our luggage in the underbelly.

I shake my head. “Nothing.” I survey the parking lot and realize the other bus is already gone. “Nothing at all.”

Sara exits the hotel, luggage in tow. “I’ll meet you on the bus, okay?”

“Sure.” Colton’s eyes stray to Sara before shifting back to mine. “Go easy on her.”

Ignoring my best friend, I stride out to meet her, my every step amping up my anger. By the time I arrive at her side, my head is ready to explode. I stop five feet from her, hands on my hips. “We’re on hiatus. Our bus is only for the band. You’re definitely *not* in the band.”

She holds up car keys, her mouth in a straight line. “Way ahead of you, Braxton.” She opens the trunk of a light blue, four-door Chevy sedan.

Because I have nothing more to say to the traitor, I turn on my heel and join the rest of the crew on the bus. Ricky’s sitting alone. “Where’s Kerri?”

He bounces an apple off his knee and takes a bite. “Decided to meet up with her in Phoenix after all. Too many willing women in Sin City.”

I clap him on the shoulder as I pass. “Good attitude.”

I take a seat next to Colton, and the bus starts to rumble forward. He frowns. “Where’s Sara?”

“She rented a car.” Not a lie.

“Oh.” He starts to say something more, but I have no patience to talk. Instead, I leave him and join Lex for a few rounds of *Mortal Kombat 2*. After losing three games in a row, I’m ready to wage war. I head over to Todd.

“Tell me, what led to you cutting the entourage bus?”

“Sara called me this morning, and we talked about it. I fought for you guys, but she’s right. We’re on a break, and they don’t belong on the payroll if you’re not touring.”

“It shouldn’t matter. It’s only a couple of nights.”

Todd shrugs. Colton butts into our conversation. “Like I told you before, Brax, it’s the responsible thing to do.”

I roll my eyes. Lex chimes in from the video console. “Yeah. We have to look out for us. Make sure we’re on solid financial footing.”

I blow the hair off my forehead. “I hate we have to worry about money.”

“Me, too,” Ricky agrees.

“Don’t think of it in that way guys,” Todd advises. “Think of it as four free days to do what you want without anyone looking over your shoulder.”

“Except for the bean counter,” I contribute.

Todd chuckles. “You always have to pay the piper. Although, there’s no denying the piper does come in a very nice package.” He sticks his tongue out between the V of his first two fingers. Fingers I want to rip off his hand.

Before I can reply, Ricky jumps in, “You got that right. I’d do her.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t want to *do* either of you douchebags,” I roar. The bus goes silent.

Colton clears his throat. “So, ah, do you want to work on making any more changes to ‘Baby, Give It’?”

I meet his gaze, and it’s clear from the way he’s looking at me he knows more than he’s letting on. Or he thinks he does. Either way, I’m not going to confirm his suspicions. “Sounds like a good idea. What are you thinking?”

We’re discussing possible changes to our latest song when the bus slows down. “What’s up?” Lex asks the driver.

Ike replies, “Traffic. Looks like an accident ahead.”

Colton and I continue our discussion, but the starting and stopping of the bus makes me nauseous. I head up to talk to the driver, hoping being able to see out the windshield will calm my stomach. I’ve always had the weakest stomach of the entire band, so they’re used to seeing me upfront when the ride becomes choppy.

“What’s going on, Ike?”

The burly man points up to the right. “Lights up ahead.”

I follow the direction of his index finger, and sure enough, a couple of emergency first responders are off to the side. Traffic moves at a snail’s pace, and the far-right lane is completely blocked off.

“Seems to be only one car involved,” I note, swallowing bile.

Ike nods. “Looks that way. We should be past this in no time. We have a bit more than seven hours left before we hit

the Strip.” His gold front tooth winks at me when he smiles.

I lift the hair off the back of my sweaty neck in an effort to calm my stomach. “Good.”

We inch forward and I keep my eyes glued on the accident ahead. It’s a trick I picked up—stare at stationary objects. Works about half the time.

When we’re a few car lengths behind the accident, the crumpled vehicle comes into focus. Light blue. Four-door. Chevy.

Oh. My. God.

Nah, it couldn’t be.

I sit forward, scanning the emergency vehicles. A cop car and an ambulance. We’re in the first open lane, and it looks like Ike’s right—wide-open road stretches in front of us. I catch sight of the paramedics placing a blanket around a woman who pushes a blonde bob off her face.

“Stop! Pull over!” I yell as we come up even with the crash.

Ike’s head turns toward me. “What?”

“Get ahead of the accident and pull over. Do it!”

I don’t stop to analyze my feelings. The woman who graced my bed last night is—or was—in that car. I know it. I need to get to her.

## SARA



*Four hours earlier*

**B**ack in my room, I nibble on a chocolate chip muffin while packing up my things. The phone stops my progress. “Hello?”

“Sara, it’s Donna. I’m glad I caught you.”

At the sound of my mentor’s voice, I sit in the desk chair. “Hi, Donna. It’s great to hear a friendly voice.” Not a lie.

Her warm laugh oozes over my sluggish body. “Well, Hunte may not be friendly, but you’re certainly working wonders with them.”

I sit up straighter. “Thanks. It hasn’t been easy.”

“I bet. You’ve turned them around. Looks like they’re breaking even.”

“Barely.”

“I wanted to let you know your success hasn’t gone unnoticed here. If you can keep this up for another week, until the partners meeting, you’re definitely going to hear good news.”



My fingers cross. This is why I've worked so hard—I let myself forget it only for one night. “I'll do my best. It's a razor-thin margin.”

The rustling of papers reaches my ears. “I see that. If anyone can whip the bad boys of Hunte into shape, it's you. On a personal note, I'm proud of you. You've done what no one else has been able to do with this account for years.”

Her praise warms a place in my soul. “I appreciate your kind words, Donna.”

She catches me up with my other clients, all of which are in the black. “Oh, and one more thing. You received another letter from At Your Door. They're still looking for a replacement band. Why don't you ask Hunte if they'll do it?”

“I already did, and am waiting for their decision.” Maybe I'll ask Todd rather than Braxton. He may be a slimeball, but he seems to be turning around too—cutting the entourage loose until Phoenix saved the band thousands of dollars.

We hang up and a new feeling of resolve washes over me. I can do this. I'm going to be the one who brings Hunte to heel at A&L.

*All you have to do is avoid Braxton for the rest of the trip.*

I take another bite of my muffin then toss the remnants into the garbage, careful to scoop up any loose crumbs. I don't have an appetite this morning—wonder why?

After a quick check to ensure I've left everything as I found it, I make my way down to the registration desk to check out. A little gift shop/bookstore is on the way, which I ignore. I love these types of stores.

The first thing I see is a decorative spoon with Boise written on it. My hand traces it, wondering if Brax—Braxton

—bought one. *Down, girl.* If he wants to pick up a spoon in his mother's memory, it's on him.

Walking away from the display empty-handed, I head to the book section. I'm going to need a good book to get lost in while we're in Las Vegas, considering I refuse to gamble and Braxton is...well. I shake my head. Never having been to the city, I don't have high expectations for any entertainment outside of gambling and sin.

Since I finished my latest fiction novel by John Grisham, it's time for a non-fiction work. I always switch between the two genres. I scan the bookshelves, picking up several biographies before settling on one about Frank J. Wilson, the forensic accountant who was appointed by the US Treasury Department's Special Intelligence Unit to investigate Al Capone's taxes. Book in hand, I'm on my way to the register when a study aid for the GED catches my attention.

Stopping in the middle of the store as if I hit a brick wall, I take a couple steps to the rack where the guide is displayed. I pick it up and flip to the back cover, reading—and answering—the questions. The twenty-dollar price tag doesn't seem like much for such a thick book, and I add it to my pile.

*Why?*

I'm not sure, yet my gut tells me to go for it.

Bag of books in one hand, luggage in the other, I continue to the check-out desk. Once the task's completed, I take a seat at the car rental desk. I made up my mind about this in the early hours of the morning. No way am I subjecting myself to ten hours of confinement with Braxton. He'll be pissed at me—and I'm pissed at him. The more I think about it, the more certain I am he was playing me last night.

Pushing up my sleeves, I fill out all the required paperwork and purchase the insurance.

“Can you please tell me how to get to I-93?” The road that will lead me directly to Las Vegas.

The man at the counter smiles at me. He’s handsome in an understated way and his smile is shy. Braxton Hunte, this guy is not.

*He’s more your speed, Sara. I bet he wouldn’t use you to manipulate budgets.*

I return the smile. After pulling a pen from his pocket protector, he outlines the couple of turns I’ll need to make. “Will you be back in Boise anytime soon?”

I shake my head.

“Too bad. Have a safe trip.”

“I agree with you on the first part. Thanks.”

Steeling myself for a possible confrontation, I take the keys and walk toward the exit.

As if my thoughts of Braxton conjured him, he stomps toward me before I can take more than ten steps across the parking lot. He stops a few feet away, standing with his hands on his hips. I raise to my full height, but remain silent. “We’re on hiatus. Our bus is only for the band. And you’re definitely *not* in the band.”

Clenching my jaw, I hold up my car keys. “Way ahead of you, Braxton.” I open the trunk of a light blue, four-door Chevy sedan, place my suitcase and bag of books inside and slam it shut. He’s gone when I turn around.

After consulting my map one last time, I begin my ten-hour drive to Las Vegas. Alone. As soon as I’m on I-93, the

monotony of the road becomes mesmerizing.

I yawn and turn on the radio, shifting in my seat as I do so. Muscles I didn't know I had complain of overuse. "Calm down," I shout, more to wake myself up than anything. "You're not going to get that sort of use anytime in the near future." Or ever again.

Without my permission, my mind relives my amazing night with Brax. The way he almost made me feel like a competent lover. The way he played my body. How I reacted when he smacked me.

*Who reacts that way?* a little voice asks in response.

My eyes pop open when I drive over rumble strips. Shoot. I hadn't realized I'd closed them. I cross back into my proper lane, grateful no one was near me. Rolling down the window for fresh air, I continue driving. The clock on the dashboard says I've already gone over two hours. Eight more to go. I can do this. I *have* to do this.

I adjust the car's speed using the cruise control buttons on the steering wheel. Crossing my ankles, I continue the long and lonely drive. The radio station turns into static and I try to find another station, to no avail. Sighing, I shut it off.

My eyelids grow heavy. Fragments of Brax's story about his upbringing surface in my mind. Despite myself, I hope he purchased the spoon. I doubt he'll want the GED book if he knows it's from me, but I heard the longing for a diploma in his voice. I'll leave it at the front desk of the hotel. Without a note about who it's from. Maybe he'll take it as a sign, rather than a gift from me, since I'm more than sure he's done with me.

I'm certainly done with him.

I yawn again. The road stretches out before me with barely a turn. Keeping my hands on the steering wheel, I sink further into the seat. My eyelids flutter for a moment.

## BRAX



**A**s soon as the bus's door opens, I bolt. My booted feet land on the pavement and I race toward the crumpled car on the shoulder. No one's inside.

“Sara!”

An overweight uniformed officer in his mid-fifties approaches me. “Can I help you?”

In a rush, the words tumble from my mouth. “Sara! I know the woman who was driving this car. Is she hurt?”

“Calm down. Ms. Anderson will be okay. She's over there with the paramedics.” The cop wearing a name badge “Officer Benson” nods in the direction of the ambulance.

My muscles grow weak all at once. “Good. Good. Can I see her?”

The officer responds, “I'll need to ask her permission. Now, where did you come from?”

I point to the tour bus with HUNTE written across its side. The rest of the band is disembarking. I want to bust past this guy to check on Sara myself, but I know it won't do us any good. Hands fisted to my side, I say, “She's our—” I edit out her title. “She's with us.”

“Are you in some sort of band?”

I stifle an incredulous outburst. “Yeah. Some sort.”

He flips a page in his notebook. “What’s your name?”

“Braxton Hunte.” Enough of this bullshit. I need to make sure Sara’s okay. She has to be okay.

“Brax, everything all right?” Todd approaches us.

“I think so. That’s Sara’s car.” I point to the wrecked sedan. “This”—asshole—“officer told me she’s okay and is with the paramedics. I need to check on her.”

Todd extends his hand to the cop. While they talk, an unfamiliar feeling of need washes over me. I can’t stand here another second, shooting the shit like nothing’s happened. I need to see her for myself, to assure myself she’s okay. “I’m going to check on her.”

Without waiting for Officer Benson’s response, I jog over to the other set of flashing lights. Wrapped in a blanket, Sara sits in the back of an open ambulance, talking with a couple of uniformed paramedics. Relief floods my body. She’s alert and talking. Has to be a good sign. She looks good, except for some cuts on her cheek and arms, which one of the paramedics bandages.

The three stop talking and look at me as I approach. Sara’s hand flies to her mouth. The paramedic not working on her wounds takes a step toward me, but her words stop him. “Braxton. What are you doing here?”

I half-smile, ignoring her use of my professional name. “I’m getting this question a lot lately. More to the point, what are you doing here?”

The paramedics look like they want to protect her from me, but she shakes her head. “I had an accident. I’m fine. The

car's not." Her eyes travel to the rental car, its front right side crumpled into the guardrail.

"I can see that." I address the nearest paramedic to me. "Is she really okay?"

"Yes. Her vitals are good, and she's refusing to let us take her to the hospital." He does a double-take. "Wait. Are you Braxton Hunte?"

I offer him my hand. "Yes. Nice to meet you—" I read his nametag, "—Riley." The other paramedic, Torry, joins us, and I sign an autograph for him. My eyes stray to Sara, who sits all bandaged up. Looking forlorn.

Addressing the one named Riley, I ask, "Are you sure she's fine?"

"Yes. Fell asleep at the wheel. We called for a tow truck, which is the only reason we're still here. She can get a ride to Jackpot in the truck."

"Jackpot?" My eyebrow rises.

"Nearest town to here," paramedic Torry responds.

Flashing lights approach us on the shoulder. "I think the tow truck's coming."

They turn to confirm what I already know, so I head over to Sara. "Hey." Because I need to make sure she's really unhurt, I run my hands over both her arms, skipping over the bandaged parts. "You really all right?"

"Yeah." She stares at the ground.

"You fell asleep at the wheel?"

Her gaze meets mine, her eyes narrowed. "Yes. I didn't get any sleep last night."



I tuck her hair behind her ear. “Sorry.” I’m not sorry we slept together, but her accident has shaken me to my core.

Todd approaches with Officer Benson, who announces—unnecessarily—the tow truck has arrived. “Glad to see you’re okay, Sara.”

“Thanks, Todd.”

He pulls me aside. “She’s fine. Let’s get going. We don’t want to lose any time in Vegas.”

“Sure.”

I shouldn’t want to stay with Sara. Her injuries look superficial, plus her accident hasn’t changed anything between us. She still left me last night. She still cut the entourage. No way am I staying with her.

“Let me tell her good-bye. I’ll meet you on the bus in a jiffy.”

Todd walks toward the bus, gathering up the rest of the band on his way. I turn to face Sara, who’s talking with the tow truck driver, waving her arms about to emphasize her point. God, she’s adorable.

*Stop it, Brax. She. Left. You. Let. Her. Go.* When the driver retreats to his tow truck, I approach her. “I’m glad you’re all right, Sara. See you in Vegas.”

Her shoulders dip even as she forces a fake smile “Great. Yeah, see you.” She trudges away from me and pops the trunk. Only the front end of the car was bashed in—the trunk wasn’t damaged at all.

I’m walking past her when I see her stuff a GED Study Guide into a plastic bag. My feet stutter. Why would she have *that*? I increase my pace toward the bus.

The trunk slams shut. “Brax,” she calls as I near the cop car.

My stomach flips at her use of my nickname. I stop but don’t turn around. “Yeah?”

Footfalls warn me she’s coming. Bracing myself to see her once more, I turn and give her my full attention. She pulls a book out of the plastic bag then shoves her arm toward me, the bag hanging from her fingers. “Here. I saw this and thought of you. I was going to leave it for you in Vegas, but I’m not sure I’ll make it there.”

The logo on the bag says “Big Boise Bookstore.” She cared enough to buy me a GED Study Guide? My heart beats louder. “Thanks.” Leaving her next to her ruined rental car, I stride toward the tour bus. And Las Vegas. Sin City. The break we all need.

I tell myself she’s trying to control me. She thinks I need to get my high school diploma in order to succeed in her world.

But then I find myself thinking about our conversation, how I opened up to her about feeling lesser because I don’t have my degree. “Shit.” I stop and turn around. The wrecked car has been removed from the guardrail and the tow truck driver is preparing to load it onto the bed.

Up ahead of me, Ricky yells, “Come on, Brax. Sometime today!”

I should get to Las Vegas with my band. Hang out. Blow off some steam.

Yet, I don’t like the thought of leaving Sara behind to deal with this mess. My gut begs me to stay.

Ricky yells again. “Brax!”

My attention shifts to the woman who made me feel ten feet tall last night. Her body language screams dejection. She's all by herself. It strikes me she's been alone for years, ever since her mother died. Making my decision, I stride to the bus. Stepping into the familiar surroundings, I tell the band, "Go on ahead, I'm going to stay here with Sara."

Ricky is the first to respond. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I want to make sure she's all right after the crash. She refused to go to the hospital."

"Then she's obviously fine. Why do you want to stay here in the middle of nowhere when you could be partying with us in Vegas?"

I don't have an answer for him. All I know is I need to be with her. Which is not something Ricky's going to understand. "She's our responsibility and someone needs to step up. I nominate myself." In the background, I hear the *beep-beep* of the tow truck backing up. Ignoring the guys' questions, I rush down the stairs and off the bus.

Ike follows me out and says, "Brax!"

I stop mid-pace in time to see the driver removing my luggage from the underbelly of the bus. I take it from him. "Thanks."

"Go get your woman," he says, winking.

I wave him off. The tow truck has stopped, and as I approach the scene of the accident, the driver is securing the wrecked car with ropes.

Sara's mouth falls open. "What are you doing?"

"I'm making sure you get to our next gig in one piece. Seems like someone has to watch over you, for your own

safety.”

She crosses her arms across her boobs. My hands know how much each one weighs. The tour bus revs its engine and pulls away from the shoulder, joining the traffic. With a honk, it rumbles away. She points. “Your bus just left.”

“I told them I was staying with you.”

“But, but...” Her mouth opens and closes several times. “Why?”

“I told you. I feel responsible for you.”

Her eyebrows slash into a frown. It would be a formidable look except for the bandages on her cheek. “I’m not your burden. I’m fully capable of handling myself.”

“And ramming your car into a guardrail, it appears.”

The tow truck driver appears at our side, handing a clipboard to Sara. “Sign here and I’ll take you to town.” He glances at me. “Are you coming with her?”

“Yes,” I reply.

He nods and points where she needs to sign. Once the transaction is completed, we pile into the tow truck, Sara in the middle. I wrap my arm around her shoulder and pull, needing to touch her, but she resists. She keeps her face forward, her lips pursed.

“I can drop you at the 4 Aces Motel. The car won’t be drivable for at least a week. I’m going to need parts.”

Next to me, Sara inhales. “I have insurance through the rental company. I’ll sort everything out with them.”

Of course she does. “The 4 Aces sounds great,” I add. “Thanks.”

He nods and we continue the short journey into the small town of Jackpot, Nevada. We ride down Main Street, passing restaurants, small mom-and-pop shops, and gas stations before he puts on his blinker and turns into the parking lot of our temporary home. The 4 Aces is a two-story motel that's larger than I'd expect for such a small town. The sign out front blinks, "Vacancy."

He stops at the front of the motel. "Here you go." When we're standing on the street with our luggage, he fishes into his front pocket and pulls out a business card, which he hands to Sara. "Give this to the insurance adjuster."

She takes the card with a thanks, and we trudge toward registration.

I precede Sara into the lobby. It's a dingy, dusty space filled with small bookcases stacked with brochures for local attractions such as Cactus Pete's and Barton's Club 93 casinos, plus hiking trails along the Jarbridge River trail.

A young girl, probably still in high school, greets me from the front desk. "Welcome to 4 Aces. Want a room?"

Sara joins me. "Two."

I turn to her. "Really?"

Her reply is swift and unequivocal. "Yes."

The receptionist flips through some paperwork. "We only have one room left. It has two beds."

"We'll take it." One for sleeping and one for sex. Or both for sex. I steal another glance at Sara. Or both for sleeping. Why did I do this again?

The girl fills out some paperwork and asks me to sign, which I attempt to do. Sara snatches the pen out of my fingers.

“I’ve got this. It’s my fault we’re here.” She signs and hands over her credit card.

It’s my turn to frown. I’ve never felt like a kept man before, and I don’t like it. “We’ll discuss this later.”

We go to the room in silence, although I keep darting looks at her. Her expression is closed off, hard to read. The room is decorated with paintings of poker scenes. All that’s missing is one of dogs on velvet. The thought brings a smile to my lips.

“Ugh.” Sara drops her luggage on one bed and her purse onto the table, which will have to serve as her desk while we’re here. Then, with an efficiency born of practice, she heads to the closet and pulls out a luggage rack.

“Hmm,” I say as she shifts her bag to the rack.

She pauses. “What?”

“Never seen one of those things used before.”

“You’re in hotels all the time. What do you use for your luggage?”

I shrug and drop my luggage onto the floor. “Works for me.”

Her eyes roll. “Really?” She looks around. “At least use the chair.” She points to one of two straight-backed chairs tucked under a dining table.

“Nope. They’re for eating.”

She unzips her suitcase and takes out some clothes, heading over to the closet. “Suit yourself.” She methodically hangs her suits, one at a time, then moves on to the dresser. “Want any drawers?”

I shake my head.

She unpacks the rest of her clothing before bringing her toiletries into the bathroom.

“Do you do this at every stop? Seems like a waste of time.”

She pauses on her second trip into the bathroom. “It’s not a waste. I like to have my things where I need them. Makes it easier for me.”

“Control freak much?”

She ignores my last statement, disappears into the bathroom and closes the door behind her. Shortly, the shower turns on. While she’s washing up, I browse through the magazines the lovely folks at 4 Aces left in here, which takes all of five minutes. Not really into *The Face of Gambling*, *How To Beat the House* and *Hiking 101*. The shower is still running, and I picture her naked body under the warm water. My body starts to harden. Shit.

I’ve never been with a more responsive woman. She seemed surprised at how her body reacted to mine, and truth be told, she surprised me as well.

I bet her hair is plastered around her face, water droplets rolling down her body. Landing on her sensitive nipples. Damn. When I bit them, I thought she was going to jump out of her skin. Her soft, supple skin. My mind wanders lower down her body, and my dick flies to full-mast. Before I know it, I’m naked and standing outside the bathroom door. I try the knob. It’s locked.

*Locked.*

My excitement is transformed into disappointment, then anger. What is she playing at? My dick deflates somewhat as I

shove my legs back into my jeans, underwear be damned. I'm buttoning my shirt when the water stops.

Sara emerges from the bathroom a minute later. "I left you some hot water."

She's only wearing a white towel. Not as fluffy as I'm used to, but not exactly threadbare either. Her hair is in another towel, turban-style. Anger pushes me forward and I step into her personal space. Her fresh floral scent invades my senses, ratcheting up my ire.

"You locked me out."

Her eyes widen. "Privacy," is her squeaked reply.

My hand lands on the top of her towel. "We're beyond privacy." I yank, and the material pulls off of her body and into my hand.

"Brax!" Her hands fly to cover her body.

"Why are you pushing me away?"

"I'm not. Now give me my towel back."

More because of the tone of her voice than her words, I relent. "Here," I pass the white terrycloth back to her. Her hands shake as she wraps it around her body. Is she afraid or angry? Or is this a delayed reaction from the accident? Tempering my anger, I place my hand on her bandaged shoulder. "We need to talk."

She drags in a breath. Her arms sprout goosebumps beneath my gaze, yet her mouth forms a downturned- line. "There's nothing to say." She runs her hands over her arms.

"Why do you say that?"



“Why?” She repeats my question, her voice filled with as much anger as mine. “I don’t like being used.”

My hand becomes like iron on her shoulder. “We used each other. For a fucking good time.”

Her chin lifts again, something I’ve noticed her do whenever she wants to regain control of the situation. Because we’re both barefoot, she’s a couple of inches taller. She looks down on me, her chest rising and falling at a fast clip. “I’m not adjusting your budget because we slept together.”

I can’t help myself—I throw my head back and laugh.

## SARA



**F**ueled by his laughter, I huff away from Braxton and go to the dresser, pulling out a pair of underwear. Because he's already seen everything, I dress in front of him. When my panties are in place, I rip open another drawer and select a bra.

His hand lands on top of mine. "Do you really believe what you just said?"

"What? That you slept with me in the hopes of getting the changes you want with your budget? Hell yes." I never swear, but this man brings out the worst in me.

"Well, you only slept with me because you wanted to slum it. I bet I'm the only man you've ever slept with who doesn't have a high school degree. How'd you like it?"

His words, filled with venom, cut directly through my heart. Still, it strikes me he didn't deny my allegation. "That's not an answer. You've always wanted a break with your budget."

"Of course I want to keep things as they are. I love hanging with our entourage. I want to keep spending without penalty. Who wouldn't?"

I shove my bra up to my shoulders, careful where my right one got banged up. "Right." I bring my arms behind my back

and snap it shut. Folding at my waist, I open the lower drawer and grab a pair of jeans and a top. The top flies over my head and down my torso.

“I swear, budgets were the furthest thing from my mind last night.” He makes a sound like a choked chuckle. “*You* didn’t answer *me*. How did you like having sex with a high school dropout? I rocked your world didn’t I, even without a degree.”

Something in his voice makes me turn to face him. With my bottom half nearly naked, I reply, “You’re wrong about me. I don’t care you don’t have a degree. Only you do.” His reaction is subtle—his fingers start to close into a fist, but he opens them and drops his hands to his sides.

His jaw clenches and he storms across the room. I shake out my jeans, yet it’s impossible to concentrate on the task. He’s standing by the window, looking at the rear parking lot. So alone. My eyes close as I drop the jeans on top of the dresser and approach him. I soften my voice. “Braxton?” When I touch his arm, he flinches away.

“Leave me alone.”

“Kind of hard to do since we’re stuck in the same room.”

“I’ll make it easy for you.” He bends down and picks up his boots. His underwear is next to his socks. How did they get there? Barefoot, he heads for the door.

“Wait.”

He pauses. I suck in my breath and count backward—three, two, one—but before I form a thought, his hand lands on the doorknob. I blurt, “I think you’re one of the most brilliant men I’ve ever met.”

“Right.” He stands stock-still.

“I don’t think you need a degree to succeed in this world.”

“Sara.” He turns toward me, a look of longing on his face.

“I mean it. Your songs are fantastic. You’ve kept your band together long after many others have broken up or fallen off the stage. Maybe things have taken a slight downswing, but it doesn’t matter—you’re talented and driven enough to turn them around. You’re living your dream.”

He takes slow steps toward me, as if my words drag him toward me. “You’re a force to be reckoned with,” I add.

He stops about two feet from me. “I am?”

I nod. It’s the truth.

He blinks. “I didn’t sleep with you to get our budget adjusted.”

Hope—an emotion I don’t usually entertain—sparks to life within me. “Really?”

He shakes his head. “I wanted you. You make me feel things no one else ever has. No one’s ever called me a ‘force to be reckoned with’ before.”

I greet his tentative smile with my own. “I only want to help Hunte manage its finances. Become more solvent. Then, when your next big song shoots to the top of the charts, you’ll be in a position to capitalize on it rather than pay off back debts.”

“Colton says you have the band’s best interests at heart.”

“I do,” I whisper. He grabs the towel from my head and tosses it over his shoulder, nodding as he runs his fingers through my wet hair. I lean into his caress and resist the urge to hang the towel up.

Neither one of us moves, but we both breathe faster. It stuns me I'm capable of affecting him this way. Brax is the first to break the spell. "I was upset when I woke up and you weren't there."

"I couldn't believe you really wanted to be with me. You're beyond experienced and I'm, well, *not*. The only rational explanation I came up with was you were using me to adjust your budget."

"It wasn't like that at all." He shakes his head. "I like this side of you. You're always so confident. You are super sexy, Sara Baby. There's no need for you to be insecure about your body. Or sex. With me." He says the last as he runs his finger over the scratches on my cheek. I took the bandages off before I showered.

I swallow. "Sex has never been important to me. It was a nice way to pass time, but I never had an orgasm with a man. Until you."

"Were all of your past lovers college grads like you?" At my nod, he stands taller. "So much for degrees."

"You may have a point." I lick my lips to moisten them, and Brax groans. "What? What did I do?"

He runs his hand through his long hair. "You did everything right. Come here." He opens his arms.

Can I do this again? We've cleared the air. He knows I don't hold his lack of a degree against him. He's assured me he's not using sex to manipulate me into letting up on accounting. I stare into his hazel eyes, which are decidedly amber. As I watch, his pupils dilate.

His raspy voice touches my soul. "I want you."

It's the need underlying his last words that propels me forward. I step into him, my bare legs touching his jeans. His arms come around me like steel bands and his mouth lands on mine with a different urgency. Last night was about sating desire—this kiss feels like a claim.

*You're in deep.*

I shove the thought away and kiss him back.

When his tongue dances with mine, I give my control up to him. He knows what to do with my body. Only he can make it sing. His hands land on my butt and he pulls on my underwear. They rip off my body.

The sound of rending material brings me back to my senses. "Seriously, Brax? You've now ruined two pairs."

He offers a wicked smirk before licking his index finger and sliding in into my core. "Not sorry," he rumbles while stroking me.

And...I'm gone again. My body moves in time with his finger. A second digit joins it and I'm putty in his hands. "Oh."

"I want you to come on my fingers."

His dirty words bring heat up my neck. I nod, desire pouring through me, my own words failing.

His thumb touches my clit and excitement screams through my body. "God." He strums me like his guitar while I stand obscenely in front of him, my legs open to his touch. Hips rocking. His thumb circles my bud harder and faster and I explode, pleasure streaking through every limb. I scream as I come.

When every drop of my orgasm has been wrung from me, he removes his fingers while steadying me on my feet. He

brings his hand in front of his face and inhales, then puts it under my nose. “Smell your scent. It drives me wild.”

After I inhale myself from his fingers, he pushes them into my mouth. “Lick.” Unable to do anything other than capitulate to his demand, I run my tongue over each digit. Sweet yet tangy. All the while, my eyes don’t leave his.

“You’re so freaking sexy.” He pulls his fingers out of my mouth.

My eyes drop down and land on his erection. Which is pushing against his jeans from the inside. “That can’t be comfortable.”

He rumbles, “What are you going to do about it?”

I want to suck him off, but despite what he’s said, I still worry I’m not good enough. None of his groupies have gagged on him, I’m sure. Tamping down the sudden rush of jealousy—I take off my shirt and toss it on the floor, making a mental note to pick it up later. Wearing my bra and nothing else, I remove his shirt. While my fingers open the buttons of his fly, he unclasps my bra. I slide his jeans, sans underwear, down his body. Standing, I say, “There. Now we’re both naked.”

He plays with my still wet hair. “Yes we are.”

When he doesn’t make another move, I confess, “I don’t know what to do.”

“Simple. I want all of you. I want your wet pussy swallowing my hard cock. I want you screaming my name so everyone on the second floor will hear.”

My body vibrates and dampens with each dirty word he speaks. All of my synapses fire at once. I’m on overload again, and he hasn’t touched me. I grab his hand and lead us over to

the bed. I sit, keeping my feet on the floor, spreading my legs wide for him. “Yes.”

He bends, placing his hands on the bed, and brings his lips toward my mouth. I open my lips to welcome him home, but he bypasses them in favor of my breast. He swirls his tongue around my nipple while playing with the other. I let my head fall backward and relish the feel of him...but it's not enough. I want to drive him wild—I want to do to him what he's doing to me. Reaching out, I wrap my fingers around his hard erection. And squeeze.

“Damn, woman.” He steps back and walks to his luggage. Unzips a compartment, watching me as he does, and pulls out a strip of condoms. He drops one into my lap and sets the others on the table. Turns to face me, his cock bobbing. “Put it on me.”

Here's my chance. No cucumber this time. I rip open the packet and pull out the latex. Remembering what Joanna and I did all those years ago, I bring it over to the top of his erection and roll it down to the base. When I'm finished, I smile at my handiwork. “I did it.”

He chuckles. “You sure did. Any slower and I'd blow my wad before we can get started.” At my intake of breath, he adds, “I loved every second of it. But now I need to have you hard and fast. Slow is going to have to wait until later.”

Hard and fast. Yes, please. “Okay.”

Chuckling, he puts his hands between my legs and urges them farther apart. Stepping into the gap, he rubs himself all over my sex, getting me ready for him, and positions himself at my entrance. With one single thrust, he enters me all the way. I wrap my hands around his trim waist and cup his butt



like he's done to me. As he pistons in and out, I squeeze his lower cheeks, bringing him in deeper.

He pulls one of my legs up and around his waist and continues thrusting into me, his hand heavy on my shin.

I'm desperate to touch him, but he's standing while I'm sitting. The only connection we have is our bodies, so I contract my inner core around him.

He groans. "Do that again."

Excited by his reaction to me, I follow his instruction and he groans again. Louder. His fingers dig into my shin while he pounds into my body. Tingling rushes outward from my core. Brax reaches down and plays with my clit and I fly over the cliff.

"Brax!"

He pumps harder. "Louder!"

"Brax!" I yell at the top of my lungs.

He thrusts once more then goes still, roaring as his orgasm washes over him. When he releases my leg, it falls to the floor, limp. He covers my lips and eyelids with teasing kisses. Traces my cuts with his tongue.

When he returns to the room after discarding the condom, we snuggle in the bed. This time, I'm determined not to let any insecurities or miscommunications come between us. It's easier to talk to him than it should be. We share more about our childhoods—neither of which were too happy—which leads to a discussion of his failed marriage.

"I was young and stupid. And Hilary and I both turned into different people."

I think back on everything I read about the band when they first hit the scene, and the research I did prior to starting my work on their account. “Tell me the real story about why you broke up. I mean, all I know is what I read in the tabloids, and I doubt they told the whole story.”

He inhales. “I want to be honest with you, all right?” I nod and he continues. “The tabloids weren’t far off. I cheated on her. She was back home in LA with King, and I was out on tour. I hadn’t seen her for months and groupies kept throwing themselves at me. I gave in.”

“That’s what I read.” My knowledge of Brax tells me there’s more to the tale.

“I accept responsibility for what I did, but Hilary wasn’t totally blameless. Our conversations turned into nagging sessions. Money, mostly. She always wanted more. Other than her harping on money, we only talked about King—and she seemed to delight in telling me about all the milestones I was missing while I was on tour.” He entwines our fingers as if he needs to be sure I’m still with him. “She never complained when the checks came.”

“You were what? Twenty? Twenty-one?”

He blows air out of his mouth. “We got married when we were eighteen and had King at twenty. Our divorce was final three years ago. In truth, our marriage was over before King turned one.”

I squeeze his hand. “Maybe if she toured with you, things would’ve been different.”

“She wasn’t cut out for the touring life. We didn’t have suites back then—we were sharing small rooms like this one.”

“I can see how it would be tough, especially with a baby.”

He pulls me closer, nodding so his chin taps the top of my head. “That’s one reason why I bought her the house in LA as soon as my first big check came. I wanted her to be comfortable while I was away.”

It strikes me he likely had another reason—he’d wanted to ensure his son would never be homeless the way he had been—but I keep this to myself. “Are you sorry things ended the way they did?”

“I could’ve done without the tabloid attention,” he says with a smirk, “but I don’t regret the relationship’s ending. Hilary and I weren’t meant to last. The way she continues to run to the so-called reporters to grab headlines for herself—and against me—proves my point.”

Neither one of us brings up yesterday’s tabloid in which she was the supposed source behind a story about how she had to beg Brax for a few measly dollars for King’s birthday party. As if eight grand is a “few dollars.” The woman is beyond the definition of nightmare. I kiss the center of his chest. “Tell me about your son. Why did you name him King?”

He chuckles. “I was a kid, you know? Riding high. I wanted to be sure no one ever would look down on my son, so I gave him the highest-ranking name I knew.”

I smile at his explanation, but a piece of my heart breaks for the upbringing that led Brax to such a lofty choice. Entwining our fingers, I ask, “What’s he like?”

His lips tip upward. “He’s a good kid. I don’t get to see him often enough, which is why I insist on going to all his birthday parties and other major holidays.”

“I bet he looks up to his dad.”

His countenance changes and pride shines from his eyes. He pulls me closer to his body. “I hope so. At least I know he’ll never lack for anything. As the only kid I’ll ever have, I have to ensure that.”

I think about my own father. I love him, of course. He’s never looked at me with the type of warmth Brax effuses for his son, though. He’s proud of my accomplishments, sure, but our relationship has—since my mother died—been more of a transactional one. Before I can formulate a response, he kisses me. “What was that for?”

“For being a wonderful listener.” He kisses me again. “This is for your support.” He gives me one more.

I smile. “What was this one for?”

“Because you’re unbelievably sexy, lying naked next to me.” He braces himself above me. “No more talking. Our bodies are going to say all that needs to be said.”

And they do.



I wake and stretch, my eyes landing on Brax next to me. Instead of sleeping, he’s watching me. I cup his cheek. “What?”

“You looked peaceful.”

“You wore me out.”

Brilliant white teeth make their appearance. “Right answer. Now, are you hungry?” My rumbling stomach answers him. “I’ll take those noises as a yes.” He tweaks my nose. “Let’s shower and go explore what Jackpot has to offer.”

“I’ll let you go first.”

“No. I want you with me.”

He slides out of bed and stands, naked. My eyes roam all over his amazing body, still hungry for the sight of him. “I don’t think the shower is big enough.”

I’ve never showered with a man before.

He wiggles his eyebrows. “My point exactly, Sara Baby.” He extends his hand and I take it. Looks like I’m going to have another first with him.

We enter the bathroom and he turns the shower on. “Ladies first.”

I get into the shower-tub combo and the water pulses over my body. Brax joins me and I bring my hand to his dick without being prompted. I close my fingers around it as he hardens and grows. Enjoying the sensation of the hot water and his velvety, hard flesh beneath my fingertips, I stroke and he flexes his hips.

We’re both wet, but neither one of us is thinking about washing up. “I want to fuck you,” he growls.

“Since you asked so nicely...”

“I didn’t ask.”

I open my legs for him. “You’re right. We both fit.”

He turns my body and places my hands on the tiles. His erection rubs against the back of my thighs, ending at my butt. He slides through my cheeks and contacts my sex. My eyes roll back in my head. “Please,” I moan.

He kisses the back of my shoulder and repeats, “Since you asked so nicely...”

He slides home and brings his hands to my straining nipples. I reach behind him and let my hand find his butt. He pumps fast and hard, hitting the oh-so-amazing spot inside of me I hadn't known about before him. My orgasm washes over me in record time. Limp, my wet hands slide down the tiles as he roars behind me, wrapping his hands around my waist like a vise. My head hangs while I gasp for air.

He pulls out of my body, which remains like Jell-O. Shortly, Brax rubs a washcloth over my sex. I should be embarrassed, but I'm not. Not after what he made me feel. When he's sure I can stand on my own—he tests me three times before I can support my body weight—he hands me the soap and we both clean up.

Sated and dressed, we walk out of the room, hand-in-hand. When we exit the motel, we head toward a restaurant recommended by the reservation clerk.

“Here we are.” We stop in front of Polly's Pancake Parlor, which is an adorable log cabin, complete with flower boxes on the windows. Brax keeps his head down while I do all the talking at the hostess stand. Once we're in our booth, he takes a big breath. It strikes me it mustn't be easy to go through life fearing someone will recognize you. Write about the things you do and the mistakes you make. No wonder he fears he'll never measure up.

With his back to the front door, he fingers his hair. When his curls look as tousled as ever, I reach over and hold his hand. After a quick perusal of their menu, we order our pancakes.

While we wait for our food, he asks, “Would you like to help me buy a birthday present for King?”

My eyebrow raises. I bought my goddaughter-slash-niece a present as soon as the date of her baptism was set. “You don’t have one yet?”

He shakes his head. “No. The hotels we’ve been staying at haven’t had too much to offer. I was going to check out the toy store at the casino back in Rapid City, but I was otherwise occupied.”

That was the night of the comedy club. “Sorry for hijacking your plans.”

“I’m not. It’s when I first really saw you. I liked what I saw. A lot.”

“I’m glad.” Shocked, yes—I never would have thought he’d look twice at me—but really, really happy.

After we finish our breakfast-for-dinner, Brax asks the waitress about the town. She tells him about a toy store nearby, so we stroll to the shop, window shopping along the way. No one pays the rockstar next to me any attention. Good.

He opens the door for me and we enter the shop. It’s filled with all sorts of toys, games, and stuffed animals. We search for something exciting enough to light up an eight-year-old boy’s eyes. Their Lego selection isn’t the best, so we end up in the video game section. Brax decides on the latest home game console and buys all the games available for it.

“Your son is going to love this. He’ll be hosting parties at his house every day.”

“Bonus.” He smirks. “I bet Hilary will love me even more.”

With all of King’s presents in the cart, we stroll by the stuffed animal section. A display of Paddington bears, ranging from pocket-sized to one as big as I am catches my eye. I pick

up a small one. It's cute. An unexpected tear rolls down my cheek.

"Maybe I'll get this for Joanna."

He leans over and whispers in my ear, "I think you'll make a great mom. You've already figured out the allowance part." He kisses the salty tear track on my cheek.

"I don't want to have a baby, remember?" I picture a little girl with long, curly blonde hair and slam my eyes shut. *Partnership track, not mommy track.* I add the bear to the cart. After picking up some wrapping paper, we head to the front to check out.

Once we're back in the motel, Brax dumps our bags of presents onto the bed and I put the wrapping paper onto the table. We spend the next hour laughing and wrapping all of them, with him stealing kisses whenever he can. Which is often.

"There. I think we're done." I wring my hands together.

He puts all of King's gifts back into the bags, both of which overflow. "Think King will like these? Maybe I should get him something else?"

"Like what? A pony?" I laugh. "No, I think you got him more than enough. Two games would've been fine."

He snorts. "You don't know Hilary. If one of something is good, fifty is better. I'm afraid she's rubbing off on my son." His expression slips. "Not that I'm helping. But I'm not there with him most of the year. I don't want him to think I don't care."

I kiss his cheek. "I'm sure he knows."



He takes a deep breath. “I didn’t have a good role model growing up, you know? I’m not sure how to act around him.”

I wrap my hand in his. “How about being yourself?”

He squeezes my fingers. “I try. I visit when we get a long enough break between gigs and work on undoing the damage Hilary has done. You’ve seen our schedule, though. It doesn’t allow for many side trips to LA. I do send him gifts and call often, to let him know I’m thinking of him.” He drops my hand. With an uncompromising edge to his voice, he proclaims, “I can tell you one thing for sure. I’m never doing the kid thing again. It’s too damn hard.”

Sensing his despair over his parenting time, or lack thereof, I remain silent. It’s not as if I have any first-hand knowledge to impart, anyway. It’s clear this man loves his son and is grappling with how best to show his love. Knowing we’re on the same page about kids is comforting. Sort of.

I break the silence. “You’re doing the best you can. You call and visit. Keep it up. King will soon learn what his mother’s all about.”

“I can only hope so. I was an adult and it still took me a while to figure out my own father.” He pulls out his cell phone. “With all this talk, I’m going to call him right now.”

Once he finishes the call, I tuck his hair behind his ear. “I, for one, think King’s one lucky kid.”

His hazel eyes darken. “You know what I think, Sara Baby? I think I hit the jackpot when you gave me my first *denied* budget.” He nuzzles my neck and all of my thoughts fly out of the window.

Hours later, we lie in bed together, our limbs interconnected. I reach over and grab some of his curly locks

and rub them against his cheek. “Are you sure you want to keep all this? I know how much of a pain long hair can be.”

He tosses his head, causing the hair to slip through my fingers. “I’m used to it.” He trails kisses down my exposed neck, ending with my nipple between his teeth. It’s time for another ride on the Brax train.

I wake when sun shines through the curtains, illuminating the disaster area calling itself our room. Scraps of wrapping paper litter the floor, tape and empty rolls of the paper are on the table. Our clothes are on various spots on the floor. I don’t even want to think about the mess of wet towels in the bathroom.

My stomach churns. What’s happening to me? All the order has been stripped from my life, but I don’t care. I’d rather stay in bed with Brax for a little while longer.

We’re on borrowed time, and I know it. I’ll likely need to spend the majority of my day dealing with the car issues, and in a couple of days, Brax and the band are flying to LA for King’s birthday party. They’ll return to Phoenix for their gig in the evening. Which will be my last night with them before Stacey’s baptism.

The churning in my stomach kicks up a notch. I’m not ready for this to end. No man ever has made me feel the way Brax does. It’s not only about sex, although that’s pretty damn amazing. No. He listens to what I have to say and considers my suggestions. Even about his hair, which I still think he should cut. He values my opinions, even if he doesn’t agree with them.

Sighing, I kick off the blankets and make my way into the bathroom. At least I don’t have to give him up yet. He’ll be with me today. When my teeth are brushed, I turn on the

shower, wishing he would join me. But he was sleeping like a baby and I'm not going to wake him to deal with my car issue.

I step into the shower and let the water sluice over my body. This is one of the first times I've been alone since the accident, and I find myself dwelling on what happened. I woke up with a jerk when the car swerved into the guardrail. I'm lucky I escaped with only a few scrapes. I'm lucky I walked away at all.

*I'm lucky I didn't kill someone.*

The time-tested way I've dealt with problems in the past resurfaces. I consider every misstep I took, analyze each, and criticize myself for my many, many faults.

When I get out of the shower, a jeans-clad Brax waits for me with a towel.

“What's wrong?” he says at once.

I unclench my jaw. “Oh, nothing. I was beating myself up about the accident.” I wrap the towel around my body and take another for my hair.

“Hey, don't do that. It was an accident and the only thing damaged was the car. A thing. It can be fixed.” His eyes narrow. “Still, I don't like how you took a chance with your own life. I think you deserve a spanking so you never forget the lesson you learned.”

“Spanking? No one's ever spanked me before.” A spark of excitement shoots up my spine remembering the few swats he's given me during sex, but I dismiss it.

“There's always a first time.” He cracks his knuckles. “I think I'm the guy to do it.”

I shake my turbaned head and brush past him, forcing my eyes to remain above the impressive bulge at the front of his jeans. “You don’t need to do it. Believe me, I won’t forget.”

He grabs my wrist. “You know, I think I do.” He drags me into the bedroom and sits on the chair. Patting his legs, he says, “Come here.”

“Are you nuts?”

“Nope. I don’t like how you’re beating yourself up over the accident. Mistakes happen. Even dangerous ones. Now, come here.” He tugs my arm and I fall forward, sprawling across his lap.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I try to push up, but his hand is on my lower back, keeping me in place. A strange sensation of longing washes over me.

“I’m not. I want you to remember to be safe always. If you’re too tired to drive, you pull over at a rest stop. Nothing’s important enough for you to risk your safety. Ever.” Air hits my butt as he pulls the bottom of the towel upward.

For some strange reason, his words zing straight to my heart. It’s the caring behind them that makes my breathing hitch. “I won’t forget, Brax. Now, let me up.” I half-push against his lap again, but only have limited movement in my arms.

His hand rubs against one of my bottom cheeks. He’s really going to do this? More importantly—I can’t like it. I muster what I expect my partner voice will be. “No!”

“Nice try.” My imposing voice does nothing to forestall him. His hand crashes on my butt in two quick successions. I struggle in his lap, which he rubs and hits me twice more.

It's oddly sensual. Arousing. I'm getting wet. "Stop it. I'll be more careful. Just. Stop!"

He rubs my butt, then leans over and kisses each one of my cheeks. His lips feel cool against my hot skin.

"Promise me."

"Yes," I whimper.

His hand rains down on me again twice more, then he sits me up, letting me go. I scramble to my feet, taking my towel with me and wrapping it tighter against me. Forcing a frown to cover my body's reaction to one of the most confusing—yet sensual—experiences I've had, I ask, "Was that necessary?"

"I believe so. You have to be safe, Sara."

"Why? Why do you care?"

He stands and takes his time tucking the chair back under the table. When I'm certain he's not going to reply, he says, "I care because somehow you've gotten under my skin. You make me feel things I haven't. Ever. I want you with me for a long, long time."

All the fight flows out of me. This man, this rockstar I've idolized for years, confessed he wants me with him? Well, wrap me in bacon and call me done. "Really?"

He nods and takes measured steps to me. "Yes. You have no reason to be insecure. You're an amazing woman, Sara Anderson. You've made your own way without anyone's help. On your own smarts. I admire you. It's much harder to rely on brains rather than looks with luck."

"What are you talking about? Your looks may be part of the package, but your creativity got you your big break. It's why the audiences keep coming."

His eyes rake over my face. “Looks like we have a mutual admiration society going on. Let’s say I like you, Sara. I want you in my life...whatever that means.” He points to my towel-covered chest. “You have a big heart.”

Cold. Prissy. Boring. Those are the words men use to describe me. No one else has ever said such wonderful things to me. About me. “I want to be this woman. For you.”

His finger moves to the end of the towel and pulls. It falls to the floor. “Better.”

After another couple of rounds of amazing sex—no recovery time needed for Brax, for sure—I sit at the table while he showers. Time to be responsible. Rummaging through my purse, I find the receipt from the tow truck and call the rental company.

I’m off the phone by the time Brax walks out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his middle. “What did they say?”

“Car’s totaled. I bent the axle or something. The rental insurance will pay for everything. I told them I wouldn’t need another car. I figure I can fly to Phoenix in a couple of days.”

He nods and puts on his jeans and a khaki T-shirt that matches his eyes. He inhales. “Actually, I’d like you to come with us to LA before Phoenix.”

I cock my head. “For King’s party?”

“Yes. I promised him Hunte would play a set, so we’re all headed there for the day on the fourteenth, then out to Phoenix in the evening for our gig. It would mean a lot to me if you would come.”

My hands go cold. He wants me to meet his son? “You don’t need your accountant there for the party.”

He walks to me, bends, and wraps his arms around my shoulders. I sink into his hard body as he breathes into my ear. “No, I don’t. But I do need my girlfriend.”

My rational brain says this is moving too fast. How can I be his “girlfriend” after knowing him for a little more than a month? Plus we’ve hated each other for most of this time.

His hand runs down my spine. “What do you say, Sara Baby?”

In a reedy voice, I ask, “Isn’t it too early for me to meet your son?”

He bites my earlobe. “I think it’s the perfect time.”

Brax wants me with him, and I don’t want to be anywhere else. He called me his “girlfriend.” He squeezes my butt, coaxing the words out of my mouth. “I’d be honored, boyfriend.”

He doesn’t say a word, rather pulls me in for a kiss that’s different from any of the others we’ve shared. A deeper connection underscores it.

Brax is the first to separate. “I guess we’re stuck in Jackpot until we head to LA, huh?” He smiles.

“I think so.” I return his smile.

“Let’s go get breakfast or brunch, and explore.”

“Shouldn’t we pick up some brochures and see what’s around?”

“Where’s the fun in that? Live a little, Sara Baby.”

Normally, the thought of living off-schedule, without a plan or an agenda, would alarm me. Now, my heartrate ticks

up and I find myself smiling back. Yes, I'd like to live a little with this rock god.

And we do. For two days, we explore without a plan, going wherever our whims take us. Which, more often than not, is to bed.

I've never had more fun in my life.



## BRAX



**W**e wait in the airport lounge for our flight to LA. I was able to switch my flight to leave from nearby Twin Falls, Idaho while the rest of the band will be flying in from Las Vegas. I even managed to pay for Sara's ticket, although she put up a fight. She really needs to let up on the money stuff. A couple of hundred dollars won't break me. After the party, we'll board a flight to Phoenix together.

"Whose faces are on Mt. Rushmore?" she quizzes from the GED study guide.

I think back to the monument we visited maybe two years ago. "Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson and," I squint, focusing on the remembered image, "Teddy Roosevelt."

"Good job! I couldn't remember the last one."

I puff up. Maybe I'll be able to pass this test after all. "Thanks. We visited it as a band. It's cool."

"Oh, wow. I've only seen it in *National Geographic*."

Even though she flips to another page, I've had enough for now. My leg bounces in double-time as an announcement about our flight booms over the loudspeaker. The prospect of seeing Hilary looms large. And King. He's my son, yes, and I love him, but months have passed since we last saw each other

face-to-face. What if he's changed and we no longer connect? What if Hilary has spewed so much shit about me he's starting to turn against me?

Sara says, "Here's a good one."

I put my hand on her knee. "Can we hold off? I need a break."

Her steel grey eyes catch mine, then she nods and closes the book. "It's going to be fine. Your son will be the talk of his class when Hunte plays in his backyard."

How can she read my mind like this? "Thanks. Seeing Hilary gets under my skin, you know? All I want is to spend quality time with King."

She lowers her hand on top of mine and squeezes it. "You will."

Within the span of these few days, this woman has invaded my mind, my life, and my heart. I don't know how she jumped from accountant to the wind beneath my music, but I like it. A lot. With Sara at my side, it's like I can conquer anything. Even Hilary.



**I**n the L.A. airport, I keep my head down as we make it through the open spaces and grab a taxi. The drive to my old house—well, it's still in my name, but I haven't lived there for years—takes another hour, thanks to traffic. We'll still arrive well before any guests, though. En route, my cell phone rings.

"We're having a little problem."

I frown. "What's up, Colton?" Sara's chin lands on my shoulder, offering silent support. She was able to hide most of

her scratches from the car wreck with makeup. I stroke her hair, grateful she's with me.

“Our flight has been delayed four hours due to weather conditions.”

I look out the window. “It's bright blue skies here. What are they talking about?”

“Our plane is coming in from New York City. A bad storm out there is stacking up delays.”

“Shit.” Our taxi driver stops in front of the gate. “Hold on.” I roll down the window and press the button for Hilary to let me in. After a minute, her voice grates through the intercom and she buzzes us in. Thank God she didn't give me a hard time.

Returning to the call, I say, “We just pulled up to Hilary's. I'll figure something out and get back to you shortly. You guys have to be here. I promised King we'd perform at his party, and I'm not breaking my word.”

“Good luck, man.”

A moment later, the taxi stops in front of the double doors. I help Sara out and we collect our luggage and King's presents. “Come on. The guys have been delayed. I need to sort out how they're going to get here.”

“Why don't you let me take care of that. You should spend as much time with King as possible.”

While her offer is appealing, I shake my head. “No. This is my problem. I'll fix it.” I grab her free hand and together we climb the front steps. Even though it's my name on the deed, I press the doorbell and wait. My leg bounces up and down in triple-time.

Sara's hand lands on my thigh, attempting to stay the nervous bouncing, when the door opens. Hilary stands in front of us, her eyes riveted on Sara's hand.

"You brought your latest whore with you, dropout?"

Sara's fingers stiffen, then she removes her hand from my leg. I inhale a deep breath. "Hilary, watch your mouth. Sara's a lady." This is not the way I'd pictured making introductions, although I knew better than to think it would go well.

Hilary huffs and looks Sara over like she's a piece of trash. "Clearly."

While I don't give a flying fuck what she thinks about me, I know Sara cares about her reputation. "She's a whiz with finances and has done a lot to help the band. Let us in."

Sara reaches out her hand. "I'm Sara Anderson. I'm Hunte's tour accountant."

Hilary snorts. "Tour accountant? How rich. I bet you give really good ... *spreadsheets*."

Sara drops her hand and I intertwine our fingers, squeezing them to give her courage. "Hilary, get over yourself. I'm only here for King, and Sara's with me."

Hilary waves her hand dismissively. "I don't care if you brought twenty women you're boffing. King couldn't think any less of you, and neither can I." She turns and walks away from the open door.

Sara's gaze catches mine. "Lovely," she says in an undertone.

"You don't know the half of it. Come on, let's go. I need to sort out the transportation stuff and spend time with my son."

We enter the foyer, which boasts a double staircase up to the bedrooms on the second level. The staircase is the reason I bought this house. Sara takes two steps and stops. “I need to use the restroom.”

After putting our luggage into a nearby coat closet, I show her to the half-bath around the corner. I plop down on the couch to wait. As the party’s outside, nothing much by way of decorations has been done in here. Unless you count the extravagant floral arrangements littered all over, and balloon arch across the foyer. Not to mention life-sized balloon figures in the corners.

Disregarding my surroundings, my mind wanders to the problem at hand—how am I going to get the band here? My eyes land on a magazine on the coffee table and the headline says, “Pilot-for-hire.” I wish I had you on speed dial, buddy.

Then it hits me. Why not?

I pick up the magazine and flip to the article about chartered planes. They’re expensive, but desperate times and all that. Our gig in Phoenix will cover this cost. Besides, our entourage was cut, so we must have saved some money there. No weather issues will prevent a flight from Las Vegas to here. Without any further thought, I grab my cell phone and make the emergency arrangements. Sara joins me as I finish telling Colton the details. When I hang up, relieved, I sigh.

“Did you figure it all out?”

Not wanting to share how the band’s getting here—or its crazy ass price tag—I reply, “Got them another flight. They should be here in a couple of hours.”

“Perfect.”

I smile. It'll be another month before she gets the bank statement and learns I used the band's checking account to make the arrangements. Our tour will have absorbed this new cost by then. Standing, I ask, "Ready to meet King?"

She swallows. "Are you sure you want me there with you?"

"Yes. I'm proud you're with me, and I want you meet him. Let's go." Assuming he's in his bedroom, I pick up his bags of presents and lead her through the foyer and up the stairs. We walk down the right hallway and stop in front of a closed door. After putting the bags down, I suck in a deep breath. Every single time I get to see my son, the same worries about whether he still loves me resurface. The nerves are much worse than playing a gig—because I *need* his love. My presents should help.

Glancing at Sara for one final shot of support, I knock. "King."

"Daddy!" The door flies open and my little boy rushes me, wrapping his arms around my legs.

My heart swells. Hilary hasn't poisoned him yet. He still loves me. Sara murmurs something about letting us have the reunion we deserve. My hand brushes over the top of his blond head and pull him tighter to my legs. "How are you doing, buddy?"

"Good," he replies, directly into my thighs.

Laughing, I extricate myself from him enough to get down on my haunches and give him a proper hug. "It's great to see you, little guy."

King straightens. "I'm not little anymore. I'm eight." He holds up eight fingers.

“That you are.” I pull him in for another hug. I’ll never tire of these.

His scrawny arms wrap around my neck. I stand, swooping him into the air, and he shouts out, “Daddy! Put me down! I’m too big to be carried like a baby!”

“You’ll always be my baby.”

He pulls back and scrunches up his nose at me. Then his eyes brighten. They’re the same color as mine, but their expressive amber irises have taken on a more calculating look, one I’ve seen in Hilary’s eyes more times than I can count. I squeeze him to my body to erase it. Muffled against my neck, he asks, “What did you bring me, Daddy?”

“Well, it is your birthday.” Sighing, I lower him to the floor and turn to Sara, who stands next to the bags of presents. Ignoring them for a moment, I counter, “I brought a friend with me. Would you like to meet her?”

King follows my line of sight, hands balled on his hips, legs apart. I recognize his stance. Even though I don’t spend nearly enough time with my son, there’s no denying he’s mine. “She’s a girl.”

I chuckle and tousle his short blond hair. Straight, like mine used to be. As the lead singer, I permed mine for our first tour. It stuck.

I tug on a lock of his hair. “That she is.” I hold his hand and bring him over to where Sara’s standing. She’s watching us with a soft expression—I’ve never seen her grey eyes look warmer.

“Sara, this is my son, King. King, this is my girlfriend, Sara.”

She bends down to an even level with him and stretches out her hand. “Hi. I’ve heard so much about you.”

He sets his bottom lip into a semi-sneer. “I haven’t heard anything about you.”

“King!” I suck in my breath.

He locks eyes with me and shrugs. “Well, I haven’t.”

“He has a point, Brax.” Sara places her hands on my son’s shoulders. “Happy birthday.”

His eyes drag back up to hers. “Thank you.”

Thank God he has *some* manners. “Sara is my band’s tour accountant.”

He tilts his head up to me and frowns. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” Sara answers for me, “I keep track of all the money your daddy’s band brings in and make sure they spend less.”

A smile breaks across my son’s face. “So he can bring me presents for my birthday?”

She laughs, the sound traveling down my spine and landing directly in my groin. What has this woman done to me? “Yes, and so you can live in this pretty house.”

King’s gaze lands on his bags of presents during her explanation and he gravitates toward them before her sentiment is fully expressed. “Are these for me, Daddy?”

Shaking my head, I reply, “Yes. Happy birthday, kiddo. Let’s bring them into your room and you can open them.”

Within minutes, he digs into the bags, screaming and squealing as he opens each individual gift. His happiness



seems genuine—innocent, even—despite an edge of covetousness. After unwrapping the last game, he lets out a loud whoop. “Trevor and Blaine and Jewel are going to be so jealous! I can’t wait ’til they get here!”

“I’m glad you’re happy with your presents,” I remark. Although, I hope he doesn’t lord them over his friends.

“You missed one,” Sara says, pulling the one video game she insisted on buying for him out of her tote. “This is from me.”

He races over and snatches it out of her hand, making quick work of unwrapping it.

“What do you say?”

King looks from me to Sara. “Thank you for my present.”

Satisfied with his response, I say, “Come on, let’s go set all of this set up.” While I attach the console to his television, Sara cleans up the mess he left behind. She sits on the bed and watches as I offer my son tips on how to master the first of the new games. Her presence is an unexpected comfort. A balm.

Sara keeps surprising me.

The three of us remain in a cocoon of comfort and love and video games, which is broken by the slamming of car doors. Hilary screams my son’s name. Guess the party’s starting. King jumps to his feet and yells, “Coming!” He pivots on his heel, gives me a kiss and races out of the room in a flurry of excitement.

Left all alone with Sara, I take a moment to absorb my son’s room. Shelves of stuffed animals, sports paraphernalia, and ticket stubs punctuate the navy blue walls. Somehow it’s a comfort to know he still likes stuffed animals. His desk sits off to the side, filled with his elementary school books.

Smiling, I reach out for Sara and bring her in for a hug. I haven't felt this at peace in ages. When she sighs and rests her head against my chest, I know she feels the same way.

"Thank you." I kiss her forehead.

"No, thank you for including me today. Your son obviously loves you."

"Feeling's mutual." Right now, though, I don't want to think about parent-child love. No. I'm all about adult love. I frame her face and kiss her in the middle of my son's room as the sun streams through his window. Even though we had sex a few hours ago, I need her again.

Grabbing her hand, I drag her across the hall, into an empty bedroom. After locking the door, I let my hands travel down to her hips, pulling our groins together. Despite our slight height difference, we fit together like no one I've ever been with before. I strip her pants off her body and ease my fingers into her pussy, where they belong. I make her come against my fingers, accepting her shouts of completion in my mouth. Handing her a condom, I shuck my jeans and lower her to the carpet—the bed being too far away.

Bracing myself above her, I kiss the spot behind her ear that drives her insane. Her legs open and I slide home.

She pushes my hair off my forehead. "Brax."

The way she says my name makes me feel as if I'm a giant among men. "Yes, Sara Baby."

I thrust into her, again and again, swallowing both our moans. Her hips buck into mine and I pound into her until she clenches around me and I let go with her. Shuddering, I collapse onto her, my lips attached to her neck.

When I can breathe again, I push back onto my knees and sit on my heels, looking down at this gorgeous woman who makes me lose my mind. “You’re some sort of sorceress. I like it. A lot.”

I pause. I really like this woman. I *more* than like her. My tour accountant. The bean counter who valiantly tries to keep us under control. The woman I used to call Miss Priss—how wrong was I? The buttoned-up woman who doesn’t know how sexy she is. I offer her my hand. “Let’s get dressed and go to the party.”

We put ourselves back together. I check my watch—the band should be here any minute. Sara’s pink-stained cheeks are the only giveaway about how we’ve spent the past half hour. Smoothing out her hair, I bite her bottom lip. Her tongue snakes out to soothe it, and I capture it in my mouth.

Then, before I can do or say something more radical, I force myself to say, “Let’s go.”

## SARA



I pass through the French doors and into the background, letting my eyes roam over the expanse of backyard, complete with an Olympic-sized pool. Life-sized balloon figures attract my attention, as does a massive tent set up with food and drinks. A big trampoline is off to the side, and a stage is set up opposite. While extravagant, it doesn't seem like the party carries the price tag Brax mentioned. My guess is Hilary pocketed the extra. Probably with the sparkly diamond bracelet I spied around her wrist. Another reason to dislike the witch.

Brax approaches his son and greets his friends as if they were full-grown men and women rather than a gaggle of kids. He doles out smiles and high-fives like he does at band events. He also glad-handles the parents, most of whom appear to be star-struck. Not all of them. A huddle of women shoot him the evil eye, and Hilary, of course, is at its center.

Watching Brax interact with King warms my heart. His son clearly adores him—and his adoration brings out something soft in Brax. As if they could hear my thoughts, King grabs his father's hand and drags him over to another group of kids. His eyes shine as he introduces Brax to the group. Hilary's gaggle of women turn their backs to the display. Whatever. Can't his ex-wife appreciate the fact he's making an effort?

Wanting something to do, I walk toward the table filled with drinks and grab a can of Pepsi. A woman I haven't seen before takes one as well. "Friend of King's or Hilary's?" she asks.

I open the tab but don't take a sip. "King's. You?"

She nods. "My son goes to school with him. Hilary's been very supportive of our PTA."

"Good to hear." I bring the can of soda to my lips and turn to leave the PTA lady behind.

She doesn't take my hint. "Can you believe it? Braxton deigned to make an appearance."

I stop as if my calculator died. Inhaling a deep breath, I turn on my heel and give her the once-over. Her hair is cut in a fashionable style, and her clothes are expensive and pressed to perfection. Bet her underwear are high-end, too. I grit out, "He *is* King's father."

She waves her can of soda. "Whatever. Sperm donor more like it, for all the time he spends with his son. He flies in for big occasions and leaves Hilary to fend for the day-to-day grind."

"He's on tour with his band, making money so she can live here." I wave toward the house. "He can't be in two places at once."

Her eyes roll. "No one cares about Hunte anymore. Heard his last concert was canceled due to low ticket sales." She cackles. "Maybe he'll be a full-time father sooner than anyone anticipates."

Ignoring the fact she knows about the Salt Lake City cancellation, I spit, "Leaving Hilary to do what, exactly?"

Seems to me his alimony payments give her a pretty cushy life.”

“That *is* true.” A new voice enters our conversation. Hilary’s.

Closing my eyes, I stare at the newcomer to our tête-à-tête. I force myself to be civil. “Beautiful backyard you have, Hilary.”

“One King loves. Not that your”—she looks me up and down—“Sugar Daddy has taken the time to find out, or learn anything about his son.” Turning to her friend, she says, “You met Brax’s newest plaything?”

The other woman’s eyes grow wide before settling into slits. “No wonder you were defending him. Well, enjoy it while you can. He doesn’t keep anyone around for long. Must be your lucky week.”

I suck in my breath, but Todd catches my eye near the makeshift stage. Even the band’s sleazy manager is a welcome breath of fresh air. Brax’s arrangements worked out and the guys made it here to play for the party. Brax wasn’t about to let King down—which gives me the perfect excuse to leave an unpleasant conversation. Stalking away from Hilary and her sidekick, I greet him. “Hi, Todd.”

“Oh, hi, Sara. Good to see you up and about.”

“I wasn’t really hurt. Didn’t even go the hospital.”

“Glad to hear it.”

The other guys greet me before they jump up on the stage. They work together on the set-up as Todd consults some paperwork. Figuring I’ve been dismissed again, I observe the band as they work in pre-choreographed moves. Ones they know by rote. Soon they start tuning their instruments. Brax

hops up on stage and joins them in the organized chaos. Hmmm.

Organized chaos.

Perhaps I've been looking at things the wrong way. Brax's life has always seemed incompatible with mine, but perhaps we could reach some sort of compromise together—some sort of *organized chaos*.

He scans the crowd, and King waves. Brax's talented lips tilt into a warm smile as he returns his son's wave, but he doesn't stop surveying the lawn. When he turns and finds me, his smile broadens and he motions me forward.

He can't want me to join him on stage? Pursing my lips, I shake my head. Instead of staying put, Brax heads to the edge of the stage. Stopping above me with his guitar strapped around his body, he pushes his sunglasses on top of his head. "Having a good time?"

Ha! As if. Since I don't want to disappoint him, I plaster a smile on my face. "It's a beautiful place." Not a lie.

His gaze travels over the grounds, pride shining through every pore. Even though he doesn't live here, he bought this house with his own money. His first home purchase. Like I'm pleased with my home purchase, he has reason to be proud. This was his first statement proving he made it, after being a homeless teen.

"It'll do." He chuckles, then strums his guitar. "We're about to go on. Stay back here so I know exactly where you are."

"Will do." Happily. Hilary won't be anywhere near the stage.

He leans over and kisses me. It's a kiss of possession. He's marking me as his in front of his band and ex-wife. His son. Like the balance sheet is in the positive. He breaks our kiss and winks, then joins the rest of his band at the front of the stage. Who are watching us with rounded eyes and open mouths.

With a flourish of his guitar, Brax places his sunglasses in their proper position and introduces himself and Hunte. "We're here to celebrate a very important birthday. As he told me earlier, my son, King, is eight today." He holds up eight fingers and garners chuckles from most of the crowd. Minus Hilary and her cronies.

Speaking of the witch, Hilary runs onstage and grabs the microphone from Brax. "I want to thank everyone for coming to *my* son's birthday party and hope you have a wonderful time. The buffet is now open." Adopting a malicious sneer, she hands the mic back to Brax. Several people start toward the food tables under the tent.

Bitch. She *had* to upstage Hunte's concert. My hands ball into fists. I've never wanted to hit someone before, but a primal part of me wants to grab her bleached-blond hair and scratch her eyes out. Brax's words stop me in my tracks.

"We know we can't compete with prime rib, although we hope 'Your Kiss Destroys Me' will forestall the mad rush." The familiar stains of their first hit ring out over the backyard. As one, the crowd shuffles back to the concert area.

Well-played. Hilary looks like she'd like to set the stage on fire, but I don't spare her more than a glance—the music pounds through my body and I join the crowd in singing the well-known lyrics.



Forty-five minutes later, the band finishes. About ninety percent of the guests stuck with them through their set. Hilary is surrounded by her friends at a couple of tables, while King and his friends remained front and center from beginning to end.

Brax sets his guitar down on its stand and hops off the stage, landing in the middle of King's group. He jokes with them, but his attention is all for King.

"Gotta hand it to him. He loves that boy," Colton remarks, making me jump. "Sorry to frighten you." He approached me from the side, and I was so fixated on Brax I didn't notice.

Shaking my head, I clasp my hands together. "No worries. I'd say it's a mutual admiration."

"No thanks to Hilary."

"No," I agree. "What's her deal? Brax pays her on time, like clockwork."

"Her pride. Brax wasn't a good husband."

His use of the word "husband" travels through my body. It's mad, but the thought of Brax being a "husband" makes funny things swirl in my stomach. I sigh with the possibility of Brax and me and forever. Could we really have a future? He's on tour more often than not and I'm returning to Chicago tomorrow. Where I'll be made partner. I certainly won't have time to follow the band around on tour anymore, no matter how much I might want to.

Colton stands in front of me, waiting for my response. I clear my throat. "Brax admitted it to me. He was young, they both were."

"True. He's grown up a lot, believe me. He's in a good place now." His voice drops. "I think you're good for him."

I give Colton my full attention. “He’s a great guy.” I take a deep breath. “We haven’t talked about the future.”

“Yet.” He tucks my hair behind my ear. His eyes are gentle as he repeats, “You’re good for him.”

“Hands off.” Brax’s lethal voice breaks into my conversation with his best friend, who raises his hands in surrender.

“Just getting to know your girl better, Brax.”

He pulls me into his side, wrapping a possessive arm around my waist. “Not too much better.”

Colton punches him on the shoulder. “I like you together. Got a good feeling about you two.”

My heart thumps in double-time as Brax turns me to face him. He licks his lips. “Me, too.” All of my thoughts scatter when his lips claim mine. His tongue enters my mouth, and I forget about everything—the party, my flight to Chicago tomorrow morning, and all my questions about what’s to come. All I want to do is let him play my body the way he played his guitar onstage.

Clapping ends our kiss. When we break apart, Colton says, “I get it. I’m happy for you, man.” He claps his hands on our shoulders, linking us together. “However, unless you want to die right here on the spot courtesy of Hilary, I suggest you keep your relationship on the down low during the party.”

My eyes fly to the ground while heat rises up my neck. Brax’s large hand engulfs mine and he says, “Thanks, Colton. Let’s go mingle.”

We spend the next hour eating some of the delicious food Hilary had catered—with Brax’s money—and hanging with

the younger guests. After excusing myself to use the restroom, I make my way inside and wait in line.

My pager goes off. I dig it out of my back pocket and check the name. It's Donna from the office. She never pages me unless there's some sort of emergency. Abandoning my spot, I wander into the living room and find a phone.

"Donna, it's Sara. Got your page. What's wrong?" My mind's awl with possibilities. Did something go wrong with one of my other accounts? Or maybe something happened to my father, and Donna was the only one who could reach me?

"Sara. I'm glad you answered my page." She drops her voice. "We got a call from First National Bank."

My mind races. That's Hunte's bank. "What's going on? Is this about the flights?"

"You could say so."

"But flight changes only cost a few hundred dollars apiece. Not great, but no big deal."

"No big deal? A few hundred? Try again with several more zeros."

My face scrunches. "What are you talking about?"

"Because we're the accountants on record for Hunte, we get notified if an expenditure above ten thousand dollars is made via their checking account. We just received a doozie. Twenty-five thousand for a chartered flight from Las Vegas to LA today."

I suck in my breath. "What do you mean? The band flew here from Vegas, but they had commercial tickets."

"Not according to this notice. You were doing so well with them, but this expense will wipe out all your gains. If you

can't fix this, I'm afraid you won't be made partner." She's disappointed with me, I can tell, even more so when she hangs up without saying goodbye. I stand, staring at the blaring dial tone.

My heart races. I can't believe Brax chartered a flight to get the rest of his band here. How could he? He *knows* how badly the band needs to cut costs. He also knows what I have riding on this account. What did he think? I wouldn't find out?

"Looks like Braxton has really done it now." Hilary breezes into the living room. "Bully on him—he's taken down your career in the process. Partner, huh? I wouldn't have thought you were capable. Well, guess you can kiss your promotion good-bye."

At my stunned look, she shrugs. "Having several lines in the house comes in handy sometimes."

Hilary's taunting is the last thing I need. "Keep your nose out of my business," I grit out and turn on my heel. Her laughter escorts me out of the room as I stomp past the bathroom and out the French doors.

I zero in on the permed blond head, and my feet take me toward the man who single-handedly ruined my career. Not to mention threw his entire band back into the red.

Bright red.

He knew exactly what he was doing, and he distracted me from asking about the arrangements by introducing me to his son and then screwing me. He certainly screwed me over. Is he even incapable of understanding how budgets work?

I come to a halt in front of him. He's making a group of kids laugh. Makes sense. They're all at the same level. "We need to talk," I hiss.

His eyes get big, then crinkle at the corners in a way I used to think was endearing. He hugs his son. They exchange a few words, and King takes off with his friends to jump on the trampoline.

“What’s up, Sara Baby?”

My stomach tightens. “Do. Not. Call. Me. That.”

A frown forms across his forehead. He runs his hands down my arms, but I step back. “Talk to me.”

I nod toward an empty spot. No need to air this very dirty laundry in public, especially not when we’re in such a hostile place. Of course, Hilary already knows everything. When we get to the spot, I face him, my mind racing as blood thunders through my veins. “How dare you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I found out how you got the rest of Hunte here. It has to be the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. What on earth prompted you to charter a plane?”

He blows out a breath. “You heard, huh?”

“I’m your tour accountant. Yes. I heard.” My voice is low, my words seething.

He shrugs. “Listen, it’s no big deal. Our gig tonight will pay for the flight, and we’ll be all good.”

“Are you kidding me?” My voice raises an octave. “Twenty-five thousand dollars is not chump change, Braxton.”

When I use his professional name, his hands fist at his sides. “It’ll be fine. It was important for the guys to get here.”

I hold up one finger. “You could’ve played an acoustic set all by yourself.” A second finger joins the first. “You could’ve

skipped the concert all together.” I add a third digit. “You could’ve, I don’t know, played a concert video or booked your band on a later flight here and rearranged the timing for the party. All these things would’ve accomplished the same goal without blowing up Hunte’s budget.”

He shakes his head. “I promised King that Hunte would play at his party, and I wasn’t renegeing. The band’s here. What’s done is done.”

“What’s done is done? Really, Braxton? Can you even comprehend what this *twenty-five thousand dollar* expenditure means to your budget? You can’t make it appear like this.” I snap my fingers.

“Come on, Sara. We have a gig tonight. It’ll cover the flight. Don’t be overdramatic.”

Anger floods my bloodstream. “Me? Overdramatic? Really? When have I ever been anything but in control?” I tilt my head. “Oh wait. When I’m with you, I’m out of control. I shouldn’t be surprised—you thrive on melodrama.” I point to Hilary, who’s smiling as she openly watches our argument.

“Leave her out of this.” He grabs my shoulders and squeezes them. “It’s not a big deal. Stop acting like this signals the end of the world.”

“Perhaps it doesn’t. Of course, assuming your gigs keep coming in, and aren’t canceled like Salt Lake City.”

His fingers dig into my flesh. “They won’t be,” he responds through clenched teeth.

“Really? How do you know? You were blindsided by Salt Lake. Your concerts aren’t selling out anymore, if you hadn’t noticed.”

He steps back from me as if scalded. “I know what goes on with my career.”

“If that’s true, then you wouldn’t have spent tens of thousands of dollars on a stupid flight to get your buddies here to insulate you from spending time with your son.”

“Stop your nagging,” he growls. “And stop talking down to me as if I’m an idiot.”

I pull myself up to my full height and tilt my head down to his face. My rage builds. He keeps spending, spending, spending, never once stopping to think of the consequences. He claims he’s worried Hilary will poison his kid, but what lessons is he teaching King? “Maybe not an idiot, but definitely a child,” I snap. “Actions have consequences. Your reckless decision ruined my chance at partnership, you jerk.”

We stand in silence. Kids scream in the background, music plays over the loudspeakers, silverware clinks as it brushes against plates, adults talk to each other. Braxton and I stare each other down, his nostrils flaring and my chest heaving in time with the blood racing through my veins.

He breaks our impasse. “You should go. Get out of my sight.”

“Gladly.” Head held high, I stomp across the lawn, past the pool, and through the French doors. I make my way into the house. This time the bathroom’s free, and I let myself in. I’m washing my hands when it hits me. I need to leave, but I don’t know where I’m going.

Someone knocks on the door. “Occupied!” I shout.

Where should I go?

*Home.*

Now.

I leave the bathroom and return to the living room. Picking up a telephone book I noticed earlier, I find the number for Continental Airlines and reschedule my flight to leave from LAX tonight. Next, I call a local taxi service to pick me up and bring me to the airport. He'll be here in twenty minutes.

Placing the telephone back on its base, I pace the empty room.

Hilary prowls in from the hallway. "Leaving so soon?"

I don't want anything to do with Braxton, his ex-wife, or this house. Instead of responding, I turn my back and look out the bay window.

"You're better off without him." She puts her hand on my arm.

I fling my arm, tossing her hand off. "Don't presume you know anything."

She laughs and twirls around. "You don't think I know something about my ex-husband? He's all love and sex and devotion. Until he isn't. At least you're getting off easy. You don't have a kid tying you to him."

My heart breaks for King. The poor kid doesn't stand a chance, with this bitch for a mother and a mostly absentee father who showers him with gifts instead of time.

I close my eyes and turn to give her a piece of my mind, but she's already gone. Good. As much as I dislike the woman, she's not altogether wrong. It was stupid and blind of me to trust a man who has earned his reputation as a total spendthrift. Why didn't I take control over the flight arrangements for the band? Why did I let my heart get in the way of my head?



Why did I trust him?

I find my luggage and wait in the foyer. A familiar voice calls out to me. “What are you doing out here?” The voice is Ricky’s.

“I’m leaving.”

He bangs on his legs as if they were his drums, per usual. Even this mannerism bothers me. He nods. “See you in Phoenix.”

“No.”

His drumming pauses, then resumes. “Okay. Probably for the best. Now we can go back to the way things were.”

I open my mouth, ready to unleash some of my fury on him—does he really think their problems will end the moment I walk away?—but he wanders off. I take two steps to follow him before thinking better of it.

*Let him go. Let them all go. You have bigger issues to solve, Sara.*

Like how on earth I’m going to fill a twenty-five thousand hole and set their budget to right within a couple of days. Otherwise, everything I’ve worked for over the past nine years will be for nothing.

No. I *will* be named A&L’s newest woman partner.

The intercom beeps. My taxi has arrived.

## BRAX



**A**nger powered me ever since I left King’s party. Sara didn’t even say goodbye. By the time our concert wraps in Phoenix, I’m so pissed my growl is deeper than ever in “Your Kiss Destroys Me.”

I grit out the final words, “Thank you, Phoenix! You rock!” The audience—at capacity—screams and claps. Sara’s mocking words haunt me. “*Your concerts aren’t selling out anymore, if you haven’t noticed.*” Take that, Sara. Score one for Hunte.

After taking our bows, we file off the stage. Todd greets us with, “Great job, guys!”

“Beer.” Sunglasses on top of my head, I hold out my hand and someone slaps a Bud into it. I open the can and down half of it in one gulp. I hold out my other hand. “Beer!”

Todd laughs at me. “Hold off for a minute, Brax. There’s someone here who wants to speak with you, and you’re going to want all of your wits about you.”

“Who?” Colton asks.

“Better not be another tour accountant,” Ricky grumbles.

My hand crushes the mostly empty beer can, spraying Bud on me and the carpet, but I don’t say anything. It’s good Sara’s

gone. She made me think all kind of crazy things I'd do best to forget. She was right—it would never work between us.

So why does my heart ache for her?

Shaking my head, I follow the guys into the dressing room. Shep MacPhee stands in the center of the room. He's a producer with five songs on the current Top Ten list. A few years younger than me. I remember Sara's advice about working with a new producer—I already don't want to talk with the guy.

“Shep?” Colton asks, the name coming out as a question.

“Beer!” I hold out my hand. A cold one lands in it within a minute. Ignoring Todd's scowl, I open it and take a long drag.

“Hi there,” Shep's deep voice fills the room. He greets each of us in turn, shifting his gaze as he does so. I'm the last one he addresses. “And Braxton.”

I hold up my Bud in response.

He clears his throat. “I want to cut to the chase. Hunte is a legend. Your first album set all sorts of records bands continue to chase. You should be proud of your accomplishments.” He bows his head. Without looking up, he continues, “However, your new stuff is missing the mark. You haven't kept up with the times.” His head pops up. “That's where I'd like to come in.”

I shift from foot to foot, my free hand tugging on my ear, while Ricky drums on his leg. Lex, Colton, and Todd hang on Shep's every word.

They're buying what he's selling. Even if I'm not.

“I'm here to offer you a deal. I heard your newest song tonight. It's good. But if you work with me, I can make it

bigger than all of your prior hits combined.”

“Yeah, and I’ve got a bridge in Brooklyn to sell you,” I scoff. Ricky chuckles.

“Let’s hear him out, Brax,” Colton murmurs under his breath.

I meet my best friend’s gaze. He’s pleading with me to listen, so I cross my arms over my chest and nod. I owe him this much.

Shep continues. “As you probably already know, I’ve worked with a number of bands lately.” He reels off his latest accomplishments. Bully for him. I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off when Colton puts his hand on my forearm. All the fight rushes out of me with his simple gesture. It’s all too much. King’s party. Seeing Hilary. Sara leaving. Now this.

I don’t have it in me.

“I’d like to rework ‘Baby, Give It.’ You’d need to lay down some new vocals and riffs, not too much. I’ll do the rest in the studio. You’ll have final approval of the track, of course.”

“Why us?” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Shep runs his hand across the back of his neck. “The truth?”

I widen my stance, staring at the producer through narrowed eyes. If he says the name “Sara” or anything related to our tour accountant, I’m going all Terminator on his ass.

At my nod, Shep continues, “When I was growing up, you guys were my idols. ‘Your Kiss Destroys Me’? Brilliant. ‘Sunnyside Up’ and ‘Hard to Bare’ were amazing. It feels like

the music industry has passed you by, and I want to be the one to remind the world that Hunte is a lasting force and not a late-eighties fly-by-night. Apex Hits has signed off, pending your say-so.”

Shep’s words sink in. Lex’s eyes are bulging, Colton’s hands are pressed together in prayer. Ricky bangs against his leg faster than I’ve ever seen him before. Todd wears a shit-eating grin.

Me? Shep’s offering us what I’ve wanted. Another Number One hit. To be back on top of the music industry, selling out *stadiums* and not these smaller venues. To show my high school teachers, Hilary and *Sara* that Hunte is in it for the long haul. Everything will be back to normal.

I’ll show *her*.

Todd is the first to respond. “Shep, this is quite an offer. I’m sure the band would like to discuss it, so why don’t you and I go to another room to talk over the finer details.” Shep nods and the duo step out of the dressing room.

When the door closes, we all start speaking at once.

“I don’t know—”

“Can you believe—”

“Why do we need—”

“Let’s do it.” The last voice is mine. And I’m standing firm.

Ricky pipes up. “Why? We’re doing great. Our concerts are solid, we’re playing our music, the way *we* wrote it. Cal has approved everything. Why do we need some young, hotshot producer to come in and fool with success?”

“Because,” Lex replies, “We haven’t had a Number One hit in four years, almost five. Shep could do make it happen for us. Did you hear who he’s worked with?”

“I heard. Boy bands,” Ricky scoffs.

“They may be boy bands, but they’re successful boy bands,” Colton responds. “I, for one, would like to give those plastic Ken dolls a schooling in what it means to make real music.”

I stand back as the rest of my band hashes it out. I don’t participate in their discussion of Shep’s offer because I already know the outcome. We’re doing this. Hunte is going to be back on top. I can’t believe I’m agreeing with an idea proposed by Sara, but since she didn’t have a hand in it, I’m okay. Besides, Shep said he idolizes us. Basically.

I raise my hand. “Guys. I’m all for this collaboration. Who knows? We may hate what he does to the song. We all know the audiences aren’t reacting to the song the way we’d like. Let’s see what Shep can do. I, for one, would like to have a calendar jammed with big dates.”

Ricky’s lips purse, but Colton and Lex agree. After a minute, he shrugs. I place my hand into the center of our circle. “Let’s tell Todd it’s a go.” One by one, they add their hands into the circle. Ricky goes last.

We find Todd and our new producer. Our manager wears a broad smile when we tell him our decision, and Shep’s excited. For such a young guy, he really knows how to put out hits. Let’s hope his streak continues with us.



“OK, Braxton, please redo the chorus again. Think you can you go up an octave?”

I take a sip of water to lubricate my vocal cords. I’ve never gone up this high, but all I can do is try. I shrug. “Let’s see how I sound.” After a couple of takes, Shep’s satisfied and I’m shocked my voice held up to the challenge.

Shep’s been pushing each of us to try different things. Colton and Lex, like me, manage to give him what he wants. Gotta hand it to the kid, he’s good.

Ricky’s another story. He plays drums like a champ, but taking direction isn’t his strong suit. He wants to play the song how he’s always done it. After the fifth try, I walk into the recording studio where he’s seated behind his drum set.

“What’s up, Ricky?”

“This is bullshit. I hate being told how to play my drums. I know what I’m doing. We all do.”

Hooking my elbow on a tom tom, I nod. “We do. We’ve hit the top before. But we haven’t been there in a long time. Why don’t you listen to Shep this once? Try out his suggestions. You know, if we hate the end product, we don’t have to use it.”

He flips his drumstick several times, then blows out a breath. “Fine,” he grumbles. “I’ll do it. Not for him—for you.”

I bow my head. “Thanks. Let’s get this over with and see what he produces.”

He bangs on his drums, ending with a trio of cymbal crashes as I exit the studio and head back into the sound booth. I address Shep. “He’s going to try it your way.”

“Thanks, Braxton. We’re almost done.”

As Ricky plays his new drum beats, I let my mind wander. Lex, Colton, and I are hungry to be back on top, and we're going to bring Ricky with us, kicking and screaming if need be. I run my fingers through my hair, getting snagged on a knot. While I work it out, Colton comes over to me.

"You did good with the vocals, man."

"Thanks. You rocked it, too." I finally free my hair of the knot and check my reflection in a nearby mirror. Time to get another perm. What a pain in the ass.

"I know something bad went down with"—Colton looks both ways—"Sara. I'm here if you want to unload."

My back goes ramrod straight at the mention of her name. "No." It's been weeks since King's birthday party and no one besides him has dared mention her name to me.

He tries a different tact. "The daily budgets aren't quite the same without her."

In response, I roll my eyes. She cut back on our entourage's expenses so much—only allowing for concert tickets, transportation (with our roadies) and after-party food and drinks—we're down to four ladies.

"It seemed you two were getting cozy. She's a good person," he presses.

I give my best friend a pass, mainly because I want to blow off some steam about Sara. "How well do you know her? Seems to me she's a manipulative bitch, like Hilary." I grunt a laugh. "I sure can pick 'em."

Colton doesn't back down. "She was always looking out for the best interests of Hunte."



I snort. “It might have looked that way, but it was all about her career. She was trying to change us. Make us into something we’re not so she could get a promotion. We never gave a shit about money until she popped onto the scene. Plus, she was forcing me to study for my GED.”

He lifts an eyebrow. “Forcing?”

“She bought me a study guide and would take any available minute to quiz me. I felt like a performing dolphin.”

He shakes his head. “Shit, man. I didn’t know.”

“She hid it well. But that’s who she is. Which is why I sent her packing.” I’ll never forget the look on her face when I told her to get out of my sight at King’s party. Her stubborn jaw was set at an angle—but her eyes. Those steel grey eyes had turned a liquid blue, a sheen of unshed tears masking her pain. So what if I charged the chartered flight to Hunte’s checking account? With Shep, we’ll make it back in no time. And save her precious partnership.

It’s not like I miss her. Not. At. All.

Lex joins us. “He’s coming along pretty well.” He points to where Ricky is recording.

“Yeah,” Colton replies.

My mind wanders back to the sexy body of a woman who didn’t see her own beauty. I snap my fingers and the image disappears. Forever, hopefully. “I, for one, am interested in hearing what Shep does with this.”

When we’re finally done recording the extra parts, we leave him to do his magic.

“How about a nice, juicy steak dinner, guys?” Todd asks. “You deserve it for all of your hard work.”

“Sounds good,” Lex replies to Todd for all of us.

Once we’re at a local steakhouse, pitchers of beer littering the table and A-1 Steak Sauce bottles lined up at the ready, Todd addresses the group. “Shep said he should have a demo ready for us in the next week. In the meantime, I made another booking for next year.”

I set the fork I was fiddling with down on the table and join my bandmates in staring at our tour manager. This news sure beats the cancellation of our Salt Lake City gig.

“What’s up?” I ask for all of us.

“A Valentine’s Day charity concert.”

Fuck. I forgot I told him to book us at the At Your Door event back when I was with Sara...

Todd raises his hand. “Shep said the remix should hit the airwaves by then, and it would be a good way to amp up Hunte’s profile with a fundraiser. It could be the live debut—a good way for us to work out the kinks, since we’re not being paid.”

Lex asks, “Like a dry run?”

“Yeah,” Todd answers. “Low exposure. If it’s a hit, the charity will benefit. If not, no harm, no foul.”

I roll my eyes. “Fine. Let’s hope Shep’s the miracle worker he claims to be.” I tug on the ends of my hair. Shit. I still need to make an appointment to get this thing permed again.

Decision made, the waitress brings out our steaks, and talk turns to more enjoyable subjects. Like after-parties and booze and broads. Yeah, so much better than having the nagging tour accountant around.

So much better.

## SARA



**A**rriving home from LA, I flick on the lights and drop my suitcase in my living room. My plants all look healthy, thanks to Joanna. My mail is piled on my dining room table courtesy of her as well. I flip through the envelopes, separating the bills from the catalogs and junk mail. I stop on a Halloween card from my aunt—my mother’s sister—who never misses an opportunity to increase the value of Hallmark’s stock. I open the card, which contains a five-dollar bill, and smile. She means well.

After placing the “Boo!” card upright on the table behind my sofa, I head into the kitchen and put a mug filled with water into the microwave. Reaching into the cabinet, I take out a box of tea. I select an herbal tea bag, something to soothe my rattled nerves.

While the water heats, I bring my suitcase into my bedroom to unpack. It’ll be nice to sleep in my own bed. *Where Braxton has never been.* I open my closet door and inhale the clean scent of my clothes. My blazers and skirts and blouses are all lined up perfectly. A sense of calm descends.

The beeping of the microwave brings me back to the kitchen, and I plop the tea bag into my mug to steep, picturing it as Braxton’s face. How dare he use the Hunte checking

account to fly the guys to his son's birthday party on a chartered plane? My blood boils faster than the water in my mug.

One nagging thought resurfaces—how am I going to clean up this mess? Braxton thinks his Phoenix gig will magically cover the cost, but that money has already been earmarked for other debts.

The man is a menace—to himself most of all, but he's likely ruined my career. Not to mention the fact he's put his own band in a really bad situation. If one more venue cancels—which is a real possibility, all things considered—then the only solution will be bankruptcy. A&L will drop them before it happens, of course, and Braxton will be someone else's problem.

Why does this possibility make me feel worse?

I wrap the tea bag around my spoon and squeeze, then return to my bedroom to unpack. Making a large pile of clothes for the dry cleaner, I put my shoes back into their places. I bet Braxton's never met a shoe tree.

The invitation to Stacey's baptism lies on my dresser. Tomorrow's for family, while tonight's for me. I'm going to take a bubble bath and curl up in my bed to sleep the night away. Something I haven't done in ages. Thanks to Braxton.

Scowling, I let out a loud yell. He has to stop invading my thoughts. I run the bath, add some bubbles and make quick work of my clothes. Sinking into the warm water, I lean back against the plush towel behind my neck and allow my muscles to relax. The musky scent comforts me. Until I realize it smells like Braxton. Sitting up, I toss the towel onto the floor and growl. Is nothing sacred?

I put on my pajamas and climb into bed, reaching over to set my alarm. The bed is comfortable, so much more than many of the hotel beds I've slept on these last weeks, but sleep won't come. I replay our break-up, over and over. The way he dismissed my very real concerns. His accusation that I'm like his ex-wife. I turn over and over, punching my pillow. Finally, I fall into a restless slumber.

The alarm wakes me too soon. I drag my weary body out of bed and get ready to play my role as Stacey's godmother. Since I didn't tell anyone I'd be back home, they should be surprised to see me. Or not. I committed to being here, so I'm sure my attendance is a foregone conclusion.

That's me. Old reliable.

The ceremony goes off without a hitch, other than the baby sleeping through the whole thing. Joanna's there like she said she'd be—she's reliable too—and I manage a somewhat convincing smile when I congratulate her and her husband on their upcoming little one. Before I know it, I'm seated with my family around a table at a celebratory dinner.

My father asks about my time on the road.

"It was very interesting to see how my daily budgets played out in real time," I say, shooting for the most diplomatic answer possible. "I realized some of my line items were way too restrictive. I had no idea prices could be more inflated than they are here in Chicago."

He nods. "I think it was a good idea for you to get out of your office. Sounds like you learned some valuable lessons."

"I did." Like how to climax at a man's hand, tongue, and dick. How to let go of control, even for a little while. Not to

mention how much I liked it. I clear my throat and reach for my goblet of water.

“Very good. Now, when should we expect the next piece of good news? When do the partners meet over at A&L?”

I rub my clammy hands on my napkin. “We should hear in the next couple of weeks.” If I can’t get the Hunte budget back on track *pronto*, all my hopes will be dashed. All because of Braxton.

Stacey lets out a howl, and Billy tries to shush her. The baby is so cute—even her howls are adorable. “She was startled when she woke up in a new location,” my brother explains, running his fingers over her hair. I’ve never seen him this attentive before.

A part of me melts. It’s like when King wrapped his arms around Braxton’s legs.

I shunt the visual to the side. *Get a grip, Sara.* Kids aren’t in your future. Besides, you never belonged in his world.

I focus on the meal and saying the right things. For the rest of the party, I refuse to let my mind wander down unwanted rabbit holes. It won’t help me or anyone else if I continue to dwell on what was.

The next day, I’m back in the office staring at numbers that don’t add up. In more than twenty-five thousand different ways.

A knock brings me up for air. Max stands in my office doorway, one of his arms casually leaning against the doorframe. How did I ever find him attractive? He certainly is selfish in bed. I push away from my desk.

“Max?”

“So, did you enjoy your time as a groupie?”

My jaw clenches. “I wasn’t a groupie, I was the tour accountant, you ass.”

His eyes widen at my use of a profanity. Why do I let him rile me up so much? “I see the band rubbed off on you.”

I swallow my tongue. He’s not worth it. “What do you want?”

He holds up his hands. “Can’t a guy inquire after his co-worker?”

A “pffft” escapes my lips. “You better watch out, Max, or someone might think you care.” Not me.

He coughs twice, then pushes away from the doorframe. The fluorescent overhead lighting glints off his cufflinks as he straightens his shirt. “Heard there was a little snafu with the budget. Too bad. Looked like you were trying to grab my spot as partner for a while there.” He pats me on the head. “Guess there’s no worry of *that* happening now.”

Instead of moving back, I take a step forward and invade his personal space. My index finger connects with his chest. It’s not scrawny, by any measure, but he’s not as defined as Brax. Braxton.

*Stop comparing them, Sara, they’re both assholes!*

“Don’t count me out yet.”

He smiles, flashing his perfect white teeth at me. “I’m not worried. I know what I’ve done to deserve this.” He bends at the waist to look me in the eye. “I’m going to be the next partner, and you’re going to be the next associate to resign.” He turns on his Gucci-loafered feet, leaving me standing with my hands fisted at my sides.

Prick.

Well, maybe the crude language of the band did rub off on me a little bit. But Max deserves to be called what he is. Huffing, I return to my seat behind the desk and look for ways to take the profit and loss statement out of the red.

Two hours later, the numbers still don't add up. In fact, the deeper I go into them, the worse things get. I toss my red pen onto my desk and stand, stretching my back. Taking the watering can out from behind the credenza, I go to the bathroom and fill it with water.

Back in my office, I give a plant some much needed water. "What do you think, Jade?" I add a spike of plant food to the soil. One of my colleagues walks by my office, his hand smoothing out his mustache.

A memory surfaces of Todd doing the same thing after we had a contentious discussion about some missing receipts.

*That's it.*

The key to Hunte's accounting issues.

I kiss the plump green leaf and scurry back to my desk. I need to back up to the beginning of the year.

"Burning the midnight oil, I see. I've missed you around here."

Donna's voice penetrates my brain. Bleary-eyed, I glance at the door. "Hi, Donna."

I motion for her to come in. Sitting in one of my blue guest chairs, she says, "I'm sorry about the Hunte account. You were doing well with them, and I'm going to push this fact at our meeting."



“Thanks. The meeting’s Friday, right?” She nods. I still have four days to flesh out my theory. “Don’t count me out. I might have uncovered something helpful.”

Her eyes take on a calculating glint. “If you can get them to within shouting distance of breaking even, it should be enough. We all know what a nightmare the account is.”

I work night and day over the next four days, calling around for receipts and rechecking all their numbers for the entire year. My theory was right—Todd’s been misappropriating funds by inches. Due to my work, the account is in the black by tens of thousand dollars. He was a smooth operator with me, but not smooth enough.

On Friday morning, I bring my findings to Donna. I make my case, showing her how Todd skimmed small amounts off every gig—never anything too big, but it added up over time. At first she doesn’t see the discrepancies. Soon she catches on to his concealment techniques. Her knowing grin broadens with each difference between receipt and entry I point out. Together, we bring my findings to Mr. Adler, and he orders a complete review of the account from the beginning. Looks like the band’s manager was cheating on more than his wife.

Donna ushers me out of his office. She whispers, “Tonight’s the big meeting. Be by your phone at home. I’ll let you know what’s decided, either way.”

Someone’s hacking in a cubicle somewhere, and another cough joins the first. “Thank you.” More coughs. “Should we send home the sick people? We don’t want to contaminate the whole firm.”

She smiles. “Flu is going around. You were lucky to have been gone during the incubation stage.”

I tuck my hair behind my ear. “Hope so.”

She leaves to go on the partner retreat, and I return to my office. No sooner do I set foot into it than a wave of dizziness comes over me. Great. Now my adrenaline over catching Todd has abated, I’m probably getting sick, too.

Deciding to pack it in, I make sure everything’s put away before heading for the door. Max stops me on my way out, leaning in my doorway again. “May the best man win.”

I place my briefcase over my shoulder and push past him. “I think it’s time for a woman.”

Bile climbs up my stomach. I manage to make it into the bathroom before tossing my cookies. Standing in front of the sink, I rinse my mouth and rub a wet paper towel across my forehead.

A secretary comes in. “Oh no,” he coughs. “That’s how it started for me. Go home and get some rest.”

“Thanks,” I whisper. “Sounds like a good idea.”

I manage to get into my Mercedes and stop at the drug store to pick up some medicine. At the register, a tabloid has a front page photo of Braxton with some woman I’ve never seen before. He has his hand on her ass. My stomach cramps and another wave of nausea washes over me.

Through a haze of tears, I make it home with my meds. By the time I enter my house, I’ve convinced myself I don’t care who Braxton is with anymore. I’m replaceable, like I knew I would be.

With deliberate movements, I put some water into a mug for tea, take the flu medicine, and change out of my work clothes. Physically, I feel terrible, but satisfaction in having caught Todd at his game still reigns supreme. No one else at

the firm realized what he was up to all these years. Has to count for something.

I'm dozing on my sofa when the phone wakes me. Shaking off sleep, I croak, "Hello?"

Donna's voice sails over my cordless phone. "Sara? Is that you?"

"Yeah. I think I caught the flu going around the office."

"Oh no, I'm so sorry. I have something to tell you that will cheer you up. I'm talking with the next female partner at A&L."

I sit straight up. I did it! Excitement wars with dizziness in my body, and neither gives an inch. I collapse back into the sofa wearing the biggest smile ever.

"Thank you very much, Donna. I know you went to bat for me, and I really, really appreciate it."

"You did all the work, Sara. You should be proud of yourself. Now, I'll let you take care of the flu so you can be in the office on Monday when the announcement is made."

I click off and let the phone slide from my fingers. If not for this damn flu bug, I'd be jumping for joy. Instead, I settle for mental high-fives.

The image reminds me of Braxton and the way the guys always high-five each other after a gig. The photo I saw today at the drug store pushes its way to center stage. Braxton is the reason I worked myself sick. His life is built on chaos—the exact opposite of what I want. Or need.

Refusing to dwell on the past, I shake off all things Hunte. *I love my contained, orderly life* where planning and hard work pay off. After all, I am the next partner at A&L!

I fish for the phone to call my father, but my stomach revolts from the toast I ate earlier and I make a beeline for the bathroom. This bug better be out of my system come Monday.

## BRAX



**W**hen Theodore Adler called to let me know what Todd had done, I lost my shit. We trusted the guy with our careers from the start, and this is how he repaid us? After I told the guys, we called a band meeting with Todd. And the local cops. The mustached *embezzler* was escorted away in handcuffs. Hope he rots in prison, the asshole.

As a band, we researched a few replacements and selected Keith Davis, someone who Shep recommended. Keith's been upfront with us every step of the way. He's a good guy—the kind who doesn't cheat on his wife or his clients.

Now I find myself at this froufrou New York City hair salon for Keith, not Sara. Turns out she's not the only one who thinks I need an image change. My thoughts keep bouncing to Sara, who was the first one to suggest this change. I'm also positive she was the brains behind Theodore's call.

“Mr. Hunte?” The hostess—is that what you call them in a hair place?—greet me and sends me to get my hair washed, where I focus on the woman with her hands on my scalp. This part's calming, or it would be if I didn't know what was coming.

Before I know it, I'm sitting at one of the stylists' stations, fiddling with the smock around my shoulders. I glance around.

Men and women get their hair cut and styled. The finished products all look good, especially on the men. I let out a relieved sigh.

A tall woman, slightly older than me, approaches. She has her dirty blonde hair cut in a bob, which causes my heart to beat double-time, but her eyes are brown instead of steel grey.

She extends her hand. “Mr. Hunte, pleased to meet you. I’m Rebecca, and I’ll be cutting your hair today.”

I shake her hand. “A pleasure.” I try to go for humor. “Go easy on me. I can’t remember the last time I had short hair.”

She smiles and picks up a pair of scissors. “Not to worry.” She plays with my long hair, then announces, “Most of your last perm is gone, so I don’t have to do anything to reverse it. I’m going to cut it to here.” She places her fingers right above my shoulders. “Okay?”

I swallow. My long hair has been my signature forever, but it feels like the right time for a change. I need to shed the past. Hell, if Shep can do magic to “Baby, Give It,” then I can do this. I inhale. “Sure.”

She pats my shoulders. “You’ll like it. I swear.”

But will Sara?

*No, you idiot, you’re not doing this for her. You’re doing it for the band’s new image. To match our song climbing the charts.*

The snipping sound pulls my attention back to the stylist. Soon the floor is littered with blond hair. Lots of it. I check in the mirror to make sure I’m not bald. Thankfully, I’m not.

“Now shake.”

I do, and more pieces of hair flutter to the floor. Rebecca runs her hands through it, not in a sexual way, only to confirm she's satisfied with her handiwork. She makes a few more cuts before turning her hairdryer on it.

After some styling, she hands me a mirror so I can see the back. "What do you think?"

I consider my new hairstyle from a variety of angles. Damn. I have to admit, it makes my face look, I don't know, bigger. Brighter? I shake my head to clear such pansy-ass thoughts. "I like it."

Her face lights up at my praise. I stand and toss the smock onto the chair. "Thanks, Rebecca." I kiss her cheek and press a hundred note into her hand. She deserves it.

Soon, I'm back in my hotel room, immersed in my GED study guide. I'm going over a couple of subjects one last time before tomorrow's test. I scheduled it for tomorrow—January fifteenth—in New York City, in the hope I can blend in with the mass of humanity here. My new haircut should help.

Someone knocks on my door and I leave my book to answer it. "Hey, Keith."

His eyes go wide. "You cut your hair?"

I shrug. "You told me to."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd do it." I swing the door open wider and he enters the suite. He checks me out from every angle. "Looks good."

"Thanks." Enough with this stupid shit about my hair. "What's up?"

His eyes gleam. "I have some good news. Great news, actually. 'Baby, Give It' just broke the Top Ten. It's now

sitting at Number Nine.”

I run my fingers through my newly-shorn locks. “Wow. Shep did it.”

“You all did it. Plus—”

The word hangs out there. “There’s more?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve been fielding calls from a bunch of venues. Large venues. They want to book Hunte.”

*This*. This is what I’ve wanted ever since our mojo stalled. “Stadiums?”

He shakes his head. “Not quite that big. Still, much larger than before.”

“Get back to me when Madison Square Garden calls.”

He claps me on the back. “Don’t let it be said you dream small.”

“Might as well go for the gold. Let’s see where ‘Baby, Give It’ lands. We still have eight more slots to climb.”

I spend the rest of the night with my nose in the ratty GED book, studying until my eyes cross and I fall asleep at the desk. When a particularly vivid dream about Sara coming on my fingers wakes me, I shake off the stiffness in my limbs and slip into bed.

The memory of Sara’s responsiveness haunts me. The way she always appeared to be surprised at how I made her body feel and react. Her tentative touches, which drove me mad. The way her mind worked—how she’d dissect a problem and come up with unusual solutions.

I remind myself of the way she ranted over the stupid charter plane. She called me stupid. A child. She knew my



insecurities and turned them on me like knives. Then she walked out of my LA house, never to be seen again.

*Remember, Brax. She didn't want anything to do with a washed-up has been who didn't even have a high school diploma.* I can't help wonder, though, if she ever made partner.

No more. Tomorrow, I'm going to ace the test and no one will be able to look down on me ever again.

I turn over and fall back asleep. Only for my alarm to wake me up a couple of hours later.

I've never been a good test taker. Nerves rise to the forefront the closer I get to the center, but nerves I can handle. Employing some of the visualization techniques I use before taking the stage, I picture myself receiving a passing score on the GED. I can do this. I've studied for this.

I enter the classroom and take the test booklet from the blue-haired old lady who's our proctor. All the students in the room are way younger than I am. I disregard the mocking voice in my head and picture a framed GED with my name on it hanging on my wall. This test is going to be my bitch.

When the final circle is shaded, I review all my answers then hand in my test booklet and answer sheet. The blue-haired lady thanks me and wishes me good luck, like she did to all the people who finished before me. I smile and leave the building.

Walking aimlessly through the streets of New York City, I pass several pizza places before ducking into one. The television's on MTV, and I find myself plotting a storyline for the video for "Baby, Give It." Finishing my pizza, I hurry back to the hotel and scribble down my ideas, ready to take them to Keith later.

No one recognized me today. Must be the hair.

Due to all the radio play our new song has received thanks to Shep, we decided to debut it live before Sara's charity event—the one I try to ignore, but still keeps getting closer—and extend the tour. None of us can contain our happiness at how well “Baby, Give It” is doing on the charts. Well, none of us except for Ricky. In the dressing room following tonight's kickass show, I approach him. “Hey. Are you stoked about the song?”

“I am. I only wish it was how we originally played it.”

“I get you, but what matters is we're getting back on top.”

He shrugs. “You're right. You sounded good out there today. Maybe losing the hair did something to your vocal cords.”

“Ha, ha, douchebag. It was time for a change.”

A couple of hours and a few beers later, I'm surrounded by my band and women. Lots of women. Tall, short, pretty, beautiful, and drop-dead model wannabes. I put my arms behind the two sitting next to me on the sofa. “Where are you from?” I ask the one to my left.

She rubs her tongue down the long neck of her beer before putting almost all of it into her mouth. I shift my hips. “I've been living in New York for a year now. I joined your entourage a few weeks ago.”

“Cool.”

The woman on my right pulls on my outer flannel shirt. “I joined your entourage, too. I love your new song.”

“Thanks.”

Our entourage has grown bigger than its original size. My eyes wander around the club, noticing some of my bandmates have three women attached to them. Life is good.

“You know, ladies, I’ve had a rough day.” They both coo and rub against my sides. Now this is what I’m talking about. “I had to take a big test this morning.”

The one on my right bites my earlobe. “What was it for?”

I puff up. I’m proud of what I did. “My GED.”

“How fly, Braxton,” the one on my left says while fondling the open buttons on my flannel shirt.

The other lady runs her fingers through my hair. “I like your new haircut.” She tugs on the ends as the other one runs her hand over my chest. “Looks hot.”

I don’t move my arms, which are still stretched across the back of the sofa. The two practically climb onto me as if I were a mountain or some shit. My body fails to respond. Maybe it was their lack of interest in my early morning test?

I lick my lips. “The GED test was hard.”

One of them snakes a hand down below my belt and runs over my dick. A giggle escapes her lips. “I bet I know what else is hard.”

Really, you don’t.

Seeing Colton across the room, I extricate myself from the groping twins. “Sorry, ladies, I need to run something by my bass guitarist.”

“We’ll be here waiting for you to come back,” one of them says. The other one grins and licks her lips in a manner that leaves little to the imagination.

I scramble to my feet and leave them behind, an empty feeling lodging in the pit of my stomach. When I meet up with Colton, I say, “New faces in our entourage.”

“Yup.” He takes a pull of his beer.

Funny, they don’t feel like family anymore.

Colton pulls me out of my head. “So tell me, how’d it go this morning? We didn’t have time to discuss the GED earlier.”

My best friend knows me. Even amid all the hoopla about our new single, he understands this is a big deal for me. “It was hard, but I think I passed.”

He nods. “When will you find out?”

“Results will be mailed around Valentine’s Day. I had them sent to Apex Hits, to be sure I receive them.”

He taps his index finger on my forehead. “Smart. I’m sure you passed.”

“Thanks, man.” We both drink our beers and scan the people in the club. “Anyone catch your eye?”

Colton points to a woman who has her back to us. She’s wearing a skin-tight leopard-print mini dress. “You never could turn down a nice pussy,” I tease.

He tips his beer to his lips. “Nope. How about you?”

My eyes wander to the sofa, but the pair doesn’t hold my interest. I shrug. “Not yet.” Maybe not at all. I’m beat.

“Well, you should go pick your party girl for the night before it gets too late.”

I check my watch. It’s already two in the morning. All of a sudden, adrenaline seeps out of my body and I yawn. “You

know what, I think I'm going back to the room by myself. Between the GED, the gig and these beers, I'm beat. I'm sure I'll be ready to party tomorrow night."

Colton says, "All right, I'll hold you to it. Congrats again on the GED and keep me posted, okay?" When I respond in the affirmative, he heads off toward Miss Leopard.

I pass Ricky, who's wasted and hanging onto two women to remain upright. "Take good care of him, ladies," I advise as I walk by.

Lex joins up with me as I make my way to the exit. "I take it you're going back to the hotel?" I nod my head. "Can I join you?"

Together, Lex and I leave the club. In the limo, he says, "So, big day today, huh?"

"You could say that again."

"Colton said you took your GED this morning?"

"I did."

He punches me on the arm. "We'll have to party when you pass."

"Definitely." Not for the first time, I wonder about his wife and how they have a successful relationship. "Tell me, Lex, how do you and Whitney make things work? How do you stay faithful to her?"

He laughs. "Being on the road all the time is hard, for sure. But Whitney flies out to see me whenever she can and we talk on the phone at least twice a day." He shrugs. "I love her. Staying true to my wife is the easy part."

"I thought I loved Hilary, too. I still cheated." Often. And with variety.

“You obviously didn’t really love her.”

The limo stops in front of our hotel and we take the elevator to our floor of suites. No more cost-saving rooms, thank you very much. “See you in the morning,” I say and enter my suite. Alone.

Just like Lex.

I drop my keys onto the table and shake off the thought. No, not like him. He’s happily married and committed to Whitney. I’m the one who’s alone.

I could’ve brought the groping twins in here with me and gotten off. But I didn’t. I didn’t want them.

They’re not *her*.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I need to get laid. It’s been...months. I haven’t had sex since King’s party.

Oh, hell no. This is going to change. Tomorrow.

## SARA



I double-check the associate's work, making corrections in the margins with my red pen, then stuff the document into an interoffice mail envelope. He's good but made some rookie mistakes. To be expected from a first year associate.

When this task is completed, I check my to-do list and survey my new office. I'm now in much larger digs, with a matching desk and credenza set and imposing leather chair. The wall of windows provides much needed ambient light, except for today. Chicago's gloomy in early February.

I drop my pen into its holder and rub my hand over my belly. I've been working nonstop since I was made partner, which officially took effect a little over a month ago in January. All of the documents are now signed and I've made the buy-in. Bonus—my father was so proud of my accomplishment he took the whole family out to dinner to celebrate. I sigh. Yes, I'm all in now.

I've learned some dreams must be adjusted to account for life changes. Top of the list is the slew of grocery store tabloids spouting vitriol from Hilary against me that popped up a couple of weeks after I returned to Chicago. At least the partnership took her words for what they were—lies. Since I'm no longer with Braxton, I fail to see why she still feels the

need to put out these headlines. Guess it's her way of staying relevant. As if she ever were.

I open my top drawer and sneak a couple of saltines. I'm still munching on the dry crackers when the phone rings. "Hello?"

"Sara, there you are!" Joanna says. "I tried your house first since it's Saturday and all, but then I figured you had to be at the office. How are things going?"

"Oh, you know. Busy, like usual." I haven't filled in my best friend about the long hours, increased workload or... anything. We did talk about the headlines when they first hit. Now they're not even a blip between us.

"I don't know how you keep up with your schedule. When was the last time you had a day off?"

My mind blanks. "I didn't work the day of Stacey's baptism."

"Gosh, lady, that was months ago. Don't tell me you worked on Christmas and New Year's?"

"Only a few hours both days. From home. It was no big deal."

"No wonder we never see each other anymore. Well, I'm changing this situation right now. My husband's away on business overnight, and you're coming over here for dinner. No excuses."

My hand rubs my belly again. I need to stop hiding behind work and figure out what the heck I'm going to do. Joanna's my best friend. She's the only one I can talk to about all this.

Definitely not *him*.

"Okay."



“I don’t want to hear ‘no’—what?”

I laugh. “I said yes. I’ll come over. What can I bring?”

Well-versed in my lack of cooking skills, she chirps, “Wine. I have dip and I’ll make a lasagna. Can’t wait to see my bestie.”

We hang up, and I let my head drop into my hands. How did I let this happen? I’ve holed myself up at A&L since the announcement I was being made partner. Put my head down and cranked out the hours. Took a couple of associates under my wing. Watched Max pack his stuff and leave for another firm. I even held the door for him—once—so he could take boxes to his car, I remember with a wry smile.

My orderly life is about to get turned on its head. All because of one very disorganized blond man. Who recently cut his hair. Whose new song is moving up the charts.

I close my eyes and take deep breaths. This will be all right. I can do it all. Plenty of other women do.

I am a partner now. *Roar.*

And...I’m going to be a mother too. My eyelids shut.

Gathering my papers to do some work at home, I walk toward the exit. On my way home, I stop at the store and pick up a bottle of Pepsi for Joanna and me. Caffeine free.

I enter my house and crumple down onto the sofa, picking up a baby catalog from the coffee table. So much new stuff is going to be added in here. So much chaos. I already moved my home office into my bedroom to clear space for the baby.

I wonder if it’s a boy. Will he have blond hair and pouty lips like his father? A tear streaks down my cheek. I close my eyes and fall into REM sleep almost immediately.

When I wake, it's dark outside, but I still have time to shower and change before heading over to Joanna's. Feeling more like myself in my jeans and oversized sweater—I'm still not showing, so I can fit into regular-size jeans—I pick up the soda and the new Louis Vuitton purse I bought when I made partner and go to the Mercedes. The entire drive, I try to come up with the best way to break the news to my best friend. By the time I pull into her driveway, I'm no closer to a solution.

The front door opens before I even reach it. A much rounder Joanna stands with her arms open wide. Without uttering a word, I fall into her embrace and together we enter her house. I hand her the Pepsi and she looks around for the wine.

“If you can't drink, neither can I.”

She smiles and places her hand on top of mine. “What a friend.”

If she only knew.

“Lasagna will be ready in about a half hour. Let's sit and catch up. Dip?”

I laugh. Dip's always been our go-to. Bad break up? Dip. Pimple before a date? Dip. Yelled at during work? Dip.

We sit on the sofa, the radio playing on low, and eat our chips with the French onion dip. I can't remember the last time I ate this, but boy is it good. Soon, we've devoured the entire container.

Swallowing the last chip, I say, “Who needs lasagna when you have dip?”

“You better not mean that. I slaved over the stove making it.”

My stomach rumbles and we both laugh. “Guess I saved some room.”

The oven beeps and Joanna jumps up to take the lasagna out of the oven. She and her husband probably eat like this every day. Soon, their baby will join their family unit.

Family.

My eyes wander over to the pile of baby stuff in the corner, including the Paddington bear I picked up in Jackpot. With Brax.

I stifle a sob.

Joanna rushes to my side. “What’s wrong?” She strokes my hair and I raise my hand, then let it fall into my lap. “I knew something was wrong. Talk to me.”

All the words I rehearsed in the car flee my brain. Instead, full-on sobs wrack my body and I hold onto my best friend as if my life depended on it. Which it sort of does.

When I’m no longer crying, she demands, “My mind is going a mile a minute. What happened? I haven’t seen you this out of control since your mother passed.” Her face is pale, her big brown eyes worried.

I pull away, my head shaking. “No, no, no. I’m not sick.”

“Thank God. Then, what is it?”

I take her in. Her bright red hair in its signature pixie cut. Her swollen belly. I swallow.

“I’m...” My voice trails and she rubs my arms.

“You’re what, honey?”

The word “pregnant” explodes out of my mouth and detonates in the room. Her hands still.

Silence. The only noise is the music playing from the radio.

“Oh, wow. I didn’t expect that.”

A half-hysterical laugh bubbles out of my mouth. “Me neither.” Might as well confess it all. “It’s Brax’s.”

She sucks in her breath. “Braxton Hunte?”

I nod as more tears fall to my cheeks.

She reaches out for more chips, but they’re all gone. “Damn. I really wish we both could drink right now.”

A laugh pops out of my mouth, and soon we’re both laughing like crazed schoolgirls. “Must be the hormones,” I manage to say.

“Yup,” she replies, wiping a stray tear from her face.

When we catch our collective breaths, Joanna stands. “Come on. Let’s eat and talk.”

We cross the room, sit down at her dining room table and talk about our experiences with pregnancy. She’s about two months ahead of me, so now I have a better idea of what’s coming up. Maternity clothes and baby paraphernalia. She chats about all the happy decisions she and her husband have made about their baby. Together. I tell her about moving my house around to accommodate the new one.

“So, you’re one hundred percent sure you’re keeping the baby?”

I place my fork onto my empty plate. “Yes. I’ve considered alternatives, but I want this baby.”

She nods. “This must’ve been tough. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to figure it out by myself before I told anyone. At first I thought I had caught the flu that was going around A&L. When the nausea didn’t go away, I started to suspect. The doctor confirmed it about a month ago.”

Joanna reaches for her Pepsi and swirls it, the ice cubes clinking against the blue goblet. “I’m so sorry, honey. I know it’s not how you had pictured your life would go.”

“No, but it’s my new reality.” I sigh. “It’ll be tough. Nevertheless, I can do it.”

She frowns. “Sara. Wait. You told the rockstar and he didn’t want anything to do with you?” She pushes away from the table.

In a meek voice, I reply, “No.”

“What?”

“It’s not like that.”

“It’s not like what, exactly? You *did* tell Braxton you’re pregnant with his child. If nothing else, he has to pay you child support.”

No, no, no. No way. I rub my stomach. “This baby is my responsibility. I’ll take care of him or her.”

In a perfect tone of command, my best friend bellows, “Sara Anderson. Does Braxton Hunte know about this baby?”

“Well, he was there when it was conceived.” I place my elbows on the table and steeple my fingers. “He told me he’s never doing the kid thing again.”

She taps on the table, not saying a word.

I purse my lips and drag my eyes off her glowing face. “No.”

She grabs my hand. “That’s not right, Sara, and you know it. Not telling me—your best friend—about it right away is one thing. It’s an entirely different story not to inform the father.”

“I know,” I snap. “It’s only we’re two very different people. He’s an utter mess. Life with him on the road was total chaos. I didn’t like how out of control I felt with him.”

“Must not have been too much of a mess if this happened.” Her hand leaves mine and lands on my stomach.

My shoulders droop. This. This is the reason I didn’t want to tell anyone. I need to talk to Brax, I know, but I’m not ready to face him. I don’t think I’ll ever be ready. Another tear falls off my eyelashes.

“Oh, sweetie,” Joanna says, wiping the tear off my face. “It’ll be all right.” She engulfs me in a hug and I let her hold me.

The radio DJ intrudes into our moment. “And now, let’s play the nation’s new Number One by a band many thought was so last decade. Well, they’re back and, might I say, better than ever. This is ‘Baby, Give It,’ by Hunte.” The familiar opening strains of the song start, overlaid with a more modern guitar riff.

When Brax starts the song, I hug Joanna tighter. Pride at their achievement flows through my body and makes me feel worse at the same time.

She rubs my back. “You have to tell him.”

I shake my head on her shoulder. “I can’t. Not yet. He doesn’t want to see me ever again.”

“Do you want to see him?”

I pull back and stare at her, searching my soul for the answer. “Every day,” I admit and more tears flow.

Joanna lets me cry it out, then hands me a napkin to clean up. She stands. “You know what you have to do. And,” her eyes focus on my belly, “you’re going to have to do it sooner rather than later. You don’t want the people at A&L to know before him.”

I exhale. “I know you’re right. But how can I do this? Call him? Send a message through his management team? I’m not on his account anymore.” Even though I uncovered Todd’s embezzlement, I declined to stay on the file.

“You have to go see him in person.”

Well, if my life didn’t suck enough... “He’s playing at the At Your Door Valentine’s Day Charity Ball here in Chicago.” Hunte’s name was confirmed to the roster over a month ago. He went through with it, like I’d asked. I tried not to be too pleased—no doubt he arranged the date before King’s party. At least the band’s newfound success will ensure more money is raised for the charity.

“Perfect. You have two weeks to get your act together and figure out how you’re going to tell him. He has to know, Sara.”

I raise tear-filled eyes to my bestie. “I’m not sure I can do this.”

She presses our foreheads together. “I know you can.”

## BRAX



“Great job, guys. That’s a wrap.”

We put our instruments down and leave the set for “Baby, Give It.” The video is going to include clips from some of our recent concerts plus us playing the song in the studio. We already filmed a part with a bunch of scantily clad ladies dancing as if they were in a go-go bar.

Keith joins us, clapping. “Congrats, guys. Looking good.”

“Thanks,” we respond.

Our new producer holds up a piece of paper. “I got the recent update from Billboard, and ‘Baby, Give It’ is at Number One for the second week in a row. Way to go.”

A round of high-fives and whoops follow his statement. Colton says, “We’re not going anywhere for a while, guys.”

“Especially when our video lands on MTV,” I reply.

After we grab lunch from Craft Services, Keith hands us our boarding passes. “Let’s get to the airport. Our flight leaves in a couple of hours. Got us suites at the Chicago Hi-Line Hotel.”

Chicago. The one place I’ve dreaded going. The chances of seeing *her* are slim to none—it may be her charity, but she’ll ensure our paths don’t cross—and yet I can’t shake the



thought she's nearby. To hide my inner turmoil, I make jokes with the band throughout our lunch and flight to the Windy City.

I'm about to enter my suite when Keith approaches me. "Hey, got a message for you from the label." He hands me a slip of paper and heads down the hall.

I flip it over and read the note. "Results are in. Call when ready."

My stomach tightens and I fumble the key. With shaky hands, I get my door open and slip inside, not paying attention to the rest of the guys.

Dropping my luggage on the floor, I sit at the dining room table. I pull out my cell phone and dial the numbers on the message. Before pressing send, I wipe clammy hands on my thighs.

After two attempts, I'm finally able to make the call and am connected with Gregg Mason at Apex Hits. "Hey, Braxton, glad to hear from you."

All I want to do is blurt out something about test results, but I owe him a bit of chit-chat. "You sound good, Gregg. I just landed in Chicago."

"Right. The At Your Door gig. Great for your image."

I don't give a flying fuck about anything other than my GED results. "So, I got a message that my results are in?"

"Yeah. Got the letter here somewhere." The sound of shuffling papers reaches through the phone. "Here, I've got it. Are you ready?"

I was ready years ago. I run my hand through my short hair. "Hit me."

“Braxton Hunte, *blah, blah, blah*, your score is 375.”

The highest score possible is 400. “I passed?”

“Congratulations. You’re now the proud holder of a GED.”

“I did it.” All of my breath whooshes out of me and I’m energized and exhausted all at once. “Thanks, Gregg. Thanks for letting me know.”

“So now you have a Number One song and your GED. Seems like there’s nothing you can’t do.”

A vision of Sara pops into my mind. Why can’t I get her out of my brain? I haven’t seen her in person since October, but she’s in my thoughts every day. Not to mention my dreams. I force a chuckle. “I think Hunte’s luck has turned. We finished shooting the video for the song earlier today.”

He starts talking label business, but my mind keeps floating back to the fact I’m now a high school graduate. After we disconnect, I remain at the dining room table, staring into nothingness for a long time.

I did it! All my hard work paid off. I want to get a copy of my GED and send it to all my asshole high school teachers. Plus Hilary most of all. I want to put it on a damned a shirt and wear it every day.

*Sara.* She’s the one who inspired me to do this. If she hadn’t pushed me, I never would have tried. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to banish the thoughts. *This isn’t about her. This is your celebration, Brax.*

Maybe I should grab one of our new entourage—hell, maybe two?—and bring them back here for a private celebration. For fuck’s sake, the idea doesn’t sound any more appealing to me than it has for the last few months. Putting the

thought on hold, I fling open the door to my suite and bellow, “I passed!”

Three doors open. Ricky, Lex, and Keith all rush me—cuffing my arm in congratulations. Colton hangs back, letting them do their thing, but he finally approaches me when they return to their respective suites. “Congrats, man. I know what this meant to you. You studied your ass off for the test and deserve your diploma. I hope you believe it now.”

“Come on in. Let’s get a drink.”

He follows me into my suite’s kitchen, where I hand him a beer from the minifridge. “You must feel like a million bucks.”

“I’m pumped.” I take a sip of the Bud, enjoying the way the cool liquid flows down my throat.

“How are you going to celebrate? No gig tonight.” He opens his beer and sips.

“How about going out to a pizza place?” I swallow some more Bud. “I had pizza in New York City when we were there a month ago, so it’ll be good to compare.”

Colton laughs. “Sure, why not? Hell, we’re in Chicago—the pizza’s going to be great.”

“Can it be just us?” I ask, clinking our beers together. “We’ll meet up with the rest of the crew at whatever club they’re crashing tonight.” Somehow it feels like it should be us. This is a journey Colton and I have taken together from the beginning.

“Sounds good to me. I’ll ask Keith to arrange our outing. Going incognito has been nearly impossible since the new song hit the charts.”

“Good idea.”

Colton claps me on the back. “Give me an hour to get everything set up and we’ll head out.” He drains his beer and leaves to make the arrangements with Keith.

I hop into the shower. Water runs down my back, and I wash my shorter hair. Takes a lot less time than before, for sure.

Not surprisingly, my mind wanders to Sara. To the time we savored each other in the shower. What’s she doing now? Does she miss me? Did she make partner? *Why am I so hung up on her?*

“Fuck!” I nick my chin with the razor. “Focus, man. Forget her.”

If only it were that easy.



**A**fter finishing a final bite of pepperoni deep dish, I toss about five napkins onto the silver platter the pizza was served on and rub my engorged stomach. “Good thing we’re not in this town often.”

Colton continues shoveling his pizza into his mouth, albeit at a slower pace. After another five minutes, he gives up. “I can’t eat another bite.”

“So, I’ve seen you sniffing around Miss Leopard Print almost every night. Anything going on besides the obvious?”

Colton swallows the last of his beer. “Her name is Penny, and I’m not sure. I like her.”

I nod. “Very cool, man.”

“How about you? I haven’t seen you with anyone lately.”

My chest constricts. Shrugging, I reply, “Nah. I’ve been too busy with studying for the GED and getting ready for the video shoot.”

“Brax.” I meet his gaze. “You should call her.”

I feign ignorance. “Who?”

“Don’t play me. Call Sara.”

He said her name. It hangs between us like a sign held up by fans at a concert. Anger surges. “Why the hell would I call her? She’s been gone for months.”

“Not here.” He taps his forehead. Fucker. Why does he have to be right?

“I don’t have anything to say to her.”

“All right. Then come out with me tonight and hook up with one of the many new women in our entourage.”

I frown at the red-checkered tablecloth. He knows I haven’t hooked up with anyone since Sara. “Maybe I will.”

“Penny has a friend who wants to meet you. Although I don’t know why.”

I crumple up a napkin and toss it at his face. “Dick.”

“Come on, Brax. You’ve been with us, but not *with us*, for months now. It’s Sara. You need to get her out of your system. Or get her back.”

I push my chair back and stand. “We’re done here. Let’s go.”

I stalk out of the restaurant and into the waiting limo. The ride back to our hotel is silent and we part after the elevator brings us to our floor.

“See you at the club tonight,” Colton tosses over his shoulder.

I live my hand, walk into my suite, and collapse onto the sofa. Why is he pushing me to call Sara? She’s not a part of my life at all. I don’t need her. I don’t want her.

*Bullshit.*

Annoyed, I grab a crystal ashtray from the coffee table and fling it across the room. The crash echoes through the room, but I don’t care. Nor do I care I probably raised our tab by thirty bucks.

I get to my feet and head for my luggage to change my shirt. Tonight, I’m going to pick one of the willing women in the entourage and screw her every which way ’til sunrise.

A couple of hours later, I pile into the limo with the rest of the band, careful not to sit next to Colton. We reach the club around ten o’clock and quickly take charge of the VIP Room. I check out every chick, trying to select one—or more—who will come with me to my suite tonight. I’ve never been this choosy before, and it’s annoying.

One woman is too tall.

Another laughs too much.

A third’s bob haircut is all wrong.

I’m pissing even myself off.

Sipping a beer, I take a seat at a high-top table. A brunette with long, curly hair joins me. Nothing like Sara. Good. “Hi,” she says, “I’m Kylie.”

I clink my glass to hers. “I’m Braxton.”

She licks her lips. “So, I heard a rumor and wanted to know if it’s true. Did you get your GED?”

I sit up straighter. “I did. Found out this morning.”

She clinks her glass to mine. “Awesome. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” I take another swallow of my Bud while perusing this woman. She’s petite with big boobs. I’d like to squeeze them. Another good sign. “I studied hard for it.”

She nods. “I bet. I heard it’s quite difficult.”

And I’m off. I tell her about the study guide, not mentioning who bought it for me, and all the mnemonics I memorized. She’s a good listener and encourages me to continue. Maybe Kylie will help me get over my dry spell?

“I’m an accountant here in town, so I know the value of education.”

Just like that, Kylie lands in the discard pile. I can’t do this. I can’t. Suddenly, the room closes in on me and I’m finding it hard to catch my breath.

“Braxton, are you all right?” The woman next to me shakes my arm.

My eyes take in the club from all angles and land on Kylie. “Excuse me, I need to get some air.” Without looking back, I head for the Exit sign and dive into the limo. The driver takes me to the hotel.

In my suite, I down a bottle of water. I’ve tried everything, but I can’t get her out of my brain.

*I don’t want to.*

I’m always surrounded by a shit-ton of people, more now than ever, but I feel alone for the first time in years.

All because of a woman who challenged me to be better. To do better. A sinking feeling rolls through my body that I let her down and ruined her career, right when she was on the edge of greatness.

I toss the empty water bottle into the trash and grab a beer. Then another. And another. I down six in about an hour.

Light streaming through the window wakes me up at nine in the morning. A wave of dizziness roils over me. Great. At least our gig for Sara's charity isn't until eight tonight, so I have all day to get over my hangover.

I order breakfast and let it settle my stomach. By noon, I'm showered, dressed, and back to normal. The band won't leave for hours and I don't have to study for my GED anymore. To kill time, I turn on the television and click through the channels.

*You're in Chicago. Click, click.*

*You know exactly one person who lives here. Click, click.*

*She doesn't know you passed the GED. Click, click.*

Colton's voice intercedes. *Call her.*

My hand lands on my cell phone. No, I can do one better.

Before I can rethink my decision, I'm out my door, down the elevator, and into the cold bright blue skies of Chicago, heading toward A&L's office. I can't stay away any longer.

When I enter the lobby, the twenty-something receptionist smiles at me. Here goes. "Hi. Hello. I'm Braxton Hunte, and I need to speak with Sara Anderson."

Her professional mask doesn't falter. Given her age, I'm pretty sure she knows who I am. "Do you have an appointment?"



I shake my head.

She picks up the phone. “Let me call her for you.”

Ignoring the bats flying in my stomach, I tap my leg until the receptionist hangs up. “Mr. Hunte, I’m sorry. It seems Ms. Anderson isn’t in the office today. Would you like to meet with someone else or leave a message? I’ll make sure she receives it.”

My entire body deflates like a popped balloon. “No, it’s fine,” I manage to choke out. Because I need to know, I ask, “Can you please tell me one thing? Did she make partner?”

The receptionist smiles and some of my guilt flies away on the bats’ wings. “She did.”

“Thanks.”

At least I didn’t ruin her career. I turn on my heel and leave the building. The cold air slams against my face as I walk aimlessly through the city.

She wasn’t there.

*There’s your sign, buddy.*

*Give it up. Give her up.*

## SARA



“Hi, Sara, nice to see you.”

I force a smile at the president of our chapter of At Your Door. “Thanks, you too.” I fiddle with the hem of my loose shirt. “I haven’t missed one of our annual events since I’ve been on the board.”

“I appreciate it very much.” She’s pulled away to meet someone, leaving me to wander around the room.

I grab a water and press the chilled bottle to my cheek. Despite it being Valentine’s Day, it’s warm in here. Or maybe my hormones are flinging all over the place because they know what’s going to happen tonight. I’m about to tell Braxton he’s going to be a father. After he said he’s never doing the kid thing again.

My stomach flips and I pull a saltine out of my Louis Vuitton purse. Tears tease the back of my eyes and I force them back down. No. I will not cry again. This is going to be an FYI. Nothing more. I’m not planning to ask for child support or anything.

The board members are pulled into a separate room to review some chapter business. I linger in the room until after eight o’clock, wanting to delay the inevitable as much as possible.

One of my fellow board members calls to me from the doorway, “Sara, are you coming? Hunte’s walking onto the stage!”

“Yes, coming.” I force my feet to bring me into the other room, within view of the stage. From my vantage point, I stare at Braxton. His haircut really brings out his jawline, even at this distance. Looks really good on him. Like I knew it would.

He flips his shorter hair, pushes his sunglasses up the bridge of his nose and talks into the microphone. “Hi, Chicago! It’s great to be here at the Valentine’s Day Ball for At Your Door. What do you think about my new haircut?”

Cheers rise up from the audience.

“I thought with our new song—maybe you’ve heard it on the radio?—” More applause. “—and other things going on, it was time for a fresh start. Glad you all like it.”

*A fresh start.* My hand flies to my mouth.

Hunte plays more of their hits, to which the audience sings and claps. Braxton looks a bit leaner to me, but other than that, he’s not changed a bit. Except for his hair, of course. His fresh start.

*You have to tell him.* Joanna’s words replay over the lyrics being growled out from the stage. I swallow a lump and leave my post, moving backstage. While several security guards stop me, my status as a board member is my free pass.

I step to the side where one of the band’s bodyguards stands watch. He’ll be more difficult to bypass—no doubt he knows I’m on Braxton’s blacklist—but I don’t have a choice. The newly remixed “Baby, Give It” floats through the air, letting me know their concert is about to end. I have to get backstage. Now.

“Time to meet your daddy,” I whisper to my stomach and march toward the bodyguard, whose eyes widen when they land on me.

“Sara. Long time no see.”

To my surprise, he waves me past him without any hassle, and I slip into the backstage area. After surveying the room, filled with many women’s faces I don’t recognize, I take a spot along the wall to the side of the stage door. I eat another saltine while my whole body buzzes in anticipation.

The stage door flings open and the band bursts into the room with a man I presume to be Todd’s replacement. I push backward until I’m solidly against the wall. If I could disappear, I would. But I can’t. Braxton has to hear about his baby. I take a step forward.

The guys exchange high-fives like usual. The sound of beer bottles opening fills the room. I can do this. I have to tell him. I’m not asking him for anything.

My eyes lock on his blond head as he makes his rounds through the room. Why does he have to be the most handsome man I’ve ever seen? Even more compelling with his new look, which is saying a lot. He tucks his sunglasses into the neck of his shirt, and I remember what those hands did to me. I shift my stance and play with the hem of my oversized shirt, hiding my growing belly.

I can tell the instant Braxton sees me. He stiffens, his mouth drops open. Oh, God. Why did I think I could do this? I shake my head and turn toward the exit. I can’t. I can’t. I don’t care if I’m a coward.

I’m five feet from the door when his hand lands on my arm. “Sara.”

His voice is hard. Unyielding. This isn't the playful and sexy tone that haunts my dreams. My free hand covers my belly.

“Braxton.”

He wrenches me around to be face-to-face with him. His amber eyes bore into mine, as if he's trying to pull answers out of me. “What are you doing here?”

Ignoring the pain radiating from my arm, I lift my chin. “I'm on the board.”

His eyes dart to his hand, still on my arm, and he lets go as if scalded. He takes a step backward and his face shutters. “Right.” He walks backward and bumps into one of the many people in the room. “Sorry, dude,” he mutters and turns on his heel.

I have to tell him, but not in here. Too many people are around. “Braxton,” I call. He stops but doesn't turn back around. I force my feet to take me to his side, and this time, it's me touching his arm. His muscles flex and harden. “I need to talk with you. In private.”

He doesn't move. “I think we've said enough.”

My heart breaks in two at his tone. However, emotion's there, undeniably so. I can tell how deeply I injured him—the little boy part inside who still feels inadequate. The kid who was told by his teachers he'll never amount to anything. The man belittled by his ex-wife.

In that moment I know I didn't keep this baby because I want him or her, although I do. I knew the baby would bring me back to Brax. I shore up all my strength. “We haven't.”

We remain still in a room full of moving parts, only connected to each other by my fingertips on his sleeve. I dig in

tighter to reach his flesh. “Please,” I whisper.

His head whips around. “Why?”

Not here. Our conversation needs to be kept away from any prying ears. “I only want a couple of minutes of your time.”

That’s all it’ll take. He can get the news and choose what, if anything, he wants to do about it. Maybe he’ll want to be a part of our baby’s life, but it’s on him. I have no illusions he’ll want to be with *me*. Not after the way I turned on him. Plus, I remind myself, he’s still a disordered, chaotic immature man-boy.

He lets out a breath. “Follow me.”

## BRAX



**M**y mind swirls with the possibilities. Sara looks more beautiful than ever. It's like she's blossomed since we were last together.

*She doesn't want you, asshole.*

Heaven help me, *I need her* in my life. I tried to walk away, driven by fear of what this woman does to me, but I'm done lying to myself. I'll grab whatever time alone with her she wants. I suddenly understand something I've been hiding from myself—everything I've done since I last saw her has been to prove I'm good enough. I worked with a new producer and made a Number One hit. I changed up my image. I got my freaking GED.

*I am good enough.*

My chin rises as I walk toward the exit leading behind the stage, the only place where we're likely to find privacy. I prayed for the chance Sara would be here, but I refused to let myself believe. Now, she's right behind me.

I want to throttle her. More, I want to hold her, kiss her, make her scream my name.

In a quiet corner, obscured by the curtain, I suck in my breath and face her. She's so damn gorgeous. She hasn't lost

any weight like I have during our separation, although the bags under her eyes mirror mine.

“Sara?” I need to know why she sought me out. I need to hear from her lips she misses me. Only then will my stubborn pride allow me to beg her to stay.

She blows air out of her mouth, making her hair fly upward. A piece lands askew, and I resist the urge to smooth it down. She looks everywhere but at me. Licking her lips, she begins, “Braxton. I, uhm.”

Her hand runs down her body, drawing my attention to her relaxed attire. Not as uptight as she was with us on tour. More like when we were alone in Jackpot. I push those memories away and remind her, “You wanted this meeting.”

Her hand rubs over her mouth. “You’re not making this easy.”

My ire spikes. “Like you didn’t make King’s birthday party easy for me.”

“You shouldn’t have misused Hunte’s checking account.”

We stare into each other’s eyes, both breathing hard. We’re right back where we were in LA. Nothing has changed.

She steps forward and grabs a fistful of my shirt. “Dammit, Brax. Why are you so hard-headed? Listen to me.”

It’s her exasperated tone rather than her words that roots me in place. Plus, she cursed and her soft hand is caught up in my shirt. She invaded my personal space. She called me *Brax*.

I want more. So much more.

I cock my head. “I’ll stay if you have something worth listening to.”



Her cheeks pinken. Not from embarrassment, no—from anger. I can tell by the flash of annoyance in her steel grey eyes. Breaking her usually controlled demeanor, she yells, “Shut up.”

Shaking my head to clear the ringing, I slam my mouth shut. I have a powerful urge to reach around to her ass and pull her to my body. Her pink tongue swipes her bottom lip, and I have to force myself away from biting it. “Make. Me.”

Her chest heaves, pushing her boobs against my chest. In response, my dick pops to life, wanting to join the party. Damn. It’s the first sign of life in that department for months.

“You’re damn frustrating,” she snarls.

She pushes away from me and my whole body craves her heat. This time, I don’t deny myself. After all, she was the one who asked to see me privately. No, begged for it. My toes crush against hers. Schooling my voice into a lower tone, I say, “I know how to work out some frustration.”

I watch, fascinated, as her pupils dilate. She still wants me, no matter how much she’s fighting us. She shakes her head. “Brax, I’m pregnant.”

My whole body feels as if a sledgehammer hit it. “What?” My tone is now higher than Celine Dion’s.

She nods and places her hand on her belly, outlining a small bump.

Holy.

Shit.

I drag my eyes from her stomach up to her gaze. “We’re going to be parents?”

In a rush, she says, “Yes. I thought you should know. You don’t have to do anything. I’ve decided to keep it. You don’t have to pay child support or anything. I thought you should know because you’re the father.”

I place my hands on her shoulders. “Is this what you want?”

She looks down. “You said you didn’t want any more kids. I won’t bother you again.”

All my prior protestations fly out of my mind. I’m going to be a father for a second time. This will be my second chance at getting everything right. While Hilary has been taking care of King—basically ruining any chance I have at a positive relationship with him, despite my best efforts—Sara will be the mother of this child. My child. My hand lowers and covers her belly.

I’ve been faithful to this woman ever since we met. Lex’s words about staying true being the easy part ring in my ears.

She believes in me. I know it. I need her in my life.

The truth surges from my soul. “I was wrong, Sara.”

Under my hand, her belly rises and falls at an increasing pace. “What do you mean?”

“I want more. From you. For us. For our baby.”

“I don’t understand.”

I lift my face to be even with hers. “Sara, I’ve been a mess since you left us. I’ve missed you every day. Everything I’ve done since mid-October has been for you. Working with the new producer, getting my hair cut. I even,” I swallow and prepare to make my biggest admission, “passed the GED.”

Her eyes widen and a huge smile crosses her face. “You did? Oh my goodness, Brax, that’s wonderful. I’m so proud of you. Congratulations.” Her hands grip mine on top of our baby.

This. This right here is what I’ve been waiting to hear. This is the reaction I’ve sought from my band, my entourage. While Colton was happy for me, he didn’t really understand what passing the test meant to me. Not like this woman. Who is carrying my child.

Beaming, I add, “Got a 375. Only missed a perfect score by 25 points.”

“I knew you could do it. I told you you’re smart.”

She did. I didn’t believe her. “I went through the book you bought me. Twice.”

“May I give you a hug?”

I don’t respond with words. I simply open my arms and she steps into my embrace, squeezing me around my waist. I inhale, and her floral scent wraps around my heart. I tighten my grip around her rounding body.

Because she’s truly happy for me, I need her to know how proud I am of her. “I heard you made partner at Adler & Lomell.” Still in my embrace, she nods her head against my shoulder. “They knew a good thing when they saw it.” Like I do.

It’s time for my final plea. I suck in a shallow breath. “Don’t leave me, Miss Partner. Stay. We’ll be a family. You and me and our baby.” She trembles in my arms. I close my eyes and admit what I’ve been fighting for weeks, “I love you.”

Her body gives out and I hold her up. I probably shouldn't have told her how I felt, but it's out there now.

A giggle bubbles up and out of Sara's mouth. "Now you tell me."

I smile and pull her body closer to mine. Her boobs are bigger and our baby bump is growing inside her belly. "I'm turning down your offer. I don't want to be an absentee father. I'm already one with King."

She buries her head into my shoulder. Unable to stop myself, I run my hand downward, over the curve of her ass, and drag her tighter to my body. It's like she was made for me. After a moment, Sara steps back. She's not only more beautiful than ever, she's glowing. How could I have missed this before?

"Do you mean it?"

I consider her question and all that's happened over the past five minutes. Over the past five months. I've never felt more confident in a decision. "Yes." I tip her chin up to mine. "If this is what you want, too?" *Please let her want to be with me.*

"If someone had told me a year ago this would happen, I would've called them crazy. I would've said there's no way you—Braxton Hunte—would ever want to be with a nobody accountant from Chicago." Her fingers skim over my cheek. "But I believe you. God help me, I believe what you're telling me now. And I"—a tear rolls down her cheek—"love you too."

At her confession, I crush my mouth to hers, sealing our admissions the only way I know how. With lips and tongues and bodies.

This woman is mine, and I am hers.

## SARA



**A** wail from the end of the bed makes the past twenty-four hours worthwhile. Brax walks over to my side, showing me our baby girl, wrapped in a pink blanket. He kisses the top of his daughter’s head, and then he kisses mine.

“She’s beautiful, Sara Baby.”

“Let me hold her.”

Brax nods and hands her to me. She’s so tiny. I count each one of her fingers and toes—ten perfectly formed digits each—and kiss every square inch of her. The nurse comes over and asks to take her for a few tests, and I comply. It’s not like I have any fight left in me.

When I’m relocated into my own, private room, Brax comes in. He looks like the rockstar he is. Instead of his guitar, though, he’s wearing a big, goofy grin and carrying the largest teddy bear I’ve ever seen.

Plunking my head onto the pillow, I ask, “Where did you get that?”

“Remember when I had to fly to New York City last month?”

I nod. I couldn’t go with him because it was too late in my pregnancy.

“Well, in between gigs and promo, I might have hit up FAO Schwartz.”

“I hope you left something in the store for other people to buy.”

Smiling, he puts the huge bear onto a chair and caresses my head. “How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

“Tired, but good. When can we see our baby again?”

“Soon.” He kisses my nose. “I think it’s time we give her a name.”

“I’ve been thinking. Would you be okay with Melody Annabel?” I hold my breath, waiting for his response. We’ve been playing the baby name game for months now, although nothing has stuck. I really hope he likes this one, seeing as I already bought a blanket with these initials embroidered on it.

He repeats, “Melody Annabel. The Annabel is a combination of our mothers’ names, right?”

I nod. “‘Anna’ for mine, and I shortened ‘Marabel’ to ‘bel’ for yours.”

He repeats the name a few times, sometimes adding “Hunte” to the end, and he grins. “I love it.”

“Me, too.”

My heart floods with love for him and our daughter. We’ve been through so much over the past year. He explained the photo in the tabloid I saw at the beginning of my pregnancy with him and another woman was a trick of angles by the paparazzi—he’s never met her. We’ve survived more awful headlines from Hilary. We’ve laughed and argued and shared more passion than I ever thought possible. Brax kisses my lips and all my thoughts disperse except for our love.

A knock on my door breaks us apart. It's Colton with King. "Got a big brother here who wants to meet his sister."

King rushes to Brax and they hug. They've spent a little face-to-face-time together lately, but we're living in Chicago, so their visits are limited. Still, King's adoration of his father is more apparent than ever. Although, our relationship hasn't quite gotten traction. I'm hoping our new addition will thaw his heart toward me.

"I got my baby sister a present, because that's what you do, Daddy. You bring presents." He bounces on his feet as he says it, then grabs the bag from Colton and hands it to Brax.

"Thank you, son." Brax stands and opens it, pulling out Timon and Pumbaa stuffed animals. "I'm sure Melody will love these."

King tilts his head and repeats our baby's name. "These are my favorite characters in *The Lion King*. I'll make sure to tell Mel-o-dy all about the story. When can I meet her?"

"Go give Sara a kiss for doing all the hard work, and I'll take you to the nursery."

King's shoulders slump for a second before he heads over to me and says, "Hi. Oh, yeah for having a baby."

Ignoring his body language, I laugh at his greeting, and point to a wrapped present on the chair. King wastes no time in ripping off the paper. "Oh, cool!" The shirt saying "I'm the Big Brother" slides over his shirt in an instant, his face beaming.

After I greet Colton, the three of them disappear from the room. My alone time doesn't last long. Talking in the hallway precedes a new group of visitors—my father, my brother, and



his family. They surround me, telling me how cute my daughter is.

“Her name is Melody Annabel.”

“Whew,” my father quips. “I was afraid she was going to be stuck with Baby Girl Anderson Hunte forever.”

Everyone laughs, and shares in my happiness. Two vases filled with flowers are positioned around my room, and Billy’s wife gives me a huge package of diapers. “You’re going to need these, believe me.”

I smile. “You should give them to Brax. I’ve volunteered him for diaper duty.”

My sister-in-law laughs. “I’d love to be a fly on the baby’s wall when he’s changing his first one.”

Another knock sounds from the door, and Joanna comes in with her husband, who’s holding their two-month old baby boy. Joanna’s arms go around my tired body.

“Congratulations, Momma!”

“Thanks, Momma,” I reply.

We’ve been calling each other these nicknames for months now, and it fills me with wonder and joy all over again we’re doing this together.

While everyone chats, I survey the room. Two years ago, I imagined a very different future for myself—an orderly existence as a partner at A&L. A predictable life. But Brax Hunte blew it all to hell, and I couldn’t be happier.

After Brax and I reunited, I decided to leave my position as partner at A&L for a full-time position as Hunte’s tour accountant. I traveled with the band until I hit my last trimester. “Baby, Give It” stayed at Number One for ten whole

weeks. Hunte soon will be hitting the studio to record a new album, including a song, “My One and Only,” which, I’m humbled to say, Brax wrote about me. They’re working with Shep MacPhee again, considering how well their last collaboration turned out.

Brax moved into my house, which threw everything into disarray. My nice and orderly home is perpetually in upheaval. Well, all the rooms except for our bedroom—and now Melody’s. The two bedrooms are my Zen spaces, where I escape when everything gets too much. This works for us.

Ordered chaos.

Male voices announce Brax has returned. With friends. The rest of the band marches in to congratulate me, bringing more flowers to adorn my room. Even Keith and his wife made it. He’s proven to be an asset as the band’s tour manager.

“Okay, okay,” Brax says, gaining the room’s attention. “Guys.”

As if they’ve orchestrated it, and I suppose they have, all four members of Hunte gather at my bedside and Lex plays a note on a pitch pipe. They hum in harmony then start singing as one, Ricky tapping a beat on a nearby table:

**Y**ou’re my girls

*Not one but two*

*Making my heart smile*

*Forever you’ll be mine*

**W**e’ve come so far

*Fighting and loving and doing it again*

*But one thing comes through*

*My love for you*

**T**he four guys stop singing and I'm about to clap when Brax steps closer to my bedside. He sings, loud and clear:

**M***y love for you is eternal*

*Our baby proves me true*

*There's only one more question to ask*

*Will you be mine, forever and more?*

**B**rax drops to his knee at my bedside, holding up an opened box containing a huge diamond ring. Happiness radiates from all of my pores as I nod to the love of my life.

“Yes!”

He jumps up and places his ring on my finger, then wraps me in a hug. “I love you, Sara Baby.”

“Not as much as I love you, Brax.”

I did everything backward. Bought a house by myself. Had a baby before marriage. Let disorder rule—in small doses. But I'm okay with it.

Because I have the only thing that matters.

I have the love of my life, holding me in his arms.

To the world, he is Braxton Hunte. To me, he's Brax. My ruler of chaos. And the only partner I'll ever want. Forever.

## EPILOGUE - PRESENT DAY: BRAX



**I** let the water wash over me, my short hair sticking to my head. I scrub my body, wishing Sara were in here with me. Well, she *is* the reason I'm taking another shower. A smirk crosses my face as I remember how she screamed my name as she came for me a third time. Yes. This will never get old.

Stepping out of our oversized shower, I wrap a fluffy white towel around my slightly thicker waist and put some product into my hair. The mirror shows crows lines and smile tracks, as Sara calls them. Signs of a life well-lived.

Who would've thought a high school dropout would end up with the smartest woman on the planet, still playing to sell-out crowds decades after his band's first Number One hit? That was so many albums ago, but Hunte is showing absolutely no signs of slowing down. In fact, now Melody's out of college, we're about to embark on a two-year world tour. With all the band's kids grown, this will be our first all-out sustained stadium tour in well-over a quarter of a century. Crap. Makes me sound old.

Shaking my head, I enter our walk-in closet and pull out a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved jersey with the Chicago Bears on it. Hey. They're my hometown team now, have been for

years—although the Giants always will have a special place in my heart.

Forgoing my shoes, I make my way downstairs, following my nose. Sara's become an excellent cook over the years, although she still jokes with Joanna about all their kitchen disasters in years past. Stopping at the threshold of our kitchen, I watch her work.

Her blonde hair looks a bit lighter these days because some grey streaks it. In my opinion, it looks fucking cool. Her bob haircut is long gone, though, and her hair falls to her mid-back. More for me to hold on to.

Her body hasn't changed much over the years. Long gone, thankfully, are those sensible pumps she used to wear with those God-awful skirt suits. Ever since she became Hunte's full-time accountant, she's opted for jeans or—when she's working from home—leggings.

She stands at our Viking range, with three pots going at the same time. I inhale the scent of the fresh herbs from our container herb garden up on the roof, mingled with ground beef.

“Bolognese?”

A wooden spoon clanks against the side of one of the pots. “Yup. Melody will be here in under an hour, and she says she has news.”

I cross the room, walking around the oversized quartz island, and lift up her hair. Pressing a kiss on the back of her neck, I say, “Any idea what it's about?”

She leans back into my body and moves her head from side to side. “No.”

I let my hands roam up her shirt, ending on her boobs. Giving them a squeeze, I nip her earlobe and reply, “Better not be a boy.”

“Brax,” she chides, and straightens to stir the sauce.

“What? Just sayin’.”

To the sound of her laughter, I walk to the wine fridge and select our favorite red. I never had Bud being replaced by grapes on my bingo card, but there you have it. I take two wineglasses from the china cabinet.

“She’s only twenty-five. Five more years before she can date.”

Sara lets out a snort. “I’ll let you believe what you want.”

“You do that.”

The front door opens. Sara removes the apron and returns it to its hook in the pantry.

“Princess, we’re in the kitchen,” I call out.

Her response floats through the air. “Coming!”

My beautiful girl strolls into the kitchen with a plastic bag over her shoulder. She sets it on the island and greets her mother and me.

“You’re as stunning as ever, Princess.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”

Sara picks up the bag. “What do we have here?”

Our daughter turns shining eyes on both of us. “Check it out.”

Sara opens the bag and pulls out a bottle of Dom Perignon. My wife’s gaze meets mine, images floating between us of the

many bottles the band “had to have” on the first tour she joined as our tour accountant. We both purse our lips to stifle our laughter, not wanting to dampen our daughter’s obvious excitement.

I return the wine to the fridge and exchange the two wineglasses for three flutes, kissing my wife on the way to open the bubbly. Sara says, “You’ve got my interest, Mel. What’s your big news?”

Wanting to draw out the suspense, she walks over to the stove. “Bolognese?”

Sara laughs. “You sound just like your father.”

Eyes the same exact color as mine seek me out and I blow her a kiss. My daughter is a marvel to me. Not only did she graduate high school like King, but I attended her college graduation three years ago. She earned a degree in costume design from NYU. Of course, we bought a penthouse in New York City so we could spend time with her during her studies. She’s living there now.

Pride wells up in me as I watch my second-born—the child I made with the love of my life—help her mother with the noodles. Both women are fiercely independent, sassy, and intelligent. And tall. How did I get so lucky?

Once the champagne has been handed out and we’ve all taken a sip to appreciate its deliciousness, I ask, “So tell me, Princess, what’s your news?”

She places her flute down on the island next to the garlic bread Sara prepared. “I got a new job.”

She works on a very popular HBO television show, a period series, as one of the costume designers. My eyebrow raises. “I thought you loved your job.”

“I do, Daddy. But this is for a *movie* that’ll film during the show’s hiatus. The lead costume designer on the HBO show is doing the costumes for the movie and she asked me to be on her team.”

“This is wonderful, honey. I’m so very proud of you!” Sara starts another round of hugs with our girl. Me, I’m bursting with pride. She’s done this all on her own. A chip off her mother’s block.

We sit down and enjoy the meal Sara prepared, like we used to do all the time when she was growing up. The windows in the dining room overlook Lake Michigan, giving us a never-ending view of all that’s good in Chicago. I’m loading the dishwasher when my phone rings.

“Princess, can you get my phone? I’m helping your mother.”

“Sure thing!” Her footsteps take her into the dining room where I left my phone. Her voice carries into the kitchen. “Well, it sounds like you’re having a good time.”

Must be one of my band members. I rinse off the last of the plate and put it into its slot, then join my daughter in the dining room. She mouths “King.” My first-born. As aimless as Melody is driven.

“I’ll let you talk with Daddy now. Good hearing from you.”

She hands me my phone and leaves me to talk with my son. “Hi, King. How are you doing?”

His baritone wafts through the receiver. “Hey, Dad. I’m good. I didn’t realize Melody was visiting.”

“She’s on a break from her show.”



“Well, I only have a few minutes. I was calling to ask if you could deposit a little more money into my account?”

“Already? I gave you ten grand what, a month ago?”

“Yeah, well I had to spend it. You know, Mom needed some help.”

Hilary. Of course. She remarried when King turned twenty-two, right when my child support payments ended. Coincidence? I think not.

“You don’t have to support your mother.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

I sigh. King’s not supporting her. I am. “How much this time?”

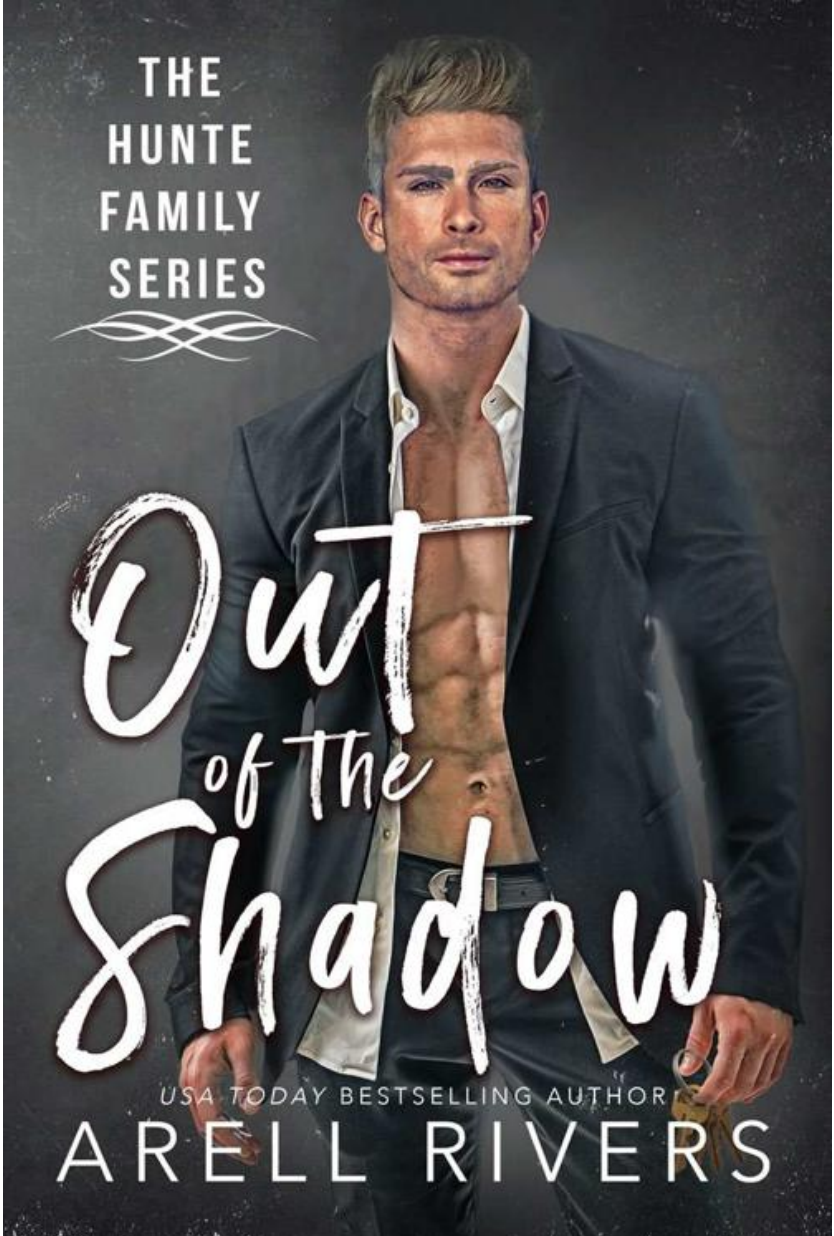
“Another ten should cover it.”

Guilt edges its way to my throat. Even though I tried—at Sara’s urging—to spend more quality one-on-one time with my son, Hilary was always a roadblock. Since I married Sara, though, King developed a healthy disdain for my new wife, which came out via snarky comments and rude innuendos whenever we were together as a family. Which wasn’t too often, given Hilary’s refusal to let him join us for vacations and summer stays. So, I ended up sending gifts when he was younger, which turned into cash deposits somewhere around fifteen years ago. He’s a grown-ass man now at thirty-three, but always my responsibility.

My shoulders slump. “Sure thing, King. The money will be in your bank account by tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Dad. I knew I could count on you.” The line disconnects.

THE  
HUNTE  
FAMILY  
SERIES



Out  
of the  
Shadow

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ARELL RIVERS

# KING



I wake to my cell phone ringing in my ear. As I fumble with the device, a photo of Dad flashes in front of my face. Oh, fuck no. My brain, still pickled from my week-long jag in Mexico, isn't capable of talking with him. I decline the call and drop my hand on top of the plush Austin Horn silk bedding. *What a trip.*

My phone rings again. Really? What's his problem? I hit decline again. When he calls a third time, I relent. "Dad. What's up?"

"Did I wake you? It's fucking noon." His famous tenor voice is as irritating as an empty barbell hitting the floor.

I sit up in my bed, pillows scattering to the floor. "Got in late last night. Or, rather, early this morning." Why do I have to justify my actions to this man? It's not like he's been around for his firstborn since...ever.

"From Mexico, I see."

My eyebrows pull together. "Yes, I was on Max's yacht off Puerto Vallarta with a bunch of friends." I pause, searching my barely-functioning brain for something redeeming to say about my hedonistic trip. "Trevor was there."

A snort soars through the phone. “Yeah, I see that loser right there with you.”

I run my hand through my hair. A kneejerk defense of Trevor is on the tip of my tongue—at least he’s been there for me well, usually—but something snags my attention. It sounds like Dad’s looking at a picture. “Where are you seeing all these things?”

“The internet has some amazing sites, King.”

I review the events of the past week, but can’t think of anything that would’ve made him this mad. Better bite the bullet. “Like I said, what’s up?”

“What’s up, *son*, is there’s a photo of you and your good friend Trevor on *The Gossip*.”

I shrug. “That’s nothing new. The papps love to follow us around and put us on their site. Harmless.”

“Oh, really? The photo I’m looking at is not harmless. At all.”

An unusual twang in his voice makes me nervous. My father has been pissed at quite a few of my many antics, but this tone—resignation?—is one I’ve never heard in all my thirty-three years. What the hell did the papps catch this time? I shake my head and put the phone on speaker so I can load *The Gossip*.

Crap. It better not be...

The site loads. In huge letters, the headline screams —“SNOW IN MEXICO!” Below the damning photo, the caption reads, “Socialite King Hunte and Los Angeles real estate agent Trevor Stern snapped doing lines of cocaine on the beaches of Puerto Vallarta with heiress twins Lacey and

London Toalle.” The photo is too crystal-clear for me to attempt denying it.

“Fuck.”

“You can say that again.” Heavy breathing comes through my phone. I picture my father’s hands, calloused from decades of playing guitar, turning white as he grips the arm of his favorite chair. “King, you know my stance on drugs.”

I can’t deny it. Hunte—my father’s uber-successful band—famously lost their first drummer to an overdose when I was an infant. No one in the band touched drugs again. Dad wasn’t around much when I was growing up, but he instilled that lesson in me many, many, *many* times.

“Dad, it’s not what it looks like.” Embarrassingly, my voice cracks.

“Oh, really? From where I’m sitting, it looks like you and Trevor were snorting cocaine with two barely-dressed women. They didn’t need to bother with the caption. The photo shows it all.”

“Listen, I can explain—”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses any more. You’re a fucking adult. I’ve let this go on for far too long.”

What is he talking about? Let what go on? This is the first time I’ve been caught doing drugs, and it’s not like it happens often. I only partake occasionally, always with Trevor. Maybe once every few months. Or so.

“Dad. I don’t make a habit of doing drugs. I don’t—”

“King. I love you. But Sara has told me for years—”

At the mention of my stepmother, my stomach tightens and I cut him off. “What does *she* have to do with anything?”

She's such a ballbuster. How she ever ensnared my father, I'll never understand. Well, he did knock her up, but it's not like having me was motivation enough for him to stay married to my mother. Not that the first Mrs. Hunte's a prize, either. However, I've been waiting for him to see the light for twenty-five years now, and it's pretty obvious he's never going to dump wife number two.

My father ignores me and plows ahead. "You dropped out of college. Fine. I understand schooling isn't for everyone. But what, exactly, have you done with your life except live off your trust fund and party all over the world?" He pauses. "Nothing. That's what you've done."

"That's a lie and you know it," I say on reflex. "I've done a lot of positive things."

"Really? Name one."

I search my memory and don't have to go far. "Diego. I've been a Big Brother to that kid for ten years, helping him through some difficult shit."

"I'm glad he got his act together. But that's on him, not on you. You, personally, haven't done squat with all the gifts you've been given. And now you're taking drugs? This is the final straw. I've tried hard to give you the benefit of the doubt, but I've been enabling you. My own father was a fuck up, and you're headed down the same path. I'm done, King. Done. I've already called and cut off your trust fund. I'm not giving you any more handouts. I love you. I do. But you need to get your shit together. Get a job." He disconnects the call.

I stare at my phone in disbelief. What the fuck just happened? No way in hell did he really cut off my allowance. Heart racing, I call my trust fund's administrator. "This is King Hunte. I'm calling because I received an unusual phone call

and I need to check that everything is still in order with my trust fund?”

The woman on the other end of the line clears her throat. “Mr. Hunte, I have been advised by Mr. Braxton Hunte himself that you are no longer to receive your monthly payments. I’m sorry.”

I don’t say another word, just kill the call. He did it. He really did it. All because of his bitch of a wife. The saintly Sara.

And Trevor. Like a douche, I asked him to join me in Mexico because we hadn’t hung out in a while. The very first night, he offered me the coke—which I did, thinking it was a one-time thing to kick off our vacation. Unlike me, he kept partying the whole trip, so much the others noticed his drugged-out rude behavior. I practically begged him to stop and go to rehab because, after all, it was my “loan” he was snorting. His response? “Fuck you, I’ll party if I want to!” Look where that’s landed me now.

Blinded by rage, I call my errant “friend,” but it goes straight to voicemail. “You asshole. You had to get snow in Mexico. Have you seen what *The Gossip* posted? Now I have to deal with a pissed-off Braxton Hunte.” I hit the red button and fling my phone across the bed.

Ice runs through my veins. Where am I with money? The condo is paid off, so no worries there. Same for my car, although I was thinking of getting a new one since the Lamborghini is already over two years old.

Retrieving my phone, I go on my bank app and pull up my balance. I have five grand. And that’s it. No more allowance coming at the end of the month.

At least I still have my social media sponsorships.

The sound of a text arriving draws my attention back down to my cell, and it's from one of my sponsors. I open it and find out they're canceling my contract under the "moral turpitude" clause due to that damn photo. A second sponsor texts, but I don't have to read it to know they're following the same path.

Now what the fuck am I supposed to do for money?

Dad's parting words about getting a job ring in my ears.

What can I do? I guess I could be a personal trainer, but how much does a job like that pay? And don't they have to be at their jobs at least five days a week? I hold back a gag and collapse back onto the feather-light bed.

My phone rings again. It better be Trevor so I can give him a real big piece of my mind. I roll over on my bed and check the screen. Despite the shitshow of a morning I've had, I can't help but smile at the sight of Diego's face. Forcing an upbeat tone, I answer, "Hey, Diego. How's it hanging?"

"Good. I mean *real* good."

I've known Diego since he was eight and a bunch of my buddies decided to join Big Brothers. While the rest of my friends dropped out, I made a real connection with the kid. Maybe because he was being raised by a single mother, although his mom did take an interest in him. Perhaps it was his dad, who only showed up for birthdays and Christmases but didn't care to know the super kid he had spawned. Diego's situation hit home.

Sitting up, I rest my head against the grey upholstered headboard. "What's up?"

"I got in."



I suck in my breath. “I knew NYU wouldn’t turn down such an accomplished scholar.”

He chuckles. “I know that’s what you said and all, but until I received their letter, I couldn’t even let myself hope. I followed your advice, and it worked.” His beaming smile reaches me all the way across the country. “Want to know the best part?”

“I can’t imagine what could top you getting into the college of your dreams, but hit me.”

“One word. Scholarship.” At his words, a tiny piece of my heart expands.

Not able to remain in bed any longer, I throw the covers off my naked body and pace around my bedroom. “Way to go. That’s super, Diego. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you. I mean that. If it weren’t for you, I don’t know what I’d be doing right now.”

I scoff at his praise. “Really, you did everything. I only gave you a couple of nudges in the right direction.” Slipping commando into a pair of workout shorts, I ask, “What did your mother say when you showed her the letter?”

“After she finished crying, she hugged the shit out of me. I’ll be the first in my family to go to college.”

“I know. The world’s going to be your oyster, man.” Diego has always been interested in filmmaking—I’ve been able to hook him up with some of my friends in Hollywood, who gave him practical experience. Now, he’ll be able to hone his skills and make the necessary connections to become a great director someday. I feel like calling Dad back to tell him. I *have* done something good.

“I can’t thank you enough for offering to cover the cost of my room and board and books. The scholarship only covers tuition.”

I still at his words. How am I going to help him now, without my trust fund? I flex my biceps. “Well—”

“When can we get together to celebrate?”

Still reeling about this new development, I toss out, “How about Thursday? I don’t have anything on my schedule since I just got back from Mexico.”

He laughs. “Nice life, King. Weren’t you in Hawaii a few weeks ago?”

“I was.” A fantastic trip with a new set of friends. My mind goes back to the villa we all stayed at, owned by the family of a guy I met in Cannes two months ago. Sun, exercise, and lots of drinks and sex. What could be better? “But that was so last month, you know?”

I won’t be going anywhere next month, a thought so depressing I flop onto an overstuffed chair to wallow.

“Well, Thursday works for me. I want to take you to someplace special, not our regular spot. I’ll arrange everything and text you, okay?”

“Sounds like a plan.” We usually hit up SmashBurger, so I can’t wait to see his “special” choice. I normally pay for our meals, but maybe this once I can let him? *Crap*. I hate this. “I look forward to it. I can’t wait to share everything I know about New York City with you. And, hey, you’re going to own that school.”

I disconnect the line and text Trevor—again—telling him that I want the last loan I gave him repaid pronto. Heading into my kitchen, I make a protein shake and head down to the

beach for my morning exercise, despite the fact that it's after noon. I need to get out and clear my head.

After my workout, I run back to the condo, sweaty from pushing my body hard, and take a long shower. I spend a few minutes shaving my stubble to get the perfect three-day look, then work some product into my hair and examine my nails. It's been five days—time for a manicure. How much does that cost? Well, maybe it can wait a couple of days...

I toss on a pair of Prada grey sweats and, sans shirt, head to my kitchen. Since my fridge contains beer and ketchup, I have no choice but to order lunch like usual. When the delivery guys shows up half an hour later, I go to pull a twenty out to give him as a tip, but—feeling like an ass—give him a five-dollar bill instead. Desperate times and all that.

As I eat my chicken, I review my options, none of which are appealing. How am I going to survive without my trust fund and sponsorships? My PR needs to change, like yesterday. This sucks in a real bad way. And it's all because of some blow.

My mind bounces from coke pusher Trevor to Blaine, our other childhood buddy. Who's producing a new TV show about real estate and asked both of us to screen test. At the time, I scoffed at the idea, but hell. Maybe I should?

After all, I've gained the reputation of being a "house matchmaker" over the years. Whenever someone I know is looking to sell or move, they always whisper in my ear to see if I know of anyone who might be a good match. I've enjoyed hooking people up.

Blaine's TV gig has to be better than getting a "real" job.

Putting my dishes into the sink, I pull up Blaine's number and make idle chitchat about his wife, Jewel—also a childhood friend—and their kids. When we finish shooting the shit, I get around to the point of my call. "So, have you made any final decisions about your new show? The one about real estate?"

"Not yet. Trevor was in here today. He looked good."

At Trevor's name, my resolve strengthens. No way am I going to let him get this gig. "I was wondering—" I let my last statement hang out there, waiting for him to take the bait. Which he does.

"Wondering what?"

I scrunch up my face, knowing he can't see me. "I was thinking I might be interested in trying out for your show after all. Since you're still looking, after all."

"Buddy, that would be great," he says, and I can tell he means it. "I'd love to have you come in for a screen test, but it has to be tomorrow. We're about to make our decision as to who goes on to the next round."

"Perfect." My nails catch my eye, and I decide to make an appointment with my manicurist today after all. "What time should I be there?"

"Come by around ten. And King, I think you're perfect for this role. We'll be filming out in the Hamptons. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow."

We hang up and I collapse back onto the couch. I can do the Hamptons. Been there, done many of the ladies. I smirk. If I have to get a job, this sounds like it'll be right up my alley. Not to mention I can pull the rug out from under Trevor, the asshole who ripped away my trust fund.

# ANGIE



I unfold the ten-year-old sheet of notebook paper and smooth it out on my desk. Swallowing over the lump in my throat, I reread the list for the millionth time, although I keep the very bottom folded like I always do.

*Graduate college, preferably Columbia. Check.*

*Pass the New York State real estate exam. Check.*

*Learn the ropes from Aunt Teresa. Check.*

I smile. Dante's aunt helped my family find our dream house in Brooklyn when I was thirteen. Most adults don't waste their time talking to kids, but she could tell I was interested in real estate and made a point of telling me about the various properties she was showing us. She was the reason I fell in love with real estate in the first place. Some people think it's only about making a living, but real estate is more than that—it's about helping people secure their future happiness.

It was pure good luck that our dream house ended up being next door to Aunt Teresa's extended family, the Russos. Dante's family. Shutting down those thoughts, I move on to the next item on my Bucket List.

*Get Broker's License and buy an office in Aroostook, Long Island. Check.*

“I did it, Dante,” I whisper. We were so in love with this town that we didn't even think of setting up shop anywhere else.

The next item is the last one I'll ever tackle. *Become the #1 real estate agency in the Hamptons.* It's so big, so ambitious, it might take me the rest of my life to get there.

I sigh. Although we were young when we created this list, we weren't totally naïve. We knew this would be the hardest one, which will make my ultimate success all the more satisfying.

But if I want that particular crown, I'll have to steal it from Poppy Mayflower. Seriously, Poppy is her real name. To make matters worse, she's the picture-perfect Hamptons socialite—tall, skinny, blonde, and immaculately groomed. She's been the top realtor here in the Hamptons for ten years, ever since she took over the business from her mother, Regina.

At forty, Poppy is ten years my senior and always lords her success over me. But she shouldn't count me out yet. How was I supposed to know my first-ever client here had already signed with her? I was told she was unhappy with her realtor and we hit it off. She hired me fair and square, and I found her a wonderful single-family house. Ever since, Poppy's had it out for me. She's made it a habit of talking shit about me behind my back, claiming I lack class and sophistication because I'm from Brooklyn. My dad's first-generation Italian, and to her that means I'm “not worthy.”

I may be vertically challenged and my last name didn't come over with the pilgrims, but I'm damn good at what I do. Or, rather, I would be if Poppy would back off. A few months

ago, she lured away my only agent. And last week, she managed to steal a new listing away from me by bragging to the owners about her contacts. She convinced the Lloyds she could sell their house in half the time it would take me.

Truth is, she may not be wrong.

But it still makes me mad.

It was my first million-dollar listing, and I'd worked hard for it. I sigh, putting my anger away. Won't do me any good.

What I need is good news from that television show. It's not a conventional way to gain attention—I'm sure Poppy wouldn't dream of it—but I want to bring in more clients and make Russo Real Estate a household name. Not just in the Hamptons, either. I'll show Poppy what it means to be from Brooklyn!

I kiss the notebook paper and fold it back into its little square, returning it to my purse. I really need to remember to leave it in my bedroom. Absently, I rub my left wrist.

The pile of bills neatly stacked on the corner of my desk mocks me. If anything else goes wrong, I don't know what I'll do. I already had to let my receptionist go to save her salary. Thank God for cousin Marlene, who volunteered to step in—free—until I get my feet under me again. That was a year ago. Whenever I do a closing, I make sure to give her a piece. Thankfully her husband's a lawyer, so she doesn't need the money.

*This will be the week you grab a new listing, or sell a home. This week.*

It has to be. If something doesn't change soon, I'm not going to be the top real estate agent in the Hamptons. I'm not going to be a real estate agent at all.

I'm standing by my desk, gathering up my things, when my cell phone rings, startling me out of my thoughts. I need to leave if I'm going to make it to my family's house for our weekly dinner—one they grudgingly changed to Saturdays to accommodate my Sunday Open Houses—but I'm waiting for a call, so I fish my phone out of my purse.

My heart pounds when I see the name on the screen. Blaine Evans, the TV producer. "Hi, Blaine," I say, accepting the call.

"Angela, so glad I caught you!"

I tug my hair. "It's Angie."

"Not a problem, Angie. I wanted to let you know that we've made a decision."

I suck in my breath. I sent in my audition video as soon as I heard about the show, and Kaitlyn Jeffries came by a few weeks later. With her long red hair streaked with purple, she looked more like a fairy than a director, but I think I convinced her the agency is a good fit for the show. I hope so.

"Congratulations, your agency has moved on to the next round."

I barely restrain myself from making a victory lap around the reception area. "Really? Oh, wow." I clear my throat. "I mean, I'm very excited to hear this."

He chuckles. "We'd like to do screen tests next week with you and your potential co-stars, see how everything gels."

My heartrate speeds up with every word he utters. If I get this gig, it will put Russo Real Estate on the map. Finally, a piece of good news. "Next week is perfect."



After hanging up with Blaine, I collapse down onto my chair and exhale. This is my big break. I kiss my wrist.

*We're going to make it, Dante. I know it.*



“**A**ngie, you don’t have any meatballs on your plate. Francesco, pass her the meatballs.” Next to him, his wife mediates a fight over pasta between their two little girls.

“Thanks, Mama.” Accepting the platter from my brother, I put two meatballs over my pasta.

“So, tell us all about this fancy television show you’ve gotten yourself onto,” my sister, Juliana, says as she passes me the grated Parmigiana Reggiano. Her son’s Pee Wee soccer team had an away game today, so her husband is representing them while she’s at our family dinner.

I sprinkle a liberal amount of cheese over my plate and dig in. “It’s a reality show about real estate agents. I’m not ‘in’ yet though. Russo Real Estate is a finalist.”

“Why are they even considering your place?” Leo says around a mouthful of food. “Are they desperate or something?”

Francesco smacks him upside his head. Of course, Leo’s joking. My younger brother—by eleven months—knows how hard I’ve been working to make ends meet. Everyone does. “Because I’m the best.” I bat my eyelashes.

“Of course you are,” Mama pronounces. “Isn’t that right?” She nudges my father.

“I think it’s wonderful, Angela,” my father says as he takes a second piece of garlic bread. He’s the only living person who

I allow to call me Angela. It sounds better in his accent. “Tell us more, *bambina*. What is the show about?”

I put my fork down. “They said it’ll showcase real estate in Aroostook, and it’s really high-end. I think they want an excuse to go into the mansions on the beach and shoot celebrities and other rich people who are buying and selling.”

Juliana taps me on the back of my arm with the flat end of her fork, a concerned look on her face. “Did you tell them you don’t have any of those listings?”

I shake my head. “I told them that I’m licensed and have had the agency for a couple of years now, but that I’m still new on the scene. They seemed to like that answer.”

She nods. “You remember when the Genovese bakery was featured on one of those shows? It made them a household name overnight and they had to hire security to make sure the crowds are orderly. Maybe that’ll happen with Russo Real Estate, too.”

I inhale and hold my breath for a second, hoping so hard my heart hurts. “That’s the idea. I’m hoping this is our big break.” I take a bite out of my bread but am too worried to savor the homemade goodness.

“What’s the next step?” Francesco asks.

“The producer told me there are two finalists who are coming into town to do screen tests with me next week.”

Francesco and Leo exchange looks. “No names?” Leo asks.

I give him the evil-eye. “I know what you’re thinking. You better not go all NYPD on me and run background checks on them. I’m sure the studio will have vetted them.”

“Not agreeing to that,” Leo rumbles over a mouthful of pasta. “Gotta make sure my big sister is safe.”

I point with my fork to both of them. “I mean it. Don’t.”

Having two brothers on the force can be such a pain. Like the time they raided an Open House I was doing because someone submitted a tip that the owner was running an unlicensed puppy mill. Turned out, the couple rescued animals from hurricane-ravaged places and adopted them out. Needless to say, I lost that listing, too. Can’t prove it, but I still think Poppy was the tipster.

“I, for one, think it’s cool. My granddaughter is going to be a television star.”

I lean over and kiss Nonna on the cheek. She smiles and picks up her fork, the glint of her wedding ring catching my eye. My grandfather passed away five years ago, but she still wears it. I sigh, and play with my own wedding rings. One true love for a lifetime.

My sister intrudes into my thoughts. “Do you think you’re going to get as much screen time as Chip and Joanna?”

My stomach twists at the thought. Could I really be in the same league as the hosts on HGTV’s hit show? Wouldn’t that be amazing? It would catapult me toward the last item on my Bucket List for sure. “If the agency is selected, the show will bring in clients who don’t care that I’m not from the Hamptons.”

“Brooklyn can kick their ass,” Francesco announces and we all laugh.

Everyone except for Mama. “All right. That’s enough. Eat up.”

When Mama decides it's time to eat, we know better than to question her.

# ANGIE



**T**he day has finally arrived. Blaine and his crew should be at the agency in under an hour. My sister and I finish our breakfast, and I toss my half-eaten bagel into the garbage. If she hadn't come over to help me prepare for the show, I wouldn't have eaten a bite. I also wouldn't look nearly this good.

Juliana touches my dark hair, which she's styled into sleek, glossy locks that move when I do. "You look gorgeous. I'm bummed I have to work this afternoon."

I've been acting as if everything's fine, but so much is riding on this show and I'm a bundle of nerves. "Are you sure I'm ready?" To lighten things up, I add, "Can you make me taller?"

My big sister takes a step back, gives me an assessing look, and wolf-whistles. It's impossible not to smile. The total confidence she has in me helps me relax. She glances down at my feet. "You're wearing my best heels. That's about as tall as you get. A little more lipstick and you'll be camera-ready."

We move into the bathroom, where she touches up my lipstick and adds more hairspray. "Just be yourself."

"Thanks so much for coming all the way out here," I say. "I'll call you later and let you know how everything goes."

She pulls me into a hug. “You better. I can’t wait to hear all about your agency being selected!”

I hold her for a moment longer than I normally would, then she pulls away and grabs my left hand. We both look at my rings—the tiny diamond Dante gave me more than a dozen years ago, layered over my plain gold wedding ring.

She inhales. “Can you do something for me?”

“What?” I brace myself. Juliana has made it very clear that she thinks I’m too young not to move on from Dante. I know she’s not the only one who feels that way, but I disagree.

Her eyes meet mine. “I have a feeling this is going to be great for you. Keep an open mind. About everything.”

I know what she means about ‘everything,’ and pull my hand away. “A reality TV show isn’t enough for you?” We both let out a hesitant laugh as we leave the bathroom.

“Knock ’em dead.” She grabs her purse and I trail her to the door. After one last quick hug, she leaves the apartment.

I lean against the closed door and strum my fingers against the wood. It’s hard to ignore Juliana when she’s on a tear about something, but I can’t think about that right now. The only thing I can focus on is honoring my promise to Dante. This television show will make the agency, I know it. I touch my sleek hair and straighten my shoulders. Now, I only have to convince the producers I’m the right pick.

Leaving all my doubts pinned to the door, I take my coffee and cell off the counter and head downstairs to the office. Flipping on all of the lights, I put my things on top of my desk. Giving the office a critical eye, I fluff up the throw pillows on the brown faux leather couch and matching armchairs, and

make sure all of the magazines on the coffee tables are neatly stacked.

A copy of *Active Aroostook*, with its cover photo of Poppy as Realtor of the Year, stares at me from the top of the pile. I so want to be on that cover next year. I bury the magazine in the middle of the stack, placing *Living Large* on top. The headline announces a group of beautiful people out on a yacht in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Nice life.

It strikes me, not for the first time, that this could all backfire on me. Many of the rich elite don't take kindly to being the center of attention and this television show will certainly put a spotlight on Aroostook. Maybe more of the old guard will turn up their nose at me, a mere Brooklynite with aspirations to conquer their town.

I scrunch my nose. Magazines like *Living Large* exist for a reason. People want to see how the top, top, top people live, and experience life through them. That's what I would be doing with this show. Helping people live out their fantasies.

Helping save our agency in the process.

If I don't get this gig, I may have to resort to offering real estate test-prep services. A shudder runs through my body as I remember the one and only time I tried my hand at teaching in Sunday School. None of the kids listened.

As I grab my coffee, the blouse I'm wearing rides up my left arm, exposing the tip of my tattoo. I bring my wrist to my mouth and kiss Dante's name. "We've got this."

The front door opens and I twirl around. A tall guy with thinning blond hair walks into the office, removing his sunglasses and depositing them into his shirt pocket. "Angela?"

“Angie.” And because I recognize his voice from our phone calls, I shake his hand and say, “Nice to finally meet you in person, Blaine.”

He smiles and looks around, and I note his even, white teeth. Shoot. I probably should’ve picked up some whitening strips at the drugstore. “Kaitlyn wasn’t kidding when she said your office is to-die for. This will play perfectly on camera.”

I stand taller. Or, as tall as I can, given I’m only five-foot-three. Thank God for the three-inch heels I borrowed from my sister. “Thanks. We’re proud of it.”

He nods and Kaitlyn, of the purple-streaked red hair fame, joins us. While she introduces me to the camera and lighting people, Blaine wanders around the office. *Wow*. There’s a lot of people in here. Glad I stocked up on drinks and nibbles.

Blaine instructs the crew to set up in the conference room. Returning to me, he explains, “Today, we’re going to see how you test with the two possible leading men for the series, and take shots of your office. We’ve tweaked our plan for the program since we last talked, so let’s sit down and discuss everything.”

Too nervous to actually drink my coffee, I drop onto the sofa next to Blaine and listen to the revised plan for the show, which is now called *Battle of the Real Estate Matchmakers*.

“So,” I say, “I’m going to be the woman real estate agent, and one of the two guys I’m testing with today will be my opponent?”

He chuckles. “Don’t think of him as an ‘opponent.’ More like a co-conspirator of sorts. We’ll want to present him as another agent at your real estate firm. The two of you will be competing on various challenges, but the end goal will always



be to match clients with houses, and your agency will get part of the commission no matter which of you makes the sale. It's a win-win for you. Well, assuming we decide to go with your agency, of course."

I cross my legs, concentrating to prevent my foot from bouncing all over the place. "And my salary for the show will be the same no matter who comes out ahead?"

He knocks on the coffee table. "Mostly. A bonus will go to the person who wins the most challenges during the series."

I'm digesting his words when the office door opens and he stands. "Excuse me, that'll be either King or Trevor. They're the two men who'll be auditioning with you today. Sit tight and I'll introduce you in a sec."

I turn toward the door and blink in recognition. King is apparently King Hunte. Notorious playboy. Son of rock legend Braxton Hunte, my first celebrity crush. Too bad that apple fell far from the tree. The son lives on social media and, by the look of him, 'roids. Or at least he exercises a whole hell of a lot. *He's* up for the role? I stifle a snort. This guy has never worked a day in his beautiful life. I'm shocked he bothered to get his real estate license.

He *is* good-looking, I'll give him that. Shorter than Blaine by about an inch with cropped blond hair that is styled "just so." I skim down his body, clad in a white button-down shirt and jeans. The shirt does nothing to hide his extra-broad shoulders and a trim torso that makes every inverted-V jealous. Geez. *Get a grip, Angie.*

The door opens again and my eyes travel to the man who now stands next to King. Trevor, I presume. Taller than both King and Blaine, he has shoulder-length brown hair, and when he takes off his sunglasses, he reveals the deepest pair of blue

eyes I've ever seen. He looks like less of a Neanderthal than King, and I instantly prefer him.

Blaine heads to the door to greet them, then launches into the same speech he gave me about today's audition. King and Trevor stand several feet apart, nodding at what he's telling them, not looking at each other. They clearly see themselves as rivals for the role.

Trevor smirks at King, straightening his back, then shifts his gaze to Blaine. "Are the clients we'd be showing real buyers and sellers, or are they actors too?"

"Good question, Trevor," Blaine replies. *Damn. It is a good question.* I lean in to hear the answer. "All of the potential buyers and sellers are actually in the market. We'll use some of the host real estate office's clients as well as clients from other agencies. To fill in any gaps."

I stifle a snort from my seat in the reception area. Although I do have a few clients, none of them have the kind of mansions the producers want to feature—or the budget to buy one. If they select me, where will these mysterious buyers come from?

My eyes wander back to the pile of magazines. Despite my reorganization, I'm all too aware of the copy of *Active Aroostook* now sitting in the middle of the stack. *Please don't let them be featuring Poppy.*

King interrupts my musings. "Will the show provide us a wardrobe, or are we expected to wear our own clothes?"

*Seriously?* He's concerned about clothes? Well, what did I expect from such a pretty boy? My opinion of Trevor notches up.

Kaitlyn emerges from the conference room and hurries over to the door. She greets both of the men, fussing over King as if he were the last garlic knot in the basket, and leads the trio deeper into the office. King's voice, a deep baritone, washes through my body like a warm rain. *A warm rain? What the hell?*

Blaine motions me over. Inhaling my breath to screw up my courage, I rise to my feet and head over to where they're talking.

King nods at Blaine, then his eyes land on me and he smiles. My brain stills. Their color is so unusual. They're not quite brown, not quite green. More of an amber. *Huh.*

"Hello there. I'm King Hunte. And you must be Angela."

Although he's looking at me, I get the feeling he isn't really seeing me. Is he distracted or just unimpressed? After all, he's some fancy socialite, and my agency is barely squeaking by. To King Hunte, I am a nobody. I almost decide against correcting him, but a glimpse of the scrawling ink on my wrist gives me the strength to speak up for myself. Clasp his hand, I say, "Angie Russo. Only my father calls me Angela."

He shakes my hand, his grip firm but not overpowering. His callouses take me aback. They must be related to working out, since he doesn't seem to be the hard-labor type.

"Nice to meet you, Angie."

I drop his hand and Blaine introduces me to Trevor, who keeps his deep-blue eyes trained on mine. "A real pleasure, Angie."

I clasp his hand and shake. It's a bit limp, but I guess you can't have everything.

King breaks in. “Nice little place you have here.” The way he says “little” irks me. He wanders over to the reception area. Picking up *Living Large*, he holds it up for everyone to see and announces, “This was a great time.”

