

FAULKNER
ROYAL
LEGACY



UNTOUCHABLE

Face

SELENA



Untouchable Face

An Iron Thorns Novel

Selena

Untouchable Face

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Unabridged First Edition

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For Crystal.

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one

Valentina Rose

“This is it, ladies,” Marisol says, giving a shimmy of excitement as the band ahead of us leaves the stage. “Let’s show the boys how it’s done!”

DeeDee folds her hands under her pierced chin like she’s praying and rolls her eyes heavenward, toward her spiky, silver hair. “Dear Buddha, Muhammed, Shiva, Jehovah, and Crimson Franco, please let us kick all the ass today.”

“And land a record deal with Iron Thorns’s new label,” I add, excitement thrumming inside me.

“All in, hookers!” Shana yells, putting a hand in the center of our circle like we’re her basketball team from high school instead of a band taking our shot at Battle of the Bands.

We all reach in though. I stack my hand on the lighter brown one of Marisol, my best friend since I joined the Screaming Divas in high school, and Dee places her pale hand on top.

“Lord God, Great Goddess, Baby Jesus, Zeus, Odin, Satan, all the

pagan gods, plus whoever Mormons pray to..." she continues muttering under her breath.

"Let's fucking rock and roll!" Shana yells, then pumps her hand down and up for us to break the circle. She thrusts her fist in the air and jogs to the stairs, leading the charge onto the stage where we'll perform three songs and try to impress the rock legends who are sponsoring the event. One band will win a contract with the new label they started for unsigned bands like ours.

It feels vintage and cool to do it this way in the digital age. Chills race over my skin as I take my place at the keyboard, positioning my long fingers on the black and white keys. My heartbeat is thundering in my ears.

Though we have a small following on *YouTube* and a slightly bigger one on *The Tea*, we haven't broken out yet. Performing in front of a real rock band is an opportunity we couldn't pass up. I know we're ready, but nerves still twist and tangle inside my belly as I look out over the crowd gathered in the June evening, plastic cups of overpriced, warm beer clutched in their fists.

I wish my boyfriend could have come so there would be a familiar face in the crowd, but he didn't want to take off work.

"One—two—three," Shana yells, counting us in from behind the drum set.

DeeDee lays down the bassline, and Marisol layers in a guitar riff before grabbing the mic, swinging her black braid over her shoulder, and

belting out the lyrics. My fingers move over the keys automatically, muscle memory taking over after the months of practicing to perfect the song. My nerves settle as the music flows through me. I let my eyes drift over the crowd again. A magnet seems to draw my gaze, and I lift my eyes to a small, enclosed platform at the back of the crowd. My gaze moves over thickly muscled, inked arms, broad shoulders, and a chin covered with stubble. Suddenly, I'm staring straight into the warm, chocolate eyes of Adrian Hart.

A jolt of electricity winds through my body when our gazes lock. He doesn't look away. I don't look away. Time stops, and there's just him and me, suspended on the last rays of early summer sun. My fingers caress the keys, but I don't hear the music anymore. All I hear is my heart hammering to some new rhythm it's never played before.

Electricity shimmers from the crown of my head, down my back, all the way to the soles of my feet, vibrating from the soundwaves coursing over the stage. I close my eyes, severing the connection. The last thing I need is to get distracted by the Iron Thorns drummer and screw up. A chance like this doesn't come along often. Even if nothing comes of it, how many people can say they played in front of the biggest rock band in the world?

And if something *does* come of it...

I picture the life that comes after signing with the new label. A contract for an album. If it does well, maybe a tour. If a US tour does well, a

chance to travel and see the world with my three besties, maybe brush up on my Italian and Spanish. Other labels will come calling, and we could sign on with a huge label like Nyso Records, or better yet, put this one on the map.

We wind up the first song, and chills run along my arms as excitement grows into a burning ember in my chest. We're killing it. We sound amazing. I open my eyes and shoot Marisol a quick smile. She's grinning ear to ear.

Shana throws her black-and-green hair forward and back like she's in a metal band, bouncing on her stool as we transition into our next song. I glance at the raised box where the Iron Thorns members are watching. Adrian Hart is standing at the side of the black, iron cage, his fingers curled around the railing, his eyes still locked on me. Heat shimmers inside me, and I flash him a quick smile, the connection between us sizzling hot.

I almost miss my first note, so I tear my eyes away, my heart hammering, and get lost in the music. My fingers fly over the keys, and I forget all about him and the crowd and the sultry summer evening. We segue into the next song, and the crowd roars their approval. This is it. The last song. Our last chance.

I dare to open my eyes, peeking at the band we're here to impress. My heart falls when I see only Crimson Franco and his son, the band's sunglass-wearing bassist, in the box.

Adrian Hart didn't even stay to see us finish our set.

two

Adrian Hart

I'm frozen solid for two whole songs, unable to tear my eyes from the fucking goddess on the stage. I can't look away, can't breathe, can't even remember what it means to live without seeing her face. I know from the moment our eyes lock that I can't live another moment without her. I've never spoken a word to her, don't know her name, don't even know who she is, but I know she's mine.

I'm hers, and I'll never be anything else.

She closes her eyes and gets lost in the music, and the spell she put me under is loosened enough for me to remember I have feet. Suddenly I know that their only purpose is to bring me closer to her, that my body was made entirely as a vehicle to bring my soul closer to hers.

My feet carry me down the iron stairs. Ignoring Crimson's warning call from above, I step through the gate that surrounds the lifted box and keeps the rest of the crowd from climbing the metal stairs.

"Whoa, what are you doing?" grumbles Kevin, one of our

bodyguards. He tries to grab me, but I shrug him off and step into the crowd.

“Oh my god, it’s Adrian Hart,” squeals a girl who must have a face, and a body, and clothes on that body. I don’t know. All I know is that I have to get to the stage, to the woman who claimed my heart with a single look, a woman with wild, untamable curls and warm light brown skin and dark eyes that captured me in an instant.

“Dude, can I get a selfie?” asks a guy with long hair and a beard, leaning in and snapping a picture without waiting for my reply. The crowd surges toward me, crushing me in a gridlock of bodies. It’s all I can do not to punch every single jackass keeping me from the deity who just changed my entire life with one glance.

“Out of my way,” I growl, trying to shove through. I ignore the cries of protest and anger, ignore the nagging thought that my manager and our publicist is going to give me hell for this. As long as I don’t punch anyone, they can’t file assault charges, though. And even if they did, I wouldn’t care. I’d kill every motherfucker between me and the girl if I had to. They don’t deserve to see her, to breathe the same air as her, if they can’t see the importance of this moment.

If they could, they would part like the Red Sea and let me through, let me bow at the feet of my goddess and worship her as she was meant to be worshipped.

The last chord reverberates through the evening, and the crowd claps and whistles.

Fuck!

The show is over.

I didn't hear a single note of their songs except for the pure magic that flowed from her beautiful fingers.

Without the band to distract them, the crowd becomes even more impassable. I'm swarmed, trapped, and all I can do is watch in fury and anguish as the band leaves the stage while I'm still fifty feet away, locked in a mob of bodies that threatens to crush us all to death.

I can't even shove through when I try. And then the next band is playing, and finally a couple members of security break through the crowd, giving me room to breathe.

"Where'd the last band go?" I demand of the nearest one, a tattooed woman with a nose ring and a mouthful of gum.

"The Screaming Divas?" she asks, holding out her arms to keep the crowd back.

"Yes," I snap, resisting the urge to grab her and shake the answers out of her.

"They left a few songs ago," she says, like it's not the most important information she's ever been asked to give.

I growl in disgust and stomp away, a couple others hired as security for the event pushing the crowd back to let me through. Suddenly Kevin and Phil, my main guy, arrive and wrestle me through, blocking the fans from touching me as we make it out. I turn to go back, but they shove me forward, marching me out the gate toward the bus waiting in the lot.

“Have you lost your goddamn mind?” Phil demands, hurrying me onto the bus. “Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to walk into a crowd like that?”

“There was a woman,” I say, hearing how insufficient my words are. They can’t begin to convey what just happened. It wasn’t just a woman. It was *my* woman. She may not know it yet, but she will. I won’t stop until I find her and make sure she knows that she’s mine and always will be.

three

Valentina Rose

“All set,” I say, slamming the back door of the dusty van, closing our instruments in.

“See y’all tomorrow,” DeeDee says, waving and hopping up into the seat. It’s always funny to see our tiny punk rock pixie in the rattling old vehicle we’ve dubbed the “maxi van” because it sure isn’t mini.

“Should we have practice?” Marisol asks, digging in the pocket of the tight, ripped black jeans that stretch over her ample hips. She pulls out a lighter and tucks a cigarette between her lips. Silence hangs over the parking lot as she lights up, the flicker of light turning her light brown skin gold.

“Well, if we’re having a band meeting right here...” DeeDee hops down from the van and joins us.

“We should stay in practice in case we fuckin’ won,” Shana says, smacking a fist into her palm for emphasis.

“Yeah, but if we didn’t...” I say, my heart squeezing. We’ve been practicing and getting ready for this day for so long, and now it’s over. It’s

not like graduation. After high school, there's college. After college, there's... This.

Now that I'm coming down from the high of being on stage, my heart feels deflated, and doubts creep into the space that was filled with nerves and elation before.

"Then we'll keep playing," Shana says. "Fuck if this is our only shot."

"Isn't it, though?" DeeDee asks, puffing on her vape.

"Yeah," I say. "It kinda was. Wasn't it?"

"Let's not get discouraged yet," Marisol says, pulling her braid forward over her shoulder. "We kicked ass, and they have a few days to deliberate. Until then, let's just rest up."

"After all, we're going to be on tour soon," Shana says, grinning at us and tugging on the end of the green hairpiece she has clipped into her dark locks. "Hello, New Fuckin' York!"

"Hello, *world*," I say, letting her excitement buoy my spirits again. "Or, more accurately, *ciao*. Imagine. Pizza in Italy. Sushi in Tokyo..."

DeeDee spins in a circle, throwing her arms out. "That's right, fuckers!" she hollers. "Get ready to meet the Screaming Divas!"

"I'm not sure the world's ready for you," I joke.

"So, no practice until the results are in?" Shana asks.

"Sounds good," I say, though I know I'll be going crazy waiting for

the results. A practice might be a good distraction, especially since I'm suspended in an odd limbo this summer.

"And hey, even if we don't win, we've still got our YouTube channel," DeeDee reminds us.

"Yeah," I agree. "It's not like Iron Thorns is the reason we play music."

Despite my words, I know it will feel hollow to go back to playing after all this time preparing for the showcase. To go back to being just four girls playing music for the love of it. That's what we are, but for a moment, it feels possible that we can be more. That we can really do this. Excitement crackles up my arms at the thought. Maybe we'll even go on tour with the band, and I'll see Adrian Hart up close this time, instead of across the crowd.

A twinge of guilt goes through me at the thought. I have a boyfriend.

Still, our arrangement is temporary, and we both know it. We dated in high school, and it didn't survive us going to different schools for college. We ran into each other shortly after I came home for the summer, the spark was still there, and we ended up rekindling things. We don't talk about the future. He's going away to law school in the fall, and I'm going... Somewhere.

A warm shiver goes through me at the memory of the connection I felt when my eyes met Adrian's.

“I gotta run,” Marisol says, stubbing out her cigarette butt on the sole of her combat boot. “I got work in the morning.”

“Alright then,” I say, giving her a quick hug before I head for my Ducati as they split off and head for their cars. I throw my leg over and slide onto the seat, buckling my helmet and waving to DeeDee, who blows a cloud of strawberry vapors out the window. “Bye!” she yells.

I wave back as the van clanks out of the lot and lumbers onto the road. I start up the bike and zip out of the lot, heading for the highway back to Faulkner, where my family lives on a big estate that’s been passed down for generations. I could have gotten an apartment in town, but my parents wanted me home for one more summer, and it didn’t really make sense to rent a place when I’m not sure where I’ll be in a few months.

As I rocket through the night, the tires eating up the interstate between Little Rock and Faulkner, I let the questions that have plagued me for the past year creep back in.

If I could do anything I wanted with my life, I’d play music—at least for a while. But that’s not a permanent career, and not one that happens the way normal jobs do. There are no guarantees, and I don’t want to be still playing in Marisol’s garage in twenty years, still waiting to be discovered. Eventually, you have to make it or walk away.

And then what?

That's the big question.

I just finished an undergraduate degree, but I haven't applied for grad school. My parents are supportive, and money's not a concern. Still, I need to decide what happens if I can't follow my dream. I've run out of time. That's why tonight was so important, why it feels like our one shot even if technically, it wasn't.

If I'm not going to make a career of this, I need to get a job or go to grad school to study whatever I want to do with the rest of my life. The problem is, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life, and it's so much more complicated than just going to grad school and using my parents' connections to get hired at an advertising agency. There's no grad school for rock stars.

I pull into my parents' garage and park the bike next to my Porsche 911. This will always be home, but it's the first year where it feels like it's not my *house*. It's my parents' house. After four years away at school, it's comforting to come home. But I'm ready to have my own life, my own family and home.

Well, maybe not a family quite yet. If I wanted that, I'd follow Josh to Georgetown and settle down with him.

At least I want my own independent life with a place that's mine, somewhere I can come and go at all hours without worrying anyone, where I

can bring guys home for a date and not have to introduce them to my parents, where they can stay over. I could get a place with one of the girls, take a year off school, and focus on music, but then what? What if, after a year, we're no closer to a record deal than we are now? Will that be enough to show me that my dreams are impossible, that it's time to hang up my hat and be practical?

Will it ever be enough?

I'm no closer to an answer than I have been for the past year when I slide into bed. I check my phone, but Josh hasn't texted to ask how it went. A pebble of disappointment and annoyance burrows under my skin. He knew how important this night was to me.

I decide to be mature and just sent him a text telling him. I'm still waiting for a reply when I fall asleep. The next day, we go to church as a family, and I pray on my decision, hoping God will send me a sign giving me the direction I so badly need.

Afterwards, I'm lounging by the pool when my brother slides open the French doors. "Val," he hisses.

"What's up?" I ask, twisting around in my chair and lowering my sunglasses.

"Adrian Hart is here," he says, his eyes just about popping out of his head.

"What?" I ask, sitting bolt upright.

He slides the door all the way open, and Mom appears with the tattooed rocker I saw from the stage last night. I thought seeing him in the flesh from across a crowd was cool. Now, the guy is standing at my pool in a pair of jeans, a camel-colored tee, and a hat flipped around backwards. A pair of shades covers his eyes and hides his expression. I'm glad I'm also wearing sunglasses, because I can't help but gape in shock.

Mom shows no signs of knowing who the guy is. "She's right out here," she says, leading him to my chaise.

Adrian Hart, drummer for the biggest rock band in the entire freaking world, is at my house. Standing next to my chair, staring at my bikini-clad body.

"Hi," I say, shaking my head to clear it of starstruck notions and grabbing a towel. I wrap it around my body and knot it in front of my chest.

Mom leans down and grips my arm. "I bet he's here about your audition," she hisses in my ear. "I'm so proud of you, baby." She gives me a quick kiss on the cheek before straightening and turning to Adrian, once again all calm and collected.

My heart is hammering in my chest. Like she said, that has to be the reason he's here. What else would bring him to Faulkner, Arkansas?

"Can I get you kids a drink?" Mom asks.

"Thanks, Mom," I say, nodding to let her know I'm fine out here with

him. It's all I can do to keep from whooping with joy that he's here. That must mean we won.

We won!

And Adrian Hart himself came to deliver the good news. I try not to ogle his thick, tattooed arms and broad shoulders, his square jaw dotted with stubble and the scar on his chiseled chin.

Mom mouths, "Good luck," behind his back and then slips back inside. I can see my brother lurking, watching us through the glass door, but Mom pulls it closed to give us a little privacy.

"I—I didn't expect you to make a house call," I say, trying to get my head on straight to talk to a guy who's fucking famous.

"I had to see you," he says, his voice a sexy rumble that makes my stomach swoop. "I couldn't wait another day."

"Okay," I say, a prickle of trepidation starting at the back of my neck. "Though I'm not sure how you know where I live."

"Yeah, you should get that taken care of," he says. "I found your address online, and the gate to your neighborhood was open. You should have more security."

He crosses his arms and stands over me, frowning around at the pool area.

"We have alarms," I say, edging off the far side of the chair. "That's

usually enough to keep the psychos away.”

Maybe not today, though, I think to myself. This guy is beyond intense.

“You should have bodyguards,” he rumbles.

I can’t help but laugh. “Well, I guess when I’m a famous rock star like you, I’ll have them.”

“Who protects you now?”

I raise my brows and give him a look. “I’m perfectly capable of protecting myself.”

“We’ll get you bodyguards,” he says, almost like he’s talking to himself.

“Where’s the rest of your band?” I ask, tightening the knot in my towel. “And... And shouldn’t *my* whole band be here for this?”

He watches my hands, his Adam’s apple moving up and down as he swallows.

“Did we win?” I ask.

“What?” he asks blankly.

“Did the Screaming Divas win the contract?”

“Oh—no,” he says. “Your band sucked.”

“Excuse me?” I ask, shoving up my sunglasses and raising my brows.

He must see my dangerous expression, because he backtracks

immediately. “Sorry, you’ve got me all fucked up. I mean, *you* were amazing. A fucking queen.”

He seizes my hand, and I’m torn between wrenching it from his grip, and fangirling like the preteen who used to write fanfic about his band ten years ago. Adrian Hart is touching me.

But also... Adrian Hart is something else.

His warm, strong hand engulfs mine, sending a rush of heat all the way up my arm and down my spine. It settles into a delicious throb in my lower belly, making me remember how long it’s been since I felt that way. A touch of someone’s hand definitely never made me feel that before.

“Will you marry me?” he demands.

Wrenching my hand away it is.

“Are you crazy?” I ask, my eyes flying wide.

“Crazy for you,” he says, reaching out both hands.

I take a step back. “Okay, this has to be some kind of joke, because there’s no way Adrian Hart is having a mental breakdown and I’m the only one here to fix it.”

He shoves his shades up on top of his head, meeting my eyes with his pleading gaze. “Haven’t you ever seen something and you just... knew?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m doing right now. Seeing you ask a perfect stranger to marry you and knowing you’re having a breakdown.”

He scowls. "I'm not having a breakdown."

"Okay, but what happened to hello? How are you?"

"Fine," he says. "Hello. How are you? Will you marry me?"

"Do you even know my name?"

"Your name is Mrs. Adrian Hart."

"No, it's Valentina Rose," I say slowly, glancing at my phone, which is sitting on the chair a few feet away.

There must be a hotline to call when celebrities go off the deep end.

"Valentina Rose," he says as reverently as if my name were "a three-album deal with Nyso Records."

I glance at the door and see Mom standing inside with DeShaun. I give a quick jerk of my head, signaling her to come out instead of waiting inside, not wanting to interrupt.

She opens the door and sweeps out in the sarong she's wearing over her swimsuit, carrying two glasses of lemonade, already fogged with condensation. "Everything going okay out here?" she asks, handing Adrian a glass.

"Wonderful," he says, flashing her his rock star smile, the one that has groupies lining up for blocks after his shows. "And this looks wonderful too. Thanks, Ms. Rose."

"Of course," Mom says, handing me the second glass with a

questioning look. “So... What’s the big news?”

I cringe, waiting for Adrian to tell her something crazy, like we’ve decided to elope.

“I was just asking Valentina if she’d like to join Iron Thorns on tour,” he says, sounding completely normal and even professional now.

Mom’s eyes widen, and her lips twitch as she tries to keep calm. I know she wants to jump for joy and cheer at the top of her lungs for me, but she stays cool and collected as she smiles at him. “That’s amazing news!” she exclaims. “Her band has been working so hard for this.”

“Unfortunately, we didn’t feel that the Screaming Divas was right for our label,” he says with a regretful smile. “But we’re interested in signing Valentina alone.”

“Alone?” Mom says, faltering. “But... Val’s not a solo act.”

“Not alone,” he says, turning to me. “We want you in the band. You’d be an amazing addition, just the piece we’ve been missing to take the Thorns to the next level.”

I’m not sure how they can go to the next level, since they’re already the top selling band in the world. They’ve reached the peak. There is no next level.

But... I just about swoon at the thought of sharing the stage with a band I’ve idolized for ten years, since they had their first #1 hit. While my

friends were putting up posters of One Direction and Just 5 Guys and Drake, I was pinning Iron Thorns to my wall and dreaming of being the first twelve-year-old Black girl to ever front a chart-topping hard rock band.

“You want me in your band?” I ask, clarifying since I’m confused as hell after his earlier outburst. Was that some kind of test? A psychotic break? He seems perfectly normal now, sipping lemonade and smiling politely at my mother. His shirt brings out the gorgeous color of his eyes, an opaque chocolate brown that warms when his gaze meets mine, his lids crinkling at the corners as he offers me a smile.

“Yes,” he says. “So, what do you say to becoming the next member of Iron Thorns?”

four

Adrian Hart

“Can you give us a minute, Mom?” asks the goddess—Valentina Rose. A more beautiful, perfect name could not exist for the most beautiful, perfect woman in the world. She is a flower, a rose, strong and breathtaking, delicate yet barbed.

“Sure,” her mom says. “I’ll be just inside. Holler if you need me.”

She returns to the house, and I swivel back toward the woman who turned my world upside down last night. “So, what do you say, my queen?” I ask, relieved to be alone with her again. “We’re going on tour as soon as the label signs a band. You can go with us. We’ll introduce the world to Valentina Rose. Don’t worry, we’ll get you a couple bodyguards so you’re safe.”

Valentina plants her hand on her hip. “I’m not joining your band, Adrian.”

“Why not?” I demand.

“Because,” she says, widening her eyes at me like I’m missing

something obvious. “You just asked me to marry you?”

“And I meant it,” I say, reaching for her.

She draws away, and my heart shatters into a million pieces. “Which is why I’m not going on tour with your band,” she says. “You’re insane.”

“Don’t do it for me, then,” I say, desperate to have her with us—with me. “Do it for yourself. Your career. Your family. You’ll be instantly famous, as you should be. Don’t you want the recognition you’ve always deserved? It can be yours with the snap of your fingers. Just say yes.”

“I’m not marrying a stranger,” she says. “Even if you’re more famous than God.”

“Forget I asked,” I say. “Just come on the road with us. One leg of the tour. Six weeks.”

I know it’s reckless, that I’m doing something that will piss off a lot of people, but I can’t help it. I’ll make sure Valentina is safe from the more unsavory things that go with our lifestyle. I just need her there.

“I don’t know,” she says, biting at her plump lower lip in a way that absolutely undoes me. I think I’ll die if I can’t do the same, if I never know how that soft lip feels under the sharp edge of my teeth. I can’t live another day when she’s not by my side. If she won’t see reason now, she’ll see it once she gets to know me. She’ll see that she can’t live without me either. That I’m the only man for her, just as she’s the only woman for me.

“What do you have to stay for?” I ask. “That ‘boyfriend’ who works at his daddy’s office? Your band that’s holding you back? Come on, Val. You know you deserve better. You were born for bigger things.”

“You looked up my boyfriend?” she asks incredulously.

“Would he put in that much effort to find you?” I challenge. “I probably know more about you than he does.”

“You’re unhinged.”

“Maybe so,” I admit. “Musicians are passionate people. But you already know that, don’t you? You’re a musician.”

Our eyes meet, and a tingling heat throbs at the base of my spine. Until now, I’ve simply known she is meant to be with me forever. Now I wonder how passionate this flawless creature would be between the sheets.

“There’s a difference between being passionate and losing your mind,” she says.

“It’s a fine line,” I say, absently thumbing over the scar on my chin. “We have to feel to make music, don’t we? When I take meds or drugs, I don’t feel anything. The music is meaningless without the emotion behind it. When I’m off them, I feel everything. The thrill of the crowd. The love. The elation. The excitement. It’s electric. No drug in the world can compare to the high of hearing an entire sold-out stadium screaming for more.”

Her dark, smoky eyes sparkle with excitement as she pictures the

scene.

“I don’t know,” she says, eyeing me suspiciously. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“Don’t think too hard,” I say. “Some decisions should be made with your heart. And I know your heart is telling you the same thing mine is telling me.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” she mutters.

“I’m going to leave you a contract,” I say. “Six weeks on the road with Iron Thorns. No obligation to continue. You’ll be a full member of the band, with all the benefits of security, pay, insurance—everything. Look over it for a few days, and then get back to me.”

“How?” she asks. “Do you have an agent or...?”

“Don’t worry,” I tell her, cracking a grin as I lower my shades over my eyes. “I’ve got your number. I’ll be in touch.”

five

Valentina Rose

“It was certainly nice of you to stop by,” Mom says, shaking Adrian’s hand as she shows him out. He brought a bodyguard, who heaves himself off the couch, where he was chatting with my mom and brother like they’re old friends. As he and Adrian step out, Mom tells them to drop by again anytime, clearly unaware of the insanity of having rock stars in our home.