I touch my throat. He was *on* that yacht? Holy crap. I smooth down my shirt, something I got on final sale at a department store, and make sure it’s tucked into my pants. Only then do I notice the large watch attached to King’s wrist. That thing cost more than my car. Must be nice not to worry about money.

“It sure was,” Trevor adds.

Blaine claps his hands, not allowing me time to ponder the fact that these antagonistic men actually know each other. “All right everyone. King, let’s head into the conference room and see what we have going on here. Trevor, take a seat out here and we’ll get to you shortly.”

I allow everyone to enter the room ahead of me, my nervousness rearing up again. Blaine points to an empty chair next to King, which I take.

Once we’re all comfortable, Blaine says, “So, today we’re just going to see how the two of you interact. Nothing to worry about. Let’s pretend you finished up an initial meeting with a new client and you’re discussing which one of you should work with them. Talk naturally and be yourselves. Let’s see what happens.”

I nod. I can do this. As I’m the only person at the agency, thanks to Poppy, I don’t have the luxury of evaluating a client with anyone anymore. Sometimes it would be nice to let another agent work with someone who’d be a better fit. I tuck some hair behind my ear, but Kaitlyn comes over and asks me not to do that. For the cameras and all.

Shaking out my hands, I turn to face King, who looks completely relaxed with his ankle propped on his knee. Having his gorgeous gaze fixed on me doesn't help my nerves. Instead of crossing my legs, I opt to keep both feet on the floor, hoping it will help steady me.

Blaine raises his voice. "And, we're rolling."

I open my mouth to begin the conversation, but King beats me to it. "That couple doesn't know what they want. Beach, no beach. Fireplace, no fireplace. Five bedrooms, no six. I don't want to get caught up in their garbage."

"Well," I start. "It seems to me that we could help them find a middle ground. They both know they like a modern style, so—"

King waves his hand in the air. "Modern is so, I don't know, non-committal. Who needs such a wishy-washy client? Not me."

His response to these fake clients raises my real hackles. "You know, here at Russo Real Estate, we strive to help everyone who walks through our doors." Even if they're suspected tire-kickers, they may turn into real buyers. Someday.

His hand runs over the perfect amount of stubble dotting his chin. "Yeah, then you can work with them. I want to help those who know what they want. With the budgets to buy it."

He's plain wrong. I shake my head and tuck my hair behind my ear, forgetting all about the cameras. "No, King. A person's bank balance doesn't dictate whether they're entitled to help. Everyone deserves to buy their dream home, no matter if it costs one-hundred thousand or tens of millions."

With an incredulous look on his handsome face, King throws his head back and laughs. “Oh, you got me going there for a minute. What sort of hovel can anyone buy in Aroostook for under a mil?”

“Hovel? You may be the son of rock royalty, *King*, but you’re certainly no oligarch.” I pause to take a breath. “I’ve sold several homes under five-hundred thousand here, thank you very much.”

His eyebrows rise toward his hairline. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

I cross my arms over my chest.

“Fine. You can work with them, but I’m going after the gold.”

His tone, combined with his air of superiority, lodges itself under my skin. “I sold a dozen homes last year. How many did you sell?”

“I don’t know exactly.” He flips one hand in my direction.

“Ball park.” I lean in for the kill.

He licks his lips, and I’m disgusted that it distracts me, even for merely a moment. “I close deals that no one else even knows about.”

Sure. I doubt he closed any deals while he was traipsing around the globe on his daddy’s credit card. He’s a trust-fund baby. A spoiled brat. Good-looking or not, he’s lower than a donkey’s nut on my scale. I scoff. “I hustle for my clients.”

He rolls his eyes. “Do what you want.” Standing, he walks in a full circle. “And what I want to do is redecorate in here. This conference room should be more modern.” He holds his hands out as if in a frame. “I can see it now. A row of

computers so clients can browse listings. Sleek architectural artwork. Repaint it a steel grey.” He makes a fist. “Something powerful. Says we’re here and we’ll help you get here, too.”

With each suggestion, my body tightens. Juliana decorated this room for me, and I love every inch of it. By the time King stops talking and relaxes into a stance that screams rich and lazy, I’m on my feet next to him. The stand-off would be more effective if I were taller, but I don’t care. I shove my index finger into his pec, which is rock hard. Of course it is. “That’s. Stupid.” Good God, did I just say “stupid”? I’m a Columbia graduate.

Instead of retreating, King removes my finger from his body with two of his own. “I think it would make a powerful statement. Clients like those time-wasters you’re so eager to help won’t even walk through the door.” He turns his back to me and moves toward the spot that would hold his imagined row of computers.

My blood pressure ticks up another notch. In a low voice, I say, “This office, this conference room, is off-limits. And as for *my* new client? I’m going to scour the listings to find them their dream home. You can do as you wish.”

He turns toward me and the air between us feels charged. His chest rises and falls. “Whatever. Handle them yourself and leave me out of it.” His voice is regal. “They. Are. Yours. Deal with them.”

I blink. What an arrogant jerk. Because someone isn’t crazy wealthy doesn’t mean they don’t deserve the best possible service. Not intimidated by his height or bulk, I stalk back into his personal space like any good Brooklyn woman would.

“As the *founding* partner, I’m glad to take them under my wing. Watch and learn.” I place a hard emphasis on my role to make my point.

His nostrils flare as his unusual eyes bore into me.

“Cut!” Blaine interrupts us. “That was great!”

King and I remain locked in a staring war. He shakes his head and grins at me. “I like your fire.” His eyes turn greener now, as if he’s really seeing me for the first time.

In my sister’s heels, I stumble a few steps backward and latch onto a chair for balance. Steadied, I try to breathe out some of my Italian temper.

From across the room, Blaine says, “Talk about differences of opinion. I liked what I saw on film. Good job, both of you.”

Oh, yeah. We were pretending. King doesn’t really think the conference room needs an overhaul. Why would he? I’ve had several compliments on this very space. “You had me going there for a moment about redecorating.”

“Oh, I meant every word. I’d redecorate the shit out of this room.” He does another full-circle. “I’d also never take on a client with a budget of less than a mil.”

My hand flies out, index finger pointing at him. “You have no idea how the rest of the world lives, do you? You take your fancy trips and live off what Daddy gives you.”

He smirks. “Jealous?”

“Guys, guys, save it for the cameras,” Blaine interrupts and places his hand on King’s shoulder. “King, that was a great screen test. Let me walk you out and I’ll give you the next address. We’ll meet you there in about two hours.”



King gives me a two-finger salute before nodding at Blaine and following him out of the conference room. My stomach twinges. Who is the other agent-finalist? The dozen or so people milling around inside the room threaten to suffocate me, so I leave and lock myself in the restroom. Leaning against the closed door, I will all the tension from that screen test to slide away.

*Deep breaths, Angie.*

Looking up at the ceiling, I say, “Dante, I hope I made the right decision here. Maybe the show isn’t worth it if I have to put up with such a jerk.” Of course, the room remains silent.

After a couple of minutes, I check my appearance in the mirror and reapply the lipstick from my purse. Time to do this again with Trevor. Holding out hope that he’ll be a much better fit, I take a deep breath and leave the room.

“There you are.” Kaitlyn grabs my arm as I step into the reception area. “Wasn’t King to die for? I mean, he’s so hot.”

I smooth the sleeves of my shirt. “He *is* something, that’s for sure.”

“So true, so true. Well, before we test you with Trevor, I wanted to see if you have any questions for me?”

*When will I find out if you’ve selected me?* I shake my head. “No, I think Blaine has done a great job of explaining the concept to me.”

Blaine claps his hands. “Let’s go get set up in the conference room.”

We all transfer location, and once we’re seated, Blaine lays out the new scenario Trevor and I are going to discuss. This time we’re discussing a plan for an Open House for a multi-

million-dollar house. I keep my longing for the listing to myself.

While the crew is taking care of some last-minute details, Trevor leans his head over to mine conspiratorially. “So, did you have a good screen test with King?”

I stifle a snort. “Let’s just say it was a challenge.”

He sniffs and wipes his hand under his nose. “Well, I hope we do much better than Mr. Challenge.” He smiles and his white teeth sparkle. Shoot. I am definitely investing in whitening strips.

“Believe me, it couldn’t be much worse.”

He winks at me and then Blaine clears his throat, capturing our attention. “All right. We want you two to run with the scenario. Talk naturally. Be yourselves.” After we both nod, he directs, “And, action.”

Feeling more confident in front of the cameras than I did with King, I start our conversation. “So, Mr. and Mrs. Delacroix’s house is in the perfect location. With its infinity pool and expansive backyard overlooking the beach, I’m thinking we host an Open House on the grounds rather than inside.” I lean in. “I know this is a bit unorthodox, but the views should sell their house even more than the renovated professional-grade kitchen.”

“That no one except the caterers will use,” Trevor agrees and we both chuckle behind our respective palms.

I tap him on his forearm. “You’re bad.”

He smiles, the expression transforming his whole face. “You know I’m right.”

I play with the ends of my hair. “So, if we do the outdoor Open House, we’ll need a waitstaff serving mimosas.”

Trevor gets into the spirit of my thought process. “And passing out appetizers. Like bacon wrapped scallops.”

We continue in this vein for another ten minutes before Blaine calls “Cut!” The rest of the crew talk amongst themselves, so Trevor and I continue our conversation. “You’re fun,” he says.

“Thanks,” I beam at him. “You’re pretty fun yourself.”

He glances down at my hand, then his face falls. “I was going to ask you out, but I see that someone’s already beaten me to the punch.”

My right hand covers Dante’s engagement and wedding rings. I’m not used to being hit on because, well, everyone in Brooklyn knows the deal and no one in Aroostook cares. “Oh, well,” I stammer.

“So who’s the lucky guy?”

“Dante,” I reply automatically. Because I need to fill the pregnant silence, I continue, “High school sweethearts.”

“Oh, wow. Then I’m really late to this party.”

I shrug. “You’re a good-looking guy. Don’t tell me you don’t have women hanging on to your every word out in...” I trail off because I realize I don’t know where he’s from.

“I live in LA,” he supplies. Just like King.

“Well, I’m sure you have your pick of women out there.”

He sniffs again, making me wonder if he has allergies. “But none as fascinating as you are.”

I roll my eyes and laugh at his outrageousness. “You’re such a charmer.”

Blaine comes over to us. “That was a great screen test, you two,” he says with a grin. “Trevor, can I speak with you for a few?”

“I’ll give you guys some space,” I say, standing. From the reception desk, Marlene motions me over, so I make my way to the front of the office.

“This looks so exciting,” she says, her eyes fixed on the cameras in the conference room.

“It was this time around. The first guy they tested for the job is a real jerk, but this one’s nice. We bounced ideas off each other like colleagues. I hope they pick him.” I pause. “And me.”

Marlene shakes her head as she hands me a message slip. “I didn’t want to distract you from the TV show, but a potential new client called.”

I grab the slip of paper from her hand. “Great! I haven’t gotten the part yet though.” I check out the people in the conference room where Trevor and Blaine are still deep in conversation. “I’m going to call them back now.”

“You do that.” She points toward the conference room. “I’ll make sure to keep these guys occupied if they try to leave before you’re done.”

“Thanks.” I head over to my desk and dial the number. I’m doing this. I am going to keep our agency afloat—better still, make it profitable. When a woman answers, I enthuse, “Hi, this is Angie from Russo Real Estate. I understand you’re looking for an agent to help you with your house hunt?”

“Oh, hello,” she says with hesitation. “Well, I actually just made an appointment with The Mayflower Agency. I’ll get back in touch with you if things don’t work out.” Click.

I sit at my desk looking at the receiver before replacing it on the base. Shit. I check the message slip—she called when I was doing that awful screen test with King. When I didn’t answer, she must’ve called Poppy. *Damn King.*

Why did he try out for this show anyway? He obviously has more money than God, as I see him all over social media. He can’t doing this be for the notoriety or the paycheck. Trevor better get the role. With me.

I stomp back over to the reception desk.

“How’d it go, honey?” Marlene asks.

I give my cousin a look and sigh. She places her hand on top of mine. “Don’t worry. I have a great feeling that this television show is going to be a game changer.”

“Juliana said that, too.”

I paste on a smile and will the empty feeling lodged in the pit of my stomach to go away.

# KING



**A**t least I don't have to get an actual job. Blaine called last night and told me I beat out Trevor for the show. Take that, *Dad*, I can do this on my own.

Too bad Blaine picked Angie to be my co-star. Her tight little body and long, brown hair could've made her hot, but her attitude sucked. I don't know what crawled up her ass, but her anger management issues aren't my problem.

When I stroll into Russo Real Estate for our first cast meeting, a woman in maybe her late-thirties sits behind the full desk in the front. She wasn't here when I came in to do my screen test a week ago. Placing my elbow on the desk, I offer her my panty-dropping smile. "Hi, I'm King Hunte. I'm here for the show."

Her demeanor doesn't change. She doesn't get flustered. Come to think about it, neither did Angie. Huh.

"Hello, Mr. Hunte, I'm Marlene Ragan. Congratulations on winning the co-starring spot. Everyone is in the conference room." She pushes away from the desk and stands.

Her tone is professional, but she's wearing a pair of leggings and an oversized shirt, belted at the waist, with flats. Not exactly office attire, if you ask me.

Reserving my opinion, I follow her to the closed door behind which is the dingy conference room where I did my screen test. I check my Rolex. I'm barely twenty minutes late. The receptionist opens the door and motions for me to enter.

As I pass, I say, "Thanks." She nods and then I look into the room. Blaine, Kaitlyn and Angie sit around a round table where paperwork is the star. Some bagels and drinks are set up on the sideboard. I stroll over and grab a bottle of water and take the empty seat between Blaine and Angie. "Hey."

Angie's eyes turn to slits. A bit unsettled by her reaction, I turn my attention to Blaine, who scowls at me. Seriously? Twenty minutes late is early, in my book.

Blaine says, "Glad you could join us, King. Angie"—he looks at my co-star—"you already know that we ran all of the screen tests by our focus groups, and it wasn't even close. Everyone fell for you and King."

That's what Blaine told me over the phone when he gave me this gig. I crushed it. My former friend Trevor didn't stand a chance. I take in the paperwork spread across the table, labeled "Contract for Television Series." My signing bonus check better be here. Blaine begins explaining what to expect when we're filming. Whatever. I'm only in this for the money.

I tune back in when Blaine asks, "Any questions so far?"

Since it would be downright rude to ask for my bonus check, I shake my head. Angie, on the other hand, peppers him with questions about the disruption to her business and what accommodations need to be made for the taping. She prefaced her questions with "My cousin's married to a lawyer who looked over the paperwork..."

Not interested, I survey the room. I'm mentally redecorating the paintings hanging on the walls, which look like they belong in some mom and pop store, when Blaine taps Kaitlyn to talk about the various locations where we're going to be shooting out here in the Hamptons.

Question and answer session over, Blaine hands out the contracts. He emailed this to me yesterday, but I still pay attention when he goes over the salient points. Especially about the money. When he hands us both our signing bonus checks, I double-check the zeros.

Blaine asks, "Angie, do you have any other requests for us before we sign these?"

She draws my attention to her thick mane by playing with the ends. "I do, actually." She looks at me with something approaching disgust, and I sit up straighter. What on earth does this woman have against me?

"Because we're going to be filming out of this office, I think it's important to remain professional at all times. To that end, since he's"—she points at me—"going to be portraying my colleague and people are going to see that on TV, King needs to show up to work every day." She gives me the stink-eye. "I'm sure I do things differently from the *agency* you work at in LA."

I shift in my seat. Her words hang in the air. Blaine knows I don't have a license. Does she? In any event, I have no desire to spend time in this place unless we're filming. "Angela—"

"Angie." She crosses her arms in front of her chest.

I wave my hand. "Angie," I bite out, "I think all the cameras have gone to your head. This is a *reality television*



show we're filming, not some documentary. There's no reason for me to show up here unless we're shooting."

She leans forward, her hands now on the table. "Actually, King"—I've never heard my name spat out like a curse word before—"you must be here daily. Believe me, I have no interest in seeing you in my office, but the show is going to advertise you as my co-worker. So, yes, you have to show up here and work. See how I do things. That way, when we *are* filming, it won't appear fake." She sits back in her chair.

It's my turn to put my knuckles on the miserable excuse for a table. Where did she pick this up, anyway? A flea market? "Angie, I am not your employee, partner, or colleague. I am your co-star. I was hired to play a role, nothing more. There's nothing in the contract that says I have to work here when we're not shooting. And. I'm. Not."

Blaine clears his throat. "Well, actually—"

I study the set of my childhood friend's jaw. *Crap*. I run my hand across my stubbly cheek.

He licks his lips and continues, "If you flip to paragraph thirteen, it does explicitly state that since we are filming at Russo Real Estate, Angela, Angie, has final say over how business is to be conducted during off-hours."

Shit. I flip to the paragraph and read the lawyer-speak. Sure enough, it does say that. I glance over at Angie, who wears a smug look. I'm fucking trapped. I've never truly worked a day in my life and this gig is starting to look much more demanding than I anticipated. I'm about to walk out on the whole mess when the compensation paragraph leaps off the page at me—the signing bonus, which I already have, one-hundred-K salary, plus an extra fifty grand to whoever wins the show's competition. Fuck. I need the money.

*Damn my father. Damn Trevor.*

I swallow, and inhale the stale air in here. Time to negotiate. “Fine. I’ll show up here every day at two. Stay ’til four. That’s more than enough facetime.”

“Our hours are noon until eight.”

Kaitlyn says, “Unless we’re filming.”

Angie nods at the director. “Right.” She focuses her gaze on me. “Two until eight.”

Oh, hell no. “Four ’til seven.”

“Okay. More if we have a client.” She slides a key across the table to me.

Wait. Was I just played? Is that what she wanted from me all along? Well, I’m not going to deal with any of her clients. I’ll simply sit at my desk and get caught up with my social media accounts for those three hours. If she thinks I’m actually going to *work* for her, she has another think coming.

Her hand flips over and she makes a come-hither motion. What on earth? My silent question is answered when she asks, “I need a copy of your real estate license. New York doesn’t have reciprocity with California, so you’re going to have to take our state test anyway. But having your paperwork on file should help us along during the waiting period.”

Well, if this doesn’t suck. *Think quickly.* “I don’t have it with me.”

“That’s okay. Email it.” She fishes into her pocket and produces a business card. When she hands it to me, her engagement ring captures my attention. What dude would marry this shrew? Well, the rock’s more like a chip, so that has to say something. “My email’s on there.”

I take the card, appreciating the heavy feel of the cardstock. At least she did this one thing right.

Blaine says, “King doesn’t have one.”

I shoot daggers at my friend. Why did he out me like that? I could’ve played it off for the three months I’m stuck here. “Blaine!”

At the same time, Angie screeches, “What?”

Blaine points to some provision in the contract, but my attention is fixed on Angie. Her chest expands and contracts as she takes deep breaths. A flash of her breathing like that after climaxing around me flits through my sex-starved brain. I do a mental headshake. It’s been too long since I was with a woman. At least a week.

Her manicured fingernail taps on the table. “Well, that changes everything. You’re going to have to fast-track it to get your license in New York. I’ll be your sponsoring broker.”

“How kind of you,” I say, sarcasm dripping from every word.

“New York requires seventy-five hours of instruction before you can qualify to take the actual test. You can do that in a week.”

My eyebrows raise. “A week?” I’d barely have time to do anything else but sleep.

“Yes. You need this license ASAP.” She points at me. “You’re going to have to actually work for it.”

I collapse back into my seat and stare Blaine down. I knew this was too good to be true. Angie explains that after I take some online course and pass their test, I’ll have to sit for the

actual state test. What a crock. And a waste of my time, since I have no desire to become a real estate agent.

“I don’t need a license. This is a television show.”

Angie’s cheek hollows and she shifts her attention from me to Blaine. “This wasn’t what we discussed. If you want me to pretend he’s working here, he needs to at least have a license. Let’s get Trevor in here. At least he has his license and understands the business.”

“I understand your position,” Blaine begins.

All I hear is *Trevor*. The dude who cost me my trust fund. The asshole who’s been mooching off me for years, only to snort it up his nose. The guy who flat-out refused my entreaties to go to rehab. My spine stiffens. No way is he taking what is mine.

Not to mention I promised Diego ten grand for college.

*I need this job.*

Fuck. I’ll take the class and pass the stupid test.

“I’ll do it.”

## KING



I wipe the sweat from my face with a towel and toss it into the hamper, then leave the locker room after a good three-hour workout. The ladies at the reception desk smile when they see me approaching.

“I hope you enjoyed what we have to offer here at Hit It Gym,” the brunette says.

She’s pretty, but Angie’s much more so. *What?* Shaking my head, I read the clerk’s nametag. “Thanks, Tammie. I did enjoy the machines you have here. I’ll be back tomorrow to continue my trial.”

“Great. I look forward to seeing you then.” Her eyes skim my body.

Gotta love these one-week free trials. With at least ten gyms in the near vicinity of my temporary apartment, I can work out for ten weeks for free. Factor in being invited as someone’s guest, I’ll be able to work out for free for this whole shoot. If worse comes to worst, I can always use the gym in the apartment complex or even run on the beach. I’m getting better at this budgeting thing, although I suspect Dad would accuse me of playing the system.

After leaving the gym, I turn left and begin the short trek back to the apartment that the network rented for me. The salt

air stings my nose in the most agreeable way possible. Maybe being stuck out here for a few months won't suck so bad. But for Angie, I'll probably enjoy it.

I enter the lobby area and head over to the elevators. My apartment is on the next-to-top-floor. Of course, the penthouse would've been better, but beggars can't be choosers. For the millionth time, I curse Dad for cutting off my trust fund. And my sponsors for pulling up stakes. Which leads me to the ten millionth time that I curse Trevor.

The elevator doors open and I'm stepping into the cab when a woman's voice rings out, "Hold the doors!"

I do and a beautiful woman, about my age, joins me. She's wearing workout clothes like me, which accentuate her toned arms and legs. Her blonde hair is pulled into a sloppy ponytail, which she reaches around and removes from its holder. No rings on her left hand.

"Hi," I offer her my hand. "I'm King. Just moved into the building."

"I'm Callie. Welcome." We shake.

Her eyes show the telltale sign of recognition, and I smirk. "What floor?"

She checks the call panel and smiles. "I'm going your way."

I nod. "So, I was just at Hit It Gym. Pretty nice, but who named it?"

She giggles. "I like it there, but I've been going to Cycle Nation lately. To answer your question, I think it was some MMA fighter who started it."

"Good to know."

The bell dings, indicating we've arrived on our floor. I let her precede me because I'm a gentleman—and because I really want to check out her ass. *Damn*. The bike's doing something right for her.

Callie stops. "This one is me."

I point to my place, three doors away. "I guess we're neighbors. That one's mine."

"It was nice to meet you, King."

"Likewise, Callie." I take two steps and stop. Turning back to her, I catch her checking me out. I tip my chin toward her. "Want to catch drinks sometime?"

"I'd love that. Actually." She pauses as I approach her. "The complex hosts a party every Thursday night. It's pretty good, with lots of booze and music. Would you like to join me there tonight? I could introduce you to a few other neighbors."

I tap my lip as if trying to remember what's on my empty schedule. "I think I can swing that. What time should I pick you up?"

"How's nine?"

After exchanging numbers, I return to my own apartment and drink my protein shake before hitting the shower. Things are really looking up. Aroostook may be the perfect place for me to lay low the next three months.

I'm getting ready to leave for Russo Real Estate when my phone rings. Diego's face lights up my screen. "Hey there, buddy. How are you doing?"

"Hi, King. I'm doing great." We chit-chat for a bit.

"So, I got a letter in the mail from NYU, and it turns out I'm going to need your money sooner than the beginning of

the school year. Would it be possible for you to send it by the beginning of next month instead?"

Before my stupid father cut off my trust fund, his request wouldn't have been an issue. My eyes wander over to the dining room table, where my signing bonus sits, waiting for me to deposit it. It'll hurt to give up that money, but I made a promise to my Little Brother, and no way am I going to renege. I take a deep breath. "Sure thing."

"Thanks, King. This means the world to me."

My eyes flick once more to the check. "I'm happy to do it. I'm proud of you for getting into NYU, and for earning that scholarship." I mean that. Every word. They're words I wish I had heard at any point in my life from either of my parents. Well, Dad did make an effort sometimes, but it was always half-hearted. Case in point—I won a trophy for my science project in sixth grade. Dad called me, and when I told him, he sent me a whole huge bio lab for my bedroom. Too bad my project was about earth science.

For the next ten minutes, Diego talks excitedly about his upcoming move to New York City, which requires little more than an occasional grunt from me. College wasn't my thing, but he's into it. We end the call by discussing his course selections.

The alarm on my cell goes off, indicating it's three-thirty. I have thirty minutes to get my butt to Angie's place. Oh, joy. Standing, I grab my wallet, phone, and keys and look at the ten grand check waiting for me—the exact amount I promised Diego. I'll find a branch of my bank out here and deposit it tomorrow.

I head back down the hall, Callie not making an appearance this time, and hop into my Audi convertible rented



for me by the studio. At least Let's Do It! covered all my expenses here. Since I've agreed to "work" during dinner, I bet there will be food in the office. Damn right. I deserve this much for agreeing to Angie's ridiculous terms—as if I had a choice.

While I'm driving my phone rings. Trevor. Clenching my jaw, I accept it through the car's Bluetooth. His voice filters through. "Hey, man. How's the filming going?"

I put my blinker on to switch lanes. "We're starting next week. Getting the lay of the land out here now." I keep the info about studying for my license to myself.

"Aroostook's a nice place."

I tap the steering wheel. Why did he call? We haven't talked since the auditions, and that wasn't exactly friendly. "Actually, I'm on my way into the office right now."

"Well, I wanted to catch up with my old buddy."

He snickers, tipping me off that he's high. Again. No matter what, we've been friends forever, so I have to try once more. "Hey, Trev. Remember what we talked about in Mexico?"

"We talked about a lot of shit out there. God, that was a blast. The women. The ocean. The blow. I know I've said it before, but thanks again for inviting me along."

His next-to-last statement is what catches in my throat. "I was referring to our discussion about your going to rehab. I think you need help." I exit onto the road for the agency.

"Nah," he laughs. "I've got this in the bag. It's not a problem." He clears his throat. "I was actually wondering if you could spot me a couple of Benjamins until my next paycheck?"

Even if I had the money—which I don't—I'm not going to enable him any longer. Besides, he never responded to my text about repaying the loan from before Mexico, which could pay for Diego three times over right now. Stopping at a traffic light, I bite my lip. "How about I think about it while you're in rehab?"

"I said I was fine. You know what? This isn't a big deal. We'll talk later when you get that stick out of your ass." He hangs up.

A few minutes later, I pull into the parking lot between the only other two cars in it, and shut off my convertible. I take some deep breaths to clear my head from my conversation with Trevor, then get out of the car.

Swinging the keys, I enter the agency and am greeted by the unflappable Marlene. "Hello, King. Let me show you to your desk." The short, brown-haired woman walks around the receptionist desk and leads me to a desk by a window. Her face bears a slight resemblance to Angie, and I wonder if they're related.

The office has an open floor plan with five desks, but no one's around. "Are all the other agents out on appointments?"

She looks at me. "I'll let Angie fill you in." With that, she swivels on her heel and returns to the front.

Come to think about it, I've never seen any other people working here. Then again, I've only been here for meetings before the agency opens. Even if Angie herself is a ball-buster, maybe the other agents are cool.

I sit down at my desk and power up the computer. The welcome screen has the Russo Real Estate logo dancing across it. Nice touch. I hit "enter" and it asks for a password.

Since it's just us in the office, I raise my voice. "Hey, Marlene, do you have the password so I can get into my computer?"

"It's in the packet," she calls back.

What packet? I look down and realize there's a fat envelope with my name on it on the corner of my desk. I rip it open and skim through the contents. Policies and Procedures manual, a map of Aroostook, and a memo with info about the computer and other things. Picking up the memo, I enter my login credentials and then set up my profile.

Seeing as I'm still alone, I go on the internet and skim through all of the important news—*The Gossip* to confirm they don't have any more dirt on me, *People*, and the rest of my favorite sites. Since I'll be in the Hamptons for the next few months, I bookmark a couple of local news sites as well.

As I'm scoping out other area gyms, trying to select one for my next free trial, Angie's voice rings out behind me. "I see you're keeping busy."

I jump in my chair. Where the hell did she come from? I swivel around and watch as Angie closes the gap between us, her eyes squinting. "Checking out gyms?"

"Gotta keep up my workouts. The cameras love..." My words die an undignified death when she puts both of her hands on top of my desk.

Leaning forward, she skewers me with her eyes. At first I thought they were plain old brown, but now I realize they shot through with a streak of khaki. Only now, they're shooting daggers at me.

"Have you signed up for a real estate course yet?"

My right hand races across my stubble. Which I made sure was perfect before I left the house. Like always. “I figured I have time for that.”

Her right eyebrow raises. “It’s a seventy-five hour course, King. And you need to get through it as soon as possible since we start filming in two weeks, and you won’t have time then.”

“Today’s my first day,” I protest.

“And if you don’t want it also to be your last, I suggest you get signed up and start taking the course.” She pivots and heads to another desk situated two away from mine. Even though I’m closer to the windows, her desk is larger and slightly more prominent. Still, she’s the boss. Why doesn’t she have an office?

Setting my thought aside as irrelevant, I huff out an annoyed noise and do a Google search. I click on the first course that comes up. Sure enough, it’s seventy-five hours of torture, followed by a pre-test and then the real New York state test. What have I gotten myself into?

Throughout the afternoon, Angie and Marlene chat while I sit here solo by the window. No clients have come through the doors, and neither have any other agents. The phones are silent, too. I sort through the various courses, all of which are the required seventy-five hours. Prices range from four-hundred to a thousand bucks, with the more expensive classes offering additional services to justify their fees. Before everything went down with Dad, I wouldn’t have thought twice about choosing the most expensive one. If he hadn’t cut me off, no way in hell would I be taking this stupid test, though.

I select the cheapest option and get all my credentials for the class that’s going to consume my life for the next week.

Angie walks over to my desk. “Did you sign up for a course yet?”

“Nagging much?”

“I was trying to be helpful. You can call it nagging if you want.” Hurt flashes through her eyes, there and then gone, and she turns away from my desk.

Feeling like an ass—after all, she isn’t *totally* responsible for making me this miserable—I call out, “To answer your question, I just did.”

Angie returns to my desk. “Apology accepted.”

*I didn’t realize I had apologized.* I think it, but even I know better than to say it.

“Let me know if you have any questions. I remember taking that exam. It’s not as easy as you might think.”

“I’ve never been a great test taker,” I admit.

She sits in one of the guest chairs across from me. “Me neither. But if you study, you’ll be fine.” She smiles and her face is transformed. It’s pleasant, welcoming even. Much better than her usual pinched look. Her teeth even look whiter than I remember.

Trying to make inroads, I click on the course and look at the various headings. Around the time I reach the tenth one, I start rubbing my temples. “Wow. This is a lot more than I expected.”

“Take it one section at a time.” She stands. “I’ll leave you to it.” She heads back to her desk, leaving behind a floral scent. It’s subtle and sweet, like nothing I’ve ever smelled before.

Shaking my head, I review the course syllabus. While I'm watching a welcome video, headphones on, Angie yells, "I love dishing about real estate. Ask me anything, anytime."

Why is she being nice to me?

Maybe she just wants to show off her superior knowledge and lord it over me.

I clear my throat. "Appreciate it. I'll make sure to do that."

I'm reading through the outline when a woman walks into the office. Finally, a client. When Angie hugs her, I realize my mistake. Given the woman's coloring and build, she's probably related to Angie, too.

I pretend not to notice when the newcomer checks me out. Well, maybe I do sit up a bit straighter and run my hand over my torso. I might even wink at her. Shortly, though, the three women disappear into the conference room.

Walking over to the bookcase to grab a legal pad, I eavesdrop on their conversation. Angie says something about her sister not knowing everything. I was right—the new woman is her sister—although I'm not sure why I care. If I keep letting myself get distracted, I'm not going to get very far with this class.

I try to concentrate, but my mind keeps wandering to the conference room. I can't shake the thought that those three women are talking about me. No way are they talking about this dead office. I frown. If this is a normal day at Russo Real Estate, things aren't going too well for Angie, but her real estate business is of no consequence to me. I'm only here for the television show.

After the women reemerge and Angie's sister leaves with Marlene, I grab a slice of pizza from the place next door. So

much for dinner at the office...

I get back to work, and a message pings on my cell phone. It's Callie, confirming that we're still on for tonight's party. Hell to the yes. I reply in the affirmative and check the time. It's already after eight! Good thing Callie texted. She's exactly what I need—a good time without any strings.

I stand and slide my phone into my back pocket. On my way to the front, I pause by Angie's desk. She was friendly earlier, so I decide to return the favor. "Are you meeting your husband for a late dinner?"

Her body goes rigid and she sucks in her breath. "Maybe," she mumbles and turns away.

Now what did I do wrong? Perhaps she and the hubs are on the outs? I make a mental note not to bring up that sore subject again. Heading over to the front door, I flip the sign to "Closed" and leave the office. For some reason, I keep thinking about Angie and her strange reaction to what should have been a simple question. She's a bit of an enigma, although she's not my mystery to solve.

Back at my apartment, I take a quick shower and clear my head of anything to do with the show. Leaving my button-down shirt untucked over a pair of designer jeans, I do one last check in the mirror before locking up and going over to my neighbor's door. Callie answers my knock with a brilliant smile that assures me I'm in for a good night.

We go up to the rooftop, which has a full bar set up on the far side, surrounded by a large group of people. A DJ spins tunes by a makeshift dance floor. Gotta hand it to Let's Do It!, this place is the bomb.

“What would you like to drink?” I ask as we maneuver to the bar.

I order her a margarita and get a bourbon for myself, and soon we’re surrounded by Callie’s friends. Some are in marketing, others are in banking, and a few are into charity work. They’re a fun group, and I’m immediately comfortable with them.

We drink and dance and talk for a while, and then Callie introduces me to Geoff, a tall guy wearing a bowtie, who’s a real estate agent with The Mayflower Agency. The name rings a bell. “Mayflower? As in Poppy Mayflower?”

He sips his martini. “One and the same. The best agency in The Hamptons.”

Leave it to Poppy to be nothing but the best. “I’ve met Poppy a few times. Seems on top of her shit.”

“That she is.”

I finish my bourbon, remembering the various parties and events Poppy and I have attended together. Never hooked up with her, though—she’s a bit too old for my taste. I place my empty glass down on a hi-top table. “I’m studying for my real estate license.”

“That’s great, man.” He chuckles. “Take your studying seriously. I didn’t and it took me three tries to pass that sucker.”

“Good to know. I don’t want to have to study like this ever again, so I’m hitting it now. And I don’t have much time, since filming for the television show starts real soon.”

His eyes go round. “Don’t tell me you’re involved with that Let’s Do It! show?” Geoff’s tone of voice lets me know



being on the show is lower than losing a multimillion-dollar listing in his book. But fuck, I need the money.

“I think it’s great,” Callie coos, grabbing my arm.

“Actually, I am,” I said, buoyed by her response. “It’s going to bring a lot of attention to Aroostook and the amazing real estate out here.”

He swallows the rest of his martini and picks up the cocktail pick spearing two overstuffed olives. Removing one with his teeth, he bites into the alcohol-laden fruit. “Dude. Poppy was on a tear when she heard a reality TV show was filming here. She did everything she could to prevent the studio from filming, including lobbying the mayor.”

“She obviously lost.”

“She made it known that anyone associated with it would be blackballed. No reputable agency would agree to do it. I’m surprised they even found anyone. Who are you working with?”

I suck in my breath. This explains the empty office, the lack of agents and clients. Does Blaine know what dud he picked? Maybe he knew, but he didn’t have a choice. Well, the answer is going to come out sooner or later, so I shrug. “Russo Real Estate.”

His teeth clamp down on the second olive on the toothpick. He swallows. “I got the hell out of her agency the first chance I got. She’s never going to get anywhere in this town.”

My breathing escalates. “You worked for Angie?”

Geoff flicks the pick that held his olives at me. “My first job. I had to hustle like crazy to find clients and then the split was fifty-fifty. With Poppy, my split is sixty-forty in my favor, and she gives me at least a couple of listings a week.”

I mull over his comments, remembering the contract Angie gave me. “My split is fifty-fifty, too.”

He shakes his head. “Listen, I know you’re not from around here, so I’m going to give you a friendly word to the wise. I would run away from this. Angie isn’t good for your career. And Poppy hates Angie, I’m not sure why, but it’s not worth it.”

“Does Poppy really have that much power?”

He nods. “She does. She can make your life a living hell. I’m not going to tell her about the taping, but Poppy will find out. She always does. And when that happens, holy hell will rain down on you and that poor excuse of an agency. Mark my words.”

Callie interjects, “Geoff, stop trying to scare King away. You’re being overdramatic as usual.”

Actually, I don’t think he’s being overdramatic at all. I know how things work in these circles. The Hamptons is all about who you know, and Poppy is the person everyone wants to know. If she wants to, she can and will make Russo Real Estate wish it had never opened its doors. Of course, since I only have to show up for filming to get paid, it won’t affect me in the long run.

Shrugging, I look Geoff square in the face, “Thanks for the warning. Appreciate it.”

Callie rises to her toes and whispers in my ear, “How about we take this somewhere more private?”

I take in her toned body, blonde hair, big earrings, and bigger tits—probably fake. So different from Angie’s shorter, lusher brunette figure.

Wait. Why am I comparing her to Angie? Angie is absolutely not my type, and besides, she's married.

Shaking off thoughts of my co-star, I grab Callie's hand and bid Geoff a good-night.

In the wee hours of the morning, I leave Callie's apartment and enter my own. Dumping my shirt and underwear in the hamper, I strip off my jeans and walk naked into my bathroom. An evening with Callie was just the release I needed after such a crazy day.

Geoff's warning plays through my brain. What exactly have I gotten myself into?

## ANGIE



**F**ive days after signing the television contract, business is even worse than usual. This past month, I've spoken with several potential new clients, but they always balk when it comes time to sign on the dotted line. At least I managed to sign one client who's looking to purchase a condo. We're going out this afternoon for a second round of showings. I'll take that small commission over nothing.

King's in the office when I get down there, his new usual, head buried in the study materials. He started coming in well-before opening after he realized what was entailed in the online course. Even though I offer my help daily, he always refuses. His diligence has come as a surprise, to say the least. I'd expect him to let this coast, but he actually seems to care. In as much as someone like him cares about anything.

I hate to admit it, even to myself, but having even *him* at the office adds to the atmosphere. My cousin is warming up to him, I can tell. She smiles more, and not the pitying, what-are-you-doing-with-your-life smiles she usually gives me. Other than offering my help or other little routine interactions, though, I've stayed away from him. I couldn't help but overhear him on the phone with someone called Diego the other day, and they were talking about NYU. King sounded sort of sweet and caring with him. If I'm tempted to be swayed

by his charm or good looks—or even his friendship with that college kid—I remember how arrogant he was during our screen test and my resolve hardens.

Today, however, is different. He’s been studying hard for days now, and I do think he could use a break from all that theory. Besides, I’m excited to let him shadow me to see how a real agent handles clients. It’ll be good for his education. Not to mention, it’ll help him look like less of a newbie in front of the cameras.

The annoying facts that he keeps in shape and smells of the woods don’t play into my decision. Not. At. All. I’ve already had—and lost—my soul mate. You don’t get a second shot at that. Of course, my sister is constantly telling me I don’t need a second soul mate—I can just have some fun—but I’m not built like that.

Pushing away from my desk, I approach King’s work station. I stop ten feet away from him. “I’m going to be showing some condos to a new client today. Would you like to join me?”

His mouth opens and he drops his pen onto the notepad. “That sounds...great. It’ll be nice to get away from all this studying. Thanks for inviting me.” He smiles and his amber-hazel eyes crinkle at the corners.

For some reason, the slight bit of maturity tickles my spine. No, *prickles* it. And he agreed to my offer. Dammit. “She’ll be here at four—her name is Abbey.” I hand him the stack of papers I brought with me. “Here are the listings I’ll be taking her to see.”

He flips through the three pages. “Thanks. I’ll study these.”

I nod and return to my desk. On the way, Marlene wiggles her eyebrows at me, which brings forth a scowl. Can't I be a good mentor to King without my cousin thinking it's something more? She knows all about Dante. It's all the smack my stupid sister said in the conference room last week. I'm glad I managed not to introduce Juliana to King—how much worse would things be now if I did?

I pick up the listings and plot out the best route to take. This morning, I already washed and gassed up my Acura, so I'm ready to go as soon as Abbey arrives. If it were up to me, I'd still be driving a little Honda like my brother Leo, but appearances are everything in real estate.

I close my eyes and Dante's face rises to the forefront. God, I miss him. Everyone told me it would get easier with time. In some ways it has, but he's been gone ten years, and that's such a long, long time to be alone. I inhale and force the tears to recede. It's something I have a lot of practice doing.

At four, Abbey walks into the office and I introduce her to King. When he stands to shake her hand, she nearly stumbles over air. Really? She's five years older than me, for heaven's sake. He's handsome, yes, and she's likely seen his picture in the tabloids before, but ultimately he's only a guy. An annoying one at that.

Well, annoying *sometimes*.

I lead them out to the parking lot and we pile into my car, with King in the backseat. At least I didn't have to tell him to sit back there. Points for common sense.

On the way to the first listing, Abbey peppers King with questions. After he tells her about LA and his workout regimen, she prattles, "Everyone's talking about Let's Do It!

filming out here. Did the television show bring you to Aroostook from California?”

I see him nodding in the rearview mirror. “I’m excited to start shooting next week.”

“I can see you as an actor.” She brings her bottom lip between her teeth.

*Oh, brother.*

He chuckles and my heart flutters for a second before I tamp the stupid organ down.

“Not really.” He leans forward, behind and between the two of us, as I pull into the parking lot. “I’ve never done anything like this before. Tell me, what do you do, Abbey?”

“I’m an ER nurse.”

“Now that’s a rockstar profession.”

Hmm. *Rockstar*. It strikes me that he hasn’t once mentioned his father, the legendary rocker. I’m curious as to why, but this is obviously not the time to ask.

“We’re here at the first condo,” I say. “I think you’re going to like it, Abbey. It has most of the items on your wish list.”

Her face falls a little as she looks at the building and the surrounding area. “Except the beach.”

I incline my head. Unfortunately, Abbey’s budget doesn’t allow for both the size she wants and a water view. “I think there’s a view from the bedroom window.” At least that’s how it’s advertised. It’s probably one of those deals where you need to look with one eye closed from the right side, but still....

We walk into the lobby of the building, which has an indoor waterfall and marble floors. Leaving Abbey with King,

I introduce myself to security, and am instructed to take the elevator to the top floor. I escort the two of them to the elevator bank, pointing out such features as the mailboxes and hallway to the gym and pool areas, which I promise to show her after the unit.

When we arrive on the penthouse floor, I lead them to a middle door. Using my code on the lockbox, I grab the key and put it into the lock. While I fiddle with the key—why do these things always give me trouble?—King points out some of the nice architectural features of the building, including the high ceilings. Finally wrestling the door open, I motion for her to precede me into her first possible home.

Abbey walks down a small hallway and passes a half-bath on the right before entering the main part of the condo, an open kitchen/dining/family room area. I explain that the condo is a very respectable one-thousand square feet and has two bedrooms and one-and-a-half bathrooms.

For his part, King walks over to the sliding glass doors and opens them. I clamp my mouth shut, as I usually don't do this until after we've visited the kitchen and dining area—I was taught to leave the best for last. It won't help to say so now, though. Instead, I follow the two of them out onto the balcony, and we check out the view of the pool.

“This is quite a lovely view,” I offer.

Abbey's gaze roams over the pool as well as nearby buildings and she half-smiles. Shoot. This is the best feature of the condo. If she's not impressed with this, we're not going to get very far.

Oblivious, King rambles on about how he can picture her down there with her friends enjoying the sun and smuggled-in alcoholic drinks. She giggles at his scenario and takes a



renewed interest in the view, even going so far as to lean over the railing when he points out the “perfect spot” for sunbathing.

Well, all right.

When she’s ready, we walk back inside and I show her the kitchen, pointing out the best features. Her interest isn’t diminished by the tiny guest bedroom, which, I suggest, may serve as her home office. We pass the hall bath before entering the master bedroom. The bed is a double, which is a time-worn trick to make the room appear larger. I head over to the window. Sure enough, the advertised “ocean view” is really a sliver of water seen between two large brick buildings.

King joins me at the window and points. “Oh, look. There’s the ocean!”

It’s all I can do not to roll my eyes at him. Geez, he didn’t have to point that out. And with such over-the-top enthusiasm.

“Oh, really?” Abbey rushes over to us, and I barely have time to move out of the way. She peers out the window and says, “I see the water! This is great.”

*What the?*

Rolling with her enthusiasm, I suggest that King and I leave her to explore. When she’s ready, we’ll tour the other amenities in the building.

In a low voice, I say, “Nice work.” Even though he did things backward, it certainly had an impact on Abbey.

“Thanks. I wanted her to see what could be, you know, and not what is.”

I nod my head and mull over his last statement. Is this what they’re teaching in real estate classes nowadays? Or is

King just being King?

Shortly, Abbey joins us in the entranceway, and I take her on a quick tour of the gym and pool. The amenities truly sell themselves and she talks about them in glowing terms as we exit the building.

The second showing goes much like the first. This condo doesn't have any view at all, but the rooms are much larger.

When I pull into the lot for the final building, which is right on the beach, Abbey enthuses, "Wow! This location is to die for."

I smile. Not wanting her to get too excited since it's over her budget and just five-hundred square feet, I say, "Let's see what this condo has to offer."

The three of us head inside, where I lead them to the elevator. This building doesn't have security, nor are there any other amenities, which I point out. We go up to the third floor and I open the door to the studio. It's larger and brighter than I had envisioned, which is good. But there's also only one room plus a bathroom. No space to spread out. This is Abbey's decision, however, so I show her the condo.

King doesn't take the tour with us this time, but rather opens the French doors and walks out onto the balcony that faces the ocean. This time, there's nothing to block the view. The ocean roils in front of us, a little wild today. King leans on the railing, his shirt pulling against his muscled back. I should remind him to leave a blazer in the office at all times.

*Pity.*

Stop it, Angie!

Getting me out of my head, Abbey asks me about the possibility of a Murphy bed, and I give her my suggestions.

When we're done walking around the space, we join King on the balcony. A light breeze blows over us, and Abbey and I both straighten our hair. King, on the other hand, lets it run through his hair like a lover's caress.

Abbey looks at him like he's her prize for choosing a condo. "What do you think, King?" she asks. "Which condo should I choose?"

I try telepathy to stop him—*Don't answer that question. It's a trap.* We're not here to tell her what to do, but rather to lead her through the possibilities.

"I believe all three are good choices."

Whew. Good answer.

"Yeah. Me, too," I agree and launch into the pros and cons of each place, careful to keep my true opinion to myself, although I do point out the various price points. I think the first condo would be the best, even though it lacks this amazing view.

King stands up straight and looks at my client. "If you want amenities, go with the first one. If you want space, go for the second. But if you want a kickass place to live, where you can be part of the Aroostook vibe, this place is for you."

Before I process what he just told my client, she says, "I'd really be a part of the town if I lived here. Right in the middle of things."

"Exactly," his baritone replies.

"Of course, you need to look at everything as a whole," I interject. "While you want to be right in the thick of things, how you want to live is equally as important. Not to mention budget considerations."

“This place isn’t that much over my budget. Probably won’t cost more than a latte a day extra in my mortgage.” Her gaze returns to King. “You’d live here, right?”

He doesn’t utter a word. Simply smiles, his white teeth mimicking the white tops of the waves crashing in front of us. Is he seducing her into purchasing a condo? My body coils as if ready to strike.

“I’ll take it!”

I blink at Abbey.

“Great choice,” King says.

When she opens her arms, he brings her in for an embrace, and then she moves over to hug me.

I clear my throat. “Congratulations on making your decision. Why don’t we go back to the office and I can write up your offer to get this process moving forward?”

“Sounds good.” Abbey takes one last look around, squeezes King’s bicep for good measure, and the three of us return to the office.

All the paperwork completed, Abbey thanks both me and King again and leaves. I call the seller’s agent to place her offer on the condo and am told I should hear back within the hour. Since Abbey agreed to pay full asking, I’m pretty confident she’ll soon be calling it home.

After everything’s done but the waiting, I look over at King, who is once again deep in his studies. Yes, he annoyed me a lot today. Yes, he said some inappropriate things. But there’s no denying he helped me make the more expensive sale.

Stowing my cell phone in my pocket, I head over to his desk. “How did you like working in the field today?”

“I surprised myself,” he says, eyes sparkling as he looks up at me. “It was actually fun.”

“Not every outing ends with an offer.”

“I know, but it was a good first time.” He smiles, those lines appearing at the corners of his eyes again. “You popped my real estate cherry.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Yeah, well, you only get one first chance, so I’m glad it was good for you.”

He chuckles and tosses his pen onto the desk. “Tell me about your first time.”

The way he looks at me, I almost think he’s asking about my first sexual encounter. A memory of Dante and me floats through my brain for only a second before I shut it down. “It wasn’t as good as yours. I shadowed Aunt Teresa, my mentor-broker, and we saw five houses that day. The client didn’t like any of them.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, well, that’s how it works out most of the time. As I said, you got lucky.”

“Are you happy with her selection?”

Shocked that he’d asked me that, I reply truthfully. “Personally, I couldn’t live in a studio, no matter how gorgeous the view. I liked the first place.”

He nods. “I liked the second one the best, because of all the space. The view is nice at the one she bought, but who would want to be in such a tiny place all the time? Hope she’s a neat freak. She’s going to have to be.”

His words bring me up short. Back at the condo, he'd seemed so earnest, so off the cuff. "You're a much better actor than you give yourself credit for, King. I never would've guessed those were your true feelings."

He shrugs. "We're here to sell an illusion to people. It's more about how a place makes them feel than it is about the features or amenities. Abbey wants to feel like she's part of the town, never mind that it will never embrace her."

His words stop me cold. "What? Why would you say that?" For all its faults, the town is beautiful, with amazing shops and restaurants. Abbey should fit right in.

"She doesn't have the background people like Poppy Mayflower are looking for."

I stiffen at the mention of Aroostook's Realtor of the Year. "Who the hell cares what Poppy thinks? Abbey is a good, solid woman who does important work as an ER nurse. She will contribute so much to this community."

He waves his hand. "I know Poppy, and she doesn't really care about stuff like that. Neither do those in her sphere of influence, which, I understand, is pretty big out here."

My hands ball at my hips. "Well, if the old guard doesn't like it, they can take their snotty asses out of town and leave Aroostook to real women like Abbey." Like me.

"Hey," he said, lifting up his hands, palms facing outward. "I didn't say I agree with her, just how things are around here."

"I think it's high time those things change." I stomp my foot and then catch myself. What am I, a two-year-old throwing a temper tantrum? "Sorry. You hit a trigger for me."

"Don't worry about it."

Needing to change the subject, I ask about his plans for the test. He picks up his pen and plays with it. It's a sign of his nerves, something I haven't seen before in the all-too-confident King. "Well, I'm taking the school's test tomorrow, and I'm scheduled to take the state test on Friday. Wish me luck."

"Wow. That was fast. I've seen you studying, so I'm sure you'll do fine. Good luck."

"Thanks."

I walk away to let him do some final cramming. King's smarter than I originally gave him credit for. He might even make a good real estate agent, given how he handled Abbey today.

But the fact he knows Poppy—flies in her set—gives me pause. No. He might have been relatively pleasant today, but a broken clock is right twice a day.

I need to keep King Hunte at arm's length.

# KING



I rest my head against the headrest of my car and exhale. Thank God the NY state test is over. That test was hard. Some of the questions were crazy, but I think I passed. I better have—I bet Angie will try to replace me if I failed.

Sitting in the parking lot of Russo Real Estate, I look around the side of the building and take in the ocean lapping at the sand down the way. Even though we're located on the edge of town, it's still a gorgeous view.

Acting on impulse, I get out of my car and head toward the boardwalk. I take off my shoes and leave them by the fence next to a couple of pairs of flip-flops, then roll up the bottoms of my pants and walk to the ocean. Being that it's Memorial Day weekend, it's already warm out. The water's not ready for swimming yet, but it's certainly warmer than the Pacific. I pick up some shells and toss them into the water as I walk, letting the salty air buffet my body.

Overall, I feel proud of what I've accomplished so far. When I went out with Angie and Abbey, I felt ... alive. Like I could really help someone make a new life. Even though she picked a condo I wouldn't have chosen, I understood it was her dream. From the beginning, it was obvious she wanted a view—it would make her feel a sense of belonging here in



Aroostook in some small way. Abbey is like me, trying to find her place in the world.

Does mine lie in real estate?

Or in television?

The show starts filming in earnest on Tuesday, so I only have this weekend to let loose before all the craziness starts. Maybe I should reach out to Callie, since I had to miss the apartment building's weekly party last night in favor of some last-minute cramming for this morning's test.

Realizing I've walked quite a few blocks, I turn around and follow the shoreline toward the agency. The sound of someone calling my name stops me in my tracks.

"I thought that was you! Rumor has it you've been here for weeks, King. Why haven't you come to visit?" Poppy Mayflower wraps her fingers around my triceps. As ever, she's impeccably dressed in a designer shift dress, her pumps dangling from one hand. Although she's seven years my senior, you wouldn't know it given her carefully maintained body and some artful nipping and tucking.

I smile down at her. "Poppy. So good to see you."

She gives both of my cheeks air kisses. "Is it true? Are you really here to do that awful reality show?"

"Now, Poppy, is that anyway to speak to an actor about his upcoming role?"

"But King," she pretend-pouts, "I told everyone to turn down Let's Do It! We don't want our town to be overrun by the *nouveau riche*." She shudders as if she were some actress from the forties.

I'm not surprised by her attitude, and not only because Geoff warned me. As her surname implies, her family came over on that first ship and never left Aroostook. Her wealth is seemingly bottomless. She works in real estate not because she has to, but because she wants to control who enters her town. A trait she inherited from her mother, or so I've heard.

"You mean like me?" I wink to take away some of the sting of my perceived defection.

"You don't need to work." She falls into step with me. "Really, though, I can't believe you've fallen in with that awful Angie Russo. She's a nobody." Her voice lowers. "From Brooklyn."

"I know." The timbre of my voice matches hers. I didn't know, actually, nor do I judge Angie for where she's from. But I'm smart enough to know I need to stay on Poppy's good side.

She stops. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Her question, made on a high-pitched whine, strikes me as both shallow and obsequious at the same time. She does not need to know about my financial situation, that's for sure, so I give her a partial truth. "Blaine asked me to help him out, and it sounded like fun."

"Fine." She puts her hand to her forehead like she's auditioning to play Scarlett O'Hara. *Oh, brother.* "You go have your fun with this little show. Since it's reality TV, everyone knows it's fake anyway." She brushes her blonde hair away from her face, flashing her diamond-encrusted Cartier watch. "I better go. Meeting a client in ten." She air kisses both of my cheeks again and flounces away.

Shaking my head, I dismiss Poppy and continue back toward the office. I have much bigger fish to fry. Like getting ready for taping on Tuesday. Perhaps I'll get an opportunity to help out with some more of Angie's clients.

Marlene greets me when I enter the office. Walking to her desk, I kiss her cheek and she taps my shoulder. I kissed her on a whim on my second day, which elicited her reaction—it's our tradition now. We've come a long way since our initial meeting. "How'd it go?"

"I think I did okay. It was tough, though."

She nods. "So I've heard. I'm sure you passed since you studied like crazy."

"I hope so." I sit down at my desk and it hits me. Now that I don't need to study for the real estate exam, I have absolutely nothing to do—but I *want* to do something other than dicking around on social media. How odd. I didn't even workout this morning, and I don't have a burning desire to duck out and hit my free gym trial.

"Hey, King," Angie says as she enters through an interior door. I've seen her use it a few times, but no one else does. It's one of those little mysteries I find myself thinking about while I twiddle my thumbs. Angie features in a surprising number of such thoughts. "Feel good about today?"

"I do."

She nods and stops at the reception desk, where she and Marlene get into a discussion. I can't hear anything they're saying, but the hand gestures tell me they're debating some issue. With a final tap on the desktop, Angie heads in my direction with determined steps.

Shit. Now what?

Stopping in front of my desk, her expression somewhere between a smile and a scowl, she states, “In honor of your sitting for the exam, I would like to take you out to lunch to celebrate. My treat.”

A smile crosses my face. My first office lunch. It’s an acknowledgment I’ve never had before. I rise to my feet. “Thanks. I’m starving.”

As we pass Marlene’s desk, I ask her to join us, but she declines, stating someone has to remain in the office to field all the calls. As an excuse, it’s debatable, but I’m not about to call her on it. After a quick discussion about what type of cuisine we want, Angie and I settle on an Asian-Fusion place within walking distance.

We’re lucky to get a table by the front window. After we place our orders, Angie asks about the test. “It was tricky, like you warned. But I took my time and I think I passed. Results should be mailed within three weeks, two if I’m lucky.”

“You seem like the lucky type, so I hope it’s sooner rather than later.”

Lucky? Me? I guess I used to be, when I had my monthly trust fund payments and sponsorships, but not anymore. Now, I make my own luck. I shrug off her comment. “Would you mind if I tagged along on more of your client appointments? I really enjoyed my time with Abbey and I’d like to learn more about real estate.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’m sure the producers for the show will set up lots of scenarios for us.” The server drops off our drinks. Angie unwraps her straw and places the paper on the table.

“Yeah, but I got such a thrill helping Abbey find her next home.”

“This is *not* a game to me.”

I trace the condensation on the outside of my glass of iced tea, trying to formulate a proper response. She thinks of me as the playboy I was rather than the guy I am now—the one who needs funds. And a job. Unless this show takes off and multiple seasons are ordered, I’m going to have to look into getting one. Real estate may be an unexpected home for me. I smirk at my unintended pun. “Actually, it’s not a game to me, either.”

She snorts and plays with the rings on her left hand. “The agency is really important to me, all right? I can’t afford to help you play realtor.”

Her response makes my blood boil. “Who said I’m playing? I honestly enjoyed learning everything for that test.”

“You don’t have to say that. The cameras aren’t rolling.”

“I surprised myself, all right? I found all the coursework to be very interesting, learning about finances and all the legal ramifications that I had no idea about.”

In a condescending tone, she replies, “Yeah, go figure. Real estate is more than putting people together with properties.”

“I got that.” Our lunches are dropped off, and I rip apart the chopsticks with a vengeance. Angie doesn’t have to turn her nose up at me simply because I had no clue what went into being an agent before I took the test. I shove my chopsticks into my General Tso’s Chicken with brown rice and bring a huge bite into my mouth.

Immediately, my nasal passages open. Shit, this is spicy. I reach for my iced tea and take a big slug.

Across from me, Angie sighs. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that you didn’t. I know how hard you’ve been studying. I just really need this show to work.” Her chopsticks dig into her sweet and sour pork.

I accept her olive branch and take a more measured bite of my lunch. “So do I.”

A shadow catches the corner of my eye and I look outside, but nothing seems amiss. I give Angie my full attention again and change the subject. “You already know I’m here because of the show. What brought you to Aroostook?”

Her chopsticks still in mid-air, then resume their course. “I always knew I wanted to make a name for myself in real estate, from when I was in high school. I got my training back home in Brooklyn, but when I got my broker’s license, I knew this was the perfect place to set up shop. I had fallen in love with this town.” She gestures out the window with her chopsticks. “This downtown area is so quaint.”

I take in the bustling as shopkeepers prepare for Memorial Day, the unofficial kick-off to summer. I never thought of the town in these terms. Although I’ve spent time in the Hamptons, I’ve always cared more about the mansions and the parties than the stores on the strip. Now I see sidewalk sales and welcome signs and people waving at each other. Huh.

“I can see why you fell in love with Aroostook.” It hits me. I don’t really know anything about my co-star. “Do you live here, too? Does your husband commute to the City for work?”

Her chopsticks land on her plate and she gulps down some water. She pushes her chair back. “If you’ll excuse me, I have

to use the ladies' room.”

I nod and finish my meal while she disappears into the interior of the restaurant. Something about Angie seems off, but I can't put my finger on it. She's very private, I get that. Hell, I'm not exactly shouting to the world that Dad cut me off, either, but she always seems to bail at the very mention of her husband. Don't most people like to talk about their spouses?

Outside, a group of paparazzi approach the window and start taking photos. I used to welcome all publicity—before reporters caught me with Trevor and the white stuff on the beach. I force myself to smile at them, but it doesn't feel natural.

Angie returns, her eyes widening when she sees the papps. “Oh. Photographers.”

My hand tightens around my glass. “They just showed up.”

She turns her head, smiles and waves at them. They take more photos.

Still unable to course-correct my feelings about the papps, I snap, “What are you doing? They're vultures.”

She shrugs. “Publicity. Maybe they'll mention the agency.”

“Maybe they'll make up a story about it that makes you wish you never left Brooklyn.”

Angie's eyes shoot daggers at me. “Getting my name out there is my goal,” she says. “Play along.”

I open my mouth to object, then shut it. Maybe she's right and they'll publish a puff piece about the show and namedrop the agency. Maybe not. Perhaps they'll start digging into her business and uncover some unpleasant truths—like her

stunning lack of clientele. Either way, it won't impact me one bit, so I toss a smile toward the cameras.

The server brings our check and Angie pulls out her wallet. Guilt creeps into my conscience, but she did invite me to celebrate. I fall on the side of being gracious. "Thanks."

"I have to admit I'm impressed you were able to take the test so quickly."

"What do you mean? You told me to."

She laughs. "Yeah, but I didn't think you would."

"I surprised myself, too," I admit. When Dad told me he was cutting me off, getting a job was the last thing I wanted, but it felt good to immerse myself in something. "I guess I'm just full of surprises." I wink.

We stand and I place my hand on the small of her back to guide her through the front door. I'm hyperaware of the spot where my fingers touch her body. I have an urge—which I shove down as fast as it arises—to pull her into my arms. What's that about?

When we exit the restaurant, at least eight photographers are waiting for us. Must be a slow news day.

"Are you really in Aroostook to shoot a TV show, King?"

"King, what's your role?"

"When does filming start, King?"

"King, who's your lady friend?"

Angie stops at that last question and turns on her heel. "My name is Angie Russo, his co-star, and I own Russo Real Estate." She pauses for a moment while photos are snapped.



“To answer your question, yes, we’re going to be shooting a television show for Let’s Do It!”

Her admission spawns another round of questions. Smiling for the flashbulbs, I grab her hand and lead her away from the group before she can utter another word. When a warmth spreads from my fingers outward, I drop her hand as if it’s diseased.

“We could’ve given them more information, you know.”

Still stung by the way the papps imploded my life, I reply, “Let them do some homework and find it out for themselves.”

“I hope they spell the name right,” she mutters under her breath.

I hustle toward the agency. From behind me, she yells, “Wait up. Some of us don’t have long legs, you know!”

Being only five-foot-ten, I’m not used to being considered “tall.” When I reach the office door, I spin around and watch the vertically challenged Angie half-jogging up the sidewalk. She stops and places her hands on her hips, then gives me the evil eye. It’s probably more adorable than she hoped it would be.

I hold my hands up. “What? I wanted to get away from them. You don’t know what it’s like.”

“Oh, I see. The high-and-mighty King has decreed how *I* get to interact with the press corps.”

“I was only trying to protect you.”

Her retort is instant. “Brooklyn girls know how to throw it down!” She does some ninja-like martial arts moves around me, her arms flying through the air, and ends with a kick. I jump back.

“Did you pick that up from a movie?”

She giggles. “Maybe.”

I shake my head, my hands stealing around her shoulders to keep her still. Smiling down at her, I pronounce, “You’re crazy.”

“Gotta keep you on your toes.”

It hits me I have my hands around this little firecracker of a woman. Who feels good. Like, really good. I offer her my panty-melting smirk and take a step closer. Her breathing hitches.

We remain locked together. It’s as if the Rockettes took up residence on my spine. Can she feel it too? I squeeze her shoulders.

She blinks.

And takes a step backward. “What the hell?”

I’d forgotten all about her husband, but that comment reminds me. She’s married. Off limits. “Gotta keep the commoners safe,” I retort.

Rushing around me, she disappears inside the agency.

*What the hell* was right.

# ANGIE



“Please help your brothers load the dishwasher, Angie,” Mama asks. More like directs.

I stand to do her bidding and join Francesco and Leo at the sink. One brother scrapes the dishes, while the other rinses and hands them to me to put into the dishwasher. My sister pulled leftover container duty this time.

From the trashcan, Leo asks, “How’s the show coming along?”

“Taping starts on Tuesday because King had to take the New York real estate salesperson’s exam first.” I take a dish from Francesco and pull out the bottom rack of the dishwasher.

“He’s only been here what, under two weeks? And he already took the test? I seem to recall it took you months to go through the books. He must be smart.”

I shoot Leo a dirty look. “He took the class online. I did the in-person version.”

“That’s code for ‘remedial,’” Francesco adds, and the two boys chuckle at my expense.

Since my hands are empty, I grab a kitchen towel off the handle of the oven and swat both of my brothers on their butts.

“Ow!”

“Ouch!”

Serves them right. Smirking, I rehang the towel and wait for the next dish. They wisely change the subject to baseball. We’re all big Yankees fans here, so it’s a conversation I happily join.

When all of the dishes are set to wash, I head into the family room where the Yankees game is on. Juliana is the only other person in the room at the moment. Her husband stayed at home with her son, who’s running a slight fever.

“Speaking of King,” she says.

“I wasn’t.”

She grabs her cell phone and taps on it. Ignoring me, she continues, “Looks like you two were enjoying an intimate lunch date yesterday.”

My eyebrows meet over my nose. “What are you talking about?”

She turns the screen toward me, and I see one of the photos the papps took at the restaurant yesterday. I wave my hand. “Oh. That was nothing. I took him out to lunch to celebrate his taking the real estate test. Marlene made me do it. It was no biggie.”

Juliana flips her phone so she can view it. “Uh-huh.” She giggles. “No biggie except that King’s hot as fuck.”

“Juliana! He is not. He’s just...King.” I cross my legs.

“Right. I’m not blind. He’s sexy.” Her finger traces screen. “That jaw. Those cheekbones. His eyes, for goodness’ sake. He looks even better in person if memory serves—although

you wouldn't introduce me when I was at the office last week. Don't try to tell me you haven't noticed how hot King is."

"I haven't noticed." Much. Maybe a little bit. It's not like his hands branded my shoulders yesterday or anything. "We fight most of the time. He's superficial and arrogant. He works out obsessively." He might have mentioned once or twice that he went to the gym before coming into the office in the morning.

"He took the real estate test in no time at all. Even you have to admit that's pretty impressive."

Some of my bravado spills onto Mama's hardwood floor. She's right. I *am* impressed. Despite myself. "Well, it's a point in his favor. But it's not like he didn't have incentive. I made it a condition for doing the show with him, and the producer agreed. So, he had to take it. Fast."

"Uh-huh."

I raise my right eyebrow. "What? I did make it a requirement."

"Why?"

"I don't want a fake agent to *pretend* to work with me. People are going to see the series and come in looking for me. Or him. They'll get suspicious if he's not there."

"Sure." She taps the screen on her phone while I focus my attention on the TV. Scoreless game. "Well, you may be on to something."

I force my attention back onto my sister. "What?"

"They mentioned your real estate agency."

I grab the phone out of her hands and, ignoring the photo, read the small article. "It says he's working at Russo Real

Estate! And they even used my address. Awesome!” I do a happy dance in my seat. Being a part of the show is putting the agency on the map already.

My sister takes her phone back and sighs. “I guess you were smart to sponsor him to take that test.”

I offer her a smug smile. Yes. This is going according to plan. Once the show airs, Russo Real Estate is going to be the place everyone goes to buy or sell their house. I rub my hands together.

“Still,” Juliana continues, “when does he find out if he passed?”

“A couple of weeks or so. I hope he did, though. Then we can put it behind us and focus on filming.”

She wiggles her eyebrows. “You’re going to be in pretty close contact with him over the next couple months.”

I need to shut down this kind of talk. Permanently. “Sort of. From what I can tell, we’ll be doing a lot of things separately. Like, we’ll meet with a couple together and then go off and do our own thing to win the ‘contest.’ I’m actually not sure how much we’ll be seeing of each other.” The less, the better.

“The more, the better,” Juliana’s sentiment reverses my thought.

My eyebrows form a “V.”

She puts her hand on my wrist, above my tattoo. “This will be good for your business, I get that, but he could be good for you personally, too. It’s been—

I know exactly where she’s going with this, so I cut her off. “No.”

Her hand slides off my wrist. “You know, I’ve never bought into the whole one soul mate story from Mama and Nonna. You were so young with Dante—”

I stand. “What part of ‘no’ don’t you understand?”

“You found great love once, but I don’t believe it was your only shot. If something were to happen with Frank, I’m sure he’d want me to find happiness again. I know Dante wanted that for you, too.”

I purse my lips but don’t say anything. Now that Juliana’s said her peace, again, we both focus on the television. The Yankees’ defense is putting up a good fight, but their offense isn’t getting the job done, and the Reds have scored a second run. Now it’s the fifth inning. “There’s still time for the Yankees to catch up.”

The rest of the family, including my young nieces, barge into the family room. We watch the game together, commenting on our team’s chances and any particularly stupid or brilliant plays. But my mind keeps returning to what Juliana said together with the snippet of conversation I overheard the other day between him and the NYU student. The tone of his voice was so compelling. I’ve always operated under the assumption there’s only one lid for every pot. My parents have been married for forty years, and my grandparents were married for over sixty. The lesson is clear—you find your match and stick with them, no matter what.

Hoots from the room bring me back to the game, where the Yankees scored three runs, and now are ahead. I focus on the game for the remaining couple innings, cheering them on to victory.

I help Mama clear the family room of all the food that made its way to the coffee table. Placing a bowl of popcorn

down on the kitchen island, I ask, “Question for you.”

“What’s up?”

Feeling a bit foolish, I blurt, “Did you ever date anyone other than Dad? I mean, you’ve been married forever. I can’t imagine it.” I’ve never asked her before, and she’s never offered the information.

She smiles and tosses the remaining popcorn into the trash. “I did, actually. I guess I never told you, but your father and I split up when he left town to go to Vietnam. During that time, I dated a boy named Christopher.” Her eyes veer away from our task and stare off into space. “I fancied myself in love with him for a while.”

“You did?”

“Yes. He was very handsome and smart. Son of the chef at a local restaurant. Man, he could cook,” she says with a laugh.

Not finding this a laughing matter, I press, “What happened?”

After a minute, she returns back to the present. “Well, your father came back. All it took was one look at him and I knew. I broke up with Christopher that night and have been with your father ever since.”

Which only serves to prove my point. “Because he’s your soul mate.”

She shrugs. “Yep. Your father has always been the one for me. Even when I was with Christopher, I knew a big piece of my heart belonged to someone else.”

Yes, I do know. My heart will always belong to Dante. Now and forever. Even though he’s never returning.



My sister pops into the kitchen, bringing in some cups, which she loads into the dishwasher. “Have you seen a photo of Angie’s co-star yet, Mama?”

“He’s nothing special,” I protest a bit half-heartedly. Empirically, he is quite something.

“Ha!” Juliana fishes out her phone from her back pocket and shows our mother.

Mama takes the phone and immediately starts fanning her face, which is a touch too dramatic, if you ask me. “Oh, wow. I didn’t know men could look like that in real life.”

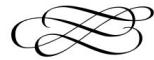
“Can you imagine seeing such a troll in the office every day?” My sister eggs Mama on, all the while giving me the side-eye.

My mother looks at the screen again before passing the phone back to my sister. Pursing my lips, I protest, “He’s merely a guy. Not even a real estate agent. Yet. Really, he’s only a paid actor.”

Except my descriptor doesn’t feel fair anymore. King actually likes real estate, and I can’t deny he poured himself into preparing for that test. Still, I decide not to share. It’s much better for him to just be my colleague.

I’ll always remain true to my one soul mate.

# KING



I take a deep breath and walk into Russo Real Estate. The place bustles with activity today, our first day of filming. Cameramen and sound operators fiddle with their equipment, while people in jeans run around with clipboards in their hands double-checking God knows what. The director walks up to me. “King. Great, you’re here.”

“Hey, Kaitlyn.” I take in all the commotion around us. “So, this is your rodeo. What’s the plan for today?”

“You and Angie are going to have a contest to see which one of you can bring the most new clients into the office.”

This sounds too easy—there has to be a catch. They’re going to make us do something embarrassing like wear a hot dog suit. Wait, they wouldn’t do that, would they?

“What am I going to be wearing?” Please don’t say hot dog suit, please don’t say ...

“A bathing suit.”

Relief washes over me. Chuckling, I say, “I had an awful vision in my head, but a bathing suit, I can do.” I’ve worked hard to sculpt my body, and I’m not averse to showing it off. Besides, now I’ll get a much better look at Angie’s lush curves.

Hey, where did that stupid thought come from? No way she's going to like this anyway.

Kaitlyn gives me a conspiratorial look. "What did you think we were going to ask you to do, King?"

I shake my head. "Oh, no. Not going to give you any ideas."

She smiles and explains we're going to pound the pavement and invite people to come into the office and sign up as agency clients, whom the show may film later in the season as potential buyers or sellers. Only those who sign on the dotted line—which includes a waiver to be on the show—will be counted toward the contestant's final tally. It will be in our best interests, of course, to bring in the highest volume of people.

Kaitlyn finishes, "The bathing suits highlight the fact that we're in an ocean community." Plus, I add to myself, will be a ratings bonanza. Finished with her explanation, she points me toward the sad conference room, where wardrobe has set up shop.

I make my way over to the makeshift wardrobe area when a woman enters the office through that mysterious door in the back. Her long brown hair and deep brown eyes look familiar, and I realize it's Angie's sister from the other day. Instead of making the right turn, I head in her direction.

"Hello, there." I extend my hand. "I'm King Hunte."

We shake, and her grip is firm. "I'm Angie's sister, Juliana Rossi. Nice to meet you."

Because I can't contain my curiosity, I ask, "So what's behind that door?" I use my chin to point behind her.

Her neck cranes behind her, then faces me again. “You mean Angie’s apartment?”

Angie’s *apartment*? She can’t live above the real estate office. If she did, I’m sure I would have seen her husband coming or going, and there hasn’t been any sign of him. Maybe she just uses it as a quiet place to escape during the day, although it seems the office is plenty quiet enough. “Ah. Now I know where she disappears to during the day.”

Juliana’s traditionally beautiful, and her smile lights up her entire face. However, she’s not Angie.

Wait. What. The. *Fuck*?

“Angie will be down in a bit. I did her hair and makeup.”

“Aren’t the professionals supposed to do that for her?”

Her back straightens. “I *am* a professional. I volunteered to help her out today.”

Trying to atone for my blunder, I offer her a smile. “Oh. Well, that’s very nice of you, Juliana.”

She tugs at the bottom of her hair, something I’ve noticed Angie doing as well. “I’m pretty sure I wasn’t voted the Best Cosmetologist in Brooklyn for nothing, you know.”

I chuckle at her remark, but why shouldn’t she be proud of herself? She’s probably earned her rep, given how well she puts herself together. Not a single strand of hair is out of place, and her makeup is sparing but immaculate. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“King! Come on! You need to get into wardrobe.”

I turn my head to address Kaitlyn. “Be right there.” Shifting my attention back to the lady in front of me, I ask, “Are you going to stick around for filming today?”

“For a little bit. I have to get to work later this afternoon.”

“We’re filming our first contest.” I lean in conspiratorially. “In bathing suits.”

“Oh, my”—she rubs her forehead—“Angie’s going to have a cow. This I have to see.”

Her response confirms my own suspicion, and I keep thinking about Angie in a sexy-ass bikini as I get ready for shooting. After wardrobe releases me, now in navy blue swim trunks, I head out the front doorway. The morning has a slight chill, but the day promises to be warm—Memorial Day was yesterday, after all, and we’re on the cusp of summer.

The members of the crew sit around in the front parking lot, chatting amongst themselves over coffee, and laughter can be heard from more than one location. It’s orchestrated pandemonium. Everyone knows where they belong and together they make something whole.

A feeling of longing washes over me. I’m here, but I’m not really a part of things. It’s as if I’ve been plunked into the middle of yet another family that doesn’t want me.

To my surprise, Milo, one of the cameramen, catches me watching him and smiles. He leaves his group and motions me forward. “Come on over, let me introduce you to the guys.”

I follow him and meet the three other cameramen as well as the four-person lighting and sound crew. They talk shop, and while I can’t contribute with stories, I do share some showbiz info I’ve gleaned from my friends over the years. The warmth of being accepted into their circle settles deep.

Noise behind me catches my attention. Angie’s unmistakable voice rings out. “Kaitlyn, this is the most

ridiculous thing I've ever heard. No reputable real estate agent would dress like this to meet clients."

"Angie," the director replies, "we need to hook viewers from the start. This will get them addicted, and then you can do your real estate stuff."

Angie huffs. "Will you at least highlight the front window with all of our listings?"

My gaze travels to said window. A big banner has been erected above it, saying, "Celebrate the Season with a New Location." Cheesy. I wander over to check out the listings, which seem rather sparse. And low budget. I sigh. For Angie's sake, I genuinely hope the show helps the agency. No denying she needs it.

Angie steps foot outside, the light streaming over her voluptuous, tankini-clad body, and my body reacts instantly. What the hell? I've seen hundreds of women in much more alluring suits, but something about Angie makes this different. I don't understand the effect she has on me, but it's disarming. Shaking my head, I amble over to her.

My focus on my co-star is so intent that I only realize her sister and Kaitlyn followed her outside when Juliana puts her hand on Angie's arm. "Don't worry. You look super-hot."

I flex my pecs, making my tribal armband tattoo dance. "Thanks."

Juliana and Kaitlyn laugh, while Angie scowls. Giving in to the desire to needle my co-star, I bend down to her ear. "You'll do."

Her eyes turn to slits and her chin lifts. "Oh yeah, 'roid head? Bring it."

“I’m *au naturel*, baby.” She sticks her tongue out at me and I point. “I’ll stake out the sidewalk across the street. You can stay on this side.”

Kaitlyn calls for action and, still chuckling, I head across the street to drum up clients. While I’m used to walking around shirtless, it’s usually because I’m on the beach or working out. Standing outside the office as man-meat is somewhat demeaning. I guess that’s the point. Besides, Angie’s doing it, too.

For a moment, I let my thoughts drift to the woman walking on the other sidewalk. *She’s married*. Even though I’ve known this all along, I still can’t stop thinking about her.

I spy a group of ladies up ahead and I beeline over to them. “Hey.”

The women eye me up and down, some licking their lips as Milo circles us with his camera. Yep, man-meat. One woman says, “Not that I mind, but aren’t you a little bit cold?”

I drop my hands to cover my junk and wink. “Don’t judge.”

“Oh, we’re not, that’s for sure,” another lady responds.

I chuckle. “I’m actually out here to see if I can interest you in some hot properties. Do you live around here?”

A third woman pipes up, “We’re from Connecticut. What do you have in mind?”

“How would you like to have a place in the great town of Aroostook?” I point to the office. “I’m with Russo Real Estate, and I’d like to show you what we have on the market.”

The lady who first spoke wraps her hand around my bicep. “I don’t think we’d mind at all.”

I escort the group to the office window, making shit up about the properties Angie's advertising because I have absolutely no clue about them. While I'm selling, a group of three men surround Angie, and a burning sensation spreads through my chest. Better try to get this group inside so they can be counted on my ledger. *You need to get back out there pronto to keep an eye on Angie.* "Think you want to know any more about these properties?"

"My husband would kill me if I bought another place," one responds.

Her friend, the one who was all over my bicep, has other ideas. "I think I could be persuaded." She beams at me as I open the door.

Their faces fall when they realize I'm not going with them, but they follow my directions and go inside.

Turning on my heel, I pass Angie and her small tribe as I cross the street. It's not long before another group of people approach me. Soon a throng of passerby's clamor for my attention and ask questions, mainly about me.

My responses vary from "I've just relocated out here from LA" to "this is such a charming town" to "real estate is my life." That last is a lie, but it sounds good for the cameras.

The one question that trips me up is asked by the daughter of one of the couples. She's about six. After her parents comment about my father's band, she asks, "What's it like to have your daddy perform all the time?"

My father's a dick. He skipped out on my childhood, and now he's cut me off. But I can't tell her that, especially not in front of the cameras. I go with a sanitized version of the truth.



Bending down so we're eye-level, I say, "He's been on the road all my life, so I don't miss him."

Her baby blues travel up to her father. "I can't imagine not being with my daddy." Then she leans up on her tiptoes and gives my cheek a kiss.

A lump forms in my throat and I run my index finger down her little nose, ending with a tap. Because I have nothing else to say, I stand and make a half-hearted attempt to sell the couple on one of the properties, but they shake their heads and the three of them walk away.

Across the street, Angie talks with an older couple. I open the door of a nearby boutique to let a few people out and engage with them. After sending them through the agency's doors, I rustle up another mixed-gender group. We talk and I glance over to see Angie is now speaking with a group of people thirty-somethings. I make eye contact with a couple of them, all ladies, and they leave her to join me. If looks could kill, I'd be dead right now from the death stare Angie sends my way. I simply wave.

Filming continues this way for some time until Kaitlyn yells, "AND, CUT!"

After heaping praise on us both, the director asks us to walk down the sidewalk together for some B-roll footage for the show. I saunter past some shops, flexing as I go. Gotta make this worth their while, especially given my co-star's sourpuss expression.

"You won this round," she grumbles under her breath.

"Don't worry, short stuff. There will be other opportunities for you to lose."

She crosses her arms over her tits. *Shame*. “We’ll see about that when the true real estate challenges start.”

Our conversation is interrupted when a gift shop door opens in front of us. None other than Poppy Mayflower strolls out. Great. I’m sure this isn’t a coincidence. For someone who wants nothing to do with our show, she’s ensuring she makes her mark on it. Taking a deep breath, I say, “Hi, Poppy.”

She jumps and twirls around to face us in a less-than-convincing show of surprise. Rubbing her hand over her perfectly coiffed blonde hair, she replies, “King,” and walks toward me, arms outstretched.

I bring her in, and she gives me air kisses. Before she pulls back, she whispers, “I see you’re shooting that awful show. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Now, Poppy. Is that any way to talk to a leading man?”

Fake smile on her face, she replies, “With *that* as your leading lady, I wouldn’t be boasting.”

Praying Angie didn’t hear her, although there’s little chance given she’s standing two feet away, I wink and step back. “What brings you to this part of town?”

She flips her hand. “Oh, you know. This and that.”

Behind us, Kaitlyn yells, “CUT!”

Thank fuck. “That’s our cue, Poppy. We better get back.”

Poppy makes a show of looking both of us up and down. “I can see how seriously you’re taking your real estate role, wearing bathing suits. Making a total spectacle of yourselves, if you ask me.”

“We weren’t,” Angie snaps.

Angie's nostrils flare as she stares Poppy down. Her bravery, her audacity, thrills me. For her part, Poppy grimaces. "Can't say I'm surprised to see you out here wearing a Grannysuit, Angie. With a pathetic group of reality show cameras following you."

Angie straightens to her full height—still barely to my shoulder—and stares Poppy down. "Upset because they didn't pick your agency?"

"Ha. I wouldn't be caught dead on that stupid reality show. None of the reputable real estate agents out here would either. So they obviously had to go slumming."

Angie laughs. "Sure. Tell yourself that's the reason, and not the fact that the camera doesn't like your—"

"Okay, ladies," I intervene. This is escalating into dangerous territory, although I can't deny part of me enjoys seeing Angie this worked up. I wrap my arm around her waist, ignoring how she stiffens next to me. "We have business to discuss, Poppy. See you." I forcibly turn away, all but dragging Angie down the sidewalk toward the office, her silky brown hair brushing against my naked torso.

For the sake of my sanity, I release my co-star. "I was handling her," I say. "But thank you for sticking up for the show, and for us. You're fierce, do you know that?"

She tugs on the bottom of her hair. "I'll take that as a compliment. One you'd better not forget."

I lick my lips. "When you're fighting on my side, you make me feel all special."

She elbows me in the ribs. "Don't be a dick—I hate that woman."

We stop in front of Kaitlyn. Ignoring how right Angie felt against my body, I pay attention as Kaitlyn hands us notes for tomorrow's shoot and says we're going to start at nine o'clock.

While the crew packs up from today, I stop at Angie's desk. We haven't had time to change yet, but Angie pulled a multi-colored dress over her bathing suit. Shelley in wardrobe said we could keep them. "What's on your agenda for the rest of today?"

She consults her calendar, which looks empty to me. "I was thinking about reviewing these notes." She puts her hand on top of the stack of papers Kaitlyn gave us. "Besides, I have to sort through all the paperwork from the new clients we brought in this morning."

I suspect we'll be lucky to end up with one real client out of this morning's shoot, but I keep my thoughts to myself. Rubbing my stubble, I ask, "Want to go over the notes together?"

"Shouldn't we do that separately? We may be doing this together, but it's sort of a competition."

I rap on the top of her desk, causing Marlene's head to pop up over the reception desk. "We can still help each other strategize. Make it a more interesting show. How about this? We're both dressed for the beach, so why don't we go out there and take our homework with us? We can go over these notes and you can share some real estate insights that I might not have learned for the test."

"Well, I don't know."

She tugs on her hair again. I have to bite back a smile at how adorable my co-star is. "Come on, it'll be fun. I'll get you back before your husband gets off work. Consider it a

planning session.” For some reason, I want to spend more time with this off-limits woman. Maybe it’s because she went all She-Ra on Poppy. Or because none of my usual ways work on her. Or perhaps I admire her dedication to her profession—a career that unexpectedly intrigues me.

Maybe it’s all of those things.

At my suggestion, I swear she flinches—it’s such a momentary thing, I’m not sure I saw it. She turns her head toward Marlene before replying. “I really shouldn’t.”

Crossing my fingers, I enlist Marlene’s help. “Don’t you think she should get out?” I wheedle. “It’s a gorgeous day now.”

Marlene smiles. “You go, Angie, live a little. I’ll hold down the fort.”

Angie sighs. “I know when I’ve lost a battle. Fine. So long as I’m back here by five.”

After she disappears through that mysterious door in the back, which I now know leads up to her day apartment, I go over to my desk and gather up the notes Kaitlyn gave me. I know exactly where I want to go—a beach in Aroostook that Callie and several others mentioned at the condo building’s rooftop party.

Paperwork in hand, I walk to Marlene’s desk. “Thanks for the backup.”

“Of course.” Her head swivels at the ringing phone. She looks surprised it’s fulfilling its purpose, and I have to admit I am, too. “Angie needs to start living again.”

*Living again?* I can’t ask for clarification because she answers the phone. The interior door opens and Angie walks in carrying an oversized- beach bag stuffed with towels. She’s

put her hair into a ponytail, and it strikes me I've never seen her looking this relaxed.

Marlene's hand flies to her mouth. Placing the receiver to her chest, she says, "Go and enjoy this fine weather."

Angie hands me a towel as she approaches us. "I wasn't sure if you had one of these in your car."

"I don't. Appreciate it."

Since the top of my convertible is already down, I go straight to the passenger door to let her in. Angie glances toward her car but agrees to let me drive with a bob of her chin. Once she's settled, I hustle around the hood, toss my towel into the backseat, and get situated behind the wheel.

"Don't you need a shirt?"

Without thought, I flex my biceps. "Nah. We're going to the beach, right? It's not illegal for me to drive without one on."

I rev the engine and pull out of the parking lot, immediately caught up in traffic. Angie reaches out and turns on the radio. Cole Manchester's tenor voice cuts through the car as he sings "To Have and to Hold."

She turns her head toward me. "So, how are you liking it here on this coast?"

I replay her words over in my brain and realize something. "I like it a lot, actually. The gyms are good and my apartment building is a lot of fun. They hold weekly parties that somehow manage not to be lame."

She nods. "How different is it from LA?"

"There's a different vibe out here, in this Greater New York City area. What appeals to me is how real the people are,

you know? There's an underlying grit around New Yorkers, if you know what I mean."

"I think I do. But, if you truly want reality, you should check out my family's neighborhood in Brooklyn. That's as real as it gets."

Poppy's derisive words pop into my head. "You're from there, right?"

She sits up, and I bet she's not even conscious of her defensive body language. "I am."

I'm about to ask her what brought her to Long Island when the song changes. Hunte's newest hit comes on. My whole body tenses, and my hold on the steering wheel becomes almost painful.

"Oh, I love this song." She starts dancing in her seat, then casts a sidelong glance at me, as if weighing my reaction. "Braxton Hunte's your dad, right? What was it like growing up with him?"

Her words make me want to jump out of my own seat and run across the hoods of the stop-and-go traffic. My breathing shallows out. "He wasn't around much when I was a kid."

"Oh." She turns the radio off, and my muscles instantly relax. "Was he on tour often?"

"Yeah." I rub a clammy hand on my chest.

Angie says, "I'm sorry. That must have been tough for you." I can tell she means it. I don't need to ask to know her family's not like that. Her receptionist is her cousin, and her sister has driven all the way out to the Hamptons, twice, just to do her makeup. Her family's close.

I force a shrug. “He breezed in and out of my life until I was eight. I don’t really get along with his second wife, so I spent less and less time with them after they got married.”

From the corner of my eye, I see unnamed emotion flit through her eyes. “I guess you’re close with your mother?”

“Not really.” Why is she dredging up all this shit? I don’t want to talk about my childhood. I can’t. My nerve endings begin to vibrate with resentment, and I honk at the car in front of me, which hasn’t moved since the light turned green a full half-second ago.

“Any siblings?”

I shake my head, keeping my eyes on the road. If I look at her, even for a second, she might glean the truth. I do have a half-sister, Melody, but my dad made sure she had nothing to do with me. He didn’t want his perfect daughter around his fucked-up son. I don’t want to talk about any of them now.

Angie’s ponytail swings as she shakes her head. “I didn’t realize your childhood was so lonely.”

This statement catches me off-guard—and so does the sympathy behind it. Sympathy, not pity. My anger dissipates. “I had a lot of close friends, so I was good. What about you?”

“I got lucky. My parents are great. You’ve met my sister, and I also have two brothers. One older and one younger.”

Grateful to shift the focus onto her, I ask, “What do your brothers do?”

“They’re with the NYPD.”

My eyebrows rise. “They must be badassess.” Everything I know about the NYPD is from the movies, but this message came across clearly enough.



“Maybe in their jobs, but they’re big teddy bears with me. I can’t imagine my life without them in it.” Her head drops. “I’m sorry about your parents. It sucks that they weren’t there for you.”

We’re back to this? Wanting to end the topic, I spit out the truth. “My looks remind my mother of my father, and she’s never forgiven me for it.”

“Oh.”

Caught up in another traffic snarl, I flex my fingers around the steering wheel again. Angie faces me but doesn’t say anything, and the silence stretches to the point of discomfort. Finally, I can’t take it anymore.

“My mother used me to get money out of my dad for years. I didn’t see it when I was young, but I started to catch onto her pattern when I was about nine. She asked him for money so I could learn how to sail.”

Next to me, Angie tucks her leg under her. “Sailing sounds fun. I’ve only been out on the Staten Island Ferry.”

I half-smile. “I never sailed, either.”

Her head tilts. “Didn’t your father pay for lessons?”

“Oh, he did. But Mom didn’t spend the money on me. She got jewelry or clothes or booze or drugs or plastic surgery.”

“King. That’s awful.”

I’m not sure why I’m telling her all of this—didn’t I want to close the subject down?—but something about her tone, about the real sympathy in her voice, makes me want to keep spilling my guts to her. I’ve never talked so openly about my family history. Only Trevor, Blaine and his wife, Jewel, know

these things—and the only reason they know is because they lived it with me.

“She paraded me out when it suited her needs,” I continue. “My birthday was always a huge party so she could show off her mansion and backyard. Other times, I was relegated to my bedroom—not that I minded. To appease his guilt over me, I guess, my father stocked me full up with the latest video games. All the neighborhood kids loved my collection, so I had people to play with. Or against, as it were.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Angie clasp and unclasp her hands. A wry smile crosses my lips. “I guess I learned my mother’s lessons. Show off your wares to get attention. Some of them became my friends, like Blaine.”

“You grew up with him?”

I tap my finger on the steering wheel. “Yeah. He’s a good guy. Married to another one of our childhood friends. I’ve known them forever.”

“He seemed nice.” She nods. “So, your mom wasn’t around much?”

“No.” I pause. “She was always out and about. It suited me just fine, because I could basically do whatever I wanted.” Like play video games and hang out with my friends. Later, that meant partying.

Angie brings me out of my head by placing her hand on my arm. “King, I’m so very sorry for how you were raised. Family means everything to me, but I can understand why it’s different for you.”

I rub my hand over my mouth to stop myself from telling her she’s wrong. That the idea of a family means more than anything to me. That I want nothing more than to belong to a

huge family with cousins and multiple generations. That I want to know my own sister, who grew up with all my father's attention while all I got was gifts to assuage his guilt.

I clench my jaw. I'm all alone, and I always will be.

I catch her hand with mine, her tiny engagement ring biting into my palm. "Family can be important for some people. I'm glad you have a good one."

Raw and exposed and vulnerable, I turn the radio back on, and Ozzy Martinez's voice fills the air. Angie taps her knee in time to the Latin beat and I bob my head. Before the song's over, I turn into the beach's parking lot, halfway filled with cars. "I heard about this place from some people in my building. They said it's the best beach in the area."

Angie looks around and sucks in her breath. It's as if she only now realized where we were going.

"Everything okay?"

She plays with her hair. "Yeah. I haven't been to this beach in years."

Grateful for the distraction from the raw conversation we just had, I pull into a parking spot. "Let's go check it out. Since it's been a while, I'm sure things have changed since you were last here."

Angie nods as if convincing herself to get out of the car and opens her door. I fling the towel she gave me over my shoulder and take the bag from her. "Let me carry this." I point to a sign advertising beach chairs for rent. "Do you want an umbrella to go with the chairs?"

"No. That's okay."

I lead her over to the chair rental place and get us two. Carrying them over my back, I walk beside Angie onto the fine sand leading out to the ocean. I set up the chairs in an empty spot and toss my borrowed towel over one.

Angie claims the other chair, but she doesn't sit. "I need to use the restroom," she says. "I'll be back." The way she stalks off to the pavilion makes me wonder if she lied.

Shaking my head at her abrupt departure, I apply lotion, lean back, and soak up the sun. Waves crash on the beach. Seagulls fly by and down by the shoreline, a kid flies a kite. Inhaling, I let the salty air invade my senses. So different from the Pacific, yet so right. The nerves that built up during our car ride fly away with the breeze, leaving me with the troubling question of why I chose to share all of my crappy childhood stories with Angie, of all people.

When she doesn't reappear after several minutes, I pull out the paperwork Kaitlyn gave us. Tomorrow we're going to be filming an episode centering around a new client. Both of us are going to meet with the couple, and then we'll each "pitch" them a few available houses. The agent the couple picks will "win."

My mind flies around this scenario, picking it apart. What will the couple be like? What sort of property will they want? When my stomach rumbles, I decide to head up to the Pavilion to look for Angie. Maybe she'll want something to eat, too, and I can pick her brain about how she approaches buyers.

So I can win tomorrow's "game" and lose the feelings stirred by this afternoon's conversation.

# ANGIE



I splash water on my face and let the coolness trickle down my chest. *Deep breaths, Angie, deep breaths.* I rip off a paper towel from the dispenser and dab the droplets off, missing at least half, and toss the half-wet paper into the bin anyway.

I check the mirror, and a younger Angie stares back at me, only eighteen years old, eyes brimming with love. A floral wreath rests on my head and I'm holding a bouquet of wildflowers.

My eyes slam shut.

I can't do this.

I can't be here.

I swallow gulps of air and try to stem the rising tide of hysteria. Why did King have to pick this particular beach out of the hundreds in the Hamptons? And why didn't I figure it out before we parked?

*Because you were so riveted by King, a voice says. You didn't even notice what was going on around you.*

Someone walks into the bathroom, and I spin around, pretending to head into a stall. The last thing I want to do is face anyone just now.

"Excuse me, are you Angie?"

I freeze. Who could this be? A client? I wipe off my cheeks and suck in a big breath. Without giving the woman the courtesy of turning around, I reply, “I am.”

“Your boyfriend asked me to see if everything’s all right?”

What? My *what*? I turn and face the stranger. “I’m sorry?”

An older woman with short grey hair, holding a beach bag at least twice her size, points to the door. “A very handsome man outside asked if I could check on you.” She reaches out to me, but I flinch back. “Is everything all right?”

I stifle a crazed laugh. My chest expands on my inhale, and I manage to mumble, “Yes. Allergies.”

She fans her face. “Well, you don’t want to keep that man waiting, honey.”

My face doesn’t move, but my body leads me to the door. Without another word, I open it and step into the bright sunshine, where King awaits me in all his healthy, blond, ripped glory. As soon as the door closes, he walks right up to me and blocks the sun from my eyes. Which doesn’t prevent me from pulling my sunglasses down from my forehead.

“Are you all right?” King’s baritone voice slides down my spine.

Because I’m still floating somewhere between the present and past, I simply nod.

He apparently doesn’t notice anything’s amiss, because he points to the concession stand. “I’m starving. Can I get you anything?”

My stomach feels like the ocean in the middle of a storm. “No.” My ingrained manners surface, and I add, “Thanks though.”

“Keep me company?”

I look around at the small group of people standing around, most of the women gawking at my date. My *date*? Am I freaking nuts? This man isn't anything more than my co-worker. He thinks I'm still married, for God's sake.

While I'm dithering, King wraps his arm around my shoulders and starts us walking toward the food.

“Are you sure you're okay? You're shivering.”

Needing to respond, I say, “It's almost eighty out.” Which really isn't much of an argument, because he's right. I *am* shaking, and the messed up thing is that I'm not entirely certain it's from the memories or my proximity to King.

We approach the counter, but King stops walking a few steps short. His eyes are trained on me instead of the menu. Thank God for my sunglasses. With his free hand, he touches my forehead. “You don't have a fever.”

His comment brings a reluctant chuckle from me. “I never know how people can do that. When I touch someone's forehead, it feels like a forehead.”

His lips tip upward. “Years of practice with my little brother.”

“I thought you were an only child?”

His cheeks hollow like he's biting the inside of them. “Long story for another day.” King steps backward. “I'm at least getting you a drink. We can sit over there.” He points toward a table under an umbrella.

I'd rather run back to the car, but if I did that, I'd need to explain. I'm not sure I can. The memories are so unbelievably

happy—and so heart-wrenchingly sad, too. Sharing them with him might break me.

He takes my silence as assent and orders me a Diet Coke and himself a couple of waters plus a grilled chicken wrap. After handing me my soda, he leads me over to a table, where I plunk down on the bench. My body doesn't register if it's hard, but the noise it made when I sat tells me it's not exactly comfortable.

King opens his water bottle as I put my straw into the plastic bottle and take a long sip. He tips the water bottle up to his lips and his Adam's apple bobs as the liquid slides down his throat. "Are you sure you're not hungry?"

Is this a jab about my less-than-stick-thin figure? "I'm fine."

"Oh, boy."

What's that supposed to mean? I reach behind my head and give my ponytail a tug. I repeat, "I'm fine."

"Listen, I've known enough women in my life to know what 'I'm fine' means. I know you're not spending time with me by choice, but I'm here if you want to talk." He bites into his sandwich. "You know more about me than most do." He bites again and half of his wrap is gone.

I take another draw through my straw, but my mind remains blank. Until a wedding party walks down the boardwalk in front of us, cameras documenting every step. The bride and groom keep giving each other these radiant looks that shoot arrows straight into my heart. A sob tries to escape. Which I force down, so it turns into a very unladylike snort.



King—ever observant—looks to the group and then to me. “They chose a gorgeous place for photos.”

That’s it. All of the ants scurrying around inside my body decide it’s time to leave *en masse*. I race to the side of the seating area, next to the dunes, and puke up everything in my stomach. And then some. Gotta give my co-star credit, though, because he’s right behind me, rubbing my back. I hear him say something, but I can’t make out the words over my retching.

Finally, finally, finally, it stops. Nothing’s left in my stomach, but tears course down my cheeks, and before I know it, I’m wrapped in King’s strong arms. For the life of me, I can’t stop crying. For me. For Dante. For what we had.

It’s all over. It’s as if I’m only now, all these years later, allowing myself to realize this awful truth.

I cry and cry and cry.

King simply holds me, rubbing my back and whispering comforting words. “Shhhh, it’s all right. I’m here. It’s okay.”

My sobs turn hysterical. It certainly is *not* all right. It’s as if the past ten years have disappeared and Dante’s death is fresh.

King tightens his arms around me, fumbling with something behind my back. Maybe he’s checking his phone, desperate for some excuse to escape his crazy co-star. But when he pulls back, he hands me a bottle of water, open. “Here. Drink this.”

I swirl a sip in my mouth and spit it out. I know I should get it together, but when King pulls me back into his arms, I sink into his embrace. God, I’m so pathetic. My body hurts from throwing up and King’s arms are comforting. I melt into him, letting him take all of my weight.

We remain locked together for a long while. Wrapped in King's arms, I'm safe. Warm. Calm. It almost feels like I belong here.

No, wait. This isn't right.

His arms are too muscular, his frame is too tall. His body is too healthy, almost offensively so. I stumble backward.

He reaches out for me again, and I take another step backward, my head shaking.

He runs his hand across the stubble on his face. "How about we return to our table?"

I nod, refusing to look into his eyes. I'll do anything to get away from this spot. From him. He guides us back to the table. Once I'm settled, he sits across from me. I take my first deep breath.

"Here, drink your soda. It should help calm your stomach."

Not processing his words, I take a sip, then push the bottle forward.

"Did something you ate disagree with you?"

And there it is. My laugh fills the area, before I shove a hand in front of my wayward mouth.

"I take it that was a 'no'?"

I shake my head. Earlier, King bared his soul to me, and maybe he deserves to know the truth about Dante. It's strange I haven't told him, I know that—I've avoided it without quite knowing why.

"No." My word comes out as a croak, so I take another drink of my soda and try again. "It wasn't what I ate." I inhale

and my tattoo dances in the sunlight. It's time for me to come clean. I hold up the inside of my wrist to him.

King squints. "Dante?"

"Yes, Dante." I trace the word with my fingernail then let both of my hands rest on my lap. "Dante was my husband. He died ten years ago, when we were both twenty."

He was reaching for his water, and his hand stops mid-reach. "I am so sorry."

A smile flicks across my face. "Dante and I were inseparable, ever since my family moved in next door to him when I was thirteen. He taught me how to play stickball, and I taught him math. We started dating as soon as we got to the point when the opposite sex no longer had cooties."

"Wow."

That's all he says. No condescending remarks, no judgment. Because of that, I go on. "We were so in love and everyone assumed we'd get married someday. He'd join his father's finance business and I'd help him with the office. We'd have lots of babies and be happy."

I stop talking, but King doesn't say a word. He just waits for me to continue my story. I inhale. "Dante was diagnosed with Ewing Sarcoma right after our Junior Prom." At his perplexed look, I explain, "It's a rare type of cancer that forms in bone or soft tissue. For Dante, it started in his femur." I place my hand on top of my thigh. "The first sign was when the bone broke for no apparent reason. The cancer quickly spread to the marrow." I turn my head and look into the ocean.

"Anyway, when he was told it was terminal, he asked me to marry him because we were so in love."

A tear escapes, followed by several more. I swipe them off my cheeks and finish up my story. “We created a Bucket List of things we’d do if we had the next fifty years to live together.”

“Was becoming a real estate broker part of the plan?”

I wrap the ends of my ponytail around my finger. “He wasn’t really interested in finance, and I’d always found real estate exciting, so we decided that we’d run an agency together instead. The last item on our Bucket List was to become the Number One real estate agency in the Hamptons.”

“That’s where Poppy comes into the story.”

I hiccup. “Yeah. She’s such a bitch.”

He smiles, the crinkles at the corner of his eyes reaching inside of me. Silence hangs between us for a while, but I’m surprised by how comfortable it feels. He looks around the beach. “And how does this place play into your story?”

Bile rises in my throat again, but I swallow and take a deep breath. “We were married here. We spent our honeymoon here. We thought this was the most magical place on earth, and never wanted to leave. And”—another breath, more tears—“we held his memorial service here after...”

King looks stricken. He stands up, and I follow his progress as he walks around the table and straddles the bench I’m sitting on. He pulls me into a hug, resting his chin on top of my head. “I’m so sorry, Angie. I had no idea about any of this.”

I wrap my arms around his torso. “How could you have known?” My words are muffled against his chest.

“Wait here and I’ll get our towels.”

“No.” I shake my head and look up at him. “No. I need to be here. It’s a beautiful place, filled with good memories.” A tear rolls down my cheek. “And sad ones, too. But, they’re all a part of life. Of my life.”

His arms flex and he strokes my back. “All right. If you want to stay, we’ll stay. Know we can leave at any time.”

I nod, my forehead rubbing against his chest. Not for the first time, I register his scent—it’s crisp and clean and smells like woodsy sunshine. Just like how you’d expect this globe-trotter to smell. Which is so at odds with his lonely upbringing. Another torrent of tears wrenches from me, but this time I’m not sure if I’m crying for me or for King. I pull away from his half-naked body with a start.

We sit facing each other for a heartbeat. King stands and offers me his hand, which I take. It’s warm and large and calloused. I rub my finger over one of them. “Are these from working out?”

He nods and throws away his leftovers. I pick up my drink and we walk back through the sand to our chairs.

The sand and the waves and the seagulls all conspire to drag me back to the past again. To my wedding. And to Dante’s memorial. I think I’m doing a pretty good job of holding both memories at bay until King says, “I’d love to hear about your wedding. If you want to share.”

I kiss the inside of my wrist where Dante’s name smiles up at me. Our wedding was a happy event, and after more than a decade, I’d like to revisit it. So I do.

“It was a day much like today, right after we graduated from high school. I wore a long white dress that fluttered in the wind, with a wreath of flowers on my head. He wore a

grey suit with a white button-down shirt. Everyone was barefoot. We stayed late with a bonfire on the beach. Dante was still feeling pretty good then.”

“Sounds idyllic.”

“It was. It was perfect.”

“I’m happy you have such a wonderful memory.”

“Thanks.” I nod, and a deep sadness washes over me. It had been one of Dante’s last good days. His disease started to take over soon afterward, and the medicine ravaged the rest of his body.

Because I need to change the subject, I ask, “How about you? Have you ever been married?”

He chuckles. “God, no. No way.”

“Because you haven’t found the right woman?”

“Because I’m not looking.”

His tone of voice tells me the subject is closed. I suppose if I’d had such an unhappy upbringing, I’d be leery of marriage as well. Given his distaste for the institution and my unwillingness to move on from my soul mate, I guess we’re the perfect dysfunctional pair.

“Me neither.”

We reach the chairs, and both of us sit. My gaze falls on King’s feet, which are playing in the sand. The movements are rhythmic and comforting. After a while, he clears his throat. “So, did you read over the notes that Kaitlyn gave us today?”

His question plucks me out of the haze of sadness threatening to envelop me. “Actually, no, I didn’t.” I pick up my bag. “I have them in here somewhere.”

“No need to look for them. Here’s my copy.”

He hands me his notes. “Thanks.” I skim over them. “Sounds pretty straightforward.”

“This will be my first real client meeting.”

The cocky attitude he usually wears like a flag is nowhere to be found, but the cynical side of me suggests he’s using me to win the show’s bonus. Testing the waters, I reply, “I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

“In the books, it said I’m supposed to let the client do all the talking and guide them through what they want in a home. Like how many bedrooms they want and whether they want a fireplace or a pool, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds right to me.” I can’t stop myself from sharing some of my knowledge. “It’s also helpful to find out what they do for a living and where they want to live. Demographics as well as the nuts and bolts.”

He nods. “Like with Abbey.”

I smile—my first real smile since we pulled up to this beach. “Exactly.” We spend the rest of the afternoon talking real estate. It’s enjoyable, and it keeps my mind out of the past.

When we’re packing up, King asks, “So the husband ruse is à la *Remington Steele*?”

His question takes me off guard, but his mention of the television show, a relic from the early eighties, makes me smile. I’ve watched it on the oldies channel. In it, the private investigator, a woman, created a fake male owner of her company in order to attract clients. Only things worked out very differently than she had planned when Pierce Brosnan showed up. I answer honestly. “Not really. I wouldn’t be here without my husband.”

He nods and we continue our trek back to his car.

Maybe King's not so bad after all.



# KING



## 3 *bedrooms, 4 baths, oceanside*

I look down at my notepad, which has Russo Real Estate emblazoned across the top, and add *Wife rules the show*.

After Angie asks the couple about a few of the basic features they're looking for in a home, I pipe up. "So tell me, Mr. Danson, where do you work?" This question will let me know if they need to be located near transportation.

"My office is in the City, but can work from home three days a week. More if I schedule my client meetings correctly."

I scribble *large home office* on my notepad and smile at the couple. "It's great that you have the flexibility to schedule your days like that. If I may ask, what brings you out here to Aroostook?"

Mrs. Danson takes the lead on this one. "I love it out here. It's like a small town but with high-end touches and easy access to the City."

I'm getting a fuller picture of this couple. "So you're a connoisseur of theatre and the opera?"

The wife responds, "Theatre, yes, but not so much the opera. I adore ballet, though."

I nod and add *high-end aficionados* to the notepad. Without asking, I continue the list with *foodies*.

Angie brings the conversation back to basics. A pool is a requirement, preferably indoors. They want an open floor-plan with a high-end kitchen.

Yup. I had them pegged correctly. I grew up around people like them. Minus the fact that they actually work for a living, I *am* them. I let my mind wander to the types of homes they would like to see. Nothing less than three-thousand square feet, I'd wager, and the more upscale finishes the better.

I open my mouth to ask their budget, but Angie beats me to the punch. With a much softer phrasing than I would have used. "What price range would you like to explore?"

Hmm. "Explore." I make a mental note to add that to my real-estate vocabulary.

The couple exchanges a look and the wife responds, "We'd like to keep it to three million."

I add their answer to my notepad, but Angie needs to work on her poker face. Her panic is unmistakable. Smiling at the couple, I lie, "I can think of several properties that should suit your needs. I think you're going to have a very hard time deciding which one to go with because of all the upside." I deliberately use those terms in an effort to establish rapport, like the books say, because the husband is a financial analyst.

"Uhm, yeah, yes, you're going to have a great selection to choose from." Angie stands and extends her hand, which each of them shake in turn. "Both of us will pull some properties for you." She slants me a look. "Please enjoy your lunch, on me—us—and we'll present our ideas to you shortly."

The couple stands and I shake hands with them as well. “I look forward to creating a strategy that will contain your forever home.”

Our new clients take their things and walk toward the front door.

Kaitlyn’s voice booms. “AND CUT!”

Angie slides back down onto her chair, while I rub my hands together, energized from our meeting.

“King, Angie, you have exactly one hour to pull together your pitches. Lita and Gil, great job. Head on to the conference room and enjoy your lunch.” Previously, Kaitlyn explained to us that we now have to select three listings based upon our meeting, and pitch each property. The Dansons will select which one of us will be their agent based upon the houses selected and our presentations. If we present any or all of the same houses, our presentations will be the deciding factor.

My fingers race over the keys as I search the current MLS—listings in the Multiple Listing Service—for the best houses to show them. It’ll have to be something breathtaking. For her part, Angie works at her desk, typing away. Despite all our sharing yesterday, we *are* in a competition. One I intend to win—especially since it comes with a big payday.

Kaitlyn shouts, “Okay, that’s it. Hands up!”

I raise my hands and look over at Angie, who scribbles something down at the last second. She looks a little frazzled. Yeah, I got this in the bag. I raise my chin toward my co-star, who responds by running her hands through her hair.

Kaitlyn collects our presentations and explains how we’re going to present our ideas to the Dansons. They’ll select which

pitch they prefer, and the winner will be filmed showing the couple the three houses. They'll pick one of them for the show.

If, in fact, they *do* choose to buy one of the three houses they're shown, they'll become real clients. Either way, this should be a big win for Russo Real Estate, so I don't feel so bad about wanting them to choose my presentation.

"Ready for the coin toss?" Both Angie and I crowd Kaitlyn, who pulls a coin out of her pocket. I allow Angie to call it in the air. The coin flies into the air and she yells, "Heads!"

Kaitlyn makes a production out of catching it and then displays it for the camera. Heads. Angie claps, then runs her hands down her skirt-covered thighs. Damn it. I shouldn't be noticing her legs, nor the fact that the skirt shows off her curves in just the right way.

She may not be married anymore, but she's still off limits.

"Okay, King?"

My wayward thoughts rope back to the present and I stare at Kaitlyn. "Sorry, I missed that."

In a sharper tone, she repeats, "I said that Angie won the toss and chose to do her presentation now. You'll have to wait in the conference room while we film."

Angie looks a bit nervous, but she squares her shoulders, retrieves her notes, and heads over to the sofa and chairs where the "meeting" will take place. Her laptop has been brought over to the table by Milo, who's filming our presentations.

I detour to Angie on my way to the conference room. "Good luck. May the best man win."

She looks me up and down, her lip between her teeth. “You wish, real estate newbie. Let the expert show you how it’s done.”

I puff up at her obvious bravado. “It’s going to be fun taking you down a peg,” I retort and pass the clients in the tiny hallway.

I’m talking smack for the camera, but I really do think I can win this one. I know what people like the Dansons want. Hell, I’ve stayed in houses they’d kill to own. Angie, for all her experience, can’t touch the fact that they are *my* people.

I take a seat in the conference room. When I first saw the paintings in here, I thought they were God-awful. Now that I look at them, though, I realize Angie was trying to make her clients feel at home. They’re...cozy. The problem is the home she’s portraying isn’t one I recognize. If she wants to appeal to a million-dollar-plus clientele, she needs to play to them. Not to clients with lower-end budgets. I find another notepad and start writing down some ideas to change things up in here. This isn’t for the show—it’s for Angie.

My cell phone vibrates in my back pocket, and I tilt my hip to retrieve it. We’re supposed to keep our ringers off during taping, but since we *are* real estate agents, the “prop” is sort of a necessity. “Mom” is written across the screen. My stomach tenses—how long has it been since we last talked? Maybe a couple of months? My finger heads toward the reject button, but remembering my conversation with Angie yesterday, I detour to the green one. “Hey, Mom.”

“King! Darling, how are you? It’s been too long!”

I bite the inside of my cheek and take a deep breath. When I was a kid, I used to love it when she was all lovey-dovey with me. I thought it meant I was the most important thing in

her life. That illusion was soon shattered—she only acted like this when she was drunk or with a new man. I sigh. Which one is it this time?

“I’ve been busy.” Not a lie.

“Not too busy for your mommy. Let’s get together.” She giggles as she says it.

Ah, I have my answer. She cries with alcohol and is totally, deeply serious with drugs. Giggles mean she’s getting laid. Crass, I know, but I’ve had to learn her language. “Unless you’re on the East Coast, I don’t think that’s possible.”

Her giggling stops. “Are you in Miami? God, I love that place. We can meet you there.”

*We.* All the air rushes out of my body. At least her money worries are probably on hold, given her taste for rich men. I can hope, anyway. “Actually, nope. I’m in the Hamptons.”

I can almost hear her nose crinkling. “What are you doing out there? It’s barely Memorial Day.”

I’d hoped to avoid sharing details, but I guess she’ll find out the truth soon enough. “I’m filming one of Blaine’s shows.” And because something inside me still yearns for approval from this narcissistic woman who birthed me, I add, “I’m the lead.”

“You’re doing a reality television show?”

The horror in her voice brings me to my feet, and I start pacing around the conference table. “I would think you’d be happy for me.”

“What does Blaine have on you to make you do this?”

Money. That’s what Blaine has on me. Cold, hard cash. Which I absolutely need, thanks to Trevor. But I’m not about

to share this with her. I run my free hand over my chin, letting the stubble prickle my palm. “Why do you want to get together, Mom?”

“I wanted to share some good news, but now you’ve got me all worried. What will my friends think when this reality show airs? Oh, God, it’s not one of those shows where people throw food at each other and tip over tables, is it?”

I stop pacing at her words. She’s worried my show will affect *her*? How rich. “No, Mom, it isn’t.”

“You’re not doing dumb things like being filmed partying ’til you puke, are you? ’Cause Thirteen won’t like that type of publicity.”

*Thirteen*? Who on earth names their kid a number? “His name is *Thirteen*?”

Her giggle floats over the phone again. She’s worse than a teenager. “I didn’t want it to come out like this, but yes. He legally changed it when he turned twenty—isn’t that awesome?”

I choose not to respond to that.

“He owns a bunch of gyms. Hey, you work out a lot, too. You’ll like him.”

Bending over, I strum the top of the table with my fingers. “Doesn’t look like we’re going to be able to meet anytime soon.”

“Such a pity. I think he’s the one, you know?”

Here comes the gushing and fawning stage of the relationship. How many “the ones” has my mother had over the years? When the guy eventually dumps her, she’ll move on to an alcohol or drug fest, or—if I’m really lucky—both at the

same time. Then rehab. At least her first stint in rehab wasn't until I was twenty-five, after Husband Number Three left her for a younger version.

"Let's hope so."

"King, don't be so high and mighty with your mother! I don't see you settling down anytime soon."

"With the role models I've had, can you blame me?"

"Well!" she says, her tone affronted. "I did the best I could for you. Considering the way your deadbeat father dumped you after he married that hussy, I'd expect you to be more grateful. Who drove you to all your lessons growing up? Who cleaned your skinned knees? Huh?"

I bite my tongue to keep from responding that it certainly wasn't her. My friends' parents usually took pity on me. I know a whole lot about first aid because I had to teach myself. Standing up straight, I exhale through my nose. It's not worth fighting with her. She's not worth my time.

"I really can't talk now. I have to get ready for my next scene."

"I want you to quit that stupid show right now. I won't have you ridiculing my good name."

I can't help it this time. I laugh. "In case you missed it, mother, I'm thirty-three years old and you haven't had much to say over my life for over twenty years. Now, I'm going to get ready for the cameras. Good luck with your new boyfriend."

She starts talking again, but I end the call and toss my phone onto the table. I realize I'm sucking in rapid gulps of air. How the hell can she still get under my skin after all these years?



I'm awash in anger when my phone buzzes again. Looking down, I see "Trevor" on the screen. That asshole got me into this mess in the first place, then totally trashed me on the call when I suggested—again—that he go to rehab, so I send the call to voicemail. I pace around the room five more times, staring at my phone the entire time. While I don't want to care about him either, I find myself grabbing the phone and punching in the password for my voicemail. Trevor's voice bounces off the walls, which feel like they're closing in on me.

"Hey, dude. Need to hit you up for another twenty thou. Got a bit tight over here. Venmo me, all right?" My finger hovers over the delete button. "Please and thank you." I smash the delete and, turning in the opposite direction, pace double-time around the conference room.

The door opens and Angie enters the conference room. Her hair looks a bit disheveled, like she ran her fingers through it several times during her pitch.

Putting a lid on my displeasure at my conversation with my mother and Trevor's voicemail, I grill my co-star, a bit too harshly, "How did it go?"

She blanches at my tone and tips her chin upward. "Great. Good luck, you're going to need it. I had them eating out of the palm of my hand."

I know bluster when I see it. It's time to get my head back into the game. While I can't do anything about Mom or Trevor, *this* is under my control. Whatever Mom thinks, this is a good show, and I'm damn proud of what I'm doing. I rub my hands together and force my lips into a smile. "They're going to forget all about your presentation by the time I'm done with them."

Kaitlyn walks into the room. "Are you ready, King?"

“Born ready.” I blow a kiss at Angie, whose cheeks turn a light shade of pink. I barely have time to register her reaction before Kaitlyn takes me by the arm and leads me out of the conference room.

I take a seat to the right of the Dansons. While Milo works his magic with the camera, I review my notes. I can do this. I’m going to win, and I’ll be that much closer to the bonus.

Pretty soon, filming starts. I give them an overview of my take on their dream home. Our conversation goes great, and I show them the three houses I selected for them. By the end, we’re laughing like old friends. Yeah. I got this in the bag.

Kaitlyn tells me to go into the conference room while the Dansons discuss the two pitches. After a round of handshakes, I return to the depressing room.

“Well? How did it go for you?” Angie repeats my question back to me. “Did they nod and talk with each other a lot?”

I make myself a cup of coffee with the Keurig, then sit down across from her with my mug. “It went great. Better than I could’ve hoped.”

Her lips purse. “What houses did you show them?”

I rattle off my three and ask for hers. We didn’t show the Dansons any of the same properties, and while mine were at or over budget, none of hers touched their upper limit. “That’s interesting. At least the show is getting its money’s worth, since we didn’t have any overlap.”

Angie stands and walks over to the side table, reaching for a bottle of water. “True. Why did you pick your three?”

“I thought about the houses I’d want to live in out here if I were married. Not to mention if I were a rich financial

accountant hell-bent on pleasing my much younger trophy wife.”

“How did you get all that? Not his job, of course, but about her being a trophy wife?”

I blink. “It was as clear as the sorry paintings in this room. How could you have missed it?”

She crosses her arms across her chest, drawing attention to her ample tits. I shift in my seat. “She doesn’t look that much younger than him.”

“Plastic surgery. Ever hear of it?”

Angie’s fingers rise to touch her lips. “You think?”

“Women aren’t the only ones who get it. Although I’m guessing they had some his-and-hers work done.” I shrug. “Plus, I know a boob job when I see one.”

Across the table from me, Angie huffs. “I bet.”

“Oh, I’ve seen all sorts. The good, the bad, and the beautiful. Hers were expensive. And gorgeous.”

“Whatever. I’m sure they’re going to select me, you pervert.”

I chuckle. “Not a pervert. Merely a connoisseur.” I take a lingering look at her frame, now that her hands are occupied with her water bottle. “Not that you need any help in that department.”

She chokes on her sip of water. “I take back all my positive thoughts about you and your childhood.”

Her words stab into me, but I’m ready to stab back. “You can’t. Besides, I know things, too.” I tap the side of my forehead.

Her eyes immediately drop and I feel like a jerk. What we shared yesterday shouldn't be brought into this minor kerfuffle. This is about the show, and that was...that. For the first time in a very long while, I feel the need to apologize. But she beats me to it.

"I'm sorry, King. I didn't mean to bring up our conversation from yesterday. That was a low blow."

"I'm sorry, too. I didn't mean to make you feel sad."

Our truce, of sorts, is interrupted when Milo comes into the room. "We're ready for both of you out here."

Angie and I both stand, and I extend my hand as a sort of olive branch. "Good luck."

We shake and head out of the conference room to find out who the Dansons chose. Given Angie's list of houses, I'm even more confident I won this round.

We're directed to stand in front of the reception desk while the Dansons face us. "And, go!"

Gil speaks first, addressing Angie. He tells her how much he appreciated her selections, especially since they didn't blow the budget they gave us. Then Lita smiles at me and explains how much my choices "spoke to her."

Yeah. I can only imagine how the hot tub and heliport on the beach spoke to her.

Lita continues, "Angie, your choices were on point and pretty. I'm sure we could be happy in any one of them."

My positivity dims for an instant until I realize that homes shouldn't be "pretty."

Gil adds, "King, your properties were breathtaking. We've decided to go with you. We can't wait to see them in person."

A huge smile surfaces on my face and I shake hands with both of them. “Lita, Gil, thanks so much for your confidence in me. I can’t wait to show you these amazing houses. I’m sure you’ll be calling one home in no time.” The Dansons also shake hands with Angie, who wears a professional smile.

“CUT!” Kaitlyn claps. “Great job. The house tours will be tomorrow.”

Gil shakes my hand again, while Lita gives me a hug.

We all walk them to the door, and as I watch them leave, my chest expands. I beat an experienced real estate agent at her own game. Well, it was just once, but I could get used to this. I’m that much closer to earning the show’s bonus. I steal a glance at Angie, who seems smaller to me. My underutilized heart does a flip, and I cough. Must be something I ate.

Kaitlyn takes me aside. “I want you to continue sparring with Angie. The camera eats that shit up. Besides, it seems to be the natural state between you two. Try to fluster her.”

Fluster her, huh? I know exactly how to put her off guard. I nod and watch as Kaitlyn steps away. She whispers something into Angie’s ear, and I have to wonder if she’s telling her the same thing.

Kaitlyn walks us over to my desk, where I sit and Angie takes a chair across from me. “Not liking this,” the director says after a moment. “Let’s take it over by the windows.” We move and wait for the cameras to get into position.

“And, Go!” Kaitlyn says.

Angie stares at me, her warm brown eyes overlaid with steel. “Congratulations. But don’t get too used to it. There are still plenty more challenges ahead.”

I nod. Operation Fluster, here we go. I reach out and rub a strand of hair in between my fingers. “That’s true. But there will never be another chance with the Dansons.”

Angie sucks in her breath, so I know she’s not immune to me, but she also tilts her head up. I’m at least a half-foot taller than this diminutive brunette. Wouldn’t know that by her attitude, though. A smile crosses her face. “Beginner’s luck.” Her eyes glance downward. “It’ll be interesting to see if you’re more than a one-hit wonder.”

My hand falters and I drop her hair. Did she seriously just challenge my manhood? Oh, this game is *on*.

# ANGIE



**S**everal days have passed since King won that stupid contest for the Dansons, and he's been strutting around ever since. The power suit that Shelley in Wardrobe gave me yesterday is laid out on my bed in preparation for today's shoot.

We're going to a seller's house and presenting our strategies to market it for sale. The actual Open House will be Sunday—five days from now—and the winner of today's episode will be filmed on site. I'm more than ready to rub King's face in my win, despite the tentative truce we've maintained since that day at the beach.

Sliding the red skirt over my hips, I tuck the cream blouse in and zip up. I play with my wedding rings on my left hand and step into my nude heels. *I'm doing it, Dante. We're going to be Number One.*

Poppy, who? Sure, she's bound to make another appearance on camera to needle me—and because she does want to be on camera no matter how often and loudly she says otherwise—but I can't worry about her. This show is going to put us on the map.

Grabbing my briefcase, I bound down the stairs. My cousin walks into the office as I sit down at my desk. "Hey,

Marlene.”

“Hi. How are you doing? Get enough of King’s gloating yesterday?”

“Did I ever.” Lifting my arms and flexing them, I drop my voice into a low register. “I worked out this morning for two hours before taking Lita and Gil to the houses I picked out for them. They ‘oohed’ and ‘ahhed’ all day. How amazing is that? Kaitlyn couldn’t believe how well the taping went and we didn’t have to redo much. She says I’m a natural.”

Marlene giggles at my impression of King and piles on. “Did I tell you how Lita fawned all over me? I could steal her away from Gil like that.” She snaps her fingers.

Laughing, I reply, “It’s just so hard being this insanely good-looking, you know? Without an ounce of body fat anywhere.” I rub my hands up and down my curvy torso.

She points to her arm. “And my tattoo. Selected for maximum impact. The ladies can’t keep their hands off me.”

At this point, we’re both doubled-over, sucking in air. I wave my hands. “Stop! Stop! I can’t!”

For her part, Marlene shakes her head. “No more.”

Except we promptly burst into gales of laughter again.

“Okay, that’s it. Enough,” I try again.

“You’re right,” she snickers. “Although, I will personally kick your ass if you don’t win this contest today.”

I rub my hand over my ample butt. “Ouch. I guess I better not lose, huh?”

We both spin around when the bathroom door clicks shut and King walks out in all of his post-workout glory. He’s



wearing shorts that hang off his hips and a skin-tight T-shirt, his tribal armband tattoo peeking out. Mouth open, I look at my cousin and whisper, “Do you think he...?”

She shakes her head once.

“Ladies,” King says as he walks to his desk and tosses a garment bag over the guest chairs in front. “Thought I’d get in early to prepare for today’s shoot.”

“King,” I reply, my voice sounding strangled. He busies himself with some papers, and I lead Marlene back to my desk.

Marlene’s eyes dart to my co-star as she straightens up my already tidy desk. “I hope you’re ready to give Let’s Do It! a huge Open House for this challenge. Pretend you have a bank account with ten million in it.”

I snort. “Don’t get me started.”

She plops down into one of my guest chairs. “You know what I mean. Don’t think small. The world’s your oyster. Act like you have more money than Poppy Mayflower. How would she spend it?”

“I can’t even,” I reply honestly. “But I’ve been thinking big. Instead of cookies, we’ll have caviar and champagne.” I lean on my desk. “Although I’d much rather have those cookies.”

“Me, too, Angie, but not big enough. Wine and dine them. Make this Open House a party for the ages. I bet you win *and* sell the mansion on Sunday. With a bidding war.”

“Now that’s music to my ears, Mar. Thanks for your wise words. I’m going *big* today.”

Her hand covers mine. “What’s family for?”

She heads back to the front, leaving me alone with my files. I study the property we're going to pitch today. The backyard is to die for. It's two acres, with perfectly manicured English gardens. I picture myself strolling through the hedges, the sound of classical music complementing the ocean waves.

I jump to my feet. "That's it!"

Both people in my office stop what they're doing and stare at me. I slide down into my chair. "Sorry. I just came up with a fun idea." I grab my pen. "As you were."

Marlene gives me a knowing look, but King's eyebrows are furrowed. My excitement has troubled him.

*Oh, it's on, baby agent. Watch and learn.*



**T**he show drives us to the property in a limo. It's not my first time in a limo, but it's hardly my usual mode of transportation. When Dante proposed, his parents rented us a limo to take us to a hotel in New York City. They also splurged for us to have a limo on our wedding day. I inhale.

Next to me, King pours himself water in a crystal glass. When he's finished, he surprises me by tipping the bottle at me. "Please." He hands me my own glass a minute later.

I sip and review my notes for the proposed Open House. I love my outdoor ideas, but the indoor part of my plan still needs some tweaking. King interrupts my thoughts. "What do you know about the clients the show set up for us, the Maguires?"

I flip the pages of my notebook. "Tessa and Liam. He was born in Ireland. Made his money in tech." I don't tell him

anything he couldn't find out with a simple Google search. Let him do his own in-depth research.

“Tech guys can be really challenging. Very exacting.”

If he's attempting to scare me off, it's not going to work. “Like most people, then.”

“Probably more so. I read that Tessa's from New York City and she and Liam met while she was studying abroad in Dublin. They've been together for thirty years.” He says it with something like disgust, then pauses for a long sip of water. “Long time.”

Hmm. Guess he was testing me before. Ignoring this thought, I reply, “Yeah. It is. When you find your soul mate, you know it.”

King places his glass in the cupholder. “Soul mates, huh?” I nod. “Pegged you.”

To cover up my surprise, I finish my water. He holds up the bottle, and I hand the glass to him for a refill. “What do you mean that you ‘pegged’ me?” I ask, taking it back from him.

“You're the star-crossed romantic type.”

I sit up straighter on the limo's bench seat, crossing my legs. “What's wrong about being a romantic? Love is wonderful.” Dante's smile lit up my world, even when he was so weak he was confined to his bed. My right hand reaches for my wrist.

Amber orbs glued to my tattoo, King says, “I'm sure it was. And now it's gone.”

My fingers wrap around my wrist and hold on tight. “Dante may be gone, but he's always with me. I can feel him

around me, cheering me on. We'll love each other forever, and not even death can separate us." I glance toward him. "Not that you would understand."

He rests his head back against the leather seat and drinks his water. "You're right. Especially since I don't believe in any of that mumbo-jumbo."

"Love? You don't believe in *love*?" How can he be so...I don't know—alone?

He chuckles. The sound is harsh. "Oh, I believe in certain types of love, that's to be sure."

"There's much more to life than sex, you know."

His biceps flex. "I'm very happy with my personal version of love. Can you say the same?"

My breath catches on his words. "I love my husband, so my answer is a great, big, huge yes. He's my soul mate, the one and only person for me. The way life is supposed to be."

"If you say so. I don't agree. Soul mates can last an hour, a week, maybe a month or two—and then you find another one."

"That is so sad."

"Well, what do I know? I'm just insanely good-looking without an ounce of body fat on me." He picks a piece of lint off his trousers and lets it drop onto the floor. "You live your life how you like, and I'll carry on as I see fit. Got it?"

Hurt lurks behind his words, although he probably doesn't know it. Heat steals up to my ears at evidence he heard Marlene and me making fun of him. "Sorry," I mumble.

He tips his glass at me. "For the record, I do appreciate being thought of as insanely good-looking."

I have to smile at that, although my mind returns to what he said about his upbringing. What a terrible job his parents did on him. They made him believe that everything in life is disposable, people, too. For what feels like the millionth time since I met King, I say a quick prayer of thanks for my own family. And for Dante. I would never exchange my life for King's, no matter how much money he has.

The scenery changes from a cityscape to houses with expansive lots and prominent ocean views, and I know we're almost to the Maguires. King and I both return to our notes.

The limo turns into a long driveway and I put my pad back into my briefcase. Although I should be focused on the challenge at hand, my mind returns to the heartache King must carry with him every day. Before we pull up to the front door, I make a pact with myself to try to get him to reconcile with either his mother or father, maybe both. He needs unconditional love in his life. One of those relationships has to be salvageable.

We come to a stop in front of the door, and it immediately opens, revealing Kaitlyn. The salty air tickles my nose as I absorb the imposing mansion in front of me. The photos I studied made the house appear warm and inviting, when in reality it's cold and sterile. I mentally add some flowers to the front stoop and a welcome mat. We need to warm this place up.

"Right on time," Kaitlyn says with a nod. "Great. Let's get some shots of you checking out the front before knocking. When you're done, Tessa and Liam are waiting inside."

While the crew finishes setting up the cameras, I take in the perfect structure and grounds. It's imposing and larger than life, a lot like King. I can't help remembering the way he held

me on the beach. The way he listened to me about Dante. No, I amend. He's not imposing. He was neglected, but he's still kind. He just doesn't want anyone to know it.

Kaitlyn returns to us. "Okay, ready? Walk around, inspect the property. You can talk and interact, or not, whatever feels right." When we both nod, she says, "And go!"

*Pull yourself together, Angie. Don't let your opponent's soft side get to you.*

King points to the upper-level windows as we start our walk. "The leaded windows make a forceful statement."

Still feeling a bit positive toward King, I reply, "I think flower boxes would warm this place up."

He snorts. "It's a stone mansion, for goodness' sake. It doesn't need any girly touches."

Just like that, I'm back in the game. I point toward the English gardens at the back of the house. "And I suppose they're a girly touch?"

He waves his hand dismissively. "It's in the back. The front is for impact."

"I, for one, wouldn't want to be so grandiose. You *want* people to come in and check out the property. If it's too imposing, it'll repel them before they hit the front door."

"Well, I think the house clearly states *I've made it, come in if you think you're worthy.*"

"You do understand we want people to show up, right? You can't challenge them to a duel before they even cross the threshold."

He turns and puts his hands on his slim hips. "We want people to feel like they've earned the right to enter."

I mimic his stance. “*We* want people to be excited to check out the space.”

We stand facing each other, nostrils flaring. Because I can’t help myself, I say, “I bet you want to give out numbers for tours so prospective buyers have to wait their turn to be led through the property.”

“I hadn’t thought of that, but now that you mention it, I think it’s a damn good idea. Creates a sense of anticipation.”

I throw my hands up and give him my back. King approaches. “You know, when I’m done with my presentation, the Maguires are going to say good-bye to whatever you’ve come up with.”

I raise my chin. “Keep dreaming. I let you win the Dansons, but all bets are off now that we’re out here in the field. Or on the beach, more accurately.”

“You didn’t let me win last time, and I’m going to prove it by wiping the floor with you now.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Kaitlyn screams from the front door, “And, CUT!”

I was so annoyed with King that I forgot we were actually filming. Great. I hope the cameras didn’t make me come off as a bitch to my golden boy co-star. I tuck my hair behind my ear and force a smile at him. He bends down and whispers, “Things just got real interesting. Can’t wait to see which one of us wins this one. Good luck.”

His last two words catch me off guard. Something tells me he really meant it. I look up at him. “You, too. Let’s both give it our best shot and see which one they pick.” We shake. King’s words and actions over the past few days have put me

off-kilter. Sometimes he's such an arrogant jerk, while others, he's a caring human being. Which one is the true King?

We join Kaitlyn. "Great job, guys," she says happily. Our antagonism pleases her the way some people get a boost from espresso. "I liked both of your takes on the property. Should make for a very interesting show."

The front door opens and a tall man and woman greet us. After introductions are made, the camera crew sets up inside and we're given a tour of the mansion. Six bedrooms and eight bathrooms, all of which have amazing views of the ocean. Not to mention a chef's kitchen, complete with a center island that could easily seat my whole family, and formal dining room.

We get settled in the family room—Tessa and Liam on the sofa, King and I in a couple of armchairs across from them. My seat is so plush and comfortable I'm tempted to ask if I could take it to my apartment. The rooms all are decorated with warm tones, multiple layers of lighting, and cheery furniture. The media room has leather sofas, but most of the other pieces are cloth and overstuffed. I'm right. The exterior of the house doesn't match their aesthetic or the way they live.

King points out the French doors, which lead out to the formal gardens. There's a pool out there, too, surrounded by some well-loved chaise loungers, which leads me to think the gardens preceded the Maguires' on the property.

Because I can't stop myself, I ask, "Did you plant the gardens?"

Tessa smiles. "No. The prior owner did, but we maintained them. They're our favorite part of the house."

King replies, "Your home is gorgeous. If you don't mind my asking, why have you decided to leave such a wonderful



spot?”

Liam responds, “Our kids are gone now and we don’t need such a large space. We’ve decided to buy a smaller one nearby.”

“We’d love to help you in any way we can,” King replies faster than me. “Our agency works with buyers as well as sellers.”

His pitch digs into me like a pair of spurs. Now, I don’t just want to sell their house—I also want to find them a new one, assuming they’re not already working with whoever is the listing agent. “I’m sure you’ll love working with whomever you decide to help you with your sale. And *she*”—I give King a sideways glance—“can also help you with your buy.”

Kaitlyn interrupts, saying it’s time for our pitches. “King, since you won the last contest, you can choose which of you pitches first today.”

King hesitates for a second before announcing I’ll pitch them first. Fine. Going first doesn’t mean you’ll lose. I’m confident in my plan, which I’ve tweaked somewhat after seeing the house and meeting the Maguires.

Liam and Tessa are sent to the breakfast nook to wait for me, and I get some additional makeup. Not for the first time, I wonder where the show found this couple. I shake my head—doesn’t matter now—I only have to wow them.

During my pitch for their Open House, I play up the dichotomy between their relaxed lifestyle and the austerity of the exterior of the house. I suggest softening the front of the house with flowers and other landscaping, to which they seem amenable. I also discuss adding the romantic touch of strolling violinists with a bar serving signature cocktails in the garden.

After I run through my marketing ideas, I answer all their questions. They seemed very receptive and I walk out of the nook with my head held high. King doesn't stand a chance.

I return to the family room, where King's waiting for his turn. "Are you ready to make your pitch?" I ask, settling in next to him. "Gotta warn you, though, they loved what I had to say."

King runs his hands over his strong thighs, which sends a not unpleasant tingle through me. My fingers cover my tattoo.

"I've got this," he says, "don't you worry. You'll be zero for three when I'm done."

I laugh at his confidence. "In your dreams."

A little while later, King strides back into the room, followed by cameras. His face is a little drawn.

"Everything go okay in there?"

"Yeah," he responds, minus his usual cockiness.

I squelch the hope rising within me. *No decision has been made yet, Angie. Wait and see before celebrating.* "We'll find out soon who they picked."

"I gave it my all. It will be the best Open House Aroostook has ever seen."

"Are you sure? Because my ideas were pretty kick-ass." I glance at Kaitlyn to see if it's okay to say that word on television, and she nods.

"Want to place a side bet on it?"

My eyebrows furrow. "Like what?" I ask slowly, trying to figure out his game.

"Loser has to help the winner out with the Open House."

Relieved at what he proposed, I agree without thought. I'm sure I've won. When I see King's eyes catch Kaitlyn's, though, I realize this was an "ask" of the show. Whatever. I still got this.

We don't have to wait long before the Maguires stride back into the family room and resume their positions on the couch. My breathing accelerates, and I rub my now-damp palms on my skirt. *Keep it together, Angie.*

"We want to thank both of you for coming here today," Tessa begins. "We appreciated your very different approaches to the Open House."

Liam takes over. "We discussed it, and we've decided to go with Angie."

I refrain from doing a happy dance in my chair and don't even make one little whoop, although I'm doing both in my head. I do, however, stand up to shake hands with them, thank them for placing their trust in me, and promise to do everything I can to sell their house quickly.

King sits in his chair, his face a mask of polite positivity. *Ha.* Score one for the Brooklyn girl. Now to keep this winning streak up and take home the big, fat bonus check.

## KING



**T**he past days have been busy, what with helping Angie prepare for the Maguires' Open House and filming another contest, which I won. Unfortunately, I had no time to gloat since the only agents here are Angie and me, and we've had to handle everything from social media posts to ordering food for the event. I might have lost the contest for the Open House, but I'm secretly glad I get to help her with it. I've never participated in anything like this before, and it's new and exciting and frustrating all at once. I'll never let on how much I'm enjoying this work. After all, it *is* work—something I don't do.

When I'm packing it up to head to the weekly party at my condo building, Marlene jumps to her feet, purse around her shoulder. "All right, lady and gent. It's the second Thursday of the month, so you know what that means!"

Um, no. I don't. I look to Angie, who's bending down to pick up her purse. Her ass in the air derails all my thoughts until she straightens and faces me. "Come on, King. You deserve a break—it's time for you to get a taste of fun, Romano-style."

Callie, in all of her blonde glory, will be at the rooftop tonight. I swallow and take in my co-star's excited grin and

her outfit of an oversized button-down over capris. She really is adorable. *In an off-limits, pixie sort of way.* Although she isn't technically married anymore...

The apartment building will be throwing another party next week. Tossing my pen down on the desk, I shrug and join them at the registration desk. "Where are we going?"

"To a club about fifteen minutes from here," Marlene explains. "It's cousins' night—a guaranteed riot." The three of us stroll toward the door. "I'm picking up my husband and we'll meet you there."

"Sure thing." Angie locks up. "You can ride with me, King."

No one really asked if I wanted to go—it was sort of assumed—but I find I like the assumption. So I just follow Angie into her car. When she turns onto Main Street, I can't contain my curiosity any longer. "What's so special about this place?"

Her smile transforms her face in a way that makes me suck in my breath. "Francesco found it ages ago. It's only the best karaoke you'll ever find."

Oh, hell no. My all-time worst nightmare. I have avoided karaoke like the plague for years, ever since my father told me my voice sucks.

"Oh, God." Impulsively, I lean forward and turn on the radio. A Hunte song is playing. Seriously? Aren't there any other bands on this fucking planet? I groan and shut it off.

Angie licks her lips. "I guess it sucks not being able to get away from him. When did your parents split up?"

For some reason, words spill from my mouth. "When I was five, but he really wasn't around much before that

anyway. My guess is he figured out my mother's number, but Mom says he cheated on her—and I wouldn't put it past him."

"That stinks."

I turn my head away from her and continue. "Well, back then, he wasn't the big star he is today—he had to go on tour if he wanted to make any money. Still, he had time off, and he sure lived it up. I remember getting my hands on a magazine Mom threw out that showed him in Ibiza with a bunch of women, partying it up." I try to laugh, but it sounds more like a whimper. Turning my head back to her, I finish my thought. "Some role model."

Angie's not looking at me, but a quick glance tells me her eyes have a sheen. "I'll say."

Now that the floodgates have opened, I can't stop. "Dad would show up at the house every so often, like for my birthday. Sometimes his band would put on a mini-concert, which was the best. The kids in my class would all come to hear them, and I'd be the big man around school for a while. But then he got remarried, the band made a huge resurgence, and I got older. The concerts sort of fizzled out."

"Didn't he have visitation? Did you ever go on vacation with him?"

"He lived in Chicago, so visitation was limited to holidays. I got to know his wife and their daughter mainly through the magazines. He didn't really want a reminder of his failed marriage tagging along with his new, perfect family, so when I hit my teenage years, I decided I didn't want to go anymore." I shrug.

She parks under a sign that reads "Sing-A-Longs" and turns to me. "King, I didn't know it was that bad. Even after

what you told me on our way to the beach.”

I force a smile. “It’s way in the past now.” I’m not sure which I hate more, re-living all my shitty baggage or singing karaoke. I swing my body out of Angie’s car and decide both suck.

Walking next to Angie, I try to muster up some courage for the night ahead. Maybe I can slip under the radar and not sing? After all, it sounds like a gaggle of her cousins will be around. We enter the darkened club where several stage areas, delineated by sofas and a variety of chairs, are set up. My stomach drops. This isn’t a one stage for everyone kind of situation. It means there’ll be more opportunities to sing. Not good.

She points to a group of people in an alcove across the way.

I nod. “Let me get the first round. What are you having?”

She seems startled by my question and tugs on the ends of her hair. “Can you please get me a Baileys with chocolate vodka, on the rocks?”

Her drink order surprises me—I figured she’d want some fruity drink. “Sure thing. I’ll meet you over there.” We part ways and I order her drink plus two fingers of bourbon. I’m going to need both of them. Why didn’t I go to the party at my complex again?

Taking a fortifying sip of the Pappy Van Winkle, I head over to where Angie is now surrounded by a whole bunch of people. All her relatives, I guess, although it’s anathema to me. A couple sing, off-key, while Angie claps with the rest of the group. I take the only empty seat, which is next to her.

“Hey.” I elbow her arm and pass her the dessert drink.

“Thanks.” She taps my stomach with her elbow and introduces me to her four cousins sitting near us.

The song finishes, thankfully, and the duo return to their spots. Four people to my right stand to take their turn and a muscular guy in a NYPD T-shirt, about my age, sits down in the vacated seat next to me. He inclines his beer to me. “Leo.”

I clink my glass with it. “King.”

He leans over to me. “You the one shooting with Angie?”

“Yep.” I take another sip of my bourbon. Next to me, Marlene and another woman approach Angie and pull her over to select a song. I trail their movements with my gaze.

“She’s my sister. She’s been through a lot to get to where she is. We’re all proud of her.”

My eyes swing from Angie to her brother, the hairs on the back of my neck standing to attention at the implicit threat in his tone. “We’re enjoying filming.”

Leo takes a sip from his bottle. “This isn’t a game for her. She’s putting her all into the show to get more attention for her agency.”

“It’s not a game for me, either,” I reply honestly. “Bonus is I’ve enjoyed learning about real estate.”

He nods. “What did you do before the show?”

His question brings me up short. I can’t very well say I’ve done nothing but workout, travel, and fuck. “I was unofficially in real estate. I hooked friends up with properties.” At his continued stare, I rush on, “Plus, I was an Instagrammer, getting paid by sponsors to take photos wearing their clothes and attending a variety of functions.” I hold my breath, hoping he doesn’t push any further.



The quartet ends their song and Angie's group is up next. Leo points his beer toward the stage. "Ever hear her sing before?"

I shake my head.

He grins. "You're in for a treat."

Something about his words and tone doesn't match, but my bafflement disappears when the trio starts butchering Kelly Clarkson song. Around me, all of the cousins catcall the stage.

"Oh, my." I bring my glass to my mouth to stop myself from making any additional comments about their awful caterwauling. Angie hits a particularly bad note and I flinch.

"Yep. They suck. But we love them," Leo chuckles. He shouts, "Work it, ladies!"

At least their lack of talent makes me feel more comfortable with the whole situation. Leo finishes his bottle and places it on the table. "Want to go pick a song?" He stands.

Shit. It's not like I can refuse him. I take another swig of my drink and join him at the song menu. He flips the pages, and one song jumps out at me. "That one," I point. With it, I won't have to sing too much.

Leo smirks. "You're all right, King. Yeah. Let's Do It!"

His choice of the television studio's name brings a reluctant grin to my face.

Angie's song ends, thankfully, and she high-fives the other two women on stage with her. When she passes us, she high-five's her brother's hand and—after a brief hesitation—mine. Why does her touch send a shiver screaming through my arm?

Shaking out my hand, I take my place next to Leo on the stage and the iconic music for “I’m Too Sexy” starts.

We strut around, encouraging everyone to sing with us, which they do. I make the first ridiculous “sexy” pose, and then Leo’s posing, too, and everyone’s laughing. Some of the cousins hurl lewd remarks at the stage, most of which are directed at Leo. We get into the song, and the cousins stomp their feet and cheer. I’m having so much fun I don’t feel weird about taking some liberties with the melody.

When it ends, Leo gives me a bro hug. “You’re all right in my book. Don’t let Angie get away with anything.”

“Don’t worry,” I reply to him as we vacate the stage area for the next singers.

Leo steps away to join some of his cousins, while I return to my seat. Angie wiggles her index finger at me. “You didn’t tell me you have an amazing voice, King.”

Her words land directly in my gut like a physical blow. “My voice is barely passable.” They’re the exact words my father used to describe my rendition of one of his hits during what would turn out to be my last trip to his Chicago house. I was twelve.

“No, you’re really good.”

Shaking my head, I pick up my bourbon, intending to drown out the harsh reality Braxton Hunte poured on me all those years ago. Some of Angie’s cousins offer the same praise, but none of them can convince me he was wrong. He’s Braxton Hunte. He would know.

For the rest of the evening, I smile when it’s required and make appropriate comments to the Romano clan, but my mind keeps drifting back to Chicago. Maybe that trip had been

doomed from the start. My mother had drilled it into my head that my father wouldn't want anything to do with me after he married Sara. That Sara would ensure there was no place for me in his new life. Oh, Sara tried to include me, but I continued to feel more and more isolated. Just like I feel now.

“What’s on your mind, King? I’ve been told I can be a pretty good listener.”

I blink and turn my head to see Angie sitting next to me. The others are gathering their stuff together.

I tap my finger on my empty glass. How did that happen? “Nothing.”

Marlene and her husband wave their good-byes. Leo crosses the room to hug his sister, and surprises me when he pulls out his phone and asks for my number. When I give it to him, he texts me, saying he'll be in touch about catching a game together. If I weren't so wrapped up in my own head, his offer of friendship would've sent adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Now, it's only Angie and me on the sofa. I go to stand, but she places her hand on my arm to stop me.

“Talk to me.”

I smile at her, the type of smile that always gets me out of tight spots. In response, she crosses her arms and leans back against the sofa. Guess it doesn't work with her.

Feeling trapped, I snap, “It's nothing to worry your head over. Don't you have a big Open House to prepare for?”

She crosses her leg and her foot taps in time with the song being sung by the group in the next stage area. “We still have a couple of days to prepare.” She leans forward. “Let me in,

King.” Her foot sways with the music and her head dips. “You already saw me at my lowest point.”

Watching her puke her guts up on the beach where she married her teenaged husband qualifies as her low point, I guess. Hers was a totally different situation. She was in love with the guy who stole her heart forever. I was a dumb kid who smartened up. “It’s not the same thing.”

“Then tell me.”

I reach out for my Pappy, only to remember my glass is empty. “It’s nothing. I don’t sing often. If ever.”

“I don’t understand why you wouldn’t. Your voice is wonderful. I’m surprised you’re not out on tour with your father.”

A harsh sound escapes my lips. “As if.”

She cocks her head. “Has he ever heard you sing? I would think he’d be excited to add his son to his band.”

“No and no. Well, yes and no.”

“Which is it?”

I run my hand over my stubble, finding solace in the tiny pricks of pain. “I sang one of his hits when we were on a family vacation. I’d practiced it for months. He didn’t find my voice to be very, shall we say, endearing.”

“How old were you?”

“Twelve.”

“Oh my God! You hadn’t even hit puberty yet!”

No one ever stands up for me. Her righteous indignation for me widens the little crack in my heart she opened that day on the beach—the one next to Diego’s spot.

“Thanks, but my father knows real talent when he hears it.”

“I’m going to give him a big piece of my mind on Sunday.”

Now it’s my turn to give her a quizzical look. My voice lowers. “What are you talking about, Angie?”

She leans forward, away from the back of the sofa. “Kaitlyn didn’t tell you? The show is going to tape us at Hunte’s concert at Jones Beach on Sunday night, after the Open House.”

“What?” That one word is so loud and sharp it would’ve ricocheted around the room if it weren’t for the various karaoke machines in use. My hands form into fists.

She looks at them, her mouth pursuing. “I thought you knew.”

I extend my fingers and smooth them over my khakis. “I’ll talk with Kaitlyn about this in the morning. Right now, suffice it to say my dad and I are not on speaking terms.”

Her finger circles the rim of her empty glass. “Maybe you could use the concert as an opportunity to talk it out?”

I’m shaking my head before she even finishes the sentence. “No. I got caught doing something stupid and he cut me out of his life. End of story.”

“But he’s your father,” she says, her tone sweet and earnest. “Families have to stick together, even if someone does something dumb. My brothers and I fight like crazy, but when the chips are down, there’s no one else I’d want at my back. I know things haven’t been like that between you and your dad...maybe they could be, though.”

Her words make me want to reach out and hug her and throttle her at the same time. I fold my hands on my lap. “I know you mean well, but I’m not going to see Hunte. Not now. Or ever again. I *will* talk with Kaitlyn.”

The server comes to collect our glasses. I glance at Angie, and figure what the hell? “We’ll each have a White Russian to close out the night.”

Angie’s mouth opens, but then she shrugs, which surprises me. I expected her to at least object to my drink selection. Our drinks arrive a couple of minutes later.

Holding up her glass to mine, she says, “Here’s to a successful Open House.”

I clink my glass to hers and take a sip. And another. Why not? I’m not driving tonight. Leaning back, I stretch my arm around the back of the sofa, which happens to be behind her. She shifts in her seat, remaining silent.

Instead of dwelling on my father or my childhood, I focus on her. One thing she said when we were on our way to the Maguires’ the other day has been nagging at me. “So tell me, do you really believe in soul mates?”

Her eyes widen before half-closing. “Oh, I do. My grandparents and my parents prove it.”

“So, in your mind, we only have one shot at love?”

She smiles at my phrasing. “There’s a saying for it in my family. A perfectly matched pair forever.”

“I stand by what I said before. That’s a very romantic notion.”

She brings the glass up to her lips. “Well, I do know not everyone is lucky enough to find their soul mate, but I believe

that's how it should be for the fortunate who do." She drinks and some cream sticks to her upper lip.

I reach out and remove it with my index finger. She smiles when I show it to her. The moment is so intimate, it captures me completely. I'm not thinking about my father. Or about soul mates. Or about her beloved Dante. I'm not thinking about the fact she's a romantic and I'm decidedly not.

No. I'm letting the tiny crack in my heart rule me.

Cupping my hand around her shoulders, I pull her forward and bring our lips together. It's a soft exploration. Her lips are soft and puffy, like untouched clouds. *Untouched clouds?* I deepen the kiss, pulling her willing body against mine.

Something explodes within me.

I extend my tongue and trace the seam of her lips, which part. Enjoying her offer, I slip inside. A low moan rumbles from her throat.

Then suddenly she's pushing away from me. With a horrified look on her face, she slaps my cheek. My hand rushes up to cover the spot where her hand made contact as she grabs her purse and runs through the club like the devil himself was claiming her.

I lean against the sofa, letting the atmosphere of the club wash over me in discordant songs. Sniffing the air, I catch a whiff of the floral scent she left behind. An errant thought crosses my mind: *Angie Russo, you're mine.*

Followed by a more practical one: *Better order an Uber.*

## ANGIE



“**B**ut Juliana, we *kissed*.” I wring my hands as I walk around the furniture in my living room. “His lips touched mine.”

“I know what a kiss is, and I’m happy for you.”

His kiss has been haunting me ever since Thursday night. Why had I thought talking with my sister about this would be a good idea? “You don’t get it.”

“No. I don’t. You know what I think about your soul mate idea, Angie. It works for Mama because our father is *alive*. And Nonna was with Nonno for *over sixty years*. She’s not interested in moving on because she’s in her eighties, for God’s sake. Dante, may he rest in peace, has been gone for a decade and you’re barely thirty years old. You still have more than—I don’t know—fifty, sixty years ahead of you. You can’t be tied to someone you were married to for two years.”

“It’s not like that and you know it. I loved Dante.” I suck in my breath. “Love. I love him. To this day.” I swipe tears off my cheeks.

Over the phone, my sister’s voice gentles. “I know you love him, honey. He loved you too. Yet, he wanted you to move on after he passed. Isn’t that what he wrote as the last item on your Bucket List?”



I move my feet faster around my small apartment. This is something she only mentions when she's bringing out the big guns. "Don't mention that to me again."

"Sit down, Angie. I know you're making a rut in your apartment."

"Fine." I stop in place and settle onto a stool that's tucked under the kitchen peninsula. However, my breathing doesn't calm.

"Now listen to your big sister. I love you. I also loved Dante. He was a good man, who was taken from us much too soon. That being said, he's gone. And King is here."

At the mention of my co-star's name, I snort. "He's a playboy."

"Who kissed you. Who, might I add, you kissed back."

"Did not," I reply without too much force. Because, God help me, I did.

She ignores me and continues, "I'm not saying you have to marry the man. But he's hot as hell."

I rap on the peninsula. It's not only his looks, though. He's been dedicated to the agency, working hard to learn the real estate business. Plus, he opened up to me in a way I never imagined he would. His childhood...

Through the phone, Juliana continues, "You need to get out. Live a little. Do something totally wild. Break free. Dante loved you because you had a zest for life. He wouldn't recognize the shell of a woman you've become."

Leave it to Juliana to tell it like she sees it, no matter how harsh.

I jump off my stool, which crashes onto the floor. “How dare you! I’m successful. I’m making a name for my real estate company. It’s hard work.”

A beat of silence stretches between us. “All I’m saying is you need to reengage with life. If King wants to be the man to reintroduce you to the land of the living, you should grab him and hold on. He looks like he could rock your world. And honey, you really need to be rocked.”

Although she’s been urging me to move on for a while now, for some reason her words strike home this time. Maybe it’s because she’s never dared to be this direct before. Maybe it’s because of that kiss. Even so, I’m not ready to think about it. “Thanks for your advice. I have to get out to the Open House.” I disconnect the call before she can dispense any more “sisterly wisdom.”

The apartment is quiet except for the chiming of the grandfather clock Dante and I received from his parents for our wedding. They knew he was sick, of course, but they gave us this gift as a reminder to cherish every moment we had together.

I right the stool and walk into my bedroom. Besides my sister and the delivery people who set up my bed and dresser, I’m the only person who’s ever been in here. The loneliness of the thought pulses within me as I open the nightstand drawer and pull out the Bucket List. This time, I skip all the other items and unfold the bottom of the page, the part of the list that always remains folded. There it is, scrawled in Dante’s oversized handwriting:

**A**ngie gets married again, has babies, and lives a full life of adventure for the both of us—with my blessing

Crying, I fold it back over and tuck it into the drawer.

*I can't do this, Dante. You're my soul mate. No one else will ever take your place.*

King's lips on mine felt electrifying.

“What should I do, Dante?” The last item on the Bucket List item mocks me. He *wanted* me to move on. But if I move on, it'll be like admitting he wasn't my soul mate and he's never coming back. It'll be like saying he doesn't matter to me anymore, and that'll never, ever be true.

I grab a tissue and wipe away my tears, only to realize my makeup is now a total disaster. Heading into my tiny bathroom, I fix up what I can. The show's makeup department will have to do more work on me than usual.

Exhaling a deep breath, I put King out of my mind. His lips and tongue—which were like a little slice of heaven—don't figure into my life. He wants to learn real estate? Well, I'm going to show him how things are really done by throwing an epic Open House today.

I'm putting the final paperwork that I reviewed last night into my briefcase when a knock sounds at the front door of my apartment. Juliana. She must've driven like a bat out of hell to get over here so quickly. Well, too bad. I don't want to see her. From inside the apartment, I say, “Juliana, I'm not—”

A baritone voice rings through the door. “It's not Juliana. It's me, King.”

My heart jumps into my throat. *King*. What is he doing here? “Go away.”

He bangs on my door again. I back up two steps even though he can't see me, wrapping my arms around my middle while shaking my head from side to side.

“I'm here to take you to the Open House.”

“I can drive myself.” The show wanted to send me in a limo, but I turned them down because of the signs and other stuff I'll need for the day. Not to mention distance from the man on the other side of the door.

“Come on, Angie. Open up.”

He's not going to leave until I answer the door, but I'm not about to invite him inside, so I gather all my things before opening it. Waiting a beat, I slip out, giving him my back as I lock up. When I'm done, I square my shoulders and face him. “Let's go.”

A smile crosses his kissable lips—ones I've now tasted and know to be as breathtaking as they appear—and I scurry around his frame to bound down the stairs. I need to be far away from my co-star. Entering the main office, which is empty, I make a beeline to my desk to pick up the brochures for the Open House. After stuffing them into my briefcase, I review the checklist on my desk to make sure I have everything. Satisfied, I stride toward the door, very aware of King's silent presence right behind me.

Once I put a sign saying we're attending to an Open House on the door, I lock up and start toward the parking lot, my car key in hand. King, who's been silent this whole time, says, “I'll let you drive, but I'd like to ride over with you, if you don't mind. I did everything you asked of me and wanted to talk about some of your strategies.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. He hasn't mentioned the kiss, not once since it happened. It must've meant nothing to him. Plus, he's entitled to the benefit of my education and experience. *Crap.*

"Fine." He tries to take my briefcase from me, but I increase my speed. He doesn't object; he simply stays in line with me.

Settled in the car—Open House signs in the trunk—I wait a second for him to buckle his seat belt before getting on the road. "We have to make a stop at The Fiesta Depot before we head over to the Maguires'."

"What do you need from there?"

"Helium balloons for the signs." When he tilts his head, I add, "To draw attention to the Open House. We'll also put them on the mailbox to let everyone know which house is on the market."

"Oh, right. Makes sense." I pull into the store's parking lot. "Want me to go get them?"

I'm exhausted and the day hasn't started yet. "Thanks. I paid for them already, so you only have to pick them up. They're red and white. Under Russo Real Estate." He nods and opens the door. My eyes trail his muscular backside, clad in a pair of black trousers, as he makes his way to the store.

*Stop it, Angie!*

This man, King, kissed me and I slapped him for his trouble. We have to find a more even keel, especially since we can't feasibly avoid each other. When he returns and puts the balloons into the backseat for the ride, I let him get settled and say, "King. Let's forget what happened Thursday night, all right?"

He rubs his stubble, which looks more perfect today than yesterday, if that's even possible. Not that I should be noticing any of this. "You made me actually enjoy karaoke. I'll never forget that."

No mention of the kiss. Yep. Must've been forgettable to him. I pull into traffic. "Well, you do have a great voice."

His large hand strums on his knee. "I guess I can carry a tune."

Despite my thoughts being so scattered—or maybe because of it—I let out a giggle. "Much better than me, that's for sure."

He makes a noise somewhere approaching a snort. "Sorry, Angie. You really should stick with real estate."

For once, I can't argue with him. "So, what questions do you have about today's Open House?"

King peppers me with insightful questions about my plan. He really *does* seem interested in real estate.

When we're five minutes out, I ask, "Tell me, King, are you really into real estate or are you simply passing the time?"

His hand, which had been resting on his thigh, strums his knee again. "If you'd asked me that question a month ago, I would've called you crazy. After taking the test and being in the field for a little while, I have to admit I'm intrigued."

"It's an exciting field. You get to help families achieve the future they want, whether they're looking to start a family, retire, or find a new home base. There's no other feeling like it in the world."

I pull over to the curb at a location a strategic distance from the mansion and put out a sign advertising the Open

House, tying a couple of balloons to it.

When I return to the car, King faces me, a smile on his oh-too handsome face. “I can tell you love this.”

My body relaxes as I lean into his words. “I do. It’s the best profession in the world.”

I finish the drive to the Maguires’ and put my blinker on to turn into the driveway, stopping at the turnoff to put out another sign, bedecked with the rest of the balloons. Returning to the car, I pick up our conversation. “Take this place. Before, it was happy on the inside and forbidding on the outside.” I point to the new window boxes and the flowers planted along the driveway. “I know you were against adding the flowers, but doesn’t this place look so much warmer now?”

King surveys the landscaping, which was done to my specifications. The bright colors diffuse the formality of the property. He turns his head to study me. “You know, you’re right. I loved the way the house looked when we first came here, but these touches really do echo what’s going on inside.”

I beam at his praise. “I’m hoping this will bring in the right buyers.”

I grab my briefcase from the backseat, and we make our way to the front door. Tessa opens it before I can knock. “So glad to see you. They’ve been here for at least an hour and all I want to do is get out.”

I peek inside, and sure enough, the show’s crew mills around. Juggling all my paperwork for today’s showing, I reach out and clasp her hand. “Don’t you worry. I’ve got this.”

She nods and ushers us into the house. From the foyer, I nod at King. “Let’s start right in here.” We put all our stuff down on the table and I turn to Tessa. “Why don’t you and Gil

go out and enjoy this glorious day? Hit the beach or do some shopping. We'll be done around four."

Gil walks up in time to catch my last remark. "Thank you, Angie. We'll leave you to it." Which means I'm officially in charge of the largest mansion I've ever been inside, with a bunch of television show people, caterers, and one semi-clueless co-star. Taking a deep breath, I begin the preparations.



**W**ith only thirty minutes left, I shake the last group of prospective buyers' hands. Open Houses always take a lot out of me, but this one has been the hardest, hands down. The sheer size of the property combined with all the extra people—including musicians—has been nerve-racking. Everyone's commented on the beauty of the property, and the strolling violinists have proven a favorite, but no one has asked to make a follow-up appointment.

On the bright side, I handed out my card to every one of the people who came through. Hopefully, I can snag one or two of them as new buy-side clients.

"No takers, huh?" King looks as bedraggled as I feel.

"Not yet. But there's still time."

"After which we have to go see Hunte," he grumbles.

Guess he lost that battle with Kaitlyn, as I suspected he would. I place my hand on his bicep—above where his tribal armband tattoo lies beneath this shirt. "I'm sorry. Maybe things will be different this time?"

He scoffs. "Only if you have a miracle in your back pocket. Maybe if you sell this house today, I'll take it as a



good omen.”

A few weeks ago, I might have assumed he was mocking me, but now I hear the hurt underlying his words. *Damn it*. I can't stifle my need to help him heal the rift with his family.

We're both brought out of our heads when the front door flies open and Milo rushes forward to capture the newest prospective buyers on camera. Showtime again. I cross the foyer, hand outstretched to the group of five people walking into the foyer. “Hello, and welcome to Views of the Ocean. My name is Angie Russo, and I'm the listing agent. And this is my, er, colleague, King Hunte.”

The parents introduce themselves and their three children, who range in age from eight to thirteen. Perfect for this house. Although the eldest daughter gives King the once-over. Twice. The attention she gives him reminds me of the celebrity crushes I had at that age, and I can't contain my small smile as I start the tour.

The wife and eldest son seem really into the house, which encourages me to ramp up my campaign in a very low-key sort of way. A delicate balance, to be sure, but it seems to be working.

After touring all the bedrooms and the pool and gardens outside, we end up in the kitchen, where chocolate chip cookies await. Although we have catered plenty of delicacies today, I firmly believe there's nothing so comforting as a warm chocolate chip cookie. These are hot from the oven, and the concept is elevated by the accompanying shot glasses of milk. The whole family partakes.

The father, a Chief Financial Officer for a big firm in New York City, pulls me aside. “I can tell that my wife and kids

love this place.” He consults the brochure I handed to him at the door. “It’s on the market for five million.”

I nod, my spidey-senses jumping into gear. Could he be about to make an offer?

“That seems fair, especially with the heliport. How about this? I can pay you in cash in three weeks so long as you don’t tell my family. I want it to be a surprise for when the kids finish their schoolyear.”

His words don’t compute. Full asking price? In cash? I blink five times and swallow, aware of Milo hovering. I lean forward. “That sounds great. I’ll need to double-check with the Maguires to be sure they can be out in three weeks, but assuming they’re flexible, you have a deal. Are you working with an agent?”

“No. We saw your ad online.”

Warmth spreads throughout my body. They will now be one-hundred percent Russo Real Estate buyers! Suppressing my excitement, I open my leather portfolio and hand him a Buyer’s Agreement and an offer document. “You’ll have to sign some paperwork today”—I pretend to zip my lips—“but I can keep your secret.”

“Great.”

*Oh. My. God.* This never happens to me. Ever. Full asking price, *in cash*? I do a small fist pump out of his eyeshot. He takes the paperwork into the family room, while I return to the rest of the family.

Shortly, I catch sight of the father lingering near the entrance to the kitchen. I excuse myself and take the documents from him in a covert move that would have made James Bond proud. As he makes his way back to his family, I

do a quick look, and yup, it's all there. I slip them into my portfolio and return to the group.

Smiling, I ask, "Does anyone have any more questions about the property?"

When they all shake their heads, King and I lead the family through the house and out the front door. When it closes behind them, I rest my back against it, savoring the way the solid wood grounds me. My mind reels from the largest sale I've ever made—possibilities for my slice of the commission dance in my brain

King crosses his arms over his chest. "The Open House is officially over. Too bad we didn't get an offer, but I think we certainly made a splash."

Not moving an inch, I whisper, "I sold it."

Milo grins as he films King doing a double-take. "What?"

Pushing away from the door, I stride up to him and pull out the signed offer. "Sold. Full asking price. In cash."

King snatches the document out of my hands and studies it. "I can't believe it. But he didn't say anything."

I smile and pluck the paper out of his hands, returning it to my portfolio. "The husband is surprising them. It's a gift for when school gets out."

A huge smile overtakes his face and I'm struck by how genuine it is—and by how absolutely gorgeous he is. "That's great, Angie! Congratulations!"

He envelopes me in a hug so tight all the air leeches from my body. Yup. That's the only reason my breathing has bottomed out. My body's reaction has nothing at all to do with

the way his muscular arms feel against my back, or how his broad chest rubs against my front.

Nothing. At. All.



Milo and the camera crew set up a respectful distance from us and start filming. Next to me, King fusses with his cuffs, which are perfect. The limo dropped us off about fifteen minutes ago—Kaitlyn thought our arrival should make a “splash”—and even though we’re backstage, we haven’t seen the band yet.

I need to get him out of his head. “Wow. Look at how packed the beach is.” The Jones Beach stage is in a pavilion built right on the edge of the ocean.

King peers out onto the crowd. “My father knows how to pack them in.”

So much for that. It’s my turn to play with the hem of the overly-revealing dress Shelley gave me to wear tonight. Suddenly, the lights in the auditorium drop and the crowd goes wild. Electricity zings through my body. I steal a glance at King, who remains stoic.

I hear them before I see them. The musicians banter as they head to the stage, only we’re right in their path.

“Hey, King? That you? Heard you might to be here tonight!”

Both of our heads swivel as a tall guy with dark brown eyes and short brown hair approaches us. I suck in my breath, but King smiles. “Uncle Colton!”

Colton pulls him into a big bear hug and I have to jump so as not to be hit by the bass guitar strapped around his body. As soon as the bassist lets him go, Ricky and Lex, the drummer and keyboardist for Hunte, grab him for hugs. I keep myself firmly in the background to give them their moment. King seems happy.

That happiness is chased away when Braxton—my first celebrity crush, in the flesh—appears. Even pushing his mid-fifties, this man still lives up to all the hype about his charisma. King certainly comes from a superior gene pool. Truth is, he's actually better looking than his father was at his age, but no way I'd confess this to him. Or anyone.

King's ego doesn't need any stroking.

“Son?”

King's chin lifts. “Hi, Dad.”

The two men embrace. Well, they sort of touch their arms around each other in an awkward way nowhere near as exuberant as the hugs King shared with the other members of the band. I hope Milo didn't catch that. The audience starts chanting “Hunte!”

“Well, we'd better go and give them what they want,” Braxton says.

“Can't let your fans down,” King replies.

I bite my bottom lip.

Braxton turns away, although I can see his shoulders rising and falling as if on a big sigh. He shakes his head and shouts, “Ready, guys?”

“Hell, yes!” the three other men in the band reply, and they sail out onto the stage.

The concert is amazing. I can't stop myself from dancing and singing as Hunte performs right in front of us. They're like a well-oiled machine, knowing when to pump up the crowd and dial it back for maximum effect.

Every so often, though, Braxton glances at King as if to assure himself his son's still there.

At the end, Braxton takes the mic. "Thank you, Jones Beach!" The band leaves the stage, stripping off their instruments and shirts, which roadies replace with new ones. Even though they're no longer the hotshot younger set, I have to hand it to them—they all sport killer bods.

"King," Braxton calls out.

He stiffens next to me. "Yeah?"

"Want to come out with us during the encore?"

Under his breath, he mutters, "And do what? Stand there like a dumbass?" He shakes his head. "Nah, you go do your thing."

Braxton gives him a thumbs up and Hunte returns to the stage.

I turn to King. "That was nice of him."

King's biceps flex. "Whatever. He wanted to show off to the world that he has a son. Hard pass."

That's not how I heard it. Seeing them together, I suspect King's father actually loves him—only he's not sure how to show it. They don't know how to be together, but that's something they can learn. Still, it's not the time to say so. I return my attention to the stage and enjoy the rest of the performance. The audience screams as Hunte leaves the stage after their encore. They're ushered through a back exit.

“That was a great concert,” I say, glancing up at King to see his reaction. “Their songs are timeless.”

“Yeah.”

I nudge him. “Come on, you must’ve enjoyed some of it.”

He shrugs. Maybe it’s the Italian in me, but I need to help clear the air between him and his father. Family is important, and I want King to have even a slice of what I have.

Knowing we’re still being filmed, I say, “Let’s go to the afterparty.” Kaitlyn arranged for us to attend.

King’s cheeks hollow. He’s not happy about this, but I know—deep down—he wants a connection with his father. Not letting him stew any longer, I grab his hand and head toward the same door that Hunte disappeared through. Somewhere around the one-minute mark, I realize I’m holding King’s hand and drop it. He continues to follow me anyway.

We enter the backroom. Food and drinks are set up along the sides, and people—mostly over fifty but some of them our age or younger—mill around. The band’s across the way.

I search for some hook to reel King in. “Have you talked to your dad about doing the show?”

“No.”

“He must be so proud.”

“Doubt it.”

Braxton really has done a number on his son. I want to give the blond older man a swift kick in the butt. Both of them, actually. These two need to talk it out. King remains in place, but his chest moves faster with each intake of breath.

The band's bassist walks over to us, giving King another hug. "How are you doing?"

"I'm good, Uncle Colton. You sounded great up there."

"Thanks." He turns his intense gaze on me and I melt just a little bit. Wow. He's got this whole rockstar thing going on, but the kindness in his eyes reminds me of my uncles. "And who did you bring with you?"

Next to me, King jumps. "This is my colleague, Angie Russo. Angie, this is Colton Frontage, the best bassist ever."

I offer my hand, but he pulls me in for a hug. Stage sweat is real, but he's the genuine article, so I don't mind. Plus, he gives good hugs.

Colton pulls back and addresses King. "So, I want to know all about your TV show."

Before either one of us can respond, Braxton walks over. He's much shorter than both Colton and King. His son stands straighter, as if to prove something with his height.

Colton nods at me. "King introduced me to Angie here."

All of their attention focuses on me for a moment. "Hi, I'm Angie Russo, King's co-star," I offer, extending my hand.

Unlike his bandmate, Braxton settles for a handshake, although his eyes skewer King in place. It strikes me that their eyes are exactly the same. Neither one of them breaks their silent stand-off. Shit. Maybe I was wrong about them.

"Yeah, about that. You didn't tell me you were working on a reality television show." The word reality has a derisive undertone. "I had to find out from the execs."

Finally, King speaks. "I needed a job, didn't I?" he asks with plenty of bite. "But it's not only a show. I've been



working with Angie at her agency, and I took the New York real estate exam. Still waiting on my results.”

“Oh,” his father replies, surprise and pride warring in his voice.

“He studied for the test in record time,” I contribute. Needing to bolster his *bona fides*, I add, “Plus, he’s doing great work at my office.”

Braxton tugs on his ear, yet his expression remains skeptical. “Impressive. Doing something for others for a change.” Ouch. His eyes bounce from my left hand back up to my face. “Has he closed any deals yet?”

I cover my wedding rings with my right hand. “Well, he’s only been with us for a short time, but he’s ahead in the contests we’re doing for the show.”

King clears his throat. “I’m not sure whether anyone told you, but Blaine’s the driving force behind the show.”

Braxton squints. “Good kid. Unlike that other one.” He pauses. “Are you keeping clean?”

*Clean?* King’s never done any drugs around me.

King’s entire frame stiffens and he raises his chin. “Don’t worry about me.”

A man who introduces himself as Keith Davis, their manager, interrupts to say the band’s needed for an interview. Braxton looks at King. “We have to go. Can you guys stick around?”

I’m about to tell him yes when King responds, “No. We have some post-production work to do.”

First I’ve heard of that.

Braxton's lips rise into a sad smile. He moves in to hug King good-bye, but King steps back. Braxton stills. "See you." He waves at me and spins on his heel to follow his tour manager.

Colton puts his hand on King's shoulder and whispers something in his ear. Then he looks at me and says, "Nice meeting you, Angie. Take care. Of both of you." After hugging us, Colton catches up with the two other men, slinging his arm over Braxton's shoulders.

In a move that's reminiscent of his father's, King turns on his heel and strides toward the exit. I rush to keep up with him, but his long legs eat up more pavement than mine. He stops in front of the network's limo.

Panting, I approach the vehicle. His features are carved in stone, with the side of his cheek moving in and out as he bites the inside. Taking measured steps, I place my hand on his forearm. "King."

Tortured eyes meet mine. "That was worse than I thought it would be. I can't imagine what the show is going to do with that footage."

Honestly? I didn't find Braxton to be an ogre at all. Whatever happened in the past, he seems to want to reach out to his son. I keep my thoughts to myself. King's in too much pain right now. On instinct, I pull him in for a hug.

King wraps his arms around me and pulls me in tight. His body shudders, but he doesn't make a sound. We remain locked in the embrace until I take half of a step back and run my hand down the side of his face.

"I'm sorry you feel rejected by him."

"You saw how he treats me."

Placing my other hand on his opposite cheek, I bring his head down to mine and kiss his forehead. “Things will get better.” I need to show him he’s misconstruing his father’s words, but he’s not ready to hear it. He’ll walk away from me if I say it now, and I need him to listen. How can I make him see the truth?

He looks at me with the cocky grin I’ve come to know so well. “Yeah. I’m going to beat you on the show.”

“You wish!” The limo driver opens the car door for us and we slide in. “You know,” I say, dipping my toe, “he seemed interested in your new career path.”

“Ha! Don’t let that act fool you. You heard how he said the word ‘reality.’” He plays with the remote for the front divider, leaving it up. “My family life is fucked up, Angie. It’s never going to be anything else.”

Wanting to soothe him, I blurt, “Why don’t you come to Saturday dinner with my family this week? You already know Leo and Juliana. Maybe it’ll lighten your spirits.” I should feel funny about inviting him to dinner, but for some reason I don’t. He needs a good dose of family life.

No other reason.

He turns big amber eyes on me. Ones uncannily like his father’s. “Really?”

I shrug, as if it’s no biggie. Perhaps it’s not. My siblings have invited other people, although I haven’t brought anyone since Dante died. “Sure.”

His hand lands on mine. “I’d like that.”

The limo barrels toward Aroostook, streetlights dimly illuminating the interior of the limo. Mainly, though, we’re in shadows.

After a few miles, King says, “Angie, tonight’s been rough. My father has no use for me. I can see that now more than ever, but I had fun anyway. Because I was with you.”

I believe he’s wrong about his dad, but I don’t want to shut him down, so I simply say, “I enjoyed myself, too.”

He squeezes my hand. “Can you be my family?”

My breath catches. The question is playful, but a thread of seriousness runs through it. I respond the same way. “I don’t know, King. Half the time I want to throttle you.”

His lips curve upward. “I’ve heard that’s how families work.”

Thinking of my siblings, I reply, “I guess you have a point.”

His hand reaches for my face and his finger lifts my chin up. My mouth parts and I lick my bottom lip.

“Kissing cousins?”

His face approaches mine, and stops. A question is in his eyes—he’s not going to do this if I don’t want him to. I swallow and my throat constricts. God help me, I *do* want this. I need to feel his lips on mine again. For a quick second. My eyelids flutter shut.

King’s mouth covers mine in a sweet caress, barely touching mine. Making me want more. Maybe it would be all right if we kiss for a little while longer?

When I don’t pull back, his lips press harder against mine, moving in a rhythm I’m starting to learn. To crave. His hands remain on my shoulders, never moving. Giving me the space I need.

But I don’t need space.

I let my tongue reach out to his lips, which part immediately. His tongue enters my mouth and dances with mine. Still, his hands never leave my shoulders. I could kiss him like this forever. Was it ever like this with Dante?

*Dante.*

My body goes rigid and I break away from King. How could I have betrayed my soul mate again? Juliana's words filter through my brain, telling me to live again, and the last item on the Bucket List dances through my thoughts. But I'm not ready. I never will be.

King stares at me, and when the limo stops in front of his apartment complex, he presses his forehead to mine. "Thank you for making tonight bearable." With one more kiss on my cheek, he slips out the door.

I collapse back, ignoring the view out the windows on the ride home, my mind consumed with Dante and King and Braxton.

And those kisses.

# KING



I pull into the parking lot and shut off the engine. In my head, I replay the show's latest competitions—both of which Angie won. Now we're tied. But tonight isn't about the show. It's about a word that's foreign to my vocabulary. Family.

My head hits the headrest. I actually sort of enjoyed karaoke night with her cousins last week. Her brother, Leo, is cool. Where we're headed now, though, won't have the distractions of a club. Plus, her parents and grandmother will be there. I swallow. Hard. I've never made the best impression on anyone's parents, including my own.

How many men has Angie brought to these Saturday dinners since Dante died? It's been ten years, so probably quite a few.

My mind settles on Dante for a minute. What did he look like? What was he like? I have no frame of reference, but I want to know more about the man who was so important to Angie. I bet I can get some info out of her sister or mother today. Leo's not the sharing type.

The door to the agency opens, startling me out of my thoughts. Angie locks up and heads toward my car. She's wearing a turquoise tank top over white capris, with wedges

on her feet. Sucking in my breath, I scramble out of the car to meet her. Kissing her cheek, I say, “Hi, beautiful.”

“Hey.” A rosy blush rises up her neck.

Her reaction, while adorable, strikes me as a bit unusual for such an obviously experienced woman. Even though I’ve only stolen a few more kisses since that night in the limo, her kisses affect me more than any other woman’s. Shrugging off the thought, I escort her into the car and plug her parents’ address into my GPS. Needing a distraction from all the exposed skin on her arms, I ask, “Tell me about your family.”

Angie’s face transforms when she talks. “It’s Saturday dinner, so everyone will be there. Nonna, my grandmother, will tell you stories about the Old Country and how Nonno, my grandfather, used to court her. Nonno died five years ago.”

I incline my head and she continues, “My parents will be there, of course, and all three of my siblings. The only one you haven’t met is my oldest brother, Francesco, who will come with his wife and their two kids. My sister and her husband and their son will be there too. He just turned four.”

“Sounds like a full house.”

She giggles. “You have no idea. It’s sort of organized chaos, all centered around the main attractions—food and baseball.”

A breath ripples through my body and all my unease about being around her family surfaces. I blurt, “I’ve never really done the family dinner thing before.”

Angie twists in her seat and places her hand on top of my leg, which tenses at her touch. She rubs my khakis and I relax a little. “You’ll be fine. We joke around a lot.” Her shoulders

raise in a shrug. “Think of us as a multi-generational group of friends. That’s what we are, only we’re related by blood.”

“It’s the blood I’m worried about.”

She squeezes. “Just relax and have a good time. We’re not going to bite.”

I wink. “What if I ask you to?”

Swatting my leg, she returns to her normal position and mumbles something I can’t hear. Despite my anxiousness about this afternoon—or maybe because of it—I’m looking forward to spending more time with this woman. As well as learning more insights about her from her family.



“**Y**ou can sit here, King.” Nonna—as she insisted I call her—pulls out a chair across from where Angie’s standing. Not daring to contradict this forceful sprite of a woman, I walk over to the indicated spot. She’s already regaled me with stories of her husband, some of which bordered on inappropriate, but who am I to judge?

The rest of the family fights to sit next to me. Not surprisingly, Nonna claims the chair on my left. I’m helping her get settled when Lisa, Francesco’s eight-year-old daughter, bounces into the seat to my right. With her mass of brown curls and permanent smile, she makes me feel right at home.

*Home?*

Leo passes a platter stacked with meats and cheeses to his grandmother while addressing me. “Mama went all out today, King. Antipasto, macaroni, and roast beef. We hit the trifecta.”



“I wanted him to feel welcome,” his mother protests. The rest of the family talks at once, poking fun at their mother. Me? I’m honored she went to all this trouble. No one ever has before.

Smiling at how loud it is in here, I take a couple of garlic knots and hold the basket for Lisa to select hers. She points and I put her choice on her plate, then hand the basket over her head to Francesco. While he’s far from quiet, he’s the most subdued of all the Romanos. I get the feeling he’s mentally working up a profile on me. After all, he is a hostage negotiator with the NYPD.

Shrugging aside the possibility that Angie’s eldest brother could find some skeletons in my closet, I focus on getting to know everyone. After sipping the wine I brought for her mother—a delightful red from her hometown in Italy—I sample a bit of all the food. I’m not used to homemade dinners, but this meal is better than anything I’ve had in a long, long while.

Angie’s father cuts through all the noise by asking me, “King. That’s a very regal name. Is it in your family?”

I let my fork rest on my plate. “Actually, it’s not.” I shrug. “My parents just liked it, I guess.”

The little girl sitting next to me turns her head. “I’m named after my great-aunt, Angelisa.”

Her sister, barely five, chimes in. “I’m named for my mommy’s mommy, Maria.”

And they’re off. Everyone sitting around the table tells me where they got their names. Most of them are named after relatives from previous generations. When the round-robin finishes with me, I decide to add in some humor. “I guess you

can say I got my name from England.” Everyone laughs, and an unnamed emotion washes over me.

When the meal is finished, Lucia—Angie’s mother—directs clean up. Everyone in the family gets a job. Even Lisa and Maria are given the small chores of throwing away the napkins and picking up the placemats.

But not me. I know it’s silly, but I feel left out. I approach Lucia. “What can I do?”

She shakes her head. “No, no, no. You’re our guest today. Next time, you work.”

Her response brings a wide smile to my face. So she thinks there will be a next time? I track Angie’s progress as she picks up the serving dishes, squabbling with her sister.

I raise my hands in surrender. Before I can say another word, Alfredo, the patriarch, calls me into the family room. A Yankees game is on the TV, the volume low, and he sits in a big recliner that’s obviously his throne. I choose the end of the sofa nearest him. He’s about as round as he is tall, but with a full head of graying hair and a welcoming demeanor. I like him. I like all of them.

“So tell me, King, how are you liking it on this coast? Angie told us you live in LA.”

“I actually like it a lot. I grew up in LA, but for some reason I feel more at peace here than I ever did out there. Now, don’t get me wrong, I love the weather and palm trees in California, but the people here—for the most part—are more...” I trail off. “Real.”

He nods. “We pride ourselves on authenticity. We work hard and have high expectations for ourselves and those

around us. But New Yorkers get a bad rap, I think. We're just honest." He chuckles. "Sometimes brutally so."

"I've seen some of that, too."

Alfredo places his hands on his knees and leans forward. "Glad to hear it. Here's some of that brutal honesty. What are your plans concerning my daughter?"

Surprised, but not shocked, at his question, I mirror his position. "I, uh, well—"

His brows pull together. "'Cause my baby girl endured more pain in her first twenty years than most experience in their lifetimes. I need to be sure you're not one of those flighty LA people."

Well, damn. He's certainly not mincing words. I swallow. "I haven't known Angie that long, but she's unlike anyone I've ever met," I answer truthfully. "I admire how hard she works"—he nods—"and her tenacity. She has a lot of, ah, sass."

"That she does." He clasps his hands. "You know about Dante, I presume?"

"Yeah." My ears prick up. Am I about to get more intel on Angie's first husband?

"That's good. I'm happy to hear she's finally opening up to someone again." He nods. "You're the first man she's brought to a family dinner since him."

I can't suppress my shocked reaction. "I am?"

Alfredo's brows come together again. "Yes."

I shift on the cushion. "I assumed, given how outgoing Angie is, that I wasn't the first guy she's invited here."

“No.” He leans back.

I lower my head, my eyes scanning the gleaming hardwood floor. “We’re not, ah, dating.” I slump back in the chair.

Ignoring my response, he barrels onward, “I expect you to treat her right.”

“Papa!” Angie’s voice booms through the room, ending my increasingly uncomfortable conversation with her father. In a more reasonable tone, she directs her question to me. “What are you two talking about?”

I figure I might as well be honest—see how she reacts. “You.”

Her hands land on her hips and she switches her attention to her father. “Papa, King and I aren’t dating.”

“So he told me.”

She throws her hands up in the air. “He’s not looking for anyone and neither am I.”

Next to me, her father shrugs. “Angela, I hear you.”

I let the two of them bicker while my head sorts through the fact that she hasn’t brought anyone to meet her family since Dante. Well, it’s not like I’ve *ever* brought anyone to meet my family, but I don’t have a real family to meet. My thoughts scatter when Juliana’s son and Francesco’s little girls tumble into the room and jump onto their grandfather’s lap. Angela, er Angie, takes a seat on the sofa next to me. But not too close.

When everyone moves in the room, the same dynamics from dinner resurface. Some people watch the game and cheer. Others talk in smaller groups. Angie’s now engaged with Leo,

who took the seat to her right. Stopping in front of me, Francesco tips his head. “King.”

“Francesco.” Not liking my submissive position, especially given the way he’s looking at me, I stand. Forcing a smile, I say, “Your daughters are adorable.”

He looks at his children on their grandfather’s lap, but his expression remains...intense. “My family means everything to me.” He heads toward a corner of the room, and I follow. “I’d do anything for them. *All* of them.” His words have an underlying sense of warning.

Message received. I swallow. “I, ah, really admire your sister. It’s hard to establish a new real estate agency, especially anywhere in the Hamptons, but Angie’s tough. She’s making it work.”

He props his arm on the wall next to my head and leans in. “She moved out there two years ago. Chasing the dream she and Dante had.”

*Dante.* I bet he wasn’t interrogated like this. When he doesn’t continue, I jump into the breach. “She certainly picked a great town. Aroostook is really growing on me.”

He nods. “Since you like it and all, are you thinking of staying out here once the show wraps? Or are you going back to your previous lifestyle?”

I expected overprotectiveness from her father and brothers, but *wow*. He obviously did his research. I shift my weight from foot to foot under his scrutiny. “Truthfully, had you asked me this question a month ago, I would’ve told you I’m going to leave as soon as shooting ends. But now, after taking the real estate exam and seeing how the business works, plus being around your sister, I’m changing my mind.”

His eyes narrow at my mention of Angie, and he takes a step closer to me, invading my personal space. I square my shoulders. I'm not letting a NYPD profiler get into my head, no matter if he is Angie's brother.

"Guys," Leo whacks me on the back, sending me forward. I nearly collide with Francesco but engage my core to stop the forward momentum. He gives his older brother a hard stare. "What are you two talking about?"

Francesco shrugs. "Just getting acquainted."

"We were discussing your sister's real estate agency," I supply.

Leo takes a step backward and all three of us adjust our positions to more acceptable distances. He says, "Angie's basically a one-woman show out there, with just cousin Marlene helping her. Thank God for family. When she volunteered to help with overhead, that was a godsend."

Volunteering? I frown. "You mean Marlene isn't being paid for her time?"

Leo shakes his head. "Not a salary yet. Angie throws her a bonus when a commission check comes in, though. That's why the show is so important for Angie. She thinks it will put her on the map. Lord knows, she needs this boost."

My throat clogs with emotion. This is what family means. A real family chips in to help one another. They're there for each other through thick and thin.

Angie lives above the agency to save money. Geoff, her prior agent, quit because she couldn't give him any leads. Here I was trying to make money to support my lifestyle, while she's doing the show to survive.

Our conversation ends when Lucia walks into the room. “Dessert is ready.”

The kids scream and scramble off their grandfather’s lap, running into the dining room for whatever sweets await. I let everyone pass, waiting to walk into the room with Angie. “You have quite the family.”

She smiles. “They mean well. My brothers weren’t giving you a hard time, were they?”

Knowing the full scoop on the agencies’ troubles, I’m tempted to pull her close. Tell her everything will work out. That we can do this together. The Maguires’ commission is only the first step.

And that I don’t plan on dying anytime in the next fifty years.

But I don’t voice any of my thoughts. Smiling at Angie, I reply, “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“Good.” She takes a step toward the dining room. “Let’s see what Mama has for dessert.” She giggles. “You’re going to have to do a hundred more sit-ups when she’s through with you.”

I can’t resist placing my hand on the small of her back, rubbing lightly through her turquoise shirt. “That’s one way to burn it off.” Her blush brings a smile to the expanding piece of my heart she’s claimed.

## ANGIE



“Mama, the Nutella pastries are better than usual.” I grab another one. That stupid Poppy probably wouldn’t let one of these enter her line of vision. Of course the Maguires had to be her clients—a fact I learned when I put in the offer letter—so the commission check will be shared with her agency in addition to the show’s cut. Still, the money will be a godsend. Marlene gets the first real bonus. I bite down and the hazelnut spread oozes throughout my mouth. Pure heaven. *Take that, Poppy.*

Across the table, King looks like he wants to *be* my pastry. For some perverse reason, I lick the Nutella off my finger rather than use my napkin. In response, his eyes dilate. *What am I doing?*

Juliana stands up. “Angie and I will clear the table. Mama, you go and relax with the rest of the family.” She shoos our mother toward the family room and the others follow her. I know her game. She never volunteers to clean up unless she wants to talk.

I watch King as he leaves the room with Juliana’s husband, then turn my attention to my sister. “Spill.”

She picks up the nearly empty platter. “What?” she asks innocently.



“You know what.” I steal another pastry, remembering the hungry look on King’s face. “Tell me whatever it is that you want to say so we can go watch the Yankees win.”

“Let’s hope. They were tied last time I checked.”

“All the more reason to be fast in here.”

We bring all the dishes into the kitchen, and I dump all the silverware into the dishwasher’s basket. Only then does she get around to why she wanted to do this in the first place. “I see the way King looks at you.”

I pretend I don’t. Feigning innocence, I say, “What are you talking about?”

“Marlene tells me how much he’s helping around the office. You should go for it.”

I fill the dishwasher and start washing others by hand. “We’ve been over this. Not going there.”

She turns the faucet off. “Listen, I’m not telling you to fall in love and be all hearts and flowers with this guy. You’re dead set against moving on from Dante. No more soul mates. I get it. You need to stop being such a demisexual.”

My hand stills. A *what?* “What the hell is a demisexual?”

She takes her time drying her hands on the kitchen towel and placing it back on the oven handle. “You.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“A demisexual is someone who can’t find it in themselves to be sexually attracted to someone unless they’re emotionally connected. That’s you. You’ve only ever been with Dante and you were in love.”

“Well, duh. Isn’t that how it’s supposed to work?”

She tucks her hair behind her ear, but it springs back almost immediately. “Before I got married, I dated my fair share. I wasn’t looking for forever, but I certainly wasn’t celibate.”

I’m about to scoff and walk off, but something she says hits and sticks. It’s hard to admit it, even to myself, but I miss sex. I miss physical intimacy. With another person. Clearly that’s the reason I’ve been falling all over King. “I don’t know how to separate the two,” I admit.

“That’s your problem.” She wraps her arm around my shoulders. “Come with me and let your big sister give you some pointers.”

She steers me up the stairs and into her childhood bedroom, which is now Mama’s craft room. We take a seat on the daybed. “You do know it is possible to have sex with someone, no strings attached. Just sex. And it can blow your mind.”

Yes, I know you can do the act without love. I’ve just never had the urge before. With Dante, I was all in. I mull over her statements and throw up my hands. “I have no idea how to do this.”

“All you have to do is set some ground rules. Like don’t go out on dates with King, just get together and have sex. Don’t spend the night with each other. And don’t text each other with stupid cutesy stuff like ‘thinking of you.’” She uses air quotes around her last phrase.

“What you’re saying is get together, have sex, and leave. No contact other than what the TV show and the office require.”

She nods. “That’s it! Easy. Mind-blowing sex with no strings attached. You don’t need to find another soul mate to enjoy being a woman.”

Her words strike a chord with me. King has a great body, that’s for sure. Based on the tabloid coverage of his crazy lifestyle, he knows how to use it. *He* certainly isn’t celibate. “I might. Possibly. Be able. To do this,” I stammer.

“Great!” She claps and leans in. “I was worried your vagina was drying up.”

Ignoring her rude comment, I mumble, “This might work.”

Juliana smiles. “I know it will. You’ll be a former demisexual in no time.” She stands. “Come on, let’s go back downstairs before Mama sends Leo looking for us.” She heads out of the room.

Remaining on the daybed, I replay our conversation. King told me he’s not looking for love. I’m not either. Maybe a casual hook-up would be okay? He certainly isn’t soul mate material, but the looks he keeps giving me tell me he’s interested. The way he kisses...

An hour later, King escorts me into his convertible and we begin the trek back to Aroostook. I keep thinking about what Juliana said to me. My attraction to King is undeniable—if I can keep my emotions out of it, we could have fun.

Getting onto the Southern State Highway, King says, “Thank you, I had a great time. Your family is so ... big.”

I play with my hair. “There are quite a few of us. You seemed to get along with everyone.”

His broad chest expands. “I liked them. Nonna is a riot, by the way.”

I smile. “She’s awesome, that’s for sure. I’m happy you enjoyed yourself.”

He switches lanes. “And Lucia even gave me a standing invitation to come back.”

“Mama always liked strays.” I flinch as soon as the words leave my mouth. “I didn’t mean it that way. What I meant was—”

King reaches out and places his hand on top of my shoulder. “I know what you meant. It was very nice of her.”

“Yeah.” He removes his hand, although my brain registers how nice and sturdy it felt on my body. I bet the rest of him would feel good, too. I’ve held his hand a few times, and it was large and capable. His callouses might be interesting against my skin. Like how his lips feel against mine. I bite my bottom lip, and he jerks and turns on the radio.

“Oh, P!nk,” he blurts. “I love her. She’s awesome.”

I tilt my head. “Have you met her?”

King blushes. He actually turns a shade of red and runs a hand across his stubble. “Yeah. At a couple of parties out in LA.”

“Must be nice.” The words fall out of my mouth without thought.

“She’s friends with some of my friends.”

Yet another sign that our lives don’t fit together. I inhale and look out the window. *This is good*. Another reason for no-strings sex. Casual. Convenient. When he returns to LA, it certainly won’t matter to me. Yes, very good. King could rid me of my demisexuality. If that’s even a thing.

We arrive at the office and King pulls into the parking lot. “It’s dark, let me walk you inside.”

This works. I can invite him up to my apartment and we can have a drink. Maybe more. Not sex yet, as I haven’t had enough time to wrap my mind around the whole no-strings idea. We can fool around, though. Yes. Good first step. Testing the waters, so to speak.

When we get to the front door, he uses his key to open it. I’m hyperaware of his heat next to me—the muscular bulk of his arm. I precede him into the lobby and spin around as the door closes. “Thanks, King,” I gush out. “Today was great, but I’m not quite ready for the night to end.” There. That’s direct enough.

He pockets his keys. “Oh? Would you like to go for a walk on the beach?”

That sounds too romantic. I shake my head. “No. How about we go upstairs for a nightcap?” Yeah. A nightcap and some fun. Perfect.

“Upstairs?”

Why is he being so obtuse? “To my apartment,” I clarify and start walking toward the back. “It’s just my apartment, nothing too special.” Gosh, that sounded lame. “But I do have bourbon.” There. Much better to entice him with “his” drink. I got a pretty good bottle as a Grand Opening gift from one of my cousins and never opened it.

He winks at me. “You had me at bourbon.”

“Great.” I take the stairs, butterflies starting to flit around in my stomach. Stupid butterflies. They need to learn the meaning of casual. I open my apartment door and enter, watching King cross the threshold for the first time.

I toss my keys on the peninsula, miss, and have to crouch to pick them up. I'm blushing by the time I open the liquor cabinet. Pulling out the bottle, I hold it up. "Is Jim Beam okay?"

He smiles. "Sure. But I'll have to introduce you to Pappy in the near future."

Pappy who? Not really caring what I drink, I pour both of us some of the amber liquid and hand him a glass. Forcing myself to look directly into his eyes—which match the color of the drink—I screw up my courage and say, "To continuing our night."

King holds his glass in the air for a couple of seconds, then smiles the way I like with the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. "Sounds good to me." He brings his glass to mine and they clink.

The sound causes electricity to zip through my veins. I haven't let this side of myself come out for a decade and now that I've given my libido permission to play—without strings, of course—I'm oddly excited. Liberated. I can do this!

We both take a sip of our drinks. God. That's awful stuff. How can he drink it? I place my glass down on the peninsula and rub my hands together, noting they're not clammy at all. Good sign.

King puts his glass down next to mine and looks around. "It's nice up here. Cozy."

"Thanks." I force my gaze away from him and survey my apartment as if for the first time. The small living room has all the basics. A loveseat and two chairs with an oversized ottoman serving as a coffee table, the vignette facing a television hung above a short bookcase. The TV was Dante's,

the furniture from a thrift store. My kitchen is small but functional. Floral curtains hang on the three windows encircling the area.

Instead of walking toward me, King turns and heads over to the wall where an original painting of the beach in Aroostook hangs. Dante and I purchased it from a small shop in town on our honeymoon after spending every day there. The waves have always grounded me.

“Is this the beach we went to?”

I nod. “It is.” I don’t share its history. We’re not here to become better friends. Well, not in that sense.

King takes a step to his right and my breathing picks up. He’s standing in front of our wedding photo. “You look beautiful here. This is Dante, I presume?”

“Yes,” I croak. Maybe we should’ve gone to his place?

He nods several times. After a second—minute—hour—passes, he walks over to the bookcase and picks up some of my favorite romance novels, and my breathing returns to normal. We’re back to safer territory, although I’m not sure what he’s waiting for. Wasn’t my invitation clear enough. Holding up an old book, the first one I purchased forever ago, which I don’t have the heart to discard even if Fabio is on the cover, he snorts. I shrug. After replacing it, he walks over to the window to check out my view. Of downtown. If you stand just the right way, you can see the ocean, sort of like the first place we showed Abbey.

“You can see all of Main Street from here.” He lets the curtain flutter back into place. “Cool.”

“Thanks. I like it, even though it’s small. I’m not up here too much, anyway.”

Finished with his grand tour, King returns to stand next to me. “It suits you.”

Does it?

Do I care? We’re not up here to chit-chat. Juliana’s words echoing in my mind, I screw up my courage and step into his personal space. I can do this. Smiling up at him, I run my nails up his arm, fascinated to see the fine hairs rise in the wake of my caress.

“Angie?”

Focused on where our bodies meet, I reply, “Yes?”

His expansive chest rises and falls in rapid succession, but he remains quiet. I take this as a signal to continue my exploration, so I let my nails trail further up his impressive bicep. When I reach his tribal tattoo, I open my fingers to span around as far as they’ll go, and squeeze.

“Angie?” This time his voice is much deeper.

Tipping my head upward, I repeat, “Yes?”

Our gazes meet. Lock. “What are you doing?”

*I’m trying to seduce you, stupid! What’s it look like?*  
“What you were just doing. I’m admiring the view.”

He swallows, then brings his head down next to mine. In my ear, he whispers, “I’d like to do more than admire.”

It’s now or never, Angie. No strings. No relationship. No emotions.

“Me, too.”

With my words, he groans. A split second later, his arms reach out and encircle my waist, pulling me into his ripped,



hard frame. I inhale his unique scent and melt into his body. We embrace for a long moment.

The contact warms my body from head to toes, but it also makes me restless. I'm not looking for anything more than sex, and neither is he. Hugs entail emotion, so I force my head back. "Kiss me."

Don't have to tell King twice. His mouth descends on mine with a ferocity that I return. Maybe it's because we're standing rather than sitting like our previous two times, but this kiss is off the charts. I let my hands wander—oh so slowly—up his chest and encircle his neck, brushing the soft hair at the nape of his neck. A shudder runs through him and he pulls me closer to his body.

His tongue prods at the seam of my lips, and I open for his expert touch. Mouths locked together, our tongues duel in a delicious dance. When I have to break apart to gasp for air, his head drops to my neck and his lips blaze a trail behind my ear. A tingling, starting in my core, zips upward and seems to blast out of the top of my head.

"King," I half-moan, half-encourage.

He bites my earlobe, causing another explosion to detonate within my body, and our lips fuse together once again. Without thought, my right hand tunnels into his hair. I tug.

"Don't stop," he says, his voice low and husky.

Not a chance in hell. I pull again and drop my hands to his waist, where I start to unbutton his shirt. Leaving it on his shoulders, I touch his bare chest and hiss at how hot and smooth it feels under my fingertips.

King takes a step backward and removes his shirt, tossing it on the stool. I can't get enough of his sculpted body. He

looks like a model in a magazine, all ripped and manscaped to perfection. I've never touched so many cut muscles in all my life. This feast of a man is here for me to devour as I wish. Oh boy, do I wish.

My fingers trace the ridges and bumps of his muscles, which causes his stomach to contract. I step forward and place kisses on his torso. He wraps his hands in my hair, and when I nip at his flat nipple, he pulls, angling my head for a kiss. His lips consume me like I'm the last cannoli at the bakery. I like it.

His hands roam all over my back before landing at the hem of my shirt and raising it an inch. My eyes meet his and I see a question. "Yes."

He smiles and I suck in my breath as my tank top is whisked off my body. Wanting to end this separation from his perfect body, I reach behind my back and unclasp my bra, skimming it over my arms and tossing it to the floor.

"God, you're breathtaking."

He doesn't have to overdo it—I know I'm not like any of the models he's dated. "I think your eyesight may be the only thing that's not perfect on you."

He chuckles. "It's 20/20, and believe me, you take my breath away."

Whatever. My goal is for him to take *my* breath from me. I step forward again and nip his other flat nipple as his hands land on my ass. Much better. He squeezes my cheeks down there and I roll my hips forward, into his thighs. Damn. I need to be taller. Or he needs to be shorter.

I turn my head toward the loveseat. "How about we get horizontal?"

“I like the sound of that.” He bends down and lifts me off the floor. “Kick off your shoes and wrap your legs around my waist.”

Now he’s talking. I do as he says and our groins touch. My heartrate accelerates as if I were running a one-hundred-yard dash against Usain Bolt. “King!”

He sets me down on the loveseat and climbs on top of me. His lips trail down from my neck to my breasts, and when he takes my left nipple into his mouth and sucks, I buck up into his frame.

“Like that, huh?”

Because my breath is coming in rapid pants, I simply nod.

“Good to know.” He suckles my left nipple while his right hand flicks the peak of my other breast.

I’m all sensation and want and need. I open my legs for him, and he moves between them, though our bottom halves are still clothed. When I roll my hips, I feel his bulge. His *very large* bulge.

This can’t be right.

I repeat my movement, and holy shit, he’s big. I rub against him three more times to confirm as our tongues tangle. He tastes faintly of Nutella and bourbon, a surprisingly intoxicating combination.

Breaking our kiss, I inhale some much-needed air, which is coated with his scent. It’s all woodsy and warm and so, so masculine. With a groan, he attacks my mouth again, the sound inflaming my desire for him.

He’s so different from—

*No! Do not compare him to Dante. This is only about scratching an itch.*

I run my hands down his back, landing on top of his khaki-clad ass. Like he did to me before, I squeeze both globes, which has the added benefit of pushing his body forward into mine. He lifts his lips off my nipple to groan.

Now that the proverbial floodgates have been opened, I want more from this man. I lift my leg and run it down his, relishing the closeness of our bodies.

It's not enough.

Our pants need to come off. Apparently, King has the same idea, as his hands slide down my torso and land on the top button of my capris. Why didn't I wear a dress or a skirt? It would've been so much easier.

King places one foot on the floor and lifts himself to standing, eliciting a whimper from me. "Don't worry, Angie. I've got you. You're going to love what I have planned."

Oh God, yes. "I'm sure I will."

His attention is fixed on my pants—or, more accurately, getting them off. Within seconds, I'm clad in only my white panties. A little tinge of embarrassment sours the moment—I'm sure the women he's usually with wear Victoria's Secret underwear. My hands fly to remove the humiliating cotton fabric, but King stops me. Pulling my hands over my head, he settles himself back over me and kisses me with tongue and teeth and lips. All thoughts about my underwear disappear.

One hand releases mine and travels slowly southward. Again, he plays with my nipples, eliciting moans from me as my head tosses on the couch. King chuckles, but not in a derisive way. "I will never tire of hearing that sound."

He bites down on my distended pink bud—harder this time, but not to the point of true pain—and is rewarded by another moan from me. His hand leaves my other nipple and travels further down, to the top of my panties. Both of my hands reach for his head and pull him up to my mouth. Before our lips meet, I whisper, “Take them off.”

King drops his mouth to mine as he removes my last piece of clothing. Now, I’m totally naked underneath this man and my body is on fire—one only he can quench. I raise my leg, feeling the smooth fabric of his pants against my bare flesh, which only serves to heighten my arousal.

King’s hand slides from my hip inward. His calloused palm covers my pussy and my leg stills. *Oh God, Oh God, what am I doing?* His finger dips between my legs and brushes against my clit. My momentary panic is replaced with a burst of excitement. “King!”

“I’ve got you.”

*Oh boy, does he.* His finger rubs against my clit and my pussy opens to him. As he continues to rhythmically move down there, my body responds with more and more wetness.

Then he does the unexpected. King pulls out of my body and brings his finger to his mouth and sucks. While my core protests the loss, his actions make me even hotter.

He removes his finger from his mouth. “Damn, baby, you taste mighty fine.” He extends his hand toward my lips and I greedily suck it into my own mouth, letting my tongue roam over the digit before clamping down. His hips move into me and we both groan.

His rumbly voice meets my ears. “I need more.”

King pulls back and slips onto his knees. He grabs my hips and turns me toward him as if I weigh nothing. Spreading my legs wide open, he guides them over his shoulders then leans forward and brings his head in line with my pussy. “I’m going to taste your passion for me.”

Why haven’t I done this with him before?

He opens his mouth and his tongue slips out and greets my clit.

“Oh,” I wail. He licks. “Don’t stop. Don’t ever stop!”

“Don’t worry, Angie.”

His smirk is my only response. He licks and sucks and nips at my clit and I fly over the edge within a minute. Yet he’s a man of his word. He keeps on doing what he was doing, only now he’s put his finger into my core. The added stimulation throws me into another climax. Still he continues, this time curling his index finger inside of me, which brings on a third orgasm.

He leans back on his heels as I lay, splayed open, in front of him. I’m a quivering, panting, sweaty mess. I’ve not felt this alive in... forever.

King straightens. It’s my turn. I get to see the whole man—and the impressive bulge he’s sporting. I can do this.

He kisses me again, allowing me to taste myself on his lips, which is a surprising turn-on. His hands roam over my body, weighing my breasts, before encircling my back and bringing me up for a hug. He whispers into my ear, “Sleep well, baby.”

Before I can process what he’s said, he’s headed to the kitchen where he left his shirt. He doesn’t stop to put it on, but

rather walks to the front door. "I'll see you tomorrow." And he's gone.

Sprawled on the loveseat, I let the euphoria wash over me. This is good. This is what no-strings feels like. No emotions, just carnal bliss. Holy hell, did he deliver.

I can do this.

# KING



I pull into my parking garage and let my head rest on the steering wheel. Somewhere between Angie's place and the condo, I finally caught my breath. *Holy shit*. From what her family told me, she hasn't dated in a decade. This amazing woman let me bring her to three gorgeous orgasms.

Warmth spreads throughout my body. Pride. I'm going to be the man who brings Angie back to the living. She's such a nuanced woman. The way she continues to pursue her Bucket List goals, refusing to give in even in the face of severe challenges. The passion she brings to her career. The love she feels for her family.

I don't want to fuck things up between us. I need to take things slow, make sure she's on board with everything we're doing. Lord knows, I want to bring her to ecstasy. For the first time in my life, a woman's pleasure comes before mine. The best confirmation of this is the erection straining against my fly. Yes, she's more important than even my own pleasure.

As I head into the lobby, a familiar voice greets me. "King!" I turn my head and Callie joins me as we walk to the elevator. She does a double-take when she notices my obvious condition. "I can help you out with that."



Her hand snakes forward toward my crotch, but I flinch. Trying to cover up my reaction, I reply, “Thanks for the offer, but I’m kind of tired tonight.”

Callie’s face falls—she’s not stupid, she knows exactly what I’m saying. I’ve met someone. I can’t even believe those three words popped into my brain, but they’re true. What is Angie doing to me? Whatever it is, I like it. *A lot.*

When the elevator pings, announcing our floor, Callie and I both get off. We stop in front of her door. “Have a good night, King. Good luck with whoever she is.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

In my apartment, I shed all my clothes and land on my bed, needing to take care of the issue that sprang up when I was with Angie. My hand strokes my cock, which engorges to its full length as I picture Angie sitting on her couch, legs wide open for me. Her smell is more intoxicating than any bourbon I’ve ever drunk. Her taste, gah! I run my hand up and down my shaft, and over the tip. My breathing gets faster and faster, and I remember how she moaned when I brought her to her first climax. I tug harder and cum bursts forth onto my stomach.

What this woman does to me. No way in hell would she let me touch her if she didn’t feel the same way about me, given how long she’s been alone. Her spot in my heart swells. For the first time in my adult life, I feel lucky.



**O**n the way to the office for today’s shoot, I stop by the local florist. For her first three orgasms, Angie deserves a special gift. Looking around, I decide against roses. They’re

too cliché. A display of calla lilies catches my attention. Instead of the traditional large white ones, I gravitate toward the mini versions in a multitude of colors.

The clerk approaches me. “Can I help you select a present for your girlfriend?”

My mouth curves upward at the word “girlfriend” and I clear my throat. “Yes. I like these.” I point to the display.

“Great choice. Very different. Do you know what the colors mean?”

I shake my head. I’ve never given flowers to a woman before. Except for my mother when I was a kid, and Lord knows the last time I did that was ages ago. The clerk explains the meanings behind each color, and I choose a bouquet of pinks and purples—admiration, appreciation, and passion. Perfect.

Taking the wrapped bouquet, I continue on to the office. When I park, I notice the sun is shining more brightly this morning, the sky is bluer, and the birds are chirping. It feels like I stepped into a Disney movie. Inhaling the air tinged with salt from the ocean, I walk into Russo Real Estate, which buzzes with people from the television show.

I nod at Milo and the guys as I head over to Angie, who’s sitting at her desk. Today, she’s dressed in a light green dress with a rather low neckline. Hmm. Must’ve come from wardrobe. The way she fills out the front makes me want to skip filming and carry her upstairs to continue what we started last night.

Instead, I approach the side of her desk and get down on my haunches. “I saw these and thought of you.” My heart pounding, I hand her the bouquet.

Her chocolate eyes widen. She takes the flowers from me and smells. “Oh. Thank you, but you really didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to.”

Angie admires the flowers from a variety of angles and pushes back on her chair. “Well, thanks. They’re very pretty. Let me put them in water.” She stands and heads for the kitchenette.

Smiling at her reaction, I sit at my desk and review the notes for today’s shoot one final time. We’re going to a broker’s Open House to check out a new property. I take in all the details about the house, noting handwritten comments from Kaitlyn to me in blue pen: *Make sure to disagree with Angie about how well this property might meet the wants and needs of your clientele.*

I still don’t have a handle on all of Angie’s clients, but I’ve definitely gotten the vibe that they are relatively few and far between. I guess I’ll have to make up people to get under Angie’s skin, a prospect that doesn’t seem as palatable as it once did.

Angie returns to the main part of the office and places the flowers I gave her on Marlene’s desk. My brows furrow. Why isn’t she putting them on her own desk? Marlene seems to be wondering the same thing. From my vantage point, I see the two women talking, hands flying. They both turn and look at me for a moment before returning to their conversation.

I push away from my desk, intent on asking Angie why she put the flowers at reception, when Kaitlyn claps her hands. “All right, listen up! We got permission from the listing broker, Poppy Mayflower, to shoot at the Open House, but we’ll need to get waivers from anyone else who gets into the frame. Let’s try to keep that to a minimum.”

Angie shifts from foot to foot, color rising to her cheeks. She addresses our director, “Do we really need to go to a Mayflower Open House? Why not choose a different place?”

Kaitlyn responds, “Because it’s a gorgeous location, right on the water, and we need to capture it on camera.”

Her answer shuts Angie down, although I can still see her temper close to the surface. It’ll be easy to poke the bear and get some good shots for the cameras. Too bad I’d much rather placate her. With my mouth.

You’re getting in deep, King. *Shit.*

Kaitlyn continues, “Let’s head over to the property and set up. Angie, ride with Shelley so she can get a jump start on your makeup on the ride over. King, your wardrobe’s in the conference room. You can change and meet us over there.” She claps again and we all go off as directed.

I change into the outfit wardrobe chose for me—navy trousers and a white button-down shirt shot through with turquoise stripes—then jump into my convertible and plug the property’s address into my GPS. No sooner do I get on to Main Street than my cell rings and Trevor’s name shows up on the screen.

Coke fiend. Trust-fund wrecker. Money-grubber. Rehab evader. My finger hesitates over the disconnect button, but for some reason, I hit accept instead. Maybe I’m still hoping he’ll redeem himself. Maybe I’m hoping he’ll prove he’s really my friend after all. As if I didn’t know who was on the end of the call, I say, “King.”

“Why haven’t you returned my calls?”

“Have you thought that I’m not interested in talking?”

“I would think that you’d be more than willing to gloat about the role you stole out from under my feet with the delectable Angie. Blaine totally hooked you up. At my expense.”

I make a right-hand turn and bite down on my lip to keep from commenting on his description of Angie. Even if she is delicious. “I didn’t steal anything from you.” More like the other way around, in my book.

“Yeah, whatever. Listen, I checked and the money’s not in my account yet. When should I expect to receive it?”

The gall of this guy. Why has it taken me so long to notice? “Listen, Trevor, and pay attention. I’m not going to give you any more money. You’ve taken enough from me over the years. You need to get your ass into rehab.”

“I didn’t ask you to give it to me, King,” he said, sounding affronted. “I asked for a little loan, like always. I’ll pay it back.”

“Like you’ve done when? Never. No. No more.” I make a left turn and see the orange and yellow balloons announcing the Open House. He’s never going to change, so I need to end this. “While you’re at it, lose my number.” I disconnect the call, feeling as if I lost one-hundred-seventy-five pounds of dead weight.

Seems like I agree with my father on one thing.

I slam my car door and head over to the huge van with Let’s Do It! written on the side. Angie’s sitting in the makeup chair and Shelley’s playing with her hair. I redirect my thoughts from my former friend to my co-star and take a deep breath. Get your head back in the game, King. Don’t let Trevor fuck with your life more than he already has.

I study Angie's face while her eyes are closed. Shelley's makeup brings out her features, sure, but I actually prefer the way she looked yesterday at her family's house. More natural. I know better than to say something like that here, though. For one, Shelley still has to do my own makeup. "Looks good, ladies."

Shelley smiles at me while finishing up Angie's hair. For her part, Angie squirms in her seat when she hears my voice. Damn. I wish we were alone so she could do that on my face.

I smile at them both and head over to the sideboard to grab a roast beef sandwich. After a couple of bites, I toss the remainder in the garbage since I don't have time to work out again later. Unless we're talking about a different type of workout.

Smirking, I return to the makeup chair as Shelley finishes with Angie—who stands up and brushes right past me on her way over to the food area. I guess she feels the need to keep up the charade of hating me while she's on set.

I shrug and sit down in front of Shelley. "Do your worst."

She takes a big brush and tickles my cheek. "King, you only need a little bit of powder. You were born for the cameras."

My parents would beg to differ. Mom would remind me of the Proactiv she bought for me as a teen. Dad would say, for the millionth time, that looks alone don't take you far. Forcing those thoughts down low, I respond, "Keep on sweet-talking me like that and you'll get a big Christmas bonus from me."

She taps the brush on my nose. Barely ten minutes later, I'm ready for filming. Which is good because Kaitlyn calls everyone outside. I slip in next to Milo and listen as she fills

us in on the plan for today's shoot. She finishes with a reminder that Angie and I should do a running commentary for the cameras while we tour the house. Today's not a contest, but rather some "filler" footage for the show. When everyone disperses to do their final setups inside, I approach the woman who's taking up her own real estate in my heart. "Looks like a nice house."

She nods. "Yeah. Being right on the ocean doesn't hurt. I only wish it wasn't listed by Poppy."

"Maybe she won't be here in person."

Angie's face tightens. "As if she'd miss an opportunity to rub her good fortune in my face, even if it means she has to be on the dreaded small screen."

It strikes me hers is no casual dislike. She hates Poppy. "Has she really been that awful to you?"

"Oh, God. You have no idea." She laughs. "Why would you? You've partied with her. I had the audacity to move here and open a competing business."

"Competition is good. Keeps you on your toes."

"Believe me, Poppy doesn't see it that way." She plays with the ends of her hair. "Right when I first started, I unwittingly 'stole' one of her buy-side clients, and she's had it out for me ever since."

Her air quotes—and what I know of Angie—tell me her misstep truly was unintentional. I inhale. She's right. It's always been Poppy's way or the highway. I never cared before because I never saw the human cost. It all seemed harmless. Not anymore. I pledge to smooth Angie's way into the upper-crust of the Hamptons. Poppy needs to understand she doesn't have a stranglehold on who comes into "her" town.

Kaitlyn calls us over to the front door and says, “Action.” I open the door for Angie, and together we walk into the mansion, which is impressive with its floor-to-ceiling windows, twenty-foot-high entranceway, and direct ocean view. The white-washed walls are on point with the nautical atmosphere—complemented by the smell of crab cakes coming from inside.

“Seriously? Who serves crab cakes at a broker Open House?”

Remembering what Kaitlyn said to me, I reply, “Seems appropriate to me.”

Angie stops and turns, giving me the evil eye, then stalks deeper into the house. I hustle to keep up with her—a relatively easy task given her short legs. At least twenty brokers already are inside the great room and I see Angie stop in the threshold for a moment before marching toward Poppy. *Oh shit.*

I’m walking up beside Angie when Poppy turns and sees us, a fake smile on her doctor-enhanced face. “Poppy,” I address the broker and receive her two air kisses. “So great to see you again.”

“King,” she coos, returning my greeting. She inspects the woman at my side as if she were a broken elliptical. “I see you brought Angie with you.” The way she says Angie’s name—like she is offended to even utter the syllables—makes my protective side roar to life. I hadn’t even realized I *had* a protective side, but I stifle it for the cameras.

Poppy extends her hand to Angie, as if she expects to be greeted like the pope. Angie’s chocolate eyes take in the hand. “Actually, he’s with me.”



I step in. “This is a gorgeous property, Poppy. Tell us about it.”

Poppy puts on her realtor hat and starts the tour. Well, she gives *me* the tour since she doesn’t once look at Angie. When we end up on the patio, Poppy hands me a glass of champagne. “This is a very nice place. I can think of a few of our clients who would love to scoop this up. Right, Angie?”

I want to give the stupid champagne to Angie, but Kaitlyn insisted we bicker for the cameras. Angie steps forward and pours her own flute, returning the bottle to the table. “I’m not sure. It’s a bit too cavernous for today’s market.”

Poppy puts her hands on her hips. “Really? I don’t know who your clients are, but all of *mine* want to be in an open-concept floor plan.”

Angie drinks the champagne and makes a face as if it’s the cheap stuff. “When a space is as large as this one, it helps to designate separate areas. Right now, people could be watching television in essentially the same room where others are eating, and none of *my* clients want that.”

I force myself to disagree. “If they’re at the dining table, no one would be watching the TV anyway.”

Angie flips her hair. “I think if it were remodeled it would flow much better. Especially with these views.” She waves her hand toward the ocean.

Poppy leans forward. “Most times, people would be eating out here on the patio anyway.”

Oh, boy. I better try to stop this before one of them throws the other into the pool. Although if it came to an actual fight, my scrappy girl would win. *What are you thinking?* “I, for one,

can see the benefits of how the house is laid out. I'm sure more than a few of our clients would agree."

Angie's back gets straighter, which is a bad omen. She sets down her champagne. "At this price point, I don't think our clients would want a fixer-upper."

"A *what*? Are you kidding me? This place is to die for." Poppy turns to me. "How can you work with such a small-minded fool, King? I took you for a worldly man."

My flute goes down next to Angie's. "Ladies, this property is a nice listing and I'm sure the right buyer will scoop it up in no time. However, Poppy, we know all buyers want to put their own imprint on a house before calling it home."

The two ignore me and square off as if getting ready to enter the octagon. Poppy says, "All that's needed here is a new family to unpack their toothbrushes."

Time for me to get Angie out of here. Milo circles us, covertly giving me a thumbs up. How can I help Angie save face while giving the studio what they want?

I clear my throat. "Well, I imagine whoever buys it may still like to make some *minor* changes to the property. With that said, I can think of maybe one or two of our clients who might take a look. How negotiable is your price?"

Of course, Poppy's response throws more gas on the gurgling fire. "Make an offer and you'll find out." She turns her head and nods at someone behind us. "If you'll excuse me, I need to give another tour to agents who may have relevant clients for me. King, enjoy your day." With that, Poppy sweeps back into the house.

I pick up my flute and chug the remaining champagne. Angie does the same, mumbling, "What a pretentious bitch."

“Now, now, is that any way to be talking about the listing agent?”

Angie’s glass crashes down onto the table. “I was right about the layout, and you know it. It’s a box. A big, open box. Who wants to live in a box?”

“An expansive box on the ocean,” I correct.

“Still a box. You can show it to your clients. I’m not going to.” She follows the same path Poppy took, crosses through the house, and strides out of the front door.

I meet up with Angie in front of the town car the studio provided. Her hand’s on the handle. “Wait up. Want to ride back with me?”

Angie’s shoulders reach her ears. “No, I’m good. See you later.” She slips inside.

If I hadn’t driven my car here, I’d be in the backseat with her, talking about the tour today. Honestly, I didn’t see anything wrong with the house, and its location is perfect. With a few minor cosmetic changes, almost anyone in the country would die to live here. I know she doesn’t get along with Poppy, but something more is going on here.

Her driver turns on the ignition and I return to my car. Kaitlyn catches my attention. “Great job, King. I loved the interplay among you three. You really got Angie going.”

“Thanks.” My overriding hope is it didn’t do *too* much damage. I hop in my car and take my time driving back to the office. I suppose I could go home, but I want to spend more time studying the MLS listings.

Alright, who am I kidding? I want to get Angie naked again.

When I enter the office, she's already standing next to her desk moving papers around on it. I walk directly to her since we're the only two people in here. "Hated the place, huh?"

She stops what she's doing and plops down into her chair. "Not exactly."

I scoot around to the front corner of her desk and rest my ass against it. "Then what exactly?"

She sighs, all her bluster dissipating. "That was the Lloyd house. I recognized the address."

My hands raise in the universal "so what" gesture. "Do I know the Lloyds?"

She tosses her pen onto the desk. "No. But I do. I pitched for that house."

Everything clicks into place—her instant dislike of the property, the open antagonism with Poppy. *Crap*. "Hey, I'm sorry you lost the listing."

She nods. "Thanks." Her hand reaches up and tugs on the end of her hair. "But I did mean what I said. Furniture groupings aren't enough to define the space. It's like a loft but a house. It's jarring."

I tilt my head. "I see what you're saying, but I believe it was designed that way to get the most out of the view from all vantage points."

"You're probably right." She sighs. "I hate that woman."

Now we're getting down to it. "I know. How about thinking of it this way—how much would Poppy hate to have to split another broker's fee with you if one of our clients buys that house? After the Maguires, and all."

Angie laughs. “That would be funny, to be sure.” Her shoulders droop. “None of my clients have that kind of budget.”

I guess a million is high, but not really for out here. Her reaction brings me back to a suspicion I’ve been harboring. “What’s your clients’ average budget?”

She sits up and rights the mess she made on her desk. She whispers, “Five hundred to seven-fifty.”

I shake my head. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I’m the bottom of the barrel in Aroostook.” While that kind of money might buy someone a mansion outside of New York City or California, it’s barely enough for a condo in this town.

I knew she was struggling, but if her business is relying on clients with such low budgets for the area, she’s in more trouble than I thought. I bite the inside of my cheek. “How about you and I spend some time brainstorming new ways to bring in higher-end clients?”

Her expression bounces from surprise to determination. “Your percentage won’t go up, you know.”

I wink. “Wouldn’t dream of asking.” This woman has no idea what lengths I’d go to for her. “I’d like to see what sort of caché I can bring in.”

She tugs on the bottom of her hair. “I’m sure people will come for miles to get a glimpse of *the* King Hunte. We can’t advertise your involvement in the firm until you have your license, though.”

We don’t have to wait to change the agency’s social media platform. We spend the next couple of hours brainstorming. By concentrating our ad spend on buyers outside of the

Hamptons, we figure we can diminish Poppy's power. She won't have as much pull on people who've never heard of The Mayflower Agency.

Angie's stomach rumbles and she places her hand over it.

"Let's call it a night," I say. "Want to go out for dinner?"

She pushes away from her desk. "Nope. We don't have to go out. How about we order in?"

Her words make my body hum. She wants to spend more time with me—in her apartment. I know exactly what I want for dessert. Leaving all our papers on the desks, I walk to the front door and switch the sign to "closed" before locking it. "What's on the menu?"

She bites her lower lip as her brown eyes start at my thighs and move upward. The moment is broken when her stomach rumbles again.

Chuckling, I say, "After. Food first."

I pass the flowers on the reception desk on my way back to Angie. I almost ask her about them—did Marlene maybe want them there? Or did Angie not want to advertise the fact that we've been spending time together?—but she sweeps up from her desk and leads the way to the formerly mysterious door. My thoughts already have shifted from the flowers to her apartment. To the fact that I might see her bedroom tonight.

We order Chinese and continue our discussion about bringing in new clients. She hands me a fortune cookie, which I break open.

"Wait," she instructs as I reach inside for the strip of paper. "You have to add 'in bed' to whatever fortune you get."

I smile. “Gladly.” Looking down, I read, ““Flattery will go far tonight.”” I pause, then add, “In bed,” waggling my eyebrows up and down.

She giggles. “Mine is ‘Do not mistake temptation for opportunity’—in bed.”

“Am I the temptation or the opportunity?” I place my hands on her cheeks and tilt her head up.

Angie licks her lips. “Definitely the former.”

She needs to see that I’m both, a thought that catches me off guard but doesn’t make me bolt for the door. I kiss her mouth, which tastes of Chinese sauce. “I’ll take that.”

# ANGIE



**A** week has passed since King and I started fooling around, and I'm ready to take things to the next level. Armed with this knowledge, I waltz through the front door of the office, where Marlene sits in her usual spot at the reception desk. "Wow! Looking hot, Angie. Going anyplace special?"

Hopefully into King's bed. "Maybe. I needed to get my haircut and didn't want to ask Shelley do it. Juliana does the best job." I pause. "For free."

She nods and picks up some envelopes. "Here's the mail—I'm afraid they're all bills."

My euphoria over seeing my sister and getting my haircut dims as she hands the pile over to me. "Gee, thanks." Until I receive the promised payments from the show, and the commission check from the Maguires' sale, I have to continue limping along. I bring them back to my desk, where I eat the last chocolate in the box King gave me as I arrange the bills in a stack by due date.

The door opens and I hope for a new client. Nope, it's King, looking drool-worthy in an amber shirt that matches his eyes and a pair of navy shorts. He winks at me and heat rushes up my neck.



From the reception desk, Marlene welcomes him. “Good afternoon, King.” He makes his way over to her, kisses her cheek, and she taps his shoulder. What’s that about? Marlene diverts my thoughts by holding up some envelopes in his direction.

He retrieves them. “Thanks.” His head bobs over them, then he pulls one out. “It’s here,” his voice booms as he waves the envelope in the air.

“What?” I ask, while Marlene smiles like the Cheshire cat.

“My test exam results.”

I jump out of my chair and join him by Marlene’s desk. He’s flapping it around so fast that neither Marlene nor I can catch it. Laughing, I say, “Open it!”

“If the boss lady says I have to.” He stops his shenanigans, flips the envelope over, and runs his finger behind the seal. I notice a slight tremor in his hand.

I suck in my breath as he pulls the sheet of paper out and skims the contents. If he passed, I can add him to the website and he can start tweeting about his involvement with the agency. New clients will probably line up around the block. A small part of me also wants to be able to brag that my *hook-up* passed the test after only studying for a week.

Marlene stands up, trying to catch a glimpse of the words. His face falls and the hand that’s holding the letter drops to his side.

*Shit.* I place my hand on his shoulder and squeeze, while Marlene falls back down in her chair.

“They really got the wording down pat.”

Realizing I'm still holding his shoulder, I release it and step back. No need to give Marlene a show, even if I want to comfort him.

King holds the sheet of paper up. He begins, "We are pleased to inform you that you passed the real estate examination for the State of New York..."

My chest tingles. "You did it?"

His biceps flex and his eyes dance. When he opens his arms, I fly into them, relishing his embrace and feeling prouder of him than I should. I'm so close, I soak in his delicious woodsy scent.

"Congratulations!" Marlene yells. Her comment brings me back to my senses, and I step away from his body and any sort of public display of affection.

Casual hookups don't hug in public.

Marlene skirts around me and gives King a hug as well. She's happily married, which legitimizes my show of affection. "I'm shocked Mr. Instagram actually did it," I say lightly as the two of them break apart.

King, once again waving the letter high in the air, nods. "Read it and weep, baby. Let's do what I do best and celebrate."

I'd like to get him horizontal and celebrate *on* him, but we're not in a relationship. I nod, pretending my pride in him is that of an employer in an apt protégé. "I think all three of us should go out for a celebration dinner."

Marlene flushes, and King rushes in to say, "Sounds good to me."

When eight o'clock rolls around, Marlene turns the sign on the door to say "Closed." Pulling her purse up her shoulder, she says, "Time to go. We're booked at La Cucina on Washington Street."

"That's right around the corner from my place," King notes. "I'll park there and walk over."

I nod. "Meet you there." There. That sounded professional. This way, I'll have escape wheels. King shoots me a questioning look, which I ignore, and we make our way to the restaurant.

After a wonderful celebration dinner, I take one last bite of our dessert—Death by Chocolate—and let my fork clatter to the plate. "Marlene, this was a great choice. I can't believe I've never eaten here before."

She licks her fork. "Timmy and I come here every so often."

King places his utensil down and continues our conversation. "I have to admit, I'm stoked to have passed that exam."

"You might have mentioned it a couple of times," Marlene teases.

"I'm not a good test taker. I really did get into all this real estate stuff, honestly."

I nod. "It can be addictive." Got to hand it to King, he seems to have a knack for real estate. His ideas about our social media campaign really make sense, and it'll only be to our benefit that we can now attach his name to tweets and posts.

When the check comes, I'm quick to grab it. "This is on me. Congratulations, King, on your big achievement. The

professional Instagrammer comes through.”

“Guess I’m not *only* good-looking,” he volleys. And then he smiles, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes calling to me, like they always do. He places his napkin on the table. “And what a wonderful way to celebrate, having dinner with two beautiful ladies.”

They’re just pretty words. Like the generic gifts he’s been giving me—flowers and chocolates and cookies. I’m sure he gives the same things to all the women he...hooks up with. Practice has made him pretty near perfect. But I can’t help it. Those little gestures are getting through to me more than I would like.

I busy myself with paying the bill. It will add another ten bucks to my monthly minimum. I pray a new client walks through the doors—like tomorrow.

We leave the restaurant in high spirits. At Marlene’s car, she hugs us both and whispers in my ear, “Keep the party going for me.” She hops into her car and takes off.

I wave as she drives away, but I feel a little uneasy. Am I being less subtle about this whole without-strings arrangement than I thought?

King holds out his hand, palm up. “Give me your keys.” He’s using the tone of voice he usually reserves for when we’re fooling around.

I stifle the urge to do a twirl right here in the parking lot. Now that we’re alone, I most definitely want to explore more of this hottie. *Casual*. Marlene forgotten, I play coy. “I think I’ll be in the driver’s seat tonight.”

“I can deal with that.” His amber gaze gets so hot I might combust on the spot.

I unlock the car doors and climb inside. This is it. Tonight, we're taking it all the way. I rub my hands together as he buckles in. Turning my head, I ask, "Ready?"

He leans over and gives me a surprisingly gentle kiss. "You have no idea."

My heartbeat is so erratic that it takes me two times to turn the engine over. A few minutes later, we're parked in his lot. He grabs my hand and we walk to the entrance.

Should I let him hold my hand? Is that against the rules? I let my thumb slide along his palm and decide it's okay just this once. After all, we're continuing our celebration in honor of all his hard work. Plus, after a week of fooling around, I know we're definitely about to have *sex*.

"Hey, Jerry." He waves to the man behind the desk, who salutes him. King presses the call button and we wait for the cab to arrive.

The doors open and we walk in together. He puts his arm around me and I slide in closer to his body heat. As the doors start to shut, someone yells, "Hold the door!" I automatically press the "Doors Open" button.

A blonde woman, about my age or a couple of years older, sails into the cab. "Oh, King, hi," she coos.

"Callie," he replies, his tone friendly.

I keep my head up, a big smile on my face. Even though King and I are not in a relationship, I'm damn proud to have this man on my arm. I peruse the woman's skinny body, taking in her toned legs and feet encased in those shoes with the red soles. My confidence is shaken for a moment, but he's sleeping with *me* tonight.

She continues, “How have you been? Missed you Thursday night.”

“We were filming.”

“Ah.” She nods.

The door pings and the three of us exit the elevator. I guess she lives on his floor. When she stops at a door and takes out her key, she catches my eye. “I’m sure you’re going to have a good time tonight.”

*Has* she already been there, done that? I have no reason to be surprised, and I’m not, I guess. I might be a tad uncomfortable, but I’m not about to show it. Shoving my hair off my face, I reply, “Counting on it.”

Her eyes widen, then she nods and enters her apartment. We walk down a few more doors before he stops and opens his door for me.

“Sorry about that.”

I enter his apartment. “No need to apologize.” If I’d needed any proof that casual is his M.O., here it is. *No strings, Angie.*

He tosses his keys onto a side table, rubs his hands on his legs, and walks into the kitchen. If I hadn’t known better, I’d take the hand rubbing thing for nerves. His apartment looks much the same as when I scouted it out, at Blaine’s request. Other than some fruit on the kitchen table, I wouldn’t know someone lives here.

“Care for a drink?”

Liquid courage. Good idea. “Yes, please. What do you have?” He holds up bottles of Pappy Van Winkle and Baileys. This must be the “Pappy” he referred to when I offered him

Jim Beam. No thanks. “I love Baileys with chocolate vodka.” He probably doesn’t have the latter—he’s not exactly a chocolate vodka kind of guy—but there’s no harm in asking.

He ducks down into the cabinet and produces another bottle. “Look good?”

“Oh, I love you!” Wait, what? What did I just say? No, no, no! “I mean, I’m surprised you have the vodka.”

He chuckles. “I noticed you drinking this the other night and wanted to be prepared.”

My body swoons a little, but I tamp down my reaction. He’s simply observant. “Such a Boy Scout.”

King pours both of us some of the delicious drink over ice and holds up his glass to mine. “To an unforgettable evening.”

“To celebrating your success.” I bring my glass to his and clink. The liquid slides down my throat like a smooth closing—all high notes with nothing standing in the way. “That’s good.”

“Not bad, although bourbon still rules.”

I walk around the apartment, checking out the minor touches he has made to it besides the fruit and liquor. A couple of framed photos sit on the mantle. One of them is of a kid with a woman I don’t recognize. The kid is undeniably a young King, which tugs on my heartstrings, so that must mean... “Your mother?”

He walks up to me. “Yeah. Not sure why I brought it with me.”

“Because she’s your mom.” I put down the frame and pick up the one beside it. A much younger Braxton holds King as a

boy. Both are smiling from ear to ear. My heart jumps at the sight of the two of them, so happy together.

“That was taken at my eighth birthday party in my backyard. Hunte performed. That was before he married Sara, back when I still thought the sun rose and set on his shoulders.”

“Oh yeah. Most of the kids on my block had international rockstars serenading them for their birthdays, too. No biggie.” He laughs as I return the frame to the mantle.

The fact he has a picture of both of them up in this apartment, his temporary home, makes me wonder if maybe family means something more to him than he would like. Maybe he wants a family, only he’s never had the chance.

This train of thought has no place in now. Casual fling, remember, Angie. I turn around and run smack into his chest. I reach out and trail my fingernail over one large pec. Lifting my chin all the way up, I murmur, “Aren’t we supposed to be celebrating?”

“Tonight, you’re my long-awaited reward.”

I allow my eyes to bore into his and will him to kiss me. Which he does, with such abandon that the floor falls out from under me. Or is it he picked me up?

“Wrap your legs around me.”

Well, damn. I do as I’m told and rock forward so my core meets his large bulge. A bulge with which I still need to get better acquainted. I intend to correct such oversight tonight. Among other things. Keeping one arm around his neck, I wrap my right hand around his waist. As our lips fuse and our tongues mate, I press his body forward, pushing it into mine.

“Oh, God, King.”



He brings us down the hall of his apartment and through an open door, and deposits me onto his king-sized bed. I giggle.

He pauses in removing his shirt. “See something funny?”

I shake my head. “Not exactly. It’s just, well, you’re King, and you have a bed made for you. A king.”

He throws his shirt to the floor and unbuckles his belt, slipping it through the beltloops on his shorts. “And in LA, I sleep on a California king.”

I can’t help it, I burst into laughter and flop down on the bed. King’s rich baritone joins me, and while we’re both laughing, he manages to remove my shirt and bra. The unzipping of my skirt brings my mirth to a halt. “You’re fast.”

“Not when it counts.”

Well, sign me up! I help him take off the rest of my clothes, which he tosses to the floor, and suddenly we’re both naked.

I’m not leaving this bed until we’ve had actual sex.

King plumps my breast and then licks my nipple, which pebbles under his attention. Any thought of laughter is now long gone. I run my hand down his chiseled torso, allowing my fingers to trace the deep ridges of his cut muscles. This man is so sculpted, so *healthy*.

His hand drops down to my pussy, and he parts my folds. I open my legs wider and he settles between them, still working me, now with two fingers inside my core. I’m on the verge of coming, but he needs to know we don’t have to stop tonight. I’m ready. I want him to make me feel alive again.

Just. Feel.

Nothing more.

“King, yes. Please, get inside of me,” I pant.

He pulls out of me and my body protests. He braces himself above me. “Are you sure? I don’t want to rush you.” His hazel eyes have taken on a deeper hue—and he’s breathing as hard as I am.

I kiss his lips. “I’m sure.”

He surprises me by landing on my side, and pulling me on top of him. “I want you to be in the driver’s seat tonight.” He repeats my words from before, making me smile.

“I like that sound of that,” I echo.

Dipping my head, I kiss his stubbled cheek, his neck, his earlobe. After giving it a nip, I continue my way downward and lick the muscles on his torso. This will never get old. When I reach his straining cock, my mouth waters. I’m not stopping tonight. I lick him from balls to tip. He’s so much bigger than, well, I’ve had before.

His hands land on my shoulders. “That can wait for later. Let me make you ready for me.”

“But—”

“Believe me,” he says, “I’m more than ready for you.”

King works his fingers inside of me and rubs my clit, sending me spiraling. Before I come, he grabs a condom from his bedside table and rolls it over his engorged cock. Putting his hands on my hips, he situates me over him again, my thighs spread over his hips. He takes hold of his cock and lines it up with my entrance.

I’m doing this. I can do this. All I can think about is his body and how wonderful he’s made me feel over the past week. It’s going to be so much better tonight.

Taking all of my weight onto my knees, I lean forward as he pushes upward and into me. With small movements, he widens my entrance for him, making little pushes into and out of me. This continues for I don't know how long until he's finally seated deep inside me. I've never felt so full. I still above him, sitting straight up.

"Are you okay? You're very tight," he hisses.

"That's because you're very big."

King's hands, at my hips, urge me to move. I take a tentative motion up and down, using his hands as a guide. After a few awkward movements, I find a rhythm where he hits my clit on every downstroke.

Once I've started to move on my own, King's hands travel upward and he grabs my bouncing breasts. He tweaks both of my nipples at the same time, and a bolt of pleasure ricochets from my chest directly down to where we're joined.

"Do that again!"

King obliges and I come undone. He continues to move inside of me for so long I feel another orgasm shimmering. My ecstasy crests once again before he stills. And then roars as he comes, too. Sweaty and panting, I collapse down onto this man who rocked my world. He's just as undone as I am.

He wraps his arms around me and turns us over, slipping out. Kissing my lips, he says, "I'll be right back," and disappears into the bathroom.

That was. *Wow*. I push my hair off my sweaty face and squeeze my legs together, relishing the delicious memory of King inside me. My body is both sated and energized.

The bathroom door closes and he eases back into bed, pulling me close. He kisses the top of my head. "Are you

okay? Was I too rough?"

I appreciate his questions—and the fact he hasn't said a single word about love. *Why am I thinking about love?*

"I'm perfect." I wrap my hands around his neck and we kiss. Which starts as a thank you, morphs into an *I could do this again*, and finally ends in an *I want to screw your brains out*.

This time, King gets on top of me, covering my entire body with his own. He suckles on my breasts and lets his hands run all over me. I explore his broad back, the tribal tattoos around his upper arm, and reach for his cock again, but he backs away from me.

"I want to make you feel good," he says, moving down between my thighs.

"If I felt any better, I'd be in outer space."

He chuckles and dips his head, kissing my inner thighs on his way to my pussy. His very talented tongue brings me to another orgasm, leaving me sprawled out like an all-you-can-eat buffet for one.

My eyes roam over his body, landing squarely on his massive erection. My mouth waters. I need to taste this part of him. Sitting up, I say, "Now it's time for me to return the favor. Lie down." I give his torso a playful shove. He grunts and does as I wish.

Laid out before me, his sheer size and bulk take my breath away. "You're like a sculpture."

"I don't know about that, but I do know one piece of me certainly feels as if it's made of stone."

My index finger goes into my mouth, then comes out with a pop. “Let me see what I can do about that.” My now-wet finger traces the vein in his cock down to his balls and back up.

“Damn, woman.”

I smile at his exclamation, promising myself he’ll shout it by the time I’m done, and follow the path my finger took with my tongue. He’s hard and so large that I’m shocked he fits inside of me. After exploring him like this, I open my mouth wide, covering my teeth, and let him glide inside my mouth. I suck on him gently—then hard—while my hand goes up and down his shaft since I can’t fit him entirely in my mouth. I repeat this motion over and over, enjoying the groans of encouragement he makes.

His hands land in my hair. “Angie, you need to stop. I can’t control myself much longer.”

“Then don’t.” I suck on him, and after one more try to get me to stop, he comes down my throat. I swallow his surprisingly tangy essence. Once I’ve licked him dry, I sit up at his feet.

King chuckles. “Pretty proud of yourself?”

I nod. Actually, I am. The way he came undone because of how *I* handled him amps my confidence higher.

I query my heart—still not engaged—and run my fingers over my wedding rings. “Yep.”

## KING



“Come here.” I grab the woman who just gave me the best blow job of my life and pull her down next to me. Facing her, I kiss those lips that drive me wild and run my hand through her silky hair.

Aware that we’re both naked, I do something I’ve never done before. Instead of diving right in for round two—or four, depending on how you’re counting—I let my hand rest on her hip. I want to talk.

“So tell me”—I kiss her pert nose—“now that I’m a licensed real estate agent, what can I do to make a difference around the agency?”

Her eyes squeeze shut. When they reopen, they’re more of a molten chocolate, all soft and sweet and oozing deliciousness. I certainly can attest to the latter. She plays with the hair at the nape of my neck. “Build up a following. Bring in clients. I can go out with you at first if you’d like—although, you seem to have the showmanship part down.”

Her words warm the spot in my heart I’ve dubbed “Angie’s Place.” I’ve decided to stay in Aroostook—for now—and I need her to know I’m not leaving when the cameras do. “A compliment from my boss. I want to be able to show you I’m dedicated.” To more than just real estate.

She traces my cheek. “I admire your dedication.”

“I mean it, Angie. The show’s almost done filming, which means it should be airing within a couple of months. It’ll bring a ton of publicity and lots of new clients through the doors.”

She sighs. “That’s the plan. I do need this influx. It was either do the show or start giving classes on how to pass the real estate exam.” She kisses my chest, right above my heart. “I think I placed the right bet.”

“It’ll happen.” I screw up my courage and ask the question that’s been nagging me ever since we had dinner with her family. “Are you in a lot of debt?”

Her hand slides off my body. “I’m making all the minimums. Don’t worry about it.”

I scoop her into my arms and hug her. “I hate to see you worry about money.”

She snuggles into my body for a moment before pushing away. Her head turns away from me. “Money’s a necessary evil, in my book. It’s not the reason I do the job. I like helping people secure their futures.”

Right then and there, I make a promise to help the agency grow. “You’re so selfless. I’m amazed. When my father cut off my trust fund—”

She shakes her head. “What?”

I sit up and let my hand play with her long hair. “Yep. He got pissed when he saw a photo the papps took. Said I needed to find my own way, and cut me off. In an odd sense, I’m grateful to him because it brought me out here.” To her. I don’t add that last bit, but I’m sure she knows it.

“Wow. It all makes sense now. I couldn’t understand why you wanted the part, especially since you had no experience in real estate.”

I shrug. “That’s not exactly true, you know. I have a lot of friends—” I pause.

No, I don’t really have a lot of friends. What I have is a large circle of acquaintances. Blaine is my friend. Trevor *was*. Now I count Angie and her family as budding members of my true friends’ circle. The Angie Spot in my heart grows another size.

Clearing my throat, I start over. “I circulate with diverse groups of people. One time, someone told me he was moving. His house was pretty sick. I’d been there for a few events, so I was pretty familiar with the layout and neighborhood. The next week I was hanging out with a different group, and one of the women mentioned she was looking to move to his city. She told me a bit about what she was looking for, and I could tell she was a perfect fit. I put those two in touch, and she ended up buying his house. From there, everyone started letting me know if they were looking to buy or sell, and I did my best to hook up matches.”

She traces my ab muscles. Her gentle touch makes me want to keep working on them so she has something to admire for many years to come. “That’s pretty cool. You did have a little bit of experience, even if it wasn’t in the traditional sense.”

“Yeah. But I have to admit, the traditional approach is actually more exciting to me. Bringing a buyer to a bunch of properties and seeing which one they choose is a thrill.”

“Exactly!” She kisses the center of my torso. And lower. And lower still.



Before she reaches my now *very* awake cock, I pull her up and flip her over. I don't normally do missionary, but it feels right with this woman because we're so connected. I kiss her face, her lips, and her neck while letting my hands roam over her tits. They're perfect. And so, so real.

“King, if you keep this up, you're going to spoil me.”

“That's the idea.” I give her nipple another tiny bite before grabbing a condom and rolling it on. I have to get inside her and feel her tight walls crush my cock again. Bracketing myself over her, I sink my hips forward and enter her wet pussy.

I pull back and she moans.

Because I don't want to hurt her—she really is very tight around me—I repeat this motion, like our first time. Finally in all the way, I wrap her leg around my hip to gain better leverage. This time I'm in charge, and I intend to take full advantage.

Latching onto her distended nipple, I let my tongue roam around it while my free hand plays with her other one.

On a pant, she exclaims, “Yes, King!”

I worship this woman in my arms with my tongue and my teeth and my cock. Her pussy changes around me, signaling she's going to come again. I pump in and out of her at a fast pace now, sweat rolling off my body and mingling with hers.

When she doesn't break right away, I bite her earlobe—knowing it's one of her erogenous zones. “Come for me, baby,” I whisper in her ear.

Her pussy contracts around me and she screams loud enough for everyone in the whole apartment building to hear. I don't care. This woman is *mine*. When she's almost recovered,

I tweak her nipples and pump into her—hard. Under me, she reignites and I reach down to stroke her clit.

“Again,” she screams as another orgasm rips through her body.

My balls tingle and I pump harder into her. The next second, I explode and roar my satisfaction.

Wrung out, I collapse on top of her, our heads sharing the same pillow and our mouths sucking in the same air. I’ve never felt so complete as when I’m with Angie.

Beneath me, she stirs. “Can’t. Breathe.”

Oh, shit! How could I be so careless? “Sorry!” I roll off of her, our bodies separating with a squishy sound from all the sweat between us. We both laugh as I leave to take care of the condom.

Once we’ve somewhat recovered, I flip the blankets down so we can crawl under them and get some sleep. I’m exhausted. Normally, I don’t do sleepovers, but nothing about my connection with Angie is normal for me.

She sits up and checks the clock. “I didn’t realize the time. I’d better get back home.”

I kiss her lips. “Stay here tonight. You can drive back in the morning.”

She giggles. “It’s already morning. No, it’ll be easier to get up on time if I’m in my own apartment. There won’t be any distractions.” She throws her legs over the side of the bed.

Shaking my head, I try to get her to stay, but she’s adamant. By the time I stand up, she’s already in her skirt and is pulling her shirt down over her braless tits. I stop right in front of her. “Sure there’s nothing I can do to make you stay?”

She folds at her waist and kisses my cock, which has already risen to half-mast. “I wish. But, no.” She grabs her purse. “I’ll see you at the office later, okay?”

Alone and naked, I sit on the bed and run my hand over my stubble. My body screams for some rest, so I get under the covers—which smell like Angie. I fall into a deep sleep, like I don’t have a care in the world.



I wake up bright and early and go to my new trial gym to work out. Some women shoot me welcoming looks, but I don’t reciprocate. If I had a shred of doubt about my future with Angie before last night, it’s gone. I’m a taken man. Once more, I like it. *A lot.*

After a quick shower, I’m back at my apartment, setting out the ingredients for my usual protein shake breakfast. Knowing we’re starting to film the final episode of the show tomorrow, I pull up Blaine’s contact info and give him a call.

We discuss how the first episodes have gone. I’m proud of what we’ve done, and Blaine seems to be as well. “Is Let’s Do It! happy with what they’ve seen so far?”

“They are. They think it’s going to be a runaway hit. I’ll bet you they order season two before this one even airs.”

A steady paycheck. A boon to Russo Real Estate. Win-win in my book. Not to mention I’ll be sharing the screen with Angie, even if we have to keep pretending we’re fighting. “That would be great.”

“Are you sure you can stand working with Angie for another season?”

I almost laugh. He doesn't have a clue about what's been going on between Angie and me. Which is sort of the point of the show. But I'm bursting to share the news, and since Blaine's a bit of a romantic, I don't hesitate to say, "More than you know."

"Something you want to tell me?"

"Perceptive." I grab a glass from the cabinet and walk over to the freezer to add ice. "I can't believe I'm about to confess this to my producer, but Angie and I have been hanging out."

"Hanging out, hanging out? Like having sex?"

His tone of voice tells me he's shocked. I chuckle. "Guess that means we're better actors than you originally thought, huh?" I pour the ingredients into the Vitamix.

"Holy shit, man. I've seen the dailies and had no idea you two are hate-banging."

I put the ice into the Vitamix and set my glass down on the island. "It's not like that, Blaine. She's different, you know?" I turn the machine on.

When the whirling stops, he asks, "Are you telling me you've fallen in *love* with her? The almighty King, captured by a mere commoner?"

"Now wait a minute. Hold your horses there. I didn't say anything about love." Although, now that he mentions it...

"Do you think about her when you're not together?"

Remembering my outing this morning at the gym, I reply, "All the time."

"Buy her gifts?"

“I’ve sent her flowers and chocolates.” Which reminds me, I better send her something to honor what we shared last night. Maybe some lingerie? Nah, she’s perfect naked.

“Long walks on the beach? Overnights in each other’s beds?”

These two questions bring me up short. “No. None of that.”

“Do you want to?”

Shit. Leave it to my oldest friend—Trevor doesn’t count anymore—to call me out. I clear my throat. “They both sound nice.”

“Dude, I didn’t think I’d ever see the day. I’m happy for you. And I’m responsible! You two never would’ve met if I hadn’t cast you on the show. Hmm, maybe we should change the name to *Real Estate Matchmakers Get It On*.”

I chuckle. “Asshole.”

He laughs. “Listen, I’m happy you’ve found the girl for you. I don’t know her well, but she seems awesome. Now I can’t wait to get out there for the final contest.” He pauses. “Soon, you and Angie’ll need to hire yourselves to buy your own dream house.”

His words have a hard landing. Rubbing my stubble, I steer our conversation to his little girls. Ten minutes later, we hang up. I better get a move on, as I still have some prep work to do for the final episode. Angie and I have competing Open Houses and the person who gets the highest rankings from the people who walk through the doors will win the contest, which will be weighted twice in the final tally. Whoever has the highest score for all the competitions wins the series and gets the big bonus check.

I can use the money.

So can Angie.

I finish my protein shake and pop online for gift ideas. What should I get Angie this time? I discard the lingerie idea from earlier and decide on jewelry. Yes. A pair of earrings will be the perfect gift. I do a quick wardrobe change and head out to the highest-rated jewelry store in town.

Proud of the box in my hand, I park in the agency's lot. A grin tugs at my mouth when I notice the huge banner over the door saying, "Congratulations, King!" I enter and take in the streamers and balloons around my desk.

"Nice decorations."

Marlene smiles at me from the reception desk. I walk over to perform our morning ritual of a on her cheek after which she taps my shoulder. "Thanks! I wanted to let the world know you passed the real estate test."

Something dims in me when I realize it was Marlene, and not Angie, who did all this for me. Still, it was a very nice gesture. "I really appreciate it, Marlene. It doesn't feel quite real to me."

"When you get your first client yelling at you, believe me, you'll know it's real."

"You're probably right." I glance over to Angie's empty desk. "Is she in yet?"

She nods. "She was here before, but told me she was tired and went upstairs to take a catnap. She should be back down shortly."

The knowledge that I was the one who made her tired makes me suppress a smile. I rap on the top of the reception

desk. “Appreciate all your hard work around here.” I do. We need to get her on the payroll.

*We?*

Yes. We.

I’m doing the final touches on my Open House for the taping when the interior door opens and Angie enters the office. Her hair is pulled up in a high ponytail and she’s wearing a pair of grey capris with a light pink top and flats. She’s adorable, if not exactly high fashion. Better, she’s all mine.

Standing, I meet her at her desk and lean in for a kiss. At the last second, she turns her head and my lips graze her cheek. Her eyes flip to Marlene, who’s fussing with something on her desk, before settling back on me.

I stifle the urge to pull her in for a hug since despite her being aware of her cousin. “Are you ready for your Open House?”

She nods and walks around me to get to her desk chair. I follow her, the earrings burning a hole in my pocket. “The show gave me an amazing property to work with,” she says. “Get ready to lose.”

I wiggle my eyebrows. “I can say the same thing. At least they’re our clients now, so if we make a sale, the agency gets the commission.”

“Split with Let’s Do It!”

“True. But half of something is better than all of nothing.”

She picks up her pen and pulls out a notepad that has writing scribbled on it. “I have to finish this up, King. Did you want to talk with me about anything else?”

Yes! Like when can we at least come out as a couple to Marlene? I clamp my mouth shut and fish the little box out of my pocket. Bending down, I whisper in her ear, “I’d love to be doing more than talking.” I give her lobe a bite and place my present for her on top of her desk. Without looking back, I amble back to my desk and pretend to search for something on the computer, all the while tracking her movements.

She picks up the tiny box, which she unwraps in her lap, out of Marlene’s field of vision. Tossing the wrapping paper into her garbage can, she pops the box open and her mouth forms a circle. She blinks one time, slowly, at me. I return the gesture. She stands and heads for the ladies’ room.

When Angie returns, I notice the key earrings I purchased for her are now in her ears. She’s wearing a huge grin *I* put on her face. More importantly, no sex was involved—well, not at this moment, anyway.

Returning to my work, I get lost in putting the finishing touches on my project, pleased with all of my ideas and advertising I’ve done. I’m going to win, I know it. I glance at Angie, who’s huddled over her desk flipping envelopes, her brow furrowed. My competitive impulse sputters and the precarious financial situation of the agency takes center stage in my brain. Do I really need the bonus? After all, my salary should tide me over until I get my first commission check.

At six, Marlene stretches and closes up her desk. “I’ll be in early tomorrow morning to help out with any last-minute details for the Open Houses. You should know, though, I’m rooting for Angie—no offense, King, but she’s family.”

“Thanks, Marlene,” Angie says brightly.

For my part, I reply, “None taken. Sorry you’re backing the losing team.”



Shaking her head slightly, Marlene smiles at me as she flips over the sign to say “Closed.”

I wait a beat after she locks up, then I rub my hands together. “Are you done for the day?” I ask Angie with a grin.

“No, unfortunately. I wanted to be a little further along. You should go. Enjoy yourself.” Her words clash with her disgruntled tone.

No way am I going anywhere without her. “No, I’ll stay with you. Let me know what I can do to help.”

At first she objects, insisting we’re adversaries in this little competition, but I remind her that the agency wins despite which one of us takes home the title. Besides, I know it’ll be me .

Unless I let her win...

After we work through some issues with her Open House, I check my Rolex. “We’ll need to hustle if we’re going to make it to your parents’ house for Saturday dinner.”

“Oh.” She tosses her pen onto the top of her desk. “Sorry. I told them I wasn’t coming tonight because of the show. Didn’t want to have to make the trek over to Brooklyn.” She plays with her new earrings.

The prospect of an evening with nothing to do but Angie makes all my blood rush southward. “I like how you think.”

Instead of focusing on the presentation for tomorrow, I picture us in a variety of sexual positions. Doggie-style. Reverse cowboy. Shower. The possibilities are endless.

I push away from the desk and almost trip in my hurry to get to her. “We’d better make the most of our time.” I hold out my hand.

# ANGIE



**M**y hand slides off my new earring and lands in his palm. His very strong, capable hand that made me feel *so much* last night. I was right—his calluses heightened my pleasure.

Because I can't help myself, I stand and lead him up to my apartment. As I climb the stairs first, I feel his eyes boring into me. I sashay a little for him.

As soon as we're inside, King grabs me around my waist and pushes me against the closed front door. "I liked that little show you just put on for me." His hands drop to my hips and he moves them from side to side.

Guess he picked up on my moves. "There's more where that came from."

In response, he covers my mouth with his. Any thoughts I had about ordering in dinner fly out of my head when his tongue demands entrance. With the door at my back and King at my front, I can't move other than my arms. Which drop to his butt and squeeze him forward.

King growls, bends down, and picks me up as effortlessly as if I were a baby. Which I most certainly am not. He heads straight for my bedroom, where he stands me up next to my

queen-sized bed. I kick off my sandals as he strips every article of clothing off my body.

When I'm naked, I reach for his shirt, but he takes a step backward. "On the bed, baby."

Why do I like it that he calls me "baby"? It's not something I expected to like, but out of his mouth, I go to mush and obey without reservation.

Once I'm seated, he looms over me, his gaze skimming over my entire body. He removes his belt in a whoosh, then lets it clatter to the floor at my ankles. His hands pull my legs wide open, dragging me down to the edge of the bed. King then gets to his knees and laps my clip. I'm screaming his name in under three minutes.

While I'm still coming down off my orgasm, he takes off all his clothes, not caring where they end up. "On all fours, baby. I'm going to take you doggie-style."

His imagination has never failed me once, so I quickly flip over and get into position. He grabs a pillow and shoves it under my tummy, which raises my ass higher into the air. "I like this," he rumbles. His erection, now covered by a condom, pushes against my entrance.

Out of my mind with pleasure, I order him, "Take me, King."

"How do you want me?"

"Hard. Fast."

"I like the sound of that." He slides home—no preliminaries this time—and starts to thrust hard. My boobs swing with every push, skimming against the blanket, my sensitive nipples sending sparks to where we're joined.

He does exactly as I told him, fucking me hard and fast. My climax shimmers ahead, taunting me for a brief minute before exploding. I scream, “King!” as wave after wave of contractions wrack my body.

He pounds into me three more times before stiffening. His groan signals his completion as his hands bury into the soft flesh of my hips. I’ll probably have bruises there, but I don’t care.

Panting, I let my head drop to the bed. If this is casual sex, I never want to do anything else.

King pulls away from me and excuses himself to take care of the condom, and I crawl up into my bed. It’s only seven. Plenty of time to eat dinner, go another round, and then get a good night’s sleep for tomorrow’s Open House.

King re-enters my bedroom, and the light glints off his body. He really should be in magazine ads. Women everywhere would drool over him. Not for the first time, I comment, “You should be a model.”

He rubs his stubble. “No way. I know too many of those guys. They can’t have a cheat day, like, ever.”

He slips into bed next to me, and I cuddle at his side, his woody scent invading my senses. Warmth spreads through my body as this sex god kisses my shoulder. I meet his gaze. “Speaking of cheat days, want to order a pizza?”

“Wow. Now that’s a real cheat. Sure, why not?”

I pick up my phone and order one from my favorite pizzeria. “Well, we still have about forty minutes to kill.” I play with his flat nipples. “Whatever shall we do?”

He licks his lips. “I’m sure we’ll think of something.”

And we do.

After the pizza is devoured and we've had a third round of amazing sex, I check the time. It's almost midnight, and our call time is eight in the morning. *Shit.*

I turn my head and King seems to be settling in for the evening. He's under the sheet and quilt, his hand stroking my leg. *What could one overnight harm?* I know it's against the rules I've established for this thing we have, but it does seem silly for him to leave now, only to return in a few hours. Besides, that's what I did last night, and I had to take a midday nap to compensate for the sleeplessness. It wouldn't be fair to give him such a disadvantage for the final competition. I'd like to win fair and square.

"Would you like to stay over?" I rub my wedding rings. This is just casual sex, nothing more.

"Thought you'd never ask."

He pulls me in close to his body and I rest my head between his shoulder and torso. I close my eyes and fall fast asleep.

The buzzing of my alarm wakes me at six-thirty. My hand finds my cell and shuts it off, but my eyes remain closed. I rearrange myself, only to feel the welcoming warmth of the man beside me.

My eyes spring open to meet King's gaze.

"Good morning, beautiful. Sleep well?"

Muddle-headed, I raise up on my arm and look down at him. *Shit.* Events from last night replay in my mind, and I exhale.

The overnight was a one-off. It has to be.

“I did,” I croak. “I better go brush my teeth.” Without waiting for his response, I toss the blankets to the side and stand. Only then do I realize I’m naked. Rushing to my closet, I grab my bathrobe, tie it around me, and make my way into the only bathroom I have in the apartment.

While I’m brushing, the door opens and a very naked King strides into the bathroom, as if he belongs here. “Do you have an extra toothbrush I could borrow?”

I spit out the toothpaste and bend down to rummage through the cabinet below. Finding an unopened package, I hand it to him.

So domestic.

My breathing hitches.

I rinse my mouth. “You go ahead and brush your teeth. I’ll take a shower.”

“Or we could take one together.”

He wiggles his eyebrows, pulling a reluctant smile from me. Casual sex happens in showers, right? Why not? I untie my bathrobe as he furiously brushes his teeth. Turning on the shower for the water to warm up, I hang the bathrobe on its hook and slip inside the enclosure.

King joins me a minute later, and we enjoy early morning shower sex. Casual-style.

We descend into the office before anyone from the crew arrives. The only person present is Marlene, whose mouth falls open when she sees us together.

I stop and whisper, “Let me talk with my cousin.”

“I can join you.”

Panicked at the thought of what she might tell my sister, or worse, my parents, I shake my head. “No. I’ve got this.”

Forcing my head high, I approach Marlene at the reception desk. She speaks first. “Do you have something you want to share?”

I bite my bottom lip. “It’s not what it looks like.”

Her face lights up. “Really? Because it looks like you two spent the night together.” She waves toward King’s desk. “I don’t blame you one bit.”

I might as well come clean. “Well, we did. But it’s all good. It’s just casual.”

She plays with my new key earrings King gave me yesterday. “Are these new?”

I purse my lips and look at the floor. “Yeah. Well, King gave them to me.”

“Not to mention the flowers and chocolates.”

I play with the bottom of my still-damp hair. “I talked with Juliana about this. She says casual sex is fine.”

“What do you mean by ‘fine’?”

I shrug. She knows all about Dante. “King’s not, like, my soul mate or anything. We’re only casual.”

Her expression says it all—she doesn’t believe me. “Do you laugh with him?”

“Of course I do. You know he’s funny.”

She nods. “Do you enjoy meals together?”

I think about all the takeout we’ve consumed, plus Sunday at my family’s. And our meal last night. “Well, yes, but that doesn’t mean anything. We have to eat.”

“I’m not going to lie, I think King may be the best thing that’s happened to you in a long time. I haven’t seen you look so happy since, well...” She trails off. “However, I’ve known you since you were a kid. I understand how much you buy into the whole soul mate thing, and I have one thing to tell you. Don’t fool yourself into thinking you’re only having something casual with him.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Don’t talk crazy, Marlene. That’s all it is.”

“Uh-huh.”

Just then, the door opens and Blaine, Kaitlyn, and the crew enters. “Who’s ready to shoot the final episode?”

I turn away from my cousin, grateful for the reprieve. “Me!”

Across the room, a baritone replies, “Me, too, bro. Good to see you.”

Blaine orders, “Then get into wardrobe and let’s get this show on the road.”

Turning to face my annoying cousin, I say, “I’m going to win this challenge. Which means I’ll win the entire show and take home the bonus. Of course, you’ll get your cut first.” I pause. “King doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“Thanks, and good luck. With both those things.”



I sit next to Shelley in a club Let’s Do It! rented out for our wrap party. Yesterday’s shoot went really well, and I think I won. I hope so. The bonus money, in addition to the Maguires’ commission plus my salary from the show, would save the



agency. Although...King did say his trust fund was cut off, which is why he considered the role in the first place. Maybe I could share a little of my winnings with him. If I win.

King walks across the dancefloor carrying two glasses, one of which I'm sure is bourbon and the other is my usual drink of Baileys and chocolate vodka. All female heads follow his progress. Why not? The man is gorgeous.

Marlene is wrong about me. I *can* do casual. We're having some steamy sex, nothing more. I deserve it, don't I?

"Here you go, baby."

I take my drink from him. "Shhh, we don't want other people to hear you calling me that."

King turns his head. "No one could hear me. Besides, why does it matter?"

Pet names are too close to a relationship. I should've corrected him from the start. "You really shouldn't call me that. Ever." I take a sip of my drink, which gives me a strange aftertaste. Almost sour.

"I thought you liked it?" An edge of hurt wraps around the question.

"It's probably for the best if you don't." I take another taste and my drink is still off, so I put it on the table in front of me.

King looks like he's about to say something else, but Blaine stands in front of the room and bangs a butter knife against his glass, drawing everyone's attention to him. "First of all, I want to thank you all for making *Battle of the Real Estate Matchmakers* the best show it can be. The studio is extremely satisfied with your work, so kudos to all of you!"

Everyone in the crew claps. Milo even makes a wolf whistle.

“Also, I’d like to offer my congratulations to King and Angie. You two were amazing on screen together. I can guarantee that you’re going to be the bickering couple of the year!”

King and I both laugh at his assessment, which is close to the truth. On screen, we did fight a lot. We’re both stubborn and have firm, and sometimes dissenting, views on real estate.

“Now I’m turning the floor over to Kaitlyn. She’s going to announce the results from yesterday’s shoot.”

I cross my legs. Next to me, King’s breath hitches. A part of me wants to reach out and rub his back. To tell him I’ll share the money if the bonus goes to me.

*No! What the hell are you thinking?*

Kaitlyn takes her spot. “Thanks, Blaine. As you know, our matchmakers held two Open Houses yesterday, both at gorgeous properties. The Open Houses were rated by the people who did walk-throughs—from ambiance, to the friendliness of the agent, to the agent’s knowledge of the property, etc. I’ve tabulated the scores and we have a winner, although the results were pretty tight.”

She holds up a check. I rub my damp hands on my capris.

“Without further ado, here are the results. Angie, you received a total of seventy-six points, while King got seventy-two. Congrats, Angie! You won this last contest and are the show’s first winner!”

A rushing noise pools in my ears at her words. I won! With my winnings and commissions, I can keep the agency afloat, use some for marketing and even bank a little. I spring from

my chair, jumping up and down while everyone around me cheers.

King, standing next to me, claps. “Congrats.”

My eyes meet Marlene’s. *Casual*. Shaking my head at King, I stride over to Kaitlyn and accept my check. I glance down at the numbers in the corner. Fifty thousand dollars. Blaine hugs me. “Well done.”

“Thank you.”

He puts his hands around his mouth. “Do you want to hear from the winner?”

The crew claps, and I smile and take a bow. “Thank you, everyone, for all your help during taping. Shelley, you were a wizard with makeup and hair. Milo, I loved hearing your crazy stories about the other shows you’ve worked on. I can’t thank you all enough for how welcome you made this Brooklyn girl feel.” My gaze shifts to King, who looks happy for me—proud, almost—despite what must have been a disappointing loss. “To my co-star, King, you made this show ... unforgettable.”

Another round of applause starts at the sound of King’s name. When Blaine urges him to say a few words, he joins me. “Congratulations, Angie. Your win was hard-fought, I can tell you that. I, too, want to say how much I appreciate everyone in this room. It’s like we’ve become a family, and that means the world to me.” He raises his glass and takes a sip. “Oh, and I definitely want a rematch next season!”

The room laughs at his last line, but I’m stuck on his remark about family. Something he’s never really had. My heart does a little tumble for him, but Shelley pulls me in for a hug and I’m soon chatting with everyone from the crew. It

strikes me that King was right. This group of strangers has become like a second family. I saw the show as a means to an end, but it's become so much more than that.

A glint of blonde hair across the room catches my eye. Poppy. Seriously? What is she doing here?

I stomp over to her. "What brought you here tonight?"

"Hello to you, too, Angie. Brooklyn may be, well, Brooklyn, but it's a borough of New York City. I thought you would have learned some manners."

I squeeze my mouth shut. "This is a closed party."

"Got my invite right here." She holds up her cell phone. "Kaitlyn invited me."

You've got to be kidding. "For someone who didn't want anything to do with the show, you certainly insinuated your way into several episodes."

"Whose clients do you think they were using, Angela? Clearly not yours."

I suck in a breath. I'd never stopped to question where the show was getting so many clients. In the back of my mind, I guess I thought they put out ads or something. This sucks, but I have to brazen it out. "It's Angie," I correct. "I can assure you, all of the clients who were filmed enjoyed the Russo Real Estate touch."

"Especially when that touch came from King." She tilts her head toward my co-star. "I taught him everything he knows."

"What?" Her last salvo strikes a chord in me. "You were nowhere to be found when he was learning the ropes from *me*."

Poppy throws her head back and laughs. “That’s rich. We spent many a night together discussing the right way to sell real estate. In between rolling in the sheets, of course.”

My heartrate picks up at her obvious lies. He spends his nights with *me*. I want to throttle her for even thinking about King that way. He’s *mine*.

Oh, no.

This can’t be happening.

My hand raises in front of my mouth. *No, no, no.*

“What are you two ladies talking about?” King appears at my side.

Tall. Built. Gorgeous. Tender. Caring. Vulnerable.

Marlene was right. I can’t do casual.

Poppy places her hand on his strong forearm and says something. I can’t understand a single word. Shaking my head, I murmur, “I feel sick,” and rush away from the pair. I don’t stop moving until I’m lying on my bed with a box of tissues.

I grab my left wrist and Dante’s name swims before my eyes. My eyes travel up to my rings. How could this have happened?

Tears stream down my face. I’ve fallen for King. It’s not only about the sex. It’s barely about the sex. I know about his deepest pains and sorrows, and he knows about mine. I want to make him see that family doesn’t have to be a four-letter word. I want to laugh with him. I want to cry with him.

I want to run the agency with him.

All that was supposed to be done with Dante.

Dante's the one I pledged myself to. Dante's my soul mate, even if he's not here anymore. I shouldn't have ever let anything come between us. I never will again.

# KING



I park my car in the agency's lot. For the tenth time, I recheck my texts with Angie from last night.

Where did you go? I'm waiting for you by the bar.

Fifteen minutes later she responded.

Angie: Felt sick, had to leave.

Can I do anything? Should I bring you some chicken soup?

Angie: No. Stay away.

I sigh. Is she actually sick? I don't believe her, given that she seemed perfectly fine before Poppy showed up. The party continues around me, but my enthusiasm dampens.

The next morning, I pick up the quart of wonton soup from next door—my twist on the idea of the Jewish remedy for sickness—and head into the office. Blaine and Kaitlyn asked for an end of season debrief about the show, and sure enough, they're standing by the conference room door. No sign of Angie.

"Hey Marlene." I place the soup container on top of her desk, kiss her cheek and she taps my shoulder. "Hope you had

fun last night.”

“I did. Have to hand it to Let’s Do It! They really know how to throw a party.”

I chuckle. “That they do.” I tap the container. “Have you seen Angie?”

Marlene shakes her head. “No. She hasn’t come down yet.”

“Wow. Must be some bug. I’ll go bring this up to her.”

I grab the plastic container and start toward her door, but Blaine intercepts me. “Hi, buddy. Are you ready for the debrief?”

“Sure am.” I hold up the soup. “Let me bring this up to Angie and we’ll be right down.”

His brows pull together. “Is she sick?”

“Yeah.”

He puts his hand on my shoulder. “Go take care of your woman. We’ll start when you get here.”

“Thanks.”

*My woman.* I like the sound of that. Smiling, I continue my path to her door, when it opens and a bedraggled Angie enters the office.

Blaine calls out. “Oh, Angie, you’re here.”

She waves and the tissue she’s holding flaps limply.

Blaine continues, “Heard you’re under the weather. Let’s get the meeting over with so you can go back to bed.”

“Okay,” she croaks.



I take her by the arm, but she flinches away. Wow. Must be some strong bug. Something in her demeanor seems off, though, like she's not really sick. "How are you feeling?" I try to place my hand on her forehead, but she turns away from me.

"I'll be all right. I just need to get my head back on straight."

"Got you some wonton soup."

She half-smiles. "Thanks. Please put it in the fridge, and I'll take it back upstairs when we're finished down here."

I leave her to do as I'm told, more worried about her now that I've seen her. My whole body buzzes like before I've walked the red carpet. Returning to the conference room, I take the empty seat next to Angie.

"Great. Let's hurry through this meeting so Angie can rest. First off, the folks at the network are excited by what they've seen so far. We're fast-tracking the editing process and hope to have the show on the air within two months."

I nod. "Impressive."

Blaine discusses a few more details, then turns his head to Kaitlyn, who hands us our paychecks. One-hundred thousand dollars. A very good down payment to my new life. One I'm going to build right here, in Aroostook. With Angie.

"I wanted to add to what I said last night. You two are dynamite on the screen. We're hoping the studio will green-light a second season and we want you both to star. Perhaps with a few new realtors, to keep the concept fresh."

Angie raises a tissue to her nose and blows. She picks up her check. "All this sounds great, but I really need to go lie down. Thank you for this opportunity. I'll never forget what

you've done for Russo Real Estate." She hustles out of the room.

"Excuse me." I push away from the table and catch up with Angie on the stairs. "Angie. Wait. Let me help you."

"No, King. Please leave me alone."

I don't want to push her if she's feeling crappy, but I have a sinking feeling something else is at play. Going against my better instincts, I acquiesce. "I'm just a text away."

She nods and finishes trudging up the stairs. I return to the conference room.

"How's she doing?"

"You saw her, Blaine. Whatever bug she has, it's awful."

He nods. "We've basically run through everything. Why don't you go help her out?"

"Wait," Kaitlyn interjects. "Have I missed something?"

Blaine and I exchange looks. Smiling, I reply, "Angie and I are dating."

Kaitlyn's shock is almost comical. "No way!" she says, slapping the table. "I didn't see that coming."

"Our boy here can be sneaky when he wants," Blaine replies.

Kaitlyn and I laugh, and a few minutes later she heads off for another meeting. My old friend hangs around for a chat. "I'd love for you to come into New York City with me tonight. Got invited to a hot club that has your name written all over it."

"I doubt Angie's up for it."

“I get that, but I want to hang out with my buddy before flying back to LA. Something tells me you’re going to be spending more time in this part of the country from now on.” He bumps shoulders. “It’ll be like old times.”

I look upward. Angie was in no mood to be coddled, so maybe I should go. Blaine’s a true friend, and I’m grateful to him. Plus, we really haven’t had any time to hang out together. Pulling out my phone, I say, “Let me ask Angie if she wants to come.”

I send the text, to which she replies in the negative, and tells me to go out with Blaine. “Looks like I’m going to the party solo.”

His hand descends on my shoulder. “Jewel’s at home, so it’ll be just you and me, buddy. The car will pick you up around nine.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

After saying good-bye to Marlene, I head back to my apartment. Hanging out with Blaine tonight should be fun, although I wish Angie were coming.

After taking a shower, I go through my typical routine with my grooming and clothes, but somehow it feels empty. Because Angie’s not here. I grab my phone.

*I’m leaving with Blaine in a few minutes. Last chance—are you sure you don’t want me to help you feel better?*

Her response comes about five minutes later. *I’m sure.*

A few seconds later: *Have fun.*

Placing my phone in my back pocket, I head to the front of my building, where a car takes Blaine and me into the City. We catch up on the ride, sharing stories and reconnecting.

When we get to the club, we're escorted to the VIP section, where everyone wants to chat Blaine up since he's a television producer.

I wander over to the bar and get two fingers of bourbon. It's a surprise, and not a pleasant one, when Poppy appears at my right and orders a chardonnay. In the dim light, she looks ten years younger. Except her facelift has left her eyes open too wide. "Imagine running into you out here." She air kisses both of my cheeks.

I don't have any desire to engage, but I also don't want to be impolite. "Thought you never left the Hamptons."

She waves her wineglass. "Have to slum it sometimes."

I clink my glass to hers, already scheming for a way out. Lacey and London Toalle capture my attention. Perfect. "Excuse me, but I see a couple of my friends over there. I haven't talked to them in months, so I should go say hello."

She leans in and kisses me on the mouth, just as a flashbulb goes off. *Great.* "I'll see you around, King." Ignoring the paparazzi, I rush away from her and approach the twins, greeting each of them with a kiss on the cheek. "How are you doing, ladies?"

London replies, "So much better now that you're here, King. We haven't seen you around since Mexico—where have you been hiding yourself?"

For once, the reminder of Mexico, and the fallout of the stupid decisions I made there, doesn't sting. "I've been working for Blaine on his upcoming television show that taped out in Aroostook. It wrapped the other day."

Lacey winds her arm into the crook of mine. "I love it out there. The parties are fantastic."

I look down at the dark-haired beauty. London, Lacey, and I have been friends for years, and that friendship occasionally had benefits. Although I'd like to stay friends, I now have zero interest in the benefits part. "My apartment building has a great party every Thursday night, but I've been too busy with the show and the agency to enjoy much of the nightlife."

"What agency?" London asks.

Flashbulbs go off to my right side. Ignoring them, I reply, "Russo Real Estate. The show's about real estate agents."

"Cool," Lacey says, squeezing my arm. "Want us to remind you of what you've been missing?" For her part, London seizes my other arm and pushes her ample tits toward me. They're glorious fakes. I know from experience.

I suck in my chest away from London and extricate my arms from both of them. "While your offer sounds amazing, I've actually met someone."

The twins' faces fall in an identical expression of disappointment, then they exchange a look and shrug. Lacey swivels her head from left to right. "Where is she? I want to meet the lucky lady who captured your wandering eye."

Have I had a wandering eye? Considering the fact I've had threesomes with the twins, plus hooked up with several of the ladies here, I guess the answer is yes. It's all changed now. "Sorry. She's home with an awful bug."

The women sigh and we make idle chit-chat for a while until they excuse themselves to go to the restroom. One of the many things I'll never understand about women.

"That looked cozy." The voice is familiar but not welcome. I'd hoped he was back in LA, but no such luck. Trevor appears at my side.

I take another sip of my bourbon. “We were catching up. They’re sweet.”

He raises one eyebrow. “And hot. And very flexible.”

“If you’ll excuse—”

“King.”

Although I’m satisfied with my decision to cut him out of my life, which was a long time coming, I freeze at his forlorn tone. “Yes?”

“Come on, we’ve been friends forever. Where’s the love?”

His plea doesn’t fall on deaf ears, but I remind myself of the way he hit me up for money a few weeks ago. “I think it’s better left in the past.”

“You can’t mean that.” He runs his hand under his nose and sniffs.

I pause and take a better look at him. He’s more gaunt than I’ve ever seen him. The transformation is most noticeable in his face. His cheeks are sunken. His nose, red. His hair is in desperate need of a cut. Despite myself, years of caring for this man resurface. “Hey, are you feeling all right?”

Trevor straightens. In an indignant voice, he replies, “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know. It’s just that you look a little...peaked.”

“Been burning both ends, you know? *My* real estate business is booming.”

I nod as if I agree, but his response rings hollow. He never was one to hustle for a sale. Not when there was a party somewhere. “Thought you might have caught something. Angie has a nasty bug and she’s down for the count.”

“Angie, huh?” He nudges me in the stomach. “Come on, you can tell me. Something going on between you two?”

“We’re dating.” The words spring free before I have the chance to censor them. “But keep that on the down low. We don’t want word to get out, considering the show will be billing us as adversaries.”

He elbows me. “Dang. Isn’t she married?”

My need to defend her honor rushes out. “No. She’s a widow.”

He touches his nose again. “Oh. Well, your secret’s safe with me, brother.” He pauses. “So, is this serious? Have you met her folks?”

I can’t help myself. A smile overtakes my face as I remember my dinner with her family. The first of many, I hope. “I did. She has a big Italian family from Brooklyn. Kind of a zoo, but they’re all really nice.”

“Huh. Who are you and what have you done with King? Has she met your parents?”

I smile around my glass of bourbon. “Well, the show taped a segment at Dad’s concert, so she met him. Not Mom. Apparently she’s shacking up with another ‘super guy.’”

He nods in acknowledgment about my mother. “Must’ve been some meeting with the band. I bet your father swept her off her feet, like he does with all the ladies. Like father, like son.”

His last comment has a tinge of bitterness to it. I clap my hand on his shoulder, ready to end our talk. “Well, it was good catching up with you, but I should be going.”

I only make it one step before he calls out to me. “Hey. King.”

I twist my head back to look at him.

“You never responded to my loan request. I need the funds for a sure thing.”

“I’ve heard that before.” I’m about to tell him about the demise of my trust fund, but decide against it. It’s none of his business, and it’s beside the point. I should never have given him any “loans” in the first place, turning into his enabler.

“You won’t miss it.”

His words hit home. Before, I wouldn’t have missed the money because it wouldn’t have come from me. Dad’s trust fund was an endless source of funds, and if it ever got low, I could always hit him up for extra cash. With my new appreciation for how hard it is to make my own money—and the satisfaction that comes with it—I realize it’s time for Trevor to figure his own shit out.

“The gravy train is over, Trevor. Please get yourself to rehab.”

His face transforms into an ugly scowl that punches me in the gut, but it vanishes a second later.

From across the room, Blaine waves me over. Ignoring Trevor’s bizarre reaction, I toss over my shoulder, “Gotta go.”

Part of me feels bad for Trevor. He’s obviously gotten himself involved in some bad shit, but I don’t want to get submerged in it. From now on, I’m planning for the future. With Angie.



# ANGIE



**S**unlight makes its way through my foggy brain, causing me to peel my eyes open. If only alcohol were the cause of this awful hangover. No. I cried myself to sleep last night and woke up twice crying from the injustice of it all. I did what Juliana urged me to do—casual sex, no strings attached. With King.

Why didn't my heart get the memo?

I throw my arm over my head, willing tears not to fall down my cheeks again. I need a distraction. Picking up my phone, I open Instagram and scroll through my feed.

Pretty book covers.

Makeup hints.

Party photos of beautiful people.

My finger hovers over the last photo, when my puffy eyes land on someone familiar. *Two* someones. I zoom in, ignoring the people in the foreground for a better look at the ones in the background.

I shoot up to sitting in bed. That's King and Poppy Mayflower! And they're...kissing!

Rubbing my eyes, I double-check the photo. That's them. I click on the hashtag, which takes me to another site, and scroll

through all of their photos. Not that one. Nope. Nope.

Bingo. Poppy's lips are fused with King's. Or is it the other way around?

Blood rushes through my veins as if I closed another million-dollar deal. Which I'm in the process of doing now, twice, thanks to the show. That's beside the point. "How dare he!" I shout, the words ripping free from the base of my soul.

I'm about to scroll through more photos—as if I need additional proof—when the phone rings in my hand. It's Juliana, and I'm tempted to give her a piece of my mind. I pick up the call.

"Juliana."

"Hey, sis. I was on *The Gossip* this morning and saw all sorts of photos of King out last night. Were you there?"

No, because my heart was breaking from the realization I've fallen for my casual hook-up. At her urging. "No." My voice is flat.

"The pictures show him with all sorts of women."

My voice turns sharper. "More than Poppy?"

"Yeah, honey. There's a ton of him with the Toalle twins. You know, the Greek heiresses?"

Looking down at my phone, I bring the site back up while she drones on about something. I catch the words "back on that horse" and "proud" and "moving on," but I don't pay much attention. Ignoring her, I scroll through until I come across a spate of pictures with King in them. With Lacey and London hanging off his gorgeous body. Which belongs to *me*.

*Stop it, Angie!* His body belongs to him. Plus half the female population, apparently. As if I needed any further

confirmation that he's not good for my mental health, I stop on a particularly damning one where both Toalle twins have intertwined their arms with his. Imagine *that* threesome.

"I'm so sorry. I know you were doing the casual thing and—"

"Juliana," I cut her off. "Listen. It doesn't matter. I got tired of it all anyway. He's free to do what he wants. With whomever." I can't bring myself to confess the truth—I got so caught up in him that I didn't remember Dante for a whole half-day.

"But you saw how good it could be, right? Sex without any entanglements. I bet King set your body on fire. Just look at that man's feet. You know what they say about feet."

I do. And his dick more than lives up to the hype. I fiddle with my wedding ring. "Sure. Yes. It was good. Now it's over."

"Well, I really am proud of you, honey." A strain underlies her upbeat tone, but I dismiss it. "Now that you've seen the benefits of casual, the next time won't be so difficult. See—you didn't break your pledge to your soul mate."

Her last words wound me deeper than the photos from last night, and the waterworks start all over again. Not wanting her to know how much I'm hurting, I end the call and throw the phone onto the bed. Still crying, I pick up the Bucket List.

"Dante, I'm so sorry. Our vows mean more to me today than ever before. It won't happen again."

Crickets.

I wish Dante were here with me right this second, wrapping me in his arms and whispering how much he loves me. Kissing my lips with the fierce passion we shared when

we first started dating. Which got weaker and weaker as the disease tore him away from me.

My heart stutters at the memory of his last words to me. “I love you, forever.” He took his last breath and left me.

Tears streaming down my face, I jump out of bed and rush into the shower, turning it up as hot as I can handle. As I wash my hair and then my body, my tears cease and my mind begins to knit itself back together.

King doesn’t know the meaning of loyalty, but I do. I will remain loyal to my husband.

Which means King has to go. Forever.

When I step out of the shower, I survey my face in the mirror. My puffy eyes have turned a deeper hue, and the redness has started to fade. Good. I am strong. I can do this—on my own, thank you very much. After all, I got my last two checks from Let’s Do It!

Once I’m dressed, I enter the kitchen and make myself a cup of coffee. I pick up my phone and the last photo I was looking at, King with his hands full of the two sisters, greets me. This is the right decision. I need to let him go for my own sanity—I owe this much to Dante. We clearly were nothing but a casual hook-up to King anyway, so he’ll take it in stride.

*That’s what he does.*

Pulling up his contact, I call him. His baritone voice sails through the phone. “Hey, Angie. How are you feeling?”

I must be a much better actress than I thought, since he obviously believed I was sick yesterday. Well, I guess I was. In a way. Even though he can’t see me, I raise my chin. “I’m much better now.” Not a lie.

“That’s great.” The clank of a spoon hitting the counter reaches me ears, and he swallows what I presume to be his coffee. “I’m getting ready to head out to the gym and I’ll be at your place by noon.”

“That’s what I was calling you about.”

“Oh?”

Girding my whole body, I vomit the words that have been running around in my head. “Yeah. You see, filming is over and the crew is gone. The show won’t air for a couple of months, and I’ve decided I was too impetuous originally. It was important for you to work at the agency during filming, but now that it’s over, I don’t think it’s important anymore.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying”—I pick up my spoon from the counter—“I don’t think it’s necessary for you to work here. It was a ridiculous idea in the first place. Without the cameras around, it doesn’t make sense.”

“Angie, what *you’re* saying doesn’t make sense. The show will air and then people will call wanting to see me. I need to be with you.”

He doesn’t get it. Plus, the show wasn’t all about him. A frost coats my heart. “No, King. When people call, I’ll handle them. I can say you were a hired actor.”

“What the hell? I got my license. Because *you* insisted on it. I’m a true real estate agent, and you know it.”

The knife twists in my gut. I ignore it. “You can use that license anywhere in the state. From now on, your presence is no longer required here.”

A harsh breath comes through the phone. “Angie, what brought this on? We’re a good team.” His voice deepens. “A very good team.”

Memories of just how good we were together hurl through my brain. Those new pictures flash through my mind’s eye. I’m overwhelmed with the need to lash out. “King, it’s all over. The show, your working here, our relat—whatever we had going on. Done.”

“You’re out of your mind. You must still be sick.”

“I’m fine.” I run my hand through my hair. “I’m finally thinking clearly. Listen to me. You can’t buy me with all your gifts.”

“That’s not what I was doing! You mean—”

I cut him off. “It’s best this way. A total break. The show’s over and so are we. Keep partying with as many women as you want. I’ll have Marlene clean out your desk and send your personal effects to you later today. Good-bye.”

I disconnect the call. He calls me back. I decline the call and turn my phone off.

My heart wonders why I referred to his stuff as “personal effects.”



**F**ive days later and I’m still going through the motions at work. Fielding calls, setting up appointments, showing houses. Every day King texts, but I never open his messages. Even though the short previews I did read deny he did anything at that party with Poppy and the twins. That never was the real issue anyway. I need to cut him out of my heart and remain

loyal to my one soul mate—Dante. If this is how casual relationships end, it's one more reason not to get involved with them. Ever again.

Not to mention that yesterday was my anniversary with Dante. I spent it in bed. Crying.

Marlene brings me back to the here and now when she picks up her purse. "I'm going to pick up lunch from the deli. Want anything?"

I shake my head. Food doesn't have any allure for me anymore. With heavy-footed steps, Marlene walks toward the door. When I told her King wasn't working here anymore, she tried to get me to change my mind until she realized she'd never win. She's been as professional and sweetly helpful as ever, and my guilt over her working for free evaporated with the bonus check I gave her from the show's payment, but her offhand remarks about "being alone" and "needing another agent like King around here" still hurt.

In the office, my gaze strays to the desk where King used to work. Where he studied so hard for the real estate exam. I slam my traitorous eyes shut. *Enough.*

Leo calls, again, and I let him go to voicemail, too. My family's been all over me since I skipped Saturday dinner, but I'm not in the mood. I'm not sure how much longer I can keep everyone at bay, but so far, so good. Guess I'll have to make an appearance this Saturday, but my normal excitement at being with my family isn't there. All I want is to be left alone. All alone.

The door opens and I automatically stand to greet whomever it is—while I want the people I care about to stay away, I'm happy to make some stranger into a client. But my

forward progress stops when I realize who's darkening my door. "Poppy."

The woman in question looks around, nodding. "About what I expected from a girl from Brooklyn."

I cross my arms across my chest. "Why are you here?"

She walks into the office and sets her Fendi bag down on one of the empty agent desks. "We need to come to an understanding."

I don't move an inch. After everything's that gone down with King—not to mention the awful photo showing their lips all over each other—I don't have the strength to deal with her shit. "We have one. You stay away from me, and I'll do the same."

She laughs. "Believe me, I'd like nothing more. Alas..." She runs her fingertip over the top of the desk, looks at it, and rubs it against the rest of her fingers. "The Maguire sale. We need to finalize the details, as it closes tomorrow."

Shit. The Maguires. We have to split the commission, as she represents the seller, I'm the buyer's agent and Let's Do It! needs to get its cut. Not having another choice, I say, "Let's talk in here." Turning, I pick up their file from my desk and head into the conference room.

Poppy walks into the room, her nose as high as King's was the first time he came in here. It hits me this is the first time the woman has been to my office since I opened, while I've been to her office many, many times. My, how the tables have turned.

She takes a seat after dusting it off. "I heard you ran King out of here."



My stomach twists. “He wasn’t a good fit,” I lie. He was. In more ways than one, which is exactly why he’s no longer here.

A second later, the bottom drops out of my stomach. Oh, no! Has she recruited him to her agency *and* her bed?

She shrugs. “I heard he’s still in town, though. I’m thinking of asking him to join the leading agency in the Hamptons.”

I slump back in my chair. He’s not working with her. The other doesn’t matter. I wave my hand. “You’ll soon see he’s only about the cameras.” The words are so fake they almost stick in my throat, but Poppy doesn’t notice.

She opens her bag and pulls out the contract, and we go over the terms. Throughout it all, my mind keeps returning to King.

Satisfied with the results of our meeting, Poppy stands. “Call my office and I’ll have someone stop by to pick up my check tomorrow, after the closing.” She takes two steps. “Probably Geoff.”

*Bitch.* I stand and force my hands to remain open. “Fine.”

She stops at the threshold. “Oh, and *Angie*, don’t think it will go unnoticed when King joins Mayflower. The media will love that the co-star of your silly show has come to work for me. *With* me.” She pauses. “Or under me, as the case may be.”

The mental image of the two of them in his bed brings my hand to my mouth, but I manage to keep from gagging. Who he does is of no concern to me—it never was. I suck in a breath. “I am sure you’ll find many uses for his talents, even if they aren’t in real estate.”

She sweeps out of the conference room. Marlene says something to her, but I can't make out the words as I fall back into a chair.

Like before, I'm building Russo Real Estate all by myself. King is of no consequence.

# KING



I swallow the last of my protein shake after a workout that left my arms and legs burning but didn't bring me any satisfaction. For the past days, I've been pushing myself twice as hard at the gym, trying to make sense of what went wrong with Angie.

I slam the glass down into the sink. Angie and I made love. It was making love, not just sex. I've never felt so connected to another human being.

So what if I sent her presents? I wasn't trying to "buy her" as she put it. They were gifts to let her know how much she means to me.

*Just like Dad used to do.*

Shit. Does she have a point? No. I refuse to believe that.

My mind goes back to that fateful phone call a week ago. At first, I was so mad at her for ending things between us that I loaded up on my favorite bourbon and drank myself into a stupor. For three days. No one called to check up on me.

When I reemerged into the land of the living, I saw those pictures on *The Gossip* and cursed a blue streak. I tried calling Angie again and again, but she wouldn't answer. I texted her, but she didn't respond.

Maybe it's time for me to face the fact she's not into me.

*No fucking way.* Angie and I were making a real connection. I met her family. We were working together to grow her agency. We had plans. I refuse to believe I meant nothing to her. Which means she either got scared because I was her first after Dante, or she saw those stupid pictures.

How can I get through to her?

I have to figure out a way to show Angie she wasn't some random hook-up. She's it for me—her beauty, her intellect, her sass—the only woman I'll ever want to be with for the rest of my life. These feelings cannot be only one-sided.

I consider enlisting her brothers to help, but they'll support her, no matter what. Family first, and all that.

*Who else can help me?*

I pick up my phone and call Blaine. He's happily married. He'll be able to give me advice. The line rings. Rings. Goes to voicemail. I don't leave a message.

Biting the inside of my lip, I open my Contacts and scroll through all of the five hundred people in my phone, looking for another friend I can reach out to for help.

No one qualifies.

I shut my phone.

Without Angie, I'm all alone.

No way I'm going to give up—not when the stakes are this high.

Picking up my Vitamix, I rinse out the contents as I discard every stupid idea that pops into my head. When I'm placing

the pieces on the drying rack, my phone rings. Maybe it's Blaine? Or Angie? I nearly fall in my scramble to answer.

It's Diego.

I didn't call him before because, well, he's just a kid. Adrenaline winding down, I answer on the third ring. "Hey, Diego. How are you doing?"

"I'm great. Missed you at my graduation, but I'm excited to fly out to New York City soon. Thanks again for the money you sent. I can't express what your support means to me."

His enthusiasm brings a reluctant smile to my face. "I wish I could've been out there for you, buddy. I was tied up out here with post-production stuff," I lie, not wanting to tell him about Angie. As a budding film director, he understands about post-production.

"I was looking over the materials that NYU sent, and I have a couple of questions for you about the City."

Relieved I have something to put my mind to other than self-pity, I engage with him about his new city. "It'll be great to be on the same coast as you again, Diego."

"Yeah. I can't believe this is really happening. It was a long road, but you knew my heart was in it and pushed me to keep at it."

I take in his words. Diego fought against huge odds to make it to NYU. He took very strategic steps toward his ultimate goal, and all his hard work paid off. He continues, "It wasn't a sprint, but nothing worth doing is."

Our conversation ends and I put my phone down on top of the island. I replay the final part of our conversation and it hits me. I have to take my own advice.

I need to prove myself to Angie. Change her mind about me. Presents obviously won't do that, and she's refused to talk to me, but maybe there's another way.

Real estate is her life. What if my way back into her life is through my skills as an agent? She may think she fired me, but our contract still exists. Even if I don't go into the office, I can still work for Russo Real Estate. Well, sort of. More on the down low, but clients don't have to know that.

Clients. I need to bring in some new blood. I bet Marlene will help me with the paperwork. I've made lots of inroads with her and I think she'll be on my side despite being Angie's cousin. I hope. If nothing else, I'll get to explain to another living soul about those damn photos in *The Gossip*.

With the beginnings of a new plan, I hit up social media. Shortly, I get a call from a prospective client. Due to an impending job transfer, Joan and John—yeah, their real names—have to sell their house. After agreeing to meet with the couple this afternoon, I reach out to Marlene.

“So, Angie's made the unilateral decision that I'm not needed around the office. I disagree and want to keep working in real estate. With her.” I take a deep breath. “I want more with her, but this is the first step.”

“I don't know, King,” she says. “I saw those photos of you with your lips and hands all over Poppy and those twins.”

Exactly what I feared. I've never heard Marlene sound so...condemning. “They aren't what they look like.”

“Oh, really? To me, they look like you don't care about Angie at all.”

My heart skips a beat. Or ten. Is that what Angie thinks, too?

“No! That’s a total lie. I do care about Angie—I want to be with her. She’s all I can think about, and who I want to be with. Those photos don’t tell you that Poppy kissed me, and I pushed her away immediately. Or the Toalle twins simply wished me well with my lady. Angie.”

“Really?”

“That’s the truth. It’s Angie who has my heart.” I take a breath. “I have a plan.”

“Keep talking.”

Encouraged, I outline my strategy. “So, if you can help me out with the paperwork, I’ll be able to get things done without Angie knowing.”

“You need to know the agency doesn’t need the money, as the Maguires’ house closed.”

My leg bounces with this news. “Marlene, please.”

“I’ll do this for you, so long as you answer one question for me.”

My throat constricts. I’ll walk across glass to help Angie. “Anything.”

“Are you doing this for Angie, or for yourself?”

“It’s for her. Everything is for her.”

The wait for her response is interminable. She finally says, “Right answer. Let me know what you need.”

Exhaling my pent-up breath, I give her a list of things to send to me. Shortly, I’m at a local Starbucks meeting with Joan and John, employing every trick I learned from Angie to get them to sign with me. They think their place will go for around five hundred. I remember when I thought their type of

budget was laughable, but I almost kiss them both when they decide to sign the documents Marlene sent.

I've discovered something over the past months. While I like the buy side, it's the sell side of the equation that really gets my blood pumping. Trying to figure out ways to make the home shine for potential buyers stokes something deep within me. I'm up for this task.

After the meeting, I pick up my phone and send my first strategic text to Angie.

I hope all is going well. Signed up a new client on the sell side. Will keep you informed.

The way to Angie Russo's heart is through real estate. God, I hope I'm right.



# ANGIE



I enter the office and zero in on the pile of pink slips on top of my desk. Messages. Things have been picking up around here, so much so I'm struggling to handle it all by myself. I go to Marlene's reception desk instead of my own, grabbing the stack of messages on my way.

"Are all these new prospects?" I wave the pink pieces of paper.

"Yes. They all want to meet with an agent."

I notice she doesn't say me, and I know she's referring to someone in addition to me. *King*. To actually say his name is superfluous.

I inhale. "I think it might be time for us to add another agent. If this is how it's going to be from now on—if not more so once the show actually airs—I better get the agency prepared." Since Marlene's now on salary, it's time to get more people working here.

She nods as she picks up the receiver to field yet another call. Returning to my desk, I sort the messages into smaller piles. Those looking to buy go in one, while those looking to sell go in another.

My preference has always been for the buy side, although the sell side is supposed to be sexier. While I love doing Open Houses, my first passion is taking people on home tours. Trying to figure out which properties to show them, and guessing which one will make them happy. Because of that, I call all of the potential buyers first. My calendar starts to fill up.

A couple of hours later, I start in on the seller pile. My second call is to a man named Robert. “Hello, this is Angie Russo from Russo Real Estate, and I’m returning your call about needing help listing your home for sale?”

On the other end of the phone, Robert clears his throat. “Thanks for getting back to me, Angie. Yes, I’m looking to move to Florida and I need to get my house on the market ASAP.”

On the message slip, I note where he’s moving. “I’m sure I can help you out with that. Would you like to come into the office so we can go over some details?” My heart races as it does during every consultation with a potential new client.

“Actually, I’m leaving for Florida tomorrow morning and want to get this all set up beforehand. Would it be possible for you to come here so I can show you the house now?”

My calendar is free for the rest of the day. “Will your wife be there as well?”

He lets out a strangled sigh. “Actually, my wife died last month. Cancer. She was diagnosed only five months ago, and now she’s gone.”

I caress my wedding rings. “I am so very sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” he replies as if on auto-pilot. As if he’s said it too many times. I get it. “We didn’t have any children, and this house is way too big for me anymore. Everywhere I look, I see her.” A muffled sob comes through the receiver.

Even though my heart hurts for him, a red flag goes up. Aunt Teresa taught me never to meet someone—especially a man—alone at their house for security reasons. “Oh.” I stall. “Can I please get your address?”

Robert gives it to me and I recognize the street. It’s in an affluent area, right by the ocean. All the houses out there sell for two million dollars plus. While Aunt Teresa’s warning has merit, I’m sure a widower who’s moving to Florida poses no danger. Besides, I understand what it’s like to be left alone after the loss of a loved one. I can sympathize with that.

I agree to meet him in two hours.

In preparation for the meeting, I pull together the documents I’ll need to sign him up as a new client, plus the folder I give all clients who are selling their homes. I check my GPS for the drive time and realize I have to leave soon. Gathering all my documents, I walk to Marlene’s desk.

“I’m going out to 37 Beach Street to meet with a potential new client.”

She takes down the address. “Selling or buying?”

“Selling.”

“Nice address. Good luck.”

“Thanks, Mar. I’ll probably be back after you leave, so I’ll see you in the morning.”

Happy to be getting out of the office and hopefully meeting a new client, I get on the highway and head toward

Robert's home. Music always soothes my nerves, so I turn on the radio. Hunte's newest song blasts over the speakers.

Damn.

I find myself thinking of the concert we attended, and the way King seemed to be misreading all of dad's signals. Given their impasse over the trust fund, I'm not surprised, but I think real healing could happen between them. If I could convince King to reach out to his father, maybe they could form a real relationship. One that would fill the large hole in his heart.

*What are you thinking, Angie? Stop it right now!*

King isn't my responsibility any longer. He never was.

The GPS announces, "Turn right in one-quarter mile, and your destination will be on the left."

I shut off the radio and make the turns. The house is set back quite a far distance from the road. My first thought is the driveway could use some TLC. I bounce along the narrow pavement until it opens up and a grand house appears. It's a Contemporary-style mansion, with the ocean behind it. The grey paint has seen better days, as has the landscaping.

I park in front of a late model red Mercedes and make a note on my pad with suggestions on how to improve curb appeal. Without these changes, at least one hundred grand will be left on the table. Given Robert's car, though, he shouldn't put up too much of a fuss over hiring a landscaper.

Sighing, I get out of the car and grab my tote bag filled with all the important documents. I walk up to the front door, noticing the dead plants on either side of the steps.

Reaching the front step, I ring the doorbell. The chimes reverberate throughout the house. Hmm. I guess he's already started moving his furniture out of the house.

“Be right there,” Robert calls.

The door opens, but no one is standing in the threshold. Odd. From within, Robert says, “Come on in, Angie.”

I push the door open a little wider and walk inside. “Hello?”

“So good of you to make it here on such short notice.”

The hairs on the back of my neck rise at Robert’s words, which come from behind the door. I twirl in that direction. “Robert?”

A man in the shadows pushes the door shut, causing me to jump. Robert’s tall, with stringy brown hair that looks like it hasn’t been washed in a week. His clothes are ruffled and he’s wearing sunglasses even though he’s inside. His wife must’ve died more recently than I had thought.

Get a grip. Take control of this situation. “Robert, I wanted to thank you for calling me to help you with your listing.” My voice drops. “I’m very sorry for your loss.” I extend my hand.

His hands remain behind his back. It strikes me that his clothes don’t fit him properly. Like he hasn’t eaten in a while. I drop my hand and am about to say something comforting when he throws his head back and laughs. The sound rings a bell, which makes no sense. I’ve never been to this house before. Or met Robert.

“Oh, Angie, you have no idea.”

“Excuse me?”

He raises his left hand—in an unsteady motion as if it’s injured—and takes off his sunglasses. Revealing pair of deep blue eyes. Ones I’ve definitely seen before. “*Trevor?*”

“So nice to see you again. Too bad it’s under these circumstances. But it’s not too late. Yet.”

I can’t move—I’m rooted to the spot. What could he possibly want from me? “I don’t understand.”

He lunges forward, a syringe appearing in his right hand. I drop my tote in an effort to flee, but I’m no match for Trevor, despite his gangly appearance. He wraps his body around me and I fight against him.

Punch.

Kick.

Scream.

He frees his right hand and shoves the needle into my neck, causing a burning sting. “Nighty night.”

Then blackness.



I regain consciousness sometime later, but keep my eyes closed. My hands are bound behind my back by what feel like zip-ties. I query my body, but I don’t have any pain except for where I’m restrained. The softness at my back suggests I’m on a bed.

I open my eyes a tiny fraction and confirm I’m in a bedroom. Hoping Trevor’s not in here, I fling my eyes wide. And...I’m alone.

Sagging, relief floods through my system. I give my senses a few minutes to acclimate and shrug off the remnants of the drug he used to subdue me. When my equilibrium rights itself, I check out the stark room.

The window looks out onto the expansive backyard, which abuts the beach. I'm on the first floor. Unfortunately, my hands are immobile, so I can't escape through it.

I wiggle to a seated position on the bed and manage to get to my feet. Taking a deep breath, I tiptoe over to the open doorway. Maybe I can make a break for it and escape out a door without Trevor being any the wiser. It's the only plan I have, so I check to see if he's in the hallway. Free and clear! I take a step out of the room and look right. Dead end. I head to the left.

A voice rings out as I reach the front staircase, and I plaster myself against the wall. Trevor's off to the left, in what I assume is the kitchen. I take another step and freeze. "I want you to bring me one-hundred thousand by eight o'clock or your girlfriend bites it, King."

*King?*

"I just texted you her photo. I haven't touched a hair on her head. Yet. I might have skimmed some other parts of her, though." He laughs, and I cringe. Since my clothes are all where they should be, that last part was to taunt King.

A clock on the wall catches my attention. It's four now. He's giving King four hours to raise the money. I can get out and call him off well before then. I take a step toward the front door. And another. And another. Just ten more to go.

"Stop."

Trevor's warning runs down my spine like ice, but I don't listen. I speed up instead. Running toward the front door, I realize I'm going to have to turn around so my hands can open the knob. He's right behind me, laughing.

Not caring about anything but escape, I get to the front door and twist. My hands land on the doorknob. Trevor yanks me away and flings me to the floor. “Guess King likes them feisty. His taste always ran to the wild side.”

Kicking my legs on the marble floor, I push away from the man who’s towering over me. My efforts are in vain, though, as he grabs me by the arms and pulls me upright.

“Do you want to be sedated again? ’Cause I can arrange that.”

He half-drags me back into the living room. Away from the exit and safety. Throws me onto the sofa hard enough that the air gushes out of me. “Stay there, Angie. I don’t want to hurt you. I just want my money.”

Plan B. Get him talking. Maybe I can make him see reason? “Why do you need the money so badly, Tre-Trevor?” I hate myself for stammering.

Fixing his glazed stare on me, he replies, “Loan sharks don’t like it when a debt isn’t repaid on time.”

Shit. This is bad. He’s high right now. And, apparently, in debt up to his vacant eyeballs. *Think, Angie.* What would Leo and Francesco do?

*Keep him talking.*

“Have you tried giving them back a portion of what you owe?”

He nods. “We’re way past that now. King will come through. He always does.”

At the mention of King’s name, my entire body goes rigid. If I confess that I broke off our non-relationship, he’ll know that King will never pay his ransom. Then Trevor will have no



recourse but to follow through on his threat and kill me. Another thought takes hold—maybe King’ll reach out to my brothers. It’s a long shot, but the need rises to keep Trevor talking to give them time.

“You asked him for a lot of money, you know. King might not have access to that kind of cash.”

“You’d better hope he does.” Trevor stalks over to the couch and picks up my hair. I stiffen at his touch. “I’d hate to have to hurt you.” He leans in and sniffs me. “You smell nice. Maybe I should sample what’s gotten King’s boxers so tented.”

Trevor brings his face even with mine. This is bad. Really bad. My hands are tied behind my back, but at least my legs are free. He leans forward, and I turn my head away so his lips land on my cheek.

“No! You won’t want to do this!”

His hand cups my breast and squeezes. “King and I share women all the time. Did you know that?”

I shake my head wildly.

He squeezes again, and I suck in my breath. “He’s a good lay. But I’m better.”

Trevor leans forward again, his mouth seeking mine. I refuse to let him do this to me. When his lips cover mine, I buck up, which only puts my body in closer contact with his gaunt frame. His tongue pushes against my lips and an idea forms. I let him enter my mouth, then bite down. Hard.

Trevor pulls away. “Bitch!” He slaps me so hard across the face that I see stars. “You’ll pay for that.” At least I think that’s what he’s saying, given he’s forcing the words around his hurt tongue.

He stands and I jump to my feet, running again toward the front door. Off-balance because of the restraints on my wrists, I lose my footing for a moment. Trevor's hand yanks my hair, snapping my head backward and stopping my forward progress.

He drags me by my hair through the living room and down the hall, my screams unnoticed. Throwing me into the bedroom I first woke up in, he pulls a needle out of his back pocket and tosses the plastic covering onto the floor.

“You're not worth the hassle.”

As he approaches me with the needle, I scramble to run away, but he blocks my exit with his tall body. I scream, “Get away,” but he grabs me by the shoulders and shakes.

“Anything you want me to say to King for you?”

That I love him. That I'm sorry for breaking up with him. That he's too good for me. *Where did those thoughts come from?* Instead of responding verbally, I spit in his face.

“Nighty, night.” He shoves the needle into my neck, and the now-familiar bubbling sting revives. “Bitch.”

My last coherent thought is “I want King.”

# KING



I stare down at my phone, unable to believe what Trevor said. He's ransoming Angie to me for one-hundred K. I'd pay triple that amount to get her back safely. Yet, how can I put my hands on that kind of money in only four hours?

My finger hovers over the button to call Dad. I know he cut off my trust fund, but this is an emergency. I know he'd come through.

*No.*

Trevor wants the exact amount of money I was paid by Let's Do It! I don't need my father.

En route to the bank, I make one call—to Leo. In case things with Trevor go south, Angie's brother needs to know.

"Hey, King." His voice relays his surprise.

"Leo, I need your help. Your sister's being held for ransom. I have the address. The guy wants one-hundred thousand dollars in exchange for Angie by eight tonight."

"Shit. Do you know who has her?"

I wait for the traffic light to turn green and continue. My bank's up ahead. "Yes. Trevor Stern. We've been friends my whole life, but he's strung out on drugs and he sounds

desperate.” I turn into the parking lot. “I’m getting the money now. I’ll text you the address and meet you there.”

“Wait! I need to report this.”

My head shakes from side to side so hard that I can practically feel my brain rattling around. “No way, Leo. Trevor said no cops. Angie’s life is on the line.”

“Do you think he’d harm her?”

My stomach clenches. Trevor has something of an angry streak, usually when he’s high on something. From the way he sounded on the phone, my guess is he’s in that state right now. “I’m not sure. He might.” Maybe to spite me.

“Send me the address. I’ll meet you at the closest shop so I can wire you up. I need to do a little of this by the book. King, thank you for bringing me in.”

I don’t acknowledge his last sentence. Killing the call, I send the text and race into the bank to make my withdrawal. The teller looks at my check. “Excuse me.” She disappears into the back, and the minutes tick by. I strum the top of the counter, shifting my weight from foot to foot. I’m about ready to jump over the counter and take the money myself when she returns, trailed by a balding man with a paunch, wearing a brown suit.

“Mr. Hunte,” Baldie says.

Clasping my hands in an effort to prevent them from reaching around his neck, I nod.

“I see you’re making a rather large withdrawal. I’ll need you to follow me into my office to fill out some paperwork.”

Shit. This is *my* money. I’m about to yell that when he turns and walks toward the side gate and ushers me to follow

him.

I do, and when we reach his office, I force myself to do the polite thing and sit. “I’m working on a tight deadline right now. I’d appreciate it if you could speed along the process.”

“Sure thing,” Baldie replies as he clicks on the computer. “Now, if you could please fill out these documents for the government and give me your identification, we’ll get you right out of here.” He smiles. I don’t.

A good forty-five minutes later, after signing enough paperwork to fill up one of Dad’s tour buses, I finally walk out of the bank holding the duffel bag I had in the car from the gym, now filled with cash. Baldie kept trying to get me to open up about why I need so much money, but I kept my mouth shut. I won’t risk Angie’s safety.

When I pull into a little strip mall near the address Trevor gave me, Leo’s standing next to a beater Honda. I park and shake his hand.

Leo holds up his cell. “I haven’t told anyone about this, against my better judgment. Do you really think this guy will step down if you give him the money?”

“I do.” I shove my hands into my pockets. “I’ve known Trevor my whole life. He has a temper, but it doesn’t stick around for too long. My guess is he got in over his head with drugs and debt.”

He nods and points to his car. “Let’s get you all wired up so we can record him making the exchange.”

I follow him, taking my shirt off. With efficient movements, he applies the leads and wires to my body and we do a sound check.

“This is going to work, Leo.” I say this more to encourage me than him.

Even under these unimaginable circumstances, it’s comforting to be part of a team. Leo’s lip ticks upward, but he remains focused on getting me ready to head in. He makes a couple of adjustments and points at my shirt, which I put back on.

After a few tests, he says, “You’re good to go, King.”

I take a step toward my car, but look back when he says my name. “I don’t like that you’re going in there alone. At the first sound of trouble, I’m inside.”

Placing my hand on his shoulder, I say, “I’m just as worried about Angie as you are. This *will* work.” It has to.

“Don’t do anything stupid. Follow his orders, keep him talking, and for God’s sake, don’t try to take him down. That’s what I’m here for. I’ll get him.”

“And I’ll get Angie.”

We hold eye contact for a moment, communicating without words. Teamwork. He pats my shoulder and I get back into my car.

When I pull into the driveway, Angie’s car is parked next to a red Mercedes. She’s here! At least Trevor gave me the right address. I grab the bag filled with money and bolt out of my car. With every step that brings me closer to the front stoop of this rundown mansion, fear rises inside me. What if I’m too late? What if he’s done something to her?

I take the final step up to the door and whisper, “I hope you can hear me, Leo. I’m going to ring the bell.”

*Showtime.* I press the bell. Chimes ring through the house.

From behind the closed door, Trevor shouts, “King?”

Not knowing exactly where he is, I reply, “Yeah.” I raise the duffel bag high. “I have your money, Trevor.”

The door swings open and he grabs for the duffel bag. I yank it back to my body. “Not so fast. I need to see Angie.”

He snarls, then takes a step back to let me in. The door closes behind me with a thud that reverberates throughout the empty foyer. The only thing in it is Angie’s tote bag.

Trevor stands close enough for me to get a good look at his changed features. His face is even gaunter than it looked in the City last week. His hair is unkempt, to put it lightly. His clothes are loose. “Man.”

“I don’t need your sympathy, King.” His words are a bit slurred. “All I need is what’s in your duffel bag.” He points to the interior of the house. “She’s in there.”

I meet his blue eyes, which are glazed over. “What’s happened to you, Trevor?”

He rushes for the duffel, but I swing it behind my body and he stops. “Why do you care? You haven’t had anything to do with me since Mexico. Just give me the money.”

Instead of handing it over, I take a few steps into the living room. Angie’s not in here. “Where is she?”

“Sleeping like a baby.”

Fear zips down my spine. What does *that* mean? “You know I can’t give you this money until I see her, Trev.” I use his nickname in the hope it’ll reignite a connection between us. One I definitely don’t feel.

He rakes his hand through his hair. “Why?”

His question makes me stop and turn to face him. “Why what?”

“Everything was going so well between us, bro. You cut me off.”

Because Dad cut me off after seeing that photo of us in Mexico. I don’t say that, though. I have one goal and that’s to find Angie. “A lot of shit went down. I got busy.”

“With the television show that should’ve been mine. It would’ve saved me. Instead, I get harassing phone calls twice a day. And threats. Next time they’ll do more than break my arm.”

For the first time, I notice he’s babying his left arm. “Who? Who did that to you? Why didn’t you go to the police?”

He laughs. “You don’t go to the police for these guys. If only you’d given me the money I asked for before, we wouldn’t be here today.”

“Dude, I’m sorry you got yourself into this situation. But kidnapping Angie and asking for ransom isn’t how you get out from under. You should’ve come to me and confessed. We would’ve thought of a way out of it.” Even as the words leave my mouth, I know they’re a lie. I doubt there’s a way out without paying up, and I’m fresh out of fucks to give.

He shakes his head. “You don’t understand. You’ll never understand what it was like living in the shadow of the great King Hunte. Whose father is a rock god. Who had every toy known to the neighborhood growing up, and then every chick under him when we became teens.”

Wow. How do I respond? “That’s not—”

He ignores me and barrels forward. “Oh, I know. Boo-hoo, Daddy sent you presents but didn’t spend any quality time



with you. Then he married someone else and had a second family. Still, you had everything you ever wanted. Me? My parents stayed married, but I was always an afterthought. Without all the toys.”

Yes, Trevor’s childhood had mirrored mine in some ways, but his family had at least remained intact. I’d eaten dinner at his house so often growing up that I had my own chair in their dining room. “That’s not how I remember things.”

“Because we showed you only what we wanted you to see. They were always nicer when you came around. Why do you think I asked you over so often? Plus,” he rubs his arm, “the ladies always followed King Hunte around.”

“They gave you plenty of attention, too, if I recall correctly.” For a moment, I remember that Leo’s listening in, but it’s more important for me to talk Trevor down if I can. I’ll deal with the fallout later.

He shrugs. “Did it ever occur to you that I might not want to share the attention? That I’d like to be something other than a fucking afterthought?”

“I didn’t know.” This is the truth. “I thought we always had fun.”

“Well, I guess it was. Most of the time. It got old, though.” His eyes return to the duffel, clutched in my hand. “When I got my real estate license, I thought things would turn around. You were the aimless playboy and I was the solid working man. You still got real estate deals I never even heard of.”

“I had no idea you were jealous of me, Trevor.”

My comment spurs him on. “Jealous? Why? Because all the high and mighty King had to do was snap his fingers and panties fell? Or real estate matches were made? Because you

were always jetting off to one end of the globe or the other? What makes you think I was jealous of any of that? I had everything I needed right in LA.”

His words hit home. I’ve been such a bastard all my life. No wonder I didn’t have anyone I felt close enough to call about my breakup with Angie. Which brings me back to the issue at hand. “What have you done with Angie?”

“Back to that bitch are we? She’s a hellion, that’s for sure. I can see why she hardens your cock.”

“What did you do to her?”

He laughs. “Nothing she didn’t want. She has nice tits, I’ll give you that. But she bit my tongue.”

My blood pressure rises, which is probably as he intended. I need to keep my wits about me and get this transaction over with. At least I know why he’s slurring. Good for Angie! I take a deep breath. “Show me where she is and I’ll give you the money.”

“She’s in a bedroom.” He motions down the hallway.

I nearly buckle at his words. “If you did anything to hurt her, you’re going to wish your bookies did the job. I’ll ruin your business first, then pick off all your friends.”

“As if my life isn’t shit already.”

Breathing in heavy pants, I consider tossing him the money and going to look for Angie. Leo’s warning stops me cold. No. I need to play this smart. “Trevor, take me to her. I’ll give you your money and this will all be over.” If he so much as touched a hair on her gorgeous head, I’ll kill him with my bare hands.

“Fine.” He points. “That way.”

Because I have no alternative, I lead us down the hall. Right before I get to an open door on the right, he commands, “Stop.”

I do, my heart pounding in my chest. Angie’s in that room. I know it. I need to get to her and make sure she’s safe.

Trevor walks around me and points with his head. “She’s in there. Give me the money.”

Remembering what Leo said about not trying to be a hero, I shout, “Here!” and throw the bag past him as hard as I can.

He scampers for it.

I race into the bedroom.

Angie’s lying on top of the bed, her clothing rumpled but still in place. Her hands are behind her. Getting down on my knees, I brush the hair away from her head. She’s sleeping.

I kiss her lips. “Angie. Wake up. You’re safe.”

A noise behind me makes me turn. Trevor swings a baseball bat right at my head. “Nighty-night, bastard prince.”

# ANGIE



**A** loud wailing—a siren—reaches my ears, rousing me. From what? My head feels like it’s been stuffed with cotton.

Memories of being trapped in a mansion with Trevor startle me fully awake. Someone’s rubbing my arms. My eyes pop open.

“Leo.”

My brother smiles at me. “You’re back.”

I nod and attempt to sit up, but he prevents me from moving. “Don’t get up. I don’t know what Trevor gave you, but I don’t want you to move around.” He continues to rub my arms. My *unrestrained* arms. “How are your hands?”

I move my fingers. “They’re okay. My wrists are sore.” I look at him. “What happened?”

Leo takes a step back, revealing King lying on the floor in the middle of the doorway. A couple of people are crouched around him, including Francesco. Ignoring my younger brother’s request to lay still, I push away from him and sit up and yell, “King!”

Leo places his hands on my shoulders. “Shhh. Let the paramedics do their job.”

The two guys with Francesco keep poking and prodding King. “He’s not moving.” My chest heaves as I suck in air. I try to push Leo’s hands off of me, but they don’t budge. “Let me go! King!”

Francesco’s voice booms. “Angela.”

I freeze.

Leo rubs my arms. “Stay here. They’re examining him and you’d only be in the way. Besides, you have to get checked out, too.”

I look from one brother to the other. “Is King okay?” He can’t die on me. This can’t be happening again. My breathing hitches in my chest.

Francesco says, “Trevor hit him over the head with a baseball bat.”

“Trevor? Where is he?”

“On his way to being booked for kidnapping, attempted murder, extortion, and any other crime we can think of,” Francesco answers.

“He was in debt. Bookies were after him.”

“We know,” Leo replies.

A stretcher is wheeled in and the paramedics lift King onto it. He doesn’t move or make a sound. I push against Leo. Taken by surprise, my brother releases me and I rush off the bed, to King’s side.

“King!” I place my hand on his cheek. It’s warm. Thank God. “Can you hear me? I want you to fight. Fight harder than you’ve ever fought before.”

“Ma’am, someone will be in here to examine you shortly,” one of the paramedics says, but her tone is not without sympathy. “We need to take him to the hospital now.”

With tears streaming down my cheek, I kiss King. The paramedics roll him out of the room.

Unable to restrain myself, I shout to no one, or maybe to the world, “No! This can’t be happening again!”

Leo wraps me in his arms and I crumple into him, sobbing. Other paramedics bring in a second stretcher and Francesco helps me onto it. After I’m assured they’re taking me to the same hospital as King, I agree. Leo touches his forehead to mine.

“You’re going to be alright, sis. So will King. I’ll ride with you to the hospital.” His voice lowers. “I know you hate them.”

“Thank you, Leo. For everything.” I glance at my other brother. “You too, Francesco.” They both nod.

The paramedics wheel me out of the house and into the ambulance. Leo never lets go of my hand, which is bruised and cut from where Trevor used the zip-ties on me. Sirens blazing, they start the journey to the hospital. To King.

“Leo, not that I’m not extremely grateful and all, but how did you get to the mansion?”

He tells me about King’s call, and everything that happened afterward. When he finishes, he brushes the hair off my head. “I’ve never been so scared in all my life. After King called me, I informed Francesco, who mobilized his people. As soon as King walked in that door, I gave Francesco the signal and he and a few other officers surrounded the house. But we couldn’t do anything to tip our hand since we didn’t

know where you were being held. When Trevor led King to the room where he was keeping you, we all felt the shift in Trevor. I'm so sorry we couldn't prevent him from hurting King."

I grab his hand and kiss it. "You saved me. And him." God, I hope he saved King.

"But answer me this." His voice turns stern. "Why did you go to the mansion in the first place? Marlene said you'd never met the client before."

I stare at the ambulance's ceiling. "I know. It was a stupid thing for me to do." I exhale. "He gave me a sob story on the phone and I fell for it."

"That was stupid."

My voice raises. "How was I supposed to know he would turn out to be King's deranged enemy?"

The paramedic steps in and adjusts my blood pressure cuff, effectively ending my brother's interrogation. I lock eyes with Leo, who has the grace to look down.

When the paramedic returns to his seat, Leo whispers, "You scared the shit out of me."

Forgiving his previous outburst, I squeeze his hand. "I'm safe."

The ambulance comes to a stop at the hospital. As soon as the doors open and my stretcher is placed on the ground, I ask the attendant, "Where's King Hunte? He was brought in right before me."

"I'm not sure, ma'am. Let's get you into the ER, and I'll find out for you, okay?"

My mind racing, I look around as I'm being wheeled into the ER, but don't see King anywhere. Once I'm situated, a doctor in his mid-fifties with a full head of white hair approaches me.

"I'm Dr. Smith. What is your name?"

From my left side, Leo replies, "It's Angie. Angie Russo."

Not caring about all the formalities, I blurt, "Can you please tell me where King Hunte is?"

The doctor shakes his head. "Angie, I don't know where he was taken, but I have to make sure you're all right." He looks to Leo. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Leo explains that Trevor shot some drug into my neck. "Twice," I add. The doctor listens, asks more questions, and orders bloodwork.

"I'm feeling fine. Really," I say as the nurse takes my blood. "Can you please tell me what happened with King? Trevor hit him over the head with a baseball bat, and he wasn't moving. He was unconscious." As I babble, my heart rate accelerates. The monitor the doctor hooked me up to beeps.

"Angie." Leo's voice doesn't register.

I have to find King.

I have to tell him I was wrong.

If he'll listen.

If he's not dead.

"Angie." The doctor shakes me. "You have to breathe. I don't want to give you any more sedatives until we find out what drugs are in your system. Do you understand?"



I inhale a deep breath. “Yes,” I reply as calmly as possible. “I’ll feel much better once you find out King’s status.”

The doctor places the stethoscope on my chest and orders me to breathe. I’ll do anything to get out of here and find King.

The attendant who brought me into the ER pops her head into my cubby and smiles at me. It reminds me of the smiles everyone at the hospital gave me when Dante was dying. It’s a pitying look. I push away from the doctor. “Tell me!”

The attendant sighs. “He’s still unconscious.” The two medical professionals exchange a glance. “But his vitals are strong. The swelling on his brain is minimal, and the doctors expect him to wake up soon. We’ll know more when he’s awake.”

I press my palm over my heart. He’s not dead. My fight-or-flight reaction recedes.

“We’re transferring you to your own room.” The doctor leans down and whispers, “I’ll let you go see your boyfriend as soon as possible, okay? You need to be stabilized.”

My boyfriend? Oh, God, yes. This is what I want. I need King to live and fight with me another day. And love me at night. I want that more than anything. “I promise to be good.”

Soon I’m in a regular room, Leo right beside me. “You’re looking a little better. Your color’s coming back.” He picks at the blanket. “My sister’s something else, you know? Tough as nails.”

“I held my own.”

“I overheard Trevor telling King what you did, and I was so impressed. You bit him?”

I shrug. “I had to get away.” Okay, enough chit-chat. I need to see my man. “Leo, do you know where King is right now? I have to see him.”

“I’m not sure. Let me go ask.” He kisses my forehead and walks out of the room.

No sooner does he leave than Francesco walks in. He crosses his arms over his chest. “You gave us all quite the scare.”

Even though I want to be with King, Francesco was integral to helping us escape. I’m not about to blow him off. “It wasn’t a picnic for me either.”

“I called Mama, Papa, and Juliana. They should be here shortly.”

Great. The whole family. All I want is to be with King. Dr. Smith walks in. “Hello, Angie. I wanted to give you an update. Seems like a mild sedative was used on you, which should get out of your system within twenty-four hours. You’re going to have to stay here overnight so we can monitor your vitals.”

“All right.” It’s not like I’d be leaving the hospital until King’s able to walk out with me anyway.

He clears his throat, glancing at my brother, and bends down. “Mr. Hunte is in Room 201. But you didn’t hear that from me.” He winks.

My last breath bottoms out. “Thank you.”

He walks out and I start to get out of bed.

Francesco watches my efforts. “Whoa. What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m going to see King.”

Francesco says, “I don’t think that’s a good idea. He—”

“Would love to see you, I’m sure,” Leo walks in and finishes his sentence. My two brothers look at each other.

“I’m not asking permission.” I take a tentative step and gather my strength. The second dose of Trevor’s drug hit me harder than the first. Maybe it’s the cumulative effect? Hating what I’m about to say, I look at my brothers. “How about helping a girl over to Room 201?”

With Leo on one side and Francesco on the other, we navigate my IV pole through the hallways until we arrive at King’s door. I peek in. He’s all alone.

Like he’s been most of his life. Until now.

“Thanks, guys. I can make it from here. Can you please give me a few minutes alone with him before you come in?” Both men nod.

I force my feet forward, taking measured steps with my IV, until I stand next to King. I hold his hand. It’s slack.

“King, I’m so sorry. About what Trevor did to you. About breaking up with you. I was an idiot. You waltzed into my agency, stole my heart and I freaked out.” I pause. “I never want you to be alone ever again.”

I swipe the stupid tears that roll down my cheeks. Squeezing his hand, I finish my confession. “You mean the world to me. Whenever you’re in the office, it’s a better, brighter place. I like working with you. When we make love, it’s magic. I told myself I could follow Juliana’s advice and separate sex from love, but I failed. Because I fell in love with you.”

My eyes stray to my left hand. To my wedding rings. I gulp. How can I be confessing my love to one man while I’m

wearing another's rings? I lean down and kiss King's cheek, careful not to interfere with the wires attaching his body to the monitors.

"I'll see you again soon, King. I promise."

My brothers surprise me by entering the room when I step back. They talk for a moment with King, who remains silent. When they're done, they help me return to my room.

My parents and sister arrive soon. After they all greet me with hugs, we discuss what happened inside that house. It's hard for me to talk about the kidnapping, which Leo must notice, because he soon takes the lead.

I yawn and my family decides to leave me alone to rest and recover. More hugs and kisses ensue, and then I'm alone. I close my eyes, but sleep doesn't come. My mind replays what Trevor did to me, what he said to King, and my feelings for the man who crashed into my life. And my heart.

When I realize sleep won't come, I sit up and look out my window at the rising sun. A nurse comes in to check on me, leaves, and closes the door behind her. After fiddling with my wedding rings, I start a much needed—and overdue—conversation.

"Dante," I trace his name on my wrist. "You were my first love. We had a perfect relationship, even as you got weaker and weaker. You always made me feel treasured."

I turn away from the sunlight, and stare at the blank television screen in front of me. I take a deep breath. "I'm ready to let love back into my life, Dante. King is unlike anyone I've ever met, with one exception. The love I have for him is different from ours, but just as powerful. I think you'd approve."

I wipe a tear as it rolls down my cheek. My right hand hovers over my wedding rings. They haven't come off in over a decade, since the day we wed. "It's time for me to honor your last wish. I want to follow the final item on our Bucket List. I'm not removing you from my life, Dante. You'll always hold a special place in my heart. But King lives there too, now."

My fingers close around my engagement ring and tug. With some effort, the diamond slips off. My fingers return to my wedding ring.

"I believe you were my soul mate. I loved you with my whole heart. Yes somehow I've found another soul mate. I didn't think it was possible, but I was wrong. My future lies with King, if he'll have me after the way I treated him." Thinking of my conversation with Marlene about the photos, plus the snippets of King's pleading texts, I add, "He's not perfect, but I'm not either. I love him."

I pull my wedding ring off my left hand. Tears flow down my cheeks as I fist my rings.

I'm still crying when the door to my room opens. Juliana pops in holding a tray of bagels. One quick look is all she needs to figure out what's going on. She places the tray on my side table and closes her hand over my newly bare fingers.

"You are so brave, Angie. Believe me, Dante understands." She pries my right fist open and takes the rings from my palm. "Come on. Let's go see King."

# KING



I wake up in a hospital room, monitors attached to my body. When I turn my head, Angie sits in a hospital gown, next to her sister. They're both looking down at her lap, deep in conversation.

“Angie,” I croak.

Her head whips around and she jumps up, reaching out for my hand. “You’re awake.”

Juliana stands. “I’ll get the nurse.” She walks toward the door and turns. “It might take me a while.”

Angie, connected to an IV, runs her hands over my face, upper torso, and arms. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I got hit in the head by a baseball bat.”

Her lips curve upward before her expression settles into a scowl. “That’s not funny.”

I chuckle, but it causes my head to pound, and I end up groaning instead. Her hand lands on my forehead before slipping up into my hair and stroking. I relax into her touch. Here I thought I’d never see her again. “You’re really here?”

She swallows then nods. “I am.”

Maybe the baseball bat really did mess up my brain. “I thought—”

“Shhh”—her hand descends to my lips—“we’ll talk later.” Then she kisses me, and for the first time in over a week, I’m certain everything is going to be all right.

The nurse comes in and shoos Angie away. A doctor joins the nurse, and soon I’m being poked and prodded and probed. I answer most of their questions in the negative—no nausea, no dizziness—except for the one about my pounding headache. The medical team is pleased with my responses. The doctor orders some more tests, gives me meds for the headache, and then I’m wheeled out so my body can be run through a bunch of machines.

Back in my room, a huge vase of flowers awaits on my side table. I ask the orderly to hand me the card, which he does and then leaves me alone. I rip open the envelope, fully expecting it to be from Angie, but the message is disappointing.

*King,*

*We heard about what happened. We hope you have a very speedy recovery.*

*Love, Dad, Sara + Melody*

**R**eally? Could he have spared the ink? This is just like him—send some extravagant gift rather than show up in

person to show he cares. Who am I kidding? We're not even on speaking terms.

I toss the card on the floor and turn my head to ignore the bouquet. Minutes later, my mood shifts as Angie, now dressed in her own clothes, walks through my door. She's carrying a stuffed animal in a Yankees uniform. Holding a baseball bat. I laugh at her morbid sense of humor, then grab my head to stop the pounding.

"Baby, you can't do that to me," I groan.

Angie waves the teddy bear in front of me—her first gift to me. I accept it and run my finger over the bat.

"I wanted to make you smile," she says, her delicious chocolate eyes dancing with humor.

"*You* are what makes me smile."

Placing the teddy bear next to me on the bed, I pat a space for her to sit. Instead, she walks over to the flowers, bends down and picks up the card. "This was nice of your father." When all I do is wave my hand, she continues, "Who is Melody?"

I clear my throat. "My half-sister."

"What's she like?"

I glance at the flowers. "I don't really know her that well. She's twenty-five now, I guess. I think she's a costume designer for some TV studio out here in New York City." Memories of her as an infant surge. Sara gave me a "I'm the Big Brother" T-shirt to wear when she was born. That was probably the closest we ever came to being a family. I rub my forehead, not wanting to relive my fucked-up childhood. I want to get my woman back.



“Maybe you’ll be able to get to know her now as an adult,” Angie murmurs. She glances at my bed, then sits in the chair.

I shrug, dismissing my sister from my mind and returning my attention squarely on Angie. Who is sitting too far away from me. Maybe she only kissed me earlier out of relief? Is it possible I misread the situation? God, I hope not. My first order of business is to calm her fears.

“Trevor was strung out. He needed money. Fast. Nothing excuses what he tried to do to you.”

“I stopped him like I was taught in Brooklyn.” Her lips quirk up for an instant. “Bookies were after him.”

I nod. “He thought I had money to spare, and you were his ticket to getting my attention. Since his other attempts had failed.” I play with the soft bat. “He never hurt anyone like this before.”

“Hell of a way to start.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” She points to her clothes. “I’ve been released.”

The bruises around her wrists capture my attention. I exhale all the air in my lungs. “I don’t care about what he did to me. The thought of him hurting you is more than I can bear.”

She graces me with a small smile. “Trevor was so different when I met him at the screen test.”

“He was desperate. The bookies had already fucked up his arm. This mess was all about the drugs.” At that instant, I agree with my father on one thing. Drugs can do no good. I’m done with them forever.

“Before we continue, I want to say thank you for paying the ransom. I wasn’t sure you would.”

“You have no idea what I’d do for you.” She offers me a soft smile. “Tell me what happened in there,” I press. “If you’re comfortable talking about it.”

Angie tells me everything, from the phone call she got from “Robert” to the second time Trevor drugged her. I keep my mouth shut during her entire story, mainly because of the anger and fear it strikes in my heart.

Angie smooths the blankets on my bed. Something about her is different, but I can’t put my finger on it. My mind still isn’t thinking straight. “I woke up to the sound of sirens coming from the ambulance. Leo had called in reinforcements as soon as you entered the mansion. They caught Trevor trying to escape and arrested him.”

I slam my fists down on the bed. “I’m so sorry Trevor did this to you. It’s all my fault.”

“Shhhh. It’s over now. He’s in jail. Where he belongs.”

“His parents will probably bail him out, though.”

“Let’s allow the system to deal with him and focus on getting better. I’m sure the police will want to question you.”

As if Kaitlyn were here directing us, two cops pick this exact moment to arrive at my door. Angie excuses herself and I spend the next couple of hours answering all sorts of questions. From my past with Trevor to my knowledge of his money issues. Even though they have the tape from Leo, they ask me to walk them through what happened in the mansion.

When we’re wrapping up, I ask, “What about the money I gave Trevor? Is that evidence?” I hate asking the question, but it’s the only money I have.

One of the officers nods. “We recovered the duffel bag at the scene, and it’s already been processed. You’ll be able to recover the money in a couple of days.”

Thank fuck.

They leave a short while later, but Angie doesn’t return like I had hoped. Alone, I pick up her teddy bear. He needs a name. It comes to me in a flash: Jeter, arguably the best Yankees player ever. “What do you mean, Jeter? Are you a peace offering, a gratitude gift, or does she want me back?”

He doesn’t give me a useful answer.

My phone rings from where it’s been charging on the side table. Moving slowly, deliberately, I pull the table over. Not bothering to check who’s calling, I answer, “Hello?”

“Honey! I just heard. How are you doing? Is the staff out there treating you right?”

I collapse on the pillows. “I’m fine, Mom. I have a bump on my head and a massive headache, but that’s all.”

“You’re all over the news, and so is that *reality* television show you filmed.”

I guess she hasn’t gotten over her disapproval of my career choice. Well, too bad—it was the best damn decision I’ve ever made. The first part of her statement catches in my brain. “What do you mean I’m all over the news?”

“The whole story’s being reported by every news outlet. Talks about how Trevor hit you over the head with a baseball bat. Something about drugs and money. I always thought that boy was bad news.”

Really? ’Cause growing up Mom always seemed more than delighted to pawn me off to his family for meals.

Although Trevor's description of his home life makes me rethink my interpretation of the past. "Drugs messed him up, Mom. Made him do crazy stuff." But they do *not* excuse what he did to Angie. After all, it's not like Mom hasn't had her own run-ins with drugs and alcohol.

"Well, I don't want to fight with you. Are you really fine? Should I come out there and bring you some chicken soup?"

"No." The word rushes out of my mouth without thought. "I mean, the doctors here are very professional and they said I should be out soon. You don't have to come here."

"Well, if you're sure..."

"I am. I'm good." I pick up the Yankees teddy bear and hug it close to my heart. I'd be better if Angie were here.

"Fine. We'll catch up soon. Thirteen is waiting for me by the pool. Ta!"

Guess she feels like she's done her motherly duty to her injured son. I glance at the flowers. Some family I have.

My mind returns to the reason I'm here. Trevor. After hearing the whole story, I feel a touch of remorse about the way I treated him. Maybe I shouldn't have broken ties with him like I did. We'd been friends for nearly a lifetime. Of course, it turns out we weren't really friends at all. I'm still trying to wrap my head around his years-long jealousy of me. However, my anger about what he did to Angie pre-empts my guilt. He deserves everything that's coming to him. Maybe this will set him straight.

My phone rings, pulling me out of my musings. It's Blaine. "How are you feeling? I can't believe Trevor would do something like this!"

I give him all the gory details since he's known Trevor as long as I have. He agrees with me that Trevor needs help—from prison.

Blaine approaches another subject. “The media picked up on your attack.”

“Yeah. So I've heard.”

“I'm sorry I couldn't contain this. It's a huge story since you're, well, the son of Braxton...” His voice trails off. “Anyway, with all the hoopla, the upside is Let's Do It! has pushed your series up. It's now scheduled to start airing in a month.”

Even though I haven't turned on the television or checked the internet, I'm not surprised the studio would want to jump on the publicity bandwagon. “I get it. Business.”

“I wish it could be different, man.”

“Me, too. You still have to play the hand you've been dealt.” I consider my last statement and mumble, “And so do I.”

My call waiting beeps. “Geez, Blaine, I've got another call. We'll talk again soon.” I click over to my next caller.

Diego's voice is an octave higher than normal, more like when he was a kid. “King! Mom made me wait to call you, but I couldn't wait any longer. How are you? If I were already at college, you know I'd be at the hospital right now. Are you okay?”

“I'm doing just fine. My head hurts like a bitch, but other than that, all is good. I should be released in a few days.” We talk for another five minutes and hang up.

Holding the quiet phone in my hand, I turn on Do Not Disturb. The only person who can reach me now is Angie. Everyone else can wait.



A couple of days pass and my strength returns, making me itchy to get back to my real life. Angie has visited me every day, but we haven't talked about anything important. Too many doctors and nurses around all the damn time.

Leo knocks on my door and I wave him in.

"You're looking a lot better than you did the last time I saw you."

"Thanks." I point to the visitor's chair, which he takes. Although I saw him the first day I was here, we haven't had the chance to talk alone since everything went down with Trevor. "I need to thank you for doing what you did to get Angie out safely."

"Of course, I'd do anything for my sister." He pauses. "And you."

His words hit me straight in the gut. I mean something to this guy. It strikes me that Leo, whom I've known for all of a month, is more real of a friend to me than some of the people I've known all my life. I cover up my girlie feelings by coughing. "That means a lot to me."

"By the way, you did an amazing job in there with Trevor. You kept him talking, and got him to bring you to Angie. Got it all on tape. Although," he clears his throat, "I feel awful that he hit you before we could get inside."

I rub my head. “That took me by surprise, too, since he already had the money. I guess he’s the type to hold a grudge.”

“Yeah.” He cracks his knuckles. “I’d like just five minutes alone with that scumbag for what he did to my sister, and to you.”

I fist my hands. “You’ll have to stand in line.”

He nods, but I can tell he has something else on his mind by the way he’s fidgeting with the sleeve of his shirt. “All that stuff he said to you in there...I didn’t know about your childhood. That sucks.”

My eyes stray to Jeter. “I’ve gotten over it,” I lie. But for the first time in my life, I’m hopeful I really can heal and move on. Except...shit. Didn’t Trevor say something about my mojo with women? The last thing I want is for Leo to think I’m still some man whore. “What he said about me and women—”

“Is in the past.” His gaze locks with mine. “Right?”

I nod.

Acknowledging my response, Leo stands and points to Jeter. “Where’d this come from?”

Grateful he’s not interested in going into further detail about my past, I show off the stuffed animal, holding up the bat. “Your sister.” Leo’s cheek twitches like he’s trying to stifle a laugh.

“Go ahead,” I say. “I laughed too.”

He bursts into peals of laughter. “She’s messed up.”

Only allowing myself one quick chuckle—I’ve learned the hard way laughter isn’t kind to my concussed brain—I reply, “That’s what I told her.”

“Wait. Angie was here? Willingly?”

I tilt my head. “Yes. She was admitted.” Which he knows.

“No.” He waves his hand. “To clarify, she came back to visit you after she was released?”

Why is this so hard for him to understand? Surely he’s aware that Angie and I mean something to each other, even if we haven’t defined what that something means. “Yeah. Every day.”

He whistles. “After Dante died, she’s avoided going to the hospital like a perp runs from me on the beat. When I had to stay overnight for something that happened on the job, she didn’t visit me. Or even Mama after she had her surgery.”

I don’t ask about Lucia’s surgery. I don’t even speculate on what might have landed Leo in the hospital. No. Instead, I focus on the fact Angie has willingly faced her fear, not once, but several times to see me. Warmth spreads through my body, but I keep my thoughts to myself. Our conversation veers to how the Yankees are faring this season.

“Oh look, Leo’s here.” Angie’s parents, Alfredo and Lucia, come into the room, carrying balloons and a big tray of something.

“I made you a lasagna,” Lucia explains. “I know how awful the food is around here.”

My mouth waters—my first real meal since I was brought in. Alfredo shakes my hand, then ties the balloons around my father’s flowers, making me resent Dad’s empty gesture a little less. Lucia hugs me, then squeezes my arms. “We need to fatten you up!”

They make themselves right at home, laughing and serving lasagna on paper plates they also brought. It’s the best damn



lasagna I've ever eaten. Soon, Juliana and her husband and son wander in, along with Francesco and his wife and kids. We all eat the lasagna, and it feels like family night has been brought to my room.

*Family.* It finally feels like I've found mine.

All that's missing is my heart. I wipe the sauce off my face with a tissue. "Has anyone seen Angie?"

Juliana replies, "She had to take care of some things at home. She told me she should be here within the hour."

My gaze meets Leo's—so like his sister's—and then bounces back to Juliana. "Thanks for letting me know."

She nods and holds up a pastry box. "Cannoli?"

I reach out and grab the first one before the box is passed around the room. This feels so...right. It's what I've been missing my entire life.

My doctor appears in the doorway. "What do we have going on here?"

Everyone stops talking at once and gives the doctor their attention. That is, everyone but Leo, who jumps up and rushes the doc, pulling her into a big bear hug. He turns and says, "Everybody, this is Toni. I know her from the gym."

My doctor turns a light shade of pink. I don't give hugs to women I know from the gym. Well, maybe the ones I've had sex with, but that's in my past. Leo, though...

"I'm Dr. Collins. I need to examine our patient, if I can find him in here."

I wave to her and the Romanos all file out, promising to return as soon as they can. Leo's the last to leave. I can't contain my smirk.

Dr. Collins straightens up her patient folder and reads off my results without making eye contact. She wasn't like this before. Seeing Leo sure put her off her game.

"All in all," she concludes, "I think you're in great shape. Your numbers are perfectly fine and your headache should go away completely over the next couple of days. I'll prescribe you some pain meds, but only take them if you need them."

With my new commitment to a drug-free life, I say, "I'll stick with over-the-counter stuff."

She hands me a prescription anyway. "Just in case." She finally looks up. "I'm releasing you. There's no reason for us to keep you here any longer. Besides, I think you'll recover better surrounded by your family."

My heart flips. Wanting to give my *brother* a boost, I reply, "I appreciate it. Although, if you want to take Leo off our hands for a while, it wouldn't hurt my feelings. He was the hero of the day for me, you know. He's a good guy."

Her cheeks pinken. "I'll get your release paperwork started." She flees.

I'm smiling from ear to ear when everyone comes back into the room. I give them the good news that I've been sprung, and Lucia declares that dinner on Saturday is going to be my welcome home celebration. After another round of hugs from everyone, they leave me alone to get dressed.

Where's Angie?

From a more practical perspective, how the hell am I going to get back to my apartment?

I don't have to wait long for an answer to my first question. When I take careful steps toward the closet to get my clothes, I hear her sweet voice behind me. "You're up?"

I spin around so quickly I need me to reach out to the side table to steady myself. She's wearing a flowy, floral summer dress, which looks sinful on her delicious curves. "Yeah. Dr. Collins released me."

"That's awesome!"

I open the closet and pull out my clothes. "By the way, she's crushing hard on Leo."

"Really? Wow."

Once I place my shorts, shirt, and underwear on the bed, I drop my Prada brushed leather boat shoes onto the floor. My hands reach behind me to untie the God-awful hospital gown I'm still wearing.

Angie's hand plays with her hair. "Have you signed the release paperwork?"

I shake my head.

"Okay. Get dressed and I'll track them down for you. I'd like to take you home, if that's all right?"

Her idea is more than fine in my book. It's damn near perfect.

# ANGIE



I help King into my car and start driving, keeping our conversation light. Jeter—I can't believe he named his Yankees teddy bear after Dante's favorite player—sits on his lap. Knowing it's time for me to man up, or rather *wo*-man up, I clear my throat.

“King, I have something at my apartment I'd really like to show you. Would you mind coming to my place before I take you home?” With any luck, he won't be going back to his place tonight.

“Sure thing. I'm in no rush.”

Nervous butterflies start to flap their wings in my stomach, but I know it's time. I need to confess everything to this man. This kind, strong, and amazing man I'm lucky to have in my life.

We enter the agency and Marlene rushes to greet King. “I'm so happy you're back.” He kisses her cheek and she taps him on the shoulder, like I've seen them do countless times. Their ritual warms my heart, letting me know I've made the right decision. She steps out of their routine by bringing him in for a hug. “And all in one piece.”

“Thanks, Marlene.” He pats her back. Because I think he's a bit winded from the trip out of the hospital, I suggest we rest

on the couches. Maybe a little procrastination won't hurt...

We sit and Marlene peppers him with questions about his health. Her next statement takes me aback. "Please don't worry about Joan and John. I've been responding to them, answering their questions. They should be ready to have the house up next week."

"Thanks, Marlene. You saved the day."

My cousin's cheeks flush.

When they don't explain any further, I ask, "What's going on?"

King rubs his beard—he didn't touch a razor in the hospital. I like his stubble, but this looks good on him, too. What doesn't? Finally, he clears his throat. "My client. The ones I texted you about."

I bite my lower lip. I didn't read his texts, purposefully, but I couldn't bring myself to block his number. So each time I got a text alert from him, I saw a few words, enough to get the gist. That's how I was able to ignore those stupid photos from *The Gossip*, before Marlene even spoke to me about them. I vaguely remember seeing something about new clients. "Oh. Well, you can bring me up to speed later."

When the phone rings, Marlene jumps up to answer it. Putting aside the news about King's clients, I place my right hand on top of his. "Do you feel up to going upstairs?"

His amber eyes shine, and he jumps to his feet. He makes a sweeping motion with his hands. "After you."

I point to the apartment door as we walk by Marlene, who is busy taking down a message. It's time to find more agents. As happy as I am about the agency's blossoming success, all I can think about is what I'm about to show King. Maybe now's

not the right time to talk with him about this? He just got out of the hospital after all.

Except this is just an excuse. I take the stairs on rickety legs, then open my door and wait for King to walk through it.

“How are you feeling? Can I get you anything to drink?”

He rubs his hands on his thighs. “I’m fine, Angie. What did you want to show me?”

I pull on the ends of my hair. He might be fine, but I’m a bundle of nerves. “I’m going to make myself a cup of tea. Are you sure I can’t interest you in any?”

He shakes his head and walks over to the living room. I pour water into my mug and place it in the microwave to heat while I take out a bag of white tea. When I turn around, King’s standing in front of my wedding picture.

“I know I said this before, but you looked beautiful.”

“Thanks.” The microwave beeps and I leap to fix my tea, leaving it to steep on the peninsula. “Take a seat,” I say to him. “I’ll be right back.”

It’s now or never. Without waiting to see if King follows my directions, I head into my bedroom and open the side table. I pull out the old piece of notebook paper and straighten it on my leg. All except for the folded part. Inhaling a sob, I return to the living room.

King’s moved my tea to the tray on the oversized-ottoman. Placing the paper down next to the mug, I take a seat next to him. We’re not touching, but we’re close. So close his heat warms my leg.

I swallow. “King, I have to talk with you. Please let me get this out and don’t stop me.”

His hand lands on top of my thigh. Instead of turning me on, it gives me the reassurance to move forward.

“I need to confess something. I love Dante with all my heart. I still do. When I married him—our anniversary just passed—our vows meant the world to me. As you know, Dante was my soul mate. His disease didn’t lessen how we felt about each other.”

“Angie, you don’t have to continue. I know how you feel about him. You wear your heart on your wrist. Literally.”

Involuntarily, I twist my left hand so it shows my tattoo. I trace his name and the heart that surrounds it. Without looking up, I continue, “See this tattoo? It’s the most appropriate design I could have gotten to honor his life, although I wouldn’t have guessed the reason at the time. Dante is inside my heart, but he isn’t my entire heart. There’s room in here”—I move my hand to cover my real heart—“for someone else.”

I suck in air. King stares at me, a single tear rolling down his cheek.

“I want you to see this.” I pick up our Bucket List and hand it to him. The care with which he handles it makes my throat clog with emotion.

He reads all of the items. “You’ve done all but this last one. And you’re well on your way to making the agency Number One.”

“With your help.” I want to kiss him, but instead I place my left hand on top of the paper. It’s naked except for a tan line where my rings used to be.

He traces my empty ring finger. He doesn’t say a word, simply bows his head and kisses my bare knuckle.

Knowing I've made the right decision, I lick my lips. On an inhale, I unfold the bottom of the Bucket List, revealing Dante's handwriting.

King's eyes travel down to the last item on the list. "Angie gets married again, has babies and lives a full life of adventure for the both of us, with my blessing."

As he reads, my eyes fill with tears. "I want that, King." He looks at me. "With you."

His lips crash down on mine, sucking in all my air and breathing new life into me. I still have one more confession, so I break away. "King, I lied when I broke up with you. It had nothing to do with the bullshit excuses I gave you. Although those photos were pretty damning."

He glances away from me. "They were taken out of context. Poppy kissed *me*, but I didn't reciprocate. The Toalle twins did try to rekindle our hook-up, but I told them I was off the market. Because I am."

I swallow. "I know." His unnecessary confession drives me to complete my very necessary one. "The real reason I ended things was because I realized what you meant to me. I'm not built for casual sex. I couldn't square my feelings for you with my vow to Dante, despite what he wrote at the end of our Bucket List. But I realized something...loving you doesn't mean I don't also care about Dante. What I had with Dante was young and pure and forever. What we have is vibrant and alive and forever." I suck in my breath as I realize what I said. "I mean—"

King's lips cover mine in a voracious kiss. "I know exactly what you meant, Angie, because I feel the same way. I lived my life in the shadow until you came into it and filled it with



color. And family. You were never a casual hook-up to me. Ever. I never want to let you go.”

He kisses my ear. “I’m grateful to Dante. He made you the woman you are today. With the biggest heart I’ve ever known. He gave you your first taste of love, and together you made the plans you’re still working on today. I’m going to take over where he left off. I want to show you the world, Angie Russo. Because I love you.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and bring his head down to mine. Gazing into his hooded hazel eyes, I say the three words I swore I’d never speak to another man. “I love you.”

His lips and tongue meet mine while his hands skim down my back. Before we can take this to another level, I break away from his kisses and ask, “Are you up for this?”

King’s smile is wolfish. “Doc Collins said I could do whatever activity I felt like.” He licks his lips. “I certainly feel like.” He unzips my dress and unclasps my bra, but the cold air only urges me to get closer to his delicious heat. He pulls the straps down my arms so I’m naked from the waist up, kissing a trail down my neck as he goes.

I reach over to his shirt and pull it up and over his head. Chest to chest, I rub against him, savoring his hardness against my softness. I know where he’ll be harder. My hands slide down his torso, stopping to finger each line of muscle. When I reach the zipper, his stomach jumps.

“Angie. You’ve made me happier than I ever thought possible. I’ve never had ‘just sex’ with you—ever—but this time... This time, we’re *both* going to be making love. Are you okay with that?”

My fingers undo the top button of his fly. “I’m more than all right with that. I want to make love with you, sleep together all night, and wake up in the morning to do it all over again.”

He ducks his head to my breast. “With a few other times thrown in during the night.”

His words land in my core and radiate outward. How have I gotten so lucky? Without pondering this question too hard, I unzip his shorts while he bites my nipple.

King stands and his shorts fall to the floor. His underwear and shoes follow. Naked, he looks at me, letting his eyes linger, and offers his hand. I slip off my sandals and get to my feet, allowing my dress to join his clothes. My hands reach for my pink panties.

“No. Leave them.”

My arms drop to my sides, while my eyes remain glued to his massive erection. Because of our height difference, I’m so close to it. Just one step forward and I’ll—

“Ahh!”

King’s reaction to my oral skills cause me to hum and his hips to buck. Snaking my hand around his back, I squeeze his tight ass muscles while my other hand slides up and down his shaft. My tongue rolls over his tip and I savor his pre-cum.

“Not like this. Not this time.” He pulls his hips backward, causing me to lose my momentum.

Standing, I kiss the left side of his chest, over his heart. Marking my territory. In that commanding tone of his, he says, “Come with me.”

Gladly.

We walk toward the bedroom, our hands linked.

When we step inside, he grabs me by the waist and physically turns me around. His finger dips under the waistband of my panties. "I'm the luckiest man in the world."

"You've got that backward."

His finger, joined with the rest of his palm, drops lower and squeezes my butt. "Let's just be happy together." With his other hand, he cups my cheek. "I'm yours, Angie."

He backs me up so my knees hit the bed. Standing above me, he wraps his hand around his cock and strokes. The sight of this man handling himself almost makes me come on the spot. I reach out. "Let me."

Never losing a beat, he shakes his head. "No. Let me see you."

Following his lead, I take off my panties, drop to the bed, and open my legs wide. I catch his gaze while my fingers find my clit and rub. Our breaths come in pants as we stroke ourselves while watching each other.

King releases his cock. He takes three steps and towers above me. "I have to be inside you."

"I thought you'd never ask."

"Not asking." He winks and reaches the side table. Opening the drawer, he tosses a few condom packets onto the bed. "No, King. I'm on the Pill. We're good."

Something flashes in his eyes. "I've never been bare with anyone before."

"You'll only ever be bare with me."

He collapses onto his back. "What you do to me." He rubs my arm. "Ride me."

At his words, I see stars. My entire universe is constricted to the two of us, right here, in my bed. I straddle his hips and position him at my entrance but don't bear down. I want to savor this moment.

King's hands come to my hips and, holding me in place, he speaks my thoughts. "This is our first time."

His words are my undoing. I push down, accepting all of him into my body. Our love drives us to completion.



I sprinkle some Parmigiana Reggiano over my plate and pass the bowl to King, who sits on my right. Even though he kept the beard from the hospital for a couple of weeks, he's back to his perfect three-day stubble. This is the fourth dinner we've shared with my family since he got out of the hospital. I savor the ravioli Mama made by hand, filled with delicious ricotta and sweet sausage. The tines of King's fork disappear into his mouth and I squirm in my seat, remembering exactly what that mouth did to me last night. Twice this morning.

My father's voice brings me back to the meal. "So tell me, King, what's the latest about Trevor?"

King swallows. "He pled guilty. His admission was caught on tape, thanks to Leo." Everyone glances to my brother, who looks down at the table. "He's getting rehab in prison."

My hand lands on his thigh and squeezes. This is a tough subject for all of us because he attacked me. However, it's hit King really hard since he grew up with Trevor. Over the past month, sometimes he gets very quiet, and at those times I know he's thinking about how alone he's been. Until now. My family loves him.

Wanting to change the subject, I bring up a topic King and I have been discussing since Blaine called last night. I want my family's input. "The show's premiere episode did really well in the ratings. The producer called and said the studio is ready to order a second season."

A chorus of "great" and "yes!" meets my ears.

Mama, ever the voice of reason, says, "Congratulations, both of you. How do you feel about doing more TV?"

King replies first. "I enjoyed shooting the first season. It was fun. Plus, the homes the show scouts are amazing."

I pipe up. "All true, Mama, but what King has omitted is that filming can be very disruptive. Plus the show promotes a negative dynamic between him and I."

"It's called acting. Besides, we don't usually see eye to eye about properties, which is what makes our partnership work so well. It allows us to consider all the possibilities."

I wipe my mouth with my napkin and tuck it back onto my lap. "The agency has made its mark now and I don't think we need to continue."

"We were named a 'mover and shaker' by *Active Aroostook* magazine, true. But Mayflower is still Number One, baby."

"I know, but Poppy has things locked down so tight in Aroostook that I'm not sure it's a realistic goal."

"I say we can take her."

I place my fork onto my plate and cross my arms. King mirrors me.

We've been over this several times in the last twenty-four hours, and it always ends like this—in a stand-off. My sister

wades into the recurring argument. “I don’t want to put too fine of a point on this, but I have to say I agree with King. But for the show, your agency would still be struggling. With all of the publicity it’s brought, you guys are starting to have an impact on the real estate market out there. Can you commit to doing one more season only?”

Before either one of us can respond, Leo adds, “What about putting some of your new talent in front of the cameras?”

King chuckles. “Can you picture Jessa and Patrick on screen together?”

I giggle at the thought. Our two new agents have only known each other for a few weeks, but they bicker like an old married couple, no enticement needed. Maybe a second season won’t be bad after all. Plus, it was a lot of fun filming with King. “You might be on to something.”

“So you’re going to do it?” Nonna asks.

Why not? What was holding me back? I look at King and nod, causing him to smile so hard the wrinkles around his eyes appear. “Yeah. I think we are.”

The rest of the meal is filled with the type of banter I’ve come to know and love. Even though King’s still new to being around the family, he fits right in and gives as good as he gets.

Juliana brings up another subject we’ve been discussing. “How’s the house hunt coming along?”

“King and I have finally settled on a location,” I explain.

King picks up the conversation. “Yeah. Your sister dragged me all over the Hamptons checking out every single town. I finally made her see reason.”

We share a special look. He can be pretty persuasive when he wants to be. “I thought we should get away from Aroostook and start in a new place. But King’s fallen in love with the town, so we’ve been looking at every listing that comes up in our budget.”

“The budget has been another bone of contention. We’ve finally settled on five-hundred to seven hundred fifty thousand,” he chokes the range out.

I place my hand on his back and pat. “There, there. I did tell you we’d be able to get a nice little place of our own in that price range. I was right.”

“We haven’t found a house yet.”

“I’m sure you’ll find something you both love,” Juliana declares. “I can’t wait to come out and help you decorate it, like I did when you opened your agency.”

“Thanks,” I respond. “It’s been a culture shock to King, who’s used to multi-million dollar places on the ocean.”

“Maybe not a culture shock.” He corrects. “More like a minor earthquake. A tremor.” Everybody laughs.

“Although,” Juliana adds, “you might have to do the painting by yourself. I shouldn’t be around those fumes while I’m pregnant.”

“You’re what? Oh my gosh!” I jump out of my seat and hug my sister and her husband, as does the rest of the family. Another baby—I can’t wait! My eyes trail to King, who meets my eyes, and I know we’ll add a few more to the mix someday.

Once all the hoopla dies down, Mama stands. “All right, let’s get the table cleared off.” She assigns each of us different duties, except for Juliana, who is exempt for the next nine

months. I pulled dish drier, while King gets to move the dirty dishes from the dining room to the kitchen.

I enter the kitchen with Leo, who will be loading the dishwasher. “He’s a good guy.” His chin points to King.

My stomach flutters. “He is.”

Leo leans his head closer to mine and whispers, “I think Dante would approve.”

Instead of making me cry, like it would have merely a couple of months ago, his comment fills me with happiness. “I think so, too.” I wrap my hand around my left wrist, letting my thumb rub against the lines of the inked heart.

King heads into the kitchen with a stack of dishes, and gooses me on his way out. I spin around, but he’s already left. I spend the next half-hour drying dishes and plotting how I’ll get him back for that. Because I will.

When everything’s in order, Leo leaves for the family room to watch the game and I slip my hand into the crook of Juliana’s arm. She returns us to the empty dining room for some privacy. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks. We’re excited.” She brings her head closer to mine. “You two are doing great, right?”

“We are,” I affirm. “We have fun together, you know? We walk on the beach at night and crash bonfires. We stroll through the shops in town to browse. We like working together, too.” I sigh. “He’s damn near perfect.”

“I’m so happy I was right all along,” she says with a grin.

I stop short. “You were the one who told me to go for a no-strings relationship!”



She giggles. “Well, you certainly went for it. I knew you couldn’t do it. I felt you two were meant to be, so I gave you a little push. Well, shove.”

“I can’t believe you! You tricked me!”

King strolls back into the dining room. “Tricked you into what?”

I spin on my heel. “Having sex with you!” My hand slaps over my wayward mouth. Thankfully, it’s only us three in here. Well, three and a half.

He shifts all of his attention to my sister. Under his stare, she turns a light shade of pink.

I think Juliana and I are both surprised when he swoops in to kiss her on her cheek. “I owe you. Whatever you need, I’m your man.”

Wide-eyed, she looks at me. “Damn, girl.”

We all laugh.

Riding back to King’s apartment—I moved in with him because his place is bigger and, honestly, the separation from the office is good for me—we rehash tonight’s dinner. King’s phone rings and the screen on the car’s console indicates it’s Diego.

“Hey there. You’re on speakerphone. I’m driving back from family dinner with Angie.” It doesn’t miss my attention that King’s whole body puffs up as he uses the word “family.” “What’s up?”

“Oh, hi Angie! I can’t wait to meet you in person. I can’t believe I’ll be moving next week.”

I’ve talked with Diego several times over the past month. He’s a smart young man, and I think he’ll do really well at

NYU. All of his hard work, plus the internships King has managed to hook him up with throughout the years, have really prepared him for his upcoming challenge. “We’re so excited for you, Diego,” I reply.

“Can’t wait to see you again, buddy. Text me your new address so I’ll have it in my phone.”

“Sure thing. I’m going to own NYU!”

We laugh at his exuberance. Diego tells us all about his course selections and his roommates, whom he’s “met” via social media. “Can’t wait to be back in the same state as you, Little Brother,” King says.

After ending the call, he brings up some of the houses we’ve toured, going through their pros and cons. I respond to him, but my mind is elsewhere. I’m still determined to heal King’s rift with his parents—in as much as it can be healed—but I haven’t pushed him on it. Maybe it’s time.

When he pauses to take a breath, I cross my fingers. This could go either way. “I’m so happy you have a good time with my family.”

“Are you kidding me? They’re awesome. I love your family.” His hand reaches for mine. “Like I love you.”

I twist my wrist and interlace our fingers. Here goes nothing. “I think you could have the same type of relationship with your family.”

Utter silence reigns for a full minute. It’s as if a bomb exploded. I refuse to say another word until he does. After all, I was the one who tossed the live grenade into the car.

“Angie,” he begins. “You know all about my relationship with my mother and father.”

I squeeze his hand, which remains in mine. Thankfully. “I do. I’ve heard a couple of your conversations with your mother, and I have to agree with you. She’s more into her own life than ensuring yours is going well.”

He nods, his focus on the road, and takes the exit for Aroostook.

“But,” I continue, “your dad’s another story. I saw how he was with you at his concert. You know my thoughts about that interaction.”

He removes his hand from mine. *Shit*. “He’s into his wife and their daughter. I’m an unwanted reminder of his time with my mother.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I think you should call him and try to keep an open mind. When you want to jump the gun and assume the worst, stop yourself and ask if there may be another side to what he’s saying.”

“No.”

“King—”

“I said no.” He slams his hand on the steering wheel. “Case closed.”

I purse my lips, knowing this is a lost cause. I look out the window as the scenery becomes increasingly familiar. Swiveling my head toward him, I say, “I want you to be happy.”

He blows a breath through his mouth. “I am, Angie. With you and your family. I’ve never been happier. Can we please drop the whole thing with my family? They’ve dropped me.”

I nod my head in acquiescence. I’ll do as he asks. Not forever, but for now.

## KING



**O**ther than rehashing my shitty relationship with my parents, today was a perfect day. My acceptance by Angie's family is more than I ever could've hoped for. Still, Angie's remark about Dad won't leave my mind, and it's hard to shake off my funk as we walk past the reception desk in our building. I wave. "Hey, Jerry!"

"King. Angie. So great to see you this fine Saturday evening. Enjoy your night."

Both of us smile at him and continue up to our apartment. With our combined income from the show, we've taken over the lease from the studio. We'll live here until we decide on our starter home. Because one day we'll buy our own multi-million dollar mansion on the ocean. With our own money. That we earned.

Not from some trust fund given to me by my father.

We enter the apartment, things still stilted between us. I don't like it, especially not after the private conversation I had with her parents earlier today.

Reaching for her hips, I pull her close and kiss her ear. "I had a great day today, Angie."

She stiffens for a second, but only a second, before melting against me. I love how all her soft curves fit against my hard planes. I simply love this woman. Period.

“I did too, King.” She rolls her head back. “It’s adorable how excited Diego is to attend NYU.”

At the mention of my Little Brother, pride wells up inside my body. “He’s a good kid. He’s going to make his mark on the filmmaking world, I know it.”

She nods. “With you in his corner, I have no doubt that he’s going to hit amazing highs.”

Here’s my opening. “So what about you?”

She cocks her head. “What do you mean?”

I let her go, but only so I can open up the drawer to the side table, taking out a pen and notepad with Russo Real Estate stamped on the pages. Before we left, I scrawled “Angie & King’s Bucket List” across the top. She becomes still when she sees what I’ve written. I take her hand and lead her to the sofa.

Sitting next to her, I say, “I know you made one of these with Dante over a decade ago, but most of the items have been ticked off. I want to honor him by making a brand new Bucket List for us. *Our* goals and dreams. What do you think?”

She rubs her tattoo, then swallows. “I think it’s a great idea.”

Even though I never met Dante, he’s been a part of our lives since the beginning. I’m grateful to him for loving my Angie as deeply as he did. He nurtured her when they were kids, and his death imbued her with a sense of focus and strength. Now it’s my turn to help this amazing woman fly free.

I lick my lips. “You’ve already established Russo Real Estate in Aroostook, but we need to take it to a higher level. Ultimately, I would like to establish a whole network of offices across Long Island. What do you say?”

Her chocolate brown eyes light up. “I never thought of that! We could open a whole bunch of offices in all of these little beach towns. I love it.” Smiling, I write that down and hand her the pad.

She places the tip of the pen in her mouth and sucks, causing my cock to stir in my shorts.

She pops the pen out of her mouth. “How about we add training of new real estate agents to our list? I didn’t want to do that before because it felt desperate, but if we keep growing, I think we should share what we’ve learned with aspiring agents.”

“I’m not a great teacher, by any means, but it could be fun. I loved the course I took online, so maybe we could play around with the structure.”

She nods and writes it down, then hands the pad back to me. Instead of sharing my thought out loud, I scribble it down and pass her the notepad when I’m done.

Angie takes it from me and reads aloud. “We get married, have babies, and go on endless adventures.” She sucks in her breath.

While she’s reading, I fall to my knee next to her and reach into my pocket, grabbing the little box I’ve been carrying around with me for the past week that was blessed by her parents tonight. Mouth wide open, she bends her head down toward me. I grab her left hand.

“Angela Romano Russo, you mean the world to me. You’ve taught me what love is. What family means. I wake up each morning happy because you’re in my life. I never want that to change.” My eyes flick down to the box, and I open it. A three-quarter-carat round brilliant solitaire set in a twisted vine rose-gold ring shank. “I know it’s not a huge rock, but it represents you. Us. Perfect and classic and elegant, with a hint of sass thrown in.”

I hold the box up, blood pounding in my ears. And say the words I had never thought I would speak to any woman. Ever. “Angie, I promise to love you more tomorrow than I do today, if that’s even possible. I want to share all of our long years together, making babies and enjoying adventures, both big ones and the everyday adventures that make a shared life. Will you marry me?”

One lone tear runs down her cheek. She opens her mouth but nothing comes out at first. For a moment, nerves get the better of me—did I ask too soon?—then she blurts, “Yes! Oh my God, King, yes! I will marry you.”

I remove the ring from the box and slip it onto her left ring finger. She brings her head to mine and cups my cheek like she’s done a million times. Only this time, she rubs her finger under both of my eyes and removes *my* tears. Then she kisses me like it’s our first time.

“I hope you like the ring. It’s not big or anything—”

“Shhh, it’s beautiful. It fits me perfectly. I love it.”

“Your parents told me you’d say that. I didn’t want to overspend. I’m not that person anymore.”

“You asked my parents?”

I return to my seat at her side and kiss her nose. “Today, while you were doing dishes.” They both hugged me as if I were already family.

“I love you, King Hunte.” Her lips crash on mine again.

Talking time is over. Heart pounding, I wrap my arms around her and stand, carrying her into our bedroom while my lips remain fused to hers. We strip off each other’s clothes and make love, crying out in pleasure throughout the night.

I wake to Angie cradled at my side, her head resting on my shoulder. I run my hand down her naked back and slip away, not wanting to wake her. My engagement ring is the only thing she’s wearing.

Moving Jeter from the floor, where he landed last night, to the top of my dresser, I grab a pair of shorts and head into the living room. I wasn’t able to sleep much last night—holding Angie long after she fell asleep. Although I’d dismissed her advice about Dad, more than once, it occurred to me that I might be wrong to discount her.

Angie’s been right about so much. Maybe she’s right about this as well?

Looking down at my phone, I bring up his contact information. It’s nine a.m. here, which makes it eight in Chicago, where he lives. Not too early. He picks up on the first ring. “King? Everything all right, son?”

My stomach knots at his last word. “Yeah,” I croak out. “Yes. I’m good. How are you doing?”

“I’m well. We finished up our tour last week, so I’ve been recharging at home with Sara.”

I nod. “That’s good. I’m sure you appreciate the break.”



“Yeah.” He chuckles. “I’m not as young as I used to be.”

I wipe my damp palms on my shorts. “So, uh, Dad. I’m calling because I wanted to let you know that I met a girl. Woman. Well, we met months ago. Angie—you met her. I, uh, asked her to marry me. She said yes.”

“King! That’s wonderful news. Congratulations to you both.” He pauses. “Do you need money for an engagement ring? I know I cut off—”

“No. I’m good. I have a job. Well, two actually. I’m a real estate agent in the Hamptons and you know I’m on Blaine’s show, *Battle of the Real Estate Matchmakers*.”

“Sara mentioned it started airing, but we haven’t had time to check it out yet. It’s on our DVR.”

Huh? He taped it? I rest my arms on the kitchen island. Time for one more truth. “Cutting me off was the best thing you could’ve done for me. If that hadn’t happened, I never would’ve met Angie—or gotten involved with real estate. I might never have realized I *like* working.”

“I’m so happy to hear that, King.” He pauses, and there’s a new catch in his voice when he continues, “I’m proud of you.”

My heart flips and expands at his last words. “Thanks, Dad. I wanted to let you know that, while I never did drugs often, they are now completely out of my life.”

“I’m so happy to hear that.”

Contented with our conversation, I end the call, “Well, I should get going. Bye.”

I put the phone onto the counter when Angie walks into the room, as naked as the day she was born. “I wasn’t listening on purpose, but were you talking with your father?”

Because the sight of her, naked and confident, sent all of my blood southward, I can only summon the will to nod.

“That’s great.” She places her left hand on my shoulder. “What did he say?”

I cover her hand with my own, my finger rubbing over her engagement ring. “He sends his best wishes.” I bring her knuckles up to my lips. “It’s a start. All because of you.”

She kisses my neck and I wrap my arms around her. She’s my family, and I know I’ll never be alone again. No matter what life throws at us, everything will work out, because I have the most amazing woman by my side.

For the first time, the future is filled with exciting possibilities.

## EPILOGUE - KING

“When did you know you were in love?”

The host directs his question at Angie, who turns an adorable shade of pink. She plays with the engagement ring I gave her two months ago. “After King did.”

The live audience laughs.

I swivel in my chair and pick up the slack. “That’s very true. I knew right away this woman was different from anyone else I’d ever met. She was pig-headed, for sure, but so determined to help everyone out with their real estate needs.” I shake my head at the chuckles from the audience. “I didn’t stand a chance.”

The host grins politely. “People who’ve seen the show always comment on your bickering. To someone who doesn’t know about you two, it would seem like you didn’t like each other. Why did you two argue so much at first?”

I think for a moment. “At first, I was all about the multi-million dollar places. I thought Angie was looking too small because she always wanted to see the best for everyone, no matter their budget. She opened my eyes, though. Everyone deserves to have a good real estate agent to find the perfect home for them.”

The host flips his card. “So tell me, Angie, how has your life changed since the show aired?”

“Oh, wow! Where to start?” She pulls on the ends of her hair. “The agency has exploded, for sure. We’ve added four new agents to help handle all of the new business.” She looks directly into the camera. “Thanks for that, everyone. Oh, and people line up around the corner to come into the office and look at the furniture.”

Truth is, I’ve come around to the way she and Juliana decorated the place. It’s unique—like her.

Angie winks at me. “And King.”

I squeeze her hand. “We try to convert them into clients,” I chime in to the delight of the people at the taping.

The host leans forward in his chair and motions for my fiancée to join him. In a stage whisper that we all can hear, he asks, “How’d he ask you?”

Angie sits back, smiling. She rubs her fingers over the ring, then traces her tattoo. My name now interweaves with Dante’s, a physical representation of the fact that we’re both in her heart. “We had just gotten home from dinner at my family’s. He brought out a notepad, and we started creating a Bucket List. He added this amazing item, and while I was absorbing it, he got down on one knee.” She pauses. “It was very romantic.”

The host looks out to the audience, grinning with his thousand-dollar smile. “Do you think we should film their wedding on the next season of *Battle of the Real Estate Matchmakers*?” Applause rumbles through my body.

“Won’t be much of a battle, though.” I shake my head.

Angie places her hand on my forearm. “I don’t know, honey. We haven’t started working on our vows.”

Everyone laughs. Kaitlyn calls “Cut!”

Angie strokes my forearm while Milo comes up and disconnects our microphones. We went out to dinner with him, Blaine, Kaitlyn, and the rest of the crew out here in LA before taping this “Behind the Scenes” episode—we hadn’t realized how much we’d missed everyone. Once we’re freed from our wires, we both stand and shake hands with the host.

Blaine comes over to us. He has the smile of a man who unwittingly hooked up two people who are wildly happy together. “Great job, guys. Everyone ate up what you gave them.”

“Thanks,” I reply.

“Let’s Do It! has scheduled taping for the next season for four months from now.”

“Perfect,” Angie says. “We should be settled into our new home by then, and taping will be wrapped well before our wedding.”

He focuses on Angie, then on me. “We really would like to incorporate your wedding into the season.”

Without hesitating, I reply, “No. That’s personal to us. Let’s keep the show about real estate, okay? I’d rather have you there as a guest.”

Blaine smiles, a bit sheepishly. “Told them that’s what you’d say. I’ll handle the studio, don’t you worry. I’m looking forward to the next season. Plus meeting your new agents. Who knows? Maybe another wedding could be in the offing.”

Angie snorts. “I’m not so sure about that. We have some clashing personalities on board.”

I lean down to her ear. “So were we, way back when.” I bite her ear to punctuate my statement.

We spend the next hour meeting everyone in the audience, accepting congratulations, and getting tons of stories about when people first suspected Angie and I had fallen in love. Some people said they knew right from our first meeting, while others said they were shocked to find out we were a real-life couple. It’s an enjoyable experience, if exhausting, and at the end we head to my LA condo.

Tossing my keys onto the kitchen island, I look around at the condo Dad bought for me all those years ago. Most of the personal items have already been put into boxes to be shipped out to Aroostook. Angie and I had a long conversation about this property, and we decided renting it out was the best course of action. The extra rental income will be a nice boon.

“LA is gorgeous.” She releases the curtain and lets it flutter over the French doors that overlook both the pool and the ocean beyond.

“It is. But it’s not Aroostook.”

She walks toward me, her hips swaying. My mouth goes dry. I force myself to stand still and enjoy the show. When will my desire for this woman stop driving me crazy? If I’m lucky, never.

Angie stops mere inches away. The air between us pops with electricity, heating up more than the weather outside. Because I have to touch her or I’ll die, I extend my right hand and wrap it around her waist, dipping my fingers under the

waistband of her skirt. She shudders as my finger grazes her bare skin.

With only my finger connecting our bodies, I ask, “Are you ready to put in an offer on the house on Cannon Street?”

Her body rolls. She’s been pushing for the other house, the one on West End. Both properties are listed around seven-hundred thousand—a shocking twist for both of us for opposite reasons—have three bedrooms and two-point-five baths, with lovely almost-views of the ocean. Well, only in the winter, when no leaves interfere with the sightlines. While the house she prefers is adorable, the one I’m pushing for isn’t quite as move-in ready. It’s larger, and I’ve been arguing we can put our own stamp on it. She seems to be slowly moving toward my point of view.

“We can use the money from this rental to update it. It won’t dip into our savings, or our wedding fund.” I unzip her skirt and lower my hand to the top of her ass.

“King.” I squeeze a cheek and she sucks in a breath. A smile creeps across her face. “Oh, all right. Why don’t we put in an offer on Cannon Street? It might be fun to redo it together.”

Placing my left hand on the outside of her ass-covered skirt, I pull her to me and kiss her lobe. Directly into her ear, I whisper, “Thank you. I’ll make it worth your while, promise.”

“You’d better,” she teases.

I lift my hands and run them over her shirt, taking it out of her skirt and pulling it over her head. Pausing to admire her purple bra, I push the cups down and latch onto one of her nipples. Tweaking the other with my fingers, I suckle and pinch. Her moans spur me to continue.

“I want you inside me.”

Well, don't have to ask me twice. “How do you want me, baby?”

She looks out the French doors and onto the patio. I follow her gaze, my erection becoming downright lethal. Before I can take another breath, I strip her and me, giving her new purple thong extra-special attention before tossing it to the floor.

When we're both naked, I lift her up, around the waist. “Wrap your legs around me.”

She does and I walk us both out the door and twist so that her back is against the glass. We're protected from prying eyes by a couple of strategically placed potted trees. I push my hips into her. “Yes, King. Right there.”

I keep dry humping her against the glass door while raining kisses down her neck.

“Stop. I don't want to come like this. Please.” She reaches down and wraps her hand around my hard cock.

Her touch makes me see stars. “Angie!” She pumps her hand up and down until all rational thought deserts me.

My right-hand snakes down between our bodies and I part her folds. “So wet for me, baby.”

“Only for you.”

With her legs still wrapped around me, I line us up and thrust into her body. We both moan at the intimate contact. I piston into her, never breaking my rhythm. Only speeding up.

Sweat rolls down my back, but I ignore it. Instead, I focus on making Angie come harder than she's ever done before. Her inner muscles contract around my cock with such force that a tingling sensation immediately starts in my balls. Within



seconds, I shoot into her, our mingled screams filling the night-time air.

Panting into her ear, I catch my breath. “God, baby, what you do to me.”

She rubs her hand over my stubble-covered cheek. “Right back at ‘ya.”

We remain locked together for a few moments before I step back and let her body slide down mine, her feet finding purchase on the patio floor. Her head remains down and her finger traces my ab muscles. When she traces my “V,” my stomach contracts and I grab her around her wrist.

“No more of that, unless you want another round of what we just did.”

Her eyes, filled with wicked intent, meet mine. She wraps her arms around my neck. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Not out here. I don’t want to give the rest of the complex a show.”

She kisses my lips and I almost forget my last statement. At the last second, I grab her by the hand and lead her into the bedroom, where we make love all night long.



My cell phone rings and Angie nudges my shoulder. “Wake up. That’s your phone.”

I open one eye and squint to see who’s calling at the ungodly hour of ... eight. “It’s Dad.”

I sit up, and Angie rolls to her side, placing her head on her hand. Because of her, I’ve reestablished a relationship with my

father. I've even come to understand why he and Sara tick, unbound from the jealous lies Mom spun around them as I was growing up. They're actually a great couple. Who knew?

Stealing a quick kiss from my fiancée, I answer the phone. "Hey, Dad."