Meanwhile, DeShaun is mouthing, “What?” over and over, making ridiculous faces and gestures to convey his utter shock at the presence of my unexpected guest.

With a final wave and a reminder of the invitation to return, Mom closes the door behind him. She lays a hand on her heart and lets out a peel of laughter. “If I’d known we were having celebrities over, I’d have told your father to skip his golf game today,” she says, a huge smile cracking over her face. “Why didn’t you tell me? I wouldn’t have been wearing this old thing.”

“If I’d known, I wouldn’t have been in a swimsuit,” I says, starting to laugh too.

“What did he say?” Mom asks.

“He says he wants... Me to join the band,” I say. “It’s crazy, right?”

“Dude,” DeShaun howls. “No way. My sister’s going to be famous. Here, let me get a pic. I’ve got to post this on *The Tea*.”

“No posting,” I say, pushing him away when he tries to put his arm around me for a selfie. “I haven’t even decided...”

“What’s to decide?” he asks incredulously. “It’s *Iron Thorns*.”

“You don’t even listen to rock.”

“Neither do you,” he points out. “Everyone in the entire world knows who they are.”

“I do too,” I protest, even though lately I’ve been listening to more West Coast hip hop.

“It’s Val’s choice,” Mom says, patting my arm. “If you don’t think it’s the right time, then you shouldn’t sign the contract he left. It’s your future, so it’s your decision. We’ll support whatever you want to do. Won’t we, De?”

“Of course,” DeShaun says. “Then I’d get to tell everyone my sister’s famous.”

“Thanks a lot,” I say, laughing. “It’s nice to know you support my dreams.”

“Exactly,” he says. “Playing in a band has been your dream since

before I was even born, hasn't it? Why wouldn't you want to join a famous one?"

"I want to play music," I say. "It's just that guy is... A lot."

"Did he do some shit?" DeShaun asks, puffing up. "Because I don't care how famous he is, if he fucks with my sister..."

"Nothing like that," I say, holding up a hand to stop him. "He's just a little crazy."

"Trust your instinct," Mom says. "And we'll trust you to do what's right for you."

"Okay," I say. "Thanks. I'm going for a ride. I need to think things over."

"Don't think too long," DeShaun calls after me, echoing Adrian's words. "Crazy guy might find someone else to take on tour."

I'm annoyed by how much his words bother me. I don't know Adrian any better than he knows me. For all I know, he offered contracts to five people, and whoever returns it first is getting the job. Just because the nutcase asked me to marry him doesn't mean he meant it. In fact, he clearly didn't mean it. No one would want to marry someone without even knowing their name.

I slip into a pair of black jeans, a loose white tee, and my favorite leather jacket and moto boots before hopping on the Ducati. I want to talk to

the band, but Marisol's working, and this is something I need to tell them all at once.

Or ask them.

I'm not sure what I want to do, but I know sitting at home trying to figure out my life isn't the vibe I'm going for anymore. I need to make a decision. I prayed about it just this morning.

And then Adrian Hart fell into my lap like... A sledgehammer.

If that's not a sign, I don't know what is.

I pull up at Josh's, since at least I can talk to him about it without having to wait until this evening. He's off today, probably sleeping in. I'm a little annoyed he never answered my text last night. He's interning at his dad's office this summer, and he probably went out for drinks with the other interns after work. Usually he'll at least tell me what's up, so I can go down and join them at the bar if I want.

I hit call on my phone. As I stand on his step, waiting for him to answer the phone or the door, a little chill goes through me. What if Adrian did something to him?

That's dumb.

I shake my head, trying to dispel the chill. He's a rock star, not a murderer. I'm sure he didn't send a hitman to off my boyfriend.

After a minute, I turn the knob, my heart starting to beat faster. The

door is unlocked. I pause to shoot my brother a message, then step inside. The apartment is spacious and light, but I don't hear any sound. There's no mess or any sign of struggle. Just in case, I grab an umbrella from the stand. I'd prefer a pistol, but I'm not above stabbing someone if they jump out at me.

I hear a man's voice and head down the hall toward the bedroom.

When I step inside, I wish I hadn't.

Josh is sitting on the bed, the blankets puddled around his hips. A curvy brunette lies on the pillows beside him, her leg thrown over his and a phone in one hand. She lowers it when I walk in, her eyes taking me in. "Is this the girlfriend?" she asks.

"Val," Josh cries, his eyes flying wide when he sees me.

"Wow," I say. "It's one thing to not show up and see me play. This is a new level of low."

"It's not what it looks like," he protests. "I don't even know her!"

"And yet, she was worth skipping my show, not calling me to join you at the bar, and going home with. I think it's safe to say that not supporting my dreams is the least of your flaws."

"What's with the umbrella?" she asks. "I thought you were auditioning for a band, not a part as Mary Poppins at the community theater."

"I'd show you what it's for, but it's not worth the arrest," I say. "In

fact, neither of you are. You can have him. He's not even worth breaking a nail for, let alone kicking your ass."

"Valentina," Josh protests, but my glare silences him.

"I have nothing to say to you," I say. "Except I never should have given you a second chance. You've had four years to figure out where the clit is, and somehow, you managed to be even further off now than you were in high school. I hope she has some artistic talent. Maybe she can draw you a map."

"Val," he calls, but I turn and storm off down the hall, because I know if I stay, I'll be tempted to put the umbrella through his lying mouth. I toss it back in the stand and slam the door behind me, taking a deep breath to calm myself. As much as I'd love to get payback, he's not worth it. I don't care enough to fight for him. I don't even want him—not really. It was nostalgic to go down memory lane with him, to reconnect after being apart for four years. That's all it was, though. It anchored me in the familiar when everything else is up in the air, just like moving home with my parents did. It's temporary, and so was he.

I'm too pissed to cry as I throw my leg over the Ducati. I feel my phone buzz in my pocket, but I don't have anything to say to Josh and whatever he has to say, it won't change what he did. I really don't want to hear his excuses anyway.

I ride around for a while to clear my head and then stop at Boehner's, a local burger place that would be a food truck if food trucks had existed when it was founded. The small burger shack surrounded by picnic tables on gravel is a few generations old, though, definitely predating the modern version. I debate just getting a tea, but finally I cave and get a basket of fries to go with it. I watch my weight and work hard to maintain my appearance, but sometimes a girl needs fries, and walking in on her boyfriend in bed with another woman is one of those times.

My phone buzzes in my pocket again, and I slip off my jacket and lay it on the bench beside me before checking my texts.

It's not Josh who texted though. In fact, he hasn't sent a single text.

I halfway expect a message from an unknown number, especially since Adrian said he'd be in touch, but there's nothing from him, either. A little twinge of disappointment goes through me, which is dumb, since the last thing I need is a stalker. Still, the image of his gorgeous, opaque irises swims into my memory, and my stomach dips.

I love my mom, but a text from her isn't quite as exciting as one from a certain tattooed rock star. I answer her text, and the one I got from DeShaun asking if I want to join him for tennis at the country club, then flip over to *OnlyWords*, a messenger app online.

I see a message from a new contact, and I can't deny I feel some kind

of way when I see his handle.

IronHeartsBreakToo: Thinkin bout u

My thumb hovers over the screen, and I try not to smile, as if being flattered by the flirtations of a gorgeous man makes me weak. Finally, I type a message. My heart skips when I hit send. Adrian isn't just gorgeous, he's famous in a way that's hard to comprehend. The mega-fame that comes with being the world's biggest band doesn't just change lives, it changes a person. He was barely old enough to drink when they broke out on the scene ten years ago.

No wonder he's not just insanely famous, but a little insane.

He's not just comfortably wealthy like my family. He's ridiculously wealthy.

He's not just in the spotlight on stage. His whole life is the spotlight.

And he's texting *me*.

Not gonna lie, it's exciting to know a man with that much money, power, and fame wants me. But am I ready for that? Am I ready for everything that comes with his lifestyle?

I know if I join Iron Thorns, it won't be exactly the same for me. I'm a girl, for one thing. The way women throw themselves at rock stars is totally different from anything I'll experience. Not only that, but a keyboard player isn't center stage the way a drummer is. If I was a dude, I'd be the one girls

tried to sleep with to get to the other members of the band.

Still, I'll be in the spotlight for being with them, even if I'm not famous like them.

BeYourValentina: Is this who I think it is?

IronHeartsBreakToo: Your soulmate? Yes

BeYourValentina: lol

IronHeartsBreakToo: did I make u laugh?

BeYourValenina: maybe

IronHeartsBreakToo: Ill take it.

BeYourValentina: do I even want 2 ask how u got my contact info?

IronHeartsBreakToo: prob not.

IronHeartsBreakToo: ud be surprised what ppl will give u when ur famous

BeYourValenina: doubt it. so who broke ur heart?

IronHeartsBreakToo: ???

BeYourValenina: ur msg handle

IronHeartsBreakToo: u don't waste any time do u

BeYourValenina: lmao. Says the guy who asked me to marry him before he asked my name

IronHeartsBreakToo: I'll answer when u give the correct answer to my question

BeYourValenina: bold of u to assume u know the correct answer

IronHeartsBreakToo: I am & I do.

BeYourValenina: ur shameless

IronHeartsBreakToo: 100%

IronHeartsBreakToo: what's the point in playing coy & jumping thru hoops & beating around the bush when I kno what I want?

BeYourValenina: maybe so u don't freak ppl out?

IronHeartsBreakToo: dating & not calling for 3 days & all the silly traditions r just a preamble to what ur really after to begin w. Why waste time?

BeYourValenina: see above lol

IronHeartsBreakToo: I don't see the point

BeYourValenina: how about getting to know someone before u ask 2 spend ur life w them. U don't even know you'll like me

IronHeartsBreakToo: so lets get to know each other

BeYourValenina: I don't understand ur fixation

IronHeartsBreakToo: I don't either.

BeYourValenina: that's comforting

IronHeartsBreakToo: ur right that I don't know u. I don't know if I'll like u n u don't seem 2 like me much. but I do know ive never taken one look at someone and known the way I knew when I saw u.

BeYourValentina: knew what?

IronHeartsBreakToo: that it was meant to happen. that I'm meant 4 u. I have 2 have u. I just have 2. Ur meant 4 me.

BeYourValentina: r u always like this?

IronHeartsBreakToo: like what

BeYourValentina: so intense

IronHeartsBreakToo: sometimes, not always

BeYourValentina: I guess it must work

IronHeartsBreakToo: doesn't seem like it's working w u

BeYourValentina: does it work w most girls

IronHeartsBreakToo: I don't pursue girls.

BeYourValentina: what do u call this, lmao

IronHeartsBreakToo: ur not a girl, Valentina. Ur a woman.

BeYourValentina: damn

IronHeartsBreakToo: n Ive never had to pursue anyone. This is new 2 me.

BeYourValentina: that explains things

IronHeartsBreakToo: make jokes if u want. But tell me 1 thing?

BeYourValentina: kk

IronHeartsBreakToo: you feel it too, right?

I stare at my phone screen, gnawing at my lip. I'd be lying if I said I

didn't feel a connection, a pull between us. But I'm also not losing my mind for a perfect stranger. It's just chemistry.

I think.

Even if he's right, and it's more, I'm not going to encourage his behavior by agreeing. Then I'll never get him to back off and let me breathe. He's already crowding me enough, getting my address, information about my relationship, and my messenger handle. Maybe the feeling is something I want to explore, but I'm not diving into the unknown headfirst and blindfolded, with no parachute.

I pocket my phone without answering and stand up, tossing the rest of my fries. I don't need them anymore. I'm smiling when I climb back on my bike and head for Marisol's garage.

six

Adrian Hart

“You did what?” Crimson thunders, staring at me across the island in the posh rental we got for our few days in Little Rock.

“She’s good,” I say, rolling the ball of ice around the bottom of my whiskey glass.

“She was good,” Lucas agrees, hitching his sock feet around the legs of his stool and looking back and forth between us.

“She could be the best fucking keyboardist in the world, and I’d still kick your ass for asking her to join the band without telling us,” Crimson growls, glaring at me.

“I didn’t ask her to join the band,” I rumble. “I invited her to join us for one leg of the tour. She might not even say yes.”

“You asked someone, and you’re not even sure if she’s interested?” Crimson splutters. Before I can answer, he grabs the bottle of whiskey and sloshes a finger into his glass. He downs it in one swallow before slamming his glass down.

“Of course she’s interested,” Lucas says. “She wouldn’t have been at the Battle of the Bands if she wasn’t.”

“She’d be fucking crazy not to be,” Crimson mutters, glowering at me.

“Call her crazy again and see what happens,” I growl back at him.

“Then she’s joining,” he says. “Because you gave her a fucking contract without even asking the rest of the band. Does Judy know about this?”

“No,” I admit. “But she’ll agree once she hears Valentina play. She’s special. We all saw it, and Judy will too. She’ll see what I saw in her when I heard her play.”

“I don’t know about that,” Lucas says, snickering.

“Watch your mouth, kid,” I snap at him, still staring his father down. I have a soft spot for Lucas, though he’s only been with us for a year, since our last bassist OD’d.

Crimson was closest with him, and he’s still the most torn up about it, so I go easy on him too. “Just give her a shot. Trust me, man. I wouldn’t have done this if it weren’t the best thing for the band.”

He sighs and picks up the whiskey, splashing a bit more into his glass. He twirls the amber liquid, his watchful gaze on me.

“You using?” he asks at last.

“No,” I say, holding up a hand. “Fuck no. I take our vow of sobriety as seriously as you do, brother. I wouldn’t do that to Dennis.”

He nods, sipping his whiskey. We drink, but never anything stronger. Finding a guy you’ve played with for over a decade with the needle still in his arm will do that to you. That’s something you can’t forget, and the temptation to try is too strong. None of us were heavy users like he was, but making that promise to each other was the only way to get through the months after the overdose.

“You spiraling?” Crimson asks, still watching me.

“No, man, I’m fine,” I say. “I like to be on top of my game, so I’m staying sharp, that’s all.”

“Swear you’re not using?”

“Fuck no.”

“You better not be,” he says. “This crazy shit sounds like something you’d do when you were. But if you can swear to me you’re sober, and you really believe in this chick, I trust your instinct.”

“Yes, Daddy Crimson,” I say sarcastically.

“I mean it,” he warns, glowering at me for using the nickname he hates. I only use it to fuck with him, since he signed his own son into the band.

“I swear on my life, I haven’t touched anything harder than alcohol,”

I insist. I don't know why he's pushing it. I'm doing great. I feel great. More alive than I've ever felt—especially knowing Valentina Rose is about to be part of Iron Thorns. For the next six weeks, she'll be mine.

“And you can't fuck her,” Crimson warns.

“What?” I ask, my fantasy rudely interrupted by his words. Not that I want to fuck her. I want so much more than that. I want to worship her, spoil her, watch my children grow inside her. She thinks I don't know her, but I do. I already know I would live and die and kill for her.

“There's a reason we don't have chicks in the band already.”

“Yeah, because you're a sexist old motherfucker,” I point out. “You heard her play. She's better than any man we heard.”

“It makes drama, and that fucks up the music,” Crimson says. “If you fuck her, she leaves the tour. That's the deal. Take it or leave it.”

“I thought the deal was I had to stay sober.”

“That too,” he says, staring me down.

I know he won't budge, so I finally nod in agreement. I'll take what I can get. If something happens between us, Crimson doesn't have to know. I won't let it affect the band. But I can't give up the chance to be near her, in any way she'll allow. Which means I have six weeks to make the one woman on the planet who seems immune to my fame, my fortune, and my charms fall in love with me.

seven

Valentina Rose

“Are you fucking with us right now?” Shana asks. “Tell me you’re fucking with us.”

I shake my head, biting back a grin. I feel giddy now that I’ve told them, as if the weight of indecision I’ve been dragging around for a year has finally fallen away. “I haven’t answered,” I admit. “I said I’d think about it.”

“What do you mean, you’re *thinking* about it?” DeeDee shrieks, wrenching at her silver hair like she’s going to rip it out by the roots.

“White people are dramatic as fuck,” Marisol says, pulling a pack of cigarettes from her enviable cleavage.

“I think it’s just Dee,” I say with a grin, having just finished a quick recap of today’s visit.

“He showed up at your house? Adrian Hart showed up at your fucking house?” Shana howls. “Be for fucking real!”

“It’s *Iron Thorns*,” DeeDee says. “Who wouldn’t be dramatic? Come on! Anyone in the world would react like this, I don’t care who they are.”

“Yeah,” Shana says, narrowing her eyes at Marisol and me. “Which means... Y’all are being under dramatic. Is this a joke? This is a joke.”

“No joke,” I say, pulling out my phone. “What should I do?”

“Um, hello,” DeeDee says. “You can’t seriously be asking that.”

“He’s a little... Unhinged,” I say, pulling a face.

“He can unhinge me any time,” DeeDee says, giving an exaggerated wink.

“This thirsty bitch would unhinge her jaw like a snake to blow him,” Shana says, planting her hands on her hips and nudging Dee with her elbow.

“Why thank you,” DeeDee says. “And yes, as a matter of fact, I would do that for Adrian Hart, though Lucas’s my favorite. He’s got that dark broody thing going on, and you never know what he’s thinking behind those sunglasses he never takes off.” She grins and wiggles her brows, making her piercing dance.

“He’s too fucking young for me,” Shana says, wrinkling her nose. “But Crimson Franco... I’d call him Daddy any day.”

That gets a laugh from all of us.

“Imagine going on tour with them,” DeeDee says dreamily. “We could each have one.”

We glance at Marisol, who shrugs. “Have ‘em. I’m just there for the music.”

“And the pussy,” Shana teases.

Marisol flicks her cigarette with her thumb and smirks. “That too.”

“Anyways,” I say. “What do y’all think I should do?”

“Sign that contract at warp speed,” DeeDee says, like it’s obvious. “Before someone else signs on at keys before you. Why are you even asking us?”

“Because you’re my band,” I say, scuffing the toe of my moto boot on the pavement of Marisol’s driveway, where we’re congregating for this very official meeting. “I don’t want to leave y’all in the lurch. Or run off and ditch you to go on tour with someone more famous.”

“Um, hello, that’s the whole point of playing in front of Iron Thorns,” she says. “To be discovered.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “As a *band*.”

“You got an opportunity,” Marisol says. “You gotta take it.”

I nod, thinking it over. I don’t need their permission, but advice is nice, especially from people who are in the exact position I’m in, so they can imagine what they’d do. My brother said the same thing, but he’s not a musician, so he doesn’t get it the way they do.

The Screaming Divas formed during my senior year of high school, so we’ve played together for years, though not as often once I left for college. But I made sure to come home at least one weekend a month, and we always

set up lots of practices over holiday breaks. Marisol put the band together, and eventually she became such a good friend she's like a big sister to me. I value her opinion over anyone except my own family.

"You have to get a new girl for keys then," I say. "I don't want to hurt the band by leaving."

She shrugs. "Don't worry about it, Val. We get it. Any of us would do the same. Probably without worrying about the rest of the band."

"Dude, if Adrian Fucking Hart came knocking at my door, I'd be out of here so fast I wouldn't even leave skid marks," Shana says. "Sorry, y'all."

"Same," DeeDee says. "I love y'all, but come on. This is, like, a once in a lifetime opportunity. No, a once in a *vampire's* lifetime opportunity."

"Fuckin' take it," Shana says.

"Even though he's a little crazy? Or maybe a lot?"

"I bet they all are," Marisol says. "They've been under so much scrutiny for the past ten years. And they lost their bassist last year, and there was that kidnapping thing when they first started... Not to mention all the money, and fame, and women throwing themselves at them. When you get everything you want and never hear the word no, it's gotta change you."

"Sounds like my kind of life," Dee says with a dramatic sigh.

"You can't think of them like normal guys," Shana agrees. "They don't have the same kind of life as regular assholes."

“I don’t know,” I say. “I figure I’d be the same person if I was famous, just with more security and a few more cars.”

Marisol blows out smoke, planting her long-nailed hand on her thick hip. “Sure, in some ways they’re probably just normal guys under the trappings.”

“If you need someone to take a peek under those trappings to find out, I volunteer,” DeeDee says, puffing on her vape.

“I volunteer as tribute!” Shana yells, throwing a hand in the air.

“If I was filthy rich, I’d be totally different,” DeeDee says. “I’d be, like, strutting my stuff like a runway model.” She does an exaggerated strut down the driveways, thrusting her hips forwards and rotating them with each step.

“Dude, that’s not how a model walks,” Shana says. “It’s like this.”

While they practice their model walk, I lean on the hood of Marisol’s Sonata and brace the heel of my boot on the bumper. “You don’t think it’s a bad idea?” I ask. “That I’d be leading him on or putting myself in danger?”

“Did you get that vibe from him?”

“No,” I admit. “He wasn’t acting psycho. But that doesn’t mean he’s incapable of it.”

“I think you can handle yourself,” Marisol says. “And him. In fact, I know you can. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t tell you to go.”

“You’re not pissed about me skipping out on the band?”

She smiles and sinks down beside me on her creaky old car. “If we can’t survive six weeks without you, we’re not much of a band. Besides, when you come back, we’ll be the band that Valentina Rose plays in. Your big name will bring us recognition.”

“Damn right, I will,” I say, bumping her shoulder with mine.

We watch the others for a second, the night heavy around us, the sound of evening traffic mingling with the buzz of crickets in the bushes.

“No, you gotta poke your ass out,” Shana instructs DeeDee. “Now put your hand on your hip and give us a seductive look over your shoulder.”

“Are you teaching her a model walk or a hooker walk?” I joke.

“Hooker,” Shana says. “Definitely hooker.”

“You cunt!” DeeDee shrieks, smacking Shana’s arm.

“You told Josh about it yet?” Marisol asks me.

“I was going to,” I say. “But then I found him in bed with another woman.”

“What?” she demands, her eyes widening. Then she shakes her head in disgust. “I’ve got a shovel and duct tape. When do we ride?”

I laugh at that. “Nah, not worth it. Otherwise I’d be in the woods with my own shovel instead of here.”

“You okay?” she asks, holding out the pack of cigarettes. “Need one

of these?”

“I’m good, really,” I assure her. “It was sweet to relive that memory for a few months, but he’s my past. He was never going to be my future.”

“So, a fries breakup?”

“Definitely,” I say, grinning. “I stopped at Boehner’s before I came.”

“Damn,” she says, pulling her long hair over her shoulder and combing it with her fingers. “You got over that one quick.”

Over the years, we’ve divided breakups into two categories—fries or cries. It doesn’t matter how long two people are together or what label they put on the relationship. What matters is how you felt, and that determines what you need to get over them. A fries breakup might make you mad, or a little hurt, but a good junk food binge can make it better. A cries breakup is the serious type that bring tears. That’s when we bury bodies—metaphorically of course.

DeeDee and Shana come back from goofing off.

“So you’re doing it?” DeeDee asks. “Because if you don’t, I will.”

“You don’t play keyboard,” I point out.

“I vote we kick your ass out of the band so you’ll be forced to go,” Shana says. “We’ll blacklist you as the chick who turned down a chance to join fucking Iron Thorns.”

“Nah, I’m going,” I say, my heart swelling with excitement.

“Really?” DeeDee squeals.

I can’t hide the grin that breaks over my face as my decision sinks in.

“Yeah. I think so.”

“I was in a band with a famous person,” she bellows, loud enough that the whole street can hear her.

“You’re gonna be great,” Marisol says, throwing her long locks behind her before turning to envelope me in a tight hug. “I’m happy for you.”

“Oh my god, is this our last band meeting ever?” DeeDee asks, sniffing a little.

“I’ll be back in six weeks,” I remind her.

“Will you, though?” she asks. “Because if I got famous, I don’t think I’d be coming back to play in someone’s shitty garage in Faulkner, Arkansas. No offense, Mar.”

Marisol grins. “Hey, I’m with you, girl. I’d be out of here too.”

“Fly, little bird,” DeeDee says through her sniffles, making fluttering gesturing with her fingers toward me. “It’s time to leave the nest and see the world.”

Suddenly I feel all emotional about saying goodbye. I was planning to come back after the tour and go on as I have been. But it’s starting to sink in how huge this is. Playing with the biggest band on earth will be a life changing experience. I have no idea how much it will change my life, or in

what ways, but I know it will.

Maybe I'll be back in six weeks, but maybe I won't. That may be a short time in the life of a regular person, but like they said, a rock band doesn't live a normal life.

And I think I'm ready to join them and find my own extraordinary life. This is what I've been waiting for—some direction, a plan, an experience that will shake up the monotony and lead to bigger things.