"Hi! I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

I look at Angie, who's rubbing circles on my arm. "No. We were sleeping in after a long night."

He chuckles, obviously understanding what I meant. "I'm more of a night-owl myself. Although Sara has taught me the value of a good morning."

Like father, like son.

"Listen, I'm calling because Hunte just booked another round of concerts and we're going to be at Madison Square Garden next month. It's such a special venue, and so close to Aroostook. We'd love it if you and Angie could come."

I place my phone on my chest and relay Dad's invitation to Angie. She nods.

Picking the phone back up, I reply, "That sounds great, Dad. Somehow I've never seen you perform there."

"Great. I'll leave backstage passes for you and Angie. Anyone else you'd like on the list?"

"I'll ask Angie's family and get back to you, okay? Oh, and Diego." It'll be a good excuse to see my Little Brother, who's already studying hard at NYU.

"You got it. I'm going to ask your sister if she can make it, too. Her movie should be wrapped up by then."

“Awesome. I look forward to spending time with Melody.”  
My eyes meet Angie’s.

“I’m going to call her now. Look forward to seeing you.”

“Thanks, Dad. Me, too. I love you.”

“Love you too, son.”

I drop the phone to my side, where it lands on the bed with a small thud. Angie picks it up and clicks on the camera, switching on selfie mode. She snuggles up to me and holds her arm out, with the screen facing us.

“I want to capture this moment forever,” she says, snapping the two of us.

Taking the phone from her hands, I check the photo. We’re both smiling, with sunlight from the window glinting off her engagement ring. The picture is so full of love it makes my heart throb in my chest. Angie changed my life—she changed *me*.

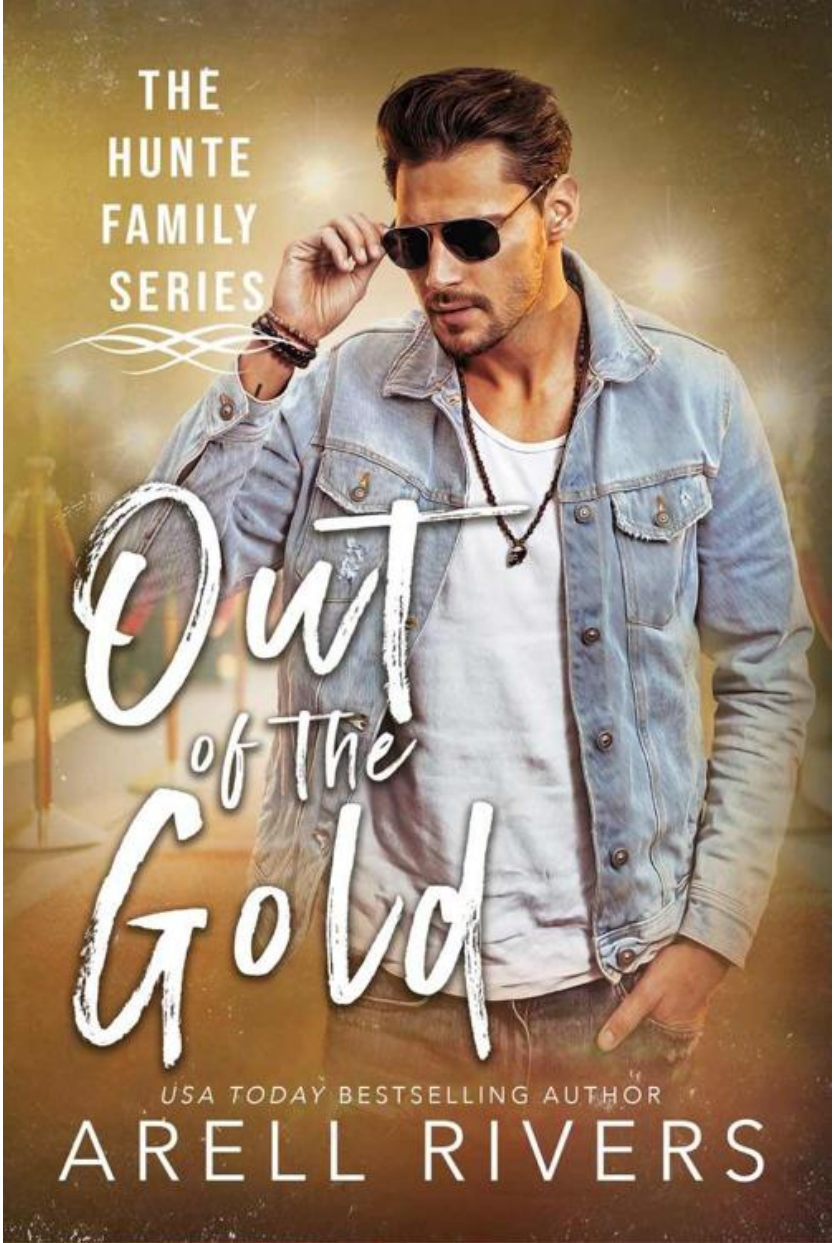
I push her hair away from her face. “You’ve made me a better person. You gave me your family and brought Dad back into my life. You focused me. You’re the best there is.”

She kisses my lips. “No, King. You’ve gotten it all wrong. You opened my heart back up to love and possibilities. I’m living because of you.”

“So let’s call it a draw. We’re both lucky to have found each other. I love you, baby.”

Her response is a kiss that lights my body on fire.

THE  
HUNTE  
FAMILY  
SERIES

A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a light blue denim jacket over a white t-shirt, dark sunglasses, and a necklace. He is looking slightly to the right. The background is a warm, golden-brown color with some bokeh light effects.

Out  
of The  
Gold

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ARELL RIVERS

## MELODY



**H**is damn thighs are so thick.

Squinting, I focus on each individual stitch I sew. Who thought this was a good idea? Oh crap, I did. His inner thigh twitches and I maneuver so my needle doesn't nick him. Or his stupid black boxer briefs.

He clears his throat. "If you want to touch my junk, you could ask nicely. I'd let you, you know."

A chuckle from his personal assistant, Thomas Berg, approves his inappropriate remark.

From my position on my knees, I pull the needle through the thick material and bite back the retort dying to spill from my mouth. Ignoring the broad shoulders and six-pack abs on full display, I redouble my efforts to sew him into the spandex as fast as possible with this tricky stitch.

Actors are an entitled lot. And the man I'm sewing into the costume, Chase Wright, is the typical Hollywood pretty boy who happened to grow up in my Chicago neighborhood. Even though he's five years older than me and we never attended school together or met before now, I know his real name. And his sister. Any relation to her is *no* friend of mine.

He wiggles his knees. “At least we shot the rest of the movie in regular clothes already. But it looks like this freaking superhero part is going to take forever.” His complaint lodges above my head. “Longer than filming the last two movies combined.”

Closing my eyes, I ignore his words and let him settle down before continuing my painstaking work. It wasn't my idea to change the costume. Judith Harris, my boss on our HBO TV show, took over the lead costume designer position for the movie when the original designer was in a fatal car accident a few months before filming was to start. Judith wanted to make her own mark on the trilogy, so she created this ingenious—although not fast and easy—new design for this costume. Since filming was to take place during our show's hiatus, Judith invited both me and my coworker, Helene Parker, to join her here. My first movie. I'll be damned if some over-entitled *movie star* ruins this for me.

My gaze skims over the work I just did. A functional and decorative DNA stitch was a design touch bandied about during our creative process, but was discarded as too difficult. On my own time, I took it upon myself to research and develop what I call the “Manipul8 Stitch,” which looks like a stylized infinity symbol filled with horizontal lines. It was included in my prototype for the costume I submitted to become the lead's dresser. Helene also tried out, but she used a simple running stitch in her design. My creativity was rewarded, even if the “reward” comes with Chase attached. Whatever. Now my résumé boasts my addition to the costume.

I earned this all on my own. It's *my* work. My lungs expand to their fullest. No one can claim I got this job because of my father.

“So, Chase, once we wrap here in a couple of weeks, you need to get back to the States to jump on the publicity for *I Was Made for Her*. The red carpet for it is in a month, and we need to get you a new tux. Who do you want to wear?” The PA consults his clipboard, clicking his pen.

The clicks pound like nails on a chalkboard. I inhale.

“I wore Tom Ford last time. How about Versace? I’m feeling more traditional. Must be all this Italian air.”

I roll my eyes and abandon the tricky Manipul8 Stitches in favor of a running stitch since his boots will cover this bottom part. How fucking tall is this guy anyway? It’s like his legs go on forever. Deftly, I tie off the thread. Before I can start on his other leg, though, I need to check that everything fits this one without any problems.

I pose my instruction to the movie star. “Can you bend your left leg, please?”

His leg bends and flexes a few times. The unsewn material on the interior of his right leg flaps with the movement, but the left one looks good moving with him. My hands skim over his leg, double-checking the costume—ignoring his hard muscles—all the while his conversation with Thomas continues. Names of hairstylists and jewelers roll off his tongue.

When we wrap, *I’m* going back to my condo in New York City to begin prepping for the upcoming season of *Ladies of the Abbey*. I’ve walked the Emmy red carpet a couple of times, and we won last year. A small smile plays over my face. Our costumes have improved over the three years I’ve been working there, and I feel confident we’ll get another nod again this year. And win.

Chase does a deep knee bend. “Can you tell me again why I have to actually be *sewn* into these leggings rather than put them on like pants?”

My eyes trace the intricate helixes embossed on the outside of his spandex-covered leg—the look I imitated on his inner thigh. The design is fantastic. His question, not. “Because Judith created this new design so it wouldn’t be as hot for you, and so you’ll be able to use the restroom without having to make it a big production.”

He rakes his hand over his perfectly ruffled almost black hair, rubbing the undercut at the nape of his neck. “Guess I can’t argue those reasons,” he grouses.

Finished checking my handiwork, I haul myself upright and stretch—I’m the one who’s been laboring over it for the past hour, not *him*. On stiff legs, I shake them as I traverse the trailer to grab a bottle of spring water. “This first time should be the longest it takes.” I cross my fingers while downing the water.

“Hope you’re right.”

No matter what, it isn’t easy to sew someone *into* a garment—he’s not a mannequin. But the result will give *me* props. *Eyes on the prize, Melody*. Taking one last swallow of water, I toss the empty bottle into the recycle bin and return to Chase. Shaking out my hands, I ask, “Ready for your right leg?”

Chase kicks, and the material flutters again. “Yeah.”

I wait a fraction of a minute for Judith to appear, but when she doesn’t, I get down on the pillow at his knees. Stretching the spandex around his upper right thigh, I begin the process all over again. Concentrating so as to avoid his *junk*.



The phone rings and Thomas addresses Chase. “It’s Sam.”

“Great.” He takes the phone from his PA and greets Sam Kirkland, his legendary agent. Even though I focus on my needlework, it’s impossible for me not to eavesdrop on his conversation. I am, after all, right below his cell phone, and the conversation is on speaker.

“There’s a new movie I just heard about. A rom-com. Set to start filming late next year.”

Chase’s leg tightens. What’s that about? I wait for him to relax before continuing my task.

“Any leading ladies interested yet?”

His agent replies, “I’ve heard various names. Julia. Emily. Ashley. Gwen. Marlo. No one in particular, but you’d look good against all of them. Want me to submit your name for the role? Pay is great, with the same perks as usual.”

Beneath my hand, Chase’s leg tenses again. I drag the needle away and flex my fingers. His tenor voice continues, “Who else is up for the lead?”

“The usuals. Plus”—Chase’s body stills as he taps his left thigh while waiting for his agent to continue—“a few younger guys. But you’re the one with the star power.”

Chase releases an exhale, which sounds more like a sigh to me. “Sure. Should be interesting. Send me what you have so I can take a look.” He disconnects and tosses his phone back to Thomas.

After a few moments, his leg relaxes and I return to my stitching, trying to puzzle out his body’s reaction to the new movie. Discarding such a useless endeavor, I do my best to ignore the rest of his conversation with Thomas, which consists of the upcoming red carpet for his last movie. From

the corner of my eye, I catch his PA taking lots of notes. Must be challenging being the right-hand to one of Hollywood's leading men.

Ha! Leading *boy*, more like it. When not on a set, Chase is well-documented as being off partying with some starlet or another. Or out with his posse of other actors, all of whom probably are up for this movie his agent pitched.

Of course, there's the obligatory gym sessions he has to make in order to maintain his physique. Which is pretty damn good. Not an ounce of fat on him, that's for sure. Matches what's on the inside, from what I can see. Nothing under the hood.

A lifetime of living with my dad has taught me all the smoke and mirrors Hollywood employs. Even though he's a rock star and my mom's his accountant, I've met too many actors to count. Some of them are nice, but the vast majority have been either empty-headed, insecure, or too full of themselves. No matter what, they've all wanted to get to know me as an access point to my family—and what the last name "Hunte" can do for them.

Like Grant.

Slamming my eyes shut, I silence the voices in my head. I'm *not* thinking about my ex-boyfriend ever again. Except to reiterate my vow. Never, ever get involved with anyone in the business. Period.

Chase continues barking orders to Thomas. Now he's directing him to get more special fizzy water only available at some high-end boutique here in Amalfi. The PA exits the trailer five minutes later, presumably in search of the specialty water.

Using both of my hands, I turn Chase's body a little bit to the side for better access.

The door to the trailer opens again, footsteps announcing someone's walked up the steps. Geez, Grand Central much?

"Looking like Doctor Manipul8, man." Mark Ivan walks up the aisle, his very distinctive baritone with slight Russian accent caressing the words.

No such thing as privacy on a movie set. I glance at the newcomer, noticing he's already in his villain costume. Giving him a dispassionate appraisal, I nod—Helene did a good job. He looks camera ready.

I pull back when Chase bends his knees. "More like a One."

The two fist-bump. I concentrate on sewing the tricky area around Chase's knee. They discuss the scene they're about to film and laugh at Mark's role as the villain. Mark makes fun of the superhero costume Chase is wearing. Like the two kids they are. Pretty boys. Actors. No, worse—*movie stars*.

When Chase's legs move again, I grab them to still the movement. I'm now at his mid-calf and the end is in sight. I tune out their conversation and focus, switching to the running stitch below the boot line. Finally, I'm done. Raking my eyes over both of his legs, I admit they look damn good and allow the exultation of the moment to wash over me.

Blowing air out of my mouth, I rise to my feet. At five-foot-seven, I'm still seven inches shorter than Chase, but standing upright again is revitalizing. Not to mention it's demeaning to be on my knees in front of him.

I clap twice, catching the attention of both of the boys in the trailer. "I think I'm done with your pants. Take a walk

around and tell me how they feel.”

Chase’s hand slashes through his hair. “About time.” His audience gives a hoot of laughter. Jerks.

I stifle the urge to seize one of the knitting needles holding up my bun and lodge it at Chase’s throat. I can see the headline from here—“Crazed Costumer Kills Doctor Manipul8 over Leggings.”

Dropping my hands to my sides, I grit out, “Just do it.” Obviously unused to being challenged, the spoiled actor quirks his eyebrow, and I mumble, “Please.” I force my hands to remain open at my sides. And my breakfast to remain in my stomach.

Mark shoves Chase, causing the desired effect, if not the manner. Chase takes a few tentative barefoot steps, bends down from his knees, and jumps. I watch his every movement for any signs of the stitches not holding, but everything looks good. “How do they feel?”

“Weird. But the leggings aren’t pulling or anything.”

“Good. You’ll get used to how the suit feels in no time.” I’ll also get used to sewing him into it. Wonder which one of us gets across the finish line first?

Mark adds, “Yeah, Doc. Gotta wear the getup or you’re not a superhero.”

“Douche.”

Mark punches his shoulder.

Chase gives him the finger.

He walks around the trailer for a few minutes and I study his movements. Pride at my handiwork grows as the costume looks good. Next up, I have to get Chase into the upper-body

part of the costume, a bodysuit made of a heavier spandex-rubber material than the pants. I walk over to the closet where two exact replicas of the bodysuit hang, running my hand over the black material. A gold stylized “8” is located over the heart. Defined six-pack abs plus an Adonis belt are the main feature of this design. Have to give props to Judith—her design really is awesome and the weight of the material is deceptively light. It’ll look fantastic on camera.

“Okay, here’s the next part of your costume.” I give him the wicking undershirt our shopper picked up. Once he’s in it, I shake the bodysuit, which snaps at the crotch. Not the most conventional outfit for a man, but super-practical.

Chase looks at the bodysuit with wide eyes. “You have to be shitting me.”

Mark stifles a snort, mutters a goodbye, and hightails it out of the trailer.

“This better be worth it,” he gripes.

*What a primadonna.* I shake the bodysuit. Again.

His jaw clenches as he snatches it from my hands, puts it down to the floor and lifts his foot.

My eyebrows reach my hairline. “What are you doing? You put it on over your head.”

He gives me a dirty look as his foot goes through the bodysuit’s opening and lands on the floor with a thud. “I’ve been dressing myself for thirty years. I think I know how to do it by now.” He places his other foot through the opening and yanks it up. His body contorts in all sorts of ways as the material makes its way toward his arms.

When the bodysuit gets stuck mid-abdomen, I shove aside my annoyance and help the thirty-year-old baby. I’m not being

altruistic, but how this costume looks will affect how Judith views me.

He grunts as it gets caught again around his arms. I take my time and settle the material over the rest of his body with care. I don't want to rip this, as it took over forty man-hours to create. Due to time constraints, we only have one other for the shoot.

When the material is situated over his upper-half and spandex abs are in place, I motion for him to snap it beneath his crotch. His lip curls downward.

*What a baby.* “For heaven's sake, just do it.”

“This outfit is so much different from what I had before.” He motions up and down his body.

His whining is the last straw. “You're getting paid a shit-ton. Do your job and stop complaining.”

He scowls. “Says the woman in street clothes.”

He steps apart and reaches down, causing me to turn my head. When I hear the telltale third snap, I return my gaze and check out the effect. My God, he is a masterpiece. Shoving this errant reaction away, I give a critical eye to the superhero ensemble before me. You can't see the snaps at all. They're obscured by the bulge. The very pronounced bulge. Yay, Judith, way to stroke his oversized ego.

Satisfied with the costume so far—and ignoring a weird flutter in my gut—I turn my attention to the last remaining pieces. All that's left are his boots, which he shouldn't complain about. Well, and the mask, which can wait till last. I hand him a pair of socks and the black boots, and point to the chair. Stiffly, he maneuvers to it and sits down with extreme care. Soon after, he's wearing the footwear.

I offer him the mask—a gold affair that covers up his eyes and nose. He takes it from me and secures it in place, then turns his azure eyes on me. Despite all I know about Charles Wainwright, which is Chase’s real name, I swallow. He has been transformed into the graphic novel character.

Piercing blue eyes.

Tousled black hair.

That damn cleft in his chin.

Body chiseled as if by Michelangelo.

I stifle my reaction. Filming in Florence with all the artist’s masterpieces before we arrived here must’ve gotten to me. I shake my head. “Why don’t you stand up and walk around to get a feel for the full costume?”

He places his hands on his knees and rises. His *bare* hands. Shoot. I forgot the gloves. While Chase walks around, I head over to my bag. Holding out the gloves, I say, “Almost forgot these.”

He glances at my hand and takes the gloves but doesn’t put them on. Whacking the side of his leg with them, he paces through the trailer.

“Does anything pinch?”

“No. It’s okay.” He stops. “Not as heavy as the one before.”

His observation warms my heart. “I’m happy to hear that. It was designed to be as comfortable as possible.”

He nods and starts to do a few yoga poses, getting used to moving in the costume. I focus on his whole body at first, then zero in on his legs to make sure the Manipul8 Stitches are

holding. Everything looks good. Although ... an unusual bump has formed around his knee.

With a furrowed brow, I watch Chase go through several standing poses, but the bump grows. “Stop for a sec. I think something’s wrong by your right knee.”

Face turned downward, he bends both of his knees. I walk to him and run my hand over the back of his leg and knee, feeling an air bubble. Relief streams through me. “It’s only air. Take off your boot and let me see what I can do about it.”

“Really? You couldn’t have caught this before?” He plops down into the chair—if another issue with his costume existed, it would appear after *this* tantrum—and rips off his boot.

Placing my hands on my hips, I stare at him with disgust. “It looked fine before. Now stand up.”

He does and I run my hand down his leg, starting mid-thigh. Ah. Here’s where it started. I work the air out of the costume to the background music of Chase’s annoyed noises. Whatever.

“There. It’s all fixed now.”

“Better be.” He sits down and puts his footwear back on. A knock on the trailer door grabs both of our attention. Chase slips on the gloves, which I turn to check their fit. Giving him the all clear, he yells, “Come on in!”

His co-star and love interest in the movie, Jessa Mendes, bounds into the trailer. “Chasey, darling, are you almost ...” Before she can finish her question, he stands. “Christ. You look hot enough to eat in that suit.” She licks her lips and I turn my head so they can’t see my repulsed expression. Not that they’d care. Why do I?



She approaches him, placing her hand on the “8” over his heart. “Holy Moly, Chasey. You look every inch a superhero. More so than ever before.”

The two talk in low murmurs, and I head toward my three-tiered design suitcase, snagging another bottle of spring water along the way. My job here is done, until filming is over today. Tossing my scissors and sewing supplies into the top compartment, I close everything up.

In spite of Chase, I’m proud of the work I did in here today. Two more weeks of this, maybe less, and I’ll be free of him. The delight welling up in me for executing Judith’s design can’t be dampened by his behavior.

Finishing up the bottle, I toss it into recycling and roll my suitcase under the table for later, then pick up my essentials tote. Passing them, I say, “I’ll let the director know you’re ready, Chase.”

His gloved hand clamps around my wrist. “I think the costume will do.”

At the contact, a tremor ripples up my arm. What the hell? My gaze drops to his glove and travels up to his blue eyes. I dip my head in acknowledgment.

When he releases me, I ignore the odd disappointment in my chest and leave the two actors. Free of the trailer, I inhale the fresh, beautiful Amalfi air. Well, to be fair, we’re located somewhere above Amalfi, looking down on the Tyrrhenian Sea. The tiny village with quaint storefronts and lots of open land is perfect for this part of the movie.

I pluck my sunglasses out of my essentials tote—needles, thread, scissors, stitching tape, and other doodads at the ready.

Let's hope I don't need any of them for today's filming. Or ever.

As I head toward the set, my cell phone rings. Digging into the tote, I grab the phone and a smile crosses my face. "Daddy!"

"Hey, Princess. How's the Italian coast treating my baby?"

Even though we're not Facetiming, I do a three-sixty. "It's gorgeous here. I mean, I loved Florence and Rome, but the Amalfi Coast is sort of magical."

"I know what you mean." After pleasantries, he says, "I got some news."

I quirk my eyebrow. "What's up?"

"We're making great strides on the movie about Hunte. Since Hollywood released *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman*, everyone's saying it's perfect timing. We've already started auditions for actors to play us." He chuckles. "Can you believe several actors want to play me?"

I turn and head toward the set. "I'm sure a lot of guys wish they could *be* you, rather than simply get the role."

"You're too good for my ego. Your mother doesn't say such nice things to me." He grunts. "Ouch! That woman hit me!"

I laugh at their antics. Married for nearly a quarter of a century, every time I see them, they are more in love than before. "I'm happy for you."

Chase and Jessa pass by me on their way to the set. Guess they didn't need me to let the director Ned Nobleman—whom everyone calls Noble—know he was ready. I slow my steps.

“I want to be happy for you, too, Princess. How would you like to be the *lead* costume designer for the movie?”

My feet stop moving as if they were immersed in cement. My head shakes from side to side.

When I don’t respond, he asks, “What do you think?”

I lick my dry lips. “I appreciate the offer, Daddy, I really do, but”—I rack my brain for a positive spin—“I’m sure you’ll be filming when I’m back on the television show.” There. He can’t argue with that.

“Honey, I’m an executive producer. We can work around your schedule, no problem.”

*Rats.* Ahead, several people surround Chase, slapping him on the back. Guess the costume is a hit. I should get there. Which means I need to end this conversation.

Gulping Italian air, I screw up my courage and say, “Daddy, I’m excited for you and the band. I think your movie is going to be amazing. But I don’t think I’d be a good fit.”

He interrupts, “That’s not true—”

Judith motions for me to join them on the set. I don’t want to admit this, especially to my dad, but time’s up. “Actually, I can’t do it for you. Everyone would think I got the job due to nepotism, and you know how hard I’ve been working. I have to make it by myself, and if I took your offer, I’d be going backward. I earned my job on *Ladies of the Abbey* by my hard work in school”—despite what the press release said—“and because of that, I’m here on *Doctor Manipul8*.”

“I guess I can understand,” he grumbles.

“I will gladly walk the red carpet with you at the premiere. I will be your biggest cheerleader. I promise! But I can’t take

the job.”

Judith waves at me again. I walk briskly toward her.

“I can understand your logic. Your mother said you wouldn’t take it either.”

I chuckle at how disgruntled he sounds. “Wise woman.” I’m close to the set. “Oh, and, Daddy, please don’t say anything to me about the movie at all. I want to experience it with the rest of the moviegoers, okay?”

He sighs. “Sure thing, Princess. My lips are sealed.”

I smile. “Thanks. Now, I have to get on set. I love you. Give Mom a big kiss from me.”

I disconnect the call, put my phone on silent, and toss Daddy’s movie out of my head. Now, I’m all about *Doctor Manipul8*.

Even if that means Chase.

## MELODY



Noble yells, “Action!”

Chase and Jessa walk down the cobblestone street, his head swiveling from side to side as if he’s looking for something. Which he is supposed to be doing—a jewel encased in a material called Aurumite, a special gold-like metal both he and his archenemy played by Mark are searching for. With each step, Chase seems more comfortable in the costume, which probably was Noble’s purpose for filming this part today.

Light catches the inside of Chase’s leg. The Manipul8 Stitches are subtle but enhance the costume. A satisfied smile crosses my lips.

“CUT!”

The actors surround Noble.

With a break in the action, my gaze steers to the only female cameraperson, my best friend in the whole world, Sophia Jenkins. She and I grew up together, but it was dumb luck we both ended up on *Doctor Manipul8*. Spending so much time with her has been a huge part of why I’m having such a great time on set. I wink at the tall, lanky woman with a brunette pixie cut, and she waves before focusing her attention on an impromptu meeting.

After watching her with the crew for a moment, I grab my Burt's Bees lip balm from my essentials tote. Hard to say how much longer we'll be at it today, but I'm proud of how everything's gone so far. Before they started shooting, Chase received a huge round of applause from everyone for his full Doctor Manipul8 getup.

We did a good job. *I* did a good job.

"I like that smile." Sitting next to me, Judith wears an identical expression on her face.

"He looks good. Great design."

Without turning her head, my boss adds, "Great execution."

Her praise seeps into my bones. It's rare and always to be savored.

She clears her throat and looks from me to Helene, who sits on her other side. "So, I was talking with Noble before, and he's very impressed with everything we've done here. He pulled me aside just now to compliment us on the revisions to the superhero costumes. Did you know he's going to be directing a new trilogy?"

Helene's shoulder-length frizzy red bob shakes while my eyebrows rise. "No, I hadn't heard."

Judith nods. "He asked me to interview to be the lead costume designer for them." She turns her head to me. "That's why I wasn't able to get into Chase's trailer while you were sewing him into the costume earlier."

Now that I understand where she was before, my heart rate accelerates. With excitement for Judith, who deserves this opportunity to shine. With questions as to what this possible move might mean for the TV show—and my career. "Wow.

That's amazing." I clear my throat. "I'm sure you're going to get the job. Look at what you did here on *Doctor Manipul8*."

Helene pipes up. "You've worked your butt off at HBO for years, Judith. Now on this movie. It's your time." She flicks her eyes to me. "I agree with Melody. You're going to be a shoo-in."

Judith sits straighter. "I really appreciate all the hard work you've both put into this movie. Not to mention what you do on *Ladies of the Abbey*."

Noble claps and the actors take their places. Out of the side of her mouth, Judith whispers, "If I get this job, my position on the show will be open."

This is happening so fast. I had expected Judith to get some movie offers, which represents the pinnacle of our industry. Movies open so many new doors, including the possibility of an Oscar to add to her Emmys. Selfishly, I hoped she would stick around the show for a few more years so I would get more time to learn from her. While I'm loving being in Italy, my experience here has taught me that I prefer the family atmosphere of working in TV rather than the team aspect of movies.

This thought leads to my next one. If Judith leaves the show, who will replace her? I remove the knitting needles from my bun and fluff my hair. After graduating *magna cum laude* from NYU with a degree in costume design, I landed my job there three years ago. I worked hard for the opportunity, no matter the press release announcing my addition to the show had the headline "Legendary Rock Star Braxton Hunte's Daughter Joins HBO Costume Design Team." However, I'm the one who arrives early and leaves later than anyone else.

I've learned a lot from Judith—am I ready to step into her heels?

Glancing at my “rival,” Helene, her squared shoulders and jut of her chin seem to show she is. Over the past fifteen years, she's been working her way up in HBO with other shows.

Yet, I'm the one who thinks outside the box to include unusual details. Working with other professionals on set, I help create the illusion viewers demand, like fun fringe on the bottom of the lead's knapsack—while Helene stays well within the lines with expected holes in jeans. My embellishments are the ones fans tweet about all the time. Hell, yes, I'm ready!

The assistant director yells, “Quiet on the set!”

Placing my hair back into a ponytail, I recreate my bun and secure it with the knitting needles. My motivation to show Judith exactly what I can do here on set is renewed. I have the remainder of the movie shoot to prove myself. With that thought, I rededicate my energy to giving more than one hundred and ten percent. I glance at Helene again, who plays with her earring. *Game on.*

The scene restarts. The two actors walk down the street, discussing the research done by Troy Oro, Chase's character, that involved revising people's DNA to eradicate diseases.

Chase doesn't tell Jessa this, as it already was in the first movie, but one of Troy's experiments went terribly wrong. Or right, I guess, depending on how you look at it. He's now able to touch the top of a person's head and rearrange their DNA—for good or ill. When he does this, CGI effects will make the gold stylized “8” over his heart glow.



As they walk down the sidewalk, Chase talks with his hands, gesturing toward a group of people ahead. One of the minor actors steps forward, pushing a curly-headed boy ahead of him. “Doctor Mainupul8, my son’s been diagnosed with a rare cancer. We’ve heard”—the actor looks behind him and all the extras nod—“you can cure him.” He pushes the child forward. “Please.”

Chase extends his hand toward the kid and ruffles his curly hair. “Let me see what I can do.”

Chase’s glove-covered hands land on top of the child’s head, and he strikes a pose in front of the green screen that he holds for a full minute. When he tries to pull back, though, the Velcro securing the glove appears caught in the child actor’s hair.

“OWWWWWW!!!!  
MOOOOOOMMMMMYYYYYY!!!!!!!!!”

I’m out of my seat and onto the set within seconds, essentials tote swinging behind me, racing to the wardrobe malfunction. Sophia’s wide eyes meet mine. Before I reach the actors, Chase tries to remove the gloves but only succeeds in getting the Velcro more tangled in the boy’s hair. Jessa works the buckle, and that, too, only makes matters worse.

“Wait! Wait! Let me do this,” I scream as I approach the throng of actors.

Brushing aside all hands but Chase’s, which is ensconced in the child’s curls, I order, “Stop moving, both of you.”

I take a deep breath and assess the situation. The strip of Velcro holding the glove in place around Chase’s wrist somehow got loose. A bunch of curls are wrapped around the buckle and now enmeshed in the Velcro. Great. The best

course of action is for me to remove the glove from Chase's hand, and then remove the Velcro from the hair. Or cut it out—but I'm sure the actor wouldn't appreciate that. Nor would the hair department.

“Okay, I'm going to get you out of the glove, Chase.”

My eyes dart to him, and he's scowling. I bury my mother's admonition to lose the scowl before his face remains like that forever, and focus on removing the flap from the decorative buckle. Once that's done, I open up the glove and Chase slides his hand out, rubbing his wrist.

“Some fucking great costume,” he mutters. “Not like I'll ever have to put my hands on another actor's head. That's the whole damn movie. Get it fixed.” He rips his hand out of the other glove and throws it onto a table. With that, he storms off the set, pushing by Judith and Helene.

I resume my efforts on the child's hair. Jerk. *He* was the one who put the gloves on. I double-checked them, but obviously not good enough.

My musings are interrupted when the child actor screams again. “Ouch! This hurts!!”

His mother, who has been on set as required by law, rubs his back and tries to comfort him. I catch her gaze and she offers a wan smile. At least one person is sort of on my side.

After minutes of wrestling with the child's curls, I hold the offending glove high over my head, free and clear.

Sophia and some of her friends on the camera crew clap. The hair people swoop down and begin to fix the damage done to their creation. I exhale and close my eyes.

“Guess we didn't think this part through.” Judith's voice floats to my ears. “Can I see it?”

I pass her the glove, grab the other one Chase left, and we walk off the set. Judith turns the offensive glove in various directions. “The Velcro should’ve stayed on the glove. What happened?”

I shake my head. “I think it was the buckle that got caught first, allowing the Velcro to adhere to his hair. It never occurred to me this could be a remote possibility.”

Helene adds her two cents, “Better change it up. I don’t think Chase would want to be afraid his gloves will do that every time he does the DNA trick.”

Judith undoes and re-secures the glove. “This looks fine, but Helene has a point. Because Chase must lay his hands on everyone’s head, we can’t chance this happening again.”

I bite the inside of my lip. “We could use a different material and have the glove go under the arm of the costume instead of over it. No buckles. Since Noble has to digitally enhance the gloves anyway, it might not make too big of a difference.” I think about the fabrics I have in his trailer. “We could use a black cotton material.”

“Cotton? Not against the body suit,” Judith muses. “I do like your idea about having it go underneath the sleeves. And no buckles.”

“What about silk?” Helene offers.

Shoot. That’s a good idea. Why didn’t I think of it?

Judith considers her suggestion. “Silk. That could work. Black silk. Matte, not shiny.”

I consider the fabrics I have, discarding them all.

Helene pipes up, “I have the perfect thing. It’s in my bag, in Mark’s trailer.”

Noble approaches.

Judith rushes us away, “Go make a prototype. I’ll stall for time.” She braces to face the unhappy director.

Without even an inhale, Helene and I race off the set. “Bring me your material while I prepare a pattern in Chase’s trailer.” We part and, panting, I rip open the door and rush up the stairs.

Chase lounges in a chair, flipping his mask. “You better get my gloves fixed pronto. I hate delays for stupid shit.”

I see red. “This isn’t stupid. How were we to know the buckle would wrap around someone’s hair? I’ve worked with gloves before, you know, and they’ve been fine. Maybe it was the idiot who put them on.” I’m so angry I don’t care about my use of the slur.

“Or maybe it was the *idiot* who double-checked the fastenings.”

I suck in my breath. Not having time for his obnoxious comments, I force a calm voice. “We’re going to remake the gloves out of a different material.” I rip open my three-tiered design suitcase and toss pieces of fabric aside, grabbing some muslin.

“Here.” I point to the table now covered by the material, the rubber band around my wrist catching my attention. I flick it, allowing the tiny sting to absorb my negative energy like my mother taught me so long ago. “Set your hand down. I’m going to make a quick pattern.”

Chase’s brow forms a deep V. “Really? Starting that now? Couldn’t have thought of this before?”

I pluck the rubber band twice more.

## CHASE



**M**elody snaps the stupid rubber band around her wrist two times and repeats, “Put your hand here. *Please.*”

Her last word sounds more like Noble’s orders—*please* get this done in one take so we can all go to lunch—rather than a polite request. Despite that, I plunk my hand down on the cloth. She traces an outline, twice, with a Sharpie, repeating the same process for my other hand.

Pacing inside the trailer, I head over to the fridge and grab one of my waters to calm my nerves. I’m renowned for never getting upset on a shoot. Directors always comment about how even-tempered I am, and how much they enjoy working with me. I’m not a diva.

Then why am I running on empty for this movie?

When we were in Florence, it wasn’t bad. Everything went pretty well, with the usual hiccups. Something changed with the salt air, ever since we arrived in Amalfi. Maybe it’s the realization I’m wearing a stupid superhero costume again, no matter how well designed this one is. Perhaps it’s the two hours it takes for me to get into said costume.

Yeah. That must be it. I’ve never had so much attention paid to my wardrobe before.

Placing the blame for my surly attitude squarely on the learning curve for my new costume, I twist the bottle open. A burst of fizz soaks into my soul, and I take a sip. The water flows down my throat, leaving inner peace in its wake. All I need to do is adjust to this new normal. Besides, it's only another couple of weeks of filming, and this trial will be over.

"There. Try these on." She shoves a couple of slips of material at me.

While I was finishing up a bottle of my water, she made a prototype for the new gloves. I take the hastily made garments from her and slide my hands into them.

She turns them in all different directions. "How do they feel?"

I form fists, then release them and wiggle my fingers. I count to five before replying, "They're good."

The door to my trailer opens and her colleague enters. Helene's older than Melody and doesn't put me on the defensive like she does. Perhaps I can ask to have my dresser switched? Walking over to us, she examines the muslin gloves on my hands and whispers something in Melody's ear.

She nods at her co-worker then moves each one of my fingers. "I agree," she addresses me. "I think these will work." Melody points to the ends of the gloves that finish partway up my arm. "I made them this length so your bodysuit will easily cover them."

Whatever. It's a smart design. I don't bother telling her that. "How long will it take you to make real ones?"

"About an hour."

"Okay. I want to get out of the bodysuit." After stripping out of the new gloves, I head to the back of the trailer and

stand with my legs wide. Reaching down, I unsnap the material.

In the front, Helene holds out a black fabric. “Here, I found this silk. Judith agrees—should be perfect.”

Melody responds, but I’m not interested so long as the gloves get fixed. I try to wiggle out of the bodysuit, but it gets caught across my upper body. Damn. Without a word, Melody appears at my side and helps me take it off. Freed, she returns to Helene while I toss the bodysuit on a table, throw the damp undershirt away, and leave the two women in the trailer to create gloves that should’ve been done correctly the first time.

A few steps from the trailer, Judith meets me. “So very sorry for what happened to you back there. We never considered the possibility the glove could become a liability for you.”

“Thank you, Judith. I appreciate your words.” Not like either of her assistants offered any such sympathies.

“How are the new gloves coming along?”

“Okay.” I point toward the trailer. “Melody created a pattern and Helene dropped off the new fabric.”

Her eyes follow the direction of my finger. “I’ll make sure everything will work as you need it to.”

Before she takes a step, I ask, “How about switching up Melody for Helene as my dresser?”

Judith grimaces for a split-second, then schools her features. “Did something happen between you and Melody?”

We grew up together in Chicago and, even though we never met there, she knows who I really am.

She’s living her truth—being a costume designer.

Her beauty rubs me the wrong way.

No sooner do these thoughts enter my brain does my ingrained need to be seen as easygoing resurfaces, and I shrug. “I just feel more relaxed around Helene.”

The lead costume designer sighs. “Normally, I would make the trade. It’s only that Melody developed the stitch for the inside of your leggings and Helene doesn’t know how to do it. I suppose—”

I close my eyes, searching for my inner Zen. Which I’m going to need a lot of to finish this shoot. “No, that’s fine. I can deal for two weeks.”

Judith inclines her head. “Thanks.”

We part ways, and I return to the set, sitting down next to Mark and Jessa. “Did I miss anything?”

Jessa doesn’t respond with words. Her eyes, however, descend over my naked torso as if it were her lips doing the traveling.

Mark finishes a sandwich. “Nah. Noble and Judith were talking about your glove for a long time. Since she left, he’s been watching a replay of the aborted scene we just shot.”

“Let’s hope the new gloves work better than the original ones.” I offer him my naked fist, which he bumps.

Jessa finds her voice. “So, it’s our first night in Amalfi. Want to check out the nightlife? Heard about a club that’s off the chain, and a bunch of us are going there tonight to check it out.”

Although I have little desire to go out, I reply as expected and summon a smile. “Count me in.”

Mark replies, “You know I’m there.”



Jessa offers us both a beaming smile, yet my body doesn't react at all. It's the first time her gorgeous expression has failed to rouse my attention. Huh.

Before I can really dissect my last thought, Noble approaches us holding an iPad, and offers some constructive criticism about how to improve the scene. When the new gloves are finally ready.

Which better be soon.

My eyes return to the area of my trailer, but it remains empty. I kick my booted foot.

When Noble pulls Jessa aside, Mark places his hand on my bare forearm. "How's it feel to be Doctor Manipul8—in full regalia—for the final movie?"

"Weird," I answer. "Sad. I'm going to miss it, but not all the hoopla over the suit." I gesture to my bottom half.

"I can imagine. Is the suit as awful as it looks?"

"Actually, no. There's a lot more breathing room than the other two times, which is good. How's yours?"

Mark bends down and picks a cup off the ground, the smell of coffee wafting up to my nostrils. Wish I liked the stuff, but I'm one of the few freaks who doesn't. "Well, since it's my first time in it, I don't have anything to compare it to. I have to say, I'm much more comfortable than I had feared I would be. Hope they can fix your gloves the way Judith said."

"Me too. By the way, I want to compliment you on your portrayal of Mr. A so far. You almost had me fooled that you were on my side."

He smiles, a prosthetic golden tooth on full display. "Thanks, man. Playing the villain is so much fun. I love luring

people into a false sense that I'm doing good." He sips from his cup and plunks it back down on the ground.

I sigh. "Yeah, I hear you. I'd love to play the villain, you know?"

Mark grabs my cheeks and squeezes. "With a pretty boy face like this one, no one would ever believe you." He lets go of my face and gestures to his own. "You need some battle scars, like me."

I scoff. "They were drawn on you by Tina." Gotta tip my hat to the makeup artist, though. She did a great job.

He smirks. "Yeah, well, stick to your lane, buddy. Leave us ugly friends some roles, okay?"

I push his shoulder. "Sometimes I want to get out of this box I'm in, you know. Sam called earlier and wants to put my name in for another rom-com."

Mark winces. "Well, you make good bank with them, that's for sure. My agent called about a few roles he wants me to try for—all villains."

"We should switch." Even though my suggestion was made with a lighthearted tone, the idea tugs at my heart. I love acting. I love everything about my craft. Lately, though, I've been wanting *more*. Like the rush of a live audience—the remembered feelings from when I was in school. I guess losing a couple of movie roles to younger guys lately has put me in a reflective mood.

Next to me, Mark picks up his coffee again. "You know the studios wouldn't go for that. We've both been pigeonholed." He tips the cup to his lips.

He's right. As much as spreading my acting wings appeals, I know the powers that be wouldn't like it. Besides, I draw a

great payday with what I'm doing. Why rock the boat? Dismissing my stupid fantasy, I reply, "Guess you're right."

Judith arrives on set, holding the new gloves out for Noble's inspection. Melody and Helene trail behind her. I open and close my fist, watching as they examine the new addition to my wardrobe.

"Looks like they got a replacement," Mark notes.

"Yeah." I stand. "I better make sure these fit and won't get stuck in anyone else's hair."

"Good luck," he calls as I stride over to the trio holding the last piece of my wardrobe.

"How's it looking?"

Noble holds out one black glove to me. "Here, try this on."

I take the silk and slide it on my right hand and up my forearm. "Fits like a glove."

Noble smiles at my obvious pun, while Judith plays with the material. "Looks good," she notes.

"Something's missing," Melody pipes up.

Of course she finds something wrong. Can't she ever leave well enough alone?

Before I can even open my mouth, she grabs my right arm and twists so my palm is facing upward, then moves so it's facing downward.

"You're right," Judith muses.

Melody snaps. "An eight!"

Noble joins the conversation. "Good catch. On the palm. CGI can make it glow gold when he's performing his DNA transformations."

A patch won't be that effective unless ... I rush in, "Two patches. Palm and top of my hand for both gloves. That way, everything can be captured easier on film."

"I like the sound of that." Noble pats my shoulder. "Good thinking. Yes. On both sides." He looks at Judith. "Do you have any patches you can use?"

Helene responds, "I do. They're sort of small, but they'll be perfect."

Judith whispers in Helene's ear, who then scampers away.

I move all of my fingers, grudgingly impressed that Melody created the gloves in such a short time. Of course, if the design had been perfect from the beginning, none of this would've been necessary. My annoyance returns. I remove the glove, drop it on the table next to Judith, and return to my chair next to Mark.

"How's it working out?"

"They're making a few more adjustments."

He nods and, using his coffee cup, points in the general direction of the camera crew. "Have you talked with that one?"

I search through the group, and my eyes land on the only woman. "Ah. Sophia."

"Yeah." He sips his coffee. "Know her? Care to introduce a guy?"

I'm surprised he's asking about her, considering she's not his usual blond-haired beauty. "Honestly, dude, I don't really know her all that well. Joe Connelly introduced us at the beginning of the shoot, but she wasn't on set during the last two movies."

“Then we have something in common.” He crushes the cup and heads toward the garbage can across the way. Melody reappears with my bodysuit, a new undershirt, the gloves, and mask. She passes the new gloves to Judith. Together, they bring them to Noble. After a brief discussion, he motions me over.

“Here you go, Doctor Manipul8.” Noble winks at me. “Try these on.”

I take the scraps of material out of his hands and examine them. The eights do finish them perfectly. Not how they were portrayed in the graphic novels, or in our prior movies, but a good workaround. Plus they look good with the revised costume. *Too bad this wasn't thought through before filming started.*

Melody plucks the material from me and slides them over my hands, making minor adjustments. The meticulous woman—her attention to detail too late in my book—checks out the gloves from every angle before holding them up for the others to see.

Noble examines every inch of the new gloves. “They look great. Good job, Judith.” He looks at the team surrounding him. “And Melody, Helene,” he adds, then claps. “All right, let's get this shoot back on track. I'm glad I only scheduled this one scene today. Chase, get back into the top half of your costume.” Noble turns his back on us and yells for everyone to resume their places.

Off to the side, Melody helps me back into the bodysuit, while hair and makeup do quick touch-ups on the others. When I'm in the suit again, they rush over to me. At least this part is minimal, given my costume. Especially now, with my mask back in place.

Noble calls for action, and we redo the scene. A father steps out of the pack of extras, pushing his son ahead of him. “Doctor Manipul8, my son’s been diagnosed with a rare cancer. We’ve heard”—he looks behind him and all the extras nod—“you can cure him.” He pushes the child forward. “Please.”

I reach out and tousle the kid’s curly hair. “Let me see what I can do.” I switch my hands to lay on top of his head, closing my eyes, and hold the position for a full minute so the CGI folks can do their thing. All the while praying there’s not a repeat of what happened before.

I open my eyes, drop my hands—thank God nothing caught—and look at the father. “Go. Take him home. He needs to rest so his DNA makes the necessary changes.” I step back and the child fake swoons. The father catches him and picks him up.

“Thank you, Doctor Manipul8. I am forever in your debt.” He turns and carries the child toward the throng of people watching the superhero miracle.

Jessa claps. “That was very impressive, Troy, I mean Doctor Manipul8. Are you sure you healed him?”

“I am. I felt it.”

She places her hand on my chest, her Botoxed lips begging to be kissed. We hold the position for another moment for maximum sexual tension effect, before she murmurs, “Come on, let’s get you back to the lab.”

We continue our walk and I turn my head to the right, locking eyes with Mark. He squints and ducks behind a building. I blink as if I wasn’t sure I just saw him. Then I shake my head, acting like there was no way it was him.

Grabbing Jessa's hand, I kiss her palm. "I'm so glad you're on my team." We take a few steps.

"AND CUT!"

Noble jumps up, clapping. "That was great, guys!" He motions for the father and son to join us and gives us more notes about how to make tweaks to the scene. We run through it another five times before he's satisfied.

Once we're done, I remove the mask. The tiny additional amount of fresh air on my face feels wonderful. "Thank God we didn't have any more wardrobe malfunctions."

Mark takes my mask from me. "Amen." He slaps it against his thigh. Raising his voice, he yells, "Party tonight at eight to celebrate my boy, Doctor Manipul8!" A round of cheers sound their approval.

The start time tonight is due to our very early call time tomorrow. "We're going to really enjoy this town, Chase." He hands me back the mask as we enter the lot where our trailers are parked. "See you there."

Holding up my gloved hands in mock surrender, I reply, "Can't wait."

Jessa turns to me, wrapping her arms around my neck. "You did great out there today, Chasey." She kisses me, her collagen-enhanced lips moving against mine.

We've enjoyed each other's bodies previously but, for some reason, I'm not into her at the moment. My solitary goal is to get out of this stupid outfit. I pull back. "Thanks, Jessa. I really need to get out of this." I motion to the costume. "I'll meet up with you tonight at the party, okay?"

"Definitely. It'll be a blast." She kisses me again, then leaves in a swirl of heavy floral fragrance.

Thomas ushers me into my trailer, praising me for the scene and giving me tomorrow's lines to review.

"Thanks," I say, skimming over the scenes we'll be laying down. "Will you be joining us tonight at the party?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Heard all the ladies from the crew will be there."

I laugh and clap him on the back. "Like your priorities, man. Have anything else for me tonight?"

My PA consults his clipboard—all the while clicking his pen—and shakes his head. "The rest can wait till tomorrow. See you later." He turns to leave.

"Catch you then."

Finally, it's time to get out of this superhero costume. Lucky me.

From deeper inside the trailer, a woman's voice directs, "Take off your boots and socks, then unsnap the bodysuit. I'll get you out of the costume as quickly as I can."

I close my eyes. Melody's voice alone makes me vibrate with annoyance. We would've been done an hour earlier if not for the glove snafu. Swallowing my opinions in exchange for expediency, I take off my footwear and do the undignified unsnapping. Gathering the material from underneath, I drag it upward, getting caught around my torso. Again.

Her hands land on my upper pecs. "Here, let me help you. We need to preserve this bodysuit."

I fucking hate this feeling of helplessness.

Finally we manage to get me out of the rubber material for the second time today, and I rip off the soaking wet undershirt.



Melody takes it from my hands, balls it up and tosses it into the garbage. Good place for it.

Picking up a pair of scissors, she swishes them open and closed. Advancing toward me, she says, “Now for the leggings.”

Despite myself, I recoil at someone advancing at me with a pair of scissors. Layering my hands over my package, I stand taller. “Watch that.”

She opens and closes the scissors again. “Don’t worry. Not interested. I only want to get you out of these leggings so I can go about with the rest of my night.”

Her sharp words wound my pride. “That’s not what other women say.”

“I’m not like other women.”

Damn straight. She’s nothing at all like any of the other women I know. “Couldn’t agree with you more.” I widen my stance. “Get to it.”

She cuts the material up the hems until mid-thighs. “There. You should be able to rip the rest by yourself.” She stands and heads over to her suitcase.

Grateful for the extra air hitting my legs, I tear the material the rest of the way, pull the wrecked leggings off and toss them into the garbage. “Freedom.” Standing in nothing but black boxer briefs given to me as part of the costume, I move my hips and savor the air caressing my almost naked body.

Without looking at me, Melody says, “I’m done for today. I’ll be here at six in the morning to sew you back into the suit.”

My elation slides downward. Thirteen more days of shooting.

With this tyrant.

## CHASE



**M**ark yells, “Three, two, one!” In response, a bunch of us down our shots.

Exchanging the empty shot glass for a scotch—given the call time, this will be the only one I’m allowing myself ... thankfully—I leave the little huddle and head toward the back of the club. Bars line one side, but the center dance floor is the main attraction. People cluster in curtain-lined alcoves with plush sofas throughout the rest of the dimly lit space. A DJ plays great tunes. Case in point, an Ozzy Martinez hit blasts through the speakers.

Across the room, long, blond hair diverts my attention. My body twitches at the sight of the unknown woman. Standing with her back to me, she gathers the lustrous locks into a ponytail. No! Such fantastic hair shouldn’t be mistreated like that. My feet start in her direction, with every intention of grabbing the silky mane and instructing her to keep it down. So I can wrap it around my fist as our naked bodies enjoy each other.

She turns.

All momentum in my body freezes, my cheek heating as if someone had slapped it. Seriously? Melody. My *dresser*? No fucking way.

Disgusted at the vignette I conjured over *her*, I turn on my heel and stalk toward the sofas. She can go drape her freaking hair over every other man in this club for all I care. Before I realize it, I've approached an alcove occupied by locals and a few Italian women giggle. I clench my drink, struggling to retain my composure as the room closes in on me.

After more than a decade in the business, how did I make such a rookie mistake? It's all *her* fault.

Hiding my annoyance at myself behind a smile, I hold up my glass. "*Signorinas!*"

On the sofa, two of the women separate and pat the cushion. "Sit with us, *Signor Wright?*" The way the brunette says my name, with her thick Italian accent, is adorable. But not adorable enough that I'd take her up on her offer. I cast about for someone to save me, and locate Thomas standing near the bar. Our eyes lock.

"Thank you so much for your kind offer." Taking my time, I focus on each woman, watching my PA approach in my peripheral vision. I take two more slow, small steps toward the sofa.

Before I reach them, a male hand lands on my arm. Thank God. "Excuse me, Chase. Sorry to interrupt, but I need to speak with you."

Halting, I offer the women an apologetic look. "I'm so sorry. Another time, *si?*"

One of the ladies pulls out a cell phone. After shooting a death glare to Thomas, she holds it up to me, now wearing a pleading expression. "A photo first?"

*Please, anything to get away from these women.* Narrowing my eyes at my PA like my acting teachers taught

me shows annoyance, I retrieve the phone and offer it to him. “Would you mind?”

“Of course not,” he replies. I think her evil eye had its intended consequence.

I take a seat between the two Italian women, wrapping my arms around both of them. Thomas snaps three quick shots and, after kissing both of their cheeks, I leave with my assistant.

“Thank God you were here,” I mutter.

He chuckles. “Always. How did you get yourself into that situation anyway? That’s so unlike you.”

I shake my head. “I know. I wasn’t thinking.” I was thinking about my annoying dresser. All because she has hair like spun gold, the likes of which I haven’t seen before. She certainly doesn’t wear it like that when she’s with me—it’s always been hidden in a bun.

Thomas leads us toward an alcove with a few people from the set. When we approach, Thomas hooks his finger toward the dance floor and they make a show of getting up and heading there. Being the star of the movie does have some perks.

Sinking into the now empty sofa next to my PA, I swallow a big sip of my scotch. The burn trails all the way to my stomach. I refuse to let my face reveal my thoughts about the loathsome drink, which is what all the A-lister men are expected to drink nowadays. Too bad I prefer a nice glass of pinot noir. How did things come to this?

I rub my forehead. “I do appreciate the save, Thomas. I’ll pay more attention in the future.”

He tips his glass to his lips. “Thought they were going to flay me alive.”

I chuckle and place my glass down on a table. Leaning back into the cushions, I watch the dancers enjoy themselves.

Jessa sidles up to us. “Hey, Chasey, want to dance with me?” She wiggles her ample backside.

While Jessa’s hot, I’m still not feeling her. Even though I love dancing and would like to get out on the dance floor, I decline. She gives me a pouty face and tosses her rather brassy blond hair over her shoulder, which only cements my decision. “Sorry, Jessa. Not tonight.”

She leans over to me, placing her surgically enhanced tits in my line of vision. “We can do horizontal dancing, if you’d prefer.” Her hands snake around the back of my neck.

Placing my hands on her wrists, I stop her from completing the clench. “Maybe another night.”

“Fine. Your loss.” Jessa kisses my lips, straightens, and heads to the dance floor.

I glance at Thomas, whose head swivels from side to side. “What are you looking for?”

“Chase Wright. What have you done with him? I swear I just heard you turn Jessa Mendes down.”

His antics give me pause. “I’m not.” I search for the words. “In the mood.”

“Dude. You’re *always* in the mood for Jessa.”

Crap. I have been off lately. A flash of blond ponytail captures my attention for a split second, and I force my attention to my PA. “It’s nothing, really. I have a very early

call time and only want to unwind for a while before getting some rest.”

He quirks his lips to the side.

I add, “It’s a big day of shooting tomorrow.”

He holds his hands up, as if in surrender. “Can I get anything for you?”

“Nah, I’m good.” We both check out the dance floor, and soon he’s wiggling in his seat. “Go out there and have fun. I’ll probably join you once I finish my drink.” I swirl the scotch.

“Don’t have to tell me twice.”

Thomas drains his glass and, with one more appraising look at me, heads toward some crew members. Alone, I will my whirling brain to quiet, even in the loud club. From my vantage point, I check out the dance floor. Everyone from the mother of the child actor I “cured” today to many of the other actors and crew are out there. Jessa’s in the middle, dancing with a small group, including Mark. The song changes to “Taboo” by Cole Manchester, and I let the sultry beat flow through me.

As I take another sip of the required drink, Judith sits down next to me. “Chase, I’m glad to catch you alone. I’m so sorry about what happened today. I believe the new gloves probably will work out even better.”

I finger the rim of my glass. Not wanting to stoke any ill feelings, I reply, “Yeah, I think the new ones will be good.”

She sips a glass of red wine, forcing me to swallow my desire to rip it out of her hands. *Any* red would be better than scotch.

Judith continues, “The costume fits you perfectly, Chase. It really did transform you into the superhero, that’s for sure.” She lets out a small laugh.

She deserves to know how I feel about all the thought that went into her design, even if I didn’t show it earlier. “Thanks to your innovations. I do appreciate all the effort you put into making it more, uhm, accessible than the last one.”

A self-congratulatory smile steals across her face. “Thank you. We wanted to do something different. I worked a long time designing the costume to make it easier for you. The whole team did.”

She sips her wine again, and I swallow my own saliva. “By the way, I hope you can get along with Melody. She really is a wonderful person. Is there something I can do to smooth things over between you two?”

At the mention of the woman with the golden hair, my body tenses. I can’t let my distaste for everything my dresser represents—my own childhood and living her dream—show. “She’s fine.”

A woman from accounting approaches and catches Judith’s attention. Happy not to probe the subject further, I stand up. Leaving my remaining scotch on the side table, I excuse myself and head toward the dance floor. Maybe some physical exertion will do me good.

Before I even hit the actual dance floor, a couple of women from makeup and hair surround me, gyrating. Smiling, I twirl them around and away from my body. I’m not interested in hooking up tonight. I only want to blow off some steam.

The music changes, blaring “Your Kiss Destroys Me,” Hunte’s first Number One. A yell goes through the crowd as



fists pump into the air.

About halfway through the song, one of the ladies in the crew places her hand to my ear and says, “That’s Melody’s father’s band, you know.”

“Yeah.”

Hard growing up in Chicago without knowing about all of its famous citizens—and their families, even if we never met. I grab the woman by the hand and spin her, my mind bouncing back to my almost-forgotten audition for the upcoming movie about Hunte’s rise, fall, and rise again to success. Sam touted it as the best role of the year. Maybe Melody can be of some use after all? She might be able to give me the inside scoop about the movie. Possibly even talk me up to her father?

The music changes to a Daughtry anthem. With everyone else, I roll my hips and clap with the beat. I dance with Janie from set design, and the song ends with us laughing and high-fiving each other.

After a few more songs, I need a break and make my way toward a sofa—an *empty* one, preferably. “Looking good out there,” Joe, the camera operator, says as I sit down.

“Thanks.” I wipe sweat off my brow. “It’s been a while since I danced like that.”

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“I’d love some water. I’m parched.”

He nods and heads over to the bar. A second later, Mark plops down next to me. “Hey,” I fist bump him. “Great music.”

“Sure is.” He holds out his glass as if to toast and realizes I’m drinkless.

“Joe’s getting me a water. Need to get hydrated and not drunk, considering my call time,” I grumble.

Mark swallows his scotch. Is he drinking it like I do, because it’s expected? He diverts my wandering thoughts by noting, “Being the lead can suck sometimes.”

“Being a human pincushion before the sun rises sucks more,” my voice drips with resentment. Joe drops off my glass of water and before he can say a word, he’s pulled away by another cameraman.

With his eyes on Joe and the guys, Mark says, “If it’s any consolation, your costume did rock.”

After I swallow half of my water, I reply, “Thanks. Be glad you don’t have to be sewed into yours.”

The bastard smirks, his eyes roving around the room. And stop. Under his breath, he mutters, “There she is.”

I follow his line of vision to the back wall. Melody and Sophia are there, talking between themselves. “She ... who?”

As if holding the precious Aurumite our characters desperately seek, he replies, “Sophia.”

For some inexplicable reason, relief pours over me. “Ah. The camerawoman.”

Without moving his eyes, he brings his scotch to his lips. “She’s talking with your dresser.”

My gaze travels to Sophia’s companion. I run my fingers through my hair, wondering if hers is as silky as it appears. “Yeah. That’s her.”

“Think they’re friends?”

“How should I know? We’re not. Friends, that is. She sews me into my outfit, fucks up my gloves, and that’s about it. We don’t chit-chat like little girls, braiding our hair.”

Mark slants me a dirty look, then his eyes return to the two women. “They look like they’re friends.”

To shut him up, I glance at the duo again. Their body language is relaxed between them. “Yeah. Guess so.” I grab my glass of water, wishing it were a pinot, and finish it. Glancing at the clock, my eyes widen. “Shit. It’s already ten. I better get back to my room so I can get at least a little shut-eye before I have to head to the gym at four, and then to wardrobe.”

Against my will, my eyes stray back to Melody and Sophia. *She* can get more sleep than me since I’d bet my left nut she doesn’t work out. Huffing, I stand.

“Wait, dude.” Mark scrambles to his feet. “You’re introducing me.”

“Huh?”

“I want to talk with Sophia, and you’re my wingman. You told me today that you’ve met her.”

“Since when did you need help talking with a woman?”

He finishes his scotch and deposits the empty glass on the table. “I don’t. But it’s smoother when someone else does it. And you’re right here.” He slaps me on the back. “C’mon.”

With slow feet, I follow him to the women. Before we get too close, though, Mark hangs back so I’ll be the first one to approach them. “You owe me, asshole.”

“Got your back, Doc, you know that. It’s your turn now.”

Sighing, I lead us to the women. “Hey, Melody. Sophia.” Real original, but it gets the job done.

Melody licks her lips and tilts her head, as if trying to figure out where some annoying buzzing is coming from. She plays with her earring for a moment, then pulls, sending her big gold hoop swinging. For her part, Sophia’s gaze runs up and down us like we’re something stuck to the bottom of her wedge sandals. Mark has a long way to go with this one.

I’m shoved from behind. Before I can say something else, Sophia’s no-nonsense voice cuts through the awkwardness. “Hi, Char—Chase.”

Ignoring her near-slip to my real name—damn Melody for telling her—I introduce Mark, who opens with a comment about the club. He tries to make small talk about Amalfi, but the ladies barely engage. Doesn’t look like this is going to work out for him.

Tired of listening to the stilted conversation over the loud music, I decide a retreat is the best offense. “It was nice seeing you, but I have an early call time.” My eyes land on Melody’s amber-hued ones, which show no reaction at all. I mirror her expression. “See you at six.”

I wrap my arm around Mark’s neck and haul him away from the two women. For the first time I wonder if the next two weeks will be the biggest battle of wills I’ve ever encountered.

My chest puffs. I’ve never met a role—or woman—I couldn’t conquer.

## MELODY



“C ’mon, Mel. We just got to Amalfi and everyone is going to be out at the club.”

In only my bra and panties, I sit and trace the design on the bedspread. It’s pretty. Nothing like the harsh designs we’ve used here, but perhaps I could replicate it in *Ladies of the Abbey*?

Sophia snaps her fingers in front of my face. “That’s it. We’re going.” She opens my closet, zipping through the hangers there.

“I don’t want to go. I’m beat.”

“Too bad.” She pulls out a dress and then replaces it back on the rod.

“Honestly, Sophia, I don’t have it in me.” I drop my hands on my thighs. “The whole glove situation—”

“Was an honest mistake. Could’ve happened to anyone. Stop beating yourself up over it.” She walks toward me. “Here. Put these on.” She plops a pair of black capris and a purple sleeveless top onto my lap.

“I don’t want to.”

Sophia sits next to me, plucking at her maxi dress with an unusual paisley print, and tapping her wedge-sandaled foot.

“Exactly why you’re going. You need to get out of your head, see some people. Have a few drinks.”

Only my best friend since first grade would dare challenge me like this, but I still have an ace in the hole. My head pops up. “I have an early call tomorrow. Noble wants Chase ready by eight, which means I’ll need to be sewing him into that damn costume by six.” Why did I think a movie was a good idea? Certainly not for my sleep, that’s for sure.

“Fine. One drink. We’ll get you back here by ten, I promise. Should be enough snooze time for you.”

I remove the knitting needles from my hair and let it fall loose around my mid-back. Playing with a needle, I don’t respond.

My best friend steals it out of my hands and hoists me to standing. “We’re going. You know who is going to be there? Judith, that’s who. If she gets the lead costume designer position for Noble’s next trilogy, her job on your TV show will be up for grabs. For God’s sake, Helene will be right next to her tonight, sucking up as usual.”

It’s not Judith’s name that lights a fire under me. It’s Helene’s. She doesn’t suck up, *per se*, rather never misses a chance to extol her long history in the industry. “She’s not so bad.”

“But not so good, either. Plus, you don’t want *Charles* gossiping about how you’re holed up in your hotel room because you’re too embarrassed to show your face after the whole ‘glove fiasco.’” She makes air quotes to emphasize her point.

I take a deep inhale. Looking at the clothes Sophia selected and place them on the bed, I say, “I need to take a shower.”

A satisfied smile overtakes Sophia's face. She makes a hurry-up motion and I dash into the bathroom. Turning on the shower, I let the water warm up and check the mirror. Oh boy, I look like crap. I need to put on a ton of makeup to hide the circles under my eyes and add color to my face. I agreed to go out tonight? Before I change my mind, though, Sophia's words about Chase's possible snarky comments come to the fore and I strip out of my underwear.

My mind leaps from the glove fiasco to Chase standing there so stupid sexy in his Doctor Manipul8 costume. *He's Lindsay's brother.* I scrub my skin harder than required.

Showered, I wrap a towel around my body and apply makeup, doing a good job of hiding those circles. Blush and bronzer make me look human again. Satisfied, I head into an empty room. Sophia left a note on top of my clothes, telling me she's waiting in her room for me.

I get dressed and select a pair of wedge sandals to match hers. Bold gold hoop earrings and bangles complete my outfit. I'll start the evening with my hair down, but I grab a ponytail holder should I decide to put it up later. Checking out the floor-length mirror one last time, I select a small purple clutch and leave to pick up Sophia.

As we walk through Amalfi's winding streets, Sophia broaches the proverbial elephant in the room. "So, Charles looked like he was in rare form today."

"I call him Chase. That's who he's become. Although knowing his real name and being related to Lindsay doesn't gain him any points in my book."

Sophia and I had the displeasure of going to school with Chase's younger sister, who was the biggest "mean girl" of all

time. Made the movie of the same name look like a fluffy comedy.

Because I've kept in all the day's problems, I use this opening to lodge my gripes. "Having to sew him into that costume was so demeaning. I mean, I was on my *knees* in front of him, for God's sake. He barely acknowledged me other than to complain about how long it was taking me to get him ready. When the glove incident happened, well ..."

"He looked pissed. I rechecked my camera before deleting the footage."

"You can say that again. He made it seem like I had planned for it to happen." I reflect on what he said in the trailer. "Or, at least I was totally incompetent for not thinking the buckle and Velcro would be an issue."

Sophia makes an unladylike noise. "That sucks. Did you remind him it was Judith's design?"

I fiddle with the rubber band around my wrist. "No. The whole design team signed off on the costume. Honestly, I was as shocked as anyone when it got caught."

We take a few more steps and make a left turn. "To make matters worse, using silk for the replacements was Helene's idea."

"Ouch. That sucks." We take a few more steps, then Sophia points. "There it is." She lays her hands on my shoulders. "Forget everything that happened today on set. You're Melody Hunte, Badass Costume Designer."

"Assistant."

"Whatever." She chucks her fist under my chin and together, we walk into the club. A long bar is set along one wall, seating alcoves on the opposite side, and a pretty packed



dance floor in the middle. The lights are low and the DJ spins Top Forty hits, with a cool laser light show. Immediately, I relax into the chill vibe.

Screwing up my courage, I say, “I’ll get my one and only drink. What would you like? A Cosmo?” Both of our favorite beverage.

She gives me the thumbs up then motions toward the dance floor. “I see some ladies from set design. I’ll be out there with them.”

Parting, I head toward the bar and wait my turn. This place reminds me of the clubs Grant used to play when we were dating. His band was good, but not as good as he thought they were. I shake my head to rid it of those miserable college memories and place my order with the bartender. Two Cosmos in hand, I make my way to the dance floor and hold out Sophia’s to her. After clinking, I take a long sip, allowing the beverage to slide down my throat, leaving relaxation in its wake. Maybe Sophia was right—this is what I needed after the shitty day I had.

We dance for a full set, ending with a song by my dad’s band. Everyone on set knows I’m his daughter, and they point to me when it comes on. I smile and dance, harder than to any other song.

I’m super proud of what he’s accomplished, as very few musicians from the eighties still are rocking, and on top of today’s charts. He’s the best man I’ve ever met and treats my mother like a queen. For her part, she never abandoned her own dream in subservience of his. She changed it somewhat once she realized being a partner at an accounting firm was no longer her goal. Instead, she’s the band’s accountant. And she

does a great job. That's the type of relationship I want. Based on love and mutual respect.

However, the movie about Hunte is just that—*his* movie. I can't be any part of it if I'm ever to hold my head up high in costume design. No. It's his gig.

I look around the club—*this* is my gig. For now. Judith may be headed to the movies, but I hope to be her replacement on the TV show if she does.

My Cosmo long finished, I lift my hair off the back of my neck to cool down. Sophia looks tired too, so I tilt my head toward the sofas on the side of the room. She approaches me. "Mel, I'll get us some waters and meet you over there."

I sit, waving my hand in front of my overheated face, then put my hair into a ponytail. Shortly, Sophia appears and plunks two cups of ice water onto the table, condensation forming on the outside of the glasses. Instead of drinking mine right away, I hold it against my cheek. "Ahhh."

"I hear you," she says, lifting the material of her dress away from her chest and blowing downward.

I catch sight of Chase on the dance floor with some people from the crew. "Don't look, but Chicago's at three o'clock."

"Well, there goes a great club," Sophia quips. "Guess they'll let anyone in."

We giggle and I take a long swallow of water. "I'm glad you made me come out, Sophia. I didn't know how much I needed this release."

"It's what best friends are for."

"Especially when we don't get to hang that often anymore, now that you're working in movies and I'm usually in New

York.”

We clink our glasses. She asks, “So, any of these fine men catch your attention?”

A lump forms in my stomach. Ever since my relationship crashed with my one and only boyfriend, I’ve been wary of men. They only want one thing from me, and it’s *not* my body. It’s a connection to my dad. “Nah.”

Sophia sips and rests the cup on her knee. “Come on, there has to be someone who catches your eye.”

I cross my legs. “Really, no one.”

I never told *anyone* what happened with Grant, but Sophia knows what I went through back in Chicago. Even though she didn’t accompany me to NYU, and we drifted apart until reconnecting on set, maybe it’s time to share. I dip my toe. “You know I have a hard time judging people.”

“Hasn’t changed since high school?”

“Nope. If anything”—I take another drink of water mainly to stall—“my original thoughts have been solidified.”

“Talk to me, girlfriend.”

I gaze into her brown eyes, which are filled with sympathy. Shared experiences. Somewhat. Her father isn’t an international rock star, though. Nor have people used her for her parents’ connections. “Just like when we were growing up, I can’t ever seem to distinguish between people who like me for me, and those who ... don’t.”

“Oh, honey. I was hoping college would’ve helped you out with this. You’re an amazing woman. You’re not even twenty-five, and you’re an assistant costume designer on an HBO

show. Now you're working on a major motion picture. How many other women can boast that?"

I roll my eyes.

She continues, "Certainly not Lindsay."

I laugh at her mention of Chase's bitch of a sister. This is why Sophia and I get along so well. We share a sense of humor that got us through growing up. Neither of our childhoods was terrible, although disparate. Her family is super awesome—her dad's a bus driver and her mom's a receptionist at an urgent care center. Bonus—they're still together, like my folks. The fact she went to school on a scholarship never entered into our friendship at all. It was our schoolmates who sucked.

Catching my breath, I say, "Thanks, I needed that."

"Is there anyone here you'd like to get to know better?"

"I've got you. I'm good." My knee knocks into hers.

She smiles. "Yeah, but you can't live on Sophia alone." Her attention wanders as one of the actors with a minor role walks by. Without turning to face me, she continues, "You never know when I might become indisposed."

She does have a point. I can't keep relying on her for my social life here on set. Well, it'll be ending in a few weeks, so I can hole up in my hotel room alone if need be. "In that case, I'm sure I can find a special gelato to keep me occupied."

She swings her foot, strumming her fingers out of time to the music. Even growing up around me couldn't instill some rhythm into her. "C'mon, Mel. There must be one guy who turns your head."

Her words make me tense up. At first, I was too ashamed to tell anyone why Grant and I broke up. It served as proof that I'm only good for what my dad could do for him. As time went on, the shame morphed into a type of phobia, one I'm not about to get over any time soon. But I have to try. That is, if I ever want to have any sort of relationship like my parents. I sigh.

"I've never had much luck on that front."

She shoulder butts me. "Well, who has? All we can do is keep trying."

*Keep trying.* How about never started? "Yeah, guess you're right. No one has really caught my eye, though."

"I could be persuaded to check out that guy." She tilts her chin toward the back sofas, where Chase and Thomas are talking.

Discarding the asshole movie star, I give her a sideways glance. "You mean Thomas? Chase's PA?"

"He's not hard on the eyes."

He's kinda cute, in a nerdy sort of way, which is Sophia's catnip. He's always so serious when he's around Chase. He has to be competent, though, since he's able to handle that over-privileged actor.

"You do know he works for Chase, right? He's in the trailer all the time when I'm getting him into costume. Maybe I could put in a good word for you."

Sophia's brown eyes light up. "Thanks. It's hard for me always being with the camera guys, you know? *You* get all the access."

Access. Guess that's a word for it.

“Okay, I’ve spilled my guts. Your turn.” She focuses all of her attention on me.

I play with the hem of my shirt. “I’ve been so busy with wardrobe, I really haven’t noticed anyone.” She gives me an incredulous look. I cross my heart, like we used to do as kids. “I’m serious.”

Next to me, Sophia sets her glass down on the table. “All right. But promise me you’ll keep your eyes peeled while we’re here. It’s so romantic in Amalfi, and we both need men in our lives to bring out the full Monty, as it were.”

We both giggle at her awful mixed-metaphor. When an Imagine Dragons song comes on, we return to the dance floor. After dancing like maniacs to a few more songs, we find ourselves holding up a wall, since all the sofas are now taken.

“I’ve had a great time with you tonight. But I’m getting tired and you know I have to get up at some ungodly hour tomorrow. I need to head out. Are you coming with?”

Sophia looks around the room, and her eyes fixate on the dance floor where Thomas dances with Tina from makeup. She deflates.

I place my hand on her arm. “Tomorrow, I’ll somehow get Thomas and you together.”

“Promise?” she whispers.

I hold up my little finger. “Pinky swear.”

Her lips tip upward and she links her finger with mine. “Pinky swear,” she repeats.

Movement from off to my right catches my eye. Chase and Mark cross the room, and everyone parts to let them through.

Seriously? No wonder he acts so entitled. “Look at that.” I point my chin toward the two men.

Sophia follows my line of sight.

I pluck the rubber band on my wrist. “They need to be treated like they’re normal people. Sure, it’s their faces on the posters for the movie, but without us, where would they be?”

The men laugh at something being said and continue walking across the room. Everywhere they go, people let them pass as if they were some sort of royalty.

“You have a point. Chase is just an asshole older brother, and Mark’s the biggest player there is.”

The actors keep coming our way. I whisper, “What the hell? It seems like they’re heading to us. Why?”

“Dunno. Maybe Chase wants to talk with you about his costume?”

I consider her words for a moment. “Doubt it. Besides, we have two hours together in the morning to discuss it,” I whisper back.

Stopping right in front of us, Chase says, “Hey, Melody. Sophia.”

Oh for goodness’ sake. What do these two want? I tilt my head upward, lick my suddenly parched lips, and fiddle with my hoop earrings. Sophia gives the men the once-over, but not in a good way. Hint, much?

When they remain in front of us, Sophia mutters, “Hi, Char—Chase.”

Chase offers us his megawatt smile, which causes an unwanted thrill to race through my body. In disgust, I focus on

the floor. His voice enters the awkward breach. “Sophia, this is Mark Ivan. Melody, I believe you’ve already met Mark.”

As if we both don’t know who his co-star is. Mark launches into a commentary on how nice the club is. Then he jumps into a soliloquy about Amalfi. Gotta hand it to him, he is a one-man show—neither Sophia nor I need to do much more than nod. Chase is quiet, too. For once.

After a while of Mark’s rambling, Chase shakes his head. “It was nice seeing you, but I have an early call time.” His piercing blue eyes land on me, but I school my features to remain neutral. “See you at six.” He grabs Mark and the two leave us.

I watch the pair as they exit the club. “Well, that was weird,” I remark.

“Totally,” she replies. “What do you think that was about?”

“No clue. But they’re actors. Who knows what motivates them?”

“You’re certainly right about that, Mel. Other than what the writers tell them.” We both giggle. “Are you ready to head back?”

“Yeah.” We say our goodbyes to our friends and retrace our steps to our hotel. Given the small size of the town and its hotel capacity, everyone in the movie is scattered in various locations. Sophia and I are in a delightful spot right across from the water. We walk along the marina on our way back.

As we tread through the cobblestone sidewalks, Sophia muses, “Why would they come over to us like that, Mel? What was Mark’s deal talking about Amalfi?”

“As I said, I have no idea. But who cares? We don’t have to be friends with them, we only have to work with them. And

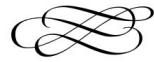


pray the Doctor Manipul8 costume holds up for the rest of the shoot.”

“Amen, sister.”

I’m also praying that any wayward tingles the man inside the suit evoked were merely the result of a Cosmo on an empty stomach.

# CHASE



I stand still while my fastidious dresser sews me into the Doctor Manipul8 leggings. Damn, this is a long, slow process. And for the first time in days, we're the only two people in my trailer.

Picking up my phone, I click on social media accounts but nothing catches my eye. Huffing out a sigh, I toss the phone onto the sofa.

I look down at the woman on her knees, who's concentrating on my left knee. I count the ceiling tiles. Even though it's a smooth ceiling.

The silence is killing me.

Mocking me.

Making me wish for things I don't have. *Can't* have. I rake my hand through my hair. Unable to move, I weigh the possibility of jumping out of my skin. I glance down again. Maybe she can do me a solid with her dad? "So tell me. What was it like growing up as Braxton Hunte's daughter?"

Her needle pauses inches away from my knee for a few moments, then continues her stitch. Without looking up, she replies, "He was a great dad."

Wanting to fill the dead air as well as possibly get intel for the Hunte movie, I press, “Was he around a lot? Or was he out with his band mostly?”

Her expressive eyes flick to mine. I thought they were straight-up hazel, but they actually are a much deeper amber, rimmed with browns and greens. Her tits push out as if she inhaled deeply.

Why did I notice them?

“Actually, he tried to schedule his concerts around my school vacations so I could go with him on tours. It was a very exciting life, being able to see all different cities as a kid.”

She focuses her attention on sewing the leggings, mouth clamped shut. Her childhood certainly was charmed—especially compared to my absentee parents. Several stitches later, she claps her hands together and vaults to her feet. “Please walk around so I can check the fit.”

“K.” Suddenly lighter, I take a few steps. Crossing the trailer twice, I try to ignore the odd feeling of flapping material on my right leg. Shit. The left one feels looser than usual near my crotch. “Melody, I’m not sure this fits me as tightly up by my, ah, junk.”

Frowning, she nods and examines my gait. “You’re right.” She motions for me to return to my spot.

Standing with my legs on either side of her pillow, she falls to her knees and undoes a few of her stitches near my most sensitive area. I hold my breath as the scissors come near my dick, releasing it only when she puts them down. Soon, she motions for me to walk around again.

I do. The legging is right now. “Feels good.”

My pronouncement interrupts her mid-stretch. Dropping her arms, she replies, “Great. I agree. Give me a minute to get the circulation going, and I’ll tackle your right leg.”

“Sounds good.” I do a couple of deep knee bends. With still just us two in here, I bring up an innocuous subject to steer our conversation back toward enlisting her help with her father. “So, which was your favorite city that Hunte visited?”

She smiles, a twinkle I never noticed before lighting up her eyes, causing my breath to still. “I actually enjoyed visiting almost every place. My favorite, though, was New York City. One of the reasons I went to college there.”

My thoughts drift to my few trips to the Big Apple. “I love New York City, too. Although I haven’t spent all that much time there.”

“You should definitely visit. There are so many great restaurants, plus the theater district is amazing, of course.”

Her two choices to extol are like punches to my gut. Restaurants mean food, which is something I’m not allowed to enjoy unless it’s broiled fish or chicken. God, if I didn’t have to maintain this ridiculously low body fat, I’d be all over the pasta in Italy. And that’s nothing compared with New York City’s theater. A twinge of longing lands in my heart, which I erase by running my hands up and down my legs.

Knowing I left her hanging, I reply, “I’ll put it on my list.”

She makes eye contact with me, causing a zing to zap. *What the?* Before I can process the reactions racing through my body, she cracks her knuckles in an impressive show of dexterity. “Okay, I’m ready if you are.”

I kick my legs to eradicate the zinging and zapping, and return to my spot next to the pillow on the floor. She sinks to

her knees and for a fleeting moment, I picture her doing something very different in that position. Her next words erase that pleasant image. “Okay, Mr. Movie Star. Let’s get this done.”

Silence descends again. I *hate* that nickname with a passion. I may *be* a movie star—the leading actor here and in all the films in recent memory—but I’m much more than that. Dammit, I am a classically trained actor. The empty air reminds me I’d like to do something with that training.

To shift my thoughts, I pick up the thread of our conversation from before. “I bet all the kids envied the traveling you were able to do.”

She laughs, but it rings hollow. “Hardly. I was singled out as a target by the school’s mean girls.” She pauses. “Too many kids wanted to get close to me so they could either meet my dad, or use him for his connections.”

“Shit. I didn’t realize.”

Her lips purse and she continues sewing the leggings. The mood in the trailer dives.

Maybe because I’m somewhat responsible for the cooler vibe—or maybe it’s how she shared a part of her childhood with me—I offer a piece of myself I usually keep private. “If it makes a difference, my parents were always working. They’re partners at a major Chicago law firm, and they prioritized their careers over my sister and me. You know Lindsay, right?”

In a clipped tone, she replies, “I do.” She continues the stitches.

Wanting to defend my folks, I continue, “I mean, they weren’t bad parents. It’s just that they were mainly absent. They did get us nannies, though.”

Her hands bend my knee. “I didn’t have a nanny. Mom was—still is—Hunte’s tour accountant, so she worked from home. As I mentioned, my dad’s schedule revolved around mine growing up.”

“I can’t imagine having both parents around that much.” I chuckle. “Did they get in your way as you grew up?”

Melody’s hand drops from my leg and she fiddles with the rubber band around her wrist. “No, they didn’t. I loved having them around.”

They were her support system. Huh. So different from how my sister and I grew up. Although I should have paid more attention to, essentially, raising her. Melody grabs the material around the bottom of my knee, and I concentrate on her stitching rather than go down that rabbit hole. Again.

Her obvious love for her parents gives me the opening I need. “I hear a movie about Hunte is in the works.”

She nods. “Yes, my dad’s very excited. I told him I was going to cheer him on from afar. I don’t want to have anything to do with the film except to support him and walk the red carpet.”

Given the fact she mentioned kids tried to use her to get to her father, this response shouldn’t surprise me. It also shuts down my line of inquiry. Crap.

The door opens. Whoever it is, I’m grateful for the relief from this awkward conversation with the intriguing girl on her knees. Thomas bounds into the trailer.

“Hey, Chase.”

Relief buzzes throughout my body at my PA’s welcome intrusion. “Hey. What’s cooking?”

He drops his bag on the sofa. “Got some stuff to go over with you. Is now a good time?”

Thank God. I’ll take his frivolous questions over the prolonged silences and stilted conversation—not to mention the unwanted lure—Melody provides. “Sure is.” I point down. “Looks like we have half a leg.”

“I’ll talk fast.”

The woman on her knees mumbles something unintelligible. Ignoring her, I say, “What’s up?”

Thomas starts, “What are your plans for tonight? Do you need me to arrange any—” His eyes dart to Melody.

I roll my eyes, “*Anyone?*”

He licks his lips and Melody tightens the material around my leg. “Well, yeah.”

In a teasing tone, I reply, “I’m good.”

He expels the air in his lungs and shoots me a dirty look. I make the “what?” motion, and he juts his chin toward Melody. I raise my shoulders.

“May I ask what you’re doing tonight? Do I need to set anything up with the press?”

“Nah. Mark and I are hitting the hotel bar.”

“That’s it?”

I grin. “Sorry to disappoint. Filming’s been brutal, and we’re both running on empty. We decided to go out for a quick drink and hit the sack early.”

He clicks his pen and scribbles something down on his clipboard. “Tomorrow’s a free day, you know. Do you have plans for that?”

“I’ve been invited to go to Positano.”

“Yeah, a bunch of us are heading over there.”

The thought of being able to finally sleep in makes me feel better than I have since we got to Amalfi. I’ll have to work out, of course, but at least it won’t be until eight rather than four in the morning. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too. I’ve heard the beach is to die for, and the women are”—he darts a look at Melody—“Italian.”

“Lame, man. The women are fucking hot,” I correct him.

He waves his pen. “Yeah, well. True.” A few more clicks follow his scribbles. “Well, it promises to be a good day tomorrow. Are you joining us, Melody?”

The woman working on my leggings pauses for a moment. “I don’t think so.”

Her words give me a sense of relief. No, not relief. I refuse to name the emotion.

Thomas picks up the chatter. “We’re meeting at ten at the docks if you change your mind.” He turns to me. “Now, Chase, I have it from Tina in makeup that Susan from Noble’s office mentioned a new project that Stephen Janus is going to be starting soon.”

I sort through the barrage of names, then focus my attention back on my personal assistant. “What’s Stephen up to?”

Thomas’s face lights up with knowledge he has good gossip. He rubs his tight abdomen—although it’s not as tight as mine. Nor fueled with so much clean eating. I grimace.

“Mr. Janus picked up a script for a brand-new sci-fi epic. Rumor mill has it the movies will be better than *Star Wars* and



*Star Trek* combined.”

My eyebrows rise. “That’s some boasting going on.” I chuckle.

“Right? But if anyone can live up to the hype, it’s him. Want me to contact Sam to get your name put in for the lead? I can see you now in some futuristic outfit, green screening against an army of bad guys.” He grins.

All air whooshes out of my body.

At my leg, Melody’s needle pulls back.

## MELODY



**A**t Thomas's sci-fi suggestion, Chase's body goes rigid. I yank my needle away from his leg to avoid pricking him.

The muscles in his body relax, one by one, until he's his normal self again. This is the second time he's reacted this way. The first time was about a rom-com movie role, if I remember correctly. What's up with that?

Why do I care? He's just a movie star. A body to showcase our design work.

Besides, he got me to spill my secrets about growing up. Even if I managed to leave his sister's name off the "Mean Girls" description I gave earlier.

"Why don't you see what you can find out about the movie first?" Chase instructs his PA.

Thomas clicks his stupid pen again and writes the order down. Chase should call Sam himself. What a pampered jerk. Annoyed at myself as well as irritated at the leading man, I mutter, "Doesn't seem to me you're too interested in the role."

While I'm talking, Thomas makes a show out of picking up his stuff and heads out of the trailer. I focus my attention on Chase's freakishly long legs. Damn him.

“See you on set,” Chase calls to his PA. The door closes. Chase directs his attention down to me. “What did you say? I didn’t hear you over Thomas’s rustling.”

Clenching my jaw, I reply, “I said you don’t seem into the sci-fi movie.” I go to finish another complicated Manipul8 Stitch.

His leg flexes.

My needle misses its mark. “Shit!”

He bends down. “What happened?”

“You shuffled, Mr. Movie Star.” With deliberate movements, I rip out the stitch.

“Oh. I didn’t mean to ruin your work.”

He sounds sincere. I glance up at him, and his expression seems contrite, despite his tight leg muscles. Annoyed with myself for treating him poorly—even actors deserve to be acknowledged as human—I sit on my heels. “That was on me. I apologize.”

He places his hand on my shoulder for a brief moment, causing me to be the one who stiffens. His stance returns to normal. Keeping my own counsel, I focus on the stitches.

“Listen, you hit a nerve. Thomas did, too.” He rubs his forehead. “And I would appreciate it if you don’t refer to me as ‘Movie Star’ from now on.”

“Why?” The word escapes my mouth before I can stop it.

“I may play roles in film, but I’m not simply a movie star.” He clears his throat. “I actually graduated from Yale’s drama school. My favorite courses were about Shakespeare.”

I mull over his words. “They were?”

He nods. His posture relaxes slightly.

I consider his shocking words. “I have to say I’m not overly surprised. I’ve been watching you on set here, and you’re clearly well-prepared. You know your stuff, and I’m not only talking about your lines. You got the blocking, and an awareness of the other actors on set with you.”

“Thank you. I did a lot of acting on stage in school. Some of my best work, if you ask me.”

I pull the material around his calf. “What was your favorite role?”

He pauses. “I think my favorite play was *Hamlet*. As for musicals—”

I remember the fuss he caused when he played Fiddler in high school. Of course, I was only in middle school at the time, but Lindsay never shut up about it. “I had forgotten you sing.”

“I’m all right. No Braxton Hunte, but I can put over a tune.”

I smile at his use of my dad’s name. “Few have his talent.”

“That’s true.” He rubs his palms together. “As for my favorite musical, it was *Aida*. Not as popular as many others, but I loved the storyline. Elton John’s score rocked it.”

“He’s nice,” I say as I tie off the bottom of his right leg. “There. I think you’re done. Take a spin.”

He complies and I study his lithe body movements. I intertwine my fingers and pulse them to get the circulation going. “How’s that feel?”

“Good.”

On my feet, I pass him the gloves while continuing to work out the kinks from my own hands. Chase's admissions are softening my opinion of him. I make quick work of getting him into the rest of his costume and soon I'm back on the set, sitting next to Judith and Helene.

Noble calls for quiet and the actors begin the scene. Chase's love of the theater replays in my head, which explains why he tenses whenever a new movie role is proposed. I slip my hand into my essentials tote and find my cell. While the scene is being filmed, I click on *Backstage*, a Broadway-based site that lists auditions for all the shows. For my own edification, of course.

When shooting finally ends, I trudge back to the trailer. All I want to do is some yoga followed by a long, hot bath. But first, I get to rip Chase out of the superhero costume. I open the door to silence. Must've beaten Chase here—he's probably with someone in the cast. Probably Jessa.

When I get into the main part of the trailer, the bathroom door opens and Chase walks out, his bodysuit unsnapped. Startled, I blurt, "You're here."

His blue eyes laugh at me. "Who were you expecting? Christian Bale?"

"Ha-ha. Very funny. I thought you were, ah, visiting with someone."

He reaches down and starts to pull up the bodysuit. I rush to his side and help rid him of the spandex. Success means I hold the bodysuit while he strips off the wet undershirt.

He takes aim and tosses the damp shirt into the garbage. "Two points!"

"You're in a good mood."

“It was a fun day on the set.” He sits and removes his boots, tossing the socks into the garbage as well.

I go into the top level of my design suitcase and pick up a pair of scissors, opening and closing them. He flinches once.

While I focus my efforts on cutting him out of the leggings, I debate telling him about the open auditions I happened to notice on *Backstage*. With his left leg cut open, I move over to the right.

Should I tell him? They *were* announced for anyone to see. I glance at his strikingly handsome face, the cleft in his chin seeming more pronounced. I swallow. “You know, I saw something that might interest you.”

His right leg cut open to mid-thigh, he takes over and rips the material off his body. “What’s that?”

I ball up the ruined leggings while he heads to the back of the trailer. “I’ll show you when you come out.”

He disappears into the bathroom and I pick up my cell, pulling up *Backstage*. Within a few minutes, he comes out wearing a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. His cologne—a light grassy smell—is inviting.

I search my scent inventory. “That’s Tom Ford, but I can’t place the line.”

“Grey Vitiver.” He runs his fingers through his hair, effortlessly styling it into a messy look.

“That’s right,” I muse. Shaking my head, I hold my cell up to him. “Thought of you when I saw this.”

He takes my phone from me. “*Hamlet 2.0?*”

A tingling sweeps up the back of my neck and across my face. I force myself to pack up my design suitcase, making

careful note to put everything back in the right spot. Why did I show him my cell? With each quiet moment that passes, I heap more criticism on myself. When he remains silent, I walk over to him, intending to rip my phone out of his hands. His expression stops me cold.

Longing.

Desire.

Futility.

He settles on a mask of indifference and returns my phone. “Thanks. I don’t think Broadway is ready for all this.” He waves at his body.

If I hadn’t seen his first few emotions, I would leave him alone with his cologne. But it’s too late. I saw them. “It might be interesting for you to diversify your résumé.”

“Leading men don’t diversify.”

“I thought you might be interested—”

“Listen, I appreciate your thoughtfulness. I’m not ... interested.” He sits to put his cross trainers on, resting his hands on his knees. “You know, you’re a quite talented costume designer.”

His change of topic gives me whiplash. Followed by a nagging feeling of insincerity. I pull the knitting needles out of my hair. “Uhm, thank you,” I reply, equally insincere.

“I mean it. I’ve been watching you, considering I don’t have much else to do while you’re sewing me into that damn suit. I’ve never seen stitches like them before.”

In the off-chance Chase means what he says, I reply, “That’s because I invented them.” I redo my bun.

His eyebrows express his surprise. “Wow. That’s cool.”

Re-securing my knitting needles, I warm to the topic. “Judith explored it during pre-production, but everyone dismissed the idea as too complicated. I spent the better part of a couple of weeks coming up with the stitch. When I showed it to my boss, she seemed impressed.” I clear the *Backstage* tab from my cell phone and toss it into my tote.

“She has a good eye.”

His praise would make me feel on top of the world but for the brittle actor mask settled over his face. I tilt my chin. “What are you playing at?”

Chase stands. “I’m not playing. I’m telling you the truth. I’ve never seen someone as skilled with a needle as you are.”

I squint. “Really? Not around too many costume designers, are you?”

He straightens to his full height. “I’ve been in countless movies. So, yes, I’ve met my fair share of designers. Geez”—he collects his wallet from a drawer—“I was just trying to give you a compliment.”

Maybe I misread him? Closing my eyes, I rub my thumb over the tip of my knitting needle. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to come off as rude. I get a lot of condescending remarks about my chosen career.”

His face softens. “Then you’re not hanging around the right people. You’re very talented. Don’t let anyone say otherwise.” He motions for me to lead us out of the trailer.

Biting my lip, I twirl on my heel and place my hand on his forearm. His very masculine, very strong forearm. “I really appreciate your compliment. I, I’m happy you like the superhero costume. And thanks for reminding me that



‘people’”—I make the sign of air quotes—“don’t really count.”

He reaches toward a piece of my hair that’s fallen out of my bun but before making contact, draws back. “I’ll tell you what one of my acting teachers told me when I was at Yale. It’s a quote from Albert Einstein. ‘Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.’”

“So are you saying I’m a great spirit?”

He taps his thigh with his pinky. “It’s also important to remember not to let someone’s opinion of you go to your head.”

“Who said that?”

He chuckles. “Me.” He turns me around and pushes me forward. “Now let’s go.”

## CHASE



**M**ark brings his scotch over to my wine glass. “May Doctor Manipul8 live on at least as long as Ant-Man!”

His words wring a chuckle from my mouth. “Seriously.” We clink and I savor the pinot noir as it glides down my throat.

Sitting at a corner table in the back of the restaurant bar, we don’t attract attention. Being left alone in public is a unique—and very welcome—experience. Maybe I should hang out more in small Italian towns? I settle into the cushions.

Mark asks, “So, are you joining us in Positano tomorrow?”

“I’ve been invited. I was thinking of staying in my room and sleeping, though.”

He makes a face. “Seriously? Get out to the Amalfi Coast much?”

“I’ve been here once before.” I run my finger down the stem of my wine glass. “I could fly out here anytime I choose.”

“True.” He places his glass down on the table. “But like those married couples without kids who don’t have sex on the kitchen floor, would you really be in Italy but for this movie?”

“You have a point.” While I’ve had sex on many a kitchen floor, I don’t hop into a plane and fly across the country—let alone cross the ocean—too often. If ever. “Although, granite floors are fucking cold and uncomfortable.”

He fist bumps me. “Good one, Doc.”

Our waitress stops by. After eye-fucking both my drinking buddy and me, she licks her lips. “Can I get you anything else?”

Too easy. I glance at Mark, who clearly shares my opinion. “Nah, we’re good for now,” I reply. “We’ll call you over if we need something.”

“I’m at your beck and call.”

Mark watches as she heads toward a different table. “Think her approach works around here often?”

I savor my fermented grapes. “Wasn’t doing it for me.”

“Me neither.” He picks up his glass. “What’s happening to us? We should’ve been all over her.”

“We’re not getting old, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I know *I’m* not. I can only take your word for yourself.” He swallows more of his drink. “Being on set proves I’m still in the game. Sophia’s running me in circles.”

“Still hung up on her?”

“I like to think of it as politely pursuing.”

I reach for the popcorn on the table, but instead of pulling the bowl toward me I toss it onto an empty table. Remove temptation. “It’s been a few days now. Must be some sort of record for you.”

“Hey, she passed me a soda yesterday at lunch.”

I stifle a chuckle. “That good, huh?”

He uses his glass to point at me. “Well, what about you? I haven’t seen you with anyone on set either.”

A vision of the golden beauty on her knees sewing me into the superhero costume pops into my mind. I force it to blank. “I’ve been focused on memorizing my lines and working out. No time to meet anyone other than Jessa, and I’ve already tapped that.”

“The sex scenes you two did back in Florence were smoking.”

I take another swallow. “Well, most of my relationships end on a positive note. Probably because neither one of us is too invested. The women usually are trying to see what I can do for their careers, and I simply enjoy her body until someone else turns my head.”

“Harsh.”

I rock my head to the side and back. “Nah, not harsh. Just realistic. I’ve seen my parents, who are like comfortable partners. Who needs a relationship when that’s all there is to look forward to?”

Mark taps his glass. “Well, have you seen the Manchesters around lately? They’re the epitome of love and marriage.” He traces a design on the tablecloth. “I’d like a slice of that for myself.”

My hand lands on my forehead. I’ve seen the rock star Cole and his wife Rose out and about, and they do dote on each other. “Exception, not rule. I bet you want the white picket fence, too?”

“Now don’t go all pussy on me. I was only saying I’d like to have someone who cares about me.”

Would I like that? Nah. I've been pampered enough by the various women in my life, even though I'm not the profligate womanizer tabloids like to portray. I refer to myself as a serial casual monogamist. "I wish you well."

"You know, I invited Sophia to join us in Positano tomorrow."

Can't he let her go? "I hope she comes, for your sake."

"Me too. During filming, I wanted to ask you if your dresser could put in a good word, but we kept getting sidetracked with shooting."

"Damn work," I quip.

"Ain't that the truth. So what's the scoop on her?"

My eyebrows come together. "Her who?"

"Melody Hunte, of course."

There she is again. No matter how hard I try to push her away, she keeps popping back into my consciousness. I shrug. "She sews me into the damn costume." I take a sip of my wine. "Really talented at it, though. She created the stitch herself."

His glass arrests on its way to his mouth. "I would've thought Judith made all decisions regarding the design."

"Yeah, so did I. But she told me the design team didn't think it would be either noticeable or worth the time and effort. She took it upon herself to create the stitch."

"Impressive."

I lean back in the booth, needing to bury this topic. "At least there haven't been any more malfunctions since my glove got caught in that kid's hair."

“Yeah. That was something. The design team got it fixed pretty damn quick, though.”

“True.” With the benefit of time, my rage over the delay in filming doesn’t return. I’ve developed an appreciation of how fast Melody was able to whip up a new pair of gloves from scratch. My mind returns to a subject that’s glommed onto me lately.

Giving Mark an assessing glance, I clear my throat. “Do you ever miss it?”

“Miss what?” His index finger circles the rim of his glass.

“Your life before you became *the* Mark Ivan?”

“Deep, man.” He knocks back the remainder of his scotch. “To answer your question, not really. I grew up in Russia, which my parents fled when I was twelve. We came to the United States with little more than the clothes on our backs. I learned English by watching cartoons, and later sitcoms. I was fat and acne-prone, and since I didn’t speak the language, I was bullied in school.”

“Sorry, Mark. I didn’t know.”

“That’s okay. I don’t hide my past, but I don’t broadcast it either. Plus, everything changed when Mom gave me a bottle of ProActiv for Christmas when I was fourteen. My face cleared up, and then I took an interest in how I looked. I joined a gym and dropped the weight. That helped.”

“That’s quite the story. Was that when you got into acting?”

He nods. “I fell into it, actually. My high school was putting on a play requiring a Soviet character. Since I was one of the few kids in school from Moscow, they approached me. I took the role.”

“So your background informed your first role.”

He chuckles. “You could say that. Of course, it was the villain of the play. Guess it did sort of set me up for my career.”

“Pretty cool. And look at you now. You’re killing it as Mr. A—he’s more evil than Lex Luthor, but the way you portrayed him at the beginning showed a real empathy.”

“Thanks. I always try to inject some humanity into the bad guys. Makes it seem much more real. No one is all good or all bad.”

“Truth.” I finish my pinot noir. I want to drink another glass, but I’m keenly aware of the requirements for my body on the set. Instead, I ask, “Do you keep the boy you were alive in your dealings today?”

“Who are you, Dr. Phil?”

I wave my hand. No need to go any deeper. He wouldn’t be interested in hearing my sorry tale of woe. I’m not like him—I didn’t suffer like he did growing up. So what if the kid I was has been lost? He was stupid, anyway. Into classical music and psychology and bees, for God’s sake. The man I am today is much more interesting, playing amazing characters in the movies. With sexy actresses dripping off my arm.

So what if I miss the excitement of performing live on stage?

My thoughts stray to *Hamlet 2.0*. Shaking my head, I punch Mark in the shoulder. Fuck my diet. “Let’s get another round.”

## MELODY



**K**nocking on my door makes me turn over and throw the blankets over my head. It's my first day off in weeks, and I want to spend it right here with my pillows. I'm exhausted.

The knocking doesn't stop. Instead, my best friend's voice sails through the door. "Open up, Mel! I know you're in there."

Throwing the blankets off my body, I get up and unlock the door. I don't bother opening it and am back in bed before the Sophia whirlwind makes her way into my room. I burrow back into my cocoon. "What are you doing here?"

My bestie jumps on the bed. "Kidnapping you!"

My body undulates. "Are you nuts? It's our only day off from this shoot!"

"Yep. And you're coming with a bunch of us to Positano today." The bed bounces again.

"Thomas mentioned that to Chase yesterday." I flip my hand. "You go. I have a hot date with my bed."

"If I thought for a moment you wouldn't be alone," she taps the comforter, "I'd totally leave you here. But I know you mean to sleep away the day, Mel, and I refuse to allow that."

I roll my eyes. "Aren't you tired? Don't you need sleep?"



“Yes, I’m exhausted. I spent a couple of hours last night working on my camera skills improvement class project. But today we’re *free*. We’re in *Italy*. I won’t allow you to hide in here.”

While she was doing her project, I was getting Chase Wright out of his superhero costume. And for the first time, we actually talked. He almost turned into a real human being. *Almost* being the operative word. I flip my head on the pillow.

Sophia yanks the blankets to my waist. “We’re meeting everyone down at the docks for the ten o’clock ferry. I’ve never been to Positano—and neither have you—so you better get going. I’m off to check the cameras I had set up last night, and I’ll be back in an hour to get you.” As she moves from the bed, she steals the blankets clear off me. Walking out of my room, she leaves the door wide open.

Why did I think working together with my bestie would be a good thing?

Because she’s my oldest and dearest friend.

Crap.

I clamber out of bed, close the door, and trudge into the bathroom. One hour later on the dot, Sophia returns to my room. “I like your outfit. Boho chic.”

My shower lifted the cobwebs, and now I’m actually excited to be a tourist. I twirl around in my loose dress, a score I picked up in the Village in New York City. “Thanks.”

“Grab your purse and let’s go. I can’t wait to see who all is going to be with us today.”

Translation—Chase’s PA better be on that ferry.

We link arms and head down to the water, passing a sign listing nearby towns. “Ravello,” I remark. “Sounds pretty.”

“Oh, I’ve heard that’s the most romantic town in all of Italy.” She fans her face. “I wish we were going to film there.”

“The sign says it’s only six point seven kilometers from here. We should visit.”

“I agree. But I don’t want to go alone. We can double-date there. Thomas and me, and you and ...” Her voice trails off.

“Judith? Janie?”

“You’re hopeless!” She shakes her head. “We need to find you a man. That’ll be my mission for today.”

“Good luck with that.”

Her shoulder contacts mine. “Don’t count me out.” She points to the dock, where a bunch of people are waiting. “Oh look, Thomas is here!”

As she tugs me forward, my gaze scans the group, noting Thomas. And Mark. And Chase. Tina’s there too.

We purchase our ferry tickets and approach the group. “Hey, Sophia,” Joe calls. She smiles at the camera operator and drags me along to chat with him, flirting with Thomas as we pass. He gives us both a quick nod.

Soon the ferry docks and we all scramble in, jockeying for the best seats. I end up next to Chase so that Sophia can be closer to his PA—who seems to be more interested in the fantastic makeup artist Tina than my bestie. Mark pushes his way over to us and squishes in next to Sophia. The boat leaves the dock and we head toward Positano.

“Have you ever been here before?”

I do a double-take when I realize Chase is talking to me. “Um, no. I haven’t. Have you?”

He nods. “Once. Did you bring your suntan lotion?”

I point to my oversized purse.

He holds out his hand. When I tilt my head, he explains, “Give it to me. Your nose is already turning red.”

Embarrassed by his comment, I whip the suntan lotion out of my bag and squeeze it onto my palms. Turning my back to him, I watch the shoreline as I spread the white lotion over my face.

Next to me, Chase chuckles. I glance at his perfectly tanned face. Of course it’s perfect. Just like the rest of him. Not a freckle or hair out of place, even as the wind attacks all of us on the boat.

Sophia reaches over and shakes my arm. “Look, there’s Positano!”

She points and the town comes into focus. Built on a steep hill, white houses dot the countryside, leading upward to the sky. My breath catches. “It’s beautiful.”

“Sure is,” Thomas agrees. He nudges Tina. “I bet Positano has a great beach.”

She giggles at him.

Leaning forward, I gaze into my bestie’s eyes. “We can explore all the little alleyways.”

“Yeah,” she answers without too much interest.

Mark pokes his head forward. “I’ve been to Positano a few times. I’d be glad to show you ladies around.”

He seems interested in Sophia. I rub my eyebrow while catching her profile. She's giving him a speculative look. Interesting.

"I'll join you," Chase adds.

Why can't he squire Jessa? I reply, "I'm sure a bunch of us will explore together."

My statement is proven correct. While Thomas and Tina head off to the beach right in front of the dock—much to Sophia's dismay—the rest of the group decides to investigate the town. We wander through small alleys filled to the brim with boutiques, restaurants, and little stalls with handmade goods.

I enter a store, crammed with unique clothing. The dresses call to me. Pulling a particular hot pink one off the rack, I hold it up to my body in front of a full-length mirror.

"The color looks amazing with your hair," Sophia notes.

"Thanks." I examine the craftsmanship. "It's made really well." I flip it to the bottom and check inside. "They even did great anchoring stitches on the inner hem." Impressed, I drape the dress over my arm.

Sophia flips through a rack of dresses. "What do you think of this one?"

I wrinkle my nose. "Nah. The neckline isn't right for you." Selecting a violet dress, I hold it up for her inspection.

"Oh. That's gorgeous!" She snatches it from my hands. "Let's go try them on."

We find ourselves in two tiny dressing rooms in the back. My elbows bump the walls. Slipping out of the tiny room, I

stand in front of the full-length mirror and examine the fit from every angle. Sophia joins me.

“Looks good, Sophia,” a masculine voice with a slight Russian accent opines.

My bestie twirls around. “Oh, Mark. I didn’t see you there.”

He saunters in, Chase behind him. Mark pokes him in the stomach. “Oof! Oh, uhm, Melody, yours is nice, too.”

I roll my eyes and—in spite of the *movie star*’s comment—decide to purchase it. Because *I* like the dress. “I’m going to take it. Sophia, how about you?”

Mark responds, “She is.”

I raise an eyebrow at her and she shrugs. Under her breath, she admits, “I do like it.” We return to the dressing room and change back into our own clothes. Before we leave the tiny dressing area, she pulls me aside.

“What do you think Mark’s doing here?”

“If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say he likes you.”

Her shoulders raise. “Really?”

I laugh. “Guess you were too absorbed with the other’s PA to notice.”

“Well, maybe. I’m sure the guys are long gone by now, anyway. Why don’t we pay for our new dresses and grab a bite to eat? Then the beach is calling my name.”

We approach the grinning shopkeeper who says our nice *uomini* already took care of it. What men? We exchange puzzled glances and exit the boutique where Mark and Chase wait for us.

While Sophia chats with Mark, I study Chase. “Thanks for the dress. You didn’t have to do that.”

He rubs his nose. “It was nothing. And the dress looked very nice on you.”

Mark diverts my thoughts by pointing toward a building. “The rest of the group went into that pizzeria.”

Walking into the *ristorante*, we place our orders and meander to the back where open-air seating is dotted with lush trees. I inhale the beautiful scent of citrus. “This place is amazing.”

“It really is,” Sophia replies.

We join a half-empty table—Mark sits next to Sophia, then me with Chase to my right—and enjoy the best pizza ever. Which is saying a lot, considering this *is* Italy.

Jessa sidles up to Chase and kisses his cheek. “I’m hitting the beach. Anyone want to join me?” She preens, her perky breasts nearly poking Chase’s eye out. Everyone decides to join her, probably to see what floss bikini she’ll be sporting.

Because I want to rest and catch the sun, I agree. I’m definitely *not* spurred on to see Jessa’s body on display, however. We take turns using the bathrooms as a dressing room, and I toss my boho dress back over my bathing suit. Soon we’re all heading toward the beach.

Mark walks next to Sophia, so I give them their privacy. He seems like a nice guy, but he’s an actor, which means he’s more about himself than anything else. He probably sees her as a means to a better camera angle in the movie.

I stop moving. That was a very unfair thought. Sophia’s an amazing woman and perhaps he sees that. Although ... he is

surrounded by beautiful women all the time. Not to mention he's not known for having any long-term relationships.

When we reach the beach, we walk past an outdoor gym. Chase perks up. "Challenge you to a circuit, Mr. A." He punches Mark in the arm.

"You're on, Doc!"

The two of them go into the open-air gym and start to show off. I mean, jump on the various pull-up bars, fly machines, and other equipment. A bunch of the crew cheers them on, while Sophia and I set up chairs on the beach. A couple of pleasure boats sail by, adding to the perfect afternoon.

I point to the fluffy white clouds. "Thanks for making me come today. Positano has been wonderful."

"What are besties for?"

I settle into the chair, ignoring when Chase and Mark abandon their workouts and rush into the water like the little boys they are. Instead, I slather on more suntan lotion and recline. The sun soothes my nerves, relaxing me like before we arrived in Italy.

After a while, Sophia checks her watch. "We should be getting our stuff together pretty soon. We all agreed to catch the six o'clock ferry back to Amalfi."

Sighing, my body absorbs the fact our trip is coming to an end. But it really rejuvenated me for the last stretch of filming. I stand and shake the sand from my towel. At my actions, Mark comes over and starts to chat up Sophia.

"I'm going to hit the restroom before we leave." The two of them wave at me, so I sling my bag over my shoulder and leave them be.

Once my personal business is finished, now wearing my dress once more, I step onto the walkway. Instead of heading toward the beach and the ferry, I go in the opposite direction. A cathedral up ahead had caught my attention, and I haven't had a chance to visit it. Before I reach the door, my cell phone rings.

Fishing it out of my tote, my dad's face smiles at me. I press the FaceTime button. "Hi, Daddy!"

"Hi, Princess," he replies, his face somber.

My nerves skitter to a halt. "What's wrong?"

"It's your brother. An unknown assailant attacked him, and he's in the hospital out in the Hamptons. I'm on tour in Arkansas and can't get to him. Sara wanted to go, but, as you know, their relationship's almost non-existent."

My hand covers my mouth. His use of mom's proper name shows how off-kilter he is. "Oh, no. Will King—is he—"

"The doctor said he's going to be fine."

The air surges out of my body. Like my mom, I don't have much of a relationship with my half-brother, but I know the distance between my dad and his firstborn has only brought him pain. "I'm glad."

"Your mother and I sent him flowers. We included your name on the card."

"Thanks. I'm sorry you can't get out to see him."

"Yeah. I talked with my agent about canceling the tour and rescheduling, but it would be a nightmare. Especially since it's a shortened tour already."

I trace his sad features. "I'm sure King will understand."



“I don’t know. We’ve been going through a very rough patch lately.”

“If I know you, you’ll figure out a way to make things right with him.”

“Thanks, Princess.” His amber eyes—identical to mine—survey my surroundings. “Where are you?”

“Oh. Well, today was a rare day off and a bunch of us went to Positano to explore. It’s a beautiful town.”

He smiles. “Yes. Your mother and I liked it there. Basically, we liked everywhere in Italy.”

We both laugh. “I was about to explore the cathedral here.”

“Then I’ll let you go. Enjoy.”

“Thanks, Daddy. And I appreciate your telling me about King. Please keep me posted.”

“Will do, Princess.” The screen goes blank.

I turn and lean on the railing, not really seeing the houses in front of me, or the beach slightly below. My mind floats back to the few times King visited while I was growing up.

“Hey, Melody!” Chase jogs up to me.

Startled, I clear my mind. “Oh. Chase?”

“We’re getting ready to head back to the ferry. Sophia yelled, but you didn’t hear her, so I volunteered to get you.”

“I was lost in my own thoughts,” I muse. I turn and glance at the cathedral. “Do you think I have time to pop my head in there?”

Chase bites his lip. “I’m sure you have a few minutes.”

“Okay, thanks.” Leaving him standing on the walkway, I hotfoot it to the door. Inside, beauty and serenity sink into my soul. I walk around the perimeter, amazed at the craftsmanship that went into the creation of the marble frescos, statues, and reliefs.

The altar is a marvel of intricately carved wood and shiny gold leaf. Behind, the stained-glass windows enhance the reverence within. I wander over to one of the tables filled with lit red candles and pick up a long match. Striking it, I light one for King.

“Dear Lord, please be with King as he heals after his attack. Please let the cops catch who did this to him. And please help Daddy to reconcile him into our family. Amen.”

A tenor voice repeats, “Amen.”

Clutching my heart, I whirl around. Chase stands behind me. “I didn’t realize you came inside.”

His eyes are filled with questions. “I gave you a couple of minutes, but when you didn’t come back out, I came in to find you.” Shaking his head, he looks around. “It’s ethereal in here.”

“It is.” Leaving him, I stop at the donations box and drop some euros into it. Chase does the same.

We emerge from the cathedral, and it takes a few moments for my eyesight to acclimate back to the sun’s rays. A bunch of people from the movie are boarding the ferry.

“Oh, no!” I grip my purse. “We have to run. The ferry’s boarding.”

Chase’s hand lands on my arm. “No. Wait. We’ll never make it back in time. We can catch the next one.”

“I can make it.” I snatch my arm back from his tense grip and make a run for it.

We race down the walkway and pass the beach. The ferry’s horn sounds. I place my hands by my mouth and shout, “Wait!”

The ferry ignores me. I halt as it pulls away, Sophia waving her arms at me. Panting, I curse, “Crap!”

Stopping behind me, Chase says, “Like I said up there, we’ll catch the next one.” The jerk isn’t even breathing hard.

My hands drop to my knees and I bend over, sucking in great gulps of fresh Italian air. He rubs my back. “Breathe.”

“No.” I pant. “Shit.” I wheeze and force my head up to look at him. “Sherlock.”

His arms come up as if in surrender. “I was only trying to help.” He steps backward.

Now I feel like the jerk. I bring myself up to standing, my breathing still labored but not the desperate gulps of a few moments ago. “I’m sorry, Chase. That was awful of me. You only came to get me from the cathedral so all of this could’ve been avoided.”

“Hey, what’s the worst thing that happened? We get an extra hour in Positano?” He smiles, the cleft in his chin enhancing his gorgeous face.

“Well, when you put it like that.” I flick the rubber band around my wrist. I need to make amends to this man who has been nice to me. “Want to get a gelato? There has to be at least twenty gelaterias nearby.”

“Sure, let’s go.” He loops his arm around my shoulders and we head off in the direction of the shops.

We pick the third place we come across and head inside. It offers at least thirty different flavors—all homemade, of course—with cute little tables off to the right. I order a hazelnut and vanilla double cup, while Chase opts for one of his preferred fizzy waters—which they surprisingly offer.

I lead us to an empty table in the back, where he might not be recognized. He sits with his back toward the front in order to facilitate his anonymity. “No gelato?”

“It’s not on my diet. And we’re still filming.”

“Man, that sucks.” I dig my spoon into the deliciousness and bring it to his lips. “A taste would be all right?”

His eyes dart from the spoon to me and back again. “I wish. I already did a ton of damage with that slice of pizza earlier.”

“But you worked it off at the beach gym.”

“Well, let’s not tempt fate.” He takes a long swallow of his water.

“Would you like to leave?”

“Nah. Finish your gelato. For the both of us.” He winks.

I laugh. And it hits me. This is the first sort-of real conversation I’ve had with the leading man since filming started.

Before I can assess how this makes me feel, he asks me a question. “So, who’s King?”

My body tenses. He must’ve heard my prayer back in the cathedral. “Since I’m torturing you by bringing you in this gelateria, the least I can do is give you an explanation.”

He taps the bottle onto the table.

“King is my half-brother. My dad’s son with his first wife—he’s eight years older than me. He used to come and visit us when I was a kid, but he stopped coming when he was a teen. My dad and he have a very rocky relationship and they’ve been on the outs recently.” I shake my head, not knowing exactly what transpired. “Anyway, King was the victim of an attack. I was praying in the cathedral for his health and for the person who did it to be caught.”

His tenor voice drops. “I hope your prayers are answered, Melody.”

“Thank you.” I scoop some more gelato onto my spoon. “Even though I don’t really know him, I don’t want anything bad to happen to him.”

“I get it. My sister and I have gotten closer since we’ve been adults, but family dynamics can be a bitch to overcome.”

My spoon stills in my gelato.

## CHASE



**T**he engaging woman across from me bites her lip. Then dips her spoon into her gelato again. “You mentioned before that your parents were too caught up in building their careers to pay much attention to you and your sister when you were growing up.”

My fingers slice through my hair. “Yeah. And I was too busy hanging out with my friends to deal with her. So, I guess you could say, we both raised ourselves.” Although Lindsay bore the brunt of it. I swallow the smothering guilt over my part in all her issues with my sparkling water. It was only due to fantastic emergency room doctors that she escaped death—twice.

“That kinda explains a lot.”

I don’t bother to decipher her comment but redirect our conversation. “That was ages ago. So tell me, where did you get your costume design experience? You certainly have a great eye for clothes.” My eyes drop to the bag with her new dress. “Not to mention you can sew me into my leggings like a superhero.”

Her cheeks pinken. “Thanks. I graduated from NYU with a degree in costume design.”

“Great school.”

She nods. “It is.” She looks down. “I don’t want to brag, but I graduated *magna cum laude*.” Her voice takes on a harsher edge. “Even though I’m only turning twenty-five, I have a lot of experience behind me.”

I cock my head. “I never said you didn’t.”

“Sorry. Must’ve been my chip.” She swipes her shoulder a couple of times, causing me to smile. “I need to remind myself not everyone thinks I got my job on *Ladies of the Abbey*—and, hence, this one—because I’m Braxton Hunte’s daughter.”

My head pushes back. “Really? People say that?”

“You’d be surprised,” she replies, the pink of her tongue licking the last of the gelato off her spoon.

Relief courses through me. I’m not sure what I’m more grateful for, though—the ice cream being gone, or her tongue being hidden again from view. I frown. *She’s your dresser*. I push away from the table and grab her empty cup.

Tossing it into the trash, we walk side by side through Positano. As we travel through the little alleys, I study her patrician profile. Her nose and cheekbones beg for my touch, which causes me to scrub my hands on my thighs. She’s not traditionally gorgeous, like Jessa, but has a true vitality about her. Nothing has been enhanced surgically. Our conversations are refreshing. Unique.

Her comments back in the gelateria run around my head. As we leave a jewelry boutique where she bought a bangle bracelet, I blurt, “You shouldn’t wonder why you were hired, Melody. You’re very talented and dedicated. Plus, you’re a hard worker.”

She stops like she hit a brick wall. Her hand flies to her bun and she removes the knitting needles, fluffing her silken

hair. I bury my desire to touch the spun gold in my pockets.

“Thanks.” She tilts her chin upward. “I know I am. I’m working very hard to prove it to everyone.”

I smile at her confidence. “You’ve won my vote.”

Her eyes shine. “Thank you, Chase.” She pauses, giving me a speculative look. “Charles.”

I freeze at her use of my real name. “No one calls me that anymore.”

She bounces her bags of purchases against her leg. “Well, you’re not Charles when you’re on set. There, you’re the movie st—actor—Chase Wright.” She licks her lips. “But now, here with me, you’re the real person underneath all that”—her free hand waves around—“stuff.”

Her words lodge in the back of my throat. With difficulty, I swallow over the large lump. “You know, you may be right. With you, I’m more of myself than I’ve felt in ages.” I shake my head. “I don’t know why.”

“Maybe ’cause we’re two Chicagoans.” She bumps her shoulder against my arm.

“That must be it,” I lie. No, geography certainly isn’t the reason why I’m so comfortable around this woman. She doesn’t want anything from me—she already has a great career going for herself, tons of money thanks to her father, and with her looks, I can’t imagine she’s lacking for male attention.

Fists form as she flips her hair, once again halting my inclination to verify its softness. Her next words catch me off guard. “You mentioned before you like to perform on stage.”



This is something I haven't shared with anyone. Ever. But I did with her. I try to make light of yesterday's confession. "When I was in college."

"But a bug like that can't be squashed," she persists.

I shrug. "It was good training."

"For Broadway." She fiddles with one of the knitting needles. "Sorry. You can tell me to shut up if I'm getting too much in your business."

The two words play on my lips, but I can't bring myself to say them. I sigh. "I've been thinking about the theater a lot lately."

She remains silent.

I take a few more steps. "Sam tells me I need to go where the money is."

"For him."

I slant her a glance. "That thought has crossed my mind." My hand lands on my forehead. "He's right, though. I need to bank as much as I can now, as I'm not sure when this gravy train will end."

"What do you mean? You're very sought after. I've heard—overheard—your conversations with your agent. He's always proposing new roles."

"Yeah. Rom-coms. Or more like *Doctor Manipul8*."

She frowns. "Don't you like playing these types of characters? You're so good at them."

A reluctant smile tips my lips. "Thanks." We stop in front of a novelty shop, filled with all things Italy. Her eyes roam over the display. "Want to go inside?"

She tosses the knitting needle into her purse. “Do we have the time?”

I check my watch. “Yeah. This has to be our last stop, though.”

She nods and I open the door for her. Following her in, I watch as she picks up unusual items, usually located on the bottom shelves. She shows me a pretty hand-painted spoon rest with the word “Positano” on it.

“I like it.” I take it from her and am impressed with the craftsmanship—it’s not a typical souvenir. The scene is not of the water, but rather one of the small alleys, with a lemon tree next to a gelateria. Like where we just were. I return the ceramic to her.

“Me too.” She brings it to the cash register.

While I keep my head down, Melody starts talking with the clerk. She’s friendly.

And perceptive.

And talented.

And beautiful. I shake my head.

She returns to my side carrying the new bag. I reach out for all of her packages. “Here, let me take these for you.”

“Nah, I’ve got it. I bought all of these, so I should have to carry them. Besides”—she gives me a sideways glance—“they’re not heavy.”

This independent streak is out of my depth. No woman ever refused my help before. “Are you sure?”

“Yup.” We head toward the ferry. “So, Charles, if you don’t mind my asking, what’s the difference between acting on

stage and in movies?”

What a question! “Well, in the movies, it can take hours to get maybe a minute’s worth of usable footage. The cameras have to capture every angle, and the director has to be happy with it. On this set, there’s quite a bit of green screen, as you know. That’s definitely a learned skill.”

“I bet. But you do make it look easy.”

Her compliment warms my chest. “Thanks, Melody. Since this is my third round as Doctor Manipul8, I’ve learned how to deal with it.” I scrape my palm over my stubble. “The learning curve was a bitch, though.”

We exchange smiles. After a few moments, she prompts, “How’s all this different from the stage?”

I rub my forehead. “On stage, there’s no time for re-dos, so you really have to hit your mark on the first try. When you flub a line.” I roll my eyes.

“What happens then?”

“Nothing good.” I chuckle. “I remember this one time, we were doing ... what was the play?” I remember the scene and snap my fingers. “Right! We were doing *The Tempest*, and the woman playing Miranda was supposed to say, ‘Your tale, sir, would cure deafness.’ Instead, she said, ‘Your story, sir, would give me the remedy for,’ and she stopped. Mute.” I chuckle again.

Wide eyes filled with mirth, Melody asks, “What did you say?”

“Well, I was playing the lead, Prospero, and she was responding to my story. I have to admit, I tortured her a little. I said, ‘hemorrhoids?’” Remembering the actress’s horror, I throw back my head and laugh.

The woman next to me puts her hand in front of her mouth, hiding her giggle. “You’re bad.”

“She was so mad! She spent the rest of the run trying to get back at me.”

“What did she do?”

“She tried to get me to flub my lines, but I was too prepared for that. So she resorted to tampering with my wardrobe. Her worst was shaving cream in my shoes.” I chuckle.

“That one never gets old. Although”—she cocks her head—“she probably should’ve tried to mess with your hair.” She reaches up and runs her fingers over my undercut, ending with shaking the top askew.

“Nice try.” I rake my hands through my hair, catching sight of myself in a window. “Looks normal to me.”

She checks me out. “The trials of having perfect hair. Guess you left your actress friend no other option but the shaving cream.”

I grimace, remembering the squishy feeling against my feet. “It was pretty effective.” We resume walking.

“So, you loved Shakespeare on stage but now are playing Doctor Manipul8. Is it the challenge of acting before a live audience that you miss?”

I shove my hands into my pockets. “That’s part of it. The connection with the audience simply can’t be replicated, especially here on these massive movie sets. There’s a tension, a camaraderie, with other actors that’s also missing. Don’t get me wrong, I do enjoy the movies.”

“While wishing you were on stage.”

“Lately, yes.” But I’ve only given her part of my reason. Sure, I do miss the adrenaline of live acting. Dare I share the more gnawing reason? I glance at her but can’t bring myself to share such a deep secret. “It looks like you’re living your dream to me.”

She blinks. Clearing her throat, she replies, “I’m trying. That’s all any of us can do, right?”

Am I trying? Instead of shutting down like I normally do when a subject gets too heavy, I find my mouth running away from me. “Some more than others.”

Her expressive eyes peek at me from under her long lashes. “What’s holding you back?”

I inhale and consider her question. She waits for me to reply but doesn’t push. Lets me work out what I’m able to share. What I *dare* to share. For some reason, I think I can trust her. “Well, you see, I guess there are a couple of things. First, I’ve recently lost some roles to younger actors.”

Her head pops up. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Because I want to do something with my hands, I grab the bags away from her. “Two times in the past couple of months, studios went with an unknown over me.”

“That sucks.”

Like Russian dolls, I shove one bag into the other in an effort to assimilate her belief in my skill. “Actually, it only hurt my pride. I wasn’t all that into the roles. However, the increased competition has shown me that, unless I change tracks, my career is definitely on the downswing.” I switch the now one bag to my other hand. Before I can confess more, I bite my lip.

“Hence your renewed interest in the stage?”

“Sort of.” I switch the light bags again. “Truth be told, my heart never truly left the stage. Movies don’t really allow me to expand my acting chops.” I shake my head. I’m not explaining myself.

“I get it,” she murmurs. “You want longevity and meatier roles than what you’ve been doing in front of a green screen.”

I’m a little shocked at her perception. “Yeah. Exactly.”

“Then you should try out for Broadway, instead of the rom-coms Sam’s throwing your way.”

“Easier said than done.” Movement to my right catches my eye. A line of reporters form along the side of the walkway toward the ferry. “Shit.”

“What?” Melody’s head swivels from side to side, stopping when she spies the paparazzi. “Oh, crap. I thought we’d be able to avoid them all day.” She rummages in her purse for a moment and offers me a baseball cap.

“Thanks.” I bring the bill down over my forehead. One of the reporters yells my name as our ferry makes its way toward the dock. “Our ferry’s coming.”

“Good.”

Melody twirls around in front of me as if to shield me from the cameras, causing me to chuckle. “I doubt that’ll put them off.”

Her hazel gaze locks on mine. “Maybe they’ll think they have the wrong guy.” Her hand slides up, rasping against my stubble.

Everything in my body seizes. This glorious woman is trying to protect me from the paparazzi with her own body.

Without command, my hands land around her waist, pulling her closer. “Now what?”

“Your hat’s brim should cover us.” Her warm breath tickles my lips.

I nod, and the bill taps her on her forehead. Behind us, the paparazzi scream my name. “Chase! Chase Wright, is that you?”

The ferry’s horn blasts.

I don’t react to either noise. Instead, my gaze drops to Melody’s lips. Lush. I incline my head toward hers.

Her head tips upward. “Charles,” she purrs.

In a husky murmur, I reply, “Yes.”

“Chase!” The reporters shout from behind us. Gaining on us.

With strength I didn’t know I possessed, I lock eyes with Melody. Clasp her hand, I order, “Run!”

We bolt toward the ferry, zigging and zagging around people. The ferry docks as we catapult near the front of the line, still being chased by a hearty group of reporters. Panting, I give them my back and wrap Melody in my arms, as the other passengers effectively cock block the reporters. “We made it.”

Pressed together, her body shudders as she seeks air. I want to tip her head up and kiss her. I want to slow her breath with mine, then increase it with passion. I do neither. The salty air stings my lungs, allowing me a brief moment to savor her limbs wrapped around me. I press her head to my chest while my breathing evens out.

The ferry docks and we make our way onto the boat. Other passengers look in our direction, but I keep my head down and direct Melody to an empty side row. With my body facing away from the dock and the paparazzi, I sit. Expending some of my nervous energy, I bend down and stow her bag of purchases under my seat.

Melody stands above me, still trying to obscure my identity. “I think we lost them. I don’t see them on board.”

“I hope not,” I reply. Her fingers worry her dress, so I capture them and tug her down into her seat. Her startled features meet mine. “Thank you.” My voice sounds raspy.

An impish smirk overtakes her face. “Plenty of practice with my dad.”

I didn’t anticipate her response, although I should have. “I bet.”

“Actually, it’s kinda fun so long as it doesn’t happen too often.”

I rub my neck as the ferry’s horn sounds and we leave Positano—without pesky reporters. “I think we’re safe.” I hope they didn’t tip off their friends in Amalfi. “For now,” I add.

Her smile gleams at me. Beckons. Whispers secret promises.

Was our almost kiss back there a ruse for the reporters, or something more? My whole body begs to know the answer.

Instead of asking the question, I swallow and bring my face toward hers. Her smile disappears, and her breathing accelerates, although not from exertion this time. A slight blush stains her cheekbones. And I have my answer.



It wasn't for the reporters.

## MELODY



**M**y brain turns to mush as Charles's gaze devours my lips.

I can almost feel his lips caressing mine, bringing me to ecstasy with the simple joining. Without thought, my mouth opens and I lean slightly toward him. My pulse reignites in a faster and faster *allegro tempo*. Anticipating. Wanting. *Needing*.

He leans back.

My pulse stutters and, self-conscious, I reach for my knitting needles—only to realize they're in my purse. I'm out of my element here. With him. Charles. Chase. Whoever he is.

"People are looking at us," he whispers.

Understanding dawns. They were intruding on our private moment, one that was for no one but him and me. I sit up straighter. Struggling to regain my composure, I cast about for a topic of conversation. "I had a lovely time in Positano today, Charles."

He smiles, and my insides flip. The lowering sun glints off blue eyes that rival the color of the water we're on. "The last part was my favorite."

Is he flirting with me? This man who has been driving me crazy in his trailer twice daily? Tentatively, I reply, “Who knew Doctor Manipul8 likes to shop in little boutiques?”

He wiggles his eyebrows at me. “Maybe it’s because his dresser has such good taste.” He leans forward and whispers in my ear, “And I desperately want to know how she tastes, too.”

Holy shit. This is for real.

We both collapse against our chairs, and he puts his arm around the back of mine. We watch the shoreline disappear while the ferry takes us toward our home away from home. His finger rubs my upper arm. Resting my head on his shoulder, I inhale the salty scent of the sea and the light grassy one of the man who’s unexpectedly turning my world upside down.

About twenty minutes later, the ferry docks in Amalfi. Charles picks up my bags of Positano treasures and carries them for me, despite my telling him I could do it. This side of the man is much different from the one I’ve come to loathe in his trailer. With an agent who offers him roles he doesn’t want, and a personal assistant who caters to his every perceived whim.

Charles grabs my hand as we walk down the gangplank, the brim of his hat downward. A bunch of other passengers crane their necks trying to catch a glimpse of the man the paparazzi were chasing, causing him to lengthen his stride. I extend my legs to match. Once we’re away from the crowd, walking toward the main area of town, I say, “I think we’re free of all of them.”

“Hope so.”

I expect him to drop my hand, but he doesn't. Instead, he brings us toward a line of restaurants on the waterfront. Confused as to his intentions, I hook my thumb backward. "My hotel is back the other way."

"I thought we'd get some dinner, if that's okay with you?"

Since I've only had pizza and gelato all day, my stomach screams its desire to be fed. Yet, I can get room service. "Uhm, yeah, sure. I could eat." I take another step. "But don't you want to be with your—" I search for the right word. Posse? Girlfriends? Lovers? I settle for the least offensive, considering the drastic turn of events over the past hour. "Friends?"

He stops in the middle of the sidewalk. "You're the only person I want to share time with."

"Really?" The word leaves my mouth before I can censor it.

He smiles and tucks some of my hair behind my ear, closing his eyes. "I really do."

"Oh, okay."

Hand-in-hand, we stroll past several restaurants looking for a menu that captures our attention. We decide on a small place a little off the beaten path, less touristy. Ascending to the second floor, we're shown to a window seat with a gorgeous panoramic view of the Tyrrhenian Sea.

I settle into my seat, placing the crisp white linen napkin onto my lap. "I've never eaten here."

"Me neither. Let's hope it's as good as it looks."

I let my eyes wander around the dining room, which is filled with native Italian speakers. "Well, if the clientele is any

indication, I think we're in for a treat."

The waiter comes by and Charles orders a bottle of pinot noir. He licks his lips. "I hope you don't mind. I'm dying for a good pinot."

"Not at all. I'm always up for trying new things. I'm usually a Cosmo girl myself."

"Can you keep a secret?"

His words take me off guard. "I might be persuaded. After all, my lips are sealed about how much of a gentleman you are by carrying all my purchases." I don't remind him about his confession about the stage—or our almost kiss.

"I hate scotch. I'd rather have a good pinot noir any day, and twice on Sunday."

I scrunch back into my seat. "But I've seen you drinking scotch, like, all the time? In so many photos."

"Yup."

"Wow." I shake my head. "Even my dad always drinks his beloved Bud."

"He's a rock star."

The waiter sets our glasses down and offers Charles a taste. Once he approves it, both glasses are poured and we place our dinner orders.

Wanting more info about the intriguing man across from me, I return to our conversation. "What does being a rock star have to do with what you choose to drink?"

Charles sips his wine, an expression of pure joy crossing his face. "Rock stars are rebels." He takes another sip. "Actors

are supposed to always be on the cutting edge of everything. You know, living the best life and all that bullshit.”

I taste the wine and find it refreshing. When a breadbasket is placed on the table, I select a roll and dip it in some olive oil. “I promise not to let anyone know your true drink of choice.”

His shoulders bob, like he’s holding in a laugh. “You’re a real trooper. If I had confessed this truth to you when you were sewing me into those damn leggings, I’m not so sure you wouldn’t have outed me from the rooftops.”

“I’m not that bad. Besides, I’m the one on her knees for nearly two hours. Cut a girl some slack.”

“Now that you mention it, it’s certainly a provocative position.” He takes the smallest roll in the basket and rips it apart. His eyes skewer mine as his hand slips across to my plate and he dips the roll into my oil.

“Hey!” I swat at him, but he’s too fast and the bread disappears into his mouth. Which is surrounded by those lips—holding untold promises. Are they soft? Hard? Would they mold perfectly against mine and turn my brain to mush? Or crash hard against me and work me into a frenzy? Electricity zips through my nerve endings, and I cross my legs to tamp down the feeling.

He smiles at me, his eyes dancing with mischief. “Gotta be faster than that, Goldie.”

I manage a squeak. “Goldie?”

He dips his remaining scrap of bread in the oil on my plate. After swallowing, he wipes his hands on his napkin and reaches for my hair. Holding out a lock, he says, “I’ve never

seen hair this color before. At first I thought it was just blond, but it really isn't. It's actually gold."

Lowering my eyes, I swipe my hair away from his grasp. "I'm sure you've seen this color before. It's the same as my dad's."

He chuckles. "Guess I never stared too hard at his hair."

Heat races up my throat. Not wanting him to see my embarrassment, I stand. "I need to use the restroom."

Charles nods at me, and I race down the stairs. Once inside the single bathroom, I turn the faucet on and let the cool water run into my cupped hands. Taking a deep breath, I splash my face, letting the water droplets slide down my throat. Why am I reacting to him like this?

I stare into the mirror and realization hits like a bolt of lightning. *No!* No. Freaking. Way. I am *not* falling for the leading man. My lips tingle and my lie falls away. "Shit." This can lead nowhere good. Even though I can't figure out how my family connections could help him in any way, I'm sure he's not interested in a costume designer like me. Not when he has beautiful starlets falling all over themselves to serve his every whim.

Not to mention Grant ...

A knock brings me back to my altered reality. Reminding myself not to become the worst sort of cliché, I force my head up, straighten my shoulders, and brush past a gorgeous Italian woman standing on the other side of the door. Who would look great on Charles's arm—and probably in his bed. Desperately trying to banish the image, I return to my seat, where our meals have been served.

Charles smiles around a mouthful of food. “Sorry. Couldn’t wait.”

He looks so young and carefree, nothing like the authoritative guy I sew into a superhero suit daily. Returning my napkin to my lap, I pick up my fork. “No problem. Is it good?”

He nods. “Fuck yeah. This fish is so fresh. With all these herbs, it tastes amazing.” His gaze strays to my oversized bowl. “Bet yours is fantastic.”

Needing the distraction, I lick my lips and dig into my seafood stew. The delicate flavors dance along my taste buds. “This is the best thing I’ve ever tasted.” I hold up a razor clam. “Want to taste?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” he teases, leans forward, and opens his lips.

I put my fork into his mouth, only realizing what I’ve done when it’s too late. Now we’re sharing utensils? He pulls back, chewing. “You’re right. It is good.”

I look down at my fork, which was just in his mouth. Do I ask for another? Steal one off a neighboring table? Casually drop it onto the floor so the waiter brings me a new one? I inhale and dig into my dish again. As my mouth closes around the fork, I try to ignore the shiver of knowledge about where it was a second ago.

He sips his wine. “So tell me something, Goldie. What was it that drew you to costume design in the first place?”

His choice of topic relaxes me. I love design and can blabber on about it for ages. While removing a mussel from its shell, I reply, “It’s the fantasy of it, you know? Creating a feeling through fabrics that translate to the screen. The



challenge of figuring out what conveys the best visible support to bring the writer's words to life. Sometimes it's subtle—like the Manipul8 Stitch inside your leggings—while other times it's big, like a wedding dress.” I shove more stew into my mouth to stop myself from waxing too poetic.

He places his fork on his empty plate. “I never thought about it in those terms. It was always what do I have to wear so I can get on with delivering my lines.” He closes his eyes. “Now that you mention it, though, I can see exactly what you're saying. About how wardrobe enhances the overall presentation. I mean, I always knew it was important—hell, there are Oscars for it—but I never truly understood how vital until you put it in those terms.” He reaches over and places his hand on top of mine. “Thank you.”

After a long pause, I remove my hand from under his by taking another bite. “That was why when your glove problem happened, we were all frantic. Of course, there was no excuse for the buckle getting caught in the young actor's hair, but so much planning went into every piece of the design. When that one part went sideways, we had to rethink everything on the fly.”

He nods. “I get it. Your solution is working well. No problems. Bonus—it looks good with the costume.”

I sigh. “I am really sorry that happened.”

“And I'm sorry for how I overreacted.” His kissable lips tip upward. “But it's all fixed now. It really was the only problem we've had.”

I rap on the table. “Knock on wood.” I take one final swallow and place my fork down onto the nearly empty plate. “Enough about me. What got you into acting in the first place,

Mr. Hotshot?” No more use of “Movie Star,” even in jest. He’s so much more.

He glances sideways. “Well, you know I was into acting back in Chicago. I got my first role in middle school.”

“Emory Middle School?”

“Yeah.” He rubs his forehead. “I fell into it by accident, sort of. I didn’t set out to be in the drama club for acting. I was, ah, looking for a new identity.” His cheek hollows like he’s clenching it.

I cock my head. “What was wrong with your old identity?”

“He wasn’t someone I wanted to be.”

I sit back in my chair, mulling over his last statement. The waiter comes and clears our table, then asks if we want any dessert. I want to explore this conversation more with Charles, yet the server seems to linger forever. When neither one of us orders anything—him because of his crazy diet and me because I’m way too full—the disgruntled waiter finally leaves us alone. Only to reappear within moments with our bill.

My hand reaches for the check so I can calculate my portion. Charles is too fast and holds out his credit card, which the waiter spirits away.

“Charles. Let me pay half.”

“No, Goldie. I never let a date pay for anything.”

I blink. Date? “I appreciate that, but ...” How can I say this?

He interrupts my thought. “I like you. I like spending time with you. And for some reason, I’m willing to share way too much about myself with you.”

My heart rate accelerates. “Oh.” I place my napkin on top of the table, for want of something to do. “I, uhm. Well, I’m enjoying our time together, too.”

The waiter returns and Charles signs the receipt. Leaving it on the table, his face lights up as he gets to his feet. Walking behind me, he helps me stand then lets his hand slide down my arm until our fingers are intertwined. “Let me walk you back to your hotel.”

“Okay.” I don’t even recognize my own fog-filled voice. I clear my throat. “I’d like that.”

He squeezes my hand. The cleft in his chin winks at me, causing my stomach to flip. Once we’re back on the nighttime street, he turns his head. “Which way?”

I point down the road, back toward the ferry. “My hotel is down there, on the right-hand side.”

His blue eyes scan the horizon and land on my hotel. “Nice view.”

“I like it. Although, I’m sure it doesn’t compare with where you’re staying.”

He shrugs. “It’s a hotel.”

We walk in silence on the sidewalk, watching as tourists and Italians alike stop and gawk at my date. My *date*? My eyes stray down to our joined hands. “Do you always cause such a commotion?”

He rolls his eyes. “People are amazed that I walk on the street like a regular human being. I guess they think I live in a mansion filled with naked women who do my bidding at all times.” He chuckles, but it sounds sad to me.

I slant him a glance. “I’m sure you have plenty of naked bunnies running around.”

“Just like your father, right?”

I bark a laugh picturing my dad in the kitchen doing dishes, with a dishtowel thrown over his shoulder. “Not a bunny to be seen.”

He throws his head back and joins me with laughter. This time, it’s uninhibited. Real. “Thanks, Goldie. I needed that.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” We take a few more steps, and his unusual statement back in the restaurant bubbles to the surface. “Can I ask you a question?”

“As long as it doesn’t have to do with naked bunnies, sure.”

I draw a cross over my heart. We’re now in a secluded spot, so it’s safe to broach the subject. I hope. “What did you mean when you said that as a kid, you weren’t ‘someone you wanted to be’?”

He stops and takes my free hand in his so we’re connected by both our hands. “When I was growing up, I was into strange stuff.”

What does he mean?

My face must betray my confusion, because he tucks my hair behind my ear. “Like bees.”

Bees? “Oh.”

Without smiling, he nods. “I was fascinated by them, and my father bought me a beehive. I had the whole suit and everything. Kids can be mean, though, and they picked on me for my hobby. That Halloween, I dressed up as a beekeeper

and my costume was the talk of the town. That's when I learned it was better to play a character rather than be one."

His words make me sad for the little boy he was. For the person who had to escape from his interests to gain acceptance, back in the judgmental schooldays of Chicago. Where the mean girls—led by his sister—terrorized me and Sophia. Guess he wasn't immune back then, either. "I'm sorry you had to go through all that."

"It was a long time ago."

Wanting to lighten the mood I had caused, I quip, "Well, it looks like the little beekeeper has stung the world."

His lips tilt. "I try. Recently, though, all the stinging is coming from the needle of my wicked costume designer." He brings one of my hands up and kisses the back of my hand, then we resume walking toward my hotel, accompanied by a buzzing throughout my body.

We take the stairs. When we reach the reception landing, I turn to him. "Thank you so much for the escort. And dinner. And for a great time in Positano."

"I had the best time with you." His gaze strays to the elevator. "So much so, I don't want it to end. Would you mind if I see you to your room?"

My mind blanks. He wants to walk me to my room? No way would he want me for ... or does he? He's older and sexy and probably gets sex at the drop of a hat. Yet I'm just me, not one of his playthings. No, he's being a gentleman—nothing more. Realizing he's awaiting my response, I shove these nonsense thoughts to the side and mutter, "Uhm, sure."

Despite all my concentrated efforts, my legs become more wobbly with each passing step to my room. Sophia's accurate

teasing plays on repeat, as I haven't had a man anywhere near my room, condo—or anywhere close to my person—since Grant. By the time we arrive at my door, the hairs on my arms are standing straight up. In a shaky voice, I announce, “We’re here.”

He holds his hand out. When I don't move, he prompts, “The key?”

“Oh!” I remain still.

He wiggles his fingers.

Charles's childhood bees have taken up residence in my stomach. “Right.” I fumble in my purse and retrieve my keycard, which he uses to open my door.

“After you.” He sweeps his arm and bows.

As I stumble inside the room, my breathing comes in faster pants. What does he want from me in here? Besides my body. Oh God, will he kiss me? I close my eyes. No way. He can get sex anywhere, from a multitude of super-hot women. I drop my purse onto the bed as the door clicks shut.

Bracing myself, I turn to face the man in my room. He seems to have grown larger over the past minute. Yet, he looks as if he belongs here. He holds up my packages. “Okay if I put them here?” He motions to the table.

My head bobs. “Sure.” I wish I could catch my breath. The items on the bedside table are messy, so I head over there to straighten them.

He frowns. “Hey, are you all right?”

I place a knickknack down. “Yeah. I'm good.”

He looks around the room, his eyes landing on the chair. “Why don't you have a seat?”

I blurt, “Why are you being so nice to me?”

He takes two steps and is in front of me. “Because I find that I like you, Goldie. You’re funny. You’re smart. You’re fantastic at your job”—he pounds his chest—“which only makes me look better.”

I offer him a small smile.

He stares at my lips.

His head travels toward me, and my brain explodes with desire to feel his lips covering mine. We’re all alone in here—no interruptions, no paparazzi. Nerves rise up, but slip away as his soft lips cover mine.

If this kiss is a mistake, it’s the best one I’ve ever made.

My mind turns to mush and my limbs grow weak. I wrap my arms around him to stay upright. But I don’t need to, because his sturdy arms encircle my body and brings it flush against his hard, muscular one. I want to purr like a kitten and rub my softness all over him. I settle for a moan.

He caresses my lips with his, asserting ever-increasing pressure, which heightens the pleasure rampaging through my body. His tongue traces the seam of my lips, begging for entrance. I open my mouth and he swoops in, sending shivers exploding in all directions.

Charles’s hands drop to my butt, and suddenly I’m wrapping my legs around his torso and being transported across the room. The plush bedding welcomes my back as I’m deposited onto it. His shirt flies over his head.

I don’t have time to revel in the hard planes of his absurdly defined torso when his mouth returns to mine and his tongue continues its exploration. He tugs my dress upward. “Lift your hips,” he implores.

Without any thought, I comply and my dress sails over my head and lands on the floor. His eyes roam over my nearly naked body, bouncing over my bikini. A large hand lands on my boob. His finger dips inside the cup. It runs over my nipple.

“Oh!”

“Like that?”

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. A thought that he’s going too fast tries to catch my attention, but like a delicate stitch, it disappears when he pinches my nipple. Charles reaches behind me and undoes the ties. My bikini top soon joins my dress on the floor.

“So beautiful,” he growls.

His mouth lowers, and his tongue flicks where his fingers just were, causing my body to ripple beneath him. Little bites on my rock-hard nipples cause my core to contract, followed by the laving of his tongue. He pulls back and smiles at me, his face flushed.

Maybe it’s the overwhelming feelings flooding my body, or maybe it’s the change in his coloring, but the thought I ignored a minute ago resurfaces. With friends. I need to tell him.

“Charles.”

He kisses me again. “I love that you use my real name.” His hand skims to the elastic at the top of my bikini bottom.

“Charles,” I repeat with a bit more force.

Above me, he stills for a moment, then dips to kiss my neck.



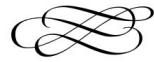
I close my eyes and revel in the tingles exploding throughout my body. My excitement is short-lived, though, as that damn voice inside my head screams—*tell him, tell him, tell him.*

I suck in a breath.

*Tell him, Tell Him, TELL HIM.*

I blurt, “I’m a virgin.”

## CHASE



**M**y hand tugs on the hair at the back of my head. It's as if virtual ice-cold water pours over me. A *virgin*? I take deep breaths to control my rampaging desire—is this my simple normal desire to plunge into her, or ... an overwhelming need to be her first?

And only.

I push away from her body and toss her dress over her nearly-naked body. Grabbing my shirt off the floor, I glide it over my torso.

Melody needs to be with someone she loves for her first time. Or at least thinks she loves. No matter the fact that I'm falling hard for her. She's so unlike any other woman I've ever known. Beguiling. Bewitching. Beautiful.

"I should go," I murmur. Forcing myself to the door, I refuse to look back at the wanton, amazing *virgin* strewn across the bed. One glance and I'm afraid I'd be back on top of her.



**I** stand still while Melody sews me into the leggings. Her hands—so passionate last night—are too professional. Like a

gnat, Thomas circles around us, clicking his damn pen, scribbling down my responses to his insipid questions. I want him to leave so I can be alone with Goldie.

*How* can a woman like her still be a virgin? I spent all last night unable to answer this question.

Thomas asks, “What do you think?”

Huh? I have no idea what he’s talking about. “Uhm, okay?”

His eyebrows rise. “Really? You’ll accept the invitation to go on the talk show?”

What? “No, wait a minute. What talk show?”

My PA sighs. With deliberate enunciation, he replies, “I said, the *Evening with Eddie* folks want to interview you the day after filming wraps here.”

I close my eyes. “Oh, shit. No way. I won’t be in any shape to do TV then. Tell Eddie I’ll catch up with him later.”

His pen clicks. “Already did.”

I grumble, “Then why did you ask?”

“Because you told me to tell you about all invitations.”

My eyelids slam shut. I’m all up in knots because of my dresser, but I shouldn’t take it out on Thomas. He’s a good guy. “You’re right. I’m sorry, my mind was elsewhere.” Entrancing hazel eyes meet mine. I need to get her alone.

I clear my throat. “So, Thomas, have I answered all your questions for now?”

He consults his clipboard. “Yeah, we’re good, boss.” *Click, click.* “I need to restock your fridge.”

Which means he has to go to the store. “Go on. I’ll be on set soon, so there’s no rush.”

“Will do.” He bends down and says something to Melody I can’t hear, and my blood pumps faster. What’s this? Jealousy?

“Appreciate it, though,” Melody responds to my PA. With a salute to me, he leaves us alone in the trailer.

Finally.

Melody rises to her feet. “Can you please walk to check out how the leggings fit?” Her voice sounds forced.

I bend my knees and pace throughout the trailer, not paying any attention to the fit. No. My mind is focused on the woman who sewed me into them.

“They look good. How do they feel?” She swipes a bottle of spring water.

Instead of responding, I open the fridge. “Would you like to try some of my specialty water? It’s much better than regular.”

She tips the bottle to her lips. Lips that were on mine last night. Lips attached to her sinful body—which no one has touched. But me. An unusual spark makes me stand taller.

“Thanks, but I don’t like carbonation in my water. I’m a plain girl.”

Talk to her, dude. “There’s nothing about you that’s plain, Goldie.”

She puts the empty bottle into the recycle bin and stares at it. She whispers, “How do the leggings feel?”

I approach her. “Like they were sewn with care.”

Her head tilts upward, hazel eyes widening when she realizes I'm right next to her. "Chase."

Not my given name. The air thickens. "I want to go out to dinner with you tonight." My breath seizes at the disbelief and dismay written all over her face.

"Last night ..."

"I was shocked." I go to cup her chin, but she moves backward, out of my grasp. "I couldn't imagine someone as gorgeous and intriguing as you is still a virgin."

Her arms cross over her chest, in a clear effort to protect herself. From me. For the first time, I notice dark circles under her eyes, covered with concealer. "Well, I am."

The urge to be her first grabs me by the balls. "We'll take it slow." An unwanted thought crosses my mind. "That is, if —" I can't make myself complete the rest of the sentence. She *has* to have feelings for me, considering mine for her.

Her hands reach behind her head and out come the knitting needles. Her spun gold hair tumbles over her shoulders. How can she be unaware of how enticing she is? Her broken whisper reaches my ears. "Please."

Her response breaks my dam. My naked arms reach out and bring her willing body against mine. "I think you're very special. I want to spend more time with you." I tap her forehead. "I need to know how your intriguing mind works."

Her voice is a squeak. "My mind's intriguing?"

I smile. "Very." I want to pull her closer and kiss the crap out of her. Remove her cute tank top and skirt from her gorgeous body. Discover the secret of how on earth the daughter of the *legendary* Braxton Hunte is still a virgin.

However, I don't do any of that, heeding an overwhelming desire to make her comfortable with me.

The possibility of us.

She stares into my eyes. "I'd like to go to dinner with you."

How does she make me feel like I just won an Oscar by simply agreeing to go out with me? "Great." Because excitement ricochets throughout my body, I give her a brief kiss. Too brief. "By the way, the leggings feel fine."

"Good." Her breath wafts to my lips.

The trailer door opens and we jump apart like two kids caught hunting for birthday presents. Helene walks up the stairs. "Melody, Judith asked me to get you. She wants to talk with you about something. I'll finish up here with Chase."

Melody responds, "Oh, hey, Helene. Do you know what she wants to discuss?" She works the knitting needles back into her hair.

"I'm not sure."

While Melody's colleague is nice enough, *now* I have no desire to switch my dresser. "Melody, if you don't mind, can you talk with Judith after you help me into the bodysuit?" Not waiting for her response, I address her colleague. "Helene, please tell your boss she'll be there in a few minutes."

Helene has made her way over to Melody's designer suitcase thingy, which she left open when she got her scissors. "It's no big deal, Chase. I can finish up."

"No offense, but I'd rather keep to my established team." I pause. "You know us actors and our superstitions. Don't want to mess with my mojo before hitting the set."

Helene plays with the items in the top tray.

I raise my eyebrow, and she steps back.

Her hands return to her side. “Fine.” She sighs. “I’ll go let Judith know. Maybe I can help her out with whatever she needs.” With that snide remark, Helene glides out of the trailer.

Within seconds, Melody’s next to me, all business. After tossing me the undershirt, she shakes out the bodysuit. “Here. We have to hurry. I have no idea what Judith wants, but I know she doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Not wanting to impose more than I already have, I put the shirt on, slip into the gloves, and then work the bodysuit up my torso. Of course it gets stuck mid-chest. “Sorry. I’m going as quickly as I can.”

Her hands land on my torso, causing my stomach to tighten. “We don’t want you to ruin this. Let me help you.”

Between the two of us, I’m suited up in no time. Once the snaps are done, I grab the socks and boots and head to the chair. “Go meet with Judith. I’ll be on the set shortly. I’m fine here.”

“Are you sure?”

Placing my left ankle on my right knee, I reply, “Yup.” She takes a couple of steps and picks up her tote bag. Before she leaves, I say, “I’m looking forward to our date tonight.”

Melody stops but doesn’t turn to face me. “Me too.” Then she scurries out of the trailer.

Finished with my costume, I walk around, confirming everything’s in the right place. Today’s lines sit on the table, which I pick up and review. Placing my mask on, I glance one

last time in the mirror to confirm Doctor Manipul8 is ready for action.



I watch Melody pour olive oil onto her plate and pick up a hunk of delicious looking bread. “So what did Judith want to talk with you about before the shoot today?”

“Oh, she wanted my opinion about a couple of new ideas for the extras to wear during the movie’s climax.” She pops the bread into her mouth.

“Not as urgent as Helene made it sound, huh?” Fisting my hands to keep them out of the breadbasket *and* off her body, I continue, “Heard a rumor Judith’s up to be Noble’s new lead costume designer for his next movies. If that happens, what will you do?”

Without hesitation, she replies, “I’ll stay on the show.” She bites into another piece of bread. “Don’t get me wrong, working here on the movie is amazing, but my heart belongs with the television show.”

“I get it. You’ve worked there for a few years now?”

“Three. They’re my family-away-from-home, you know? We’ve become pretty tight here on the set, but it doesn’t compare with working with people for ten months a year.”

“I get it. Noble’s decision will be made soon, I’m sure.”

The waiter brings our appetizers, and I dig into my shrimp cocktail, trying to ignore the meatballs on her plate. Maintaining such a low body fat sucks. When our meals are finished—she had a nice mahi mahi while I opted for broiled chicken, again—I ask, “What would you like to do after



dinner? I was thinking we could either hit a club, or walk by the waterfront, or maybe go back to my room?" Please pick the last option.

"Oh." Her eyes dart around.

"Don't worry. I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do."

"Thanks." She plucks at the rubber band around her wrist. "A walk sounds nice."

I keep disappointment out of my voice. "Then a walk it is." Maybe we can discuss how on earth she's still untouched at twenty-four. Did something happen to her? My mind conjures up terrible possibilities. I need to ferret out the truth.

Outside, it's a beautiful night, with an array of stars filling up the inky sky. I wrap my arm around her shoulders.

"It's so gorgeous," she remarks.

"Yes, you are."

She stops and turns to face me. "Charles, seriously, what's going on here?" She motions between the two of us. "I'm all sorts of confused."

My eyes travel from the top of her head to her hands, settling on her mouth. "I really enjoy your company, Goldie. I like how feisty you are." I brush my lips against hers. "Not to mention your passion."

As if her response is dragged from the depth of her soul, she replies, "I like you, too."

My forehead collapses against hers. "I'm not some overeager high schooler. We'll take this slow, okay? Whatever you're comfortable with is good for me." As soon as the sentiment is in the air, I realize how true it is. Sex has always

come easy for me. I don't do it like another role. But with Melody, it's all changed. I do want to know why she's made the decision not to indulge, although her innocence is an unexpected turn-on.

Her forehead rolls against mine. "You're used to so many women throwing themselves at you."

"None of them mattered. They were warm, willing bodies. You, however, are different. I've never known anyone quite like you, Goldie."

She pulls her head back, confusion written all across her face. "Do you mean it?"

"I do." I tuck some stray hair behind her ear. "Come on, let's go for the walk you requested."

"Okay."

Holding hands, we wander the Italian roads for a while, passing fountains and other tourists, eventually ending up inside her hotel room. With every step, her confidence seemed to increase, and she leads me over to the only place big enough in here for both of us to sit—her bed. Her hands land on my thigh, which causes my cock to stir. I give him a stern warning.

"Charles, I never thought I'd be feeling this way toward you, of all people."

"Why not me?"

"Oh, you know." She laughs. "You're *the* Chase Wright, tabloid fodder with zero body fat. No to mention the looks of a superhero."

I roll my eyes. "A happenstance of genetics, workouts, and lots of broiled chicken."

Her smile reaches her eyes. “Well, I guess that’s true.” She licks her lips and it’s all I can do not to suck her tongue into my mouth. “Is this for real?”

“It is for me.” I square my shoulders. “I sure as hell hope it’s real for you.”

“It is.”

With one final glance at her gorgeous face, I squeeze her hand on top of my thigh. “I’d like to kiss you now.”

“Please.”

Her permission unleashes my desire, and I take her into my arms. As I kiss her lips, her cheeks, her neck, I keep reminding myself she’s a virgin. With every encouraging response she offers, the reminder plays louder.

Like when I remove her shirt. Then her bra.

When I take her nipple into my mouth and suckle. When she rolls against me.

When she tosses my shirt to the floor. And lies back on the bed.

Putting all my weight on my forearm, I trace her upper body with my index finger. I ignore the pressure against my fly where my cock begs to join the party. Instead, I play with the zipper of her skirt. “May I?”

She nods and lifts her hips for me, and soon the fabric is on the floor. Her hand lands on my belt buckle. Placing my hands over hers, I shake my head. “Not tonight.”

Her pout is replaced with a gasp when my fingers slide inside her panties. They swirl around her clit, and she gasps. When I enter her tight, wet center, her legs tighten around my hand, so I kiss her until she relaxes. Slightly.

Her fingernails dig into my back as she moans at the feelings I'm triggering inside her body. With one more stroke, she comes around my hand, her whole body going rigid as she pants out a scream. When she softens under me, I collapse onto the bed beside her, pushing her silky hair off her face.

Her finger graces my mouth. "I've never felt anything like that before."

I catch her finger between my lips and bite. She giggles. "That's just the beginning."

Her eyes drift downward, toward the bulge in my pants, and she licks her lips. Instead of letting worry overtake her, I draw her back to my mouth and kiss her, exploring every inch of her delicious body with curious fingers.

Later, when my own body screams for more, I pull back. "I think I better go."

The nearly-naked woman asks, "Why?"

"Because my heart"—I roll my hips to demonstrate I don't mean *that* organ—"can't take any more." I toss my shirt over my head. "Get some sleep, and I'll see you in my trailer in a few hours." I give her one last kiss then hightail it out of her room before I give in to the desire rampaging through my body.

Back in my room, I take a very cold shower and jerk one out. Someday—not sure when, 'cause I sure as hell won't pressure her—I'll be doing this with Melody. Until then, my right hand is my new best friend.



I throw the soaked undershirt into the trash. “Where would you like to go to dinner tonight?”

Melody pauses while hanging up the bodysuit, casting a furtive glance toward Thomas who’s busy at the front of the trailer. She whispers, “I liked the place last night.”

I nod. “It was good.”

Up front, Thomas coughs. Directing my attention to my PA, I ask, “Are you okay?”

He blows his nose. “Yeah.” Crinkling sounds as he unwraps a throat lozenge.

After a quick glance at Melody, I head into the bathroom and switch into my T-shirt and jeans. Buckling my belt, I head over to my PA. “Are you sure everything’s all right? I heard a lot of coughing on set today.”

“I think it’s just a cold. Nothing to worry about. But, if you don’t mind, I’m going to take off and lie down. You’re all set in here for tomorrow, so nothing to worry about.”

I clamp my hand on his shoulder. “Feel better, man.”

He waves and exits the trailer, causing me to turn around and walk to where Melody’s closing up her suitcase. “All alone.”

She smiles, and her whole face lights up. For some reason, this “letting her lead” thing makes me feel like a better man. Her next words confirm it. “I like being alone with you, Charles.”

I kiss her. Because I want to. And because I can.

When we separate, she whispers, “I enjoy going out to restaurants and all, but would it be okay if we had room service tonight?”

My heart skips a beat. My mind knows better than to think she means what my body desires. I place my hand onto my belt, in an effort to calm my overeager body. “Sounds nice.” Because I can’t help myself, I add, “Your place or mine?”

She pulls the knitting needles out of her hair and shakes. “How about yours? You’ve seen mine.”

When she goes to put the needles back into her hair, I steal them. “Let’s go.”

She looks from my hands with her knitting needles in them and back up to me and smiles. Exiting the trailer, I don’t grab her hand like I want to. When she wants everyone to know about our relationship—like I do—she’ll take it. Until then, we walk toward my hotel side by side.

Helene walks by us. Coughing, she waves. “Something’s in the air.”

Melody replies, “I heard Thomas coughing before. I hope you’re okay.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing.” She points toward the street that leads to their hotel. “Are you going back?”

I bite back the retort that wants to escape.

Melody says, “Not yet. I, uhm, have to discuss something with Char—Chase. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Helene appears oblivious to Goldie’s word challenges, so we part ways with her and continue toward my hotel. Soon, we’re in my room. The sight of the woman who’s taking up a big place in my heart standing in here makes me want to bellow from the rooftops. Instead, I pick up the room service menu and pass it to her. “Want to order dinner for us?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not hungry yet.”

I drop the menu onto the counter. Pointing to the living room area, I ask, “Talk?”

When she agrees, we sit side by side on the couches. Before I can stop myself, the pressing question I’ve been disregarding pops out of my mouth. “May I ask you why?”

She tilts her head. “Why what?”

“You’re beautiful, smart, and funny. Why hasn’t someone snagged your heart yet?” Not to mention your amazing body?

She sighs and tucks her leg under her thigh. “It’s not what you think.”

“What do I think?”

“That I’m frigid.”

I chuckle. “Not a shot in hell on that one.”

She grins, probably at the incredulous tone in my voice. “I’ve never told anyone this. Not even Sophia.”

A heavy weight descends on my chest. “If you don’t want to share, you don’t have to.”

Her damn tongue licks her pink lips again, causing me to remind my body to calm the fuck down. She blinks several times. “No. I want to. I want you to know.”

Unable to sit next to her and not hold her when she’s about to spill her guts to me, I bring her into my embrace. I whisper, “Are you sure?”

Her head bangs against my chest as she nods. After a pause, she begins, “I had a serious boyfriend when I was in college. I was a sophomore, and he was a senior. I thought the sun rose and set on Grant—that’s his name. He was a

musician, the lead singer and guitarist in a band, and I went to all his shows. He reminded me of my dad, I guess.”

I don't interrupt, just stroke her hair, reveling in the light vanilla scent rising to my nose. She goes silent for a little while, then continues, “I thought I was in love with him. His lifestyle was one I knew and understood since birth, and we got along really well. He was a pretty big man on campus, and I was his girlfriend. It felt so ... right.”

What did this asshole do to her? I want to scream my question from the rooftop but bite my tongue instead.

She pulls back to look into my eyes. “Remember when I told you I was subjected to a lot of ridicule growing up?”

I do. “We all were, in one way or another.”

“Right. Well, the people who weren't bullying me all wanted to get to know me for what my dad could do for them. His connections. His money.”

Blood rushes through my system. “I'm sorry.”

“Not your fault.” Her chin climbs upward. “Anyway, I had Sophia. She was my lifesaver.” She settles against my chest. “I told you that not for your pity, but so you'd understand a bit better.”

She inhales deeply, and I continue smoothing her gold mane, giving her strength to finish her story. When she doesn't, I prompt, “So, Grant?”

“Yeah. Grant. The night I decided to go all the way with him, I went to his rehearsal room to tell him. I figured he'd be excited, and his performance would be off the chain. Well, when I got there, the door was open and I overheard what he and his bandmates were saying.”



My hand stills. “Which was?”

“He was bragging how my dad would give the band everything they need because he’d shackled himself to me. How he was taking it for the team so Hunte would promote them.”

I tangle my hand in her long locks and push her head to my chest. In a muffled voice, she adds, “Like everyone else, he only wanted me for what my family could do for him.”

She starts to cry, and I hold her tighter, each tear slamming into my system. “Shhh, Melody.” I try to soothe her.

After a little while, her tears subside. In a small voice, she adds, “That was too much for me, Charles. I decided I didn’t want anything to do with men, and focused on the one thing under my total control, which was my career.”

My heart breaks for her pain. “So you graduated at the top of your class and landed your job with HBO.”

“Even then, the press release announcing my hire only talked about how I was the daughter of *the* Braxton Hunte.”

Her words blast apart inside me. I place my hands on her shoulders and disengage from her. Using my pointer finger, I tip her chin to force her to look at me. After a full minute, tear-filled hazel eyes lock onto mine.

“Listen to me, Melody. You are damn good at your job, which you earned through hard work. Being Braxton’s daughter may have played into their hiring decision—so they could boast of their new hire—but you wouldn’t have gotten the offer if you weren’t qualified. And”—I wipe away a tear that rolls down her cheek—“you certainly wouldn’t have kept the job more than a hot minute if you sucked.”

Her chest rises and falls. “Thank you.” She forces a sad smile. “I don’t think anyone gets me like you do. Even though you didn’t grow up in a famous household, you’ve been famous for nearly a decade. I appreciate the kind words.”

My heart expands. “Only telling you the truth.”

Her tear-stained lips cover mine. When she pulls back, she says, “I can’t figure you out, though. What’s your angle?”

“I’m not Grant. My angle is that I like you.”

A beaming smile overtakes her face. “Right answer.”

She kisses me again, and all I want to do is make her feel good. Wipe away the assholes who have ruined her accomplishments. Or used her for their own ends. I deepen the kiss and she reciprocates with fervor.

I pull back. “Melody, I have absolutely no interest in anything your father can do for me.”

“I believe you.”

All the tension flows out of my body, and I can’t stop myself from reaching for her shirt. “May I?”

She nods. Soon she’s divested of all of her clothes. I bring her prone on the couch and place one of her legs onto the floor while the other one goes over my shoulder. I kiss her inner thighs, letting my hands run all over her body.

Memorizing.

Learning.

Adoring.

I play with her pussy, which is so wet for me. Her expressive face shows all of her emotions. Desire and lust top the list. “Trust me.”

Wary, yet excited eyes follow my movements as I kiss between her thighs. My tongue encircles her clit, and she cries out. My fingers enter her core.

“Oh!”

*There's much more where this came from, Goldie.* I continue my ministrations on her body, savoring every single moan and movement of her hips. When she clenches, I give a full-out assault on her body, including pinching her nipples. She comes with a long scream, ending with a chant of my name.

Even without rounding home, tonight was the most profound sexual experience of my entire life.

So far.

## MELODY



**M**y phone rings, ripping me out of a delicious dream about Charles and his magical hands. Well, in the movie they're magic but on my body? No comparison. It's been eight hours since our amazing interlude in his hotel room last night, and I need more. Much more. My cell rings again.

With a smile, I fumble for the phone, and Judith's name appears. It's five o'clock. I don't have to be in Chase's trailer to start dressing him until ten. Sitting up, I answer, "What's wrong?"

Over the phone, my boss sneezes. She must've caught whatever bug's been going around the crew. *Another reason to stay with the actors.* Rather, only one actor.

Coughing, she says, "Sorry to call you so early, but Noble just called. He's down for the count with this bug. Filming is canceled for the next two days. If you're not sick, I suggest you leave this germ-infested town."

Excitement streaks through my body. Two whole days off! I school my features, even though she can't see me. "Oh, thanks for letting me know. I really hope you feel better soon."

"Thanks."

We disconnect and I flop back into my bed. My mind races with the possibilities of what Charles and I can do together with our new free days. Heart racing, I text him.

Just got the news that we're free for two days.  
Everyone's sick.

While I await his response, I consider the various towns nearby. Didn't Sophia say Ravello is rumored to be the most romantic spot on the entire Amalfi Coast? I'm searching for hotels there when his response comes.

Charles: Confirmed. Noble's down for the count.  
But we're not! Whatever shall we do, Goldie?

I squirm at the nickname he gave me. A sappy smile covers my face. After spending the past days and most of the *nights* with Charles, I know he's going to be my first. He doesn't want anything from me or my family. I'm ready.

Heard good things about Ravello.

*Charles: Then let's go. I'll have Thomas book us somewhere.*

I shake my head. When will my spoiled actor learn to do stuff on his own?

No. I'll book us a room and a car. Text you again when I'm on my way over to yours.

Returning to my search, I select a secluded villa in what's called "the most romantic hotel on earth." Kinda cheesy, but the photos look fab. I race to take a shower and throw some

clothes into my overnight bag. With any luck, I won't be needing any of them while we're there.

My face heats with the thought of spending the next forty-eight hours, naked, with Charles. When I have everything in order, I go down the hall to Sophia's room because she's my bestie and I want to share my news with her. The door opens a crack and a somewhat green Sophia appears. I step back, placing my fingers in a cross in front of my face.

“Oh no, not you, too?”

She holds up a tissue. “Yeah.”

“Guess you've heard filming is canceled for the next two days.”

She nods and blows her nose.

“I came over here to let you know I'm going away with Charles, to escape those germs you all are swapping.”

Watery brown eyes meet mine. “Going away with as in ‘going away with’?”

I swallow. “Yeah.”

“If I didn't have the cooties, I'd be hugging all over you right now, Mel. I *knew* something was up between you. So happy you listened to me. Go.” She waves her tissue. “Have fun for the both of us.”

“I will.” I blow her a kiss and return to my room, calling for a car service on my way. Within fifteen minutes, I'm loaded into the black car and we're on our way to pick up Charles. My *boyfriend*. He is my boyfriend, right? Considering what I'm planning, he sure as hell better be. I text him I'm on my way.

“There.” I point to his hotel. “We have to pick someone up here, and then we’re on our way to Ravello.” Excitement strums through my body. The next two days are going to be epic.

Charles leans against the cement fence, a small bag at his feet. The driver makes a startled noise. In a strangled voice, he asks, “That’s, I mean, isn’t that Chase Wright?”

My eyes gobble him up. “Yeah,” I reply on a sigh.

The car stops next to Charles, then the driver jumps out and grabs his bag. He ushers Charles into the car and stows his kit in the trunk. When he returns to the driver’s seat, he chatters about all the Chase Wright movies he’s seen and what a huge fan he is. For his part, Charles kisses the top of my hand. Then, he engages the driver for the twenty-minute drive.

Despite the crazy, corkscrew skinny road without guard rails, I manage to smile at the driver’s reaction to Charles. After all, I’m used to my dad’s fans treating him much the same way. He reacts exactly how Charles is. With respect. As if they’re family. My opinion of my *boyfriend* goes up yet another notch.

When we pull into the hotel, I ask them both to remain in the car while I check us in. No need to get Charles noticed by anyone else. While people know my dad here, they don’t associate me with him, so I slip in under the radar and get the key to our private villa.

The driver takes us to our room, then asks for photos, to which Charles graciously agrees. Once ensconced inside our room, I head for the balcony and fling open the French doors. I step outside and inhale the beauty that is the Amalfi Coast. We’re high up, with an unobstructed view of the town and the water below us. Blue skies are filled with fluffy white clouds.

Charles steps behind me and whispers in my ear, “Perfect.” He kisses my earlobe, then bites it.

A shiver of excitement races through me. I reach out and play with his hair. “The view is perfect.”

“Not talking about the view.” His hands come around my waist, and he settles my back against his front.

I melt into him. Tracing each of his fingers, I murmur, “I was thinking ...”

He blows into my ear. “About?”

My shoulders wiggle against his torso. I blurt, “I can call you my boyfriend, right?”

He chuckles, a low, rumbling sound that courses through my body. “You’d better. I’ve been thinking of you as my girlfriend since Positano.”

His words catch in my throat and I spin around in his arms. Positano’s where I shared about King and we saw the cathedral and had gelato. Escaped the paparazzi. Almost kissed. Where I started to fall for the man beneath the actor. “I like the sound of that, boyfriend!”

I pull his face down to mine. Our lips meet, slide over the other’s, molding. His tongue presses forward, and I open for him. We kiss like we haven’t done this mere hours ago and can’t get enough of each other.

His hands slide down to my hips and pulls me to him. His bulge grows against my midsection, due to our height difference. I want more. I want all of this man.

I can trust him. He’s not after my dad’s connections, he has his own.

He believes in my talent.



And I believe in him. He's the real deal.

Charles breaks our kiss, panting. He places his forehead against mine. "Give me a minute, Goldie."

"I don't want to." I squeeze my arms around the back of his neck.

His blue eyes darken and he tips his head back down to mine. Our kiss reignites.

Charles runs his hands up and down my back. My nipples harden beneath my bra. The sensation's still new to me, yet it's amazing. I rub my chest against his.

Charles breaks our kiss and stumbles back two steps. "I have to stop."

I repeat, "I don't want to."

His eyes pierce right to my soul. I have no doubts and need to tell him. "I want it to be you, Charles. Please, show me what I've been missing."

His palm runs across his perfect stubble. "Are you sure? You want to take this step with me?"

"I've never been more sure about anything. I trust you to make this wonderful for me. For us."

His chest expands. "I haven't wanted a woman as much as I want you. Ever. I promise you'll never regret choosing me."

When he doesn't move, I step forward and place my palm on his pecs, over his heart. It's pounding as much as mine is. My gaze travels upward. "I know."

Chase closes the gap between us, his mouth landing on mine again as his hands travel down my abdomen and pull my shirt free of my shorts. Holding the hem, he tugs on the

material. Raising my arms, he skims it up and over my head and buries his mouth on my neck.

He gives me little love bites, which zing straight to my core. My hips pulse in time with them, and I moan.

He licks my neck where he bit me, and his lips curve upward. “Like that, huh?”

“I like everything you do to me.”

He unclasps my frilly yellow bra and slides it off my arms, then drops to his knees in front of me. “How about this?”

His mouth attaches itself to one of my distended nipples and he sucks. We’ve already established how sensitive I am, but this time is different. We’re not stopping. And the intensity is off the charts.

“Oh, that’s so”—I suck in my breath when his free hand plays with my other nipple—“good.”

He removes his mouth from my body. “Only good, huh? I’ll have to see what I can do to earn a ‘great’.” He redoubles his efforts. When he bites—he gets an A+ for this skill—my knees buckle, which earns a chuckle from him. “That’s better.”

My body’s not my own. It’s his to play with, and I like it. When he switches to my other breast and gives it the same treatment, I moan my approval. Clamping his head to my body, I run my fingers through his silky, perfectly maintained hair.

We remain locked like this until his hands move downward. To my waist. I watch him undo my gold metal belt and slide it through the loops. It clanks on the floor.

But I don’t want to be naked when he’s still fully clothed. He inches toward my fly. “No, wait.”

Breathing hard, he drops his hands, which curve into fists on his thighs. “That’s okay, Goldie. We can stop right now.”

I shake my head. “No, Charles. I don’t want to stop. But I don’t want to be the only one not wearing any clothes.”

I reach for the hem of his shirt, but he beats me to it. Pulling it upward from the back of his neck, the shirt’s on the floor before I realize what’s happening, and my hands land on his naked torso. “Oh.”

His stomach tightens with my touch, but his smile tells me he likes it. He holds his arms out to the side. “Enjoy.”

My gaze explores every inch of the sculpted masterpiece that is Charles Wainwright. I step forward and trace his six-pack with my lips, causing him to hiss. The sound is heady. When I get to the top of his V, I close my teeth.

“Yeah, someone’s a quick learner.”

I step back. “I did graduate *magna cum laude*, you know.”

“Inspiring.” He reaches out for me again and draws me deeper into the villa. “Let’s go find the bedroom, all right?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

“We can do it on the balcony later.” He winks.

My gaze darts back to the private balcony, noting the discarded clothes strewn there. I catch my bottom lip with my teeth. “You think we could do it out there?”

He laughs. “Yeah. I do. But not this time. Now I’m going to spend hours worshipping you in a soft bed.”

I mouth the word “worshipping.” I like that. “I’m all in.”

We enter the bedroom, which boasts another huge window overlooking the same view. A king bed with white bedding

and a chaise lounge are off to the side. Two closets. Another door leads to the bathroom, I presume.

“It’s gorgeous in here.”

He turns me to face him and stares into my eyes. “I only see you.”

I’m lost. In him. In this moment. I’ve waited almost twenty-five years, and it’s more than perfect. I’m ready.

He bends down and takes off his shoes, and I slip off my sandals. Now we’re both barefoot and half-dressed. My hands go to the button at the top of my shorts, but he shoos them away. “No. Let me. Please.”

I smile. “Since you asked so nicely.”

He kisses me as he undoes my fly, and my shorts slip to the floor. For my part, I reach out and untie his shorts. He wore workout clothes, probably to be less recognizable. Shortly, they’re on the floor next to mine.

Charles reaches out to my yellow thong. I don’t usually wear them, but I planned ahead. “A thong? Are you trying to kill me?”

I giggle. “Maybe a little.”

He bends down, wraps his fingers around the sides, and pulls. The scrap of material moves down my legs, leaving sensuous sparks in its wake. When he reaches my ankles, I lift one and then the other. Now, I’m naked.

Instead of standing back up like I expected him to, Charles kisses my legs where my thong traveled. He licks behind my knee, causing my stomach to clench. “Oh!”

He licks again. “Like that?”

“Yeah,” I reply on an exhale. Who knew that was an erogenous zone? They’ve always only been knees.

He smiles against my skin. “Good to know.”

Charles kisses his way back up the inside of my legs, which reminds me of how I sew him into the superhero costume. Despite being turned on, I giggle. Charles rears back. “What, pray tell, is so funny?”

I school my face. “It’s not funny.” Another giggle escapes.

He places his hand high up on the inside of my thigh. “I can see that.”

I try to suppress my wayward mirth, watching as he walks his fingers higher. My last giggle dies as Charles traces my folds. “Oh!”

“Not laughing now?”

I shake my head. “I was thinking,” I moan. “About,” I moan again. “Sewing you into your costume.”

“Oh.” The pad of his finger passes over my clit and I squirm. “Certainly *not* funny.” He leans forward and kisses right where his fingers are.

“God, that feels good.”

“Charles, not God.” He kisses my sex again. “Yet.”

Liquid seeps out of my body, and I try to pull away. Charles stills me by placing his free hand on my butt. He removes his finger from my core and licks it. “Delicious.”

“It’s okay?”

It’s his turn to laugh. “More than okay. I live to make you wet.”

His words do something to my insides. Dirty, yet thrilling. “I aim to please.”

Charles gets to his feet. “That you do, Goldie.” He kisses my lips again, and I taste a slight tangy flavor.

I’m naked, but he isn’t. I reach out to the waistband of his boxer briefs. His hand covers mine. “Not yet.”

“But ...”

“Shhh.” He covers my lips with his again, kissing me deeply. I cling to his bare shoulders as he picks me up and deposits me onto the bed. “Wait here.”

Like I’d leave.

He disappears into the bathroom and comes back, placing a small towel on the side table. Then, he opens his luggage and rummages around, putting a bunch of condom packets on top of the towel. He glances at me. “I was hoping.”

I don’t tell him about the pit stop I made in my hotel’s convenience store, for the same item. “Good hope.”

He kisses me. “There’s no reason for either one of us to leave this bed for a long time.”

“I like the sound of that.” I get onto my knees and maneuver over to him. “I like the sound of a lot of things, and they all start and stop with you.”

“Damn. You know how to stroke my ego.”

My hand reaches out and covers his erection, still covered by his underwear. “I want to stroke something else.”

“You’ll get your turn, my little minx. I’m going first.”

He pushes forward and I land on my back. Standing, he grabs my ankles and pulls them apart, sliding me toward the

end of the bed. Leaving his arm across my stomach, he gets on his knees and kisses up my inner leg again. When he reaches my core—and I think he’s going to go for the gusto—he starts over on my other leg.

Finally, finally, finally, he ends at my sex. I get on my elbows as he spreads me open with his fingers. Our eyes meet, then his flicker down my body. His nostrils flare, and he kisses me. Intimately. His tongue swipes over my clit, and a thrill races up my body. I lose the ability to hold myself up and collapse onto the comforter.

His chuckle greets me before he attacks me again. Concentrating on my clit, he forms all sorts of designs with his tongue, eliciting a loud moan from me.

“Charles, oh!”

At my exclamation, one of his fingers enters my body. In the spot he’ll soon be the first man to breach. The feeling is indescribable. Tight, but so good. He licks my clit again—more like devours it, while his finger now moves in and out.

Like when I use my vibrator, a buzzing starts at my toes. However, unlike with the toy, the buzz detonates throughout my body like lightning. Charles coaxes my orgasm faster than a BOB ever could. The force of it makes my eyeballs roll back in my head. I scream as I arch and come for my boyfriend.

When I return to my body, he’s standing and pulling the comforter back. He takes the folded towel and puts it down, then places his hands on his waistband.

“No.”

He stills. “No?” He lets out a breath and closes his eyes. “All right.”

I jump to standing and approach him. “I mean no, don’t *you* do that. I want to.”

“Oh.” Relief crosses his face. “Fine by me.” His arms drop to his sides.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” I trace his muscles, which ripple at my touch. “Your body is so hard.” At his laugh, I smile. “Well, you know that, huh?”

Screwing up my courage, I grab his boxer briefs and drag them down his long legs. Legs I’ve sewn into his leggings for days. That have just the right amount of hair. Masculine legs. I throw his underwear on the floor and stand up, my eyes riveted on his erection.

No way will he fit inside me.

“Believe me, I’ll fit. And you’ll howl in pleasure for me.”

How does he know what I’m thinking? I reach toward his cock, which is huge and long and pointing straight out at me. He’s hard and silky at the same time, with some liquid at the tip. Adding the rest of my fingers, I close them around him. And squeeze.

Charles sucks in his breath. His hips buck in time with my stroking. His cock expands even further.

Stepping back, he says, “No. Not now. This time is all about you.” Physically, he turns me around and smacks my butt. “On the bed.”

I give him a saucy look over my shoulder—at least I hope it’s saucy—and do as he bids. The bed dips when his much larger frame joins mine. He situates me over the towel and rests his chin on his hand while tracing my nipple with his index finger.



“You’re so beautiful, Goldie. I’m lucky to have you in my life. Please don’t think I’m taking your gift to me for granted.”

I touch the cleft of his chin. “I know you’re not.”

We kiss again, the familiar tingles gripping my body. His mouth moves from my lips, raining kisses down my throat and back up to my ear. “I’m proud to be your first.”

Because I can’t form proper words, I nod.

He nips my lobe and moves down to suckle my breasts. His hand slips between my thighs, and he, once again, plays with my sex. He inserts one finger into me and pumps. My hips move in time with it while his mouth retakes mine.

Down there, a second finger joins the first. I still pump my hips, but relish the fullness. Charles keeps distracting me with his mouth, which moves to my ear. “How does that feel?”

“Great,” I breathe.

Scissoring his fingers, he lowers his head to my pebbled nipple and bites. “Now?”

The sensations rolling through my body dial up a notch. “Oh!”

Charles makes his way up my body again and kisses me. He removes his fingers from me, which disappear into his mouth. Holding them up in front of my face, he orders, “You’re delicious. Taste yourself.”

My gaze locks on his fingers and I open my mouth. Sucking, I taste. They’re tangier than his lips were before, but not in an unpleasant way.

“See?”

I whisper, “I do.”

He removes his fingers from my mouth and situates my body flat on the towel he had laid down. Reaching over, he grabs a foil packet from the side table and rolls on the condom.

It's now or never. Last chance to change my mind. My breathing spikes.

I focus on the most gorgeous naked man I've ever seen. Well, the only entirely naked man I've ever seen, but he's perfect. Honest. Trustworthy. Wonderful. I take a deep breath and spread my legs wider.

He braces his weight on his hands and kisses me again for a long while. He lowers his body and the tip of him comes into contact with my clit. A familiar zing rushes through my body.

I moan. "Yes, Charles. Yes!"

He smiles, but it's more of a pained smile. "I'm debating whether I should go slow or fast. I don't want to hurt you."

My head knows this will hurt, but my body doesn't care. "I trust you."

At my words, he groans. "Melody, you're perfect."

His tip pushes against my entrance, slowly. My body accepts him and adjusts to his intrusion. A very welcome intrusion. Above me, Charles clenches his jaw, and sweat covers his brow. My arms slip up his back, encouraging him to continue. Which he does.

He pushes inside further, moving with deliberate speed. The full feeling morphs into something more.

Raw.

I catch my breath and he stops moving. We remain locked like this for a few heartbeats.

His lips crash down on mine again, his tongue seeking and gaining entrance into my mouth. He pulls back. "I'm sorry." He pushes forward and seats himself deep within my body.

Blinding pain sears through me. Oh, shit. This hurts. Tears leak from my eyes and trail down the side of my face. Charles's tongue captures them.

"Sorry, so sorry," he repeats as I struggle to adjust to my new normal.

He's kissing me when the pain recedes a bit. Tentatively, my tongue reaches out and licks the seam of his lips. My fingers cup his stubbled jaw and the kiss deepens.

Pain and budding excitement war within my body. Charles's mouth retreats a fraction as I struggle to regain my composure. Inches away from me, he asks, "How are you doing, Goldie?"

My eyes meet his, his pupils so dilated that I can barely see any blue. We stare at each other even as our bodies are connected.

In that moment, I realize the pain has diminished quite a bit. I lift my head and kiss him. "I'm good." I move my hips a fraction. "I'm good."

His lids slam shut over his eyes. Without moving at all, his breathing increases. In a strangled voice, he whispers, "I need to move. I'll be gentle."

I brace myself for the renewed pain and squeeze my eyes shut. "Go ahead."

Instead of covering my lips again, his lips trace the shell of my ear. He plucks at my nipple, which causes a chain reaction within my body. A thrill reignites.

As if in slow motion, Charles pulls back and pushes forward within me.

The sensation is not at all unpleasant. He repeats it, and my first impression is confirmed. Slow and steady, he plunders my body as his lips return to mine. Tender kisses.

A restlessness grows within me. I want something ... more. I'm not sure what I need. For the first time, I deepen our kiss, extending my tongue to his. In response, he kisses me as if I were the very air he breathed.

I find myself moving in time with his thrusts, picking up my leg and hooking it around his butt. My arms go around his midsection and I squeeze. His tempo accelerates, and his hand slides up and down my leg.

The only noises are our lovemaking. Our hips rustle the bed coverings. Panted breaths, coming faster and faster. Sweat beads across my forehead and down his back. He's driving into me now, harder than ever before, and my body craves his touch.

The shimmer of an orgasm builds from my toes, causing my breath to catch. Can this really be happening to me? I meet his next thrust and the shimmer grows into an excited tingle.

"Charles, yes. Oh, please!" I don't know what I'm begging for. I hope he does.

"I've got you." He rolls his hips in a way that obliterates all my remaining pain. I want what only he can give.

He pistons in and out of me, his teeth fastened to my nipple. When he bites, a shock runs throughout my entire system and explodes behind my eyes. I cry out something unintelligible. I think it was Charles or God or Yes or Please.

Above me, Charles goes still and roars, letting himself come inside of me. He thrusts twice more before collapsing on the bed next to me, breathing as if he ran a marathon. His arms wrap around my body, holding me close.

Our heart rates are off the charts, and I relish being wrapped around this man. The man I love. My realization I'm in love with Charles Wainwright doesn't even scare me. I simply tuck it into my heart and let the glow of our lovemaking bathe over me.

He kisses my forehead. "You okay, Goldie?"

I nod, unable to form coherent words.

## CHASE



**W**hen my breathing returns to a somewhat normal pace, I kiss the forehead of the woman warming my bed and carefully pull out of her body. She winces when I slide out. “Sorry.” I kiss her lips. “Let me get us cleaned up.”

I pad into the bathroom and dispose of the condom. Grabbing a smaller towel, I run warm water over it and return to the bed. Melody’s still splayed over the sheets, all tousled and gorgeous. Because I can—because I made her come no less than three times—I bend and lave my tongue over her nipple. A rush of air streams from her mouth.

Grinning at her, I reach between her legs and press the warm compress on her inner thighs, cleaning up the specks of blood, ending on her pussy.

“Mmmm. Feels so good.”

Instead of responding with words, I kiss her hipbone and remove the small towel. “Lift your hips.” She does and I remove the other blood-spattered towel. Balling the towels up together, I return to the bathroom and toss them under the sink.

Slipping back into the bed, I cover us with the sheet and encircle her into my arms. I run my fingertips up and down her naked skin.

So soft.

So unblemished.

Virgin. Well, not anymore. My lips tip upward.

She slowly blinks. “That was, wow. So much more than I had expected.”

“It’ll only get better.” I kiss her shoulder. Although I’m not sure how. That was the best sex of my life.

She snuggles in my arms, causing my breath to hitch. “I can’t imagine.”

My hand drops to her boob, and I play with one of her sensitive nipples. “So, you’re all right? I wasn’t too rough with you?”

She tilts her head upward. “No, Charles, you were perfect. It was perfect.”

Her amber eyes tell me she’s telling the truth. Well, and her satisfied expression. Which is the only thing she’s wearing. “I’m glad.”

Glad? I’m more than glad. I haven’t been with a virgin since I was in high school, and back then I didn’t care about anything other than getting off. This time was so different.

The realization brings me up short. *She* is different. Special.

Her arms wrap around my neck and she kisses the middle of my pecs. “Can we do it again?”

I redirect her head to right under mine, resting my chin on its top. “I think you need a breather. You’re going to be sore.”

She moves her legs under the sheets. “I’m not,” she protests.

“Always the overachiever, Miss *magna cum laude*, hmm?”

She pulls her head back and bats her eyelashes at me. A classic flirtatious move all actresses are taught. When she does it, though, it’s without pretense. Like everything she does.

“I try.”

I run my hands up and down her back, refitting her under my chin. “Let’s try to catch a nap.”

She sighs and replicates my movements by running her hands on my back. However, she doesn’t stop and dips below my waist, grabbing my ass. When she squeezes, I hiss as my cock awakens.

I rumble, “No sleep?”

She shimmies up my body and places her lips at my ear. “No,” she whispers.

With that, I flip her on top of my body and am rewarded by her delighted squeal. Pushing her gorgeous hair off her face, I French kiss her. She meets my every move, spurring our passions. I want to devour her whole! Instead, I nibble on her nipple.

She grimaces, then tries to cover up by bringing her lips to my ear. Despite my cock begging for more action, I hold my breath and give him a stern talking-to. Melody’s sore. She needs a break. With slow movements, I twist so she lies next to me again.

“Hungry?”

She scowls. I raise my eyebrows.

She sighs.



Her index finger lands on her mouth. “You know, now that you mention it, I’m kinda ravenous.”

“Seems to be a theme. Not that I mind one bit, though. Want to go somewhere? Explore the town?”

She glances out the window. “Nah, I don’t want to leave this room. If that’s all right with you?”

Because I can’t help myself, I kiss her collarbone. “Perfectly. Let me get the room service menu.” I hop out of bed and stride toward the desk, where I saw a menu. When I turn around to return to her, she’s sitting up. The sheet lies at her waist.