I don't know exactly how my life's about to change, but I'm ready to find out.

“Shut up, you're going to make me cry,” I say, standing and pulling DeeDee in for a hug. “And I've already had fries today. I can't be doing that twice in one day.”

“You're crazy,” Shana says, holding out a hand for me to clasp, since she's not a hugger. “You'll fit right in with Adrian. You can both obsess over your figure, for very different reasons.”

She cracks a grin and wiggles her brows.

“Don't go getting all emotional on me,” I say, wiping away a tear. “I'm not dying. You don't have to stop cussing entirely.”

“Fuck you,” she says, shoving back from our handshake with a grin. “If you died, I'd be cursing like a fucking sailor at your funeral.”

“Love you, girl,” Marisol says, standing and pulling me in for one

last, long hug. “Take care of yourself.”

“You know I will.”

“I wouldn’t let you go if you couldn’t.”

“Like you could stop me,” I answer.

“All in, hookers!” Shana yells, extending her hand into the circle. I lay my hand on top of her tan one, and DeeDee layers her tiny one on top. Marisol lays her newly manicured hand on last, and we pump and then break like we do before a show.

“Make sure to text us when you hop on that dick,” DeeDee calls when I climb onto the Ducati.

“Send pics,” Shana yells.

“Dick pics,” DeeDee yells over the throaty throttle of my bike.

I secure my helmet and wave one last time, looking back at them with a heart filled with sadness at leaving my friends but also bursting with excitement and nerves at the unknown future opening wide in front of me.

eight

Adrian Hart

“Damn, they’re getting ballsy,” Lucas says through a mouthful of cereal, his shades already in place for the day. “How’d they even get past the gate?”

“It’s not a photographer,” I say, pocketing my phone and heading for the door as the bell chimes again. Even if she hadn’t texted, I’ve had eyes on Val since the moment we met. I can’t risk anything interfering with our connection.

I swing it open to see my dream girl standing on the porch, a folder in one hand. She’s wearing faded skinny jeans and a ruffly, silky top with flowers on it.

“Damn,” I say, curling my fingers to resist the urge to reach out and touch her bare arms, stroke her smooth cheek, or bury my fingers in her wild mane of curls. “You look completely different every time I see you.”

“Last time you showed up unannounced, or I wouldn’t have been in a bikini,” she says, pursing her full lips and giving me a look of consternation. “Did you think that was my normal attire?”

“No,” I say, frowning down at her. “But you were all decked out like a rocker chick at the show.”

“That’s my stage persona,” she says lightly. “And good morning to you too.”

“You must have taken the Porsche today,” I say, noting her heels.

“Stalk much?” she asks, raising a brow.

She has no idea.

“It’s not stalking when it’s for your own protection,” I point out.

“You’re protecting me by finding out what vehicles are registered to me?”

“Welcome to being famous.”

“I brought the contract.”

I fight the urge to shout with joy, pick her up, and spin her around and around until we’re both laughing and too dizzy to stand up. “How’d you find us?” I ask instead.

“You’re not the only one who knows how to stalk people on the internet,” she says with a grin. “Is your manager here yet?”

“She is,” I say. “Come in. Need anything to drink?”

“I’m good, thanks,” she says, striding in with an amount of confidence that’s as sexy as it is refreshing. She doesn’t seem to give a single fuck that we’re famous. It makes me fall in love with her a little more each

time she acts like I'm no big deal. It makes me want to try anything and everything to change her mind. Fuck the rest of the world. All I want is to be a big deal to her.

We step into the kitchen, where Lucas is drinking milk from his cereal bowl.

“Sorry about him,” I say to her. “He’s an animal.”

“You must be the famous Valentina Rose we’ve heard about,” Crimson says, setting down the green smoothie he drinks every day, which looks like a glass of swamp sludge.

“And you know who we are,” Lucas says, finishing off his bowl of sugar milk and wiping his palm on the leg of his black jeans.

“I’m Judy,” says our manager, standing to shake the goddess’s hand. “I hear you got an unconventional offer from our drummer the other day.”

“I did,” Valentina says. “I brought it back all signed. But I do have a stipulation.”

She turns to give me a hard look.

Crimson whistles under his breath and cuts his gaze toward me.

“What’s that?” Judy asks.

“You can’t ask me to marry you,” Valentina says. “Or... Any of that kind of thing.”

“Glad we’re on the same page,” Crimson says. “We don’t allow

fraternizing within the band. He'll keep it in his pants. Won't you, A?"

I hold up both hands. "Fair enough. And I owe you an apology, Valentina. That was out of line. There won't be any more proposals."

"Great," she says, handing over the folder and extending a hand. "Here's the contract. When's your next practice?"

I wrap my fingers around her long, slender ones, giving them a shake and ignoring the way my head spins at the contact, every nerve ending in my body firing at once, like the grand finale at the world's biggest fireworks display.

I'm fucked, but I don't care. I got what I wanted—for her to join the tour. It doesn't matter what concessions I had to make to get it. All that matter is that now I have six more weeks to get her to fall in love with me.

*

She's so beautiful I can't keep my eyes off her. I don't even want to touch her. I just want to watch her play, the enraptured expression that settles over her face like a veil of peace when she closes her eyes and gives herself to the music. I want her to give herself to me that way. I want her fingers to caress me the way they caress the keys. I want to make her glow with the radiance of pure joy, like she does when she's lost in the music.

But I can't.

I promised I wouldn't fuck up the band with my fucked up brain chemicals.

I promised Crimson I wouldn't get involved with her.

I promised her I wouldn't ask her to marry me.

And I promised myself that I'd keep myself in check so I don't scare her away. If I pretend I'm a normal guy, maybe I can make her fall in love with me. That's all I want. For that, I can hold back enough that they don't think I've lost it. I've never felt this way before, and I wouldn't miss it for anything. No way in hell am I losing Val to appease the band.

Instead, I'll watch from afar, watch Valentina Rose make love to her piano, watch her and pour my frustration and longing into the music. I'll worship every inch of her feminine body from afar, adore her soft curves and full lips, her unruly curls and untouchable face.

For now, I'll have to be content with just this, just watching. It's enough. Watching her is better than watching the most beautiful sunset, better than watching a baby blink for the first time or the most spectacular lightning. She is all those things—radiant as a sunset, spectacular as lightning, perfect as a newborn baby. She is everything.

How can I become her everything, too?

nine

Valentina Rose

“Let’s get some sleep,” Crimson says, rising and stretching. “Tomorrow’s the first show.”

We’ve been practicing together for a few weeks while they finished up their search for new talent to sign to the label. I’m grateful for the time to practice with the band, learn their songs, and get used to their rhythms and places within the band.

“Did you get the schedule?” Adrian asks, turning to me. “I emailed it this afternoon.”

I open my phone and thumb through my email. “Got it,” I say, opening the document. I scroll through it and then look up with a frown. “We start at 6 AM?”

“What, did you think you were going to sleep till noon like a princess?” Crimson asks.

“No,” I say, scowling at him. “I just didn’t know the tour schedule included... Smoothies and early workouts?”

“We work all day, not just during the show,” he says. “We’ll be at a hotel every night we can, and sleep on the tour bus when we can’t make it to the next city in time to get a good night’s sleep. Welcome to life on the road.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I say firmly, not letting his grumpy asshole routine intimidate me.

“Good,” he says. “See you at six for the workout. You’ll follow the same routine we do. If you don’t like it, don’t join a man’s band.”

“Crimson,” Adrian snaps. “Don’t be a dick.”

“I said it was fine,” I grit out, glaring at Crimson.

“Good,” he says. “That’s every day on tour. Unless you have your period or something. Then you can skip a day.”

“On second thought, I can do my own workouts,” I say, standing from the chair in the penthouse suite where we’re staying. “Don’t worry, I’ll be up bright and early to find a studio with pole classes.”

“Forget the workout, I’m going with her,” Adrian says, shooting me a wink. He’s been true to his word since we left Faulkner, not asking me out and keeping the flirting to a reasonable level. I can’t deny it’s addictive. I feel the spark too, and it’s hard not to flirt back when he starts. I don’t want to lead him on, so I usually shut it down, but sometimes I catch myself after I’ve already responded to his flirty tone or a sly brush of his hand.

“Mr. Universe here is going to miss a workout?” Lucas asks. “Are

you off your meds?”

“It wasn’t Mr. Universe,” Adrian says. “It was Sexiest Man Alive.”

“The fact that you said that unironically is the cringiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“That’s because you’re a baby,” Adrian teases, ruffling the younger guy’s hair. “As evidenced by your use of the word *cringey*.”

“Get off me,” Lucas grumbles, leaning away and adjusting his sunglasses.

“And hey, I didn’t give myself the title,” Adrian says. “I just accepted the award.”

“I’m going to bed,” Crimson grumbles. “And if your ass isn’t at our workout tomorrow, she’s fired.”

“Excuse me?” I say, drawing back.

He shrugs. “I told him not to bring a lady on the road with us unless she was a hooker.”

“So you’re going to fire me because you can’t keep your drummer in line?”

“I don’t need to be kept in line,” Adrian growls.

“Whatever works,” Crimson says coolly before turning and heading into one of the bedrooms, leaving me fuming.

“Ignore him,” Lucas says. “Dad’s just like that. Don’t take it

personally.”

“Seems kinda personal when he’s threatening to fire me,” I point out. I stalk out onto the balcony to cool my head. I’m the new girl, a temporary addition to the band. He’s probably had hundreds of guest performers and opening acts in the past decade. I mean nothing to him. Of course he’s going to use me to keep Adrian in line if he sees that it works.

A minute later, the glass doors slide open, and Adrian joins me on the balcony overlooking Minneapolis. “Care for a beverage?” he asks, setting down glass in front of me. “Hennessy and Diet.”

“Thanks,” I say, giving him a shy smile. I’m flattered that he knows what I drink after such a short time. We haven’t been alone together at all, really, since the tour started. “You here to tell me I’m overreacting?”

“No,” he says, sitting across from me at the patio table. “You’re reacting.”

“Guess you wouldn’t be one to talk.” I hide a smile in my glass.

“Hey,” he protests, bumping my foot with his. “Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“For trying to marry someone he saw from fifty feet away? I kinda can.”

He chuckles and takes a drink from his glass. His laugh is masculine and quiet, and it blankets me with warm tingles. We lock eyes across the

small table, and a moment of charged tension fills the space.

“Big night tomorrow,” he says, clearing his throat.

“Yeah.” I sip my drink.

“You nervous?”

“A little,” I admit. “And excited. And terrified.”

“You’ll be great,” he assures me, leaning forward to cover my hand with his. “You *are* great.”

Heat crackles along my arm from his touch. “Adrian...”

“I said I wouldn’t ask you out,” he points out.

I laugh and shake my head, but I don’t pull my hand away. His warm, calloused fingers trace the veins on the back of my hand. “What are you doing?” I ask, my voice lowering an octave.

“Not asking you out,” he says.

My heart thuds heavy in my chest. “Good,” I say. “Because that’s not allowed.”

“Tell me you don’t feel it,” he murmurs, slipping his pinky under my palm and stroking over the sensitive skin. The sensation sends a current of electricity straight to my core.

“I do,” I admit, pulling my hand back and picking up my glass. I wrap my hand around it to cool my heated skin. “But we can’t. Crimson’s right. It would fuck up the band, and I’d be the one sent home. I’m not throwing away

this chance.”

“Not even to get laid by a famous rock star?” he asks with a wicked grin.

The tension breaks, and I laugh and shake my head. “Not even for that.”

“Sorry about him,” Adrian says. “He can be a bit of a dick sometimes.”

“A bit?” I ask, quirking a brow.

“Yeah, okay, more than a bit, and more than just sometimes,” Adrian says with a grin. “But he hasn’t had it easy. I know, I know, we’re rich and famous, and everything’s handed to us. That doesn’t mean life’s perfect.”

“I know,” I say, my voice softening. This time, I’m the one who reaches out to touch his hand. “I’m sorry about Dennis.”

He shrugs and finishes his drink in one swallow. “It happens.”

“Doesn’t mean it doesn’t suck,” I say. “And not just for Crimson.”

“Yeah,” he says, not meeting my eyes. “Want another drink?”

“I’m okay,” I say, wrapping my long fingers around his thick hand.

Finally he meets my gaze, and the air sizzles with hot electricity between us. I wet my lips, and Adrian’s eyes lock in on the movement, filled with hunger and lust that makes me squirm in my seat.

Before I can do something stupid, the glass doors to the balcony slide

open, and Lucas sticks his head out. He immediately takes in our linked hands, and a knowing smile tugs at the corner of his lips. “You kids be careful out here,” he says. “I’m headed to bed.”

“We’ll be in before too long,” Adrian says, slipping his hand from mine and standing. “Just having a nightcap before bed.”

“Sure,” Lucas says. “Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me.”

He slips back inside, and Adrian shakes his head at me. “Sorry about him.”

“You don’t think he’ll say something to his dad?” I ask, nervous all over again. Getting kicked off the tour the day before it starts is not much of an adventure.

“Nah,” Adrian says. “I’m going to grab one more drink. Sure you don’t need a refill?”

“If you’re having one,” I say, finishing off my drink and handing back the glass.

He pauses when he reaches the open French doors. “Are you even old enough to drink?”

“I’m twenty-two,” I point out. “I’m surprised you don’t know that.”

“Oh, I do,” he says with a grin. “You think I’m going to forget your birthday?”

“Then why’d you ask?” I say, rolling my eyes.

“Just thinking about what a dumbass I was at twenty-two,” he says with a grin. “I probably shouldn’t have been drinking. Or let out of my cage at all.”

I laugh and lean back in the chair, amazed at how comfortable I feel with someone so famous. He really is pretty normal under the trappings. “Who let you out, anyway? That was a bad decision all around.”

“You’re telling me,” he says, shaking his head again. “I got the ink to prove it.”

“Really?” I ask, my gaze dropping to his gorgeous arms, thick with muscle and covered in tattoos. He looks like the perfect rock god standing there in his faded jeans and black tee.

“Guess you’ll have to find out,” he says, stepping through the doors into the suite. I watch him through the open doors, letting the giddy grin take over my face when he can’t see it. His broad shoulders fill his shirt to perfection, like it was made to stretch over the muscular planes of his body. He moves with easy confidence, filling our glasses before turning back and catching me admiring his masculine form. He cracks a smile, his smooth chocolate eyes crinkling at the corners.

When he steps onto the balcony, I can feel the charge in the air, palpable as it stretches between us. Being with him is a rush, a high. He’s intense, sure, but he’s also incredibly talented and passionate, and now that

I'm getting to know him, I can see he's also sensitive and he cares deeply about his bandmates. They aren't just people he plays with. They're his friends, people he loves as much as I love Marisol and our band.

"To tomorrow," he says quietly, handing over my drink.

We clink our glasses together, then each take a sip, our gazes still warring.

"Tomorrow," I echo, my belly swooping at the thought of playing in front of a crowd. What if I fuck up? It's not like I'll just beat myself up a little, the way I would with the Screaming Divas. I'll be in front of thousands of people tomorrow, and if I fuck up, they'll all see it and judge me. Not only that, but it'll reflect on Iron Thorns. The band will be judging me too.

"Don't let Crimson intimidate you," Adrian says. "He may threaten, but he always, always puts the band first, and if you're best for the band, he'll never fire you."

"Good to know," I say. "All bark and no bite."

"Pretty much," Adrian says. "He's just protective of us, and after what happened with his son..."

"Shit," I say, remembering the year they hit number one. They didn't just make headlines for their music. Damien Franco, Crimson's oldest son, was kidnapped when he was staying with his mom while the band was on tour. It was all over the national news for months. No wonder he keeps his

younger son so close. I've seen so many pictures of Lucas, I feel like I grew up with him. For a solid decade, you couldn't open a magazine and find a picture of the band without Lucas tucked into his father's arm, and then at his side, and now in the band, even though he's not even eighteen yet.

The poor kid's grown up in the relentless spotlight of the media from the time he was seven years old. And here I thought it messed up Adrian. I can't imagine what's buried in the psyche of the band's youngest member.

"Are you even old enough to remember that?" Adrian teases, nudging my foot with his.

"You're not even ten years older than me," I point out.

"Still robbing the cradle."

"Yeah, you're a regular perv," I say. "I was a literal child when I first put your poster on my wall."

"You had our poster on your wall?" he says. "That's kinda hot."

"I was twelve."

"Damn, now I really do feel like a pervert," he says.

"Well, it's a good thing I'm all grown up now," I say, rubbing my toe against his, emboldened by the slight buzz from the alcohol.

"Yes, you are," he says, giving me an appreciative once over that makes my nipples pebble and my skin prickle.

God, I need to stop. Flirting with him can't lead anywhere good. But

it's so fucking hard to quit. He's quickly becoming the best part of my days besides the music. I definitely never felt this way about Josh, not even when we were young and in love. Nothing quite compares to the giddy elation of falling for someone, the eagerness to see them, the extra effort put in for them each morning, and the payoff when they look at you and notice.

The fact that we can't be together makes it feel freeing—because we're already on the same page that the flirting is harmless and can't lead to anything—and torturous for all the same reasons.

“So,” I say, breaking the tension sparking between us at last. “Do you still get nervous before a show?”

“Yeah,” he admits, swirling the ice cubes in his glass. “More than I used to.”

“That seems backwards.”

He gives a rueful smile. “Sobriety does that to a man.”

“You used to go on high?”

He nods. “Fucked out of our minds sometimes. But after Dennis died, we made a vow of sobriety. For him.”

“That's really sweet,” I say, reaching out to cover his hand with mine. The mood's turned somber again, and I don't move away when he turns his hand and laces his fingers through mine before speaking.

“The whole band did it, and we stuck with it,” he says. “It's hard

sometimes, but I'd rather feel the nerves if it means feeling the music, y'know? Now that I'm used to it, I like being clearheaded. I don't even have a beer before a show. Once we get going, the nerves melt away, and it's just... Euphoria."

A little smile tugs at my lips. "I'm excited for that part."

"You should be," he says, squeezing my hand. "You're going to be amazing. And we can grab a drink afterwards to chill out."

"Isn't that against the rules?" I ask, giving him a wink to show I'm kidding.

"It's your first show on the road with a big band. That's worth celebrating."

"Yeah, but we said we wouldn't go out."

"Who said anything about going out?"

"You're not going to try to impress me with your wealth?" I tease.

"I get the impression that's not going to work on you," Adrian says, giving me an appreciative glance. "I'm going to have to bring out the big guns."

"Ooh, the big guns," I say, laughing. "I like the sound of that."

"You do, huh?" he teases back. "I thought you didn't want to go out."

"Convince me," I say, before I can talk myself out of it.

Our gazes catch and hold, and warmth tingles down my spine and

settles in my core. I hide my smile behind the rim of my drink and watch him over the glass, his eyes heated and alive with excitement. It definitely feels like I just accepted an invitation for something more than a drink in the room.

And even though I know that's a bad idea, it's one I've been thinking about since I came on the road. The chemistry between us is hard to ignore. I can't help but wonder what would happen if we gave in to the tension, just for one night, and got it out of our system. It might be the perfect way to work off steam after getting amped up for the show.

Most of the men I've dated hit a wall when they found out I come from money. When they couldn't just flash a few hundreds to win me over, they were stumped. Sometimes I don't tell them because I like to be wined and dined as much as the next girl, and they'd get weird about it. It's like they think I've taken away the only tool in their arsenal. But eventually they always find out, and more often than not, it becomes an issue, either because I have more money than them or because they can't figure out what I need them for since I can pay my own way.

Adrian has more money than most people on the planet, so he must have his own issues with dating. I like that he's seen my house and knows money won't impress me. The fact that he might have to work a little harder and be creative doesn't seem to be turning him off. If anything, he seems excited by the prospect of a challenge.

“Fair warning,” Adrian says at last, flashing me a smug grin. “I’m very convincing.”

“I’m sure you are,” I say, returning his smile.

He rises to take my glass when we finish, and my gaze trails up his sleeve of tattoos. I want to ask about them, but the conversation seems to have come to an end. Later, as I lie in the soft hotel bed trying to fall asleep before my thoughts can spiral into anxiety about the show tomorrow, my mind keeps going back to our conversation, my heart flipping each time. I know it’s dangerous to even entertain those thoughts, but I can’t get him out of my head.

Has he fallen asleep? Or is he lying awake, thinking about me too? What would he do if I tiptoed across the suite and slipped into his room, between his sheets?

I know exactly what he’d do. That’s the problem. I’m supposed to be the levelheaded one, the one who’s not going to risk it all for a night in a rock star’s bed.

I bet it would blow my mind, though.

Was he serious about convincing me? I shouldn’t have said that. I should have told him that I’d never risk this opportunity, no matter what he does to change my mind. I can’t help but be excited by the possibility that he’s going to try, though.

ten

Valentina Rose

The crowd is deafening. My feet move forward toward the stage though, my body still functioning even though my brain is spiraling into total panic mode. The noise level is incomprehensible, so loud it makes my blood and bones vibrate, so loud it makes my brain short circuit and my breathing hitch until I think I'll pass out.

“I can't do it,” I say, balking before we step out.

I'm not speaking to anyone in particular, but it's Lucas who stops. “It'll be okay,” he says, tapping on his designer shades and giving me a sympathetic smile. “We can get you a pair of these for next time.”

“No one's going to be looking at you,” Crimson says, stalking past. “Get a grip on yourself.”

“Go,” Adrian says to Lucas, glaring at his father's back as Crimson strides out onto the stage. The crowd suddenly gets so loud I think the whole stadium is going to be shaken to pieces by the sound waves.

I lean back against the wall, my head spinning. “I can't.”

“You can, and you will,” Adrian says, taking my face between his hands. “Now look at me.”

He pulls my face up, so I’m forced to stare directly into those flat, chocolate eyes. There’s something so calm and still about them, like staring into the mirrored surface of a lake without a single ripple. “Breathe,” he orders.

I breathe, my lip trembling with nerves. His eyes drop to my mouth, and he steps in closer, until heat and electricity crackles between our bodies.

“There are so many people,” I manage. “What if I fuck up?”

“There’s no one,” he says, still cupping my face in his hands. “There’s only me, okay?”

I nod mutely, trying not to let my knees buckle when the stadium vibrates with the force of the pounding feet as everyone stomps and screams louder.

Adrian’s hand moves lower, gripping my jaw and forcing my gaze to meet his. He leans in, until his lips are only a breath away from mine. “There’s only me, and I need you out there because for me, there’s only you.”

I swallow hard, my erratic heartbeat suddenly finding a new rhythm, one that matches his. His grip loosens, his rough palm sliding down my neck, his fingers closing gently around my throat. I lick my lips, my thighs clenching as the roar of the stadium quiets behind the rushing in my ears.

Adrian's eyes turn molten with heat, and his lips brush over mine, sending a wave of pure lust crashing over me.

“You walk out there for me, Valentina,” he growls. “You play for me now.”

The low, rough tone of his voice and the dominance in his words makes my core throb, and the world drops away as I stare into his eyes, my body suddenly alive again, tearing my attention from my careening thoughts. In that moment, I know exactly what I need. Without hesitation, I lean in, closing the fraction of space between us and pressing my lips to his.

Electricity jolts through my body, and the next moment, Adrian pins me to the wall, grinding his hips against mine and groaning into my mouth. His arms slide around me, crushing my body to his in a passionate embrace while he thrusts his tongue roughly into my mouth, tasting me without shame or apology. It drives me wild, and I angle my head to go deeper, my whole body alive with heat as our tongues battle, our teeth clashing in the heat of the moment.

After a moment, Adrian pulls away, his lips red from our kiss, his eyes hazy and unfocused. “Damn it,” he says. “Can we cancel the show and do that all night instead?”

I can't hide my grin. “I don't think Crimson would like that very much.”

“Fuck Crimson,” he says. “Or rather, fuck me.”

I laugh and shake my head. “We better get out there before the fans tear this place down.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he says, grabbing my hand and squeezing. “Ready?”

“Ready,” I say, smiling as we walk out onto the stage. The roar of the crowd makes my head spin, but I’m calm now. There’s a glowing ember of heat in my chest as I take my place at the keyboard, forcing myself not to look over at Adrian as he takes his place behind the drums. The band begins, and the noise of the crowd is drowned by the music flowing around me, each instrument bringing another layer of sound, the pieces fitting together like a puzzle. My fingers dance across the keys like they have in practice every day, fitting my own piece into their sound, adding another dimension.

I glance over at Adrian, watching the way he moves, as if he’s one with his instrument. His gorgeous, muscular, tattooed arms show below the sleeves of his black tee, and the angle of his hips in a pair of faded jeans as he sits on the stool behind his set makes my mouth water. Our eyes meet, and electricity crackles in the air between us as we hold each other’s gaze, the moment stretching between us as the music swells. I want to break the connection, but my fingers fly over the keys, answering every drumbeat with a note of my own.