She purses her lips and whistles.

I shake my head and dive back into the bed, causing it to bounce and her to giggle. I like the sound. A lot. Sharing the menu, we place our order.

Kissing each one of her fingers, I enjoy all the different sounds she makes. She’s so responsive, so genuine. I find it hard to believe she’s had a hard time with men. Although, the fact she’s only ever been mine warms my soul. And something farther south.

“So tell me, have you given any more thought to the auditions in *Backstage*?”

My stomach flips and I drop her hand, banging my head against the pillow. “Well,” I begin. “I did go on the site. And.” I pause. Can I confess this to her? She’s going to think it’s stupid.

*I’m* stupid.

“And what?” She circles my nipple with her tongue, then gives it a tiny bite. She’s a fast learner.

I clear my throat and glance into her eyes. They've taken on a deep greenish hue as they urge me to continue. I was wrong. She doesn't think any of this is stupid. "Well, ah, the Hamlet retelling does look sort of good."

She grabs my hand and kisses the tip of my index finger like I did to her before. "When are the auditions?" I remain silent, so she flicks me with her tongue, urging me to reply.

"I think now."

She hums. It's a pleasant sound. Would sound good wrapped around my cock. "Something could be worked out for you."

Her response does two things. First, drives all thoughts of a blowjob out of my sex-fueled brain. Second, revives any hope I had for even a remote possibility of auditioning.

She fills the silence. "I'm sure you could audition via Zoom."

I close my eyes. She's right. If I really wanted this role, I could make it happen. Am I ready? Good enough? "I'm sure all the auditions are already lined up."

"You won't know until you ask." She blinks. "That's what my mother always says."

"She's a wise woman."

"She is." Melody turns over and picks up my cell phone. "Here. Call Sam. Get this off your to-do list."

With two fingers, I take the phone. Can I do this? Will Sam even entertain my offbeat desire? "Oh, I don't know. This is sort of ridiculous, don't you think?" I drop the phone onto the bed.

She kisses down my nose. “No, I don’t think wanting to see your dream come true is ridiculous at all. You told me before how much you loved doing Shakespeare when you were in drama school. You said the roles spoke to you.”

Me and my damned stupid mouth. Why did I have to confess all this to her? I try to turn my head, but she forces me to face her. Her eyes bore into mine. They give me a strength I didn’t know I possessed.

Maybe I don’t.

In a weak voice, I reply, “Well, I did say that.”

“Charles, I’m not going to make you call Sam. The decision is all yours. I want you to know I have faith in your acting abilities. I also know whenever I pursued something I really wanted, whether I succeeded or not, I didn’t regret anything.”

Her words hit home. Regret. If I don’t jump on this chance right now, will I regret the missed opportunity? Will I always wonder *what if* I’d made this call?

Inhaling, I hold my phone again. I lick my nervous lips and glance at her. She gifts me with a glorious smile. I can do this. I press the button for Sam.

He answers on the second ring, albeit a bit groggy. “Hey, Chase. How’s my Doctor Manipul8?”

I force a smile. “Doing well. Um, better than most of the people on the set out here. Some nasty bug is going around and Noble caught it. We’re on a short break until everyone recovers. Luckily, I’m one of the few healthy ones.”

“Hope you left all the sickies and are gallivanting somewhere like Lake Como with George.”

George and Amal Clooney, and their twins, are a great family. Melody would love them. I could schedule something with them. She pokes my ribs, bringing me back to the reason for my call. “Actually, I did get out of Amalfi, but only by about a half-hour.”

“That’s good anyway. So, what can I do for you?”

It’s now or never. He’s going to laugh at me and tell me I’m crazy. But at least I tried. I look at Melody, who plays with the end of the blanket, trying to give me space.

“Chase?”

“I’m here.” I clear my throat. “Well, the reason for my call is because I heard about a role I’m interested in.”

“Oh? Cool. Which one? I’ll place a call.”

“For *Hamlet 2.0*.”

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

“Uhm, you do know that’s a straight acting role, right? No CGI. No laugh track.” He pauses. “On *Broadway*.” He utters the last like a curse.

At least he didn’t laugh in my face. “Yeah.”

“And the role you’re interested in is ... ?”

Here goes. “The villain. Claude.”

“Geez, really?”

I shrug my naked shoulder. Because he can’t see me, I reply, “I’ve always loved that play.”

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

“Well, let me see what’s going on for it.” I wait while he checks the schedule. “Looks like they’re almost done with auditions. Last day is tomorrow. Listen, if you want to do some Shakespeare, let me put feelers out. I did hear about a new movie based on *The Tempest*. It’s a light-hearted look at it, like *Pretty Woman* was. You’d be great in that.”

“No.”

“C’mon, Chase. *Hamlet*, really? On Broadway? Seriously? Leave this one for the real hard-nosed actors. Keep in your lane.”

His words spur me on. I won’t have a regret if the producers refuse to let me audition. If, however, Sam prevents me from even trying, well ... In a much firmer voice, I state, “I said I want to audition for *Hamlet 2.0*. Can you please call the producers and see if they’ll fit me in via Zoom or something?”

Melody’s hand lands on my bicep.

In a strained voice, Sam replies, “Fine. Give me ten and I’ll call you back.” He disconnects the line without another word.

I took my first step toward changing my career. *Hamlet* has always been my favorite play. My drama teacher told me I was the best Prince of Denmark he’d ever seen. So what if the first director I ever auditioned for took one look at me and hooked me up with Sam. I connected with that play.

I want the role.

“Thank you. For giving me the courage to make that call.”

Melody kisses me. “It was all on you. I only helped jump-start the dialing.”

“You’re so beautiful. And smart.”

The woman next to me smiles, her eyes glowing. “Well, you’re amazing.” Her hand slips underneath the sheets, and she wraps it around my cock. “*Really* amazing.”

My body clenches at her touch. “Did I create a monster?”

“A very sweet one,” she quips.

The ringing of my cell phone breaks the spell between us. Sam’s name appears on the screen, and I suck in my breath. I hit the speakerphone. “Hey.”

“All right, here’s the deal. They can fit you in tomorrow. Last audition’s at four thirty. The problem? They don’t want to see it by video. If you really want this role, you need to get to New York City.”

At least I tried. “Well, thanks.”

Sam continues, “Listen, if you really want to pursue Shakespeare—”

Melody grabs the phone out of my hand and puts it on mute. “You can do it, Charles. It’s a quick flight from Rome to JFK. We can go, audition, and fly back the next day, before we start shooting again.”

“Goldie, that’s insane,” I whisper, even though we’re on mute.

She folds her arms across her bare chest, pushing her boobs upward. “Then I guess you don’t really want to take your shot.”

Her words land directly on my heart. And squeeze. “Fuck.” I fumble with the phone and take it off mute.

“Chase? Chase? Did we lose our connection?”

“Sorry about that, Sam. No, we’re all good. I’ll take it.”

“Wait, what? What did you just say?”

“I. Said. I. Will. Take. The. Audition.” My gaze jumps to Melody, who’s grinning like the Cheshire Cat. “I’ll be there.”

“Are you sure? How are you going to get there?”

“Don’t worry about that. Call them back and hold my spot. Send me the sides I’ll need to prepare.”

“This is crazy.”

“No. It isn’t.” I run my fingers over Melody’s arm and slide toward her impressive boobs. “I’ll look for them in my email. Thanks, Sam.”

I disconnect the call and toss the phone onto the nightstand, then dive onto the woman in my bed. I’m strumming her nipples when a knock sounds. I break away and fling my arm over my forehead. “Shit.”

Melody giggles. “Looks like our food is here. I’ll get it.” She rustles out of the bed. Heading to the closet, she pulls a plush white bathrobe out and encases her naked body in it.

While she’s attending to our meal, I worry about the audition tomorrow. In New York City, for God’s sake. I must be as crazy as Sam accused me of being. Who flies halfway around the world for a half-hour audition? I’m groaning when Melody returns into the bedroom and drops the clothes we left on the balcony onto a chair.

“We’re all set up to eat on the balcony. The food smells delicious.” She stops directly over me and tugs on my arm, which flops like spaghetti. “I’m so proud of you.”

“What did I do?”

“You took the first step toward your new chapter.”

I look up at her, all tousled and gorgeous. Warmth spreads throughout my body. “You’re too good for me.”

“I like to think we’re good for each other. Now come. Get up. I want to eat.” She turns around and heads out of the room.

Damn. Bossy. A smile spreads across my lips. I like it.

Hopping out of bed, I grab my shorts and put them on, commando. I meet her on the balcony as she takes off the silver domes, revealing a pasta carbonara for her and broiled bronzini for me. Freaking diet. I take my place at the table.

“Wine?”

She holds up a bottle of chianti. It’s not pinot noir, but I have enjoyed this vino while we’ve been here in Italy. When I incline my head, she pours us both glasses and holds hers up. I join her.

“To new experiences,” she says, a beautiful blush staining her cheeks.

“To enjoying every single second.”

After sipping the wine, we dig into our meals. I enjoy the fish, but not as vocally as she devours the pasta. I can’t stop myself. I reach over to her plate and spear some spaghetti and bring it to my lips. When I pop it into my mouth, I understand her moaning. “Damn, that’s good.”



“Next time order your own,” she grumbles, a smile on her face.

When we’re both satisfied—at least as to food—we return into the living area of the villa. Melody pulls out her phone. “We need to make reservations for the flight.”

“I can have Thomas do that,” I reply, placing my hand on top of hers.

She gives me a quizzical expression. “Really? I want to do this for you.”

Warmed by her response, I incline my head. “Thanks.”

She pecks at her phone and says, “Okay. Got it. Best I can do is a flight out tomorrow from Rome at ten twenty-five that lands at JFK at two fifteen.”

It’ll be tight, but I’ll make the audition. I give her the go-ahead.

Her attention returns to her phone. “Return flight leaves at nine forty-five and lands back in Rome right after noon on Saturday. Not even time to get jetlagged.”

My stomach dips. “But we’ll be shooting on Saturday.” My hopes for this audition plummet.

“Not without Doctor Manipul8. You can tell Noble you’re stuck in Lake Como and will be on set by two. He was the one who canceled shooting for two days—he won’t have a leg to stand on to yell at you.”

“You make a good point.”

“Of course I do.” She holds her hand out. “I need your passport.”

At her request, I head into the bedroom and rummage through my bag. Retrieving the document, I turn it over to her. After a few minutes, she lays her phone down. “Done.”

“Thanks. I’m so sorry we had to cut our mini vacation short. We haven’t even explored Ravello yet.”

“There’s still time tonight. I do think we need to get some sleep, though, as the helicopter leaves at six thirty so we can make it to Rome for our flight.”

Her words sink in. “We? Our?”

“Yes, silly. I’m not letting you fly there and back alone. You’ll need someone with you to give you moral support.”

The fact she booked herself with me on my flight doesn’t irritate me at all. In fact, it makes me feel warm. Hopeful. Positive. Like I can conquer the world—or at least this audition. “Thanks. It means so much to me.”

She stands and unties her robe, letting it hang open. “Think we should go to bed? You know, for our early wake-up call?” She slips the terrycloth off one shoulder.

I stand up as well and discard my shorts, thoughts about my audition forgotten for now. “Oh, I seem to recall you were interested in learning about balcony sex.”

Her voice rises a full octave. “Really?”

I take one step toward her and grab the end of the robe. “Yes, really.” I pull and it ends up in my hands. For every one step I take, she retreats one, until her back is against the French doors. Her breath comes in pants.

Even though I’m all in for another round, I need to make sure she’s okay. “Are you up for this?”

She nods, her eyes trained on my lips, then dip lower.  
That's all it takes.

“Right answer, Goldie.”

## MELODY



**T**he blades of the helicopter whir and we rise from the helipad in Ravello. I suck in my breath at the magnificent landscape below. Small towns, windy roads and the water look beautiful from the air. “It’s so gorgeous.” I glance over at Charles.

“Yes, you are.”

His repeated compliment lodges in my heart. He’s been nothing less than wonderful with me. We made love twice yesterday and, even with the flash pain of the first time, it turned wonderful. He treated me with such care, always concerned about how I was feeling. Plus the balcony! Given our secluded villa, I knew no one would see us—still, it was a thrill.

Not to mention, his body is like the most perfect sculpture. Michelangelo be damned. Not an ounce of body fat on him, with the most defined muscles I’ve ever seen. Yet his body isn’t what drew me to him. It’s his vulnerability. He’s been typecast in a particular role, and now he’s taking the difficult steps to change that. Because he wants more. I glance over at him and smile.

He leans over and kisses my nose, one of the only spots on my face available to him, given the huge headsets we’re

wearing to block out the noise. “This was a great idea, Goldie. Much better than taking a car through those streets.”

“Thanks. I was looking for the fastest way to Rome.”

He nudges my shoulder. “Wanted to keep me in bed longer?”

His smile is almost boyish. I’m sure mine is pretty sappy. I’ve got it bad. “Not at all. I wanted you to get as much shut-eye as possible.”

He laughs and returns his gaze to the papers on his lap. The lines he needs to memorize, internalize, and recite during his audition. I let him study, while enjoying the changing scenery below us.

Soon, we land at the heliport and are transported to the terminal. We arrive in the first class lounge with plenty of time, so we find a quiet spot in a corner. I grab the papers from his hands. “Why don’t you give it a rest for a little bit.”

Stormy blue eyes meet mine. He doesn’t have to say a word, as those eyes convey all his feelings. Guess that’s why he’s such a good actor. Why he’ll grow into a spectacular one, given the proper roles. This part sounds like it’s a good platform to start.

“I need to nail this.” He tries to take the papers away from me, but I hold them against my chest. However, I do understand his desire to know the words inside and out. “How about I quiz you?”

One eyebrow rises. “As in I give you my audition?”

I nod. “Yeah. Let’s see where you’re at.” I make a big deal out of placing the papers in front of me.

His Adam’s apple bobs. “I’m not ready yet,” he admits.

“I bet you’re in a much better spot than you think. Give it a shot. Consider it a sort of litmus test.”

He huffs a breath. “Fine. All right. But if you’re going to make me do this, right now, before I’m ready, you’re going to have to do something for me.”

His challenge stirs my competitive side. “You got it, big guy. What?”

A wolfish smile overtakes his face. “I’ll tell you when I’m done. It’ll give me something to look forward to.”

I *know* this is going to be something I’ll regret. Or really, really enjoy. “Fine.”

He squeezes his hands together and closes his eyes. I let him prepare for this practice however he likes. His eyes open and I swear, he’s a different person. More serious. Intense. Before he even opens his mouth, he’s already sucked me into the vortex of Hamlet’s world.

When he speaks, I’m transported. Not to the Hamlet of Shakespeare’s time, but rather to a painful place in today’s gritty world. I trail the lines as he performs the soliloquy with a couple of missteps, before stumbling to a halt.

I wait for him to continue, but he doesn’t. Glancing up, his palm is on his forehead, eyes squeezed shut.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” I prompt.

“Right.” He clears his throat and launches back into the role. When he’s done, I clap. “Charles, that was fantastic. I mean it. You’re well on your way to acing this audition.”

He rubs his temple. “I can’t do this. What was I thinking? Let’s cancel our flights and return to the coast.”

I touch his arm. “Stop.”

He freezes.

“You can do this, Charles. You’ve only had this script for a few hours. You have about twelve hours ahead to get all the words memorized.” I return the script back to him. “Don’t abandon your dreams now.”

He takes the papers from me and places them on the seat next to him. “This is hard.”

“I have faith in you.”

He places his hands on his knees, and I mirror his posture. “You’re right. I can do this. I have to.” He grabs the script. “Do you know what you can do for me?”

I bite my lip. “Get you a piece of fruit?”

“Well, yes, but that’s not what I was thinking.” His eyes sweep over my body, and he holds his hand out. “I want something of yours to hold on to during my audition. An anchor, of sorts.”

My mind turns to mush. He wants a piece of me with him, in there? I could give him my earring. Or the bracelet I picked up in Positano. Before I can suggest either one, he continues, “Your thong.”

“My what?” I squeak.

His head bobs. “I need it now, to help me finish memorizing these lines.”

“Now?”

“Bathroom’s over there. Unless you’d like me to get it myself.” He reaches for my body.

I jump out of my chair and rush away from him. I have zero doubts he’d at least try to remove them from my person

right here, right now.

Five minutes later, I walk out of the ladies' room, sans panties under my skirt. The sensation's odd. Instead of returning to Charles, who's deep into studying, I select a banana, an apple, and some grapes for him, as well as a Styrofoam cup of coffee for myself. When I offer him the fruit, our flight is announced.

Motioning toward the door, I say, "That's us."

"First things first. Hand 'em over." He holds out his palm.

I look around, but no one's paying us any attention. I pull my thong out of my purse and ball up the material. "Here."

He opens his fist and takes in the green wisp of material. Bringing it to his nose, he inhales.

"Don't," I admonish, smacking his hand away from his face.

He laughs and steals a kiss. "That was worth the hell I'm about to go through."

"Yeah, well, it better be." I step back as he picks up the overnight bag containing both of our things. Even though we're not staying even one night, we're going to need a change of clothes. "Let's go." Without checking to see if he's following me, I head out of the lounge. Sans panties.



“Welcome to JFK, where the local time is three o'clock.”

Ever since we sat on the runway for an extra hour, Charles has been bouncing between frustration at our transportation, to



nervous for the audition, to trying—and failing—to flirt with me. “We’re here. You’ll make it by your audition time, no problem at all. Let’s go.”

With only one carry-on, we’re off the plane, through customs with our Global Entry passes, and in a taxi in no time. Charles offers the driver an extra hundred dollars to get us to the address in midtown by four. I take this opportunity to try to pass some calmness into my boyfriend’s demeanor.

“Let the driver do his job, Charles. We’re already in New York City. Your audition’s in ninety minutes. You’ll be great.”

With effort, he pulls his glare away from the man behind the steering wheel and faces me. “Thank you, Goldie. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you weren’t here with me.”

“Probably thrown yourself out of the helicopter over the Amalfi Coast.”

He smiles. It’s a genuine look that transforms his face. “Probably.”

“Want to run your script one last time?”

He shakes his head. “Nah. I’m good. I have it memorized and I’d like to let everything soak in.”

I slide across the seat and nuzzle into his warm, hard body. I try to distract him by drawing circles on his chest, loving the sensation of his heart beating.

The taxi stops at four on the dot. “We’re here,” the driver says.

“Well done.” Charles reaches for his wallet as I get out onto the sidewalk of the bustling city. People dash by us as rush hour approaches, which is nearly ten at night according to our body clocks. “Want me to wait with you?”

“Nah. But I’m not ready to go inside yet. Let’s walk around the block.”

Knowing he needs to get rid of some pent-up energy, we walk around in the city I now call home. The vibe, which is so different from Italy, soaks into my bones. “I’ve missed this place,” I admit.

“I like it here, too.”

I stop as it hits me. I don’t know where he lives now. “Where’s your home?”

“LA.”

I nod. If our relationship’s going to continue, we’ll have to nail down our living situations. Well, if he gets this role, he’ll be in New York City. Smiling, we approach the main entrance to the building.

I touch his forearm. “Want company now?”

“No, I’m good. I have to do this by myself.”

His reaction stings, but I get it. He needs to prove himself—to himself. “I’ll text you my address, which isn’t too far from here. Come over when you’re done.”

“Thanks.”

I stretch onto my tippy-toes and kiss his cheek. “Break a leg, Charles.”

“I will.” He takes a few steps toward the front of the building, then turns around. He bellows, “You’re the best, Goldie!”

I kiss my hand and blow my good wishes toward him. “Knock ’em dead!”

He disappears into the building. *You can do it.* Clutching our overnight bag, I hail a cab and arrive at my Upper Eastside townhouse ten minutes later. I give the doorman a hug, tell him that Chase Wright will soon be arriving, and go into my apartment.

The atmosphere in here's stale since I haven't been here in a month. I turn on the air and grab the only item in my fridge, which is a lonely bottle of water. When Charles gets back, we'll have a couple hours before heading back to JFK, so I order a food delivery. Chinese. Not something you get in Italy.

I wander around, touching my things. My dad's piano takes center stage, although my lessons ended miserably when I was eight. Discarded instruments likewise have turned into decorations—a violin, flute, and even a pair of drumsticks. In my bedroom, I fluff my floral comforter, images of what Charles and I might do in here soon dancing around my mind.

Sighing, I return to the living room and stretch out on my couch. Still being *sans* panties reminds me of where they are right now. Even though it's late in Amalfi, I'm too wound up to catch a catnap. I FaceTime my parents.

“Melody, we didn't expect to hear from you for another couple of weeks. How are you? Is everything okay?”

“Hi, Mom. Yes, I'm good.”

I twirl a lock of my hair. “How's King?”

Mom bites her bottom lip. “He was pretty bad there for a while, but he's doing better now. He's dating a woman from his show.”

I smile. Something we have in common. “That's nice.”

Mom's eyes search the screen. “Where are you?”

“I’m actually home. For only a couple of hours. Charles had an audition come up in New York City, so we flew in this afternoon and we’re leaving in a couple of hours.”

“Charles?”

“Yes.” She doesn’t know about my boyfriend, and I’m dying to clue her in. “You know of Charles. I grew up with him.”

Mom’s eyebrows furrow. “Do you mean Chase Wright?”

My head bobs. “Yeah. But I call him Charles. Chase is his stage name.”

“You’re dating him?”

I swallow. “Yeah. It’s new, but he’s my boyfriend. I think you and Daddy will really like him.”

She peers into the phone’s camera. “Isn’t he the older brother to that awful Lindsay Wainwright?”

At the mention of my childhood nemesis, I wince. “Well, you can’t pick your family.”

Her eyes widen a fraction before returning to her usual demeanor. “Tell me about him. Does he treat you right?”

“He’s wonderful!” My mind replays how he treated me yesterday in bed, but I don’t share that info. Not something I’ll ever tell her. “He’s a great actor and we’re here in New York so he can audition for a role in a modern-day Hamlet on Broadway.”

She digests my words. “Doesn’t he usually play the pretty boys? Isn’t he Doctor Manipul8?”

“Well, yes, he’s the main character on the movie we’re filming. But he has a deep desire to do live work.”

“That’s a good ambition.”

“Right? I helped him prepare on the flight over. He’s going to nail the audition, I know it.”

“Princess, is that you?” My dad’s voice floats through the air, and his head pops onto the screen with Mom.

“Hi, Daddy.” I giggle. “Yes, it’s me.”

“How is Italy?”

I indulge him, giving a description of the places I’ve visited. “And the food. Oh, the food!”

He nods. “Like we told you before you left, we love Italy. So different from here, in a good way.”

My parents gaze into each other’s eyes, and I get the distinct impression they’re recalling their own memories of Italy. For the first time in my life, I understand their look. Love and memories. And shared experiences. All the stuff I’m starting with Charles. Although, thinking about my parents in this way is disconcerting.

“How’s the movie treating you, Princess?”

My dad’s welcome question takes us off on a discussion about the set, costumes, and the trials and tribulations of the nasty bug we’re currently dealing with. “Hopefully, we’ll be filming again tomorrow afternoon.”

Mom notes, “I bet Charles is anxious to finish up shooting.”

My dad turns to her. “Who?”

I giggle. “I’m dating someone from the movie.”

“Who?” He repeats, and Mom fills him in. Then he returns his attention to me. “I’d like to speak with this Charles.”

“He’s at an audition right now.” My eyes dart to my clock. “He should be getting here any moment, so I guess I’d better go.”

“Princess, I want to meet him, even over the phone.”

Mom cuts him off. “She’ll introduce us when the time is right.” Thank God for my mother.

“Yeah, Daddy, I’ll do that later. Right now, I better go. It’s been great seeing you. I’ll be back in touch soon.” Before they can reply, I click off.

Whew. I love my parents, but I’m not ready to introduce Charles to them yet. My dad can be intimidating when he wants to be. Plus, I want to keep my boyfriend all to myself for a while longer.

I walk to the cabinet and pull out plates when a knock announces dinner’s arrived.

## CHASE



**E**xhaustion roils through me. Not from jet lag, but from the audition. It's like someone ripped my heart out, wrung it dry, and tried to put it back in without a jump-start. The taxi stops in front of a brick building two blocks from Central Park on the Upper East Side, and I double-check the address Melody texted me. Yup.

*Sweet.*

I lug my tired body out of the taxi and walk toward the front door, where a doorman opens it for me.

“Mr. Wright, so delighted to have you at The Mission. Miss Hunte’s expecting you.”

“Thanks.”

Behind me, the doorman stops someone with a food delivery. My stomach rumbles, reminding me I haven’t eaten a decent meal since Ravello. At least our meal last night was delicious. Both the hotel’s food and the even more scrumptious morsel in bed.

“For Hunte, six-zero-nine.”

My footsteps stop, and I spin toward the deliveryman. “For Melody Hunte?” When the delivery guy nods, I pull my wallet out of my back pocket and pay him, taking the bag. Sniffing

its contents, Chinese aromas tickle my nose. Leave it to Melody to select a cuisine we haven't had since stepping foot in Italy.

And to anticipate my needs.

I take the elevator to the sixth floor and stand outside her door for a few moments, gathering my thoughts. What should I tell her about the audition?

About how the three-person panel were ready to leave before I opened my mouth?

About how they tried to hide their eye rolling when I walked in?

About how their body language changed as I gave my audition? Well, somewhat.

The smell of the food in my hand diverts my thoughts. "Fuck it," I mutter. "Just wing it and eat." I knock on the door.

Melody flings the door wide, holding her wallet. Her mouth drops open when she realizes it's me, holding the delivery bag. "Expecting someone else?"

"Charles." She flings her body at me, causing me to stumble backward before gaining purchase of her body. Food in one hand and her in the other, I step into her apartment and kick the door shut.

She leans back but doesn't disengage from my body. "How'd it go?"

"I'll tell you all about it if you feed me."

She giggles, and my body perks up. How can she give me energy when I swore I was down for the count? She drops her legs, which dangle until I bend down and she regains her



footing. Not one to miss out on a chance like this, I steal a kiss from her more than willing lips.

When her stomach rumbles, I pull back. “Food. We both need food.”

“I was setting the table.” She kisses my mouth once more and leads me into the kitchen. Not a table, but an oversized granite-covered island with two placemats. “I’ll finish with this if you’ll please take out the food.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I tease, smacking her ass, which elicits a cute squeal.

Shortly, my chopsticks rest on the side of the plate. “That was the best General Tso’s shrimp I’ve ever had.” I rub my now full stomach.

“Yeah, they’re the best around here. My orange-flavored beef was great, too.” She drops her chopsticks onto her plate.

Now that my physical hunger has been satisfied, my natural curiosity about all things Melody rises. Standing, I head into her living room, picking up various framed photos. The one of her father holding her high up in the air catches my eye. The sheer joy on her face is contagious. I doubt I’ve ever felt this way about my parents. “Oh my God, you were so cute. How old are you here? Four?”

She peers at the photo in my hand. “Yeah, about that. We had just returned from an extended tour, and Mom caught the shot.” She smiles at me. “It’s one of my favorites.”

“I can see why. You were an adorable kid, Goldie.” I wink at her, and color rises to her cheeks. I fucking love that.

She gets on her tippy toes and pecks my lips. “Thanks.”

I return the photo to the shelf and continue my exploration. Requisite romance novels on the shelf. Flat-screen TV. Off to the corner, a sewing machine is set up, together with plenty of bolts of fabric and other sewing stuff. Skipping that area of her condo, which is more about work than anything else, I head over to another part with lots of musical instruments. Tapping the ivories of the piano, I ask, “Do you play?”

She waves her arm. “Nah. Failed miserably at all of those.” Walking over to the flute, she picks it up. “Except this one. I did enjoy playing flute for a while. That is, until I found my true passion. Sewing.”

I nod and walk over to the instrument that originally caught my eye. Picking up the violin, I let my fingers roam over the strings, plucking a couple of notes. “I bet your father was disappointed.”

She laughs. “You could say that. Neither I nor my brother sing or play anything.”

As I test the bow on the violin, I ask, “Have you heard an update about King?”

“Mom said he’s out of the hospital and recovering.”

“Great news.” Satisfied with the sounds coming out of the violin, without thought I begin playing a song I’ve had memorized for ages. She snaps in time with the rhythm. Finished, I close my eyes and start in on another. When it ends, clapping forces my eyelids open. Melody’s grinning from ear to ear. “Wow, Charles, You’re very talented.”

Her honest words of praise lodge inside my chest, which are so infrequently heard in this part of my private world. Usually, if I play for anyone, they either mock my choice of

instrument or immediately change the subject. It's my turn to blush.

Placing the violin back on its place of pride, I reply, "Thanks. I don't really play much. Just those few songs."

"Seriously, you're super good. Acting, playing violin, singing. The trifecta!"

"Not exactly." I grab her by the hips. "But I can make you sing." I plant kisses on her neck, to her excited squirming.

"No way, Charles. You haven't told me how the audition went."

My body screams its desire to forget the undignified experience and turn to a much more pleasurable way to pass the time. I run my tongue around the delicate shell of her ear. She pushes against my chest.

"Stop it. I want to hear all about how they loved on you."

"Like how you're going to love on me." I close my teeth around her ear.

"No! I mean it, Charles!"

"All right." I sigh. I'm not going to let her off the hook this easily. "How about a little tit for tat."

She sucks in her breath and crosses her arms over her chest, obscuring her glorious boobs. "A what?"

I try to stifle my smile, but with rather mixed results. I lean forward so my lips are next to her ear. "I'll tell you something about the audition, if you give me a little of what I want." If I wasn't standing right next to her, I might have missed the shudder that screamed up her spine. But I am. And I didn't. I kiss the erogenous zone behind her ear.

“Oh.” She rolls her hips into mine. “I guess that’s fair.” She twines her fingers behind my neck. “So tell me, what happened when you walked into the room?”

Because I’m feeling magnanimous, I answer her. “There were three people behind a long table, and a chair up on the stage. Nothing unusual. I hit my mark and introduced myself. To which they said, and I quote, ‘Aren’t you filming some superhero movie in Italy?’”

Her amber eyes darken before her long lashes cover her eyes from my view. Slender hands move downward, and she intertwines her fingers with mine. She whispers, “What did you say?”

I lick my lips. “I told them that, yes, we’re filming, but I felt a calling to audition for the part. That *Hamlet*’s my favorite of all of Shakespeare’s plays, and I love their updated concept. And I’d do the role justice.”

She nods. “That’s perfect! Then what?”

I pull her to me. “That’s my tat. Where’s your tit?”

She giggles and struggles for a moment, then stills. “Well, I guess that’s only fair.”

She wriggles out of my embrace and tosses her shirt off her body and over her head. Nice. My hand reaches out and plays with her bra. When she gasps, I reach behind her and unclasp it. Skimming down her shoulders, I remove the offending material from her body while my lips seek her nipples, which have pebbled due to my touch. She’s so responsive.

“Okay, your turn.”

From my position with her nipple in my mouth, our gazes meet. I suck. She inhales. “No, no more. It’s your turn.” She

disentangles herself from my embrace.

Sighing, I stand and shove my hands into my pockets. “They said since I was there, I should go ahead. Not the most encouraging start to an audition, but at least they didn’t throw me out on my ass. None of the three laughed, which was a positive.”

“They had to know how important this was to you. You did, after all, fly halfway around the world to audition.”

I bounce from one foot to the other. “Yeah.”

Reaching for her body again, she jumps back, wiggling her finger at me. “Oh, no. I need more than that.”

“You’re a hard taskmaster.”

She laughs. “You have no idea, mister. Now continue.”

I shrug. “Well, not much more to tell you. I ran through my lines—”

“Did you mess any up?”

Shaking my head, I reply, “Nope. Nailed them all.”

Her face lights up. “I’m so happy for you, Charles!”

“Happy enough to strip out of that skirt for me?”

“You’re incorrigible!” With a smile, she unzips the side. “You mean like this?”

My breathing hitches. “That’s a good start.”

She runs the zipper up and down, teasing me with glimpses of her naked hip. I reach into my pocket and produce her thong. “Missing something?”

She swipes her panties from me and changes the subject. “You know, I think I want to see more of you first.” Her hands

land on my shirt and she pulls it out of my khakis, making quick work of undoing the buttons. I forgot she's a costume designer and adept at getting clothes on, and off, people. "There. Now we're both half-naked."

"That we are. Come here." I guide her to my body and kiss her as if I'll never have the chance again. My cock stirs against my own zipper, and I hold our groins together.

She moans, a sexy sound that encourages me to press for more. I slide the zipper down again, slipping the material over her legs. Without breaking our kiss, she kicks the skirt to the side. Melody turns her head and holds her breath, taking a step back from my aching body. Totally naked for me.

"When did they say you'd hear back?"

A rushing sound whooshes through my brain at her gorgeous body, bared for me. "Huh?"

She twirls in front of me, stepping out of her shoes. "Did they give you a date of when you'll hear back from them?"

"Soon. Whatever that means." I extend my arm in a valiant effort to grab her and reel her to my body, but she ducks.

Swinging her index finger at me, she asks, "How do you feel about your audition?"

That question makes me stop my pursuit of the naked woman in front of me. When I called Sam on my way over here, he didn't ask me this question. I query my excited body. "I did the best I could. I was proud for not flubbing any lines. I really put my heart and soul into it."

"So, no regrets whether you get the part or not?"

"Well, if I don't get it, I'll definitely be bummed. But no. I did everything I could possibly do to show them my skill."

This is the truth. I gave the audition my all and don't have any regrets. "I need to thank you. You helped me so much with this process. In fact, if it weren't for you, I wouldn't have made this insane journey."

She plays with the ends of her blond hair. "I like to think of it as I helped you see what was right in front of you."

"Speaking of, I see something I definitely want standing right in front of me." I lick my lips.

Melody closes the gap between us, unbuckling my belt and pulling my pants and underwear down my legs. As I kick them away, she drops to her knees in front of me, like when she's sewing me into my leggings. Only this time, her hand surrounds my swelling erection.

"Melody, you don't have to do this."

"I want to, Charles. I want to experience everything with you. Only you." She runs her fingers around my shaft with a light touch.

"Have you ever done this before?"

Eyes downcast, she shakes her head. "Teach me."

Her plea lands on my ears laced with a slight insecurity, which causes lust to shoot through my body. I swallow. Placing my hand over hers, I show her how I like to be touched. Together, we rub my length, ending with a twist at the base. We press down on the tip and trace my shaft downward. Over and over with increasing pressure.

"I want to taste you."

God, what this woman does to me. I release my cock to her tender mercies. She opens her mouth and swallows it nearly whole.

“Whoa!”

Sputtering and choking, she separates her tonsils from my manhood. “This looks so easy in porn!”

I can’t help it. Laughter bubbles up and out of my mouth. “First off, those ladies have a lot more experience than you do. Second, it’s filmed so any possible issues are cut from the final. And third, what the hell were you doing watching porn?”

She sits on her heels. “I wanted to learn how to—” Her sentence remains unfinished.

I touch the top of her head and let my hand remain on her crown for a few beats before dropping down to her chin. I tip it upward and her eyes meet mine. “You don’t have to watch porn, Goldie. I’m right here and more than willing to experiment with you. Although the thought of you and porn makes me feel all naughty inside.”

“I wanted to make you all naughty outside, too.”

“Oh, you will. I promise. Now, why don’t you put your lips to good use. Lick up and down my cock while keeping your hand here.” I indicate the base.

She opens her mouth again and inserts my erection much more slowly this time. Gah, her mouth feels warm and wet and wondrous.

“You can play with my balls if you’d like.” Before she reaches them, I warn, “Lightly.”

She does. Her tongue traces circles around my shaft. Up and over the tip, while her hand applies a light pressure at my base. I place my hand over hers, guiding her to apply the pressure needed to drive me crazy.



Confidence growing, she hits the right speed and strength. My hand finds its way into her hair as my hips buck against her mouth. “You’re a quick learner.”

Her eyes flick to mine, satisfaction at my praise evident. My body gets wound tighter and tighter under her ministrations. My hips push with an increasing speed down her throat.

“I’m getting close. Let me pull out.” Having her swallow my come is too much for me to ask.

Instead of listening to me like she’s done this entire time, she redoubles her efforts. Her tongue swipes across my length and she hollows her cheeks and sucks hard.

In short pants, I huff, “Melody. Don’t.” Pant. “Come.” Pant. “Mouth.”

Ignoring my pleas, she continues working my straining cock with her lips and tongue and hands. My balls retract and a flash of energy ripples through my body as I explode in her mouth with a loud roar.

On her knees, Melody takes everything I give her and swallows. With a satisfied smirk, she kisses the tip of my softening cock.

Her actions almost bring me down to my knees with her. Instead, I drag her up my body, bury my face in her hair, and breathe in. She wraps her arms around my naked torso and holds on tight.

When my heart rate declines somewhat, I murmur, “You were amazing.”

She squeezes me. In an uncertain voice, she replies, “You liked it?”

Pulling back, I gaze into her deep amber eyes. Her hesitant question tugs at my heart, making me fall deeper under her thrall. “Yes, you didn’t know what to do at first, but after I showed you, you caught on fast. Like, really fast. You did things to me no woman ever has. Ever. I think that qualifies as amazing.”

Her shoulders straighten. “You taste much better than I thought. A little tangy. I like it.” She licks her lips.

My stomach flips. What the hell? Ignoring my body’s reaction to her sultry words, I quip, “What am I going to do with you, Goldie?”

She winks. “Everything.”

My hand skims over her body, seeking her pussy. Before I reach my destination, an unknown ringtone fills the room. She jumps back from my body.

“Oh! That’s my timer. We have to get going to the airport now. The car service will be downstairs in five minutes.”

“Fuck!”

“No time for that, Charles.”

## MELODY



I take my seat on the plane as Chase stows the measly piece of luggage we brought from Ravello some fifteen hours ago. I'm still on a high from giving my first blow job. Although, truth be told, I am a bit frustrated as well. We'll be back in Ravello in a *mere* ten hours. I can wait. I sigh.

Chase takes his seat on the aisle, where he can stretch out his long legs, even here in first class. The flight attendant is all over him like shoulder pads in the eighties, though. Seriously? Doesn't she have any pride?

Smiling like a lunatic, she asks him, "Would you like a glass of champagne?"

He turns to me. "Want one, darling?"

Even though I know he used the term of endearment for show, I can't stop my heart from skipping. Offering a saccharine smile to the flight attendant, I bat my eyelashes and reply, "I'd love that, Chase."

Chase. Using his stage name sounds so odd, but it was the right move for this moment. His eyes widen, then he turns back to the flight attendant and holds up two fingers. When she walks off, a now-fake smile plastered on her face, we both laugh.

“Chase?”

“Felt right, honey. My very own actor.”

He rolls his eyes. “You don’t need to lay it on so thick.”

I lean over and kiss his cheek. “Actually, I’ve seen my mother do that with my dad to some of his overenthusiastic fans a lot. It’s fun.”

He runs the back of his hand down my cheek. “Tell me about your parents. I don’t know them at all, despite having grown up in the same neighborhood.”

His request warms my heart. “Actually, when I spoke with them before you got to my condo, I might have told them about you.”

“You did? All good, I hope.”

I nod. “Yeah. I told them I was in New York, traveling with you, for your audition. Mom knows who you are. My dad, well, he”—my voice trails off to barely audible—“wants to meet you.”

He cups his ear. “Huh? I didn’t hear that last part.”

I clear my throat. “My dad was being a father, you know? He wants to meet you,” I repeat, louder this time. “I told him he will, when the time is right.”

Charles’s eyelids slam over his blue eyes.

“That’s okay, right? You do want to meet them, don’t you?”

He opens his eyes, a softness there I’ve never seen before. “Yes,” he says. “That’d be nice.”

Our conversation is cut short when the flight attendant returns with our bubbly. Charles clinks his glass to mine.

“Here’s to a short ride back to Italy.”

The champagne slides down my throat, leaving effervesce in its wake. Together with Charles’s admission he wants to meet my family, my decision to trust my gut that he’s a good guy is solidified. The plane takes off.

“So, tell me more about them.” At my quizzical look, he continues, “Your parents.”

“They’re very much in love, still. I’ve caught them giving silly looks to each other all the time. I used to be embarrassed by their expressions and stolen kisses, but now I’m grateful. They’ve shown me what love looks like. They both work really, really hard, but never forget to take time out for each other.” I explain how my mother turned the band’s finances around when she first started working for Hunte. Concluding, I say, “Even when I was young, they’d go away for date weekends every so often.”

“Sounds like a wonderful way to grow up.”

Something in his tone prompts me to ask, “What was it like growing up in the Wainwright household? Both of your parents are high-powered lawyers.”

He takes a swig of the champagne. “Yeah. They both valued their careers above everything else. Including their children. Now don’t get me wrong. Lindsay and I never lacked for anything money could buy as we grew up.”

I digest what he’s telling me. “Sounds a little lonely. Especially since you and your sister are five years apart. Basically, you both were only children. Sort of like King and me. Although, you both were in the same household.”

He pulls on the end of my hair. “What were you like growing up? I can picture you as this wild tomboy, causing

havoc everywhere you went.”

“Not exactly. I wasn’t a tomboy, that’s for sure. I was, well, just a regular girl. Or at least I wanted to be. Regular, that is.”

“I can’t imagine you being anything except extraordinary. Were you the ringleader of the cool chicks?”

His teasing tone doesn’t register, as his words lodge in the center of my chest. “No, I didn’t belong to that clique.”

He cocks his head. “Were you involved with costume design back then?”

“Yeah. I was in the artistic crew. Sophia and I both were.”

“Well, that I can believe. I didn’t realize Sophia’s from Chicago, too.”

I smile. “Yup. She’s my oldest friend. I was so excited to find out she was in the camera crew for the movie. We haven’t had much time to hang out since graduating high school. Nothing beats being around each other every day.”

“I get it. I met Mark on the set of my first movie, so I was happy to see him cast as the villain here.”

“I could tell you were friends before filming *Doctor Manipul8*.”

Chase yawns. “So, tell me a Melody story from when you were oh, say, ten.” He tweaks my nose.

“Let’s see ...” When I was ten, his sister—who I thought was a good friend at the time—threw my dad in my face. I know Charles was seeking a fun memory, but this one wants to come out. I do modify it, for his sake. “That was the age when I first learned the world my parents had created for me wasn’t how everyone viewed it.”

His hand lands on mine. I entwine our fingers and continue, “To make a long story short”—and avoid any references to his sister—“I found out others thought I was getting preferential treatment because my dad’s a rock star.”

He squeezes my hand. “I’m so sorry.”

“Ever since, I’ve had a very hard time trusting my gut as to whether someone likes me for me, or for what my dad can do for them and their careers.”

“That’s terrible, Melody. It doesn’t matter what others say about you.” He taps my heart. “It’s what’s inside here that counts. Everyone else be damned.”

I give him a small smile. “I’m getting there. Thanks to you, Charles.”

My free hand grabs at my ever-present rubber band. “Tell me about this,” he raises our linked hands.

Inhaling, I remember when my mother first gave one to me. Helplessness, anger and frustration swell deep within. “To do so, we need to go back to when I was ten again. After a week of coming home from school crying, my mother gave me my first rubber band.”

He nods for me to continue. “Anyway, Mom told me bullies torment others because they’re hiding something in themselves. She said whenever I was feeling ambushed, I should snap it and let the hurt absorb all my anger.”

His blue eyes soften, as does his voice. “Sounds like a wise woman.”

“She is,” I reply, nodding. “Anyway, whenever I’m annoyed or mad, I pluck it as a reminder to channel my negative energy and live to fight another day.”

“Wow. I’m glad this has helped you throughout the years. Although,” he snaps it and the sting seems weaker somehow. “I seem to remember you flicking it around me.”

“You probably deserved it,” I quip.

He winks. “Then I better do my best to avoid the dreaded rubber band snap.”

“I’d say you’re doing a mighty fine job.” I give him a kiss, which ends when he yawns again.

“Please excuse me, Goldie. It’s the hour, not the company, I swear.”

I open the plastic bag with a blanket and pillow in it and cover us both up. “Why don’t you get some sleep? You’ve had a very hard day.”

He wraps his arm around my shoulders. “So have you, sweetheart.” He directs my head to his pecs and closes his eyes.

I can’t sleep, despite the fact the lights have dimmed and we’re flying over thirty thousand feet above the earth. Verifying he’s out, I whisper, “Your sister was the ringleader of the mean girls at school, Charles. She made my life a living hell growing up.”

With that confession off my chest, I close my eyes and drift off into dreamland.

*My core clenches with want. My swollen nipples are strummed, causing desire to streak directly to my core. My hips roll against the air. A second zing between my legs brings my eyes wide-open.*

And I’m looking directly into passion-laden blues.

“Charles,” I murmur.



His lips tick upward as his fingers play with my nipple beneath my bra. “Yes,” he mouths.

A low moan escapes my lips. I try to push his hands away from my body, but he only brings me closer. Kissing my lips in that way of his, the one that makes me forget everything and everyone around me—including my own name—I trail my hands into his hair.

He pulls away, breathing hard. “Go into the bathroom and don’t lock it.”

I blink. Slowly. Is he actually proposing what I think he is? “You don’t mean ...”

He returns my breasts into the cups and inches the blanket away from my body. “Oh, but I do. Now go.”

He’s wearing a devious smile, which only serves to spur me on. Biting my bottom lip, I toss the blanket onto his lap and stand in the darkened cabin. Snores greet my ears. I glance over to where the flight attendants sit, and they’re either talking among themselves or otherwise occupied.

On unsteady steps, I walk over to the lavatory and slip inside. I can’t believe I’m going to get into the Mile High Club! Whoever would’ve thought me, a virgin until a few days ago, would ever be so daring?

Grinning, I rip my clothes off my body. Banging my elbow against the wall, I toss my shirt over my head. Damn. When he gets in here, how much room are we going to have? How will this even be possible?

I fold all my clothes and lay them on top of the tank. Ignoring the practicalities, I remember the way his fingers were just playing my body. He’ll make it work. Somehow.

The doorknob turns and Charles enters the tiny room. His eyes widen at me, standing naked before him. “Well, well, well. Fancy meeting you here.”

He clicks the door shut and locks it. The lights pop on. My eyes land on the huge bulge in his pants, topped by an open button. I reach out for him and unzip. His hand slides into his pocket and he retrieves a foil wrapper, then kicks off his pants and underwear.

I can't help myself but launch my naked body at his bottom-half bare one, kissing his lips and sharing his breath. The packet rips open and he pulls back slightly to roll the condom down his length. Damn. I need to do that next time.

While he's doing that, I unbutton his shirt and explore his sculpted torso. He turns me around so I face the mirror.

Inserting a finger into my body, he rumbles, “We have to be quiet. Think you can do that for me, Goldie?”

“Yes,” I hiss, modulating my voice lower than the scream I want to let out.

“So wet for me. Have you been like this since your condo?” He rubs my clit with his thumb as he inserts a second finger into me.

“Yeah,” I manage to get out. Between the taboo of doing this on the plane, the requirement that we keep quiet, what he did to me out in the seat just before, and the possibility of being caught, my body vibrates with excitement.

He circles my clit with more force. “My poor, poor baby. What you've been suffering with.”

I push back against his hand. “Please.”

Against the back of my head, his lips form a smile. “Since you asked so nicely.” He lifts my right leg so it’s on top of the closed toilet seat. In the mirror, I watch his left hand tweak my nipples again. He removes his fingers from my sex and positions himself at my entrance.

Before he pushes in, his fingers return into my body. “Are you ready for me?”

“God, yes,” I half-yell, then catch myself. In a lower voice, I whisper-shout, “Please.”

He removes his fingers and licks, then holds them up to my mouth. As soon as I suck on them, he plunges into me. My whole body lights up with want. Watching him thrust into me in the mirror, his shirt flapping with his every movement deep inside of me, I can’t imagine anything ever being more erotic.

Then he removes his fingers from my mouth and plays with my clit again.

It’s too much.

I’ve been primed since I gave him the blowjob. My core tightens, and I clench all around him while my body explodes. I open my mouth to scream, but he covers it with his hand—which still smells of me.

He thrusts twice more, then stills. He lets out a low grunt as he spills inside me.

When I come back to my senses, Charles holds my back to his front as if his every breath depended on it. “Each time is better than the last,” he whispers in my ear, then nips the lobe.

I shudder at his words, savoring the feel of his body deep in mine.

Soon, way too soon, he eases out and removes the condom. Wetting paper towels, I help him clean up, and he returns the favor for me. I fling my arms around his neck.

“That was spectacular.” I kiss him.

Tracing my bottom lip with his tongue, he replies, “That it was.” His lip ticks upward. “Sorry it was so quick.”

“No complaints here.” I trace his mouth with my index finger. “Guess we have to get dressed, huh?”

He gives me a wolfish grin that would make every female’s panties drop from age ten to ninety. My breath sucks in. “Since I’m halfway there,” he raises his arms, indicating his open button-down shirt, “I’ll go first. Follow me back to our seats when you’re ready.” He buttons his shirt.

My eyes follow his movements as he drags his pants up his long legs. Tucking himself into his fly, he zips up. Still ass naked, I grab his hand.

“Charles.”

“Melody.”

My heart overflows with love. “Can I trust you?”

His thumb rubs over the back of my hand. He leans in and kisses me. “Yes.” He kisses me once more and slips out of the restroom.

I sigh and collapse against the small stretch of wall. My heart pounds with desire. Want. Hope.

As I reach for my clothes, I whisper to the airplane gods, “I do.”

## CHASE



**T**he pilot announces we'll be arriving in Rome within minutes. I've been holding Melody's hand ever since she returned from the bathroom, so I bring it up to my lips. "Ready to go back to Amalfi?"

"It's like we never left," she quips, winking at me.

As soon as we land, I turn on my phone to a bunch of missed texts from Mark, Thomas, Jessa, Lindsay, and Noble. I open Noble's and my breath catches. "No filming until Monday."

"Yeah, just read Judith's text." She bites her bottom lip. "Whatever bug everyone else has, they better keep it to themselves."

"That's true." I glance out the window as we taxi toward the airport. The thought of getting on a helicopter right now to return us to the Amalfi Coast makes my stomach turn sour. "Want to take a slow route back to Ravello?"

Melody's eyes light up. "I like the sound of that. I'm sick of traveling by air, truth be told."

A girl after my own heart. "Twenty hours on a plane in twenty-five hours is enough." We both laugh. "How about I

rent a car and drive us back? We'll take our time and enjoy. No rush."

"Sounds wonderful to me, Charles."

The way she says my *real* name makes me want to bare more of my soul to her. I did play violin in front of her and she didn't laugh. It's been so long since I've touched base with the real Charles, though, I'm afraid I don't know who he is anymore. With Melody, I want to try.



**W**e're out in the Italian countryside, passing small villages on our way to the Amalfi Coast. Melody's quiet. I glance over to make sure she's awake, and her amber eyes greet mine. "Enjoying the ride?"

"I am. Such a beautiful country."

"It is. No wonder it's produced so many wonderful artists." I purse my lips. No one knows I was an art history minor in college. Well, that's not true. My fellow acting students knew and mocked my interest in the masterpieces. Ones I've had the pleasure of seeing in person. During this trip alone, I've seen Michelangelo, da Vinci, Botticelli, and my favorite Raphael. I'm living my secret dream.

"I don't know too much about art," she confesses. "I do enjoy going to museums, though. So many gorgeous paintings. They take my breath away."

Perhaps I can dip my toe? "Yes, the museums here boast originals. In the towns they were created."

She doesn't laugh in my face. In fact, her gaze wanders, then returns to me. "I know. I spent hours looking at *The*

*David* in Florence. Although,” she licks her lips, “now that I’ve seen you, I think Michelangelo used the wrong model.”

I chuckle. “No, I don’t hold a candle to *The David*.”

She wiggles her eyebrows, her gaze firmly on my crotch. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

I bring her hand over for a kiss. Releasing her, words fall out of my mouth. “I was an art history minor in college, actually. I learned all about the masters. Whenever I’m on set, I always make it a point to go to a museum to check out their collections. I’d be more than happy to take you on a museum tour while we’re here.”

When my confession is over, I clench my jaw. Did I reveal too much? Will she think I’m a pussy? Why did I share this part of me?

“I think that is so cool. You’re a regular renaissance man.” Her lips bus my cheek.

Her praise seeps into all my pores. She doesn’t think my studies were ridiculous, like my parents did. Although, now that I can buy and sell their life savings many times over, they’re more forgiving. At least they approve of my choice of career, especially since they can show me off to their friends.

“I’m not too sure a renaissance man would be playing a superhero.”

She rubs her finger over my cheek, getting rid of her lipstick. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe not Doctor Manipul8, but a Shakespearean one.”

At her oblique mention of my audition, I tense. I’ve done a damn good job of putting it out of my mind. I want that role so bad I can taste it. It’s not up to me, though. “Well, we’ll see about that.”

Her stomach rumbles and she places her arm over it. “Excuse me.”

I chuckle. “Better feed my woman. You’re going to need your strength for later.” I wiggle my eyebrows, and her complexion pinkens. So cute.

I’m falling for this woman.

Hard.

Soon we enter a small town where I park. Placing a cap on my head for a disguise, I guide her toward the nearest restaurant. It has an overly large carved mahogany door that’s wide-open. The odors of fresh garlic, tomatoes, and lemons dance across my nose.

“Look good, Goldie?”

“It looks beyond fabulous. My mouth is already watering.”

Wrapping my arm around her, we walk to the hostess stand and are escorted to a seat right by oversized windows overlooking the town square and its fountain. She leaves us with menus, written in Italian. I flip it over, but the wine list also is in Italian.

I toss my menu on the table. “Can you read any of this?”

She shakes her head and puts her menu down as well. “We’ll just have to wing it.”

Our server comes and says something in Italian. Clearing my throat, I respond for both of us. “My girlfriend and I don’t speak Italian. Do you speak English?”

“Ah, welcome, welcome. I don’t, ah, speak English so well. Cush take you over for me. Drink?” He mimes as if he were drinking from a glass.



“We’ll take a bottle of your best pinot noir.”

“Pinot noir, *sì*. I will go to get it for you both.”

He leaves and Melody grins at me. “He’s cute.”

I pretend to be affronted. “Hey. You’re not supposed to comment about another guy to your boyfriend.”

She giggles. “Not as hot as you, of course.” She bats her eyelashes at me. Then giggles some more, ending with a snort. “Oh my God. I’m so embarrassed.”

“Karma. Such a wonderful bitch.”

She gives me the evil eye. Or, rather, tries to, but it’s way too adorable to be effective. A new server, Cush, interrupts us. He presents a bottle, which I taste. Damn. That’s good. When I nod, he pours two glasses.

“Your prior server, Angelo, asked me to help him here, since I am more familiar with English.” He looks from me to Melody, then his eyes swing back to my face. Shit. Guess he recognized me. In a dramatic fashion, he places his hand over his heart. “Signor Wright, we are so honored you selected our restaurant.”

I pull off my cap and toss it onto an empty chair. No need for it now. “*Prego*, Cush.”

He beams at my use of his name and fiddles with his notebook. “What can I offer for your dining pleasure?”

Melody jumps in, diverting his attention. “I’d like some pasta. With a red sauce. And some meat.” She eyes me up and down, and my body responds to her unspoken offer.

The waiter scribbles on his pad and turns to me. Feeling reckless, I say, “I’ll have a pizza. With lots of cheese and ... broiled chicken.” I stifle a grimace.

“Spaghetti and pizza, I will bring right out.” He heads off toward the kitchen.

I look out the window to check out the town square, where several people have gathered. A small group turns some plastic buckets upside down and they begin dancing and banging on the makeshift drums. We watch as the group does intricate steps.

“I’m surprised to see such a routine out here, away from the city.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Maybe it’s a festival?”

A few minutes later, the group disperses as quickly as they started. Their enthusiasm was contagious. I find myself tapping my foot to the music playing in the restaurant. “Want to dance?”

Melody turns her head from right to left. She leans forward. “Hate to break it to you, big guy. There’s no dance floor.”

“Who needs one?” I stand and hold out my hand. “Dance with me, Goldie.”

Slowly, she takes my hand. I lead her through some simple dance moves around empty tables.

“Where did you learn how to dance like this?”

I dip her low. “I’ve always loved to dance.” I bring her back upright and resume the proper dance hold. “But I had some formal training for a movie I did a few years ago.”

“Nice.”

Our waiter stands to the side, watching us enjoy ourselves. I lean to her ear. “I think dinner’s almost here. We can pick this up later. Naked.”

“You.” She taps my chest.

We return to our chairs and our meals are delivered a minute later. I pour her another glass of wine, but ask for water for myself since I’m driving. Picking up a slice of pizza, I take a huge bite while she tastes her dinner.

“Oh my, this is totally delicious!”

“My pizza rocks, too.” I hold out my slice toward her. “Wanna taste?”

She leans forward and opens her mouth, then closes it on my pizza. My cock takes note. Adjusting my lower half, I ask, “Am I right?”

She swallows. “Yes, that is awesome. Here.” She twirls some pasta around her fork and holds it out for me.

I accept the proffered sample and wash it down with the remainder of my wine. “That’s fantastic. Not heavy like I expected.”

We devour the rest of our meals, enjoying simply being with each other. With her, I’m a regular guy. I don’t have to play any role. She’s helped me get back in touch with who I am. Who I’m afraid to let be seen.

Dishes cleared, she kisses my lips, her tongue licking mine. “You’re not at all what I had expected, you know.”

My eyebrow lifts. “Really? What did you expect?”

“More like the guy you were at first. Arrogant. Cocky. Annoying.”

“Ouch. You wound me, *madam*.”

She smiles. “You’ve made a lot of progress.”

“Hmmm. I don’t think I ever was those things. I think you were mistaken. I’ve always been a sweet, loveable kitty cat.”

“Kitty cat?” She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, that’s you all right.” She finishes her wine. “I like the real Charles, thank you very much. The art minor. The hard-hitting actor. The violin player.”

At her description of me—the *real* me—I recoil against my seat, even though she echoes my earlier thoughts. I remove some crumbs from our table. “How about we keep this our dirty little secret?”

“I can understand wanting to keep a part of yourself private. Hell, I’ve had a front-row seat to how my dad’s handled being in the public eye.” She lowers her voice. “There’s a difference between privacy and hiding.”

Like a whip, my response is fast and surgical. “I haven’t been hiding.” I smooth out my eyebrows. “I don’t like to advertise who I really am. Doesn’t go with my reputation, you know.” I rise. “Are you ready to head back?”

“Charles, I didn’t mean anything—”

I motion for her to stand and soften the tone of my voice. “I know. Let’s get going. We still have a drive before we get to Ravello.” To take the sting out of my outburst, I kiss her full on the mouth until she clings to my shoulders.

I wrap my arm around her waist while Cush thanks us for enjoying his restaurant. I sign a menu and take photos with him and the entire wait staff. Leaving a pile of euros on the table, I escort Melody to the car and resume our ride.

My phone rings. “It’s Thomas.” I look at Melody. “Should I answer it?”

“Yeah, he might have something important to tell you.”

Taking her advice, I press the button for the car's Bluetooth to link the call. "Hey, how are you feeling?"

"I'm doing better. A lot better than some, that's for sure. How are you?"

"Good. I managed to escape the dreaded bug and got the hell out of Dodge." I place my hand on Melody's knee. "Is everything still in order?"

"Yeah, boss. Even with this little break, nothing got all wonky. Except—"

Thomas does love his theatrics. Perhaps I should encourage him to get in the acting game? But for now, I call his tease. "What happened?"

"I haven't seen Tina at all."

I chuckle at the mention of the set makeup artist who caught his eye. Under my hand, Melody moves her leg and emits a long sigh.

"Sorry, dude. Was she sick?"

"No. Can you believe it? She's like you, she has the constitution of an elephant. No, wait, that came out wrong. She's not an elephant at all. Neither are you. You know what I mean."

I let his word salad continue for a little bit. "I got you. Well, I think it's good she didn't get sick. Did she stay on set?"

"No. I heard she went to visit Naples with Joe. The camera operator."

"Ouch. Sorry, dude."

Melody whispers, "Ask him if he's heard how Sophia's feeling."

Thomas's voice comes over through the car's speakers. "Hey, are you alone? I didn't mean to interrupt something—"

I glance at Melody, who shakes her head. I evade. "Have you heard how Sophia is doing?" Then add, "And Mark?"

"They're both better, from what I've heard. Sophia got it real bad, though. I saw her walking into a local grocery store a couple of hours ago, and she looked like death warmed over. She has to have lost five pounds. I wanted to go over and talk with her but couldn't get my own body moving."

Melody nods, and I ask about Mark again.

"Oh, he's probably the best of all of us. He was back on solid foods yesterday."

"That's a little bit of positive news anyway."

"And Melody. No one's seen her at all. She must have it worse than Sophia."

At the mention of Melody's name, I squeeze her knee. In response, she opens her legs a little bit. No longer interested in gossip from the set, I try to wrap things up with my PA. "Guess we'll find out soon. Noble texted that we'll resume filming on Monday. I have a feeling we're going to be doing very late night shoots."

"Yeah. I know he's going to want to get the shoot back on track. You better get all the rest you can now."

"Good advice, T. Well, I better go. See you on Monday."

When the line is disconnected, I glance at my girlfriend. She's holding her phone. "I feel badly for Sophia. Especially since Thomas talked about Tina." She taps her phone.

I cock my head.

Melody sighs. “You didn’t hear this from me, but Sophia has a little crush on your PA.”

Understanding seeps into my bones. “Very interesting. Seems Mark may have something to say about that.”

“I had a hunch.” She holds up her phone. “Do you mind if I call her to check in?”

“Not at all.”

On speaker, her best friend picks up on the third ring. Her voice is painfully scratchy. After Melody asks about her health, Sophia gives her a rundown. Geez, she still isn’t ready for prime time.

“I’m so sorry, Sophia.”

The sound of her blowing her nose fills the car. “I’ll be okay before we start shooting again. I hope. Now tell me all about Doctor Manipul8. Has he performed any superhero tricks on you?”

Melody giggles, and the lighthearted sound makes my heart swell. Well, that in addition to the fact she’s shared our relationship with her friend. She glances at me, her smile wicked. “Oh, he sure did.”

To punctuate her point, I slip my hand up to the juncture of her thighs, keeping my eyes trained on the road. She swallows a surprised exclamation.

“Good for you. I’m so happy. At least one of us is having fun. And not sick.”

“More than having fun.”

At her words, I press my palm against her pussy and she clamps her legs together, trapping my hand. “That we are,” I add.

“Oh my God. Charles, is that you?”

“In the flesh.” I move my hand in a small circle.

“We’re enjoying the Italian countryside,” Melody squeaks.

Sophia coughs, then sneezes. “I think that’s my cue to let you two lovebirds go. I’m so happy for you. Both.” She clicks off.

“Sophia seems nice.”

“She is. She’s one of the only people on earth who I trust. Implicitly.” She opens her legs a fraction. “You’re another.”



## MELODY



**W**e finally arrive at our villa in Ravello at six o'clock. We're both beat from all the traveling, Charles especially so. "I know it's early, but we should really hit the hay. We've traveled so much and our bodies need to unwind."

The smile he gives me is downright ... *dirty*. I've never known a smile to be dirty before.

He drops our overnight bag to the floor, unbuttoning his shirt. "I think that's an excellent idea."

"You're incorrigible. I meant to *sleep*." I dash into the bathroom, locking the door behind me.

Even though I want to experience another round with him, my body really does need to recover. After seeing to my needs, I strip off my travel clothes and wrap myself in the white terrycloth robe. With caution, I open the door.

Charles isn't in the bedroom. Huh. Walking into the main part of the suite, I check out the empty balcony. Where he introduced me to balcony sex. My body hums to life. *Maybe I'm not so tired after all.*

Coming back into the villa, I walk around the sofa and stop. Charles is passed out. I study him in his sleep. My goodness, he is classically gorgeous. His Roman nose is

straight and in the right proportion to his face. His cheekbones are pronounced but not so much as to make him appear skeletal. And that cleft in his chin is something Lucifer himself would covet.

My gaze travels downward, over his exposed abs. He left his shirt on, but unbuttoned. Same for his pants. In repose, he's downright scrumptious. Chest rising and falling as he sleeps. I memorize every inch of this man.

*My man.*

I am safe with him. He sees me for me, recognizing my costume design talents. I'm not Braxton Hunte's daughter with him. I'm Melody. My own woman. Someone he values for what I, myself, bring to the table.

My heart expands at the certainty he's the real deal. Not after me for what my dad can do for his career, or for what he thinks my money and connections—actually, Daddy's—can buy. Charles doesn't need any of that from me, as he's already set in his career. Even if he wants to take it in a different direction.

No, he doesn't *need* me.

He *wants* me.

Just as I want him for his true, renaissance self.

My eyes eat him up from head to toe. As much as I want to be with him again, he's exhausted. I am too, really. Should I wake him up to bring him into bed? Shaking my head, I pick up a blanket and drape it over his prone form, kissing his forehead. And tiptoe back into the bedroom. Tossing off the bathrobe, I slide, naked, into the bed and fall fast asleep before my head hits the pillow.



A flutter on my chest makes me turn.

A low rumble warms my body.

A nip against my nipple wakes me up.

An oversized naked man lies next to me in bed, the sheet draped low over his hips. He bites me again.

“Charles!”

He places his index finger against my lips. “Shhh.” Moving his hands to my shoulders, he brings me flush against his body, tucking my head under his chin.

We remain like this for a while. The only thing that moves is his growing erection against my abdomen. Sliding my hand between us, I close around his girth and squeeze like he taught me to do in my condo earlier today. Or was that yesterday? Everything’s a blur.

“Now, Goldie. I thought you were tired.”

I move my hand up and down his shaft, and his breath catches. “Sleep is overrated.”

Charles turns onto his back, pulling me on top of him and proceeds to kiss every thought out of my head. Panting, he breaks from me and grabs a condom from the side table.

I steal the packet from him. “Let me. I’ve always wanted to do this.”

His chuckle rolls through me, then he spreads his arms wide. “I’m all yours.”

A thrill at his words races through my body. I open the packet and pull the latex out. It’s coated in a lubricant, but not

too sticky. Concentrating, I pinch the top of the condom. Before covering his erection, though, I stick my tongue out and lick the pre-cum off.

“Need a clean surface,” I explain.

He groans but doesn't try to take over.

I position the condom over him and roll it down his length, like how I practiced on a cucumber after watching a demonstration on You Tube years ago. Not even Sophia knows I did this. Too embarrassing. Definitely worth the practice, as it's a perfect fit.

“Better than a cucumber,” I murmur.

He laughs loudly, his cock moving in my hand. “I would hope so.”

Ignoring his comment, I situate myself over him. Leaning forward, I kiss him and let our tongues dance. Without breaking the kiss, I position his hardness straight up and sink down on him. I moan. He's so deep.

“Damn, Goldie.” He thrusts his hips up once. “You feel so fucking good.”

“Back at ya.”

He lets me set the pace. Deep thrusts followed by shallow ones, fast then slow. I try out different rhythms, enjoying every last one.

Charles's left hand clamps on the back of my head while the other goes to my hip, guiding me in his preferred pattern. He's so big, but my body accommodates him like we were made for each other.

Maybe we were.

His hand slides from my hip to my clit and he rubs in a circular fashion. On his third pass, without warning, I explode. Splintering in his arms, I shout my completion. He continues to pump into me and roars my name. I collapse onto his hard body, melting around him.

I rest my chin on his chest, looking into his deep blue eyes while he brushes the hair away from my forehead. “You’re amazing.” He guides my face to him and kisses me while maneuvering me to his side.

I grin at his praise. However unfounded. “No.” I kiss both of his cheeks. “You’re the amazing one.”

“Let’s call it a draw.” He wraps his arms around my body and kisses me senseless.

Two hours and my first sexual encounter in a shower later, we’re dressed and standing on the balcony. His fingers play with my hair. “Want to explore?”

“Explore what?” I turn and wrap my arms around his neck.

“Ravello,” he responds. “Although I’m not opposed to exploring other things.” He squeezes my butt. “I think we should give your body a little breather.”

Muscles I’ve never used before scream at me to explore the town. I drop my cheek to his pecs. “My brain is willing, but my body says otherwise.”

He chuckles and slaps my right butt cheek. “Later, I promise.” Taking my hand, we walk out of our cocoon and into the village.

We spend the next few hours walking aimlessly, trying on silly hats and modeling fun clothes. I’ve never laughed so much in all my life. Charles has a dry sense of humor, which keeps me in stitches.

“No more,” I plead. “That visual is too much!”

He chuckles and wraps his arm around my shoulder. “Fine. No more talk about flubbed lines.” He squeezes me to his side.

We pass a garden and he stops. “Let’s go in.” He motions toward the open gate.

As we enter the almost deserted space, the smell of roses hits me in the face as if I walked through a haze of perfume. I take a deep inhale. “It smells wonderful in here.”

“It does,” Charles says as he walks to a cluster of rose bushes. He picks a gorgeous, yellow bud and tucks it behind my ear.

I kiss his stubbled cheek. “Thank you.”

He inclines his head toward an empty bench under what has to be a century-old tree. I go to sit next to him, but his hands encircle my waist and he pulls me onto his lap. Instead of struggling, I lean my head onto his shoulder and swing my foot. “I understand why everyone says this town is so romantic.”

“I know what you mean. We’re high above the water, so we have a perfect view out to all the boats. Yet, here we are, sitting in our own secluded paradise.”

Noise from down the street catches my attention and I look back. A bridal party walks our way, no doubt for photos. What a perfect place for a wedding. I sigh.

His tenor voice whispers in my ear, “Looks like we should give up our slice of heaven to the newlyweds.”

I lift my head and gaze at my boyfriend for a long moment before reaching forward and kissing him. The shock of our lips coming together still steals my breath. “Okay.”

When I stand, I offer him my hand. As we head toward the gate, the wedding party enters. Charles ducks his head downward, causing my heart to reach out to him. I know how difficult it is to be recognized, given my lifetime as being Braxton Hunte's daughter. I point toward some bushes, gesticulating with abandon. Anything to divert their attention from the man at my side.

We're almost to the gate when one of the groomsmen says, "Hey! No way! Guys, it's Chase Wright!" Everyone in the party stops and turns our way. Guess this is an American celebration, given their accents.

Next to me, Charles stiffens. With practiced ease, he releases his pent-up breath and schools his expression to one of welcome. He waves. "Hi, everyone. Congratulations on your wedding. You remind me of my sister. You make a beautiful bride."

The dark-haired woman in an elegant white gown with sequins that catch the Italian sun turns a shade of red when she's singled out. So unlike Lindsay, who loves being the center of attention. Their photographer circles us, making me feel like a hunted deer. I can only imagine how Charles is feeling.

"We wish you all the happiness," I pipe up. "We'll leave you to your photos."

Before we can take another step, the groom appears at Charles's side and whispers something to him. Although I can't hear him, the subtle change in my boyfriend's demeanor tells me he's going to take some pictures with them. So much for a relaxing day in Ravello.

Charles turns to me. "I've agreed to add 'a little something' to their wedding album. I hope you're not mad at

me.”

My eyebrows rise. Guess he’s used to this and, while not exactly thrilled, he’s taking it in stride. I return the favor. “Take as long as you need.” He bends down and kisses me, then joins the wedding party.

I wander over to the bench we previously occupied and watch him work the wedding party. He takes photos with everyone, not just the newlyweds. From the looks on their faces, they are beyond thrilled. A small smile plays around my lips. He’s given them a memory to enhance their wedding, set in such a romantic place. Charles is a good man.

When he starts to sign whatever they’ve given him, I rise and go to the gate. Finished signing, he poses for one last photo, kisses the bride’s cheek, and walks toward me. With measured steps, we leave the wedding party and turn left. Instead of going into any more stores, we head over to the low rock wall overlooking the water.

To break the silence, I rub the back of his shoulder. “Hey, you did a great thing back there.”

He expels a long breath. Slanting me a sideways glance, he confesses, “I’m sorry I had to leave you alone like that.”

“You were worried about me?”

He kicks a little pebble and it bounces off the wall. “Other ladies have lost their minds when I had to interact with my fans.”

What sort of women has he been with in the past? “That’s nuts, Charles. Being with your fans is a part of your job. My dad taught me that from a very early age.”

He bends down. “He did?” His knuckles scrape the ground and he retrieves a small rock.



“Yes. I know how important your fans are to your career. You don’t have to explain that to me. I’ll never begrudge you any time spent with them.” His whole body relaxes as if he was bracing for a much different response from me. However, I can’t allow him to get away scot-free. “I know you’ll make it up to me in other ways.”

He throws his head back and laughs, then tosses the rock over the wall. We lean over and watch as it descends into the water, far below us.

“What ‘other ways’ were you thinking about, Goldie?”

A variety of possibilities come to mind, all beginning and ending with us naked. I lick my lips. “I’m sure you’ll think of something creative.”

“I can be damn imaginative when spurred on.” He grabs my hand. “Let’s get back to the room, where I can test out some of my creativity.”

We begin the climb up the hill to our villa. Charles has been nothing but up-front with me, and I trust him. He was scared to tell me about his interactions with fans, but he did. He was even more nervous to share his love of classical music and violin, yet he did that too. Since he compared the bride with his sister, the need to share another piece of my reality with him becomes overwhelming.

I lick my dry lips and start in reverse. “After everything that went down with Grant the mistrust I had for people grew.” He nods and I gather the strength to continue. “If you haven’t noticed, it takes a lot to get to know me, the real me. I mean, I’m friendly with everyone, but no one really gets to know me all that well.”

He kisses the top of my forehead. “I’m honored to be one of the few people you let in.”

“You should be,” I tease to break the tension. “But the truth is that after Grant, no guy could get close to me. I went out on a couple of dates here and there, but nothing ever got too serious. Until ...”

“Me.”

My breathing stutters. “Charles, I’m scared because I’ve never been in a relationship like ours.” I’m able to take a deep breath. “The more time we spend together, the more I’m convinced you’re the real deal.”

“Goldie, I’m flattered you feel that way. If I could go back in time and change what Grant did to you, I would. No one, especially you, deserved to be treated as a pawn for what your family could do for him. That’s so wrong.”

“Thanks.”

We keep walking up the hill toward our hotel, now passing by houses that have flowers in window boxes. “Relationships in show business can be tricky things,” Charles points out.

“They can be done, you know. I do know people in the business who have successful marriages. The media likes to portray them as if they were unicorns, but it doesn’t have to be that way.”

He rubs his forehead. “I also know a couple of good marriages. Not many, but the ones who are real are true inspirations.”

“Hope my parents are on your list.”

“Definitely. Rock and roll at your fingertips, and two parents who supported you.”

I smile. “That part of growing up was the best.” I shake the tingles out of my limbs. “Not everyone got the memo, though.”

He pounds his fist into his cupped hand. “Who needs a lesson, besides Grant?”

I slant him a look. I need to tell him Sophia and I dubbed his sister the main ringleader of the “Mean Girls” crew. *Please don't let this come between us.*

When I don't reply, he places his hands on my shoulders. “Talk to me.”

I can't look at his face. Blinking to the side, I confess. “Remember when I told you about the kids who made it their job to be, well, bullies?” That's an understatement. I force my head up. “The ringleader was your sister,” I mumble.

His cheek indents to match the cleft on his chin. “Excuse me.”

“You didn't know me back then. I know you're not responsible for your sister's actions.”

His fingers dig into my shoulders. When I grimace, he lets me go. “Lindsay was the baby of the family, which isn't an excuse. She's been going through some stuff for years now.” He slams his mouth shut and turns toward the hotel.

I follow him up the road and grab his hand, causing him to stop. “Hey. I didn't tell you to drive a wedge between us. I wanted to come clean to you, that's it.” I bite my lip. “I haven't been that little girl in a long time.”

The war crossing his face is heartrending. “I apologize for what my sister put you through.”

His *mea culpa* is appreciated, although he wasn't responsible for his sister. "You're not your sister's keeper."

Charles's hand lands on the back of his neck, and his elbow moves up and down. "There's stuff I'm sure you don't know about Lindsay, and I'm not at liberty to divulge. Just know I feel awful for what she did to you." His arm freefalls to his side.

A twinge of pity for her runs through me. Not for the first time, I skirt my hatred of his sister and puzzle what crawled up her butt and made her so nasty. Whatever. She was a royal bitch to me growing up. Nonetheless, I appreciate his explanation, and his remorse on her account. Reaching for the knitting needles in my hair only to realize I left them on the dresser, I voice, "Thank you."

We continue the schlep toward the hotel, each deep in our thoughts. I spend the time burying, again, the feelings of inadequacy and pain his sister caused me growing up. When she's back in her box, I want to lighten the dark mood I caused. I slant a glance at my boyfriend, who's now eyeing me up and down like I'm a perfect couture gown. Looks like we're on the same page.

"You're definitely right about one thing. You're not a child anymore." He rubs his palms together. "Not with those tits and ass."

I cross my arms across my "tits." Yup, same page. "Really? You're going with that?"

He licks his lips. "Yep."

"Well, you better use some of that Doctor Manipul8 superhero mojo if you want any more of this T and A." I twirl

and swivel my hips. His wolfish laugh lets me breathe easier in the certainty our relationship is back on track.

He grabs me around the waist and tosses me in the air as if I weighed less than a feather. Catching me, he puts me down and places his hands on top of my head like in the movie. He releases me and steps back.

I shake my head. “I think you lost your mojo. I’m still affronted by your crude description of my body.” I manage to say this without laughing.

“Then maybe I need to make more crude descriptions, naked, in bed. I bet you’ll *love* them then.”

As he speaks, I walk backward toward the hotel. Shaking my head, I yell, “Oh no you don’t! Keep your distance, Doctor Perverted! Besides, you’ll have to catch me first!”

I turn and race toward our villa, Charles hard on my heels.

# CHASE



**C**onsidering it's 4:00 a.m., I'm the only one in this gym, which is smaller than the one at my hotel but still serviceable. Jumping onto the exercise bike, I pedal away the calories I've been eating. Can't have a flabby superhero. Earbuds in, I feel the burn and push through. When I've done thirty minutes, I hop over to the free weights and start in on the arm exercises my trainer gave me a week ago.

Despite my best efforts to stay focused, my mind wanders to the woman who has invaded my life and turned it inside out, in a good way. To the woman I left sleeping—naked—in my bed.

Melody's teaching me by example of how to live your own truth. If not for her, I would've never flown halfway around the world to audition for the Broadway play. It was a good audition. I nailed the lines, made appropriate eye contact, and did everything I've been taught. God. I really want that part.

But I don't have any control over whether they cast me. Their demeanor certainly wasn't encouraging. I sigh as I begin my last set of cross-body curls.

Huffing with exertion, I put the weights into their cradle and pick up some kettle bells. Sam thinks I'm nuts for wanting to change the direction of my career, but he's not me. This is

what I want. Not another stupid rom-com. Not even the movie about Hunte that I auditioned for before filming for *Doctor Manipul8* began.

Shit. The Hunte movie. Maybe I should talk with Melody about my audition? Before the thought flits through my head, I'm already nullifying it. She distinctly told me how she is not involved with it at all. If I'm on the short list to play her father, I'll tell her. No use bringing up a what-if with her now. Besides, I should hear from the Broadway show first.

Dropping the kettle bells, I begin my final exercise, the dreaded burpees. I quiet my mind and get to work on the buggers. The sooner I complete these hundred, the sooner I can get back to the room. And wake up sleeping beauty.

Finally finished, I grab a cup and fill it with cucumber water. I glance at the TV and grimace as my face is plastered all over the screen as being a "wedding crasher." The bride and groom gave details about meeting me yesterday and shared some of the photos. I run a towel over my sweaty forehead and toss it into the basket. At least it was positive press.

At ten after five, I arrive at our villa. We need to get a move on if we're going to be in my trailer at seven to sew me into my suit. My lips quirk at how much more fun the chore is going to be. When I enter the bedroom, Melody's not in bed and the shower's running. A grin touches my lips. We definitely have enough time for what I have in mind.

A languid Melody drapes her hand on my leg as I drive us back to the lot. We managed to gather our stuff and get into the rental car by six thirty, after an amazing round in the shower. Where we got very dirty before we got clean.

I rub my finger over my lips. “So, are you looking forward to sewing me into my superhero costume today, Goldie?”

She blushes. I love that she blushes for me. “I think it may be more enjoyable than ever before, especially since I now know exactly what you’ve got going on underneath.”

My voice drops an octave. “Only for you.” Truer words have never been spoken.

On my thigh, she traces various shapes. After a few minutes where I have to concentrate on navigating the windy, narrow Italian roads down toward Amalfi, her head pops up.

“Charles,” she begins.

“Hmmm?” A bus ahead honked, which I’ve learned means he’s coming toward me and there’s not enough room for both of us on the road. I apply the brakes and he passes. From now on, I’m leaving the driving here to those experienced with the crazy rules of the road.

“Charles,” she repeats.

I spare her a quick glance, then return my concentration on my drive. “Yes?”

“I’ve been thinking.”

At these three words, my stomach tightens. Nothing good ever follows this statement out of a woman’s mouth. Has she been using me? Wanted to get rid of her virginity with someone who’s a notorious player? My breath catches.

She continues, “I’d like to keep our relationship a secret.”

My brow furrows. How could I have misread her so thoroughly? I was a means to an end, nothing more.



Before I can formulate a response, she blurts, “It’s just that, I’m, well, in so deep with you and I don’t want anyone to spoil what we have. I also don’t want to get the reputation I’m with you to further my career.” She retracts her hand. “I also don’t want to diminish how others see you. You’re like a god on set. I don’t want the fact that you’re with a lowly assistant costume designer and be dragged down.” She turns her head and faces the passenger side window.

All of my insecurities evaporate. Her main concern is for *me*. She’s worried about what others will think of *me* for being with her. My whole body relaxes. “Goldie, the fact *you* chose to be with *me* will make me the envy of everyone on set.”

Her head whips around to me. “You’re wrong. Believe me.”

“I don’t.” I’d reach out and grab her hand, but I need to keep my concentration on the road and both hands on the wheel. Another bus honks, and I pull over to the side. The road is so narrow, and we’re on such a tight swerve, that he can’t make it without backing up a few times. While we’re stopped, I face her.

“Listen to me. I’m damn proud you chose me. You’re sweet, talented, funny, and I’ve seen every man from cast to crew giving you speculative looks. Eager looks.” I push her long locks away from her face, which I asked her to wear down until we get to the set. “But you chose me.”

“Charles.” She breathes my name a split-second before her lips land on mine.

The rumbling of the bus as it passes breaks us apart. “God, you’re wonderful.” With effort, I turn away from her and resume our drive back to Amalfi.

“Still, I’d like to keep our relationship a secret. I really don’t want to give anyone the idea I’m trying to sleep my way to the top. After having my dad’s name brought up all the time, that’s all I need.”

Her words cut right to my core. “I’ll do anything you ask, Goldie. I don’t want to make this harder for you.” I make another corkscrew turn. “But, I do want to proudly walk with you on my arm soon.”

In a quiet voice, she replies, “Thanks.”

I hate having to hide our relationship, but I understand. All her life, she’s been touted as the daughter of Braxton Hunte, rather than as a very talented woman in her own right. I can give her this. For now.

Melody interrupts my thoughts. “Thomas said no one has seen me since they all got sick, and they thought I had a bad time of it. Why don’t we go with that? I’ll simply tell them I was down and out, too.”

I weigh her words. “Sounds like a good plan.” We approach the town. “Should I drop you off at your hotel?”

“It’s already after seven, and we need to get you sewn in. How about you drop me off down the road from your trailer and I’ll walk the rest of the way.”

I nod, unhappy but understanding her decision. “I’ll bring our luggage into my trailer and stow it with your wardrobe kit.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I maneuver to a stop in a quiet alley and she turns to leave. I clamp down on her shoulder. “Oh, no. You’re not getting away from me that easily.”

Spurred on by our first parting in days—even if it’s only minutes—I bring her back to me and kiss her one last time. When we break apart, she’s panting. So am I.

Her hand lands on my cheek. “I’ll see you in a few.” Then she’s gone.

I clutch the steering wheel for a long moment, and then pull away, leaving her trailing behind the car. A few minutes later, I park next to my trailer, my hand landing on the warm seat she just vacated. Closing my eyes, I breathe in her vanilla scent.

Forcing my eyes open, I get out of the car and collect our bags. I reach my trailer and am about to pull out my key but realize someone’s already inside. So it begins.

I open the door and walk up the steps. “Chase, you made it.”

“Hey, Thomas.” I place our bag next to her work suitcase. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better. I’m about at ninety percent. You never got it?”

I shake my head. “Getting away from everything felt good, though. I feel like a new man.” Not a lie.

My PA checks me up and down. “You look good, man. Better than I’ve seen you look in a long time.”

Instead of responding, I slap him on the back. Opening the refrigerator, I grab one of my favorite specialty waters.

The trailer door opens and my heart begins to thump like an audio mixer was creating the score. Melody bounds up the steps, sees I’m not alone, and drops her head.

“Hi, Melody,” Thomas says. “How are you feeling?”

She fidgets with her purse strap. “I think I’m almost back to one normal-ish. How about you?” Melody gives me the side-eye as she passes to get to her design suitcase.

“Not quite that good but getting better,” Thomas responds.

“Some bug, huh?” She offers me a pair of black boxer briefs.

I busy myself by leaving for the bathroom. If Thomas weren’t here, I’d demand she settle me into these. With pleasant thoughts about how such a feat might go, I reenter the main area in only the underwear. When my eyes land on her, my cock stirs.

*Corkscrew turns with buses coming straight at me.*

*Sheer vertical drops into the water without any guardrails.*

*Wrinkles.*

I try to think of anything to divert my body’s reaction to being so near to my woman when I’m barely wearing any clothes. Thomas accomplishes this feat without even trying when he says, “So, Chase, we have a lot of ground to cover.” My libido dies.

While Thomas goes over post-shoot plans, Melody starts sewing my left leg into the costume. The questions continue, and I know I have to involve Melody in the decision-making.

“Let’s recap. I’ve got you down for the fitting with Versace the week after we wrap here. That’ll give them enough time to make any needed alterations before the red carpet. Hair appointment for the morning of. Plus, you’ll be at all the pre-parties except for the two the weekend after this shoot.” He clicks his pen. “Where are you going after Amalfi?”

Put on the spot like this, I reply without thought. “Chicago. I haven’t been home to visit my folks for a while and want to check in.”

He nods and scribbles it down on his notepad. I lock eyes with Melody and she does a slow blink at me. Resisting the urge to pull out the damn knitting needles keeping her hair back in that austere bun, I return my attention to my PA.

“I’ll make your reservations for Chicago. Will you be staying with your parents?”

Two problems arise. First, they have to be reservations for two. And second, what will our sleeping arrangements be while we’re there? “That’s okay. I’ll make the reservations.”

The color on his face is replaced with a greenish hue. Is he going into relapse? In a strangled voice, he says, “Are you sure? I mean, I always do your travel.” He clicks his pen several times.

Melody’s hand wraps around my calf. “Sorry to interrupt, but, Chase”—she pauses at the use of my stage name, which sounds weird from her lips now—“could you please move your leg. I want to be sure it’s all set.”

Thank God for her. Focusing all my attention on the task at hand, I shake my leg and walk around. Pride at her competence grows. “Feels great.”

“I think I’m getting the hang of this,” she replies, running her hands up and down my inner leg, paying special attention to the spot behind my knee. Gah.

“I think you are.”

Her eyelashes flutter. “You know, the thought of going home after this shoot sounds like a good one, Thomas. My parents keep my room and a guest one ready at all times.”

Thank you, Melody. Giving my leg one more shake, I look at my clueless PA. “Good idea. I think I’ll stay with my parents, so there’s really no need for you to worry about my trip to Chicago.” After which, I’ll have to go to LA and she’ll be back in NYC gearing up for the HBO show. Hiding my disappointment, I instruct him to get me all set for my trip west for the damned red carpet.

Melody makes a show of plumping her pillow on the floor at my feet and looks up at me. Her mouth is even with my cock. She closes her eyes and licks her lips, and my body responds as predicted. A knowing grin tugs at her lips. Fuck.

Her fingers run up my right inner thigh. I brace for her onslaught, which comes with remarkable speed. Her hand closes around me and she squeezes, eliciting a moan from me.

“Are you okay, Chase?”

With my eyes closed, I step back from the temptress on her knees and respond to Thomas. “Yeah.” Think quick. “Trying to get into character, you know?”

“Oh, all right. I’ll leave you to that.” He consults his notebook. “I have enough to keep me busy.” He clicks his pen several times. “Catch you later, Chase. Melody.”

The door closes behind him, and Melody lets out a howl of laughter.

“Not funny, Goldie.”

She laughs so hard that tears stream down her face. “Getting hot and bothered there, Char—Chase?”

My restraint breaks. Bending down, I reach under her arms and yank her upright and slam my mouth onto her willing one. I mold her body against mine.

The trailer door opens and we spring apart. “Hey, Chasey, how are you feeling?” Jessa’s voice precedes her into the trailer.

I do a one-eighty and give her my back, all the while trying to calm my body down. For her part, Melody jumps in front of me.

“Hi, Jessa,” Melody says. “Is this your costume for today?”

“Oh, no. I thought I’d stop by and check in on Chasey here before heading to wardrobe.”

While I futz at the refrigerator, Melody approaches Jessa. “Well, I’ve finished up one leg of his costume and need his undivided attention to get the other one done for call time. Perhaps you could stop by when you’re done with your clothes. And makeup.” She hustles her toward the door. “Your hair looks great, though.”

“Well, all right. I’ll check back in when I’m ready for the shoot. Bye, Chasey!” The door closes behind her.

I applaud my girlfriend’s ingenuity. “Well played, Goldie.”

She bows. “Thanks. I didn’t think you wanted to talk with her right this second.” Her eyes drift downward, then she pouts. “She ruined all my hard work.”

I chuckle. “*Your* hard work? Felt like it was my hardness.” I rub my crotch.

“Letch!”

I glance at the clock and grimace. “As much as I’d love to pick up where we left off, you really need to get me into this costume. No more wandering hands.” I slant her a piercing glare.

She lifts her pinky to mine. “Pinky swear.”

I lock my little finger with hers and she gets back on her knees and starts in on my right leg. “So, are you okay with going to Chicago after we wrap? Will it be cool for me to stay at your family’s?”

Melody continues the intricate stitches. “Yeah, I’m fine with going to Chicago. My parents won’t ever let me stay in a hotel. As for you ...” Her shoulders raise, then lower. “Never done that before, but there’s a first time for everything.”

“I’m honored. If your parents have an issue with it, I can stay with my folks, no problem. Although, we’ll have to find time to sneak in a few quickies.” I wink at her.

She continues to sew me in my costume and, in much less time than before, she finishes. “There. Try that out.”

As I walk around the trailer, she stands and shakes out her legs, grimacing with the movements. “Are your legs bothering you?”

“It’s not the easiest position, but I’m good.”

Dropping to my knees in front of her, I let my fingers trail down both of her legs, massaging them. She moans. “That feels so good.” I end my impromptu massage with kisses behind both of her knees.

She laughs. Carefree and happy. Which, in turn, lifts my spirits. After putting on the now infamous gloves, we spend the next minutes wrangling me into the top part of the costume. “I’ll get your boots while you snap in,” she directs.

I open my legs and let the material hang. “I don’t think so.”

“What?”



I look down toward my cock and then back to her. “As my dresser, I think you need to do your job.”

“Oh you do, do you?”

“Yep.”

My boots clatter to the floor as she stands in front of me. “I guess I can’t shirk my responsibilities.”

“Nope.” I let the “P” sound pop off my tongue, prompting a giggle from her. Drawing her in, I kiss her lips. “Now, go do your duty.”

She mock salutes me and falls to her knees. Again. I widen my stance. She grabs for the snaps.

“Easy. You’re dealing with some pretty important cargo.”

In a husky voice, she replies, “Very true.”

She traces my dick over the underwear and I reconsider whether this is a good idea. Before my body gets too aroused, I snap my fingers. “Eyes on the prize.”

“Oh, they are.” Without moving her head, she looks up at me and snaps the top of my costume closed. “Done,” she breathes.

“I might be.”

She giggles and stands up, then her face turns serious as she makes minor adjustments to my costume. Satisfied, she orders me to put on the socks and boots.

“The price is a kiss.”

She beams at me. “Gladly.” Wrapping her arms around my neck, she gives me one, complete with her tongue.

“Damn. I wish I wasn’t sewn into this outfit. I’d like to—”

“Shhh. Save your creativity for later, Charles. Now it’s time to turn into the good doctor.”

I wish I could argue with her, but I can’t. Instead, I shove my feet into the boots and pick up the mask. “How do I look?”

She appraises me, making additional adjustments. “Great. I’m happy with your outfit. Are you?”

I steal one final kiss. “I am because you did it for me.”

“Judith designed it.”

I shrug. “Whatever. You make this Doctor very happy.”

The trailer door opens again, and Judith herself walks in, carrying a tissue. She’s still a bit green around the edges. “How are you feeling, Judith?”

“Been better, been worse. I wanted to come and check out the costume before you head out to the set.”

I stand still while she walks around, assessing Melody’s handiwork.

“Looks good.”

Judith picks up my hand and studies the gloves. “These are expertly done. Form a fist, please.” I comply. “Yes, very good.”

Melody’s blushing, this time from her boss’s praise. I let her bask for a few moments. “Am I ready for the cameras, ladies?”

Judith nods. “Yes.”

She motions for Melody to leave the trailer first. My eyes don’t wander farther than her delectable ass.

## MELODY



**T**oday's shoot went well, with no problems with wardrobe. To my eyes, Charles gave his best performance to date. Hopefully, I've had a hand in that. During the shoot, Judith pulled me and Helene aside to refine wardrobe issues for the extras in tomorrow's shoot, which we figured out. I like to think my ideas were more innovative than Helene's. Assuming Judith gets the job on Noble's next movies, I send up one more prayer that the lead costume designer position becomes mine.

With light footsteps, I skip toward Charles's trailer. When I enter, it's filled with people. Jessa is there, sniffing around my man again. Seriously? Plus, Mark and of course, Thomas. I stifle the frustration overcoming me, wanting to be alone with my boyfriend. He's a big star and has many obligations.

I go to my design suitcase and remove the scissors and other things I need to get Charles out of the costume.

Charles mocks, "Uh-oh, folks, shit's getting real. The scissors are out."

I open and close them a few times in rapid succession. Mark claps him on the back, "We'll leave you to it." He passes me and stops. I freeze. Has he figured out about Charles and

me? He turns his head. “Hey, Chase, want to go out on a yacht tonight? A friend of a friend is in Positano and invited me.”

“Sounds cool, man,” Charles says while looking at me. “Let me get out of this suit and I’ll let you know. I have to go over the lines for tomorrow.”

Mark addresses Thomas. “Want to join me?”

The PA clicks his pen. “Thanks for the invite. I’d love to.”

Mark nods and heads toward the door. On his way, he does a two-step with Jessa, whispering something in her ear that makes her tap his chest. Holding the door handle, he tosses, “Melody, you’re welcome to come as well. Bring your friend, Sophia.”

Jessa appears at Charles’s side, and I snap the scissors harder. When she kisses him, I almost break them into two.

“See ya later,” Charles calls as Jessa walks down the aisle toward the door, his gaze never straying from mine communicating the kiss was an act. *Of her making.*

When Thomas takes a seat and pulls out his clipboard, Charles reaches between his legs and unsnaps the bodysuit. I help him get out of it and throw away the soaked undershirt. No matter how breathable we tried to make it for him, the suit still makes him sweat.

Charles sits next to his PA and removes his boots, tossing the socks into the garbage as well. The two men refine the details for tomorrow’s shoot and longer-range plans.

I motion for Charles to stand so I can cut him out of the leggings. Because Thomas is still here, I try to be as quick as possible for my boyfriend. After I free Charles’s left leg, Thomas stands.

“I think I’m good here. Will I see you on the yacht tonight?”

Charles’s knee bounces, the material flapping. “Not sure yet.”

Thomas clicks his pen, says goodbye to us, and leaves. Finally alone, Charles opens his arms and I fly right into them. My head resting against his chiseled pecs, I let my fingers wander over the muscled expanse of his back.

“I’ve been wanting to do this all day,” he murmurs in my ear before kissing me senseless.

Stepping back, I look into his passion-laden eyes. “Let’s get you out of the rest of the costume.” He rolls his hips and I get back to work, which doesn’t take long.

Soon, Charles stands before me in only the black boxer briefs, and his hand goes to his waistband. My mouth waters as he slowly—oh, so slowly—teases me by pulling down one side, and then the other, until he stands naked in front of me.

I place my index finger to my lips and walk around him, examining every square inch of his sculpted body. “Damn, Mr. Wainwright,” I drawl as if from the South, “you’re a mighty fine specimen.”

He throws his head back and laughs, then reaches out and grabs me around my waist. “You, my dear Goldie, are my Aurumite.” His lips descend on mine. I let my hand roam lower, cupping his hard ass. I pinch.

“Did you just goose me?”

“Yep. But it wasn’t satisfying ’cause it’s so hard.”

He rubs against me. “Not the only thing on me that way.” He kisses me again.

Hyperaware we shouldn't be doing this in his unlocked trailer, which seems to have no privacy, I take a step back. "Charles, I'm not feeling safe in here, if you know what I mean." I cast my eyes toward the door.

His face turns from teasing to understanding. "I get it. Let's take this back to my hotel."

"That's an idea I can get behind." I slap him on the butt as he selects a pair of workout shorts and puts them on, commando.

I'm fixing up my design suitcase when a knock sounds. "Geez."

Charles shouts over me, "Come in."

I busy myself with finishing my task when the new intruder makes herself known. In a very big way. "Charles! So good to see you!"

The hemming tape slips from my fingers. It can't be.

"Lindsay!"

Oh God. His sister is here. All the feelings of insecurity that plagued my childhood rush to the fore. She made my life a living hell. I figured I'd have to see her sometime, but thought it would be back in Chicago, not here. In Italy. The most romantic place on earth just got ruined. I slam my design suitcase closed and grasp the overnight bag Charles had stashed behind it.

Aware of how I feel toward his sister, Charles licks his lips. In a forced upbeat tone, he introduces us. Again. "Lindsay, I believe you know our assistant costume designer, Melody Hunte. Melody, my sister Lindsay."

I place the overnight bag at my feet and draw to my full height. Lindsay Wainwright, in the flesh, stands before me. My back goes straight and my chin rises. “Lindsay. What brings you here?”

For her part, Lindsay’s eyes travel down my body, but I refuse to be cowed. I’m no longer a child and she can’t do anything to demean me. “Melody. I’m surprised to see you.” She shakes her head, then looks at Charles. “I came to see my big brother, of course.”

Mimicking her response, I repeat, “Of course.” I look between the two of them. Both tall, dark-haired, and blue-eyed. Only she sports deep wrinkles around her mouth. At least I don’t have wrinkles. “Well, I should be going. I will see you back here tomorrow at six a.m., Chase.”

“Wait.” He grabs my arm.

I look at his hand, then at his sister and back up at him. “Looks like you have a big evening ahead. A yacht cruise with your sister,” I whisper.

His eyes plead with me, but I’m not going to let Lindsay get her hooks back into me. Of all people, she can’t find out about our relationship. Not yet. I gentle my voice. “You’ll have a nice visit.” I fake a yawn. “Besides, I’m sort of tired. It’s been a long few days and I hardly got any sleep.”

My last words bring a grin to his face. “Yeah, I hear you on that score.” In a louder voice, he says, “I’m thinking of skipping the yacht to have dinner with the little runt.” He nods toward his sister.

“Hey.” Lindsay punches his arm. “Who are you calling a runt, Godzilla?”

He chuckles. While I'm happy to see he has a good relationship with his sister, I don't need to witness it up close and personal. I pick up the bag again. "I'll leave you to it."

When I'm almost at the door, Charles says, "I'm thinking we should meet up here more like five a.m. tomorrow. Distractions can slow us down."

Despite his sister being here, his words make my core clench. "Okay. Have a good evening, Chase. Lindsay." I escape the confines of the trailer and stumble back to my hotel.



“**W**hy the hell did she have to come here?” I’m whining and I know it.

Sophia sighs. “Well, she *is* his sister.” She takes another sip of her Cosmo. “So, tell me, how are things between you and Charles?”

Still fuming over Lindsay’s appearance, I grab a piece of bread from the breadbasket and dip it into olive oil. “Good. I mean, real good.” I take a bite and the deliciousness eases my annoyance somewhat. “He’s wonderful, you know?”

She laughs. “No, I don’t ‘know.’ Care to enlighten me?”

With a dreamy expression, I tell her about our weekend. Not all the details, of course, but she’s a smart girl.

The server brings us our meals as we look out to the water. A huge yacht lumbers by, to which I point with my fork. “That must be Mark’s friend’s yacht. You really should’ve gone, you know. Thomas is on it.”



She tastes her pomodoro sauce and moans. “And miss this amazing meal with my bestie?”

I steal a taste and agree. “Wow.” Digging into my own chicken dish—not broiled, thank you very much—I ask, “Aren’t you interested in Thomas anymore?”

“I am, but Mark’s a, a distraction. He’s everywhere I am, and it’s kinda weird. When I was sick, so was he, and yet he left me chicken soup every day outside my door.”

“That was nice of him.”

“Thomas saw me once, across the street from the drug store, and gave me a half-hearted wave.”

“I’m sorry, girl. I know you were into him. But Mark seems to be a nice guy.”

She busies herself with her pasta. “He’s a manwhore.”

“So was Charles.”

My bestie shovels some food into her mouth. “Mark’s always looking for his next score. I’ve heard he has one conquest per movie he works on, and leaves her in the dust when it wraps. I want no part of that.”

“I could talk with Charles about him.”

“No way!” Her finger roams around the rim of her glass. “Mark is who he is. He’s not for me.”

“If it makes you feel any better, Thomas doesn’t have much time for anything but a meaningless fling. Charles keeps him very busy.” With silly stuff that he should be doing for himself, like booking his own flights.

She taps her fork against the side of her dish. “Really?”

I nod. “I tried to work your name into their conversation today, but I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. He has a full plate. But you know, Mark did specifically ask me to invite you onto the yacht. In front of everyone in the trailer—Charles, Thomas, and Jessa.”

“Jessa was there?”

I cut a piece of chicken. “Yup.”

Sophia eats a few forkfuls. “Okay, enough about me and my dismal love life. What are your plans with Charles?”

I like the fact she uses his real name even if it is a deflection. “We’re going to go to Chicago after we wrap here. Then, I’ll have to return to New York City, while he has to go to LA for the red carpet for *I Was Made for Her*.”

“Why don’t you go with him? I don’t think you’re needed at HBO so soon.”

I shake my head. “Only you know we’re dating. If I walked the red carpet with him, it would be everywhere.”

“And that would be bad because?”

“Can’t you read the headlines now? ‘Daughter of Braxton Hunte Dating Hollywood’s Heartthrob.’ No, thank you.”

“Now, Mel, you’re going to have to get over that. You *are* his daughter. Charles *is* Hollywood’s heartthrob. So what? You’re an amazing costume designer. No matter who he dates, the gossip columns are going to have a field day. Ignore them.”

If only it were that easy. “I know I’ll get there, Sophia, but not yet. I need more time.”

“How does Charles feel about sneaking around?”

“We’re not sneaking.” I drop my fork. “Not really.”

Sophia reaches across the table and places her hand on top of mine. “I know, honey. It’s hard because he’s the lead. I also know you don’t want to be seen as going from being Braxton’s daughter to Chase’s girlfriend.”

My eyes land on the white tablecloth and I smooth out a nonexistent wrinkle.

She presses, “Am I right?”

“Yes,” I whisper. I force my gaze to lock with hers. “Can you blame me? I love my dad so much, but I need to be valued for my own skills. And ...”

She waits for me to continue. “And what?”

My boyfriend elbows everything out of his way, taking over all space in my brain. I’m overwhelmed by the rush of emotions, as my stomach performs major backflips, all my limbs tingle, and heat bathes my entire body. I glance at my bestie, who’s leaning forward in her seat urging me to spill.

I gulp. “And, I think I’m in love with Charles.” Hearing the words out loud makes my heart beat erratically. “I haven’t told him yet,” I whisper.

“You will when the time is right.” She leans back in her chair and beams at me. “I’m so happy for you. Try not to overthink all of this. At the same time, don’t push him away from you, either.”

I brush my palms together, wiping away the dampness. That’s it. I need a break from all things Charles. When the waiter takes away our dirty dishes, I ask, “Want to get a gelato?”

“Now you’re talking.”

We make our way deeper into the town until we end up at my favorite gelato shop. The woman behind the counter recognizes me and reaches for a cup without asking my flavors.

Sophia elbows my torso. “Come here much?”

“Basically every day after filming.” I rub my stomach. “This will end once I’m back in New York.”

“I get it. There’s nothing like real Italian gelato.”

I take my cup from the clerk and Sophia places her order. Once she gets hers, we start walking back to our hotel. “Charles never eats anything as decadent as this.”

“Must be tough being so in shape.”

I giggle. “There isn’t any fat on his body, that’s for sure.”

“Not even a jiggle?”

I savor the hazelnut gelato before responding. “Nope. Could bounce a euro off his ass.”

Laughing, we toss our empty cups into a garbage can and continue walking beside the water to our hotel. I leave her at her door and continue into mine, and flop down onto the bed. The very empty bed. Against my better judgment, I grab my phone and send a text to Charles.

Had a great dinner with Sophia. Hope you are enjoying your visit with your sister.

I keep my personal thoughts about Lindsay out of the text and drop the phone onto the bed. He doesn’t respond.

Sighing, I get up, brush my teeth, and wash my face. I pull out a pair of pajamas and get myself into bed. Turning my

head, I look at the empty pillow. “Good night, my love.” I turn off the lamp and my eyes close.

Until a knock drives them open.

# CHASE



I stand in the empty hallway in front of Melody's door. Pulling my fist back, I rap. It's only nine thirty, so she still could be out on Mark's friend's yacht. I mask my probable disappointment. While she was at a luxurious party, I was eating in the hotel's restaurant with my sister. It was an unexpected surprise to see her, and I'm glad we caught up. I know Melody told me she treated her terribly growing up, but that's ages old. Lindsay's been through so much. My guilt hasn't subsided, no matter how well she's recovering.

My thoughts scatter when the door opens and a drowsy Melody stands before me in the cutest pajamas I've ever seen. Not that I've seen too many, actually. Usually women wear sexy lingerie. Not one of them were as sexy as her.

My brain escapes me, all my finesse lost. "Hi."

"Charles." She plays with her long, loose hair, which hangs past her shoulders. She startles and jumps back into the room. "Come in."

"Thanks." I join her inside and she closes the door.

She looks like a jumpy cat. Where did this weirdness between us come from? "I won't stay if you don't want me to."

“No. I mean, yes, I do want you to stay.”

Relief rushes through me. “I’m glad, because I definitely want to stay with you. Were you sleeping?”

“Not really. I had my eyes closed, but couldn’t relax.”

She’s a bad liar, but I go with it. “Oh.” I reach out and rub her shoulders. “Need a massage?”

“Mmmm, feels good.”

“Let’s get on the bed so I can give you a proper one.” I turn her body toward the bed and tap her ass. “Now get on your stomach.”

Obediently, she lies down as instructed and I straddle her. Leaving her shirt on, I run my fingers beneath the soft fabric and focus my attention on making her relax. Given her satisfied moans, I’m doing a good job.

“Charles, if you continue this, I’ll be asleep in no time.”

I lean down and kiss the back of her neck. In her ear, I reply, “Then I’ll cover you up with the blanket so you can get your rest.”

She twists so she now faces me, her hands landing on my shoulders. “Stay. Please.”

My cheeks inflate. “Since you asked so nicely.”

I toss my shirt over my head. Then I discard my pants and shoes. Wearing only my underwear, I slide next to her.

“I pictured you here with me, you know.”

“You did?”

She nods. “And here you are.”

I raise one eyebrow. “What was I doing? In your fantasy, I mean.”

“Sleeping.”

“I can do that.” I close my eyes and pretend to forget the warm woman lying next to me. And the insistence of my lower half.

Her hand lands on my cheek, and her finger traces my lips. Without opening my eyes, I snag the digit and suck it into my mouth. “I thought you said sleep.”

“I may have been mistaken. You must’ve fallen asleep after I wore you out.”

My eyelids pop open. “Just how did such a slip of a woman do that to big old me?”

She giggles. “It started like this.” Her hands drift down my abdomen, caressing the definition of my ab muscles, causing them to jump and my breathing to hitch.

“Then I did this.” She pinches the waistband of my underwear.

I grab her wrist. “Uh-oh.” Her quizzical look makes me drape my leg over hers. “I think it’s my turn.” I unbutton her top and peel it open, my eyes zeroing in on her nipples, which come to points. I lean over and suckle, her back arching against me.

“Charles.”

Moving between the two peaks, I wait for her to do the thing she does in the back of her throat that lets me know she’s ready for more. I want to give her more. So much more.

“Oh, yeah.” Her arms wrap around my neck and then she makes *the* noise.



I rear back, my eyes now fixated on her pajama bottoms. With a quick motion, I slide them off her body so she's naked before me. "Goldie, you're so beautiful." I position myself between her open legs. My tongue circles her clit.

Melody's head thrashes against the pillows, and her body contracts. Inserting my index finger into her channel, her body's slickness welcomes me.

"Yes, please!"

I continue my assault until her core clenches around my now two fingers, and she cries out in pleasure. Pleased at the orgasm I gave her, I make quick work of my underwear and toss them over the side of the bed.

"Charles." Her hand to the center of my stomach stops me.

"Melody," I reply, kissing her lips and tangling our tongues.

Her hand drops lower and encircles my straining cock. She rubs over my head and brings my pre-cum to her mouth. Those movements are my undoing. Grabbing her arms, I toss them over her head, line up, and enter her body with my own. On my first thrust, I'm overwhelmed with how wet and tight she feels around me. Sensation after sensation rocks my body, unlike anything I've experienced before.

I've never felt this before.

I thrust again.

Bareback.

"Shit. Condom."

Her head whips against the pillow as I try to drag my unwilling body out of hers. "Can you pull out at the last second?"

Inside her body, I try to consider her question. I've never done this before. "Guess there's a first time for everything."

"I trust you."

Her words, coupled with her crossing her ankles around my back, makes me want to make her see stars. She trusts me. *Me*. And she knows more about the real Charles than anyone else. I circle my hips, hitting her in the spot that guarantees her another explosive climax. I don't have to wait long before she screams out again.

Enflamed, I piston in and out of her body. A tingle runs up my spine. Using all my concentration, I pull out of her warm pussy. Holding my throbbing erection, I come all over the tits I had cherished earlier. With effort, I collapse to her side.

She flings her arm over her face. "Wow."

"Agreed."

I wait a minute for my gasping to drop to a mere pant and roll off the bed. In the bathroom, I grab a towel and wet it. Returning to the bedroom, I wipe my seed off her body, ending with a nibble on both nipples. Tossing the towel on the floor, I return to her bed.

Eyes like liquid amber meet mine as her hands encircle my neck. "How can this get better every time we do it?"

I kiss the tip of her nose. "Because of you."

She rests her head on my shoulder and I hold her tight. I've never once considered myself a cuddler, but with her, I love it. I squeeze her naked back, inhaling her fresh scent. "Go to sleep, Goldie."

Her breathing evens out, and I follow her into slumber.

All too soon, my alarm goes off. Turning to shut off my cell before Melody awakens, I slip out of her bed and gather my clothes. I need to get back to my hotel and work out before meeting up with her in my trailer.

I gaze down at the sleeping beauty who pushes me to do more. To be better. To be myself. Like she does. Bending down, I kiss her cheek and whisper, “See you soon.” She doesn’t move.

Gathering my clothes, I put them on and return to my hotel. Given the ungodly hour, no one else is up and about. After a pit stop in my room to change into workout clothes, I head to the gym. For the first time, I’m not alone.

“Hey there, Doc.”

“Mark! Surprised to see you here, dude.” I shake his hand and make my way to an elliptical.

“Yeah, figured I should do something to eradicate last night’s debauchery.”

I chuckle as I start on the machine. “How was the yacht?”

“It was fucking amazing. Too much to eat and drink. The pasta!” He rubs his belly before hitting the weight bench. “Only thing that sucked was Sophia wasn’t there. And where were you? I thought you were going to go?”

“My sister showed up unexpectedly, so I went out to dinner with her.” I keep the rest of my night to myself, honoring Melody’s wishes.

“Sweet.”

He does his reps while the incline pushes me harder. Deciding twenty minutes of cardio is enough for today, I do

the cool down and head toward the pull-up bar. Mark's now at the rower.

“You didn't happen to see Sophia while you were out, did you?”

I shake my head.

“I don't know what it is about her, but she has all my attention. I turned down a couple of women last night. What's wrong with me?”

Resting between sets, I reply, “Sounds like you got it bad.”

“It's probably because she's been dissing me. If she deigned to talk with me, I'd be on to another woman by now.”

Hand on the bar, I reply, “I don't know. She might be the one for you.” I begin this round while stifled outrage comes from the rower.

“Exactly what would you know about finding ‘the one’?” He heads over to some boxes and jumps.

Dropping from the bar, I consider my words carefully. I know a ton about it now, all because of Goldie. “Oh, I don't know, Mark. Seems to me it happens when you least expect it.” I shrug. “From what I've observed, you know.”

He huffs, and not simply from exertion. “Whatever. Are you ready for today's shoot?”

In between exercising, we discuss the upcoming scene and make a few minor changes to our approaches. We're starting to film the movie's climax, where I'm going to manipulate his DNA so it attacks itself and kills Mr. A. We're both more than eager to wrap up and get back to our real lives.

I clap his back. “I'll see you on set. Need to shower and get over to my trailer for costuming.”

He smirks. “Put in a good word with Melody for me. She’s Sophia’s best friend and the only shot I have at getting to her.”

“I’ll try.”

Returning to my room, I shower and dress in record time. Soon, I’m in my trailer grabbing a specialty water. The door opens and a grin crosses my face to welcome my dresser. A brunette walks in instead of the gold I was expecting.

“Lindsay,” falls out of my mouth.

“Hey there. I wanted to spend as much time as possible with you today before I have to head back to Switzerland bright and early tomorrow morning.”

Tamping down my disappointment that Melody isn’t here, I invite my sister in and offer her a water. She holds up her coffee cup.

“So, this is where you’re transformed into Doctor Manipul8?”

“Yeah. Melody does a great job, even if it takes two hours to get me into the suit.”

“Two hours is a crazy-long time.” She wanders around the trailer, touching the bottom half of the costume draped over a chair. “It seems weird that they couldn’t have made the leggings like normal pants. No one else I know ever has to get their pants sewn on them.”

I chuckle at her words, which resemble my initial griping. “I know what you mean. But these fit me like second skin yet don’t look like women’s tights.”

She smiles. “I guess there’s something to be said for that.” She wanders to the back and opens the closet door where the

bodysuit part hangs. She takes out the hanger. “This is some fine workmanship, Charles.”

From my vantage point, she studies the torso part, then turns it around. The door opens again, and my blond beauty ascends. Needing to warn her of Lindsay’s presence, I rush to the front.

“Just so you know, Lindsay’s here,” I whisper.

She stiffens, then throws her shoulders back. “Thanks for telling me.”

I need to get these two together so they can air out their differences—they both have so much to say. If Melody is going to be a part of my family—which I’m hoping she will be—they need to get along. Not now. We haven’t come out as a couple to anyone besides Sophia and I don’t think Lindsay is at the top of Goldie’s list. Melody brushes by me and heads for her workstation.

Swallowing a sigh, I return to her side and take the boxer briefs from her hand. Nodding toward the bathroom, I say, “I’ll go change.” Damn my sister. I had high hopes for this session.

Melody busies herself with setting up the area for me to get sewn into the leggings. On my way to the bathroom, I stop next to my sister, who straightens from her inspection of the bodysuit.

“Hey, I’m getting into costume now. Do you want to stick around here, or catch up later?”

Her eyes trail to the front area when Melody drops her pillow to the ground. Lindsay’s mouth tightens. “I can see we won’t get any quality time together now. How about lunch on set?”

“Sounds good, runt.”

She swats my arm. “Go get ’em, Godzilla. I’ll catch you later.”

I enter the bathroom, clicking the door shut. Lindsay’s footsteps lead her toward the exit and, against my better judgment, I open the door a crack. The two women say each other’s names, then Lindsay exits the trailer. Expelling my pent-up breath, I close the door with a snick and change into the boxer briefs. Airing of grievances will have to happen at a later time.

On bare feet, I stride back into the trailer and approach my woman, who’s muttering something. “What’d I miss, Goldie?”

She twirls around to face me. “What?”

She scans my body. I can’t help myself and flex. Her eyes widen.

I prompt, “You were saying?”

“Oh! Nothing. Nothing at all.” She glances at the clock. “We really should get going on your costume, Charles. No matter how scrumptious you look right now.”

I puff up. “I like the sound of that.”

She giggles. “I bet you do.”

The door to the trailer opens again and she rushes to grab the open-seamed leggings. I pull the waistband up and she’s adjusting the material around my legs when Thomas appears.

“Hey, Chase. Missed you last night.”

“My sister showed up, and we went out to dinner.”

At my words, Melody falls to the pillow on the floor at my feet. She goes about stretching the fabric around my left thigh.

Thomas clicks his pen and starts in on today's schedule. Time flies and soon I'm clad from the waist down. "Excuse me, Char—Chase, can you please walk around so I can ensure the fit?"

"Of course."

I obey her command, and she makes a few more adjustments. "Looks good. Now put on your gloves while I get the bodysuit."

Thomas brings me the silk material, which I slide onto my hands and up my arm. "I'm going to leave you to finish up in here. I'll take care of everything we discussed." He turns to walk away but stops. "Oh, I almost forgot to ask, who are you taking with you to the red carpet for *I Was Made for Her*? I need to let the studio know."

Melody. I want to show her off. Hell, I want to scream our relationship from the rooftops. But I can't. "I haven't given much thought to it. Why don't you select someone for me?"

My PA nods. "What about Lindsay? Being with your sister will guarantee positive press."

From the back of the trailer, Melody drops something, causing both of our heads to swivel. I call out, "You okay back there?"

"Yeah."

I really need to get my sister and my girlfriend together. Their childhood rivalry isn't good for either of them. I return my attention to Thomas, sideswiping his question. "She'll be in Switzerland for a bit."

"Oh, okay." His pen clicks a few times. "Want to run a contest from your social media fans? Winner gets a date?"



“What am I? Eighteen? No. Just pick someone.”

“Fine. The studio wants a name soon.” With that parting shot, he leaves.

Exhaling, I stalk toward the back of the trailer and grab the bodysuit out of Melody’s hands. “I know you want to keep our relationship a secret, but it’s tougher than I thought it would be. I want to take you to the premiere.”

I start to step into the costume but, at the last minute, change my mind and put it over my head. Maybe this peace offering will break the ice?

Her lips widen into a beautiful smile. “I know,” she replies in a softer tone, helping me with the tight material. Which does slip down my body with much more ease than feet first. “I need more time to wrap my head around all this.”

“Don’t take too long.”

Her lips purse. Once I’m situated in the suit, she directs me to do the snaps. Guess my olive branch fractured. Despite having done this countless times, I have a tough time with the damn things. Finally sorted, I put on the socks and boots, pick up my mask, and head toward the front of the trailer.

Before I reach the door, I say, “See you on set.”

Quick steps race down the hallway, and a kiss lands on my cheek. “Break a leg.”

With her lips still sizzling on my face, I make my way to Noble and we begin shooting. Things are moving fast now, as everyone seems to feel the electricity in the air. The movie’s almost done and everything’s running smoothly.

In the middle of a take, I run down the cobblestoned street toward where Jessa’s character is being held hostage. I shout,

“Aurelia!”

As I run, something feels funny.

A breeze where there shouldn't be any.

My bodysuit flies open from between my legs and bunches  
at my torso.

## MELODY



**N**oble calls “action,” and the actors hit their marks. Judith, who sits next to me, whispers, “I was told I’m on the short list.”

“Oh, Judith, that’s wonderful!”

On her other side, Helene agrees. “Yes, I have no doubts that you’ll be chosen. Then you’ll have to name your successor on the show.”

As filming progressed, Helene has been more and more pushy about taking over Judith’s job. I’ve been quiet about my ambition, rather proving my worth by my work. However, since Judith’s promotion seems more likely than before, I chime in, “Will you make that decision, or will the execs at HBO?”

Judith’s eyes trail the actors. “It’s basically my call, with their final blessing. I have to say, I’ve been impressed with both of your work, on the set and here. Maybe I should withdraw my name from Noble’s list so I won’t have to make this decision.”

I smile at her joke. No way would she turn this offer down. Helene, however, puts her hand on Judith’s forearm. “Don’t do that, Judith. You’ve worked too hard to turn back now.”

“Don’t worry, Helene. I was only kidding.”

I watch as Charles runs through the street, screaming for his “girlfriend” who’s being held by Mark. Frowning, I lean forward. Something’s not exactly right with his costume.

He runs and the bodysuit unsnaps, giving the whole set a peek at his fine ass, even if it’s covered by the boxer briefs.

“Oh my God,” I mutter and jump out of my seat. I rush to his side while chaos erupts. Judith and Helene are hard on my heels.

I grab the material around Charles’s abdomen, which should have been securely held in place by the snaps. “Let me look at this!”

Before I can examine it, Helene pushes in and runs her fingers over the snaps.

In a brusque voice, Judith demands, “What happened?” Noble mirrors her sentiment, using more colorful descriptors.

I stand, helpless, while Helene points to something on the bodysuit and Judith ducks her head to inspect it.

My eyes go to Charles, who’s surrounded by women prodding his body. The part that belongs to *me*. He removes the mask, which I take from him, and stormy blue eyes meet mine. “Another wardrobe malfunction?”

“I don’t know what happened yet,” I whisper, still unable to see whatever they’re prodding.

He clears his throat. “Ladies, if you wouldn’t mind, can I get out of this thing?”

Feeling embarrassed for him, I nod. “Yes, let’s get you to your trailer.”

He shrugs. “I can strip out of this damn costume right here. Just don’t feel like having my junk poked when you really only need the bodysuit.”

Heap my own embarrassment on top of me now. I shoo the hands away and reach for the bottom of the costume. Together, Charles and I pull it up his body.

Noble yells, “Everyone, take a lunch break.” Turning back to us, he levels me with a withering stare. “Get this fixed. I want to know what happened.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply, redoubling my efforts to get Charles out of the bodysuit. His furious reaction when his glove got tangled in the boy’s hair replays in my head, making me less effective.

“Step aside, Melody,” Judith demands. She takes over the removal process while I’m relegated to onlooker again. Within minutes, she has my boyfriend out of the costume and takes a long look at the snaps.

What happened to that bodysuit? I checked everything so carefully today, like all days. Nothing was wrong.

Judith holds up the material and moves the snaps, which somehow are loose. “How did this happen, Melody?”

My stomach tightens. “I don’t know. It looked fine in the trailer.”

Charles pipes up. “I had a little trouble snapping them today.”

Shit. This is what my career needed right now. I look at him. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought everything was okay, since I was able to snap them.”

Judith lowers the bodysuit. “Looks like regular wear and tear.”

I step over and lock my gaze with the woman for whose HBO job I’m vying. “May I see it?”

She passes the bodysuit to me. “Is the other suit wearable?”

“Yes.” Thank God I thought to get the other one cleaned and asked Sophia to pick it up for me. With only two suits made, I didn’t want to take a chance of a spill. Of course, I never considered this could be a possibility.

Behind me, Helene snarks, “That’s lucky.”

Ignoring her, I examine the bodysuit. The material around the snaps looks worn. But something’s not right. The snaps themselves are loose as well. How could this have happened? It’s almost as if someone did something to them, the dissolution is so perfect. How could that be?

Lindsay comes up to our pow-wow. “Is everything going to be okay?”

Today’s events rearrange in my head. White-hot heat sears through me. “You!”

All eyes turn to me. I hold up the bodysuit. “This wasn’t any regular wear and tear. I shake the bodysuit. “This was pushed along somehow. Maybe by a solvent of some sort.” I give my childhood nemesis the evil eye. “What did you do?”

Judith is the first to speak. “Melody, the material simply wore out. As you said, you have the other bodysuit all ready for Chase to put on. Switch it out.”

Judith’s final words are drowned out by Lindsay’s screech. “What do you mean, what did I do? You’re his dresser. Seems

to me any problems fall at your doorstep.”

My body tenses as if to spring.

Noble ends the escalating melee. “All right. You”—he points to me—“go get Chase into the other bodysuit. Don’t take more than thirty minutes. Time is money, and this is the second time we’re being held up by wardrobe.”

In a tense tone, Charles says, “Come on. Let’s get this done.” He stalks toward his trailer, and I trail behind like a stupid chastised schoolgirl.

Which I’m not. I *know* the bodysuit was tampered with. No doubt in my mind that his sister did it. She was in the back of the trailer with it, all alone, for a while this morning. She knew it would make me look bad. Motive and opportunity.

Without saying a word, Sophia grabs my hand and diverts me to her locker. I take the other bodysuit and head to the trailer, passing Thomas on the way.

Stomping up the steps, I’m greeted by Charles raking his hand through his hair. “What the fuck did you do out there?”

Still fueled by righteous anger at what his saintly sister did to me, I don’t temper my response. “What *I* did? Are you nuts? Your sister put something on the snaps to make the material disintegrate.”

“How could you say such a thing?”

Indignation races through my blood. “You have absolutely no idea exactly what your sainted sister is capable of. I hold no illusions.” I do a thorough inspection of the replacement bodysuit.

“You need to get this out of your head. Whatever slights you believe Lindsay did to you as a child, you’re both grown

ass women now. Well, at least I know she is.”

I pause in my inspection. “Good to know, asshole.” I triple-check the snaps and surrounding material, all of which appear fine. I shake the garment.

He takes a deep breath. “Listen, Melody, I know my sister. No way would she do this.”

Trying to mimic his stance and lower the temperature in here, I reply, “I know her, too. Better than you.”

“She’s been—” he cuts himself off. Brow furrowed, he directs, “Get me in this damned costume.”

I hold it out for him and together we make quick work of getting him into it. He bends down to snap it, but I stop him. “Let me do it. I want to be sure everything’s okay.”

Stance wide, hands on hips, he glares at me. Ignoring the anger rolling off him in waves, I snap the costume and do one last inspection. All the while overlooking the fact his dick is almost in my face.

“There. I think you’re fine. Walk and check it out.”

He takes a few steps. Everything looks good from here. “How’s it feel?”

“Good.”

“Fine.”

Without another word, he storms out of the trailer. How could Lindsay have put the solvent on without my noticing? Gotta hand it to her, she’s good.

However, I’m better. I’m not going to let her get away with this sabotage. My fingers find the rubber band around my wrist and I pluck it several times.



Back on set, Noble talks with Charles. No, he's *Chase*. I take my seat next to Judith and Helene.

In a terse voice, my boss asks, "Is he all set now?"

"Yes. This suit's fine, as far as I can tell."

Judith nods and Noble calls for quiet on the set. My eyes find Sophia behind a nearby camera, and I send her a silent thanks. She makes the universal motion for "what happened?" I skim the crowd and find Lindsay and point. Sophia dips her head. The clapper comes down on the take, and Sophia focuses her attention to the camera.

The rest of the day's shooting goes off without a hitch. Throughout, I try to come up with a scenario where I can confront Lindsay. She will *not* get the better of me now.

When Noble calls it quits for the night and summons the actors for a meeting, I make my way toward Chase's trailer. To confront my no-good, unsupportive boyfriend. The dammed jerk.

I set up my things to get him out of the costume. Thomas is here and, even though I'm still hopping mad, I remember Sophia wants to get to know him better. I modulate my anger out of my voice. "Hey, Thomas. Chase should be here shortly."

"Thanks." He pauses. "Hey, good job earlier."

I incline my head.

"Well, there's nothing much going on now, so I'll be out of your hair in no time."

This is for Sophia. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Going back to that club we went to when we first got to Amalfi. You?"

“Sounds fun. Would it be okay if Sophia and I joined you?”

He clicks his pen. “The more the merrier. A few others from the crew will be there.”

All discussion ceases when Charles enters the trailer. Thomas intercepts him to sign some documents. Before he leaves, Thomas invites him to the club.

Charles says, “Not tonight. I’m beat and need to get a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow’s the last shoot.”

Alone in the trailer, I focus on my job. With efficient movements, I cut him out of the leggings. Before I can instruct him to unsnap the bodysuit, it’s already halfway up his torso. We don’t exchange more than ten words. He goes into the bathroom to change into his own clothes, while I clean up my stuff.

Dressed in street clothes, he looks even more delicious. Damn him. Grabbing a fizzy water from the fridge, his clipped tenor reaches my ears. “I think it’s best if we spend the night apart. I’m sorry you hate my sister so much, but I know she didn’t do anything to my costume. She never would do anything to hurt me on purpose.”

I shove the last items into my tote. “See you tomorrow, Mr. Movie Star,” I huff.

We part ways and my anger dissipates, leaving a wake of hurt and betrayal. He wouldn’t even let me talk. Defended his sister at all costs. What about me, his girlfriend? I stop as if I was the one being sewn into a costume. Am I still his girlfriend? What sort of couple doesn’t talk things out? My parents always have open lines of communication. Maybe I was wrong about Charles.

Chase.

My heart drops and I slam my hand over my mouth to prevent a wrenching sob from spilling out.

The trudge to my hotel takes forever. When I reach my floor, Sophia's sitting outside my door. "Hey, Mel," she says as she stands. "You look like you could use a drink."

I unlock the door and we enter. "You're right. I know just the place. Thomas invited us to that club we went to before."

She smiles. "He did?"

At least one of us might have a good night. "Yup. So let's get changed and head over."

"Do you want to talk about what happened today?"

"No."

She sighs. "Fine. I'll meet you here in an hour." She leaves me alone.

Without any interest in going out tonight, I shower and put on the hot pink dress Charles—Chase—bought for me in Positano. I'll show that stupid Doctor Manipul8. I'm applying my lipstick when Sophia knocks. You can tell we're besties, since she's wearing the violet dress, also from Positano.

Filled with people from the movie, the club is packed. After getting our Cosmos, Sophia spies Thomas across the dance floor and passes me her drink. Alone, I watch as she approaches him. Mark materializes out of thin air and grabs her hand, twirling her around. He leads her two left-feet in a Latin rhythm.

Holding both drinks, I sip mine, alone, feeling *his* defection with every swallow. A couple of minutes later, Sophia rejoins me.

“Why aren’t you out there dancing? You were near Thomas.”

“Yeah, but Mark came up and then Thomas went off with Tina from makeup.” She reclaims her Cosmo and gulps it down in one swallow.

I wrap my arm around her. “Stupid men.”

A new voice intrudes in our conversation. “I’m glad you’re here.”

I turn around and Lindsay, holding a glass of what appears to be water, half-smiles. My entire body tenses.

She starts, “I wanted to talk with you. Both.”

Sophia and I exchange glances, then focus on our schoolgirl tormentor. Lindsay was as awful to Sophia as she was to me growing up.

I lift my chin. “I can’t imagine what you want to talk about.”

She tips her glass, leaving a sheen on her lips. “I bet you can’t. Listen, I’ve made a list of people I need to talk to. It must be serendipity because you’re both on it, and you’re both here.”

Sophia’s hand lands on her hip. “Yay. Serendipity.”

Charles’s sister takes a deep breath. “Let me talk for five minutes without interrupting me, okay. This is hard.”

I cross my arms over my chest.

Sophia looks at her watch. “Fine. Start.”

Lindsay bends down and leaves her glass on a nearby table, then stands and rubs her right hand up and down her left

arm. She clasps her hands in front of her. For someone who wanted to talk with us, she's not saying a word.

Sophia prompts, "Four minutes, thirty seconds."

Lindsay fists her right hand, and her knuckles turn white. "Well, I want to first apologize to you. I was a terrible child and I did awful things to you growing up. I am sorry. This is no excuse, but I've had some issues. Big ones. You see, I ..."

She plays with her dark brown hair. So like her brother's.

"We all had problems," I note.

Sophia rolls her eyes.

"Yeah, well, I'm sure yours didn't land you in the hospital with alcohol poisoning. And then in rehab for six months. Both, twice." Her leg bounces. "Some people take a little longer to learn."

Sophia's eyes widen and I absorb her meaning. Neither one of us knew she was battling alcoholism.

"I've just finished a six-month stint in rehab in Switzerland. I have a sponsor, who's really helped me. I made a list of people to whom I owe apologies. You two were at the top of it. I am so very sorry for how I treated you growing up. I was wrong to say you were riding on your father's coattails, Melody. I was wrong to insinuate you didn't belong at our school because you were on scholarship, Sophia. You don't have to accept my apologies, and I do understand if you don't. I wanted you to know some background about me, and I feel awful about how I treated you back then." She bows her head.

Well, shoot. She seems contrite. Doesn't erase what she did to us, though. Sophia and I lock eyes, and my bestie starts, "Lindsay—"

Her head pops up.

“When did you start drinking?”

“I was ten. Charles—Chase—was drinking with his friends then, and I emulated him. Beer at first. Then vodka became my liquor of choice.”

Sophia continues, “How did you get your hands on that when you were only a kid?”

“I stole leftovers from my brother and his friends. I appropriated from my parents. I became quite creative.”

Her confession clicks things into place for me. She was my major tormenter since we were ten. When she started drinking. “I can’t even imagine drinking at that age.”

For the first time, Lindsay’s lips twist into a slight smile. “When you’re raising yourself, practically, you’d be surprised at what you can get into.”

I remember Charles telling me their parents were absentee, both partners at a large law firm in Chicago. Not mean, simply not around much. Which gave Lindsay room to get into a lot of trouble. Clearly.

Still, she needs to hear this. “You were the ringleader of the mean girls. You made our lives a living hell.”

Sophia adds, “We couldn’t go to school functions without you and your friends making us feel like pariahs.”

“I know. I’m so sorry. I can’t go back in time, but please believe me when I say I wish I could.”

We let her confession hang for a moment. I reach for the knitting needles usually in my hair, only to drop my arms when I realize it’s loose. “I believe your disease made you do and say those awful things when we were growing up. I’m not

speaking for Sophia here, but I accept your apology. I can't forget what you did, though."

Sophia says, "I'm with Mel. I appreciate your apology, but you caused quite a lot of damage."

"I, I can't expect anything more."

I study her expression. Since we're going for honesty here, I push, "And Char—Chase's costume today. Did you have anything to do with the snaps?"

She places her right hand over her heart. "No. I swear to you, I would never do that to Charles."

Her brother's the actor of the family—no way could she feign such innocence. My stomach flips as I lean into Sophia's ear. "Do you believe her?"

After a moment, she nods.

A buzzing starts in my head having nothing to do with the club's music. Ignorant of my inner turmoil, Lindsay holds out her left hand, where a diamond sits. "I'm turning my life around. I'm engaged now. My, my fiancé is finishing up his rehab in Switzerland in a month, which is where I'm headed tomorrow. He's wonderful."

Sophia answers for us. "Congratulations."

Lindsay plays with her engagement ring. "Well, I'm going to go now. I only came to this club because I heard you were here. I don't make it a habit of going into places like this. Not anymore. Goodbye." With a wave, she disappears toward the exit.

Two things hit me at once. One, Lindsay was as tormented as us growing up. The pity for her that emerged when Charles and I were in Ravello reappears. However, it in no way

excuses the awful way she tormented Sophia and me. The painful scars she left behind run way too deep.

Two, I need to figure out who really ruined his costume. If not Lindsay, then who? Who hates Charles so much?

As I'm puzzling through this mystery, one more thing clobbers me over the head. I owe Charles a big apology.



## CHASE



I shovel the last bit of broiled fish into my mouth. Thank God shooting ends tomorrow. Not a day too soon. Well, yesterday would've been better.

My fork clatters to the plate.

What the fuck happened with my costume today? I know Lindsay wouldn't have done anything to it, but she did have access. Clearly Melody convicted her already. Losing my appetite, I leave my half-eaten dinner on the dining room table and flop onto the sofa. An ad for a musical runs on the TV.

"Fuck you," I yell at the screen and hit the power button.

Flinging my arm onto my forehead, I study the ceiling and focus on Lindsay. If only I could explain my sister's life better to Melody. Maybe she would've given her a break today. Although, I did tell her we basically raised ourselves with the help of some half-assed nannies our parents employed, more to keep up with the Joneses rather than provide us with any true guidance.

No, that's my sister's story to tell if and when she feels ready. The fact she got hooked on booze when she was a kid still tears me up inside. To think I contributed to her downfall ... I pick up my phone and text her an encouraging note. She has so much strength to overcome the addiction.

Now she's getting married. She showed me the rock last night. I'm happy she's found someone who fits her so well, and definitely need to meet him once he gets out of rehab.

My smile turns downward when thoughts about my own personal life surface. Melody seemed to be perfect for me. Until she called me "Movie Star" today. She's like the rest of them.

I sit upright and stare blankly around the hotel room. My one-hundred-fiftieth such room this year, but who's counting?

Rage and disgust and frustration roil through me.

I jump to my feet.

Tossing my shirt onto the floor, I head into the bedroom. Might as well try to get some shut eye so I'll be ready for the big day of shooting tomorrow. If only I didn't have to meet up with *her* at the ass crack of dawn to get sewn into my fucking costume. One more day. That's it. I'll never have to see her again.

The doorbell rings. One of the perks of being in the hotel's presidential suite is a doorbell rather than a knocker. Must be the wait staff coming to clean up from my dinner. Without bothering to put my shirt back on—why should I since my physique is honed to perfection, plus it's what's expected of me—I yank open the door and turn my back.

"The meal's on the table."

"Did you eat it?"

Melody's voice halts me in my tracks. I pivot toward the door to verify I didn't mishear. Nope. She stands in the hot pink dress I bought for her in Positano, her hair loose around her shoulders, wearing a pair of five-inch stilettos.

My hands contract into fists at my side. “What are you doing here?”

She stares at the floor. In a small voice, she asks, “Can I come in?”

“Why? Want to see how a movie star spends his evenings?”

She raises her gaze to mine. “Charles, no. I want to talk with you.”

The pleading in her amber-hazel eyes beckons to me. My heart pounds, but my brain refuses to agree. Pushing down the surging hope at her use of my given name, I reply, “You’ve said enough.”

She looks down the hallway and her chest expands. I shove my hands into my back pockets to stop them from reaching out to her.

“Charles,” she tries again, “I owe you a big apology.”

Out of everything that could’ve come out of her mouth, such a line would’ve rated a nine on the Rotten Tomatoes scale. Perhaps a ten? My pulse accelerates. Without moving, the words “Come in” are wrenched from my mouth.

The door shuts with a barely audible snick, and I close my eyes. Not ready to look at the one woman on earth who I thought was different, I spin around. Her next words suck the air right out of my body.

“I was wrong about your sister. I’m very sorry.”

I cross my arms, my gaze landing on the carpet.

“She told us about her drinking problem.”

“Problem?” I clench my jaw. “She almost died. Twice.”  
That I know of.

Her quiet voice is closer to me. “She told us.”

I step toward the balcony, trying to keep some distance between her and me. Each step I take is more difficult than the last. My resolve wavers. “Us?”

“Yes. Sophia and me.”

Her reflection in the sliding glass door becomes clearer as she approaches. My body stiffens. “Oh.”

Her image disappears as she stands directly behind my body. I move to the side and her reflection reappears. Her face is contorted in anguish.

My resolve falters.

She reaches out and touches my forearm, which tenses. My head turns to look at her fingers. Long, capable, and filled with talent.

“I had no idea, and I understand why you kept her story to yourself. Even when I told you some of what she doled out to me growing up.” She remains still. “I’m sorry I accused her today.”

I dip my head.

She blurts, “I was blinded by fury. At her for being my childhood tormentor. At you for defending your sister.” She inhales. “I lashed out, and I was wrong.”

One shred of hostility remains. Is she also sorry for throwing the title of Movie Star at me? I remain motionless. Waiting.

When she doesn't say another word, pain lances through my body and I step away from her touch. In a strangled voice, I reply, "Thank you."

"What more can I say?"

My hand rubs against my mouth. She's apologized for so much, but still not *that*. I whisper, "I guess goodbye."

Her harsh intake of air reaches my ears, but I don't move. She takes a step away, and another, and another. With every footfall, I stifle my urge to beg her to repent for calling me a "movie star."

She stops in front of the door. "Charles, you're the best man I've ever met. You're kind and funny and sweet and talented. I have no doubt you'll achieve all the success you desire."

Those are not the words of someone who only views me as a movie star. The door opens and I turn around. "Wait!"

Her eyes meet mine.

Her regret. Her sorrow.

They quell my pain.

She whispers, "I love you."

My feet propel my body across the room and I spin her around in my arms, closing the door and pushing her against it. She's never said those words to me. Given my upbringing, I've still never uttered them to any woman outside a sound studio. Ever.

Bracing myself away from her on the doorframe, I rasp, "You don't think of me as some movie star?"

Her face squinches. “No. You’re so much more. You’re a real actor. A truly wonderful man.”

At her description of me, my heart expands. A sense of connection to this woman fills my being. Yet I can’t utter those three words. Not yet. Instead, I close my arms around her. “Oh God, Goldie.” I bury my face in her hair—the locks that first caught my attention.

Her palm caresses my cheek. “I’m so sorry.”

I grab her lips with my own. “Stop saying that. I forgive you. I’ll always forgive you.”

“I promise not to ever jump to conclusions again.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” She closes the gap between us, and all talking ceases.

Later, I stroke her bare arm across my equally naked torso. Her leg tangles with mine. “I was so scared I’d never be here again.”

“You belong here. I couldn’t imagine sleeping without you.”

She giggles. “Then it’s a good thing that I came here tonight.”

I roll her onto her back and settle myself on top of her. “A very good thing.”



I return from my early morning workout—I won’t miss these early morning call times, that’s for sure. “Are you ready

to sew me into that damn Doctor Manipul8 outfit one last time?”

“I’m going to miss it,” she replies, standing in front of the kitchen’s island.

“Are you serious?” At her nod, I continue, “You can always put a pillow on the floor and kneel before me any time you’d like.”

She rolls her eyes. “In your dreams.”

I hold up my phone. “Better take a few photos today then.”

She giggles, but her face turns serious. “I’ve been thinking. We know your sister didn’t touch your bodysuit.” She inhales. “But who did?”

“You’re sure someone tampered with it, and it wasn’t simple wear and tear?”

“Yes, I’m positive. It was too perfect not to have been tampered with.”

“I really don’t know. My trailer always has a bunch of people in it.”

She sighs. “Who would do it, though? Do you have any enemies on set?”

I consider everyone in the movie. “I can’t think of anyone here. If we were in LA, I’d say some actors aren’t too happy with me because I snagged a role from them.”

She plays with her hair. “Lindsay showed up unexpectedly—did anyone else?” At my frustrated head shake, she implores, “Well, keep your thinking cap on. Maybe someone will come to mind.”

“Will do. This is my third time playing Troy Oro, you know. If someone was angry about losing the role to me, they would’ve done something earlier.”

“I was thinking that, too. However, the damage to the bodysuit didn’t happen by itself. I’m positive of it.”

At her determined look, I caress her cheek. “I believe you.”

She tilts her head into my palm. “Okay, stud. I’m running back to my hotel room to change and I’ll meet you in your trailer in thirty minutes.”

“If I didn’t say so before, I’m mad as hell you wore that dress out without me.”

She rises to her tiptoes and kisses me. My hands land on her waist and slide down to her ass. After a minute, she steps back. “I’ll model it, with a couple others, for your private pleasure.”

“That’s what a man wants to hear from his girlfriend.”

She beams and slips into her stilettos. “I’ll see you there soon. You need to take a shower, though. You stink from your workout.”

“Actors don’t stink.”

“Ha! And rock stars don’t sweat.”

I capture the sassy woman and wrap her in my stinky body, kissing her thoroughly. When we part, we’re both breathing hard. I slap her ass. “See you there.”

When she leaves, I hop into the shower and get dressed. Beating her to the trailer, I chug my specialty water. The door opens and, instead of my girlfriend, Thomas enters.



“Hi, Chase. Are you ready for your final shoot as Doctor Manipul8?”

“I’m so ready to be done with this costume, that’s for sure.” We high five.

“I wanted to catch you before all hell broke loose once the shoot is done.” He clicks his pen. “I’ve arranged for you to bring Cherie Adams to the red carpet.”

He looks at me expectantly, wanting praise for scoring one of the hottest young actresses as my date. I fail to applaud. I want to bring Melody, now more than ever.

“Did you hear what I just said? *The* Cherie Adams will be on your arm.”

“I heard you. Whatever.”

“Dude. Cherie Adams is not a ‘whatever.’ She’s the ultimate.”

No one compares with Goldie. “Yeah.” I finger the bodysuit hanging up. “Fine.” I double-check the snaps.

Thomas’s eyebrows disappear into his hairline. Behind him, the trailer door opens and Melody jumps in.

“I’m so sorry it took me longer than I thought to shower and get here, Charles!” She stops dead when she realizes we’re not alone. “I mean, Chase, I apologize for getting here late.”

“That’s okay, Melody. I haven’t been here long. Thomas and I were wrapping up some details.”

Thomas’s eyes take on a calculating beam. He looks between Melody and me several times and clicks his pen. “I just told him I scored Hollywood’s hottest star to be on his arm for the *I Was Made for Her* red carpet. The media will go crazy.”

“Oh.” Melody drops her tote bag next to her design suitcase and opens the top level. “Who, exactly, is that?”

Thomas straightens. “Cherie Adams.”

Goldie’s face takes on a decidedly green hue. “Wow. Yes, she is quite the score, Thomas.”

The pen’s clicking is the trailer’s only noise. Until Melody gives me the boxer briefs. “I need to get sewing.”

Before I move, Thomas says, “I’ve got tons to do for tonight’s wrap party. It’s the end of an era. Gonna be a blast.”

“Great. I’ll see you back here later.”

While he ambles down the hall, I rush into the bathroom and change into Troy Oro’s underwear. Nearly naked, I stride into the main area and grab the leggings. Sliding them up my body, I say, “I want to walk the red carpet with you.”

“I know you do. But even if I had changed my mind, Thomas already has lined up your date for the evening.”

“No one but you is my type.”

“After this red carpet’s over, we’ll come out as a couple, okay? I promise.”

Elation overcomes me for a moment. “I wish we could do it now.”

She drops the pillow to the floor, needle in hand. “Not too much longer.”

Bending down, I kiss her lips. “I’m holding you to that, Miss Hunte.”

She giggles as she sews me into the costume.

## MELODY



I pass Charles the mask and give him one last go-over. Adjusting his gloves, I say, “Perfect. You’re ready for your close-up, Mr. Wright.”

He puts the mask over his face and becomes the superhero. “The only up close and personal I want is with you. Between the sheets.” He reaches for my breasts. “Or on the dining room table. Or on the balcony. In the shower.”

“You!” I swat his hands away and finish cleaning up from the two-hour process. Even though he hasn’t said the words, I’m sure he loves me. I can be patient.

Our banter is cut off when the trailer door swings open. My best friend walks in, lugging one of her cameras. She appears confused.

I approach her. “Sophia?”

She starts, “After you left last night, I got to thinking. I’ve been doing some extra camerawork unrelated to the movie while we’ve been here.”

I nod, but Charles takes off the mask and cocks his head. “She’s been refining her camera skills with an online course, specializing in night-time shoots,” I clarify.

Sophia waves her hand. “Right. Anyway, once I got over the shock of what Lindsay told us last night, I went back to my room and was playing around with what I’ve shot over the past week. I think I found something interesting.”

Did she uncover who ruined the costume? I can’t control my excitement. “What?”

With a small smile, she sets up her monitor and presses play. “Watch this right here.”

The camera’s pointed at the entire trailer area, not only to Charles’s. The time stamp shows it’s 10:00 p.m., and several people mill around. I focus on his trailer as people wander about, but no one enters. A couple minutes pass and still this trailer remains empty.

I turn to my bestie. “Sophia, I don’t think there’s anything.”

Next to me, Charles stills. He bends and gets closer to the monitor. “Shit. Rewind that part, Sophia, please.”

With a satisfied smirk, she does. “I stopped watching right here and ran over to show you.”

I direct my attention to what’s captivated my boyfriend and best friend. A shadowy figure wearing dark clothes and a beanie lurks around the area. He bypasses several other trailers and slinks over right to Charles’s, careful not to get caught in any light. His head swivels as if to confirm no one saw him, and the figure pulls something out of his pocket.

My breathing accelerates. “It’s a key!”

“It is,” Sophia confirms.

He slips into the trailer and doesn’t reappear for ten minutes, during which time none of us move an inch. When

the door reopens, the figure slips out and walks away from the camera. I'm about to say something when he stops and turns around, a light catching on his face for a split second.

Charles commands, "Freeze it right there."

Sophia rewinds the video and stops it. Even with the light, it's still hard to discern facial features.

The height and build are hard to discern without something to compare them to. I say who I think it is, ready to be disproven. "No way is that Thomas."

Charles's brows form a V. "I'm praying it isn't."

Was I right?

A knock sounds and we all jump back as if we were doing something wrong. The man himself enters. "Are you ready? Noble's getting antsy."

Sophia turns off the screen.

Charles's cheek twitches. "I'll be right there. Just doing a final test of the suit."

Thomas crosses his arms over his chest. Next to me, Charles walks toward the back of the trailer and returns. "It feels fine."

"Great." I force my voice to remain steady. "You're ready for your last outing as Doctor Manipul8."

Without giving away his feelings, Charles passes by us and leads the way toward the set. Leaving her equipment in the trailer, Sophia and I follow. Walking with us, Thomas asks, "Did he seem funny to you?"

"Chase? No, he's fine. Must be last shoot jitters." I've never heard of such a thing, but it's the best I could do as I

may be walking next to the man who deep-sixed my career. Well, almost. Not if I have anything to say about it. But why would he embarrass Charles? Is he jealous?

When we get to the shoot, Sophia leaves to take up her position at the camera. I nod to Thomas and sit next to Judith, never letting him out of my sight. The actors huddle off to the side.

Judith asks, “Is everything all right with the costume today?”

“Yes. I triple-checked everything. Thank God this is the last day.”

Helene takes the seat on the other side of Judith. “Has Noble made a decision about his next movie? Have you gotten the job?”

Our boss shakes her head. “Haven’t heard yet. Although, given the mishaps on the set, I’m not too confident.”

Guilt races through me. “I really hope they don’t reflect on you, Judith. Your designs were amazing. Any problems were fixed quickly.”

Helene leans back. “You’ll get it. I’m sure.” She pauses. “All you’ll have to do is decide on your successor on *Ladies of the Abbey*.”

Which better be me, I finish the thought in my head.

The actors break up and take their places. Quiet is called and silence descends.

Hours later, they break for lunch. During the entire shoot, I’ve been mentally replaying the video Sophia showed us. If only there was better lighting. The clothes he wore were dark

and ill-fitting, as if he was trying to hide every last piece of himself. Skull cap included.

Wanting to be alone with my thoughts, I find a quiet corner to eat my very last Kraft services focaccia sandwich. I will *not* miss the same old boring food on set, that's for sure. At least HBO switches the menu up. Although, the dinners in Italy do rock.

I eat what I originally deemed the most delicious sandwich ever without tasting it. Charles sits with the cast across the way, laughing at something Mark said. Why would Thomas do this? What's he hoping to gain?

Sophia's tray lands next to mine. "I want to watch the tape again, Mel. That's all I've been able to focus on today, despite the high action we're filming."

"Yeah, me too. We could go back to Charles's trailer when you're done and see if we can pick up any more clues."

She bites her sandwich. "Yeah, I'd like that. I can't believe Thomas did this. Why would he?"

"I was thinking the very same thing."

She tosses the remainder of her sandwich onto the plate and stands. "Come on, let's go. We need to get to the bottom of this."

Without a word, I trail her as we skirt around the boisterous group and head to Charles's trailer. Inside, we boot up the monitor again and watch what we saw before, still without any further clarity. This time, however, we let the tape roll a little longer, hoping to catch another glimpse of the intruder.

Our patience is rewarded five minutes later.

The dark figure reemerges underneath another light in the background. I point. “There! There he is again!”

“Ahead of you, girlfriend,” she replies as she presses a bunch of buttons.

The figure is now much closer, the foreground cut out. We watch as he takes the hat off his head and a shock of short, red hair comes into focus. Our gasps ring out.

Turning to each other, we both say in unison, “Helene.”

My hand flies to my mouth. “I can’t believe it!”

Sophia packs up her equipment. “I can. She wants the lead costume designer job on HBO when Judith gets named to do Noble’s new movies. She’d stoop to nothing to get it. She knows her work isn’t up to your standards, so she decided to make you look bad.” She zips up the case. “Only she didn’t. She didn’t count on you to have had the first bodysuit cleaned. She certainly didn’t count on *me* to rat her out.”

I give her a huge hug. “Which means Thomas is innocent.”

“It does.” She passes me a camera bag and we leave the trailer, desperate to get back to set and expose the saboteur.

When we arrive, I catch Charles’s eye and he excuses himself from the table. To my shock, Mark joins him as he approaches us. Sophia turns her attention to putting her equipment down on the table, taking the bag I was carrying from me.

My boyfriend comes right to the point. “Did you find something?”

“A picture is worth a thousand words, don’t they say?” Sophia pulls out the monitor. She starts the video from the moment Helene turns into the light and walks away.



Charles says, “We already saw this part.”

I reply, “But not the next.”

When Helene goes to toss the beanie away, Sophia stops the video and enlarges it on her as the red bob is exposed. Both men have the same reaction as we did.

Charles whispers, “Why didn’t I think of her sooner?”

Mark locks eyes with Sophia. “You deserve an Academy Award for this footage.”

Sophia blushes under his praise. I wrap my arm around her shoulders. “You do.”

Charles rises to his feet. “Let’s go. Hand me the monitor, Sophia. We need to talk with Noble.”

The four of us head to the director. I separate from them and ask Judith and Helene to join us. Keeping my eye on the traitor in our midst, we stop behind the table where Sophia has her equipment spread out.

Charles says, “Sophia here is the true genius.”

Mark places his hand on my bestie’s shoulder. My attention diverts from their interesting interaction when Noble speaks, “Judith. I’m glad your entire team is here. Sophia was moonlighting to improve her camera skills and caught something she wants us to see about the last wardrobe mishap.”

Sophia turns on the video and the newcomers have the same reactions as we did when we first saw it. Helene’s hand covers her mouth when she first shows up on screen, then her shoulders drop when her subterfuge isn’t uncovered.

Noble notes, “Nice angle. Too bad the person is so well-disguised.”

Pride on Sophia's behalf surges. I say, "Just wait."

Helene's arm drops to her side and she scans the area. As if she's looking for an escape route. Charles moves his position to be on her right, and Mark to her left. I slide back to be behind her. *Gotcha.*

Before we get to the part where she takes off her hat, Sophia once again enlarges the video on Helene. When her red hair is uncovered, Noble swings to face the culprit. For her part, Helene turns to run and realizes she's surrounded.

Judith's steel-laden icy voice freezes everyone in place. "Helene!"

Noble's not so restrained. He bellows, "Security!"

Helene doesn't remain silent. She shoves her finger into my chest. "You! You're getting everything that's mine. What I've worked for all my life. All you had to do was be born to that rock star, and doors opened for you. You waltzed onto our show, while I struggled for years at every turn."

Her words lance through me. I take a step back to dislodge her finger, and words stumble from my mouth. "That's not true. None of it is."

Judith raises her hand. "Cease, Helene."

Two men wearing "security" T-shirts join our group. Noble points to Helene. "Get her out of my sight. I want her prosecuted for tampering with my costumes." He wheels around to my former colleague. "I intend to make sure you never work another day in this business. You'll consider yourself lucky to get a job as a department store's window merchandiser once you get out of prison."

Helene blanches but doesn't resist as one of the security team pulls her away from us. Sophia turns over a thumb drive

to the other man, who follows his partner.

Noble takes a few moments for his breath to calm. “Sophia, I’m more than impressed.”

She bows her head. “Thank you.”

He nods and addresses Judith, “If it wasn’t for you and”—he looks at me—“you, this film wouldn’t have stayed on track. Hell, I wonder if she imported whatever germ it was that made us all sick.”

Judith begins, “Noble, I’m so very sorry. I had no idea she was so unhinged.”

Noble raises his hand. “I believe you. You told me she’d worked with your team for years. I’m confident nothing like this happened before.”

My boss licks her lips. “No.”

He plows through. “Right. That all being said, and weighing all the equities, I’ve decided to bring you along with me on my new films. Despite all this, I admire how you handled all setbacks. You were prepared to change course on a dime and came up with solutions rather than excuses. I need that on my team.”

Judith inhales. “I’m honored.” She pauses. “I accept.”

Charles and I exchange glances. Noble continues, “I’ll have the contract drawn up. Now, if all this unpleasantness is behind us, I’d like to finish up *Doctor Manipul8*.” He claps as if to say “break,” and stalks toward the director chair.

The rest of us remain in place, speechless. I stop myself from flinging into Charles’s arms. It’s over. Helene’s been exposed. She’s gone.

Sophia starts to collect her equipment, and Mark jumps in to help her. Charles takes a couple of steps backward and I follow. He whispers, “I want to fuck you so hard right now.”

His crude words bring a smile to my face. “Looks like that will have to wait. Right now, the hot Doctor has a movie to finish.”

“You better be ready.”

“Oh, I am.”

We part ways. Returning to my seat, I take a deep breath. I can’t believe Helene would go to such terrible lengths to hurt me and boost her own career. Still, I can’t shake her comment that I only got the job because of my dad.

Judith sits down. “I haven’t missed how hard you work, Melody. Thank you for always being ten steps ahead.”

I incline my head.

“I want to offer you a choice. I can’t imagine doing a movie without you at my side. Yet I know the HBO show needs a steady, capable hand. So, it’s up to you. Which position do you prefer?”

This is the moment about which I’ve been dreaming for years. The lead costume designer on *Ladies of the Abbey* or Judith’s assistant on Noble’s next films? For me, the choice has already been made. I should be feeling joy, but old insecurities about my dad have resurfaced. They’re never far away.

I lick my lips. Instead of answering her question, I ask my own. “Are you asking Braxton Hunte’s daughter for the notoriety it’ll bring, or are you asking Melody Hunte?”

I hold my breath.

“You’ve never been anyone else to me except for Melody.” She leans forward. “Your parentage never figured into my equation.”

Tears well up. “The press release when I was hired said—”

“Was done by HBO’s PR team. No, Melody. I never would’ve hired you if you weren’t qualified. I’d say a degree from NYU made you eminently qualified.”

Air rushes out of my body. I earned my position all on my own. Still. “And now, you’re asking because Helene is gone and there’s no one else?”

Judith shakes my shoulders. “Listen to me, young lady. Do you know how many costume designers there are? I could snap my fingers and have a stack of qualified résumés on my desk in the morning. No, this is not some pity ask, if that’s what you’re thinking. You’ve proven yourself time and again. Even here, when Helene tried to ruin the Doctor Manipul8 costume, you had a backup all ready to go. Only an experienced designer would’ve thought so many steps ahead.”

Her words warm my heart. Before I can respond, she continues, “And another thing. Before all this came out, right when I was put in the running for Noble’s movies, I *knew* I wanted you to be my right-hand. My only real issue was figuring out a way to tell Helene. You’re young, yes, but you have a great head on your shoulders, killer instincts, and fantastic work ethic. I haven’t seen such a combination in a designer since, well, me.” She grins.

I blink. “Really?”

She removes her hands. “Yes. Really. Now the question remains. Do you want to stay in television, or do you want to join me in this exciting world of movies?”

This is happening. I made it so. “You know I love you, right, Judith?”

“What’s not to love?”

I huff a laugh at her attempt to interject levity into the situation. “Nothing. I admire your career and the steps you’ve taken. I’ve learned so much from you. As between your two amazing offers, though, I have a clear preference.” I wave to the set. “While all this is challenging, I much prefer the family we’ve created on the show. I’d love to take over your position on HBO.”

She snaps. “Done. I will recommend to the brass you become the lead costume designer on *Ladies of the Abbey*. Although, I admit I’ll miss working with you.”

Inside I scream, “I got the job.” Outwardly, I beam at my almost-former boss. “And I you.”

Noble yells, “Quiet on the set! This is the last scene to be shot, and before we start, I want to say thank you for all of your hard work. This hasn’t been an easy time for any of us, and I appreciate everything you all have done to wrap up the Doctor Manipul8 trilogy. Now, let’s get rolling.”

While they film several takes of the scene during which Doctor Manipul8 kills Mr. A—poor Mark dies over and over again—I squirm in my seat, hardly able to contain my excitement. I want to tell Charles, my parents, Sophia, and everyone on the show. I start plans about certain changes I’ve been contemplating.

Lost in my thoughts, I’m shocked when Noble yells, “CUT! That’s a wrap!!”

I, together with everyone in the cast and crew, jump to our feet and clap. I have only one job left, and that’s cutting

Charles out of the costume. Bursting with excitement, I hug both my soon-to-be former boss, then my best friend, and everyone in the cast. Finally, I make my way to the trailer.

“Mel, wait up!”

I spin in the direction of Sophia’s voice, and she rushes toward me. Her flushed face indicates she has big news. Before she reaches me, I ask, “What’s up?”

“Noble pulled me aside and he complimented me, again, on my camera skills. Then he asked me. No, not really asked, more like *told* me I was going to be working with him on his next movies! He’s giving me a promotion to camera operator!”

“Oh, honey, I’m so proud of you!” We jump up and down in each other’s arms.

When we part, she looks down to the ground. “Mark gave me a hug, too.”

“Mark? What about Thomas?”

Her cheeks tinge pink. “Mark’s kinda hot, you know.”

I laugh at her admission. “I’m so excited for you! You deserve this promotion and working with Noble will do wonders for you professionally.” I bite my bottom lip. “I only wish I could be working with you, but I took Judith’s job on the TV show.”

“You got it?”

I nod and she engulfs me for another hug. When we break apart this time, we both have tears in our eyes. “I’ll come visit you in New York.”

“You better.” I hug her again.

Charles interrupts our celebration. “Is this a private party, or can anyone join in?”

My best friend and I open our arms and he embraces us both.



# CHASE



I wipe my mouth with my napkin while tension releases throughout my body. The past few days have been perfect. The wrap party. Melody's promotion on the HBO series. My own feeling of accomplishment at having played Troy Oro, aka Doctor Manipul8, for the final time.

Melody and Lindsay having a short, yet civil, conversation on the phone yesterday.

Her father inviting me to stay in their house and to call him Brax.

The possibilities ahead are endless. Those three important words I've never spoken without a script are at the tip of my tongue.

I beam at the people around the table. Ma and Dad seem to be getting along well with Brax and Sara—especially since Sara's the band's accountant. Which is relatively close to being a lawyer.

“After working less than a year as partner, though, I couldn't take it. It was too hard being away from Brax, and my heart wasn't in the firm's work anymore. I admire what you both have accomplished with your firm. Especially you.” She directs her attention toward Ma. “Being a woman partner can be its own form of torture.”

Ma laughs. “Can’t argue with you there.”

“How did you manage? I mean, you had not one, but two children to raise as well as juggling your career.”

I jump into this conversation. “My parents worked a lot, so they hired nannies for us.” Wanting to divert this discussion, I add, “We went to the same schools as Melody, although I was too old to attend the same one as your daughter at the same time.”

Melody puts down her wine glass. “That’s true. Your reputation preceded you, even to my year. Your playing the lead in *Fiddler on the Roof* in the high school play was legendary.”

My father says, “Goodness, he practiced that piece on the violin for hours. I swear, he played it in his bed.”

Everyone laughs. I squeeze Melody’s thigh to convey my appreciation at her diversionary tactics. “I wanted to be sure I got it right.”

“And you did, honey,” Ma supplies. “I can’t say we weren’t happy when it was over, though.”

More chuckles. Melody and I stand to clear the table. In the kitchen, I pull her close for a kiss. “Good work out there.”

“Thanks. I didn’t want to get too deep into your childhood, including Lindsay, this being our first meeting and all.”

I kiss her nose. “It seems like everyone’s getting along really well.”

“I’m so happy.” She wraps her arms around my neck.

“You know something else, Goldie?” She quirks her eyebrow. “I actually miss being sewn into my costume every morning. Is there something you can do about that?”

She grabs my head and kisses my lips. “Tonight I can cut you out of your jeans.”

I hoot a laugh. “I’d let you.”

She steals another kiss. “Come on, let’s get this cleaned up.”

We load the dishwasher and return to the dining room, where a game has been set up. Her father says, “Good thing you came out when you did. Otherwise, I was going to have to send in a search party.” His wink at Melody lessens the impact of his words.

I rub my hands together. “What do we have here?”

Sara responds, “Cards Against Humanity.”

“Oh fun,” Melody replies. “I love this game. We play it on set when we have a break.” She pauses. “On the TV show, I mean.”

Brax swells. “I’m so damn proud of you, Princess. Getting named the lead costume designer on the show is a big accomplishment.”

Her cheeks redden. “Thanks, Daddy.”

Not to be outdone by her father, I say, “It really is a big deal, especially since Judith gave her the choice to stay with her on Noble’s next movies.” I wrap my arm around her slim shoulders, which have carried so many hurts. “She’s special.”

Melody looks at me, all the love in the world shining in her eyes.

“All right, let’s get to playing this game,” Dad says. “What do we do first?”

After Sara gives a quick rundown of the rules, we start dealing the cards. The first two rounds go to Brax, but Melody wins the third.

Ma says, “I caught your son on the real estate show follow-up show. Congratulations are in order. Angie seems to be a lovely girl.”

Melody’s father sits taller. “King’s very lucky to have found someone as wonderful as Angie. They make a great team.”

My girlfriend says, “I’ve heard great reviews for *Battle of the Real Estate Matchmakers*. Since I’ve only been home two days, I haven’t seen it yet.”

Ma replies, “You’re going to love it, Melody. King does a great job. And the houses they feature are amazing. It’s set out in the Hamptons, where people like my son live.”

Ma has to brag about her actor son, with access to all the people she and Dad have tried to woo all these years. Still. “Ma, Brax’s career is much more storied than mine.”

His eyes—so much like his daughter’s—crinkle. “I’m shocked to hear you say that, Chase.” Melody taps her card on the table, and he amends, “Charles. Usually actors think very highly of themselves.”

“Rock stars usually don’t have an ego problem either,” I note.

“Touché.” His fist reaches across and we bump.

Melody says, “Well, I am looking forward to seeing the show. I haven’t had too much contact with King through the years.”

Brax sighs. “I know you haven’t. But he’s changed quite a bit. When you get back to New York City, I’d love it if you could get to know him now. I think you’ll really like him.”

Sara places her hand on her husband’s forearm but addresses the table. “We had dinner with him and Angie when they were in town not that long ago. They’re a lovely couple, and I do believe we’re finding our way back to each other. As a family.”

Brax swallows. As if by tacit agreement, the game resumes, punctuated with much laughter.

Dad says, “So, Melody, you’re going to be working in New York City. How’s it going to work between you two, since my son lives in LA?”

If I have my way, I’ll be on Broadway soon. I can buy a place in New York. Or move in with Melody. Still, I haven’t heard back from *Hamlet 2.0*. With each passing day, my hope diminishes. Melody fiddles with the knitting needles in her hair. “We’ll see what time brings. I have a good feeling our locations will be aligned in the very near future.”

Brax clears his throat. “Maybe not in the *very* near future.”

All eyes swing to him. He clenches and unclenches his fists. “Listen, I know you told me not to talk with you about the movie, Princess, but I can’t take it anymore.”

My breath freezes.

“What do you mean, Daddy?”

His gaze swings to me. “I think you two will have to be separated for a couple of months in the near future. Sitting here, with you, it’s like I’m looking at my younger self.” He looks directly at me.

I swallow. Dread crawls up my spine, hitting a discordant note at each vertebra.

“We made the decision this afternoon and I can’t contain it. Congratulations, Chase. Charles. You got the role! You’re going to be playing me in the Hunte movie. Isn’t that great?”

It’s as if everything in the room moves in slow motion.

Ma and Dad, for their part, appear elated. He says, “That’s wonderful!” She says, “How great is this!”

Then it speeds up.

Melody yells, “What?” She pushes away from the table and jumps to her feet. She leans forward. Not toward me, but at her father. “What. Did. You. Just. Say?”

I can’t move. I try to catch my breath, but it comes in shallower pants. Trembling fingers reach toward Melody. She swerves away.

With deliberate movements, I rise. I swing my gaze to the man I’ve been tapped to play. “I, what?”

“You got the part!”

I turn toward my girlfriend. My arm reaches out.

Huge, hurt amber eyes land on me.

She explodes. “Don’t you dare touch me ever again!”

## MELODY



**M**y dad's words rush over me. Charles is going to play *him* in the movie.

Charles.

My Charles.

Chase.

He was using me this whole time.

Summoning all my strength, I add, my tone clipped, "You never told me you were going for that part."

"Goldie—"

"Don't! Don't use that name for me."

He flinches as if my words struck him. Good. I hope they did. "All right," he begins again. "I auditioned for the role before our movie started filming. Before we met."

This enflames me more. "So that makes it okay? You didn't audition when we knew each other?"

"No, I didn't."

"You never think to mention this 'little fact' to me? Not once. Not once since we—" I break off mid-sentence, aware of noises around me.

My mother walks behind me. “Melody, honey, why don’t you stop for a moment and listen. I’m sure Charles has a reasonable explanation for all of this.”

I move away from her. “No. I won’t stop. This, this, *movie star*—”

Chase winces. “Listen, Melody, you told me you didn’t want to be a part of the Hunte movie. You said—”

I throw my arms in the air. “Since when did you ever listen to what I said? You auditioned to play my dad.” I stop. Within me, hurt and betrayal war with the fact I was used. Again. “I thought you were different!” I advance on the object of my wrath.

My dad steps between us. “Now, now, Princess. Charles said you told him you weren’t interested in the movie, like you told me. It’s not fair for you to be mad at him now.”

I whirl on my dad. “Not fair? That’s rich. Can’t you see him for what he is? He’s a scheming, conniving *movie star* who used me to get this part.”

Chase erupts. “I did no such thing.”

I give him a derisive laugh. “Yeah, right. You can’t deny you auditioned for the part?”

“Well, no.”

A chain-link fence forms around my heart. “You also can’t deny you never told me.”

“No, but—”

I hold up my hand, imagining a piece of black silk, like what I used to make Doctor Manipul8’s gloves, lands on top of the fence. Silk is strong. Impenetrable. Nothing can get through it.



My mother whispers, "Let's give them some privacy."

I ignore the four people shuffling out of the dining room and continue, "You saw the opportunity to get close to Braxton Hunte's daughter and you took it. You knew I was talking with my parents, that I told them about us. You knew, didn't you, they would be predisposed to like you. Was this your idea, or did Sam put you up to it?"

Chase strides next to me. "No, dammit. You have it all wrong."

"Really? 'Cause it looks right to me."

His arm comes toward me, and I step out of his reach. "Melody, you have to stop and listen to me."

"No, I don't." I tip my chin.

His arm drops to his side and his cheek clenches. "You promised me you would stop jumping to conclusions when you apologized about Lindsay."

He scores a direct hit by throwing my own words at my face, and my breathing hitches. A split second later, all the blood in my body rushes through my limbs, my fingers forming a fist. "There are no conclusions being jumped here. You auditioned for the role. You never told me."

His eyes widen and he looks from side to side. "I love you."

Those three words. The damn words I've been dying to hear from his lips land like final stitches in the silk material around my heart. I shake my head and take several steps backward. "You love what I can do for your career. You love I'm the daughter of the man you want to portray. You love how easily I was to manipulate."

“Stop it.” His voice is now as frigid as mine.

My body goes rigid. My voice lowers to ice. “Christ, I gave you my virginity. You must’ve loved that, too.”

His hands land on my shoulders. “What is it going to take for you to understand? You have this all wrong! I love you, for fuck’s sake.” He shakes me.

I jump away from his touch. “You used my body, you used my status as Braxton Hunte’s daughter, you used my desire to keep our relationship secret to hide your scheming.” I clap. “Bravo! You truly are a much better actor than even I thought you were.”

He takes a deep breath. “How many times do I have to tell you this? I never was my real self until I met you. I always was acting. You, *you* made me drop the mask. You saw me for who I really am.”

“A lying manipulator.”

“No, a *real* man with *real* feelings. And they’re all for you. Yes, I should’ve told you about the audition, but you were so decisive about not having anything to do with your father’s movie that I figured I would tell you if there was something to tell.”

“Whatever.”

His jaw flexes. “Be reasonable about this, Melody.”

An icy calm surrounds me. “I am calm. So calm, in fact, I think I should ensure you receive an Academy Award for this performance. Best Manipulator of All Time.”

The color drains from his face.

“Get your shit out of my room and go home with your parents. Or fly back to LA. Enjoy your red carpet walk with

Cherie.” I spin to face the back wall. “Enjoy your life.”

I wrap my arms around my middle as his footsteps recede. How dare he exploit me like that. He took all my confessions and used them against me. I gave him my *virginity*, dammit. Yet tears don’t flow.

I’m not sure how much time passes. I don’t move an inch, but rather focus on bringing air through the silk material covering my heart. My mother walks back into the dining room and places something on the table. “Melody, sweetie, they’re gone.”

“Good.”

“We all, ah, heard your fight. Want to talk about it?”

I flinch. “No.”

“All right.” She pulls out a chair. “How about we have a hot chocolate? I made you one. With the marshmallows you like.”

Growing up, Mom always made hot chocolate whenever I was down about something at school, usually brought on by Lindsay. I force myself to take a seat at the table, next to her. My fingers clutch the mug’s handle.

“I’m sorry things ended like that.”

I flick the rubber band around my wrist. All I feel is utter betrayal by the man I thought I loved.

Wisely, she changes the subject. “Have you thought about what you’re going to do now that you’re the lead costume designer?”

Her words bring me back to what’s important in my life. I can control my job, which isn’t using me for my family

connections. I blow on my drink. “I have a few changes in mind.”

Nodding, she asks, “When are you going back to New York?”

I had planned on staying here for a couple of weeks. Now the idea of remaining in the same hometown as Chase makes my skin crawl. “I think I’m going to head back tomorrow.”

“So soon?”

Nothing’s keeping me here and being around my parents isn’t appealing. They’re too much in love. I need the anonymity of the City. “Yeah. I have to hire a couple of new designers and since I’ve never done that before, it might take me a while.”

“I understand.”

My dad enters the room. “Princess,” he begins, but I raise my hand.

“I can’t right now.”

He looks at my mother and addresses me. “All right. Your room is ready for you.” Translation—all Chase’s shit is gone.

“I’d like to sleep in the guest room, if you don’t mind.”

“That’s fine, honey,” Mom says.

Leaving my untouched hot chocolate on the table, I stand. “I’m going to bed. I’ll see you in the morning before I head out to the airport.”

I don’t wait for them to respond but trudge up the stairs to my bedroom. Making quick work of selecting my clothes for tomorrow as well as a nightshirt for tonight and toiletries, I leave the room I had shared with Chase and trek down the hall.

In minutes, I'm staring at the guest room's ceiling, knowing sleep won't come.

I refuse to shed a single tear for that man. *Movie star*. Instead, I replay our entire relationship, finding numerous times he could've told me about the audition. It's clear he set his sights on me once he realized who I was, and what a connection to me could do for his career. Before I had to sew him into that damn costume, he didn't speak more than ten words to me. He was just another arrogant actor.

Then I was assigned to spend hours a day with him.

I bet he had Thomas research me. I can only imagine his elation when he realized I was his "in" to Braxton Hunte. A small voice reminds me he knew who I was from growing up here. I shake my head. No. Chase is a cool customer. I remember the way he peppered me for information about my family life, obviously trying to gather more details he could use for himself. He probably passed the intel along to Sam, who used it to his advantage.

I turn over and smack my pillow. He fed me all that bullshit about my talent, and how he saw me as separate and apart from other costume designers. And I fell for it like a thread to a needle. Bet he laughed with Mark about how gullible I was.

He succeeded where Grant could not. I actually *slept* with the bastard. How he lowered himself to have sex with plain old me pushes the imagination. I remember our conversation when I confessed I felt outclassed by the women he's been with, and he lied to me by saying I was beautiful and different. Yeah, I was different. Stupid and naïve.

An easy mark.

I flip over. He used me worse than anyone else ever has in my life. He pursued me, got inside my head and heart and body, then was rewarded with the role he always wanted. All that crap about wanting to perform on Broadway! Have to hand it to Chase, he really is a method actor.

One thing is certain. I will never again lower my shields and let someone else into my life. No one is to be trusted. Except Sophia. She's the exception who proves the rule. I will create an efficient department at HBO, but not get too attached to anyone. I have a friend circle so I can get out, but there's no reason to encourage any one-on-one time with them, especially the men. Groups are fine. I can disappear into them. Never again will anyone get so close to me.

I toss and turn all night, haunted by Chase's betrayal.

## MELODY



A week passed since the fateful dinner at my parents' house, and I'm back where I belong in New York City. My first agenda item was to clean my condo from top to bottom. Everything's scrubbed clean, with no traces that anyone but me has been here.

All of my attention has been focused on *Ladies of the Abbey*. As soon as HBO officially offered me Judith's job, I set out to hire two new members of my costume design team. It's been surprisingly difficult.

Becca, an assistant producer for the show, enters Judith's office. My office. "Your next interview is here."

"Thanks, Becca," I say while picking up the résumé and reviewing it one final time.

"I hope you like him."

"Me too." I place his résumé on the top of my desk. "I want to get this right."

She nods. "I understand. Let me bring him in."

Why did I decide to interview a man for this job? I take a deep, cleansing breath. Because his background is great, he went to my alma mater, and he's had more years of experience in the field than I have, only at smaller networks. Man or

woman, it doesn't matter so long as they're competent. Right? Not like I'd ever sleep with him.

A tall, muscular man with dark brown hair worn in an undercut enters my office. My body tenses as the thirtyish man crosses the threshold and offers his hand. His eyes aren't blue, thank God. I force a smile and we shake.

Thirty minutes later, I know he's the right fit for the job. His attitude, his outlook, and his positivity are contagious. Well, the combination will be contagious to the rest of the team. Not to me. But I can fake it.

"It was a pleasure meeting you. I really enjoyed hearing your views about costume design on the small screen."

"Thanks." He rubs his hands on his thighs. "The pleasure was all mine. I appreciate how hard you work on the show, and all of your efforts have been showcased so well over the past seasons. I hope to be added to your team."

I stand. No use keeping him in suspense. "No need to hope. I think you'll be a perfect fit around here and would like to offer you the job."

He rises to his full height, causing me to tip my head backward to meet his gaze. Like I used to have to do with Charles. Chase. He diverts my thoughts with a broad smile. "Thank you so much. You won't be disappointed." Thank God he doesn't have a cleft in his chin.

I force my cheeks to inflate. "I'm sure I won't. Do you have time now to meet with HR and go through all the required paperwork? You can start on Monday."

"Thank you, again, Miss Hunte. I promise to give you my all."



I escort my new hire to human resources and lean against the closed door. I hope I didn't make a mistake. He looks sort of like the movie star, but that's it. He's qualified. He has a winning personality. He'll do a good job. So what if I want to hurl when I look at him? That'll subside. It has to.

Blowing out a breath, I stop at the kitchenette and make a coffee. As I doctor it with creamer and stir, my mind flies halfway across the globe. Drinking coffee in Amalfi while Charles drank his stupid fizzy water. I shove the memory away and return to my office.

One hire down, one more to go. I sort through the résumés and invite three more people to come in to interview. With that chore completed, I turn to more exciting tasks. Like designs for the opening episode, which starts filming in a month.

After I've been working and reworking the lead actor's dress for hours, I'm satisfied with the result. Hers was the final costume needed. Accomplishment courses through my blood.

I did it. I created all the designs for the first episode. Only twelve more to go.

I twirl around in my seat and look out over the now dark New York City. Becca raps on my office door. "I'm heading out. Want to grab a bite to eat?"

Becca's asked me to join her for dinner every day since I returned to the City. And every day, I give her the same answer. "Not tonight. I'm still trying to get my arms around things."

Similarly, her reply is the same as well, "Okay. Maybe tomorrow?"

Sometime later, I pack my tote and head out, saying goodbye to the security guards at the front. I take advantage of

the nice evening by walking the twenty minutes to my condo. The fresh air does not soothe my soul, though. Nothing ever will.

Along the way, I stop by a salad bar and pick up dinner. The only thing, besides coffee, I'll eat today. Not hungry anymore.

In my condo, I plop down on the sofa, take-out container on my lap. It's time for me to redecorate in here. I need new furniture, something untainted by where others have sat.

Without thought, I direct Alexa to turn on the TV as I start to eat the lettuce. The music for *Entertainment This Evening* starts. I don't want to watch anything about the business. Before I can formulate the command to change the channel, the voice-over says, "Last night was the ladies' turn, but tonight it's the men's. Let's check out the red carpet from last weekend to see 'Who Rocked the Premiere!'" Flashes of several men walking the red carpet follow her announcement. Chase Wright among them.

My fork, forgotten in my cold hand, lands in the Styrofoam.

The package rolls, where each man is asked who he's wearing and then the cameras roam up and down their bodies. When it comes time for Chase's turn, I mouth "Versace" as he says it out loud.

I watch, transfixed, as he does a slow twirl, showing off the black three-piece suit with a skinny blue tie that matches his eyes. The piece moves on to another actor and I exhale. I was wrong. Our new hire looks nothing like him.

I set my uneaten salad down onto the coffee table and lean back, my mind reeling over seeing him again. This was bound

to happen. He is a superstar and on the cover of at least two magazines a month. Not to mention coverage by such shows as *Entertainment This Evening*.

Memories of the first blow job I ever gave, right here in this very room, fight to surface. How he responded to my touch. The silk around my heart slips a fraction. With ruthless determination, I shore it back up and shove the thoughts away.

My attention is once again drawn to the television when the host announces they're going to play an interview with the stars of *I Was Made for Her*, the nation's number one movie, after the break. I spend the next two minutes trying to force myself to tell Alexa to change the channel. And lose.

The interview rolls.

A scene from the premiere is first, with Cherie Adams on Chase's arm. He's smiling down at something witty she said. I'm sure it was clever, as he never smiles like that for something stupid. My stomach churns.

After several scenes from the red carpet, the interview starts. All three lead actors are in a room, talking with the reporter. They laugh at each other's jokes. I'm fixated on Chase's features. He looks tanned and happy and carefree. My stomach lurches again.

The reporter asks Chase what he enjoyed the most about filming the movie. He looks directly into the camera and replies, "We all got along so well, like a family. You don't get that too often in movies, where you can simply relax and be yourself. There were no hidden agendas. That's what I appreciated the most about this shoot."

It's like he's mocking me. I shift in my seat, pain welling from deep within. I force my eyes to remain on the television.

Before the interview ends, the reporter returns to Chase. “I see you brought Cherie Adams with you to the premiere.” She leans in. “Do you want to share any news with us?”

He mirrors her position. So do I. His eyes take on a mischievous glint. “She’s very special to me.” Then he sits back.

I collapse into my sofa, my hand on my clenched stomach.

“I would be remiss if I didn’t ask you about the rumors that you’ve been tapped to play Braxton Hunte in the upcoming movie about his band. Are the rumors true?”

“Yes,” I respond for him, my voice wobbly over the single syllable.

Chase swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “I’ve heard them as well.” He chuckles. His fellow actors join in his mirth.

The reporter wraps up the interview, clearly disappointed she didn’t get the scoop she wanted.

When the commercial starts, I finally find my voice. “Alexa, turn off the TV.” The screen goes dark.

My chest hurts. Chase looks like he’s having the time of his life, without a care in the world. And why shouldn’t he? He got an evening with Cherie Adams, in all her blond-haired beauty. Her bright blue dress was cut almost down to her navel, with a slit up to her upper thigh, which I’m sure he liked taking off. Not to mention he’s in the number one movie in the country.

I refuse to let his fucking coups get the better of me. My chin rises. I got what I wanted, too. I’m the lead costume designer on my show. Judith told me I earned it all by myself, not because of who my dad is. I choose to believe her. Besides,

now that I'm making all the decisions, the top brass will have to see my worth.

Yes. We both got what we wanted. Only his triumphs come with a sex kitten on his arm and TV hostesses fawning all over him. My stomach flips at the way he was doting on Cherie ...

When my eyes start to swim, I leap to my feet, swallowing over a hard lump. I haven't shed a single tear for him, and I don't intend to start now. My cell rings.

"Hi, Daddy," I inhale.

"Hi, Princess. I haven't spoken with you since you left. How are you?"

Not going there with him. Or anyone else. "I'm fine."

Clearly understanding I'm not going to talk about what went down, he asks, "How's your new job going?"

"Oh, it's great." I divert my thoughts by launching into a conversation about what I've been doing for the show, and he praises me for my hard work. *He* recognizes my talent.

"Sounds like you have your hands full."

"I do."

"That's great. Before I let you go, I wanted to ask if you've reached out to King and Angie?"

"Yeah, we made plans to go to dinner tomorrow night."

"I'm sure you're going to enjoy getting to know both him and his fiancée." He pauses. For the first time, our conversation's awkward. When I don't fill the silence, he says, "Well, I should go, your mother will be back here soon. I love you, Princess."

"Love you too, Daddy."

Tossing the phone next to the uneaten salad, I decide it's time for bed. Not that sleep ever comes.

The next night, I enter the restaurant late and King's already seated. We never got to know each other growing up, and this is our first try at reconnecting. Joining the table, I give my big brother a hug and shake his fiancée's hand. "Sorry I'm late. I got caught up with a design in the office."

"I can imagine how busy you must be, Miss Lead Costume Designer." He smiles, the corner of his hazel eyes—so much like mine—crinkling. I explain about my hiring process and what I've been up to with the designs.

"Please, tell me about yourselves. I had no idea you were into real estate." I glance at my brother.

"That's because I wasn't." He laughs. "Angie, here, is a great teacher. And motivator. And co-star." He leans over and kisses her cheek.

Ignoring the shot of jealousy racing through my veins, I look at Angie for clarification—her diamond ring blinking at me. She tells me about how they were brought together by their reality show and how she hated him on sight.

"The feeling was mutual," King says, reaching for his bourbon.

"And then it wasn't," Angie continues with their story, including their attending one of Hunte's concerts at Jones Beach this past summer.

King picks up the narrative. "We saw him and Sara a couple of weeks ago in Chicago, when we were there for a real estate convention. We had a nice time. It's really great to have reconnected with him. And now you. Family means a lot."

His sincerity sends warmth through every part of my body. “I like getting to know you, as well. I’m so very sorry I wasn’t around this summer when you were in the hospital.”

He waves his hand. “I’m fine now. Everything’s been taken care of by the cops. Now we’re planning our wedding and looking for a house out in the Hamptons.”

“It took me a long time to convince your brother we needed to stay within our means and not buy a multimillion-dollar house.”

They gaze at each other and move in for a kiss. The love radiating between the two of them causes me to fix the napkin on my lap. “I’m happy for you two.”

King smiles at me, his white teeth almost sparkling with happiness. “So tell me, sis, what’s up with your personal life? I know all about your job, but what do you do outside it? Do you have a special someone?”

“No.” I bet our parents put them up to asking me.

King confirms my suspicions. “Dad mentioned what happened at dinner.”

They look at each other. Angie affirms, “We don’t mean to pry.”

I play with the knitting needles in my hair. “I know you don’t,” I say, because it’s what’s expected. We sit in uncomfortable silence for a few minutes.

Angie tries to rekindle our conversation, “Your brother and I go to the beach to clear our heads. What do you do here in the City to relax?”

Her question brings me up short. “Well, I go out with my friends.” That sounded normal.

She breaks off a piece of bread for her and King, and offers the basket to me. After pouring olive oil onto my plate, I dip the warm bread into it. So reminiscent of Italy. I drop the bread, uneaten.

Angie continues, “The City is so busy all the time. While it must be nice to go to new restaurants, do you find all this bustle relaxing as well?”

I consider her query. “Not really. But it’s fun. I wouldn’t have suggested this place if I hadn’t found it with my friends before the movie shoot.”

The waiter brings our entrees. King salts his without tasting it, and Angie rebukes him. I like her. He needs a woman’s hand, since he’s always seemed so hard to me. She’s softened him around the edges. I take a bite of my beef Wellington. While I’ve enjoyed this dish before, tonight it’s tasteless. I’m sure it has everything to do with my current emotional state, and not a reflection on the chef’s culinary talents.

Angie takes a bite of her steak and exclaims, “Well, I’m certainly glad you found this place. It’s great.”

I force my face to reflect her excitement and try my dish again. Still unappetizing. I cut up several pieces of the beef, moving them around my plate. King finishes his meal first and I push mine away from me. Angie takes her time, savoring every last bit.

King lifts his bourbon to his mouth, eyeing me speculatively. “How did you enjoy working on the movie? Was it much different from your job on the show?”

I sip my Cosmo, the only thing with any taste. “It was, in a sense. Of course, shooting over in Italy is much different from



what I do here in the City.” I chuckle.

“I’ve enjoyed several trips to Italy. Angie and I are thinking of going there for our honeymoon.”

“Oh, you’ll really enjoy it there. It’s very romantic. Florence has the most amazing vibe and gorgeous countryside. There are so many bridges there.” I sigh.

“I agree,” King says. “I loved the Lake Como region. But my favorite place was the Amalfi Coast. Did you get to Positano?”

I choke on my last sip of my Cosmo. “Yes.” I wheeze. “I went there with a bunch of people from the set. It’s nice.”

“I can’t eat another bite.” Angie lays her fork on her plate. “I’ve read about a place in the Amalfi Coast called Ravello.” She leans her head on King’s shoulder. “It’s supposed to be one of the most romantic towns in the whole world.”

I push away from the table. “Please excuse me. I need to use the restroom.” Without looking back, I seek the only viable escape.

At the sink, I turn on the cold water. Fight the memories. Trying to regulate my breathing, I cup my hands and catch the water. The bathroom door opens, but I ignore it as water splashes over my face.

“I’m so sorry.”

I tense at Angie’s words, which shred me from the inside. As water drips into the sink, I tamp down my tumultuous feelings. “I’m fine.” My voice sounds strangled to my own ears.

She tears off a couple of pieces of paper towels and offers them to me, which I put over my wet face. When I can’t hide

anymore, I crumple the paper and walk over to the garbage can.

“Have you talked with anyone about what happened?”

There’s no use pretending she doesn’t know everything from my parents. “Nothing happened. Chase was exposed as a fraud and a user. A *movie star*.” I keep my eyes averted from her, studying my manicure instead.

“I’m so sorry he broke your heart. Please, don’t close up. Take it from me. I know what I’m talking about. I owe everything to your brother, who brought me out of the hibernation I had consigned myself to after I lost my first husband.”

“Thank you for your kind words. I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll survive your broken heart. It’ll mend. You’ll find your real smile again.” She steps closer to me, placing her hand on my shoulder. “You’re going to be my sister, and I want to let you know I’m here for you.”

“Angie,” I say, turning my face away from the woman. “I just can’t.”

“I understand.” She worms her arm through mine. “Come on. Raise your gorgeous head up and let’s go back to our table. Dessert awaits.”

I force a reluctant chuckle. “I thought you were full?”

“Never too full for something sweet.” She gives me a sideways glance. “Plus, we have to celebrate your birthday.”

Her words jolt my system. Explains all the calls I sent to voicemail today. “It is, isn’t it?”

“You only turn twenty-five once!”

As we walk back to our seats, I bury my feelings over Chase once again. Yet, not even a family birthday celebration can ease this heartache.

Someday I'll smile again. Today's not the day.

# CHASE



**T**homas flutters around me like a feeding bird. The clicking of his pen makes me want to crawl out of my Versace suit and wrap my tie around his throat. With supreme effort, I maintain the mask I've been hiding behind for the past several days.

“What time am I picking Cherie up?”

“The limo's going to arrive here in thirty minutes, then you'll go to her house and head over to the red carpet. She's been prepped with info about all the actors in the cast and will look amazing on your arm. She's wearing a bright blue dress, which matches your tie. And your eyes, of course.”

I roll my “matching eyes.”

“Also,” my PA continues, “we need to discuss the next several weeks until you start filming your next movie. Have you decided what role you're going to take?”

I shake my head. “I'm meeting with Sam next week and will let you know.”

“Okay.” Five more pen clicks. “I've got you down for the party tonight, plus the one at Jessa's in the Hills this weekend. Then there's a club opening on the fifteenth, and ...”

My mind wanders. I want to sit in my dark bedroom and disappear. It feels like my heart's been half beating since that awful day at the Hunte's house. When he finishes, I shrug. "Set up what you think is best."

"Okay, I'll take care of it." He consults his watch. "The limo's going to be here soon, so let's make sure you're all set." He runs through the names of the designers I have on, which makes me think of a certain costume designer.

The one who refused to believe me when I told her the truth. I *had* forgotten about the audition. Well, mainly. I was honoring her wishes not to involve her with her father's movie.

Damn Braxton Hunte anyway. Why couldn't he have kept his big mouth shut?

I shove those thoughts to the side when the front gate intercom blares. Thomas answers it. "Limo's here."

He offers me a pair of sunglasses, and I double-check the arm. Prada. I'm sure he told me this before, but nothing's staying in my brain. "See you tomorrow."

Alone in the limo, I pour myself a glass of scotch and welcome the burn. All the while replaying Melody's words.

"... a scheming, conniving *movie star* who used me to get this part."

"I think I should ensure you receive an Academy Award for this performance. Best Manipulator of All Time."

It's the last one that scores the deepest cut. I told her I loved her, and this was her response?

Having to explain everything to my parents was beyond humiliating. Of course, they felt it would all blow over and

began calling their friends to ramp up their standing in the community by having dinner at the Huntess’.

I take another swig of the scotch. Well, I’m done. If she thinks I deserve an Academy Award, then by damn, I’m going to show her. I’m going to walk—no, own—this fucking red carpet.

My co-stars will laugh at my jokes.

The press will adore me.

Because I *know* she’ll see it, I’ll make sure Cherie hangs off my every word. Every delectable inch of the actress’s body will be putty in my hands.

I’ll show *her*.



**I**t’s just after one, and the after party is in full swing. Booze flows like the lines from writers, and everyone is either half-drunk, half-stoned, or both. Stunning starlets mingle. Hook-ups disappear in discrete rooms in the producer’s mansion.

Next to me, Cherie smiles and flutters her eyelashes. Which brings me right back to the time Melody did the same act, making Cherie’s attempt seem like a pathetic replica. I bite my tongue and brush her blond hair off her forehead. It’s the wrong shade. My arm drops.

“You seem to be a million miles away, Chase.”

I force my lips upward. “I was thinking about what’s coming up for me next. I’m sorry if I’m not paying you the attention you deserve.”

“Do you have any roles lined up?”

She's asking about Braxton Hunte. I shrug. "There's some parts in the hopper, but nothing's been signed yet." Not a lie. "How about you? What's up next on your docket?"

Being in the business, she gets it. Sucking in her breath, she says, "I've been looking at a script. It's very hush-hush." She lowers her voice and I lean in closer. "They asked me to play Marilyn Monroe in a story about her glory days."

My eyes widen. "Holy shit. That sounds like the role of a lifetime."

Her eyes search mine. "It's an opportunity, that's for sure. My agent's been pushing me to take it. But ..." Her voice trails off.

"What's holding you back?"

She takes a sip from her champagne. "Do I really want to take on such an iconic role? Everyone adores Marilyn Monroe. What if I can't do her justice?"

I take her by the shoulders. "Cherie, they wouldn't have offered the part to you if they didn't think you'd be a perfect fit."

"I guess. If I take it, though, I'd always be compared against the original. I'm sure I'd be found wanting."

Her fear over the role is understandable. These things can fall flat or soar to new heights. "And you don't want to be known as the actress who played her. You want to be known for your own talents."

She nods. "You get it. I want to forge my own path and not be remembered as an imitation."

"Have you told your agent this?"

"He'd just think I was a stupid blonde."

I tip her chin upward. “No. He wouldn’t. If he does, you need to fire him. This is your career, and only you can direct it. Your agent works for you and not the other way around.”

Tears well behind her expressive eyes. “I know you’re right, but it doesn’t feel that way.”

I thumb the tears off her cheeks. “You have to choose the parts you want to take because they feel right to you. And if you think you can bring them to life unlike how anyone else could. If this movie does that for your soul, take it. If not, pass. Other actresses will line up to take this one, and other movies will be there for you.”

“You make it all sound so easy, Chase.”

I step backward. “Believe me, I know it’s not.” I sip my second scotch.

Her eyes rivet to my drink, and her nose wrinkles. “How can you drink that stuff?”

I set my barely touched glass down on a table. “I have absolutely no idea.”

She bursts into peals of laughter, causing me to join in. Her vibrant personality is refreshing here in Hollywood. Maybe what I need in my life.

The music changes to a slow song and Cherie places her hand in mine. “Enough shop. Come dance with me.”

I let her lead me onto the dance floor. The last time I danced was in the small Italian town on the road to Ravello. Closing my eyes, I clear my head and pull Cherie into a proper position. We move effortlessly, and she rests her head on my shoulder.

She’s too boney.



She's too tall.

She's not ... Goldie.

I step on her toe, causing her to wince. "I'm so sorry," I murmur.

"I'm happy you did. It proves you are a fallible human after all. For a while there, I was thinking you didn't have any flaws."

Her words bring me up short. "Hardly." The music changes to another slow song, but I can't stomach staying here any longer.

"I think I've hit the wall. It's been a big day for me, with the premiere and crush of the press. Would you like me to take you back to your house, or would you prefer I sent the limo back for you?"

"I'm ready to go."

We make our way through the still packed room, saying our goodbyes. I text the limo driver so he's waiting for us when we finally escape the mansion. Letting her precede me into the vehicle, I instruct the driver to drop her off first, then take me home.

Sitting next to me, she leans her head against my shoulder. "I had a lovely time tonight, Chase. Thanks for thinking of me."

"You're welcome. I enjoyed tonight with you as well."

She bites her lip. My stomach flips. I've been here before and now all I want to do is forestall her offer. "I'm exhausted, though. Jet lag this time has really been a bitch."

Her eyes drop to her lap. "I understand all about jet lag. Directors expect us to be some sort of machines and disregard

all the crazy time changes.”

“Yeah. At least *Doctor Manipul8* filmed all in Italy, so once we got started, we didn’t have to worry.” Except for the one day I flew back to New York City to audition.

“You’re lucky! In my last shoot, we went from Vancouver to Miami without a break in shooting.”

“That must’ve been rough.”

She laughs. “You have no idea. I had coffee inserted via IV.”

I chuckle at her exasperated tone, and shortly we arrive at her house. I tuck some stray hair behind her ear. “Please let me know what you decide about the Marilyn Monroe film. Make sure it’s the decision that’s right for you.”

She nods and leans forward, kissing me gently. “Thanks for the advice. I’ll see you around, Chase.”

When she leaves, a twinge of guilt at not accompanying her into her home hits me. I shake my head. No. First, I don’t need any photos posted of us, and the concomitant issues they would bring. Second, I’m no longer interested in her beyond friendship. Third, Melody—I cut my thought process off and instruct the driver to take me home.

The next day, Mark’s in town for some business meetings so I hook up with him in a small café in Malibu, overlooking the water. We scored a private room, thanks to Thomas, who stops by.

“Appreciate your setting this up for us, man,” I say to my PA.

He gives me a salute. “Just doing my job. Do you need anything else from me before I head out?”

Mark speaks up, “Do you have a brother? I need someone like you in my life.”

Thomas preens under Mark’s compliment. “Sorry, just a sister.”

“She married?”

Thomas punches Mark in the shoulder. “I’d never let you near her, you slut!” He turns his attention to me. “Remember, you’re meeting with Sam in his office next Tuesday. The other stuff can wait.”

“Thanks, Thomas.”

He clicks his pen.

The slut next to me offers, “Give your sister a big wet kiss from me.”

“Asshole,” he mutters and excuses himself.

When I order a personal pizza, Mark’s eyebrows lift to his hairline. “Nice to be on break, huh?”

“Definitely,” I reply, drinking my pinot noir. “Although, I still hit the gym three times a week and swim in my pool daily.”

Soon, our meals come, and I dig into the pizza. Since the end of filming, I’ve been allowing myself to enjoy carb-laden foods. I’m starting to feel human again, but know my strict regimen will be picked back up as soon as Sam and I settle on my next role.

I’m in the middle of swallowing the crust when my phone rings. Wiping my hands on my napkin, I raise my finger to Mark and check the screen. It’s a New York City number. Could this be about my audition? My heart rate picks up. Turning to face the windows, I answer, “Chase Wright.”

“Hello, Mr. Wright. This is Athena Davis with *Hamlet 2.0*. I don’t normally make personal calls to the actors who auditioned for us, but I wanted to make an exception for you.”

I can’t catch my breath. They wouldn’t call me unless they had positive news. “Thanks for calling, Ms. Davis.”

“You see, your audition was excellent. You had the lines down, but more than that, you nailed the character.”

I can’t keep still, so I stand and walk to the side of the room.

“However—”

I pause mid-stride.

“We’ve decided to go with another, more seasoned Broadway actor for the part. We felt he would be able to bring experience to the role. I hope you understand.”

My entire body slumps. I wanted that part more than I even let myself believe. Knowing a response is expected, I force my voice to remain steady and reply, “Of course. Thanks for calling me to let me know.”

“I’ll keep you in mind for any future plays I’m involved with.”

“Thank you.” I disconnect the call and hold on to the back of a chair, staring out the window without seeing the boats or the waves.

Mark’s hand lands on my shoulder. “Everything all right?”

I swallow. “Yeah.” Like a second-string actor, I follow him back to our table.

The rest of my pizza remains untouched, but I order another glass of wine. Mark puts his fork down and circles the

rim of his glass with his finger. “Care to tell me what that call was about?”

“I didn’t get a part.” I finish the wine and motion for the server to bring me another.

“Sucks, dude.” He sips from his glass. “Was it the Hunte movie?”

My breath catches at the mention of Melody’s father’s gig. I shake my head. “No. It was a part I really wanted.”

“Well, if rumor means anything around here, your name is the one on everyone’s lips to play Braxton Hunte. You know what happened to Rami Malek when he played Freddie Mercury.”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe your not getting this role was a sign that things are lining up for you with the Hunte movie. Hell, I’d love to be in that one myself. Just don’t see me playing a rock star.” He chuckles. “You, on the other hand, would be an excellent Braxton. I’ve seen videos of him when he was younger. With makeup and a wig, you’d be a dead ringer.”

I finish my wine.

Seeing that he’s getting nowhere with me, he wisely changes the subject. Although the new topic isn’t better. “I don’t think, though, the Hunte movie will be filmed in any place as wonderful as Italy. Probably on a sound stage.”

“I guess.”

“Now, Italy, was amazing. Even though I caught whatever that bug was. God, that was awful.”

“Yeah, it delayed shooting for quite a few days.”

He chuckles. “Believe me, you didn’t want me on set when I was so sick. I’m guessing most of us were in the same boat.”

I nod.

“By the way, did you hear Noble selected Sophia to be the camera operator on his next movies? He was impressed with how she uncovered what Helene had done to your costume.”

“Yes. She was very excited.” Pulling my head out of my ass for a second, I ask, “Anything going on between you two? Sophia seemed to be warming up to you near the end of filming.”

He fiddles with the napkin. “If only I had another week, you know?” I wave, my mind returning to my dismissal from *Hamlet 2.0*. His words don’t register as he continues, “I texted her a couple of times since we’ve been back to the States, but her replies have been lukewarm at best.”

Mark continues talking, but my mind’s back on losing out on the part.

His eyebrows bounce. When I don’t respond, he implores, “Did you hear what I said?” Rapidly blinking, I refocus on Mark, who’s wriggling in his seat. “Noble tapped me to play the villain in his next movies.”

His excitement penetrates through my disappointment. “Really? Congratulations.” I hold out my fist, which he bumps.

“Yeah.” His gray eyes shine. “That’s why I’m out here. Sorry I blurted it out right then, though.”

I shake my head. “No, don’t be. I am truly excited for you. Another villain?”

Mark holds his hands up. “Guess I’m good at them. It’s a really juicy part.” He tells me the story and about his role. I have to agree, this is a wonderful opportunity for him.

“You know the best part, right?”

At my perplexed expression, he answers his own question. “Sophia’s going to be on the set!”

His answer forces a chuckle out of me. “You got it bad for her, don’t you?”

“Dude. She only started to give me the time of day near the end of *Doctor Manipul8*, and then we parted ways. I’m going to change that when we start filming.”

“I wish you luck. Although, love is overrated. Keep it superficial, and you’ll be good.” I finish my wine.

“That’s not the tune you were singing on set.”

With a twist of my lips, I note, “I should have.”

He looks as if he’s going to mention my costume designer, but wisely changes course. “Well, I’m going to take that as bad advice from someone who’s never been in love before. I think Sophia might be right for me. Just you wait, Chase.” He pats my forearm. “When the lightning in the bottle hits you, you’ll change your tune.”

I doubt that.

# CHASE



I park in the lot and take the elevator up to the top floor. Passing through the glass door with “Kirkland Management” etched on it, I’m ushered into a conference room overlooking downtown LA. A bottle of my favorite sparkling water is given to me by the efficient receptionist.

“Thank you.”

Within moments, Sam strolls through the doors, accompanied by a younger man and woman, presumably associates. The woman places a stack of papers down on the table, while the guy distributes an agenda for today.

“Why so formal, Sam?”

Instead of answering me, he introduces his interns.

Realization dawns. I needle my agent, “Ah, need to show the interns how things are supposed to be done, huh? When they’re not around, it’s like a quick phone call here and there.”

Sam’s eyes slant. “No,” he says with a sarcastic tone. “This is how I conduct business when my clients actually deign to come into the office. Which you haven’t in what, three years?”

I shrug. My mood hasn’t improved since I got the news I was passed over for *Hamlet 2.0*. Which was compounded by the fact I had exactly one person I wanted to discuss it with,



and she's strictly off-limits. Her words "movie star" sound on repeat in my mind.

Sam nods to the young lady, who pulls out a piece of paper. Her gaze darts to mine for an instant and refocuses on the words in front of her. Her chin lifts. "So, uhm, Chase, your role as Doctor Manipul8 has ended, and the franchise has been very successful. The prior two movies grossed, on average, over two billion dollars worldwide, with six hundred thousand right here in the United States."

The numbers flow right over me. The movies were successful. But didn't tax me acting-wise. Since it seems she's waiting for me to say something, I oblige, "That's great."

She continues, "Which puts them on par with *The Avengers* movies." Her eyes snap to mine. "The top grossing superhero movies of all time."

I fake a smile and hold up my still-closed bottle of water. "Hope we beat them."

"Well, this movie won't release until next year, so I bet you're going to break the record! Noble's already boasting it's his best work ever."

"I read the interview in *Variety*."

Sam points at the young man, who takes over the meeting. "According to your contracts, you earned one million for the first movie, and an extra half-mil above that for your second. Not including your box office and merchandise cuts."

"And Sam here took his share off the top."

My agent smiles. "Of course. Who do you think negotiated your contracts?"

His words bring a reluctant chuckle from me. “Someone did a good job.”

Following his boss’s chuckle, Sam’s intern continues, “Well, your pay for this movie was a flat two million, plus an increased share of the profits and merch.” He flips the page. “For *I Was Made for Her*, your payday was another million.”

All of these recitations mean I never have to work another day in my life. I’ll never live long enough to spend the profits from even one of the films. This realization clears my head. I’m free to do whatever I want to do. Even Broadway.

“Very good summary of Chase’s recent work.” Sam retakes control of the meeting. “I heard about *Hamlet 2.0*. I’m sorry you didn’t get the part.”

“I’m sure,” I reply dryly. I open the bottle of sparkling water and take a sip.

Sam places a stack of papers before me, titled CONTRACT. “This should help you get over losing the play. You’re set to star as Braxton Hunte in the Hunte movie, tentatively titled *Out of the Red*.”

My hand reaches for my bottle again, but I pull it back. The two interns study me as if I were a specimen under a microscope bleeding money. Sam points to the staggering salary. My palm lands on my forehead.

“Brax told me I was selected ... I’m surprised you got the contract so quickly.”

“Brax, is it?”

My throat constricts. “He told me to call him that.”

“Nice” He pauses. “Thank you for being impressed with my negotiating skills.” Three people in the room laugh. I smile

because it's expected. "Take a look at this contract and let me know if you have any questions."

Without much interest, I skim through the document. The amount of money they're going to pay me is astronomical. The shooting schedule will take up the next four months, between rehearsals, voice lessons, and going to various locations. I can use a four-month hiatus from being Charles Wainwright, that's for sure.

But this isn't Broadway. And it's about *her* father. Remaining seated, I push back from the table.

Sam seizes the moment. "Chase, I haven't read the script yet, but I have high hopes for this movie. They've hired the writers from *Bohemian Rhapsody*, so you know this is going to be big. Not that *Doctor Manipul8* isn't a huge franchise, but this one movie could redefine your career."

His last words stump me. "Redefine it?"

"Yes. You've played leading man roles, from romantic comedies to a superhero. This part will rocket you into superstar status. Your paydays will more than double. More. Than. Double."

My heart skips a beat. "It's all about the money with you, isn't it?"

"You know that isn't true, Chase. I want what's best for you, for all of my clients." His eyes dart from me to his interns, and back to me. "I want your career to continue to grow."

I rub my hands together. Here's my chance. "I've lost several movie roles lately to younger actors."

He picks up a pen. "That's true. But don't you see? Playing Braxton Hunte will give you what you've been looking for.

Respectability.”

“Respect,” I choke out.

“Don’t think I don’t know why you wanted that role on Broadway. You lost a couple of roles and were seeing the end of your career in front of you. You naturally thought if you got a job on Broadway, you’d be able to extend that. This movie will do that for you without having to deal with the grind of Broadway. Believe me, I’ve had several clients go that route, only to come back to me begging for a movie. I don’t want to see that happen to you.”

Absorbing what he said, I grab my water and take a sip. And another. “You’ve had clients do Broadway, only to return to movies?”

“I didn’t say that. What I said was I had clients go off to do a play or a musical or something and come back looking for a movie. I succeeded about half the time, and most only got supporting roles moving forward.”

“But you have had exceptions?”

He scribbles something down onto his notepad. “I have.” He sighs. “But they had gotten their start on Broadway before hitting it big in the movies. They are the ones who can switch between the two genres without taking a hit.”

“And I started in movies.”

“Exactly.”

My hand clenches around the water bottle. This role is going to be amazing, and it could launch my career in a different direction, the way I thought going to Broadway would. “Do you really think playing Brax would open more doors for me?”

“I can’t say for certain, as I’m sure you’re aware. You can never truly predict how things shake out in this business. But if past is prologue, the movie will be a huge hit and will propel you to even bigger and better roles.”

I roll my chair back under the table. Movies. I know how to make them. I’m comfortable in front of the cameras. CGI is my friend. I can act in an ensemble or with only one other person on the screen. It takes me away from home for months at a time, but that’s not an issue for me. I can hook up with whoever on set and leave her when it’s over. My life yawns ahead of me.

“What about Netflix? I’ve been hearing good things about that studio.”

“So have I. In fact, I’ve been getting info from them and Amazon Prime Video. Those roles usually have more meat to them.”

I nod. Picking up the contract again, I read it more thoroughly.

Sam’s intern interrupts. “I think this role will be great for you, Chase. I’ve Googled Hunte and read about their career. I bet the script will be fantastic.”

I tip my head at her enthusiasm. “I do have one major problem, though. I can’t sing like him.”

Sam waves his hand. “They’ll overdub your voice. No one really can sing like Braxton.”

My head slams against the back of my chair. He’s addressed all of my possible objections. All except one. How do I feel about playing my ex-girlfriend’s father? My stomach constricts.

I look at the young woman. “If you’ll please excuse me, I need to use the restroom.”

As I make my way to the men’s room, my heart rate picks up. Thankfully, I’m the only one in here. It takes me a few deep breaths to get my breathing back to normal.

Can I do this? Can I play him, knowing that he’s Melody’s father? My *ex*-girlfriend. Who I desperately want back, but know she’d rather design an entire wardrobe for my sister than spare one word for me. I stare into the mirror. *Get a grip, man.* She’s just one woman in a long string of them.

So what that I let my guard down with her? Fat lot of good that gave me. She turned my innermost feelings against me.

So what that I laid bare my soul to her? I’m still me. Better, in fact. By letting my thoughts out, I exposed them for the stupidity they are.

So what that we had explosive chemistry, unlike anything I’ve felt before? Another woman will take her place. All I have to do is snap my fingers and a line will form.

My stomach calms down. My pulse returns to normal. I need to get back on the horse. Take this “role of a lifetime” and make it my bitch. Dare the Academy Awards *not* to give it to me. In the mirror, I watch as the cleft in my chin rises.

I can do this.

I will do this.

Determined, I return to the conference room. Six eyes follow me as I return to my seat. Sam asks, “Any additional thoughts?”

I keep my mind blank. “No. I’m good.”

He smiles, obviously calculating the zeros on his upcoming check.

I pick up a pen.

## MELODY



I tie my cross-trainers, tuck some cash into my sports bra, and head out to meet up with Sophia in Central Park. She's in town for a few meetings with Noble to do some post-production things for *Doctor Manipul8*, discuss her role in his upcoming movies, and will be heading to Chicago tonight.

"There you are!" Sophia rushes to give me a hug. "I'm so glad you were able to get away from work today."

I play with the knitting needles securing my ponytail. "Yeah, well, it is Sunday."

"I guess even *lead* costume designers need a day off."

I stand taller at the mention of my new title. "I'm still not used to being called that."

"Don't you dare doubt for one second you got the job due to anything other than your mad skills." Sun beating down on us, we approach the jogging path. "I'm returning to Chicago tonight. I wish we'd had more time to hang out."

"Me too. But you were so busy with Noble."

We start walking at a brisk clip. "And when I was free, you were at HBO."

Because I needed to escape my own memories. "It's become my second home."



“More like your first home.”

We round a bend, all the while her comment festers. After a few more steps, the need to explain myself becomes overwhelming. “HBO’s much more involved than I thought. I’ve had to hire two new people to replace Helene and myself, plus I have been in several rounds of meetings with the network. Quite eye-opening, actually.”

“Sounds challenging. Professionally, you’re proving yourself.”

“I’m trying to. As with any change, people are nervous. I’m keeping everyone on the same page, though.”

“I have no doubt.”

We round a corner and thread our way through the throngs of tourists. As we near the large building housing the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Sophia points to a kiosk. “Want a drink?”

Today’s summer heat is typical for New York. Swiping my arm across my sweaty forehead, I nod. We get a couple of fruit smoothies and take a seat at a nearby bench.

“I wish I lived here.”

I bump my shoulder against hers. “One simple answer to that. Move.”

She stirs her drink with the straw. “I would if I wasn’t flying all over the world all the time. Nobel’s next movies, which start pre-pre-production next month, are going to be shot in various locations, but based in LA. It doesn’t make sense for me to get an apartment here when I won’t be around to live in it.”

I let the strawberry banana smoothie cool my body from the inside out. “I guess you’re right.”

“Things never change.” She giggles.

Her positivity almost succeeds in infecting my body, but not quite. I freeze the smile on my face, even though it wants to slide away. I won’t let the precious time we have together be ruined by my broken heart. Which will mend. Someday.

“I do hope you’ll be able to get out and see the amazing countryside you’re going to be shooting in.”

“Me too. But for that damn bug in Italy, I would’ve been able to explore the Amalfi Coast more.” She sips her drink. “Like you and Charles did.”

Boom.

My mouth tightens around the paper straw. She knows all about how he used me to get the part in my dad’s movie. “Maybe you got the better end of that stick.”

“Sorry, Mel. I didn’t—”

“No worries.” I cut her off as I sip the final bits of my smoothie.

She slurps the last part of her drink. Standing, she collects my empty cup and walks over to a trash can. I use the few moments to calm my speeding heart. Chase belongs in the past. I shunt all memories of him as far away as possible as she approaches. Standing up, I join her on the jogging path.

As we finish, she mentions that Mark’s texted her a couple of times. “Really?”

She toys with her collar. “Yeah.”

“Are you two going to go out?”

“He’s in Florida.”

“He’ll be in LA soon, though.” I take a few more steps. “Have you heard from Thomas?” My use of Chase’s PA’s name causes a pain to slice through me. Because she was so into him on set, I maintain control of my neutral expression. By a thread.

“No.” Sophia points to an outdoor café. “Want to grab a bite?”

I sigh. “I’d love to, you know that, but I’m not up to it. I’m so sorry.”

Walking next to me, she says, “I get it. I’m sorry, too. If I could get five minutes alone with that Charles, I’d give him a huge piece of my mind.”

Her defense makes me tip my lips upward. “He’s not worth it,” I say softly.

She stops and turns to me. “When I’m back in town, I’m not going to be giving you any more breaks. We’re going to hang out for hours. Do each other’s hair. Go out. Get drunk.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“Pinky swear?” She holds up her little finger, into which I hook mine.

I give her a heartfelt hug and we part. On my way back to my condo, I pass a magazine stand where a photo of Chase stares at me. Before I can stop myself, the magazine’s in my hand. In my condo, I toss my keys and the magazine on the kitchen island. His stupid, smiling face stares back at me. Taunts me. I reach over to crumple it, but step away. Removing my knitting needles from my hair, I head to the bathroom for a shower.

Back in my kitchen, I make a snack of crackers and cheese and sit down. Next to the magazine. “You’re an asshole!”

I plunk my plate on top of his lying face. Laying a piece of cheese on top of a cracker, I take a bite. And chew.

I take another bite. And chew.

I finish the cracker.

I look down at the rest of the items on my plate and push away from the table. Standing up, I walk around my kitchen and then the rest of the condo. I find myself standing in front of the violin. Annoyed at the world, I turn and end up at the island where I move the plate and pick up the magazine.

Above Chase’s head is the headline, “What’s Next for Chase Wright?”

“Jerk!”

Despite my knuckles turning white, I flip the pages to the article. I’m greeted by a photo of Chase standing in front of a pool, soaking wet, wearing an equally wet white, button-down shirt that’s molded to his defined torso. My heart stutters. “Fuck.”

My eyes bounce from the photo to the article. I try to stop myself from reading it, but my damned eyes betray me. The article talks about his wrapping up his role as Doctor Manipul8 and shows a promo photo of him in the new superhero costume. I sewed him into that outfit. Objectively, the suit looks good. Subjectively, though ...

I force myself to look at the rest of the photos, which show him out with Cherie Adams, after the red carpet premiere of *I Was Made for Her*. God, they look so good together. With her gorgeous figure and perfect blond hair, she’s his exact opposite—his perfect compliment. It’s like *he* was made for *her*.

Drowning a tortured sob, I give up and skim the rest of the article, which concludes with a discussion of his next role. Playing Braxton Hunt in the upcoming rockumentary.

My stomach lurches. “He did it. He took the role.” Of course he did.

Tears threaten, but I slam my eyes shut. “I haven’t shed a tear for you yet, and I’m not going to now.” I take several deep breaths, which are interrupted by a knocking at my door.

Without thought, I fling open the door.

Chase stands before me.

Everything freezes.

The air.

My breath.

Time.

When he clears his throat, I push the door forward.

He moves his foot over the threshold to block the door’s closing. His achingly familiar tenor voice reaches out, “Melody. Please.”

The door bounces off his foot. I regulate my voice downward. “Go. Away.”

He pushes, and I press back. “Please. I need to talk with you.” His voice contains a timbre I’ve never heard from him. Desperation?

Perhaps it’s the pleading note in his voice. Maybe it’s my own traitorous body wanting to give him a better put down than I just did. Whatever the reason, I let the door go and step to the side, causing him to fall forward, fueled by his own

momentum. He catches himself before he face plants. Unfortunately.

Standing behind the door, I give him the evil eye. My brain yells for him to die. DIE!

Clearly he doesn't hear me, because he continues breathing. With precise movements, he turns to face me.

I cross my arms.

His head motions toward the living room. "Can we talk in there?"

"No."

He swallows and tugs his hand through his hair, ending on his forehead. Then he draws to his full height.

I don't move. Not an inch.

"You look thin."

I point to the open door. "You can leave if you're here to comment on my weight."

He licks his lips. "No. I'm not here for that."

I force a breath to go in. And out.

"God, you're so beautiful."

Out of all the things I expected him to say, this was not one of them. My hands land on my hips. "Still a great movie star reciting lines, I see."

He flinches. "Melody, please, I'm not acting. You *are* beautiful. You have hair like spun gold and a royal profile."

I throw my head back and force a harsh laugh. "You're much better when someone else writes your words."

His jaw tightens. "They're not lines."

“Fine. They’re not. Since that’s all you have to say, you may go. Now.” I point at the open door.

“No.”

I flick the rubber band around my wrist. “Why are you here, Chase?”

His gaze bounces from my wrist to my eyes. “Charles.”

“Spit out what you came to say and leave.”

He strides toward the kitchen island and stops on a dime. Picking up the stupid magazine I was reading, he brings it back to me. “You were reading about me?”

“Don’t get a swelled head. Someone left it down by the mailboxes and I brought it up here because I needed the newsprint to, to pack up a few things,” I prevaricate.

His eyebrow rises, but he doesn’t comment. Skimming the article, he points to the final paragraph where it says he’s going to play Braxton Hunte. I raise my chin. “It says my next role is of your father.”

I turn my head.

“Lies. It’s all lies.”

I swing toward him. “What?”

He whacks the magazine against his thigh. “Not your father. He was telling the truth at the dinner table back in Chicago. I was offered the role. I turned it down.” His cheeks turn a light shade of pink. “Sam’s not happy with me.”

He turned down the role? “You did? Why? It’s a great part.”

“I haven’t seen the script, so I can’t agree or disagree with you. It was pitched as the next *Bohemian Rhapsody*. I was

practically promised an Oscar.”

My brain tries to get up to speed. “You didn’t take it?”

“No. I didn’t.” His hand lands on his forehead. “I have you to thank for my decision.”

“What did I have to do with any of this?” Cramming down an unusual buzzing in my chest, I add *why are we having this bizarre conversation?*

Chase walks toward me, stopping about three feet away. His voice drops. “Everything. You sewed me into the Doctor Manipul8 costume every day for two weeks and turned my life upside down. You let me dream big. You let me simply be *me.*”

For the first time in ages, I take hold of the rubber band around my wrist, but leave it unplucked. His words don’t make any sense. “Okay?”

His hands land on my shoulders, and he squeezes. My body goes rigid. “I turned down the ‘role of a lifetime,’ as Sam described it to me, because you showed me who I want to be. I want to act in front of a live audience, and not be behind a camera. I want to hear applause, and laughter, and crying. I want the emotions I’m portraying amplified back at me.”

I don’t move a muscle, his hands remaining on my person. “Oh.”

“I want to do all that here. In New York City. Because I want to breathe the same air as you, celebrate our successes together, and share the bad times with you.” His chest expands. “Because I love you, Melody.”

The air stills.



He's said that before. In Chicago. "Practice those lines much?"

A smile reaches his blue eyes. "I had the best teacher. You."

His hands haven't moved. Neither have I. I search his face for traces that he's lying. Yet his handsome face remains open. Heat rises behind my eyelids.

He shakes me a little. "You taught me all about love. About pursuing your passion. I finally believe in my own talent because you modeled how it's done."

My limbs gain twenty extra pounds. I don't believe him. I can't. "You used me. I bet you couldn't believe your good luck when I offered myself to you like an idiot."

He tucks my hair behind my ear, causing me to bite my inner cheek. "No, I never used you. Not for a moment. I was honored you chose me as your first. *Am* honored."

Why is he saying this to me? "What do you have to gain from telling me all this?"

"The only thing that matters to me in the world. You."

My breathing hitches. I rub my palms on my hips, trying to process the past few minutes. "Did you really turn my dad down?"

"Yes." His eyes drop to my mouth, then bounce up to my eyes. "I want to cut my chops on Broadway, not doing more movies."

He told me that in Amalfi. That's why we flew here for his audition. "Did you get the part in *Hamlet 2.0*?"

Air expels through his mouth. "No. They went with a more established Broadway actor."

“It doesn’t matter.” I gulp in air. “You’re just like the rest of the world, Chase. You wanted me for what I could do for your career. For my connection to my dad.”

“Think about what you’re saying, Goldie.”

I spasm at the nickname.

“Remember what happened. True, I auditioned for the part before filming of *Doctor Manipul8* began filming in Italy, and I’m guilty of not telling you right away. That’s it. I got to know you as my dresser, and then we went to Positano and everything changed. I think I fell in love with you on the ferry ride back to Amalfi, even though it took my brain a little longer to catch up with my heart.”

I swallow.

“Everything between us was real. I never gave a second thought to your father’s movie, truth be told. You helped me focus on my career in a strategic manner, a destiny only I could steer. I started out wanting to be on stage and sort of fell into movies. And success. Which bred more movies. I’ve put an end to that vicious cycle now. I turned down the movie role. I don’t want it. I don’t want any of those roles.”

“You’re crazy. It’s going to be an epic film.”

He shrugs. “Maybe. For someone else. I do wish your father and the crew all the best. But it’s not what I want for me. I want to live here in New York City and work eight performances a week in front of different audiences.” His hands slide down my slack arms. “More than anything, though, I *need* you in my life. Today, tomorrow, and forever.”

My heart lurches. My blood moves faster through my system. Is he telling the truth? Can I believe him? “Chase—”

He cuts me off. “Charles.”

I force myself to utter the forbidden name. “Charles.” My voice cracks. I lick my lips. “How can I believe you?”

“Because I’m telling you the truth. I have no job, no place to live. All I have is me, wanting to be with you. I love you, Melody Annabel Hunte. I’ve never said these words to any woman outside of a movie script. If you’ll let me, I’ll say them to you every single day as long as we both shall live.”

I suck in my breath. He’s baring his soul, and it’s fresh and clean and honest. And *mine*. Still. “What about Cherie?”

He winces. “What about her? We’re friends.” He steps back and I mourn his heat. “We had a fling before I met you, but now we see each other from time to time as friends only.”

I close my eyes. He’s been living the Hollywood high life for a decade and has countless notches on his bedpost. Yet, he could’ve lied just now and he didn’t. I open my eyes. “Thank you for telling me the truth. However, you did take her to the premiere. I saw pictures in the magazine.” My eyes go to the table.

“I did. You know Thomas set it up. But believe me, nothing happened.” He pauses. “I didn’t do anything with her because she’s not you. She’s too tall. Her hair’s the wrong shade. She doesn’t have your smile or wit or talent with a needle.”

My upper lip worries my bottom. “I guess I’m going to have to accept the fact you’ve slept with a ton of women.”

“Not a ton.” He steps forward and puts his finger under my chin, coaxing it up. “They didn’t mean anything but sex. I’ve never made love with anyone but you.”

I search his eyes for a hint of deceit and come up empty. As I inhale, all my molecules jump over each other,

rearranging themselves into a new order. One where Charles Wainwright is my leading man. Still, years of life lessons can't be undone with one pretty speech.

My chest tingles. "I want to believe you."

His thumb catches the tear rolling down my cheek. "How about this? Why don't you close the door and let me start proving myself to you?" He reaches into his back pocket and produces a copy of *Backstage*. "You can help me select my next auditions."

I laugh because that was not what I had expected. I thought he would try to seduce me and make me forget all the hurt. This overture, however, means more to me. I close the door. We spend the next several hours poring through the magazine, selecting three parts he'd like to try for. Two plays and, at my urging, one musical.

Charles presses a button on his cell. "Last audition submitted! All that's left is the waiting."

Excited for him, I throw my arms around his neck and give him a hug. Realizing what I've done, I start to pull back.

"Don't," he whispers.

His tone sends my nerve endings scattering in all directions. He doesn't reach for me, though. He's offering himself *to* me.

I gaze into his magnetic eyes. Charles turned my life inside out and upside down, all the while making me a better person for it. A better designer. A better friend and daughter and even sister. More than anything else, he's made me believe in myself and my talents. Not because of an accident of birth, but for what I bring to the table.

Standing, I hold out my hand. “Take me to bed, Charles. I want to share everything I am with you, my love.”

His expressive eyes darken. “You’ll never regret this decision, Goldie.”

“I know.”

## CHASE



**T**he beautiful woman under me giggles. “Charles, you’re going to make me late!”

I bring her arms over her head and secure them with my hands, all the while raining kisses over her expressive face. Life with Melody is never dull. She sees the world differently from me, and I love that about her. I love every single thing about her.

“You’re the boss. You set the hours. Besides, filming doesn’t start for another two weeks.” I nuzzle her neck.

She tilts her head onto the pillow in order to give me better access. That’s my girl. *My girl.* Mine.

My hands leave her wrists and they skim down her naked body. Even though it’s been two weeks since we reconciled—well, I groveled and she let me back into her life—nothing about sharing our bodies gets old. It only improves.

Letting her nipple slip from my mouth, I gaze up at her amber, hooded eyes, filled with so much passion. I slide up her body and rest my weight on my arms, bracketing her face.

“Charles.” She arches her back.

I kiss her lips. “I’ll never get tired of hearing you say my name.”

“And I’ll never get tired of this.” Her legs rub against mine as she fits her softness against my straining body. “I have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Not as much as me, Goldie. You’ve taught me what it means to give yourself over to someone else, body and soul.” I kiss her mouth, my tongue entering hers. Pulling away, I gaze into her passionate eyes.

Her nails scrape down my back, ushering in a shiver of desire.

My fingers enter her core and I work her into a frenzy, but deny her release. Instead, I splay her wide-open and position my mouth right above her clit. I lick her swollen bud. “Like this?”

Her head swivels from side to side on the pillow while her lower body moves in time with my licks. Her body clenches, then she screams her release.

Sitting on my haunches, I wipe her juices off my mouth, a satisfied smirk playing around my lips. She lies, limp. “You’re mighty talented with that tongue.”

I cup my hard cock in my hand. “That’s not the only thing I’m talented with.” I give myself a tug.

She sits up. “Need a hand with that?”

“That’ll be a start.”

Her fingers close around me, causing my breath to cease for a second, then rush through my body. When her tongue swipes at my tip, I grab her hair and direct her closer. She looks up at me, my cock still in her mouth.

Is there any more amazing sight?

“I want to come inside your body. Because I can. Because you’re mine.”

At my use of the word “mine” her eyes widen, and her mouth slackens. “How?”

Because I’m feeling selfless, I roll my hips. “However you want.”

Fast as a clapperboard, she rolls a condom on me and pushes against my pecs, sending me sprawling onto my back. She climbs on top of me, her delicious thighs straddling me. “I want it this way.” She kisses my mouth.

Wrapping my arms around her, I pull her down and deepen the kiss. Her fingers find my erection and hold it upright while she seats herself on me. My eyelids flutter closed at the welcoming feeling. Forcing my lids back open, I watch as she takes her bottom lip between her teeth.

Thrusting upward to her downward strokes, our bodies wrestle in the most amazing way. Her tits sway in front of me, and I latch onto one nipple, sucking hard. Her hips jolt forward.

“Charles. God.”

“Just Charles will do. I’m a man, not a deity.”

“You’re my divinity,” she breathes. She increases her tempo, causing all sorts of friction between us.

Her body stiffens and she screams again. With her core flexing around my cock, I take a shallow breath, my balls starting to tingle. Roaring, I let myself go.

She collapses on top of me, my hands landing on her ass to keep her in place. Next to my ear, her breathing comes in increasingly deeper pants until it evens out.



Not wanting her to move, I flex my fingers. “I love you so much, Melody.”

Her head lifts a fraction. “And I love you, too.”

“This isn’t how I had planned this, but I can’t hold back anymore.” I slip some of her gorgeous blond hair behind her ear. “Melody.” Words desert me.

“Yes?” Against my will, she slides off my body and sprawls on the bed next to me. A wanton nymph. *My* wanton nymph.

With the sudden freedom from her body, I sit up and dispose of the condom, then reach into the drawer of the side table. With the velvet box in my hand, I face my future with all the determination to secure the most important role of my lifetime. Which this is.

I land on my side next to her, the box hidden in my hand that’s supporting my head. “Melody,” I begin again. “I can’t imagine my life without you in it. I lived that way for what? A few weeks? I was the most miserable SOB ever.”

She giggles at my accurate characterization.

Undeterred, I continue, “I never intend to go through that ever again. Whatever happens, I want you at my side. Only then I know everything will turn out the way it should.” I open the box.

Her eyes go round.

“Melody, will you be my wife?”

A surprised giggle bursts through her lips. “Like this? You’re asking me while I’m naked and still euphoric from the two orgasms you gave me?”

I quirk my eyebrow. “Looks like it.”

She sits up, and I join her. My confidence dips a fraction.

“What will I tell my parents about how you proposed?”

A smile quirks. “I guess it depends on what your answer is.” I shake the box in front of her.

“But I’m naked!”

“So am I.” I kiss her mouth. “Say yes and we’ll come up with a better story.”

“You’re incorrigible,” she complains. “But I guess that’s why I love you so much. Of course I’ll marry you!” She throws her arms around my neck, her lips fusing to mine.

With supreme effort, I pull back and put the four-carat emerald cut diamond on her left hand. “Perfect fit.” I kiss the inside of her palm.

“Like you,” she whispers, stroking my already hard cock.

I toss the box over my shoulder and bring her thigh up to my hip. “Forever.”



**A**fter Melody went to work, I worked out, cleaned the condo, and went to my acting class. Following another stimulating session with my fellow actors, I stop at the mailbox and retrieve Melody’s copy of *Variety*. Walking into our condo, I toss the magazine on the dinette. A headline grabs my attention, and I flip to the article. Smiling, I put the magazine under my arm and head over to her office.

“Knock, knock,” I say as I enter her space. I’m always awed at the amount of fabrics, mannequins, and notebooks

strewn all over in here. My fiancée seems to know exactly where everything is.

I stroll over to her and kiss her forehead. “I’ve missed you,” I murmur.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes. I’ve been holed up in this office all day, trying to get through some of this paperwork and finish up the prototypes.” She drops her pen on top of her notebook. “I thought we were meeting at the restaurant for dinner?”

“I couldn’t wait that long to see you again.” My fingers trail down her cheek to her left arm, and I close them around her hand. Bringing it up, I stare at my engagement ring perched there. “It looks so good on you.”

She dons an adorable smirk. “You should be happy I said yes. After all, I’m doing all the heavy lifting around here. *One* of us has to work while the other one sits around eating bonbons all day.”

I chuckle at the traditional role reversal. Tugging her to her feet, I place her open palms on my tight stomach. “Really? Bonbons?”

She giggles as she traces my muscles through my shirt. “Okay. That might have been a slight exaggeration.”

I suck in my stomach, making my abs more pronounced. “I demand tribute as restitution!”

She rolls her eyes, but the smile on her lips tells another story. In a husky voice, she asks, “What do you have in mind?”

I scan her office for a flat surface, but everything’s covered with either paper or fabric. But not her chair. “I’d like to have

a repeat performance of this morning's activities." Turning, I bring us to her chair and sit down so she's on top of me.

"I can see that." Her head swivels toward the open door. "I think we need to do this show in private."

She's right. But I'm not giving up without a fight. I stroke her hair. "A kiss then. From my fiancée."

"That I can do."

Her lips pucker and she leans forward. As soon as our mouths meet, the kiss explodes. After a long while, we pull back, each breathing hard.

Our foreheads touch. "What you do to me, Goldie."

"Right back at 'ya."

With slow moves, she climbs off my lap and I stand, reaching into my back pocket and producing her copy of *Variety*. "I actually came over here to show you this."

Her eyes bounce from me to the magazine. "What's in it?"

"Thought you'd never ask. I mean, you were so busy kissing me and all," I tease, a large part of me still disbelieving she's actually mine. I double-check her left hand, and my heart swells at the confirmation.

She shakes her head. I open the magazine to the small article and point. "Let me do the honors."

I shake the magazine. "Headline—'*Ladies of the Abbey Gets Hunted.*'"

Melody's eyebrows rise, and she bites her bottom lip.

I start reading, "The hit HBO drama has undergone some changes during this hiatus. Judith Harris led her team from the show to the set of *Doctor Manipul8*, and she emerged with a

new title. That of the newest lead costume designer for Ned Nobleman—better known to all as simply Noble.

“I was so impressed with Judith’s work ethic and ability to be prepared for any eventuality, not to mention her extremely creative designs. When my next movies were greenlit, I knew she had to head up my team.’

“Noble’s gain was HBO’s loss. Moreover, it was discovered on the movie set that one of Judith’s assistant costume designers, Helene Parker, was undermining the film in order to get ahead. Parker is now awaiting trial in California for her efforts of sabotage.

“Which left Judith’s other assistant, Melody Hunte, 25, as the sole remaining option for HBO if they wanted to stay in-house. HBO is known, however, for bringing in new talent under such circumstances.

“Not in this case, however. Hunte was named as the new lead costume designer for the HBO series and word on the street has it that she’s very hands-on. She’s already hired two assistants and is busy at work creating new designs for this season.

“‘We’re thrilled to have such a young and vibrant talent with us, leading *Ladies of the Abbey* forward. Ms. Hunte offers a unique perspective and brings an exciting eye to the design. She is going to make a very big splash here on the set, and we can’t wait to showcase her work,’ an HBO spokeswoman said.

“Hunte is the daughter of the legendary rock star Braxton Hunte, of the band of the same last name, about whose career a movie is in the early stages of production now.”

I finish the article and set it down on her desk. Melody slams her mouth shut. “Wow. That was some article.”

I point to the part about Helene. “I wish they had done a better job of describing all the bullshit she put you through.” I tap on the magazine. “You know, I have only one unanswered question when it comes to Helene. How on earth did she manage to pull the stunt about my gloves?”

Melody swallows. “I’ve thought about that for a long time. I don’t think she did anything. I believe the buckle somehow got caught in that boy’s curls, and everything unraveled from there. Although, Helene was prepared with the silk material we finally used.”

“Accident then?”

She nods. “I think so. When she realized how easy it would be to foster more accidents like it, I think that’s when she went over the edge.” Melody picks up the magazine and repeats the last line. Big, expressive hazel eyes meet mine. “I’m being recognized for my own work. Not for being someone’s daughter.”

I drop to my knee in front of her. Grabbing her hands, I say, “You’re your own talent, Melody Hunte. You bring wit and creativity and vibrancy to any set you’re on. Your creations are clever and fit with the aesthetic the director is trying to convey. Yes, Brax is your father, but you are a formidable woman in your own right. I bet you, one day, there will be a movie made about you.” I kiss her fingertips.

“Oh, excuse me!” Melody’s new assistant stands in the doorway. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Melody stands up and waves her left hand. “No worries. What’s up?”

The assistant’s mouth flies open. Her eyes bounce from Melody’s hand to her face and then to posture on one knee.

“Oh my God. Did you just get engaged?”

Melody starts to stammer a reply when I jump to my feet. “Guilty! Melody always said she wanted to have a romantic proposal, one she could share with her parents and, someday, our kids. I’m proud to say she agreed to be my wife.” I bring her hand to my lips, a smile dancing around my mouth.

Melody bursts out laughing. “I never thought being surrounded by my work would be a romantic setting, but leave it to Charles to turn anything into a memorable occasion.”

Her assistant turns and yells, “Melody got engaged!” She rushes in and hugs us both.

We spend the next hour accepting congratulations from everyone on the show, and even the network. Melody exalts under their excitement, at being accepted as a talent in her own right. Even better, for being loved as the amazing woman she is.

Finally, I escort her out of the building and toward a new restaurant opened by one of the premiere chefs in the world. I offer her my arm and escort her inside. Right to a table where her family awaits.

“Mom! Daddy! King! Angie! I can’t believe you’re here!” She gives them each huge hugs and then thrusts her left hand in front of them. “Charles proposed today!”

Brax walks over to me and shakes my hand. “Son, we’re so happy to welcome you into the family, even if you turned down the role playing me.”

“Thanks, sir,” I reply. We’ve cleared the air between us over the movie. I’m actually a bit excited to see the premiere, without being a part of it. He breaks into a broad smile and wraps me in a bear hug.

After hellos and congratulations are shared—as well as how I romantically proposed this afternoon in Melody’s office, which causes my fiancée and me to share a conspiratorial wink—I bring up the *Variety* article. Everyone is excited to see Melody blossoming. No one more than me.

I place my arm around the back of Melody’s chair and raise my champagne. “To my future wife, the woman who resides in my heart. She taught me to trust in my secret desires, and I’m here following them. Because of her. I’m humbled to be welcomed into your family and promise to allow Melody’s light to shine brighter than she even believes possible.”

I raise my glass. “To my fiancée. Who shares her golden light with everyone she touches. I love you.”



## EPILOGUE – MELODY

Time has passed in a blur. I'm taking our engagement slow, enjoying the process as much as possible. I toss a copy of *Bride's* onto the coffee table and rest my head on my fiancé's wide, muscular shoulder.

“What's next on our to-do list?”

Charles has been so supportive in planning, having definite ideas on our décor. Especially the flowers, which he's insisted all be shades of yellow. To match my hair. I fiddle with a long lock of it.

“I think we need to plan our honeymoon.”

He turns toward me. “Now you're talking.” He kisses me, and all thoughts of wedding plans scatter.

My finger traces his cheek, ending in the dent in his chin. “You're so hot.”

His eyes sparkle. “That's what a man likes to hear from his woman.” He kisses the tip of my nose. “Although your beauty eclipses mine.”

I accept his exquisitely-worded lie. I know I'm not special in the looks department, but Charles sees me this way, and I'm not about to argue. I rest my head on his shoulder. “I think we've gotten a lot of the major stuff taken care of for the

wedding for a while. We'll figure out a super-awesome honeymoon in a while." I trace a heart on his upper chest. "I was thinking we could work on something a bit different."

"Uh-oh. What are you thinking?" He taps my forehead.

"Nothing bad. I was thinking I'd like to move. I love this condo, but my parents bought it for me when I went to college. I'd like to get something only for us."

"I like the sound of that, Goldie. Our place."

I nod, my head bouncing on his body. "In the City, right?"

"Since I'm now a bona fide Broadway actor, I totally agree. I have my house out in LA that I can sell. We'll never live out there."

"Are you sure?"

Charles shrugs. "Yeah. We can use the profit as a down payment." Not that we need any help in that area.

Blood races through my body and I kiss his cheek. "I'll let Daddy know he's getting this place back."

His hands close around my body, and he rubs them up and down my back. "Our place. I like the sound of that. Stay in the Upper East?"

"Yeah. I like it up here. Maybe a couple of blocks down on Central Park?"

He hugs me closer, his nose breathing in the vanilla from my shampoo. "I'm down with that."

"Do you think we could hire King and Angie to find it for us?"

He pulls back. "That sounds like a great idea. I know they're set up out in the Hamptons, but I trust them to find us

something perfect.”

“Great.” I text my brother. We’ve spent more time together than ever, and he’s a pretty great guy. The fact Angie will be my sister-in-law rocks. “I can’t wait to see what they have to show us.”

My phone dings with an incoming text. “King says he’s on board.”

“Great.”

“He wants to know if we want to be featured on his reality TV show.”

Charles removes his body from mine. “Not great.”

I cock my head. “Why not? Having us on their show might help out their already high ratings. He is my brother, after all.”

He combs his hand through his hair. “I know King’s your brother. But I’m acting on Broadway now. I’m not looking to boost my next movie.”

“I know that. You’re still a big movie star though—”

He winces at my use of the term. “Exactly why I don’t want to be on the show.”

A new text arrives. “Angie just texted me. She’s saying she understands if we don’t want to be on the show. She says Let’s Do It!, her network, wanted to put her wedding planning and ceremony on TV, and she overruled it.”

“See.” He crosses his arms in front of his chest. “She gets it. No cameras.”

My cell dings. “This is from King. He says there’s a difference between being on the show and having their wedding exploited.” I drop my phone onto the coffee table.

“He’s right, you know. Their wedding is private, while if we decide to go on their show about our real estate hunt, we’ll be doing exactly what the show was designed to do.”

“I hear you. However, don’t they advertise addresses on their show? Everyone and their mother will know where we’re living.”

“You have a point. If we decide to go on the show, we’ll have to negotiate how they do that.” My finger traces my cell, and I return my head to his shoulder.

Slowly, his hard physique relaxes, and I move my left hand to over his heart. My engagement ring refracts so much light. “How much longer do we have before you have to get to the show?”

He caresses his ring. “Two more hours.”

I look into his eyes. “Whatever shall we do to pass the time?”

He doesn’t respond with words. Instead, he places his hands under my legs and stands with me in his arms. “I’m not sure. I think if we go to the bedroom, something will come up.”

I link my arms around his neck. “I’m betting on it.”

An hour later, we lie together in bed, sweat lingering on our skin. I trace the cuts of his abdominal muscles. “How many murderers have bodies like you?”

He rumbles a laugh. “Every time I walk onto the stage without my shirt, we have to wait for the audience to settle down. My friends all make fun of me.”

I kiss his stomach. “I think it was a stroke of genius for the producers to cast you as the villain. No one expects it of you.”

He puffs up. “Athena Davis wanted me to audition for the lead. Thanks to you, I stuck to my guns and refused. I think it adds to the enjoyment of the play.”

““And Chase Wright’s first turn on Broadway is a smashing success. He brings an aura of unpredictability to this delightful murder-mystery.””

He smiles. “My favorite review ever.”

I turn onto my stomach. “Even better than their enthusiasm over your playing *Doctor Manipul8*.”

“Yes. However, being sewn into that costume during the last part of the trilogy was a highlight for me.”

“That’s because you had an amazing dresser.”

He smacks my naked ass. “True!” He gets out of bed and heads to the bathroom. Shortly, the water in the shower starts.

I check the clock. Charles still has enough time before he needs to head out to the theater. I pad into the bathroom behind him and slip into the shower. “I think you might need some help getting clean.”

“Getting dirty, you mean?”

“Trying to do my fiancée duties.” I squeeze around him, my hand landing on his semi-erect cock. “I think he needs a little help.”

One eyebrow rises. “You do?”

I school my expression to show feigned concentration. “Yes.” I glide my hand up and down, back and forth, cupping his balls ever so often.

He swallows and widens his stance. His erection grows larger under my ministrations. “Seems like you’re doing a

damn fine job, Goldie.”

The water rolls down our backs. I rub my thumb over the pre-cum at his tip, which formed already even though we made love not thirty minutes ago. His eyes close when I bend and take him in my mouth. I let my tongue lick over his hardness, then take him as deep as possible into the back of my throat.

“Melody, I’m close.”

Instead of moving back, I suck harder and swallow everything he has to give me. I stand, a satisfied smile on my face.

“I want to make you come, but I’m not sure we have enough time.”

“I trust you’ll make it up to me later.”

“Without a doubt.”

I let my fingers roam over his hard muscles. Muscles he works hard to maintain, both in exercise and diet. He’s very disciplined in all aspects of his life. Except when it comes to me. With me, he’s carefree and loving.

“I love you so much, Charles,” I say, wrapping a fluffy white towel around my body.

“Right back at you.”

My heart swells. “I’ll let you get dressed and I’ll meet you in the living room.” I kiss him once more.

Exchanging the towel for a breezy navy blue dress, and sans shoes, I walk into the kitchen to put together a power snack for Charles before he heads out to work. I understand his worry over being on *Battle of the Real Estate Matchmakers*, but I think it could be fun. However, he does

have a valid point about everyone knowing our new address. I pause from cutting up his apple—I'm feeling very domestic at the moment, plus I'm taking advantage of it being Sunday and don't have to work—and text this idea to King and Angie.

Setting the table with his apple and a jar of peanut butter, I begin making his protein shake. My eyes land on the spoon rest boasting "Positano" resting on the oven, a grin tugging at my lips.

Clad in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, Charles strolls into the kitchen. "A man could get used to this treatment."

"Don't get too used to it, Big Boy." I pour his shake into a glass. "Tomorrow's Monday, and you're back to being on your own."

He slumps into a chair. "I hate Mondays the most. You have to work, and I get to mope around all day."

I steal a piece of apple. "You have your acting classes on Mondays."

"True." He slurps down the shake. "That is the bright spot until you get home."

"I'll try to leave the office earlier. We're in the middle of shooting, though, so you know how that goes."

He spreads some peanut butter on his apple. "I do. Which is why I'm in the 'theatre' now."

I laugh at the affected way he pronounces *theater*. "I'm sure you'll survive one day without me. How about what I have to endure as the fiancée of a man of the *theatre*." I use his same affected pronunciation.

"What? All the fans throwing themselves at me?"

I frown. “I wasn’t thinking of that until you brought it up.” I grab another slice of apple from his plate and chomp down while he chuckles.

“No,” I continue. “I was thinking of how my Wednesday nights and Saturdays suck. You have doubles those days.”

“We’ll work it out, Goldie.”

My cell beeps with an incoming text. “King says we could give an oblique neighborhood versus the actual addresses of the places we go visit. Or the address of places we don’t buy. If we decide to go on the show.”

He crunches the last bit of his apple. “You really want to be on the show?”

“Not really,” I admit. “However, I do want to support my brother. You’re such a big star,” I bat my eyelashes at him.

Charles’s jaw tenses. Then a wolfish grin overtakes his face. “I’m sure you can think of a way to make up the shoots to me. Something along the lines of what you just did in the shower would be a good start.”

I step back. “Are you sexually propositioning me to be on the show?”

“I wouldn’t say that exactly. More like offering you a way to sweeten the pot.” His phone alarm sounds. “This conversation isn’t over.”

He steps into the kitchen and embraces me, kissing me with all the passion we shared this morning. Will share again tonight. “I love you, Goldie.”

He opens the fridge and grabs a fizzy water before striding across the room. As his hand lands on the doorknob, I yell, “Break a leg!”



Charles smiles and disappears into the hallway.

Alone in the condo, I plop down on the sofa. Do I want to be on King's show? I'm torn personally, but I do know I want to support my brother. This feeling overrides my misgivings.

Because I can't give King the go-ahead without getting Charles one hundred percent on board, I call my parents. "Princess! How's life treating you in the Big Apple?"

My gaze lands on the remnants of Charles's snack and pull myself out of the sofa. Walking to the dinette, I begin to clean up, starting by closing up the peanut butter jar.

"It's good here, Daddy. Charles and I decided that we'd like to move." I place the peanut butter into the pantry and add, "We love your condo, of course. But we'd like to have a place that we pick, if you know what I mean."

"I get it. Finding a home is something very personal. Your mom and I will happily stay in the condo when we visit our kids, who both seem to be growing roots in the Empire State." He chuckles.

I stack the dirty dishes in the sink and toss the debris into the garbage can. "Thanks. What do you think if we show our home search on King and Angie's show?"

My dad takes a moment to respond. "I never thought my two kids would be together on a TV show," he says in a thick voice. "Personally, I think it would make for some amazing television."

"Charles and I are trying to decide what to do."

Noise in the background from my dad's side comes through my receiver. "Your mother just got home. Hold on." In muffled tones, I hear a kiss followed by him telling her about the show. "I'm putting you on speaker."

My mother's voice comes through. "Hi, Melody. How's wedding planning?"

"It's coming along well, Mom. Got the major vendors locked down."

"That's great. Now your dad tells me you're looking for a new place?"

"We made that decision today."

"I trust you to make the right choice for you."

"Thanks, Mom." We get caught up on the local gossip about my job, her role as Hunte's tour accountant that has expanded with the movie, and my dad's excitement over said movie.

"Oh, one thing before you go, Princess."

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Hunte is performing next month at Madison Square Garden. We'd love it if you and Charles could be there. King and Angie are coming."

A smile crosses my face. "Of course I'll be there. It depends on what day for Charles, though, as he's working on Broadway."

"Oh right. Sara, what day of the week is the Hunte concert?"

She replies, "Monday."

"Oh great. Charles is off on Mondays, so we'll definitely be there."

We hang up and I decide to sneak into the theater tonight to watch my kickass fiancée perform. Returning to our bedroom, I stride to my jewelry box. My life has come such a

long way since I took a movie job with Judith during the HBO show's hiatus.

I got my dream promotion on HBO.

My talent is finally being recognized.

And the most important thing in the world to me—the love I share with Charles.

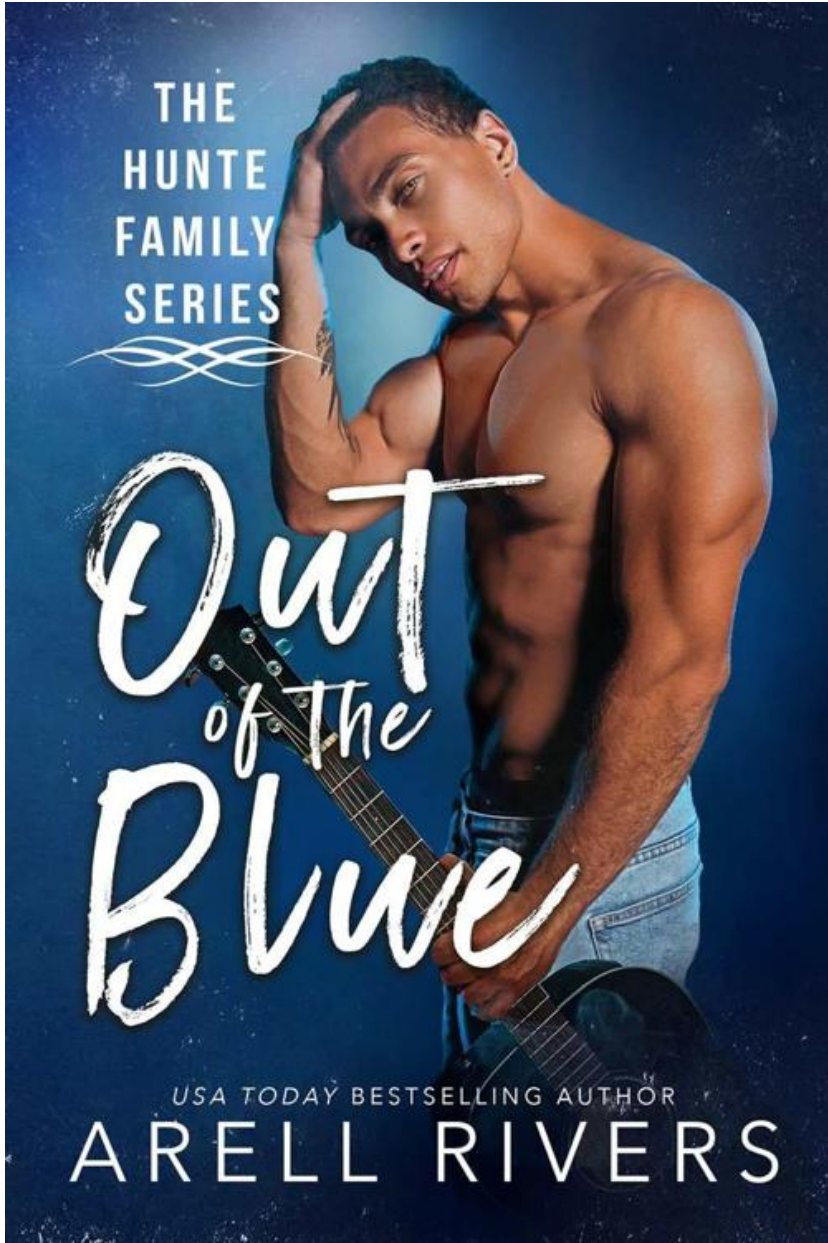
I select a pair of earrings and pick up a rubber band I had discarded ages ago. Charles helped me realize I don't need it any longer. I've learned how to navigate challenges with a positive outlook, just like he's allowing his true self to shine.

Whatever life brings from this moment forward, I have confidence we'll tackle it all. Together.

THE  
HUNTE  
FAMILY  
SERIES

Out  
of the  
Blue

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
ARELL RIVERS



## TRENT



I raise my mug, foam sloshing over the rim of the cold glass. “To The Light Rail. First we’ll be an opening band, next stop world domination!”

As if they rehearsed it, Dwight, Joey, and Maurice chorus, “Here, here!”

Our glasses clink and the cool effervescence of Budweiser, my favorite beer, bounces down my throat. Even my Bud celebrates I’m on the cusp of achieving my dreams. Finally.

We’re at our favorite Mexican restaurant in Jersey City, celebrating our impending big break, hopefully for the last time as unknowns. Sitting outside on this warm September day, we scarf down a variety of appetizers. All my bandmates put in for an extended leave from their day jobs today, since we’ll be touring for at least the next few months. With everything that went down with Mom, I’m still on leave from mine. For a minute, I clasp the cross necklace she gave me ages ago. Using a jalapeño popper, I stuff down my grief over what happened. Not. Now.

Maurice pushes his thick rims up his face—the deep black frames a good complement to his skin tone. “We’ve been here before, guys, so we shouldn’t get too ahead of ourselves.”

Joey, our bassist, punches his shoulder. “Shut it, piano boy. No negative talk allowed.” For emphasis, he shakes his head, his mass of dark brown hair swishing over his light brown skin.

Maurice takes a swig of his drink—his signature, a Cuba Libre. His glass thuds onto the table. “Don’t get me wrong. I *am* pumped. I only wanted to bring us all back to reality.”

“Fine. What can we do to change your mind?” interjects Dwight, our kickass drummer. “The radio station already called and said we won. We’re opening for Hunte at Madison Square Garden in two weeks. *Fourteen days*. Then we’ll be their opening band for the Eastern seaboard part of their tour. We’re going to be huge!” As he speaks, his voice raises with eagerness.

Reaching over to my best friend, I put up my fist, which he bumps. “Yeah, this is it. I can feel it.” And I can. This is so different from the other times we were supposedly “on the cusp.” Excitement courses through my veins. If only my mother were here to experience our success with us. I stifle a sigh.

“I don’t want to be a wet blanket, guys. We’ve been here before and it’s always fizzled. I can’t take another disappointment.” Maurice sips his drink. “Neither can Fee. She said this is our last shot and if it doesn’t work out, I’m going to have to step back.”

Maurice and Fee got married three years ago, and they’ve been talking about having kids soon. Guess I can see her point, but fuck. This is our big break. “C’mon, Maurice. We won the radio station’s contest fair and square. This time is different from all the others.” I almost believe my own words.

His shoulders rise then fall. “We still haven’t heard from Apex.”

He’s right. Hunte’s label hasn’t contacted us yet. “We will, man. How about this?” I toss my cell on the table. “Will you feel better when they call?”

Maurice stares at my silent phone. “Well, yeah.”

“Okay. While we wait, you can coddle your Cuba Libre. The rest of us will more than cover for your pussy ass.” My bandmates grin at our banter. As if by unwritten agreement, we finish our drinks—including Maurice—and the server delivers another round together with our meals.

Munching on some of the remaining nachos, Dwight turns to me. “Wish your mom were here to cheer us on.” He offers me a chip.

Automatically, I pop the tortilla into my mouth. Unlike when I *thought* about her, his *speaking* about my mother does dampen my spirits. The pain of her loss, only four months ago, is still raw. I rub my arm, over the tattoo I got in her honor. “Thanks. Me, too.”

“I’m sure she’s looking down on us, proud as all get out. I bet she even had her finger on the pulse of the contest, if I know her.” Dwight spreads his own hands wide over the table.

His words are like a balm. “I can see her now, directing everyone from the Pearly Gates.” I smile at my closest friends—for all intents and purposes, my only remaining family. “She’s probably taking a victory lap with her harp and halo right now.” I picture her doing just that. Telling everyone up in heaven her boy won this contest.

I’m jolted out of my pleasant musings when my phone bounces. Four pairs of eyes land on the phone jumping on the

table. It's an unknown number from New York City.

Clearing my throat, I scoop it up. "Hello?"

A woman's voice floats through the line. "Is this Trent Washington?"

"Yes."

"I'm Cordelia Hernandez, and I work for Apex Hits. I've been instructed to call and give you the logistics for your performance at Madison Square Garden, opening for Hunte in two weeks."

Although I'd tossed out the phone to pacify Maurice, I never thought this call would come through now. "Okay. Good. Great." I fumble to put my phone on speaker. "Is it alright if I put you on speaker? I'm with my band now."

"Sure. Are you ready?"

"For?"

She sighs. "For the details about the concert?"

"Oh, right. Yeah. I mean, no. I need to get some paper." *Way to play it cool.* My bandmates pass me a napkin and a borrowed pen. "Got it. Shoot." I write down her detailed instructions. When the call concludes, I hold up the napkin toward Maurice. "Proof enough for you?"

Through his thick glasses, he squints as he reads my chicken scratch. Looking up at me, his face sports a wide smile. "It's real."

We all ride the high of winning. I haven't felt this good in ages. And I'm sure Mom had a hand in our good fortune.

When all the food has been eaten, and more celebratory drinks downed, our meal wraps. I knock on the table. "Guys, I



wouldn't want to be on this journey with any other group. This is it. We're on our way. Remember when Maroon 5 wasn't known at all and then they opened for The Rolling Stones? We're the next Maroon 5!"

"I think they already had won some Grammys before they landed the gig," Maurice corrects me. Joey pops him on the back of his head, and we laugh.

As we walk out of the restaurant, Dwight slaps my back. "Okay, Adam Levine. See you tomorrow at rehearsal." He hops on his beloved Harley, straps on his helmet, and revs the engine. Twice.

I grin all the way home. Unlocking the door to Mom's townhouse—now mine—I enter the empty space and my lips compress. My excitement at our win turns down to simmer. After tossing my keys into the bowl on the entry table as Mom always chided me to do, I stride into the living room.

"We're going to be big!" I scream to no one as I sink into my recliner. The puffy black one Mom thought was ugly but still allowed me to buy.

Everyone in the band, minus me, is now married. Dwight got hitched only three months ago—it was his wedding Mom was buying a present for when she was killed in the mall shooting. The pain surrounding her death rears. His guilt. My agony.

I pack those memories away and shunt them into the darkest recesses of my mind. Today is only about happy thoughts. A new beginning.

Restless, I stand and go into the kitchen for a bottle of water. After I down it and flip through all the channels on my television, three times, I leave the clicker on the coffee table.

Drifting through the house, I soak in the details my mother used to make our thirteen hundred square-foot Jersey City townhouse a home. The curtains from Target that looked like those on an HGTV show. A rug Mom picked up at a flea market as it reminded her of one she saw at a hotel. The mismatched china, collected from thrift stores, I haven't had the heart to throw away.

Her touch is still all around me, even if she's not.

I find myself loitering at the threshold of her room, which contains her desk. It's the last piece of furniture I still need to go through. I wander inside and my hand alights on her closet's door pull. I slide the door open. Lilac, faint, reaches my nose from the couple of blouses still on hangers. My eyes squeeze shut and I inhale Mom's scent.

After a few beats, I open my eyes and face her desk. Buoyed by my band's good fortune, and supported by her spirit around me, I shut the closet door and sit on her chair.

I wet my lips and lift the rolltop.

Post-its, in all different colors, greet me. Her precise handwriting wraps around my heart and throat, constricting both. Slowly, I gather each sticky note and throw them away. It's not like she needs to be reminded about friends' birthdays or events anymore. The heart-shaped one with "Dwight + Denice" on it makes my heart race.

Dwight blamed himself for her death until I was able to let him off the hook. Which was only thanks to my therapist's help. After all, Dwight didn't make her go to the mall to pick up their wedding present on that fateful day. A horrible coincidence, but he's not responsible. No. That honor belongs to the mall shooter alone. The mantra my therapist gave me replays in my mind several times—*Her death wasn't his fault,*

*he didn't send the shooter there*—until my breathing gets under control and I accept it as true. Again. Grace flows through my body. For her. For them. For me.

However, my grace never will extend to the fucking shooter. No, he left ten people dead before he turned the gun on himself. Police told me he was some white supremacist pig who targeted the mall because it's in a "Black neighborhood." I refuse to even *think* his name. Only pray he burns for eternity.

Shaking my head, I focus on my task and go through the rest of the items on her desk, then move on to the top drawer. It's surprisingly easy to process her things. Papers she thought were important no longer hold any sway. Except for her tax forms, which I carefully put into a pile with contracts for her house. My house, I correct myself.

I go to open the middle drawer but it refuses to budge. Figuring something got stuck, I try shimmying it with no luck. As I don't want to break anything, I continue to the bottom drawer where several files brim with my report cards, which are ages old. I flip through some, remembering milestones from second grade and even high school.

Poor Mom. She really tried to keep me focused, but my attention always diverted to the guitar. I would practice for hours in my room and delay doing my homework until she bugged me enough. But I still managed to get into Jersey City State and major in music production. My degree has helped the band several times, so I don't think of it as wasted years. Even though all I wanted to do was perform.

Here I am over a decade later, poised to make our mark on the music world. Finally. Overnight success, we are not. I

know deep inside, though, this truly is our big break. We're going to become household names.

I'll make Mom proud. She always believed in me. Now it's my time to shine. I just wish like hell she were here to experience it with me.

Sighing, I throw away the last of her useless papers and return to the stuck drawer. As I'm studying it, I realize there's a keyhole. Hmmm. Why would Mom lock a drawer in her own bedroom?

Intrigued, I paw around for a key but come up empty. Wait! Didn't she keep some keys in a little ceramic cup on her dresser? I stride over there, and sure enough, several keys remain inside. Taking the whole cup back to the desk, I try each until one fits inside. Turning it, the drawer pops open.

“Success!”

I can't wait to see what she felt was so important. When I rip open the drawer, I'm greeted by several hardback books. Some have floral covers, others have stripes, while others have world maps.

Frowning, I pick up one that simply says “Diary,” and my mind immediately drifts back in time to when I was a kid, maybe six or seven years old. Mom sat with one of these books in her rocking chair—which I've moved into the living room beside my recliner. Curled up, she had a pen in her hand and wet cheeks.

I remember asking her what was wrong. She smiled through her tears and said she wished my father could have seen how big and strong I'm becoming. How he would've celebrated with me as I picked up my first guitar and started playing like I was born to do.

I ran over and gave her a big hug. Sometimes she would look so sad, and I'd leave her alone to mourn. My dad, her only true love, was a Marine killed in Operation Desert Storm in the Gulf War before he even found out about my existence. They definitely would've gotten married if he'd returned from the war. She never dated after him. At least they're reunited now.

Dare I read her most private words?

I debate with myself for ten full minutes before cracking open her diary.



“**H**ow dare you?” I scream at the tombstone. “You had no right!”

I read the inscription aloud. “Lorinda Washington. Beloved mother, daughter, sister. Dancing with the angels.” Yanking on my short dreadlocks, I sneer, “You were beloved by them only because your parents predeceased you. And why did I feel it necessary to add in about my aunt? Not like you talked with her for over a decade.”

Kicking the ground next to her grave, I offer a derisive laugh. “Should've only said one word. ‘Liar.’”

I turn my back and take two steps away, only to spin around and stare down once again at my mother's final resting place. “You know what? This is *your* cross to bear. You did this. It's all on you. Hope you rot in Hell!”

My hands form fists. “Don't ever expect to see me back here again. I'm never coming back.”

## TRENT



I knock back my second Bud and slam the empty mug onto the counter. I can't process the shit my mother—the sainted woman who claimed her whole life revolved around me—fed me. And I swallowed it all like the gullible jerk I was.

The bartender approaches me. “Another?”

“Yeah.”

While he removes my mug, I scan the room. I've been to this dive bar several times, usually when I want to forget. And I certainly wish I could forget those fucking diaries now. My gaze lands on a woman sitting alone three stools over. Long, dark, straight hair with some reddish undertones. Olive complexion, a few shades lighter than mine. Lush lips stained red sucking on a straw.

My body perks up as I imagine those lips closing around me rather than the piece of plastic. Damn, she's hot. Maybe Hot Chick is what I need right now?

A guy approaches her and she gives him her attention.

Or not.

The bartender stops in front of me and places a coaster down. Followed by another Bud. “Care to talk about it?”

My brows furrow. Rage surges through my bloodstream, perhaps fueled by the beer. Perhaps not. My pinky traces the condensation as it rolls down my mug.

He flips a towel over his shoulder. "I'm a good listener."

My fingers wrap around my cold brew. No one wants to hear the shit banging around inside my head. The words my mother wrote so long ago. And recently, too. I guzzle a quarter of the Bud.

Well, maybe?

"Lies suck, you know?"

He fiddles with the towel. "I hear you, brother."

Taking his comment as encouragement, I let loose. "I'm not talking a little lie, either. More like a big, fat, motherfucking symphony of the biggest whopper you could imagine."

His eyebrows go up. "Wow. Have you talked with her?"

How did he know it was a "her"? I slam back a long pull. "Totally not possible."

"It's always possible. And usually not as bad as you think."

I huff an unamused chuckle. "Believe me." I hold up my pointer finger. "It's not possible unless you're a medium." My middle finger shoots up. "And it is *worse*."

He rests his elbow on the bar. Leaning forward, he says, "Then you only have one other option. Find a way to make peace with whatever it is."

Make peace? How the hell can I do that? Yell at her tombstone? Been there, done that. My only remaining family

member, her sister, got married and moved to New Hampshire when I was a pre-teen. She did come to Mom's funeral, but too many years have passed to rekindle any real relationship with her. Besides, she has her own life now. No. My band's my only remaining family. And I *can't* share this with them.

Making peace with the intel in my mother's diary is like telling a full-fledged caffeine addict to pass on a cup of Joe. I lower my beer as the bartender's called to help another patron. Maybe I should get out of here, buy a twelve-pack at the liquor store, and drink myself under my own table at home.

Home.

The four-letter word makes me want to throw up in my mouth. The place my mother raised me, nurtured me, comforted me when I was sick. My jaw clenches. It was all a lie.

Glancing over my shoulder, I notice Hot Chick's now sitting alone. My eyes travel from her face to her fingertips, with fuck me red polish to match her lips. I bet she knows what to do with those sexy hands. My cock perks up.

I continue my perusal of this beauty, noticing how her full tits fill out her t-shirt. It has some sort of saying on it I can't read from my angle. I take a smaller sip of my beer, mentally stripping her out of it.

The woman in question turns her head and we stare at each other. Her eyes are an unusual shade. Not quite dark brown, but not light either. Maybe mocha? They are captivating. And they're assessing me right now. I sit up and flex.

Her lips tip upward, her teeth biting her lower one. Her skin seems soft. I wonder what her most intimate part would



feel like as I pound into it? Despite the beer I've been drinking, my mouth goes dry.

I raise one eyebrow toward her.

She runs her index finger down her cheek.

Fuck.

She's what I need at this moment. A random chick who will take my mind off how my life has made such an unexpected U-turn. Maybe she can give me some "peace" right now?

Leaving my half-drunk Bud on the bar, I get up and advance to the woman on the bar stool. She's wearing sky-high heels and jeans. Fucking my troubles out of my system seems like a good idea, and she's the lucky candidate.

I stop behind her. "Hey."

Hot Chick swivels to face me, her features even more entrancing up close. Not that it matters, but they'll make this encounter all the more pleasant. Her gaze roves up and down my length before locking with mine. "Hey."

My stomach clenches at the throatiness of her voice. Sort of like Regina King or Scarlett Johansson. With only one word, I can tell she's been through a lot in her life. I twist one of my short dreads. "I'm not looking for anything more than tonight." Might as well be upfront with her.

She circles the straw in her drink for a moment. "Sounds good to me."

I pull an empty stool next to her. Resting against it rather than sitting properly—because nothing is ever proper anymore—I cross my arms over my chest. "What brings you here tonight?"

She blinks, her fake eyelashes sweeping off her lids. “Needed a night away, you know?”

Fuck yes, I do. Clearing my throat, I tip my head toward her drink. “What can I get you?”

“I’d love a seltzer with lime.” She draws the straw into her mouth, releases it, and I sport a semi. “And vodka.”

My hand raises, finger pointing to the roof. When the bartender comes over, I order a round for us and offer him a grin. Understanding what I’m conveying, he returns with two drinks. On my coaster, he wrote. “Peace.”

As I pay, I say, “Keep the change. Peace out.” Then I return my attention to the woman who promises to fulfill all my needs. At least for tonight.

She lifts her glass. “To unexpected delights.”

I’ll drink to that. I clink my beer to her glass, and we tip our drinks back. Her throat bobs as the liquid slides down, and, in response, endorphins flood my system. Lowering my voice, I ask, “What kind of delights might those be?”

“Hopefully,” she licks her lips, leaving them glistening. “Ones that will make me scream.”

Before I know what I’m doing, my thumb reaches over and swipes the moisture from her lip, and I bring it into my mouth. “Sounds dirty.”

“Aren’t they the best kind?”

Hell, yes. One last item to check off my list before we get this party started. I push her dark hair away from her face, luxuriating in the texture. “Especially when they come with no strings attached.”

She motions me closer, her red fingernails undulating to the beat of a siren song only she can hear. When I'm kissing distance from her lips, she replies, "Those are the only types I do."

The fact she's not interested in any sort of relationship seals the deal. Closing the gap between our mouths, I touch my lips to hers and fireworks explode inside my brain. I press harder against her mouth and it opens for my tongue, which steals inside and swirls against hers.

Noise from around us penetrates my lust-filled brain, and I pull away. We stare into each other's eyes, her pupils dilating as I watch. The need to fuck screams throughout my body. I jut my chin toward the restrooms.

She turns her head and follows my signal, taking in what I'm proposing. More like propositioning. Without another word, she hops off the stool and elbows past me toward the restrooms, her red high heels promising infinite pleasure.

Enjoying her forwardness, I use this opportunity to check out her ass in those fucking tight jeans. A smaller waist followed by curvy hips causes me to swallow. She definitely has something to grab onto, and I plan on taking full advantage.

She reaches for the handle under a sign marked, "Ladies." Before she twists her wrist, she pivots to me. "I presume you're not going to quibble about the gender?"

Cheeky. Exactly what I need. "Only if you don't plan on delivering on what you're offering."

"Oh, I'm good for it." She enters the bathroom.

Standing in the hallway, I take a deep breath, only a bit surprised to notice how fast my heart is beating. Closing my

eyes, I exhale and enter the restroom, locking the door behind me. She waits at the sink, which faces an oversized mirror in this rather large, single-person facility. Tile is on the floor as well as the walls, and the scent of potpourri lingers. Not totally dingy, but not overly inviting either.

As I stride behind her, it hits me—I don't know her name. I shrug. This is going to be a down-and-dirty fuck. No names exchanged. I'm good with that.

I push her long hair away from her neck, where I plant small kisses. Punctuated with bites. I let my hand slide into her dark mane. Up close, some waves are apparent, but she tamed most of them into straight submission.

In the mirror, our gazes lock. She tilts her head to the side, offering me more of her delicious softness. She reaches her hands backward, and her palms land on my belt buckle, which nudges her tits forward. A growl escapes from deep within my throat. I suck on her neck and draw a low moan from her.

I pause a second to read her shirt. It has a keyboard on it, and says, "Push My Buttons." Damn straight. No need to tell me twice. My hands slide to her tits and squeeze. They're the perfect size.

She raises her arms, and I strip her of the cotton t-shirt and take in her gorgeous tits straining to pop out of their cups. Not wanting to waste any time, I unclasp her bra and toss it on top of her shirt, where its label—"Push-Up Bra"—grabs my attention. But not for long. Perky, dusty nipples point straight at the mirror. I lick my fingers and pinch both of them at the same time, eliciting an excited exclamation from her red, red lips.

Nice.

I insinuate my thigh between her legs, and she promptly humps it. Which, in turn, makes me harder than steel. Dropping my hands down to her fly, I unbutton the jeans and unzip, then shove them both, together with her flimsy panties, down her legs. She clamps her hand on the sink and lifts one leg, then the other, returning each foot into those stilettos. When I rise, I pause to devour her naked form save for the heels. Fuck, she's hot.

Hot Chick swings around to face me. "Your turn. Strip."

Her audacity sends thrills shooting throughout my body. "With pleasure."

I remove my shirt, confident the hours in the gym will please her as much as her body does me. I'm rewarded when a red nail traces my ab muscles, triggering my smooth, warm light brown skin to spring in her wake. Only a couple of shades darker than hers. "Nice. I appreciate men who take care of themselves."

I offer her a lopsided grin as I unbuckle my belt. "I like what I see, too."

At my words, she doesn't smile. Rather, she gives me a knowing look. Like she's used to hearing such praise. Whatever. It's well-deserved.

My hands land on my fly, but hers shoo me away. "I like unwrapping my presents." And she does with abandon. Soon, my jeans and underwear are at my ankles and she's hinged at the waist, mocha eyes even with my cock. Her red lips open. I rock my hips forward, but before she can close around me, I twist so the stain from her lips ends up smearing down my shaft.

"Fuck. That's so sexy," I groan.

Not one to be outdone, she encircles her hand around me and squeezes tight. Running her tongue all the way up and down me, she laps up my pre-cum like it was her birthright. Pulling back, she flattens her lips into a line and rubs against my tip. A red stain circles my crown.

Standing upright, she checks her handiwork. “I like this better.”

I fight back the urge to plunge inside her body. “Now it’s my turn.” I grab her waist and spin her to face the mirror again. “Open those legs for me.”

She does as she’s told, but her stance isn’t wide enough. Grasping her hair into a ponytail—her red highlights too uneven to be natural—I give a gentle jerk. Her neck extends beautifully as I shuffle forward and tap the inside of her knees with mine. She opens wider for me. While I’d like to be totally rid of my jeans, this will suffice.

Keeping my left hand holding her makeshift ponytail, I let my right one come around to squeeze her tits before slipping lower. Lower. And lower, until I’m cupping her pussy.

Hot Chick doesn’t hesitate, ordering, “Rub my clit.”

I bite her earlobe. “Let’s see what you got for me.” My index finger parts her folds and is welcomed with slickness. “The way I like it.”

Her hips move from side to side, only stilling when my finger ghosts her nub.

“Oh, God.”

Not yet, Hot Chick. I kiss her exposed neck. “Soon.”

I continue playing with her clit, applying more pressure. But I know it’s not enough. After a few minutes of torture, I

replace my finger with my thumb, find her opening, and slip inside. She welcomes me with a roll of her hips. “Look in the mirror. I want to watch you as you come for me.”

Obediently, she studies her reflection. Our gazes hold while I glide another digit inside her, fucking her like my cock soon will be doing. Her tits bounce as her breathing becomes more labored. When she closes her eyes, I tug on her ponytail once more to whip her head upward. “Watch.”

A sound—a cross between a mewl and a moan—escapes her lips, which aren’t so red anymore. Her fingers close around the rim of the sink as her entire body tightens. One more internal stroke and she comes. Her cheeks flush, her lips form a perfect “O,” and she lets out a yelp of ecstasy. Then, she collapses forward and hugs the sink while she catches her breath.

Without moving an inch, she instructs, “Condom.”

I’m one step ahead of Hot Chick as I bestow on her the packet I retrieved from my pocket while she was gathering her wits. She puts it between her teeth and rips it open, then spins around to glove me up.

I reach under her arms and bring her back to standing. Naked save for those fuck me heels and false eyelashes, she pushes her hair off her face. Hot Chick really is gorgeous. No way am I looking to have a relationship again, though. Years ago, my last girlfriend lied to me. Instead of applying the money I gave her toward college, she chose to buy out clothing departments—so I decided easy hook-ups were the answer. My mother’s lie cemented the fact that women are good for this one thing. Without any strings. Let my bandmates up the marriage statistics. Fucking her this once

will be more than sufficient. Plenty more hot chicks out there to scratch my itch.

But *she's* here now. So scratch away.

“Interesting tat.”

Any lighter feelings I was harboring toward Hot Chick evaporate with her reminder of my utter stupidity in getting inked in honor of my mother. “From a lifetime ago. Turn around. I want to fuck you now.” Before I can see her confusion—or worse, pity—I spin her away from me.

Grabbing my cock, I position myself at her entrance and shove all the way inside. Her inner walls wring me tight, and I still deep inside her. Pulling back, I shove myself forward hard, and she lets out a throaty moan. And repeat. My awareness of our location disappears, so it's just me fucking away my anger in deep thrusts.

Our bodies slap together with our rough coupling. Because our positions allow, or even encourage it, I slap her round ass. She squeals at the contact. Yet, not a second later, she urges, “Again.”

This woman is taking what I'm giving her and asking for more. I'm not about to deprive her. Or me. I slap her other butt cheek and admire how both are now a rosy red. Fitting.

“Yes! Yes!”

Her words spur me on. I reach down and rub her clit while biting her earlobe. My balls draw up, warning me I'm closing in on the point of no return. I flick her nub twice more. She freezes, then convulses around me. I add my groan to her sounds of ecstasy as I empty into her body. Gasping for breath, I collapse onto her back, thrusting into her warmth to milk every ounce of my orgasm.



After a minute of labored breathing, she flips her head.  
“That was amazing.”

“No complaints here.” With a deep breath, I hoist myself up and help her stand, only letting go when I’m sure she’s regained her footing. Then she surprises me by removing the condom, tying it off, and tossing it into the bin.

Hot Chick rubs her palm over my exposed tat, kissing my sweaty chest. I still her movements by grasping her wrist and lift it. She helped me forget about my treacherous mother for a short time. And rid me of all the rage building inside, even for a little while. My lips circle her pointer and I bite.

She pulls her finger out of my mouth and licks it. Damn.  
“Pleasure was mine.” She winks. “Yours too.”

I slide up my underwear and jeans. Bending down, I pick up my shirt from the tile floor. Which exposes her pile of clothes, topped off with her Push-up Bra. My eyes narrow. Between her fake eyelashes, dyed highlights, and false chest she presents to the world, she’s a liar just like the rest. I yank on my shirt.

My gaze rakes her naked body from tip to stern.

The sound of my jeans zipping ricochets off the bathroom.

“Thanks.”

My long strides take me to the door, which I unlock and pass through without sparing a backward glance. My whole life has been based on a lie. Meaningless hookups in random bathrooms with other liars are all I deserve.

# CORDELIA



“S low down, Juanita.” I remove the phone from my ear and glance around the grey carpeted walls of my cubicle. No one in the office is paying any attention to me. Good. Keeping my voice low, in stark contrast to my rising internal temperature, I return the phone close to my mouth and whisper, “What are you saying?”

My sister huffs. “Mom gambled away my tuition money!”

I grab onto my long, brown hair, watching as some of the red highlights dance in the fluorescent lighting. My drug store dye job is about the only “good” thing about this day. Seriously. Could life get any worse? An email pops up on my screen from my co-worker, Rita Ortiz, about tonight’s concert. Without thought, I minimize it. “Are you sure?”

I’m surprised her shriek doesn’t cause a stampede to my desk. “Of course I’m sure. The cosmetology school wants its money like yesterday!”

I wrap a lock around my finger and inhale. “Have you spoken with the school to ask for an extension? I’m sure many students don’t have five thousand sitting around to pay.”

“You know I called them.” Papers rustle. “They told me, and I quote, ‘there are no exceptions.’ It’s too late to apply for a loan.”

Fuck. I don't have access to that kind of money to bail out my sister. No thanks to my lazy-ass mother. "Give me a day, okay? Let me see what I can do."

"Classes start next week. If my payment isn't made by then, I'm out. Then what am I going to do? I was counting on getting this degree."

"I don't know, Juanita. Maybe get a job and save up?" I snap.

"What do you think I already did?" The line goes dead.

Guilt cloaks me. I know my sister worked hard, saving up since she graduated high school two years ago for the money to pay for the cosmetology school. I close my eyes. Where did she leave the money so *Mamá* could get it? She probably had it "hidden" in her special spot—a place we all visited often. Deeply rooted feelings of responsibility for my younger sibling rush forward. My need to help her is as reflexive as breathing, no matter the fact I didn't tell *Mamá* to go to Atlantic City and put everything down on red. What idiot does that anyway? I open my eyes. Our mother, that's who.

I pull up *Mamá's* contact and send her a nasty text. She never really cared for either one of us, so I'm sure she won't respond. At least I got my feelings off my chest.

My thoughts revert to my sister. Maybe I can get an advance of my salary to pay her tuition? But that would be well more than two months' take-home, and what would I live on? I toss my Bic in the air and it bounces on my desk before rolling to the floor. Of course it does. I lean over to retrieve it.

My cell phone rings again. What did Juanita forget to tell me? From my hunched over position, I grasp the pen while

simultaneously reaching for my phone. Without checking the caller ID, I bring it to my ear, “What?”

The person on the other end of the phone clears his throat. “Is this Ms. Hernandez? This is Mr. Johnson from Returns Collection Agency, and I’m calling about the debt you owe to Visa. According to our records, your outstanding balance is now twenty-thousand, five-hundred and thirty-seven dollars.”

I bang the top of my head against the underside of the desk as I come to an upright position. At least Apex Hits has solid furniture. “I’m well aware of the amount. Like I told the other person who called, I did not run up the bill. My boy—ex-boyfriend did. Go after him.”

“Well, Ms. Hernandez, this is your credit card, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then you are the one responsible for it. You need to pay the minimum amount of five-hundred twenty-two dollars by next Thursday. Otherwise, we’ll have no other option but to refer your account to the attorneys.”

“Mr. Johnson, is it?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t care who you send this ludicrous debt to. I didn’t run it up, so I’m not going to pay it.” My stupid fucking ex-boyfriend-asshole did this to me. Not for the first time, I wish rats would overrun his used car dealership. Or at least his lot would be discovered to be on a Superfund site.

A sigh drifts over the phone. “As was previously explained, the fact this debt is on your credit card, and no one else is a signatory, means you indeed are responsible for it. It doesn’t matter whether it was you who purchased all the

furniture or not. I'm sure you're enjoying the leather sofa and end tables, right?"

"As a matter of fact, I am *not*." My ex kicked me out of the apartment four months ago. I hit disconnect. "Suck it, asshole."

First my mother, then my ex. How much worse could this day get? No sooner does this thought cross my mind than I oust it from my brain. If nothing else, life has taught me that, yes, things can always get worse.

Much worse.

I inhale, then exhale through my mouth. I've already cut my budget to its bare bones. No money for going out, barely anything for much-needed cosmetics and lotions. Forget new clothes. And I still only scrimp about two hundred dollars a month to save so I can eventually move off my worthless mother's sofa—where I ended up when Big Rolls kicked me out. I'm twenty-five and living with my mother and kid sister.

Which brings me back to my more formidable financial problems. How on earth am I going to come up with the money Juanita needs *and* pay off my Visa bill? Maybe each will accept one hundred dollars apiece? For, like, forever?

My co-worker Rita drops by my cubicle, fussing with the sleeves of her cardigan. I'm sure it was quite stylish a decade or two ago—back when she was in her prime. Yet, today, her twinset still looks cute. "Everything okay?" She settles her butt on the corner of my desk.

Rita's the first person in my life who's ever shown an interest in me. A true interest. It's as if she really does care how I'm doing and where I'm going. Whether I've eaten. Her morning presents of bagels or scones sometimes are my only

meal of the day. I always tell her I'll get her the next time, and she invariably offers me a maternal smile. If ever there was a person I could rely on in this miserable world, it would be her.

But everyone I know leaves me in the dust. I'm sure Rita will disappear soon. "Everything's fine, Rita." I make an effort to smooth my forehead so no wrinkle lines will form. All I need is another cream.

She picks up the pad I was using to take notes, then tosses it back onto my desk. Score one for my awful penmanship. "I'm stopping by to make sure you got my email about tonight's concert. It's a big one."

God, I want to go and get lost in a big crowd. It's been well over four months since I've gone out. Ever since Big Rolls came home and kicked me out of his apartment because I was being replaced by the stupid Barbie wannabe. Stick thin with bleached blonde hair matching her skin tone, and the IQ of a fruit fly. And that's an insult to fruit flies. He can have her.

"Who's playing again?"

Rita smiles. "Hunte. They don't tour often, so it's special. Plus, rumor mill has it that something big's going down tonight. Not sure what, even though I've been pestering my boss all week."

That's right. I remember now. Anyway, Rita's been with the company for at least three decades and has worked her way up to being the admin for the record label's bigwig in charge of the Big Four, as we call them. The four biggest bands signed to Apex, who have been on the roster for ages. Hunte's the longest-running band with the label, being a major force in the industry since the nineties, if not before. Well before I was born. They're a cash cow that only gets better with time.

“I can’t believe you haven’t been able to get the goods out of him,” I note.

She pushes her glasses up her nose. “Not for lack of trying, I’ll tell you.”

A hunger pain chooses this moment to make its voice heard. Perhaps there will be free snacks at this shindig? “What’s on the menu?”

“I hear Apex is going all out for Hunte. Open bar and a spread fit for a king. Or a queen.” She winks at me.

She had me at open bar. “Sounds more appetizing by the moment. I think I will join you.”

Rita pops off my desk. “Great. I’ll stop by your desk around five so we can walk over together.”

“Sounds good.”

Rita strolls back toward her cubicle, and my mind flits back to my money woes. Another email pops up on my computer screen. Maybe I can get absorbed in work rather than stew about where this fictional monetary windfall will come from. I click on the email icon and read a message from one of our account reps. Managing travel and logistics for the label isn’t too demanding, but at least it provides a steady paycheck. Wish it had more zeros attached.

Like when I worked for Big Rolls. Back then, I handled the social media marketing for his dealership. Damn, I loved my job. I was good at it, too.

Closing my eyes, I shift my focus from myself to the work at hand. No matter what, I can’t afford to lose this job. Even if all it encompasses is calling bands with their schedules like I did the other week for the band opening for Hunte tonight. Or

arranging for a block of hotel rooms for a band, like this email requires. *Keep your eyes on the mundane, Cordelia.*

At five o'clock exactly, Rita stops by my desk, purse slung across her shoulders. "Ready?"

The possibility of good food makes me nod. "Closing down now." She waits while I turn off my computer and grab my purse. As I stand, she advances toward the exit and, like a Pied Piper, most of my co-workers follow.

While they talk among themselves, I unbutton my shirt to expose my t-shirt that says, "Do I Look Like I Care?" So apropos. I face straight ahead. Other than Rita, I don't have a relationship with anyone else in the office. To be honest, she's done most of the heavy lifting between us.

As we make our way to the venue, my stomach gurgles in anticipation. Maybe they'll have sliders or potato salad, or even ice cream. Oh my God—dare I dream of flan? My mouth waters at the visions dancing through my brain.

At the entrance to Madison Square Garden, Rita presents me with a lanyard indicating I'm with Apex. Not for the first time, I thank my lucky stars for these perks. We pass the restrooms on our way to the reception area and my mind darts back to a recent encounter I had in one in a Jersey City bar. I linger on memories of the best sex of my life, but they evaporate when we turn the corner and the buffet tables beckon. I hoof it across the room. First in line. Hell, someone has to be *Numero Uno*.

I scan the buffet. Finger sandwiches, lots of different salads, and some desserts at the end I can't make out. Not what I had been hoping for, but I can make this work.



Ignoring the rest of the gathering, I snatch a plate and pile it high. Glee races through my body when I notice my absolute favorite dessert, flan, and grab several. Without a backward glance, I cruise toward the corner, scarfing two slices of flan *en route*. Desserts can be eaten first when you're an adult.

When I reach the wall, I lean onto it, surveying all the people congregated as I stuff my face. I recognize many of them from the office, while some are unfamiliar. Probably with the radio station that held the contest I called the opening band about, or maybe with magazines. I shrug and pop another slice of flan.

One of my fellow Apex employees claims some wall space next to me. "Nice spread, huh?" Alan, who works in accounting, notes.

Turning my head, I ascertain he's talking to me. Not interested in anything other than feeding my hunger, I nod.

He checks out my plate. "Wow. I'm down for some of those brownies. Are they any good?"

Swallowing the rest of my flan, I reply, "Dunno. They looked appealing." Because he's watching me, I deposit a piece of the brownie between my lips. Around my full mouth, I say, "Yeah, it's tasty." I don't care if I'm being rude. Food takes precedence.

"Think I'll get one."

Using my fork, I wave it at him as he walks away. Good. I don't do colleagues as that shit can get messy. I shovel some couscous salad into my mouth and watch Alan as he snags a brownie and goes to talk with another co-worker. Guess he got the hint.

Once my plate is clear and my tummy full, I look around for the bar where free drinks are being poured. No water for me tonight!

Leaving my now-empty plate on a tray, I approach the bar. Before I snag the bartender's attention, my boss touches my forearm. Though it's after working hours, I am at a work function. Suppressing a sigh, I stare at the well-groomed man in his mid-fifties, at least thirty years older than me. If I hadn't sworn off any sort of relationship thanks to Big Rolls, if he wasn't working with me, *and* if he weren't married, I might've been tempted to tap him. He's easy enough on the eyes, in any event. My life is back to random hook-ups, like the hot one the other night in the Jersey City bar's bathroom. I prevent myself from fanning my face and address my boss. "Hi, Mr. Tenley."

"Cordelia, so happy you're here. I was just thinking about the new band we have coming in on Monday. Did I ask you to book them rooms at the Omni?"

Mentally, I scroll through the emails and calls for today, but none were for this band. Shoot. There go my free drinks. For now. At least I got to eat. "I don't think you did." This shouldn't take me too long, and I'll be back to the bar well before it closes. When he doesn't say anything, I pipe up. "Do you want me to go back to the office to confirm everything for you?"

He offers me a lopsided smile. "So sorry to pull you away, but it is really important."

With a forlorn glance to the bar, I say, "I'll be right on it. And I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Great. Hunte doesn't come on for a while, so I'm sure you'll be able to catch them. Something special's happening at the end, and you don't want to miss it."

I don't care, so long as the food and booze remain plentiful throughout the night. Still, I have to be polite. "I'll find you when I return to let you know everything's set."

After swiping two more slices of flan, I trudge out of the party. The festivities go on around me and I'm sidelined. Again.

# TRENT



I check the full-length mirror once more to confirm everything's in place, the blondish overtones in my dreads catching the light. The green room here at Madison Square Garden is larger than most apartments I've visited. Wish it would get me jazzed, but my nerves have taken center stage.

I bounce on the balls of my feet. Tonight's it for my band, The Light Rail. If we can get the audience behind us, then previously locked doors will swing wide open.

"Can you believe we're here, dude?" And ... I land on my heels. Dwight pounds a beat on my shoulder, above my misinformed tat. "Right?"

"It truly is hard to grasp." No lie.

"Wish your mother were here to see this."

I twist my mouth at his unknowing irony.

He clamps his hand on my shoulder. "We all miss her. But she'll be in the front row with us like always."

If only he knew.

But he doesn't.

No one does.

Over the past couple of weeks, I've stewed over what I learned from my mother's diaries. After my encounter with Hot Chick in the bar, I haven't left my house other than to attend rehearsals with the band. Since we've all been laser-focused on tonight's event and making sure our sound is the best it could be, no one's noticed anything off about me.

I rub my arm and can't get myself to say anything concerning the woman. "We deserve this break. It's what we've been working toward forever. One night, less than one hour, to change our lives." I offer a weak grin. "We got this."

"Bring on the fame and fortune." He makes air motions of da-da-da, ending with crashing on his imaginary cymbals.

My lips quirk upward in time with the pterodactyls gathering in my stomach. "That's the hope."

Joey joins us. "I peeked through the curtains, and the arena is filling up! Can you believe it? We're going to open for Hunte, and all their fans will hear us first."

"It's sinking in now," Dwight replies. "What do you think? Bet 'ya twenty the place will be thirty percent full."

"I'll take your bet. My guess is it'll be closer to fifty."

The two shake hands as Maurice walks over. "What's this bet about?" Since we usually bet on everything from the first one of us to be served at a crowded bar to the first song a band will play, he's well versed in the routine.

Joey answers, "How full do you think our crowd will be? Dwight here took thirty percent, and I got fifty. Get your bet in now!"

Maurice chuckles. He's always been the least optimistic of the group. "I'll take twenty-five."

Six eyes zero in on me. I don't have a clue, but I'm not going to ruin this for them. Shrugging, I chime in, "My guess is sixty." Might as well go for the gusto, even if the thought of performing before so many people makes an unusual lump catch in my throat. Dwight shoves his fist forward. "A Jackson on the percentage, as tallied by Apex."

Two other fists pile on top of his. As soon as mine completes the tower, Dwight releases his, causing a four-car explosion of all our hands.

Joey pulls a piece of paper out of his back pocket. "So, we're starting with 'Hurts Good,' followed by "Let Me Give You A Sweet." Then we'll play our usual set, ending with the song that got us here, 'Yes, You're a No.'"

The two other band members voice their approval of our song list, while I simply nod as the flying dinosaurs travel upward and lodge in my throat.

"We've got this. This is what we've been practicing for our whole lives. We're going to bring down *the* Madison Square Garden. The crowd—no matter its size—is going to love us." Dwight ends his speech by elbowing me in the stomach. "Right, Trent?"

I've never felt so conflicted in all my life. I should be the one screaming from the rooftops about our good fortune. Yet I'm feeling suffocated by all the strangers here to see us perform. Against my will, my mind returns to the cops knocking on the door to tell me Mom was killed in the mall shooting. My gut tightens. We haven't performed live since that awful day.

Knowing the band's expecting an answer, I manage a mumbled, "Damn straight."

Dwight's voice lowers. "You okay, bro? It's our first time on stage since ... well, you know. Everything okay up here?" He taps on the top of my head.

I cough. "Yeah, I'll be fine. It's a lot to take in, you know." Understatement of the decade.

"We're all here with you, brother," Joey adds. "We got your back."

"Thanks, guys. It's normal to be a bit antsy before a big gig, though, right?" They all murmur their agreement. "We got this."

The tour manager assigned to us by Apex, Raine Hopper, ambles over. Running his fingers through his shaggy, sandy brown hair, he says, "Hey, guys. You're on in ten. The seats are filling up, and I'm sure they're excited to hear you perform."

"If you had to guess, what percentage of Hunte's sell-out crowd do you think is here now?" Maurice says by way of greeting.

"I'd say about fifty percent."

Joey raises both his hands high in the air. "Oh yeah. I win!"

Raine looks quizzically at each one of us until Joey explains about our bet. Chuckling, he shakes his head. "You're one of those, huh? Any bets on what food will be available at the after-party?"

Dwight's chin pops up like he's contemplating the guy's offer. Pinching my lips, I divert attention from the betting pool. "Can you go over the logistics for tonight once more? Want to be sure we got all our bases covered."

“Sure thing.” The Apex dude dives into the schedule. Our set, followed by us back here with a meet-and-greet from the radio station that brought us here plus one hundred of their listeners who voted for us. Hunte will make an appearance before hitting the stage. “Oh, and you’re definitely going to want to watch Hunte’s performance all the way to the end. There’s a big surprise the band doesn’t have a clue about.” He puts his index finger over his mouth.

*As if I’d ever tell them anything.*

After leaving us with well-wishes, Maurice pulls out some eye drops, dispenses them, then uses a tissue to wipe his eye. Using his actions as a welcome distraction from my own thoughts, I study my buddy and my eyebrows rise. Joey beats me to the punch. “Dude, what’s up with your eye?”

“Shit,” he wipes his eye again. “When I woke up, Fee noticed it was red and I’ve been putting in some drops hoping it would go away. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Maurice has had vision issues since forever. Even back in middle school, when we met, he was sporting glasses. They’ve gotten thicker over the years, but his vision has always been correctable. We nod and start grabbing our instruments. My stomach clamps in on itself, and I feel lightheaded. Pressing my body against a wall, I rest my head against the solid concrete.

“Close your eyes and breathe. In through the nose, out through the mouth.” My best friend’s voice contacts my panicked ears, and I follow Dwight’s instructions.

“That’s it. Now open your eyes.”

When I do, he’s standing directly in front of me, one of his drumsticks pointed at my chest. His gaze searches mine. “You



going to be okay, buddy?”

From the other side of the black curtains, a roar comes from the crowd. Joey yells, “Two minutes!”

Dwight’s drumstick taps my chest. “Got this?”

“Yeah.” I gulp again. “Yeah, I got this.”

His face cracks into a brilliant smile. “Then, let’s go. Make your mom proud.”

He turns toward the stage, leaving me to fight through another wave of nausea. I’m sure she’d be grappling with all sort of fucked up feelings right now if she were still with us. And I’d be as excited as the rest of my bandmates, totally oblivious. Truth can be the biggest bitch of all.

“Trent!”

Dwight’s voice reaches me, and I shunt all my rage and panic and anxiety to the far recesses of my mind. Placing one shaky foot in front of the other, I join The Light Rail behind the black curtains. All of us bounce from foot-to-foot, arms shaking. They’re wearing huge, toothy grins. For my part, I jog in place. I don’t share their happy nerves with them, and a smile doesn’t cross my face. My emotions are much deeper. And darker.

A voice over the loudspeaker announces, “You voted, New York City! Radio Station V250 held a contest, and out of the hundreds of bands who entered, you chose this next band to open for Hunte tonight! We’re here to grant your wish! Please show some New York love for your opening band—The Light Rail!”

Cheers from the audience assail my ears as our Apex rep shouts, “Break a leg out there!”

My three bandmates scream and rush the stage. I take a deep breath and, with measured steps, trek toward the lights. And halt before crossing from the protection of the curtains. The wall of noise from the sea of humanity is overwhelming.

Petrifying.

Remaining on the fringe of the stage, I can't bring myself to move my foot an inch.

My band strikes up the first notes of "Hurts Good." The crowd roars. Maybe a dozen or so have heard this song before, so it's extra special to be met with such wide approval.

Roots have grown from the bottom of my feet.

In my mind's eye, a gunman bursts through a side door. My head rotates, looking for him. Instead, the mass of people in the audience is on their feet. Jumping in time with the music. Our music. *Get it together, Trent. It's safe.*

The tour manager touches my shoulder. "You've got this. Make us proud."

Maybe it's his choice of words, or maybe it's his tone, but I toss him a grateful glance and start to play my guitar riff offstage. The crowd's reaction notches up a decibel. With a nod toward Raine, I force myself onto the stage where our instruments are set up in front of a white curtain hiding Hunte's staging. And get my first full view of the audience gathered to hear my band. I freeze next to Dwight's drum set.

So many of them.

All it would take is one crazy person with a gun.

Paralyzing fear seizes me, and I remain in place. Dwight shouts, "Trent Washington. Get your dopey ass out here and show them what we've got!"

His words penetrate the fog in my brain. With a grateful nod to my best friend, I join Joey as he plays bass. Facing each other, we warm our fingers up while I prepare for the opening lyrics. Which I wrote ages ago.

Taking a deep breath, I turn toward the crowd, approach the microphone, and open my mouth. When I start singing, my voice is low—a mere croak. I'm going to ruin this for my buddies if I can't get my head out of my ass.

I shake the microphone as if it's a mechanical problem causing my voice not to carry rather than my own ineptitude. Clearing my throat, I begin again and my voice resounds throughout the venue this time. *Thank God.*

When the song ends, a respectable smattering of approval rings out. Buoyed by their response, we start the strains of our next song, with my voice continually getting stronger. I walk from one end of the stage to the other but can't make eye contact with any crowd members for a couple of reasons. One, the lighting prevents me from really seeing anything but a swarm of humanity. Two, my gaze keeps darting to the exits to reassure myself no one with murderous intent has entered the space.

I stroll over to Maurice at the keys and execute a rather intricate riff while he plays up his part. Strumming my guitar with a flourish, I point to our fantastic keyboardist and urge the audience to cheer him on, which they do.

*Man, that's a heady rush.*

Our set continues as more and more bodies enter the arena. While I'm not exactly having fun, I am enjoying myself on the stage well enough. Bonus—the audience definitely is getting into our sound.

Right before our last song, I take the mic for the only planned remarks of our set. “Hello, Madison Square Garden!”

“Hello!” booms back at me. *Whoa.*

“We’re The Light Rail, and we’re super pumped to be with you tonight. We’re a bunch of Jersey boys who dreamed of hitting this stage, so thank you for making our dream come true!”

More applause.

“Let me introduce the band. On keys, we have Maurice Walker, our chief optimist!” He laughs at my inside joke—the truth being the opposite, but at least he’s never disappointed—and plays a little solo.

“Over on bass is Joey Taylor. He’s our chief jokester!” He spins around and plays his bass solo. Not lying about Joey.

“Then on drums is my best friend, Dwight Jackson!” Dwight slams his drumsticks together three times before banging out an excellent beat.

“And I’m Trent Washington.” I play a short solo before retaking the mic. “We’re going to leave you with one last song. The one you listeners of V250 might recognize. It brought us here to you tonight! Give it up for ‘Yes, You’re a No.’”

I concentrate on the tricky guitar solo entrance, then the rest of the band joins in. Looking around, I marvel at all it means to perform on this fabled stage. The band plays their heart out, and I give it my best. Soon the last note reverberates throughout the space, and the audience cheers. I’m not sure if they’re cheering for us or for the fact Hunte will soon be on the stage.

This final thought brings me way back down to earth.

We take our bows and strut off the stage. The guys are more pumped now than before we started. Surprising myself, I'm much lighter now than before as well. At least I left visions of gunmen shooting up the place behind. When we're out of eyeshot, we double fist bump each other, congratulating ourselves on a great job.

Raine approaches us. "You killed it out there." He extends his hand to me, which I shake. Then he does the same with the rest of the band.

He motions toward a different corridor than the one we used before. "Let's go this way. There's a few people back here who want to meet you."

"Must be the V250 meet-and-greet," Dwight says, his drumsticks pounding on his legs.

"What I'm thinking too," Joey agrees.

When we enter a room, I'm struck immobile. This isn't the radio event. The members of Hunte mill around, together with some other people I don't recognize. I zero in on the lead singer-slash-guitarist, Braxton Hunte, as he struts around the room, surrounded by the rest of his band.

My breath goes cold.

Our Apex tour manager puts his hand on Braxton's shoulder. "Hey, Raine," the fifty-five-year-old musician greets him.

Raine gestures to our band. "Please let me introduce you to The Light Rail, the band that opened for you just now." He points to each one of us, giving our names to the legends.

The blond guitarist takes over our impromptu meeting. "We got to hear some of your songs. Great job."

“Thanks, Mr. Hunte,” Maurice grovels.

“It’s Braxton. And thank you for doing such a great job warming up the crowd for us. We’ll make sure to continue the good vibes when we get out there.”

Everyone shakes hands. When it comes time for me to meet Braxton, I stare at him for a couple beats before extending my arm. His grasp is firm. Like how I shake.

“Trent, nice to meet you. Enjoyed your performance out there.”

His words make me want to puke, but I succeed in not hurling. “Thanks.” About all I can muster.

He plants his free hand on my shoulder. My whole body freezes on impact, yet I don’t push away. Can’t. It’s all I can do to remain breathing.

“I used to be like you were on stage. By picturing the whole audience singing along with me, I was able to loosen up more.”

He thinks I need to be more relaxed onstage? Anger surges within me. Let him perform after his mother was massacred and see how he likes it. Not to mention ... I pull back.

“I’ll try it.” Asshole.

Raine’s voice fills the room. “Sorry to cut this short, but The Light Rail needs to get to their meet-and-greet, and you,” he nods toward the headliners, “need to get ready to perform. There will be plenty more time to get to know each other over the next few months.”

I start to move toward freedom when Braxton’s large hand slides on my forearm—such a contrast to my own darker hue—the calluses from playing guitar rubbing against my skin.

I'm on high alert. "I'm rooting for you. Keep up the great work."

I nod and hurry to follow Raine to our next event. An open bar and some food are over in one corner, but we're directed to the other side where a step and repeat is set up, with V250, Hunte, and The Light Rail logos printed on it.

Joey skips ahead and waves us over to him. "Guys, our first banner! We gotta record this!" He produces his cell phone and turns it on selfie mode, then snaps the four of us on the red carpet.

An older lady wearing an unbuttoned sweater over a matching shirt comes over to us. "I'm Rita, and I work for Apex. May I take a picture for you?"

"Sure. Thanks!" Joey offers her his cell phone, and she gets several shots of us. The rest of the band makes goofy faces and I join in but know my image won't be as carefree.

When he gets his phone back, Joey continues to snap pictures of us as well as the room. Even though it's pretty industrial, posters of Hunte and our band add personalization. Joey's wife pops up behind him, and they take a few more shots of them kissing on the red carpet.

Both Dwight's and Maurice's wives come over and start dissecting our performance. "I think you guys were fantastic," Joey's other half says.

"Thanks, babe." Joey kisses her cheek. "I think we did pretty damn good. We made Madison Square Garden rock."

Dwight hooks his arm around his new bride after she gives us another fabulous review. For my part, I catch a server's eye and he brings us a tray of champagne.

Without taking a flute, I ask, “By chance, do you have any Bud?”

“Of course.” He disappears to fulfill my beverage choice, and returns with a pilsner brimming with my favorite beer.

I take a sip and Raine points out where we need to stand for the meet-and-greet, which starts in a couple minutes. We make a show of changing places in the lineup several times, trading good-hearted barbs nonstop.

For my part, I’m ready for this spectacle to be over. Finishing my beer, I force an upbeat tone and announce, “Let’s meet some radio fans!”



# CORDELIA



**B**ack in my cubicle, I take care of all the details for Mr. Tenley and shoot off a confirming email. It's already nine o'clock. So much for a quick assignment. I'm powering down my computer when a raised voice sails from one of the offices.

It's Rita's boss, Mr. Griffith, one of the head honchos here at Apex. Someone I've only met once during the few months I've been working here. Deciding it's better for me to leave than be caught up in whatever drama's going on—I have enough of my own, thank you very much—I pull my purse out of the drawer and rise to my feet.

Mr. Griffith's door swings open, banging against the opposite wall. I wince at the anger radiating from across the way. The man himself stalks out into the main office and swivels his head as if looking for someone.

Fuck. Why did I leave my invisibility cloak at home today?

“You.” His voice booms.

Never one to cower, I lift my chin. “Yes, Mr. Griffith?” He probably needs a town car to drive him home. I step toward my phone. “Can I order something for you?”

“You don’t happen to know anything about social media, do you?”

I swallow. Hell yes, like a shit ton. I did all of Big Rolls’s social media for his used car dealership. Grew his following on Facebook and Instagram over one hundred percent during the year I worked for the asshole. Hope he’s back in obscurity now.

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Guess he needs to make a post or something. “What can I help you with?” I hope this is quick so I can get back to the open bar.

He waves his hand, motioning me over. I drop my purse onto my seat and cross the office to stand in front of the grey-haired, bearded giant. Well, he’s at least six-foot four.

“What’s your name?”

“Cordelia Hernandez, sir.”

“What sort of experience do you have with social media?”

“I used to be in charge of all the social media at my last job.” No need to tell him where or for whom. This fact alone should give him enough confidence I can post something for him, or respond to a PM.

“Who was that for?”

*He asked.* I sigh. “Garcia Used Car Dealership.”

“Ever do anything with musicians?”

“No, but the concept’s the same.” Whatever. Let’s get this over with. “How can I help you?”

He places his index finger on his lips. “What’s your job here, Cordelia?” His voice has taken on an inquiring tone.

Not sure what he's getting at, I reply, "Travel and Logistics Clerk." Basically, an entry-level gopher, I'm a catch-all for whatever someone needs to coordinate, like the hotel block for Mr. Tenley tonight.

"Nothing with marketing?"

I shake my head.

"Show me some of your work." He turns and strides into his office proper.

What the heck is going on? Because I'm the only person here, I don't have an excuse not to follow him inside. At his direction, I sit at his oversized desk and pull up Big Rolls' Facebook page, then scroll down to the posts I did. Of course, I note his more recent stuff isn't getting as much interaction as when I was in charge. I sit up a bit taller.

Mr. Griffith leans closer to the screen and scrolls down, humming in what I believe is agreement. "Good questions, great engagement."

"Thanks." He asks to see my work on Instagram, which garners the same sort of reaction. What's he getting at?

He leans on his desk and folds his arms across his broad chest. "Listen, I'll give it to you straight. The person we had lined up to do the marketing for the new opening band we're repping, at least for a short while, just quit. All of our other marketing personnel are caught up with other, and to be honest, more profitable projects. The truth remains, though, we're contractually obligated to assign a marketing person to handle this band starting tomorrow."

My hair wraps around my pinky. What is he saying? Incredulously, I ask, "Do you want me to do marketing for the new band?"

“Looks like it.”

Excitement buzzes throughout my limbs. Does this position come with a raise? “What all would be entailed with this?”

“It’s a short gig. Three months on the road, following the band and capturing their moments to post across social media. They’re going to be the opening band for Hunte, so they’re not headliners or anything. But we have to uphold our obligations. You’ll report to our Marketing VP, Kevin Hewitt.”

I keep twirling my locks around my pinky. Three months on the road? Meaning I won’t have to sleep on my mother’s pullout? If I’m touring with them, does it mean my meals will be covered, too? I’ll be able to save all my salary. Or, more accurately, pay down bills with it.

While I’m thinking, he sweetens the pot. “It’ll mean you’ll get a raise.”

A weight lifts off my shoulders. Before another person walks by with more experience, I rush, “I’ll take it.”

Relief washes over his face. “Good. Thanks.” He reaches past me to grab a pen and a manila folder on his desk and flips it open. “Here’s the contract.” He crosses something out. “Write in your name and contact information and initial it. Let me know if you have any questions. I’ll be right back.”

He presents a stapled document to me, drops his pen, and exits his office. For the first time since Big Rolls kicked me out of his life and my job, I release a cleansing breath. Fate must be smiling at me. Seeing the space for me to add my name and address, I pick up his Mont Blanc pen and fill in the required information. *Damn. This pen is a dream.*

I skim the rest of the page, my eyes landing on the paragraph labeled “Salary.” They pop at the amount I’ll be getting for three whole months. This gig will pay off Juanita’s tuition in no time, with some leftover for those damn credit card bills my ex left me.

The next paragraph, describes the “competition.” As I understand it, The Light Rail—the name of the opening band I’m assigned to help—is up to win some sort of competition against another band called California Skies, and if they do, this contract will be extended for the remainder of Hunte’s tour. The competition is based upon Apex’s observations, audience attention and reaction, media coverage, increased number of social media fans, and rapport with Hunte. I grew my ex’s social media following exponentially in a few months, and I can do it again. Disappearing debt tantalizes me. Not bothering to even look at the rest of the document, I flip to the last page and sign my name before Mr. Griffith can change his mind. I replace his precious pen on the desk.

Leaning back into his plush leather chair, I close my eyes and imagine myself surrounded by such luxuries all the time. How my life would be so much better. Then reality rears its ugly head, and I sigh. At least some of my money woes will be gone.

Before I let myself get too used to these high-end details, I rise to my feet. Almost immediately, Mr. Griffith reappears in his office. “All signed.”

“Great.” He strides past me, picks up the expensive pen, and signs his name to the right of mine. “Can you make a copy of this for your records?”

“Of course.” I go to the copier then return the original to him, an unusual feeling floating through my body: *excitement*.

Since I'm reporting to the band tomorrow, I double back to my desk and make a list of outstanding items from my current job and forward them to Mr. Tenley.

Finished, I check the clock and figure about an hour of Hunte's performance remains. Might as well catch the end of the concert at Madison Square Garden, and maybe even meet this band I'm now working for. Not to mention grab more grub and get a much-deserved celebratory drink.

I practically skip over to the Garden and, Apex lanyard around my neck, go straight to the room with the free food and booze. And it hits me. For the next three months, I won't have to subsist on Rita's pity offerings. The fabled song "Luck Be a Lady" rings through my head for a split-second before a wall of Hunte's music drowns it out. Snagging a couple more finger sandwiches and another slice of flan, I make my way to the bar and order a Vodka Seltzer with a festive twist of lime. When the bartender delivers it to me, I savor the flavor floating down my throat. So much better than the free virgin ones I've been relegated to drinking.

All of a sudden, a bunch of well-dressed people I've never seen before rush through the doors, cross the room, and go through a door marked "Stage." Unsure of what's going on, I join the rest of the group backstage, remaining out of the audience's view. An unknown man walks across the stage, causing the music to stop haphazardly. Braxton Hunte—Oh My God is he freaking hot!—twirls around. His eyes get huge as he stares at the man approaching him in a pair of dark jeans, black boots, and a blazer over a button-down shirt.

Rita's not far away. I sidle over to her and whisper, "What's going on?"

“I’m not sure, but this must be what the buzz has been about,” she responds.

The unknown man takes the microphone away from Braxton’s trembling hand. *Trembling?* “Hello, New York City!” The crowd cheers at being recognized. “I’m Ted Mazur, and I’ve been tasked to come here to let you all in on a big secret. Before I tell you, though, you’ll have to promise me you’ll tell everyone you know, okay?”

Laughter bubbles up from the audience. I raise my hands, palms up, at Rita, who shrugs. We turn our attention back to the stage.

“Sounds like we’re on the same page. The reason I’m interrupting your concert is because I have the very distinct pleasure to announce that Hunte will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame this year.”

Rita, normally more reserved, jumps up and down, whooping it up.

Unable to restrain myself, I join her. My mind immediately goes to my new assignment. Maybe, if my marketing is good enough, I can help The Light Rail win this competition and become the *Hall of Fame* Hunte’s opening band for the duration of this tour. Then I can keep this job for more months. Together with the money it brings. *Maybe.*

I grab my cell phone and snap a few photos to commemorate this occasion. I’m sure Hunte’s marketing team will post about this. Too bad I haven’t met The Light Rail yet, or I’d chronicle their reactions.

Before the shouts end, Ted shakes the hands of all the band members up on stage, salutes the arena, and walks back toward where I’m standing. The band hugs each other, then

Braxton retakes the mic. “Now that was the best surprise. I’m so happy our families got to share this moment with me.” He points to the front of the stage. “My wife, Sara, my son King and his fiancée Angie, plus my daughter Melody and her fiancé Charles are all in the audience.” He rattles off other family members of his bandmates before saying, “Now I think it’s time we showed you all that ‘Love Rules.’” The band starts in on one of their numerous chart-topping hits.

Backtracking to the room, I deviate from my norm and chatter with the people around me about this news. I even discuss it with my *former* boss Mr. Tenley. When I inform him of my new assignment, he wishes me well. He even gives me a genuine smile. Seems like he wants me to succeed. Wow.

Alone for a second, my mind works overtime and my earlier idea expands. If I can’t get a shot of The Light Rail with Hunte, I can at least show their reaction to touring with a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame band. I find Rita. “Hey, do you know any members of the opening band?”

“Yeah. I was able to meet them when you disappeared. Where did you go, by the way?”

I fill my co-worker in about my new position, which elicits another hug. “You’re going to blow their socks off. Mark my words.”

Her confidence in me, even without knowing much about my experience, is a rush. “I plan to. But, first, I need to meet them.”

“Oh, right.” She scans the room. “Ah, there they are.” She gestures across the way where a group of about twenty or so people are talking.

“Great. Thanks. I’ll go over and introduce myself.”



With a wave, I stroll in the direction she indicated. Since so many people are clustered around, I pull out my phone and do a quick Google search for the band. The first headline makes my stomach flip. “Hunte’s New Opening Act Reels from Heartache.” I click and *First Rumors*, a tabloid with sensational fare, opens. Thankfully, Apex has an account with them, so I don’t have to pay to read the article. Showing a photo of Hunte, the piece describes how the mother of the opening band’s lead singer, Trent Washington, was one of ten people killed in a New Jersey mall shooting a few months back. The shooter committed suicide before he could be captured. Here’s my first order of business—shield the band from these types of articles.

Without going any further down the online rabbit hole, I approach a tall, beefy guy. “Excuse me. Are you in The Light Rail?”

He shakes his head. “No, but I’m a new fan.”

When he stares directly at my chest, I roll my eyes. *God, spare me from dopes like this one.* “Could you please point out the members of the band?”

The guy nods to a cluster of guys ahead of us by about four rows. At least he was good for something.

I assess the crowd and consider how to wiggle my way up to the band. Finally, I stand next to one of the men who was pointed out to me. Shit. I don’t even know their names, other than Trent Washington. Whatever. I tap him on the shoulder, and he spins around.

Holding out my right hand, I say, “Hi, I’m Cordelia. I work with Apex Hits, and I’ve been assigned to do your social media while you’re on tour with the newly-minted Rock and Roll Hall of Fame band, Hunte.”

His eyes, covered by thick black frames, widen. He pumps my hand. “Hey, I’m Maurice Walker, the keyboardist. We have a social media manager?” His voice raises at the end not because he’s asking a question, but rather due to excitement.

I’ll take his title for me. My eyes roam over his striking features, including pillowy lips. Before I can respond, he waves over a woman who’s been hovering nearby. She’s wearing a pair of jeans with a pretty long-sleeved white blouse highlighting her caramel skin tone. A hue that matches mine. “Fee, get over here. Meet our new social media marketing extraordinaire, Cordelia.”

I nod and the woman smiles at me. “Hi, I’m Fee, Maurice’s wife. Nice to meet you.”

Of course, he has a wife. All the good ones do. One line I’ll never cross.

Soon I’m introduced to Joey Taylor, the bassist. He sports a full head of dark, kinky hair and the broadest grin I’ve ever seen, complete with blindingly white teeth juxtaposed against his light brown skin. And he’s paired with a wife, Cheri, who fiddles with her wedding rings.

Another man joins our group. He’s the shortest, barely taller than my five-foot-six-inch stature. Yet he’s built like a tank and his arms boast guns I’ve only seen on models. He deposits drumsticks into his back pocket. “Dwight Jackson.”

I give him my name, then add, “Drummer, right?”

Pulling out his drumsticks, he asks, “What gave me away?” Then he busts out laughing.

I join him. These guys are going to be a blast to work with, I can tell. I deserve some joy in my life—while collecting an increased paycheck without all my expenses. I’ll probably

have to send Mom my rent, though. My mood dives a bit, only to rise again as it sinks in that I won't have to pay for any food or beverages, preferably of the alcoholic kind. Yes. This is a good day.

Dwight directs his attention to a short woman standing off to the side. "Denice Jackson, get over here!"

Jackson. Yup, another married one. Whatever. Since I'm not in the market for any strings, sex comes easy. Probably better this way, anyway, as I refuse to bang the same guy twice after what Big Rolls did. He drove the point home to me, again, that relationships aren't in my cards.

The seven of us make idle chit-chat. Mainly, the guys chatter about Hunte's upcoming induction into the Hall of Fame, and how it might influence this leg of the tour they're opening. I capture some of their happiness on my phone's camera.

"What did you think of our set, Cordelia? Any pointers?" Dwight's drumsticks bounce up and down his wife's arms.

I purse my lips. Might as well come clean. Mostly. "Sorry, guys. I was caught up with some last-minute things in the office and wasn't able to catch your performance. But I'll get to see every show going forward since I'm touring with you."

Joey's hair moves by itself as he nods. "Probably for the best. We were a little rusty today since we haven't performed in front of a live audience in over four months." Around the same time that Big Rolls gave me the heave-ho. Curious, I ask, "Why'd you stop?"

Dwight steps forward. "Some serious shit went down."

Oh, crap. Right. The death of the lead singer's mother. Before I can try to clean up my faux pas, Maurice chimes in.

“But now we’re back, better than ever.” His head swivels.  
“Hey, where’s Trent?”

Joey looks around, then points toward the bar. “He’s getting a drink.”

I follow the invisible line where Joey indicated. A ton of people stand at the bar.

Dwight helpfully clues me in. “Trent’s our guitarist and lead singer.”

“Great.” I try, and fail again, to pick him out of the crowd waiting for drinks. “Is he married, too?”

Dwight lets out a hoot of laughter. “No way. My best friend isn’t the type to settle down.”

“Good to know.” The drummer’s words are interesting, in a fun fact sort of way. I remind myself it’s not a good idea to get involved with a member of the band. Rubbing my hands on my thighs, I dive into getting to know my new assignment a bit better. “How long have you been together as a band?”

“Since junior high.”

Maurice’s words lodge deep in my heart, striking a discordant note to my life. Discounting my sister, my oldest friend is Rita, who I met four months ago when I got my job at Apex. I raise my chin. “Wow. A long time.”

Dwight adds, “I met Trent in kindergarten, and we became best friends. When we first went to junior high school, Joey was in our class and we sort of became the Three Musketeers. The next year, Maurice’s family moved in and he insinuated himself into our group. Have been together ever since.”

At his description, Maurice punches Dwight in the gut. “I didn’t ‘insinuate myself,’ asswipe. As I remember it, you three

took one look at me and begged me to hang out with you.”

Silently, Joey’s fingers count down from five. He gets to two when Dwight jumps and starts to wrestle with Maurice. What the hell? Joey motions for me to lean to him. “Old wounds, Cordelia, old wounds.” He chuckles.

A tenor voice enters the fray. “Guys, guys, what are you doing? This is supposed to be a party, not a UFC octagon.”

My body responds to his voice. Juanita makes fun of me because I can’t remember a face to save my life, but a voice? I’m all over that. And I *know* that voice. Talking dirty to me at the bar in Jersey City a couple of weeks ago. Grunting as he pounded into me in the bathroom. Oh, God.

Despite our encounter being the most memorable in my life, *no way* will I deviate from my no repeats rule.

Steeling my spine, I angle my body in the newcomer’s direction, noticing Dwight and Maurice quit messing around. Unique black/blond short dreadlocks top a six-foot frame that best can be described as a swimmer’s body. Not an ounce of fat on him, for sure. Ripped abs, strong arms.

And a cock that wouldn’t quit. *Stop it, Cordelia.*

Unusual hazel eyes, more like amber, widen, then skewer mine. Yep, he recognizes me, too.

Inhaling deeply, I extend my hand as if we’ve never met—intimately—before. His darker brown one slides over mine and my body clenches. In a deeper voice than usual, I introduce myself properly. “You must be Trent. I’m Cordelia Hernandez, the social media rep Apex assigned to follow your band during this leg of the tour.”

His eyes bounce from my hand to my chest to my mouth, and finally back up to my eyes. “A pleasure.” He pumps my

hand. Twice. Then releases it.

I sag, knowing he's going to keep our secret, even though my traitorous body's begging for another round. The rest of the guys and their wives chat about their performance and the exciting fact they're now touring with Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees. I do my best to ignore the drool-worthy man next to me and engage with the rest of my new clients. I even put all their contact info in my phone, including the lead singer's. Couple by couple, they disperse for the buffet or the bar, until only Trent and I remain together.

Motioning for him to bend down, I whisper, "Jersey City never happened."

His gaze meets mine. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Although he gave me what I wanted, why does his quick capitulation sting?

# CORDELIA



**M**y fist bangs the sofa. “Juanita, I don’t know what I can do for you. I don’t have the money yet.”

Her voice is shaky as if trying to hold back tears. And knowing my sister, she probably is. “I get it! This sucks. Only five more days until school starts.”

Tracing the funky pattern on the sofa, I force myself to appear less agitated than I am since I’m sitting in an alcove backstage. The Light Rail—or TLR as I’ve dubbed them on social media—is performing. I should be taking more photos of them, but at least I got enough before my sister called. I draw a deep breath. “I’m making more money now and will be able to pay off your debt in a few months. But not before.”

“They’re going to kick me out. All because the worthless woman who spawned us gambled away my tuition.”

“I’m sorry.” What else can I say? Our stupid mother ruined both of our lives and is rubbing salt in the wound as we speak.

Sniffling comes through the phone. Shit. Guess she couldn’t curb the tears any longer. “It’s okay. I can get my job back at the store. I’m sure they didn’t find a new cashier yet.”

I hate hearing her sound so depressed. “Don’t do anything hasty yet.” An idea forms. “Maybe I can ask Apex for a loan.”

Is this even an option?

“Oh my God. Do you think they’d give it to you? I mean, you are working for a rock band. And they make more money than anyone, right? Why didn’t I think of this sooner?” She blows her nose.

If the situation weren’t so dire, I would laugh. But it is. Not even a slight giggle comes out of my mouth. I need to temper her expectations. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. I’m working social media for an opening band. Really, no clout here.” Why did I volunteer this to my sister? Well, it is a possibility. Remote, though. But desperate times and all that.

“If this works, I promise to make you proud. I’ll move out of *Mamá’s* house and rent a two-bedroom where we both can live. No more sofa beds for you.”

I smile at my little sister’s enthusiasm, however misplaced. “Now, calm down. I said I’d ask. No idea what they will say.”

Juanita, ever the optimist, replies, “I’m sure they’ll come through.” She blows her nose again. “Now, despite this positive news, I have something to ask you. Have you seen the latest issue of *Cars on the Parkway?*”

At her mention of the main advertising engine for Big Rolls’ used car dealership, my blood runs cold. “No. Why would I?”

Silence reigns for a few seconds. “You know, you’re right. It was stupid of me to blab. Ignore me. I’m just getting excited to be able to go to school.” She prattles on about her schedule, and how much she’s looking forward to learning all about color and cut. Not to mention the possible job offers that await her after she graduates.



I steal a glance at the clock. TLR has about twenty more minutes onstage, so I should get to uploading their photos. “Juanita, I’m happy for you. I really hope I can find a way to get you the tuition money. I have to go now, but I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thanks, sis.”

I disconnect the call and post the band’s photos on Facebook and Instagram. Even upload a quick video shout out to Albany, New York on TikTok. When I finish, the band’s still playing so I collapse back into the comfy, although quite ugly, couch. How am I going to come up with five grand by next week? I’ll contact HR at Apex to find out the procedures for getting a loan. If it’s even an option. Guess I should wait until my work gains some traction for the band, though.

Assuming this effort fails, I could sell my body to a high-end bidder. Trent did fuck my brains out in a bar bathroom. Maybe he’d pay me for the privilege again? As soon as the thought crosses my mind, I shut it down. No way in fucking hell would I ever do that. No matter how bad things get, I’m not a hooker. Plus, no repeatsies.

I close my eyes and listen to the band perform for a moment. They’re quite good. Although Trent’s voice sounds tight.

Whatever. Not my problem so long as I do their social media marketing. Speaking of marketing, why did my sister bring up the stupid magazine? Curious, I pull up *Cars on the Parkway* online and scroll through its pages, which are mainly ads. As I flip to the back page, wondering what Juanita was getting at, my heart freezes.

Oh. My. God.

There, on the back cover, is Big Rolls, “King of the Used Cars,” and the skank he dumped me for. She’s petite, wearing a leopard print mini dress barely covering her surgically-enhanced lily-white tits and sky-high leopard- print stilettos. Her hair’s bleached blonde, her lips are collagen-kissed, and she’s staring up at my ex-boyfriend while holding out her hand to the camera. Her left hand. Sporting a huge fucking diamond on it. Beneath the pair, the headline screams, “The King has found his Queen.”

I drop my phone and emit a keening sound. What the actual fuck is going on? He left me four months ago, ran up my credit, and now is engaged to the model *I hired* for his marketing? This can’t be happening.

Because I’m a masochist, I pick up my phone again and stare at the photo, all the while my heart breaks into tiny little pieces. How could he do this? His *queen*? When I analyze the picture, all I see is him, over me, shoving his puny little dick into me while crooning how much he loved me. Look where his *love* got me. Deep in debt and living with my terrible mother again.

But still. *Engaged?*

He put a ring on her finger. Not on me. Despite him saying he loved me. Love? Ha. What a ridiculous concept. No one ever told me they loved me and stuck around for long. I guess Big Rolls was the winner at a year. Then he kicked me out. And promptly gave the skanky model a ring before the door even shut.

I’m forever alone. Here’s proof, right before my eyes, I’m not worth anyone’s love. No one ever stays with me. Not Big Rolls. Not my father. Barely my mother.

I’m not lovable.

Water lands on my phone, and I wipe it on my shirt. I certainly don't have any money to replace this old model. Where did the droplet come from anyway? Only then do I realize my cheeks are wet. And my nose is running. And everything in front of me is swimming in my tears.

Because TLR is still playing and I'm all alone back here, I allow myself a pity cry over the sad state of my miserable life. Cradling my cell, I rock forward and cover it with my body as tremors rack through me.

Why did he propose to her?

What was wrong with me?

Why is something *always* wrong with me?

Somewhere along the line, my tears no longer flow, but I don't move. I can't. I wallow in my misery until I realize canned music is playing rather than the band. Still, I remain immobile. I'm sort of hidden away from the main part of the room, tucked into a side alcove. No one will find me here. I shove my forehead against the ugly couch and focus on my breathing. Which stutters again as I hear echoes of Big Rolls telling me he loves me.

A palm lands on my shoulder. "Hey, are you feeling alright?"

A response to Trent's too-kind words lodges in the back of my throat. Unable to utter a word, I shake my head.

His hand curls around my shoulder. "Is something wrong with our social media?"

He's not concerned for me. Only about his band. I wave him away and find my voice, "No. All good."

His hand disappears. Yup, he doesn't care about me at all. Only what I can do for his band. Or what I did for his dick. *Get it together, Cordelia.* I take several deep breaths, close my eyes, and push away from the couch. Only when I sit upright and verify with my body it can hold my weight, do I open my eyes.

At that moment, Trent plops down in front of me, causing me to jump. Why is he still here? Before I can ask, he reaches over and swipes some tears off my cheek and rubs them between his fingers. In a low voice, he asks, "Want to talk about it?"

I look away from him. Pursing my lips, I will myself not to cry again. Stupid Big Rolls and his skank. I stifle a sob.

"Hey." He brushes my back.

Despite his requests to the contrary, I remain rigid. *Stop crying!* "I'm okay. You should go." My words mingle with another sob.

"Shhh. Come here." He puts both of his arms around me and pulls me forward.

Because I'm a wuss, I let him bring me to his chest and snuggle into his warmth. Tears I thought were over resurface. With friends. I rationalize we're tucked away and his band members won't see us.

"It'll be alright." He strokes my back. I relax into him for a fraction of a minute before straightening my spine.

Ignoring my reaction, he asks, "How about telling me what happened?"

His concern oozes out of him. It's my undoing. "My ex-boyfriend," I manage to choke out. Then the tears flow again, and he holds me tight against his hard chest.

He runs his hand over my hair, pushing some back and tucking it behind my ear. “Sounds like a real asshole.”

I sit upright. “He’s an important businessman.”

He frowns. “From where?”

“Newark.”

“I’m from next door, in Jersey City. So’s everyone in the band.”

“That’s where he lives.” Where I used to live until four months ago. Nearly five now. Tears continue to fall.

“What does this so-called important businessman do?”

I hiccup. “He sells used cars.”

“Sounds like a douche to me.”

I lean back against the couch cushions. “He’s not. He does difficult work. Selling cars is hard, you know?”

Trent cocks his head. “Yeah. Because playing in a band is super easy.”

I mull over what he said. “You’re right.”

His lips quirk. “Want to tell me what the douchebag did? Sell your car without your permission?”

For some unknown reason, I smile back. “No.”

He fingers his short dreadlocks, an unusual mixture of black with blonde overtones—natural, as my sister would note—and tugs at the ends. “I know. He ran an ad showcasing your car without your permission.”

My shoulders drooping, I stare at the ugly couch. “I don’t have a car.”

“Yet you were dating a guy who has hundreds on his lot?”

“Yeah. Sort of. His dealership owns them.”

“And Apex owns us.”

I consider his statement. “Well, he does own the cars. Although he never gave me one.” He also didn’t give me a diamond ring, but he gave one to *her*. I sniffle.

“So, I was right. He’s an asshole.” He grins.

I force my shoulders back. “Yeah. He is a big, fat, giant asshole.”

“How long ago did you break up?”

“Four-and-a-half months ago.”

His face pinches and he mutters, “An awful time.” He raises his chin. “You dumped his sorry ass for not buying you a car, am I right?”

My gaze slides down his chest, taking in his muscular arms on display in his Maroon 5 tank top. “Why Maroon 5?”

He glances down. “Oh. Sort of an inside joke with the band. We want to follow in Maroon 5’s footsteps.”

“Good goal.”

“Yeah. But don’t try to distract me here. What brought on all the tears?”

At his mention of my crying using the past tense, I realize I’ve stopped. Wow. I guess I do owe him some sort of an explanation. “He broke up with me, actually. Came home one day and kicked me out of his bed, his business, and his apartment. Said he was done with me.”

“Oh, that sucks.” He reels me in for a hug, and I inhale his scent, which reminds me of the beach.

I let him hold me while I share the rest of my sorry tale. This way, I can't see his face. The pity. Or worse, the mocking. "I had to move back home with my mother. And that's not the worst of it, by a long shot, and it's pretty shitty. Before he kicked me out, he ran up my credit cards, and now creditors are calling me all the time. Plus, my mother gambled away my sister's tuition money." I fall silent.

He skims my back again. The touch is strangely—soothing. "This all happened four months ago?"

I nod, my forehead banging against his pecs. "Well, not the tuition money. That just dropped. The creditor calls started like two months ago."

"Ah. It's the tuition money that triggered all this."

I wish. Tears threaten again. "No," I whisper.

His arms contract around me. Why am I being so pathetic with Trent, of all people? I *never* share my feelings. Ever. Yet I can't muzzle myself, and I'm spilling my guts to him. "He just got engaged."

"Oh, Cordelia." He pulls me even tighter to his hot bod and I clamp down a sob, relishing his warmth. "He's a total prick, you know, right? He's not worthy of one of your sideways glances, let alone your tears."

My what glances? I lean back. "My what?"

His left lip curls upward into a half-smirk. "You got them down pat. When you think we're doing something stupid, you make a face but you hide it by looking in a different direction."

I know exactly what he's talking about but didn't think anyone else picked up on it. "Well, you all bet on everything."

Like how many bras will be thrown onto the stage during your performance. It's sort of ridiculous."

He chuckles, and it lodges directly in my pussy. What the hell?

"Yeah, I always win that one by betting zero. Now this guy." He scrunches up his nose. "What's his name anyway?"

"Big Rolls."

His nose scrunches double-time.

Adorable.

*Adorable?*

"His name sounds like a wannabe rapper, and I don't want to insult good musicians."

I glance at the ugly couch. "It's Roland García. He chose the nickname when he got the car dealership. He wanted to sound important."

"More like a douche canoe to me."

I giggle at his apt description. Then I remember the photo, and all mirth ceases. As I've already shared most everything with Trent, might as well complete the package. I fumble with my phone and pull up the back cover of the magazine, and turn it over to him.

He takes my phone and peers at the screen for a minute. With a disgusted noise, he tosses it onto the couch.

Instead of picking my phone back up, I get lost in Trent's amber eyes. Such a complement to his warm, light brown skin color. I become attuned to my surroundings for the first time. We're tucked behind a low wall, more-or-less out of sight from the rest of the room. Over his shoulder, I notice a couple



of doors. The carpet is a utilitarian beige, not showing any wear and tear. The walls are ivory. Such a bland setting for a concert venue hosting bands such as Hunte. Maybe TLR will be a headliner here one day?

My thoughts return to the man in front of me when he says, “I am sorry you’re so broken up over him. Reminds me of my mom when—”

He doesn’t complete his sentence. His eyes glaze over.

In pain?

The need to wipe the emotion off his face surfaces. Hard. I have no idea where it came from, but Trent was nice to me. He got me to laugh when my life was totally falling apart. I have to do the same for him.

The only way I know how.

Wrapping my fingers around his wrist, I bring us both to standing. “Come with me.”

I lead us to the two doors behind him and twist a handle. It opens to a supply closet. Entering, I pull him behind me and shut the door.

Which leaves us in complete darkness.

Perfect.

“Cordelia, what—” His words cut off when my hands slide down his hard chest, ending at the hem of his idol’s shirt. Without a word, I lift it up his body and onto his arms. He takes over from there, tossing it onto the floor as my lips find his hard nipple. I flick it with my tongue, which causes his breath to hitch. I smile at the sound.

Moving my mouth over to lick his other nipple, I slide my fingers downward until they land on his belt buckle. I open it,

thrilling when it clanks against his jeans. Not waiting for him to say anything, I unzip his fly and shove both his jeans and underwear downward. Bared to my hands—since our vision is useless in here—I explore his cut abdomen. Trace the hard muscles and deep ridges.

I trail my fingers with my tongue, and his stomach jumps. When I lick his V, he moans.

“Just wait.”

His palm stills my descent. “You don’t have to do this.”

I have an overwhelming need to refute him. He made me see Big Rolls as a jerk, rather than the man who stomped all over my heart. And credit. “I want to make you feel as good as you made me.” I punctuate my sentiment by licking his swollen, hard cock.

“Ahh.”

With his strangled encouragement, I lick his crown, then up and down his shaft. God, he’s bigger than I remember. My right hand closes around him, and I twist while swirling my tongue around his tip. Squeeze him as my left-hand sneaks underneath and cups his balls.

“Fuck.”

I smile around his erection. I give his balls some attention and, at the same time, open my mouth and bring him deeper inside. He’s so hard. I drop both of my hands and swallow around him until he’s at the back of my throat.

“That’s it. Right there.” His hand returns to the back of my head, and he directs the rhythm while he fucks my face.

I take all of him, hollowing my cheeks and sucking as hard as I can. His hips join the action, slamming into my mouth.

He's using me to get off, like I want him to do. I run my tongue down his hard shaft, tracing the bulging vein. My jaw aches as he slides in and out.

It's a good hurt.

He thrusts a couple more times. His body tightens up. "I can't hold back."

Good. I suck him hard one last time, and he blows down my throat with a roar. Not exactly quiet, but we're far enough away from the people in the next room. I swallow every last drop of his essence and release him from my grip with deliberate movements. He slips from my mouth with a sexy pop.

"Fuck. Let me catch my breath and I'll make you feel this good."

As I stand, I drag my fingernails up his naked chest. Leaning forward, I plant a kiss somewhere near his belly button. Hard to tell in the darkness. But I don't want him to make me feel good—I'm already feeling all sorts of weirdness over this encounter. I don't do seconds with guys. No man, no matter how nice, is worth this sort of pain ever again. Asshole or not, Big Rolls taught me this hard lesson.

One I just disregarded.

But I can still stop this train. "No. I'm fine." My tone is bitchier than I intended and definitely aimed more at myself than him, but whatever. He got his rocks off. Good enough.

I take a step backward, and Trent tries to follow. However, since his jeans and underwear are still somewhere around his ankles, he doesn't get too far. I retreat toward the door, guided by the sliver of light shining through underneath it.

"Wait. This isn't right."

I wave my arm, even though he can't see it. Part of me wants to stay in this supply closet and let him make me come all over his lips or cock or whatever. But a bigger part of me needs to run away as fast as possible. "It's the right amount of right," I force out, not caring that I didn't make much sense.

I grasp the door handle, wanting to say, "thank you," or something equally ridiculous, but don't. Without another word, I twist the knob and slip out of the supply closet, leaving him to get dressed alone.

Stepping into the alcove with the ugly couch, I catch my breath. Not from the most incredible blowjob I've ever given, but from the disquiet shooting through my body. I straighten my shoulders and plow into the main area of the room. Shoving what happened with Trent, and my ex-boyfriend's engagement, behind me.

Or at least try to.

# TRENT



**T** *he fuck?*

I fumble with my underwear, tucking my spent cock into them before hiking up my jeans and zipping up.

*Why did Cordelia run out of here like Satan was chasing her?*

I redo my belt buckle and slide my hand over my naked arm. Where's my shirt? Blindly, I bend down and grope the floor until I latch onto a piece of cotton.

*She was sitting on the sofa crumpled over, crying. Like Mom used to do.*

I sigh. My heart broke for her then. It always gutted me when Mom would cry over her diary. Of course, that was before I knew what she was crying about. I shove my shirt over my head and smooth it down my torso.

*She blew me and then acted like I forced her to do something she didn't want.*

The hell. I didn't force her to take me down her throat, her eyes all red because of her stupid ex-boyfriend. Who got engaged and put a photo on the back cover of some stupid magazine.

*She probably lied to him.* There's always another side to a story.

Yanking the door handle open, I storm back to the after-party. Her blow job was terrific, so there's that. And it's for the best she bailed. If I fucked her again, she'd probably want to be in a relationship, and I'm never going there again. If it wasn't for my lying ex-girlfriend, my mother's betrayal cemented my decision. Totally not worth it.

I scan the room. My band's off to one side, so I grab a Bud and walk toward them. Before I reach my friends, the curvy figure of a woman with long brown hair—with fake red undertones—slips out the door. Good.

Taking a swig, I say, “So, great show tonight, yeah?”



I wake up around nine the next morning. Ended up having a rather early evening last night, as I wasn't in the mood to hang out with the guys for too long. Even though it's just us from now on since their wives had to get back to their day jobs, I wasn't feeling the vibe.

I throw on my workout clothes and wander over to the hotel's gym. At least being on tour with Hunte has some perks, like staying in nice hotels with all the amenities. I hit the elliptical first, moving my arms and legs at a punishing speed. After thirty minutes, I switch over to the rower for more cardio. Dripping sweat, I wipe my face with a towel and chug two paper-cone cups of water.

At least this workout cleared my head. I didn't force Cordelia to do anything with me last night. I was offering her a sympathetic shoulder. She was the one who dragged me into

the closet and took off my clothes. All on her. At least I got a first-rate orgasm out of it.

Later that morning, after showering and getting dressed, I flip on the television to some random entertainment show. More like a tabloid on the screen, judging from the topics they're discussing. I'm about to change the channel when one of them says, "Hunte's new opening band is hiding some deep secrets, according to *First Rumors*."

What the ... ?

One talking head turns to the other one and says, "Yeah. I read an article about the bassist and his heroin addiction. Doesn't look like this group's going to be opening for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame band for too much longer." A voice-over urges everyone to stay tuned for more celebrity gossip, and a commercial starts.

I close my eyes and focus on my breathing, pinching the bridge of my nose. How did a stupid magazine get hold of Joey's secret? I better get to the bottom of this. Picking up my phone, I pull up the most recent article of the magazine and pay them five dollars for the privilege of reading their shit.

This fucking sucks. Without explaining why, I text Joey about meeting up, and he invites me to join him for breakfast. My churning stomach revolts, but I agree. We need to fix this mess.

I knock on Joey's door and we shoot the shit on the way to the elevators. "Cheri's back teaching kindergarten, right?"

He slants me a quizzical once-over. "You know she is."

"Probably for the best, given what I need to talk with you about." So much for keeping things light.

He cocks his head. "What's up?"

“Nothing good.”

The elevator opens and we join a couple others inside the cab, so we ride down to the restaurant in silence. We’re shown to our booth, and order before Joey says, “Alright. I’m all tied up in knots here. What’s going on?”

In response, I yank out my phone and punch the screen. Tossing it onto the table, I lean back and watch as he reads it.

“Shit.”

“I hear you, brother. How do you want to deal with this?”

I can see him processing the ugly words. Shane, Cheri’s younger brother, died of an overdose five years ago. It was the night Cheri and Joey ventured into the heroin den to save him, after getting a tip from another junkie. They failed with her brother but did manage to save the guy who tipped them off. Ever since, they’ve been doing charity work for heroin survivors on the down-low. Somehow, the rag got wind of the story and twisted it into an unrecognizable bunch of lies, saying the two had met shooting up heroin. And he’s still a heroin addict.

Joey sighs. “Cheri and I talked about this. We knew this could come out, but we didn’t want it to, obviously. Seems like we have no choice here. We have to deal with it head-on.”

“The band knows the truth, and that’s all that matters. We’ve got your back, whatever you decide to do.” I push against the booth’s cushioned back. “We could ignore it.”

He shakes his head. “No. Reporters, or whatever you call them, will be hounding us, watching for Cheri or me to slip up. We don’t do drugs, man.”

“I know. We all know.”



He blows a breath upward, causing his hair to fly out in all directions. “I’m pissed, you know? But this was Cheri’s brother. It’s going to gut her.”

“I’m sorry this happened. I have no idea how they found out.”

After picking at our food, we return to our rooms. Joey calls Cheri to tell her about the article while I pace in my own room coming up with a bunch of different ideas about how to tackle this. I do understand Cordelia is the logical person to work this out, but hell if I’m going to seek her out if I don’t have to. A knock sounds on my door, and I open it. Joey walks in.

“So, before I could even call Cheri, a man named Kevin Hewitt called me. He’s the Marketing VP at Apex, and I gave him the broad strokes of our real story. He told me to speak with Cordelia and she’d circle back with him. I finally called Cheri and we discussed this whole thing. She doesn’t want to be a part of the decision-making, since it’s too hard on her. But she supports whatever we decide to do.”

At the inclusion of Cordelia, my blood runs cold. I was trying to avoid her for the rest of the tour—as if that were possible since she’s in charge of our marketing. But, Joey’s worth it. I’ll do what I have to.

“Want me to go with you to meet her? Or the whole band? Or do you want to talk with Cordelia by yourself?” Pick the third option. Please.

“I could do it alone, but really would appreciate your coming with me. Just you. Not all the guys.”

So much for my hope. Placing my hand on his shoulder, I reply, “Sure thing.”

We select a different restaurant in the hotel, where Cordelia meets us. She's stunning in a black miniskirt, thigh-high black boots, and a t-shirt under a fluffy jacket. Can't read what this one says. Whatever, her tits stretch the material in a tantalizing way.

Joey tells her about the article and what really went down five years ago. Thankful for something other than her sexy body to look at, I give Joey my undivided attention. Well, at least when my mind isn't wandering off to how she sucked me off last night. Then bolted.

“That's a lot to take in.”

Joey nods, his hair moving in triple time. “Yeah.”

She bites her luscious bottom lip “You didn't know about Shane's drug addiction before that night? Cheri either?”

Joey shifts in his seat. “No. We didn't know. Cheri still beats herself over it, thinking she should've figured it out sooner. But she didn't know.”

She purses her lips, then proceeds to ask a ton of questions. Where did this happen? Who else knows about it? How did her parents handle it? Where is he buried?

I'm here for Joey. I support him as he answers her questions but try not to look at the inquisitor. Or breathe in her mysterious floral scent, which makes my lower half take notice.

Together, we craft a social media strategy that includes seeking donations to stop heroin use by underage kids. When we've exhausted all the avenues, Cordelia stands.

“I'll go call Mr. Hewitt and get right on this.” She rests her hand on Joey's shoulder as if she's going to say something else. But doesn't.

After she leaves, I focus on Joey, who appears wrung out. “What do you think?”

“She’s making sense. It fucking sucks it was disclosed this way, but I’m sort of relieved. I figured it would come out somehow. But what’s done is done. We can get it out into the open and move on. I don’t want to be the reason TLR implodes.”

His use of the new hashtag Cordelia created doesn’t go unnoticed. I certainly sympathize about not wanting to be the reason the band falls apart. Shit, I’ve worried about that myself countless times since my mother was killed. Somehow, though, after I read her diary, I was too angry to care anymore. Still am. But I do understand where Joey’s coming from.

I rise. “Believe me, brother, you won’t be the reason.” Together, we return to our rooms.

Later, Joey tells Dwight and Maurice what went down in the tabloid and how Apex is dealing with it. They offer him support. Dwight even offers to smack some heads at the tabloid, and we all erupt into laughter.

God, we needed that.

“I think Cordelia’s got a good handle on this,” Maurice notes. He removes the bandage from the blood test his eye doctor ordered. Since drops don’t seem to be clearing up the redness, his doc ran some tests.

Dwight bangs a beat on the table. “Yeah. Bet you a Jackson this is old news in a week after she gets through with our social media rebuttal.”

“Make it three days, and you’re on,” Maurice counters.

Feeling the need to join in the bet, if nothing else but to support Joey, I add, “I’ll take two weeks. Sorry, man.”

Joey nods. “I pray it doesn’t take a month. Cheri doesn’t need this, after everything.”

I’m rooting for Maurice to win this one.

# CORDELIA



**A**fter my meeting with Joey and Trent yesterday, I spoke with the Marketing VP and we fleshed out a strategy to counteract the hateful story in the tabloids. Going along with what's been authorized, I put together a bunch of social media posts outlining, in broad terms, exactly what happened five years ago.

I reread the Word document one final time. I've never had to rebut such an awful mess of half-truths and outright lies before, so I decided to create everything in one document before posting separately. It's taken me longer to finish than I had hoped, but it's ready to go now. Thankfully, TLR isn't high on people's radar, so the traction the story's gained has been limited. But now, we're ready. Finished with edits, I email it to Mr. Hewitt for his blessing.

While I wait his approval, I dial Rita to get a feel for what Apex, in general, is thinking about this mess, and there's no better source. She picks up on the second ring. After a quick check-in, I plow ahead. "So, have you heard anything about the article *First Rumors* wrote about one of the members of The Light Rail?"

She whistles. "I have. The whole office has been buzzing about it. Mr. Griffith pitched a fit and had an emergency

meeting with Hunte's team yesterday."

I swallow. "Yeah. I kinda figured it was something like that. The band and I developed a strategy I'm about to execute, with Mr. Hewitt's input, of course. Correcting all the lies printed in the tabloid." I fill her in on the real details of the sordid story.

"Wow. Poor Cheri. It must be hard having to relive such awful moments of her life."

My head snaps backward. "You know, I never thought of it like that. I knew Joey was upset, but I thought it was mainly over all the lies. I bet his wife is suffering all over again."

"I'm sure she is. You haven't spoken with her?"

"No. Joey said she didn't want to talk about it, but he was speaking for the both of them."

"I can only imagine. Oh, wait a sec." She places me on hold for a minute. "So sorry. I have to go deal with a travel snafu one of the bands is having."

I laugh. "Wish I was there to help out."

"Don't you worry. I've got this."

"Thanks for everything, Rita."

Once we disconnect, I ponder what she said about how hard this whole thing must be on Cheri. Maybe I'll give her a call once everything's posted.

After getting the VP's go-ahead, I busy myself by uploading a press release onto the band's website and posting on Facebook and Twitter. After doing some edits to a photo of Joey and Cheri I captured at Madison Square Garden, I post it to Instagram together with their statement and make a similar post to TikTok. The fact Apex was somewhat concerned over

the smear campaign, and I am counteracting it, can only earn me brownie points. Perhaps even a favorable rating for an advance?

Knowing I should wait a little longer before approaching Apex for a loan, I busy myself by monitoring the fans' positive reactions on social media. I'm happy the band decided to go this route rather than calling up a reporter. It's much more personal, and this story is nothing but personal. Pride at my work swells. Even if no one else says it, I'm confident I did a good job.

While I'm reviewing TLR's social media, *Mamá* texts me. Sticking out my tongue at my screen, I read her latest rant about how *my* creditors are calling *her* house. She ignored my texts about her gambling away Juanita's tuition, so I do her the same courtesy.

That night, I'm backstage with the band before their performance, preparing to take more photos. I jump when someone taps my shoulder.

"Oh, Joey, you scared me."

"Sorry." He flashes me a brilliant white smile as if to make up for being so stealthy. His arms move behind his back as if he's holding something.

Intrigued, I ask, "What'cha got there?"

He grins. "Cheri and I are grateful for what you put out on social media. Most of the comments have been so supportive, and we're happy our story may help others." He brings his arms forward, and shows me a shiny, new Canon camera. "We got you this as a thank you. Figured you could use it to snap photos rather than using all the storage on your cell phone."

My eyes widen. I reach for my new camera. “You didn’t have to do this. I was only doing my job.”

He shrugs. “We wanted to. We really appreciate everything.” He kisses my cheek, then Maurice calls him over for a pre-show huddle.

No one has ever given me a gift for doing a good job. I pause as a memory of Big Rolls giving me a fancy dress replays in my mind. Something he wanted me to wear to one of his soirees. Not without wanting a hand job in return, I amend.

I flip the camera over, checking out all the buttons and settings. Sweet! I vow to take a ton of good photos and videos of Joey performing to show my gratitude.

Holding my new present up, I start snapping shots of the room and capture each of the guys. I flip through the images, pleased with the quality. I play with the settings some more, finding a way to post directly onto social media from the camera. All of my limbs feel lighter.

Is this what happiness feels like?

The band leaves the room, and I jolt out of my stupor. Cradling my new camera, I follow, documenting their every movement. They’re about halfway through their set when I return to the green room to sort through all the photos. Fans go crazy for these shots, especially when they’re posted during a performance.

Photos of Dwight banging on the drum set make me smile. His face is etched in concentration, with beads of sweat flying off his hot bod. Nice. I post that one with the caption “Banging out a hard beat.”



Several pictures of Maurice at the keys are pretty decent, although none really call to me. I keep scrolling through my images until I stop on one. His head is thrown back while his fingers rip at the keys. Nice. This one goes up with “Feeling the keys in Connecticut.”

Joey’s next up. Because of everything he’s been going through thanks to the *First Rumors* article, I want this one to capture his essence. Several shots feature him interacting with the crowd, which are very good. But not gripping. Sighing, I return to the beginning of the roll. And pause on the third one. In it, he’s holding his phone to his chest, eyes closed, right before the band hits the stage. Must’ve been talking with Cheri. It’s sweet and loving and he’s jazzed. My own excitement at finding this photo bottoms out. Wish I knew the feeling.

Before I can post this one, I should at least ask Cheri for permission. Since I’ve been meaning to speak with her anyway, this might provide a good excuse. I pull up her contact info and FaceTime her. After some pleasantries, I dive into the reason for my reaching out. “I wanted to say thanks for this amazing new camera, Cheri.” I hold it up to the videocam.

She glances at the camera. “It was Joey’s idea. But you deserve it for what you’ve done. I really appreciate how you portrayed what happened with Shane, without sensationalizing his, um, passing.”

Staring at the floor, I take in her praise. “I’m happy you liked what I did.”

Shoulders moving on a big sigh, Cheri says, “You diffused a potentially awful situation. The camera was the least we

could do for you. Besides, it helps the band out. Better photos to post, and all that.”

Her compliments are foreign to me, so I push forward with the reason I called in the first place. “Toward that end, I wanted to ask if it would be okay for me to post this photo?” I text it to her.

She sucks in her breath. “It’s so—personal. But, so long as you don’t say who he was talking with, feel free to post it.”

I nod. “How about a caption that says, ‘Getting into the music zone.’?”

“Oh, I love it!” She squints as she examines the photo. “Would it be okay with you if I framed it?”

In my veins, my blood buzzes. I wrap my hair around my finger and pull, unable to believe she’d want to actually keep a photo of mine, little less frame it. Since she expects a response, I find my voice. “Of course. You never need to ask.”

Cheri smiles at me, and her whole face transforms as the sadness lifts, however briefly. “I appreciate it.”

“Sure thing.”

“You’re really good at this. The band’s lucky to have you on their team.”

Her positivity is confounding. Does she really like me? Nah. Probably stems from how I counteracted the article and she didn’t have to do anything. “Just doing my job.” I disconnect the call, grab a chair, and post the approved photo of Joey.

One band member left. Trent. Why didn’t I do him first? I skip through some photos until I land on his tall, swimmer’s

bod topped with those short, intriguing dreadlocks. My fingers itch with wanting to grab onto them. *Stop it, Cordelia.*

This is why I left him for last.

Sighing, I flip through the shots of him, which are roughly double the rest of the band. Well, he is their frontman. I snort. As if his status is the reason I have so many pictures of him.

I like a few and try to decide among them. In one, he's smiling at the audience, although it seems to be a fake smile. In another, he's playing his guitar but the positioning makes it not such a great shot. Then there's one with him singing, yet the way he's grasping the microphone makes me think he's using it to remain upright rather than to amplify his voice.

Frustrated, I go to the beginning of the roll and start fresh, hoping something will jump out at me. No, no, no. Ugh. Why is he being so difficult?

*Well, you beat a hasty exit after giving him a blow job the other night.*

Frowning, I move on to the next image. And freeze. It was taken just before TLR hit the stage. He's last in line, and Dwight's already striding toward his drum set. Maurice's swinging his wrists and Joey's fiddling with his bass. Trent, however, isn't moving. Rather, the photo shows him standing stock still, his head tipped toward the ceiling, kissable lips pursed. His cheeks are drawn inward. But it's his eyes. Rounded. Scared. Exposed. I suck in my breath at how fearful he looks. No way can I post this photo.

I progress to the next screen and keep moving forward until I reach the end. Nothing grabbed me. Shit. From the stage, Trent's introducing the band members before their last song. Maybe something will pop up now?

Without a backward glance, I rush to the side of the stage and snap every possible photo of Trent. Something has to be post-worthy. Right before the song ends, I review my shots on the way back to the room. One of which halts me in my tracks. In it, Trent's rocking out on his guitar. More like fucking it. My girlie parts tingle. Guess I found the winner. I post the final shot with the caption, "Who wants to be Trent's guitar?"

The guys burst into the middle of the room, exchanging high-fives and pumped from their performance. The tour manager assigned to TLR, Raine, appears almost out of nowhere and ushers them over to a meet-and-greet. I follow, hoping to chronicle this event for their social media pages. With the goal of pushing the *First Rumors* article further and further down in searches. Yeah. That's my only goal.

While I'm clicking away, Raine comes over to me. "Impressed with how you took care of all the nasty business with Joey and Cheri."

Lowering my camera, I reply, "Thanks. They thought it was best to come as clean as possible about the whole incident, and Mr. Hewitt agreed."

"Putting links to heroin addiction donation sites was a great touch."

That was my idea. I tuck my hair behind my ear. "But we never got an apology from the magazine that started it all."

He shrugs. "They won't. Tabloids like them never do. But TLR's fans ate it up. And Keith loved it too. Garnered more fans, to boot. Nice job."

I puff up. His mentioning Hunte's tour manager is a coup. Yeah, I'm pretty good at this marketing stuff. Maybe my loan

request will be approved, especially since both my band's manager and his boss liked it? "Thank you."

Raine straightens, then mumbles, "What's the deal with those fans?" He scurries away before I can even respond.

From my vantage point, I take a few shots of Raine handling the overzealous fans who seem to want to grab the shirts off the guys' backs. Literally. Can't say I blame them, as each one of them is mighty hot.

Redirecting my thoughts, I check out the social media comments. While not huge in number, they're pretty enthusiastic. Hope they continue to grow and outpace California Skies, the rival band who opened for Hunte on the West Coast. I bite my lip, pondering ways to grow their fan base while the meet-and-greet finishes up.

We return to the green room, where I review the new photos. Some good shots, but nothing I feel like posting right now. I'm setting my new camera by my jacket when Trent approaches.

"Hey."

I straighten up. "Hi."

He licks his lips. "Listen, I wanted to add my voice to say thank you for countering the article about Joey. I think things will be dying down on that front soon."

"I hope so."

A pain at the back of my throat pokes at me. Guilt over how I fled from him. It's unsettling. The need to make it up to him—in some small way—prods me to click the band's Facebook profile. I locate the photo of him and his guitar posted an hour ago. Passing my cell to him, I ask, "Like it?"

I forget to breathe while his gaze bounces from the photo to the caption to the fans' responses. He scrolls past responses like "hot," "super-talented," and even, "I'd let him play me!"

"Interesting photo choice." He conveys the phone back to me. "I like it. The comments, well—"

Ignoring the latter part, my body collapses in on itself, relieved he approved of the picture. "You're a hard get."

He half-smirks. "Gotta keep you on your toes."

Because I want more absolution from this talented man, *not* because he's a sexy beast, I show him the photo I didn't post. The one from right before he took the stage.

"This photo spoke more to me, but I felt it was too..." I pause. "Intimate." His mouth falls open as he peers at the screen in my hand, then he bites his bottom lip. Clouds cover his amber eyes.

Remembering how Cheri wanted to frame the photo of Joey holding his phone, I breach the silence. "Let me know if you want me to email it to you."

His eyes don't stray from the camera.

What's up with his reaction? Guess my skills aren't so mad after all. "You don't have to," I add.

His mouth closes for a moment. "Thanks for not posting it. This one's sort of, personal." He stumbles back.

## TRENT



**F**rom the other side of the room, Dwight calls, “Hey, Trent. Leaving in ten.”

Pulling out of my stupor, I give him a thumbs-up, then shift my attention back to the woman who broke down in front of me. And gave me a killer blow job. Then ditched me. Was that only a day ago? With the story about Joey and Cheri hitting the airwaves, it feels like much longer. Cordelia came through for us, though, developing a press response that shut down the tabloid like a dog. She’s really talented outside the bedroom.

Inside it, too.

Not like we’ve ever done it in a bedroom.

*Yet. Yet?*

Taking in her false eyelashes and dyed hair, plus her overly-perky tits, I remind myself she’s one big walking lie. Still, she did me a solid by not posting the photo. Where I looked petrified to take the stage. And I was. For some unknown reason, I’m compelled to explain myself. “About the picture, you already know how my mom was killed.”

She nods.

“Well, I’ve been finding it difficult to go onstage. Always imagining some random dude with an AK-47 is going to come in and shoot up the place.”

“Oh, God. How awful.” She rests her hand on my forearm and a spark zaps between us. “You are aware the venues you guys play always have the audience go through a metal detector before they’re allowed to enter, right?”

“I know. Never said it was rational.”

Her hand falls away. “I seem to recall reading online about how to combat phobias. Maybe there’s stuff about battling stage fright?”

Following how I froze before the gig at Madison Square Garden, I checked in with the therapist who helped me when Mom was killed. She gave me some exercises to do, which have helped. Somewhat. “Maybe I should do some more research.”

She blinks. “I’ll do it for you, and report back. That way your talents won’t be wasted reading through all the useless crap I’m sure is out there.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Don’t read anything into it,” she warns. “I want TLR to succeed so I can, hopefully, keep my job.”

I smirk at her warped logic. “Sort of like helping me out is helping yourself?”

“Something like that.” She smiles right back.

I run my hand up my arm where my tattoo sits. “Hey, if you’re not doing anything tonight, you’re welcome to join us. Joey found a club nearby, and we all want to blow off some



steam. Especially after all the bad publicity. Which you spun into something good.”

She stands straighter, her eyes focused off to the right. Finally, her chin rises. “Sounds fun. Thanks for the invite.”

With an uneasy truce, we join the rest of TLR and climb into a couple of Ubers over to the Hartford club. Correction. All of us get into cars except Dwight, who somehow managed to get his Harley transported with us during the tour. I shake my head. Never underestimate the resourcefulness of a man and his prized hog.

When we arrive, a line snakes around the block waiting to get in during this early fall evening. “Shit,” I mutter as our Uber drives off.

The rest of the band turns their focus on Joey. “Did you make us a reservation?” Dwight asks.

A blush overtakes his light black skin. “Cheri’s not here, and it didn’t occur to me.”

Guess we need to get out of here. No way am I waiting around forever only to be denied entrance.

Next to me, Cordelia fishes in her purse. Holding up her cell phone, she punches something on the screen and raises her finger at us. “One moment.”

We watch as she hops over to the line and insinuates herself into a group of women. Cordelia shows her the phone, points at us, and a woman exclaims, “Holy! Guys, guys.” She tugs on her friends’ arms. “Look.” They all turn to us.

“WTF?” I raise my arms to Dwight.

He silently motions as if to reply he doesn’t have a clue.

The next thing I know, the crowd pushes toward us, screaming “TLR is here!” Flashes from camera phones go off in our eyes. A couple of seconds later, club bouncers approach our group, which grows by the second.

A beefy, bald guy points at me. “You with a band?”

“Yeah. The Light Rail. We opened for Hunte at their concert tonight.”

“Come right in.”

He motions for us to follow, and the guys do. Walking on air with our newfound fame, I start to follow them before realizing we’re missing someone. Spinning back around, I search the crowd for our awesome social media manager and find her in the background with some other people in line, jockeying for a photo. Placing my hands to my mouth, I yell, “Cordelia!”

Her head snaps in my direction.

“Get over here!”

She starts toward us and when she gets close enough, I reach out to grab her hand. She is, after all, the reason why we’re getting VIP treatment. Together, we walk to the bald bouncer.

“Thanks, dude.”

“Rock royalty always is welcome here. Enjoy.”

Under my breath, I repeat, “Rock royalty.” Holy shit! Is this my life?

Cordelia squeezes my hand—I almost had forgotten I was holding hers. “I think it was all your social media that got you entrance.”

Her quip makes me laugh, and I raise her fingers to my lips. Together, we enter a large, dim room. An impressive light show illuminates the dance floor in the middle, the colored lights accentuating the music. Straight behind us is the DJ booth, with a bar to the right. A sign marked “VIP” is on the left, where my band has taken up residence. I tug Cordelia into the area.

Someone offers me a Bud. Addressing the woman who made this possible, I ask, “What can I get you to drink?”

“Vodka and seltzer.”

Her choice of drink rings a bell. “With a lime?”

Our gazes meet and freeze for a second. “Yeah.”

I place her order with a server, and soon we’re back with the guys. Our roadies made it to the VIP section as well. A guy could get used to this treatment.

Maurice lifts his chin toward Joey. “How’s my eye looking?” He removes his thick glasses.

The bassist peers into his bandmate’s eyes. “They’re both clear,” he pronounces.

Maurice emits an elongated breath. “Thank fuck. Doc told me I have episcleritis, and prescribed Prednisone.” He holds up a prescription bottle. “Seems to be working. Can’t wait to get off the pills, though. They make me jumpy.”

I clap my hand on his shoulder. “You’ll be back to your normal, blind self in no time.”

He rubs his middle finger across his cheek, used to my teasing.

Joey’s white-toothed grin almost glows. “Bet you twenty your eye doc reduces your prescription at your next check-in.”

“I’m in for it being eliminated altogether,” Dwight says.

I point the neck of my Bud at Maurice. “Count me in for some kind of new eye drop that will change the course of your life.” Despite his seeming progress, Maurice seems to want this possibility.

Being at the apex of the bet, Maurice doesn’t chime in. Yet, the look of relief crossing his face says it all. He lifts his Cuba Libre high. “To the best band of brothers ever!”

We clink our drinks and the sweet goodness of my Bud coats my throat. For the first time in ages, I feel lighter. Maybe it’s focusing on my friends’ problems rather than my own. Cordelia laughs at something, and my cock stirs. Maybe it’s something more basic. Even though she ditched me after our last tryst, it seems he didn’t get the message.

I enjoy the music and the drinks and even join everyone on the dance floor when a classic by Bon Jovi plays. After it finishes, a slow anthem by Cole Manchester blares, and I find myself staring into the fascinating mocha-brown eyes of the woman who’s changing things for the band for the better. And for me.

I lift my brow. “Dance?”

She licks her lips and places her hand in mine. Squeezing her close, I enjoy her floral-fruity scent and we sway to the sensuous beat. Manchester writes some fantastic shit.

“I appreciate all you’re doing for us. You’re great at what you do.”

If I wasn’t holding her, I would’ve missed the way her body swelled against my chest. With her sexy as all get out raspy voice, she replies, “Thanks.”

I get lost in the music and the woman in my arms. Who I fucked in a bathroom not too long ago. And who gave me a Grade A blowjob the other night. She's opened up to me about her money problems and asshole ex. I've shared one of my deepest secrets with her.

Not the big one.

No one gets to hear that.

The song continues, and we move together to the anthem like we're the only two people here. I like it. *I like her.*

Stop. She's a woman. She lies like everyone else.

Well, not *everyone*. None of the guys in the band has broken my trust. But women? Both my mother and my ex-girlfriend were bald-faced liars. Perhaps Cordelia's lies—the false eyelashes, push-up bra, and dyed hair—really aren't too much in the grand scheme of things, though. Especially considering all she's doing for the band. For me.

Cordelia traces her arm down my back, scraping her fingernails as she goes. Fuck. “That feels really good,” I murmur in a gruff voice.

She offers a lazy smile. “I've forgotten how much I enjoy dancing.”

I lean down to kiss her, but don't meet her lips. Instead, I note, “You were built for it.” Noise off to the side reaches my ears. “Wonder what's going on?”

She pokes her head around me. “Oh. Looks like Hunte has entered the building.”

It's like ice water pours over me. I still as the last notes of the song blare. “I need a drink.” Without waiting for her to

join me, I leave the dance floor, find a server, and order another Bud.

Beer in hand, I flop down on a sofa, spreading my legs wide. Why did *he* have to come and ruin my night? It was going so well before he crashed into it. I take another swig of my drink when the man himself crosses in front of me, a Bud at his lips. I rest mine on my lap and slide my thumb over the opening.

Cordelia approaches him and they talk. From my vantage point, I study him. His posture. His mannerisms. The way he slips his thumb on top of his open beer bottle.

*Fuck.*

Cordelia nods and turns toward me, straightening her shoulders. She walks over, the tips of her toes inches away from my boot-covered ones. “Braxton just told me he’s digging your sound. How cool is that?”

I chug another swig of my Bud. “Yeah.” I down more of my favorite drink.

Off to the right, Braxton’s best friend, the bassist phenom Colton yells, “Yo, Brax! Need another Bud?”

He responds, “You know it!”

Colton laughs. “Damn. Should’ve gotten you stock in your favorite beer ages ago.”

Braxton says something back, but I’ve tuned them out. I don’t need to witness any more of this bullshit. Suddenly, the club is too loud, the noise level too high, and the drink too flat. I slap my half-drunk beer onto a nearby table and slam my palms on my knees. Cordelia takes a couple of steps backward.

“I’ve about had my fill of this after-party.” I rise, causing her to scurry to the side.

“How are you getting back to the hotel?”

Her question freezes me for only a second. “I’ll order an Uber.” I fish into my back pocket and extract my cell.

“Mind if I catch a ride with you?” She yawns. “We have a big day ahead, and I’m sort of beat.”

I shrug. “Sure.” Wanting to flee from the club, I order the car through the app. “Twenty minutes.” Shit. Such a fuck-long time.

“Great. Just enough time to say good-bye,” she replies.

Could we be more opposite if we tried?

We make our rounds to my bandmates, none of whom are ready to leave. Why would they? It’s only a little past midnight. Braxton reels his wife in for a kiss and my stomach curls. Even though the night’s still young, I’m beyond ready to bolt.

Good-byes done, we pass the bathrooms on our way to the front of the club. Reminds me of where Cordelia and I first hooked up. I glance at the Ladies’ Room door and note her eyes doing the same. The air thickens for a moment.

“Let’s go. The car should be here soon.”

She clears her throat. “Right.”

We leave the club and I fist bump the bald bouncer. “Thanks, man. Nice place you got here.”

“Appreciate it. See you around.”

Cordelia waves to him. “Bye!”

I stride over to the curb, ignoring the long line of people waiting to get in and party. Actually, the line looks longer than before. Word must've gotten out that Hunte's inside. My body goes rigid.

"Everything okay?"

I'm roused out of my stupor by the woman at my side. She had nothing to do with this mess. "Yeah. Long day, that's all."

Our Uber pulls up and I help her into the car, which shuttles us to the hotel. We keep our conversation to a minimum. What's there to say anyway?

"Thank you," Cordelia offers the driver as she exits the vehicle.

"Yeah, thanks." In the app, I add a tip and review the driver before following her into the hotel. I'm too agitated to go straight to my room, and the bar provides a perfect spot to blow off the steam ready to combust inside my body. When she starts toward the elevators, I pause in front of the bar. "I'm going to stop off here. Have a good night."

She comes to a halt. Her eyes squint as if she's trying to figure me out. *Good luck.* "You know? A nightcap sounds good. May I join you?"

Do I care? Hell to the no. I shrug. "Suit yourself."

She slips onto a high bar stool and I order our drinks. A seltzer and vodka with a wedge of lime for her, and a Bud for me. In a pilsner this time. She extends her glass up to me. "To a successful day. Joey's story has been buried, and you all hit it out of the park at the concert."

Our glasses clink together. The beer sloshes its way down my throat, leaving a calming wake. She isn't wrong. "The way



you counteracted the tabloid's article was great. Joey's hopeful all the positive press and donations will help some families."

She uncrosses and recrosses her legs as if she's unused to getting praise for her good work. In a low voice, she replies, "Thanks." After a brief pause, she adds, "Apex's Marketing VP was happy with the strategy, too."

We drink in silence as the Latin strains of Ozzy Martinez filter through the bar. I'm more inclined to believe most of the strategy came from Cordelia but let her comment slide.

"You were fantastic out there tonight. By the last part, you were loosening up with the audience. And they were eating you up." She takes another sip of her drink.

Warmth spreads through my body. "I'm glad you're seeing improvement."

She nods. "Now I know you're having some, ah, difficulties in getting onto the stage, we can tackle them together. I'm looking forward to doing some research for you."

"You really want to help me?"

She traces the logo on the napkin before lowering her glass onto it. "As I said before, your success is my success."

My thumb traces the back of her palm. Our gazes lock. "I think you can do anything you set your mind to accomplishing."

She sucks in her breath, her eyes flicking to my lips. My dick pushes against my fly. Fuck it. I tug her forward and our mouths fuse. My heart rate spikes and, for the first time tonight, it's not out of fear. Or anger. No, this time it's pure passion.

I pull back. "We need to go to a room."

She tucks a wisp of hair behind her ear. “Yours.”

I’m on my feet before she can change her mind. Not that I expect her to, but she can be unpredictable. I toss some bills onto the bar and lead her to the elevator, and then inside my suite. When the door closes behind her, I pin her against it.

“You’re staying here tonight.”

Since she doesn’t object for two full seconds, I slam my mouth against hers. I want to fuck my stage fright, Hunte, and this night out of my system. I rid her of her clothes while she does the same to me, but not before I take a few condoms from my front pocket. Leaving everything on the floor, I hoist her up around her waist—she wraps her legs around me—and bring us into the bedroom, where I deposit her onto the bed.

I don’t waste any time, pushing her body down onto the mattress with my own. Her hardened nipples poke my pecs. Our first time doing it on a bed.

“Trent. God.” She moans when I open her up, spread eagle, and dip my finger into her wet pussy.

I’m too impatient to go down on her. All I want to do is pound into her wet body and suck on her tits, all of which are laid out before me. I tear open a packet. She snags the latex out of my hand and rolls it down my hard cock.

Sheathed and ready to go, I swirl two fingers inside her to ensure she’s ready for me. I pull my digits out and touch them to my mouth, savoring the tangy goodness. She’s more than ready.

Lining up to her entrance, I push forward. Her hips raise to meet me and when I’m fully sheathed inside her, I wait a beat. Wrapping her legs around my shoulders, I pull out and thrust into her again. And again.

“Yes!”

Her cry spurs me on, and I unleash everything inside of me. I pump hard, and she meets me with equal ferocity. Pounding. Thrusting. Grinding. Her body takes what I’m giving and begs for more.

Sweat pours off my chest. Her shiny torso speaks of her investment in our activities. I hammer into her until she clenches around me, her body goes rigid, and she cries out. In the middle of her long wail, I let loose, roaring as my own climax overtakes me.

Even when I’ve emptied myself into the condom, I continue to pulse inside her body, prolonging her orgasm until her cries reduce to whimpers.

Only then do I collapse next to her, my head cushioned by the pillow. After I slide all the way out of her body, I hop off the bed to take care of the condom. Within a minute, I’ve returned to the bed. Her eyes are closed, her breathing slow and steady. Standing by her side, I bend down and kiss her forehead. “Sleep well, Cordy.”

I’ve never fucked someone unconscious before, but I like it.

# CORDELIA



**C**ordy.

He called me Cordy.

No one's ever bothered to give me a nickname. Ever. Not my mother. Certainly not my father. Big Rolls? Fuck no.

The man who gave me an orgasm I'll never forget did. Correction—three most amazing orgasms. Of my life.

My heart flips while I continue to feign sleep.

The bed dips as Trent slides in next to me and wraps his naked body around mine. Shit. I need to get away. Nothing good can come of this. I blame my third vodka seltzer.

Remaining silent and still for some time, I wait until he turns over and releases me from his grip. Free! I wait a few more minutes to make sure his light snoring continues. With deliberate care, I flip up the covers and pad to the living room where our clothes are scattered around. With one eye on the bedroom, I put everything back on except for my black booties, which I carry with me. I slip out into the hall, drop the shoes, and make quick work of getting back into them. My body sags against the wall, relief flooding over me. I made it. My body makes a last-minute plea to go another round with

him, but I squash that. *Get your head on straight. He'll never stay.*

I exhale a deep, cleansing breath and return to my empty room. I shed my clothes once more and take a long, hot shower. All the while his nickname for me plays on repeat.

*Cordy.*

When I shake my wet head, water flies everywhere in the tiled bathroom. I wrap a towel around my body and walk to the queen-sized bed. Not nearly as large as the king in his “Junior Suite,” but whatever. Mine’s fine for me. A good reminder of who he is. And who I am.

I throw off the towel and climb under the blankets, which aren’t warm from both our bodies working off excess energy. And doesn’t feature the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen lying next to me. *It’s better this way.*

I punch my pillow and close my eyes, willing sleep to take me away. My alarm goes off in what seems like minutes and I shake cobwebs out of my head. Time to get back to work. Or, rather, onto the buses, since today’s a travel day.

Making sure my hair is flat ironed straight, I check my reflection in the mirror and stain my lips bright red. Buoyed by my false eyelashes, I place the call I’ve been dreading and, of course, I’m put right through to Apex’s HR. Five minutes later, I disconnect, knowing the possibility of a loan against my salary was a pipedream. Fuck.

I drag my sorry ass down to the restaurant where the TLR members sit on one side and their crew and roadies on the other. Unable to meet Trent’s gaze, I join the roadies’ table. Marvin clears a place for me, and I plop down. The server fills my coffee cup, and I sip while everyone talks around me. I’m

not interested in joining in, as my disappointing conversation with Apex plays on repeat. Not to mention my stupid heart, and a spot much lower, wants to be over at the other table. I keep my butt firmly planted.

On the other side of me, Hector carries the conversation about our next stop—Boston. They're all so excited to hit the town they don't even notice I'm not chatting them up. Whatever. Works for me. When they've finished their meals, and I've eaten about half of my bagel, we lug our suitcases toward the buses. Funny how having availability to food makes it less desirable.

“Cordy!”

Ignoring how my heart sings as Trent yells my nickname, I pretend not to hear him, leave my suitcase by the cargo hold, and jump onto the roadie bus. Much better. At least, safer.

My serenity bubble bursts when an angry guitarist boards the bus and stalks over to me. “Didn't you hear me calling you?”

My body vibrates as the man who made me feel all sorts of incredible pleasures looms over me. Not wanting to be towered over, I stand. And lie. “Been in my own world.”

His face morphs with a warring emotion. Pride? Satisfaction? Delight? “I know the feeling.”

I square my shoulders. I'm sure he does *not*. I announce, “I'm riding to Boston on this bus today.”

His fists go to his hips. “Why?”

Because I don't want to be too close to you. Because you make my head spin. Because “danger” is written across your forehead so only I can read it. I adopt my trademarked glare

that skewers people in place. “I have some research to do. Remember?”

After a moment, he tugs on a short dreadlock. Up close, I realize hurt simmers right under his surface. “You could ride with us.”

I’m not giving in. “My luggage has been stowed under this bus.”

He glances up and realizes he’s causing a rather large disruption and delaying our departure. He drops his arms. “Well, see you in Boston.”

*As little as can be.* “Bye.”

He turns and descends the stairs at the front of the bus. My heart yearns for his touch again, yet my mind wants to excise him from my life. Despite our short time together, I fear he has the power to hurt me worse than Big Rolls ever did. Something I’ll never allow to happen.

Once the roadies have all settled into their routines, I pull out my computer. No matter what, Trent needs to get control over his stage fright now before he’s unable to perform. Which would be the end of TLR. And my salary.

A few hours later, we rumble into Boston. I’ve spent the entire time sifting through tons of information about Trent’s challenge, and have compiled some promising exercises to help him overcome his nerves. Armed with the new information, I disembark, collect my luggage, and wheel it into another, interchangeable lobby. At least we have two shows here, meaning two nights.

*Which you’re going to spend in your own bedroom.*

Instead of going to the hotel’s restaurant, I order room service and review my notes. Once I’m confident I can help

Trent without jumping his bones again, I text him.

What's your room number? I have some exercises that should help you.

Trent: 1147

Good. No flirty response. I walk to the elevator, all the while reminding myself I don't do repeats. Or second repeats. Or thirds. Whatever, we're over. Nothing to see here.

When I arrive at his door, I knock. He's changed into the clothes he'll wear onstage—an Imagine Dragons t-shirt this time, with a pair of tight black leather pants. Fuck. Me.

*Down, Cordelia.*

He ushers me into the room and reaches out as if to help me with my computer, but I flinch away. I adopt a professional demeanor as we sit across from each other at a small table, and open my laptop. "I think these exercises will help you out. I wanted to go over them with you so you can pick out the ones that speak the most to you." I pass him my laptop.

After skimming my notes, he asks, "You did all this on the bus ride?"

"Yes."

He nods. "Some of these sound good. Like diaphragm breathing, yoga stretches, and eliminating caffeine at least two hours before showtime. I think I can add a couple of your ideas to my routine."

"I'm glad. Do you need me here to help you, or are you fine going over them by yourself?" God, please don't ask me to stay.



He swallows, and my body reacts to the way his Adam's apple bobs. *Stop it.*

Oblivious to my inner turmoil, he murmurs, "I'm good alone."

"Great." Tapping on the keyboard, I rush to my feet and edge toward the door. "Just sent you the links." I'm out of his suite without waiting to hear his response. As I retreat to my room, I try to convince myself I made the right decision about the broken man I fled.



**A**s is my routine, while the band performs, I post photos to generate hype. The fans at the concert won't see them 'til later, but the ones who aren't in the arena get to experience a little of what they're missing. I even post a video snippet of them performing "Let Me Give You a Sweet" from backstage. In it, Trent and Joey are out on the catwalk interacting with some girls in the front row. Comments light up almost immediately.

TLR finishes their set to the loudest applause I've heard for them to date. This is good. Trent took the stage minus the deer-in-the-headlights look he usually sports. Maybe today will be the day the band's social media responses pull ahead of California Skies, and I'll be one step closer to securing this salary for the long haul. Visions of my debt decreasing dance in front of me. It's still out of reach, but I'm closer.

The guys make their way into the green room, hooting and hollering. Guess everyone felt the excitement in the air tonight. Still, it's my cue to become scarce. I don't want a

repeat of what Trent and I did last night. My body begs to differ, but I shut her down. No. More.

When Raine calls them over to yet another meet-and-greet, I breathe easier. Free for one more hour. Scrolling through the band's Instagram account, I stop on @Joey'sFangirl, who posted he's "the biggest dreamboat with a heart of gold for his admission about his BIL's OD. I was there and got clean, and he's doing a lot to help out right now."

My heart does a double beat. Confidence races through my body. My strategy really is helping people.

Hunte chooses this exact moment to walk into the green room, laughing and slapping each other's backs. Within minutes, TLR returns from their appearance, and drinks are passed all around. Carrying two bottles of Bud, Braxton approaches Trent and holds one out. I raise my Canon and snap the exact instant when Trent accepts the offered one. Nice. I post it with the caption, "A happy toast from one frontman to the other." A couple of minutes later, the headliners disappear, followed by an explosion of happiness from the audience.

"Cordelia," Joey yells. "Come over here." He waves me over.

Because I don't have any other excuse, I force myself closer to the man I'd left sleeping in his bed last night. Although there's no room, I insinuate myself between Joey and Maurice, at an angle where I can't see Trent. About as good as I can get.

Joey examines his phone and raves, "Guys. You have to check out these photos. Cordelia even did a cool video from 'Let Me Give You a Sweet.'" He passes his phone to Maurice, who swipes through and gives it to Dwight. The drummer

gives me a thumbs up and hands the phone to Trent. The guys all praise me and gush over the short video.

Dwight points at Trent. “There you are! Check you out, flirting with those chicks in the front row. Man, I’m so happy to have you back.”

For his part, Trent’s gaze lowers to the floor. “Been working on finding him again.”

Dwight smacks him on the back. “Keep it up, dude, and we’re going to be opening for Hunte through the rest of their tour.”

I take an imperceptible step backward. Then another. And one more. Until I’m free of the lovefest going on. It belongs to the band, and I most certainly do not. My job here is done.

Standing at the table gathering my things, I don’t hear anyone approach until Trent’s tenor makes me freeze. “The fuck is this?”

I squeeze my eyes shut and count to ten. “I’m leaving. Another big show tomorrow—”

“Don’t give a rat’s ass about tomorrow.” He shoves a cell phone under my nose. “What. The. Fuck?”

I glance down to see the last photo I took staring back at me. “Um. You and Braxton?” What could possibly be wrong with this pix? Or the post?

He grabs my arm, none too gently. “Get your shit and come with me.”

I yank away from his grasp. Now I want to stay. “You can’t order me around.”

He bares his teeth, like a feral animal. “Don’t cross me,” he utters in a menacing tone.

I don't like being told what to do on a good day. I *hate* his ordering me around. Yet, I stuff my camera into its bag and shove the strap over my shoulder. With my head held high, I lead the way out of the room. He doesn't say a word, but I know he's behind me when he palms the center of my lower back.

We walk like this throughout the bowels of the arena until we reach the exit. I stop in front of it. Crossing my arms, I take my final stance. "I'm not leaving here."

He grits out, "You. Are. There is something you need to see, and it's not here."

My curiosity piques, lowering my defenses a smidge. He shoves the door open and drags me out, toward the car that brought us here. The driver hops out and opens the door for us, then returns to the arena. Ten minutes later, Trent's ushering me inside his suite.

"Sit."

What am I, a dog? I toss my bag onto the coffee table, my foot tapping, while he disappears into the bedroom. Who does this asshole think he is? Why did I allow myself to leave the safety of the green room—and people who were actually praising me? My hand returns to my bag when Trent reappears in the room, holding a book. What the fuck? He wants me to read a *book*?

"Sit," he repeats, staring at the couch behind me.

With half-closed eyes, I frown at him. Trent, however, clearly didn't get the message to stay the fuck away, as he crosses the room, clamps his hands on my shoulders, physically moves me to the couch, and presses downward.

I thump on the navy-blue upholstery with a huff. Seriously? I prepare to stand when the book he was carrying plops next to me. Against my better judgment, my eyes stray to the cover. And widen. It's not a book. The frilly pink cover reads, "Diary."

I focus on the man towering over me. He's pinching the bridge of his nose.

Which one of his women's diaries does he want me to read? Is he nuts? Like I give a shit about his female problems. Unless he wants me to fix something, as his marketing person. I bite the inside of my cheek.