At last, the song ends, and the crowd noise surges. I can't see much beyond the bright lights, just a sea of ghostly dots bobbing in the darkness. My stomach drops, but before the nerves can get me again, we segue into the next song, and I forget the crowd and just play. I don't look at Adrian again, but I can feel his presence on the stage, the heat of his gaze on me, the comfort of knowing he's right there to ground me if I get rattled again.

When the show finally ends, the noise of the crowd is deafening again, but I'm not nervous anymore. I did it! I played a full set on a stage with the world's most famous band, in a sold out arena. I can't wrap my head around the magnitude of the moment.

We leave the stage, and Adrian grabs me up, spinning me around and planting a hard kiss right on my lips in front of the others. I push him back, detaching myself and giving him a warning look. He shrugs and gives me a goofy grin before his agent pulls him away to mingle with a handful of VIP ticket holders. I try not to look when the five or six scantily clad groupies drape themselves over him for pictures, pressing their lipstick prints to his cheeks and shoving their tits against him as they pose.

A blogger comes over to talk to me, and I tear my eyes away from Adrian and focus on the interview. This isn't about him. It's about my career.

But I can't help but wonder how many of those VIP women end up getting the VIP treatment in his bed. He's been in the band since he was a

kid, grown up with hordes of gorgeous girls throwing themselves at him. For years, he's had his pick of women wherever he goes. He's never been married, preferring to stay single and play the field aside from a few celebrity girlfriends over the years.

What am I getting so worked up about? It's not like I'm going to be the one to tame him, the one to tie down the notorious bachelor. He only wants me because I'm off limits and a challenge—or because I'm another pretty girl to add to his list.

When I'm done talking to the blogger, I make my way over to where Lucas is standing against the wall, his sunglasses in place as he watches the groupies fawning over Crimson and Adrian.

“Where are your fangirls?” I ask him, accepting a bottle of tea from an assistant with a smile of gratitude.

“I'm not allowed to have fangirls,” he grumbles. “Dad cock blocks any of them who try.”

“That doesn't seem fair.”

“That's what I fucking told him,” he says. “Everyone needs to work off steam, but apparently only Adrian gets to fuck it out of his system.”

I choke on my tea. “What?”

“I didn't mean you,” Lucas says quickly, then seems to realize what he said and tries to backtrack. “I mean, not that he's fucking other people,

either. Just that he's allowed to, if he wanted."

"It's fine," I say, screwing the cap back on my bottle. "He can do whatever he wants. We just met, and we're not allowed to hook up anyway."

"Right," Lucas says, his shoulders relaxing. "Exactly."

"I think I may head back to the hotel and turn in," I say. "It's been a long day."

I'm not even to the door when a strong hand clamps around my arm, spinning me around.

"Where are you going?" Adrian demands through a scowl.

"I was going back to the hotel," I say calmly. "I did my interviews, and I could use a shower and some sleep."

"You're leaving?" he asks. "I thought you were going to let me impress you."

"You're busy," I point out, nodding toward the VIPs.

"You're mad?" he asks, his brows furrowing in confusion.

"No, I'm not mad," I say, tugging my arm free of his grasp. "This is your life, and that's fine. I knew that when I signed on. But it's not mine. I'm temporary in this band, and I have to make the most of it. That means being on top of my game every night."

"You were," he points out. "You were incredible."

"Thank you," I say. "And if I want to make something of this

opportunity, I need to stay that way.”

“Let me take you out,” he says. “To celebrate.”

“You’ve got half a dozen women waiting to celebrate with you.”

“I don’t want to celebrate with them,” he says earnestly. “I want to celebrate *you*. Just the two of us.”

“We’re not allowed to get involved,” I point out.

“If we can’t be together, then I can’t be with anyone,” he says, seizing my hand.

“I’m sure they’d be happy to convince you otherwise.”

“I don’t give a fuck what they want,” he says. “They’re just fans. You’re the only woman I see anymore, Valentina. The only woman who exists to me.”

I know I shouldn’t want that, since we can’t even be together. But no one’s ever said anything like that to me before, and my resolve melts. Not just because of his words—most musicians are good with those—but because I’m pretty sure he means them.

“You know you’re giving up a sure thing,” I warn. “I’m not promising anything, Adrian.”

The most adorable, sunshiny smile breaks across his face, one I didn’t know was possible for a guy like him, a seasoned musician who’s seen the world and all its debauchery countless times over. Over a decade in the

spotlight must change and harden a person, leave him jaded or at least disillusioned in some ways. And yet, he can still smile like a kid on Christmas morning at the thought of spending time with me.

It gives me a jolt of giddy energy, his excitement so contagious that I find myself giggling as we duck out of the backstage area together.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Back to the hotel,” he says. “Let’s get out of here.”

His grip tightens on my hand, and he leads me out the back, where his bodyguards are waiting to usher us quickly into a waiting car. Back at the hotel, we enter the penthouse suite, which has four bedrooms, two on each side. Adrian ushers me to my room on the right. When he swings open the doors, I pull up short.

The entire room is drenched in candlelight, with hundreds of candles of all types and sizes flickering on every surface. The bed is covered with foil-wrapped chocolates, and two dozen long-stemmed red roses explode from huge vases on either side table. In the middle of the spacious room, a blonde woman in a beige uniform stands beside a portable massage table, a little tray with oils and folded cloths beside her.

I turn to Adrian, my jaw on the floor. “You did this?”

He shrugs, giving me an adorably boyish grin. “I mean, I arranged it,” he says. “I didn’t know what color roses you liked, so I went with classic red,

but next time...”

“Lucky for you, red’s my favorite,” I say, pressing my hands to my heart and surveying the room again. “This is... Incredible.”

I should have known he’d go overboard. It’s Adrian. He asked me to marry him before he asked my name, for fuck’s sake.

“I’ll be in the other room,” he says, hooking a thumb back toward the common area. “Take your time. I’m sure you need to relax after that performance. Oh, and when you’re done...”

He swings open my bathroom door. The sweet fragrance of jasmine wafts from within, where more candles surround the private jacuzzi tub, now overflowing with bubbles and dotted with rose petals. A bottle of champagne chills in a bucket of ice next to the tub, and a glass sits waiting beside it, along with a single, long-stemmed red rose.

“This is... It’s too much,” I protest, not sure what else to say.

“It’s not enough,” he says. “Not for a queen like you. But you said you wanted to stay in.”

“Adrian...”

“You told me to convince you,” he reminds me. “Maybe next time, you’ll let me take you out.”

“Thank you,” I say, tears threatening. “It’s perfect.”

“Enjoy your Swedish massage,” he says, leaning in and brushing his

lips over my cheek. Then he leaves me to be pampered for the next hour. I'm a puddle of contentment by the time I leave the massage table and sink into the luxurious bubbles. The jets in the tub have kept the water warm, and I moan with pleasure as I sink into the hot bath. The suite's private butler already poured the champagne before I got off the massage table, and I sip at it and poke my toes up from the bubbles, wiggling them and admiring my new pedicure.

If Adrian set out to make me feel like a queen, he's succeeded. In one night, he's surpassed all the romantic gestures my past relationships have managed in their entire length. The only thing missing is...

Adrian.

The realization hits me with a chorus of warning bells. I shouldn't give in to this, to his very persuasive antics. I don't want to give him false hope.

I groan and drop my head back, sinking down in the water until it rises to the back of my neck and threatens to creep under my shower cap. Finally I push myself up, dry my hand, and reach for my phone.

"Hey, Miss Rock Star," Marisol answers. I can hear an echo in the background, and a steady beeping.

"Hey," I say. "Are you at the hospital again?"

"Yeah," she says. "My *abuela* had another stroke."

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” I say. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“You’re on your big tour,” she says. “I didn’t want to bore you with depressing stories about trying to sleep while my *abuela* alternates between snoring and farting all night.”

“It’s not boring,” I protest, feeling hurt that she didn’t include me, even if the news was tragic. I’m not there for her when she needs me, not there to support her. She acts tough, like nothing bothers her, but I know she’s devastated. Her grandmother raised her, and she’s as close as a mother to her.

“Trust me, it’s boring,” Marisol says. “What’s up with you? Please distract me with your glamorous life.”

“I can’t,” I say. “Not when you’re going through that.”

“Please,” she says. “I’m begging of you. Talk to me about anything but your medical history and insurance claims. I’m going out to smoke right now, and if you don’t talk to me, I’ll spend my whole smoke break thinking about her, and it won’t be a break at all.”

“Well, we had our first show tonight,” I say, still feeling guilty for even talking about this when she’s dealing with so much.

“Shit, that’s right,” she says. “I can’t believe I forgot.”

“Don’t even start,” I warn. “You had way more important things than a concert going on. Besides, it’s not like you could have watched it.”

“I know,” she says. “But I could have been praying for you.”

“I should have been praying for you,” I point out, my throat tight.

“So, how’d you do?” she asks, and I can hear the flick of her lighter.

A stab of the deepest homesickness sinks into me. I actually miss the smell of her cigarette smoke, which is something I always hated before.

“I did good,” I admit, feeling even more guilty that I was succeeding while her *abuela* was sick. There’s nothing I could have done, but it still feels wrong.

“I knew it,” Marisol says. “I knew my little Valentine would kick ass as a famous rocker chick. Did you just finish the show?”

“Pretty much,” I say, glancing around at the opulence around me, which only sinks me further into my guilt spiral. “Adrian got me a massage when I got back to the room.”

“Excuse me?” she says, letting out a little cough. “Did you just drop ‘Adrian Hart gave me a massage’ like it was nothing?”

“He didn’t *give* me a massage,” I correct. “He got me one from a professional.”

“Lame,” she says, laughing.

“It’s called respectful,” I argue. “I wouldn’t have felt comfortable having him give me a massage.”

“Don’t let DeeDee and Shana hear you say that.”

“I wouldn’t have done it if I’d known...”

“You can just shut up about that,” she says. “You deserve to be spoiled, no matter what’s going on with anyone else. And you could do worse than Adrian Hart. You’ve dated some real L’s over the years.”

“Hey,” I protest.

“Not saying it’s your fault,” she assures me. “Shana and DeeDee have even worse luck. It’s slim pickings out there for the straights.”

“You’re not wrong,” I admit.

“I’m just saying, it wouldn’t be the worst thing to let a man treat you like a queen.”

“Ugh, you’re right,” I say, dropping my head back with a groan. “But why does it have to be him?”

“Oh no, a rock legend-slash-sex god wants to seduce you,” she says. “Whatever will you do?”

“Shut up,” I say, laughing and flicking the bubbles in the tub. “I’m not allowed to date him.”

“So don’t date him,” she says. “Doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy yourself a little while you’re living the rock star life. Just don’t catch feelings, and you’ll be fine.”

“You really think so?”

“Do I think you should let yourself be spoiled by the rich and famous?”

Or pampered by a guy who's head over heels and will do anything for you? Girl, if he wants to, who are you to say no? Let him! Hell, if you won't do it, I will."

"You don't even like men," I point out.

"Exactly," she says, laughing. "But since you do, go blow off steam with that hot piece of ass."

"We have a couple days before the next show," I say. "Do you want me to fly home for a day?"

"Nah, I'm fine," she says. "You couldn't do anything for her anyway. But I've got to get back in there. Thanks for distracting me. This was exactly what I needed."

"Happy to distract you with my guy problems," I say. "But for real, call me if you need anything at all. Even if I can't help, I'm here for you."

"I know," she says.

Once we're off the phone, I pull on my silk robe, take my hair down, and leave my room, my best friend's advice fresh on my mind.

eleven

Adrian Hart

My goddess emerges from her rooms looking refreshed, her light brown skin glowing and dewy from the bath. A red silk robe skims over her soft curves like the cruelest tease.

I jump up from the couch, where I was having a beer. “I didn’t expect you to join me,” I explain, gesturing to the sweats and undershirt I pulled on after showering. When Dennis was with us, we always had parties after the shows. Drugs and women and money flowed like the heyday of eighties hair metal. But things are quiet now. We’re all sober, and Crimson likes to make sure everyone’s a boring old man, not just him. For once, I’m glad for it.

I’ve been a lonely bastard since the parties ended, but I wouldn’t have indulged tonight, even if a hundred naked groupies paraded through the room. I wouldn’t even be tempted. But I’m glad I don’t have to explain that to Valentina, glad that she doesn’t have a reason to feel threatened. I already feel like an asshole for taking pictures with the VIP ticketholders after the show. I don’t want to do a single thing to make her feel like she’s less than

the most important person in my life.

“You thought I’d take all that and not thank you?” she asks with a teasing smile. She sinks onto the couch and picks up my beer. I gulp as I watch her raise it to her lips and take a sip. My cock stirs when her mouth lingers on the rim of the bottle where mine just touched.

“Thank me?” I ask, swallowing hard. I refuse to let myself think what I want that to mean.

“That’s what I said,” she says, looking amused.

“You could have just relaxed and gone to bed,” I say, sinking back down beside her. “I set that up for you because you deserve it, not because I expected a thank you.”

“I thought we were celebrating,” she reminds me. “Wouldn’t be very festive to celebrate alone.”

“I didn’t want to presume.”

If it were up to me, I would have given her the massage and bathed her too. But I already freaked her out enough the first time we met. I’m keeping myself in check until she’s as smitten as I am. She doesn’t have to know the lengths I’ll go to make her mine just yet.

“I said stay in, not turn in at midnight,” she says. “Shouldn’t we be up all night after my first big show?”

“I seem to remember you telling me you had to go to bed early to be

on your best game for the next one,” I remind her.

“You sure seem intent on sending me to bed,” she teases. “Did I interrupt something? Were you about to have some special alone time?”

“No,” I say, scowling at her. “I was concerned about your wellbeing.”

“Why don’t you let me be concerned about that,” she says. “You can be concerned about not offering a lady something to drink.”

“A lady, huh?” I tease back, going to the bar. “Is that what we call a woman who comes out of the bath wearing that?”

“Am I making you uncomfortable?” she asks. “I can put on more clothes if you’d like.”

“No,” I say, frowning as I pour her Hennessy. “That’s not what I’m saying. I’m just a little confused.”

“Maybe this will clear things up,” she says, tugging at the belt holding her silk robe closed.

I watch, transfixed, as the material slides over itself, the knot untying and falling open. The silk drapes over her shoulders, still covering her breasts, but a strip of her golden brown skin shows between them, dipping almost to her navel. As I gape, trying to keep my head from exploding, her nipples pebble against the fabric and her breathing comes quicker with the daring thing she just did.

I’m not about to ask her to reconsider again. Maybe that makes me a

bastard, but she made the first move, and I'm not questioning her motives. This is my chance to make her see how good we could be together. If she regrets it later, we'll deal with it then. I already know there's no going back for me. No man could be asked to resist the alluring sight before me.

I cross the room in a few quick strides, the drinks forgotten in my hands.

I set them down on the table and reach for Valentina, but she picks up her drink and holds it up. "To our first night on tour," she says, a wicked smirk on her luscious lips.

I gulp down the growl rising in my throat and pick up the glass. If she wants to tease, she'll only wind me up further.

"You're playing a dangerous game there, Princess," I say, clinking my glass against hers.

"Oh yeah?" she asks, her dark eyes sparkling with mischief as she sips her drink. "How's that?"

"Hasn't anyone ever told you what happens when you play with fire?"

"What happens?" she asks, batting her lovely lashes.

"I'll show you what happens," I growl, setting down my glass and grabbing her hips, dragging her toward me.

She lets out a sound that's somewhere between a giggle and a shriek as I latch onto her neck, raking my teeth over her damp skin as I suck it into

my mouth, tasting her. My stubble scrapes against her throat, and she shudders against me, setting down her drink and dropping her head back, giving me full access. I slide my hands up her body, holding her to me as I kiss and lick my way down her neck to the hollow of her throat. I bite down, groaning into her flesh and inhaling the sweet, slightly spicy scent of her, like a wild azalea.

She moans in answer, twining her fingers through my hair and holding my head to her. My hands skim over the silk robe, pulling it aside to thumb her dark, erect nipples. I pinch one of them gently, squeezing and smiling against her throat at the gasp of pleasure that escapes her. I grab the couch pillows and arrange them before laying her back on them. Resting my weight on one elbow, I slide my body over hers, settling between her hips. I let my free hand roam over her soft, feminine body, not wanting to leave a single inch of her untouched by my hands, unclaimed by my mouth.

I start with her mouth, covering it with mine, plunging my tongue inside, tasting the alcohol on her sweet lips. She moans softly and arches up, her tongue dancing with mine in perfect rhythm and her arms sliding around me. I draw back from the kiss, nipping at her plump lower lip and drawing it between my teeth. I run my tongue along it, sucking off the brandy before moving lower, nudging her chin up to gain her throat again.

She sighs and drops her head back, letting me take over. I kiss my

way down her neck, tugging her skin into my mouth and scraping my teeth over it, letting my stubble rasp against her again just to watch her glorious nipples tighten into hard buds. I capture one between my lips, tugging at it gently before letting my teeth grip it while I tongue the tip. Her whole body quakes, and I slide my hand down over her belly, letting my palm revel in the velvet softness of her clean skin.

She parts her thighs, angling her pelvis toward my fingers. I don't need further invitation. I'm a greedy bastard, and all I can think about is sinking into the wet heat of her cunt and exploding inside her. Holding myself in check, I skim over the top of her mound. I groan and move my hand lower, stroking the feverish, bare skin between her thighs.

"Adrian," she moans, the sound of my name in her mouth in that tone of pure bliss making my cock throb hard enough to squeeze a drop of precum into my sweats.

I sink a finger into her drenched slit, teasing her pussy open and circling her clit with the tip of my finger. She shudders and grips my shoulders, rocking her hips and panting wordlessly as I stroke her clit, coating it with her wetness and feeling it swell and harden with arousal at my touch. I grind my cock against her thigh, letting her feel how hard she makes me too.

"Oh god," she moans, raising her knee to wrap around my hips.

I capture her panting mouth with mine, sliding my tongue between her lips at the same moment I sink a finger into the tight grip of her cunt. She whimpers for relief, her walls squeezing my finger and making my head spin and another drop of precum soak into my sweatpants. I fuck her mouth with my tongue and her pussy with my finger, dizzy with lust at how wet she is, how willing and soft she feels under me.

“Adrian,” she gasps out, breaking our kiss and pushing against my shoulders. “Can we talk a minute?”

“So talk,” I growl, thrusting another finger into her hot, wet cunt. I can’t even think, let alone have a conversation with her tight pussy drenching my fingers. My cock is straining so hard I know I’m going to cum in my pants if I can’t cum in her.

“It’s a little hard when you’re doing that,” she manages, her breaths coming quick and shallow.

“Want me to stop?” I ask, drawing back and quirking a brow while circling my fingers inside her, hitting her G-spot.

She bucks and lets out a cry of pleasure that’s the sweetest music my ears have ever heard.

“Was that a yes?” I growl, working a third finger into her straining pussy.

“No,” she gasps, her nails biting into my shoulders. “Don’t stop.”

“I couldn’t if I tried,” I say, bending to capture her nipple in my mouth when she arches up, her head dropping back.

“But this is just... *This*,” she says through shallow breaths. “Nothing more.”

I can’t argue with that. It’s more than I hoped for, and I’m fighting so hard not to lose control that I can’t answer. She rocks her hips faster, letting out little cries of pleasure as her cunt clenches rhythmically around my fingers. Watching her face lost in bliss, her wild mane spread over the pillows, her delicious lips parted in a silent “o” as she cums is the hottest moment of my life.

If someone told me a year ago that the sexiest thing I’d ever see would be one woman coming on my fingers, when I wasn’t even fucking her, I’d never have believed it. But Valentina is a thousand times better than all the orgies I’ve participated in and groupies I’ve fucked combined. I thought those things were hot when they happened, but now they’re all cheap and meaningless. All that matters is Val.

I swirl my fingers inside her slick walls, reaching for her drink with my free hand. I swallow a mouthful, keeping only a single ice cube on my tongue. Then I lower it to her fevered skin, now misted with sweat. A shiver wracks her body when I push the ice between my teeth, gliding it around her puckered nipple.

“Oh,” she gasps. “That’s cold!”

I hum around the ice, sucking it back onto my tongue and tugging at her cold nipple with the hot inside of my lips.

“I already came,” she says, lifting her head.

“Did you think that was the end?” I ask, grinning up at her and slowly stroking inside her with my fingers. I lower my head again, letting the ice cube slip from my mouth onto her bare skin. It glides down from her chest to her belly, and I wrap my lips around it, sliding it lower and settling it in her bellybutton.

Goosebumps sweep over her skin, and I slip my fingers from inside her, stroking over her engorged clit with my thumb while I move the ice with my mouth. I hold it between my lips and circle it slowly around her clit, making her thighs clench around my head and her fingers grip my hair again. Her hips buck, and she yelps in surprise when I move lower, pushing it inside her. I suck it back out, then push it into her with my tongue again, letting my thumb play over her clit while I fuck the melting ice cube in and out of her cunt with my lips.

“Oh god, Adrian,” she cries, her hips jerking in involuntary spasms when my tongue laps at her wetness. I suck the cold water from her entrance before replacing it with my tongue, gliding it inside her, tasting her cunt slow and deep. I moan into her, and she answers with a soft cry of her own,

gripping my hair tighter and opening her thighs, offering her pussy for my enjoyment.

I take my time, sucking and nibbling and fucking her with my tongue until she's gasping for breath as she reaches her second climax. I savor every cry from her lips, every pulse of her cunt as I draw her over the edge, nursing the cum from her entrance with slow, strong strokes.

Moving back up, I take her clit between my lips, giving it a little tug that makes her hips buck against my face.

"It's too much," she gasps out. "I need a break."

"Give me one more," I growl, latching onto her clit and sucking rhythmically. Her thighs close around my head, her cries growing louder as she gasps in pleasure and pain, rocking against my mouth, seeking another explosion. When she's almost there, I release her thigh and reach for my drink, a glass of straight Hennessy. I take a sip, keeping my other hand working over her perfect little pussy.

I spread the lips with my fingers, holding her spread open for me, and spit a stream of the alcohol slowly over her open cunt, watching it trickle through her slick folds. She gasps, her hips jerking and her head flying up from the pillow.

"What are you doing?" she yelps.

"I told you it burns when you play with fire," I say, then run my

tongue from her ass to her clit in one wide stroke.

She gasps and shudders, her head dropping back and a moan escaping her lips. Using both hands, I lift her hips and feast, licking and sucking and drinking the whiskey from her thirsty cunt. When I feel it start to clench again, I can't hold back without risking complete insanity. The delicious taste and smell of her, the slickness and heat of her tight cunt around my tongue, is too much. I reach into my sweats and grab my cock, jerking it in rhythm with her pulsing orgasm.

I'm already so close that it only takes a few tugs before cum erupts over my fist. I groan into her, sucking her release from her while my own body shudders with longing to be inside her fully, to make her mine. Finally, I settle her down onto the couch and sit back, licking her sweetness from my lips.

"Oh fuck," she says, not moving from her position, which is fine with me. I have the most spectacular view in the universe right now, seeing her body open for me, her knees wide, her swollen cunt looking so tempting I can hardly hold myself back from diving in and satisfying her one more time just to hear her cry my name again.

"As much as I want to keep going, the others will be here any minute," I say, grabbing a handful of tissues from a box on the end table and cleaning myself up. "I'd better get you to bed."

I arrange her silk robes, now covered with giant wet spots, before scooping her into my arms and carrying her into her bedroom. I lay her down in her bed, then gently tug her robe down over her arms and slip it from under her. One look at her beautiful, shapely body laid bare before me makes my head spin, but I manage to pull the blankets over her and tuck her in before I lose myself entirely.

“Stay like that all night for me?” I ask, sinking onto the bed and smoothing the little crease between her brows as she frowns up at me. “I want to know you’re just next door without a stitch on.”

“You’re a masochist,” she says.

I crack a smile. “Maybe a little.”

“I wish you could stay,” she says, her delicate fingers closing around my wrist.

I meet her dark eyes, my heart breaking at the disappointment I see there. “I can,” I offer, because fuck Crimson, and fuck the consequences.

“No,” she says with a shake of her head. “You’d better go.”

I press a kiss to her forehead. “For now, my beautiful flower. But one day, I’m going to hold you all night. I promise.”

She slides her hand down mine, gripping it gently. “Are we okay, Adrian?”

“Of course,” I say, drawing back. “More than okay. That was the

most incredible night I've ever had in my life, even if I have to sleep alone."

"But you're okay with what I said?" she asks. "You're okay if it's nothing more than tonight? If nothing happens again, or if it never moves beyond this?"