He bends down and flips the diary open to some page near the end, and shoves it at me. "Read."

I inhale. Yes. He needs me to act as his fixer. To do my job. Fine. Let me see what shit he's been up to. I pluck the book from his hands and focus on the girlie handwriting. He must like them young. Obviously, I'm way too old for him.

My eyes focus on the top of the page, and Trent disappears into the kitchen. Before I begin reading, I flip to the front of the book and Lorinda Washington's signature stares at me. Isn't that his mother's name? I return to the spot he pointed out and take in the words. My stomach sinks.

"A drink, please," I beg.

He hands me a glass of water. After a sip, I continue reading.

*After my one night—really just an hour—I return home with Gloria. The days pass, and I keep the fact I had sex with the Braxton Hunte to myself, although everyone comments on how upbeat I've been. Yeah, well not everyone gets their lives rocked by that sexy man. No one ever will surpass him.*

*I can't believe it's been months since I've written to you, Dear Diary. So sorry. Let me catch you up. Well, my night with Braxton certainly changed my life. I can't believe it still, but it's true. The doctor confirmed it. I'm pregnant! Since I wasn't with anyone else before or after him, I know Braxton Hunte is the father of my baby. Gloria's the only person I've told. My twin promised to take my secret to the grave. She came with me to a bunch of Hunte concerts where I tried to catch his attention again, but I never did. Now that I'm showing, I'm sure he'll never pick me again.*

*Gloria keeps chiding me to tell him, but why? I've always wanted to be a mother, and I already love this little life growing inside of me. I can be both a mother and a father. Besides, I've written to Braxton several times, but I've never heard back. I wonder if his team even gave him my letters?*

The diary continues, but I can't read another word. This poor woman—Trent's mother. She found herself in an impossible situation and did the best she could. I can't imagine how I would've managed if I'd gotten knocked up by one of the many men who've passed through my life for a quick tryst. I hope I'd have dealt with a baby better than *Mamá*, but who knows?

I snap the book shut and place it at my side.

## TRENT



I stand at the French doors, holding the curtains back. My gaze doesn't register Boston, with its churches and green spaces. No, I don't see anything in front of me. My whole being is back in my room, on the sofa. Reading my mother's diary.

Why did I share it with *her*, of all people? Not Dwight, my best friend. Not with any of the great guys in my group.

She flips the page and my body tenses. I know why I gave it to her. Because she's never pitied me. Even when I told her my mother was killed by a mall shooter. It wasn't pity. No. It was understanding. I need some fucking understanding right now. After all, *her* photo triggered my meltdown.

Tonight, Braxton handed me a Bud. My favorite beer. And his. We share that. Plus, we both use our thumbs to cover the open tops. Not to mention our matching eye color. If I didn't share this with her tonight—or at least with someone—I was going to explode.

I remember how I manhandled her out of the green room and to the hotel. Guess I sort of did explode.

She turns another page.

It's over. She knows. She knows Braxton Hunte is my father. The clock ticks backward.

A hand lands on my shoulder. I refuse to move. I can't.

Her swallow makes an audible sound. "Some reading material you have there."

I tip my chin upward.

"He doesn't know?"

"No." I sound like a dying frog, but I don't care. Nothing matters.

Even though she remains at my side, she reaches out to hold the other curtain back, mimicking how I'm standing. "Does anyone else know?"

I shake my head.

"Your secret's safe with me."

I slam my eyes shut. "Thanks."

"Now I know why you were so unhappy with the photo I posted tonight."

My eyes slowly open. "Yes."

We both remain at the French doors, facing the twinkling Boston skyline. I'm not seeing anything. Nothing matters anymore.

Her side of the curtain flutters back into place. A feminine hand squeezes my shoulder, and she nudges me to turn around. With her right hand on my forearm, she guides me to the sofa where the diary sits. She moves it and we both sink into the blue fabric. After tucking her hair behind her ear, she begins with a story I wasn't prepared for. "My father was a total deadbeat."



I look at her. She nods.

“In the eyes of the law and our family, he was the worst. When I was five, he went to jail for grand larceny and other gang-related charges. *Mamá* took me to visit him every week until he died there the next year. He never cared about me.” She wraps some of her hair around her finger.

Her eyes get a faraway look. “Right after he died, my mother shacked up with a long line of guys. She got pregnant with my sister—”

“The one in beauty school?”

“Yeah. Juanita. Anyway, he bolted before Juanita was born. She’s sort of been my responsibility ever since. *Mamá* kept bouncing from one guy to the next, but never got remarried.” She scoots her ankle under her thigh. “Doesn’t mean they weren’t in our house more than we were.”

As I picture Cordy’s fractured home life, I open my heart to what she’s saying. Even though my mother never told my father—and *lied* to me about who he was—I did lead a pretty blessed life. Mom always supported me, no matter what. Cheered me on, even when I wanted to play guitar. Like my real dad. Cordy’s father was a scumbag, that’s for sure. And her mother’s no better, if not worse. Although, I do find her tale of woe a little much to swallow. Could anyone really have a life like this?

“I learned how to cook by age ten and kept my sister and I fed on canned things I found in the cupboard. I used to make tuna melts, which was Juanita’s favorite.” Her lips tick up. “*Mamá* never cared what I did unless it interfered somehow with one of our ‘uncles.’”

I can't stop my hand from reaching out and covering her thigh. Not in a sexual way. To offer her my support.

“You know, the only thing I wished for every birthday as a kid was a father who loved me. When he died, so did my wish.” Tears well behind her now dull brown eyes.

I want to pull her into my arms and offer her comfort. I want to run out of Boston and pretend tonight never happened. That I didn't share my darkest secret with this woman who I'm learning is resilient and certainly capable, judging from her marketing efforts for my band. Instead, I lean into the sofa cushions.

“At least you know your dad is loving. It's been well documented that Hunte, Sara, and his kids—the family he knows—all love him. He's a good man.” She glances to a point over my head.

I have to admit, she's not wrong. Braxton's never without a ready smile, a word of encouragement, or a compliment. Yet, he's still the man who knocked up my mother and didn't give her a second glance, leaving her to raise me the best way she saw fit. Any benevolent feelings toward him vanish.

I manage one word. “Still.”

Her hand covers my palm. “I know. But what I'm saying is he's your reality, and it could've been much worse.”

Finding my voice, I mutter, “Banging teenagers and leaving them to fend for themselves makes him a true model citizen.”

“He was basically a kid himself back then. Not to mention, he never found out about you.”

I slash my arm through the air, dislodging her hand. Anger races through my body, and I vault upward. Pacing from the

front door to the French doors, I take longer and longer strides. Until they shorten. I halt in front of Cordy, where she's remained seated.

“Please don't tell anybody.”

At my strangled plea, she jumps up and wraps her arms around my waist. “I promise. I told you this before—your secret's safe with me. All of them. Until you decide to change up your history, of course.”

“Not a shot in hell.”

Her neck elongates and our gazes lock. “Why don't you get yourself into bed?” She checks the clock on the microwave. “We can call it an early night. It's only one.”

All fight drains from my body. All of a sudden, I can barely remain upright. “Sounds good,” I mumble.

Cordy grabs my hand and leads me through the open door to my bed. She removes my t-shirt and tosses it on top of my suitcase. Next, my leather pants drop down my legs and I kick out of them, taking my shoes off in the process. Leaving my briefs on, I collapse into the bed.

She tucks the blankets around me and goes to stand. “No.” I reach out and our palms slide across each other's, hers a couple of shades lighter than mine. Closing my fingers, I hold on to her hand. With a voice rougher than gravel, I beg, “Stay with me. Please.”

Her shoulders drop and she nods. She walks around the bed, discarding her clothes along the way. Wearing only her panties and a bra, she slips in beside me. Then she does something unexpected. She shifts onto her side and her arm crosses my chest.

Her lips kiss my shoulder.

“Sleep well. Things will look different in the morning.”

Will Cordy still be here when I wake? She wasn't last night, after we fucked like rabbits. Pushing my question aside, I extend my arm and cover hers. Turning my head on the pillow, I stare at the woman at my side. “Thank you.”

She closes her eyes and I watch her sleep. Her enhanced eyelashes veil the tops of her cheeks. Her makeup has dissipated somewhat, but it's still there. Her lips glisten a lighter shade of red tonight. Her hair, with the red highlights diminishing, fans across the pillow.

I close my eyes, but sleep doesn't come. She knows my secret. She didn't judge me for it, though. And the hell that was her own upbringing tears at me. Even if it was fifty percent as bad as she described, it's still awful. Her appeal climbs to the sky.

*High enough to be my girlfriend?*

Did someone slip me a mickey? A Google Alert chimes from my phone, pulling me out of my weighty thoughts. After what went down with Joey, I set one up for the band, and each one of us. Figured keeping an eye on everyone was the least I could do.

Without waking her, I click on the alert. A huge photo of Maurice rubbing his eyes greets me. The headline screams, “Keyboardist Going Blind!”

“Fuck,” I mutter. Next to me, Cordy's phone beeps with the Google Alert, too. She turns over but doesn't wake. Fumbling with her device, I get the noise to stop.

Pursing my lips, I skim through the article in *First Rumors*, talking about Maurice's supposed “dire” eyesight issues. The band knows the truth, yet my heart hurts for him. I know how

sensitive he is about his vision, especially with his current epiphany condition. The stupid article ends with the line: “A blind guy on keys won’t be able to keep up with the rest of The Light Rail. Looks like they’ll be casting about for a new keyboardist soon.”

I shut off my phone and toss it on top of my pile of clothes. Assholes. No way would we get rid of Maurice, even if he did lose his eyesight. Which he’s not. Stupid fucking tabloids.

I punch my pillow and grab Cordy around her waist, pulling her in tight to me. We’ll deal with all of this tomorrow. In her sleep, her pink tongue peeks out of her mouth and runs over her lips.

The remnants of my heart do a little dance.

# CORDELIA



I wake in a strange bed. Nothing new since going on tour with TLR. This morning, however, is different from all the rest, as a man's body is wrapped around mine.

Trent Washington.

Whose father is Braxton Hunte. Didn't see that one coming.

I study his face in his sleep. His warm, light brown skin and short dreadlocks don't resemble his father's at all. Even with their blond overtones. He's also much taller than his dad, topping six feet. Their mad musical skills are on par, though. Or will be when Trent gains some more confidence.

His poor mother. I can't imagine having to keep such a secret from her child. The toll it must've taken on her. Yet, she did a great job raising him as witnessed by the bond with his band. Beneath it all, he's quite sweet. Yes. She did a fantastic job with him.

Now he hates her. Hates his father, too. *Welcome to my fucked-up club.*

I review the Google Alert showing a new article about Maurice. Who is feeding the piece of shit tabloid all this fake news? I move, and amber eyes pop open.

Ones I've definitely seen before, and not just on the man in bed with me. They're Braxton's eyes. Shit.

"More shut-eye," he mumbles.

I kiss his cheek. "Need to use the bathroom."

He grumbles something unintelligible and I slip out from under the blankets, wanting to give him another kiss but refusing to let it happen. When I'm upright, I grab my clothes—including my cell phone—and cross the room to the bathroom. Inside, I wash up and get dressed. Then I pull up the article and read it once more.

The lying, hurtful piece sticks with me.

Turning on the fan so as not to allow our conversation to reach Trent's ears, I call Apex. "Hi, Rita."

"Cordelia. So good to hear your voice."

Despite everything that's gone down, I smile. "Yours, too. Hey, I'm calling because *First Rumors* posted another hit job on TLR, this time about their keyboardist, Maurice. Anyone talking about it over there?"

"Girl, you have no idea. Mr. Griffith was called into a meeting first thing. He asked me to stick around and take notes. The meeting just ended, and I have to be honest with you—they're getting worried about the bad press. Expect a call from Mr. Hewitt at any moment."

Crap. "I understand. I have no idea who is tipping them off."

"Apex wants the story buried."

"I hear you. But I know it's all lies. Yes, Maurice does wear glasses, and he has a non-life threatening condition right now giving him a red eye, but he's not going blind."

“Good to hear.”

Ideas about how to counteract the story start to form. Some more outrageous than the others, but maybe that’s what the situation calls for. “I’ll work on burying the story like Apex wants.”

Rita fills me in on the office gossip, to which I listen with only half an ear. I wasn’t there for too long and didn’t get to know many of my co-workers. But she needs to let off steam, so I let her. It’s the least I can do for this kind woman.

Before we hang up, I asked to be transferred to Mr. Hewitt. Might as well beat him to the punch. I present my general idea of how to bury the story, and he gives me some suggestions. With a promise to get back to him with a more formal proposal, I wander back into the bedroom, where Trent’s still sleeping. Instead of bothering him, I go to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee to brew. After I take a sip, my nose crinkles. Man, it’s awful. I throw it down the drain and grab my purse. Stealing his key card, I slip out to the hallway, toward the coffee shop I glimpsed in the lobby.

With a vanilla latte, a regular cup of Joe, and a slice of decadent flan in my hands, I return to Trent’s suite and sit in the kitchen area. Why did I come back here instead of going to my own room? Because I want to be sure the lead singer of TLR is okay, I tell myself. No other reason.

Not like he rocked my world the other night. Or the first night we met.

Well, he did open up about his truths to me and no one else. Not even to his best friend Dwight. He selected me to share such a deep, hurtful fact that goes right to the very core of his being. I find I like helping him. Being there for him.



Can I really trust he'll stay at my side?

*No one ever has.*

I bite my bottom lip and force my thoughts to the more urgent matter—how to counteract the article about Maurice. It's not as easy as getting his eye doctor to give a statement. This smear campaign needs more. Something bigger.

My mind's bouncing from one idea to another when my phone rings. "*Mamá*" comes up on the screen. Just what I needed.

With dread, I pick up her call. If I don't, she'll continue to bug me over the next hours until I do. Might as well suffer now. "*Hola.*"

She doesn't waste a second of time on pleasantries. Jumping right in, she says, "Two creditors called here today looking for you. Two. Today. What are you going to do about them? I don't want my phone ringing off the hook with your people calling."

I take a deep breath and wrap my fingers around my cup filled with hot coffee. "They're not 'my people.' And it isn't my debts they're calling about."

"Seems to me it's your name on the credit cards, so makes them your debts."

I match her bitchy tone. "Don't answer the phone, then."

"I have to. It's *my* home phone. I do get calls from my friends who want to talk with me, believe it or not."

Unlike me. If I never had to talk with my mother again, I wouldn't be broken up over it. But she did let me crawl back to her apartment when Big Rolls kicked me out. My voice softens. "Then say you're not Cordelia and hang up."

“That’s what I’ve been doing, but the calls continue. I have half a mind to change the number. Of course, you’ll have to foot the bill since you’re the reason I need to change it in the first place.”

My ire reignites. I gulp some hot coffee and bite back a cough. “I’m not paying for any such thing. Hang up on them or don’t answer, but I will not foot the bill for your getting a new telephone number.”

She huffs. “And that’s not all. Juanita’s school needs to be paid off today or she can’t go.”

Anger at my reckless mother rushes through my veins. Any good will she garnered when she let me back into her house evaporates. “If you hadn’t lost all of it in Atlantic City, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Her equally annoyed voice irritates me. “I was assured it was a winner.”

“Betting on red never is a winning strategy.” Air expels from my mouth and I leap up and stride into the living room as she goes off on a tirade about how the casino changed up the croupier mid-game when she was winning. How the new one was mean to her, pointing out when her chips weren’t stacked appropriately. Whatever. She still lost all of my sister’s tuition money and set me back months—if not longer—in paying off the credit card bills Big Rolls ran up on me.

A loan from Apex isn’t on the table.

This conversation, if that’s what you call it, is going nowhere. Huge bills loom in front of me. Not to mention the massive issue I need to resolve about Maurice. Plus dealing with Trent’s revelation. “*Mamá*, I have to go to work. Here’s a piece of unsolicited advice. Check the caller id.”

I toss my phone onto the coffee table and stalk across the room. Despite it being freezing outside, I open the French doors and step onto the balcony where a cold wind whips my hair in all directions. I open my mouth and scream across the courtyard. “Bitch!”

Anger flows through my body. Using my boot-clad foot, I kick the two chairs out here, causing one to flip over. Leaving it on the concrete, I walk to the railing and grasp the cold metal. Squeezing tight, I close my eyes and count to ten. When I exhale, my breath comes out in a wisp of air. Early morning Massachusetts fall coldness seeps into my cheeks. My earlobes register the cool temperature.

Removing my hands from the railing, I rub them together to get my circulation going again. Spinning around, I return to the warmth of the room, closing the French doors behind me.

My mother makes me want to commit murder sometimes. Well, usually. But her annoyance about the bill collectors does require my attention. I leave Trent’s suite, go to my own room, gather both my suitcase and laptop, and return. After all, my coffee’s here.

Picking up my cup, I sit on a stool at the counter and fire up my computer, opening a spreadsheet. At the top, I type, “Juanita’s Tuition - \$5,000.” Skipping several rows, I type “Credit Cards - \$20,000.”

*Think, Cordelia.* You need to get these paid off. With my promotion, I’ll be seeing extra money in my paycheck without all the expenses of my regular life. *If only someone would help me with them.* Cut the damsel in distress bullshit. Life isn’t some stupid fairy tale where a man rides in on a horse and saves the day. If it’s going to be, it’s up to me.

The door to the bedroom opens and Trent's voice carries to my ears. "Cordy?"

"In the kitchen. Be right out."

Before I can get my limbs to move, he drifts into the room. "What'cha doing?" He stops behind me.

Slamming the laptop shut, I reply, "Just working on some personal stuff."

Standing behind me, he turns the stool so I'm surrounded by his body. He bends forward and nuzzles my neck. I tilt it to give him better access before regaining my senses and sitting up straight.

His eyes stray to the counter. "Flan?"

I glance at the half-eaten dessert. Shrugging, I reply, "Never can resist."

Trent picks up the plate and feeds me the rest, wiping a stray crumb off my lip. He offers me a grin and grabs my hands. "Let's go sit on the sofa and talk."

We need to discuss Maurice. And Braxton. In other words, *get your head out of your ass and do your job*. Sighing, I pick up our coffees and follow him into the living room.

He sits on the navy-blue sofa and pats the cushion next to him. I place our cups on the coffee table and look into his mesmerizing eyes. Stalling for time, I take off my knee-high boots and slide one foot under me as I sit. Pursing my lips, I rub them together, comforted by the silkiness of my lip gloss. He reaches over and captures my bottom lip. "Stop. Talk to me."

"Tell me about Maurice's vision problems."

His eyes widen as if I asked an unexpected question. Don't know why—TLR's marketing is my *job*.

Trent gives me a quick sketch of Maurice's eyesight issues through the years. I ask, "So his red eye is new?"

"Yeah. His eye doctor diagnosed him with some condition starting with 'epi,' and prescribed Prednisone. It's pretty common and won't interfere with his vision at all—not a big deal."

His explanation goes along with what I remember Maurice saying at the club. "That's good." I pull up the article and skim it again. "I think this is all based on the fact he wears glasses, and his eye has been red lately."

"Yeah."

"Okay. I think the best offense here is going with a bigger story."

As the color drains from his face, I capture his hands in mine. "Not that. Never that." How could he think I would use his parentage in such an awful way?

He deflates. "Sorry. I know you'd never suggest telling the world about my sperm donor."

I wince at his word choice. However apt. "I have a couple of things I'm thinking about, but I'm waiting to hear back from Mr. Hewitt."

"I believe in you."

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth, even as his unexpected praise warms me. My eyes travel back to my laptop.

He follows my line of vision. "What's eating at you, besides TLR?"

Dare I share my mother's call with him? He did let me read his mother's diary after all. I've already told him about Juanita's tuition and my credit card bills. My eyes bore into his expressive ones, now sporting concern. My chest rises and falls. "You can probably guess what I'm about to say. More money issues."

"Let me help."

This is the second time he's offered, and the second time I'll say no. I need to do this on my own, although it's a tempting offer. "No." I reposition myself on the sofa, farther away from him. I grab my coffee.

He places his palm on my knee. With a half-smile, he admits, "Knew you'd turn me down. Fine. Let's hash this out together, okay? It's your sister's tuition and your credit card bills, right?"

My shoulders droop. "Yeah. Neither of these are my fault, but they're both my problem. *Mamá* called me while you were sleeping."

He squeezes my knee, releasing it and moving his palm to rest on my thigh. "What did your mother say?"

I stare straight ahead at the blank wall. Mechanically, my hand raises and I sip my now-tepid brew. I replace it on the table. When he rubs my leg, I begin, "The school wants their money so Juanita can start classes next week. And bill collectors are calling my mother at home about the credit card debt." I push my hair off my face. "If only my stupid mother hadn't lost the tuition, and my ex hadn't run up my cards."

He pats my thigh, and I start counting the colors in the boring painting across from me. He lowers his voice. "Money issues were a very common occurrence when I was growing

up. We did a lot of *rearranging*, as Mom used to call it. Here, the school deadline is the most important thing. We”—I give him a dirty look so he wisely rephrases—“You should contact them first with a payment plan. How much do you have saved up?”

“A thousand,” I mumble.

“Great! Tell them you can Venmo them the whole amount today, followed up by another, say, a couple hundred every other week until her tuition is paid off.”

“But they said they want the whole thing, or my sister can’t go to school.” My voice is tiny, but with an underlying steel of determination. I have to fight my way out of this financial mess.

“I understand that’s what they want. They’ll have to take what you’re offering or go without totally. No one wants to lose out on five G’s. Even if it’s delayed.”

I focus my attention to the sofa, tracing the pattern with my finger. Keeping my gaze fixed to the navy material, I ask, “Think it’ll work?”

“I hope so. Worth a shot.”

I nod. “But the credit cards want their pound of flesh, too. I keep telling them to go after Big Rolls. Hell, he owns the used car dealership, so he should be good for the money.”

He remains quiet for a full minute as if debating something internally. Finally, he answers, “Well, true, but the cards are in your name. I suggest you do the same thing. Figure out how much you can pay them and enter into an agreement. That’ll take them off your back, so long as you make your payments. And you can sue his ass.”

My lip curls at his final suggestion. “You make it all sound so easy.”

His large hand covers mine, the calluses from playing the guitar strumming over the back of my palm. I calculate how much money I could spare on a monthly basis, which isn’t much. But once the tuition is off my plate, I could bump up the amount. Maybe this could work? At least I’ll be taking charge instead of being their victim.

I find my voice. “I need to make some calls.”

His beaming smile warms my body. I lean over and kiss him, letting my tongue grapple with his for a prolonged moment. I’d much rather stay here with him than have to deal with this mess.

Too soon he pulls away. “Go make the calls.”

I bring my face even with his and tug on one of his dreads. “One more for good luck?”

With the taste of his kiss on my lips and his parting swat on my ass, I go into the bedroom and place the first call.



**R**ubbing my temples, I allow the success of my phone calls to wash over me. No one was happy with the results, but at least my sister can go to school, and debt collectors will quit harassing me. My mother too. A small step toward victory.

Sighing, I review the notes I took during the two painful phone calls. Over debts that rightfully aren’t mine. The numbers I agreed to are doable, but my budget for other areas of my life will have to be cut even more. If TLR wins this competition and becomes Hunte’s permanent opening band for



the rest of the tour, *and* if I'm kept on as their social media manager, then I'll be able to breathe much easier. Maybe I can even tell *Mamá* I'm moving out of her apartment and stop paying her rent, since I won't be back in New Jersey for months.

My musings stray to the man in the other room. His success is linked to my being able to eat, or at least end with the Ramen noodles and free bagels courtesy of Rita. Folding up my notes, I slip the papers into my laptop case and return to the living room.

“Done.”

He stands and wraps me in his arms. “Great! What did they say?”

Breathing in his perennial beachy scent, I tell him the results. “Thanks for encouraging me to reach out to them. You were right. They were just as happy as I was to make a deal and get me off their radar. So long as I make these payments, all the calls will end.”

Trent hugs me tight, and I revel in his warmth. He feels so steady, so strong, so steadfast. I hug him back and pray for this feeling to last. Knowing it won't.

“Wonderful news. I'm so happy this is off your back.”

We remain locked together until my heart begs for more. Stuffing its stupid desire away, I reply, “Thank you.”

He pushes my hair away from my face, his lips ticking upward. “You're welcome.”

Standing so close yet not close enough, we stare at each other. He's so handsome. His next words bring me back down to reality. “We're dating now, yeah?”

Dating? I've only ever dated one guy and that ended in a disaster for me on every level. Yet things are different with Trent. He opened up to me about things he hasn't even told his bandmates. I've shared more with him than any guy. About my family life. My finances. But dating? I swallow.

"I. Umm. Are we?"

He pulls my now icy body to his. "You're freezing." He rubs his hands up and down my back and I sink into his warmth, although tension keeps me rigid. Can I trust him with my heart? Is this even possible?

"I've shared more with you than anyone on earth." He kisses me. "And you're damn smart. Plus, you don't let me get away with any shit."

I offer a half-laugh. "I don't know. I have a ton of baggage in the relationship department."

"Believe me, I get it. I had a girlfriend who lied to me, and Mom's lie has fucked with my head. I now expect women to lie to me." He pauses. "But you haven't."

"I never will." I kiss his cheek. "But I don't know about dating." I focus on his chin and mumble, "Everyone leaves me."

"Hey. I like you, Cordy. Even though I thought I'd never say these words again, I'm willing to dive into a relationship with you, if you'll have me."

It takes me a full ten seconds to swallow. "I want to, but I'm scared I'm going to fuck things up."

He pushes my hair away from my face, keeping a few locks between his talented fingers. "How about this? Let's try out this dating thing, but promise each other we'll be patient if something goes sideways?"

God, I want to try with this man. Yet can I survive if I'm left again? He tugs on my mane. With my stomach churning, I step back and the last strands of my hair fall from his digits. Can I possibly do this?

*How can I not?*

He's stuck by me, even with the crap I've thrown at him.

He told me his deepest, darkest secret.

His promise to be patient appeals. As does he.

I extend my right hand. "Deal?"

His hand closes around mine. "Deal." He draws me closer to him, and our breaths mingle. His full lips come closer to mine until they cover me entirely. Hungrily. I lower my hands from his back to his ass and squeeze as his tongue explores my mouth.

His hand slips in between our bodies and squeezes my breast over my clothes. Despite the fact I'm not naked, or maybe because of it, I moan. Beneath my bra, my nipples harden. I wrap my arms around his neck.

"Can't wait to tell the guys."

His words cause me to go rigid. When he kisses my ear and his tongue traces its shell, I relax into his body. They're his friends and he wants to share this news. I hope the black cloud that's clung to me all my life doesn't follow this decision. "Think it's a good idea?"

His lips cover mine. "Damn yes. I want to shout it from the rooftops." Then he kisses me senseless again.

His hand slides down my shirt and lifts it up, then delves into the cups of my bra. He pulls upward, and both my breasts are freed of their restrictions. He licks his lips, bends down,

and latches onto one distended nipple. His teeth nibble while his fingers play with my other one.

“Oh my God.” His magic fingers make me need him more now than ever before.

He sucks, hard, and my core contracts. I grab onto his shoulders to remain upright. The desire to touch his skin overwhelms me and I repeat his actions in reverse. My hands slide over his torso, landing on his belt, which I open. Before my hand can delve deeper, a low pinging noise sounds below us.

What’s that? Ignoring it, I cup the erection over his pants.

“Cordy.” He bites my nipple and steps back. “We have to stop.”

Stop? Huh? “We don’t.”

He shakes his head like a dog, his dreadlocks flinging around his face. “We do,” he pants. “That was my alarm.”

## CORDELIA



**W**e pause in the hallway outside the rehearsal space his alarm reminded him about. Trent brings my hand up to his mouth and kisses it, triggering explosions of excitement to scream down my arm. How can his simple touch do that to me?

*Somehow I've agreed he's my boyfriend.*

While he opens the door wide and ushers me inside the conference room, I shove down all my doubts about telling the band about us. They're playing a melody I've never heard before. When they see us enter the room, the music discontinues. Joey yells, "Check this out, Trent!"

I'm happy they're more focused on their music than the fact their frontman is holding their social media manager's hand. Dwight's drumsticks crack three times, then the band starts playing a new melody. He squeezes my hand, and we come to a halt. My nerves ratchet up the longer we stand still, but he doesn't look like he's going to be moving anytime soon.

Resigned to this new form of torture, I absorb the music. It's catchy, with a hard, driving edge to it. My head starts to bob in time with the beat. The song ends with Dwight doing a roll on the cymbals, then clamping them off into silence.

From our spot, I shout, "I like it, guys. Sounds great."

Maurice moves away from the keyboard while Joey places his bass down on its stand and Dwight disentangles himself from the drum kit. In a low voice, I murmur, “Why don’t you go talk with them about their song?” I push Trent’s butt and he shuffles toward his band. I’m still standing near the entryway when my cell pings with Mr. Hewitt’s comments on my marketing proposal.

When he approaches, Dwight asks, “Did you like our new melody?”

Their lead singer swallows. “I did. Very much.”

The rest of the band nods.

I reach Trent’s side while they discuss the new music. “Is this how it works?” I whisper. “They present a new melody to you, and you come up with lyrics?”

He expels his breath through his mouth. “Sometimes. We’ll get into all this later.” He interlaces his fingers with mine and addresses the band. “I want to tell you all something.”

My heart hammers in my chest. No more delays. He already told me they’d be happy for us. *Trust*. Oh, God, I think I’m going to be sick.

“Hey,” the man holding my hand announces. “Cordy and I are dating. Wanted to let you know.”

Geez. No time to warm up to the idea, just rip the Band-Aid off as fast as possible. My stomach tightens as I suck in my breath, waiting for their disapproval.

“Ah, right!” Maurice whoops. He pulls his wallet out of his pocket and motions for Joey and Dwight to fork over. For their part, Joey says, “Congrats,” while Dwight adds, “About time.”

What? They're not making fun of us? Of me? When they remove some bills and pass them to Maurice, my eyebrows shoot up.

For his part, Trent shakes his head. "Dudes. Really? You bet on us?" His gaze levels at the two paying the money. "You bet *against* me?"

Returning his wallet to his back pocket, Dwight shrugs. "I was all in for Cordelia. Didn't think you had it in you, bro."

He's happy we're together? I grin at the drummer.

"I knew you two were bumping uglies. I was rooting for Cordelia here to be able to tame you. But with your track record, I didn't think she had a chance," Joey explains.

Maurice waves a fistful of cash at Trent and me. "Hey. I bet you'd pull it out."

My grin gets bigger and encompasses all of the band. Trent takes their ribbing with the good nature I think he used to have. Before. Before his mother was killed. Before he found out his true parentage. In this moment, I vow to do everything I can to help restore goodness to his life all the time. Even if he eventually cuts me out of his life, like all the others. I've never been a paragon of hopefulness, or even positivity. But he deserves this.

My thoughts scatter as I'm embraced by each of these amazing men. When the hugfest ends, Maurice says, "Welcome, officially, to the group, Cordelia!"

They swim before my eyes, but I tamp down my silly tears. "Thanks, guys."

Dwight plays a beat on Trent's leg. "You caught a good one. Don't fuck it up."

His tight group of friends has accepted me into the fold. A little adrift at such affection, I retreat into working mode and pluck out my cell phone. Bringing up the Apex analytics, I compare TLR against California Skies—the metrics remain static.

The guys continue to bust on Trent. Meanwhile, I check out the rest of the stats. Finished, I pop over to *First Rumors*, releasing my breath when nothing new has been added about the band. *Please let their smear campaign be over.*

When a lull overtakes the room, I hold up my phone. “Well, I have some news. Want the bad or the worse?”

My question puts a damper on things, but we have to get real here.

Joey’s the first to answer. “I vote for the worst news. Get it over with.” The other guys nod in agreement.

I glance at the keyboardist and reply, “Last night, *First Rumors* published another article. It was about you, Maurice.”

“Shit.” He takes off his glasses, wipes them on his shirt, and puts them back on. When the other members of the band put their hands on his back, I know these guys will rally through together. Like they did for Joey.

“Yeah. It’s all lies, of course.” Air fills my chest as I continue. “It basically says you’re going blind.”

Maurice winces. The rest of the band remains steady in support.

After a moment, Maurice steps forward. “My vision sucks, but you already knew that. As I said the other night, my eye doctor diagnosed me with episcleritis and put me on Prednisone.” He fishes into his pocket and pulls out a bottle of



pills. “They’re working. My eye’s not red anymore, but I hate the drug’s side effects.”

I realize he’s worried about his eyesight. Who wouldn’t be? Still, the article is way out of bounds. “I’m glad, Maurice. Hope you can stop taking them soon.”

The rest of the guys murmur their support.

I wish I could figure out who the tipster is and shut him or her down. No one fucks with what’s mine.

*Mine?*

Correction. No one fucks with *my job*.

Better.

“I’ve already spoken with Apex about this, and we can simply put out a general denial. Better yet, we can post a photo of you with the Prednisone.”

They all approve of my idea to battle *First Rumors*. When vocal support for the idea wanes, Dwight asks, “So what’s the bad news?”

I bring up the site with analytics from Apex. “Here’s the tracking for your social media.” I pass the phone to Joey, who looks at it and conveys it over to the other guys.

When Trent gives it back, I say, “Now, your numbers are pretty good. Solid, even. But, they’re essentially tied with California Skies. Which is a good thing. If you were lagging behind, it would be awful. You’re not.”

Maurice interrupts me. “We should keep doing what we’re doing. It’s working.” The others agree with him.

Their support for each other, their solidarity, twists an unknown part of my heart. Ignoring my stupid organ, I know

they need to crush California Skies. If we're essentially tied, how will Apex make the decision? They could have a "Battle of the Bands" or do some other crazy stunt. Hell, they could do that anyway. But why give them the ammo? "I hear you. I really do."

Observing my posture, Trent says, "But—" He bends over and kisses the sensitive spot behind my ear.

Refusing to turn to mush in front of his bandmates, I wrap my hair around my pointer finger. "But I'm afraid without a true 'winner'"—I use air quotes around the word—"Apex will devise another competition between you two. Wouldn't you rather win it outright on the first go-round, rather than have to deal with whatever comes next?"

Although, if Braxton found out he's Trent's father, all bets might be off. I slant a glance at the man himself and shove the thought aside. No. Trent wants to win on his band's own merits. I understand.

The guys toss around marketing ideas, getting more outrageous by the moment. When Joey whips out his cell phone and starts snapping photos of the guys doing goofy things, I start to laugh.

"I know what'll get all the likes," Dwight announces.

He tosses Trent his phone and spins around. When he unbuckles his belt, Trent yells, "Dude! What are you doing?"

"Dropping trou. That'll get us some notoriety," Dwight tosses over his shoulder.

"Oh, hell no!" Trent throws the phone back at Dwight, who catches it. Barely. Rebuckling his belt, he grumbles, "Got any better ideas?"

While their antics are humorous, we need to get serious here. Stop *First Rumors* in its tracks and win this competition. “I might.” I broach the topic approved by Mr. Hewitt. “How about some more behind-the-scenes stuff?”

Dwight’s hands land on his belt again. “That’s what I was trying to do before!”

Before he can pull the same stunt, I raise my hands. “No. Not like that. What I meant was to give out some information only you guys know about your band. Like how you came up with the name The Light Rail, for instance.”

Four sets of eyes pitch to the floor. What did I say?

“That’s dumb,” Joey answers for the group. The rest of the guys agree.

Now my curiosity is piqued. “What is it? Now you have to tell me.”

“Have you told Fee?” Dwight asks Maurice, who shakes his head.

Hmmm. This could be going somewhere. Remembering they met back in junior high, I ask, “What? You used to take The Light Rail to school?”

They kick the floor, appearing to be recalcitrant kids again. Trent sighs. “Fine. I’ll tell her. It’s not like she’s going to shout it to the whole world. Not worth it.”

“Bet you twenty she does.” Joey reaches for his wallet. The others place their wagers.

They really do bet on everything. Might become a marketing angle, too. First, I need to find out where their name came from. “Trent? You promised.”

“Yeah, Trent. Can’t break a promise,” Maurice mimics my voice.

Trent doesn’t appear pleased, though. More like—embarrassed. He runs his hand down his arm, over where his mother’s tattoo lives, and inhales. “When we were kids in high school, we used to take the Light Rail everywhere. As in, ride on it to all of the stops.”

His words linger as I try to sort out what he told me. And what he didn’t. “Okaaaay, so you used to ride the train?”

Dwight agrees. “Yup. That’s it. End of story.” The other two’s heads bob.

I half-close my eyes and slant a look at each band member. Something’s not adding up. This isn’t a story to be embarrassed about, not like the way they reacted earlier. A light bulb goes off. Two, actually.

“Ah. Got it. You ditched school to ride the train. Plus, you skipped out on paying.”

Eight eyes hit the deck. Trent squeezes my hand and whispers, “Man, you’re perceptive.”

Even though it wasn’t exactly praise, I stand straighter. “Well, maybe I can work with this. I can spin your story so it’s not quite so, ah, truant.” Ideas swirl inside my mind of how I can repackage their less than positive story into something the actual Light Rail could promote for us. Maybe the lyrics for one of their new songs could touch on their train rides, and the train could play it on a rotation to riders. And then we’d be exposed to so many more new followers.

*We.* Even my thoughts have accepted the band as a part of my life. A fissure of panic screams down my spine, which is derailed when Trent asks, “What do you have in mind?”

The band probably will think my ideas are stupid. Biting my lip, I blurt, “How about the lyrics to one of your new songs be about the real Light Rail? Then we can put out a sanitized story of how you used to ride the system all the time when you were growing up, omitting their actual timing. And all the freebies you took. If we tag the Light Rail when the song’s released, maybe they’ll share it with their customers.” I take a deep breath. “Maybe they’ll pipe it in when their patrons are waiting for a train or riding one.” I shut my mouth and swallow. Now it’s my turn for my eyes to bore into the utilitarian brown carpet covering their “rehearsal space.”

“I like it.” Maurice’s voice reaches my ears.

My chin pops up.

“Yeah, I think it could work, big time,” Joey adds.

Dwight bangs out a beat on a nearby chair, nodding. “That’s a great idea, Cordelia. Think you’re up to the task, Trent?”

My head swivels to him. If he’s not on board, my idea will be deep-sixed. Probably where it belongs.

His right hand rubs his left arm. Up and down. Up and down. “It’s solid.”

All the air rushes out of my body as their acceptance of my crazy bold proposal sinks in. It’s like I’m floating above my body. Is this what hope feels like?

After allowing myself a minute to revel in the unusual sensation, I rummage into my bag and pull out a mini notebook and pen. “I’ll work up a plan while you guys rehearse.”

Before I can even crack open my spiral-bound notebook, the guys trip over themselves offering ideas on how to

implement my concept. Laughing, I write down all of them, promising to explore even the wacky ones. Like “select one lucky rider and the band will go to their house and sing the song.” I don’t think it will work, but a germ of an idea may be in here we can use.

The only person not as animated as the rest is Trent. I’m too busy transcribing their suggestions to question him.

Right now, that is.

## TRENT



**M**y bandmates welcomed Cordy into the family like I knew they would. Their bet? Geez. Amazing how they could see what was going on long before Cordy and I did.

Turning my head on the pillow, I look at the sleeping beauty next to me. The blankets have slipped to below her luscious tits. Her long, brown hair sprawls around her like a halo. Most of the red highlights have washed away, and I prefer her like this. She may appear to be an angel, but a sexy devil lurks beneath the surface. When I unleash her, she's unlike anything I've ever experienced. So good.

I flip my head to the other side where my journal stares at me. Maybe after all the good things that have been happening, I can come up with some workable lyrics. *Starting with some about the real Light Rail.* Pride wells up in me about her suggestion. If it didn't involve me writing lyrics, I would've been drooling all over her idea like the rest of the guys. Maybe it's time.

Reaching over, I grab the blank book and a hotel pen lying next to it. Across the top, I scrawl, "Ode to the Light Rail." I zero in on the first word. Is "Ode" right? Should it be "Homage"? Or "Thoughts"? Or "Memories"? My mind goes down a rabbit hole of synonyms, then floats off to

remembering those rides. Running from conductors. Jumping the turnstiles. Laughing and being annoying to other riders.

Corralling my thoughts, I return to the notepad. It still says, “Ode to the Light Rail.” What rhymes with ride?

Muzak.

Nothing.

Not a single lyric floats in my mind.

Whenever I got stuck before, Mom used to recite stupid nursery rhymes, which always somehow helped me write. Obviously, that’s never happening again.

I stare at the mostly blank page for a full ten minutes, until Cordy turns over and rubs one of her nails down my back. “What’cha doing?”

I slam the book shut. “Nothing.” Placing it on the bedside table, I toss the pen on top of it. Her beauty steals my breath for a moment. “God. You’re so gorgeous.”

Pink stains her olive skin from her neck to her cheeks. “You’re not a slouch either.” She traces my ab muscles, and they contract. “Really, though. What were you working on?”

Sliding my fingers over my unfortunate tattoo, I gaze deep into her mocha eyes, which beg me to spill my guts. I’ve already told her about my mother, the stage fright, and Braxton. Maybe she can help me like she’s been helping with everything else in my fucked-up life? I worry my bottom lip.

She wraps her arms around my body, and I draw in her goodness. After much debate, I confess, “I can’t write anymore. Lyrics, I mean.”

“Now I understand.” She kisses my collarbone. “That’s why you weren’t excited when the rest of the band performed



the new melodies. They expect you to write the words.” She hugs me, our bodies touching from head to toe.

I remain in her embrace, letting her words soothe my pain. “That’s what you do.”

She pulls herself away from my chest. “What do you mean? What do I do?”

“You calm me. You let me feel my feelings, without any judgment.”

She runs her fingers over my stubble-filled cheek. “Maybe because no one ever did that for me.”

“That’s a damn shame. I’m here for you now.” I kiss her pliant mouth.

She settles into my body. “You’ve been a big help with all of the debts I’m responsible for, even though I didn’t rack them up. I want to help you out with this.”

She doesn’t mention all she’s done for me. She doesn’t need to. “That’s too much. You’re my girlfriend, not my therapist.” In fact, I haven’t needed a follow-up session with my therapist since this gorgeous brunette bounded into my life.

“Maybe I want to help you. Maybe your successes make me feel like I’m a little bit of a success, too.” She raises onto her elbow.

Her words tug at my heart. “Come here.” I pull her closer and kiss the shit out of her. All hard lips and tongues and fingers. Loud moans preceding fast thrusts. Even a few spanks. And unparalleled mutual orgasms.

Once I’m showered and dressed, I click on the TV and sit on the bed staring at my empty lyric book. Cordy’s in the

bathroom doing all her girly stuff, so I have another half-hour alone. At least. I flip open the blank book and stare at the blank lines. Fourteen of them. Well, the title takes up one, so thirteen left. What are my feelings toward the Light Rail?

Happiness.

Excitement.

Truancy.

Getting away with something.

Freedom.

I gawk at five lines of emotions related to the train. A song's in here somewhere. Concentrating on the lines brings up nothing. I even recite a stupid nursery rhyme, and still nothing. Fuck.

From the side table, my girlfriend's phone pings. Happy for the reprieve, I toss my journal onto the bed and roll over, grabbing her cell.

Juanita: "You're not going to believe this!"

Not wanting to introduce myself to her sister over text, I leave Cordy's phone lying on the table.

Returning to the lyric book, I stare at the ideas until a few minutes later, Cordy walks out of the bathroom. She's wearing a pair of tight black jeans and one of TLR's tees. "You look good enough to eat." I pat my lap.

She strides over and straddles me, resting her rear end on my thighs while wrapping her arms around my neck. Giggling, she replies, "I think you already did that. Twice."

"Third time's a charm."

“Later, stud. We have work to do today.” She gives me a kiss and dismounts.

At her reminder, all my ardor floods out of my body. I love playing music with my buds, but it’s getting harder and harder to open for my father’s band. Braxton is everywhere, and I need him gone. Out of my life like he used to be.

Correction. He used to be one of my idols. His talent’s off the charts. Before I read my mother’s fucking diary, I would’ve been over the moon to open for them. Now, I ping pong between wanting this ordeal over, and craving for my band to win the damn competition. Of course, my loyalties lie with TLR.

Deliberately ignoring my lyric book, I turn on the TV where a faceless voice-over admonishes everyone to add an ICE—In Case of Emergency—contact on their phones. A sinking feeling runs through me, and I pick up my cell. Sure enough, Mom’s still listed as mine. I glance at my girlfriend, and thumb some buttons. There. No need to tell her, since I’m sure it’ll never be used. Makes me feel good, though.

My attention strays to my lyric book for another five minutes. Not able to concentrate on my own work, I find myself behind Cordy at the desk. Pushing her hair back, I kiss her neck. She shudders and leans against me. Peering over her shoulder, I ask, “So, what are you doing today?”

“Well, I’m checking over responses to our rebuttal about Maurice’s eyesight, then working on a blog post and related content to promote the unveiling of the origins of your band’s name. Thought I’d also curate some photos I’ve taken but haven’t used yet and create a video montage backed by one of your songs.” She stares at the lyric book I left on the bed. “What are your plans?”

“We have a rehearsal, but no concert tonight. Maybe I can persuade you to help me explore the town of—” My voice trails off. “Where are we?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” She pulls a piece of paper out of her bag. “We’re in Burlington, Vermont.”

“Oh, right. I love skiing. Want to check out the slopes?”

“Never been.”

“I could teach you. Get you on the bunny slopes.” I make rabbit ears above my head.

She giggles. “Nah. I’d rather stay around a fire and sip hot cocoa, making s’mores.”

“If we’re doing it together, I’d be all for that.”

She places her lips on mine, far too short of a period for my liking. Instead of reclaiming her spot, she holds out the tour schedule. “Tomorrow, we’re going to be in New Hampshire. Next concert is in Manchester.” She rises and leans her round ass against the desk, facing me.

“My aunt lives in New Hampshire.”

“Oh?” Her eyes light up.

Why did I tell her this? When she taps my chest, I explain, “Auntie Gloria moved away when I was twelve, and we only exchange Christmas cards. I’ve only seen her in person for Grandmother’s and Mom’s funerals. We’re not close.”

“You haven’t talked much about your mother’s family. Do you have any other aunts and uncles?”

“Nope. Just her. She’s my mother’s twin.”

“Oh.” She drops her head on my shoulder, tracing a heart over my real one. “Tell me about your family. Grandparents.”

Her voice is low.

Happy memories rush through my system. “My grandmother was a cooking fiend. She could make any meal better than you’d get in a restaurant. And my grandfather loved eating her food. They always had ready smiles. Grandfather used to make quarters appear from behind my ear as a kid.” Laughter bubbles. “I once asked him if the inflation fairy could change the quarter to half dollars.”

She leans away from my body, smiling. “What was his answer?”

“He said the fairy who brought him all the quarters told him she didn’t have access to the other buckets of coins. So, quarters was it.”

“Sounds like a very smart man.”

“He was. I loved him so much.”

She nudges me and I continue. “He worked as a New York City bus driver and had to deal with irate customers all the time. Yet, he always was so patient with me.”

She strokes my cheek.

“After a shift one day, he got out of his bus and was walking home when he had a heart attack. He was dead before he hit the ground.”

Cordy pulls me to her. “I’m so sorry.”

“This happened years ago. I was only ten.” I kiss her forehead.

She sits back on the desk, her arms looped around my neck. “How did your grandmother take it?”

“Bad. She still cooked, but her joy wasn’t in it anymore. Her baked goods still were delicious, but they didn’t sparkle like when my grandfather was alive, you know?”

“That stinks.”

“Yeah. My mom and her sister tried to make things better, and Grandmother continued to be my babysitter. No matter how hard we tried—I even had The Light Rail come over and play concerts for her—she kept withdrawing as the years went by. She died when I was sixteen.”

“Wow.” Cordy gives me another squeeze and leans into my body. “Which left your mom and her sister.”

My chin taps the top of her head. “By then, Auntie Gloria was gone. When I was a little kid, she and Mom used to get into it. They were like oil and water. Once she married Uncle Casey and moved to New Hampshire, she got busy with having kids and raising her own family. She didn’t get back to New Jersey, and we didn’t go up to visit her.”

She’s quiet for a long while, stroking her hand up and down my back. “But your mom. She was your champion.”

I remember her rooting for The Light Rail to win a local Battle of the Bands. Her driving us to gigs outside of Jersey City. The dinners she’d cook up for all of us when something bad happened, like we didn’t get a booking.

*Her writing in her diary.*

I take a step back, distancing myself from the kind and warm woman next to me, and pace. “You could say that. She was. Until she wasn’t.”

“She always rooted for you. No matter what. Despite who your father was.”

I swing to challenge her, anger replacing all the good memories, my arm slashing through the air. “It was all a lie. All of it.”

My girlfriend doesn’t flinch. No. Her face remains a mask of kindness and understanding. “I know all about disappointment brought on by parents.”

She does. The wind vanishes from my sudden anger, and I collapse into an overstuffed chair. “I know you do.”

“What about your Aunt Gloria? Do you still have her number?” Cordy stands above me.

I cock my head. “Yeah.”

“Why don’t you reach out to her? I mean, her sister—no matter how distant they were—was killed a few months ago. You said she came to the funeral.” She sits on my lap. “Don’t you think she wants to truly reconnect with her only nephew?” She pauses. “What’s the worst that could happen? She hangs up on you? I guess, then you’d be sure of where you stand.”

Desire to connect with my only remaining Washington relatives rises out of the ashes. “Well, she did make the trip for the funeral.”

“I think you should call her. Ask her why she fought with your mom. Try to forge a new, adult relationship with her.”

I weigh her suggestion. While it’s appealing, do I really want to get back in touch with this woman? Who helped my mother keep my real father away from me for my entire life? “No. I think she’s dead to me.”

“What if—”

Cordy’s words hang in the air. My mind can’t complete her sentence. “What?”

She flips her hair across her shoulder. “What if their disagreements stemmed from the secret your mother took to her grave?”

It’s like a Les Paul whacked me in the gut. All of the air disappears from my body, which goes cold. Should I do this? While I mull this over, my cell phone lands between us. “Call her.”

Her command propels me into action. I search my contacts. “Auntie Gloria” shows up right away. “Here she is.”

Cordy crosses her arms across her chest, obscuring her glorious tits. I’d much rather be taking advantage of them rather than being forced to make this call. Opting for the second option, I try to pull her into my arms, but she wiggles away.

“No. You can have me *after* you make the call.”

I know Cordy. She won’t force me to make this call. Nor will she withhold her delectable body from me if I don’t make it.

I also know myself. My girlfriend’s explanation may have some merit. Did Mom and her sister have a falling out over her keeping the truth about my parentage from me? It’s this possibility that spurs me to press the green button.

Seeing I’ve placed the call, Cordy points to the door. “I’ll give you some space,” she whispers. Taking her phone and laptop, she leaves me alone in the bedroom. The phone sounds its first ring.

A woman’s voice answers. “Hello?”

I lick my lips. “Hello, Auntie Gloria. This is Trent.”



“Trent?” She coughs. Then snuffles. “Trenton Washington?”

No one calls me by my full name anymore. “Yeah. It’s me.”

“Oh my goodness, thank you for calling! How are you doing? I’m sorry I wasn’t able to spend more time down in New Jersey after the funeral. Had to get back to our fishing business, you know. But that’s no excuse.”

Because I can’t contain my energy, I get to my feet and stride over to the oversized window offering a great view of the Vermont mountains. Which I don’t see. “I understand.”

“So, ah, Trenton, how are you doing?”

I turn around in the hotel room. We’re not the headliners—and won’t be so long as we’re the opening band for Hunte—but my “junior” suite is spacious, with a living area, bedroom area, bathroom, and a little kitchenette. All of us are blessed with the same rooms. At every stop. I’m beyond grateful for the bed.

“I’m good. Well, I mean, obviously, things could be better.” My word salad grinds to a halt. How can I ask her if she knew about my true father and if that’s why she and Mom parted ways?

“I can only imagine.” She goes on to update me about her husband and their two daughters, both of whom are teenagers now. They didn’t come to the funeral, but I did see pictures. “Sounds like everyone’s doing great.”

“I do love it here in New Hampshire. It’s so different from Jersey City.”

Here’s my chance. “So, Auntie, I’ve gone through all of my mother’s stuff. I had her photos transferred to DVD, and I

can send you a copy, in case you want to keep any.”

“Oh, I’d love that.”

“And—” How can I say this? I take a deep inhale. “I read her diary.”

Boom.

A clock ticks.

She sighs. “So you know?”

“Yeah.”

After a couple of beats, she begins, “I’m so sorry, Trenton. I fought with Lorinda all the time, begging her to tell you the truth. Well, not at first. When you got older, like after Dad—your grandfather—died, I started in on her in earnest. She was stubborn. She told me the lie she’d fed you about your father being a Marine who was killed in Operation Desert Storm was sufficient. She felt it was for the best.”

“But you didn’t agree?” Her answer to this question determines whether I hang up or let her into my life. The place Mom refused to let her.

“No, I didn’t agree with her decision. I felt you had a right to know. And so did—he.”

“Braxton Hunte?” His name rolls out of my mouth without warning.

In a strangled sound, she replies, “Yes.” Her sigh spreads to my ears as if it were one of Dwight’s long cymbal rolls. “My parents never knew the truth. Ever. Lorinda only told me what had happened because I was at the concert when it all went down. And three months later, when she found out she was pregnant with you, we both knew who the father was. I took her to some Hunte concerts afterward, but she never

caught Braxton's eye again. When she got her baby bump, she gave up trying to reach him. She told me she sent him a few letters."

"But he never responded."

"No. I doubt he ever got them. Or his label threw them away as being cranks. Back then, things were different."

Have to agree with her there. No email, no social media. Gatekeepers made it easier, in a sense. "So you let her continue to lie to me. Let me believe my father had died, when he was very much alive." *And now I'm touring with him.*

"Please, you're not being fair. I wanted to tell you several times, but Lorinda forbade me." Sniffles come through the speaker. "She told me it was her life, and she was doing the best she could for the both of you." Auntie Gloria blows her nose, and I remain quiet. "In a way, I couldn't disagree with her. We fought about it, all the time. Then I met Casey, who was visiting his extended family down in New Jersey, but had a job as a fisherman in New Hampshire." She trails off. "Please believe me, your mother thought she was doing the right thing for you."

"By lying."

"Yes. About who your father was. But not the rest. The rest was the absolute truth. She was so proud of you. I know it bothered her when you picked up the guitar, but she supported you. When you boys got together and started playing, she was so proud. She even once told me you were her biggest shining star."

I close my eyes, remembering Mom calling me the nickname. Said I was brighter than the star on top of the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center. My heart hurts for what

Mom put her sister through. “She put you in an impossible situation.”

“Yes. And she pushed me away.”

I pluck the bedspread. “But you still loved her?”

“With my whole heart. It broke me to learn about the shooting. She was my sister. My twin.” Additional sniffles come through the phone.

The hotel bedroom door opens, and Cordy walks in, carrying two cups bearing the Starbucks logo. I nod toward the side table, where she places my coffee. She takes hers into the living area.

I speak the truth. “I know she loved you too, Auntie. It was written all over her diaries.”

Cordelia reappears at my side, drops off a box of tissues, and leaves. Why? I run my hand over my wet cheek. Well, damn.

“And I love you too, Trenton. You were always the center of my sister’s life. For all of us.”

They’re all gone now. Mom, Grandmother, Grandfather. Even Auntie Gloria lives far enough away. “I’ve missed you.”

“We need to get together.”

Her words spur me on. “It’s funny you say that. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but I’m in a band and we’re touring the eastern part of the United States.” I omit the fact we’re opening for Hunte. I’ll get to this delightful piece of information later. “Our next stop is in Manchester. Do you think.” I clear my throat. “Would you and your family want to come and see us perform tomorrow night?”

“Oh, honey! How exciting! I’ll make sure to change whatever plans we have to be there. Where are you playing? One of the bars on Franconia Street?”

I trace the company’s logo on the cup. “No, not any of those bars. We’re going to be at the Bank of New Hampshire Pavilion in Gilford. Is it far from where you live?”

“The. Bank. Pavilion,” she sputters.

“Yes. We’re not the headliners, we’re the opening act.”

She recovers her grace. “You soon will be! Who are you opening for?”

It’s now or never. “In an odd twist of fate, we won a radio station contest back in New York City, and the prize was this tour.” I steady my voice. “We’re opening for Hunte.”

Coughing takes over the airwaves. “Oh my.” More coughing. “Have you told him?”

“No.” My single syllable is definitive and hard.

“Oh, okay. Does he treat you well?”

“He treats everyone with respect as far as I can see. I don’t spend any time with him if I can help it.”

She’s quiet for a few moments, which I allow her. After all, it’s not every day you reconnect with your nephew who admits he’s touring with his father, totally unbeknownst to said sperm donor.

“I’m glad. At least you’re forging your own relationship with your father, even if he’s unaware his blood runs through your veins.”

I’m done talking about him. “So, will you be able to make it? I can leave tickets and backstage passes for you at Will

Call.”

“I wouldn’t miss this performance for anything in the world, Trenton.”

Her words settle into my soul, releasing a fragment of happiness I believed never would reappear. “*Please* call me Trent. I’m really looking forward to seeing you and Uncle Casey. And finally meeting my cousins.” I pause a beat. “I love you.”

# CORDELIA



**A**s I overhear Trent's last words to his aunt, the results for my search about "how to overcome writer's block" fill my screen. Since my work concerning stage fright has been helping him, I'm confident I'll get some great tips about this new issue from my search. His life seems to be getting back on track. Sipping my coffee, I write down ideas to help my boyfriend.

My pen lifts from the hotel's notepad. *Boyfriend*. I swore after Big Rolls no one would ever get that moniker from me again. Yet here I am, doling it out without reservation. During the call I just had with my sister, Juanita even teased me about him, but I shut her down. In my heart of hearts, I know he'll leave me like everyone else in my life. Our agreement certainly isn't permanent. Maybe we'll last until the end of the tour, but who knows? At least I'm getting some great sex out of the deal.

"She's coming. She's bringing her whole family."

I drop the pad onto the table and focus on Trent, who's standing in the bedroom doorway, wearing a gigantic smile. I grab my cell and snap a photo. "Fans will love this one."

He strides over and places his hands on my shoulders. Bending down so our eyes are even, he whispers, "Thank

you.” His lips cover mine. This kiss is different from our usual ones. It lacks urgency, the frenetic desire underscoring our relationship. My heart reaches out for more, yet I pull away. Such emotions won’t take me far.

“I’m guessing things went well with your aunt?”

“They did. They’re coming to the concert. Oh, do you have any tickets? I told her I’d leave some for her and her family at Will Call, together with backstage passes.”

“I’m so happy for you. But to answer your question, no, I don’t have any tickets.” Because the band’s connections with Apex, Raine and his boss Keith Davos—Hunte’s tour manager—both were called away for some label planning meeting last night, I venture, “I think you’re going to have to ask Braxton.”

My pronouncement lands like a heavy rock in a puddle. Trent plops down on the sofa next to me, takes a sip of his coffee, and places the cup on the floor. “Yeah, I want to avoid that at all costs. I’ll ask the guys when we get together to practice.”

Even though I’m pretty sure none of them will have tickets either, I reply, “Sounds like a plan.”

Despite everything, he dons a smile. “Auntie affirmed what you said. The reason she and my mom had a falling out was over my father. She was the only person in the family to know the truth and they fought about whether to tell me all the time. When the opportunity for her to get married and move away came up, she ran for the exit.” He tugs on one of his dreadlocks. “Can’t say I blame her.”

Entranced, I watch as the sunlight bounces off the natural blondish overtones in his hair. “You’re such a striking man.”



He sits taller. “Now that’s something I could hear every day.” He reaches over and slides me toward him. He kisses me with all the passion and relief he’s clearly feeling.

Before we can get carried away—or even remove any piece of clothing—he disengages from me. “As much as I’d love to finish this now, I have to get to practice. Come with?”

Shaking my head to clear it, I find my footing. “Yeah.” I run my fingers down his chest. “But only if you promise to pick this up right where we left off.”

He kisses my ear. “You got it, babe.”



**W**hile the band practices, I post some photos on their social media. Below a close-up of Dwight pounding on the drums, I write, “Super excited to rock the Bank of New Hampshire Pavilion. Who will I see tomorrow night?”

Next, I turn my attention to the issue of Maurice’s eyesight. Per Mr. Hewitt’s comments, I rework the blog post about it for the remainder of the rehearsal. Happy with what I wrote, I hook up to the printer in the room and grab the pages. When they finish rehearsing, I’ll ask Maurice if he’s good with it.

Smiling at all my accomplishments—if only Big Rolls could see me now—I listen to the end of the rehearsal. TLR sounds better by the day. This tour schedule has been very good for them.

While they pack up, I go to Maurice and give him my proposed blog. He reads it and inhales. “Yeah. This is good. I

like the part about how episcleritis doesn't affect vision at all. I only have a few changes."

"Great." I collect the paper from him and make notes on what he wants changed.

"Hey." Trent snags my attention away from the revisions I'm making. "Meet us at the restaurant downstairs when you're done here." He kisses me and disappears with his band.

Smiling, I finish editing the post and reread it another few times to make sure everything's good. Satisfied, I shoot it over to Mr. Hewitt for his final approval. As I'm gathering my stuff, he calls to give me the green light. With pleasure, I load it up together with an awesome shot I took of Maurice last night. Take that, *First Rumors*.

Finished, I bound down to meet up with everyone in the restaurant. I approach the hostess stand and ask for their table. She checks and tells me they're not there. Not believing her, I ask if I can do a quick run-through of the dining room. She shrugs and lets me enter.

After my sweep confirms the hostess's conclusion TLR isn't here, I leave the restaurant and trudge into the hall. *You knew he'd abandon you at the first chance, like everyone else.* Instead of texting Trent, I allow this thought to play on repeat.

The hotel's shop snags my attention, and I wander in. Nothing else to do, anyway. I pick up and put down various items—shot glasses, visors, flip flops. Why am I here? A bunch of journals catch my attention and, against my better judgment, I glance through the selection. Didn't one of my searches about writer's block say to scribble down prose if you're trying to write poetry? Maybe this could work for Trent. Without thought, I plunk down ten dollars for a journal urging "Reach for the Stars."

As I wander through the lobby, I glance into the bar. And stop. Inside, everyone I've been trying to find raises their glasses in a toast. They probably decided to have a drink before going to the restaurant. Trent didn't abandon me.

Right?

Leaving all my stuff in a corner, I approach the group. Trent extends his arms toward me. "Oh my God. I told you to meet us at the restaurant, but we got a little sidetracked."

Joey holds up his glass and everyone raises their drinks to the ceiling. "Glad you could make it, Cordelia," he says.

I have two choices. I could yell at them for their irresponsible behavior, or I could go with the flow. I choose the latter. After all, Trent obviously didn't do this deliberately to hurt me. Plus he apologized.

A simple mix-up. No biggie.

Our promise to be patient with each other reasserts itself. I wave. "I'm here now."

Trent turns to the bartender and orders me a seltzer and vodka with lime. When I take a sip, I relax. Yeah, simple misunderstanding is all. Nothing to get worked up over. He's nothing like the other men who've been in my life. Right?

He kisses me with an apology on his lips, and I stuff my stupid fears aside.

When Trent and Maurice get into a debate over the best green room they've been in so far, Dwight pulls me away. "You're so good for him," he announces.

I murmur, "Think so?"

"Heck yeah. When his mother was killed, he lost all of his *joie de vivre*. Now that you're in his life, he's regaining it." He

pauses, drumming a beat on his thigh. “Don’t get me wrong. He’s still guarded and a bit jumpy. But you’ve made a big difference in him.”

My palms turn clammy. How can I be responsible for any real change in Trent? Rubbing them on my thighs, I tell myself he’s misreading the situation. Yet Trent’s making inroads in my life. Maybe I am helping him out as well?

I busy myself by tracing the patterns on the carpet with my foot. “Thanks.”

Dwight briefly touches my forearm. “I’ve been meaning to talk with you for a while now. I’ve been best friends with Trent since we were kids, and I’ve seen the signs. Ever since his mom, well, you know, he’s been wary of the stage. I think you’re helping him to calm down and enjoy performing again. I wanted to say thank you. And please keep it up. If TLR is chosen to be Hunte’s opening band for the rest of the tour, it would change all of our lives.” He grabs my hand. “And I do mean *all*.”

I so want to be worthy of Dwight’s praise. I *have* helped him with the stage fright his bandmates obviously recognized, despite how well he thought he was hiding it. I do deserve some credit for this. “I appreciate it, Dwight. I’ve given him some exercises to help overcome his jitters, and it seems to be helping.”

His dark brown eyes crinkle at the corners, underlying his good nature. “Keep up the good work.”

If only he’ll stick around long enough.

# TRENT



**H**appy with how our rehearsal went for the first time in ages, and at a bar with my guys, plus my girl, I raise my Bud into the air. “I bet New Hampshire is going to be our best gig yet.” Everyone cheers.

I allow the moment to sink in. I’m going to see Auntie Gloria again tomorrow. And meet her family. Family. Not a word I ever thought I’d be excited about again, but Cordy’s helped me see how good it can be. Reaching out, I wrap my arm around my girlfriend and kiss her forehead.

The bar’s filled to the brim, which I’m sure is different for them at four in the afternoon. Besides the band, most of our roadies and crew joined us. Laughter and excited chatter fill the space. Cordy’s called over by one of our roadies, Hector. She kisses my cheek and disappears.

Across from me, Dwight’s hands bang on his legs in a never-ending beat. He still gets like this when he’s excited. Much less so than when we were kids, but still. Buoyed by my good mood, I yell, “Yo, Dwight, your ADHD is showing!”

His caramel hands still, and he looks from side to side. In two seconds, he crosses the bar and smacks me upside the head, grumbling, “Not cool, bro.”

Realization hits me much harder than my best friend's rebuke. When we were kids and our guidance counsellor told him to take up drums as a way to manage his ADHD, he made me promise never to tell anyone about his diagnosis. Even though it's been over two decades, I can tell my stupid comment hurt. Our gazes meet. "Shit. Sorry man."

His jaw clenches and he nods.

I glance around and thankfully no one is paying attention to us. I order him his favorite drink as an apology. When the dirty martini arrives, his eyebrow quirks. After he swallows, he gives me his benediction. "Forgiven."

Feeling better about my *faux pas*, it's time for me to address my burning issue. I toss out, "Do any of you have any tickets for the concert in New Hampshire? Promised family there'd be some for them at Will Call."

Dwight furrows his brow. "Who?"

"Auntie Gloria."

He claps me on the back. "Beyond cool, man. I remember her from ages ago. And, of course, she was at your mom's, well, funeral."

Relieved we're truly back on an even keel, I glance toward my girlfriend. "Cordy encouraged me to call. I'm looking forward to seeing her and her family, under much happier circumstances."

"Righteous." He offers his fist, which I bump. "But we don't have any tickets, right guys?"

Joey and Maurice shake their heads. Joey puts down his drink. "Both Keith and Raine had to hit some Apex thing, so I think you should ask Brax. He told us to call him Brax. Isn't that cool?"

While the others voice their agreement, I bite the inside of my cheek. Cordy approaches me and reaches out so her thumb rubs against the back of my palm. Although her touch doesn't soothe. "Fine. Anyone know where he is?"

Maurice answers, "Didn't they go over to a radio station for an interview?"

Joey agrees. "That's right. Should be finishing up in about an hour and will be back at the hotel afterward."

Where would be better for me to approach him? I never wanted to have to ask *him* for anything, but there's no way around it. At the radio station or in this hotel? No brainer. The radio station is much more neutral.

I'm too wound up to take a car service to the station, so I elbow Dwight. "Can I borrow your Harley?"

He fishes into his pocket. "For a good cause. I can't wait to see Auntie Gloria again, too." He drops his keys into my open palm.

"Thanks, brother."

"And wear a helmet, Evel Knievel."

"You got it."

Keys clamped in my fist, I want some encouragement before making this trek. Grabbing my girlfriend by the waist, I bring us over to the corner of the room near her stuff. I slam her against the wall and kiss her hard. When I pull back, she holds onto my body to regain her equilibrium. A satisfied smirk steals across my face.

Maurice whistles. "Have at it!" Our roadies join him with some choice suggestions.

Ignoring their crass comments, I push Cordy's hair off her neck. "I'll see you back in our suite." I bite her earlobe. "Be ready for me. Naked." I smack her ass and leave the room. If only asking for these tickets didn't feel like I was heading on stage without my band or guitar.

I park Dwight's Harley in a space near the front of the local radio station's building. Unbuckling the helmet strap from around my chin, I close it up in the compartment at the back and follow the pavers leading to the front door.

This is the first time I'm actively seeking out my "father," and to ask him for a favor no less. Well, it's not exactly a favor. As the opening band, we're entitled to some tickets. So, I'm only getting what's mine.

With this rationalization firmly rooted, I enter the granite-covered lobby and walk over to the reception desk. A guy about my age wearing a wrinkled suit smiles at me. "May I help you?"

"I'm going to the radio station."

The receptionist asks me to fill out some information and show him my driver's license. "Are you with a band?"

Muffling a sigh at my inconsequence, I nod. "Yeah. I'm with The Light Rail. We're opening for Hunte."

At the name of the headliner, his eyes open wide with recognition. Someday, hopefully, we'll achieve this level of recognition for our work. "Oh, wow. I heard they were in the building but wasn't here when they arrived. I'm a big fan."

"I'll be sure to pass along your appreciation." The words stick in my throat, but then I remember I used to be a huge devotee, too. How did my life get this complicated?



He writes my name down and gives me a nametag.  
“Thanks, Trent.”

I almost tell him not to forget my name. No. Who knows if we’ll even be around once this leg of the tour finishes? Gauging from the middle-of-the-road progress report Cordy read to us, it’s probably a fifty-fifty proposition.

Nametag adhered to my light brown untucked shirt, I ride the elevator to the tenth floor. On the ride up, I fiddle so much with my sleeves that one of the other passengers asks if I need any help. Ha! If only he could do this ask for me.

Getting off at the radio station’s floor, I stand outside the glass doors for a minute. With a large inhale, I open the doors and stride over to the desk. A beautiful girl with long blonde hair raises her head, her eyes skimming my entire form.

Quirking my left lip upward, I lean my forearm against the counter. “Hi there, darling. I’m Trent Washington, a member of The Light Rail. We’re opening for Hunte during this leg of their tour.” Shit. Did I sound like a jerk?

“Hi. I’m Jenni. How may I help you?”

Whew. Guess not. While my body revolts, I know I need her help. “I need to talk with Braxton Hunte. Can you point me in their direction?” As I speak, I give her a wink. Too skinny for my taste, but gotta do what I have to do.

“Sure. They’re down the hall to the left. I think they wrapped. So long as the ‘On Air’ sign isn’t lit, you can go in.”

Wonderful. No obstructions to getting to him. Today’s my lucky day. *Yeah, right.*

“Thank you, Jenni.”

I turn and strut down the hallway she had indicated, making sure to put more swagger in my step for her benefit, and stop in front of an oversized ebony doorway. Since the sign isn't lit, I can go right in. And ask my father—Braxton—for some tickets. *Why did I feel the need to seek him out before they returned to the hotel?* Oh yeah. Neutral turf.

Sheathed in this nonpartisan territory, I open the door. The members of Hunte are scattered about, talking with other people I don't know, presumably from the radio station. It only takes a second to register the blond hair on my old man. With him in my sights, I circle the table.

“Hey there.” An overweight guy wearing a button-down shirt straining around his middle places his hand on my arm. His appearance is belied by a smooth-as-honey voice. Must be an on-air personality.

Refusing to be put off when my goal is so near, I square my shoulders. “Hi. I'm Trent Washington, a member of The Light Rail. We're opening for Hunte on this leg of their tour.”

Braxton appears to the DJ's right. “Hey there, Trent.”

The DJ's head rotates between us. Addressing my father, he says, “I want to thank you, again, for such a great interview. We really appreciate your coming here and talking with our listeners. I'll let you get down to business with Trent here.” He offers his hand, which Braxton shakes.

Now Braxton and I are alone, as it were, and my stomach clenches. Rubbing my palms together, I'm again struck by his well-chiseled features. For an older guy, he's in good shape. Guess it bodes well for me.

“What brings you all the way over here?”

His question spurs me on. *Spit it out.* “I was talking with my aunt, who lives nearby. She and her family would love to come to the show tomorrow.”

“And you need tickets?” He tugs on his ear.

“Yeah. I was told you’re the guy to ask.”

“Well, I don’t have them, but Sara does. She’s in charge of all things on the money side. How many do you need?”

“Four.”

“No worries. Whose name should we put on the envelope?”

“Gloria Robinson. And can you include backstage passes, too?” I feel like a beggar asking for another cup of gruel.

“You got it.”

Done! I can get out of here now. Maybe even catch my breath.

He rests his hand on my shoulder, and relief this ordeal is almost over disappears. “Hey, I’m glad you’re here. I wanted to read you something.” He fishes out his cell, thankfully removing his hand from my rigid body.

He pushes some buttons on his phone. “Listen to this.” He looks down at the screen and a frown crosses his brow. “Shit. It disappeared. Wait a moment.”

This is the most interaction I’ve had with Braxton during the whole tour, and it feels so wrong. But I have to continue with the charade. Another few minutes, and I can escape. I focus on his grumbling about technology. So reminiscent of how Mom used to deal with her phone. Fuck.

“Ah. Here it is.” He glances at me, and I stare into his eyes. So like mine. “This is from the *Connecticut Times*. ‘The opening band for Hunte, The Light Rail, was impressive. While still in need of some refining, the band’s music was catchy and inspired, encouraging audience goers to get out of their seats. The band’s lead singer-guitarist, Trent Washington’”—Braxton’s amber eyes dart to me—“holds much promise. His voice is pitch-perfect, and his guitar chops move from average to sometimes spectacular. In fact, watching him is like watching a young Braxton Hunte, and this writer hopes he grows into his potential.”

I swallow. Being compared to my father in such a way sends my synapses flying in all directions. I’m being compared to my idol. That is, before I knew who he was to me. *Is*. Is to me. The writer said I had potential. Potential to grow into being my father?

“What do you think?”

Braxton’s question makes me focus on his face. One my mother found irresistible once upon a time.

“Trent?”

My hand skims over my tattooed arm. “Some review. Hope I realize my potential sooner rather than later.”

The man before me chuckles. “Takes a while sometimes. I have to admit, though, this writer nailed it. I don’t know what it is about you and your band, but I agree with him. Somehow your dreadlocks remind me of how I used to be onstage at the beginning.”

He does a quick tug on one of my dreads, and my stomach adds some churns into its already convulsing mix. I can tell him why. Mouth closed, I raise my chin.

“You’re good, son. Real good.”

I spasm at his word choice. *Fuck*. I came for tickets and got them. I need to get out of here.

Before I can make my escape, though, Braxton—oblivious to my inner turmoil—continues, “Let me give you two pieces of unsolicited advice, from one musician to another. I’ve watched you guys perform. I like you and your band a lot.”

I swallow and indicate for him to continue, since my voice has left the building.

“First, add more songs to your repertoire. Change things up. It’ll keep it fresh for you as you perform, and audiences will respond to your renewed energy. Second, try to lighten up a bit on the stage. Play with the crowd. Let your true personality shine. I’ve seen you with your band after a performance and you’re different. More relaxed. Try to let that guy loose on the stage. I bet you’ll be much happier with the results. Okay?” His damn hand lands on my shoulder once more.

He’s talking to me like I imagine a father might. My whole body erupts from the inside out. With a gruff voice, I manage to utter, “Thanks. I’ll try.” Then my throat closes up.

I want to yell, to hit something, to throw up.

He gives me a bro hug, his arms going around the back of my shoulders and I don’t move. My body stands stock-still as he invades my every cell. His vanilla scent wafts to my nose and buzzing takes over my eardrums.

The hug ends after a few seconds. I want to pull him back to me and confess the truth—and punch him in the gut. Hard. I do neither.

“You can do it. I have faith.” Someone calls his name and he tells me, “Catch you at the show,” before he ambles away.

My body, in full revolt, can't assimilate what just happened in this room. One thing's for sure—I did get Auntie Gloria's tickets. Time to get the fuck away from my father and his band. With a salute to the room in general, I stride toward the colossal doors and away from the man inside.

Back on the Harley, I zoom over the icy roads, barely registering any potential danger. I'd welcome a spill on the ice over another conversation with the motherfucker ever again. His one piece of advice about adding new songs to our rotation sticks in my throat, because he was right. If only I could string more than two lyrics together, we would have at least five new songs thanks to the work the guys have been doing on the melodies.

I'm such a fuck up. I'm holding my boys back. Maybe I should bow out? Give them an opportunity to shine like I know they can.

I take a turn too fast and skid, barely maneuvering the bike to remain upright. Like the roads, I need to pay more attention to my band. I don't want TLR to succeed without me. No. I sit taller in the seat. I can do this. I will make us the best opening band of all time. Then we'll become superstars in our own right.

Just to spite the lead singer of our current headliner.

## CORDELIA



**I**n Trent's suite, I do more research into how to overcome writer's block. If only I could write some lyrics for him, but I'm shit at it. Like most things. Except for social media. I sit taller. Pulling up the band's Instagram, I get confirmation of my skills as over two hundred responses have been made to Maurice's post already.

Buoyed by my success, I work on the blog post about how TLR got its name. This one's going to take some time, but I want it to be perfect. Over an hour later, I print it out—thank goodness the suite comes with a mini-business center—and email it to Mr. Hewitt. Resting my head against the cushions, weightlessness flows through me.

I'm good at my job.

If only this would make me good enough.

My gaze travels to my purse, holding my room key. I haven't told Raine to dispense with getting me a room, even though I haven't stepped foot in my own quarters for a while. An image of Big Rolls appears in my mind's eye, and he's all over his new *fiancée*. Keep getting those room keys, I remind myself. I'll never be homeless ever again.

The front door to the suite blasts open and Trent crosses the threshold. In three strides, he grabs me under my arms,

lifts me upright, and kisses me with a ferocity I've never felt from him. When he releases me, it's all I can do not to collapse.

Still entwined with him, I ask, "How did it go with your fath—Braxton?"

He disengages and spins so his back is to me. "He's arranging for the tickets and backstage passes to be left in an envelope at Will Call."

"That's good news," I reply to his back.

He turns his head. "Yeah." He pauses. "He read me an article from a local Connecticut paper."

I was so caught up working on the blog posts, I must've missed the review. Shit. I have to do better. In a tight voice, I ask, "What did it say?" I hold my breath.

His cheek clenches. "It called me a young Braxton Hunte."

My eyebrows rise to my hairline. "What?"

He hikes over to the kitchen, takes out a Bud from the fridge, and twists off the cap. After taking a long drag, he slides his thumb over the opening. "Plus, *he* told me he likes our band a lot."

His voice mimics the tenor pitch of his father's exactly. I don't dare mention this. However, if he wants TLR to win the competition, the critic's review—and Braxton's opinion—will mean something to Apex. And then I can keep paying my bills. Perhaps with some left over to buy new clothes?

Knowing how angry Trent is about this development, I need to be careful with how I get to the root of the issue. "Seems like he's on your side. I mean, TLR's side. That's great, right? What you've been working toward?"



Trent doesn't move. "Of course it is. I'm not sure how I can survive it." He licks his lips. "He even gave me some pointers on how to improve."

I cross some of the distance between us, knowing he's in a very delicate place. "What do you want to do?"

"I want to get the fuck away from him. At the same time, I want my band to make it to the next level. This is our last chance. You know the rest of the guys are married, and they're ready to start families. If it doesn't work out this time, we're breaking up." His face crumples.

I want to hug him and eliminate his worries. But visions of my own financial situation going up in smoke dance in front of me. I straighten my shoulders. TLR can win. I've got to get him focused. "It's not over yet. There's still another month of this leg of the tour. You guys are keeping even with California Skies." Maybe slightly ahead, but I keep this part to myself.

"This situation is so screwed up. *I'm* so fucked up. I have stage fright that pushes me back on my heels, I can't write a lyric to save my life, and I'm opening for the frigging man who isn't even aware he's my father."

Despite all my worries, or maybe because of them, my heart breaks in half for the man in front of me. Who seems to be downplaying his major successes, at least in the pre-gig jitters department. "Oh, Trent."

I can't stop myself. I cross the remaining space between us and wrap my arms around his middle. Beneath my hands, he's a solid rock, with no hint of his passionate soul. His pain sears me because I'm so well-acquainted with it. I kiss his heart, which is covered by his shirt, and rest my ear against his hard pecs. His heart rate beats a fast rhythm.

After a few seconds, his arms go around my waist, yet his posture doesn't waver. I kiss his pecs again. One of his arms travels upward and his fingers thread into my hair, pulling it into a ponytail.

My head falls backward and I stare into his hazel eyes, which are blazing with so many emotions. Pain, anger, frustration, yearning.

Swallowing hard, I whisper, "Take me." I can offer him this.

Trent's mouth covers mine in an instant. His hand leaves my waist and slides downward, until he's cupping my ass. I understand his need—to feel something other than his own reality—and feed it by opening my mouth under his.

He growls. His tongue accepts my offer as he squeezes my butt cheek, all the while he never lets go of my hair. If anything, he exerts more pressure and my neck cranks backward. I raise my leg to his thigh and leave it there.

We remain locked together in this erotic position. Our mouths grind against each other's, both his hands pumping on various parts of my body, my leg rubbing against his, my arms hugging his trim waist.

He breaks our kiss and trails tiny bites down my exposed neck, which I accept without hesitation. He pants, "I need you."

My heart flips at his words, but my brain soon overrides my stupid organ's leap of fantasy. Sex. He needs sex. "Yes."

He scans the room for a second, let's go of my hair and lowers his freed hand to my other butt cheek, and picks me clear off the floor. The next thing I know, my back makes contact with the beige wall behind me. With a grunt, he

presses into my body. Even through his jeans, his erection prods, and I roll my hips in appreciation. Yes, sex I can do.

He dry humps me, which causes my breathing to escalate. I want more. I want all of him.

He pulls back. "Too many clothes."

The next instant, my feet are on the floor and my zipper is lowered in one frantic beat. He places my hands on my open jeans. "Take them off."

"Do the same," I challenge.

"Oh, I plan on it."

Soon, we're both naked from the waist down. His lips are back on mine while he parts my wet folds. He inserts two fingers into my body. "I love how wet you get for me, Cordy."

His nickname makes my nipples tighten beneath my bra. "For you."

He kisses me, banging my skull against the wall as I give him total control of my pleasure. When his thumb presses on my clit, I'm close. "Yes. Make me come."

He doesn't respond with words, instead letting his fingers and tongue do the talking. One more flick, a couple of pumps, and I sail over the edge, screaming his name.

When I return to my senses, his beautiful cock is wrapped and ready. "Open your legs for me."

Don't have to tell me twice. Trent grabs his massive erection and positions it at my entrance, but doesn't push in. I undulate toward him. "Please."

On an inhale, he thrusts forward, filling me all the way up. Our shirts rub against each other while our naked lower halves

perform a dance as old as time. He pulls my leg up and drives in even deeper. He kisses up my neck and ends at my ear, where he bites my earlobe. “You fit me perfectly.” He punctuates his statement with a deep thrust, then swivels his hips.

“God, Trent. More.”

With my back to the unyielding wall and the rest of me joined with his hard body, he switches to pumping into my core. He pounds into me with a ruthless rhythm, making it nearly impossible to catch my breath. In response, I dig my fingernails into his ass.

“Fuck. Cordy. Come for me.”

Two more thrusts later, I do as he orders. He rams into me a few more times, then joins me with a loud groan. His head lands on my shoulder and we both focus on the pleasure coursing through our bodies. After a while, our heart rates drop to below one thousand beats per minute.

“You’re amazing, do you know that?”

I tug one of his dreadlocks. “You’re not too bad yourself.”

My comment elicits a low chuckle, yet he doesn’t move. Knowing he’s still connected to me, holding me, makes my age-old yearnings resurface. *Can I believe in our promises to each other?*

He disengages from my body and removes the condom. “Let me take care of this.”

While he walks across the room and tosses it into the garbage can, I bend and pick up my jeans. By the time he turns around, I’m wearing my panties again.

He licks his lips. “They’re going to come off again.”

Don't I have work to do? Doesn't he? "We didn't finish our conversation."

He stops in front of me, his erection already coming back to life. "Talking is overrated. I need you."

When he expresses his desires like this, I can't fight him. I let all my reservations go and wrap my fingers around his cock. "Guess I can be persuaded."



Trent's dressed in ripped blue jeans and The Weeknd concert t-shirt under a button-down that won't make it past the third song. I snatch the cross necklace out of his fingers and clasp it around his neck. He adds a leather strap around his wrist.

Hazel eyes meet mine. "How do I look?"

I straighten his outer shirt. "Like a well-fucked man." He wiggles his eyebrows, causing me to tap his chest. "Be good."

Trent kisses me like it's our first time. "I'm always good. Don't forget that."

I trace his eyebrow. Even they're sexy on him. "Hmmm. We'll see. Are you ready?"

He nods. I grab my laptop and stop to glance in the mirror and ensure I'm presentable. I'm pretty sure the high color in my cheeks can't be misconstrued. I shrug. My life's taken a pretty fantastic turn.

Together, we saunter down to the lobby and meet up with the rest of the band. The tour bus picks us up and brings us all to the New Hampshire Pavilion, where we go backstage.

While TLR warms up for the concert, I check their social media.

Raine, newly returned this morning from the Apex meeting, comes up behind me. “They’re doing great.”

I glance up. “They really are.” I share some of the positive press from the concert the other day.

“This is great. I’ve been on Hunte’s tour from the beginning, and I worked with California Skies. Honestly, they’re pretty well matched in terms of talent, but TLR has a special something that lights up a crowd. I really hope they win the competition. What you’re doing plays a big part.”

My hand twirls the end of my hair while a satisfied smile plays around my lips. “No pressure there.”

He chuckles. “Oh, I’ve been watching you, too. You’re killing it.”

I have been kicking ass, but I don’t know what to do with Raine’s praise, so I point to the article Trent told me about earlier. The one that calls him a young Braxton Hunte. If only they knew.

“Yeah, saw it. Have to say I pretty much agree.”

I’m mulling over his last comment when the band finishes their warm-up and Trent reminds them about his aunt and her family being at the concert. “So, let’s give them a great show.”

Dwight talks with him for a while, and I go back to my own pre-gig ritual. Once I’ve liked and shared everything, I grab my new camera to snap some shots before the guys go onstage. Hopefully, some of the photos will be good for posting.

Joey and Maurice ham it up, like usual, and I capture their antics. I'm sure their fans will love these. Dwight joins in, drumsticks in hand, and wails on Maurice's back. I scan the room for Trent, but he's nowhere to be found.

Leaving the band's antics, I search for my boyfriend. *I do like the sound of that.*

Where can he be? My eyes stray to the bathroom, and my body hums to life remembering our first encounter. Which was supposed to have been our last. I reach the door and knock.

“Yeah?”

Trent's voice sounds strained. Shit. He's probably fighting another bout of stage fright. With one eye focused on the people gathered across the room, I whisper, “It's me. Cordelia.”

The door opens and I enter. He's holding up the grey tiled wall, eyes downcast. His breathing is shallow and rapid. Yup. He's in the middle of one of the worst panic attacks I've ever seen, which needs to end pretty damn quickly if he's going to get onstage. With his aunt and her family in the audience.

A light bulb flashes over my head. Their presence is probably what's causing such a severe reaction. Inhaling, I tiptoe to him.

Placing my hand on his bicep, I say, “Hey. Everyone in the audience is excited to hear your music, some for the very first time.”

He doesn't say anything. His chin tips in a slight incline.

“Do you remember the first exercise we did together before you went onstage in Connecticut?” I stop myself from saying Hunte, or anything else that might further upset him.

He doesn't move.

Oh boy. He can't even force his brain to function in the most basic way. My heart bleeds for him. "It's okay. Why don't you close your eyes and take a very deep breath? Now, inhale."

His hazel eyes disappear beneath his eyelids and his chest expands, thank fuck. Even though he can't verbalize anything right yet, at least he still can follow directions.

"And let it all out."

His body relaxes.

"Again." I lead him in these deep breathing exercises three times before switching it up. "This time, when you inhale, I want you to hum. Not a song or anything, just a note. Can you do that for me?"

He licks his lips, and his eyebrows form a deep V.

His reaction isn't encouraging. He's not ready for this step yet, so I murmur, "Actually, change of plans. Take two more deep breaths."

Still with his eyes squeezed shut, Trent does as I asked.

"Great. You're doing so good. Do you think on this next inhale, you could add in a hum? You've heard me hum before, and I don't think you want me to add my vocal talents to yours." I raise my lips in a smile, trying to lighten the mood.

He nods his assent. *Score!*

"Awesome. On the count of three, alright?"

His hands form fists. When I say "three," he inhales followed by a low hum. Perfectly on pitch.



“That’s so much better than I could ever do. Can you do it again for me, maybe slightly louder this time?”

His palms open on his powerful thighs, and he rubs. Not waiting for any additional signals, I say, “Three.”

Like before, he takes in a deep breath and hums out a note with increased power. Whew. He’s coming back. “And again.”

After three more breaths, his humming is at the level it should be. “You’re doing so good. Do you think you could repeat your hum, this time with your eyes open?” I tense. This will be the most difficult step for him to take. “Look at the floor.”

After a minute, his eyes pop open but they remain glued to the white tiles below him. His hum and breathing remain as they were during the last time, steady.

Relief courses through my body. He’s definitely going to make it. I glance at my cell to check the time. We only have five more minutes. He can do this, but I need to speed up the process.

I inject wry humor into my voice. “Wow. You might even be the lead singer for the best up-and-coming band out there. Who knew?”

He doesn’t chuckle but emits a huff. My attempts are working. Next phase. “Think we can leave this bathroom and go out into the other room? Not that I’m against bathrooms or anything, as you already know.” I squeeze his arm but refrain from kissing him. Instead, I turn and open the door and pop my head out. The band is still on the other side of the room.

The articles I’ve read about stage fright all stress the need to make the person suffering feel safe. “No one’s waiting to

come in. It's okay." I step outside and hold the door open. My breath stills.

Trent responds by joining me at the threshold.

"Look at me."

His gorgeous amber eyes reach mine. They're still a little cloudy, but he's nowhere near how he was when I entered the bathroom. Progress. "You are *the* Trent Washington. The man I willingly went into a bathroom with after knowing him for only thirty minutes. You rocked my world then, and you're about to do the same to fans in the arena." Might as well ease him into what he's up against.

"You intrigued me."

His first words to me bring a true smile to my face. "Even though the bathroom was pretty, ah, less than sparkly clean."

He blinks and the clouds disappear. "Your light made up for it being dingy."

I lay my palm on his chest. "You certainly did your part back then. Now, it's time for you to demonstrate to everyone what you showed me that night. Although, you better keep your pants on this time." I tap his groin.

"I'll see what I can do." He clears his throat. "Thank you, Cordy. I want to bottle you up and keep you for myself forever."

I allow my heart to soar at his sentiment. A vision of being together with him, forever, plays across my soul. "I like the sound of that. But for now, it's time for you to rejoin your band. Go out there and show everyone who TLR is—the next big band on the music scene."

“Damn straight.” Grabbing my hand, he brings it to his lips, then intertwines our fingers. “Let’s go.”

“Glad you could join us, man,” Dwight ribs. “You’ll have to make it up to Cordelia for such a quickie, though.”

Happiness at my success and his loving words still coursing through my body, I quip, “I love it with Trent no matter how he gives it.”

Cue my body tensing. *Love?* Rewind, Cordelia. I love having sex with him. Although we didn’t just have sex.

Unaware of my inner turmoil, Trent powers on. “You should be so lucky, Dwight.”

Dwight dons a large smirk. “Believe me, no complaints in that department.”

Raine comes over, clapping. “Alright, you guys. Are you ready to rock this arena?”

I get my head out of my ass soon enough to nod along with the entire band. Including Trent. Good.

“So, we have some VIPs here with us tonight. I’m sure you know Trent’s aunt and her family are up front. Make sure you give them a good show.”

Dwight slings his arm around Trent’s shoulders. Their mouths move, although I can’t make out what they’re saying. When they break apart, I’m relieved to see him joking with his friends. All’s good.

“Alright, guys. Let’s get ready to show New Hampshire what they’ve been missing out on. Break a leg!” Raine puts his hand in and the guys follow suit.

“TLR” rings through the backstage area. I allow myself a mental pat on the back for creating the hashtag. Trent walks up

to me. “Thank you. I wouldn’t be standing here if it weren’t for you.” He kisses me, the power of it turning me to mush.

When he steps back, his hands reach for my shoulders to steady me. I stare into his eyes, which shine back at me. “Enjoy yourself out there.”

“I will, knowing you’re back here waiting for me.”

And he’s gone.

Leaning against the wall, I follow the band as they make their way behind the curtain. The guys bounce from foot-to-foot backstage, getting pumped for the concert. Good-natured ribbing and laughter rise to the rafters, spreading warmth throughout my limbs. I had a small part in helping Trent get to this point.

Raine yells, “Alright guys. Go get ‘em!”

With a final high five, they enter the stage, and the audience greets them with warm applause. Pushing away from the wall, I hold up my Canon and tiptoe next to Raine.

While they get situated by their instruments, I snap some shots. Photos from this vantage point are cool.

“They’re definitely on it tonight.”

I glance at the shaggy-haired man in jeans and sneakers. “Yeah. I think so.”

I upload a couple of photos as they begin their gig with “Hurts Good.”

A Google Alert pops up on my phone capturing my attention. It’s from *First Rumors*. Crap. I raise my phone to Raine, then leave the backstage area for the green room. I click on the article and a story about Dwight pops up, which I force myself to read. It shares about his ADHD, alleging his “erratic

behavior” puts a strain on the band. Laying the blame squarely on him as the reason why they haven’t put out any new songs.

Remembering their interaction at the bar when Trent teased him about his ADHD, I know this will cut both Dwight and Trent to their cores. Since I can’t do anything to counteract the story right this second, I pull up Mr. Hewitt’s contact info and give him a call. It’s only eight, so I’m sure he’s still at Apex.

He answers on the first ring. “I was getting ready to call you. Did you read the latest from our friends at *First Rumors*?”

I sigh. “That’s what I’m calling about.”

“This is the fourth article about the band they’ve run.” I hear some clicks, like he’s at his computer. “We’re launching a full-out investigation into who might be tipping the tabloid off.”

I wish I could give him a clue. “I don’t know who it could be. The articles they’re posting are sort of generic, you know? Like, anyone could see Maurice’s glasses are thick and he did have a red eye at the beginning of the tour. Dwight’s diagnosis happened back when he was in school.”

“I hear you. But Apex is starting to think the band may not be worth all the effort.”

My stomach curls in on itself. “Please don’t give up on them. TLR’s really good.”

“Well, how about you work up a strategy on this latest article and send it over. I’ll do what I can from my end.”

“Sounds good.” Damn it. Why is this tabloid picking on TLR? What did they ever do to anyone? They’re barely known

outside of Jersey and some places in The City. What could be prompting all this negative press?

I collapse onto the sofa. TLR's still playing, and I allow their music to envelope me. Standing up, I grab my camera and amble backstage. Trent's only a little stiff, more relaxed than I've ever seen him onstage. The band sounds great. I'm sure his Auntie Gloria is enjoying herself.

"They're doing better tonight."

I startle at the tenor voice, not having heard anyone approach. Well, with TLR playing, it's understandable. Twisting my head, I reply, "Yeah. I was thinking the same thing, Braxton."

He bounces in time with the music, enjoying the show. Sticking his neck out behind the curtains, he scans the audience, which has grown to about three-quarters capacity during their performance. Of course, it'll be one-hundred percent full—or more—when Hunte hits the stage.

"I told Trent I really like his band. I want them to be our opening act, but Apex has the final say. How are they doing with social media?"

"Good. They're running even, if not a little ahead, of California Skies."

He nods and watches as Trent interacts with the crowd more than ever before. "There's something about him." His jaw points toward the stage, where Trent's riling up the audience.

"Kinda like watching yourself from years ago, huh?" *Why did I say that?*

He tugs on his earlobe. "Yeah. Sort of."

An empty feeling lodges in the pit of my stomach and I eye the exit. I inch away from the man who is responsible for Trent being on this earth. “Well, I better, ah, post something.”

“Cordelia.”

I freeze.

“Did you read the article?”

He must be referencing the story Trent told me about this afternoon. Whatever. “The Connecticut one? Yeah, I did. Well, catch you later.” I scurry away, berating myself for saying something so stupid.

## TRENT



“Thank you, New Hampshire!” I wave to the crowd, which has filled up more than in the other venues. I toss my guitar pick toward where I was told Auntie Gloria’s sitting, even though the lights prevent me from seeing her.

My bandmates surround me and we lift our arms high, then take a bow. Sweat drips off all of our limbs onto the stage.

“Great show tonight, man,” Dwight yells.

“You were on fire,” Joey agrees.

Maurice adds, “We all were.”

Living off the high of my performance, I respond, “It’s a group effort, guys. We rocked it!”

With one final wave, we leave the stage and go back to the green room. I scan the room for my girl. She’s across the way engrossed on her phone. “Cordy! Give your man some sugar!”

Her head pops up, a grin crossing her face. She tucks her phone into her back pocket and stands. Soon, she wraps her arms around my body. Man, I could get used to this.

After our mouths do what our bodies should be doing, she sniffs. “Ugh. You’re all sweaty.” She launches herself backward.



I call her out. “Didn’t seem to mind a second ago.” Her tits have some damp spots on them, courtesy of me. I point. “Looks good to me.”

She rolls her eyes. “You.”

The guys approach, so I whisper, “Thank you for helping me get on the stage. Meant the world to me.”

“Glad to have helped.”

Someone pounds me on the back. “Dude. You did give your aunt backstage passes, right?”

I turn to face the culprit—my best friend. “Yup. She should be back here soon.”

Dwight gives me the thumbs up, followed by Cordy passing me a towel to wipe off the stage sweat. As I’m taking care of business, the door across the room opens. A heavier black woman strides across the threshold, followed by a man and two younger ladies. A boulder lodges in my throat. She’s pretty identical to my mom, only not rail thin. An overwhelming need to rush into her arms wars with a staggering desire to give her my back. Grief wins for a moment, and my towel flutters to the floor. Before she sees me, I allow myself an extended moment to drink her in like the final note before a gig ends. Swallowing, I offer a slight wave.

She zeroes in on me. “Trenton Washington. Get over here and give me some love!”

I put one foot in front of the other and travel toward the family unit. My only surviving family. Auntie Gloria opens her arms wide and I willingly go into them, receiving a hug that steals my breath. For one fleeting moment, I’m transported back into Mom’s arms and peace overcomes me. A picture of her diary floats through my brain and burning anger

flares. Ultimately, the reality it's my mother's twin sister holding me—my mother remains in the ground—brings peace.

“You've grown so big.” Auntie Gloria steps back. “And these muscles. Hey, Casey, ain't I right? Check out how well Trenton's turned out.”

I correct her. Again. “It's just Trent now.”

Her husband, my uncle, steps forward and shakes my hand. “So nice to see you again, Trent. Heck of a show you put on.”

Happy he used my shortened name, I respond. “Thanks, Uncle Casey. Glad you enjoyed it.” A welcome feeling of belonging washes over me.

“We more than enjoyed it, didn't we, girls?” Uncle Casey motions toward his kids. “Let me introduce you to our daughters, Hazel and Nia.”

Two young ladies in their mid-teens join us. Hazel, wearing black jeans and high heels—the overprotective side of me thinks they're too high for a teen—offers her hand first. “Nice to meet you.”

Her sister, maybe a couple years older and in loose-fitting pants with a purple shirt and matching headband, waves. “We really enjoyed your music.” At least one of them is dressed appropriately.

I snort at how Cordy would respond to my thoughts. “Thanks. We've worked hard on it. So happy you liked the show.”

Smiling, I wave my bandmates over and introduce everyone. As if by magic, a server carrying trays of beer, champagne, and soda approaches us. Nice.

Across the room, I find Cordy and wave her over. When she finally joins us, I introduce her. “Auntie Gloria, Uncle Casey, Hazel and Nia, I want you to meet my girlfriend.” Cordy offers her hand.

My aunt looks at it like it’s a snake and shakes her head. “No way. Any girlfriend of my nephew’s deserves a hug. Come here.”

Like she did with me, she opens her arms wide. Cordy sends me a slightly panicked glance, but I give her a little push. Within seconds, she disappears as Auntie Gloria envelopes her. I like that.

My aunt puts her hands on Cordy’s shoulders and she gives her the once over. “Tell me, honey, where are you from?”

My girlfriend’s chin rises. “New Jersey. I’m from Newark.”

She nods her approval. “As you know, I’m a Jersey girl myself.”

“Yes, ma’am. Jersey City isn’t far from me.”

Without sparing me a glance, my aunt barrels forward. “So, how long have you and my *Trent* been dating?” At least she used my shortened name.

Big mocha eyes swing to mine and I motion for Cordy to spill. Not like it’s some big secret anyway. It’s sort of sweet to have someone looking out for me again. Like my mother would’ve. My hand flies to my arm and I squeeze my tattoo. At least her twin wanted me to know the truth.

“We’ve, uh, been together for about a month now.”

“Oh, young love.” She laughs. “I remember those days.”

Blocking any sort of vision of her and Uncle Casey in *flagrante delicto* from my mind, I interject, “So, you enjoyed the set?”

Auntie Gloria swells up. “You boys were fantastic. I really enjoyed your songs, as did Uncle Casey and your cousins. In fact, we might have been dancing in the aisles.” She winks.

While she’s talking, Cordy grabs her camera and starts taking photos, causing me to frown. How do I feel about sharing my family with the world? Hell, I’m proud to call her family. Probably the only person in my life who truly deserves this title in addition to my band. And my girlfriend.

“Give your aunt a hug, Trent. Your fans will love it.”

At Cordy’s direction, I share a warm hug with my aunt, and she pulls me down for a couple of kisses. I accept her love with a gratitude I didn’t realize was missing from my life.

“Awesome! Do you mind doing some group photos?”

“Sure thing.” My aunt puts her arm through mine, and does the same on her other side with my girlfriend. Together, we join my cousins and uncle and pose for some pictures. The band gets into the act.

When we’re finished, Cordy asks my aunt, “What’s your number? I want to send you some of these.”

My aunt beams at being included in the publicity part of my life. They exchange numbers and my spirits lift.

After some fun catching up with everyone, she says, “May I have a word, Trent?”

“Of course, Auntie.” We distance ourselves from the band.

“Your girlfriend has a beautiful soul. Better not let her get away.”

I watch as Cordy draws Dwight aside, which makes me feel like she's a part of our family now. Warmth flows through my body. "I'm not planning on it."

"I'm glad you've found someone wonderful to share your life with, especially now. I'm sure your mom would've been so proud to share this moment with you. I know she's cheering you on from heaven."

She soothes a piece of my broken soul. From the stage, Hunte begins singing "Sunnyside Up," and the happiness dissipates.

I shrug. "Maybe."

Auntie's eyes close as she listens to the headliners when their set begins. Opening them, she says, "I know I told you this on the phone, but I want to reiterate. In every conversation I had with your mother after she found out she was pregnant, I pushed her to tell Braxton." She points toward the door leading to the stage. "I begged her to tell him, and she tried. I was with her at a few concerts after, well, but she wasn't able to catch his eye again."

I remember the portion of my mother's diary. How her handwriting became smaller and smaller, then grew to more than double the normal size. At some points, the words were deeply etched into the pages. My heart, which had become as rigid as stone where it concerns my mother, beats harder against its prison. "Thanks for being there for her."

"I wrote several letters to him on her behalf. You know, back then there wasn't such a thing as the internet."

She's right. Back in 1991, when I was born, even basic email wasn't widespread.

“Anyway, I never sent them because she didn’t want me to. I felt he deserved to be aware of the consequences of his actions. Your mother wouldn’t listen to me.” She places her fingers against my jaw. “The fact she wasn’t able to tell Braxton about you was only half of the equation, though. She denied him the ability to get to know his second-born son, true, and that was a horrible sin she had to take to her grave. But the worse one was not sharing your parentage with you.”

“You got me there.”

She rubs her palms together. “Have you thought about telling your father the truth?”

My stomach clenches. “No. Fucking. Way.”

“I get where you’re coming from.” She rests her hand on my forearm. “Maybe before the tour’s over? It might help—”

“No.” At her stricken look, I amend, “But I do appreciate your concern.” I need to change this topic, pronto, and a question that’s been gnawing at me all this time pops out of my mouth. About the man my mother claimed was my father. “Who was Rory Chamberlain?”

She takes a step backward. “Rory was a friend of ours. He was a good man. When he graduated from high school, he joined the Marines and was sent to Operation Desert Storm right when it first started. He was killed in action. One of the first Americans who lost their lives during the war.” Her head hangs. “Such a loss.”

“How long did he and my mother date?” She never wrote about him in her diaries, but I want to find out why she chose him to be my “father.”

She licks her lips, then raises her chin. “Honey. He was two years ahead of us in school. His family moved to Florida

as soon as he graduated and went to boot camp. They were good people. But—”

It crystallizes in my mind. “They never even dated, did they?”

She shifts her weight from foot to foot. “No.”

My heart rate slows to sludge. “He never wrote her love letters? She didn’t pine for him for the rest of her life?”

“I’m sorry.”

I spin on my heel, trying to assimilate this new piece of lies making up the songbook of my life. Hell, at least now I know why his family never returned my letters. Fuck. I bet Mom never even mailed them for me.

On top of my anger, embarrassment screams through my body. I told all my friends growing up about my father, the war hero. They all believed me. Hell, *I* believed me. My aunt’s hand closes in on my arm and I jerk it away.

From behind me, she says, “I begged your mother to come clean to you. I told Lorinda it was one thing to give up on your father, but an entirely different kettle of fish not telling you.”

I think back, remembering Mom slamming the door and running into her bedroom, where I could hear her cry. I yelled at her to let me in, which she did after what seemed to be hours but probably only was a few minutes. She grabbed my chin and stared into my eyes. “Sometimes family breaks up, sweetie. But you’ll always have me.” Then she hugged me and I felt like everything was right with the world again.

“Must’ve been tough for you.” For Mom, too. But she deserved it.

“It was. For both of us.” She walks around to be in front of me. “After I moved away, my mother, your grandmother, kept me up to date with all of your milestones. With her passing, I was able to keep tabs of you on the internet, although I did it only sporadically.” She wipes away a tear. “I was so very happy you called.”

This woman is my only connection to the family I’ve lost. The shooter may have taken away my mother but she, herself, ruined my relationship with the only remaining Washingtons. At least I’m reconnecting with Auntie. She’s a welcome addition to the new family I’m building. Her, Uncle Casey, my cousins, my bandmates, their wives. And Cordy. Most not blood, but still family. The best kind of relationships.

It’s me pulling her in for a hug this time. “I’m happy you’re back in my life, Auntie.”

“Me too.”

When we break apart and rejoin her family, Cordy catches my eye. Without words, she asks if I’m okay, and I nod. For the first time in a long time, things seem to be going pretty freaking well.

Braxton’s voice sails through the green room, and I amend my thoughts. My life is getting back to a more even keel, but it’ll never be right.

He got my mother pregnant and left her to fend for herself. I know how these things go, however. Now, hookups after every concert are easy to come by, and I can only imagine how much more so back in the wild nineties.

Auntie had it right, though. It was one thing for Mom not to tell him about me, and a very different thing for her to keep the secret from me. Not only that, but to affirmatively lie to



me about Rory Chamberlain. As a Hunte, I could've been brought up with a much bigger family, surrounded by a brother and a sister. Or, at least, she could've shared the truth. My body goes taut.

Raine walks into the room. "Hey, guys, Hunte has one more song. We're going to be doing a meet-and-greet for them here, so if you want to move over to your dressing room until it's over, that'll be great."

We grab our stuff and start moving out. No way do I want to even be in the same room as my sperm donor.

Auntie Gloria's family approaches. She says, "I think we're going to get going, Trenton, er, Trent. We're very proud of you."

I share hugs with my family and escort them to the exit, then return to the dressing room. Cordy shows me some of the photos she took backstage. "Your aunt, uncle, and cousins are wonderful."

"Yeah. I'm glad we reconnected. Thanks to you."

My girlfriend smiles at me while scrolling through her camera roll. "I think your fans are going to especially love this one."

She shows me a picture of my aunt hugging me, her face beaming with pride. My breath stills as I absorb her similarity to my mother. *They're different people, Trent.* Very different. Despite everything, I'm so lucky she's back in my life. I now know she always was on my side.

Inside the new, smaller room, my band takes up all the furniture. I stand off to the side with Cordy. "Being Mom's twin, they shared everything. Until they didn't, that is."

She cocks her head to one side. “You truly forgive her for not getting in touch with you all these years?”

Calmness overtakes my body. “Auntie tried. She also tried to get Mom to reach out to Braxton. But back then it wasn’t so easy to contact rock stars as it is today.” I point at her phone. “Now, anyone can PM me and get my attention.”

“Or your social media manager’s attention.” She bumps my shoulder.

I fill her in on all the new details I learned today.

“I’m sorry things ended up this way.” She kisses my cheek. “But look where you are now. Maybe you can fully ease your burden by telling Braxton.”

All my ire toward my mother resurfaces in an instant. My limbs tighten to an excruciating level. “It was her story to tell him.” I remember the deep ridges in her diary as she confessed everything. Her pain was palpable. But nothing compares with mine. “Braxton probably doesn’t even remember her. He was a real manwhore back in the day.”

“Maybe.” She clucks. “Do you remember all your groupies?”

I refuse to look at the stranger before me. In a tight voice, I reply, “Yes, I do. I wasn’t a saint before we met, but I made a connection with every woman I’ve ever fucked, thank you very much.” I’m nothing like my father.

She flinches. “I didn’t mean anything untoward.”

Air expels from my nose faster than a guitar string breaking. “I know exactly what you meant, Cordelia.” I deliberately use her full name. “I survived this long without having a father. I certainly don’t need one now.”

Her arm reaches out toward me, but I step back. “It might help you, if you told him.”

“Help me?” Fists form. “I don’t need any help.”

“I think—”

Buzzing in my ears forces me to clench my teeth. “Stop. I don’t need your pity, either.”

“Trent, no. That’s not what I meant.”

Before she continues, the audience screams Hunte’s name, signaling the end of the concert. Even this far away from the backstage area, their excitement at listening to a Hunte concert is unmistakable. My breathing bottoms out. “I’ve already forgiven my aunt and her family. That’s friggin’ enough.”

She succeeds in grabbing my arm, but I yank it away. My breaths become shallower as the buzzing gets louder. The walls close in on me.

“I can’t breathe. I have to get out of here.” With my heart racing, I rush toward Dwight. “Hey, man, gimme your keys.”

“It’s dark and icy out there, dude,” he replies.

“The hotel’s not far.” When he doesn’t move, I add, “I need to clear my head.”

Dwight’s eyes scan the room and land on where I was standing, talking with Cordy. Although I don’t spare her a glance, I’m sure she looks less than happy. His brown eyes return to mine. “Here. Marvin drove her over.” He tosses me his keys. “Don’t let things fester too long between you two, okay.”

I close my fingers around my freedom. “Yeah, man. I’ll keep it cool.”

I stride out of the room and into the chilly New Hampshire evening. I need the Harley's speed under me. Seconds later, helmet strapped under my neck, I get on the open road.

# CORDELIA



If I don't stop pacing, I'm going to leave a rut in the cream-colored rug between the window and the bed. After staying in a dozen or so hotels, I can vouch they're basically all the same with interchangeable browns and beiges on the walls and floors. And sanitized artwork. After Trent bailed in the dressing room, I lasted another twenty minutes at the Pavilion before hitting my own hotel room—wasn't able to bring myself to go to his suite.

I've spent the past hours focusing on a rebuttal for the Dwight story. At least I've been more or less productive. His counselor was ahead of her time with prescribing drums to him. Maybe other kids with ADHD will find their way to playing drums as a way to manage the disease. Even though this idea still isn't mainstream, some exciting research has been made into drummers' brainwaves and such. I send my draft to Mr. Hewitt and stare blankly at the wall.

"He'll be back. Give him time." Dwight's order from earlier, no matter how sweetly couched, rings in my ears. Checking the clock once more, I confirm I've already given him plenty of time.

*You should be used to this.* You promised to be patient if something goes wrong, my mind stubbornly reminds me. So

did he. I place my hands over my ears and yell, “Stop!”

Nothing moves in the room. Not my cell phone with a call from my erstwhile boyfriend. Not a knock to alert me he’s back. Not even the radiator dares turn on.

Exhaling, I collapse onto the bed. It’s probably for the best, anyway. We were only together for a month or so. *Time for me to end this farce.* Yet—why are tears coating my cheeks?

Getting up, I open my suitcase and pick up one of my nightgowns.

My phone rings.

Adrenaline rushes through my body as I fumble to pick up my cell. *About time.* I get ready to lay into Trent when my foggy brain shows it’s the Franklin Pierce Hospital calling. I glance at the clock, which reads three a.m. Is this a crank?

*What if it isn’t?*

Grappling with the phone, I finally press the green button. “Hello?” I croak.

A disembodied voice asks, “Is this Ms. Cordelia Hernandez?”

My body freezes. “Yes.”

“I’m calling because your name was listed as the Emergency Contact for a,” papers rustle. “Trenton Washington.”

My breath accelerates faster than one of Dwight’s drum rolls. He put me down as his contact person? Shoving this thought aside, I ask, “What happened to Trent? How bad is he? Can I talk with him?” My questions stumble all over themselves.

“He was brought to the ER of Pierce Hospital after an accident. We’re located at ...”

I take down the address, then stare at my blank screen. I have to get to him. Realizing I’m still dressed, I grab my purse, shove my feet back into my boots, and let the door slam shut. In the hallway, I freeze. I don’t even have my coat. Shit. Finally getting the keycard to work, I fling open the closet and snatch it. Leaving the closet door ajar, I’m back in the hallway in seconds and stop dead. Again. I don’t have a car.

Raine. He can help me. Instead of the elevator, I expend some energy scrambling up two flights of stairs to get to his floor. Outside his room, I bang on the door. A groggy man opens it wearing only a pair of boxers. Recognizing me, he pushes his shaggy hair away from his face. “Cor—”

Before he can even finish my name, I dive in. “Trent. Accident. Hospital.” I wave my cell phone. “I need a ride.”

His eyes widen. “Shit.” He turns his back on me and I follow him into his suite. All business despite wearing next to nothing, he places a call. “I need three cars immediately to go to—” He looks at me. “What hospital?”

I give him the information and he relays it to the car service. When he hangs up, he says, “Cars should be here soon.”

I draw him in for a brief hug. “Thanks, Raine.”

As I spin to leave him, he says, “I’ll let the rest of the band know and we’ll get there as soon as we can. Take the first car.”

My body seizes as tears well. Without looking at him, I manage, “Appreciate it.” And I’m back in the hallway.

Once again forgoing the elevators, I hoof it down the six flights of stairs, savoring the pain it brings to my lungs. I cross

the empty granite-lined reception area and burst through the front door.

Everything's dark.

I wrap my coat around my body, not having the coordination to button it. All alone, I wait for my car, starting every time I see a pair of headlights. What if he's in a coma? What if he's in pain? What if he's *dead*?

Jumping from foot to foot, I try to calm my fears. Oh My God. His aunt! I snag my phone and fill her in, and she promises to meet me at the hospital.

Where is my car? If Trent didn't survive, the hospital would've told me, right? He's alive. Probably with something stupid like a broken pinky. Which would sideline his guitar playing—

A pair of headlights turn into the hotel's driveway and stops in front of me. I jump inside.

“Going to the hospital, miss?”

“Yes. Please. Fast.”

The driver nods, and we take off in such a hurry I'm thrown backward against the leather seat. In any other situation, I would've admired the upholstery and all of the accoutrements of the car. Now, I don't care so long as it has four wheels and a driver who can reunite me with Trent. “How long?”

“Normally, twenty minutes. But being this time of night, probably less. Have to be careful, though, because there's a lot of black ice.”

Black ice. Did he hit some of it on Dwight's Harley? Did it cause the accident?



My phone beeps, signaling a text.

Dwight: The whole band's coming. Where are you? What do you know?

Just that he was in an accident. I'm in a car already. Should be there soon.

Dwight: Shit.

**A** bout sums it up.

Don't know how your Harley is.

Dwight: It can always be replaced. Let me know what you find out. *Our car should get us there in 30.*

**I** don't respond. Instead, I toss my phone next to me and count mile markers. My heart rate speeds up with each passing mile.

He has to be okay. We can work through our differences. *If he wants to.* I shut down my conscience. He has to.

The driver points to a large building straight ahead. "That's the hospital, miss."

Relief surges through my body. Another couple of minutes and I'll be inside. "Thank you."

I count three more miles before the driver pulls up in front of the door. "Here you are. Hope everything's alright."

"Me, too."

I hop out and slip on ice I didn't even notice, and latch onto the car for stability. Shit. Is this what happened to Trent on the motorcycle? What did he have to stabilize himself? Air?

Shaking my head, I enter the mechanical revolving door going about a millimeter a second. Finally inside, I cast around. Where's the ER? A sign over a desk says "Reception," and I aim my footsteps forward.

"Hello." An elderly woman with glasses greets me.

"Hi. I'm looking for Trent Washington. He was in an accident."

The woman's eyebrows raise. She licks her finger and flips a page. Licks her finger and turns another page. Lick. Turn. Lick. Turn.

My body wants to hop over the desk and yank the book out of her hands.

Finally, she stops and her finger glides down the page. Slower than Juanita on a slide in the playground when she was a toddler. Because I can't wait another second, I ask, "Did you find him?"

She raises her head toward me. "I have the department's extension. Let me give them a call, honey."

I want to yell at her not to honey me, but I manage to keep my mouth shut. After what feels like an interminable wait, she says, "Do you have any information about a Trent Washington? I have a young lady here who is concerned."

*Concerned?* More like jumping out of my skin. I clench my teeth.

“Okay. I will. Thank you.” The receptionist hangs up the phone and pulls out a light blue piece of paper. She presents me the visitor pass, plus a map.

“Your Trent is in the Emergency Room. To get there—” She draws a route on the map.

Without waiting for her to finish, I raise the paperwork in the air and wave. “Thanks.”

My feet take me away from the reception area as fast as they can. Following the map, I arrive at the ER. Finally. Trent’s aunt beat me here, sitting in a chair off to the side. She brings a tissue up to her eyes.

Now that I’m here, so close I can almost feel her hand in mine, I stall. Maybe I don’t want to know how he’s doing. Maybe he’s already been discharged. Maybe he’s in the back somewhere singing for the nurses.

Auntie Gloria looks up and our gazes lock.

Or maybe he’s really messed up.

She stands and I cross the room. When I get within a pace of her, she opens her arms wide and for the second time tonight, I’m enveloped in her big hug.

When she lets me go, I step back. “Where’s your family? Uncle Casey? Your kids?”

She shakes her head. “Casey has an early morning, and I didn’t want to wake the kids if I didn’t have to.”

So she’s all alone, too. I give her another embrace and whisper, “You’re not alone any longer. Did you speak with any doctors yet?”

Auntie Gloria hauls me tighter, then releases me. “Let’s sit.”

I plunk my body down in the seat next to the one she was using. After she settles herself, she begins, “When I got here, his doctor was at the nurse’s station and told me Trent was in a motorcycle accident. They think it was the damned black ice. Anyway, he wiped out pretty badly and was thrown over a ravine. A truck driver saw the bike on the other side of the road and pulled over. He found Trent and called 911.”

As she talks, all air evaporates from my lungs. “Is he—” I can’t bring myself to complete my sentence.

She grabs my hand. “He’s out for testing somewhere.” She squints. “I don’t remember what they’re testing.”

At least he’s still alive. They don’t test unless the patient is alive, right? “Did you see him at all?”

“No.” She starts to cry again. I pat her back and snag a tissue for myself. We remain in our own misery for a while.

“I’m actually happy Lorinda isn’t here for this. It would’ve killed her.”

“We don’t know what’s going on with him yet. We need to keep the faith.” I’m not sure who needs to hear this more, her or me. But we both calm a little.

She blows her nose.

I can’t restrain myself any longer. With a voice losing its power with every word, I confess, “This is all my fault. Trent got mad at me after you left. I suggested he tell Braxton.”

Her eyes get bigger. “You know?”

“I do. He shared his mother’s diary with me.”

She nods. “I told him to do the same thing.”

“Trent felt, uhm, overwhelmed. He lashed out and borrowed Dwight’s Harley to get away from everything.” And went straight into a ditch.

God.

Noise from the entrance to the ER garners our attention. “The band’s here,” I say. Not like I needed to tell her.

“I see. Trent will be happy his friends are around him.”

I wave, and the guys hurry in our direction as a tiny Indian woman wearing a white coat and stethoscope approaches. “Cordelia Hernandez?”

I scramble to my feet. “Yes.”

Next to me, Auntie Gloria stands. “I’m Trenton’s aunt.”

The doctor looks at me, glances at the woman at my side, and registers the band approaching. She waves us toward a corner of the room. “May I have a word with both of you, please?”

The members of the band notice what’s going on and detour to some chairs in the waiting room.

The white coat begins. “My name is Doctor Patel, and I’m treating Mr. Washington.” After customary pleasantries, she continues, “He suffered quite a fall off his motorcycle, and he’s still unconscious. We’ve got him stabilized now.”

My eyes slam shut. Tears stream down my cheeks. “That’s good, right?”

“There’s more.”

Auntie Gloria places her hand on my forearm. I brace myself for the doctor’s next words.

“In the fall, he broke his leg, which will need surgery to set. But his kidney requires immediate attention. You see, one of his kidneys was damaged beyond repair. Tests show that his other one is very low functioning.”

At my quizzical expression, she explains, “He needs a kidney transplant to survive.”

I parrot, “A kidney transplant?” His aunt’s hand flies to her chest.

“Yes. And time is of the essence. Does he have any next of kin?”

“Me. And my kids. I’m his mother’s sister.”

I almost shout that we’re touring with his father.

“Great. We’ll check to see if you’re a match first, if that’s okay with you?”

“Of course.” Trent’s aunt gives me a kiss on the cheek and disappears with Doctor Patel.

Once they go through a door marked “Restricted,” the faces of the men I’ve been working with for the past month surround me. Dwight’s the first to speak. “Come on, let’s sit. You look like you’re ready to collapse at any moment.” He takes my hand and leads me down into a chair. He sits on the other side of me, with Joey and Maurice on the other side. Raine stands in front of us.

I fill them in on Trent’s condition. The words spill out of my mouth, together with the tears I can’t hold back any longer.

Dwight places his hand on my knee. “It’ll be okay. Trent’s strong. He’ll come out of this with flying colors.” Joey and Maurice lay their hands over Dwight’s.

“He’s got this,” Joey says.

“And we got his back,” Maurice avows.

Comfort spreads through my body for a moment, knowing his band of brothers is here for one of their own. *Do I even belong here?*

Raine interrupts my dark thoughts. “Any intel about the truck driver who found him?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Okay. I’ll go see what information I can get from the nurses and call the police station. I want to reward the guy.” Raine stalks off toward the desk.

We all watch Raine for a moment. Dwight mumbles, “His aunt will be a match. She has to be.” The others murmur their agreement.

What if she’s not?

There is someone with a closer relationship to him than her. In addition to his aunt, I’m the only other person on earth who knows this.

I need to find Braxton.

# TRENT



I open my eyes to an unfamiliar sound. Beeping. Where am I?

Turning my head, I see Cordelia sitting next to me. She's stroking my hand. My throat feels like sandpaper. I manage to croak, "Cordy?"

Huge, mocha orbs zero in on me. "Trent? You're awake?"

"Was I run over by a truck?"

She giggles, and my heart expands. Then contracts into my body as pain lances throughout. "Ow!" I rub my free hand over my heart. Wires are attached to my body. "Where am I?"

My girlfriend licks her lips. "What do you remember?"

I think back, remembering talking with my aunt backstage. Her pushing me to tell Braxton he's my father. Cordy, separately, piling onto the bandwagon. I also remember needing to get away and grabbing Dwight's keys. Taking his bike out.

Speeding along the road.

Hitting black ice and going sideways.

Things get hazy from there.

"An accident. I skidded."



She nods and whispers, “Yeah. Dwight’s bike went one way, and your body went another. You ended up in a ditch. A truck driver came across the accident scene and called it in. Raine’s tracking him down to send a gift.”

I glance around. “Am I in a hospital?”

“Yes, and you’ve given us all quite the scare. Your doctors all thought you’d wake up sooner than this, but I’m so happy you’re awake now.”

“How long have I been out?”

“About a day.”

“Wow.” I send a desperate message throughout my body. Pain and heaviness are all that respond. My leg feels like it weighs a thousand pounds. Oh my God, am I paralyzed? “What happened to my body? Can I walk?”

She smiles, and my spirits lift. I know the answer before she says another word. “Yes, you’re pretty banged up and you have a broken leg.”

No wonder everything feels heavy. “Oh, well, that’s not too terrible. I can play on a chair.” I try to offer her a grin, but fear it looks more like a snarl.

A frown mars her face. “There’s something more.”

Before she can tell me what else is wrong, a team of doctors and nurses floods the room and kicks her out, no matter how much I protest. Finally, when I’m alone in the room except for one tiny woman wearing a white coat, I demand, “What’s going on?”

The woman wraps a stethoscope around her neck. “I’m Doctor Patel, and I’ve been your attending physician. You

have a broken leg, some severe road burns and bruises. You'll heal from all of these things, with time."

"Good news."

She nods. "Yes. That's the good news. The bad news is you damaged your kidney in your fall off the motorcycle."

This doesn't seem like too big of a deal. "Well, I can use the other one. I don't need two, right?"

"Ordinarily, I would agree. However, not in your case, since you were born with a condition called kidney dysplasia. This means only one of your kidneys developed properly and the other, basically, doesn't work."

My breath stutters. "What?"

She nods. "You're one of the approximately four-thousand people who are born with only one functioning kidney. This usually isn't a big deal, as your operative one takes over the needed processes for both. However, because your good kidney was damaged in the accident, you need a transplant."

I try to process the information the doctor gave me. "I need a kidney transplant? Only one of my kidneys works?"

She consults her iPad. "During the accident, you went down hard, directly on your side. You broke your leg and impacted directly on your functioning kidney. The trauma to it is severe. We need to get you a new one right away." She points to wires attached to my body. "You have a catheter, and we've put you on hemodialysis."

My mind blanks. I'm on dialysis? I swallow the sawdust in my throat. *Think, man.* I have no living relatives except for my aunt. I've never acknowledged any others—not that I've known about the others for longer than a month. "My aunt lives here in New Hampshire. I bet she's a match."

The doctor taps on her screen. “We tested her as well as her children. They didn’t match, I’m sorry.”

“Well, isn’t there a registry of organ donors?”

“We’ve added your name to the list, but no matches have come up yet.”

Beeping peals throughout the room and she checks my heart rate. After urging me to calm down, she explains, “We’re looking for donors everywhere we possibly can.”

Calm down? How the fuck can I calm down when my life might be ending. “How. Long?”

“How long what?”

Is she deliberately being obtuse? “How long before I won’t need a transplant because I’ll be dead?”

“Don’t say that. We’ll find you a donor. You must stay positive.”

I’m positive I’m going to die without a new kidney, and all I want to find out is when the Grim Reaper will come to collect. I take a deep breath, and the beeping stops. Thank fuck. “Doctor, please tell me how long I have to find a donor.”

“We don’t know for sure. I’d like to see this happen within a week or so.”

I nod. A week. I have seven days to wrap up everything here on earth. Then I’ll join my mother and teach her what Holy Hell means.

The doctor continues. “I’m going to let you rest now. It’s a great sign you’re awake. Please have faith in the system and know you have a lot of people on your side. They all got tested for you.”

“Who?”

“Your band, the people who support you like your roadies, your aunt and her family. There are still more people to test, so remain hopeful for me, okay?”

My arm flops in the bed. “Yeah,” I mutter and turn my head away. A week. I have one week left to right my wrongs. Or cement the things that need to be cemented. Deep.

“I’m going to leave you alone, and let your family and friends come in, one at a time.” She points to a button. “Press there for more pain meds.”

Pain I can deal with. Reminds me I’m still alive. For now.

Picking up another rectangular contraption, she holds it out. “This is your call button. If you need anything, press it and someone will be here for you.”

Automatically, I take it. “Thanks,” I mutter, my brain racing ahead. What do I need to do in seven days to set everything right? Or wrong?

The doctor leaves, and I mentally begin preparing a list. I need to tell my band I love each one of them and give them permission to find my replacement. A couple of talented guys pop in my head. Yeah. The band will do fine without me. Maybe better.

Then there’s my aunt, who I’m now only reconnecting with. Since I’ve been out of her life for decades, I’m sure I won’t be missed.

An image of Braxton appears, and I shove him far away. What he never knew won’t hurt him. Before all this, I wanted to punish him. Now, I don’t really care. He never meant anything to me, so why should I tell him now?

The last person who comes to mind is my girlfriend. For the first time since I was given my diagnosis, tears spring to my eyes. I don't want to leave her. No matter how much we fight, she's my perfect match. Her passion rivals my own. She's so talented with the whole social media gig. And she's suffered so much in her life already.

But I can take care of her, even after I'm gone. I have some savings, plus my mother's house. I'll leave her everything I have so she won't be so stressed about money in the future.

A future she'll have with another guy. Someone else will make her scream in pleasure, laugh at his stupid antics, and give her babies. All the things I wanted to do with her. If only I had more time. Somehow I bet fifty years wouldn't be enough.

"Oh, Trent." Auntie Gloria rushes into my room.

I swipe the tears away from my face. "Hi."

She rolls a chair over to my bedside, sits on the too tiny seat, and grabs my hand in hers. "How are you feeling?"

Like I only have seven days left on this earth. "Like I wiped out on a bike."

She chuckles. "That you did, my boy."

"Auntie, I need you to do something for me."

"Anything."

"Can you get a lawyer over here? I need to do my will."

In a commanding voice, she orders, "Now, stop saying such things, Trenton Washington. You're going to be just fine, you hear me."

If only that were true. “I need a new kidney. You and your kids weren’t a match. No donors on the registry work either. I’m trying to be responsible here.”

She sighs. “I’m not giving up on you, so you can’t either. There’s a big push for everyone to get tested. I mean everyone. Your little Cordelia put it out on social media, and all your fans are lining up as we speak. There will be a match.”

“She did what?” I can’t keep the shock out of my voice. “Why would she do such a thing?”

My aunt strokes my cheek. “Because she loves you, silly.”

Love? My mouth clamps shut. Such a wasted emotion when I’m only around for another week. I shake my head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Keep the faith. I have enough for the both of us.”

A knock sounds and a nurse comes in. “I need to check Mr. Washington’s vitals. If you would please give us a moment.”

Relieved she’s leaving for no other reason than I need to process what she told me, I accept her kiss. The nurse checks my blood pressure, temperature, and all the machines in the room. Writing something on a whiteboard hanging across from me, she says, “Okay. You’re doing great.” She offers a practiced tip of her lips. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours to check on you again.”

“Thanks.”

When the nurse leaves, I go over how I want to leave things with Cordelia. Love? God help me, I do love her, too. If only things were different. *Like I had years ahead of me instead of days.* But I need to play the cards I’ve been dealt. I don’t want Cordy to be here with me when I die. It would

make my passing that much harder on me. On her. Yet, in my heart of hearts, I'm sure she won't leave. This is so fucked up.

How didn't I know I had a bum kidney?

The main subject of my musings sails through the door, a bright smile plastered on her face. Such a brave soul. I don't want to leave her.

"You're still awake."

"Yeah." My stomach rolls. I can't send her away. I'm not strong enough. "A little birdie told me you posted my situation on social media and fans are checking to see if they're a match."

She shrugs. "It was the least I could do. I'm sorry I wasn't able to ask you, but you were unconscious. The band thought it was a good idea."

My brothers would. "I want you to know that even if no match is found, I appreciate what you did."

She sits in the seat my aunt vacated, only it doesn't look as tiny against her body. The curves that respond to my every touch—when I had the strength and ability. I move my hand a fraction and she takes it. "You're going to get through this. You have to."

I force my lips upward. "I'll do my best, okay?" In my heart, I don't believe what I'm telling her.

She nods, and tears start flowing down her cheeks. I wish I could wipe them away, but I can't reach. Fuck, I wish they never had to start. After a few minutes, she grabs a tissue and wipes her cheeks. "I'm alright now." She inhales a deep breath. "We got this. Something will come up, it has to."

I squeeze her hand. I don't want to say this, but I must. "If it doesn't, you have to promise me you'll continue moving forward. You'll keep working in social media because you're fucking badass with it. You'll continue seeing the world." I glance away from her because I can't watch her face as I say this. "You'll meet a great guy, get married, and have babies with him."

She bursts out, "Oh, no! I'm not doing any such thing unless it's with you!" She rushes to her feet, kissing my forehead. "I love you."

I open my mouth but nothing comes out. She gives me her side-eye, then continues, "That's right, you dumbass. I. Love. You. I'm saying it out loud, to you. Right here, right now." She stands up straighter. "You better love me back, or I'll never forgive you."

An unanticipated laugh escapes without my permission. "Then I guess I better tell you I love you too, since I don't want to go to my grave knowing you're mad at me."

The impact hits me square in my chest. Hard. But the machines don't beep. No, our admissions go much deeper than my heart rate—our confessions come straight from the soul.

Cordy leans over and plants her lips on mine. The touch is tender, yet so much more than any other kiss we've ever shared. A touch I want to savor for the rest of my days, no matter whether it's measured in days or hours. "I love you," I whisper.

"Right back at you," she returns.

We stare into each other's eyes for a long moment, until the opening of my door breaks our trance. My girlfriend spins around and moves away from me.



When the new occupants of my room cross my line of sight, my body tenses. What is *he* doing here? I glance between a smiling Sara and Braxton, and over to Cordy, but no one says anything.

Until Braxton breaks the silence. “I’m glad you’re awake. That’s great.”

My shoulder rises and falls. “Thanks.”

“We’re happy to see you doing so well,” Sara offers.

Well? I’m doing *well*? I guess for a dead man walking—rather, lying in a hospital bed with one leg in a cast—being awake is a good thing. I can’t respond, so I blink.

Braxton takes a step closer and places his hand on the footrail. “We have some good news for you.”

I glance at Cordy, but she’s looking at him, a small frown marring her face. Sara’s watching her husband. Because it’s expected, I reply, “Guess I could use some good news about now.”

He nods. “We’ve talked it over, Sara and me, and it’s a go. I’m here. I’m ready. My kidneys are your perfect match. I want you to have one of mine.”

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

I round my gaze to Cordy, who’s now sporting a huge smile. How could she do this to me? All that bullshit about loving me she spouted was just that—bullshit. My ire blasts at her. “How dare you!”

My “girlfriend” whips toward me, her mocha eyes open wide. Her hand covers the spot where her heart should be. Her head shakes violently from side to side. “No, I—”

My hand slashes through the air. “Save it.” I direct my attention to Braxton. “Wow. Must make you feel like a big star, coming to the aid of your dying son. All you have to do is give up a kidney. And some sperm.”

The air in my hospital room stills while my own beating heart gallops. Thank fuck the machines somehow remain silent.

Sara’s the first to find her voice. She stutters, “What?”

I stare at Braxton’s wife. “Didn’t he tell you what Cordelia obviously told him?” I spit out her full name like an epithet. “How rich.” I focus on the rock star who picked my mother out of the crowd for a quick tumble. “You’re only coming here to do your fatherly duty now, after over thirty years. Keep your kidney.”

Braxton’s knuckles become whiter as he crushes the foot railing. He mimics his wife’s query. “What?”

“I’ve had enough of you two.” I point toward the door. “Go. Leave.”

Sara places her hand on Braxton’s shoulder and turns him toward the door. Before they walk out, she says, “We’ll be back, Trent.” They shuffle out of my room.

I round on the woman who I thought was special. Who was going to inherit all my worldly possessions. Well, not anymore. I snarl, “How dare you?”

In a low voice, she responds, “I didn’t. I swear to you I didn’t tell him. I only asked them to get tested, like I’ve been begging everyone to do.”

“Pretty words. Too bad I don’t believe them. Go! Get out of my sight!”

“No. I would never—”

The machines around me choose this moment to blare. I’m so fucking pissed, and now the whole hospital knows it. Good. I don’t care.

Within a few seconds, a nurse rushes in and shoos Cordelia out of my room. To her retreating back, I expend my remaining energy, “Good! And stay away!”

## TRENT



**A**fter those fucking machines stop beeping, Doctor Patel consults her iPad. “I understand that as well as talented, you’re a very lucky man.”

I turn my face toward the window and stare out at the deep blue sky, which belies the freezing cold temperature both outside and in. How appropriate. I lift my arm. “Whatever.” I let it drop back to the bed.

“Honestly, not everyone finds a match in time. You should be grateful.”

*Grateful.* Is she crazy? “I don’t want his kidney.”

The doctor makes a clucking noise. “Then you want to die?”

Yes.

I take a breath.

No.

I don’t know.

Maybe death would be preferable to living through this hell. I settle for a shrug.

Rolling the chair—the one Cordelia and my aunt used—into my line of sight, Doctor Patel sits directly in front of me.

No avoiding her this time. “I’m going to give it to you straight. If you don’t take Mr. Hunte’s kidney, you will survive maybe another week. Against all odds, he is a perfect match for you. You can win here. You can live. No matter what your beef is with your organ donor, the fact remains he is willing to give you one of his kidneys. Think about the people who love you. Think about all the great music the world will miss out on if you let yourself die. Don’t do that.” She rises, the chair rolling backward.

Her words strike a chord, but it’s faint. Death seems preferable to living in this nightmare.

When I don’t respond, she says, “Consider what I said. But don’t take too long. I want you to have the best possible chance of making a full recovery.” The door clicks shut. I’m alone. Again.

I already have my sperm donor’s blood flowing through my veins. What would an additional kidney do? *Plenty*. Do I want to live or die? Dying seems like the better choice. I retreat into the rabbit hole of what went down a few minutes ago, my head spinning.

A while later, the door opens and I whip around expecting Doctor Patel again, only to see Auntie Gloria walk in. Before she can even tread another step, I blurt, “You didn’t tell Braxton he’s my father, did you?”

My aunt comes to a full stop. “No. I haven’t even spoken with him.” She maneuvers the overused chair around my bed. “I did hear, though, he’s a perfect match for you, and he’s willing to donate his kidney. To you.”

“Yeah.”

If she hadn't ratted my mother out to him for thirty years, no way would she do it now. For the hundredth time, I replay what went down in this room.

My heart counsels me that Cordy didn't tell him.

The truth smacks me across the face. No way could he have faked his reaction. *You outed yourself, stupid.*

I remain silent while my aunt sits. "How are you feeling?"

Like I want to jump up and kill someone, if only my leg wasn't in a cast. I've been reduced to a pity organ recipient who has some good friends in a band and an aunt who seems to care. Nothing else. I certainly don't deserve to have a girlfriend, since I wrongly accused her of blabbing to Braxton and sent her away. "Like shit."

She strokes my cheek with the back of her fingers. "I bet." She scans the room, checking out all the machines to which I'm attached. "Let me tell you a story, okay?"

"Sure." Why not? It's not like I don't have time to kill. *Kill. Ha!*

"There was a time way back when you were about three years old." She gives me a soft smile. "You were so cute back then. You walked around with this little strut." She laughs.

I try to remember how I was back then, but only fragments of memories come to mind. Mainly featuring my mother, and how wonderful she was to me back then. I punch the pillow behind my head.

"Well, Lorinda and I brought you into a music shop one day and your eyes lit up like it was Christmas. You played on the keyboards and drums, banging anything you could get your little hands on. Then you found a guitar and you stopped right in front of it, as if you were transfixed."

A fuzzy memory surfaces. I frown, trying to bring it into focus. “It was made for my size. Blue.”

Her lips rise. “Yup.”

My body jolts as I remember my little hand reaching out and touching the strings for the first time. I haven’t thought about my first guitar in ages, especially now with my three Les Pauls.

“You didn’t strum it like I thought you would. No, you touched each string carefully. Your hand slid up the neck and you examined the instrument as if it were priceless. When the store owner came over and asked if you wanted to put it on, you couldn’t answer him. You only nodded.”

I pick up the story. “He put the strap across my body and ... I felt like I was home.”

“Yes.” She pushes her hair away from her face, her lips curved upward. “Then you strummed your first note. And another one. We all were amazed at how you took to the guitar. Of course, my sister bought it for you, and you refused to take it off even when you went to bed.” She laughs.

“I loved that guitar.”

Her eyes crinkle. “Well, later on, your mother and I shared some beers on the front porch. We had a real humdinger of a fight. It ended with me begging her to try again to tell Braxton about his son. About how you were a chip off the old block. She yelled at me that it was none of my business, and how you believed your father was Rory. Who was dead.”

I turn my head away. When the silence continues, I force my gaze to return to her. Only then does she pick up where she left off. “That was the beginning of the end for your mother and me. I knew, even back then, you had—at the very least—

inherited his musical ability. I didn't learn until a decade later that you also got his singing voice."

She tries to place her hand on mine, but I scooch it away.

"And now Braxton knows the truth. It's after your mother passed, but at least he knows. It's right for him to know, Trenton. You didn't need him growing up, although I'm sure you felt his absence, even if you believed your father was killed in combat. But now you do need him. Desperately. I, for one, really want you to consider his offer."

Because she's my aunt, my mother's twin, I don't tell her I'd rather die than be beholden to the man for anything more than he's already given me. "I hear you."

She stands. "I've said what I needed to say. Just consider this. This is his second chance to give you life. One in which he willingly and knowingly has agreed to do. Which, might I add, he volunteered to do before he found out the truth. Think on that." She bends down and kisses my forehead, then leaves without saying another word.

I'm left blessedly alone for at least thirty minutes before the nurse comes back in to check my vitals. When she leaves, Dwight enters the room. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," I reply truthfully. Not going to lie to my brother.

"I bet." He stops next to me but instead of sitting, he remains standing.

"Hey, sorry about your Harley. I'll get you a replacement."

He waves his hand in dismissal. "We'll sort it out later. She's the least of our problems." Caramel arms cross his broad chest. "So. Braxton Hunte, huh?"



My eyes close. “Yeah.”

“Seems to me he’s never been a Marine, and he’s still very much alive.”

I pluck the sterile blanket and remain silent. I deserve this.

“Who else knew?”

“Mom. My aunt.” My lips pucker as my breath streams out. “Cordelia.”

My best friend shifts from one leg to the other. “You see, I understand the first two. Hell, of course I get them. But your girlfriend? Really? Not me? Don’t you trust me?”

The tone of his voice is more painful than my road burn. “Dwight, I just couldn’t bring myself to share it with you. We’ve known each other all our lives. You were there when I would talk about my so-called hero father. How could I tell you it was all a lie?”

He kicks the floor. “You should’ve found a way.” He turns his head toward the door.

My life is a fucking mess. “I’m such a schmuck. You’re right. Okay? Is that what you want to hear?” When he doesn’t respond, I barrel ahead. “But there’s another side to this, you know. You guys were all so excited to be touring with the Rock-and-Roll-Hall-of-Famers-Hunte. How would you have felt to know the truth?” I pause for a beat. “Well, I can tell you. It sucked.” I face the window, so now we’re both staring away from each other.

A few moments later, the ubiquitous chair rolls on the tiled floor. It squeaks as it accepts Dwight’s weight. “I didn’t think of it like that.” He hits a beat on my bed. “So, how in the hell did this happen in the first place?”

I roll my face toward my best friend and am sure we're back on the right footing. Shrugging, I reply, "The typical. She went to a Hunte concert, he picked her out of the crowd, and voila. Here I am."

"Dude. That's pretty fucked up." He dons a smirk. "Kinda in the truest sense of the word."

My eyebrows raise and we bust out in laughter. Well, he laughs and I chuckle, as anything more is too painful. We shoot the shit for a while, the only hiccup coming—from my perspective, not his—when he tells me how Cordelia took down the stupid tabloid's latest story about him from this very hospital room. We end with a fist bump and I'm grateful, once more, to have such a brother. Visits with Maurice and Joey go much in the same vein. When I leave this earth, I'm going to miss my band.

*My band?*

The group of guys I've grown up with, celebrated with, mourned with. Who have always been there for me, as I have been there for them. We've written songs together—well, they've come up with the music and I've added the lyrics. Who will write their lyrics for them when I'm gone?

I pound the bed. Not like I've been able to write a single lyric since Mom was killed.

I flip my head. They can find another songwriter. *Do I want them to?*

Forgetting the living, I focus in on my mother and allow myself the luxury to think about the good times. She single-handedly raised me. She supported my choice to go into music knowing full well I was following in my father's footsteps.

She always attended our gigs. Cheered the loudest. Danced with the crowd.

God, I miss her.

I miss her support. Her ready laugh, and how she always encouraged my dreams. All I ever wanted in life was to make her proud. And here we are, opening for a humongous band, and touring the East Coast. Despite the name of the headliner, I bet she's looking down on me and smiling.

It hits me like a new guitar riff.

I want to stay here. I want to play music with my friends and make more people dance and sing and cheer. I want to make a name for TLR, as Cordelia dubbed us.

But to do all that, I need to accept a kidney from my father.

What did Auntie Gloria say? "This is his second chance to give me life." As far as I know, he isn't backing away from his decision just because he found out I'm his son.

My eyes slam shut.

If I accept his offer, it doesn't mean we'll have any sort of relationship. It only shows I want to live to spend more time with my boys. A vision of Cordelia pops into my mind. No. Not her. Not the way I ran her out of the room.

Or maybe...

I'm still mulling over my less-than-spectacular options when someone knocks on my door. I clench my jaw. "What?"

Sara, alone, marches through the door, an unreadable look on her face. My body tenses. Guess I don't have to make a decision after all. He wasn't even man enough to tell me he's changed his mind himself. She stops at the foot of my bed. "Can I be straight with you?"

No howdy-dos with this one. Guess her accountant training stood her in good stead for our conversation. I flip my wrist, indicating the floor is all hers.

“I’m not going to lie and tell you that your, well, truth didn’t come as a complete shock to us. Brax had absolutely no idea you were his son.” Her gaze remains fixed on me.

“Yeah. I kinda got that.”

She nods. “But shock or not, this is our new reality. All of us. You’ve got Hunte blood in your veins. You’ve done some amazing things with your life. TLR is a fantastic band, and you have a wonderful group of friends in them. Plus, your girlfriend is a real go-getter. Despite everything, or maybe because of it, you’ve created a very good life for yourself.”

Her description echoes my prior thoughts. Some of my wariness recedes. “Thank you. I’m aware I’ve been blessed.”

“Yes, you have. So, please don’t throw all of it away out of some sort of animus against Brax. He’s a wonderful man, with a huge heart. If you let him save your life now, you’ll have time to get to know each other.” She pauses, blinking several times. “And I’ll be able to experience life with my third child.”

“You want me in your family?” The question spills out of my lips before my brain can censor it.

Her fingers steeple. “Not going to lie. This has been quite jolting, but I knew Brax’s reputation when I married him. We have some things to sort through, clearly, but none of it involves you, if you get my drift. That aside, I want to get to know the man you are. I think you’ll complete the Hunte family in new and exciting ways.”

Is she speaking for herself alone here, or for him as well? “Have you asked him if he’s still willing to donate?”

She rearranges her fingers. “Not directly. I can’t imagine he’d turn his back on his own son.” She steps toward the top of the bed. “Will you let him do this for you?”

“Guess my choices are limited.” My heart rate picks up. While death does have its allure, I’m not ready to give up on my life. I let my decision sink into my bones. Smoothing down the blanket, I ask, “Could you possibly ask him to come in here?”

Her face brightens into a breathtaking smile, her beauty catching me off guard. Braxton chose well. Really well.

“I’d be delighted.” She reaches out and touches my cheek, then leaves.

I don’t have much time to digest our conversation when a blond head pokes into the room. “Sara said you wanted to speak with me?” With an unnatural gait, he walks to the foot of my bed, where his wife stood minutes ago. Guess he isn’t sure what to expect.

Makes two of us.

“Thank you for coming. I’ve made a decision.” I swallow. “If you’re still willing to donate your kidney to me, I’d be happy to take it.” I stumble on the last part of the sentence, but I manage to get it out.

He lifts up taller, dipping his hands into his pockets. “Yes, the offer stands. I’m glad to give it to you. I was happy to donate it before,” he pauses. “Before I found out I’m your father.”

There it is. Hanging between us in the air like a sound check gone bad.

No matter what, I need to nip this in the bud. “Don’t go reading anything into this. It’s not like I have a lot of options.

Either I take your kidney or I die. Even though I probably should, I'm not ready to cross the bridge yet."

"I'm glad you made this decision." He stares at me, and I feel as if I'm under a microscope. "You have my eyes. I don't know how I didn't see the truth before."

My palm rubs over my eyelids.

When I don't respond, he asks, "Could you, I mean, would you, please, ah, tell me about your mother?"

Did I make the right decision? Dying and getting out of this whole mess or living and trying to make it with my band. My band still wins. Even if this choice comes with Braxton Hunte more firmly attached to my being.

Where does Cordelia fit into the scenario?

*Does she? Does she want to?*

I sigh. I can give him the basics. Guess I owe him this much. He is giving me his kidney and all. "Her name was Lorinda Washington. She was only nineteen when you picked her out of a crowd and took her backstage after one of your performances. It was only the one time."

He tugs on his ear. "That was when?"

"1990. I was born in March of 1991."

"I wasn't divorced from Hilary." His gaze drops to the bed. "I was a bit, uhm, wild back then. Before I met Sara."

"I get it."

"I didn't know. I swear to you I didn't know you existed. I mean, I only met you when your band won the radio contest and you guys opened for us at Madison Square Garden."

Of this, I have no doubt. "Yeah."

“Your aunt? The woman who’s been here?”

“Her twin.”

His eyes drift to the window and he nods. “She seemed vaguely familiar,” he mutters. After a few moments, he licks his lips. “I understand your mother was killed in a mall shooting a few months back?”

My throat tightens. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry.” He takes a deep breath and I steel myself for what’s to come. “How long have you known? When did she tell you I was your father? Were you ever going to tell *me*?” This last is laced with hurt, pain, and anger.

I can sympathize.

Ignoring his last question, I begin with the first. “She never told me.” My hands fist at my side. “I only found out recently when I read her diary for the first time.” Why am I telling him all this?

He executes a couple of steps and stops next to my hip for a moment before sitting on the edge of the bed. I move my arm away from him. If I could disappear, I would. My breathing accelerates. I can’t take any more of this father-son bonding. It’s too much.

He looks like he wants to ask me more questions about my mother, but I’m done. I didn’t ask him to be my father, only to give me one of his kidneys. Time to redirect this conversation. If that’s even what’s going on here. “So, what’s all involved with this transplant stuff?”

He grabs his earlobe again. “Honestly, I don’t know too much other than we’re a match. Which makes sense, considering—”

I cut him off. “Right.”

We gaze at each other for an extended note.

“Then I guess we should get ourselves educated. I don’t have too much longer, or so I’ve been told.” I press the call button.

My nurse enters immediately. Wonder if she’s been waiting on the other side of my door this whole time with the hope of getting a glimpse of the rock star? “Mr. Washington, everything okay in here?”

“I’ve made a decision. I’ve agreed to accept Braxton’s kidney.”

“I’m relieved.” She offers both of us a wide smile.

When she doesn’t make any other statements, Braxton prompts, “So, what do we do now?”

“Oh. I’ll get Doctor Patel in here so she can discuss your next steps.” She leaves us with a whoosh of her ponytail.

I lick my lips. “I don’t want you to read anything into my decision, okay?”

He grimaces. “Can you give me a chance?”

My entire body tightens as my fight-or-flight mechanism is tripped. I look out the window. “Now’s not the time.”

All I want is to reach out and hold onto Cordy for support. But I pushed her away, and I’m sure she doesn’t want anything to do with me. So much for our promise to be patient with this relationship stuff.

We wait in awkward silence until Doctor Patel comes in and gives us an explanation of what to expect. Braxton raises some good points. He ends with, “Please don’t feel upset by



this question, but how many kidney transplants have you performed?”

“I’ve assisted on two. During my residency.”

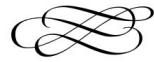
He nods. “Do you think we might be better served if the operation were performed in a more metropolitan hospital, say in New York City?”

I never would’ve thought to ask this question, but now Braxton brings it up, he makes a good point. I add, “That is, if you even think I would be able to make the trip.”

Doctor Patel shifts her weight from foot to foot. “I understand your concern and was going to suggest this move. To answer your question Mr. Washington, I do think you can make the trip via helicopter. But I would do it quickly. Fly out tonight, if possible. I can arrange for the surgery to be performed by a friend I have in New York City who has a lot of experience with transplants.”

Braxton looks at me, his hazel eyes an exact match to mine. Without words, the decision is made.

# CORDELIA



I saw Doctor Patel enter the room a while ago. Sara asked Braxton to go into Trent's room thirty minutes ago. I'm in the waiting room with the members of TLR and Hunte, as well as Trent's aunt. Around me, everyone chatters about Braxton being Trent's father. They call him Brax.

Comparisons are made between his and Trent's guitar playing. And their similar tenor singing voices.

Obvious differences—like the fact Trent's half-Black—are brought up. Not in a disparaging way, but rather as a statement of fact.

Trent's bandmates seem to be on board with this new development. Braxton's bandmates already have concluded it's pretty cool as well.

Me? I remember the last words Trent hurled at me, with such venom. I'd rather have Big Rolls kick me out of my home and job again than to be accused like Trent did in his room. That he jumped to the conclusion I told Braxton the truth, without any proof, sears my soul.

The fact remains, though. I'm still here. Why? *Because you dropped a big hint to Braxton last night.* And because I promised Trent I'd be patient if something goes sideways. How much more sideways could they get?

I shut my eyes. Yes, I may have said something stupid to Braxton, but I didn't give away Trent's truth. No, I kept his secret. My ire ramps up in equal measure with my guilt.

As I stew, Braxton rejoins us. "So, I have some news."

Together with everyone in the waiting area, I stand and give my full attention to the leader of Hunte. He whispers something to Sara, who nods. Then he straightens.

"My son," he clears his throat and begins again. "My son has agreed to let me give him my kidney. His time is running short, and this hospital isn't the best place to do the transplant. I'm going to arrange for helicopters to take us over to the best hospital around, in New York City. Trent will go in one chopper, with a team of medical professionals, while Sara and I will fly out in the other."

His announcement is met with many sighs of relief. Everyone hugs each other. Me? All I hear is Braxton claiming Trent as his own. Plus they're flying to the City tonight. These decisions were made without me. The one person on earth Trent entrusted with the truth before *he* blurted it out to Braxton. My anger outpaces all reason.

I absent myself from the festivities and storm toward Trent's room. On death's door or not, I want to give the jerk a big piece of my mind.

When I enter the room, he's all alone. Perfect. "Heard you're accepting your father's kidney."

Tortured hazel eyes meet mine. "You're here."

I stomp over to his side, fists on my hips. My nostrils flare. "How dare you?"

He struggles to push himself upright. I stand, not moving a finger to help. He can do it all by himself. He collapses down

into the pillows. Or not. “I’m sorry, Cordy. I was wrong. I know you’d never betray me.”

My anger tries to seep out of my veins, but I put an end to that shit. I raise my chin. “Damn straight.”

He holds out his hand. “God, I love how feisty you are.”

*Don’t give in just because he used the “I” word.* I skewer him with my side-eye.

He smiles, his kissable lips pulled upright. His tongue trails over his teeth.

I crack my knuckles.

He tugs on his dreads. “You’re more tempting than flan.”

A picture of my favorite dessert tantalizes me. My arms drop. “This isn’t fair,” I murmur.

“Tell me about it,” he quips.

With effort, I re-stiffen my spine. “Don’t ever do that to me again. I gave you my word.” My voice only trembled a tiny bit.

He has the decency to drop his gaze. “I was stupid. I know he wasn’t aware of, well, me. I jumped to the wrong conclusion and I’m sorry.” He raises his face toward mine, offering puppy dog eyes. “Forgive me?”

Forgive him? I should shake him, yet all I want to do is wrap my body around his, banged up and all. I remain strung out between the warring emotions for an extended moment before I allow his words to enter my soul. My shoulders are the last thing to fall. “Jerk.”

“Kiss me.”

I scan all the wires attached to his body, and his cast sticking out from underneath the blanket. Yet, I can't refuse him. Shaking my head, I lean over and place my lips on his, in a tender meeting.

Pulling back, I tug on one of his dreads, then roll the chair over. I have so many questions. "How did Braxton take it?"

He pushes against the pillows, and this time I help him adjust. "Better than I had expected, actually. He asked about my mother."

I lift my shoulder. "Makes sense."

"Whatever. I don't want to form a relationship with the guy. I only want his kidney."

I snort at his last statement. "Sort of like saying you don't want to dance, you just want to have sex, huh?"

He turns, but not before I catch a grin lurking around his lips. "It's the truth. I told him that."

"Then he asked for info about your mother?"

He kicks his good leg. "Whatever. I made it clear to him I don't need him in my life."

"Maybe he wants you in his?"

Turning his head, he catches his bottom lip between his teeth. He's angry, for sure, but a deep-seated need to be a part of his father's life—maybe even be accepted into it—peeps out. No matter who his father is. I sympathize with his feelings and can't begrudge him for wanting more.

Trent swallows. "I'm so happy you came back to me. I was an asshole for sending you away. Please forgive me."

A quick temper, I understand. Jumping to the wrong conclusions, I get that too. Thinking I betrayed him, stings. Yet his apology goes a long way toward fixing it. I grab his hand in mine and kiss the top. “Don’t do it again.”

He flips his hand and cups my chin. “You got it.”

I relax into his palm. “So, you’re taking his kidney, huh?”

“Yeah. Thought it was better than to leave you here without me.”

I smile. “My big, bad protector.” I roll my chair closer to him. “Tell me about how it all went down.”

He shrugs. “Sara came in first and got me to thinking. She actually told me she wants to get to know her ‘third child.’” His eyes develop a glossy sheen. “Then I told him I’d take him up on his offer, if it was still available.”

“You made the right decision. I want you here with me.”

He strokes my hair. “I’m not ready for more. With him, I mean.”

I nod. “I get it. Let’s take it one day at a time. Speaking of which, he mentioned the surgery is going to be done in the City. What’s the timeline?”

“I’m not sure, but they want to get us out there tonight, and do the transplant like tomorrow or the next day.”

I reach over and give him a kiss. “I really am happy you’re getting this surgery.”

“Oh, and one more thing. Thanks for organizing everyone to get tested.”

I blow on my fingernails, then rub them on my shirt. “It’s what I do.”

The doctor chooses this moment to enter the room. “We’re getting the helicopter ready for your transport, Mr. Washington. You’ll be leaving in about thirty minutes.”

“Thanks for everything.”

“Just doing my job.” She steps toward the door.

He calls out, “One more thing.” His doctor turns back around. “Can Cordelia ride with me in the helicopter?”

Goosebumps erupt on my arms. He wants me to go with him?

The doctor glances between him and me. “Sure. There’s room on the chopper.” She leaves the room.

“Do you really want me to fly out with you? Not Dwight? Or your aunt?”

“I want the love of my life with me.”

Can’t argue with his logic. “Let me arrange for someone to grab our stuff from the hotel. I’ll be back soon.” I kiss his forehead and rush back to the waiting room.

Hunte’s gone, presumably to get ready for their trip back home. TLR, on the other hand, is still here. When I approach, they all stand. “He’s in good spirits. You can visit with him until the helicopter leaves in about thirty minutes.” I pause. “I’ll be flying out with him.”

Auntie Gloria disappears toward his room, and I replay our conversation. I’m grateful not to be shut out of his life. Beyond thrilled he’s taking Braxton’s kidney and, hopefully, will be able to lead a normal life afterward. Whatever “normal” means. No matter what, he’ll still be with us.

His best friend is off to the side, holding up a nearby wall, and I approach him. “Dwight.” He turns to face me. I fish out

two keycards. “Would you be able to get my stuff from my room? And Trent’s things from his?” I extend my hand.

“Sure thing.” He takes the cards. “Thank you for what you’ve done to help my boy. I’m happy you’ll be flying out on the chopper. You’re so good for him.” He kisses my cheek.

My hand flies to where his lips just left. It’s like I belong with them. Swallowing, I continue, “He made the decision all on his own. He wants to stay on this earth and make the band a huge success.”

Dwight raps a beat on his leg. “With such a marketing genius on our side, I have no doubt.”

I smile at Trent’s brother. My cell phone dings and I step away, feeling as if I could conquer the world. “Hey, Rita.”

“Cordelia. Goodness. How’s it going up there?”

I sink into a chair and fill her in about the upcoming kidney transplant. “Guess we need to rearrange the tour.”

After a moment, Rita admits, “This is a lot to take in. Braxton is a match, huh? Isn’t it weird for non-relatives to be donors?”

“Well, it’s not too unusual. But Trent did get lucky.” Never going to reveal the truth underlying my statement.

“Very lucky.” Shuffling papers comes through my receiver. “Don’t worry about anything. I’ll let Mr. Griffith know and we’ll take care of the disruption to the tour. I’m sure Mr. Hewitt will be back in touch about the marketing details.”

Relief bubbles. “Thank you, Rita. I think they’ll need a few months off.”

“Gotcha. I’ll take care of it. Guess I’ll be seeing you back in the office next week.”



“Yeah.” With the tour on hold, I’ll be returning to the office. My back slumps into the chair. “I’ll be there.”

When I disconnect, a Google Alert notification beeps. I tap on the screen and yet another story from *First Rumors* pops up, this one about Trent and his accident. Of course, the headline is as trashy as possible. “Lead Singer of TLR Wipes Out.” I skim the article and exhale when it discusses his accident and need for a new kidney. Since I had already put most of this intel out on social media, I’m relieved. Nothing new. Nothing about Braxton.

I wonder what Apex will think about this story? Seeing as the tour’s been put on hiatus, none of the article will be news to them. Since Trent did make the tabloid, though, guess I better do some sort of response. Without bothering to run it by Mr. Hewitt, I click on their Facebook page and write a quick update about Trent’s condition. I even mention the fact he found a kidney donor—omitting Braxton’s identity. I end the post with a plea for prayers and ask for privacy. There. That should do it.

When I return to the waiting room, Auntie Gloria guides me toward the chairs. “I already told Trent this, but I asked him to cut his father some slack.”

“Bet he loved that.”

She leans toward me. “He inherited his mother’s arrogance.”

“She was cocky, too?”

“You could say that.” She huffs a laugh, her whole face transforming. “I know he’s going to be just fine. His mother is looking down on him, and you’re at his side. There’s no way

anything will go wrong.” She pulls me in for another hug. “I’ll see you in New York City soon.”

I know what Trent told me, but I want to offer my place to his aunt. She *is* family. “Do you want to fly out?”

She shakes her head. “No. I need to tie up things at home and will make the trip down shortly. You should be with your boyfriend.”

Her words barely have time to register before Dr. Patel interrupts our conversation. “Cordelia Hernandez. It’s time to go.”

I squeeze Trent’s aunt once more, wave at TLR, and rush over to Trent’s room with their good wishes ringing in my ears. I watch as he’s transferred to a gurney together with all of the machines. A squad of at least five people surrounds him. Together, we escort him into the hallway and over to a special elevator that brings us up to the roof where a helicopter waits.

The blades whir and I take a deep breath. I’ve never been in one of these before. The group pushes ahead, and Trent’s brought inside. Dr. Patel waves me over and helps me onto the chopper. I go to the open seat next to him, strap my seatbelt, and put on a noise-canceling headset.

Dr. Patel explains, “I’m his attending physician, so I’m going to monitor him during the flight. We gave him a sedative to ease his transport.”

“Thanks.” I grab Trent’s hand. “We both really appreciate it.”

I turn my attention to my boyfriend. His lids are half open. “Cordy. I’m so happy you’re here with me.”

“Me, too.”

He squeezes my hand. “I kinda hoped our first time up in the air would’ve included a much more fun interlude.”

Leave it to him to think of something sexual at such a time. “I’m sure we’ll have our chance soon enough.”

The helicopter lifts off the roof and I lean back into my seat. We hover not high off the ground and take off toward the south.

He dons a serious face, although I can tell the meds are starting to do their job. “Dwight ripped me a new one.”

I’m sure he did. “He was hurt.”

His head bounces on the pillow, and Dr. Patel admonishes Trent to remain quiet. He gives me his full, glassy-eyed attention. “Kinda got that. Promised never to hold anything back from him again.”

“Good idea.”

Trent’s now wearing a full-fledged goofy grin. Pretty soon, he drifts off and I’m left alone with my thoughts.

His father is a perfect match.

His surgery has to be a success. He needs to create more music for the world to hear.

We need many more years together.

My anger over his earlier behavior simmers on low. I need to let this slide. Like how I let the incident with the restaurant mix-up go. He’s different from how all the other men in my life have been.

Isn’t he?

# CORDELIA



The next days roll by. We arrived at the hospital and Trent was put into a private room. We talked about our past, the tour's being put on hiatus plus press coverage about it, and the hopeful future for TLR. We discussed our relationship, which seems to be on a better footing now than ever. He truly is rewriting everything I know about men.

The transplant was delayed by one day so more tests could be run. Finally, the big day arrived yesterday, and both he and Braxton were rolled into surgery. I'll never forget his last words to me. "I love you so much. You're my person."

*I'm his person.* Yeah. I think my whole life is being rewritten with my first ever happy ending.

Surgery took a long time. Auntie Gloria and the bands were here, and we waited together. Drank crappy coffee. Stared out into the New York City skyline. Ignored the rest of the world until we received word that Braxton came through with flying colors. A collective sigh of relief went up with the piece of good news.

Then more waiting. More coffee. More butterflies. Finally, Doctor Tuck came out and told us Trent's transplant went well and he was in recovery. I've never felt such all-encompassing relief.

And the hugs from his aunt and all the members of TLR, plus their wives, were pretty good too. Like I belonged.

I crashed on the chair next to Trent last night, guarding him. From what, I don't know. I only knew I couldn't leave his side. He woke up a few times since the surgery ended but hasn't regained his wits about him yet. Although some of the stuff he's spouted has been damn funny.

It's now two o'clock in the afternoon, and I'm watching some stupid show on TV, wishing he'd wake up for good. I want to hear he's going to be okay from him, rather than from the medical team recording his vitals. I've been surviving on hospital coffee, vending machine snacks, and cat naps in this chair.

His head thrashes on the pillows. "Mom!"

I rush over to his side and lay my hands on his shoulders. "It's okay."

The door opens and Auntie Gloria comes in. "Did I hear him yell out?"

Before I can respond, he repeats, "Mom!"

We both sigh. She stops next to me. "Why don't you go take a break? I'll stay with him for now."

My eyes trail over to my boyfriend, who seems to have settled. "Thank you. I'll get a coffee. Want one?"

She shakes her head. I kiss his cheek and trudge out of his room, rubbing the kinks out of my muscles. I step into the hallway and rest my head against his door. "Please wake up."

Pushing away, I trek toward the elevators to get some coffee from the cafeteria rather than the vending machine on the floor. Maybe they'll have flan. When I pass the waiting

room, someone says my name. Pausing, I turn and a bunch of TLR's roadies and crew come over.

Various versions of "How's he doing?" accost my tired ears.

"He's still asleep, but the doctors say he's doing as well as can be expected." I parrot the medical jargon. Trying to stifle a yawn, I fail and it overcomes my weary bones.

While I try to unscramble my brain, Marvin says, "That's great," and slaps Hector on the back. The other guys high-five each other. I need coffee. The elevator is so close.

"Hey, we heard a rumor and maybe you can help us out," Hector says.

I yawn again and motion for him to continue. I'm ready for this idle chitchat to be over.

"Is it true Braxton Hunte is Trent's father?"

Geez. News really does travel fast. "Yeah."

The roadies exchange glances, and a faint bell trips in my brain. "Just keep it between us, okay?"

"Sure thing," Marvin replies for the group.

"Great. Now, if you don't have any other questions for me, I'm going to grab some coffee and get back to Trent. I'll let him know you're here and send your best wishes."

Hector nods. "Thanks. Appreciate it. Hopefully, we'll be able to see him today."

I wave and leave the group for the cafeteria. Steaming Styrofoam cup in hand, and a brownie already in my tummy since they didn't have flan, I return to the elevator bank. A

bunch of nurses surround me, talking among themselves. “Have you seen him yet?”

One of them giggles. Hardly professional behavior. “No, but Kellie was assigned to him overnight. Said he’s better looking, even in a hospital bed, than in his photos.”

My ears prick. Are they talking about—Braxton?

Another nurse chimes in. “I saw Hunte perform at Madison Square Garden a month ago. He was fantastic. And he’s on my floor today.” She does a little happy dance.

The elevator dings and opens. I follow the nurses into the cab. A variety of buttons are lit up and I decide to visit Trent’s father instead of circling back to my boyfriend’s side. His aunt’s with him anyway. When the doors open on Braxton’s floor, I follow the nurse to the desk. When I ask for his room, because I need the inside joke, she stops, her mouth hanging open.

With unneeded directions, I meander toward his room. Standing outside, I collect my thoughts and knock. Sara greets me at the door. “Cordelia?”

“Hi,” I whisper. “I’m taking a little break from Trent’s bedside and thought I’d check in on Braxton. How’s he doing?” I nod toward the interior of the room.

“He’s pretty good. A bit woozy, but he came through the donation with flying colors. The doctors are all happy with how the surgery went, and expect he’ll be discharged in a few days.” Her eyes drift down to my coffee.

“Great news.” I lift my hand. “Would it be okay if I visited with him? Maybe you could get a coffee from the cafeteria? It’s actually pretty good.”

She licks her lips. “You know, that sounds wonderful. The kids,” her voice halts. “That is, King and Melody, should be here in about an hour, so you came at a great time.”

The discovery of Trent’s parentage ripples across the entire family. “Thanks, Sara.”

After a quick hug, she leaves me alone at the threshold of Braxton’s room. I take a fortifying sip of the coffee and enter the room. Trent’s father’s face lights up. “Cordelia! So great to see you!”

Even though he’s loopy on pain meds, his warm welcome comes as a surprise. I walk to his feet and stop. “Hello, Braxton. I’m happy to see you looking so well.”

His arm sweeps down his body in a jumbled move, which I presume he thinks is smooth. I stifle a smile. “Never better.”

“Great news.”

“I wasn’t worried at all. This is a great hospital. How’s Trent?”

“Not quite as alert as you. He’s been sleeping a lot. But the doctors said the transplant was a success. Of course, he’ll have to be on anti-rejection medicine for the rest of his life.”

“Par for the course.” His hand bangs against the bed. “But that’s my boy! I knew he’d come through with flying colors.”

For want of something to do, I pull a chair over and sit closer to his head so he doesn’t have to try to project his voice. I take a sip of my coffee and put it on the side table. “So, uhm, where will you go to recover once you get out of this place?”

He blinks. “Didn’t think about it before. I’d like to stick around the City. Close to my doctors, for checkups. And I want to be near all my kids.”



I bite the inside of my lip. “Makes sense.”

“I’m so proud of him.”

Who is he talking about? Trent? Or his other son, King? I go for the safe, “I bet you are.”

“When I first saw him perform, he knocked my socks off. He has mad guitar skills, you know. And his voice is strong. He’s getting much better at interacting with the audience, too.”

My stomach flips when I realize he’s talking about his second-born son. I don’t bring up his stage fright. “Yeah.”

“And he did this all on his own. He’s a natural. TRL, I mean, TLR works so well together.” His lips raise at the jumbled initials.

I reach for my coffee, not surprised to see the shake in my hand. After taking another sip, I reply, “They do.”

“It’s funny. That article”—he waves his hand as if I should know which article he’s talking about—“said he was like a young me. They had no idea how right they were.” He chuckles.

He’s talking about what the Connecticut newspaper printed. “Guess they were on to something.”

“They were! You know what? It’s probably for the best no one knows who he is so he can gain his own reputation. No one can say I gave him a leg up.”

My, he’s chatty when on drugs. “Very true.”

He hooks his finger toward me, and I lean in. “I’m busting to tell the world, but I’m sure he’s not ready. I wish I had been there for him, and his mother. She did an awesome job raising him, but I do like to think my genes contributed at least a little

bit to his musical success. I can't wait to watch him perform again." He pauses. "When he's healed, of course."

"Right." The way he's gushing over his newly found son makes my heart hurt. If only my father had been as excited about me as Braxton is about Trent. Hell, I would take one-tenth of his enthusiasm.

"That's why I agreed to this transplant originally. Before I even knew I was his father, which only solidified my decision. I really enjoyed his performances and knew the world needs his voice. He's an important musician. And son."

His disjointed rambling ends, and he looks at me. "You're gorgeous. My son chose well."

"Braxton—"

"Brax. Call me Brax. Please." His tenor ends on an upswing, as if it were a question. Or a plea.

How do I feel about using his nickname when Trent can't stand the thought of him? I lick my lips. "Brax," the word tingles on my tongue. "You're too kind. But, thank you." His eyelids cover his amber eyes, which I recognize as my signal to go. Rising, I say, "I'm going to leave you to get your rest. I can't express how happy I am this all worked out."

Should I kiss him? Is that weird? If he were a stranger, what would I do? I lean forward and give him a peck on his cheek.

"Please tell Trent I'll be by soon."

I raise my coffee toward the man in the bed.

## TRENT



“**Y**ou’re looking much better.”

“Thanks, Auntie. I’m feeling stronger. If only I didn’t have this cast.” I tap the plaster, which now sports the signatures of my bandmates, their wives, Hunte, and various medical personnel. Cordy’s and Auntie Gloria’s wishes are on here as well.

“The doctor told me you’re going to be sprung over the course of the next couple of days.”

“I know. I can’t wait.”

“I wish I could stay with you, but I have to be getting back home. I took time off, but I need to get back to my job and my family. I’m so proud of how well you’re recovering. I’m sure Lorinda’s watching over you.”

Pain lances at her mention of my mother, but it’s not as strong as it has been. Maybe I’m getting soft in my recovery. “I’m going to miss you,” I reply honestly.

She strokes my cheek. “We’re family. I’m not leaving you alone ever again.” She holds up her cell phone. “You’re in here forever.”

I smile and she moves around to snap a selfie of both of us. She shows me our photo and I give her the thumbs up. “I’m so

happy you're back in my life. No more extended breaks between calls."

She grabs my hand. "I agree. Your Cordelia will definitely keep us in touch."

At her mention of my girlfriend, my spirits soar. She's been with me every step of the way. "I'm lucky to have her."

"Don't you forget that." She winks. "Okay, I'm going back up to New Hampshire. But I'll be burning up your phone line."

"Please do, Auntie."

With a kiss, she disappears. Five minutes later, Cordy sails into my room. Under her button-down, she sports a t-shirt saying, "Social Media Is My Superpower." Damn straight.

"Give me some sugar," I beg.

She strides over and kisses my lips. Grabbing her shoulders, I drag her tighter and extend my tongue. At her gasp, I slide it inside her mouth and tangle with hers. She feels freaking amazing. If only I wasn't connected to all these wires. And my leg wasn't in this stupid cast.

She pulls back when beeping goes off around us. "Oops," I chuckle.

In under a minute, a nurse rushes in. With a frown, she checks the machines. My girlfriend, sporting red cheeks, spins on her heels and plays with some shit on the side table. The nurse glances at me. "Everything okay in here?"

"Yeah. All good."

She shakes her head. "Must've been some sort of malfunction. I'll leave you be." She walks out of my room.

Cordy cracks up. "Oh my God! You're so bad."

“That’s why you love me.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear. “Well, yeah.”

“Fine by me. I love you more.”

She pushes the stool over, next to my bed, and intertwines our hands. Giving my fingers a kiss, she says, “You’re looking so much stronger by the day.”

“I’m getting ready to blow this popsicle stand. With my favorite flavor on my arm.”

Her expressive mocha eyes shine. “I’m so excited. I got your house all ready for you, like we talked about. Had your bed moved down to the living room, so everything’s on one floor.”

“I can’t wait to get you alone with me in there. Without these stupid machines to tell the world when my heart rate picks up because of my girl.”

She giggles. “Can’t wait.”

My door swings open and a nurse wheels Braxton into the room. “Hey, Trent. How’re you doing?”

This isn’t the first visit my father’s made to my hospital room. My anger toward him has diminished, but we’re a long way from a kumbaya moment. Cordy stands. “Brax. So good to see you. I’ll let you two have a nice visit.” She kisses my cheek, hugs him, and disappears with the nurse.

Brax?

He wheels himself closer to my bed. “Your color is back to normal. Feeling better?”

“I am. Should be sprung soon.” This man did give me his kidney, so he deserves my response. But nothing more.

“Me, too. Getting back’s been more of a bitch than I thought.”

I tap my cast. “I hear you.” Without this man—my father—I would be dead already. Not making plans with Cordy to go home. With her.

“Happy I was able to help.”

I rub the back of my neck, avoiding all the wires. “In case I didn’t say it before, thanks.”

“You have.” He waves his hand. “It’s the least I could do since I wasn’t there when you were growing up.”

His words noseplant into my new kidney. “Well, in your defense, you didn’t know I even existed.” For the first time, the truth lodges in my heart. Is it right for me to continue to hold a grudge when he was clueless?

“Can you share a little bit with me? How was your childhood?”

I shrug. “It was good, I guess. I met the guys in the band early on. We always were playing music and getting into trouble.” Like riding the Light Rail for free. I beam at the memory.

“I get that. I’ve known the guys in Hunte forever.”

Huh. Another similarity. “I can tell. You guys gel when you’re on the stage.”

He smiles, and the crow’s feet by his eyes crinkle. Wonder if I’ll get them someday? “I have to admit, I’m kinda pumped one of my kids has some musical chops.”

“Mom was surprised when I picked up the guitar, but she always supported me.” I blink. “She was our biggest cheerleader.”

“I’m glad you had her.”

I rub my hand down my arm, over the tattoo that honors her. For the first time in a long while, I allow myself a moment of happiness over my decision to get it. “She was kinda amazing.” No lie.

“Would you tell me one story? From when you were a kid.”

His question takes me back. My mind races backward, discarding memories, until I settle in on a relatively innocuous one. “Well, when I was about eight or so, Mom got me a bike for my birthday.”

“Which is when?”

“March fifteenth.”

He nods. “Ah. Beware the Ides of March.”

Visions of Caesar with a knife in his back appear. *I can sympathize.* “Yeah. Well, it was blue, and I’d wanted it for a while. Of course, I didn’t know how to ride it, so I learned in our driveway. Mom held on to my back and helped me keep upright.” I smile, remembering the wind on my cheeks. “I was riding with her help, too afraid to break away from her steadying hand. I remember tossing my head back to ask her something when I realized she wasn’t there. She was off to the side, watching me. I was pedaling without a backup and I felt, well, free. That was it. From then on, I rode all over the neighborhood.”

Braxton chuckles. “I bet she was sorry.”

My grin grows wider. “I like to think of her as proud I was a quick learner.”

“Such a milestone. Thanks for sharing it with me, so-Trent.”

My eyes drop to the blanket. “You’re welcome.”

An awkward silence descends, which is broken when someone raps on the door and calls in, “Knock, knock.”

I turn and see three people enter the room, only one of which I recognize. Sara. A man and a woman flank her, both of whom are blonds. And they both resemble the lead singer.

Addressing her husband, Sara says, “Thought you might be here.”

He rocks back and forth in his wheelchair and motions for the trio to come in. To *my* hospital room. Hmmm.

He responds, “I needed to get out of my room.” The trio approaches him and gives him kisses. Then he turns toward me. “Trent, may I introduce you to my son, King, and my daughter, Melody. You already know Sara. Guys, this is—” He breaks off, and I can see the possibilities flit across his face. I hold my breath while he decides. “Trent Washington, the lead singer of The Light Rail, and the proud new owner of my old kidney.” He tugs on his ear. “And your brother.”

I gulp. My brother and sister. I’ve known about them peripherally, like everyone knows about the Hunte family, but never bothered to Google them. This is all so surreal.

Sara steps into the breach. “We’ve already told them about your, ah, relation to us. And how proud we are to have you in the family.”

Family? Proud?

Melody comes toward me, her hand extended. “I’m happy to get to meet you, Trent. Daddy won’t stop talking about



you.”

The dude follows suit. “I’m King. It’s good you both seem to be recovering from the transplant so well.”

“Thanks. I’m doing alright.”

Braxton chuckles. “Trent’s modest. He’s doing better than I am. Must be his youth.”

I go to punch his arm, but barely tap it. “You’re not doing too badly, old man.” I inhale when I realize what I called him. Fuck.

Braxton’s eyes go round like saucers, then a tiny smile crosses his features. “I have to work out to keep up with you young guns on tour.”

We all let my stupid word choice pass. Sara interjects. “King is a real estate agent out in the Hamptons. He and his fiancée have a reality television show on *Let’s Do It!* called ‘Battle of the Real Estate Matchmakers.’”

My eyebrows flick upward at my good-looking brother. “Sounds fun.”

King glides his index finger against his stubble. “The show can be kinda intrusive, if you ask me. But I fell in love with real estate. And Angie.” His amber eyes light up as he mentions his real-life co-star’s name.

“I’ve only been to the beaches out there a couple of times. I liked them.”

Braxton interjects. “We have a stop at Jones Beach on the tour. Once we get back to it, we can hang out and King can show us around.”

“Angie and I would love that. We’ll take you to our new house, too.”

Buzzing fills my ears. Sounds so—family-oriented. Instead of responding, I turn to Melody. She’s beautiful. I wonder if she’s a model or something. “So King’s on television. What does his younger sister do to show him up?” My sister, too...

She laughs. “I dress him.”

I tilt my head. “Come again?”

“I’m the lead costume designer for HBO’s ‘Ladies of the Abbey.’”

“I’ve heard of the show.” Who hasn’t? “Although, I have to confess I’ve never watched it. I’m always too busy with the band.”

“I get it. You’re like Daddy.”

Okay, this is getting way too weird for me. I change the subject. “Are you dating anyone?”

She holds up her left hand where a rock the size of Manhattan blinks at me. “I’m engaged too! You may have heard of him. His name is Charles Wainwright, better known as Chase Wright.”

Now that’s a name I *do* know. He’s fucking awesome. I have a connection to Chase Wright? The guys in the band are going to flip. “Really? I love his movies, especially the *Doctor Manipul8* franchise. Can’t wait for the next one to drop.”

She exchanges glances with her mother. “I’ll be sure to tell him. He wanted to come and meet you today, but he has an audition.”

“For what?” The question is out of my mouth before I think better of it.

“He’s breaking into Broadway. But don’t worry, the next superhero film will be released next year sometime. I was a

costume designer for it. That's where we met."

I push back against the pillows. "Cool."

Sara steers the conversation toward more basic stuff, and I learn some interesting tidbits about my siblings. *Siblings*. I have siblings now. No matter the circumstances of how we met, they're kinda cool.

Braxton clears his throat. "I'm starting to fade, and I can see Trent's tiring as well. I'd like to address one thing before we head out. You all know this, but I want to put it out there. I've been so blessed. My life hasn't been like most others, for sure, but right here and now, I can honestly say, you all make it so full. I have the love of the best woman in the world." He blows a kiss to his wife.

His blond head swivels toward his kids. Rather, King and Melody. "You both are so successful professionally and personally, and I couldn't be prouder. The lives you're building are filled with so much joy." His gaze meets mine, and I suck in my breath. "And now I'm adding a third member to this family. I didn't know you growing up, which King might say was a good thing."

King guffaws. "Only if he was a fuckup like I was."

Braxton extends his hand toward his firstborn, who clasps it. Still holding his son's hand, he continues. "Princess has always been a light for me." She adds her hand.

Then his attention lands on me. "I'm looking forward to getting to uncover all the talents of my newly discovered son."

I stare at their hands. Sara moves and places her hand into the mix.

My heart beats a staccato rhythm. I try to swallow but my mouth is dry.

Can I do this?

# TRENT



I'm still marveling at how my first meeting with my entire family went twenty-four hours later.

About how I tentatively moved my hand out from underneath my blanket.

How my darker-skinned arm extended toward their quadruple white tower.

How my fingers grazed the back of Sara's hand.

How we locked in place with such a simple gesture.

Then I pulled away, breaking the weird connection.

Sara, Melody, and King gave me good wishes before they left.

Braxton and I stared each other down for a beat. Rather, I dissected him while he tried to shore up a connection. I wasn't ready for all that. Too much. Too soon.

Cordy snaps her fingers in front of my face. "Earth to Trent."

I shake my head a few times. "Huh?"

"I was saying—" She glances up at me to make sure she still has my attention. "Everything's set for you to return home. All our luggage from the tour has been delivered there."

That call was from the workers Apex hired, who just finished up.”

“Great.” I pluck at my blanket. “Hope I’m sprung soon.”

“Yeah, well, in the meantime, have you tried journaling?” She points to the blank book she gave me. Which has remained blank.

“Nah, haven’t felt like it.”

She picks it up and turns it over to me. “Why don’t you try to put down your feelings about Braxton?”

I drop the book. “I’m not a fucking head case.”

“Didn’t say you were. I thought, if you wrote down your feelings, it might open the flood gates.”

“Yeah, well I don’t think so. We had a moment yesterday. I met his kids.”

“Your brother and sister,” she corrects.

I wave my hand. “Whatever. They seemed cool and maybe under other circumstances—”

“There aren’t other circumstances. This is your new reality. With people who want to get to know you.”

My thoughts scatter, replaced by sheer emotion. Anger, disappointment, longing, disgust. Too, too many feels. “I can’t.”

She retrieves the journal and places it back on the side table. “Fine. It’ll be here for you, when you’re ready. I think it might help.”

Fascinating how she knows I’m running on my base feelings. I decide to turn the tables. “Why don’t you tell me

how you're managing to do social media for a band that's not touring?"

Cordy knows when a subject's closed. She launches into her strategy to keep TLR—even I'm referring to the band with her hashtag—in the spotlight. Gotta hand it to her, she is a dynamo.

"In fact," she concludes, "why don't we give your fans an update? I haven't done one of those since you made it through your surgery. How about a photo?" She picks up her cell phone.

"I look like shit."

She feathers her hand over my hair, tugging on the end of one of my dreads. "No. You look amazing. Believe me." She flutters her long eyelashes.

"How can I resist?"

"Great!" She jumps up and arranges the blankets over my lower half, playing with them to get the right angles. Satisfied, our social media manager takes about a dozen shots. "Okay, one of these should work." She flips through all of them before settling on one. "What do you think?"

I shrug. Never been too high on pictures of me.

"Well, I think it's a perfect thirst trap." Her focus moves to uploading it. Her thumbs tap out the post. "There. Done."

"You rock social media."

Cordy blows on her fingers. "I do, don't I?"

As we laugh, a ping from her phone captures her attention. "Huh. Seems like *In the Know* ran some sort of piece about TLR."

They're a reputable entertainment news show on a major network. "We made national news?"

Without taking her eyes off her phone as she taps away, she replies, "Looks like it. Here."

She settles on the bed next to me, hits the "play" button, and maximizes the video on the screen. The well-known music introduces the piece, which features a close-up of our band we had taken well before going on tour with Hunte. I hadn't even grown out my dreads.

The *In the Know* host dives right in. "We wanted to share with our viewers that Trent Washington, lead singer and guitarist for The Light Rail—or #TLR as they're known on social media—is recovering nicely from his kidney transplant surgery in a New York City hospital. After Washington suffered a motorcycle accident last week, it was discovered he was born with only one functioning kidney, which was severely damaged in the accident." They play a clip from Doctor Patel back in New Hampshire, who explains her diagnosis, and how my condition is more common than people think.

Cordy presses pause. "Such great exposure! I can use this clip to further the band's push toward organ donation."

"I love how your mind works. I was thinking it's great they didn't mention the black ice or how idiotic I was to be out on the roads in the first place."

"You." She leans over and kisses me.

My hand steals into her hair, and I hold our faces together. When she pulls away, she's breathing as hard as I am. "When I get home, you're going to wear a Naughty Nurse outfit for me, right?"



She bites her bottom lip. “I don’t know. You’re going to need bed rest, without extracurricular activities.”

I frown. “Who said that shit?”

She bops me on the nose with her index finger. “You’re bad.”

I snuggle closer to her, grabbing her tit for good measure. She removes my hand and starts up the video again.

“This would be a great feel-good story, if that were the end of it,” the other host takes over the narrative. “But it’s not. Not by a long shot. Turns out, Washington’s donor match was none other than future Rock and Roll Hall of Famer Braxton Hunte.”

My breathing stops. How did they find this out? Where is this story going?

Cordy fumbles the phone, but she performs a quick save.

The first host agrees, “That’s right. In an unusual situation, Braxton Hunte was Washington’s perfect match. He donated his kidney so the young musician could live.”

The other talking head pipes in. “I know, what a fantastic ending!” He leans toward the camera. “Except, it isn’t the end.” The screen goes black. We exchange looks.

After some ads, the music for *In the Know* plays again.

“Welcome back from the break. As we were saying, Braxton Hunte donated his kidney to the lead singer of the band that has been opening for them on the East Coast leg of their tour. Of course, we were intrigued by the story, so we dug a little deeper. You’re never going to believe what we uncovered.”

Photos of Braxton and me, side by side, take up the entire screen. “What the hell’s going on?”

Cordy shakes the screen. “I have no idea.”

A voice-over asks, “See anything similiar in these two pictures?” Bile rises to my throat.

After a beat, the camera focuses on the first host. “It’s in their eyes.” The camera zooms in on our identical amber-hazel eyes. “Did you catch it? The reason they’re a perfect match isn’t so far-fetched after all. Cordelia Hernandez, social media manager for Washington’s band, confirmed Braxton Hunte is, in fact, Washington’s father. We’ve reached out to Hunte’s rep, but so far no comment.”

The host’s words ring in my ears. Cordelia outed me to the entire world as Braxton Hunte’s son. I’m going to be known as his illegitimate by-blow. All my band’s hard work to establish ourselves is tarnished. With one sentence, my entire world shatters.

The phone drops onto the bed and the screen goes to black. She yells, “I didn’t do any such thing!” Her hand covers her mouth.

I round on my erstwhile girlfriend, whose eyes are filled with crocodile tears. Spare. Me.

“I have no idea how this happened. I never talked with anyone from the stupid show. Ever.”

My throat tightens in time with the pace of my shallow breathing. “Then how did they get your name?”

“I don’t know! I’m associated with the band. I’m listed as your social media manager on the website. Maybe they zeroed in on me there.”

“Riiight.”

Her arms fly akimbo. “I don’t know!”

An icy calm descends. I cross my arms over my chest. “Who have you talked to about Braxton and me?”

“No one! I mean, other than the band, and Hunte, obviously.” She pauses. “Raine and Keith and Mr. Hewitt know, but they had to. You know?”

The more she babbles, the less inclined I am to believe her. Lies. It’s always lies. “No one else?”

She goes still. Bingo.

“Tell me.”

“No, no, no. There’s no way.”

“Who. Did. You. Tell?”

Her whole body slumps. “Some of your roadies. They caught me right after your surgery and I was so tired and they asked me to confirm what they’d already heard and I did but I told them not to tell anyone.”

Once her run-on sentence trails to an end, she focuses on me. Tears stream down her traitorous cheeks.

Unmoved by her pain, I note, “Obviously, one of them blabbed my personal business. And now it’s everywhere. All because you opened your mouth.”

Her voice raises. “I swore them to secrecy.”

“You wouldn’t have had to if you hadn’t broken your vow.”

She throws her body onto mine. “Please, give me a break. I was exhausted when they accosted me. I told them not to tell anyone. Remember our promise to each other!”

Fuck that stupid promise. This situation isn't sideways, it's mangled beyond recognition. I remain motionless, my arms lying on the bed. She kisses my face and I turn away from her. "You promised you'd keep my secret. You *knew* I had only entrusted you with it. Not even Dwight, my best friend, knew. Only you did."

"Maybe it was one of your aunt's kids?"

I push her away. First, she admits to telling our roadies, and now she's trying to throw my real family under the bus? Do I have "sucker" written across my forehead?

"No, Cordelia." My voice is icy. "You promised me you'd keep my secret, and you lied. You *lied* to me."

As a result, the whole world's been informed of my parentage.

Because of her.

"However it came to be, *you* opened your mouth and told a secret that wasn't yours to tell."

"I was so tired. I hadn't slept for days."

"You should've gone to a hotel where no one would've been able to hear your mouth," I snap.

"Trent."

I raise my hand. The blanket acts like a barrier against her, protecting me as if I were a fortress to be breached. My walls had tumbled so low she hopped over them and squirmed her way into my life. I mentally rebuild them. No more. I refuse to be taken in by another woman. Lessons from my previous girlfriend should've been enough. And my mother did it all my life. But no. The woman in front of me will destroy its tattered remnants.

“Get. Out.” My tone brooks no further conversation.

Her fingers swipe across her cheeks, smudging mascara off her fake eyelashes and down her cheeks.

# CORDELIA



I let myself into Trent's Jersey City townhouse ten minutes ago.

“How dare he!”

I throw his books across his living room. Unsatisfied, my hand clamps around an ugly vase, and I hurl it toward the bedframe across the way. It smashes into a million pieces.

I growl, my fingers itching to throw something else of his far and wide. I pick up a stupid figurine. “He's the biggest asshole ever!”

My knuckles turn white and I pull back. A split-second before I take aim at the bed again, my gaze lands on a framed photo sitting on a side bookcase. It's of a woman with my asshole ex-boyfriend. She looks like a younger, thinner version of Auntie Gloria. I hold up the statuette and stare at it. All fight deflates from my body.

Collapsing onto an ugly black recliner, I place it on the standing tray next to me. Banging my head against the chair, I let all my frustrations out.

Exhausted, I flip the lever and my legs go up. I twist my ankles for a few minutes, then let them go still. How did I let myself get here? Again?

We were good. Solid. He even asked me to remodel his home so he could come back here for rehab. He invited me to move in with him.

I snort. Must be some record. At least I *actually* lived with Big Rolls for about a year before he tossed me out on my ass. Didn't even make it to one day with the rock star, despite our stupid promise to be patient with each other if something went wrong. And boy did it.

My eyes slam shut. I can't believe one of the roadies ratted me out. Probably got a good payday for it, too. My hands clench. Trent was so mad, madder than I've ever seen him before. But it was my mistake that brought it out in him.

"Fuck!" My scream bounces off the empty room.

I toss my hair over my shoulder. I have to find a way to make this up to him. It's not like Braxton doesn't want anything to do with him. No. He's basically welcomed him into the family.

Lucky bastard.

My cell rings and I stare at it, reading Juanita's name through the five rings. She calls right back. Tapping my foot, I answer. "*Hola.*"

"I take it you caught the *In the Know* segment?"

"Yeah."

"At least they gave your proper title. And a shout out to the band."

Leave it to my sister to look for a silver lining. "Yee-haw."

"I'm guessing Trent's pissed."

“You could say that. He kicked me out of his hospital room. I’m at his house now in Jersey City. I’m going to pack up my things and head over to you, I guess.” My voice trails off. Just what I wanted—to go crawling home to my mother. Again.

“Oh, Cordelia, I’m so sorry. I thought you two were the real deal. Maybe you only need a little time apart? I’m sure he’ll cool down soon.”

I laugh without humor. “I think our break is going to take the rest of my life.”

“Then it’s his loss.”

Her belief in me is cute. Too bad I don’t need cute right now. Or ever. “Listen, I can’t talk now. Can you let *Mamá* know I’ll be over there tonight?”

“Sure. I still believe in you guys.”

“Gotta go.” Without waiting for her to say anything else, I hit the red button and drop my phone onto the recliner.

Juanita’s belief in us consumes my heart. He told me he loves me. So did I! And I still do. He’s the full package for me—a beautiful, shattered heart wrapped up in a fascinating mind and a body that makes even tone-deaf me sing. Our month together was the best one of my life, bar none.

He made me believe. In myself. In his band. In the supposed better nature of the world. I don’t want to lose this, because if I do, I’ll never find it again. What did my sister say? She thought we were the real deal?

My shoulders push against the back of the puffy chair. We *were* the real deal, dammit. So, I fucked up. It’s not like he’s never made a mistake before. After all, he was the one who ran his mouth off about Dwight’s having ADHD.



True, he didn't blab some massive secret affecting two families' lives to the entire world. But he did divulge a secret that was decades in the making when *he* told Braxton he was his father. I can't be banished from his life so easily. I am Cordelia Hernandez.

I jump to my feet. In minutes, I'm on public transportation returning to New York City. Over an hour later, I stride through the lobby of the hospital and go directly to Trent's floor. We can work this out.

We have to.

I stop outside of his room. Now I'm here, tremors take over my body. I shake out my hands and bounce from foot to foot. We're good together. We can get through this ... misunderstanding. After all, I didn't affirmatively divulge his secret.

Taking one last deep breath, I fill my lungs with clean air. Preparing myself to beg, I let out my breath and push open the door.

To an empty room.

I blink away the mirage.

Nothing changes.

None of Trent's things are here—flowers, cards, even his clothes in the closet, which stands open. And empty.

I rush out of the room and double-check the number. Yes. This is the right place.

Like a fool, I crouch down to make sure he's not hiding under the bed. Where can he be? Did he have an adverse reaction? Did something happen while I was gone?

I make a beeline to the nurse's desk. "Hi. I'm looking for Trent Washington." I point. "He's not in his room."

My breathing's erratic while I wait for the nurse to consult her computer. "Ah. He was discharged this afternoon."

"Discharged?" I repeat.

"Yes."

I deflate. "Oh." He's gone? "Okay." He left me. "Thanks." Like everyone.

I stumble down the hallway, past his room, and fall into a chair in the waiting room. How could he leave without letting me know? *Because he doesn't want you in his life, stupid.* Where is he?

I'm as empty as his hospital room. Desolate. Unwanted. Abandoned. Feelings I'm intimately acquainted with.

Anger rushes through my bones. How dare he? Well, if he can leave me behind without a backward glance, I can reciprocate. Fishing my cell phone out of my purse, I pull up his contact and press, "Block." There. Two can play his game.

I don't need him in my life. If I've learned anything in my twenty-five years, it's no man ever wants me for longer than a roll in the hay. My father taught me this at an early age—minus the sex part, of course. Every other guy in my life has reinforced this truth. My only mistake was to believe *he* was different from all the rest. I jump to my feet and stomp out of the hospital, wiping my boots on the sidewalk.

I wake the next morning at the ungodly hour of six. My mother's sofa bed has a bar that hits my back in the exact spot to prevent anyone from getting a good night's sleep. At least I have a roof over my head. Stretching, I leave my uncomfortable bed and begin my morning ritual. I need to

leave in a couple of hours to make it to Apex in the City on time. My first day back post-accident.

As I'm flat ironing my hair, the doorbell rings. Neither my mother nor my sister has shown their faces yet this morning, so I leave the device on the side of the sink and answer the door.

A guy in a grey jacket reading Rick's Messenger Delivery stands on the stoop. "Miss Hernandez?"

I grab on to a lock of my hair and twirl it. "Yes."

"Got a letter for you." He points to his iPad for me to sign. When I'm done, he delivers an envelope with Apex as the return address to me.

Plodding back into the house, I mutter, "What did you have to write me a letter about, Trent?" Seriously, dude? A fucking letter? Never knew we were so formal. Using my finger, I break the seal and pull out the letter.

As I unfold the paper, my eyes bug out. Fired! Apex fired me. For "performance-related issues." I crumple the pink slip up in my hand and whip it across the room. It lands at my mother's slippered feet.

"What's this?" She bends down and picks up proof of my failure.

With a listless voice, I admit, "Got fired." No use trying to spin it.

She flattens the paper out on her leg. "I see." She places the document on the kitchen table. "Well, not to add insult to injury, but last night Sebastián asked me to move in with him. Isn't that great?"

My mother's revolving door of men is doing much better than mine. "Wonderful."

Her head bounces. "I agreed, of course."

"Clearly."

"And I'm moving out. You and your sister can have the apartment, if you want it."

Two-bedrooms in the heart of Newark. I can have a bedroom. Although, without a job, how can I pay for it? "How much?"

"I've already paid for this month's rent, so you're good until the first. Thought you'd appreciate I did that for you."

For me? Yeah, right. She probably couldn't get this guy, Sebastián, to ask her sooner. I repeat, "How much is the rent?"

"Only two grand a month."

How am I going to be able to pay this, plus Juanita's tuition and my credit card bills, *sans* job? The only positive thing about my split from Trent is he didn't add to my debt. I'll figure it out somehow. I always do. "I'll take it."

*Mamá* points to my letter from Apex. "Better get on this." With her parting shot, she leaves the room.

I fall onto my bed, which I haven't returned into a sofa yet. On a side table, my phone rings, and Rita's name appears. I'm not ready to talk with her, if I'll ever be ready. I decline the call.

*Time to start over.* Again. I run through all the people I know and come up empty. None of them will have any leads for me. Not one to wallow in my own misfortune—because if I did, I'd never resurface—I force myself back into the

bathroom and finish my morning ritual. Might as well look as good as possible for my job hunt.



**A** week flies by. After some—alright, like fifty—job interviews, I nailed two new positions. It’s now eleven at night, and I throw the grocery store’s apron on top of the washing machine. *At least I have some money coming in.*

Grabbing my yoga pants, I slide into them and toss on a TLR sweatshirt. I should’ve thrown this away, but I only have a limited amount of clothes. Yeah, keep telling yourself that, Cordelia.

I check my phone and listen to Rita’s latest voicemail message. After leaving several about how sorry she was I got fired, her latest ones plead for info about how I’m doing. I haven’t been able to bring myself to actually call her, so I settle for another single line text and a few smiley emojis. At least something is smiling in my life.

As I put my phone away, my sister strolls into the living room. “*Mamá’s* gone now. Since you’re paying for everything, you should take over her bedroom.”

I reply without much enthusiasm. “Thanks, sis.”

“Don’t want to move out of my room anyway.” She punches me on my shoulder. “So, tell me, how’s the grocery store treating you?”

“Hot. Sweaty.” Boring as all hell. Making the same biscuit every day for hours doesn’t top my excitement list. But it puts money in my pocket. Or, rather, in my landlord’s pocket.

“Thanks so much for doing this. If it weren’t for you, I have no idea what I’d be doing.”

“You’d have figured something else out. I have faith. How was school today?”

Her whole face transforms. “It was great! I learned how to do highlights *and* lowlights. I love the coloring process. It’s so scientific, you know?”

I laugh. “I don’t know too much, since my experience with coloring has come from a drugstore.” Not like I’ve had either the time or the money to do anything with my hair since I’ve been back.

She picks up my mane. “I don’t know. If I had hair like yours, I don’t think I’d change a thing. I love your color. So much better than mine.” She points to her own hair, which is about three shades lighter than mine. Not blonde, but not a true brunette. In any event, it’s pink right now.

“Looks like you’re eating the profits, so to speak.”

“You like?” She does a three-sixty, showing off her asymmetric hairstyle from all angles. She plops down onto the couch next to me. “How’s your other job going?”

She’s referring to the advertising gig I picked up at a local department store. It’s only part time—hence also working at the grocery store—but at least it’s more interesting and related to my preferred field. Nothing as exciting as working for a rock band, for sure. Not much is. At least this one pays for important things like electricity.

“It’s good enough.”

“Maybe you’ll get promoted to full time soon. They have to love you.” She drops her head on my shoulder for a few moments.

Her youthful exuberance is adorable, although not based in reality. “We’ll see.”

She twirls her pink hair. “So, I saw a clip on *In the Know* about TLR.”

My entire body spasms. “Don’t want to hear it.”

Juanita continues as if I hadn’t said anything. “Trent’s recovering really well. They showed him playing his guitar.”

My eyebrows raise. He’s already back to playing?

“He looked good, physically anyway.”

I don’t take the bait. “So, are you keeping up with your schoolwork?”

“Yeah. Great stuff. As I was saying, *In the Know* reported he’s been recuperating at Braxton Hunte’s house.”

I turn away. I don’t want to hear anything about my ex. He certainly doesn’t care what I’ve been doing. “I don’t want to talk about this, okay?”

She sighs. “Fine. I want to go on record that I think you guys were good together. I liked how you were when you were with him. You laughed a lot, even when all my financial shit piled around your ears. I think you should call him.”

“Your two cents are duly noted.” I throw her advice away with all the junk mail we receive. Call him? Is she on crack?

The next morning, I wake up and make my coffee. No more Starbucks for me—or slices of flan. Way too expensive. I make a tuna sandwich to bring with me for lunch at the department store and put a little bit on a paper towel. When I plod out the door, a little black and white cat meows. I noticed the furball the other day hanging around by the bushes. He

doesn't have a collar or a tag, so I assume he's homeless. I can relate.

Putting the paper towel down on the stoop, I pet him as he devours the treat. "Hope it fills your little belly." When he finishes, he rubs his head against my leg, lets out a little meow, and scampers away.

Yeah. Even a stray cat abandons you when you've outgrown your usefulness.

At the department store, I get to my desk and settle in. At least I'm able to sharpen my marketing skills here. Without paying much attention to my co-workers, I boot up my computer and start working.

A woman walks by and says hi to me. I wave. Haven't bothered to learn anyone's names. What's the point?

When I need to do some online research, I pull up the search engine and a new article is recommended for me. It's the story from *First Rumors* about Joey's supposed heroin addiction. Warmth spreads throughout my body as I remember how I tore them apart, finishing with a plea for donations to a heroin addiction charity. Last check, they've raised nearly one-hundred thousand dollars.

Despite my best intentions, I reread the stupid story. Something niggles at the back of my mind.



# CORDELIA



**M**y hand shakes as I grasp the phone at my ear and tell Rita my story.

“I mean, are you really sure?”

Positivity flows through my veins. “I am. Rita, this makes total sense. Hector was always hanging around. I never thought too much about it before, but he was there whenever something was discussed.”

“Well, thank you so much for telling me.” Rustling of papers comes through the phone. “Now, please, let me know. How are you doing? How’s the marketing job at the department store?”

I may have told Rita a white lie to avoid her sympathy. Or pity. Neither one appeals. I force my voice to mimic enthusiasm. “Oh, it’s great. I’m learning so much! Plus, it’s a super place to work, without a horrible commute, you know?” My stomach tightens.

“I’m so happy to hear this. Sounds like you found your calling. And so close to home!”

I punch my leg. “Yeah. It rocks.”

“Hold on.” Rita puts me on hold.

I almost throw up at our conversation, but can't let on about how miserable I am. Not to mention the fact I'm also working at the grocery store to make ends meet. Today's the first of the month, and it's the first time I had to pay rent. If I skip breakfast, stick to a tuna sandwich for lunch, and eat scraps at my night job for dinner, I may be able to make my payments to Juanita's school. The credit cards will have to wait. The thought of having to deal with creditor calls again isn't something I'm excited about, but what can I do?

"Cordelia, honey, I have to go. It was great catching up with you. Let's try to get together soon for dinner. I miss your face."

I miss hers, too. "Sounds good," I lie. No way can I afford a meal out.

Hanging up, I pray for Hector to see some sort of comeuppance for what he's done. After I zeroed in on him and Marvin as the potential source to *In the Know*, I did some digging. They both were present during conversations that alluded to, or outright discussed, the topics *First Rumors* ran with in their articles. All except for the one about Dwight's ADHD, as Marvin was sick and didn't go to the bar that night. Once I zeroed in on Hector, I uncovered he was a roadie for California Skies, the band in competition with TLR for Hunte's opening band position. Means, motive, and opportunity. He hit the trifecta.

After I'd unraveled everything, I did the only thing I could think of to do. I called Rita to let Apex know. Basically, my final act as TLR's social media manager. I double-check my hollow reflection in the mirror before grabbing a paper towel with some scraps of tuna for the stray, and make the trek to my day job.

A few days later, I'm at home getting ready to slog to the grocery store for my evening job when my phone rings. It's from Apex. What could they want? Eh, it's probably Rita calling to chat.

"Hello?"

A male voice I recognize asks, "Is this Cordelia Hernandez?"

Rita's boss? I play dumb to allow my brain to sort through why he's calling me. "It is. Who's asking?"

"This is Thad Griffith."

My heart gallops. "Did something happen to Rita?"

"What? No."

I sag in relief. She's the closest thing I have to a mother, barring none. "Oh. Good." If not about Rita, what the hell is he calling me for? "What can I do for you, Mr. Griffith?"

"I'm calling to, well, say thank you for unraveling the source of those tips about The Light Rail to *First Rumors* and *In the Know*. Rita passed along the tip you gave her, and we were able to verify everything. You were right. Hector Gomez was the informant." He pauses. "Hector confessed that he and the bassist for California Skies cooked up the scheme to win the Hunte competition. They thought Apex wouldn't want to be involved with a band with a notorious reputation. Turns out, they're right, only not in the way they predicted."

I twist my hair around my finger. "Glad I could help." Wonder how this new information will impact TLR? Shaking my head, I remind myself I don't care.

"Well, it's more than that. For your intel, you've won the reward Apex offered."

My hand falls to my side. “Reward?” I choke out. God, I can use an extra five-hundred dollars right about now.

“Yes. You’re no longer an employee, so you’re eligible. On behalf of the entire Apex team, we want to thank you for your invaluable work.”

Must’ve killed him to have to say this to me. My mind races. How soon will I get my unexpected check? If I get it fast, I might be able to send in a partial payment to the credit cards this month.

“We still have your checking account information on file. Check your account tomorrow for the deposit.”

“Will do.” Direct deposit to the rescue. I do a little jig.

“Thanks, again.” He disconnects the call.

I stare at my reflection, noting the high color in my cheeks having nothing to do with the blush I’m wearing. I had no idea there was even a reward. “Thank you, Rita,” I put out to the universe. Even though we haven’t seen each other in months, she’s still looking out for me.

Even my shift at the grocery store doesn’t dampen my spirits. Nor my night on the lumpy pullout couch—haven’t had the energy to move into *Mamá’s* old bedroom yet. I rush through my morning routine, feed the stray, and get into my department store cubicle. Wait for the clock to strike nine.

At five minutes after the hour, I log into my bank account. “Please be an extra five hundred dollars,” I whisper, then enter my password.

My eyes bug out. “Oh, my!”

My co-workers turn and stare at me for shouting. For once, I don’t give a shit. I raise a trembling hand to my lips. This

can't be right.

I open my account and gape at the balance. Five-hundred dollars? I begin to laugh. Loud. Add another two zeros to the end of the number. I've never seen this much money in, well, ever.

“What’s going on, Cordelia?”

Suzanne, my boss, asks. I blink a million times, unable to respond. She comes over, but I minimize my screen. Don't want to advertise my sudden good fortune.

“Is everything alright?”

I nod. Still unable to speak, I do the calculations in my head. I can pay off Juanita's tuition, Big Rolls' debt on my credit card, and *still* have money left over. Which I will be smart about, no matter that I'm dying to take a vacation and buy out all the clothes in Walmart.

Finding my voice, I reply, “Yeah. Just got some good news—about my sister. She's in beauty school.”

“Oh, that's great,” she replies. “How's the advertisement coming along? It's due at noon.”

Right. I still have to do my job. Even though I'm fifty *thousand* dollars richer. I click on the design icon. “Working on it.”

She leaves my side and my brain whirls. I had absolutely no idea a reward was offered, let alone its size. Clearing my life of all my bills is a strange feeling. But one I'm going to savor. Shoving aside my good fortune, I focus on completing my project. No matter what, I need to keep this job. But maybe I can stop cooking biscuits at night?

Shift over, I return home. Since I don't have to work at the grocery store tonight, I pull up my bank account and stare at the zeros. Then I direct this month's bills to all be paid in full tomorrow.

When my new life starts. Tomorrow.

No more creditor calls. No more past due notices. Freedom.

I grab a whole can of tuna and put it on one of our saucers—the only one without a chip. Opening the front door, I yell, “Here, kitty!”

Rustling from off to the side catches my attention, and the cat pops out from behind a bush, meowing. “I have some tuna for you, but you have to come inside to get it.”

As if he understands what I'm saying, or more likely lured in by the smell of his favorite meal, he hops up the steps. I back up and place the saucer down in the foyer, thankful we live in a walkup rather than one of the large apartment buildings I used to covet growing up. The cat comes closer and sticks his face into the curved plate. I pet him while he devours his unexpected treat.

“There's more where that came from.” The cat needs a name. His black and white fur reminds me of the outfits all the stars wear to awards ceremonies. His meow is as smooth as one of Trent's notes. As I pet him, I test, “Liking this, Tenor?”

He meows and shoves his head against my hand. I walk toward our door. “Want to come inside?”

Tenor approaches me, hunched down on all four legs. Then he meows, turns tail, and runs out of the building. Even his defection can't penetrate my positivity today. He'll be back, and I'll get him to come inside. My luck is changing. *I hope.*

Returning inside, I pick up my phone and scroll through Instagram, landing on a recent photo of Trent and Brax. Together. I torture myself by staring at both of their faces, knowing I'll never be a part of their world again. The open wound otherwise known as my heart scabs over. In an indirect way, they helped me get out of the red. I close the app and check my emails one final time.

A new one has arrived from *Record News* magazine, if the "from" line is to be believed. Yeah, right. Out of curiosity, I open the email and my mouth drops open. It's from a Jeremy Davis, supposedly one of their writers. I skim the email where he asks me for the scoop about how I figured out Hector Gomez was trying to undermine TLR by sending information to *First Rumors* and *In the Know*. He also says he wants to know about my background to include in the piece.

Wow.

I reply, and a meeting is scheduled for Sunday, the only day I'm completely off. I pinch my arm and the sting tells me I'm not dreaming.

Since Juanita's out with her friends tonight, the evening stretches before me. I could hit up a local bar like I used to. I could actually pay for my own drinks, too. Maybe even get laid. My stomach sours. No way do I want to return to the role of party girl.

Shaking my head, I transfer myself to the couch. Instead of picking up the remote, I sit in silence. Is this how my new life is going to be? Silent?

Maybe it's for the best.

I scan the living room and decide. It's time. I've paid our rent for the month, *Mamá's* moved in with her new boyfriend

—for however long it lasts this time—and I deserve to make this change. I grab my pillow and walk into her room, which is now mine. The window looks out onto a brick wall. But there's a bed. A real bed, not a pullout. A proper closet and dresser. When she left, she emptied these, so I can move my stuff in.

I enter Juanita's room and take my hanging things out of her overstuffed closet. After five trips, all my stuff's in my new bedroom. Next up, I go to the hall closet and drag out my shoes. When they're all in the hallway, I scoop them up and dump them onto the floor in my closet. I pair them and line them up in nice rows.

I stop at the overstuffed dresser I used as a kid that's been shoved outside the bathroom. Because it has a marble top, *Mamá* used it to display our family photos. Rather, framed pictures of her and her latest boyfriend, plus baby photos for Juanita and me. She left all these photos behind. My first order of business is to toss all of them into the trash, except for the two of my sister and me. Better. We can decorate it with current pictures. Well, photos of her since nothing about me is worth framing.

I brush my hands against my legs. Only one place left from which to relocate my stuff. In the living room, I approach the plastic bins stacked in a corner and sort through my folded clothes. Once in my new room, I open the dresser drawers and lay my underwear, bras, and socks in their new home.

Pulling open the bottom drawer, I pick up my nighties and go to dump them into it. Something at the bottom of the drawer catches my eye. There's paper stuck between the bottom and the side. What did *Mamá* leave behind?



With some cajoling, I maneuver out a letter. Shaking the open envelope, a couple of photos fall to the bed. My father's grin stares back at me. My limbs seize.

I pick up the two pictures and focus on the first one. In it, I'm about three and am staring up at the man who gave me life with love shining on my face. He looks down at me with a big smile. The pictures float to the bed. I follow suit.

What am I seeing? This can't be real ... can it?

I retrieve the pictures again and flip to the second one. In it, my father's hand is under my chin, tipping my head up. His lips are on my forehead. Such a tender moment between a father and his five-year-old daughter. Tender? What the fuck?

Tears roll down my cheeks as I absorb these scenes. Biting my lip, I flip the pictures over and suffer another blow. One of the photos is blank. But the other ... In my father's handwriting, I read, "I love you so much, my baby girl."

What? I hiccup as my tears turn into full-blown sobs. He loved me? So much? He called me his baby girl? I clasp the photo to my chest and cry over the man I lost way too soon. To the outside, he may not have been a good man—after all, he was sent to jail for doing bad things—but he did love me.

I fish out the envelope in which the two pictures were stored, but it only has *Mamá's* name and address, with *Papá's* return address from prison in the upper-left side and a canceled stamp. Only these two photos. Why would *Mamá* have kept them away from me?

Discarding my negative thoughts about her, I focus on my father once more. His words sear into my soul.

He loved me.

He didn't abandon me willingly.

*I was enough.*

My body rids itself of the pain I've held all my life. I cry out the hurt and rejection, and breathe in acceptance. A warmth spreads through my limbs. "I loved you too, *Papá*."

I remain on the bed, soaking in my newfound glow.

Outside, people on the street yell at one another, fighting over how he was flirting with another woman at some party. He yells at her for the outfit she's wearing. Sounds like so many of the fights I've witnessed over the years between my mother and whatever guy she was with at the time.

As my thoughts land on *Mamá*, my newfound peace is replaced with a raging anger. How dare she hide these photos from me? That woman has been nothing but awful to me and Juanita for years. She's always played the victim, fostering my feelings of guilt. Exhibit A—Juanita's tuition. *She* gambled it away, and somehow it became *my* problem. My backbone stiffens. Time to set her straight.

With newfound conviction, I wash my face, shove my feet into my shoes, and storm out of our apartment. My ire never wanes as I make my way to her new boyfriend's place. By the time I arrive at her latest doorstep, I swear smoke's coming out of my ears. The building is well-maintained, with pretty marble reliefs. Double-checking I'm at the right place, I find his last name and ring the bell.

Several times.

Not as satisfying as banging on a door, but it'll have to do.

*Mamá*'s discombobulated voice answers. "Who is it?"

I bury all the choices I could say. This conversation is long overdue and must be done face to face. "Cordelia."

“Oh. What do you want? I’m not giving you any money—the rent’s your responsibility now.”

“I don’t need any money. I want to talk to you.” I pat myself on the back for the restraint I’ve shown.

An overburdened sigh comes over the intercom. “I’ll be down shortly.”

Because you don’t want me to see the full lap of luxury you’ve scored. *Bitch.*

When she exits the building, wearing all new clothes and large hoop earrings, I contain my derision. With difficulty. I’m not here to comment on her “improved” circumstances.

“What’s so important you had to bother me in the middle of the night?”

It’s only nine, and she’s dressed like she’s ready to go out. Ignoring her stupid remark, I fish into my purse. Pulling out the two photos of *Papá* and me, I hold them up. “Recognize these?”

Her eyes go wide. “Where did you find these?”

“Doesn’t matter. What *does* matter is that they exist. Why did you hide them from me?”

She looks around her nice new neighborhood, tugs on her earring, then gives me her full, toxic attention. “I didn’t hide them. I threw out every last photo of Andrés. They weren’t important.”

“They are to me.”

She waves her hand. “Why? He’s dead. As in never coming back. Not like my Sebastián, who’s rich and takes care of me.”

I don't ever want to hear about her new Sugar Daddy, but this statement exposes her ugly truth. "That's it, isn't it? You never wanted to be a mother, but sometimes all your fucking came with consequences, huh? It's always been about *you*. What you wanted, what you needed for yourself. You never thought about Juanita or me, besides what we could get for you."

Her plucked eyebrow raises. "Cordelia. I will not stand here and be spoken to like this. I am your mother. I deserve respect."

I tuck my precious photos back into my purse. "I beg to differ with you, *Mamá*." I place extra emphasis on the undeserved title. "Respect is earned, and you never earned mine. I can't speak for my sister, but after I tell her what went down here, I'm sure she'll agree. The days of you running our lives are over. In fact, you're no longer welcome in my life ever again. I wish it was you and not *Papá* who is planted six feet under."

Her hand flies to her chest. "Well, I never!"

"That's patently false, but it ends here. From this moment on, I don't have a mother or a father. The days of you interfering with any aspect of my life are over." Not waiting to see her reaction and ignoring her sputtered criticisms, I spin on my heel and leave the hoity-toity neighborhood, with *Mamá* in it, in the rearview mirror.

I get my first full night's sleep in a long while.

The next morning, I call out of work and devote time to researching on the computer. With *Papá's* photos and the envelope tucked into my purse, I propel myself forward. Three hours later, I stand in the prison cemetery in front of a

tombstone marked 56998. I hold out the envelope and verify his inmate number in the return address.

Yes.

This is my dad.

## TRENT



**B**reathing hard, I wave once more at the crowd before disappearing backstage. Dwight slaps my back. “You were on fire tonight.”

I drape my arm around his shoulders. “As were you, bro.”

Joey piles on. “That was our best gig ever!”

Maurice holds up his fist, which we all bump.

Once we cross into the green room, Cheri, Denice, and Fee flood over to us. My guys clinch their wives—who each took vacation this week—and plant hot kisses on them. Me? I continue deeper into the room and grab the Bud waiting for me. Twisting off the cap, I down about half of it and let my thumb rest over the opening before my bandmates resurface.

“Are you up for coming out with us tonight, Trent?”

I glance at Joey. We’re now in South Carolina, having resumed the tour as Hunte’s opening band. California Skies was disqualified from the competition due to the revelation that their roadie and guitarist were in cahoots in tipping off *First Rumors* and *In The Know*. We’ll make up the skipped New England part at the end. Brax thought this was the best way.

Brax? Over the past few months, our relationship's gotten better. Still not a real father-son one, but we're working on it. After all, he never knew about me.

I glance at Joey, who's expecting an answer. "Thanks, man. I am feeling much better but can't imagine staying out past ten. It's only been three months since the transplant."

"Then come to dinner with us and bail. Charleston's supposed to have some frickin' fantastic food."

"Well, guess I have to eat."

Joey puts his hands to his mouth and yells, "Trent's coming out with us tonight. Let's make it a big party!"

I shake my head at his antics, yet in my heart, I know he loves me as much as I love him. My band. My brothers. They, together with all of Hunte, have been here with me every step of my recovery.

From when I was released from the hospital.

When I moved into Brax's house for rehab.

After I returned to my townhome, which the guys had made sure was back to its original format. I never needed to sleep on the main floor or use any of the other things she had arranged for me.

*She.* Cordelia. My heart rate flutters.

My band of brothers has been my lifeline. Since we've resumed the tour as the permanent opening band for Hunte, I do have to admit, we've never played better. Every night I'm feeling stronger, and the audiences respond with increasing enthusiasm. Tonight's performance was, without question, our very best. The crowd's cheering only cemented my opinion. Even our new PR manager graced us with a rare smile. Apex

plucked him away from the tail end of another band's successful tour, and we all can tell he's more than ready for a break. We're grateful he's here, though, especially after our prior one's lying ass was fired.

One hour later, we all sit in the courtyard of a restaurant called Circa 1886, enjoying a fantastic meal. Maurice adjusts his glasses. His eye's not been red for a long time and he's been properly weaned off the Prednisone. "Shit, this food's the bomb. We may have to move here! What do you think, Fee?"

She pops the last bite from his plate into her mouth. "I don't know. Would you love me if I gained a hundred pounds?"

He pulls her in for a kiss. "I'll love you no matter what."

Fee whispers something about Cordelia, but Maurice shushes her before I even make eye contact with him. Smart man.

To divert my thoughts, I grab the last biscuit from the breadbasket. I'm not usually this carb-heavy, but these corn thingies are fricking delicious. After slathering on some butter, I pop it into my mouth and savor its deliciousness, all the while trying to erase all thoughts of my *ex*.

The waiter, who has round glasses and looks like Harry Potter, drops by. "Everything all good here? Can I take your plates?"

Fee's fork clatters onto her empty dish. "Please. This food is to die for."

He smiles. "I'll tell the chef." He produces some menus and distributes them. "Here's our dessert menu. I'll give you a moment."



Joey points to the menu. “Check this out. They have a Bittersweet Chocolate Crémux with salted bourbon caramel, seasonal berries, pistachios, and chocolate fudge sauce! Did you see that, Cheri?” He hits her forearm. “Although there’s also a Spiced Pear Cake.” His eyes roll back in his head. “And—Oh My God—a West African Milk Tart!”

I’m so full, I can’t even imagine eating another bite. But Joey’s running commentary about the various treats gives me pause. No harm can come from scanning it. Of course, my eyes zero in on the flan. Cordelia’s favorite dessert. Longing for her springs up, which I shove down.

Hard.

She lied to me.

All of my bandmates and their wives end up ordering desserts to share. Against my will, when Harry Potter asks for my order, I say, “Flan.” Fuck. Why did I choose *her* preferred sweet?

Maurice asks, “So, what club do you want to hit tonight?” His question launches a variety of suggestions. Me? I keep quiet.

Not that I’m physically unable to go clubbing with them. I am. Even got the go-ahead from my doctors to drink again, in moderation. It’s not my body that’s refusing to go out. I glance around my table. It’s the fact I’m no longer a pair. Nor do I have any desire to hook up with anyone. Other than Cordelia.

Which will never happen anymore, notwithstanding our promise to be patient if our relationship goes off the rails. Can’t be more cockeyed than this.

Dwight leans over to me. “We’ll be back on our home turf in a couple of months. Maybe you can reach out to Cordelia?”

I can think of her, but no one else has the privilege of saying her name to me. The right is mine alone. In a gruff voice, I reply, “Not happening, ever.”

“I just meant—”

“I know what you’re saying, Dwight, and I’m. Not. Interested. Don’t bring her name up again. Got me?”

He raises his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. We all agreed with you to get her fired. Don’t bite my head off.”

“Don’t be a dick and I won’t.” I turn away from my asshole best friend and engage with Cheri. Get the hint, dude?

When we’re done, we leave the restaurant. Joey, Maurice, and their wives leave for whatever club they’ve selected, while Dwight and Denice hop on the new Harley I bought for him. I grab a nearby pedicab to our hotel and ride in silence. The gorgeous antebellum surroundings don’t penetrate my anger-fueled brain. I wish I could forget her. I just can’t figure out how.

The next morning, someone knocks on my door at an ungodly hour. Checking my clock, I realize it’s already after ten. Shit. I shuffle to the door and open it, where Brax stands holding two coffees. “I brought sustenance.”

I chuckle and let him in. “Thanks. Let me throw some water on my face and I’ll be right out.”

He calls to my back, “Feeling okay?”

“Yeah. It took me a while to fall asleep last night.” I don’t bother telling him my mind was looping memories of Cordelia and me. She’d be so excited to see this scene happening here. For the millionth time, I utter, “Never again.”

After brushing my teeth and tossing on some workout shorts, I remember the first time I called him “Brax.” The way it rolled around my tongue. How his eyes glossed over. Now, it’s like second nature.

Returning to the living room area, I take a sip of my coffee. Brax added the perfect amount of creamer. “This is good. Thanks.”

He holds his cup upward. “I noticed your band had cleared out last night before we finished playing.”

“Yeah. We all went to Circa 1886 for dinner. A kickass restaurant downtown.”

He nods. “Been there. It’s really good.”

As has been a routine we’ve started over the past weeks, he launches into a critique of our performance the night before. Not to criticize us, but rather to help us improve. Having Hunte as our mentor is a dream. Since my secret’s been out in the open, things are getting better between us. Still shocks me, though.

“So, tell me what runs through your brain before you go onstage. I’ve found my mindset from behind the curtain can really affect how the gig goes in front of it.”

I focus on blowing on my hot coffee. When I can’t avoid him any longer, I answer, “That’s the worst part of my performance, honestly.” I take a deep breath. “I have a routine I’ve been doing before going out. It involves some deep breathing, positive mental images, and a short burst of cardio.” The routine my therapist outlined for me so long ago. As refined by Cordelia.

He nods. “Sounds good. What image do you envision?”

Without thought, I say, “The beach.”

“Ah. You can take the boy away from Jersey, but not the other way around.”

“Yup.” I blow on my still hot java.

“How about tweaking your image a bit? What do you think about adding your band on a stage to your vision of the beach?”

The purpose of my exercise is to calm me down, not shoot adrenaline into my already hyperalert body. “No.”

“Why not? I picture my band on the stage performing in front of a huge open-air arena before I hit the stage.”

Maybe I should share my stage fright with him? He is my father, after all. I dip my toe. “I need to regulate my breathing before walking out. Thinking of the beach helps.”

He frowns. “Being with your best friends, doing what you love to do, doesn’t?”

I run my hand up my arm, ending with a squeeze over my tattoo. “Actually, this routine was developed to help me with stage fright. Not to psyche me up to perform.”

“Ah.” He places his cup down onto the coffee table. “Things are making sense now. Have you always felt nervous before hitting a gig?”

In for a penny. “No. It started when we opened for you.”

“Well, I know jumping the size of your audience can mess with your head. But you’ve been doing great.”

I swallow my coffee. My chest expands as I prepare to tell him the truth. “It’s not that. It all started after Mom was killed. If I don’t calm down before performing, I picture a gunman busting in and shooting up the place.”

He winces. “Oh, God. I’m so sorry.” He drops his hand on top of my knee. “You do know everyone’s screened before entering the arena.”

I might have heard this before—I clamp my line of thought down tighter than my guitar case. My right shoulder lifts. “Didn’t say it was rational.”

He leans backward, his hands now resting on his own knees. “Have you spoken with a therapist about this?”

“Yeah.” Not going to tell him how Cordelia amplified the advice.

When Brax sees I’m not willing to do down this path, he says, “Well, all things considered, I think you’re doing fantastic. Fans are loving you guys, according to your social media. Their ranks are growing.”

“Thanks.” For some reason—maybe because I denied him info about my therapy—I need to share something more with him. Which becomes undeniable. This is something he’s wanted, and I’m finally ready to give it to him. I bite my lip. “Do you want to see her?”

“Who?”

“My mother,” I whisper.

He tugs his ear. “Yeah. I would.”

I nod and stand to grab my cell phone off the kitchen counter. Opening my photos, I click on the album marked, “Mom.” She smiles at me in a pretty pink dress. At her side, I’m blowing her a kiss. I had to be around three. I pass him the phone. “Here’s one of my favorites. She just returned from getting her hair done.”

He takes my phone and focuses his attention on the screen. His head bobs in time with his foot. “I do remember her—your aunt triggered my memory.” The left side of his lips tip upward. “Her smile was infectious.” He holds up my phone. “May I?”

“Sure.” My throat almost closes, but I was the one who opened the door.

The minutes tick by with the only sound being his finger swiping through my photo gallery. I can’t move. Can’t drink my coffee. I sit and watch as he immerses himself in my mother’s life via pictures. As he mentally places her.

After a while, he lifts a wounded hazel gaze to mine, although his sentiment is positive. “It looks like you had a great childhood. She was at so many of your events.”

“She was. I was lucky.” Would I have been luckier to know Brax was my father? I have no answer for that question. “She meant the world to me.”

Until I found her diary and she died. Twice.

His fingers trace my screen. “It’s great you had her love to support you.” He leans over, offering my cell phone back.

I lay it on the coffee table. “Still does.”

His fingers tug on his ear again. “Love is important, son.”

*Son.* I let his slip of the tongue—or his truth—slide. “So I’ve noticed.”

“Before I met Sara, I was a different man. I was wild when I met your mother. Aimless. Chasing the next high, be it alcohol or sex. Never drugs, though.”

“I remember reading about how your first drummer overdosed.”

He nods. “Jack Jefferson. He was a great guy.” He takes a beat of silence, then continues, “But my point is Sara’s love changed me. For the better.”

“I thought I had that with Cordelia,” I admit. “But her loose lips ruined everything.”

“I know what she did. And I’m sorry.” He waits a beat. “But maybe consider the fact she might have done us a favor. We never had to come out and make an announcement. True, it was put out there before we could control it, but we would’ve had to come clean at some point.”

His defense of her spikes my wrath. “It should’ve been our choice.” I jump to my feet and cross the room, shoving the curtains to the side. Not seeing anything before me.

Brax’s footsteps approach me. “I’m sorry.” He pats my shoulder. We remain in place for a long while. Next to me, he sighs. “I need to get to rehearsal now. Remember, I’m always here for you if you want to talk.”

I remain at the window, clenching my jaw when the door shuts. Leaving me alone in the suite. How is it possible I miss her—when she ruined me?

## TRENT



**T**he arena in New Orleans vibrates as the audience does the wave twenty minutes before we take the stage. Raine grabs our attention. “Guys, tonight’s crowd is bigger than I’ve ever seen before. And they’re here early to see *you*. Apex is so proud of how your fanbase has grown throughout the tour.”

Joey’s fists raise into the air. “Yeah! Bet you twenty we fill up seventy-five percent of the seats tonight!”

Maurice removes his glasses. “I’m still cautious. I bet sixty.”

Dwight’s drumsticks bounce off the top of a table. “In for sixty-five.”

All eyes land on me. Because I want to appear positive, I pronounce. “I’ll take eighty.” Truth be told, Raine’s announcement—followed by our bet—was like a match to dry timber in my stomach. I lose the thread of the rest of Raine’s speech.

After he finishes our pre-show pep talk, I excuse myself and dart toward the bathroom. Stage fright sucks—especially when it rears itself so unexpectedly. Inside the men’s room, I run through my exercises. The ones I shared with Brax. When my mind settles on the Jersey Shore, my pterodactyls land, but don’t disappear.



Jumping from foot to foot, I repeat my breathing exercises. Switching things up, I hum “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.” I picture the beach at night, with waves crashing on the sand. Mentally, I build a stage and put TLR on it, performing before a huge crowd who sing our lyrics back to us, beach balls tossed overhead. My body unlocks as the fear recedes.

“Thanks, Brax.”

Cupping my hands, I gather water and throw it on my face. Taking a few paper towels, I dry my cheeks and confirm I’m ready to perform—dinosaur-free. I open the door, where Dwight stands.

“You okay?”

I rub my neck. “Yeah.” Then I admit, “It was worse this time, but I got it under control.”

“I’m glad.” We enter the backstage area. “Looks like you won the bet.”

I stop in my tracks. “Eighty percent? Really?”

He nods. “Pretty fucking awesome. They want to see a double-header, rather than only hear the future Rock and Roll Hall of Famers.”

Floating back to the beach, I allow my imaginary concert to continue while taking deep breaths. “Wow.”

We approach the rest of the guys. After strapping my guitar across my body, I murmur my new mantra under my breath. “I can handle this.”

The lights dim. The energy from the crowd rises. Raine claps. “Have a great time out there, guys. Show them what TLR is all about!”

Maurice yells. “Hands in!”

Tossing my guitar to my back, I add my hand to the circle and complete our pre-stage ritual. Then the guys start to take the stage. Before he leaves, Dwight whispers in my ear, “Show them what you’re made of, bro!”

Then it’s just me standing here. I wiggle my fingers and let the music flow through my body. Refusing to let any negative thoughts enter my brain. When the band hits my intro, I stroll onto the stage, letting my guitar wait for me.

The crowd surges to their feet and I duck. Joey mimics my move, as if it were planned. I bounce upright on the balls of my feet. My panicked heart rate decelerates a little.

I scurry over to Joey and repeat my ducking move, to which he replies with an extra glide across the stage. I toss him a grateful look and slip away from him, toward the microphone. When my hand closes around it, I go on autopilot and let the music reign.

About forty-five minutes later, we’re waving to the good people of New Orleans. We walk off the stage, into the darkness that always reminds me of where we started. Small bars in New Jersey.

I nudge Joey’s shoulder. “Thanks for the save at the beginning.”

He flips his bass behind him. “Wanted to help you out. Like my glide?”

“Yeah.” I chuckle. “Didn’t want to start dancing with you on stage, though. But, seriously, I appreciate what you did.”

“What are brothers for?”

Hashtag Truth.

We enter the backstage area, where Raine corrals us for our meet-and-greet. The days are monotonous, but at least we're out on tour. Our following is growing exponentially. Probably doesn't hurt that everyone knows Brax is my father.

Once we finish up with the fans and the DJs, we're led into another room with a bar and some food. Given where we are, a buffet of jambalaya, po'boys, and bread pudding awaits. My mouth waters over all the enticing smells. Bud in hand, I join the band and load up on the food.

Dwight gets in line behind me. I pass him the tongs for the sandwiches. "Great show tonight."

"I have to admit, I actually got into it near the end."

"I could tell." He deposits some dirty rice onto his plate. "What got you spooked at the start?"

I return the spoon for the crawfish onto the serving platter. "There was something about the way the crowd surged."

He nods. "Glad Cordelia's exercises helped you out."

Frowning, I retort, "There are no 'Cordelia's exercises.'" She may have found more on the internet, but my therapist gave me the first round. "I got my own head back into the gig."

He swallows. After a second, he continues, "You sure did. I liked your interactions with those chicks in the front."

That's more like it. "They were hot."

He shrugs. "Not as hot as Denice, but I can see their appeal."

"Damn straight." I zip toward the tables set up around the perimeter. After I sit, Dwight's plate lands next to mine. Followed by his cell phone.

I dig into my meal. Wow. For concert fare, this food is the real deal. When our first plates are empty, I wash everything down with my beer and contemplate what I'm going to get for seconds.

Dwight drops his fork onto his equally empty plate, then picks up his phone. He fiddles around on it for a while and holds up his screen for me to see. "Have you read this?"

I take his phone from him and squint as I read the headline. "Ex-Apex Woman Solves Rumor Mill Tipster." I frown. "What's it about?"

"Cordelia."

I drop his cell as if it were a flaming bananas foster. "I don't want to talk about her."

"I know. But I think it's time you did. She was great around here. She fit in with the band, and really set us on the right path with our social media."

I lower my voice. "Whatever. She got what she deserved. We don't need her." I suck down air. "Our new social media guy is doing a great job. The audiences are coming to hear *us*, and not because we're Hunte's opener."

"You loved her."

At his pronouncement, I leap to my feet. Wiping my mouth, I throw my napkin onto my chair. My voice rises, and I ignore the descending silence. "She fucked me over. She broke her vow to me. She *lied*, like all the women in my life. And now she's gone. Forever." I storm out of the room and hop into one of the waiting black sedans, instructing the driver to take me to the hotel. My entire ride is spent fuming.

When I'm in my suite, I grab another Bud from the fridge and sit at the table. Fucking Dwight. Just because he's married

and shit, doesn't mean he gets to spew crap to me about love.

I bring the bottle to my lips and tilt it back. Placing it on my thigh, my thumb covers the open top.

So what if she gave me a few stupid exercises to calm me down before I hit the stage. My therapist already beat her to the punch. Same for the ridiculous lyric book, which sits—still blank, thank you very much—on the nightstand.

Abandoning my Bud, I flee to the balcony.

I don't care that I told her I loved her. She ruined everything when she told the entire planet about my relationship with Brax. She didn't even come clean to me about it until *In the Know* published their "tell-all." She was content to let her lie well, lie. No forgiveness from me.

I never forgave my prior girlfriend either, and no one gives me shit about her. I hope her wardrobe keeps her warm at night.

It's just like how Mom lied to me about my father. She never came clean, either. But for her diary, I'd never have found out.

Only the guys in the band have had my back. Forever. We don't lie to each other, no matter how hard the truth is to swallow.

*Like when Dwight told me I loved her.*

My body wars against itself. I want to hurt her, lash out, make her disappear from the face of the earth. Yet why do I employ her calming exercises before every performance? And sometimes without a gig looming. I tug on my dreads to the point of pinpricks of pain.

I gather all my energy into my diaphragm and scream, “Fuck!”

Whirling around, I stalk back into my suite and grab my phone. With a few taps, I pull up the article Dwight showed me. I skim the first few paragraphs and lean against the wall.

She figured out Hector was the guy supplying *First Rumors* all the intel. Well, since she literally told him about Brax and me, guess it wasn’t too difficult for her to figure this out.

As I continue reading, my body becomes heavier. I slide down to the floor, my back leaning on the wall while my knees remain tented.

Ah, ha. She got a reward from Apex for tipping them off. *At least she doesn’t have any more money worries.* Why does this make me feel lighter?

My legs stretch out in front of me. The article reveals all about her debts and exposes Big Rolls’s role in them. She extols her sister and how well she’s doing in cosmetology school. That’s good, I guess. Never wanted anything bad to happen to Juanita. After all, she never did anything to me.

I read the final paragraph and almost drop my phone. She comes clean to the whole world about her role in confirming to Hector about Brax’s being my father. I can almost wipe her tears as she explains how her one, exhausted, slip of the tongue ruined her entire life, even if she’s no longer in debt. How she’s happy I’m doing so well from my transplant—and Brax, too—and she wishes me only the best. How she’s positive TLR will become major superstars in our own right.

I drop the phone next to me.

And process the article.

She all but said she still loves me. It's all there in black and white.

My chest rises and falls with increasing rapidity.

According to the article, Hector already knew about Brax. She only confirmed what he had heard. When I pressed her back in my hospital room, she claimed she was exhausted after staying with me for days, through my surgery.

True, she did stay at my side throughout the flight and my surgery. I was out of it, but she stood by me the whole time. Well, she and Auntie Gloria.

I reread the part where she explained how Hector asked her for verification of the rumor. She didn't actually *tell* him.

I remember her trying to explain all this, but I wasn't ready to hear her. I wasn't able to. Back then, I jumped to the conclusion that she lied to me like my mother and ex-girlfriend did. And ordered her out of my life.

Was I wrong?

My heart stutters over Dwight's earlier declaration.

There's a big difference between hiding a buried truth and outright lying.

Fuck. *I am the biggest asshole ever put on this earth.*

I pushed Cordelia away when she could've been here with me every step of the way. Making me laugh with her crazy antics. Helping me with my exercises. Smiling with the special look she reserved only for me.

I miss her so much.

Dwight was right.

My head bangs against the wall. Closing my eyes, I say the words out loud to no one. “I love you, Cordy.”

For the second time tonight, my hands wrap into my dreads, and I pull. I need to fix this. Like right the fuck now.

I grab my phone and bring up her contact information. Without delay, I press Send. She doesn’t pick up—am I surprised? I leave her a message.

Needing to reconnect with her, I send her a text. Or two. Or twenty.

She never responds.



## TRENT



I sit in my black recliner in my house, all alone. We're on a short break after wrapping up the New England leg of the tour. The past month has been torture. I've left Cordelia more messages than I can count, more texts than the number of new fans TLR's picked up. Who number in the thousands.

She hasn't responded to one.

*Get the hint?*

A knock at my door snags my attention, and I get up. On leaden feet, I cross the room and open the door. A guy in a messenger uniform holds up a letter. It's the one I sent to Cordelia yesterday.

"I tried to deliver this envelope, sir, but was told she's no longer at this address. Thought I should return it to you." He extends his arm.

I take the envelope. "Thanks."

Without another word, I topple into my recliner. All alone. Sliding my finger underneath the seal, I drop the contents onto my lap—a front-row ticket to our upcoming performance at Madison Square Garden plus a backstage pass. Snagging the pass, I flip it over and over.

She may be stubborn, but she doesn't have anything on me. Not when I want something. And I fucking want this woman back in my life. More than anything else I've ever wanted.

Grabbing my cell, I pull up her article again and reread it for the hundredth time. Or millionth. I've memorized every line. When I get to the part where she's talking about her sister, I freeze. Juanita. Yes!

I scroll through my contacts and confirm I don't have hers. Shit. My fingers strum my forearm. We're friends on Facebook! I hop on the app to find her. Hitting her up in Messenger, I leap to my feet and press the phone icon.

“Fuck you, you fucking asshole!”

I wince at her greeting. At least she accepted my call. “Please listen to me.”

“Are you fucking nuts? You ruined my sister's life. Ruined! She's a shell of who she used to be, and it's all your fucking fault.”

I deserve this. And more. But still—what a mouth. “I'm sorry.”

She laughs. “You're sorry! That's rich. Well, I'm soooooorry, I don't want to talk with you.”

I rush in before she can disconnect. “No, wait! I really need to talk with Cordelia.” There. I said it. The truth.

“You truly are fucking something aren't you? Son of *the* Braxton Hunte who thinks his shit doesn't stink, huh?”

I try a different tack. “I sent a letter to her, but it was returned. I need her new address.”

“Why? So you can fuck with her head some more?” She laughs. It’s a hollow sound.

“No. But I’m not going to get into this with you. I need to talk with her.”

“Well, too bad Mr. Rock Star. She doesn’t even know you sent the letter because I sent your fucking messenger away.”

Her last statement grabs my attention. “You what?”

“Something wrong with your ears? Must be all the loud music. I said, I fucking refused it.”

Which means Cordelia doesn’t even know I was trying to send her something. “So, she’s still at this address?”

“Duh. Not the sharpest tack in the drawer, are you?” A bell goes off in the background. “Fuck. I have to go. Stay the fuck away!” The call ends.

My brows raise. She seriously needs her mouth washed out. But we’ll get to that later. Right now, I have a woman to beg.

Less than an hour later, I get out of my Uber in front of a sad-looking building in a sketchy area of Newark. My fingers tighten around the handle of the case housing my acoustic guitar as I survey the outside of her building.

The front stoop is swept clean. At least that’s a plus.

The bushes appear to have been shaped somewhat recently. A pot with some flowers sits to the right-hand side of the front door. The exterior, though, needed a paint job maybe five or six years ago. One of the shutters on the third floor’s askew. The shades are pulled down on all of the windows on the second floor.

On the first floor, a window box seems to be new. Well, that's another plus.

She actually *did* lie to me. This place is so much worse than she had described. My heart fractures once more. What she's had to deal with is beyond anything I had imagined.

Down the street, some kids bound into the road and start playing stick ball. At least there are families around here.

While I dither, the front door opens, and two women exit her building. The first chick bounces down the stairs. The second one takes a step outside then bends down to fiddle with her laces. All I can see is her hair—long and brown with reddish highlights. My lunch almost comes up.

Next to me, the first woman yells, "Come on, Nelly. We're late." She walks down the road, toward the kids playing.

Nelly. Not Cordelia. I'm almost lightheaded it wasn't her.

"Hold your jets, Rhea. I'm coming!"

The women around here certainly don't take any shit. Reminds me of another woman who lives in this building.

Nelly stops next to me as if she hit a brick wall, giving me the once over. "Haven't seen you around here before. I'd remember a face like yours. Who are you here to visit, honey?" She plucks at my shirt.

I'm definitely not going to tell her. "I was on my way to the bar," I point my guitar in the opposite direction than they're going. "Thought I recognized you, but I didn't."

Her hand swipes down my shirt. "I think I'd like to be recognized by you. Want to change that up?"

Seriously? "Ah, don't think so."

Her roommate approaches. “Nelly, come on. We have to get to work. Flirt on your own time.”

Nelly spares her a glance. “Fine. See you around again, soon, okay handsome?”

Not if I can help it. I offer a non-committal nod and they disappear. Thank God.

Now I’m back to staring at the front door. I need to go up the three steps and ring the bell for her. I double-check the envelope—she lives on the first floor. With the nice flower box.

*It’s now or never, Trent.* On jelly legs, I reach the front door and press the bell for her apartment.

# CORDELIA



I'm off for the rest of the day. Even with the money from Apex paying off all my bills, I thought it was a good idea to keep working both jobs in order to save up a bigger nest egg to get another apartment. In a better neighborhood. I'll start looking for a real estate agent soon.

I stick my bare foot under my butt on the couch and pick up the word search book I purchased. Holding my new Mont Blanc pen—the only luxury I've allowed myself—I start searching for the word “songwriter.” Snorting, I drop my hand to the couch and trace the textured fabric. Juanita's been bugging me to buy a new one, but I'm not ready to part with the money yet. Once we move, I'll buy one. Then we won't have to pay for the movers to transport it. Makes sense to me.

Tenor hops onto my lap. Reaching out, I stroke his black and white fur. “How are you doing today?”

In response, he purrs. The first time I heard him purr, I thought something was wrong with him, it's so loud. Now, I love the way he expresses how happy he is to be living with us. His happy sound is like a balm on my weary soul.

I yawn and drop my head against the cushions and continue to pet our new addition. He's the only living soul I've allowed myself to get close to, probably because he can't share

his disapproval of me. I've kept all of my co-workers at more than an arm's length. I've even distanced myself from Rita. Well, I haven't picked up her calls and only respond with short texts.

It's better this way. No one can leave me if I don't let them in.

The only exceptions being Tenor and Juanita. Tenor rolls over on my lap, totally stretched out. I rub his white belly. Juanita's sort of like my cat. She accepts my helping her to pay for her schooling, but I've refused her offers to go out with her friends. They're too young for me anyway.

I pull up my bank account and a satisfied grin crosses my face. Big Rolls made his deposit on time. Since the article outed him as running up my credit card, he was shamed into entering a payment plan with me. At least something good came out of this whole debacle.

My doorbell rings. "Who could that be, Tenor?"

He purrs.

If past is prologue, probably a delivery for one of my neighbors. I don't move a pinky.

My doorbell rings again, followed by banging on the building's front door.

Really? What the heck? A signature or something is probably needed. Sighing, I put Tenor onto the couch, check my reflection in the mirror, and make my way to the front door. The blouse I wore to my day job is untucked from my skirt and I'm barefoot, but who cares? I'm sure the delivery guy won't.

Pounding on the front door gets more insistent.

Geez. “Coming!”

Leaving the apartment door open, I grab the front doorknob. As I swing it open, I ask, “Who are you looking for?”

A tall, dark, and decidedly handsome man stands on my front doorstep. “You.”

My whole body spasms, and I slam the door. Remaining inside the foyer with my back against the door, I keep my hand glued to the handle. My breathing comes in rapid pants. What is *he* doing here?

He knocks on the door again. An aching familiar voice begs, “Open up, Cordelia. Please.”

Please? He thinks he can say the magic word and I’ll open the door—and probably my legs—for him. “You’re fucking nuts!”

He chuckles. “You sound just like your sister.”

He talked with Juanita? No. He must be lying. Not moving from my spot, I yell, “Go. To. Hell!”

“I only want to talk with you. Can you give me a couple minutes?”

I can’t let him anywhere near me. He crushed me like a bug the last time I was in his presence. Not giving him another chance. “No! Leave before I call the cops!”

His tenor voice floats through the open door to my apartment. “I’m an idiot!”

No shit. I take one step, but his next outburst makes me stop.

“I was an asshole.”



Fists clench at my sides. My jaw hardens.

“I don’t deserve you.”

I collapse against the door again, my hip landing on the knob. “Ouch!” I rub my right hip, but it’s only a distraction from the man on the other side.

“I didn’t listen to you before. I jumped to all the wrong conclusions.”

Damn straight. My head bangs against the hard door.

“Cordelia, would you please open the door. I need to see your beautiful face.”

I grab my hair and spin it around my finger. My beautiful face? My shoulders lock. “I don’t want to talk with you!”

He sighs. “Fine.”

I hear something bang outside. What could he be doing? Why do I care? Why am I still here?

My eyes stray to my front door, where Tenor’s now sitting at the threshold, his head tilted. “I don’t know either,” I whisper to my tuxedo furball.

“Cordelia Hernandez!” Trent bellows from the other side of the door.

I cringe at his use of my full name. He’s bringing attention to me, while I’ve been working so hard to remain invisible.

He strums an acoustic guitar. What the hell is he doing? From up the stairs, a door opens. One of my neighbors hits the landing. “What’s going on?”

I shrug my shoulders and pull a face communicating I’m at a loss. Fuck if I know.

His strumming turns into a complicated guitar solo. Two more of my upstairs neighbors appear on the stairway. Then his voice comes through loud and clear.

*It all started before I met you  
I stopped believing in the possibility  
That anyone would ever stay true to their word.  
They would say one thing, yet all the while  
Hold back the truth, truth, truth  
They would lie. They would all lie.  
I started believing no one would ever be true  
Why would they when she hid the most basic facts  
From me forever. Forever. Forever.  
She hid my most basic truth.*

**H**e starts to play a guitar interlude and I take my first deep breath since he banged on my door. This song is haunting. He's baring his soul about what his mother did to him, although I'm sure no one else will understand.

Why is he doing this? What does it mean?

My neighbors have moved into the foyer next to me.

One of them, Joss, says, "He's pretty good." His wife nods in agreement.

My chin raises. He *is* a great singer, but who cares? He was a shitty boyfriend. He left me like all the rest.

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**F**rom outside, Trent continues:

*Then you blew in and blew my mind  
But it wasn't your hair or your face or everything in between  
Though they are burned into my body  
It was your smarts, your brain, your gorgeous mind  
Oh, it was your soul, the beautiful you  
That breached my walls  
No matter that she hid my most basic truth  
Lied to me every single day  
I started to believe again, all because of you  
Her lies started to recede, I let you in*

**H**is voice breaks.

Oh, God.

The crowd surrounding me gasps.

Blood pounds inside my chest. My hand twists the knob.  
With a final pull the door clicks open and I drag it open wide.

Trent Washington stands on my stoop, playing his guitar.  
His dreadlocks move in time with the music. The beautiful,  
sweet, and loving music. Tearful amber eyes lock with mine as  
my hand stalls in front of my open mouth.

The hazel windows into his soul beg for forgiveness.

I remain unmoving.

He jumps into the next verse:

*Then a big explosion turned me away  
Brought me back to the way I was  
Of course, history repeated itself again  
It was time for distance—to get far away  
Because no one is ever true, why would they be?  
She taught me that lesson even after she went away  
But, now I know I was wrong, oh so wrong  
The blast was more of a whimper, which I didn't realize  
I was so wrong. I need you back or else I can't go on  
You're my love and I need you to breathe.*

*Cordy.*

**H**e strums one final time, then his hand stills.

My own hand slides down my body. His song was gut wrenching.

The crowd behind me claps. Joss yells, “Great song!”

I become aware of people standing on the street behind Trent, who also encourage him with shouts of “I love your voice!” and “You should get paid for this!”

My nose wrinkles. That’s what he does. He sings songs for a living. My throat tightens. I’m about to spin and go back into my apartment when he says, “Cordelia. Please. Stay.”

I tip my chin upward.

He addresses the people surrounding him. “Thanks. Show’s over.” They offer more accolades, then disperse. Even

my neighbors return to their apartments. Traitors.

Then it's just him and me on my front stoop. He kicked me out of his hospital room. He was gone when I went back. *He told me he loved me, then he left me.*

A memory of my father's photo resurfaces. *He* did love me. And he didn't leave voluntarily.

All this buzzes in my head while Trent removes his guitar and puts it into its case. Straightening, he takes the two steps up. He stands tall in front of me.

God, he looks good. His beachy scent reaches my nose. I swallow my saliva. And remember what he did. My bare foot crosses the foyer. I need to get away.

"I didn't know how to say this to you, so I wrote a song."

His words penetrate. Even though my name in the song was a tip-off, I still can't process what's happening. "You wrote?" I clear my throat. "You *wrote* the lyrics?"

He cracks a slight grin, which disappears almost immediately. "I did. For you."

Wow. He actually was able to write lyrics again. Happiness bubbles up at his success, which I squelch. He. Left. Me. "You're an asshole."

He nods. "I know."

In the foyer, I pace. "You were discharged from the hospital and you didn't tell me."

"I was a jerk."

"Understatement," I scoff. He can't worm his way back into my life with a stupid song. Even if the song wasn't stupid. It was powerful. *Too. Bad.*

“I’m here now. I’m not going anywhere ever again. I want to be with you forever.”

My heart flips, yet my overheated blood boils. How dare he show up at my doorstep and do this to me? Wait. “How did you find me?”

“Apex.” He kicks the concrete. “I might have also talked with your sister.”

Juanita ratted me out? My hands land on my hips as I give him my side-eye. “I doubt she told you where I am.”

“Well, in and among cursing me out—that girl has quite the mouth—”

I don’t doubt that. Still, I cut him off, “She’s not your concern.”

He flinches. “I want her to be. I want to be involved in every aspect of your life.”

Why does he have to say things like this? And sound so sincere doing it? I bite my lower lip to keep it from trembling. “You lost all rights when you ghosted me.”

“I want them back. I fucked up. I know I did. I was stupid and let my temper run.” He inhales. “I will stay here all night and grovel for your forgiveness, if that’s what it takes. I love you, Cordy.”

It’s his use of my nickname that spurs me to jump at him, my fists pounding on his hard chest. “Stop it! I don’t want your pity or your regret or whatever this is. Hasn’t anyone else been able to get your rocks off like I did? Is that what this is all about?”

He doesn’t move an inch to protect himself from my wailing fists. He stands there and absorbs all my pain and

anger and heartbreak. “I belong with you. Keep hitting me. Get it all out.”

Why does he have to say such things to me? “I hate you!” I continue to wail against his chest, only now, tears prick the back of my eyeballs. No! I’ve let out all my tears for this man. He doesn’t deserve any more.

“You’re it for me. Only you. I. Love. You.”

Then he says shit like that. “No! You don’t love me. You wouldn’t have left me hanging like you did after our fight if you truly loved me.” I force my fists to keep hitting him, but they slow down. “You can’t love me.” No matter how hard I try, tears overflow.

My hits turn into sobs.

His arms go around me. “You’re so wrong. I love you with every molecule of my being. My life has been dark without you. I do the exercises you taught me not only before a gig, but all the time. Because I want to feel closer to you. I refuse to check our social media because you’re not in charge of it anymore.”

My fingers land in his dreadlocks and I yank. He winces but doesn’t try to stop me. I plead, “Why are you doing this to me, after how you abandoned me?”

He kisses the top of my head. “I’m here begging you to forgive me for being a total, absolute asshole. You might have *confirmed* Brax is my father to a group of our roadies, but you had spent the previous forty-eight hours with me as I got the transplant. Hector was already sniffing around. Things were moving so fast back then, I don’t blame you. I probably would’ve said the same thing. You didn’t lie to me. You considered it a non-issue. I understand. I get it.”

Against my better judgment, I stay in his embrace. Can he mean what he said? I sniff. “You do?”

“Yes, Cordy, I do. I turned into a freak who refused to see you didn’t lie to me. You didn’t. I was blinded by what Mom did to me. And my ex. I am so very sorry. Immediately after I found out what Mom had held back from me, you crashed into my life.” His hand strokes my hair. “I’ve never been the same. I’m not going anywhere ever again without you at my side. I belong to you.”

I absorb all he’s said. Is this really happening? Pulling back, I take in the man holding me. A warmth starts in my toes and spreads upward. My pain can be over, if I believe him. But I’m not sure it’s even possible. “How can I trust you ever again?”

He wipes away some of my tears. “If you let me back in, I promise to prove my love to you every single day.” We stare at each other, neither willing to disturb the tenuous truce.

Trent’s full lips tick up. “Did you block me?”

His question pierces my brain fog. Did he text or call me? A hiccup escapes. I blocked him so I wouldn’t be tempted to reach out to him, never thinking he would try to contact me. I remove myself from him and a frown mars his face. I cross the foyer and stand in my apartment’s open doorway. Trent’s shoulders droop and he stares at the cement.

I clear my throat. His eyes pop up and our gazes meet. The moment expands in its silence. Finally, it’s his expressive hazel irises that are my undoing. I motion for him to follow me into my apartment.

While he enters my space, I retrieve my phone, which Tenor’s now using as a pillow. He grumbles when I pull it out



from under him, then rolls over and falls back asleep. I raise my cell. “I did.”

“Kinda guessed, after the millionth time you didn’t respond.”

I press the screen and unblock him. My phone blows up with his texts and voicemails. “Guess you’re not lying.” I press play on the last message and put it on speakerphone.

“Cordy, it’s Trent. I am so very, completely sorry for what I did. I realize now that you didn’t lie to me, and I was a stupid fool. I love you so much. This can’t be the end for us. You make my days brighter, and my nights, well, much more blinding. You’ve supported me through everything, and I want to deserve to be your man again. I want to grow old with you, to hold our kids and grandkids. I want to write you a new song every day. You are my life, and I don’t want to be half a person anymore. You have to let me crawl back to you. On my hands and knees, if you want. Please.”

As his message plays, Trent moves next to me. His words burrow into my soul and lodge into my throat. I can’t help myself. I yell, “I hate you so much!” I drop my phone and my open palms hit his chest, his cheek, his arms.

“I hate you!” I scream as tears flow down my cheeks and my assault on his body wanes.

“I hate you,” I say as his arms close around me and he strokes my back.

“Shhhh, Cordy, get it all out.”

I sob into his arms. “I want to hate you,” I whimper.

His arms move to my shoulders and he pulls me away from his body. He bends down and lifts my chin. "I love you."

Everything comes crashing down on me at once. He loves me. As much as I love him.

"I love you," he repeats.

On a broken sob, I whisper, "I love you, too."

## TRENT



**W**hile my girlfriend's getting a manicure and pedicure, I stay in the hotel room and put the finishing touches on my latest song. Since I wrote "Cordy," lyrics have been flowing so much the guys are now behind with their melodies.

"Hey! I'm back!"

"Out on the patio," I call. I left the sliding glass door open for when she got back. Our new addition, Tenor, is sound asleep on the sofa.

Within seconds, Cordy comes up behind me and throws her arms around my neck, showing off her new purple nails. She kisses my cheek. "How's it coming?"

I snap my book shut and drop the not-blank book onto the table. "Just finished another song." Pulling her fingers to my mouth, I kiss each newly painted nail.

Her eyes shine at my attention. "That's great!" She walks around and straddles my lap, flexing her feet so her matching purple toenails dance. "Want to celebrate?"

Her throaty voice wafts over my body, her lips meet mine, and I'm a goner. Like every other time we kiss, our passion explodes into a million points of light. Ever since the awful day in Newark, we've been inseparable. Apex happily

returned our replacement social media manager to his prior band, so Cordy's back working with us. Where she belongs. The guys have started razzing me about joining their marriage club—and I know they're right. Although at this moment, it's time for more pressing matters.

Reaching down, I skim my hands up her bare legs. Gotta love summer. My fingers go under her skirt and slip inside her panties to her very wet core. Her hips rock.

“Oh, yes, Trent!”

But I don't want to finger fuck my girl. I leave her pussy and wrap my hands around the sides of her panties and pull. A rending sound fills the air. “Oops.”

“You're so bad.” Her hips move from side to side as I toss the now ruined scrap of material over my shoulder and into the suite. Guess she's not too upset.

I shove my shorts down and my woman closes her hand around me. When she squeezes, I swear more stars join tonight's night sky. But I don't want a hand job either.

Thanking all things holy for having given up condoms a month ago, I extract my cock from her hand and point it directly upward. She shimmies over me and sinks down in one hard thrust.

I make an unintelligible noise. “You feel so good.”

“Back at ya.”

I allow myself a moment to enjoy how her bare channel cloaks me. Welcomes me. Milks me from the inside out. My hands reach out to her hips and guide her into a very hard rhythm. If anyone were to see us—which is highly unlikely given our high floor—their show would be obscured by her

skirt. But not by the way her spine bows. Or how she throws her head backward.

She groans, “You’re so deep.”

I push her faster. My body wants to come, but not before she does. My golden rule. She clenches around me so hard I start coming without permission. Thankfully, she’s screaming my name at this very instant.

When my ecstasy recedes a fraction, I lean back into the chair and bring her with me. From the outside, she’s still dressed, yet we’re intimately connected. Her forehead rolls against my pecs.

“It gets better every time. Although,” she adds with a giggle, “I might not be able to survive if we kick it up any more.”

“I think we need to test your theory.” I find her earlobe and bite, causing her to squirm on my dick. Swatting her ass, I add, “Like, right now.” Our second coupling is much slower, but no less passionate.

In bed, I hold my naked girlfriend while she tugs on my dreads. “Did you catch Joey’s hair today? It’s even more wild than usual.”

I laugh. “We’ve been harassing him about it for the past week. He keeps claiming he doesn’t have time for a haircut, especially since we’re not in a city for more than a day or two at a time.”

She giggles. “We’re going to have to do something about it or change his name to Cousin Itt.”

I return her laugh. God, it feels so good to relax next to her like this. Talking about Joey’s hair leads me to think about her sister. Who still needs to have her mouth washed—although,

truth be told, I've not heard her curse like she did to me on the phone ever again. "Have you heard from Juanita lately?"

Her fingers make their way to my pecs, and she traces circles. "Yeah. Classes are going well, and she's loving them. She and two other friends are going to get an apartment in Manhattan, and she'll be looking for a job soon."

I focus on the latter part of her reply. "I'm sure she'll find something. After all, we New Jerseyans love our hair."

"We sure do." My thought about her sister vanishes when Cordy kisses my nipple, then blows on it. "Hey, I forgot to ask you about your meeting with Brax earlier. How'd that go?"

We've continued meeting up weekly to discuss band stuff. More personal things as well, if I'm totally honest. These meetings started out of curiosity, but now I look forward to them. "It was good. He gives some really good advice, you know? About performing, connecting with the audience, that sort of stuff. Plus, we've been talking about things like Sara and his other kids."

"I'm glad. He really seems interested in your progress as a band. He's backstage with me for your performances more nights than not."

"I know. Sometimes I catch him singing along."

She kisses my other nipple. "Yeah. The other members of Hunte join him from time to time. It's pretty cool how they're mentoring you guys. Can't ask for better teachers."

Cordy's been so supportive of how I've been making my way to Brax. Not pushing me. I appreciate her more for it. Using my index finger, I tap her nose. "Thanks for your support with him." My father. Still can't use the term. Too weird. But he is a fantastic mentor. And man.

“Today, King called when we were meeting. I chatted with him for a little while. I was thinking of asking to get together with him and his fiancée when we’re done with this leg of the tour. I want you to meet him. He’s sort of pretty cool. I want to meet his Angie, too.”

Her eyes brighten. “I’d love to meet them. Plus your sister and her hunky fiancé.” She shimmies her shoulders, and I roll over on top of her.

I stretch her arms over her head. “Hey. I’m the only hunky guy I want in your orbit.”

She laughs. It’s an uninhibited sound. “Believe me, I only see you. I do think it’s pretty cool you’re getting a whole new family.”

“Yeah.” Right now, though, there’s only one family member I’m interested in. We’re not even family. Yet. I rock my hips so she feels how hard I’m getting. “Enough talking about the Huntés. The only hunt I want to go on is for your next orgasm.”

“Well, when you put it that way...”



**A**fter a shower, we drift into the kitchen for some snacks. Need to refuel after how Cordy laid me flat. Tenor plays with a catnip mouse in the living room area.

While my girlfriend browses through the hotel’s offerings, the pterodactyls take flight again. I’ve been thinking about this for a while, and I’m comfortable with my plan. Still—it’s not every day a guy proposes to his girl. I take a cleansing breath. “So, we’re going to be in Las Vegas tomorrow.”

“Uh, huh,” she replies, holding up a Snickers bar. I nod.

“It’s a short, four-hour drive from here,” I note, putting two champagne flutes on the counter. Opening the fridge, I stand a bottle of champagne next to the glasses and peel the label away from the cork. “Fun town. Lots of gambling.”

She picks up some trail mix, scrunches up her nose, and replies, “Yeah. Great place for TLR, considering you guys bet on everything.” She drops the trail mix into the drawer and checks out what I’m doing. “What’s the bubbly for?”

I pop open the bottle and it overflows the neck. She giggles. Fuck, I love that sound. While I pour the glasses, she perches onto a high stool on the other side of the counter.

I walk over to her and hand her the flute. Her choice of seat isn’t ideal, but I don’t care. It’s our moment.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Our glasses clink together. We sip the effervescence.

“So good.” I put my glass onto the counter and reach into my pocket, pulling out a ring box. I swallow sawdust. When I visualize the beach, calmness descends. I drop to one knee.

Holding the box upward, I say, “I lived without you for too long, and that ends now. I want you at my side for the rest of our days, if not longer. You’re my person, Cordelia Hernandez. I promise to be at your side forever, as your husband.” I open the box. “My Cordy, will you marry me?”

Her mouth falls open as soon as she sees the box. She hops off the stool, screaming, “Yes! Yes! A thousand times yes!” She barrels into me and we both fall backward onto the hard floor, laughing.



I take the diamond out of the box and place it on her left ring finger. “Perfect fit.” I kiss the symbol of our commitment, and she lets out a squeal.

One final ask. “Elope with me. When we hit Vegas tomorrow, let’s go find a chapel and get married. Just you and me. I don’t want to wait, or to share you with anyone else.”

“Like no one? Not the band, or my sister?”

I shake my head. “No. Well, maybe an Elvis impersonator.”

Her nose crinkles. “Okay. On one condition.”

I push her heavy hair away from her face. She’s abandoned the drugstore red highlights, and I appreciate the lustrous pure brunette locks more. “Let’s hear it.”

“No Elvis.”

I laugh and pull her entirely on top of me. “That I can agree with.” And I seal our engagement with a kiss. Right here on the kitchen floor in some random hotel. Doesn’t matter, so long as we’re together.

The next morning, my fiancée hides her new ring before we board the bus to take us to our wedding destination. The ride seems interminable, yet it’s filled with the people I love. Of course, they bet on everything from the time we’ll arrive in Sin City to the number of floors our hotel will have. We also celebrate the email Cordy received from the real Light Rail with details about how they’re going to start playing our songs in passenger waiting rooms. Sweet.

As soon as we arrive, I snag Cordy’s hand. Pretending to be a normal day, we mosey inside our hotel suite and drop our bags. In the bedroom, she opts for a long floral dress and I select a white button-down and pair of navy trousers.

Changed, I scratch the tuxedo cat's head as Cordy puts down a bowl of water and some food.

When she stands, I ask, "Ready?"

She nods. "Born ready."

I drag her to my body and kiss her with all the passion inside me. "All for you."

Online, we find a nearby chapel—without Elvis, thank you very much. I reserve an Uber, and together we make our way back to the lobby. Only when we're safely inside our ride does she pull out my ring and hold it out to me. "Put it on me?"

"With pleasure, my love." I kiss her lips, slide the ring onto her finger, and kiss the diamond as well.

Shortly, we arrive at the chapel and walk inside. We're greeted by a woman with grey hair and glasses connected to a lime green string matching her shirt. "Welcome and congratulations on your wedding."

Cordy stifles a laugh, while I fill out the required paperwork. We purchase two wedding bands, and she selects a bouquet. Finally, we stand before a man wearing a black suit. Not a cape or pompadour in sight. I stare into her gorgeous, multi-faceted mocha eyes, which reflect her love at me.

The officiant asks, "Do you have personal vows for each other?"

We nod. I've worked on mine like they're the most precious lyrics ever. Because they are. Raising our entwined hands to my mouth, I kiss her fingers.

"Cordelia, you asked me for a drink in a club in Jersey City and what I didn't know was that in addition to the vodka seltzer with lime, I gave you my heart then and there. My

issues drove a wedge between us, but even then, I couldn't stop thinking about you. Your smile. Your smarts. Your stunning soul. I'm humbled you accepted me back into your life, and I vow to be worthy of your decision every single day. I love you with every fiber of my being. I promise to stay at your side forever to prove your decision in Newark, and the one you're making here in Vegas, is the right one."

Cordy blinks several times in an obvious, but failed, attempt to prevent her tears from falling. She laughs and swipes her cheeks. When the officiant asks her if she would like to say something, she replies with a wobbly, "Yes."

I look at the woman who is in the process of becoming my wife and fall deeper in love with her, if that's even possible. She's my everything.

"Trent, you weren't the only one who came into this relationship broken. I had my own issues I'm still working through, but you've shown me the possibilities of what a life filled with love can mean. I'm learning to rely on a new hope, which is happiness can be a lasting truth. You're the reason for this, and I'm going to hold you to it." She gives me her patented side-eye.

I laugh.

She continues, "I promise to be at your side in good and bad times. I promise never to lie to you, whether by omission or directly. I'm so proud you chose me to be your wife and vow to work hard every day to prove you made the right decision. I love you."

Her vows sink into my soul and remake me as a better man. We exchange rings, and then we're pronounced the glorious label—"Husband and Wife." Our mouths clash in a

kiss sealing our commitments and only ends when the officiant coughs.

I lean my forehead against hers. “Let’s get out of here, Mrs. Washington.”

“With pleasure, Mr. Washington.”

The next day we stroll into rehearsal, our hands linked. I’m shocked the guys don’t notice our glow. Or the way Cordy’s walking with a slight hitch. I can’t wipe the grin off my face.

In a teasing tone of voice, Dwight spins his drumstick. “Nice of you to show up.”

I wink. “We were kind of busy.” I catch a breath. “I’m here now. With my wife.”

My pronouncement results in total pandemonium. My bandmates rush toward me, pounding my back and both shoulders. They’re more gentle with Cordy, yet her winded laughter fills my heart.

My. Wife.

I absolutely love her new title.

Joey yells, “Pay up!” Maurice and Dwight reach into their back pockets, while I roll my eyes.

“Seriously, dudes? My wedding?”

Dwight passes Joey his twenty and offers me a scowl. “I can’t believe you did it without us. Or, at least, me.”

“Dude, this was for Cordy and me only.”

“I get it.” Eyes downcast, he mutters, “But, I wanted to be there to celebrate with you. Seems like I’ve been replaced.”

His comment makes me feel like a selfish asshole, and I don’t like it. First the revelation about Brax and now this. My

gaze meets Cordy's. We've been so wrapped up in each other that we didn't even consider how it would make others feel. Hell, we haven't even told Auntie Gloria or Juanita yet. I need to make this up to everyone.

I stride over to my wife and bend to her ear. "Reception in New Jersey?"

"My thoughts exactly," she whispers.

I clap to gain everyone's attention. "Here's some more exciting news! We're going to have a reception back in New Jersey when we have a break in the tour. All the trimmings."

A collective cheer goes up, and my wife relaxes into my side. We may have done everything backward, but it was right for us. Hell, we started with a literal bang before we found out each other's names. Why would our wedding be any different?

I kiss my wife and join the guys by our instruments. We rehearse "Cordy." I resisted giving this song to the band for a long time, but its namesake wore me down. She loves it so much and argued the whole world needs to hear it. Now we're trying to figure out where to put it in our gig's lineup.

When we finish, Cordy joins us. "Posted some great photos today, guys." Her eyes dart to mine, and I'm on instant alert. What's she up to? Don't have to wait long. "I think you should release 'Cordy' as your next single."

Before I can even open my mouth, Maurice replies, "Hell, yes. It's our best one yet." Joey agrees. Damn them.

Dwight hops in. "I love it. The beat's rockin', and your vocals are the real deal."

Cordy comes over to me and places her bejeweled left hand on top of my heart. "This song is going to be huge. I can

feel it. When you're on stage, close your eyes and sing it to me."

How can I deny her anything? Even this. "One condition. If we do a video for it, you're my love interest."

Her face lights up, her bottom lip coming between her teeth. "I can do that."

I seal her promise with a kiss, then agree to our decision. Feels like this is our new path, the new way we'll be dealing with obstacles. Together.

And I love it.

## EPILOGUE – CORDELIA

My hands sail down the white dress Juanita forced me to buy. It's been two months since Trent and I said "I do" in Las Vegas, and today's our reception. After much debate, we decided to hire another officiant to oversee a second wedding so all of our friends and family can bear witness.

Not up for debate, however, was my decision not to invite my mother. Once I told Juanita what went down with my father, my sister cut her out of her life as well. We're both okay with our smaller tribe by blood, as Trent's friends and family have made up for our lack. They've welcomed me and Juanita into their homes and lives, and I couldn't be happier. They even made Juanita the official hairstylist for the band. She's been on cloud nine since they offered her the job—which includes taking care of all of their wives' hair when they're on tour with us, too. Joey's out-of-control style could be a full-time job in and of itself.

Rita floats into the room carrying my bouquet of wildflowers. So different from the commercial one I had in Vegas. "Here you go, honey. Thought you might need this."

"Thanks."

The woman who's been like a mother to me places the bouquet down onto a table. "You look beautiful."

“So do you. You’re all badass in the palazzo pants.”

She smiles, her eyes crinkling behind her glasses. At this moment, I’m positive I’m making the right choice. “These old things?”

I laugh. “Oh, Rita. I’m so happy you’re in my life.” My laughter dies. “But I do have a favor to ask of you.”

“Sure thing, honey. What do you need?”

Here goes. “I would like for you to walk me down the aisle.”

She raises her hand to her face. “Me?”

I rush to her side. Brax would’ve done this for me, but her reaction proves I’ve made the right choice. “Yes. You. You’ve been more of a parent to me than anyone else in my life. You gave me food when I didn’t have any other meals. You always kept tabs on me. Even though you never admitted it, I bet you had something to do with Apex giving me the reward money.”

She swallows, and her eyes flick down to my bouquet. “I am so very honored, Cordelia.”

“It’s all settled. You’re my honorary mom, and now everyone who matters will know it.”

She brings me in for a hug. When she steps back, I gaze directly into her eyes. “I love you.” Never have I used this term so often, and it feels good.

Rita’s hand lands on her chest. “I love you like the daughter I never had.”

I pull her in for another hug as Juanita bounces into the room carrying Tenor, who’s all decked out for the occasion. “I want to do a quick fluff of your hair and then we have to go.”



I break apart from Rita and Juanita fusses over my hair. Which I thought was perfect, but she still finds pieces to curl and spray.

“Thanks, baby sister. You look beautiful in your purple gown.” She beams at me.

Trent and I chose to have our wedding at The Chalet, the premier venue in New Jersey. It’s an old mansion that’s been converted into an event space not too far from our home in Jersey City. It features little rooms for our guests to wander through, which we’ve decorated with photos celebrating our lives. The main ballroom has been set up so Hunte and TLR can perform, plus a kickass DJ I insisted on so all band members can enjoy the reception. It’s going to be an amazing day, one I’ll always cherish. Mainly because Trent will be at my side.

And because all of the people who matter most in my life are here.

The venue’s wedding planner walks in, together with the rest of my wedding party—Denice, Cheri, and Fee—who are dressed in varying shades of purple. I figured choosing a color and letting them pick their dresses was the easiest thing, and my decision was spot on. They all look fantastic.

Once we’re all assembled, we go to the outdoor courtyard where our ceremony will take place. I remain hidden around the corner as each woman proudly struts up the aisle.

“I’m so excited for you,” Juanita says, doing last-second adjustments to my hair.

“Thanks. I’m proud you’ll be out on the road with us, making this motley crew look fantastic.”

The wedding planner touches Juanita's shoulder and my sister kisses me. Then I give Tenor a pat. "See you on the other side." My maid of honor saunters up the aisle holding our four-legged furbaby in lieu of flowers.

Rita steps up next to me. "I'm beyond happy to see you like this. You're more settled, less brittle. And you radiate happiness. Thank you for giving me this honor."

I kiss her cheek. "Knowing you're next to me now, like you've been ever since I met you, makes my day perfect."

The music changes.

"Here's our cue," I note as the wedding planner fluffs my train.

Rita looks at me. "Let's go make you Mrs. Washington. Again."

"Please."

The second ceremony happens in a blur, except this time it's not only the love from Trent piercing my heart. My bridesmaids grin from ear to ear. The handsome groomsmen beam at their lead singer. Brax and Sara stand proud and tall in the front row, next to Trent's new siblings and their significant others.

When my husband's lips cover mine, time stands still. I'm where I belong. No more fear he'll leave me alone ever again. My life is so different now that he's in it.

Our guests clap like Hunte played a brand new song just for them.

With my arm in his, we walk up the aisle, stopping and turning near the end. The string quartet plays a beautiful

classical piece. The sun shines from above. My love is next to me. This day couldn't get any better.

Our friends surround us and give us congratulatory hugs. Rita, Denice, Fee, Cheri, and Juanita remind me I belong. The guys from the band high five my husband, then snuggle with their wives. We drift into the various rooms and sample the variety of delicious foods and receive even more well-wishes from our friends.

Auntie Gloria puts her plate down and comes over to us, her arms outstretched. "Come here, you two." We're enveloped in her warm hug.

"You've made me so happy. I knew you were going to make it, no matter what. And now I have a new niece!" She hugs me again.

"I've never had an aunt," I admit.

"Well, you do now. And an uncle and cousins." She waves behind us, and her husband and kids appear.

I've gotten to know Uncle Casey, Hazel, and Nia over the past months, and they're awesome. Nia's even talking about studying marketing and called me her role model. Me? I can't believe it.

Our wedding planner appears. "Sorry to interrupt, but it's almost time for the introductions."

"Already?" I shake my head. "Today's flying by so fast."

Trent snags my hand. "Go on ahead, Auntie. Just promise me a dance."

"You got it." She and her family disappear down the hallway.

I turn to my husband. “Thank you so much for our wedding in Las Vegas. If today was my only ceremony, I don’t think I’d remember a second of it.”

He kisses me and everything else disappears. “I’ll give you everything you want on a platter. If somehow I haven’t already told you this, you’re the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen.”

“You might have said that a couple of times today.” I fiddle with his tie. “You’re the most handsome groom ever invented.”

“Right answer.” His lips descend again.

Dwight clears his throat behind us. “Break it up, you two. It’s time for your formal announcement as husband and wife.”

Trent grumbles something under his breath at his best friend. I’m not sure what he said, but I’m sure I agree with him. It’s not like we haven’t been married for two months already. Then the MC—Brax—calls out our wedding party’s names and they sashay into the ballroom.

Brax announces, “And now, the couple we’re all here celebrating. Please give it up for my son, Trent Washington, and his gorgeous bride, Cordelia. Mr. and Mrs. Washington, come on in!”

The man at my side remains immobile. I tug on his arm and tearful eyes meet mine. “He just called me his son. Publicly.”

I smile as tears once again prick the back of my own eyes. “I heard.”

“I liked it.”

I lift onto my tiptoes and kiss his jaw. “Me, too.”

The sound of clapping dances around us while we gather ourselves. We stride into the ballroom, which is festooned with flowers. It's such a happy place.

Brax stands on the stage, his band assembled behind him. "And now, we'd like to play the Washingtons' first dance song. We wanted to surprise you. We hope you like it. It's called, 'At Last.'"

Hunte begins playing the opening notes of the Etta James classic, updated with an amazing guitar solo by Brax. When his smooth vocals are added to the mix, Trent pulls me into his embrace. I rest my forehead against his pecs and we sway to the delicious beat.

"They should put this song out," I comment.

"It's only for us." He licks his lips. "I want to say something to everyone. To thank them for coming, but—" He stops.

"You want to thank your father," I whisper.

"I do."

I kiss him to the sound of Brax's sexy vocals and sexier lyrics. "I think that would be great."

We continue dancing until the final note is sung and join everyone in applauding Hunte. Trent's hands drop to his sides before everyone else's. He kisses my cheek. "Here goes."

He walks up to the stage and shakes the band's hands. They clap him on the back and shower him with affection. As if he were one of them. Which he is.

I glance to my left where Melody and Chase have positioned themselves. To my right, King and Angie stand with their arms around each other. Sara pulls me in for a hug,

while Rita's behind me. Not to be outdone, Juanita drags her date over to my group. Far from feeling abandoned, I feel welcome.

Cherished.

Loved.

Trent hugs Brax and takes the mic. Hunte leaves the stage, but my husband motions for Brax to remain. He begins. "Cordy and I want to thank you all for coming tonight."

Juanita leans over. "I'll never get used to hearing you called by a nickname."

"Don't you try it. Only Trent."

My sister smirks.

Trent's fingers strum the mic. "Today has been a dream for my wife and me. Seriously. I have one more thing I need to say, and now's the right time." He turns to Brax, whose eyebrows raise to the ceiling. "As everyone here knows by now, I found out who my father was by reading my mother's diary after—she passed away." He pauses for a moment. "To put it mildly, I was rocked off my ass."

Everyone laughs, including me. Pretty accurate description.

"Despite everything, I met Brax as the lead singer to the band TLR was opening for. I wanted to hate him, but I found I just couldn't." He gives his father a nod. "I admire your talent so much, and how hard you work to make Hunte even better. After you gave me your kidney, we really started getting to know each other. I can't express how amazed I was that you agreed to donate it to me *before* you knew who I was. To you. You offered to do it anyway."

Trent's speech is interrupted by clapping. When it dies down, he continues, "Since the transplant, I've actually become friends with Sara, King, and Melody. The Hunte family's the best. I'm floored by their talent and humbled by their friendship."

Trent and Brax turn and clap at their family, and I join in the applause with all our guests.

My husband takes a deep breath and I hold mine. Having an inkling where this is going, I send him all the good vibes I can muster.

"I'm doing a bad job of this!" He pulls on his dreads. "I wanted to say here, in front of everyone, I'm super proud you're my father, and to be a part of your family, Dad. If it's okay, I'd like to put a hyphen to the end of my name so Cordy and I will be known as the Washington-Huntes."

Although we've never discussed it, I couldn't be happier. My left hand raises in front of my open mouth as Brax pulls Trent in for a hug. Sara, King, and Melody wrap me in their love.

Sara murmurs, "This means so much to Brax."

Before I can respond, I'm being called up on stage and am enveloped in four arms. Two pairs of distinctive arms belonging to two very different men, sharing the same blood. When we separate, I catch Auntie Gloria clapping off to the side. While Trent and Brax both wipe tears away, I steal the microphone.

"I only want to add that I'm blessed to be a part of both the Hunte family and the Robinsons. Auntie Gloria is Trent's mom's twin, and she's as instrumental in what just went down as anyone. I can't express how blessed I feel right now."

We leave the stage and let the DJ spin some tunes, starting with “To Have and To Hold” by Cole and Rose Manchester. A perfect song to kick off the festivities.

Standing next to my husband, I overhear Brax as he says, “Thank you, son.”

My husband beams at his father. “I meant every single word, Dad.”

It’s at this moment when I realize everything happens for a reason. *Mamá* bailing on us whenever we needed her. Big Rolls. My finding those photos of my father and a much younger me. My sister’s reaming Trent out for being a jerk—although I did have a long talk with her about her language. She winked and told me it worked. Can’t argue with her.

Yes, all these experiences led me to this moment. In love with a sexy, amazing, talented, flawed, and fantastic man who makes my heart race with one single look. His Washington family—really, the Robinsons. His new Hunte family. His TLR band of brothers.

Later, I dance with Brax. And call him Dad.

I trip the dance floor with each of the members of TLR and Hunte. Even with Juanita and Rita. Sweet memories sear inside my brain. All too soon, I throw the toss bouquet—Nia caught it, much to Auntie Gloria’s chagrin—kiss Tenor’s head and tell him to be a good boy for Juanita, and hop in a limo going to Newark airport. First-class tickets, courtesy of Trent’s new siblings, take us to the beautiful beaches of St. Lucia. The island has been on my husband’s bucket list forever, since his mother read him a story about it as a kid.

Umbrella drink in hand, I recline in a lounge on the beach. Trent grabs his towel and dries off after a dip in the ocean. I



sip my piña colada. “Ahhh. This is perfect.”

“It is.” He drops onto the chair next to mine, his hand skimming over the tattoo on his arm honoring his mother.

I set my drink onto a nearby table. We have one outstanding issue. “St. Lucia’s amazing. The food’s beyond anything, and I love the beaches. I mean,” I motion toward the ocean. “Look at all this.”

“No argument from me, that’s for sure.” He wiggles his eyebrows. “The beds are pretty comfortable, too.” He reaches across and skims his fingers over my forearm, leaving goosebumps in its wake, despite the sun beating down on us.

I move my arm and rub it, causing him to laugh knowingly. I refuse to be deterred. “Your mom sure was right on the money about the island.”

His attention diverts to his beer, and he picks up the pilsner. “Yeah.”

It’s now or never. “She was a great mother to you, you know. She didn’t run off with guys. She didn’t leave you to your own devices, much to your chagrin. She didn’t steal your money to go gambling.”

He tips his glass and the beer travels down his throat. “She definitely was my biggest cheerleader.”

“Dwight told me how she always was in the front row, arms over her head, dancing to your music. Even when there weren’t too many other fans there for you.”

He smiles. “She was a sight.”

“I wish I could’ve met her.”

His eyes bounce to mine. “Maybe you can. I have all her diaries. You can get to know her through them.”

“I’d love to read them. Thanks.” I twist the end of my ponytail around my finger. “She may not have told you the truth about your father but did try to reach out to Brax the only way she knew how. When those attempts were, uhm, not fruitful, she figured there was no reason to tell you the truth. As far as you were concerned, your father was Marine Rory Chamberlain who died in combat.” I move my hand down and fiddle with the straw in my drink. “How would you have reacted to knowing about Brax back when you were growing up?”

He frowns. “Dunno.” He circles the top of his pilsner with his index finger. “What could I have done?”

I nod. “Right.” I bring my drink to my lips, sipping while he ponders what I said. Returning it to the table, I continue, “I think it’s time you let your mom rest in peace. Forgive her.”

His finger pauses on top of the glass. He clenches his jaw. Please, please, take my advice.

Trent’s tongue slips past his lips, then disappears back into his mouth. He drops his sunglasses into place and rises to his feet. He holds his hand out to me. “Come with me.”

Unsure of his mood, I join him at his side. Hand-in-hand, we walk toward the beach and stand as the warm water covers our feet. He scans the horizon while I watch the waves buffet a few pieces of seaweed.

He finds his voice. “She loved the beach.” At my nod, he continues, “It’s the reason I use it as my calming place when I do my exercises before taking the stage. She was freer every time we visited the Jersey Shore. She would’ve loved it here, though.”

“I bet.”

He pulls me to him, and I wrap my arms around his waist, the sun glinting off his cross necklace. His body's rigid. "You're right. When Braxton Hunte didn't respond to her letters—or pick her out of the crowd again—she made up her mind to raise me as a single parent. She even gave me a father, or at least the image of one." He sighs. "She was a great mother, and I miss her." He ends his sentence on a sob.

"She loved you." I pause. "You loved her."

He holds me tighter. "I will forever."

Relief pours through me. He's healing. "She needs a song."

"You may be right." He holds onto me as if I were a lifeline saving him from going down with the Titanic. "I want you to meet her."

I lean my head back.

"I want to bring you to her grave."

Understanding pours through me. "I'd really like that." Tingles race up my spine. *Take your own medicine, Cordelia.* I've already shown him the photos I found in *Mamá's* dresser and shared the wonder that he loved me. "But only if I can introduce you to my father."

My husband's response is immediate. "I'd be honored."

With my nose pressed against his suntan-lotioned pecs, I ask him something that's been kicking around my brain for a while. Ever since I visited *Papá*. "Although do you think I could maybe move him to be near your Mom? And give him a real tombstone?"

His arms tighten. "Of course. It'll be perfect for them to watch over us, together."

Waves crash against the beach, seagulls fly overhead. The smell of the real beach mingles with Trent's scent. We remain locked together, water lapping at our feet, for a long while. When the same group passes us for a second time, I tilt my chin back. Time to lighten the mood. "Want to go back to the room? I need to shower before dinner."

"I might be persuaded to help you out."

I step out of his embrace. "Who says I need help?"

He pushes his sunglasses on top of his head, squinting at me while his smile turns wolfish. "Bet I can make you sing a different tune."

I offer him a cheesy grin. "Oh no. No betting on our honeymoon!" I take a step and toss out, "You're the only one doing the singing around here!"

I rush toward our chairs, but am swept off my feet, literally, as his arms grab me around my waist. My legs go straight out as he spins us around. People around us watch our antics and smile.

Laughing, I yell, "Stop! Trent!"

He does another one-eighty and stops. Lowering my feet to the sand, we face the ocean. He tugs on my ponytail, making my neck arch backward. In my ear, he whispers, "I'll always catch you, Cordy."

"I believe you."

He nips my earlobe. "Look around us. What do you see?"

Trent releases my ponytail, and I do a quick scan of the beach. "People enjoying a glorious, sunny day. Kids making sandcastles. Fathers holding their kids' hands as they wade

into the water. Moms putting on suntan lotion. Couples, like us, sharing intimate moments.”

From behind me, his tenor reaches my ears. “You know what I see? Families enjoying the beauty of the beach, yeah. More importantly, the most gorgeous woman on earth standing in my arms.”

I run my hand over his tattoo. “In your very sexy, very manly arms.”

He kisses my neck and steps forward so my back is positioned against his chest. “Want to guess what all this has gotten me to thinking?”

In a whisper, I ask, “What?”

“I’d like to add little ones to our family. They would grow up with both a mother and a father who love them. In a big family.”

My mouth drops open. “You want a baby?”

“Not right now. But, yeah, I do.”

I spin around so I’m facing him. “A little baby boy with amber eyes and a passion for music would be pretty awesome.”

He smiles and my entire body flushes at the promise his eyes offer. “I’d like a girl with long brown hair and an attitude that won’t quit. But not in nine months. Although—” He pauses. “I think we should get lots of practice.”

I giggle. “Sounds like a good plan. We have to be sure we’re doing it right.”

His lips slam onto mine. I’m transported to a place where our love shines brighter than anything else. Where I’m safe and loved, and the special people in my life won’t leave me

ever again. Where Trent isn't betrayed by lies. Our own bubble.

I'm not naïve enough to think bumps aren't hiding in the road ahead. One thing's for sure. We'll tackle them. Together.

He inclines his head toward our room. "Want to go rehearse?"

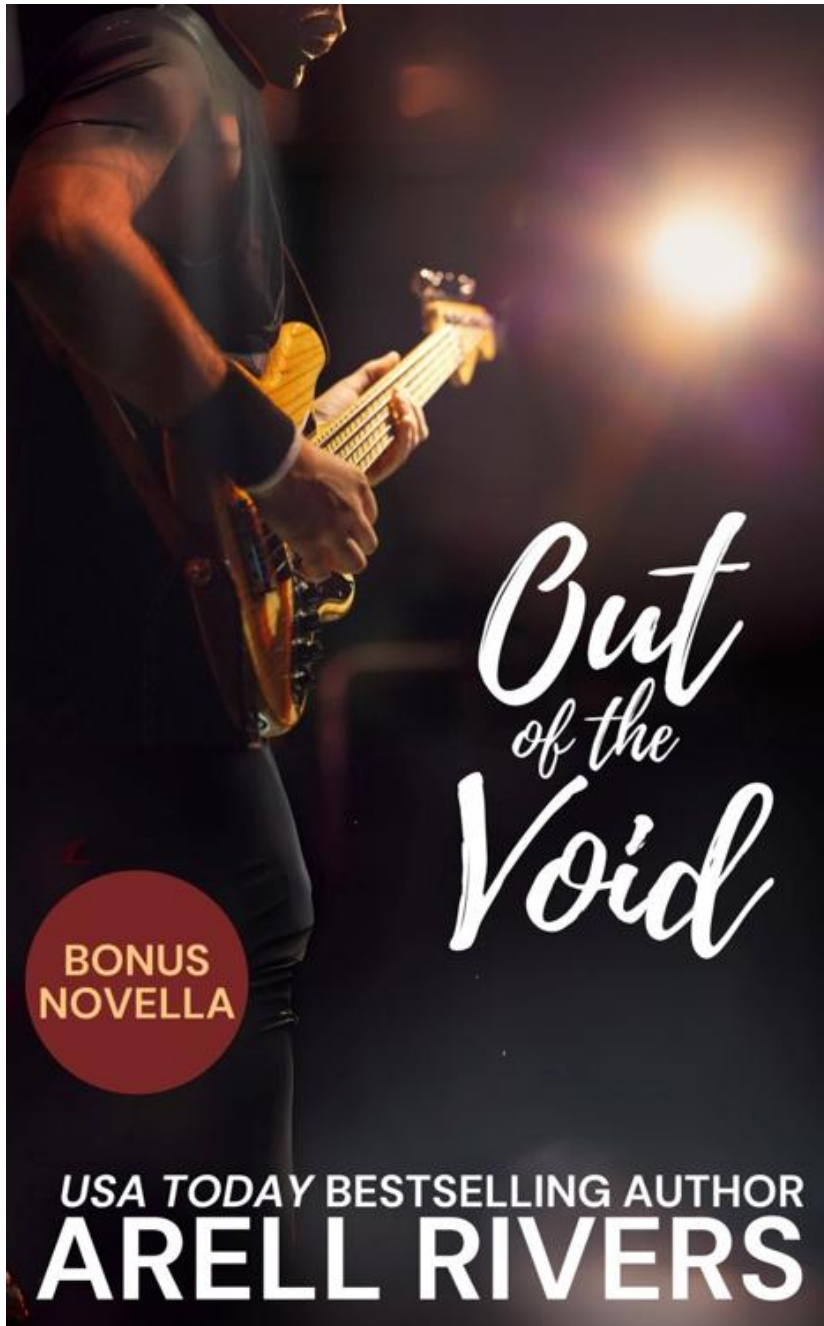
"Thought you'd never ask."



Have you fallen in love with Braxton and his family? Want MORE? [Check out the bonus epilogues for all 4 full-length books ~ OUT OF THE RED, OUT OF THE SHADOW, OUT OF THE GOLD, and OUT OF THE BLUE here.](#) I promise you won't be sorry!

To make sure we stay in touch, [please join my newsletter!](#)

Please keep reading to find out more about Colton Frontage, Brax's BFF!



*A collaborative novella written in conjunction with Arell's Angels*

## CHAPTER 1



**S**tanding in line at a Chinese buffet, I pick up tongs and select some spareribs. After placing the ribs onto my dish, I return them to their holder and move down to my next choice—cold sesame noodles.

Our long-time producer, Shep MacPhee, calls out, “They got some sushi over here.”

“Thanks, man.”

A load of noodles lands on my plate and I amble in his direction when a waft of patchouli and vanilla wrapped in flowers and jasmine assails my nose. I freeze. Flowerbomb by Viktor & Rolf. My head swivels wildly looking for its source, knowing it can’t be true.

Praying it can be.

*Caitrona’s signature perfume.*

A young woman, somewhere in her late twenties, reaches around me, grabs a spoon, and puts some dumplings on her plate. Without thought, I suck in her scent. Her eyebrows raise and she scurries down the buffet.

Closing my eyes, I remember my wife as I always do. Smiling and happy on our wedding night. Clad in a sexy black teddy, courtesy of Brax and Sara Hunte. Afterwards, wearing



only my rings and Flowerbomb. Before my memory can travel down that particular rabbit hole again—or switch to something much more tragic—I trudge toward the sushi.

Shep captures my eye and points to a table where the rest of Hunte sits. I nod, fill my plate without enthusiasm, and join them. His head tilts. “You okay there?”

I shrug. Trying to portray nonchalance, I reply, “One of the women here was wearing Caitrona’s perfume.”

He pauses in bringing his General Tso’s chicken to his mouth. Shep’s face reads sadness for a long moment. Then he smiles. “I saw her first.”

I let out a huge guffaw, remembering the first time I met my future wife when Shep and I were working out some finer details of a song. The way he tried to engage with her, but she only had eyes for me. And I for her. Catching my breath, I reply, “Too bad she ran from your ugly mug, straight into my arms.”

We grin at each other. While my loss still hurts like a motherfucker, it’s not the same acute, searing pain of even this time last year. When Caitrona passed three years ago from breast cancer, I swore my life was over. But Brax and Shep, with the help of the other guys in the band and our crew, helped me smile again. To live a little. Yet when I smelled her perfume, I was right back there.

I select pork fried rice and swallow, not really tasting the rice as it slithers down my throat. When will this pain disappear?

Do I want it to?

God, I miss her.

Without much enthusiasm, I pick at the food on my plate, listening as Shep walks us through his next song idea for the band. At least I think that's what he's blabbering about. I nod and make the correct noises, along with my bandmates.

“So, you'll be there, right Colton?” Shep's voice echoes but doesn't penetrate my brain.

I smile, picturing Caitrona sitting on my lap. Daring me to eat one of her god-awful eel sushi rolls, complete with roe on the outside.

“Right?”

I bolt forward. “What? Oh, uhm, yeah, sure.” What did I agree to?

Shep whips out his phone. “Super. I texted you the address.”

Address? I reach into my back pocket and pull out my cell, clicking on Shep's text.

The Dancing Hall, 223 Canon Street. 9 pm

I sweep my gaze over the table. “Tonight?”

He smacks me across the back of my head. “Yes, dumbass.”



I adjust my dark jeans and run my hand over the Cole Manchester t-shirt he gave me after his last concert. Hunte attended and had a great time—of course Caitrona used to tease me *he* was her favorite rock star.

With a wistful smile, I stroll into The Dancing Hall. It's packed. I could turn around and no one would be the wiser. My weight shifts from leg to leg while I remain near the threshold. A fast beat by Imagine Dragons plays, which draws me in. We've formed a good relationship with these guys, so I take a deep breath and trek to the bar. I order a Sam Adams, slither past groups of patrons, and walk to the back where Brax's blond hair bobs to the music.

Coming up behind my best friend, I punch his shoulder. "Dude."

He turns to me and gives me a warm bro hug. "Colton. So glad to see you out, man. Shep said you were going to be here, but..." His voice trails off.

I've made several promises to my friends over the past three years—attend this party, go to that band's debut, even hit up an art gallery opening—but seldom have been able to bring myself to actually make the effort. Tonight, though, I couldn't be alone. Again.

I force my lips upward. "Gotta keep you all on your toes."

He slaps my back. Raising his glass, he shouts, "To a great night!"

I clink my beer to his Bud. Soon, our bandmates and friends encircle us, and the banter starts. Laughing, I give as good as I get. I even toss in a few old strip poker tales, much to Brax's chagrin and Sara's delight.

A young band takes the stage and plays their first couple of songs. I shoulder-bump Brax. "They're pretty good."

He lowers his bottle to his thigh. "Yeah. I've heard them before, and they're getting better. But there's something missing."

We listen to their set. The bassist is very talented, but the lead singer's guitar skills don't quite match up. His voice is solid, though. "They'd be better served adding in a more accomplished guitarist and letting the lead guy do his thing at the mic."

Brax snickers. "Yeah, well, do you want to tell them that?"

I consider what Brax's reaction to such a suggestion would've been. "Maybe you should tell the singer to take some guitar lessons." Knowing neither will ever happen, we savor long drags from our drinks.

"Gotta take a leak." Placing my second bottle down on a table, I stride in the direction of the bathroom. As usual, the ladies' room has a long line, but the men's room is empty. I stand at the urinal and unzip.

A feminine voice peels from under the doorway. "I don't care. I'm not waiting any longer!" The door opens.

Holding my dick, I whirl toward the entrance. A tall, gorgeous woman with short brunette hair strides into the bathroom. Shocked, I yelp, "Wrong room."

Mysterious dark brown eyes travel over me.

I clench my ass.

"I won't tell if you don't."

## CHAPTER 2



**A**t her words, disgust roils through me. If there's one thing on earth I despise more than Brussels sprouts—and I really hate them any which way they're prepared—it's a pushy chick. Ignoring the brunette, I direct my attention back to the urinal. Well, she did come into the men's room. A stream leaves my body and I watch it flow down the drain. Finished, I zip up, wash my hands, and leave without uttering a word to her. None of which would've been appropriate for the woman. Not that she was any lady.

Once I move from the threshold, about a half-dozen women flood the men's room. I jump to my right to avoid the stampede. Shaking my head, I amble down the hallway to return to my brothers.

Standing alone at the corner, a blonde woman puts her hand on my forearm. "In case she didn't say so, Lisa's sorry to have barged in on you." She motions with her chin toward the bathroom I vacated.

My jaw clenches. "Thanks."

She tucks her hair behind her ear. I like its color—a silky buttercup. Her voice has a lilting quality. "Have a nice evening."

Realizing she's not her friend's keeper, I offer her a small smile and continue in the direction of my friends. Sara and Brax are making out as if they were a couple of teens. I smack the back of his blond head. "Get a room."

He pulls away from his wife, a satisfied smirk on his face. "Not a bad idea."

Sara swats his chest but addresses me. "Did you enjoy the band, Colton?"

"They were pretty good. Need a bit of tweaking, though."

"Want to hear what I told Brax?"

I glance between the two. He's scowling, while she's beaming. I lick my lips and brace myself for whatever Sara's cooking up. "Sure. What?"

"They should get a female singer."

My eyes widen. Ignoring Brax's deeper scowl, I consider her suggestion. "You know, I thought they needed a new guitarist. If they got a second singer, that might do the trick."

Sara beams at her newfound support.

"Although," I continue, "we don't have anything to do with them. They need to find their own way, like we did."

Sara's lip disappears between her teeth. Uh-oh. I know this look. So does Brax. Her husband turns his undivided attention to her. "What are you thinking?"

"Well," she glances at me. "What do you think if we—I mean, Hunte—take them under our wing?"

Brax takes a step back while I consider her proposal. It could be a good project for us under normal circumstances. It's not as if we haven't talked about doing something like this in

the past. Hell, look how it turned out for The Light Rail. Sure, Brax finding Trent was more than a shock, but everything righted itself in the end. Now, though, I'm not positive it's the best time.

“With the movie and everything, I don't know if we have the bandwidth.” My last word choice makes my cheeks puff.

Brax snorts a laugh. “Bandwidth. I see what you did there.”

Sara shoots me a dirty look. She huffs, “Guess you're right. Too bad, though. I have the perfect singer in mind.”

Brax kisses his wife's cheek. “Who?”

Sara's chin lifts. “Her.” Both Brax and I follow her chin toward the blonde woman who I met when I left the men's room, now standing next to the pushy brunette. “Her voice is unique. Throaty.”

Disregarding her forward friend, I study the blonde. She glances away from the woman at her side, searching the crowd for ... I don't know what. Her friend inserts herself into a group of men, laughing, while the blonde hangs back.

Returning to Sara, I ask, “Where did you hear her sing?”

Sara straightens, standing taller than my best friend, who's now frowning at my interest. “She sang at a women's entrepreneurial event I attended last month.” She leans toward me, causing me to mimic her posture. “I was really taken with her, as were all my friends.”

I give the woman in question a speculative glance. Why am I even considering this proposal? We're busy with the movie. Well, it takes up a few hours a week. Which might leave us with a little time to devote to a new project. “We haven't done something like this since TLR, Brax.”

“This isn’t the appropriate time,” he decrees.

As I learned a ways back, this tone is not to be crossed. I sigh, my eyes returning to the blonde, who has now distanced herself from the group, standing against the wall on the side of the room. Sara tries to convince Brax to change his mind, pulling him in the direction of the bar.

I remain in place, studying the mystery singer. Sara, while an amazing accountant for the band, can’t sing a note to save her life. But her ear is a talent scout’s dream.

Seemingly of their own volition, my feet bring me toward the woman. Truth be told, I have more than enough time to help out with a new band. All I do is knock around my house, alone, when I’m not either working on the movie, rehearsing, or playing a gig with Hunte. Maybe this project is what I need?

A guy approaches her and they start talking. I study her face. She’s older than I first thought—perhaps in her late thirties or early forties. Besides her fantastic hair, she’s all legs with a small bust, and a nice butt. After a bit, the guy’s shoulders drop, and he lumbers away. Guess she has good taste in men, too.

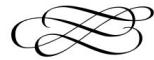
I’m not here to pick her up, so I don’t pose any threat. Given all Sara’s told me, my only goal is to talk with her. See if she’s even interested in being part of a band. Hell, I’m not sure the band would be open to discussing the changes Brax, Sara, and I discussed. Perhaps this isn’t a good idea.

I run my fingers through my hair, freezing when her gaze lands on me. They’re unusual. Violet. Swallowing, I eliminate the distance between us. Extending my hand, I say, “Hi. I’m Colton Frontage.”



Her gaze bounces from my face to my hand, and she clasps it. With a blinding smile, she replies, “I know who you are.”

## CHAPTER 3



**H**er warm hand covers mine in a firm handshake while her violet eyes burrow under my skin. “You’re Braxton Hunte’s bassist! Is he here?”

Numbness overtakes me. “I’m Hunte’s bassist,” I correct her. “And he’s over there,” I withdraw my hand and point to where my best friend stands. “With his wife.”

“Oh. Right.” She shakes her head. “I’ve enjoyed your band’s music for a long time.” She tucks her blonde hair behind her ear. “I’m happy to hear they’re not on the skids like the tabloids report.”

“Don’t believe everything you read, especially at the grocery store.” She stares at me with mesmerizing eyes. *Why did I come over here in the first place?* Oh, yeah. “I wanted to meet you because Sara, Braxton’s wife, told us you have an amazing voice and I have a possible opportunity for you.”

Her eyebrows raise to her hairline. “She did?”

I smile at her incredulity. “She did. Brax and I were talking about the band that just played, the Hard Hatters. Despite their band’s awful name, they’re good, but they’re missing something. We thought perhaps a female singer. Sara suggested you.”

The woman's palm lands on her chest. "Me?"

"Yes, you." I realize I still haven't gotten her name. "Miss..."

She shakes her head. "I'm so sorry—Ellen Johnstone."

"Would you be interested in singing with a band?"

Her fingers flex. She bites her lip. "I'm not sure. I've never sung with a band before. I mean, I've sung in choirs and groups, with some solos, but never a band."

"Listen, we haven't spoken with the band yet, so I don't know if this is all only a pipe dream. Think about it. Maybe we can get something together, yeah?"

"Thank you so much! I am interested."

"Great." I reach into my back pocket and pull out a business card. Caitrona always required I carry these with me, saying I never knew when they would come in handy. She's never been wrong—I do never know. "You can contact me using this email."

She places her fingers on my forearm. "Don't you want me to sing first?"

I shake my head. "Nah. Sara's a good judge of talent." I pause for a beat. "And an amazing wife."

I leave Ellen and walk toward my friends. Brax and Sara appear to be in a deep conversation while Ricky "R-Man" Jones and Lex Hibbard, the other members of Hunte, as well as Shep are nowhere to be found. My gaze lands on the Hard Hatters who are surrounded by at least a dozen scantily clad women. One of the band members—the drummer—sits at the end of the table, more or less alone.

Eschewing the rest of the group, I walk straight for the guy with drumsticks. “Hey.”

He looks up at me, his eyes widening in recognition. He hops to his feet, extending his hand. “Colton Frontage, wow. Rumor is Hunte’s here tonight, but I didn’t expect to meet you. I’m Steve.”

After pleasantries, I slip into a seat next to him. We shoot the shit about music and video games and football for a while. He seems to be a cool guy. I segue into our idea about changing up the band, and we discuss the possibilities. The conversation’s promising. Leaving him, I tell my friends I’m heading out.

For the first time in ages, I fall into a deep sleep. When I wake the next morning, two emails transform my usual cold detachment into an excited energy. I attack my workout with renewed vigor, eat breakfast, and then drive over to Brax’s. In his man cave, I broach the subject that’s given me all this positivity.

“I spoke with both Ellen and Steve last night.”

Brax slants his amber-hazel eyes toward me. “Who and who?”

“Ellen is the singer Sara pointed out to us, and Steve is Hard Hatter’s drummer.”

“Oh. And?”

“They both agreed to my proposal. Listen, I want to help this band out. They’re good. Not great. Yet.”

He laughs. “You’ve found a stray you need to take in, huh?” He shrugs. “Sara got into my ear last night. Why not? So long as it doesn’t interfere with the movie, I’m on board.”

Our conversation delves into some details of ideas for the band, logistics, and personnel. Together, my best friend and I make calls and set up recording studio time for tomorrow for the Hard Hatters. We also discuss the latest issues about the Hunte movie, bringing in Ricky and Lex via phone. I leave his home around three, making my way back to my empty house.

“Caitrona, I think you’d like what Brax and I are planning for this new band.” I hold my glass of Sam Adams up to honor her. “Starting with giving them a different name. Theirs plain old sucks.” I smile and place my pilsner on the coasters we bought on a trip to Kauai years ago—the memories now bringing peace instead of desolation.

The next day, my bandmates and I meet with the band plus Ellen in the conference room adjoining the studio space we arranged. Although the Hard Hatters don’t seem totally onboard with the suggested changes, we enter the studio for Ellen’s audition. Rubbing my hands together, I send up a short prayer that she really can sing. I’ve never doubted Sara before, but this could be a game changer, and I’ve only heard spoken words out of this woman’s mouth.

Playing their instruments, the band runs through one of their catchy, if not basic, songs. Finished, all eyes turn to Ellen. “I love your sound. And I’m thrilled to be here with you now. I’d like to try singing this song with you.” The band nods and restarts the opening riff.

Out in the control room, Brax, Ricky, Lex and I listen. Amy Caras, the sound engineer, mans—or “wo”mans—the sound board, fiddling with it multiple times. We were lucky she was available on such short notice. She’s mixed Hunte’s sound on a couple of our recent albums, and we’ve all been taken by her fantastic touch.

Amy's choices now make Ellen's throaty voice more pronounced over the instruments. My shoulders lower. Sara was absolutely correct—Ellen's talent is the real deal. When Kurt, the original singer-slash-lead guitarist joins her in a harmony, the song explodes. The four men of Hunte share a look.

This band is going to be fantastic.

And we're mentoring them.

After they finish the song, Amy plays around with the track while we enter the live room. Brax takes the first shot, "How'd it feel?"

The Hard Hatters glance amongst themselves, while Ellen stares at me. My teeth worry my lower lip in response to the attractive woman's attention. The spell is broken when Steve hits a rimshot. "Pretty damn good."

Everyone starts talking at once, but I remain quiet and observe Ellen. She moves with grace and sings like an angel. A sexy angel, to be precise.

After a while, Steve and Kurt ask for a moment to huddle with the band to discuss the direction they're going to take, but I'm convinced they'll add Ellen and change their lives. They'd be fools not to.

When we, plus Ellen, return to the sound room, Amy clears her throat. "I liked what I heard in there. While you were talking, I did something. Let me know what you think." She pushes a button and the song plays over the speakers again. This time, with Amy's magic applied.

About halfway through, the door from the studio opens and Steve leads the band into the room, joining us in listening to the newly mixed song.

“Shit, this is fantastic.” Brax, as usual, is the first one to pronounce judgment.

“The song’s untouchable,” I agree. My gaze shifts to Amy, who’s wearing a satisfied smile. Like she knows she made something super even better. Which she did.

As if sensing my eyes on her, Amy’s eyes swing to mine. Her youthful face belies her gray hair, styled in a pixie cut that fits her perfectly. “They did all the work. I just tweaked it a little.”

## CHAPTER 4



I'm impressed with Amy's work, which turned the song into something radio-worthy. "I can hear this being played on iHeart Radio."

Ellen's eyes widen. "Really?"

Kurt, the erstwhile lead singer and guitarist exchanges a glance with Steve. "I thought it was kinda hot before," his gaze drops to the floor. "Now, yeah, with Ellen's voice and Amy's magic fingers, it's fire."

Lex chimes in. "So, Ellen's in?"

Kurt nods his head and the rest of the original band members follow. Something in my chest releases. With his blessing, the band's new configuration is going to soar. "One more thing." The weight of twenty eyes land on me. "What do you think about changing your name? I mean, now that you have a woman in the group, and all."

Kurt slashes his hand through his hair. "Well, I guess it makes sense. The four of us met working construction, so the name worked. But now..." His voice trails off.

Ellen licks her lips and an odd sensation flutters beneath my belt buckle. Must be indigestion.



She says, “I don’t mean to cause any problems. The only time I’ve picked up a hammer, though, is to hang a photo.” She smiles and her face transforms into something beautiful. I shove such unwanted thoughts down while the guys in her new band offer muted scoffs.

Steve replies, “Yeah, guessing Hard Hatters doesn’t work anymore.”

Amy swivels around on her chair and assesses the now five-member group. “What do you all think about ‘Hole in One’?”

Wow. I gaze at the little pixie behind the huge sound board, wearing an expectant expression. “That’s a loaded name,” I reply, my lips ticking upward.

Brax pipes up next, “I think it’s super. Hot. Ironic.”

The rest of the band agrees, and Hole in One is born. Ricky suggests we wrap up and go to a celebratory lunch. After a quick discussion, we decide upon a local Mexican restaurant and drive over in three cars. I ride in the backseat with Ellen, while Lex drives and Ricky rides shotgun.

Her light scent of cinnamon wafts over to me—an enticing, yet somehow calming, smell. Curling up my leg, I twist toward her, ignoring my bandmates who discuss the upcoming baseball season. “How did it feel in the studio?”

She smiles at me, her eyes twinkling. “Good. Great, actually. This is something so different for me, but I really enjoyed jamming with the guys. Kurt has some mean skills.”

“He sure does, although I think you added a wonderful dimension to the band. A piece that was missing before.”

“Oh, thanks.” Pink rises up her neck and invades her cheeks. I reach over and trace her growing blush with my

finger before realizing what I'm doing and yank my hand back. What *was* I doing?

In a gruff voice, I add, "You better get used to such compliments. They're all true."

Her palm lands on my knee. "Thank you so much. I owe you." As she talks, she squeezes.

Tingles emanate from where she's touching me, causing my leg to bounce out of her grasp. Guilt wars with pleasure and I will this ride to end. Quickly.

Finally, we arrive at the restaurant, and I scramble out of the suffocating confines of Lex's Mercedes SUV. I meet up with Brax on the way inside and sit next to him—and away from the confusing feelings Ellen whipped up. I watch as Kurt and Steve surround her. Amy takes the only remaining empty seat at my side.

Brax shovels some tortilla chips into his mouth. "You did some impressive magic in there, Amy."

She beams. "Thanks. I heard it in my head, you know?"

"Not many people have your talent," I reply. I reach across the table for some chips and guac.

She shrugs. "It's my superpower."

Brax crunches. "A very important one it is. We could've used you when we were starting out."

I consider his words. He's right. Hunte started out like gangbusters, riding the wave of big-haired boy bands. But we really didn't know what we were doing—and no one would've been able to tell us anything, anyway. I smack the back of his head. "You wouldn't have listened to Amy when you were twenty."

His eyes crinkle at the corners. “Probably not.” All three of us burst out laughing.

“At least you’re honest,” Amy says, squeezing lime into her beer. Some juice squirts up and lands in my eye, causing me to rear backward, blinking rapidly.

“Shoot, sorry Colton!” A paper napkin is pressed to my face, and she dabs it. Just the way Caitrona used to do. She pulls back, and anxious blue eyes sear into mine. “Is that better?”

The same fluttering below my belt from the car ride over stirs again. What’s going on? “Yeah. I’m good.”

She nods and drops the napkin onto the table. Lifting up her offending beer, she clicks the neck against mine. “To better aim!”

I smile and sip my own beer, enjoying her wry sense of humor. We join in the lively conversation about the newly-minted Hole in One, possible new songs, and their career aspirations. From across the way, Ellen’s animated movements demonstrate her exuberance, her violet eyes shining. Next to me, Amy contributes some of her own ideas. Both women stir emotions in me I haven’t felt since Caitrona.

I take a long swig of my beer.

Amy leans over and whispers in my ear, “I want to thank you and Brax for bringing me in today. I had a great time, and felt like I contributed something positive.”

I study her heart-shaped face, spiky black eyelashes, and grey pixie haircut. So smart. So distinctive. “You’re as important to the band as each member.”

She leans back. “This means a lot to me, Colton. I’m usually an afterthought, or at least a second choice.”

Her words hurt my heart. “Well, never doubt your place with us or them.” I wave my fork in the direction of the entire table.

She kisses my cheek. “Thank you.”

I resist the urge to lay my palm on my cheek to hold in the warmth. Pausing a couple of beats, I say, “If you’ll excuse me, I need to use the restroom.” I leave the table and make a beeline for the men’s room, needing to get ahold of my erratic emotions. After a stern talking-to in the mirror, I’m ready to return to the table. When I exit, Ellen stands outside the door.

“We really have to stop meeting like this,” I quip, remembering her being in the same position in the club after her obnoxious friend burst in.

“I want to speak with you privately,” her fingers land on my forearm. “I appreciate this opportunity. You’ve changed my life forever.” She throws her arms around my neck, and her body molds against mine.

My need to flee is almost overwhelming, but instead I remain stock-still. Between her hug and Amy’s earlier kiss, the icy desolation that has surrounded me for the past three years begins to melt.

## CHAPTER 5



I swallow deeply. After a brief hesitation, I bring my arms around Ellen's slim waist. This is just a gratitude hug. Similar to when I gave Brax's daughter Melody a sweater for her last birthday.

Ellen pulls her head off my chest and her violet eyes gaze deep into my soul. "No one has ever done something like this for me."

I force saliva down my throat. "You deserve it." With my pronouncement, I drop my arms and step back.

As we near the table, she says, "I won't disappoint you, Colton."

"Believe me, with a voice as amazing as yours, there's not a chance in hell of that happening."

My compliment stains her cheeks a light crimson, and she pauses. Stopping as well, I turn toward her. She asks, "Do you really have this much faith in us?"

I place my hands on her shoulders. "You have to know you have a remarkable vocal gift." I squeeze. "Your addition to Hole in One is a real game changer."

She swallows. "I've only performed with sedate choral groups, sometimes singing solos. Never in my wildest

imagination did I think I'd ever be in a rock and roll band.”

“You’re going to be great,” I turn her toward the table. “Hunte knows genuine talent, and we all heard it this afternoon.”

Her eyes sparkle. “Then, all I’ll say is that I promise to make your belief in me worth it.” She winks.

Is she flirting with me? This thought passes through my brain for a split second before I shut it down. No way would a woman like her be interested in a broken old guy like me. We part and I return to my seat beside Amy. The pixie next to me makes me laugh for the remainder of the meal.

After the bill is taken care of, we trek back to the cars. I slide into the backseat of Lex’s SUV, fully expecting Ellen to hitch a ride with someone else back to the studio where we left all our cars. The door opposite me opens and the new lead singer’s blonde head peeks in. I sit up straighter, only giving in once to gawk as Ellen’s shapely legs settle in next to me.

“Great meal to end a super session,” Ricky notes, and we all agree.

I decide talking with Ellen might be too fraught with unnamed and confusing emotions, so I chat with my bandmates about our own upcoming mini tour for the rest of the ride. When we arrive at the studio, we leave Lex’s car, and Ricky heads toward his truck.

Despite the warring emotions inside me—nerves, fear, guilt, wonder—I place my hand on Ellen’s arm. “Can I walk you to your vehicle?”

“That’s okay, Colton. My car had to go to the shop this morning, so I’ll call an Uber. You don’t have to wait for me.” She pulls out her cellphone.

I should let her call the car service. She's stirring up too many feelings. Ones Brax has been urging me to feel over the past year. No, I need to get away from her as fast as possible. I open my mouth. "Don't bother with an Uber. I'll drop you off at your house." What did I say?

Amy passes us and waves. "See you soon!"

I reply, "Definitely" as Ellen says, "Definitely."

We look at each other and I call it first. "Jinx!" We break into laughter.

"Come on," I nod toward my car, happy I drove my sporty convertible today rather than my sensible Lexus sedan. I plug her trendy Lincoln Park address into my GPS.

"Are you sure you want to drive me home? I can easily take an Uber."

"No problem at all, ma'am." I tip my imaginary hat to her.

She giggles. It's a cute sound, one that makes me yearn to hear it again. And often. Like how Caitrona used to laugh. My wife's memory dims my enjoyment.

"I do have to admit, I had a blast today." She tries to keep her hair from blowing in the wind, but isn't having much luck.

When we stop at a light, I open the glove compartment and point to a scarf. "Here, you can use this for your hair, if you want." I pause. "It belonged to my wife."

Her hand stops on its way to the scrap of material. She pins me with her violet eyes. "Are you sure it's okay?"

"Yeah." Somehow, I think Caitrona would want her to keep her hair from flying all over the place—the reason the scarf is in here in the first place. My wife hated when her hair got all messy. Even if I liked it.

“Thanks,” she whispers, and ties it around her neck. “May I ask you what she was like?”

My stomach sinks, but I play it off with a grin. “Who?”

“Your wife. I heard about her cancer diagnosis a while back. I’m sorry she passed.”

I purse my lips. “Thank you.” The proper response when someone offers their condolences. It’s become much easier for me to mean the sentiment over the past three years. Not quite there in my heart though.

“Don’t give me a reply,” she rushes in before I can form a coherent thought. “That was rude of me.”

I put my blinker on to make a right turn. “It wasn’t rude. Caitrona was a wonderful woman. Smart as a whip. A creative choreographer. She even gave Braxton a couple of new moves.”

“She sounds like a great person.”

“She was.”

Her palm flies in front of her mouth. “Oh God. Choreography! I have two left feet. Please tell me we won’t have to dance on stage.”

I chuckle. “Nah. In my opinion, the days of dance moves are over.”

She brushes her fingers across her forehead. “Whew.”

After a few more turns, the GPS announces, “You have arrived at your destination.”

I pull in front of Ellen’s house—a pretty grey, two-story with flowers inviting you inside. For the first time in ages, I don’t want the conversation to end. What’s the proper etiquette



today? I rub my permanent callouses forged from my bass playing.

While I ponder my next move, she removes Caitrona's scarf and opens the car door. "It was a great day. You're a big reason for that."

It's now or never. I might be misreading her signals. Maybe I'm misreading *mine*. Before sense takes over, I blurt, "Would you like to go out for dinner with me sometime?"

## CHAPTER 6



**E**llen stills. Oh God, did I misread her and the situation? Did I even mean to ask her out? I open my mouth—

“Yes.”

My lips slam shut. My hand covers the bracelet I always wear, given to me by Caitrona during one of many tours we took together. I swallow. “You will?”

Her smile starts at her captivating violet eyes. She walks around to my open window, causing the nerve endings in my body to hit vibrate. “I’d love to go out with you, Colton.” She brings her palm to my cheek, leans forward, and gives me a kiss. On. My. Lips.

My brain seizes.

When she steps back, she says, “How about Saturday night? I’m in rehearsals with Hole in One until then.”

“Sounds.” I lick my lips. “Good.”

“I can’t wait.” She turns on her heel and walks into her house.

When the front door closes, I’m startled out of my trance. As I put the car into reverse, I swear the curtains flutter at her front window. In a bemused state, I drive back to my house and wander inside. Standing next to the photo of Caitrona and

me on our wedding day all those years ago, I pick up the frame and collapse onto the couch.

Tracing my finger over her gorgeous smiling cheeks, I admit, “I asked a woman out today. She’s the first woman to even capture a glimmer of my interest since you left me. Believe it or not, there’s another woman, also, who caught my eye, but Ellen and I were together because I offered to drive her home since her car is in the shop, and, well ...” My babbling voice trails off.

Setting the picture onto the coffee table, I rest my head. Closing my eyes, I say, “No one ever can take your place, baby. I loved you with my whole heart and soul. But you’ve been gone for so long and I miss...” I cover my face with my hands. “I miss the companionship, you know? The fun we had together. Perhaps it’s time for me to try to find fun again—in a different way—with someone else?”

I blow air through my mouth, causing my hair to fly off my forehead. This is so hard. When your spouse dies, people say you’ll find love again. It’s only a platitude. Like “how are you?” No one wants to hear the answer, or be there to help you rediscover your way without the love of your life. They expect you to grieve and move on, in silence. Quickly.

Shaking my head, I bite my lip. No, that’s not right. Not everyone reacted this way. I pick up my phone and call Exhibit A, my best friend. “Hey, Brax.”

“Colton. It’s Sara—Brax is in the shower. How are you?”

There’s the stupid question again. Sara’s on my side, I know it. Sucking up all the air in my house, I blurt, “I asked Ellen out.”

“Oh, wow. I didn’t expect that. I know it must’ve been very tough.”

Her kind words steal around my heart. “It was harder than almost anything I’ve ever had to do,” I confess.

“I’m proud of you. I bet Caitrona would be as well.”

Her name hangs like a silent cloud over us, and I bite back the threatening tears. Haven’t I cried enough to last three lifetimes already? “You think?”

“I do. She was a wonderful woman, and your perfect match. I loved her dearly. I’m sure she wouldn’t want you to skate through the rest of your life, all by yourself. You have so much love to give.”

I pluck at my bracelet again. “Thanks, Sara. I’m out of my depth here.”

“I can only imagine how you’re feeling. But understand Brax and I are on your side. We’re rooting for you to find happiness again.” She lets out a little giggle. “To think I could’ve had a role in bringing you two together. After all, I was the one who told you about her.”

Her words bring a smile to my face. “That you did.” I inhale. “I’m not guaranteeing anything here. It’s just a date. Saturday night.”

“Where are you going to take her?”

Tumbleweeds flit across my brain. “I, uh, don’t have a clue.”

She laughs. “Men. Here are some ideas—”

After a few minutes, we hang up and I consider the places Sara suggested. Dinner seems the most obvious choice, but I definitely want something unusual. A variety of restaurants

pop to mind that Caitrona and I used to haunt, but I discard all of them. No. I'm ready to create new memories. I scroll through Open Table on my phone.



Saturday finally arrives, and I decide to attend Hole in One's rehearsal. It's the first one I've attended, and I'm interested in seeing how things are progressing. Hunte officially has taken the band under its wing, so my appearance won't be considered unusual.

Back in the same studio as before, I watch Hole in One practice. "They're getting better."

Behind the mixer board, Amy nods. Usually sound engineers don't attend rehearsals, but since this is a young band, we're all pulling together to find our footing. Amy keeps playing with the levels, improving the sound incrementally.

"You know, Colton, I was thinking of recording them like this." She describes the technical aspects of laying down tracks with some innovative ideas.

"Your concepts rock. It'll really help Ellen's voice pop, while keeping the rest of the band primed for the spotlight as well."

She beams at my praise. "Thanks."

In silence, I observe both her and the band. Impressed by both. "In my opinion, they're going to make it."

Her gray pixie head bobs in time with the song they're playing. "I think they have what it takes, too."

Amy's skill and innate ability with sound impresses me. "I can only imagine what you'll do for Hunte's next record."

“I can’t wait!” She cracks her knuckles. “I’ve been wanting to get my hands on you guys again for a long time.”

My lips curl into a smirk. “That’s what all the girls say.”

Her laughter is uninhibited. “Damn. I’d love to continue this conversation outside of work.”

My chuckle seizes in my throat. “Like a date?”

She pauses a beat. Then two. “Maybe.” She swallows. “Yeah.”

The air stills.

Ellen bounds out of the rehearsal room. She catches my eye and points toward the restroom.

## CHAPTER 7



I smile at Ellen as she breezes by me, then return my attention to the woman who just asked me out. *She* asked me. I take a deep breath. “Amy, this sounds wonderful. I have your number so I’ll reach out to set something up.”

She bites her lip. “I look forward to it.”

Should I tell her about my date tonight with Ellen? The grown-up part of me says to do it, but the teenager living inside my body says to wait. See how the date goes. I could cancel with her if Ellen and I hit it off—or gladly go out with Amy if we’re a dud.

While I dither, the rest of the guys in Hole in One crowd around the sound board. Amy handles their questions with ease and respect. She’s the real deal.

A small hand lands on my arm. “I’m ready, Colton.”

My body thrills at our slight contact. “Great.” I lift my fist into the air. “Good job today everyone.” I scan the room, making eye contact with every person, including Amy. “I have to leave, but keep working hard.”

Ellen says, “Great rehearsal today, guys!”

We’re pelted by a chorus of “thanks” and “good-byes” as I turn and open the door. Ellen walks through it first. Glancing

back, Amy's blue gaze locks with mine for a moment. I wink at her and exit the rehearsal space.

“Where are we going?”

I give my date—the description makes my heart miss a beat—a conspiratorial smirk. “We are going to sit down for a civilized dinner. No bands playing. No bartenders serving warm beer to the masses.”

“Ooh, sounds like a mystery place to me.”

She nudges my shoulder with hers, and I'm once again struck by her height. She's not as tall as me by a long shot, but I'd bet she stands around five-seven. A few inches taller than Caitrona was. “I hope you enjoy this spot. I found it on Open Table, but I haven't tried it.”

“Then it'll be new for both of us. Sounds good to me.”

I escort her into my car—tonight, I took the SUV for comfort—and drive away from the rehearsal space. The GPS gives me directions while the radio plays some righteous tunes.

“How many cars do you own? This is the second one I've been in.”

I tap the steering wheel to the beat of the song. “Well, I'm sort of a collector. At last count, I garage ten.”

Her eyes widen. “Ten? Holy moly. I can't even keep one going!”

I turn onto Wacker Drive, a main Chicago thoroughfare. “Caitrona used to limit me to five. Since she's been gone, I've let my little vice run wild, I guess.” I shrug.

At the mention of my wife's name, Ellen places her hand on top of mine. Neither one of us speaks, and soon the GPS



announces we've arrived.

“Seriously? I’ve heard of this place like everyone else here in Chicago, but I thought it was booked up, for forever.” She turns her head toward me. “You said you made this reservation on Open Table?”

“No. I said I *found* this restaurant on the website.” My fingers play with my bracelet. “When I couldn’t book it through the app, I may have called our manager to set this up.”

She laughs. “It’s nice to have people.”

“Stick with me kid, and you’ll have people, too.” I suck in my breath as the meaning of what I said lodges in my bones.

Ellen picks up her purse. “You got it wrong, Colton. You need to stick with me, and someday I’ll have *my* people call *your* people to make arrangements.” Her giggle causes me to chuckle.

Relieved at her witty response, I stop at the valet stand. “Well, let’s see if this place is worth either one of us making a call to our peeps.”

The valet opens our doors and we exit the SUV. When the guy takes my keys, I whisper, “Take good care of her.”

He eyes my car with a sappy smile on his face. “Promise, sir.”

Satisfied, I join Ellen at the front door and escort her inside the newest restaurant owned by the famed celebrity chef. A svelte hostess shows us to our well-positioned table, and I hold Ellen’s chair out for her.

The meal is one of the more delicious ones I’ve tasted in years. To be fair, my zest for all things living—including food—died with my wife. This was a wonderful reintroduction for

me, though. For her part, Ellen seemed to enjoy everything from the bread basket through dessert. Not to mention our conversation never flagged once.

As we sip our cappuccinos, she places her hands over her stomach. “I think this meal contained more calories than I’ve eaten all month!”

“It was worth every forkful.”

She blows on the beverage in her cup. “It really was amazing. Yet it pales in comparison with the company.”

I glance down at the tablecloth, then back into her violet eyes. “I should’ve been the one to say that, Ellen. I’ve honestly had a wonderful time with you. You bring an extra special zing to the band, but your vocals are your least attractive quality. I love how close you are with your parents, and you grow your own herbs. You’re so real.”

A blush steals up her neck to her cheeks. “I’m only me. Living my life and making ends meet. Not a major rock star traveling all across the world.”

“Yet.”

She leans back into her chair. “Do you really think this could happen to Hole in One?”

I swallow the delicious liquid in my cup. Damn, this place is fantastic. “I do. In my honest opinion, your group has what it takes to go all the way.”

She plays with the handle of her mug. “I never thought this would happen for me. At my age, it felt as if my ship had sailed, you know?”

“You’re not over the hill, by any means.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear. “I’m forty, Colton. Do you think if the guys in the band knew this, they’d kick me out?”

I shake my head. “No way. You still have tons of years ahead of you. Perhaps you’ll be able to make the ‘guys in the band’ tow the line.”

At my words, we burst out laughing. She swipes at the corner of her eye. “Yeah, like that will ever happen.”

“You never know. Sara put Hunte on the straight and narrow.”

“Because she was your tour accountant and you had to listen to her. I’m only the new lead singer.”

“And a lovely one at that.” I place my napkin onto the table. “How are you still single?”

She straightens the tablecloth. “I was in a relationship for a long time, but things went south. As they do.”

I nod at her honesty. “His loss.”

At this precise moment, the waiter appears and gives me the bill, and I take care of it without moving my gaze from her. When we arrive at her house, I escort her to the front door. “Will you give me your keys?”

She passes them to me and I unlock the door. Like the gentleman I am. Sometimes.

Sticking my hands into my pockets, I say, “I had a great time tonight.”

“I did too.” She looks at me.

Am I supposed to kiss her? Do I want to? Hell, yes. I pull my hands out of my pants and grab hers. “I’m glad.”

She studies our intertwined fingers. “Would you like to come inside?”

My heart picks up the beat to where I almost can't breathe. “Thank you so much, but I'm not ready to take this step. I would like to give you a goodnight kiss, if that's alright?”

She licks her lips. “I'd enjoy it.”

I take a step closer to her, never dropping her hands. My gaze sweeps over her hair, forehead, eyebrows, and nose, before landing on her parted mouth. I lean forward and press my lips against hers, fusing them together. My fingers tighten around hers, sensations rocking through my body. I don't want to pull back, so I press harder against her lips and urge them to open. When she does, my tongue swoops inside, tangling with hers.

Tingles race up and down my spine. I jump back, breathless. Ellen's panting, too, but I can't concentrate on her right now. I'm overwhelmed.

Too much.

Too soon.

With what I hope is a smile—at least not a glower—I turn on my heel and speed walk to my SUV. Honking twice, I leave Ellen's neighborhood behind.

And perhaps my sanity?

## CHAPTER 8



I rub my damp hands across my forehead. How did I get myself into this position? I had an awesome date with Ellen the other night, and now I'm leaving in ten minutes to meet up with Amy. For someone who hasn't dated in nearly two decades, my life has shifted into overdrive.

I force myself to take a deep breath. It's only one night—one meal—and I do have to eat. "Relax and go with the flow, buddy," Brax said. Before he gave me a noogie, the jerk.

Slapping my hands onto my thighs, I walk to my selection of car keys hanging on the wall. The Mercedes tonight. It's sleek and dark blue and purrs like a kitten. I need some of her energy to seep into my bones.

Walking toward the car, the light and playful texts Amy and I shared jump to the fore. I put the restaurant's address she gave me into the GPS. Her text said it was a favorite of hers, so I'm looking forward to it.

When I pull into the parking lot, there's not a valet in sight. Locking up and pocketing the keys into my navy slacks pocket, I rub my hands together and approach the front door. It's Greek—if the name of Adonis didn't give it away, the laurel branches on the blue and white flag certainly did.

A kid wearing a black bowtie greets me. “Welcome to Adonis. Do you have a reservation?”

“I believe Amy Caras made one.”

The kid’s eyes wander over me, then he consults the book, nodding. “She sure did.” His response seems like it’s more for his benefit than mine, but he grabs two menus and leads me to a quiet table. “Amy will be here in a minute.”

That certainly was a familiar thing for him to say. I shrug off the kid’s remark and open the menu. Greek dishes greet my eyes, and my stomach gurgles in appreciation. At least I’ll get a good meal out of the evening.

Amy appears at the table, and I scramble to my feet. She’s wearing a simple dark green dress that highlights her grey pixie cut. “You look lovely tonight.”

She smiles at me, her blue eyes catching an iridescent glow. “As do you.”

I pull her chair back and let her settle in before retaking my seat. “I checked out the menu, and everything looks amazing.”

“It is.” She pauses while placing her napkin on her lap. “I have a confession, Colton. This is my family’s restaurant. I was practically raised in here.”

I rock backward. “Wow. How cool. You must’ve been fed well all the time.”

“That was the best part.” She offers tips on the items on the menu, each one more mouthwatering than the one before it.

“Hello, and welcome to—” Our waitress’s speech comes to an abrupt halt. “Oh, hey Amy.” She turns her attention to me,

and her eyes widen. “Well, well, aren’t you a nice drink of water.”

I smile at the waitress, who appears to be slightly older than me. Amy jumps in, “Maya, this is Colton Frontage. He’s the bassist for Hunte, one of the bands I’m working with.” Amy directs her focus towards me. “Maya is my cousin.”

After exchanging pleasantries and her love of all things Hunte, Amy’s cousin takes our beverage orders and tells us she’ll get the kitchen to whip something up for our dinners. When she leaves, I say, “They don’t have to go out of their way for me.”

Amy waves her hand. “They always do this. It’s how things are done.”

Maya delivers our drinks and pita bread with hummus and disappears. Picking up my glass, I toast, “To a wonderful evening.”

“Definitely.” She clinks her glass to mine.

We gorge ourselves on a well-dressed salad, a delicious and delicate chicken dish that Amy tells me is a Santorini specialty, and baklava for dessert. Like with Ellen, our chat never wanes—nor does it touch on work. We discuss her family, her childhood, and mine.

With each passing moment, I’m more relaxed with her. And more intrigued. She’s so pretty. And funny. And talented. A buzzing swirls in my head. Is she able to make me swoon with only conversation? I rub my temple, picturing her mouth where my fingers are, and drop them to my lips.

“I was so sorry to hear about your wife’s passing, Colton.”

Her statement brings me out of my lustful haze. “Thank you. It was a very difficult time.”

“I can understand.” Amy takes a deep breath. “Truly.”

Her words cause me to really look at her. It takes me a minute, but I see it. “When?”

She half-smiles. “Two years ago.”

“I’m so very sorry.” Then, because the whole world knows my story, I ask for hers. “How?”

She glances away. “Car accident. Late at night. The cops said he fell asleep at the wheel.”

My heart seizes. At least with Caitrona, we had time to prepare. “Oh, Amy. That’s so awful.”

She nods once. Twice. “It was. But my friends and family have been bugging me to get out again. And I’m so happy you agreed. I’ve been having a wonderful evening, Colton.”

So have I. “Me, too, Amy. And believe me, I get being pushed into the dating world.”

“I know how much Ron would’ve wanted me to move on.”

“My wife would be screaming that I can’t stay in our home forever.”

A smile creeps across her face, then dips. “Did you and Caitrona ever think about having kids?”

I rub the back of my neck. “Yeah. We tried everything, from artificial insemination to IVF, but nothing took. We settled for being a good aunt and uncle to our nieces and nephews, as well as to the kids of my bandmates. We reconciled ourselves to our reality and were happy.” We were, even if the ache to have a child never really went away.

“I’m happy for you.” She swallows. “I have to tell you, though, that—”



A man in a big, white chef's hat appears at our table, arms wide open. "Amy!" He pulls her out of her seat and wraps her in a bear hug.

Her family's cool. I like the way they are all so good to her, especially after she lost everything. The same way I did.

Amy turns to me. "Colton, this oversized guy here is my big brother, Alec. He's the one responsible for our dinner tonight."

I stand and stretch out my hand. "Nice to meet you, Alec. Great meal, I'm impressed." I'm not lying.

He beams at me and his sister. "So happy you enjoyed. Now, I'll send you guys a shot of Ouzo to complete your evening."

I make eye contact with Amy and reply, "Thanks, that'll be perfect."

We return to our chairs, and our shots arrive soon thereafter. Amy picks hers up. "Yamas!"

My eyebrows rise, but I mimic her word and take the shot. Swallowing it, I ask, "What did we just say?"

She giggles. "Yamas literally means 'health,' but we use it like 'cheers.'"

I repeat the Greek word. "I like it."

She's smiling at me when a young girl approaches our table. Must be another cousin. Or niece. Amy's eyes flicker from the girl to me, then she offers a hug to the newcomer. She turns the girl to face me, and inhales.

"Colton. This is my daughter, Zoey."

## CHAPTER 9



**M**y heart zings.

She. Is. Her. Daughter.

I catch and hold my breath, assimilating the sight in front of my shocked eyes. Amy stands with her arm wrapped around the tween girl and gives her a slight shake. Zoey—was that her name?—offers me a wide smile, missing a bottom tooth.

“Hi, Mr. Colton.”

Her high-pitched voice elicits a long-forgotten yearning buried within me. With a raspy chuckle from deep within my chest, I reach out and pull on one of her pigtails. “Hello, Zoey. It’s very nice to meet you.” *Think of something nice to say, Colton!* “And, I, uhm, like your pink dress.”

The girl looks down at her attire, yanking on the hem. “Thank you. I love pink! Do you love pink, too?”

Her genuine question tugs at my heart. I give her a come-hither motion with my index finger as I lean toward her. When her face is close to mine, I whisper, “I really do, but don’t tell your Mommy. It would ruin my image. Okay?”

She blinks, tilting her head. Leaning forward, she puts her hand to my ear. “I don’t keep things from Mommy, but I can do this.” She kisses my cheek and skips to her mother’s side.

Without thought, I rub my palm over my cheek, capturing her sweet kiss. Amy says something to her daughter, who nods. Zoey wraps her arms around her, and then faces me. “It’s been nice meeting you, Mr. Colton. I have to help Uncle Alec now. Bye!” She waves at me, then scampers into the kitchen.

Silence settles over our table. My mind bounces from one question to the next—was Amy about to inform me she had a daughter before the girl bounded in? Is she looking for a daddy replacement? What does this mean for our budding relationship?

Amy runs her finger around the empty shot glass. “Colton,” She licks her lips. “I can’t imagine what you must be thinking.” At my nod, she continues, “I was going to tell you about Zoey when Alec came and interrupted me.” She half laughs. “I don’t go out on too many dates, but learned fast not to lead with ‘hey, I have a daughter.’”

Can’t fault her reasoning. “Makes sense.”

She runs her fingers through her short, prematurely-grey hair. “I feel a real connection with you, Colton. You get it about Ron’s death. Really get it.” She looks over to the left. “Not many people do.”

My misgivings deflate. Her honesty shines through every word. Especially her last sentiment. I reach over and put my hand on top of hers. “So true. Everyone wanted to help, but no one understood.”

She shakes her head. “Right? At least I didn’t have to cook for weeks.”

Beneath my palm, hers feels so soft. Feminine. Yet I’ve seen, firsthand, how extremely capable they are and give hers

a squeeze. “With such a fabulous restaurant in the family, I can’t imagine you’d ever be hungry.”

“Well, that’s true.” Her hand swivels so it’s open underneath mine, and our fingers interlace. I’m not sure which one of us initiated the movement, but it feels good. Right.

Not taking my eyes from our hands, I request, “So, tell me about Zoey.”

At the mention of her daughter, Amy’s face lights up. “She’s wonderful. She was only six when her father passed and was so very confused. I told her to look up to the sky at night and find the brightest star. That was her daddy, watching over her. I catch her often staring into the sky after dark.

“What a brilliant idea. I’m sure it helps her.”

“It wasn’t original—I got it from one of the millions of self-help books I read. But, yes, I think it does give her comfort.”

I tighten my hand around hers. The last patrons, other than us, leave the restaurant. “Looks like we should get going. I don’t want to make your family wait here because of us.”

“Yeah. Guess you’re right.”

I signal Maya for our check. Amy’s cousin shakes her head as she approaches our table. “Your dinners are on the house.” Addressing Amy, she says, “We’ll take Zoey home for a sleepover tonight.”

It’s Sunday, which means Zoey will have school tomorrow. I voice my objections. “No, that’s not a good idea. She has class in the morning.”

Amy glances between me and the server several times. Her shoulders dip. “Colton’s right. I’ll bring her home with me.

Thanks, though, Maya. Appreciate it.”

“What are cousins here for?” She sticks her pen behind her ear. “I’ll get her ready.” She leaves us to return to the kitchen.

Amy collects her things and stands. I jump up and walk around to her side of the table. “Looks like we’re all alone for a moment.”

“Yeah. I had a wonderful time with you, Colton. Thanks for agreeing to meet up with me.” She slips her purse over her shoulder. “I’ll collect Zoey.”

I bite my lip. I don’t want our evening to end, despite the fact Amy has a daughter. With a gap-toothed smile. Will Amy think I’m being too forward? That I’m crazy? Guess I’ll never know unless I ask. “Would it be alright with you if I followed you to your house? I want to make sure you get there okay.”

Her eyebrows raise. “I’m fine, Colton. I’ve been getting myself home for years now.”

My eyebrows connect. “I can imagine. But, you’re out on a date with me, and I want to see you home safely. With Zoey.”

At her daughter’s name, her expression softens. My insides flip at her look of pure love. She exhales. “That would be nice.”

Her daughter picks this exact moment to leave the kitchen, and barrels straight for her mother. Unaware of her impending doom, Amy flies forward upon impact—right into me. I catch her in my arms. “I got you!”

Amy’s forehead rests against my pecs for a fleeting moment, which causes my heart rate to skip a beat. All too soon, she pulls away and turns to chasten her daughter. “What did I tell you about rushing at people?”

Her daughter's head bows. "That I shouldn't do it."

"Why?"

The tween mumbles, "Because someone could get hurt."

"Correct. Now, I want you to thank Mr. Colton for saving Mommy from a fall."

Zoey casts chastened eyes at me. Unlike her mom's, hers are a deep brown. Probably like Ron's were. "Thanks, Mr. Colton."

I can't help it, I grin at the pair. "No harm done." When Amy clears her throat, I amend, "This time. C'mon, let's go home."

The three of us exit her family's restaurant, and get into our cars. On the drive to her house, I find myself imagining huge family dinners there. With laughter, and love, and great food. My chest swells.

Pulling into the driveway behind them, I meet up with mother and daughter on the grey stone walkway. Letting Amy open the door, I follow them into a nice sized living room featuring a vast assortment of framed photos and candles. The walls are beige, with pillows providing multicolored pops.

Amy messes the top of Zoey's hair. "Brush your teeth and I'll be in to read you a story soon. Say goodnight to Mr. Colton."

With a shy wave, her daughter runs out of the room. "You're doing a wonderful job with her. Like you do in the recording studio."

A blush stains her cheek. "Thank you."

Torn between wanting to kiss this woman senseless and respecting her need for family time, I take a step forward. "I

had a great dinner tonight, Amy. May I give you a goodnight kiss before leaving you to your nighttime ritual with your daughter?"

A small sigh escapes her lips. "I'd really like that."

Encouraged, I place my hands on her cheeks. The admiration I've had for her skills morphs into something deeper as I stroke her lip with my thumb. Slowly, I bring our mouths together, setting off fireworks throughout my body. When our tongues enter the dance, I swear the whole neighborhood can see the blasts.

Zoey calls out, "Mommy, I'm ready for my story!"

Breaking our kiss, I smile. "I'd really like to take you out on another date." I pause. "With your daughter."

She sucks in her breath. "We'd love to."

## CHAPTER 10



“**T**hat was so much fun, Mr. Colton!”

I smile at Zoey’s enthusiasm at riding the Centennial Wheel, Chicago’s answer to the London Eye. Winking at Amy, I reply to her daughter, “I always enjoy a good Ferris wheel.”

The eight-year-old points, then turns excited eyes toward her mother. “Mommy! Look! They have cotton candy.”

While my teeth hurt at the thought of the spun sugar, the little girl doesn’t have such issues. Amy opens her purse, but I’m faster to my wallet. Pulling out a ten, I pass it to her and she races to the cart.

Amy hands me a replacement bill. “Thanks, Colton. I can’t ask you to pay for her sweet tooth.”

I close her hand around the money. “It’s fine.” We watch as she waits on line, hopping from foot to foot. “She’s a great kid. You’re raising her right.”

“Thank you.” With a dirty look, she puts the bill into her wallet. “Not going to lie. Doing it alone has been hard, but I wouldn’t change anything. She’s been my lifeline, and now I’m getting to see her explore the world.”

“I can only imagine.” Truer words have never been spoken. Not having kids with Caitrona was something I had



reconciled myself with before... I inhale. Being around Zoey has ignited a longing deep within me. Plus, Amy's so wonderful at everything she does, whether in the sound studio or with her daughter. I reach for her hand.

"Amy! Is that you?"

My arm drops to my side.

Amy responds to the mystery voice. "Lenore? Hey. What are you doing here?"

A woman steps in front of us. She's younger than Amy by a couple of years and has two boys around Zoey's age with her. "The kids insisted on coming to Navy Pier." She focuses her attention on me. "And *who* might you be?"

I clear my throat. Extending my hand, I say, "I'm Colton, Amy's, uh, friend. I thought it would be a good day to come here, too."

Zoey approaches and interrupts the awkward discussion. "Hey, Zane and Zack. Want some cotton candy?"

"Sure." The two boys reach for the blue fluff as their mother admonishes them to take it easy.

Lenore returns her attention to me. "So, Colton, what do you do?"

My answer usually brings about one of two responses—either shock or disapproval, especially when I don't say my band's name. Here goes nothing. "I play bass guitar."

"Oh." Her eyes swing from me to Amy. "Well, I guess you met Amy at work. She's the best!"

Ignoring my prior hesitation, I wrap my arm around Amy. "She is pretty wonderful." Amy's cheeks pinken.

One of the boys, sporting blue lips, asks, “Hey, Zoey, want to join us on the swings? We were about to get in line.”

Zoey’s face lights up for the hundredth time today. “Mommy, can I?”

Amy glances at her friend, who nods. “Sure. But you have to mind Miss Lenore, okay.”

“I promise.” After a few minutes, the four of them leave and walk toward the ride.

Alone at last. “Looks like the line will take a while.” Amy points to a nearby attraction. “Want to try out the virtual ride over there?”

I prefer to spend quality time with her, not waste precious alone time on a silly ride. “Nah. Why don’t we eat ice cream and sit on a bench to wait for them? I’ll even let you lick my cone.” I wiggle my eyebrows.

Giggling at my double entendre, she shakes her head but follows me into the ice cream parlor. She orders a cup while I get my promised cone, and we walk over to an empty bench.

“This is good.” She scoops some ice cream on her spoon. “Want to try?”

“I make it a habit to never turn down ice cream. Especially not when the offer comes from a beautiful woman.” I open my mouth and she inserts her spoon into it. The creamy goodness slides down my throat. “Yours *is* good, but you need to sample mine. Here.” I place my cone in front of her lips.

She licks, her pink tongue swiping over the cold treat. My dick twitches, causing my hips to do a dance despite being on a hard bench. “I like mine better.”

“I might like everything about yours better.”

At my comment, both of us suck in our breaths.

I refuse to take back the words. They're true. Since Amy's silent, I bet she agrees. The need to taste her lips *now* grows into an almost overwhelming urge.

She puts her empty cup beside her thighs, but her eyes remain trained on mine. I swallow my final bite of the cone and brush my hands together to get rid of the crumbs.

"I have to kiss you, Amy."

She whispers, "I'd really like you to."

Damn good thing we're on the same page. I grab her hands and lean forward so our faces are sharing the same air. My eyes take in her blue, blue eyes, pink lips, and button nose. Finally, I close the gap between us, and our mouths meet.

Tiny explosions race up my arms and down my legs at the contact. She inhales, even as our lips explore, confirming we're both feeling the same thing. My hands contract around hers, and she squeezes back.

Spurred on, I deepen the kiss, ignoring the low hum of people nearby. Right now, it's only Amy and me in our own little bubble. I let my left hand leave hers and travel up to the back of her head, pushing her closer to me. When she doesn't protest—rather, gifts me with a soft moan—I touch her tongue with the tip of mine.

Everything detonates.

My heart races. All I want to do is draw this woman closer to me and worship her. A breeze moves through my hair. Sounds around me flood into focus.

I pull back a fraction and let my forehead collapse on hers.

"Oh my God, Colton. I've not felt like this since ..."

I kissed Ellen the other day, and there were fireworks. Big ones. These feelings are different, but as strong. This time, though, thoughts of Caitrona weren't what pulled me away—rather the fact we're on Navy Pier surrounded by hordes of people. I tuck these musings inside to analyze later.

“It was, wow.”

## CHAPTER 11



“C heers!”

My pilsner clanks against my bandmates’ and we all take long draws on our beers. Brax starts to brag about how well his kids are faring in New York, which spurs Lex to chime in about his progeny attending Ivy Leagues. Ricky adds his commentary about his much younger kids, who are in elementary school. Since we haven’t had a chance to hang together in a couple of weeks, we’re catching up with each other’s lives.

With all their talk about children, a picture of Zoey crosses my mind. I swig my drink. God, I had such a great time with Amy and her daughter the other day. We have another date set up for Saturday night, when it’ll just be Amy and me. My cock stirs to life as I remember our few stolen kisses at Navy Pier. *Better shut this down, Colton!* I shift in my seat and focus on the conversation, which has now turned to our newest tour dates.

“I’m looking forward to hitting Boston,” Lex says. “My oldest son will be backstage at the TD Garden.”

Ricky snags some chips and pops them into his mouth. “Can’t wait to see Clarke again. He’s majoring in political science, right?”

Lex replies, “Yes, he is. He loves BU, and ...”

My phone rings. Sneaking a quick glimpse at my screen, Ellen’s name flashes, and my limbs tingle. Pushing away from the table, I hold up my cell. “Sorry guys. It’s Ellen. She probably wants to talk about Hole in One.” My bandmates nod toward me as I get to my feet.

Walking to the front of the Thai restaurant, I answer the call. “Hey Ellen. How are you doing?” Memories of our kisses replay in my mind as I step outside in the hope of getting some cooler air.

“Hi Colton. I’ve missed you, but the band’s been rehearsing nonstop. I think we’re better as a result, though.”

I inhale at the melodious sound of her voice. “That’s great. It takes a while for things to settle into a good routine.”

“Yeah. I have some exciting news. We’re taking tomorrow off before our first gig on Friday, and I’d love to spend the day with you.” She pauses. “If you’re free.”

A smile stretches across my face. “Sounds like a date. What do you have in mind?”

“I was thinking of going to a jazz club. We could grab dinner beforehand.”

“Jazz is great. How about I pick you up at seven?”

After ending the call, I rejoin our table. Lex concludes, “Hole in One’s been working really hard, and they have their first gig Friday night.” Plans to attend their concert are finalized—where Ellen will be the lead singer, and Amy will work the soundboard.

A flicker of confused emotions sails through my body. I push them down and enjoy the rest of the evening with my

best friends.



“I ’m stuffed from dinner, Colton. Where did you ever find out about that place?” Ellen wraps her hand inside my arm as we walk down the sidewalk.

“I’ve been friends with the chef for ages. I try to get out here a couple of times a year.”

We stop in front of a little club, with a small sign above the doorway saying “Duke’s.” Opening the door, I usher Ellen into the dark room and soon we’re settled at a table nestled in the back corner.

A four-piece band plays on the stage, with a piano, trumpet, sax, and drums. Despite the fact there’s no singer, their music is soulful.

After a few moments, she decrees, “I like them.”

“Me, too.” I lean forward and brush her hair away from her cheeks. “They could use a talented singer, though. Know anyone?”

She chuckles. “I might have a connection or two.”

The dim light glints off Ellen’s blonde hair, making it appear like a halo. I suck in my breath. “You look like an angel in here.”

She reaches over and kisses me square on the lips. At first, our contact stuns me, and she takes control of the kiss. When her tongue slips into my mouth, though, I startle into action, wrestling for the upper hand. Her mouth tastes of basil and garlic from my friend’s restaurant, and a unique flavor that’s

hers alone. I deepen the kiss, and she moans. How did we go from zero to sixty in one second flat?

When the audience claps, we break apart. Not too far, but enough so we can catch our panting breaths. I place my hand on top of hers.

Her pink tongue licks her lips. “I’ve been wanting to do that all evening.”

Damn. Me, too. “You’re a very beautiful woman. I can’t think clearly when I’m around you.”

“Feeling’s mutual, Colton.”

A few notes are plucked on the piano and she steals another kiss before we both settle into our chairs to enjoy the entertainment coming from the stage. Throughout the set, we never stop touching each other. A hand on my forearm. Fingers on her thigh.

The band takes a break, and I trace random shapes on the back of her palm. “Thank you for suggesting a jazz night out. They are truly talented performers.”

“Yeah. I used to want to be out there with them. I feel like this music’s in my soul. Don’t get me wrong, though, I’m loving being a part of Hole in One—it’s been a mind shift for me.”

Her admission stuns me. “How’d you get into jazz?”

“My father loved listening to all the old classics. Every weekend, we’d be treated to Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Ella Fitzgerald while he’d wash the car.” She smiles. “It was great.”

“Sounds idyllic.”



Her violet eyes get a faraway look in them. “Yeah. It was. Until he lost his job and couldn’t find work. That broke him. He died two years later.”

My touch turns from sensual to comforting. “I’m sorry.”

She nods. “My mother ended up finding work in a department store and was able to provide for my two brothers and me. I swore back then I wouldn’t ever bring a child into this world unless I was in a situation where money wouldn’t be an issue.”

My heart breaks for what she went through growing up, and how it affected her. I try to lighten the mood. “Now that you’re going to be a big-time rock star, I say you have this covered.”

“We’re not there yet. Besides, that ship has already sailed for me. I can’t have kids.” She smacks herself on the head. “What got into me? I shouldn’t have said all that. Please forget I did.”

“No.” I grab her hand. “This is what makes things real. In order for us to get to know each other, we have to be honest.” Even if her admission tugs at my heart.

She breaks our eye contact. “I shouldn’t be burdening you with all this sad stuff.”

I take a deep breath. “My wife and I tried to have kids, but we weren’t successful. I’ve adjusted to being a great uncle to all the children in my life.”

“I do have a niece and nephew through my older brother. We’re not a very prolific family.”

Wanting to see the light reappear in her eyes, I say, “I’m sure you spoil them rotten.”

A small smile plays around her kissable lips. “I may be their favorite auntie.”

The music resumes, and we get caught up in the jazz spell. When I drop her off at her home, we share quite a few more passionate kisses in the car. I’m not ready to take this next step, despite the fact she invited me in for a “nightcap.”

Walking her to her door, I say, “I had a great time tonight, Ellen.”

“Me, too.” She gets to her tiptoes and kisses me again. “Sure I can’t persuade you to change your mind?”

I shake my head, letting my brain rule my body’s desire. “Not tonight.”

I return to my house and, after a very cold shower, ponder all she told me about her childhood. And not being able to have kids.

## CHAPTER 12



**H**ole in One's first note sounds, and the audience shows their appreciation with loud yells and clapping. Ellen, Steve and the rest of the band inhale their exuberance, and exhale even better music.

Brax turns to me. "They're improving greatly, especially with Ellen singing lead."

I nod. "Yeah, and Kurt's harmony is spot on."

"Amy's mixing really makes them pop." He gestures to where Amy's fiddling at the sound board.

Ellen. Amy. Both women are taking up way too much space in my brain lately. Not to mention my heart. And other points south.

"Right?" Brax punches me in the gut. "Earth to Colton."

Rubbing my stomach, I give my best friend a dirty look. "Damn. What was that for?"

"I said," he pauses for dramatic effect. Ever the ham. "I know you've taken them both out on dates."

Trying to redirect this conversation, I gulp my water. "So?"

“So, they’re the first women you’ve gone out with since, Caitrona.” He pauses. “How’s it going?”

I mull over his words and my response. “Good. I’ve been having a great time with both of them.” When he doesn’t say anything, I continue, “I have dates lined up with Ellen tomorrow, and Amy on Wednesday.”

Brax claps my back. “My man.”

I close my eyes. I’ve never been too much of a partier—not like he was back in the day—and the need to decide between the ladies takes hold of my throat. This is it. Two more dates and I’ll know which woman I want to pursue. Yet the thought of ending things with one of them makes me want to hurl.



I pull up to Ellen’s house and put my SUV in park. Instead of taking the convertible tonight, I chose this more staid vehicle. Why? To protect myself from the wild child that’s dying to let loose?

Discarding this image, I hop out of the vehicle and walk to her front door. I run clammy hands down my thighs. Get it under control, Colton. Stand tall. Take charge. You’re steering this ship.

I knock and she appears in the doorway. Wearing a flimsy little bathrobe. “Come on in,” she purrs, motioning for me to enter.

Checking my watch, I say, “I’m not early, am I?”

She shakes her head. “I had to run some errands, so I got into the shower late. Something to drink while I get dressed?”

She holds up a bottle of Moray Whisky.

Instead of focusing on the amber liquid, my imagination runs wild. Mental images of her, stripping off the bathrobe for me, dance in my mind. Complete with perky tits and rounded hips—ready for a man to grab. Damn.

“Colton?”

Shit. “Uh, do you have any beer?”

“I think so.” She opens the fridge and bends over, causing even more vivid pictures to unfold. Standing, she lifts a bottle of Sam Adams. “I also have an orange.”

I clear my throat. “That’s great,” I croak.

She makes my drink in a fancy pilsner and turns to change. Without thought, my hand captures hers and drags her against my body. “Hello kiss?” I rasp.

A bright smile overtakes her face, and she wraps her arms around my shoulders. “I can get on board with your request.”

She rubs her chest against me and, as I watch with rapt intent, she extends her neck and her lips capture mine. While the kiss starts off gentle, it quickly morphs into something carnal. My hands slide down her back to her ass. Cupping her bottom cheeks, I raise the hem of her robe so her bare bottom is exposed.

She lifts her leg around my hip, granting me access to anything and everything. My tongue delves deep into her mouth and I pick her up. She entwines her legs around my waist as I walk over to an oversized upholstered chair. When I sit, she’s straddling me. And her robe has fallen open, showing off her tits.

I can't stop myself from bending down and latching onto one distended nipple, while my fingers pluck at the other. She moans my name, which only serves to encourage me to continue my exploration of her willing body.

A ringing from the area of my own ass causes us to break apart. Ellen leans forward and whispers into my ear, "Don't answer." She ends her directive with a nibble on my earlobe.

I'm about to do as she ordered when my cell rings again. Shit. What if it's an emergency? I retreat and give her an apologetic look. "I have to."

She gets off my lap in a sexy move that has me rethinking the phone call. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

I pull out my phone and Amy's and Zoey's faces greet me. Guilt at what I was doing with Ellen scores my heart. Raking my fingers through my hair, I ensure Ellen's bedroom door is closed. "Hey, Amy."

"Hi, Colton. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time." My eyes stray to Ellen's room, but I answer in the negative. "I'm so sorry, but my babysitter for Zoey had to cancel for Wednesday and I wanted to give you a heads up as soon as possible."

I lick my lips, tasting Ellen. "Oh, well, thanks for letting me know."

"I can line someone up for tomorrow night, if that works?"

The note of hope in her voice is my undoing. "It would be great."

"Wonderful! I'll see you then."

As I disconnect the call, Ellen returns to the room—now dressed in a sheer negligee. I stand to take her all in.

She places her hand on her hip. “Seems like all my clothes need to be washed. I had to put this old rag on.”

I nearly swallow my tongue. “I guess our plans have changed to an evening in.”

She saunters up to me. “Sounds good.”

Her fingers run down my chest, ending on my belt buckle. She pulls, and my legs bring me flush against her willing body. I play with her blonde hair. “Whatever shall we do?”

She gives me a seductive smile, and soon our lips fuse. As our kisses become more passionate, my shirt hits the floor. The straps of her negligee slide down her arms, baring her gorgeous breasts to me.

Instinct takes over, directing us to the couch where I sit and guide her to straddle my lap. My hands cup her curves, eliciting a moan from her luscious lips.

“Colton, yes. Oh yes.”

Her words spur me on to trace her distended nipple with my tongue. Her fingers in my hair tug me closer to her secrets. As I trail open-mouthed kisses down her bare torso, my conscious decides now is the time to raise his annoying head.

I’m no longer an arrogant twenty-something rock star feeling up groupies.

I’m no longer in a competition with my bandmates over who can bag the most chicks in a month.

I’m no longer the guy looking to score his next hookup.

I’ve lived and loved and lost.

I can’t forget about my date tomorrow with Amy. Before I take this step with either of these amazing women, I need to be

sure who's the right lady for me. With reluctance, I extricate myself from her embrace and call for delivery.

Twenty-four hours later, I knock on Amy's door. Zoey yanks it open, her gap-toothed grin taking over her whole face. "Mr. Colton!" She wraps me in a big hug, then "drags" me into the house.

Amy appears in the kitchen, standing next to Maya. I do a double-take at seeing our waitress from the restaurant in Amy's home—but why not? They're cousins. Amy holds up a cup. "Juice?"

"Sure!" Zoey abandons me for the drink, and Amy takes her place at my side.

"Smooth move, Momma," I whisper.

"Gotta be sneaky around here," she replies. In a louder voice, Amy says, "See you two later. Maya's in charge."

Zoey takes a pause away from her cup. "Okay, Mommy!"

Knowing we need to leave while the getting's good, I open the door. "After you."

I escort her to my F250 four-door truck. When she's buckled her seatbelt, she says, "Once again, I'm sorry about the babysitter mix-up. Were you able to make plans for tonight, or do you want to go back to the Adonis?"

"While your family's restaurant rocks, I was thinking about something a little more ... intimate. How about takeout on my patio? Or, we can hit up the brand-new Irish place on the Miracle Mile."

She sucks in her breath. While I wait for her to pick her poison, so to speak, I wonder if I was too forward. With Ellen



I have no doubt which one she'd choose. With Amy, things are slightly less determined.

Large blue eyes hold my gaze. "I would love to relax in your backyard, if that's okay with you."

I reach over and clasp her hand. "Perfectly." Then I pull up GrubHub and place an order.

In my driveway, I put the truck into park. And it hits me. This is the first time I'm bringing a woman—not Caitrona—into my space. Did I make a mistake? I sneak a peek at Amy, who's staring at her hands. Are we both ready for this step?

"Your home has beautiful curb appeal. The lighting is to die for."

Just like that, all my fears about tonight disappear. I haul myself out of the truck and help her down to the ground. Holding hands, we stroll up the path and into my house. Grabbing a bottle of wine and two glasses, I show her to the patio, where we sit in my outdoor living room.

"It's absolutely breathtaking out here. Your pool and grounds are to die for, but I can tell you Zoey would never leave your fire pit." She points across the way.

"It was a favorite of Caitrona's," I admit.

She nods. "I understand. Ron was in charge of all the landscaping we had, but it's nothing like yours."

I lean forward. "Can I tell you a secret?"

She inclines her body so we're inches apart. "Of course."

"I am more of a music room sort of guy. I do enjoy sitting out here, though, with some wine on clear nights like this one. But that's the extent of my landscaping knowledge."

She holds up her filled wine glass. “Makes two of us! Give me a sound board and I’m lost for hours. But please don’t make me responsible for the life of anything other than Zoey.”

I clink her glass. “To black thumbs!”

We enjoy the takeout and our beverages, never once having a lull in conversation. Moving by the pool and sharing one chaise lounge, she settles into my body. She fits perfectly against me, and I run my hands up and down her arms. We kiss and talk and laugh for what feels like hours.

After some passionate kissing, we rest in each other’s embrace. “What was Caitrona’s best quality?”

I ponder my response for a couple of seconds. “Her laugh. It was always so free.” Her lips cover mine. “How about Ron’s?”

She immediately responds. “How he used to throw Zoey up in the air when she was a toddler.” I kiss her.

“How about his worst trait?”

She bites her lip. “He snored really loudly.”

I chuckle. “I promise I don’t snore.” What am I saying? I quickly rush to add, “For Caitrona, she couldn’t carry a tune if her life depended on it.”

Instead of kissing me, she burrows into my body. “I still miss him. It took me a long time, but I’m ready to share my life’s journey with someone again.”

I bring my forehead to hers. “Ditto.”

She lifts her face, and I kiss her, pulling her closer to my hardening body. Our tongues explore each other’s mouths and I trail my hands over her torso, ending at the bottom of her shirt. With a nod, I silently ask for permission, which she

grants with a blink. I pull up and toss the material onto the table. She reciprocates, and my shirt lands next to hers.

Her body feels so good on mine. I run my fingers over the cups of her lacey bra, dipping inside. She hisses when I stroke her nipple. Pulling her breasts upward, I free them and kiss each rosy peak. Her fingers land in my hair, and she tugs.

My hands reach around to the fastening of her bra when a phone alarm goes off. In my arms, Amy mutters, “Shit.”

“What’s the alarm for?”

She taps on her phone, dismissing the sound. “My reminder it’s time for me to get home to Zoey.”

My body deflates. Amy’s a single mom and has responsibilities. Namely, one very adorable daughter. I blow out my breath. “We can’t impose on Maya.”

I rub my hands together and Amy watches as I fix her bra over her breasts. Giving her nipples an extra tweak before abandoning them.

Did these two dates change anything for me?

## CHAPTER 13



**I** pull the blanket under my armpits.

Push it down.

Turn over.

Smack my pillow.

Check the clock—it displays three o'clock.

Crap.

I sit up and rest against the padded headboard. The darkness from outside stoking my inner turmoil. Images of Amy and Ellen dance through my mind's eye.

“What should I do, Caitrona?”

Silence.

I inhale deeply. It's time. It's probably beyond time, truth be told. I close my eyes and let my mind drift. Past our dates and the fooling around and the laughter. To the deeper truths we shared with each other. Well, really, that was all Amy.

My legs straighten. I'm not being fair—Ellen also gave me her secrets, like her love for jazz. Yes, Amy allowed me in on her pain—pain I can identify with all too well. However, Ellen, like me, doesn't have kids, nor can she. I understand her situation very well too.

Ok, I'm getting absolutely nowhere in making up my mind. All I know, for sure, is it's time to decide.

Amy.

Ellen.

Ellen.

Amy.

I collapse back into my bed.

Get a grip, Colton. What would Caitrona tell me to do? Her sultry voice reaches my ears. "Let your heart choose."

"My heart chooses you," I say into the empty room.

My stomach rebels as I realize my words are not entirely true. Not anymore. A cold sweat covers my forehead.

I shove the blankets off my nude body and stride over to the dresser, where our framed wedding photo sits. My index finger traces her gorgeous face. "I will always love you," I murmur. "But there's room in my heart to add another." I kiss her two-dimensional lips and return the frame to its place.

One woman's image takes shape in my mind's eye.

Even though it's barely three thirty, I hop into the shower. When you decide who you want to spend the rest of your life with, the time to start it ticks loudly. Spritzing cologne on my upper pecs, I grab a shirt out of my closet and smooth it over my torso.

I stand stock still before Caitrona's jewelry box. With only a brief hesitation, I reach out and pick up the bracelet she gave me. It hovers in my fingers for a long moment before I replace it.

I have to have a clear conscience to complete the task ahead. I need to tell one fantastic lady we're through, while offering my battle-scarred heart to another. Before all that, I have to make a pit stop.

I pull into Brax's driveway and turn the Camaro off. Whenever I've needed him, he's always been there for me. Ringing the doorbell, I stand on his front stoop bouncing from one foot to the other as the sun rises behind me.

The light switches on, nearly blinding me. The door opens, and Brax ties his bathrobe around his trim middle. "Colton?"

Not waiting for an invitation, I push past him. "I need your help."

His sleepy eyes widen. "Come in," he says with irony as he ushers me into the kitchen. His fingers work the coffee maker.

"You know I've been dating both Amy and Ellen, right?"

He nods and hands me a coffee.

"I made a decision."



“I was surprised you called so early today.”

My voice deepens. "Thanks for meeting me here. I wanted to talk with you." I needed neutral territory. The waitress puts down two glasses of water, pours our coffees, and takes our breakfast orders.

Across from me, her eyebrows raise. "What's up?"

I stir milk into my third coffee of the day. "I've had a super time with you, Ellen. It's been great getting to know you."

She smiles. “Me, too. It’s been awesome.”

“Going to hear jazz with you is a memory I’ll always cherish.”

The efficient waitress returns with our breakfast plates. Ellen pours syrup over her French toast, while I nibble at my omelet—which tastes like sawdust to me at this moment. Placing my fork onto the full plate, I continue, “I want to be honest with you. I think you’re dynamite on stage and make an excellent addition to Hole in One. I honestly believe the band’s going to go all the way.”

She takes another bite of her breakfast. “Thanks. That means a lot, coming from you.”

I need to rip off the Band-Aid. What we have is fun and musical and sexy, but I don’t feel the same deep connection with her. I owe her this much. “Although I’ve enjoyed getting to know you, I need to stop dating you.” *Man up*. “I met someone else, and ...”

Her fork clatters to the floor. “Oh.”

I wait for her to continue, but she remains silent. My hand covers hers, but she removes it. Words spill from my lips. “I’m sorry. I know this is unexpected.”

Her voice is tight. “You can say that again.”

No, thank you. “Ellen—”

She spits out, “Who? What’s her name?”

I’m not about to out Amy, especially before I have a chance to talk with her. I try a different tact. “You’re a beautiful and talented woman—”

“Just not one you want to have a relationship with. What am I? Good enough for a roll in the sack, but nothing more?”

Her words are like a gut punch. And untrue. “No, it’s not like—”

“I hope you mean all your support for the band.”

“I did.” I rub my nose, and correct, “I do. Hunte still wants to mentor Hole in One.”

“Fine. Let the other members of Hunte give their feedback. You can keep yours to yourself.” She pushes away from the table.

I get to my feet. “Ellen.”

The look she gives me is filled with hurt, but her tone is fueled by anger. “Save it.” She picks up a glass of water and before I can move a muscle, it drips down my cheeks and off my chin. She huffs out of the restaurant.

Taking note of the rest of the diners staring at me, I slink down into my seat and dry my face with a napkin. I toss a fifty onto the table and enter the parking lot. Ellen’s nowhere to be seen.

“That went well,” I say to no one. Within moments, my Jaguar moves toward home.

After my second shower of the day, and a check in with Brax, I hit the button for Amy on my cell. She answers on the third ring. “Hi, Colton. Didn’t expect to hear from you today.”

Her cheerful voice fills me with hope. Namely, hope she’ll pick me. I replay Brax’s advice and dive into the deep end. “I was wondering if I could stop by?”

“Sure thing. Zoey gets out of school at three, and I’m here all by myself.”

“Perfect. I’ll be right over.”



I spend the drive to her house in my Thunderbird getting my thoughts in order. I need to come clean about Ellen. More importantly, I have to make her understand I'm ready for a commitment. To her. I pray she picks me, too.

I grab the bouquet of wildflowers I bought at a local florist, and approach Amy's front door. After a brief hesitation, I ring the bell, which she answers with a smile. She gives me a welcome kiss. "Oh, wow. Thanks for these."

While she gets a vase, I sit at her dinette, overlooking her backyard. With landscaping created by Ron. She hands me yet another cup of coffee, which she doctored to my preference without even asking. "It looks like you want to talk."

"I do." I blow on the hot drink as she takes a seat across from me.

"I have something I need to share." Brax's words ring in my ears—tell her about Ellen first. Here goes. "While we've been dating—which I've adored so much—I was also seeing someone else."

Her smile wavers. "Oh." Her chin tilts upward. "I understand."

"No, you don't." I want to reach out to her but keep my hands clasped around my mug. "I had fun getting to know both of you. But ... I choose you." My body tenses.

Her whisper reaches my ears. "Me?"

I nod. "Yes. I already ended things with her, and I want to date you exclusively, Amy." I suck in air. "Only if you want me."

She tucks her pixie cut behind her ear. "Colton, this is all so new to me. I haven't dated anyone in over a decade, since Ron..."

“Been twice that long for me. Since Caitrona,” I point out.

She licks her lips. “I’m so overwhelmed. You’ve been taking up so much of my headspace, it’s not funny. When I look at the sofa, I see you sitting there. Plus, Zoey rambles on and on about you all the time.”

“She’s a wonderful little girl.” I want to hold this woman tight, but need to let her say her piece. I also have to give up Ellen’s identity.

Amy traces the rim of her mug. “I want the same thing. With you, Colton.”

At her words, all my restraint vanishes. I pop out of my seat and land on my knees next to her. Grabbing her hands, I proceed with my last confession. “You know the other woman I was dating. It’s Ellen, the lead singer of Hole in One. We only had a few dates, but I broke it off this morning without revealing your identity. I’m ready to commit to you now. A thousand percent.”

Under mine, her hands stiffen. “Ellen?” I squeeze and she continues, “She’s beautiful. And talented.”

“Yes, she is. And so are you. However, you’re the one who has my heart.”

Her blue eyes lock with my browns. “And you have mine.”

The dam breaks and I wrap her in my arms, kissing every available square inch of her exposed flesh. I rise to my feet and pick her up, bringing her over to the sofa.

“You imagined me here?” I kiss her lips again.

“I did.” She fingers my t-shirt. “But nothing can compare with the reality.”

She's right. We'll figure out a way to deal with Ellen. We'll navigate the storms ahead with Zoey. Share the good times and bad, because what we have is real. Caitrona is in my past and forever will live in my heart. As will Ron in hers.

This living, breathing woman in my arms, Amy Caras, is the center of my new world.

And I'm all hers.



**H**ave you fallen in love with Braxton and his family? Want MORE? Here's a second chance to grab all of the extra scenes for these books. [Check out the bonus epilogues for all 4 full-length books ~ OUT OF THE RED, OUT OF THE SHADOW, OUT OF THE GOLD, and OUT OF THE BLUE here.](#) I promise you won't be sorry!

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## DEAR FABULOUS READER

Thank you so much for reading OUT OF THE BOX: A Rockstar and Celebrity Contemporary Romance Collection!

In this box set, you got to meet a wild Braxton Hunte in the mid-90s ~ being tamed by his tour accountant Sara Anderson! The rest of the books follow Brax's children ... oh, what a web to untangle! Of course, Brax's BFF Colton needed his own bonus novella to round out the Hunte picture!

As usual, these books have either played a role in, or borrowed from, my own life ~

- My muse for Braxton Hunte was none other than Jon BonJovi, a local boy made good! He grew up about 30 minutes away from me, a few years older than me. I actually went to Seaside and was *thisclose* to him when he and his band were doing a shoot for their album of the same name!
- When I wrote King's story, I had recently purchased a new house. I based a lot of the real estate tricks on my experience!
- OUT OF THE GOLD being set on the Amalfi Coast came about because Big Mike and I took our 20th anniversary trip there. It's a totally gorgeous part of

the country! I hope I described it well enough to make you want to visit!

- As for Trent and Cordelia, well, I totally made up their story! Except for their wedding ... I based the setting on the Pleasantdale Chateau in West Orange. It's a gorgeous old mansion that's been the site of several films, and the perfect venue for the Washington-Huntes to say "I do."
- Out of the Void didn't really come from my warped brain. I wrote a chapter and asked the members of Arell's Angels to direct the next chapter. I hope you enjoyed this collaborative story about Colton Frontage finding love again!

Please stay in touch! [Subscribe to my newsletter](#) or [join Arell's Angels](#), my reader group on Facebook ~ or both!! Also, if you have any questions, feel free to email me at [Arell@ArellRivers.com](mailto:Arell@ArellRivers.com). I love chatting with readers!

Thanks for devoting your precious time to OUT OF THE BOX: A Rockstar and Celebrity Contemporary Romance Collection. I hope got sucked into the Hunte's world as much as I did!

All my love,

Arell

# GRATITUDE

OUT OF THE BOX: A Rockstar and Celebrity Contemporary Romance Collection couldn't have happened without so many awesome people!

My husband, Big Mike, roots for me to succeed no matter what. And my Mom, who doesn't get what I write but supports me nonetheless. I'm so blessed to have them in my life!

Big kisses to all of the amazing people who worked with me throughout the years in polishing my words for you. From editors to proofreaders to cover designers and formatters, I'm not going to name them here ~ they're listed in the Copyright section ~ but suffice it to say each one of them left an indelible mark on me!

Huge thanks to my ARC Team!! I love your enthusiasm for the words I write. My heart is so full!!!

Arell's Angels, my Facebook reader's group, is the *best place ever*. Your support gets me by on so many days ~ I just hope my daily posts of hotties and lots of fun shenanigans bring a smile to your faces!

To all of my alphas, betas, author friends, KBR tribe, and all the wonderful people in my online and real life, YOU ROCK!! You're the reason I'm able to spin tales about fame, passion, and thrills that ignite!

And to everyone who picks up this box set, *I hope Braxton and his family make you cheer, cry, smile, and believe in love*. If you enjoyed OUT OF THE BOX: A Rockstar and Celebrity

Contemporary Romance Collection, please recommend it to your friends and write a review where you purchased it.

Blessings,

Arell

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For as long as Arell Rivers can remember, she has been lost in a book. During her senior year in college, she picked up a romance novel ... and instantly was hooked!

Arell started writing her first book because the characters were screaming at her to do so. The story came out in her dreams and attacked her in the shower, so she took to the computer to shut them up. But they kept talking.

Born and raised in New Jersey, Arell has what some may call a “checkered past.” Prior to discovering her passion for writing romance, she practiced law, was a wedding and event planner and even dabbled in marketing. Arell lives with two adorable cats and a very supportive husband who doesn’t care that the bed isn’t made or dinner isn’t on the table. When not in her writing cave, Arell is found cooking in the InstantPot, working out with Shaun T, or hitting the beach.





## ALSO BY ARELL RIVERS

### *The Hunte Family Series*

*An enemies-to-lovers series about the dynasty created by rocker Braxon Hunte*

Book #1: [Out of the Red](#) (Brax and Sara, set in the mid 90s)

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Book #5: [Out of the Box](#) (box set of books 1-4 plus a bonus novella)

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*A second chances series about rock star Cole Manchester, his publicist Rose Morgan, and their friends*

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Book #3: [To Have and to Hold](#) (Cole and Rose trilogy, book 3)

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HOLD ME

## A ROCK STAR BOX SET



## SNEAK PEEK

*Need more rockers in your life? Want to experience a second chance rockstar romance with Cole Manchester and his publicist Rose Morgan? Check out the box set in The Hold Series!*

*Flip the page to enjoy the prologue of HOLD ON, a prequel novella about rock star Cole Manchester ~ Book #1 in HOLD ME, a Rock Star Box Set!*

## HOLD ON, PROLOGUE



I push back from the table, placing my hands on my distended stomach. “Mom, I’m gonna miss these meatballs.”

She smiles at my compliment, while her sister, Aunt Doreen, replies, “Grandma’s recipe never fails.”

Seated around my parents’ Sunday dinner table are most of the important people in my life—my small family of four plus my aunt and uncle, and my cousins. They have always supported my dream, and now that dream is finally becoming a reality.

My younger brother, sitting in his regular spot beside me, jumps into the conversation. “So, this Noah guy went backstage to a bar you were playing in New York City, and said Platinum Records is taking pity on you?”

Something about Jayson’s taunt makes me feel like I’m back in middle school, not the twenty-five-year-old man that I am. A man with a newly inked contract from *the* Platinum Records. I reach over and shove his shoulder. He turns to me, wielding a butter knife.

Mom’s stern voice freezes our antics in their tracks. “Boys.”

We both say, “Sorry, Mom,” in unison. This is something we have down to an art. The knife clatters to Jayson’s plate.

Shaking her head at her supposedly adult children—a gesture undermined by her grin—she says, “Help me clear the table.”

My brother and I collect the serving platters and carry them into the kitchen. I join Mom at the sink to rinse the dishes and load the dishwasher, and Jayson returns to the dining room for dirty dishes. We automatically revert to our old Sunday routine whenever Jayson and I are home.

After Mom and I finish loading, Aunt Doreen enters the kitchen and opens the fridge. “To celebrate your new career milestone, I made a red velvet cake for dessert.”

My mouth waters. How weird to suddenly long for something I’ve taken for granted all my life, something I’m about to enjoy with my family. Aunt Doreen is an expert baker, and her cakes are one of the many things I’m going to miss about home.

“Thanks. You know it’s my favorite.” While she pulls out a large, rectangular cake box, Mom removes plates from the china cabinet and I head over to the coffee maker. I know this choreography by heart, but it strikes me that I’ll have to learn a completely new dance now that I’m moving to Los Angeles.

Mom piles forks on top of the stack of plates. “So, you’re sure Dan has room for you in his apartment? I don’t want it to damage your friendship.”

I pour the water into the back of the machine. “Mom, we lived together for four years in college. It’s going to be fine. Besides, his roommate moved out a couple of months ago, so the timing’s perfect. With any luck, I’ll be going out on tour

soon, and he'll get the best of both worlds—I'll pay my share of the rent and he'll have the place all to himself."

Jayson, who's been bustling in and out between the dining room and the kitchen pauses to make a face at me.

"Do you know when you're going to be on tour?" Aunt Doreen asks with a smile. "Your uncle and I will want to buy tickets for as many shows as we can."

Ignoring my brother, I return her grin. "I'm not sure what's going to happen just yet, but I hope to cut an album and get out on tour sooner rather than later. And no buying tickets—you'll have free tickets to any concert you want to attend."

"The perks of having a nephew who's a rock star."

"That's the plan." Opening the cabinet with the coffee, I continue, "And I'm going to win a Grammy."

"It's good you're keeping your goals modest," she teases.

Mom taps her sister's shoulder. "Hey, Cole can do anything he sets his mind to." She smiles at me. "I have faith in you, sweetheart."

"Thanks, Mom." I kiss her cheek and give my aunt a dirty look, earning a throaty chuckle from her. Returning to my dessert duties, I add the coffee to the machine and turn it to brew.

Dad enters the kitchen. "The kids are getting restless out there, Jules. They know there's red velvet cake for dessert." He swats Mom on the butt, causing her to giggle.

"We'll be right there," she replies. The two share an intimate look, then he picks up the pints of ice cream Jayson had left on the counter and disappears into the dining room.



Theirs is a one-of-a-kind love. Something I admire and cherish. Something for which I'm definitely *not* in the market.

Aunt Doreen takes a cake knife from the drawer, clears her throat and the two sisters squint at each other. My body tenses. This body language usually precedes some unanticipated concession by me. Busying myself by returning the coffee tin to the cabinet, I turn to escape the kitchen before...

“Cole.”

*Shit.* Not fast enough. “Yes, Mom.”

Mom starts, “We’ve been talking.”

I open my mouth, but Aunt Doreen jumps in before I can get anything out. “We know you’re a grown man now, and you’re starting a high-profile career.”

“But I don’t want my son to have a bad-boy reputation,” Mom blurts out. She cups my cheek. “I didn’t raise you to be wild.”

Her sister moves in for the kill, placing her hand on my forearm for a brief moment. “Please be careful. Don’t get caught up in the lifestyle you’ll be offered.”

Mom drops her hand. “Promise me you won’t become one of those out-of-control stars we hear about on the news.”

My heart races. I need a cigarette. I’m flanked by two of the strongest women I’ve ever known, and their concern is both touching and intrusive. But it’s born from love. I glance from one pair of green eyes to the next and swallow.

Mom presses. “Promise me.”

I’m not giving up the perks of my soon-to-be-lifestyle—women and parties being at the top of the list. I’ve *earned* this.

However, the set of their jaws tells me I'm not getting out of this kitchen without giving them my word.

“Promise,” she prods.

I gauge the distance to the dining room. *Too far*. Mom crosses her arms, and Aunt Doreen follows suit.

Rubbing my hands up and down my legs, I mumble, “Okay, fine, I promise. I won't get a bad rep.”

Dazzling smiles greet my capitulation. They pick up the dessert and dishes and leave me in the kitchen wondering how the hell I'm going to both honor *and* get around my vow.



**W**ant to know more about this rockstar on the verge!  
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