I will die if I can't kiss her again, taste her, and one day, claim her. But for now, I agree, because she may not know it, but there's nothing beyond this. I love her with a deep certainty that will never change, never end. There's nothing beyond this feeling. It's all there is, the end of the line, the final destination that others only dream of reaching.

"Whatever you give, it's more than enough," I say. "I'll take what I can get, and it will be a million times more than I've ever had, even if we never touch again."

She gives a little chuckle. "You're too much."

"There's no such thing as too much for you," I tell her. "You deserve the world and the moon and all the stars. Even then, it wouldn't be enough."

"Goodnight, Adrian."

I bend down and press a tender kiss to her lips. "Goodnight, my flower."

Just then, we hear the soft ding of the elevator outside.

"Go," she whispers, her eyes widening with alarm.

I hurry out of the room, missing her the moment she's out of my

sight. But I can sleep with her taste on my tongue, the scent of her on my face, the memory of her velvet skin under my palms still fresh in my mind.

Just as I step away from Val's room, the suite door opens and Crimson steps in with Lucas. I glance around, spotting the wad of tissues in the corner of the couch. Our glasses sit on the coffee table, but there's no other signs of our tryst evident.

"Huh," Lucas says, sliding his sunglasses onto the top of his head. "I figured we'd find you balls deep in the pianist."

"Have some fucking respect," I snap, swiping the tissues balled up on the end of the couch. I toss them and stalk into my room, closing the door behind me. I don't want anything between me and the memories of Valentina Rose that I'll replay in my head all night, because sleep is just another inconvenient barrier between me and thoughts of the woman I've fallen in love with.

twelve

Valentina Rose

The next few weeks pass like a dream. Every show is sold out, every stadium packed. Despite being the world's biggest band, Iron Thorns leaves out the sex and drugs and just focuses on the rock and roll. They're more into structure than parties and orgies and drugs. That suits me just fine—better than fine. I'm not sure I could handle seeing Adrian with a different groupie every night. Whenever we can, we slip away from the others for a little make-out session or stolen kiss, but we don't manage the same privacy we had the first night.

I don't know how he's able to resist. The chemistry between us sizzles on and off stage. I'm about to go crazy and find a male groupie if I can't have him. I've never been so sexually frustrated in my life. Getting off by myself takes the edge off, but an orgasm is not all I need. I need the act of sex itself, the connection, the intimacy of two bodies coming together as one. Every night, I'm sure I'll combust if I can't get it out of my system, but I somehow survive. Every night I hope he'll come to my room and slip into

bed with me when the others are asleep, but he never comes, and I'm left frustrated and unfulfilled.

Finally, after a show in San Antonio, Adrian grabs me backstage after my first solo.

"You killed it," he says, squeezing me hard to him and then setting me back on my feet. "What do you say we go out to celebrate this time?"

"I don't know," I say, glancing over at Crimson, who's giving an interview. He's the lead, so most of the attention is always on him. I turn back to Adrian and give him a sly grin. "I kind of liked the whole staying in thing we did last time."

A wicked grin stretches over his lips. "You did, huh?"

"Just a little," I say. "I mean, I could really take it or leave it."

His smile widens. "Now you're just being cruel."

"You said you were a masochist," I point out. "Shouldn't you enjoy the pain?"

"There's only so much a man can take," he says. "I think two weeks is my limit."

My heart flips with excitement, and I steal another glance at the Francos. "Then let's ditch these guys and go do some celebrating."

Before I can clarify if we're going out or back to the hotel, Adrian grabs my hand and we duck out a back door to where our tour buses are

waiting. A crowd has gotten past the fence and is milling around the buses, blocking our way.

Adrian insisted on getting me a bodyguard, and now he steps out behind us, along with Adrian's guys, Phil and Kevin.

"Shit," Kevin says, spotting the fence that's now lying on the ground, letting the fans inside. He gets on his radio, stepping in front of us to block us. It's too late, though. A swarm of rough-looking guys and heavily made up women storm toward us. A few reporters and photographers are among the crowd trying to get shots of us.

Adrian puts a protective arm around me, steering me along the edge of the building, trying to escape them while our bodyguards block them from us.

"Put your hood up," he says into my ear, pulling up his own hoodie to cover his head and shield his face a little.

I gather my hair while he hurries us along, blocking me from their view and keeping his head ducked. I shove my hair down the back of my shirt and pull the hood up.

"Are you two dating?" calls someone, shoving a microphone in front of Adrian.

He shoves it away, and I glance over my shoulder to see Kevin holding back a herd of fans while Phil tries to get the paparazzi off. We reach

the corner of the building, and Adrian drops his arm from around me and grabs my hand, pulling me close.

“Can you run?” he asks against my hood.

“Yes,” I say without hesitation, thankful I didn’t know we were going out tonight. If I’d planned ahead for a date, I would have dressed up and worn heels. Instead, I opted for my usual post-show wardrobe of jeans, a tee, and Converse sneakers.

“I won’t let go,” Adrian promises, and we take off running, his strong hand gripping mine.

Our feet pound the pavement as we race down a side street, a group of fans trailing behind us. I hear one of our bodyguards shout behind us, but we don’t stop. We race down one street and then another, then down a long, wide sidewalk dotted with outdoor tables in front of restaurants. We find a set of stone steps and race down them, finding ourselves on the river. Adrian flattens us against a stone wall, and we stand there, catching our breath. My heart is hammering, and I listen for footsteps behind us.

“I think we lost them,” Adrian says.

I take my hood down, fanning myself in the sultry heat. We’re overdressed, but we weren’t planning to spend the evening outside, so the hoodies are mostly for privacy getting on and off the tour buses.

“Does this happen a lot?” I ask.

“Less than it used to,” Adrian says with a grimace. “Our security team is a well-oiled machine now, but it can’t account for fans tearing down fences. Good thing this isn’t my first rodeo with the paparazzi.”

“Shit,” I say. “This whole band thing is less glamorous than I imagined.”

“Is that what you’re after?” he asks. “Glamour?”

“Among other things.”

He smiles and steps closer, pressing my body to the wall with his. His fingers brush over my cheek before sinking into my hair. He pulls my face up, his lips meeting mine. The mixture of excitement and fear that coiled inside me when we ran from the fans melts away the moment we connect. I kiss him back, getting lost in the moment. These stolen moments are the best part of the tour, along with the shows.

In truth, life on the road isn’t at all what I imagined. The band is pretty businesslike. Crimson has them on a strict regimen that includes early workouts, green smoothies, and very few late nights. They don’t party. Except for a few drinks after shows, they don’t indulge in any substances. None of them seem interested in groupies except Lucas, and Crimson always shuts that down before we go back to our hotel or tour bus.

I’m grateful for that, but it’s strange to join a band that’s already done everything. They learned and had their fun, and now they’ve settled into a

routine after outgrowing all the usual rock and roll lifestyle cliches. In a way I'm glad for it, since I'm not sure I want to deal with the kind of crazy parties that rock bands are legendary for. But some part of me is disappointed that I missed out on all that, and I'll never get to experience the highs of doing everything together for the first time. Everything is a first for me, but not for any of them.

After a few minutes, I pull back from the kiss, not wanting to get carried away somewhere that people out on the river walk could see us. Or worse, the fans or paparazzi could find us. I can only imagine how that would go over in celebrity gossip circles.

Adrian Hart caught nailing band's new keyboard player in public.

I'm sure Crimson would just love that.

"Should we head back?" I ask.

"In a minute," he says, his thumb skimming over my lower lip. "Let's give them time to give up." His lips meet mine again, and the world disappears. When we finally break from each other's arms, my lips are tender, and my head is all kinds of turned around. I love kissing Adrian, but it can't lead anywhere good. Still, it feels too good to resist.

He takes my hand and smiles, his own lips red from our make-out. An ember of pride glows in my belly at the sight of him, the gorgeous rockstar marked by my kiss.

We start up the steps, ducking our heads when another couple passes. Adrian grips my hand tighter, pulling me into his side, like we're just another pair of lovers out for a midnight stroll. It makes warmth spread through me, like we're in on our own little secret, and I cuddle into Adrian's side as we walk. The moment we reach a more public street, a group of photographers descends.

"Fuck," Adrian curses, gripping my hand and dragging me away from them. We start running again, down one street and another, trying to lose them.

"This way," I say, pulling him down a side street. We reach the end of the short block and find ourselves at a dead end. A fence blocks off a construction area ahead, and there's no way through. I glance over my shoulder, listening for the sound of the running feet and voices of the fans and photographers who stood around waiting for us to come back from the riverwalk. If they'd wait that long on the chance that we'd show up again, they'll still be chasing us. They haven't turned onto the short street yet, but by the time we backtrack, they'll definitely be on us.

"What should we do?" I ask, glancing around.

"Inside here," Adrian urges, dragging me through a set of glass doors. We find ourselves in the lobby of a small, old hotel.

"And then what?" I ask.

“Go wait by the elevators,” he says, nodding to a small alcove where the doors to a set of elevators is hidden from the front entrance. “I’ll get us some rooms.”

I reluctantly release his hand, not wanting to be separated even though I know it’s a smart idea. If the photographers come this way and glance inside, they’ll see one person at the desk, not two. They might not realize it’s Adrian, since he’s been glued to my side all evening. As I stand there, hidden away from view of the desk and the door, I can’t help but wonder what happens if they do recognize him? If they corner me and shove their microphones and cameras in my face and demand to know what’s up with me and Adrian.

What would I tell them?

I wouldn’t want to tell them the truth, but in all honesty, I don’t know what answer I’d give. I don’t even know the truth myself.

I hear footsteps and tense, waiting with my heart in my throat. But it’s Adrian who steps into the little nook. Relief washes over me, and I cuddle into his arms when he pulls me in. He presses a plastic key card into my hand. “Archaic, right?” he says with a grin, flipping the other card over with amusement in his voice. “Can’t remember the last time I used one of these.”

We step into the elevator, and it dings just as the front door opens. We dive inside, punching the button to close the doors the second we’re in. The

door whisks closed, but my heart's hammering again.

“Do you think it was them?” I ask.

“Probably,” he admits, sliding an arm around me and pulling me into his chest. “But we’ll be in our room in a minute, and we don’t have to come out all night.”

“Where are our rooms?”

“They only had one room,” he says. “It’s a corner room, whatever that means.”

Before I can answer, the elevator door opens, and he wraps his hand around mine and hurries down the hall. Another door opens somewhere at the other end, the noise echoing down the empty corridor. Adrian ducks into a tiny nook at the end of the hall where two doors are catty-corner to each other. He thrusts the card into the reader, glancing back over his shoulder as the light flashes red.

“Fuck,” he mutters, fumbling the card around as soft footsteps thud along the carpet, coming closer. Adrian slides the card in, and the light flashes green. He yanks the handle down, pushing open the door at the same time. I rush in, and promptly knock into the bed.

Adrian steps in behind me, and the door swings shut behind us.

“Well, this is... Cozy,” he says.

I gape at the room, which might be more accurately described as a

closet. There's a tiny entrance where we both stand, and then a queen bed with what can only be called an aisle on two sides. A TV sits on the dresser across the aisle at the foot of the bed, and the other aisle runs along the edge of the bed and ends at a shelf with a mini fridge and a microwave on top. The bathroom opens off that side. Beside us, a full length mirror graces the wall beside the entrance. The head of the bed is against the wall, and the far side is only a few inches away, leaving a space too small for a person to stand to open the curtains on the window.

"This is the only room they had?" I ask incredulously, staring at the one bed. It's not even a king bed.

"I can sleep on the floor," Adrian says, as if guessing my trepidation.

"Of a hotel?" I ask, wrinkling my nose and letting my gaze drop to the indistinguishable color of the thin carpet.

"This hotel?" Adrian asks, scuffing his toe on the thin, synthetic material underfoot. "I might need a few drinks first."

He laughs and squeezes past me to the fridge. Pulling it open, he lets out a sigh of relief. He swipes his hand along the collection of tiny, travel-sized bottles, gathering them all into his big hand before dropping the door closed. He dumps the pile in the middle of the blanket.

"Quite a selection," I say, sinking onto the corner of the bed. Adrian's already turning all the labels up, arranging the bottles so we can see what

we're working with.

“Should we risk an excursion to the vending machine?” he asks.

I shudder at the thought and shake my head. “I'm good with this,” I say, picking up a bottle of coconut rum. “Unless you can't handle shots, old man.”

“Hey,” he growls, glowering at me.

“To my first time running from the paparazzi,” I say, holding up the tiny bottle.

He grins and picks up a bottle of whiskey, unscrewing the cap and bumping it against mine. “And many more.”

We down our bottles, which only takes a few swallows.

“I'm sorry about this,” Adrian says with a grimace, tossing his bottle into the trash can. “Not quite the celebration I had in mind.”

“It has its charm,” I say, gesturing around the room.

“Where?” Adrian asks, craning his neck to survey every wall.

I laugh and pick up another bottle, this one peach vodka.

“Maybe you just need to look harder,” I tease, twisting off the cap. I hold it out. “Bottom's up, old man.”

“I do see one thing charming,” he says, picking up another bottle.

“Now you're catching on,” I say, smirking as our gazes lock.

We tap them together and then down the burning contents.

“Too bad they don’t have a balcony,” he says. “I like sitting up talking to you.”

“There’s no law that says you can’t sit up talking on a bed.”

“I can think of more interesting things to do in a bed,” Adrian jokes.

“Let’s play a game,” I say, kicking off my shoes and sitting cross legged on the bed.

“What kind of game?”

“Come on, put your feet up,” I say, smacking the bedspread with my palm. “Let’s play truth or dare.”

“Truth or dare?” he asks, shaking his head as he pushes at the heel of his shoe with the toe of his other one. “Damn, I really am an old man. It’s probably been twenty years since I played that.”

“Then get ready to feel young again.”

“You’re tempting fate now,” he says, giving me a wry smile. He gets his shoes off and situates himself opposite me, with the four remaining bottles of alcohol between us. “What are the parameters for this game?”

“We take turns asking. You pick truth or dare, and then if you won’t answer or do the dare, you have to drink one of those,” I say, nodding at the alcohol.

“Sounds easy enough,” he says. “Who goes first?”

thirteen

Valentina Rose

“So, what’s it going to be, old man?” I ask. “Truth or dare?”

“Watch it, little lady, or I’ll bend you over my knee and spank that ass,” Adrian says.

I laugh and lean back on my hands. “Sounds fun, but unless it’s part of the game, it’ll have to wait.”

“Fine,” he says, glowering at me, though I can tell he’s trying hard not to laugh. “Truth.”

“Aww, chicken,” I say. “I was going to dare you to spank me.”

“Dare,” he shouts. “I’m changing to dare!”

“Too late,” I say, grinning. I think about asking when was the last time he got laid, but I really don’t want to know. He hasn’t been with anyone since I started the tour, and I’m curious, but then, I don’t think I’d like the answer. I was sleeping with Josh until I met Adrian, so I can’t exactly be mad if he was hooking up with groupies before we met. And if he wasn’t, and it’s been a while, I’d just feel bad.

“Who broke your heart?” I ask instead.

“What makes you think I have a broken heart?” he asks, drawing back.

My stomach drops. Fuck. Is that what this is? *A rebound?*

“Do you?” I blurt, my heart suddenly hammering with pain and anger. I try to remember the last person I saw him linked to in the tabloids, but I don’t spend much time looking at celebrity gossip the way I did when I was a teenager. I can’t even remember who he dated last or when it was. But it would explain the crazy things he’s done.

I shouldn’t care, but I feel like puking at the very idea of processing that level of offensiveness. It’s not that I think I’m all that, but he’s made me feel good, and I liked the way he looked at me. If it wasn’t about me at all, but some other woman...

Which is silly. He doesn’t owe me shit. We were strangers when he started acting that way.

But it’s still a blow to my ego.

“Is that your question?” Adrian asks.

“It is now,” I say, scowling at him.

“No,” he says. “I don’t have a broken heart—yet.”

Damn him.

My blind heart swoons at his words. Why does he have to be so damn

charming? He always has the perfect words to melt me when I start to bristle. And now I'm wondering how he got that way, when he's so famous he could literally walk into a room and drop his drawers without saying a word and girls would be lining up on their knees to blow him.

"What about you, Valentina Rose," he says. "Is that why you're so guarded? Someone hurt you?"

"I'm more of a dare kind of girl," I say.

"I dare you to go out with me."

I give him a long look. "Does tonight count?"

"No," he says. "I want to take you out. Not to celebrate. On a real date. The kind where we plan ahead, you get dressed up for me—the works."

"Who said I'd dress up for you?" I tease.

He shrugs. "Then don't, if you want to end up back in a hotel room with me because we couldn't get into the place I want to take you in jeans. But I won't be sleeping on the floor if that happens."

"Is that right?" I ask, unscrewing the cap on one of the bottles. "Where will you be sleeping?"

"I won't," he says, his chocolate eyes heated. "Now say yes or drink."

"Yes."

He smiles so big it makes me feel all stupid inside. "Really?"

I nod and try to play it off as no big deal. "Sure. We were going out

tonight without a plan, and look what happened. Might as well plan ahead and have security set up so your groupies don't eat you alive."

He just shakes his head and gives me a tiny smile, like he's on to me but isn't going to call me on it. "Your turn," he says instead. "Shoot."

"So tell me who did break your heart," I say.

"Why are you stuck on this?" he asks, grinning like he's winning at something because I can't let it go.

"The first time we texted, I asked about your handle—*IronHeartsBreakToo*. You said you'd tell me later."

"I said I'd tell you when you agreed to marry me," he says, looking as smug as if I said I'd marry him.

"Then drink up," I say, nodding at the bottles. "Or answer even though I'm not marrying you."

"That's what you think."

"That's what I know."

He downs one of the bottles and tosses the empty toward the trash can in the corner. It bounces off and rolls across the floor, but neither of us get up to pick it up.

"My turn," he says. "Truth or dare."

"Truth," I say. I have nothing to hide, and I'm a little afraid of what he'd dare me to do next.

“Admit you like me.”

“That wasn’t a question.”

“Tell me,” he commands, a dominant edge to his voice that makes heat throb in my lower belly.

“Then ask me.”

“Do you want me the way I want you?”

I swallow hard and then lift a bottle to my lips, downing the alcohol in a few swallows before squaring up to shoot the bottle across the room into the trash can.

“Damn,” Adrian says. “I’d be hurt, but I’m too impressed by your hook shot. You play basketball?”

I shrug. “Just messing around with my brother. I’m more of a dancer than an athlete.”

“You going to let me come to one of your pole classes and see for myself?”

I roll my eyes. “It’s a workout, not a strip club. It’s really not what you’re thinking.”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking,” he says. “I want to see you sweat.”

“You’ve seen me sweat,” I remind him.

We haven’t talked about that night, and tension crackles in the air

between us as the words hang between us, the erotic memory playing through my mind. From the look of raw lust in his eyes, he's replaying it too. Suddenly, all I can think about is that we're finally alone, in a hotel room with only one place to sleep.

This is the first time we've been truly alone, and the heavy meaning of that sinks in slowly. The possibilities are too big to contemplate right now.

"Okay, my turn," I say, breaking the heady tension. "Truth or dare?"

"Dare."

There's no hesitation in his answer, and with the way he's looking at me, suddenly all I can think of are sexual things. And I can't remember why that's a bad thing.

We've kissed at least half the days since the hookup after our first show, and he hasn't gotten any crazier. If anything, he's gotten less crazy as time goes on. After the last time, I was afraid he'd act like we were together or tell the others we were married or something insane like that, but he's hasn't said a word to Crimson. Things have actually been great—aside from the lethal dose of sexual frustration I get every time we play a show and then go to our separate rooms like nothing happened.

I'm a little drunk, but not too drunk to want to find out what comes next. I glance around the room, searching for a dare, and my eyes fall on the open bathroom door. Inside, I can see the glass doors of the shower stall next

to a small sink.

“I dare you to take a shower,” I say at last.

“That’s it?” he asks, regarding me suspiciously and stroking the scar on his chin.

I give him a wicked grin. “With the door open.”

“Valentina Rose,” he says with mock scolding. “That’s how you get the floor wet.”

I laugh and pick up one of the last two bottles, holding it out to him. “Then drink up, old man,” I say, arching a brow.

“I never said I wouldn’t take the dare,” he says, crossing his forearms across his torso and grabbing the hem of his shirt. He pulls it over his head and tosses it to the floor before standing. “You sure you’re ready for this?”

“No,” I admit. “I’m a little drunker than I expected from three shots.”

He picks up one of the bottles and squints at it. “These are two shots each.”

“Shit,” I say. “I’m going to be paying for that tomorrow.”

Adrian snorts. “Get back to me when you’re over thirty.”

“What does that mean?”

“I didn’t know what a hangover was in my twenties,” he says. “It’s the old man who’ll be paying.”

“You deserve it,” I say. “After what you did last time.”

“What did I ever do to you?” he asks, feigning hurt.

“Tortured me,” I say, nodding at his jeans. “Now go torture me some more.”

“I thought I was the masochist.”

“That’s true,” I say, narrowing my eyes. “I’m more of a sadist. Maybe you should be the one suffering this time.”

“Suffering?” he demands.

“Yes,” I say, sinking to my knees in front of him. “I think it’s payback time.”

“Payback?” he asks incredulously. “For what? Making you come too hard?”

“Yes,” I say, undoing his button. “And denying me ever since.”

“I never denied you,” he protests. “I couldn’t say no to you if my life depended on it.”

“Then let me do this,” I say, lowering his zipper. I smile up at him as I dip my hand inside, gripping his thick shaft through his underwear. As much fun as it was letting him take control and make it all about me last time, I’m ready to explore what I could only fantasize about up until now.

Adrian groans and reaches out blindly, steadying himself on the wall.

“What are you doing?”

“What do you think?” I ask, pushing his jeans down around his knees.

I kneel up, nuzzling his cock through his black boxer briefs.

“Valentina,” he growls.

“Yes, Adrian?” I tip my head up and bat my lashes at him. At the same time, I curl my fingers over the top of his waistband, tugging it down to free the thick head of his cock. I nudge it with my chin and smile up at him.

“You were saying?” I prompt.

“Fuck if I know,” he breathes, running his free hand down the back of my head and pulling me close. His chocolate brown eyes are blurred with lust as he shifts his hips, running the head of his cock over my lower lip.

I chuckle and flick my tongue out, tasting the soft, warm skin stretched over his rigid shaft.

“Fucking put it in your mouth or I’ll going to give you a facial right now,” he growls, digging his fingers into my hair and thrusting his hips forward.

I smile as I open my lips, letting him in. I’m not used to his gruff demands, and my core throbs as he takes control, pushing my head down onto his cock until my throat constricts and I gag around it. He growls and pulls me up, and I suck in a breath before he thrusts me back onto his shaft. I moan and hollow out my cheeks, squirming with desire at his dominant treatment. Wrapping my fingers around the base of his cock, I let him set his own rhythm so I can focus on breathing between strokes and swirling my

tongue over his smooth, hot skin.

“Fuck, Val,” he chokes out. “You feel so fucking good.”

I slide my other hand around him, grabbing his firm ass and yanking him in, encouraging him to get rough with me. Reading my signal, he widens his stance and grips my hair tighter, fucking his cock with my mouth in unapologetic, dominant strokes. Tears blur my eyes, but I’ve never been wetter in my life as I feel him plowing into my throat with each thrust.

When I start choking, he eases back, pulling me off so I can catch my breath. His hard, glistening shaft stands straight and tall, thick and corded with throbbing veins that make me have to clench my thighs with lust.

“Touch yourself,” he commands, turning a half step so he’s facing the mirror next to the door while I kneel beside the bed, with my back to it. “Pull down your jeans and let me see you finger that pretty pussy while you swallow my cum.”

I reach down, undoing my jeans and pushing them down around my knees. I adjust my position so he has a view of me from the back in the mirror as I open my knees and reach between my thighs. I’m slick and ready as I slide a finger inside.

He groans and fists his cock, closing his eyes. “Fuck,” he grits out. “I’m not going to last much longer. Can I cum in your mouth?”

“Yes,” I say eagerly, wrapping my fingers around his shaft and

bringing his cock to my lips again. I push it deep into my throat, sliding it in and out of my mouth and pumping my finger into my pussy in the same rhythm.

“Oh god, Val,” he groans, grabbing my head with both hands and fucking me hard onto his cock. His hips jerk forward, and he fills my throat with his cock, blocking my airway. I breathe through my nose and swallow reflexively as his vein throbs thick against my tongue and then hot cum fills my mouth, sliding down my throat. I suck it down, pulsing my tongue against his cock and making his whole body spasm as he squeezes more into my mouth.

He draws back, his muscles still shaking, and drags me up, tossing me back onto the bed. I let out a little shriek of surprise as he dives between my thighs, ducking under my jeans that still bind my knees. His tongue plows into me as his thumb swipes over my clit, already swollen and aching for release. I thrust my hips up, spreading my knees as his tongue spears into my opening, stroking inside me until stars explode behind my eyelids and I cry out, bucking under him as my orgasm comes quick and hard.

He moans and moves over my clit, sucking it gently and sliding two fingers into my opening to feel the aftershocks pulsing through my walls.

“I have to have you,” he groans, resting his chin on my mound while his fingers stay buried inside me. “I’ve been losing my mind every day I’m

around you, unable to touch you.”

“Me too,” I admit, the achy need inside me only easing for the moment. I know it won’t be fully gone until we do this.

“Oh fuck,” he growls. “I’ve been waiting to hear you say those words since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

He ducks out from between my legs, tugging off my jeans while I peel off my shirt and slip out of my bra. When I’m naked, he shoves off his own jeans and stands over me, the rock god himself in the flesh, his body glorious and perfectly sculpted. Ridges of muscle ripple in his abdomen and dance under the ink covering his strong, drummer’s arms and shoulders.

I reach for him with my feet, hooking them around him and pulling him closer. “Fuck me,” I say, knowing this is probably a bad idea, but I don’t care. I’ve been fighting the attraction for too long.

“Are you too drunk?” he asks, leaning down to brush his lips over mine.

“No more than you,” I point out.

“I still have to finish your dare,” he points out, a teasing smile on his lips.

“Then I’m coming in with you.”

“I thought I was the stage four clinger,” he says through a grin.

“Fuck me, and I’ll leave you alone,” I say, smiling back.

“Now I’m never going to fuck you,” he says, standing and heading into the bathroom, leaving me wanting.

I jump up and follow him in, grabbing a crappy hotel shower cap off the counter and slipping it on while he gets the water in the shower running. I watch him through the hinged glass doors, his body so gorgeous I can’t remember why I ever wanted to resist. I open the doors and step through, wrapping my body around his and letting the warm spray of the shower fall over me.

“Fuck, you’re so sexy,” he says, falling back against the wall, his hands falling to my hips. “You’re not playing fair. How can I say no to this?”

“You said you couldn’t,” I point out, reaching between us to tug at his cock, which is already starting to harden again. “You shouldn’t have told me your weakness.”

“I wouldn’t have told you if I didn’t want you to exploit the fuck out of it,” he says, grinning down at me and sliding his hands to my ass, massaging it and dragging me against him.

“Are you clean?” I ask. “I’m on birth control.”

“Then get on my dick,” he says, lifting me off my feet.

I wrap my legs around his hips and my arms around his neck, kissing his mouth while he positions his cock at my entrance and slowly pushes inside me, stretching me deliciously around his girth. I gasp against his

mouth as hot water sluices over my back and his thick cock fills me until I think I'll tear in two.

“Aw, fuck,” he says, dropping his head back against the wall and taking a few breaths. “If I hadn't just cum down your throat, I'd be busting inside you like a virgin right now. You feel so fucking good, Val.” He eases me onto him deeper, shuddering as I sink onto him to the hilt.

I gasp with a twinge of pain, adjusting to his size inside me while he fights for control. At last, I tighten my legs around his hips and begin to move up and down on him. He grabs my ass and helps me move, slamming me down onto him harder and harder. At last, he spins us around, slamming my back to the tile wall and driving up into me so hard I cry out, my nails biting into his skin. I drop my head back and let him take over, fucking me hard against the wall as my nails shred his skin and his name falls from my lips, echoing around the tiny bathroom as my core clenches around the intrusion of his thick shaft until climax takes me.

He keeps going, not giving me a moment to catch my breath as he hammers into me until I feel myself cresting again. “Cum with me, baby,” he growls, slamming me down onto him. “Let me feel that tight cunt milking my cock.”

I reach down, massaging my clit as he gets rougher still, until we both explode over the edge at the same time. “Fuck, Val,” he grits out, his hips

jerking uncontrollably as he spills his seed deep inside me. “I fucking love you.”

“Don’t say that,” I protest breathily, my core gripping him and squeezing out every last drop. My whole body is shaking with intensity, and I could melt into a puddle of bliss and never wake up at this point.

Adrian doesn’t seem to agree. “You’re going to be sorry you told me we don’t need condoms,” he says against my neck, his cock pulsing inside me again. “Now that I know there’s no limit to the number of times I can fuck you, I’m going to keep coming inside you all night.”

“Surely you’ll run out before morning,” I tease, climbing off him and setting a foot down on the shower floor, testing my knees before I trust them to hold me after that orgasm.

“Challenge accepted,” Adrian says with a wicked grin. “Let’s see who breaks first.”

fourteen

Valentina Rose

The moment we rejoin the band the next day, Crimson drags Adrian onto his tour bus. I can hear the thunderous shouts from outside, and I feel a little bad for Adrian facing the control freak on his own. But then, he's been in the band for years, so he must be as used to the leader singer's temper as Crimson is used to his crazy intensity. They're all passionate, like Adrian said.

"Late night?" Lucas asks with a smirk, handing me a coffee as we stand outside, our bodyguards a few paces off.

"I'm surprised your dad lets you have caffeine," I say, slipping my shades on to hide the circles under my bloodshot eyes.

"He's not so bad," Lucas says. "He's a little over the top like the rest of us, but he's has good intentions."

"Maybe when it comes to y'all," I say, sipping the coffee with a grimace. "I get the feeling I'm in the doghouse, even if Adrian's getting the brunt of it this morning."

“He’s just looking out for us,” Lucas says with a shrug.

“I know,” I say, because I’m not going to shit talk his dad too much. He really is looking out for the band, and he sees me as a threat. I can’t really blame him, with the way Adrian acts. I nod toward the bus. “So, is this pretty normal?”

“Dad going off on A?” Lucas asks, leaning against the side of the vehicle. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“Is it always about a guest musician on the tour with you?”

“Sometimes it’s about the opening act,” Lucas says, cracking a grin and giving me a knowing smirk, like he knows it’s driving me crazy not knowing if I’m just the latest in the string of Adrian’s fixations.

“The female opening act?” I press.

Lucas nudges his mirrored shades up his nose and chuckles. “He’d be flattered that you’re asking.”

“You’re not going to answer?”

He shrugs. “It’s not always about a girl,” he says. “It’s always about Dad being controlling, though. But he’s just trying to keep us safe, y’know? After Dennis...”

“That makes sense,” I say. “I’m sorry about that, too. It must be hard for all of you.”

Lucas rakes his fingers through his black hair. “I never really played

with him,” he says. “I actually wouldn’t be in the band if he hadn’t kicked the bucket. So I guess I should be thankful.”

“That must suck.”

“What?”

“That you have to deal with people who say that.”

“Yeah,” he grumbles, scuffing his toe against the pavement. “I grew up with the guy. Then people act like I’m supposed to celebrate the fact that he died because it means I get to be famous.”

“That must be hard.”

“You’re lucky, you know,” he says, downing the rest of his coffee and holding out the cup. As assistant rushes to take it and he crosses his arms and frowns at me. “You get to leave in a few weeks.”

Before I can poke around in that can of worms, the door swings open and Adrian comes storming out. I decide to let him cool down on his own, and apparently Crimson doesn’t need to have a word with me at all. He locks himself in his bus to pout once Lucas gets on. We’re on the road, so Adrian goes to his bus. I get on the third bus with the rest of the entourage, where I spend my days on the road. Sometimes I hang out with Adrian on his bus, but usually I spend the days with the crew of assistants, bodyguards, managers, agents, and whoever else happens to be around for the next show.

By that evening, everyone seems to have calmed down, and we play a

killer show in Houston. Every show I play better than the last, fitting into the band's sound better, and growing as an artist. Part of me can't believe there's only a month left with them. I try to soak up the thrill of each show, even the ones where I can feel tension and resentment brewing, which happens more often over the next few weeks.

The more time goes on, the more Crimson and Adrian bicker. I hope it's just from spending so much time together and not about me, but I can't shake the feeling that we're adding to it. More than once, Crimson hangs out until late into the night, even though he used to go to bed early the night before each show. Now, I'm pretty sure he's cock blocking so we can't be together, but I can't say anything without admitting we actually are hooking up.

Adrian and I sneak off for quickies when we can, and when we have a few hours together, no matter what time of day, we take full advantage of the time alone. The sex is too good to give up, and our chemistry on stage sizzles hotter than ever instead of fizzling now that we broke the tension between us.

One night, about a month into the tour, when I've gone back to the hotel early and am waiting impatiently to see if Adrian can slip away and join me before the others get done with their obligations, my phone rings.

I roll over on my bed and grab it up, hoping he'll be saying he's on his way.

Instead, I see Marisol's face on the screen. We text pretty much every day, but a phone call is pretty rare, and I dread the worst.

"Hey," I say, rolling onto my stomach and resting on my elbows. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," she says. "Yeah, it's fine."

"Your grandma's okay?" I ask, knowing by her voice something's up.

"Yeah," she says. "She's fine."

"So, what's up?" I ask, cutting to the chase.

"You know how we said we were going to keep doing shows when you were gone?" she asks.

"Yeah..."

"Well, we did one in Little Rock, and someone came who had seen our Battle of the Bands performance," she says. "A small label, but..."

I hear screams and whoops in the background behind her.

"They wanted to sign us," she says, a smile entering her voice.

"Yeah they did," Shana howls into the phone, so loud I have to pull back. I can just imagine her pumping her fist into the air like she always did, hyping up the band.

"Oh my god," I say, laughing a little. "That's amazing. Congratulations!"

"I just wanted to let you know," Marisol says. "We're going to sign

with them. With a new name—Marisol’s Garage. I guess our old name was actually already taken.”

I know she’s not really asking my permission, and she doesn’t have to, but I can’t help but feel left out. Which is stupid. I left the band, so of course they got a new name. I’m playing with the biggest band in the world now. I shouldn’t be jealous that my friends signed with a tiny label. And I’m not—not exactly. I’m so happy for them that tears of joy fill my eyes as I laugh over the phone as they celebrate together.

But that’s just it. They’re together, and I’m halfway across the country in some posh hotel. As grateful as I am for all of it—the five star hotels and massages and spa treatments, the great sex and overwhelming success of Iron Thorns—the truth is, it’s not my band.

Screaming Divas is my band.

And they’re moving on without me. They’re not even Screaming Divas anymore.

“Take that, Iron Thorns,” DeeDee yells in the background. “They wouldn’t know talent if it bit them in the ass. We don’t need their label. We got our own!”

“I better go,” Marisol says. “They’re getting rowdy, and if I don’t stop them, they’re going to start smashing guitars. Not everyone can do that every show and replace it for the next.”

I know that's not a dig at me, but her being self-deprecating because they're a small band and none of them have a lot of money, but I can't help but feel awkward about it. Iron Thorns doesn't really do that—at least not since I've been on the tour. But I've seen videos of them doing it in past years, when they were a little more crazy, back when Dennis was alive and would get out of control at some of their shows.

“I wish I was there to celebrate with you,” I say, a pang of regret going through me.

“Don't be silly,” Marisol says. “You're famous now. I saw you on *Your Celebrity Eyes* holding hands with Adrian fucking Hart. You can't be missing our little Podunk town.”

“Not the town,” I say. “But I miss y'all.”

“Aww, we miss you too,” she says, and I hear the speakerphone switch on. “Y'all say hi to our star, Valentina.”

“Hey, Val,” the others yell in the background before they go back to carrying on.

“I'm really happy for you,” I say. “I know you'll make it big.”

“Hell yeah, we will,” DeeDee crows.

“Okay, I really have to go,” Marisol says.

“Right,” I say. “Congratulations again.”

I hang up, the sound of their celebration ringing in my ears. I'm not

bitter about missing it.

I'm sad.

They're going to go on tour for the first time, have all the experiences I'm having for the first time on my own. Iron Thorns is a veteran band by now, but I'm still new. And instead of getting to experience all my firsts with them, I'm here alone in a hotel room, missing them and feeling too green for the band I'm playing with. I want to experience all those things with my own band, my own friends. I want to share all this with someone who really gets it, to share our first sold out show and our first tour announcement and all the rest of it. Even if it means we have to struggle along the way. Even if we never get as big as Iron Thorns.

A few minutes later, Adrian slips in my door with a grin. "I got away," he says, coming to the bed where I'm sitting. He takes me in his arms and kisses me, then smooths the frown between my brows.

"What's wrong, my love?" he asks.

"Nothing," I say, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him. "My friends just signed to a small label."

"That's great," he says. "Right?"

"Yes," I say. "Definitely great."

"Maybe we can get you to sign on with a big label," he says. "I just have to convince Crimson, but I think you should come on the rest of the tour

with us. Judy's already approved."

"Really?"

"Yes," he says, pulling me tight against him. "Then we don't have to say goodbye. We can stay together. And you won't have to find a new band when you go home, because you won't go home. You'll be part of the biggest band in the world."

"Thank you," I say, feeling so grateful my heart might overflow. I push away the lingering sadness about not being part of the Screaming Diva's success, and I give myself to Adrian Hart's overwhelming brand of pleasure and forget everything else.

fifteen

Adrian Hart

We have a three day break between shows, and I decide it's the perfect time to show my lover the benefits that come with being a part of Iron Thorns. The tour schedule is grueling, and not reflective of how we live our lives for most of the year.

“Ready to complete that dare you owe me?” I ask, stepping into her room on the second day of our break.

“I figured you'd forgotten about that,” she says, straightening from where she's folded on the sofa in her room.

“You underestimate me, Valentina Rose,” I say, pulling the door closed behind me and going to her. “You think because we're sleeping together, I don't still want to take you out?”

“Well...” she says, tossing aside a *Car & Driver* magazine. “That's how it usually works. You work your way up to the sex with dates, and then once you're hooking up, the dates kind of end.”

“Give me the names of every man—no, every little boy—who ever

treated you that way, and I'll personally pay him a visit."

She cocks a brow. "You're going to reward him with a visit from a famous rock star?"

"I'm going to feed him his teeth," I growl.

She laughs and shakes her head. "You're nuts, and it's fine. That's how dating usually works."

"Not with me," I say. "Not with you, anyway. And you owe me a date. So get ready."

"Well, aren't you bossy today?"

"Damn right," I say. "I've been waiting two weeks for this."

"Two whole weeks," she teases. "Damn, Adrian. That must have been so hard."

"Harder than waiting to fuck you," I say, pulling her in and pressing my lips to hers. "Now, will you go on a date with me tonight?"

"Yes," she says, grinning and looping her arms around my neck. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

She sighs. "Men really think we want that."

"You don't?" I ask, drawing back but resting my hands on her hips to keep her close.

She rolls her eyes. "At least tell me what kind of shoes to wear."

“I thought you didn’t like it when I was bossy.”

“I never said that,” she argues, leaning in to plant a quick kiss on my lips. “It’s cute that you think you can tell me what to do outside the bedroom.”

“Outside the bedroom?” I ask, my grip tightening. “Does that mean you obey me in bed?”

“Don’t I?” she asks with a coy little smile.

I growl and drag her close, nipping at her neck. She giggles and lets me lay her back on the couch. “Then spread your legs and show me that pretty little pussy I like to lick so much,” I order.

She pushes down her sweatpants, spreading her knees and touching herself. My head spins at the sight, at the view when she drops her head back and gives me access to her graceful neck. I bite at her skin, sucking and licking as I push down my jeans and give my cock a few quick tugs. I spit on my hand and slick it over the top, then push into her tight, bare cunt. She gasps and shudders, moaning my name as I begin to pump into her, holding back from filling her with my seed and claiming her as my own again.

She’s my favorite drug, the only one I need. Fucking her is the best high next to seeing her smile and watching her play. I can’t get close enough, even when I’m inside her. I can’t get enough of her. I live to bury myself inside her and hear her cry my name when I bring her the pleasure she

deserves every single day. I'd crawl inside her skin and spend my whole life inside her if I could.

I get rougher as she gets wetter, until she's whimpering for release. Then I flip us over, so she's straddling my lap. "Hold onto the back of the couch," I order, gripping her hip with one hand and watching my cock glide into her, stretching her to fit. She leans forward, gripping the back of the couch with both hands while I fuck her hard from below, slamming up into her as her mewling cries echo through the room. Her pussy clenches around me rhythmically, and I pin her down on me, holding her hips and grinding up into her. My head spins and my whole body tenses with the strength of my release as I let go. My cock throbs thick with cum before my seed erupts into her depths.

I've never cum so hard in my life as I do with Val. Sex had become cheap and meaningless until she came into my life. Now it's so much more than just a release or physical pleasure. It's a way to be close to her, to show her how good I can be for her, how good I can make her feel every day of our lives. When I've pushed her over the edge again, I rise from the couch and carry her to the bed, where I lay her down.

"Get some rest if you need it," I tell her, brushing a hand over her forehead before I lean down to kiss her brow. "That's why I didn't ask you yesterday. I wanted to give you a chance to rest up for a day. The schedule is

tough. But now it's time to blow off some steam and have fun. Wear something comfortable, but bring a nice change of clothes."

I leave her recovering and go back to my room to pull some strings and get everything set up. That evening, I lead Valentina to the waiting car, and we leave the hotel.

"You going to tell me where we're going yet?" she asks.

"Not yet," I say, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze. I'm excited to get away, especially with her. A few minutes later, we pull up at the small, private airport.

"Are you giving me flying lessons?" she asks.

"Not quite," I say, flashing her a grin.

"Then you should probably tell me where we're going now."

"Not yet," I say with a smug smile, undoing her seatbelt and climbing out of the car. I lead her to the steps of my private jet, and together, we climb on board. My assistant and our bodyguards follow, but they'll stay in the back of the plane so we can have some privacy.

On board, we sit in our plush seats, and a waiter brings us sparkling glasses of champagne.

"What's the occasion?" Valentina asks me when the waiter's gone.

"You agreeing to go on a date with me," I remind her, clinking my glass to hers.

She takes a sip and sighs. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re a bit over the top?”

“Only for you,” I say, taking her hand. “Welcome aboard. You might as well get used to this, because that’s all you’re getting from now on.”

“I hope we’re not going too far,” she says. “I didn’t bring a passport.”

“It’s been taken care of,” I assure her.

“You went through my stuff?” she asks incredulously.

“I only did what was required,” I promise. “And we’ve already got copies of everything from when you signed on.”

The plane takes off, and once it’s in the air, we move to a table. The waiter comes back and serves us dinner, filet mignon and new potatoes that melt in our mouths, broccolini with truffle butter, and wine. Afterwards, she brings an assortment of delicate, pastel colored freshly made macaroons to nibble on with cups of espresso.

“Okay, this is a pretty good date,” Valentina says, sitting back and sighing with a pink macaroon pinched between her thumb and finger.

“We’re just getting started, my love,” I assure her. “Ready to watch a movie?”

We curl up together on the couch and watch a movie, and then I bring her to the bathroom, where she finds a new toothbrush along with her favorite toothpaste and soap. When she’s done getting ready, we turn in, sliding down

on the Egyptian cotton sheets of the bed together and resting our heads on the satin pillowcases.

“You going to tell me where we’re going yet?” she asks, turning on her side to look at me and laying her cheek on her folded hands.

“You’ll see when you wake up,” I say, pulling her close and twining my legs through hers. I cup her cheek and lean in to brush a kiss over her lips. “Trust me?”

She nods, snuggling into my chest. “I finally get you all night.”

“I told you I’d hold you all night,” I say. “And I didn’t just mean in a hotel where we had no choice but to share a bed.”

I wrap my arms around her, my heart swelling with happiness and contentment that makes me drowsy with warmth. When I feel her breathing deepen as she falls asleep, I lay awake watching her, not wanting to miss a single breath she takes. At last, sleep pulls me under, though.

We wake when the plane lands, then spend a few minutes washing up and getting ready for the day. When Valentina emerges from showering and getting ready, I gape at her in shock. She’s wearing a tight black dress along with a pair of heels. A pair of oversized shades hides her eyes, and instead of her usual wild mane of curls, she’s hidden her hair under a long, blonde wig.

“Damn,” I say, letting out a low whistle. “Nice job on the disguise.”

“Thanks,” she says, flashing me a grin. “I figured I should do what I

could to avoid running from photographers in my Louboutins.”

“Good call,” I say, pulling on a hat and grabbing my own shades. Though it’s hot out, I wore sleeves to cover my arms, since my tats have given me away one too many times. If nobody knows we’re here, and they think we’re back in the States for our tour, though, they won’t look too close. I’m just a guy in a hat and sunglasses, walking with his lover. She’s a knockout, easily the most beautiful woman in the world, and people will be too busy looking at her to give me a second glance. And if they do... Well, our bodyguards will be a half block behind, pretending they’re just a couple regular guys too.

It’s already noon by the time we climb into our waiting car. “Where to, my queen?” I ask, taking Valentina’s hand.

“Considering I don’t know where we are, you’re going to have to help me out here,” she says.

I turn her gently and point to the Eiffel Tower in the distance. “We’re in Paris,” I tell her. “I thought the macaroons on the plane would tip you off. Want to get crepes for breakfast? Or go see the sights?”

“Oh, I love Paris,” she says with a contented sigh, leaning into my side. “Let’s have breakfast and then walk around.”

We eat and then go to a few shops, where I buy Valentina anything she even looks at, despite her protests. We pile the bags into the trunk of the

car and then go to the Eiffel Tower, where we walk around hand in hand like so many other pairs of young lovers. Soft rain begins to fall in the evening, and I buy an umbrella at an outdoor stand and hold it over us, holding Val to my side, grateful for the further disguise.

We find a quiet little restaurant and sit tucked away in one corner under strands of twinkling lights, sipping fine wine and listening to the thunder rumble outside while we eat.

“Well, I think it’s safe to say this is the fanciest date I’ve ever been on,” Valentina says, sitting back in her chair with her wine glass balanced in her delicate fingers when she’s done eating.

“Fanciest?” I ask, raising a brow. “Not the best?”

“And the best,” she says with a grin. “I just didn’t want you getting a big head.”

“Too late for that,” I say tucking a handful of hundreds under the plate for a tip. “I’m the shit. Hadn’t you heard?”

She laughs and reaches over to cover my beat up old hand with her lovely, slender one. “Seriously, though. Thank you. This was... Amazing. It couldn’t have been more perfect.”

“Just wanted to spoil you the way you deserve for one night,” I say. “Until you let me do it every night.”

“You’re going to fly me to Paris for dinner every night?” she teases.

“If you give me the chance,” I say seriously. “I’d do anything for you, Val. Just let me.”

“You’re very convincing,” she says. “But we only have a couple weeks left of the tour.”

“So don’t leave,” I say, turning my hand and linking my fingers through hers. “Stay on for the next leg. For the rest of the tour. The rest of my life.”

“Adrian…”

“What?”

“Can we just enjoy our date tonight?” she asks. “I don’t want to think about the future, or to let anything ruin this perfect day.”

“Okay,” I agree, just like I agreed we could just fuck and it wouldn’t mean anything. She doesn’t have to know that I’m lying through my teeth. It doesn’t matter. It only matters that she’s mine, and I’ll say anything I need to say to make that happen, to make her stay.

When we leave the restaurant, the light rain has turned into a deluge. We run to the car, and I help Val in, the blowing sheets of rain soaking us despite the umbrella. I worry that the perfect night has been dampened by the rain, but when I climb into the car, she’s laughing and more beautiful than she’s ever been.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to take off in this storm,” the driver

warns us as he whisks us toward the airport and my waiting jet.

When we arrive, the pilot confirms. I know we'll miss a show, and they'll have to cancel without a drummer, but I don't care. I'd rather be here with Val for another night anyway.

We retreat to the bedroom and close the door, and I light a few candles and then take off Valentina's dress, letting it fall to the floor around her feet. I step back and admire the goddess before me for a moment. Then I drop to my knees and worship her with my mouth, letting my tongue carry her away one slow lick at a time. When I feel her cum in my mouth, her sweet essence spreading over my tongue, I know I'm the one who should be thanking her, that she's given me the greatest gift on earth, and I'll never let her go.

I lay her back on the bed and eat her out until she's screaming my name and dripping down my fingers as I stretch her open, fucking her with them until she cums again. Only then do I unzip and lower my cock to her weeping cunt, sliding inside the wet heat of her body. I pump into her, giving her all of me, until I can't hold back. We come together, my arms tight around her.

"God, I fucking love you," I say, my hips jerking involuntarily as I squeeze the last drops of cum into her core.

"I think I'm falling for you too," she admits softly, her legs wrapped

around me and her heart hammering double-time against mine.

I've never heard a sweeter sound in my life, no matter how many perfect concerts we've played. There's been an emptiness inside me for so long I forgot it could be filled, and now it's bursting with joy and love for this beautiful woman who changed my life with a single look.

When we finally pull apart, I feed Valentina chocolate-covered strawberries and we drink the bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice by the bed. Then we make love on the soft sheets again before falling asleep in the paradise of each other's arms.

I know that no matter what happens, I'm the happiest man alive when I'm with Val. I could miss every show on the tour, and it would be worth it to keep from missing one moment with Valentina cradled in my arms, peacefully dreaming with her lips parted in a soft smile of contentment. The only thing in the world that feels better than the happiness she brings me is knowing I bring her happiness too.

sixteen

Valentina Rose

“Where the fuck have you been?” Crimson thunders the moment we step foot through the door of the penthouse suite in the hotel where he’s holed up with Lucas the next evening. Crimson is pacing, a frenetic energy radiating off him, while Lucas sits scrolling on his phone. He barely glances up when we walk in, despite his father’s deafening volume.

“We were stranded by the weather,” Adrian says. “We tried to come back last night.”

“What weather?” Crimson fumes.

“It was storming in Paris,” Adrian says.

“Paris?” Crimson splutters, his face going red with rage.

“I told you I was taking Valentina out,” Adrian says.

“Two days ago,” Crimson screams, slamming his beer bottle down on the counter.

Adrian goes to the fridge and pulls out a couple beers, resting each one on the edge of the counter and knocking the lid off with the heel of his

hand. He pours them into beer glasses and hands me one before heading for the doors to the balcony. “This isn’t what Val needs right now,” he says. “We just had a long flight. Let her chill for a minute.”

“I’ve had it with your shit,” Crimson screams after us.

Adrian takes my hand and pulls me outside, drawing out a chair at the balcony table for me. “Sorry about him,” he says. “Just give him a minute to calm down.”

Crimson storms out, a new beer in his hand and fury burning in his eyes. “You went to fucking Paris?” he demands. “In the middle of our US tour?”

“I wanted to take Valentina somewhere special,” Adrian says. “We would have been back in plenty of time if the storm hadn’t come up.”

“But it did,” Crimson says, breathing hard and gripping his beer bottle, glaring at Adrian. “You didn’t take into account it was a possibility? Or even bother to look at the weather?”

Adrian shrugs and takes a swig of beer. “Italy is further.”

“Grow the fuck up,” Crimson snarls. “Lucas is a kid, and he knows better than to take off without knowing he’ll be back in time for a show. He knows to look at his fucking weather app.”

As if summoned by hearing his name, Lucas steps out on the balcony, a glass of beer in his hand. He sits at the other table and crosses his arms,

watching the fate of his band be decided.

“I wouldn’t change a thing,” Adrian says, taking my hand. “It was perfect.”

“You fucking child,” Crimson rages. “You know how many people bought tickets to tonight’s show? How many fans you disappointed?”

“As long as I didn’t disappoint Valentina,” Adrian says.

“You’re not making it better,” I mutter to him.

“We had to cancel the show and refund all the tickets,” Crimson grits out.

“You act like we need the money,” Adrian says. “If we never played another day in our lives, we’d still be some of the richest bastards on earth.”

“The band is fucking suing you,” Crimson says. “For lost profits.”

“Fine by me,” Adrian says. “Call my lawyer.”

“You can’t just take off any time you fucking feel like it,” Crimson snarls.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I cut in. “We thought we’d be back in time, or we’d never have left like that. I wouldn’t have agreed to go if I’d known it would take so long to get back.”

“You,” Crimson says, his eyes narrowing at me. “This shit is all because of you.”

“Excuse me?” I ask, drawing up.

“I told you not to fuck her,” Crimson growls at Adrian.

“Not everyone’s your goddamn puppet,” Adrian snaps back. “It’s bad enough you do it to your own son. I’m thirty-two years old, and you’re not my fucking father. You don’t get to tell me where to stick my dick.”

“Well, this has been enlightening,” I say. “But maybe I should go let you two work this out.”

“Don’t go,” Adrian says, turning to me. “You know that’s not all you are to me.”

“She’d better not be,” Crimson says. “I’ve put up with your antics for a decade, but I’ve never known you to be stupid enough to risk the band for a piece of ass, no matter how good she is.”

“I’m not risking the fucking band,” Adrian says, throwing his hands up. “You’re the one ruining it with your delusions. You can’t control the whole world, Crimson. And even if you do, it won’t bring him back.”

“I fucking know that,” Crimson bellows, hurling his beer bottle at the railing. He turns to me, breathing hard. “If you’re going, then fucking go.”

“She’s not going anywhere,” Adrian says quietly, seeming to be calm and rational for once while his older bandmate falls apart. It’s kind of sweet, the way they step in for each other when one of them is struggling.

“Oh yeah?” Crimson asks, looking me up and down. “Then maybe you can stay and be the band whore. We need one of those, according to

these two dickheads. That way it won't distract them. You can come on the road with us. We'll even give you an official job title. How about Stress Relief Expert? If the pussy's that good, surely Adrian wants to let his band try it out and see for ourselves. What do you say, Luke? You want to fuck her next? I bet she could show you a thing or two."

"Don't you fucking talk to her like that," Adrian growls, shooting up from his seat like he's about to jump across the table and throttle Crimson.

"I think I'm done here," I say, standing and staring Crimson down without giving him the reaction he so obviously wants. I understand. He's making an ass of himself, falling apart in front of a virtual stranger, and the only way for him to save face is to goad me into going off on him so I look like the crazy one.

"Come on," Crimson says, grabbing himself through his jeans. "I'm sure Adrian wants the whole band to benefit from your precious cunt like he has."

Adrian leaps before I can say a word, slamming a fist into Crimson's jaw and sending him flying. He crashes over the second table, which grinds across the balcony with a metallic screech, sending the drinks tumbling. Glass shatters and beer splatters. Lucas jumps up, shaking off his hands, now dripping with spilled beer.

Adrian dives for Crimson again, but I step between them, shoving him

back. “Stop,” I yell. “I don’t need you to save me, Adrian. I’m perfectly capable of fighting my own battles.”

“I’m not saving you,” he says incredulously. “I’m defending your honor, and any man worth his salt would do the same for his woman, no matter how capable she is.”

“I’m not your woman,” I say firmly.

“You are,” he says, seizing my hand between his. “You’re my—my everything.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a problem,” I say, extracting my hand. “I can’t be everything to you, Adrian. And I’m not going to stick around to be disrespected by your band just because you think you need me for some inexplicable reason.”

“I *do* need you,” he insists.

“You’re not going to walk away from Iron Thorns,” Crimson says, shoving off the railing, where he’s been leaning to catch his breath and spit blood.

“I’m damn sure not going to stay and be your *stress relief*,” I say. “Or be talked to like that. So if there’s no apology, I walk.”

“You think I’m going to apologize?” Crimson asks incredulously. “To you? You really think you’re all that, don’t you?”

“I think it doesn’t matter who I am,” I say. “No one deserves to be

talked to that way.”

“I’ll tell you what you are. You’re fucking lucky to speak to us. Just because our drummer is mentally ill, you think you’re his savior now? Please. Get lost, bitch.”

I hurl my drink in his face, gripping the glass so I don’t lose my temper and punch the shit out of the asshole the way Adrian did. “I hope that burns your busted lip all night, you washed up egomaniac,” I snap. “And by the way, we all know the reason you won’t let the band fuck groupies is because then everyone would know that the only women you can pull are the ones as nasty and delusional as you. Not that you could get it up anyway.”

I stomp inside. Since the band traveled on to the next stop while we were gone, I haven’t unpacked my stuff. I find my bags packed and sitting on the bed in one of the rooms. One of the band’s assistants must have packed the few things I’d taken from my bags at the last place when it was time to move on and we hadn’t shown up yet. I sink down on the bed beside them, exhausted from the last few days of travel and still steaming about Crimson’s disgusting comments.

I thumb on my phone and start looking for a flight.

A tap on the door interrupts me, and Adrian sticks his head in. I sigh and motion for him to come in.

“Where are you going?” he asks. “You can’t leave, Val. I need you

here. You're the only thing that keeps me going on stage."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I've felt the tension for a while, and I don't want to come between you. The band was fine before I joined, and they'll be fine when I'm gone."

"The band might be fine, but I won't," Adrian says, sinking onto the bed beside me. "I love you, Val. I can't lose you."

"I'm sorry," I say again, gripping my phone and swallowing hard, trying to keep from caving when he looks at me with those adoring brown eyes. "I don't want to get in the middle of things and break up your band. The entire world would hate me. Besides, there's only a few weeks left, and to be honest, I don't think I could go back on stage with Crimson after the things he said tonight."

"He's just pissed at me," Adrian says. "And he knows he can get to me by disrespecting you."

"And you don't see the problem with that?" I ask. "I'm not going to be his punching bag to protect you."

"I never asked you to protect me," he says, sounding hurt.

"But that's what's happening," I point out. "He can't hurt you because you're used to him, and you don't let it bother you when he's an asshole. But now he's using me to hurt you. I'm not here for that."

"I tried to protect you, and you shut me down," he protests.

“Because I don’t need you to do that,” I say. “I also don’t need to take the heat when you fuck up. Besides, this is all pointless. I told you, I’m not playing with a guy who talks to me that way.”

“I’ll make him apologize,” Adrian says, grabbing my hand.

“It’s too late,” I say, my throat tight. “Even if he said he was sorry, I’d know he was still thinking those things. That he thinks of me that way—like I’m nothing but a groupie who got a job on the road with you.”

“Fuck him,” Adrian says. “Who cares what he thinks? This is my band too, and it’s better with you in it. *I’m* better. Just stay. For me, Val.”

“I can’t do that,” I say, squeezing his hand gently. “I really care about you, but I can’t live my life for you, and I don’t want you living your life for me.”

“It’s too late for that, too,” Adrian says. “I’ve been living for you since the moment you set foot on that stage in Little Rock. That’s why I—did the things I did to make sure you came with us. Because I knew how much I needed you after just one look. And I can be what you need too.”

“What things did you do?” I ask, my voice edged with warning.

“What?”

“You said the things you did to make sure I went on tour with you. What did you do?”

“Gave you the contract,” he says, looking down at our linked hands.

“Found out where you lived, convinced the band to take you on. All of that.”

“Anything else?” I ask, a pit opening up in my stomach.

“I... I may have set up your boyfriend,” he says. “But he wasn’t right for you. What were you doing with that stuffy little asshole? Come on, Valentina. You’re a *goddess*. It was never going anywhere with him, and if it did... I couldn’t let him hold you back.”

“You have no right,” I grit out, withdrawing my hand from his. “It’s one thing to track me down, but to meddle in my personal life?”

“He wasn’t helping you grow,” Adrian says. “I helped you realize your dream.”

“You crossed a line,” I say flatly.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” he says. “But I’d do it again in a minute. He wasn’t good for you.”

“You don’t get to make that decision for me,” I say. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m getting a flight home.”

“You’re leaving?” he asks incredulously.

“Yes,” I say. “As hard as it may be to believe, there are more important things to me than fame. I’m not going to be disrespected the way Crimson did tonight—or the way you did.”

“I didn’t,” he insists. “You said you liked it when I was bossy and took control.”

“*In bed*,” I say. “No woman wants to walk in on her boyfriend with another woman. Do you think the fact that you set it up makes it better? Did you even think about how much that might hurt me?”

“You’d barely been together a few months,” he says.

“So the ends justified the means.”

“Exactly,” he says.

“As long as you got your way,” I say. “You’re unbelievable, Adrian. What else have you done that I don’t even know about? You obviously have no idea what boundaries are.”

“I did it for us,” he insists, jumping up and pacing the bedroom. “You have to understand.”

“There is no *us*,” I say. “That’s what I understand. Now answer the question.”

“What question?”

“Did you do anything else that I don’t even know about, *for us*?”

He looks away, his jaw working back and forth.

“What else?” I grit out.

“There were more rooms at the hotel,” he admits. “I just wanted to be closer to you. But I would have slept on the floor if you wanted. I would do anything for you, Valentina. Anything.”

I stare at him a long minute. “Prove it.”

“What?” he asks.

“If you’d do anything for me, then prove it,” I say.

“Anything,” he says, sinking back onto the bed next to me. “What do you want? Name it, and it’s yours.”

“Let me walk away,” I say, standing and picking up my bags.

“I can’t do that,” he says, grabbing my face and pressing his lips to mine in a hot, desperate kiss. “Don’t go, Val. Please.”

“I have to,” I say. “You’ll be fine without me. The band will be just like it was before I came on tour with you, and in a couple weeks, you’ll hire someone else to play keyboard on the next leg of the tour. In a month, you’ll have forgotten I exist.”

“I will never forget,” he swears. “You’re in my heart, my mind, my body. Every breath I take is for you, Valentina. Don’t you understand that?”

“No,” I say. “I don’t think I do.”

“You can’t do this,” he says, his voice defeated.

“I have to.” I set down my bags and wrap my arms around him. “I’ll never forget you either, Adrian. But Crimson would fire me if I didn’t leave, and I’d rather do it on my own terms. And I’m not looking to stay in a band where I’m not wanted for a guy who wants me too much. You can’t just manipulate people to get your way. Sometimes, you have to take the loss.”

“I can’t do that,” he insists. “I can’t lose you. You’re my everything.”

“I can’t be your everything anymore,” I say. “So you’ll have to figure out how to go on without me. You’ve done it for thirty years. We’ve only known each other a few months. You’ll get over this infatuation, and you’ll be okay. I know you will.”

I give him one more kiss, then bend and pick up my bags.

“Goodbye, Adrian.”

I turn and walk out the door. No fans chase me, and it’s not just because I’m still wearing the wig. No one knows me. I’m not famous on my own. I’m just a girl who got a lucky break, and for a few months, played a minor part in a major rock band. In a month, a week, no one will even remember my name.

I should be relieved, but I have to force myself to keep walking, telling myself with every step that I’m not making the biggest mistake of my life, walking away from the only opportunity I’ll ever have, and going back to a life I was never satisfied with when I had it.

seventeen

Adrian Hart

The fun thing about drums is that they're loud. Even without a mic, those suckers can still dominate a stage. You can turn down the other instruments, but you can't soften an angry drummer. Kill his mic, do everything else in your power, but it won't do much good. If he wants to take center stage, he will.

It's funny watching Crimson get more and more furious as I pour my own fury into the next show, drowning out him and even Lucas. I do feel a little bad for the kid, but hey, he's gotta learn that in rock and roll, as in life, things don't always go according to plan. Not only do we all have enough passion for six men, but we've got egos sized to match.

We've always had our differences, but Dennis held us together. At first because he calmed us while hiding his own pain, and later because, as shitty as it sounds, he bound us together by giving us something to work towards together. Years of my life feel like a fever dream, the drug-fueled antics on stage and off, smashed guitars and wrecked hotel rooms and all

night orgies. We all went down the rabbit hole together, but only one man was left behind.

Not that we didn't try to bring him up out of it with us. As we saw him spiraling, there came a point when we started to pull back, to realize it was too far. It was never too far for Dennis. There was never enough. That's when he bound us together in the common goal of averting the crisis that seemed inevitable. Eventually, it proved to be just that. Even after he was gone, though, we've been clinging to a life raft left by his death, bound in common grief.

Now I have something to live for again, a light in the darkness, illuminating a path forward.

And Crimson can't fucking stand it.

Or maybe he's just pissed that he's being upstaged, and he's not the center of attention for once. But he should know that no one's seen him a single time since Valentina joined the tour. Not one person in the hundreds of thousands could have looked at anyone but her on that stage. Even a blind man could have seen she was the star from the moment she sat down at the piano the first night.

There's no replacing her.

So, we play a show with no keys at all, and though we've done it before, the hole she left in the band can't be filled with all the smashing drum

tangents in the world. We need her. Not just me, but the whole band.

“What the fuck was that?” Crimson thunders the moment we’re off stage. He shoves me, and I slam into the wall.

“That was what the band sounds like without Val,” I say.

He lunges for me again, but Kevin steps in and holds him back. “The band doesn’t need your precious little Valentina,” Crimson thunders. “We made it to the top of the charts a dozen times without that bitch.”

Now it’s my turn to swing. My fist connects with his jaw, and he goes stumbling backwards, grabbing his face. Kevin shoves me off, and then Crimson comes up behind him, trying to land a blow over his shoulder. Judy and Phil show up then, shoving him back and dragging us apart.

“Get yourselves together,” Judy scolds. “The media’s clamoring at the door. Don’t give them a reason to speculate more than they already will after tonight.”

“You’re fucking ruining the band over a piece of ass,” Crimson snarls at me.

“If that’s what you see when you look at her, the band is already ruined,” I say. “Your own ego has gotten in the way so much you can’t even see what’s good for us.”

“She does keep Adrian focused,” Lucas says from behind his shades.

“You never needed anything to keep you focused before,” Crimson

says to me. “The music should be enough. Which means she’s not adding something. She’s taking something away, and then offering herself as the solution.”

“You’re right,” I say simply. “She’s taking me away.”

“Where the fuck are you going?” he demands when I turn toward the dressing room.

“I’m going to find the solution,” I say.

“You can’t just walk away from the band,” Crimson shouts. “We’re in the middle of a tour!”

“Some things are more important than music.”

“Bullshit,” he says. “One girl isn’t more important than the tens of thousands of fans you’re going to let down.”

“This one is,” I say, and I walk away.

“I hope that fucking Yoko Ono is worth it,” Crimson calls to my back. “Because once you walk out of here, you’re in breach of contract, and there’s no coming back.”

I clap Lucas on the shoulder. “Bye, kid. It’s been a blast playing with you.”

“No one says that anymore, old man,” he says drolly. I pull him in and give him a hug, clapping him on the back. Then I head into my dressing room, not bothering to look back at Crimson.

I skip the media circus and get a car to the airport. On my jet, I watch the news break on *Your Celebrity Eyes*.

“Is Iron Thorns at war?” a pretty, young reporter with purple hair asks the camera. “Breaking news out of Kansas City tonight, Chris. After tonight’s drums-heavy performance, it appears that drummer Adrian Hart has abruptly left Iron Thorns. No comment from the band yet, but front man Crimson Franco is pursuing assault charges after an alleged altercation backstage.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m surprised,” says one of the gossip channel’s anchors back in the studio, an old guy with a walrus mustache who’s been there for decades. “I know fans will be disappointed if they can’t finish out the tour though.”

“Not surprised?” says the other anchor, a younger Black woman with a shaved head. “I have to say, I’m shocked.”

“Well, you know, they lost Dennis not too long ago,” the male anchor says. “You can’t expect many bands to move on from something like that. At least not as fast as they did. You think about Nirvana, for example. Or the ones that regrouped later—the Wailers, Sublime with Rome... It doesn’t usually happen overnight. Iron Thorns barely skipped a beat.”

“Well, maybe they’ll barely skip a beat now,” the woman says. “I’ve got tickets for their LA show. They could replace Adrian just as fast, right?”

“With who?” asks Chris. “Sorry, but I think it’s over for them,

Pepper. Better get that refund before they file for bankruptcy.”

They cut back to the reporter in Kansas City, and I turn it off, not interested in hearing more speculation. They’re delusional if they think we’ll be filing for bankruptcy. Maybe some bands would, but they obviously never met Crimson Franco if they think we squandered all our money on cars and blow. I guess I should thank his tight-ass, controlling tendencies for making sure we always had good lawyers and investors, because I’m the one going to get sued for breaking up the band mid-tour.

Thanks to Crimson, though, that won’t be a problem. I could pay to refund every ticket on the entire tour, and I’d still have so much money I couldn’t spend it all in a dozen lifetimes.

And even if I didn’t, I’d be happy living in a trailer as long as I get the girl. She’s more important than any tour, any fans, any tickets or money or bands. She’s the only thing that matters.

I can’t sleep, so I spend the night writing. When we land in Little Rock, I get a car to Faulkner, then head to Valentina’s house. I stand on the step for a few minutes before the door finally opens. It’s not Valentina who looks out at me, though. It’s a fortyish man with a neat goatee and a frown on his face, wearing a Razorback t-shirt and a pair of shorts.

“Who the hell are you?” he demands. “And how’d you get through our gate?”

“I’m Adrian,” I say, holding out a hand. “I’m Valentina’s—I’m here for Val.”

“Is someone in trouble?” he demands, ignoring my hand.

“No, sir,” I say. “I just need to talk to her.”

“So no one’s dead,” he clarifies. “You just thought you’d come calling on my daughter at three o’clock in the morning?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” I say. “If it wasn’t urgent, I would have waited. But I really need to see her.”

“Not this time of night,” he says, shaking his head. “You can see her tomorrow, after you’ve introduced yourself to me and her mother properly.”

With that, he closes the heavy door in my face.

Shit. I sit down on the porch swing and wait, watching the stars. I can’t remember the last time I sat still and looked up at the sky. It’s something forgotten, something I must have done as a kid, but not much in the last ten or fifteen years. I wish Valentina was here to watch them with me.

Instead, I’m alone with my thoughts, trying to work out what I need to do to convince her that she can trust me, that we can be together. Quitting the band was easy, but it’s not enough.

Finally, birds start to sing and light creeps into the sky in the east. I watch it grow, a brighter day already, just from the possibility that Valentina will be in it.

I watch the sunrise, a beautiful haze of pink and orange and gold lighting up the sky and then disappearing with the light. Finally, a car pulls up, and a woman climbs out and comes onto the porch. She stops short when she sees me, a hand flying to her heart and her eyes widening like she's seen a ghost.

“Are you—are you Adrian Hart?” she gasps.

“That’s me.” I stand and hold out a hand, smiling and shaking her hand while she stands gaping up at me, looking like she’s in shock. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Holly, the maid,” she says. “Wh-what are you doing here?”

“Well, Holly, I’m here to see Valentina,” I say. “Just waiting for her to be up and about.”

“I’ll send her out,” she says, still gazing up at me like I’m the wonder here and not her employer. She scurries inside, and I take a seat on the swing again. A while later, the door opens, and Valentina steps out.

“Adrian,” she says, planting hand on her hip. “What are you doing here?”

“You know what,” I say, standing and reaching for her.

She steps back. “I told you, I’m not going to finish the tour. I know I broke the contract, and I can work that out with your manager. You don’t have to show up in person.”

“I’m not here on behalf of the band,” I say. “I don’t care about them. I care about you.”

She sighs. “Adrian…”

“I left the band,” I say, reaching for her hand. “I’m not part of them anymore.”

“What?” she squeaks.

“I quit,” I say. “You were right about Crimson. He’s a dick. I guess he’s always been a dick, but you opened my eyes to it. I don’t want to be part of a band that’s fronted by a guy like that, who treats women that way.”

“You can’t just quit Iron Thorns,” she says, like I’m insane.

“You did,” I point out.

“That’s different,” she says. “I wasn’t really a part of the band. You’re a founding member. There is no band without you.”

I shrug. “Maybe. Maybe not. It’s not my problem anymore. My only concern is you.”

“Adrian, you can’t just show up here at seven in the morning and think it makes everything okay. You did some messed up shit, and I’m not sure I can just forgive that, even if you quit the band for me. I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t have to,” I say. “All I want is you. Just give me another chance. I’ll never do anything like that again, I swear. I would never do

anything to compromise what we have.”

“What do we have, exactly?” she asks.

“We can have anything you want,” I say. “You’re my everything. You said you couldn’t be that for me, but you’re wrong. You already are, and you have been for a long time. The only question is, do you want to be?”

“I don’t know,” she admits, biting at her plump lower lip in what must be the cutest gesture in the entire universe. “I need to think about it. And you... You can’t show up unannounced at my house, Adrian.”

“I couldn’t *not* show up,” I say. “You’re all I think about, Valentina. You’re it for me. And I’ll be here until you know that you can trust me. If you want to take it slow, I’ll take you on dates. If you want to get married... I’ll marry you today.”

“This is a lot before coffee,” she says, her eyes looking a little shiny.

“I know you’re scared, but I also know you feel it too,” I say. “You told me as much—that you were falling for me. I want my life to be with you. That’s the only life I see. Don’t you see it?”

After a long moment, she nods. “I do. I think I love you, but... I don’t know about the rest of it. It’s so fast, and I’m not ready to settle down.”

“Then what do you see for your life?” I press. “What do you want?”

“I want... I want to play music,” she says.

“Then play music.”

“Not with your band,” she says. “But it’s part of my life. I want that. I know you’ve had that life, and I understand you being done and wanting to move on. But I don’t want this to be it for me. If I stop now, the best thing I ever did was play for that month with you. I don’t want to look back and regret it. You’ve played for over a decade. I’m just getting started.”

“And do you see me in that life?” I ask. “Am I a part of it, or is someone else by your side when you make it big?”

“I see you,” she admits quietly. “I do, Adrian. I just... I don’t want you to give up all that for me.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” I say. “At least, not entirely. It was a long time coming. I think I just held onto it to keep Dennis alive in some way, through the music. But it was overdue already. We never should have let management talk us into a tour so soon.”

“You don’t have any regrets?”

“None,” I say honestly. “And if music’s what you want, I’ll be there to support you every step of the way. Just because I’m not playing doesn’t mean you have to stop. I can help you navigate the waters, contracts, all that. I’ve been there. Let me be there for you now.”

“If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure,” I say. “I’ll be there for you, Valentina. Now and forever.”

I sink down onto one knee, pulling out the ring I’ve been carrying in

my pocket.

“Adrian,” she gasps. “Oh my god. Why do you have a ring?”

“Because I knew from the moment I set eyes on you that I was going to marry you,” I say.

“I—I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes,” I say. “Marry me, Valentina.”

eighteen

Valentina Rose

If there's one good thing about a famous rock star showing up at your house at the crack of dawn to propose, it's that it gets you moving. I've spent the past few days moping, if I'm being honest. I'm not usually one for second-guessing my decisions, but I couldn't help but wonder if I made a huge mistake after leaving Iron Thorns and Adrian behind.

I've never had an opportunity like that, and I couldn't help but wonder if I'd thrown it all away for my own foolish pride. I've sure as hell never had a guy treat me the way Adrian does.

Or the way I thought he did, before I found out what he'd done.

"Adrian," I say. "I can't marry you. I don't even know if I can trust you."

"You can," he insists. "I'd never hurt you, Valentina. I just want to be with you. Let me prove to you I can be everything to you, too."

"I need to think," I say. "Just give me some space, okay?"

"Are you saying no?" he asks, looking so heartbroken I almost cave.

“I’m saying I need to think about it,” I say firmly. “This is all so fast, and you showing up out of the blue isn’t helping. Not to mention if my dad finds you here when he leaves for work, it won’t be pretty.”

“But you’ll think about it?” Adrian asks, that sunshiny smile breaking over his features that always makes me feel so happy just being near him.

“I’ll think about it,” I say, trying not to smile and encourage him. “Now go.”

He grabs me into his arms and kisses me hard on the mouth. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Okay,” I say, laughing a little and kissing him back.

“I love you,” he says.

“I love you too,” I admit. “Now seriously. Go home.”

He bounds down from the porch with as much excitement as if I’d said yes. Then he turns, walking backwards toward the waiting car. “I wrote a song for you, Val,” he says. “I’m going to get the words down and then play it for you tonight.”

I laugh and wave, my eyes blurring with tears, though I’m not sure why. I watch him drive away, then close my eyes and take a deep breath. This is not where I need to be. And if Adrian quit the band, that’s not where I need to be either. So where is my place? What’s the next step?

I can’t keep wondering if I made the right decision by leaving, if I

should call and beg for them to take me on the road for the last two weeks that I'm contracted. I also can't sit around my parents' house any longer. I need to clear my head.

So, after breakfast and a change of clothes, I hop on my bike and take off. I've lived in Faulkner all my life, and it's home, but I'm ready to leave it behind. I'm fortunate that I've been able to indulge in my love of travel too, but I'm ready for more. There's a whole world out there waiting. And maybe it's okay if I don't know where I belong just yet. Maybe I don't need to be in one place, but many. Maybe finding my place is what I need to be doing right now.

That evening, I grab a bag of burgers from Boehner's and head to Marisol's. I've been home a few days, but I haven't gone by to see them. I'm not in their band anymore, and I told myself seeing them would just make me feel left out. But fuck that nonsense.

They're not just bandmates. They're my friends, and right now, I need the kind of advice only my friends can give.

I pull up and park the Ducati at the curb, since DeeDee's maxi van is filling most of the driveway. Beyond it, I can just see that the garage door is open, but no music spills out. My heart does a little flip, and I realize I'm actually nervous to see my friends. What will they think of me leaving Iron Thorns like that? Or the fact that Adrian Hart proposed to me on my front

step this morning—and not the crazy kind he did before he knew my name.

He had a ring.

It was real.

I round the front of the van and spot my friends setting up for practice in the garage.

“Hey,” I say, walking up and stopping at the entrance.

They all turn and stare at me. “Hey,” Marisol says, tipping her chin at me. “We’re about to practice.”

“Sorry,” I say, shifting awkwardly on my feet. “I should have called ahead. I didn’t realize you’d changed practice night. Guess it’s a bad time.”

“What’d you bring us?” Shana asks, nodding to the bag in my hand.

I hold it up. “Burgers.”

“Dude, there’s never a bad time for a fucking burger,” she says, turning to Marisol. “Eat first, play after?”

“Hell yeah,” Marisol says, cracking a big grin at me. “Get over here, girl. We’ve missed your ass around here.”

The band crowds around, Marisol and DeeDee throwing their arms around me while Shana reaches in for a fist bump.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” DeeDee crows when we break apart. “Oh my god, I have so many questions!”

“Let the girl eat first,” Marisol says, walking over and parking herself

on the hood of the Sonata. “Did you bring fries?”

“Yeah,” I say, swallowing the lump in my throat that formed when I ordered them, thinking this was more of a cries breakup. But I didn’t want to show up without fries and explain it to them.

“I’ll grab some drinks,” Shana says, heading for the mini fridge in the garage.

“So,” DeeDee says, drawing out the word and widening her eyes at me. “Aren’t you going to tell us about it?”

“I thought we’d eat first,” I say, sharing a smirk with Marisol as I start setting the food on the hood between us.

“Oh my god,” DeeDee groans, dropping into a crouch and making some sort of grabby hands gesture of pure overwhelm. “Please!”

“She’s going to explode,” Marisol warns, grinning at me.

“Don’t you want to tell me about your exciting news first?” I ask, opening the box of fries. “Y’all got signed. You formed a new band. A new beginning is more exciting than an ending.”

“Dead,” DeeDee howls, flopping onto the driveway and sprawling out flat.

Marisol laughs and shakes her head. “Yeah, you’re right. No one wants to hear about that old band. Marisol’s Garage the hot new band that everyone’s going to be talking about now.”

DeeDee rolls over and lays facedown on the concrete, her arms by her sides.

“Who the fuck killed our manic pixie?” Shana asks, returning with an armful of soda and beer, along with a bottle of tea for me. A pang goes through me. My friends know me so well. It feels wrong to be separate from that, but maybe that’s part of growing up. Leaving behind childish things, even childhood friends.

“I’m just messing with you,” I say to DeeDee, laughing to cover the pain. “Ask your questions.”

She pops up like a jumping bean and gives me a Cheshire grin. “Did you smash?”

I take a bite of burger and chew, pretending to ponder her question. “Like, smash a guitar, or…”

“Dead,” she wails, flopping back down on the pavement so fast I’m honestly concerned for her health.

“You’re gonna kill her,” Shana says conversationally, handing a beer to Marisol and snagging a burger.

“Fine,” I say, holding back a grin. “Yes, we did in fact ‘smash.’ And a lot more than that.”

“Fuck,” Shana says. “You can’t just leave us hanging like that! Have you gotten meaner since you left, or were you always like this?”

I laugh and set my burger down on the wrapper spread over my knees.

“I might be a little bit... In love.”

DeeDee lets out a shriek into the pavement.

“In love?” Marisol asks, leaning away from me. “Say it ain’t so. What’d I tell you about keeping it casual?”

“I know,” I say with a groan, dropping my head back. “But you don’t know him. It’s hard not to get swept up in his passion.”

“Oh, I bet it is,” Shana says, wiggling her brows and grinning like a maniac.

“The dick was that good?” Marisol asks.

“So good,” I admit with a sigh.

“I knew it,” DeeDee cries, hauling herself up. “So you love him? Does he love you?”

“I think so,” I say, unable to hold back a smile. “He asked me to marry him.”

“What?” all three of them demand in unison.

“I know,” I say. “It’s so soon. It’s crazy, right?”

“Definitely,” Marisol says. “But then, this whole thing has been crazy since day one, and if you’re happy...”

“You really think so?” I ask. “You don’t think I’m crazy for considering it?”

“Oh, I think you’re completely *loco*,” Marisol says, finishing her burger and brushing off her hands before picking up the fries. “But maybe that’s not such a bad thing. You never get anywhere if you don’t put yourself out there and take some risks, right?”

“Yeah,” I say. “If I hadn’t gone on that tour, I’d never have fallen in love with Adrian. But marriage...”

“Where’s the damn rock?” Shana asks. “That’s what I wanna know. Is it the size of a basketball—an NBA one?”

“I told him I’d think about it.”

“You’d think about it?” DeeDee shrieks, making a full circle in the driveway as she tries to process my words.

“Girl, when Adrian Hart asks you to fucking marry him, you don’t think about it,” Shana says. “You take the rock, demand fifty-percent in the event of a divorce, and sign on the dotted line.”

“I don’t want his money,” I say. “And I don’t want him to think that’s what I’m after. I’m just not sure if it’s crazy to do it so soon.”

“Do you think time will make you more sure?” Marisol asks.

“No,” I admit. “I love him. But I can’t just say yes to marriage on an impulse.”

“Why not?” DeeDee says. “My mom did it like ten times.”

“And that’s why I’m thinking it over,” I point out. “I’m not looking to

have more husbands than boyfriends in my life.”

“Is it because he’s old?” Shana asks. “You afraid he won’t be able to get it up pretty soon?”

“What? No,” I protest. “He’s only ten years older than me.”

“Is his dick crooked?” DeeDee asks. “How big is it? Is it like this?” She grabs a bottle of Diet Mountain Dew from the selection Shana set on the hood and holds it against her crotch like she’s about to use it for a strap-on.

“No man is like that,” I say, laughing. “If that’s what you’re getting, there’s something seriously wrong with the dudes you’re dating.”

“This *is* Faulkner, Arkansas,” Shana says, finishing her burger and crumpling the wrapper in her fist. “I can’t wait to get the fuck out of here and get some quality D.”

“Cheers to that,” DeeDee says, twisting off the cap on her bottle and chugging half of it before letting out a spine-chilling belch that has no business coming from a body that small.

“I’m not sure caffeine is what you need right now,” Marisol says, shaking her head and handing DeeDee the veggie burger from the selection.

“Look, we all gotta work with what we’ve got,” DeeDee says. “Some people get deep dickings from rock stars, and some of us get Diet Mountain Dew and veggie burgers.”

“There’s a guy out there who will love all your quirks,” I assure her.

“Even the obscene burps. Probably not in a small town in the south, but he’s out there somewhere.”

“Where do you think I’ll meet him?” she asks. “Austin? Ashville? Ooh, Portland. No—Seattle!”

Marisol holds out the fries to her. “As long as he makes you happy, we don’t care where he’s from. Maybe he’ll be an investment banker in New York. You never know.”

“Ew, never!” DeeDee swears. “My soul is dying just thinking about it.”

“He could turn you into a proper trophy wife,” I tease. “You’ll grow your hair out and stop dyeing it and start wearing pantsuits.”

“Soul. Dead,” DeeDee shrieks, clutching her heart.

“Seriously, though, I hope you have the best time on the road. I know you’ll love it.”

There’s an awkward moment as they eat, but I’m not going to avoid the topic just because it’s uncomfortable. If I do that, I might as well say goodbye to our friendship and just comment on their posts on social media like other friends I lost touch with after high school. And I’m just not ready to do that.

“How was it?” Shana asks at last.

“It was... Different than I expected,” I say. “A lot of work and

schedules and not as glamorous as it's made out to be."

Marisol nods. "You gonna tell us about the band breaking up?"

"Actually, I can't," I say. "I signed an NDA when I went on tour with them. I can't really talk about anything that happened within the band."

"What about why you left?" DeeDee asks.

"That one's easy," I say with a grin. "Crimson Franco is a giant asshole."

The others laugh, and we make small talk and finish up the food, chatting about the different cities we visited. I fill them in on my trip to Paris, leaving out the fight that ensued afterwards, which is band business and not mine to share. Finally, we're all done, and Marisol stands and announces it's time to practice.

Taking that as my cue to go, I climb off the Sonata and drop my empty tea bottle into the paper bag the food came in.

"Hey," Marisol says. "By the way, Val, we're looking for a keyboard player for the band, now that our old one went and got famous."

"You better not be fucking with me," I warn.

"Know anyone who might be interested?" Shana asks, sliding her hands into the pockets of her athletic shorts and rocking back on her heels.

I take a deep breath and offer them a shaky smile. "Hell yeah, I do."

"Cool," Shana says, picking up a beer and cracking it open.

“Come ‘ere,” Marisol says, dragging me into a hug.

DeeDee whoops and runs in a circle around us. “Screaming Divas is back together, bitches!” she yells down the street. “And better than ever!”

“Don’t you mean Marisol’s Garage?” I ask through a laugh.

“Whatever,” DeeDee says. Then she leaps onto us, wrapping her arms around both of us.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask, wiping a tear from the corner of my eyes.

“Of course we are,” Marisol says, wiping her own eyes. “It wasn’t the same without you, and you know all our songs. You were never *not* a part of the band, Valentina.”

“Thank you,” I say, sniffing and wiping my eyes with embarrassment.

“Plus, you can show us the ropes when we go on the road,” DeeDee says. “Since you have four whole weeks of experience before you couldn’t take the heat.”

“Shut up,” I protest, laughing through my tears.

“Y’all don’t have to fucking cry about everything like a bunch of girls,” Shana says. “Let’s get this practice started.” She holds out a hand, palm down, in the center of the circle. “All in, hookers!”

nineteen

Adrian Hart

Waiting for Valentina's answer is the hardest thing I've ever done in my life, but I told her I'd give her space, and I'm determined to prove to her that she can trust me. My word is good, and if she can't believe that, then I already have my answer. So I fly home for a few days, which works out because my leaving the band creates a whole heap of shit, and I'm on the phone with lawyers, agents, managers, and accountants day and night.

When I'm with Val, I want to give her my full attention, be everything she deserves. I don't want to be interrupted and have to answer phone calls every five minutes. Finally, after a week, the noise has died down to a call or two per day, and I'm about to start going crazy when she messages me asking to meet.

I'm tempted to ask if it's bad news, because I'm not sure I want to fly back to Arkansas to have my heart broken. But I'm a big boy, and I can face the rejection if that's what comes. I hop back on my jet and arrive that evening. Climbing off the plane, I pull my ballcap low over my eyes and

head to the waiting car, since despite leaving Iron Thorns, I'm still very much sought out by paparazzi. If anything, it might have increased now that everyone's wondering why I left and what I'll do next. I know my fame will fade eventually, but right now, it's in full force.

The car drives around a bit, making sure we're not being followed by photographers, before it drops us at the bar where I agreed to meet Valentina. I sit waiting for her, watching the door with a pounding heart. At last, she walks in, looking every inch the queen of summer in a simple yellow sundress and sandals. Her brown skin is sun kissed, and she's glowing with a radiance that takes my breath away.

"Valentina," I say, rising from the bar and holding out a hand to her. "You look beautiful."

She steps close, which I take as a good sign. I lean in, and she allows me to kiss her smooth cheek. "Where is everyone?" she asks. "This place is usually packed on Friday nights."

"I bought it out," I say, shrugging and pulling out a stool for her and helping her onto it.

"What do you mean, bought it out?" she asks, her eyes widening. "You bought a bar in Faulkner, Arkansas?"

"No," I say, laughing. "I just bought it out for the night, so we'd have some privacy and I could hear what you have to say without being interrupted

by fans.”

“The life you lead,” she teases, shaking her head.

Her comfortable manner makes me relax a little. Things seem normal between us, as easy as they always have been, like we’re made for each other and there’s no room for awkwardness or any of the other things that happen when two people don’t quite fit right. Valentina and I are a perfect fit, in more ways than one.

Once our drinks arrive, we move to a small, secluded booth in the corner, where I slide in across from Val. I’d rather be at her side, with her cuddling into me the way she has so many times on my tour bus, but this is a serious talk where I need to have a clear head, and that’s impossible when her addictive body is pressed against mine.

“I have some news,” Valentina says, stirring her drink with the straw.

“Good or bad?” I ask, prepared for anything she has to say.

“It’s about my band,” she says. “And it’s good news.”

“Okay,” I say nodding and swirling my whiskey in the bottom of the glass.

“I told you they signed with a small indie label.”

“Yes.”

“Well, they want me to rejoin,” she says. “Or—they invited me to join their new band, Marisol’s Garage. I said yes.”

I can't hold back my smile. "That's amazing, Val. Congratulations."

"You're happy?"

"Of course I'm happy," I say, reaching across the table to cover her hand with mine. "I know you were feeling out of place on tour with us, but this is your band. You're going to have a blast."

I chuckle, remembering Lucas scolding me for using that word. But there's no regret in my memory. I love the kid like a little brother, but until he's ready to grow up and have his own life, I can't do anything about it. Crimson is his father, and he's dead set against me. One day, when Lucas is an adult and out from under his father's thumb, we'll reconnect like no time has passed, the way only old friends can.

"You're not upset I made that decision without you?" Val asks carefully.

I shrug. "No. It was your decision to make. My only question is, where do I fit into all this?"

"Wherever you want to fit," she says. "I'm going to be on the road, and I know you've had more than enough of that life. But if you want to be there..."

"I do," I say, lacing my fingers with hers. "There's nowhere else I'd want to be."

She nods, licking her lips. "I really do love you, Adrian. I'm just not

ready to settle down and start a family. My first love will always be music, and I'm not ready to give that up."

"I would never ask you to," I promise. "It'll always be a part of my life too, even if I'm not with Iron Thorns. Maybe I'll join another band, maybe not. But no matter what, I'm a musician, and so are you. That doesn't change just because you're in a band, or on the road, or at home with a family."

"I guess what I'm saying is, this is my career, and right now I want to pursue it."

"Okay."

"But if you want to get married... I'm also open to that."

I sit back, studying her face. "What does that mean for us?"

"It means, I'm not going to be a housewife, but I could be a wife."

My heart starts to pound, and I can barely get my words out. "Is that... Is that a yes?"

She nods, a little grin on her red lips. "Yes."

"I love you, Valentina Rose," I say. "Or should I say, Mrs. Hart."

"I love you too," she says. "Now put a ring on it, Mr. Hart."

I laugh and pull out the ring, my heart beating like a drum in my chest as I slide the huge canary diamond onto her finger. It's a perfect match for her dress. I should have guessed when she walked in wearing yellow that

she'd done it to match the ring I showed her the other day. I stand halfway and lean across the table, capturing her sweet lips with mine. She's laughing when she pulls away and holds out her hand, admiring the ring. "It's beautiful," she says. "Wow. Adrian..."

"What is it, my queen?"

"My friends will definitely approve of you now," she says with a chuckle.

"Good," I say, returning to my seat. "Since I'll be coming on tour with them."

"You will?" she asks, looking up at me.

"Of course," I say. "I'll stay in the background, don't worry. I can work from anywhere, and I don't want to be anywhere unless you're there. And if you need any advice about navigating the world of contracts and touring schedules and the whole business, all you have to do is ask."

"You're going to be my groupie?" she teases.

"I guess I am," I say, unable to keep the smile off my face. "But I've also been writing some of my own songs. Maybe by the time your tour's done, I'll have enough to make my own album."

"That sounds fair," she says. "We can take turns being more famous."

"Now you're just being silly," I tease. "You can't get any more famous than Iron Thorns."

She just smirks at me over the rim of her glass. “We’ll see.”

“Yes, we will,” I say, sipping my own drink. “I can’t wait to see you shine like the star you were always meant to be.”

“Is it bad if I say, me too?”

“Not at all,” I say. “It’s exactly what a queen like you deserves. The sun and the moon and all the stars—with you being the biggest star of all.”

“Can’t say no to that,” she says, reaching over to take my hand. “As long as my crazy king is by my side.”

I lift her hand and kiss her knuckles. “Exactly where I belong.”

epilogue

Valentina Rose

“All in, hookers!” Shana screams. “Let’s rock and fucking roll!”

We stride onto the stage and take our places to a roar of applause. The amphitheater is packed, and though we’re not selling out Madison Square Garden yet, it’s a dream come true.

Shana tosses her drumsticks in the air and flips her new fire-engine red hair piece forward and back before catching the sticks and counting us in. I join the rest of the band, our signature sound rising into the night and rolling over the crowd, who sing along in unison with unbridled enthusiasm. Looking up, I see Adrian Hart standing in the VIP section, watching us from under a ballcap, with a pair of shades hiding his eyes even though everyone knows he attends all our shows. We hid our relationship from the media at first, but eventually, enough photographers had posted pics of us together that we decided to stop hiding and go public.

Adrian still gets mobbed, so he has to be careful to stay out of the crowd, and he doesn’t want to take attention from us, so he usually arrives

early and hides out in whatever private viewing area the venue has or can create for him. Now, the same current of electricity I felt the first time I played in front of him washes over me, as if I'm just a little more alive with his eyes on me.

I close my eyes and let the music take me over, sinking into my soul as Marisol's smoky voice hypnotizes the crowd. Warmth and pride swirl through me as I play. We've come a long way in the past year, playing small clubs and local venues, then larger and larger places. We haven't made our way to a stadium tour, but I'm not impatient. It gives us something to dream of, something to work towards, and that's better than instant success. We're not a flash-in-the-pan one hit wonder. We've got staying power, and we're all committed to making a career of this.

After the show, we sign autographs and take selfies with fans before heading back to our hotel. The label doesn't put us up at five-star hotels with spa services, but we're not staying in roach motels or sleeping in the maxi van, so we're all happy.

"I've gotta call my *abuela*," Marisol says, slipping away when we reach the hotel. Her grandmother has full-time care thanks to our growing income, so Marisol can relax on the road, knowing she's in good hands, but she still calls home every other day.

"We've got a couple groupies coming up," DeeDee says with a sly

grin. “Do not disturb.”

I laugh and roll my eyes, then hit the button in the elevator. As I step inside, I remember that night in San Antonio when I had to hide out with Adrian, when he got us the tiniest hotel room in existence. I’ve forgiven him for misleading me back then. Everything he did was so that we could be together, and I know there’s no limit to his crazy love, so I trust him completely. I hurry down the hallway to our room, slipping the key card into the lock just as the door swings open.

Adrian sweeps me into his arms, letting the door fall closed before pinning me against it. His mouth crashes onto mine in a passionate kiss, and I wrap my arms around his neck and my legs around his hips.

“You looked so fucking hot on that stage tonight,” he says, kissing along my jawline and nipping at my earlobe.

“You looked pretty hot standing up there watching,” I say, grinding against his hardening length. He’s been recording his own album, which means we don’t get to spend every night together. After months of sharing a bed every night, I’ve missed him, and I’m ready to make up for the past few days, when I haven’t seen him. He hasn’t missed a single show, though, and he says once he’s back on the road, he’ll just make sure we never go on tour at the same time, so he can always watch me play.

I can’t say I mind. He always gets all hot and bothered, and I reap the

benefits after the show. He drops to his knees now, dragging my pants down and tossing them aside before throwing my legs over his shoulders and diving in. His tongue drags through my slit, and he moans as my head falls back against the door. He latches onto my clit, sucking and tugging at my sensitive bud while he slides two fingers inside me. I grip his hair, grinding against his face as he strokes my G-spot until I can't hold back. My knees clamp around his head, and I cry out as my body bucks, the orgasm gripping me.

Before I've come down from the high, he stands and shoves down his jeans, lining himself up before driving into my hungry core.

"God, I've missed this pretty little pussy," he growls, reaching between us to massage my clit while his cock plunges into me, claiming my depths with each stroke. I tighten my legs around him, moving up and down on his shaft to ride him as well as I can while pinned to the door. His thrusts grown rougher, and he growls and bites down on my shoulder, taking control of the rhythm as he approaches his own climax.

"Give me one more, beautiful," he orders, gripping my ass in both hands and driving into me hard and fast. "I know you can do it. Milk my cock with that hungry little pussy."

I move with him, and when I feel him pulse thick inside me, it pushes me over the edge. I grind my clit against his pelvic bone and let go, throwing my head back and riding him as my orgasm crashes over me. My core

clenches, squeezing him tight as his cock expands, filling me with a rush of heat when his seed spills into me.

Still breathing hard and buried deep inside me, he staggers to the bed and falls onto it with me. He cradles me in his arms, shudders still wracking his body. “I love you so fucking much, Valentina Rose,” he says, kissing my forehead gently. “Watching you cum is like being in the presence of a goddess.”

“As long as you’re my rock god, I’ll be your goddess,” I say, kissing him back.

He squeezes me tightly to his chest. “It’s a deal.”

The End.

I hope you enjoyed Val & Adrian’s story. If you’re in the mood for another sweet & spicy rock star romance, check out Just Sing:

<http://books2read.com/justsing>

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****Please note: my non-rockstar books are dark romance & contain triggers****

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